



## Southeast Asia and Trump year one: a work in progress

Sally Tyler

In November of 2016, I published an essay in *New Mandala* comparing Donald Trump with former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra; drawing parallels between their status as billionaires who have avoided financial transparency, marketed false narratives of themselves as self-made men, and displayed formidable media savvy.<sup>1</sup> Like most political handicappers, I underestimated the Trump campaign's appeal, and predicted his defeat.

A few lines of that essay, however, stand in crystalline relief when trying to decipher the rise of outlier candidates:

"The U.S. and Thailand are separated by thousands of miles, but base voters for Thaksin and Trump share some notable characteristics. The Bangkok taxi driver transplanted from Isaan might seem to have little in common with the gun-toting, Christian fundamentalist in Oklahoma. Yet, both have felt overlooked by successive administrations, and have not identified with the campaign rhetoric spun by traditional candidates. Both groups have had their votes vilified as not merely helping a disfavored candidate, but as actually undermining democracy.

Pundits on either side of the Pacific have wondered how anyone could support a demagogue like Thaksin or Trump. "What is wrong with those people?" has been a familiar, shocked refrain. The more instructive question from a political viewpoint is, "What is wrong with democratic institutions for failing to craft policies and messages more inclusive of society's marginalized factions to prevent them from becoming targets of megalomaniacal candidates?" A democratic nation which ignores large blocks of voters for long will be made to pay in one way or another."

Above: U.S. President Donald Trump registers his surprise as he realises other leaders, including Russia's Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, President of the Philippines Rodrigo Duterte and Australia's Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, are crossing their arms for the traditional 'ASEAN handshake' as he participates in the opening ceremony of the ASEAN Summit in Manila, Philippines, November 13, 2017. Copyright: REUTERS/Jonathan Ernst.

### Parallels in unexpected places

Like many others in the U.S. who found themselves stunned by the outcome of the 2016 presidential election, I experienced the desire to be far away from my home in Washington DC on the day of Donald Trump's inauguration in January of 2017. For me, there was little question of where to go: Southeast Asia. I first began traveling in the region more than two decades ago, and have developed enduring friendships there, which have led me to become a student of its culture and politics.

My work in the U.S. concerns both policy and politics, and I hoped that post-election travel in the region would bring me respite from it. It was impossible, however, to completely escape the political lens, and I saw parallels in unexpected places between events unfolding in the U.S. and in Southeast Asia. I explored these parallels in a series of articles published throughout 2017 in *New Mandala*, ANU's *Policy Forum* and the *Mekong Review*. I intentionally avoided the topics of trade and defense, because they are already extensively covered in the media; and instead focused on more subtle connections on a wide range of issues.

A visit to a 'prison without walls' on the Philippine island of Palawan allowed reflection on efforts to roll back Obama era criminal justice reforms in the U.S., and mass

incarceration trends in both nations. Changes to Internal Revenue Service (IRS) policy in the U.S. encouraged me to examine tax collection efforts in Cambodia, Indonesia, and elsewhere in Southeast Asia; and the necessity of a strong public sector workforce to create a value-based system of tax participation. Going to the theatre in Washington DC to see a new production of *The King and I* led to consideration of Thailand's *lèse-majesté* laws, and comparison with Trump's desire to tighten libel laws in the U.S., as well as the value of artistic free expression within a society. Other topics included labor rights, the environment, refugees, space exploration, the fashion industry, and more. What began as taking note of quirky associations while traveling morphed into a chronicle of the indirect ways that policy developments in the U.S. and Southeast Asia can affect each other; below are a few excerpts.

### On labor rights<sup>2</sup>

(Failed Secretary of Labor nominee) Puzder's c.v. is a familiar roadmap to Trumpland—a white male CEO with no experience in governance. His Senate confirmation hearing was delayed, at least in part because he failed to submit the required disclosure forms, apparently flummoxed by the level of transparency regarding possible conflicts of interest required of a Cabinet member. Or perhaps, it was indecision on how to spin his hiring of an undocumented

immigrant as a housekeeper, and the fact that he paid legally-required federal employment taxes for her only after he had been nominated.

