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# Asia Struggles with Democracy

Evidence from Indonesia,  
Korea and Thailand

Giovanna Maria Dora Dore

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Korea and Thailand**

**Giovanna Maria Dora Dore**

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# Asia Struggles with Democracy

Since 1974, when the current wave of democratization began, the movement toward democracy in Asia has remained limited. Many countries in Asia have not made a decisive move toward democracy and find themselves struggling with the challenges of democratic consolidation and governance. Focusing on Indonesia, Thailand and Korea, this book analyzes why democratization seems to be so difficult in Asia.

The book investigates the dynamics by which citizens embrace democratic rule and reject authoritarianism, and compares these dynamics with those of consolidating democracies around the world. It also inquires about the forces that affect the emergence and stability of democracy, such as elite interactions, economic development and popular attitudes as beliefs and perceptions about the legitimacy of political systems have long been recognized as some of the most critical influences on regime change. Finally, this book discusses what it is about the nature of public opinion and the processes of day-to-day democratic participation that make countries vulnerable to crises of legitimacy. Using Indonesia, Korea and Thailand as case studies, the volume highlights the uniqueness of Asia's path to democracy and outlines both the challenges and opportunities in getting there.

The book will be of interest to students and scholars of Asian politics, comparative politics and international studies.

**Giovanna Maria Dora Dore** is a Visiting Scholar in the SAIS-JHU South-east Asia Studies Program. Earlier in her career, she worked for the World Bank Group as a political economist focusing on Asian emerging markets and as Special Assistant to the President.

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# Contents

	<i>List of illustrations</i>	viii
	<i>List of annex illustrations</i>	ix
	<i>About the author</i>	xi
1	Introduction	1
2	What does democracy mean to you?	9
3	Is democracy a process or an outcome?	39
4	Does democracy spread like a wave in Asia?	53
5	Is democracy the <u>only</u> game in town?	68
6	Conclusions	97
	<i>Annex 1: the 2000 and 2011 SAIS Surveys</i>	103
	<i>Annex 2: statistical and spatial econometric analyses</i>	109
	<i>Bibliography</i>	141
	<i>Index</i>	155

# Illustrations

## Figures

5.1	Democratic and authoritarian attitudes in Indonesia, Korea and Thailand	78
5.2	National and capital-level democratic and authoritarian affective support in Indonesia, Korea and Thailand (2011)	80
5.3	Democratic and authoritarian affective support in Seoul, Bangkok and Jakarta in 2000 and 2011	81

## Tables

2.1	CSOs membership and participation in Thailand in 2011	35
3.1	Citizens' understanding of democracy in Indonesia, Korea and Thailand	42
3.2	Vote turnout rates for parliamentary elections in Thailand (1946–2007)	49
4.1	Citizens' knowledge of Asian authoritarian regimes in Indonesia, Korea and Thailand	58
4.2	Citizens' knowledge of Asian democratic regimes in Indonesia, Korea and Thailand	60
4.3	Knowledge index for Asian authoritarian and democratic political systems	62
5.1	Preferences for democracy and authoritarianism in Indonesia, Korea and Thailand	74
5.2	World Value Survey preferences for democracy and authoritarianism in Indonesia, Korea and Thailand	76
5.3	Factors influencing citizens' affective support for authoritarianism and democracy	84

# Annex illustrations

2.1	Indonesia 2011 summary results for correlations and significance of associations for respondents' democratic cognitive skills	111
2.2	Indonesia 2011 summary results for logistic regression model for respondents' democratic cognitive skills	112
2.3	Korea 2011 summary results for correlations and significance of associations for democratic cognitive skills	113
2.4	Korea 2011 logistic regression model for predictors of citizens' democratic cognitive skills	114
2.5	Thailand 2011 summary results for correlations and association of significance for democratic cognitive skills	115
2.6	Thailand 2011 summary results for the logistic regression model for respondents' democratic cognitive skills	116
2.7	Indonesia 2011 summary results for correlations and significance of associations for democracy as a process or as an outcome	117
2.8	Indonesia 2011 summary results for the logistic regression model for democracy as a process or an outcome	118
2.9	Korea 2011 summary results for correlations and significance of associations for democracy as a process or as an outcome	119
2.10	Korea 2011 summary results for logistic regression model for democracy as a process or an outcome	120
2.11	Thailand 2011 summary results for correlations and significance of associations for democracy as a process or as an outcome	121
2.12	Thailand 2011 summary results for logistic regression model for democracy as a process or as an outcome	122

