
PRIMARY CAUSES OF ASIAN DEMOCRATIZATION

Dispelling Conventional Myths

Junhan Lee

The global tides of democratization that have swept South and East Europe, Latin America, and Africa since the 1970s also engulfed Asia in the 1980s and 1990s. In this region, between 1986 and 1999, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand all embraced genuine transitions to democracy. This paper undertakes a systematic investigation of the primary causes of Asian democratization, which has yet to be fully explored, compared with similar trends in other regions.

To date, South Korea and Taiwan have been reported to share many features that are theoretically intriguing and challenging in the study of democratization. For instance, their stellar economic performance during the 1960s and 1980s is viewed as a key factor in their political democratization in the mid-1980s. Additionally, their Confucian heritage has been lauded by so-called Western society. The Confucian tradition has been identified as the cultural and moral locomotive of economic prosperity in the two countries, similarly with the Protestant ethic in the West.¹ The respective cultural tradition may be related to the democratic development in each region. A number of scholars have used the political agent model to examine the “from below” type of democratization that occurred in South Korea, as well as President

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1. Larry Diamond, ed., *Political Culture and Democracy in Developing Countries* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993).

Chiang Ching-kuo's transition engineering in Taiwan.² To what extent, then, do the democratization experiences in South Korea and Taiwan help us to understand Asian democratization in general? To what extent do the widely accepted theories of democratization—modernization, economic crisis, civic culture, and British colonial—account for Asian democratization? More generally, what caused democratic transitions in Asia?

Scope of the Study

The current inquiry deals with 18 countries out of the more than two dozen countries on the continent of Asia. The first group examined consists of Bangladesh, Indonesia, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand, where democratic transition took place between 1986 and 1999. Asia's old democracies of India, Japan, and Sri Lanka, on the other hand, are beyond the scope of this paper. The second group includes Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), North Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam, where democratic transition has yet to appear. Although Cambodia, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Singapore have held full-scale national elections more than once, they are not categorized as democratic countries. These elections had too many serious limitations to be truly democratic.³ This article excludes many small states with populations of less than two million in 1990.

This paper inevitably focuses on the pre-transition period in each country because it mainly seeks to identify the primary causes of democratization. To be more specific, the pre-liberalization period is considered the baseline of this research. Democratization is a long and divergent process that consists of democratic transition and consolidation. Political liberalization that brings about a general relaxation of official controls over political rights and civil liberties, precedes democratic transition. Moreover, democratic transition never occurs without political liberalization.⁴ For the second group of countries that have not undergone democratic transition, the year 1990, when political liberalization occurred most frequently among the first group of countries, is used for comparison.

2. See Hee-Min Kim, "A Theory of Government-Driven Democratization: The Case of Korea," *World Affairs* 156:3 (Winter 1994), pp. 130–40; Junhan Lee, "Political Protest and Democratization in South Korea," *Democratization* 7:3 (Autumn 2000), pp. 181–202; and Tun-jen Cheng and Stephan Haggard, "Regime Transformation in Taiwan: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives," in *Political Change in Taiwan*, eds. Tun-jen Cheng and Stephan Haggard (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publisher, 1992).

3. Adrian Karatnycky, "The Decline of Illiberal Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 10:1 (January 1999), pp. 112–25.

4. Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Economic Development and Asian Democratization

Economic development (or modernization) theory proposes a positive relationship between economic development and democracy.⁵ According to this theory, economic prosperity indicated by wealth, industrialization, urbanization, and education promotes political democracy. In this paper, economic prosperity is measured by the conventional indicator, Gross National Product (GNP) per capita. The GNP per capita in the year of political liberalization succinctly suggests the level of economic development when the whole process of democratization unfolds in each country. Following the World Bank's *World Development Report*, Table 1 allocates an individual country to four different categories depending upon its GNP per capita.

