ASIEN 100 (Juli 2006), S. 11-17

Third-Wave Democratization in East Asia: Challenges and Prospect

Chu Yun-han[1]

East Asia presents quite a few puzzles to students of democratization. First, East Asia has defied the global movement towards democracy. Since the current wave of democratization began in 1974, more than 80 countries have made significant progress towards democracy by holding free and competitive elections and expanding political freedom. In contrast, in East Asia there has been no region-wide movement towards democracy during the same period. The bulk of the region is still governed by various forms of authoritarian and semi-democratic regimes. In 2005, measured in terms of political rights and civil liberty developed by the Freedom House, among the eighteen sovereign states and autonomous territories in the region, only six are ranked "free".[2] Among the six, only five (namely the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand and Mongolia) became democratized within the time span typically referred to as the third wave. On the other hand, most of the region's non-democratic regimes seem to be well-positioned for an extended life lease.

Chronologically, the popular uprising that toppled Marco's rule in the spring of 1986 led a mini-series of (re)democratization in the region. It was followed by a formal transition to democracy in South Korea when the opposition forces forced the military regime to accept constitutional revision on their terms in the summer of 1987. In 1988, the KMT government formally lifted the martial law and the pace of political opening was accelerated after Lee Teng-hui succeeded the deceased strong man, Chiang Ching-kuo. In Thailand, the popular backlash against a bloody crackdown on street riots in May 1992 brought down a military-led coalitional government and broke up a sixty-year-long cycle of recurring military coups. However, the temporal proximity of these cases was more co-incidental than causal. So the "wave" metaphor brings only limited heuristic value to the understanding of the dynamics of regime changes in East Asia. There was hardly a regional snow-balling process to speak of and the phenomenon of 'democracy by contagion' was also much less compelling.

Second, the region presents a perplexing juxtaposition for the modernization theory. On the one hand, it delivers the most compelling cases, notably Taiwan and South Korea, in support of the thinking that modernization is a coherent process that pro-

[1] National Taiwan University, Dep. of Political Science.

[2] *Freedom in the world*. New York: Freedom House, 2005.

duces a certain uniformity of economic and political institutions across different regions and cultures.[3] On the other, the region contains some of the most prominent "recalcitrant cases," most notably Malaysia and Singapore, in defiance of Adam Przeworski and his co-authors' statistical generalization about economic development and democracy.[4]

Why the region, which has been known for many success stories of rapid economic development, was only scantily touched by the tidal wave of global resurgence of democracy? There is no simple answer to this question. The starting point is the specific constellation of prevailing conditions in the regional environment. While most of the recent transitions to democracy in Southern Europe, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union significantly benefited from a highly supportive global as well as regional political, economic, and ideological environment, the constellation of prevailing conditions in East Asia has produced very mixed effects, at times augmenting authoritarian order rather than inducing democratic changes.

To begin with, unlike South Europe, Latin America and Eastern Europe, East Asia witnessed no compelling pulling forces in terms of sanctions or inducements from powerful external actors. For much of the post-War era, China has maintained a Pax Sinica on mainland East Asia and the United States maintained a Pax Americana in maritime East Asia.[5] The bipolar peace of East Asia reflects the ability of China and the United States to dominate the local powers in their respective spheres. The United States, with their geo-strategic interests predominantly in mind, were slow or even reluctant to exercise their potentially potent political and economic power to promote democratic change among their security allies during the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, with its neo-mercantilist agenda in mind, Japan, the region's largest donor and source of foreign direct investment, was shun from using its economic leverage in ways amenable to democracy.

On the other hand, the adaptability as well as resiliency of China's communist regime has made the region's overall environment much more hospitable for non-democratic regimes. For its socialist neighbors, China has exemplified a viable path for growing out of plan economy and has proved (thus far) sequencing political and economic change is possible for transition from communism. More recently, the shift of the center of regional economic gravity from Japan to China also means that East Asia is becoming one of the few regions in the world where democracies do not dominate the agenda of regional security and economic cooperation and perhaps the only region in

---

[3] Francis Fukuyama, "The illusion of Asian Exceptionalism", in: L. Diamond & M. F. Plattner (eds.), *Democracy in East Asia.* Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1988, pp. 224-5.

