The Fate of Democracy in South and Southeast Asia

BY WERNER LEVI

The lot of democratic government in South and Southeast Asia in recent times has not been a happy one. Pakistan, which struggled for years to adopt a constitution and finally did so in 1956, never fully lived up to it and set it aside again in 1958. To the relief of large sections of the public and also of some political factions, a military leader took over power in the proudly announced and widely acclaimed conviction that democracy is not yet for Pakistan. Indonesia is torn by civil strife, elections are postponed, and parliamentary institutions replaced by advisory councils harmless enough not to interfere with "guided democracy." In Nepal, democracy serves largely as a pretext for selfish politicians to gain power and profit; the King has been ruling since the revolution of 1950 with a handful of advisers; it is too early to foresee the consequences of the recent elections. Burma, where democratic techniques never made as much progress as the democratic way of life, is under a "caretaker" government of the army and some democratic practices are suspended. Traditionally placid little Ceylon has been under martial law. India (with perhaps the Philippines) remains the showcase for parliamentary democracy in Southern Asia; yet there also strong doubts have arisen, for some of India's intellectuals question the suitability of democracy and many of her interest groups are dissatisfied with its functioning.

Former devotees of the democratic system—men like Jayprakash Narayan of India, U Nu of Burma, and prominent Indonesians—seem to be concluding from recent evidence that free Asia must evolve some other system of its own; Titoism, Nasserism, even de Gaulle's ideas are examined as possible alternatives. In all the countries of South and Southeast Asia which adopted democratic constitutions from the West, dissatisfaction with political democracy has grown, in several cases to the point where radical departures from it have taken place in proportion to its failure to bring the expected miracle of peace, order, and prosperity.

There is triumph among those who have always argued that a political system cannot be abstracted from its cultural context and then transferred in generalized form to a strange culture in the expectation that it will flourish on the strength of its own laws and inherent merits. The argument is cogent, but slightly beside the point. What is a country to do after its escape from colonialism? A return to pre-colonial regimes is impossible, as reason would tell and as futile attempts in this direction by certain religious groups prove. A break in the continuity of political developments has occurred. In a new system some contrivance becomes indispensable.

Why democracy should have been given the first chance in these countries' search for a new system is fairly obvious. It was the legacy of the colonial powers, more because they preached it than because they practised it. Only some rudiments of parliamentary government had been established by some of the colonial powers, but apparently just enough to create some corresponding habits and vested interests to build upon when independence came. Western influence among important native leaders was strong and democracy appealed to them. Finally, to be recognized as Western and progressive (which included the need to profess democracy) facilitated admission to the coveted membership among the elite of the world. Democracy was thus established on a narrow basis of ruling groups; and for a variety of reasons which did not all reflect deep seated convictions about its superior qualities as a form of government. Nowhere did it come as the result of deliberate choice among carefully considered alternatives. Nowhere was the mass of its beneficiaries readied for its arrival and successful establishment.

The resulting problem is that the forms and mechanics of Western democracy are there now, but they do not have the backing by ideologies and social realities which gave them birth and make them viable in their homelands. Not that all prerequisites for a proper functioning of a democratic system are absent among the peoples of South and Southeast Asia; they possess them now in varying numbers and degrees of adequacy. But from the past they also retain beliefs, attitudes, and habits which interfere with democracy and are responsible for some of its difficulties in this region. Though they vary from country to country, of course, some generalizations about them and their relation to democracy can be made, with the usual risks, which apply to a greater or lesser extent to the whole region and which provide a clue to the decline of democracy from Pakistan to Indonesia.