2.13	Indonesia 2011 democracy scale raw scores	123
2.14	Indonesia 2011 democratic scale	124
2.15	Indonesia 2011 summary results for correlations and significance of association for the ID 2011 democracy scale	125
2.16	Summary results for logistic regression model for Indonesia 2011 democracy scale	126
2.17	Korea 2011 democracy scale raw scores	127
2.18	Marginal distribution for Korea 2011 scale of democratic and authoritarian attitudes	128
2.19	Summary results for correlations and significance of association for the Korea 2011 democracy scale	129
2.20	Summary results for logistic regression model for Korea 2011 democracy scale	130
2.21	Thailand 2011 democracy scale raw scores	131
2.22	Thailand 2011 democracy scale	132
2.23	Summary results for correlations and significance of associations for Thailand 2011 democracy scale	133
2.24	Summary results logistic regression model for Thailand 2011 democracy scale	134
2.25	List of countries used in the SAR and SEM analyses	137

# 1 Introduction

Many countries in Asia are not making a decisive move toward democracy. They remain in a “democratization gray area”, with weak political institutions and limited citizens’ political engagement. Recently democratized countries in the region find themselves struggling with the challenges of democratic consolidation and governance, whereas authoritarian regimes seem to cope easily with any new challenges emerging from a more globalized regional outlook.

Since 1974, when the current wave of democratization begun, the movement toward democracy in Asia has remained limited, with 8 countries becoming electoral democracies out of more than 60 countries that became democratic around the world.<sup>1</sup> Why does democratization seem so difficult in Asia? For many years, Korea vacillated between parliamentary and military governments until it completed its transition to democracy with the 1987 direct presidential elections. In 1986, People Power ended President Marcos’ era and brought the Philippines back to electoral democracy after 14 years of martial law. Yet, since then, the Filipino democracy continued to encounter significant obstacles to consolidation caused by both a weak institutional structure and imperfect constitutional governance. In 1991, Mongolia transitioned to democracy following the collapse of the former Soviet Union. While there is agreement that Mongolia has done well out of necessity of becoming a democracy almost overnight, the country’s shortcomings in rule or law remain a significant obstacle to further democratic consolidation. Indonesia successfully transitioned to democracy following the fall of Suharto in 1998. Incomplete institutional reforms, corruption and dysfunctional bureaucracy have been common features of the country’s progress toward democratic consolidation. In 2002, Timor Leste became independent and joined the ranks of Asian democracies with much fanfare.

1 Freedom House. 2012 Freedom in the World Survey. [www.Freedomhouse.org](http://www.Freedomhouse.org)

The last decade, however, has seen slow progress and mixed results in both governance and democratization. Large shares of populations in Singapore and Malaysia have become vocal about the shortcoming of democracy in those countries, while remaining supportive of the authoritarian regimes that currently govern their countries. Finally, even if people in Thailand remain outspoken about the need for democracy to take firm roots in their country, Thailand “stop-and-go” process toward finding a legitimate form of government, with 18 constitutions and 18 coups since 1932, is without precedent in the annals of democracy.

