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Asian Democratization
and Its Discontents:

The Quest for Substantive Democracy



Asian Democratization and Its Discontents: The Quest for Substantive Democracy

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With an increasing proportion of Asia-Pacific nations embracing elections as an arbiter of political competition, and a mechanism for selection of political leaders, there is a palpable sense that the march towards democracy is very much alive and kicking.

In an era where China and India are seeking to regain their historical position (prior to the 18th century) as the world's largest economies, with other smaller Asian countries such as Vietnam and Philippines featuring among the fastest growing markets for decades to come, there is a glimmer of hope that prosperity and democratization could move hand in hand as we enter the so-called "Asian Century". After all, history tells us that massive economic transformation could serve as a powerful precursor for political change, as a burgeoning middle class together with new centers of power demand for greater accountability and effective governance from the traditional center. (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012)

As Diamond and Morlino (2004: 3) argue, democracy, at the minimum, has four basic elements: "(1) universal, adult suffrage, (2) recurring, free, competitive and fair elections, (3) more than one serious political party; and (4) alternative sources of information." And there are some reasons for optimism. By any measure, Northeast Asian countries such as South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan bear relevant characteristics of modern, minimalist democracies, having managed to hold popular, free and fair elections in recent decades.

In Southeast Asia, countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia have shelved their autocratic past in favor of a new

political future, notwithstanding the occasional outbursts of "autocratic nostalgia" among certain circles, while the Indochinese states of Thailand, Myanmar, and even Cambodia have tilted in the direction of political liberalization -- flirting with democratic opening under the watchful gaze of the ancien regime.

Meanwhile, South Asia has been home to long-standing democracies such as India, with neighboring Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan managing -- in the last decade -- to stage relatively peaceful and democratic political transition through the ballot box. Sri Lanka, in turn, has been benefiting from an unprecedented 'peace dividend', as it tries to move past its tortuous history of civil war and internal divisions.

Nevertheless, the fate of democracy in Asia is far from assured, especially as the inexorable forces of economic integration -- breeding ever-greater uncertainty into labor markets and fuelling regulatory rollback at an astonishing pace -- intensify longstanding schisms within the society: growing economic inequality feeding popular discontent, unfettered corruption affecting multiple levels of governance, and stubbornly high levels of poverty marginalizing large sections of the public.

"Globalization often means...a race to the bottom for wage levels, while capital flees from high-tax states in search of 'tax holidays' or even tax havens," Malaysian Parliamentarian Liew Chin Tong and Singapore-based academic Ooi Kee Beng write in the *Quarterly*, pondering the nefarious impact of intensified market integration on Asian societies. "The economic programs of the mainstream parties representing the left and the right no longer differ in substantive matters or even in their manifest values."

Worryingly, the region has seen the endurance of "electoral autocracies", which have largely -- and with varying degrees of astuteness -- instrumentalized elections as a means for projecting a veneer of reform and openness, but in reality co-opting various sections of the society as well as the opposition -- not to mention foreign patrons -- to perpetuate an autocratic regime.

Democracy, after all, isn't only about holding regular elections, as most Asian countries do to the pleasure of foreign observers eagerly in search of traces of political modernization in the East, but instead it is essentially the consolidation of the fruits of prior democratic opening -- achieved through either revolutionary upheavals, say the Philippines' 1986 EDSA Revolution, or pacted-transitions as in the end of the New Order in Indonesia. Democratic consolidation entails the (i) engendering of vertical and horizontal accountability into state institutions, (ii) guaranteeing basic welfare and civil liberties for the greater population, (iii) establishing civilian supremacy over the armed forces, and (IV) upholding the rule of law. None of this would be possible in absence of a strong, autonomous state, capable of protecting vulnerable sectors against the predation of more powerful forces and complemented by well-functioning and inclusive economic institutions, which equitably spread the fruits of prosperity to the far corners of the society. In short, as scholars such as Larry Diamond put it, *substantive* democracy requires a systemic deepening of the democratization process, whereby a vibrant civic culture co-exists with accountable, participatory governance. And this constitutes the major struggle for fulfilling an Asian democratic vision.

The Struggle Continues

Despite the incessant efforts of regional autocrats to use the manufactured discourse of “Asian Values” to stymie external criticism and justify internal repression, recent studies suggest that the desire for democracy is almost universal across the region. While Asian democracies such as Japan and the Philippines have suffered from decades-old economic sclerosis, there is little to suggest that more economically vibrant Asian autocracies, at least for now, have proven to be bastions of stability and resilience. Since many autocracies have sought legitimacy based on economic performance, rather than political participation and electoral accountability, they have shown to be much more vulnerable to systemic shocks during crisis period – forcing autocratic regimes to engage in short-term reforms that could neither guarantee social passivity nor long-term regimesurvival. (Nathan, 2012)

Yet, even among Asian democracies, the quest for substantive democracy is far from over. In fact, even the most established regional democracies such as Japan and the Philippines have seen the perpetual dominance of the old elite, despite the occasional rise of progressive forces amid the cyclical euphoria of change, say the rise of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in 2009 and the election of Benigno Aquino III in 2010.

After the DPJ's brief hold on power (2009-2012), what Japan has seen is the return of the right, with ultra-conservative elements coalescing around the charismatic leadership of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who has vowed to revive the Japanese economy as well as revise the peace constitution. Abe's ascent to power has come hand in hand with the weakening of progressive forces in the Japanese parliament. As Japan expert Sven Saaler explains in the *Quarterly*, “No opposition party of relevant strength is left. Rather, the opposition is disunited and fragmented and, for the time able, seems unable to restrain the plans of the ruling coalition.”

As a result, Abe enjoys an unprecedented opportunity to overhaul the Japanese political system, as exemplified by his so-called *Abenomics*, which combines



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fiscal-monetary expansionary policies with structural reforms to revive the Japanese economy, as well as an aggressive push to make Japan a normal power by revising the constitution. The Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) strong performance in the most recent Upper House elections indicated the relatively strong resonance of Abe's initial posturing.

“After the victory in the Upper House elections in July, it is likely that Abe will further push his real agenda - the overcoming of Japan's 'postwar regime',” Saaler explains in the *Quarterly*. But it is still far from assured whether Abe will have enough popular support to execute a successful referendum to revise the constitution, while the negative regional repercussions of an assertive Japan could also weaken Abe's hands at home and trigger a corresponding push-back by moderates. Thus, Saaler argues, “If his (transient) popularity wanes, he will most likely stick to concentrating on economic policies.”

In the Philippines, the Aquino administration has been responsible for a series of consequential reforms, which have injected a measure of stability into the economy as well as political institutions. Displaying sincerity in cracking down on corruption, ensuring stable economic policies, and ameliorating poverty, President Aquino

has come to enjoy historic-high popularity, with approval ratings hovering around 70% half way into his administration – an astonishing achievement for any democratically-elected leader.

Despite incessant opposition from business and conservative groups, the Aquino administration has successfully pushed for the passage of important legislations, chiefly the Reproductive Health (RH) and Sin Tax bills. The former allows the Philippine state to exercise oversight over the country's population growth as well as ensure the basic reproductive rights of women, while the latter allows the state to levy heavier taxes on tobacco for fiscal consolidation and healthy lifestyle promotion purposes.

Crucial to Aquino's reformist agenda has been his willingness to accommodate progressive voices, with the Philippines' leading Leftist group, the Akbayan Citizens' Action Party, serving as an integral coalition-partner of the ruling Liberal Party.

“The passing of Akbayan's priority bills owed itself in no small measure to the party's being part of the political coalition in power,” Walden Bello, the leading representative of Akbayan at the Philippine Congress, explains in the *Quarterly*, “The party's decision to

support Aquino rested in particular on the president's push to eradicate corruption and his poverty containment program via Conditional Cash Transfers (CCT), which aimed to break the cycle of poverty for millions of Filipinos."

Nonetheless, Akbayan's partnership with the ruling party has been fraught with ideological and policy-oriented differences. After all, Aquino not only hails from the traditional elite, but he has also adopted a largely pro-market economic agenda, which has disappointed many in the progressive circles. Despite Aquino's crackdown on corruption and openness to incorporate some Leftist figures into varying organs of the state, the business-as-usual patterns of political behavior continue to shape the dynamics of governance in the country, much to the disappointment of some within the Akbayan party.

"Political reforms introduced since the 1986 overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship have created more 'democratic space,' but this has been very limited," Bello argues in the *Quarterly*, lamenting the perpetuation of elite-driven politics in the country.

Recent months have also seen an explosion in public anger over revelations that suggest majority of lawmakers may have engaged in wanton misappropriation of public funds, specifically their Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF), sparking massive protests that culminated in the August 26 "Million People March" rally in the iconic Luneta Park in the old city of Manila.

"The [PDAF] scandal triggered popular outrage that was unexpected in its intensity and longevity. A continuous stream of revelations has kept the scandal under the watchful gaze of the nation," writes Cecilia Pe Lero, Chairperson of the Center for Popular Empowerment (CPE), in the *Quarterly*. "On August 26, between 70,000-400,000 people attended mass gatherings across the country and beyond to protest against corruption, calling for the prosecution of implicated officials and the abolition of the PDAF."

"So far, the government has vowed to crack down on corruption and exact accountability from corrupt officials,

with the Department of Justice expected to file multiple batches of complains against dozens of officials, legislators, and private individuals charged with malversation of public funds and corruption.

But in order for the Philippines, and the Aquino administration for that matter, to truly effect change in the direction of a substantive democracy, the establishment of genuine political parties -- as anchors of political accountability and mechanisms for articulation of pluralistic societal interests -- is of highest necessity. And the Philippine civil society should play a pivotal role in this regard. "Reform movements have yet to be able to harmonize their reform agenda to provide a framework for reforms and to effectively get the government to respond to it in a sustainable fashion," Rafaela David of FES Manila argues in the *Quarterly*. "Political parties provide accountability checks that are absent from political alliances and non-partisan engagements...it is high time for progressives to take a step back and carefully look at political parties and the central role they could -- and should -- play in winning and sustaining reforms."

In the case of newly-established minimalist democracies such as Indonesia, there has been an intensifying debate over the long-term trajectory of the country's democratic march, with many questioning whether there has been a complete and decisive

break with the autocratic past. Are we witnessing *reformasi* by consolidating democratic gains, or instead witnessing a *restorasi*, whereby the old order has cleverly managed to hijack or co-opt electoral institutions to perpetuate its traditional interests, now within a new competitive environment?

