



The Implementation of Asian Value on the Democratic System of Southeast Asia

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Abstract. The dichotomy between the east and the West has become a salient aspect in politics, where people tend to politicize the term to gain power or maintain any other movement. Democracy—as it has been a fascinating long-term issue to discuss—is a state system and the foundation of the establishment of the modern state nowadays. As the concept is constantly developing from time to time, it has been taken as a concern of leaders to implement the democratic ideology in their states—as the voices of people are now becoming the significant consideration in the term of rights where every human deserves the right to speak and right to decide, which apparently comes in the form of democracy. Learning on the condition of current states with the democratic system, sophisticating is to find Southeast Asia with democracy as a prominent actor in the system of the state. Nevertheless, the region has also implemented a value created by the moral and behavioral beliefs of the Asians, namely the Asian value. The value contains a plethora of moral and historical ideologies, and it maintained the establishment of states in Asia for decades since the monarchy era. However, given that there are some biases found due to the dichotomic perceptions between freedom in the democracy and the maintained culture in the Asian value, this study will elicit more on the discussion about these aspects using the method of qualitative literature review.

Keywords: Democracy, Asian Value, Southeast Asia, State system.

Introduction

Democracy has been a fascinating long-term issue to discuss as the term's idea is the core of the majority state system and the foundation of establishing the state. As the concept is continuously developing from time to time, it has been taken as a concern of leaders to implement the democratic ideology in their states—as the voices of people are now becoming the significant consideration in the term of rights where every human deserves the right to speak and right to decide, which apparently comes in the form of democracy. Learning on the condition of current states with the democratic system, sophisticating is to find Southeast Asia has also established its region using democracy as a prominent actor in the state's system. Nevertheless, the region has also implemented a value created by the moral and behavioral beliefs of the Asians, namely the Asian value. The value contains a plethora of moral and historical ideologies, and it maintained the establishment of states in Asia for decades since the monarchy era. In a way, the use of this value could create new issues regarding the concept of democracy. However, the fusion of democracy and Asian values creates a unique harmonization in a state system, which reforms the ideal state by collaborating Asian values.

This article would like to discover an in-depth idea of Asian values and their contrast to the democratic system. First, it aims to find a suitable system that tends to the background and culture of Southeast Asians. Then, using the literature review method, the writer would like to present a comparative concept towards democracy and Asian values and its results once it is implemented in Southeast Asia.

The Growth of Democracy

Democracy is a term that has constantly been developing since its establishment in the meantime of the civilization of developed Greece. It was generally maintained by the efforts of the ancient Greeks, who aimed to establish a system where people have another option and chances to live in a term of justice with less authority of the monarch. The idea of justice, which derives from Aristotle, contains fundamental cores. It offers his thought on a judicious contention among egalitarian and non-egalitarian thoughts of equity, which is the point of convergence being the reason for sufficient equity (Hinsch, 2003).

According to its origin, the term democracy, which derives from the original Greek *demos* and *kratos*, means the people and the rule, refers to a form of government that stands *for people* and *defines* sovereignty (McLean, 2009). It then maintained a plethora of movements, ideas, and theories that ultimately generate

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tons of campaigns, changes, and even revolutions. The trace of democracy, which linked from ancient Greek experiments towards the participation of government by people, extended to the development of Rome and continued to the British Parliament as well as the American Declaration of Independent and the French Revolution, the modern democracy in nowadays era has developed into a plethora of liberal model of democracy which finally existed and succeeded in a last number of decades, under the idea of *the western surveillances*. This narrative is somehow showing people that, indeed the democracy is a notion that is Eurocentric.

John Dunn (2005), in his book *Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy*, mentioned that the general concept of democracy as

the improvised remedy for a very local Greek difficulty two and a half thousand years ago flourished briefly but scintillatingly and then faded away almost everywhere for all but two thousand years. It came back to life as a real modern political option in the struggle for American independence and with the founding of the new American republic. It then returned, almost immediately if far more erratically, amid the struggles of the France Revolution. It [had a] slow but insistent rise over the next century and a half, and triumph[ed] in the years since 1945. Within the last three-quarters of a century, democracy has become the political core of the West's civilization, which the West offers to the rest of the world. (Dunn, 2005 p.13-4)

According to this overview, it is evident that democracy is established with a number of European concepts and the western point of view. It developed the various concept of freedom and rights globally among people. Within the democratic system, the tendency of gender concern, freedom of speech, and human rights are going to the upper level where more people are considering these disciplines. This system—which lately more to be like a campaign—goes mushrooming, wherein the particular point, people are trying to fight for their own choice and own aims, which therefore creates some chaotic movements and impacts.

