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AUTHORITARIANISM TO DEMOCRACY : EAST ASIA IN TRANSITION

Democracy it seems has been the most compelling political trend of the late twentieth century in the Third World context. The connotation of the term has of course varied from people to people, even to the extent that some of the world's most repressive regimes have used the term to give themselves a facade of popular support. Yet in the past decade genuine currents of democratisation appear to have brought greater political freedoms to a growing number of nations around the world. This trend is being increasingly observed in the East Asian¹ region where the authoritarian regimes are yielding as dominos to the pressures of political liberalisation.

When 'people power' revolution deposed the Philippino dictator Ferdinand Marcos and handed the reins of democratic rule to Corazon Aquino in February 1986, it was considered a watershed in the region's politics. Soon 'people power' began to be felt in other East Asian countries. In South Korea determined opposition compelled the military regime to turn the upcoming presidential election into a truly democratic choice. Taiwan has begun to tolerate opposition politics and has lifted martial law as a first step towards democracy. In Singapore, economic prosperity has created an educated middle and professional class that understands the importance of consulting

1. East Asia has been identified as a broad region in this article which includes countries of both Northeast and Southeast Asia.

people of different views. Even the basically apolitical Hongkongers have been pressing the British government for direct legislative elections. However, the most recent example is Burma. After a quarter century of doctrinaire government the Burmese have finally abandoned their near saintly patience and ran amok. Hundreds of thousands of Burmese marched in the streets last June to demand democracy, Communist Asia too is affected by the liberalising current. In December 1986, university students mounted a series of demonstrations calling for real democracy in China. However, Deng Xiao Peng's reforms in its aftermath illustrates greater economic and political openings in the country. Even Vietnam is looking for ways to loosen the party's grip. The Philippine revolution clearly put the issue of democratisation on the agenda of almost all the developing nations of East Asia. The strength of 'people power' and their legitimate demands for political liberalisation is gradually surfacing and in all probability will continue to surface in the remaining states of the region.

Now, it may be difficult to consider countries like South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore as full-fledged democracies, but the overall progress towards democratization is significant. Emerging democratic institutions offer the hope of longer term political stability. On the other hand greater political freedom is linked to greater economic freedom and to better standards of living. So the crucial point is that this trend of democratisation is taking shape on the basis of both political and economic infrastructure of these countries.

However, ousting dictators, forming new constitutions or calling elections does not necessarily guarantee the success of democracy. Certain preconditions can be identified e. g., a fairly high level of economic development, a strong middle class, a tradition of tolerance and respect for the individual, the presence of independent social groups and institutions, a market oriented economy and the existence of elites willing to give up power.² Although it may not be possible to

2. Thomas A. Sancton, "Democracy's Fragile Flower Spreads its Roots", *Time*, July 13, 1987. p. 16.

usefully generalise these to be the preconditions for democracy in all cases equally, some combination of them are certainly essential and the more the better. So it remains to be seen whether the East Asian nations can create and sustain an ideal condition where democracy may thrive and thus, whether the current democratic movement is a durable phenomenon or just a passing trend that will be reversed in time.

In the meantime certain questions may be asked : What are the factors that have led to the outbreak of political liberalisation ? What are the motivations of these regimes and ruling elites in seeking political liberalisation ? How economic freedom served as a catalyst for political liberalisation ? Is the currently witnessed process of political liberalisation likely to remain irreversible and if so how far and for how long ? What prospects does democracy have in East Asia ? The paper will attempt to answer some of these questions.

Authoritarianism in East Asia

By the late 1950s most of the countries of East Asia were independent. But attaining independence for the peoples of the region involved more than a change of political control and leadership. In almost any field that one chooses to examine the newly independent states faced formidable difficulties. One such basic issue was the problem of arriving at an agreed form of national government. The search for ways to achieve national unity has led to a wide range of political formulas being tried and followed or rejected by the various states of the region in their efforts to find a system of government to meet each independent state's individual needs. Given the very different background, historical experience and socio-political make-up that the states of East Asia have as distinct from the Western world, the fact that Western models have been little used should not be a matter for great surprise. Western parliamentary systems have evolved over centuries. The history of the twentieth century alone has shown how fragile

democratic parliamentary system can be in many states of Europe, and a universal suffrage is, with the rarest exceptions a twentieth century phenomenon in the West.³ These facts need to be kept firmly in mind when looking at the different choices that have been made by the developing states of the East Asian region as to how they should be governed.