Table 1 clearly suggests that there is no significant relationship between economic development and Asian democratization. Among the recently democratized countries in Asia, there were more low- or middle-income economies (78%) than upper-middle- or high-income economies (22%). There were four low-income economies (Bangladesh, Indonesia, Nepal, and Pakistan), and three middle-income economies (Mongolia, the Philippines, and Thailand). In contrast, only South Korea and Taiwan belonged to the category of upper-middle-income economies. The actual amount of the GNP per capita provides a more concrete idea about how the new Asian democracies varied in terms of economic development. As of their respective liberalization year, the GNP per capita ranged from \$170 (Nepal, 1990), through \$210 (Bangladesh, 1990), \$350 (Pakistan, 1988), \$560 (the Philippines, 1986), \$636 (Indonesia, 1998), \$1,840 (Thailand, 1992), and \$2,690 (South Korea, 1987), to \$5,325 (Taiwan, 1987).⁶ Mongolia's GNP per capita in 1990 is estimated to have been in the middle-income category (\$500–\$1,499).⁷ When the whole process of democratization started, Nepal had the fifth weakest economy in the world; Taiwan's was estimated to be one of the top five economies, next to those of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and high-income countries.

5. See Ross Burkhart and Michael S. Lewis-Beck, "Comparative Democracy: The Economic Development Thesis," *American Political Science Review* 88:4 (December 1994), pp. 903–10; Larry Diamond, "Economic Development and Democracy Reconsidered," *American Behavioral Scientist* 35:4 and 5 (March/June 1992), pp. 450–99; and Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review* 53:1 (March 1959), pp. 69–105.

6. The GNP per capita was calculated with the raw data from *Key Indicators of Developing Asian and Pacific Countries* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 1997). US\$ of GNP per capita = per capita GNP (at current market prices)/average exchange rate of the year for US\$.

7. Data for Mongolia are from *The World Bank Atlas* (Washington D.C.: World Bank, 1991).

TABLE 1 *Economic Development and Asian Democratization*

<i>GNP Per Capita*</i>	<i>Democratization</i>	
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Low	44.4% Bangladesh (1990) Indonesia (1998) Nepal (1990) Pakistan (1988)	55.5% Cambodia China Laos Myanmar Vietnam
Middle	33.3 Mongolia (1990) Philippines (1986) Thailand (1992)	22.2 Malaysia N. Korea
Upper-Middle	22.2 S. Korea (1987) Taiwan (1987)	
High		22.2 Hong Kong Singapore

SOURCES: *World Development Report* (World Bank, various issues) and *The World Bank Atlas* (World Bank, 1991). For Taiwan, calculated from *Key Indicators of Developing Asian and Pacific Countries* (Asian Development Bank, 1993, 1997, and 2000).

*Indicates year of political liberalization, otherwise as of 1990.

Among the non-democratized group, there were also more low- or middle-income economies (78%) than upper-middle- or high-income economies (22%), as of 1990. There were five low-income economies (Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam), and two middle-income countries (Malaysia and North Korea). While there was no upper-middle-income economy comparable to those of South Korea and Taiwan, there were two high-income economies (Hong Kong and Singapore) in this non-democratized group. When those democratized and non-democratized countries are considered together, the levels of economic development appear not to have significant effects on democratic transition in Asia.

Economic Crisis and Asian Democratization

An economic crisis caused by high inflation rates and negative growth rates, either separately or jointly, facilitated regime breakdown in some Latin

American and Asian countries between the 1950s and the early 1970s.⁸ Since the mid-1970s, however, such economic crises have ignited numerous democratic transitions amid the global tide toward democracy. In order to judge first whether or not there was an economic crisis, inflation rates before transition to democracy are employed in this section.⁹ As a result, we can find no severe inflation prior to political liberalization among the new Asian democracies with the exceptions of Indonesia and the Philippines. Indonesia experienced high inflation rates of 58.5% in 1998 and 20.5% in 1999, in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian economic crisis. The Philippines registered a two-digit annual inflation rate (18.2%) on average, between 1980 and 1986. In other countries, the average annual rates of inflation during the 1980s were lower than 10%: 9.6% in Bangladesh (1980–90); –1.3% in Mongolia (1980–90); 9.1% in Nepal (1980–90); 6.5% in Pakistan (1980–88); 5.0% in South Korea (1980–87); 1.3% in Taiwan (1980–87); and 4.2% in Thailand (1980–92).¹⁰ The degree of economic crisis is also measured by GDP growth rates during the last two years prior to political liberalization. Indonesia registered a GDP growth rate of 4.7% in 1997, but the rate dropped to –13.1% in 1998. The Philippines, in the last two years under Ferdinand Marcos's neo-patrimonial regime, registered the same GDP growth rate consecutively, –7.3% (1984 and 1985). In the other newly democratized Asian countries, there was no severe downturn in the GDP growth rates during the two years prior to political liberalization. The GDP growth rates were 2.9% (1988) and 2.5% (1989) in Bangladesh; –11.4% (1988) and 3.7% (1989) in Mongolia; 7.2% (1988) and 4.2% (1989) in Nepal; 5.5% (1986) and 6.5% (1987) in Pakistan; 6.9% (1985) and 12.4% (1986) in South Korea; 4.9% (1985) and 11.6% (1986) in Taiwan; and 11.6% (1990) and 7.9% (1991) in Thailand,

