

# 1. Introduction: democracy and governance

**Lok Sang Ho and Brian Bridges**

---

During the past decades since the end of the Second World War many countries in Asia have adopted some form of democracy. In some the struggle for democratization has led to consolidation and freely functioning democracies. In others the path has been marked by reversals and set-backs and frequent changes in style and content. In yet others, democratization, as understood in the West, has yet to occur or has been stifled and suppressed. What is particularly disturbing, however, is that some of the Asian countries that had instituted democracy at an early stage, such as Indonesia and the Philippines, apparently failed miserably economically, while many of the other Asian countries, such as China and Singapore, that until quite recently have not introduced 'Western style' democracy apparently have been doing very well and have enjoyed a strong economy and growing international stature. How can this paradox be explained? By focusing on the key concept of governance, this volume, through both the conceptual chapters and the individual country case study chapters, aims to throw light on the dynamics of political development and the realities of policy capabilities across Asia.

Democracy is a term which is subject to varying definitions and interpretations. Clearly the ideal model of direct democracy espoused by fifth-century BC Athens is not feasible in the modern world, but modern forms of democracy – all broadly covered by the term 'representative democracy' – cover a wide range of formats and institutional patterns.

At the most basic level, and under a common interpretation, democracy means government by the people, but democracy also means government for the people. If a government is truly responsive to people's needs and serves them well, it is hard to describe it as undemocratic. In this sense 'benevolent dictatorship' is a contradiction in terms. It is unthinkable for a dictator – implying personal power and unresponsiveness to people's needs – to be able to serve people well. On the other hand, it is generally understood that modern democracy does not mean policy-making by the people. According to one theorist, Seymour Lipset, democracy today means 'a political system which supplies regular constitutional opportunities for changing the governing officials, and a

social mechanism which permits the largest possible part of the population to influence major decisions by choosing among contenders for political office' (cited in Roskin *et al.*, 2000, p. 72). This form of 'representative democracy', in turn, implies certain institutions and practices, including accountable government, political competition through at least two political parties, open and peaceful alternation in power, popular representation, majority decision-making, the rule of law, the right to dissent, voting equality, a free press, popular consultation through public opinion polls, and so on.

In practice, it is possible that several items on this list exist but that not all prevail in any given country at a given time. In particular, suppose we take away 'political competition through at least two political parties', and instead politicians compete in the political process as individuals. Suppose no party is allowed to require any individuals to declare allegiance to the party line or to behave in any particular way. Moreover, suppose a candidate can be supported by one or more 'parties' or any organization (see Chapter 2). This would be an even more liberal version of 'liberal democracy'<sup>1</sup> than that described in the literature, one that goes beyond upholding the rule of law, a free press, the freedom to organize and equal voting rights. In Chapter 2, Ho argues that this system is more democratic because it truly allows politicians to speak and vote more freely as individuals based on their own conscience. Can such a system, which is alien to the tradition of inter-party competition, be called 'democracy'?

## THE ONE-PARTY OR NO-PARTY MODEL

It does appear that in Asia quite a number of countries disavow the multi-party framework. In Vietnam, the May 2007 National Assembly elections 'were hailed by the government as a breakthrough for democracy because independent candidates were encouraged to run, even though the Communist Party ended up with 91 per cent of the 493 seats. State media have published lengthy articles criticizing the western messy multiparty systems and trumpeting "Vietnamese-style democracy" – that is, one party rule – as a guarantor of stability and peace' (*Time*, 18 June 2007). This scene is of course almost exactly what happens on the China mainland and in Singapore. While these countries should perhaps be criticized for the lack of independence of the judiciary, the lack of press freedom and the lack of the freedom to organize, simply branding them as completely undemocratic may be going much too far.

We live in an imperfect world, and countries are experimenting with different forms of democracy. A basic assumption of this volume is that such experimentation contributes to the evolution of political systems and is good for humanity. The US election system is routinely criticized as inferior to

proportional representation, which is prevalent in Europe. Only open-minded experimentation can tell us what system works better.

