Democratization
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fdem20

Political parties, party systems and democratization in East Asia
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Available online: 28 Feb 2012

To cite this article: Chow Bing Ngeow (2012): Political parties, party systems and democratization in East Asia, Democratization, 19:1, 152-155
To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2011.650070

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Political parties, party systems and democratization in East Asia, by Liang Fook Lye and Wilhelm Hofmeister, eds, Singapore, World Scientific, 2011, xiii + 331 pp., index, £61.00 (hardback), ISBN 978 981 4327 94 7

East Asian economic dynamism fascinates many people. It is no less fascinating politically. This edited volume examines the state of political parties and democracy in 11 East Asian political systems, grouping them under three section headings: one-party state, one-party dominant system, and multi-party system.

In the first section on ‘one-party state’, Zheng and Lye first introduce the paradoxical notion of ‘democratization without democracy’ in China. In this sense,
'democratization ... refers to the process of introducing democratic elements or features to an existing political system which is widely regarded as authoritarian' (p. 18). In other words, to make the political system more ‘democratic’ does not necessarily mean the end of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) monopolization of power. An adaptive CCP is proactively taking actions in response to changing socio-economic environments. Specifically, the authors examine three areas of ‘democracy’ introduced in recent years: intra-party democracy, grassroots elections, and a more positive role for civil society. The CCP is successfully transforming itself into a ‘catch-all party’, which implies that it is able to co-opt diverse societal interests. In short, it is mastering democratic games to consolidate its own hold on power. Thuy’s chapter discusses the importance of the Vietnamese Communist Party’s (VCP) 1986 Doi Moi policy in directing the country toward reforms. Under Doi Moi, a certain decentralization of power has taken place, while beginning with the constitutional amendments in 2001, the rule of law was also promoted by the VCP.

The second section deals with the ‘one-party dominant system’, which begins with Peou’s analysis of Cambodia. Peou shows how a liberal democratic constitution is no match for a determined party intending to hegemonize the political space. Hun Sen and his Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) use violence, intimidation, co-optation, ‘divide and conquer’, and other tactics to weaken its opposition, and to gradually and irreversibly establish itself as a hegemonic party. The CPP dominates the election organizing body, the administrative and security apparatus, and the judicial organs. Hence, even though relatively free elections are held under the Hun Sen regime, Cambodia is very much an authoritarian state.

The master of electoral authoritarianism is Singapore. Tan’s chapter begins with the statement that Singapore has ‘all the trappings of modern representative democracy’ (p. 107) but proceeds to show how the People’s Action Party (PAP) uses various means that are ostensibly meant to strengthen democracy, but in fact meant to achieve and secure its own dominance. For example, in the name of minority representation, multi-member plurality districts were introduced, which magnify disproportionality of seats and votes and mostly benefit the PAP. The appointment of a small number of non-elected opposition parliamentarians in effect weakens opposition legitimacy. The PAP also introduces other novelties that apparently strengthen public participation, but in effect render the opposition irrelevant and unnecessary. On top of all these tactics and strategies, the PAP still limits freedom of speech through draconian laws and control of the media. If Cambodian electoral authoritarianism is rough, the Singaporean version can be described as ‘elegant’, but no less effective.

The third case of a ‘one-party dominant system’ is Japan. Lam argues that the dominance of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in Japanese politics is largely a myth. The LDP has been in a state of decline since 1989. Its continual survival throughout the 1990s and 2000s before its collapse was due to fragmentation among the opposition and the personal charisma of the LDP leader Koizumi, not its own strength. Even during the heyday of LDP’s dominance, it faced constraints
in imposing its own values. Also, as with other post-industrial societies, the LDP is facing ‘dealignment’. The rise of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) is also well treated in Lam’s chapter. In essence, the DPJ is ideologically similar to the LDP. Japanese party politics seem increasingly similar to the Republican-Democratic contest in the US.

