

# The 'Asian Values' Debate

## A Partisan Assessment

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This essay asks: Do modernizing Asian societies share social and political values that make 'Western' liberal democracy unsuitable for their peoples, and favor an 'illiberal' more authoritarian version of democracy instead? Five Southeast Asian political systems that exemplify these two forms of democracy are described and arguments on both sides of the 'Asian values' debate are presented. The essay ends by suggesting why different Southeast Asian leaders have chosen one or the other of these contrasting forms of democracy. Some predictions are made concerning the prospects for liberal democracy in the region.

THE 'ASIAN VALUES' DEBATE HAD ITS ORIGIN IN THE CONTENTION of Singapore's long-time Prime Minister and now Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew that Western formulations of human rights and Western models of liberal democracy are no more than that — the ideas of Westerners, with no universal applicability. They are not appropriate, and may in fact be harmful, to non-Western societies, including those of Asia. Asia has its own values, and its own more limited form of democracy, or what a critic has called 'illiberal democracy'. These, Lee believes, are better suited for Asian and other societies that hope to achieve rapid economic growth. Such Asian conceptions of rights and of democracy are embodied in the political system of Singapore, as well as the systems of the neighboring countries of Malaysia and Indonesia. Lee has urged the rulers of China to use Singapore, instead of the West, as a model for China's future development.

Some Asian leaders have expressed similar views. But they are not shared by all Southeast Asians. Filipino political leaders, intellectuals, and citizens with few exceptions, believe in the universal validity of human

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rights as they are defined in the West, and are proud of having restored their own liberal democracy in 1986.

#### THEORY

ROBERT Dahl (1971, 1989), the most influential living American democratic theorist has identified three dimensions of democracy or what he prefers to call 'polyarchy': public contestation, participation, and individual rights. By public contestation, Dahl means fair and free political competition among candidates and political parties. By participation, Dahl means that all citizens may vote or run for public offices. By individual rights, which are inextricably linked to the two other dimensions, Dahl means freedom to criticize the government, access to information through a free press, and the right to form and join autonomous social and political associations.

To the degree that a political system scores high on these dimensions, it can be regarded as a polyarchy. Ideally but not necessarily, Dahl suggests, his three tests would be met not only at the national level of government, but at lower levels as well. In such a multilevel polyarchy, there would exist elected municipal and provincial governments that are relatively independent of the country's national government.

To Dahl's three dimensions of polyarchy, Latin America specialist Guillermo O'Donnell (1998) has added a fourth: 'republicanism', which 'embodies the idea that the discharge of public duties is an ennobling activity that demands exacting subjection to the law, and selfless service to the public interest.' Indeed, 'virtuous rulers should subject themselves to the law no less and even more than ordinary citizens' (O'Donnell 1998). Many Third World countries, while meeting Dahl's original three criteria and therefore qualifying as polyarchies, fall short of satisfying O'Donnell's additional criterion of republicanism. Their elected and appointed officials take it for granted, and ordinary citizens have learned to accept, that while attending to the public's business, officeholders are also entitled to use their official positions to promote their private interests as well as those of their families and friends.

It is the weakness or absence of the republican values of noncorruption among their leaders that O'Donnell believes distinguishes many new democracies from most older ones. That explains why the elite and other citi-

zens of Third World democracies often are dissatisfied with the results of political democratization even though their countries meet Dahl's three part test of polyarchy.

#### LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES

As a prelude to a discussion of the 'Asian Values' debate, it may be useful to describe in summary form some Southeast Asian political systems that embody Western, liberal ideas of democracy, as well as some that have been presented by their leaders as examples of a form of democracy that better expresses Asian values. In each case, the main concern will be with the ways in which that political system meets or fails to meet the tests proposed by Dahl and O'Donnell and, if it falls short, what compensating benefits may be attributed to that failure. Through an understanding of these particular systems, readers may come to their own conclusions concerning the merits of opposing arguments in the 'Asian Values' debate.

Among the ten countries of Asean, only two now qualify as polyarchies in Dahl's sense, which I shall call by the more familiar designation 'liberal democracies'. These two countries are the Philippines and Thailand. But even they fall short of fully meeting O'Donnell's criterion of republicanism.

*Philippines.* Citizens of the Philippines have elected both national and local officials for nearly a century. They have done so through highly competitive multiparty elections, and are accustomed to exercising the usual democratic liberties, including freedom of speech, the press, and voluntary association. Liberal democracy was absent for two fairly short periods of time: the four years of the Japanese occupation (1942-1945), and the 14 years of Ferdinand Marcos' imposed dictatorship (1972-1986). After each authoritarian interlude, liberal democracy was restored, the second time through the combination of a military mutiny and a democratic uprising by the Filipino people. Few think it likely that another leader can reimpose a Marcos-style dictatorship.

Even in Spanish times, long before national and provincial offices became elective, Filipinos have elected their municipal mayors. But until the end of the Spanish era the right to vote in municipal elections was restricted to a small number of *ilustrados*. Today, public contestation in local elections

remains imperfect. There are in each election year a substantial number of municipalities as well as some provinces where petty local dictatorships, not very different in kind from that which Ferdinand Marcos created nationally, restrict both competition and the exercise of political rights by their citizens.

