



TALKING POINTS

Asan Plenum 2013: “New World Disorder”
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RELEASE EMBARGO DATE: MAY 1, 2013 AT 9 AM

Panel: Democracies in Southeast Asia (Grand Ballroom I)

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Talking Points for: Toh Kin Woon, Senior Research Fellow, Penang Institute

The authoritarian Malaysian state

The post-colonial Malaysian state has since the achievement of independence in 1957 and the formation of Malaysia in 1963, been authoritarian. Over the years, the ruling elites have relied on a set of laws, some inherited and some their own, to restrict and oppress freedom in a bid to contain the opposition against them. Among these obnoxious laws are the Internal Security Act, which allows the state to detain people without trial; the Sedition Act; the Official Secrets Act; the University and University Colleges Act and the Police Act. The resort to these measures has led to a shrinking of the democratic space and the stifling of dissent.

Contestations against the state

Yet, contests against the abuse of state power have long been on-going. Initially, opposition came primarily from left-leaning groups, with some pursuing their struggle through the open democratic parliamentary mode and the rest through armed struggle. The left groups were considerably weakened by the state’s resort to the use of very harsh and restrictive laws such as long years of detention without trial and even banishment. The left’s containment did not, however, deter the other political forces, such as the Islamic Party and social democratic parties, from continuing with their struggle against state oppression. These struggles reached a crescendo in 1998 with the launch of the Reformation Movement following the arrest and incarceration of the then Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim and again in 2008 when a political tsunami swept the country at its 12th General Election held that year.

Why the tsunami?

Frustrations with poor, incompetent and corrupt governance that have led to widespread and

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rampan corruption among high circles, growing inequality in the distribution of wealth and incomes, the growing ineffectiveness of inter-ethnic consociational bargaining as a result of the one party state as manifested in the dominance of the United Malays National Organization or UMNO, and the strong desire to break this hegemony in order to create a more competitive and contestable political environment are among some of the reasons. The political hegemony of UMNO has also led to much abuses of power in many state institutions such as a judiciary that is partial in favor of the ruling elites; a police force that is corrupt and that is used as a tool to coerce the opposition and to silence dissent; the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission that investigates cases of corruption selectively and an Election Commission that is biased to the ruling party. Public anger has been further aroused by state elites resorting to the use of state power to grab land from natives and granting them to cronies for logging (deforestation), or for the construction of mega infrastructural projects that are economically, socially and environmentally destructive. Recent years also saw the large scale importation of capital in hazardous and toxic industries that are potentially harmful to peoples’ health.

The growth of civil society

Opposition to the state has in recent years been joined by the growth of civil society organizations. Chief among these are Bersih 2.0, a broad-based coalition that calls for clean and fair elections; many green organizations that struggle against the setting up of industries that emit toxic wastes; Suaram (Voice of the People) that fights for greater human rights and many women organizations that press for gender equality and against domestic violence. These, together with opposition parties at the Federal level, have coalesced into a broad movement to effect a two party system by seeking to topple the current ruling coalition, in power for 56 years, in the soon to be held 13th general election.

Progress of democratization

This broad coalition is pressing for the abolition of all oppressive laws that curtail freedom, the restoration of local government elections, decentralization and the pursuit of a socially

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balanced and more inclusive socio-economic policy. The growing popularity of the parties opposed to the ruling coalition at the Federal level, coupled with the increasing strength of civil society have already elicited some positive responses from the current state regime, with several oppressive laws having been amended. Still, peoples’ appetite for greater democratization has as yet not been fully satisfied. This won’t be until the two party system and a more contestable electoral system have been put in place. This is the next most important agenda that hopefully will be carried out in the forthcoming general election to be held soon. What is of interest is the fact that the emergence of a strong, broad opposition coalition at the level of Federal politics, despite a still restricted democratic space, is the strongest indication yet of increasing boldness and defiance on the part of citizens against state perpetrated authoritarianism. Peoples’ desire for greater democracy is unmistakable

Democracy in the Philippines- Capture by elite interests

The absence of a strong and stable party system in the Philippines has led to shifting alliances among political leaders and a lack of genuine ideological competition. The capture of the state by big business elites has led the state to pursue and implement policies that are largely pro-capital; while the development of patron-client ties, the tendency to resort to gold, electoral fraud and glamour; and the perpetuation of political clans have led to the inability of the electoral system to reflect the popular will. These practices have also led to the domination and control of the legislative and executive branches of the Philippine state by the rich elites, both from the provinces and Manila. The faith in the current institutions and practices of democracy in the Philippines among the poor, the middle class and even some in the big business league, has declined. However, this elite democracy, which has led to the exclusion of the interests of the mass of the poor, both in terms of participation and policy outcomes, is increasingly being challenged by the progressive forces. Elite democracy is now increasingly being contested.

Burma’s fledgling democracy

Developments in Burma over the last two years point to the opening up of its’ democratic

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space. The ending of Aung San Suu Kyi’s house arrest, which should not have happened in the first place; the release of political prisoners; the easing of press and internet restrictions and the holding of by-elections which the National League for Democracy (NLD) swept, are some of these. However, much remains to be done. The holding of free and fair elections for a fully representative parliament is still restricted by the reservation of one quarter of its seats for the military. Getting the military back to where it should be, the barracks, remains a challenge, which, however, is not insurmountable. After all, both Thailand and Indonesia went through such a phase earlier in their history. There is a chance that Burma may follow a similar path as well. After all, national elections, which barring any unforeseen factors the NLD is expected to win, are expected in 2015. The prospect of a civilian government being installed after that may be good. For long-term stability and popular legitimacy, however, such a government must bring economic progress, especially to the poor. It must also be able to keep the fractious country, with all its inter-ethnic contradictions, intact through the pursuit of socially and economically inclusive policies that are able to accommodate the interests of the ethnic minorities. Once these can be achieved, the military, which regards itself as the only institution which can keep the country together, may be persuaded to stay out of the legislature.

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