

Military treats democracy like a video game

LET IT BE
Suranand
Vejjajiva



Our leaders handle politics as if it were a video game. There is a reset button. Everything can be reset to zero — and we start all over again.

The latest to be reset is the Election Commission (EC) after the new organic law governing the EC was passed by the National Legislative Assembly on Friday. The five incumbent election commissioners selected and appointed under the defunct 2007 constitution will lose their jobs and seven new ones will be selected within four months.

There were arguments for and against this provision in the draft law. Some feel the current commissioners should be allowed to continue their work till the end of their seven-year term which began in 2013. Although the current EC was heavily criticised in their failed attempt to conduct elections in 2014 due to political protests, they have the necessary experience for the upcoming election next year.

Others opted for a new team of commissioners. The EC law is one of the most important organic laws of the new constitution, and to start over would be within the spirit of reform. It is hoped the selection process of the commissioners under the provisions of the new law will guarantee impartiality and independence from political influence.

But there are concerns about an ulterior motive. Some are afraid that the regime may fill the vacancies with those close to them.

But some have argued that pushing for new EC commissioners signifies double standards. The new constitution sanctioned continuity of other independent bodies, for instance, the Constitutional Court. At the same time, if legal procedures get tangled up, Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha is willing to use the special powers of Section 44 to facilitate the process, like the selection of the commissioners of the Auditor General.

This means all are not treated equally under the law. For that matter, any Thai individual can become the victim of discrimination by resetting, which is widely known in Thai as “set zero”.

The biggest and most bogus “set zeros” of all, of course, are coups d’etat.

Coups disrupt and destroy democratic processes. They suppress citizens’ rights and liberties. Institutional development is halted and reorganised to the liking of those who took power.

In Thailand, coups d’etat are usually a collusion of the military and the elite technocrats, financed by business interests. By the barrel of the gun arises political power, to paraphrase what Chinese leader Mao Zedong stated. The military was and continues to be the instrument of the elites in taking matters into their own hands when not satisfied



A 2014 photo shows an Election Commission (EC) sign at an empty meeting table. The new organic law on the EC will see the five incumbent election commissioners lose their jobs in what many see as an attempt by the regime to reset the independent body for its political gain. KRIT PROMSAKA NA SAKOLNAKORN



Some leaders are naive who believe they can make things right overnight.

with politicians elected by the majority of the people.

Then they tinker with the constitution, particularly the election mechanisms, to enable continued control and manipulation of the country. And when it turned out otherwise — not in accordance with their interests or when the personnel involved do not serve them — then they push the reset button.

Why do they do it? There is a naïve reasoning and a malevolent one. Mind you, both are equally pathetic.

The first one goes like this: The 1932 Revolution which transformed the country from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy occurred before the appropriate time. Khana Rassadorn members were young, who were educated abroad and, thus they did not understand that

They became power corrupt and infighting ensued. Eventually the military presented itself as the guardian of the nation. With such upheaval, the country was reset.

Generations of military leaders who staged coups followed this rhetoric: People were not ready. They needed to be educated first. They were too easily fooled by the politicians who used the elections to legitimise their quest for power.

They often claim politicians are corrupt. Yet, they look at themselves as more educated, while technocrats are more intellectually stimulated. They are the “good” people. The masses must be led by the superior vanguard in the name of national security, peace and order.

Some leaders are naive who believe they can make things right overnight. That they know better. That they can dictate how society should be.

With such an attitude, those leaders use power to suppress differences. Apart from undermining institutions and public trust, such a practice reinforces class differences and patron-client relationship, establishing forever the rulers and the ruled.

At another level, many believe there is a mastermind — a conspiracy even — that tries hard to preserve the status quo where a class of people forever dominate and direct the country for their personal and oligarchs’ interests. The same individuals have been the ones who deliberately “reset” the system to suit their dominance.

I view it as more inherent within our political structure and culture. It is a culture of technocrats and authoritative military which can maintain the power, and without ever being uprooted by colonialism or experiencing a loss in a modern war, it has become institutionalised.

The change induced by the 1932 Revolution was a non-violent one compared to revolutions of the same sort around the world. Democracy has never had a chance to take a firm root as citizens may feel they had to lose blood and tears to

attain freedom. Thais basically remain subservient to those in power.

Our education system teaches us not to question authorities. State propaganda reinforces it. Our religion, Buddhism which is blended with Hinduism, leads us to believe in karma that reinforces submissiveness.

That is: We are in this ordeal because of the karma we did in the past life. The way out? Do good things, make offerings to monks and the next life will be better. It is a condition of the mind that makes many accept the situation as it is.

