

# Democracy and Modernity – When the Twain Shall Meet? Reflections on the Asian Conundrum<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the trajectory of Asian politics in terms of modernization and democratization. Going beyond broad generalizations about democracy's Third Wave, empirical evidence is adduced to show an affective orientation and lively appetite for democracy among Asian citizens and even states. However, in many instances, while the citizens are willing to democratize, the state is institutionally weak. Conversely, strong, high performance states often block the path of democratization. Historically speaking, modernity and its social and economic concomitants have been coterminous with the emergence and arrival of democracy, but, owing to socio-economic and historical disjunctures in Asian social formations, such an emergence or arrival of democracy has remained tortuous and problematic. The institutionalization of middle-class driven 'bourgeois' democracy is clearly evident in many cases. However, civil society and political culture in some instances remain mired by a lack of political maturity and sophistication and a superficial attachment to economic performance. Many Asian politics have remained starkly authoritarian or simply undemocratic, even as modernization has advanced rapidly. Ultimately, the agency for democratization rests with a vibrant civil society. Again no necessary automatic correspondence obtains between modernization and the development of a vibrant civil society. The agency for such a social transformation has to be contextualized for different social formations. Finally, an important distinction has to be made between procedural and substantive democracy. For the latter to be sustained, it necessitates the engagement of citizens and civil forces on a multiplicity of social and political terrains outside of electoral politics.

<sup>1</sup> This paper has benefited from the comments and suggestions of Takashi Inoguchi. Some ideas in this paper have also appeared in joint work with my colleague Francis Loh. However, I alone bear responsibility for what is written herein.

## Introduction

This paper examines contemporary Asian polities in a generic fashion with a view to determining whether their current trajectory of modernization augurs for continuing democratization. It problematises the Huntington thesis on democracy's third wave (1991, 1991a, 1993) by further historicizing and contextualizing Asia's, and particularly, Southeast Asia's modernisation over the past few decades, seen as a corollary of its economic development. The project of 'modernity' the paper argues is at this present historical moment largely unchallenged or contested by both state and civil society.<sup>2</sup> Historically speaking modernity and its social and economic concomitants have been coterminous with the emergence and arrival of democracy but owing to socio-economic and historical disjunctures in Asian social formations, such an emergence or arrival of democracy has remained tortuous and problematic.

The project of democracy has been subjected to both statist and societal challenges until the present time. Many Asian polities, especially in the Southeast Asia region, have remained starkly authoritarian or simply undemocratic even as modernization has advanced rapidly. Nonetheless some social formations are well on the road of democratization and in some cases arguably even on the path of consolidation. The institutionalisation of middle-class-driven 'bourgeois' democracy is clearly evident in many cases. However, civil society and political culture in some instances remain mired by a lack of political maturity and sophistication and a superficial attachment to performance legitimacy as the underpinning of political stability. Paradoxically, while Asian polities have long been embedded in historical epochs and periods of the acculturation of non-materialist Eastern cultural practices, a new culture of materialism (often crass in its social manifestations) has probably taken root and infects everyday socio-political discourses and practices. Spiritualism and politics have become decoupled except in the case of a 'political' Islam, often at variance with democracy, which has emerged in Muslim regions, itself a phenomenon which requires more complex and nuanced deconstruction than can be managed in this paper.<sup>3</sup>

For the most part in developing Asia, post-colonial industrialization and modernization has presented a political moment for the onward trajectory of high-consumption societies devoid of political sensibilities which are post-modern, post-material or anti-development. Indeed, a broad culture of "developmentalism" (Loh, 2002) born of the developmental state – an invention of East Asia – is the order of the day.<sup>4</sup>

The essay draws on recent survey research and empirical work to adduce evidence that a culture of developmentalism pervades Southeast Asian, if not most Asian

<sup>2</sup> Modernity's most recent symbolic statement in Asia was the so-called "East Asian miracle" and while the bubble burst in 1997/98, the overall modernization thrust of Asia remains in place.

<sup>3</sup> For some discussion of this in Southeast Asia, see Saravanamuttu (2004a).

<sup>4</sup> Developmentalism may be defined as an embedded social phenomenon especially amongst the middle classes which valorizes individual and consumerist interests over and above social and political ideals. (cf Saravanamuttu and Loh, 2004).

societies. Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand are classic cases in point. Some East Asian polities, such as Japan, may however have become less enchanted by materialism while others such as South Korea and Taiwan have demonstrated a taste for a more participatory democracy not necessarily delinked from materialism.

Some caveats should be stated about the scope of this essay. It is certainly not the purpose here to review the vast literature on modernisation and democracy but merely to highlight some important recent empirical work pertaining especially to Asia. It is also not the purpose of this essay to provide sophisticated modelling or manipulation of data but rather to draw on the recently available data and empirical work (including that of the present author) to reflect on the Asian conundrum.

