

Lessons for Singapore from the Thai turmoil

2010-06-16 13:06

By **KISHORE MAHBUBANI**

The Straits Times, Singapore

Wednesday 16 June 2010

As I watched the dramatic developments in Thailand over the past year or two, I often asked myself what Singaporeans thought as they watched these developments.

Did they think: "Thank God we are not like Thailand. Such political instability could never characterise Singapore." Or did they think: "We should watch out. What happened in Thailand could also happen here."

Unless an opinion poll were to be taken here, we will never know the answer. In my view, it would be unwise for Singaporeans to dismiss the events in Thailand. There may yet be lessons in them for us.

Superficially, Thailand and Singapore could not be more different. Thailand is an ancient kingdom. It has a more ethnically and religiously coherent polity, with the exception of its southern provinces. It has also been blessed with a monarchy that has for several decades provided it with social stability.

By contrast, Singapore is a truly modern republic with little of the history that Thailand has. We have had a Westminster-style parliamentary government since independence. In short, there is little in common, superficially, between Thailand and Singapore.

However, we do share one attribute in common: For a long time, Thailand was perceived to be the most stable society in South-East Asia. It was the only South-East Asian state to escape colonial rule. This took great political wisdom on the part of the Bangkok establishment. And after South-East Asia was decolonised, Thailand remained stable despite the military coups that came and went.

From time to time there was unrest in the southern provinces, but the heartland of Thai society remained stable. The reverence that both the Bangkok establishment and Thai peasants had for King Bhumibol Adulyadej served as a stabilising force.

After a failed coup in 1991, Thailand had a pro-democracy uprising that led to several peaceful transfers of power, making it one of the first countries in South-East Asia to experience this.

Thailand was seen to have safely crossed a political threshold to achieve modern political stability. Through all this, the Thai economy continued to grow, attracting valuable long-term foreign investments.

Remarkably enough, though Thailand went through a wrenching economic and financial crisis during the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, it remained stable. Thais accepted peacefully the great economic deprivation. Contrast this with the social and political upheavals that Greece is experiencing today.

So what went wrong in Thailand?

The full story is too long to be told here. And the roles, for good or bad, of key personalities, like former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, have to be recorded in full too.

But while the full story is complex, the systemic or structural explanation may be quite simple.

For decades, despite all the political ups and downs, the Bangkok establishment had dominated the political system of the country and assumed that this was its birthright.

This establishment never understood that Thaksin had used all the instruments of democratic electioneering to wake up a rural electorate that had been politically quiescent.

Once this political genie was let out of the bottle, it could not be put back in. The old socio-political contract between the Bangkok establishment and the rural masses broke down. In its place, a new socio-political contract needs to emerge. This is what Thailand is struggling to achieve now. And it does not help that King Bhumibol's health is poor at this moment of great political need.

Like the Thailand of the past, Singapore, too, is perceived to have one of the most stable political systems in South-East Asia.

The question for Singapore is: Will such political stability continue naturally? Or will it require, like Thailand, new socio-political contracts as society changes with modernisation and growth?

As a student of politics, I have come to believe that political stability is not a natural development. It requires great effort and often great political wisdom -especially the wisdom to make changes ahead of time.

And Singapore suffers from unique political vulnerabilities: It is the world's only city-state with a very diverse ethnic population. It also has the most globalised economy in the world, making it vulnerable to external shocks.

I have no doubt that in 2015, we will celebrate 50 happy years of independence and peace and prosperity. There is no imminent danger at our doorstep. But we must also think beyond 2015 and of how Singapore would fare if it is subjected to new strains and stresses.

Can a socio-political contract that did well in the first 50 years of our independence serve us equally well in the next 50 years? And will our HDB heartland continue to accept this old contract? Or will it at some point demand more? Who knows?

And why do I ask such uncomfortable questions? Because the very first minister I worked with was a great man called S. Rajaratnam. He told me: "Kishore, we must think the unthinkable."

And political instability is now unthinkable in Singapore.

All these thoughts about potential political instability have also come swirling into my head because I have just finished reading Meira Chand's brilliant new novel *A Different Sky*. It is a gripping read. It captures well all the stresses and strains that Singapore experienced in the turbulent period from 1927 to 1956.

Although I was alive for only eight of those years, the novel nonetheless surfaced in my mind a rush of childhood memories I had forgotten: gangsters ripping one another apart with broken beer bottles in Joo Chiat Road; me creeping inside a monsoon drain in violation of a curfew imposed because of ethnic riots so I could buy bread from a bakery; watching a Malay neighbour return home with blood on his shirt after being beaten up by a Chinese mob.

Chand never lived in Singapore during this period. Despite this, she has successfully resurrected memories of a turbulent period I had long forgotten.

This is why I believe her novel -- which will be launched by President S R Nathan on 8 July -- should be read by all junior college students in Singapore. I say this despite the sex in the novel. Come to think of it, given Singapore's procreation problems, I should say 'because' of the sex in the novel. No, it is not a steamy read. But it does not flinch from describing brutal realities. Scenes of torture are always difficult to describe. But Chand has succeeded. My stomach turned with each scene.

She did not intend to write a didactic novel. This is not a book about good and evil. It provides a vivid description of the messy world that Singapore experienced for more than three decades from 1927.

We have not experienced political messiness for almost 50 years now. So the obvious question we need to ask is: How will we handle it if political messiness returns again to Singapore, as it has to Thailand?

[The writer is the dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore.]