

# Democratic Expansion and Democratic Deepening in South- East Asia: The Fateful Connection

■ *Walden Bello*

*The movement for democracy in South-East Asia is in crisis. Its roots long precede this summer's coup in Cambodia. Perhaps more than Cambodia, a more significant indicator of the weakness of pro-democracy forces in the region was the acceptance of Burma as a member of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN)<sup>1</sup> without even the slightest demurral from the two governments in the region where formal democracies are in place, Thailand and the Philippines. Walden Bello asks why did the democracy movement get to this impasse? Can it be revitalised, and if so, how? Or must we resign ourselves to the ascendancy of authoritarianism at the regional level?*

*Bello examines the democratic deficit in South-East Asia and identifies its main causes, a principle one being a lack of awareness of the relationship between democratic expansion in the region and the deepening of democratic practice in the countries where it has a foothold. Bello asks can Asian values of solidarity, equity and justice win out over a narrow view of development equated with economic growth, often aligned with political elites and which denies the majority of people their human rights and basic freedoms?*

# The crisis in the democracy movement

South-East Asia has witnessed a see-saw struggle between democracy and authoritarianism over the past decade. To fully understand the crisis, its roots, and its solution, perhaps the best place to begin is with the democratic wave that swept many parts of the world in the period from the late seventies to the early 1990s. In Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe, popular struggles brought down dictatorships and installed formally democratic governments in power. In the Philippines, the EDSA Revolution of 1986 was followed in 1987 by the ousting of the Chun Doo-Hwan regime in South Korea and the lifting of martial law in Taiwan. Then in 1992 came the events in Thailand, which resulted in the fall of the Suchinda military dictatorship and the start of a process which has since seen a number of peaceful handovers of power from one parliamentary coalition to another.

## The rise of "Asian values"

It was in this context that the notion of "Asian governance" or governance according to "Asian values" made its debut. Not surprisingly, the theory was first popularised at the regional level by Lee Kwan-Yew of Singapore, who had for years been toying with the idea of resurrecting conservative Confucianism as a national ideology to legitimise his People's Action Party's (PAP) hold on power.<sup>2</sup>

Traversing the world stage as "Asia's voice" in 1990, Lee led the counter-offensive by Asian elites threatened by democratic mass movements. He sought to convince their populations that they had their own peculiar forms of governance and that their own brand of "democratic" practice did not have the western emphasis on individual rights, electoral competition, a free press, freedom of assembly and other checks and balances.

Asians, like good Confucians, Lee contended, value order over change, hierarchy over equality, and co-operation and mutual respect over conflict between the elite and the masses. Asians, we were told, fear that too much democracy may undermine the "East Asian economic miracle." However, as one Asian observer has noted, "when I first came across Lee's list of supposed Asian values, I saw values that were not so much specific to Asian culture but good British, upper-class Tory values dear to threatened elites everywhere." It was not without

good reason that one British cabinet minister once referred to Lee, when he still was known as Harry Lee, as the “best bloody Englishman east of Suez.”<sup>3</sup>

Not to be outdone by Lee was Malaysian Prime Minister Mohamad Mahathir, who combined an attractive Third World critique of Western economic domination with a strident equation of liberal democracy with anarchy and Western imperialism. The classic Mahathir statement in this regard was his speech at the United Nations in 1991, in which he asserted:

If democracy means to carry guns, to flaunt homosexuality, to disregard the institutions of marriage, to disrupt and damage the well-being of the community in the name of individual rights, to destroy a particular faith, to have privileged institutions [i.e., the western press] which are sacrosanct even if they indulge in lies and instigations which undermine society, the economy, and international relations; to permit foreigners to break national laws; if these are the essential details, can't the new converts opt to reject them?...Hegemony by democratic powers is no less oppressive than hegemony by totalitarian states.<sup>4</sup>

Part of the strategy was to paint the liberal democratic systems of South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Thailand as alien Western implants which were out of step with the Asian psyche. In July 1992, in a much-publicised speech in Manila, Lee pinpointed democracy as the cause of what he viewed as the Philippines' economic backwardness. Lee's words then were equally, albeit implicitly, directed at Thailand, which had just, a few months earlier, ousted the Suchinda military dictatorship at the cost of many lives. Lee's message was that Thailand could lose its status as Asia's fastest growing economy if it allowed the liberal democratic rot to spread.

