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"ASIAN-STYLE DEMOCRACY"

A Critique from East Asia

Yung-Myung Kim

In the wake of the rapid development of the economies of East Asia, there has been an increasingly strong voice advocating Asian ways of “doing” politics and economics. This voice represents an increased sense of autonomy and confidence on the part of many East Asians, especially those in power and wealth. It is causing growing tension between East Asians and Westerners, particularly Americans, on matters concerning trade, human rights, and regional cooperation. This article critically examines the major arguments of this Asian view and judges if they hold validity.

"Asian-Style Democracy"

Voices proclaiming ever more loudly the superiority of the Asian ways of development are heard everywhere in East Asia today. The most aggressive stance is being taken by the political elites in Southeast Asia, especially Singapore and Malaysia, who “look East” toward Japan for their inspiration for development. Lee Kuan Yew, former prime minister and still the leader of Singapore, is undoubtedly at the forefront. Time and again, he has denounced the ills of Western—especially American—society and advocated Eastern ways of political and economic development. He stresses the strength of Eastern culture and values based upon family solidarity and discipline, claiming that an overemphasis on individual freedom at the cost of the entire community is the main source of economic and moral decay of America.

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These so-called America-bashers’ assertions do not stop at criticizing the weakening economic competitiveness of, and alleged moral decay, in the U.S. They go further and often explicitly denounce the Anglo-American style of democracy as inefficient for, or detrimental to, economic development and political order, especially when employed in East Asia. These arguments are often labeled as “soft authoritarianism” or “Asian-style democracy.”² They represent political and social values quite different from the ones found in the West.

The arguments assume that social order and political stability are more important than individual rights and democracy. They assert that Eastern values, based upon the teachings of Confucius, are superior to Western values for the realization of an orderly society. For these advocates, abiding by tradition and respect for authority are indispensable for achieving an orderly and moral society. The advocates of the Asian model of development clearly put priority on the group over the individual and on the whole society over its individual members. They see individualism as a threat to the prosperity of a community, be it a business organization, a political group, or the nation as a whole. For them, it is only natural to put constraints on individual rights for the sake of enhancing the welfare of the whole society as they understand it. Democracy is not something to be placed above other social values or taken as an end in itself. Rather, it is an instrument to serve higher social goals such as order and economic well-being. Not only do they not believe in the utility of democracy in the building of an orderly society, but they are also openly against democracy as a political goal because they believe that Western-style democracy hinders the orderly development of society.

Soft authoritarians put forth a value system that is radically different from those dominant in the West. What’s more, they also employ different yardsticks for estimating such political and social values as democracy, human rights, and freedom, which are Western in origin. For Singapore’s leaders, the minimum qualification for a democracy is the free periodic elections that the city-state holds. They justify Singapore’s one-party rule with the claims that the party maintains broad popular support and the system guarantees political stability. Lee Kuan Yew even objects to the one-man, one-vote principle, arguing that married and older persons should have more than one vote.

Soft authoritarians claim that Asian-style democracy is based on consensus-building and trust in political leaders, and assert that their political objective is “good government.” Good governments are those which feed their

subjects well and maintain stability, order, and moral soundness within their communities. To achieve this objective, political leaders are expected to exercise their broad powers with moral rectitude. This is a highly elitist, and Confucian, conception of politics.

Because they hold different value systems and yardsticks, soft authoritarians tend to see Western criticism of East Asia's political and human rights situations as biased, ethnocentric, hypocritical, and variations on the idea of Japan-bashing. Thus, advocates of Asian-style democracy voice a strong desire for Asian solidarity against the Western world, although this view is not a central component of their theory. Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad proposed an ambitious plan for East Asian economic cooperation excluding non-Asian countries, i.e., the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand. This plan contradicted the American conception of the makeup of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) grouping which includes those countries.

Although they are not specific about details, soft authoritarians generally adhere to the idea of a market economy combined with a communitarian solidarity and paternalistic-authoritarian polity. Culturally, the theory is generally based upon Confucian teachings of social and political order.

