

East Asian Politics in a State of Flux

IN the midst of East Asia's worst economic recession since World War II, political change took place in South Korea, Indonesia and the Philippines. In Korea, the democratic elections in December 1997 paved the way for the new administration of President Kim Dae Jung. In May 1998, the Philippines elected a new president, the former movie actor Joseph Estrada. In both Korea and the Philippines, the transfer of power was smooth and followed the rules of constitutional succession. But in Indonesia, political change was more turbulent as President Suharto's 33-year rule collapsed under the pressure of Indonesia's most disruptive political unrest since the fall of the Sukarno regime in the aftermath of the 1965-1966 upheaval.

Although the East Asian financial turmoil was not the catalyst that sparked elections in the Philippines and Korea, economic dislocation did precipitate the change of events that accelerated the collapse of the Suharto regime. And for the rest of East Asia, governments, whether democratically elected or politically restrictive, face the challenge of coping with the continuing economic turmoil.

In this issue, *Public Policy* is pleased to have assembled a panel of international scholars who examine East Asia's political

changes in the context of the economic crisis from multidisciplinary perspectives. The essays explore the issues of democracy, 'Asian values', and the impact on political theory of Asian politics in the midst of economic turmoil.

Our lead essay, by Belinda Aquino, examines the May 1998 Philippine elections which she shows to be symptomatic of an 'illiberal democracy' where democratic electoral forms are followed but democratic outcomes are in doubt. Aquino provides abundant insights into the 1998 Filipino election campaign, and points out that the results of the last elections 'are disturbing from a democratic standpoint.' She argues that 'while the kind of democracy we have developed enables us to go through the electoral exercises that can be considered open, free, competitive, and so on, it has not nurtured the deeper meanings of economic and social justice that can bring about a democratic society in the real sense.'

Another Filipinist, John Sidel, stands on its head the conventional interpretation of Filipino politics as one driven by 'personality politics', which is a perspective deriving from the patron-client framework. Sidel rejects the notion that the results of the 1998 elections reflect the triumph of 'personality politics'. Instead, his essay is a

nuanced examination of Filipino politics, situating the 1998 elections within a historical and institutional context and locating the role of 'personality' within 'a complex nexus of money and machine politics'.

Harold Crouch takes on a larger perspective and examines the notion that the sudden collapse of the Asian economic miracle is due to the lack of democracy in East Asian countries. From a close examination of seven Asian economies hit by financial turmoil, he warns that there is a need to temper enthusiasm with a bit of realism: 'Democracies, no less than authoritarian regimes, often exhibit the kind of close links between governments and vested interests which inhibit the implementation of effective policies.'

Carl Lande, on the other hand, assesses the debate over 'Asian values', pointing to their ramifications and their varying interpretations in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Singapore. He raises the question: Are the region's authoritarian governments likely to become more democratic in the foreseeable future? A possible answer, he says, may be found in a study of the conditions under which several authoritarian newly-industrializing countries have liberalized their political systems. The study suggests that these political systems 'were most likely to make such political adjustments not in times of prosperity as some had predicted, but when they were in the midst of economic recession.'

Focusing on Malaysia, Edmund Terence Gomez and Jomo KS find little support to the conventional wisdom that economic development transforms social

structures, encouraging new forms of social and political mobilization, advancing civil society, regime change and involving greater democracy. In Malaysia, they find that 'there does not appear to have been such a strong link between economic development and greater democratization mainly because the social and political changes due to economic liberalization have not created the necessary political will or desire among the long-standing ruling coalition, the *Barisan Nasional* (National Front), to permit greater political liberalization.'

Eva-Lotta Hedman examines the increasing role and significance of business backing for non-partisan efforts on behalf of 'free and fair elections' in the Philippines and throws the focus on the efforts of the National Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL).

In this issue, we have a special article by Jose Dalisay Jr, who writes about a remarkable landowning family — composed of the Lava brothers — who exerted an important influence in Filipino politics. Three of the brothers became general secretaries of the Communist Party of the Philippines and two were outspoken nationalists. The Lavas represented a minority strand in Filipino society; unlike most Filipino elite families, they directed their intellect and talent toward a commitment to ideas and an alternative view of Filipino society. The essay is an excerpt of Dalisay's forthcoming biography of the Lavas.

