

Asia

North East Asia

➔ **China/Japan Tensions continued between Japan and China over contested island chain in East China Sea.** Japan's coast guard 13 Jan reported four Chinese ships temporarily entered Japanese territorial waters near disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Defence Minister Nobuo Kishi 14 Jan held online meeting with UK counterpart Ben Wallace to discuss regional issues; both leaders agreed to "strongly oppose" unilateral changes to status quo in East China Sea through force, and Kishi welcomed PM Johnson's Nov announcement to deploy carrier strike group led by UK's flagship HMS Queen Elizabeth to region in 2021. Incoming Japanese Ambassador to China Hideo Tarumi 20 Jan said Tokyo and Beijing should focus on fighting COVID-19 before holding high-level talks. Chinese govt 22 Jan passed Coast Guard Law allowing coast guard to use "all necessary means" to stop or prevent threats from foreign vessels to safeguard China's sovereignty, security and maritime rights. New U.S. Sec Def Lloyd Austin 24 Jan had first telephone call with Kishi during which he reaffirmed that Article 5 of U.S.-Japan security treaty, which stipulates U.S. defence obligations to Japan, covers Senkaku/Diaoyu islands; China 28 Jan responded that islands are "China's inherent territory".

➔ **Korean Peninsula North Korea held rare ruling party congress and reportedly unveiled new missile, while South Korea called for inter-Korean talks and urged U.S. to pursue dialogue.** North Korean leader Kim Jong-un 5-12 Jan held Eighth Party Congress of ruling Workers' Party – first since 2016 and second since 1980 – attended by 250 party executives, over 4,500 delegates and 2,000 spectators; Kim admitted his five-year economic plan had fallen short of goals "on almost every sector" and vowed to place "state defence capabilities on a much higher level", including by developing nuclear weapons and expanding diplomatic relations, while calling U.S. "biggest enemy". During congress, ruling party 10 Jan elected Kim as general secretary – assuming title enjoyed by his late father and grandfather; Chinese President Xi Jinping 11 Jan congratulated Kim. Congress 12 Jan concluded with Kim reiterating call for increased military power and "greater nuclear war deterrence". North Korea 14 Jan staged large military parade, displaying what appeared to be new submarine-launched ballistic missile described by state media as "world's most powerful weapon". South Korean President Moon Jae-in 11 Jan reaffirmed commitment to engagement with North Korea, said govt will also strengthen alliance with U.S.; Moon 18 Jan said incoming U.S. administration should hold talks with North Korea to build on progress made under former U.S. administration, and 20 Jan nominated former National Security Adviser Chung Eui-yong as FM. South Korean Supreme Court 14 Jan upheld former President Park Geun-hye's twenty-year prison term for bribery and other crimes. Seoul Central District Court 8 Jan ordered for first time Japan to compensate twelve South Korean "comfort women" forced to work as sex slaves during Japanese occupation; Japanese PM Suga said Japan could not accept ruling and lawsuit should be dropped.

➔ **Taiwan Strait Cross-strait tensions continued to run high amid U.S. lifting of four-decade-old restrictions on interactions with Taiwanese officials and ongoing Chinese military activity.** Outgoing U.S. Sec of State Mike Pompeo 9 Jan announced lifting of “self-imposed restrictions” on interactions with Taiwanese officials which had been in place since 1979; China 11 Jan strongly condemned move. Taiwanese presidential office 14 Jan said President Tsai Ing-wen and outgoing U.S. Ambassador to UN Craft had discussed deepening Taiwan-U.S. ties; in response, Chinese MFA 18 Jan announced sanctions on U.S. officials who have engaged in “nasty behaviour on the Taiwan issue”. Taiwan’s de facto ambassador in Washington D.C. 20 Jan attended U.S. President Biden’s inauguration ceremony with official invitation for first time since 1979. China’s Ministry of Defence 28 Jan warned “Taiwan independence” means war; U.S. same day reaffirmed “obligations under the Taiwan Relations Act”. Earlier in month, U.S. Assistant Sec of State for Political-Military Affairs Clarke Cooper 7 Jan held political and military dialogue with Taiwan. Meanwhile, Taiwanese defence ministry claimed series of Chinese military aircraft entered Air Defence Identification Zones (ADIZ) throughout month, including: one Y-8 electronic warfare aircraft, one Y-8 anti-submarine warfare aircraft, one Y-8 reconnaissance aircraft and one Y-9 electronic warfare aircraft 4 and 18 Jan; one KJ-500 airborne early warning and control aircraft 7 Jan; one Y-8 anti-submarine warfare aircraft and one Y-8 electronic warfare aircraft 12 Jan; one Y-8 tactical reconnaissance aircraft 20 Jan; eight Chinese bomber planes and four fighter jets 23 Jan; two Chinese Chengdu J-10 fighter jets 28 Jan; and seven military aircraft 31 Jan. In response, Taiwan scrambled jets, broadcast radio warnings and tracked planes with air defence system on each occasion. Tsai 1 Jan said Taiwan’s govt is ready to have “meaningful” dialogue with Beijing; China’s Taiwan Affairs Office same day rebuffed offer. Taiwanese military forces 19 Jan staged drill using tanks, mortars and small arms aimed at repelling attack from China. U.S. continued military activity in region; U.S. Navy surveillance drone 13 Jan flew within Taiwan’s ADIZ.