This is true of individualism as the fundamental concept underlying democracy. While the worth of the individual is not an unknown value in Asia—Burma has been called a "community of individuals"—individual-
ism as a doctrine formed by Europeans in the nineteenth century with all that it implies is strange to most of the peoples of South and Southeast Asia. The technological and social reasons which brought it forth in the West do not exist there. Its introduction without compensating rearrangements in customary social institutions has led to disturbing consequences in the communal life prevailing almost everywhere in this region. The individual has rarely been of primary concern; the joint family or the clan are the fundamental social units and the lower as well as the upper limit of loyalty. Loyalty to the national community has been as strange to most Asians as to the individual, causing a lack of solidarity with the state-wide community which has often been regretted by Asian leaders as a major cause for the weakness of democracy.2 Democracy as the tool of individualism, as the means for its political realization, can therefore not be very comprehensible to the Asian masses and might even appear sometimes as a threat to their social existence. A change could occur gradually as traditional individualism (and with it, democracy) becomes modified by the newer concepts of social responsibility and social cooperation—that is, as the interpretation of the ends of democracy corresponds more closely to Asian values and social organization.

The individual in subordination to the group; inequalities in power, status, and wealth; a hierarchical order of society (with greatly varying degrees of rigidity from country to country)—these things have characterized Asian societies for so long and have been rationalized so profoundly in systems of belief, that the masses must learn to question the system into which they were born before they can be expected to accept the values of individual dignity and rights and behave accordingly. They must be convinced that the order and values they and their forefathers have known are neither immutable nor necessarily the most beneficial. The corollary to this is, of course, a demonstration of the superior benefits of the new order and values they are to adopt in relation to their ambitions. Unfortunately for the cherished belief of many Westerners with their missionary zeal, the virtues of individualism are not self-evident. There should be no mistake in Western minds that the demand for national freedom in Asia implied demands for individual freedom. The two have little in common, except perhaps in the mind of the elite groups. There is no evidence that the expectations among the limited sections of the population who shared in the struggle for freedom included personal freedom in the form of Western individualism. There is, on the contrary, a point to be made that some nationalist leaders sublimated, for their own benefit, potential de-

sires for individual freedom into the wider struggle for national independence—and that some are continuing to do so to this day.

Equally alien to most inhabitants of South and Southeast Asia is democracy’s basic assumption that sovereignty rests in the people. As a device to pacify the Western conscience, which cannot easily reconcile power with freedom, it is not needed. Unlike the Westerner, the Asian has not yet turned this issue into a practical political problem. As an idea it has not found any support for hundreds of years in any major creed of the region and by some it is actually opposed.3 For long periods of time, theories of divine kingship have prevailed. Sooner or later all major creeds developed their own authoritarian ideologies. They all confirm, explicitly or implicitly, that the ruler is the embodiment of supreme political authority. Even where (as in Confucian China, Hindu theory, and certain early Islamic conceptions) the people’s right was granted to determine whether the ruler possessed the mandate of heaven, the source of the mandate was heaven and the ruler monopolized sovereignty.

Some present leaders of Asia wish to read democratic features into these creeds, usually for internal or external political purposes, in an age when to be democratic carries the presumption of respectability; some of these creeds may indeed have been corrupted in the course of time to justify authoritarian rule; and the influence of these creeds, in their spoiled or unspoiled version, may be strong or weak today. The fact remains that because of these creeds (or in spite of them), the civilizations in which they prevailed have never had anything resembling democratic or even potentially democratic systems. This includes the often romanticized village systems of self-government which more often than not are run along authoritarian lines and which never affected the decidedly autocratic governments above them. On the contrary, and perhaps forcing the point somewhat, there is almost a direct relationship between the success of democracy in these countries of Asia and the extent to which either politics and religion could be separated, or religion could be reinterpreted to become compatible with democracy.

The practices and experiences of the peoples in the region correspond to their traditional doctrines—not surprisingly, since these were often developed to justify autocratic rule. Until the end of World War II, they

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2 E.g. Prime Minister Nehru’s press conference of October 12, 1958.