With very few exceptions, one of which was the Philippines, the process of decolonisation in the region did not occur smoothly. China, Korea and Vietnam experienced bloody civil wars. In spite of American pressure on its allies the British, Dutch and French were loath to depart and sought to hold on to their Asian possessions. The epilogue of empire embittered nationalist leaders further and fuelled hatred. But the new political leaders were given little choice. Once the decolonisation process had been more or less terminated, they were in effect forced to declare themselves political friends or foes of one of the two superpowers. Chiang Kai Shek of Taiwan leaned heavily to the right, as did Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam, Syngman Rhee in South Korea, Pibul Songkhran and Sarit Thanarat in Thailand and Manuel Roxas and Ramon Magsaysay in the Philippines. Mao Zedong in China, Kim Il Sung in North Korea and Ho Chi Minh in North Vietnam leaned equally heavily to the left. Leaders such as Norodom Sihanouk in Cambodia, Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore and Sukarno in Indonesia proclaimed their non-alignment but were generally perceived as fellow travellers with the Eastern bloc.⁴

Irrespective of affiliation or non-affiliation with the United States or the Soviet Union, the main motivating force behind these new leaders was a combination of nationalism and anti-white racism.

3. Milton Osborne, *Southeast Asia*, George Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1985, p. 194.

4. Akira Iriye, *The Cold War in Asia: A Historical Introduction*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1974, quoted in Jean Pierre Lehmann, "Dictatorship and Development in Pacific Asia: Wider Implications", *International Affairs*, Vol. 61, Number 4, Autumn 1985, p. 595.

There was in varying degrees of intensity what could be termed a sense of political machismo. This posturing was in part a legacy of the resentful sentiments of the past.⁵ The point to stress is that this period in East Asia witnessed national situations where basically politics was in command. There were also objectives of economic development but priority was given to political ideology and it was proclaimed that political ideology was the means to achieve economic ends. Although it is difficult to identify when, why or how and it is different in each case the fact is that a transition took place from emphasis on ideological nationalism of the first generation nationalist leaders to economic pragmatism of the second generation nationalist leaders. In most of the latter cases, the political system has been dictatorial where economics, not politics, have been in command.

Most of the states of the region have been characterised by an 'authoritarian' pluralist order. This system includes a politics governed by the dominance of a single party or small elite, military or civilian, but with varying degrees of political expression permitted and with a private sector comprising economic and social organisations having some independence from state control.⁶

It mattered very little whether the regime in power was a military or civilian one. Even when the government in power was initially elected by some reasonably free and fair procedure, it frequently entrenched itself in such a way that there was no effective chance of displacing it, so that participation in politics was low, regardless of the formal status of the regime. Military regimes are often regarded as depending on force for their tenure of power but exactly the same may be true of civilian ones which equally have the army and police at their disposal to suppress opposition,⁷ Whatever the nature of the regime the fact is that till the mid-1980s most

5. Jean-Pierre Lehmann, *op. cit.*, p. 595.

6. Robert A. Scalapino, "Asia's Future", *Strategic Digest*, Vol. XVII, Number 11, November 1987, p. 2130.

7. Christopher Clapham, *Third World Politics*, Croom Helm, London, 1985, p. 141.

of the states of the region experienced an authoritarian system of government.

The role of the key leader has been supremely important in this system. His personality, his political style and his policies made a vital difference, inspite of the substantial power of the more permanently entrenched bureaucracy. The strong tendency has been that of a dominant party system. Thus political competition has not produced serious instability.