On the one hand, some have argued that Indonesia has come a long way in ensuring competitive and fair elections for the top political leaders, forcing the armed forces back to the barracks, and establishing new institutions such as the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) to ensure accountability among officials, recently arresting Constitutional Court Justice Akil Mochtar for alleged graft.

In the *Quarterly*, Paskal Kleden, an Indonesia expert currently based in Georgetown University, argues that the de-politicization of the armed forces was crucial to Indonesia's democratic transition. This has, Kleden argues, been achieved through two important elements: "First, it is the reformist element within the military consisting of Armed Forces Commander General Wiranto and then Chief of Staff of Socio-Political Affairs Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Second, Indonesia had a number of civilian experts (academics and activists) who had such high level understanding of military aspects that they were able to discuss on par with the military and were able to push for reform from the outside."



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On the other side of the debate, critics have raised concerns over the decentralization of corruption, now affecting all levels of government as opposed to Suharto era's more centralized corruption. Despite all its deficiencies, Kleden argues the KPK has, since its formation in 2003, shown a healthy measure of political will, "investigating cases related to even the political inner circle including former Member of Parliament Muhammad Nazaruddin and former Minister of Sports and Youth Andi Mallarangeng both from the president's Democrat Party."

Amid an expanding democratic space, there is, however, growing concern over the endurance of the Pancasila principles, as religious tensions and fundamentalist impulses threaten the country's long history of multiculturalism and tolerance. The civil society, a bedrock of civic activism and democratic politics, has also been hamstrung by new regressive legislations such as Law on Mass Organizations, which in principle intends to empower NGOs, but in practice "restraints and sanctions" national and international NGOs. This has major repercussions for Indonesia's democratization, and as Kleden aptly puts it the new legislations raises a critical question: "Since CSOs and NGOs have played an important role during Indonesia's transition phase, it has yet to be seen how their weakened financial and political capacity will affect the trajectory of Indonesia's democratization process."

A New Opening?

While Asian electoral democracies continue to battle for a more substantive form of participatory governance, international observers have been enchanted by political green shoots in staunchly autocratic states such as Myanmar and Cambodia.

In Myanmar, after decades of ironclad rule by the junta, which saw the violent suppression of not only the democratic opposition but also varying ethnic separatist movements, recent years have seen a qualitative shift in the posturing of the leadership: The generals have pushed for constitutional revisions, relaxed restrictions on the media, welcomed the participation of opposition forces,

curtailed the dominance of military officials in the parliament, and opened up the economy to foreign investments. Ostensibly, Myanmar is going through a process of political liberalization, expanding the democratic space and instituting a new structure of political opportunity that could benefit the democratic forces in the medium- to long-run.

So far, Western powers as well as regional neighbors have welcomed Myanmar's liberalization, hoping to influence the country's political trajectory by sustained and multidimensional constructive engagement -- culminating in the visit of top European and U.S. officials to the country, with the iconic opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (DASSK), who is currently a member of the parliament and a crucial figure amid the liberalization process, touring Western capitals after decades of house arrest and isolation. But is this for real? Many critics have dismissed the recent reforms as purely cosmetic, a political charade designed to break the junta's isolation and growing dependence on China. The ongoing political liberalization, critics contend, is simply an instrument to unshackle Myanmar from decades of economic stagnation, since improved relations with Western powers could mean the elimination of sanctions and a massive inflow in foreign investments. In short, what we are witnessing is simply a tactical short- to medium-term decision to ensure long-term regime survival.

As Arnold Tarrobago Villa, the Executive Director of Active Citizenship Foundation (ACF), argues in the *Quarterly*, the military continues to dominate the parliament, in addition to the security and intelligence organs of the state as well as much of the national economy. Despite the opposition National League for Democracy's (NLD) astonishing success at the 2012 by-elections, which saw the long-suppressed party to win 43 out of 44 contested seats, up to 110 parliamentary members are directly appointed by the junta. And despite the abolition of state censorship of media, beginning in August 2012, Tarrobago Villa argues, "the culture of fear that has been built-up by 48 years of censorship cannot be unlearned in a fortnight." So the media is now exercising self-censorship to avoid persecution.



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Then, there is the more fundamental question of: Who calls the shots?

"Some analysts believe that it is still [the long-standing military dictator] Than Shwe who is calling the shots behind the scenes even while already very sick," Tarrobago Villa argues in the *Quarterly*, explaining the ongoing debate over the power struggle within the regime. "But there are others who believe that a break in the mindset has finally occurred, which has allowed moderates and reformers to rise in the hierarchy." What we increasingly see, by many accounts, is a fluid process of contestation within the junta as well as among varying political groups in the country's political landscape.

While analysts continue to debate Myanmar's fate, Cambodia's most recent parliamentary elections has sparked a national crisis, as opposition forces, who have managed to massively increase their seats in the parliament, continue to accuse the state of widespread electoral fraud and manipulation.

As a result, the country has seen an unprecedented showdown between the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) led by Prime Minister Hun Sen, on one hand, and the opposition coalition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), led by previously-exiled opposition figure Sam Rainsy. As a result, recent months have seen a major

explosion in street protests and failed dialogues between both sides.

“...Intimidations and threats did occur in 2013,” Max Grömping, an elections expert currently based at University of Sydney, explains in the *Quarterly*. “Media bias was staggering. All mainstream TV and radio stations [were] firm in their pro-government reporting... More than one million voters were disenfranchised due to a manipulation of the voter lists.” Most strikingly, as Grömping explains, the indelible ink used by voters was easily washed off, raising concerns with multiple voting.

But is the ruling CPP in trouble? Are we set for regime-change? And, are we going to witness post-electoral revolutions ala color revolutions in the post-Soviet space?

“Regardless of whether the election results hold or large-scale violent protests erupt, it is unlikely that the CPP will easily relinquish its powers,” argues Grömping providing a provisional answer to the question of whether an upheaval is in the cards. “It depends in large parts on whether the ruling party can rely on the security apparatus for repression, and on whether a mode of power-sharing can be found in which key figures can protect their vital interests.”

Overall, the *Quarterly* brings together a number of essays by leading experts and observers in the region, helping us to shed light on latest developments vis-à-vis the ongoing democratization challenges and opportunities in the Asia-Pacific.

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Japan's Fateful Elections: What the Abe Administration Portends

SVEN SAALER

Two elections in Japan, in December 2012 and in July 2013, completely changed the balance of power in the Upper and Lower House of the Japanese Diet, the national parliament. The ruling government under Shinzo Abe, a coalition of the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the party Komeito, now commands an overwhelming majority in both houses. No opposition party of relevant strength is left. Rather, the opposition is disunited and fragmented and, for the time being, seems unable to restrain the plans of the ruling coalition. This is particularly worrying because of the fact that Shinzo Abe is the representative of a particular right-wing camp in the LDP. He and his allies have pushed the moderate and liberal groups into the background.

On the other hand, there are nine (!) opposition parties ranging from the Communist Part of Japan and the Social Democratic Party on the left to the ultraconservative Japan Restoration Party on the right. Cooperation between these parties is highly unlikely. Each one of them is hardly a menace to the dominant position of the ruling government. The Social Democratic Party, for example, has constantly lost seats over the years and has only five seats left - combined in the Upper and the Lower House. Other opposition parties are crippled by internal struggles, such as the Democratic Party of Japan, the center-left party that was in government from 2009 to 2012. Other parties, such as the small party People's Lives First, which also advocates social democratic positions, and the reform-oriented Everybody's Party, is also suffering from internal struggle and is likely to split up in the near future.

With an opposition in such a bad shape, the Abe government is likely to go ahead with far-reaching reforms. In the first six



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With an opposition in such a bad shape, the Abe government is likely to go ahead with far-reaching reforms.

months in the office as prime minister, Abe has been cautious not to push highly debated and sensitive policy issues, such as the revision of the Japanese Constitution. He has focused on the revival of the Japanese economy, through his economic policy known as "Abenomics." The strongly Keynesian policy, aiming at pumping government money into the economy, expanding the - already ludicrously high - national debt, and stimulating economic growth by a loose monetary policy and depreciating Japan's currency, the Yen, has not yet shown any effects, but only the hope in economic recovery has allowed Abe to retain high popularity rates. After the victory in the Upper House elections in July, it is likely that Abe will further push his real agenda - the overcoming of Japan's "postwar regime."

Abe claims that the social and political system of postwar Japan, including its Constitution, was forced onto Japan under the occupation by the United States (1945-52). The fact that the occupation forces accused his grandfather, wartime Minister of Commerce and Industry Nobusuke Kishi, as a war criminal surely is contributing to his almost obsessive negation of postwar Japan's polity.

So what are Abe's plans for Japan? First, Japan, in the view of Abe and like-minded conservatives, needs a new Constitution. What bothers Abe most about the current Constitution is that it does not allow Japan to use its military autonomously. What Japan would do if it could, he does not clarify.

However, Article 9 of the current Constitution, an article which is a source of pride for many Japanese, is the main target of Abe and his like-minded allies. Article 9 stipulates the following:

Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. (2) To accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.

Abe wants to delete, or at least markedly revise this article, and he insists on including a statement that Japan, which at present calls its military forces "Self-Defense Forces" (SDF), has a "National Army." Surely, the SDF are more than mere forces of self-defense. Japan has the fifth-largest military-budget worldwide, and the SDF are a small, but well-trained and extremely well-equipped force. The Air Self Defense Forces (ASDF) have state-of-the-art jet fighters as well as Patriot missiles (PAC3); the navy has AEGIS destroyers and just added a helicopter carrier to its fleet. Although Japanese territory is not really suited for land battles, Japan also has a large number of state-of-the-art tanks. The obsession of the conservative camp in the LDP causes observers to raise their eyebrows concerning the true meaning of the intended revision (or deletion) of Article 9.

Abe has also completely overlooked the symbolic meaning of Article 9. After waging war in East and South East Asia from 1931 to 1945, Article 9 has to be seen as a part of Japan's postwar reconciliation policy. Japan clearly stated, in its Constitution, that it would not wage war again. Deleting Article 9, of course, will be an odd message. This will mean that Japan revokes its promise that it will not wage war anymore. Abe obviously has not thought about the consequences of revoking this promise in the eyes and ears of the victims of Japan's war and occupation.

