

# Policy Dialogue Brief

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Foundation



46th Strategy  
for Peace  
Conference

October 20-22, 2005

Airlie Center  
Warrenton, VA

## Challenges to Democracy in Southeast Asia: Rethinking US Policy

Since September 11, 2001, and particularly after the intervention in Iraq, US foreign policy has held that the spread of democracy and freedom is essential and integral to the war against terrorism. The Greater Middle East Initiative was launched on that assumption. And while the focus of this policy paradigm is on the Middle East, its implications extend to other regions with significant Muslim populations. Southeast Asia, which contains the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, is a prime test case for the administration's attempts to link democracy promotion with counterterrorism. However, initial readings there suggest a serious disconnect between US rhetoric and actions.

To assess the state of democratization and political change in Southeast Asia today, and to evaluate US policy in that regard, the Stanley Foundation convened a roundtable at its 2005 Strategy for Peace Conference at the Airlie Center in Warrenton, Virginia, from October 20 to 22, 2005. Participants included US congressional staffers and analysts, scholars, and representatives of nongovernmental organizations. The inclusion of participants from Southeast Asia—Indonesia, the Philippines, and Cambodia—provided invaluable insights and grounding in the course of discussion.

Southeast Asia has the broadest political spectrum in the world, incorporating new democracies, semi-authoritarian systems, Leninist states, and a right-wing totalitarian

regime. The region contributed two early successes to the Third Wave of democracy—the Philippines in 1986 and Thailand in 1988—but the most profound democratization process has been Indonesia's transition

### Recommendations

- Make investments in education, American studies, and exchange programs.
- Be cautious in advocating the restriction of civil liberties in the name of antiterrorism.
- Consider the possibility that working with ASEAN nongovernmental networks and parliamentary caucuses may be a better route to promoting democracy.
- Rethink sanctions as a long-term democracy promotion tool.
- Don't look for, or assume, a specific short-term outcome in democracy-promotion policies.
- Recognize that political liberalization—even democratization—can take different forms.
- Make creative use of civil society programs to build a foundation for ultimate democratization.
- Play a more active assistance role in the implementation of peace settlements in conflict areas.
- Encourage other areas of the Muslim world to examine the model of Indonesian democracy.

This brief summarizes the primary findings of the conference as interpreted by the rapporteur and chair. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this bulletin. Therefore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to all of its recommendations, observations, and conclusions.

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Southeast Asia in the  
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in 1998-1999, making it the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy. Nevertheless, Southeast Asia's democracies have encountered significant obstacles in their transitions. Other countries in the region have incomplete democratic transitions at best, while some have deeply rooted authoritarian systems. The 1991 Paris Peace Accords and the subsequent UN intervention caused a quantum leap in Cambodia's political development, but that has fallen short of a genuine multiparty democracy. At the same time, despite relatively free and fair elections in 1990, Burma has been an intransigent holdout, impervious to both external and internal pressures for political change.

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In the years immediately following the end of the Cold War, Southeast Asia was a potential hothouse for political change as former enemies normalized relations and economies reached double-digit growth rates. Although the region did not figure prominently in global US policy, the United States was the preeminent interlocutor and ally on democracy promotion. After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Southeast Asia had greater salience in US policy, but democracy promotion appeared to lose ground as a priority, if it did not disappear altogether. This downward trend has contributed to negative views of the United States and has weakened ties with the very progressive elements in Southeast Asia that the United States hopes to attract to further its security and economic goals in the region.

### **Democracy Promotion in a Changing Policy Environment**

In contrast to the early years of the post-Cold War era, the present policy climate mitigates against democracy promotion. Three major trends contribute to this new environment:

- **The deteriorating image of the United States abroad, especially in the Muslim**

**world, which undermines US legitimacy among prodemocracy groups in Southeast Asia.** Surveys have charted the steady downward spiral of Southeast Asian approval of the United States since 9/11, particularly after the onset of the Iraq war. The new American focus on counterterrorism in Southeast Asia and US encouragement for stiffer antiterrorism laws have led some reformers in the region to conclude that the United States has abdicated its role as an advocate of democracy. This is exacerbated by the furor over Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. An October poll in Malaysia indicated that a majority of Muslims in that country considered the United States to be the world's worst violator of human rights.

