

Preface

When running for United States (US) president in 2008, Barack Obama built his campaign around the theme of “change”; political change for a better US. With that message, “Candidate Obama” became “President Obama”. The first Afro-American US president promised, campaigned for, and delivered a changed United States—although Obama’s legacy is in doubt since he left office.

Outside of the US, however, something has happened since. Political change appears to be the order of the day in many regions. Big events, such as Brexit in Europe or the election of strongman Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, relied on essentially the same message, though in a more insidious manner. Campaigners employed imprecise and ambiguous, sometimes even contradictory, messages that ostensibly appealed to equally imprecise yearnings for political and societal change being felt by a public no longer satisfied with the status quo. Emotions trump rational policy decisions; for better or worse.

In recent years, political change has spread across both Asia and Europe and more often than not, contemporary political change is accompanied by various kinds of political populism, influenced by a rise in nationalism, identity politics, and anti-globalisation and anti-establishment sentiments. In this issue of our biannual *Panorama: Insights into Asian and European Affairs*, our valued contributors discuss current and future challenges that come with this current wind of change sweeping through Asia and Europe. They discuss challenges for the countries domestically, their origins and impacts, their relations with the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) respectively, and what all this means for the world’s two main organisations of institutionalised regionalism.

The papers paint a mixed picture. Political change can be positive; a rejuvenation of the national discourse, an empowerment of the younger generation, and a lifeline for ailing multilateralism. The election of Emmanuel Macron, for example, breathed new life into a stale political system and provided the EU with a France yet again keen on European leadership. Unfortunately, however, political change can also go in the opposite direction. Almost simultaneously to Macron’s election, there is the diametrically opposed case of Brexit, where populist leaders successfully campaigned on a platform of nationalism, which most in Europe had thought overcome, while in Asia, the election of Duterte seems to have put the seemingly positive democratic trajectory in the Philippines on hold. The jury is still out in all cases, but contemporary political change is not inevitably for the worse.

What all cases have in common, though, are characteristics such as resurgent nationalism, internal divisions and identity politics, the emergence of strong individual leaders as well as anti-globalisation and anti-establishment sentiments, or even all of the above. What is apparent is a decline, perhaps even a collapse, of

many narratives around which certainly European but also many Asian political structures were successfully constructed. Peaceful international cooperation, free trade, and ultimately also institutionalised multilateralism suffer. All the more important that we begin to study in earnest recent political changes in national governance and discourse and begin to identify commonalities and differences, so that we can find appropriate mechanisms to safeguard the regional security and stability that we have been fortunate enough to enjoy in both regions in the past few decades.

Enjoy this read.



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