

## Is Asian democracy at risk?

RALPH COSSA

Is democracy in trouble in Asia? From the removal of an elected president by less than constitutional means in the Philippines to an attempt to remove another sitting president in Taiwan to questions concerning the eligibility of the presumptive prime minister in Thailand to a near-coup by the ruling party in Japan and "pre-mature lame duckism" in South Korea to disturbing political instability in Asia's newest and most fragile democracy, Indonesia, the democratic process seems under attack and many point to last fall's events in Florida to argue that, even after over 200 years, kinks remain.

Fortunately, with a few notable exceptions, one can argue that recent events merely represent democracy "the worst form of government, except for all the others," as Winston Churchill once observed very much in progress, and not in serious peril. The key point is that, so far at least, the political process and its self-correcting mechanisms still generally work. And, while some Asian leaders took delight in making barbed remarks about the need for overseas observers

at U.S. elections, most comments came from officials who remain unprepared to submit themselves to a similar test of the people's will.

The Florida experience nonetheless should remind Americans that democracies are not perfected overnight and need constant nurturing and fine-tuning. That fine-tuning is very much in evidence in many of Asia's emerging democracies today. Efforts by nations like Thailand to root out corruption, for example, while causing some short-term pain and disruption, augur well for the future of democracy there. Others would still do well to follow the Thai model, despite its obvious imperfections and growing pains.

Charges of government corruption were also behind Joseph Estrada's ouster. George Bernard Shaw once said that "democracy is a device that ensures we shall be governed no better than we deserve." Surely the Philippine people deserved better than they were receiving from "Erap." Nonetheless, the abandonment of the constitutional process, no matter how seemingly justified, provides cause for concern, especially given the decision of the Philippine military to unilaterally interpret "the will of the people" and abandon its

commander in chief. The good news is that Estrada's constitutional successor, Vice President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, assumed the presidency and the Supreme Court gave credence to the process. Any other outcome would have represented an even more serious setback for Philippine democracy. Estrada's current insistence that he did not resign but only "temporarily stepped aside" provides the Philippine Senate with an opportunity to complete the constitutional process by officially finding him guilty and thus clearing the way for civil prosecution as well.

Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian's political travail demonstrates that it is much easier to lead an opposition than to run a government. From the viewpoint of this observer, however, Taipei's political "crisis" (which appears to have been temporarily put on hold) is primarily about hard-ball politics and power-sharing; thus far, it falls well short of being a constitutional crisis. It has, however, severely limited Chen's ability to move his government forward and has affected consumer and investor confidence in Taiwan. It has also helped to guarantee a lack of progress in

cross-strait interaction, since Beijing is taking obvious pleasure in Chen's struggles and is unlikely to do anything that would earn him points domestically. However, should Chen's solution be to form an alliance with opposition Kuomintang factions still sympathetic to former President Lee Teng-hui, Beijing may wish it had been more responsive to Chen earlier.

In Japan, infighting among Liberal Democratic Party factions is hardly anything new, although both the nature of former LDP Secretary General Kato Koichi's late-November challenge to Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori and its dismal failure took many by surprise. While the LDP clings to control, few expect Mori to still be in charge at summer's end (if he lasts that long), as the democratic process plays itself out in the face of the LDP's inability or unwillingness to pursue genuine internal political and economic reform. The democratic process works slowly in Japan, but it works.

Meanwhile in South Korea, President Kim Dae Jung is being treated like a lame duck by opposition politicians who are already looking ahead (perhaps a bit overconfidently) to their assump-

tion of power in two years. While it is true that Kim seems more popular abroad than at home witness his well-deserved Nobel Peace Prize it remains to be seen which side will suffer more in terms of public support from the failure to develop a bipartisan approach to dealing with Seoul's economic challenges and its predominantly one-way engagement policy toward Pyongyang.

All these "crises" appear manageable. This may not be the case in the country where the democratic process still appears most at risk Indonesia given President Abdurrahman Wahid's mercurial actions and his failure to live up to promises to transfer significant authority over day-to-day operations to his vice president, Megawati Sukarnoputri (who remains largely untested herself). US attempts to pressure Jakarta into holding an increasingly demoralized army accountable for past sins, while stressing the urgent need to disarm West Timor militias and handle other separatists more gently, may seem reasonable. But these well-meaning efforts will all be for naught if the democratic experiment in Indonesia fails. Conversely, if democracy takes hold in ASEAN's pre-eminent capital which

remains possible, but is by no means assured it could prove an irresistible force throughout the rest of Southeast Asia and beyond.

