

SNIPPETS OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER BY CENTER FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

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SEPTEMBER GALLERY



Picture Courtesy : Aljazeera



Picture Courtesy : Aljazeera

Top to bottom, left to right : Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh chairing an ASEAN video meeting; Philippines Government officials have taken to using mock coffins as part of a campaign to educate people about the risks of Coronavirus.

NOTE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CSEAS

Greetings...

We would like to thank our readers around the world for sharing your invaluable comments in our first newsletter, and we look forward to receiving them in the future. Since its inception in 2016, one of the core objectives of CSEAS has been bridging Southeast Asia with the rest of the world through teaching, research and publications. I hope you enjoy reading the snippets.

*Sincerely,
Dr. Nehginpao Kipgen*

THE EU-ASEAN TRADE DEAL DEBACLES

- Hariharan Chandrashekar



Picture Courtesy : AL Mesbar Studies & Research Centre

On August 1, 2020, Vietnam attempted to revive its economy by ratifying a trade agreement with the European Union (EU). Highlights included a commitment to ratify and implement the eight fundamental conventions of the International Labor Organization (ILO). Following Singapore, this trade agreement is the second instance of the EU's engagement with an ASEAN country. However, this was not enthusiastically welcomed by the other member countries, with their economies expected to decline post-COVID-19. So, the nations must engage in economic recoveries.

The trade agreement had impressive gains for Vietnam - allowing tariff-free as well as almost double exports to the EU bloc by 2025, adding 4.6 percent to gross domestic product growth within five years. So far, four countries have engaged in similar negotiations with the EU, albeit at a staggering pace due to differences over human rights or environment. Moreover, a lingering perception that the EU applies double standards in its dealings with various countries does not help the discourse. Thailand had given the green signal to restart negotiations in 2019, but the ongoing human rights issues within the region have hindered the development. In the Philippines, two sessions were rolled before 2017 but were stalled over President Duterte's 'War on Drugs' developments. But alternatives offered through the EU's Generalized Scheme of Preferences Plus scheme provided relief. Yet, calls for rescinding this privilege over the country's human rights situation by the European parliament is worrisome. Even Cambodia lost similar trade privileges due to democratic backsliding and Myanmar also for mass human rights violations years ago.

While Indonesia is in talks, it should have paced up dialogues due to its retracting economy at 1.9 percent; the 'palm oil' has been a source of contention between the two sides. Last year along with Malaysia, Indonesia made a complaint against the EU at WTO, due to the latter planning to phase out palm oil over health and environment concerns. But the former maintains its position looking at it as an attempt by the EU to protect its 'vegetable oil' interests. Amid the pandemic, gains from palm oil trade are vital for the sustenance of their economy, thereby, curtailing any idea of a deal between Indonesia and the EU. Moreover, despite the positive outlook of the EU among ASEAN nations, it still trails behind other powers such as the US, China, and Japan in terms of trustworthiness and influential power. There is also consensus that the EU needs ASEAN more than the other way around, noting that the former's economy plunged to 11.9 percent last quarter. Also, other ASEAN nations remain wary over penalizing Cambodia and Myanmar when Vietnam has similar levels of repression. If anything, the pandemic has further diminished the prospects for trade pacts between Europe and the region.

ASEAN SUMMIT 2020: COVID-19 EDITION

- Mihika Kothari

With the rising rhetoric and hostility (both economic and political), the friction between the United States (US) and China was at the forefront of discussion among other things, during the virtual ASEAN Summit 2020 held on September 9, 2020. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi joined the meeting between the foreign ministers of 10 Southeast Asian countries, which was delayed by a month due to the ongoing health crisis the world is facing.

The US accused Beijing of bullying and employing strong-arm tactics, fresh off the live-fire exercises by China in the South China Sea (SCS), merely five days before the start of the summit. China has claimed a significant portion of the resource-rich SCS, and this claim has been contested by Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan. The US has been wary of the development of artificial islands and military bases by China in the sea.

