

Policy Insight

Systemic Perils in Post-Pandemic Southeast Asia¹

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and related policies had a debilitating impact on the economies and societies of all countries around the globe. Economies suffered a recession, companies went bankrupt, supply chains were disrupted, major stock markets indices fell, unemployment rose, job vacancies were at an all-time low, and global tourism suffered downturns (Jones et al. 2021).

Southeast Asia was no exception as the region was “hit harder” economically than other parts of the globe (World Bank 2021). The Asian Development Bank calculated that COVID-19 “pushed 4.7 million more people in Southeast Asia into extreme poverty and 9.3 million jobs disappeared” (ADB 2022a). The only businesses that prospered were the corporations engaged in the manufacture and marketing of pandemic-related products.

By early 2021, the COVID-19 numbers appeared to be receding and stabilizing. By mid-2022, governments began easing up on the severe COVID-19 restrictions including opening their countries to visitors. The World Health Organization (WHO), however, advised that countries can loosen restrictions and lift lockdowns only “if they have high immunity rates, their health care systems are strong and the epidemiological trends are going in the right direction” (Keaten 2022).

This essay provides new and updated data that magnifies the sorry state of Southeast Asia’s economic, social, and political fabric,

and the perils that remain in a post-pandemic era, and reiterates longstanding policy recommendations to address such issues.

COVID-19 Cases and Deaths Continue to Rise³

The easing up may prove to be double-edged. While economies recovered in 2022, with Southeast Asia growing by 5.5 percent for the year (OECD 2023 and ADB 2022a), COVID-19 infections and resulting deaths continued to rise. Table 1 shows that total Southeast Asian COVID cases rose from 20 million to 36 million, a yearly average of 78 percent from 1 February 2022 to 1 February 2023.

The increases may be attributed to the early easing of restrictions for most countries in the region. Deaths from the pandemic continued with the Southeast Asian fatality rate rising by 13 percent in one year between 1 February 2022 and 1 February 2023, or from 323,401 to 365,541 deaths.

These figures, however, may tend to be underestimated or underreported. This would be true for countries with underdeveloped health systems with inadequate mass testing and contact tracing capabilities.

Table 1. Southeast Asia COVID Status, 1 Feb 2022–1 Feb 2023

Country	Total Cases, 1 Feb 2022	Total Cases, 1 Feb 2023	% Increase Cases	Total Deaths 1 Feb 2022	Total Deaths 1 Feb 2023	% Increase Deaths
Vietnam	3,120,301	11,526,522	269.00%	39,962	43,186	8.07%
Indonesia	5,457,775	6,730,537	16.72%	147,586	160,822	8.97%
Malaysia	3,367,871	5,037,242	49.56%	32,591	36,942	13.35%
Thailand	2,819,282	4,726,984	67.67%	22,809	33,392	46.40%
Philippines	3,658,892	4,073,504	11.33%	56,224	65,810	17.05%
Singapore	679,795	2,218,050	226.28%	986	1,722	74.64%
Myanmar	581,837	633,836	8.94%	19,356	19,490	0.69%

Brunei	51,516	261,440	407.49%	115	225	95.65%
Laos	142,237	217,289	52.76%	619	758	22.46%
Cambodia	129,078	138,320	6.74%	3,027	3,056	0.96%
Timor-Leste	22,584	23,375	3.50%	126	138	9.52%
Totals	20,013,168	35,587,099	77.82%	323,401	365,541	13.03%

Source: CSIS n.d.

Regarding vaccinations, Southeast Asia's record remains uneven (Table 2). As of 1 February 2023, the percentage of persons fully vaccinated (i.e., two doses) in the region's total population remains low at 68 percent. This number falls below the threshold range to achieve “herd immunity” (Brueck 2021).⁴

For those with the required booster shots, the number drastically falls to a low of 31 percent for Southeast Asia as a whole with only Singapore, with 84 percent of its population fully vaccinated, having achieved herd immunity.⁵ Furthermore, the regional average of 210 vaccine doses per 100 population means that, in general, each person has had only two vaccine doses, instead of the required four.

