

Book Review: Roland Rich, *Pacific Asia in Quest of Democracy* (Boulder, CO and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008), 330 pages.

Pacific Asia **New Regional Approach for Democratization?**

Eric Chen-hua Yu

This book, written by Roland Rich, a veteran Australian diplomat in Southeast Asia, and the first executive director of Australia's major democracy-promotion organization, the Centre for Democratic Institution (CDI), surveys the political development of five democratizing countries of Pacific Asia: Indonesia, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand, with references to other democratic and nondemocratic countries in the region. The book's goal is twofold: first, it employs democratic theories to examine whether these emerging democracies, under the context of non-Western civilization, can be consolidated. Second, through the lens of democratization of these five countries, it assesses the prospects of democracy in Pacific Asia as a region and seeks to identify a "Pacific Asian" model for democratic development.

"The most influential development in Pacific Asia since the end of the Cold War," Rich observes, "has been the burgeoning of the practice of democracy" (p.38). Indeed, students of democratization became enthralled as transitions started to take place in the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan during the late 1980s, followed by the fully elected civilian government in Thailand and the end of Suharto's authoritarian rule in Indonesia during the early and late 1990s, respectively. Democratization in these Pacific Asian countries, along with other Asian countries such as Japan, India, and Mongolia, highlights the fact that democracy can be a universal value that transcends Western civilization. In the earliest chapter of the book, Rich surveys the global impact of the third wave of democratization that spread beyond Western societies and demonstrates that Asia and Pacific Asia, in particular, compared with Africa and the Middle East, may have the greatest interest in transition to the practice of liberal democracy.

Yet, it is important to note that the breakdown of democracy is nothing new to the Pacific Asia region. As the Second World War ended Western colonial rule in most countries of the region, the newly formed states, including South

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Korea, the Philippines, Indonesia, Burma, Singapore, and Malaysia, adopted varying forms of democratic political procedures and institutions. However, the breakdown of democracy in the region started almost as soon as these new democracies were established. It was during the peak years of the Cold War that these early democratic experiments failed. Analysis of these failures offers the historical lesson that the prospect of deepened democracy in the region depends on whether the transition can hold its course. The importance of democratic consolidation itself leads to the first of the three major questions that Rich asks in the book: Can these recent transitions develop into the consolidated practice of high-quality democracy? Then, the distinctiveness of Pacific Asian civilization leads to Rich's second question: Can democracy be consolidated in the nations of a non-Western civilization?

In the second chapter, "Charting Pacific Asia," the book explains the ways in which Pacific Asia can be regarded as a community—geographic proximity, similar civilizational origins, political and economic architectures, and imagination. Rich argues that forming an imagined Pacific Asian community requires the people of the region to envision themselves as members of this wider community. Various political, economic, and security architectures, established through a top-down approach over the past decades, are unlikely to hold the people together as a community in a conceptualized way. Rather, only a specific type of civilizational consensus can serve as glue to bind people within the Pacific Asia community. Under this premise, Rich's final inquiry of the book is: If a civilizational consensus can be formed in Pacific Asia, can it be one that favors democracy? Or, to put it differently, can Pacific Asia imagine itself as a community of democracies?

The bulk of the book addresses mainly the first two questions. Rich does not adopt a country-by-country approach but organizes the book with thematic elements according to Robert Dahl's conditions of polyarchy—that is, separate chapters examine these countries' institutional designs, the rule of law, political parties, politicians, public conversation, and political culture, respectively. The method that Rich employs to identify consolidation among these countries is based on Linz and Stepan's criteria for determining whether democracy becomes "the only game in town." The elements that Rich chooses to analyze in the book encompass institutional, behavioral, and attitudinal factors. Although Rich does not make use of a quantitative approach that may produce an actual "score card" to evaluate the quality of these emerging democracies, he does conduct a solid qualitative analysis in a form that combines major democratic theories with rich historical narrative. His assessment with respect to each of the six thematic elements can be summarized as follows:

- 1. Political Institutions.** Rich surveys various representation models, electoral systems, and anticorruption mechanisms across the five countries, in a comparison with the institutional designs in Japan and India. While he uncovers different types of institutional path

dependency, he also highlights the importance of diffusion mechanism in the region—that is, suggesting that Pacific Asia can be a laboratory for democracy: that one country can learn from another in crafting its institutions. Yet, Rich warns that in searching for and adopting “the best practice” in the region, the lack of systematization, under which a set of political institutions has a tenuous relationship to the reality on the ground, will result in the malfunction of any institutional design, even if its effectiveness has been proved in another context. In other words, even a well-crafted institutional design needs to be nurtured with broad public engagement and will not function properly as a purely exogenous factor.