8. Hyug-Baeg Im, "The Rise of Bureaucratic Authoritarianism in South Korea," *World Politics* 37:2 (January 1987), pp. 231–57; Robert R. Kaufman, *Transition to Stable Authoritarian-Corporate Regimes: The Chilean Case?* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1976); Robert R. Kaufman, "Industrial Change and Authoritarian Rule in Latin America: A Concrete Review of the Bureaucratic-Authoritarian Model," in *The New Authoritarianism in Latin America*, ed. David Collier (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); James R. Kurth, "Industrial Change and Political Change: A European Perspective," in *ibid.*; and Guillermo A. O'Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism: Studies in South American Politics* (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1973).

9. Stephan Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman, *The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

10. Data are collected from the World Bank (1994), with the exception of Taiwan (Council for Economic Planning and Development, Taiwan, 1997). Evidently, the Asian inflation rates were far smaller as compared to the inflation rates of some economic crisis-induced transitions, for instance, 167.8% in Argentina (1973–83), 25.9% in Bolivia (1970–82), 147.7% in Brazil (1980–85), and 44.6% in Uruguay (1980–85) (World Bank, 1994).

respectively.¹¹ When inflation and growth rates are considered together, Indonesia and the Philippines were the only countries facing an economic crisis among the nine transition countries.

Among the Asian countries that have not been democratized, Cambodia (29.3%), Laos (25.0%), Myanmar (14.8%), and Vietnam (42.6%) suffered from high annual inflation rates during the late 1980s. On the other hand, the average annual inflation rates in China (5.8%), Hong Kong (7.2%), Malaysia (1.6%), and Singapore (1.7%) reflect the absence of major economic problems between 1980 and 1990.¹² Additionally, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam registered positive economic growth during the late 1980s, while Laos and Myanmar marked negative economic growth between 1987 and 1988. Yet, the growth rates in Laos and Myanmar were on the rise afterward. Taking both inflation and growth rates into consideration, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam may be considered the economic crisis countries during the late 1980s.

Table 2 rejects the causal relationship between economic crisis and Asian democratization. There were a lot more countries (77.8%) that underwent democratic transition without an economic crisis than those that did so with an economic crisis (22.2%). On the other hand, among the non-democratized countries, one-half faced an economic crisis, whereas the rest were free from such economic problems.

“Civic Culture” and Asian Democratization

A successful democracy requires citizens who are actively involved in politics.¹³ These active citizens develop civic culture in a society with some cultural traits including trust, tolerance, and a willingness to compromise. Protestantism is generally identified as a political culture that has such civic cultural features. Thus, Asia may be the last continent to be democratized, due to the lack of civic culture or Protestant traditions.¹⁴ In a similar vein, Singapore’s former Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew and Malaysia’s Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad propagate the so-called “Asian values,” broadly characterizing Asians as people who choose order or discipline over political

11. Asian Development Bank, *Key Indicators of Developing Asian and Pacific Countries* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 1997).

12. *Ibid.* Myanmar’s inflation rate is averaged between 1980 and 1992. Data for North Korea are not available.

13. See Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963); Diamond, *Political Culture and Democracy*; Ronald Inglehart, “The Renaissance of Political Culture,” *American Political Science Review* 82:4 (December 1988), pp. 1203–30.

14. Lucian W. Pye, *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1985).

TABLE 2 *Economic Crisis and Asian Democratization*

<i>Economic Crisis</i>	<i>Democratization</i>	
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Yes	22.2% Philippines Indonesia	50.0% Cambodia Laos Myanmar Vietnam
No	77.8 Bangladesh Mongolia Nepal Pakistan S. Korea Taiwan Thailand	50.0 China Hong Kong Malaysia Singapore

SOURCES: *World Development Report* (World Bank, various issues), *Key Indicators of Developing Asian and Pacific Countries* (Asian Development Bank 1993, 1997, and 2000), and *Taiwan Statistical Data Book* (Taiwan: Council for Economic Planning and Development, 1997). NOTE: Data for North Korea are not available. Since Taiwan is not a member of the United Nations, statistical yearbooks published by U.N.-related institutions often exclude Taiwan data. Here, data for Taiwan are collected from the *Taiwan Statistical Data Book*.