These events will undoubtedly lead to shifting dynamics and allegiances, and determine the political relations of the two largest economies of the world. Vietnam, which is currently chairing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), has previously stated that the global pandemic had 'swept away years of economic gains in the region'. Even the Philippines, whose president has been critical of the US, has had a more strained relationship with China, which has further worsened over the Scarborough Shoal in the SCS, which is one of the region's copious fishing grounds.

Currently facing international backlash, China has found itself in an unfavorable light across the world stemming from losses incurred due to the initial misrepresentation of data regarding the pandemic, the negative limelight of the Uighur internment camps and its aggressive style of trade negotiations and diplomacy. The US and China used the meeting as a platform to further strengthen their political agendas in talks which are unlikely to provide any progress in the SCS. In the era of major global economic instability and recession, both economic powerhouses must harvest favorable political brownie points from this summit to gain the upper hand on one of the most profitable and used maritime trade corridors, which is the SCS.



Picture Courtesy :Reuters

DEEPENING CRACK IN CAMBODIA'S DEMOCRACY

- Dishant Choudhary

In a recent crackdown on opposition leaders and activists from the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), courts sentenced seven activists for treason over comments posted online in support of CNRP's exiled leader Sam Rainsy's return to the Southeast Asian country. The judgement was pronounced in absentia of four activists while the authorities already apprehended one of them. The remaining two activists' sentence was suspended on account of defecting to the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP). Opposition leader Sam Rainsy fled Cambodia in 2015 to avoid detention and legal charges, which he believed was politically motivated. The motive stems from Prime Minister Hun Sen's insecurity of his diminishing influence in Cambodian politics after ruling the Kingdom for almost 35 years. Since then, many crackdowns have been made by the CPP to repress the dissenting voice of the opposition in the country including dissolving the CNRP in 2017 by a Supreme Court ruling.

According to the United Nations, 24 human rights campaigners, including environmental activists and rappers, have been detained since July this year. Despite the government's restriction, small protests continue to register in the capital city besides international condemnation and sanctions imposed by the European Union. Many CNRP supporters and activists believe that a democratic change would still come about and with the popular support, the party will continue to fight for justice and restore the democratic values as enshrined in the constitution. However, with Prime Minister Sen's control over the country's authorities and strong ties with neighboring countries, it will be critical to see how CNRP makes inroads back into the country's politics amidst threats to their freedom and life.



Picture Courtesy : Reuters

ASEAN AND THE POLITICAL MINEFIELDS OF DIGITAL DECOUPLING

Hariharan Chandrashekar

Amid the worsening US-China relations and a tense standoff between India-China, ASEAN countries are cautiously witnessing developments of actions against Chinese digital giants. The recent ban on TikTok and other apps in India has resulted in similar calls in the US. With President Donald Trump ordering Chinese digital giant Bytedance to sell its US operations, ASEAN is ready to witness a steady launch of 'non-political' products that adhere to the local laws.

The ASEAN is key for the future of these companies with Tencent and Bytedance both pouring billions into Southeast Asia to compete with US behemoths. Even though there is general stress on privacy and security concerns, with 43.5 million active TikTok users and WeChat being the "SuperApp" integrating communication and mobile payments, these platforms have become a lifeline for all demographics, especially the youths who would "rather continue to use it before its getting banned everywhere" - highlighting a general trend of disregard of the perceived concerns. Even businesses have hoped to migrate towards WhatsApp in its US operation rather than disregarding WeChat completely.

While the region might be cautious, it will unlikely ban these apps, because "No one desires to antagonize China or be constructed as having made its choice between the US and China." To sweeten the deal, Bytedance has roped in local moderators offering strict censorship of political and social content such as increasing the age barriers in Indonesia to avoid its brief ban in 2018, to taking down anti-monarchical content posted by pro-Thailand student protest groups in 2020. It also has been particularly attractive to Vietnam, which has been in a prolonged conflict with US tech giants over the restriction of content against the state offices, contrary to Bytedance's promise of being 'non-political'.

But being 'non-political' also means acceptance of censoring anti-China content. Even though there is a lack of evidence against data mining done by these companies on behalf of China, the inherent danger looms around. Nevertheless, the pressure of opportunistic loss of China, in terms of trade and other factors, such as access to Chinese coronavirus vaccine comes into play as well. The tacitness toward US response notes the region's reluctance toward this front of contestation.



