

PATTAYA DEMONSTRATIONS
Asean dealt a blow - but not a fatal one

By Rodolfo C. Severino
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ON APRIL 11, mob violence, resulting from conflicts between the two sides of the Thai political divide, forced the Thai government to cancel the Asean summit meetings it was hosting. This prompted a number of commentaries on the impact of these events on the future of Thailand, on the future of Asean and on the relationship between the two. It is necessary to take a close look at each of these. First, Thailand: Outside observers - and even most of the internal observers - can have only an imperfect knowledge of the dynamics of Thai politics. However, one thing is clear: What happened in Thailand is not unique in terms of political violence, either in South-east Asia or in the wider world. One only has to recall the political paroxysms that brought about far-reaching changes in Indonesia in 1998 or the series of coup attempts launched by disgruntled elements in the Philippine military in the late 1980s, one of which threatened the Asean summit of December 1987 and another of which wrought havoc on the Philippine economy in 1989.

Nor are massive demonstrations on the occasion of major international meetings limited to Thailand. Think of the violent mass actions at several International Monetary Fund (IMF)/World Bank annual meetings and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) gatherings in Seattle in 1999 and in Hong Kong in 2005. Unlike in those instances, the Pattaya demonstrations were not even aimed at an international organisation - in this case, Asean - but at the sitting Thai government. But the security forces at all these IMF/World Bank and WTO gatherings were able to prevent disruptive mass actions from causing the cancellation of the meetings, while the Thai security forces were unable to keep the demonstrators from overrunning the meeting site.

It is ironic that the summit's official website quotes three Thai Foreign Ministry officials as 'reaffirming' on April 9 that 'Thailand is ready to host the 14th Asean Summit' and that 'the current political situation has not disrupted the preparations'. They also noted that 'Thai security authorities have monitored the situation closely and tightened security'.

The disruption has led to the observation that Asean had been 'held hostage' to the hardly unique vagaries of Thai politics, hostages being largely innocent victims.

But in what ways was Asean a victim?

Summits are supposed to be where countries try, at the highest possible level, to sort out their differences and work out common positions on vital international issues. In the case of the Pattaya summits - Asean, Asean Plus Three (China, Japan and South Korea), and the East Asia Summit - the heads of government would have discussed and made clear their stand on the global economic crisis, reforms of national and international financial systems, and the resuscitation and diversification of markets.

Summits are expected to result in agreements on cooperative actions that cut across sectors. The Asean Plus Three summit would have discussed food security and bio-energy development, and the East Asia Summit would have agreed on practical measures related to disaster management.

Just as importantly, summits provide the political context and sanction for regional initiatives, like the Asean-China investments agreement, and the multilateralisation and expansion of the currency pool under the Chiang Mai Initiative.

Most summits are also occasions for bilateral meetings between leaders who wish to make progress in reconciling bilateral differences or simply strengthening links between them.

The Thai disaster aborted an unprecedented Asean Global Dialogue that would have, on April 12, brought the 16 leaders of the East Asia Summit together with the heads of the United Nations, the World Bank, the IMF, the Asian Development Bank, the WTO and the UN Conference on Trade and Development - giving prestige, as well as practical benefits, to Asean.

Although its image has been clearly dented and it has lost face, Thailand will eventually work out its political problems. Asean has been dealt a blow, but not a fatal one. It has gone through worse crises before, worse than the postponement of a summit on account of political troubles in the host country.

It is indeed regrettable that an opportunity has been put off to advance regional purposes at a time of serious economic crisis. But Asean will survive, possibly become even stronger than it was before.

Meanwhile, it has to deal with the immediate repercussions of this setback. For example, Thailand is scheduled to host the annual meeting of Asean foreign ministers in July, together with the post-ministerial conferences with Asean's 10 dialogue partners and the ministerial meeting of the 27-party Asean Regional Forum on political and security issues.

Will all participants feel confident enough, three months after Pattaya, to send their foreign ministers to Thailand?

The writer, a former secretary-general of Asean, is head of the Asean Studies Centre, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.