German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence for Public Policy and Good Governance
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Grasp the pattern, read the trend

Asia in Review

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Dear Reader,

Wishing you a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, CPG is presenting you this week's update on major developments from South, Southeast and East Asia. Among the topics covered in this issue are the human rights situation in Bangladesh, the Maldives, Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia, Cambodia and Myanmar, the growing omnipresence of the police state in China's Xinjiang region, rising political Islam in Indonesia, Malaysia's changing political landscape as well as India and China in the light of the US National Security Strategy and China's foreign policy in Southeast Asia.

I hope you find the selection of articles useful and you enjoy reading!

With best regards,

Henning Glaser

Director, German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence for Public Policy and Good Governance (CPG)

P.S. Don't forget to follow CPG's events and activities on our website.

Main Sections

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Law and Politics in South Asia

India: Ruling BJP wins state assembly elections

Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) victory in the Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh state assembly elections, is also a major confirmation of the power of Prime Minister Modi who was the chief minister of the Gujarat state three times before becoming Prime Minister. In Gujarat BJP won 99 out of 182 seats and in Himachal Pradesh 44 out 68 seats. BJP together with its allies now forms 19 of India's 29 state governments [Aljazeera] [The New York Times].

Pakistan: Pakistan's ability to protect religious minorities questioned

Pakistan's ability to provide security of religious minorities, especially Christians, has once again been called into question as a result of a terror attack on a church packed with worshipers on Sunday in the troubled southwestern part of the country. At least nine people were killed, and at least 35 others injured. The Islamic State (ISIS) claimed responsibility for the attack in Quetta, the capital of the restive Baluchistan Province, in the country's southwest. Christians make up at least 2% of the country's population of about 198 million [New York Times]. While there have been several terrorist attacks on churches in recent years, including one in the northwestern city of Peshawar in September 2013 that killed 85, ISIS has most targeted Shiite Muslims in Baluchistan Province [Washington

Post]. The author of the third piece, the former Director of India's Intelligence Bureau, assesses the broader terror threat on the subcontinent from India's perspective: He links faith-based extremism in the Pakistan-Afghanistan belt, Pakistan army-ISI support to Islamic militants of all hues, and the China-Pakistan military alliance as the three key factors India must confront to safeguard its national security [The Guardian].

Bangladesh: Agreement with Myanmar on joint group to oversee Rohingya repatriation

Some estimates palce the number of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh at around 700,000. Of that number, roughly 655,000 are Rohingya who fled to Bangladesh in the last four months due to Myanmar military attacks. This week Bangladesh and Myanmar agreed to establish a bilateral group to oversee the voluntary repatriation of the refugees. The movement back to Myanmar could begin by January 23. The refugees will be moved from camps and settlements in southeastern Bangladesh for resettlement in neighboring Rakhine. Not all refugees may choose to return to strife-torn Rakhine, though [Radio Free Asia].

Maldives: Human rights in chains

Last week, the Maldives celebrated "Human Rights Day" and its "great successes in the areas of protecting, promoting and sustaining human rights". But some question precisely what justified the government's celebration. Human rights defenders in the country cite murders and disappearances of those who have spoken out against the government, and the "defamation law" that curtails freedom of expression. There is, they say, "no freedom of assembly, there's no right to protest, and even if we protest or talk about our concerns, action can be taken against us." This has deep ramifications for the 2018 presidential elections, many fear, as the the "pre-election environment does not support a free, fair, and competitive election" [Maldives Independent].

Law and Politics in South East Asia

Singapore: Limited space for political rights and external funding for right defenders

A newly released Human Rights Watch report gives a detailed account on the limited space for the freedom of speech, media and assembly strictly confined by overly broad criminal laws, oppressive regulations, and the weaponization of civil lawsuits imposing serious damages on parties. The underlying strategy to “Kill the Chicken to Scare the Monkeys” is directed against individuals who are critical of the government or the judiciary, or speak critically about issues regarded as being divisive such as religion and race. At the same, a government order issued in late 2016, prohibits foreign or multinational companies to support events at Speakers’ Corner without a police permit having led to the rejection of the applications of 10 multinational companies that applied to support the 2017 Pink Dot celebration of LGBT pride. The new report documents how various regulatory restrictions are used to limit discussion of political or “sensitive” issues in plays, films, and on the internet. The government frequently conditions licenses for public performances of politically themed plays on censorship of the script. It effectively prohibits all positive portrayals of LGBT lives on television, radio, or in film. In 2015, the government banned the showing of a promotional video for the annual LGBT Pink Dot celebration, even though the video simply featured a countdown and then the words “Pink Dot” and the date of the event [Human Rights Watch].

