



The America-Eurasia Center's Southeast Asia Program

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Southeast Asia in Flux



Street protests in the weeks after the 2021 military coup. Many protestors carry photos of the now arrested leader of Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi. Photo Credit: The New York Times

Sanaa Zakariya
The America-Eurasia Center
www.EurasiaCenter.org

Eurasia Brief
Southeast Asia Program
America-Eurasia Business Coalition
www.usebc.org

Southeast Asia Nations in Flux

Regional Introduction

Southeast Asia is a region that is quickly becoming more critical to the global world. This is a region that is often forgotten about when we think of world affairs or conflict zones, but like many other parts of the world, Southeast Asia also has a story to tell. Their story goes from British colonialism to dictatorships in the latter half of the 20th century and eventually becoming one of the world's foremost tourist destinations and a manufacturing hub. It is one of the foremost regions for retail manufacturing and agriculture in the world today. The region also has the distinction of having two of the remaining five communist countries in the world, Vietnam and Laos. All Southeast Asian countries, except Timor-Leste, are connected through the Association of Southeast Nations (ASEAN). ASEAN was created in 1967 in Bangkok, Thailand. The 2nd half of the 20th century Southeast Asia was detangling themselves from European colonization and just as the region began to finally stabilize, the Asian Financial Crisis came crashing in. In Thailand in 1997 the crisis began when the Thai Baht and the U.S. dollar currency exchange rate collapsed. Currency devaluations soon spread throughout the entire region including Japan and South Korea. Most of the Asian stock markets crashed and oil prices and national revenues fell rapidly. The IMF arranged several bailout packages for some of the most economically affected countries. It took almost a year for the Asian economies to fully stabilize again. As the western world continues to be further occupied with the decline of democracy in Europe and the United States, the world has begun to turn to East and Southeast Asia for political and economic stability in the 21st century.



Thai protests in 2020. Many protestors adopted the 3-finger salute from the Hunger Games books as a sign of resistance to the government and police. Photo Credit: AFP

Thailand

Recent/Current Events

A new constitution was drafted in 2017 by the military leaders which created a new framework for the government and in 2019 the government held the first elections since the 2014 coup. The Pheu Thai opposition party won the majority of seats but were mostly unable to form a government due to the fact that many of the election laws created in the new constitution were designed to keep the military, and their proxies, in power. In 2020 protests swept the country protesting the Thai Monarchy and their entrenched grip on power and politics in the country. The protests lasted until the early months of 2021. During the protests Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha declared the use of the Lese-Majeste law against the protesters. This law makes it illegal for people to criticize or insult the Thai Monarchy. Hundreds of people were arrested in accordance with this law.

However, the draconian nature of the government's restrictions on speech led to an outpouring of public support for democracy and republicanism, with support for a republican form of government hitting all-time highs. The people of Thailand have shown remarkable resilience in recent years despite repeated rollbacks of democratic progress. Within Thailand, younger generations especially have taken it upon themselves to forcefully push for democracy. Support for

democratic reforms is most prevalent among younger generations of Thais, giving hope that a truly democratic future may be in Thailand's future.

Beyond issues surrounding democracy, Thailand has seen several stories of both tragedy and triumph in recent years. In June of 2018, 14 youth soccer players were rescued by Thai Navy SEALs after being trapped in an underwater cave for over 2 weeks. The ordeal saw thousands of ordinary Thais come together to do whatever it took to rescue the boys, efforts that were ultimately successful. Despite the mission's success, 2 SEALs died of illnesses stemming from their rescue efforts. More recently, on October 6, 2022, 36 people were killed when a gunman attacked a childcare center in northeast Thailand. This was the deadliest shooting in Thai history. As of October 2022, the investigation into the motive of the shooter remains ongoing.

Statistics

Capital: Bangkok

Currency: Thai Baht

Government: Constitutional Monarchy

Population: 69.1 million

Official Language: Thai, ethnic dialects

Religions: 92% Buddhist, 5% Muslim, groups of Taoists, Hindus, Christians



Queue lines for fuel and gas due amid a global rise in food and energy prices
Photo Credit: The Financial Times