The Secretary of Labor's impact on domestic policy is clear, but its linkage to foreign policy has received less public attention. From taking a stand on whether worker standards are included in trade agreements to weighing in on where nations land on the State Department's Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report, the Department of Labor contributes significantly to U.S. foreign policy, and decisions made by a new secretary will be felt by workers around the world.

Puzder's track record as CEO offers a dismal glimpse into his take on global corporate responsibility. A key example is palm oil, demand for which by the U.S. fast food industry has helped drive tropical deforestation in Indonesia and Malaysia, contributing to global warming and air pollution in Southeast Asia. As part of efforts to promote sustainable palm oil practices, the Union of Concerned Scientists released a score card indicating corporations' commitments to use deforestation-free palm oil. Puzder's Hardees and Carl's Jr. brands received a score of zero. Because of such disregard for sustainable food practices, as well as his company's sordid history of labor violations, the International Labour Rights Forum (ILRF) recently joined with more than 100 organizations to oppose Puzder's nomination.

Globally-minded consumers need to know that the world's largest economy is helping ensure labor standards around the world. Just as I want to be confident that a fashion bargain in Bangkok did not originate in an unregulated hellhole like Rana Plaza, other Americans should be able to eat a burger that does not contribute to the erosion of habitat for diverse species in Southeast Asia. But we can't do this without a firm and vigilant Department of Labor.

### On mass incarceration<sup>3</sup>

A prisoner named Ver gave me a tour of parts of the compound open to the public (the maximum security unit is off limits). He told me that he received a life sentence, of which he must serve 40 years, for selling marijuana at the age of 21. He has now served 32 years. Ver hails from Banaue, 330 kilometres north of Manila. At the time of his conviction, he had a wife and two babies, whom he has not seen since his imprisonment. He was imprisoned in Manila for a few years before being transferred to Iwahig, and says that the cost of travelling made family visits prohibitive. He says he does not think much about what he will do when he is released, as that is still eight years away and he will be an old man by then.

Historically, Iwahig has served as an overflow for Manila's notoriously overcrowded prisons, and those ranks are expanding precipitously. Though most international scrutiny of Duterte's so-called war on drugs has centered on extrajudicial killings, less emphasis has been given to the ever-widening swath of humanity he has had thrown into prison. Now, lawmakers happy to do his bidding are pushing legislation to lower the age of criminal liability to nine years old, where it had been until 2006, when the age limit was raised to 15.

Through concerted approaches, including new sentencing guidelines without mandatory minimums and clemency toward individuals sentenced under previous guidelines, the Obama Administration had successfully reduced the federal prison population from 220,000 inmates in 2013 to 195,000 inmates in 2016. Only days into a new Department of Justice, the dismantling of this progress began. US Attorney General Sessions announced the reversal of Obama's 2016 executive order aimed at reducing, and ultimately ending, federal use of private prisons.

And now, the Trump Administration has thrown the nation once again into the vicious cycle of the prison industrial complex. The cycle's effect is long-term; characterized by lack of economic and educational opportunity coupled with discriminatory sentencing guidelines, resulting in a veritable prison pipeline for many young people, particularly African Americans, leaving them just as hopeless as Ver in Iwahig.

### On the fashion industry<sup>4</sup>

This week<sup>5</sup> marks the launch of Asia Islamic Fashion Week, a first of its kind trade show in Kuala Lumpur to showcase fashion featuring "cutting-edge style that is in line with Islamic values". The women who wear such clothing have traditionally not identified it as 'Islamic', but simply as modest. The fact that the organizers of the Malaysian exposition chose to brand it as an Islamic fashion event reflects that they are aware that such clothing, and the women who wear it, has reached a new level of global visibility in non-Islamic eyes. Though the wholesale and retail buyers targeted by their trade show remain Muslim, their work, and any messages they wish to convey through it, now includes a potentially broader audience.