This chaotic impact concern had actually been explained by the political philosopher Plato in his book *The Republic* (1968), which conceptualized in 300 BC where the philosopher believed that democracy is actually a concept of the rights which fought by the majority, which mostly are the poor, the uneducated, and those who have no enough wisdom to rule. To Plato, the only position that could maintain a system of the state is the philosopher-king. Therefore, he put aside the ordinary-majority people as they might have possibilities to perceive the

barbaric system of governing. Furthermore, Plato believed that those who were not gifted by wisdom could not go into a good position in a state, as education, wisdom, and clarity only come to those who are gifted—and most likely, privileged. Hence for him, democracy, according to his aristocratic background, is a concept where people are trying to make a new chaotic impact as all people have the opportunity to speak up and deny things that already have been managed by the ruler.

It is undeniable that democracy is somehow creating some destructive impact on the welfare of society and state as it is also narrated as democracy is a tyranny of the uninformed and ignorant people (De Tocqueville, 2003). Nevertheless, once the well-communicating government manages it, it will cultivate a mutual relation between ruler and people because the aim of democracy, as a humanitarian philosophy (Parks, W. R., 1953), is to create the individual's well-being better served indeed.

The Concept of Asian Value

In the previous chapter on defining the term democracy, evidently, western history is a salient aspect that contains a fundamental role in making the idea of democracy. However, unfortunately, the *western term* then pops up as a sensitive term that tends to seek another dichotomy and eventually raises the eastern idea.

Speaking of which, the eastern apparently has its own way of managing states. As the monarchy system managed the region, it is acknowledged that monarchy has conventionally become an anomaly. According to Michael Leifer in his preface (Kershaw, 2001), Asia has validated this axiom only up to a point in some cases. Some colonialism and the dismantling which create the institutional upheavals do not rule up the idea of the one ruling monarchy in Brunei, for example, as well as the three varieties of a constitutional monarchy—which for example, implemented in Cambodia, Malaysia, and Thailand—of some political import. Therefore, it is evident that monarchy and the behavioral tendency, as well as the morals and norms of the monarchy, have been implemented in Asia with an inherent culture.

At the end of the European expansion in Asia, Asian values, a new *zeitgeist*—as mentioned by T.N. Harper (1997)—have arisen and became a new term for the international intellectuals, expanded intensively in the United States. The notion continually maintains a new meta-history in which it believes that culture is the one that defines civilizations. The intellectual Samuel Huntington also supports this statement in his book *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order* (1996), who mentions that the non-western civilization indeed has some common

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thing in their belief—primarily the Muslim and the Confucian—which by then, tighten them into a manner in which prioritize the primacy of family hood and community union over the rights of the individual. He also mentioned that these people with their beliefs likely tend to have a consensus over the dissent and discipline above permissiveness. This belief is what is gradually known as the Asian value. According to Handers (2017), the term Asian values is an ideology with norms such as discipline, instructive accomplishment, custodial roles by the elders, hard work, adjusting individual and cultural necessities, frugality, and deference power handler. The Asian political leader promotes this value in the post-World War II era as an alternative to facing Western political values such as capitalism, democracy, and the mess human rights movement. Many supporters of the Asian value believed that the economic growth of the Easterners was caused by their integrity of society beliefs, especially for the Confucians and Muslims. Given the explanation, it shows the existence of Asian value and, vaguely, its triumphs in managing the state in the era of post-World War II.

This concept brings up social and cultural concerns to the system, which is undeniably debatable, moreover, from the Western perspective. The issue of human rights comes along within the idea of tribal matter and constructs a long disputation. Kotkin (Cohen, 1993) contends that a modern tribe is an exceptionally versatile and urbanized individual who actually sticks to its ethnic and strict roots. This ethnic and manners—which ultimately creates a nation—gradually establish a maintained structure and system. Therefore, he believes that global tribes indeed are a conspicuous aspect to create a network and an essential role in making the welfare of the state. The output of the successfulness of Asia—by Asian value—proves this argument in the world economy.

The Asians Concern towards Democracy

Understanding that Asian values bring the idea of cultures, discipline, instructive accomplishment, custodial roles by the elders, hard work, adjusting individual and cultural necessities, frugality, and deference of the authority, many people began to criticize the term as it tends to the concept of authoritarian system in which gives fewer possibilities to people to have their right otherwise being used by the government. This critic started mushrooming and became popular in the meantime when Lee Kwan Yew, the former of Singapore, used this term to establish the city-state. In a way, the leader has succeeded in maintaining the ideal city, but many believed that people were suffering due to its dictatorship. The former president, Lee Kwan Yew, had repeatedly made several papers regarding

the idea and concept of Asian value—where the custody of the elders and the deference of the authority is a culture in which maintaining the value of Asia itself. As given so, many believe that democracy and the idea of human rights is a western value where people are led to put themselves first and otherwise put aside the interests of the community and family—which is seen to be more damaging. As given so, democracy became a disadvantage for Asians for some particular people.

