



## Democracy is shining in the dark

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**COMMENT** Largely driven by ordinary citizens, often connected through the social media, Southeast Asia is experiencing important and substantive political change.

In this year of the Arab Spring, attention has centered on developments in the Middle East. With street protests and elections, amidst violence, there is no question that the region has experienced a profound political upheaval.

Yet, 2011 has been extremely significant in Southeast Asia as well. The ripples of change are here. Largely driven by ordinary citizens, often connected through the social media, Southeast Asia is experiencing important and substantive political change, with the balance clearly in favour of greater empowerment of citizens, human dignity and promise.

Let me begin with the one that Malaysians themselves know well - the increased political awakenings of citizens.



It centers on July's Bersih 2.0 and more recently the demands for academic freedom by university graduates, but one can go back to the Sarawak state election in April to see a greater sense of political awareness and appreciation of the impact every individual can have on bringing about a better government.

Personally, I will never forget the energy at the political rallies in Miri, where young and old came out in the rain to listen and hope for a better future. It is important for all the political parties across the spectrum to remember that people stand in the rain not to support the parties, but the potential of better governance they represent.

The trend now is moving outside of political parties towards civil society and individuals, taking the issues directly into the hands of ordinary people. This broadening of political participation is healthy, in that it allows for more diversity of views.

This political awakening is happening across Southeast Asia - in Singapore, where a record number of citizens attended political rallies and voted, in Thailand, where local communities banded together to address the challenges of the floods, and in Indonesia, where the anti-corruption drive and calls for good governance are being led through whistle blowing and robust online discussions.

Even when poor decisions are being made by leaders or politicians are providing bald-faced denials, the citizens are exposing these and fighting back.

Consider the saga of housewife Prita Mulyasari of Tangerang, Indonesia. When she complained about the hospital service and sent the email to 20 of her friends, the hospital sued her and she was fined. She fought back, winning an acquittal in civil court in 2009, and earning the support of thousands of Facebook fans.

This July Indonesia's Supreme Court overturned the decision saying that she was guilty of defamation and now the outrage has deepened. Her family is calling for a judicial review, with the support of an angry public frustrated with the inequalities in court decisions and corruption within the judiciary.

Fights like Prita's are never easy. Those who stand up to power often face alienation and threats, especially women. The rallying around what is right is increasingly common and gaining ground, as the public across Southeast Asia are speaking up.

### **Political openings in authoritarian outposts**

There are now more places in the region where people are standing tall. This year will be remembered as that change occurred in the most unexpected places - the more authoritarian political systems.

In May, Singapore's general election became a watershed, exposing the frustrations with elitist governance in the island state.

This human wave calling for inclusion and fairness extended to the presidential polls in August, where the PAP's chosen candidate for president Tony Tan only squeaked through with less than 1% of the vote.

Months later, the system remains in shock, still assessing how to win back the support and at the same time operate in a new



political environment where the public has a sense of its own power. Once the power of the people is let out of the bottle, it is very hard indeed to put it back into constraints.

The PAP is working hard to adjust in contrast to how Umno responded after 2008. Yet, one-party dominant political systems face real challenges incorporating new voices and embracing reform, especially when the resistance inside the system is entrenched.

Singapore's political evolution is important as it has served as a global model. It is especially important for Malaysia, given its historical links to the island republic.

In both countries, the tests for the future lie within the dominant parties and whether the leadership of both countries is genuinely willing to bring about reform, not just promises and deliver half-hearted and flawed measures. It is important to laud the efforts of reform, but carefully scrutinise the implementation.

Nowhere is the importance of scrutiny more relevant than in Burma. What a political year that country has experienced. Since the November 2010 election results were announced early this year, the country has undergone political liberalisation led by the new civilian leadership.

This top-down transition is still in its early days, yet there are distinguishing groups of soft-liners and hardliners in the system.

Right now the soft-liners - those advocating for genuine inclusion of the opposition, pushing for economic reform and better governance - are leading the charge.



