

# Making sense of democracy and governance in the Asia-Pacific

*Stephen McCarthy and  
Mark R Thompson*

**REGIONAL OUTLOOK**

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*Griffith Asia Institute*

# Griffith Asia Institute



## Regional Outlook

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governance in the Asia Pacific

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'Making sense of democracy and governance in the Asia Pacific', Regional Outlook Paper No. 62, 2019.

This Regional Outlook Paper is based upon research which originated from a joint workshop hosted by the Griffith Asia Institute and the South East Asia Research Centre (SEARC) at the City University of Hong Kong. The research will be published in the forthcoming manuscript McCarthy, Stephen and Thompson, Mark R. (eds.), *Governance and Democracy in the Asia-Pacific: Political and Civil Society*, (London: Routledge).

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# Contents

1. Introduction .....	1
2. Governance and democracy.....	3
Democracy since the Cold War .....	3
Civil society and democracy .....	5
‘Good governance’ .....	6
3. Effectiveness and legitimacy in the Asia Pacific.....	9
4. Democracy and good governance in the Asia Pacific .....	11
Democracy and governance.....	12
Political society and governance .....	13
Civil society and governance.....	15
5. Conclusion .....	17
Notes and References .....	19

# 1. Introduction

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For the past several decades, governments, multilateral institutions, international NGOs, and many in the academic community have operated with some doubtful assumptions about 'good governance'. The first is that all good things go together: hence if one is able to promote good governance, one is simultaneously able to promote both democracy and development, and vice-versa. Another is that civil society plays a key role in bringing about these positive changes. Civil society is viewed as a major force in the fight against corruption, the promotion of good governance, and the consolidation of democratic regimes. Good governance is also promoted by reforms that aim to strengthen political society in ways that are said to improve the quality of democracy.

The purpose of this paper is to question these assumptions across a variety of country cases and themes that address the theoretical tension between governance and democracy in order to illuminate how this tension is played out in political and civil societies across the Asia-Pacific region. The paper is based upon the research and findings of the forthcoming book *Governance and Democracy in the Asia-Pacific: Political and Civil Society*.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the book examines the character, structure, and current trajectories of polities in the Asia-Pacific, democratic or otherwise, to demonstrate that the role of civil society, political society, and governance has been quite different from what has commonly been assumed within the international community.

From the early 1980s, buoyed by the economic agendas of the Thatcher and Reagan governments as well as the influence of the US Treasury Department, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) had promulgated a path to economic development for developing countries that involved structural adjustment policies entailing privatisation, deregulation, trade liberalisation, and macro-stabilisation. In 1989, John Williamson of the Institute for International Economics coined the term 'Washington Consensus' to a list of ten policies which he believed had long been accepted as appropriate within the OECD and which were viewed by most key players in Washington as being necessary reforms for Latin America. The ten reforms that constituted his original list were: fiscal discipline; reordering public expenditure priorities; tax reform; liberalising interest rates; a competitive exchange rate; trade liberalisation; liberalisation of inward foreign direct investment; privatisation; deregulation; and property rights.<sup>2</sup> Gradually these policies became perceived as those which the Bretton Woods institutions applied towards their client countries worldwide. Critics labelled them as ideologically driven economic foreign policy - an attempt to export 'neo-liberalism' and 'market fundamentalism' to developing countries.

At the same time, the understanding of the relationship between democracy and development has undergone distinct phases marked by paradigm shifts - each of which represented a specific embodiment of what is generally called the Washington consensus, or how international organisations think and look at the world.<sup>3</sup> While the Washington consensus has been modified to reflect what have been called 'second-generation reforms', the ideas and the implementation of the subsequent 'augmented' policy program remained contentious.<sup>4</sup> The additional reforms were institutional in nature, prompting Dani Rodrik of Harvard University to label them as an example of 'institutions fundamentalism' as distinguished from the earlier wave of 'market fundamentalism'.<sup>5</sup> They were an ambitious set of 'best-practice' type programs designed by Western scholars, or at least based upon Western practices, that required a large level of administrative, human, and political capital - all of which may be severely lacking in developing countries. They could neither guarantee success, nor were they falsifiable. Yet the IMF maintained a strong belief in the need for these as well as the original reforms to the extent that a country's failure to produce economic growth could only mean that their reforms had not

been taken seriously. The World Bank, on the other hand, was beginning to recognise that 'one size fits all' solutions based on 'rule of thumb' economics may not be the best policies to promote.<sup>6</sup>

Rodrik summarises the 'Augmented' Washington Consensus as the original ten items, plus: corporate governance; anti-corruption; flexible labour markets; WTO agreements; financial codes and standards; 'prudent' capital-account opening; non-intermediate exchange rate regimes; independent central banks/inflation targeting; social safety nets; and targeted poverty reduction.<sup>7</sup> Just as the original reforms required, or rather assumed, a depoliticised state, these reforms again assumed the neutrality or insulation of local power structures and political interests. The state itself, or at least the institutions of the state, would be geared towards a best-practice solution while ignoring the realities of local political, economic, and social conditions.

The economic liberalisation reforms pushed by international financial institutions and more generally by Western governments also underpinned an ambitious 'state-building' and governance reform agenda that was accelerated following the events of 9/11 and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. State-building also focused on improving the institutions of government and, like the second-generation reforms for economic development, they directed developing countries towards what a well-functioning state should look like – i.e., a modern Western state. However, although it was not self-evident that democracy could be promoted through good governance, it was more than possible that adopting the advice of international institutions could prove to be economically and politically destabilising – especially for emerging democracies. Although policy makers may have wished to create new liberal democracies fashioned in the mould of those already in existence, it remained probable that intervention and the projection of norms of Western origin upon non-Western societies lacking in democratic experience, maturity or bureaucratic capacity could lead to further instability in the Asia-Pacific region, nationally and regionally. Instead, it remained likely that domestic variables such as traditional sources of power, political culture, institutional legitimacy, and the strength of civil society would remain critical to regime outcomes.