### **How Goes Modernisation and Democracy in Asia<sup>5</sup>?**

A recent important book by Yi Feng (2003) has tried to address the nexus between democracy and modernisation with the underlying proposition that political freedom or democracy is conducive to the latter. In particular, Feng tries to address the puzzle of the “economic miracles” of Pacific Asian (in our parlance “East Asian”) countries and the suggestion in much writing of political economy that democratic political institutions matter little in the achievement of economic development in these countries.

Through a series of complex empirical testing of various hypotheses using a mathematical model, Feng concludes as follows:

The fundamental finding is that political institutions *do* matter in their influence on economic growth. Political repression, political instability, and policy uncertainty all define and constrain an individual’s economic decisions in the market place. Therefore, they have pronounced dampening effects on a nation’s economic development. . . . Empirically, I found that political instability and policy uncertainty have significant negative effects on growth. The effect of democracy on growth is positive but statistically insignificant. However, I argue that democracy affects uncertainly, investment, education, property rights, and birth rates. (emphasis in original, Feng, 2003: 296).

The thrust of this paper is to look at the opposite relationship of Feng’s work, that is, whether economic development is conducive to democracy, which, as famously argued by Seymour Martin Lipset (1960), was said to be the case. The relationship between the rise of a middle class and democratisation has been addressed by a number of Southeast Asian scholars in a recent volume (Abdul Rahman Embong, 2001), more of which is discussed below. We now turn to examining some empirical data to see if modernisation, broadly defined, corresponds or correlates with various indices of

<sup>5</sup> In this paper, Asia is taken to be all of East Asia (excluding North Korea), Southeast Asia and South Asia. For purposes of analysis, in this paper, the Middle East, central Asian countries which were part of the former Soviet Union, and Nepal and Afghanistan, are excluded from our definition of “Asia.”

**Table 1.** *Human Development Index trends of selected Asian countries*

HDI rank	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2002
High human development							
9 Japan	0.854	0.879	0.894	0.91	0.924	0.934	0.938
Hong Kong, China 23 (SAR)	0.76	0.799	0.826	0.862	0.879	–	0.903
25 Singapore	0.724	0.761	0.784	0.821	0.859	–	0.902
28 Korea, Rep. of	0.705	0.741	0.779	0.817	0.852	0.878	0.888
33 Brunei Darussalam	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.867
Medium human development							
59 Malaysia	0.614	0.657	0.693	0.72	0.759	0.789	0.793
76 Thailand	0.613	0.651	0.676	0.707	0.742	–	0.768
83 Philippines	0.653	0.686	0.692	0.719	0.735	–	0.753
94 China	0.523	0.557	0.593	0.627	0.683	0.721	0.745
96 Sri Lanka	0.613	0.648	0.674	0.698	0.719	–	0.74
111 Indonesia	0.467	0.529	0.582	0.623	0.662	0.68	0.692
112 Viet Nam	–	–	–	0.61	0.649	0.686	0.691
127 India	0.411	0.437	0.476	0.514	0.548	0.579	0.595
132 Myanmar	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.551
Lao People's Dem. 135 Rep.	–	–	0.422	0.449	0.485	0.52	0.534
138 Bangladesh	0.345	0.363	0.388	0.417	0.445	0.497	0.509
Low human development							
142 Pakistan	0.346	0.373	0.405	0.444	0.473	–	0.497
158 Timor-Leste	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.436

Source: Human Development Report 2004, UNDP.

democratisation in Asia. The exercise undertaken here is one of examining correlations in a simple fashion rather than any attempt at causal relationships.

If one takes as a surrogate measure of modernisation the Human Development Index (HDI)<sup>6</sup>, Asia's modernization may be said to be incomplete, uneven, and in many cases still highly rudimentary. On high HR ranking are Japan (9), Hong Kong (23), Singapore (25), South Korea (28), Brunei (33), on medium HR ranking are Malaysia (59), Thailand (76), Philippines (83), China (94), Sri Lanka (96), Indonesia (111), Vietnam (112), India (127), Myanmar (132), Laos (135), Bangladesh (138), and on low HR ranking stands Pakistan (142) and Timor-Leste (158).

Table I above demonstrates that 'modernity' is objectively advancing even among the low ranking Asian states. For our purposes, Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore and South Korea could be taken as high ranking modernisers, Brunei being an exception as an oil-rich state. Taiwan, not included in HR rankings, would qualify by most accounts as a high ranking modernising state. Most of Southeast Asia would rank as medium ranking modernisers, and much of South Asia constitute low ranking modernisers. One

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all references to HDI are from Human Development Report 2004.