*Asia Struggles with Democracy* investigates the role played by democratic knowledge, attitudes and behaviors of ordinary people in the democratization of Indonesia, Korea and Thailand. Many forces affect the emergence and stability of democracy such as elites interactions, economic development and popular attitudes. Beliefs and perceptions about the legitimacy of political systems have long been recognized as some of the most critical influences on regime change, and particularly on the consolidation or breakdown of democracy. Furthermore, normative commitment to democracy among the public at large is crucial for evaluating how far the political system has traveled toward democratic consolidation. Democratization can only happen if the majority of the people believes that democracy is the best form of government for their society while at the same time rejects any other form of government, particularly non democratic ones. This book explores what it is about the nature of public opinion and the processes of day-to-day democratic participation that have made Indonesia, Korea and Thailand vulnerable to repeated crises of legitimacy and seemingly lacking commitment toward democracy.

*Asia Struggles with Democracy* is informed by data from two original opinion surveys designed by the Southeast Asia Studies Program of the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) of the Johns Hopkins University. The SAIS 2000 Survey was designed to investigate the 1997 East Asian financial crisis as a possible cause of broad social, economic and political changes that might alter the development trajectory of Indonesia, the Philippines, Korea and Thailand. The survey focused on the cities of Jakarta, Manila, Seoul and Bangkok, had a sampling size of 300 individuals per capital city and used a semi-original, 12-modules questionnaire, which comprised 135 questions, 10 percent of which were open-ended questions. The SAIS 2011 Survey is a national-level opinion survey, which targeted the same four countries of the SAIS 2000 Survey with a total sampling size of 4,000 individuals. To ensure consistency with the SAIS 2000 Survey, the 2011 survey included a capital-city sample of 300 individuals and an updated version of the questionnaire used for the 2000 survey.

The methodological challenge of establishing comparability in any cross-national survey remains formidable. The research compared national responses to questions that are identically worded but must be translated into a number of different languages and administered in different cultural and institutional contexts. Standardization does not solve the problem of cross-cultural validity, and the resulting analysis takes this issue under consideration by trying to strike a balance between generalizing cross-national comparisons and contextualizing the meaning and significance of data in their political and cultural settings. The SAIS Surveys are part of a new generation of comparative public survey projects such as the regional Barometer Surveys and the World Value Survey (WVS). Increasingly, these large surveys have cooperated with one another to standardize questions and response formats to achieve global comparability in understanding the third-wave transition to democracy and the role played by attitudes and values toward politics, governance, and political reforms. In this spirit, where possible, this book includes data from the WVS and the regional Barometer Surveys to validate and crosscheck the findings emerging from the SAIS Surveys.

The choice of Indonesia, Korea and Thailand as the focus of this book resulted from their institutional and political trajectories to become consolidated democracies and how their democratic choices might influence other countries in the region. When the SAIS 2000 Survey was launched in 2000, Indonesia, Korea and Thailand were democratic countries enduring the stresses created by the 1997–1998 East Asia financial crisis. At that time, Korea and Thailand appeared to be economically fragile but politically stable as power was transferred peacefully from one political group to another. Indonesia, in contrast, was just entering democratic transition and appeared on the brink of failure from the breakdown of law and order and the possibility of secession of various regions across the Indonesian archipelago. By the time the SAIS 2011 Survey entered the field, the list of relatively stable democracies in Asia had changed. It included Indonesia, along with Korea and the Philippines, while the democratic stature of Thailand had declined as a result of military and judicial coups that ousted democratically elected governments.

Korea's success in establishing democracy in a country without a democratic tradition has made it one of the most interesting cases of third-wave democratic transition. In the span of one generation, Korea has transformed itself from one of the poorest countries into one of the world's most successful economies. In the 1990s, Korea joined the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), thus becoming the second country in Asia, after Japan, to join the OECD. Korea begun its transformation from military rule to representative democracy in the late 1980s, and over a

10-year period, successfully established democratic institutions in a country that had not previously been capable of peacefully transferring power to the political opposition. In 1993, Kim Young-sam became the first civilian elected president in 30 years, and he has been succeeding in orderly elections featuring civilian politicians from different parties. There is consensus that a return to the pre-1993 days of military involvement in the political process has become virtually impossible. However, many scholars wonder how much progress Korea has made in consolidating its democracy, given that its presidents have at times resorted to extra-legal tactics to overcome the political deadlock in periods of divided governments, political parties are personal political vehicles and citizens' participation in day-to-day politics has been decreasing.