## 2. Governance and democracy

Governance has become a buzzword of political and economic development in recent years.<sup>8</sup> Studies in governance have emerged as an increasingly important academic and policy field, along with the growth of governance-related courses being offered by international organisations, NGOs, and tertiary institutions. The evolution of the public policy understanding of 'governance' can be traced back at least to the early 1980's<sup>9</sup>; its steady trajectory parallels ideas described as the 'Washington Consensus' and 'Post-Washington Consensus' of the 1980s and 1990s promulgated by the World Bank, the IMF, and other IFI's. Indeed, the 'good governance' agenda has to a large extent replaced the Washington Consensus in development policy circles and is now used by most development agencies and international organisations like the World Bank and the United Nations.<sup>10</sup> Yet it is important to note that definitions of governance vary considerably across different fields of research and there is no commonly accepted academic or policy-wide definition of governance. At the same time, the way that political scientists understand democracy has changed significantly since the end of the Cold War.

### Democracy since the Cold War

The understanding of democracy among political scientists has undergone a major transformation since the end of the Cold War. It stands in stark contrast to the more cautious path taken by political development scholars. While early political development theory suggested that economic development fostered democracy, which in turn promoted political stability, it also recognised that there were exceptions to this rule and that some regimes possessed unique features that resisted democratic pressures.<sup>11</sup> Economic development (including industrialisation, urbanisation, wealth accumulation and education) required *legitimacy* and *effectiveness* to ensure political stability. Effectiveness referred to the performance of the political system, seen as the extent to which it satisfies the basic functions of government as defined by the expectations of most members of society *and* powerful groups within it that might threaten the system, including the armed forces.<sup>12</sup> Legitimacy, Lipset believed unlike many democracy optimists of later decades, 'may be associated with many forms of political organisation, including oppressive ones'.<sup>13</sup> In Lipset's view, political instability occurred where there was a loss of legitimacy or a prolonged loss of effectiveness, though a country would likely remain democratic so long as it remained legitimate. If both legitimacy and effectiveness were lost, then the regime would become unstable and break down unless it was a dictatorship maintained by force.

However, after the end of the Cold War democracy optimism prevailed, reflected in the literature of this period, most notably Francis Fukuyama.<sup>14</sup> It became awkward for many mainstream political scientists to point to the often long term stability of authoritarian rule given the prevailing normative bias toward democracy. Yet in the Asia-Pacific region a number of non-democratic regimes proved to be decade long exceptions to this democratising 'rule': military rule in Burma (Myanmar), long-standing state socialism in China that had morphed into authoritarian state capitalism, dynastic state socialism in North Korea as well as dominant party 'soft' authoritarian rule in Malaysia and Singapore.

Advocates of the 'development-inevitably-leads-to-democracy' school preferred to point to the examples of South Korea and Taiwan democratising after several decades of successful economic development. This was cited as vindication of the claim that democratic transition is 'driven by growth'.<sup>15</sup> Wolfgang Knöbl suggests that the democratisation of the 'tiger states' of the Asia-Pacific in the late 1980s was a major reason for the revival of so-called modernisation theory which, just a decade earlier, 'no longer [seemed] convincing and it seemed difficult to imagine a future in which



modernisation theory would again play a dominant role within macro-sociological theorising.<sup>16</sup> But by the late 1990s, Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi had again raised serious doubts about its continued relevance with their critique of the strong or 'endogenous' version of modernisation theory that claims that economic growth which leads to an advanced economy and extensive social transformation is likely to create conditions conducive to a democratic transition from authoritarianism.<sup>17</sup> But this did not keep ever optimistic modernisation theorists from sketching a 'soothing scenario' for China's political future.<sup>18</sup> Writing about China in 1996, Henry S. Rowen argued that 'either China will remain relatively poor and authoritarian or it will become rich and pluralistic - and it seems to have chosen the latter path,' with Rowen even predicting democratisation would take place by 2015, a date he later pushed back to 2025.<sup>19</sup> Bruce Gilley offered a similarly optimistic view a decade later, one which now seems highly implausible given the increasingly repressive and anti-reformist rule of Xi Jinping.<sup>20</sup> Viewed in this light, and ignoring the (literally) small but theoretically significant exception of Singapore,<sup>21</sup> the Asia-Pacific can be seen as the 'last redoubt' of the thesis that economic development, with the resultant social differentiation and political mobilisation, will ultimately lead to democratic transition.<sup>22</sup>

By contrast, classical accounts of politics from Aristotle onwards, as well as the early political development literature of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, recognised the natural tendency of many regimes to decay into a worse form of rule.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, in 1965 Huntington had noted that democratisation was only one aspect of political development and that a concept of political development should be understood as reversible, defining both political development and the circumstances under which political decay takes place. Accordingly,

*'a theory of political development needs to be mated to a theory of political decay. Indeed...theories of instability, corruption, authoritarianism, domestic violence, institutional decline, and political disintegration may tell us a lot more about the 'developing' areas than their more hopefully defined opposites.'*<sup>24</sup>

The mainstream of modern political science, however, adopted a Hegelian-like linear progression towards democracy as the final end, with economic development seen to inevitably be leading to democracy and non-democratic governments challenging this movement of history, particularly when they were developing rapidly economically. The literature on democracy and democratisation focused on the conditions under which transitions to democracy occur, the conditions under which newly established democracies consolidate, the conditions under which democracy survives, the relationship between democratic consolidation and survival or breakdown, the quality of democracy, the qualities of democracy, what democracy is (and is not), the role of international organisations in promoting democracy, and the impact of transnational actors on democracy.<sup>25</sup> While recognising that the breakdown of an authoritarian regime did not inevitably lead to democratic transition, the literature nonetheless focused on what at the time seemed to be the most likely outcome of what appeared to be a global crisis of authoritarian rule: the establishment of stable democracies. Indeed, it is only in recent years that a number of scholars have shifted their attention to examine the theoretical and empirical grounds for cases of authoritarian resilience.<sup>26</sup> In addition, many 'transitologists' have come to recognise that democratic 'progress' is very much reversible and that the world is currently in the midst of a 'democratic recession',<sup>27</sup> even asking whether 'democracy can save itself'<sup>28</sup> due to the rise of illiberal populism.<sup>29</sup>