Problems inherent in the soft authoritarian arguments may be divided into political, intellectual, normative, and empirical ones. For the sake of convenience, this article will first focus on the empirical issue, followed by a brief discussion of the others. This critique begins by considering the validity of these facts which soft authoritarianism considers to be givens, as well as those that have been ignored. What are those facts? First, there are basic contradictions in the East Asian model of development. It has had problems in the industrial age and will have more in the coming post-industrial age. These problems are the outcomes of excessive groupism, communitarianism, lack of ingenuity and flexibility, and political authoritarianism. Due to space limitations this issue will not be explored.

What is of interest, however, is the second fact that realities are changing. Societies, in East Asia and elsewhere, are increasingly becoming democratized, deregularized, and internationalized. Given these changing realities, the East Asian model will be less adequate for the future development of this region. The following questions follow from this position: What are the relationships between economic and political development? More specifically, how do capitalist industrialization and the modes of political regime affect each other? Secondly, how important is East Asian—that is, Confucian—culture to economic development? And how does it affect the maintenance of social order and the development of political democracy in East Asia?
Regime Type and Economic Development

Let us first consider the effect of regime type upon economic development, and then discuss the reverse situation, that is, the effect of economic development upon political democratization. The question here is: which type of political regime—democratic or nondemocratic—is more conducive to economic development? Or, more fundamentally, does political regime matter in explaining economic development? (Although we are aware that economic development involves more than growth, we will use these terms interchangeably for the sake of convenience.)

Historical observations and the experiences of East Asia’s newly industrialized economies (NIEs) would tempt us to believe that nondemocratic regimes are more conducive to industrialization than democratic ones. Historically, industrialization has begun under despotic or dictatorial regimes. This is true for Western Europe and Japan, as well as contemporary NIEs, with the possible exceptions of England and the U.S., the countries where industrialization first started. But this fact does not prove that industrialization can occur only under nondemocratic regimes, for there are countervailing historical facts.

The process of industrialization paralleled that of democratization both in Western Europe and East Asia, although there were time lags between the two. Mancur Olson and others have indicated that the centuries-long pattern of economic growth in Europe and its former colonies has been intimately linked to the earlier development of democracy. They also found that “there [were] strong evidences that [revealed] a strong correlation between absolutist rule and economic stagnation in Europe’s cities over the seven centuries to 1800.”

It is historically evident that, once the phase of early industrialization ends, mature industrialization unfolds in conjunction with the democratization of the polity. The communist regime in the Soviet Union and the socialist-authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe initiated heavy industrialization, but all collapsed as forces for pluralism and democracy became strong. Similar developments are taking place in many Third World societies. Cases show that dictatorship can initiate an industrial breakthrough, but further development requires the opening of the system. In this respect, the positive relationship between authoritarianism and economic development found in East Asia is only temporary, suited only for a transitional period from the preindustrial to the industrial age.

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Moreover, among the nondemocracies in the Third World, there have been only a few cases (in East Asia and Latin America) in which there was success in achieving meaningful economic development. The vast majority of the Third World countries under authoritarian rule still suffers from chronic poverty and despair. This demonstrates that the nondemocratic nature of the political system itself cannot be a determining factor in economic development. Economic development—a result of complex interactions of diverse factors—seems to be affected more by the nature of the state than the regime type. Within the East Asian context, it is frequently argued that the developmental characteristics of the state played a significant role in the region’s rapid industrialization. It is true that the developmental state tends to be linked to less democratic political regimes, but considering Japan’s procedural democracy and increasingly democratic Korea and Taiwan, there is no predetermined linkage between the two. The combination of state and regime types can be varied according to specific conditions in each country. For this reason, if not for others, it would be a gross oversimplification to say that the authoritarian political regime was a prerequisite for the rapid growth of East Asian economies.

