



TALKING POINTS

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Talking Points for: Satu Limaye, East-West Center in Washington

Southeast Asia presents a mixed picture for democracies. Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Timor-Leste are characterized by some as electoral democracies; countries with institutionalized free and fair elections but ones with constraints on rights and freedoms emanating from political and legal factors. Other, non-democratic Southeast Asian countries run the gamut of being competitive authoritarian—Malaysia, noncompetitive (hegemonic) authoritarian—Singapore and Cambodia, and one-party authoritarian—Vietnam and Laos. Burma seems to be something in between given its current, far from finished efforts to liberalize. The explanations for the mixed record of democracies in Southeast Asia range from colonial legacies, a hierarchical and paternalistic elite culture and deeply held animosity to pluralism (Gainsborough) to China’s tributary relationships in mainland Southeast Asia (Reilly). The future of democracies in Southeast Asia is likewise seen as mixed. In the context of the US’ “rebalance” to the Asia Pacific, and the particular attention paid to Southeast Asia in this policy, democracy in the region becomes an increasingly important factor in how US relations with the region will unfold. For example:

- Upcoming election outcomes in several regional countries (Indonesia, Philippines, and Malaysia) will likely impact the pace and direction of emerging partnerships with these countries.
- A failure to liberalize in other regional countries such as Burma, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia will mean the continuance of constraints on the further development of relations.

* The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.