

PACIFIC PERSPECTIVES IS DEMOCRACY LOSING ITS WARM GLOW?

BY TOM PLATE

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BALI, Indonesia – There’s no guarantee that an intellectual counter-revolution will last any longer than a major monsoon – or cause more long-term damage. But there is in the works in this region growing disenchantment with the views of what one might call democracy fundamentalists. These are the people who insist that the democratic form of government is universally applicable, morally necessary in all instances and must be applied as soon as possible.

As a devout American – and quite proud of it – I was born and raised as a democracy fundamentalist. The notion that a democracy could be dysfunctional and that another form of governance could provide far better for the needs of the immediate people was not in my civic vocabulary.

But travel can do wonders to attenuate intellectual provincialism. Here in Southeast Asia, perhaps especially, quiet doubts about democracy’s universal salience are continuing to grow.

“In today’s Indonesia,” claims Tanri Abeng, the publisher of the monthly business magazine *GlobeAsia*, “democracy can be argued to have been successfully implemented, yet more and more people complain that ‘it was better under Suharto’.”

General Suharto was this country’s last ruling authoritarian. Since the fall of his decades-long regime, Indonesia has been proud to show the world three successive peacefully elected presidents. The current one is Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, a former general who was elected in 2004.

There is – in fact – some nostalgia for the strong-willed Suharto over the statesman-like style of Susilo – or SBY, as he is often called. Comments Tanri Abeng, “For business, it is not the system of government that is the essential ingredient. What is required is sensible macroeconomic management, a transparent regulatory system and the correct support from government in developing a public infrastructure to support growth.”

Most businessmen almost everywhere, to be sure, will make peace with almost any form of government as long as it’s good for profits and the bottom line. They tend to not shed a whole lot of tears over the finer points of political life, such as human-rights standards and constitutional protections.

But because business leaders produce wealth – and jobs, and economic growth – they have considerable credibility with many people. Sometimes they have more credibility with the people than do the democratic politicians.

Of course, not all authoritarians have credibility with the business sector. For instance, the ruling junta in Burma (also called Myanmar) has little credibility with anyone. The generals there have mastered the not-so-fine art of authoritarianism, but have miserably failed Economics 101. They have taken an economy rich in resources and human potential and driven a stake through its heart and its gross-national-product.

But the best answer to authoritarians who are incompetents may not be democrats who are incompetents. Both neighboring Singapore and Malaysia have been run for decades by strong one-party political systems, with impressive economic development to show for it.

Here in Bali, the growingly intense issue of democracy and elections is at the center of a major international meeting. The 40th World Annual Conference of the International Association of Political Consultants opens serious business later this week. The core membership of the IAPC consists of campaign managers, political consultants and election experts from all over – in countries where elections and democracy exist.

Their stake in the outcome of the current intellectual counter-revolution about democracy fundamentalism is obviously great. Many of the participants are gifted and well-known professionals at the business and practice of elections. If the idea of democracy and the need for elections declines, they know they could become as outmoded and irrelevant as a typewriter salesman at a computer convention.

There is a very long distance to go before that might happen, of course. But it's fitting that the first major speaker at this IAPC conference is Indonesia's President, SBY. The former general whose term extends until 2009 will receive the organization's "Democracy Medal," will address the delegates and will submit to a press conference.

Please note that authoritarians often do not bother with press conferences; indeed, authoritarian regimes sometimes find the news media nothing more than a silly nuisance. Elected politicians have no choice but to face the media music. As a journalist, I thus give such a practice of democracy a gold star: Press conferences can be important.

But in this region of the world, at least, there may come to be fewer of them if the political systems that require them fail to produce real-world goods: jobs and economic security, for starters. And it is not just for the businessmen that this requirement is increasingly the bottom line of political legitimacy. Most people want this, too.

UCLA Prof. Tom Plate, a board member of the Burkle Center at UCLA, is attending the IAPC as a journalist and a seminar participant. His columns appear regularly in newspapers across Asia and the United States, from Dubai, U.A.R. to Tokyo to Seattle to Providence, Rhode Island. © Tom Plate, 2007.