- **The balkanization of US human rights policy that places special emphasis on such issues as religious freedom or human trafficking.** This approach discourages the more holistic view required for democracy promotion, since democratization is a complex process that brings together multiple actors.
- **China's role as a rising power and its increasing influence in Southeast Asia.** In its new diplomatic campaign, Beijing emphasizes an unconditional approach—particularly in the poorer, authoritarian nations of the region—that contrasts favorably to sanctions-heavy US policy. These countries (Burma, Cambodia, Laos) increasingly view China as a regional stabilizer and the United States as destabilizing. However, China's new popularity is not confined to these poorer nations. Polling data from 2004 in Thailand revealed that 76 percent of Thais interviewed identified China as Thailand's "best friend" and only 10 percent placed the United States in that role. Washington's relatively tame approach to promoting democracy in China, contrasted

to its stridency in Burma and Cambodia, encourages the impression of US inconsistency at best, and hypocrisy at worst.

Most participants felt that it would not be possible to enlist China as a partner in democracy promotion in the region. However, greater US engagement in Southeast Asia in general could help counterbalance the effect that Beijing's growing regional presence has on domestic political dynamics in Southeast Asia.

Not all trends in this new Southeast Asian policy environment are negative, however. Some participants believed that the region is gradually becoming more democratic and that this balance could eventually influence ASEAN's authoritarian members to liberalize. Specifically, Indonesia's political transition could alter the ASEAN core and result in more integrated initiatives. In addition, ASEAN is developing a form of regional civil society, initially organized around opposition to Burma's chairmanship of ASEAN, that can be further nurtured. Lastly, transnational threats such as SARS and avian flu have created momentum for regional approaches to these problems and create pressure on all the region's governments for greater transparency. All of these trends are incipient and none is irreversible, but they suggest that a targeted regional approach could open new avenues for democracy promotion in Southeast Asia.

### **Democracies Challenged**

Southeast Asia's diversity makes the political development of each country in the region *sui generis* to some degree. Nevertheless, some commonalities can be seen at this juncture. Overall, Southeast Asia's authoritarian and semi-authoritarian systems are fairly stable, and do not seem to be approaching major changes. Participants agreed that, despite more than a decade of international pressure,

Burma's regime does not appear close to reform or collapse. On the contrary, the purge within the government last fall only illustrated that the hard-line ranks can be easily replenished. Economic reform is encouraging greater openness in the Vietnamese system, but there is little doubt that the party system will endure for the time being.

Many of the world's semi-authoritarian systems have lasted for decades, as Singapore and Malaysia have demonstrated. Their democratic procedures allow for some degree of political pluralism, particularly in Malaysia, but these same procedures are employed to keep the dominant party in power. After more than a decade of struggling to graft an internationally designed democratic system onto a Leninist political structure, Cambodia, too, seems to be settling into semi-authoritarianism. But US policymakers should not view this relative stability as a reason to ignore these systems and should consider new approaches to encourage democratic gains. This is difficult, because Americans are often uncomfortable with the shades of gray in semi-authoritarian systems.

At this point in time, Southeast Asia's democracies appear to be the most politically dynamic, for better or worse. Indonesia is still in the process of consolidating a democratic system that has developed fairly rapidly, after 30 years under Suharto's rule. Political parties are still weak, as is the judiciary. Corruption continues to eat away at democratic legitimacy, and successful economic growth will be essential to the continuation of the democratization process. Two questions about Indonesia's democracy are still outstanding: (1) is democracy working at the local level and (2) can and will the Indonesian armed forces reform? Although the military is considered to be removed from politics, it has yet to be brought fully under civilian control, and some consider it to be a political party awaiting an opportunity. On a different plane, Indonesia has not fully defined democracy

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from an Islamic perspective, a task that is all the more important in an era of heightened extremism and terrorism.

