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★★★★
FOUR
MORE
YEARS?
★★★★

After a tumultuous first term, will US President Donald Trump defy the polls and win a second stint in the White House? What would that mean for Asia, the fight against Covid-19, climate change and global trade?



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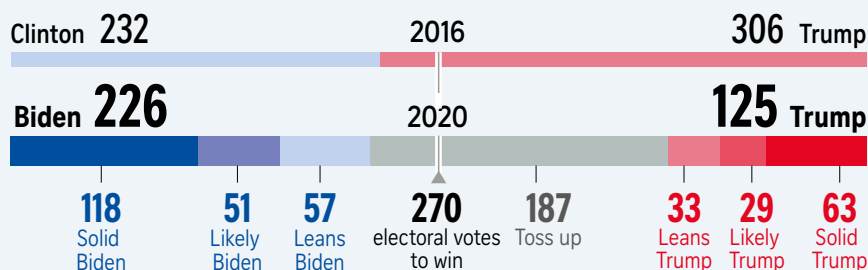
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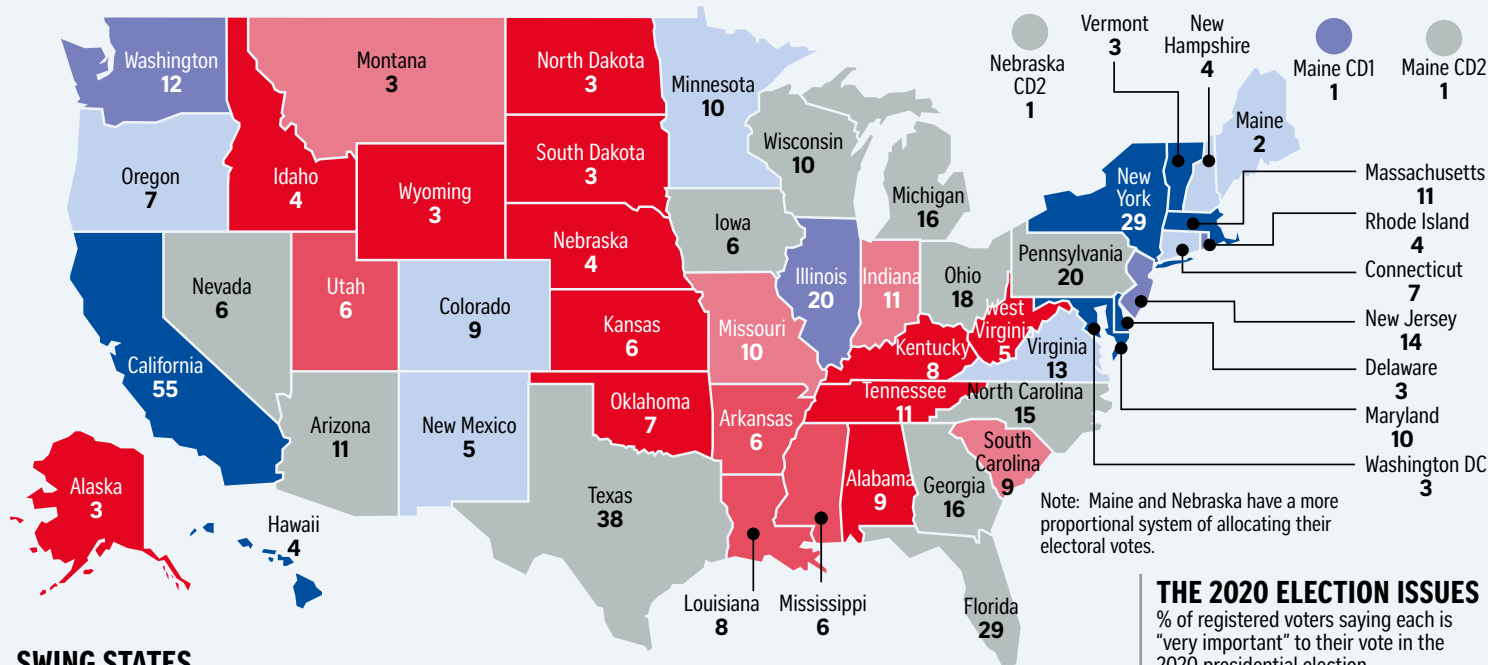
Path to the White House

President Donald Trump trails Democratic nominee Joe Biden in most of the swing states he won in 2016. But some races are very close, giving Mr Trump the room to pull off another surprise victory in the Electoral College and clinch four more years in the White House.

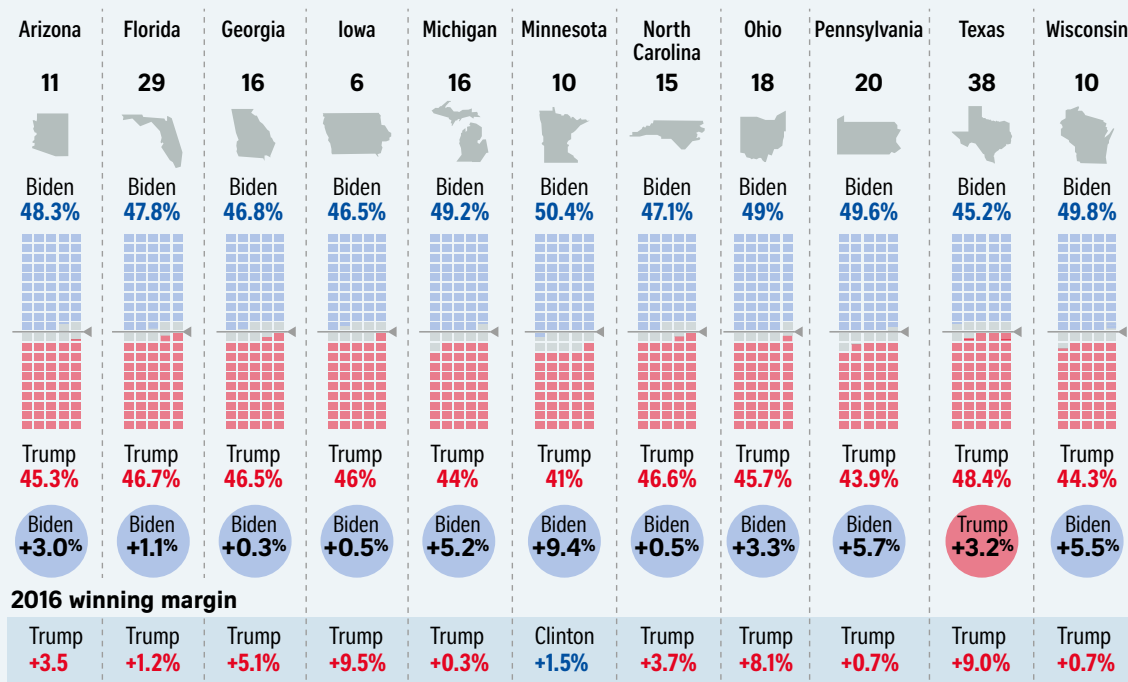
270 ELECTORAL VOTES NEEDED TO WIN



THE 2020 BATTLEGROUND



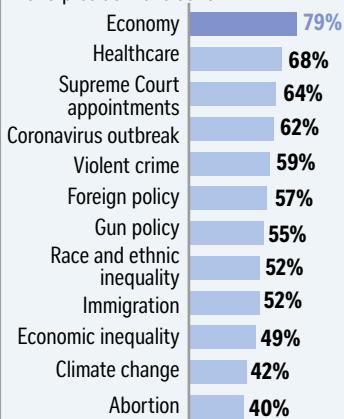
SWING STATES



NOTE: State polling average as at end September

THE 2020 ELECTION ISSUES

% of registered voters saying each is "very important" to their vote in the 2020 presidential election



Note: Based on registered voters

TRUMP'S APPROVAL RATINGS



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After a tumultuous first term, US President Donald Trump's election campaign has been jolted further with a positive Covid-19 test. Some say this could hit his chances of re-election, but he has surprised pundits before.

Cover Story

U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Twists and turns on the way to the White House

Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden speaking to reporters in Pennsylvania on Sept 17. With President Trump having come down with Covid-19, Mr Biden will be able to show that his strategy of wearing masks and avoiding large crowds was prudent.

PHOTO: REUTERS

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UNTIL OCT 2, ANALYSING HOW THE VOTE might go a month ahead of Election Day on Nov 3 was a matter of weighing up the knowns – voter sentiments, the effects of the presidential debate, and historic voting patterns.

President Donald Trump's positive Covid-19 test, however, plunged the presidential race into uncharted territory. Mr Trump has been keen to project an image of business as usual after he was discharged from hospital and certified as no longer contagious by his doctor, hitting the campaign trail again the following week with stops in the swing states of Florida, Pennsylvania and Iowa.

But Mr Trump's very infection shone a spotlight on his handling of the pandemic, which he has consistently downplayed and which pundits see as his biggest weakness. Polls show that most voters think the President did not take the threat of catching the coronavirus seriously enough, and they are unlikely to change their minds with his comments that Americans should not fear the coronavirus.

"We are now going to be talking about the coronavirus as the top issue for the next four weeks," said Dr Ian Bremmer, president and founder of political risk analysis firm Eurasia Group and GZero Media. "That's a big deal, because President Trump... doesn't do as well talking about it, he's not seen to have handled it very well."

Mr Trump's coronavirus bombshell comes as Americans have endured a tumultuous summer

marked by more than 200,000 coronavirus deaths, a battered economy, and a national reckoning over racism and police brutality.

Until this twist, most major election models had been predicting a victory for Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden, but it was far from a foregone conclusion.

The former vice-president's national lead diminished from double digits to hover around seven points before Mr Trump's Covid-19 diagnosis, unsettling those who feared a repeat of Mr Trump's shock defeat of Mrs Hillary Clinton, whose lead in battleground states shrank to nothing in the days leading up to the 2016 election.

But Mr Biden's lead has since widened back to the double digits, both nationally and in some battleground states. For Asia, the latest unfolding events come amid increasing geopolitical uncertainty.

The region had already been considering the effects if Mr Trump were to pull off another surprise victory in the Electoral College, earning the mandate to continue his "America First" foreign policy of pulling away from multilateral institutions, international agreements and global norms.

In four years, he has withdrawn the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal, the Paris Agreement on combating climate change, the World Health Organisation and the Iran nuclear deal.

Allies and friends of the US have been drawn into its great power competition with China, pressured to



reject Chinese technology and denounce Chinese behaviour, and pressed into paying more for their defence.

If, among all the new uncertainties, Mr Trump remains a candidate and then President, another four years with him at the helm could mean a further erosion of American leadership on global issues that require cooperation, from vaccine development to combating climate change, that would be harder to undo.

"If he wins again, friend and foe alike will accept that the post-World War II period of American leadership has come to a definitive end. The effect will vary from country to country," Brookings Institution foreign policy senior fellow Thomas Wright wrote in an essay for *The Atlantic*.

"All will prepare for a world with less cooperation."

Mr Trump's path to renew his White House lease continues to evolve.

To win, candidates need at least 270 of the 538 electoral votes held by the nation's 50 states and capital. Winning a state's popular vote – that is, the most number of votes in that state – nets them all of that state's electoral votes, with small exceptions.

This time, as with most American presidential elections, a handful of swing states hold the key.

Both Mr Trump and Mr Biden have been vying hard for the Rust Belt states flipped by Mr Trump in 2016, but where he is now trailing.

These include Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, as well as Ohio, which no Republican has ever become president without winning.

The Biden campaign also appears to have a real chance of stealing Florida, a prized bellwether state that has correctly chosen the eventual president in 18 out of 20 races since 1932.

Once again, its 29 electoral votes could very well carry either candidate across the threshold and into the White House.

Who do Trump and Biden most need?

The Trump campaign has been doubling down

on the voter group that propelled him to victory in 2016: white working-class voters.

Enough of these voters did not turn out to vote in 2016 that boosting their turnout this year could propel Mr Trump to victory in the Midwest, which he won by razor-thin margins.

He is also seeking to stem the loss of support among women and seniors, and to peel away enough minority voters from Mr Biden.

"During the Republican convention, President Trump's strategy for closing the gap became clear: intensify his support among white workingclass voters while diminishing opposition among white suburbanites, especially women," Brookings Institution governance studies senior fellows William Galston and Elaine Kamarck wrote in an analysis on the think-tank's website.

Veteran pollster John Zogby told reporters at a media briefing that Mr Trump also seeks to "create doubts about Biden among younger non-white voters that he's part of the establishment", tying the former vice-president to his time in the Obama administration from 2008 to 2016, and arguing that those years were not very good for younger voters.

To these ends, Mr Trump has been painting the Democrats as socialists to regain his lead among older voters, and portraying them "as the party of chaos, as the party of rioting, party of disruption" by tying them to the unrest that has erupted in some protests over racial injustice.

Mr Zogby, the founder of polling firm Zogby International, said that the gap had narrowed between Mr Biden and Mr Trump because the President had regained some support from older voters and "safety mums, mothers who are predominantly in the suburbs and white... who are worried about the perception of and the reality of violence in the streets".

"Now that both sides have had a chance to hone their message, you're seeing that Donald Trump

United States President Donald Trump at an election campaign rally in Duluth, Minnesota, two days before he announced on Twitter that he and First Lady Melania Trump had tested positive for Covid-19. His diagnosis now restricts him to virtual events. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

Allies and friends of the US have been drawn into its great power competition with China, pressured to reject Chinese technology and denounce Chinese behaviour, and pressed into paying more for their defence.

”

KEY EVENTS AHEAD

OCT 22: Final presidential debate in Nashville, Tennessee. There is no word on whether it will proceed as planned.

NOV 3: Election Day

NOV 4-23: Deadlines for states to receive overseas and mail-in ballots.

NOV 5-DEC 12: Deadlines for states to certify their election results, which will mostly determine how members of the electoral college vote.

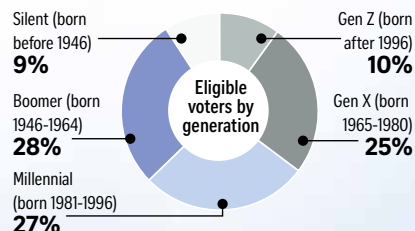
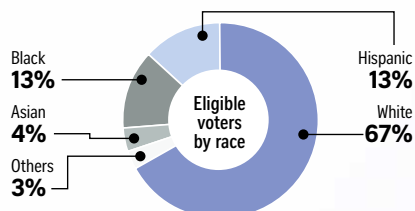
DEC 14: Members of the electoral college meet to formally cast their votes. The winner must have at least 270 of the 538 electoral votes.

JAN 6, 2021: The newly elected Congress meets to count the electoral votes and certify the results.

JAN 20, 2021: Inauguration Day

ELIGIBLE VOTERS

THE 2020 ELECTORATE



Note: Eligible voters are US citizens aged 18 and older

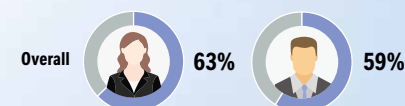
PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

WOMEN VOTE MORE THAN MEN ACROSS RACE AND EDUCATION LEVELS

% of eligible voters who say they voted in 2016

White	Black	Hispanic	Asian
Women 67%	Women 64%	Women 50%	Women 48%
Men 64%	Men 54%	Men 45%	Men 49%

Lower than high school	High school grad	Some college education	Bachelor's degree or higher
Women 36%	Women 54%	Women 65%	Women 77%
Men 32%	Men 49%	Men 61%	Men 76%



actually is able to score some points on the whole issue of law and order, on safety and security," he said.

As for Mr Biden, he needs to reassemble the Obama coalition of younger voters, as well as African-American and Latino voters.

"If Biden can bring out the African-American voters in numbers that Obama was able to but that Hillary was not able to, if Biden can bring out the support of young women, particularly young white women, the way Obama did, then it could look very good for Joe Biden," said Mr Zogby.

What does the choice look like now?

Mr Trump's Covid-19 diagnosis and ongoing hospitalisation has pulled him off the campaign trail, restricting him to virtual events he feels healthy enough for.

This could prove a crucial disadvantage at a time when Mr Biden – who will be able to demonstrate

that his strategy of wearing masks and avoiding large crowds was prudent – returned to the campaign trail, with a multi-stop train tour across the Midwest.

Moreover, unlike in 2016, when voters who disliked both Mr Trump and Mrs Clinton went for Mr Trump in the end, those who similarly disapprove of both candidates appear to be breaking for Mr Biden this year.

"President Trump is many things, but 'safe' isn't one of them," wrote Dr Galston and Dr Kamarck.

Dr Galston and Dr Kamarck added: "If Republicans persuade suburban voters that Democrats will not stand up to violence and looting, President Trump could win a come-from-behind victory.

"If Democrats persuade these voters that Republicans are trying to win the election with racist dog-whistles, the result could be a Biden landslide." [ST](#)

President Trump and Mr Biden in their first presidential debate, in Cleveland, Ohio, on Sept 29. A final debate between the two is planned for Oct 22 in Nashville, Tennessee, but there is no word on whether it will proceed as planned. PHOTO: REUTERS



What could happen on Nov 3

CONTESTED RESULT

Election issues, such as a contested result in a key swing state, could lead to no candidate getting an outright majority of 270 electoral votes. In this situation, the House of Representatives will choose the new president from the top three candidates. Each of the 50 states gets one vote and the candidate who wins at least 26 state votes becomes president.

The Senate elects the vice-president from the two remaining candidates, with each of the 100 senators getting a vote. This Congress session will be led by Republican Vice-President Mike Pence, the Senate's current president.

Only twice in American history was the president elected this way: in 1800 and in 1824.

More likely is a situation like the one in Florida in 2000, when the result was close enough to trigger an automatic recount under state law.

This led to legal battles between the Bush and Gore campaigns that ultimately ended with a US Supreme Court ruling to stop the recount.

Republican candidate George W. Bush went on to be president while his Democratic opponent Al Gore conceded instead of escalating the situation to Congress.

Mr Donald Trump has said, more than once, that the 2020 election could end up with a decision by the Supreme Court.

Republicans are committed to nominating and installing Judge Amy Coney Barrett, a conservative, to the court by Election Day, which would bring the number of Trump-appointed Supreme Court justices to three of the nine spots.

But that does not necessarily mean they will weigh in in his favour if it comes down to that. The Supreme Court may even decide not to rule on what it sees as a political matter.

This outcome may also change depending on whether the Republicans keep or lose the Senate.

Mr Trump has repeatedly refused to commit to accepting the result of the election if he loses, raising a possibility that he may say no to

leaving the White House.

States are bracing themselves for a surge of mail-in ballots, and given the pandemic, nearly half of the Democrats say they are planning to vote by mail compared with only a quarter of Republicans who say the same. This raises the possibility that votes counted earlier may show an early Trump victory, only for his lead to erode.

Should this happen, Mr Trump may call the results rigged, triggering protests from his supporters and efforts from his campaign to ask the courts to reject some mail-in ballots as invalid.

This also depends on a Biden margin of victory. If his opponent wins by a landslide, Mr Trump may lose the support of the Republican Party, and may even be physically removed from the White House, likely by the Secret Service.

But if he and the Republicans dig their heels in, it may trigger an unprecedented constitutional crisis, especially if the situation is unresolved by Inauguration Day.

Quite likely, unrest may hit the streets. [ST](#)

America careening towards a fork in the road

WHEN IT COMES TO AMERICA'S PRESIDENTIAL elections, the saying goes: An October surprise is never a good surprise.

This time it came early and that leaves room for more surprise. At the very start of the month, President Donald Trump contracted Covid-19 and had to be helicoptered out of the White House to Walter Reed hospital.

Although by October 10 he was back in the White House and according to his doctor fully recovered, the episode only piled a new uncertainty upon others.

Election 2020 could be described as America packed in a pickup truck in which everyone is arguing, some have guns and some are praying, caught in a hailstorm and careening towards a major fork in the road.

The stakes in the polarised nation are that high – not just for the United States itself, but for the world as well.

FOR THE WORLD

The election itself is looming as a major challenge. It is a truism that people either love President Trump or hate him.

Mr Trump has presented the choice ahead as

It faces a test of its democratic traditions and institutions, and of American exceptionalism itself

binary – a socialist hell versus a capitalist heaven; godlessness versus religiousness; anarchists and unruly illegal immigrants versus law and order; low-cost (mostly African American and immigrant) housing versus salubrious (mostly white) suburbia; gun control versus gun rights.

Right-wing white militia are emboldened, experts say – and they are not the only militia. The ghosts of America's Civil War and the ensuing 100-year struggle for civil rights still stalk the landscape.

With the President having said explicitly, and many times, that the only way he will lose the election is if it is rigged, for the first time in living memory a peaceful transfer of power is in doubt. America thus faces not only a test of its democratic traditions and institutions, but of American exceptionalism itself.

If former vice-president Joe Biden and his multicultural running mate, Senator Kamala Harris,

NIRMAL GHOSH

US Bureau Chief



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WHAT CANDIDATES SAID

PANDEMIC

Democratic vice-presidential contender

Kamala Harris: The American people have witnessed what is the greatest failure of any presidential administration in the history of our country: 210,000 dead people in our country for just the last several months.

Vice-President Mike Pence:

I want the American people to know that from the very first day, President Donald Trump has put the health of America first.

VACCINE

Kamala Harris: If the public health professionals, if Dr Fauci, if the doctors tell us that we should take it, I'll be the first in line to take it, absolutely, but if Donald Trump tells us to take it, I'm not taking it.

Mike Pence: The fact that you continue to undermine public confidence in a vaccine – if the vaccine emerges during the Trump administration – I think is unconscionable... stop playing politics with people's lives.

CHINA

Kamala Harris: What ended up happening is because of a so-called trade war with China, America lost 300,000 manufacturing jobs. Farmers have experienced bankruptcy because of it. We are in a manufacturing recession because of it.

Mike Pence: Look, lost the trade war with China? Joe Biden never fought it. Joe Biden's been a cheerleader for communist China over the last several decades.

win on Nov 3 – or eventually, given that the result might well be contested, potentially plunging the US into turmoil – it would mean an America still committed to a liberal path.