Along with the growth of this body of work on resilient authoritarianism, the field has witnessed the pluralisation of taxonomic efforts, conceptual tools and categorisations that could be employed to map the distribution of variously defined democratic regimes worldwide. Political regimes that were non-democratic could be regarded as totalitarian, authoritarian, sultanistic, and post-totalitarian.<sup>30</sup> Regimes that could be regarded as democratic by using a very expansive notion of democracy could no longer be treated as

a homogeneous bloc. Political scientists in the post-Cold War era tended to classify regimes in accordance with their democratic attributes, or their lack thereof, and continued to invent adjectives to signify what elements of democracy the less than perfect regimes were lacking in – most regimes were classified with a view to their inevitable transformation into a better, or the best, form. Thus, there are many hybrid regimes that lie somewhere between authoritarianism and democracy as they hold elections but lack civil liberties, alternatively termed competitive or electoral authoritarian.<sup>31</sup> Regime classification of authoritarian hybrids resulted in a plethora of sub-classifications, with other contenders including illiberal democracy, military-dominated democracy, proto-democracy, virtual democracy, and façade democracy.

The countries included in this variously labeled in-between category were regarded as partly democratic because while they may have had universal suffrage, multi-party competition or regular elections they were also treated as failed, imperfect, illiberal quasi or formal democracies because their functioning, including their electoral competition, did not resemble that of liberal-democratic regimes found in Western societies. Hence, since the Western liberal-democratic regimes represented a normatively loaded benchmark by which all other variously qualified democratic regimes had to be judged, the other regimes were more or less democratic depending on how closely they approximated the Western standard. Minimalist definitions of democracy were at the same time insufficient for they neglected to examine how representatives mandated to make decisions on behalf of citizens were responsive to voters' demands – i.e., democracy must be representative, decisive and responsive.<sup>32</sup> Minimalist definitions of democracy could not, in other words, adequately account for what Lipset called a regime's *effectiveness* – or what has also become known as 'outputs' or performance outcomes.

### Civil society and democracy

In many recent discussions, civil society and democracy have become close conceptual companions.<sup>33</sup> Civil society is often seen as the key variable explaining the late twentieth century 'wave' of democratisation and democratic consolidation discussed above. Although most scholars working on contemporary civil society make at least implicit assumptions about liberal democratic civility, this premise can be challenged. Civil society is often advertised as having hosted the Arab Spring of 2011 and before that the 'colour' revolutions of Eastern Europe in the early 2000s, and the Central-Eastern European democratic revolutions of 1989–91. But civil society was also strong in the interwar German Weimar Republic where support from many different societal groups enabled extremist groups to scuttle democracy and paved the way for seizure of power by the Nazis.<sup>34</sup> Nancy Bermeo has argued that 'ordinary Germans' grouped into 'antagonistic camps' from the far Left to the extreme Right 'did battle in public spaces'. Such polarisation and extremism in Weimar civil society has 'darkened' views about the role of 'ordinary citizens' and 'testified to the potential of antidemocratic movements everywhere'.<sup>35</sup> Recently, Robert Putnam has conceded that Al Qaeda is an excellent example of social capital, enabling its participants to accomplish goals they could not accomplish without that network.<sup>36</sup> In the US context, civil society is not just composed of civil rights groups, bowling clubs and parent teacher associations, it also includes the Tea Party Movement, the Oklahoma bomber and his network, and the Ku Klux Klan. A number of scholars point to how often civil society has proved 'uncivil'. It can turn from a pro-democratic force against dictatorship to one which undermines electoral democracy.<sup>37</sup> How 'civil' civil society is, is an open question, not one to be answered by fiat with assumptions about democratic civility.

Antonio Gramsci understood civil society as a site of contestation.<sup>38</sup> While some scholars have focused on civil society promoting liberal political change, others have emphasised social revolutionary, populist or traditionalist forms.<sup>39</sup> Eastern European dissidents rejected the ideology of egalitarian socialism that in practice had led to collective

downward mobility and robbed peoples of their freedom.<sup>40</sup> But (the few remaining) social revolutionaries and (the more numerous) populists asked what was the use of political freedom in the midst of profound social inequality that characterises life in so many 'developing' countries and increasingly 'developed' countries as well in the world today. Socially-oriented civil society which champions the cause of the disadvantaged in society often draws the ire of elitist opponents. They do their utmost to mobilise against populists as capitalist states had once moved to crush the 'communist threat'. Elitist society tries to counter the efforts of populists who use electoral victories to at least promise (if not actually bring about) significant social reform. Another neglected variation of civil society is 'Burkean' in that traditionalists use their proximity to the state in an effort to roll back secular policies and implement more religiously oriented ones. This shows that Robert Putnam's<sup>41</sup> argument about social capital creating civic mindedness and thus helping to support and deepen democracy has its critics of both the 'left' and the 'right': on the one hand, those who believe civil society needs to be deepened through radical social reform and, on the other, those who aim to reinforce in-group identities rather than 'bridging' across ethnicity, class and other cleavages.

Both the character of, and the alliances within, civil society may change. A diverse civil society that has united around the aim of achieving a democratic transition is likely to fragment into its different ideological components after some degree of liberal democracy has been achieved which even amplifies these differences given the newly established protections of civil liberties. Differentiating types of 'democratic' civil society thus helps us understand why civil society may on some occasions appear part of the classic liberal democratic agenda of introducing civil liberties and then 'making them work' in a consolidated democracy as Putnam famously argued.<sup>42</sup> In other contexts, however, particularly in developing countries facing grave social inequalities and ethnic conflict, such formal democratic institutions may seem superficial compared to deep social divides in society. While secularist NGOs attempt to modernise society – targeting clientelist networks and religious-based discrimination – traditionalists will defend the status quo in the name of indigenous ethno-religious values and the need to ward off 'Western' influences. Rather than conceptualising a single, normatively homogenous civil society, it is more usefully understood as a wide variety of ideological streams with quite different political aims, with liberal democracy being only one possibility.