In three of the non-Communist states of East Asia the military has been closely associated with government for lengthy periods. This is true for Burma, Thailand and Indonesia while in the Philippines President Marcos's declaration of martial law in the early 1970s depended for its effectiveness on the close support of the military. It must also be mentioned that the long years of martial law greatly increased the power of the military in Philippines. In each of the cases mentioned the military has seen their role in society as very different from the traditional role assigned to the military in many Western democracies.

Ne Win, Burma's absolute ruler for 26 years ruled Burma through a nationwide network of loyal colonels, majors and captains who hold key positions in state, divisional and town councils.⁸ Similarly, Thailand has been dominated by the military for much of the time since the coup in 1932 instituted constitutional monarchy. Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond, a retired general, during his long years in office continued to own his position to the military officers for policy advice⁹.

The army in Indonesia has continued to see itself as the guardian of the revolution that gained independence from the Dutch. During the years of Sukarno's rule, the Indonesian army ensured that it gained a tight control over the administration. Suharto who has

8. *Asiaweek*, July 8, 1988, p. 15.

9. Clark D. Neher, "Thailand in 1987: Semi-Successful Semi-Democracy", *Asian Survey*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 2, February 1988, p. 195.

been at the helm of affairs since 1965 has so far not shown any sign of either relenting his power or naming any successor.

These countries' experiences underline the extent to which political developments and decisions as to where power should lie and how it should be exercised often have little to do with the parliamentary patterns of the West. For the 'rules' that are accepted in Western countries often do not appear to East Asia as valid for their own situation. The ballot box may indeed be used, and parliamentary forms adhered to, but usually in a system that allows the party or group that hold power to ensure that it retains that power. The Thai military, with the exception of the years of democratic experiment in the early 1970s has had an intention of risking what it sees as the dangerous factionalism of democratic politics. The Malay politician who have dominated the politics of Malaysia since independence have had no intention of altering the system that allows members of the Chinese minority within the country to participate in politics, and indeed to hold high office, but not to play the role of an equal partner. In Singapore, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's iron-fisted leadership is the only rule the city-state has known since its independence in 1959. And in the most recently independent state of Brunei, the ruler and members of the royal family, exercise autocratic power without any indication of an intention to introduce a participatory form of government.

The Indo-Chinese states of East Asia are unique in the sense that only in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos were Communist governments in power although there were efforts to advance the cause of Communism in other states too. And it must be mentioned that there was no political movement in these countries in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s that could challenge the Communists in the political field.

In other East Asian countries too, authoritarianism was very much the system followed. In North Korea, a series of purges of opponents, a highly repressive system of internal control plus the deft

neutralisation of Chinese and Soviet influence on his country's internal politics have enabled Kim Il Sung to remain in power for 40 years. A cult of personality has been built up around Kim elevating him to a semi-deified position¹⁰.

In South Korea the armed forces have remained the dominant force since they first intervened in politics in 1961. In Taiwan the Chiang dynasty ruled for four decades. Chiang Kai-Shek and later his son Chiang Ching Kuo occupied positions of supreme influence in the Taiwan political system till the lifting of Martial law in 1987, which was imposed almost 40 years back.

Most of the region's authoritarians enjoyed legitimacy for a substantial period of time, some because of their success in raising living standards and others because they were so much better than their predecessors.

Since they lacked political legitimacy authoritarians often attempted to buy their legitimacy by using state power to grant economic favours. They justified their excesses by insisting that democracy is bad for economic growth and free markets. Western nations cannot make the hard economic choices, they say, because democracies engage in self-destructive debate and must create welfare states to pay off political interests. Authoritarians, so the argument goes, can make 'the trains run on time.' Others contend that strong centralized authority is the only way to preserve racial and religious harmony.

