

With Burma's general election just around the corner, many regional observers are predicting some form of political change; even if they do all agree that the election itself will be no more than a sham.

This was a common view at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok on Oct. 5 when a public forum was held titled “Transition to Democracy in Southeast Asia: Similarities and Differences with the Upcoming Election in Burma/Myanmar.”

“It is a sham election and everybody knows it, including the [Burmese] military,” said Dr. Thitinan Pongsudhirak, the director of the Institute of Security and International Studies (ISIS), who was one of the panelists at the forum. “But it certainly will have an opening and a potential for new dynamics to emerge. This is where the space has to be considered for expansion.”

During his seminar—titled “Thailand's Lost Democratic Consolidation”—Thitinan compared the upcoming election in Burma with the Thai military-sponsored election held in 1957 after a military coup, when the then Thai coup leader formed a political party and became prime minister after his party won the election.

Thitinan briefly analyzed the up and down struggle for democracy in Thailand since the 1957 military coup, including the mass demonstrations in 1973 and 1992, and the drawing up of a new Constitution in 1997, something the speaker characterized as “a constitution to end all constitutions.” He then reminded the audience how that Constitution was put to the sword by a subsequent military coup in 2006.

However, Thitinan offered optimism, saying that Burma's election represented an “opening-up”; but he noted the downslide of democracy in Thailand, a country he said that was once an example in the region.

Taking Burma as a country in transition to democracy, the forum looked to the experiences of elections in the Southeast Asian region and used the transitional lessons of Cambodia, Thailand and Indonesia to shed some light on what might and might not unravel in Burma.

The other panelists at the Chulalongkorn forum were: Dr. Maung Zarni, a Burmese research fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science; Mohammad Hatta, the Indonesian Ambassador to Thailand; and Youk Chang, the director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia. About 100 academics, diplomats and students participated in the forum.

Recalling an article in the New York Times published two weeks before the polls criticizing the 1990 Burmese election, Zarni, a staunch critic of the Burmese military regime, opened his seminar on Tuesday by saying that today's discussion was exactly the same as the political debate that was going on 20 years ago.

Zarni predicted the political landscape of post-election Burma would practice “constitutional military rule with a select mix of feudalism and crony-capitalism.

“When we say 'Constitutional Monarchy' in history, it is to curb the role and authority of the

Monarch and Monarchy,” said Zarni, reflecting the Burmese regime's attempt to institutionalize 'a constitutional military rule' through an election.

“But in our case, the distortion is that the 2008 Constitution is expanding and legitimizing military rule,” he said.

The 2008 Constitution—the third in the country since independence from British colonial rule in 1948—has, for the first time, given the military the supremacy it has always sought. Moreover, the military's directly appointed representatives are constitutionally guaranteed 25 percent of seats in the national and regional parliaments.

However, when discussing how democracy—manifested through the electoral process—had fulfilled the desires of Southeast Asian people and the point in transition where countries see themselves, several panelists from Thailand, Cambodia and Indonesia presented vastly different criteria when presenting examples from within their different historical, ethnographic and geographic settings.

One common view at the forum was that those three countries had striven to maintain economic development despite their internal political conflicts. Thitinan said that even in war-torn Cambodia, where recently constructed high-rise buildings have helped develop the Phnom Penh skyline, signs of progress were evident—something that is sadly lacking in Burma.

Youk Chang, a former refugee who fled to Thailand and was later resettled in the United States before coming back to his homeland, reflected on the international community's involvement in Cambodia's transition to democracy, citing the United Nations-supervised Cambodian election in 1993.

He said that the political feeling in Cambodia at that time was that democracy must come first, with justice second.

After more than a decade, the issue of justice has finally reared its head through the opening of a tribunal to try those accused of genocide during the Khmer Rouge era.

However, when asked whether democracy had taken root in Cambodia, his answer was simple: “Cambodia has no democracy.”

Unlike Cambodia and Thailand, Burma has within its borders an armed ethnic resistance—one of the world's longest running civil wars— which will not cease after the election. Indeed it is likely to intensify, given the recent rising tensions between the junta and the ethnic cease-fire groups.

On the subject of the ethnic issue in Burma, the panelist from Indonesia told the audience how his government solved the heated conflict in Aceh in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami.

“We had the upper hand at that time,” he said. “If we took advantage of this, the violence would have continued. We needed peace and so we sought it.”

He said that the conclusion of the Aceh conflict was due to the government's peace initiatives, such as the release of political prisoners, and the provision of land and revenue to the rebel groups.

The clear parallel in Burma's case is that the profiteers of the military junta have only shown interest in securing everything for themselves—in particular, natural resources such as oil, natural gas, teak, minerals and gems, all of which are largely indigenous to and must be exploited from the ethnic states. Little, if anything, has been paid back into the socioeconomic development of the ethnic areas over the past 20 years.

Asked to elaborate on his stated viewpoint about the 'democratic space' that would open up in Burma, Thitinan told The Irrawaddy that “the democratic space is very little—in fact, almost none.” Despite that, he said he maintained a positive outlook toward the election.

As one who has resisted the longest dictatorship in the region and who has had to live in exile due to his political beliefs and active participation toward democratic change in his homeland, Burmese scholar Dr Zarni said: “The 2008 Constitution was designed to introduce a military apartheid in the country.”