## **The authoritarian counter-offensive falters**

The authoritarian counter-offensive reached its high point during the UN Vienna Human Rights Conference in 1993, when the authoritarian members of ASEAN along with China were able to present what appeared then to be a formidable argument that there was a connection between their rapid

economic growth and their authoritarian political systems. But this ideological push has lost momentum during the last few years owing to a number of developments.

In Singapore these included a succession of much-publicised events—including the conviction of a Singaporean reporter for releasing confidential government economic data to the press, a court case brought by the Singaporean government against the *International Herald Tribune* for an article critical of ASEAN judiciaries which did not even mention Singapore by name, the rush to execute a Filipino domestic worker Flor Contemplacion, whose guilt was widely in doubt, and most recently, exposés of the Lee Kwan-Yew and the PAP elite's entrenched privileges, including being on the inside-track of property deals netting them hundreds of thousands of dollars. All this focused the international spotlight in an unprecedented fashion on Singapore's justice and political system. And what most of the world came away with was the image of a party dictatorship bent on staying in power through control of the police, judiciary and the press.

Where previously the Singaporean leadership's recital of their usual mantra of "economic progress through political discipline" evoked tolerant nods, if not agreement, it now began to elicit smirks and lay exposed for what it essentially was: a thinly veiled justification for a continuing monopoly of power by Lee Kwan-Yew's People's Action Party.

In Indonesia, the expectation that rapid economic growth would be accompanied by a more liberal political regime was squashed in 1994 when the Suharto regime cracked down savagely on the labour movement, closed three of the country's leading newspapers for expressing increasingly independent views, and launched military-sponsored terrorism in East Timor using militant youth groups. Hosting the APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Conference) Summit in November 1994 was Suharto's supreme effort to white-wash his regime's repressive past and paint Indonesia as the newest "Asian Tiger." However, what mostly came across to the outside world was the image of young East Timorese, within the confines of the US embassy, protesting against Indonesia's occupation of their country, while hundreds of police eager to arrest them waited impatiently outside.

In Malaysia, it does not take long to realise the tremendous discontent which lurks beneath the glitzy surface of rising skyscrapers and shiny Mercedes and BMWs, as a very large minority, the Chinese, chafes under its politically imposed

second-class citizen status under a regime of permanent affirmative action for Malays. NGOs are tolerated, but those who step out of line are summarily dealt with. Mahathir's Third Worldist rhetoric was hard put to contain the international damage to his regime's image wreaked by his party's youth group's busting of a conference on East Timor in November 1996. This resulted in the jailing of most of the participants and the subsequent expulsion of the foreigners among them.

In both Malaysia and Singapore, no amount of talk about Asian values has hidden the truth among both their citizens and increasing numbers of outsiders that the ultimate guarantee of stability is less social consensus than internal security acts, which allow the authorities to pick up and jail people indefinitely without charging them with any crime.<sup>5</sup> In the more sophisticated Asian political context of the past few years, Lee himself is increasingly seen for what he is: a relic of East Asia's past. Some of the region's younger leaders, like Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in Malaysia, are distancing themselves from the authoritarian position, at least in rhetoric. His words in a much-noticed speech given in 1994 are virtually indistinguishable from those of Amnesty International, its subtext being a disavowal of Mahathir's hardline ideological position:

While we accord high priority to social and economic rights, we must at the same time guard ourselves from stretching the argument too far. Development cannot be used as an apology for authoritarianism. The fact of the matter is that more nations have been impoverished by authoritarianism than enriched by it... By not giving vent to the voices of dissent, wrongs cannot be made right and remedies for failures cannot be made available. Thus the notion that freedom must be sacrificed on the altar of development must be rejected. Indeed, it is our conviction that only through the ability of every individual, however weak or disadvantaged, to freely articulate his fears and grievances can we hope to bring about a just and caring society. Only by guaranteeing the individual's right to participate fully in the society's decision-making processes can we confer legitimacy to political leadership and governance, for governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed.<sup>6</sup>

# The democratic revolution loses steam

Even though the authoritarian ideology has failed to make headway, the democratic revolution has, unfortunately, also lost steam in the past few years. In most countries, the novelty of free elections, multi-party competition, and separation of powers has abated, to reveal several sources of discontent associated with the model of democracy after which insurgent elites patterned their systems of governance.

