ASEAN

After the Fall

By Roberto R. Romulo

For much of Southeast Asia, not least the five founding members of ASEAN, April 1975 brought the curtain down on one act of geopolitical drama and presaged the opening of another. The global balance of power was undergoing one of its great realignments, with Southeast Asia minus the United States in Indochina for the time being apparently fated to remain a cockpit for the sport of the Great Powers. After 1975, Moscow also increased its influence in the region through a strategic partnership with Hanoi symbolized by the Soviet navy's access to Cam Ranh Bay. China, on the other hand, was quick to counter with support for the Khmer Rouge, who were then set to begin their genocidal rule over Cambodia.

For many in the region, the ominous rattle of tottering dominoes filled the air. These nations' response to this threat was to shape Southeast Asia's contemporary history over the next decade. After the fall of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos to communist forces in 1975, other governments tightened their grip on governance from the center, adopted a policy of rapprochement with former enemies and intensified regional cooperation.

This specter of the communist bogeyman gave legitimacy to "guided democracy" as the appropriate model of governance for Southeast Asia. Its practitioners claimed it was necessary to save their nations from those who would subvert and enslave them. The "iron rice bowl" became a respectable excuse for authoritarianism. Asia's unique brand of capitalism of government directed support of the private sector emerged during this period. When Jakarta annexed East Timor, also in 1975, in part out of its belief that Marxists were about to seize control there, the United States chose to back President Suharto, as, indeed, it backed Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines. Two decades later, America would blame the financial crisis that decimated wealth accumulated during this period almost overnight, on this very same system that it tolerated earlier.

In the years after the fall of Saigon, a flurry of diplomatic efforts by Southeast Asian governments widened their political and economic engagements beyond their colonial masters and historical trading partners. One by one the governments of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (then Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) opened diplomatic and economic relations with Moscow, Beijing and their satellites in Eastern Europe and North Asia. The economic gains to ASEAN governments were for the most part disappointing because the exchanges were almost always lopsidedly in favor of the new trading partners, whose foreign trade was state-controlled.

The fall of Saigon also breathed new life into ASEAN, and the grouping attempted to bring some order to the regional stage by reaching out to a newly reunified Vietnam. This overture was initially rebuffed. (Thai troops and bases had been involved in support of the U.S. side in the war while the Philippines sent troops in a civic-action role.) Hanoi saw ASEAN as Washington's surrogate, while, ironically, the U.S. had scant regard for ASEAN's potential as a regional stabilizer. The grouping had never been ostensibly, and continues to officially deny being, a regional security organization. It preferred at first to approach the task of improving regional security by the pedestrian means of getting its members to converse with one another. When the grouping began in 1967, it looked to some modest forms of economic, social and cultural cooperation to engender trust and familiarity among the countries of the region.

This was hardly earthshaking stuff, but it was significant when you remember how fragmented the colonial experience and the Indochina conflict had left Southeast Asia in those years. Each Southeast Asian country had faced the difficulties of nation-building largely on its own, and several had already come to blows with their neighbors. ASEAN's founders steered clear of Cold War rhetoric. They observed all the usual nonaligned sensibilities. However, given the staunchly anti-communist nature of their governments at home, and the fact that most were either formal or de facto allies of the United States, there was no doubt that ASEAN was a concert of very like-minded, essentially pro-Western, conservative states.

The events of 1975 galvanized ASEAN. The management of regional political and security concerns could no longer be kept at arm's length. By then, it was clear to the grouping's members that they had to find strength in numbers and in solidarity if they were to avoid being cast helplessly once again into the maelstrom of Great Power rivalry. In 1976, ASEAN concluded two of its most important constituent agreements, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia and the Declaration of ASEAN Concord. These gave the grouping a framework for regional political and security cooperation that remains operational today. Peaceful resolution of regional disputes, and non-interference in and respect for the sovereignty of states, were enshrined as the twin pillars designed to foster long-term peace among the nations of Southeast Asia.

Moreover, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation was made open to accession for all states in the region, not just to the original five ASEAN members. ASEAN obviously wanted to bury the hatchet with the Indochinese countries, for the sake of a larger vision that would gather all 10 nations of Southeast Asia into one, fraternal, regionwide community.