But Abe also wants to change the basic character of Japanese society. An LDP

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proposal for a revised Constitution emphasizes the importance of "the people" (kokumin) to develop a stronger sense of nationalism (one that Abe calls "healthy nationalism", thus implying that there is also "unhealthy nationalism," but not clarifying why Japan's nationalism will not fall in the latter category). Further, the LDP proposal suggests limiting the "freedom of expression" to the degree where it does "not harm the public order." This reminds of the 1930s, during which the Law for the Preservation of Public Order allowed the Japanese police to arrest advocates of communist, socialist, and later liberal thought at random, under the pretext of an "endangering of public order".

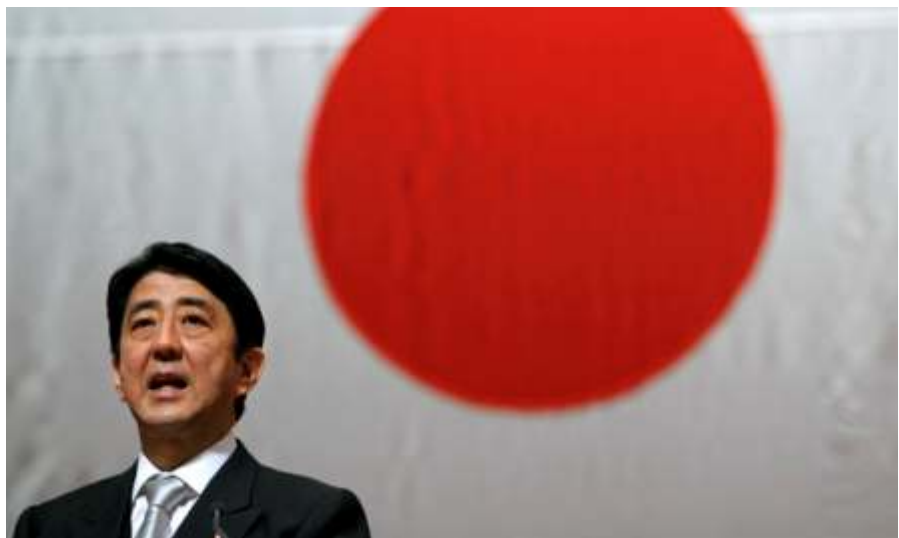
Further, Abe's foreign policy adds to the headache that these developments cause in Japan's neighboring countries. Recently, even the United States expressed concern about Prime Minister Abe's "aggressive military posture," which could lead to destabilizing the region. (The Japan Times, 8 August 2013). Beyond the U.S., Abe's plans are causing concern in China and Korea. Abe has continuously demanded that Japan takes a "strong position" vis-a-vis China,

while not giving efforts at dialogue and reconciliation high priority. To be sure, China's diplomatic posture in the last decade is also not characterized by a particularly pro-Japanese line, to say the least. However, given the historical background of Japanese warfare in China from the late nineteenth century (with the Sino-Japanese War 1894/95) to the various military interventions in the 1910s and 1920s, with full-scale war between both sides in the 1930s and until 1945, it is not unreasonable to remind the Japanese government (less so the Japanese people, whose awareness of historical liabilities is relatively high) of its responsibilities for the past.

It remains to be seen how soon Abe will embark on his radical agenda. If his popularity wanes, he will most likely stick to concentrating on economic policies. If "Abenomics" will not lead to robust economic recovery, however, his popularity is likely to vanish very soon. Only in case of a (unlikely) swift economic upturn will Abe be able to push for the more controversial parts of his agenda, namely the attempt at Constitutional revision to buttress an increasingly hawkish foreign policy.

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Abe's foreign policy adds to the headache that these developments cause in Japan's neighboring countries.



Remaining Homework and Motivations: Indonesia's Post Democratic Transition and Its Challenges

PASKAL KLEDEN

Indonesia has charted its own course through an extraordinary democratic transformation from a rule of the iron fist to the rule of the people.

- Barack Obama,
University of Indonesia, 10 November 2010

Introduction

The above quote may encapsulate the general perception of the international community towards Indonesia. Yet the country's state of democracy has been a continuing debate among scholars and activists. Subono and Darmawan (Subono, Darmawan, 2013) assert in the last *Quarterly* about disconnectedness between the level of democracy with the ability of the state to deliver welfare. Such analysis is a signpost about remaining homework to be done after the democratic transition. The questions this article intends to answer are: (1) What are the factors solidifying Indonesia's reform process? (2) What are the motivations for the government to address the country's remaining challenges given the positive international reputation it already enjoys? Within the limited space, this article will only select a number of issues instead of providing a full analysis.

Military Reform as *Primus Inter Pares*

O'Donnell and Schmitter (Mainwaring, 1989) elucidate that the "transition is the interval between one political regime and another." So, what are the enablers for a post-"New Order" setting? They may be among others: (1) Constitutional reforms (2) Three successful elections (1999, 2004, 2009) which are deemed as free and democratic; (3) A free press. (4) Transfer of power from the central to the regional levels. (5) A strong and independent Corruption Eradication Commission (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi, or

KPK) is established. Yet, a *primus inter pares* among these factors could be military reform. During the early reform era, it was believed that the military had a "veto power", or in other words, the necessary capacity to turn back democratic processes.

It is palpable that had the military opted for a hardline reaction to defend Suharto, the level of coercion would be high and it is uncertain whether a free and fair election could be held in 1999. There are two factors that contributed to a peaceful depoliticization of the military. First, it is the reformist element within the military consisting of Armed Forces Commander General Wiranto and then Chief of Staff of Socio-Political Affairs Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. They were among the military officials who believed that the New Order regime could not be defended (Mietzner, 2006). Second, Indonesia had a number of civilian experts (academics and activists) who had such high level understanding of

military aspects that they were able to discuss on par with the military and were able to push for reform from the outside. In 2010, FES organized a visit of CSOs and politicians from Myanmar to Indonesia. A conclusion at that time as to why demilitarization was difficult in Myanmar was that because the country lacked such a technically capable civil society.

After Suharto's downfall, the military lost much of its influence on the political process, were subject to civilian control and were required to improve their professional standards. However, at the same time, the military was given sufficient time to adapt and many policy compromises were taken to allow a "controlled transfer of power" (Mietzner, 2006). It can be imagined that if a peaceful military reform had not taken place, the reform process would be longer and steeper, perhaps mirroring the daunting experience of Egypt.

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Emerging Challenges after Democratic Transition

When exactly did the transition period for Indonesia end? There seems to be no consensus among experts as such. However, the UNDP for instance started using the term “deepening democracy” for its governance program (UNDP, 2010), the FES began to speak of a “substantive democracy” (Rachman, 2007) and the Asia Foundation talked about “quality governance” (Hamid, 2013). The use of such terms indicates that something else needs to be done despite the fact the main institutions and processes are in place. Indeed, discussions with scholars and activists often reflect a level of dissatisfaction, some even fearing a setback or backlash of democracy. What are the symptoms for such suspicions? To answer that question, this section looks at three different groups namely CSOs, the executive, and political parties.

In 2010, Australian National University's Edward Aspinall published an intriguing paper titled *Indonesia: the Perils of Success*. One of his conclusions was that many donor organizations these days have decided to leave behind support for NGOs and CSOs as was the case during the first years of the reform era. Instead, they tend to deliver governance assistance programs, which are implemented in close collaboration with the government. One of the reasons, Aspinall argues, is that because they believe Indonesia is “out of the danger zone” such a collaborative support would

be more appropriate to the current setting (Aspinall, 2010). However, such action has limited the resources and hence has limited the civil society's influence.

Amidst criticisms from the civil society in July, the parliament passed the Law on Mass Organizations (311 supporting, 50 against) (Kleden, 2013). The law itself was originally intended to “empower mass organizations”. However, in practice the law is heavy in providing restraints and sanctions for national and international NGOs. Since CSOs and NGOs have played an important role during Indonesia's transition phase, it has yet to be seen how their weakened financial and political capacity will affect the trajectory of Indonesia's democratization process.

Examining the executive, another remaining homework for Indonesia would be to address corruption and decentralization. Last February, the Minister of Home Affairs Gamawan Fauzi stated that in the 2004-2012 period, 290 regional leaders were implicated in corruption cases. These consisted of 20 governors, 7 vice governors, 156 regents, 46 vice regents, 41 mayors, and 20 vice mayors (The Jakarta Post, July 2013). A staggering number given that as of October 2012, Indonesia consisted of 34 provinces, 410 districts and 98 cities (MoHA, 2012). This statement uncovers two conclusions. First, that corruption is still endemic and affects top level government officials. Second, that decentralization -- believed to bring

public service delivery closer to the people -- has also resulted into decentralized corruption.

It would be too harsh to argue that little has been done against corruption. Since the beginning of its operation in 2003, the KPK has been investigating cases related to even the political inner circle including former Member of Parliament Muhammad Nazaruddin and former Minister of Sports and Youth Andi Mallarangeng both from the president's Democrat Party. Yet, many of the KPK's investigators rely on the police, perhaps a logical reflection of the latter's capacity. But at the same time, such arrangement carries a conflict of interest at heart, especially when the police itself was put under investigation. Worryingly, when withdrawing some of its investigators, the police was able to weaken the KPK. Transparency International's Perception Index in 2012 still ranked Indonesia 118 out of 174 countries (Transparency International, 2012) -- an indication that much more needs to be done.

Do political parties play a role in corruption? In 2012, for instance, 52 politicians (Kleden, 2013) were involved in graft-related cases (from the legislative and executive). Apart from politicians' moral standards, this phenomenon may be related to the high level of financial costs required for political campaign. The expenses spent by political parties to advertise at national TV, newspapers, and magazines during the 2009 election were as follows:

Party	Costs IDR	Costs US\$ (assuming 1 US\$ = 10,000 IDR)
Golkar	IDR 303 billion	USD 30.3 million
The Democrat Party	IDR 162 billion	USD 16.2 million
The Great Indonesia Movement (Gerindra)	IDR 92 billion	USD 9.2 million
The Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P)	IDR 90 billion	USD 9.0 million
The Prosperous Justice Party (PKS)	IDR 67 billion	USD 6.7 million
The National Mandate Party (PAN)	IDR 66 billion	USD 6.6 million
The People's Conscience Party (Hanura)	IDR 41 billion	USD 4.1 million
The United Development Party (PPP)	IDR 38 billion	USD 3.8 million
The National Awakening Party (PKB)	IDR 19 billion	USD 1.9 million

Source: AC Nielsen quoted by Kompasiana

If one considers the funds required for governors' and regents' elections than the financial costs for democracy will even be much higher. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that politicians spending vast amounts of money during elections will inevitably seek a "return of investment" upon assuming office.