## Elite democracy

One set of concerns relates to the paradox that rule by established elites can be just as effective, if not more so, through democratic competition as in dictatorial rule. For the most part only the wealthy or people backed by wealth can afford to run for office, leading to effective control of the political system by economic elites which have the added advantage of legitimacy owing to their democratic election.

Related to this realisation is increased questioning of the limits of the notion of democracy as a system of governance among formally equal citizens. Economic inequalities, which continue to be severe in Asia despite economic growth, make a mockery of formal equality as the principle determining people's actual weight in political decision-making.

The Lockean separation of the realm of the political from the realm of property characteristic of Anglo-American democratic theory has become less persuasive. But this has not lent more credibility to the countervailing position associated with Mahathir, Lee, and Suharto who argue that Asian governance systems must prioritise socio-economic development, even if this means limiting political liberties.

It is becoming increasingly clear to advocates of human rights and democratisation that the challenge is to expand political rights while at the same time extending democracy to the realm of social and economic rights, through making economic equality an essential element in the definition and practice of democracy. And the route to this objective is to make representative democracy the basis from which to legislate and implement a variety of measures for the redistribution of economic power, thus ending its use as a mechanism to uphold the status quo, as has happened in Thailand and the Philippines in recent years.

In this connection, the eyes of many people in South-East Asia's formal democracies are currently focused on developments in the one country in the Asia-Pacific region where democracy has not been "institutionalised" in the clinical sense, where it continues to break the containment structures to which the elites wish to confine it: South Korea.

The South Koreans have sent two former presidents to jail. Will they be able to carry the process to the point of breaking up the chaebol or conglomerates whose money continues to grease the Korean political system? Will citizen action lead to a breakthrough from a wealth-centred democracy to a people's democracy, from an elite democracy to an economic and social democracy?

A measure of the significance of events in South Korea for democratic development elsewhere is that these have attracted the attention and anger of Lee Kuan-Yew. "What [events in Korea] proves", he told *Fortune* Magazine, "is that democracy and a free press do not produce clean and good government. The preconditions are not there."<sup>7</sup> He continued:

I may be old-fashioned, but had the liberalisation or the unwinding of military rule been more gradual, not these dramatic purges with two ex-Presidents in jail, which can't do much for the history of the country and its sense of self-esteem, South Korea would not be in such a difficult position. To say this is not politically correct. But I'm not interested in being politically correct. I'm interested in being correct.

### **The crisis of representative democracy**

A second set of concerns has to do with the limitations of representative democracy. Democracy, it is alleged, has become narrowly identified with the holding of free and fair elections. Moreover, parliaments in the region are seen not only to reflect the narrow interests of economic and social elites, but to increasingly represent simply what Rousseau termed the "corporate will" and interests of the parliamentary and governing class, that is of the representatives themselves, rather than that of the broad base of the population. One only has to look at Thailand's parliamentary process to appreciate Rousseau's well-known skepticism about representative democracy.

The rise and popularity of NGOs and people's organisations throughout Asia testifies to the frustration of significant sections of these societies with the performance of current parliamentary

models. Can the institutions of formal representative democracy be modified to accommodate the "NGO phenomenon," which represents an effort by citizens to go beyond mere electoral participation to more direct popular intervention in the political process? Not surprisingly, professional politicians see NGOs as a threat, while others see them as a step forward from representative to direct democratic rule.

To democratic innovators the challenge is not only to decentralise political decision-making on local issues to grassroots communities in line with the principle of subsidiarity. It is also to enable local communities to participate directly in decision-making on national, regional, and international concerns. It is eliminating as many layers of intermediaries as possible between the citizen and the act of decision-making.