As for O'Donnell's republicanism, while there have been many honest and dedicated elected and career public officials, there have been many others who have taken advantage of their positions to enrich themselves and their followers. Prominent among the first of these types of officials during the postindependence years were Presidents Ramon Magsaysay, Diosdado Macapagal, and Fidel Ramos. Corazon Aquino came close, but has been faulted for her unwillingness to jeopardize her family's landed interests for the benefit of the country's landless peasantry.

The most corrupt Filipino president surely was Ferdinand Marcos, who devised governmental policies including marketing monopolies, that facilitated the enrichment of his family and his business cronies. The

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speedy restoration to power and influence of a number of these same Marcos cronies at the beginning of the Estrada administration suggests that centrally-tolerated corruption may not have come to an end in the Philippines.

As President Joseph Ejercito Estrada himself noted in his inaugural address, the country's most egregious criminals are those in uniform, in *barong tagalog*, and in judicial robes. It is common knowledge that officers of the national police,

both high and low, including one of the new president's appointees, have been implicated in criminal activities ranging from robbery to murder; that the decisions of many judges are widely assumed to be for sale, and that even members of the Supreme Court have accused one another of being less than impartial in some of their decisions.

*Thailand.* Unique in the region in never having been subjected to foreign colonial rule, Thailand came to liberal democracy more recently than the Philippines, and by an alternating course of progress and retrogression.

Its future as a liberal democracy remains uncertain, although there are reasons for optimism on this score. Until 1932, Thailand was an absolute monarchy, as it had been for many centuries. Its government was wholly controlled by a king, who reserved all higher positions in his government for members of the royal family. In 1932, that absolute monarchy was overthrown by a group of commoner officials, both soldiers and civilians, who resented their exclusion from the higher positions of government. These rebels then created a constitutional monarchy modeled upon those of Western Europe, complete with an elected parliament.

But in reality, for most of the following four decades, Thailand was governed by a succession of military regimes, assisted by civilian bureaucrats, which usually took power by force, then rewrote the Constitution, and manipulated the parliamentary system as well as the monarch, to legitimize their rule. During these years, with but a few short interruptions, three army officers headed the government: Field Marshal Pibul Songkhram, General Sarit Thanarat, and General Thanom Kittikachorn.

Military rule as Thailand's normal form of government came to an end in 1973, when the then Prime Minister General Thanom used force in attempting to suppress student demonstrations that called for the institution of genuine democracy. After substantial bloodshed, the King intervened on the side of the students, and forced Thanom into exile. There followed three years of civilian rule by two popular but not very effective civilian prime ministers, the brothers Kukrit and Seni Pramoj. That interlude of civilian-led government was not to last, for in 1976 power was seized once again by a military junta which had won the approval of the King. This military government however held power for only two years.

The years 1978 to 1991 were a stage of transition, during which most governments were based upon the support of majorities in Parliament. Distinctive features of this transitional stage were two parliamentary governments headed by popular retired officers, Generals Prem Tinsulanond and Chatichai Choonhavan. Both enjoyed the confidence of civilians, politicians and voters, of the King, and of some, but not all, of their former comrades in arms in the active military forces.

The year 1991 brought a replay of the events of 1973. A seizure of power by General Suchinda Kraprayoon, provoked in the following year a

round of student protests, supported by members of a newly assertive middle class as well as by many among the poor. When the government attempted to suppress these protesters by force, the King intervened once again on the side of the demonstrators, and Suchinda was forced to step down.

Since then, all Thai prime ministers have been leaders of multiparty parliamentary coalitions. Most of them have been civilian politicians, though one, Chavalit Yongchaiyudh was a retired army general. The present prime minister, Chuan Leekpai, who is a popular civilian politician, is serving in that post for the second time.

The events of recent decades suggest that parliamentary government under civilian leadership now has put down strong roots in Thailand. Retired soldiers continue to involve themselves in party politics, and still form a majority in the appointed upper house of Parliament. But it seems probable that the events of 1973 and 1992, during which the King emerged as a defender of democracy, have taught the soldiers a lesson that will make simple armed seizures of power less likely in the future.

Thailand now meets Robert Dahl's three tests of polyarchy: public contestation, participation, and — for the most part — individual rights. There are regular and highly competitive elections involving contests among numerous political parties. Still, Thailand is a typical 'Third World' democracy. As in the Philippines and many other young democracies, most political parties and candidates do not stand for distinctive programs, but win support by calling on personal loyalties and buying votes. As in the Philippines, opportunistic party-switching is common, a fact that contributes to the instability of multiparty coalitions in Thailand's Parliament.

The Thai people enjoy freedom of speech, assembly and religion. Although some of the media are owned by the government and the army, there are also privately owned television stations and newspapers, which subject the government and its leaders to lively criticism. Furthermore, a growing number of nongovernmental organizations have contributed to the development of a vigorous 'civil society'.

Thailand's polyarchy extends to the subnational level. Municipal governments have long been elected and provincial governors in the past were appointed members of the bureaucracy, but the new Constitution makes

them elective also. In this, as in the occasional presence of local strong men, Thailand resembles the Philippines.

Like the Philippines too, Thailand falls far short of meeting O'Donnell's criterion of republicanism. Corruption remains widespread at all levels of the body politic. There are not infrequent reports of extra-judicial executions of suspects by the police. Prosecution and punishment of such abuses of power remain uncertain.

#### ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACIES

IN a different class than the Philippines and Thailand are three illiberal democracies: Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. All of their governments hold periodic elections. All of them limit public contestation and severely restrict the individual rights of their citizens. But they differ markedly in the degree of their enforcement of republican values.

*Malaysia.* Of these three countries, the Federation of Malaysia comes closest to meeting the criteria of liberal democracy. Even before the Federation was created in 1963 through the joining together of several former British colonies, many of these units had held credible parliamentary elections, as the Federation continues to do today. While the same coalition of political parties, first called the Democratic Alliance and later renamed the *Barisan Nasional* (National Front), has won a majority of seats at every federal parliamentary election thus having uninterrupted control of the central government, other political parties have been free to campaign and have gained control of several of the Federation's constituent states. Malaysia then fulfills two of Dahl's criteria of polyarchy: participation and contestation. It also has what is reputed to be a capable, reasonably honest bureaucracy and meets O'Donnell's criterion of republicanism.

A contributor to a book published in 1964 during the tenure of Malaysia's first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman described Malaysia as 'one of the most stable, free and prosperous countries in all of Asia and Africa' (Parmer 1964). That could not be said today. Especially in recent years, Malaysia has failed to meet Dahl's other test of polyarchy, that of individual rights.

Throughout the Federation's existence, the country's three main ethnic groups or races as they are called — Malays, Chinese, and South Asians,

comprising 52 percent, 35 percent and 10 percent of the total population respectively — have not possessed equal political rights. Under a ‘bargain’ struck between the leaders of three racially-based political parties even before the Federation was formed, certain special rights were reserved for the *bumiputra* or ‘sons of the soil’, which means the Malays and other indigenous peoples. From the outset, *bumiputra* were assured political dominance, including favored access to civil and military employment in the government, as well as preferred treatment in university admissions. Chinese and Indians, while facing discrimination in regard to such employment, were free to pursue their economic interests in business. At the same time, the government gave special assistance to the then mainly peasant *bumiputra* in order to help narrow the economic gap between them and the other races. In the beginning at least, this was widely regarded as a reasonable arrangement in view of the unequal distribution of skills between the races.

The rights of all races were narrowed in 1969 when several days of interracial rioting ended with the restoration of order by an all-Malay military unit and with the imposition of emergency rule. Parliamentary government was soon restored, but this was accompanied by the enactment of measures that, among other things, broadened the emergency powers of the executive. Most disadvantaged by these measures were the Chinese and Indians. The new rules prohibited the discussion, even in Parliament, of certain ‘sensitive issues’, including the political primacy and special rights of the *bumiputra*. Under a New Economic Policy, designed to more quickly reduce the economic gap between *bumiputra* and non-indigenous peoples, substantial new resources were committed to assist *bumiputra* entrepreneurs.

Under the Federation’s fourth and present Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, the government moved more decidedly in an authoritarian direction, by imposing numerous new limits to the civil and political liberties of all Malaysians. The judiciary has lost its independence. Various laws, notably a strengthened Internal Security Act, permit preventive detention without trial, and have in fact been used to detain numerous individuals including some members of Parliament. The government now may and does ban organizations and newspapers that in its view threaten the public order. Police permits are needed for meetings of five or more people. Labor’s right to strike is limited, as is the right of the government’s critics



to demonstrate. There are strict restrictions on the political activity of university faculty and students.

The justification given for these new measures is that they are needed to maintain peace in Malaysia's multi-ethnic society. They may in fact be needed to guarantee the special position of the *bumiputra*. But many of the new restrictions affect the Malays no less than the other races. A more fundamental reason for these impositions perhaps is that Malaysia's present Prime Minister shares the skepticism of the leaders of several neighboring states as to the suitability of liberal democracy and Western formulations of individual rights for the developing countries of Asia. Whatever his reasons, Malaysia must now be classified as an illiberal democracy.

*Singapore.* Another of the region's illiberal democracies, Singapore, meets only one of Dahl's criteria of polyarchy, that of participation. It fails Dahl's two other tests: public contestation and individual rights.

Although parliamentary elections have been held at regular intervals, and the winning political party has always formed the subsequent government, that perennial winner, the Peoples Action Party (PAP), has taken extraordinary measures to impede other political parties from posing serious challenges to its dominance. One of these impediments was revealed during the course of the legal actions brought in 1995 against Christopher Lingle, an American professor teaching at Singapore's National University, and against the *International Herald Tribune*. In a short piece published by that newspaper, Lingle (1994) alluded to 'some regimes' of the region as 'relying on a compliant judiciary to bankrupt opposition politicians.'

Lingle did not identify 'some regimes' and, somewhat disingeniously, denied that he had referred to Singapore. But in presenting the government's case against him before the court, Singapore's Attorney General Chan Sek Keong made the surprising statement that it was 'common knowledge to anyone familiar with Singapore that the government had a track record of suing opposition politicians' (Fernandez 1995). Between

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1971 and 1993, he added, there 'had been 11 cases of opposition politicians who had been made bankrupt after being sued.' There was 'no other country where there had been a large number of such cases' (Fernandez 1995).

