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USAPC: President Obama pledged to increase U.S. engagement in Asia. Yet, he postponed his much anticipated trip to Guam, Indonesia and Australia in early June for the third time. Do you have a sense for how this went down in the region?

Although President Obama met Indonesia President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono on June 27 on the sidelines of the G-20 meeting in Canada, that isn't quite the same as actually visiting Indonesia.

Jackson: Having played a role in the cancellation of trips to Asia in various past administrations, I know these decisions are never easy. The host country usually is very gracious in public when these sorts of things happen. There always is a residual feeling of disappointment.

I think the Obama administration will recover from this latest trip cancellation—especially with respect to the Indonesian leg, which will be a bath in love. When President Obama finally visits Indonesia, it should be very successful.

The U.S. president helped to ensure this when he met President Yudhoyono at the G-20 meeting in late June. As you may know, President Obama pledged \$165 million over five years to support a joint higher education partnership as part of the “U.S.-Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership.” In addition, he committed \$136 million over three years to support establishment of a Climate Change Center in Indonesia, among other environmental initiatives.

By the way, the total amount pledged by this administration, \$301 million, is nearly double the \$157 million former President George W. Bush delivered when he visited Indonesia during his term. The Comprehensive Partnership must involve substance on both sides—and substance usually means money—or implementation cannot proceed effectively. Both substantively and symbolically, Obama's pledge represents something new and not just more of the same.

I was not surprised that higher education will be an important element of the Comprehensive Partnership. President Yudhoyono, otherwise known as President SBY, supports this focus and repeatedly has discussed its merits. And in view of President SBY's early pledge at the G-20 to reduce Indonesia's carbon emissions by up to 41 percent by 2020, it also makes sense for the two countries to cooperate in tackling climate change.

USAPC: You said that the Comprehensive Partnership should involve substance on both sides. In what area(s) do you think the Indonesian Government also might commit new money.

Jackson: Again, I think higher education would be a natural for the Indonesian government. I understand that the U.S. government invited Indonesia's Minister of National

Education to attend a U.S.-Indonesia Higher Education Summit in Washington next summer, so we'll see what develops from that.

I know that Jakarta would like more Americans to study in Indonesia and learn about Indonesian culture and society, but also help to enhance the R&D capacity of Indonesia. So, for example, the Indonesia government could offer to pay all of the in-country costs of visiting U.S. scholars. It could pledge rupiah to support various educational initiatives, which the United States then would match in dollar-supported activities. If this is going to be a genuine partnership, it must be two-way. Both sides must play the game.

USAPC: The U.S. government has high hopes for Indonesia's fledgling democracy. However, some literature has characterized Indonesian politics as an ongoing battle between Islamists and nationalists. Is this an accurate characterization that might affect the outlook for Indonesia's democracy?

Jackson: I have been watching Indonesian politics for the past 40 years, and during this time many people worried about the rise of radical Islam. Well, all the warnings notwithstanding, this still hasn't happened and I don't believe it will happen anytime soon. The radical, fundamentalist, xenophobic wing of the Islamic movement is a tiny fraction. It's loud, noisy, and noxious, and sometimes sets off bombs, which means it gets media attention. But I would be astonished if this wing amounts to one-third of one percent of the Islamic movement.

Many Indonesians are fundamentalists, but they are not radicals. They may believe in certain things, but they are peaceful citizens. The majority of Indonesian Muslims are remarkably tolerant of one another, but there is a tiny minority that gets all of the press coverage and generates all of the worry. This is understandable. After all, we have Federal buildings in Omaha [Nebraska] that get blown up by tiny fractions of our population. So I'm not particularly worried about a potentially destabilizing influence by this small but radical Islamic minority.

USAPC: How, then, would you gauge Indonesia's political health at this point?

Jackson: This is another question. For the first time since 1957, there is a powerful legislature, but between elections there is very little that connects the legislator to his or her electorate. Civil society organizations in Indonesia continue to be remarkably weak. That is not the popular image, but, in fact, that is the empirical reality. There are no civil society movements in Indonesia that are capable of making the legislature or the judiciary less corrupt. Everyone agrees that corruption is a bad thing but very little is done about it.

Corruption is the sulphuric acid of democracy. It is having a corrosive impact. President SBY twice campaigned on doing something about it, and Indonesia does have the Anti-Corruption Commission. But the commission itself is under fairly constant attack by the very people who want to continue the types of log-rolling operations that have been in existence ever since Indonesia became independent.

USAPC: Members of both Houses of the U.S. Congress have been concerned about developments in Thailand. The House and Senate have passed resolutions expressing support for the U.S. alliance with Thailand and urging a peaceful resolution to the political unrest there.