3 There was an earlier Vedic principle and a theory in Hinayana Buddhism that kingship rested on popular will. Similar ideas could be read into the texts of some other creeds. But these were all early versions. Gradually they were all modified to support the autocratic rule which in fact existed. Cf. Richard A. Gard, in P. W. Thayer (ed.), Southeast Asia in the Coming World, Baltimore, 1953, pp. 154-160.
knew only authoritarianism, native or foreign. Sometimes it was cruel, sometimes paternalistic. It had, at any rate, the advantage of being clear-cut: one knew whom to worship, love, hate, or blame. One knew who the government was. Many Asian villagers continue to find it easier to understand a political system in which a recognized and recognizable leader personifies authority than one in which a vague mass, they included, represent it. This understanding is all the firmer and the system more desired because the traditional relationship between the citizen and his government has been antagonistic. Most of the time, government was the tax collector; much of the time it was a worse exploiter. It was therefore something to be suspicious of, to guard against. Government, in the words of former Prime Minister Suhrawardy of Pakistan, was to the people "something set against their own interests and purposes." There was rarely a mutually responsive relationship. The citizen, far from being the source of authority, was more likely its victim.

Consent was an unknown ingredient in government. Some Asians have a suspicion that vesting authority in the people is a subterfuge of unscrupulous rulers to evade responsibility for their actions; an open door to corruption; or a trick to exploit the people in the name of the people. Others, on a more rational level, argue that in the pluralistic societies of South and Southeast Asia such a diffusion of authority can have no reality and at the same time weakens the integrating effect of the national leader whose strong rule and symbolic role are sometimes the vital elements in holding such societies together.

There is little consolation for those who find government by representation unsuitable or suspect its implications in the fact that this (to them) nebulous relationship between ruler and ruled is made concrete through the accountability of the government. Delegation of authority is a mental process which requires training and for which there are few precedents in the social experience of Asia. Furthermore, and more important, the methods and institutions of accountability have not developed rapidly enough to make it real.

Notwithstanding justified pride felt by some observers in the success with elections in such countries as India and Ceylon, the fact remains that elections have limited value for making governments accountable, especially when they are a novelty to the voters. In many instances, where elections took place, candidates were nominated and elected because according to custom and tradition they had a right to be. Or candidates had themselves elected not on reasonable issues but by clever tricks appealing to ancient beliefs and superstitions. Further examples could be cited to indicate that many voters had no real conception of or interest in the motions they were going through at the ballot boxes. And it is questionable how much those governments really cared in those several countries which do not possess an effective opposition party. Elections have greatly reduced value where the real alternative to the present government is the same next government—or the army. More important, however, than these childhood diseases of the election process is the fact that an election is only one means of making government accountable, that accountability should be a continuous process whose performance requires additional means.

Political parties are important among these means, and parties, in this part of the world, are with few exceptions a sad chapter in the story of parliamentary democracy. The fundamental reason for this appears to be that parties have not developed as an integral part of the society in which they function. Most of them have been created from the top, more in response to the needs and desires of Westernized elites than to the basic concerns and views of large sections, especially rural sections, of the public. As a result, the parties usually float above the heads of the people. With some exceptions, such as the Indian Congress, they become active on the mass level only when the leaders, too often for personal reasons, need demonstrations of "popular" support. Few parties in this region can claim to be transmission belts between substantial numbers of the electors and the elected (few indeed have any organization reaching the village level). When there is any contact between the rural masses and the government—usually the great unknown far away in the big city—strong personalities are usually responsible for this rare situation.

Many parties are either factions or composed of factions. They are built around a leader or a grievance and disappear with the one or the other, leaving behind only a disturbing influence upon the growth of democracy. In these cases, the parties serve as instruments for individual leaders and their followers in the unending struggles for personal power and prestige, conducted by intrigue, corruption, violence. Constant mergers and dissolutions of "parties", switches in loyalty, splits and splinters are the external evidence of this un-


5 Mr. C. Rajagopalachari pointed this out recently in a call for the development of an effective opposition party in India. The Hindu, October 19, 1958.


