

**“The assertions that there are Asian values and a distinctive form of Asian democracy are little more than attempts by authoritarian leaders to justify non-democratic forms of government.” Critically assess this statement, drawing on the theoretical reading you have completed, and by relating your answer to an Asian society or societies.**

“Every country in the world is a veritable laboratory for the discovery of democratic principles and workshop for the construction of democratic machinery.”

“Democracy in Asia” symposium, *Asian Studies Review* 17, 1 (July 1993), p.2.

The end of communism and the Cold War symbolised a political and ideological victory for the Western world and the principles and values it espoused. Western, or at least American, power and influence appeared at its zenith. Surely, the forces of globalisation, westernisation and modernisation would soon convert all nations to adopt the universal notions of democracy, capitalism and individualism. The threat of homogenisation and convergence produced local and regional backlashes against American power and consequently a rejection of Western values and Western democracy.

These new actors on the international stage repudiated Westoxification and examined regional and internal models as alternative value and political systems. Many Asian nations empowered by their economic success and encouraged by the apparent moral decline of the Western system were prevalent in this search for alternatives. This ‘Asianisation of Asia’ witnessed countries such as Singapore and Malaysia assert the validity of ‘Asian values’ as a counter to Western or universal values.

Proponents contend that ‘Asian values’ are a legitimate and identifiable value system shared by a number of Asian nations based on both Confucian and Eastern philosophies. These values which include an emphasis on family, hard work and education are seen as both specifically Asian and more communitarian and collectivist in their application than the individualism of the Western model.

‘Asian values’ have also informed and moulded the Western democratic model. Indeed democratisation was spread by the process of decolonisation and adopted by nationalists as the most effective argument against colonial rulers. Robert Scalapino believes it was not unexpected that the transplanted model has been modified into a distinctive form of Asian democracy.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, Asian style democracies exhibit both authoritarian and democratic elements.

Critics point to the authoritarian characteristics of these democracies such as the one dominant party, centralised bureaucracy and strong state, and respect for authority as representative of regimes that place social order and political stability ahead of individual rights and democracy. The longevity of leaders such as former Indonesian President Suharto and Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir also contribute to this perception. Consequently, Asian leaders may be viewed as manipulating Asian

values to legitimate existing political structures “which just happen to be authoritarian and which just happen to be controlled by them.”<sup>2</sup>

Asian political elites respond by emphasising the success of the Asian model of development. In advocating the priority of society over the individual Asian style democracies have produced stability, order, moral soundness and economic well-being. Leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew, former Prime Minister of Singapore, contend that the West must recognise that Asian values and culture preclude the acceptance and flowering of democracy in the true Western tradition. Indeed Tun Abdul Razak, second Prime Minister of Malaysia, noted:

The view we take is that democratic government is the best and most acceptable form of government. So long as the form is preserved, the substance can be changed to suit conditions of a particular country.<sup>3</sup>

This essay will argue that in some cases, particularly Singapore and Malaysia, authoritarian leaders have hijacked the Asian values debate to sanction non-democratic forms of government. However, the term ‘Asian values’ immediately questions the universality of terms such as democracy and human rights. Chinese President Jiang Zemin, states that “Democracy and human rights are relative concepts and not absolute.”<sup>4</sup> Whilst acknowledging that culture and terms are neither monolithic nor immutable it remains possible to attribute certain specific and generally accepted characteristics to these terms. Otherwise as Chan Heng Chee, Director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, suggests democracy would be in the eye of the beholder.<sup>5</sup> Indeed those leaders attempting to preserve the status quo must beware the global and cultural forces in operation or accept the same fate as Suharto.

Asian leaders asserting the notion of Asian values challenge the concept of universal values. Mahathir, for example, argues that the differences of culture and the passage of history render the idea of universalism unacceptable and not applicable in an Asian context. So, what are these universal values?

Most Western nations would propose that democracy, human rights and liberalism are core or universal human values, or least should be adopted as universal values. Indeed, such a proposal would be supported by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights drafted in 1948. Articles 1-5 outline such seemingly basic human rights as the right to life and prohibition of slavery and torture. Article 21 denotes that the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government. Consequently, the inclusion of Article 21 almost enshrines people power or democracy as the natural political system.

Supporters of the document maintain that this “common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations” was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly.<sup>6</sup> Out of the then 56 nations of the United Nations, the vote was 48-0 with eight countries abstaining. Some of the most vociferous advocates for the acceptance of the document included Panama, Chile and Cuba. This almost unanimous support for the document and the values it contains has not prevented modern challenges to its relevance.

