

WORKSHOP ON CONTENTIOUS POLITICS IN ASIA

NOVEMBER 28-29, 2020 (ONLINE)



Organized by

V-Dem East Asia Regional Center



V-Dem East Asia Regional Centre Virtual Workshop

Contentious Politics in Asia

Date: November 28 (Saturday) & 29(Sunday), 2020

Time: 10:00-12:00, 13:00-15:00, 15:30-17:30 (Japan Standard Time)

Registration: Open to the public/please register using the links below/ the meeting links are good for all sessions for each day

November 28 (Day 1)

https://keio-univ.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJEudO6hqT8uGNXO-sbtHRF-qA01_ZYyX5Y3

November 29 (Day 2)

https://keio-univ.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJAqc-2urz4sG9FMlpFbPfj_2cZGZxhG4mwP

Co-hosts: Yuko Kasuya & Hans H. Tung

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DAY 1 (FOR DAY 2, CLICK [HERE](#))

November 28, Saturday

10:00-12:00

Panel 1: Civil Society in East and Southeast Asia

Presenters

Maggie Shum (University of Notre Dame)

The Intersection of Street and Electoral Politics: How Localism Reshapes the Political Landscape in Hong Kong

Jai Kwan Jung (Korea University)

Saving Democracy by Civil Direct Action: Macro Claims and Micro Analyses of the Candlelight Protests in South Korea

Khoo Ying Hooi (University of Malaya)

Civil Society and Contentious Politics in Post-GE14 Malaysia

Discussants

Ming-sho Ho (National Taiwan University)

Yi-chun Chien (National Chengchi University)

Elvin Ong (National University of Singapore)

Chair Yuko Kasuya (Keio University)

13:00-15:00

Panel 2: Micro-Foundations of Protests in Hong Kong

Presenters

Tetsuro Kobayashi (City University of Hong Kong), Jaehyun Song (Doshisha University), Polly Chan (Oxford University)

Does Repression Undermine Opposition Demands? The Case of Hong Kong National Security Law

Hans H. Tung (National Taiwan University), Ming-Jen Lin (National Taiwan University)

Preferences for Government Concessions amid Protests: A Conjoint Experiment with Causal Interactions in Hong Kong

Elizabeth Lui (University of Hong Kong)

Understanding Hong Kong's Anti-Extradition Movement through Twitter – Network and Discourse Analysis on Local, National and International Players

Discussants

Jean Hong (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology)

Charles Crabtree (Dartmouth College)

Stan Wong (Hong Kong Polytechnic University)

Chair Marisa Kellam (Waseda University)

15:30-17:30

Panel 3: Modernization and Contentious Politics in Asia

Presenters

Aurel Croissant (Universität Heidelberg), Lars Pelke (Universität Heidelberg)

Terrorism and Democratic Regression. Evidence from Asia-Pacific and a Large-N-Research Design

Mathew Wong (Education University of Hong Kong)

Income Inequality and Political Participation in Asia

Jonson N. Porteux (Kansai Gaidai University), Sunil Kim (Kyung Hee University)

On the Calculus of State Violence and Developmental Interest: The Changing Patterns and the Persistence of Labor Repression in a Democratizing South Korea

Discussants

Masaaki Higashijima (Tohoku University)

Wen-Chin Wu (Academia Sinica)

Mark Thompson (City University of Hong Kong)

Chair Kenneth Mori McElwain (University of Tokyo)

DAY 2 (FOR DAY 1, CLICK [HERE](#))

November 29, Sunday

10:00-12:00

[Panel 4: Social Movements in South and Southeast Asia](#)

Presenters

Basanta Rai (International Studies and Cooperation Nepal)

Contentious Political and Its Impact on Social Changes after 1990 in Nepal

Kana Inata (Waseda University)

Protest Size, Third-Party Intervention, and Leadership Change: Model and Narratives from Thailand

Minju Kwon (Chapman University)