Leaders of the 'bureaucratic authoritarian regimes' in the East Asian region tended to see the pointlessness of populist agitational politics and perceived the threat it poses to national cohesion. In the process they snuffed out most political life emphasising one party rule, banning opposition political parties, repressing trade unions, suspending constitutional guarantees and institutionalising systemic violence. These second generation of nationalist leaders

10. *FEER Asia Yearbook* 1988, p. 195.

have ruled for a considerable period of time and their brand of authoritarianism was remarkably stable for a very long period. However this does not confer on an authoritarian government any shade of legitimacy, nor provides it with the justification to continue for all time to come. Denying the people the right to participate in politics a given society is bound to politically wilt in no time. There are ample examples of such cases in the East Asian region where 'people power' have defied authoritarianism and strongly demanded democratic rights. This will be discussed later. Before that, attempt is made to briefly review the economic developments that have been achieved in the region and to see how economic freedom has served as a catalyst for political liberalisation that has been rapidly taking place in the region.

Indivisibility of Economic and Political Freedom

During the 1960s and 1970s most of the countries in the region witnessed a spate of capitalist 'developmental dictatorships' led by the military and civilian technocrats, so called 'bureaucratic authoritarianism' that have devoted themselves to advancing their countries' industrialisation by means of strategies that deliberately bypass both equity and democracy¹¹.

As a general proposition dictatorship has not been particularly conducive to development. In most countries of Latin America, Africa and Middle East, where various shapes and sizes of military or civilian dictatorships rule or have ruled until recently, the situation is desperate. In a number of Asian countries too the panorama is bleak. By contrast, however, in most of the East Asian countries development trends have either been impressive or at least provide

11. Guillermo A. O'Donnel, *Modernisation and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism*, Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1973; cited in David G. Becker "Development, Democracy and Dependency in Latin America, A Post-imperialist View," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. April 1984, p. 413.

more than a glimmer of hope. From the early 1970s a rapid succession of events transformed the East Asian political landscape. These countries were imbued with a new sense of realism.

The most familiar part of the story is that several countries mastered the lessons of market economies so well that they became the fastest developers the world has ever known. Japan's achievement in successfully weathering the OPEC oil shock in 1973 and 1974 led its emergence as a formidable economic power. Over the two decades between 1955 and 1975 Japan's real GNP per head grew on average by 7.8% a year, a rate that doubled real incomes every nine years.¹² Though Japan has remained an economic powerhouse, since the early 1980s the 'four little tigers'—Hongkong, South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan have become leaders in the group of countries loosely known as the newly industrializing countries (NICs). In 1987 three of them figured in the world's top five fastest growing economies.¹³ By 1987 South Korea had achieved a GNP of \$ 118 billion, a per capita GNP of \$ 2,813, and a trade volume of \$ 88 billion, which placed it twelfth among the world's trading nations.¹⁴ In the past 20 years, Taiwan has evolved from a rural backwater to a powerhouse of light manufacturing. It now produces the world's eleventh largest volume of exports including textiles, appliances, sporting goods and electronic components. In the process Taiwan has amassed one of the world's largest foreign currency reserves estimated at \$ 75 billion.¹⁵ State economic planners confidently predict that Thailand's growth rate will climb to 9% this year and remain strong through 1992. By that time they expect manufacturing and industrial sectors will provide the lion's share of Thailand's gross national product, enabling the country to join the privileged rank of Asia's Four Tigers.¹⁷

12. *The Economist*, July 18, 1987, p. 12.

13. Brian Bridges, "East Asia in Transition: South Korea in the Limelight", *International Affairs*, Vol. 64, No. 3 Summer 1988, p. 381.

14. *Ibid*, p. 385

15. *Time*, January 25, 1988, p. 6

16. Brian Bridges, *op. cit*, p. 381.

17. *Newsweek*, June 27, 1988, p. 6.

This progress had been founded on a number of factors—a firm commitment to development, a strong partnership between government and business, a well-educated, disciplined and industrious workforce and a positive but to a certain extent selective integration with the international economy. Until the late 1970s the development of market based economy was a controversial policy in Asia. The countries that rejected market based policies performed much worse than the free market parts of Asia. The governments of the latter category of countries promoted the industries according to the dictates of the market forces. In this context it must be mentioned that the bureaucracy has effectively functioned as an accelerator of economic development and definitely not as a brake on economic development as is usually the case. In the economic success stories of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore the other regional countries have the model they increasingly tend to emulate.

