



## Asia

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### North East Asia

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➔ **China/Japan** China maintained naval activity in East China Sea, while Japan strengthened defence posture amid regional threats.

*Beijing continued maritime presence.* As of 28 Jan, Japan spotted 105 Chinese vessels in Japan's contiguous zone, with six vessels detected in Japan's territorial sea. Japan's Coast Guard 11 Jan urged four Chinese vessels to leave its territorial waters, which marked first time Chinese coast guard ships entered such waters since 18 Dec. Japanese, South Korean and U.S. navies 16 Jan held three-day trilateral maritime exercise off South Korea's Jeju Island to bolster regional security.

*Tokyo continued military build-up.* Tokyo late Dec approved record increase in defence spending for 2024, accelerating deployment of long-range cruise missiles, amid perceived regional threats. Japan 18 Jan signed deal with U.S. to purchase up to 400 Tomahawk cruise missiles. Japan late Dec revised arms export guidelines to enable Patriot missile systems to be delivered to U.S. for onward transfer to Ukraine, prompting Russia to warn move could have "grave consequences" for bilateral relations.

↓ **Korean Peninsula** Inter-Korean tensions escalated after North Korea fired artillery near South Korean island and formally dropped goal of unification, signalling Pyongyang's intention to stoke tensions on peninsula in 2024.

*North and South Korea exchanged fire at sea, raising risk of major crisis.* North Korea starting 5 Jan fired more than 200 rounds of artillery shells into seas around South Korean island of Yeonpyeong. In response, South Korea same day launched more than 400 artillery shells into same waters, having ordered civilians to seek shelter on island. Incident follows collapse in Nov 2023 of agreement reached at Sept 2018 inter-Korean summit, which had prohibited artillery fire in area, and may indicate North Korea's intention to drastically raise tensions by manufacturing conditions for deadly clash in West Sea – scene of past deadly maritime escalations.

*North Korean leader took aim at reunification.* Leader Kim Jong Un 15 Jan announced that Supreme People's Assembly "newly legalised the policy of [North Korea] toward the south on the basis of putting an end to the nearly 80 year-long history of inter-Korean relations and recognising the two states both existing on the Korean peninsula"; Kim also called for reinforcement of land border with south, dissolved institutions dealing with inter-Korean relations, and urged constitutional revision to eliminate references such as "northern half" of peninsula. Moves mark

most assertive measures against South Korea in recent years, likely aimed at countering Seoul's soft power, exerting pressure on U.S. and south in election year and diminishing public resistance to war; steps nonetheless are reversible and align with Kim's framework for reunification through federation – one state under two systems.

*Pyongyang conducted weapons testing.* Pyongyang 14 Jan tested solid-fuel hypersonic missile with intermediate range and 19 Jan conducted test of nuclear-capable underwater attack drone. North Korea 24, 28 and 30 Jan test fired cruise missiles into waters off western coast.

*Russia and North Korea continued engagement.* North Korean FM Choe Son Hui 16 Jan met Russian President Putin in Russian capital Moscow in bid to “strengthen strategic and tactical cooperation”. UK 22 Jan presented fresh evidence to UN indicating transfer of North Korean weapons to Russia for Ukraine war.

➡ **Taiwan Strait** **Taiwan's incumbent party won unprecedented third presidential term, as China downplayed result and refrained from significantly intensifying military activity around island.**

*Democratic Progress Party (DPP) won presidential election.* Taiwan's incumbent DPP secured historic third term in 13 Jan presidential poll, which elected William Lai as new president having emerged with 40% of vote; DPP, however, did not secure majority in Legislative Yuan as it won only 51 seats, while opposition Kuomintang won 52, likely reflecting voters' frustration over domestic issues. In response, China same day dismissively stated election result “does not represent mainstream opinion in Taiwan” and reiterated commitment to complete national unification. Taiwan's senior representative in U.S. 19 Jan described status quo as “neither unification, neither independence”; Chinese embassy 23 Jan responded that “independence forces are trying to stoke confrontation and antagonism”.

*China maintained military activity in Taiwan Strait.* As of 29 Jan, Taiwan detected 318 Chinese military aircraft around island, of which 89 either crossed unofficial “median line” or were detected inside Taiwan's air defence identification zone – approximately on par with activity in Dec; notably, over thirteen planes 27 Jan crossed “median line”. Taiwan spotted 132 Chinese navy vessels in surrounding waters. Taiwan reported significant increase in balloons from China crossing “median line”, tallying at least 22 in Jan compared to seven in Dec. Taiwan's Defence Ministry 9 Jan issued nationwide emergency alert after China launched satellite which passed through Taiwan's airspace. *USS Carl Vinson* aircraft carrier 11 Jan deployed east of Taiwan; *USS John Finn* destroyer 24 Jan transited Taiwan Strait.

