

Book Review: Yun-Han Chu, Larry Diamond, Andrew J. Nathan, and Doh Chull Shin, *How East Asians View Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 309 pages.

Does Democracy Enjoy Popular Support in East Asia?

Stephen D. Collins

A wide set of democratic “barometers,” including the Latinobarometer, Afrobarometer, and New Europe Barometer, were introduced in the 1990s, permitting researchers and observers to measure the degree of popular support for democracy within those regions. East Asia was not plumbed for this information until a new East Asia Barometer (EAB) was released in 2000 (with an updated edition in 2005). *How East Asians View Democracy*, edited by Yun-Han Chu, Larry Diamond, Andrew J. Nathan, and Doh Chull Shin, artfully distills the data compiled in the EAB to provide important and often counterintuitive insights about the views, preferences, and attitudes of East Asians. It brings together a skilled set of country experts to analyze what the data reveal about support for democracy in the East Asian countries/territories of China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Mongolia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Thailand. In addition to the country studies, the book’s editors—an impressive collection of luminaries in the field of Comparative Politics—provide region-wide assessments and interregional comparisons.

The volume’s primary added value is to assess the suitability and sustainability of democracy in East Asia. The authors find many worrisome trends and data which suggest that democracy may not be fully consolidated or accepted. However, overall, they find that democracy is, contrary to conventional wisdom, valued and supported in East Asia, even more so than in regions with cultures that are ostensibly more receptive to democracy. Still, support for democracy is not steadfast, and in many countries, due to the prevalence of illiberal values and equivocal support for democratic regimes, the threat of backsliding into authoritarianism remains.

Acquiring insight into the perceptions and preferences of publics in East Asia is a tremendous benefit to the democracy literature, as, the authors shrewdly note, East Asia presents several “puzzles” to democratization researchers. First, East Asia has resisted, to a greater extent than most other

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regions, the “third wave” democratization which has swept across the world since 1974. Second, East Asia presents a challenge to the “modernization” thesis of democracy, as posited by Inglehart and others, given the resistance of Malaysia and Singapore to democracy and the perpetuation of authoritarianism in China, despite these countries’ remarkable economic strides. Third, most of the new democracies of East Asia emerged in the wake of authoritarian regimes that were not fully discredited, due to the social stability and economic growth experience under their tenure. Fourth, hegemony in East Asia has passed from democratic Japan to rigidly authoritarian China, and therefore regional pressures for democratization may have ebbed. The fifth and final puzzle relates to the appropriateness and long-term prospects of democracy in East Asia, considering that the conventional wisdom that “Asian values” is unreceptive to the core democratic norms of political contestation and individual rights.

Perhaps the latter puzzle is the most relevant to this study, as it directly confronts the issue of attitudes and values, the very subject of the EAB. Also, the question is perhaps the most compelling for democratization scholars, as it relates to the meta-question about whether democracy is universally applicable, that is, appropriate for all cultures. This book explores the attachment of publics in several East Asian polities to democracy as a political system, and as a set of normative values, and in so doing, assesses the contention that democracy confronts inhospitable soil in the world’s most populous region.

This tome reveals many sanguine findings about grass-roots support for democracy in East Asia. Democracy was viewed favorably by the “overwhelming majorities” of publics in the new democracies of East Asia, and even in China. In response to the question of whether democracy is “desirable for our country now,” some 9 of 10 respondents answered in the affirmative (p. 22). Only in China and Taiwan was support significantly lower; but even in these countries, more than seven of ten respondents expressed a desire for democracy. Substantial majorities of publics in each of the East Asian countries also believe democracy is suitable for their societies; indeed, in most countries, more than three-quarters of respondents viewed democracy as compatible with their societies. Even in Mongolia, among the world’s most underdeveloped states, 86.3 percent of the public viewed democracy as being suitable for their country. Therefore, according to survey data, the majority of East Asians deem democracy to be both desirable and appropriate for their societies.

Though the authors present evidence that democracy enjoys significant grass-roots support in East Asia, they are unable to assert with a high degree of confidence that democracy is consolidated in the new East Asian democracies. As presented in this book, the East Asian Barometer yields worrisome evidence for democracy supporters. Scholars have found that democracy’s survival in a country can be predicted not only by its broad appeal, but also by the unequivocal rejection by society of all other political forms. Though most East Asian citizens report attachment to democracy, for large percentages of the population, such

support is not unequivocal. In only one country—Thailand—did at least three-quarters of the respondents assert that democracy was “preferable to all other kinds of government” (p. 22). In Japan and the Philippines, just two-thirds of the public considered democracy sacrosanct; in Mongolia and China, just over half of the respondents thought that democracy was the most preferable political system; and in Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, just under half of all those surveyed were willing to consider democracy the only acceptable form of government. Explicit rejection of authoritarianism, or, *authoritarian detachment*, is also considered a useful measure of popular commitment to democracy. The data reveal that detachment from authoritarianism is not exceptionally strong in East Asia. In only three countries—Korean, Japan, and Taiwan—did more than half of the citizens reject all three authoritarian options of rule by a strongman, military rule, and technocratic rule.

The authors also introduce a useful composite measure of popular commitment to democracy, which combines responses on support for democracy with responses on rejection of authoritarian alternatives. The resulting “Patterns of Commitment to Democracy” eschews a binary (yes or no) measure of democratic support, and instead produces a continuous measure, with categories of democratic commitment from “very strong,” “strong,” “moderate,” and “skeptical” supporters, to “weak” opponents, and, finally, “strong” opponents of democracy. Using this measure, only two countries appear to possess a robust popular base of support for democracy—Japan and South Korea. It is only in these two countries where we find the percentage of “principled supporters”—the combined set of “very strong,” “strong,” and “moderate supporters”—exceeding three-quarters of the population, and also only a very marginal percentage of outright opponents of democracy (pp. 28, 29).