Historical evidence aside, we find contradicting arguments that support both types of political regime, democratic or authoritarian, as contributing to economic development. Critics of democracy contend that in democracies the state’s ability to execute the investment necessary for economic development is greatly constrained because various interest groups form “distributional coalitions” to achieve their own self-interests.4 The incumbents are naturally concerned about their political tenure and the next elections, so the argument goes, and thus pay more attention to short-term material benefits to the electorate. Therefore, they spend more money on consumption than investment and are more concerned with welfare than investment. Moreover, because there are regular and frequent turnovers of incumbents, policy continuity is less guaranteed in democracies than in authoritarian societies. This reality in turn negatively affects economic policy making and implementation.

Authoritarian regimes, on the other hand, are believed to be able to overcome these democratic diseases. It is often believed that, since authoritarian regimes attain autonomy from distributional pressures, they are better able to follow liberal economic policies which are not distorted by redistributive goals that constrain growth. It is also alleged that, because they are in a better position to use sanctions to overcome collective-action dilemmas,

authoritarian regimes can more easily overcome distributional obstructions to efficient economic policy making.\textsuperscript{5}

These arguments have a certain validity, but we can easily detect their inherent weaknesses. Is there any reason to believe that dictators would necessarily be future-oriented? Is there any reason to believe that a dictator’s tenure is more secure than democratically elected incumbents, leaving them able to accomplish long-term policy goals? Furthermore, is there any reason to believe that authoritarian regimes are necessarily better positioned to construct a strong state vis-à-vis civil society? If so, is there any reason to believe that an autonomous and strong authoritarian state would necessarily behave in the interests, long-term or short-term, of anyone else?\textsuperscript{6}

There is evidence to believe that dictators are often predatory and not future-oriented nor benevolent nor unselfish. Democratic states are not necessarily weaker than dictatorial ones. There does not seem to exist an organic link between regime type and the strength of the state. For example, in Korea, the Kim Young Sam government is certainly more democratic than the previous Roh Tae Woo government, but the Korean state seems to have become stronger in pushing for various reform measures which preceding authoritarian governments failed to implement. In fact, the present Korean state appears no less strong than the autocratic state of the Yushin system (1972–79) under the late dictator Park Chung Hee, although state intervention into civil affairs has been significantly reduced.

This leads to the arguments in favor of democracy, which focus mainly on economic freedom and property rights. In this view, democracy entrenches economic freedoms, making them more stable and more credible. Thus, political freedom makes a contribution in its own right to economic growth. The significance of this advantage, however, is somewhat diluted when we consider cases such as China now, and, until recently, Korea and Taiwan, where economic freedom was fairly guaranteed without substantial political freedoms. The argument for economic freedom is related to that of the security of property. It is often assumed that the security of property is more firmly anchored under democracy than under autocratic rule, because in democracies those in power cannot easily seize private property as often occurs in autocracies. However, when we consider that property rights are threatened not solely by the state but also by such private actors as organized workers or landless peasants, we do not have sufficient reason to believe that


\textsuperscript{6} For the last question, see Mancur Olson, “Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development,” American Political Science Review 87:3 (September 1993), pp. 51–69.
they are necessarily better preserved in democracies than in soft authoritarian liberal economies.

Following the above considerations, we find that causal relations between regime type and economic growth are inconclusive. Just as the strong state is not a monopoly of authoritarian regimes, respect for property rights is not a monopoly of democratic regimes. After all, the arguments for both democracy and authoritarianism fail to provide convincing reasons as to why either is superior for promoting economic development.

Statistical evidence on the role of regime type in promoting economic growth is also inconclusive. Numerous studies have tried to find convincing evidence on whether democracy or dictatorship is more beneficial to economic growth, but the results are contradictory and depend upon who the researchers are and which methods they employ. There are also many cases that fail to offer any meaningful correlations.