The latest opposition politician to be ruined financially was Tang Liang Hong, a 1997 parliamentary candidate of the small Worker's Party, who was accused by members of the ruling party of being an 'Anti-Christian Chinese chauvinist'. This accusation followed his statement, made while campaigning, that too many of those who were English-educated and Christians occupied high government posts. When Tang called his critics liars, he was sued for defamation by 11 members of the ruling party, including Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew. Tan fled the country, whereupon a court injunction ordered him to set aside 11.2 million Singapore dollars to pay any damages arising from the defamation suits. Also sued was another Workers Party leader who had merely told an election rally that Tang had filed a police report against leaders of the ruling party. In the face of all this, Tang — who was running against the prime minister himself — won 45 percent of the popular vote in Cheng Sang district.

As for the expression of political opinions by ordinary citizens, a fundamental right in liberal democracies, the limits to which that would be tolerated in this Confucian state were made clear in 1994 to one of the island's most respected novelist, Catherine Lim. In an *op ed* piece printed in the *Straits Times*, Lim (1994) had written that the new prime minister and his government had promised a 'more open, more tolerant climate' through a 'consultative, consensual approach', but that this was 'being abandoned in favor of the authoritarian style of its predecessors.'

The response after some days during which the shock of Lim's statement sank in, was a round of attacks on Lim by an array of government leaders and supporters. Typical was the response by Singapore's Information and Arts Minister George Yeo Yong Boon: 'remember your place in society before you engage in political debate,' he admonished Lim, 'debate cannot degenerate into a free for all where no distinction is made between the senior and junior party.... You must make distinctions... what is high, what is low, what is above, what is below...then within this, we can have a discussion' (*Straits Times* 1995). After having seen this widely-respected au-

thor put in her place, only the bravest of Singaporeans are likely to publicly question the wisdom of their rulers.

But the city-state fares much better than its neighbors in meeting Guillermo O'Donnell's criterion of republicanism. Its government has maintained what for the region is an exceptionally able and honest officialdom. It has accomplished this both by punishing officeholders who have engaged in corruption, and by paying its public servants salaries that are considerably higher than would be paid to such officeholders by the citizens of a more democratic, and less affluent, state. Singapore's prime minister, in effect the mayor of a medium-large city, receives a salary four times that of the president of the United States, while ministers' salaries are tied to those of top executives in the private sector. This goes far toward explaining why governmental service is a much desired career path for Singapore's best university graduates.

Finally, the high quality of Singapore's officialdom may be explained by the structure of Singapore's economy. Sixty percent of Singapore's GNP is produced by parastatals (government enterprises), 25 percent by multinational corporations, and only 15 percent by privately-owned Singaporean enterprises. Parastatals, as parts of the government, are largely invulnerable to the types of extortion that in other developing countries victimize private firms. Multinationals are free to move elsewhere should they find corruption of the type common in neighboring countries. Private firms are too few in number to be major attractive targets for extortion by public officials. All this helps account for the government's determination to maintain a competent, well-paid, and reasonably honest administration.

Whatever the reasons, in a region where republican values are widely ignored, Singapore stands out as a model of governmental competence, efficiency, and probity. It is this fact, combined with Singapore's impressive economic performance, that provides persuasive support for the contention of Singapore's leaders that 'Asian values', strictly enforced by a no-nonsense authoritarian government, are essential for rapid economic development.

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*Indonesia.* Most far removed from a polyarchy, among the three Southeast Asian illiberal democracies, has been Indonesia. Under the rule of its long-time president, Suharto, it failed to meet any of Robert Dahl's three criteria: participation, contestation, and individual rights. It also failed to satisfy O'Donnell's criterion of republicanism. But there are strong indications that this is changing in the post-Suharto era.

Indonesia's slide into autocracy began with that country's first president, Sukarno. After some years of attempting to govern through a parliamentary prime minister, Sukarno declared Western-style 'fifty percent plus one democracy' to be unsuitable for Indonesia, and in 1959 introduced what he asserted was a more appropriate form of 'guided democracy' in which decisions were to be made not by voting but through consensus. In effect, this meant that decisions were made by President-Prime Minister Sukarno, with the assent of an appointed 'mutual aid parliament'.

But the growing political strength of Sukarno's allies in the Indonesian Communist Party, culminating in 1965 with an attempted seizure of power by elements associated with that party, resulted instead in the coming to power of the Indonesian armed forces. With that began the presidency of General Suharto which lasted 33 years. Therefore, the following description of Indonesia's illiberal democracy refers to the form of government created and maintained by Suharto from 1965 until 1998.

In Suharto's Indonesia, participation was severely restricted. Ordinary citizens played only an indirect part in the election of their highest officials. Both the president and vice-president were chosen instead by a Peoples Consultative Assembly. One half of this body consisted of the members of a popularly elected parliament. The other half were appointed by the government, which is to say by Suharto.

Furthermore, the Consultative Assembly's selection of the president involved no public contestation. Every five years since the forced resignation of Sukarno in 1965, General Suharto was the unopposed presidential nominee of all of the country's three legal political parties, whose representatives then elected him by acclamation.

