



Congressional Testimony

Democratic Transitions in Southeast Asia

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Chairman Gardner, Ranking Member Cardin, Members of the Committee, I am honored to have this opportunity to appear before you today. By way of background, the International Republican Institute (IRI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working in some ninety countries around the world, including eight in Southeast Asia. For over 30 years, our broad mission has been to advance democracy; well, it is safe to say that no region of the world these days is at once more challenging – and more promising – than Southeast Asia.

In my brief remarks this morning, I hope to discuss the state of democracy in some countries where important challenges remain, such as Thailand, Malaysia, Cambodia and Laos. On the encouraging side, I will point to several countries that give reason for optimism and a renewed faith in the growth of democratic ideals in Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia and Burma.

Challenges and Setbacks to Democracy

Unfortunately several countries in Southeast Asia, countries of importance to the U.S., are suffering from constricting space civil and democratic backsliding. There is no clearer instance of this phenomenon than in Thailand, where the May 2014 military coup severely curtailed space for civil society and political actors to operate freely. What had been a strong flame for democracy and liberty has been reduced to just a few warm embers.

Thailand is America's oldest treaty ally in Asia and was once seen as a democratic beacon in the region. The democratic regression manifested by the coup and subsequent manipulation of the constitutional reform process is of serious concern for the democracy community as well, of course, as Thai citizens themselves. On a recent trip to Bangkok, I met with a group of women civil society activists. They were clear and passionate in their belief that the space for civil society to bring opinions, concerns and priorities to the military-controlled government is shrinking rapidly and dangerously.

The highly anti-democratic process the government is using in drafting a new constitution is particularly troubling. The first Constitutional Drafting Committee, whose members were handpicked by the military, began working on a new constitution in January 2015 and submitted a draft charter to the military-appointed legislature in September. The legislature has rejected the charter, thus ensuring continued military rule until at least 2017. Prime Minister Prayut, the former general who orchestrated the 2014 coup, has since appointed a new drafting committee, naming a figure who was instrumental in the coup to be the committee's new Chairman.

The military leadership's official line is that a new constitutional reform is required to rid the political system of the hyper-partisan factionalism that has caused corruption and political violence in the past. Given the tightly controlled nature of the reform process, it's hard not to be very skeptical of whether any government that emerges can be a credible representative of the people. In order to restore a political system based on leadership emerging from responsive political parties, the Thai military government must lift the ban on international organizations providing technical assistance to Thai parties. Making political party support available to all Thai parties will transfer skills promoting modern, issue-based platforms and party operations. More professional and responsible political parties will alleviate the acrimonious political environment and remove the rationale for the military to interfere in politics.

Mr. Chairman, as you are well know, Thailand is not the only country in the region going through challenges and government repression. Malaysia, has recently seen new infighting among opposition coalition parties, and the ruling coalition has sharply reduced opportunities for compromise in meeting the country's important political, economic and social challenges. Given increased ethnic tensions and shrinking space for dissent, we at IRI worry that both the opposition and ruling coalition have diminishing interest in building better democratic governance.

All is far from lost, however, and IRI remains committed to increasing the capacity of party leaders and elected representatives to speak to priority issues of concern to their electoral base. Additionally, to counteract divisiveness in Malaysia, IRI is providing opportunities for the growing youth demographic in Malaysia to engage in inclusive and moderate policy-making and advocacy. Mr. Chairman, if there is an urgent recommendation we can make regarding Malaysia, it is that the U.S. pressure the government to end its policy of restricting freedom of movement for democracy activists. These individuals are not a threat to the Malaysian government, rather an important resource to further advance democratic norms in that beautiful and important country.

Not unlike recent setbacks in Thailand, Cambodia's volatile democratic development recently took a turn for the worse. The longtime ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) has used Cambodia's legal system to stifle dissent from opposition lawmakers, including the arrest and indefinite imprisonment of an opposition Member of Parliament and the recent issuance of an arrest warrant for long-time opposition leader Sam Rainsy. What appear to be determined efforts by Prime Minister Hun Sen and his party to fragment the opposition severely threaten Cambodia's hopes for democratic growth and progress ahead of crucial 2017 commune council elections and 2018 national elections.

To make matters more complicated, IRI's local sources report the opposition finds itself struggling to consolidate its own message and to leverage modest political powers. It is incumbent upon the opposition, bolstered by an active and organized civil society, to hone its message and challenge the decades-long rule of the CPP with valid, constructive critiques and clear alternative proposals. Given the rapid deterioration of the legal and political environment and the deliberate dismantling of the opposition by the CPP, IRI urges the United States to bolster its democracy and governance assistance to Cambodia and use every diplomatic opportunity to express deep concern where the ruling government engages in illegal and undemocratic acts.

Mr. Chairman, I have just spoken of countries where democracy is facing great challenges. Now I would like to point to a country – Laos – where the situation remains dire, however, recent events demonstrate a small window of opportunity for activists engaging in civic life. Last week, Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes announced that in 2016, President Obama will become the first U.S. President to visit Laos to attend the Association of Southeast Asian Nations summit. In light of the changing dynamics of our bilateral relationship, now seems an opportune moment to consider the role we can play in promoting democratic reform and development in that nation.

Laos is a single-party authoritarian political system that rates poorly on indicators of government transparency, civic participation and freedom of expression. Civil society in Laos was virtually non-existent until 2009, when in response to international pressure, the Lao Prime Minister issued a decree with the first ever process for independent civil society organizations (called non-profit associations, NPAs) to register. IRI has been a leader in training many of these new independent Lao civic associations. Lao civil society activists face daunting challenges; nevertheless, new NPAs are applying for registration and established NPAs are ramping up their important work. Though the pace of reform is still very slow, with additional resources and technical support from the United States, IRI contends the Lao civic movement will expand, strengthen, become more independent and will increasingly provide feedback to public officials – all important benchmarks in a gradual evolution to a more democratic society.

