How Do the Millennials See It? The Future of Democracy, Legitimacy and Governance in Asia

By Yun-han Chu

The limited, fitful spread of democracy in Asia following the Second World War encouraged Western liberals to believe the region was destined to adopt Western democratic governance standards.

But the capacity of many Asian economies to deliver prosperity without democracy has fueled a fundamental debate. Asian millennials are now weighing in on that debate.

They are open to liberal democracy, but not committed to it. They value what political systems deliver more than their underlying normative principles. This will have a profound effect on Asia's political future, writes Yun-han Chu.

LAST NEW YEAR'S EVE, the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama wrote in a commentary in Singapore's *Strait Times*: "As 2016 begins, an historic contest is under way, largely hidden from public view, over competing Chinese and Western strategies to promote economic growth. The outcome of this struggle will determine the fate of much of Eurasia in the decades to come."[1] Indeed, no one is more qualified than Fukuyama to proclaim that we are witnessing the end of "the-end-of-history" triumphalism, just as the global economy is still struggling with the downward pressure and contagion of deflation spreading from Japan and the EU to the rest of the world, eight years after Asia was hit by the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. For decades, liberal democracy has been extolled as the best system of governance to have emerged out of the long experience of history. Today, such a confident assertion is far from self-evident. Democracy, in crisis across the West, must redeem itself.

The momentum of the so-called third wave of democratization ran out of steam well before the 2008-2009 global financial crisis. As Larry Diamond astutely observed, the world slipped into a democratic recession at the turn the century.[2] In the first 15 years of this new century, the rate of democratic breakdown has been substantially higher than in the preceding decade and a half. A majority of young democracies that emerged during the third wave remain unstable and illiberal, if they remain democratic at all.[3] East Asia was not immune from democratic backsliding, sometimes in the form of military coups, as in Thai-

1 Francis Fukuyama, "Exporting the Chinese model," *The Straits Times*, Dec. 30, 2015.

2 Larry Diamond, "The Democratic Rollback," *Foreign Affairs*, March-April, 2008.

3 Larry Diamond, "Facing up to the Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 26 No. 1 (January 2015): 141-154.

4 Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, "The Democratic Disconnect," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (July 2016): 5-17.

5 Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer — and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class* (Simon & Schuster, 2011).

land in 2006 and 2014. In other instances, they have gone through subtle and incremental degradations of democratic rights, as in Cambodia under Prime Minister Hun Sen and the Philippines under presidents Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and more recently Rodrigo Duterte, who vows to be a "dictator" against "evil."

Over the last decade, the allure of Western-style liberal democracy has significantly declined in the eyes of the Asian elite and citizens alike. The reality of contemporary democracies looks far less appealing than the end-of-history story might suggest. The incapacity of Western governments to make necessary decisions and take actions in a timely manner poses significant questions about their effectiveness in relation to Asian countries. Scholars and others have picked up on many worrisome signs of democratic deconsolidation. In the West, citizens are losing trust in key democratic institutions; are more willing to jettison institutions and norms that have traditionally been regarded as central components of democracy; and are increasingly attracted to alternative regime forms.[4]

In many established democracies in the West, there is a return to the staggering scale of economic inequality last seen during the "Gilded Age" of the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the US, fueled by the vast political power that the wealthy have to control executive, legislative and regulatory activity. In turn, the concentration of resources at the top leads to an even more disproportionate influence by wealthy elites over public life, fueling further discontent at the gap between public policies and public preferences. Elected representatives are increasingly unable to represent the views of the people, and politics has become a game for the rich and powerful.[5]

