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THE COMING WAVE

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If there is going to be a big new lift to global democratic prospects in this decade, the region from which it will emanate is most likely to be East Asia.

With the eruption of mass movements for democratic change throughout the Arab world in 2011, hopeful analysts of global democratic prospects have focused attention on the Middle East. Three Arab autocracies (Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya) have fallen in the past year. At least two more (Yemen and Syria) also seem destined for demise soon, and pressures for real democratic change figure to mount in Morocco, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, and perhaps Kuwait, and to persist in Bahrain. Yet among these and other countries in the Middle East (including Iraq and Iran), only Tunisia has a good chance of becoming a democracy in the relatively near future. Aspirations for more democratic and accountable government run deep throughout the Middle East, and for years to come the region will be a lively and contested terrain of possibilities for regime evolution. But if a new regional wave of transitions to democracy unfolds in the next five to ten years, it is more likely to come from East Asia—a region that has been strangely neglected in recent thinking about the near-term prospects for expansion of democracy. And East Asia is also better positioned to increase the number of liberal and sustainable democracies.

Unlike the Arab world, East Asia already has a critical mass of democracies. Forty percent of East Asian states (seven of the seventeen) are democracies, a proportion slightly higher than in South Asia or sub-

Saharan Africa, though dramatically lower than in Latin America or Central and Eastern Europe, where most states are democracies. As a result of the third wave of global democratization, East Asia has gone from being the cradle and locus of “developmental authoritarianism,” with Japan as its lone democracy—and a longstanding one-party-dominant system at that—to at least a mixed and progressing set of systems. Today, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are all consolidated liberal democracies. East Timor, Indonesia, Mongolia, and the Philippines are at least electoral democracies with some resilience.

Moreover, as I will explain, there are now significant prospects for democratic change in a number of the region’s remaining authoritarian regimes. Thailand is progressing back toward democracy; Malaysia and Singapore show signs of entering a period of democratic transition; Burma, to the surprise of many, is liberalizing politically for the first time in twenty years; and China faces a looming crisis of authoritarianism that will generate a new opportunity for democratic transition in the next two decades and possibly much sooner. Moreover, all this has been happening during a five-year period when democracy has been in recession globally.

There are three democracies in East Asia today that rank among the stable liberal democracies of the industrialized world: Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. They are not without stiff economic and political challenges and large numbers of disenchanting citizens who in surveys express only tepid support for democracy. Yet in each of these countries, overwhelming majorities of citizens reject authoritarian regime options while voicing reasonably robust support for broadly liberal values such as the rule of law, freedom of expression, and judicial independence.¹ Comparative data on political rights, civil liberties, and the quality of governance confirm that these are liberal democracies. They could become better, more liberal ones, however, by deepening the rule of law and civil liberties and improving mechanisms of accountability and transparency to control corruption and political favoritism.

East Asia’s merely electoral democracies have further to go toward deepening and consolidating democracy, of course. Mongolia scores relatively well in Freedom House ratings of political rights and civil liberties, but in this phenomenally mineral-rich country the judiciary remains underdeveloped, the rule of law is weak, and corruption remains a grave problem widely recognized by the public. Indonesia’s democratic performance over the past decade has been much better than what many experts on that country might have expected. The Philippines has returned to democracy with the 2010 election, in which Benigno Aquino III won the presidency. Yet semi-feudal elites retain a strong hold on the politics of many Philippine provinces and constituencies, and their presence in the country’s Congress has so far largely

blocked basic reform. In the World Bank's annual governance ratings, Indonesia and the Philippines rank in the bottom quartile of all countries in corruption control and not much better (the bottom third) in rule of law. In 2010, among big (mainly G-20) emerging-market democracies such as Argentina, Bangladesh, Brazil, India, Mexico, South Africa, and Turkey, only Bangladesh did worse on these two governance indicators.²

