During the 1990s, the rapid development of many East Asian economies under restricted political arrangements led to claims for the superiority of a so-called ‘Asian model’ of democracy.\footnote{There is a voluminous literature, much of it self-serving, on this subject. Important early claims include Tommy Kho, ‘The 10 Values Which Undergird East Asian Strength and Success’, \textit{International Herald Tribune} 11-12 December 1993, 10; Fareed Zakaria, ‘Culture is Destiny: A Conversation with Lee Kwan Yew’, \textit{Foreign Affairs} 73 (1994), 109-26; Kishore Mahbubani, ‘The Pacific Way’, \textit{Foreign Affairs} 74 (1995) 100-111. For critiques from the region, see Kim Dae-Jung, ‘Is culture destiny? The myth of Asia’s anti-democratic values’, \textit{Foreign Affairs} 73 (1994), 198-194; Aung San Suu Kyi, ‘Freedom, Development and Human Worth’, \textit{Journal of Democracy} 6 (1995), and Yung-Myung Kim, “‘Asian-style democracy’: A critique from East Asia’, \textit{Asian Survey} 37:12 (1997), 1119-1134.} The 1997 Asian economic crisis dealt a severe blow to such claims, revealing deep structural weaknesses in the region’s political and economic systems. Proponents of Southeast Asia’s much-heralded combination of restrictive one-party politics with open competitive markets, such as Lee Kwan Yew in Singapore and Mahathir Mohamad in Malaysia, lost their main justification – economic success.\footnote{See Mark R. Thompson, ‘Whatever Happened to ‘Asian Values”?’, \textit{Journal of Democracy} 12 (2001), 154-165.} But while the impact of the crisis was economically devastating, particularly in states such as Indonesia and Thailand, it also proved to be politically liberating. By giving voice to long-repressed social cleavages, isolating incumbent elites and providing opportunities
for new entrants, the crisis stimulated an intense struggle for political reform in countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, Korea and (to a lesser extent) Malaysia and the Philippines.\(^3\)

In this essay, I argue that in the aftermath of the crisis there is an emerging Asian model of democracy – but one that bears little relationship to the soft-authoritarianism advocated by the ‘Asian model’ proponents.\(^4\) Rather, in something of a grand irony, the political systems of many East Asian democracies are not only becoming more consolidated, but in many cases are actually moving closer to the Anglo-American model of two-party politics. This movement towards more aggregative and majoritarian political outcomes has been facilitated by deliberate strategies of ‘political engineering’ across an increasingly diverse array of competitive electoral democracies. Political engineering refers to the conscious design or redesign of political institutions in order to achieve certain specified outcomes – for instance, more stable government, greater female representation, stronger political parties, and so on.

One of the most interesting forms of political engineering has been in the area of electoral system design. A growing number of Asian democracies – including Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Thailand and the Philippines – now employ highly majoritarian forms of mixed-member electoral systems to elect their national legislatures. While mixed systems have become common around the world in the past decade, the Asian variants are distinctive in providing no compensatory measures between tiers and weighting the allocation of seats heavily in favour of the district component of the elections over the proportional list –

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making them function more like plurality systems than true mixed systems. Moreover, in Asia-Pacific states which employ proportional representation, such as Indonesia and Cambodia, proportionality has been sharply reduced by changes to electoral formulae and districting rules in recent years. Finally, a growing number of states have adopted complex political party laws which require parties to surpass cross-national membership or vote thresholds before they can compete in elections – encouraging party system consolidation and penalizing new entrants, particularly those with regionally-concentrated support.

