

March 25, 2015 1:34 am

Mekong authoritarianism a growing test for western partners

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States in Southeast Asia's Mekong region seem to have learnt at least one lesson from the late Lee Kuan Yew: how to stage-manage electoral democracy.

As the death of Singapore's founding father this week triggers debate over his legacy, authorities in Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia are busy crafting or reinforcing laws aimed at quelling social pressures that threaten their control.

The growing institutionalised autocracy is likely to increase tensions in the countries wound around the storied Mekong river, which are already being reshaped by industrialisation, urbanisation and economic internationalisation. The trend presents a growing problem for western countries that claim support for human rights but are seeking new strategic alliances, markets and investment destinations in the Mekong.

"We are likely to see an intensified struggle in this changing region," says Ambika Ahuja, Southeast Asia analyst at Eurasia Group, the political risk consultancy. "It will pit those who want more political and economic rights against the entrenched regimes that want to control the liberalisation process and secure their places in the countries' future."

Since Lee's death, tributes have poured in from the Mekong countries for the way he oversaw economic development while keeping a tight rein on dissent during his 31-year premiership.

General Tanasak Patimapragorn, foreign minister in the Thai government installed by a military coup led by army chief Prayuth Chan-ocha in May, said the former prime minister's "bold and visionary statesmanship" had left behind an "everlasting legacy" on his country and the region.

While Lee was able to muzzle scattered opposition through a mix of persecuting individual critics and electoral gerrymandering, the military rulers of Thailand, the quasi-civilian government of Myanmar and the autocratic Cambodian People's party face a more profound problem. All know from previous election results and wider social trends that they and their allies are likely to lose the next scheduled polls if they are free and fair.

The authority of the military-linked dominant political orders in these countries is being threatened by growing discontent with social inequalities, abuses of power and curbs on political rights.

While the Communist government of Vietnam, the fourth main Mekong country, looks secure, latent frustrations still threaten to build to a level where they fuelled riots against foreign-owned businesses last year, as anti-China protests over a group of disputed South China Sea islands turned violent.

In Thailand, leading politicians swept aside by the coup are now crying foul over a draft new constitution that promises to emasculate big parties and weaken the power of representatives due to be elected in polls signalled for next year.

In Myanmar, President Thein Sein underscored again last week how the army that ruled for 50 years until 2011 would continue to play a dominant role in the run-up to landmark polls this year, reserving a veto on constitutional change and the right to take power again.

In Phnom Penh, where the Cambodian People's party denies it stole a close election in 2013, parliament last week passed laws that rights groups said would curb political campaigning and dissent. Hun Sen has been prime minister there for more than 30 years.

While western powers have criticised clampdowns in Bangkok and — to a limited extent — Naypyidaw, they have drawn back from harsh sanctions and are still continuing with prestige activities such as the annual US-led Cobra Gold military exercise in Thailand.

In Vietnam, both the US and EU are negotiating comprehensive trade deals with a country that is home to 90m people and a crucial link in the global supply chain for many big western retailers.

The awkward balancing of interests was underscored at the weekend during an official visit by US First Lady Michelle Obama to Cambodia, when she made oblique comments calling on students to demand greater freedom and equality. Many expect the chafing between the west's rhetoric and its desire for good relations to deepen, as the stakes for both Mekong country ruling elites and their foreign partners rise.

“The Mekong region is a front line where western policy on democracy and human rights is put to the test,” says Sunai Phasuk, a Bangkok-based researcher for Human Rights Watch. “Sadly, in many cases, it has become a matter of rhetoric that does not match with real practice.”

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