Fundamentally internationalist, Mr Biden may not quite return to untrammelled globalism, given the fierce resistance to it which helped bring Mr Trump to power in 2016. Nor will the intensifying competition with China go away.

But he would restore American engagement in some multilateral agreements and institutions, and encourage more diplomatic engagement with allies. Climate change would be back on the agenda after four years of science scepticism – if not outright denialism – under Mr Trump.

And for the international community, it would be a return to some predictability.

MEANWHILE, AT HOME...

But at home, where it counts in elections (foreign policy, unless the US is in a war, is low on the average voter's list of priorities), it would mark the embracing of an inclusive rather than an inward-looking, nativist America. A Biden administration would look more representative of America's diversity – and would have to carry all Americans along.

A second term for Mr Trump would, in effect,

consolidate power in the hands of religious conservatives. Even if the Republicans lose control of the Senate, they would have the White House, plus, if Supreme Court Justice nominee Amy Coney Barrett is confirmed – which is likely – a conservative bench.

More widely in the judiciary, Mr Trump had, by July according to Pew Research, appointed almost a quarter of all active federal judges. In that aspect, even if Mr Trump loses, executing that core conservative agenda will be his legacy, enduring for years, even decades. The election outcome will not change that. A Biden win, or even a Democratic sweep, would not in itself lead to any fundamental changes in the now significantly conservative judiciary.

This is the "last stand of religious and evangelical conservatives", Dr Glenn Altschuler, professor of American studies at Cornell University, tells The Sunday Times. "The percentage of white evangelicals, even if you include evangelical Catholics, as well as Protestants... in the American population is going down.

"The appeal of Donald Trump to evangelicals has been... (that) we will soon be outnumbered and outgunned. And therefore this at least temporarily gives us a greater hold on power, with the possibility or likelihood of being able to exercise that power

US V-P debate civil and robust, but unlikely to change minds

THE VICE-PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE BETWEEN Republican Vice-President Mike Pence and Democratic challenger Senator Kamala Harris on Oct 7 was relatively civil, though both speakers often evaded the questions directed at them.

That was a welcome change, analysts said, from the first presidential debate between United States President Donald Trump and Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden that turned into a shouting match.

Mr Pence, in particular, known not only for his religious conservatism but also his unflappable composure, did not lose it. And in many ways, the US got to witness a metaphorical bridge for the seemingly insurmountable political and cultural divide – a multiracial progressive versus a white conservative.

"This was a much more substantive discussion tonight," said Dr Mitchell McKinney, a professor from the University of Missouri and an expert on campaign debates.

"Both of the vice-presidential candidates will come away from this debate claiming victory, and both avoided any major gaffes or blunders that would do damage to their ticket's chances with voters."

Eurasia Group president Ian Bremmer wrote on Twitter: "Tonight, Biden folks thought Harris won. Trump folks thought Pence won. That's a draw."

But even though the debate was of greater interest

than usual given that both candidates are next in line should something happen to the two oldest presidential nominees in US history (Mr Trump is 74 and Mr Biden is 77), it is unlikely to have moved the needle much in the election, analysts said.

"No one watching this debate will vote for president based on their running mates," said analyst Taegan Goddard, who runs the Political Wire newsletter.

"Partisans are looking for the running mate to reinforce the top of the ticket. If I had to guess, Democrats were probably happier about Harris than Republicans were about Pence," Mr Goddard wrote. "But overall, this debate didn't change much."

In the broader context of the presidential campaign, polls show Mr Biden widening his lead over Mr Trump. A New York Times average of national polls showed Mr Biden leading by 9.51 points – more than two points ahead of the average about a week ago.

Separate state polls show that Ohio is a toss-up, with Mr Biden leading 45 per cent to Mr Trump's 44 per cent. In 2016, Mr Trump won Ohio, which has 18 electoral votes, by 8 percentage points.

Quinnipiac University polls released on Oct 7 showed Mr Biden leading with 51 per cent to Mr Trump's 40 per cent in Florida and 54 per cent to

for a longer period of time, even if we're less likely to prevail in elections.

"The sense of urgency that religious conservatives have is clearly connected to some sense that their opportunity to control the levers of government is running out."

The conservative right, conservative religious groups, and conservative anti-tax groups, have all won a major victory in the appointment of judges, says Dr T. J. Pempel, professor of political science at the University of California, Berkeley.

"Almost everybody that has been appointed... is a part of the Federalist Society, which is a group dedicated to the so-called originalist doctrine," Dr Pempel tells The Sunday Times.

The Federalist Society, a powerful nationwide organisation of conservative lawyers, advocates a textualist and originalist interpretation of the Constitution.

DEMOCRACY AT STAKE?

Meanwhile, almost every scenario less than an outright, indisputable win by one or the other candidate, has the US heading into a constitutional crisis in which the result of the election is challenged by one side or the other in the courts and in the streets.

"I do think that at stake, is very much the whole

future of American democracy," Dr Pempel tells The Sunday Times. "I don't want to sound paranoid, but I've studied the military and the authoritarians' takeover in Japan. I've looked at it in Germany. And this is starting to look very familiar to me."

"From my standpoint we're five weeks from institutionalised authoritarianism. So much of American exceptionalism has hinged on... most political elites accepting norms (but) now it's simply about pure power."

Historian and author Edward Watts of the University of California, San Diego, has been quoted as saying in a Sept 25 article in Foreign Policy: "If Trump is re-elected, then I think the norms and restraints of American democracy disappear completely."

However, Georgetown University political scientist Charles Kupchan, an author and former diplomat, has told Foreign Policy that if Mr Trump is re-elected, that would be "an affirmation this is the direction Americans want to go."

The election offers a stark choice – but whoever wins, it will also do little to assuage political and cultural tensions.

"The polarisation is going to outlast Trump in a big way – it is supercharged," warns professor of international politics Inderjeet Parmar at the City, University of London. [ST](#)

41 per cent in Pennsylvania – both states that Mr Trump won in 2016.

Meanwhile, early votes have already far outstripped the 2016 numbers at the same stage of the race. More than 5.6 million people have voted early so far, compared with about 75,000 in 2016. Early voting is generally seen as favouring the Democratic Party.

Florida has had the greatest number of early voters followed by Virginia, Michigan and Wisconsin. South Dakota has seen the greatest increase in early voters compared with 2016.

Twenty-three per cent of South Dakota's 2016 turnout has voted early, followed by 19 per cent in Wisconsin and Virginia, and 15 per cent in Wyoming.

"Those are just staggering numbers to see, that this many people have already voted in these states," Dr Michael McDonald, an associate professor of political science at the University of Florida, told USA Today. He manages the United States Elections Project that tracks early voting totals.

Mr Trump is back in the White House and is apparently asymptomatic after taking what medical experts say are basically experimental drugs.

And after neither candidate's teams could agree on the format for the second debate previously scheduled for Oct 15, the Commission on Presidential Debates has cancelled it. The only remaining debate is thus far scheduled for Oct 22. [ST](#)

– Nirmal Ghosh, US Bureau Chief



US Democratic vice-presidential candidate Kamala Harris (left) and Republican Vice-President Mike Pence at the vice-presidential debate at the University of Utah on Oct 7. The debate was of greater interest than usual as both are next in line if something should happen to the two oldest presidential nominees in US history. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE



A Covid-19 victim being buried at the General Cemetery in the Mexican city of Santiago. The US, Brazil, India and Mexico alone account for more than half of the Covid-19 deaths globally.
PHOTO: AFP

Covid-19

Lessons from One Million Covid-19 deaths

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Covid-19 still hasn't given up all its mysteries, but nine months on, experts have a fair idea about the steps required to control the spread of the pandemic. What they suggest is easier said than done

IT HAS TAKEN JUST NINE MONTHS FOR COVID-19 to claim a million lives, a milestone it has crossed. Given that 95 per cent of these casualties occurred over the past six months, will the next million deaths come even sooner? Or will the world find a solution to stem the pandemic?

No one has the answer, but those one million deaths provide some valuable pointers.

More than 200,000 of them were in the United States which, with 4 per cent of the world's population, accounts for over 20 per cent of Covid-19 deaths.

Just four countries – the US, Brazil, India and Mexico – account for more than half of the Covid-19 deaths globally. The other 480,000 deaths are spread over about 190 other countries and territories.

The major factors that contribute to Covid-19 deaths are:

Age: Older people who are infected have a higher risk of dying. A comparison done by the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), using 18 to 29 years as the base group found that toddlers four years and younger are nine times less likely to die, while deaths are 630 times more likely in seniors aged 85 years and older.

Underlying medical conditions: The CDC said regardless of age, certain medical conditions also put people at higher risk of death. They include cancer, chronic kidney disease and heart conditions. Transplant recipients are also more susceptible as they have weakened immune systems.

Overwhelmed healthcare systems: More people die when healthcare systems are stretched beyond capacity, as some patients are not able to get the care they need to overcome the disease.

Infection numbers: This may be obvious, but it bears repeating. Only those who get infected by the coronavirus are at risk of dying from it.

How countries have performed in their battle against the virus has depended largely on how they have managed these four factors.

Countries that have been successful in keeping infection numbers low have also seen fewer deaths. They include (when world death toll passed the one-million mark):

- New Zealand (25 deaths out of 1,827 infected in a population of five million)
- Vietnam (35 deaths out of 1,069 infected in a population of 97.5 million) and
- Thailand (59 deaths out of 3,516 infected in a population of 70 million).

Countries where healthcare systems were overwhelmed for some time also recorded higher mortality numbers. These include several European countries like:

- Britain (41,902 deaths out of 416,363 infected in a population of 68 million)
- Italy (35,781 deaths out of 304,323 infected in a population of 60 million) and
- France (31,511 deaths out of 497,237 infected in a population of 65 million).

In April, there were reports from these countries of patients being turned away for lack of beds, doctors crying as they could not provide intensive care to patients who needed it, and overworked healthcare professionals clocking very long hours.

Infections among the sick and elderly are one reason for the high number of deaths in the US. Reports by US media say care facility deaths account for at least a quarter, and perhaps as much as a third, of Covid-19 deaths in the country.

The virus has spread globally with practically no country spared. So why have some succeeded and others failed so miserably in dealing with this virus?

Often with a novel virus, the countries that are first to face it fare the worst, since it would have caught them by surprise. Also, little is known of the new bug. But not with this pandemic.

China, where this new virus emerged, has done relatively well with 4,745 deaths out of 90,934 infected in a population of 1.4 billion. In fact, as the epicentre moved from Asia to Europe and then to the Americas, the problem seemed to get worse.

Dr Michael Ryan, executive director of the World Health Organisation's (WHO) Health Emergencies Programme, gave some possible answers during the NUS Medicine's Covid-19 webinar on Sept 10.

He suggested that the disparate performances of different countries stemmed from insufficient preparation, lack of muscle memory and varying levels of social cohesion.

NOT PREPARED

Dr Ryan, who has been at the forefront of

managing acute risks to global health for nearly 25 years, said the world has learnt a lot from past health emergencies, "but we haven't implemented a lot of those learnings."

He said globally, there has been "serious under-investment in managing and mitigating" the risks from new infectious diseases.

It is not that countries have not invested in healthcare. But the investments tend to be in bricks-and-mortar infrastructure – more hospitals and beds, and more laboratory facilities. He said this is "very static preparedness", adding that "the true essence is the way data is collected and decisions are made." It was this lack of preparedness in Europe that resulted in the surge in cases and hospitals being overwhelmed.

"Much of the failure on the global level is the failure to prepare, not in failure to perform," said Dr Ryan. "I honestly think everyone had tried to do their best. Unfortunately our best is sometimes not enough."

Citing the example of running a marathon, he said: "No matter what my will is, no matter what my intent, I will not finish that marathon because I have not prepared. Good will and best intentions aside, performance is always dependent on your preparation."

MUSCLE MEMORY

Only countries that have been through a health emergency – such as Sars (severe acute respiratory syndrome) for Singapore which killed 33 people out of 238 infected in 2003 and caused the closure of Tan Tock Seng Hospital, one of the busiest hospitals here – would have muscle memory ingrained in their psyche. Such countries would be quick to collect, analyse and act on data. They also possess the capacity to make decisions, to create new science and turn that into policy and action.

Dr Ryan said "Asian countries have a much higher sense of alert for this kind of virus. (It) triggers a collective community disquiet."

In the first week of January, when the world heard of the possibility of a novel virus, the number of phone calls he received from Asian countries like Singapore, South Korea and Japan had "gone through the roof." These countries had an immediate level of concern.

Singapore, for example, had set up the multi-ministry task force before a single patient here had been diagnosed with Covid-19.

For the rest of the world, Dr Ryan said, "it's a remote concept", resulting in them being "caught off guard" when the virus hit them.

SOCIAL COHESION

Countries that have performed better also tend to have stronger community buy-in, said Dr Ryan.

He said such a health emergency "triggers a collective community disquiet and governments are expected to be ready to handle it." People see government intervention as responsible action.

Countries that have performed better also tend to have stronger community buy-in, said Dr Michael Ryan, executive director of the WHO's Health Emergencies Programme. Such a health emergency "triggers a collective community disquiet and governments are expected to be ready to handle it". People see government intervention as responsible action.

”

But in some countries, that is seen as interference in the lives of individuals and an invasion of personal privacy. It boils down to differences in social contract that people have with their government.

He said countries where people see themselves as part of a community tend to absorb information positively and act in a more sustainable manner.

But in societies where the individual is seen as the most important unit of society, as opposed to the community, people do not feel that sense of responsibility.

He said: "Their response is: What does it mean to me? What is the transmission risk for me? Will the vaccine work for me? Is my travel important for me? Rather than ask the question: Is my travel behaviour dangerous to someone else? Is my attending the event dangerous for someone else? Is my taking the vaccine important to society?"

He said: "Societies with a high level of social cohesion and sense as a group have done better."

Dr Ryan added that if one takes the view that social distancing, avoiding crowds and hand hygiene can slow the spread of the virus, "then your success is almost 100 per cent based on society's willingness to accept those rules."

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

What does politics have to do with the science and strategy of fighting the virus that has disrupted lives and livelihoods globally?

More than one would think, especially in the US and Brazil – two of the three countries worst hit by the virus. In both cases, the leaders were driving their own agenda to keep the economy open.

With his re-election campaign on the line, US President Donald Trump has ignored the advice of health authorities and downplayed the severity of the Covid-19 crisis. He even took the CDC, one of the foremost health authorities in the world, out of the reporting line.

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro even replaced his Health Minister with one willing to push for reopening the economy.

Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, cautioned it may be premature to determine the part that politics has played "in the appalling situations in US and Brazil."

But he added: "When leaders of countries choose to ignore the facts and the science of Covid-19, this is when poor decisions are made that amplify the spread of the coronavirus in a country, rather than help to improve the situation."

The lessons of the past nine months are clear. Reactions to the unfolding crisis will have to be faster. Policy will have to be driven by science rather than political agendas.

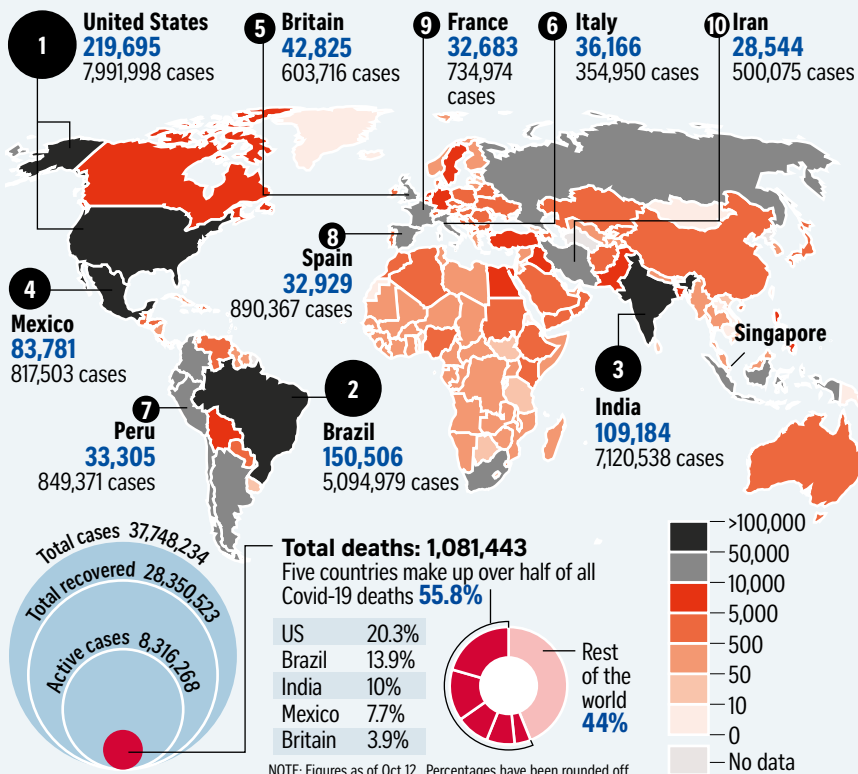
And while the search for a vaccine continues, population buy-in for Covid-19 measures will determine whether the virus claims another million lives – and if so, how quickly – or if it will be kept at bay. [ST](#)

A world devastated by disease

The novel coronavirus has ravaged the face of the earth since the first reported cases surfaced late last year. In a span of nine months, Covid-19 has killed nearly a million people across the globe and infected many millions more.

DEADLY DELUGE

The virus has affected 188 countries and regions to different extents. These are the 10 worst-hit nations ranked by fatalities.



A SEVERE SICKNESS

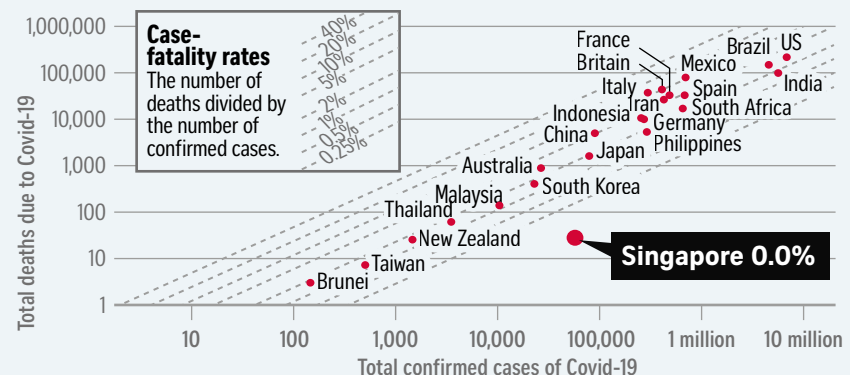
The case-fatality rate measures how badly Covid-19 affects those infected. The higher the rate, the worse it is.

Why is Singapore's case-fatality rate so low?

Total cases
57,876

Deaths
27 (The latest death was on July 14)

- Vast majority of those infected are **young and healthy**
- Its healthcare system has **never been overwhelmed**
- Community testing picks up asymptomatic cases, ensuring **early treatment** and preventing further spread



HOW THE KILLER VIRUS PROGRESSED

Deaths: 100,000

Date: APRIL 10

- The six-figure death toll comes 101 days after China alerted World Health Organisation (WHO) about the coronavirus in Wuhan on Dec 31 last year.
- The worst-hit nation is Italy, with nearly 19,000 deaths.

200,000

APRIL 25

- Fatalities take only about two weeks to double, with the US, Spain and Italy accounting for more than half of all deaths.

300,000

MAY 14

- The same month, India overtakes China to become Asia's worst-hit nation by both number of infections and deaths.
- Deaths accelerate in South America.

400,000

JUNE 7

500,000

JUNE 28

- World hits milestone of 10 million Covid-19 infections.

600,000

JULY 18

700,000

AUG 5

- Global total of coronavirus infections reaches 20 million.
- During this period, one person dies from Covid-19 every 15s.

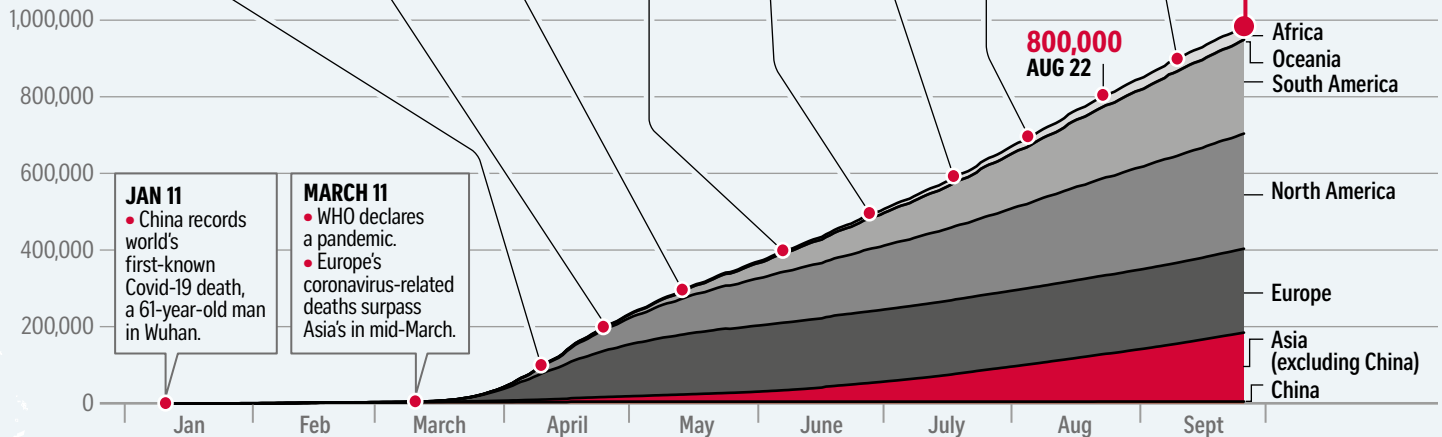
900,000

SEPT 10

- The Americas and South-east Asia are the most affected regions, accounting for 62 per cent and 19 per cent of deaths respectively.

