



SESSION SKETCHES

Asan Plenum 2013: "New World Disorder"
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Democracies in Southeast Asia

Panel: Session 6 (Grand Ballroom I)

Date/Time: Wednesday, May 1, 2013 / 16:00-17:30

Speakers: David Chance Thomson Reuters
Lee Jaehyon, The Asan Institute for Public Policy Studies
Satu Limaye, East-West Center in Washington, DC
Toh Kin Woon, Penang Institute
Christopher Walter, National Endowment for Democracy

Rapporteur: Olivia Enos, The Heritage Foundation

Democracy in Southeast Asia has taken on many different forms. While there is no one formula or pattern that Southeast Asian nations have taken when adopting democratic processes there are many interesting trends that have emerged as political transitions have transpired. Experts at the Asan Plenum 2013 discussed the future of democracy in the region and noted some of the most informative trends.

All of the panelists agreed that Southeast Asia is a diverse region that has adopted democracy in a multitude of ways. In an attempt to categorize four important countries in Southeast Asia, Lee Jaehyon listed Malaysia and Singapore as semi-democracies and Indonesia and Philippines as unstable democracies. Christopher Walker expanded the categories by adding Thailand to the semi-democratic category. He along with several of the other panelists agreed that Burma was not yet a true democracy. According to Dr. Satu Lamaye, "It is improper to call what's happening in Burma democratization."

While most of the panelists agreed that few, if any, of the Southeast Asians would return to authoritarian regimes, it still remained unclear as to whether these nations would turn into full-fledged Western democracies. In the Philippines and Malaysia, the ruling parties have never or rarely been defeated. Rampant corruption dominates many of the nations, and in much of Southeast Asia the ruling parties are comprised of the wealthy elites. Additionally, because political Islam comes with promises of a centralized welfare state, there is concern that political Islam might replace democratization in the region.

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The fate of Malaysia is to be determined in its next elections this upcoming Sunday May 5th. Malay expert, Toh Kim Woon acknowledged that in recent years, Malaysia has seen a decline in good governance. Kim Woon argued that a lack of media freedom, an un-free judiciary, illegal detentions, and a variety of ethnic minorities have kept the ruling government in power. He likened Malaysia's system of government to oligarchy rather than democracy.

There is also a general acknowledgement that China could play a key role in democratization in Southeast Asia. Lamaye noted that since China serves both as an obscure model of democracy and as an influential power in many of the countries, including Burma, China has the unique ability to influence politics in the region. Walker also mentioned that Vietnam has modeled its system of governance in part after China and will likely continue to follow China's lead.

Most of the governments in Southeast Asia are not like the traditional de Tocqueville description of democracy, but many of them offer hope for future reforms.

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