Indo-Pacific election pulse 2019: Thailand, Indonesia, India and Australia
Views from The Strategist

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Introduction

Huong Le Thu

With democracy under stress globally, a deeper understanding of the impact elections in the Indo-Pacific in 2019 will have on the region’s strategic direction is crucial.

In the context of growing concerns over the strength of democracy, the influence of authoritarianism and ideological competition, this Strategic Insight—a collection of articles from The Strategist—delves into the complexities and implications of elections in India, Indonesia, Australia and Thailand.

Research institutions, international NGOs and government institutions have raised concerns about negative trends in government and a study by the V-Dem Institute indicates that a third of the world’s population lives in declining democracies. Several governments are considered by the report’s authors to have become severely autocratic, while others are experiencing a decline on measures such as the independence of the judiciary, checks on the executive

branch of government, and the maintenance of civil liberties. Many established democracies are showing an ‘illiberal slide’, as a result of both external influences and internal factors, such as declining support for mainstream parties, populism, societal polarisation, and the proliferation of technology and social media.

The crisis is linked to shifts in the global power balance. With the end of the Cold War, many came to believe that there was no longer a struggle between ideologies and that democracy would prevail. As the share of global wealth and power increases among the non-democratic countries, the influence of anti-liberal and autocratic systems is growing. The US government has identified this trend as a key global challenge and an active effort to discredit democracy.

The Trump administration—which hasn’t been immune to criticism at home and abroad over violations of liberal principles—sees the world as split between ‘those who favour repressive systems and those who favour free societies’. Washington has identified China and Russia, among others, as revisionist powers that are attempting to reshape the global order according to a vision that’s antithetical to US interests. In foreign policy, the US emphasises strengthening alliances and cooperation with other democracies. An important pillar of the administration’s free and open Indo-Pacific strategy is the promotion of liberal democratic institutions and the rule of law.

Concerns are mounting about interference in domestic democratic institutions by foreign powers, including Russian electoral interference and ongoing influence operations by China. This has prompted a number of initiatives to defend democracies and strengthen partnerships with other liberal democracies against autocratic meddling. Australia shares these concerns, as noted in the government’s 2017 foreign policy white paper.

In short, the great-power competition isn’t just about material power and access to markets; it’s also about ideologies.

The Indo-Pacific—a vast region with an array of diverse political systems—is hugely prone to all of these tendencies.

Of regional nations that held elections in 2019, Thailand presented perhaps the most difficult case, with many questions about the relationship between the military and the new king, as well as the transparency of the country’s election committee and constitutional change. In both India and Indonesia, nationalism, populism, the personal charisma of the leading candidates and religious divides played the main role. Despite the verdict of fair elections in both cases, manipulation and disinformation, and some post-election violence in Indonesia, are of concern. Results from the Australian federal election might have been the biggest surprise of all, as they contradicted the weight of predictions in the lead-up to polling day. Voters in India, Indonesia, Thailand and Australia opted not to change their leaders.

The continuity of leadership provides, to varying degrees, reassurance of stability—a value very much in demand in the current context of tumultuous change and mounting challenges. It is also essential for domestic stability and is a precondition for a commitment to protect liberal institutions and a willingness to partner in defending institutions, enhancing accountability and ensuring good governance.

That continuity is critical in these countries’ foreign policy stances and in their pursuit of their respective roles in the evolving landscape of the Indo-Pacific. Elections are only one of many tests of the health of a democracy. But their processes and results affect other aspects of a functional polity and give a strong indication of the policy agendas that the incumbent leaders may pursue.
On 24 March, Thailand will have its first national election since the 2014 coup. Regardless of the outcome, it’s unlikely that the junta’s political ambitions will change.

This week the campaign continued on its unpredictable path after the unexpected development in early February when Princess Ubolratana announced she would run for political office. The princess is the eldest child of former monarch King Bhumibol Adulyadej, and the sister of the current monarch, King Maha Vajiralongkorn. In 1972 she renounced her royal titles when she married an American and settled in the United States. Her decision to run raised questions about the emergence of new royal networks in Thai politics. No royal family member had ever attempted to run for elected office before. Adding to the confusion, Princess Ubolratana registered her candidacy with Thai Raksa Chart, an offshoot of the populist, pro-democracy Pheu Thai Party. But King Maha Vajiralongkorn quickly vetoed his sister’s candidacy, declaring that it violated the constitution.

In the meantime, Thailand has witnessed the emergence of a new pro-democracy champion. The leader of the Future Forward Party, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, has been a vocal critic of the junta in the past year, challenging the authority and legitimacy of its leaders. He has promised to change the 2017 constitution and vowed to cut the army’s budget and to eliminate the junta’s influence over Thai politics. Thanathorn is very popular among young adults and, with more than 7 million people voting for the first time in this election, he could provide a serious challenge to junta leader Prayut Chan-o-cha, who led the 2014 coup against an elected government and is now a candidate for the pro-military Palang Pracharat Party.
As a result, some observers might view this election as a positive step forward for democracy in Thailand. Indeed, a record number of parties have registered, with 68 prime ministerial candidates. Unfortunately, much of the media attention has focused on the unpredictability of the poll rather than on the fact that the election will not change the overall balance of power within Thailand’s fraught political system.

This election provides only a semblance of democracy.

Thailand has a long history of military interventionism. Since 1932, the country has witnessed 21 successful or attempted coups against elected governments, the most recent in May 2014 when the military removed Yingluck Shinawatra from power.

For the past five years, the junta has placed itself at the centre of a new political system designed to reinforce its political influence. The National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), a group of seven senior members from all branches of the Thai army and police headed by former general and junta leader Prayut, and the National Legislative Assembly, have replaced state institutions to become the ultimate decision-making bodies in Thailand.

Under Prayut’s leadership, the NCPO has sought to maintain a high level of control over Thai politics, using the legislative assembly to weaken Thailand’s democratic institutions and reinforce the junta’s control of the political system in several ways.

In 2017, the NCPO wrote a new constitution which made changes to the parliamentary system that give the junta the ability to maintain power even after the election. In the previous system, the party with the most seats in the house of representatives had the power to appoint the prime minister. Under the new charter, the junta has set up a bicameral system in which the senate, whose members are handpicked by the NCPO, will also have the power to appoint the prime minister. Requiring a majority of members of both houses makes it more difficult for elected MPs to counter the military’s political influence.

On Sunday, Thais will vote only for members of the lower house, which is made up of 500 MPs. Because the junta is likely to control the 250 senators who make up the upper house, the junta will need only 126 seats in the lower house to obtain the 376 votes needed to appoint its preferred prime minister. It’s going to be much more difficult for pro-democracy parties to counter the junta’s political influence under this new system.

The junta’s desire to limit the decision-making power of elected officials hasn’t changed. This is reflected in the new army chief’s refusal to rule out another coup if riots occur. More worryingly, in response to prime ministerial candidates who said they would cut the military’s budget, the junta has suggested politicians listen to ‘Nak paendin’ (‘Burden of the land’), an ultra-nationalist song that invokes memories of deadly political crackdowns in the 1970s. This veiled threat of violence shows the junta is not ready to relinquish power.

It is true that Thai juntas have almost always failed to consolidate their political influence through elections. But for decades they have successfully exploited political divisions to undermine elected governments and democracy more broadly. Major political unrest and violent street protests have regularly been used by juntas to justify their political interventions, particularly in 2014, when Prayut declared the coup would bring ‘happiness’ back to the people.

Predicting the outcome of this election may be difficult, but one thing is certain: the prospect of Thailand doing away with years of military interventionism is slim.

For print readers, the original post with live links is at https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/thai-election-likely-to-cement-militarys-power.
Thailand’s flawed Election Commission

Luke Courtois, 10 May 2019

More than a month after Thailand held its first national elections in seven years, official results have been released by the country’s Election Commission, an inherently flawed political institution which has had a key role in boosting the junta’s chances of staying in power.

The election held on 24 March produced several surprises. The pro-military party, Palang Pracharat, was able to attract more votes than the pro-democracy Pheu Thai party. The new Future Forward Party, led by charismatic young billionaire Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, came third, beating Thailand’s oldest party, the increasingly unpopular Democrat Party. What’s more, Thailand’s Election Commission said it would not release official results until 9 May.

Officially, this deadline has given the commission time to order by-elections, recount votes and disqualify candidates found to have broken electoral laws.

But the commission is not the impartial actor it claims to be. By design, it’s an institution prone to government manipulation.

The commission was created in 1997, an important year which saw Thailand adopt a new constitution that introduced compulsory voting and several other executive and legislative reforms meant to protect the nation’s democratic development. At its inception, it was hoped an independent and impartial body overseeing the process would help Thailand conduct free and fair elections, consolidating democracy.