Blacklisted Rebels: Commitment to Child Rights in the Philippines

Discussants

Mom Bishwakarma (University of Sydney)

Paul Chambers (Naresuan University)

Rosalie Hall (University of the Philippines)

Chair Hans H. Tung (National Taiwan University)

13:00-15:00

[Panel 5: Politics in Plural Societies in Southeast Asia](#)

Presenters

Chin-Huat Wong (Sunway University)

Can Political Division be Healthy and Productive? – Interrogating Malaysia's Incompatible Craving for Unity and Democracy

Christopher Wyrod (Advancing Community Empowerment Project)

Protests on the Periphery: Ethnic Contestation and Confrontation in Democratic Myanmar

Lwin Cho Latt (Ritsumeikan University)

The Contentious Politics of Anti-Chinese Projects in Myanmar: The Case of Kyaukphyu-based Projects under the NLD Government

Discussants

Benjamin Reilly (University of Western Australia)

Masao Imamura (Yamagata University)

Maung Aung Myoe (International University of Japan)

Chair Yuko Kasuya (Keio University)

PANEL 1: CIVIL SOCIETY IN EAST AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

The Intersection of Street and Electoral Politics: How Localism Reshapes the Political Landscape in Hong Kong

Maggie Shum (University of Notre Dame)

In the decades since the Handover of Hong Kong, contentious politics (albeit with a peaceful, restrained and orderly proclivity) has been part of the city's political life. The hybridity of the Hong Kong regime on one hand guaranteed a set of civil liberties from which civil society organizations can thrive; on the other hand, Hong Kong's political structures are designed to keep a close tab on any meaningful political development.

Under this backdrop, the ongoing anti-ELAB/anti-government mobilizations have caught many by surprise in terms of the wide scope, intensity and duration. While most eyes are on the innovative organizational structure and fluid tactics (decentralized/leaderless structure, savvy usage of social media and online platform for mobilization, "be water" tactics), few explore the intersection and the interaction between contentious politics and electoral politics. Under what condition does a periphery movement move to the mainstream politics in such constrained political structure? How does the hybrid regime's reaction shape the tactics? Unlike the traditional mobilization with clear leadership, party or civil society leaders refrain from claiming the role of leadership in the current movement. What are the implications for a decentralized movement for democratization? The Umbrella Movement and the anti-government mobilizations, I argue, are part of the ongoing manifestations that rupture the existing cleavage framework as fixated by the institutional design. Despite the high degree of party system fragmentation, the political/ideological cleavage has remained constant over the past two decades – pro-democracy versus pro-establishment. Localist interests (ranging from environmental conversation, anti-neoliberalism, to safeguarding Hong Kong culture and identity) were seldom at the political mainstream until the beginning of 2010s. The opposition to the Northeast New Territory Development and the Patriotic Education, and the Umbrella Movement in 2014 brought localism to the forefront and in direct conflict with traditional parties, mostly the pan-democrats.

As McAdam and Tarrow (2010) calls for, rather than confining the study in movements and protest, I am linking them in the context of institutional and electoral politics. To borrow Tilly's words, my goal "is not so much to eliminate the distinction between the two kinds of politics as to clarify the nature of their interaction" (2003, 247). Moreover, I incorporate the literature on political cleavage to studying the rise of localism from the periphery to the mainstream; from a loose movement base to winning seat in the District Council and Legislative Council. Similarly, cleavage politics pay no attention to forms of political mobilization apart from parties and elections.

Saving Democracy by Civil Direct Action: Macro Claims and Micro Analyses of the Candlelight Protests in South Korea

Jai Kwan Jung (Korea University)

The 2016-17 candlelight protests were a historic moment in South Korean democracy in several respects. First, a total of 17 million people participated in the Saturday protests from October

2016 to April 2017 without having a violent clash with police. Second, this massive scale of peaceful protests resulted in the impeachment of the incumbent president through due constitutional procedures for the first time. Third, the declining quality of Korean democracy has been rejuvenated since the candlelight protests. Then, who were those candlelight protesters? Using unique survey data collected in the middle of the 6-month long wave of candlelight protests, this paper analyzes political orientation and socioeconomic characteristics of protest participants compared to non-participants. By doing so, it will seek to assess two competing arguments about the causes of the candlelight protests – whether Korea’s increasing inequality was the root cause of the protests or its defective democracy was. This empirical investigation will offer some important implications about the changing political cleavages and subsequent development of South Korean democracy.

