



New Authoritarianism in Asia

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Outline Paper

According to Freedom House, source of one of the most recognized datasets concerning democracy (or as they assess it, political freedom), the Asia-Pacific region has been the only one, in recent years, to record steady gains in political rights and civil liberties: “Although it is home to China, where over half the world’s Not Free population lives, and North Korea, the least free country in the world, a number of Asia-Pacific countries have made impressive gains in the institutions of electoral democracy—elections, political parties, pluralism—and in freedom of association”.

Economic freedom is also seen to be the rise in the region. There is no doubt that high levels of modernization are being achieved throughout Asia, with first Japan, then the Asian Tigers, (South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore) and finally China itself and the Asian Tiger Cubs (Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and more recently Vietnam) becoming increasingly developed and integrated into the international economy. Even some of the more economically challenged countries in the region, such as Laos, Cambodia, Timor-Leste, and Myanmar are starting to grow and harbor ambitions to achieve middle-income status in the near future. Economic freedoms are seen by many as precursors to additional political freedoms.

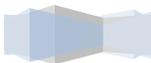
Furthermore, at the turn of the millennium, a CIA publication analyzing global trends leading to a world vision of 2015, noted that the ‘networked global economy will be driven by rapid and largely unrestricted flows of information, ideas, cultural values, capital, goods and services, and people’ and that ‘this globalized economy will be a net contributor to increased stability in the



world.’ In particular, ‘Emerging Asia’ was highlighted as the fastest growing region, led by breakout candidates China and India, whose economies already comprise roughly one-sixth of global GDP (CIA, 2000, 5-25). Asian countries feature prominently in lists of the most interconnected societies on the planet, and this democratization of information also has important implications for governance in Asia.

Civil society groups in many Asian countries are increasingly vociferous in condemning unjust privilege and prioritization, whether with regard to caste (India and other South Asian societies), ethnicity (Malaysia), religion (Philippines), age/generation (South Korea), or gender. Second, with democratization of the media, it has become harder for governments to perpetrate, cover up, or turn a blind eye to inhumane practices within their jurisdictions or within those of fellow Asian states. David Shambaugh has identified international relations in Asia as increasingly a two-level game, whereby societies of the region are interconnected to an unprecedented degree. “New Preachers” – NGOs and civil society community activists – have sprouted in many countries in the region to uphold humanitarian causes, and to pressure governments and corporations (Chanda 307). These activists have also linked with international bodies and fellow activists in other countries for coordination and support. Thus the authoritarian state’s efforts to maintain its power are challenged by the mutually reinforcing trends of the constant diffusion of information and the rise of civil society activism (Chanda 308-9).

Thus at first sight it would appear that Asian ‘good governance’ is on an upward trajectory. Good governance means different things to different people depending on their disciplinary, cultural, and organizational background. Indeed, it is an essentially contested concept with no single and exhaustive definition, nor a delimitation of its scope, that commands universal acceptance. From a neoliberal institutional perspective good governance refers to efficiency in the provision of services and economic competitiveness, comparing ineffective economies or political bodies with viable economies and political bodies (Agere, 2000, p.1). For instance, historically, ‘the IMF’s main focus has been on encouraging countries to correct macroeconomic imbalances, reduce inflation, and undertake key trade, exchange, and other market reforms needed to improve efficiency and support sustained economic growth’ (IMF, 1997). Likewise the World Bank has emphasized that overall economic growth is crucial for generating opportunity, and that market reforms can be central in expanding opportunities for poor people assuming adequate mechanisms are in place to create new opportunities and compensate the potential losers in transitions. ‘Access to market opportunities and to public sector services is often strongly influenced by state and social institutions, which must be responsive and accountable to poor people’ (World Bank, 2000, p.7). Contemporary interpretations of good governance, as opposed to merely efficient governance, is that set of policy prescriptions and practices which prioritizes the interests of the most vulnerable sections of society, and that the most foundational interests of these individuals can be found in



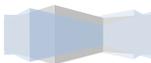
entitlement rights covered by the newly emerging human-centric discourse in the fields of both security and development.