*U.S. maintained diplomatic support; Nauru severed ties with Taiwan.* Senior U.S. delegation 14 Jan met with political leaders in Taiwan, expressing concern about stability in strait. U.S. House of Representatives 12 Jan passed “Taiwan Non-Discrimination Act of 2023” and “PROTECT Taiwan Act” aimed at advocating Taiwan's membership of International Monetary Fund and countering Beijing's efforts to exclude island from financial institutions. Meanwhile, Pacific nation Nauru 15 Jan severed ties and aligned with China, leaving Taiwan with just twelve states recognising it; Pacific island Tuvalu late Jan signalled it would review ties with Taiwan after its own election.

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## South Asia

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➔ **Afghanistan** Islamic State's local branch launched multiple attacks across country and in neighbouring Iran, while Taliban authorities made first arrest under draconian 2022 decree on women's dress.

*After short pause, Islamic State resumed deadly attacks.* In its first attack of 2024 following pause since mid Nov 2023, Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-KP) 4 Jan beheaded Taliban member in Kunar province (north east). IS-KP 6 Jan conducted explosive strike in capital Kabul's Dasht-e Barchi district, which killed two and injured over a dozen. Suicide explosion 14 Jan rocked office of provincial governor in Nimruz province (south west), killing three security guards; although unclaimed, it also bore hallmarks of IS-KP. Relatedly, IS-KP claimed twin bombings in Iran's Kerman city that killed scores (see Iran).

*Taliban enforced conservative dress rules on women.* Reports 2 Jan surfaced that Taliban authorities had arrested women in Kabul for violating religious hijab-wearing rules, marking first reported arrest for such violation since May 2022 decree enforcing rules; Taliban officials claimed women were detained and released on bail after male relatives had been informed. Meanwhile, crackdown on political space continued: reports indicated that Taliban authorities had arrested over dozen Hizb-ut-Tahrir members in Takhar province (north) as part of broader crackdown on group.

*Pakistan and Afghanistan took steps to repair ties, but bilateral tensions remained.* Acting Deputy Defence Minister Shirin Akhund 3 Jan visited Pakistan for meetings with senior Pakistani officials. Pakistani politician Fazal-ur-Rehman 7 Jan visited Kabul; unconfirmed reports claimed Rehman was granted audience with Taliban emir, making him only the second foreign dignitary to meet Taliban leader in recent years. Talks followed months of tension between two countries over anti-Pakistan militants growing active in borderlands, but issue remains unresolved.

*Norway and UK engaged diplomatically with Taliban.* Norway's Chargé d'Affaires to Afghanistan Paul Klouman Bekken 9 Jan met Taliban's Deputy FM for Political Affairs Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai. UK's Chargé d'Affaires to Afghanistan Robert Dickson 12 Jan met Stanekzai; Dickson stated bilateral "engagement will be further enhanced in the future".

➔ **Bangladesh** Ruling Awami League won fourth consecutive election marred by low turnout and boycott by main opposition party, while insecurity and hardship continued in Rohingya refugee camps.

*Awami League secured massive majority in largely uncontested election.* Awami League 7 Jan secured 222 of 300 elected seats in national parliament, awarding PM Sheikh Hasina another five-year term that marks her fourth consecutive and fifth overall election victory; Awami League members who ran as "independent" won additional 61 seats. Poll, however, was uncompetitive as main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) boycotted vote following arrest of most of its party leaders since Oct. Officials claimed turnout was 42%, although many suspected real figure was as low as 28%. Voting on 7 Jan passed without major incident, although violence occurred between supporters of official Awami League candidates and those

standing as independents. Potential arson on train in capital Dhaka 5 Jan killed four, which govt blamed on BNP, while police arrested Awami League youth leader after he 15 Jan allegedly hacked to death BNP supporter in Mymensingh city. After vote, U.S., UK and Canada said poll fell short of democratic standards, while India, China and Russia enthusiastically supported its outcome; threat of U.S. sanctions appeared to recede. Hasina now faces challenge of navigating crisis of declining foreign currency reserves and high inflation. While election marks major blow to BNP, party announced plans to hold “black flag” processions countrywide on 30 Jan to coincide with first session of new parliament; although party was able to reopen head office in Dhaka, Hasina before poll hinted at further crackdowns, including possible deregistration of party.