With the tenets of reform in place, Indonesia is still struggling with the institutionalization of the principles of democracy, transparency, and accountability, especially when they clash with pragmatic political and financial interests. Being considered by the world as the "third largest democracy", what motivations are left for Indonesia to tackle the remaining challenges?

Indonesia's aspirations at the global stage

Former presidential spokesperson for international affairs and former Ambassador to the United States,² Dino Patti Djalal classifies President Yudhoyono as a foreign policy president (Djalal, 2008), or a president who actively shapes the matters of international affairs instead of leaving it to the (foreign) minister. However, as a member of the G-20, Indonesia's international stature will matter for future administrations beyond Yudhoyono's government. In a paper presented at ANU's Indonesia Update conference in 2011, CSIS Executive Director Rizal Sukma elaborates the relationship between domestic politics and Indonesia's engagement at the regional and global levels. He explains that the successes of democracy have boosted Indonesia's confidence in the international arena. At the same time, Indonesia needs to constantly convince the world as to its solid democratic credentials (Reid, 2012).

To project its presence at the global level, Indonesia carried out several initiatives among others: hosting the United Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) conference in Bali in 2007; President Yudhoyono is chairing the high-level panel of eminent persons on the post-2015 development agenda together with President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, and Prime Minister David Cameron of United Kingdom; and Indonesia mediated the Thai-Cambodia

border conflict. In fact, the Bali based Institute for Peace and Democracy (IPD), which was initiated by President Yudhoyono, has the purpose of "sharing experiences and lessons learned on democracy and peace". In 2011, the IPD organized the Egypt – Indonesia Dialogue on Democratic Transition. In 2012, the IPD together with the Presidential Advisory Council visited Yangon "to discuss cooperation and support for the democratisation processes (IPD, 2011, 2012)."ackle the remaining challenges?

Indonesia is very much aware that its democratic achievements have become its soft power at the global stage. However, there is still a level of disconnect between domestic actors heavily engaged in corruption and those eager to push for a stronger and more credible Indonesian presence globally.

In addition, to be a global power Indonesia will need to better articulate its foreign policy priorities. In a statement released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2010, the vision that guides Indonesia's current diplomacy is "one thousand friends, zero enemies" (Natelegawa, 2010). There will be a time when Indonesia will pursue its national interest globally, and unfortunately will make some friends as well as enemies along the way.

Conclusion

Indonesia has come a long way from an authoritarian country led by the "Smiling General" to the world's third largest democracy. However, Indonesia needs to constantly demonstrate that its democratization process is on the right track. Should Indonesia fail, it is likely that its global presence will falter. During the 7th Annual International Conference of the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) in 2011, President Yudhoyono emphasized: "Indonesia is no longer a 'nation in waiting' as my good friend Adam Schwarz wrote in his book some years ago. Indonesia is a nation whose time has come – and we are seizing the moment with determination and hard work" (Djalal, 2011). Thank you Mr. President, but Indonesians and the world will remain eager to see how the principles of democracy will endure against pragmatic short-term political interests.

¹ Indonesia carried out four constitutional reforms in 1999, 2000, 2001, and 2002. The amendments are among others: limiting the power of the president, clarified a greater authority for the parliament, created decentralized decision making processes, provided the bases for direct presidential election, the creation of the Regional Council (DPD), establishing a constitutional court, and ensuring the human rights is respected. A detailed study was made by Denny Indrayana, Ph.D, *Indonesian Constitutional Reform 1999 – 2002, An Evaluation of Constitution-Making in Transition*, (Jakarta: Kompas Book Publishing, 2008).

² Dino Patti Djalal recently resigned as Ambassador to the United States to focus on his participation in the Democrat Party's convention which will select a presidential candidate for 2014.

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Social Democracy Needs Rejuvenation

LIEW CHIN TONG AND
OOI KEE BENG

The world, in particular Asia, is in dire need of a coherent left-of-centre discourse.

The recently concluded elections in Australia and Germany, just like those held in Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Malaysia in the past year or so, produced, domestic peculiarities aside, strikingly similar recipes for right-wing parties. First, hijack the populist pronouncements of their nominally left-leaning opponents, and second, couple these with the drumming up of the nationalist fervour that often favours parties on the right, especially in times of crisis or insecurity.

Even in Germany, Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats moved strategically leftward to accommodate the growing public malcontent towards capital and in so doing, she stole the thunder from the Social Democratic Party.

At the risk of generalizing to the extent of ignoring local conditions, it is still worth asking why left-leaning parties, which supposedly represent the less-well-to-do, are failing to win elections in times of global economic hardship.

Perhaps the challenge lies in the fact that there is no vibrant left-of-centre social democratic discourse around today.

In Asia, most social democratic parties were lumped together with the communists, which in itself is ironic since the two were usually hostile towards each other. They were then wiped out together, often violently and brutally at the height of the Cold War. To this date, anything that is left-leaning is treated suspiciously in many Asian societies—Taiwan, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia included.



Photo by lewishamdreamer @ Flickr

...it is still worth asking why left-leaning parties, which supposedly represent the less-well-to-do, are failing to win elections in times of global economic hardship

In the European context, the most effective rivals of the communists were in fact the social democrats, not the right-wing parties. The social democratic movements allowed for peaceful victories after accepting the parliamentary process.

But since Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan shifted the centre rightward, neoliberals have been defining the macro-economic agenda through tax cuts, the creation of tax havens, and privatisation of government functions, hence diminishing the ability of the state to redistribute wealth and opportunities.

The New Labour constructed by Tony Blair takes its lineage from Australia's Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating (1983-1996). All hitherto social democratic parties converged with the right, accepting "economic rationalism" or neoliberal ideals as gospel truth.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellites – dramatically remembered through the tearing down

of the Berlin Wall – there is no more ideological challenger to neoliberalism, a situation the American neo-conservative thinker Francis Fukuyama triumphantly called "the end of history".

Consequently, long-secure jobs, decent wages and social welfare quickly turned into old ideas standing in the way of the coming of the Brave New World. "Globalisation" often means that more workers all over the world are moving in all directions to look for jobs, resulting in a race to the bottom for wage levels, while capital flees from high-tax states in search of "tax holidays" or even tax havens.

Essentially, the economic programmes of the mainstream parties representing the left and the right no longer differ in substantive matters or even in their manifest values.

And so, during bad economic times, when left parties tend to do well, all that the right simply needs to do is copy the nicer sounding policies of its opponents to boost voters support.

Why the right is able to do this so easily and so successfully, is that there is hardly a coherent left-of-centre discourse around today that offers a somewhat comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic problems of our times and that at the same time provides solutions based on that analysis.

With the fall of Communism, the idea that wealth and opportunities generated by society needs to be redistributed throughout society by the state is forgotten. With that amnesia comes the tremendous widening of the income gap experienced throughout world since 1990.

Not only does this threaten the political stability of most countries, the excessive accumulation of wealth in the hands of the increasingly small class of the super-rich almost enervates consumption capacity away from society at large as aggregate demand falls.

In many ways, therefore, we are back in the days of the early 20th century when social instability threatened to destroy capitalism. What saved it then were the reformist movements that we came to know as social democratic parties.

However, because Communism is not knocking at the door, the need for social democratic policies is not properly felt, and governments crave for endless increments in their GDP in the blind hope that wealth will distribute itself naturally. The increasing income gap tells us one definite thing—whether or not wealth trickles down, it is certainly not doing it faster than wealth being accumulated into the investment accounts of the increasingly smaller group of fantastically wealthy families and individuals.

In the days when the Left effectively faced the Right in parliament, the differing values were simplified as that between Justice and Freedom. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, freedom for the few has taken over, and notions of justice have disappeared from everyday thinking.

It is time, for the sake of the social sustainability of economic growth and political stability throughout the world that justice and freedom needs a new balance. Social democracy needs rejuvenation.

And, in Asia, the opponents of right-wing ideologies cannot just rely on piecemeal populist ideas to win. They need a coherent centre-left policy platform that balances justice and freedom—and seeks to integrate them in practice.

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..we are back in the days of the early 20th century when social instability threatened to destroy capitalism.



Photo by jeroenzo @ Flickr

Cambodia's 2013 Elections: The Retreat of “Electoral- Authoritarianism”?

MAX GRÖMPING

While thousands of opposition supporters gathered on the streets of Phnom Penh, Cambodia's National Election Commission (NEC) reaffirmed their final vote tally of the parliamentary election on September 9, 2013. More than a month earlier – on July 28 – about 9.6 million eligible voters had been called to cast their ballots for the 123 seats of the national assembly. The controversial polls produced a clear winner – or so it seemed – with Prime Minister Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (CPP) gaining 68 seats, with the opposition Cambodian National Rescue party (CNRP) winning 55. Although an absolute majority such as this might be a ultimate fantasy for many incumbents in other countries, for Hun Sen it was a slap in the face. His CPP has ruled the country comfortably ever since the first UN-sponsored post-war elections of 1993, steadily increasing its share of seats to an astonishing 90 (out of 123) in the

last election of 2008. The dramatic opposition gain, which stopped just seven seats short of a government turnover, must have come as a shock to the Prime Minister, who is Asia's longest-reigning ruler with 28 years in office. And even this narrow win was only possible with massive and widespread electoral manipulations. This is what outrages the demonstrators in Phnom Penh's Freedom Park: They claim that the election was stolen, thus demanding an independent inquiry. So far, the NEC has remained steadfast in its refusal.

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Are we witnessing an electoral autocrat in retreat? Or is it merely business as usual in Cambodia? The country fits comfortably in the category of electoral authoritarian regimes – which is no stranger to Southeast Asia. While an electoral authoritarian regime allows general elections that are broadly inclusive and minimally competitive (i.e. opposition parties are allowed to run), the purpose of elections is very different from what one is used to in liberal democracies. All the institutions of democracy exist on paper, but are at the same time subverted by systemic and widespread manipulations. To contrast one classic definition of democracy as “a system in which parties lose elections”,¹ an electoral autocracy is “a system in which opposition parties lose elections”.²

There could not be a more accurate description of Cambodia's political system. For election after election (until this one), the CPP has tightened its grip on the country by relying on a potpourri of diverse strategies. These range from more traditional clientelistic maneuvers of distributing “pork” to loyal cohorts, to co-optation or intimidation of all mainstream media, to outright repression, intimidation and incarceration of opponents. The 2013 elections were no exception in this regard. Yet, perhaps the specific configuration of the employed tactics of manipulation can tell us something about the state of affairs at the centers of power.

