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by Walden Bello*

Mid-year 1995 saw two developments that seemed to indicate that in the struggle between authoritarianism and democracy in East Asia, democracy is gaining the upper hand. In Thailand, national elections in July served as the medium of transition from one parliamentary regime to another. Two months earlier, the Philippines successfully conducted its third round of elections to the Senate since the overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship nine years ago. The two exercises were, in many areas, marked by violence and massive vote-buying, leaving many citizens with the cynical opinion that they had merely been witnesses to another factional struggle among the Thai and Filipino elites.

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But if Filipinos and Thais were to be asked if they would consider changing their lot with that of their neighbors in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) who still live under varying forms of authoritarian rule—namely, Singaporeans, Malaysians, Indonesians, and Bruneians—a great majority would probably answer in the negative.

**Alpha and Omega**

The Philippines' "EDSA Uprising" in February 1986 and Thailand's "Bloody May" in 1992, when the Thai people unhorsed the Suchinda military regime at the cost of over 44 dead and 39 still missing, constituted the alpha and omega points of the first great wave of democratization that swept the East Asian region in the late eighties—a phenomenon that was, in turn, the regional manifestation of the broader wave of global democratization that liberated much of Africa and all of Latin America from dictatorships and Eastern Europe from authoritarian socialist regimes.

Between the EDSA Uprising and Bloody May occurred the Great Spring Democratic Offensive in Korea in 1987, which toppled Chun Doo-Hwan's military regime, and the beginning of an irreversible process of democratization that ended the monopoly over political power of the Kuomintang party in Taiwan. In all these developments, one saw the explosive interaction of the following factors: widespread popular yearning for self-rule led by expanding middle classes that had been straitjacketed by authoritarian politics; discredited and corrupt military or civilian dictatorships; and, with the end of the Cold War, the withdrawal of U.S. support for right-wing regimes that could formerly count on Washington's knee-jerk anti-communism.

One cannot discount as well the demonstration effect that televised democratic uprisings in one country had on the people of another country. The EDSA Uprising, for instance, is oftentimes cited for its electrifying inspiration to other democratic movements in the Asian region and elsewhere.
Thermidor

But although Bloody May liberated the Thai people, it was also the act that finally triggered the authoritarian counteroffensive in East Asia, as elites threatened by what they regarded as the democratic "virus" sought desperately to inoculate their restive populations against it.

Lee Kwan-Yew of Singapore emerged as the central figure in East Asia's Thermidor.

Although in the early 1980's, Lee had already created a sophisticated ideological justification for authoritarian rule in Singapore, his stage was limited to the island-state. By 1992, however, Lee had resigned as Singapore's Prime Minister to take up a second career as the spokesman for "Asian democracy" or the "Asian Way of Governance."

Lee's message was simple, and it had two basic propositions: first, that western democratic institutions that maximized the liberty of the individual vis a vis the state were unsuitable for "Eastern peoples" because the latter sought "happiness and freedom through the group" rather than against it. Second, democratic competition could derail the process of high-speed growth that had marked East Asian economies during the last few decades. While unstated, Lee proposed the universalization of the political system that he had constructed in Singapore, in which the individual's rights were awarded conditionally to him or her by the party-state, which also reserved the right to limit them in the name of the "common good."1

In his controversial speech in Manila in July 1992, where he lambasted western democratic institutions as being responsible for the economic backwardness of that country, Lee's ostensible target was Filipino governance, but he was reacting more immediately to the democratic uprising in Thailand a few months earlier and articulating a containment ideology against the expansion of democracy in the region. Lee's ideological counteroffensive was taken up not only by his ASEAN counterparts, but also by the ruling communist elites in China and Vietnam, who were searching for a new ideological justification for authoritarian rule after junking Marxism-Leninism. In one of those ironic twists of history, after decades of being blood enemies, the anti-communist Lee was lionized by the formerly communist rulers of Beijing and Hanoi as they discovered their common interest in containing democracy.

The high point of the authoritarian counteroffensive came in 1993 and 1994. At the United Nations Human Rights Conference in Vienna in the fall of 1993, China and most of the other East Asian governments were able to present what appeared then to be a formidable argument that there was a correlation between their high-speed economic growth and their systems of authoritarian governance. "Western democratic methods are not for us," they told the conference. "Asians have their own unique methods of government that will bring about ordered change and avoid the crime, racial strife, drug epidemic, licentiousness, and moral breakdown of the West—all of which are propagated by liberal democracy."