*Insecurity and hardship continued in Rohingya refugee camps.* Newly-appointed FM Hasan Mahmud 14 Jan signalled support for proposed repatriation pilot project to return 3,000 refugees to Myanmar’s Rakhine state; heavy fighting in Rakhine, however, cast doubt over returns (see Myanmar). Meanwhile, police said armed and criminal violence 4-16 Jan killed four refugees. UN 23 Jan reported at least 569 Rohingya dead or missing in attempts to flee Bangladesh/Myanmar in 2023, highest toll since 2014. Following election, national newspapers displayed growing anti-Rohingya sentiment.

➔ **India Ethnic conflict in Manipur state in north east showed no sign of ending, security forces stepped up anti-Maoist operations in centre, and regional competition with China came into focus amid ongoing border dispute.**

*Deadly attacks persisted in Manipur.* Authorities 11 Jan recovered bodies of three people from Meitei community after four went missing previous day. Gunfight on border of Imphal West and Kangpokpi districts 17 Jan killed Meitei village volunteer; Meiteis 20-22 Jan held strike in protest. Armed assailants 17 Jan killed two police personnel in Moreh district, forcing state govt to ask central govt to send helicopters. Mob 17 Jan tried to attack police headquarters in Thoubal district, with three security forces personnel wounded from gunfire. Unidentified gunmen 18 Jan killed three Meitei men on Bishnupur-Churachandpur district border. Gunfight between armed Meiteis and Kuki tribals 27 Jan killed Kuki village defence volunteer in Kangkokpi district. Army chief 11 Jan said insurgent groups operating in Myanmar were seeking to cross into India to set up bases.

*Chhattisgarh state (centre) witnessed uptick in anti-Maoist operations.* Shootout between Maoists and security forces 1 Jan killed six-month-old baby and injured mother in Bijapur district. Security forces 12 Jan killed Maoist commander in Bijapur. Security forces 20 Jan killed three Maoists, including two women, in Bijapur. Clashes 30 Jan killed three paramilitary soldiers. In state capital Raipur, Home Minister Amit Shah 21 Jan urged security forces to eradicate Maoism within three years. In Jharkland state (east), suspected Maoists 8 Jan set ablaze several vehicles near mine in Gumla district.

*Amid border dispute, strategic competition with China heightened in Indian Ocean.* Army chief 11 Jan described situation along disputed “Line of Actual Control” as “stable but sensitive”, saying priority was to continue talks with Beijing and return to state quo ante before 2020 clashes. Indian media 14 Jan reported that Indian and

Chinese forces had clashed on two occasions in 2022, which were previously undisclosed. In sign of strategic competition spilling into region, Maldives President Muizzu's staff 14 Jan reaffirmed decision that Indian military personnel must leave country by 15 March; move followed Muizzu's five-day state visit to China 7 Jan, where pair agreed to elevate ties.

➔ **India-Pakistan (Kashmir) Militant activity remained at low ebb in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), while mandate of grassroots body of representatives expired as new regional elections remained in doubt.**

*Militant attacks and security operations remained at low ebb due to winter.* Security forces and militants 3 Jan engaged in gun battle in Kulgam district. Security forces 4 Jan arrested Hizbul Mujahideen militant from New Delhi. Security forces 5 Jan killed alleged Lashkar-e-Tayyaba militant in Shopian district. Authorities 21 Jan arrested juvenile harbouring militants. During annual press conference, India's army chief 11 Jan claimed "increase in terrorism" in last five-six months in J&K's Rajouri and Poonch districts, describing it as "one area our adversaries have been active in"; he claimed security forces killed 45 militants in last three years in area, while militants killed seven soldiers in Kashmir valley and twenty in Rajouri-Poonch area in same period. Security forces 27 Jan busted module of cross-border arms smuggling and arrested five militant associates in Kupwara district.

*Terms of grassroots political representatives expired.* Mandate of 28,000 grassroots representatives elected in 2018 to first-ever three-tier system of representation in J&K officially ended on 9 Jan after completion of five-year term, bringing end to last semblance of political representation in region; calls continued for regional assembly election to be held this year, last of which was held in 2014, but no date has been set.

*Govt banned two separatist organisations.* Ministry of Home Affairs 27 Dec declared Muslim League Jammu Kashmir "an unlawful association" for five years under Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, accusing it of seeking to establish "Islamic rule in J&K". Ministry 31 Dec declared Tehreek-e-Hurriyat unlawful for five years under same law, alleging "terror activities to fuel secessionism in J&K".