Picture Courtesy :The Verge

ROHINGYA ATROCITY CONTINUES: THREE YEARS ON

- Dishant Choudhary

Last month (August) marked three years of the plight of Rohingyas, a Muslim-majority community, who were forced to flee Myanmar after being subjected to violence in 2017 in an attempt by the country's military, in what was called a brutal campaign of 'ethnic cleansing'. Subsequently, nearly 800,000 Rohingyas fled to neighboring Bangladesh and have since settled there as refugees in overcrowded camps. Those in Myanmar's Rakhine state, where the violence initially broke out, continue to face severe repression and inhuman treatment, without any basic rights and freedom of movement.

While addressing the 75th session of the UN general assembly on September 26, 2020, Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, asserted that Myanmar should take responsibility for the crisis and that the solution must be found in the Buddhist-majority country itself. She also called for greater international action to this end. However, contrary to its obligations, Bangladesh has failed to protect the rights of the refugees including providing adequate security, access to medical care, education and the right to work.

The government has recently involuntarily detained some refugees in an unprotected island of Bhasan Char, separating them from their family members based in Cox's Bazar refugee camps. While the ultimate solution of this predicament lies within Myanmar, the recent developments in Bangladesh have proven again that there is a growing xenophobia across the globe. The international community should not discredit the unfortunate and peculiar situation of forced migrants but rather collectively take positive actions to eliminate this common threat.

E3 SUBMIT JOINT NOTE IN UN AGAINST CHINA'S CLAIM IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

- Vikas Nagal

On September 16, 2020, three major European countries- Germany, the United Kingdom and France, also known as the EU 3, submitted a Joint Note Verbale to the United Nations Secretary General and alleged that China's maritime claims in the South China Sea are illegal under the international maritime law.

In the note, France, the UK, and Germany- all three are signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Law of Sea, 1982 (UNCLOS) -reaffirmed that the UNCLOS should be used to settle the disputes between parties, and reiterated the importance of freedom of navigation in the high seas for international peace and prosperity.

In the note, all the three European countries also stated that international maritime law (UNCLOS) clearly states that continental states like China cannot treat archipelagos as a whole entity and emphasized that specific conditions are outlined in the UNCLOS for the application of archipelagic baselines.

In August 2019, all the three European countries had released a public statement expressing concern about the situation in the South China Sea but they stopped short of direct criticism of China. But in recent months during the COVID-19 pandemic, China's actions in Hong Kong, the Taiwan Strait and the Xinjiang province have deteriorated Europe's relations with China. So the latest move by the E3 can be seen as tit-for-tat retaliation for China's aggressive actions and will further plunge the bilateral relations deep into a rabbit hole.



Picture Courtesy : Hanai Times

LAOS BECAME THE LATEST VICTIM OF CHINA'S DEBT-TRAP DIPLOMACY

- Vikas Nagal



Picture Courtesy : Xinhua

On September 4, 2020, Reuters reported that Laos was set to cede majority control of national electric grid to the Southern Power Grid Company, a Chinese state-controlled enterprise. This has raised alarm bells for other developing countries around the world which had taken a loan from China for their infrastructure development. In 2017, the Hambantota Port was leased to China for 99 years by the Sri Lankan government, after they failed to repay the debt taken from Chinese banks. So, the new development in Laos again raised the concerns related to the use of debt traps by the Chinese Government to acquire strategic assets in developing countries.

But few countries in the world are as vulnerable as Laos when it comes to defending their economic and financial sovereignty from the Chinese government. In recent years, Laos has borrowed heavily to develop infrastructural projects like Mekong River hydropower project and the \$6 billion high-speed rail project, which will link Yunnan province of China with mainland Southeast Asia. This year, Laos' foreign reserves has fallen below \$1 billion, which is less than its annual debt payments, and it has raised the risk of a sovereign default. According to various news reports, the government of Laos has requested China, its biggest foreign creditor, to restructure its debts to avoid defaulting. Last month, Moody also downgraded Laos rating, from B3 to Caa2, and it has changed the outlook from neutral to negative due to "severe liquidity stress."

