

Identifying Regional Political Trends and Markers in 2016:

Vietnam and Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand

Carlyle A. Thayer



Aung San Suu Kyi sworn in as a member of Myanmar's Lower House of Parliament, May 3, 2012 Picture: Reuters

Presentation to Debating Tomorrow's Issues Today,
Regional Outlook Forum 2016, Session 1,
Yusof Ishak Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
Shangri-La Hotel, Singapore
January 12, 2016

Identifying Regional Political Trends and Markers in 2016: Vietnam and Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand

Carlyle A. Thayer

Introduction

In 2016 the ten states comprising the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) will enter a new stage of development as they seek to forge an ASEAN Community. This process of community-building will be tested by political transitions in two states – Myanmar and Thailand. New leaders will take office in Vietnam, Myanmar and the Philippines, while Thailand's transition from military rule to civilian government will continue to be a work-in-progress.¹

Vietnam

The Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) will convene its 12th National Congress from January 20-28. The congress will set the political, socio-economic and foreign policy priorities for the next five years. The most important outcome of the 12th Congress will be the selection of leaders for the top party and state posts. All incumbents will step down as they have completed the maximum of two terms in office and/or have reached the mandatory retirement age of 65.

Leadership selection has been particularly vexatious this past year due to long-standing differences in personality and style between the state president and party Secretary General, on the one hand, and the prime minister, on the other. It is an open secret that Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung wants to become party Secretary General. This is unprecedented because no top leader has sought to switch office upon expiration of two terms in office. Party rules, however, permit exemptions to the 65-year retirement age in special cases.

In 2015, Secretary General Trong and his followers took a number of measures to circumscribe Dung including adopting prescriptive criteria for selection to the Central Committee (a prerequisite for membership on the Politburo and higher office). Candidates who were politically opportunistic, lusted for power, involved with special interest groups, or who led an inappropriate life style (including spouse and family members) were not eligible for selection.

¹ This presentation will not discuss developments in Indonesia and Malaysia as they are the subject of separate sessions.

At the 13th plenum of the Central Committee, which met from December 14-20, full and alternate members unanimously approved the list of candidates for the new Central Committee. Each member of the Central Committee also completed a ballot listing their personal choice for high office: party secretary general, state president, prime minister, and chair of the National Assembly Standing Committee. At the time of writing it was reported that the Politburo would consider special exemptions and report back to another meeting of the Central Committee for endorsement prior to the 12th Congress.

If Nguyen Tan Dung is appointed party Secretary General he would bring substantial experience as a former two-term prime minister with a deep knowledge of international economic issues and global affairs, including familiarity with the leaders of those countries most important to Vietnam. Dung would pursue “proactive international integration” through the Trans-Pacific Partnership and other multilateral institutions, an activist role in world affairs, further modernization of the armed forces, and continued engagement with China and deeper overall relations with the United States.

Vietnam’s political system is one of equilibrium. If Dung becomes party Secretary General it is very likely that those who opposed his rise will be given representation on the Politburo and Central Committee.

An important marker will be who is chosen as the presumptive prime minister at the 12th Congress. Will the new prime minister be a protégé of Nguyen Tan Dung? The next prime minister is likely to be chosen from one of the five current deputy prime ministers. Reports indicate that the military is divided on who will succeed the current Minister of National Defence, General Phung Quang Thanh.

There should be no major surprises in domestic policy as the draft Political Report and Socio-Economic Plan, 2016-2020 were circulated for public comment in September 2015.

There will be no major changes to Vietnam’s one-party political system and the leading role of the VCP; but there will be continuing political reform of local government.

Elections for the National Assembly will take place on May 22, 2016. Once the new deputies are sworn in the National Assembly will elect the state president and prime minister. The prime minister will then nominate his Cabinet (after prior vetting by the Politburo).

Myanmar

The November 2015 landslide victory of the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, has been described by one analyst as the most important political events in Southeast Asia this past year.²

Myanmar's first past the post voting system greatly favoured the NLD. The NLD won 79 per cent of the elected seats in the bicameral national legislature. The ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) retained only 8 per cent of elected seats.

At local level the NLD won seventy-five per cent of all elected seats and holds a majority in Myanmar's seven Burman-majority regional assemblies and four of the seven ethnic minority state assemblies.