In some respects, the prominence of institutional crafting in the Asia-Pacific over the past decade echoes the way East Asia’s newly industrializing states attempted to shape the growth of key industries through targeted sectoral strategies of economic development in the 1970s and 1980s. Implementing highly interventionist economic policies rather than more orthodox, laissez faire approaches, countries such as Japan, Korea, and Taiwan become exemplars of this distinctive model of state-led development which relied upon strategic industrial policy rather than the invisible hand of the market. Academic studies hailed the success of this unorthodox approach to industry policy and government-led economic growth by coining a now widely-used term to describe it: the ‘developmental state’. With the democratic transitions of the 1990s, this interventionist approach to economic development began to be replicated in the political arena as well – by deliberate strategies of political engineering. Mirroring their interventionist economic strategies, Asian elites sought to strategically retool their political architecture by technocratic reform of democratic institutions. These attempts to craft what has been

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5 For more on mixed-member systems, see Andrew Reynolds, Ben Reilly and Andrew Ellis, Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2005).

called a ‘democratic developmental state’ thus represent an extension of successful economic strategies into the political arena.\footnote{See Mark Robinson and Gordon White (eds), \textit{The Democratic Developmental State} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).}

Drawing on a book-length study, this essay examines how East Asian regimes have increasingly attempted to engineer majoritarian electoral outcomes, aggregative party systems, and broad-based governments.\footnote{See Benjamin Reilly, \textit{Democracy and Diversity: Political Engineering in Asia and the Pacific} (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).} I argue that Asia’s newfound preference for majoritarianism is, at heart, an attempt to engineer political stability through the design of democratic institutions. These shifts towards more majoritarian electoral systems can be seen as a response to the problems of political instability, weak parties, and clientelistic politics that have historically afflicted many of the region’s democracies. Especially in the absence of cross-cutting ideological fissures or strong party identification, the introduction of competitive elections in such environments can create powerful incentives for vote-seeking politicians to indulge in particularistic campaign strategies to win and maintain elected office.

Clientelism has profoundly influenced the democratic development of Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand, Indonesia and a number of other Asia-Pacific states. Thailand’s pre-reform party politics, for instance, “centered on the struggle for pork. With multiple contenders and weak party organizations, there were few constraints on politicians in the competition for patronage and pork-barrel expenditures and limited incentives to cooperate around reforms that provide public goods”.\footnote{Stephan Haggard, ‘Democratic Institutions, Economic Policy, and Development’ in Christopher Clague (ed), \textit{Institutions and Economic Development} (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 136.} Similarly, elections in the Philippines have for decades been characterised by weakly-organised parties dependent upon patron-client ties, with politicians appealing for votes by distributing...
material goods to their supporters in exchange for electoral support and loyalty.\textsuperscript{10} As a consequence, “the logic of patronage politics remains central to understanding Philippines politics, and political parties remain weak, ill-defined, and poorly-institutionalized”.\textsuperscript{11} Similar problems are also evident in more developed states such as Korea, where electoral competition “revolves around personality-dominated, clientelistic parties build on the basis of vast networks of patron-client relations”.\textsuperscript{12}

The pre-existing institutional configuration of a number of Asia-Pacific states has also played a role in the promotion of particularistic politics. In pre-reform Japan and Thailand, for instance, candidate-centred electoral systems in multimember districts independently encouraged internal, intra-party competition between candidates of the same parties. In pre-1997 Thailand, the combination of block vote election laws and a highly fragmented party system created incentives for vote-buying, patronage and corruption: as it was difficult for candidates to campaign effectively across the whole of a multi-seat district, particularly in rural areas, politicians relied heavily on local agents to deliver votes from particular villages or districts in return for financial rewards.\textsuperscript{13} Likewise in both Japan and Taiwan, prior to their recent electoral reforms, a single non-transferable vote (SNTV) electoral system was applied, forcing candidates from the same party to compete with each other for votes – leading directly to personalised and factionalised pork-barrel politics.\textsuperscript{14}

Deep social cleavages – from the multiple cultural, linguistic, religious and regional schisms at play in Indonesia to the national identity issue that forms the bedrock political


\textsuperscript{12} Aurel Croissant, ‘South Korea’ in Dieter Nohlen, Florian Grotz and Christof Hartmann (eds), \textit{Elections in Asia and the Pacific: A Data Handbook}, Oxford University Press, New York, 414.


