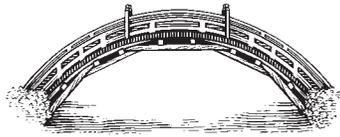


REVIEW ESSAY

Democracy, Security, and Regionalism in Asia

Daniel Lynch



Benjamin Reilly

Democracy and Diversity: Political Engineering in the Asia-Pacific

New York: Oxford University Press, 2007 ≈ 256 pp.

Yun-han Chu, Larry Diamond, Andrew J. Nathan,
and Doh Chull Shin, eds.

How East Asians View Democracy

New York: Columbia University Press, 2008 ≈ 328 pp.

Donald K. Emmerson, ed.

Hard Choices: Security, Democracy, and Regionalism in Southeast Asia

Stanford: Shorenstein Asia Pacific Research Center, Stanford University, 2008 ≈ 422 pp.

Democracy, Security, and Regionalism in Asia

Daniel Lynch

One consequence of the “great recession” is that faith in a cardinal verity of the past fifteen years—China’s inexorable rise—is under challenge. Economic data published throughout 2009 seemed to suggest that China’s rise relative to the United States would accelerate. By early 2010, however, analysts were warning that the credit boom Beijing launched to mitigate the loss of export markets was transmogrifying into a dangerous property bubble. Some predicted that even if this bubble were contained, China could face many years of stagflation. If this scenario developed, China’s rise would proceed but at a substantially slower pace. Asia’s future has suddenly become significantly cloudier with uncertainty.

The three stimulating books reviewed in this essay do not focus primarily on China; and all were published prior to the great recession. But the books are extremely valuable in helping a reader to think through the possible implications of differing China scenarios for the internal governing arrangements of countries throughout Asia. Though significantly different in focus, the books all assess the degree to which democracy and good governance (not always seen as identical) influence institutional design or public demands in Asian states as they continue their quest for development—broadly defined to include economic advancement as well as effective, just, and clean government.

In *Democracy and Diversity: Political Engineering in the Asia-Pacific*, Benjamin Reilly studies fourteen democratic, semi-democratic, or democratizing states in the less-developed corners of Asia and the Pacific. His core finding is that “for both self-serving and national-interest reasons, [elites] consistently sought to foster aggregative and centrist political parties and broad-based coalition governments” as they strove to construct or consolidate democracy, “while actively discouraging sectional or minority groups from forging their own political parties” (p. 96).

Such centripetal techniques are expected to be useful for state elites anywhere in trying to reshape (or “engineer”) ethnically diverse societies so that development can be facilitated. But Reilly shows how Asia-Pacific states are even more alacritous than others in using such techniques. “There is indeed an emerging Asian model of democracy—but one that has little relationship with the political restrictions advocated by the region’s now-retired autocrats”—the

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proponents of “Asian values.” Instead, “in something of a grand irony, the political systems of most new Asia-Pacific democracies are not only becoming more consolidated, but in many cases are actually moving closer to the Anglo-American model of two party democracy” (p. 194).

This is a strikingly counterintuitive and challenging claim that some readers may find hard to accept. Students of Thailand, for example, might question how Reilly’s hypothesis could account for the processes by which Thaksin Shinawatra’s centripetal techniques ended up exacerbating the divisions in Thai society and politics (as well as creating new divisions). To some extent, Reilly inoculates himself against such criticisms by noting that any large comparison will inevitably require some sacrifice of detail. Readers may be sympathetic to this claim because the book is undeniably learned and stimulating. But the Thailand case suggests the possibility that a prior intellectual commitment to end-of-history conceptions may be influencing, to some degree, Reilly’s interpretation of the evidence.

The real value of Reilly’s work is his elucidation of how elites in these varied Asia-Pacific states are all, to varying degrees, attempting centripetal engineering, even if stubborn social realities sometimes cause their endeavors to fail. The states that Reilly studies (he excludes the staunch authoritarian states) all share in a common “project.” This is fascinating to ponder and immediately raises the question: Why? Why have so many Asia-Pacific states in recent years pursued some version of democratization and democratic consolidation, even moving closer to the Anglo-American model of two-party democracy? The answer to this question has important implications for what China’s developmental trajectory could mean. Is an underlying reason that numerous Asia-Pacific states pursue development in at least a quasi-democratic way the continued predominance of U.S. material and soft power?

Whereas Reilly focuses on the political ideas and practices of elites who design institutions, the contributors to *How East Asians View Democracy* study the political cultures of publics—as reflected in original public opinion surveys—in eight East and Southeast Asian states, including Hong Kong. Reilly emerges as substantially more optimistic than the contributors to *How East Asians View Democracy*. In the very first line of this important book, editors Yun-han Chu, Larry Diamond, Andrew J. Nathan, and Doh Chull Shin assert that “East Asian third-wave democracies are in distress” (p. 1), even though “this does not mean that democracy is in imminent danger” (p. 24).