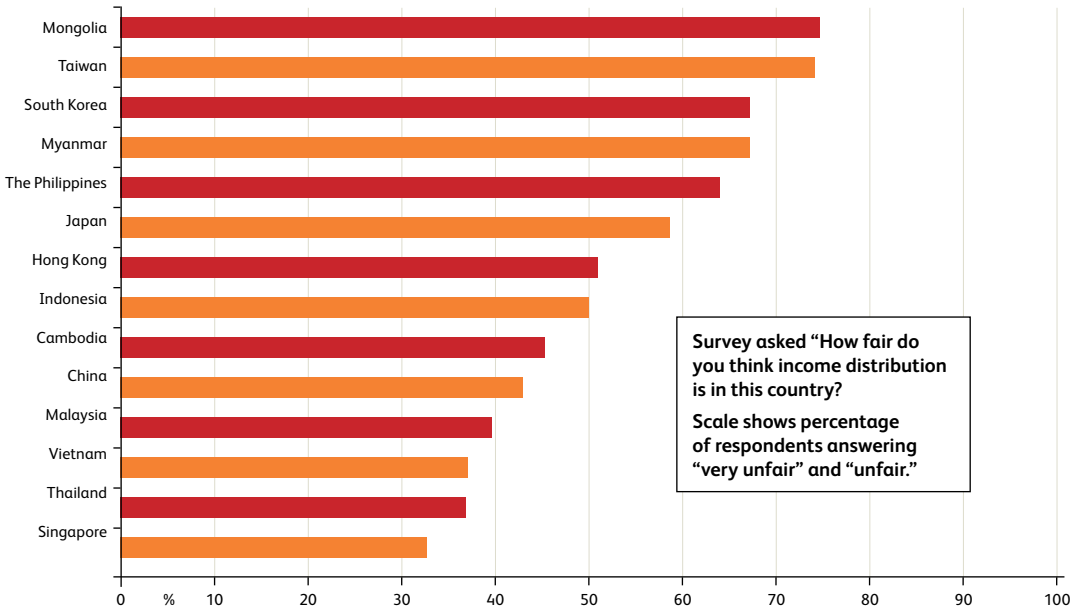
At the same time, East Asian authoritarian and semi-democratic regimes remain fierce competitors to democracies, with Singapore being notably the most economically developed authoritarian state ever. China is also on the list of countries with large middle classes and authoritarian regimes. The resiliency of the Chinese communist regime and the economic ascendance of China have made the region's overall environment much more hospitable for non-democratic regimes.

With the shift of economic gravity away from the United States and Japan to China, East Asia has become one of the few regions in the world where the characteristics of political systems pose no barrier to trade and investment, and is becoming perhaps the only region in the world where newly democratized countries are economically integrated with and dependent on non-democratic systems. China has rapidly emerged not only as the region's locomotive of economic growth, but also as the principal architect of regional integration and new rules of economic engagement, most notably with the launch of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative and the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). In a nutshell, history is no longer loading the dice in favor of Western-style liberal democracies.

Even at the height of third-wave democratization, East Asia defied the global trend. Between 1986 and 2015, among the 18 sovereign states and autonomous territories in the region, only five countries — the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Mongolia and Indonesia — made successful transitions to democracy. Meanwhile, most of the region's authoritarian regimes have survived the global tidal wave toward democracy, and much of East Asia today is still governed by non- and semi-democratic regimes that have displayed great resilience. They are seemingly capable of coping with the multiple challenges brought about by complex economies, diverse interests, the Internet revolution and globalization. In the ideological arena, sustained interest in the debate over "Asian values" as well as the "Beijing Consen-

6 Yun-han Chu, Hsin-Hsin Pan and Wen-Chin Wu. "Regime Legitimacy in East Asia: Why Non-Democratic States Fare Better than Democracies," *Global Asia*, 10(3) (November 2015): 98-105.

FIGURE 1 PERCEPTION OF INCOME DISTRIBUTION
Source: Asian Barometer Survey Wave IV