Civil Society and Contentious Politics in Post-GE14 Malaysia

Khoo Ying Hooi (University of Malaya)

The 14th General Election (GE14) that took place in May 2018 is a historical moment for Malaysians as they experienced the first change of the government from Barisan Nasional (BN) to Pakatan Harapan (PH) after six decades. Much of the literature has focused on uncovering the causes of how the GE14 happened, but little on how the changes impact on the role of civil society actors working on human rights. To fill up this gap, this paper puts forward the changes in pro-rights civil society actors’ repertoire of contention since GE14. Public expectations were high but dissatisfaction took place surrounding the human rights discourse. The debates are two-fold. First, some argued that the PH has not kept their human rights promises in the GE14 election manifesto. Second, the PH policies that are inclined towards human rights received backlash. Guided by this, this paper aims to explain the forms of contention where the notion of human rights is challenged and protected in different ways by different civil society actors. I argue that the “consentful contention” is made possible in post-GE14 based on two factors: existing institutional channels, and the diversification of space through political opportunities. My findings also reveal the implications of the expanded political opportunities that lead to the “legitimation” of “anti-rights” groups and the contestation of human rights norms. This paper contributes to the literature on how democratisation can shape and impact on pro-rights groups’ repertoires of contention.

PANEL 2: MICRO-FOUNDATIONS OF PROTESTS IN HONG KONG

Does Repression Undermine Opposition Demands? The Case of Hong Kong National Security Law

Tetsuro Kobayashi (City University of Hong Kong), Jaehyun Song (Doshisha University), Polly Chan (Oxford University)

The extant literature is mixed regarding whether the government's repression effectively deters dissent. As repression increases the cost of participation in protests, it is expected to undermine the protests, at least in the short term. However, this direct effect of repression can be nullified, or even reversed, if repression leads to micromobilization processes that raise incentives for protests in the long run. One of the limitations of the previous studies is the shortage of micro-level evidence that compares the opposition's preferences before and after the repression. Although the observable protests can be reduced by repression, the dissents' demand could be intact or even be strengthened, which may lead to the long term galvanization. Capitalizing on the recent enactment of the Hong Kong National Security Law, we investigated whether the enactment of the law reduced support for the so-called "five demands" from the opposition camp in Hong Kong. We fielded comparable conjoint experiments before and after the enactment of the law and compared the preferences regarding the demands. The results indicated that the support for the demands was remarkably stable despite the sweeping impact of the law on the protests. Implications for the effectiveness of repression is discussed.

Preferences for Government Concessions amid Protests: A Conjoint Experiment with Causal Interactions in Hong Kong

Hans H. Tung (National Taiwan University), Ming-Jen Lin (National Taiwan University)

The paper empirically tests at a micro-level Acemoglu and Robinson's (2006) commitment problem thesis by conducting a conjoint experiment with causal interactions on protesters in Hong Kong's recent anti-extradition movements. According to the thesis, the dictator's (redistributive) concessions to rebels won't be credible *ex ante* without democratization, which leads to a change in the median voter's identity. While the bulk of the literature has mostly investigated the thesis cross-nationally, our survey experiment provides an empirical test for a micro-level prediction derived from it that a concession without any franchise extensions offered by the government should be rejected *vis-a-vis* that with them. Our experimental design has the following critical features. First of all, our conjoint design captures the multidimensionality of future potential concession packages (including political reform, economic reforms, social assimilation, law enforcement, and government personnel) and allowed us to estimate the independent effect of each dimension. Moreover, to understand the effect of democratization from the Acemoglu-Robinson thesis, we also conducted a conjoint analysis featuring interaction effects (Egami and Imai, 2019). Finally, as de la Cuesta et al. (2019) contend, the external validity of a conjoint experiment very much depends on knowing the population distributions of attributes. As a result, we also adopted a data science approach to scrap all the related news reports from online media outlets to capture the population distributions of all the reform proposals listed above.