Table 2. Southeast Asia Vaccination Status, 1 Feb 2023

Country	PPersons Fully Vaccinated	P% of pop vaccinated	Persons booster + add'l dose	% of Pop booster + add'l dose	Vaccine Doses/100 pop
Brunei	446,323	97%	339,711	73.70%	294.26
Cambodia	14,620,423	86%	10,477,144	61.50%	272.82
Indonesia	172,693,321	62%	67,952,274	24.40%	162.44
Lao PDR	5,648,517	75%	2,359,576	31.47%	206.90
Malaysia	27,536,594	81%	16,296,842	48.00%	224.00

Philippines	73,960,026	62%	21,425,727	18.52%	155.15
Singapore	5,119,159	92%	4,595,884	83.63%	254.28
Thailand	54,077,454	77%	27,206,983	38.82%	198.92
Timor-Leste	797,351	48%	328,531	20.00%	152.33
Myanmar	27,545,329	51%	2,227,351	4.09%	118.64
Vietnam	85,868,733	86%	57,505,108	58.00%	272.93
Totals	468,350,000	68%	210,715,032	30.76%	210 Ave.

Source: Our World in Data n.d.

Access to vaccines by poor and developing countries is crucial to strengthening efforts at curbing the pandemic. This need, however, is hamstrung by refusals of developed states and multinational pharmaceutical corporations to widen access to COVID-19 tests, vaccines, and treatment (Stiglitz and Wallach 2022). In December 2022, rich country governments successfully delayed deciding on a proposal by developing countries to waive intellectual property rights on therapies and tests related to COVID-19.

On 30 January 2023, the WHO declared that “COVID-19 continues to constitute a public health emergency of international concern, its highest form of alert” and added that the viral disease “was likely in a ‘transition period’ that continues to need careful management to mitigate the potential negative consequences” (Reuters 2023).

Southeast Asia's Economies

As a direct result of the easing of pandemic restrictions and the opening up of economies, Southeast Asia’s growth for 2022 clocked at a higher 5.6 percent from an earlier estimate of 5.1 percent “on stronger-than-expected domestic consumption, exports and services, particularly tourism” (OECD 2023 and ADB 2022a)

Such growth rates, however, cannot be sustained for 2023 “as global demand weakens” alongside high inflation due mainly to rising global food and energy prices, rising interest rates, higher capital

outflows, currency depreciation, reduced government spending, and the “collateral damage” from the Russian invasion of Ukraine (ADB 2022). Accordingly, growth for Southeast Asia’s 10 ASEAN-member economies is projected to slow down to 4.6 percent for 2023 (OECD 2023).

The region’s vulnerabilities are heightened by the predominance of informal workers, who compromise more than half of the workforce in most countries. In Cambodia and Myanmar, this portion surpasses 80 percent (Sciortino 2021). While “their contribution to national economies is crucial,” they are ineligible for mandated benefits. Their already dire situation was further intensified during the pandemic, as many lost their means of livelihood and were denied access to social assistance (Sciortino 2021).

Southeast Asia faces a funding gap arising from the “almost US\$500 billion in collective debt reserving payments that are due in the next four years” (World Economic Forum 2023). The debt-to-GDP ratio for Southeast Asia “grew from 49 percent in 2019 to 63 percent in 2021” (Fraser 2022).⁶

Worrisome is the region’s increasing development financing debt to China. Cheong (2022) reports that since “China’s development loans in the region are ‘mainly debt-financed, rather than aid-financed,’” interest rates are “substantially higher . . . than those of benchmark institutions such as the World Bank, and therefore generate higher returns for Chinese lenders.”

The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP), the world’s biggest trade bloc, is composed of ASEAN members, China, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, and Australia. Hailed by free trade advocates, RCEP has dire consequences for Southeast Asia. The UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) warns of tariff revenue losses, damaged economic and financial capacity prospects, and worsened trade balances for ASEAN while benefiting mainly its developed country-members (Sok Chan 2021). RCEP is also seen as damaging to the developing countries’ industrial development, weakening regulatory mechanisms on social protection, telecommunications and financial services, and lacking in commitments on labor, human rights and environmental standards (Ranald 2020).

Southeast Asia and the World

Southeast Asia's regional organization, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), has been actively engaged in extra-regional engagements. Southeast Asia has become attractive to the US due to the discordant state of US–China relations. The region is seen by the US as allies or buffer states. The European Union views Southeast Asian economic ties as a respite from the fallout from the Ukraine–Russia war and the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, Europe and the US are keen to match China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Asia.