cleavage in Taiwan to the intense regionalism that continues to characterize electoral competition in otherwise homogenous Korea – are another piece of the reform picture. The interplay of social cleavages with processes of democratization can unleash powerful political pressures for segmental politics, presenting aspiring political entrepreneurs with the temptation of exploiting ethno-political divisions in their quest for electoral success. Growing awareness of the damage inflicted by such tactics – up to and including the localised civil wars in Indonesia and the Philippines – have provoked other institutional reforms. Across the region, these have typically sought to encourage party aggregation, limit the representation of minorities, and promote majoritarian political outcomes – resulting in highly convergent political engineering strategies. Figure 1 sets out a simple causal model of this story. Social cleavages, weak party systems, and candidate-centred electoral laws which fostered intra-party competition have each played an independent role in promoting clientelistic politics, underprovision of public goods, and unstable governments – and thus led to the search for ameliorative institutional responses.
Figure 1: A Causal Model of Political Engineering in the Asia-Pacific

Social cleavages
(Indonesia, Taiwan, Philippines, Korea, East Timor)

Weak parties and party systems
(Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, Korea)

Political pathologies
Rent-seeking
Clientelism
Money politics
Unstable government

Political engineering
Majoritarian politics
Political party reforms
Party-centered elections

SNTV or Block Vote electoral systems
(Japan, Taiwan, Korea, Philippines, Thailand)
The result of this unusual approach to political reform in the region has been the development of what appears to be an ‘Asian model’ of institutional design, making the Asia-Pacific distinctive by world standards. The remainder of this article examines the impact of these changes of ‘political architecture’ – “the complex of rules that make up the constitutional structure and party system”15 – across the Asia-Pacific. It looks first at the specifics of the electoral and party system reforms across the region before examining the extent to which these reforms can indeed be said to constitute an identifiable ‘Asian model’ of democracy.

Electoral Reform

One particularly striking reform trend in recent years has been in the area of electoral system design. Because electoral systems determine how votes cast in an election are translated into seats won in parliament, they are the central ‘rule of the game’ determining who governs. The constituent elements of any electoral system – such as the formula for translating votes into seats, the way electoral districts are drawn, the structure of the ballot, and the extent to which voting is candidate or party-centred – all exert an independent influence on the behavioural incentives facing political actors, and hence on the development of political parties and the kinds of campaign strategies and policy appeals they employ.

Despite the considerable differences in forms of government, political culture and democratic consolidation across the East Asian region, increasingly convergent reform patterns are evident, with Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Thailand all enacting similar electoral reforms over the last decade.16 A clear trend has been the increasing adoption of ‘mixed-member’ electoral systems, in which both proportional and district-based elections are run side-by-side, in parallel. Under such

15 MacIntyre, The Power of Institutions, p. 4.

systems part of the legislature is elected, usually at a national level, by proportional representation (PR), and the rest from local districts, usually by plurality rules. While mixed systems have become common around the world in the past decade, they have been a particularly popular choice in Asia’s new democracies – perhaps because they appear to combine the benefits of proportional outcomes with the accountability of district representation.\textsuperscript{17} However, in sharp contrast to similar reforms in other parts of the world, most East Asian mixed-member systems are highly majoritarian in both design and practice, leading to quite distinctive outcomes compared to other regions.

Japan is East Asia’s best-known example of electoral reform, and illustrates some of the broader concerns driving political change across the region. In 1994, after a long debate about the political impacts of its electoral arrangements, Japan replaced its existing single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system with a mixed-member model, with three-fifths of all seats chosen from single-member districts. This reform was intended to lower the value of the heavily weighted rural seats and re-orient Japanese politics away from special interests by fostering a two-party system which would be more responsive to the interests of the median voter. As the region’s only long-term democracy, Japan’s reforms thus represented a deliberate effort to change the conduct of national politics by manipulating the electoral system.

Recent reforms in Taiwan have followed a similar pattern. Taiwan first adopted a mixed system in 1992, but continued to use SNTV rules to elect most of the legislature, leading to the same problems of personalized and factionalized party politics that had plagued Japan.\textsuperscript{18} In 2002, Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian advanced a similar reform to Japan’s, proposing that two-thirds of the Taiwanese parliament be elected by plurality rules and the remainder from a national PR list, with electors having a separate vote for each. Under this new model, the parliament has been halved in size to 113 seats, two-thirds of which are elected in single-member districts, with the remaining 34 from a national PR list and 6 seats reserved for

\textsuperscript{17} For more on mixed-member systems, see Andrew Reynolds, Ben Reilly and Andrew Ellis, \textit{Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook} (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2005).

aboriginal voters. This new mixed-member model will be used for the first time at parliamentary elections scheduled for 2007, and has brought Taiwan’s electoral system design squarely into line with other East Asian democracies.  