Public contestation was narrowed in several additional ways. To prevent any political party from mobilizing a following among the voters as once did the now illegal Communist Party, the doctrine of the 'floating mass' restricted the activities of all political parties in rural areas, and limited

the political involvement of ordinary Indonesians — the floating mass — to the periodic casting of their votes. That has reduced political parties, except the ruling Golkar Party, to ineffectiveness. Finally, the doctrine of '*dwi fungsi*' (dual function) has affirmed the armed forces' dual role as both a military and sociopolitical force, making it a major participant in civil government.

Individual rights were also restricted. The spectrum of these restrictions, too broad to be detailed here, resembled those in Malaysia and Singapore. But there is this important difference: While Singapore's leaders suppress their critics by bankrupting them, and Malaysia's leaders subject their opponents to preventive detention, more violent methods have been employed repeatedly in Indonesia. Also, in contrast to ethnically tolerant Singapore, ethnic minorities have fared badly in Indonesia. Nowhere else in Southeast Asia have the resident Chinese suffered government-tolerated and quite possibly government-incited violence as they have in that country.

Indonesia's long-serving ruler, General Suharto, was a spectacular violator of O'Donnell's principle of republicanism. In enriching himself, his late wife, four of his children as well as his business cronies by granting them various lucrative business monopolies, Suharto made the Philippines' Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos seem petty thieves by comparison. *Forbes Magazine* estimated the family's total wealth at US\$16 billion, while an estimate attributed to the CIA doubled this sum to US\$35 billion.

Defenders of Suharto's authoritarian 'Asian democracy' could well say that, whatever its faults, it gave Indonesia more than three decades of domestic peace as well as of impressive economic growth. This places the Suharto era in striking contrast to the social and political turmoil and the economic stagnation of the Sukarno years. But that stability came to a sudden and unexpected end in 1998, together with the ending of economic growth.

It was egregious corruption at the top that finally brought Suharto down. Shortly after having been elected unanimously to a seventh five-year presidential term, Suharto was forced to resign at the depth of an economic

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crisis that was exacerbated by the inefficiencies of his crony capitalism. It seems unlikely that corruption on such a scale, and with such dramatic political consequences, could have occurred under a more democratic form of government. As in a number of other countries of the region, Suharto's resignation was hastened by student demonstrations, supported by older members of the middle class.

Whether the military will permit Suharto's vice-president and successor, BJ Habibie, to guide his country toward something resembling liberal democracy cannot be foretold. It would be Habibie's best way of legitimizing his presidency. The new government's investigations of its predecessors' human rights abuses is promising; so is its withdrawal of part of the occupation forces from East Timor, and its offer of autonomy to that rebellious province, the relaxation of restrictions on the press and on the formation of political parties, and the promise of parliamentary elections in mid-1999. It seems clear that the regional influence of Southeast Asia's remaining autocrats cannot but suffer from the fall of their powerful Indonesian ally.

Little need be said about the other countries of Southeast Asia whose political systems have little bearing on the topic of this paper. None claim to be either liberal or 'Asian' democracies. Burma (Myanmar since 1963) has been a simple, and brutally repressive, military dictatorship. Brunei is an absolute monarchy administered by its Sultan and members of his family in the manner of a Gulf Emirate. Vietnam, Laos, and until recently Cambodia, have been communist party dictatorships. The United Nations, through its presence and its supervision of elections, attempted to guide Cambodia toward liberal democracy. But communist leader Hun Sen's expulsion of his more popular co-premier, Prince Ranariddh, and the killing of many of the latter's supporters, leaves that prospect in considerable doubt. Overall, liberal democracies still remain a small minority among the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

#### THE ARGUMENTS

It is not surprising that, in proclaiming the 'shared values' of their predominantly ethnic Chinese state, Singapore's leaders looked mainly to the Confucian tradition of China. The list of these values is as follows: (a) nation before community and family before self; (b) family as the basic unit of

society; (c) community support and respect for the individual; (d) consensus, not conflict; and (e) racial and religious harmony. Not included in the list, but clearly high among the values which the state seeks to inculcate, are two other tenets of the Confucian tradition: first, the preservation of a hierarchic social order modeled upon that of the family which once placed the Emperor, and now places virtuous public officials, above ordinary citizens; and second, an emphasis on the maintenance of social discipline with a view to avoiding the chaos that must result if individuals are unhampered in the exercise of what in the West are thought to be their inalienable individual rights. It appears to be assumed that other Asian societies, including the ancestral societies of Singapore's Indian and Malay minorities, have values similar to these Confucian ones.

Both the historical experiences and the present needs of Asian societies are cited by 'Asian Values' advocates to justify the enforcement of these values and of the need for a narrowly limited form of democracy. As most Asians have never lived in liberal democracies or exercised the full panoply of Western human rights, it is assumed that they do not miss their absence and do not really desire them. If ordinary Asians were granted democratic freedoms, it is argued, they would not use them in responsible ways. In the case of Singapore, if ethnically-based political parties were allowed to win widespread support and to take over the government, that 'plural' society would descend into bitter ethnic conflict. Racial riots, during Singapore's early years, are cited to make clear that danger. A more limited form of democracy, under a political party that is determined to turn its people into a multi-ethnic nation, while leaving no space for parties that might tear it apart through appeals to race or class, is therefore justified in Singapore, as well as in other countries that are vulnerable to internal conflicts.