### **Representative democracy: the tyranny of the majority?**

A third set of issues concerns how the interests of minorities, be they ethnic, racial, or religious, can be safeguarded under representative democracy, which by definition is the rule of the majority.

One of the vulnerable points of the current authoritarian regimes in the region is their being identified with dominant ethnic majorities, whether this be the UMNO (United Malays National Organisation)-Malay connection in Malaysia, the PAP-Chinese link in Singapore, the Suharto-Javanese tie in Indonesia, or the SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) – Burman connection in Burma.

Moreover, it is not clear that democratic rule has been an advance over authoritarian rule for the Muslims in southern Thailand where a Buddhist majority holds sway. It is very clear that 11 years of democracy have not resulted in significant political and economic gains for the Muslims in the southern Philippines, despite the establishment of the Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD). Fortunately for the democracy movement, authoritarian regimes in South-East Asia have a much worse record in terms of assuring minority rights than do democratic governments.

### **The West is no guide**

The problems referred to above are, of course, the same problems which have confronted longer established democracies in the West. One thing is certain: the record of Western democracies provides no guide to the newer or re-emerging



democracies of Asia and the wider Third World. The translation of formal to substantive democracy, the achievement of both political and economic equality, the transition to more direct forms of democracy, and the protection of the rights of the minority from the majority are still the great unresolved issues facing Western democracies.

There is no longer any doubt that Lockean democracy functions as a facade behind which a power elite, to use C.Wright Mills enduring term, makes the fundamental decisions about political and economic direction. In the US the process is breached only occasionally by populist movements. The current US system of political contributions is a form of legalised corruption through which corporations, wealthy individuals, and other moneyed interests can exercise undue influence over the direction of the democratic process.

Moreover, in many parts of Europe and the US, there are record low turnouts in elections, and politicians, be they from the right, the left, or the centre, are registering very low approval ratings and inspiring a great deal of mistrust — two indicators of citizens' perceptions that the system of representative democracy is malfunctioning.

Indeed, Asian democratic activists are keenly aware that there is currently in the US and Europe a retreat from a positive approach of deepening democracy, as economic elites succeed in stripping the state of its already limited redistributive powers and racial and ethnic majorities increasingly restrict the rights of minorities. For instance, France's denial of automatic citizenship to children of immigrants born in France, Germany's adoption of very restrictive asylum regulations, California's Proposition 187 withdrawing educational and other benefits from children of undocumented workers, and recent US immigration legislation restricting social security benefits to immigrants, disproportionately effect non-white minorities, especially the immigrant minority. However, they find favour among the majority white populations.

Increasingly, the US and Europe are turning out to be negative examples for Asia and the rest of the world, as democratic mechanisms become the vehicles for reactionary social and economic ends. Thus, when President Clinton and US Secretary of State, Madeline Albright, speak on the need for Asian governments to respect human rights and promote democracy, they open themselves to the charge of hypocrisy, of not practicing what they preach.

# Isolating the democracy movement: the current game plan

In any event, the very real flaws in democratic practice in the region are working to the benefit of the authoritarian regimes in their struggle for survival. Indeed, taking advantage of the impasse in the region's democracy movement, they have recently launched a fresh drive to shore up their rule.

## **Growth versus democracy – again**

Apologists of authoritarianism have not hesitated to paint the parliamentary crisis in Thailand as the future of corruption, deadlock, and inefficiency which awaits their own people should they allow democratic movements to come to power. In fact, Thailand's current economic problems are now being partly attributed to the crisis in democratic decision-making as it is claimed that stable economic development demands the strong hand of an authoritarian state. Of great concern is that this argument is resonating in Thailand itself, especially among business people and technocrats.

Indeed, authoritarian advocates in the region have voiced their strong doubts that recent economic growth in the Philippines is compatible with a democratic succession in the May 1998 presidential elections. They argue that this may yield a "man or woman of the people" as president—one who might resurrect the economics of populism and protectionism, with what they term "destabilising consequences".