In each of these three electoral democracies—Mongolia, Indonesia, and the Philippines—at least three-quarters of citizens agree that “Democracy may have its problems, but it is still the best form of government.” In each, likewise, only about half the public is satisfied with the way democracy is working, but majorities believe that democracy remains capable of solving the country's problems. One possible reason for this faith in democracy is suggested by the wide majorities in each country (up to 76 percent in Mongolia and 80 percent in the Philippines) who say that they believe the people retain the power to change the government through elections.³

Prospects for Further Democratization

It is by now widely appreciated that Singapore is by any standard a massive anomaly. As we see in the Table on page 8, Singapore is far richer today than any major third-wave countries were when they made their transitions to democracy (this includes Spain and Greece, which do not appear in the Table). Singapore is the most economically developed nondemocracy in the history of the world. But Singapore is changing, and this change will probably accelerate when the founding generation of leaders, particularly Lee Kuan Yew (who turned 88 last September), passes from the scene. In the May 2011 parliamentary elections, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) recorded its weakest electoral performance since independence in 1965, winning “only” 60 percent of the vote. Although the PAP still won (yet again) well over 90 percent of parliamentary seats thanks to a highly rigged electoral system, the opposition Workers' Party broke through for the first time to win a five-seat group constituency, and a total of six seats overall—a record for the Singaporean opposition. While a postelection survey failed to reveal a general increase in support for greater political pluralism since the last elections (in 2006), the expressed preference for a more competitive political system did increase dramatically in the youngest age cohort (those from 21 to 29), shooting up from 30 to 44 percent.⁴ If Singapore remains in the grip of a half-century-long single-party hegemony, that hegemony now seems to be entering a more vulnerable phase, as opposition parties find new energy and backing, as young people flock to social media to express themselves more openly, as independent media crop up online to provide a fuller

TABLE—DEVELOPMENT LEVELS AND DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS

Country	Year of Transition	GDP per Capita, PPP\$ (2009 international dollars)	HDI Score (year of transition)
Turkey	1984	6,316	-
Brazil	1985	7,596	0.687
Philippines	1986	2,250	-
South Korea	1988	9,086	-
Pakistan	1988	1,722	-
Hungary	1990	12,979	0.692
Poland	1990	8,376	0.683
Chile	1990	6,896	0.675
Bangladesh	1991	748	0.186
Thailand	1992	4,732	0.685
South Africa	1994	7,235	0.716
Taiwan	1996	19,938	-
Indonesia	1999	2,666	0.681
Mexico	2000	12,662	0.698
Ghana	2000	1,653	0.431
Ukraine	2005	6,037	0.696
Asia (Current)			
Singapore	-	56,522	0.866
Malaysia	-	14,670	0.761
Thailand	-	8,505	0.682
China	-	7,519	0.687
Vietnam	-	3,134	0.593
Laos	-	2,436	0.524
Burma	-	1,256	0.483

Note: GDP per capita and HDI (Human Development Index) scores in the bottom index are for the years 2010 and 2011, respectively. All GDP per capita figures have been transformed into the value of constant 2009 dollars using the GDP deflator.

Source: for HDI: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/data/trends>; for GDP per capita: www.imf.org/external/pubs.

range of news and opinions, and as the ruling party feels compelled to ease censorship and other controls. Singapore, in other words, has already joined the ranks of the world's "competitive authoritarian" regimes—the class of autocracies among which democratic transitions are most likely to happen.⁵

Singapore's exceptionalism is widely known. Less well known is that Malaysia now also has a higher per capita income than most third-wave countries did when they made their transitions to democracy. In fact, among the prominent cases in the Table, only Taiwan had a higher per capita income than Malaysia when it completed its democratic transition. Moreover, Malaysia's score on the UNDP's Human Development Index—which, in measuring not only per capita income but also levels of health and education, is arguably a truer measure of development—is now significantly higher than the levels in Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and even Hungary, Poland, and Ukraine when they made their respective

transitions to democracy. From the standpoint of modernization theory, then, Malaysia is also ripe for a democratic transition.

