

# *The Democratic Prospect in East Asia*

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It is hard to think of a region of the globe so packed with both threats and opportunities as East Asia. Of course, the Middle East is as strategically significant as it is combustible. But none of that region's states have yet shown signs of the economic and political dynamism that we've seen in East Asia over the last 20 years. Strategically vital to the world economy, the region is home to some of the most vibrant new democracies as well as harsh tyrannies. South Korea and Taiwan, along with the Philippines in Southeast Asia, were in the vanguard when the Third Wave of democratization reached the region in the late 1980s. Significantly, their transitions occurred or began *before* the collapse of Soviet communism and in a regional context that was far from friendly to democratization. The new democracies of post-communist central and eastern Europe not only enjoyed at least some democratic traditions and experiences dating back to before communism, but benefited as well from the nearby gravitational pull – and financial subsidies – of the wealthy Western democracies making up the European Union. By contrast, East Asia's nascent democracies have emerged in the shadow of the world's most powerful authoritarian state, namely China, though admittedly with the intense involvement of the United States as a security guarantor and of Japan as an engine of economic growth.

With the simultaneous growth of democracy in East Asia and the rise of China, along with the continued division of the Korean peninsula, East Asia is today the region of the world where the alternative systems of democracy and authoritarianism are most sharply counter-posed. It was not so long ago that serious attention was paid to the notion put forward by Singapore's leader Lee Kuan Yew that democracy is a Western system that cannot take hold in a region shaped by 'Asian values,' which presumably emphasize authority over liberty and order over pluralism and democratic processes. One doesn't hear much about this viewpoint anymore since it is out of touch with both the political realities of East Asia and with public attitudes as revealed in recent opinion surveys. Steady democratic gains in both South and Northeast Asia – in the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia and, most recently, in Malaysia – hardly bespeak a region that is inherently authoritarian. And public opinion surveys throughout the region, and in South Asia as well, show that roughly six in ten people believe that democracy is the best system of government.

## GERSHMAN | The Democratic Prospect in East Asia

Even larger majorities reject the authoritarian alternatives of military, one-party, and strong-man rule, and the public in East Asia is not more likely than citizens of the West to demand respect for authority.

At the same time, they want to see democracy perform in terms of delivering health, education and other services and improving the quality of life and the effectiveness of governance. In this respect, East Asians are not very different from the citizens of Latin America and Central Europe, who are also unhappy when democracy does not deliver up to expectations. The challenge in East Asia is especially acute since the democracies in this region face rivals in tiny Singapore and a resurgent China that consciously offer an alternative authoritarian model of economic development. Obviously, though, the backward dictatorships of Burma and North Korea offer no such challenge.

While I don't believe there is much chance of a democratic rollback in East Asia, the performance of the new democracies has been uneven. Taiwan and South Korea are cases in point. Taiwan is now one of Asia's most robust democracies, having passed the Huntington test of a 2nd genuine alternation of power with the recent return to power of the KMT led by new president Ma Ying-jeou. But Taiwan's political culture remains deeply polarized and partisan, reflecting not just the ethnic divide between native Taiwanese and mainlanders, but a political divide between two camps with sharply different visions of Taiwan's future – the green camp looking toward eventual independence and the blue camp preferring more cooperation with the mainland and open to possible unification under proper conditions. This division has led to bitter political conflict and often governmental paralysis, which makes the recent election an expression of Taiwan's remarkable resilience as a democracy. An independent judiciary and a vigorous civil society have contributed powerfully to this resilience.

Like Taiwan, South Korea itself is deeply divided, with differences over how to deal with North Korea sharpening divisions in the same way the debate over relations with the mainland has done in Taiwan. And yet despite these divisions, again like Taiwan, the elections last December produced a transfer of power from one party to the other without violence and with an air of democratic normality, thus demonstrating once again the resilience and stability of democracy. Of course President Lee will be challenged to deliver on his promises to revive the economy, and his high approval ratings have already begun to decline because some of his ministerial appointees have had to step down in reaction to controversies over

their real estate dealings. His visit to the United States this week should give new momentum to the US-Korean relationship, both at the economic level where a new free trade agreement could soon be ratified, and at the security level where close US-Korean cooperation is a precondition for the success of the six-party talks. But the trade agreement and the six-party talks face serious obstacles, and President Lee will do well to bear in mind the cautionary lesson of his predecessor's experience, whose presidency was badly weakened by protracted confrontations with his parliamentary opposition. Such political divisions will not disappear, of course, but Korea's two decades of democracy have been on the whole a remarkable success, and there is nothing to suggest that this will not continue.