### 'Good governance'

International organisations and NGOs have continued to use concepts and terms in a very imprecise way, resulting in a considerable amount of confusion as to what democracy is, as to what good governance is, and what the relationship between the two is. In order to provide some clarity, one needs a working definition or measure of good governance. One of the most commonly used set of indicators of governance, developed by a research team at the World Bank in 1996, are the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI). They consist of six broad dimensions of governance:

*voice and accountability, political stability and absence of violence, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption.*<sup>43</sup>

These indicators have been criticised by scholars on several grounds however, particularly for their aggregation methodology, independence of assessment, and biases in the individual indicators – the WGI are said to be biased towards the perspective of business elites and are influenced by the level of development of a country (i.e., rich or fast growing countries get better scores simply because they are rich or growing fast). Moreover, the WGI seem to be correlated to each other, especially government effectiveness which is significantly correlated with economic indicators and regulatory quality. Apaza, for example, shows how a country's (including Fiji's) government effectiveness scores improve when their scores for regulatory quality improve.<sup>44</sup> And while regulatory quality

refers to a government's ability to promote private sector development, government effectiveness refers to the quality of public service provision and public policies. These biases are said to persist and may influence the scores for each WGI. In addition, the indicators are said to be based on perceptions of something, like corruption, but these perceptions may differ between business elites and the population as well as from country to country, and using a general perception of corruption may not capture particular perceptions in a country where corruption may be defined differently.

To be sure, the developmental imperative of the 'good governance' concept has attracted much criticism from various quarters. Goldsmith, for example, questions whether good (i.e., transparent, accountable, and inclusive) governance should be established and expanded everywhere because it is a static and ahistorical doctrine that overlooks the political and economic costs of governance reforms.<sup>45</sup> Using the World Bank's indicators for good governance (above), and the concept of 'growth accelerations', Goldsmith found that good institutions of government were not needed to produce economic development and that good governance reforms were more an effect than the cause of development – they may sustain development, although development also encourages corruption.

Subsequent literature on governance reform and development emphasises the importance of knowing the context in which reformed policies, institutions, and processes are to be introduced, and designing interventions that are appropriate to time, place, historical experience, local capacity and informal institutions.<sup>46</sup> The call for contextually sensitive analysis in achieving better governance requires research that focuses on arriving at localised and informed solutions to specific constraints and needs. The emphasis on improving governance has not taken into account that the scope for system-wide reforms is limited by country-specific political and economic factors and that country specific options for policy reform must be considered.<sup>47</sup> To that effect, Grindle coined the concept '*good enough governance*' to refer to the assessment of possible reform options *under a certain regime, at a certain point in time, given the characteristics of existing institutions*.<sup>48</sup> Grindle further stressed that the feasibility of particular interventions can be assessed by analysing the regime, the institutional context for change, and the implications of the content of the intervention being considered.<sup>49</sup> In other words, forcing governance-based reforms on developing countries like Burma (Myanmar) or Cambodia ignores the fact that Western states chose to adopt these reforms after they had developed the capacity to do so.

The importance of rule of law in the world-wide good governance agenda today is highlighted by the World Bank's 2017 *World Development Report: Governance and the Law* where the Bank notes that rule of law 'is the very basis of the good governance needed to realise full social and economic potential'.<sup>50</sup> In a surprising turn, the World Bank claims that it now recognises the importance of customary and religious law, and cultural and social norms, as rule systems that may accompany state law and order behaviour, authority and contestation.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the Bank notes that 'simply transplanting institutional forms to developing countries does not work' and that 'such forms need to emerge in a homegrown fashion from internal governance dynamics that reflect socioeconomic demands and other incentives'.<sup>52</sup> Although this is an admirable if not overdue concession on the part of the Bank, the fact remains that many of the 'internal governance dynamics' are far from liberal democratic across the Asia-Pacific, and demands for socioeconomic reforms are often crushed by the state. Even where laws are formally passed, they may only serve to further consolidate socio-economic injustice, such as land grabbing in Burma (Myanmar).<sup>53</sup>

Clearly, comparing regimes to some ideal type of liberal democracy fails to adequately explain how the qualities of democracy (or the indicators of governance) are interwoven with social, political and economic realities in the Asia-Pacific region. While recognising that compromises are essential for democratic transitions, empirical accounts should not

understate the importance of domestic conditions; nor make the quality of democracy a litmus test for the success of political and socio-economic reforms. Indeed, good governance and democratic governance may not even be a comfortable fit for the Asia-Pacific region. Emmerson, for example, notes not only that liberal democracy and effective governance do not go together in Southeast Asia, but also that large gaps can appear between the two and become destabilising.<sup>54</sup> Good or effective governance is largely a matter of measuring performance outcomes, while democratic governance is a matter of measuring participant inputs.

### 3. Effectiveness and legitimacy in the Asia Pacific

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It is clear that for various reasons the Asia-Pacific region has not been a showcase for the successful diffusion of liberal democratic ideas. In any reform agenda designed to improve commonly understood governance outcomes, reasonable consideration should be given to the local political, historical, ethnic, cultural and religious differences and influences that prevail across the region. Yet because any successful diffusion of an idea also requires local assimilation, one important question remains to be addressed: what do citizens and voters in the Asia-Pacific mean by democracy and good governance; and what do they desire?

