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In Focus

# Asian Barometer Survey

## East Asia Wrestles With Questions of Trust and Democracy

# Regime Legitimacy in East Asia: Why Non-Democratic States Fare Better than Democracies

## By Yun-han Chu, Hsin-hsin Pan & Wen-chin Wu

**For proponents of orthodox theories of Western liberal democracy, the results of the third wave of the Asian Barometer Surveys pose a serious challenge.**

**It turns out that authoritarian or non-democratic governments in East Asia enjoy more support from their people than the region's democratic governments. Yun-han Chu, Hsin-hsin Pan and Wen-chin Wu dissect the survey's findings to explain why.**

EAST ASIA poses an intriguing puzzle to the literature of comparative democratization, because the region has evidently defied the global trend of concurrent movement toward democracy over the last three decades.<sup>1</sup> Since the start of third-wave democratization in 1974, more than 80 countries have gravitated into the orbit of democratization, triggering a series of political reforms, including allowing media freedom and holding competitive national elections. In East Asia, however, the wave of democratization has swept through only a few countries. While South Korea and Taiwan fully democratized in the 1990s, Thailand has swung back and forth between democracy and military rule; the Philippines, Indonesia and Mongolia are still struggling with democratic consolidation; and other Asian countries remain resistant to democratic gravity as late as this second decade of the 21st century. More surprisingly, some of the most long-lived authoritarian regimes, such as mainland China, Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam, have sustained themselves and thrived in the past decades against all odds, and they are expected to sustain their rule for many years to come. As a result, authoritarian resilience in so many East Asian countries raises a puzzling question: why can they successfully resist the momentum of democratization in an age of globalization and digital revolution?

In this essay, we use the third-wave Asian Barometer Surveys (ABS3) to track down micro-level evidence and explain why we still find entrenched authoritarian rule in so many Asian countries. We answer this puzzle by investigat-

<sup>1</sup> Yun-han Chu, Larry Diamond, Andrew Nathan and Doh Chull Shin, "Introduction," in Yun-han Chu et. al. eds., *How East Asians View Democracy* (Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 1-34.

<sup>2</sup> David Easton, *A Framework for Political Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1965).

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Gilley, *The Right to Rule: How States Win and Lose Legitimacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).

ing sources of regime legitimacy in 13 East Asian countries, including Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Mongolia, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam. Our data suggest that many authoritarian countries enjoy a higher level of regime legitimacy than their democratic counterparts in East Asia. Put another way, a high level of regime legitimacy enjoyed by many East Asian authoritarian and hybrid regimes prevents them from experiencing democratic transitions.

Furthermore, we investigate sources of regime legitimacy in East Asian countries. Based on the political system theory elaborated by David Easton (1965),<sup>2</sup> classic Western democratic theory emphasizes the input side of a political system — including universal suffrage, competitive elections and popular accountability — as the defining features of democracy and sources of regime legitimacy. With the ABS3 data, however, we demonstrate that non-democratic regimes denying democratic rights to their citizens may still enjoy higher levels of political support if they deliver economic wellbeing and good governance. In other words, empirical data from East Asian countries suggest that regime legitimacy turns out to be created, maintained, and destroyed less at the input but more at the output side of the political system.

In the rest of this essay, we will first flesh out how the literature of liberal democracy and regime legitimacy fails to apply to political development in East Asia. While theories of liberal democracies emphasize the input side of the political systems as the fundamental cornerstone of regime legitimacy, East Asians tend to place emphasis on the output side when evaluating the legitimacy of their political regimes. Furthermore, we also see that a higher level of regime support found in the non-democratic regimes is buttressed by a cognitive foundation widely

shared among East Asian citizens. The divergence in regime support to a substantial degree manifests itself in the way people understand the meaning of democracy. East Asians tend to conceptualize democracy in terms of output-related policy performance rather than input-related norms and procedures.