It must be admitted that no 'perfect' democracy exists today in the world. Every system known to date is subject to some kind of problem. Thus, it is doubtful whether countries should be classified under a dichotomous approach as either democratic or undemocratic (Elkins 2000). Such a dichotomous terminology is likely to be divisive and unproductive in the enterprise of the evolution of political institutions, as it is tantamount to a 'holier than thou' approach, creating dissent and ill will, on the one hand, and implicitly assuming, on the other hand, 'mission accomplished' among self-congratulating countries that call themselves full democracies, as if nothing further needs to be done to improve the degree of democracy. In this volume, we take the position that there can be substantial variations in the degree of democracy across time and space, and that we need to understand more about these variations, particularly in the case of individual Asian countries which have totally different cultural backgrounds in comparison to the West.<sup>2</sup> The choice of which democratic model should be based on which model serves people the best, rather than which model is the 'most democratic' according to some predetermined criteria. One interesting theme that we want to explore in this volume is whether, notwithstanding the diversity of different cultures, there is enough commonality in humanity so that a workable or functioning democracy will be characterized by the same key features regardless of when and where.

## DEMOCRACY AS GOOD PUBLIC GOVERNANCE

Mao Zedong's remark that political regimes are born out of the gun barrel stands in sharp contrast to the ideal of democracy, whereby political regimes are born out of the ballot box. Unfortunately for humanity, history apparently has vindicated Mao's observation. In Myanmar back in 1990 Aung San Suu Kyi won the general election with a vast majority, but the military would not cede power. Instead of being declared prime minister, she was placed under house arrest, in which condition she stayed for 13 of the 19 years up to 2009, when she was put into prison for violating the conditions of house arrest. At the time this book goes to press, she was still awaiting her trial. For good or for ill, Thaksin Shinawatra, who became prime minister of Thailand by election, was ousted in a coup by the military in September 2006.

Herein lies the dilemma: if an elected government has no effective control of the military, it may be thrown out by the military. On the other hand, if an elected government controls the military, there will always be the possibility that the ruling party (here 'party' is used in the loose sense) will not step down after a defeat at the polls. This is so with or without multi-party competition.

Even with multi-party competition, if the opposition party wins, the ruling party may still ignore the result and declare the results void, and even may arrest its contestants. The promise of an opposition party to provide checks and balances is empty if people who have control of the army, the police and even the courts do not follow the rules.

Using brute force to declare the results of an election void perhaps is too blatant for some people to be acceptable. More often elections may be rigged or manipulated, and there may be political assassinations. A good question is why people will rig elections or use brute force. The answer seems clear: usually they do so in order to gain power, so that they and their associates can profit from the power thus gained. This leads to one important conclusion: if power is always so circumscribed – by checks and balances, otherwise called ‘governance mechanisms’ – that those in power cannot abuse the powers to benefit themselves, then the contest to gain power will most probably not turn so ugly.

Since most adherents of modern democracy accept that people should use the democratic process to further their own interests, that process typically is a process of struggle to promote self-interest, rather than a competition to seek the best policies to serve the nation. This provides the backdrop to Amy Chua’s *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability* (2002). People’s frustration over democracy calls into question the premise that the democratic process should provide a mechanism for diverse interest groups to fight for their diverse interests. Perhaps the democratic process should, instead, prevent people from using it to further their personal or sectarian interests, so that it can better serve the interest of the nation. As suggested above, this is the essence of public governance.

In an interview with *Time* (12 March 2007) General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, who led the 2006 Thai coup to oust Thaksin, accused him of interfering with many organizations,

especially the independent organizations established to oversee and scrutinize the government’s actions. . . . The previous government wanted to control the whole system. That [led to] large-scale corruption [and] vote buying during local and general elections. . . . As far as the army staging a coup, we could not just do it on our own. We needed the consent of the people to help us preserve democracy.

He also made an observation that deserves much thought: ‘The most important thing in politics is money. If you have cash, you can have somebody do things for you. [Rich people] can control political parties’. It is not for us to vindicate or to reject the general’s accusations about Thaksin, but what he said about politics and money in general is quite true.

In order for democracy to work, there has to be a culture of respect for the rules of the game. The contenders for power, in particular, need to respect the

rules of the game. If there is a lack of effective public governance, positions of power would easily be used to serve the self-interest of the powerful at the expense of the public. Following the rules would call for very civilized behaviour. On the other hand if power is so circumscribed that it cannot be abused, it will be much less tempting for politicians to break the rules and much more conducive for everybody to uphold the democratic institutions. That is why an important theme of this volume is that *governance is paramount*. Thus it is conceivable that in a country such as China or Singapore, with one dominant party in power which does not have to face an effective opposition, democracy in a substantive sense can still obtain if there is effective public governance through a free press, the rule of law, transparency of procedures, and accountability in general. Equally conceivable is that in a country with several parties vying for power, simply because the governance mechanisms are flawed or ineffective, democracy could still exist only in name but not in a substantive sense. Preventing those in power from abusing their power is fundamental to upholding democracy.