There are numerous methodological difficulties in identifying clear-cut correlations between the two variables, but can we assume that once these difficulties are removed, a universally relevant answer can be found? It is doubtful. It is impossible to arrive at a clear-cut generalization concerning the effects of regime type on economic development, mainly because the forces which enhance economic growth do not depend on what type of political regime is in place. Rather, they depend on other variables, such as the nature of the state and its economic policies, people’s work ethic, the international environment, and maybe even pure luck, none of which are directly linked to the types of political regime. Democracy and economic prosperity can and do coexist in many developing countries, not to mention advanced ones, including those of East Asia. Clear examples can be found in Korea and Taiwan, with their continuing economic development in recently democratized societies. Japan has a 50-year history of coexistence between economic development and democratic practices. Therefore, although East Asian countries are often cited as vivid examples of authoritarianism contributing to economic development, even within this region there is increasing evidence that authoritarian politics are not logically linked to economic growth.

Finally, and more fundamentally, if we grant that authoritarianism promotes growth, then shall we prefer authoritarianism to democracy for economic reasons? Shall a state remain authoritarian and sacrifice democracy for the sake of economic prosperity? What about the seemingly inevitable worldwide trend of democratization? If democracy is developing societies’ political future, are the people in those societies doomed to economic decay or stagnation because of democracy? This is the fundamental dilemma the advocates of Asian-style democracy face. What would Lee Kuan Yew say about this? We turn now to this matter.
Economic Growth and Democracy

When we reverse the direction of causality, the dilemma of Asian-style democracy is more easily recognized because we find the inevitable long-term trend that economic growth promotes the forces of democratization. There is one clear fact apparent in all the discussions about the relationships between regime type and economic growth: democracy and the level of economic development are very highly correlated. All advanced economies are either genuine or at least semi-democracies, while all dictatorships have less than advanced economies, especially since the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe.

The classic exposition of the argument is by Seymour M. Lipset. Using indicators of socioeconomic development and political democracy from throughout the world, he demonstrated that there was an obviously positive correlation between the two. However, his analysis utilized a worldwide synchronic method, and thus does not provide a clear explanation of the historical trends in the two variables' relationships within one country or region. Also, the correlation Lipset found can hardly be considered as a causal relation; it is rather common sensical that political democracy does not come automatically from socioeconomic development. Nonetheless, his work still stands as an intellectual milestone. It clarified the worldwide trend of democracy and socioeconomic development and provided researchers with heuristic hypotheses for individual case studies.7

The value of Lipset's contribution should be assessed in the light of a countervailing argument. One of the central components of the Marxist analysis of the Third World political economy is that capitalist development contributes to the decay, not development, of democracy. Consider Guillermo O'Donnell's Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism thesis. Although his approach is more eclectic than purely Marxist, O'Donnell found an "elective affinity" between the end of an "easy" phase of import-substitution industrialization and the advent of harshly repressive authoritarian rule in the more advanced Latin American countries.8 He argued that, in those countries, the need for industrial "deepening" caused severe class conflicts that in turn provoked military interventions in politics. The military took power to put an end to class conflicts by repressing the "already activated" popular sectors. Thus,

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after seizing power, the military established highly repressive and technocratic regimes through alliances with the technocracy and the capitalist class.

O’Donnell’s thesis exerted a powerful influence on more optimistic modernization perspectives as found in Lipset’s works; it presented a highly pessimistic picture of the future of Third World development. Methodologically, however, he employed historical-structural case studies that focused on the economic structure of and class conflict within each individual country. Since the two analyses employed different methodologies that analyzed different subjects, O’Donnell’s thesis cannot be considered a direct refutation of Lipset’s arguments. That is, the rise of authoritarianism in a specific historical period in a specific region cannot negate the universal phenomenon of the coexistence of socioeconomic and political development.

Moreover, the efforts to apply the Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism thesis to other regions do not appear particularly successful. O’Donnell’s thesis was further confined to a particular historical phase given the widespread democratization of Latin American countries since the 1970s. Therefore, even if we accept the validity of his thesis for its original purpose, it is evident that it cannot be widened to mean that “capitalist development generally causes political authoritarianism.” Universal application is much more feasible with Lipset’s thesis.