Mahathir has demanded a review of the document that he states was “formulated by the superpowers” and drafted when there was only 56 nations in the United Nations as opposed to some 185 today.<sup>7</sup> The Malaysian Prime Minister also accuses the document of empowering civil and political rights at the expense of economic, social and cultural ones. Chinese leaders supported Mahathir's proposition by stressing the main Chinese human concern was to "feed and cloth its 1.2 billion people" instead of, or at least ahead of, individual freedoms.<sup>8</sup>

Mahathir's proposals were criticised by both Western leaders and human rights activists. Ravi Nair, executive director of the South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre, suggested that the attack on universal values was a convenient cover for repressive regimes to hide behind.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, Mahathir did receive limited acknowledgment from the InterAction Council that released the Universal Declaration of Human Obligations. This Western based council concluded that responsibilities and obligations are a necessary corollary to the individual freedoms outlined in the 1948 Declaration. However, neither criticism nor Western support negates the link Mahathir has drawn between universalism and Western values.

Professor Samuel Huntington notes that the very notion of a universal civilisation is a Western idea. Such a notion is in direct contrast to the particularism of Asian societies and what Asians identify as distinguishing between one people from another. Huntington contends that the absence of debate in this area has been due to Western predominance in international relations, notably in the last three centuries. He states that the West has used military power, economic resources, international institutions and a ‘universal’ ideology to establish and consolidate Western pre-eminence.<sup>10</sup> In this respect the West appears to have achieved the world domination that their Roman, Crusading and Imperialist predecessors failed to. Globalisation and modernisation have proved more effective weapons than spears and religion.

Huntington continues that the future will be dominated not by universalism but by a clash of civilisations. These civilisations will be grouped around shared values, religion, language and culture. The thesis, however, discounts the plurality evident within both regions and nations. For Ingleson “the assertion that certain values are Asian and others are western is based on an idealised Asia and a stereotyped West.”<sup>11</sup> Kieran Ord adds that much work must also be done on the definition of Asia and the West. She explains that neither geographical nor simplistic ideological groupings confer sufficient justice to the West or Asia.<sup>12</sup>

Francis Fukuyama, author of *The End of History and The Last Man*, believes it is the underlying value system of nations that allows such groupings as Asia and The West to be identified. Fukuyama states that the Christian concept of a universal God is replaced in modern liberalism by the concept of universal human rights. Like Christianity, these rights apply to all human beings. Moreover, their strong emphasis on the individual repudiates and transcends any social obligations. He suggests that in western Christian culture this morality underpins the ‘universal’ ideology of individualism, materialism and liberalism. For it is these values which infuse human rights, capitalism and democracy as Western values. It is clear to Fukuyama that it is this emphasis of individualism over social obligations and responsibilities that differentiates the West from Asia.<sup>13</sup> Huntington agrees that “the values that are most

important in the West are least important world wide.”<sup>14</sup> What then are the values important to Asia and Asian societies?

Melinda Quintos de Jesus, executive director of the Centre for Media Freedom and Responsibility in the Philippines, finds the fundamental force in Asian affairs is the family.<sup>15</sup> Lee Kuan Yew believes that this is the fundamental difference between Asian and Western society.<sup>16</sup> Yet, Ord points out that family are equally important in other societies including apparently Western ones such as Italy.<sup>17</sup> However, the difference appears to lie in the application of the family concept to society:

Eastern societies believe that the individual exists in the context of his family. . .the family is part of the extended family, and then friends and the wider society.<sup>18</sup>

However, if the family is the driving force in Asian society its fellow passengers include hard work, respect for authority, emphasis on law and order and the avoidance of conflict. Yet, these are also values evident in other societies. Timothy Chorba, former American Ambassador to Singapore, states that the Universal Declaration on Human Rights incorporates many of these specifically Asian values.<sup>19</sup> Article 16 states that “the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and the state.” Article 29 states that “everyone has duties to the community.”

Nonetheless, Eastern philosophies and the teachings of Confucius have infused these values. Although, perhaps, not as widespread as its Christian counterpart in the West Confucianism has provided the basis for a large number of Asian societies. Confucian teachings of respect for authority based on the five key relationships have helped produce social order, political stability and a system of values more communitarian than the Western versions. At least that is the slant Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir provide.

Critics such as Kim Dae Jung counter that such a static portrayal of Asian values not only inhibits the debate but also reinforces the status quo and makes progress or improvement more difficult.<sup>20</sup> While Kim Dae Jung’s criticisms have merit, they do not preclude the existence of a value system that has informed Asian society. A particular area of dispute is democracy and its application and success in Asia.