In November 2022, Southeast Asia hosted three major summits. These were the ASEAN leaders meeting in Phnom Penh (8–13 November 2022), the Group of 20 summit in Bali (15–16 November 2022), and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in Bangkok (16–19 November 2022). However, the original goals to “foster deeper economic cooperation amid the COVID-19 pandemic, spreading inflation and the risk of a global recession” were overshadowed by severe geopolitical tensions, from the Ukraine war to the U.S.–China rivalry and North Korea's launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile” (Obe 2022).

Earlier, in May 2022, US President Biden hosted Southeast Asian leaders, promising “a new era in US–ASEAN relations” and pledging US\$150 million to fund various programs (Camba 2023). The summit, however, turned into a Western-centric affair, where its priority agenda, the “prolonged political crisis in Myanmar ... received relatively less attention than Ukraine” (Obe 2022).

ASEAN and the European Union met on 14 December 2022 in Brussels in “the first-ever summit between the two blocs” (Shibata et al. 2022a). This is where they “resolved to cooperate more on everything from clean energy to security” while glossing over differences such as “human rights and the Russian invasion of Ukraine” (Shibata et al. 2022a).⁷ The EU also announced financing worth “10 billion euros (US\$10.6 billion) for ASEAN's “Global Gateway” program, an obvious answer to China's Belt and Road Initiative (Associated Press 2022).

Using Cold War language, Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. opined: “Although we come from very different places, we have a very similar world view of the challenges that we all face” (AP News 2022). Absent from the EU-ASEAN meeting was Myanmar’s junta leader, Min Aung Hlaing, who was disinvented even as other authoritarian leaders like Cambodia’s Hun Sen and Thailand’s Prayuth Chan-o-cha were welcomed.

Southeast Asia is further caught between an “economic cold war over China,” forcing it to “create ‘China and non-China’ portfolios for its products” and jeopardizing its “do business with all” strategy to “boost foreign investment and economic growth” (Take 2023). The resulting separation of supply chains is seen to “weaken economies of scale and raise production costs.”

Southeast Asia's Democratic Deficit⁸

Southeast Asia may be a favored region of developed countries seeking to rebound from the pandemic and other economic problems. The region, however, mains “largely a fortress of authoritarianism, with military-based regimes (Thailand and Myanmar), dominant single parties (Vietnam, Singapore and Laos), absolute monarchies (Brunei) and old-fashioned autocrats (Cambodia) dominating the political landscape” (Heydarian 2022). Despite “a decent record of relatively competitive and free elections,” the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia “have also seen the emergence of authoritarian populist forces and the continued marginalization of progressive parties” (Heydarian 2022).

The effectiveness of progressive social movements has been blunted by extreme repression and their diminished ability to mobilize and galvanize the region’s marginalized peoples into embracing more radical alternatives. In Thailand and Myanmar, democratic movements led by young activists and students mobilized tens of thousands into the streets protesting against military power grabs. Their efforts, however, could not be sustained over a longer period.

In the Philippines, the promise of the 1986 insurrection that toppled the Marcos dictatorship dissipated with the return of traditional dynastic politicians and the ascendancy of corporate-

driven neoliberal forces. The May 2022 elections saw the dictator's son and namesake, Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., handily winning the presidential race. Heydarian (2022) pointed out: "Absent a genuine revival of progressive forces, the region is likely at best to produce democratically elected populists and at worst, regress into full-fledged authoritarianism."

Myanmar is the worst-case study for Southeast Asian politics. Since the 2021 coup, the military regime has reportedly killed over 30,000, jailed 13,763, and displaced "hundreds of thousands along remote borders" while oblivious to international condemnation (Okumura 2023). Junta intransigence is encouraged by its lucrative trade deals with the US, Japan, European Union, Russia, China, and India (Okumura 2023).⁹ Western countries, as well as ASEAN, confine themselves to token and largely ineffective gestures such as disinviting the generals to international gatherings.

In December 2022, Indonesia enacted a controversial law, the *Kitab Undang-Undang Hukum Pidana* (KUHP; Book of Criminal Law), that brings the Joko Widodo government closer to the Southeast Asian authoritarian norm (Llewellyn 2022). The law limits the right to dissent; prohibits insulting the president, the vice-president, and government institutions; and criminalizes cohabitation, extramarital sex, and abortion.