The Third Indochinese War, sparked by Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia, and further complicated when China and Vietnam went to war with each other in 1979, temporarily disrupted the realization of this vision. ASEAN met the issue head-on. Its long campaign in the United Nations to help restore Cambodian independence confirmed its diplomatic mettle and its ability to pursue a single-minded policy despite strategic differences among its members.

In the years after 1975, ASEAN also intensified economic cooperation. Preferential trading arrangements, joint ventures, industrial and functional cooperation were introduced. Though these programs did not go far, they encouraged habits of regional consultation and joint effort that made it possible to later launch the ambitious plans for the ASEAN Free Trade Area, an ASEAN Investment Area, subregional cooperation like the Mekong Basin initiative and, most recently, an ASEAN community.

Governments were not the crucial factor behind the economic growth. The grouping's economic successes stemmed from trade and investment expansion within its own region, and with other regions, which began in a big way during the latter 1970s. Regional integration and globalization propelled ASEAN's export- and foreign investment-led development, giving the grouping a more solid economic base for greater regional cooperation to complement its political and diplomatic advances.

In recent times, the shock of the financial Crisis, and the tremendous transformation of Indonesia, have set the stage for another act in Southeast Asia's ongoing geopolitical drama. It will be as demanding on ASEAN as anything seen in 1975. Nine members of the grouping were buffeted by the Crisis: Vietnam joined in 1995 and Myanmar and Laos just as the meltdown began in July 1997. The Crisis shook regional self-confidence, and exposed a host of social ills that good times could tolerate, but which hard times will not. Absent any external or internal threats, leaders could no longer justify denying a little freedom here and there for the survival of the nation.

ASEAN's citizens are boldly pressing, and rightly so, for better governance, for greater respect for human rights and basic liberties, and for a less paternalistic relationship between the state and the individual. The cry of the hour in ASEAN is still national development, but this time it is for democratic development. The peoples of ASEAN expect the fruits of growth to be shared by all, and not just by a privileged and patronage-addicted few. The steady but irreversible empowerment of citizens, of civil society and of the private sector, is the main thrust of the next phase in the development of the grouping's countries.

Internal stability is still a goal of ASEAN, but it now has to be attained in a manner that rides more on the vigor and self-confidence of open societies than on the claustrophobia of national security-obsessed states. Even the hallowed tenet of non--interference in the internal affairs of states is being reinterpreted in lively discussions among the countries of the grouping. It was first tested with Cambodia's application for membership; eventually, in 1999, this nation made it the ASEAN 10.

In 1975 and the years immediately afterwards, ASEAN demonstrated a capacity for both pragmatism and vision, and for self-reliance as well as openness to others, in the management of regional problems. The circumstances now are vastly different. The regional cooperation required may be completely new. Yet the grouping must find the same internal fortitude to learn from adversity as it has done in the past. Only with such adaptability will ASEAN's aspirations for regional community be brought closer to realization.

Courtesy: The Economist of London.

FINANCIAL SYSTEM

Making the Presence Felt

By Martin Khor

The global financial system is dominated by a few countries acting on behalf of private financial institutions, and its system of decision-making should be changed to allow developing countries their rightful say.

This was a clear message coming from several Asian countries as well as experts and non-governmental groups at an Asia-Pacific regional meeting held in Jakarta in last August.

Dissatisfaction with how developing countries have been marginalised in the process of decision-making and reform of the international financial system was evident in the meeting.

Countries making the call for reform included Malaysia, China, Indonesia, Pakistan, Korea and Japan.

The consultation meeting was co-organised by two United Nations agencies ESCAP (the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific) and UNCTAD (the UN Conference on Trade and Development) - to prepare the region for a UN high-level 'event' on Financing for Development to be held this year.

One of the panelists, Ariel Buira, said that the legitimacy of the international financial institutions (IFIs) has come into question.

'We are aware that in these institutions there is a heavy concentration of power in a few countries, and this has to do with the system of quotas,' said Buira, who is the Mexican Ambassador to Greece and a former Deputy Governor of Bank Mexico (the Central Bank).

Buira was referring to the distribution of voting rights among member states in the IMF and World Bank, which are weighted according to the ownership of equity of these institutions, where these shares are allocated according to a system of quotas.

A few major developed countries hold a majority of the shares allocated by the quota system and therefore are able to dominate the institutions' decision-making process.

Buira added that an important question is how to develop a system of wider participation in the IFIs that takes into account members of the international community.