Finally, even if Asians desired to have liberal democracies, and could govern themselves democratically without creating chaos, they cannot now be given a full measure of liberal democracy. Authoritarian governments have shown that they offer the quickest route to economic growth. All of Southeast Asia's illiberal democracies have industrialized rapidly. That was

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made possible by a variety of measures that only authoritarian governments could impose. These included large-scale forced savings, as in Singapore, and strict limits on the wage demands of organized labor.

A similar case has been made for the ability of authoritarian governments to impose needed socioeconomic reforms. 'A period of strong and firm government, one that is committed to radical reform,' writes Kishore Mahbubani (1992), 'may be necessary to break out of the vicious circle of poverty sustained by social structures that contain vested interests opposed to any such changes.' General Douglas MacArthur could impose radical agrarian and other reforms in occupied Japan. That has not been possible in the democratic Philippines.

In support of these arguments, both Lee Kuan Yew and Singapore's controlled press have often alluded to the excesses of unrestrained democracy abroad: crime and familial breakdown in the United States, rioting students and unruly labor unions in South Korea, fist fights on the floor of Taiwan's legislature, lawlessness and economic failure in the Philippines. Singapore's government, it is argued, has satisfied most of its citizens by providing for rapid economic growth, full employment, high incomes, and social peace. And as Singapore's government has been successful in suppressing its political opposition and its human rights advocates, there is nothing to be gained by changing its political system now. A similar case can be made, or could be made until recently, in Malaysia and Indonesia.

Critics of Asian-style illiberal democracy and of what are alleged to be a distinctly Asian set of rights, notably the superior rights of the community over those of individuals, present a number of counter arguments: first, they point out, there are profound differences between various Asian societies and cultures. Confucianism lies at the heart of Chinese tradition. But the traditions of the Indianized, Muslim, and Christian societies of Southeast Asia are not identical to that of China. That became evident to both Filipinos and Singaporeans in 1994, at the time of Singapore's execution of Filipina overseas worker Flor Contemplacion who had been convicted of murdering her Singaporean ward and another Filipina. By refusing to delay her execution, Singapore's leaders saw themselves as maintaining the strict and speedy enforcement of the law. Filipinos, whose president had asked his Singaporean counterpart for a stay of execution so that new evi-



dence could be presented, saw the denial of that appeal as a personal affront to their president. Particularly offensive to the large number of Filipino workers living in Singapore was the decision of Singapore's authorities to deny the about-to-be-executed maid and her daughter one last embrace, and to order priests saying mass in Singapore not to name Contemplacion in their prayers. To Filipinos, it seemed Singapore's government was inhumane; while in the view of Singaporeans, Filipinos lacked a proper respect for the law.

Values differ not only between Asian societies but within such societies. The most enthusiastic exponents of Confucianism's hierarchic values are, not surprisingly, those at the top of any hierarchy. The two most prominent recent spokesmen for Asian authoritarianism are members of the Singapore diplomatic corps. But I have seen no similar advocacy of illiberal democracy by any independent Singaporean intellectual. Far more representative of their view is that of a young Singaporean scholar who wrote some years ago:

I find it hard to believe that the urge to speak up and criticize the ruling power is only a Western tradition. I cannot think of a Chinese philosopher, and Indian, Malay or Japanese philosopher who said to posterity 'Don't tell the truth, be afraid to speak up against injustice and wrongdoings.' And there are many Chinese scholar-officials who have lost their heads criticizing the Emperor.

Today too, Southeast Asia's intellectuals and students, Asians all, have been at the forefront of the region's democracy movements, even under the most brutally repressive regimes.

Political scientists have a criticism of illiberal democracy that transcends the question of cultural differences. As Lord Acton said long ago, 'Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.' It does so no less in Asia than in the West. The corruption made possible by unchecked power may involve the massive self-enrichment of the autocrat. Or it may manifest itself in the ruler's ability to exercise total control over a compliant

**Critics of Asian-style illiberal democracy point out that there are profound differences between various Asian societies and cultures, which became evident during Singapore's execution of Flor Contemplacion in 1994.**

people and to mold them as he pleases. Indeed, as this century's history has shown all too clearly, 'honest' dictators with grand designs for coercive social engineering can inflict more harm on their subjects than merely greedy ones. Democrats know that while corruption can occur under any form of government, as it certainly does in the democratic Philippines and Thailand, only the checks imposed by an active opposition can limit such abuses, and replace corrupt rulers with better ones. Such checks are absent in Asia's illiberal democracies, or must take the form of open revolt.

Dubious too is the claim that autocracies are better able, than democracies, to foster speedy economic growth. There can be economic growth, and economic stagnation, under both types of systems. What makes a difference is the economic policies adopted by a country's government. Authoritarian Singapore has achieved spectacular economic growth because its government adopted the right policies and, it should not be overlooked, because its well-educated urban population does not have to support a less productive rural hinterland. Authoritarian Myanmar remains impoverished because its rulers cannot detach themselves from their socialist ideology. As President Fidel Ramos pointed out in a valedictory statement, the Philippines has shown that economic growth and democracy are not incompatible. Reflecting that conclusion, Domingo Siazon, continuing as Secretary of Foreign Affairs in the Estrada administration, has placed democracy at the top of his country's foreign policy agenda, especially in dealing with the military government of Myanmar.

