

THE SIGUR CENTER FOR ASIAN STUDIES

ASIA REPORT

NOVEMBER, 2009

“OBAMA FROM A SOUTHEAST ASIAN PERSPECTIVE”

Given President Barack Obama’s Southeast Asian ties and his visit to Asia, Amitav Acharya, in a lecture at the Sigur Center for Asian Studies, discussed Southeast Asian perspectives of Obama. His analysis incorporates discussions from both official and non-official sectors of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. More specifically, Acharya examines two questions:

1. How do Southeast Asians view Obama as a person and as a president?
2. How has Obama’s election been viewed; how has it affected domestic politics in Southeast Asia?

Acharya considers the following perspectives in his analysis:

Identity- Can the American dream be our dream?

Race and ethnicity constitute an important facet of Southeast Asian politics. Obama’s victory raises questions about whether the election of a minority, or a Southeast Asian “Obama,” is possible (mainly in Singapore and Malaysia, where racial diversity is greatest). For Indonesians, Obama’s election constituted a victory of one of their own. Many believe Obama’s early years spent in Jakarta exposed him to religious and cultural tolerance, a point of pride in Indonesia—there is a view that this will play a formative role in his foreign policy.

Democracy- Change they can believe in

The 2008 elections came at a time of intense political contest in the region: a battle between democracy versus corrupt authoritarian governments. The American elections inspired hopes for change in many Southeast Asian countries. Acharya notes that the question of identity and democracy are intimately related, especially in Malaysia and Singapore, where the idea of a minority Obama was associated with the need for greater democratic space. In Thailand, the election of a president via free and fair elections sharply contrasted with the state of domestic political disorder at that time. Bloggers within the country noted that unlike the U.S., Thailand’s political system lacks unity. In order to attain similar change, Thailand’s politicians should first draw lessons from the American political system and allow for greater change.

“Endearment” or engagement- What role will the U.S. play in the region?

Obama’s election raised three sentiments regarding the role of the United States in the region. First, questions emerged on whether or not Southeast Asia’s role as the “second front” in the war on terror might

LECTURE SERIES

Power and Identity in Asia
November 12, 2009

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change with the shift in administration. Onlookers also questioned the degree of U.S. involvement in the region: the U.S. skipping a few meetings of ASEAN during the previous administration had generated a sense of neglect. Lastly, Southeast Asians asked how the new administration might address the rise of China.

While reactions vary from country to country, Acharya notes that this is because Southeast Asians perceive foreign events in terms of local and domestic politics. Despite these differences, Southeast Asians share several common notions regarding Obama's victory. Overall, there is general belief that the Obama administration will revive ties with the region. Obama's iteration of a multilateral approach to foreign policy in recent months is very much in line with regional efforts towards multilateralism via institutions such as ASEAN and the Bali Democracy Forum. Moreover, Obama's victory reinvigorated the debate on democracy in the region and introduced a new dimension to the prospects of democracy in Southeast Asia. The possibility for change in the region is a real one.



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“THE LOCAL CON-
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MATTERS...
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Amitav Acharya at the Sigur
Center for Asian Studies,
11/12/2009.

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