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The Limits and Potential of Liberal Democratisation in Southeast Asia

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Abstract: This article argues that Southeast Asia is a region where uneven political development presents a theoretical challenge to the study of regime change and continuity in the academic field of comparative politics. Of the 11 political regimes, only Timor-Leste, the Philippines, and Indonesia can now be considered liberally democratic. However, these democracies are far from consolidated. The other eight regimes range from soft dictatorships to electoral authoritarian regimes and illiberal democracies. This article seeks to explain why no single theory adequately explains regime change and continuity in this region. Impediments to democratisation are many – one of which is the fact that traditional and undemocratic institutions remain strong and that transitions to civilian rule remain vulnerable to other powerful state institutions, most notably the armed forces.

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Introduction

Liberal scholars in the West like Francis Fukuyama (1992a, 1989) cele-brated the collapse of communism and confidently predicted that the end of the Cold War would make liberal democracy the final form of human government, which raises the question of whether political re-gimes should still be studied through comparative methods. Howard J. Wiarda (1998, 1999), for instance, even asked if comparative politics was dead.

Southeast Asia remains one of the world's most diverse regions and can serve as an important case study for scholars who teach and do re-search in the field of comparative politics to help answer the question of whether this academic subfield is still relevant today. I argue that this field of study is still alive and well today, especially when we study politi-cal regimes in Southeast Asia[1] – a region where uneven political devel-opment presents a theoretical and empirical challenge to the academic study of regime change and continuity. This paper explains why no single theory adequately explains regime change and continuity in Southeast Asia. The 11 political regimes of Southeast Asia include an undemocratic state under military rule (Myanmar), one under monarchical rule (Brunei), those with one-party communist systems (Laos and Vietnam), non-liberal democratic countries that maintain hegemonic-party regimes (Sin-gapore, Malaysia, and Cambodia), and democratic states in the liberal sense of the term (Indonesia, Thailand (until May 2014), the Philippines, and Timor-Leste) – these democracies, however, are far from consoli-dated. None of the major theoretical perspectives on liberal democratisa-tion advanced up to now adequately captures the complexities of regime continuity and change. Various theoretical insights show that liberal democratisation as a process of political liberalization depends on the interests of and power relations between social and political actors at different levels and how these actors manage to prevent one another from subverting democratic rule.[2]

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1   Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia are the two separate subregions that form East Asia. Southeast Asia is the focus of analysis in this paper, but political de-velopment in this region can be better explained if the experiences of North-east Asia are also discussed.

2   I would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for reading the manu-script and for their comments, however uncritical or critical they may be.

Undemocratic Regimes and Democratisation

The concept of democracy and the process of democratisation are always difficult to define and operationalise. One way to deal with this challenge is to define democracy in liberal terms and assess democratisation as a liberal process.

Democracy is the conceptual antithesis of dictatorship. By and large, dictatorship as a system of government refers to rule unrestrained by law. Rulers are not held accountable to their citizens as they are not elected representatives. There are no elections. Dictators are able to rule for indefinite periods of time – even for life. Changes of government only come about when dictators die or by revolution, coup d'état, war, and so on. Dictators control public institutions, such as the military, the judiciary, the legislature, and the mass media. They eliminate active opposition and cover up their absolute rule with ideological rationalisation. Civil society does not exist; if it does, it remains extremely weak or lacks political independence and succumbs to state control.

Dictatorship has several forms, but it can be either 'hard' or 'soft,' depending on the level of political repression and violence. Dictatorship can be military, monarchical, personalist, civilian, or radical. The regimes in Japan that existed until the end of World War II, in Nigeria until 1975, and in Myanmar until 2010 (to be discussed below) can be considered military dictatorships during which military juntas ruled unchallenged. The best example of monarchical dictatorship or absolutism is the personal rule of King Louis XIV of France, who regarded himself as the state ("L'état, c'est moi" or "The state, that's me!") (Beik 2000). Civilian dictatorships include Nazi Germany, where the armed forces supported the democratically elected dictator Adolf Hitler. Personalist dictatorships are characterised by family members or friends of the dictator ruling with the latter. The Philippines under President Ferdinand Marcos, for instance, can be interpreted as an example of personalist dictatorship (see below). Radical dictatorships are those in which the proletariat (working class) or a communist party rules and does not allow any opposition parties to compete in elections. The Soviet Union and China (especially under Mao Zedong) are two good examples that come to mind.

Electoral authoritarian regimes allow a degree of political openness through electoral inter-party competition; though the hegemonic party is always certain to win any elections and dominate the political arena. Such regimes have also been described as "competitive authoritarian" (Levitski and Way 2002), "pseudo-democratic", and "virtual-democratic" (Diamond 1999: 15–16). According to Larry Diamond, a hegemonic party system is one

in which a relatively institutionalized ruling party monopolizes the
political arena, using coercion, patronage, media control, and oth-
er means to deny formally legal opposition parties any real chance
of competing for power (Diamond 2002: 25).

Elections are unfree and unfair, ensuring hegemonic parties win most of
the seats. The system of institutional checks and balances exists but re-
mains extremely weak. The legislature and the judiciary are subject to
manipulation by the executive whose power is monopolized by the heg-
emonic party. Hegemonic parties also tend to use brute force to maintain
their dominance rather than more subtle techniques, such as bribery, co-
option, or forms of mild persecution or harassment (Levitsky and Way
2002: 53).