But these hopes were short-lived. The commission quickly became a political tool for governments to eliminate political opponents and manipulate election outcomes. As Khemthong Tonsakulrungruang explained in New Mandala, at successive polls, the Election Commission hasn’t been able to dissociate itself from Thailand’s fraught domestic politics.
This was particularly evident in the case of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who led the country from 2001 until 2006, when a military coup removed him from power. After he was deposed, the junta appointed a new commission committee which actively sought to undermine political parties aligned with him, using Constitutional Court rulings to dissolve three political parties affiliated with Thaksin in 2007.

Today, the commission’s lack of independence is reflected by a series of controversial decisions it’s made. In early March, it dissolved the pro-Thaksin Thai Raksa Chart party after it proposed Princess Ubolratana Rajakanya as its prime ministerial candidate. This, and the commission’s unwillingness to investigate the pro-military Palang Pracharat’s possible campaign violations, indicate that it has protected the junta and bolstered its chances of election success.

It’s been suggested that such failures should not be blamed not on the commission itself but on the junta-drafted constitution, which appeared designed to complicate the election process. Indeed, the 2017 constitution introduced new laws to prevent any political party from getting too many seats in parliament. There has been so much confusion that the commission asked the Constitutional Court if the formula it chose to calculate the allocation of the 350 ‘party-list’ seats in the 500-seat House of Representatives was constitutional.

But the commission was never in a position to organise free and fair elections. All seven commissioners were approved by the National Legislative Assembly in 2018, two of them just months before the election was held. In February last year, the assembly voted down all seven nominations for the commission, with one source claiming the nominees did not have enough experience to organise elections.

There’s more evidence to suggest the commissioners had strong political connections with the junta. The commission’s decision to not rule against current prime minister and former general Prayut Chan-o-cha’s candidacy, even though state officials were not authorised to run as prime ministerial candidates under the 2017 constitution, further reflects its lack of independence. Despite Prayut’s prime ministerial status, his candidacy was accepted by the commission.

The commission has done its best to give the junta the best possible outcome in this election by adopting a formula that has improved the military’s chances of forming a coalition against pro-democracy parties Pheu Thai and Future Forward. Incredibly, small parties that did not even obtain the required number of votes to win a seat have now had a seat allocated to them in the House of Representatives. On top of this, the number of seats allocated to Pheu Thai and Future Forward seems to have been reduced since preliminary election results were announced in late March.

If these official election results are anything to go by, the next few weeks are likely to be a hotly contested period in Thai politics, not least because of the commission’s handling of the election. Although it’s not yet clear who will be able to form government, the junta is still likely to retain power.

Thailand’s political future has partly hinged on a body which lacks the independence or credibility to organise truly democratic elections. Thailand’s flawed Election Commission shows us how vital institutions can be to the conduct of free and fair polls. The Thai experience should serve as a warning for other states that the bodies that are meant to protect democracies can sometimes be manipulated in order to undermine them.

For print readers, the original post with live links is at https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/thailands-flawed-election-commission.
Why Thailand stuck with a military government

James Wise, 23 July 2019

Last week, a new Thai government, which had been in the making since the 24 March election, swore an oath of allegiance to King Vajiralongkorn. The new government looks a lot like the old one. General Prayut Chan-o-cha, who appointed himself prime minister after the coup in 2014, retains the office. And members of his pro-military party, Palang Pracharat, hold the most influential ministerial portfolios.

Why didn’t the election dislodge the military government? Partly because the military rewrote the rules. And partly because a decisive number of Thai voters prefer the steadiness of military governments to the volatility of civilian governments.

The military scripted a new election law. The generals wanted to prevent the resurgence of the former prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra. Since 2005, they had accumulated ample reasons to hate Thaksin, who won elections in 2001 and 2005. He interfered in military promotions. He curbed the military’s budget and power. And he challenged the monarchy, the ultimate legitimiser of the military’s political role.

The election law was designed to prevent Thaksin’s one-party dominance. In 2005, his party won 377 seats in the 500-seat parliament and in 2011, under his sister Yingluck’s leadership, 265 seats. For this election, the generals moved Thailand towards a mixed-member proportional voting system, which fosters smaller parties and coalitions.

As well as changing the law, the military allowed parties to campaign only three months before the election, and blitzed its opponents with lawsuits. In addition, some outspoken critics of the election’s unfairness were attacked. The military was variously blamed for orchestrating the assaults, failing to try to apprehend the assailants, and failing to protect the victims.
In its recent report, *The 2019 Thai general election: a missed opportunity for democracy*, the respected Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) concluded that Thailand’s election was ‘partly free, and not fair’. It criticised the military government for not establishing ‘the healthy political climate that lies at the heart of a free and fair electoral process’.

Unlike the proportional voting systems in places like Germany and New Zealand, where voters have separate ballots for constituency and party-list candidates, in Thailand voters marked only one ballot.

The best way to explain how the system was meant to work is with an example. The Thaksin-aligned Pheu Thai Party received 22% of the popular vote. In a 500-seat parliament, that would equate to 110 seats. But Pheu Thai had already secured 137 constituency seats so it wasn’t eligible for any party-list seats. The pro-military Palang Pracharat received 24% of the popular vote, equating to 120 seats. It secured only 97 constituency seats, so it was entitled to 23 seats through the party-list system.

After the party-list seats were calculated, the parties likely to form a pro-military coalition were slightly short of a majority. In what ANFREL called its ‘most flagrant misstep’, the military-appointed Election Commission, supported by judges of the Constitutional Court (whose terms had been extended by the military government), changed the distribution formula for the party-list seats. The pro-military coalition suddenly had 254 MPs—a bare majority, but a majority nonetheless.

Any reasonable analysis of the election can’t disregard the biases in the electoral system, the constrained campaign, or the post-election manipulation of the outcome. Nor can it disregard the fact that, even though the generals stacked the cards in their favour, they won only narrowly.

But, equally, any reasonable analysis can’t disregard the reality that more than 45% of Thai voters, after five years of direct military rule, still favoured parties that sympathise with, or tolerate, a military government. This reflects an enduring preference for order and a disdain for the quarrelsome, self-seeking and often corrupt conduct of many elected politicians.

Therein lies an obstacle to democracy in Thailand: the institutional weakness of elected legislatures. Since 1932, when Thailand became a constitutional monarchy, the legislature has struggled to check the power of the executive government and the military, which have mostly been able to rely on the backing of the judiciary and the monarchy.

The leader of the Future Forward Party, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, understands the problem. After the election he said, ‘We must make parliament a place of honour, not a place where people’s faith goes to die.’ His party won 18% of the popular vote, with policies aimed at weakening the political influence of the military.

Thanathorn hasn’t ruled out street protests—a favoured political tactic since 2005 of both the yellow-shirted and red-shirted sides of Thailand’s deeply polarised politics. But he will resort to the street only ‘when all options are exhausted and when parliament can’t function’.

Ironically, Future Forward’s efforts to elevate the legislature might be enabled by a champion of the Democrat Party, a party which in recent years, including through boycotting elections in 2006 and 2014, made a mockery of its own name and reneged on its commitment to democratisation in the 1990s.

Chuan Leekpai, twice prime minister in the 1990s and now an elder statesman of the Democrat Party, is the speaker of Thailand’s parliament. In the 1990s he boldly tried to reform the military. The astute Chuan knows that the legislature, responsibly led, can become a more credible institution.

If Chuan gives Future Forward a fair hearing in the parliament, the generals’ views of elections, even controlled elections, may become dimmer. And voters’ views of elected MPs and the legislature may become a little brighter.

Indonesia

Jokowi on track for a second term, but can he deliver?

Donald Greenlees, 16 April 2019

When Joko Widodo came to power in 2014, he promised as Indonesia’s seventh president to usher in a different style of politics to anything the country had seen before. He exuded humility. The son of a woodworker from Central Java, who had suffered the ignominy as a boy of seeing his family serially evicted from their home, Widodo entered municipal politics to make a difference in the lives of ordinary people.

He captured the public’s imagination with his modesty; he joined buffet lunch queues, even as president, and flew economy class. His favourite restaurants in his hometown Solo were simple places where the chefs cooked sate kambing (goat satay) out front in large woks and everyone joined each other at long trestle tables.

Widodo, 57, even looked the part—his slender frame (he claimed to weigh just 53 kilograms) and his inexpensive attire contributed to a man-of-the-people image. It was not out of character when Jokowi, as he is universally known, rode into the opening ceremony of the Asian Games last August on a scooter, the people’s conveyance. The video went viral.

Five years in the presidential palace has eroded the authenticity, but it hasn’t worn off.

