

Global Fellowship for Democracy: Perspectives from Asia

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The bleak state of democracy in Asia Pacific and the World

According to V-Dem Democracy Report 2023, the level of democracy for the average global citizen in 2022 is back to the 1986 level. Seventy-two percent (72%) of the world's population lived under autocracies in 2022. For the first time in more than two decades, there are more closed autocracies than liberal democracies in the world.

Democracy has deteriorated in many regions and worst in Asia-Pacific which is now down to the levels of 1978, 45 years ago. The region comprises about 60% of the world's population, some 4.3 billion people. A whopping eighty-nine percent (89%) of the population in Asia-Pacific lives under closed and electoral autocracies, while only 7% under electoral democracies, and 4% under liberal democracies. Using V-Dem's classification, of the 25 countries in Asia only 4 are full-fledged liberal democracies (Bhutan, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan), 5 are mere electoral democracies (Indonesia, Mongolia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Timor Leste), the rest are either electoral autocracies or closed autocracies. The third wave of autocratization is creeping in as well in Asia. Countries formerly categorized as electoral democracies have regressed into electoral autocracies, such as India, Bangladesh, Papua New Guinea, and the Philippines.

India, the world's largest democracy, is in critical condition. Anti-democratic forces have combined a lethal potion of extreme religion and nationalism, infused with patronage and disinformation. What will the party founded by Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian National Congress, and the democratic alliance do to direct the nation away from deepening religious nationalism back to democracy? A similar threat of extreme religious nationalism has also reared its ugly head in Indonesia, the world's third largest democracy.

Further in Southeast Asia, two countries not only share borders but also a long tradition of military intervention in civilian governance. Since 1962, Burma/Myanmar has been under the tight grip of military dictatorship for over 6 decades, including a brief period of military experiment for 'democratization' under the leadership of

Aung San Suu Kyi from 2012 and culminating in military coup in February 2021. Almost a decade since the latest of a series of military coups in 2014, neighboring Thailand had a defining election dealing a decisive blow to the military-led government and an overflowing clamor for democracy and major reforms in Thai governance. While the peoples of Myanmar and Thailand have clearly spoken through their ballots, democracy has been trumped by the military. Both countries have similar constraints of a constitution that secures the position of the military.

Surprisingly, the alarm bells are not ringing as loud as they should. Democracy support is even weakening. One of the biggest contributors for promoting democracy has recently cut down on its foreign aid. Global organizations or movements are dispersed in addressing the erosion of democracy across the world. There are even debates among members of the European Union to tone down on of democracy and human rights requirements in trade dealings with other countries, such as China.

Losing the narrative war

Some politicians in Asia articulate that democracy is not suitable to the 'Asian culture'. That it is a 'foreign concept' imposed upon by the west and the north. More recently this line of argumentation is augmented by providing China and Singapore as governance model that other Asian countries should aspire for, not democratic but economically viable. There are further suggestions to completely move away from democracy and to follow the models of China and Singapore. Democracy is not necessary for development. In fact, pundits point out the 'democratic' countries suffer massive poverty and economic inequalities. This creeping war against democracy is gaining traction.

According to IDEA, The Global State of Democracy 2022, global opinion surveys show declining fate in the value of democracy itself, due to the inability of democracies around the world to provide key public goods to their citizens and to close the gap between social expectations and institutional performance.

Reimagining democracy

Our notion of democracy is based on the conceptualization of electoral democracy as "polyarchy", namely clean elections, freedom of association, universal suffrage, an elected executive, as well as freedom of expression and alternative sources of information.

To a great extent, what peoples in Asia have regarded as ‘democracy’ fail on the basic tenets. Nonetheless, the failures of these supposed democratic regimes are used as clear manifestations of the failure of democracy. “Illiberal democracy” has come to be used to describe autocratic regimes with a façade of democracy. More accurately these regimes should not be called democracy at all but “electoral autocracies.”