A more democratic form of government may be labelled as *illiberal*.
This type of political regime is similar to the "delegative democracy"
model advanced by A. Guillermo O'Donnell (1994). In delegative de-
mocracies basic democratic standards are generally met, but levels of
accountability remain low. Opposition parties can be expected to gain
more seats due to freer and fairer elections and to have more influence
within the legislature; they are, however, predictably unable to decisively
defeat the incumbent. Elections only serve to back the ruling elite's strat-
egy for development and to continue legitimising its performance, not to
remove the incumbent from power. As far as procedural issues are con-
cerned, democracy is largely viewed as a means to "justify" the dominant
party's electoral victory. The rule of law, the protection of political and
civil liberties, and the institutional separation of powers may exist in
theory but not in practice. The individual does not *fully* enjoy certain
liberties, such as freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, demon-
stration and strike. The system of checks and balances fails to constrain
elected officials as they seek to stay in power (Zakaria 1997).

Democracies are liberal not only because they hold regular, free, and
fair elections with a degree of outcome uncertainty (not unpredictability)
but also because they are governed by laws designed to protect individual
human rights and freedoms, most notably political rights and civil liber-
ties. Elections are a political mechanism designed to ensure free and fair
competition for power, but they do not make countries liberally demo-
cratic unless elected leaders represent citizens' interests.

According to Diamond (1999: 13–15), liberal democratic regimes
have several basic features: first, elections are contestable in a free and
fair manner. Samuel Huntington's procedural definition of democracy
provides a starting point. In his words:

> a twentieth-century political system [is considered] democratic to
> the extent that its most powerful collective decision makers are se-
> lected through fair, honest, and periodic elections in which candi-
> dates freely compete for votes and in which virtually all the adult
> population is eligible to vote (Huntington 1991: 6–7).

However, free and fair elections alone do not make a society democratic.
Elections are "only one step, an important virtue of governance, but are
not the only one virtue" (Zakaria 1997: 40). Second, there must a peace-
ful transfer of power after elections. The losers must accept the results
and let the winning party form a new government. Third, civil liberties –
one of the three dimensions of procedural democracy identified by
George Sorensen (1993) – are defended. Democracy is liberal only if it is
based on "constitutional liberalism". Whereas the term "liberal" empha-
sizes individual liberty, the term "constitutional" is associated with the
individual rights to life and property and other forms of freedom such as
religious freedom and free speech. These individual rights and freedoms
are secured by "checks on the power of each branch of government,
equality under the law, impartial courts and tribunals, and separation of
church and state" (Zakaria 1997: 26). Fourth, elected representatives
possess real authority to govern without being subject to undemocratic
acts of subversion, such as military coups, insurgency movements and
terrorism. In other words, democratic politics is the "only game in town."

Democratisation as a process of political development towards lib-
eral democracy is often messy and not linear. Thus, we can choose to
talk about the "hybridity" or "quality" of democracy as does William
Case (2002). Still, we can define liberal democratisation as the process of
transition from illiberal to liberal democracy and the consolidation of
liberal democracy. Democratic consolidation has been defined in differ-
ent ways. Adam Przeworski, for example, makes this argument:

> Democracy is consolidated when under given political and eco-
> nomic conditions a particular system of institutions becomes the
> only game in town, when no one can imagine acting outside of the
> democratic institutions, when all losers want to do is to try again
> within the same institutions under which they have just lost
> (Przeworski 1991: 26).

Juan Linz also defines consolidation as a regime within

> which none of the major political actors, parties, or organized in-
> terests, forces, institutions consider that there is any alternative to
> democratic processes to gain power, and that no political institu-

tion or group has a claim to veto the action of democratically elected decision makers (Linz 1990: 158).

Larry Diamond (1999: 20) advances a *behaviour*-based perspective, arguing that "The essence of democratic consolidation is a behavioral and attitudinal embrace of democratic principles and methods by both elites and masses." Others view democratic consolidation in maximalist terms, which consists of the establishment of a civilian political regime that is responsive and accountable, that has full control over the military, that guarantees basic civil rights, and that presides over a Tocquevillian social democratisation (Im 2000).

This article argues that liberal democracy is consolidated not only when it becomes the "only game in town" (i.e. when elections are free and fair, when the transfer of political power takes place peacefully, when civilian governments have effective control over the armed forces, and when democratic institutions are stable and face no serious subversive activity from undemocratic forces), but also when elected governments represent the interests of those who vote for them and protect civil liberties for all citizens (which includes economic freedom but not socio-economic equality).

Undemocratic Regimes in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is arguably the most diverse region in the world in terms of political regimes. It is this diversity that has made it extremely difficult for scholars to create a precise typology of political regimes that satisfies everyone. For instance, in his major work *Politics on Southeast Asia* (2002), William Case describes Indonesia as a pseudo-democracy in transition, Singapore as a stable semi-democracy, Malaysia as a semi-democracy with strain points, Thailand as an unconsolidated democracy, and the Philippines as a stable but low-quality democracy. Since the turn of the century, changes have taken place in the region. Based on the definitions presented earlier, this chapter offers another typology of 11 political regimes in Southeast Asia.

