POLI 423

Professor Ben Nyblade

Louise Lu

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Regional Democracy Report 2013:

Initial Thoughts on East Asia

1. Introduction

In this report I will assess the political regimes of six East Asian countries from 1990 onwards. While the entire region will be overviewed, specific attention will be paid to the countries exhibiting regime transitions within the temporal scope examined: Mongolia and Taiwan. Data from six major measures of democracy will be summarized for all countries examined, but specialized analysis of Mongolia and Taiwan will be limited to a combination of the Polity IV, Freedom House Political Rights, and Political Regime Change indices.

For the purposes of this paper, I will utilize an institutional definition of democracy comprised of two attributes: A. Competition and B. Participation. Within each of these attributes, I identify two components: A1. Regulation of political contestation, A2. Competitiveness of political participation, B1. Right to vote, and B2. Fairness of the voting process, all of which are necessary, and none of which are singularly sufficient for democracy.

1. Summary of the region

The data used in the preparation of this regional democracy report was aggregated from the following six indices: i. ACLP- Democracy and Dictatorship ii. Polity IV iii. Freedom House, iv. Coppedge and Reinecke- Polyarchy, v. Political Regime Change and vi. Vanhanen. The data from these measures specify that, for the time period examined, North Korea, China and Japan do not undergo any notable changes; South Korea experiences very minor fluctuations; and Mongolia and Taiwan undergo significant regime shifts.

A brief investigation of China and North Korea reveals unanimous agreement across all measures that both countries are non-democratic. Although North Korea’s constitution self-declares it a multi-party democracy, in practice, it is an single-party dictatorship. Leadership is restricted to the Workers’ Party of Korea by law, and absolute control is concentrated in authoritarian leader whose identity is determined via hereditary means. China shares a number of North Korea's non-democratic features; it is a nominal multi-party republic, but a de facto single-party authoritarian state. The Communist Party of China has held power since 1949, and continues to maintain unitary control over the state, military and media.

The measures unanimously place Japan at the opposite end of the political spectrum. Japan is a constitutional monarchy that exhibits all the systematic and structural characteristics of an established parliamentary democracy, i.e. a constitutional separation of powers and checks and balances. Although the Liberal Democratic Party held nearly continuous power for 54 years, the recent victory of the Democratic Party of Japan in 2009 demonstrated a peaceful alternation of power, and had no adverse effects on its scores.

Formally the Republic of Korea, South Korea receives scores that generally reflect a mid-tier quality of democracy. There are a number of minor fluctuations in its scores both within and between measures, most likely due to its comparatively recent regime transition in 1987. Regardless of these oscillations, the collective data from 1990 onwards confirms South Korea’s status as a presidential republic. Currently, five parties are represented in its legislature, with the Grand National Party holding a majority of seats.

In the cases of Mongolia and Taiwan, there is visibly greater fluidity in the scores across measures.  The data aggregated indicates that two countries both underwent regime transitions from authoritarianism to democracy within the temporal scope examined. The variations in individual scores make these two countries the most effective models for analyzing the utility of certain measures. Thus, they will be discussed separately in the subsequent section.

1. Analysis

Cases of measurement variance across the three unchanging regimes in the region, China, North Korea, and Japan, reveal a number of noteworthy patterns, both endogenous to individual measures and exogenous across different measures of the same type. For instance, all assessments of these stable regimes are identical among non-gradated measures (with the exception of a lack of data for Japan in PRC), displaying the one-dimensional character of the quality of information inherent to non-gradated measures.

The relationships found when comparing gradated measures in these stable regimes suggest that the Polity IV data is more generous at the ‘institutionalized democracy’ end of the spectrum than the ‘institutionalized autocracy’ end. While both FHPRCL and Coppedge and Reinecke give North Korea scores at the ‘least democratic’ limits of their data, a consistent 7|7 and 10|1 respectively, Polity IV maintains a consistent score of -7 for China and -9 for North Korea. Taking into account its inverse attribution of Japan with a consistent 10, the Polity IV index portrays a skewed region of East Asia that moredemocratic than it is in reality.

When looking at data aggregation techniques, the prototypal trade-off between validity and reliability surfaces. While the Vanhanen index is easily the most replicable and, thus, the most reliable, the variables utilized for competition and participation are not adequate measurements of either concept, and, thus, it has low validity. Conversely, while FH PRCL is a more valid measure, comprehensively examining 25 individual components in capturing the concepts of political rights and civil liberties, it is also one of the least reliable, due to a lack of transparency in methodology that makes FH almost impossible to replicate.

Despite its lack of replicability, essential components of the FHPR variables agree with my conceptualization of ‘democracy’ for this report, and, thus, FHPR will be used in conjunction with the Polity IV to best encapsulate the competition and participation attributes I identify. The utility behind combining Polity IV and FHPR is not demonstrable in North Korea, China and Japan, as all measures generally agree for these cases. However, in the cases of Mongolia and, to a greater extent, Taiwan, these two gradated measures convey much more information than would otherwise be possible with non-gradated measures and simultaneously work to correct each other’s systematic biases

In 1990, a regime transition from authoritarianism to democracy was initiated in Mongolia through a peaceful revolution that ousted the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party, the prevailing party since 1921. Accordingly, Polity IV and FHPR capture Mongolia as being in a state of flux throughout the early 1990’s. There is a slight discretion regarding the timing of Mongolia’s transition, as the shift in FHPR occurs between 1990 and 1991, but it occurs between 1991 and 1992 in Polity IV, owing to a difference in the time scale of data collection. To provide further clarification, the PRC dataset was examined for its month/year data; it declared Mongolia ‘democratic’ at the completion of its first election in September 1990.

The 1990 Democratic Revolution of Mongolia is a clear-cut benchmark for its establishment of a democratic regime, and the relative constancy of the Polity IV and FHPR data after the mid-90s reflects that. The same pattern of Polity IV being more generous at the ‘institutionalized democracy’ end of its scale is exhibited in Mongolia; after 1996, Polity IV maintains a 10, while FHPR maintains a 2.

Unlike Mongolia, Taiwan has no single, agreed-upon event marking its democratization. In 1979, a rapidly suppressed pro-democracy protest know as the Kaohsiung Incident united the then-incumbent government’s opposition, but it was not until 1986 that the formation of new political parties occurred. Soon after, in 1987, the repressive martial law was lifted, and, in the following year, the restrictions on newspaper registration followed suit. This succession of events culminated in the country’s first democratic election with universal suffrage in March 1996.

The temporal scope limits our analysis to the final stages of Taiwan’s democratization. Reflective of the disorder leading up to its first democratic presidential election, there were internal fluctuations within Polity IV and FHPR, as well as external discrepancies between the two measures. There is a correspondence between Polity IV and PRC; the crucial shift in Polity IV from -1 to 7 occurs between 1991 and 1992, coinciding with PRC’s denomination of Taiwan as ‘Semidemocratic’ in 1992. This is most likely explained by the December 1992 elections for the total renewal of the Legislative Yuan, Taiwan’s most important parliamentary body. From 1992 onwards, Taiwan’s Polity IV score steadily increases but its FHPR score remains in a state of perpetual instability.