Thailand and the Philippines, Southeast Asia's oldest democracies, appear to be switching places, with Thailand moving closer to a presidential system and the Philippines contemplating a change to parliamentary rule. However, political trends in Thailand may be temporary and tied to the management style of Prime Minister Thaksin, who has been successful in bringing minor parties into the Thai Rak Thai party and in shuffling the cabinet to keep its core close to him. This consolidation puts pressure on opposition parties to become better organized. At this time, Thaksin's greatest challenge is the increasing violence in the Muslim south. Resolving tensions in that area is a long-term undertaking, and some elements within the Thai political community see the emergency powers that have been conferred upon the government as counterproductive in that regard.

The Philippines appears to be in a protracted political crisis of a broader kind, and some observers believe that the traditional political class in the country is on the verge of extinction. The government is increasingly beleaguered, and splits are emerging in civil society as well as between the executive branch and the Senate. One participant described the present political conflict not as a two-sided one, but as a "circular firing squad." In an attempt to extricate the country from this crisis, public debate has centered on the possibility of adopting a parliamentary system, on the theory that it would help strengthen and stabilize the political party system and make relations between the executive and legislative branches less confrontational. Many observers believe that the instinct is to adhere to a presidential system, but the current debate has at least identified some of the weaknesses in that system that need to be addressed.

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## Recommendations

Despite heavy emphasis on spreading freedom and democracy in the National Security Strategy of 2002 and other policy instruments, there is little to suggest that the United States will reorder policy priorities to downplay conventional security and counterterrorism and make democracy promotion a central theme in Southeast Asia policy. Indeed, democracy commands only 8 percent of the present budget of the United States Agency for International Development, essentially making it a discretionary item. However, considerable improvements can be made in current policy with a number of paradigm and operational changes. Taken collectively, participants' recommendations advocate a more vigorous and disciplined approach to democracy promotion, but one that is also more indirect, in recognition that political development in Southeast Asia is an intensely internal affair in the great majority of countries.

1. **Make investments in education, American studies, and exchange programs to strengthen the US role as an interlocutor in Southeast Asia, and strengthen American influence as a result.** This is a broader problem related to declining US influence in nearly every area of Southeast Asian policy, but it has particular resonance for democracy promotion. A deeper involvement with Southeast Asian education sectors will build stronger links with younger generations in the region and help convince government and societal leaders alike that the United States is committed to the region's economic and social development. American studies and exchange programs are needed to underscore the complexity of the US political system and to build fraternal bonds with new groups. Without these longer-term instruments, "drive-by" US democracy promotion will not only be ineffective but could raise nationalist hackles further in a region already wary of US motives.

2. **Be cautious in advocating the restriction of civil liberties in the name of antiterrorism.** Stronger internal security laws and similar measures are viewed as shortcuts in counterterrorism, but they can backfire by creating resentment of strong-arm tactics or even by weakening ordinary judicial processes. Moreover, if new internal security measures are specifically identified with the United States, they could be all the more incendiary. Although new legal codes to fight terrorism may be needed in some systems in Southeast Asia, they should not be pressed upon every country in cookie-cutter fashion. Existing laws should first be examined to determine if they already cover terrorist activities adequately. If not, new laws should be narrowly crafted, to avoid their use by the government against the political opposition or against civil society more broadly.

3. **Consider the possibility that working with ASEAN nongovernmental networks and parliamentary caucuses may be a better route to promoting democracy than the more central ASEAN bureaucracy.** A regional approach to press Burma to open its political system is not necessarily ill-advised, but the United States and the European Union are inclined to focus primarily on ASEAN governments. Although ASEAN efforts in advocating political reconciliation to Rangoon have stepped up in recent years, the “ASEAN way” of noninterference in the internal affairs of a member state still provides an escape clause. Moreover, pressure on governments is subject to trade-offs for other, more central, policy priorities.

Working with NGO and interparliamentary networks may be a better way to apply sustained pressure on ASEAN governments. Even more important, it may be

the best way to help Southeast Asia develop its own framework for the promotion of democracy that can generalize in part from the Burma case.