*In other important developments.* India's Border Security Force 20 Jan seized consignment of arms and ammunition smuggled by drone, allegedly from Pakistan, in Punjab district. India 13 Jan protested UK High Commissioner to Islamabad's visit to Pakistan-administered Kashmir, asserting "such infringement of India's sovereignty and territorial integrity is unacceptable". Pakistan's FM 25 Jan claimed "credible evidence" of links between Indian agents and 2023 killings of two Pakistanis in Pakistan; India rejected allegation.

➔ **Pakistan Iran and Pakistan launched tit-for-tat cross-border strikes on alleged insurgents, militants continued deadly attacks in provinces along Afghan border and country prepared for 8 Feb general election.**

*Iran launched cross-border strikes, prompting Pakistani retaliation.* Dispute erupted after Iran 16 Jan launched cross-border strikes on village in Balochistan's Panjgur district, claiming to target "strongholds" of Jaish al-Adl – anti-Iranian Baloch militant group. Pakistan claimed strike killed two children and recalled its

ambassador in Tehran. Pakistan 18 Jan launched strikes on village near Iranian border city of Saravan, claiming to target Pakistani Baloch militants. De-escalating crisis, Tehran and Islamabad 29 Jan struck agreement on FM-level coordination mechanism and stationing military liaison officers at border.

*Militant attacks continued in provinces bordering Afghanistan, including on election candidates.* In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants 9 Jan killed six police constables and injured 28 in Bajaur district; militants next day shot dead three constables in Kohat district. Assailants 10 Jan shot dead election candidate in North Warizistan district. In Balochistan province, bomb 13 Jan killed five soldiers in Kech district. In Turbat town, assailants 25 Jan killed police constable in attack on election official's office. Baloch militants 30 Jan killed four security personnel and two civilians in Mach city. Meanwhile, Interior Ministry 2 Jan said over 500,000 Afghans had been "repatriated" under ongoing forcible deportation drive. Head of Deobandi party Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam –Fazl (JUI-F) 8 Jan met senior Afghan Taliban officials and, reportedly, the Emir (see Afghanistan).

*Opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) faced setbacks ahead of 8 Feb elections.* After former PM Imran Khan 26 Dec appealed to Supreme Court in bid to remove ban from public office ahead of polls, Khan's main competitor Nawaz Sharif 8 Jan overcame last legal hurdle to contest polls after Supreme Court overturned lifetime ban. Supreme Court 13 Jan upheld Election Commission ruling that denied PTI its recognisable election symbol; PTI candidates will now contest election as independents. In further blow to PTI, special court 30 Jan sentenced Khan to ten years imprisonment in diplomatic cable case; Khan's lawyers lodged appeal. In third conviction, court 31 Jan sentenced Khan to fourteen years imprisonment for illegally selling state gifts.

➡ **Sri Lanka Govt began 2024 with raft of legislation to expand powers of surveillance and repression and advance its contested reconciliation agenda, while police crackdown on drugs led to tens of thousands of arrests.**

*Govt moved to retain and expand surveillance powers.* Parliament 24 Jan passed govt's Online Safety Bill, despite uncertainty whether it included amendments required by earlier Supreme Court review; civil society and opposition parties criticised expansive powers law would afford state to regulate speech on social media, as opposition lawmaker labelled it "threat to our democracy". Global tech and social media companies 16 Jan urged govt to withdraw bill. Govt 10 Jan presented to parliament proposed Anti-Terrorism Act, which was only modestly changed from version first introduced in early 2023 that was roundly criticised; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) 19 Jan criticised new draft, while bill's constitutionality was challenged in numerous Supreme Court petitions.

*Govt sought to advance its reconciliation program amid opposition.* Govt 1 Jan publicised text of legislation to establish Commission for Truth, Unity and Reconciliation amid near unanimous opposition from survivors' groups and rights activists who view it as designed to win support at UN Human Rights Council. Parliament 9 Jan passed legislation to establish eleven-member "Office for National Unity and Reconciliation" despite opposition from most Tamil parliamentarians and many civil society groups. Police 4 Jan arrested and detained for eight days

prominent Tamil woman campaigner seeking truth about enforced disappearance of her son, following protest against President Wickremesinghe's visit to northern town of Vavuniya.

*Police faced criticism for heavy-handed drug crackdown.* Public Security Minister Tiran Alles continued to champion police operation which to date has led to arrest of over 40,000 suspected of using or selling drugs and detention in prison or "rehabilitation" centres of more than 3,000; while popular among some parts of public, OHCHR 12 Jan criticised "heavily security-based response to country's drug problem".