Understanding Hong Kong's Anti-Extradition Movement through Twitter – Network and Discourse Analysis on Local, National and International Players

Elizabeth Lui (University of Hong Kong)

It has become increasingly recognized that social media is playing a paramount role in cultivating and shaping contentious politics and social movement in today's world. The anti- extradition movement in Hong Kong which took place in the latter half of 2019 was no exception, with Twitter being the battlefield for both sides of the fence. Notably, given the city's unique colonial history and the geo-political landscape amid the US-China trade war, protestors, activists and politicians in Hong Kong alike had turned to the world for solidarity and support. On the other hand, Beijing was equally, if not more, tireless in launching covert campaigns which aimed to undermine the movement in the Twitterspace. Against this backdrop, this paper aims to examine the dynamics in which various actors, be it ordinary citizens in Hong Kong, "50 Cent Army" from China, or American politicians, engaged in the debate pertaining to the anti-extradition movement. To this end, more than 160,000 tweets were extracted using Twitter Application Programming Interface (API) during the period between June to December 2019. Leveraging the extant amount of "big data" and employing techniques including natural language processing (NLP), sentimental analysis and social network analysis, this study seeks to address the following questions:

What was the trend of the tweets regarding the movement? When was the peak? Did that correspond to what was happening on the ground? How many unique users were there? Where were the tweets mainly from? Were they mostly generated by people from within Hong Kong? Did those from beyond Hong Kong engage in the discussion? Who led the discussion? What did these "key opinion leaders" say? How many followers do they have? How many re-tweets and replies did they generate? To what extent they connect with and influence each other?

What was the general sentiment towards the movement? What was mostly discussed? What topics generated the most interest? Were bots and trolls involved in automating tweets during the movement? If so, were they originated from mainland China or elsewhere? What kind of discourse was adopted as a response to the movement? To what extent it had succeeded?

All in all, this paper will hopefully shed some useful lights on how the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong made use of and reacted to numerous forces at local, national and international level in the Twitterspace.

PANEL 3: MODERNIZATION AND CONTENTIOUS POLITICS IN ASIA

Terrorism and Democratic Regression. Evidence from Asia-Pacific and a Large-N-Research Design

Aurel Croissant (Universität Heidelberg), Lars Pelke (Universität Heidelberg)

In recent decades, Asian societies experienced multiple transformations, which continue to have a deep impact on the social fabric. Socioeconomic modernization has had improved the livelihood of billions of Asians, whereas globalization has had a lasting impact on their life worlds. In addition, Asia has seen transitions from autocratic rule to democratic governance and the number of democracies quadrupled from the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s. In addition, another trend has shaped regional trajectories. According to many analysts, especially South and Southeast Asia became a breeding ground for militant Islam and other forms of religiously motivated political radicalism, and "jihadist structures" with an international backing emerged throughout the region. Moreover, there is a growing concern that - after a period of political liberalization and of democratic opening - democracy is backsliding in many parts of Asia. However, democracy is also in retreat around the world. The new wave of autocratization manifests in democratic regression and authoritarian hardening. This has potentially far-reaching implications for our understanding of the relationship between types of political regimes and terrorism.

Within the relevant literature on radicalization and terrorism, the potential link between terrorism and different types of political regimes has long received little attention. However, a sub-branch of research has emerged which, asks whether there is a link between democracy and the occurrence of terrorism. However, few works examine possible causal paths along which acts of terrorism might lead to a decline in democratic practices and, related to this, how democratic recession deepens problems of political radicalism and armed violence.

