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Summer of change in Southeast Asia, but no Arab Spring

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By Raju Gopalakrishnan

SINGAPORE (Reuters) - Myanmar's cautious relaxation of strict government control has grabbed the spotlight in recent weeks, but it's only the latest act in a summer of political change in Southeast Asia.

It's not a replay of the Arab Spring. Although part of a trend toward more political openness in the region, the changes have been driven mostly by governments or through elections.

Singapore's long-ruling People's Action Party returned to power in May elections but anger over surging prices and immigration, and a feeling that the government was not responsive, sank its share of the vote to a record low. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said the election was a watershed and had altered the political landscape.

In Malaysia, Prime Minister Najib Razak has repealed two sweeping security laws and lifted curbs on the media. The moves came after sharp criticism of police action against a huge rally in the capital Kuala Lumpur in July for better governance.

And in Thailand, the party of deposed premier Thaksin Shinawatra ousted the ruling party in parliamentary elections, a victory for his red-shirted supporters involved in bloody clashes with the military last year.

"In a simplistic way, it is a movement towards democracy, towards political liberalisation, just at different paces with gains but also with setbacks," says Jaime Davidson, an associate professor of political science at the National University of Singapore.

"This tussle, this back and forth between conservative elites in the region, whether they be policy elites, economic elites or military elites, trying to rein in moves towards this process -- that's what links it all together."

Davidson said despite the overall trend, there was little evidence that the events were inter-dependent. "It (the process) has been over years. So it's not coincidental, but it's certainly not domino-related in the short-term."

AIR ASIA EFFECT

Just a generation ago, much of Southeast Asia was ruled by autocrats or generals. The 1986 ouster of strongman Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines and President Suharto in Indonesia in 1998 has brought in change which has spread, in fits and starts, across the region.

Controlled democracies in Singapore and Malaysia are now more liberal, military-backed regimes have given way to elected governments in Thailand and Indonesia is now seen as the most pluralistic state in the region.

Brunei remains a tightly-run kingdom while Vietnam and the smaller Indochina states have a long way to go, but still, there is a perceptible trend, analysts say.

"Watchers of Southeast Asian politics have been seeing these trends for many years," says Jim Della-Giacoma, Southeast Asia Project Director for the International Crisis Group.

"It's more coincidence than anything else," he said of the events this summer. "But perhaps now there is a greater spotlight globally on political change and thematic political change."

Della-Giacoma ascribed the interplay between the events in Southeast Asia to what he called "the Air Asia effect", or how travel was allowing people to increasingly put different political systems under the spotlight.

"There is an increasing amount of travel throughout the region," he said. "With budget travel, people are moving around, seeing how different countries work. There are different contexts but there is some kind of interaction in the neighbourhood."

OUTLIER

The outlier in this Southeast Asian summer has been Myanmar.

After the junta was dissolved in April and an army-backed but civilian government took power, the regime has freed hundreds of political prisoners, made overtures to Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, called for dialogue with ethnic rebels and postponed construction of a controversial Chinese dam that was opposed by many in the reclusive



nation.

But the changes appear to have been driven by the government, rather than any popular sentiment, as could be said about Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, says Simon Tay, chairman of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs.

"Ground up policies do matter, democracies which we called autocratic or elite before are having to recognise the ground elements much more," he said. "The question is whether people outside those elites can use those sentiments against the established elites in all three countries."

And although Myanmar was at one time seen as ripe for a revolution against the junta, there is no sense that what happened in the Middle East is in any way a trigger for the current reforms.

"Right now it's a very managed process that is deliberate and methodical, although it has been happening at a somewhat surprising speed since mid-July when the president appears to have sorted out some internal political squabbles," said Della-Giacoma.

"The reform agenda of the government is not being driven by a fear of what's happening in the Middle East, but more by a concern of Myanmar having been left behind.

"Twenty years or more of isolation have left it trailing its Southeast Asian neighbours in terms of prosperity and wealth and now they want to catch up."

(Editing by Sanjeev Miglani)

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