‘Especially in the villages, they see him as one of them, as a village guy. He’s wong cilik [ordinary person],’ says a Jakarta businessman, who has taken time off to campaign for Widodo’s Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) in Central Java.

The plebeian background is central to the story of Widodo’s rise—from furniture maker, to mayor of the Central Java city of Solo, then governor of Jakarta and finally president in 2014. It underscores his popularity with working-class Indonesians, especially in his populous home province. It also defines the style of his presidency and the limits of his ambitions in office.
Widodo has pursued a utilitarian agenda: stability, security, prosperity. He has focused on improving the physical welfare and livelihoods of his supporters rather than advancing the cause of liberal democracy.

He goes into Wednesday’s simultaneous elections for the presidency and parliament as the clear favourite, bolstered by a bigger coalition of political parties than he had five years ago. While the polls have been narrowing, and the campaign team of his opponent, Prabowo Subianto, a retired general and the son-in-law of the late dictator Suharto, contends that they grossly exaggerate Widodo’s position, the average of several shows that Widodo remains comfortably ahead.

Yet the prospect of a Widodo victory is imbued with less hope and excitement than in 2014 when the final days of the campaign were energised by an army of ‘Jokowi volunteers’. He has since disappointed many of his most ardent admirers and been criticised by civil society activists, academics and journalists for winding back the clock on democracy. The opinions of the Jakarta café set might not overly worry Widodo, although they should. Beyond the elections, whoever emerges as president will find that the political and economic health of the country are deeply entwined.

Indonesia’s ability to create new industries and new markets—in other words, new sources of growth—will require strong democracy and the continued opening of the economy, politics and society.

President Widodo or President Prabowo will face two deep challenges: first, to reunite the country around the republic’s founding principle of pluralism at a time when identity politics, particularly those centred on religion, have been the source of profound fractures and, second, to embark on more radical structural reform of the economy to find the investment and trade necessary to meet their ambitious growth targets. Widodo’s economic masterplan promises to turn Indonesia into an upper-middle income country by 2025; Prabowo promises growth in the double digits.

On the political front, one of the strongest critiques of Widodo’s first term is that he failed to protect basic civil liberties and democratic rights. Democracy in Indonesia has been described as stagnating, the result of a range of encroachments on free speech and organisation.

Widodo toughened a law allowing the government to ban mass organisations, ostensibly in order to proscribe the Islamist organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir. But human rights groups say it will restrict freedom of association and expression.

Police also were accused of disrupting the peaceful activity of some opposition political groups. And the door was opened for a return of active-duty military officers to civilian government positions.

The use of the mass organisations law against an Islamist group in July 2017 came after Widodo’s ally, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, or ‘Ahok’, an ethnic Chinese Christian and former Jakarta governor, was convicted on charges of blasphemy against Islam. The two developments are the flip sides of a more assertive political Islam and the administration’s efforts to combat it. Each has contributed to a weakening of the quality of democracy.

This is far from being a harbinger of the decline of constitutional democracy in Indonesia. The country is a long way from the type of intervention or dire political and economic circumstances that produced the end of the first democratic experiment in the 1950s. Indonesia remains a vibrant multi-party democracy with a high degree of elite and popular endorsement.

Nonetheless, whoever occupies the presidential palace faces a big task in building social cohesion. He would be wise to remember that the republic’s founders were convinced the only way to achieve that was by affirming pluralism and social tolerance.

The message from the election campaign is that there can be little hope that will happen. Widodo, feeling vulnerable over the religious issue after Ahok’s jailing, sought a running mate with strong Islamic credentials. He ended up with an elderly cleric, Ma’ruf Amin, who has espoused a range of conservative interpretations of Islam.

Prabowo and his running mate, a wealthy young businessman, Sandiaga Uno, have openly courted the orthodox Islamic vote. In the closing days of the campaign, he drew some big crowds to stadiums, where, hoarse from shouting, he strutted the stage, pounded the lectern, and summoned up a dire picture of Indonesia being plundered by foreign forces. This went over well with his core audience.
With neither incumbent nor challenger overly troubled by the finer points of democratic principle, there can be little hope of seeing growth in the quality of democracy in the next five years. Indices of democratic performance have seen Indonesia slip to either ‘partly free’ or ‘flawed’. There’s a risk they will slip further.

The second broad challenge is to push structural reform to open the economy to new competition and market opportunities. International Monetary Fund economists have identified three potential drivers of growth in Indonesia—the ‘demographic dividend’ of a young population, the development of a digital economy on the back of a huge population of young social media users, and sustained consumption in China.

To take advantage of the opportunity, Indonesia has to reduce disincentives caused by excessive and contradictory regulation, particularly at the municipal level; relax restrictions on markets to encourage trade and investment; wind back a bloated public sector; continue to build infrastructure; and invest heavily in the quality of education and skills.

Indonesia has moved up the rankings in the World Bank’s ease of doing business index from 106 in 2016 to 73 in 2019. But the task of further reform is immense. For example, state-owned enterprises have been encouraged to grow under Widodo. Their assets now account for about 50% of GDP, while their return on capital has been falling.

Removing impediments to a better functioning economy will require the president to take on vested interests with powerful political connections. The prospects of creating an innovative digital- and tech-capable economy will be greatest in an open society. These are tough political as well as economic decisions. They require an effective democracy.

It’s an open question as to whether either candidate has what it takes to deliver. Indonesians saw how the previous president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono frittered away a second term, occupied more by preserving his public popularity than by taking the tough decisions to secure the quality of democracy, social cohesion and economic progress. Widodo will leave an enduring legacy only by avoiding that trap.

As for Prabowo, it’s difficult to read too much into the theatre of campaign performances. His impassioned speeches can be alternately bemusing and deeply troubling. His message, verging on nativism, resonates with a sizeable proportion of Indonesians, but it unnerves potential investors and hints at a future lurch in favour of investment and trade protectionism.

Such populism works well in Indonesia for many of the same reasons it has worked abroad. Widodo’s worry is that come Wednesday it might work too well.

A version of this piece originally appeared on Asialink.

For print readers, the original post with live links is at https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/jokowi-on-track-for-a-second-term.
Indonesia’s democracy at risk from disinformation

Mali Walker, 15 May 2019

In the long lead-up to the world’s largest ever single-day elections, disinformation ran rampant in Indonesia. It became so widespread that the government started holding weekly briefings to reveal ‘hoaxes’ and give the ‘real facts’. Of particular concern was the rise in disinformation targeting Indonesia’s electoral commission, the KPU. With the official results to be released by 22 May, how people react to this wave of disinformation could affect the short- and long-term stability of Indonesia’s young democracy.

On average, Indonesians use social media for 3 hours and 26 minutes a day, the fourth-highest rate of social media usage globally. Indonesia is Facebook’s third largest market, with over 100 million accounts. Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram are also popular. Many Indonesians use social media as a convenient and trusted source of news and information, but digital literacy remains poor. As well as during this year’s campaign, disinformation was also widespread during the 2017 election for the governor of Jakarta.

Leading up to the 2019 election, both presidential campaigns funded teams of people to produce and disseminate disinformation using fake identities created for social media accounts. Aribowo Sasmito, the head of fact-checking at an Indonesian civil society organisation called Mafindo, compared the spread of hoaxes in Indonesia to the drug trade, with its laboratories, dealers and victims. For some Indonesians, creating and sharing fake news became ‘just a job’, unrelated to ideological position or political motivation.

The Indonesian communication ministry reported 700 election-related hoaxes in the month before polls opened. Hoaxes ranged from the predictable to the bizarre. Following the first presidential debate, stories spread that claimed incumbent Joko Widodo (‘Jokowi’) was fed answers through an earpiece, while people accused challenger Subianto Prabowo of using smart glasses to ‘cheat’. Both stories were false. One video purported to show the leader of the Indonesian Solidarity Party, who supported Jokowi, inviting people to join her to eat pork after the election. The clip shocked some Muslim conservatives, and more than 150,000 people watched it in the 24 hours after it was published. The video turned out to be doctored; she was actually inviting people to eat noodles.
Disinformation in Indonesia has typically focused on the religious and ethnic credentials of candidates. Stories were spread depicting Jokowi as Chinese, Christian or communist, or maybe all three. Disinformation targeting Prabowo portrayed him as both irreligious and on a quest to create a caliphate. Given the deep social, ethnic and religious divides in Indonesian society and the country’s history of persecution and bloodshed, this type of content can be highly inflammatory.

Trying to discredit a political opponent is a standard electoral tactic, but this year there’s been a disturbing rise in a different style of disinformation: hoaxes targeting the KPU and the electoral process itself. This type of disinformation has the potential to erode public trust in elections and democratic institutions.