7 Mr. Asoka Mehta has pointed out that, in deviation from the frequent rule, the disappearance of outstanding leaders by death or disaffection has not affected the strength of several Indian parties. "The Political Mind of India," Foreign Affairs, Vol. 35 (1957), pp. 686-7.
healthy system. Nothing has discredited “democracy” more in the eyes of the Asian peoples, or has made them more cynical about politics, than this politicking in the worst sense of the word; nothing has produced more quickly calls for the strong man and the creation of “party-less democracy.” It is this which has motivated some prominent Indians to urge Nehru and the Congress to quit party politics and become “a movement” which could harness jan shakti (the strength of the people) for the salvation of the country. “Democracy” has already become disreputable among large sections of the peoples in this region before they ever had a chance to experience it.

Great damage has thus been done. But luckily not all political leaders or all political parties fall into this evil category. They possess, however, characteristics which, though morally neutral, nevertheless form barriers to progress towards democratic government. The communal way of life of most of the citizens, their lack of loyalty to a national community, their preoccupation with local issues—all these have carried over into the party system. Parties have difficulty in reaching or maintaining themselves on a national level or, when they succeed, in retaining contact with the villages (or even the urban communities from which they usually sprang). Local problems could easily be taken up by some of the larger parties but frequently are not. Local politicians and enthusiasts turn them into ideological principles and create a party to defend them. Such a party lacks national concern; it is uncompromising, disrupts the political system and emphasizes the dangerously pluralistic nature of the society.

There are, on the other hand, all too many genuine and serious ideological splits in many countries of this region. They are founded on religious, racial, linguistic or similar fundamental facts and beliefs and do not lend themselves easily to the democratic processes of adjustment or compromise. These controversial issues, instead of being underplayed, became, in the absence of a higher loyalty to the national community, the foundation of political parties (and where the multiplicity of parties is based on such grounds, the stability and very existence of the state) is seriously threatened. Democracy cannot function for the dogmatic position of the parties, based on unadjustable ideologies instead of compromisable interests, makes it impossible for a government to serve them all; nor can the parties play their expected constructive role while in the opposition. In such circumstances, the government can make itself accountable to only one or the other side, and the opposition can only reciprocate by trying to make that government impossible. The prospect for democracy remains dim as long as all these matters of belief are expected by its believers to be reflected in the nature of the state and when it becomes the primary purpose of the parties to realize this goal.8 This dangerous situation was referred to by the Vice-Chancellor of Madras University, Dr. A. L. Mudaliar, when he warned that democracy cannot function if emotional, spiritual, or other influences of this kind were brought to bear upon “purely” political issues.9

The unfortunate fact is, however, that parties are too often considered by their founders and followers to be the proper outlets for such influences. They are considered movements more than political instruments. They perform more comprehensive functions than they do in the West. There is a dearth of other social organizations with specific functions which members could join to satisfy their needs—material, spiritual, psychological, or social—so that memberships in diversified organizations would overlap and the contrasts created by contradictory values and interests could be softened and play themselves out without endangering the whole foundation of the state at every turn. It may also be true that the chance to see ideologies realized in the form of the new states and maintained by political power has intensified the desire of their adherents to advance them as political issues. Perhaps, therefore, once the peoples of this region can take the existence of their states more for granted and their material existence as better assured, the present intense and disruptive debate about the nature of the state will become more relaxed. There might then be a growing inclination to subordinate ideological matters of this kind to an overriding desire for a smoothly functioning state which can serve a multiplicity of functions of which most Asians today can hardly conceive.

An increase in the social organizations would have the additional advantage of improving the formation and expression of public opinion as another important check upon government. Today, as an Indian editorial complained recently,10 the ideas holding nationwide sway are crude derivatives of class and caste antagonism, social jealousies, and individual cupidities. There is need for education for an understanding of the major national problems and a greater differentiation of the public along the lines of specific concerns and interests. Only then can leaders cease to appeal on the basis of broad and often emotional generalizations and turn to proposals for the solution of specific and manageable problems. Opinions are, of course, expressed every day in the market places of thousands of villages and they refer no doubt to local and specific problems, probably

9 Indian Express, October 3, 1958.
10 Ibid., October 30, 1958.

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too much so. But they remain ineffective in the absence of adequate communication between them and with the government. The most efficient "grapevine" is a poor substitute for newspapers or nationally organized interest groups. It can lead only in the most exceptional circumstances to concerted action or influence upon the government. But newspapers and the few organizations are concentrated in the urban centers and serve only a minute fraction of the population. What passes as public opinion in a number of countries is the opinion of groups which may represent a diversity of interests but which are, by and large, composed of relatively homogeneous elites and tend to be identical with the actual or potential ruling groups. Public opinion lacks the representative and diversified character which make it valuable as a method of governmental accountability.