In two other East Asian countries, the Philippines and Thailand, there is more cause for concern. The Philippines provides few grounds for optimism save that its democratic institutions, while compromised, have withstood decades of communist and Islamist insurgency, military coups, endemic corruption, and the constraints of a political system in which traditional elite families continue to monopolize political power, despite the vibrant associational impulses of civil society. The toxic blend of political violence, political clans and corruption – 'guns, goons and gold' – combined with President Arroyo's deference to her generals and corrupt political allies, has prompted an alarming decline in public confidence in democratic institutions.

The situation is only marginally better in Thailand. The September 2006 coup, it must be said, had the support not only of the military but of the monarchy and the Bangkok middle classes, who worried about Thaksin's attempts to compromise judicial independence, delegitimize opposition, and nurture division between urban democratic critics and his rural base of support. All of these moves undermined Thai democracy even if they were exploited by the military as an excuse for the coup. It's a good thing that the military has withdrawn from power and that there is now the restoration of a democratically-elected government. But the victory of the PPP and the return of Thaksin and his allies promise another round of battles between him and the Thai establishment and the possible return of all the problems that preceded the coup, including the violence in the south, the extra-judicial killings in the war on drugs, and close relations with military in Burma, as shown by Samak's recent visit to Rangoon.

The cruel dictatorship that continues to grind Burma under its boot heel is, in its own corrupt way, as poisonous a factor in Southeast Asia as the Kim Jong-il regime

## GERSHMAN | The Democratic Prospect in East Asia

is in Northeast Asia. Burma does not have a nuclear program, to be sure, but it is a source of tremendous instability as a base for the smuggling of drugs and other illicit items, the spread of HIV-AIDS, human trafficking for the sex trade, and the displacement of millions of people with the relentless assault on the national minorities. There is still great bitterness left over from the crushing last September of the popular protest movement and the jailing and persecution of the Buddhist monks who led it. The situation remains unstable, with the economy doing poorly and military desertions on the rise, and the May 10 referendum on the regime's new constitution could set off another round of protests.

With Thailand mired in its internal crisis, leadership in dealing with the cancer of Burma might conceivably come from Indonesia, whose democratic transition over the last decade is both the most important advance for democracy globally during that period and also the most overlooked. Though Indonesia faces enormous challenges in strengthening the rule of law, fighting endemic corruption, and uplifting the 40 percent of the population that continues to live on less than \$2 a day, we should not underestimate the great progress that has been made in the consolidation of Indonesia's new democracy. I have in mind the success of the democratic government in improving the delivery of services, reforming the police and the judiciary and reducing crime, radically decentralizing government while avoiding the Balkanization that many feared would occur under democratic rule, improving security while ensuring that the armed forces stay out of politics, signing the historic Aceh Peace Agreement in the aftermath of the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami, and achieving sustained economic growth to the point that Jim Castle and Craig Charney, writing in *The Washington Post*, have spoken of the emergence of a 'democratic Indonesian tiger.' No less significant is the continuing strength of moderate, mainstream Islam and Muslim democratic parties, and the weakness of Islamist radicalism, electorally and in the society at large. On a recent visit to Jakarta, I met some of the highly impressive leaders and activists of the country's mass Islamic movements – the Nahdlatul Ulama and the Muhammadiyah. Leaders like former president Abdurrahman Wahid have successfully resisted the influence of radical Salafist elements and are positively projecting a model of democratic and civil Islam that, in time, could assume genuinely global significance. As I have suggested, Indonesia will hopefully also become a more assertive force within ASEAN in defending human rights and democracy within Burma.

The positive impact of the democratic progress in Indonesia could soon be reinforced by changes underway in nearby Malaysia, where the March 8 elections

have produced the most significant democratic political change since independence. The victory of the three-party opposition alliance led by Anwar Ibrahim in five of Malaysia's 13 states (Penang, Kedah, Perak, Selangor, and Kelantan), and the capture of enough seats in the national parliament to deny the government a two-thirds majority, represented the biggest loss for the governing National Front since 1957. The government had tried to play on Malay fears of minority Chinese and Indian influence, but the big and most hopeful news from the election is that many Malays joined with Chinese and Indian citizens in giving an enormous boost to Anwar's People's Justice Party (PKR), which offers a new model in Malaysia of inter-ethnic cooperation. If the opposition can govern well in the five states, it could challenge the government for national power in the near future. For now, the government of Abdullah Badawi remains stunned and ineffective, with *The Economist* speaking of him as 'shuffling deckchairs on a personal *Titanic*.' If there is a real democratic transition in Malaysia, it will have important repercussions within ASEAN, with implications for Burma, in Asia generally, where Anwar is a deeply respected figure, and in the wider Muslim world, where his voice resonates.