In January, a video went viral which claimed to show seven boxes sent from China containing millions of ballots pre-marked for Jokowi at a port in northern Jakarta. The story was established by police to be a hoax, but it was estimated that there were at least 17,000 tweets sharing the false information. Prabowo’s campaign also claimed there were 17.5 million ‘problematic’ names on the voter roll, something the election commission later refuted.

Hoaxes targeting the KPU haven’t slowed down since election day. A recent YouTube video purported to show a KPU official admitting that he was bribed. It later came out that the video was doctored and that the original, filmed in 2014, showed the official stating that he had refused a bribe.

As he did in 2014, Prabowo has claimed victory. This is despite exit polls that showed Jokowi with a nine-point lead. Days after the election, Prabowo condemned ‘lying pollsters’, and asked his cheering supporters, ‘Do you believe survey institutes?’ He answered for his audience: ‘No. They are liars, the people do not believe them.’ On 1 May, Prabowo told crowds that the media are ‘destroying democracy in Indonesia right now’ by continuing to publish ‘false results’. Prabowo has also used the news of the tragic deaths of more than 300 electoral officials from exhaustion-related illnesses to discredit the KPU.

Sometimes the KPU didn’t help itself. Discrepancies were found between the results entered by the commission and those recorded on the vote tally forms by the independent election monitoring committee. But those anomalies were shown to be the consequence of human error and have been corrected. An election watchdog and observers from 33 countries have found no indication of systematic cheating or fraud.

Mafindo says disinformation targeting the electoral process is the most worrying kind. If people start to doubt that the elections were free and fair, and that the results reflect the true will of the voters, then they will be much more likely to dispute the results and any incoming president will struggle to lead effectively.

Although most Indonesians will accept the results, the scepticism created by KPU-targeted disinformation gives impetus to Prabowo’s calls for a people-power movement to contest the results. Hardline Prabowo supporters may be provoked by claims that the election was rigged and that the KPU is a tool of Jokowi.

Analysts and authorities in Indonesia are concerned that the release of the official results may be followed by mass demonstrations and violence. There are even fears that terrorists may target protest sites. Former environment minister Sarwono Kusumaatmadja said, ‘The short-term risk for Widodo is an attempt to foment chaos in Jakarta through arson, sabotage and violence.’ Indonesian authorities have reportedly relocated thousands of police from provincial areas to guard the KPU and shore up security in Jakarta, where regular rallies have been held since polling day. Widespread violence is unlikely, but the combination of the ‘fanaticism and militancy’ of many of Prabowo’s supporters and the hoax-drenched environment, stoked by scepticism and distrust, may be combustible.

Disinformation has become a factor in elections around the world. The effect it has on politicians is a problem for democracy, particularly from a partisan position. But more troubling is the way that disinformation targeting the electoral process works to undermine faith in the system itself. Politicians come and go, but the system needs to be protected.

With our own election fast approaching, Australia should take note and be prepared for a potential attack on the integrity of the electoral process. The long-term erosion of public trust that results from this type of disinformation has implications for the sustainability of all democracies, including Australia’s. Democracy is based on trust, not so much in politicians (we often don’t trust them anyway) but in the institutions that uphold it.

For print readers, the original post with live links is at https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/indonesias-democracy-at-risk-from-disinformation.
Jokowi wins second term as Indonesian president, but the Islamist challenge remains

Alexander Arifianto, 22 May 2019

After a campaign that was called ‘one of the most divisive election campaigns in Indonesia’s history’, incumbent president Joko Widodo, or ‘Jokowi’, handily won his re-election bid against long-time rival Prabowo Subianto. On 21 May, the Indonesian election commission declared that Jokowi had won, securing 55.5% of the vote to Prabowo’s 44.5%.

Prabowo is set to file a legal challenge against the final results in the Indonesian Constitutional Court, though most observers expect that the court will not rule in his favour, paving the way for Jokowi to begin his second five-year term as president of the third largest democracy in the world in October.

Prabowo’s continuing rejection of the election result has been accompanied by repeated threats from his most militant supporters—many of whom are conservative Islamists—that they will stage ‘people power’ street protests.

Indeed, Jokowi has struggled against conservative Islamist activists since the ‘defending Islam’ rallies which succeeded in removing his former ally Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (popularly known as ‘Ahok’) from the Jakarta governorship in April 2017.

These activists—now known collectively as Alumni 212—aligned themselves with Prabowo during his bid for the presidency. During the long campaign, they often turned to social media to accuse Jokowi of being a closeted communist, ethnic Chinese or Christian, in order to dissuade devout Muslims from voting for him.

In response to the challenges from the Islamists, Jokowi is relying on statutes such as the law on religious blasphemy, the law on electronic information and transactions, and an emergency decree on civil society organisations as the legal basis to resist the Islamist activists who are challenging him.
Using these laws, authorities are cracking down on the Islamist activists. One of the initiators of pro-Prabowo protests, Eggi Sudjana, has been charged by the Indonesian police, while others, including Islamist preacher Bachtiar Nashir, have been summoned for questioning. Eggi is facing multiple charges of treason and it’s been revealed that Bachtiar fled Indonesia for Saudi Arabia.

These arrests were the latest in a series of disciplinary and punitive actions taken by the Jokowi administration against his critics—who mainly come from the ranks of Alumni 212 activists—but also against others who have aligned themselves with Prabowo, such as the #2019GantiPresiden (‘#2019ChangePresident’) movement, which stood in opposition to Jokowi and his policies prior to the election.

In May 2017, police charged the leader of the Defending Islam movement, Habib Rizieq Shihab, with online sex solicitation. This forced him into self-imposed exile in Saudi Arabia. The next month, the Jokowi administration banned Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia, an Islamist group that advocated for Indonesia to become part of a global Islamic caliphate. Some of Jokowi’s other critics, like singer Ahmad Dhani and academic Rocky Gerung, were arrested and convicted under the same religious blasphemy law that was used to convict Ahok.

These cases have led observers to begin accusing Jokowi of turning to authoritarian methods to deal with the challenges against his rule from hardline Islamists and others. Political scientist Marcus Mietzner has called such methods ‘fighting illiberalism with illiberalism’ and questioned whether Indonesia’s democracy, which is widely considered one of the most durable in Southeast Asia, is now entering a stage of ‘deconsolidation’.

Islamists—particularly those who aligned themselves with Alumni 212—have emerged as the strongest opposition force against Jokowi. While he rightly sees them as a threat against his rule, so far Jokowi has dealt with them using coercive measures. This raises concerns that he might end up endangering the Indonesian democracy over the long run.

Instead of using coercion, Jokowi might consider alternative measures, such as providing education and economic opportunities for low-income Muslims (particularly young millennials). Land redistribution, as proposed by Jokowi’s running mate and now vice-president-elect Ma’ruf Amin, might be another strategy that can be pursued by the administration during Jokowi’s second term to provide more opportunities for low-income Muslims. Ma’ruf has also proposed that the state promote entrepreneurship utilising Islamic economic principles ranging from Islamic banking to cooperatives and tourism as another means to reduce poverty.

If Jokowi is successful in promoting economic opportunities among low-income Muslims, he will also be able to neutralise many of the grievances of his Islamist critics. In doing so, he’ll also be able to avoid repressive measures that are only going to inspire further complaints and protests from groups like Alumni 212.

In what amounts to a clean sweep, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party have won a fresh mandate from the Indian electorate to rule for another five years. There are many factors that have contributed to the outcome.

Probably the most important was the BJP’s success in making this into a presidential-style election and turning it into a referendum on Modi’s charismatic and pugnacious persona. This strategy was aided by the opposition’s inability to project a single credible prime ministerial candidate because of the lack of consensus among the opposition parties. There were several reasons for this, including the oversized ambitions of several party leaders and the fact that in a number of states regional parties that formed the bulk of the opposition to the BJP were locally pitted against the Indian National Congress party.

The BJP exploited the ‘dynastic’ nature of the Congress party to the hilt, especially after Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, the sister of party president Rahul Gandhi, was inducted into the Congress leadership in the run-up to the elections. The Congress also played into the BJP’s hands by running a largely negative campaign against Modi personally. That strategy boomeranged: it allowed Modi to hog the limelight and relegate his government’s lacklustre policy performance to the background.

