Opinion

LICENSE TO LEAD

There are big cultural differences in the way leadership is exercised from country to country. In some places, there are historic patterns of strong, personal leadership. Others prefer consensual forms of power, where, if there is a prime minister or president, they are at best only 'first amongst equals.' Some political cultures have strong aversions to the kind of rhetoric-loving, ostentatious country heads that one sometimes gets in the west.

Kerry Brown

ASIA CONTAINS EXAMPLES of almost all of these approaches. The diversity of its political models must be the most extensive in the world. Even the ten members of the Association of South East Asian Nations encompass liberal democracies, monarchies, and outright dictatorships. The Asian region extends from robust, new democracies like Indonesia, to trenchant one party states like North Korea and China, to any number of systems in between. Democracy in Japan has only recently seen an opposition party gain real power, after almost half a century of dominance by one party. In the Philippines, there remain plenty of questions of just how much benefit the oldest democratic system in the region has delivered to its people, in terms of economics, accountability and stability.

Countries need their own path. This is something asserted almost across Asia. Nationalism sits just under these issues of types of leadership. Sovereignty and non-interference in the affairs of others remain the key mantra, even in the age of globalisation. So it is not surprising that there is plenty of evidence recently of countries going through key leadership transitions having to approach these in very different ways. The two most striking current examples are of China and North Korea. While the ruling Parties in both remain utterly unchallenged in their monopolies on power, the imminent leadership changeover in late 2012 for the Chinese, and the health issues around supreme leader Kim Jong Il in North Korea have both posed issues. For China, it is simply one of how to manage a major changeover right at the top of the Party which gathers public support, and manages to satisfy the complex constituencies within the CCP. The lack of a presiding dominant political figure like Deng Xiaoping who can broker compromise only complicates things. While a public outbreak of spats in the coming two years is unlikely, the possibility of some fierce backstage horse trading remains very strong. And at the moment, it remains very unclear how disagreements about who gets what slots at the top are going to be resolved, if and when this happens.

For North Korea, the situation is even more opaque. Kim Jong Il, as he showed during his two appearances in Beijing on visits earlier this year, and during his public showing after the Korean Workers Party Congress in late October, is in poor health. There is very little knowledge about the various leadership groups around him that might have some influence on the direction of the country should he die suddenly. The one thing we do know is that it was finally deemed necessary to promote his third son to a raft of army and party positions, giving every indication that he is on track to be the successor in the coming years, when Kim either retires or simply dies.

Democracies are faring little better at managing their leadership issues. Japan has had four prime ministers in as many years, with the latest, Nato Kan, hastily put in place after the fall of Hatoyama earlier this year because of the loss of faith in him by his own party. Kan almost immediately faced a challenge by Ichiro Ozawa, a member of his own party. He saw it off, but at a time when the country remains mired in a deep recession, and when it is being challenged by both China and Russia, this shows an ominous lack of focus on the part of governing elites.

Strong men exist in Asia, still. Hun Sen maintains an iron grip on power in Cambodia, after being in power for almost two decades. But the norm is now more for leadership circumscribed by qualifications and anxiety. Elites are being challenged in political cultures as diverse as the Philippines and Malaysia, and though the response from place to place differs, it is clear that very few leaders can refuse to engage with their constituencies in a more consensual, calibrated way. Expectations towards politicians are rising. Demands for greater accountability are also increasing. Even in China now, the new Five Year Programme, which is due to run from 2011 to 2015 and was released in October, talks of delivering efficient governance, allowing greater participation in decision making, and creating more balanced, equal growth.

Are we heading towards an era of weak leadership in Asia? A Japan, India or China distracted by internal leadership issues might cause big problems. Their importance in the world political and economic system now is too great for them to become introspective. The problem, at least for China, is that these leadership changes may well create doubt and uncertainly during a critical period when the country's voice to the outside world needs to be consistent and clear. Despite all the cultural differences, therefore, the surprising thing is that, pretty much whatever the system, the preoccupations of leaders remain to satisfy the basic demands of their constituents, and those who, whatever the differences in their systems, put them in power. And balancing these against their international interests and obligations remains a huge challenge, whatever kind of system one is working in.

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