Indonesia is the latest democratization success story in Asia. As a result of the financial crisis of 1997–1998, President Suharto was driven from power through protests, the collapse of local and international private sector confidence and, most importantly, the decline of Suharto's support within the Jakarta elites. The future did not seem to augur well for democratic reform in the years immediately after Suharto's fall. Fragile governments faced emboldened legislatures, law and order declined for several years during the transfer of responsibility from the army to the police and loss of life occurred in ethno-religious conflicts. Yet, the drive for change that began during the 1997–1998 financial crisis was maintained through the dismissal of President Habibie, the impeachment of President Wahid and the lackluster administration of President Megawati. The fact that Indonesia made a successful democratic transition is not in dispute. Yet, the country's progress toward democratic consolidation might just not be as thorough as it seems. The political system has been showing signs of democratic stagnation and backsliding, with the political elites trying to tighten its grip on key institutions, often in ways that reduce transparency and the effectiveness of the institutions themselves. In addition, parliamentary and party systems are becoming increasingly associated with lack of accountability and discretion, and citizens' confidence in the strength of the democratic consolidation process in Indonesia appears to have decreased over time.

Finally, the checkered relationship between Thailand and democracy is nearly without precedent in democratic history. In 1932, a bloodless coup by a small group of elite military and elite bureaucrats replaced an absolute with a constitutional monarchy. Democracy, however, remained elusive as government in Thailand continued to be an exchange of power among competing entourages of the Thai elite. Between 1932 and 1991, military coups rather than general elections were the normal means of changing governments, with elections held only to legitimize the new arrangements both domestically and internationally. Democratically elected governments,



including that of media tycoon turned political leader, Thaksin Shinawatra, ruled Thailand from 1992–2006. Thaksin's government had been preceded by a series of weak, multi-party governments that were dominated by up-country, often corrupt politicians whom the Bangkok elites despised. Through his personal fortune and populist policies that shifted benefits to his constituents in the North and Northeast provinces, Thaksin Shinawatra built the first popular political party in Thailand. Prime Minister Thaksin's charismatic hold upon his supporters remained strong even after he was deposed by a military coup in 2006. His political parties, even after being disbanded by court decisions, continued to outpace all others in the 2007, 2011 and 2014 national elections. Thailand seems to be caught between a traditional elite-centric, administrative state and democratic mass public participation. Because of this, Thailand is never more than just a step away from constantly falling back into authoritarianism.

The findings from the SAIS 2000 and 2011 Surveys presented in this book show the relevance of mass attitudes for democratic consolidation across Indonesia, Korea and Thailand, where citizens seem to be favorably disposed toward democracy, but not necessarily committed to it. Across the three countries, democracy is understood and well valued as an idea or a set of values. However, as a regime to be chosen as the preferred way to govern any of these countries, democracy does not seem as popular and seems to still have to prove itself through successful and consistent performance. Equally relevant the fact that in Indonesia, Korea and Thailand concepts such as non-electoral participation, membership and participation in civil society organizations, economics or the middle class do not play as relevant a role as argued by democratic theory and showed by the success of Western Liberal democratic tradition.

The chapters of this book are unified by the survey questions that inform them. This uniformity makes cross-national comparisons possible while allowing for contextualized interpretations of the findings, with chapters applying expert knowledge of each country democratization path, evolving institutional setting, changing social and economic conditions and national political dynamics. Chapter 1 introduces the book to the reader. Chapter 2 examines citizens' cognitive orientations toward democracy – that is, what democracy means, or what they expected it to be – in Indonesia, Korea and Thailand, tries to identify relevant trends across the three countries as well as those unique to each country. It considers whether citizens' conceptions of democracy are based either on enduring cultural values, social circumstances, or the degree of their formal and informal political participation. Finally, findings from comparative research on the meaning of democracy, based on data from the WVS and the Barometer Surveys, are weaved into the narrative to check whether the findings for Indonesia, Korea and