## **Free speech versus non-intervention**

Second, authoritarian governments, particularly in Indonesia, have successfully circumvented the ASEAN "principle" of strict non-intervention in the affairs of other member states to oppose free-speech activities conducted in the territory of other ASEAN countries, which they allege have destabilising political consequences for themselves. Indonesia got President Ramos to ban the holding of the Asia-Pacific Conference on East Timor (APCET) in Manila in 1994 and to prevent the Nobel Peace Prize winner Jose Ramos Horta from attending the Manila People's Forum (MPFA) on APEC in November 1996. Under Indonesian pressure, then Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leek-Pai also tried to break up an East Timor conference in Bangkok and expelled Ramos Horta from the country in 1995.

### ASEAN—Authoritarians Inc.

Third, pro-authoritarian forces have sought to bring other non-democratic regimes into ASEAN to shore up their hegemony at both the national and regional level. Burma's entry into ASEAN in July 1997 was largely led by the Suharto regime's domestic concerns. Suharto is becoming more preoccupied with the growing pressure for democratisation in Indonesia, which he sees as being stoked by various movements for human rights and democracy in the region. Expanding ASEAN to include more non-democratic regimes helps neutralise the power of formal democratic regimes—the Philippines and Thailand—and places greater limits on their pursuing foreign policies which would be more sympathetic to democratic movements on the ground.

Moreover, recruiting more authoritarian regimes helps create a solid front against external criticism of repressive practices not only in Indonesia but in the majority of ASEAN states. Not surprisingly, the most enthusiastic backers of expansion aside from Indonesia have been Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei. In the process, "ASEAN brotherhood" is being redefined as a brotherhood of ASEAN authoritarian states against liberal democracy, human rights, and other "western biases."

In the face of this reinvigorated authoritarian offensive, what have the formal democratic governments done? They have behaved almost as if they were ashamed of their democratic credentials. They have given in to Indonesian demands to ban East Timor conferences and East Timorese representatives. Indeed, so weak and unprincipled has the Philippines' ASEAN policy been, that the Filipino government agreed to serve as the SLORC's *ninong* or formal sponsor during the ASEAN senior ministers' meeting which finalised Burma's membership. The day may not be far off when a conference on human rights in Burma will not be allowed to take place on Filipino or Thai soil, and Aung San Suu Kyi will be the next Nobel laureate banned from entering the two countries.

But just as alarming as the abandonment of the principles of democracy and human rights as pillars of foreign policymaking, has been the domestic impact of what amounts to "authoritarian encirclement," to borrow an image from the 1930s, when Stalin justified repressive measures in the Soviet Union by appealing to the notion of "capitalist encirclement." The authoritarian climate at state level in the region has encouraged the authoritarian propensities of those sections of the governing elites in Thailand and the Philippines who have never been wedded to democratic principles and processes.

In the Philippines, personal support and approval from the other ASEAN leaders, who consider him a good ASEAN team player, is undoubtedly one of the factors which is leading President Ramos to take an increasingly cavalier attitude to the question of revising the Philippine Constitution in order to allow him to again stand for election. President Ramos, it must always be remembered, served his cousin Ferdinand Marcos in a variety of roles, including director general of the Integrated National Police, Chief of the Philippine Constabulary, and Chief of the Armed Forces. Switching sides in February 1986 was more a product of military and political calculation than democratic conversion.

## **Revitalising the democracy movement**

There is therefore some urgency in reinvigorating the democracy movement in South-East Asia. If the analysis above is correct, revitalising this movement must proceed along the following lines.

- Democracy must be expanded in the region for democracy is, in a very real sense, indivisible. There can be no “democracy in one country,” to borrow another famous historical slogan. Unless it expands to become the system of governance of your neighbours as well, democracy will constantly be under threat of being undermined from the outside by regimes which fear the example that democratic processes hold out to their own citizenries. Therefore, support for democracy and human rights in Burma, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, and Indonesia should not only be seen as an enterprise stemming from fraternal solidarity but from self-interest, that is, for the sake of protecting one’s own democratic practices, cultures, and traditions.
- Democracy must be deepened in those countries where it now has a foothold. For democracy is an evolving, not a fixed enterprise. A democracy that is limited to the respect and protection of political rights and classical individual rights will wither away. Democracy must be deepened to create the conditions for the meaningful exercise of those political rights. This means that fundamental to the democratic enterprise is a relatively equal distribution of income and assets which can serve as the only basis of genuine political equality.