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Tab.1 Official results of the 2013 Cambodian parliamentary election

	Votes	%	Seats	+/-
Cambodian People's Party (CPP)	3,227,729	48.79	68	-22
Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP)	2,941,133	44.45	55	+26
Funcinpec Party	241,866	3.66	0	-20
League for Democracy Party	69,667	1.05	0	New
Cambodian Nationality Party	37,963	0.57	0	0
Khmer Anti-Poverty Party	43,312	0.65	0	New
Khmer Economic Development Party	34,569	0.52	0	New
Democratic Republican Party	19,871	0.3	0	-
Invalid/blank votes		-	-	0
Total	6,616,110		123	

Source: National Election Commission (NEC)

First of all, outright violent repression of voters was notably absent from the 2013 polls. Although there were some instances of physical violence directed at opposition parties or voters – among them a gunshot attack on the CNRP headquarter – luckily no fatalities occurred. This is already in stark contrast to previous Cambodian elections which have been frequently plagued by physical threats and killings. Yet, intimidations and threats did occur in 2013. Local government officials ostracizing known opposition supporters from the community or refusing to register them; security forces engaging in political activity and campaigning; or the presence of uniformed personnel within 100m radius safe-zone of polling stations are some examples of this. Some electoral violence did occur however in a reaction to voters being restricted from casting their ballot.

Media bias was staggering. All mainstream TV and radio stations are firm in their pro-government reporting. When opposition leader Sam Rainsy surprisingly returned from exile shortly before the election, the turnout of CNRP supporters to greet him was in the tens of thousands. Yet, the major television channels did not cover these events at all. Similarly, ongoing opposition rallies in Phnom Penh in the lead-up to the election were under reported. A media monitoring effort by the election watchdog Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL) during a one-month period in early 2013 found “over 4000 speeches by, or references, to Prime Minister Hun Sen [...] in contrast to 1200 combined mentions of the two opposition leaders, Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha, on radio FM105. Broadcasts referencing FUNCINPEC leader Nhoek Bunchhay were observed only 170 times.”³

The most serious form of tampering was the large-scale disenfranchisement of the Cambodian voters. More than one million voters were disenfranchised due to a *manipulation of the voter lists*, as two independent Voter Registry Audits found.⁴ At the same time, up to 18.3% of names on the voter list were invalid, meaning that they belonged to deceased or non-existing persons. 24 hours before

Fig.1 Video evidence on the (not so) indelible ink is presented



Photo: Max Grömping

For most OECD countries, Cambodian affairs apparently command little interest, while ASEAN adhered to its usual practice of non-interference. Only a few international NGOs decried the election results.

the election, the NEC removed the voter rolls from its website, saying they did not want the political parties to “exploit” the lists. Thus, voters could not verify the locally posted voter roll against the official one that had been on the NEC’s website earlier. In addition to this, there was an *over-production of ballot papers* (about 27% more ballots than needed) and an *over-issuance of temporary Identification Certificates for Election (ICEs)* (at least 480,000). These last-minute documents could be used as an alternative method of identification that allowed people to vote. Incidentally, ICEs are issued by commune chiefs – locally elected government officials, 98% of whom are CPP party members. Finally, it was revealed shortly before election day that the *indelible ink* employed for the election could be easily and completely washed off with household detergents.

These acts individually might be discounted as technical incapacities or minor problems, but taken together they amounted to a systematic attempt at preventing large numbers of the

populace from voting. Simultaneously they facilitated multiple voting, and allegedly the voting by Vietnamese nationals supposedly bussed in from the neighboring country. The voter list manipulation alone might have easily accounted for the margin of victory in this election. Unsurprisingly, the opposition rejected the election results and called for an independent inquiry. Several civil society organizations urged for a recount and an independent audit – if necessary facilitated by the international community. The latter remained conspicuously quiet. For most OECD countries, Cambodian affairs apparently command little interest, while ASEAN adhered to its usual practice of non-interference. Only a few international NGOs decried the election results.⁵

So why did the opposition manage to win 55 seats in spite of these systemic and widespread manipulations? The merger of the two major opposition parties into the newly-founded CNRP certainly helped to enlarge the opposition’s capacity for voter mobilization. But

perhaps more importantly, opposition leaders Sam Rainsy and Khem Sokha managed to capture the young generation's imagination with their slogan of change. Indeed, in the weeks leading up to the election, young Cambodians could be seen in spontaneous rallies all around the country, chanting the mantra of “dou” (*change*). Most of them were younger than 25 and have not experienced the horrors of political terror and civil war, especially under the Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s. They are eager to voice their political opinions, and are brought together through the increasing ubiquity of mobile phones and social media.

Yet, the most important ingredient to the surprising opposition windfall might have been the fact that the CNRP actually presented a policy platform. For instance, they campaigned for an increase in minimum wages in the public sector and the garment industry, and proposed a modest old-age care scheme. In a country that ranks 139th (out of 180 countries) for GDP per capita,⁶ 138th (out of 178) on the Human Development Index,⁷ and 105th (out of 128) on the Bertelsmann Transformation Index⁸ of governance indicators, such promises undoubtedly drew a huge amount of votes. Only the Lao PDR and Myanmar are in a similar bleak spot in Southeast Asia in regards to development and governance. And at the same time, Cambodia is riding an investment boom of logging and contract farming for China. These profound transformations and rising inequalities, in conjunction with the often brutal modes of land misappropriation have likely led to insecurities and grievances among large parts of the populace. This manifested itself in support for the only viable opposition party.

Turning back to the issue of authoritarianism, the patterns of election tampering might give a hint as to the strategic calculus of the ruling party. Electoral manipulations are an autocrat's tools to contain uncertainties - threats to their incumbency. At the same time, they are costly because they increase popular outrage, as is obviously the case in Cambodia. Thus, manipulations cause “second-order uncertainties”⁹ for the survival of an authoritarian ruler.

A rational autocrat – and Hun Sen can certainly be characterized as a savvy ruler – should use manipulations that are just severe and visible enough to ensure immediate regime survival, but not too severe and visible, so as to minimize second-order uncertainties. Outright violent repression should only be expected if the regime is immediately threatened, while the somewhat ‘softer’ tactics of media censorship and exclusion of opposition voters and candidates should occur when a regime still has a longer time horizon in mind. If these bold theoretical conjectures are true, and one looks at the menu of manipulation employed by the CPP in this election, the party seems to think about the future, and does not see a very immediate threat to its continued rule.

So is electoral authoritarianism in retreat in Cambodia? Maybe not. But even if it were, the question is: is democracy on the advance? The answer is far from straightforward. Although there are clear signs that Cambodians want better governance, more participation, and a state that is more responsive to their needs, it is questionable if they will get it anytime soon. Regardless of whether the election results hold or large-scale violent protests erupt, it is unlikely that the CPP will easily relinquish its powers. It depends in large parts on whether the ruling party can rely on the security apparatus for repression, and on whether a mode of power-sharing can be found in which key figures can protect their vital interests. But even in the most unlikely scenario of an ascendance of the CNRP to government (perhaps in the next election), one should perhaps be hesitant to expect spick-and-span democratic leadership. Sam Rainsy and Khem Sokha seem to have learned from successful populist leaders in their design of their policy platforms. This is somewhat reminiscent of Thaksin

Shinawatra in neighboring Thailand. Also, their rabid anti-Vietnamese rhetoric directed at Hun Sen personally (“a Vietnamese puppet”) and against alleged foreign voters seem far removed from liberally minded democrats.

Therefore Cambodia might be on a slow trajectory towards becoming an electoral democracy – one in which elections actually matter and determine who gets what, when and how. But its path towards genuine public participation, the rule of law and democratic entrenchment remains a long and rocky one.

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³ See http://anfrel.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/joint-statement-on-pre-national-election-period-2013_Eng_Final.pdf

⁴ http://www.comfrel.org/eng/components/com_mypublications/files/484678Voter_Survey_2012_SVRA_Plus_Eng_01_04_2013_Final.pdf and <http://nicfec.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/ndi-nicfec-cas-vra-report-2013.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/07/31/cambodia-ruling-party-orchestrated-vote-fraud>

⁶ http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD?order=wbapi_data_value_2012+wbapi_data_value+wbapi_data_value-last&sort=desc

⁷ http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR2013_EN_Statistics.pdf

⁸ <http://www.bti-project.de/?L=1>

⁹ Schedler (2013), see foot note 2

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Burma's March Towards Democracy: Opportunities and Challenges

ARNOLD TARROBAGO VILLA

Burma is definitely back. Any way one looks at it, the country is on center stage once again. To say that it has been the darling of the western press these past few months is no overstatement as even a cursory search of the Internet churns out hundreds of new articles, photo galleries and commentaries about the country, its key personalities, politics, people and prospects.

But the question is whether “Burma,” or Myanmar if you prefer to call it by its official name, is “in the news for the right reasons?” A closer scrutiny of news coverage reveals a preponderance of opinions that can only be diplomatically described as “guarded optimism.” Less tactful wags would say “sensitive pessimism,” and understandably I can’t blame them for that.

Yes, Burma, indeed, seems to be “back on the road towards Democracy,” but what a patently peculiar road it has chosen to follow! For lack of a better image, imagine yourself driving down a bumpy, pot-holed road that has been twisting and turning and doubling back on itself for a very long time and then, after what seems a lifetime of doing that, suddenly finding yourself on an obviously newly-constructed, well-paved road stretching straight as a ruler far into the horizon. Can you be blamed for thinking that the nice stretch of road is just a temporary thing and that you’ll be back on the rough and rocky path soon enough?

The same doubt applies to the “trend towards Democracy” that many people seem to observe Burma to be pursuing at the moment. Is it the real thing? Does this “road to democracy” remain straight and unwavering until the very end, or does it revert to its winding and pot-holed old self somewhere at a point beyond our vision?

Who can tell, really? Unfortunately, arguments to support the latter possibility far outnumber arguments for the former. Looking at the concrete indicators on the ground, and contrasting these with the picture of the new Burma being painted for the world to see, exposes so many contrasts and gaps that one immediately begins to be cured of the unbridled optimism that is so common with many “Burma watchers” today.