Another panelist, Aziz Ali Mohammed, Adviser to the Group of 24 (developing country members of the IMF and World Bank, based in Washington), said that one key issue on financial reform that is not on the table, but should be, is the distribution of voting power in the global financial system.

'This distribution derives from a totally arbitrary formula designed to perpetuate the dominance of developed countries,' he said.

He added that another important issue so far missing in the discussions is the internal governance of the IMF. He said that very few countries exert influence on the Executive Board and the staff. The proximity of the IMF to the US Treasury creates an undue influence, which should not be determined on the basis of geography, he added.

Malaysia's delegation at the meeting was also vocal in voicing the need for developing countries to have more rights and a bigger say in international financial matters.

Tan Seng Sung, a senior official of the Foreign Ministry, said at the meeting that an adequate representation of developing and emerging countries in international fora on financial reforms is important. 'At present there is inadequate representation and participation by developing countries and the decision-making or discussion fora are highly lopsided and dominated by the developed countries,' he said.

'Reforms are therefore needed to the decision-making structures and processes in the IFIs. This will balance the current leanings towards free-market principles against issues facing emerging markets, taking into cognisance the need to accommodate the different interests and circumstances of individual countries that are at different stages of development.'

Dr Makarim Wibisono, Indonesia's Permanent Representative to the UN and current President of ECOSOC (the UN's Economic and Social Commission), also called for changes to the IMF and World Bank, their decision-making system and policies.

He said that with the advent of globalisation and unprecedented financial flows, the adequacy of these agencies to manage the world economy has become increasingly questioned. Despite the wake-up call of the Mexican crisis, the institutions had not responded by the time of the Asian crisis and it is 'therefore urgent that we review the capabilities and modalities of these institutions to respond to financial crises induced by large capital movements.

'We must be mindful that the decision-making structures of these institutions also need to be reviewed and made more inclusive and democratic.'

A representative from China said the Asian crisis had shown inherent weaknesses in the present financial system and there is now a widespread demand for reform and a need for the region's participation in the reform process.

She noted that there are now many fora and agencies devoted to deliberations on reform and the rules and standards of the game are being formulated. 'But the participation of developing countries is partial or even sometimes excluded,' she said.

'Developing countries are asked to follow the standards and rules, yet we are left out of the negotiations setting these rules. This is unacceptable to us as developing countries. This situation should be redressed. The full participation of developing countries is demanded.'

A delegate from Korea, referring to Buira's presentation, agreed that the reform of the IFIs should be at the heart of international efforts to build a new international financial architecture.

'The IFIs must operate according to the changing economic climate,' he said, adding: 'The quota system should be adjusted to reflect the demands of member countries. This will strengthen the accountability of the organisation.'

Ambassador Hideaki Kobayashi, Japan's permanent representative to the UN in New York, and member of the preparatory committee bureau of the Financing for Development event, agreed with previous speakers that the allocation of quotas in the IFIs should be revised.

Taking his own country as an example, he said that Japan has a 6.8% quota in the IFIs, when it should be around 10%. In comparison, Japan's quota for UN contributions is 20%, whilst its share of world GNP (gross national product) is 14%. 'There is a big gap between these different quotas,' he said. 'There must be a thorough review and consideration of the allocation of quotas.'

He cautioned, however, that the rules of decision-making of the Bretton Woods institutions need to be fully respected once it is agreed upon and their jurisdiction should be respected.

Pakistan's permanent representative to the UN in New York, Ambassador Shamshad Ahmad, said the participation of developing countries is important to redesign the international financial architecture so that it is geared to financing development.

'But the voice of developing countries in the reform process is muted,' he said. 'Only a handful of developing countries are in the Group of 20. We want transparent and democratic forums.'

The meeting also discussed many other issues, including disruptions caused by excessive capital flows, and the need to better prevent and manage future crises.

Third World Network Features

SINGAPORE

Innocents Abroad

By Salil Tripathi

THE only remaining virtue of Singapore's dilution of its equity stake this month from its flagship industrial park project in Suzhou is its Asian veneer. As a face-saving measure, Singapore will retain a small stake in the project that was once billed as its bold attempt to recreate the Singapore business experience in China. It did not work out. Instead it drained Singapore's resources, causing the republic huge embarrassment.