Brunei can be considered closest to a soft form of monarchical dictatorship. The country remains an absolute monarchy, although it is no perfect stranger to electoral democracy. The 1959 Constitution, for example, made provisions for elections. In 1962 the Brunei People's Party (BRP) won an overwhelming victory. During that same year, the BRP's military wing staged a revolt. In 1965 tentative steps were taken to hold elections. But elections were abolished in 1970. According to Roger Kershaw (2001), Brunei "remains an absolute monarchy, constrained by

parliamentary institutions, or the judiciary" and a "bureaucratic state." Scholars are in little disagreement about the structure of the regime: the sultan is the ultimate source of executive power. He is, among other things, prime minister, finance minister, and defence minister. He is also the defender of faith and a state ideology deeply rooted in Islam. The political system is based on the 1959 Constitution and the religious tradition of the Malay Islamic Monarchy. Political power is transferred on the basis of hereditary succession. Freedom of movement is generally respected and some other freedoms, such as academic and religious ones, are not severely restricted, but other types of freedom are, including freedoms of expression, assembly, and association (Freedom House 2014d).

The single-party systems of Laos and Vietnam remain electorally non-competitive and may be viewed as soft forms of socialist dictatorship. Martin Stuart-Fox (1996) views Laos as a "Marxist state." When declared as the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPRP) in December 1975, it was stated that the LPRP exercised all political power and was "responsible for propagating its own official version of the Marxist-Leninist world view" – a view that derives from Soviet and Vietnamese forms of Marxism, which rest on the concept of class struggle and the dictatorship exercised by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on behalf of the peasant–worker alliance (Stuart-Fox 1996: 73, 74). Nick Freeman (2001: 13) contends that Laos "remains an avowedly socialist-oriented state." To all intents and purposes, the political regime in Laos can be regarded as a soft radical dictatorship with the Lao People's Revolutionary Party still maintaining tight control over political space by prohibiting the establishment of alternative political parties, although the regime began to move towards some type of capitalism in 2005. Civil liberties are severely restricted. Religious freedom remains under tight state control. There is no respect for academic freedom. Freedom to assemble, demonstrate and strike is also severely restricted. Free speech is not permitted. The state controls nearly all media outlets. Freedom House (2014c), for instance, reports that, "Despite recent improvements to the telecommunications infrastructure, press freedom in Laos remained highly restricted in 2013." *Reuters* (2014) reports that the government outlawed online criticism of the communist party's policies by enacting strict internet controls.

Vietnam's political regime is similar to that of Laos. The Vietnamese political regime is characterised by "bureaucratic centralism" (Beresford 1988). The Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) remains the sole political party and remains committed to the Leninist principle of "dem-

ocratic centralism," which does not allow the establishment of a multi-party system. For others, though, the country has the potential to move in the direction of "authoritarian pluralism" (Brown 1998: 197). According to one study (Gainsborough 2005), VCP candidates faced awkward questions from voters and sought to demonstrate their "democratic" credentials. Overall, the door for political liberalization remains tightly shut. Bill Hayton (2010) contends that the Communist Party is determined to stay in power without sharing it with anyone else, despite growing political and social discontent. Civil liberties remain severely restricted. Vietnam's steps toward capitalism since economic liberalization that began in the late 1980s remain incomplete, as the state still controls much of the economy. Human Rights Watch (2013a) claims that the

> government systematically suppresses freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, and persecutes those who question government policies, expose official corruption, or call for democratic alternatives to one-party rule.

The regime in Myanmar remains subject to military rule, but its party system has become more competitive in recent years. Observers used to describe the regime as being under the thumb of military leaders (Fink 2001; Steinberg 1999: 47). According to Andrew McGregor,

> the military continues to figure prominently in reports of brutality against civilians, particularly in ethnic areas; and thousands of refugees seek sanctuary in the refugee camps of neighboring countries (McGregor 2011: 144).

Despite the military has recently been loosening its grip on power, the future of democracy remains uncertain. The general election in November 2010 – the first in 20 years – was boycotted by the National League for Democracy (NLD), which is led by Aung San Suu Kyi. The election, which was judged as not being free and fair (Englehart 2012), was won by the Union Solidarity and Development Party (headed by President Thein Sein, a former military general), which secured 129 out of 224 seats (57.59 per cent). In 2012, however, the NLD competed in a parliamentary by-election and won 43 of the 44 seats available, making the electoral process quite competitive. Although military representatives and former military officers still control the legislature, Myanmar has made the transition from a military dictatorship to a reform-minded civilian government (Joseph 2012). Thus, the regime may be characterised as competitively authoritarian. National elections are scheduled for 2015, but it remains to be seen whether the electoral process will be freer and fairer.

Political rights and civil liberties have been improved, but further respect for them remains to be seen. Some ethnic groups still face restrictions on their rights to form political parties and contest elections. Furthermore, ethnic conflict persists and the

> military continues to engage in extrajudicial killings, attacks on civilians, forced labor, torture, pillage, and use of antipersonnel landmines. Sexual violence against women and girls remains a serious problem, and perpetrators are rarely brought to justice (Human Rights Watch 2013b).

The media sector has become more open, but restrictions and abuses continue. Academic freedom is more evident, but cyberattacks and alleged surveillance of scholars are still being carried out. The right to peaceful assembly and demonstration is limited by the need to obtain permission, whereas strikes are illegal (Freedom House 2014a).