In light of this challenge, the administration of US President George W. Bush needs to reaffirm America's commitment to the promotion of democracy and human rights in Indonesia, but should pursue this long-standing US national objective in a manner that places priority on internal stability and territorial integrity. In the Philippines, Washington should use behind-the-scenes diplomacy to press for a renewed commitment to the constitutional process. Elsewhere, the Bush administration needs to remember that nurturing existing democracies is at least as important as trying to create or inspire new ones.

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### THAILAND

## Taming the media

JULIAN GEARING *in Bangkok*

THEPCHAI Yong isn't easily fazed. Drug lords, corrupt police, hostile pimps, former dictators he's taken them all on as news editor of Thai television station ITV. His dramatic video footage of traffic cops extorting money from motorists prompted a shake-up in police ranks. He stirred controversy with his groundbreaking stories on corruption, drug trafficking, child prostitution and the secret designs of retired generals. In his efforts to establish ITV as Thailand's top investigative news channel, Thepchai has stepped on quite a few toes. But now Thepchai may have met his match. And it is not a crime boss or an angry police chief, but Thaksin Shinawatra, the country's incoming prime minister. The outspoken newsman was forced to step down from his position in November after Thaksin bought a controlling stake in ITV. Thepchai is convinced that the tycoon-turned-politician, miffed at critical stories by ITV about his candidacy, made the move in order to silence the loss-making TV station. "Thaksin knew from the beginning he wouldn't make any money out of ITV," says Thepchai, 45. "He wouldn't have bought in if he hadn't had the ambition to become prime minister. As Thaksin is sworn in as Thailand's next leader on Feb. 9, he promises a new era of government, stressing real help for ordinary Thais. But if Thepchai and others are to be believed, Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai party have turned what used to

be Thailand's version of CNN into little more than a mouthpiece for the new prime minister.

The ITV controversy, which started with Thepchai's ouster, blew open on Jan. 12 when 20 of his former colleagues at the station, led by managing editor Jira Hong-anrerng, went public with charges that pressure had been applied on them to do stories favorable to Thai Rak Thai and Thaksin's Shin Corp. business empire. "There was so much intervention by the executives, so much political interference," says Jira. After the whistle-blowing, Jira was called in for a meeting with his bosses. "They told me I had a problem, because what I had done was to the detriment of ITV. They said I was wrong to tell the public. And there on the table was the resignation form. I was forced to resign. Similar allegations have been forthcoming from another television station, Channel 3. Popular TV commentator Kasemsant Weerakun recently announced that he and his news team had quit the station following pressure to toe the Thai Rak Thai line. The TV station had been bleeding red ink it lost 775 million baht (\$18 million) in 2000 and the Democrats worried that if it collapsed, it could adversely affect Siam Commercial Bank, a key ITV shareholder and one of the country's biggest banks. In order to attract outside capital, Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai lifted the 10% limit on ownership in the station, enabling Shin Corp. to swoop in and purchase a 41% stake. While in office, Thaksin could conceivably wield influence not only over ITV,

one of just two independent TV stations in Thailand, but over all the state channels. "I worry that Thaksin's party will interfere in other stations," says lawyer Thongbai Thongbao. "The best way to shut the eyes and ears of the people is to control the media. Thaksin's opponents also fear that he will be equally aggressive in exercising his clout in other sectors. "There is the specter of politics dominating business, in the sense that Thaksin will have the power to force businesses to act the way he wants," says Thepchai, who now leads Nation TV, the other independent channel and a rival of ITV. "This could lead to a form of patronage system in which business and politics are combined. Shin Corp. now says it will sell its ITV shares as stipulated in the original terms of agreement, under which the station must go public by the end of this year. But the damage has been done. Once seen as the paragon of objectivity and fearless reporting, ITV has emerged from the episode with its credibility in tatters. "ITV was set up in the wake of the May 1992 democracy uprising," says democracy activist Adul Khiewboriboon, "because too many people had been killed and injured as a result of the false news and lies spread by the state-run media." No one is suggesting that Thailand is about to return to those days, but its system of checks and balances is clearly weaker today than it was when Thepchai was able to go after the bad guys

Courtesy: Asiaweek

### CHINA

## As the world changes

TANVIR AHMAD KHAN

IT is not difficult to see that China would play the most pivotal role in re-shaping the global alignment of forces during the first quarter of the new century. In the days ahead, comprehensive national power, of which a robust economy would be the major component, would be a more important determinant of international stature than pure military muscle. Our Chinese friends rightly look with distaste at the use of the word 'superpower' but the fact remains that in foreseeable future, China would be the only country with the capacity and potential of being the second superpower in the world. One hopes that it would continue to reject the traditional attitudes and attributes of a superpower.