Economic development during the past three decades have changed the class structure in most of the countries. Traditional agrarian society has been replaced by a more open, pluralistic class structure. In addition there has been in these countries a significant investment in education and consequently a much greater degree of social mobility and injection of new blood into the streams of the elites. The authoritarians have been progressive in the sense they have facilitated social change. One major social achievement has been the emergence of a sizeable middle class - composed of owners and operators of small and commercial establishments, professionals, school teachers as well as white collar employees of private business organisations. These are the exceptional factors that the East Asian countries have experienced during the past decades. These factors have placed this region in a unique position in the history of development. By the early 1980s East Asia had changed beyond recognition economically as well as socially. Today, talk of 'Pacific Challenge' or the 'Pacific Century' has become commonplace.¹⁸ However the point requiring emphasis is the degree to which

18. Jean-Pierre Lehmann, *op. cit.* p. 596

authoritarian East to Asian political leaders have favoured a policy and style of government stressing economic pragmatism. In most cases, the political system has been dictatorial where economics, not politics has been in command. However, economic growth has its counterpart in political stability. Although in the East Asian countries, it has not always meant an open or broadly based democratic process, the issues of political succession and the degree of openness in the political process have come to the forefront.

Economic freedom by itself requires some political freedom. Politicians must refrain from confiscating property or from excessive taxation and that reduces the spoils of power. They must also obey certain economic rules - let the price system work, let production be guided in the main by consumer, keep labour markets flexible. All of these have great consequences for personal freedom. Though they have lacked a Westminster style democracy, the citizens of Taiwan and Thailand have for the most part been able to live where they want, work where they want and buy what they want. The Communist countries of Asia by contrast have largely kept firm control over the means of production with predictable consequences for political freedom.

Economic freedom also leads to prosperity which in turn creates momentum for further political change. As incomes have soared over the past three decades, so have popular expectations. In many East Asian nations, an emerging middle class wants more than a paycheck. Most people desire political reforms but only non-violently and in a way that will not be detrimental to the maintenance of political stability and economic growth. They are spurring debate on issues like pollution control investment and consumer choice and press freedom. The leaders of the region know they cannot ignore this influential group of the young and middle class who want a more open political system.

Authoritarianism can have economic virtues in the early stages of industrialisation but it becomes a political and economic hindrance

when carried on too long: politically because people enjoying freedom as consumers start craving other kinds of liberty as well; economically because as a country starts to move up-market it needs the unruly skills of individual creativity more than it needs disciplined kowtowing in big factories.¹⁹

The Japanese have been the first to realise that technology-based service economies which theirs is, run more on people's inventiveness than on their discipline and that inventiveness thrives on freedom. Other fast growers especially Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan are starting to feel the pressure to relax social and political controls so they can keep on growing now that they are reaching levels of development which require different skills.

It is being realized more and more that civil liberties are a necessary condition of growing productive efficiency. There can be no real development in a country where freedom does not prevail and where democratic institutions are not really functional. Liberty, be it economic or political are indivisible. Greater political freedom is usually linked to greater economic freedom-and to better standards of living. It is no accident that the greatest democratisation is occurring in Asian countries that allowed and even encouraged economic freedom for their citizens. A quarter century ago, theorists of the domino effect had feared and warned of an insistent revolutionary momentum coming out of Mao's China and Communist regimes in the region. And today the pressure that has proved most compelling is democratic liberalism. Asia's 'newly industrialising countries' are now becoming 'newly democratising countries.' Economic freedom has thus served as a catalyst for political freedom in the East Asian countries.

Political Order in East Asia: A Survey

An encouraging trend in the East and Southeast Asian region in recent times have been the gradual expansion of political freedom.

19. *The Economist*, June 20, 1987, p. 11.

