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### **Asia's Democratic Values**

by Francis Fukuyama

With former Indonesia dictator Suharto on his death bed, and his democratically elected successor Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono visiting Washington this week, it is instructive to reflect on the changes that have taken place across East Asia since 1967, the year that Suharto took power. At that time, the United States was fighting a communist insurgency in South Vietnam, China was embroiled in the insanity of the Cultural Revolution, and only Japan qualified as a genuine democracy across the entire region. The Indonesian Communist Party had been suppressed with ferocious violence in 1965, and the U.S. was content to let Suharto rule with a strong hand for the next three decades.

Today, the political landscape is entirely different. Besides Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Thailand, and most recently Indonesia and East Timor have become genuine democracies. Throughout the region, democratic transformation has been underpinned by strong economic growth, ironically driven today by Chinese capitalism. One would have been foolhardy to predict such a future for Asia back in 1967.

This democratic revolution was helped along by a critical shift in American policy that occurred during the Reagan years, when the U.S. moved away from a "realist" policy of support for friendly dictators towards encouragement of democratic transition. This began in 1986 when Benigno Aquino's assassination provoked the "people power" revolution that eventually brought Corazon Aquino to power as a democratically elected president of the Philippines. Paul Wolfowitz (who will soon become president of the World Bank and was at that time assistant secretary of state for East Asia), together with his boss George Shultz, played a key role in gently persuading President Reagan to give up on the dictator Ferdinand Marcos and take the risks of a plunge into democracy.

The following year, President Reagan quietly but firmly urged General Roh Tae-woo to support the establishment of democratic institutions when popular protests against military dictatorship in South Korea spread. This contrasts sharply with U.S. behavior seven years earlier, when Washington stood aside as General Chun Doo-hwan staged a bloody crackdown on demonstrators in Kwangju. The U.S. looked on favorably as well when Taiwan's ruler, Chiang Ching-kuo, prepared his country for a political opening in 1988 and was succeeded by the democratically elected Lee Teng-hui. \* \* \*

This record shows that democracy promotion, which President Bush has recently put front and center on the American foreign policy agenda, is not a new initiative, but one that has been given real content over the past two decades.

(Another example would be U.S. support for upholding the "no" referendum against General Augusto Pinochet in Chile in 1988, which again contrasts with a more sympathetic U.S. policy at the time of his rise to power in 1973.)

Democracy in Asia has been a messy business. Four newly elected presidents in new democracies there -- Abdurrahman Wahid in Indonesia, Joseph Estrada in the Philippines, Roh Moo-hyun in South Korea, and Chen Shui-bian in Taiwan, faced impeachment proceedings shortly after being elected. Messrs. Wahid and Estrada were actually removed from office, the latter by means some people regard as unconstitutional. All four faced crises of legitimacy, either because they were elected by a minority of the voters, had no support in the legislature and faced disastrously low popularity ratings, or were charged with fraud or corruption. (In Chen Shui-bian's case, this involved the bizarre accusation that he staged an assassination attempt on himself to gain sympathy in a closely contested election.)

Democratic politics in Asia, just as in the U.S., has been disappointingly personality- and scandal-driven, focusing on issues like the military records of the children of candidates in Korea to Mr. Wahid's tendency to fall asleep during parliamentary sessions. The Philippines, with its low levels of education and income, has nominated two B-grade movie actors in a row to run for president; the one who got elected stayed up drinking and carousing as the economy tanked and cronyism ran rampant. But while Joseph Estrada was no Vaclav Havel, the manner in which Philippino elites used extralegal street demonstrations to remove him also raises questions about how well electoral politics is institutionalized there.

Many people in Asia have contrasted the uneven performance of Asian democracy to the technocratic efficiency of authoritarian states like Singapore and Malaysia. But the good news is that these recent problems represent the growing pains of new democracies and not a permanent feature of democracy itself. Indonesia, for example, inherited a highly complex constitution from the former regime whose provisions for the indirect election of the president led to Mr. Wahid's selection, without clearly defining his powers. President Yudhoyono, by contrast, was elected under a much more straightforward direct election. The conservative Grand National Party in Korea made a strategic blunder in trying to remove President Roh by impeachment, when their dispute was really over policy. The gambit failed, and no Korean political party is likely to misuse impeachment powers in a similar way in the future. Finally, constitutional courts played critical roles in resolving executive-legislative deadlocks in the Philippines, Korea and Taiwan; in earlier years, these sorts of disputes would have been solved by military intervention. Democratic institutions, in other words, worked as they were supposed to.

Democratic politics can often make the United States uncomfortable, which is why Washington has at times preferred predictable authoritarians. Both South

Korea and Taiwan have moved dramatically to the left over the past decade; their foreign policies are scarcely recognizable compared to what they were during the Cold War. South Korea has sought rapprochement with the Communist North, making impossible a hard-line U.S. policy to turn back Pyongyang's drive for nuclear weapons, while Taiwan has threatened cross-Straits stability by making noises about independence from mainland China. The process of political change has been accelerated in these countries by winner-take-all presidential systems that contrast with the slower-moving parliamentary one in Japan. But there is no question that these reorientations in the policies of the two countries represent genuine democratic choices on the part of their populations, reflecting generational change in the Korean case, and the rise of indigenous Taiwanese in Taiwan's.

It is Indonesia that most vividly demonstrates the fallacy of much of the contemporary conventional wisdom about democracy. Observers have argued at different times that, first, "Asian values" did not support democracy; that Islam was similarly an insuperable obstacle; and that paternalistic authoritarians like Suharto presented a good model for development. Contemporary Indonesia contradicts all three points. It is unquestionably Asian and Muslim, and yet has evolved into a credible democracy in the difficult years since the crisis that brought Suharto down in 1998.

Indonesia shows, in fact, that even for an Asian Muslim society, democracy is the only durable source of legitimacy. The Indonesian people supported Suharto's soft authoritarianism only as long as it delivered the goods of rapid development, but when it hit a setback during the Asian crisis, that legitimacy crumbled. There was no reservoir of good will for dictators that are incompetent as well as corrupt. South Korea, whose crisis was comparable in magnitude, faced no similar challenge to its political system's legitimacy because the latter was based on democratic choice. Indonesia still faces enormous problems: Corruption has moved from a wholesale to a retail level; poverty has increased, and Jakarta faces the threat of jihadism. But President Yudhoyono's government has proven remarkably mature in working cooperatively with the U.S., Australia and other sympathetic governments to deal with problems from terrorism to tsunami relief.

In the democratic transformation of Asia over the past generation, the U.S. often played a critical role when it ceased to hold back, and indeed encouraged, local demands for accountable government. The East Asia of 2005 that resulted is incomparably more hospitable to U.S. interests than the one we faced when Suharto first came to power in the 1960s. It is something to keep in mind as we contemplate the trade-off between familiar dictators and uncertain democracies in other parts of the world.

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