[4] Adam Przeworski, Michael E. Alvarez, Jose Antonio Cheibub and Fernando Limongi, *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950-1990.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

[5] Robert Ross, "The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-First Century," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Spring, 1999), pp. 81-118.

the world where newly democratized countries increasingly become economically integrated with and dependent on non-democratic countries. In East Asia, characteristics of political system are no barriers to trade and investment (or even migration). The regional economy increasingly orbits around China, the new regional institution builder.

Next, democracy's demonstration effects are limited. Japan, which has suffered from endless scandals of corruption and beset by a deplorable record of dealing with structural reform, deflation and stagnation, provides little inspiration for her neighbors. Most emerging democracies in the region are struggling with overwhelming governing challenges: inconclusive or disputed electoral outcomes, endless partisan gridlock and bickering, recurring scandals, widespread corruption, slower growth and foggy economic outlooks.

Third, authoritarianism remains a fierce competitor to democracy in East Asia. In the ideological arena, East Asia and the Islamic World remain the two notable exceptions to the general observation that "the democratic ideal has become the 'spirit of the times' (zeitgeist)".[6] The sustained interest in the "Asian Values" debate among elites suggests that liberal democracy has not yet established itself as "the only game in town". In terms of regime performance, the region's resilient authoritarian or semi-democratic regimes, such as Singapore, Malaysia and China, are seemingly capable of coping with complex economy, diverse interests, and globalization. Furthermore, most of the region's former authoritarian regimes were not thoroughly discredited. In people's recent memory, the old regimes had delivered social stability and miraculous economic growth. Also during the authoritarian years, most of East Asia's emerging democracies had experienced limited pluralism, allowing some forms of electoral contestation as well as the existence of an opposition. As a result, citizens in many East Asian new democracies did not experience as dramatic an increase in the area of political rights and freedom during the transition as did citizens in many other third-wave democracies. In a nutshell, the above analyses lend some support to the so-called "Asian exceptionalism".[7]

The region's democratic prospect essentially entails the following two questions: First, can the region's emerging democracies be consolidated? Second, will there be more East Asian authoritarian or semi-democratic regimes embarking on the path of democratic transition in the foreseeable future? The answers to both questions are far from sanguine.

There are ample signs to suggest that most of the third wave democracies in East Asia are in serious troubles. Many of them have been paralyzed by inconclusive and even disputed electoral outcomes, incessant political strife and partisan gridlock, rampant corruption, and recurring political scandals. In the recent past, frustrated citizens in

---

6 Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of democratic transition and consolidation: Southern Europe, South America and Eastern Europe*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996, pp. 74-76.

7 Fukuyama, 1998, ibid.

Bangkok and Manila have lost the confidence in the efficacy of the democratic procedure and tried to bring down the incumbent through extra-constitutional route, i.e., staging crippling demonstrations to flex the muscle of the so-called "people's power". The results of the most recent presidential elections in Taiwan and the Philippines were both bitterly challenged by their respective loosing camp. Not long time ago, Joseph Estrada of the Philippines and Abdurrahman Wahid of Indonesia were swept out of office under extraordinary circumstances. At about the same time, both the South Korean and Taiwanese presidents barely escaped an impeachment attempt.

While all East Asian third-wave democracies are likely to persist, most of them are not fully consolidated yet. They still suffer from many deficiencies and are liable to backsliding in areas of political freedom, rule of law and democratic accountability. Furthermore, their ability to address the pent-up popular demands is severely hampered by weak political institutions and external structural constraints.

At domestic front, relative smooth democratic transition in many East Asian countries oftentimes cancelled lingering authoritarian residues and the problem of incomplete pact-making. Many new democracies lack lasting accords on institutional arrangements resulting in recurring partisan bickering over the nature and logics of the constitutional design. This also explains why political forces frequently initiate unsavory attempts for further constitutional tinkering rendering the constitutional order in a constant influx. Furthermore, most East Asian democracies are endowed with weak and deficient political parties. In East Asia, political parties normally fall into two extremes: either as an agent of nation-building (such as KMT and Golkar) or personalized power vehicle. The former have difficulty in transforming itself into a democratic force while the later are mostly inchoate and incapable of fostering meaningful policy choices.