Almost without exception the governments of these countries are pledged to a process of democratization to include free competitive elections and greater freedom of speech and press and other civil rights.

The newly emerging middle class, rapidly increasing in numbers, insists for greater political freedom and fuller participation in the process of making those decisions that will effect their lives. The initiators are generally student-intellectuals backed by journalists, professionals and in some settings, religious elements. The commercial-industrial representatives conscious of the importance of stability and supportive of strong governments are rarely in the vanguard although their ultimate support like that of the military may be crucial. All these people are connected primarily by education, a degree of westernisation and a standard of living that has elevated them above poverty, hence enabling them to assign a higher priority to political rights.

In the political culture of the region, much that is traditional still holds sway. Rarely is the highest premium placed upon the rights of individual or special interest group. Nor has majority rule been a valued form of decision making. There is only minimal tolerance for those who insist upon taking a different stance and this makes the effectuation of genuine parliamentarism so difficult.²⁰ It is in this setting that one must view the on-going events in the region.

Most of the countries of the region are experiencing some form of progress towards political freedom. In the Philippines a people's revolution had put an end to the twenty years of authoritarian and oppressive rule of Marcos and ultimately brought in Corazon Aquino to power. Questions of democracy and human rights were pivotal in 1986 February revolution in Manila. Although a democratic government came to power, they faced one setback after another in earnestly trying to address the problems inherited from decades of misrule. Mrs. Aquino is continuing to respond to the difficult task of governing a

20. Robert A. Scalapino, *op. cit.*, p. 2128.

country in transition from dictatorship to democracy amid tremendous economic difficulties and continuing political instability.

The fall of Marcos to people power was immediately taken up by political opponents of South Korean President Chun Doo-Huan and student radicals. They took to the streets to press for the establishment of a fully democratic order. The situation in South Korea differed from that of the Philippines in almost every dimension. Yet it is in the nature of revolution that major instances are invariably seen as models or paradigms for allegedly analogous situations in other countries.²¹

Korean society has changed. Power has become diffuse with the large conglomerates which dominate South Korean business becoming less dependent on the armed forces and a well-educated middle class emerging. Resentment at the military domination of politics has grown. Chun's government was eventually forced to recognise the wider demands not only for a fairer distribution of the benefits of economic development but also for a greater share of the political cake. The concessions rendered by the government, to be sure, were the product of another people's revolution. In December 1987, the first election of a President by direct popular vote in 26 years was held in South Korea earmarking the inevitable transition to democracy. Both politically and economically, the country moved one giant step closer to joining the ranks of advanced, democratic countries of the world. But at the same time the Korean people braced themselves to face uncertainties ahead, as political consensus was far from realization.

In Taiwan also, the movement towards greater political openness is much more rapid than most observers have envisaged. With the lifting of martial law a genuine political opposition has been permitted to organise. This development may be viewed as a major departure on the part of an authoritarian regime that ruled the

21. Chalmers Johnson and Khatharya Um, "The United States and Asia in 1986: Demands for Democracy," *Asian Survey*, Vol. XXVII, No. 1, January 1987, p. 12.

country for nearly four decades without any toleration for political opposition. The opposition party now has about 10,000 members and gets around a quarter of votes in Taiwan's elections²². The formation of an opposition political party does not by itself make Taiwan a pluralist democracy but it is the most important single step that could have been taken in that direction. In time its leaders may constitute a viable alternative to the Kuomintang providing the Taiwanese with a meaningful choice.

Thailand is further advanced down the parliamentary road. After long years of rule Prime Minister Prem Tinsoulanond declined re-nomination to a fourth term. In August an elected civilian regime under Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan took over paving the way for a full fledged democracy in Thailand. His six party coalition is gaining more and more acceptance. Although there was no popular agitation as in some other countries, the outgoing premier realized that the politically mature population would demand quick changes if political liberalisation is not metted.