For more than a decade, Malaysia's competitive authoritarian regime has faced a much more serious challenge than anything Singapore has so far seen. As the opposition has gained in unity, credibility, and mobilizing power, the long-ruling United Malays National Organization (UMNO) feels under increasing threat. Much of what is driving change in Malaysia is not only exhaustion with half a century of rule by one party (formally through a ruling coalition), but also a much better educated and more pluralistic society, with the attendant growth in independent organizations and the intense and innovative use of social media (including one of the most influential online newspapers in the world, *Malaysiakini*).

Alarmed by the upheavals that began sweeping the Arab world at the end of 2010, Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Razak pledged to appoint a broad committee to review the country's electoral system and recommend reforms, and then vowed to repeal the draconian Internal Security Act. Many opposition and civil society leaders, however, saw these promises as empty, citing Razak's push to enact stiff new security laws in place of the old ones. After winning control of five of the thirteen states in 2008, opposition forces are poised to do better in the next elections, which could come in 2012. The new opposition alliance, Pakatan Rakyat, is gaining momentum, and the regime's renewed effort to destroy former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim with trumped-up charges of homosexual misconduct seems even less credible than when the ploy was first tried some years ago. To be sure, Malaysia's authoritarian establishment still has a lot of resources, but Razak's proposed reforms now seem "too little too late," as "cynicism still pervades the country."⁶ A transition to democracy could happen any time in the coming years, through the familiar instrument that has brought it about in other competitive authoritarian regimes: the electoral process.

Thailand is less developed than Malaysia, but also has far more democratic experience and now, once again, more freedom and pluralism. Although Thais remain deeply polarized between a camp that backs ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra and one that clusters around the institution of the monarchy, national elections are highly competitive and seem to meet the "free and fair" standard of electoral democracy. With the decisive opposition victory of the new Pheu Thai Party (led by Thaksin's sister Yingluck Shinawatra) in the May 2011 parliamentary elections, the political force that the military deposed in the 2006 coup has returned, and Thailand has apparently become once again an electoral democracy. Yet it faces a rocky road ahead, as the stabilizing presence of long-reigning King Bhumibol (b. 1927) draws toward a close. If the end result is a weaker monarchy (and military), this might ultimately help to ease the country's intense polarization and create a more mature and securely in-

stitutionalized politics. At least the military seems to have learned from the political turbulence and polarization of the last decade that its own direct intervention will not solve the country's political problems. Though it clearly preferred the incumbent Democrat Party, the military made a point of declaring its neutrality in the recent election. If the 2006 military coup does prove to be the last in Thailand's history, democracy will put down firmer roots over the coming decade as modernization further raises incomes and education. Already, Thailand has a per capita income and human-development score roughly equivalent to those of Poland when it made its transition to democracy around 1990 (see Table).

It is not only Southeast Asia's wealthier countries that are experiencing the winds of democratic change. As Burma's iconic democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi has recently acknowledged, that country's political opening, launched in 2008 amid widespread skepticism with many voters abstaining from a constitutional referendum, suddenly seems quite serious. Labor unions have been legalized, Internet censorship has been eased, and a number of political prisoners have been freed. Now, Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (which won the aborted 1990 elections) is preparing to register for and run in parliamentary by-elections to be held probably later in 2012. As has happened with other authoritarian regimes that opted to liberalize politically, Burma's authoritarian rulers seem to have been influenced by democratic developments elsewhere in the world, as well as by the prospective economic benefits—chiefly flowing from closer integration with the global economy—that political liberalization might bring. As an advisor to Burma's President Thein Sein noted in December 2011, "The president was convinced about the global situation; he saw where the global stream was heading."⁷