### REGIME LEGITIMACY IN EAST ASIA

Legitimacy by definition concerns how power may be used in ways that citizens consciously accept. The survival and effective functioning of modern political regimes depends on the public's will to familiarize and support them. As Bruce Gilley forcefully points out, regimes without legitimacy devote more resources to maintaining their rule and less to effective governance. When citizens' regime support declines, regimes are vulnerable to overthrow or collapse.<sup>3</sup> Empirically, one can measure the level of regime legitimacy by examining to what extent the existing system of government enjoys popular support.

Western normative political theory typically expects democratic regimes to be more legitimate than authoritarian ones, because democracy is built on the consent of the ruled and universal suffrage that ensure the participation of citizens in the policy-making process. A fair and participatory democracy with citizens' collective input, the argument goes, produces better output to improve the wellbeing of the general public. In contrast, authoritarian regimes are questioned for their lack of legitimacy because they suppress political competition and deny citizens the right to a final say over the selection of government leaders.

The difference in the level of legitimacy can be further explained by David Easton's theory of political systems. Members of a political system, according to Easton (1965), express their support for the system in a way that corresponds to

5 E.g. Bruce Gilley, "The determinants of state legitimacy: Results for 72 countries," *International Political Science Review*, 27, 1 (2006): 47-71.  
6 Most work in English on the subject has used surveys organized

not only by local scholars or research institutions but also by credible international collaborative survey projects, such as Asian Barometer and the World Values Survey. See Tang Wenfang, *Public Opinion and*

*Political Change in China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005) and Teng Zhenglai and Sujian Guo, eds., *Reviving Legitimacy: Lessons For and From China* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).

7 Yun-han Chu, "Sources of Regime Legitimacy and the Debate over the Chinese Model," *The China Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Spring 2013): 1-42.

how their demands (inputs) are met by the policies (outputs). Since democracies have institutionalized political participation and electoral competition, citizens may give more support to the regime. In other words, the emphasis on the input side of the political system, in the eyes of some theorists of democracy such as Robert Dahl (1971),<sup>4</sup> has made liberal democracy a more desirable and legitimate form of political regime than any other alternatives. Many empirical studies also demonstrate that democratic regimes usually have better policy outputs than their authoritarian counterparts, such as more protection of property rights, more provision of public goods, and a lower rate of child mortality.

However, East Asia poses a serious challenge to these liberal democratic theories. As illustrated in Figure 1, East Asian citizens under non-democratic regimes usually register higher regime support and loyalty than their counterparts in democratic regimes. Specifically, when presented with the statement, "A system like ours, even if it runs into problems, deserves the people's support," more than 80 percent of respondents in Thailand, Singapore, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Malaysia agreed with this statement. Meanwhile, citizens in democratic countries such as Mongolia, Taiwan, Japan and South Korea express substantially lower support for their regimes. If democratic procedures, such as free elections and multi-party competition, are key components of regime legitimacy, these findings are indeed implausible.

**INPUT VS. OUTPUT IN POLITICAL SYSTEMS**

The high regime support and loyalty in non-democratic East Asian countries not only account for authoritarian resilience in the region, but also shed light on the inadequacy of existing liberal theories that overemphasize the input side of the political system. Alternatively, Bruce Gilley argues that non-democratic regimes deny-

