Democratic Governance
in Asia 2030

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Organized by Oxfam, Chulalongkorn University (Thailand) and the Lew Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (Singapore), with support of the Rockefeller Foundation, these and other perspectives were suggested at a two-day forum in Bangkok on Visions of Democratic Governance in Asia 2030. While there were certainly key influence makers from around Asia – a minister from Pakistan - leadings civil society leaders from Thailand Cambodia – intellectuals from India and Singapore, the meeting in itself was not a typical conference highlighted by long speeches and irrelevant questions. Rather it was an interactive workshop that used the methods and tools from the emerging field of Futures studies to explores visions of democracy in 2030 and pathways to realize that vision. While methods and tools such as the futures triangle, scenario planning, causal layered analysis and backcasting were thrown around the room by the facilitator, Professor Sohail Inayatullah, the process was in itself democratic – participants worked and voted on the futures they wished to see. And what did they wish?
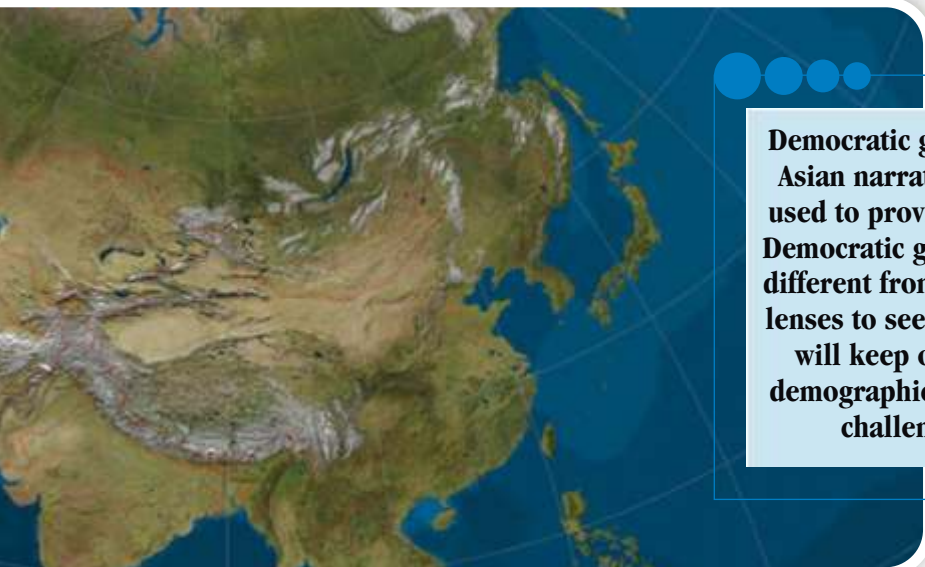
Five Visions of the Future

Five powerful visions of the future emerged. The first was titled, Contribution, Inclusion and Empowerment. By this they meant that citizens needed to contribute to governance, everyone needed to be included, and in doing so empowerment would emerge. But this was not empowerment, i.e. power over others, rather, it was empowerment that contributed to the lot of everyone. The core metaphor for this group was: the Ant. A small but powerful creature that understands the empowerment born from working together. Ants work as a cohesive unit and are able to achieve so much more than they would as individuals. Understanding that any true democracy requires participation, this group rallied around the ideas of bringing more people to the forefront of democratic governance and giving those citizens a meaningful way to participate. This was a vision of less government and more participatory governance. Government as facilitator and guide rather than government as teacher or parent.

The second group took inclusion even more seriously. They argued that for better democratic governance by 2030, a set of indicators would need to focus on social inclusion. Indices that would measure how nations and/or cities include their voices and perspectives of their citizens need to be created. These indices would also offer awards to those who demonstrated institutional practices that enhanced inclusion. In the dystopic scenario that this group explored as a counter valence to their preferred future, the current lack of inclusion in politics could lead in the future to a charismatic leader with extremist viewpoints rallying the masses who have far too long felt excluded and marginalized.

The third group agreed with inclusion, but wished to add the reality of the environment. There could be no democratic governance if nature was not part of, and ultimately built into society. This meant nature at every level – green design for cities, green design for buildings, indeed, nature could not be an externality, but had to be internalized and accounted for. Green democracy was their vision of the future. They imagined Green political parties rising up throughout Asia. This was logical as Asian

> **Democratic governance will thrive in Asia, once Asian narratives – myths and metaphors – are used to provide support and give meaning to it. Democratic governance in 2030 will be radically different from how we see it today. We need new lenses to see the future. Democratic governance will keep on changing as new technologies, demographic shifts and geopolitical transitions challenge reality – prepare for flux!**

development had, while creating a middle class, been "cement" heavy, nature had been pushed away. As more and more research has demonstrated that productivity is enhanced in green buildings, and the immune system of individuals is strengthened when the forest enters the city, democratic governance in 2030 rests on the platform of green politics – gender equity, nature inclusion, smart design, and deep diversity. Their metaphor for the future was a healthy body – the body politic was smart and green, using the best from science to create a healthy environment so Asians could enjoy the gains from sound economic development.

