



Annual Democracy Forum 2016

Learning from Democratic Transitions in Asia and the Pacific: An Inter-Generational Dialogue

25-26 August 2016, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

BACKGROUND NOTE

Background

As the Chair of the Council of Member States of International IDEA in 2016, Mongolia is organizing the Annual Democracy Forum in collaboration with International IDEA and also with the Non Aligned Movement Centre for South-South Technical Cooperation (NAM Centre). The regional Forum will be held in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, on 25-26 August 2016 with the theme “*Learning from Democratic Transitions*”. The Forum aims to bring together actors of democratic transitions in Asia and the Pacific of older and younger generations and create space for inter-generational dialogue on transitions and their aftermath.

Democratic transitions in Asia

The Asia-Pacific region includes number of countries; Indonesia, Philippines and Mongolia, where democratic transition took place about a generation ago. Mongolia’s own revolution for democracy in 1990 was sparked by a youth movement, by the generation which has now been in power for some time. Many of these countries were able to consolidate their democracies including through constitutional reforms, regular elections and relative economic gains. However, the 21st century has brought about new sort of demands for more direct accountability, participation and more inclusive economies by ordinary citizens and younger generations to which governments need to respond.

More recent transitions include Bhutan, Nepal, Kyrgyzstan and the ongoing one in Myanmar. In parts of the region, democracy has failed to take root after transitions; Thailand and Fiji amongst some others have been oscillating between military takeovers and elected governments for several decades. The region also still includes a wide variety of political systems without genuine elections.

With large ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity, many Asian countries are struggling with the challenges of inclusion for all communities in the democratic processes and institutions. Ongoing debates on devolution of power in Myanmar and Nepal, and peace-building efforts in Philippines and Thailand are just a few examples. Consolidating multiparty systems remains a challenge in many places. The political participation and representation of women is far below the global average, particularly in the Pacific sub-region. Global and regional economic slowdown is also testing the resilience of new democracies.

Another feature of Asian transitions is the wide array of types of previous systems which vary from monarchies, military regimes to communist one-party systems; with very diverse colonial histories. The preceding systems have had their impact to the nature and pace of transitions in the region and continue to impact today's politics.

Global commitments/SDG agenda

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted by the UN Member States in September 2015 and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) included commitments relevant to countries going through democratic transition processes, notably in SDG 5 on gender equality and SDG 16 on effective, accountable and inclusive institutions. The SDGs form a key commitment to the future generations and a central challenge for citizens across the region will be to monitor and hold governments accountable for making progress on the implementation of the SDGs. At the level of sub-regional cooperation, countries in the Asia and the Pacific region have developed strong shared norms and principles on democracy, as illustrated by the ASEAN Charter and the SAARC Charter of Democracy, as well as peer exchanges on best practices and experiences of democratic transitions.

Looking back, looking ahead

Learning from these various democratic transitions, the Annual Democracy Forum is taking a look back in order to move forward; what has enabled consolidation of democratic order in some countries and why has democracy failed to take root in others? How do younger generations assess the gains and flaws of democratization processes? Looking ahead: How are Asian democracies responding to increasing demands for more transparency and participation? What will be the role of technology, social media or citizen movements in deepening democracies or in initiating new transitions? How have constitutions accommodated demands for inclusion and autonomy in the region? What about role of international community – how to best mobilize external support so that it is useful and relevant to the transitional processes?

Output

Based on the presentations and discussions in this Annual Democracy Forum, a booklet will be created showcasing the various thematic and country-specific experiences and lessons learned on democratic transitions. This booklet will be supplementary to the book, "Democratic Transitions: Conversations with World Leaders".