South Asia

↓ **Afghanistan Taliban stepped up deadly attacks on Afghan security forces, killing dozens; intra-Afghan peace talks resumed after short hiatus.** Taliban conducted attacks at high intensity despite winter weather that typically ushers in period of reduced violence; while there was no strategic shift in conflict dynamics, sustained high tempo of conflict could strain intra-Afghan peace process. Taliban infiltrators inside security forces perpetrated numerous attacks involving shootings and poisoning, including: 4 Jan killed nine forces in Kandahar province (south); next day killed seven soldiers in Ghazni province (centre); 8 Jan killed five soldiers in Herat province (west); and 15 Jan killed 13 police officers. Taliban 14 Jan also attacked security outposts in Baghlan (north), killing nine security personnel; repeat attack 18 Jan killed another nine. Taliban attacks on military bases and security posts in Kunduz province (north) 7, 15 and 19 Jan killed 49 security personnel. Meanwhile, Afghan forces backed by U.S. air support repelled Taliban advances around Kandahar city throughout month. Afghan air force bombing 9 Jan killed 18 civilians, mostly children, in Nimroz province (south west); govt allegedly attempted to cover up number of casualties prompting local protests in provincial capital Zaranje. Targeted killings by unidentified assailants continued: gunmen 1 Jan killed prominent local journalist Bismillah Adil Aimaq in

Ghor province (centre); gunmen 17 Jan killed two female Supreme Court judges in capital Kabul. As violence surged, First VP Amrullah Saleh 18 Jan declared “capital punishment is needed to stop the wave of terror”, referring to imprisoned Taliban fighters. Following three-week break, intra-Afghan negotiations resumed without making significant progress: U.S. envoy Zalmay Khalilzad 4-5 Jan returned to Qatar’s capital Doha to meet Taliban, then flew to Kabul to meet Afghan officials. President Ghani declined to meet with Khalilzad after reports he discussed possible interim govt with opposition political leaders. Following call between new U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Afghan counterpart Hamdullah Mohib 22 Jan, White House same day said Biden administration will review Feb 2020 agreement “to assess whether the Taliban was living up to its commitments”.

↓ **Bangladesh** **Deadly violence broke out amid local elections, while govt continued relocating Rohingya refugees to flood-prone island in Bay of Bengal.** Violent incidents erupted in lead-up to local elections for around 60 different municipal bodies; second phase of polls 16 Jan held across country. Gunfight between rival factions from Awami League (AL) party 12 Jan killed one and injured another in Chittagong city (south east), prompting arrest of 26 people, including rebel AL candidate; opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) mayoral candidate 26 Jan disclosed arrest of more than 200 activists, including polling agents. Internal AL clashes 27 Jan killed two. In west, armed clash between two AL factions next day left one injured in Rajhashi district; clash between two rival groups same day left at least twenty injured in Narayanganj district (centre) and killed at least two in Jhenaidah district (south west). BNP councillor candidate Tariqul Islam 16 Jan killed during clash between BNP and AL supporters in Sirajganj district (north-central) shortly after he was declared victorious. AL leader Afsar Sikder 18 Jan died, following beating previous day by supporters of rival party faction in Barisal district (south-central). Six 27 Jan injured in electoral violence in Jhalokathi district. Third and fourth round of local elections scheduled for 30 Jan and 14 Feb, respectively. In south east, gunfight between two rival Rohingya refugee groups in Cox’s Bazar’s Teknaf subdistrict 10 Jan killed one refugee and injured ten others; gunfight 26 Jan killed another refugee. UN 15 Jan reported that around 3,500 refugees “lost their homes and belongings” after a fire previous day destroyed over 500 shelters in Cox’s Bazar’s Nayapara camp. NGO Save the Children’s Bangladesh director 14 Feb said fire was “another devastating blow” for Rohingyas. Meanwhile, authorities continued transfer of Rohingya refugees from Cox’s Bazar District to Bhasan Char, low-lying flood-prone island in Bay of Bengal; relocated third and fourth batches of refugees, with over 1,700 sent on 29 Jan, despite longstanding concerns about living conditions on island and coercion in sending refugees there. Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal 6 Jan announced that unnecessary visitors would be barred from Bhasan Char.