In short, Thais condone system resetting.

And now again we come to a juncture where there is a process that ensures the regime’s presence after an election. The resetting of the EC is one. Others will follow various reform agendas. Some long-term schemes and legislation are designed to curb public dissent.

Resembling the coding of video games, the regime makes it quite clear that if people are up against them, they are ready to reset the game, and all will start from zero once again.

Suranand Vejjajiva was secretary-general to the prime minister during the Yingluck Shinawatra government and is now a political analyst.

COMMENTARY

Mohamed
A El-Erian



Outsider politics not going away

It is tempting to consider last week’s UK election — in which the two major parties combined to take more seats in parliament — another indication that the anti-establishment phenomenon that propelled Brexit and President Donald Trump’s victory is waning. That would be a mistake. A closer look suggests that, far from going away, the phenomenon is evolving, with potential consequences for key upcoming European elections.

Up until the Dutch elections in March, the political narrative was a simple one. Years of low and insufficiently inclusive growth delivered populations that had lost confidence in “expert opinion” and the “establishment”, both public and private. They were angry, inclined to become single-issue voters, and open to alternatives, even if these lacked details and sufficient upfront implementation plans.

In 2016, and in successive blows to consensus predictions, Bernie Sanders challenged Hillary Clinton right up to the end of the Democratic Party primaries in the US, Brits voted for Brexit in June and, having prevailed over 16 adversaries in the Republican primaries, Donald Trump was elected president in November.

It was an anti-establishment movement like no other in the western world. It upended long-established electoral behaviours and made a mockery of most political analysts. It suggested that far-right candidates would prevail in Dutch and French elections in the first half of 2017, that Italian politics may also be upended, and that even Angela Merkel could face a once-unlikely challenge to her continued dominance of the German political landscape when parliamentary elections are held in September.

But the Dutch and French elections did not adhere to this narrative, nor did regional elections in Germany that traditionally have served as precursors to the general election there. Meanwhile, last week’s UK elections saw its two major parties, when aggregated, add to their seats at the expense of smaller parties and, in particular, the Scottish National Party, which had advocated a second referendum on Scotland’s independence.

Up to now, the evidence on the ground has not been comforting.

With that, it is becoming more fashionable to postulate the end of the anti-establishment movement. Yet that would be both premature and misleading.

Yes, the extreme right did not win the French presidential election, but the person who did, Emmanuel Macron, was a previous unknown, who ran under his own newly established “movement” and humiliated the long-standing mainstream parties — which, for the first time, failed to put a candidate into the second round of the presidential election.

Yes, the mainstream parties did better in the UK, but this came solely on the back of an unexpectedly strong performance of a Labour Party that, visibly and purposely, opted for more extreme left-wing policies under Jeremy Corbyn, a leader whom more political analysts seem to have ridiculed than took seriously — an outcome that led the *Economist*, a mainstay of the British establishment, to argue that Mr Corbyn “has revolutionised the British left”.

Rather than dying, the anti-establishment movement is undergoing an endogenous evolution as some of the mainstream parties scramble to adapt. And, judging from the UK elections, those who do adapt can hope for an increase in support. All of which serves to keep the big political question very much in play: Will the anti-establishment phenomenon that is still playing out in Europe and in the US serve as an orderly disruptor that breaks the deadlocks that have paralysed economic governance, dimmed long-term growth prospects, and worsened the inequality trifecta (income, wealth and opportunity)?

Up to now, the evidence on the ground has not been comforting. Despite talk to the contrary, anti-establishment movements have yet to decisively break the political malaise that has held back both actual and potential economic prosperity. And voters remain disillusioned, divided and disappointed with their ruling elites — suggesting that yet more political surprises may await down the road. ©2017 BLOOMBERG VIEW

Mohamed A El-Erian is a Bloomberg View columnist. He is the chief economic adviser at Allianz SE, the parent company of Pimco, where he served as CEO and co-CEO. He was chairman of the president’s Global Development Council, CEO and president of Harvard Management Company, managing director at Salomon Smith Barney and deputy director of the IMF.

It’s time to prepare for the battle to save Britain

BREXIT

DENIS MACSHANE

Rejoice! Rejoice! The Battle of Downing Street is over. Now the Battle for Britain begins. Like lions rising from slumber, the British people have risen and dealt a mighty blow to the Leave Liars.

A Tory Party fighting on the most isolationist manifesto in its history and a prime minister who gave in across the board to the xenophobic Ukip-style hate of Europeans have been repudiated by British democracy.