MALAYSIA'S MAHATHIR EYES NEW ROLE AS A POWER BROKER IN THE COUNTRY'S POLITICS

- Avirat Parekh



The 95-year-old former Malaysian Prime Minister, who's been in office twice, seems not even remotely tired of the job as he continues to emerge as a significant power broker in the nation's political spectrum. The politician, who came to power in 2018, had then only lasted for twenty two months on his second outing, does not seem to be giving up the fight against what he believes as the return of corrupt malpractices and a review of reforms under his successor, Muhyiddin Yassin.

This August, Mahathir created the Pejuang party only months after his absolutely reformist government was removed in a major coup while he was fired from his own party. In an [interview](#) with the Associated Press, he spoke about Malaysia's governing coalition not being likely to call for early elections because of the current political discourse, and while foreseeing his new ethnic Malay party to be the power broker in the next polls.

If the Pejuang party manages to win 30 seats, it will be able to decide which side to support to form a majority. Mahathir had quit this February after Muhyiddin had pulled the Bersatu party out of the ruling alliance to [form a more Malay-oriented](#) coalition with the then opposition.

What's fascinating is how Mahathir is still so significant in Malaysia's political landscape, and the fact that he is leading a very different post-retirement lifestyle; his plans for the same remain clouded. However, these attempts at reclaiming power might not go down very well with the people of Malaysia which is something only time will tell. But as of this moment what we can understand is the man is a powerhouse of political office who is still giving his best at trying to stay relevant.

MYANMAR ELECTION OF NOVEMBER 2020

~ Shivangi Dikshit

Myanmar is preparing for a general election on November 8, 2020. Voters will elect members to both the upper house (House of Nationalities) and the lower house (House of Representatives) of the Assembly of the Union, and state and regional Hluttaws (legislatures). The State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) is expected to win. The military in Myanmar (Tatmadaw) holds 25 percent of the seats in the national parliament and in the state and regional legislatures through the 2008 constitutional provision. This provision significantly reduces the power of the head of the state and allows the military to influence the government.

Some parts of the country, including certain areas in Rakhine and Chin states are under lockdown either due to COVID-19 pandemic or an ongoing armed conflict, and the Union Election Commission has restricted election campaigns in these areas. The Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine are likely to be excluded in the election. There are reports that many citizens cannot find their names in the electoral list.

There is a speculation that corruption might play a role in the election outcome. Even though the NLD and the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) are likely to be the main competitors in the election, the role of smaller ethnic parties and parties formed by ex-military officers cannot be downplayed. Citizens had expected a significant change after the 2015 election, but the NLD government has failed to meet some of its major promises, such as constitutional amendment and peace with the country's ethnic armed groups. While the 2020 election result may not have a significant impact on the lives of many citizens, it will create room for some smaller parties to grow.



Picture Courtesy : CTV News

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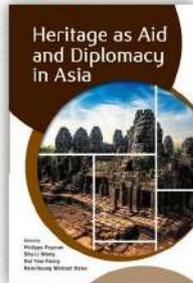


This volume is the first comprehensive study of Indonesia's contemporary democratic decline. Its contributors identify, explain and debate the

signs of regression, including arbitrary state crackdowns on freedom of speech and organization, the rise of vigilantism, deepening political polarization, populist mobilization, the dysfunction of key democratic institutions, and the erosion of checks and balances on executive power. They ask why Indonesia, until recently considered a beacon of democratic exceptionalism, increasingly conforms to the global pattern of democracy in retreat.

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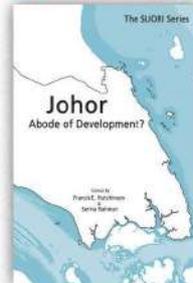


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*Barbara Watson Andaya,
Professor of Asian Studies,
University of Hawai'i*

2020 539 pages
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"This edited volume evaluates the new development of Islamic scholarship and authority in Indonesia. Things have changed significantly in

recent times that make many observers and researchers wondering: has Indonesia moved from traditional authorities, mainstream Islamic organizations, and the established scholarship to the new actors, movements and platforms? Has the change occurs owing to the democratization and political reforms that took place in the last twenty years or are there other factors we need to take into account? The contributors in this book provide possible answers from many different areas and perspectives. It's a must-read!"