Most East Asian democracies also have to wrestle with three enduring structural features that tend to feed on money politics, political corruption and cronyism. The first is an absence of a tradition of rule of law and the underdevelopment of an independent judiciary system. The second is the opaque structure of corporate governance prevalent in most family-owned businesses. This ownership structure tends to induce power peddling and under-the-table exchange of favors. Thirdly, in most East Asian societies there are an under-supply of bridging social capital and over-supply of bonding social capital that is built around *guanxi*, i.e., interpersonal ties. This in turn inhibits the growth of a vibrant civil society.

The international economic environment is not friendly to emerging democracies either. Forces of globalization aggravate socio-economic disparity and impose grave risks of economic fluctuation and dislocation on to the great majority of citizens. The 1997 financial crisis was a wakeup call. On the other hand, globalization and the associated neo-liberal ideology hamper the capacity of the state to manage the national economy and to provide adequate social safety net. New democracies have to wrestle with the unforgiving nature of the "global market forces" which penalize slow

and inefficient democratic process on a daily basis in terms of currency fluctuation, capital outflow and disappearing of foreign buyers. Globalization accelerates the hollowing-out of national politics. It shifts the locus of governing power away from national capital to international organizations (such as IMF), multinational firms, foreign institutional investors and private transnational actors. Last but not least, China's rapid rise as the world's premier manufacturing powerhouse has exerted tremendous competitive pressures on export-oriented emerging democracies. It has been a painful process for most citizens to realize that in a globalized world there is very little their democratically elected government can do to protect the solidarity of their community, their economic security or their children's future.

At the more fundamental level, people's disenchantment with the gap between the promises and the realities of democracy is growing in all Asian emerging democracies. Many citizens felt that there has been little visible progress over some key characteristics of a democratic regime such as equal rights, rule of law, accountability and responsiveness. The only area that citizens experienced significant progress in is in the area of freedom. In terms of governing capacity, the citizens felt that the performance of the democratic regime has been less impressive than the old regime, especially in the area of social equity, economic growth, and law and order. As a result, their confidence in the superiority of democratic regime has waned.

According to *East Asia Barometer Survey*,[8] the level of popular support for democracy as a preferred political system as measured by a commonly used item,[9] is surprisingly low as compared with other third wave democracies. In Spain, Portugal, and Greece, more than three-quarters of the mass public say democracy is always preferable in survey after survey. In East Asia, around 2002-03 very few countries have reached that threshold. It is surprising to find that in Japan, widely regarded as the region's only established democracy, only 67 percent of the respondents preferred democracy to other forms of government, actually lower than the average (above 70 percent) of the twelve sub-Sahara countries surveyed by Afrobarometer around 2000.[10] In Taiwan and South Korea, more than half of the disenchanted citizens either supported a possible authoritarian option or showed indifference to democratic or non-democratic form of government, pushing the support level down to 40 and 49

---

8 The *East Asia Barometer Survey* is co-hosted by National Taiwan University and Academia Sinica. The statistics reported here are from the first-wave survey, which were conducted around 2003-03 and based on country-wide face-to-face interviews with probability sampling and standardized instruments. Please visit the project website (www.asianbarometer.org) for details.

9 In the survey, the respondents were asked the following item: 'Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government,' in comparison with 'Under some circumstances, an authoritarian government can be preferable to a democratic one' or 'For people like me, it does not matter whether we have a democratic or a non-democratic regime.'

10 Michael Bratton, Robert Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi, *Public opinion, democracy, and market reform in Africa*. London: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 73.

percent respectively.[11] Outside East Asia, this depressingly low level of support was found only in some struggling Latin American democracies such as Mexico and Ecuador.