A large share of the blame must be borne by the Chinese, who went back on promises they had made to Singapore and allowed a cut-rate competitor to be built. But failure lay at Singapore's doorstep too, for its failure to grasp the mercantilist nature of China. This debacle reflects a deeper problem for Singapore: its model of state-driven capitalism. Few businesses would have taken the audacious gamble to invest in creating a Singapore-style township near Shanghai. But Singapore bureaucrats, invincible at home, believed they could replicate one overseas.

Unfortunately, Suzhou is not an isolated case. It is part of a growing list of Singapore's state-driven, high-profile overseas failures. These include Singapore Telecom's abortive forays in Hong Kong and Malaysia, Singapore Airlines' repeated attempts to acquire a stake in airlines in the region and, earlier, DBS Bank overpaying for some overseas assets.

To be sure, Singapore companies sometimes have been caught up in domestic political compulsions they cannot control. But savvy investors do not expect a handshake between ministers as a substitute for political strategy on the ground. Singapore's problem is expecting competent technocrats at home to operate as fire-in-the-belly entrepreneurs elsewhere in Asia without creating a political climate in Singapore that rewards free enterprise.

Since the early 1990s, Singapore's state-owned enterprises (known as government-linked companies, or GLCs) have made several attempts to expand overseas. They were relatively well-managed, had surplus cash, and the region, until 1997, was booming. But the results have not met the high expectations normally associated with Singapore. It's true that the partners sometimes changed the rules, or were reluctant to let a regional competitor take a strategic stake in the local economy. But the sheer variety of the industries involved, and the range of countries, shows that the GLCs found it difficult to operate beyond Singapore.

Singapore Airlines, which is more competitive abroad than other Singapore firms, nonetheless failed to acquire a stake in an Australian airline, nor could it launch new airlines in Cambodia and India. When SIA did take a stake in Virgin, some analysts in London argued that a deal-hungry airline may have paid too much. The story is similar with Singapore Telecom. The state-owned telecoms company made bids in Hong Kong and Malaysia. In each case, it fell at the last hurdle, mainly due to local political sensitivities.

These cases reveal flaws in the Singapore model. Deals that look attractive, and which seek to build on the relationship between top political and business leaders, have unraveled lower down the chain. At that level, Singapore officials appear to lack deftness when the regulations overseas are amorphous. Singaporeans say their unwillingness to pay or take bribes ties their hands. But the U.S. has a robust Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, and many American firms have refused to bribe and yet secured projects they wanted in the same countries where Singaporeans said they had problems.

A home climate that does not encourage risk-taking is another deterrent. Singapore has one of the world's highest savings rates. But there is downside. A large proportion of national savings is pre-empted by the government. As SG Securities has argued recently, when these savings flow back into the market, they are parked as short-term deposits with local banks. As the banks are flush with funds, interest rates remain low. This penalizes the risk-bearers, because activities with higher returns and higher risk are not even attempted. A rational assessment of risk becomes difficult.

This is coupled with another deterrent, cultural conditioning. Singapore does not have an entrepreneurial class; state-led or multinational-led management has crowded out private initiative. The GLCs and MNCs require clear rules and guidelines, and technocrats run the best ones in each case. An entrepreneur would know that tying up with a politically sensitive partner like the Salim Group in the autumn of the Suharto era may not be politically sound, but a bureaucrat would not think that way. No wonder some were surprised by the hostility of locals when Singapore firms in Batam were attacked in the post-Suharto era.

Singapore will have to trust its private sector more. A few private companies have thrived: Creative Technologies is often cited, and CDL Hotels has made a reasonable success of its overseas investments. And reforming the GLCs, once again, becomes a priority. Furthermore, a political environment that allows debate on alternative ways of doing business, and a business environment at home which tolerates failure, are necessary though not sufficient conditions from which a new Singaporean model can take shape.

--Asiaweek

INDONESIA

Talking about a Devolution

THE long-awaited attempt to shift more power to Indonesia's regions got off to an uninspiring start last week. Before the newly-empowered districts and provinces could flex a muscle, the architect of the scheme asked to leave the cabinet.

The former regional-autonomy minister, Ryaas Rasyid, believes the whole scheme has been botched. His ministry was abolished in August, less than a year after it was set up, and replaced by a "director-ate general" in the interior ministry. Ryaas was then pushed, unwillingly, into a new role as minister for administrative reform. He had been talking of quitting for weeks and spoke of a "difference of vision" after meeting President Abdurrahman Wahid the week before the last. The president has turned down his resignation, at least until he can hear the views of Vice-President Megawati Sukarnoputri, who is on a pilgrimage to the Muslim holy places in Saudi Arabia.