In spite of Singapore's political stability, the ruling party's ability to maintain hegemonic control since 1959 means it is not a liberal democracy. Although academics have described democracy in the country in different ways, none considers it to be liberal. The People's Action Party (PAP) has been in power since 1959. The 1968 election saw the PAP win every single parliamentary seat (58 altogether). In both the 2001 and 2006 elections the PAP collected 82 out of 84 seats. The most recent general election (May 2011) confirmed the PAP's continued dominance, with the party winning 81 out of 87 seats. Although it lost one seat in a by-election on 26 January 2013, the PAP has maintained its hegemonic power through political tactics.

Various accounts still classify the political regime in Singapore as electoral authoritarian – in part because civil liberties are not fully protected. For instance, the Internal Security Act was initially designed to arrest and detain suspected communists, but more recently it has been invoked to hold suspected terrorists. The country has also not signed the core International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In fact, Singapore's "political leaders continue to spend more energy challenging or dismissing the universality of human rights than identifying, and seeking to protect, culturally and historically specific versions of those rights" as they continue to reject "concepts of citizenship rights threatening an acutely elitist authoritarianism" (Rodan 2011: 72). Despite religious freedom being positively evident everywhere, civil liberties remain unprotected in the country as the government "continues to sharply restrict basic rights to free expression, peaceful assembly, and association" (Human Rights Watch 2013c).

Malaysia has a greater degree of electoral competition than does Singapore, but it remains an illiberal democracy. Although it is part of the Barisan Nasional (BN), the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) remains dominant – though no longer hegemonic. In 2001 the government banned all political rallies, citing a threat to national security as the reason. The main opposition party, the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS), has continued to challenge the ruling coalition. The May 2013 general election saw the BN deliver its worst ever performance when it won only 133 of the 222 federal parliamentary seats (less than its previous low of 140 out of 222 seats in 2008 and less than two-thirds of its target) and saw the opposition party Pakatan Rakyat (PR) win nearly 51 per cent of the popular vote. Civil liberties in Malaysia are not well protected and are still subject to security concerns and political repression. Moreover, Malaysia has not adopted the core International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Human Rights Watch (2013d) reports that "In 2012, the government continued to violate rights to free association and peaceful public assembly," that "Most major newspapers and television and radio stations remain controlled by media companies close to political parties in the government coalition," and that there were cases of police abuse and impunity.

Unlike Singapore and Malaysia, Cambodia has adopted a series of international covenants on human rights – though this policy does not make Cambodia a liberal democracy either. The country's multiparty system has become more competitive in recent years, but the political regime remains illiberal. The ruling party – the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) – has actually been in power since 1979 after Vietnam invaded Cambodia and installed a new one-party regime and has since the 1998 national election always won multiparty elections. In 2013, however, the CPP only claimed 68 of the 123 parliamentary seats (a loss of 22 seats compared to 2008, which left the Sam Rainsy Party with 26 seats, the Human Rights Party with three, and the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia and the Norodom Ranariddh Party with two seats each). In 2013 the newly formed Cambodian National Rescue Party won 55 seats but refused to accept the election results, claiming that some 1.3 million names were missing from electoral rolls, that the CPP had stuffed ballot boxes with illegal votes and had actually won only 60 seats, and that the CNRP had in fact won as many as 63 seats. Although the human rights situation has improved since the 1990s, civil liberties remain under threat, with various types of individual freedom (e.g. freedom of expression, to strike, to protest and to demonstrate) being restricted (Peou 2011).

Unconsolidated Democracies in Southeast Asia

The Southeast Asian political regimes that have not become democratic in the liberal sense of the term show the serious limits of liberal democratisation in the region, but they do not tell the whole story. Four other states can be regarded as liberally democratic: Thailand (until May 2014), Timor-Leste, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

The political regime in Thailand was democratic until it was again subject to military rule in May 2014. Nevertheless, history shows that liberal democratisation in Thailand is not doomed for good. After all, the country has gone through various stages and experienced both democratic progress and setbacks. Indeed, Thai politics has witnessed a continual alternation between military and civilian rule since 1932. According to Suchit Bunbongkarn (1999: 175), democratic consolidation "is yet to be achieved." In November 2013 massive anti-government protests by opposition demonstrators (known as Yellow Shirts) were stepped up in their attempts to overthrow the government led by Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. After months of political turmoil, which left 28 people dead and hundreds wounded, the prime minister eventually stepped down. On 22 May 2014 the military ousted the caretaker government, imposed martial law, dissolved the Centre for Administration of Peace and Order and established the National Council for Peace and Order. This was the country's twelfth military coup. Although the military junta promised to return to civilian rule, it ruled out holding new elections until October 2015; democracy, however, will return in the future.

Meanwhile, civil liberties continue to be under attack from state institutions, especially the armed forces and even courts. According to one scholar, "contemporary courts exert great power and are generally the tool of senior arch-royalists" and the Constitutional Court "can force politicians from office, eject sitting governments, dissolve political parties and annual elections," among other things (Chambers 2014a). After its landslide victory in the 2011 election, the government failed to address "many serious human rights problems, including lack of accountability for the 2010 political violence, abuses in southern border provinces, free speech restrictions, and violations of refugee and migrant rights" (Human Rights Watch 2013e; Connors 2011). The current junta has been accused of grave human rights violations, including cracking down on free speech, silencing dissidents, enforcing arbitrary detentions, and acting with legal impunity (Dominguez 2014).