Today one can find almost revolutionary changes on the ground with pictures of Aung San Sui Kyi on the streets of Rangoon, a much more open media and even a protest law that is more liberal than Malaysia's.

While many activists, especially ethnic minority leaders and what is known as Generation 88 leaders (those associated with the student movement opposing military rule in 1988) are still in jail, many others have been released

and the 40 or so seats to be contested in by-elections in 2012 will include the National League for Democracy, bringing it into parliament.

Interestingly the country's legislature has become a place for substantive discussion of policy and problems, as all sides seem - at least for now - to be focused on bringing the country forward. The resistance is strong, and challenges, especially in the economic realm are high - yet here too, in one of the region's darkest democratic corners, there is light.

## Increased contestation over basic freedoms

This year has taught us - from the Middle East to Southeast Asia - that political change is possible in the more authoritarian outposts.

Yet, in the focus on the unexpected, we sometimes overlook the ordinary. There are two realms where serious contestation over basic rights is evolving with great intensity in Southeast Asia.

The first is in an issue many Malaysians know well - religious freedom. Despite the talk of 1Malaysia, the fact is that religious minorities in the country feel a deepening sense of anxiety. What is forgotten here is that many individuals in the religious majority feel a similar sense of concern.

The problem here - as it is elsewhere in the region - is multifaceted, from the over-politicisation of issues and a lack of trusted political leadership to deep-seated racism and more. What is important is to appreciate how much healthy dialogue now exists.

The media tends to focus on the problems, the bogus police reports against religious leaders for speaking frankly, rather than on the quiet sanity and respectful interactions that are growing.

Between and among faiths there is considerable respectful discussion as the quiet majority embraces the ridiculousness of the Obedient Wives Club.



Interfaith understanding is deepening, as with a more robust discussion within faiths on issues. This is part of the more open political space filled by ordinary citizens, engaged in discussions and genuinely motivated by our common humanity.

Religious freedom issues are also being contested and engaged elsewhere in Southeast Asia. This year saw a religious crackdown in the Hmong in Vietnam, further marginalisation of religious minorities and attacks on religious institutions in Indonesia and religious violence in Timor L'este between groups often through gangs.

Yet, simultaneously, for every crackdown or attack, there are thousands of discussions and shared knowledge as solidarity across the faiths remains the mode of the majority.

Minorities are facing another troubling issue, however. It involves land. There is a region-wide crisis evolving over land rights, from Cambodia and Vietnam to Timor and Burma.

Land grabbing is occurring unchecked throughout the region, often with impunity and dire consequences for those lacking the political connections to hold onto their homes.

Consider the case of Boeung Kak Lake in central Phnom Penh where over 3,000 people were pushed aside for a "new development " despite having land titles. There has been an ongoing battle through the courts and on the streets to stop the evictions.

Residents won a court victory in August, recognising their titles, but the struggle continues. Many more cases of land grabbing are going unnoticed, as often those who are affected lack the resources to fight.

Now there is more international attention and support of this issue through civil society, as steps are being taken to strengthen laws and improve access to information. Protests against injustices such as these are having an impact, admittedly with high costs for those involved.

### **Inequality firmly on the agenda**

This year more attention is placed on the concerns of the marginalised. The Occupy Wall Street movement has had an international dimension.

Whether it has been in the budget programmes or in the human rights reports on migrant labor, an appreciation of those outside, those left behind by development, is increasing permeating into the broader public psyche. Inequality has squarely been on the public agenda in 2011.

While the policy solutions and approaches have yet to fully evolve, getting to be part of the agenda is an important first step.

Democratic openings require inclusion of all, especially those who have the least. You judge the vibrancy of a democratic system by looking at the conditions faced by those on the political periphery, not those in the center.

As we look toward the future, to a year that will indeed be historic in Malaysia given the upcoming 2012 polls and increased levels of political engagement, taking stock of the trends in 2011 allows us to move forward constructively.

This year has been a good one for democracy in the region, and the trends of empowerment point to future success, despite the obstacles. Let's celebrate the successes of 2011, especially acknowledging the bravery of individuals, and welcome hope for 2012.

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