Policy issues turned out to be of marginal concern to the electorate. This was surprising given the visible distress in the agricultural sector, the highest rate of unemployment in 45 years, the mess created by demonetisation in 2016 that affected the average Indian adversely, and the impact of the goods and services tax, which created resentment in much of the business sector. Macroeconomic indicators also signalled a noticeable slowdown in economic growth, but much of this data either was fudged by the government or was too complicated for most voters to understand.
The election was decided on emotional rather than policy issues. Modi successfully made national security a central issue in his election campaign. He was aided in this endeavour by a major terrorist attack in Kashmir in February for which a Pakistan-based terrorist outfit claimed responsibility. The terrorist attack and the Indian air strike deep into Pakistani territory in response to it provided the BJP with an election bonanza by creating the image of a decisive prime minister who could teach Pakistan a lesson even at the cost of risking a war between the nuclear-armed neighbours.

The BJP’s exploitation of national security as a major election theme enabled it to talk up its credentials as the primary proponent of Hindu nationalism. The BJP media trolls linked any attempt by the Congress to counter Modi’s national security narrative and the hyper-nationalism it engineered to its presumed policy of ‘Muslim appeasement’ and the consequent ‘soft’ policy towards Pakistan.

Anticipating such a move, the Congress leadership began to emphasise the party’s Hindu credentials more than a year ago by adopting a ‘soft’ Hindutva posture against the ‘hard’ Hindutva of the BJP. By doing so, the Congress turned itself into the BJP’s B team and sacrificed its commitment to India as a plural society. But the strategy failed miserably because as a pale imitation of the BJP’s aggressive Hindutva, the Congress couldn’t compete with the genuine article.

The equating of Hindu nationalism with Indian nationalism is now taken for granted by large sections of the Indian population. This is demonstrated by the fact that Yogi Adityanath—the chief minister of India’s largest state, Uttar Pradesh, and an intensely anti-Muslim Hindu monk—was the second most sought-after speaker after Modi in the BJP’s election rallies across the country. The media amplified the majoritarian and hyper-nationalist instincts in the country and often conflated the two. This helped BJP propagandists to denigrate the opposition’s attempts to ask the government legitimate questions about national security issues.

One should also not ignore the fact that a major contributor to the BJP’s victory was the disciplined and ideologically committed cadres of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or RSS, the parent body of the BJP and the ideological font of Hindu nationalism. These cadres catalysed pro-BJP voters to turn out in large numbers. In contrast, the Congress as an amorphous organisation is bereft of committed cadres. Its so-called workers are largely opportunists or hired hands. Regional parties, such as the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal, that have committed cadres did reasonably well in the face of the BJP juggernaut but are incapable of providing a pan-national alternative to the ruling party.

The BJP victory is likely to have long-lasting effects on the Indian polity. The party has been accused of subverting the autonomy of institutions, such as the Election Commission and the Central Bureau of Investigations, that are critical to the success of democracy in the country. Under Modi, it has also been blamed for promoting a form of populism and a cult of personality that could be conducive to the rise of authoritarianism.

India needs a strong and unified opposition that’s committed to principles of liberal democracy in order to keep these tendencies in check. However, this election indicates that no such formation is currently on the horizon. In the absence of a credible alternative to the BJP, there’s a danger that, while procedural democracy may endure, the liberal spirit undergirding it could be in danger of extinction.

For print readers, the original post with live links is at https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/modis-re-election-and-the-future-of-indian-democracy.
After Modi’s election win, what’s next for India in the Indo-Pacific?

Ian Hall, 24 May 2019

At the start of 2019, it looked unlikely that Narendra Modi would lead his Bharatiya Janata Party to a win in India’s general election. Economic growth had faltered and promised jobs were not being created. The acche din (‘good days’) he pledged to deliver in 2014 seemed increasingly unlikely.

In the end, however, Modi succeeded, thanks to a well-funded campaign, a weak opposition, and his recent handling of national security challenges. The air strikes Modi ordered after terrorist attacks in Kashmir in mid-February, and the anti-satellite missile test in late March—tests he hailed as a step towards making India a ‘space super-power’—both played to the prime minister’s advantage.

Despite this brinksmanship and muscle-flexing, Modi’s win will be met in capitals across the Indo-Pacific with relief. India has been perceived as a more active and arguably more reliable interlocutor under his leadership. Officials across the region will expect more continuity than change in India’s foreign and security policies in Modi’s second term.

This assessment is not unreasonable. Over the next five years, as over the last, it is likely that New Delhi will look to further strengthen its security partnerships with Washington, Tokyo, Singapore, Hanoi and Canberra. It’s likely, too, that the Modi government will try to manage India’s relationship with China much the same as before, oscillating between engagement and pushback when red lines are approached. And it’s likely that New Delhi will keep talking up India’s economic prospects in an effort to drum up inward investment, albeit while dragging its feet on trade liberalisation, including the conclusion of the ASEAN-centred Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

Whether Modi can continue along these lines is not, however, completely clear. The international environment has become steadily more challenging since he first came to power. China is far more assertive and more ambitious. Donald Trump is now in the White House, and while Republicans are generally more generous to India than Democrats, the current president is manifestly capricious,
and disagreements with Washington loom. New Delhi has extricated itself from at least two major crises with nuclear-armed Pakistan, but not without signs that things could, if the cards fell differently, slip out of control. Last but not least, the relatively positive economic circumstances of the past few years, underpinned by low oil prices, may not last for much longer.

During Modi’s second term, India may find foreign policy far more difficult, as Ashley J. Tellis observes. Chinese pressure will continue to build, as its Belt and Road infrastructure projects roll out through South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Another confrontation on the disputed frontier with the People’s Republic, like the one at Doklam in Bhutan in mid-2017, could well occur, with more threats of ‘pedagogic war’ from Beijing. A serious falling out with Washington—or at least with Trump—over India’s trade surplus with the US, purchases of Iranian oil or acquisitions of Russian arms is also possible. If progress is not soon made on RCEP, disillusionment with India’s already-doubted commitment to liberalising trade will grow. And in the background to all of this, there’s the ever-present risk of another major crisis concerning Pakistan.

Meeting these challenges will require concerted effort to build India’s diplomatic capacity and modernise its military. To rely on personal diplomacy and apex summity, however energetic, as Modi has done to date, will not be enough. His government needs urgently to invest in building institutional capacity—and to lift the defence budget from where it currently languishes, at 1.5% of GDP.

It will also require support from India’s friends and partners, including Australia. Despite Trump, much will, of course, come from the US. Having designated India a ‘major defence partner’ in 2016, Washington now treats it as a quasi-ally in terms of sales of military hardware and technology transfer. More recently, the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act made clear congressional backing for the strategic partnership with India, and, indeed, for the Quad.

Where Australia might make a difference is elsewhere. Deepening defence cooperation, including more and more complex joint exercises, should be a given. Sharing information about how best to manage the many challenges posed by a changing China—from economic statecraft to political interference—ought to be a priority. Working with New Delhi to help it find a way of accepting RCEP and endorsing trade liberalisation more broadly, as essential to India’s economic development, should be too. And so might exploring ways in which India can contribute more to ensure the independence of the states of Southeast Asia—a key shared interest—and the security of its peoples and commons.

The overwhelming victory of Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP, in India’s elections was even more resounding than expected. The medium-term political and social actions are predictable; the long-term consequences are not.

The BJP and its four allies in the National Democratic Alliance look like improving their result in 2014 and winning more than 350 seats in the Lok Sabha and as much as 40% of the vote. They have swept the north and west of the country, captured most of the state of Karnataka in the south, dominated the far-flung northeast and made inroads for the first time into West Bengal, once a communist bastion.

The re-election of a party with a majority in its own right for the first time since 1984 is the result of three interrelated factors: the ‘Modi story’, an ideologically driven organisation, and the media tsunami of the past 30 years.

Let’s begin with the Modi story. The first time the name Narendra Modi appeared in the Times of India, as far as I can discover, was on 23 May 1978 when he was listed as a participant in a discussion about ‘the youth struggle during the emergency’ on a television program called Yuvadarshan (‘Youth vision’). Part of the Modi story is that he was a daring young underground organiser during Indira Gandhi’s cooked-up ‘emergency’ and period of authoritarian rule from 1975 to 1977.

That connects the Modi story with the second element in last week’s victory—the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or RSS, the Hindu-chauvinist organisation Modi joined as a young man. Modi’s second appearance in the Times of India came on 1 October 1979 when he received a cheque for 500,000 rupees as a contribution to RSS-led relief work after a disastrous flood that killed hundreds of people in the town of Morvi, in his home state of Gujarat. He had established himself as someone who got things done.

Founded in 1925 and modelled on Mussolini-style organisations in Europe, the RSS now has more than a million members. Fifty years ago, when I rode my bicycle on winter mornings to the school in north India where I taught, I used to marvel at the few dozen
Men in white shirts and khaki shorts who drilled with *lathis* (staffs, or rods) on a school parade ground before going off to their jobs in shops and offices. They were members of the RSS.