**Table 2.** *Freedom House score for South and East Asia 2003*

Free	Partly free	Not free
1.0 (None)	3.0 East Timor	5.5 Cambodia Pakistan
1.5 Japan	3.5 Indonesia Sri Lanka	6.0 (none)
2.0 Korea, South Taiwan	4.0 Bangladesh	6.5 China (PRC) Laos Vietnam
2.5 India Philippines Thailand	4.5 Singapore	7.0 Burma Korea, North
	5.0 Malaysia	
	5.5 (none)	

Source: Extracted from: *Freedom in the World Survey 2003*.

could suggest other measures of modernisation to rank countries and minor variations in ranking may pertain but by and large the picture in Asia is not terribly complex and it should not take too much persuasion, we believe, to use the HRI as a valid, if rudimentary, indicator of modernity. The trend shown in table clearly suggests that Asian countries have moved upwards on the HDI, hence, have become progressively more ‘modern’ since 1975.

While measuring modernity may be relatively easy, measuring democracy is much more problematic. The secondary data found in Huntington’s Third Wave thesis (1991a, 1991, 1993) and elaborated upon, as well as revised, by Diamond (2004) suggest that like modernity, a secular trend has tended to obtain in democratisation. However, Huntington himself has suggested that there have been reversals in various periods and Diamond also talks about “hold-out” states. For example, the Middle East is highlighted as a region in which democracy has failed to emerge, never mind, take root.

If we take Freedom House indicators as a primary surrogate measure, a thirty-year trend line shows that the number of “free” countries has continued to increase from 42 in 1973 to 89 in 2003. Asia Pacific increases are notably significant with a rise from 8 to 18 in the past three decades. However a closer examination of South and East Asian countries, we find that only six countries qualify as “free,” six as “partly free” and seven as “not free” (Table 2).

**Table 3.** *Voice and accountability, comparison across selected Asian countries*

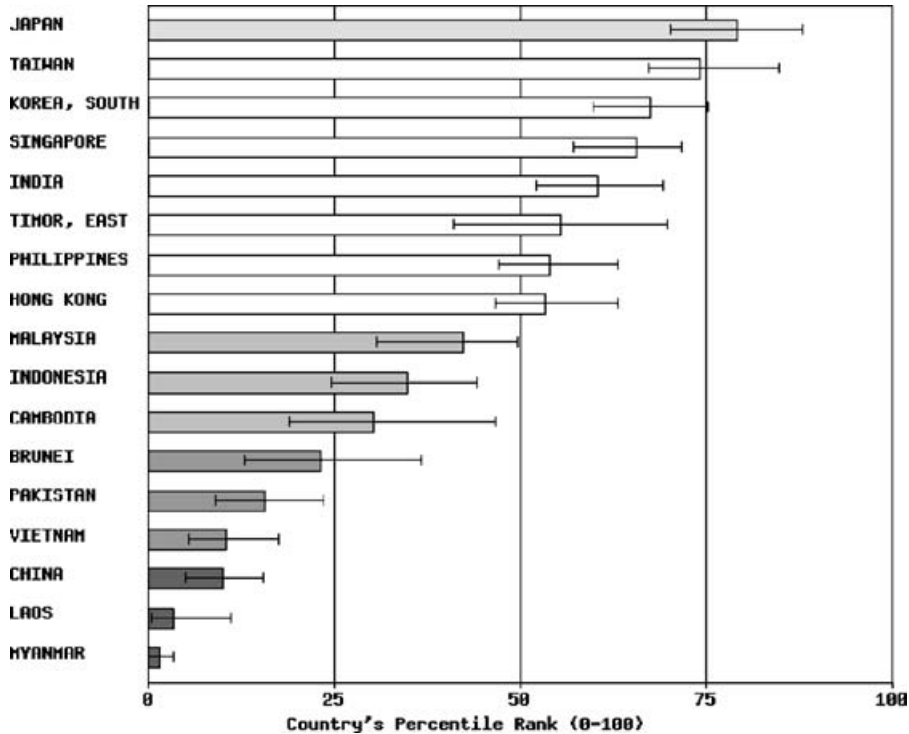
Country	Dataset	Percentile Rank (0–100)	Standard Deviation	Number of surveys/polls
BRUNEI	2002	23.2	0.22	5
CAMBODIA	2002	30.3	0.25	4
CHINA	2002	10.1	0.17	9
HONG KONG	2002	53.5	0.18	8
INDIA	2002	60.6	0.17	10
INDONESIA	2002	34.8	0.17	10
JAPAN	2002	79.3	0.17	10
KOREA, SOUTH	2002	67.7	0.17	10
LAOS	2002	3.5	0.25	4
MALAYSIA	2002	42.4	0.17	10
MYANMAR	2002	1.5	0.17	7
PAKISTAN	2002	15.7	0.18	7
PHILIPPINES	2002	54.0	0.17	9
SINGAPORE	2002	65.7	0.18	7
TAIWAN	2002	74.2	0.17	9
TIMOR, EAST	2002	55.6	0.29	2
VIETNAM	2002	10.6	0.17	8

*Note:* The governance indicators presented here reflect the statistical compilation of responses on the quality of governance given by a large number of enterprise, citizen and expert survey respondents in industrial and developing countries, as reported by a number of survey institutes, think tanks, non-governmental organizations, and international organizations. The aggregate indicators in no way reflect the official position of the World Bank, its Executive Directors, or the countries they represent. As discussed in detail in the accompanying papers, countries' relative positions on these indicators are subject to margins of error that are clearly indicated. Consequently, precise country rankings should not be inferred from this data.