The fourth group agreed with the others but added the power of the digital citizen. By 2030 dramatic new interactive evaluative Big Data technologies would be embedded in everything citizens did. While certainly this challenges our current notions of privacy, by 2030 with digital natives as the dominant demographic category, everyone is a "friend". Politics is daily, immediate and interactive. There are new public spaces where engagement occurs. Ratemymayor.com and many other applications would be the norm,

many of them predictive, solving problems of sanitation, safety and security before they become big issues. Citizens play a direct role in the polity, indeed, they are the polity. Politicians are seen far less as daily legislators but instead as last resort custodians of decisions, most of the time they work with citizens to facilitate desired futures. The metaphor for this future was the co-scripted text. Democracy is not a book authored by others, rather, is it written daily in the actions and choices – the "likes" of citizens.

To create any of these visions, a narrative platform is required. The fifth group offered the Asian marketplace, the fresh market, as the guiding story. In this market, buyers and sellers interact daily, their choices creating the political-economy. No one group dominates, this is not an oligarchy or a corporatist monopoly. Rather, citizens own the future. Democracy is owned by all. And thus loved by all. Democracy thus is engaged, participative, inclusive and creates results that benefit the market as whole and the citizens who live in the market.

Drivers and Strategies

To get to these visions, changes clearly have to occur. Already,

however, the drivers are there: 1. Generational shift from the independence generation to the digital natives, who expect far more embedded technologies and inclusion. 2. Digital, 3d printing, holograms, Big Data technologies that can make democracy as a daily practice far more real. 3. The move from vertical sociality organized by seniority to more peer-to-peer organizations where the capacity to share information, to be hubs in the node, to cooperate and work together – and this can be slow – is creating a new narrative that leads to more productivity. This does not mean the end of hierarchy but situational hierarchy, where in times of emergency, tough decisions do need to be made by leadership to ensure the long term over the short term and all groups instead of the few or the individual. 4. Climate change leading to crisis throughout Asia – 32 trillion dollars of assets are at risk, most of that in large Asian cities – forcing innovation to meet these challenges. While there is a scenario where crisis enforce the "big man" metaphor, there is also the possibility that innovation is social, leading to a future where the actions of each individual enhances the ability to meet this mega

challenge. 5. As Asia becomes wealthier and basic needs are met, the needs of freedom, the desire to enhance agency, to influence the future, will become more pronounced. This means more economic democracy – cooperatives – but also political democracy. While phase one means regular fair and transparent elections in nations, citizens and organizations, phase two means direct democracy using new digital technologies. Direct democracy by 2030 may not be relevant to every issue, but there may be many issues where citizens can either offer consultative advice, legislative advice, or indeed, executive advice.

Given the power of these drivers, it would not be a surprise if the visions outlined by the fifty or so participants become reality by 2030. Participants, even, as they remained idealistic, did articulate the outlier scenarios - one where autocratic or charismatic religious leaders used new technologies to influence people toward their religion or nation-state? Or where climate change led to Eco-fascism? Or where there was dramatically enhanced fragmentation as China fell apart. But there were also positive outliers. In one scenario participants imagined a confederation of Asian states, an Asian Union, with extensive trade, a security regime, and institutional networks and high order organizations to promote democracy.

While the alternative scenarios explore possible futures, the strength and power of the workshop was the articulation of desired visions of the future. Visions pull us forward toward the future, even as there are weights – mindsets, institutional blockages, resource constraints – that challenge the realization of the preferred. What participants were certain about was that democratic governance in Asia would be transformed by 2030.

Prout Policy

The Proutist approach on the futures of democratic governance in Asia by 2030 is focused in three areas:

First, economic democracy. Instead of Asian multinational corporations spreading wealth, it is far more important to create legislation throughout Asia to support cooperatives. Asian need to own the future they wish to see. Ownership comes from having a say not just in the polity but the economy. The use of digital networks that can create peer-to-peer cooperatives networks should be strengthened Asia-wide. The economic benefits will be enormous ensuring that wages for labour keep up with productivity, that equity is enhanced.

Second, while as much as possible, democratic forms of government are required – equality before the law, regular elections, an independent judiciary and press, enhanced electoral education for voters – it is developing leadership that is not beholden to financial interests nor to any particular religious interests that is paramount. The leader needs to see the alternative future, protect the weak, serve the poor, innovate through ideas and ensure that productivity is enhanced.

Third, the context of current democracy is the nation-state. Prout envisages the shift to a confederation of Asia. This can be accomplished by an increased flow of goods, services and the ideas of neohumanism/universalism. Challenges of climate change, organized crime, inequity within and between economies all create conditions where more Asian glocalization (global and local simultaneously) is required not less. Harmonization of laws are necessary to protect minorities, the poor and refugees from war and climate change. Asia-wide financial, cultural, environmental and regulatory institutions are a must.

Asia needs to continue to move forward, where identity is far less based on ethnicity, religion and the nation-state and far more on our common humanity. Governance - at local, national and regional levels - that can create conditions for the movement of people, ideas, good and services can help create a transformed Asia.

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Village scene in South Asia