Beijing's first preference should therefore be to pursue relations with both Washington and Moscow to mutual advantage without turning it into a triangular zero-sum game in the context of global security. This could, however, change if Washington disturbs the fragile balance between constructive engagement and the so-called containment of China established by the Clinton administration. One adverse consequence would be the reactive transformation of the present Sino-Russian relationship into a strategic alliance to counter US moves in Europe, Central Asia and the Pacific, adjudged detrimental to the interests of either state.

There are excellent reasons why China should avoid policies of confrontation unless left with no option. After centuries of decline and struggle, it is now poised to enter the world with immense potential and prestige.

China relies heavily on international trade. The United States is the destination of 26% of its exports while, at present, its imports from US are of the order of 11%. The security partner of the United States in the Pacific, Japan, accounts for 17.5% of China's total exports and 19% of its imports. A major focus of Chinese attention is the coming challenge of joining the World Trade Organization (WTO). Already the private sector share of Chinese GDP is 33% - only four percentage points behind the state enterprises.

China's foreign policy continues to reflect a steadfast adherence to the objective of rapid economic development. It has tried to promote a stable architecture of mutually beneficial relations amongst the major powers conducive to the emergence of a truly multipolar world. A major Chinese concern in the 1990s was to combine intelligent management of Sino-US ties with a sustained, upwardly mobile, relationship with Russia.

While the former remained subject to some fluctuations, the latter went through properly thought-out phases of consolidation and expansion. More recently, China has intensified its exploration of the possibilities of fruitful cooperation with India partly because of its intrinsic promise and partly because

China does not want India to play a negative partisan role in the containment cycles of the US policy towards China.

As to the constructive engagement impulse in the US policy, Beijing has sought to reinforce it not only by making the Sino-US economic ties indispensable to both the nations but also by taking a positive interest in promoting peace and reconciliation in the Korean peninsula and by signalling the acceptance of US-Japan security relationship as long as it is not directed against China.

The litmus test is Taiwan. Following the rise to power in Taiwan of Democratic Progressive Party's President Chen Shui-bian, China has tried to forestall the danger of a higher emphasis on Taiwan's independent status by creating incentives for Taiwan to cooperate more closely with the motherland - the mainland China.

But Beijing also expects Washington and Tokyo to resist the temptation to encourage the independence lobby in Taiwan. In the Chinese eyes this restraint is pledged in all the joint communiques and statements signed by Washington and Beijing since 1972. This is why the question of the continued supply of US sophisticated weapons to Taiwan and the provision of theatre missile defence system to it acquires crucial significance.

On February 6, the Chinese foreign ministry again pointed out that the US plans to build an anti-missile system go against the trend

of the time and are detrimental to international disarmament and arms control efforts.

Between the dichotomies of containment and engagement, there is some middle space in US thinking described as 'conditional engagement'. Colin Powell's characterization of China as a competitor and potential rival (but not an inevitable foe) probably fits into that space. In the past, conditional containment has been spelt out in some detail. An objective analysis of the Chinese foreign policy shows that in assuming the role of a responsible major power, China already fulfils these so-called pre-conditions.

Unfortunately, another strand of US opinion, which may seek to assert itself during the Bush era, is guided more by a priori abstract considerations than by empirical evidence. According to this viewpoint, China has a civilizational compulsion to be expansionist and hegemonic and, therefore, must be effectively contained. The protagonists of this view want nothing short of a fundamental change in the "Chinese mindset".

This is a grave fallacy as the West's entente with China rests on a viable balance of power and interests, underpinned by solemn treaties and agreements concluded by states with different identities, characteristics, culture and history. The gemeinschaft of Western Europe is simply irrelevant in the Asia-Pacific region.

During my own Moscow years as Pakistan's ambassador, I noticed

the care both China and Russia took to emphasize that the deepening of the Sino-Soviet strategic understanding was not in the nature of an anti-US alliance. Subsequently, however, there were voices that a new coalition inclusive of India and Iran was becoming increasingly necessary to restrain American unilateralism. The decisions that the new US administration takes on some crucial issues of interest to Russia and China would make an important impact on the nature and scope of Sino-Russian 'axis'.