## COVERAGE OF THE CONTENTS

In the first part of the volume, Lok Sang Ho and Baohui Zhang have contributed conceptual chapters which examine the philosophical basis of liberal democracy versus formal democracy, the meaning of representation, and the requirements for a workable or functioning democracy, with particular reference to Asian examples. In the remaining parts of the volume, a number of Asian countries are examined as case studies.

It goes without saying that Asia is a huge continent and, as such, it is impossible to cover all the countries within that region within a single volume. We have therefore had to be selective. Although only selected Asian countries are covered in this volume, the countries nonetheless span a wide spectrum of possibilities. At the two extremes are China and India, the world's two most populous countries. They share many similar characteristics: both geographically expansive and ethnically diverse, both nuclear powers, and, while many of the coastal areas of China are quite well developed, much of the country is as underdeveloped and poor as is much of India. Both of them need to be included because of the vastly different paths of political development. The former is normally characterized as authoritarian and the latter democratic. Included also are Japan, the first post-war democracy in East Asia, and the 'little dragons' of East Asia, which seemed to follow in the footsteps of Japan in terms of economic development but which have had interesting and significantly different political histories. Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea and Singapore provide interesting contrasts between democracy

based on multi-party politics, with power obtained by political competition and the popular vote, versus dominating tendencies by centralized sources of power. Other important case studies are also drawn from South-East Asia, where Thailand, the Philippines and Myanmar (Burma) have experienced important disjunctures in the evolution of democratic polities and the struggle for good governance.

The authors of the various country chapters have been asked to address four foci for analysis and discussion. Firstly, there is the historical development of democracy (or democratic aspirations) within the country/territory chosen. In all cases, a brief historical overview, sub-divided by either themes or periods, has been provided. Secondly, the authors have analysed the factors that influenced that development, either positively or negatively. As such, they have considered both internal and external factors at play.

Thirdly, and arguably most crucially for the overall theme of this volume, they have all provided an assessment of whether the form of democracy that has developed (or the lack of it as the case may be) brings benefit or harm to the people living in the countries and why. In particular, they have addressed the question of the extent to which policy-making has nonetheless been able to produce benefits for the population, regardless of the degree of democratic development (that is, even in so-called semi-democratic polities). Finally, while wary of false comparisons across very different social, political and cultural backgrounds, the authors have investigated whether there are any broader lessons that can be learnt from these experiences with democracy: whether they are *sui generis* and applicable only to other Asian countries or relevant to democratic experiences in any other parts of the world.

To return to the third aspect in more detail, the central theme which runs through this volume is that the purpose of democracy is actually to ensure that the government is truly 'for the people' and not 'for some interest groups'. There is a danger that, in overemphasizing the formal democratic process in terms of multi-party competition, it may be forgotten that often different political parties in practice represent different sectoral interests rather than different interpretations of the national interest. As a result, the democratic process has in practice usually turned out to be a competition among different sectoral interests for the power to serve their private interests or those of their supporters. In contrast, the 'substance' of democracy is a responsive and accountable government serving the interest of all the people.

If a country does respect and protect basic human rights and private property, and has set up governance mechanisms that effectively prevent officials from abusing their power, then the citizens of that country can already enjoy the kind of life they desire, the country itself can retain and draw in talent and investment, and the government can provide social and economic stability. Even in the absence of explicit political competition among parties, the

country is in a substantive sense democratic. On the other hand a country which calls itself a democracy and holds general elections but fails to genuinely uphold the rule of law may be constantly in turmoil. Potentially, elections can degenerate into mere 'power grabs' by different interest groups which would not serve the interest of the public. We asked our authors in their country analyses to consider whether these kinds of arguments make sense and to examine the balance between 'democratic' electoral mechanisms, political party competition and good governance in their respective case studies.