However, Lipset’s thesis concerning the relationships between socioeconomic development and political democracy is strengthened by Samuel Huntington’s recent exposition of democratization on a worldwide scale. Huntington found that in this democratization of the “Third Wave” economic development played a significant role. He, of course, made clear that economic development in itself did not guarantee political democratization, but emphasized that almost all the Third Wave-democratized nations were middle-income countries with a certain level of economic development.

Then, how shall we explain the close affinity between socioeconomic development and the emergence of new democracies? The many explanations that exist can be divided into three groups—functional, political-cultural, and class-structural. Functional explanations emphasize that the effectiveness and capacity of authoritarian regimes diminish with the diversification of society and the growing and increasingly complex demands of the populace. According to this line of logic, the focus is placed upon the weakening capacity of authoritarian governments to deal with political and economic affairs. Political-cultural explanations take a similar tack: they assume that economic development and social diversification foster the citizenry’s democratic values which in turn exert a powerful force on the democratization of political institutions and procedures. Explanations of class structure have two distinct intellectual origins that appear the same. The Marxist version maintains that the power shift within the class structure—from the dominance of the landed
Asian-style under
tion, while more mainstream explanations—such as functional and political-cultural ones—emphasize that the rise of the middle class lays the groundwork for political democratization in an advancing economy.

In East Asia, all three explanations have a certain validity, though the Marxist class analysis seems less pertinent considering the weak class formation and strong state dominance that have traditionally characterized this region. Generally, industrialization and social diversification eventually (although not in an early phase) foster increasing forces for the liberalization and democratization of a political system. An authoritarian grip on power under these circumstances becomes increasingly difficult to maintain.

Recent political changes in Korea and Taiwan represent model types of this phenomenon in East Asia, and Singapore will follow the track sooner or later. The basic dilemma of the “soft authoritarians” lies in this development: that as societies are diversified, they accordingly come under greater pressures for democratization. If this is true, how will soft authoritarians react to changing realities? Will they advocate coercion to silence democratic pressures? Will they alter their conception of “Asian-style democracy” to embrace more democratic elements while still remaining “Asian”? If so, will Asian-style democracy be still soft authoritarian or will it become genuinely democratic? If the former comes to pass, the argument for democracy will become a mere sham, which will never be as firmly grounded as now; if the latter, then Asian-style democracy will wither away in the wake of democratization.

Culture and Economic Development

The “Asian-style democracy” argument makes a misguided connection between culture and political economy, or rather, culture, industrialization, and democracy. The question is: To what extent do cultural differences explain development? More specifically, how much of a role does Confucianism play in East Asia’s political economy?

Cultural explanations seem to constitute a school in the literature of East Asian development. They cite thrift, respect for education, deference to authority, groupism, hard work, emphasis on social harmony, and consensus in decision-making as Confucian cultural traits that have allegedly played important roles in rapid developments of East Asian economies. It is difficult to deny that culture does play a part in social realities. Culture certainly is involved in the economic configurations of a society, but the problem is that

there is no convincing way to clarify which part of Confucianism contributed to the development of East Asia, nor in what ways or to what extent.

There are a number of arguments on why cultural elements are difficult to employ as independent variables in explaining social realities; we present five here.

1. So-called Asian cultural traits often do not correspond to the reality in question. For example, too often social order in Japan is attributed to the homogeneity of society, but is the Japanese society really as homogeneous as many claim, with so many outcasts including *burakumin* and ethnic Koreans? Is the Japanese work ethic really so strong and is Japanese society really as harmonious as its admirers claim?

2. Cultural explanations are inherently weak in dealing with the differences of social realities when measured over time within a culture. It was often contended, for example, that Korea could not modernize herself because her orthodox Confucianism despised trading and manufacturing activities, but now many admirers attribute Korea's economic success to Confucian ethics. Such logic does not allow us to establish any meaningful relationship between the Confucian ethic and economic growth in Korea.