However, research on autocratization is rapidly expanding, but existing works focus almost exclusively on questions of conceptualization and measurement (Tomini and Wagemann 2018; Cassani and Tomini 2019; Skaaning 2020). Still lacking is research about the political consequences of autocratization, including the risk of political radicalization and terrorism. Our explorative study therefore asks if and how a decline of democratic regime attributes affects the volume and lethality of terrorism in countries that are experiencing autocratization.

This study examines the causal effect of autocratization on terrorism in explorative case studies in Asia-Pacific as well as with a difference-in-difference analytical framework with a time-series cross-sectional (TSCS) dataset on 182 countries from 1970-2018. Building on insights from structural approaches in terrorism studies, we develop and test four hypotheses concerning the countervailing effects of autocratization in democracies and non-democracies on domestic and transnational terrorism. We use data from the Global Terrorism Database (START, 2020) to construct different measures of terrorism. Data on the treatment variables comes from Episodes of Regime Transformation (ERT) dataset (Edgell et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2020). Our dataset includes 89 episodes of autocratization in 65 countries in the period 1970 to 2018.

After presenting cross-national evidence consistent with our theory, we move from the global to the regional level of the Asia-Pacific region. In explorative case studies for Thailand and the Philippines, we further elaborate the causal link between autocratization and terrorism and further elaborate our hypotheses.

Income Inequality and Political Participation in Asia

Mathew Wong (Education University of Hong Kong)

Scholars have long been concerned about the equality of political participation among citizens, which is a key for a healthy representative democracy (e.g. Verba et al. 1995; Lijphart 1997). This study examines how income inequality, which is thought to be on the rise around the world including in Asia, would affect political participation. While democracy can be conceived of as “political equality”, it is theoretically interesting to examine the manner in which “economic inequality” might spillover into the political arena, undermining the ideals of democratic representation. The various high-profile protests such as the Occupy Wall Street and slogans like “1% versus 99%” since the 2007-08 global financial crisis further brought the issue of inequality to the forefront of political actions.

In explaining the relationship between inequality and participation, two dominant perspectives have been developed in the literature (Stockemer 2017). The majoritarian perspective associates a higher inequality with a lower participation, as a wider resource discrepancy would limit the poor from participating (lack of time, money) or even prompt them to refrain from competing altogether (Goodin & Dryzek 1980; Solt 2010). On the other hand, the minority/conflict perspective predicts the opposite: inequality boosts participation by inducing grievances (Gurr 1970) or by increasing the expected gains under a redistributive system (Meltzer and Richard 1981). While studies have found supporting evidence in favor of both perspectives, with few notable exceptions such an investigation has seldom been done in Asia, especially on a cross-national basis. For good reasons, most studies focused on the effect of socioeconomic status (SES) and economic conditions such as recessions, but the neglect of inequality is crucial given its impact on both levels (i.e. personal grievances towards the rich and overall bias in resource distribution).

To examine the effect of inequality on participation in Asia, this study will utilize the nationally representative survey data from the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS), consisting of dozens of Asian countries over 4 waves (spanning 2001-2016). Nested hierarchical regressions will be conducted to examine how individual characteristics (e.g. gender, class) and national economic conditions (including inequality) and regime types affect one’s likelihood of participating in political activities. With the availability of survey data, the study will also distinguish between various types of participation, namely regular/ad-hoc or institutionalized/non-institutionalized (Norris 2002; Tarrow 1994), capturing how inequality affect voting vis-à-vis violent protest (or other unconventional forms of actions) differently.