Thailand has been ruled by a military junta since General Prayuth Chan-ocha staged a coup in 2014. Unilaterally declaring himself "Prime Minister" he sought legitimacy by calling for elections in 2019 (The Economist 2022). But after an antimilitary party performed well, Prayuth had it dissolved and charged its leader with *lèse-majesté*.¹⁰ Mass protests against military rule and the monarchy led by university students are routinely repressed, and its leaders incarcerated or disappeared (Keating 2020).

In the 14 May 2023 elections, however, the military suffered a crushing defeat when eight pro-democracy parties led by "Move Forward" and "Pheu Thai" won 62.4 percent of House of Representatives seats (Regalado 2023). The military, however, hesitates to hand over power to the Move Forward leader, Pita Limjaroenrat, who would have to be confirmed as Thailand's next Prime Minister by the military-dominated Senate.

Malaysia’s elections on 19 November 2022 could herald a turning point away from authoritarianism, with Anwar Ibrahim installed as the new Prime Minister. The country, however, has been stuck in a “sluggish growth” stemming from weak fundamentals, low investments, setbacks in productivity, and “rampant corruption” (Nakano 2022). Ominously, Anwar had to enter into a coalition with the Barisan Nasional party long identified with one-party, semi-authoritarian politics.

Not surprisingly, the region’s “freedom ratings” continue to deteriorate, according to Freedom House (Table 3). Six countries were rated Not Free—Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. Four were rated Partly Free—Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore. Only Timor-Leste got a Free rating, despite barely making it to that category.

Press freedom has been deteriorating as well. In Singapore, “authorities forced one of the city-state’s few remaining independent news outlets to shut down by suspending its license” (Freedom House 2022). Thai authorities “issued a broadly worded regulation to expand their ability to prosecute individuals for distributing news deemed to incite fear in the public” (Freedom House 2022).

In the Philippines, independent journalist and Nobel Prize laureate Maria Ressa was constantly harassed, intimidated, and swamped with libel and other court cases by the previous Duterte administration. In addition, the franchise of the Philippines’ biggest media network, ABS-CBN, was not renewed.

In 2018, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) ranked the Philippines as the “deadliest country for journalists in Southeast Asia and the worst offender in media impunity because of its high number of media killings” (Bagayas 2018). Other Southeast Asian countries that ranked high in the IFJ’s “impunity scale” were Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Timor-Leste (Bagayas 2018).

Table 3. Global Freedom Ratings, Southeast Asia, 2022

Country	Total Score and Status	Political Rights	Civil Liberties
Brunei	28 Not Free	7	21

Cambodia	24 Not Free	5	19
Indonesia	59 Partly Free	30	29
Laos	13 Not Free	2	11
Malaysia	50 Partly Free	20	30
Myanmar	9 Not Free	0	9
Philippines	55 Partly Free	25	30
Singapore	47 Partly Free	19	28
Thailand	29 Not Free	5	24
Timor-Leste	72 Free	33	39
Vietnam	19 Not Free	3	16

Source: Freedom House 2022

Lagging Social Protection

Wealth and income inequalities have accompanied Southeast Asia's economic expansion in the last decade. The UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) reports that "Southeast Asia has seen inequalities widen," setting back SDG [UN Sustainable Development Goals] Number 10 (Reduce inequality within and among countries) (ASEAN Post 2018).

Table 4 shows that two countries, the Philippines (42.3) and Malaysia (41.1) have crossed the borderline index of 40, which is seen as the danger zone for the Gini inequality index. Singapore (39.8), Laos (38.8), and Indonesia (38.2) are dangerously close to the borderline.

Table 4. GDP Inequality in Southeast Asia (Based on the Gini Index)

Country	Gini Index	Year
Philippines	42.3	2018
Malaysia	41.1	2015

Singapore	39.8	2018
Lao PDR	38.8	2018
Indonesia	38.2	2018
Vietnam	35.7	2018
Thailand	35.0	2020
Myanmar	30.7	2017
Cambodia	26.6	2018
Timor-Leste	28.7	2014
Brunei	n.a.	n.a

Source: World Bank n.d.; Singapore Department of Statistics 2022.