Regional autonomy was once a cherished aim of Indonesia's reform movement, but there was little celebration to mark its arrival on January 1st. Parliamentarians in Jakarta's city legislature walked out during a debate to complete the 2001 budget. In Gorontalo, one of four new provinces, several people were killed in rioting.

One difficulty is that few agree on what the purpose of decentralisation should be. It was first mooted by the government of President Suharto in 1997. After he fell in May 1998, the idea was picked up by those who feared that a new strongman could emerge within the central government. Now the main question seems to be about who should control the revenues from various taxes and from the exploitation of the regions' natural resources.

Two laws in 1999 which broadly shifted resources from central to regional government raised more questions than they answered. Politicians in the centre worried that the extra financial clout of the provinces could encourage separatists. That seems a genuine risk in separatist-minded Irian Jaya and Aceh, both rich in natural resources. So most of the new powers were given to districts and municipalities, bypassing the provincial governments, although Irian Jaya and Aceh will still get "special autonomy" packages later this year.

The districts will now get 80% of the income from most mining and forestry operations, 30% of earnings from natural gas and 15% from oil. They will also get a fifth of local income-tax receipts and at least a quarter of a special fund of centrally collected revenue. Receipts from this fund could amount to some 80 trillion rupiah ($8 billion) this year.

Despite this largesse, the recipe is almost certain to leave people unhappy. Even before it began on January 1st, problems arose. Some local legislatures have begun to demand bigger payments from foreign mining firms working on their turf. Elsewhere local representatives have insisted that their leaders should be "sons of the local soil", and have tried to force out well-qualified incumbents. More corruption is widely expected in local governments, and environmentalists warn that money-hungry local governments will encourage faster timber extraction and so quicker deforestation. And some local governments even want to get their hands on VAT and corporate taxes, which now go to the centre.

Even if it keeps control of those, the central government and some poorer regions will now have less to spend. Much of Indonesia's mineral wealth is concentrated in just four of its provinces, rebellious Irian Jaya and Aceh among them. Without plump revenues from these, Jakarta will find it harder to dish out subsidies to resource-poor parts of the country.

This could in turn cause even more fragmentation. Already, in the past two years, four new provinces have been set up; other places are clamouring for provincial status. Rule from Jakarta is increasingly shaky in some outlying areas. In war-torn Aceh and Maluku, for example, there is even a shortage of judges to staff the courts. Rather than solving Indonesia's problems, this messy decentralisation scheme may make them worse.

Courtesy: The Economist of London

THAILAND

The People's Choice

Julian Gearing in Bangkok

It is not every election that voters overwhelmingly endorse a new leader who they know faces the prospect of being kicked out within weeks of taking office. But that is exactly what has happened in Thailand, thanks to people like Kanchana Thienthong. As the 26-year-old farmer from northeastern Surin province piles up sacks of rice from her fields, she casts aside allegations that her candidate, billionaire politician Thaksin Shinawatra, falsely declared his wealth. Instead, she embraces his populist message of more money in her pockets and an end to her economic hardship. "Thaksin has promised to help farmers and villagers and I have been encouraging my friends to vote for him," she says. "He is the answer to our troubles." Millions of other Thais obviously felt the same way.

But is Thaksin the right person to deliver that? On the plus side, the 51-year-old telecommunications tycoon has a big mandate and is viewed as dynamic and decisive. On the minus side, he is under a cloud on several fronts. His critics say there is no way he can make good on his numerous and, in their eyes, unrealistic promises. The sheer fortune he spent on his campaign has raised the specter of money politics. Most significant of all, if the false-declaration charges, currently being examined by the Constitutional Court, are upheld, then Thaksin may find himself barred from office and Thailand may find itself without a leader.

For now, though, Thaksin and his supporters are basking in the glow of victory. Bangkok's previouslylethargic stock market surged 3.2% after the poll. Although final results will not be out until after the Election Commission has disqualified those charged with vote-buying and fraud, Thai Rak Thai appears to have won 257 out of 500 seats in parliament, leaving the Democrats, with 127 seats, to wonder where they have gone wrong. Thaksin's incoming administration has already been dubbed a "parliamentary dictatorship" by critics, such is its strength and stability.