On the Calculus of State Violence and Developmental Interest: The Changing Patterns and the Persistence of Labor Repression in a Democratizing South Korea

Jonson N. Porteux (Kansai Gaidai University), Sunil Kim (Kyung Hee University)

The state’s repression of labor protest under an authoritarian regime seeking economic development through labor-intensive industrialization is believed to substantively weaken as pressure for democratization expands and civil society becomes increasingly emboldened, thus destabilizing pre-existing state-business cooperative equilibria. South Korea, however, showcases persistent labor suppression by the state even after its successful democratic transition. Furthermore, it also exhibits a puzzling mix of the state’s direct intervention and the management’s indirect suppression under the state’s implicit and at times explicit approval. Conventional approaches posit that it is because of the still resilient legacy of authoritarian politics, underdeveloped labor politics, neoliberal labor reform, or the capitalist class’s capturing

of the state. We find that those explanations have limited explanatory power as South Korea features a highly robust and contentious civil society against the state, a strong tradition of labor-friendly social movements, solid anti-neoliberal sentiment, and a highly autonomous—i.e. “uncaptured”—state vis-à-vis the business sector.

This study underscores the subtle change of government tactics in handling labor protest in the midst of democratization and neoliberal industrialization, from a monolithic repression to diversified responses, which has been largely ignored or otherwise undetected by conventional analyses. Under the mounting political pressure triggered by the growth of the middle class, the Korean state had to handle labor militancy with restrained coercion while maintaining the state-business developmental coalition. The state has thus developed a dualistic labor control scheme, deliberately ignoring management-conducted violence in the emerging unorganized sector while directly interfering with the core organized-labor sector. This study of state violence elucidates the persistent militancy and politicization of industrial contention in the organized sector along with the fragmentation and isolation of protest in the unorganized sector, which eventually undermines the political effectiveness of labor despite the growth of civil society in Korea.

PANEL 4: SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

Contentious Political and Its Impact on Social Changes after 1990 in Nepal

Basanta Rai (International Studies and Cooperation Nepal)

Nepal is one of the least developed countries in the world with a struggling economy. Nepal is exercising federal system first time. Citizens are overwhelmed with the fledgling federalism. Within periods of three decades there are mega political changes such as unitary system to democracy, democracy to monarchy and monarchy to federalism. Contentious of people has significant role in these political changes. Achieving these changes people have participated numerous demonstration, street protests, blockade announce numbers of strikes throughout the countries, partly and subject wise as well. As a result of dalit's collective struggle and protests have largely been directed toward ending exclusion from public spaces like temples and accessing opportunities that should be available to any citizens, such as selling milk publicly owned dairies. It has also minimized the practice of untouchability which has been already eliminated in law. Some of the street protests have gained positive result on emancipation of Kamaiyas and haliya (the bonded laborers). Incidents of riots against any cases of religions have been decreased.

There are many positive social changes due to antagonistic practice. Numerous social movements including street protests and strikes occurred beside identity movements of Maoist insurgency. There are many noticeable riots and insurgencies except violent Maoist conflict i.e. Hindu-Muslim riots particularly in Nepalgunj, a famous western terai city, riots between hilly and terai/madhes people due to spoke of Hritik, Bollywood actor, Khambuwan insurgency, riots against Muslim due to 12 Nepalese killing in Iraq and Madhes insurgency. There are also many contentious activities have been occurred i.e. mobilization to sell dairies, temple entry movement, anti-carcass disposal campaign and right water from public sources etc. These activities also have contributed in especially the positive changes in societies.

This study is primarily qualitative. Mostly secondary document have been reviewed. During the study ample discussions have been held with various stakeholders who have engaged and faced contentious politics in Nepal after 1990.

Protest Size, Third-Party Intervention, and Leadership Change: Model and Narratives from Thailand

Kana Inata (Waseda University)

To extract concessions from political leaders, protesters must commit to punishing them when concessions are not granted and rewarding them when they are. The growth of protests is assumed to enhance protesters' ability to pose threats, whereas it can also undermine their ability to credibly reward political leaders because large protests facilitate other actors' challenges to the same leadership, such as impeachments and coups, and some actors may not want to retract their threats even after concessions have been granted. This paper argues that executive responsiveness to protests does not simply depend on the size of the protests but also on the degree to which the actors, who may subsequently make threats, are vulnerable to the

growth of the protests. This has a significant implication where democratic executive constraint is not consolidated, the growth of protest size is less likely to improve the probability of protest success.