The UN ESCAP reports that Southeast Asia fares badly in all but one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set to be achieved by 2030 (UN ESCAP 2021). Goal 1 (ending poverty) progress suffers from low social spending for health, education and natural disasters. Progress for Goal 2 (zero hunger) is slow, and food insecurity continues to affect 100 million people in the region. Regression is also observed in Goal 7 (sustainable energy), Goal 13 (climate action), Goal 14 (life below water), and Goal 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions).

Meanwhile stagnation characterizes Goal 11 (sustainable cities and communities), Goal 12 (responsible consumption and production), Goal 15 (life on land), and Goal 17 (partnership for the goals). Southeast Asia also lags in bridging digital divides. It is only in Goal 9 (innovation, industry, and infrastructure) that Southeast Asia is on track.

The UN Social and Economic Council (2022) reports that, overall, social protection in Southeast Asia is deficient, with some 62 percent to 88 percent of vulnerable populations deprived of benefits. Only 33 percent of the population is covered by at least one social protection benefit.

Persistent corruption contributes to rising uncertainty and exacerbates the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change,

and security and economic threats. Corruption bloats the power of authoritarian rulers, adds to the democratic deficit, and marginalizes civil society organizations (Putz 2023). Transparency International's (2022) corruption perceptions index shows that six Southeast Asian countries are in the bottom half of the 180 countries surveyed (Table 5).

Table 5. Corruption Perceptions Index, Southeast Asia 2022

Country	Score	Rank	Change
Singapore	83	5	-2
Malaysia	47	61	-1
Timor Leste	42	77	+1
Vietnam	42	77	+3
Thailand	36	101	+1
Indonesia	34	110	-4
Philippines	33	116	0
Laos	31	126	+1
Cambodia	24	150	+1
Myanmar	23	157	-5
Brunei	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.

Source: Transparency International 2022.

Sustainable Tourism?

Southeast Asian tourism has been a major source of economic growth - contributing from “15% to 25% of each country’s GDP” and employing 40 million (Thenextepictrip 2022, TTG Asia 2020, and ADB

2022b). Arrivals plunged by 82 percent during the pandemic but with the reopening of borders visitors have been returning.

Tourism revival is “an opportunity to fix structural issues ... and rebuild it greener” (ADB 2022b). The ADB and the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) promote “sustainable travel,” i.e., “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities” (ADB 2022b and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs n.d.).

The question, however, is whether Southeast Asian governments will adopt the UN and ADB proposals “to counter excessive tourism” (Shibata et al. 2022b). Measures such as “charging higher admission fees, limiting visitor numbers, and temporary closures of vulnerable areas like national parks and marine sanctuaries” have been met with “opposition from the tourist industry and local government officials” (Shibata et al. 2022b).

The South China Sea Disputes

The decades-old territorial disputes in the South China Sea (SCS) represent both economic and military flashpoints. China is a major claimant, its controversial “Nine-Dash-Line” claiming approximately 62 percent of the SCS. Southeast Asian countries involved in the territorial disputes include the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei.

The SCS is a major passage way for international commerce with an estimated US\$3.4 trillion in goods transiting it each year and its oil and marine life reserves are vital to economic growth for all claimants (Congressional Research 2022).

Long considered an “American lake” where US military maneuvers have enjoyed unhampered access, the SCS is now a contentious site between Chinese and American naval maneuvers. In April 2023, the US and the Philippines held their largest joint military exercise ever (“38th Balikatan”) with 18,000 troops participating and sending a warning signal to China (CNN Philippines 2023).

The territorial disputes are nowhere near to a satisfactory resolution with saber-rattling, intimidation, unilateral build-ups, diplomatic protests, threats, and counter-threats characterizing the conflicts. Efforts to establish a Code of Conduct in the SCS between ASEAN and China have not gone beyond mere platitudinous statements from both sides.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

What Southeast Asian societies are undergoing and will continue to experience in a post-pandemic period point to systemic perils that underlay what is beneath the perceptible surface. While the economies rebounded when restrictions were lifted, a host of problems immediately came to the fore in terms of high inflation, higher prices, job layoffs, the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war, and the US-China rivalries.

Along with economic growth, social and wealth inequalities are bound to endure for the long-term and fester. This is a paradox that policy makers need to address. Southeast Asia must provide a judicious balance between economic growth and redressing social inequalities as the latter could eventually cancel the benefits of economic progress for the majority of the region's population.