Approaching this question requires uncoupling the Western tautologically biased conception of liberal democratic governance. To do this it is useful to return to Lipset's and Huntington's insights that some regimes resist democratic pressures and that economic development required *legitimacy* and *effectiveness* to ensure political stability.<sup>55</sup> Notably, legitimacy included non-democratic regimes while effectiveness meant government performance or how well the regime satisfied the expectations of society. Political instability occurred where there was a loss of legitimacy and/or a prolonged loss of effectiveness – if both were lost, then the regime would become unstable and break down unless it was a dictatorship maintained by force. In the modern (post-Cold War) interpretation, (*liberal*) *democracy* and *good governance* have replaced legitimacy and effectiveness, and there is no allowance for non-democratic regimes, many versions of which we find in the Asia-Pacific region. Yet if people in these societies have their own criteria for what constitutes political legitimacy in their regime, then government effectiveness (which would also be related to legitimacy) becomes the major driver of what they understand to be 'governance'. Perhaps measuring political legitimacy and government effectiveness also becomes the Asia-Pacific's own 'good enough' version of governance.

There is evidence that supports this contention. Research based on surveys and polling data has shown that people in Asia desire good governance – defined mostly as effectiveness – but not necessarily democracy. Indeed, Chu, Diamond and Nathan discovered that support for democratic regimes in Asia fluctuates widely in response to changing perceptions of these regimes' performance, levels of corruption, and the trustworthiness of their politicians.<sup>56</sup> While Asian publics are open to democracy, they are not captive to its charms and must be shown that democracy works in terms of effectiveness. Citizens in East Asian democracies want not just democracy as such, but more accountability, more responsiveness, more transparency, and less corruption. Democratic consolidation can only come about by improving people's material lives and advancing economic development.

Pietsch further finds that many citizens in Southeast Asia have an instrumentalist view of democracy, measured according to governance outputs, and the vast majority of citizens considered the economy as more important than the abstract ideal of democracy.<sup>57</sup> These findings are consistently supported by Asian Barometer survey data – whereas Western nations understand democracy by procedural aspects, Asians tend to focus more on the substantive outcomes and do not always regard democracy as the best form of government (these findings are also consistent across all regime types).<sup>58</sup> In addition, Chang, Chu and Welsh find that most regimes in Southeast Asia draw political legitimacy from perceptions that their governance is effective and marked by integrity,<sup>59</sup> which lends

support to the argument that regime legitimacy is also rooted in the output side of the political system.

Finally, Morlino, Dressel and Pelizzo's work on the qualities of democracy in the Asia-Pacific region found that the democratic dimensions were only loosely connected to one another, there was no funnel of causality, and that participation and competition were not the main drivers of democratic qualities.<sup>60</sup> These findings were exceptional because they inferred that when Asia-Pacific voters talk about democracy, they are often thinking about good governance. Satisfaction with democracy was inversely related to its representativeness, and Asia-Pacific voters care more about good governance (defined as decisiveness and responsiveness) than democracy and representation.

## 4. Democracy and good governance in the Asia Pacific

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The thematic structure of *Governance and Democracy in the Asia-Pacific*<sup>61</sup> allows for a theoretical and empirical examination of the tensions between governance and democracy introduced above, which in turn becomes a major recurring theme in the rest of the volume. This theme is systematically applied to an examination of political and civil society in the Asia-Pacific region, and the most important elements of each – elections, judiciaries, political parties, militaries, informal political organisations, and non-government associations. The evidence produced in each chapter highlights the tension between governance and democracy and suggests that for various reasons the Asia-Pacific region struggles to meet the demands of governance-based policies derived from misguided assumptions. Particular attention is given to the Asian countries in which we believe the tension between governance and democracy is most pronounced – including Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, and China. The book includes a broad analysis of elections and political parties in the Asia-Pacific, as well as an examination of parties and civil society in the Solomon Islands and Fiji – the latter country also being important for examining how, along with Burma (Myanmar), militaries influence political and civil society in the region. Also included is an examination of the governance of think tanks and religion in the most important rising power in the Asia-Pacific region – China. Together, these chapters illustrate how ideas of governance can also be understood and promoted in non-democratic regimes.

Relations between democracy and governance produce a range of patterns in the Asia-Pacific that are in need of some explanation. In some settings, civil and political society has acted at least initially as a democratising force but largely failed to promote good governance (Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand). Later, in Indonesia, political mobilisation by intolerant Islamist groups led to an illiberal state response, representing a double danger of an increasingly illiberal civil society and growing repression by the state.<sup>62</sup> When ‘pro-poor’ populist challenges arose in the Philippines (president Joseph Estrada) and in Thailand (prime minister Thaksin Shinwatra), key civil society groups instrumentalised corruption scandals to legitimise their turn against democratically elected leaders, helping pave the way for supposed ‘people power’ uprisings but actually military-backed or led takeovers.<sup>63</sup> In other settings – especially in societies supposedly influenced by ‘Asian’ values, – good governance based on meritocratic rule has been pitted against ‘Western’-style democratic change by regime elites in Singapore and Malaysia (in the latter country only until a surprise defeat of the ruling party in 2018) and in China.<sup>64</sup> In cases where political society has been monopolised by militaries, civil society has struggled to promote democracy while governance has been redefined to serve military interests (Burma and Fiji).<sup>65</sup> Only in a fourth group of countries (Japan, South Korea and Taiwan) has civil society indeed promoted both democracy and good governance but only after prolonged periods of development mostly under military or dominant party non-democratic rule.<sup>66</sup> Other countries often course, may display a combination of some of the attributes above, with particular circumstances making it difficult to fit them easily into these categories.

A number of outcomes are possible depending on the local circumstances and the environment in which civil and political society evolves: one may find democracy and strong governance; democracy without good governance; no democracy but good governance; or neither democracy nor good governance. In the Asia-Pacific region, historical legacies and social structures dispose civil and political society to interact in different ways, producing outcomes that may be reinforced by institutions that then hold



implications for democracy and governance. These outcomes are derived from conditions that are delicately intertwined and are influenced by, and have influence upon, colonial legacies, religion, ethnic pluralism, the role of the military, the monarchy, bureaucratic capacities, constitutions, party systems, elections, and the judiciaries.