Timor-Leste presents another case of how a people under long-lasting, repressive colonial rule can still come to enjoy more political

freedom in the context of liberal democracy. The road to democracy began with the interim United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), which was tasked by the Security Council with setting up a democratic government. The country has become more independent of international governance, especially since the last personnel from the Australian-led International Stabilisation Force left the country in March 2012 and the UN Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste departed later in that year. Democratisation in Timor-Leste began as early as 2001, when a constituent assembly was elected to draft a constitution. The country has a multiparty system and elections have been held on a regular basis since the first presidential elections in April 2002. In the last two presidential elections, no winning party has sought to maintain power by force. Election results show that there is currently no party in Timor-Leste that is capable of monopolising power and becoming the hegemonic force, which ensured that, in general, the presidential, legislative, and local elections in Timor-Leste between 2002 and 2012 were relatively free and fair and that the transfer of political power was comparatively peaceful.

Democracy in Timor-Leste remains unconsolidated, however. Although religious freedom is respected and clashes between or among different religious groups are virtually absent (since 98 per cent of the population is Catholic), other civil liberties are still subject to restriction. The rule of law remains weak and the culture of impunity persists. The freedom to assemble and demonstrate is restricted by a 2004 law that regulates any attempts to question constitutional order and defame political leaders. Despite the 2009 penal code decriminalising defamation, provisions against "slanderous denunciation" were retained (Freedom House 2014b). Academic freedom faces no serious restrictions, though journalists continue to opt to exercise self-censorship.

The Philippines has become a liberal democracy, but the regime remains unconsolidated. The country is no longer a civilian dictatorship, which came to an end in 1987. It has since become a presidential democracy and there have been calls for the adoption of a parliamentary system. The multiparty system remains vibrant. National elections have been held on a regular basis and are still based on the right of suffrage of all Filipino citizens at the age of 18. The country, however, has witnessed a political climate of fear. Overall, the rule of law has not prevailed over the economic, political, and military elites (Rogers 2004). As a state institution, the military has been deeply active in politics for more than 30 years. Successive presidents have not only been unable to control the

military effectively, but they also continue to depend on members of the armed forces to implement measures aimed at placating restive officers.

In addition, civil liberties continue to be violated. Raul Pangalangan, for instance, writes: "More than twenty years after the restoration of democracy, the Philippines is facing a repeat of the human rights nightmare experienced under Ferdinand Marcos." In his analysis, "The human toll is familiar: extrajudicial killings, disappearances, the intimidation or killing of witnesses and the assassination of lawyers […]." He then goes on to add that the government of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was repressive, that it "deployed the formalist approach and harnessed legal arguments to excuse human rights violators" (Pangalangan 2011: 56). According to Human Rights Watch (2013f), the government of President Benigno S. Aquino – Macapagal-Arroyo's successor – has performed better in this respect, with the number of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances decreasing. However, "harassment and violence against political activists and journalists continue. No one was convicted in any extrajudicial killing case since Aquino became president" (Human Rights Watch 2013f).

Indonesia's liberal democracy also remains unconsolidated. After gaining political independence, the country experimented with democracy, but differences between the new political elites led to the breakdown of new political institutions. The birth of "guided democracy" arrived when Sukarno banned elections in 1959. After General Suharto's successful military efforts to crush the coup attempt in 1965 and his successful measures against the communist movement, "guided democracy" came to an end. Under Suharto's New Order only three political parties were allowed to exist. Some scholars adopted the concept of "authoritarian corporatism" to describe the system. (Robinson 1993: 41) For others, Indonesia was a semi-democracy. On 21 May 1998, Suharto finally ended his 32-year political career. Although his long-term protégé, Vice President Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie, assumed the presidency, the country has since become more liberally democratic. No one single leader has managed to monopolise power. The country has held several elections: first multiparty election in 1999, presidential and parliamentary elections in 2004, and the last election in 2009. The 2009 election was relatively peaceful despite the return to power of the incumbent president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who in 2004 defeated the then president, Megawati Sukarnoputri of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), in a run-off election. The parliamentary election held in April 2014 further confirmed that no political party in the country has become hegemonic. The Democratic Party of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono

saw its share of the vote fall to only 10.2 per cent from over 20 per cent in the previous election. Even though the main opposition party (PDI-P) won the election, it only received 18.9 per cent of the vote and thus fell short of the 25 per cent threshold needed for the party to compete in the run-off presidential election on 9 July. No longer dominated by former president Megawati Sukarnoputri but supported by her, the PDI-P won and Joko Widodo (a middle-class furniture entrepreneur) defeated Prabowo Subianto (a retired lieutenant general implicated in the massacres of East Timorese in the early 1980s) and was inaugurated on 24 October as the seventh president of Indonesia. Prabowo's coalition, however, holds a tenuous majority in the legislature.

Civil liberties in Indonesia have also been better respected since the country made a democratic transition in the late 1990s, but remain restricted. Citizens enjoy freedom of worship, but serious human rights problems still exist (Ford 2011). Members of the media still express concern about threats from authorities, and journalists still practice self-censorship. Freedom of demonstration and strike remains subject to political repression. Moreover, minority rights are still violated. According to Human Rights Watch (2013g), "Violence and discrimination against religious minorities, particularly Ahmadiyah, Bahai, Christians, and Shia deepened." The report further states that, "Lack of accountability for abuses by police and military forces continues to affect the lives of residents in Papua and West Papua provinces." (Human Rights Watch 2013g). After taking power in 2014, President Joko Widodo promised to end the culture of legal impunity by aiming to revise the current Military Tribunal Law. It is, however, too early to judge, and it remains to be seen whether criminal investigations will be carried out and action taken against individuals responsible for serious human rights violations.