3. The same social phenomenon can occur in different cultures. It goes without saying that there are many cases of economic growth in non-Confucian cultures. In East Asia, non-Confucian new NIEs, such as Malaysia, Thailand, and even Vietnam, now show impressive rates of economic development, which means that Confucianism is not a prerequisite for economic growth.

4. Many alleged cultural traits are in fact of recent rather than traditional origin, shaped owing to structural necessities. This is an important point in understanding the political structure of economic development in East Asian countries. A number of Japan specialists have indicated that the institutional characteristics which allowed Japan exceptional economic performance were, rather than cultural traits, the result of historical necessity derived from political-economic difficulties and the resulting crisis mentality that developed among both elites and the masses.

5. Cultural explanations easily fall into a tautology; they often explain everything and nothing at the same time, mainly because it is extremely difficult to pinpoint which element of a given culture plays which roles and in what social reality. Too often, cultural explanations of social reality end up saying little more than “they act like that because they are like that.”

Cultural factors can be saved as explanatory variables by placing them in the context of overall relations between dependent and independent variables in explaining social realities. Here, cultural factors are considered to be intervening variables that facilitate or hinder the workings of independent variables to produce dependent ones. As to Confucianism and East Asian development, we may identify elements of Confucianism which strengthen (such as group solidarity and high education) or obstruct (lack of individual ingenuity) the forces that produce rapid economic growth (state policies). In this way, we can explain the differing roles that culture (Confucianism) plays in different social realities.
In any case, East Asia’s economic success is attributable primarily to the policies and institutions of each state. Each is itself the outcome of historical and structural necessities rather than cultural traditions, and each efficiently utilizes competent human power and effectively maneuvers within the constraints of and opportunities offered by the international political economy. In this process, cultural factors may have facilitated state actions and institutional consolidation. Thus, Confucianism was neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the state action and institutional consolidation necessary for economic growth in East Asia. Seen from their perspective, those arguments for Asian-style democracy emphasizing the Confucian ethics of hard work and social consensus as prerequisites of socioeconomic development should be greatly circumscribed.

Confucianism, Social Order, and Democracy

Undeniably, Confucian culture, with its emphasis on deference to authority and hierarchical human relations, contributes to the social stability and political order; this is a major justification for Asian-style democracy. In crime-stricken individualistic societies such as the United States, this claim for Asian ways of social order appears to have certain validity.

However, this does not mean that East Asian polities are necessarily stable or will become so in the long-run. Singapore’s one-party rule appears stable enough and the widely shared Confucian sense of social order among the populace contributes to this, but what is not to be forgotten is that this political stability is to a large extent a result of the state’s ideological indoctrination and coercive control of the society. The relative stability of East Asian societies is largely attributable to the ideological hegemony of the state over the civil society.

As noted earlier, an inevitable consequence of capitalist industrialization is the growth and diversification of civil society which results in growing tension between that society and both the classes within it and the state. This weakens the state’s control over the society and, at the same time, the legitimacy of authoritarian power. Social stability and political order based upon Confucian ethics are not guaranteed in a developing capitalist society. Tension is bound to arise between the Confucian ethic, which often fails to adapt itself to changing realities, and capitalist diversification, which occurs much too fast for the dominant social order to change. These societies may well face political and social disorder unless proper procedures are provided to accommodate the movement toward effective political institutions. The breakdown of Korea’s Yushin regime, for example, vividly demonstrated the failure of political legitimation through Confucian ideas in a rapidly changing society. In short, the Confucian ethic typified by social harmony, authority,
and consensus may have a short-term effect on political and social order, but its staying power is hardly guaranteed in rapidly changing Asian societies.

We should, at this point, consider the effect of this ethic on the development of political democracy. Are a Confucian ethic and democracy antithetical? Advocates of Asian-style democracy seem to believe this; they rank democracy below the higher goal of Confucian social order and thus minimize democratic institutions and procedures in their own territory. Common sense would accept that the deference to authority and hierarchical human relations which Confucian ethics dictate are not compatible with democratic norms requiring mass participation in the political process on an equal basis for each individual.

