
Of despair and hopes: Tales of Democratic aspirations in South East Asia

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Abstract

The economically flourishing and politically vibrant region of South-East Asia has been leading the tough battle of integrating democratic values institutionally and culturally for a long time now. While some of the states in the region have made significant progress with functioning albeit flawed democracies, others are still running their state of affairs on governance ideologies not at all conducive to or tolerant of democratic values. With Brunei being an absolute monarchy, Laos and Vietnam striding the communist path and Myanmar under the Military Junta, the picture seems a bleak one. The Unitary and Presidential Republics that Indonesia and Philippines are, they have their own everyday struggles to sustain democratic institutions from forces of democratic erosion. Politics dominated by political dynasties and celebrities in Philippines is one instance. Another is the weakening of opposition parties and civil society in Indonesia. Similarly, *de facto* one party democracy of Cambodia with no opposition presents its own challenges. Singapore, with its unique indigenous model of governance, is an interesting case itself that begs the question of whether democracy can be accepted with altered versions that are locally suitable but are in contrast to some of the universal democratic values that today's international community holds dear. This paper delves into the various moulds, pieces and aspirations of Democracy that exist in this region. It discusses the challenges that erode and hinder Democratic values and institutions in the region and the constructive ways of overcoming them. It takes into account the specific cases of ASEAN members in this regard and also analyses ASEAN's role in it. The paper also illustrates how Democracy is essential to sustain economic development in the long run.

Key words: Democratic backsliding, Authoritarianism, Co-optation, civil society

Introduction

It is ironic that the region of South-East Asia, which boasts of a very prominent and strong regional organisation like ASEAN functioning on the values of democracy, finds itself lacking in the same democratic values at individual state level. While the world, as part of the process of Political Development, seems to be moving towards the institution of Democracy, the South-East Asian states are quite content in their authoritative and autocratic regimes. The regional development is quite impressive in South-East Asia and the same becomes the reason as to why democratic values of political participation, political transparency and political accountability are neither much missed nor much sought after. One may consider the primary functions of the state to be good governance and developmental welfare of the citizens. And if the authoritarian regimes are well capable of providing the needed development and prosperity, then what is the need of striving for Democracy. But then the question arises as to whether economic prosperity is all that matters in the long run or Is there a need to look for multiple aspects of development. Because economic well-being is not the only purpose that a state serves. It is the values of Civic participation, political freedom to acquiesce or dissent and the realisation of human rights that form an indispensable part of state goals and

these are manifested most comprehensively in democratic culture. And this is where the regional discourse should be headed if we are to debate whether it is wise or if at all necessary to disrupt the already well established authoritarian regimes in the region in favour of democracy.

The region of South-East Asia is a politically, culturally, economically and historically rich and diverse region. This renders any generalizations efforts futile be they in the field of political systems prevalent in the region or the economic milestones associated with them. Hence, a thorough study and understanding of the existing phenomena in a comparative manner may turn out to be more fruitful than a generalized approach. However, exceptions can be made wherever the need may arise.

Civil Society, Democratic backsliding and Co-optation in South-East Asia

Civil Society plays an indispensable role in any democracy. The persistence of democracy is naturally substantiated by the effective role of the Civil Society Organizations active in its space. In South-East Asia however, the religiously conservative and pro-business forces support the process of democratic backsliding which may be defined as the fading away of the democratic processes and values in the governance of a state (**Waldner and Lust, 2018**). Although there has been expansion in the strategies of and cooperation between the civil society organizations, there has been a parallel resurgence of innovation in strategies for suppression. The failure of civil society to prevail against the autocratic forces in Myanmar and Thailand is glaring example of this (**Bünthe, 2023**). However, it is equally fascinating to watch how civil society still seems to be functioning in some of the states that fall between the inveterate authoritarianism and effective democracy. Some of these states like Malaysia and Singapore seem to present more hope for democratic forces in future where civil society groups have managed to create democratic spaces despite the repression they faced under the hand of the state. Similarly, in Indonesia Civil society has shown its persistence by avoiding polarization on religious or other fronts by bringing together a cross-sectoral support system that tries to bring together supporters from multiple sectors like religious organizations, politicians and business associations in support of a general cause (**Setiawan and Tomsa 2023**). There have been instances of civil society erosion in other states like Philippines where the existing civil society got replaced by a new set of 'Uncivil Society' controlled by the autocratic regime that facilitated the targeting and alienation of liberal institutions and liberal values, rendering the effectiveness of civil society largely useless. In contrast to this phenomenon, the civil Society groups in Cambodia have adapted their strategies to break loose from the state repression by co-opting with the state. Thus their activism is still very much alive but rather tamed by the boundaries set by the ruling regime (**Lorch, 2023**). Though this has also created divisiveness within the civil society and weakened it. This phenomenon has positively affected the autocratic regimes by strengthening their legitimacy through lending them cooperation of civil society in the mutually agreed sphere. Although the presence of a strong civil society does not guarantee the conversion of autocratic states of South-East Asia into democratic regimes, it still creates a space where democratic values may thrive and gradually lead the autocratic regimes toward a more democratic outlook. After all, Democracy is not a miracle that manifests in one night but develops gradually by creating space for itself through processes that lead the society to a more liberal outlook. (**Bünthe & Weiss, 2023**).