Equally dubious is the claim that authoritarian governments are better able than democratic ones to teach diverse ethnic groups to live together in harmony. That was the claim of Europe's communist rulers, who thought that nationalism was a capitalist invention and that it would disappear with the advent of socialism. But Yugoslavia's collapse after the end of communism showed that ethnic hostilities had not abated but were only suppressed under Marshal Tito. In today's Yugoslavia, a postcommunist autocrat, himself a former communist, has now inflamed ethnic violence to an unprecedented degree. In Southeast Asia, Singapore's authoritarian government has persuaded its various ethnic groups to live together in some degree of harmony. But in equally authoritarian Malaysia, non-*bumiputra* resentment simmers under the surface calm. Meanwhile, a democratic Philippines has found it possible to end a long-standing Mus-

lim rebellion that grew during the Marcos dictatorship, by granting regional autonomy to its Muslim minority.

My own observation, after having lived under two Asian autocracies, is that they were remarkably alike. In each of them, a self-inflated ruler attracted to himself a coterie of sycophantic clients, including some members of the press, who prospered by doing his bidding and parroting his ideological pronouncements. Beyond this inner circle were the obedient officials who were 'only following orders', the 'good Nazis' as one of my friends calls them. Outside of the ruling group were the great majority of embittered but obedient citizens. And finally there survived in even the harshest autocratic state a small band of courageous dissenters. It is these dissenters who usually light the spark that, when the time is right, can lead to the fall of authoritarian governments. The main difference among various autocracies lies in the degree and methods of their repression. Under some regimes, critics are shot. Under others, as Christopher Lingle observed, they are destroyed financially through libel suits brought by members of the government.

Within any Asian tradition, as within any non-Asian one, there exist many values, not all of them consistent with each other. Which of these values are given special recognition by a particular Asian state, and which are de-emphasized, is likely to depend on the personal convictions and objectives of the rulers. Singapore's leaders, for example, appeal to the Confucian principle of hierarchy to justify their authoritarian form of government. But they have chosen to reject another Chinese tradition, that of *guanxi*, or the practice of network-building and favor-giving, which was a major incentive to and rationalization for corruption in traditional China as it is in the People's Republic of China today.

Instead, Singapore's leaders are justifiably proud of having created an almost corruption-free administration, which is to say an administration that has more resemblance to that of 18<sup>th</sup> century Prussia than to the administrative culture of premodern China. If an Asian ruler can select among traditional values, rejecting those that are dysfunctional for economic growth while elevating those that justify authoritarian rule, then no values are sacrosanct simply because of tradition, and the Confucian injunction that subjects must give unquestioning obedience to their rulers also becomes open to challenge.

Finally, the claim that liberal democracy is unsuitable for modernizing Asian societies is refuted by the growing number of such societies that have become liberal democracies. They began with Japan which, after a period of authoritarian government before World War II, had democracy reimposed on it by the American occupation forces. Since then, the Japanese people have shown no sign of wishing to restore their prewar autocracy. That country has been joined in recent years by South Korea and Taiwan. Among the states with historically Confucian cultures, only Singapore, China, and North Korea remain in the non-democratic camp.

As a member of the scholarly profession, I must mention what in my view is a fatal shortcoming of illiberal democracy. Autocrats find it hard to accommodate themselves to independent thought on the part of their subjects. Singapore, where I lived for a year, provides an example. That small island state, despite its high levels of formal education, remains an intellectual backwater. There is no independent press. All newspapers are owned by the government, and parrot the government's line. The ownership of television antennas is prohibited. CNN programs are delayed so that they can be censored. Foreign journals printed in Singapore risk having their press runs reduced if they publish critical material about Singapore or its leaders. All overseas telephone calls, it is reported, are monitored for the first 15 minutes. I can confirm such monitoring from personal experience. A visitor to a Singapore bookstore can find many flattering biographies of Lee Kuan Yew, but almost no books about Singapore's politics and society. Such books, written usually by foreigners or Singaporean exiles, cannot be imported.

Both of Singapore's universities are government institutions. Their students are not encouraged to think critically, but are expected to memorize what they are taught so that they will earn high marks on their exams and join the public service. Faculty members, aware that there may be government spies among their students, and that their department chairmen are expected to keep them on the permitted path, avoid sensitive topics in both their teaching and research. Indeed, most research on Singapore is performed in government departmental think tanks. The Singaporean scholar quoted earlier in this essay put it this way:

In Singapore today, the views of the independent intellectual receive no favor, and if his views are critical of governmental power, his

function is not regarded as legitimate. Such an intellectual is vilified on the grounds that his claim to the right of criticism is an alien tradition, born of Western liberal thought.

That independence of mind and action are not encouraged may help to explain why, in contrast to Hong Kong, there are few private Singaporean entrepreneurs. There are no uncensored journals of opinion, no student movements other than that sponsored by the ruling party, and no cafés where intellectuals gather for uninhibited discussions of public affairs. By publicly humiliating Singapore's most distinguished author, Catherine Lim, the country's rulers have made it clear that intellectual achievement is not much valued in their technocratic state. Such a country may well be an economic Sparta. But it cannot become an Asian Athens while it remains under this type of illiberal rule.

#### EXPLANATIONS

WHY have some Southeast Asian countries become liberal democracies, while others have remained under authoritarian rule? There is a large and growing body of theory on this subject. One of the most pervasive theories, confirmed statistically by Seymour Martin Lipset many years ago, is that economic development, which creates a large, educated middle class, provides favorable conditions for democracy, while mass poverty makes democracy unlikely if not unworkable.