4. **Rethink sanctions as a long-term democracy promotion tool.** Once sanctions are imposed to promote democracy, they are all but impossible to lift, absent large-scale political change. They are thus a blunt instrument and are difficult to tailor to the situation. In this policy area, if sanctions are applied they should be tight and timely, with clear objectives and even clearer guidelines on the conditions under which they will be withdrawn. Under the present circumstances and with the current regime in Rangoon, it would be unwise to lift sanctions on Burma, but US sanctions on Cambodia may merit a second look. More broadly, the United States should not be so quick to threaten or impose sanctions, particularly in complex political situations.

5. **Don't look for, or assume, a specific short-term outcome in democracy-promotion policies.** A policy pitched to a specific political outcome tends to focus on individuals, rather than on issues or institutions. However, anointed individuals may be booby-trapped by identification with an external power and have difficulty establishing the legitimacy needed to rule. They may turn out to be bad or even disastrous choices. Moreover, short-term frameworks established from the outside tend to be simplistic and underestimate the time needed for negotiation between reformers and traditional power-holders. Lastly, this policy approach is inherently intrusive and raises issues of ownership if a political transition does occur. As one Southeast Asian participant said, “The US should help establish the scaffolding for a democracy and leave the politics to the local boys.”

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This description may fit some elements of US policy toward Cambodia at the present time. In contrast, US democracy promotion in Indonesia in the 1990s illustrated the wisdom of a longer-term approach. For most of the decade, with no apparent political transition in sight, US assistance focused on capacity-building in Indonesian civil society. Assistance plans did not assume the collapse of the Suharto regime or even a specific era of reform. However, in the political turmoil in Indonesia that followed the 1997 Asian financial crisis, this civil society foundation helped effect a “democratic landing” for Indonesia.

*...settlement of longstanding conflicts will improve the political climate in the entire country and weaken support for extrajudicial government acts.*

6. **In paradigms and policymaking, recognize that political liberalization—even democratization—can take different forms and may not always appear on the scene as a multiparty system.** US policymakers may be blinding themselves to opportunities to promote political openness by insisting on the rise of a formal and confrontational opposition as a model for political change. Thailand took a more evolutionary path to democracy in the 1980s. Brunei is moving away from an absolute monarchy through an expanding consultative process. At present, Vietnam shows signs of greater pluralism within the party structure and a more assertive legislature. These trends represent movement in a positive direction and should be nurtured for themselves, not just as a possible prelude to democratization.
7. **Make creative use of civil society programs to build a foundation for ultimate democratization in countries where political dynamics present significant obstacles.** In Burma, the only entry point at this time through which to promote liberalization is the nascent and extremely small civil society. Although Malaysia is considerably more democratic than Burma, its rigid political

party system—which excludes members on the basis of religion or ethnicity—is an impediment to further democratization. Civil society in Malaysia is the best meeting ground for races, religions, and genders. In countries with constricted space for civil society organizations, low-profile US assistance to nonpartisan NGOs, such as social service or environmental groups, can help expand that space. In those with more extensive civil society systems, the United States can help NGOs develop funding sources within their society and lessen their dependence on foreign donors, thereby strengthening their sustainability.

8. **Play a more active assistance role in the implementation of peace settlements in such conflict areas as Mindanao or Aceh.** The emergence of democratic institutions and mechanisms is much more difficult in an atmosphere of internal conflict, or a serious threat of it. Beyond the direct benefit to these specific target areas, settlement of longstanding conflicts will improve the political climate in the entire country and weaken support for extrajudicial government acts.
9. **Where there is receptivity, encourage other areas of the Muslim world to examine the model of Indonesian democracy.** At the present time, the Middle East and other more radical Muslim areas are inclined to view Southeast Asia as the periphery, in need of “purification” because of its syncretic approach to Islam. However, Indonesia’s democratic experience offers valuable lessons in incorporating political Islam into the broader political system, and developing Muslim civil society organizations that encourage moderation. ■

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Production: Jen Maceyko, Elizabeth Pomeroy, and Margo Schneider

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