Laos

Recent Events

Laos is currently hurtling towards a massive economic crisis due to the large amount of borrowers' debt from China. The country is deeply indebted to China for several infrastructure projects that they have begun over the past few years. This debt crisis has been exacerbated by the continuing Covid-19 pandemic as well as supply issues and rising oil prices related to the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine. The country's overall debt is up to 14.5 billion, about half of which is owed to the Chinese for funding projects such as the Laos-China railway system. However, Laos has made notable progress on other infrastructure projects, most notably a key passenger railway link between itself and neighboring Thailand that will bring jobs, encourage investment, and foster greater intercultural ties. Laos has also been pursuing closer relations with many of its southeast Asian neighbors, hoping that closer political and cultural ties foster economic development. Laos has improved its bilateral relationship with Vietnam, which has fostered increased cross border trade and contributed to political stability on both sides of the border. Similarly, Laos has taken particular care to improve its relations with neighboring Cambodia. While Cambodia has seen marked democratic backsliding in recent years, its economic growth and dynamism stand out

among regional peers. Thus, Laos has increased trade and cultural links with its neighbor that have resulted in close political cooperation. The cooperation between Laos and its neighbors, brought closer by their shared experiences in the 1970s, has proven to be a positive development for regional stability at a time when the wider Indo-Pacific region is undergoing strategic turmoil.

Along with the billions in debt in Chinese loans, Laos' economy has experienced an economic crash in recent months and has a current inflation rate of 23.6%, the highest the country has seen in two decades. The cost of basic goods has been skyrocketing all year and the tiny nation is now nearing a default on their foreign debts. The World Bank has downgraded its growth forecasts for Laos and the country's medium term economic future looks grim despite the positive developments stemming from better ties with neighboring Cambodia and Vietnam.

Statistics

Capital: Vientiane

Currency: Lao Kip

Government: One party Communist system

Population: 7.2 million

Official language: Lao

Religions: 64.7% Buddhist, 31% not religious, 2% Christian, 2.1 other



Street protests in the weeks after the 2021 military coup. Many protestors carry photos of the now arrested leader of Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi. Photo Credit: The New York Times

Myanmar

Recent Events

In 2017 a military campaign of ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya Muslim population broke out in the Rakhine state on the Western side of the country. The Rohingya have been persecuted in Myanmar for decades, but Aung San Suu Kyi came under fire from many world leaders for not speaking out against the military's violation of human rights. The Myanmar military, known as the Tatmadaw, still have enormous government power and their party, the Union Solidarity and Development party, still have 25% of parliamentary seats allotted to them every election automatically. The latest development from this fragmented country came in February of 2021 when the military took power in a coup ousting the first, and so far, only Myanmar State Counselor (Prime Minister), Aung San Suu Kyi who they subsequently placed under house arrest once again. She has now been in solitary house arrest since last February. The coup came a few months after the military's party did poorly in the 2020 parliamentary elections and Aung San Suu Kyi's party,

The National League for Democracy, won an outright majority. Months of public protests engulfed the country and since the coup almost 2,000 people have been killed by the military junta and over 10,000 have been arrested or disappeared. Myanmar is currently banned from all ASEAN meetings and events until a peace plan is with the military.

In addition to the rapidly deteriorating state of democracy and individual rights in Myanmar, the country's military has also been accused of carrying out a genocide against the Rohingya Muslim population that live in the northwest part of the country. On May 21, 2022, the U.S. State Department declared the Burmese government's campaign against the Rohingya a genocide. An estimated 25,000 Rohingya have been killed and another 700,000 displaced since 2017. Neighboring Bangladesh and Malaysia have become overrun with refugees fleeing the violence and have pleaded with the international community for assistance.

Statistics

Capital: Naypyidaw

Government: Military Dictatorship (Previously Parliamentary Democracy)

Official Language: Burmese

Currency: Myanmar Kyat

Population: 54.41 million

Religions: 88.6% Buddhist, 6.3% Christian, 2.3% Muslim



Supporters of Philippine Vice President Leni Robredo, a presidential candidate for the 2022 election, cheer during a campaign rally in San Fernando City, Pampanga Province, Philippines
Photo Credit: Reuters

The Philippines

Recent Events

In 2016 Rodrigo Duterte was elected president and began a violent “war on drugs” campaign throughout the country with the aim to rid the Philippines of drugs. This violent campaign has led to the deaths of over 12,000 Filipinos as of this year. Most deaths occurred extrajudicially and without trial. Many of these victims are poor and low-income citizens, but only about 2,500 people were actually killed by the Philippines National Police because Duterte supported and encouraged people to go after so-called “drug runners” and “hold-up men” themselves. This led to hundreds of extrajudicial killings during Duterte’s presidency. In the Philippines 2022 Presidential election, Bongbong Marcos, the son of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos, was elected president and Sarah Duterte, the daughter of Rodrigo Duterte, was elected as vice president. In the Philippines, the vice president and president are elected on separate tickets. Even though he was the son of the former brutal dictator he was still elected with a majority of the popular vote. The bulk of his popular support comes from 30–45-year-olds who would have not been alive or would have only been young children when his father was in his last years in power.