- The practice of democracy must be made more direct. Traditional models of representative democracy have ossified, and a central element of their reinvigoration is innovation and experimentation in direct democracy, through eliminating more and more the intermediaries between the citizen and the exercise of decision-making. This is not only a case of devolving additional power to local level but also of enabling a much broader base of society to participate more in decision-making on national, regional, and international matters. It is time to rediscover Rousseau.
- But probably only Rousseau among western thinkers because democracy must be cast as an Asian enterprise, one whose wellsprings are found not only in the European enlightenment but also in Asian cultures, most of which have rich traditions which are based on participation and equity. We must increasingly root our democratic philosophy, theory and practice in these genuine Asian traditions.

We must make sure that our mission of democratic expansion and deepening does not play into the cynical politics of using the rhetoric of human rights and democracy to advance selfish national interests, be they political or economic. Democratic activists must expropriate the symbols of nationalism, regionalism, and anti-imperialism from the apologists of authoritarianism, whose rhetoric often masks the fact that the regimes they seek to legitimise are deeply tied to Northern corporate interests, Northern military interests, and Northern-dominated multilateral bodies like the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund.

Democratic activists must ensure that democracy does not function as a system of government which gives the majority a tyranny over the minority, but instead serves as a process which can be creatively adapted to an ethnically and culturally diverse region. One of the weaknesses of authoritarian regimes is that they have been identified as oppressive systems of control by dominant ethnic groups over others. Democracy must be identified with cultural and political autonomy, decentralised governance, and pluralism in the expression of national identity.

## **Conclusion: a battle of visions**

While it is certainly true that repression or the threat of repression accounts for most of the staying power of

authoritarian regimes, it is not the only source. Daniel Goldhagen's book *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* reminds us that while the Nazis did exercise coercion, probably an even greater source of their stability was their popularity with the German people.<sup>8</sup> Asia's authoritarian regimes are probably much less popular with their peoples than the Nazis were with the Germans. Nonetheless, part of their control rests on the residual appeal of their ideology among some sectors of the population. Unless the idea and practice of democratic governance is revitalised so as to present a vision that is more compelling and attractive than the formula of political lobotomy in exchange for economic prosperity and security offered by ruling elites from China to Indonesia, it will not fare well. Indeed, if all we have to offer is the paradigm and practice of "actually existing democracies" in the Philippines and Thailand, our side stands to lose. And that we cannot afford.

### Footnotes

- 1 ASEAN's members are Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei, Vietnam and since July 1997 Burma and Laos.
- 2 Lee's ideas were articulated thus by his son, Brig. Gen. Lee Hsien-Loong: "Western ideals emphasise the rights and privileges of the individual over the group, and particularly over the state." Eastern societies, on the other hand, "believe in individuals fulfilling themselves through the greater identity of the group". He went on to say: "I am not suggesting that Westerners are incapable of selfless service to others, or that there are no selfish people in the Orient. But there is a real difference between East and West...We are in this respect an Oriental society, and we should remain one. If we swing to the other extreme, and accept uncritically the more unrestrained Western views of the absolute supremacy of individual rights and liberties - views which are challenged even in the West, we will be ruined." Lee Hsien-Loong, "Westernisation: The problem Singapore is trying to solve." *Straits Times*, 12 January 1989.
- 3 Quoted in Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1996, p.93
- 4 Quoted in James Fallows, *Looking at the Sun: The Rise of the New East Asian Economic and Political System*, New York, Pantheon, 1994, p.314
- 5 See Victor Karunan, *The Security Syndrome: Politics of National Security in Asia*, Bangkok, Forum Asia and Focus on the Global South, 1997, pp.78-80, 88-90
- 6 Anwar Ibrahim, Lunch address at the International Conference on Rethinking Human Rights, Legend Hotel, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 7 December 1994
- 7 Quoted in Louis Kraar, "A blunt talk with Singapore's Lee Kuan-Yew", *Fortune*, 21 July 1997, p.36
- 8 See Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, New York, Vintage, 1997.