In addition to less-than-reassuring data on the public’s commitment to democracy and its rejection of authoritarianism, two other measures undermine confidence in democratic consolidation in East Asia. First, citizens in the new East Asian democracies report a low sense of political efficacy. Across the region, large percentages of the public lack confidence in their ability to either understand or participate in politics. Perhaps even more unsettling is the response to questions related to democratic values. In East Asia, the data reveal weak attachment by individuals to the fundamental principles of democracy, including belief in the importance of government by rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, and the balance of power among branches of government. The authors suggest that “Overall across East Asia, popular commitment to the rule of law is weak. The specter of...“illiberal democracy” hangs over most East Asian societies” (p. 34).

The results of the East Asian barometer, as skillfully analyzed by the authors of this work, reveal the uncertain foundations of democracy in the region. Indeed, the authors find that, “In all, none of the new democracies in East Asia appear [sic] firmly consolidated at the level of mass public opinion, and all

are vulnerable to public disaffection” (p. 36). Does this confirm the assertions of those who posit that Asia is uniquely hostile to democracy? As revealed in the excellent comparative section of the concluding chapter, East Asians are actually no more hostile to democracy or supportive of authoritarianism than any other newly democratizing region. The regional democracy barometers reveal that public support for democracy (“democracy is always preferable to other regimes”) in East Asia is, at 60 percent, above average when compared to other newly democratizing regions, including Latin America, Africa, Eastern Europe, and South Asia. East Asians also report greater levels of satisfaction with the way democracy works in their country as compared with Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa, and South Asia. Finally, East Asians reject authoritarianism as robustly, or more so, than any region outside of the West. Despite the evidence of inconsistent support for democracy in East Asia, the authors note that “the cross-regional comparisons suggest that if democracy is in trouble in Asia, it also suffers serious, and in some respects more acute, vulnerabilities in other regions” (p. 245). According to the authors, the EAB survey data suggest that democracy scholars should reject “the pessimistic view that democratic values are only Western and have no appeal in the East” (p.256).

The cross-regional comparison, therefore, challenges the theory—advanced most notably by Singapore’s Lee Kwan Yew (1994)—that Asia is culturally unreceptive to democracy. While the study finds little support for the theory of Asian Exceptionalism in the region at large, the authors do find some support for the theory in the Confucian-based societies of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Among the citizenries examined in this study, the publics of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan report the lowest levels of preference for democracy, and, at 57 percent, 67 percent, and 59 percent, respectively, the smallest proportions of the public affirming belief in the suitability of democracy for their societies. The authors assert that skepticism about the suitability of democracy for their societies reflects “the lingering influence of common cultural values which privilege order and harmony” (p. 21). Yet, despite the ostensible cultural impediments, even in the country with the lowest suitability response—Taiwan—a significant majority of citizens maintained that democracy was both desirable and suitable. Confucianism, thus, appears to be hardly an insurmountable obstacle to democratic consolidation.

This well-crafted and insightful study of popular support for democracy in East Asia is not, however, without a few shortcomings. As proximately discussed, the book does address the subject of the cultural compatibility of democracy for East Asia. Still, for a subject so prominent in the discourse on democratization, the book provides only a cursory discussion of the debate and what the EAB data reveal about the theory of Asian Exceptionalism. Some discussion of the Lee Kwan Yew (1994) and Kim Dae Jung (1994) articles on the subject would have been merited. Additionally, the EAB survey reflects views of people in East Asia immediately in the wake of the epic late 1990s economic

crisis which ravaged the region. The authors give passing acknowledgement of the possible influence of the crisis on the data; still, the analysis would have been strengthened if more consideration had been devoted to how the crisis may have skewed popular support for democratic government. The book also leaves democracy observers wondering whether citizens are aware of the finding—advanced most prominently by Stephan Haggard (2000)—that the democratic governments of the region escaped from the crisis much earlier than their authoritarian neighbors. If so, did this affect views of democracy? At isolated moments, the narrative seems to vacillate in terms of the conclusive judgment on public support for democracy in the countries. For example, in the chapter examining South Korea, the author asserts that “Koreans’ rejection of authoritarianism is unambiguous” (p. 59). This clashes, however, with the statement presented a few pages earlier that one-third of Koreans were “willing to entertain an authoritarian alternative” to democracy (p. 54).

Still, these modest flaws notwithstanding, *How East Asians View Democracy* provides a superb analysis of popular support for democracy in the region, and will long serve as a highly valuable resource to both regional specialists and democracy scholars. The book presents ample evidence suggesting that the consolidation of democracy in East Asia remains a work in progress. Though most East Asians report a preference for democracy, significant percentages in several countries remain democracy skeptics, that is, skeptical of the merits of democracy and its suitability for their countries. Still, although democracy’s survival, consolidation, and proliferation in the region are hardly preordained, democracy “barometer” surveys suggest that the same conclusion can be asserted with respect to every other region outside of the West, including Latin America, Africa, Eastern Europe, and South Asia. According to this book, East Asians appear to be at least as receptive toward and supportive of democracy as individuals in other democratizing regions. The book subtly delivers a counterpoint to the theory of Asian Exceptionalism, as it reveals democracy to be a genuinely Asian value.

