



ASEAN's Pattaya Problem by Donald K. Emmerson

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The turmoil in Thailand is about domestic questions: who shall rule the kingdom, and what is the future of democracy there? But the crisis also raises questions for the larger region: who will lead the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and what is the future of democracy in Southeast Asia?

In mid-2008, Thailand began its tenure as ASEAN's chair. The chair is expected, at a minimum, to host successfully the association's main events, most notably the ASEAN summit and multiple other summits between Southeast Asia's leaders and those of other countries.

Accordingly, Thailand had planned to welcome the heads of ASEAN's other nine member government plus their counterparts from Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea in a series of meetings in the Thai resort town of Pattaya on April 10-12. (The other nine are Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos, Brunei, Cambodia and Indonesia.)

Summitry called for decorum – serene images of Thai leaders greeting their distinguished guests. Bedlam came closer to describing the scene in Pattaya when Thai protesters opposed to the new government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva stormed the summit's venue and forced its cancellation. Heads of state and government who had already arrived at the seaside resort 150 kilometers southeast of Bangkok were evacuated by helicopter. Planes carrying other leaders to Thailand were turned back in mid-flight.

No one blames ASEAN for Thailand's political travails. Because of it, however, the regional organization has lost major face.

Ever since coup plotters in Bangkok in 2006 replaced a "red-shirted" government with a "yellow-shirted" one, the two factions have successively ousted each other in a politics of sheer reprisal, characterized by rampaging mass demonstrations, questionable court rulings and controversial referendum and election results. Ins and outs have traded places with dizzying speed. In the last seven months, Thailand has had four different prime ministers, including one interim premier.

With Bangkok's current watch over ASEAN, this seemingly endless Thai fracas has collaterally damaged the organization. Thai authorities postponed and relocated the

14th ASEAN Summit twice due to fears for the safety of its invited guests and, correspondingly, the reputation of its Thai host.

Normally, top-level gatherings with leaders from outside Southeast Asia are held back-to-back with the ASEAN summit. But when the authorities in Bangkok did finally decide to go through with the 14th ASEAN Summit, held at the end of February 2009 in Hua Hin, three hours south of Bangkok, they made what turned out to be a mistake. They decided to postpone these associated summits for a third time, and to hold them in April in Pattaya - outside of Bangkok and thus seemingly secure from disruption by the red-shirted demonstrators in the capital. The protesters traveled to Pattaya and shut down the meetings anyway.

Responsibility for hosting these summits would not have been allocated to Thailand were it not for the English alphabet. The 10 governments that comprise ASEAN are assigned to chair the organization by alphabetic rotation according to each member country's name in English. So it was that in mid-2008 the government of Singapore got up from the ASEAN chair and the government of Thailand, fatefully, sat down.

In December the association acquired a new legal basis - the ASEAN charter. Previously, chairs had served for 12 months measured from mid-year to mid-year. The charter changed the chair's term in office to run for a calendar year. To enable this change, rather than relinquish the chair in mid-2009, the Thai government is set to keep the position until the end of this year, for an unprecedented 18-month term through December 2009.

The charter's coming into effect was supposed to have been celebrated at the 14th ASEAN Summit in Thailand. The kingdom's chaotic politics having already caused the postponement of that event, the charter's inauguration had to be downgraded to a foreign ministers' meeting held at the ASEAN secretariat in Jakarta in December 2008.

One can wonder whether any of those present on that occasion noticed the irony of what they were up to: congratulating each other on a document whose implementation guaranteed that the one member country most ridden by political havoc, Thailand, would remain in the chair – and thus retain the potential to embarrass the association for another entire year.

In the wake of the fiasco in Pattaya, one must ask: should these most recently disrupted summits be postponed a fourth time and relocated to a fourth location in Thailand?

Other questions also loom. Because of its 18-month tenure as chair, Thailand is scheduled to host the 15th ASEAN Summit and related summits toward the end of 2009, probably in October. Should the association sit on its hands and hope that the kingdom's politics will stabilize between now and

then? Or should ASEAN move to save itself from further humiliation – Pattaya redux – by rescinding the authority of Thailand to host any more summits during its current term as chair?

The ASEAN way of respect for the sovereignty of member states and reliance on consensus among them favors the first choice – passivity – and rules out the second – interference. Yet several Indonesians, including a foreign ministry spokesperson, have already deviated from the “ASEAN way” by suggesting that the summits that were aborted in Pattaya could be convened next month in Indonesia.