Altogether, government, parties, public opinion are too much the preserve of a relatively small group for a healthy democracy. The base of democracy is as yet too narrow, whatever the constitutions may say. It threatens to remain so for some considerable time, partly because some of the leaders have no interest in undermining their own positions by broadening it, partly (and more important) because there is poor communication between the Westernized, urbanized intellectuals and the masses of their fellow citizens on the land. The resistance of the technically backward and tradition-bound peasants to innovations has made the development-minded elites impatient. A deep gulf exists between the two groups. The democratic requirement of working with the acquiescence of those concerned and with respect for their culture is proving too much of a stumbling bloc to many of these restless and mostly well-meaning reformers. In a paternalistic and authoritarian mood they attempt to impose their own ideas upon the people instead of executing the people's wishes. They dare not risk the delays involved in exposing the masses to the education which has made them the reformers they are.

Democracy faces a dilemma here. The sense of superiority of Westernized Asians over their technically backward fellow citizens (which also leads them occasionally to despise these) is factually justified. They are superior. Yet the customary democratic methods of reconciling conflicting views and policies cannot easily be applied, even were they available, because they assume a certain degree of cultural homogeneity. Where there are such stark contrasts in cultural levels as can be found within several of the countries of this region of Asia, there is hardly common ground for agreement.

The counterpart to the superior attitudes among sections of the elites is a widespread attitude among the masses accepting these as natural. The class and caste systems and the authoritarian practices of native and colonial rulers have conspired to instill in the masses a great respect for the rulers, often simply because they occupy the ruling positions and regardless of how they got there. In return for this vast deference to the ruler, he is expected to solve the people's problems. Even in countries where this relationship is rapidly disappearing, its after-effects can still be seen in the extraordinary reliance of the people upon government initiative and direction. This mutual complementation of undemocratic attitudes delays the acceptance of fundamental democratic ideals of the equality of men and the sovereignty of the people.

Aggravating this condition among the elites is the incomplete moral and emotional satisfaction which democracy can give them in their present search for new values and new ways of life. While this problem should not be exaggerated—Asian youth being more interested in material welfare than philosophy, Asian "spirituality" notwithstanding—it has a bearing on the chances of democracy, if only because it has relevance also for the material progress of Asia. In the process of Westernization, the traditional way of life was destroyed, but Western education was too often formal and lacked social content or applicability. Western standards were rationally accepted, but emotions remained largely under traditional influences. Few Asians have achieved a synthesis, as Prime Minister Nehru implies when he refers to his personality as split between East and West. Furthermore, democracy (in contrast to Communism) as a philosophy and a political system is an incomplete substitute for the (at least partially) discarded integrated systems and practices of Asia. It does not offer a comprehensive view of the world or claim to provide an interpretation of history, an analysis of society, a knowledge of the future, and a timetable for action. It has few dogmas to cling to and no infallibility to rely upon. In other words, democracy does not provide the sense of security and the confidence in the future sought by a good many members of that Asian generation whose traditional beliefs have broken down because they do not fit a world they know or want. In day-to-day existence (of overwhelming concern is Asia today) democracy has few appeals because it does not supply prescriptions for the solution of economic problems any more than it does for the creation of conditions guaranteeing its successful functioning in the political sphere. One may hope that what appears as a trend away from democracy in South and Southeast Asia will in the end turn out to be the evolutionary process by which the values of democracy will be preserved in the forms best suited to the local environment.