Chan Heng Chee illustrates the difficulty in defining democracy in the modern world as many non-democratic regimes appropriate and apply democratic labels. The plethora of terms includes “peoples democracy”, “guided democracy” and “democratic centralism”.<sup>21</sup> These democratic claims are often designed to simultaneously attract international legitimacy and domestic servitude. Fortunately, this profusion of terms has not prevented attempts democratic definition.

Schumpeter describes democracy as a procedural arrangement that selects leaders through competitive elections. Huntington adds that the full test of a democracy is the successful and peaceful negotiation of two transitions of power between competing rivals.<sup>22</sup> Western democracy appears characterised by electoral effectiveness, representative decision making, and executive responsibility and accountability. Even within this broad framework, further theoretical classification remains possible. O’Donnell and Schmitter have scaled regimes from Dahl’s polyarchy to dictablanda.<sup>23</sup>

The Western democratic model was not part of the political landscape before the start of the decolonisation period. Democracy was both part of European political tutelage and the most effective argument used by nationalists against colonial rulers. The return of Hong Kong by Britain to China witnessed a virtual re-enactment of decolonisation. Chris Patten, the last Governor of Hong Kong, returned the colony over complete with the legacy of democracy attached! Indeed, nearly all Asian countries achieved democratisation at independence. A process undertaken without the prior historical experience of the West.

Consequently, democracy interacted with the existing culture. Despite the democratic reversals of the 1950s and 1960s the interaction of democracy, culture and time has produced, what Huntington has called the Third Wave of democracy. The appearance of 'Asian style democracies' has been a key form of this wave.

These Asian style democracies exhibit different characteristics to their Western brethren and emphasis different values. Clark Neher and Chan Heng Chee recognise these characteristics as including a strong sense of communitarianism, the respect for authority, or personalism as Neher regards it, a dominant party and a strong state buttressed by a centralised bureaucracy.<sup>24</sup>

Yet, many critics have not been willing to concede the democratic label to these Asian polities. For example, Crouch has suggested that Malaysia is neither authoritarian nor democratic.<sup>25</sup> Diamond adds that increasingly Malaysia is a democracy without consensus.<sup>26</sup> An accusation increasing in authority in Western eyes since the arrest and apparent mistreatment of Anwar Ibrahim, formerly Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia. Singapore has been labelled a soft authoritarian country. Thailand a semi democracy. Such categorisation prevents or denies democratic legitimacy. However, Asian leaders contest such rigid and unflattering classification as anti Asian. Asian leaders also challenge this interpretation on other grounds.

Firstly, that democracy is neither a universal nor exclusively Western concept. Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew realise that the semantics of the definition must be challenged. Otherwise, power over the democratic discourse will remain firmly in the hands of the Western powers. In short, this will force the Asian style democracies to eventually align their political system with the Western democratic version. This transformation in political systems would have two results. Firstly, the structure of society, particularly politically, will be altered. Asian leaders often argue that the people are not ready for democracy. This view is given compelling force on the basis that Western democracies have had three centuries to establish and modify their system. A system that in many eyes remains unable to provide either good government or stable and harmonious society. On the other hand, Asian societies have had only three decades to formulate trial and consolidate their democracies. Consequently, any externally driven change to the system possesses the potential to cause unnecessary social damage to Asian societies unable to cope with the changes.

For these reasons the very existence of 'Asian style democracies' challenges the homogenisation and universalism posited by Western democracy. Nor is the popularity of the Western model that is universally recognised but not uniformly practised disputed. Thus, it is not unexpected when Asian style democracies exhibit characteristics supposedly only attributable to Western democracies.

One of the features of Western democracies is competitive elections. Elections provide the opportunity for the regular rotation of executive power. Many Asian nations including Japan, the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore are all bestowed with elections. The Philippines in the post Marcos era has thrice peacefully transferred power. The last time to the former movie star now President Estrada! Critics who label the Philippines as a “no-party system” or “partyless democracy” ignore the pre Marcos history of an effective and competitive two party system and give little credit to the democratic strides made since his removal from power. Nor is the Philippines is not alone in this regard.

Huntington has listed Japan as democratic but not fully consolidated due to the absence of turnovers in power.<sup>27</sup> However, whilst the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has faced little challenge until recently, rulers have rotated relatively regularly depending on their performance. Moreover, supporters would allude to the development of a complex and pluralistic structure that incorporates a dense system of checks and balances on power. These checks and balances include the Emperor and different branches of government.