➔ **India (non-Kashmir)** **Maoist-related violence persisted, protests against agriculture reforms left one dead, and small-scale tensions erupted at India-China border over unofficial boundary.** Anti-Maoist security operations and Maoist violence continued throughout month. In Chhattisgarh state (centre), security forces 13-19 Jan killed three Maoists in Dantewada and Bijapur districts; Maoists 14-30 Jan killed six civilians and two security personnel in Rajnandgaon, Bijapur, Kondagaon, Kanker and Narayanpur districts. In Jharkhand state (east), Maoists 16 and 17 Jan killed two civilians in Latehar and Chatra districts. In Odisha state (east), Maoists 30 Jan killed two civilians in Kandhamal district. In Maharashtra state (west), Maoists 5 Jan killed

civilian in Gadchiroli district. Tens of thousands of farmers continued to demonstrate throughout month on outskirts of capital New Delhi, calling on govt to repeal controversial agriculture laws; govt and farmers held several rounds of unsuccessful talks. Farmers 26 Jan rallied in New Delhi on Republic Day to protest govt agricultural reforms; one protester died and hundreds of demonstrators and police officers were injured in clashes, which climaxed with protesters storming city's historic Red Fort. Internationally, amid months-long border standoff with China, Indian army 8 Jan apprehended Chinese soldier who reportedly crossed Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh and 11 Jan handed him over to China. Indian and Chinese military officials 24 Jan held talks on disengagement of forces along LAC, agreeing to continue efforts to ensure "restraint of the front-line troops". Indian army 25 Jan said Indian and Chinese troops had been involved in "minor face-off" at Naku La pass in north-eastern Sikkim state on 20 Jan, adding that it was "resolved by local commanders". In Palk Strait between India and Sri Lanka, Indian fishing boat – allegedly engaged in illegal fishing in Sri Lankan waters – 18 Jan reportedly collided with Sri Lankan navy ship, causing it to sink and four fishermen to drown; India 21 Jan lodged "strong protest" with Sri Lanka. FM Subrahmanyam Jaishankar and Nepali FM Pradeep Gyawali 15 Jan reportedly discussed India-Nepal border dispute. India 1 Jan began its two-year tenure as non-permanent member of UN Security Council.

➔ **Kashmir India-Pakistan tensions continued as both sides accused each other of supporting terrorism amid military clashes along Line of Control (LoC, dividing Pakistan and Indian-administered Kashmir).**

Cross-LoC incidents continued throughout month. India claimed Pakistani cross-LoC fire 1 and 11 Jan killed one soldier and injured a child; said Pakistani firing 19 Jan responsible for injuring four soldiers and three militants killed during incident; also alleged two Indian soldiers killed 21 and 24 Jan. Pakistan claimed Indian cross-LoC fire 14 Jan killed one soldier; 10 and 22 Jan injured three civilians. Earlier in month, Pakistani FM Shah Mahmood Qureshi 9 Jan rejected accusation made by Indian external affairs ministry that it held "farfetched trials" of UN-designated individuals to avoid blacklisting by inter-govt agency Financial Action Task Force. U.S. State Department same day called on Pakistan to hold Lashkar-e-Jhangvi leader Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi "accountable for his involvement in terrorist attacks, including the Mumbai attacks"; Lakhvi previous day sentenced to three concurrent five-year sentences for terrorism financing in Pakistan. Pakistan's MFA 10 Jan expressed concern over India becoming chair of three key panels of UN Security Council including the Taliban sanctions and counter-terrorism committees, claimed that India is "state sponsor and perpetrator of terrorism" and "massive violator of human rights". In Jammu and Kashmir, militant attacks continued: grenade attack 2 Jan injured at least six civilians in Pulwama district; militant attack on security forces 6 Jan injured two civilians when grenade missed intended target in regional capital Srinagar. Militant grenade attack 27 Jan killed one soldier and injured three in Kulgam district. Qureshi 22 Jan said "the onus lies on India" to reverse steps and improve situation in Kashmir. Earlier in month, after family members claimed that security forces 30 Dec killed three civilians who had no links to militancy and demanded investigation into incident, Kashmir's police 1 Jan said three individuals had provided logistical support to militants. Police 10 Jan charged army captain with killing and branding three labourers as terrorists in Shopian district last July to claim reward money.