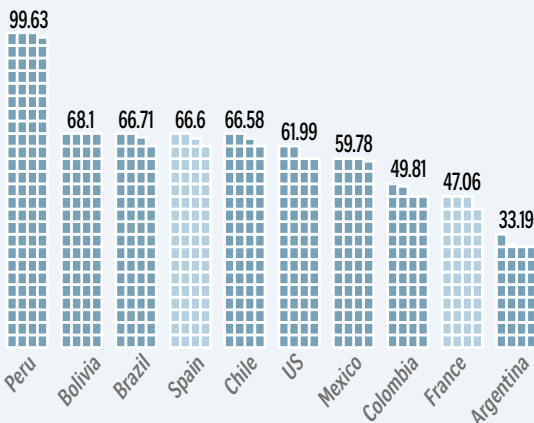
983,751 SEPT 25

- World sets new daily record of 321,466 Covid-19 cases this month; total cases surpass 30 million.



The 10 countries with the most Covid-19 deaths per 100,000 of their population. Eight of them are in North and South America.

■ North and South American countries



HOW COVID-19 COMPARES WITH OTHER DISEASES

Covid-19
(2019-present)
1,081,443

Hong Kong flu (1968)

1 million

HIV (2019)

690,000

H1N1 (2009-2010)

151,700-575,400

Malaria (annual)

400,000

Sars (2002-2003)

774

Mers (2012-present)

935

Spanish flu (1918)
50 million

Cancer (2018)

9.6 million

Diabetes (2019)

4.2 million

Asian flu (1957)

2 million

Case-fatality rate

Seasonal flu (US)
0.1% - 0.2%

Covid-19
3.2%

Sars
10%

Mers
34%

Ebola
50%

BY THE NUMBERS

Indonesia is South-east Asia's worst-hit nation in the pandemic by death toll, with **more than 10,000 dead.**

India accounts for **about half** of Asia's Covid-19 fatalities.

Latin America is the current epicentre of the pandemic, accounting for nearly 40 per cent of all daily deaths.

WHO expects Europe to see its daily Covid-19 deaths rise in **Oct and Nov.**

The true toll of Covid-19 is **at least 263,000 deaths**

higher than recorded, according to a review of data from 32 countries.



1 in every 5 people

killed by the coronavirus is from the United States.

The US will likely see a death toll of **380,000** by Jan 1 next year, according to a projection by the University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation.

Sources: WHO, JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY, OUR WORLD IN DATA, EUROPEAN CDC, WORLDOMETER STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Will Suga chart a different course from Abe?

WALTER SIM

Japan Correspondent
In Tokyo



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New PM is likely to work behind the scenes to score results

AS GET-WELL-SOON WISHES POURED IN FROM world leaders after US President Donald Trump said he had tested positive for Covid-19, one voice was conspicuously absent – that of Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga.

Tokyo's immediate response was a bland statement from Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato, saying only that Japan was “aware” that Mr Trump had taken ill but is in “good health condition.”

Mr Suga later tweeted, in English and Japanese: “I was very worried about you when I read your tweet saying that you and Madam First Lady tested positive for Covid-19. I sincerely pray for your early

recovery and hope that you and Madam First Lady will return to normal life soon.”

Contrast this to his predecessor Shinzo Abe, who broke diplomatic protocol by meeting Mr Trump even before he formally took office, bringing as gifts gold-plated golf clubs to burnish a friendship with a mercurial personality.

It worked wonders. Observers are curious as to the type of relationship that Mr Suga will come to forge with Mr Trump if he were to be re-elected, or with his Democrat opponent Joe Biden, were he to prevail in the US presidential election next month.

Mr Suga's expertise, honed from years as chief Cabinet secretary, has been in domestic issues and he is seen as a diplomatic greenhorn. Being much less showy than Mr Abe, he has not made any grandstanding pledges, but will more likely work behind the scenes to score results.

The Mainichi daily, in an editorial in September, called on Mr Suga to be more proactive internationally. It said: “Suga needs to show his own colours. Unless he actively presents his own vision, it will be difficult to build trust in international society.”

Indeed, Mr Suga faces tall hurdles in navigating Japan's myriad diplomatic minefields, including such long-standing issues as North Korea and Russia.

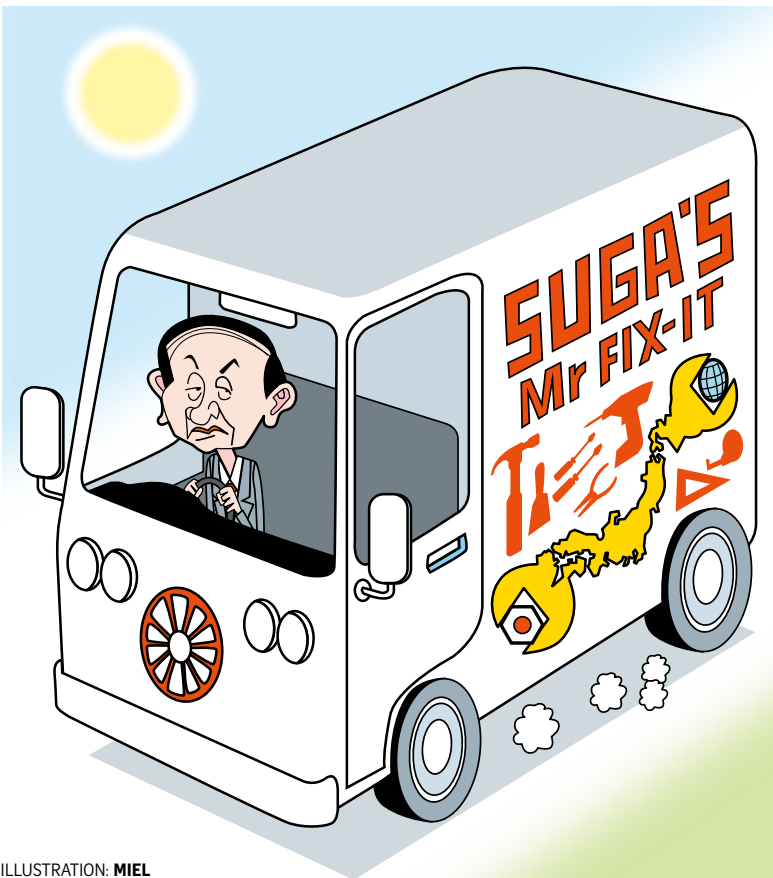
The world's third-largest economy is also caught in the spat between the US and China. Although Mr Abe had spent plenty of political capital trying to build bridges with Beijing, Mr Suga will find himself hard-pressed to go against Washington now, noted University of Tokyo political scientist Yu Uchiyama.

The ruling Liberal Democratic Party is also against Chinese President Xi Jinping making a state visit any time soon, given that geopolitical uncertainties are rising over such issues as military assertiveness and Hong Kong.

The state visit had been planned for this April, but was indefinitely postponed because of the Covid-19 pandemic. And although Mr Suga and Mr Xi agreed “to work closely together” to build closer ties in their first phone call last month, the state visit was not discussed.

What Mr Suga is likely to do is to better articulate the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision, which had been mooted as a counterbalance to China but had been nebulous under Mr Abe's watch.

Security expert Tosh Minohara noted recent moves to give the Quad group of countries – Japan, the United States, Australia and India – more teeth.



ST ILLUSTRATION: MIEL

The nations have entered into a series of bilateral defence agreements, including most recently a logistics-sharing pact between Japan and India, that “cut the bureaucratic red tape and brings more practical effectiveness to Quad”

Ties with South Korea are also in deep freeze, over wartime issues – like that of requisitioned workers – that continue to cloud ties, as well as a trade dispute, with Japan slapping export restrictions on materials that are key to its semiconductor industry.

Keio University Professor Junya Nishino, in noting that a new leader offers a chance for a reset of the relationship, said Mr Suga had not even mentioned South Korea when discussing diplomatic issues in his first news conference as Prime Minister. “This could mean the severe policy from the Abe administration has been maintained,” he said.

“But another interpretation, given that bilateral ties are at a nadir, is that it could be an expression

of Mr Suga’s will to work on this matter calmly and quietly.”

He also saw as a positive sign the fact that South Korean President Moon Jae-in was one of the first world leaders whom Mr Suga spoke to after he became Prime Minister. Mr Suga had told reporters after the call on Sept 24: “The tough issues that have arisen between the two countries must not be left unattended.”

Still, with the two nations at a crossroads, observers are looking at whether Mr Suga will attend a trilateral summit with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and Mr Moon, which Seoul is slated to host later this year.

But source-based reports in Japanese media last month cited officials as saying that it would be “impossible” for Mr Suga to visit South Korea without a satisfactory breakthrough in the wartime labour court case. [ST](#)

Premier’s hold on bureaucracy could ease way to reforms

JUST A FEW WEEKS INTO HIS TENURE AS JAPAN Prime Minister, a controversy is already threatening to hurt Mr Yoshihide Suga’s sky-high approval ratings.

The prime minister is tasked with appointing scholars to the Japan Science Council, which is set up within the government but makes policy recommendations independent of it.

This would ordinarily be a rubber-stamp process, with the names nominated by the council approved by the prime minister. In a first, however, Mr Suga rejected six out of the 105 names submitted this year, leading to an uproar and claims that his government is curtailing academic freedoms.

All six had crossed Mr Suga when he was chief Cabinet secretary by voicing opposition to controversial policies in the past.

The government has refused to explain why the six academics were rejected, despite calls for an explanation by council president Takaaki Kajita, who won the Nobel Prize for Physics in 2015.

Small demonstrations have broken out across Japan over the snub, with major names like director Hirokazu Kore-eda, a Cannes winner, protesting what they see as a “violation of the freedom of expression”.

But observers also noted that the treatment is in line with Mr Suga’s reputation as chief Cabinet secretary of demoting bureaucrats who did not see eye to eye with him.

“The Suga administration does not seem very interested in liberalism, as seen from the refusal to appoint the members,” University of Tokyo political scientist Yu Uchiyama said.

But on the flipside, Mr Suga’s hold on the bureaucracy could make him more adept at bulldozing

Japan’s new PM: Yoshihide Suga



Son of a strawberry farmer from rural Akita prefecture, a rare self-made outsider within the LDP leadership

- Since 1996, elected to Parliament for eight consecutive terms
- Chief cabinet secretary 2012-20
- Trusted adviser to predecessor Shinzo Abe, and top spokesman for the government

Seen as pragmatic rather than ideological, and politically neutral within the LDP

Source: AFP PHOTO: CHARLY TRIBALLEAU STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

through the reforms he wants and undoing practices that are relics from Japan’s heady bubble era.

“I feel that the awareness of reforms is quite strong,” Dr Sota Kato, a research director at The Tokyo Foundation for Policy Research think-tank, said.

“The new Prime Minister will put considerable effort into improving productivity through regulatory reforms.

“He has the know-how and personal connections to eliminate resistance from businesses or other groups with vested interests.”

One of those leading the charge is Administrative Reform Minister Taro Kono, a former defence and foreign minister, who wants to stamp out inkan or hanko seals and fax machines, which remain commonplace.

WELL-EQUIPPED

The new Prime Minister will put considerable effort into improving productivity through regulatory reforms.



— DR SOTA KATO

a research director at The Tokyo Foundation for Policy Research think-tank, told The Straits Times.

Mr Kono also led the charge last year to switch the naming order of Japanese names in English such that the family name is written first, to reflect the way they are presented in Japanese.

In arguing for a reversal of what has effectively been government policy since the Meiji era (1868 to 1912), Mr Kono said that Chinese and Korean names are written in English as they are read in their native languages.

What this means is that “Yoshihide Suga” should, in fact, be written as “Suga Yoshihide”, though the practice has been inconsistently adopted in the Japanese government, let alone in the private sector.

But Mr Kono might well see more success with his push to eliminate the seals and fax machines, especially with the push to go paperless amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

Mr Suga has also named to the Cabinet Japan’s first digital minister, Mr Takuya Hirai, who was directed to set up a digital agency to speed up the inefficient bureaucracy.

Mr Kono told a news conference in September: “I don’t think there are that many administrative

procedures that actually need printing out paper and faxing.

“Why do we need to print paper? In many cases, it’s simply because the hanko stamp is required. If we can put a stop to that culture, it will eliminate the need for paper, faxing and seals.”

He then said in a tweet this month: “We checked 800 most often used government procedures with hanko, or name stamp or seal, and found few of them need to continue with hanko. This is the first step to make those procedures online.”

Experts are split over the possibility of success, unless Mr Suga weighs in with his influence.

Dr Uchiyama told The Straits Times: “Mr Kono is very energetic, but I think the resistance is strong.”

Still, Dr Kato said: “In the case of the seals, there are interest groups that are connected to LDP (the ruling Liberal Democratic Party) members and have hindered reforms.

“But if it becomes a major agenda, it will be a game of numbers and the resistance of small interest groups can be overcome.” [ST](#)

— Walter Sim

Japan turns to Abe’s brother to further defence goals



Newly appointed Defence Minister Nobuo Kishi, younger brother of former prime minister Shinzo Abe, arriving at the prime minister’s office in Tokyo on Sept 16. PHOTO: AFP

JAPAN’S NEW DEFENCE CHIEF, MR NOBUO KISHI, shares the same ideological vision as his brother Shinzo Abe, and, therefore, analysts said, was likely appointed to further the former prime minister’s goals.

The choice of Mr Kishi, 61, caught many analysts by surprise, coming after years of his serving in junior positions – although that might have been a conscious decision on the part of Mr Abe to avoid any hint of nepotism.

His nomination in Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga’s first Cabinet was also notable given his close ties with Taiwan, which China views as a breakaway province.

In 2015, it was Mr Kishi who arranged a meeting between Mr Abe and then Taiwanese opposition leader Tsai Ing-wen, now President, in Yamaguchi, the ancestral hometown of the brothers.

He most recently visited Taipei in August to attend the funeral of former Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui. He also had an audience with Ms Tsai.

Beijing bristled at Mr Kishi’s appointment, congratulating him but adding: “We also hope that Japan will abide by the one-China principle and avoid any form of official exchanges with Taiwan.”

The new pro-Taiwan defence chief takes over from Mr Taro Kono, now Administrative Reform Minister, who had last month singled China out as a “security threat.”

Defence observers expect Mr Kishi to be hawkish on security matters. His priorities will likely be to strengthen the United States-Japan security alliance while also pushing policies that are meant

to counterbalance China, like the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision.

He will also lead the charge for Japan to acquire first-strike capabilities, under the direction set out by Mr Abe in one of his final acts in office, and will foster closer cooperation with the other Quad countries – the US, Australia and India.

Mr Kishi has in the past advocated nuclear weapons for Japan, but, as Defence Minister, he said that the nation’s nuclear armament “will never happen.”

Dr Satoru Nagao, a visiting fellow at the Hudson Institute, told The Straits Times: “Mr Kishi shares similar strategic opinions with Mr Abe, and will materialise Mr Abe’s policies.”

He added: “His close ties with Taiwan should also be noted when considering how Chinese aggression has been pushing the US to support Taiwan.”

Mr Kishi is Mr Abe’s blood brother, but has a different surname because he was adopted into the maternal side of the family when he was born.

He spent his childhood being raised by his grandfather, former prime minister Nobusuke Kishi, who led Japan from 1957 to 1960. The latter was a founding member of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and had proposed constitutional revision as a key party priority.

Mr Kishi saw Mr Abe as a cousin until his teenage years, when a school assignment required him to look into his family registry. It was only then did he realise he was adopted. [ST](#)

— Walter Sim



South Asia Watch

Indian and Chinese troops settle in for winter of discontent along disputed border

Sub-zero temperatures will test soldiers while their governments hold talks

AS INDIA AND CHINA CONTINUE WITH MILITARY and diplomatic talks on their disputed border, their troops in the Ladakh region now have to grapple with deteriorating weather conditions as winter sets in.

At Pangong Tso, a Himalayan lake, where Chinese and Indian troops are in a stand-off, temperatures often drop to sub-zero.

Temperature during the winter, from October to February, will plummet to minus 40 deg C and the lake, which cuts through Chinese and Indian territories, will freeze over.

The area is known as the “cold desert”, according to retired army colonel S. Dinny, who served as

commanding officer at Pangong Tso between 2015 and 2017.

“The temperature goes down to sub-zero. The oxygen level is at 60 per cent. Fatigue increases manifold. You get chilblains if a body part is exposed for even a short duration,” said Col Dinny.

“There is definitely a decrease in activities in winter, whether infrastructure development like building roads or patrols. It is quite challenging. It will test the limit of logistic backup, sustenance and survivability of people and equipment. It won’t be easy. But there is a job to be done, we will do it.”

Videos released in September show Indian Army tanks and armoured personnel carriers in forward locations in eastern Ladakh. The tanks can reportedly operate at temperatures as low as minus 40 deg C.

“Even in the best of conditions, it is difficult to function (at Pangong Tso). When you add temperature and wind conditions created by the onset of winter, it becomes really difficult to survive,

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An Indian Army convoy (above) moves along a highway leading to Ladakh, at Gagangeer in Kashmir’s Ganderbal district on June 18.

PHOTO: REUTERS



At Pangong Tso, a Himalayan lake, where Chinese and Indian troops are in a stand-off, temperatures often drop to sub-zero.

ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

and for troops to spend the whole winter there is a challenge by any standards," said journalist and former Indian Army officer Ajai Shukla.

While India has experience in high-altitude warfare, it is known to come at a high cost. At Siachen Glacier, the highest battlefield between India and Pakistan where the winter temperatures can drop to minus 70 deg C, the adverse conditions have killed hundreds of soldiers, mostly from

hypothermia, avalanches and frostbite than actual fighting.

"I think physically, from the point of view of experience, Indian soldiers are better geared for the prospect of spending winter out there. The key is to put in place the infrastructure required to do so, like snow shelters, that is more difficult from the Indian side.

"The Chinese have better roads and better access. So it evens out," said Mr Shukla.

He noted that India had upgraded infrastructure exponentially since the standoff with China started nearly five months ago.

Tensions along the India-China border, which has largely remained peaceful, spiked in June after soldiers on both sides were killed in a clash in Ladakh's Galwan Valley.

In August, Indian troops stopped their Chinese counterparts from occupying vantage positions on the southern bank of the lake, after they were prevented by Chinese troops from patrolling areas on the northern bank that had been accessible earlier.

A potential trigger for the border tensions is said to stem from India's moves to boost infrastructure along the border and last year's decision to carve out the union territory of Ladakh from Jammu and Kashmir.

Analysts said that there was no question of either side giving up vantage points in spite of the adverse weather conditions.

"Soldiers will remain unless there is a breakthrough in the talks..." said retired lieutenant-general D. S. Hooda. [SI](#)



A poster depicting portraits of Indian soldiers killed in a hand-to-hand fight with their Chinese counterparts on June 15, is displayed in a market area in New Delhi. PHOTO: AFP

Anwar's gambit shakes up Malaysian politics

Claim that he has backing to form new govt exposes Muhyiddin's fragile hold on power, PN rivalries.

SINCE DROPPING THE BOMBHELL THAT HE HAD garnered enough support to form a new government, opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim has unleashed a clutch of forces that have laid bare the brittle state of politics in Malaysia.

His latest and most audacious make-or-break gambit for the premiership has exposed Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin's fragile hold on power and brought to the surface the bitter rivalries within the ruling Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition, in particular the simmering struggles in the long-established Umno. It is yet to be seen how the win in Sabah by Tan Sri Muhyiddin's alliance might change the political picture.

Datuk Seri Anwar's own Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition that he leads has not been spared.

His bid for power has stoked unease among PH leaders – such as Democratic Action Party (DAP) secretary-general Lim Guan Eng – over speculation that the new formula to wrest power includes forging alliances with Umno factions led by president Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and former premier Najib Razak.

Close aides to the 73-year-old Mr Anwar, who spoke on condition of anonymity, were coy about the specifics of what they acknowledged would be his last bid for the premiership, a position that has eluded him since the late 1990s when he fell out with former premier Mahathir Mohamad and served two long separate jail sentences.

“What Anwar is proposing is quite radical and it is understandable that some (PH) leaders are upset because they do not have the full picture,” said a long-time associate who has been alongside Mr Anwar since the 1980s.

He added that the PH construct will be recalibrated to “make way for a new political structure.”



This veteran political operative declined to elaborate, but other Anwar supporters and other politicians familiar with his plans said the new political structure will deal directly with concerns over Malay representation in the government that had plagued the PH administration before it collapsed in February.

That could prove particularly tricky in a country where disputes over race and religion can break fragile political alliances.

Success for Mr Anwar is far from assured and much will depend on how he engages with Malaysia's King, Sultan Abdullah Ri'ayatuddin, who has granted him an audience on Oct 13.

While the role of the King, who is picked from the country's nine royal households every five years, is largely ceremonial, the Constitution dictates that Mr Anwar must convince Sultan Abdullah that he has the majority support of MPs in order to form the next government.

The King could also upset Mr Anwar's bid by dissolving Parliament and calling fresh elections.

But several political analysts noted that the prospect of fresh polls – which are being strongly promoted by factions within Umno and another PN component, the right-wing Parti Islam SeMalaysia, or PAS – is unlikely at this point, largely owing to the complications posed by the coronavirus pandemic.

While the odds appear stacked against Mr Anwar, his latest move has sent shock waves through the political landscape.

For starters, his declaration of securing a majority, together with unidentified elected representatives from Umno and other politicians from the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, has effectively cast doubts over the two-seat majority Mr Muhyiddin enjoys as premier.

Umno controls the largest block in his PN coalition with 39 seats, and the departure of a handful of MPs would mean the collapse of the government.

In recent days, Mr Muhyiddin has come out

Malaysia opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, with his wife Wan Azizah Wan Ismail. His bid for power has stoked unease among leaders of his own Pakatan Harapan coalition.

