

ASEAN ROUND-UP

Rodrigo Duterte Has a Commanding Lead in the Polls as the Philippines Goes to Vote

TIME, 8 May 2016

The boorish frontrunner—who during campaigning made jokes about rape, his penis and killing his children if they took drugs—is tipped to win

It was all grins in Davao City on Monday morning, as voters lined up to cast ballots for the new President of the Philippines, confident that their pugnacious mayor, Rodrigo Duterte, would romp home after building a commanding lead in latest polls...

... Human-rights groups allege that “death squads” reporting to Duterte stalk criminals across sprawling Davao and conduct summary executions that have claimed hundreds of innocent lives. However, Duterte is unapologetic for the tactics he’s used to clean up this city of 1.5 million, once renowned as a lawless hub of communists, Islamic militants and gangsters, but which now has a reputation for thriving security.

“If I make it to the presidential palace, I will do just what I did as mayor,” Duterte told a crimson sea of 200,000 supporters in Manila’s Rizal Park on Saturday. “All of you who are into drugs, you sons of bitches, I will really kill you. I have no patience, I have no middle ground, ether you kill me or I will kill you idiots.”

Why it matters: Duterte is a polarizing figure in the Philippines. His opponents often highlighted Duterte human rights abuses allegations. Meanwhile, his supporters seem to vote him for his strong style of leadership and his promise of order—perhaps a ‘bloody’ one, as he himself said, but order nonetheless. This is another example of why democracy in Southeast Asia is an ongoing dialogue. Time and again, strong leaders would arise in democratic countries in the region and challenge democratic values, often mentioning that the leaderships that democracy has produced are often weak and riddled with corruption.

ASEAN Literary Festival Brings the Region’s Finest Writers to Jakarta

Jakarta Globe, 26 April 2016

Top writers and thinkers from across Southeast Asia will gather for the third edition of the Asean Literary Festival at Taman Ismail Marzuki in Central Jakarta on May 5-8.

This year’s festival, themed “The Story of Now,” brings into focus the way Southeast Asian authors “respond and adapt to the current global system,” the festival’s website says.

This marks the festival’s continuing dedication to themes of democracy and human rights, as was also apparent in its previous instalments. The festival was initiated in 2014 by the Muara Foundation, a Jakarta-based nonprofit organization that aims to improve education and cultural literacy in Indonesia.

Programs throughout the four-day event range from panel discussions and readings, to workshops and children’s programs.

Read more: <http://jakartaglobe.beritasatu.com/features/asean-literary-festival-brings-regions-finest-writers-jakarta/>

Why it matters: The forum is important to promote greater attention towards ASEAN literatures. Indeed, the Southeast Asian region has yet to produce a Nobel Prize in Literature winner. This is not because of lack of talent. Countries in Southeast Asia have produced literary geniuses, such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer from Indonesia, or Jose Rizal from the Philippines. A forum that coalesce the diverse literatures in the region in one place is important to put greater attention from the world toward the treasure trove that is Southeast Asian literatures.

Weak Perception a Challenge to AEC Labor Integration

The Jakarta Post, 7 May 2016

Indonesia is faced with regulatory obstacles and the weak perception of potential workers in its battle to effectively integrate its labor force into ASEAN, which promises free movement of skilled labor within the region, according to an academic forum.

To date, those two problems represent the main challenges for Indonesians hoping to integrate promptly among the ASEAN labor market.

There are currently 100,000 Indonesian workers employed in alternate ASEAN member states, according to data presented by Indonesia’s permanent representative to ASEAN Rahmat Pramono during a seminar held by the Foreign Ministry and the University of Indonesia (UI) on Tuesday.

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This figure is far below proportion for the most populous country in ASEAN. With a population of 250 million, Indonesia makes up more than two-thirds of the 600 million people in the ASEAN Community.

Read more: <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/05/07/weak-perception-a-challenge-aec-labor-integration.html>

Why it matters: Indonesian workers should be able to gain benefit from the ASEAN Economic Community as it allows free movement of skilled labours. However, in order to do so, the Government of Indonesia needs to increase workers' competitiveness through increasing education level and skills. In addition, the Government of Indonesia should also provide more information on how to work in other ASEAN Member States.

ASEAN Needs Laos leadership

East Asia Forum, 7 May 2016

Laos has announced a new leadership team amid calls for the country, as the ASEAN Chair for 2016, to unite ASEAN on territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

Laos changes leadership every five years. Two top posts were in the spotlight this time around as the incumbent president and prime minister did not run again for the 11-member Politburo in the National Congress, held in January this year. Former vice president Bounngang Vorachith, a recently elected Party Secretary General, was endorsed to become the President in the first session of the National Assembly held on 20–22 April.

As part of the US' so-called 'pivot to Asia', President Barack Obama hosted the US–ASEAN summit in February this year, with the aim of forging closer US engagement with ASEAN. The South China Sea territorial dispute was one of the major topics discussed. Yet a joint communiqué, the 'Sunnylands Declaration' released by the participating heads of states, did not specifically mention the South China Sea as a potential hotspot. Rather they called for countries to respect the sovereignty of each nation and adhere to international law, in comments seemingly directed at China.

China's rise has profound implications for Laos specifically and the Asia-Pacific region more generally. China is now the largest investor in Laos, having overtaken Vietnam in 2013, and has also become the country's biggest trading partner. Regionally, China's assertive behaviour in the South China Sea has upset ASEAN members such as Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam.

Ahead of a much anticipated ruling by the International Court of Justice in a case brought by the Philippines on the issue, Beijing has begun to court smaller ASEAN member countries such as Cambodia and Laos, and even Brunei, to act in China's favour.

Read more: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/05/07/asean-needs-laos-leadership/>

Why it matters: ASEAN chairman is a difficult position to hold, as was shown by Cambodia during their chairmanship in 2012. The region as a whole is still finding the right rhythm in regard to its relations with China and US. In regard to Laos, it is worth noting that while they are traditionally close to Vietnam which is currently locked in dispute over the South China Sea with China, they are seen to increasingly veer towards China in recent years. This is not surprising given the fact that China is investing heavily in the country, including through mega infrastructure development projects such as the Laos-China high speed railway. This is a move that provides real benefit for the Laotian people. In this connection, the burden is not just on Laos to ensure that their chairmanship holds true to ASEAN spirit and centrality but also for other ASEAN member states to ensure that ASEAN still matters for Laos.