freedom and equality. According to them, Asian culture does not integrate well with democracy.¹⁵

As Table 3 illustrates, Buddhism is the most frequent state religion or the dominant culture in Asia. Nine out of 18 Asian countries have followed Buddhist cultural traditions. Confucianism is dominant only in four countries (China, North Korea, South Korea, and Taiwan), and Islam is dominant also in four countries (Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan). Catholicism is the dominant culture only in the Philippines. This distribution of culture also suggests that there is no such thing as "Asian values." Asian culture is remarkably diverse, including Buddhism, Catholicism, Confucianism, and Islam. Additionally, profound variations do exist in the same Bud-

15. Yet, their primary goal is to justify their authoritarian political systems on the grounds of "glorious" economic development in their countries. See Bilahari Kausikan, "Asia's Different Standard," *Foreign Policy* 42:3 (Fall 1993), pp. 24-51; Dae Jung Kim, "Is Culture Destiny? The Myth of Asia's Anti-Democratic Values," *Foreign Affairs* 73:6 (November-December 1994), pp. 100-11; Margaret Ng, "Why Asia Needs Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 8:2 (April 1997), pp. 10-23; and Fared Zakaria, "Culture Is Destiny: A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew," *Foreign Affairs* 73:2 (March-April 1994), pp. 109-26.

TABLE 3 *Cultural Background and Asian Democratization*

<i>Cultural Background</i>	<i>Democratization</i>	
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Buddhism	33.3% Mongolia Nepal Thailand Singapore	66.7% Cambodia Hong Kong Laos Myanmar Vietnam
Catholicism	11.1 Philippines	
Confucianism	22.2 S. Korea Taiwan	22.2 China N. Korea
Islam	33.3 Bangladesh Indonesia Pakistan	11.1 Malaysia

SOURCES: *Political Handbook of the World* (Bank and Muller 2000).

dhist culture, Confucian tradition, and Islamic heritage, not to mention the significant cultural differences within each country.¹⁶

The most important point that Table 3 makes is that it is not easy to determine which culture is most conducive to democracy in Asia. There is one Catholic country (the Philippines), which was democratized in 1986. Yet, the sample is too small to draw a generalization about the relationship between Catholicism and democratization in the Asian context. Islamic culture seems to be closely linked to democracy in Asia, which contradicts the worldwide conventional perceptions. Three of the Asian Islamic countries were democratized but one of them has not been democratized. The Confucian traditions are equally divided among the democratized countries (South Korea and Taiwan) and the non-democratized nations (China and North Korea). On the other hand, Buddhism appears to be non-democratic in Asia. Among the

16. Moreover, Buddhism, Catholicism, Confucianism, and Islam in themselves contain teachings of the so-called civic cultural traits such as compromise, mercy, harmony, equality, and freedom. See Francis Fukuyama, "The Centrality of Culture," *Journal of Democracy* 6:1 (January 1995), pp. 7-14; Bernard Lewis, "Islam and Liberal Democracy: A Historical Overview," *Journal of Democracy* 7:2 (April 1996), pp. 52-63; and Amartya Sen, "Democracy as a Universal Value," *Journal of Democracy* 10:3 (July 1999), pp. 3-17.

Buddhist countries, Mongolia, Nepal, and Thailand passed the hurdle of democratic transition in the early 1990s, but Cambodia, Hong Kong, Laos, Myanmar, Singapore, and Vietnam are far away from democratization. The ratio between the democratized Buddhist countries and the non-democratized Buddhist countries is 1:2.

The “British Colonial Experience” and Asian Democratization

Former colonies’ experience of British colonialism has been claimed to be conducive to democracy in the years after World War Two, as well as later, especially when coupled with the impact of economic development on democratization.¹⁷ Under colonial rule, democratic ideology and institutions were transmitted to the colonized countries. Table 4 suggests, however, that the British colonial experience theory makes only a weak case in Asia. Although 33.3% of the democratized countries shared the British colonial experience, a larger percentage than that for any other colonizing nation, this experience may not have been a condition for democratic transition in Asia in the 1980s and 1990s. There are more former British colonies (Hong Kong, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Singapore) that remain non-democracies than the democratized former British colonies (Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan). Moreover, all of the three former French colonies in Asia (Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam) have not experienced democratic transition. Apparently, Western occupation of these Asian countries has not been conducive to democracy.