Lee Kuan Yew carries the semantic challenge even further. He hopes to redefine democracy. In an interview with Fareed Zakaria, Lee Kuan Yew objected to the validity of the one-person, one-vote principle, arguing that married and older persons should have more than one vote.<sup>28</sup> It would appear that Lee Kuan Yew would limit universal suffrage to his own voters. As Kim Dae Jung interjects such a proposal represents an “Orwellian extreme of social engineering.”<sup>29</sup>

The second and final reason for the Asian rejection of this narrow and Western based classification is that the Asian fusion of Asian values and democracy has produced an alternative and better version of society. The soft authoritarian polity reveals the influence of Confucian or Asian values. Values that provide a strong but moral state and serve the needs of society over those of the individual. Asian proponents argue that this model offers a better framework for political and economic development. Moreover, it is a framework consistent with Asian concerns. The system combines a market orientated economic system with “a kind of paternalistic authoritarianism that persuades rather than coerces.”<sup>30</sup>

In such a system democracy is not a political objective but used as an instrument to serve higher social goals such as order and economic well being. Moreover, it is a democracy on Asian terms. In Singapore’s case this means free periodic elections only. However, the presence of the dominant party in many of the Asian polities precludes or reduces open opposition. Thus, Asian style democracy is based less on competition and more on consensus. This may be due to the Confucian link between consensus, harmony and order.

Sukarno, the former President of Indonesia and architect of “guided democracy”, openly proclaimed his disdain of competitive, ‘majoritarian’ or ‘50 percent plus one’ democracy. He viewed this concept as being potentially divisive in a society that could ill afford division. He expressed a preference for a true democracy based on traditional village decision-making processes of deliberation and consultation

(musjawarah) and search for unanimous agreement (mufahat). A decision would be made from this open discussion and unanimously supported since it resulted from group consensus.

The broad political objective to which these soft authoritarians aspire is good government. Good governments are those which feed their people, maintain stability, order and moral soundness. Indeed, from this basis it can be seen that the resignation of President Suharto of Indonesia was due to his failure meet the economic needs of his people. The growing poverty in Indonesia produced widespread dissatisfaction that in turn simultaneously undermined the legitimacy of the regime and the stability and order of society. Nonetheless, the objective of good government has garnered growing support and legitimacy in the Asian region.

One of the reasons for this has been the moral decline and recession of American power and influence in Asia. Many Asians often view America as the West. Such a view is predicated on the continued political and economic involvement of America in Asia since World War II. It is an observation blinded by globalisation and consumerism. These twin forces convince many that the ideologies, ideas and images of the dominant hegemon are those of the West. Such a static portrayal of the West precludes the recognition of the differences inherent in Western society. However, the decline of global American hegemony has caused a corresponding reverse in the spread of American ideas. Perhaps more crucially in an Asian context is the apparent moral degeneration evident in American society.

The race riots in Los Angeles in 1992 appeared to Malaysians and their Prime Minister as worse than any ethnic violence their ethnically balanced nation had witnessed including the communal problems of 1969. Mahathir has also strongly denounced the social problems he views as endemic within America and by association the West. He has listed the carriage of guns, the flaunting of homosexuality, the sanctity and institutionalisation of freedom of the press and breakdown of the institution of marriage as symbolic of the moral problems undermining Western society. As he contends “if these are democracy’s details, cannot the new converts reject them?”<sup>31</sup> His own reply to his question is negative:

Let us not be slaves to democracy. If by practising certain aspects of democracy we run the risk of causing chaos in our party and country, we have to choose our party and country above democracy.<sup>32</sup>

The Asian alternative is built on a more than just the negative American model. Asian leaders have attributed the East Asian economic miracle to the success of the Asian polity. Their view is that order and stability generated from Asian style democracies has facilitated conducive conditions for economic development. This is a model that increasingly draws leadership and inspiration from the Japanese system. One example of this is Mahathir’s Look East vision of the 1980s. However, the Asian alternative has not been without its critics.

Firstly, Kim Dae Jung underlines that the Eastern values the Asian leaders acclaim as informing Asian democracy are a rich source of democratically oriented philosophies. Meng-tzu (Mencius), an ancient Chinese philosopher, claimed that the right to govern was a mandate from heaven. This mandate empowered rulers to provide good

government. The inability of rulers to provide good government would result in the removal of the mandate to rule. The removal of the ruler would be at the hands of the people. In Meng-tzu's theories the people came first, the country second and the king third.<sup>33</sup> Even Confucianism is recognised as containing elements that are supportive of democracy. Clark Neher has suggested that the Confucian ideals of harmony, order and consensus are all favourable to the development of democracy.<sup>34</sup>

In more practical terms both China and Korea practiced county/prefecture systems whilst Europe remained bound in the grip of feudalism. A meritocratic civil service complemented the prefecture system. Entry into the civil service was via examination. This meritocracy was stringently applied and encouraged individual achievement.