The chapters in the book examine this complex network of underlying conditions and the relations between them by dividing them into themes that enable an examination into the nature of civil and political society in the Asia-Pacific as well as the presence, or absence, of good governance and democracy (or a particular mixture of both). The book is organised into three themes—each theme is intended to focus on the kinds of issue areas it identifies and, in turn, encourage both an analytical and comparative study between a number of similar countries or cases, as well as comparisons over time within the countries themselves. The first theme of the book, governance and democracy, includes a theoretical and conceptual analysis of the contested relationship between them; it also includes an examination of three countries where the tensions between these two concepts is most pronounced—Singapore (strong though weakening governance under continued though ‘soft’ authoritarian rule) as well as Thailand and the Philippines (where a discourse of good governance has been instrumentalised against democratically elected leaders). The second theme, political society, broadly examines the governance of some institutional elements of politics in the Asia-Pacific – elections, political parties and the rule of law, with particular attention paid to the Solomon Islands, Cambodia, and Thailand. The third theme, civil society, examines how governance and civil society are impacted by military and non-democratic rule in the Asia-Pacific, focusing on Burma, Fiji, and China.

## Democracy and governance

That the relationship between good governance and democracy is disputed can be traced to their conceptualisation and operationalisation. There is considerable variation in the extent to which the understanding of good governance overlaps with democracy. Further, the indicators of good governance – and the commonly used empirical measures and data sources used for each – are often inappropriate, they overlap, or they are imprecise. Pelizzo shows how the close relationship between the indicators of democratic quality and governance makes investigating their conceptual relationship problematic on theoretical and empirical grounds.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, Plattner believes that the inclusion of ‘voice and accountability’ and ‘rule of law’ among the six dimensions of governance tilts the good-governance playing field in favour of democratic over authoritarian governments.<sup>68</sup> And yet Singapore – which scores consistently highly on most measures of governance – provides proof that democracy and good governance do not always go together. While some scholars argue that ‘the causal connections linking democracy and good governance remain obscure and contested’<sup>69</sup>, Pelizzo finds that this is due to a history of definitional and conceptual problems surrounding the two concepts, measuring their often indistinguishable relationship a difficult and tautological exercise.<sup>70</sup>

Singapore is perhaps the world’s leading example of a model of governance which runs counter to the conventional view equating good governance with liberal democracy. Singapore’s hybrid regime combines both authoritarian and democratic institutions; its governance embraces neoliberal economic rationality and statist direction with limited civil and political liberties (Tan, 2019).<sup>71</sup> Singapore consistently ranks highly on most of the WGI (often it is ranked among the top five least corrupt countries in the world by Transparency International). However, it ranks lowly for ‘voice and accountability’—meaning limited freedoms of expression, participation, association, and media (i.e. qualities of democracy). The continued success of Singapore’s state-centric governance model faces a number of challenges, including the state’s handling of immigration and population growth, and rising income and social inequalities. Despite the prosperity and wealth, in recent years Singaporeans have called for a fairer and more inclusive society, and have shown increasing signs of disaffection, unhappiness and a loss of national pride leading to

a rise in controlled protests and petitions. The destabilising threat caused by widening gaps between effective governance and liberal democracy<sup>72</sup> is beginning to appear in Singapore, threatening the city state's delicate social harmony and the People's Action Party's hold on power. Without increasing the quality of democracy and allowing more political participation, Tan believes that Singapore's model of governance is unsustainable and could lead to deeper social problems,<sup>73</sup> a point also recently made by Rahim and Barr.<sup>74</sup>

Thompson argues that politics in Thailand and the Philippines are dominated by two competing discourses.<sup>75</sup> On the one hand there is an elite discourse of 'good governance' which proclaims the higher morality of elites and the urban middle class which promote political reform. It criticises elections as manipulated by corrupt politicians who buy poor peoples' votes. On the other hand, poorer Thais and Filipinos often subscribe to a 'moral economy of electoralism'<sup>76</sup> which favours politicians who are part of a community they are seen to be benefitting. An elite-led, 'virtuous' movement for reform was discursively constructed during anti-dictatorship struggles. The initial result was an uneasy truce between 'bossist' local politicians and 'good' national elites, which broke down with the rise of pro-poor populist leaders at the national level. Populists were threatening because they combined centralised clientelism with social policies and appeals directed toward the disadvantaged—this brought a largely hidden discourse of localist electoralism to the national stage, challenging the elite monopoly on the discussion of the democratic good.<sup>77</sup> But it also led to a sharpening of elitist critiques of 'corrupted' democracy that pitted the good against the many.

In Thailand, Thaksin and his surrogates' electoral invulnerability led Thai elites to back to military rulers who postponed elections repeatedly before finally allowing them to go ahead in March 2019. Although the military government has of this writing seemingly 'civilianised' itself through heavily manipulated elections, the election and its results showed that a new political cleavage is emerging between civilian politicians calling for democracy and military rulers clinging to electoral authoritarianism. This has overshadowed if not replaced the previous divide between political elites and the military, on the one hand, and pro-poor populists led by Thaksin Shinawatra, on the other. Despite the apparent success of a 'reformist' president in the Philippines (Benigno S. Aquino, III), the contradictions of the 'good governance' agenda - persistent poverty, dependence on political patronage, and the inability to strengthen institutions—paved the way for the election of an illiberal bossist politician, Rodrigo R. Duterte,<sup>78</sup> who promised order *over* law.<sup>79</sup>

## Political society and governance

Three of the most important institutional elements of political society often included in calls for democratic and governance-based reforms involve elections, party systems, and the competing visions of the rule of law.<sup>80</sup> Reilly presents an overview of electoral governance across the Asia-Pacific region, and highlights the growing importance of regional models of democracy and clusters of political reform in the emerging democracies of Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia and the South Pacific.<sup>81</sup> He identifies four sub-regional trends - the combination of (semi-) presidential government, mixed-member majoritarian electoral systems and nascent two-party politics in the Northeast Asian democracies of Korea, Taiwan and Mongolia; the historical prevalence of dominant-party parliamentarism in the Southeast Asian 'quasi-democracies' of Singapore, Malaysia, Myanmar, Cambodia and Thailand; a shift towards more complex elections and more fragmented party systems in the Southeast Asian presidential democracies of Indonesia, the Philippines and semi-presidential Timor Leste; and experimentation with a broader range of electoral and party reforms in the politically-fragmented parliamentary democracies of the South Pacific. Such sub-regional clustering of institutional choices is a

product of many forces, including geopolitics, neighbourhood diffusion, and internal political dynamics, with direct implications for policy outcomes.

The single most important factor affecting party systems across the region's democracies is, according to Reilly, sociological, which is manifested in terms of basic cultural divisions.<sup>82</sup> The inter-relationship between social diversity and party numbers across the region is important because it points towards the difficulties which democracies face in building consolidated party systems under conditions of social diversity. It also highlights how variations in party systems impact upon government performance. Thus in competitive one-party dominant or two-party systems, parties must provide benefits to society at large (public goods) to maximise their chances of re-election; whereas in multiparty systems with high social diversity, politicians are pushed to deliver private goods to their supporters - including through efforts of nepotism, cronyism and corruption which are common problems found in many Asia-Pacific states.<sup>83</sup> The latter classification that points to problems in governance linked to the party system is applicable to the situation experienced in Solomon Islands as well.

Wood shows how democracy in Solomon Islands produces poor governance, caused mostly through clientelist electoral politics and citizens casting their votes for candidates they believe are most likely to help them personally or locally.<sup>84</sup> These may not be the best equipped candidates to run the country; it advantages more wealthy candidates and provides an avenue for vested interests (logging or casino industries) to influence political outcomes; and it incentivises MPs to focus on the local rather than governing the country as a whole, leading to the misallocation of large amounts of government revenue towards discretionally allocated constituency development funds. Overcoming what is essentially a collective action problem among voters in order to improve governance would require large-scale national level political movements. The rise of urbanisation, rising education levels, and the arrival of new social media are the soil from which such movements could grow.

The absence of democratic rule of law, discussed above, has been a constant feature of Cambodia's judicial landscape, from its colonial experience to the ambitious state-building agenda undertaken by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). West examines the rule of law mandate of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) - to strengthen judicial independence in Cambodia's local courts and to improve the competency and capacity of Cambodia's domestic judiciary - and describes it as one of the most substantive rule of law reform efforts in the post-UNTAC period.<sup>85</sup> She argues that there is disconnect between the conditions present at the ECCC and what can realistically be transferred into the national courts, and that the mandate does not consider the broader socio-political environment in which the domestic judiciary operates. Cambodia's local courts lack bureaucratic capacity and the political will to ensure that the judiciary operates independently of the executive. While the Cambodian government continues to express its commitment to judicial reform, mostly to satisfy the demands of international donors and maintain democratic appearances, judges are often unable to execute decisions without coercion or fear of punishment. Cambodia's patron-client culture helps reinforce the ruling party's use of the judiciary as a political weapon. Thus, the ECCC is unlikely to deliver on its rule of law legacy because internationally-driven judicial reform efforts that are not sensitive to historical legacies and local political cultures cannot deliver the rule of law outcomes intended.

Likewise, the case of Thailand questions the unfettered technocratic transfer of the Western discourse on governance and rule of law in favour of a reading that anchors these concepts not only within local circumstances but above all within the conflicts between social and political actors. Good governance and the fight against corruption and instability in Thailand have been intrinsically linked to key institutions associated with the rule of law, its reform agenda, and efforts to strengthen institutions through constitution writing, law reform and judicial empowerment. Dressel traces how the 'good governance' agenda in

Thailand since the 1990s was explicitly anchored in rule of law principles, and the rule of law as a concept was explicitly mentioned in the 2007 Constitution as a binding principle for state agents.<sup>86</sup> While the rhetoric about and use of the rule of law seems to be central to the current political struggles, for over a decade the trend has been a decline in standards of governance and human rights of citizens as emergency rule, interference with the judiciary and harsh application of *lèse majesté* laws against regime critics have become the norm since the 2006 military intervention.

Moreover, elites have manipulated the rule of law as part of the recasting of Thailand's traditional trilogy of 'nation-religion-king'.<sup>87</sup> The impact of the King's death in 2016 has brought about the gradual elevation of this trinity to state ideology, which has in turn generated an ever more exclusionary narrative that has complicated understandings of the rule of law itself. The monarch has emerged from this recasting as a 'metaconstitutional' actor, not bound by the law, but exerting influence over it and the courts. Thailand is a vivid reminder that the rule of law and associated concepts of governance travel only with difficulty, and on arrival are shaped by battles and alliances among political actors and by the ideologies that animate their choices.

### Civil society and governance

As discussed earlier in this paper, the liberal democratic view of civil society is that it promotes democracy and builds trust which contributes to democratic consolidation. In addition, it assumes that the state has a high degree of legitimacy and capacity for governance. Yet civil society is not always liberal democratic, or even civil, and its composition often reflects the nature of the political regime. Although conceptually distinctive, in practise there is normally much overlap between civil and political societies, the boundary separating them is porous, and in authoritarian situations civil and political societies tend to fuse. The nature of civil society is transformed by a strong military presence or an authoritarian one-party state which occurs in the Asia-Pacific region. McCarthy examines the nature of civil and political society in two countries in the Asia-Pacific that have recently emerged from direct military rule, Burma (Myanmar) and Fiji.<sup>88</sup> Both modern and traditional civil society can exist under authoritarian conditions - the latter may threaten the state's dominance of political society in a militarised regime. This has occurred on several occasions in Burma, for example, through the participation of the Buddhist Sangha community in large-scale demonstrations against the policies of military rulers. He considers the changing roles of the militaries in their societies, their understanding of governance, how they have taken steps to safeguard their position in political society, and how the maintenance of their political roles requires the co-optation or neutralisation of important elements in traditional civil society.

There are limits to the degree that civil society can develop and mature following periods of direct military rule; military legacies persist in transitional settings; and many freedoms remain undefined as groups explore and challenge the limits of boundaries set up by their former rulers and their quasi-military contemporaries. These conditions have existed under the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and National League for Democracy (NLD) governments in Burma (Myanmar), they exist in Fiji today, and they will also be true of Thailand in the future. While new freedoms create a sense of openness in society, unrestrained freedom also challenges conservative military thinking.

Although a fusion of civil and political society is also evident in the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) recognises the utility of certain types of popular institutions that may be crucial to the establishment of good governance. At the same time, and similar to Burma under military rule, China's leaders are antagonistic towards some forms of traditional civil society like religious organisations which have the potential to destabilise their one-party rule. The Chinese case is also like Singapore in that rulers' strictly limiting 'voice and accountability' (with those restrictions growing in the

past few years) while aiming to improve government effectiveness and increase meritocracy questions assumptions of good governance necessarily being liberal democratic.<sup>89</sup> In fact, Chinese officials have attempted to learn from the Singapore model of improving governance while maintaining authoritarian rule.<sup>90</sup>

Howard and Smith examine the evolution of ‘think tanks’ in China, their relationship to the CCP, and identify their role in the new emphasis on constructing effective structures of governance.<sup>91</sup> They argue that despite the level of political oversight think tanks are subject to, it would be incorrect to devalue their role in the development of civil society, albeit one sitting firmly within the Chinese political context. Indeed, their existence undergirds a dramatic change in attitudes towards the relationship between the state and society—some even engage in sensitive domestic political issues. Significantly, the state is looking to improve governance by re-establishing the role of expertise in policy formation; their existence also shows anti-intellectualism has not been apparent under the current regime. This adds further credence to David Shambaugh’s earlier argument that the CCP has engaged in political learning, adapting and attempting to improve its governance in order to strengthen its hold on power.<sup>92</sup>

Although the Chinese think tank may represent what may be acceptable ‘independent’ thought on scientific or intellectual grounds, the challenges facing other civil society institutions remain. In his examination of the PRC’s treatment of religion as a governance issue, Schak examines how its governance of religion, in particular Protestantism, has been uneven and often turbulent and tense.<sup>93</sup> The local enforcement of rules and regulations has varied from place to place; and what is and is not regarded as acceptable can suddenly change. Although China’s constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief, religious practice is subject to regulations that members claim interfere with those same beliefs; local governments can take action against individual churches while others are left alone elsewhere; and a province can engage in a concerted effort to dishonour Christianity’s symbols in an effort to reduce its public presence. Such actions cause uncertainty and tensions in the Protestant community and because their numbers may soon surpass that of the CCP membership, this could bode ill for China’s ‘harmonious society’, not to mention its future political stability.

## 5. Conclusion

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This paper has explored some doubtful assumptions about 'good governance'. In particular, the belief that all good things go together – the promotion of good governance promoting democracy and development, and vice-versa – was questioned. It was also asked whether the often positive portrayal of civil society in the fight against corruption, the promotion of good governance, and the consolidation of democratic regimes is justified. With critics claiming that the 'post-Washington' consensus has only replaced market with institutions 'fundamentalism', it has increasingly come to be recognised that one-sized policies might not fit all situations, particularly in so called developing countries. Thus, increasingly there have been calls for contextually sensitive analysis in achieving better governance focused on localised solutions to specific constraints and needs.

The 'democracy optimism' of the immediate post-Cold War period led the long-term stability of authoritarian rule in many parts of the world to often be overlooked or underappreciated. Particularly in the Asia-Pacific region a number of non-democratic regimes proved to be decade long exceptions to this democratising 'rule' (Burma/Myanmar, China, North Korea, Malaysia, and Singapore) with their various forms of authoritarian rule, from military to state socialist to electoral authoritarian. Moreover, rather than conceptualising a single, normatively homogenous civil society, it is more useful to understand it as including a wide variety of ideological streams with quite different political aims, with liberal democracy only one possibility.

Following Emerson's observations in Southeast Asia, it was argued that liberal democracy and effective governance often do not go together in the Asia-Pacific, but also that large gaps can appear between the two and become destabilising.<sup>94</sup> Good or effective governance is largely a matter of measuring performance outcomes, while democratic governance is a matter of measuring participant inputs. If people in Asia-Pacific societies have their own criteria for what constitutes political legitimacy in their regime, then government effectiveness becomes the major driver of what they understand to be 'good governance'. Thus, measuring political legitimacy and government effectiveness also becomes the Asia Pacific's own 'good enough' version of governance, as survey and polling data have shown. In fact, support for democratic regimes in the region fluctuates widely in response to changing perceptions of these regimes' performance, levels of corruption, and the trustworthiness of their politicians. Citizens in East Asian democracies want not just democracy as such, but more accountability, more responsiveness, more transparency, and less corruption. Democratic consolidation only seems possible after substantial improvements in people's material lives and advances in economic development.

Our study has shown how a number of outcomes are possible depending on the local circumstances and the environment in which civil and political society have evolved: one may find democracy and strong governance; democracy without good governance; no democracy but good governance; or neither democracy nor good governance. The first theme of *Governance and Democracy in the Asia-Pacific*, governance and democracy, includes a theoretical and conceptual analysis of the contested relationship between them; it also includes an examination of three countries where the tensions between these two concepts is most pronounced: Singapore (strong though weakening governance under continued 'soft' authoritarian rule) as well as Thailand and the Philippines (where a discourse of good governance has been instrumentalised against democratically elected leaders). The second theme, political society, broadly examines the governance of some institutional elements of politics in the Asia Pacific – elections, political parties and the rule of law, with particular attention paid to the Solomon Islands, Cambodia, and Thailand. The third theme in this volume about civil society examines how governance and civil society

have been impacted by military and non-democratic rule in the Asia-Pacific with a focus on Burma (Myanmar), Fiji, and China. The combined effect of this research has been not only to critically assess the unfounded coupling of democracy and governance in the Asia-Pacific, but also to demonstrate how the role of civil society, political society, and governance has been quite different from what has commonly been assumed within the international community.

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