The ideological foundation of the RSS is the belief that India is a ‘Hindu nation’, suppressed for a thousand years by Muslim and European invaders and enervated today by ‘secular liberals’, an equivalent of the ‘rootless cosmopolitans’ demonised in 20th-century Europe. The goal is to establish a strong Hindu nation, enforcing higher-caste beliefs and requiring non-Hindus and other deviationists to conduct themselves as grateful guests.

In the early 1950s, the RSS formed a political party, the Jana Sangh, which reconstituted itself as the BJP in the early 1980s. The relationship between the party and the movement can sometimes be rocky, but they find plenty of common ground at election time. Even as party leader, Modi remains a product of the RSS, and the dedicated RSS cadre has been essential to the rise and rise of the BJP.

Modi’s own rise in the 1980s owed something to the third element in the BJP’s victory. In 1989, India had a single government television service covering only 50% of the country. There were no more than 20 million TV sets in a population of 800 million, and most programming was ponderous. In 1987, however, a religious serialisation of the epic *Ramayana* brought the country to a stop on Sunday mornings. Over many weeks, the story of Lord Ram was told, and neighbours, servants and passers-by piled up in front of any available television set. The *Ramayana* series was followed by the other epic, the *Mahabharata*. The two series provided a ‘standard version’, a homogenisation of two great tales that had often been told in distinctive, local ways.

The BJP, far from power in the 1980s and desperate to mobilise support, staged a number of ‘chariot processions’ around the country, echoing how the deities in the TV epics had ridden in chariots. Modi appears to have been a key roadie and organiser for one or two of these popular events.

By 2000, India had 70 million television households receiving dozens of land-based and satellite channels. It was possible and profitable to telecast to all of India and create a single market. This was especially true in the north, where Hindi, spoken by about 40% of all Indians, was the prevalent language.

From the 1990s, benefiting from the expanding possibilities for Indians to see and speak to each other, the BJP’s parliamentary strength grew, and Modi’s prominence with it. He visited the United States in 1994 and 1999, partly to study media practices, and handled the party’s dealings with journalists.

Each of India’s six general elections since 1998 has exploited the latest innovations in media, and the BJP has usually been better at it than its opponents. For a lad who grew up in a world where ‘media’ meant government radio, Bombay movies and a big bakelite telephone locked in a box in a senior official’s room, Modi has been an eager and astute learner.

Today, no one in India is far from a mobile phone, and smartphone use is into the hundreds of millions. In this year’s election, the BJP deployed a vast stable of media professionals to out-WhatsApp and out-Instagram its opponents. The BJP had the money to do it well: its coffers overflowed, while the Congress, once the moneybags party, lacked such spending power.

The Congress was unable to stitch together a plausible opposition alliance, and Rahul Gandhi, its languid leader, had little to tell voters that they wanted to hear. Modi, on the other hand, benefited from the bloody scuffle with Pakistan, provoked when a suicide bomber killed more than 40 Indian paramilitary police. In retaliation, the Indian air force launched what was portrayed as a brilliant ‘surgical strike’ against ‘terrorist bases’ in Pakistan, and the bold prime minister took some of the credit. A spoonful of patriotic fervour helped the electoral medicine go down.

Modi’s government could also point to visible achievements—roads built, villages electrified, an ambitious attempt to create a ‘clean India’ that showed some modest achievements, and a national health insurance scheme. A well-resourced social media operation and a largely compliant press and television disseminated the good news.
What happens now? If it is more of the same, that means the continued transformation of state institutions into clients of the ruling party—in education, law, regulation and defence. It means the continued favouring of particular capitalists and entrepreneurs, Gautam Adani among them.

It also means more name changes: ‘Muslim’ places on the map replaced by ‘Hindu’ names. It means more nudge-nudge, wink-wink opportunities to put ‘liberals’ and non-Hindus—Muslims, but also Christians—in their place. ‘Teach them a lesson’ is a phrase you sometimes hear. Modi, of course, was chief minister of Gujarat during such a teaching session in 2002, when hundreds of Muslims were murdered around the state in retaliation for the murders in a small-town railway station of a carriage full of Hindus, apparently by a Muslim mob.

The hollowing out of India’s shaky institutions will continue. Already, the Election Commission of India, one of the country’s most respected institutions, is under scrutiny because its three commissioners are at odds. One of them asserts that his colleagues let the prime minister and BJP get away with flagrant breaches of the campaign code of conduct.

Looking at the electoral map of India, one sees that the north and west, stretching from Karnataka in the southwest to Bihar in the east, have overwhelmingly returned the BJP. But the rest of the south and portions of the east coast, including Odisha and West Bengal, have voted for local political parties.

India’s federation offers a resilient flexibility, but the BJP and the RSS often proclaim that they want to dominate the whole subcontinent. They now have the opportunity to focus on the states that have spurned them so far.

The party will soon also control the upper house of parliament, the Rajya Sabha, whose members are elected by the members of state legislatures. It takes a two-thirds majority of both houses to amend the constitution, something the BJP is likely to want to do to introduce ‘Hindu principles’ and eliminate aspects of ‘secular liberalism’. In this sense, India seems part of a global pattern of states welcoming ‘strongmen’ who emphasise ‘national values’, as defined by them.

The BJP and RSS are way ahead of this trend. The Jana Sangh, forerunner of the BJP, laid down in its manifesto long ago that ‘Bharatiya [Hindu] culture is thus one and indivisible. Any talk of composite culture, therefore, is unrealistic, illogical and dangerous.’

Yet India, with its 22 official languages, 29 states, hundreds of castes and millions of Christians, Muslims, Sikhs and Buddhists, constitutes a rich biriyani full of herbs and spices, cashews and sultanas. Trying to make a biriyani into a smoothie may not produce particularly digestible results.

A version of this article was originally published on Inside Story.

For print readers, the original post with live links is at https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/modi-the-man-the-moment-the-media.
Australia

The uncertain geopolitics and geoeconomics of the federal election

Graeme Dobell, 8 April 2019

Australia zipped through budget week and now Zooms off to the May federal election.

The country will get to vote on the budget before the parliament, which means its tax-and-spend promises are written in sand.

What’s chiselled in the budget documents—enduring beyond the election—is a set of geopolitical and geoeconomic judgements about the state of the world.

The geo settings in the budget outlook document and the portfolio statements are always revealing. Look for the caveats and cautions offered, plus the way surprises and shifts are acknowledged or hinted. What are the trends and how blow the winds?

The nods towards surprise from the Defence and Foreign Affairs and Trade departments last week are how things have shifted since their big policy statements—the 2016 defence white paper and the 2017 foreign policy white paper.

DFAT gives the flavour with the ‘strategic direction statement’ in its budget document:

Since the White Paper’s release, many of the international trends identified within it have intensified—rising nationalism and geo-political competition, anti-globalisation and trade protectionism, a shift in power in the Indo-Pacific without precedent in Australia’s modern history, rapid technological advances that are changing the way economies and societies work, and mega trends such as climate change and urbanisation. These trends are testing Australia’s policy settings and demanding new efforts in several areas.
Distil the department’s prognosis, its geo crystal balling, from the second paragraph of the strategic musings:

1. The global environment is more uncertain than any time since the end of World War II.
2. The Indo-Pacific is in the midst of a major strategic realignment.
3. The world is moving to a new, more multipolar era.
4. Australia and the region face fundamental challenges to long-term prosperity and security.

Add to those points the top-of-mind issue for the era offered by Defence Minister Christopher Pyne in December: ‘The first priority is to manage great power competition in the Indo-Pacific.’

Such settings mean cash flows to national security. ASPI followed the budget money trails here. As Marcus Hellyer reported, the defence budget continues to deliver as expected, hovering a little over 1.9% of GDP on the long march ‘to the promised land of 2% of GDP’.

Defence’s budget statement refers back to the 2016 white paper forecast of greater strategic uncertainty because of ‘changes in the distribution of power in the Indo-Pacific and globally’. The shift/surprise that’s then singled out is in the South Pacific:

Since the release of the 2016 Defence White Paper, some strategic trends have accelerated – arguably faster than was anticipated when the White Paper was drafted. Defence responded to some of these trends, along with other agencies, in devising new measures under the Pacific Step-Up announced by Government in late 2018.

You don’t have to mention China by name to be talking about China. In the South Pacific, Australia sees its strategic interests directly challenged by China. That’s the pointy end of the Pacific pivot.

The geoeconomic report card from Treasury comes from a relatively sunnier place than the geopolitical climate described by Defence and DFAT.