The Republic of Korea has, until recently, represented a third approach to electoral reform in the region. Over the years, Korea has experimented with different combinations of local districts and national lists, all of them strongly majoritarian in practice. Since March 2004, of the Korean National Assembly’s 299 seats (restored after a cut to 273 seats for the 2000 elections as a cost saving response to the Asian economic crisis), 243 are elected from single-member constituencies by a plurality formula, while the remaining 56 are allocated from one national constituency by PR. Whereas previously voters received one ballot only, they now receive separate votes for the district and list seats, mirroring the Japanese and Taiwanese arrangements.

Southeast Asian two best-established democracies, the Philippines and Thailand, also adopted mixed systems in the 1990s. Under its 1987 Constitution, the Philippines was the first Asian democracy to adopt such a system, with up to 20 percent of the legislature allocated to national list seats. Uniquely, however, list seats in the Philippines are not open to established parties but are instead designed to represent “sectoral interests” and marginalized groups such as youth, labour, the urban poor, farmers, fishermen and women. First used in 1998, the party list regulations restrict each groups’ representation to a maximum of three seats. The effect of these rules appears to have been widespread confusion, and the list seats have been dogged by problems, with less than half the winning list candidates taking up their seats after the 1998 and 2001 elections. The lists seats have, however, resulted in more diversity within parliament than previously, with list MPs playing an increasingly prominent role in the media and on legislative committees.

Like the Philippines, Thailand also moved to a mixed-member system in 1997, with 400 of the parliament’s 500 seats elected from single-member districts by plurality.

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rules, and the remainder chosen by PR from a national list. While established parties can compete for these seats (in contrast to the Philippines), the effect of this reform has been the creation of two classes of Thai politicians with radically divergent career incentives. The constituency MPs represent local districts and need to bring development opportunities to them; while the list MPs are supposed to concentrate their energies on national issues and provide a wellspring of ministerial aspirants. Together with a new anti-corruption commission, constitutional court, electoral commission, ombudsman and audit offices, these measures were designed not just to combat electoral fraud, but to radically change the conduct of democratic governance in Thailand.22

All these cases of electoral reform sought to remedy perceived failings in political practices via institutional redesign. In Thailand, for instance, it was hoped that a shift to a mixed system with a majority of single-member districts would undercut the prevalence of ‘money politics’, as local candidates would not have to rely on local agents to the same extent as they had in the multi-member electorates of the past, thus reducing the impacts of vote-buying, pork-barrel politics, and corruption.23 In Japan, similarly, reformers hoped that electoral reform would foster the development of a two-party system and political competition based around policy rather than patronage.24 The reasoning in Korea and Taiwan was similar to Japan’s, but with one important addition. Regionalism is a problem in both countries, and is particularly acute in Korea, and so the party list is elected on a nationwide basis, encouraging parties to pitch their policy messages to a national audience rather than concentrate on a regional one.25 In the Philippines, by contrast, the aim was to break the stranglehold


of the existing elite families on national politics and provide more representation for marginalised groups.26

The most recent example of democratization in Asia, East Timor, also used a mixed-member system for its foundation elections in 2001. However, the East Timorese model stands apart from the region’s other mixed systems by electing most seats from the party list rather than from districts. For the August 2001 constituent assembly elections, 75 seats were elected on a nationwide basis by proportional representation, and only 13 seats (one for each district) by plurality rules. These elections were won in a landslide by the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (Fretilin) which captured 55 of the 88 Assembly seats, winning 43 of the 75 national seats and all of the available district seats. The Assembly then transformed itself into a legislature and passed a new constitution for the country, renamed Timor-Leste.