PHOTO: REUTERS

LESLIE LOPEZ

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Who's who in Malaysia's power play

- A one-time deputy prime minister under the Najib administration before he was sacked for speaking out on the 1MDB scandal, Tan Sri Muhyiddin, 73, joined hands with Tun Dr Mahathir to oust BN in the 2018 national polls.
- He held the powerful Home Minister portfolio in Dr Mahathir's administration but was propelled to the premiership after Dr Mahathir resigned and the Pakatan Harapan government collapsed in February.
- However, his hold on his seven-month-old Perikatan Nasional government – an alliance of 13 parties – is tenuous: he commands only 113 MPs in the 222-strong Parliament.
- Malaysia's general election is not due until 2023, but Mr Muhyiddin has said he may hold a snap election sooner if his coalition won the state polls in Sabah, where he is currently campaigning.
- Following Mr Anwar's announcement, Mr Muhyiddin has maintained that he is still the legitimate leader, but his options are increasingly running out. He could either advise the King to dissolve Parliament to pave the way for a snap election, or Mr Muhyiddin could announce that he has lost the majority and allow Mr Anwar to take over.

**PRIME
MINISTER
MUHYIDDIN
YASSIN**



**OPPOSITION
LEADER
ANWAR
IBRAHIM**



- Always the bridesmaid, never the bride. Datuk Seri Anwar, 73, had come tantalisingly close to the premiership twice – in the 1990s when he was deputy prime minister before he was fired and jailed for six years on charges of sodomy and abuse of power, and in 2018 when he waited patiently for former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad to fulfil a pledge to eventually name him prime minister.
- On Sept 23, he dropped a bombshell that he has a "strong, convincing, formidable majority" to form a new government and that the government of Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin has "collapsed".
- There is scepticism over Mr Anwar's claims, especially since he refused to state the number of pledges he has from MPs and no leaders from across the aisle have openly pledged support for him.
- Moreover, back in September 2008, he claimed he had secured enough support to topple the then Barisan Nasional (BN) government led by Tun Abdullah Badawi but the claim quickly fizzled out.



PHOTOS: EPA-EFE, AFP, THE STAR, BERNAMA STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

While the role of the King, who is picked from the country's nine royal households every five years, is largely ceremonial, the Constitution dictates that Mr Anwar must convince Sultan Abdullah that he has the majority support of MPs in order to form the next government.



to defend his position, arguing that the country's Attorney-General had affirmed that he was still the prime minister.

But political analysts believe that his days are numbered after Zahid said recently that his party would not stop lawmakers from backing Mr Anwar, a move that was widely viewed as a blunt message to Mr Muhyiddin that factions in Umno no longer supported him.

Zahid's statement also drew criticism from other Umno leaders, who want to keep the tottering Muhyiddin administration in power, and at the same time strained the party's already testy relations with PAS, which is demanding that the Umno president clarify his stand.

Close aides of Mr Anwar noted that the element of panic in statements by PN leaders in recent days was because of a growing view among his political foes that he does have the number to back his claim.

"The Palace has informed us that unless it was a minimum of a 118-seat majority, it would not entertain any bid (for the change of government)," said one Anwar associate directly involved in the bid to wrest power.

Under the country's Constitution, the King, has the sole prerogative to appoint the prime minister who he believes has the majority support of MPs.

"The King is very detailed and meticulous. He (Anwar) wouldn't be getting the meeting if he did

Success for Mr Anwar is far from assured and much will depend on how he engages with Malaysia's King, Sultan Abdullah Ri'ayatuddin, in the ensuing days. PHOTO: CHINA PRESS



not have the numbers," said a long-time Anwar associate who is directly involved in the opposition leader's current campaign for the premiership, a post that has eluded him since the late 1990s, when he fell out spectacularly with then Premier Mahathir.

Mr Anwar, who as Deputy Premier was then just a heartbeat away from the top office, was imprisoned twice eventually.

But Mr Anwar's bid has other potential hurdles. Among them is securing the buy-in from the Chinese-dominated DAP, which is the single largest component in the PH coalition with 42 seats, over growing speculation that Mr Anwar's attempt to wrest control of government is coming with backing from factions aligned to Umno's Zahid and Najib.

"I want to stress today that DAP will not cooperate with an Umno that is under the leadership of Ahmad Zahid and Najib Abdul Razak. Absolutely not," DAP's Lim said while campaigning in Sabah. [ST](#)

FORMER PM MAHATHIR MOHAMAD



- Malaysia's longest-serving prime minister came out of retirement to join hands with former foes to oust then PM Najib Razak. He became PM for a second time when his Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition won the 2018 general election, but his government crumbled less than two years later after PH's allies, including his own party, left the government, triggering the collapse of the PH administration.
- Since then, Dr Mahathir, 95, has formed a new party, Pejuang, with his faction of four MPs. Mr Anwar said that Pejuang is not part of his new alliance, although it may join later.
- Following the latest political uncertainty, Dr Mahathir has asserted that a vote of no confidence should be held in Parliament to determine if Mr Muhyiddin still has the majority support to lead the government.

UMNO PRESIDENT AHMAD ZAHID HAMIDI



- Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid, 67, took over the reins of the Malay party in 2018 after predecessor Najib Razak stepped down following Umno's defeat in the general election.
- Since the party's poor performance in the national polls, he has worked hard to make the party relevant again among its Malay-Muslim votebank – including joining hands with former foe PAS, and forming a working alliance with Mr Muhyiddin's Perikatan Nasional pact.
- After Mr Anwar's announcement, Mr Ahmad Zahid, who is also chief of the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, said he knew that "many" MPs from his party and coalition have voiced support for Mr Anwar to form a new government.

MALAYSIA'S KING, SULTAN ABDULLAH RI'AYATUDDIN



- Only Sultan Abdullah, 61, can resolve the growing political impasse. While his role is largely ceremonial, the monarch has the sole power to appoint the prime minister whom he believes enjoys the majority support of the elected representatives in Parliament. If that is not viable, he can also – on the advice of the prime minister – dissolve Parliament, after which an election has to be held within 60 days.

NUMBERS GAME

Total seats in Parliament:

222

Minimum needed to control House:

112

Perikatan Nasional: 113



Pakatan Harapan (PH): 91

Other opposition parties: 16

Others: 2

Perikatan Nasional

Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu): 31, Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS): 18, Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA): 2, Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC): 1, Gabungan Parti Sarawak alliance: 18, Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRS): 1, Parti Solidariti Tanah Airku Rakyat Sabah (Star): 1, Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS): 1 Independent: 1, *Umno: 39

*Umno president Ahmad Zahid Hamidi has said the party would not stop its MPs from backing Anwar as prime minister, but to date, no one has openly expressed support.

Pakatan Harapan (PH)

Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR): 38, Democratic Action Party (DAP): 42, Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah): 11

Other opposition parties

Pejuang: 5, Muda: 1, Parti Warisan Sabah (Warisan): 9, United Progressive Kinabalu Organisation (Upko): 1

Others

Parti Sarawak Bersatu (PSB): 2

Mahathir says he can't make up with successor Muhyiddin

Ex-premier adds that Malaysian PM is using Najib style of politics both men had sought to reform at 2018 polls

MALAYSIA'S FORMER PREMIER MAHATHIR Mohamad says he cannot reconcile with his successor and erstwhile ally Muhyiddin Yassin, because the Prime Minister is playing the same politics that both of them had sought to reform when they defeated the Najib Razak-led government at the polls more than two years ago.

The 95-year-old, who many here consider an elder statesman, having served as prime minister for 24 years with two stints in office, told The Straits Times that Tan Sri Muhyiddin "has adopted the kind of strategy that Najib had, undermining all those who are against him".

Mr Muhyiddin, formerly Umno deputy president, was among a raft of leaders sacked by the party



Former Malaysian premier Mahathir Mohamad told The Straits Times that his successor Muhyiddin Yassin "has adopted the kind of strategy that Najib had, undermining all those who are against him". ST PHOTO: SHANNON TEOH

SHANNON TEOH

Malaysia Bureau Chief
In Kuala Lumpur



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If you reduce the disparity, the jealousy, the envy will be reduced. The country will be stable, then the country will grow. When the difference in terms of wealth is not so big, it is all right. We can do away with that (affirmative action).

— MALAYSIA'S
FORMER PREMIER
MAHATHIR MOHAMAD

”

in 2016 after criticising its leader Najib over the 1Malaysia Development Berhad scandal.

He later co-founded Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia with Tun Dr Mahathir, also a former Umno leader.

Bersatu later became part of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) opposition pact that triumphed at the May 2018 General Election.

PH collapsed in March after dozens of lawmakers, including those from Bersatu, defected and backed the Perikatan Nasional government (PN) led by Mr Muhyiddin. Dr Mahathir resigned as prime minister, and his chairmanship and membership of Bersatu were later terminated.

Dr Mahathir said in an interview that “for three months... I didn’t make any comment”, but he eventually broke his silence as he thought the corruption he had sought to fight had returned.

Dr Mahathir himself has been accused of cronyism and nepotism, allegations that he dismisses.

“We helped a lot of people whether we know or don’t know them,” he told ST. “Hundreds and thousands of them were helped. Some of them actually took advantage and are doing well. But the moment somebody succeeds, (the accusation is) that is my crony.”

Money politics, where favours are exchanged for power, has been a constant bugbear in Malaysia, even during Dr Mahathir’s initial tenure as prime minister from 1981 to 2003. As Umno president then, he headed the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition.

Umno has backed PN, helping Mr Muhyiddin stay in office with 113 seats in the 222-seat Parliament. Najib remains an influential presence in Umno even though he was convicted of seven counts of graft in July and sentenced to 12 years in prison. He remains an MP, pending an appeal against the verdict.

“How can I accept Muhyiddin like that?” said Dr Mahathir, who added that the Premier is willing to work with Mr Najib because “politics is more important than principles”

Nevertheless, Dr Mahathir concedes that he and the other opposition parties are not in a position to

challenge Mr Muhyiddin’s parliamentary majority as they are split on who should take over as premier.

Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim has made a bid for the top job but has yet to back up his claim that he commands enough support in the federal legislature.

“Anwar has a lot of people who are against him. If I am not accepted, many (of my supporters) will pull out so he will not have the majority. Now he claims he has the support of 20 to 30 MPs, but everybody has denied it,” Dr Mahathir said of his former protege-turned-nemesis, with whom he formed an uneasy alliance to win the 2018 election.

Despite this, Dr Mahathir does not agree with holding a snap election now, as he does not think either side would be able to secure a stronger mandate from it.

This is because the public is not yet ready to vote on substantive issues following the political turmoil of recent months, he said, and would make their choice “not because the party is good”, but based on historical sentiment.

“The same people will be elected and you will find that there will be a hung Parliament or a very small majority,” said the veteran of 10 general elections.

“Like now, if three persons have stomach aches and didn’t attend Parliament, they will fall. What kind of government is that?” he added.

Speaking about Malaysia’s controversial affirmative action policies that have largely benefited the Malay majority, Dr Mahathir said they could be done away with if the country had stayed the course to become a developed nation with a narrow wealth gap by this year.

But endemic corruption has hampered progress towards developing the economy and attempts to redistribute wealth that began half a century ago under the controversial New Economic Policy, he said.

“If you reduce the disparity, the jealousy, the envy will be reduced. The country will be stable, then the country will grow,” he said.

“When the difference in terms of wealth is not so big, it is all right. We can do away with that (affirmative action).” **ST**

Ex-premier Mahathir signals he may stand in next Malaysia polls

Watch the full interview here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdo6V6R_1Ko

FORMER MALAYSIAN PREMIER MAHATHIR Mohamad could yet lead his two-month-old party, as well as the opposition, into the next general election, as he revealed that supporters still want him to continue as an elected representative.

The 95-year-old had said at the end of September that he would not contest the next national vote but instead campaign for his new party, Parti Pejuang Tanah Air, in a fight against corruption.

But a few days later, Tun Dr Mahathir said his plan to refrain from standing for election was due

to the fact that he would be 98, should Malaysia’s 15th general election be held when the current parliamentary term ends in 2023.

This opens up the possibility that Dr Mahathir, who has twice been prime minister, could be a candidate for an 11th time in fresh polls that most observers expect to be called within months.

In an interview with The Straits Times, he explained that his proposal not to stand “has caused a lot of unhappiness among my supporters”

“They still want me to say that I want to contest. It is true that most people at 95 would not be functional. I am more fortunate, I am still able to be active. But they don’t seem to think I will deteriorate when I grow older,” he said. “They see me as I am now. So they want me, at least, not to say that I won’t contest.” **ST**

— Shannon Teoh

Europe rethinking its approach to China

Shifts under way as realisation grows that the concept of 'change-through-trade', which worked with the Soviet Union, is failing with Beijing

THE SHIFTS MAY BE SLOW, SOMETIMES imperceptible, and often contradictory. But make no mistake: Europe is now in the throes of re-evaluating its relations with China.

And although the Europeans are highly unlikely to follow the United States in confronting China across the board and across the world, recent events indicate that the strategy rethink now taking place in European capitals – particularly in some of the continent's biggest countries such as Germany or France – is just as profound as the policy review undertaken in Washington, and with just as many long-term consequences.

One of the key arguments made by China critics in the US is that the old assumption which underpinned the engagement of Western powers with China, according to which the more China becomes embedded in global trade and institutions, the less threatening and more cooperative it would become, has failed.

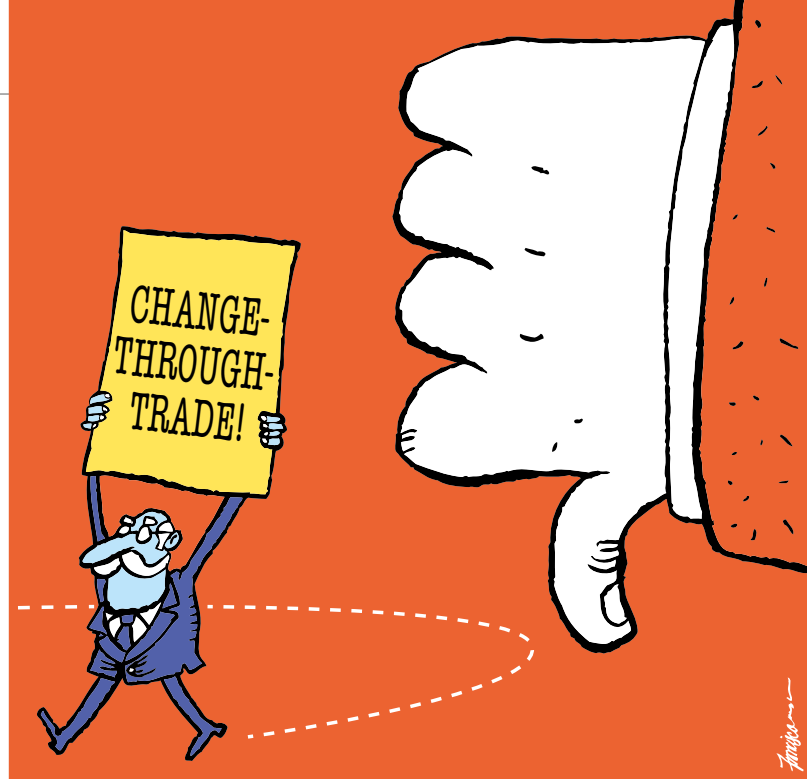
China, argue the US critics, has translated its economic might into a military one and, far from being more accommodating, Beijing is now telling others in no uncertain terms and without much politeness that it's their turn to accommodate Chinese interests.

'WANDEL DURCH HANDEL'

Most of the China "hawks" in the US hold this assumption about the West's ability to "tame" China as a US invention, started by President Richard Nixon in the 1970s, and pursued by every president since.

But although this may come as a surprise to American politicians, the idea that a country can be fundamentally changed through trade is actually a European one.

It was invented well before China was even a subject of discussion in Europe and, for many



ST ILLUSTRATION:
MANNY FRANCISCO

decades remained so entrenched in the political psyche of people such as the Germans that it even has a term which rhymes in their language: "Wandel durch Handel."

It was this policy that Germany resorted to during the Cold War, when the country was divided and the only way the Germans could hope to avoid a destructive nuclear war while maintaining some links with millions of their brethren locked up in East Germany behind the Iron Curtain was through trade.

That policy was a monumental success. By the 1980s, not only East Germany but also the Soviet Union were dependent on German financial credits and trade. So, when the entire communist system collapsed and Germany reunified, those who advocated change through trade were hailed as visionaries.

It was, therefore, entirely understandable that Germany and other European countries would see the logic of following a similar policy in China.

For, if the Soviet Union with its implacable suspicion of the West and its determination to export its ideology to the world could be tamed through the supply of Western consumer goods, the results could be even better in the case of China, a country that has long given up on exporting its ideology and is only too eager to prosper.

There are still politicians in Germany who believe in this concept. Economy Minister Peter Altmaier – a confidant of Chancellor Angela Merkel – told journalists recently that economic engagement with China remains imperative because, as he says: "I still believe that change can be achieved through trade."

But such views – which only a few years ago would have been regarded as a statement of the blindingly obvious – are now being questioned as at best naive, and at worst downright dangerous.

For, in reality, the comparison between the change-

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through-trade policies that Germany and the rest of Europe applied to the Soviet Union and those that Europe tried to apply to China is simply inappropriate.

The Russians and their communist satellites became dependent on Western trade and capital because they used these not to reform their dysfunctional communist economies, but to keep these going without implementing any change. Unsurprisingly, therefore, they ended up both dependent on the West and bankrupt.

UNFULFILLED HOPES

The Chinese, however, used engagement in the world trading system and Western financial inputs to overhaul their own national economy. Equally, unsurprisingly, they ended up not only with a formidable economy, but also being masters of their own home.

For a while, the Europeans still persuaded themselves that, if China cannot be changed, it can at least provide Europe's salvation from economic decline. One after another, European leaders flew to Beijing or laid out the red carpet for visiting Chinese leaders. Mega-billion trade contracts were signed in a blaze of publicity, promising untold riches that were about to flow through newly established "silk roads."

It did not matter that many of these large deals never materialised; every European leader still believed that his or her country was about to experience a bonanza.

Most of these hopes have now evaporated. Nobody doubts that China remains a key market. But Europeans are losing patience with the bureaucratic obstacles, forced technology transfers, subsidies and other hidden protectionist barriers that China demands. Fair and equitable trade is now more important than just more trade. And reciprocity is now the keyword.

GROWING IMPATIENCE

That much became clear at the annual EU-China summit in mid-September. Dr Merkel dreamt of making this year's summit a seminal event, the one encounter designed to reset the relationship, because she hosted it and also because she and other European politicians persuaded themselves that Chinese President Xi Jinping and his officials now understand the imperative of doing something to address European concerns.

The summit was largely a flop; apart from repeating boilerplate phrases about the need for cooperation and an agreement to protect the trademarks of European food products that represent only 2 per cent of Europe's trade with China, Mr Xi offered no concessions.

The rising irritation of the EU to this lack of progress was evident from the communique it issued at the end of the summit, which recalled "the important commitments made at the 2019 EU-China Summit and stressed the need for the implementation of these commitments in a dynamic and result-oriented

manner as progress today is limited", the sort of "frank" language Europeans seldom used before.

Trade tensions are only likely to increase as China becomes an industrial competitor to even Germany, Europe's most robust economy. Germany's share of world trade in mechanical engineering goods – one of its specialities – shrank from around 20 per cent a decade ago to barely 16 per cent last year, while China's share rose to 13.5 per cent from just 8 per cent over that period.

And when it comes to cars, another German strength, it is China that leads on battery development, which will account for around half of the value of future electric cars. German politicians are suddenly being reminded that their biggest single export market outside Europe is not China, but the US.

THE INVISIBLE ELEPHANT

None of this means that the Europeans are about to copy the US model of dealing with China through threats, boycotts or tariffs; Europe's hope is that it may yet evolve a different engagement policy with Beijing, one that avoids confrontation on security matters.


But as the newly released German policy paper for the Indo-Pacific region makes clear, key European countries are now grappling with the long-term implications of their changed approach. They accept that their involvement in Asia is not just an option but a must, and that there is more to Asia than just China. Undoubtedly, this is a reappraisal long overdue.

The question now is whether Germany and other European countries are prepared to go beyond the generalities of their new stances. For, as Dr Andreas Fulda, a German academic specialising on relations with China, points out – the German policy paper "does not offer even a tentative clue as to how Germany aims to address existing power imbalances in the region."

Instead, it vaguely articulates a desire for further engagement, without specifying in what way, or what Europeans should do to counteract those who may wish to disturb Asian stability. In short, the "elephant in the room" remains invisible.

Still, the trend from other key European players is unmistakable. The British openly state that at least one of their aircraft carriers is likely to spend much of its time around the Indo-Pacific region, participating in naval exercises with other nations. And the French are a major arms supplier not only to India, but also to Australia.

And Britain, France and Germany have put their signatures to a joint legal submission to the United Nations Security Council, flatly contradicting Chinese sovereignty claims in the South China Sea.

The days when European policy towards Asia largely consisted of a set of policies towards China, and when China was just a huge market with no strategic implications, are now over. China did not prove amenable to the concept of "change-through-trade." But, paradoxically, it is the Europeans who are now being changed by the realities of trade. 

Covid-19 has killed one million, infected many more, destroyed livelihoods and ravaged societies. Through the turmoil, journalists around the world have kept the presses rolling and the platforms updated, helping communities they serve make sense of developments. This Special Report, to mark World News Day is a showcase of some of their work.

Why real news matters amid twin pandemics of Covid-19 and fake news



ST ILLUSTRATION:
ADAM LEE

MORE THAN 150 NEWSROOMS FROM AROUND the world came together on Sept 28 to mark World News Day, including journalists from Toronto to Taipei, Spain to Singapore. ST ILLUSTRATION: ADAM LEE

This, however, is not an occasion for journalists to pat themselves on the back for the work they do. Rather, the focus is on how journalists go about reporting on issues that matter to their audiences.

In the face of the Covid-19 outbreak, audiences have been turning to professional journalists like never before.

They want answers on how to stay safe, as well as how to safeguard their jobs. They need to know the facts. They need help separating fact from fiction, amid the pandemic of fake news that has also gone viral. They are looking to people they can trust to help them join the dots, to make sense of these bewildering times.

At a time when so much has been turned on its head, this much has become clear: Real news matters. The truth matters. Objectivity matters. Balance and fairness matter.

In short, quality journalism matters.

These are hallmarks of professional newsrooms. These newsrooms strive to tell the stories that matter to the communities they serve.

Consider these examples. In March, Brazilian media group 100 Fronteiras told the story of the trauma caused by the sudden closing of the International Friendship Bridge between the towns of Ciudad del Este in Paraguay and Foz do Iguacu in Brazil.