Seventy-three years ago, as the democratic world rose up to save the Continent from the ravages of extreme nationalism, British soldiers stormed the beaches of Normandy jointly with American, Commonwealth and European armies and units.

Now the British people have said an emphatic “No” to the English nationalism of Ukip and the *Daily Mail-Telegraph* media clique. And north of the border, Scottish nationalism has been also been dealt a blow, as Scots booted out the SNP leader in the Commons, Angus Robertson, and the SNP supremacist, Alex Salmond.

Before we exult too much in Ms May’s humiliation, let us not forget Labour under Mr Corbyn also bought in to core Brexit ideas. The Labour manifesto proposed imposing immigration controls on fellow Europeans that would have been incompatible with Single Market membership.

Anatole Kaletsky, chair of Best of Britain, said the YouGov poll of 1,875 voters he commissioned showed most Brexit voters including Tory voters and over 65-year-olds support staying in the Single Market.

Another question the poll asked: “Do you think our government should offer EU citizens the right to travel, work, study or retire in Britain, in exchange for EU countries giving British citizens the same rights?”

Some 62% agreed that keeping EU travel, work and retirement rights for British citizens should be a negotiating priority. This



Protesters with anti-Conservative Party and anti-Democratic Unionist Party placards march into Parliament Square in front of the Houses of Parliament from Whitehall in central London on Saturday. AFP

compares to 17% in favour of immigration controls applied to all EU citizens, including British passport holders, with 21% of “don’t knows”.

A final question combined the single market and free movement: “Do you think our government should or should not allow free movement of people between Britain and EU countries in exchange for the EU allowing British businesses full access to the Single Market?” Some 43% supported such a deal, 31% rejected it and 26% were unsure.

This shows the Tory-Labour election manifestos may have been too quick in surrendering to the line that voters last June voted to quit the Single Market and the

Customs Union, as well as give up the right to retire in Spain, France and Greece or live and work in Europe without any obstacles as if living at home in Britain.

Napoleon famously sneered at the British as a “nation of shopkeepers”. It is deep in the instincts of the average British citizen that we do well when markets and frontiers are open to British commerce, citizens and ideas. This should be the line of argument in the opening rounds of the Battle for Britain now that the Battle of Downing Street is over.

It should also not be forgotten that, in June of last year, there was a clear majority of Remain MPs in the House of Commons,

in the two-thirds range. If anything, that majority has now gotten larger, as quite a few venomously anti-EU Tories got defeated at the polls.

Moreover, MPs from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (other than Unionist supremacists) were all opposed to amputating the UK from Europe. So too were most Labour MPs and more than half of Conservative MPs.

MPs should stand back and consider the wider national interest rather than looking over their shoulders.

As British voters slowly wake up to the massive economic damage leaving the Single Market and Customs Union would

do to jobs, it is high time for politicians to take a fresh look.

There is also a need for a serious debate inside the Labour Party. It is clear that adopting a Brexit line on the Single Market and the rights of British and European citizens to work and live in each other’s nations has made Labour largely indistinguishable from the Tories on Brexit.

Mr Corbyn must recognise that, despite his personal political triumph (which is especially impressive in view of the establishment onslaught directed at him), he largely won a protest vote. He stood up against public sector cuts, inequality, and no wage increases for a decade.

It was largely his opting for a much softer Britain that gave him his 40% voting share. In addition, Labour did best in London where Labour MPs campaigned against leaving the Single Market and Customs Union and against adopting internal migration controls.

Last year, only five very rich men provided 61% of the funds for the Leave campaign. Are there no men and women ready to bankroll a serious campaign to defend Britain and its citizens from the isolationists and the economic amputationists?

As David Davis, Theresa May’s Brexit Minister, says: “A democracy that cannot change its mind ceases to be a democracy.”

It is time for a new democratic campaign to defend core British rights and interests that cannot be enhanced by leaving the Single Market and Customs Union.

The plebiscite win for the Leave Liars last year is not the last word. Parliament must once again be the centre of national debate. In particular, pro-European Tories like Amber Rudd need to encourage ministers like Philip Hammond and others who have serious doubts about Brexit.

A pivotal battle was lost last June and a battle was won on Thursday. But we need to train and find resources for a longer campaign to save Britain for the 21st century by keeping our great country part of the community of EU nations. THE GLOBALIST

Denis MacShane is former UK Minister for Europe under Tony Blair and a contributing editor to The Globalist, www.theglobalist.com, where this article first appeared.