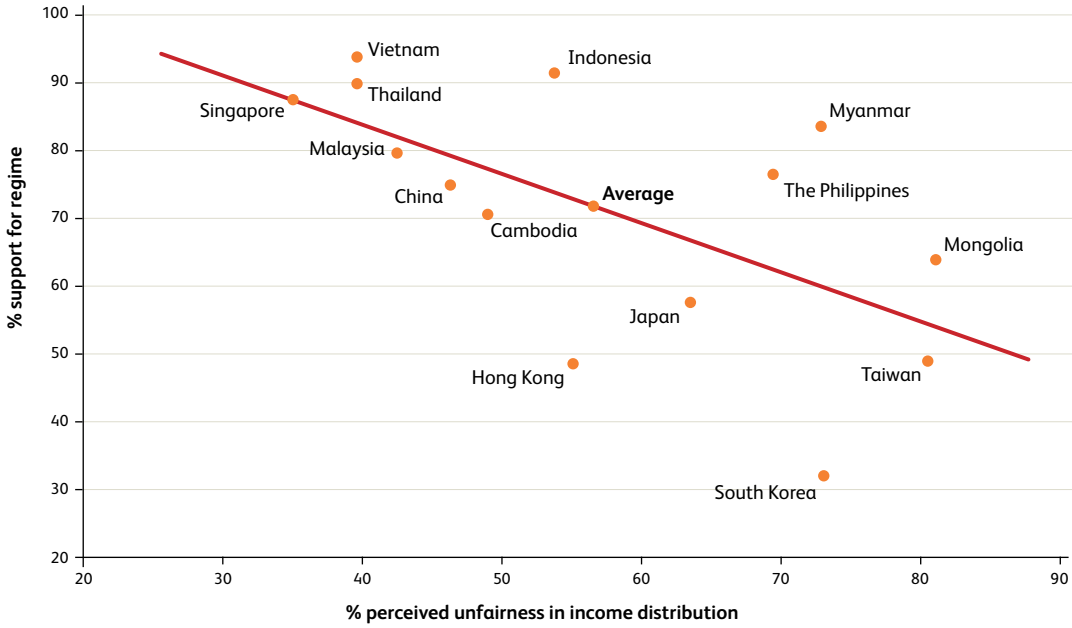


sus" (as opposed to the Washington Consensus) among Asian elites suggests that liberal democracy has not yet firmly established itself.

While most of the region's democracies do not face any imminent existential crisis, they suffer from a fragile foundation of legitimacy. According to the Asian Barometer Survey, the level of diffuse regime support in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Mongolia and the Philippines have been consistently lower than that of the authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes. Distrust of democratic institutions is widespread. In all East Asian democracies except Indonesia, most citizens dismissed the trustworthiness of what are arguably the two key institutions of representative democracy, political parties and parliaments. Compared with democracies in the region, non-democratic countries are also found to be enjoying higher popular ratings of government responsiveness.[6]

Democracies have failed to win over the hearts of many Asian citizens because oftentimes political polarization, elite infighting, partisan gridlock and corruption scandals have debilitated governments. Many citizens have withdrawn their support for democratic government because it fails to deliver an acceptable level of good governance in terms of rule of law, controlling corruption, impartiality and fair treatment, the provision of a social safety net and being responsive to the needs of citizens. Many non-democracies in East Asia also enjoy a higher level of popular support due to the fact that they have become a vibrant force in driving regional development, while democracies show signs of languishing. For three consecutive decades, Japan, the only long-established democracy in the region, has been trapped in a loss of vision and adaptability in an age of digital revolution and globalization. Taiwan has been struggling with a crisis over national identity, an aging population, wage stagnation, dwindling fiscal resources and an escalation of political tension in the Taiwan Strait — and it still lacks a clear strategy to consolidate its niche in the global economy.

FIGURE 2 **REGIME SUPPORT AND PERCEPTION OF UNFAIRNESS IN INCOME DISTRIBUTION**
Source: Asian Barometer Survey Wave IV



One of the most corrosive forces undermining the legitimacy of Asian democracies is the widening gap between the rich and poor. While glaring income inequality is a source of popular discontent everywhere, this explosive issue has reached a boiling point primarily in Asian democracies. As Figure 1 shows, the proportion of respondents in the Asian Barometer Wave IV survey who believe that their country's income distribution is unfair has reached an astonishing level — almost 80 percent in Mongolia and Taiwan, more than 70 percent in South Korea and Myanmar, and roughly two-thirds in the Philippines and Japan. The comparable numbers in Thailand, Vietnam and Singapore, in contrast, are below 40 percent, with the remaining countries straddled somewhere in between. In addition, there is a clear inverse linear relationship between the level of regime support and the perceived unfairness of income distribution. As Figure 2 shows, the higher the perception of unfairness, the lower the support for the regime.

DEMOCRACY STALLED

Many forces operating at the regional and global level have not been conducive to democratic consolidation and expansion in East Asia. First, the neoliberal economic reform that came with democratization and its overarching guiding ideology have deprived the state bureaucracy in Asia's young democracies of the necessary policy instruments and/or the steering capability to facilitate industrial upgrading and arrest the trend toward growing income inequality. At the same time, in virtually all Asian societies, globalization and economic integration have strengthened the position of the transnational economic elite and shifted the balance of power in society at the expense of labor, farmers, the middle class and local communities.