Take, for example, the quintessential symbol of Burma’s struggle for Democracy, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Daughter of General Aung San, founder of the modern Burmese Army and initiator of Burma’s independence from the British. DASSK was the Chairperson and Secretary General of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) Party, which swept the 1990 General Elections¹ but were subsequently denied, by the ruling Military Junta the right to occupy their seats in Parliament. Subsequently, Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest – which was to last 15 years eventually – and many of her NLD colleagues arrested, or forced into exile, with some even being killed in the

crackdown that followed. Not even Suu Kyi’s winning of the Sakharov Prize in 1990 and the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 caused any shortening of her incarceration. On the contrary, it may have even contributed to the lengthening of her house arrest.

DASSK was eventually released in November of 2010 and, soon enough, the visits from foreign political leaders commenced. Thailand’s Prime Minister, Yingluck Shinawatra, started the ball rolling, becoming the first foreign leader to meet Suu Kyi in Rangoon. Then there were the groundbreaking visits by the American Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, and the British Foreign Minister, William Hague. China’s apprehension during this time was quite obvious and understandable as her long-time ally, the Burmese government, was suddenly being wooed and, more worrisome perhaps, was suddenly quite receptive to the overtures of so many countries, some of them China’s political and economic rivals. Could it be that the Burmese Government, led by the SPDC² was finally turning over a new leaf? If only it were that simple.



Photo by fRusty Stewart @ Flickr



Photo by Franz & P @ Flickr

Alas, nothing is ever simple when it comes to Burma; and nothing is ever quite as they seem. In fact, looking at Burma from the outside always gives me the feeling that there is something significant in the picture that I am failing to see.

Yes, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has been released from house arrest, allowed to travel freely around her country and abroad, and successfully contested the 2012 By-Elections, wherein the NLD won 43 of the 44 seats they contested! An overwhelming result by any measure, yes, until one finds out that out of the 440-odd members of the Lower House,³ 110 are directly appointed by the military and the remainder – the new NLD parliamentarians and some minor ethnic party representatives exempted – are members of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which is generally acknowledged to be THE party of the government.⁴ Suddenly, NLD's 43 seats seem quite insignificant in comparison.

Yes, press censorship has officially been removed starting August of 2012, with the Ministry of Information no longer requiring that all publications be approved first by the Press Scrutiny and Registration Division, the official government censorship body. The removal of any type of censorship is always good news and is, definitely, a requisite to democratization. However, freedom of speech and of the press are still not guaranteed by law, and media practitioners in fact still practice “self-

Clearly, the culture of fear that has been built-up by 48 years of censorship cannot be unlearned in a fortnight.

censorship” from fear of long prison sentences associated with libel and state security charges. Clearly, the culture of fear that has been built-up by 48 years of censorship cannot be unlearned in a fortnight.

Yes, the Burmese government has entered into “peace agreements” with several ethnic parties and armies, most notably the Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army (KNU/KNLA), which has been waging a war of attrition against the Rangoon government since 1949. In fact, since 1989, the Burmese government has signed no less than 35 peace agreements with almost as many ethnic organizations, parties and armies. However, where many see signs of the start of the long-desired “lasting peace” in Burma, others only see the Junta's sly maneuverings—playing off one ethnic group against another, co-opting some into “alliances”, or/and entering into ceasefires in one area in order to concentrate its military forces in another. Truly, the “way to peace” has been fraught with war and deception.

Yes, the Burmese government does look more “civilian” now than, say, a decade (or two) ago, with most of the high positions currently being held by non-military men; but how exactly is the term “civilian” understood? Closer scrutiny shows that many of the “civilian” officials occupying key government positions have become civilians only recently (read: just retired); most have simply discarded their military uniforms in favor of a new one – that of the public servant. In this situation, where do you think the loyalties of these “civilian” leaders lie? One doesn't have to be an incurable cynic to suspect that these people remain military men at heart.

And finally, The Lady does seem intent on becoming the next President of Burma come 2015. And, if she does achieve her goal, one assumes that she will use all of the powers vested in the Presidency to effect radical change in Burma. But how powerful, really, is the President of Burma? Thein Sein, the current President, is of course a very powerful man, no doubt. But how did he become so? The simple answer is “because he's one of the important cogs of the current system, that's why.” He is powerful because he is adhering to *the plan*: Some analysts believe that it is still Than Shwe who is calling the shots behind the scenes even while already very sick.⁵ But there are others who believe that a break in the mindset has finally occurred, which has allowed “moderates” and “reformers” to rise in the hierarchy. In short, we are potentially seeing the rise of new guards, who appreciate the changing political situation clearly and, more importantly, know how to deal with them effectively so as not to ruin the regime's plan for ‘managed’ political liberalization – not necessarily a shift towards genuine democracy.

And because he doesn't rock the boat, the full support of his colleagues is behind him, propping him up and adding to his power.

One might ask, “But isn't Thein Sein's allowing these social and political ‘reforms’ to happen already rocking the boat?” I can only answer this question with another question: “But who is to say that these ‘reforms’ are not part of their overall plan in the first place?”

And therein lies the rub. There are lots of things that we don't know for sure about Burma – most especially about her leaders and what they're thinking and planning. And it is precisely the knowledge of these things that is necessary before anyone can hope to form a reasonably accurate picture of Burma today, or Burma tomorrow.

Is Burma finally and truly on its way to democratization; to real political and cultural independence; to sustainable development? One's answer depends on whether you are an optimist or not. We can always hope for the best, of course; but one thing is certain: given all the uncertainty surrounding this country, optimists and pessimists both have an equal chance of being wrong.



Photo by Kateski5 @ Flickr

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- ¹ NLD's getting 59% of the vote would have guaranteed them 80% of all seats in Parliament, an overwhelming majority.
- ² State Peace and Development Council, the new name adopted by the SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council), which ruled Burma since the military coup of Gen. Saw Maung, heir of Gen. Ne Win who wrested control from the civilian government in 1962.
- ³ The Burmese Legislature is bicameral: a 224-seat Upper House and a 440-seat Lower House
- ⁴ Current President, Thein Sein, and several key Cabinet members are leaders of USDP.
- ⁵ He is a known diabetic and is rumored to have intestinal cancer.

Philippines' Battle Against Corruption

CECILIA PE LERO

In recent months, the Philippines has once again been gripped by controversy. On July 12, 2013 a national newspaper broke the story about how businesswoman Janet Lim-Napoles ran an elaborate scheme, whereby PHP 10 billion (US\$230 million) of public money meant for development programs and social services was misappropriated. This latest pork barrel scandal is notably different in that while a significant chunk of the people's anger is directed at Napoles, the crux of public focus has been on the pork barrel system itself. While this focus on systemic deficiencies should be an advantage for the Left and our advocacies, we instead find ourselves in a subdued position as the newly-politicized and mobilized population reacts against organized groups and what it perceives as "professional protesters." Thus, for the Philippines' democratic socialists, the current situation provides both unprecedented hope as well as sobering realizations.

The 10 billion Pork Barrel Scam

Under the Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF) system, legislators have received yearly allocations that they are entitled to spend on a "menu" of programs. Napoles, the alleged mastermind, made deals with legislators whereby they would agree to direct their PDAF to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for development programs. These supposed NGOs were in reality ghost organizations controlled by Napoles that implemented no project, while she, the legislators, and compliant department officials pocketed the money meant for community development.

The Pork Barrel scandal triggered popular outrage that was unexpected in its intensity and longevity. A continuous

stream of revelations has kept the scandal under the watchful gaze of the nation. A former employee of Napoles continued releasing detailed information about the mechanisms of her operation. Pictures and videos revealed the luxurious lifestyle of Napoles' young daughter, her a Porsche, a condominium in the Los Angeles Ritz-Carlton, and Hollywood parties with Justin Bieber. The Commission on Audit (COA) released a report indicating 192 lawmakers used 82 dubious NGOs to allocate their PDAF. Days before the planned "Million People March" rallies on August 26, the President announced that he was ending the PDAF system. This failed to assuage popular outrage, however, as the population continued to call for an end to the entire pork barrel system, not just the PDAF.

On August 26, around 70,000 people are estimated to have attended mass gatherings in Manila, with hundreds more across the country and beyond, to protest against corruption, calling for the prosecution of implicated officials and the abolition of the PDAF. The mostly middle-class, disorganized crowd was larger than the EDSA Dos uprising (2001) that ousted former president Joseph Estrada, and larger than any preceding protests aimed at ousting former president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. At present, the Department of Justice (DOJ) has filed cases against Napoles and eight legislators for plunder and malversation related to the PDAF, and intends to file two more batches of cases. The DOJ has also filed charges against former President Arroyo cabinet members for plunder related to the corruption of presidential funds intended for typhoon victims. President Aquino is also under criticism for allegedly directing additional pork barrel funds to Senators in exchange for voting to impeach the former Supreme Court Chief Justice. Meanwhile, civil society is struggling to sustain the momentum of popular outrage.

Focus on the System

The Philippines is no stranger to large-scale corruption scandals. Yet, in the past the focus has always been on individuals. This time the people are still calling for prosecuting individuals involved, but the brunt of the focus is on *abolishing the pork barrel system*.

The significance of this new focus on the system instead of personalities cannot be understated. Abolition of the pork barrel system has long been a goal of the progressive movement in the Philippines. The system's vulnerability to corruption is clear. Additionally, by entitling legislators to discretionary funds for development projects, the pork barrel system bequeaths executive functions to legislators. This encroaches on executive functions, results in projects that are incongruous with the overall development plans, and distracts legislators from their basic lawmaking functions.

At a more fundamental level, traditional Philippine politics is marked by personalistic loyalties and patronage. Both of these elements are reinforced by the pork barrel system. Poor Filipinos line up daily at legislators' offices to ask for assistance for medical treatment and school tuition. Absent adequate social safety net programs, legislators are often the poor's only hope for assistance. Legislators maintain absolute prerogative over their beneficiaries--thus, in many instances political patronage becomes literally a matter of life and death.

The current crisis may be a chance to seriously undermine the institutions that maintain poor government. It also reveals political maturing among Filipinos. Increasingly, people have come to recognize that improving government is about more than "electing the right people." It is the system itself that fosters corrupt and irresponsible leadership -- and this must be changed.

Barriers to Change

While we are facing an opportunity to meaningfully change a broken system, much work still has to be done. Ideological and policy-oriented differences among various groups and



Photo by nando jamolin

The significance of this new focus on the system instead of personalities cannot be understated. Abolition of the pork barrel system has long been a goal of the progressive movement in the Philippines

their respective advocacies have undermined unity and triggered confusion. Yet, some issues are more or less universal: 1) The pork barrel system must be totally abolished; 2) Those who misused pork barrel funds must be held legally responsible; and 3) Increased measures for transparency must be adopted.