Yet all is not well in the region. Freedom House lists India, Indonesia, Japan, Mongolia, South Korea, and Taiwan as the only “Free” states in Asia. The Economist Intelligence Unit finds only Japan to be a “Full Democracy” but adds Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Mongolia, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and Timor-Leste as Flawed Democracies. Polity IV considers Japan, Mongolia, and Taiwan to be “Full Democracies” with a score of 10, whereas East Timor (7), India (9), Indonesia (8), the Philippines (8), and South Korea (8) are considered “Democracies”. The CIA World Factbook refers to Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Japan, Mongolia, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and Timor-Leste as democracies. There remain many governance challenges in all Asian countries, including those perceived as democracies. Perhaps more alarming, however, are the apparent new trends and pressures contributing to authoritarian challenges to good governance in Asia.

This workshop frames these challenges based on the prevalent threats they pose to good governance throughout the region, in all countries regardless of formal government type. Country, or more accurately polity case studies are grouped, therefore, according to different conceptual themes, rather than in accordance to the democratic/non-democratic dichotomy, or sub-regional geographic categorization more commonly used. The broad theoretical categories are neo-monarchism, democratic roll-back, national project prioritization, and political culture. Each case study could in fact face two or more of these sets of challenges, but they have been categorized according to which concept best encapsulates the type of authoritarianism rising to prominence in the polity.

Neo-monarchism refers to two growing authoritarian challenges to governance in Asia which are redolent of monarchic or autocratic feudal systems of government. These are first, inherited reservoirs of power and authority which distort democratic governance structures, and facilitate elite capture of the commanding heights of government, the economy, and society; and second, the further concentration of power in the hands of a central political figure. No matter how enlightened an elite is placed over the common people, it is unlikely that they will give equal consideration to interests that they do not share and which are not represented among their number. This may not necessarily be as a result of any callous disregard, but merely due to the pressure of time and the complexities of government. Thus in order for the wishes of all to be represented, the people must rule and exercise power. The more power is concentrated in the hands of the elite, and the smaller the number of the enabled elite, the greater the authoritarian challenge posed by neo-monarchism.

Democratic roll-back is a problem for all those states in the region, whether or not they are generally considered consolidated. Indeed, as mentioned above, the Economist Intelligence Unit finds Japan to be the only truly ‘Full Democracy’ in Asia. Yet even Japan is not immune to the march of new authoritarianism, and indeed, under the new Abe administration, would



seem to embody the concept of ‘freedoms imperiled’ highlighted in this panel. Essentially this concept is related to that outlined by Samuel Huntington in his work on the ‘Third Wave’ of democracy, which covers many of these case studies, whereby for every wave of democratization, there is a countering movement of authoritarianism. This manifests in attacks by the central authority on freedom of speech, assembly, association, etc. usually under the guise of protection of national security from enemies both domestic and foreign.

The third category is somewhat related to the second, in that national security projects, as well as national economic development projects are championed by authoritarian forces as being in the interest of collective good for the whole society. There are a number of consequences of this prioritization. First, the interests of minorities may be sacrificed on the altar of conformity or in the interests of the supposed collective good. Second, the national projects may themselves provide reservoirs of power and patronage for authoritarian elites. Third, national projects may serve as diversionary activities and rallying points to divert publics from questioning elite domination. Finally, and perhaps most devastatingly, security and development interests at the human level (particularly those of the most vulnerable sections of society) may be undermined through the pursuit of the national variants.

The final category looks at the political culture of the people themselves may be the source of authoritarian governance challenges. There are two broad sub-categories to consider here. First, the idea that societal values somehow support authoritarian governance practices rather than more representative or democratic versions. Henry Nau notes that the lack of full protection for civil liberties in Asia ‘reflects the significantly different traditions regarding the relationship of the individual to society. Nowhere in Asia is there a celebration of political individualism as we know it in the West, either in political thought or in historical events such as the Reformation or Enlightenment’ (163).’ Furthermore he claims that authority patterns ‘infuse all social relationships – in the family (Confucianism), in religion (Buddhism and Islam), and in the state (Shintoism)’ (164). Second, that hopeless divisions within societies create a space, or even a desire for authoritarian solutions to the national governance stalemate; or alternatively they allow authoritarian actors to exploit and politicize the divisions, using antagonisms to rally support for their political agendas against the ‘other’.

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Asia-Pacific department associates to this APISA workshop through its regional programme because it plans to develop a project on interdependencies and linkages of challenges to democratisation and authoritarian trends in Asia. To this effect the workshop will be followed by a closed session which will explore experiences of promoting democracy in Asia. Further, it will debate which regional research agendas and fora are suitable to assist policy makers in Asia and Europe to engage in a dialogue on how to mitigate the challenges and threats to inclusive good governance and broad-based people’s participation.