The Coming Change in China

Annual per capita income in China is still little more than half what it is in Malaysia, but it has been rising rapidly and now approaches the level that South Korea could boast at the time of its democratic transition in 1987–88. In fact, by IMF projections, China could surpass that level (about US\$9,000 in 2009 Purchasing Power Parity [PPP] dollars) by next year. In 1996, Henry Rowen predicted on the basis of data and projections regarding economic development that China would become what Freedom House would call a Partly Free country by 2015, and a Free one (with political-rights and civil-liberties scores as good as those of India or Indonesia today) by 2025.⁸ More recently, Rowen affirmed that analysis, estimating that even if China's growth in GDP per capita slowed to 5 percent annually starting in 2015, it would have by 2025 a per capita income roughly equivalent to that of Argentina's in 2007 (about \$15,000 in current PPP dollars—which is roughly where Malaysia is today).⁹ And if China's growth in per capita income were to slow

immediately to 6 percent annually, it would still reach \$13,000 in current PPP dollars before 2020—the level of Hungary in 1990 and Mexico in 2000 when they transitioned to democracy.

It is not only modernization—the spread of democratic values and capacities in tandem with rising incomes and information—that is feeding the escalating pressure for democratic change in China. As Yun-han Chu notes in his contribution to this set of essays, the growing density of ties between mainland China and Taiwan—including direct access (through travel and satellite television) to political news from the highly competitive and even raucous democracy that is Taiwan—is serving as an additional stimulant to the growth of democratic norms and aspirations in China. The irony of Communist China’s relentless push for closer integration with Taiwan is that it may well begin to generate political convergence—but not in the way that the Communist leaders imagined.

Rowen’s projections were a bit mechanical in assuming that economic growth would necessarily drive *gradual* political change toward democracy in China. Instead, it seems increasingly likely that political change in China will be sudden and disruptive. The Communist Party leadership still shows no sign of embarking on a path of serious political liberalization that might gradually lead to electoral democracy, as their counterparts in Taiwan’s then-dominant Nationalist Party did several decades ago. Instead, the rulers in Beijing are gripped by a fear of ending up like the USSR’s Mikhail Gorbachev, who launched a process of political opening in hopes of improving and refurbishing Soviet Communist rule only to see it crumble and the Soviet Union itself fall onto the ash heap of history. Torn by intense divisions within their own ranks and weakened by the draining away of power and energy from the center to the provinces and a congeries of increasingly divergent lower-level authorities, China’s political leaders seem as frozen and feckless on the grand question of long-term political reform as they are brisk and decisive in making daily decisions on spending and investments.

As Francis Fukuyama notes in the essay that follows, the one flaw in the otherwise impressive institutionalization of Chinese Communist rule is its lack of adaptability. For a regime whose specialty is producing rapid economic change, such rigidity is a potentially fatal defect. With every month or year that ticks by while corruption, routine abuses of power, and stifling constraints on expression go unchecked, citizens’ frustration mounts. Already, protests erupt with ominous frequency across tens of thousands of Chinese localities every year, while subversive and democratic ideas, images, and allusions proliferate online, despite the best efforts of fifty-thousand Internet police to keep Chinese cyberspace free of “harmful content.” As Minxin Pei has been arguing for some time and as he asserts again in his essay here, the strength of the authoritarian regime in China is increasingly an illusion, and its resilience may not last much longer. As frustration with corruption, col-

lusion, criminality, and constraints on free expression rise, so do the possibilities for a sudden crisis to turn into a political catastrophe for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Beyond the ongoing frustrations with censorship, insider dealing, abuse of power, environmental degradation, and other outrages that can only be protested by antisystem activity of one sort or another, there are, as Fukuyama notes, the big looming social and economic challenges that China faces as the consequences of its one-child policy make themselves felt in a rapidly aging (and disproportionately male) population. Jack Goldstone reports that China's labor force stopped growing in 2010 and has begun shrinking half a percent a year, which "will, by itself, knock 2.2 percentage points off China's annual economic growth potential." Urbanization, a key driver of productivity increases, is also slowing dramatically, and the growth of education "has clearly reached a limit," as the number of college graduates has expanded faster than the ability of the economy—even as it faces labor shortages in blue-collar industries—to generate good white-collar jobs.¹⁰

The Chinese economy will have to pay for rapidly rising wages and cope with industrial labor shortages even as it comes under pressure to finance pension, welfare, and healthcare benefits for the massive slice of the populace that is now moving toward retirement. Moreover, as it manages all this, China will need to address growing frustration among college graduates who cannot find jobs to match their expectations. If the suspected bubbles in the real-estate and financial markets burst as these twin generational challenges are gathering force, political stability in the world's most populous country may well become no more than a memory.