"Many families had to split up. People who live in Foz, but have relatives on the other side of the bridge, now see one another only through the cellphone screen.

"Never before in the history of the world has a hug been so desired. Yes, people really value it only after they can't. Now we are feeling it in our skin and it hurts."

On the other side of the earth, a similar story of separation and loss was playing out. In Singapore, the Causeway that many use to cross into Malaysia, also had to be shut down to stem the spread of the virus.

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Credible journalism is critical if people are to have informed debates about where they might be headed in a post-pandemic world. Newsrooms that are engaged with their readers can help rally communities in a time of wrenching change.





Front-line workers at St Paul's Hospital in downtown Vancouver in British Columbia, Canada. Nearly 125 of them were involved in the treatment of just one patient.

PHOTO: THE CANADIAN PRESS

Families, workers, businesses and communities that had been intertwined for decades were suddenly left bereft of one another. Their stories were told in the pages of *The Straits Times*.

In the face of a global pandemic, our common humanity also rang out in stories of courage and hope which many newsrooms recounted. In a special report in February, titled "On the front lines of the coronavirus", we profiled the doctors, nurses and officers in Singapore who were fighting the virus.

Likewise, *The Canadian Press* traced a patient's harrowing journey from emergency room to intensive care unit and finally to recovery and rehabilitation, highlighting the many people who pitched in to save one man's life in a feature in April.

Across the planet, newsrooms have been bringing these stories to their audiences, not only to inform and educate, but also to inspire and uplift communities.

In the process, Covid-19 has reminded people of many things they had taken for granted.

It has made plain the importance of good governance, the value of trust in leaders and institutions, and the solace and strength that families and communities provide. It has also highlighted the critical role that a credible and reliable media plays in the health and well-being of societies.

Ironically, however, the pandemic has also posed an existential threat to many newsrooms. While audiences have surged, revenues and resources have plunged, making it harder for journalists to keep doing their jobs.

World News Day is an opportunity for people to ponder why this matters.

Real news matters if people are to make sense of the bewildering developments around them. Credible journalism is critical if people are to have informed debates about where they might be headed in a post-pandemic world. Newsrooms that are engaged with their readers can help rally communities in a time of wrenching change.

Indeed, as French author Albert Camus mused in his novel, *The Plague*, which tells the story of how the inhabitants of a town came to terms with a deadly outbreak: "The strongest desire was, and would be, to behave as if nothing had changed... but, one can't forget everything, however great one's wish to do so; the plague was bound to leave traces, anyhow, in people's hearts."

Wittingly or otherwise, the "traces in people's hearts" that are left post-Covid-19 will have to be dealt with, when the pandemic now still raging around the world, eventually, passes.

Societies that remain well served by good news organisations will be better placed to do so.

Professional journalists and newsrooms will be vital in helping communities survey the ravaged landscape around them.

They will also be critical for the honest conversations that will be needed to figure out the way forward.

That, put simply, is why the success and sustainability of the media matters – now more so than ever – to everyone. **W**

Warren Fernandez is the president of the World Editors Forum, a global network of editors set up by the World Association of News Publishers.

COVERING THE PANDEMIC

ST correspondents have covered the Covid-19 pandemic in Singapore and the region with news reports, analyses, graphics, videos & webinars. Here are some of the ways we did it

All hands on deck at Singapore's public hospitals

AT THE HEART OF THE BATTLE AGAINST THE Covid-19 outbreak, Singapore's front-liners were put to the test as coronavirus patient numbers swelled and hospital beds filled up at alarming rates after the Republic's first case emerged on Jan 23.

From daily press briefings to treating patients in makeshift open-air "consultation rooms", medical professionals went out of their way to adapt to fears and precautions around the virus.

In February, The Straits Times did a special report on Singapore's efforts to tackle the outbreak, showcasing the efforts of doctors, nurses and officers on the front line and the scientists racing to find a vaccine.

At the heart of the battle, the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID), where most coronavirus patients have been taken, senior consultant Monica Chan reflects on what it has meant to her family.

Since late January, as the number of suspected and confirmed cases grew, Dr Chan has managed to see her two daughters, aged nine and 11, for only about half an hour each day before they sleep.



As the number of suspected and confirmed Covid-19 cases grew, NCID senior consultant Monica Chan managed to see her two young daughters for only about half an hour each day before they slept.

ST FILE PHOTO

When she is unable to do so, she stays in touch with them through video call.

A check of Singapore's public hospitals shows the challenges and fears faced by healthcare staff in the line of duty, who put in extra work hours as days turn into weeks and possibly into months.

Dr Chan says it can take five to 10 minutes to put on the gear, which includes an N95 mask, a visor, a gown and gloves, and another five to 10 minutes to remove it very carefully.

"We minimise unnecessary entry into a patient's room, and so it's probably twice a day," she says. **ST**

ST interviews experts for Covid-19 webinar

MORE THAN 1,000 PEOPLE SIGNED UP FOR THE inaugural Straits Times Covid-19 webinar on July 23 that focused on lessons learnt and the way forward in tackling Covid-19.

It was held at a time when the Republic was nearing the 50,000 mark in its number of cases and was in the midst of a cautious reopening.

Experts cautioned that even the best vaccine would be no panacea alone and must be combined with effective treatments, as well as individual responsibility, to reduce the spread of the virus.

They also drew attention to ways to overcome challenges that remain and called for measures to address the economic impact of the pandemic, which would see some segments hit harder than others.

The Straits Times held a second Covid-19 webinar on Sept 28. **ST**

(Clockwise, from top left) Straits Times senior health correspondent Salma Khalik moderating a webinar on July 23 that featured Professor Dale Fisher, a senior infectious diseases expert at National University Hospital; Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health; and Professor Ooi Eng Eong, deputy director of Duke-NUS Medical School's emerging infectious diseases programme.





A section of the Pan-Island Expressway and Central Expressway in Toa Payoh on May 5 at 8.30am. With many working from home, the morning rush-hour jam had disappeared.
ST FILE PHOTO

Singapore like you've never seen

OUR EXECUTIVE EDITOR SUMIKO TAN TOOK to the streets of Singapore to capture the uncanny quiet of a normally bustling city at the height of the partial lockdown in April. This was for a report to go with special drone footage of the city captured by our team from the ST Photo Desk. She recounts: In a city that has hit the pause button, it is the security officer you see the most often.

The crowds are gone but there he – or she – is, at an MRT station, ready to be of help.

You will spot him manning a desk at an office

building in the now-deserted downtown.

Or sitting by the gate of a condominium where, in the units above, hundreds of people are at home serving out this Covid-19 circuit breaker period.

I, too, have been working from home since April 7. Save for a few runs to the supermarket and three trips to the office, I have stayed home.

My work days are marked by two daily virtual meetings. There is a structure, yet time has taken on a shapeless quality. Days drift. Is today Tuesday or Saturday?

An escape from the tedium comes when my colleagues Benjamin Seetor and Mark Cheong produce drone footage of Singapore under shutdown.

The view from the top is beautiful. Let me do a story to see what life on the ground is like, I volunteer.

I set off at 2pm on Wednesday, May 13, mask in place and hand sanitiser in my bag. I also have my media pass, just in case. (Journalism is an “essential service” after all.)

I am expecting to find Singapore under shutdown eerie. A country sapped of its soul. Sad. Desperate. Disaster movie.

What I find instead is something quite magical.

It is a Singapore I have never experienced before, a city of space and quiet and peace and previously undiscovered beauty.

And while the grass on pavements is overgrown, it strikes me that everywhere I go, it is cleaner than usual.

I stride across the wide, empty expanse of Ngee Ann City's Civic Plaza, wind in my hair, and know that this is a Singapore I will never experience again. **ST**

STORIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Lockdowns within and between countries led to separation and loss of lives and livelihoods

In Brazil, grappling with loss when bridges – and borders – close

IT ALL HAPPENED VERY FAST. THERE WAS NO time to prepare the mind for what was coming.

We woke up on March 18 to news of the closure of the International Friendship Bridge that connects the cities of Foz do Iguacu in Brazil and Ciudad del Este in Paraguay.

Suddenly the busiest border in Brazil grew still and a part of our identity was gone.

On that day, the thousands of Brazilians who cross the bridge to Ciudad del Este to work or shop were unable to do so – the same for Paraguayans coming from the opposite direction.

In addition, many families had to split up. People who live in Foz, but have relatives on the other side

of the bridge, now see one another only through the cellphone screen. Never before in the history of the world has a hug been so desired. Yes, people really only value it after they can't. Now we are feeling it in our skin and it hurts.

That day, the biggest feeling was loss. But not loss of health or life – as is happening with hundreds of thousands of people worldwide due to the Covid-19 pandemic – not even the loss of a job, but the loss of a lifestyle so common for those living on what is known as the Triple Border.

Argentina's city of Puerto Iguazu is the third sister city. The Tancredo Neves Bridge connecting it and Foz was also closed.

**WORLD
NEWS
DAY**

REAL NEWS MATTERS

Thus, the three cities found themselves isolated. It is no longer possible to shop in Paraguay, then visit the Argentine market. We even miss having to spend a few hours in the queue to cross the bridge, because after that came the enjoyment of the local culinary delights of Puerto Iguazu.

The atypical life of those who carry in their veins the urge to migrate from one place to another, talk on the street to a foreigner and visit a tourist spot in their backyard can be experienced only by those who have the pleasure of living on a triple frontier.

But this is not possible for now. Today, what remains is the feeling of uncertainty about the future. When will the bridge open? How will it be when it reopens? What will become of our frontier when the “new normal” appears?

I wish I could have all these answers, especially since 100 Fronteiras, which means 100 borders in Portuguese, has always been about going beyond bridges, uniting and integrating neighbouring cities. But at the moment, I don't.



The borders are closed, so I can only say that with or without borders, my mission of bringing information to and integrating the region remains the same. It is still being carried out, albeit in the home office, with the safety of the employees in mind. It is also about cheering, hoping that the bridges will open, safely, and that soon we can cross borders and discover the new pleasure of living here. **SI**

– Patricia Buche, 100 Fronteiras, Brazil

The closure of the International Friendship Bridge connecting Foz do Iguaçu in Brazil and Ciudad del Este in Paraguay has disrupted life for those living on the Triple Border, which includes Argentina's Puerto Iguazu.

PHOTO: 100FRONTEIRAS

No money for food and rent as Covid-19 upends blind couple's life

FORTY-YEAR-OLD DHARMAN AND UGANTHAI ARE a visually challenged couple living in Chengalpattu in Tamil Nadu.

As the pandemic altered lives, instilling a fear of touching things before sanitising them, the couple faced their worst fear—how could the blind survive without touch?

With that fear posing a major health risk, they have been confined to their homes for months now, reeling from financial stress and struggling to make ends meet.

All through our conversation, Ms Uganthai sported a beautiful smile. On getting a compliment, she laughed out loud and said: “You should be glad you are not seeing me cry as usual.”

Chengalpattu is a Covid-19 hot spot. The street they live in has been allocated by the government and more than 30 visually challenged people live here in small 100 sq ft homes.

When they step out to buy essentials, they fear falling prey to the coronavirus. “The coronavirus is scary. We don't know how it is going to attack us. We try not going outdoors but we have to go out at least thrice a week for milk and other things,” said Mr Dharman.

Blissfully married for four years, the couple had fought against their family who disapproved of their relationship. The couple had been selling pens, chikki (an Indian sweet), and accessories on



local trains to earn a living.

Since mid-March, when the nationwide lockdown was imposed, rail services have halted and so has their income.

“The life we treasured in the past four years has got worse over the past four months. I've never faced as many difficulties as I faced in the past four months.

“We used to go out and earn 200 rupees (\$4) to 400 rupees if we worked hard. But now we can't earn even 50 rupees,” Ms Uganthai said. Their landlord has warned them of eviction as three months of rent stand due.

With coronavirus cases on the rise, they are considering alternative livelihoods. “Nobody will buy food items because everyone is scared of the coronavirus. We will probably sell toys for kids. But even then our life is dependent on the trains. We can do everything only there,” the couple said.

For now, a few meagre donations from friends and well-wishers have helped them get by. **SI**

– Smitha T.K., The Quint, India

Mr Dharman and his wife Uganthai with their two-year-old son Rohit. The couple used to sell items on local trains to earn a living, but lost their income after rail services were halted.

PHOTO: THE QUINT

View more stories here:
<https://str.sg/J2Lu>

TACKLING THE INFODEMIC

Bogus remedies, misinformation, rumours and conspiracy theories – the Internet has been flooded with false information as the world grapples with Covid-19.

SHEFALI REKHI
Asian Insider Editor



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Coronavirus thrives and agonises in fast spreading infodemic

Fake news is said to travel further and faster than fact. Is there an antidote?

WHEN THEY CATCH THE COVID-19 BUG IN THE remote interiors of Indonesia, the patients would urge the hospital authorities and nurses to come only in the middle of the night to take them away for isolation.

Such is the misinformation and stigma attached to the Covid-19 disease that those infected worry their kith and kin will suffer endlessly if neighbours learn of their ailment.

In South Korea, officials in charge of quelling Covid-19 had a harrowing time in the earlier part of September as data showed that around 650 church

PROBLEM OF MISINFORMATION DURING COVID-19

Misinformation and disinformation can:

- harm people's physical and mental health
- increase stigmatisation
- threaten precious health gains
- encourage people to disregard public health measures
- polarise public debate on topics related to Covid-19
- amplify hate speech
- heighten risk of conflict and human rights violations
- endanger countries' ability to stop the pandemic

SOURCE: JOINT STATEMENT BY WHO, UN AND OTHERS



A woman wearing a mask walks down a street in Seoul. South Korea's early success in containing the pandemic was thwarted by a mid-August rally that led to another massive outbreak in the country, although that too has been largely brought under control now.

PHOTO: REUTERS

members and 7,700 protesters had defied orders to be tested for coronavirus infections and more than 300 congregations breached bans on in-person gatherings.

Many were simply not convinced that the rules and regulations put in place by the government to contain the pandemic were necessary and would protect them from catching the infection.

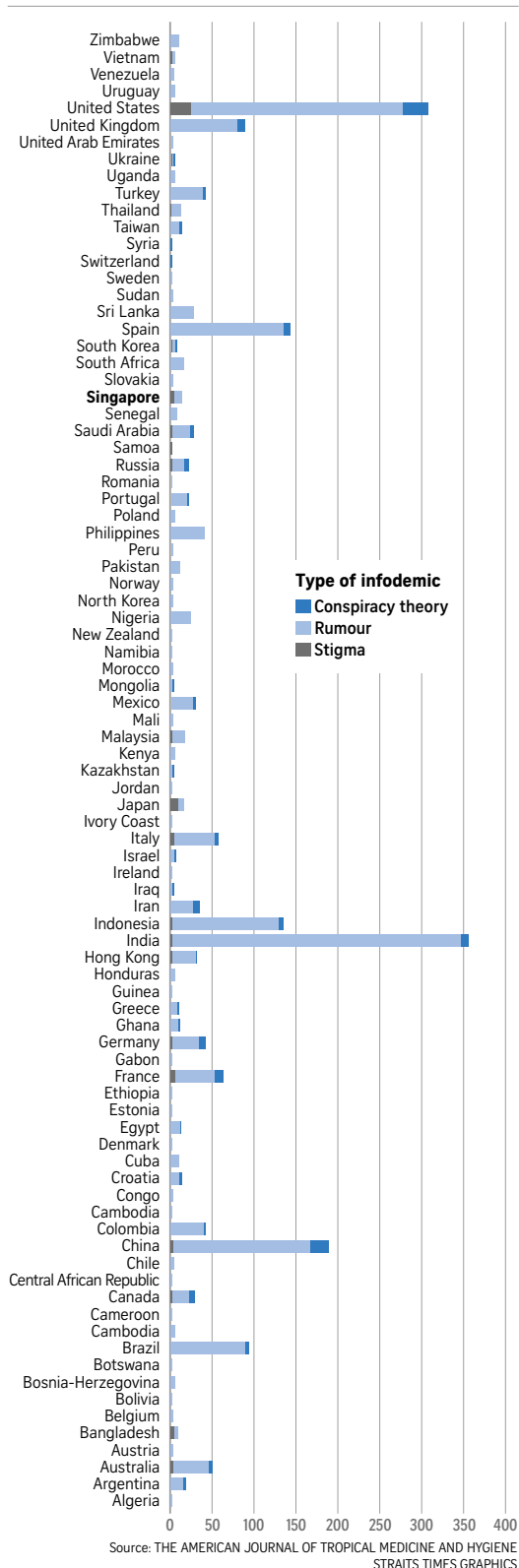
South Korea's early success in containing the pandemic was thwarted by a mid-August rally that led to another massive outbreak in the country, although that too has been largely brought under control now.

Elsewhere, officials tasked with containing the pandemic are agonising over growing anti-vaxxer and anti-mask movements in several countries. They question the efficacy of Covid-19 vaccines and support conspiracy theories. On Sept 19, 32 were arrested in London after heated clashes between the police and protesters.

These and several other instances pointing to the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation surrounding the coronavirus and measures to contain the pandemic have raised alarm levels.

Spread of inaccurate information

Covid-19 rumours, stigma, and conspiracy theories around the world



The World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations once again warned against the coronavirus “infodemic” in a joint statement and urged member states to develop and implement action plans to counter its spread.

WHO said that without appropriate trust and correct information, diagnostic tests will go unused, immunisation campaigns or campaigns to promote effective vaccines will fail to meet targets, and the virus will continue to thrive. “The technology we rely on to keep connected and informed is enabling and amplifying an infodemic that continues to undermine the global response and jeopardises measures to control the pandemic,” the statement said.

Separately, the apex health body has warned that the number of deaths could well hit two million before a vaccine becomes available.

Misinformation is a common problem during public health crises, research by The American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene shows. It was rampant during the recent Ebola outbreak and during the severe acute respiratory syndrome outbreak from 2002 to 2003.

While there are several consequences of the rumours, misinformation and conspiracy theories that circulate in such situations, the report points out that misinformation suggesting the “consumption of highly concentrated alcohol could disinfect the body and kill the virus” caused 800 people to die, 5,876 to be hospitalised, and 60 to go completely blind after drinking methanol.

“Rumours, stigma and conspiracy theories have the potential to decrease community trust in governments,” the authors note.

“Managing rumours, dispelling misinformation and conspiracy theories, and mitigating fear and stigma directed towards persons and places affected are essential to pandemic preparedness and control.”

Much is going on at national and global levels to contain the spread of the infodemic.

The UN launched a formal UN Communications Response initiative to combat the spread of misinformation and disinformation in April that sets guidelines for governments and international health agencies to counter disinformation.

The European Parliament set up a special committee to examine the disinformation and conspiracy theories surrounding the virus, although its remit goes beyond the pandemic as well.

The European Union will work with leading tech platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Google to counter the infodemic. And governments are stepping up fact-checking measures.

But India, at the UN last week, warned that terrorists are disseminating misinformation to exploit the financial and emotional distress caused by lockdowns to attract the vulnerable to their fold.

Among those they are targeting to harm are health workers. **ST**

The writer is also the paper’s Asia News Network editor.

WHO said that without appropriate trust and correct information, diagnostic tests will go unused, immunisation campaigns or campaigns to promote effective vaccines will fail to meet targets, and the virus will continue to thrive.



US, China and the indelicate art of insults

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Strong words are being hurled at each other but there is calibration in the cursing

THERE'S THIS MEMORABLE ANECDOTE IN Mario Puzo's crime classic, *The Godfather*, where the mafia don from New York sends his henchman to reason with a Hollywood mogul who is standing in the way of his godson getting a film role perfect for him in every way, except that he has alienated the studio big shot who now hates his guts.

Where words fail, more potent nudges are sometimes needed – in this case, a horse's head placed in the studio chief's bedroom while he is asleep, blood and reedy tendons included, did the trick. It persuaded the man that the favour requested, and declined, is serious business. And thus he yields, shouting invectives and threats at the actor and his Italian origins, the consigliere who had reached out to him with the initial contact on behalf of his boss, and the mafia.

But not a word against the *Godfather*, himself. Genius, writes Puzo, has its rewards.

There's no special genius, and even less reward, in the acrimonious exchanges that are causing a tailspin in ties between the world's two biggest military powers and economies. If anything, it bespeaks dangerous brinkmanship as a once-overwhelmingly dominant hegemon confronts a resolute challenger now picking a cue or two from its own playbook on how to throw weight around.

Nevertheless, the curses the movie mogul held

back from uttering came to mind as I checked around the region about the goings-on at the Asean Ministerial Meeting and related meetings with dialogue partners hosted in September by Vietnam.

Perhaps the two warring sides were mildly cramped by the fact that the conference did not take place in a single hall but over video link. Even so, while both the United States and China did robustly put forth their positions, each seemed to be taking care to keep the attacks from getting too immoderate.

Indeed, the rare frisson, according to Asian diplomats privy to the talks, came when China's Vice-Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui, standing in for Foreign Minister Wang Yi, dropped an acid comment about "drunken elephants in the room".

Faint light at the end of the dark tunnel of US-China ties? Maybe not. But then again, maybe.

Some cultures, particularly in Asia, teach their young that even insults have to be measured; if you spit up at a person high above you, the mucus falls back on yourself. If you do that to someone far below you, it is a waste of time to descend so low. Insults have to be exchanged between equals. But most important of all, never insult so completely that the door to a reconciliation is closed forever. Perhaps that's what we are witnessing.