In the words of influential Indonesian scholar Rizal Sukma: “Indonesia should not let itself be held hostage to ASEAN.” If Indonesia “wants to retain its relevance in the international relations of the Asia-Pacific region,” he argued, Jakarta should “begin moving beyond” ASEAN, which he termed an “outmoded vehicle.”

Sukma immediately qualified his critique by noting that ASEAN remains valuable for Southeast Asia and for Indonesia. Nevertheless, a first possible lesson of Pattaya seems clear: ASEAN’s fetish for member sovereignty should not allow the domestic politics of Thailand, or of any other member country, to obstruct regional interests.

ASEAN has long insisted on occupying the driver’s seat in vehicles for cooperation between Southeast Asia and countries outside the region. One of these formats is ASEAN Plus Three (APT), the Three being China, Japan, and South Korea. Another is the East Asia Summit, which adds Australia, India, and New Zealand to the APT. When Thai strife stymied summitry in Pattaya, both of these vehicles were derailed.

ASEAN may or may not be outmoded as a vehicle for beneficial comity among Southeast Asians alone. But a second effect of the Thai debacle is to throw into serious doubt the right of ASEAN to drive the larger regional car.

A third possible “lesson of Pattaya” features the extent to which the summits’ disruption may affect the pursuit of democracy in Southeast Asia. One could contend that the disarray in Pattaya will boost the legitimacy of democracy in Southeast Asia. That logic depends heavily on the future role of Indonesia, which is by far the largest, and also the most democratic country, in the region.

Thailand’s failure and the related vacuum in ASEAN may have created an opening for Indonesian leadership in the region. If Jakarta chooses to fill that role, if its leadership is beneficial and welcomed by its neighbors, and if it remains stably and successfully democratic, others in ASEAN could come to view their largest co-member as a political model worthy of emulation.

But this scenario relies heavily on expectations of a single country, Indonesia, and contains too many ifs to be as persuasive as its antithesis: that the red-shirted routing of ASEAN in Pattaya is not good for the prospects of democracy in Southeast Asia.

Thailand is neither autocratic nor democratic enough for the fracas in Pattaya to be blamed on either type of regime.

But it is unlikely that many of ASEAN’s disappointed leaders, as they were evacuated from Pattaya or turned back en route, blamed the waste of their time on Thailand’s failure to handle the demonstrators more democratically. More likely was the opposite conclusion: that the Thai government should have cracked down harder on the protests to stop them from getting out of hand.

It might have mattered that the Thai authorities are linked to a faction – the yellow one – calling itself the People’s Alliance for Democracy. However, not to be outdone, their red-clad opponents in Pattaya called themselves the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship. Off and on since 2006, the two movements’ acts of vengeance and intimidation had skirted mob rule. Neither group deserved its name. Both gave democracy a bad name.

Unrelated to what occurred in Pattaya is another reason to doubt whether ASEAN will pay much more than lip service to democracy in Southeast Asia. The English-language name of each ASEAN member determines its place in the rotation to chair the organization. After Thailand comes Vietnam (2010), Brunei (2011), and Cambodia (2012) – three states that are semi-authoritarian at best. A mere dialogue between ASEAN leaders and human rights activists at the 14th ASEAN Summit in Hua Hin in February 2009 offended Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen enough for him to mutter “Anarchy!” And he said this despite having succeeded in forcing the activists to remove from their delegation, in advance, its only Cambodian member.

In 2005, ASEAN governments pressured the junta in Myanmar into passing up its turn to chair ASEAN from mid-2006 to mid-2007. Elections are supposed to be held in Myanmar in 2010. If they do take place, they may be so blemished by official intimidation and violence as to reduce the willingness of other ASEAN states to indulge their most globally reviled co-member. But if the polls seem even minimally legitimate, the generals in Naypyidaw may want to cash ASEAN’s 2005 rain check by exercising, for calendar 2011, their delayed right to the chair.

Were this to occur, the sequence of high-handed-to-brutal captains at ASEAN’s helm would continue until January 2014, when Indonesia’s turn would finally arrive. One can hope that by then Jakarta’s democracy will still be intact. Even if it is, however, Indonesian leaders hoping to encourage democracy in Southeast Asia could be distracted by domestic politics. In 2014, Indonesians will go to the polls repeatedly in legislative and presidential elections at national, regional, and local levels.

Who will lead ASEAN? On present evidence, for the next four to five years, it will be one authoritarian government after another. What is the future of democracy in Southeast Asia? As of now, and for the same near term, not as bright as might be hoped.