

Threats to East Asian Leadership

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Introduction

“The war is not meant to be won, it is meant to be continuous” observed George Orwell (Orwell, Audiberti & Rocheteau, 2016). As for Political leaders in East Asia, the race to the Presidential or Prime Ministerial office constitutes only one phase of the war fought with the opposition, whereas the battle of sustaining themselves prolongs for the entire span of their careers. The consequence of not being legal sacrosanct is dire for the region’s leaders and inhabitants alike, for there are no consistent and reliable legal clauses to provide immunity at the event of unforeseen attacks. Eventually, are they made to conjure means to manipulate the legal protocols in bid to retain their position at the signal of aspersions cast on their rule, as social movements that displaced their predecessors, repeatedly haunt them. This uncertainty places them on a slippery slope, the reflex of which causes their style of governance to be irascible in order to secure themselves from falling from the pinnacle of political hierarchy. This article outlines the risks that couple with power in East Asia, with solutions to prevent the existing heavy-handed method of rule from staying in effect indefinitely.

Assassination

The most virulent of all dangers befell upon Former Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, who was shot during a campaign event at Nara with a homemade firearm by Tetsuya Yamagami, a former leading seaman of the JMSDF (Arranz, 2022). Whilst the motivation behind the murder stayed personal rather than political with the primary grudge being held against the Unification Church (an organization the Abe’s family had a generational association with), it can be considered as an act of terrorism. This is because the targets of terrorists are often those with whom they have no individual scores to settle with, but are chosen in order to send a message conveying their interests to the public at large. A definite outcome of an attack of a magnitude as high as Abe’s assassination, is publicity, that serves as a channel of mass communication. However, this raises questions on how it might affect Japanese security, as the police forces of the country admitted that the slacks from their end turned advantageous to the shooter (BBC, 2022). A pacifist nation heretofore might impose stricter, pre-emptive measures to curb political violence upon the incident and replenish its security apparatus. Posthumously, Abe might be able to alter the peaceful post-war stance of Japan, which he sought to overturn during his time in office by proposing a 100% increase on defence expenditure. Abe’s assassination proves the relevance of the fatal practice amidst an illusion of such staying empty threats as numerous public figures periodically face intimidation of their lives being taken, including Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, whose potential assassin revealed his devious plans under the comment section of a Facebook post that mourned Abe’s passing.

Whilst it may be an act of fear-mongering or a show of force, the Singaporean police forces left no room for complacency and immediately arrested the 45-year-old man (Singh, 2022). This portrays how leaders are compelled to be intolerant towards the citizens in order to secure their skin, although decades ago, assassinations in East Asia were executed against tyranny and to bring autocracy to a closure, as was South Korean President Park Chung-hee, who was shot by his friend Kim Jae Kyu in 1979. The perpetrator was the chief of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency and claimed that he took the extreme step to reinstate democracy in Korea (Keesing, 1980).

Forced Relinquishment

At the time of writing this article, the citizens of Thailand had shed their acquiescing skin by congregating in rebellion against their Prime Minister, General Prayuth Chan-ocha. The paradigm seemed to have shifted for the whole country as Thailand's Constitutional Court mirrored the disapproval held by the civil society and the opposition, whereas the national body was infamous for taking judicial decisions in favour of the incumbent. The General, who claimed authority through a coup in 2014 reached the threshold of his tenure, for the Thai constitution limits each Prime Minister's term to a period of eight years. However, it was General Prayuth Chan-ocha's autocratic style of rule, refusal to hold nationwide elections and the poor handling of the Thai economy that served as a tipping point for the unanimous resistance.

At present, the General stands suspended. However, his ouster is impending and yet to be finalised through upcoming trials (South China Morning Post, 2022). The Thai regime change would be monumental for East Asia, as it could restore the faith of the public in national bodies and set a reminder to the Thai leaders of tomorrow that the law cannot be undermined for the sake of power retention. However, it is plausible that a future Thai Prime Minister with meagre public support might take advantage of the eight-year cap set by the Thai Constitution and compromise on electoral democracy just as General Prayuth did to extend his tenure by four additional years. Amid the above, only a systemic change would yield results that concur with the public.