Philippines: Asia's ‘deadliest country’ for journalists

President Rodrigo Duterte's comment that journalists are not exempted from assassination is reflected by the country's presence among the deadliest countries for reporters in the world in 2017, joining Syria (12 people killed), Mexico (11), Afghanistan (9) and Iraq (8) having risen 11 places to 127th when compared to last year's index. Altogether 65 journalists were killed in 2017, 26 of them in the course of their work, 39 deliberately targeted [Philstar].

Indonesia: Political Islam on the rise and the presidential election 2019

Last year an unprecedented phalanx of pro-Islam groups rallied against then Jakarta governor Ahok, an ethnic Chinese and Christian, for "blasphemous" comments putting President Widodo under significant pressure while entrenching the reach of extremist Islamic groups like the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) more broadly into society. Now, the Islamic forces have not only celebrated a reunion whose success had been assessed differently by observers but managed to mobilize an overwhelming 100,000-strong pro-Palestine crowd to protest over US President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the Israeli capital. In general, radical Islamic organizations and thought has steadily grown in importance since last year marking a general trend towards conservatism, nationalism and Islamism that is accompanied by the armed forces whose old main factions are advancing an increasing political influence. Behind the Islamic movement in the country's capital have been and are identified not only former fringe leaders of extremist Islam but also former generals turned political party leaders, former president Yudhoyono and Suharto's former son in law Prabowo, who almost managed to win the last presidential elections and heads the third largest party in parliament, the right-wing Gerindra. Since the Ahok rallies of 2016, Islamist ideas have increasingly consolidated among Indonesia's Muslim population, the biggest worldwide, putting not only the President under pressure but also the social contract and its constitutional manifestation in a country that never has been a secular one but one that recognized several religions [A Times 1] [The Diplomat] [A Times 2]. In a related development, Islamic militants – referring to a fatwa of the Indonesia's Islamic Clerical Council issued in 2016 – have announced to raid businesses in which Muslims are forced to wear Santa Claus hats during the upcoming Christmas days [Independent].

Indonesia: Concerns to stay despite Constitutional Court's rejection to ban gay and extramarital sex

Following last week's ruling of the Indonesian Constitutional Court in which it rejected a petition to ban gay and extramarital sex, human rights activists remain skeptical of the prospects of LGBT rights as the petition will now be delivered to the Parliament for consideration and criminalization of homosexuality continues to exist under the Pornography Law under which at the same day of the Constitutional Court's decision a North Jakarta court issued 2-years imprisonment sentences against eight men taking part in a gay sex party [Voice of America News].

Indonesia: West Papua independence rallies

In more than a dozen cities in Indonesia, West Papuan students demonstrated for an independent West Papua on Tuesday. According to Free West Papua Compaign, the rallies received an unprecedented wave of solidarity from people across the country. West Papua has been a province of Indonesia since 1961. A petition for independence submitted to the United Nations was rejected in September [Asia Pacific Report].

Malaysia: A changing political landscape awaiting next year´s elections

Malaysia – having been governed by UMNO-led coalitions since its independence in 1957 – approaches its crossroads with next year's elections once more. In the previous two elections in 2008 and 2013 the UMNO-led coalition had lost its two-thirds and absolute majority respectively. Since then things went worse for the major Malay party in country´s polity dominated by religion and ethnicity as the ever shaping cleavages. Corruption and cronyism charges peaked with the 1 MDB scandal centered at UMNO President and Prime Minister Razak over US$800 having been vanished from a state-owned fund. While Razak´s intra party position seems nevertheless secured the UMNO has split again due to a breakaway of the Parti Pribumi Bersatu, short Bersatu, with former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad and former deputy prime minister Muhyiddin Yassin in its ranks.

Most notably, Bersatu has entered into an unexpected alliance with the opposition Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition which is effectively led by the jailed former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, Mahathirs former deputy and then arch enemy.

Meanwhile, not only UMNO's stakes are declining but support has also dropped for its more Islamic major oppositional contender PAS which, as an Islamist party is in constant tension with the secular Chinese dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP) within the PH. UMNO's strategic response in this situation is a further shift towards political Islam and an even firmer stance on Malay supremacy which might even lead to another unexpected confluence of former arch rivals, UMNO and PAS which would split the oppositional coalition as much as the reconciliation of Mahathir and Anwar expresses UMNO's recent split. A third trend for next year's elections is the growing dissatisfaction among many Malaysians with both camps and, thus, with the established political caste as such.
Besides many of the youth, also many Malay are disappointed by UMNO which is not any more able to safeguard Malay interests as it did before amidst unemployment, low wages and fear for the future [East Asia Forum] [Malaymail Online].