*Source:* D. Kaufmann, A. Kraay, and M. Mastruzzi 2003.

As for electoral democracies in 2004, Japan, India, South Korea, Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, Timor-Leste, Bangladesh made the cut among 117 such democracies worldwide. In Freedom House's book, Malaysia is categorised under "restricted democratic practice" and Singapore as an "authoritarian regime" as is China. Vietnam has been categorised as a "totalitarian regime" along with Laos. (*Democracy's Century*, 2004). Nonetheless, on the whole, Freedom House is extremely sanguine about the progressive expansion of democracies and subscribes to Huntington's third wave, viz:

By the close of our century liberal and electoral democracies clearly predominate, and have expanded significantly in the Third Wave, which has brought democracy to much of the post-Communist world and to Latin America and parts of Asia and Africa. Electoral democracies now represent 120 of the 192 existing countries and constitute 62.5 percent of the world's population. (Ibid.)



**Figure 1.** Voice and accountability (World, 2002)

Source: Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi (2003).

Recent World Bank studies have come up with indicators and measures of good governance. A comprehensive data set of these measures has been provided by the studies of Kaufmann, Kraay and Zoido-Lobaton (1999) Kaufmann, Kraay (2002) and Kaufmann, Kraay and Mastruzzi (2003). We reproduce some of the data and findings for our purposes below.

If we take “voice and accountability” as a surrogate measure of democratic practice, a pattern emerges. A strong correlation obtains between the countries which are high on HDI and democratic practice. The exceptions are India and Timor, one a sustained democracy, the other a brand new case, which are low ranking HDI countries, but which stand out with a relatively high score for voice and accountability. An expected exception, Brunei, correctly drops down this scale in sharp contrast to its high HDI rank.

Let’s take another surrogate measure of democratic practice, “rule of law” and see the results.

The results are quite similar to voice and accountability with even a higher correlation to the HDI index. India and particularly Philippines have dropped down the scale. China, on the other hand, moves up the scale. On the rule application aspects

**Table 4.** *Rule of law, Comparison across selected countries*

Country	Dataset	Percentile Rank (0–100)	Standard Deviation	Number of surveys/polls	Sources
BRUNEI	2002	70.1	0.31	3	List
CAMBODIA	2002	20.1	0.21	5	List
CHINA	2002	51.5	0.13	12	List
HONG KONG	2002	86.6	0.14	9	List
INDIA	2002	57.2	0.13	13	List
INDONESIA	2002	23.2	0.13	13	List
JAPAN	2002	88.7	0.13	12	List
KOREA, SOUTH	2002	77.8	0.13	13	List
LAOS	2002	12.9	0.21	5	List
MALAYSIA	2002	69.6	0.13	13	List
MYANMAR	2002	2.1	0.16	7	List
PAKISTAN	2002	28.4	0.14	10	List
PHILIPPINES	2002	38.1	0.13	12	List
SINGAPORE	2002	93.3	0.13	10	List
THAILAND	2002	62.4	0.13	12	List
VIETNAM	2002	44.8	0.13	11	List

*Note:* The governance indicators presented here reflect the statistical compilation of responses on the quality of governance given by a large number of enterprise, citizen and expert survey respondents in industrial and developing countries, as reported by a number of survey institutes, think tanks, non-governmental organizations, and international organizations. The aggregate indicators in no way reflect the official position of the World Bank, its Executive Directors, or the countries they represent. As discussed in detail in the accompanying papers, countries' relative positions on these indicators are subject to margins of error that are clearly indicated. Consequently, precise country rankings should not be inferred from this data.