Under the Constitution, the Tatmadaw (military) is entitled to one-quarter of all seats in both houses of parliament as well as state assemblies. These seats are not contested. In addition, the Tatmadaw will retain control of three vital ministries - Home Affairs, Defence and Border Affairs - and retain the right to veto changes to the Constitution.

Virtually all political analysts agree that the NLD victory was an electoral tsunami that marks the beginning of a new phase of political contestation in Myanmar and not the end of military rule.³ The electoral results gave Aung San Suu Kyi a clear popular mandate. There are high societal expectations for political change that she may find difficult to meet. The current term of the USDP government expires on January 31, 2016 but the tenure of the new government will not commence until March.

There are seven markers to observe this year to gauge the trajectory of domestic politics and the stability of the NLD government:

First, given the NLD's majority it can expect its nominees to become Speakers for the People's Assembly and House of Nationalities, or the upper and lower houses of Parliament, respectively.

Second, the most important marker for 2016 will be the election of the President (who does not have to be Member of Parliament). This is a two-step process. The first step

² Moe Thuzar, "Myanmar's 2015 elections: New Hope on the Horizon?," *ISEAS Perspective*, No. 70, December 17, 2015, 2.

³ Transnational Institute, *The 2015 General Election: A New Beginning?*, December 4, 2015; Kai Ostwald and Paul Schuler, "Myanmar's Landmark Election: Unresolved Questions," *ISEAS Perspective*, No. 68, December 8, 2015; International Crisis Group, *The Myanmar Elections: Results and Implications*, Asia Briefing No. 147, December 9, 2015; Moe Thuzar, "Myanmar's 2015 elections: New Hope on the Horizon?," *ISEAS Perspective*, No. 70, December 17, 2015; and Transnational Institute, *The 2015 General Election in Myanmar: What Now for Ethnic Politics?*, December 21, 2015.

involves the nomination of three candidates, one each from (a) the elected representatives of the upper house, (b) the elected representatives of the lower house, and (c) the unelected military deputies from both houses. The second step involves forming an electoral college of both the elected and appointed deputies from both houses. The person who receives the most votes will become president; the remaining two candidates become 1st and 2nd vice president on the basis of the number of votes they received. The crucial question is whether Aung San Suu Kyi, who is barred from the presidency, will govern from above through a figurehead and whether this arrangement will be acceptable to the military.

Third, the President-elect will then form a Cabinet subject to approval by the legislature. The NLD will come to office with limited experience in government, a small pool of technocrats and virtually little policy development. The key question here is the composition of the new Cabinet and its inclusivity. Will the NLD reach out to the USDP and ethnic minorities to fill suitable posts? The Tatmadaw will have three *ex officio* representatives in the Cabinet.

The NLD government will not take office until March 31, 2016 when the term of the current USDP administration ends. The NLD will have five-year tenure.

Fourth, how will the NLD go about promoting national reconciliation? This process involves not only the Burman majority and ethnic minorities but also national reconciliation between the NLD and the old political elite, the Tatmadaw and Buddhist nationalists. It should be noted that with two exceptions political parties representing ethnic minorities did poorly in the November 2015 elections.⁴ Ethnic minorities voted for the NLD. The NLD will have to walk a fine line between maintaining a working relationship with the entrenched military and meeting the expectations of ethnic minorities. One reality is that the Tatmadaw will continue to dominate the border areas and ethnic minority leaders do not believe the NLD can bring about significant change.

Fifth, what priority will the NLD give to the issue of a ceasefire and peace process involving armed ethnic minorities, especially in the Shan and Kachin states, and the Tatmadaw? Will the military, which controls the border affairs ministry, go along with this process?

Sixth, allied to the above, what priority will the NLD assign to resolving the Muslim Rohingya issue, including citizenship rights, especially in light of the fact that no major party – including the NLD – nominated a single Muslim candidate? Related to this question is how the NLD government will deal with Buddhist nationalists.

⁴ The two exceptions are the Arakan National Party and the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy.

Seventh, given widespread expectation of change, how will the NLD government go about promoting democracy, especially through amendment of the 2008 Constitution?