As an expression of the political climate´s overall volatility the Royal Malaysian Police just questioned 92 year old former Prime Minister Mahathir over his remarks at a “Love Malaysia, End Kleptocracy” rally on Oct 14 where he had called Prime Minister Najib a “descendant of Bugis pirates” allegedly insulting the seafaring ethnic group of the Bugis. The police investigates charges of sedition, intimidation and incitement of hatred via multimedia [Channel News Asia] [Free Malaysia Today].

Thailand: Deputy Prime Minister under pressure over alleged asset concealment

Prime Minister Gen. Prayut Chan-o-cha has been urged to suspend Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Prawit Wongsuwan on the grounds that the latter is currently facing investigations over alleged concealment of assets. Pictures, showing the Deputy Prime Minister wearing luxury watches, went viral on social media and triggered an online campaign demanding him to step down [The Nation].

Cambodia: Pre-election skirmishes

After the Supreme Court has dissolved the only opposition party, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), at the request of the government, on grounds that it was plotting to seize power, the United States and European Union announced they would suspend funding for the 2018 elections. Continuing his anti-Western line ahead of the 2018 elections, Prime Minister Hun Sen mockingly encouraged the United States and European Union to freeze the assets of Cambodian leaders abroad in response to his government's crackdown on the opposition and civil society [The Phnom Penh Post 1]. For a neat description of the opposition's increasingly precarious position see [Voice of America News].

While China, Cambodia's largest aid donor, has went on to lend its support to the Hun Sen government, the government has shut down 330 print media outlets supposedly "inactive" print media with 388 'functioning newspapers' remaining [Bangkok Post].

The government's stance received discursive support from a seminar of the Cambodia's Royal Academy following the mentioned party dissolution whose main message was the claim that US democracy would not suit Cambodia [The Phnom Penh Post 2].

Myanmar: Genocide on UN's mind as Myanmar's attacks on Rohingya continue

Myanmar's Army continued to destroy Rohingya villages even as Myanmar and Bangladesh signed an agreement last month to repatriate refugees from the ethnic Muslim minority who had fled the violence, New York-based Human Rights Watch alleged Monday. Citing satellite imagery, HRW say more than 350 villages have now been partially or completely destroyed since Aug. 25, when the Myanmar Army "clearance operations" began. More than 630,000 Rohingya have fled from Myanmar into Bangladesh since then [AP].

Meanwhile, the UN rights chief said Monday that Myanmar's attacks could possibly amount to genocide, and the NGO "Doctors Without Borders" alleged Thursday that at least 6,700 Rohingya were killed in the first month of a Myanmar army attacks on rebels that began in August. Although accused of "horrific crimes", Myanmar denies committing atrocities in Rakhine, saying the crackdown was a proportionate response to the Rohingya militants who attacked police posts on August 25 and killed several dozen officials [AFP].

Meanwhile, two journalists investigating reports of a mass grave in north Rakhine State were arrested last week. Their crime? Illegally obtaining information about the attacks on the Rohingya. They obtained photographs and documents from residents in a village. Subsequently, at least eight villagers were arrested in connection with the journalists' apprehension. Myanmar says it is investigating the reports of the mass grave [New York Times].

Law and Politics in East Asia

China: Ubiquitous police state in Xinjiang

Xinjiang, the north-western Uygur autonomous region and China's largest administrative unit, has rapidly become an omnipresent police state under Chen Quanguo, Communist Party Secretary for Xinjiang since 2016, with an unprecedented level of police and digital surveillance, mass disappearance and re-education camps. In a latest development of Chen's campaign against Uygur separatism, authorities have been tracking the whereabouts of suspected terrorists among Uygur students studying in Islamic countries and pressuring parents to call their children back. Back in China, many of them end up in detention [South China Morning Post]. Meanwhile, Radio Free Asia reports that close to 10% of residents of a township in Kashgar prefecture have been sent to prison or education camps this year over allegation of harboring extremist ideas [Radio Free Asia].

China: Public trials still regular practice

Despite official banning, public trials are still conducted by local authorities on a regular basis across the country. In such a trial this week conducted before thousands of spectators at a sport stadium in the southern city of Lufeng 10 people have been sentenced to death. The trial received mixed reactions of approval and refusal on social media [The Guardian].