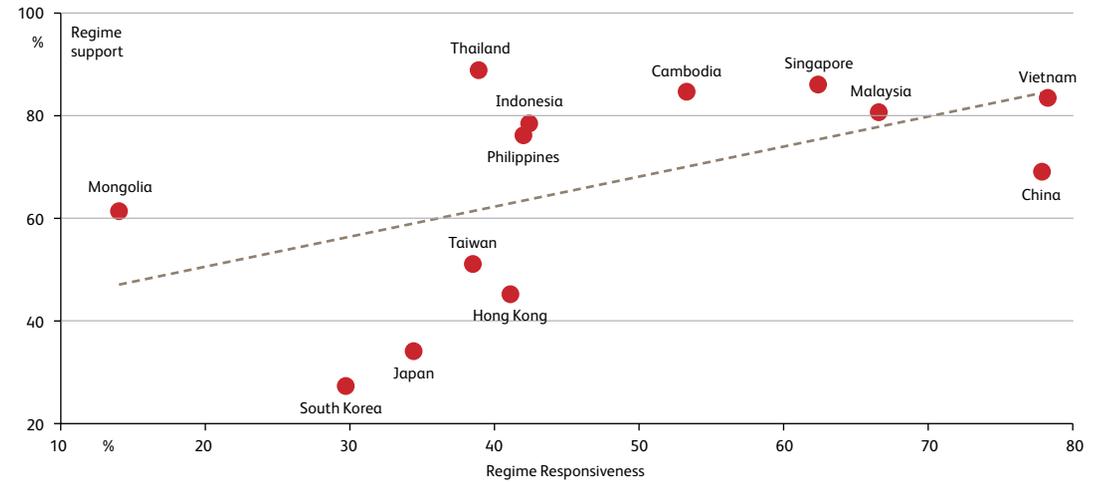
**FIGURE 1 REGIME SUPPORT IN EAST ASIA**

Source: Asian Barometer Survey, Wave 3 (2014-2016).



**FIGURE 2 GOVERNMENT RESPONSIVENESS AND REGIME SUPPORT IN EAST ASIA**

Source: Asian Barometer Survey, Wave 3 (2014-2016).



ing democratic rights to their citizens might still enjoy a higher level of political support if they deliver economic wellbeing and good governance.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, mechanisms of popular accountability and democratic representation do not immunize democracies from poor economic performance and bad governance.

For instance, China has been regarded as a regime with limited legitimacy in the eyes of followers of Western liberal democracy, since it lacks direct and competitive elections. However, the empirical data from survey after survey have corroborated our findings, showing that the Chinese one-party regime actually enjoys substantial popular support.<sup>6</sup> A plausible explanation suggests that the Chinese political system under one-party rule has succeeded in delivering a "for the people" government. Although the current Chinese political system fails to meet the criteria "of the people" and "by the people," this system can still enjoy sustainable public support as long as it maintains its "for the people" track record.<sup>7</sup>

The validity of this explanation and its implications for authoritarian resilience is not confined to the Chinese political system, but can be further extended to other East Asian countries. In short, we have to entertain the possibility that regime legitimacy does not solely depend on the input

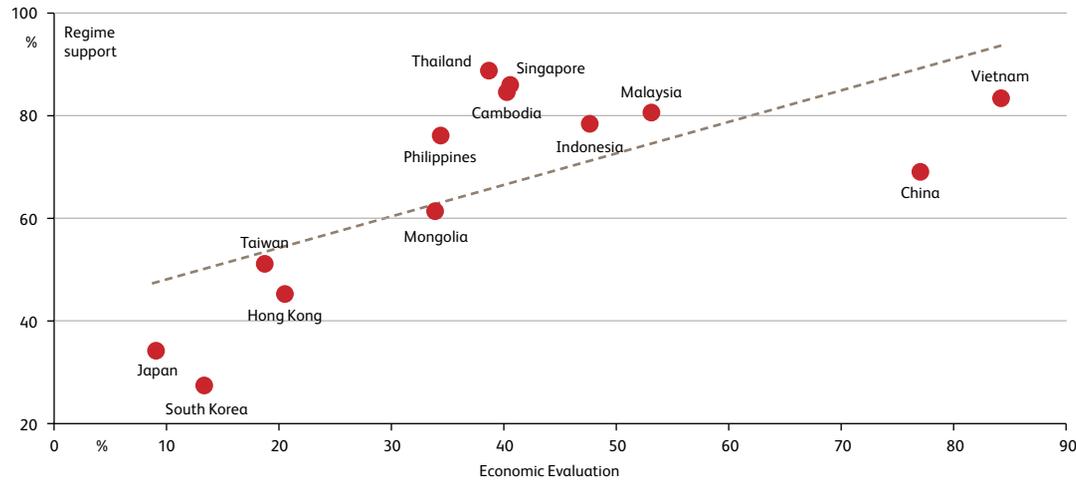
side of the political system. Instead, outputs of the political system can garner support among citizens and legitimize the system.