Much like their counterparts in other regions of the world, Asian democracies also suffered from a hollowing out of democratic sovereignty as the power of making the most important decisions and rules is either transferred to suprana-

tional organizations and multilateral arrangements or subordinated to the interests of the transnational corporate elite and the super-rich. In this sense, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement, which has been vigorously promoted by the administration of US President Barack Obama, will certainly aggravate this predicament because the agreements under the TPP go well beyond trade. They require a mandatory overhaul of a myriad of regulations and rules over investment and finance, intellectual property, labor practices, food safety standards, Internet regulation, public health and the environment. They will impose fundamental changes on the legal, judicial and regulatory frameworks of countries, without input or accountability through democratic institutions.

To foster a more conducive environment for democratic development, it is imperative to harness the power of transnational corporate elites and their allies through the enactment of regional as well as global conventions on foreign investment, capital movement, financial arbitrage, corporate income taxes, capital gains taxes, inheritance taxes, and new international rules on labor, migration, the environment, food safety, cyber security, equal access to digital resources and so on. Obviously, no one country can achieve any of the above alone. This agenda can only be accomplished through concerted multilateral actions propelled by visionary leaders, vibrant regional and global social movements, and a strong global civil society pushing for democratic governance.

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DIGITAL IMPACT

Another potent transformative force is the explosion of Internet communications and social media. The digital technology breakthrough is a double-edged sword when it comes to coping with the wrenching challenges that Asia's democracies are facing. The Internet revolution has the potential to empower the poor to break up the political oligopoly of the entrenched elite, because it facilitates information-sharing, promotes transparency and substantially reduces the cost of coordinating collective actions. It also might help the development of democratic citizenship by enhancing empowerment through online social networking and political engagement.

On the other hand, digital communication might overburden representative democracies with its many unintended consequences: frequent and sudden outbursts of online activism, destroying social capital and burning bridges between contending groups with the rise of cyber tribalism. It also dramatically compresses the time span for democratic institutions to respond to the demands or problems of the day. It also tends to amplify the corrosive effects on democratic governments of the hollowing out of dem-

7 Yun-han Chu and Bridget Welsh, "Millennials and East Asia's Democratic Future," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (April 2015):151-164.

ocratic sovereignty and polarization over income distribution, especially in the eyes of citizens who lack the patience to wait until the next parliamentary session, much less the next election, for the slow and cumbersome democratic process to frame a policy response.

MILLENNIALS CHALLENGE

In the final analysis, Asia's millennials will hold the key to the region's democratic future. While the baby boomer generation still possesses the economic and political clout in East Asia, their children are a powerful transformative group that will shape tomorrow. In some East Asian countries, voters under the age of 30 have already become the critical force determining the outcome of elections.

East Asia's current youth cohort, who were born between the early 1980s and 2000s, is the generation of millennials. This group knows very little about the 1986 People Power uprising in the Philippines, the 1989 Tiananmen Square protest in China or the fall of the Berlin Wall in Germany; even their memory of the 1997-1998 Asian Financial Crisis is vague. Their reference points are the trends and events of the last 15 years — a rising China and a declining US, mass commercialization of Asian pop culture and the broad experience of rapid social change and vibrant economic growth.

The Asian Barometer Survey has shown that Asian millennials are open to liberal democracy, but not committed to it. They value the outcomes of political systems more than their underlying normative principles. They are more inclined to conceive of democracy in terms of good governance and social equity than electoral accountability, political competition or liberty. It is not enough for the region's young democracies to provide their citizens with freedom, open political contestation and free and fair elections; they have to deliver tangible outcomes in terms of social equity and good governance to win over their younger citizens.[7] In particular, all Asian political systems have to address intergenerational distributive justice in the context of upward social mobility and a level playing field for everyone.

Our empirical data also indicate that the normal channel of vertical accountability evolving around electoral cycles is no longer sufficient to address the sentiments, expectations and demands of millennials. The traditional pattern of political mobilization, often through local political machines, patron-client networks or trade unions, is of diminishing value in capturing Asia's millennials, who are physically mobile, hooked up to online information flows and embedded in social networks among peers. The Internet has transformed the pattern of political engagement by younger people and fostered activism in areas such as blogging and virtual social networks. All of East Asia's political systems — democratic or not — will need to address the growing popular demand for real-time, interactive e-government at all levels and to provide online consultative mechanisms in all areas of public policy and governance. Without these institutional innovations and adaptations, both the effectiveness of governance and the legitimacy of regimes will suffer.

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