The observations above show that only four states in Southeast Asia – Thailand (until May 2014), Timor-Leste, the Philippines, and Indonesia – became more liberally democratic (when assessed in terms of electoral competition levels and degrees of respect for political rights and civil liberties), albeit far from consolidated. Singapore, Cambodia, and Malaysia still maintain hegemonic-party systems, which keep electoral competition in favour of the ruling parties. Laos and Vietnam have electorally non-competitive regimes due to their one-party systems. Myanmar still holds on to military rule, whereas Brunei remains under monarchical control. Overall, liberal democracy has had a hard time in Southeast Asia, but its long-term future may not be as grim as cultural relativists predict (see below). Michael B. Frolic, for instance, claims that there is an "emerging political liberalization" process underway in the

region that "is slow and at times uneven, but political change is in the (East) wind" (Frolic 2001: 33, 34). Human rights issues have now become formally part of 'Asian values,' especially since the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) inaugurated the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights in 2009 (Davis and Galligan 2011; Galligan 2011).

Explaining Regime Continuity and Change

Although different theoretical perspectives on liberal democratisation have been reviewed (Case 2002: 10–25; Frolic 2001), none has adequate explanatory power. Culturalist, economic, class-based perspectives help shed light on the challenges of liberal democratisation, but their insights are limited. As will be seen, economic and political elites and their power relations vis-à-vis social actors as well as external powers also matter. Democratisation is constrained by the limits of institution-building in a context where non-elected members of the armed forces remain powerful.

Culturalist perspectives remain popular in terms of their ability to explain regime continuity and the limits of liberal democratisation in Southeast Asia, but they still have difficulty clarifying varying degrees of democratic development in East Asia. Culturalists reject Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history' claim about the triumph of liberal democracy over all other cultural and ideological rivals. Even scholars who previously advanced structural functionalism modified their thinking. Huntington (1993, 1987, and 1984), for example, came to recognise the importance of cultural factors. Non-liberal traditions like Islam and Confucianism resist democratic values.

Culturalists do not claim that no state in East Asia has become democratic. Rather they argue that democracies in the region – Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines – have not become truly liberal. Some use such terms as "soft authoritarianism" (Roy 1994). Democracy in East Asia is also characterised as "Asian style" or simply "illiberal" (Bell et al. 1995). The term "Asian-style democracy" has been coined to make the point that this system is anti-liberal (Case 1996). Western-style democracy has made no serious inroads into East Asia because of its anti-liberal values (Kausikan 1998). William Case predicts that "politics [in the region] will probably evolve in the direction of semi-democracy rather than towards greater regime openness" (Case 1996: 438). Cultural perspectives have difficulty explaining why democracy emerged in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, the Philippines,

Thailand (until May 2014), and Timor-Leste and why it has become more liberal. Cultural factors do matter, but they are almost always subject to interpretation and change (de Bary 1983; Saeed 2011).

Economic perspectives, too, have limited explanatory power, despite their general appeal to scholars in the Western world. Scholars have been captivated by the positive relationship between economic development and political liberalisation. Seymour Martin Lipset's seminal article makes a correlation between economic development and democratisation, advancing the thesis that "the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy" (Lipset 1959: 69–105). As some countries in East Asia became more economically developed, a growing body of academic literature placed emphasis on the positive relationship between economic development and liberal democratization. In more recent years some scholars have even made bold claims about the positive impact of economic development on authoritarian Chinese politics. One scholar, for instance, points out that there is "a positive correlation between a market economy and democracy" (Lollar 1997: 4). In his words, "China has gone through its first stage of transition from totalitarianism to authoritarianism, and is on the verge of starting the long-term, second transition towards democracy (Lollar 1997: 83–84). A major work that seeks to identify a positive relationship between economic development and liberal democracy is entitled *Driven By Growth* (Morley 1999).

Still, economic perspectives have difficulty explaining why China, Laos and Vietnam adopted economic liberalization and continues to enjoy economic prosperity but still successfully resist political liberalisation and why democracies like Indonesia, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste rank lower than Brunei, Malaysia, and Singapore in terms of educational levels, literacy, maternal health, and other human development indicators (Reilly 2013). Economic development can, in fact, be used by ruling elites to justify their authoritarian rule. Richard Stubbs and other scholars, for instance, make a forceful argument that growing prosperity in fact helps legitimise the "staying power of soft authoritarianism" in Southeast Asia (Stubbs 2001). Singapore, for example, has been able to remain authoritarian because of economic development – though the severe financial crisis that began in 1997 helped undermine Suharto's New Order. Despite economic development appearing to help states consolidate their democracy, affluence *per se* does not seem to be the key prerequisite for democratic transition.

But there is some truth to the argument by Adam Przeworski et al. who contend that "transitions to democracy are random with regard to

the level of development" (Przeworski et al. 1996: 39–55), but they agree with Lipset that liberal democracies that enjoy an annual per capita income of more than USD 6,000 "are impregnable and can be expected to live forever" (Przeworski et al. 1996: 41). This point helps explain why liberal democracies in Southeast Asia (whose annual per capita income is lower than USD 6,000), such as Thailand, have experienced setbacks. Southeast Asia cannot be counted as a falsifiable case, however, because none of the democracies in this region has achieved an annual per capita income of more than USD 6,000. However, democracy in more economically advanced and prosperous states in Northeast Asia (such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan) seems to be consolidated, healthy and thriving.