In this regard, democracy in a Confucian society seems possible only with the weakening of the Confucian ethic in that society. This is now happening in much of East Asia, but the democracies there at present still contain strong Confucian traits which are reflected in the existence of elitist, one-party or one-man rule in the polity or in particular political institutions. This fact makes the prospect for genuine democracy in East Asia less likely. Is democracy in a Confucian society not possible? Accepting that Confucian ideas hinder the development of modern democracy, we propose a few reasons why democratic development is not only possible but also likely in East Asian societies.

First, although Confucian ideas are antithetical to Anglo-American democracy, Confucian emphasis on social order and respect for legitimate authority, harmony, and consensus may contribute to the survival of a new democracy otherwise in danger. This is quite ironic because these very components of Confucianism are considered antithetical to liberal democratic ideals, e.g., respect for individual rights and compromise between diverse opinions and interests. Democracy grows from the soil of such values, but its long-term development may well need some combination of the seemingly contradictory values of Confucian and liberal ideas. In this sense, we may think of an East Asian-variety democracy as being that which combines the Western values of respect for individualism and participation with the Eastern values of consensus and authority. This should not, however, be identified with "Asian-style democracy" with its greater emphasis on Eastern values to justify authoritarian rule in Asia.

Second, cultures change. We can no longer claim that East Asia is dominated solely by Confucian culture. People in the region are becoming more and more Westernized, most notably Americanized, and less and less Confucian. Generational changes are quite radical in this regard. The younger generations in East Asia are no longer able to abide strongly by Confucian values. Their political ideas are rapidly becoming similar to those of their
Western counterparts. Historically, Western ideas of democracy and human rights are also increasingly taking root in these societies.

In Korea, the influence of Christianity has been so great that it has played a formidable role in ousting the military rulers and regaining democracy. In Japan, Confucianism is less and less a determining factor in the everyday life of Japanese, especially younger ones who are more and more Westernized. In short, East Asian societies are no longer predominantly Confucian; their politics and economics can no longer be explained by resorting to the Confucian culture for interpretive cues. They evince a varied mixture of Confucianism, Buddhism, Christianity, nationalism, and other Western as well as native cultural practices. It is even doubtful that Confucianism remains the most single powerful cultural trait in these societies. The picture of “Confucian Asia” dominant in the literature of Asian studies is exaggerated and interestingly reflects either Western observers’ inevitable sense of cultural difference or East Asian elites’ paternalistic conceptions of state and society.

Third, culture can also be made to change. This can occur through the conscious efforts of the state, as is often seen in a revolutionary society, although it alone cannot completely eliminate old culture and create a totally new one. If paternalistic political elites can promote a Confucian culture, there is no reason why democratic elites, politicians, or intellectuals cannot promote democratic values in East Asian societies.

In conclusion, cultural obstacles to democracy are limited; democracy can be built upon a culture traditionally considered antithetical to democracy through the combinations of democratic statecraft and people’s desire for democracy. Therefore, Confucian culture cannot justify the undemocratic practices seen in “Asian-style democracies.” Nor is there any reason to believe that a “Confucian democracy” is either genuinely democratic or superior to Western democracies with their “excessive individualism.”

Other Critiques
Other critiques of Asian-style democracy are all related to empirical issues already discussed. That Asian-style democracy is most vociferously contended by the region’s political elites sends the clear message that the argument serves the political purposes of Asia’s ruling elites. The term “Asian-style democracy” evokes the memory of the “Korean-style democracy” that the late Korean dictator Park Chung Hee espoused for the purpose of defending his highly repressive rule during the Yushin period. It contained all the elements of what Lee and Mahathir argue for—order, stability, harmony, consensus, economic development, the importance of leadership, attacks on “irresponsible and immoral” Western values including liberal democracy, and, what’s more, anti-Communism. Nobody would deny at present that the
“Korean-style democracy” was hardly a democracy. Although milder in form, “Asian-style democracy” is virtually the same thing.