Drawn from the ABS3 data, Figure 2 further illustrates our argument. In it, we plot the percentages of agreement with the statement "How well do you think the government responds to what people want?" against the percentages of their support for the regime in each surveyed country. The relationship between perceptions of government responsiveness and regime support, as suggested in Figure 2, is positive with a correlation coefficient of 0.53, indicating that a higher perception of government responsiveness is associated with higher regime support. Furthermore, Figure 2 demonstrates that citizens in non-democratic regimes, China and Vietnam in particular, perceive more responsiveness from their governments and express higher regime support than those in Taiwan, Japan and South Korea, the three highest-rated liberal democracies in the region.

In addition to government responsiveness, the ABS3 also investigates citizens' evaluation of the improvement in their families' economic situation. Similar to Figure 2, we draw Figure 3 (overleaf) to illustrate the relationship between East Asians' regime support and their evaluation of the economic situation of their countries com-

**FIGURE 3 ECONOMIC EVALUATION AND REGIME SUPPORT IN EAST ASIA**

Source: Asian Barometer Survey, Wave 3 (2014-2016).



pared with what it was a few years ago. Figure 3 shows that the better respondents think the economic conditions in their countries are, the higher regime support they tend to express. Both Figure 2 and Figure 3 suggest that non-democracies in East Asia still enjoy a higher level of political support if their citizens perceive that their governments are able to deliver economic well-being and good governance. It is not a coincidence that citizens in Taiwan, South Korea and Japan both give a very downbeat assessment of their country's performance and register a rather low level of regime support. This implies that the mechanism of popular accountability and democratic representation does not protect East Asian democracies from reaping a disparaging level of support for the system of government.

**HOW EAST ASIANS DEFINE DEMOCRACY**

The observed divergence of regime support among East Asian political systems challenges the prevailing theory on sources of regime legitimacy. Does this mean that the citizens living under non-democratic regimes do not embrace democracy as an ideal form of government and they don't mind living under a non-democratic regime? Our survey results suggest otherwise. People living under

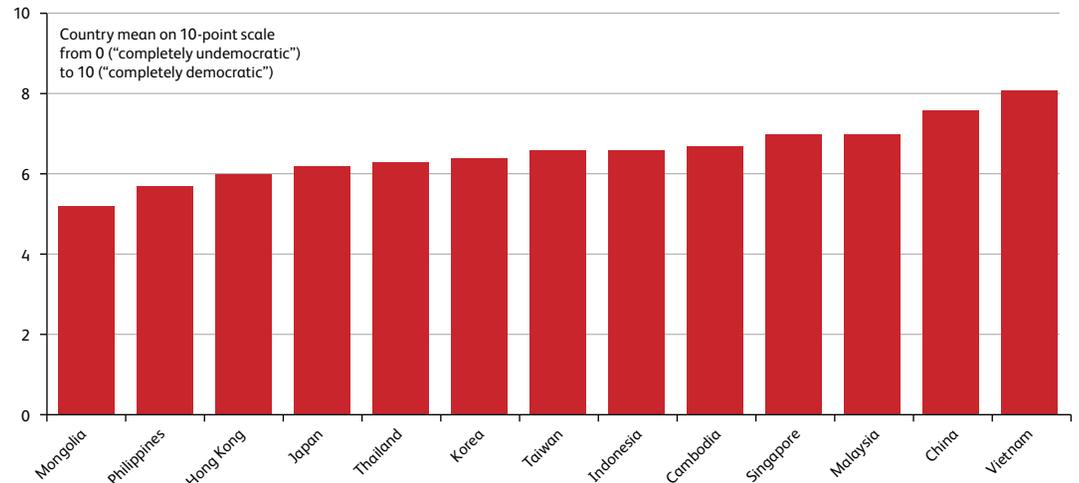
**Asians do have very different understandings of democracy from people in the Western world. Even for citizens in East Asian liberal democracies, including Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, the procedural and liberty components are easily subordinate to good governance and social equity components.**

objectively non-democratic regimes paradoxically tend to think their political systems are quite democratic, while a majority of the people living in objectively democratic systems tends to think their current system is not democratic enough.