Systematic investigation, thus far, reveals that the four conventional democratization theories fail to account well for Asian democratization. Moreover, the democratization experiences in South Korea and Taiwan seem not to improve our understanding about Asian democratization as a whole. The two countries always belong to the same categories across the variables of economic development, economic crisis, and cultural and colonial backgrounds, but they do not represent the third wave of Asian democratization. Then, what is the primary cause of Asian democratization? Were there any common political phenomena observed in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand on the verge of democratic transition? This puzzle may be solved by focusing on

17. Kenneth A. Bollen and Robert W. Jackman, “Economic and Noneconomic Determinants of Political Democracy in the 1960s,” *Research in Political Sociology* 1 (1985), pp. 27–48; Kenneth A. Bollen and Robert W. Jackman, “Political Democracy and the Size Distribution of Income,” *American Sociological Review* 50:4 (August 1985), pp. 438–57; and Kenneth A. Bollen and Robert W. Jackman, “Income Inequality and Democratization Revisited: Comment on Muller,” *American Sociological Review* 60:6 (December 1995), pp. 983–89.

TABLE 4 *Colonial Experience and Asian Democratization*

<i>Colonial Experience</i>	<i>Democratization</i>	
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Britain	33.3%	44.4%
	Bangladesh	Hong Kong
	Nepal	Malaysia
	Pakistan	Myanmar
		Singapore
China	11.1	
	Mongolia	
France		33.3
		Cambodia
		Laos
		Vietnam
Japan	22.2	11.1
	S. Korea	N. Korea
	Taiwan	
Portugal & Netherlands	11.1	
	Indonesia	
Spain	11.1	
	Philippines	
Never	11.1	11.1
	Thailand	China

SOURCES: *Political Handbook of the World* (Bank and Muller 2000).

nationwide political protests that erupted prior to political liberalization in these nine Asian countries.

Political Protests and Asian Democratization: The Alternative Model

Political protest has been defined as “demonstrations, boycotts, or strikes in which participants demanded political rights or new rulers.”¹⁸ Political protest is directed at political changes, while economic protest aims at, for instance, increases in salaries or improvements in the work environment. Tired of the legitimacy crisis in the regime in power, Asian people demanded the resignation of authoritarian leaders, the repeal of martial law, free elections, or constitutional changes, depending upon their nation-specific political con-

18. Michael Bratton, “Deciphering Africa’s Divergent Transitions,” *Political Scientific Quarterly* 112:1 (Spring 1997), p. 72.

ditions. In response, the regime in power conceded, and began political liberalization.

Political protests are measured by both the duration of demonstrations and the number of participants. First, Asians had taken to the streets for a remarkably long time before political liberalization took place. Mass political protests erupted in Bangladesh during October-December 1990; in Indonesia during May 1998; in Mongolia during December 1989-March 1990; in Nepal during January-April 1990; in the Philippines in February 1986; in South Korea during April-June 1987; in Taiwan during 1986-1987; and in Thailand during November 1991-May 1992.¹⁹

Second, however, it is almost impossible to obtain the exact number of demonstrators who participated in the nationwide protests in each country. Instead, the number of protesters at the peak of street demonstrations indirectly suggests the magnitude of political protests: a couple of hundred thousand in Bangladesh; 6,000 in Indonesia; 30,000 to 50,000 in Mongolia; 200,000 to 400,000 in Nepal; half a million to one million in the Philippines; several hundred thousand in South Korea; thousands in Taiwan; and several hundred thousand in Thailand. Although the numbers of demonstrators vary widely from thousands to a million, the respective number set a national record in each country's history, as did the duration of political protests.²⁰

Table 5 illustrates a strong relationship between political protests and democratization in Asia. Among the newly democratized countries, eight out of nine countries (88.9%) experienced political protests prior to political liberalization. The only exception to this political protest model in Asia is Pakistan. The sudden death of President Zia ul-Haq in a plane crash in August 1988 resulted in an unexpected transition from authoritarianism. In the following November 1988 parliamentary election, Benazir Bhutto of the Pakistan People's Party became prime minister.

