

NTS Bulletin August 2014 *This year is the 20th anniversary of the release of the 1994 United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Human Development Report, which defined the concept of human security and brought it to international attention. It is thus timely to ask: where is human security today? The following is the seventh part of a series exploring the evolution of the concept and its impact on security thinking and practice.*

20 Years of Human Security: A special focus on political security

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Defining political Security

Security used to be defined in military terms with the state as the referent of security. From this state-centric lens, political security means the stability of the state's political regime and social order. Human security shifts away from the state-centric approach and takes people as the referent of security. Against its many definitions, human security is often defined as freedom from fear and freedom from want. Political security, a key element of the freedom from fear, refers to the realization of the civil-political aspect of human rights, such as electoral rights, freedom from violence and abuse and freedom of religion, association and expression.

Hence, political security encompasses both state-centric and people-centred approaches and they are mutually reinforcing. If a state is politically insecure, its citizens often face high risks of human rights violations. Political insecurity of people can be the cause and trigger of state instability. For instance, political protests that demand reform have turned violent in recent years, like those in Thailand and Cambodia most recently.

Political insecurities in Southeast Asia

During political unrest and conflicts like those in Aceh and Mindanao, people often see human rights violations by both government forces and insurgent groups such as rape, torture and extrajudicial killing. State oppression and ineffective governance are also threats to individual political security. These include discriminatory or restrictive policies on the basis of religion, ethnicity or culture, such as those restrictions faced by the Rohingyas in Myanmar. Arbitrary detention and degrading treatment by the police and prison systems in Southeast Asia have been identified in UN human rights reports.

Two steps forward, one step back: Progress and challenges

Political security is in itself an 'operationalisation' of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Despite the difficult challenges in this respect, there has been limited but significant improvement in Southeast Asia. With the help from the UN agencies, Timor-Leste embarked on a campaign between 2007 and 2012 to encourage female participation in elections which resulted in the return of 38 per cent of Timor-Leste's parliamentarians being female, the highest percentage in the Asia-Pacific. The UNDP and local non-governmental organisations helped marginalised people in Cambodia to register to vote in the 2013 election.

Regional institutionalisation of human rights contributes to improving political security. The 2008 ASEAN Charter marked a regional step forward for human rights. This was reinforced by the ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint adopted the following year, the establishment of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Human Rights Commission (AICHR), the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC) and the adoption of the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration in 2012.

Despite this progress, regional institutions still have limited power in responding to challenges to political security in the region. AICHR only plays a consultative role in providing expertise and promoting human rights. Regional response was near silent on recent protests in Cambodia which turned violent in July 2014 and shows the challenges for human rights in the region. In addition, there have been calls for AICHR to be more inclusive and to strengthen its engagement with civil society. Hence, protecting human rights and ensuring political security in Southeast Asia primarily rely on awareness of state responsibility and capacity with limited but increasing space for global and civil society influence.

Core Readings:

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