Leadership is important, of course, but it should not be overstressed. Emphasis on good government and good leadership can easily fall into the trap of defending the autocracy found in many Asian countries. Moreover, what will happen if the leadership misjudges or proves self-serving? There is no guarantee that strong leaders will serve the well-being of the whole society. Even when it devotes energy to the genuine purpose of national development, there is no convincing evidence, as we have already seen, that an autocratic leadership performs better than a democratic one even in the narrow field of economic growth, let alone in those domains where democracy is inherently stronger, such as individual freedoms and civil rights.

The level of intellectual elaboration for Asian-style democracy is at its most banal when it is advocated by political leaders for their own political purposes. Expressed mainly in political elites’ speeches and journal editorials, the arguments for Asian-style democracy do not put forth any systematic set of arguments about desirable forms of political economy; neither do they envisage concrete institutions and procedures of political and economic systems. They are more moral and emotional than intellectual or practical.

Academics do not pay particular attention to the arguments for Asian-style democracy, although they give passing, albeit considerable, attention to regime types interlinked with the strong state, which is believed to have enabled the rapid growth of the East Asian economies. Unlike political elites and conservative journalists, academics do not explicitly espouse the Asian-style democracy as a desirable form of governance. They tend to shy away from normative issues. However, by focusing upon how authoritarian politics and strong states facilitate capital investment and rapid industrialization in East Asia, they tacitly endorse authoritarian political structures in the region.

Generally, the major interests of East Asia specialists lie in the structure of industrialization and economic policy making rather than in the nature of the political system itself. Discussions on the nature of the East Asian political system largely have been fragmented or secondary, except perhaps for the political-cultural approaches pioneered by Lucian Pye.¹⁰ The East Asian political system has been presented as a reflection of either market mechanisms and state-society relations or traditional cultural traits. An effort to conceptualize the East Asian political system en toto has yet to emerge. One sign of it is found in the collective work of Bell and others. However, it is still largely dominated by cultural, and illiberal, conceptions of East Asian

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politics; thus, we do not accept it as a desirable alternative to the interpretation of or prescriptions for East Asian democracy.

This naturally leads to normative questions. Are the major normative foundations of Asian-style democracy defendable? Are Asian society and morality superior? Should group interests precede individual interests? Are order and stability more important than political freedom and civil rights? Important for what? Is material prosperity more important than spiritual fulfillment? And for what end?

Order and stability are, of course, important social values; they are preconditions for the survival and meaningful life of human beings. But these values are not something to be maximized at the cost of other, competing values. As with the case of material values—indispensable, but impoverishing when taken to an extreme—the pursuit of order and stability in excess leads to inhumanity. Order, stability, and material well-being, while valuable goals to pursue, are not entitled to sacrifice other social values such as individual rights, freedom, ingenuity, and democracy. Often, these two sets of values contradict one another and political leaders have to make difficult choices between them, but in any case they should not choose one at the cost of the other. This is especially so when that choice results from the political elite’s paternalistic efforts to control people’s demands for democratization. Aside from normative considerations, even when functionally seen, just as democracy without stability cannot endure, neither can stability persevere without democracy.

Some of the key elements in Eastern values—the emphasis on the family unit, respect for education and legitimate authority, and social order—are important, and the social decay caused by “too much individualism” in American society is real indeed. Eastern societies are, of course, different from those of the West, as are the value preferences of each. The question is how to reconcile the supposedly superior Eastern values with the undoubtedly important universal ones. That is to say, how can the universal values of prosperity, freedom, and democracy be combined with the East Asian values of familism and communitarian humanism? We cannot at this moment present a clear and convincing model for this East Asian—and genuine—democracy, but one thing is clear: the present “Asian-style democracy” is not the answer.