In early May, Thailand's Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva proposed a national reconciliation roadmap. [His five-point plan includes respect for the monarchy, reforms to address social and economic injustice, a free media, an investigation into casualties resulting from clash on April 10, 2010 between security forces and so-called Red Shirt anti-government protestors, and examining the need for constitutional reform.] What is your assessment of the roadmap as a means of securing peace?

Jackson: The roadmap is fine as far as it goes. But how far does it go? Does it really represent a willingness to bring into the same room the leaders of the political opposition? To be fair to the Abhisit government, only one month has gone by since the shooting stopped and the streets of Bangkok were cleared. No government anywhere would have tolerated what was going on in downtown Bangkok earlier this year. Therefore, it will take time to realize genuine reconciliation.

But at some point in the next several months, the Abhisit government must have discussions with representatives of the opposition Red Shirts [formally known as the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship] -- up to and perhaps even including behind-the-screen discussions with former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra -- for there to be a genuine reconciliation.

What we are observing in Thailand is a genuine increase in of public participation that is unprecedented. It simply cannot be suppressed. Therefore, any democratic government must find ways of dealing with the opposition and bringing it into the discussion.

The real problem of Thailand is that when we talk about pro-government Yellow Shirts and the anti-government Red Shirts, in both instances it's a "parliament of the streets." Those two groups fundamentally are unrepresentative of the vast majority of Thais. They constitute the radical fringes. Somehow you have to put the "parliament of the streets" back into the formal parliament.

The normal way to do that would be through elections. Prime Minister Abhisit has said there will be an election. Originally, he had proposed calling for elections in November 2010. In the wake of the violence, however, he has said that it would be premature to hold the elections then. But the election has to take place sometime between now and the end of 2011.

Importantly, this must be a free and fair election that is open to parties of all political stripes. What role -- direct or indirect -- can former Prime Minister Thaksin play? Some political insiders maintain that Thaksin would like to leave politics permanently. If that is the case, then perhaps the Abhisit government could negotiate a deal that would do just that and allow Thaksin to return to Thailand as a private citizen. Perhaps that would help to pave the way toward fundamental reconciliation.

USAPC: Some media accounts of the clash between the pro- and anti-government groups described it as rooted in tensions between urban and rural forces. Is that portrayal too simplistic?

Jackson: Yes. One of the things generating the conflict is a growing inequality, which is mostly rural but also has an urban slice to it. Part of the Red Shirt movement is an urban phenomenon, not just a rural phenomenon. So you have inequality in both rural and urban communities in Thailand that has been increasing over time.

But there is another important development. There is a growing political movement. Thaksin was the first politician to really understand its potential. He observed the rising aspirations of the lower classes in rural Thailand as well as the Bangkok lower classes to have a genuine voice in Thai politics.

Throughout the Chakri Dynasty, [the current ruling house of Thailand] since the 18th century, Bangkok always has run Thailand. “Bangkok is Thailand; Thailand is Bangkok.” Thaksin’s rise to power indicated that there are genuine, widely felt pressures to change that equation and provide a voice for rural politicians from outside of Bangkok and those from Bangkok’s non-elite circles. This is different. It represents an important change in the Thai body politic. To some extent, these political changes may be energized by economic inequality, but the reason why the Abhisit government can’t get them to go away is because they have taken on a life of their own.

USAPC: How is the influence of the “palace” complicating the evolution of this new political voice in Thailand?

Jackson: As far as I can tell there isn’t something called “the palace.” There are differences within royal circles close to His Majesty the King. In addition, His Majesty the King is quite ill. But I also think the king is a very sophisticated man, who may have determined that he simply cannot intervene because these two mass movements -- the Red Shirts and the Yellow Shirts -- might be unwilling to accede to his views.

Since 1973, the king’s ability to settle unrest in Thai politics has been based on his ability to summon elite members and tell them, “Stop it – get the demonstrators off the streets and stop ruining my kingdom.” This is harder to do now because the Yellows represent a rising level of political activism as do the Reds. This is a very different Thailand. So His Majesty the King may have chosen not to intervene because political participation in Thailand has become a mass phenomenon and therefore far more difficult to influence.

USAPC: The United States and Thailand are long-time allies, yet Washington imposed sanctions on Thailand following the coup that ousted former Prime Minister Thaksin. More recently, the State Department’s *Trafficking in Persons Report*, placed Thailand on the Tier II Watch List, which puts the country at risk for further sanctions. How have U.S. sanctions (or threat of sanctions) affected Thai attitudes about the alliance?

Jackson: I’m quite convinced that sanctions in most cases either are ineffective or counter-productive. Admittedly, U.S. sanctions were very effective against the Union of South Africa because the sanctions had nearly universal support and South Africa had a big economy and did not want to be isolated from the rest of the world.