Figure 4 shows the results of the subjective democratic rating based on the measurement asking respondents to place the country's current political system on a 10-point scale where

**FIGURE 4 POPULAR ASSESSMENT OF DEMOCRACY LEVEL BY COUNTRY**

Source: Asian Barometer Survey, Wave 3 (2014-2016).



0 represents "completely undemocratic" and 10 "completely democratic." Citizens living under non-democratic regimes such as China, Vietnam, Singapore and Malaysia rate their countries relatively higher than citizens living under democratic regimes. For instance, citizens in Mongolia on average rate their political system below the passing grade of 6.0. A majority of people in Taiwan, South Korea and Japan still think their respective political system is far from being completely democratic (not much above the passing grade of 6.0). While these results might look perplexing to some observers, our respondents are at least cognitively consistent. For example, Vietnamese citizens think that their system is very democratic and also deserves their support.

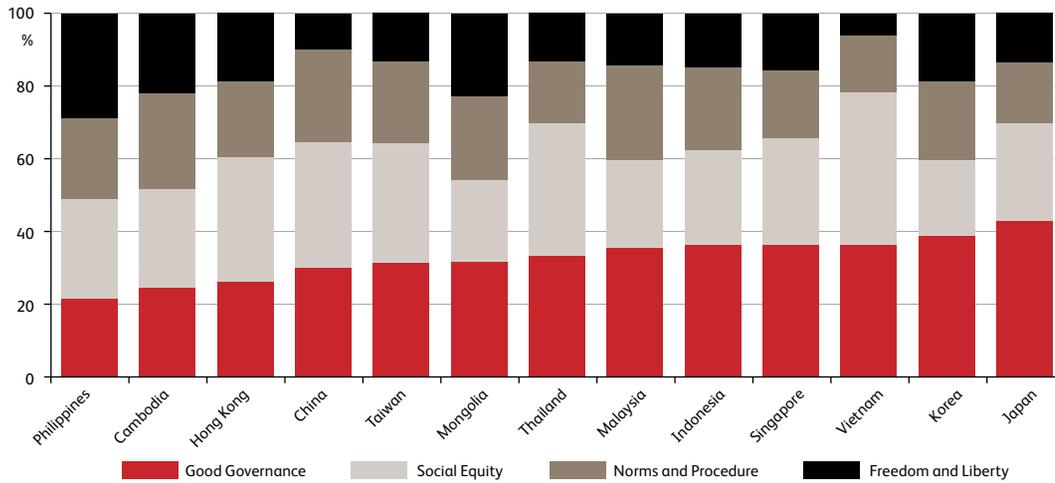
Why do people in Vietnam, China, Singapore, Malaysia and Cambodia think this way? The most plausible explanation that immediately comes to our mind is that the non-democratic regimes seemingly enjoy a higher level of regime legitimacy and are rated as a more favorable political system because the citizens living in those countries are denied access to free media, are influenced by official propaganda, are not exposed to open criticism from an opposition, and are afraid to express their real feeling and views.

The real story is more complicated than this. Besides, we have to explain why people in Taiwan and South Korea do not rate their own political system more favorably on the 10-point democratic scale. The key to this puzzle is how East Asians actually understand democracy. While democracy has become the only game in town in many Asian societies, it remains a contested concept, having numerous connotations in popular political discourse. To tap into people's conception of democracy, ABS3 employed a four-question battery. According to our prior research using open-ended questions, East Asians' understanding of democracy typically contained four different components — namely, norms and procedures, freedom and liberty, social equity and good governance. The four-question battery was designed as repetitive measures. For each of the four questions, our respondents were asked to choose one statement out of four choices corresponding to freedom and liberty, social equity, norms and procedures, and good governance, respectively. These statements were summarized by their correspondences to different meanings of democracy.

