

Modern Direct Democracy in Asia: Trends and Advocacies

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Asia is a battlefield for modern democracy. Even more, it is a battleground of direct democracy activism. The various Asian democratic states, in relation to the standards of modern democracy, range from the relatively consolidated or consolidating democracies in Japan, South Korea, India, Mongolia, Indonesia, and Taiwan, to the broad swath of fragile democracies in much of Asia such as the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, East Timor, Nepal, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and the central Asian countries. The rest of Asian states suffer from a case of democracy deficit, ranging from those where democracy struggles to be born to those whose claim to democracy has yet to be substantiated.

Wherever democracy has taken roots in Asia, it is usually equated with elections or representative democracy. It may also be equated—in Asian monarchies—with representative government. The latter govern but do not rule. Still others equate democracy with their republican form of government and its institutions.

Representative democracy in Asia fails or is in danger of failing once citizens realize that the representatives they elected into public office may not necessarily represent the interests of the people. The vast majority of Asian democracies are beset with the problems of elite or dynastic politics, grand corruption, weak rule of law, and military interventionism.

Wherever these conditions persist, the people are either disempowered or still struggling for empowerment. Invariably, the level of people's empowerment has a direct bearing on the strength of these democracies.

In Asian states where there is a democracy deficit, the stirrings of democracy are getting stronger. These may take the form ranging from peaceful engagements with the ruling elite to more assertive internal conflicts. All non-democratic regimes in Asia are feeling the pressures, internal and external, to democratize their societies and—as the logical consequence—to democratize their political structure.

Asian direct democracy, as a conceptual reality, straddles both the democracies and non-democracies in Asia. In representative democracies, direct democracy instruments complement the election and governance of elected political leaders. In non-democracies, direct democracy methodologies guide the people in creating democracy spaces, enlarging these, and eventually convincing or creating the critical mass for establishing democracy.

People power as an embodiment of direct democracy in the Philippines was born in the crucible of the struggle against the Marcos dictatorship. It did not stop at the overthrow of the dictatorship but went on to establish the present constitutional republic, safeguard its democratic essence, and provide a model for the subsequent wave of democratization in the region and throughout the world.

The icon of people power, Mrs. Corazon Aquino, recently died. She died at a time when the fragility of Philippine democracy was exposed—when the unpopular incumbent president was about to force a major revision of the Philippine constitution that would allow her to stay in power.

People power manifested itself in the million-strong, eight-hour funeral march for the fallen leader, while millions more throughout the country followed the events. It basically stopped the charter change plot on its track and ensured that the 2010 presidential elections will push through.

Elsewhere in Asia, people power is alive and kicking. In Burma, Thailand, Hongkong, Taiwan, Nepal, Indonesia, Mongolia, Malaysia and Cambodia—there are countless stories of people engaging in people power to widen the space for democracy.

The direct democracy instruments, particularly the local assemblies, are present in almost all Asian democratic states as well as in some non-democracies. In many constitutions, the direct democratic instruments of plebiscite and referendum, recall, citizen initiative and local assemblies are embodied.

Wherever these are understood by the people, they have become effective in realizing their broad participation in government and helped bring the government closer to them.

However, a lot remain to be done. In many Asian democracies, direct-democratic instruments are being used—not by the citizens—but by the politicians for their own ends. In the Philippines, for example, national people's initiative was used twice by incumbent presidents in futile attempts to remove the one-term presidential limit.

We are now at a stage where there is a maturing of political consciousness in many Asian democracies. This is apart from the democratic surge in hitherto non-democratic states.

Asian democrats have a challenge before them—making democracy work in each and every country that already set out on the democratic path. Thus, Asian peoples who still are fighting the great battle for their own freedom and democracy will be inspired.