Despite Rodrigo Duterte’s initial desire to pursue close ties with China at the expense of those with the United States, new President Marcos has pursued a more nuanced policy. Marcos

has described a future for the Philippines without the U.S. as “inconceivable” and sought to improve ties between the two countries’ militaries by resuming joint exercises. Filipino democracy has not improved markedly under Marcos, with violence against journalists still a serious problem. On October 4, 2022 a popular radio journalist known for his criticisms of Duterte and Marcos and his outspoken support for democracy was gunned down by unknown assailants.

The Filipino economy has made steady progress as it recovers from COVID, however that progress is being undermined by persistently high inflation and concerns about corruption. However, with improving relations with the United States, it is possible that future investment from the world’s largest economy will help boost the Philippines' sluggish recovery.

Statistics

Capital: Manila

Population: 109.6 million

Official Language: Filipino, English

Currency: Philippine Peso

Government: Democratic Republic

Religions: 79.5 Catholic, 6% Muslim, 9% other Christians



A bustling night market in Vietnam's capital Hanoi exemplifies the country's impressive economic growth
Photo Credit: Wendy Wei Tours

Vietnam

Recent Events

Vietnam's major industries are agriculture and manufacturing. Particularly in the south of the country where much of the farmlands are located. Their economy is powered by agricultural exports and tourism. Vietnam has the fastest growing economy in Southeast Asia and also has the biggest tourist industry. They have relatively low inequality. Several people, from a democracy activist to a noodle vendor, have recently been arrested for speaking against the state due to the country's strict restrictions on personal and political freedoms. Vietnam is the least traditionally religious of the Southeast Asian countries and only about 26% of the country is religious. The current Prime Minister of Vietnam is Phạm Minh Chính and the President is Nguyễn Xuân Phúc. Nguyễn Phú Trọng is the General secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam. Vietnam is ruled as a one-party communist state and curtails most government dissent and has restrictions on basic

freedoms such as freedom of the press, speech and religion. Its main industries are retail, manufacturing, agriculture, and food.

In recent years however, Vietnam has made progress on opening its economy up to foreign investment and improving living standards. Vietnam is now Asia's fastest growing economy and is showing no signs of slowing down. The country's large investments in infrastructure are starting to show dividends as Western companies like Apple are looking to expand manufacturing operations in the country. Vietnam has made impressive progress in fostering better economic relations with its former foe in the United States. Despite territorial disputes over the rights to the South China Sea, Vietnam has also been keen to avoid alienating China. While the country's human rights record remains poor, Vietnam has fostered greater economic freedom for its citizens by opening up its economy to private investment and encouraging the development of local private enterprises. Vietnam's transition from war-torn poverty to a thriving and stable middle income state is impressive, even if the country remains politically repressive.

Statistics

Capital: Hanoi

Currency: Vietnamese Dong

Government: Communist State

Official Language: Vietnamese

Population: 97.6 million

Official Language: Vietnamese

Religions: 14.9% Buddhist, 7.3 Catholic, others Taoist, Protestant, Daoist



The Sultan of Brunei waving to crowds during his Golden Jubilee parade throne. Photo Credit: CNN

Brunei

Recent Events

In recent years Brunei has moved towards a stricter version of Islamic law since the Sultan has been trying to refine his image. The Sultan's reputation is actually the opposite of conservative Islam surrounds himself with beautiful women and has a fleet of luxury yachts as well as 7,000 luxury brand cars. The government has now implemented a new strict penal code based around the strictest version of Sharia Islamic law. Many of these so-called crimes were already banned under a previous penal code, but nothing was traditionally enforced like in many other Islamic countries. These new laws include being stoned to death for gay and pre-marital sexual activity, 40 whip lashes for lesbian sex and abortion is completely illegal. These laws have been condemned by many human rights groups as well as the United Nations. The international community has called for sanctioning the Sultan if this new penal code is enforced.