Increasingly, the CCP faces the classic contradiction that troubles all modernizing authoritarian regimes. The Party cannot rule without continuing to deliver rapid economic development and rising living standards—to fail at this would invite not gradual loss of power but a sudden and probably lethal crisis. To the extent that the CCP succeeds, however, it generates the very forces—an educated, demanding middle class and a stubbornly independent civil society—that will one day decisively mobilize to raise up a democracy and end CCP rule for good. The CCP, in other words, is damned if it does not, and damned if it does. The only basis for its political legitimacy and popular acceptance is its ability to generate steadily improving standards of living, but these will be its undoing.

For some time, I suspected that Henry Rowen's projections were a bit optimistic and that China's democratic moment, while foreseeable, was still 25 to 30 years away. Now, as the need for a more open, accountable, and law-based regime becomes as obvious as the current leaders' inability to bring one about, I suspect that the end of CCP rule will come much sooner, quite possibly within the next ten years. Unfortunately, a sudden collapse of the communist system could give rise, at least for a while, to a much more dangerous form of authoritarian rule, perhaps led by a nationalistic military

looking for trouble abroad in order to unify the nation at home. But this would likely represent only a temporary solution, for the military is incapable of governing a rapidly modernizing, deeply networked, middle-class country facing complex economic and social challenges.

Whatever the specific scenario of change, this much is clear: China cannot keep moving forward to the per capita income, educational, and informational levels of a middle-income country without experiencing the pressures for democratic change that Korea and Taiwan did more than two decades ago. Those pressures are rising palpably now in Singapore and Malaysia. They will gather momentum in Vietnam as it follows in China's path of transformational (even if not quite as rapid) economic development. In Thailand, continuing modernization over the next decade will change society in ways that will make democracy easier to sustain. In short, within a generation or so, I think it is reasonable to expect that most of East Asia will be democratic. And no regional transformation will have more profound consequences for democratic prospects globally.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Yun-han Chu et al., *How East Asians View Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), and various reports of the Asian Barometer, www.asianbarometer.org.

2. World Bank Group, Worldwide Governance Indicators, 2011, <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.asp>. Indonesia and the Philippines were rated in the 27th and 22nd percentiles, respectively, on control of corruption and the 31st and 24th percentiles, respectively, on rule of law. South Korea, by contrast, was in the 69th and 81st percentiles on these two measures.

3. Data is from Round III of the Asian Barometer.

4. Institute for Policy Studies (Singapore), "IPS Post-Election Survey 2011." My thanks to Tan Ern Ser for sharing a copy of the summary findings.

5. Stephan Ortmann, "Singapore: Authoritarian but Newly Competitive," *Journal of Democracy* 22 (October 2011): 153–64.

6. Ooi Kee Beng, "In Malaysia, Reforms Take a Staggered Path," *TodayOnline*, 3 December 2011, available at www.todayonline.com/Commentary/EDC111203-0000021/In-Malaysia-reforms-take-a-staggered-path.

7. "In Myanmar, Government Reforms Win Over Some Skeptics," *New York Times*, 30 November 2011.

8. Henry S. Rowen, "The Short March: China's Road to Democracy," *National Interest* 45 (Fall 1996): 61–70.

9. Henry S. Rowen, "When Will the Chinese People Be Free?" *Journal of Democracy* 18 (July 2007): 38–52.

10. Jack A. Goldstone, "Rise of the TIMBIs," *Foreign Policy*, 2 December 2011, available at www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/12/02/rise_of_the_timbis?page=0,1.