ASEAN: A hindrance in promotion of Democracy in the region?

There has been an observation that following of certain ideational paths by the South-East Asian states and ASEAN as an organisation may have hindered their efforts in the direction of promoting democracy. The first of this is the regional corporatism which entails the application of ideational elements, specifically the

integrationist organic state theory, that most of the South-East Asian states follow to the regional level policy making. The Organic state theory implies that the constituent parts of the state must be consolidated under the ambit of the state in a harmonious manner. This calls for a state that is vertically structured on the basis of functional lines. This leads to a type of state that tries to have monopoly over interest articulation to ensure that its authority remains unchallenged. The autocracies of the region have assimilated ideas related to organic state theory in the local culture and transformed it into authoritarian processes and system. Thus the internal political system of the South-East Asian state has essentially been plagued by corporatist and organicist thinking. This has also manifested itself in the regional governance wherein ASEAN has been locked in a state-centric and elitist form of governance. For instance, the ASEAN-Inter-Parliamentary Association (AIPA) typically endorses policy decisions agreed upon by ASEAN leaders and acts as an instrument of mobilizing support for them rather than having real parliamentary functions. **(Ruland & Bechle, 2014)**. Similarly, the civil society organizations, both at the state level as well as at the regional level, as discussed before have been reduced to co-optation thus leaving them practically irrelevant to the functions they were created for.

The second ideational path that hinders the promotion of democracy in the region is the ASEAN way which is based on certain norms like mutual respect for individual sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference in the internal affairs of one another, equality etc. These norms, specifically the non-interference norm, prevent any kind of external influence to promote democracy in individual states in South-East Asia. **(Haacke, 2003)**. The ASEAN charter which is progressive and promotes democratic ideas like protection of human rights, rule of law, good governance etc. has not been able to make much progress in this regard due to these norms. In fact, the ASEAN way and regional corporatism go along very well thus enabling the autocracies to pursue a centralized and authoritarian agenda with state sovereignty as the basis. Although, ASEAN financial crisis of 1997-98 provided some impetus to the process of regional democratization when the regional Civil Society Organizations started demanding more transparency and inclusiveness in regional policy making, the effect was not long lasting. An Eminent Persons Group that was assigned the task of drafting a blueprint of the ASEAN Charter, recommended for more empowered civil societies but its recommendations got diluted in the actual Charter. Rather than involving people in the process of decision making and evaluation, they were encouraged to participate in implementation of government designed policies. Such paternalistic concept of people participation has rendered the whole process of regional democratisation ineffective. Even the ASEAN Inter-Governmental Human Rights Commission (AICHR) and the ASEAN Human Rights declaration fall well below the Internationally accepted norms and standards of Human Rights. **(Rüland, 2020)**