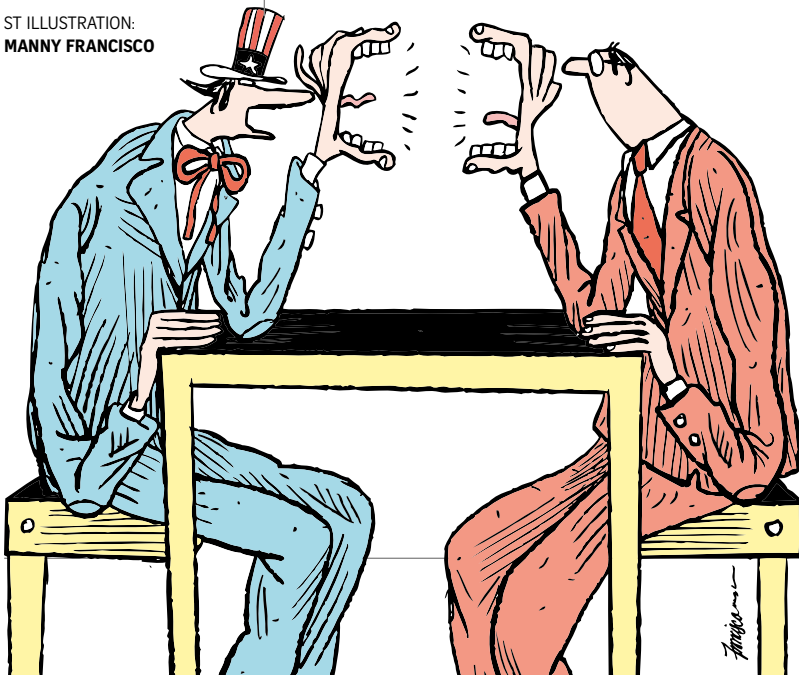
A real estate and casino mogul before he ran for the US presidency, the New York-born and raised Mr Donald Trump, whose most trusted counsel is close family, has ordered his administration to pile on his strategic adversary the most intense pressure seen in a half-century. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has enthusiastically fallen in line, as have his key deputies, including Mr Max Pottinger, and other arms of US government such as the Pentagon.

In July, two aircraft carrier groups led by the USS Nimitz and USS Ronald Reagan conducted war games in the South China Sea, joined by subsurface vessels and nuclear-armed bombers. Technology links built up over decades are being torn apart like the wanton act of a child and within the US, the Federal Bureau of Investigation is putting Chinese nationals and Americans of Chinese ethnicity under unprecedented scrutiny.

Mr Trump's long arm has even snatched Ms Meng Wanzhou, the powerful daughter of the Huawei founder, one of China's most respected tech tycoons.

Chinese diplomats and media have pushed back, and unfeeling for a nation where the virus was first identified, sometimes suggesting that the US could learn a lesson or two from Beijing on how to control a pandemic. Also mocked at have been the racial tensions and the rioting that have scarred the

ST ILLUSTRATION:
MANNY FRANCISCO



US in the wake of the pandemic and the resultant economic hardship. Nevertheless, through it all, most of the US vitriol has targeted the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), not the Chinese nation.

In a landmark speech in July at the Nixon Presidential Library, Mr Pompeo declared that the “free world must triumph over this new tyranny.” At the Asean forum in September, he underlined US “commitment to speak out in the face of the Chinese Communist Party’s escalating aggression and threats to sovereign nations.”

Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell began his testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee by saying he was there to “discuss the threat posed by the Chinese Communist Party to the US and the global order” in three geographical regions, before going on to say that “it is now clear to us, and to more and more countries around the world, that the CCP under general secretary Xi Jinping... seeks to disrupt and reshape the international environment around the narrow self-centred interests and authoritarian values of a single beneficiary, the Chinese Communist Party.”

Just as the US has tried to separate the CCP from the Chinese people, Mr Trump and Mr Xi have been careful to not throw barbs directly at each other.

Indeed, Mr Trump has claimed to have a “tremendous relationship” with Mr Xi and he has described Mr Xi as a “man who truly loves his country” and is “extremely capable.” He has also stressed that the two will be friends “no matter what happens with our dispute on trade”, and he also has spoken of his liking and “great respect” for China. On the other side, Chinese anger seems to be largely directed at Mr Pompeo, rather than his boss.

At a recent panel discussion I moderated for the FutureChina Global Forum, I asked Professor Randall Kroszner, former member of the board of governors of the Federal Reserve System and who currently serves on the advisory board of the Paulson Institute, which works to promote US-China ties, whether he saw wiggle room for a patch-up after the election.

“Ultimately, there’s an understanding that major economic and military powers need to have connections, need to be able to talk and work with each other,” Prof Kroszner responded. “There is a lot of manoeuvring and posturing that’s going on right now, but I don’t think anyone wants to burn any bridges. They want to make sure the bridges are still there, even if there are some blockades now.

For now, of course, it does look as though things will get worse before they get better.

In July, two US aircraft carrier groups conducted war games in the South China Sea. Technology links built up over decades are being torn apart like the wanton act of a child. In the US, the Federal Bureau of Investigation is putting Chinese nationals and ethnic-Chinese Americans under unprecedented scrutiny.

Still, some in Asean suspect a certain fakery in all this, a sense that a lot of the noise coming from

the US is mere posturing. There are few illusions about China either.

Indeed, the lull in assertive Chinese behaviour in the South China Sea witnessed in the lead-up to the Asean ministerial meet and forums is generally seen as nothing more than temporary easing of pressure to get a “good meeting.”

Malaysian Foreign Minister Hishammuddin Hussein spoke for many when he said the South China Sea issue “must be managed and resolved in a rational manner” and Asean has to “look at all avenues, all approaches, to ensure our region is not complicated further by other powers.”

Indeed, some even think Mr Trump is capable of doing a deal with Beijing the week after election day, should he win.

Already, the latest iteration of the TikTok deal is being called by some analysts as a watered-down version of what Mr Trump originally sought to demand, something that had been on the table months ago, although it is not quite clear if China could live with it.

Likewise, it is not lost that China has held back on announcing its own blacklist of US firms – “unreliable entity list” as it is called, although its intentions were announced more than a year ago.

Beijing is said to be staying its hand to both not exacerbate tensions, as well as to wait for the US election results. While the document explaining the unreliable entity list is 1,500 characters long, the attached clarifications are double in length – suggesting much of this is shadow play.

If a deal needs to be made, the Pompeos and Pottingers can always be switched out and more moderate voices brought in; Mr Trump does not shrink from letting people go. Indeed, given that he is said to harbour ambitions about a 2024 presidential run, it might even help Mr Pompeo’s political career to be made a casualty of a rapprochement with China, so he can distance himself from the deal.

Still, it hardly needs to be said that Mr Trump is capable of busting every code in the book, spoken or unspoken. With the election looming and his own standing in pre-election surveys not looking too promising, he let fly in September at the United Nations, returning to his “China virus” theme, boasting about three US-developed vaccines in Phase III trials, and the unprecedented rearmament of America under his watch. America’s weapons, he declared, “are at an advanced level, like we’ve never had before, like, frankly, we’ve never even thought of having before.”

Judging from Chinese media, Beijing read it for what it was; while made to a global audience, the speech was targeted at the domestic voting public. Nevertheless, it did not go without a response.

An editorial comment in the Global Times reminded Mr Trump that the “hysterical attack on China violated the diplomatic etiquette a top leader is supposed to have.”

In short, never omit to leave that bit of margin for a future reconciliation. **ST**

There’s no special genius, and even less reward, in the acrimonious exchanges that are causing a tailspin in ties between the world’s two biggest military powers and economies. If anything, it bespeaks dangerous brinkmanship.

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The writer says that Mr Trump’s long arm has even snatched Ms Meng Wanzhou (below), the powerful daughter of the Huawei founder, one of China’s most respected tech tycoons. PHOTO: AFP





Country Report

THAILAND

Extraordinary protest lands Thailand in uncharted territory

Pro-democracy protesters holding up the three-finger salute on Sanam Luang field next to the Grand Palace in Bangkok on Sept 20, following an overnight anti-government demonstration. PHOTO: AFP

TAN HUI YEE

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Many of the students taking part hail from middle-class backgrounds

IT WAS 10PM ON A SATURDAY, IN SEPTEMBER. Weary young protesters were packing up their gear to leave Sanam Luang, or Royal Field, next to Bangkok's Grand Palace and head home.

Daeng – who wanted to be known only by the nickname – 70, camping out on her straw mat under a tree for the overnight protest, called out: “Don’t give up, kids! Make sure you come back tomorrow morning!”

Daeng is a “red shirt” supporter who still remembers being tear-gassed in the heart of Bangkok during the political turbulence of 2010.

Like many other red shirts, she joined the weekend protest by student group United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration.

It turned the event into a reunion of sorts for

ageing activists from a network that Thailand's ruling establishment tried to dismantle after the 2014 coup.

But Daeng this time eschewed red and wore a black shirt.

“I want to follow the kids,” she told *The Straits Times*.

By any measure, the Sanam Luang protest was extraordinary. Tens of thousands of protesters occupied a field normally fenced off for royal events and called it the “people’s field”.

Protest leaders directly addressed King Maha Vajiralongkorn on stage. They tried to submit a list of demands for political reform – not to Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, but to the monarch via his Privy Council president Surayud Chulanont.

They then called for a boycott of Siam Commercial Bank, of which the King is a major shareholder.

In the process of trying to make “what was previously unsayable, sayable”, the students drew support over the weekend from foot soldiers of the

red shirt movement, noted Chulalongkorn University political scientist Khorapin Phuaphansawat.

"It showed that red shirts haven't disappeared. They haven't been crushed." Key red shirt leaders, faced with lawsuits and other forms of pressure, stayed away.

It remains to be seen if the demands for monarchy reform will resonate with the larger Thai society, said analysts.

For many, this topic remains unthinkable, given how the King's late father Bhumibol Adulyadej was considered a demigod. The lese majeste law hangs over anyone daring to openly criticise the royalty, even though it has not been used recently.

Mainstream Thai broadcasters widened coverage of this protest, unlike previous ones live-streamed only by alternative media.

Dr Khorapin said the movement is still not widely known or acknowledged among Bangkok's elite and the lower strata of Thailand's working class. It is also too early to tell how intellectuals will respond, she added.

Among the royalist elite who have prevailed after Thailand's most recent coups, the red shirts are often seen as hillbillies paid by corrupt politicians to occupy Bangkok's streets and responsible for plunging the kingdom into a decade of colour-coded

conflict. They were suppressed by the authorities after the 2014 coup.

Yet many of the students taking part in the current protests hail from middle-class backgrounds and some of Thailand's most elite institutions. One high-school activist said some parents even tried to stop their children from participating further in protests by threatening to send them abroad to study.

The September protest gave an idea of how the groups' ideals dovetailed. The young protest leaders named on stage people killed during the military's crackdown on the 2010 red shirt protests, placing their calls for accountability within the larger arc of history.

A student protest leader handed a letter detailing the protesters' demands, including monarchy reform, to the police in Bangkok on Sept 20.

"We should no longer look at this protest as merely a youth protest," said Chulalongkorn University political scientist Pitch Pongsawat. "This organic connection between the red shirts and student groups has been sealed."

Indeed, Daeng's call for the student protesters to return was almost unnecessary – thousands again joined for another protest, last month.

The movement's growing reach, coupled with increasingly strident calls for monarchy reform, now puts Thailand squarely in uncharted territory. [SI](#)

By any measure, the Sanam Luang protest was extraordinary. Tens of thousands of protesters occupied a field normally fenced off for royal events and called it the "people's field". Protest leaders directly addressed King Maha Vajiralongkorn on stage.

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Thai Constitution amendment bid delay adds to tensions

POLITICAL TEMPERATURES IN THAILAND ARE rising after Parliament delayed a bid to amend the Constitution on Sept 24, enraging protesters who had gathered outside to press the lawmakers into action.

Protesters harangued legislators departing Parliament as police officers linked arms to form a safe passage for their departing vehicles.

The combined meeting of elected House of Representatives and appointed senators had spent the past two days debating six motions to amend the Constitution.

One of the motions – to form a charter drafting assembly – had been sponsored by lawmakers from the governing coalition.

As the debate rounded up, members of the governing coalition led by the Palang Pracharath Party abruptly supported a bid to form a special committee to study the draft amendments.

This was approved by 432 members of the 750-seat Parliament.

Amid the outrage of opposition lawmakers, Parliament president Chuan Leekpai said: "There was no cheating... We do our duty with sincerity for the benefit of the country and the people."

The Constitution was drafted under the previous

military government led by Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, leader of the 2014 coup.

It created a 250-member senate largely picked by the then ruling junta, and an electoral system that disadvantages big parties like former election winner Pheu Thai.

Though its draft was approved via a national referendum in 2016, it was amended at King Maha Vajiralongkorn's request in 2017.

Thailand's ongoing protests were started largely by youth who demand that the Constitution be amended, that the Prime Minister step aside for fresh elections, and that the government stop harassing its critics.

Protesters have also voiced a "dream" of having a monarch "truly under the Constitution."

Analysts say while the Constitution amendment process would have been contentious, attempts to amend it would have at least eased some of the political tension that had been building up over the past few months. [SI](#)



Besides flashing the three-finger salute, this protester also holds a sticker of the memorial plaque of the 1932 Siamese Revolution during an anti-government protest. Protesters have also voiced a "dream" of having a monarch "truly under the Constitution".

PHOTO: EPA-EFE

– Tan Hui Yee



Indonesia's Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati. PHOTO: REUTERS



Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto. ST PHOTO: ARIFFIN JAMAR

Country Report

INDONESIA

Presidential hopefuls jockeying for 2024 race

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Potential contenders would not face an incumbent president

INDONESIA'S NEXT PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IS four years away, but several prominent figures have been gearing up to put out their names as possible candidates, including those serving in the Cabinet of President Joko Widodo.

The 2024 election is attractive to potential contenders because they would not face an incumbent president who would typically have a big political advantage over challengers, observers say.

The Indonesian Constitution limits the presidency to two five-year terms. Mr Joko is currently serving his second and final term.

Mr Joko, popularly called Jokowi at home, came to

power in 2014 after his predecessor Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono – Indonesia's sixth president – wrapped up his second term in office.

"It is normal that they start their manoeuvres early, as long as they do not breach conflict of interest protocols if they are ministers or high-ranked public officials," Dr Arie Sujito, who teaches social and political science at the Gadjah Mada University, told The Straits Times. "There won't be an incumbent in the next election, which would mean everyone has an equal chance (of winning)."

Meanwhile, Mr Joko is expected to back a candidate who can best ensure he remains politically relevant after stepping down. A friendly successor could help ensure his reform and development programmes are followed through, observers say.

The most prominent figure in the Cabinet touted as a contender is Defence Minister Prabowo



Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan. PHOTO: REUTERS



State-Owned Enterprise Minister Erick Thohir. PHOTO: FC INTERNAZIONALE

Subianto, 68, who was twice defeated as a challenger to Mr Joko and is expected to run for a third time in 2024.

The others have not quite decided whether to run for president or as a running mate, which would automatically grant them the vice-president post should their ticket win.

These include State-Owned Enterprise Minister Erick Thohir, 50; Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs Airlangga Hartarto, 57, who is also chairman of the country's oldest party Golkar; Domestic Affairs Minister Tito Karnavian, 55; and Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati, 58.

Outside the Cabinet are three ambitious provincial governors who are also eyeing the top post – 51-year old Anies Baswedan who leads Jakarta, West Java's Ridwan Kamil, 48; and Central Java's Ganjar Pranowo, 51.

Others said to be in the running include Parliament Speaker Puan Maharani, 47, whose grandfather is the country's founding president Sukarno and mother is former president Megawati Sukarnoputri. There is also former Jakarta deputy governor Sandiaga Uno, 51, who was Mr Prabowo's running mate in the 2019 presidential election.

The Straits Times understands some of these hopefuls have made discreet moves to establish their credentials and build political capital.

Some are preparing biographies for mass public

consumption, while others have been rubbing shoulders with an influential opposition group called the 212 Rally Alumni. The group was behind the Dec 2, 2016, rally seeking the prosecution of Mr Joko's political ally, then Jakarta governor Basuki "Ahok" Tjahaja Purnama, for alleged blasphemy.

In April, video footage showing a group of Jakarta residents declaring support for Mr Erick to run for president in 2024 made its rounds on social media. The minister's spokesman, Mr Arya Sinulingga, however told ST that his boss had nothing to do with the event or the video.

Surveys conducted by several pollsters last year and early this year showed Mr Prabowo leading the ranks as the potential next president with Jakarta Governor Anies coming in second, according to the Detik.com news site.

Dr Arie, who does not rule out Mr Joko endorsing his former staunch rival Mr Prabowo, said: "Jokowi is testing the waters now, providing the stage to his ministers who have potential, so the public would have ample chance to gauge."

Ms Imelda Sari, a deputy secretary-general of the Democratic Party, noted that Mr Joko has been assigning those who might potentially be his successor high-profile tasks to give them a chance to prove themselves. "Basically, Jokowi blesses everyone who wants to run, so after he completes his term he has no problem with his successor." [ST](#)

Apart from former presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto, other contenders include State-Owned Enterprise Minister Erick Thohir, Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan and Sukarno's granddaughter, Parliament Speaker Puan Maharani.



Myanmar polls likely to be subdued, with Suu Kyi win expected

Campaign hit by virus-related issues but victory for ruling NLD is very likely



Myanmar's de-facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi wearing a face shield and mask as she attends a flag-raising ceremony for the National League for Democracy (NLD) party to mark the first day of election campaigning in Naypyidaw on Sept 8. PHOTO: AFP

TAN HUI YEE

Indochina Bureau Chief



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A MASKED AND GLOVED MYANMAR STATE Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi kicked off the ruling National League for Democracy's (NLD) election campaign on Sept 8 by raising its flag in Naypyitaw.

In the commercial capital of Yangon, streets that would have been filled with canvassers were fairly quiet, with restaurants forced to shutter dine-in operations.

Like South Korea and Singapore before it, Myanmar is now heading towards national polls in the middle of the coronavirus outbreak. The vote is set for Nov 8.

It is battling a second wave of the virus that has swelled the country's total number of cases by some 1,000 each day. So fluid is the situation that the Ministry of Health and Sports released election guidelines only two days before campaigning began, mandating that gatherings have no more than 50 people, who have to stay 1.8m apart from one another.

Campaigning is banned where residents are on stay-home orders like Rakhine state and Yangon. In Mandalay, a key trading hub, truck drivers from other regions need to present health certificates before they are being allowed to enter.

Compared with the 2015 general election, when the NLD rode on national optimism to a landslide win, an element of uncertainty has entered this year's event.

"This is totally different compared with the previous general election. So many townships in Yangon region are locked down and we can't engage with our voters," said Ms Htoot May, an Upper House lawmaker who is running as an independent in the race to be the Yangon region's Rakhine ethnic

affairs minister.

People may be too fearful to come out to vote, she warned.

Mr Tharindu Abeyrathna, the Myanmar programme officer for the Asian Network for Free Elections, said other countries were able to pull pandemic polling off by creating trust in the safety of the process and communicating it well. In Myanmar, "it's going to be a huge challenge if the current outbreak continues further", he told The Straits Times.

The military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) has suggested polls be postponed if conditions worsen.

Mr Maw Zin, spokesman for the Yangon-based Myanmar Institute for Democracy, said: "Five years ago, people were full of expectations. In this current election, people are not very excited."

This has only partly to do with the economic situation. The World Bank has projected that Myanmar's economy could eke out only a 0.5 per cent growth in the fiscal year that ended in September, and shrink by 0.9 per cent if conditions are worse.

Beyond Covid-19, the country is grappling with many challenges. Myanmar in 2015 was the darling of the Western world, eager to rehabilitate a former junta state and take part in its economic boom.

It has since been vilified for the 2017 purge of Rohingya Muslims from Rakhine state and now wrestles with the risks of China's strategic embrace.

Myanmar has also been forced to defend itself at the International Court of Justice against allegations that it breached the Genocide Convention.

Armed conflict that continues to simmer in

Rakhine state and the northern Shan state may result in the election being called off in more constituencies this year than in 2015, said Mr Abeyrathna.

Meanwhile, some long-time supporters of the NLD have been disappointed about its slow progress on human rights and uncomfortable at how it seems to be getting too close to a military which is guaranteed a quarter of all parliamentary seats and controls vast swathes of the economy.

Yet there remains no viable alternative civilian party.

Disillusionment has sparked calls for an election boycott by student and trade unions. Still, analysts expect an NLD victory.

"The majority would say that military rule is something they cannot accept, so they will vote NLD. They understand that the USDP will have their base, so if they don't vote, USDP will return," said Mr Maw Zin.

Support for the NLD seems to remain strong. Ms



Suu Kyi sparked a run on NLD's fighting peacock flag in September by asking supporters to fly the flag in lieu of gathering in person to show their support. On Facebook, supporters have already updated their profile pictures with variations of the red flag.

This is an election that may be strewn with surprises, but where the outcome is not in doubt. **ST**

A worker preparing T-shirts with the logo of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party at a printing house as election campaigns kick-off in Yangon, Myanmar, Sept 7. PHOTO: REUTERS

SINGAPORE

Republic's new drone for security sweeps

It can monitor larger areas, conduct operations in risky or inaccessible situations

THE HOME TEAM HAS UNVEILED A NEW unmanned drone that will allow agencies to fly farther into areas to do security sweeps, covering larger areas based on a pre-programmed flight path.

The drone, which embarked on its maiden long-distance flight on Sept 16, can be operated beyond the sight of the operator, which means it can fly several kilometres away from the person controlling it, instead of being only several hundred metres away.

The machine, developed by the Home Team Science and Technology Agency (HTX) and ST Engineering Aerospace, executes long-distance Beyond Visual Line of Sight (BVLOS) flights for unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).

This is as opposed to Extended Visual Line of Sight (EVLOS) flights, which require a safety pilot to eyeball the drone and take over control if required, working with a primary drone operator situated in a control room.

With this new technology, Home Team agencies will be able to use the drone in areas such as patrolling and monitoring larger perimeters. The drone can also be used to conduct security operations in inaccessible areas or in situations that are too risky for manual operators to be present.

The drone can provide real-time situational pictures of incident sites and bird's-eye views of large-scale or high-security events with large crowds, as videos from the drone can be streamed directly to the Police Operations Command Centre for officers to rapidly view and assess the situation.

The drone can also play a role in detecting hazardous materials and monitoring large fires from above.

Its developers are also working on giving it the capability to deliver essential supplies – including automated external defibrillators (AEDs) during critical missions such as building collapses – which can shorten response times and potentially save lives. **ST**

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Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam watching the drone take off during a flight demonstration at Tuas View Fire Station on Sept 16. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

Taiwan's narrowing defence options

As Chinese pressure grows, Taiwan is shifting to asymmetric responses. The question is: Will the US come to its aid?

