

Banyan

Trouble at home

Political instability returns to South-East Asia

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SINCE the turmoil of the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s, South-East Asia has, with some glaring exceptions, enjoyed remarkable political stability. Its leaders have used that calm to promote greater integration of their club, the Association of South-East Asian Nations, or ASEAN. This was supposed to reach something of a climax at the end of 2015, with the birth of the ASEAN Community, which would set up an “economic community”, turning a region of 630m people into a “single market and a single production base”. But this looks likely to be a hollow achievement. There will be myriad formal legislative targets but little genuine integration. One reason is that the political backdrop has changed. Throughout the region, governments are increasingly preoccupied by crises at home.



The usual sources of instability, such as Thailand and Myanmar, remain troubled. A coup last year has imposed a phoney calm on Thai politics. But the central dilemma—that voters keep electing governments the establishment cannot tolerate—is no nearer resolution. Thais have long feared unrest or worse after the death of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, now a frail 87-year-old. The worry makes the generals even less willing to restore anything like real democracy, in case the monarch should die with the wrong sort of people in charge.

In Myanmar two linked and perilous processes were meant to reach fruition this year: democratisation, with an election in late 2015 that should, in theory, mark the transfer of power from the army’s representatives to a popularly elected government; and a national ceasefire, followed by formal peace talks to end decades of strife with the ethnic groups ringing the country’s borders. But the election may be held under a constitution that continues to give the army a veto over radical change. And hopes that a formal peace process might have been launched by now have been dashed (see [article](http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21646246-things-fall-apart-along-violent-stretch-myanmar-china-border-two-reports-look) (<http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21646246-things-fall-apart-along-violent-stretch-myanmar-china-border-two-reports-look>)).

ASEAN has long survived the difficulties of these two countries. What has changed the regional outlook more is the emergence of political trouble in three of its founder members, all of which had seemed on course for a few years of stability and growth: Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

Indonesia's neighbours were relieved by the victory in last year's presidential election of Joko Widodo, or Jokowi. As the first president from outside the established elite, Jokowi seemed to represent a victory for the democratic process itself and hence for stability. And his economic platform was not marred by the aggressive nationalism of his opponent, Prabowo Subianto. But Jokowi is struggling to manage his party, which has forced him into a bruising confrontation over his nominee (later withdrawn) to head the police force. His priorities remain domestic, as he showed with his refusal to heed pleas from foreign governments not to execute their citizens convicted of drug smuggling. ASEAN frets that he thinks Indonesia has outgrown it, and that he might try to pursue his country's diplomatic interests more on his own.

Malaysia holds the rotating chair of ASEAN this year. Some observers think that may help Najib Razak, the prime minister, keep his job. His enemies, though, seem unconcerned about such niceties. Having apparently secured his post until 2018, in a narrow election victory in 2013 (in which his coalition lost the popular vote), Mr Najib is under fire from his own side. Mahathir Mohamad, a grumpy former prime minister fond of making mischief in Mr Najib's United Malays National Organisation, points to a series of scandals and has suggested Mr Najib consider resigning.

Benigno Aquino of the Philippines, until recently a remarkably popular president, faces similar calls: from church and civil-society groups, from legislators and even from his aunt and uncle (brother of his revered mother, the late Corazon Aquino). A botched commando raid in January against Islamist rebels on the southern island of Mindanao led to the deaths of 44 special-forces troops and a row over who knew what and when. Mr Aquino will probably survive the storm. But his administration, at long last beyond its honeymoon, is on the brink of its long goodbye: talk of amending the constitution to allow him more than the permitted single six-year term ending in 2016 has been dropped. The favourite to succeed him is his vice-president, who, as often in the Philippines, is from the opposition.

Even Singapore, ASEAN's richest country and famous for the tedium of its politics, faces uncertainty. Its founding prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, has been in intensive care with pneumonia for over a month. The current prime minister, his son, Lee Hsien Loong, is recovering from an operation for prostate cancer. It was reportedly successful. His father retired from the cabinet in 2011. But so dominant was the elder Mr Lee in the shaping of modern Singapore that his ill health raises questions. And, with a big celebration planned this year to mark the 50th anniversary of its eviction from the Malaysian federation and birth as an independent country, Singapore, too, has domestic preoccupations, including the date

of an election due to be held by early 2017.

We'll always have Brunei

That leaves, within ASEAN, only four stable spots, all dictatorships: two Communist ones (Laos and Vietnam); one Islamic Sultanate (Brunei); and one thugocracy (Cambodia). None is likely to take a lead within ASEAN to foster integration.

So, as Barry Desker, a former Singaporean diplomat who is now an academic, says: "ASEAN integration remains an illusion." Writing in Singapore's *Straits Times*, he pointed to two dangers. One is that ASEAN splits into two tiers, with poorer Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar all shunning the—albeit stately— "fast" track to integration. The other is that ASEAN's diplomatic unity frays as external powers, notably China, court individual members. For the moment, ASEAN offers little to shield its members from internal political upset or external diplomatic pressure.

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