In what way do these convergent reform patterns constitute a distinctively ‘Asian’ model? First, apart from East Timor, all of East Asia’s mixed-member systems are heavily weighted in favour of the district-based, plurality element of the system. In South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines, roughly 20 percent of seats are elected from the national list. In Japan, the figure is 36 percent; in Taiwan’s new system it is 30 percent. In all cases, the bulk of seats in the legislature are chosen from local districts rather than the national list. This means that all these systems are highly majoritarian in their structure. This stands in direct contrast to the international norm, where well-known examples of mixed systems such as Germany and New Zealand feature an equal or nearly equal split between the district and list components. Asia-Pacific states have also rejected the kind of compensatory mechanisms used by these countries, in which list seats are allocated in such a way as to produce proportional outcomes overall. Rather, every East Asian mixed-member system runs the list component of elections in parallel with the district contest, but with no interchange between the two.

Asia’s mixed-member electoral systems are thus extreme examples of what Matthew Shugart and Martin Wattenberg call ‘mixed-member majoritarian’ (MMM) systems, and in practice operate much more like plurality systems than mixed systems elsewhere. The limited number of PR seats in most Asian cases compared to other regions can be explained in part by the desire of incumbents to minimize the threat of political fragmentation by restricting the electoral prospects of minor opposition parties. While smaller parties can legitimately hope to gain some representation from the list seats, overall levels of proportionality in such systems are in most cases more like those of a plurality system than a proportional one. The lack of any compensatory mechanism combined with the relatively small number of proportional seats on offer reinforces these majoritarian tendencies, benefiting large parties with a national scope.

**Political Party Reforms**

Complementing these distinctive electoral reforms, many East Asian regimes have also attempted to shape their emerging party systems. Despite their crucial role in any well-functioning democracy, political parties have traditionally been viewed as social phenomena beyond the scope of deliberate institutional engineering. In recent years, however, political reformers in a diverse array of Asia-Pacific states have sought to influence party system development by strengthening party organizations, promoting cross-regional party structures, countering the rise of ethnic parties, and encouraging the growth of cohesive party systems. While not yet the subject of much attention, these political experiments are likely to have important consequences for governance in the region.

Scholars of democracy have long considered political parties to play a crucial role not just in representing interests, aggregating preferences, and forming governments, but also in managing conflict and promoting stable politics. However, the extent to which parties can play these roles varies significantly depending on the nature of the party system. In two-party systems, for instance, parties must cultivate and maintain support across a range of social groups to win elections, and therefore need to provide broad public goods in order to maximize their chances of success. In fragmented multiparty

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systems, by contrast, parties may need only a small plurality of votes to win office, and can thus focus on providing sectoral benefits to their own supporters, rather than to the broader electorate. At an extreme, such private goods can include the fruits of nepotism, cronyism and corruption – all long-standing problems in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and a number of other Asia-Pacific states.²⁸

Empirical studies have also emphasized the benefits of ‘moderate multipartism’ for the survival of new democracies. G. Bingham Powell’s work on democratic durability suggests that the most favourable party system comprises a limited number of cohesive and broad-based parties, rather than many small, fragmented, personalized or ethnically-based parties.²⁹ Diamond, Linz and Lipset’s multi-volume comparison of democracy in developing countries concluded that “a system of two or a few parties, with broad social and ideological bases, may be conducive to stable democracy”.³⁰ In the same vein, Myron Weiner and Ergun Özbudun found that the one common factor amongst the small number of stable third world democracies was the presence of a broad-based party system, prompting them to conclude that “the success of democratic politics in developing societies is strongly associated with the presence of broadly-based, heterogeneous, catch-all parties with no strong links to the cleavage structure of society”.³¹

If we know that they are desirable, the next question is surely how such aggregative parties and party systems can be encouraged to develop. Clearly, forging cohesive party systems, particularly in societies riven by deep communal cleavages, is easier


said than done. Nonetheless, recent reforms in states such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand have attempted to strengthen parties and remodel party systems through a variety of institutional incentives and constraints. Three distinct strategies of ‘party engineering’ have emerged: those which seek to promote the development of national party systems and hamper the growth of regional, local or secessionist parties; those which attempt to control, influence or restrict the number of parties; and finally, those which try to strengthen party organizations by building stable party structures from the top down.  