On the other hand, in those Asian countries that are not democratized, it is not easy to find political protests of a comparable magnitude to those that occurred in the newly democratized countries. Historically, some remarkable

19. Bank and Muller, *Political Handbook of the World* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1986-2001); and *New York Times*.

20. The numbers of demonstrators are from the following: Reuters, "Bangladesh Chief Resigns His Office," *New York Times*, December 5, 1990; Susan Berfield and Dewi Loveard, "Ten Days That Shook Indonesia," *Asiaweek*, July 24, 1998; William R. Heaton, "Mongolia in 1990: Upheaval, Reform, but No Revolution Yet," *Asian Survey* 31:1 (January 1991), pp. 50-55; Sanjoy Hazarika, "Nepal Opposition Rejects Overture," *New York Times*, April 8, 1990; Seth Mydans, "Aquino Proposes Nonviolent Moves to Depose Marcos," *New York Times*, February 17, 1986; Clyde Haberman, "Student Protesters Gain in Intensity in Center of Seoul," *New York Times*, June 19, 1987; Jausheh Joseph Wu, *Taiwan's Democratization: Forces Behind the New Momentum* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Reuters, "100,000 Thais Reject (sic) Against Premier," *New York Times*, May 8, 1992.

TABLE 5 *Political Protests and Asian Democratization*

<i>Political Protests</i>	<i>Democratization</i>	
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Yes	88.9%	22.2%
	Bangladesh	China
	Indonesia	Myanmar
	Mongolia	
	Nepal	
	Philippines	
	S. Korea	
	Taiwan	
	Thailand	
No	11.1	77.8
	Pakistan	Cambodia
		Hong Kong
		Laos
		Malaysia
		N. Korea
		Singapore
		Vietnam

SOURCES: *Political Handbook of the World* (Bank and Muller, various issues) and *New York Times*.

political protests erupted in China (June 1989) and Myanmar (August-September 1988). Yet, these demonstrations led by student activists and Aung San Suu Kyi, respectively, did not bring about transition to democracy, but instead prompted a crackdown by the military. At the other end of the spectrum, political protests were very rare in Cambodia, Hong Kong, Laos, North Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam. In the middle is Malaysia.

Some Characteristics of Asian Protests

The political protests that took place in Asia during the 1980s and 1990s shared some characteristics. First, it was college students who sparked off a series of political demonstrations. In South Korea, university students (the National Coalition of University Student Representatives) took to the streets during 1986–87 to demand a direct presidential election and the resignation of President Chun Doo Hwan. In Taiwan, National Taiwan University students held several demonstrations during 1986–87 to press for liberalization of campus rules. These demonstrations challenged the ruling Kuomintang's campus security rules, and spread to many universities, leading to a university-student alliance. In Nepal, a treaty dispute between Nepal and India

stimulated nationalist sentiments among college students, who launched street demonstrations against India in 1989, and these student protests soon turned against the impotent Nepal government. In Bangladesh, Nationalist Student Party leaders of Dhaka University Central Students Union (DUCSU), and later, a stronger student alliance called the All Party Students' Unity (APSU), led nationwide street demonstrations during 1990–91.²¹ In Indonesia, Jakarta's prestigious Trisakti University students began to march in early May 1999. These student demonstrations spread to middle-class people, unionized laborers, peasants, and other social groups.

The second common characteristic of the political protests in Asia was that the middle class served as the backbone for the political movements. Even in economically underdeveloped Bangladesh, Nepal, Mongolia, and the Philippines, the middle class was the main locomotive of democratization. In the Philippines, half a million to a million ordinary citizens participated in the anti-Marcos campaign under the lead of the Philippine National Citizens Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL). In Nepal, lawyers, university professors, doctors, journalists, and artists based in the relatively urbanized Kathmandu valley area joined the mounting pro-democracy demonstrations in February 1990. Similarly, Mongolian intellectuals organized popular demonstrations and led pro-democracy movements in late 1989 and early 1990. In Bangladesh, two prominent female opposition leaders, Sheikh Hasina Wahid (the Awami League, or AL) and Begum Khaleda Zia (the Bangladesh National Party, or BNP) successfully orchestrated several general strikes in 1990.²²

In one of the economic powerhouses, South Korea, intellectuals, professors, white-collar workers, small business owners, and ordinary people participated in pro-democracy demonstrations that unfolded in the center of major cities. In Taiwan, the origin of the opposition *Tangwai* (meaning outside the ruling Kuomintang) movement was liberal intellectuals in the 1960s, and *Tangwai's* leadership, activists, and supporters were also drawn from the middle class throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In Thailand, the May 1992 uprising was even called the "cellular phone revolution."²³ Armed with phones, middle class protesters could relay information regarding the military deployments from one place to another so that they could manage prompt reactions.