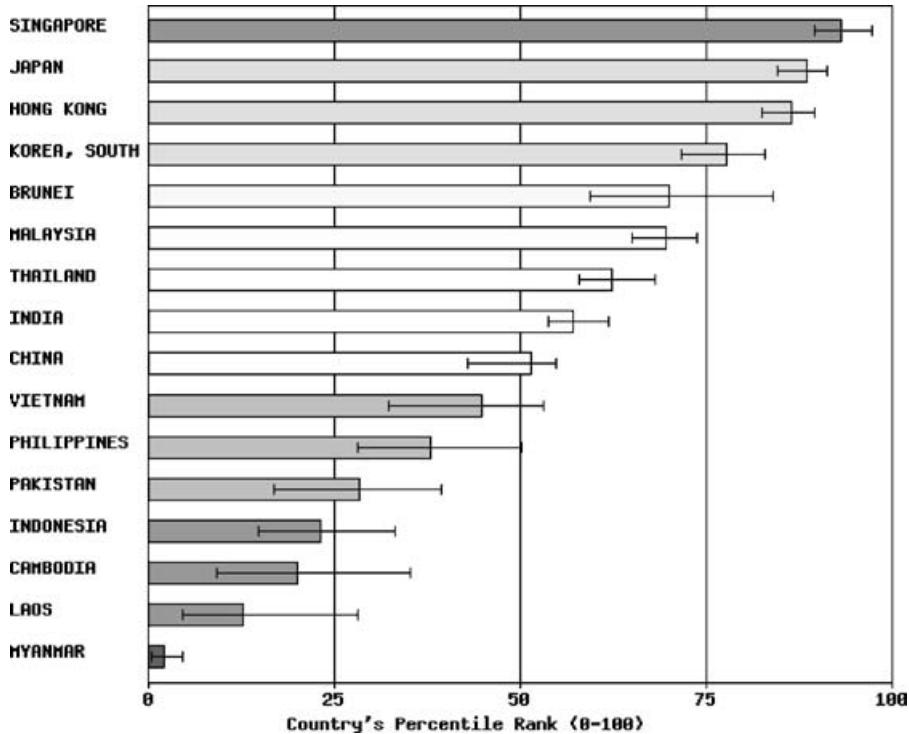
*Source:* D. Kaufmann, A. Kraay, and M. Mastruzzi 2003.

of democracy countries like Philippines and India do less well than their other Asian counterparts functioning within democratic frameworks. Myanmar predictably scores lowest of all countries on both counts.

One final indicator of democratic practice of a more qualitative sort can be employed, namely intended adherence to human rights conventions. In the Appendix is a table showing all the major human rights conventions and the Asian countries which have signed or acceded to them. The accessions to these conventions show a strong orientation towards a fundamental, universal democratic practice despite the much-touted notion of an "Asian values" approach to governance propagated by some Asian leaders and intellectuals.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> In response to a negative categorization of the Southeast Asian states, leaders like Mahathir Mohamad and Lee Kuan Yew, supported by local elites, were wont to argue that cultural factors had important bearing on political modernity; that modernity and tradition as in orthodox modernisation theories were misplaced polarities; and that the seemingly illiberal political systems in Asia had been inaccurately





**Figure 2.** Rule of law (World, 2002)  
 Source: Kaufmann, Kraay and Mastruzzi (2003).

### AsiaBarometer and Other Findings: Some Highlights

Among the most prominent recent comparative studies of Asian politics and society based on survey research is the AsiaBarometer project (Inoguchi *et al.*, 2005). It represents the largest ever comparative survey of Asia, covering East, Southeast, South and Central Asia. The countries surveyed were: Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, China, Sri Lanka, India, Vietnam, Uzbekistan and Myanmar. The survey period was June till September 2003. We will try to draw on some of the AsiaBarometer findings to highlight broad social thrusts and political cultural trends and variations in the Asian region. There are many well-known pitfalls of survey research but few methods beyond it to source out lifestyles, political attitudes, social awareness at the quotidian or everyday level. The AsiaBarometer survey sought to understand the daily lives, perceptions, norms, beliefs, preferences and actions of ordinary people. Here we

classified as 'undemocratic'. They merited reclassification as 'Asian variants' of democracy. It was argued that such democracies were in line with traditional 'Asian values' anchored around the family, placing the community's interests and the common good above that of the individual's, seeking consensual and eschewing competitive politics, and displaying respect rather than disrespect of authority (Robinson 1996, Chua 1997 and Khoo 2002).

will focus on their orientation and disposition towards matters related to democracy. The analysis at this stage can only be cursory and preliminary. However, certain broad findings can be drawn.

From the various country surveys, one could surmise a strong affective orientation towards democracy. However, while Japan and South Korea evinced a level of disaffection (Dadabaev, 2005, M. Shin, 2005), many of the newly developing South and Southeast Asian countries show high affective orientation towards democratic norms (Saravanamuttu, 2005, Kumar, 2005, Abeyratne, 2005). In this latter set of countries, there appears to be high political efficacy (i.e. a belief that political actions are meaningful) and a high trust in electoral mechanisms and procedural aspects of democracy.

The AsiaBarometer survey question which asked for respondents' sentiments towards a "democratic political system" finds highest support in Malaysia, Sri Lanka, China and Thailand in that order. Highest positive responses towards voting in national elections every time are found in Sri Lanka (82%), Thailand (78%), India (72%), Vietnam (65%) and Malaysia (62%). One among these countries, Vietnam, is not even a procedural democracy. Japan (43%) scores lower than Korea (53%) (Inoguchi et al. 2005: 374).