*International creditors recognised economic progress.* International Monetary Fund officials 19 Jan stated reforms had produced first signs of recovery but stressed importance of "sustaining the reform momentum".

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## South East Asia

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➔ **Myanmar** **Regime remained on backfoot as ethnic armed groups in north expanded control before agreeing to another tenuous ceasefire, while Arakan Army made major gains in west; regime extended state of emergency for six months.**

*Three Brotherhood Alliance seized territory in Shan State before partial ceasefire.* After collapse of China-brokered peace talks on 23 Dec, heavy clashes continued between Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) – member of Three Brotherhood Alliance – and regime in Kokang Self-Administered Zone in northern Shan State, where MNDAA seized full control of Laukkai town as 2,400 soldiers 3 Jan surrendered. Brotherhood Alliance 6 Jan attacked Hopang and Pan Lone towns in regime-controlled part of Wa Self-Administered Division. Concurrently, Brotherhood member Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) clashed heavily with regime forces in bid to solidify its control in northern Shan State, capturing Kutkai town on 7 Jan; TNLA consolidated its position around Lashio, Kyaukme and Hsipaw towns. Following third round of China-brokered talks, regime and Brotherhood Alliance 11 Jan agreed to ceasefire in northern Shan State; TNLA, however, 13 Jan accused regime of launching airstrikes in Kyaukme and Mogyoke townships.

*Arakan Army (AA) broadened its offensive in Rakhine.* With 11 Jan ceasefire not applying to Rakhine theatre, AA (member of alliance) 15 Jan captured all of Paletwa township and detained regime brigadier-general before expanding operations further south, forcing battalion of regime soldiers to surrender in Minbya on 17 Jan, and seizing Pauktaw town, close to state capital Sittwe, on 24 Jan.

*Hostilities persisted in Kachin and Kayah states.* After Kachin Independence Army (KIA) mid Dec captured two outposts in Kachin State from military and allied militia forces, KIA 3 Jan shot down regime Mi-17 transport helicopter near Laiza, killing six crew members. In Kayah, Karenni Nationalities Defence Force and other allied groups claimed to control more than 80% of state capital Loikaw.

*Regime extended state of emergency.* Despite devastating battlefield losses and unprecedented nationalist criticism of regime leader Min Aung Hlaing, regime

showed little sign of panic: Min Aung Hlaing 4 Jan announced plans to hold national census to improve voter list for general election. On eve of third anniversary of coup, regime 31 Jan extended state of emergency for six months.

➡ **Philippines** **Clan violence, rebel infighting and security operations continued in south, while security forces battled Communist insurgents.**

*Insecurity persisted in Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).* During reconciliation ceremony between members of Sinsuat clan in Cotabato city, shootout 3 Jan erupted between escorts of two prominent clan politicians. Bangsamoro regional police 15 Jan deployed personnel of elite Special Action Force in three towns in Lanao del Sur province and its provincial capital Marawi city to help local officials guard against clan wars and protect constituents from local terrorists. In Maguindanao del Sur province, armed men associated with Moro Islamic Liberation Front's (MILF) 105 and 106 Base Command 19 Jan clashed in Kulambog village, motivated by political rivalry. Security forces 26 Jan launched operations against jihadist group Daulah Islamiya in Lanao del Sur, killing nine militants – including two alleged suspects linked to deadly bombing in Marawi in Dec – and leaving four soldiers wounded.

*Clashes persisted between Communist rebels and military.* Clashes between govt forces and Communists in Luzon Island (Sorsogon) in north, Mindanao Island (Agusan del Norte) in south and Visayas Islands (Negros and Samar) in centre killed at least nine combatants and civilians.

➡ **South China Sea** **Amid mounting tensions, China and Philippines struck deal to improve maritime communication, while Manila sought to deepen military ties with Western partners.**