Coup d'etat

Inverse to the sentence of the Thai court which answered the prayers chorused by public opinion, stand the Junta that governs Myanmar with General Min Aung Hlaing at the helm. Despite both Thailand and Myanmar having commanders-in-chief serving as Prime Ministers, Thailand being a constitutional Monarchy led by King Maha Vajiralongkorn might give the opposition and common public the leeway to exercise their freedom of expression, as long as the king remains untouched.

However, the same privilege is not granted to the civilians of Myanmar, for the military has consolidated power and has determined the act of quelling and suppressing dissidents as their primary safeguard. The decades-long house arrest following the coup of Aung San Suu Kyi and the frequent execution of activists might discourage democracy campaigners from revolting frequently, whereas the majority discontent of Myanmar's subjects might lead to a retaliation of an iron fisted rule by the Junta in order to impose 'discipline'. It is left to The UN and the International community to salvage the country by relegating it to rogue status. Yet, The US, UK and European Union's sanctioning of military officials hasn't impacted the country much, for its membership in ASEAN and allies comprising of Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand always provided a safety net during the time of economic damages perpetrated by the western powers, thereby allowing only mild threats to be directed at the leadership (Goldman, 2022).

Party Infighting

Whilst discord within the party might not be a threat by itself, the climate of resentment that it induces might spawn several existential threats. This is especially true in East Asia where the law can be manipulated to the convenience of the bureaucrats, often resulting in false allegations, defamations and incriminations on various grounds. This makes the possibility of offence ambiguous as evidence too can be nefariously fabricated to make the target appear guilty.

Likewise, The South Korean leader of The People Power party Lee Jun-seok was suspended in 2022 over a sex scandal that took place in 2013, which he accused of being a cunning set-up by the inner networks of President Yoon Suk-yeol (Jun-tae, 2022). Support of the party members irrespective of the situation, goes a long way in protecting and prolonging the tenure of leader, which Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha could have enjoyed, if it weren't for his disillusioned functionaries who decided to part ways with him. Similarly, former Korean President Park Geun-hye's impeachment in 2017 could have been averted if it weren't for the infighting between pro and anti-Park camps, which prevented her from receiving adequate backing from her own Saenuri Party members (Haas, 2018). Whilst heated arguments and misgivings between party members are commonplace, the leaders of the first world countries of the west cannot bypass the law or constitution due to more power given to the latter, and hence act within its confines. In East Asia, due to the legal protocols merely being a text of reference rather than a ruling standard, party members bearing ill-will against each other, gang up as factions and use it to the other's detriment. The Communist Party of China has also shown evidence of factions- one led by President Xi Jinping, dubbed as the Beijing Gang and the other by PRC's erstwhile leader Jiang Zemin along with his deputy Zeng Qinghong, termed the Shanghai Gang.

These factions are dictated by favouritism, execution of unauthorised political decisions and unequal concentrations of power, with the Shanghai Gang having caused many problems during Xi Jinping's bid to get re-elected in 2022 (Tenderdine, 2022). Needless to say, Xi Jinping is bound to conduct a political witch hunt against his own party members for leaving him on the knife's edge, thereby strengthening his laser focus on the security aspects of PRC.

Conclusion

Shakespeare did warn the ambitious beforehand with his phrase "Heavy is the head that wears the crown" (Shakespeare, 1413). In East Asia to have the crown intact, is a further challenge, as the region is resistant to change and hence stipulates a set of expectations on its rulers along with an ideal reputation to live up to. Due to their transfixed position, leaders try covering up their numerous flaws, often through means of brute force, suppression of information and other violations against democracy. In order to preclude their misuse of power out of insecurity, the dogma of the region must fade out and encourage leaders towards self-correction upon the realisation that the civilians use their electoral right to choose the leader who manifests a good standard of living, and not in order to dethrone the establishment. This way, political figures would recycle the spirit of freedom and acceptance that has been granted them through confidence building measures with their subjects. However, it is to be understood that democracy and human rights are western concepts and will take time to completely pervade through East Asia, where justification of the leaders' indiscretions and public restraint is the norm. However, there is scope for change in East Asia provided that the overarching legal provisions and constitutional postulates are given their due respect and put into practice.

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About The Author

Humsika Srikanth is a Research Affiliate at Christ University who specialises in the security dimensions of world politics, with her microscope presently focusing on East Asia. She has a penchant for all things foreign, whether it be cinema, clothing, cuisine, literature, architecture, spirituality or any other cultural representation from lands afar. She intends to further research on esoteric topics of International Relations and bring unique perspectives to the table.

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