But striking Asian exceptions to this rule place that theory doubt. India, with a large impoverished peasant population, has maintained its democracy over most of its postcolonial years, while prosperous Singapore has not. A country's political leadership, whether it is democratically or autocratically inclined, probably is as important for explaining the survival of liberal democracy as is the level of the country's economic development.

Our survey of Southeast Asian political systems suggests some other explanations. Long before independence in countries such as the Philippines and India, former colonies of the United States and Britain respectively, members of all social classes became accustomed to participating in the election of their governors, and the propertied classes were able to contain the demands of the poor through clientelistic politics. These countries appear to have had better prospects for maintaining democracy than have countries where colonial rule remained authoritarian to the end, as was the

case in formerly Dutch-controlled Indonesia and the successor states of French Indochina.

This does not assure that would-be autocrats cannot impose authoritarian rule in long-established democracies for a period of time, as it happened in both the Philippines and India. But the successful popular expulsion of authoritarian rulers in both of these countries, and in never-colonized Thailand where this twice happened, probably makes further attempts to impose authoritarian rule unlikely.

How can one explain the persistence of authoritarian governments in the region, especially in former democracies? The cases of Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and Burma suggest that a brief but unsuccessful experiment with democracy, that exposed serious internal divisions which cannot be easily suppressed in democracies, may lead to the imposition of a long period of authoritarian rule. All three of these countries had brief periods of democratic government during their early decades of independence. But after encountering threats to their national unity — separatist rebellions in Indonesia and Burma, interracial riots in Singapore and Malaysia, these countries reverted to authoritarian forms of government.

The three communist countries of Southeast Asia are in a different class. In none of these countries was there any preparation for democratic self-government under French colonial rule. In all of them a communist party sank deep roots during the struggle for independence. On seizing power, these parties established one-party dictatorships based on the Leninist model. An important question now is whether there can be a peaceful transition to liberal democracy from these Leninist systems.

Until the voluntary surrender by the Communist Party of its monopoly position in the Soviet Union, and the dissolution of that Union itself, the conventional answer would have been 'No'. The seeming determination of China's communist leaders to maintain their party's monopoly, while at the same time abandoning the economic system that justified their claim to rule, suggests that the answer is 'Maybe'.

#### PROSPECTS

Writing in a recent issue of *The National Interest*, Sebastian Mallaby (1998) has noted several important facts. Until quite recently, it was widely believed both in Asia and elsewhere that Japan and its imitator South Ko-

rea had discovered a new Asian route to rapid economic growth, differing from that prescribed by Adam Smith and practiced in the West. It involved close collaboration between government and a small number of favored conglomerates, as well as similar special relations between each conglomerate and its own bank. It required high levels of tariff and non-tariff protection for local industry, and the casting of a veil of secrecy over these transactions so as to give would-be competitors no quarter.

The bursting of Japan's 'bubble economy', and the more recent travails of neighboring economies, shattered that illusion of a special Asian way. Now the region's governments are making painful adjustments to their economic systems in accordance with not merely a Western, but rather a universally-applicable free market model. The Philippines, which learned this lesson early and has sought to apply it since 1986, has therefore suffered less from the present regional economic crisis than many of its neighbors.

A similar development, Mallaby (1998) points out, is occurring in Southeast Asia. There the illusion has been of a different kind. It has been the belief, propagated by several of the region's autocrats, that they have devised a new form of democracy, different from that practiced in the West, and better suited than the latter to the countries of their region. That, too, is coming to be seen as an illusion. India, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines and Thailand have found that there is only one kind of modern democracy. It may have had its origins in the West, but like the market economy its applicability knows no regional or cultural boundaries. 'Asian style' illiberal democracy is not democracy at all. Its deficiencies, which will have become evident in this essay, stem from that fact.

Are the region's authoritarian governments likely to become more democratic in the foreseeable future? My colleague Fiona Yap has suggested a possible answer to this question. In examining several autocratically-governed 'newly-industrializing countries' with a view to identifying the conditions under which they have liberalized their political systems, she found that they 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 recessions.

That may help to explain why, Mallaby (1998) reports, some of the region's leading spokespersons for 'Asian values' have recently been willing

to moderate their views. And, speaking in Thailand, Malaysia's former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, a strong admirer of Filipino national hero Jose Rizal, and until recently Mahathir Mohamad's likely successor, has rejected the idea that democracy, freedom, honesty and accountability are merely 'luxuries of the West', incompatible with Asian values (Mallaby 1989). In September 1998, after publicly criticizing Mahathir's policies, Anwar Ibrahim was abruptly dismissed as deputy prime minister, and jailed on a variety of charges. Massive and prolonged demonstrations by his supporters after his arrest, unprecedented in Malaysia, suggest that Anwar's views on democracy and human rights are shared by many of his countrymen. And in Manila, President Joseph Estrada, speaking to the press, deplored the mistreatment of the jailed Anwar, while in Jakarta, President BJ Habibie expressed similar views, something that would have been inconceivable under his predecessor. After Suharto, after Lee and after Mahathir, one may hope there will be more liberal democracies in Southeast Asia.

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