The third section on ‘multi-party system’ begins with an excellent chapter on Thailand by Pavin. Thailand was torn by two opposing violence-prone mass movements resulting from the military overthrow of former PM Thaksin and the military-royalist suppression of his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party. Pavin sees the chaotic politics in recent years as helpful for democratic development. With both movements solidifying into stable party alignments, Thailand will eventually have stable democratic competition. Parties finally will focus on policy agenda rather than being appendages to leaders or networks of patronage. He gives credit to the TRT as the first party that has a strong social base and coherence. Pavin here corrects the misperception that the TRT is a ‘personalistic party’ (Diamond and Gunther, 2001, p. 28). The resiliency of the TRT is proved correct in the 2011 Thai general elections, in which its latest incarnation has won once again. Hadi’s chapter deals less with party competition but more with the clash of political personalities in Indonesia, which yields insights into the weak institutionalization of party politics in Indonesia. Personalities seem to matter more than parties. The principal dividing lines between the governing coalition and its opposition were also not based on policy agenda but on conflicts between political leaders. In this sense, Hadi comments that the vibrant democracy in Indonesia is still not mature.

Lim’s chapter on the Korean ‘cartelized party system’ presents another picture, in which established parties, while quarrelling among themselves, worked together to block new and minority parties from gaining influence. Electoral systems and party law also strengthened the cartelization of the party system. The party system could be said to be stable and consolidated, but at the cost of rigidity. The new electoral and party law reforms in 2004 were intended to weaken the cartelized system, but the reforms also restricted certain channels of political expression, such as the banning of rallies. Korea, Lim contends, wanted to import the best democratic institutions from different Western traditions (America and Europe), but the end result may not always be the best of the traditions. He therefore cautions against blindfold copying of democratic institutions by developing democracies. Gonzalez’s chapter is based on a survey in the Philippines. The parties are shown to have weak appeal, and the prevailing public acceptance of party-switching also contributes to the persistence of party weaknesses. One bright spot in this survey is that college graduates appeared to have a stronger political consciousness and interest in policy programmes. Hence Gonzalez recommends recruitment of college graduates, together with introduction of a party law, provision of political education, and mass membership, as ways to strengthen the parties, and ultimately to consolidate democracy.
Shyu uses Lipset-Rokkan’s ‘freezing’ thesis to analyse the development of the party system in Taiwan. Accordingly, Taiwan is experiencing the classic case of the ‘freezing’ of party-voter alignment, with the cleavage dividing the parties and voters being national identity. The political consequence of this alignment is the gradual emergence and strengthening of a two-party system at the expense of the smaller parties. Shye uses the term ‘bubble phenomenon’ to describe the rise and decline of many smaller parties, and many of them were eventually forced to align themselves to the two big parties for sheer political survival. Finally, Li’s chapter attempts to explain the underdevelopment of democracy in Hong Kong. He faults the focus on constituency service, rather than big policy ideas, among the major political parties in Hong Kong as a factor that contributes to this state of underdevelopment. Another factor cited is Beijing’s policies. With the Legislative Council composed of many legislators elected on the strength of their constituency service, the quality of legislative debates, and the policy agenda of the parties within the legislature, would be further weakened in an executive-dominated political system. Also, beginning in 2004, Beijing’s policies that were meant to boost Hong Kong’s economy had significantly reduced the dissatisfaction, and consequently the demand for greater democracy, amongst the public. In Li’s chapter, one could see that Beijing’s Hong Kong policy is actually quite brilliant. Without directly interfering in the internal affairs of Hong Kong, and without generating much opposition, it has successfully steered the political direction of the territory to its own liking.

This is an impressive and comprehensive book. However, I have some reservation about grouping Japan with Cambodia and Singapore. After all, LDP’s political dominance is not founded on suppressing freedom of speech and the opposition. This ‘one-party democratic system’ essentially does not preclude the possibility of changing the governing party, and eventually it did succumb to that. Electoral authoritarianism is another story, in which threats to the governing party are seen as threats to the regime and the nation, and hence it is much less tolerant of dissent and opposition. The case studies in this book also add credence to the thesis that a stable party system contributes to democratic consolidation.

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© 2012, Chow Bing Ngeow
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2011.650070

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