*Beijing and Manila brokered communication agreement.* China's military 3 Jan launched two-day routine patrol in SCS, concurrently as *USS Carl Vinson* began drills with Philippine navy; Philippines military 4 Jan reported two Chinese navy vessels shadowed Philippine and U.S. ships. Philippine Coast Guard revealed video purportedly showing China's Coast Guard harassing Philippine fishermen near Scarborough Shoal on 12 Jan; 27 Chinese maritime militia ships were spotted near Scarborough Shoal on 21 Jan. In rare move by regional leader, Philippines' President Marcos Jr. 15 Jan congratulated winner of Taiwan's presidential election and expressed hope for cooperation (see Taiwan Strait); China next day summoned Philippine ambassador, warned Manila "not to play with fire". Philippine military chief 15 Jan announced intention to develop islands and reefs in SCS to make them habitable for troops, including enhanced provisions for troops stationed at grounded warship on Second Thomas Shoal. Philippine Defence Secretary Teodoro Jr. 17 Jan announced country was planning "more robust" military activities with U.S. and its allies in face of "more aggressive" China. In positive step, Manila and Beijing 19 Jan brokered agreement to enhance maritime communication in SCS, aiming to defuse tensions and manage differences around contested areas.

*Philippines deepened defence ties with Western partners.* Philippines 11 Jan signed defence agreement with UK that could expedite Manila's military modernisation through access to UK's advanced weapons systems. German FM Annalena Baerbock 13 Jan met Marcos Jr. and FM Enrique Manalo and pledged €129mn assistance to coast guard, including additional drones for SCS operations; Baerbock expressed



concern over China's SCS activities. Philippines and Canada 19 Jan signed memorandum of understanding to enhance defence cooperation.

*Disputes between China and Vietnam came into focus.* U.S.-based research organisation early Jan reported presence of Chinese coast guard ship 5901 near Vietnam's oil exploration blocks at Vanguard Bank in SCS since early Dec. Vietnam 20 Jan asserted its claim over Paracel and Spratly Islands, prompting China 24 Jan to reiterate its own claims. Philippines and Vietnam 30 Jan agreed coast guard cooperation pact in SCS.

➡ **Thailand Constitutional Court ruled Move Forward Party's lèse-majesté stance unconstitutional, Court of Appeals handed activist 50-year prison sentence, and govt signalled talks with main southern separatist group may resume in Feb.**

*Constitutional Court ruled on cases concerning future of Move Forward Party.* After stunning victory in May 2023 general election, Move Forward Party's leader Pita Limjareonrat was suspended from MP duties due to allegations he broke election law by holding shares in media company during election campaign. Constitutional Court 24 Jan ruled Pita did not violate election regulations. Constitutional Court 31 Jan ruled that Move Forward Party's efforts to amend Section 112 of Criminal Code – the lèse-majesté law – violate constitution and must cease; verdict will likely trigger legal proceedings to dissolve party.

*Court sentenced activist to 50 years for lèse-majesté conviction.* Court of Appeals in Chiang Rai 18 Jan found Mongkol "Busbas" Thirakot, a 30-year-old activist, guilty of eleven counts of lèse-majesté associated with 27 Facebook posts, for which he was sentenced to three years imprisonment on each count, which combined with earlier convictions marked record sentence of 50 years. Bangkok criminal court 17 Jan convicted attorney Arnon Nampa of lèse-majesté for three Facebook posts from Jan 2021, sentencing him to four years imprisonment.

*Govt signalled potential return to southern dialogue amid militant attacks.* Deputy PM Somsak Thepsuthin 10 Jan met with Malaysia's General Zulkifli Zainal Abidin, facilitator of peace dialogue with main southern separatist armed group Barisan Revolusi Nasional; talks have been in abeyance for almost one year but govt's chief negotiator said he expected talks to resume in Feb. Meanwhile, four motorcycle-borne militants 10 Jan opened fire on Border Patrol Police (BPP) vehicle in Bannang Sata district, Yala province, injuring two officers. Militants next day ambushed BPP vehicle in Rueso district, Narathiwat province, killing lieutenant. IED attack 16 Jan damaged BPP vehicle in Sri Sakhon district, Narathiwat province, but caused no injuries.

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## **Pacific**

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↓ **Papua New Guinea Protests over surprise public sector wage cut sparked widespread rioting, killing at least 22 and forcing govt to declare state of emergency.**

Following unannounced docking of paycheques, which govt blamed on computer glitch, police and other civil servants 10 Jan declared strike and staged protest outside parliament in capital Port Moresby. Rioting and looting erupted throughout Port Moresby and Lae city, which observers blamed on opportunistic residents of poorer suburbs exploiting absence of police; unrest reportedly left 22 dead and caused extensive property damage. PM James Marape same day called in military and next day declared fourteen-day state of emergency, while suspending chief of police, who was reinstated 26 Jan. Marape 19 Jan announced cabinet reshuffle, facing prospect of no-confidence vote in Feb. Telecommunications Minister Timothy Masiu same day threatened social media shutdown over widespread misinformation around riots.