However, divisions remain. There are disagreements, for instance, on the definition of pork barrel. Some have defined pork barrel as any lump sum, including in the budget of the Executive. Others, including Akbayan, accept the Executive's needs to retain lump sums to respond to unforeseen events, but have also called for increased control over Executive expenditures. Some groups are using the pork barrel issue to call for the President's resignation. But others, including Akbayan, are not yet making that call. The call for the President's resignation is easily the most divisive issue, and multiple groups and unorganized individuals have expressed reservations at joining mass actions in fear that those seeking his ouster would hijack their activity.

Another barrier to participation has been the largely middle class character of the mobilizations. Fed by coverage in English-language newspapers and social media, the middle class has claimed ownership over the pork barrel issue while the masses have primarily remained on the sidelines. But the middle class has demonstrated aversion to joining political organizations, especially Left-leaning ones. Without attachment to an organization, those that were mobilized are more likely to experience rally fatigue and to be confused about the goals of actions and the likelihood of their success.

There have been few efforts to reach out to the masses about pork barrel and build a widespread constituency for reform. This is necessary to both deepen the masses' understanding about pork barrel and to provide perspective to middle-class and elite forces about the attitudes of the poor towards pork. The masses are the supposed beneficiaries of pork, since the poor are those who primarily rely on these funds for basic needs. At the same time, the masses are those most



Photo by nando jamolin

victimized by the system; they are the country's largest taxpayers -- in terms of number -- as well as those most vulnerable to the trappings of political patronage.

The Road Forward

The eruption of public outrage over the pork barrel scam should serve as a catalyst for social democratic forces to further our advocacies. Pork barrel strikes at the root of some fundamental problems with Philippine political society: corruption, patronage, and personalism. We may be facing a real chance to eradicate a system that encourages and replicates predatory elite-driven politics.

Yet, progressives have not been at the forefront of this outrage. The post-ideological middle class character of the initial mobilizations is marked by extreme suspicion of organized groups. The pride with which citizens identified themselves as unorganized was a painful realization that the Left has not been successful at reaching out to those with the potential to be politicized, and that the Left has a serious image problem inhibiting its growth. The lack of voices from the masses also indicates that we

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have not been successful in educating those we claim to represent, nor in representing their sentiments on the national stage.

These realizations are a wake-up call, and we are determined to move forward. We are striving to represent ourselves as a group that, while angry, offers real solutions that push the reform agenda. We demanded the removal of PDAF from the 2014 budget and have filed three bills at the Philippine Congress, which seek to control the executive's budgetary discretion and increase government transparency. An important next step would be to develop and push for participatory mechanisms in the budget process.

We also plan to embark on an education campaign that will discuss the pork barrel issue in communities through interactive town hall meetings. We maintain that meaningful change must

come from a combination of participation in national-level democratic processes and participation and pressure from below. Only through the dual approach of offering a credible alternative in government and empowering those excluded from traditional politics can we ensure this opportunity is not wasted but instead results in a meaningful push towards participatory democracy and socialism.

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Akbayan's Post-Electoral Soul

Searching: Balancing Expectations Against Realities



WALDEN BELLO

The 15th Congress, which ended June 30, 2013, was one of the most productive Congresses for Akbayan in terms of priority legislation being turned into law. No less than six of the party's priority bills became Republic Acts, all of them in the last year of the Congress!

Among the Akbayan priority measures translated into law was the *Reproductive Health and Responsible Parenthood Act*, the central provisions of which are the mass distribution of contraceptives subsidized by the state, the institutionalization of sex education in elementary school, and the enshrinement of family planning as a state policy.

The passing of another Akbayan priority measure, the *Marcos Compensation Act*, will finally bring some measure of justice to the more than 12,000 victims of human rights abuses during the Marcos period. Funded by 10 billion pesos from the Marcos assets seized by the Swiss government and turned over to the Philippines, the Act is one of the few, if

not the only instance, a government anywhere in the world has made financial reparations to victims of human rights violations.

Alongside the Marcos Compensation Act as a milestone human rights measure was the *Anti-Enforced or Involuntary Disappearance Act*. The Akbayan measure has been described as “a milestone in Asia as it will be the first national law to criminalize enforced disappearance as a separate or distinct offense.” The Act provides for a penalty of from 20 to 40 years in prison, renders illegal “orders of battle” that give police and military units blanket power to deal with targeted individuals, outlaws secret detention centers, and mandates the compensation, restitution and rehabilitation of victims.

The *Kasambahay Act*, another of Akbayan's priorities, has brought long-delayed legal coverage to the millions of domestic workers that constitute the pillar of the household economy. Now they will be entitled to a minimum wage, social security and Pag-Ibig housing benefits, days off, and limits to their working hours. The Act, along with its

signing the International Labor Organization's *Convention Concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers*, will also strengthen the government's hand in negotiating stronger benefits and protections for our migrant domestic workers in the Middle East and other parts of the world. Owing to its implications for family finances, many in the middle class may not be happy with this bill now, but they will eventually come to accept it as necessary from a human and social rights perspective.

The *Amended Anti-Trafficking Act*, co-authored by Akbayan, strengthens the hand of the authorities in dealing with the cancer of human trafficking against which they have made little headway so far. It strengthens their power to intervene in before an act of trafficking is completed. It eliminates the privacy clause previously enjoyed by traffickers, which means that people, including members of the media, who reveal the identities of those accused in human trafficking cases shall not be subjected to criminal sanctions. Finally, it penalizes the confiscation of travel documents such as passports and working permits from trafficked persons.

Another of the party's priority bill was ratified on the very last day of the last session on February 6. This was the *Amended Overseas Voting Act*, which did away with the requirement that those registering to vote overseas must file an affidavit stating they will return to the Philippines after three years. It also empowered the Commission on Elections to explore new technologies of registration and voting, including internet registration and voting, and make recommendations to Congress on their adoption. With over 10 million Filipinos now living and working abroad, the amended law is expected to dramatically expand the number of overseas voters. A commonly accepted view is that, owing to their cosmopolitan experiences, Filipinos working overseas

are not easily subverted by the blandishments of traditional politicians and are likely to base their vote mainly on candidates' stands on issues and their programs instead of feudal loyalties or bribes. This amended law will provide a good test of this thesis, and if the outcome is as expected, then people will look back on it as a major step forward in the modernization and maturation of Philippine democracy.

The passing of Akbayan's priority bills owed itself in no small measure to the party's being part of the political coalition in power. Akbayan supported the candidacy of Benigno Aquino III, who upon accession to the presidency in May 2010 inaugurated an era of reform. The party's decision to support Aquino rested in particular on the president's push to eradicate corruption and his poverty containment program via Conditional Cash Transfers (CCT), which aimed to break the cycle of poverty for millions of Filipinos. As the Aquino presidency unfolded, the party also made major contributions to the impeachment of Supreme Court Justice Renato Corona, a stalwart defender of former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, who had presided over one of the most corrupt periods of Philippine history, and to the defense of the CCT

program from efforts of the right and the extreme left to emasculate it.

Thus, as the 2013 mid-term elections approached, the party was cautiously confident that with its high-profile role in promoting the president's programs and its glowing legislative record, it would perform relatively well. Two other advantages were enjoyed by Akbayan during the campaign period: the very popular president announced his personal backing of Risa Hontiveros, the party chairman, who was a candidate for the Senate, and told the press that he was only supporting one party, Akbayan, for the party-list elections. People would occasionally ask us during our campaign sorties, "You really don't need my vote since you've got the president behind you." Or, "you're already number one, so I'll vote for another deserving party?"

Thus, it was not unreasonable for the party to expect that National Chairperson Risa Hontiveros had a good chance to make it to one of the 12 winning slots in the Senate race. Hontiveros had nearly made it to the "Magic 12" during the 2010 national elections, placing number 13. It was also not an unrealistic expectation that, with the president's explicit endorsement and its legislative record, Akbayan would top the party-list elections, thus acquiring the maximum

number of three seats in the House of Representatives.

Given these expectations, the electoral results were disappointing. Though she gathered more than two million more votes than she got in 2010 elections for the Senate, Hontiveros only placed number 17 this time around. Akbayan placed fifth in the party-list elections, garnering about 200,000 less votes than it got in 2010, when it obtained over a million votes. Its representatives at the lower house remained at two.

The power equation resulting from the party's disappointing electoral performance made itself felt shortly in the weeks leading up to the opening of Congress, as the House leadership parceled out the chairmanships of the leading committees. Despite the party's being a part of the ruling coalition—and the crucial role it played in promoting the coalition's reform program at critical points—Akbayan failed to become the chair of any of the committees it had told the Speaker of the House it wanted to head. Most of the chairmanships went to either the president's Liberal Party or to other large parties in the coalition, most of whose members had been allied to the corrupt administration of ex-president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and switched sides after Aquino came to power.

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Shortly after the elections, the party leadership conducted a number of assessments at all levels to determine the reasons for its disappointing performance.

Among the questions that are being asked are the following:

1. Did the presidential endorsement of both Hontiveros and the party add anything to their electoral performance?
2. Did the electorate perceive the party as having become part of the political establishment owing to its being a part of the ruling coalition?
3. Did the party overestimate the chances of Risa Hontiveros running at a time when her competitors carried well-known dynastic names?
4. Did the party simply lack the massive financial resources necessary to compete in Philippine elections?
5. Did the party become too complacent and, instead of working extra-hard to secure support at the grassroots, rely too much on endorsement by the president or expect that people would know and appreciate its legislative and other achievements?
6. Did the party rely too much on electoral alliances with traditional politicians at the local level and neglect party building efforts?

Some in the party are asking more profound questions, such as whether Akbayan has lost its vision, whether it has become too pragmatic, or whether it still is able to excite voters as a reformist party. Some leaders of labor, an important base of the party, think that the party's accountability to the mass movements has become weaker, a concern that others in the party say has little basis.

As in 2007, when it saw its votes cut by half relative to 2004 in the party list elections, Akbayan finds itself at the crossroads. Few reformist parties, much less parties with a socialist or social-democratic orientation, have enjoyed greater success in entering the

The party's decision to support Aquino rested in particular on the president's push to eradicate corruption and his poverty containment program via Conditional Cash Transfers (CCT), which aimed to break the cycle of poverty for millions of Filipinos.



Photo by DILG.gov.ph

mainstream of Philippine politics. Progressive parties have come and gone, but few have enjoyed electoral staying power. Indeed, despite its unimpressive electoral performance in the 2013 elections, this is the sixth straight election since it began competing in 1998 that the party has been able to secure congressional seats.