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CHINA'S MILITARY PRESSURE ON TAIWAN HAS been mounting, particularly in recent months as ties between the self-ruled island and the United States have strengthened and Sino-US relations have soured.

In September, over two days, nearly 40 Chinese military aircraft crossed the median line in the Taiwan Strait, the unofficial border between the two sides, as US Undersecretary of State Keith Krach was visiting Taipei. Chinese tabloid Global Times said these drills "are not a warning, but a rehearsal for a Taiwan takeover."

In August, the Chinese sent two fighter jets across the median line and held combat drills in the Taiwan Strait when US Health Secretary Alex Azar visited Taiwan. Mr Azar was the most senior US official to visit the island in the four decades since Washington established formal ties with Beijing in 1979 and derecognised Taipei. In China's eyes, his visit violated Washington's one-China policy of recognising only Beijing as the sole government of China.

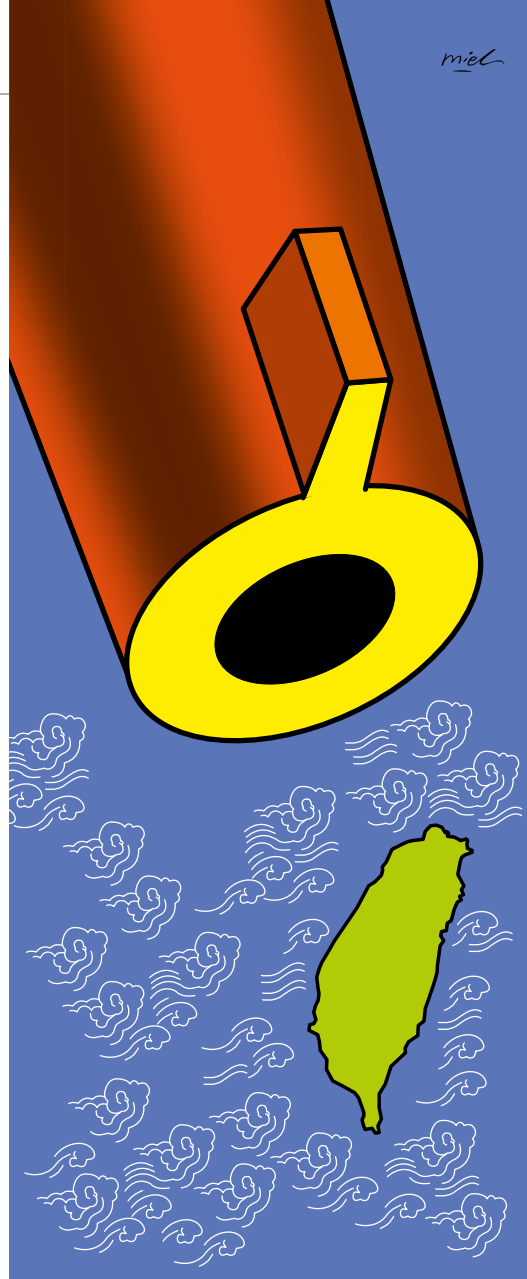
China has been ramping up pressure on Taiwan militarily, politically and economically since Ms Tsai Ing-wen of the independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party came to power in 2016. The People's Liberation Army has been conducting exercises in the Taiwan Strait more frequently and its military aircraft have encircled the island with increasing frequency while its two aircraft carriers have sailed through the Strait.

The latest Chinese military manoeuvres are a strong reminder to the Taiwanese – and the US – that China has not and will not abandon the use of force to wrest back control of what it considers a breakaway province. As President Xi Jinping made clear in January last year, China "must be and will be reunified" and this goal should not drag on from generation to generation.

In response, Taiwan is increasing its defence spending and adopting a multiple-deterrence strategy to make up for its David-versus-Goliath military imbalance with China. But it is becoming increasingly apparent that in the event of a Chinese attack, Taiwan would not be able to defend itself without outside help. The burning question is whether the US will go to its aid.

MILITARY IMBALANCE

In August, Taiwan announced an increase in its defence budget from this year's NT\$411.3 billion



ST ILLUSTRATION: MIEL

(\$\$19.4 billion) to NT\$453.4 billion next year, a spike of about 10.2 per cent. But this is nowhere close to China's defence budget this year of US\$178 billion (\$\$242 billion).

Things were quite different in 1980 when the US ended its Mutual Defence Treaty with Taiwan. Then, the island enjoyed a qualitative edge over the mainland militarily, wrote Professor Brendan Taylor from the Australian National University in his book *Dangerous Decade: Taiwan's Security And Crisis Management*.

China's troop numbers at 4.36 million in 1980 greatly outnumbered Taiwan's 539,000, but about 3.6 million of the Chinese soldiers were in the land forces. China's navy and air force then were also small and relatively weak, meaning that Beijing lacked the power-projection capabilities needed to take the island by force.

But from the mid-1990s, that cross-strait military balance began to shift in China's favour

as it modernised its armed forces and increased its defence spending on the back of its phenomenal economic growth.

According to the Pentagon's 2020 report on the Chinese military, China has 412,000 troops, 257 warships, 250 bombers and 600 fighter jets based in the Taiwan Strait area and 1,600 missiles placed opposite Taiwan. By comparison, Taiwan has 88,000 active-duty ground troops, 109 surface ships and 400 fighter jets in total.

The US Defence Intelligence Agency said in a January report that China continues to take ambitious steps to modernise and better equip its military, driven by its "longstanding interest to eventually compel Taiwan's reunification with the mainland and deter any attempt by Taiwan to declare independence"

ASYMMETRIC DEFENCE STRATEGY

Given how lopsided the military balance has become, Taiwan in recent years has opted for a strategy of multiple deterrence, that is, using "innovative, asymmetric" means to complement its conventional military power.

Such a strategy entails "not only protecting our territorial boundaries, but also having the capability to destroy any potential military threats... from the other side", said Taiwanese defence expert Andrew Yang.

It means, among other things, having a very effective and strong air defence system so that China faces tremendous challenges if it decides to go on the offensive. For air power, Taiwan should focus on relatively inexpensive unmanned aerial systems, say analysts. They also note that sea mines are a critical capability as they have proved hard to counter and effective at slowing invasive forces, as are highly mobile coastal defence cruise missiles.

While this asymmetric defence strategy of using unconventional warfare against a stronger adversary was first propounded in 2017, Taiwan's national security officials have been slow in adopting it, continuing to focus instead on prestige weapons systems such as Abrams tanks and indigenous diesel submarines, which are costly. However, as military pressure from the mainland has increased, asymmetric warfare has gained attention again.

Ms Tsai, in her inaugural speech in May, said that while Taiwan would continue to bolster its defence capabilities, "future combat capacity development will also emphasise mobility, countermeasures and non-traditional, asymmetrical capabilities."

In its July Han Kuang military exercise, Taiwan tested this new concept, simulating a coastal attack from China that saw a shift from its reliance on heavy armoured forces to integrated asymmetric defence.

The idea, said Mr Yang, is to make it very difficult for China to continue its military actions against Taiwan and to create "a lot of international concern and responses to Chinese renegade behaviour."

Given the huge disparity in their military strengths, many analysts feel what Taiwan's asymmetric strategy could do is to buy time before external support arrives.

WILL AND CAN THE U.S. HELP?

The external support that analysts talk about is really US intervention.

Even as the US derecognised Taiwan in 1979, it also passed the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) that obligated it to maintain the capacity "to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion" jeopardising the security or social or economic system of Taiwan's people.

Under the TRA, the US is also to "make available to Taiwan such defence articles and defence services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defence capability."

While some US presidents have been judicious about arms sales to Taiwan so as not to irritate the Chinese too much, President Donald Trump has had no such qualms. In the past four years, his administration has approved several major arms sales to the island totalling US\$13 billion and is reportedly planning to sell seven major weapons systems.


However, the US has been ambiguous about going to Taiwan's aid in the event of a China attack. The TRA requires only that the US president and Congress determine "appropriate action" in response to any threat to the security or the social or economic system of Taiwan and any danger to US interests as a result of this.

Some feel that the US will go to Taiwan's aid in the event of an attack for two reasons – one is that democratic Taiwan represents values that reflect the US' own and a war also hurts US economic interests as both are its major trading partners. The second is that not defending Taiwan will have devastating consequences for US ties with treaty allies Japan and South Korea, and will be a blow to its credibility among other allies and US-friendly countries in the region and beyond.

Chinese scholars, however, point out that the US has abandoned Taiwan before, when it sought rapprochement with China in 1972 and normalised ties with Beijing in 1979, and could do so again. In their view, Americans see Taiwan as a mere pawn in the US-China rivalry, one not worth sacrificing their own interests for.

Prof Taylor warned against underestimating US willingness to defend Taiwan, albeit at substantial cost and risks, "in this era of deepening US-China strategic competition." He said, however, that with each passing year, the ability of the US to come to Taiwan's aid is diminishing, particularly as China develops a formidable arsenal of "anti-access, area-denial" capabilities that allow it to hold US forces at arm's length and in time "will largely remove America's ability to intervene in a cross-strait conflict."

He warned that the tipping point looks set to occur "well within the next decade."

Taiwan has few options in the face of such an eventuality. Apart from its defence strategy of making it as unpalatable as possible for China to take it by force, Taiwan should make efforts to engage China and re-establish channels of communication that will reduce tensions between the two sides and the possibility of military conflict. 

Council on Foreign Relations researchers Richard Haass and David Sacks have argued that given an increasingly assertive China with growing military capabilities and growing doubts over US reliability, the US should make it explicit that it would respond to any Chinese use of force against Taiwan so as to maintain deterrence in the Taiwan Strait.



Xi Jinping's latest purge to ensure stability

The clampdown has included muzzling critics from property tycoon to academics



In July, President Xi Jinping turned the crackdown inwards, going after his own law enforcers with a campaign to purge corrupt, disloyal officials in the public security and judicial spheres.
PHOTO: REUTERS

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Political watchers view this latest cleansing by President Xi as the continuation of the saohai (sweep black) campaign, mounted in January 2018, to go after crime syndicates and “protection umbrellas” or local officials who shield these criminals.



IN MARCH 1950, SIX MONTHS AFTER THE Communists defeated Kuomintang (KMT) troops and won the Chinese civil war, Mao Zedong launched the first political campaign in the fledgling People's Republic of China to “suppress counter-revolutionaries.”

During the three-year campaign to consolidate the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) hold on power, at least 2.6 million people comprising KMT remnants, landlords and bandits were rounded up and half that number were sent to labour camps.

More than 700,000 people were executed, with some estimates putting it as high as two million.

Historian Yang Kuisong, an expert on the brutal campaign at East China Normal University and Peking University, wrote in 2008: “Power seized with violence has to be maintained with violence.”

In October 1950, Mao threw China into the Korean War, which ended three years later with Beijing and Pyongyang signing an armistice with Washington and Seoul. That further consolidated Mao's position at home. A source with ties to the leadership, told The Straits Times: “For Mao, to resist external (forces), (one) first must (ensure) internal stability.”

“The internal and external situation today is no different,” the source said, referring to China's domestic crackdown on dissent and ethnic minorities as it prepares for a possible showdown with what it perceives to be an increasingly hostile US.

The clampdown has included muzzling critics from property tycoon Ren Zhiqiang, a minor princeling whose father was a vice-minister of commerce, to Tsinghua University professor Xu Zhangrun and Central Party School professor Cai Xia in recent months.

Ethnic minorities from Uighur Muslims and Mongolians to Hui Muslims and Tibetans have also been subjected to an increasingly harsh “Sinicisation” campaign.

In July, President Xi Jinping turned the crackdown

inwards, going after his own law enforcers with a campaign to purge corrupt and disloyal officials in the public security and judicial spheres.

Delivering a speech to launch the campaign, Mr Chen Yixin, secretary-general of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission which oversees all legal enforcement authorities, said that “the situation remains grim” despite efforts to “eliminate black sheep” every year. It is necessary to “drive the blade in” and “scrape the bones to rid the poison” so that officials are “absolutely loyal, absolutely pure and absolutely reliable,” he said.

He invoked another one of Mao's campaigns, the Yan'an Rectification Movement in the early 1940s, a purge that solidified the Great Helmsman's grip on the party and his own theories on its ideology.

Political watchers view this latest cleansing by Mr Xi as the continuation of the saohai (sweep black) campaign, mounted in January 2018, to go after crime syndicates and “protection umbrellas” or local officials who shield these criminals.

Beyond a crackdown on crime, however, the saohai campaign was meant to purify and strengthen governance at the grassroots level under the CCP's leadership, said Associate Professor Sheena Greitens of the University of Texas at Austin, who has written about the latest clean-up.

Since coming into power in 2012, President Xi has embarked on a sweeping anti-corruption drive that has taken down hundreds of high-level bureaucrats, including top military officers, and many more regular officials.

The latest purge is Mr Xi's “method of reinvigorating his control of the domestic security apparatus – especially at a time when his personal authority and governing competence are being questioned due to the perceived weakness in his response towards ongoing US pressure”, said associate research fellow James Char of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies' China Programme. [S](#)

Malaysian PM Muhyiddin's pick Hajiji Mohd Noor sworn in as new Sabah Chief Minister

MR HAJIJI MOHD NOOR, A LEADER FROM PRIME Minister Muhyiddin Yassin's Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition, was sworn in as the new Sabah Chief Minister on Sept 29, three days after Tan Sri Muhyiddin's loose alliance managed to wrest control of the state administration during the state polls.

The 65-year-old becomes the 16th Chief Minister of Malaysia's eastern-most state after being sworn in by Governor Johar Mahiruddin. He is the Sabah chief for both PN and Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) – Mr Muhyiddin's party.

Mr Hajiji was chosen as the chief minister candidate by the Gabungan Rakyat Bersatu (GRS) alliance, after intense negotiations that lasted 36 hours.

He has drawn support from 41 out of 73 lawmakers – 38 from GRS and three independent winners.

Mr Hajiji's appointment is another big win for Mr Muhyiddin, who is facing a leadership challenge in



Datuk Seri Hajiji Mohd Noor being sworn in on Sept 29.
PHOTO: BERNAMA

Parliament from opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim.

Despite GRS members clashing with one another in 17 seats and unable to agree on a chief minister candidate throughout the campaign, Mr Muhyiddin managed to steer GRS to a win at the state polls.

The impasse over the chief minister post threatened to undo GRS' victory, opening a door for Parti Warisan Sabah to try and form the state government again, but GRS unanimously agreed to go with Mr Muhyiddin's personal pick.

Mr Hajiji, who was elected as the assemblyman for Sulaman for an eighth term on Sept 26, was previously a Sabah state minister.

The Sabah state election was called after PN, led by Mr Musa, attempted to form the state government in late July after securing 13 defections from the Warisan administration.

However, Mr Johar opted to dissolve the assembly and call for fresh elections instead of swearing in a third chief minister for the same term. **ST**

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Jakarta's ex-governor Ahok takes up reform of state-owned firms

FORMER JAKARTA GOVERNOR BASUKI TJAHAJA Purnama has been in the spotlight after slamming bad bureaucracy, rent-seeking and systematic inefficiency in Indonesia's state-owned companies.

Speaking on YouTube channel Poin, which has more than one million subscribers, Mr Basuki, who is popularly known by his Chinese nickname Ahok, expressed his frustration with the management of state-owned oil company Pertamina for using loans to buy overseas oil fields while ignoring prospective businesses domestically.

He also alleged that another state company was trying to engage in rent-seeking.

Mr Basuki, a political ally of President Joko Widodo, serves as the chief of Pertamina's board of commissioners, whose job is to supervise the board of directors. He is also a member of the ruling Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle.

Pertamina is among 140 companies that come under the State-Owned Enterprise Ministry.

Mr Basuki said Indonesia should establish a super holding company for state-controlled firms, like

Singapore's sovereign wealth fund Temasek.

"The State-Owned Enterprise Ministry should be disbanded... and we (should) instead have Indonesia Incorporation, like (Singapore has) Temasek," Mr Basuki said in the 6½-minute YouTube video uploaded on Sept 14. He also said Pertamina could have tapped into at least 12 potential oil blocks for exploration domestically rather than venturing overseas and buying foreign assets.

Building refineries is a programme Mr Joko wishes Pertamina to undertake expeditiously.

Mr Basuki, an ethnic Chinese who is a Christian, had been accused of blasphemy by political opponents, after he made a speech in September 2016 that referred to a Quranic verse. He was convicted and later sentenced to two years in prison for blasphemy in 2017.

After he was released from prison, Mr Basuki was appointed by Mr Joko to the position of chief commissioner of Pertamina, one of the country's most strategic state companies that had been often plagued by inefficiency and corruption. **ST**



Mr Basuki Tjahaja Purnama says Indonesia should establish a super holding company for state-controlled companies.
PHOTO: BASUKI TJAHAJA PURNAMA/FACEBOOK

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Thai King's personal life in spotlight again after royal consort's reinstatement

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NEWS THAT MS SINEENAT WONGVAJIRAPAKDI is back in favour with Thailand's King Maha Vajiralongkorn has taken citizens by surprise, but the development once again shone the spotlight on the King's personal life.

No one expected that Ms Sineenat would be back in the royal fold. Then again, no one could have predicted her swift fall from grace 10 months ago either, less than three months after being made royal noble consort.

The latest palace intrigue comes amid widespread protests across Thailand by pro-democracy groups calling for more transparency and reforms in the royal institution.

"(Sineenat's reinstatement) will add fire to the demonstrations and calls for reforms," Professor James Chin, director of the Asia Institute at the University of Tasmania, said.

The Royal Gazette in its announcement dated Aug 29 declared that Ms Sineenat, 35, had all her titles restored as she "is untainted." The phrase became a top trending Twitter hashtag in Thailand.

The former royal bodyguard was stripped of her titles for "misbehaviour and disloyalty against the monarch" last October. She was also accused of seeking to sabotage Queen Suthida's appointment in a bid to take the position herself.

"(She) was acting out against the royal marriage and the appointment of the queen," said the Royal Gazette in a detailed condemnation of the disgraced consort.



General Sineenat Wongvajirapakdi, the royal noble consort is seen in this undated handout photo. PHOTO: REUTERS



Thailand's King Maha Vajiralongkorn and General Sineenat Wongvajirapakdi, the royal noble consort pose at the Grand Palace in Bangkok, Thailand. PHOTO: REUTERS

Following her royal excommunication, Ms Sineenat disappeared from public view and all mention of her in the palace website was scrubbed.

It is unclear why Ms Sineenat, who is believed to be in Germany now, is being reinstated.

The announcement once again shone the spotlight on the 68-year-old monarch's personal life, long a subject of speculation both in his homeland and abroad.

King Maha Vajiralongkorn – who ascended the throne in December 2016 after the death of his father, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, two months earlier – spends most of his time abroad, especially in Germany, where he keeps a home.

Born in the northern Thai province of Nan, Ms Sineenat, nicknamed Koi, is a trained pilot and a former nurse. [ST](#)

Interpol issues urgent 'red notice' for Thai Red Bull heir over hit-and-run



Vorayuth Yoovidhya, grandson of late Red Bull founder Chaleo Yoovidhya, is seen during a police investigation in Bangkok. PHOTO: AFP

INTERPOL HAS ISSUED A "RED NOTICE" TO arrest the fugitive Thai heir to the Red Bull billions for his role in a fatal hit-and-run accident, police said on Oct 4.

The move by the international police organisation is the latest in the years-long saga surrounding Vorayuth "Boss" Yoovidhya, who crashed his Ferrari in 2012, killing a police officer.

The charges against Vorayuth, who is the grandson of Red Bull's co-founder, were dropped in July – sparking public outrage from Thais who saw it as an example of impunity enjoyed by the kingdom's elite.

It spurred probes by various government agencies, including the Attorney-General's Office, which, in September, announced fresh charges against Vorayuth of reckless driving causing death and cocaine use.

National Police spokesman Colonel Krissana Pattanacharoen confirmed on Oct 4 that a red notice – Interpol's most urgent alert – was issued earlier in the week.

"After we received the confirmation, we then passed our request to 194 member countries asking for assistance from them," he said. [ST](#)

– Agence France-Presse

‘Love letters’ between Trump and Kim tell of ‘personal bond’: Woodward’s book

Letters touch on ‘crucial’ S’pore Summit on June 12, 2018

THE LETTERS WHICH NORTH KOREAN LEADER Kim Jong Un and United States President Donald Trump exchanged before and after their meetings in 2018 and 2019 were effusive in their praise of each other, investigative journalist Bob Woodward wrote in a book released on Sept 15.

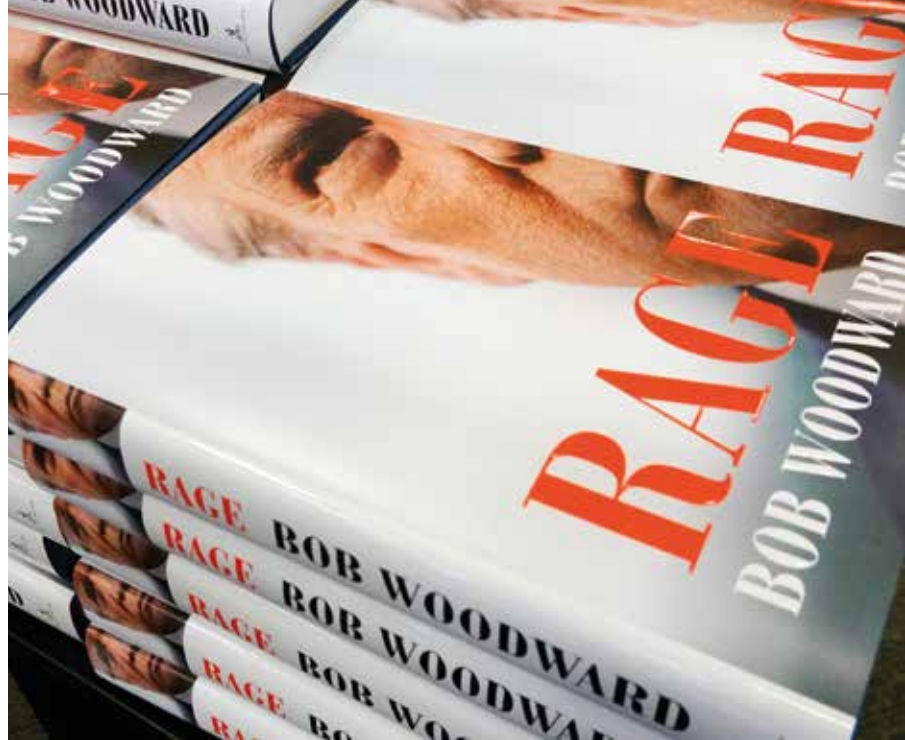
Mr Kim’s letters were masterpieces of verbose flattery that bordered on romantic prose, wrote Mr Woodward, a veteran reporter most known for his reporting on the Watergate scandal that eventually led to US President Richard Nixon’s resignation in 1974.