The most direct means of fostering broad-based political parties with a truly nationwide policy focus is to ensure that parties themselves are elected on a national basis and draw support from different regions of the country and segments of the electorate. While this is easier said than done, an increasing number of Asia-Pacific states require parties to take account of regional, ethnic and religious balance when putting forward candidates for election. Thailand, for example, has since 1981 required registered parties to establish membership and branch networks in each of the country’s four main regions, while for the ostensibly non-party Senate elections the regions must be “equitably represented” among candidate lists. The Philippines places similar cross-national thresholds on party formation: by law, political parties must have regional offices in at least nine of the 16 regions of the country, and must gain support in more than half of the cities and provinces where their candidates run. The country that has taken the engineering of party systems the furthest, however, has been Indonesia. While only three officially sanctioned and controlled ‘national’ parties were allowed under Suharto’s New Order regime, its collapse in 1998 saw over one hundred new parties emerge in a matter of months, many with extremely limited support bases. This mushrooming of new parties provoked widespread fears that Indonesia’s emerging party system could be too fragmented, with too many

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32 The following discussion draws liberally upon Reilly, ‘Political Parties and Political Engineering’.

33 Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, Art. 99 and Electoral Law, Art. 35.

34 Christof Hartmann, Graham Hassall, and Soliman M. Santos Jr, ‘Philippines’ in Nohlen, Grotz and Hartmann, Elections in Asia and the Pacific, 195.
parties, for democracy to function effectively.\textsuperscript{35} At the same time, there were overriding concerns, particularly with the breakaway of East Timor in 1999, of secessionism in provinces such as Aceh and Papua, and the very real fear of the country breaking up under separatist pressures.

Indonesia’s political reformers therefore introduced a complex collection of incentives and restraints on party system development. All parties were required to demonstrate a national support base as a precondition for them to compete in the transitional 1999 elections by establishing branches in one-third of Indonesia’s (then) 27 provinces, as well as offices in more than half the districts or municipalities within these provinces. As King notes, “where previously the number of election contestants was stipulated by law, permitting only three, now they were limited on the basis of insufficient geographical coverage and depth of penetration of their organizations”\textsuperscript{36}

The 2004 election laws went even further: new parties had to establish branches in two-thirds of all provinces and municipalities within those provinces, while each local party unit needed at least 1,000 members (or at least one-thousandth of the population in smaller regions). In addition, parties which failed to gain more than two percent of seats in the lower house of parliament or three percent of seats in regional assemblies in 1999 had to merge with other parties to surmount these thresholds in order to contest future elections – a provision which resulted in a number of smaller parties amalgamating prior to the 2004 elections.

Similar reforms have been evident in Thailand, which has a long history of fragmented party politics leading to ineffectual coalition governments and, often, military coups. As well as the cross-regional membership requirements, new parties must also show they have at least 5,000 members within six months of being registered. The Thai authorities have taken an activist approach to the enforcement of these new laws, disallowing parties that do not meet the membership criteria.\textsuperscript{37} In Korea, similarly, local party organizations must prove they have a minimum number


\textsuperscript{37} Personal communication, Allen Hicken, 15 November 2004.
of party members in a specified number of electorates across the country, a requirement which “favours big parties above minor parties [and] also contributes to political stability by preventing extreme pluralism (that is, very small parties with limited public support) from emerging.” Such schemes thus echo the Indonesian reforms, even though they are aimed at restricting political fragmentation generally, rather than separatist parties in particular.

A third approach to party engineering in the Asia-Pacific has been to try to strengthen internal party organizations by privileging party interests within the structure of government. In both Indonesia and Thailand, for example, all lower house candidates must represent a political party, and are not permitted to stand as independents. In Indonesia, the systemic and educative role of parties is also emphasized in the new legislation governing party registration, and party leaders are given significant power in terms of candidate selection and replacement. In 1999, for the first time, public funding was also introduced. In Korea, both main parties introduced major changes to their own internal governance arrangements in 2001. American-style primary elections were initiated as the parties sought to transform themselves into more open organizations with a mass membership base. The new nomination system of open and closed party primaries had an immediate impact, with the nomination of Rho Moo Hyun, a relative outsider, as the ruling Millennium Democratic Party candidate for president. Rho’s rapid rise in popularity, particularly amongst younger voters, and his subsequent victory at the 2002 presidential elections greatly strengthened the new ‘people’s primary’ and internal party governance measures, and spurred the rival Grand National Party to announce similar reforms. Whether these changes will be sufficient to transform Korea’s weak, regionalized and personality-dominated party system into one based around truly mass parties with a national reach, however, remains to be seen.