21. Talukder Maniruzzaman, "The Fall of the Military Dictator: 1991 Elections and the Prospect of Civilian Rule in Bangladesh," *Pacific Affairs* 65:2 (Summer 1992), pp. 203–24.

22. See L. P. S. Shrivastava, *Nepal at the Crossroads* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1996); Heaton, "Mongolia in 1990"; Craig Baxter, "Bangladesh in 1990: Another New Beginning?" *Asian Survey* 31:2 (February 1991), pp. 146–52.

23. Philip Shenon, "Mobile Phones Primed, Affluent Thais Join Fray," *New York Times*, May 20, 1992.

The third common characteristic of the political protests was that a pro-democracy organization orchestrated the nationwide street demonstrations. In South Korea, the National Coalition for a Democratic Constitution (NCDC) was the umbrella opposition organization that led the pro-democracy movement in 1987. In Nepal, the leftist United National People's Movement called for a general strike in early 1990, which resulted in a grand compromise by the king. The king ended the partyless *panchayat* (council of elders) system after almost three decades. In Mongolia, intellectuals were influenced by political changes in the former Soviet Union, and formed the Mongolian Democratic Union, which served as a general headquarters for the opposition movements in 1990. In Bangladesh, a united front formed by Hasina and Zia in 1990 brought a significant boost into the whole opposition movement. In Thailand, Bangkok Mayor Chamlong Srimuang led nationwide popular protests with the coordination of the Student Federation of Thailand, the Campaign for Popular Democracy, and the New Aspiration throughout the May 1992 uprising.²⁴

Unlike these newly born pro-democracy organizations, in the Philippines and Taiwan, the national headquarters was formed many years prior to democratic transition.²⁵ In the Philippines, a group of the Philippine people formed NAMFREL in September 1983. In the aftermath of the assassination of the prominent opposition leader Benigno Aquino, the Philippine opposition came to believe that a free and fair election was the only peaceful way to political change. In Taiwan, the Tangwai appeared for the first time as a political opposition force in the 1977 local elections. The Tangwai pursued the lifting of martial law and the independence of Taiwan until martial law was lifted in 1987.

The fourth common characteristic was that political demonstrations never stopped until the pro-democracy movement's demands were met. In the Philippines, Corazon Aquino, the Catholic church, and NAMFREL led nationwide demonstrations against Marcos, and the snowballing opposition movement encouraged the defection of Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile and Deputy Chief of Staff Fidel V. Ramos. Facing this unexpected defection from his associates, along with isolation from the people, Marcos flew to Hawaii with his family and close cronies. In June 1987 in South Korea, mounting protests continuing for more than two weeks forced President Chun

24. See Ole Borre, Sushil R. Panday, and Chitra K. Tiwari, *Nepalese Political Behavior* (Nepal: Aarhus University Press, 1994); William R. Heaton, "Mongolia in 1991: The Uneasy Transition," *Asian Survey* 32:1 (January 1992); Lawrence Ziring, *Bangladesh: From Mujib to Ershad, An Interpretive Study* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1992); and David Van Praagh, *Thailand's Struggle for Democracy: The Life and Times of M. R. Seni Pramoj* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1996).

25. Wu, *Taiwan's Democratization*.

to withhold an attempt at military crackdown. In Bangladesh, as Hasina and Zia finally united in 1990, even government employees joined street demonstrations. A couple of days after the peak of street demonstrations, Prime Minister Hussain Muhammad Ershad conceded to the demands for his immediate resignation. In Thailand, in 1992, when the king finally started to intervene in Prime Minister Suchinda Kraprayoon's hardline stance to avoid imminent bloodshed, the ruling coalition stopped supporting the former general. Upon receiving the king's grant of clemency, Suchinda stepped down. In the latest Indonesian transition, the Muslim hierarchy and the ruling GOLKAR party leadership persuaded President Soeharto to resign, after the country witnessed popular protests in May 1998.