Asia Islamic Fashion Week comes on the heels of the spring shows in New York, where Indonesian designer Anniesa Hasibuan, who also made headlines by showcasing the first all-hijab collection at Fall New York Fashion Week, featured a cast of immigrant models, in response to the Trump Administration's highly-publicized travel ban targeting nine primarily-Muslim nations.

But beyond campaigns to confront implicit bias and incorporate inclusive messaging, can prominent Trump policies be challenged through fashion industry engagement? Lest the sartorially-dismissive scoff, consider that fashion is a more than \$1.75 trillion global industry, accounting for at least \$370 billion of spending in the U.S. The fashion industry could potentially provide a valid test case for engagement on Trump policies because it hits on so many key issues. The complex nature of the global supply chain involved in fashion touches on trade, labor rights, gender equity and the environment, among other issues.

**"A leadership void has been created; but nature abhors a vacuum."**

### On church-state relations<sup>6</sup>

The threat of taxation has been the primary regulatory mechanism that the U.S. has used to shore up what Thomas Jefferson called "the wall of separation between church and state", as articulated in the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The primacy of this concept within American society cannot be minimized. The country's founders, some who had fled religious persecution, understood religious freedom to incorporate both freedom to practice their religion of choice, as well as freedom from religion, a concept heartily articulated by Australia's most recent census.

But without the impending stick of taxation, would churches use their considerable resources to play politics? Other nations seem to agree that they might. In Singapore, churches are required to register as charities to receive a tax-exemption, with revenue from side business or investment taxed at a regular rate, tax-exempt income is required to be used for charitable purposes or the routine operation of their ministries, as in the U.S. Not surprisingly, the Singapore government is efficient about policing revenue owed to it, and leaders of the City Harvest Church (CHC) were criminally convicted in a high-profile case for misuse of S\$50 million of donations meant for charity, funneling the funds into the pastor's wife's pop singing career, as well as an opulent penthouse in Sentosa.

Christianity, however, does not have the lock on prosperity theology. Thailand's Wat Dhammakaya urges adherents around the world to give generous donations as a short-cut to merit making, and is conspicuous in its accumulation of wealth. Some have argued that the junta has been targeting the temple's assets to line its own coffers, summoning images of Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries to pay for his military campaigns. The endless Ramayana ballet of Thaksin and Prayuth aside, the failed siege of Dhammakaya illustrates one peril involved in establishing a state religion: its institutions become impervious

to attack by the government, regardless of the transgressions of their leaders. Thailand's constitutional requirement that its monarch be Buddhist has created a *de facto* state religion. Despite its litany of legitimate or manufactured charges against (former abbot) Dhammachayo, the junta must tread carefully in attacking any wat, even one with deep connections to political forces which threaten its existence.

### On substance abuse<sup>7</sup>

Methamphetamine, whether called *shabu* in the Philippines or *yaba* in Thailand, has long eclipsed heroin as the most abused illicit drug in Southeast Asia, despite the region's proximity to the Golden Triangle. Ironically, though the U.S. is half a world away from opium's fertile crescent, Americans consume more drugs derived from opium than any other nation. Opioid overdoses are now the most common type of accidental death in the U.S., accounting for more fatalities than gun homicides and car crashes combined.

When the US launched its so-called war on drugs in the 1980s in response to the scourge of crack cocaine, criminal justice and sentencing policies were adjusted to incarcerate more people for longer times. Now, 16 per cent of all federal and state prisoners are locked up for drug use, possession or sale,

down from a high of 22 per cent in 2000.

More than half of all prisoners in Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand are jailed for drug related crimes, and many nations in the region require compulsory detention

for drug addicts. Such compulsory detention centers have come under scrutiny for human rights abuses, and for lacking scientifically-based rehabilitation therapies.

U.S. states have passed legislation attempting to halt the rapid transformation from patient to addict by creating prescription drug databases which can be monitored by law enforcement to scrutinise, and potentially stop, over-prescribers of opioids. The efforts are working, as prescriptions for Oxycontin (a brand name for oxycodone) have declined by 40 per cent since 2010. But even as reforms are taking hold in the U.S., Big Pharma is strategising ways to keep global sales strong. Following the 'playbook of big tobacco' manufacturers, the drug companies' solution to enhanced scrutiny back home involves global expansion, particularly in Asia's developing nations.

