

Towards Illiberal Democracy in Pacific Asia

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Preface

During 1992, when we were all members of the Political Science Department of the National University of Singapore, we each contributed departmental seminar papers on different aspects of political change in East and Southeast Asia. The book grew out of the realization that these papers, while differing markedly in focus, shared two characteristics. They each constituted attempts to rethink, in the light of the Asian experience, the conceptualizations of democracy and democratization which comprised the conventional armory of western-trained political scientists. Moreover, they each reflected a suspicion of the growing sentiment that Asia offered a new model which combined economic growth, cultural self-confidence, and political stability in a new 'Asian democracy' – a new utopia which the West would do well to emulate.

The recognition that Asian democratization was intrinsically problematical came not just from the examination of the particular issues which each of us explored in our papers, but also from the experience of living and working in Singapore. Singapore is unique in East and Southeast Asia in the extent to which its managerial state is able effectively to engineer the economic, cultural and political behaviour of its society. But it is this very characteristic which makes it the paradigmatic Asian polity. It exhibits in an exaggerated form both the managerialism, and the tensions arising from that managerialism, which constitute the problematical politics of Asian democratization. Certainly, these problems manifest themselves differently in each state; in the parliamentary confrontations of Taiwan and the aggressive money politics of Malaysia, as well as in the anxiety of Singaporean politics.

The common themes and interests of our seminar papers were explored in a series of discussions in bars and coffee shops, as well as in repeated oral and written critiques of each others successive drafts. Each individual approached the discussions from the perspective of his particular interests in the politics of democratization, democratic theory, traditional culture, the role of the middle classes, the political economy of industrialization, and the role of ethnic and state nationalisms. The book is thus organized as a series of chapters which explore contemporary political change in Pacific Asia from these different angles, and which are tied together by an overall argument as to the illiberal character of Asian democratization.

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