Blacklisted Rebels: Commitment to Child Rights in the Philippines

Minju Kwon (Chapman University)

Contentious political situations in Southeast Asia provide timely cases to understand the conditions under which international actors influence rebel groups' commitment to international humanitarian law. I explore rebel groups' commitment to international humanitarian law for children in contentious contexts with a particular focus on MILF. It is notable that a non-state armed group, which is ineligible to be a member of the UN human rights treaties, would voluntarily sign and comply with a written agreement with the UN to address its child rights violations. The case of the Philippines is crucial because it demonstrates the sub-national variations in compliance with UN action plans. In particular, MILF is one of only three rebel groups worldwide that have fully complied with signed action plans. By conducting process tracing with archives and interviews, I examine five factors influencing compliance: 1) rebel goals and governance; 2) other warring parties' behavior; 3) the UN's commitment to resolving the conflict; 4) likelihoods of future conflict; and 5) activities of local non-governmental organizations. I argue that the low likelihood of future conflicts, evident in the group's signing of a comprehensive peace agreement, is a necessary condition for compliance. MILF complied with its action plan when it implemented the power-sharing provisions of its peace agreements, due to its aspiration to be considered as a legitimate political actor by international and regional audiences. This paper contributes to both literatures on international institutions and political violence by demonstrating why the UN's "naming and shaming" increases rebel groups' commitment to international law. My findings also have implications for policies regarding the contemporary implementation of UN action plans during rebellions, as MILF is the most recent instance of compliance by a rebel group.

PANEL 5: POLITICS IN PLURAL SOCIETIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Can Political Division be Healthy and Productive? – Interrogating Malaysia’s Incompatible Craving for Unity and Democracy

Chin-Huat Wong (Sunway University)

Multiparty democracy, by definition, is premised on political division and parties as the mechanism to manifest and mediate such division. As the antithesis, political unity means neither choices nor check and balance beyond interpersonal rivalry. Arguably, democracy’s fundamental distinction from autocracy is in its recognition that a nation’s or a group’s collective interests can be harmed also by internal betrayal (“the principal-agent problem”) and not just external threat. For divided societies like Malaysia, rival groups however fear domination by each other so much so that many crave political unity at two levels: (a) within the group, to avoid fragmentation before a united rival group; (b) between groups, especially when inter-group conflicts in the past have resulted in bloodshed. The survival of democracy therefore may hinge on a faith that political division is necessary and legitimate and can be healthy and productive.

One cause of Malaysia’s reformist Pakatan Harapan (PH) government’s collapse after 22 months is its failure to assign the opposition parties healthy and productive roles in multiparty competition. Winning power with 49% (and largely non-Malay) of votes, different factions of PH were caught between pursuing liberal policy reforms and replacing UMNO as the dominant party representing the ethnic majority Malays. Inheriting the authoritarian infrastructure left by UMNO’s electoral one-party state of 49 years from 1969 to 2018, PH was serious in only combating corruption and loosening media control, but largely retained the key measures to marginalise the opposition: rubber-stamp legislatures, partisan constituency funding and Executive-controlled prosecution. While Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad enticed certain lawmakers to defect and break-up UMNO, PH’s liberal base too spoke victoriously about a “New Malaysia” which PH must have the “political will” to materialise, ignoring the need to win over the 51% opposition supporters. Intertwined with succession struggle between Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim, the rising ethno-religious tension eventually paved way for the defection of some 20% of parliamentarians and put UMNO back in power as part of the predominantly-Malay Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition.

The failure of PH’s multiethnic politics in 2018-2020 is comparable to UMNO’s earlier failed experiment in consociationalism in 1957-1969, where a centrist government finding itself losing popular support to the flank opposition and a post-election riot erupted. The PH’s messy collapse and the continued fluidity and fragmentation in PN have led many Malaysians to detest democracy and parties and crave political unity and “outsider politicians”. If major parties do not ensure healthy and productive political division, authoritarianism may appear more appealing than democracy, like how it did after 1969.

