

Abstract : Panel on Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia

In the space of 10 years after the entry into force of the ASEAN Charter, the human rights situation in Southeast Asia changed dramatically from one of cautious optimism to something which may fairly be described as desperate. The preamble of the Charter stated that they were: “Adhering to the principles of democracy, the rule of law, and good governance, respect for and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms” A sense that the region was moving forward in a progressive manner vis a vis human rights was further enhanced by the adoption of the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration in 2012.

Today, the human rights situation in the region is dire. We witness the democratic deficit in different countries raging from flawed elections in Cambodia to the rise of Islamist extremism which is influencing mainstream politics in Indonesia and populism in the Philippines and this not to mention military regime in Thailand. The list continues; but there is one underlying theme and that is the region is becoming more and more authoritarian. Strong government with limited personal freedoms and democratic spaces appear to be the order of the day.

The panel aims to examine this phenomenon by bringing together regional experts to discuss a thorough scrutiny of authoritarianism in Southeast Asia. Each speaker will analyse his/her subject matter within the context of how it is created and affected by an authoritarian regime.

Presenters

1. Azmi Sharom - University of Malaya - Malaysia
2. Deasy Simandjuntak – ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute – Singapore
3. Eakpant Pindavanija- Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University, Thailand

Moderator and Discussant – Sriprapha Petcharamesree – Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University

Paper I : Has the General Elections of 2018 Truly Rid Malaysia of Authoritarianism?

Dr Azmi Sharom

On 9 May 2018, Malaysia witnessed for the first time in its history a change in government. For sixty-one years, the same government had passed laws which can be described as authoritarian. The loss of independence in agencies meant to keep a check on government behaviour, such as the judiciary, anti-corruption agency and Attorney General’s Chambers added to the steady erosion of human rights and democracy in the country. Furthermore, the print and broadcast media were very tightly controlled by the government so that dissenting opinions were difficult

to come by. And the Election Commission was complicit in the practice of gerrymandering meaning that areas considered pro-government were disproportionately represented in Parliament. This made what occurred in 2018 not just historical but also extremely surprising. The manner with which change occurred; with no violence and very few displays of civil disobedience meant that Malaysia became an example of how despite the odds, the democratic process can still work peacefully.

The euphoria was intoxicating and the sense that the country was going to move towards a more democratic, inclusive, non-corrupt and just future was tangible. It did not take long before this euphoria changed into disappointment. The slow process of repealing repressive laws; the back pedalling of promises to ratify international human rights laws; and the seeming capitulation of the government to the baser motivations of the country; racism and religious extremism, has meant that there is uncertainty about the future of Malaysia. This paper will examine the events of the past year to see whether the hopes for a more democratic and progressive country was just a false dawn; and if so, what can be done to ensure that Malaysia does not go back to its authoritarian past.

Paper II : Jokowi's "authoritarian" policies: an illiberal turn or pragmatism in Indonesian binary politics?

Dr Deasy Simandjuntak

In the recent years, some Western observers of Indonesian politics have highlighted what they perceive as a decline of democracy in the country whose democracy has been deemed the most consolidated in the region. Dubbed with a myriad of somewhat verbose terminologies ranging from "authoritarian" and "illiberal" turn, "illiberal tendencies" to "statist-nationalist ideological orientation", the current situation, according to these observers, is exemplified by, for example, the President's reliance on Pancasila and the principle of "unity in diversity" to curb his Islamist enemies – a policy reminiscent of the harsher tactics used by Soeharto's authoritarian regime-, the President's growing closeness to the military, and his choice of Ma'ruf Amin, a conservative senior Muslim cleric, as his running-mate for the 2019 presidential election.

However, have the President's policies really indicated an ideological turn? With the election approaching, politics are geared towards winning the elections and consequently reduced into mere electoral strategies. This is understandable, as Indonesian political "spectrum" lacks ideological contestation with parties having no clear platform. If there is an "ideological cleavage" worth mentioning, it would be that some parties use Islam while others rely on Pancasila nationalism to mobilize followers. In this simplified binarism, Jokowi, due to his supporting parties, came to exemplify the latter. Prabowo, with his mobilization of religious sentiment, is seen as pro-Islam, despite himself lacking Islamic credibility. Consequently, the second binarism is between those for and against the status quo, or in the election context, between Jokowi and Prabowo. With abstention severely discouraged, the space for a "third

politics” is non-existent. As Jokowi is both a pragmatic statesman, who has focused on economy during his tenure, and a politician who aspires a re-election, his recent foray into “hyper-nationalism” should be seen as a pragmatic move rather than an ideological turn.

Paper III : Authoritarianism, an Obstacle of Liberal Democracy in Thailand

Dr.Eakpant Pindavanija

It has been almost five years that Thailand is ruled by military regime, and it seems that most of the Thais could tolerate the undemocratic government too well. The pro-liberal democratic movements that aim to defy against the coup resistance have been suppressed by various means including by the use of force and strategic lawsuit against the public participation. Many of them are imprisoned or fled abroad. The control and censorships of the mainstream media is another tool that the military junta has been using to legitimise the regime, legitimacy which is being supported by the laws issued by appointed Thailand's National Legislative Assembly (NLA). Over three hundred acts were approved by NLA in the past four years and eight months. More over National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) established by the coup makers continue to exercise the extreme dictatorial law of the Article 44 from the 2014 interim constitution despite the promulgation of 2017 Constitution. Even though, the date for the upcoming election has just been recently announced to be March 24, 2019, but there are a lot of uncertainty of how much the election could be free and fair under the extremely high degree of military control.

The phenomenon described is not just a temporary symptom of authoritarianism in Thai society but it a permanent situation of the Thai politics in which authoritarian elements have been always present, easily justified by the military junta that the main purpose of exercising power against the Pro-democratic activists is to maintain peace and stability of the Nation, justification that many Thai dictators enjoy. The toleration if not acceptance of the authoritarian environment shapes up certain attitude that contributes to the clashes of the political ideologies between authoritarianism and liberal democracy throughout the development of democracy in Thailand. The paper argues that the clashes of ideologies continue to reinforce a deeply divided society that Thailand has been in for decades. The up-coming elections, if it happens and not free and fair, just provides another proof to the military ruler that elections is a problem in Thailand, it may not lead to a more democratic society.