➔ **Nepal Amid anti-govt protests, Supreme Court continued to consider legality of PM KP Oli's Dec decision to dissolve lower house of parliament.** As Supreme Court considered cases against Oli's dissolution of parliament, court 28 Jan issued two contempt of court notices to PM after he 22 Jan mocked senior lawyers petitioning against dissolution; contempt of court notices also followed several statements by Oli calling on Supreme Court to rule in his favour, including 3 Jan claim that issue did not warrant judicial review. Street protests against Oli's move continued as faction of ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP) led by former PMs Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Madhav Kumar Nepal 22 Jan led demonstrations in capital Kathmandu; police response to 25 Jan civil society-led march on PM's residence widely criticised as heavy-handed as police beat peaceful demonstrators and used water cannons; opposition Nepali Congress and Janata Samajbadi Party both announced nationwide protests throughout first half of Feb. Election Commission 24 Jan decided not to recognise either of two competing factions of NCP – led by Oli on one side, and Dahal and Nepal on other – as legitimate wing of party, creating new legal uncertainties about party's future. Meanwhile, FM Pradeep Gyawali visited India 14-16 Jan to discuss bilateral cooperation but made no notable progress on boundary dispute, which had triggered May 2020 diplomatic standoff.

➔ **Pakistan Tensions between ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and opposition persisted while Islamic State (ISIS) claimed major attack on Hazara community.** Political tensions ran high between PTI govt and Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), 11-party opposition alliance including Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), as opposition held anti-govt rallies throughout month. Demonstrators 3 Jan gathered in Punjab province's Bahawalpur district, calling for PM Khan's resignation; 19 Jan held rally in capital Islamabad calling for an early ruling by Election Commission of Pakistan on 2014 case alleging PTI received funding from illegal foreign sources. Meanwhile, violence and militant attacks continued. In Balochistan province (south west), ISIS 3 Jan claimed responsibility for killing 11 miners from Hazara Shia community in Machh, small mining town. Protests by Shia political parties and other groups condemning killings were held countywide, including in Karachi city which has large Shia population. Khan 9 Jan met with Hazara delegate members in Balochistan's capital Quetta and reiterated claims that India was backing ISIS to ferment sectarian strife (see Kashmir). Also in Balochistan, militant attack on Frontier Corps checkpoint 9 Jan injured four in Turbat city. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (north west), cross-border attack by militants on checkpoint 6 Jan killed one soldier in Mohmand district; attack on polio vaccination team 12 Jan killed police officer in Karak district; militant attack 15 Jan killed soldier in North Waziristan district. Across border, bomb attack in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province 28 Jan reportedly killed chief of Pakistani militant group Lashkar-e-Islami. Supreme Court same day acquitted Omar Saeed Sheikh, principal accused in 2002 beheading of American journalist Daniel Pearl; in response, U.S. Sec of State Antony Blinken said U.S. was ready to prosecute Sheikh. Pakistani govt continued engagement in Afghan peace process; Pakistan FM 21 Jan urged incoming U.S. administration to "persevere" with peace process. Earlier, U.S. Afghanistan peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad 4 Jan met with army chief Javed Bajwa and Inter-Services Intelligence director general Lt. General Hamid, day before intra-Afghan talks resumed in Qatar's capital Doha. In confirmation hearing, new U.S. Sec Def General Lloyd Austin 12 Jan called Pakistan "essential partner in any peace process in Afghanistan".

