

The Arab Revolts and South East Asia: What Impact and What Influence?

**Teresita Cruz-del Rosario
et James M. Dorsey**

Southeast Asia experienced its own political upheavals well before the Arab revolts. Nevertheless, the wave of popular uprisings that shook the Middle-East and North Africa region goes far beyond the region's boundaries, and Southeast Asia is no exception to the global crisis of confidence towards governments. 2011 was a year of massive demonstration of widespread and deeply felt discontent that was willing and able to assert itself in powerful and often new ways. Although contexts and political cultures differ, the impact of the Arab revolts on Southeast Asia is already palpable. The consequences of the wave of Arab protests on Southeast Asian countries carry their load of opportunities and risks for governments, in political, social and economic terms. But the impact is not one way, and Southeast Asian experiences could represent a source of inspiration.

A Different Political Culture

In countries that have narrower opportunities for public redress, citizens cleverly manoeuvre within tightly controlled spaces mainly through electoral contests that do not directly challenge entrenched authority. Malaysians have succeeded to get their messages across, created dents, raised questions, and expanded spaces for public discourse. Filipinos, Thais and Indonesians who have succeeded in regime change through relatively peaceful means, redirected the course of political life and a qualitative shift in social life has occurred. Thai voters returned to power the party of deposed premier Thaksin Shinawatra through the landslide victory of his sister Yingluck --- a victory for his red-shirted supporters that in the past involved bloody clashes with the military. For the moment, her unequivocal electoral victory ended years of strife between red and yellow shirts and put the country back on a path of

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Teresita Cruz-del Rosario, PhD, is the Visiting Senior Research Fellow, Center for Asian Law Studies, National University of Singapore

James M. Dorsey is Senior Fellow in the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies

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relative stability and economic growth. In Burma, the generals have retreated, and a new civilian government promises to deliver reforms, signaling a new political direction for the country that would emulate market-based democracies. In Indonesia, broad-based social movements have helped restore democratic practice.

Since the eruption of the Arab uprisings, Myanmar has relaxed strict government control in part for fear that the Burmese might be capable of the kind of resilience displayed by Syrians in their 14-month old defiance of brutal regime repression. Singapore's long-ruling People's Action Party has seen its share of the electoral vote drop to a record low because of surging prices and immigration and a new generation of young voters who espouse the values of political choice and social change. In a further indication of sensitivity to developments in the Middle East and North Africa and recognition of the need for release valves, Singaporean bloggers were long able to get away with what mainstream media could not¹. Malaysia has responded to sharp criticism of the police by repealing two sweeping security laws and lifting restrictions on the media even though a new restrictive assembly law and clashes between police and demonstrators point in the opposite direction. In all of these countries in Southeast Asia, grievances were channeled via organized efforts of social movements.

In all of these countries thus far, political strife has not resulted in civil wars. This is perhaps the singular feature that distinguishes protest action in Southeast Asia from the Middle East. It also suggests that Southeast Asian governments are likely to be more adept in responding to potential popular discontent than entrenched Arab autocracies.

Further, most Southeast Asian countries have engaged in party politics despite the imperfections in the development of political parties in this region. Some countries like Malaysia have experienced the dominance of the *Barisan Nasional* which has ruled the country for nearly two decades. Yet, opposition politics led by Anwar is making inroads into the ruling party and will most likely see the emergence of more vigorous electoral contests in the coming years.

In Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi has been elected to parliament in which her party, the National League for Democracy, commands a respectable following. The Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia continue to struggle with political party formation, so that these entities reflect broader programs for governance rather than the personality of its front-runner candidates. Political evolution, though slow and tedious, heralds the institutionalization of a political process

¹ That could be changing with at least one blogger for the first time having been taken to task for what he wrote and forced to retract some postings

that in turn signals a forward march in the creation of a more modernized political culture. For all the citizens of these countries, hopes are high that the deepening of these processes will consolidate democracy and therefore become irreversible.

For all Southeast Asian countries, an active electoral culture is in place, and citizens do take their electoral rights seriously. They insist on the legitimacy of their leaders through fair and honest elections. This should be construed as a sign of political health, and a staunch adherence to a social contract between government and their subjects.

Finally, social movements have been a part of the institutional life of Southeast Asian countries. Even in Myanmar where civil society organizations including media have faced severe restrictions, the Burmese found spaces within the existing political opportunity structures to have their voices heard and registered. In Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, social movements have been an integral part of the fabric of social life. Where protest groups have taken to the streets, these have been, by and large, relatively peaceful despite the occasional violence and destruction to public property.

Interestingly, social movements in all these countries opt for an electoral option, thus working within institutional means that are offered by a regime which, in and of itself, desires to play by the rules of the "legitimacy game." However unpopular, regimes seek recourse to legitimatizing procedures, even incurring the risk of potential loss. Thus far, all rulers seek a popular mandate, never mind that they might engage in the occasional electoral manipulation to ensure longevity. Notwithstanding fraudulent practices in electoral politics in Southeast Asia, the quest for political legitimacy should be construed as a hopeful development in the evolution of politics in these countries.