The levels of trust in public institutions and sense of political efficacy indicate a rather paradoxical situation. Respondents in the more developed democracies (Japan and South Korea) tend to show a distinctly low level of trust while in the more authoritarian states (Malaysia), trust levels are rather high. Taking South Korea and Malaysia for example, respondents' overall trust (*trust a lot* and *trust to a degree*) in parliament in the former was 11% while in the latter it was a remarkable 89%. The corresponding figures for Japan and Thailand are 12% and 70% respectively (Inoguchi et al. 2005: 361). Somewhat related to the low trust for state institutions in Japan and South Korea is what one author noted was a favourable disposition towards authoritarianism or even autocracy (M. Shin, 2005: 72). As a corollary, a higher preference for a powerful leader without restriction is found in South Korea and Japan compared with other Asia countries in the AsiaBarometer survey. South Korean preference stood at a disturbing 64% compared with Thailand at 14% (Inoguchi et al. 2005: 381).

Finally, overall personal satisfaction is clearly higher in the less developed democracies (and even non-democracies) as shown in responses to indicating high level of satisfaction with regime performance among the less matured democracies as is pride in one's nationality (Inoguchi et al. 2005: *passim*).

Inoguchi (2004) suggests, along with others, that the East Asian "disaffected democracies" are also exemplars of states with critical citizens. In my view, the less mature democracies of Southeast Asia along with established authoritarian structures have produced citizens less critical of established political institutions. The rising middle class with its strong consumerist tendencies has meant that political awareness and political sophistication in general has taken a backseat. An attachment to performance legitimacy – usually also promoted by statist actors and a state-controlled media – has

conspired to produce the lack of critical participation in the political realm. This said of Southeast Asia, the more developed East Asian democracies are far from perfect in the eyes of their citizens. The great concern with political corruption and low trust in institutions in Northeast Asia could lead to a deep legitimacy crisis over the long run if democratic institutions remained locked into systems of political-corporatist hegemony outside the control of ordinary citizens.

Apart from the AsiaBarometer survey, a couple of other comparative efforts have been conducted in recent years. In a survey research study conducted in 2002/03 of six Asian countries (Japan, South Korea, Mongolia, Philippines, Taiwan and Thailand), Doh Chul Shin found that citizens overwhelmingly prefer democracy to authoritarianism as a form of government (Shin, 2004). Using the Asia-Europe Survey of 2000, Jean Blondel also found “the roots of democracy” in East and Southeast Asia to be rather solid (Blondel, 2004).

Thus one could say that in general, survey research findings point to a strong affective orientation on the part of citizens in Asia towards democracy. Differences do pertain to levels of satisfactions with regimes and there is also suggestive evidence that political awareness or sophistication may vary considerably across countries, given the varying time spans of engagement or experience with democratic practices in Asia.

### **The Middle Class and Developmentalism in Southeast Asia<sup>8</sup>**

Southeast Asia presents itself as an important region to understand in the development of democracy. Broadly speaking, both from the evidence of surveys and especially qualitative work, the practice of democracy in Southeast Asia remains highly uneven, and rather shallow compared with that of North East Asian democracies or even South Asian democracies such as India. However, the region as a whole has undergone tremendous strides in development in recent decades. Modernisation as corollary of economic development has also been a fact of life, much more so than, say, in South Asia. The Southeast Asian countries may generally be understood as a group aspiring towards democratic change which is often retarded by statist-oriented regimes but these countries also face the daunting task of engendering vibrant civil societies.

In the first category of states, democratization could be expected to proceed in tandem with the rapid development of consumerist societies. The culture of developmentalism however has tended to act as a check on democratization and the emergence of vibrant civil societies. The impasse to democratisation has sometimes been attributed to the rise of the middle class. While it is well-established that economic growth had spawned a new urban-based educated middle class, the debate over politics of the new middle classes produced little consensus. Some suggested that large segments of the middle class acted as technocrats and bureaucrats or were employed by

<sup>8</sup> Some sections of the arguments presented here have been amplified in Saravanamuttu and Loh, 2004.

transnational corporations and hence were disinterested in democratization. Indeed, few of this class objected when the occasional repression or coercive law was used in order to maintain political stability and economic growth.

Others argued that such events as the overthrow of Marcos by ‘people power’ in February 1986 or the revolt in Bangkok during ‘Black May’ 1992 in Thailand was led by the urban educated middle-class, and dictatorship or military rule was removed. In the 1980s, several observers of Indonesian politics attributed the struggle for constitutionalism and public accountability to the new middle class, especially professionals such as lawyers and others financially independent of the state (Lev 1990). However, surveying democratic prospects a decade later Crouch (1993) concluded pessimistically. Similarly, writing on the same theme on the eve of the financial crisis, Anders Uhlin (1997: 22), after surveying the growth of the NGOs, concluded that democratization had not yet started in Indonesia, nor, in his view, has the process of liberalization or regime transition.