Authoritarianism and legitimacy in South-East Asia

The region is endowed with a variety of regimes both autocratic and democratic with autocratic regimes clearly winning the race. Most of the attempts of democratization have been failures and even if the attempts have succeeded, keeping the newly established regimes intact has been a tough task seldom accomplished. The most immediate need for any newly emerged democracy is to legitimize its authority in front of the people. But the democracies in the most of the South-East Asian region seem to be having failed in this endeavor. In fact, some of the autocracies have been more capable in generating support and legitimacy for their rule as compared to the democratic regimes. Just as they have been more successful in establishing internal stability as compared to the democracies in the region. Thus the reason as to why the autocracies are more successful and prevalent in South-East Asia region may not lie in just use of repression as a strong

instrument but rather a combination of other tactics like providing stability, economic progress, balancing elite interests, effective governance and providing substantial measures of welfare state that cloud over autocratic practices. **(Croissant & Lorenz, 2018)**. As compared to the west where economic achievement went hand in hand, the scenario in South-East Asia was different. There was rapid economic development in most of these nations but it was rarely accompanied by democratic values. The dilemma of democracy in South East Asia is that while in the Western nations, there has been a direct connection between growth of democracy and economic development, the same pattern does not follow in South-East Asia where economic development has no significant consequence on development of democratic values. Whenever there is a mismatch between the economic aspirations of citizens and the outcomes of the performance of the reigning government, there is a possibility of unrest that may create the conditions of regime change. However, in South-East Asia the autocratic governments have been able to perform economically quiet well. This has contributed a lot in their stability and longevity as a form of government in the region. However, there may be more contemplation on what kind of economic development is happening since there has been reduction in poverty but the social inequality is on the rise. **(Aminuddin & Purnomo, 2019)**.

The Singaporean model

Singapore's parliamentary system is derived from the British Westminster system but it is a significantly altered version. The dominant People's Action Party (PAP) has made several amendments in the constitution and these amendments have rendered the system an elitist model that adversely affects political participation and political pluralism in Singapore. It has served as a tool to maintain the hegemony of the ruling party and suppression of the alternate voices within the parliamentary system. As a result, it has been a one-party system since it got separated from Malaysia in 1965 **(Tey, 2008)**. Recent elections in Singapore have suggested that its polity is changing from being a simple authoritarianism to competitive authoritarianism wherein more alternatives in the form of opposition are emerging that are giving hope that maybe the authoritarianism in the state might be turning into democratic politics. Other authoritarian regimes in the region that aim for substantial economic development without compromising on the authoritarian components, often tend to consider the Singaporean system of government as a model to be imitated with its effective administration, low corruption and robust economy. If authoritarianism in Singapore moves towards liberal democracy, it would change the perspective that economically developed states can continue to prosper under the authoritarian regime **(Ortmann, 2011)**. Although economically Singapore has achieved significant success, it doesn't compensate for the loss of the democratic values. Singapore is a clear example of how flawed elections are used as legitimation mechanism by the authoritarian regimes to establish stability. The people's participation in the elections is interpreted by PAP as a validation of the system that is otherwise unfair to the opposition parties. Though his form of legitimization through flawed elections is not limited to Singapore only. It is also present in states like Cambodia, Malaysia, Laos and Vietnam **(Morgenbesser, 2016)**. The course of democracy in the region has never run smooth and any progress in the favour of liberal democracy, if happens, will be full of hurdles. With the Authoritarian innovations, which are novel governance practices that are designed to reduce spaces for effective people's participation in politics, always on the work it becomes difficult for the democratic instruments to succeed and create space for themselves. **(Curato & Fossati, 2020)**.

Conclusion

If the region decides to opt for democracy gradually, it will be imperative to ensure that it has the same capacity to deliver economic well-being as its predecessor had if not more. Equally important is the fact that

the nature or form of democracy that is adopted needs to be suitable for the targeted society and political culture. Those institutions that are adapted to particular setting and culture are more likely to survive rather than those that are alien and outwardly imposed. Various regions of the world mould democracy according to the needs of their particular political culture and society without compromising the basic values of democracy. South-East Asian states need to do the same and evolve a form of democracy suitable to their premise without sacrificing the values that make democracy a champion all over the world. While authoritarian governments have been successful in achieving economic development, it is democracy that makes development inclusive. It is through democracy that the marginalised would find their place in the development spectrum and the hitherto side-lined areas would be mainstreamed in the collective progress. To achieve economic prosperity is a tough task but tougher is to deliver that prosperity to all. The democratic values of inclusivity, decentralisation, equity and collective empowerment is best way to facilitate it. To safeguard and nurture the progress achieved, we must create institutions that are responsive to those that they are built for. Autocratic and authoritarian structures cannot do that. It is through democracy that it is possible (Conference Report, 2017).

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