

The old Asian Way Excuse

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Will the fiction of holding democracy hostage for “national security” fall with the information age?

Last September, an old man died of heart failure in a Singapore local hospital, aged 82.

While not many Thai people know him, he was Joshua Benjamin Jeyaretnam, known universally as JBJ. He was a Singaporean politician, former leader of the Workers' Party of Singapore and the first member of parliament who was not from the People's Action Party (PAP), the ruling party since the independence of Singapore in 1965.

For those who are not familiar with history and should be, JBJ won a by-election for the Anson district in 1981, defeating Pang Kim Him from the People's Action Party by 51.9 percent to 47.1 percent. He thus became the first opposition MP of Singapore, one of only two ever, and broke the “one-party state” of Singapore created by Lee Kuan Yew.

By descent, JBJ was a Sri Lankan Tamil who became a lawyer and won the election with the support of the lower classes. In 1984, he was re-elected for the same seat. Since then, the People's Action Party has never won 100 percent of the seats in a general election despite truly draconian limitations placed on the opposition.

In his second victory speech at Anson, he said “My dearest people, you did it again, you can resist the attack of the PAP”. This speech was a sharp rebuke to the PAP leaders and it also signaled the high cost of his victory. Two months later, JBJ. was charged with allegedly mis-stating his party accounts. He was fined S\$5,000 and was sentenced to three months in Queenstown Remand Prison. His MP status was revoked, also his lawyer's license.

Since Singapore is one of the Commonwealth states, JBJ attempted to appeal against his disbarment to the Privy Council in London. The Privy Council agreed that he was innocent but the President of the Republic of Singapore, on the advice of the cabinet, refused to give him a pardon. Singapore judges also refused to reverse his convictions. JBJ was disqualified from standing for election until 1997.

The PAP, led by Lee Kuan Yew, filed several lawsuits against him for defamation. JBJ spent more than S\$1.5 million on those cases and the compensation. In 2001, he was declared bankrupt, lost his lawyer's license again and was disbarred from standing for election. He was forced to resign from the Workers' Party. He tried to come back by selling political books, most of them attacking Singapore's PAP government, but only a few were bought.

In 2007, he was able to pay his S\$233,000 debt. He got out of bankruptcy and regained his lawyer's license. He tried to return to politics by forming a new party but death prevented him forever.

It is widely known that even though Singapore has elections in the modern democratic way, it is one of the most restrictive societies in the world. The Singapore government has never hesitated to attack its political enemies. The reason given for a long time is “national security, foreign investment

and the aim to become Asia's business hub".

When we look at the Pacific west coast from Pyongyang to Naypyidaw, we see similar reasons for begging (or forcing) their citizens to sacrifice their right to something else, most often, the right to criticize their governments. The Beijing government has even invested in the so-called Great Firewall to keep several web sites from foreign servers away from the Chinese people's eyes.

While the ideologies are different, from Marxist ideals, religious commandments and government regulations to preserve economic stability, we can summarize all of them into the same category: "national security," to which the leaders from all these countries, no matter their ideology, can seamlessly tie their ruling authority.

In the history of each of these Asian countries, these reasons are grounded at different levels. "National security" arguments are related to the beginnings of these countries, after their independence from western colonization. Singapore left the Federation of Malaysia in 1965 due to a racist conflict between the Malays and the Chinese. With its lack of natural resources, the Singaporean elite agreed that economic growth was the core factor for the survival of the country. The people also believe in this mantra. The "national security - economic freedom - competitive state corporations" formula became the root of country's wealth. Lee Kuan Yew argued to the world that this approach, "The Asian Way," is different from the freedom-respecting values of the west. Besides Lee Kuan Yew, Malaysia's former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad also used the same "Asian Way" to counter international pressure.

Singaporeans sacrifice their right to freedom of speech for economic growth. But in Bangkok, we see something different. Thailand dedicates its "economic growth" to "national security". Last year's conflict between the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and the Samak Sundaravej government (later led by Somchai Wongsawat from the same party) destroyed Thailand's tourism industry.

We can see from the graph below that the number of foreign tourists declined in line with the political situation. The PAD's campaign, from the first demonstration (20 June 2008), to the siege of Government House and the National Broadcasting Television (NBT) station (26 August), the violence at Government House (29 September) and Parliament (7 October) and finally to the siege of Suvarnabhumi Airport (25 November-3 December) were directly related to tourism.

Winter is the high season for Thailand's tourism. Thailand had 14.4 million tourists in 2007 and the Thailand Tourism Authority (TAT) estimated this number should be increased to 15.7 millions in 2008. However, the number of tourists visiting the country by air fell by 2 million. Calculating from only the travelers by air, Thailand lost Bt 76,000 million in income from the political turmoil.

The current Prime Minister, Abhisit Vejjajiva, appeared on a TV program on February 1 to claim with a straight face that the 20 percent decline in the tourism industry was caused by the world transportation situation. This is one-sided information, since Malaysia achieved its goal of 22.9 million tourists in 2008, a rise from 20.9 million in 2007 despite the economic crisis.

However, the chances of Thailand's current government charging the PAD for the Suvarnabhumi siege are low. If not for reasons of "national harmony", there is speculation that the newly installed ruling Democrat party has close relations with the PAD and benefits from the movement. The Suvarnabhumi case is likely to be forgotten. In contrast, the use of the infamous "lèse majesté" law is the first priority for Democrat government. The given reason is definitely "Thailand's Way."

While the situation and reasons are different, "Thailand's Way" is the same strategy as the "Asian Way".

The era is going to change, the paradigm is going to shift. The industrial age is being eclipsed by the new Information Age in the 21st Century. The internet is the new infrastructure for society, in the same way as guilds were for the merchants in the Middle Ages, where independent freedom reigned.

This new “guild”, along with the necessity for Asian economies to create a new information industry by a new generation of Asians who need more freedom, are the great challenges to the good old Asian Way. We will see if these challenges are met.

P.S.

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