Rodan’s study (1993) of the Singapore middle class argued that the steady erosion of electoral support for the ruling PAP (from 70–80% in the 1970s to about 60% in the late 1980s and early 1990s) and the emergence of several independent NGOs augured well for democratization in Singapore. However, this opinion was contested by others. Jones and Brown (1994) showed how the middle-class while keenly competitive in the educational and business spheres, stopped short when it came to competing for power. Drawing a distinction between cultural and political power, Chua (1997) suggested that cultural pluralism was acceptable to the ruling PAP government but not the sharing of power. Given this, there was no reason for the majority of Singaporeans to call for change which could undermine the country’s economic performance and threaten the lifestyles they were enjoying.

On the other hand, I have argued that the middle-class contributed significantly to the democratization process in Malaysia (Saravanamuttu, 1992, 2001). A multi-ethnic coalition of middle-class groups were instrumental in the opposition to amendments to the Societies Act and Official Secrets Acts which sought to restrict civil liberties, and in the protests against the executive’s removal of the head of the judicial service in the 1980s. In so doing, these middle-class elements were said to have negated to a great extent communal politics, which for a long time had characterised Malaysia. This view, however, was in contradistinction to Ishak Shari and Jomo (1984), for instance, who considered the middle-class to be responsible for heightening communal polarization in the 1980s. This is because the ethnic factions of the middle-class were in intense competition with one another for educational, employment, promotion and business opportunities. Consequently they did not hesitate to invoke communal sentiments to mobilize ethnic support for themselves in the competition against one another.

Loh (2002) in particular has focused attention on ‘developmentalism’, a new political culture which valorises consumerist habits dependent on rapid growth, in turn dependent on political stability, which many Malaysians believe only the

Barisan Nasional ruling coalition could guarantee. For Loh, it is this discourse of developmentalism, not ethnicism, and certainly not ‘Asian values democracy’, that now posed limits to the discourse of democracy which had been re-emerging since the 1980s. In the same vein, Abdul Rahman Embong (2001) has drawn attention to the ‘cultural baggage’ of the new middle-class.

It is in this context that the new global economy beginning from the mid-1980s led to the liberalization of the local economies, the cultural and social pluralisation of the Southeast Asian societies, and depending on the particular case, changes in government or regime-type or consolidation of the existing regimes amidst political fragmentation of civil society. At best, one could argue that democratization is underway in some states, at worst, it continues to encounter stubborn relics of embedded authoritarianism amidst fragmentation of its social fabric.

### Democracies – Less or More?

Let us now briefly examine the state of democracy in Southeast Asia. In a recent comparative work, William Case (2002) has given an interesting assessment of Southeast Asian democracy. He has found five democracies “or less” in the region:

Indonesia: A pseudo-democracy (institutionalized during the Suharto period)

Singapore: A stable semi-democracy

Malaysia: Semi-democracy with strain points

Thailand: An unconsolidated democracy

Philippines: Stable but low quality democracy

Case’s notion of “democratic quality” is interesting. Unlike Larry Diamond’s notion of quality based on the liberal-democratic practice, Case employs a case-by-case approach. For example, he examines the Philippines in terms of the quality of its electoral practices, political campaigns and mass participation. A parallel concept to democratic quality that has been suggested in this paper is political sophistication. In a study of a parliamentary constituency in the 1999 Malaysian General Election, I found voters to have low level of political awareness on issues of the day and tendency of low or non-participation in political campaigns (Saravanamuttu, 2003). In a pre-election survey conducted with 913 respondents in a largely middle-class constituency, the following was revealed:

[Ninety] 90 percent and above of our respondents have neither attended BN<sup>9</sup> nor BA<sup>10</sup> political talks or *ceramah*<sup>11</sup> at the point of time when we conducted the survey.<sup>12</sup> Only nineteen persons, or 2 percent of the sample, attended up to three BA talks while nine persons (1 percent) did the same for BN talks.

<sup>9</sup> *Barisan Nasional* (National Front), the ruling coalition.

<sup>10</sup> *Barisan Alternatif* (Alternative Front), the opposition coalition.

<sup>11</sup> Political forums, with a panel of speakers, held during the election campaign period.

<sup>12</sup> Admittedly, the survey was conducted about one week before nomination day not during the heat of the campaign period but the question related to previous elections as well.

Some 742 respondents (81 percent) had no idea who would be the prime minister if the BA won the election. Indeed fully 36.6 percent of the respondents had never heard of the name *Barisan Alternatif* (p. 192).

We would argue that democratic quality has to be assessed not only from the regime practice side of the ledger but also on the side of society based on notions of good citizenship. Here is where the role of civil society is particularly crucial.<sup>13</sup> Thailand provides a particularly important recent example of the crucial role of civil forces in the democratization process although the evidence remains mixed.