History and philosophy are supplemented by modern reality. Since the end of World War II democracy has been consistently practiced in Japan and India. Other countries including Korea, Taiwan, Thailand and Malaysia contain some components of democracy. Admittedly, setbacks and reversals have occurred. One example is the landslide victory of the National League for Democracy led by Aung Sun Suu Kyi in the 1990 Burmese elections (now Myanmar). A victory not recognised by the ruling military government. Yet, as Kim Dae Jung, despite these ordeals "the torch of democracy continues to burn in Asia because of the aspirations of the people."<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, the political stasis advocated by Lee Kuan Yew must be prevented to avoid the entrenchment of non-democratic forms of government. In this respect Aung Sun Suu Kyi has argued that the emphasis on the indigenous path to democracy can lead to a lack of specificity in the implementation of democracy. That is, in accepting that democracy is not universal but rather regional or cultural Asian style democracy will be legitimated. The one party and often one-man rule of these democracies will dominate the democratic discourse. In other words democracy will be defined by the very powers that would be threatened by universal democracy. Therefore, it is almost inevitable that democracy in this instance would remain both cultural and contextual and defined and dominated by Asian leaders determined to undermine its impact.

Accusations of non-democratic forms of government coalesce in the nations where one party dominates the political system. Japan's LDP, Singapore's People's Action Party (PAP), Malaysia's United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), India's Congress Party and Golkar in Indonesia all belong in this category. Neher views one party systems as democracy without rotation among competing parties and democracy without change between the established elites and opposition.<sup>36</sup> Any changes within the elite are driven not by the electorate but by the elite. This claim is borne out by the infrequent changes to leadership positions within these nations.

Kim Dae Jung also suggests that Asian leaders incorrectly identify democracy as the cause of Western society's moral decrepitude. Instead this should be ascribed to materialism and industrialisation. Kim Dae Jung encourages Asian leaders to recognise that democratisation, deregularisation and modernisation are reconstructing the world. Asian leaders insistence on maintaining the status quo in the face of these forces appears to be an attempt to manage a past rather than accept the future. Indeed, it would appear ironic that the economic success Asian leaders lay claim to creating may contribute to their downfall. For it is arguable that economic development

contributes to democratisation via the production of civil society and increased individual wealth. Thus, Kim Dae Jung advises leaders to work with democracy rather than against it.

Rudyard Kipling once wrote that “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.” This dichotomous view proposes that culture and history are both monolithic and immutable. It is view currently championed by Asian leaders such as Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew in the Asian values debate.

Concerned at the homogenising effect of the West and globalisation, these leaders have reasserted Asian cultural identity. This identity has been nominated as a valid alternative system to a Western model depicted as in a state of decay. Thus, these leaders expose the Western weaknesses produced by individualism and democracy. Moreover, the same leaders forward a communitarian approach based on Asian style democracy as an increasing attractive alternative. An attractiveness underlined by the high degree of political stability, social order and economic success associated with their regimes. However, critics such as Kim Dae Jung state that these cultural assertions contain or disguise a political agenda,

This agenda employs the use of culture and Asian values to validate existing political structures. These structures, or Asian style democracies, contain a mixture of authoritarian and democratic elements. However, it is the increasing influence of the authoritarian elements including the dominant political party, longevity of executive, infrequency of power transferral and limited input of the people that most concern the democratic advocates from Aung Sun Suu Kyi to Hishamuddin Rais. The maintenance of such structures entrenches authoritarianism at the expense of democracy.

Democratic supporters advocate the recognition of Asian democratic traditions, highlight the universality of democratic concepts and the changing nature of culture and the world due to globalisation in an effort to reform the nature of Asian style democracies. These democratic concepts include the legitimisation of opposition, the refinement of competitive elections and the peaceful transition of executive power. Indeed, it has been suggested that the wedding of these universal democratic concepts to the Asian emphasis on society may produce a system more effective and responsive than either the Western or Asian version. Anwar Ibrahim has noted that Western individualism must be reconciled with Asian society:

No Asian tradition can be cited to support the proposition that in Asia, the individual must melt into a faceless community.

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