➔ **Sri Lanka UN human rights office (OHCHR) issued highly critical report about country's trajectory and called on international support to avert future abuses.** OHCHR 27 Jan issued report – pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 40/1 – criticising country's failure “to address past violations” and “risk of human rights violations being repeated”: said govt “proactively obstructing investigations and trials” and called for “enhanced monitoring and strong preventive action” by international community; govt 27 Jan rejected report as “speculative, presumptive and unsubstantiated”, and beyond mandate given by Human Rights Council. Earlier in month, Tamil political parties, civil society groups and religious leaders 15 Jan jointly called for UN to establish international accountability mechanism and rejected domestic accountability process. President Gotabaya 21 Jan appointed Commission of Inquiry to review work of past commissions established to investigate human rights violations. Indian FM Subrahmanyam Jaishankar 6 Jan met with Gotabaya in capital Colombo; Jaishankar said it is in country's “own interest” that Tamil aspirations for “equality, justice, peace and dignity” are met, urged govt to maintain devolution of power enshrined in 13th constitutional amendment, which some of Gotabaya's close allies seek to abolish. Gotabaya 13 Jan announced deal with India and Japan to jointly develop container terminal in Colombo port; PM Mahinda Rajapaksa 31 Jan promised major change to deal following protests against Indian involvement by nationalist monks and trade unions. Jaffna University authorities, on orders from central govt, 8 Jan demolished memorial to Tamil civilians killed during civil war, sparking student protests along with domestic and international backlash; university's vice chancellor 10 Jan promised to reconstruct monument, reportedly after India's ambassador to Sri Lanka raised concern with PM. Amid growing criticism from opposition over govt's policies, Gotabaya 9 Jan called on opponents to engage in “civilised politics without misleading the public” and appeared to threaten to kill prominent opposition MP Harin Fernando who had earlier criticised him; Fernando next day requested police protection. Health minister 7 Jan told parliament that govt would continue to cremate all COVID-19 victims in contravention of Islamic burial practices and contrary to World Health Organization guidelines.

South East Asia

↓ 🇲🇲 **Myanmar Military staged coup d'état following escalating tensions with civilian govt over Nov election.** Following Nov polls which saw landslide election victory for ruling National League for Democracy (NLD), military late month demanded postponement of new parliament due to convene in capital Naypyitaw on 1 Feb; asked for delay while allegations of electoral malpractice investigated; govt refused after Union Election Commission rejected fraud allegations and international observers called poll a success. Military 31 Jan said “Tatmadaw categorically denies it is impeding Myanmar's democratic transition”; early morning 1 Feb seized power as it declared one-year state of emergency, imposed communications blackout and detained State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, President U Win Myint and other senior NLD figures, as well as cabinet ministers and civil society representatives; office of Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlain same day announced that military would name new election commission and hold fresh elections. Previously, tensions mounted as Tatmadaw and military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) throughout month made

unsubstantiated claims that there were over ten million errors in electoral lists and equating them with fraud. Group of 203 opposition and military MPs 11 Jan signed request for Speaker of Union parliament to convene special session to discuss electoral disputes; speaker next day refused request, said parliament had no authority over elections; military statement 14 Jan suggested that speaker's decision was unconstitutional. USDP 14 Jan convened more than 1,000 demonstrators against election commission's conduct of polls in Mandalay Region's Pyawbwe township. Meanwhile, Commander-in-Chief's office 7 Jan called for elections to be held in remaining townships of Rakhine and Shan State where Nov poll was cancelled on security grounds; Zaw Htay next day stated delayed vote could not be held since military had not provided security guarantees. Informal ceasefire in Rakhine State continued to hold. Following meetings between Arakan Army (AA) and military, AA 1 Jan released three NLD election candidates previously held hostage since Oct. Speaking as chairperson of National Reconciliation and Peace Centre, Aung San Suu Kyi 1 Jan said constitutional amendment to establish democratic federal union was "absolutely necessary".

➔ **Philippines Clashes in south between militant groups and security forces continued.** In Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao in south, clashes between insurgents and security forces continued at relatively lower levels than Dec. Suspected elements of Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters late Dec and early Jan attacked indigenous people in land dispute in municipality of South Upi, ambushing town's mayor who emerged unharmed; unidentified armed men 8 Jan ambushed town councillor who survived attack; unidentified armed men 14 Jan shot and killed three soldiers and civilian in Poona-Piagapo municipality, Lanao del Norte province. Military operations against elements of Islamic State-linked Abu Sayyaf Group continued, including operation 11 Jan aimed at recovery of firearms and prevention of kidnapping in waters of Indanan, Sulu province; meanwhile, smaller cohorts of Abu Sayyaf members surrendered to govt late Dec and throughout month. In south, implementation of peace agreement with Moro Islamic Liberation Front remained delayed due to COVID-19; average of new daily cases across country rose slightly to 1,950-2,200 compared to last month. Clashes between communist New People's Army and armed forces continued throughout month in Visayas islands in centre, Mindanao island in south and Luzon island in north, killing at least eight combatants and civilians, and injuring three.