However flawed these processes are, most Southeast Asian nations are poised to consolidate their economic and political gains in the years to come. And in contrast to the Middle East and North Africa with its entrenched autocracies, their governments have by and large displayed a greater degree of attunement to what is happening around them with a greater deal of vision and flexibility.

Energy Security Issue and Islamist Experience

If the Arab revolts and developments in Southeast Asia are both expressions of a broader global trend, the impact on ASEAN nations of developments in the Middle East is far more direct. As the Arab uprising inevitably spreads to the Gulf, Southeast Asian nations will have to define the risk to their energy security and develop alternatives in case of a disruption in oil and gas supplies as well as increase their focus on alternative energy options. Some Southeast

Asian nations particularly the Philippines and Indonesia will also have to deal with the impact of large numbers of migrant workers returning home to escape erupting turmoil.

The energy security issue will no doubt shoot to the top of the agenda if or more probably when the protests spread to Saudi Arabia and/or other major oil producers. Non-oil producing Southeast Asian nations like Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines depend on the Middle East for 70 per cent of the oils and gas imports. In addition, Southeast Asia and the Middle East are crucial links in a seaborne commerce conveyor belt that runs from the Gulf to the Pacific. If the Straits of Malaka and Singapore were seen as potentially among the most risky maritime choke points in the past, today it's the Straits of Hormuz and Bab el. Mandeb, which is straddled by Somalia and Yemen. Asia would be most affected if shipping particularly through the Strait of Hormuz were to be interrupted. The US gets 22 per cent of its oil from the Gulf, Europe about 30 per cent as compared to Asia's whopping 75 per cent. Needless to say, Asia has the most at stake in terms of energy security.

Southeast Asian governments and military and intelligence organizations are monitoring closely the geopolitics of the Arab revolts as well as their fallout as part of a global trend that expresses a lack of confidence in institutions with a mixture of hope and anxiety.

The debate over the potential domestic fallout is to some degree coloured by vested interests that have gained in strength and prominence in the wake of 9/11. For those whose budgets are boosted by perceptions of a terrorist threat, the focus is on the rise of the Islamists in countries like Egypt and what this is likely to mean, for example, for Islamist groups in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Brunei.

To be sure, the rise of Islamist forces in the Middle East and North Africa boosts confidence among Islamists in Southeast Asia. Yet, the tradition of Islamist participation in Malaysian party politics dates back to the 1950s and has proven its resilience despite the efforts to silence its proponents. Islamist politics in Indonesia is no doubt gaining ground against more secular forces. But it is doing so in a country that votes decidedly secular despite growing religious intolerance and widespread corruption.

Beyond The Turkish Model A Southeast Asian Inspiration

As post-revolt and opposition forces in the Middle East and North Africa look first and foremost to Turkey but also to Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore, they are likely to have to first settle their post-revolt battles before they can really build on the experiences of others. Despite all their warts, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, the Philippines, and more currently, Myanmar, have much to offer. Singapore alongside Malaysia constitutes

examples of multiculturalism which the Middle Eastern and North African countries increasingly wracked by ethnic and sectarian cleavages will need. Similarly, Indonesia stands as a model of reform of the military in a post-revolt society, a model that, like Turkey, can only grow in significance as the push for greater accountability and transparency moves forward in the Middle East and North Africa. Finally, Myanmar's path towards a more open political system demonstrates that even the most intractable of regimes are capable of being pried open.

Nonetheless, with the exception of Brunei, Southeast Asia is likely to be more a question of a monsoon in which steady rain washes away entrenched powers rather than an Arab Spring in which costly revolutions seek to replace systems rather than reform them. Fact of the matter is that Southeast Asia despite its political uprisings is a region of relative peace and stability. It has posted one of the world's highest growth rates and Southeast Asians enjoy relative prosperity.

Southeast Asia is largely governed today by leaders whose legitimacy is grounded in elections and who, by and large, have upheld their end of the bargain in social contracts. In doing so, they have established structures that are increasingly robust yet capable of embracing change. This is being reinforced by Southeast Asia having one of the world's fastest expanding middle classes whose clamour for greater openness, transparency and accountability is certain to make itself felt.

There is reason to believe that no matter how flawed the process is, most Southeast Asian nations are poised to consolidate their economic and political gains. The challenge will be for governments to see social movements and street politics not as fundamental defiance to the system but as evidence that social contracts are subject to the vigilance of their citizens.

The collective experience of Southeast Asia should boost confidence in the region and hold out hope for the Middle East and North Africa. It is an experience of volatility, of two steps forward and one step backward in the immediate wake of a revolt and of the ultimate entrenchment of electoral politics and the flourishing of civil society in the longer run. In short, Southeast Asia shows that institutions, processes and mechanics, however flawed and imperfect, can convert contentious springs into manageable monsoons. What sets the experience in Southeast Asia apart from that in the Middle East and North Africa is that in Southeast Asia grievances were channeled through the organized efforts of social movements rather than suppressed by a military crackdown on civil society.