Acknowledging the human rights issue, many Democrats believe that the anti-family-prioritized term and statements are genuinely a bullet to fight against the democracy—which the dictators politicize to keep their authoritarian system towards people. On the other hand, unlike the authoritarian leaders who execute the "westernized human right", many democrats in Asia find that the idea of human right comes from their religious beliefs. Dae Jung (Kim, 1994), on countering Lee Kwan Yew's statement on the Asian value with a paper about the critics on the culture and its nature towards human life and the myth of Asian values mentioned anti-democratic values. In addition, according to Thompson (2015), In Southeast Asia, Abdurrahman Wahid—the fourth former president of Indonesia—has criticized the attempts of using cultural relativism to undermine democracy in the region while calling for democratic lessons from Islam. The same goes for Anwar Ibrahim in Malaysia (Hoon, 2004), who stood against this undermining attempt of democracy. Moreover, the 2021 Myanmar coup d'état-ed President Aung San Suu Kyi, in her written article in 1995, formulated a rebuttal to the "Asian values" style criticism of democracy in Buddhist cultural terms strategy adopted by opposition elsewhere in the region.

The Implementation of Asian Value in Southeast Asia

Ideology has always been a fascinating term in the political aspect. Asian values, as it rose in the 1990s led by the leader of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad, and Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, has also been the new sophisticating term since the particular time. Both strongly argued that individual freedom, in his point of view of the western idea, was not compatible with the condition and culture of Asians and their society, which initially established harmony and family hood as the preference. According to Bauer and Bell (1999), Asians are collective in which society is established with communitarian values where the society's interests take precedence over that of the personal individual. However, not leaders said the same, as Asian Values, at the time, merely served as a tool for the authoritarian leaders to preserve themselves from westernized ideologies which are also known as liberal critics (Hoon, 2004).

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According to the reported data on Asian Venture Philanthropy Network (2021), Malaysia still has inadequate national plans and policies, declining fertility rates, with low labor force participation as an aging nation. However, the social economy has had renewed by government support in ecosystem-building efforts to promote innovation and social entrepreneurship. With the Asian values bounded by the collective interests—enhanced by behavior and religion, religiously motivated charitable giving is powerful. While Malaysia's prominence in Islamic finance makes it the second-largest socially responsible investing market in Asia. Corporates are also becoming more engaged with social impact by deepening their engagement with sustainability.

On the other hand, Singapore, which also establishes the Asian Values in the government, has often been mentioned as a country with strict laws. Singapore law is full of personal acts restrictions where the laws are odd with stringent and often bizarre penalties. For instance, it is a fact that many countries are illegally forbid littering, but Singapore has a very straight restriction on it. A person will get as much as a \$1,000 fine, as well as the "community work orders," where government forces them to pick up trash in public—which undoubtedly aims to embarrass convicted litterers publicly. The other example is the forbiddance of selling chewing gum as the Asian country takes cleanliness seriously. People are allowed to eat gum, but no spitting on the floor; otherwise, they are ready for the hefty fine. However, the government regulates these restrictions to ensure the welfare and proper country and the collective effect.

Conclusion

Given the evidence, people should understand that Asian value is an impactful alternative that evidently could maintain a state into its ideal. On the other hand, it is also evident that historically, democracy is a Eurocentric ideology. Nevertheless, people could not help the fact that this term is easily politicized as Westernization has also become mushrooming among the conservatives who intended to preserve cultural heritage. However, this explanation sums up the idea that East and West's dichotomy is an eternal issue that will continually flam fire as discussed. Asian values themselves have genuinely a salient role as the resource of the development of Southeast Asia states—where many states are having their increasing economy and states developed faster by this value. In some other way, it is prominent to consider the existence of democracy in establishing the state for the sake of being a developed country.

Cultivating the value of a region—such as maintaining the beliefs, heritages, religion, and behavior—is indeed important, yet as democracy has become the nowadays system, establishing this preservation of culture could be subsisted within the society and smaller scale of the state system. Asian values have a number of more relevant aspects within the individual approach—the family hood, authority among elders and younger, the disciplinaries, etc. Once it comes into a local movement, people would not merely consider it a westernization movement; it is as if Asian identity can be changed only under the guise of democracy. Indeed, the possibility of the anarchic impact of democracy is undeniable; therefore, it is essential for the leaders to understand the value of a region so that what has been the struggle of the ancestors in the past can continue to be instilled and sustainable—but not thus used only to gain power. In essence, a democratic system will be sound if it is regulated by an institution and wise people in its regulation. As Plato said, that *only* the philosopher King was able to become a leader. However, that is not the case; people miss opportunities because they are equal and given to all entities in the modern era. Hence, anyone possible to reach the position as philosopher-king. Given the evidence, it is salient to understand the core of democracy to choose the state's system.

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