The empirical result can be summarized into a percentage measure for the appearance of each major concept. As Figure 5 shows, Asians are more

**FIGURE 5 EAST ASIA'S DEFINITION OF DEMOCRACY**

Source: Asian Barometer Survey, Wave 3 (2014-2016). Note: Percentages based on respondents' first choice from four major concepts.



In Focus: Asian Barometer Survey

**The historical experiences constitute a pull for a non-democracy that delivers and a push from a democracy that stagnates. East Asian democracies now seem to be trapped in a loss of vision and adaptability in an age of ever-changing globalization.**

likely to think of democracy in terms of output-related characteristics such as good governance and social equity rather than input-related ones such as norms and procedures or freedom and liberty. For instance, in Singapore, the most popular connotation of democracy is good governance (36.1 percent), followed by social equity (29.6 percent), norms and procedures (18.5 percent), and freedom and liberty (15.7 percent). This cognitive pattern, however, is not unique to Singapore. In fact, this is the prevailing pattern across all East Asian societies, regardless of their different trajectories of regime evolution or levels of socio-economic modernization.

Indeed, Asians do have very different understandings of democracy from people in the Western world. Even for citizens in East Asian liberal democracies, including Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, the procedural and liberty components are easily subordinate to good governance and social equity components. Citizens in Japan and South Korea put even more emphasis on good governance than people in other countries do. In other words, East Asians tend to value the output of political systems more than the underlying normative principles that are prioritized by theorists of Western democracy.

**A SEASON OF DEMOCRATIC RECESSION?**

During the 1990s, East Asia's third-wave democracies maintained satisfactory policy performance and fared better than non-democracies, just as the classic theories of liberal democracy would suggest. The situation has dramatically turned around at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Non-democracies in East Asia have become a vibrant force in driving regional development, while democracies are showing signs of languishing. An alternative system embedded in the prevailing East Asian conception of democracy, which places more emphasis on the output side of the political system, has been clearly on the rise. The historical experiences constitute a pull for a non-democracy that delivers and a push from a democracy that stagnates. East Asian democracies now seem to be trapped in a loss of vision and adaptability in an age of ever-changing globalization. Japan surrendered its position as the second-largest economy in the world to China in 2010. It has not yet found a way out of its third decade of loss in the global economy. Taiwan has been struggling with its political and economic relationship with China, and it still lacks a clear grand strategy to consolidate its foothold in the global economy. In East Asia, democracies are not only failing to advance, they have also fallen behind developmental authoritarian regimes.

Compared with democracies in the region, the levels of regime support and perceived regime responsiveness are found to be higher in non-democratic countries. This anomaly is buttressed by a cognitive foundation widely shared among East Asian citizens. The divergence in regime support substantially manifests Asian people's understanding of the meaning of democracy. A substantive understanding of democracy anchored in social equity and good governance turns out to be more popular across East Asia than one based on norms and procedures or liberty.

Our empirical evidence also shows that it is entirely possible and conceivable that an objectively democratic regime may be viewed by its citizens as being not fully democratic and not fully legitimate if it fails to fulfill "good government" or "social equity" criteria. It is also entirely possible for an objectively non-democratic regime to be perceived as being democratic and legitimate if it fulfills "good government" or "social equity" criteria. This prevailing popular conception shapes Asian people's expectation about what democracy ought to deliver. It also shapes Asian people's diffuse support for the overall political regime and lifts popular support for the region's non-democratic regimes.

Another important take-away is that Asian people simply expect more out of democracy. They expect democracy to deliver social equity and effective governance, not just popular accountability, rule of law and political freedom. They also expect democratically elected governments to be responsive to people's needs.

In a nutshell, democracy has to deliver more to win over the hearts and minds of Asian people. We cannot afford to be complacent about the challenges that East Asian third-wave democracies are facing. Asian political leaders have to find ways to close the big gap between the promises and the realities of democracy in the eyes of their citizens.

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