

# Destructive elites bring Asean to brink of inertia

**Three countries share the same problem, with dim prospects for their futures and that of the regional bloc. By Yiriko Koike.**

Asean has long been envisioned as a foundation stone for stability, security, and increased prosperity in Asia. But with uncertainty plaguing the political systems of Myanmar, Malaysia and Thailand, the bloc may be entering a period of policy and diplomatic inertia. At a time when China's economic downturn and unilateral territorial claims are posing serious challenges to the region, Asean's weakness could prove highly dangerous.

The problems that are now bedeviling Myanmar, Malaysia and Thailand may appear to have little in common. But they all spring from the same source: an entrenched elite's stubborn refusal to craft a viable system of governance that recognises new and rising segments of society and reflects their interests in government policy.

And yet, despite the shared roots of these countries' political dysfunction, their prospects vary. Surprisingly, hope is strongest in Myanmar, where the military junta recognised the need for change, exemplified in the 2010 decision to free the long-imprisoned Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and embark on a transition to democracy.

Myanmar's former military leaders, it seems, looked ahead dispassionately and saw a stark choice: either gradually relinquish their absolute power, allowing for a democratic transition, or permit China to tighten its grip on their country. China's efforts to impose development plans that would deliver few, if any, benefits to Myanmar made the choice somewhat easier.

Today, Ms Suu Kyi is Myanmar's paramount leader. Though the constitution imposed by the junta prevents her from serving officially as president, she holds the real power in the current government led by her National League for Democracy (NLD), which secured a landslide victory in last year's general election.

Of course, there is no guarantee that Myanmar's democratic transition will succeed; after all, beyond barring Ms Suu Kyi from the presidency, the junta's constitution reserves all of the "power" cabinet posts for the military. But with Ms Suu Kyi carefully establishing the NLD's authority, and with friends in India, Japan and the United States monitoring any potential backsliding, there is a legitimate hope that most of the members of Myanmar's military elite will continue to reconcile themselves, if begrudgingly, to modern democracy, just as Eastern Europe's former communist rulers once did.

The situations in Malaysia and Thailand are less promising. Extreme political polarisation is almost as deeply entrenched in these countries today as it was in Myanmar before 2010. But whereas Myanmar's generals recognised the need to escape their cul-de-sac, the Malay and Thai elites seem to be doubling down on political exclusion.

In Malaysia, the problem is rooted in ethnic and racial divisions. Since gaining independence, Malaysia's leaders have pursued policies that favoured the indigenous Malay majority, at the expense of the country's minorities, most notably the sizeable Chinese and Indian populations.

But throughout Malaysia's first decades of independence, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the country's largest political party, did seek to incorporate minority interests, despite commanding the loyalty of the vast majority of the electorate. This inclusive approach began to break down with the 1997 Asian financial crisis, when a coalition of political parties was forged by former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim — who was subsequently jailed on contrived sodomy charges — to challenge the UMNO's authority. With Prime Minister Najib Razak and his government now enmeshed in a vast corruption scandal, the UNMO is relying more than ever on Malay chauvinism.

In Thailand, the source of deep political polarisation is economic. Simply put, the “haves” want to keep the “have-nots” from having a voice. For much of Thai history, the elite's rule was untroubled. But the enactment in 1997 of what came to be known as the “People's Constitution” enabled previously discounted political forces to rise. None rose faster or higher than the business tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra, who exploited the resentments of the long-disempowered rural poor to forge a mighty political machine that challenged the entrenched political establishment, which includes the monarchy, the military, the judiciary and the civil service.

The clash between the two factions led to two military coups, one in 2006 to push Thaksin out of power and another in 2014 to drive out his younger sister, Yingluck. The conflict became increasingly violent, with both sides willing to go to great lengths to maintain their grip on power.

Today, the ruling military junta is systematically cracking down on dissent; it has banned Thaksin-aligned politicians from entering politics, and is trying to impose a new constitution. And Thailand's troubles may be about to worsen.

Just as India, Japan and the US have been helping to shepherd Myanmar through its transition, they should take a more proactive role in saving Malaysia and Thailand from their elites' self-destructive behaviour. Standing idly by while two of Asean's core members consume themselves is simply not a viable option. © Project Syndicate (Bron: *Bangkok Post Sunday*, 3 maart 2016)

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