39 King, Half-Hearted Reform, 52.

A final means of engineering party stability is to try to encourage party cohesion within parliament. Such provisions aim to strengthen parties’ internal control over their members in order to maintain greater organizational cohesiveness and stability. One way of doing this is to restrict the capacity of parliamentarians to change parties once elected. Practices of ‘party-switching’, ‘party-hopping’, or ‘turncoatism’ – once widespread in many Asian countries – have been curtailed by the introduction of anti-‘hopping’ provisions in states such as Malaysia and Thailand which make it difficult or impossible for a politician elected under one party label to switch to another party in exchange for a ministerial appointment or similar inducement. In Thailand, for example, the 1997 constitution mandates that candidates must be members of a political party for at least 90 days prior to an election – double the standard interval between the end of a parliamentary term and the election that follows. As a result, politicians who switch parties to help bring down a government usually cannot legally contest the forthcoming election.\(^4\)

**Political Stability**

Beyond changing the party system, an underlying objective of many of these attempts to engineer politics was greater ‘political stability’. There are several meanings inherent in this oft-stated objective. First, political stability is sometimes used to refer to the maintenance of formal democracy, or the avoidance of civil strife. However, this broad definition tends to muddy the conceptual waters, confusing stability with other analytically distinct phenomena such as regime type or conflict management. A more precise and more limited definition of political stability relates to the tenure and composition of executive governments.\(^2\) Under this interpretation, political and policy continuity depends significantly on the durability of cabinets. Thus, politics is more ‘stable’ when governing executives are durable in terms of both longevity and personnel; conversely, executives are ‘unstable’ if their composition alters frequently,\(^1\)


particularly if governments change between elections due to no-confidence votes, impeachment, party swaps or similar events.

One way to assess the impact of the electoral and party system reforms discussed above is therefore to examine the average duration of governments in the period before and after political reforms were enacted. In almost all cases, the longevity of executive governments has indeed improved since electoral reforms were introduced. The most striking increase in political stability occurred in Thailand, which went from an average government lifespan of just 10 months to over four years since the 1997 reforms with the rapid emergence of the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party. In the Philippines, the longevity of cabinets elected under the 1987 constitution has also improved compared to the pre-Marcos democratic period, although ‘people power’ revolutions have overthrown one elected president (Estrada) and may yet claim others.\footnote{See Carl H. Landé, ‘The Return of “People Power” in the Philippines’, \textit{Journal of Democracy} 12:2 (2001): 88-102.} In Indonesia, the longevity of each post-Suharto president has increased incrementally. Habibie’s transitional administration lasted just 17 months and initiated fundamental reforms to civil and political rights, including new electoral and decentralization laws, but lacked popular support because of his longstanding association with Suharto. His successor, Abdurrahman Wahid, the first president chosen under the new political arrangements, continued with the democratization process by forming an unstable grand coalition government before being impeached after 21 months in office. Wahid was replaced by his vice-president, Megawati Sukarnoputri, who lasted for 38 months before losing the 2004 elections to Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who appears set to become the first democratically-chosen Indonesian president to govern for a full term of office.

Attempts to engineer party systems to encourage more broad-based political parties also appear to have succeeded, although not always in the way intended. Indonesia, for example, initially experienced a sharp reduction in party numbers following the introduction of new party formation laws. While hundreds of new parties appeared in the lead-up to the 1999 elections, only six achieved any significant representation, and the Indonesian political system quickly became dominated by a few large parties. At the 2004 elections, most of these parties were able to attract a regional spread of voter
support across the archipelago – no small achievement, given Indonesia’s modern history and the dangers of acute fragmentation that it faces. As a result, while Indonesia’s parliament remained politically fragmented, a more coherent party system with broad support across the country does appear to be emerging. But party engineering entails costs as well as benefits. Indonesia’s current electoral laws greatly benefit incumbents, restricting the level of political competition and placing barriers on potential new entrants into the political marketplace. As a result, there is a real danger of overkill, especially given that plans for future elections include raising the barriers to smaller parties and new entrants even higher.