In the past few months, Burma's unpopular, totalitarian regime has been the target of 'people power'. Braving bayonets and bullets students, workers, Buddhist monks and ordinary people rioted in the streets for greater political freedom. The government responded with brutality by ruthlessly repressing the pro-democracy demonstrations. They let out a reign of terror in the capital and other important cities of Burma. Now the question remains how far the opposition would dare to go. The Burmese people seem to feel it is the first real hope for democracy in a generation and they are unlikely now to lay those aspirations aside. Meanwhile, the three main opposition leaders in Rangoon have joined forces under the League for Democracy, the new political party. They have the all out support of the people.

Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysia's Mahathir Mohammad have developed their countries into two of the most politically and

22. *The Economist*, April 23, 1988, p. 37

economically stable societies in the region. But both the leaders have wielded a heavy hand in shaping their country's politics. Mahathir has maneuvered to strip the judiciary of much of its independence and at the same time he has mounted a campaign to nuzzle the nation's press. After ousting his critics from the cabinet and party, the Prime Minister has begun rebuilding his political organization from scratch. Virtually every move that Mahathir has made has increased the power and authority of the executive and has fuelled suspicions that he is leading Malaysia down the path of authoritarianism²³. Increasingly the ethnic Chinese and Indian voters are turning away from Barisan, the thirteen party ruling coalition, and the Malays are deeply divided. A truly multiracial opposition may soon emerge, something Malaysia has never seen before. In Singapore too, Lee's paternalism no longer suits people grown to greater political maturity²⁴. Although in the September 3rd general election the opposition grabbed only one seat, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) faced the largest and most formidable contingent of opposition candidates since independence in 1965.

There are yearnings of the Hongkongers too for democratic government. The signing of petitions, the attendance at rallies, the outspokenness of people like Martin Lee—a member of Hongkong's legislature in favour of direct elections—these are all signs that Hongkongers want to be governed by people they choose rather than by people who are chosen for them.²⁵ It appears that moves are underway towards a limited democratic system under the watchful eyes of the Chinese.

In Indonesia, a political transition from military rule is moving more slowly, reflective of the persistence of deep economic and social problems and the effectiveness of the political arrangements created by president Suharto. Nonetheless, the Indonesian military

23. *Newsweek*, May, 2, 1988, p. 11.

24. Robert A. Scalapino, *op. cit.* p. 2133

25. *The Economist*, February 13, 1988, p. 12

has gradually stepped back from rule under conditions approximating martial law, experimenting with 'supervised openness'.²⁶ Regulated opposition is allowed and elections possess an element of competition, but Suharto's forces are in full control. During his twenty years in power, he has brought peace, unity and prosperity to Indonesia. But now he faces a more subtle challenge. He must open the way for greater political and economic freedom that the young, educated Indonesians are beginning to expect and may soon start demanding.

The indications are that the system of military technocratic governance is likely to continue throughout the Suharto era and beyond. Yet in Indonesia as in other quasi-authoritarian states, the instruments of greater political openness—opposition parties, competitive elections and quasi-independent social organisations exist in embryonic form. At a later point they will become more prominent.

Even the Communist states were not unaffected by the changes taking place in the region. In China during the end of 1986 there were outbreaks of student demonstrations around the country demanding democracy and freedom. In Vietnam too during the 6th Congress of Vietnam's Communist Party held in December 1986 top three leaders were retired under the pressure of younger members of the party who favour reforms for the country. Political discontent finds contemporary expression in cynicism, anti-social behaviour and indifference to ideological appeals together with the yearnings of many intellectuals to have greater contact with their Western counterpart.²⁷ When conflict ends in Vietnam political changes of an important nature are likely to take place.

Against the context of traditional Asian cultures, Japan was exceptional. Through most of the period from 1868 to 1945 the government was of a totalitarian nature, pragmatism has guided

26. Robert A. Scalapino, *op. cit.* p. 2131

27. *Ibid.*, p. 2130.