Philippines

The Philippines will hold presidential elections on May 19, 2016. The official campaign period begins in January. Table 1 below provides polling data on the main candidates after the close of official registrations on October 16, 2015.

Table 1 - Polling Results for Presidential Candidates, 2015

Candidate	Party	MBC-DZRH 27 Nov	Pulse Asia 4-11 Dec	SWS 12-14 Dec
Grace Poe	Independent	25%	21%	26%
Jejomar Binay	UNA	18%	33%	26%
Rodrigo Duterte	PDP-Laban	30%	23%	20%
Manuel A. Roxas	Liberal Party	15%	17%	22%
Miriam Defensor Santiago	PRP	6%	4%	4%
Camilo Sabio	Independent	<1%	-	-
Roy Reneres	PMM	<1%	-	-
Martin Dino	PDP-Laban	-	-	-
Apolonia Soguilon	PGRP	-	-	-
Legend: MBC-DZRH = Manila Broadcasting Company-DZRH News; SWS = Social Weather Stations; PDP-Laban = Partido Demokratiko Pilipino-Lakas ng Bayan; PGRP = Philippine Green Republican Party; PMM = Partido ng Manggagawa at Magsasaka; PRP = People's Reform Party; and UNA = United Nationalist Alliance.				

Two developments and three markers are worth noting. First, Senator Grace Poe, the front-runner in polling after official registration closed, was declared ineligible by the Commission on Elections on December 22.⁵

Second, Rodrigo Duterte, the Mayor of Davao, threw his hat into the presidential ring after the October 16 deadline for registration. Election rules permit a registered political party to replace one nominated candidate with another of the same party. It is widely expected that Duterte will replace PDP-Laban Secretary General Martin Dino, who did register.

⁵ Trefor Moss, "Philippine Presidential Favorite Grace Poe Barred from May Poll," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 1, 2015; Avantika Chilkoti, "Philippine poll leader rejects disqualification," *The Financial Times*, December 2, 2015; Sheila Crisostomo, "Full Comelec disqualified Poe," *The Philippines Star*, December 23, 2015.

The first marker to look out for is whether Senator Poe appeals to the Supreme Court and what the court rules. If Senator Poe fails who will her supporters turn to?

A second marker to look out for is whether any candidate can break free of the pack and emerge as favourite; otherwise polling suggests a close race.

A third marker to look out for following the May election is whether the new president and his/her Administration is capable of building on the legacy of high-growth, anti-corruption, and reconciliation with the Muslim south left by retiring President Benigno Aquino.

Thailand

In September 2015 the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) rejected a draft constitution by the Constitution Drafting Committee that it had appointed. This decision reset the political calendar back to zero. The NCPO must commission another draft constitution and submit it to a public referendum; if approved new general elections could be held as early as mid-2017. If the Constitution is rejected this will extend military rule.

There are three important markers to look out for in 2016. The first is the content of the new Constitution and whether it will entrench a continuation of rule by the military cum bureaucracy or effectively bridge the current divide in Thai politics roughly characterized as between the Yellow shirts (supporters of the monarchy and status quo) and the Red shirts (democratic populists).

The second marker concerns the timing, management and outcome of a national referendum on the draft Constitution. Will this process confer legitimacy on the electoral process?

The third marker concerns the management of royal succession in the event of the incapacitation or death of the current monarch.

Conclusion

Political change in Myanmar, Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam will affect the pace and scope of ASEAN community-building in 2016. Generally the trends look positive. Both the NLD and Tatmadaw have supported and will continue to support engagement with ASEAN. Myanmar's capacity for engagement, however, could be undermined by domestic instability.

Thailand's military junta, and new leaders in Vietnam and the Philippines can also be expected to continue their engagement with ASEAN.

Political change in these four Southeast Asian countries raises critical questions about how they will manage relations with China and the United States. ASEAN community-building could be affected by increased rivalry by these two major powers.

As Myanmar seeks greater engagement with the United States and the West to end sanctions it will also have to take China's economic, security and political interests into account.

Vietnam's new leaders will have to weigh carefully how to pursue deeper relations with the United States without upsetting the slow but positive upward trajectory in relations with China.