For us, Social Democrats, mere elections, and enjoyment of political rights does not equate to democracy. These political rights should come along with economic, social, and cultural rights. If regimes fall behind both the provision of political and economic, social, and cultural rights, then it is not a democracy. How can citizens truly participate in the society when they are not given access to education, housing, healthcare, and decent jobs? As seen in many countries, citizens fall prey to the trappings of patronage politics, disinformation, and the allures of supposed quick economic development promised by autocrats and populists.

While Singapore and China are seen by some as potent model for Asian countries, there are more worthy models to look at. What are the elements or criteria of a model country that we should look for? There are global measures for richness, such as GDP per capita, and for sustainable development. We know that richness must be coupled with sustainability, by going green. Aside from these, there are global measures for happiness, equality, and democracy. What we are looking for as criteria are rich, sustainable, happy, equal, and a democratic country. We are not asking for the impossible utopia as such countries exist. And these countries are those with strong social democratic and labor foundations and institutions. They contradict the disinformation that democracies do not deliver. There are fully functioning democracies that create richness, sustainable development, equity, and happiness for its peoples.

Moving democracy forward

The alarm bells need to be rung loudly. Our democracy is in crisis. We need to account where we have fallen short. Then, we need to re-envision democracy with our peoples. We need to showcase how true democracy works in securing both political and economic dividends for the people. We need to capture the hearts and the minds of our peoples once again to work for societies that are rich, sustainable, happy, equal, and democratic. These can be done at various levels.

The playbook for autocrats is clear. By harnessing legitimate issues and concerns of people, populist and autocrats create insecurities and fear. Then they attack institutions of democracy starting with the media, civil society, and the academia. This is to control access to information and freedom of expression. They polarize

societies by disrespecting opponents and spreading disinformation, crafted from people's insecurities and fears. While disinformation dominates the air war, money politics coupled with guns and goons are deployed to control the ground. When in power, autocrats start undermining the remaining formal democratic institutions to bare minimums of a democratic façade. Concentration of power to the executive, the proliferation of repressive legislation, and the use of law against the opposition characterize autocratic regimes in Asia.

There is need to reintroduce our own version of playbook for democrats. Firstly, we must be keenly aware of our people's issues and concerns. We need to provide concrete proposals and long-lasting solutions to age old problems of insecurity and inequality. We need to support free and independent media, encourage vibrant civil society and academic freedom. These institutions have important roles to play in our democracy. The Nobel Committee attests to this in the recognition of Maria Ressa and Dmitry Muratov "for their efforts to safeguard freedom of expression, which is a precondition for democracy and lasting peace". We need to tackle disinformation and how it is amplified in the internet and in social media.

Autocrats seem to be closely sharing notes and sharing resources. Democrats should do no less. A global fellowship for collective, concerted, and comprehensive global approach must be set up to address democratic backlash and the rise of electoral autocracies. We need to amplify and promote functioning democracies and at the same time protect and support progressives that are under siege.

Often overlooked is the role of political parties in our democracies. Political parties remain as the most potent force in shaping our politics and the future. In political parties, we organize people for a common cause, we germinate ideas, we develop leaders, and we hold power to account. Political parties should be of people and not only politicians, of members not only of leaders. One perennial problem of political parties is decreasing memberships. As political parties fail to perform their role in democracy, they become old, irrelevant, and exclusive. Within the political parties, this could be addressed by continuously organizing and recruiting from the ranks of young people, women, and various marginalized groups. Democracy needs more democrats and our political parties need to continuously expand our membership.

Across political parties and ideologies, we must work together to strengthen the political party system and ensure fair playing fields for the competition of ideas. Democratic elections should be won not through fear, disinformation, violence, or money. Progressive political parties must take the burden of the difficult task of developing a well-functioning electoral and political party system.

In the current state of our global democracy, there are now more autocratic regimes. Now more than ever, our values of solidarity and internationalism are much needed. While we have our own domestic struggles, we should not turn a blind eye while elsewhere democrats, human rights defenders, journalists, and development workers are being attacked, tortured, imprisoned, or killed.