Japan ever since 1945. The new elite espoused the causes of economic nationalism. Political leaders proposing and passing legislation, civil servants defining industrial policy, managers formulating corporate strategies have all worked on a consensus basis to find practical approaches to enhance the country's industrial and technological development. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has been the majority party for the last forty years and has created a stable political environment enabling the pursuit of long range economic policies. Although power has not alternated via elections in decades the Japanese people regularly have political choice between widely differing parties under conditions of complete political freedom. The three main opposition parties are the Japan Socialist Party (JSP), the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP) and the Clean Government Party (CGP or Komeito). The basic determinant of the LDP's dominance, has been the success of its policies. Japan united the authority of the state and the energy and creativity of the citizenry in a manner both different from and more successful than either the modern socialist or old capitalist economies.²⁸ Although some critics refer to Japan as 'an authoritarian bureaucratic' state arguing that power remained unaltered over a long period of time there is no doubt that Japan is the only East Asian country with a truly democratic system although it has yet to pass one of democracy's key tests : the peaceful transfer of power from one political party to another.

Prospects for Democracy

In the survey of the East Asian political panorama certain broad trends stand out. The most significant is that the accelerating socio-economic growth has presented challenges to the political systems currently operating within the region. In the authoritarian-pluralist societies mostly led by second generation nationalist leaders a process of transition underway from restricted to more open politics of the

28. *Ibid*, p. 2124.

parliamentary mould. The authoritarian governments whether civilian or military are no longer attractive to the emerging class of educated and politically mature population. They are more confident and firm in their demand for greater participation in politics and democratic values. The Leninist states too, although reluctantly, are being forced to move from rhetoric to practice in permitting more meaningful public participation in politics and greater openness in the society at large. Major systemic change cannot be ruled out but most of the political changes that are taking place are, or will be evolutionary. No generalisation should be hazarded because the circumstances under which political liberalisation has been set into motion in one country are different from that of the other. In any event whatever may be the manner by which the transition has come about or will come the path is set for greater political liberalisation. While democracy still remains a destination, the events that are unfolding in the decade of 1980s appear to have moved the countries of East Asia a step closer to that goal.

The seizure of power in the name of democracy does not of itself lead to it. "The way of the reformer is hard," Samuel P. Huntington has observed.²⁹ The reformer must maintain a concentrated hold on power in order to be able to dispense it, and must implement reform measures quickly enough to prevent the consolidation of conservative opposition but not so quickly as to allow the pace of events to get out of control. The newly democratising regimes have not only to contend with the capacity of authoritarian elements to strike back but accomplish the none-too-easy task of unity within their own ranks. Contending civilian elites and parties can invite military intervention.

29. Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963, p. 344. cited in Yangsun Chou and Andrew J. Nathan, "Democratizing Transition in Taiwan," *Asian Survey*, Vol. XXVII, No. 3, March 1987, p. 285.

The transition to democracy entails the building of democratic political institutions where there were none or rebuilding them where they were destroyed. Since most of the countries of East Asia are in a nascent stage of democracy setting up of institutions such as free press and liberated media is essential. The mobilisation of public and fair elections are no less important. Steady development of political parties and democratic institutions provide certainly a base for the sustenance of democratic regimes. While building democratic structures is not an easy task breathing life and giving substance to these structures is harder. The greatest challenge is getting these structures to address the socio-economic and political problems plaguing the countries. One must not overlook that healthy economy, pluralistic social structure and progressive and enlightened middle class—the characteristic features of most of the East Asian countries—are conducive for democracy to flourish. In spite of this the challenge is faced by the newly democratic countries in some form or the other as they carry on with the difficult task of governing a transitional state. Until the emerging political systems prove their staying power, the threat of de-democratisation will continue to haunt the entire region. Without doubt however, in the next few years, the currently muffled demands that political liberalisation accompany socio-economic freedom will become loud and central in the East Asian region. And it appears unlikely that the spill-over effect of democratisation in these countries will be stopped. One cannot predict what form democracy will take but the fact is that it is the people's choice. Willingness of the masses coupled with a strong socio-economic base points to reasonable prospects for flourishing of democracy in East Asia.