The reason that third-wave East and Southeast Asian democracies seem to be in distress is not only the immediate political crises that, at the time of study,

bedeviled Thailand, in particular, but also Taiwan and the Philippines. The more fundamental problem is that while the publics in these states expressed high levels of support for democracy in the abstract, they also frequently (but to varying degrees) answered subtler questions in ways that suggested low legitimacy for democracy and a tepid popular commitment to democratic rules of the game. For example, respondents in all countries were asked, “if you had to choose between democracy and economic development, which would you say is more important?” The answer: “Across the region, democracy lost to economic development by a wide margin” (p. 23). Respondents also expressed weak commitment (with some exceptions) to the rule of law, including judicial independence and the separation of powers (pp. 31–34).

Individual country chapters provide concise contextual backgrounds while discussing the surveys in greater depth. In the course of reading these chapters, however, a problem looms that eventually receives some attention in the concluding chapter by Chu, Diamond, and Nathan (especially in pp. 245–48). The problem is that in discussing the survey data, the contributors sometimes imply that they have discovered relatively enduring patterns in relatively constant political cultures—even though they only studied small slices of each country’s political history. The editors, too, come to some rather large conclusions as they sum and compare these eight slices of history, although they do use prudent qualifiers when positing these conclusions. But what if idiosyncratic factors are coloring the data for each of the eight cases? Since there are only eight slices, it is impossible to know just how much light the results shed on these states’ future trajectories.

The problem is more complex than it first appears. Thailand, again, illustrates the point. The Thai survey found an unusually strong divergence between popular commitment to democratic rhetoric and commitment to the rule of law. Thai respondents expressed high levels of support for democracy in the abstract, but “the level of support for the principle of judicial independence [for example] is quite low” (p. 32). This, to the editors, suggests that “a seemingly strong popular base of democratic legitimacy is actually quite shallow because it is not backed by a belief system revolving around democratic values” (p. 34). The difficulty with such an interpretation is that at the popular level in Thailand, the police and judicial system are viewed as corrupt and favoring the rich and powerful. The same holds true for parliament. Consequently, resisting these anti-democratic forces—if only by the expression of cynical views—could be interpreted as consistent with a democratic vision, a prelude to reform. When, as a result of this pressure,

Thailand comes to be administered more justly, resisting the rule of law could more certainly be classified as undemocratic.

Thaksin's complex premiership makes Thailand's peculiarities even more important to dissect carefully. It is clear that Robert B. Albritton and Thawilwadee Bureekul, the authors of the Thailand country chapter, share the popular view that Thaksin unquestionably personifies Thai democracy. Albritton and Bureekul join the book's editors in presenting the September 2006 military coup that ousted Thaksin as the unfortunate end to a promising democratic experiment. And yet "even among supporters of the coup...the ideology of democracy continued, and polls taken only weeks prior to the coup showed overwhelming support for democracy" (p. 118).

The reason for this apparent paradox is that Thaksin—despite being an elected leader—spent most of his time in office waging a terrifying war against anyone or any force that would limit his power or contest his apparently boundless ambitions. When Thaksin ordered a crackdown on suspected methamphetamine dealers in early 2003, Thai police killed nearly 2,400 people (including innocent bystanders) in a sanguinary three-month spree. If Albritton and Bureekul had discussed this and Thaksin's other numerous anti-democratic acts—including his systematic undermining of the new National Human Rights Commission and his harassment of civil society groups—the notion that democracy supporters might welcome the September 2006 coup would not seem incomprehensible. And commentators would start rightly dating the crisis in Thai democracy to 2001.

If repeatedly rerunning the post-1992 Thai political experiment were to produce a populist billionaire supremo only one time in one thousand rounds, Thaksin would have to be viewed as an aberration rather than as the inevitable result of structural forces. The Thaksin phenomenon did occur, of course, and this fact conditions the present and future. But the situation in Thailand is probably more open to the resumption of a democratic developmental trajectory than the Albritton-Bureekul structural analysis leads a reader to expect.

The data for the other countries should also be treated with caution, as three of the editors (Chu, Diamond, and Nathan) acknowledge in the conclusion: "Survey data...can alert us to whether the mass base provides the support necessary for [democratic] consolidation...or is instead dangerously fragile...[But] public attitudes toward democracy in Asia are labile, fluctuating dramatically over relatively short periods of time" (pp. 246–47).