The international economic outlook pins its hopes to the notion that US President Donald Trump will cut a deal with China, declare victory, and end the trade war:

There have been recent signs that an escalation of trade tensions between the US and China is less likely; however, trade policy uncertainty remains elevated between a number of economies and global trade growth has eased. This uncertain outlook for trade tensions has been weighing on confidence, new export orders and investment intentions. Escalation of tensions would be expected to negatively affect growth in a number of countries including in Australia’s major trading partners. Conversely, a resolution of tensions could result in global growth that is stronger than forecast.

The uncertainty meme keeps recurring. Treasury lists a high degree of uncertainty around the global growth outlook, uncertainty surrounding measures of global confidence, risks around the Italian financial sector, Brexit, and the fact that financial markets now expect monetary policy to remain accommodative or neutral for longer than before.

Australia’s trade, as Treasury notes, is oriented more towards Asia than Europe. So along with the geostrategic winds roiling the Indo-Pacific, there’s a lot of work to be done and money to be made: ‘Growth in Australia’s major trading partners has outpaced global growth over the past decade and this is expected to continue over the forecast horizon as growth in the Asian region remains relatively strong.’

When it lifts its eyes beyond that horizon, Treasury goes to the basics of people, production and productivity:

Over the longer term, unfavourable demographics will constrain potential growth rates in some of the world’s major economies. Slower productivity growth could also limit productive capacity in many countries. Future global productivity growth will depend on the dispersion of technology, the mobility of capital and the degree of openness and competition maintained across economies.

The geo report cards are in. Thanks for that, world. We’ll get back to you after May. Australia is off to enjoy, and endure, a festival of democracy.

The silences of the Australian election

Graeme Dobell, 13 May 2019

Election campaigns involve loud argument and quiet consensus—and then there are the silences.

Silences point to hard stuff just offstage: no-go, too dangerous.

For political parties, breaking the silence introduces complexity that tends towards tangled nuance, toppling into dilemmas and hard choices. There be conundrums and nightmares.

Risk-averse parties embrace silences, invoking on-message discipline. Don’t scare or confuse voters. The corollary is that parties don’t want to declare and decide.

In this federal election campaign, international issues show how consensus fades quickly to silence. The biggies are the dragon conundrum, the Uncle Sam nightmare, the international unravelling, and a solo mime—the government’s silent scream on climate change.

While much of Australia loudly argues the dragon-slayer-versus-panda-hugger puzzle, the parties tip-toe around the dragon in the room.

After the fifth icy age with China, the Coalition and Labor don’t want to slip on the ice again.

Enter the ever-vivid Paul Keating, never one for silence.

The former prime minister delivered a mighty swipe, calling for dragon slayers to be banished: ‘When the security agencies are running foreign policy, the nutters are in charge’, Keating told the ABC. ‘You’d clean them out. You’d clean them out.’

Labor disavowed Keating, pledging no Canberra purge.

The no-purge-no-nutters-here promise should mean that Labor, if victorious, won’t axe Home Affairs secretary Mike Pezzullo. The ABC’s Andrew Greene makes that point in an astute piece which had a sharp Canberra quote from a ‘senior official’ on the security
threats facing a Shorten government: ‘The three Bs are the biggest threats to Bill Shorten once he’s in office; boats, bombs, and bytes.’

Add Beijing to that B list. The panda pressures push and pull.

Neither side can play the usual reset card of ‘new government, new day’. There’s no going back to the future with China, as Shadow Foreign Minister Penny Wong notes: ‘It is not simply a matter of a “diplomatic reset.” Fundamentally, we are in a new phase in the relationship.’

Wong says the ‘complex and consequential’ panda pressures will persist and could get harder. Amen. Her answer is an uneasy balance: ‘First, we don’t pre-emptively frame China only as a threat. Second, we must be grounded in the realities.’

Amen, as far as it goes. You can see why the parties prefer panda silence during the campaign.

On the other side of Saturday’s vote, though, loud moments of truth await. Not least, as Michael Shoebridge writes, is identifying the ‘sophisticated state actor’ that hacked into the Australian parliament’s information system and the networks of the Labor, Liberal and National parties.

US President Donald Trump, meanwhile, offers the mirror reverse of the dragon conundrum. Australia loves the alliance but fears Uncle Sam’s economic intent.

In the trade war, Australia wants Beijing to give enough for Trump to claim victory and declare peace. But Australia detests Trump’s protectionist, trade-bloc vision—all about America’s might, not what’s right.

A striking silence—both in policy and in politics—is the collapse of any sense of principle in Australian trade policy.

Once, Australia had standing as an intellectual and practical force in the World Trade Organization and its predecessor, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. In the 1980s and 1990s, as a significant player in international trade, Australia created and led the Cairns Group. Today, the Cairns Group is limping, not loud.

Australia’s only interest in talking to Trump has been as a small target, seeking exemption from US tariffs. Australia should be mounting loud protests and principled arguments against Trump as he hacks at the WTO and the rules that have made the world better and richer.

That bring us to the international unravelling. As former intelligence chief and wise owl Allan Gyngell put it, ‘[T]he order we have known for the past seventy years has ended. It’s not being challenged. It’s not changing. It’s over.’

The ‘unravelling’ view sees the constant fretting about the ‘rules-based order’ in the 2016 defence white paper and the 2017 foreign policy white paper as a lament for the recently departed.

The unravelling hasn’t featured in the campaign or the leaders’ debates. But it’ll be the central motif of the incoming government briefs from the defence and foreign affairs departments. Drawing on DFAT’s description of international trends in last month’s budget document, the concerns will range from rising nationalism and geopolitical competition to anti-globalisation and protectionist sentiments, along with a shift in power in the Indo-Pacific ‘without precedent in Australia’s modern history’ and wider trends such as climate change and urbanisation.

Top of defence’s brief will be: ‘The first priority is to manage great power competition in the Indo-Pacific.’

The silent scream of the campaign has been the Coalition’s inability to say anything about the megatrend that’s the top issue for many voters: climate change.

The Coalition has been screaming at itself for so long it’s lost its voice.

Climate was the policy issue that twice toppled Malcolm Turnbull, once as opposition leader, then as prime minister. Labor adopted Turnbull’s energy policy, so the Coalition can only argue about cost, not detail or intent or the size of the problem.

The silences last till Saturday. And then …

For print readers, the original post with live links is at https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-silences-of-the-australian-election.
President ScoMo wins ‘miracle’ election
Graeme Dobell, 20 May 2019

In Australia’s presidential-style election, the sitting president has amazed the nation—and himself—by winning.

Scott Morrison expressed his own surprise at the start of his victory speech: ‘I have always believed in miracles … and tonight we’ve been delivered another.’

A government that trailed in every opinion poll conjured a come-from-behind salvation it can parade as a famous victory. Morrison’s title is prime minister, but he did it the presidential way.

Pause to note a dynamic taken for granted by the happy residents of the lucky country—the brutal elegance of Oz democracy.

The job was done in an evening. Nations as diverse as the US and Indonesia can only gawk at the speed.

Our polls closed at 6 pm and counting started. By 9.30 pm eastern time, the ABC declared that the Liberal–National government would be re-elected.

At 11.30 pm, Bill Shorten emerged to concede defeat and step down as Labor leader. Few things so graced Shorten’s leadership as his manner in leaving it. On the hardest of nights, he offered a gracious, positive speech about Australia’s future and the Labor Party: ‘We can’t change the past, but my word we can change the future!’

By midnight, ScoMo (the designation Scott Morrison uses on Facebook) was on stage revelling in his miracle. Whether the final seat count delivers him a minority government or a razor-slim majority mattered nought. Rightly so. In this game—taking government, wielding power—a win is a win.

At the G20 in Osaka next month and in Asia’s summit season later this year, ScoMo will be present in his own right—the elected leader who dominates his government with a victor’s authority.
At the G20 this time, German Chancellor Angela Merkel won’t need a cheat sheet to remind her of the identity of the latest leader to emerge from the revolving door of the Australian prime ministership.

Indeed, rule changes mean the revolving-door decade of prime ministerial fratricide is over. That sorry decade taught tough lessons: the four previous prime ministers were each dispatched by their own party rooms (although Kevin Rudd in his brief second coming as PM was also discarded by the voters).

Little wonder Australians expressed cynicism and disillusionment at the chaotic, cannibalistic antics of the two parties.

In the pragmatic way of Oz, the Labor and Liberal parties have done a fix, changing their rules to graft presidential protections atop the rights of the party room. The significant presidential habits that have evolved in our Westminster-based system are now reflected in the leadership protocols of the main parties.

In his last great gift to Labor in his second PM stint, Rudd changed the rules so it’s virtually impossible for the caucus to topple the leader between elections. When ScoMo stepped over Malcolm Turnbull’s political corpse, he did the same for the Liberals.