The same survey also shows that except for South Korea and Japan most East Asian democracies do not enjoy a deep legitimation. In Taiwan, the Philippines, Mongolia and Thailand, the number of citizens who harbor either professed reservation about democracy or lingering attachment to authoritarianism remain significantly large, suggesting that the four countries still have a long way to go on its way to democratic consolidation. This suggests that most East Asian democracies are burdened with authoritarian nostalgia. Citizens tend to compare the current regime with two readily available benchmarks: either with variants of growth-oriented, less strictly authoritarian regimes that they had experienced in their lifetime or with their more prosperous non-democratic neighbors. Either way, these region-specific benchmarks tend to generate unreasonably high expectations about the performance of democratic regimes. Thus, while East Asian democracies on the whole are endowed with many favorable socio-economic conditions (such as a sizable middle class, well-educated population and highly internationalized economy) that are conducive to the growth of democratic legitimacy, the region's culture, political history, and the overall geo-political configuration might put a drag on the development of a robust democratic culture.

Last but not least, the region's democratic prospect depends on if and when China will embark on a path of democratic transition. The prospect of further political liberalization and eventual democratization in China will not only profoundly affect the livelihood of 1.3 billion Chinese people but also shape the prospect of democratic changes in countries within China's political and economic orbit.

It has been a received view that China's economic reform has planted many seeds of democratic changes. It has substantially deprived the regime of the ability to effectively control the society. At the same time, with more and more people being self-employed or employed by private enterprises, fewer and fewer people in urban China depend on the state for their bread. This newly acquired economic freedom has laid the foundation for political liberalization in Chinese society. Economic reform has also constrained the ability of the government to control media and information. The widespread use of the Internet, email, and short messages via cellular phones has made it impossible for the government to monopolize information any longer. Subscribers to the Modernization Theory postulate that there is an intrinsic contradiction between rapid marketization and persistent authoritarianism. The Communist regime has to open up in the long run in order to cope with the rising complexity as a result of the rapid socio-economic modernization by establishing

[11] For a summary of the survey results, please refer to Yu-tzung Chang, Yun-han Chu and Min-hua Huang, "The Uneven Growth of Democratic Legitimacy in East Asia," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 18, 2 (June): 246-255.

more responsive political system, more inclusive channels of interest representation and political participation, and rule of law.

This received view is now under scrutiny. More and more empirical studies lend support to the thesis of "authoritarian resiliency".[12] They pointed out that China's one-party state has actually introduced extensive legal, administrative, social and political reforms that have considerably strengthened the regime's legitimacy and its capacity to cope with the daunting governing challenges arising from China's socio-economic transition. These institutional adaptations include the assimilation of emerging social forces into the Communist Party, the installment of advisory and consultative mechanisms (such as public hearing) at all levels of government, the strengthening of internal check-and-balance mechanism (such as independent auditing), the extensive use of both intra-agency survey and public opinion survey for evaluating the performance of government officials, upgrading the deliberative function of the people's congress at all levels, etc. We should seriously entertain the possibility that the on-going political reforms can sustain an enlightened authoritarianism for quite some time to come. As long as the majority of the Chinese people believe that the Communist Party is the only viable force to guarantee the country's security, stability and economic rise and that their leaders are committed to make the system more inclusive, responsive and accountable, the regime can still enjoy a critical level of legitimacy.

From the viewpoint of the region's democratic future, the sustainability of China's authoritarian resiliency cuts both way. On the one hand, it exemplifies a viable alternative to its neighbors that resist the introduction of formal democratic arrangements. It also imposes competitive pressures on the region's emerging democracies on a score of indicators of governing efficacy. On the other hand, most of the institutional innovations installed by the communist regime, while still far from embarking the country on a path of democratic transition in the conventional sense, do carry elements of democratic governance, such as representation, accountability, deliberation and responsiveness, in a generic sense. Finally, it may not entirely be a bad thing for East Asian new democracies to face up competitive political models. If democracy indeed becomes the only game in town, many Asian countries might be stuck with low-quality democracies as political elite becomes complacent and impetus for improvement and reform dries up.

---

[12] Andrew Nathan, "Authoritarian resiliency," *Journal of Democracy*, 9, 1 (2003), pp. 6-17.