Japan: Ruling Liberal Democratic Party divided over scope of constitutional change

While Prime Minister Abe hailed the intended revision of Japan's constitution and especially the constitution's Art. 9 as a 'rebirth' of the Nation [Asahi Shimbun], his the party, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, is struggling internally to find a consensus on whether to pursue moderate or drastic changes. The former would add to Art. 9 a reference to the term "self defense forces" (SDF) to formally acknowledge the role of the SDF in the constitution. The latter foresee the deletion of the Article 9's second paragraph that prohibits Japan to maintain military forces and other war potential [The Japan Times].

South Korea: Liberal Korea Party internal power struggle

With local election ahead in June 2018, the main opposition Liberty Korea Party's (LKP) president Hong Joon-pyo has dismissed 62 party members as electoral district chiefs. Among them are many regarded as belonging to former President Park's fraction within the party. Park is currently standing trial on multiple charges including abuse of power and bribery. Hong's reshuffle is widely seen as an attempt to strengthen his grip on the party leadership [The Korea Times].

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

India-China-USA relations: China targets India as political tensions rise, while America highlights India's leadership in its new security strategy

A senior Chinese PLA officer said last week that China should "thank" India last for "compelling" Beijing to address shortfalls in its military buildup in the contested Doklam border region. In revealing comments at the annual meeting of a leading official Communist Party press organ, other Chinese representatives opined that India is "challenging China and containing China in Asia" and is now, accordingly, one of China's "strategic targets" [Global Times].

Meanwhile, in his first National Security Strategy (NSS) released Monday, U.S. President Donald Trump placed the "Indo-Pacific" at the very top of the regions addressed – in a marked departure from his predecessors' strategies –, above Europe and the Middle East [Council of Foreign Relations].

The NSS says that Washington supports a leadership role for India in the Indo-Pacific region. As a means of countering "a wide range of threats", Trump vowed to deepen America's "strategic partnership with India and support its leadership role in Indian Ocean security and throughout the broader region." His strategy also called for continued pressure on Pakistan to intensify counterterrorism efforts and safeguard its nuclear weapons. In addition, he framed the threats presented by China as "a geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order is taking place in the Indo-Pacific region" [NDTV].

The third article analyzes the Trump's National Security Strategy, providing historical perspective and background to the methodology. It is, says the author, a "sustainment" strategy supported by a peace-

through-strength defense buildup. It continues America's post–World War II–era national-security policy, but tailors it to today's challenges and clearly states that America is presently in a great-power competition with Russia and China [National Review].

The fourth link is the NSS as presented by President Trump. It lays out the four vital national interests driving the strategy, and bases on the strategy on clear-eyed "principled realism". It is, says the release, clear-eyed about global competition and it "is principled because it is grounded in the knowledge that promoting American values is key to spreading peace and prosperity around the globe" [White House].

India-Nepal relations: New Delhi fears losing Nepal to China after Communist return to power

The communist's stunning upset victory in Nepal's parliamentary elections is set to give New Delhi headaches for the next five years, Indian analysts fear. As India's army faces off against Chinese forces on the Doklam Plateau and continuing political warfare regionally, India fears the incoming premier in Kathmandu will serve as Beijing's proxy, a "vassal state". Since the communists took control of Beijing in 1949, Delhi found security in Nepal's role of as buffer zone against Chinese influence [Asia Times].

Pakistan-China relations: Beijing lavishes aid on Pakistan town

In a move that has fueled suspicion in New Delhi and Washington, China is lavishing vast amounts of aid on a small Pakistani fishing town that is strategically located on the Arabian Sea. Beijing has pledged half a billion USD in grants for an airport, hospital, college, and water infrastructure for the town of Gwadar. In return, China's rulers hope to obtain access to – and potential military control of – some of the world's busiest oil and gas shipping lanes [Japan Times].

China-Cambodia relations: Chinese-language schools pushing soft power

With Chinese – Cambodian ties getting steadily closer the market for Mandarin language education is

significantly expanding with the support of local branch of the Confucius Institute (CI) with its network of language schools in more than 140 countries. The local CI works in collaboration with the Royal Academy of Cambodia but has also supported the set - up of a “Mandarin Center” at the Ministry of Defence in July reflecting the Cambodian dependency from Chinese weapon deliveries. Requests for Chinese language education have however, also come from at least seven other ministries reflecting a shift to a singular position of Chinese language education in the country as avenues to spread Chinese soft power [Reuters].