A similar conclusion applies to Thailand, where the 1997 constitutional reforms aimed at combating political instability and fractionalization contain so many incentives favouring strong parties that they may have unbalanced Thai politics. In particular, the reforms appear to have facilitated the rapid emergence of prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra and the TRT as Thailand’s dominant political players. Already in a commanding position following the 2001 elections, Thaksin initiated a series of post-election mergers and coalition deals with other parties which led to the TRT controlling 365 of the 500 parliamentary seats. As a result, it was able to legislate virtually unopposed, winning the 2005 elections by a massive margin and becoming the first government in Thailand’s democratic history to win an election outright. In a paradoxical twist, however, some of the political reforms that helped create the current moderate multi-party system, such as a strong independent electoral commission, have been rolled back.44

An Asian Model?

To what extent do these reforms collectively constitute a distinctive Asian model of electoral democracy? One means of gaining traction on this question is to look at the changes in party systems that have occurred as a result of the region’s new political architecture. With the exception of Indonesia, East Asian democracies have seen a sharp reduction in party fragmentation in recent years based on the “effective” numbers of political parties represented in parliament. Indeed, a number of East Asian polities appear to be in a process of

transformation towards embryonic two-party systems. Japan, for example, had just 2.4 effective parties after the November 2003 elections, two-thirds of the pre-reform number. For Taiwan, the current figure is 2.18 parties – prompting claims that Taiwan was “moving toward a two-party system more quickly than expected”. The most dramatic change in the party system has occurred in Thailand. From an average of 7.2 effective parties prior to 1997, the number of parties after the February 2005 elections fell to just 1.65, an outcome interpreted by some commentators as proof of Thailand’s “drift towards a two-party system”. In Korea too, the long-term trend appears to be in the direction of a consolidation around two large parties. There, effective party numbers fell to 2.36 following the 2004 election, in which the new Uri Party of embattled president Rho won a majority of seats in the assembly, while the conservative Grand National Party formed the opposition.

The main exceptions to this trend towards political consolidation are Indonesia and the Philippines – each of which experienced an increase in party numbers following the political openings that accompanied the fall of the Suharto and Marcos regimes, respectively. While both countries have attempted to promote party development and limit the enfranchisement of minorities, these have not yet changed fundamentally the nature of electoral politics. Contradictory reform incentives are also a problem, particularly in the Philippines, where numerous aspects of the electoral process – limited public funding, a candidate-centred written ballot, and caps on the party list lists – continue to undermine the broader goal of political consolidation.

These exceptions notwithstanding, the evidence of this essay thus suggests that there is indeed an emerging Asian model of democracy – one which appears to be moving closer to the aggregative and stable two-party systems of the English-speaking world. Increasingly, East Asian democracies have enshrined majority-promoting democratic institutions likely to promote centripetal electoral competition, broad-based political parties, and stable executive government. As such, the political reform wave that has swept across the region over the past decade reflects not the vague concepts of ‘Asian values’ or ‘Asian-style democracy’, but rather pragmatic efforts to build functioning...
democratic systems that can generate development and have a realistic prospect of survival.

Of course, it may be that this turn towards majoritarian politics may also herald a drift away from democratic values towards a new form of illiberal democracy – in effect, a return to Asia’s long experience with dictatorial, autocratic, monarchistic or other forms of non-democratic rule. Certainly the creeping authoritarianism of some of the region’s democratically-elected strongmen such as Thaksin in Thailand is cause for concern. But, on balance, I am more optimistic. If East Asian states can indeed transform their institutional architecture and make the transition from fragmented, personalized and unstable political systems to cohesive, programmatic and stable ones – as at least some appear to be doing – their prospects for both democracy and development will be significantly enhanced, as will their ability to manage internal conflicts. While political engineering cannot guarantee the achievement of this goal, it appears to be one means of smoothing and straightening the path.