➔ **South China Sea Tensions continued between China and U.S. amid military activity, targeted sanctions on both sides, and new Chinese law authorising coast guard's use of force.** Outgoing U.S. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross 14 Jan announced blacklisting of China National Offshore Oil Corporation and imposed visa restrictions on Chinese navy officials, ruling party and state-owned enterprises, citing "China's reckless and belligerent actions in the South China Sea"; U.S. Dept of Defense same day released names of nine additional blacklisted "Communist Chinese military companies". China 20 Jan imposed sanctions on 28 U.S. individuals, including former Sec of State Mike Pompeo, former National Security Advisor Robert C. O'Brien and former Deputy National Security Advisor Matthew Pottinger, citing actions that "gravely interfered in China's internal affairs". Japan 19 Jan submitted *note verbale* to UN Sec-Gen rejecting China's claims of sovereignty in SCS as contravening international law. In significant policy change, Chinese govt 22 Jan passed Coast Guard Law allowing

coast guard to use “all necessary means” to stop or prevent threats from foreign vessels to safeguard China’s sovereignty, security and maritime rights”. Philippine FM Teodoro Locsin 27 Jan said he filed diplomatic protest over China’s Coast Guard Law, calling it “verbal act of war to any country who defies [it]”. U.S. Indo-Pacific Command 24 Jan said that U.S. aircraft carrier group led by USS Theodore Roosevelt had entered SCS to promote “freedom of the seas.” China 26 Jan announced military drills held 27-30 Jan in SCS. New U.S. Sec of State Antony Blinken 27 Jan told Locsin that U.S. stands with South East Asian claimants in SCS and underscored importance of U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defence Treaty for security of both nations. UK and Japan 14 Jan vowed to “strongly oppose” unilateral changes to status quo in SCS through force. Indonesia’s Maritime Security Agency 14 Jan reported intercepting Chinese survey ship, Xiang Yang Hong 03, 13 Jan as it conducted unauthorised activities in Sunda Strait; vessel’s automatic identification system had been switched off three times 8-12 Jan in violation of requirements for transit through strait; Xiang Yang Hong 03 13 Jan exited Indonesia’s exclusive economic zone.

➔ **Thailand Amid small-scale protests, authorities continued arrests of anti-govt supporters under lèse-majesté law.** In effort to intimidate opponents and quash protest movement, govt resorted to law prohibiting criticism of monarchy: as of late Jan, at least 55 people had been summoned by police on lèse-majesté charges since law was revived in Nov – including at least 39 counts throughout Jan. Notably, Progressive Movement and former Future Forward Party leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit 18 Jan staged Facebook Live event questioning govt’s decision to grant license to produce COVID-19 vaccine solely to company Siam Bioscience owned by Crown Property Bureau; in response, PM Prayuth Chan-ocha next day said he would prosecute those who “distorted” information about country’s vaccine strategy and Digital Economy and Society Ministry 20 Jan filed lawsuit against Thanathorn, accusing him of defaming monarchy. Protest leader Parit Chiwarak 20 Jan answered police summons to hear lèse-majesté charges against him and some of his fellow leaders. Meanwhile, only 11 members of 21-member govt-backed reconciliation committee, proposed by parliament in Oct with view to defusing political tensions, 18 Jan attended first meeting; opposition parties and pro-reform groups spurned initiative as “insincere”. Small groups of protesters continued to gather throughout month, most dispersed by police: We Volunteer (WeVo) group 16 Jan staged small protest at Victory Monument in capital Bangkok; police rapidly and forcibly broke up protest and arrested six people; later same day, about ten protesters gathered at Sam Yan Mitrtown shopping mall to demand release of those arrested. After protest ended, assailants on motorcycle hurled small IED outside mall, injuring two police officers, one reporter and one bystander. Member of WeVo 18 Jan filed complaint with police stating that members of Internal Security Operations Command 16 Jan had abducted him after Victory Monument protest; police 20 Jan summoned him to face charges of submitting false police report.