Thailand, however, has many different potential trading partners that will not support sanctions. In addition, Thailand is not dependent upon the United States for military or economic assistance. You can’t take away that which you have not given. Forty years ago, the threat of sanctions might have been meaningful to Thailand. But now the threat of sanctions is largely empty. It would be an irritant more than anything, and yet it is unlikely to change policies.

In fact, it is more likely that sanctions would convince the Thais to dig in their heels. One should remember that Thais are very nationalistic. They really believe that Thais should run Thailand. Why? Because no one else has ever run Thailand.

Thailand remained independent even during the Japanese occupation in World War II. The Thais ran circles around the Japanese. The Thais were just flexible enough to satisfy the Japanese. Thailand is a very independent nation, so imposing further sanctions against it would be very counter-productive.

USAPC: Washington has adopted a new approach to dealing with Burma, which features engagement combined with existing sanctions. Yet this does not appear to have influenced the behavior of the Burmese ruling junta in the least. It continues to subject the country's ethnic minorities to harsh discrimination. More recently, there were allegations of arms purchases from North Korea. Where is this country headed? Could it become Southeast Asia's "North Korea?"

Jackson: Yes, the imposition -- and re-imposition -- of sanctions against Burma by the United States and others has not altered the behavior of the ruling junta. Again, this is an instance in which sanctions can irritate and they can serve to impoverish the poorest people. But at the end of the day, it's very difficult to create sanctions that will change a government's policies, especially if the sanctions do not receive support from China and ASEAN.

But beginning in 2011, I think we may begin to see Burma open up a bit. This will not be because of sanctions. Rather, it will be because of a generational change in the Burmese leadership. I've been told that one of their ways of accommodating such generational change is to bring more people into the support base of the government.

The junta probably will do this by allowing the election of the first parliament since 1962. Will that election be entirely democratic? Almost certainly not. Aung San Suu Kyi, [leader of the opposition National League for Democracy, who has been under house arrest for more than half of the past 20 years], will not be allowed to run.

Will other politicians who might be characterized as opponents of the current regime be allowed to win the election? Almost certainly not. But at the end of the day, will you have something like a parliament, in which the people can express their views about particular government policies? This isn't much, but it may be better than nothing.

Democracies do not come about by the flicking on and off of a light switch. I don't think you'll have truly democratic elections in Burma for another decade. But we might have the beginning of a process that leads in that direction.

I think it is a good idea for the U.S. government to encourage such positive developments while continuing to speak out and label the negative aspects for what they are. It should be a nuanced policy, not black or white.

Burma will change because the Burmese change it, not because someone in Washington decides Burma is going to change. We've been trying that for 20 years and it's never worked. It's always seemed to me that a smart axiom in politics is that when you've been pounding your head against a wall for 20 years and some policy hasn't worked, you should try something different.

USAPC: Former Philippine President Corazon Aquino's son, NoyNoy, was recently elected president there. Many observers are skeptical of his leadership capabilities. What is your view of his leadership potential?

Also, do you think developments in Thailand may inspire mobilization of the rural and urban poor in the Philippines and possibly threaten the elite hold on power in Manila?

Jackson: There is an important difference between the situations in Thailand and the Philippines. There is a pro-poor constituency in the Philippines that antedated the rise of Thaksin and the Red Shirts in Thailand. The coalition that gave former President Joseph Estrada 40 percent of the vote when he was elected president in 1998 is an indicator that there is something out there that is seeking change from a political system that continues to be dominated by the same small number of families in Manila who have patronage contacts throughout the entire archipelago.

Concerning the election of Noynoy Aquino, I don't think anyone knows what he will really do because Filipino elections are not about policy decisions. They are about personalities.

Noynoy won by a substantial amount. The tradition in the Philippines is that immediately after someone wins the presidency, many politicians from other parties automatically switch to the new president's party. If the new president can bring effective people into the governing circle, the administration likely will be successful.

When former President Fidel "Eddie" Ramos was elected, he received only 24 percent of the vote. Ramos was one of the most successful post-war presidencies. Eddie Ramos, with only 24 percent of the vote, was effective because many switched into his party after the election. Why? They wanted a share of the spoils. Politics in the Philippines is about spoils.

And that's also the underlying problem of Filipino politics. The system has enormous transactions costs because there is so much corruption. And yet, how are you going to make this struggling democratic political system work without it? These are tough questions. I would suggest that very few people in the Philippines or the United States have an answer to that conundrum.

Corazon Aquino's lasting contribution was to get certain democratic institutions in place and to prevent them from being overthrown. Now maybe her son will make them work – at least as well as Eddie Ramos was able to make them work. Estrada was a disaster, but outgoing President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo at some levels has been incredibly effective. At the same time, though, her administration also has been tarred by enormous scandals.