Thaksin's success is based on his dynamic style and an unashamedly populist approach a sharp contrast with the Democrats' dull, plodding image and their perceived obsession with rescuing the banking sector. Thaksin has promised to provide 1 million baht ($23,000) for each of the 70,000 villages in Thailand, a three-year debt moratorium for farmers and cheap health care. Chuan may have succeeded in bringing the economy out of crisis mode, but that means little to rural folk, who make up 70% of the total population. "People don't really care what the GDP is, what the import and export figures are, what the consumer price index is," says newly elected Chart Thai MP Varawut Silapa-archa. "What they want to know is what the next government can do in order to bring the price of rice up and get a better standard of living."

Thai Rak Thai's Surakiart Sathirathai, a likely deputy prime minister, says the new government will focus on non-banking sectors that he feels the Democrats neglected: "There will be a whole range of programs for farmers, for industry, for small and medium-size businesses." Thai Rak Thai also promises to reduce non-performing loans. "We support the idea of a central asset-management corporation to purchase bad debt from financial institutions," says Surakiart. "We may be fortunate enough to find a model that requires as little taxpayers' money as possible."

Thaksin has to make it into office and stay there. Tough new anti-corruption rules have already claimed a few scalps in this election and Thaksin's may be next. The tycoon maintains that his failure to fully disclose his assets is an honest mistake, but his fate is now out of his hands and in the Constitutional Court's. A ruling against him would mean he is barred from politics for five years, though that would not preclude him from pulling the strings of government from behind the scenes. It also raises the prospect of Thailand becoming a "headless chicken" and plunging into chaos. But political scientist Pasuk Phongpaichit dismisses such fears. "It will be messy, international bankers will be nervous, and journalists will spread panic," he says. "But the world will not come to an end."

Such scenarios are beyond Kanchana, who only wants to see her candidate deliver on his promises. "We voted for Thaksin because we think he is the man to carry them out," she says. With his party's clear mandate, Thaksin now has the opportunity to put his money where his mouth is. The question is whether he will and whether the Constitutional Court will let him.

--Asiaweek

EAST ASIA

Democratic Ups-and-downs

By Philip Bowring

It has been three years since a wave of political change hit East Asia after the region's economic crisis. What, if any, common lessons about democracy, good government and constitutional development have been learned since Indonesia's President Suharto was peacefully overthrown, South Korea elected the veteran oppositionist Kim Dae Jung as president, Thailand acquired a new constitution and government, and the arrest of Anwar Ibrahim sent Malaysian politics into uncharted territory?

In theory, separation of powers should mean reducing the prospect of abuse of power, and decentralization should improve accountability and curb centrifugal tendencies by accommodating regional interests. Reality is different.

In Indonesia, the president has immense power in theory, but in practice his executive authority has been undermined by pro-Suharto elements within the military and the bureaucracy. That is a product of circumstance. However, separation of powers could be blamed for President Abdurrahman Wahid's difficulty in pushing badly needed legislation through a fragmented legislature, and for his inability to reform the judiciary and central bank.

Without decentralization, Indonesia may be in danger either of falling apart or of being returned to the Suharto system of authoritarian control. But decentralization may make local corruption worse, increase environmental damage and exacerbate communal tensions.

In Malaysia the parliamentary system has been scant brake on the autocratic instincts of Mahathir bin Mohamad and on the cronyism embedded in a political structure so long dominated by his party. Malaysia's federal system, with the opposition in power in some states, has helped keep pluralism alive, even though the price in terms of illiberal state laws and rape of the forests has been high.

South Korea has shown how a strong, elected executive presidency backed by a strong (Japanese-model) bureaucracy can make change happen. Separation of powers has not been a major hindrance to President Kim, although his party has never had a majority in the legislature.

South Korea has been toying with moving to a parliamentary system to reduce the tendency of executive presidents to abuse power. The Philippines considered this, too, after Ferdinand Marcos. But there seems little public pressure for it. Most citizens find it easier to identify with personalities, not parties. Other than the monarchies (Japan, Thailand, Malaysia) the only country in East Asia with a nonexecutive head of state is ex-British Singapore.

The U.S.-style systems in the Philippines and South Korea have roots in local political culture. In the U.S. tradition, popular participation in government at the lowest levels was the norm, government authority was suspect and the legal system enjoyed immense prestige. Asian antecedents are feudalism, colonialism and authoritarian Confucian bureaucracy.

Courtesy: The International Herald Tribune