- 2. The Rule of Law.** From both historical and conceptual perspectives, Rich examines the applicability of the rule of law in the five nations. His findings suggest that Asian society is not antithetical to the constitution of a nation of laws. Rich identifies the growing trend toward constitutionalism in the region and argues that globalization becomes a force to forge a global system of rules and to drive Asian countries that have diverse rule of law systems to gradually converge to a system based on standards of international rule of law.
- 3. Political Parties.** Rich observes that major political parties in Pacific Asia’s democracies fulfill some of the main tasks outlined by democratic theorists, such as candidate recruitment and support mobilization. Yet, they usually fail to structure policy choices for voters, as “money politics, pork barrel promises, and appealing to ascriptive loyalties” (p.124) constitute major characteristics of electoral politics in Pacific Asia. Rich argues that the choice of any electoral system will have a very direct impact on the shape and strength of political parties. A broad comparison of the party systems in Pacific Asia suggests that most of them are moving in the direction of the two-party format, which is more likely than others to nurture a robust and stable party system and then, in turn, to facilitate democratic consolidation.
- 4. Politicians.** While an authoritarian regime allows politicians to pander to a small group of decision-makers, a democratic system requires politicians to appeal to a wider audience and to accommodate diverse public demands. Rich observes that traditional Asian political culture, along with some structural problems such as money politics, narrow loyalties, and recourse to violence in these emerging democracies, hinders political elites from becoming what Linz calls “vocational politicians,” the ideal type of political leaders required in a consolidated democracy. Yet, as election rules become institutionalized and the electorate becomes more informed, Rich believes that the incentive scheme for Pacific Asia’s politicians is changing, nurturing future mainstream politicians who will then behave in the Linz vocational mold. Additionally, a shared commitment to democracy is forging

among democratically elected politicians in the region.

5. Public Conversation. The process of deliberation, in which various voices have their chances to be heard in the public sphere, is essential to a robust democracy. After reviewing the quantity and quality of media channels in the emerging democracies of Pacific Asia, Rich concludes that the “marketplace of ideas,” if not yet fully matured, is gradually taking shape in the region.

6. Political Culture. Rich admits Lucian Pye’s observation that Asian culture may not be well-suited to the practice of democracy. However, by assuming the negotiability of political culture, Rich argues that a number of traumatic events such as colonialism, World War II, the Cold War, and the 1997 financial crisis helped to shape new political culture in Pacific Asia. Because change is the norm, the people of Pacific Asia may be comfortable with a mixed cultural system that blends old and new elements. In other words, although traditional values based on patriarchy and paternalism could be deeply rooted in Asian societies, they should not preclude ordinary people from choosing a democratic system.

In short, Rich’s assessment of democratic consolidation in the five Pacific Asian countries is optimistic. He gives positive answers to the first two questions asked in the book, claiming that these emerging democracies have achieved steady progress toward consolidation, and that Pacific Asia’s distinctive civilization, if not inclined toward nurturing a democratic system, at least is open to liberal democracy.

However, these countries’ prospects of high-quality democracy depend on whether some “authoritarian legacies” can be replaced by new democratic procedures and institutions. Rich emphasizes a bottom-up approach as well as a diffusion mechanism on this matter: the former underlines the importance of broad public engagement when any significant institutional reform is to be adopted, and the latter highlights the positive impact of developments and practices of one nation in Pacific Asia on another.