Also pessimistic about prospects for democracy (particularly in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries and East Timor) are the contributors to *Hard Choices: Security, Democracy, and Regionalism*

in *Southeast Asia*, edited by Donald K. Emmerson. Much of *Hard Choices* focuses on the constant anguish engendered by Burma's ASEAN membership since 1997. As the contributors to this outstanding book were in the process of revising their chapters in 2007–08, the junta in Burma first brutally suppressed a monk-led rebellion against dictatorial rule (in August–September 2007), and subsequently rejected aid from Western states in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis (May 2008), contributing to the deaths of more than 100,000 people. Kyaw Yin Hlaing's chapter, "ASEAN's Pariah: Insecurity and Autocracy in Myanmar [Burma]" (pp. 151–89), details these developments and contextualizes them expertly. Kyaw criticizes ASEAN and India (after 2000) for refusing to isolate the junta economically, unlike the many states that isolated South Africa under apartheid. But Kyaw is most critical of China:

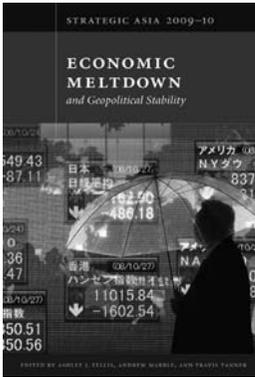
The Western arms embargo has not stopped Beijing from supplying the junta with an estimated \$2 billion in military hardware at "friendship prices." China has helped the regime to build up its infrastructure—roads, railroads, ports, dams, sports stadiums, bridges, and radar stations. China extended interest-free and low-interest loans...to the junta...The Chinese government has allowed its citizens to invest freely in Myanmar—as have Myanmar's co-members in ASEAN (pp. 183–84).

The Burma question is central to the dominant theme in *Hard Choices*: the relationship between democracy and nontraditional security, on the one hand, and between ASEAN regionalism and both democracy and nontraditional security, on the other. All of these matters were debated intensively in 2006–08 as ASEAN crafted and eventually adopted a charter. In the chapter "Toward Relative Decency: The Case for Prudence," David Martin Jones disabuses any illusions that ASEAN would have decided that achieving nontraditional security requires democracy and that ASEAN should therefore start pressuring all of its members to democratize. This is a Kantian notion reinforced by more recent Fukuyamaesque and Rawlsian thinking that does little to shed light on contemporary Asia (p. 265). Jones believes that active promotion of democratic principles throughout ASEAN could shatter the organization and end economic development. Moreover, consistent with *How East Asians View Democracy*, he contends that Southeast Asians do not generally want liberal democracy, particularly if the trade-off is reduced economic growth. Instead, Singapore may be their model. "The city-state's successful mix of social and political control with a degree of transparency and economic accountability...represents a stable long-term developmental ideal type that most Asians would consider not only materially acceptable but also politically decent" (p. 284).

Jones's chapter is followed immediately by that of Erik Martinez Kuhonta, who takes an almost diametrically opposite position on democracy-promotion. In "Toward Responsible Sovereignty: The Case for Intervention," Kuhonta contends that unless ASEAN members rethink their commitment to mutual non-interference, the association risks irrelevance. Particularly on the issue of Burma, "it should be clear that ASEAN's default position, based on constructive engagement, has failed miserably" (p. 310). Finding a cure for this self-inflicted existential wound requires systematically reassessing the circumstances under which intervention might be considered and the modalities by which it could be implemented.

The focus on Burma by Kuhonta, Kyaw, and other contributors (including editor Emmerson, in his masterful synthesizing introduction) resonates with a theme Jones develops concerning the difference between decent and outlaw regimes, a concept he borrows from Rawls. Decent regimes may still be authoritarian but they accept social pluralism and do not willfully violate human rights (pp. 265–68). Upon reflection, it seems clear that what exercises ASEAN states the most about Burma is not Burma's lack of democracy but rather its lack of effectiveness in pursuing development: a more limited version of "decency." This may even be what exercises some members of ASEAN civil societies, as well as many observers outside Southeast Asia. Otherwise, why would Vietnam's membership in ASEAN not elicit remotely the level of anguish that Burma's membership does? Vietnam may be authoritarian, but it is highly effective—not so wildly different from Singapore in some respects (although vastly poorer). Jones is right that states like Singapore and Vietnam elicit respect in ASEAN, albeit not universally. Evidently, the globe-level constitutive norm specifying a democratic political system as the pinnacle of human development is far from hegemonic.

This leads back to the question of China and its rise. China directly supports the resistance of the Burman and Cambodian states to democratization. If China's rise succeeds, it would indirectly strengthen the position of authoritarians elsewhere in Asia because they could argue that—contrary to the end of history thesis—the world's greatest future power-center will evidently be avowedly undemocratic: Singapore (at best) on a colossal scale. Precisely for this reason, the present economic juncture is extremely important to comprehend. If China's rise slows or stalls, the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party's uncompromising authoritarian domination over society will likely fade. And that, in turn, could open up all manner of political possibilities that presently seem unthinkable. ◆



STRATEGIC ASIA 2009–10

ECONOMIC MELTDOWN and Geopolitical Stability

Edited by Ashley J. Tellis, Andrew Marble, and Travis Tanner

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