The protocols mean the presidential graft has even stronger purchase on the Australian prime ministership.

The international message to our neighbours and friends is that the days of Canberra as a leadership coup capital are over.

President/PM ScoMo will lead the country for the next three years, barring personal mishap or defeat in a substantive vote in the House of Representatives. And the last time an Australian government fell in a House of Reps vote was during World War II.

The recent experience of minority government under Julia Gillard and Turnbull has taught both sides how to dance on the Reps razor edge: show proper respect for those on the cross benches, relying on the sanction that independents who topple a government will bring on an early election that could end their own careers.

The presidential nature of the system was at the heart of Morrison’s campaign. He presented the contest as one between presidents, not parties: ‘If you vote for Bill Shorten, you’ll get Bill Shorten. If you vote for me and the Liberal and National parties you will get me to serve you as your prime minister.’

The Australian electorate didn’t warm to Shorten during his six years as Labor leader. The blood splatters on his toga from plunging the knife into two Labor prime ministers defined his image as an ambitious apparatchik.

In a fine meditation on Shorten’s leadership on election eve, journalist Laura Tingle got at the nature of that voter ambivalence with this paragraph quoting the cheerily pragmatic judgement of a former Labor colleague: ‘[Shorten] is a completely disingenuous lying bastard whose ambition knows no bounds. However, none of these things stop you being a prime minister, or for that matter, a good prime minister. In fact, they are probably job qualifications.’

Like Shorten, Morrison started out as a party apparatchik. Yet in this election, ScoMo put on his baseball cap and campaigned with relentless energy and driven focus to embrace and uplift ‘the quiet Australians’. That, plus his drumbeat about the dangers posed by Labor did the trick—or delivered the miracle.

Australia has witnessed the rebirth—with a huge enlargement of power within the Liberal Party—of the sitting president. Plus the dispatch of Labor’s would-be president. All in an evening’s work for pragmatic, proficient Oz democracy.

Aim for a firm schedule of four leaders’ debates and eight to 10 portfolio debates.

For print readers, the original post with live links is at https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/president-scomo-wins-miracle-election.
Scott Morrison is now generating a clear foreign and defence policy direction for his time as prime minister and working closely with key cabinet ministers to achieve it. The emerging agenda seems to be as much Morrison’s personal creation as it is a product of cabinet government policymaking.

And at the heart of this policy agenda is something that has been mostly absent in Australian strategic thinking and international relationship management for some years—values.

As the prime minister put it earlier this month when standing on the flight deck of the American aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan:

> Australia believes in what Ronald Reagan called the ‘truths and traditions’ that define the United States. We stand together in these self-evident truths. We stand together for personal liberty and freedom. For democracy and the ballot box. For the rule of law, and freedom of association. For free economies and free peoples.

Morrison then quoted from remarks Reagan made at a White House state dinner to honour Malcolm Fraser in 1981: ‘We both recognise the responsibility of freedom and are prepared to shoulder it squarely.’

At other times, Australian political leaders have come over misty-eyed talking about shared values with Americans, but they’ve done so when times were good and the recitation didn’t seem to matter all that much. And values have routinely got a guernsey in various government policy statements, like the 2017 foreign policy white paper, but haven’t seemed particularly operative in what our officials and diplomats then do.

The context has changed and with it the pointedness and power of the words. Because now these words read as a statement of intent in the face of other powers that do not believe in these ‘truths’, and act accordingly—the two most notable of which are the Chinese state and the Russian state under presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin.
The words jar with the reality of Chinese authorities’ exercise of power domestically against their own citizens—in Xinjiang, in Wuhan and in Hong Kong—and with the Chinese military’s annexation of disputed territory in the South China Sea in the face of claims by states like the Philippines and Vietnam. The rule-of-law emphasis contrasts bluntly with the Chinese party-state’s use of law as a weapon against foreigners from states that have made it unhappy and against its own citizens to protect party rule.

While it may jar with Chinese state actions, the statement of what Australia stands for aligns very well with the Morrison agenda in the Pacific and with the steps taken at home by both the Turnbull and Morrison governments. This makes for consistency in international and domestic policy because of parallels between deepening international partnerships with ‘like-mindeds’ and moves to enhance national cohesion.

Domestically, the laws put in place to prevent ‘foreign influence activities that are in any way covert, coercive or corrupt’ from undermining Australian institutions, policymaking and democracy are all about ensuring Australia continues to protect and reinforce these values at home. Similarly, calling out cyber intrusions into the heart of Australian democracy and theft of intellectual property by the Chinese Ministry of State Security is about resisting efforts to subvert our politics and undercut our economy.

And Morrison’s Pacific step-up has a theme of helping our Pacific partners do the same, to enable their own sovereign decision-making. The prime minister’s three big elements of Australia’s renewed engagement with our Pacific family—‘to work with our Pacific islands partners to build a Pacific region that is secure strategically, stable economically and sovereign politically’—echo the ideas of rule of law, free economies and free peoples.

Lowy Institute polling shows that many Australians no longer trust ‘China’ (more accurately, Xi’s government) to act responsibly in the world, no doubt because of growing knowledge in our community of Chinese interference in political parties, cyber intrusions, punitive trade measures and growing presence in our near region. The very different values that the authoritarian Chinese Communist Party uses to guide its policies and actions are the root cause here.

This view from the Australian community is good news because it tells our leaders that we support—and want—a defence of basic values and freedoms. As John Fitzgerald has noted in a forthcoming publication, it provides a timely reminder to a democratic government that values are anchored not in foreign policy documents, but in civic life. Morrison seems to understand this implicitly and to realise that acting on this impulse is a source of political power.

This contradicts a heavy stream of strategic and international policy and commentary that has bled into the public debate, which seeks to portray nation-states as interchangeable ‘powers’ and the acme of excellence in statecraft and political leadership as the ability to solve the algorithms of changing power balances and adjust the state’s policies and actions accordingly.

That approach seems well represented in Hugh White’s latest book, How to defend Australia, and is probably most familiar to historians of European balance-of-power politics at the time of Bismarck. In this world, the nature of states seems to not matter much. It’s all about the power equation.

This idea leads to the equivalence of living under US or Chinese power and is also quite popular for uncritical advocates of deeper engagement with China despite the realities of authoritarian power.

Maybe it’s odd to a dry strategic mind contemplating 1800s Europe, but values matter because they can increase or detract from a nation-state’s national power. The values a state practices domestically and internationally matter in quite practical ways—because they affect the extent to which that state is trusted, supported, partnered with and even allied with.

Peter Varghese put this clearly recently when speaking about the nature of the Chinese state: ‘For Australia, a democratic China becoming the predominant power in the Indo-Pacific is a very different proposition to an authoritarian China occupying this position.’ It’s a very different proposition because the values of authoritarian China are in stark contrast with Australian values.
Even the Cold War was as much a competition about values as it was about naked national power. And the values of personal liberty and freedom, democracy, the rule of law, freedom of association, free economies and free peoples won.

Maybe the values concept comes easily to Morrison because he’s centred in his own personal (including religious) values. It does seem that this is one of his easy connections with Pacific leaders and audiences.

Beyond Morrison, at least one senior cabinet minister is also signalling a return of values to the core of Australian foreign and defence policy. Linda Reynolds has been using her early speeches, like her July address in the UK, to connect Australia’s defence partnerships to the Morrison agenda. It’s also the way the minister is taking up the theme of ‘political warfare’ sketched out by Australian Defence Force chief Angus Campbell.

Reynolds speaks of the importance of ‘sovereign rights, and the concept that nations of all sizes in every corner of the globe have the right to conduct their affairs free from coercion’. These rights and freedoms are being undermined ‘in very direct ways, contesting our values’ with brazen challenges, ‘whether in the Gulf or the South China Sea, in eastern Ukraine or Salisbury’.

Even more pointedly, some states are using grey-zone tactics, operating ‘just below the threshold of traditional armed conflict’. They are ‘prepared to flout the rules-based order in resorting to these options’.

‘The longer we leave it unchecked, the bolder they become. Australia has been prepared to call out violations of international law and international security and hold those responsible to account. More voices need to join this chorus’, Reynolds says.

The most intriguing thing in all of this is what policy directions and decisions will be most driven by this renewed focus on values.

National security policy is my big pick here, because it’s where the contest of values with authoritarian powers is most intense and where Australia and our allies and partners have a strong competitive advantage, although it’s one that until recently we seem to have discounted.

And it’s where the opportunities from closer partnerships—security and economic—with like-minded states are real. As we are likely to see when Morrison goes to Washington.

*For print readers, the original post with live links is at https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-return-of-values-morrisons-strategic-policy-agenda.*
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