Even as the democratic situation in the country has deteriorated, the Sultan has been effective at safeguarding the country's economic stability. Brunei has recovered remarkably well from a COVID induced downturn, continuing on progress towards diversification. Growth in the food/agriculture and farming sectors has been particularly robust. Inflation, while elevated, has

largely been kept under control and GDP growth remains strong. Brunei had an extraordinarily effective vaccination rollout that helped it move on from the pandemic quicker than many neighboring countries. In all, Brunei has been an economic standout, noted for its stability, progress, and steady growth even in the face of challenging headwinds.

Statistics

Population: 446, 710

Currency: Brunei Dollar

Capital: Bandar Seri Begawan

Official Language: Malay

Religions: 78.8% Muslim, 8.7% Christian, 7.8% Buddhist, 4.7% others

Government: Absolute Monarchy



The ancient Angkor Wat temple in Angkor, Cambodia Photo Credit: Britannica

Cambodia

Recent Events

The current prime minister of Cambodia is Hun Sen who is the longest serving prime minister of Cambodia and has been the nation's leader since 1985. General elections are held every five years, the next one being in July of 2023. Currently the Cambodian People's Party is in power in parliament and they have effectively ruled the country as a one-party non-communist state since 1979. The party has continually been elected by the public the past few decades. It joined ASEAN in 1999 finally becoming a proper member of the Southeast Asian region after decades of violent conflict and isolation. Elections are held every five years, the next one being in July of 2023. Communal elections for councilors and commune chiefs were held this past June of 2022. The Cambodian People's party won the most seats with 78% of the popular vote. The opposition Candlelight party gained more seats than expected and now holds 18% of the seats. The ruling party and leader have come under fire over the years for a sedition crackdown that has put hundreds of opposition party members in detention.

Cambodia has seen some recent economic progress, with GDP growth projected to be a respectable 5% in 2022 and 6% in 2023. While COVID hampered Cambodia's progress towards upper middle-income status, growth has been steady and solid. Deep political repression that militantly enforces a one-party state has preserved Cambodia's security and prevented large scale unrest that could threaten its economic growth. Increasingly warm relations with neighboring Laos also provide an opportunity to build on the undeniable economic progress that has been made in recent years. However, the repressive and brutal nature of the Cambodian regime prevents it from fully accessing Western investment that could be key to truly robust growth.

Statistics

Capital: Phnom Penh

Currency: Cambodian Riel

Religions: 90% Buddhist, 4% Muslim, 3% Christian, 3% other

Official Language: Khmer

Population: 16.72 million

Government: Constitutional Monarchy



Student activists protesting against rising fuel prices and taxes in the capital city of Jakarta.
Photo Credit: New York Times

Indonesia

Recent Events

Indonesia is one of the leading ASEAN countries and one of the most stable in Southeast Asia. The current president is Joko Widodo who was elected in 2014. In 2019 he was reelected, but his opponent, former General Prabowo Subianto, refused to concede resulting in violent protests throughout the country until pressure from the international community forced him to admit defeat. This past year there have been rumors started by the wealthy elite about whether Jokowi, as he is popularly known, will attempt to outstay his presidential tenure and amend the constitution. Due to this news this past April hundreds of students took to the streets to protest the possible constitutional changes along with rising food prices and employment issues. Now in recent weeks there have been large widespread protests by university students throughout the islands, primarily in Jakarta, protesting the fuel increases. It is the first price hike on fuel subsidies in eight years. The government deployed hundreds of police units to guard gas stations across the nation. This comes at a sensitive time for the country which is already suffering from a seven-year high inflation rate due to rising global prices driven by the war in Ukraine.

The protests take place with the backdrop of improving nominal economic data for Indonesia. The country's main stock exchange, the Jakarta Composite, has been the best performing market in the Indo-Pacific region, posting a gain of 6.51% when most major indices are showing notable losses. Rising commodity prices also buoy the topline of the country's major corporations, further fueling public anger as such profits have not translated into better living standards for average people. However, Indonesia has been the site of some important emerging sectors, with green energy being a particular avenue many see Indonesia pursuing as climate change continues to pose a threat to coastal and archipelagic nations.

