



Domestic Faultlines in Southeast Asia

Asean may look like a homogenous body to the outside world. In reality it is a collection of many states with different levels of development, political systems, cultures and languages with little in common other than living in the same neighborhood.

The outside world sees this region with rosy eyes. You can't really blame them. This region is home to Timor Leste and Asean (Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam), arguably the most successful regional organisation in the developing world.

It is also home to several Asian 'Tiger' economies. The figures alone are impressive. The population of the 10-member Asean countries plus Timor Leste is about 620 million. GDP is about US\$2,550 billion. Real GDP growth is about 6%.

The region is also strategically important. The Straits of Malacca is a key waterway for world trade. The South China Sea is marred by disputes over who owns the Spratly and other islands.

Asean's 10 dialogue partners (Australia, Canada, China, EU, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia and the United States) account for more than 80% of world trade.

The Asean Regional Forum (ARF) is now a premier security summit for all the major powers.

A closer look may suggest something else. There are many domestic faultlines in this region and while Asean may look like a homogenous body to the outside world, in reality it is a collection of many states with different levels of development, political systems, cultures and languages with little in common other than living in the same neighborhood.

If you just look at political systems, you will find a whole range of regimes among the 11 countries. You have Absolute Monarchy in Brunei; Single-Party-Dominant system

FREEDOM HOUSE INDEX 2013

	PR	CL	Status
Indonesia	2	4	PF
Philippines	3	3	PF
Malaysia	4	4	PF
Singapore	4	4	PF
Thailand	4	4	PF
Myanmar	6	6	NF
Laos	7	6	NF
Cambodia	6	5	NF
Brunei	6	5	NF
Vietnam	7	5	NF

PR: POLITICAL RIGHTS
CL: CIVIL LIBERTIES
PF: PARTLY FREE
NF: NOT FREE

SOURCE: WWW.FREEDOMHOUSE.ORG

in Malaysia, Singapore and Cambodia; Military-back government in Myanmar; Communist system in Vietnam and Laos; and Competitive Systems in Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia and Timor Leste.

The most widely used tables for comparing civil and political rights is probably the Freedom House Index. The 2013 table makes for interesting reading. Not a single country in the region is ranked "Free" and there is a 50/50 split between countries that are "Partly Free" and "Not Free".

On the development front, the most widely reference point is the UNDP's Human Development Index (HDI). Singapore and Brunei are classified as 'very high human development'. Malaysia is next as 'high human development'.

The countries that came under 'medium human development' are the Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia, Timor Leste, Laos and Indonesia, while Myanmar is classified as 'low human development'.

Linked to level of development and political systems, of course, is the issue of corruption. Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (TI-CPI) is the most widely used measurement. TI measures 175 countries and what is most interesting about its 2013 index is the 50/50 split, again. Five out of 10 countries in the region are in the upper 50% while the other five countries are in the bottom 50%. Laos and Cambodia actually fall in the last 10% of countries.

Another measure scholars used but not widely known to the public is the Social Hostilities Index published by the Pew Research.

This index measures hostilities caused mainly by religion. The results are instructive. Countries rated "very high" when it comes to religious hostilities are Indonesia and Thailand. Next, countries rated "high" are Vietnam and Malaysia while "moderate" countries are Philippines, Brunei, Laos, Timor Leste.

Only two countries in this region



were ranked "low" in terms of social hostilities, Singapore and Cambodia.

Taken together, we can easily see that there are a lot of problems in this region; not least not a single country can truly call itself a fully developed democracy.

Countries are still in the various stages of democratisation, while a few are actually moving away from democracy towards theocracy. Brunei announced recently that it has adopted Islamic law as its supreme law.

I see the following as key domestic faultlines in the coming decade. Ethnicity and religion (think Malaysia, Indonesia, Southern Thailand, Southern Philippines, etc.), the quest for regional autonomy and decentralisation (think Southern Thailand, Southern Philippines, Kalimantan Indonesia,

CORRUPTION PERCEPTION INDEX 2013

Country	Score	Rank
Singapore	86	5
Brunei	60	38
Malaysia	50	53
Philippines	36	94
Thailand	35	102
Indonesia	32	114
Vietnam	31	116
Timor Leste	30	119
Laos	26	140
Cambodia	20	160

SOURCE: HTTP://CPI.TRANSPARENCY.ORG/CPI2013/

Muslims in Myanmar, West Papua, East Malaysia, Aceh, etc.), the pursuit of economic growth and poverty rates (think gini coefficient in all the countries), quality of elections (all elections in this region are free but not fair!), corruption and abuse of power (enough said!) and the pace of reforms.

The pace of reforms will be a major faultline given the fact that more and more ordinary citizens are questioning their governments.

The use of social media means that the people will demand instant reforms and governments who do not know how to speed up reforms or bring about reforms will face major crisis (think of the role played by social media in the recent MH370).

More than half of the population in Asean countries are under 45. People in the region want reforms and transparency and they are not going to wait.

What we need in the next phase of development for this region is a new kind of political leadership; the kind that understands that genuine democratisation goes hand in hand with economic prosperity and political stability. The current crop of leaders leading this region, unfortunately, may not be up to the task in the near-term. **mb**

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