Yet, broad public engagement does not necessarily lead to the good practice of democracy; instead, it could result in unrest among the population. A diffusion mechanism does not guarantee the dissemination of “the best practice,” if one cannot even determine what could be “the best” on the basis of different evaluation schemes. While Rich posits that these new democracies are getting on the right track toward consolidation, he does not point out a clear pathway, if any, that accounts for the interactions of the institutional, behavioral, and attitudinal variables. Regarding the recent progress of the five emerging democracies in Pacific Asia, Rich’s assessment successfully addresses the “what” and “why” questions but does not fully uncover the “how” question that explains the ways by which these democracies have transformed from point A to point B.

Following the series of thematic analyses, Rich turns to a country-by-country comparison and concludes that each new democracy in Pacific Asia has its unique challenge that needs to be overcome before it can bear fruit. While acknowledging “five democratizing countries, five hopeful electorates, five sets of difficult problems” (p.263), Rich shifts to search for a regional factor that could constitute a key milestone for democratization of these countries. If a “Pacific Asian model” for democracy cannot be concluded via an inductive approach, it can still be formed in a deductive way. Rich follows the logic of the democratic peace theory and suggests that the commitment to democracy of neighbors reinforces the commitment to democracy at home, and vice versa. The virtuous circle will continue if a civilizational consensus favoring democracy can be forged in the region. Such consensus will not only confirm democracy’s irreversibility, but also help build an “imagined” regional community of democracies.

By assuming the importance of a civilizational consensus in favor of democracy, the core issue with respect to Rich’s third inquiry in the book becomes how to forge such consensus in Pacific Asia. Rich borrows the “core state” concept from the clash of civilizations thesis and argues that as a regional hegemon, a democratic China becomes a priori for such consensus building because “it is difficult to see how a civilizational consensus in favor of democracy can emerge without China’s concurrence” (p.283). Thus, the question becomes whether China can be a democracy. Rich posits that the emerging democracies in the region, whose pathways toward democracy are mainly depicted by modernization theory, can surely show China how this is achieved. In short, a perceivable “Pacific Asian model” for democracy can be built upon a civilizational consensus in favor of democracy. And China holds the key for forging that consensus.

Overall, the book tells a great story of recent democratic development in Pacific Asia. It blends academic theories, historical narratives, and anecdotal stories in a well-balanced way. While Rich’s pathological analysis of these emerging democracies is discerning, his prescription for democracy’s irreversibility and his possible “Pacific Asia model” for democracy are probably debatable. Indeed, if a civilizational consensus favoring democracy can be forged in Pacific Asia, it might help in the consolidation of other democracies in the region. Yet, Rich also admits that this consensus “is probably not a necessary element for the national consolidation of democracy” (p.280). In other words, the lack of a civilizational consensus should not thwart the consolidation of Pacific Asia’s emerging democracies. It is difficult to imagine, for example, that South Korea and Taiwan would forfeit their practices of democracy, even though their adjacent authoritarian regimes might never become democratic. Rich is right in suggesting that in both countries, “the major heading must be security” (p.263). However, it is in fact security concerns that have helped both countries to develop a belief in the legitimacy of democracy, as they constantly face vital threats from their authoritarian counterparts. It is important to note

that what the democratic peace theory predicts is proposed to be a result, rather than a cause, of democratization in the neighboring countries.

The diffusion mechanism of democracy that centers on the core state of civilization is appealing, but on the other hand, puzzling. Rich assumes that once democracy is adopted by China, the core civilization in Pacific Asia, democracy will diffuse to the entire region. But what if China never adopts liberal democracy, regardless of its level of modernization? What if China maintains its soft-authoritarian rule long enough to become a “recalcitrant case”? Does the diffusion mechanism also apply if China happens to become something other than a liberal democracy? Additionally, if only China holds the key for Pacific Asia’s prospect for democracy, the study of Pacific Asia’s emerging democracies might have less merit, as their efforts on building a democratic Pacific Asia community become empirically interesting, but theoretically irrelevant.

In short, the book admirably applies a set of analytical dimensions to examine the recent developments of emerging democracies in Pacific Asia. In a combination of rich empirical data and insightful observation, it contributes to a variety of important theoretical debates about democratic development and tells a hopeful story of democracy in the region. More importantly, it duly raises a number of provocative questions for both scholars and practitioners, and astutely proposes a new theoretical model for regional democratic development that will likely stimulate considerable future studies. This book is surely a significant addition to the literature.