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Australia and Climate Change: The Changing Weather in Climate Politics

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The rise of Julia Gillard as Australia's prime minister has given Kevin Rudd the dubious honour of being probably the first political leader to fall victim to climate change. What does this mean for Asia's drive to tackle global warming?

AUSTRALIA'S new prime minister Julia Gillard has called for fresh federal elections on August 21, following her take-over as leader of the Labour Party from Kevin Rudd. The coming elections will be Labour's first popularity test since the disastrous climate change summit in Copenhagen in December 2009. That led to an end in Rudd's premiership after only three years. Unsavoury words have been used to describe his political demise – a stab in the back, a vicious political assassination, a nasty coup, just to name a few. To be sure, there were many domestic reasons for his fall, though they largely had to do with his growing unpopularity. No matter how you call it, one thing is clear: Rudd is probably the first victim of climate change politics, at least in the Asia Pacific. On this score alone, the coming elections will bear significance as the region awaits to witness how the political impact of climate change unfolds -- starting with Australia.

Rudd's Climate Change Policy Revisited

Amongst the host of factors that undermined his standing was his climate change policy which faced resistance, post-Copenhagen. His fall will have repercussions beyond Australian politics -- including Southeast Asia -- as Gillard, his successor, seeks to roll back his geopolitical moves and moulds her own foreign policy.

When Rudd won the federal elections in 2007, he linked his victory to Australians' growing concern for climate health. He described climate change as the greatest moral challenge facing Australians today. Indeed, Australia is one of the world's largest greenhouse gas emitters, with the economy driven substantially by coal-related energy. On assuming power, Rudd pushed for a cap in Australia's

emission of greenhouse gases. Australians bought into the climate change rhetoric as they realised how global warming could eventually haunt them through famine, worsening drought and rising sea levels. Rudd soon pitched his popularity to the 2009 Copenhagen Summit by pledging Australia's emissions caps.

In so doing, Rudd was one of the very few political leaders who pushed for a global campaign for climate change. Tragically for him, the Copenhagen Summit proved a disaster and Rudd paid the price. A Lowy Institute poll found that public sentiment in Australia shifted away from a strongly pro-climate change policy.

Australian mining companies, which wield a strong influence on the economy, balked at the move to introduce an emissions tax that would directly hit their bottomline. This forced a delay of Rudd's Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) till at least 2012 and put pressure on Labour to contain its declining popularity. Rumours flew that Gillard, who was then Rudd's deputy, was not loyal to him -- an accusation Gillard took strong exception to. The upshot was an internal party challenge to Rudd's leadership. The issue was settled when Rudd surprisingly stepped aside when he realised that the core party leadership had deserted him for Gillard. The coming elections will test whether Gillard has the backing of the electorate for her controversial rise to power -- as well as for her stand on climate change, which is expected to be a major campaign issue.

New PM's Climate Change Policy

The new PM clearly has to pursue Australia's climate policy differently. She has gone on record as saying that she believes in climate change. In other words she is saying she is not a climate sceptic. But while her commitment to climate policy is not as strong as Rudd's, she cannot completely abandon it either. Certainly, she does not want to pursue it in a way that will cost her votes in the coming elections. So she is likely to go slow on the unpopular ETS. PM Gillard is also likely to pursue energy efficiency more than any radical moves at cutting greenhouse gases.

What is clear is that Australia under the new PM will not be a champion of climate change policy to tackle global warming. Her predecessor's aggressive policy would have raised Canberra's international profile. But Australia under Gillard will not be pursuing such ambitions to boost Canberra's position as a regional power. Her declaration not to follow through with Rudd's "big Australia" immigration policy will also mean no "big Australia" ambitions on the world stage -- climate change posturing included.

Asia Pacific Community

In this context, Rudd's incipient foreign policy of pursuing an Asia Pacific Community (APC) will also see a reversal. Gillard will be a more inward-looking leader without pretensions for a global role for Australia. This will make ASEAN more comfortable.

When Rudd came to power and floated the idea of an Asia Pacific Community, many in the ASEAN capitals were none too pleased. The proposal proved worrying for its exclusivist aim of involving mainly the "key nations" in the region such as the United States, China, Japan, India and Indonesia. ASEAN felt threatened because it sees Australia as usurping its role as driver of the Asia Pacific regional architecture. Rudd's exclusion of ASEAN as a group -- Indonesia was to be invited in its own right -- would marginalise ASEAN's central role in geostrategic system-building.

Given the ruffled feathers in the ASEAN capitals, the APC idea eventually got watered down. It has now shifted -- to paraphrase the symbolically significant language of Singapore's Foreign Minister George Yeo -- from a potential "Community" with a big "C" to a "community" with a small "c".

New Climate Change Posture?

By implication, the rise of Gillard means that the small “c” could also suggest a smaller profile in international climate change policy. A more inward-looking Australia under Gillard will tone down Canberra’s climate change diplomacy. But there is nothing to prevent her from stepping it up again should she win a big mandate in the coming elections. If and when she does so, will she be tempted to revive Rudd’s ambition of a bigger, and more influential Australia – including in climate change diplomacy? Should that happen, it would be instructive to see how ASEAN reacts.

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