India has worked overtime to pit the emerging strategic partners against the natural post-Soviet revival of Islam in Central Asia by drumming up the threat posed by extremist elements. China has gone along with Moscow's reassertion of influence in this sensitive, resource-rich region for reasons of realpolitik. Rapprochement between Russia and China is now too well advanced to suffer a major reversal but its contents and purpose are still open to adjustments in larger major power equations.

We, in Pakistan, need to go deeper into the Sino-Soviet relationship to work out how it will impinge on our national interest and what would be the likely response of these two major powers to the Indian bid to be a significant coordinate of their strategic configuration be it a triangle involving the United States, or a quadrangle that brings in New Delhi as well.

Courtesy: The Dawn of Pakistan

### INDONESIA

## Safe, for now

Even if Megawati becomes President, she, too, can face the same forces within Parliament. The institutional basis to Indonesian democracy remains weak and that is a factor all leaders will have to contend with.

ABDURRAHMAN Wahid has won a temporary reprieve. The Indonesia Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), led by the Vice-President, Megawati Sukarnoputri, and the former ruling party, Golkar, have said there is no legal basis to support advancing a session of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) for a possible impeachment move against the President.

Political tensions have been rising in Indonesia after Wahid was censured by the House of Representatives (DPR) last week. The Vice-President's party, Golkar and the military (TNI) faction joined hands with the Islamist opposition to censure the President for his alleged dealings in two corruption scandals. The President's supporters, belonging to the Nadhlatul Ulama, have gone on the rampage in eastern Java, torching the headquarters of Golkar in the city of Surabaya.

It is, indeed, ironical that, for a country which was dominated by corruption and cronyism during the 32-year-rule of Gen. Suharto, the first-elected President of Indonesia in 40 years Wahid is on the mat for "corruption". While corruption cannot be condoned, especially at the highest levels, the focus in Indonesia has quickly shifted from the corruption of the Suharto era to the two scandals involving Wahid.

With the Indonesian Supreme Court "freeing" Gen. Suharto from house arrest and saying that he should be brought to trial when he is "fit", it is clear that the former General is unlikely to face the courts again. He had been acquitted earlier in a minor case of embezzlement last year. The former dictator's son, Tommy Suharto, is a fugitive from justice the "short" arm of the law has not been able to locate him anywhere. His continued evasion of justice is a signal that the law enforcement efforts have solid links to the past regime.

In the current political scenario, it would appear that with the two major political parties deciding to back-off from an immediate confrontation with Wahid, the President has some time to ponder his future. It is, however, clear that the Vice-President, who will be President if Wahid is forced to resign anytime in the future, has made her first move by backing the findings of a parliamentary committee into the two corruption scandals involving Wahid. She has, however, stopped short of supporting any moves for convening an early session of the MPR to consider impeaching Wahid. "Our faction will not support an expedited special session because it goes against the

Constitution," Heri Achmadi, PDI-P secretary, was quoted as saying. He added that all 153 members of the faction had been barred from signing a petition calling for the President's resignation.

In turn, the Golkar chairman, Akbar Tandjung, said: "The Golkar faction has decided to follow up the issuance of the first memorandum of censure and see if the President improves the way he runs the Government. And our legislators have been ordered to comply with the party's ruling on how to exercise legislative rights." "Our faction will be patient and wait for corrections to be made by the President within the next three months. If no improvement is made, we will call for the issuance of the second memorandum of censure," he added.

For the record, Lt. Gen. Agus Wijoyo, told the press in Jakarta: "With regard to the institution of the presidency, our (TNI) stance is one of obedience and loyalty to the legitimately and constitutionally elected President." "The TNI is of the opinion that other possibilities remain open and (the censure) should not automatically and necessarily be followed by a special session (to impeach Wahid)," the Army chief added. In 1999, when Wahid was elected President, it was evident that he was a compromise candidate. Today, in 2001, the other, bigger players in Parliament are making their moves against the President, whose main body of support remains his religious supporters. It is clear that the President's future is in the hands of the PDI-P and Megawati personally. There is no love lost between Golkar and Wahid, despite the fact that Golkar claims to have snapped links with the Suharto family.

However, even if Megawati becomes President, she, too, can face the same forces within Parliament. The institutional basis to Indonesian democracy remains weak and that is a factor all leaders will have to contend with.

Wahid, meanwhile, has repeatedly ruled out the possibility of his resignation. In a reference to the recent torching of the Golkar office in Surabaya, the President remarked: "All of this actually (serves as) a bitter lesson for all of us, and it should not continue. But this is the price to pay for the continuing process of democracy."

Courtesy: The Hindu of India