China-Philippines relations: Nascent defense ties

Beijing and Manila after a break of four years have resumed the annual defense and security consultation (ADST) last week. This move reflects emerging defense ties between the two countries which within the frame of President Duterte’s ‘independent foreign policy’, do not exclude the possibility of stronger ties with Washington [The Diplomat].

China-Laos relations: Beijing’s infrastructure funding rises

In a latest development reflecting an increasing dependence of Laos on Chinese development aid and funding, Vientianne witnessed last month a ground-breaking ceremony led by Chinese President Xi Jinping for the construction of a 90 Mio USD hospital. A prior Chinese infrastructure investment is US$6 billion high-speed rail, of which Laos own roughly 30% and of which the government is confident that it will transform the country into a job-creating modern logistics hub for Chinese trade. With a domestic product (GDP) per capita of less than 2,000 USD, which is one of the lowest rates in Asia, Laos is in dire need of foreign investment and cannot waive Beijing’s influx of money and assistance despite the risk granting Beijing political leverage over the country [Asia Times].

Cross-Straits relations: China and Taiwan on the brink to war?

The usually high number of 10 PLA air force drills around Taiwan since the Party Congress in October

have led to speculations whether those exercises could be a precursor for an invasion of Taiwan [South China Morning Post]. David Spencer, however, argues that the latest military exercises are a show of force to intimidate the Tsai government and an appeasement to saber-rattling hawks on the mainland [Taiwan News]. Meanwhile, the Taiwan's Defense Minister has announced that his Ministry will stop issuing reports on China's naval and air craft drills in order to demonstrate that Taiwan "will not dance to China's tune as it tries to use psychological warfare against Taiwan" [Focus Taiwan].

Indonesia-Australia relations: Australia's Foreign Policy White Paper recognizes Jakarta strategic importance

Australia's Foreign Policy White Paper, released in November, has put focus on the Indo-Pacific and has stressed the significance of Australia-Indonesia relationships within this frame. Indonesia is one of the "trusted partners and friends" along with the USA, Japan, India, and South Korea. Given Australia's strategic and trade interest, this perception of Indonesia's importance is reasonable as Indonesia is expected by become the world's fifth largest economy by 2030 and is strategically placed in terms of size, significance and geography at the juncture of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Security cooperation between both countries, which share a common maritime border, meanwhile, is firmly based on the Lombok Treaty of 2006. [The Diplomat].

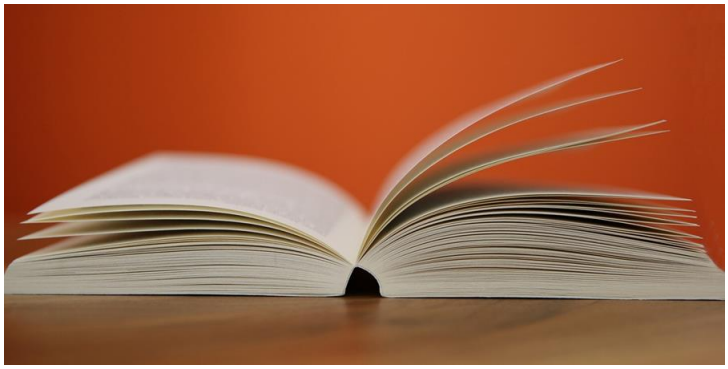
Terrorism in Southeast Asia: Fight against IS continues

Philippine Armed Forces this week have warned against continued recruitment activities of the remnants of the terrorist group despite the end of the Marawi battle. Against the background of this claim the Philippine Congress has approval the extension martial law over Mindanao until 31. December 2018 [Task and Purpose] [NPR]. In a related development, Philippine and Australian marines jointly conducted a counter-terror warfare training [SBS News].

Meanwhile, Malaysian security and counterterrorism authorities have voiced concerns over the threat of militants returning from Syria and the Philippines. Since 2013, several hundred Malaysians have travelled

to Syria to the join the IS there whereas around thirty joined forces with the pro-IS Maute group in Marawi earlier this year. Although an IS attack in Malaysia is unlikely, lone wolf attacks and recruitment activities will continue [Global Risk Insights].

Background Reading



US bombing of Cambodia in the Vietnam War and its legal justification

The article reveals how the USA legally justified the bombing of Cambodia as a third party in the Vietnam War by an extension of the term self-defense which would become increasingly important in justifying US American intervention abroad afterward [New York Times].

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