## ASIAN VALUES VERSUS GLOBAL VALUES

One of the key words often used when describing Asia is 'diversity'. For all the talk of a common set of 'Asian values' (to which we will return later), this region encompasses a wide range of countries, which certainly share some commonalities but which also have varying social, cultural, political, economic and historical experiences. Within the boundaries we have drawn for Asia can be found plenty of evidence to support this contention of diversity. Economically, we have advanced technological and financial powers, such as Japan, countries with high per capita income such as oil-rich Brunei, and the so-called newly industrializing economies of the 'four dragons', alongside poor economies such as Myanmar and Laos. We have the reforming socialist economies, such as China and Vietnam, alongside an isolated command economy such as North Korea. Socially and culturally, many countries, particularly those in North-East Asia, owe a debt to Chinese cultural influences, but most South-East Asia countries also received strong influences, religious and cultural, from India and the Middle East. The region is host to all the world's major religions. Historically, in the modern era, most countries in the region have suffered under some form of direct or indirect colonial control. Although Japan and Thailand managed to remain 'independent' throughout the high noon of imperialism, the other South-East Asian states experienced control by different European powers and/or the United States, while China was at least partially sliced up by such competing powers. Taiwan and Korea, in turn, experienced Japanese colonial rule. The variety of ruling systems and objectives in turn impacted not only on the way that the various former colonies achieved independence but also how they used or destroyed colonial practices and institutions upon liberation.

Yet 'Asian values' is a term that frequently comes up from Asian leaders. Lee Kuan Yew, for example, has often referred to Asian values and has eschewed what he sees as 'excessive' Western-style democracy. Chinese leaders have often claimed: 'Stability is the overriding concern' (*wending yadao yice*) and indeed have used this as the excuse when they crushed the pro-democracy rally in

Tiananmen Square in 1989. To date, China and Singapore are indeed stable regimes that offer much confidence to foreign investors and foreign governments.

But are Asian values really so different from Western values? Do Asians value freedom as much as Westerners? Certainly Asians often conduct their businesses and run their countries using a style that is different from that of Westerners. For example, Asians are more prone to settling their disputes through a mediator whereas Westerners are more prone to use the adversarial process. But these differences may be superficial. The demonstration against corruption in Beijing's Tiananmen in April 1989 and the huge rally with a million demonstrators filling the thoroughfares of Hong Kong in the aftermath of the Tiananmen crackdown suggest that Asians detest corruption and the excessive use of state power as much as Westerners do. The diversity of cultures notwithstanding, many Asians migrate to the West and thrive in their newly adopted societies.

Freedom House, whose surveys and reports on freedom of 193 countries and 15 related and disputed territories are widely used by scholars and concerned citizen groups around the world, assumes that the same standards of freedom and human rights should apply to all countries and territories, 'irrespective of geographical location, ethnic or religious composition, or level of economic development. . . . The opportunity to act spontaneously in a variety of fields outside the control of the government and other centers of potential domination – according to two broad categories: political rights and civil liberties' is valued globally.

Political rights enable people to participate freely in the political process, including the right to vote freely for distinct alternatives in legitimate elections, compete for public office, join political parties and organizations, and elect representatives who have a decisive impact on public policies and are accountable to the electorate. Civil liberties allow for the freedoms of expression and belief, associational and organizational rights, rule of law, and personal autonomy without interference from the state. (Freedom House 2008)

The chapters in this volume show that the tensions of democratic development, centralized control, effective governance, the rule of law, and autonomy intermingle in complex and myriad ways. But there is a common yearning for the protection of personal freedom and private property, for economic prosperity and for social stability, for law and order, and for equality and for prevention of power abuse. Asian values, after all, appear not so different from Western values. After all, Christianity and Buddhism preach similar virtues.

## NOTES

1. The discussions in this volume about liberal democracy versus formal or electoral democracy mirror that in Larry Diamond (1999). Citing what Terry Karl calls the 'fallacy of electoralism', Diamond wrote: 'This flawed conception of democracy privileges elections over other dimensions of democracy and ignores the degree to which multiparty elections . . . may exclude significant portions of the population from contesting for power or advancing and defending their interests' (p. 9).
2. For a more general theoretical discussion of this point, see Elkins (2000).

## REFERENCES

- Chua, Amy (2002), *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability*, New York: Doubleday.
- Diamond, Larry (1999), *Developing Democracy: Towards Consolidation*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Elkins, Zachary (2000), 'Gradations of Democracy? Empirical Tests of Alternative Conceptualizations', *American Journal of Political Science*, **44** (2), April, pp. 287–294.
- Freedom House (2008), *Freedom in the World*, available at [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org), Washington DC.
- Roskin, Michael, Walter Jones, James Medeiros and Robert Cord (2000), *Political Science: An Introduction*, 7th edn, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

