

BANGKOK—The run-up to Burma's Nov. 7 election has left observers and policy wonks wondering whether the vote will facilitate some opening-up inside the military-ruled country, despite the seemingly overwhelming bias in favor of the army and its allies.

Some clues, it could be argued, might be found in the experiences of other countries in the Southeast Asia region.

Indonesia left a long era of military dictatorship behind it in 1998, when the Asian financial crisis precipitated the collapse of the Suharto regime. Since then, the vast, multi-ethnic archipelago has undergone a largely successful—if hardly flawless—transition to being southeast Asia's best-functioning democracy.

In 1986, soldiers refused to fire on protestors on the streets of Manila, as mass protests backed by the Catholic Church helped bring about the end of the Marcos dictatorship. During the 2007 Saffron Revolution in Burma, some views held that a similar dynamic might prevail once Buddhist monks took to the streets. Just as the armed forces of the Philippines backed down when confronted by priests and nuns, then surely the Tatmadaw would not harm the Sangha?

Events proved otherwise, and Dr Maung Zarni, a scholar at the London School of Economics and an exiled Burmese dissident, says that the military rulers of Burma are operating from a different template than other Asian leaders, no matter how despotic.

“Even absolute monarchs and rulers elsewhere were constrained by the Buddhist or Confucian norms that required them to rule in a paternalistic manner,” he said. His remarks were part of a seminar titled “Transitions to Democracy in Southeast Asia: Similarities and Differences with the Upcoming Elections in Burma/Myanmar,” at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University on Tuesday.

In contrast, “Burma is ruled by a form of military feudalism that involves junking or misusing the country's own religious and cultural traditions,” he said, pointing to images of Burmese consular staff in China prostrating themselves, in a display of faux Buddhist devotion, before senior junta figures such as Shwe Mann and Than Shwe.

While Burma remains something of an embarrassment for Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) leaders, many of whom are in Brussels now for a summit with European Union counterparts, other Asean members cannot point to a linear or seamless transition from authoritarian rule to democracy.

Youk Chhang, a survivor of the murderous Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia and now executive director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia, reminded the gathering that the 1993 United Nations-backed elections in his country were won by the Royalist Party, from its exile in Thailand.

“However the UN allowed the losers to form a government, after they resisted the result, and after the international community spent US \$2 billion on the elections,” he said.

That result reversal came three years after the Burmese military ignored the landslide win for

Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy in Burma's last election.

“Cambodia is not a democracy,” said Youk Chhang, “as there is no opposition.”

Sam Rainsy, the main opposition leader, now lives in exile and on Sept. 22 was handed a 10-year jail sentence by a Cambodian court for a comment he made about a border dispute with Vietnam. The sentence was only eight years less than the real term handed down to “Comrade Duch” in July, the first conviction at Cambodia's war crimes tribunal which is looking into abuses perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge. Like Maung Zarni, Youk Chhang spent time as a refugee in Thailand after fleeing persecution at home.

Thailand, alongside the Philippines, was for a time held up as a beacon of democracy in the region and has long offered a support base and refuge for oppressed people from neighboring countries. The Thai military has occupied a largely background role since a failed attempt at governing after the September 2006 coup, but remains hugely influential, part of what scholar Dr. Thitinan Pongsudhirak calls it a long-established “holy trinity” of bureaucrats and royalists, who are now “afraid to make any concessions” to opposition groups such as the Redshirts, “for fear that one may lead to losing all.”

Coupled with the use of emergency laws and a system whereby citizens can randomly sue one another on lese majeste charges, the result is declining freedom of speech and deteriorating democratic standards, he warned.

The Thai Army reserves a right for itself to intervene politically, as outlined by new army head Gen. Prayuth recently, who commented “the army would like to stay out of politics, but is willing to come in, if necessary.”

Ethnic conflicts inside Burma remain unresolved, with calls for reconciliation before elections going unheeded by the ruling military.

More fighting would see more refugees flow into Thailand, on top of the 140,000 already in camps along the border.

“I don't see much happening in the way of contingency planning by the Thai authorities or the military for this,” said Thitinan.

For Indonesia, resolving ethnic conflict has been a key aspect of its democratic transition, according to Ambassador Mohammed Hatta, the country's representative in Thailand.

“We have 465 ethnic groups, with different languages and religions,” he said, and claimed that “once we found out the core issues of ethnic conflict,” the country tried to resolve them, pointing to the example of Aceh. However, human rights abuses continue in West Papua, according to activists.

The ambassador pointed out that Indonesia has elections at all levels of government, and that associated institutions, such as an anti-corruption commission, the judiciary, parliament, are working to entrench democracy in the country.

Such an over-emphasis on institutions is flawed, according to Zarni, who pointed out that the proliferation of councils and commissions under Burma's Ne Win regime remained under strict junta control. He said he anticipates the same under the post-election system, where Burma will have regional parliaments, as well as a central upper and lower house, all dominated by the military and allied parties.