

# Across Asia, Stirrings of Democracy

By Keith B. Richburg, *The Washington Post*

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia—In Taiwan last November, the ruling Nationalist Party suffered its biggest defeat ever in local elections, presaging a possible loss of power in the 1998 national elections for a new parliament. Meanwhile in South Korea, a veteran pro-democracy campaigner and a long-time political outsider has emerged victorious.

In the Philippines, a revived “people’s power” movement and vociferous media criticism forced President Fidel Ramos to abandon thoughts of running for another term, while in Thailand, popular protests and media pressure forced an unpopular prime minister, Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, to relinquish his office last November and retire to the political sidelines.

Even in tightly controlled Indonesia—where general elections are still derisively called “elections of generals”—there are discernible stirrings of discontent and change. President Suharto is set to be anointed in 1998 to a seventh consecu-

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tive five-year term, but already there is open talk about the “post-Suharto era.”

The question now, say Indonesia analysts and journalists, and foreign diplomats there, is not whether the vast archipelago will democratize, but at what pace and in what manner.

For most of the past three decades, East Asia has been known largely as a region of miraculous economic growth but stilted political development, with most countries led by military regimes, autocratic

strongmen, or all-powerful ruling parties that kept power through money, patronage, and a measured amount of repression. Yet recent events are converging to challenge some of the old certainties, and ending some long-held political orthodoxies.

Just as the region-wide economic slowdown has called into question the Asian “miracle,” so too have recent democratic stirrings tested the much-repeated axiom that Asians, by and large, care little about democracy and favor authoritarian government.

A few regional leaders—Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in Malaysia, Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore, Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa in Hong Kong, and China’s communist leaders—still advocate the idea of “Asian values,” a system that prizes stability and consensus while eschewing Western-style democracy with its emphasis on political conflict.

But a more complex reality is emerging, with more and

more Asians now choosing their own leaders, throwing out old ones, forming labor unions and advocacy groups outside of government control, and publicly clamoring for more democratic rights.

Just as the democracy swept through Latin America and the former communist-run states of Eastern Europe at the end of the Cold War, East Asia, too, is in the midst of what many here are calling a slow but steady move toward more pluralism and openness.

"The trend is toward greater democratization," said Dewi Fortuna Anwar, a political scientist with the Indonesian Institute of Sciences in Jakarta. "There is increasing societal pressure in every country. This relates to the fact that people are getting more education. It's the rise of the middle class. And it's also a result in the increased globalization of communication and travel. The wave of democratization since the end of the Cold War seems to be catching everybody."

"Democracy is on the march in East Asia," said Douglas Paal, president of the Asia Pacific Policy Center in Washington. "But the problem is, it's hard to notice because all we tend to listen to are the booming voices of the Mahathirs"—a reference to Malaysia's outspoken leader. Paal called democratization "an inevitability in the region" that will only be reinforced as more countries are forced to liberalize and open their economies as a condition for international aid.

One sign of the trend can be seen in the heavy electoral calendar of the next 12

months. South Koreans went to the polls last December for their third free presidential elections since 1987. After voting in local elections in November, Taiwanese—who emerged from martial law only in 1986—will vote in 1998 for a new national parliament.



Mural of Suharto and various images of Indonesia

Fuke Yosuke/AMPO

Filipinos will elect a new president in May, further consolidating the democracy restored by the 1986 "people power" revolt that tossed out dictator Ferdinand E. Marcos. Thailand is likely to hold its first elections under a new reformist constitution aimed at cleaning up "money politics" and reducing the role of patronage in the country's ailing system.

Hong Kong will elect its first legislature under Chinese rule which, despite complaints about the fairness of the rules and the size of the voting franchise, will make the territory the most democratic part of China.

With so many Asian countries now voting for leaders—and in places as diverse as Taiwan, with its Confucian tradition, and the Philippines, a former colony of the United States and Spain—it seems difficult to argue anymore that Asians in general don't care about democracy.

"It's nonsense," Taiwanese

President Lee Teng-hui said in an interview, commenting on the "Asian values" concept and speaking as the first leader ever elected democratically by Chinese. "Asian people are human beings... Democracy is something everybody would like to have. Everybody would like more freedom."

Some Asian countries have a long tradition of democracy and pluralistic elections—Japan, which became a Western-style liberal democracy after World War II, the Philippines, where democracy was aborted by the Marcos dictatorship, and India, the world's most populous democratic nation.

But Asia's autocrats have been able to brush aside those three countries as unsuitable role models for the rest of the region because of their unique circumstances—Japan's wartime defeat and occupation, for instance, and the Philippines' history as a US colony. And India, with its endemic poverty and violence, often still is seen as a negative example showing that democracy does not guarantee economic development and stability.

Nevertheless, academics, journalists, diplomats, and others point to a number of trends that they say shows democracy is becoming more entrenched. They are:

- ◆ The declining role of the armed forces in East Asia.
- ◆ The growth of non-government organisations.
- ◆ The rise of information technology and the aggressiveness of the media.
- ◆ The emergence of a new leadership generation.

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