The relentless desire for corporate profits fueled by trade and investment opportunities continue to overshadow efforts to address and redress gross human rights violations in the region. Human rights need to be brought to the fore of policy initiatives which entails creating relevant institutions where they don't exist and strengthening existing ones.

Politically, the era of authoritarian governments lingers on with the remaining "democratic" ones marching in that same direction. Democratic governance mechanisms such as free elections and popular participation need to be solidly in place and amply protected.

Social protection for the most vulnerable populations remains low with little progress and even reversals in achieving the UN's sustainable development goals. Social protection has to cover all of the marginalized and excluded. This entails dramatically increasing public

expenditures for health, education, housing, and essential services for the less privileged social and geographic sectors.

Efforts to protect the environment and seriously confront climate change are hampered by the need to attract tourists make up for the pandemic-induced downturn. Climate change concerns need to be seriously tackled and global agreements to reduce emissions must be religiously implemented.

The South China Sea territorial disputes need to be resolved in a manner acceptable to all claimants with the assumption that each one will have to compromise on matters of sovereignty and access to resources. The ideal set-up is where resources can be shared by all parties and joint development and management mechanisms are instituted.

The contradictory aspects of Southeast Asia's development patterns need to be rooted out and seen as a systemic whole rather than fractions of disjointed segments. Policy advocates and decision-makers need to view the various aspects of Southeast Asian (political, economic, social, cultural) societies as interconnected and function as a system.

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Endnotes

- 1 Excerpted, revised and updated from Eduardo C. Tadem. 2023. "Introduction: Post Pandemic Southeast Asia: Systemic Perils and Peoples' Responses" in "Re-Imagining Post-Pandemic Societies: Alternative Practices across Southeast Asia," edited by Eduardo Tadem, et al, 1-31, Quezon City: UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies.
- 2 Eduardo C. Tadem, PhD is also the Convenor of the Program on Alternative Development at the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS AltDev).
- 3 This section was extracted and appeared in Eduardo C. Tadem, "Has Southeast Asia reached a Post-Pandemic Stage?" CoverStory, March 1, 2023, <https://coverstory.ph/has-southeast-asia-reached-a-post-pandemic-stage/>
- 4 The range of "herd immunity" status as of mid-2021 has been calculated to be from 80 percent to 90 percent vaccination rate for the COVID-19 virus for Delta variant infections (Brueck 2021). The current herd immunity rate has not been determined for the now more prevalent Omicron variant.
- 5 Herd immunity is "when most of a population is immune to an infectious disease," thus providing "indirect protection" (d'Souza and Dowdy 2021).
- 6 The standard measure of debt sustainability sets a threshold of 60 percent beyond which a debt crisis or a "debt trap" could arise.
- 7 Europe has been severely hit by "the disruption of Russian energy supplies that have affected financial markets and driven up inflation," resulting in skyrocketing consumer prices of essential goods and services (Associated Press 2022).
- 8 This section was extracted and appeared in Eduardo C. Tadem, "Southeast Asia's Democratic Deficit." CoverStory. March 14, 2023, <https://coverstory.ph/southeast-asias-democratic-deficit/>
- 9 Myanmar exports of garment products to the European Union, Japan, and the U.S. reached a record high of USD33.3 billion between January and September 2022, or about 1.6 times more than the same period a year earlier" (Okumura 2023).
- 10 Lèse-majesté offenses are defined in Thailand's Criminal Code (Article 112) as acts that "defames, insults or threatens the king, the queen, the heir apparent, or the regent," BBC, "Lese-majeste explained: How Thailand forbids insult of its royalty," October 6, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-29628191>

- 11 The 2009 Ampatuan massacre in the Philippines that killed 32 journalists stands historically as “the single deadliest attack on the media worldwide” (Bagayas 2018).
- 12 The Gini index (or Gini coefficient) ranges from 0 (or 0 percent) to 100 (or 100 percent), with 0 representing perfect equality and 100 representing perfect inequality.
- 13 No. of countries ranked = 180. 100 is very clean and 0 is highly corrupt. Brunei was not included in the ranking.
- 14 This section was excerpted and appeared in Eduardo C. Tadem. 2023. “Can Southeast Asia Achieve Sustainable Tourism?” CoverStory, February 20, 2023, <https://coverstory.ph/can-southeast-asia-achieve-sustainable-tourism/>