The picture I have so far presented of East Asia is mixed, and generalizing extensively about such an enormous area and so many different countries is dauntingly hard. But surely the future of the region will be decisively influenced by what happens in China, which is undergoing transformative changes, the outcome of which is not at all clear. China's undeniably impressive economic performance is now giving rise to a growing political profile on the global stage, which takes the form of more active diplomacy, and a greater assertion of soft power through its network of Confucius Institutes to promote Chinese language and culture, and enhanced development assistance to neighbouring autocracies like Laos, Cambodia, and Burma, as well as to sub-Saharan African states, or at least to those with valuable raw materials and energy supplies.

Some feel that a stronger China will have more leverage in mediating conflicts in the Asia-Pacific, and will therefore be a net plus for regional security and stability. Beijing has certainly taken part in the international effort to bring North Korea to the negotiating table, though its refoulement of North Korean refugees violates its obligations under the refugee convention. And of course its failure to adhere to international standards of transparency, disclosure and human rights in the run-up to the Olympics is drawing increased international criticism. Indeed, the communist authorities have stepped-up their harassment of independent NGOs

## GERSHMAN | The Democratic Prospect in East Asia

and dissidents like on-line activist Hu Jia and dissident writer Lu Gengsong in what has been called ‘a coordinated cleansing campaign.’

Recent events in Tibet, the protests surrounding the Beijing Summer Olympics, and the forthcoming constitutional referendum in Burma – with China being perceived by the world as ‘the prop that always holds up a loathed regime,’ to quote *The Economist* – serve to remind us that, Beijing has yet to demonstrate that it can consistently fulfil the role of being a ‘responsible stakeholder’ in the global system. The venom with which Chinese officials have reacted to the Dalai Lama’s calls for moderation and dialogue – describing His Holiness as a ‘monster with a human face and an animal’s heart’ – suggests that Maoist intolerance dies hard. And the April 1 demonstrations in Xinjiang by several hundred ethnic Uyghurs protesting the death in custody of a prominent local philanthropist are a timely reminder that China remains a one-party state hostile to basic democratic values such as freedom of the press, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, the rule of law, and human rights, even though these values are enshrined in the Chinese constitution.

For all its economic dynamism, China’s communist regime is beset by fundamental challenges, if not contradictions, which should lead us to question whether it is sustainable. Like all authoritarian regimes, it is ultimately fragile, lacking the institutional flexibility and ‘release valves’ required to accommodate change, especially when economic crisis hits.

Consultations with Chinese analysts and activists suggest several reasons why serious political reform will become a compelling imperative over the next five to ten years:

Corruption is endemic and pervasive, manifested in widespread land seizures and property confiscations, undermining both business performance and the legitimacy of party rule, particularly in the rural hinterland dominated by alliances of corrupt business interests and local party apparatchiks.

Such corruption has led to a dramatic increase in the number of protests driven by social inequalities, environmental degradation, endemic corruption, and acute crises in health care, education and social security. In the absence of constitutional channels for expressing grievances and resolving conflict, this volatility can only increase.

The Communist Party's legitimacy is fragile, relying on a blend of Maoist nostalgia, economic competence, and nationalism that is being challenged by an albeit nascent generation of emerging leaders – in business, media, civil society and within party circles – many of whom have been educated in the West, take a technocratic rather than an ideological approach to most issues, and feel frustrated with the Communist Party's stultifying political monopoly.

The party's legitimacy crisis is evident in internal party divisions and debates which have seen younger and lower-level officials become more vocal in their demands for democratic change, and more and more senior officials exposing their lack of faith in the regime's future by sending their personal wealth abroad.

The party recognizes that with increasing social agitation and the emergence of an increasingly affluent middle class, demands for a more open society will increase. This middle class is starting to show signs of restiveness, as evidenced by the recent 'collective walking' protests in Shanghai against plans to extend the right-of-way for a maglev (magnetic-levitation) railway line.

In her new book, *The China Price*, Alexandra Harney observes that as its economy continues to develop, not merely in scale but in variety and sophistication, China will inevitably begin to erode its own main competitive advantage as a manufacturer dependent on cheap labor. Rising costs for wages and materials, increasing litigation, demands for unionization, tightening labor markets, and higher safety standards will all eat into 'China, Incorporated's' profit margins. In so far as the Party's legitimacy is in large part based on its management of China's economic boom, an economic crisis or severe downturn *could* precipitate demands for systemic change, much as the 1997-98 East Asian financial crisis prompted Indonesia's democratic turn. The political monopoly of an ideologically bankrupt and manifestly corrupt ruling-party elite is incompatible with the diversity of opinion and demand for government accountability that is being driven by a dynamic economy and a population with rapidly rising levels of schooling, literacy, and exposure to outside ideas via such technologies as the Internet. One has only to contemplate the impact on a once-closed society of having more than a quarter of a million cell-phones and 140 million Internet users, among whom are 34 million bloggers. To cite just one consequence of the changes taking place, China's unofficial on-line media drove five of the ten biggest news stories covered by the official Chinese media during the last year, all of them involving citizens defying arbitrary power, insisting on their right

## GERSHMAN | The Democratic Prospect in East Asia

to know the truth, protesting grave injustices, and demanding that government be held accountable for its policies and actions.