Since the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932 and prior to the economic crisis, Thailand has seen the promulgation of 14 constitutions. As such, the Constitutional Drafting Assembly (CDA) of the 15th document was hardly guaranteed a smooth passage and a tussle ensued between reformists and conservatives. The reformists and pro-democracy camp wanted a constitution that would foster greater accountability, transparency and human rights while the conservatives rooted for retaining features of the old constitution. After weeks of debate the CDA in September 27, 1997 approved a draft constitution comprising 336 articles, which arguably represented the most comprehensive and democratic-constitutional changes in Thai history. The major changes were as follows:

- House of Representatives to consist of 400 MPs from single-member constituencies plus another 100 from party list (compared with 393 MPs from multi-member constituencies before).
- Cabinet ministers must relinquish their seats in parliament (cabinet ministers could be MPs in the past)
- MPs must have at least a university degree (no minimum education standards were required in the past)
- Elections to a 200-member Senate (senators were appointed before)
- Elections controlled and supervised by an autonomous Election Commission (elections were controlled by Interior Ministry before)
- Guarantee of Press freedom (courts could order media closure before)
- Vote-counting centralised (vote-counting at polling stations before)
- Elected local government

Thus if we went beyond Freedom House's minimalist classification of democracies cited earlier, the following generic types of states may be discerned in Southeast Asia:

*Democracies and aspiring democracies:*

- Middle-class driven (high consumption) authoritarian democracies: Singapore, Malaysia and to a lesser extent Thailand.
- Emergent democracies (still rural-based but with a growing but small middle class): Philippines and Indonesia.

<sup>13</sup> Some recent comparative work has found that the relationship between civil society and democracy is indeterminate (Muthiah, 2004). This is precisely why one has to examine each set of relationships in particular historical and national contexts.

*Southeast Asian non-democracies:*

- Transitional states – Vietnam, Laos
- Military dictatorship – Burma (Myanmar)
- Oil rentier state – Brunei

As suggested earlier the development of democracy in Southeast Asia has been stymied by both the developmental state through its performance legitimacy and also by a citizenry consumed by a political culture of developmentalism. The emergence of middle classes in certain Southeast Asian states has yet to lead a full-scale democratization given the consumerist orientation of this class and the continued fragmentation of civil society on a number of ethnic and ideological fissures. However, in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis, reformist politics took root in both Indonesia and Thailand and to a lesser extent in Malaysia with unintended salutary effects on democratization.

Finally, we argue that an important distinction has to be made between *procedural* and *substantive* democracy. For the latter to be sustained in any system, it requires a vibrant civil society, necessitating the engagement of citizens and civil forces on a multiplicity of social and political terrains outside of electoral politics. Strong civil societies presuppose a high level of social capital as suggested by the work of Putnam and others. However, not much work has been done on a comparative basis in Southeast Asia to address this question.

### **In Lieu of Conclusion**

We have shown in this essay that a strong drive and orientation towards democracy is evident in most of Asia at this historical juncture. Going beyond broad generalizations suggested about democracy's Third Wave, evidence is also adduced from survey research which demonstratives an affective orientation and lively appetite for democracy among Asian citizens. In many instances, while the citizens are willing to democratise, the state is unwilling or is institutionally weak. Conversely, strong, high performance states often block the path of democratization among its citizenry. Southeast Asia provides ample evidence of how authoritarian states have stymied the development of vibrant civil societies.

What about the nexus between modernity and democracy in Asia? A strictly chronological rendering of the two events in Asia would suggest that the former clearly arrived well in advance of the latter presenting a different case to that of Europe and North America. However, the conjoining of modernization with democracy came with the post-colonial moment of self-propelled nationalist projects entailing democratization in many cases. India and most of Southeast come to mind. The picture changes and becomes more complex with Northeast Asia or Indochina. Here we have extraneous interventions or political ventures as in the case of Japan or communist revolution as in the case of China and Korea and Indochina. We would argue that with Third Wave democratization as well as the end of the Cold War and the advent of globalisation, modernisation and democratization has been conjoined *à fortiori*.

However, the contradictions engendered by both processes remain palpable and real; modernization and economic development provided the basis for a performance legitimacy which, it has been argued, has sidetracked democratization. Ultimately the agency for democratization rests with developing a vibrant civil society. Again no necessary automatic correspondence obtains between modernization and the development of a vibrant civil society. The agency for such a social transformation has to be problematised and contextualised for different social formations. However, the fact that civil societies (though not necessarily political societies) have emerged in many Asian formations is indicative that modernization may have become the midwife of democratization.

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### Appendix 1. Southeast Asian Human Rights Conventions Signatories

HDI Rank	Country	International Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide 1948	International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination 1965	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1966	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women 1979	Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment 1984	Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989
9	Japan		X	X	X	X	X	X
25	Singapore	X				X		X
28	South Korea	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
33	Brunei							X
59	Malaysia	X				X		X
76	Thailand		X	X	X	X		X
83	Philippines	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
94	China	X	X	Y	X	X	X	X
111	Indonesia		X			X	X	X
112	Vietnam	X	X	X	X	X		X
130	Cambodia	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
132	Myanmar	X				X		X
135	Laos	X	X	Y	Y	X		X

X = Ratification, acceptance, approval, accession or succession.

Y = Signature not yet followed up by ratification.

Source: Human Development Report 2004.