Reasons for Optimism

The political developments in Southeast Asia are far from all negative. Democratic regression in Thailand, Cambodia and Malaysia should not distract us from the positive gains in other parts of the region, such as in Indonesia and Burma.

Indonesia's 2014 national legislative and presidential elections were unquestionably an encouraging new chapter in the country's democratic progression. Considering Indonesia's checkered past with authoritarianism, the successful transfer of power from one political party to another – its first peaceful presidential level transfer via the ballot box – was a significant advancement in the consolidation of Indonesia's transition to democracy. With the election of President Joko Widodo, the public sent a clear statement about its desire to address pervasive problems of economic stagnation and corruption. Recognizing the importance of combatting nepotism and political malfeasance, IRI has launched an innovative program to empower women across the country to take the lead on fighting corruption in politics and to increase their participation at the subnational level. Much more needs to be done. We recommend ramping up support for anti-corruption measures with a focus on the subnational level. By most measures, corruption remains by far Indonesia's biggest impediment to progress.

Perhaps the most consequential democratic breakthrough in Southeast Asia has come in Burma, a nation few would have expected to be in this position only a few short years ago. In my recent trip to the region I witnessed the increasingly restrictive democratic environment in Thailand. But in the second part of my trip, in Burma, where I served as a credentialed observer for their historic parliamentary elections, I observed the seriousness and enthusiasm with which its citizens peacefully went to the polls for the country's first competitive election in 25 years. Though glaring gaps remain in the country's reform trajectory remain, including rising religious and sectarian conflict and a flawed constitutional foundation, Burma represents the most positive democratic shift in the region right now and a real opportunity for uplifting progress.

IRI formally began implementing programs inside Burma in 2013. We have engaged more than 200,000 individuals from 340 organizations, from national political parties to local civil society organizations. Thanks to the generous support of USAID, as well as the Canadian government and working closely with our fellow non-profit organizations the National Democratic Institute and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, we are proud of the role IRI and the democratic community have played in fostering new hope in that country.

On November 8 in Burma, with dedication, patience and a firm belief in democracy, millions of voters exercised their right to vote, often under difficult conditions. The ruling party exercised commendable restraint – something that surprised many observers. With the results indicating the National League for Democracy now controls a two-thirds majority of seats in the lower and upper houses of parliament, these bodies will now represent a clear expression of the desire for continuing democratic reform in Burma. Of course, the elections serve as only one element of an ongoing and long-term political process that is now unfolding in the country. As the dust settles from the elections, this important work will continue in earnest. As we have seen in many countries around the world, including in Southeast Asia, successful transitions take persistence, time and patience. It will be important for the United States to support a long-term view while insisting in the short-term on maintaining momentum for reform.

As experience has shown us, the period after elections is when the hard work truly begins. Voters' faith in these new democratic processes will only be as strong as the capacity of elected officials to effectively respond to voters' needs and to adapt accordingly. When – or even before – the new parliament convenes next year, newly elected legislators will need critical skills, and developing their capacity to engage with citizens and providing them with independent data to make evidence-based decisions will be critical.

As the dust settles from these elections and Burma navigates the uncharted territory of becoming a representative democracy, IRI recommends that international support should be boosted significantly to strengthen and consolidate democratic institutions. The United States government should provide technical support to the newly elected legislature, including on budgeting, legislative drafting, ethics and constituent outreach to provide many first-time officials with the skills to effectively represent their constituents. IRI also recommends the U.S. continue its vocal support of the peace process in Burma to be inclusive of ethnic minority political parties, civil society organizations and other marginalized groups. A peace process that leads to a comprehensive and lasting ceasefire and political dialogue will make an important contribution to democratic consolidation in Burma as it could remove the rationale for the oversized role of the military in Burmese politics.

General Recommendations

With respect to the Administration's policies in promoting democracy and governance in Southeast Asia, I am grateful to USAID and the State Department for their support, and urge continued funding in each of the countries discussed today. To be honest, I am concerned by the analysis conducted by InterAction that shows that funding for democracy and governance programs worldwide is down 38 percent since 2010. Further, history shows that these cuts are often made worse by "raids" in these funds for other new priorities and initiatives. During these consequential times in Southeast Asia and around the world, now is not the time to cut funding, but rather to double down on our investment in democracy and governance programming.

Finally, IRI recommends the Committee consider the importance of a regional approach to democracy development in Southeast Asia. The U.S. should continue to support the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a unifying regional body and should encourage ASEAN and its individual member states to prioritize development of transparent and inclusive

democratic governance both within the individual states and in ASEAN's regional mechanisms. In addition, the U.S. should engage in and support regional initiatives like the ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN People's Forum that amplify civil society voices in the region, create strong networks among the region's diverse civil society organizations, and ensure marginalized groups can provide input and raise concerns about developments in the region.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, the United States has longstanding economic, political and cultural ties to this region that should not only continue, but be deepened at every possible turn. Home to 625 million people, Southeast Asia as a market is the fourth largest export destination for the United States after Canada, Mexico and China. Half of the world's trade passes through its sea lanes.

The countries throughout Southeast Asia remind us that nothing about advancing democracy should be taken for granted; indeed, cases such as Burma vividly illustrate that democracy must be fought for each and every day, and that it can only succeed with a strong commitment from all stakeholders. We in the United States are a leading stakeholder in this effort in Southeast Asia. By sharing our resources, experience and technical expertise, we align ourselves with the words of Ronald Reagan in his 1982 speech to the British parliament: "We must be staunch in our conviction that freedom is not the sole prerogative of a lucky few, but the inalienable and universal right of all human beings."

Thank you.