Mundipharma, a subsidiary of Purdue Pharmaceutical, the maker of Oxycontin, first began operations in Asia in 2011, as U.S. sales began to drop. With regional offices in Singapore, the firm's promotional materials downplay the risk of opioid addiction. Instead, flashy marketing campaigns have featured glamorous celebrities who tell viewers not to resign themselves to chronic pain.

### On the environment<sup>8</sup>

In late 2017, EPA director Scott Pruitt announced that the "war on coal is over", and that the agency will rescind the Obama Administration's Clean Power Plan, which required utilities to steeply reduce carbon emissions as part of the administration's overall goals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, central to its commitments within the Paris accord on climate change, from which Trump has already signaled his intent to withdraw.

The Trump Administration's renewed endorsement of coal mirrors Vietnam's recent decision to mothball its long-standing plans to become Southeast Asia's first nuclear-powered nation, in favor of coal. Citing concern over both the level of public debt needed to complete construction and 'environmental risks' following the disastrous Formosa leak, the National Assembly announced a decision at the end of 2016 to halt development of the Ninh Thuan plant.

This sharp increase in the use of coal will carry dire health effects, according to researchers at Harvard and the University

of Colorado. Their report, *The burden of disease from rising coal-fired plant emissions in Southeast Asia*, concludes that Vietnam is the ASEAN country that will be most affected by coal pollution in the near future. They estimate that more than 188 excess deaths per million people will result there due to the burning of coal.

With the Asia-Pacific region representing four of the world's top five coal producers (China, India, Australia, and Indonesia), significant shifts toward coal could create economic benefits in the area – but these will be more than offset by the erosion of progress toward the Paris accord goals. If investment in renewable energy stalls, the global objective of decreasing greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 may prove unreachable. Thus, the 'Bridge Scenario' to increase Southeast Asia's reliance on renewable energy and decrease oil and coal consumption, envisioned by a 2015 report from the International Energy Agency, would be largely obliterated.

### The big picture

Obviously, the people of Southeast Asia want to understand where their interests may lie in the Trump Administration's new order, as do people around the globe. But connecting the dots between the president's words and actions to reveal what might be considered a consistent foreign policy is challenging, at best. It may be more instructive to examine understated themes to piece together the big picture.

Themes which emerged include the Trump Administration's troubling retreat from multi-lateralism, particularly on pressing issues requiring global solutions; and sheer inaction enabled by administrative chaos at the highest levels. A leadership void has been created; but nature abhors a vacuum, and it remains to be seen whether ASEAN nations will band together with more regional coherence to address problems, whether they will take more nuanced positions in bi-lateral dealings with the U.S., or will develop stronger alliances with nations ready to assume a greater leadership position.

The articles excerpted here are about neither U.S. nor Southeast Asian policy in isolation, but rather illustrate a juncture which may afford a synthesized exploration of both. As such, they may be difficult to characterize, particularly in a world prone to neat labels. Taken together, I hope they can help the reader recognize a greater connectivity between our two regions, in what has become an increasingly fractured world.

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#### Notes

- 1 Tyler, S. 'Second Acts for Thaksin and Trump?' *New Mandala*, 4 Nov. 2016
- 2 Tyler, S. 'A Good Day's Work', *New Mandala*, 16 Feb. 2017
- 3 Tyler, S. 'Lock Them All Up', *New Mandala*, 16 Mar. 2017
- 4 Tyler, S. 'A Fashionable Entry to Policy', *New Mandala*, 30 Mar. 2017
- 5 This excerpt originates from an article written on 30 March 2017.
- 6 Tyler, S. 'Blurring the Lines Between Church and State', *Policy Forum*, 7 July 2017
- 7 Tyler, S. 'Exporting Addiction', *Policy Forum*, 7 Sept. 2017
- 8 Tyler, S. 'Where There's Smoke, There's Coal', *Policy Forum*, 13 Oct. 2017