A low point of sorts for the democratic movement in Southeast Asia was reached in the first half of 1994, when Indonesia, invoking "ASEAN brotherhood" and the principle of non-interference in a country's internal affairs by its neighbors, and wielding the threat of diplomatic or economic retaliation, forced the Philippine and Thai governments to crack down on conferences on the Indonesian
aggression in East Timor that were being held in Manila and Bangkok.\textsuperscript{2} The fledgling democratic regimes were made to feel they were out of step in ASEAN, where the institutional memory was monopolized by the old boy network of bureaucrats of the authoritarian regimes that had been ensconced in the regional grouping since its founding in 1968. Indeed, in regional government meetings, Thai and Filipino bureaucrats became almost apologetic that they were representing democracies and upsetting the normal authoritarian order of things by having to tolerate media and NGO criticisms of their conduct of foreign policy.

**Faltering Counteroffensive**

But the authoritarian propaganda counteroffensive has lost momentum, if not unravelled, in the last few months owing to a number of developments.

- A succession of much-publicized events—the caning of the American teenager Michael Fay, the conviction of a Singaporean reporter for publicizing confidential government economic data, a court case brought by the Singaporean government against the *International Herald Tribune* for an article critical of ASEAN judiciaries that did not even mention Singapore by name, and, most of all, the execution of the Filipino domestic Flor Contemplacion whose guilt was widely in doubt and for whom Philippine President Ramos had twice requested clemency—focused the international spotlight on Singapore's justice and political system in an unprecedented fashion. And what most of the world came away with was the image of a party dictatorship bent on staying in power through the efficient manipulation of the police, judiciary, ideology, the press, and social engineering.

Where previously the Singaporeans' recitation of their usual mantra of "economic progress through political discipline" evoked tolerant nods, if not agreement, it now usually draws smirks and stands exposed for what it is: a thinly veiled justification for a continuing monopoly of power by Lee Kwan-Yew and his disciples in the People's Action Party.

- In Indonesia, the expectation that with economic growth would come some liberalization was rudely punctured in the second half of 1994, when the Suharto government cracked down savagely on the labor movement, closed three of the country's leading newspapers for expressing increasingly independent views, and launched military-sponsored gang terrorism in East Timor. Hosting the Summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in November 1994 was Suharto's supreme effort to whitewash his regime's repressive past and paint Indonesia as the newest "Asian tiger." What mainly came across to the world, however, was the image of young East Timorese protesting the Indonesian occupation of their country within the U.S. Embassy while hundreds of policemen eager to get their hands on them waited impatiently outside.

- As for China, increasingly bitter factional infighting within the Communist Party has undermined the post-Tiananmen Square justification that in this big and complex country, authoritarian rule is the only means of ensuring a stable transition as the Deng generation dies off, and underlined the fact that democratic competition, for all its surface disorder, is really a more effective solution to the problem of political succession.

In this context, it is now the authoritarian regimes that are seen as out of step in their relationship to their peoples; and the democracies in Thailand, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan have reemerged, despite all their flaws, as advanced political systems in the eyes of their neighbors still living under restrictive rule, rather than as alien western implants, as Lee Kwan-Yew and his cohort have tried to paint them. Lee himself is increasingly seen for what
he is: a relic of East Asia's past.

In the democratic countries themselves, however, the novelty of free elections, party competition, and separation of powers has worn off, and the citizenry is now wrestling with "second-generation" issues having to do with the translation of "formal democracy" to "substantive democracy." It is the their inability so far to make this transition that accounts for the increasing alienation from parliamentary politics of the NGOs' (non-governmental organizations) and people's organizations that played such as vital role in overthrowing dictatorships in Thailand and the Philippines.

The dilemmas that are testing the new or reestablished democracies include the following:

• Rule by established elites can be just as effective, if not more so, through democratic competition, since for the most part only the wealthy or people backed by wealth can afford to run for office, leading to effective control of the political system by economic elites that have the added advantage of legitimacy owing to their democratic election.3

• How does one translate formal political democracy into economic or social democracy, in which the equality as citizens is translated into equality as economic actors? How can political democracy become an instrument for the redistribution of wealth rather than a mechanism to uphold the status quo, as has happened in Thailand and the Philippines? In the Philippines, for instance,

even efforts to decentralize government after Marcos, which were backed by many progressive organizations, were converted by the elite to serve its own ends of dispersing political power within the class rather than deconcentrating it within the population.4

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

- How can the interests of minorities, be they ethnic, racial, or religious, be safeguarded under democratic rule, which by definition is rule by the majority? It is not at all clear, for instance, if democratic rule, has been an advance over authoritarian rule for Muslims in the Southern Philippines and Southern Thailand, where Christian or Buddhist majorities have political sway.