How economic development shapes socio-economic classes may be important. States that have become more democratic and liberal tend to be those where the economic elites have become less dependent on the political elites – a proposition similar to the thesis advanced by some scholars (Moore 1967; Rueschemeyer, Huber Stephens, and Stephens 1992). Economic elites in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, for instance, have enjoyed greater degrees of such independence, whereas their counterparts in Singapore and Malaysia remain more dependent on political elites (Sidel 2008: 127–147).

Socio-economic class-based perspectives still raise the question of why non-political elites in economically less-developed states such as Thailand (at least until May 2014 when the military staged a coup) are more liberal than those in states like Singapore, which are economically more advanced. Nevertheless, even in the case of Thailand, the capitalist class has not been successful in promoting or consolidating democracy. While there seems to be no clear correlation between economic development and liberal capitalist-class empowerment, economic classes may be empowered by non-economic factors, such as the growth of civil society and elite politics.

Research on emergent civil societies in the region shows a positive relationship between civil society and democratisation (Majid 2010; Saravanamuttu 2001; Rodan 2001). The growth of the ASEAN economies led to the growth of a middle class that "has indeed engendered or minimally provided the condition for the growth of NGOs and CSOs" (Saravanamuttu 2001: 100). In the Philippines and Thailand the NGO communities have engaged in high-profile activism. In Saravanamuttu's view, "were it not for a strong civil society in the Philippines in the mid-1980s the transition from dictatorship to democracy would not have been possible" (Saravanamuttu 2001: 101). According to Garry Rodan,

NGOs played leading and coordinating roles in the events of 1991 and 1992 [in Thailand] which eventually led to the demise of a military government. Earlier, in 1986, NGOs played a similar role in overthrowing the Marcos regime (Rodan 2001: 77).

Rodan further contends that,

the greatest potential of civil society to act as a force for liberal political change derives from its potential to institutionalise the rights of organised citizens to influence the decision-making process (Rodan 2001: 57).

Faced with political repression but with recourse to web-based information and technical channels of communication increasingly available, people seek to address their grievances rather than staying silent. They express their rights to be heard, to secure support in electoral contests, and to change government policy (Majid 2010).

Is civil society the principal agent of democratic change? The jury is still out on this question. Some evidence questions the significance of the impact of NGO communities and social movements on political development, which varies from country to country. These social actors have played an increasingly active political role in countries like Taiwan and South Korea, but a more subordinate role in Southeast Asian countries like Singapore and Malaysia. In the first half of the 1990s, for instance, "hundreds of NGOs emerged in South Korea and there are now more than twenty environmental organizations alone" (Rodan 2001: 77). Even though they play an influential role in politics, civil society does not help transform or consolidate democracy. Civil society in Thailand has not prevented military coups, nor has it made any significant or sustainable impact on the politicised Constitutional Court, which is capable of overthrowing elected governments. Civil society in Indonesia was larger and stronger during the 1950s and 1960s than it was in the 1990s. Yet it did not play an effective role in promoting democracy during President Suharto's rule. When Suharto was overthrown in the late 1990s, civil society had actually become weaker. The Philippines has one of the largest, best-organised civil society networks in the world, and yet it does not have a consolidated democracy. In fact, after the death of popular former president Corazon Aquino in 2009, President Gloria Arroyo suppressed mass mobilisation politics and entrenched an electoral politics that strengthened the "guns, goons, gold" mentality of those seeking to defend their dominance (Abinales 2010).

Thus, it appears that neither economic elites nor civil society actors *per se* are forces sufficient for democratic consolidation. The critical ques-

tion is *how strong* civil society actors are *in relation* to political and military elites. As noted earlier, neither the Philippines nor Thailand has achieved democratic consolidation. The independent variables explaining democratisation in Southeast Asia discussed so far still depend on other variables, such as elite politics and external influence. Economic classes (middle and capitalist) and civil society forces are more likely to increase their political influence in democratic politics if they can become more united (Chambers 2014b) and political elites become politically less cohesive and internally weaker (and thus unable to maintain hegemonic control). The weakening of political elites makes democratisation more likely – which appears to have been the case in Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and Indonesia.

In Taiwan, for example, factional politics within the ruling nationalist party (the Kuomintang) helps explain democratisation in the country. Although initially obsessed with the dream to reunite all of China under nationalist rule, the Kuomintang regime gave in to intra-party political pressure exerted by "a patient but persistent opposition that was driven by sub-ethnic rivalry and the hope of democracy" (Hood 1997: 3). Bradley Richardson's work (1997) highlights political fragmentation and discordance to refute the common conception of Japan's semi-authoritarian and consensual state led by a government bureaucracy. According to Richardson (1997: 3), "bargained democracy" in post-war Japan was possible because "power is fragmented, conflict is frequent, and issues are contested by parties, interest groups, and organs of governments." In his words (Richardson 1997: 240), "Political power in Japan is fragmented and pluralistic. The parties are horizontally fragmented and partially decentralized."