It is also interesting to note that demonstrations in other Asian countries and changes in the Soviet Union also seemed to spark Asian demonstrations. South Korea's NCDC studied how the strategies, lessons, and roles of NAM-FREL played in the transition to Philippine democracy. Also, it is not a simple coincidence that South Korea's June 29 Declaration (1987) came less than one month ahead of the lifting of martial law in Taiwan.²⁶ Like this close connection among the three Pacific Ocean countries (the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan), democratic movements in the inner-Asian states of Mongolia and Nepal had impacts on each other. The latter two transitions were also influenced by *perestroika* in their neighboring Soviet Union. Mongolia, especially, could not be free from the fever of democratization among its fellow communist states.

Political Liberalization and Democratization in Asia

These unprecedented political protests tipped the power balance favorably toward the opposition movements. Once the power balance was changed, the military could not intervene in or halt the transition to democracy. As political turmoil raged out of control, the regimes in power chose finally not to suppress the opposition movements. Instead, they made a grand compromise with the pro-democracy movements, which then opened up political liberalization. The most common form of political liberalization in Asia was a special declaration or announcement accepting protesters' democratic demands. In South Korea, the June 29 Declaration was the wholesale package of meeting the NCDC's demands. In Mongolia, the Politburo announced in March 1990 that it was giving up the Communist Party's monopoly on power and would work with opposition parties to construct a new constitution. In Nepal, the king announced the lifting of a 29-year ban on political parties, and

26. The June 29 Declaration included direct presidential elections, a large-scale pardon of political prisoners, and the restoration of freedom of the press, among others items.

dissolved the old parliament in April 1990. In addition, transitions to democracy began with the resignation announcements of authoritarian leaders Ershad in Bangladesh (December 1990), Suchinda in Thailand (May 1992), and Soeharto in Indonesia (May 1998).

Additionally, Asian political liberalization occurred with the lifting of martial law. A clear-cut case is Taiwan's liberalization in July 1987. On the other hand, political liberalization was launched by an unexpected event such as the exile or death of political leaders, as observed in the Philippines and Pakistan. After President Marcos fled the Philippines, Corazon Aquino assumed the presidency and maintained the transition to democracy. In Pakistan, the president's sudden death in a plane accident led to a new election where opposition parties could participate.

In the wake of political liberalization, a series of serious negotiation processes between the regime in power and opposition forces unfolded to discuss new constitutions, election schedules, and institutional choices, among other items. These Asian third-wave countries successfully held democratic elections that ushered in a democratic form of government. More recently, transitioned Asian nations whose change was triggered by political demonstrations have embraced power transfers from the ruling party to an opposition party in an orderly and peaceful fashion, and have enjoyed the longevity of new democracy; it is too early to judge the future of Indonesian democracy. Surprisingly enough, it was the Pakistani transition—not directly triggered by political demonstrations—that returned to a military rule.

Conclusions

This paper has tested some traditional theories of democratization in the Asian setting. These conventional theories of democratization appear unsuccessful in explaining the primary cause of the recent Asian transitions. The economic development, economic crisis, civic culture, and British colonial experience factors did not have significant impacts on Asian democratization. Nor do they systematically explain Asian democratization. In sharp contrast, the political protest factor evidently had significant and consistent effects on Asian democratization.

The political protests in the third-wave Asian countries share some common characteristics. First, college students sparked off a series of political demonstrations that spread from the capital to many major cities in each country. Second, the middle class served as the backbone for the pro-democracy movements. Third, many opposition leaders formed a national pro-democracy organization through which they orchestrated demonstrations joined by students and middle class people. Finally, the political demonstrations had a snowball effect both at the domestic and the international levels, and never stopped until the pro-democracy movement demands were met.

The recent Asian transitions are not the only cases for the political protest model. It is reported that labor movements played an important role in the mobilization process and the beginning of transition from authoritarianism in some Latin American countries.²⁷ Additionally, general strikes and political demonstrations ignited democratic transition in some East European countries in the late 1980s.²⁸ Also, political protests have led to liberalization and ended with democratic governments in many African countries between the 1980s and the 1990s.²⁹

27. J. Samuel Valenzuela, "Labor Movements in Transitions to Democracy: A Framework for Analysis," *Comparative Politics* 21:4 (July 1989), p. 447.

28. Michael Bernhard, "Civil Society and Democratic Transition in East Central Europe," *Political Science Quarterly* 108:2 (Summer 1993), pp. 307–26; and Doh Chull Shin and Junhan Lee, "Comparing Democratization East and West," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, 2001.

29. Bratton and van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa*.