Protests on the Periphery: Ethnic Contestation and Confrontation in Democratic Myanmar

Christopher Wyrod (Advancing Community Empowerment Project)

Myanmar has experienced decades of protracted conflict between its military junta and mass-based movements demanding democracy and ethnic federalism. Infamous as one of the most repressive countries on earth, Burma captured the world’s attention through sporadic mass

protests in its center, such as the 8888 Uprising in 1988 and the Saffron Revolution in 2007, and civil conflict on its peripheries. The military's roadmap to 'disciplined democracy' slowly phased in reforms over a decade, culminating in November 2015 elections resulting in a landslide victory for the National League for Democracy (NLD). In addition to multiparty elections, the peace process was a cornerstone of the reform process, resulting in a historic Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015 between the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) government and the majority of the country's ethnic armed groups, some of which have been fighting the Burmese military, or *Tatmadaw*, since independence in 1948. The NCA promised a new era of security and equal rights for ethnic communities, which had long borne the brunt of the military junta's 'three cuts' policy in ethnic states.

This paper examines how political protest and confrontation have evolved within Myanmar's recent transition to democracy. While the Bamar majority at the center of Myanmar has morphed from democratic opposition and underground resistance into power holders and staunch supporters of the ruling NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi, ethnic communities at the peripheries have not experienced such transformation. Instead, ethnic groups are using new political space to resist Bamarization and push back on both traditional enemies, such as the Burmese military, and newfound foes in the NLD administration. While the peace process advanced under the military leadership of the USDP, it has paradoxically stalled under the civilian-led NLD, which is overseeing a marked increase in violence and fighting in ethnic areas. With fewer official channels to advance long-held political grievances, ethnic communities on the peripheries are taking to demonstrations, protests, civil disobedience, and armed resistance against the center. From new confrontations in the world's longest civil war in Kayah State to youth protests in Kayah State and dramatic upticks in violent conflict in Shan, Kachin, and Rakhine states, Myanmar's peripheries are ablaze with political contestation. What is spurring these protests and confrontations in newly democratic Myanmar, and how are they related to political and economic struggles within Myanmar and with powerful neighbors like China? As Myanmar prepares for national elections later this year, this paper charts the origins, trajectory, and implications of these protests on the periphery that have paradoxically grown in parallel with Myanmar's transition to democracy.

The Contentious Politics of Anti-Chinese Projects in Myanmar: The Case of Kyaukphyu-based Projects under the NLD Government

Lwin Cho Latt (Ritsumeikan University)

Since 2011, the planned Chinese massive investment projects have met with strong opposition from local population of Myanmar. The most notable example was the opposition against the Myitsone Dam project which led to a suspension of the project in September 2011. With the popular wave of public resistance to the Chinese projects, the Kyaukphyu-Yunnan railway project was cancelled in 2014. This paper examines the contentious politics of public opposition to the Chinese-backed Kyaukphyu projects under the National League for Democracy (NLD) government in Myanmar. With the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) Plan (2019-2030) on September 9, 2018, the NLD government's decision on the implementation of this corridor likely provoked the reemergence of public criticism against the Chinese investment projects. The Kyaukphyu projects were resumed in November 2018 due to their strategic importance to the CMEC. However, many in Rakhine State and project-affected people have claimed to stop the projects and/or called for the right to control over their own natural resources. This paper, thus, raises a question: What are the implications of carrying out the Chinese-backed Kyaukphyu projects for state-society relations in Myanmar? This paper argues that the NLD government's political and socio-economic considerations on the Kyaukphyu projects in China-Myanmar relations affect its domestic societal politics as a result of lack of prior consultation with local peoples in Rakhine State. Although the NLD government attempted to lessen public concerns about the "debt trap"

issue, its engagement in the Belt and Road Initiative framework has generated unfavorable state-society relations which can lead to a challenge to the regime solidity. This paper offers to study other scopes of the NLD government's relations with different local societies in the areas of CMEC operations.