Yet the Philippines remains a formal democracy, dominated by traditional dynastic elites, where the advantage remains with those blessed with the combination of name and money. Political reforms introduced since the 1986 overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship have created more "democratic space," but this has been very limited. The party-list system, for instance, was designed to allow representatives of marginalized sectors such as labor, peasants, and indigenous peoples to enter the legislature. However, it has become largely another avenue to political power for traditional elites. Regionally based party-list

competitors formed by traditional local or regional dynasties ate into much of the Akbayan vote in many critical areas. Their use of such inducements as free medical treatment for indigent people or free ambulances in impoverished communities to woo votes away from issue-based progressive parties like Akbayan underlined how patron-client politics still permeates Philippine politics.

In the party's 15 years of existence, crisis has been a periodic experience. Yet crises have also been an occasion for intense party soul searching that has reinvigorated the party rank and file and produced innovative responses to both internal and external challenges to the party. Will the same process of crisis and creative response take place this time around? If you ask me, my answer is a confident yes.

Walden Bello is one of Akbayan's two representatives to the 16th Congress.

The Unfulfilled Promise of Political Parties in the Philippines: Bringing Back Political Parties into the Center Of Reforms

RAFAELA DAVID

Introduction

In the Philippines, the political party reform agenda has been largely sidelined, demoted on the list of priority reforms of progressives both inside and outside of government.

Though one would hear political reform experts commonly refer to political parties as some form of panacea for the Philippines' political and social qualms, good governance advocates have instead put themselves to the task of plugging holes in government institutions instead of party-building. The problem of bad governance has largely been seen as rooted in corruption and not at how we do our politics. In recent months, we have seen mainstream discourse focusing on patronage politics, but even that has not been popularly connected to the lack of functional parties, but instead to the high profile plunderers in government. Political parties also suffer from negative ratings, with 58% of Filipinos thinking that parties are affected by corruption, according to the 2013 Global Corruption Barometer. Alas, joining a party, not to mention a left-leaning party, is seemingly tantamount to undermining one's political potentials.

But why is there a certain allergy among the general population as well as the reform movement towards working with and for political parties? As the reform constituency appears to be moving farther away from championing party reform, a fundamental question begs to be asked: how can the stagnation of the party system development affect the democratic consolidation of a specific country?



Sectoral interests have historically pushed civil society groups to contest power for it is in this direct contestation that they believe their interests can be best represented

Answering this question requires us to go back to parties: why they are essential in a functioning modern democracy and what makes them especially critical in our present context.

Parties as Weavers of Reform

Eminent Political Scientist Andrew Heywood, in *Politics* (Second Edition), defines political parties as “a group of people organized to gain formal representation or win government power; a party usually displays some measure of ideological cohesion.”

This definition helps us amply distinguish parties from other advocacy groups on several levels.

Firstly, political parties are groups of organized citizens. Indeed, strong parties have strong roots in society, and are thus mostly based on one or multiple

sectors. The classic examples are labor groups, which came together to form political organizations and forward their sectoral interests. It is further through parties that citizens can interact with one another, recruit and politicize more citizens to join their campaigns, build second-line leaders among their ranks, exchange political viewpoints, and arrive at consensus among the citizens themselves.

Moreover, what is particularly distinct with parties is that through them, citizens converge around a particular political goal apart from advocacy campaigns, to win elections. This brings us to the second point: the desire for representation in government. Sectoral interests have historically pushed civil society groups to contest power for it is in this direct contestation that they believe their interests can be best represented --

not as a lobbyist outside of government, but instead as decision-makers in power.

Thirdly, a functioning party forwards a coherent vision of society based on the ideologies it espouses, which ideally are translated to a package of policies. Parties are generally found to be strong when they also have strong platforms and when their party positions are more or less predictable based on such platforms and values.

It is this key role of political parties that progressive advocates tend to forget: that parties allow citizens to be part of a collective weaving of reforms. They are expected to act as political architects, given their ability to (a) aggregate citizens' interests and (b) articulate them through a coherent government policy, which shall guide the numerous reforms and innovations that non-partisan reform groups have been forwarding.

Why Parties Fail

Even with the potential of political parties to usher in substantive political reforms, however, political parties in the Philippines have failed to serve as mechanisms to push the fabric of reforms beyond the persisting patronage-based, personalistic politics. Similarly, parties in other Asian countries have not fared better, with some parties exhibiting similar tendencies especially in developing democracies such as Indonesia, India, and Thailand. Other countries in Indochina, exhibiting a combination of electoral competition and autocratic rule, still have single dominant political parties, which govern from the extremes of the political spectrum, rather than the moderate center.

There are a number of reasons why parties fail, but there are two interplaying factors worth mentioning: (1) party strength and (2) party systems, both legal and societal.

One of the most obvious reasons parties fail is their weak organizational structure, the best indicator of which, at least for multi-party systems, is the presence of very strong personalized links between voters and candidates -- effectively independent of any particular party (Hicken 2006). Where

personalities play a larger role in elections, parties become mere political machineries for political aspirants and their electoral campaign. In certain countries with dominant parties, the strength of the political party is limited to the ruling faction, with the opposition lacking the needed resources and support to challenge the status quo.

On a practical level, most ideological and grassroots-based parties do not have the financial capacity to sustain their operations and mount a national campaign. Even mainstream parties are subjected to financial constraints, with campaign donations coursed through the candidates and not the party. Moreover, human resources remain wanting as party work does not figure as a sustainable career for young progressives. Thus, second-line leaders remain limited, and parties are lacking in a capable pool of full-time staff and volunteers.

The party system or the overall legal and societal context where parties operate similarly plays a crucial role in determining political party development in a country, be it multi-party or a dominant party system. The contradictions of having a dominant party system and its implications for democratic consolidation are obvious enough: Political competition is and will

be largely curtailed, as seen in the newly democratizing Myanmar, where the Union Solidarity and Development Party still holds majority of the parliament, to the allegedly rigged elections in places such as Cambodia.

However for multi-party systems, the specific legal arrangements are more complicated, as existing systems tend to incapacitate parties in effecting change, whilst creating an illusion of providing a conducive environment for pluralism and party development. This is most dangerous as the constraints to party development points towards an absence of support mechanisms in a highly competitive environment, rather than the presence of regulatory ones such as in dominant party systems. These support mechanisms range from election rules on party-switching and campaign financing, among others. Such absence, unseen and unfelt by the general public, poses a danger of accountability: How much should the parties be blamed for their underperformance? Or shouldn't (under-funded and under-developed) parties have some level of support from the state in recognition of their critical role in a functioning democracy?

The party system is also subject to the socio-political context that persists alongside legal regimes, namely patronage-client relations and social

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cleavages that may supersede party relationships. When and if political parties fail to account for socio-political relationships among political actors and sectors, and unless parties are equipped in traversing social conflicts, ethnic divisions, religious differences and economic divides, parties will inevitably lose to persisting relations that have been socially institutionalized. The persisting unequal distribution of resources and the resulting high levels of poverty for instance create economic divides that further entrench patronage. Subsequently, political and economic elites become even more relevant than political parties and government institutions.

Adjusting to a Deficit of Political Parties

At this point, several more questions need to be asked: When parties fail, will democracies inevitably fail too? Is it perhaps valid to consider that Asian democracies in particular offer another model of democracy, one where alternative mechanisms for interest articulation -- instead of party politics -- prevail?

Let us look more closely again at the Philippines.

With under-developed mainstream parties serving as mere political machineries for traditional politicians, and thus failing to represent the general welfare and interest of the people, non-partisan organizations become the best mechanism to forward particular reforms without posing a threat to the ruling elite and shaking the core of Philippine politics. Often, the civil society has been pushed to act as a mechanism to broker political decisions, both during and in between elections, in the absence of functioning parties. Through non-partisan engagements, innovations upon innovations have been introduced to build up participatory democracy, in a piecemeal manner, at different levels of governance. Thus, you have a range of movements and groups, from advocacy NGOs, social accountability initiatives, and budget reform networks, becoming the main agents for transformative governance.

To a large extent this has been beneficial for the Philippines. However, this becomes problematic on two fronts: on the one hand, how can a very vibrant civil society provide a coherent framework for

Often, the civil society has been pushed to act as a mechanism to broker political decisions, both during and in between elections, in the absence of functioning parties.

reform? How can particular advocacy groups and networks answer critical questions such as what kind of growth the country should have, what industrial policy it should follow -- questions whose answers can only be sufficiently satisfactory and actionable with regularized collective direction-setting processes coupled with direct access to power.

On the other, how can political parties find relevance in a context that has adjusted to the lack of a functioning party system? How can we persuade the civil society to give up some of its role as mediators of power?

The Cost of Failing Political Parties

The two sets of concerns above should be central to developing democracies precisely at a time when the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries have been experimenting with, and to some extent, failing at party-building -- and when political actors are increasingly losing optimism on whether the political party system will ever deliver the promise of a modernizing democracy.

Herein, the failure to achieve functioning political parties has had major implications for countries such as the Philippines, costs that have yet to be covered by non-partisan engagements.

First, progressive movements have yet to be able to harmonize their reform agenda to provide a framework for reforms and to effectively get the government to respond to it in a sustainable fashion. Administrations come and go, and built alliances are highly volatile, with reforms becoming highly dependent on who may be in power. Indeed, the *de facto* political power that the civil society can build up in general is very transitional and difficult to sustain without institutionalizing itself [Acemoglu and Robinson 2012]. Parties in contrast are tasked to both provide a vision of society that coheres their reform engagements negotiated and built upon consensus through regular party processes, and further to manage

the succession of political managers who shall be championing these reforms; all these are important ingredients in the quest for the sustainability of reforms.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, political parties provide accountability checks that are absent from political alliances and non-partisan engagements -- checks that are central to working political parties. On the one hand, parties should be able to toe the party line and more or less hold members accountable for their actions both inside and outside the government. This is especially true if a thorough nomination process determines a specific politician's mandate. On the other hand, parties, which have distinct collective identities, allow for greater accountability between the electorate and the elected politicians as functioning political parties make it easier for the electorate to assign responsibility to collective groups, while temporal alliances remain elusive to such accounting.

Thus, unless we develop alternative mechanisms that can effectively fill in the 'political party void', it is high time for progressives to take a step back and carefully look at political parties and the central role they could -- and should -- play in winning and sustaining reforms.

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