Over the past decade, East Asian democracies have undertaken key political and institutional reforms, changes that have converged in both the shape and function of their democratic systems. Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Thailand and the Philippines have all adopted electoral systems that encourage the participation of large “aggregative” political parties, yet restrict ethnic or minority representation. As Asia’s new democracies establish presidential or semi-presidential systems, strong single-party governments are increasingly common, and some countries appear to be developing nascent two-party systems.

These institutional trends represent a new ‘Asian model’ of democracy, which has important policy consequences: such systems tend to place a premium on national stability and economic growth over other goals, such as social equality or minority participation. They also provide a powerful and potentially more acceptable model for non-democracies such as China or Burma if they choose to adopt democratic reforms. Furthermore, a pattern is developing across East Asia where governments appropriate the symbolism but not the substance of democracy: economic and political efficiency is the primary goal and is achieved at the expense of representation. In the future, scholars and practitioners alike should take note of such developments, given that different models of democracy engender different policy outcomes.

—Benjamin Reilly, July 19, 2010