In his new book *The Spirit of Democracy*, my colleague Larry Diamond has suggested four scenarios for China that don't exhaust the possibilities, but which may help to give an idea of some of the likelier alternative outlines of future events. Two are transitional, one leading to a Singapore-like soft authoritarianism with managed single-party rule, the other – more on the model of South Korea and Taiwan – where economic development generates a growing middle class and increased social complexity and pluralism, trends that force the party to concede its political monopoly.

Each of the other two scenarios involve what the Spanish democrats of the post-Franco period called a *ruptura*, a complete break with the old system, which will fall to either a new form of authoritarianism or to democracy. Diamond is aware of the danger of the former, quoting Minxin Pei's analysis of *illiberal adaptation*, where the current dictatorship ceases to be developmental and mutates into a 'decentralized predatory state,' diminishing prospects for political liberalization. But he clearly feels that the democratic alternative is a more likely outcome for China, which has a growing middle class and a larger and more networked civil society than existed in 1989 during the Tiananmen events, the proliferation of Internet users and NGOs, a more robust community of liberal intellectual leaders than is generally appreciated, and a hunger for religious fulfilment, with Christianity and other organized religions filling the moral vacuum left by the ideological collapse of communism.

The historical experience of Germany and Japan between the 1860s and the 1940s shows that economic modernization need not entail political liberalization, at least not without the prospect of dangerous and globally catastrophic detours. So there are no grounds for complacency. Moreover, China's uncertain future is hardly the only source of regional instability. East Asia is one of the world's few regions with a number of unresolved conflicts and ominously latent crises – from North Korea's nuclear aspirations to Taiwan's status and Japan-China tensions – but without an overarching multilateral security and cooperation architecture through which they can be addressed or resolved.

The United States has a profound interest in how the divisions in the region are managed and contained and how the contest over values is resolved. The outcome, according to Michael Green, the former senior Asian Affairs director at the National



Security Council, will 'determine whether the future regional architecture in Asia is inclusive and based on universal values, or instead excludes the United States and undermines its interests.'

There is good reason to be sceptical about the chances for building a new and inclusive regional architecture. Former Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso's vision of an 'Arc of Freedom and Prosperity' is now a distant memory, overtaken by the current political jockeying between Prime Minister Fukuda and opposition leader Ozawa. And China's record on its other flanks, as an architect of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, suggests that its vision for Asia is not necessarily inclusive, given that the SCO explicitly rejects global norms of human rights, political liberties, and good governance.

Still, evidence suggests that a significant number of Asia's leaders have come to see democracy as integral to their respective nations' stability, success, and sense of identity. There is a compelling case for taking advantage of the region's growing economic integration, its shared anxiety over latent or incipient security threats, and the glimmers of interest that some of its elites are beginning to show in the idea that promoting human rights and promoting security can work together, in order to start a process that would forge a regional architecture and promote a vision of East Asia based on cooperation mutual guarantees of security, and universal norms. Ironically, the North Korean dictatorship, in a case of history 'writing straight with crooked lines,' could even prove to be – by dint of its very worrisomeness, whether it endures or it collapses – the unwilling catalyst for the precipitation of such a beneficial new compound.

The six-party talks have certainly run into severe difficulties, but they have brought together the United States and China, along with South Korea, Japan, and Russia, around a common project of denuclearizing North Korea militarily and ending its complete isolation and recklessness, which all agree are a threat to regional peace. The agreement of February 13, 2007, has yet to be implemented, but it contains the seeds of a new regional architecture. Of the five working groups established under the agreement, only one deals with the North Korea nuclear issue. Three deal with regional economic and energy cooperation and the normalization of relations between the United States and North Korea and between Japan and North Korea. The fifth, chaired by an immensely able Russian diplomat, establishes a Northeast Asia Peace and Security Mechanism that is already being called by its acronym NEAPSEM. It is out of this working group that a comprehensive multilateral

## GERSHMAN | The Democratic Prospect in East Asia

framework for cooperation in Northeast Asia might develop, one that would integrate security, economic, humanitarian and human rights issues, as was done in Europe three decades ago through the Helsinki process.

The elements of a new architecture have thus been assembled, but the building cannot commence until the nuclear stalemate with North Korea is resolved. It is, to be sure, a risky undertaking to base the success of such an ambitious initiative on the cooperation of such an unlikely partner as North Korea. But given what is at stake for all sides, it is not out of the question that this calculated gamble might in the end pay off. We should all hope that it does.

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