*Nadirsyah Hosen,
Monash University, Australia*

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SEPTEMBER HIGHLIGHT:

A virtual discussion on the topic *Southeast Asia: A Strategic Region For Competition And Power Rivalry* chaired by Dr. Nehginpao Kipgen was successfully concluded on the September 3, 2020.

Speakers (top to bottom, left to right):

Dr. Nehginpao Kipgen, Executive Director, Center for Southeast Asian Studies & Assistant Dean, Jindal School of International Affairs;

Dr. Stephen R. Nagy, Senior Associate Professor, Department of Politics and International Studies, International Christian University;

Dr. Lina Gong, Research Fellow, Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University;

Dr. Shankari Sundararaman, Professor of Southeast Asian Studies, Centre for Indo-Pacific Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Dr. K.V. Kesavan, Visiting Distinguished Fellow, Observer Research Foundation, Author of several books on Japan.

Find the detailed report of the [discussion held here](#) and the [recording here](#).



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PROF. (DR.) NEHGINPAO KIPGEN
 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES AND ASSISTANT DEAN, JINDAL SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
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SPEAKERS

	DR. NICHOLAS FARRELLY Professor Head of Social Sciences University of Tasmania		DR. CHAW CHAW SEIN Professor Head, Political Science & International Relations University of Yangon
	DR. ASHLEY SOUTH Research Fellow Centre for Ethnic Studies and Development Chiang Mai University		DR. MIN ZAW OO Executive Director Myanmar Institute for Peace and Security

PROGRAMME	
11:00 am – 11:05 am	Welcome Address by Ms. Shivangi Dikshit, Research Assistant, CSEAS
11:05 am – 11:20 am	Electoral Democracy by Dr. Nicholas Farrelly
11:21 am – 11:35 am	Economic Outlook and Foreign Relations by Dr. Chaw Chaw Sein
11:36 am – 11:50 am	Minorities, the Peace Process and Federalism by Dr. Ashley South
11:51 am – 12:05 pm	The Role of Military in Politics by Dr. Min Zaw Oo
12:06 pm – 12:25 pm	Questions & Answers
12:26 pm – 12:30 pm	Vote of Thanks by Mr. Hariharan C, Research Assistant, CSEAS

UPCOMING EVENT:

**Thursday, October 15, 2020
 11:00 AM - 12:30 PM (IST)**

Mark your calendar as Center for Southeast Asian Studies cordially invites you to a discussion on

**Myanmar's 2020 Election:
 The Way Forward**

We are awaiting you to join us and the exciting panel !

Zoom Link:

<https://zoom.us/j/97670821089>

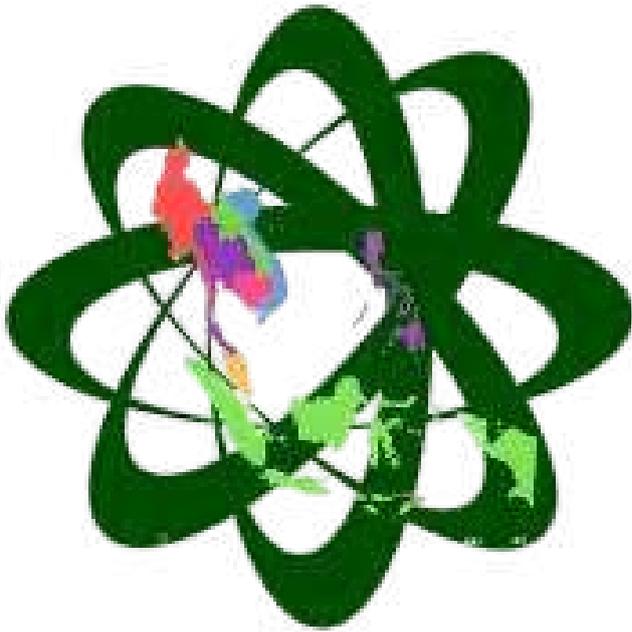
YouTube Live:

<https://youtube.com/jguvideo/c/live>

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