The election of a new president of the Philippines could provide an opportunity for Manila to improve its relations with Beijing. In 2016 two wild cards could result in a marked change in foreign policy from the Aquino Administration – (1) the decision of the Arbitral Tribunal on the Philippines' maritime entitlements in the South China Sea and (2) the decision of the Supreme Court on the constitutionality of the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement with the United States.

Thailand's stalled transition to elected government is unlikely to result in any appreciable change in its present relations with China and the United States in 2016.

REGIONAL OUTLOOK FORUM 2016

Debating Tomorrow's Issues Today

Tuesday, 12 January 2016
Island Ballroom, Shangri-La Hotel
Singapore

PROGRAMME

8.30 am – 9.00 am Registration

9.00 am – 9.15 am **Welcoming Remarks**
Mr Tan Chin Tiong
Director, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute

9.15 am – 10.00 am **Session 1**
Identifying Regional Economic and Political Trends and Markers in 2016

Moderator:

Dr Francis Hutchinson

Senior Fellow and Coordinator, Regional Economic Studies Programme, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute

Panellists:

Mr Manu Bhaskaran

Partner, Centennial Group International; Founding Director and CEO, Centennial Asia Advisors, Singapore

Emeritus Professor Carlyle A Thayer

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, The University of New South Wales, Australian Defence Force Academy, Australia

10.00 am – 11.15 am **Session 2**
Major Power Interests and Contestation in Southeast Asia

Moderator:

Mr Bilahari Kausikan

Ambassador-at-Large and Policy Advisor, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore

Panellists:

Professor Jia Qingguo

Dean, School of International Studies, Peking University, China

Dr Masashi Nishihara

President, Research Institute for Peace and Security (RIPS), Japan

Professor Susan Shirk

Chair, 21st Century China Program; and Ho Miu Lam Professor of China and Pacific Relations, University of California, San Diego, USA

11.15 am – 11.35 am Coffee

11.35 am – 12.50 pm **Session 3**
The ASEAN Economic Community: Realising Gains and Expanding Opportunities

Moderator:

Tan Sri Dato' Dr Mohd Munir Bin Abdul Majid

Chairman, Bank Muamalat Malaysia Berhad; and Chairman, ASEAN Business Advisory Council, Malaysia

Panellists:

Mr Sam Cheong Chwee Kin

Executive Director, Commercial Banking, United Overseas Bank, Singapore

Mr Robert Yap Min Choy

Deputy Chairman & Executive Director, Y3 Technologies Pte Ltd, Singapore

Mr Junichi Sasaki

CEO, ASEAN & South West Asia Bloc, Itochu Corporation; and President & CEO, Itochu Singapore Pte Ltd, Singapore

12.50 pm – 2.00 pm Lunch

2.00 pm – 3.00 pm **Session 4**
Understanding ISIS Extremism and its Consequences in Southeast Asia

Moderator:

Professor Joseph Liow Chin Yong

Dean, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Panellists:

Ms Sidney Jones

Director, Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, Indonesia

Dr Maszlee Malik

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia

3.00 pm – 4.00 pm

Session 5
Indonesia: Looking Outward, Turning Inward?

Moderator:

Dr Hui Yew-Foong

Senior Fellow and Coordinator, Indonesia Studies Programme,
 ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute

Panellists:

Professor Dewi Fortuna Anwar

Deputy for Government Policy Support, Secretariat of the Vice
 President of the Republic of Indonesia

Dr Edy Prasetyono

Executive Director, Center for ASEAN Studies, University of
 Indonesia

Dr Jonathan Pincus

President and Executive Director, Rajawali Foundation, Indonesia

4.00 pm – 4.30 pm

Tea

4.30 pm – 5.30 pm

Session 6
Malaysia: A Polity Under Stress

Moderator:

Dr Michael Vatikiotis

Regional Director, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Singapore

Panellists:

Mr Wan Saiful Wan Jan

Chief Executive, Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs
 (IDEAS), Malaysia

Associate Professor Andrew Aeria

Department of Politics and International Relations, Universiti
 Malaysia Sarawak, Malaysia

5.30 pm

Closing Remarks

Dr Ooi Kee Beng

Deputy Director, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute
