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WEIGHING THE ASIAN MODEL

Benjamin Reilly

The Nature of Asian Politics. By Bruce Gilley, Cambridge University Press, 2014, 262 pp.

The second half of 2014 saw two events—one in Indonesia, one in China—that heralded the arrival of the much-touted “Asian century.” The election in July 2014 of Indonesia’s fourth democratically chosen president, Joko Widodo, and the judicial rejection of fraud claims brought by his autocratically inclined opponent, Prabowo Subianto, marked another step forward for democracy in the world’s largest Muslim country. Over the same period, China’s long-running economic transition reached a new milestone: In late 2014, China surpassed the United States to become the world’s largest economy (in purchasing power parity terms).

Indonesia and China are the two most important developing states in the world’s most economically dynamic region, East Asia. But rarely have scholars claimed that these two large and complex countries, or indeed the other disparate states of Northeast Asia (Japan, the two Koreas, Taiwan) and Southeast Asia (from Myanmar to the Philippines), share many political similarities. Fewer still would claim that there is a common underlying model of governance that can explain the nature and trajectory of both democracy and development across the region.

Nonetheless, this is precisely the argument that animates Bruce Gilley’s comprehensive and provocative new book. Gilley sets out to capture the deeper logic driving East Asian politics. This is no easy task when it comes to a region that is home to some of the world’s largest

(China) and smallest (Brunei) states, and some of its richest (Singapore) and poorest (Timor-Leste) economies, with regimes that run the gamut from liberal parliamentary democracy in Japan to despotic autocracy in North Korea.

Beneath East Asia's abundant diversity, Gilley sees common patterns underpinning political and economic development. At the heart of these commonalities is what he calls the "Asian governance model" of strong states that focus on delivery (of economic growth, political stability, public order, efficient services, and the like) while emphasizing that the public good takes precedence over more particular interests. Gilley walks through one key dimension of Asian politics after another—development, democracy, governance, and public policy—arguing that each is powered by the same underlying causal engine, which is the dominant role played by entrenched, legitimate, and capable central states.

This broad-brush approach yields some consistent if not unexpected findings, including the predominance of strong executives over representative bodies such as parliaments or civil society groups. Rationality and order are constant preoccupations in Gilley's Asia, where "executive-led governments" such as those of Singapore and China's Hong Kong Special Administrative Region carry the flag for approaches to governance that put public order and social-goods provision at the forefront.

Gilley's key contribution is to show just how often these same patterns recur across time and space. Colonialism in Asia, he breezily observes, "came and went like a summer monsoon" (p. 51), with nothing like the damage to precolonial power relations that occurred in Africa or Latin America. In Gilley's telling, moreover, contemporary nationalism in the region is largely benign, pragmatic, and development-focused. Asian nationalism seeks to emulate and surpass the West, not blame it for past sins. Culture and religion are coopted, never allowed to exist as rival sources of authority to the state itself. Indeed, Gilley argues that the state in East Asia is ontologically the precursor to society, raising some unanswered questions about the origins of state strength.

Although Gilley at times waxes Panglossian, overstating East Asia's developmental successes while minimizing its democratic deficits, he marshals an impressive body of evidence for his claims. Most readers will know of Asia's rapid rise, but may not be aware of the connection between economic development and government capacity across the region. For Gilley, Asia is the "land of the Leviathan" (p. 34), with strong states that have deep historical roots predominating. This echoes the "hydraulic despotism" thesis of Sinologist Karl August Wittfogel (1896–1988), who argued that demands associated with the design, building, and maintenance of large-scale irrigation projects explained the rise and endurance of imperial China and other Asian empires. In the contemporary era, the success of precolonial state-building ensured that across the region "traditional political orders were revamped and

updated with modern notions of technocratic rule, state-led development and modern public administration” (p. 38).

Gilley’s analysis of democracy in Asia likewise is rooted in the importance of order, development, and state capacity. As I have also argued in my own work, democracies across Asia today display distinctive commonalities: They are, for the most part, state-preserving, developmental, majoritarian, and consensus-based. As such, public interest in economic growth takes precedence over individual or other particular interests. There is less emphasis on the rights of man and still less on the rights of minorities. Both public and elite conceptions of and support for democracy tend to be instrumental.

Similarly, judiciaries across the region typically act as defenders of the state, not of individual rights as is common in the West. The contrast between East Asia and India (a country not considered by Gilley, since it belongs to South Asia) is apposite—India’s unruly democracy and judicial activism find no place in Gilley’s schema. Other troublesome cases, such as the Philippines and East Timor, create similar problems for his argument.

Some marginalization or shoehorning of awkward cases might be expected in a work of this scope, but it will inevitably incite country specialists. There is indeed much to argue with: Can Indonesia, as Gilley suggests, seriously be considered a showcase of bureaucratic efficiency? Is Thailand truly poised for greatness, if only the monarchy would get out of the way? And would democracy in China, as Gilley suggests (doubling-down on his earlier predictions), really “have excellent prospects for consolidation”? (p. 140). Others will find that his relentless focus on state-society partnership neglects the role played in East Asian polities and societies by cultural cleavages having to do with social movements, ethnic identities, and class affiliations.

These problems should not detract from the breadth of Gilley’s achievement, however. His book is full of original insights. Take, for example, his contention that democracy, far from posing a challenge to the Asian state, is actually central to its maintenance and management of social order—an argument that is fundamental to Gilley’s long-running optimism regarding the prospects for democracy in China. His experience as a reporter in Hong Kong and his close association with China infuse his writing, making for a spirited read.

While Gilley’s book is an impressive display of both scholarship and synthesis, it bears a striking resemblance to a classic Asian state. It is unyielding in its emphasis on the theme of solidarity, especially considering the unruly and contentious Asian-politics literature from which it emerges. As a work of discipline, focus, and synthesis, it mirrors the centralizing ethos that both underpins and sustains Asian politics.

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