The West Is No Guide

These are, of course, the same problems that have confronted the older democracies in the West, but one thing is certain: their record provides a poor guide to the newer or reestablished democracies of Asia and the Third World. For the translation of formal to substantive democracy, the achievement of both political and economic equality, the transition to more direct forms of democracy, and the protection of the rights of the minority from the majority are the great unresolved issues of the democracies of the West.

Indeed, there is currently in the United States and Europe a retreat from a positive approach to these challenges, as economic elites succeed in stripping the liberal democratic state of its redistributive powers and inflamed racial and ethnic majorities increasingly restrict the rights of minorities. For instance, the Republicans' "Contract With America" is essentially a war against the poor, especially the nonwhite poor, but it is popular with the white American majority. Increasingly, the possibility that democratic mechanisms can become the vehicles for reactionary ends is becoming a reality in both Europe and the United States.

The new or reestablished democracies of Asia are also being judged by their citizens in terms of their ability to deliver in areas beyond economic equality and popular empowerment. Weary of almost two decades of economic stagnation, people in the Philippines are, in fact, watching closely whether a democratic political framework can be just as effective as authoritarianism is delivering rapid economic growth. For Thailand and Korea, the situation is the reverse: a citizenry that has experienced two decades of dizzying development is judging democratic government partly in terms of its ability to provide solutions to the traffic nightmare, infrastructure bottlenecks, and ecological crisis spawned by high-speed economic growth fostered by authoritarian regimes.

The new democracies of East Asia and the Third World will have to forge their own answers to all these challenges by themselves. And here, one thing is also certain: they have no choice but to address these issues, and address them successfully if they are to avoid the setting in of popular disaffection or indifference that could tempt anti-democratic actors to seize the government via extra-parliamentary means. Both Thailand and the Philippines are haunted by the experience of the early 1970és, when the combination of corruption, intense party rivalries, and paralysis of reformist initiatives radically reduced the citizenry's stake in the existing democratic systems and paved the way for strongman rule.
Democracy and Regional Security

The combination of democratic consolidation in some countries and increased democratic agitation in others still subjected to authoritarian regimes will have major implications for peace and security in the region. With the end of the discipline of the Cold War, the territorial, resource, communal, and economic disputes that had previously been kept in check in East Asia are rearing their heads. Moreover, the very prosperity that now marks the region may well become a deadly force that could fuel future conflicts and wars, as countries compete for scarce regional resources. The strong-arm regimes of East and Southeast Asia may be partners in the struggle against democracy but they are likely to be volatile rivals on other matters, particularly on territorial and resource issues. And the increasingly nasty struggle over the Spratly Islands in the oil-rich South China Sea may well augur even more nasty things to come.

In this context, the spread of democracy, many people in the region increasingly feel, is the best antidote to the flareup of tensions into military conflicts. For the historical record shows that democratic states are far less likely to go to war with one another than non-democratic governments.\(^5\) The mechanisms of democracy--free public debate, constitutional checks, challenges to the prevailing policy from the opposition--which assure that even if a democracy has gone to war wrongfully, its policy can still be reversed. These restraints are absent in authoritarian regimes. Moreover, these regimes are often unstable actors that tend to channel outwards the internal tensions that have built up owing to the repression of political expression.

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These dynamics help explain the continuing East Timor problem, which is a festering sore in regional relations and a major stumbling block to regional stability. Were Indonesia a democratic state in 1975, the East Timor problem might never have arisen. But precisely because there was no free speech, free press, and genuine political opposition, Suharto and his generals could make a snap decision to swallow the place. And this created one of the points of instability that has plagued the Asia-Pacific region over the last twenty years.

The relation between external aggression and internal repression is today even more central: holding on to East Timor and preventing a development that could touch off the "centrifugal forces that could lead to the archipelago's disintegration" has become a major rationale for justifying authoritarian government in Indonesia, and authoritarian controls on domestic dissent have allowed the Suharto regime to hold on to East Timor by force.

To many in the region, East Timor underlines the truth that peace and democracy are strategic partners, and that the most important pillar of a new architecture of peace and security that would supplant the Cold War system in the Asian-Pacific is the spread of democracy.

Conclusion

Successful electoral succession in South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand combined with a variety of political crises in the East Asian authoritarian regimes has blunted, if not unravelled the authoritarian counteroffensive against regional democratization that was launched by East Asia's threatened elites in 1992. At the same time that pressures for democratization are again sharpening in places like Indonesia, the new or reestablished democracies of the region are facing popular pressures for more profound democratization from key sectors of their populations. The new democratic
momentum will have important implications for regional relations and regional security, since the best guarantee for a lasting system of peace and security in the region is the spread and consolidation of democratic governments in the Asia-Pacific.