Southeast Asia's democracies remain unconsolidated because their armed forces and other elite groups that support them remain powerful and can undermine civilian rule by various means, which includes controlling the executive and legislative bodies of government and the conventional media (Dressel and Bünte 2014; Majid 2010). In the case of Thailand, the military has dominated politics since 1932. During the 1960s and 1970s (except a short period from 1973 to 1976), "the military ruled with dictatorial power" (Bunbongkarn 1999: 162). As noted, there have been two recent military coups (2006 and 2014). Many political leaders in Timor-Leste are former military commanders and the military and police forces have a history of struggles for power (Sahin 2007). The current president, José Maria Vasconcelos, was a former guerrilla leader and later an East Timor military commander. Timor-Leste's current prime minister, Xanana Gusmão, was also a senior military commander

during the 24-year armed resistance against Indonesian colonial rule. Since the turn of the century, military officers in the Philippines have remained politically active, limiting democratic leaders' ability to enforce democratic rules and protect human rights. Seeking to maintain her political dominance and her allies (Abinales 2010), President Arroyo proved either unwilling or unable to take control of the military. According to Human Rights Watch,

> Human rights activists remain concerned that Arroyo remains beholden to the military officers who put her in power, and that they are preventing her from disciplining those in the military who may be implicated in rights violations (Human Rights Watch 2007: 9).

A renewed campaign against communists has kept the Philippines' restive armed forces influential. Some scholars still argue that

> in the cases of Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines […] the military has remained a significant feature of the state apparatus, either dominating or sustaining order within society (Ganesan and Kim 2013: 15).

Although elected leaders in Indonesia seem willing to comply with democratic rules and human rights norms, "they are either powerless or unwilling to fully reign in the military and the paramilitary groups that help elites stay in power" (Freedman 2007: 214). In contrast, the armed forces in consolidated democracies like Japan (Katzenstein and Okaware 1993) have been subject to effective civilian control.

External factors have also influenced politics in East Asia. More states in various regions of the world joined the "third wave" of democratisation following the collapse of dictatorial socialism, the emergence of the United States as the only superpower, and the United Nations' transition into a more active player in the process of democratisation in post-conflict countries. Regional organisations like the European Union have also played a role in promoting democracy. Globalisation also has had some impact on political regimes. Evidence shows that external influences help shed light on democratisation in states like Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines, which are close allies of the United States. This does not mean that politico-military alliances with the United States automatically transform states into democracies after all, certain US allies remain authoritarian. Following the end of the Cold War, some scholars stressed the virtues of international engagement aimed at promoting democracy. Cambodia and Timor-Leste, for example, might not have moved towards democracy had external actors (especially the United Nations and major Western democracies) not pushed it. The military

junta in Myanmar also might not have moved towards civilian rule had the pro-democracy movement not received democracy assistance from Western states and, to some extent, ASEAN (despite the different positions among its members) (Beatty 2010; Haacke 2008).

However, other scholars contend that we cannot assume external actors always help promote democracy as part of their foreign policy commitment (Peou 2007). In the case of Southeast Asia, external powers have often pursued their security interests at the expense of democracy. China has supported the ruling elites in Cambodia and Myanmar, while the United States has, for example, sent US military advisors to work hand in glove with the Philippine armed forces, which were responsible for impeding democracy (Alexander 2006). Unless external democratic actors stay involved in already politically fragmented or pluralistic states like Japan, democratisation will not thrive. And unless pro-democracy actors help create such political structures within authoritarian states, liberal democratisation is also unlikely to emerge and thrive (Peou 2000).

Conclusion

The political regimes of Southeast Asia show that they do not remain static or unchanged and the changes that have taken place are far from rapid or irreversible. Countries that used to be under colonial and dictatorial rule have become more democratic and liberal, but some such as Thailand have experienced setbacks. Those that remain undemocratic are not as repressive as they used to be, though change has come about slowly. Cultural perspectives help explain regime continuity or the slow pace of regime change, but they fail to account for the extent that democratic dynamics has taken place in several countries across the region. Modernisation theory helps explain why economic development and democratisation seem to have a positive correlation, but it raises the questions of whether economic development results from democratisation and why prosperity has not caused some states to become increasingly democratic and liberal.

All in all, economic development helps ensure political stability, whether in democratic or authoritarian states. Democracy often appears to emerge after crises (socio-economic or political), which was the case for Japan after World War II and Indonesia and Thailand after the 1997 financial crisis. Such crises, however, have to result in political fragmentation and factionalism to the extent that no political group emerges as the hegemonic party. Civil society plays a positive role in the process of democratic development, but the extent of its effectiveness remains

questionable. Evidence shows a positive relationship between democratisation, civil society, and elite fragmentation, but how exactly political elites fragment to the point where they lose hegemonic control remains a subject of speculation and requires further research. One of the critical challenges to democracy in Southeast Asia is the armed forces' refusal to give total control to civilian leaders. Democratic transition can be reversed and democracy is likely to deconsolidate when political elites regain cohesion and hegemonic control, or when the military establishment restores its power through coups d'état or by keeping social movements in check. External democratic forces do play a positive role, but they often support the armed forces in unconsolidated democracies for geostrategic reasons.

As the case of Southeast Asia shows, various factors may have to interface in complex ways before liberal democratization can take off and become consolidated. We are still left with the challenging task of drawing on different theoretical insights that help explain why some states have become more democratic and liberal than others. At the end of the day, the game of liberal democracy is a matter of interest and power relations among actors (social, political, internal, and external) who compete with each other with uncertain outcomes. Unless the structures of political power within states fragment to the point that no single party or group becomes dominant, liberal democratisation is unlikely to emerge – even if it does, democracy will not be consolidated.

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