Tuning into a world of protests

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FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

URING protests in Bangkok some weeks back, I listened to music, picked up some souvenirs and had a milky Thai tea. The mood was carnival but shrill whistles and placards with slogans like "Thaksin Get Out" make clear the political point.

I felt safe enough in the shut-down centre of the city. But earlier, I had passed a side street where an explosion had injured dozens just 48 hours earlier. I went through Bang Na a day before a vocal protestor was shot.

These are not the first protests in Bangkok. Back in 2006, there were weeks of angry protests against then premier Thaksin Shinawatra, followed by a coup. I stood in the crowd as speakers hurled angry accusations and the day after the military took control, stood outside Government House next to tanks and gun-toting soldiers.

Those curious about glaciers or the roots of Western civilisation must journey beyond our island. Travel allows us to learn about things that aren't available in Singapore. Similarly, for those keen to understand human nature and politics, protest may be something else to see first-hand.

In many parts of the world, there is the notion that ideas can be expressed in the street without threat to civil order. Whether it is Hyde Park, Harvard Square or in front of Notre Dame, public demonstrations are common even if there have been past incidents of violence. Yet our history has taught Singaporeans to fear that protests quickly devolve into riots and recent events in Little India remind us of possible conflagration.

The state's approach to public assembly has nevertheless evolved. In the 1990s, a non-partisan group called the Roundtable (of which I was then a member) proposed having selected tree-speech venues. The Government introduced the Speakers' Corner at Hong Lim Park although, at first, this was little used. As Nomination MP, I was among those who believed that the corner might develop. Today, the park sometimes overflows. In recent years, we have witnessed revolutionary power of the streets worldwide, from Egypt and the "Arab Spring" to the Ukraine. Street protests are also well-attested in Asia. The angry Asian citizen is a growing factor to reckon with, for better or worse.

Flames envelop a Ukrainian protestor behind burning barricades during clashes with police in Kiev, Ukraine's capital, in February. In recent years, we have witnessed revolutionary power of the streets worldwide, from Egypt and the "Arab Spring" to the Ukraine. Street protests are also well-attested in Asia. The angry Asian citizen is a growing factor to reckon with, for better or worse.

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With Mr Abe's party now controlling both the Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament, they fear such laws would too easily be passed. They were not reaching revolution. There are lessons of civility and of civil and political rights in this example, to allow and also control a demonstration. Yet things can go wrong even in peaceful protests.

At one point, I was at the World Trade Organisation minister's meeting in Seattle. Trade meetings are often technical and quite secretive. But in Seattle, the streets were filled with more than 40,000 labour unionists who felt that globalisation was taking their jobs, joined by activists from green groups who decried environmental harms.

Violence broke out before my eyes. Protestors smashed storefront windows at Nike World, already shut in anticipation of problems. Orchestrated by a core of anarchists, they closed down key intersections and even detained government officials. Seattle police responded with tear gas, and the National Guard was called up for "the Battle of Seattle".

Even societies that had little culture of protests can quickly gain a taste for taking to the streets. In Hong Kong, protests there grew after the 2001 controversy about the Basic Law that brought 500,000 to the streets. Since then, the annual July 1 rally quite usually matches 100,000. Smaller protests are also common, like one in February for media freedom.

Some may succeed in making their voices heard powerfully and yet peacefully. But violence can be stoked. The truth is that not all societies in Asia are ready with the habits and discipline I saw in Tokyo. Some may also actively provoke protests to lead to a revolution, without care of the costs. In disruption or, worse, lives...