Statistics

Capital: Jakarta

Currency: Indonesian Rupee

Population: 272 million

Religions: 87% Muslim, 7% protestant, 1.5% Hindu, 3% Catholic

Official Language: Indonesian

Government: Presidential Republic



Anti-government protests in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur in July of 2021. Photo Credit: Bloomberg

Malaysia

Recent Events

In 2018 national elections ended the reign of the long-ruling Barisan Nasional Party and brought in the opposition Pakatan Harapan Party. This was the first time the opposition party was in power since Malaysian independence. This coalition soon collapsed, paving the way for the king to appoint Muhyiddin Yassin as the next prime minister and return the former ruling party to power once again. He restricted parliamentary sessions and even shut down Parliament last January. During the summer of 2021 Malaysian citizens began protesting the government's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic and demanded that Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin resign his office. Malaysian authorities have used laws to broadly attack and arrest dozens of activists for protesting the pandemic policies. The prime minister and his cabinet resigned last August and Ismail Sabri took over, but these violations of democratic governance have still yet to be addressed by the new government. In recent years, including over the pandemic, there has also been much political infighting between political parties and within the current leading government.

Recently, Malaysia has made very limited progress on rectifying basic human rights concerns, passing a landmark measure in October 2022 that finally criminalizes stalking. This has been a persistent and serious issue that has terrorized the lives of countless Malaysians, especially Malaysian women and this measure is a welcome and important (albeit belated) step towards protecting Malaysia's most vulnerable citizens. However, much more must be done to protect Malaysians from both interpersonal and state sponsored violence

Statistics

Capital: Kuala Lumpur

Government: Parliamentary Democracy (With a royal ruling family)

Currency: Malaysian Ringgit

Population: 32.7 million

Official Language: Malay

Religions: 61.3% Muslim, 19.8% Buddhist, 9.2% Christianity, 6.3% Hinduism, 1.3% others



Voters waiting in line wearing masks during the 2020 election in Singapore.
Photo Credit: The New York Times.

Singapore

Recent Events

The current president is Halimah Yacob, who is also the first female president. The current prime minister is Lee Hsien Loong and has been serving in the position since 2004. He is also the general secretary of the People's Action Party. Singapore is one of the most prosperous countries in the world and has the highest GDP per capita in Asia. The nation's last elections were held in 2020 where the PAP gained a supermajority in Parliament, but the opposition parties made their most significant gains in many years. The party won 83 of the 93 available parliamentary seats. The opposition party gained 10 seats during the 2020 election, the most an opposing party has gained since independence. The country's economy took a hit during the worst days of the pandemic since they are heavily reliant on tourism and trade.

However, Singapore has seen robust growth as the pandemic recedes. Singapore is consistently ranked as the freest economy in the world and has attracted significant foreign investment in recent years. For such a small country, Singapore is remarkably well developed, wealthy, and stable. Singapore had a very successful COVID vaccination campaign, with 92% of eligible adults being fully vaccinated with effective mRNA vaccines.

Statistics

Capital: Singapore City

Population: 5.68 million

Government: Parliamentary Democracy

Currency: Singapore dollar

Official Language: Malay, Mandarin, English

Religions: 33.1 % Buddhist, 18.1% Christian, 14.3% Muslim, Taoist 10.2%, Hindu 5%



Supporters shout slogan during a campaign rally of the CNRT (National Congress for the Reconstruction of Timor Leste) Party in Dili, East Timor, Tuesday, March 15, 2022 Photo Credit: ABC News

Timor-Leste

Recent Events

Timor-Leste is one of the youngest and smallest nations in the world, but despite its economic struggles and impoverished population, they have still managed to create a thriving democracy in a region of the world where democracy is hard to come by. The current president is Jose Ramos Horta, who was recently elected in May of 2022. He was formerly prime minister and is also known as the founder of FRETILIN, the revolutionary independence movement. Although the nation has made great progress after such a violent independence there are still many issues facing the island. Timor-Leste is the only country in Southeast Asia who is not a part of ASEAN. They formally applied for membership in the organization in 2011. The country was hoping to enter the bloc this year, but Cambodia, who currently holds the rotating chair, has put a temporary pause on their accession to the group due to few existing concerns like their close ties with China and not speaking out against the military junta in Myanmar. Singapore is also still wary of the nation entering the economic and trading bloc. Timor-Leste abstained from a UN vote last year condemning the military

takeover in Myanmar. Joining ASEAN will bring much needed investment and economic influence on a country still struggling through the effects of occupation as well as the covid-19 pandemic these past few years.

Statistics

Capital: Dili

Government: Parliamentary Democracy

Population: 1.3 million

Official Language: Portuguese, Tetun

Currency: U.S Dollar

Religions: 97.3% Catholic, 1.9% Protestant, 1% Muslim, Other Christians

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