SESSION I: Constitutional transitions

In most cases transitions from one regime to another require constitutional reform which may take place through amendment processes (Indonesia) or through writing a whole new constitution (Nepal) and new elections. These process inevitably open important debates on fundamental issues: from social and economic rights to the design and details of the electoral system; from the role of the military to the reform of the justice system; and the issue, in some cases, of regional autonomy and more inclusive representation. The optimal sequencing of constitutional reform and elections can also prove to be a difficult consideration. Should elections be organized under the existing constitutional framework which may no longer be valid and then have the constitution written under a freshly elected

government or should the constitution be written first in order to prepare a new framework for elections, and if so, how is it decided who writes the constitution. This session discusses examples of compelling reasons to opt for these different routes. Some countries in transition have also used interim constitutional arrangements, either as part of peace agreements or as separate processes/documents. The session will also draw lessons for the future from examples of stalled or failed constitution building processes in the region. Some scholars are also arguing that all constitutions should have a sunset clause so that each generation can draft their own constitution. This session looks at lessons learnt from the region on these issues, with a view towards strengthening the constitutional reform processes of the current and next generations. .

SESSION II: Role of Security Sector in democratic transitions

Actions of state and non-state security sector agencies are prominent in determining the successes or failures of democratic transitions. Transitions to democracy are often successful with the cooperation of the security sector. Nepal's fall of the monarchy, Myanmar's democratisation and Indonesia's "*reformasi*" could not have been possible without the security sector's support. A key challenge of many transitions, however, has been bringing the armed forces and other security institutions under civilian authority while recognizing their legitimate roles, their appropriate claim on some level of resources and their need to be protected from reprisals by former opposition forces. In many Asian countries, it has taken repeated confrontations over several years between democratic governments and elements of the armed forces and/or the intelligence and police agencies—some highly visible, others not—to firmly establish civilian control. This session will look at the lessons learned in the processes of bringing about security sector's support towards democratisation.

SESSION III: Role of Leadership and rise of social movements

Most Asian transitions were brought about as a result of political movements rising to question the status quo and political leaders either responding to or emerging from these movements. Traditional sources of authority have also played important roles. Qualities such as mobilizing for political freedom, building spaces for dialogue, constructing convergence and consensus, forging agreement on procedures and rules of engagement, and reassuring opposing forces that their fundamental interests will be protected have been vital priorities in these transition processes. In recent times, an increase in new media aided leaderless social movements that use electronic networking to mobilise many people, including across borders, in short periods of time will pressure governments and other institutions, and in some instances even spark transitions. But, how far can these movements go in engaging in the difficult task of building sustainable democracy? How important is it for these leaderless social movements to work with political institutions and leaders as well as organised social organizations? How important are the leaders with vision, patience, persistence and openness to compromise in facilitating successful transitions? How can political leadership and citizen movements ideally reinforce each other to steer the direction of transitions?

SESSION IV: Role of Women in Democratic Transitions

Like all political processes, transitions are gendered – men and women play different roles within them, and the processes often have different impacts on men and women. Women have played significant roles in many Asian transitions, including in Indonesia, Philippines, Fiji, and Mongolia amongst others, and have attempted to ensure that outcomes were favourable to women. These efforts have met varying degrees of success, which can be understood as a result of a variety of factors; the importance of women organising; the ability of female activists to build broad coalitions involving allies in the bureaucracy, political parties, legislatures, and civil society; and activists' ability to frame their issues effectively, often in contexts with conservative views on gender relations. Key issues in democratic transitions include the involvement of women in negotiating the content of new constitutions, post-transition levels of women representation in legislatures and in bureaucracy, as well as gender policy reforms (including for example gender-based violence, property rights, reproductive rights) This session brings together women involved in fostering transitions from authoritarian rule toward more democratic governance and in promoting policies to strengthen women's rights and gender equality. Building on this diverse set of experience, this session discusses strategies to ensure women's participation and representation in current and next generation of democratic transitions.

SESSION V: Role of International community in transitions

Democracy can take root in a society only after it becomes the most accepted way to contend for political power. International actors can sometimes do a good deal—patiently, quietly and in supporting the priorities of local actors—to reinforce movement in that direction, but they cannot take the place of domestic actors. International community has played varying roles in Asian transitions, from very hands-on involvement, including organising the first elections (Timor Leste) to much more subtle support before and during the transitions. What are the potential contributions and the limits of external involvement? What could be the role of regional organisations and peer support networks in supporting future transitions and/or preventing backsliding from democratic order in the region?