Rage, his second book on the Trump presidency, was based on 18 interviews with Mr Trump. He was shown 27 letters between Mr Trump and Mr Kim, 25 of which had not been reported on before.

The new details on the letters offered fresh insights on the bond between the two leaders at the time which provided the momentum for US-North Korea diplomacy. Progress has since stalled, with critics then and now arguing that the leaders’ three meetings were flashy but of little substance.

“Florid and grandiloquent, they trace how the two forged a personal and emotional bond,” wrote Mr Woodward.

“Trump has personally said they are ‘love letters’. They are more than that – they reveal a decision by both to become friends. Whether genuine or not, probably only history will tell.”



US intelligence analysts could not conclude who penned the letters that came from Mr Kim, but they “marvelled at the skill someone brought to finding the exact mixture of flattery while appealing to Trump’s sense of grandiosity and being centrestage in history”, wrote Mr Woodward.

The Singapore Summit on June 12, 2018, was crucial, Mr Trump told Mr Woodward. “We really got along. It was a great chemistry.”

In a Christmas letter half a year after the summit, Mr Kim described the meeting as “reminiscent of a scene from a fantasy film”.

He wrote: “Even now I cannot forget that moment of history when I firmly held Your Excellency’s hand at the beautiful and sacred location as the whole world watched with great interest and hope to relive the honour of that day.”

Mr Woodward observed that the two leaders often portrayed their diplomatic relations as an us-against-the-world effort, as they discussed the give-and-take of denuclearisation.

At least twice after the Singapore Summit, Mr Trump told Mr Kim in letters that they were the only ones who could end the hostility between their countries, lauding their “unique style and a special friendship” and pledging that Mr Kim would always be his friend.

After their third meeting, an impromptu but historic summit at the border of North Korea and South Korea on June 30 last year, Mr Trump sent a letter to Mr Kim, praising him and the success of the meeting.

He attached a copy of the front page of The New York Times, which featured a large picture of the two leaders, and wrote in marker: “Chairman, great picture of you, big time.”

Two days later, Mr Trump wrote again, this time attaching 22 photographs of their meeting with his letter.

Rage, Bob Woodward’s second book on the Trump presidency, was based on 18 interviews with Mr Donald Trump. He was shown 27 letters between Mr Trump and Mr Kim Jong Un, 25 of which had not been reported on before.

PHOTO: AFP

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Excerpts of letters

US President Donald Trump and North Korea leader Kim Jong Un exchanged at least 27 letters in 2018 and 2019, viewed by journalist Bob Woodward for his new book, *Rage*. Here are excerpts of the correspondence.

2018

Letter to Mr Kim

Letter to Mr Trump

The Singapore Summit took place on June 12.



June 15

I just have arrived back in America, and the media for North Korea and you (have) been fantastic. They have great respect for you and your country.



MR TRUMP

July 6

The significant first meeting with Your Excellency and the joint statement we signed together in Singapore 24 days ago was indeed the start of a meaningful journey.

Wishing that the invariable trust and confidence in Your Excellency Mr President will be further strengthened in the future process of taking practical actions, I extend my conviction with the epochal progress in promoting the DPRK-US relations will bring our next meeting forward.



MR KIM

NOTE: DPRK refers to Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the official name of North Korea.

Dec 24

I look forward to our next summit and to making real progress on denuclearisation and a really bright future for your people under your leadership in the year ahead.



MR TRUMP

Dec 25

As the new year 2019 approaches, critical issues that require endless effort towards even higher ideals and goals still await us. Just as Your Excellency frankly noted, as we enter the new year the whole world will certainly once again come to see, not so far in the future, another historic meeting between myself and Your Excellency reminiscent of a scene from a fantasy film.



MR KIM

Dec 28

I just received your letter and very much appreciate your warm feelings and thoughts. Like you, I have no doubt a great result will be accomplished between our two countries, and the only two leaders who can do it are you and me."



MR TRUMP

ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

But by the time Mr Kim replied more than a month later on Aug 5, relations appeared to have cooled, with the North Korean leader upset that US-South Korea military exercises had not fully stopped.

In this letter, Mr Kim was polite but "sounded like a disappointed friend or lover", wrote Mr Woodward.

Weighing in on the Trump-Kim relationship, Mr Woodward remarked on "the nature of how they talked and how they leaned on each other and how they maintained they were friends and trusted each other."

It was an interesting, original experiment in diplomacy, he said at a virtual event hosted by the Washington Post, where he is an associate editor.

"They did charm each other," he said. "Trump felt very much that it worked, we didn't have war. You have to give him credit, at this point there's been no war."

He added: "We don't know where this is going to go. The relationship between Trump and Kim Jong

Un is not good now, there's a lot of tension, so we will watch that."

Mr Woodward also noted that in his interview with Mr Trump, on the Singapore Summit, he had to bring the president's focus away from the public relations extravaganza to the substance of the meeting.

Mr Trump recounted that he was deeply impressed by the wall of cameras when he first met and shook hands with Mr Kim at the Capella Hotel on the island of Sentosa, Mr Woodward wrote.

He claimed it was among the largest number of cameras he had seen in his life, even more than at the Academy Awards in Hollywood.

"You know, it was the most cameras. I think I've seen more cameras than any human being in history. There's like hundreds of them. It's free. I get it for free. It costs me nothing. It's called earned media," said Mr Trump. [ST](#)

A still from Disney's *The Mandalorian*. Disney+ has notched up 60.5 million subscriptions in North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. PHOTO: THE WALT DISNEY COMPANY

Business Trends

US\$1.4 billion

Estimated value of South-east Asia's streaming market by end-2020

US\$3.6 billion

Estimated value of South-east Asia's streaming market by end-2025

5.1 billion

Total minutes watched a week from mid-March to mid-June across Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines

Streaming wars in South-east Asia

Viewers spoilt for choice amid flood of video-on-demand services

Disney's expected entry in the market is set to spark rapid growth

THERE'S NEVER BEEN A BETTER TIME TO BE A couch potato in South-east Asia. The region is being flooded by video-on-demand streaming services – whether home-grown or imported from the US or China.

And they come with steep discounts and local content to coax tens of millions of consumers away from free platforms like YouTube and into paying for a subscription.

Entertainment giant Disney earlier introduced its Disney+ Hotstar subscription service in Indonesia,

unleashing its catalogue of princesses, superheroes and the Star Wars franchise on the 60 million or so citizens with disposable income and Internet-ready mobile phones.

Analysts point to mobile subscriptions for less than S\$20 a year, ubiquitous smartphones and a captive audience quarantined at home by the Covid-19 outbreak as laying the groundwork for rapid growth in the video-on-demand segment.

South-east Asia's market for streaming will be worth US\$1.4 billion (\$1.9 billion) by the end of the year, and will more than double to US\$3.6 billion by 2025, helped by ballooning demand, according to consultancy Media Partners Asia.

During the 10 weeks from mid-March to the

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A television still of variety show, S-style Show, that is screened on IQIYI.
PHOTO: IQIYI

middle of June, viewers in a cross section of the region's biggest streaming markets – Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines – were bingeing on a combined 5.1 billion minutes of subscription-based on-demand programming a week. During the previous 10-week period, the tally was less than half that.

Mr Vivek Couto, co-founder of Media Partners Asia, believes Disney's entry into South-east Asia will spark another round of rapid growth. "We are still in the first innings," he says.

Disney will challenge Netflix for its dominant position in the still small pool of subscribers. For now, Netflix has a 44 per cent market share of the streaming minutes in South-east Asia.

Viu, from Hong Kong's PCCW Media, which leans heavily on South Korean dramas, accounts for a fifth of the market, Media Partners Asia says. Line TV, which is big in Thailand, Vidio, iFlix, GoPlay and a host of others divvy up the rest.

Netflix has said it has 22.5 million subscribers in all of Asia and Australia, although it does not break down the data further.

By comparison, an estimated 150 million in South-east Asia regularly shop online, according to the 2019 e-Economy report published by Google, Temasek and management consultancy Bain & Company.

In May, Disney Channel, Disney XD and Disney Junior stopped broadcasting on Singtel and StarHub. Disney+ has notched up 60.5 million subscriptions in North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. A roll-out in more markets is in store, but Disney won't say when.

SURVIVOR, THE VIDEO

When it comes to facing off with entertainment giants, Netflix, which started as a DVD rental business, says it has seen this movie before.

"We've faced competition before," says Ms Myleeta Aga Williams, director of content for South-east Asia and Australia for Netflix. "It's always been about content that works for us."

Driving subscriptions are rock-bottom fees. Disney+ is charging 39,000 rupiah (\$3.60) a month, undercutting Netflix's 54,000 rupiah.

Getting bigger on the horizon, too, are rival offerings from Chinese streaming services.

In June, China's Tencent bought the loss-making streaming service iFlix to beef up its WeTV business, which is already available in Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines.

Earlier that same month, IQiyi, (pronounced eye-chi-i), from Internet giant Baidu, headhunted a top Netflix regional manager of government relations.

However, a shake-out has already begun. Hooq Digital, set up in January 2015 by Singtel, Warner Brothers and Sony Pictures, folded in April.

And there are regulatory headaches, too. In May, Indonesia's biggest private broadcaster, MNC, which is iFlix's local partner, sued in the country's Constitutional Court to halt all social media live streaming and video-on-demand services unless the platforms are held to the same permit requirements as broadcasters. The government opposes the suit.

So far, the region's consumers are taking two subscriptions on average per household, compared with four in Australia.

Even at that rate of adoption, some services will be elbowed out. "If there are four or five survivors," Mr Couto says, "who are they going to be?" **ST**

MAIN PLAYERS IN THE REGION

DISNEY+

Disney+ Hotstar, which started in Indonesia on Sept 5, is offering mobile subscriptions for just 39,000 rupiah (\$3.60) a month. Users will get access to 7,500 Disney movies, including those from its Marvel franchise, as well as series episodes. It also offers 300 Indonesian titles. Seven Indonesian production houses have agreed to stream their upcoming releases directly to the Disney+ service.



NETFLIX

Netflix is defending its dominant position in South-east Asia with an additional 500 licensed titles from the region this year. More than 200 original series and films since it set up in the region in 2016 have helped give Netflix a 44 per cent market share of streaming minutes, according to Media Partners Asia data. However, that share is poised to shrink as Disney and Chinese providers, backed by Tencent and Baidu, enter the market.



VIU

Owned by Hong Kong telecoms company PCCW, Viu is a hit in Indonesia and Thailand and has about a fifth of the South-east Asian video-streaming market.

It specialises in Korean and other Asian titles and offers a mixed subscription and advertising model. Still, Viu risks being squeezed out by bigger competitors with thicker catalogues and deeper pockets.



Regional viewership

Here's a look at who is watching what in the region

MALAYSIA

Over 14 million people in Malaysia subscribe to streaming services, and this multicultural audience laps up everything from local Malay dramas to US horror shows.

Homegrown shows like *Arus Merah* and the *KL Special Force* series are available from regional provider iFlix, which also offers subscribers VIP access for a monthly fee of RM10 (\$\$3.30).

Stalwart Tonton has been streaming local movies and TV channels for free since 2010.

Korean drama fans get to watch their favourite oppas ("oppa" is a girl's form of address for an older brother or boyfriend) in *Goblin* or the acclaimed movie *Parasite* on Viu, from as little as RM8 a month.

Newcomer Dimsum focuses on Asian content including popular Chinese dramas like *Love Of Thousand Years*, the Korean series *At Eighteen*, and Thai comedies like *My Ambulance*.

Streaming giant Netflix has the highest fees, from RM17 a month. Its current top trending shows are Korean horror movie *Alive* and TV series *Record Of Youth*, with American comedy horror *The Babysitter Killer: Killer Queen* coming third.

Business looks set to grow. A million new subscribers were added last year alone, according to data analytics company Nielsen.

— Nadirah H. Rodzi, Malaysia Correspondent

THAILAND

The coronavirus pandemic has given a boost to video streaming as Thais stuck at home flocked online.

Viewership of *The Series Y*, which depicts romance between men, reportedly grew by five times in March on Line TV, a streaming platform offered by the Line messaging app.

Online viewers in Thailand have a multitude of options ranging from Line TV and AIS Play to WeTV by Chinese giant Tencent, Viu, as well as Netflix.

According to research firm Nielsen Media Thailand, 37 million unique users in the country watched content on streaming platforms in August. This is a 28 per cent jump from the monthly average of 29 million last year.

— Tan Hui Yee, Indochina Bureau Chief

PHILIPPINES

There are at least a dozen streaming services in the Philippines, including big names such as Netflix, Apple TV+, HBO Go, Amazon Prime Video, Fox+ and YouTube Premium.

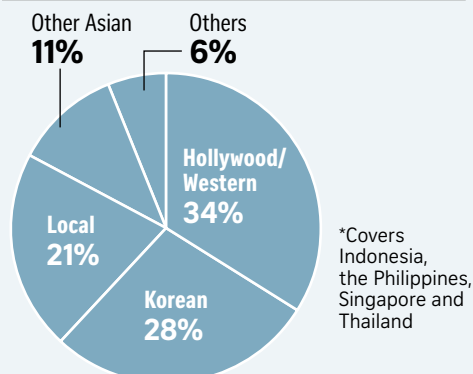
Homegrown iWant carries the biggest library of



Television remains king in the Philippines, drawing nine out of every 10 Filipinos. PHOTO: REUTERS

Most-watched programme genres in South-east Asia*

Share of streaming minutes for second quarter of 2020 (%)



Sources: AMPD RESEARCH, A SUBSIDIARY OF MEDIA PARTNERS ASIA
STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Filipino movies, alongside iFlix which also offers a slew of Filipino titles. Viu, HOOQ and Mubi are other contenders.

One estimate by a social media polling firm said some 30 million Filipinos have streamed movies, whether via free services or as paying customers.

Still, television remains king, drawing nine out of every 10 Filipinos. But with 73 million out of the total population of 110 million having Internet access, the Philippine market remains fertile for streaming services.

— Raul Dancel Philippines Correspondent



Entertainment

Netflix's *Never Have I Ever* stars Japanese-American actor Darren Barnet and Tamil-Canadian actress Maitreyi Ramakrishnan.
PHOTO: NETFLIX

Asian Americans on the rise

Tech and social media-savvy, they are shaping US and global pop culture

TECHNOLOGY-SAVVY AND HIGHLY ENGAGED ON social media, Asian Americans may be one of the most influential demographics when it comes to shaping entertainment trends in the United States and, by extension, the world.

This is according to data collected by Nielsen, the global media and consumer analytics firm. And its vice-president of strategic community alliances, Ms Mariko Carpenter, broke down some of its more interesting findings in a recent chat with *The Straits Times*.

Asian Americans made up just 5.6 per cent of the US population in the country's last census in 2010, but they now exert an outsized influence on its film, television and news programming, as well as being integral to the fast-growing e-sports or video gaming industry worldwide.

Ms Carpenter attributes this to the fact that compared with the general American population, the community – the fastest-growing racial or ethnic group in the US – spends significantly more time on digital devices such as smartphones and gaming devices than it does watching live television.

And because its viewing patterns tend to favour titles with ethnically diverse casts and Asian-led stories, Hollywood has been spurred to produce more culturally varied content, she believes.

Nielsen found that Asian Americans – about a quarter of whom were of Chinese origin as of 2015,



Vietnamese-American actress Lana Condor (centre) leads the cast of *To All The Boys: P.S. I Still Love You*. PHOTO: NETFLIX

followed by Indians (20 per cent) and Filipinos (19 per cent) – are more likely to be early adopters of new technology and media platforms compared with the general population.

This digital savvy springs from the fact that “the influence on them from Asia is huge”, says the executive, who co-authors the reports that Nielsen publishes on Asian-American consumers, which it shares with media and retail clients as well as manufacturers.

“If you think about all the immigrants coming to this country, they left a world with apps such as WeChat, where you are buying a pair of jeans online or looking up an article or transferring money or shopping at one of the big e-commerce stores in China.

“So they come here being already very advanced when it comes to technology,” says the New York-based Japanese American.

Asian immigrants also use technology to stay in touch with their home countries and cultures, she adds – “to connect to content that’s not readily available

ALISON DE SOUZA

In Los Angeles



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here or to family abroad because we are bicultural.”

As gamers, spectators and content creators, Asian Americans are also over-represented in an entertainment industry that has seen exponential growth since the coronavirus lockdowns: e-sports and video gaming, which have strong ties to China, home of the world’s largest game company Tencent.

For example, Nielsen noted that Asian Americans are 14 per cent more likely to own a gaming console and 37 per cent more likely to own virtual-reality headsets that are mainly used for gaming.

And two of the 10 highest-paid gamers in the world – Mark Edward Fischbach and Evan Fong – are Asian American, as is another popular figure, Jeremy Wang.

But perhaps the most subtle way the Asian-American community is influencing popular culture is through its support for more ethnically diverse content in Hollywood.

This can be seen in the popularity of films and shows with Asian stars – romantic comedy hits such as *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and the *To All The Boys I’ve Loved Before* series (2018 to present) as well as the TV show *Fresh Off The Boat* (2015 to 2020), not to mention the growing list of Asian-American comedians finding success, including Ali Wong, Jimmy O. Yang and Jo Koy.

The report noted that in 2007, the percentage of Asian-speaking characters in US films was 3.4 per



A cinema still of romantic comedy hit *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018).
PHOTO: WARNER BROS

cent. By 2018, that number had grown to 8.2 per cent.

And because Asian Americans engage on social media more than the general population and are not shy about touting their favourite shows, they are often instrumental to these titles and names taking off.

This has not gone unnoticed in Tinseltown. Streamers such as Netflix are also globally promoting content made in Asia, such as the reality series *Terrace House* (2012 to present) and *Indian Matchmaking* (2020), and Asian-American viewers have helped these become hits in the US.

In publishing this data, Nielsen hopes that US content creators and marketers will finally give Asian consumers – a previously neglected segment of the market – the attention they deserve.

“We want to promote an understanding of our community and the contributions we make not just to the economy and society, but the cultural landscape as well.” [SI](#)

Asian-American influencers

The crossover comedy stars

The already long list of prominent Asian Americans in stand-up comedy continues to grow, with a few successfully crossing over to film and television too.

They include Ali Wong, who made a splash with her 2016 Netflix special *Baby Cobra* before co-writing and starring in the romantic comedy film *Always Be My Maybe* (2019); and Jimmy O. Yang, who starred in the acclaimed comedy series *Silicon Valley* (2014 to 2016) and debuted a stand-up special on Amazon Prime Video, *Good Deal*, earlier this year.

Comedic rapper and actress Awkwafina, who stole scenes in 2018’s *Crazy Rich Asians*, also established herself as a credible dramatic actress with her Golden Globe-nominated turn in the comedy-drama *The Farewell* (2019).

Mindy Kaling, the Emmy-nominated writer and star of *The Office* (2005 to 2013), was the first Asian-American TV showrunner with her sitcom *The Mindy Project* (2012 to 2017) and is now a prolific TV producer.



Hong Kong-American actor and stand-up comedian Jimmy O. Yang.
PHOTO: AMAZON PRIME VIDEO

Mindy Kaling, the Emmy-nominated writer and star of *The Office* (2005 to 2013).
PHOTO: UNIVERSAL NETWORKS INTERNATIONAL



The actors turned producers

Randall Park (*Fresh Off the Boat*, right), Steven Yeun (*The Walking Dead*, 2010 to 2016) and Daniel Dae Kim (*Lost*, 2004 to 2010) have all turned their hand to producing.

Kim’s production company is responsible for the hit medical drama *The Good Doctor* (2017 to present), while Park and Yeun have inked coveted production deals with 20th Century Fox Television and Amazon Studios respectively.



PHOTO: NETFLIX

The gamers

In the billion-dollar world of video-game playing – which can involve competitions or just streaming one’s gameplay online – two of the top 10 highest-paid gamers on the planet are Asian American: Mark Edward Fischbach (right), known as Markiplier, and Evan Fong, known as VanossGaming.

Jeremy Wang, known as Disguised Toast, is another famous Asian-American gamer with a massive fan base.



PHOTO: MARKIPLIER/INSTAGRAM



ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

Big Picture

Inside Apple's new floating store in Singapore

APPLE HAS UNVEILED ITS WORLD'S FIRST floating spherical store at Marina Bay Sands.

Surrounded by emerald waters and built entirely of glass, Apple Marina Bay Sands (MBS) is made up of 114 pieces of reinforced glass held together by 10 narrow mirror-like columns known as mullions.

Store visitors get a 360-degree view of Marina Bay, from the ArtScience Museum to Marina Bay Financial Centre to the wide open sea, and encounter no sharp corners or obstructive columns while inside the orb.

Apart from showcasing Apple products, the

interior of the dome holds the Forum, an events space centred on a video wall which will serve as the stage for Apple's in-store events, featuring artists, musicians and creators.

Apple Marina Bay Sands, Apple's third store after Orchard Road and Jewel Changi Airport, also features baffles – spherical strips of metal that act as massive blinds – that protect visitors' eyes from the sun's blinding rays and create a night-time lighting effect.

An oculus or clear space in the ceiling lets in shafts of light for a touch of drama. **ST**

– The Straits Times

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