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EXPLORING ASIA:

POLITICAL CHANGE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Changing Asia

By Reşat Kasaba, Director, The Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, Stanley D. Golub Chair of International Studies, University of Washington

When historians look back at the period we are living in now, there is little doubt that they will mark it as the beginning of a major shift in the global balance of power from North America toward Asia.

In recent years, China has surpassed Japan as the world's second-largest economy. India's economic growth has been among the fastest in the world. In addition to these two giants, the continent sparkles with economic success stories, including South Korea, Vietnam, Singapore and Malaysia.

When compared with the economic crisis that has crippled the European Union and the ongoing difficulties the American economy has been dealing with, the shift in the balance of power between the two hemispheres seems unstoppable.

Today, in our increasingly better-connected world, such economic success has all kinds of effects, not only on these countries themselves, but also in other places.

Some Asian countries have found a way of combining economic development with open, democratic political systems. South Korea is the best example. On the whole, such places usually have an easier time of dealing with economic change. Sometimes solutions to crises can take a long time to emerge, but in the end, political institutions come out of such periods stronger and better equipped to deal with future crises.

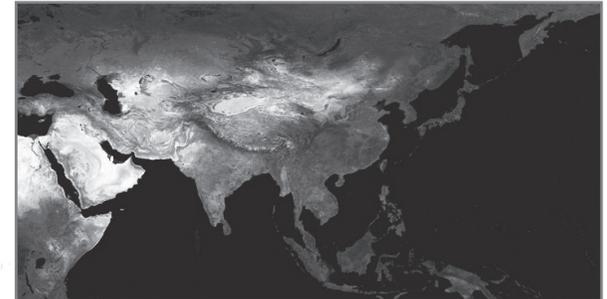
By contrast, Japan seems to have been stuck in economic and political paralysis for more than a decade. The Japanese have been attempting to find a way out of their situation by trying different political arrangements without abandoning democratic principles. Despite their long-term economic stagnation, the Japanese have been remarkably fast in recovering from the tsunami that hit their nation two years ago, thanks to the strength of their political institutions.

Countries such as South Korea also become desirable models to emulate for people in other countries who may lack economic fortunes or political liberties — or both. For example, recently a North Korean refugee remarked that he had thought North Korea was the best country to live in, until he left the country and saw for himself the opportunities that people in neighboring countries have.

Of course, advanced means of communication make it unnecessary for people to leave their homes in order to become familiar with how the rest of the world lives and what kinds of opportunities others have. When people realize the disparities between their lives and that of their peers elsewhere, they start to make demands on their rulers and put pressure on their institutions. Existing institutions do not change themselves, but when people start to push, institutions begin to give and ultimately break down, ushering in new institutions and new ways of organizing. Today, all across Asia we are starting to see the result of such changes.

For example, after being completely closed to the outside world for more than two decades, Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) took a sharp turn toward liberalizing its economic and political institutions in 2011. The change in that country in just the last year is breathtaking. Political prisoners have been released, free elections have been held, and a series of economic and political agreements with foreign states have established new ties between Myanmar and the rest of the world.

In Myanmar, the impetus for change came primarily from the top, from President Thein-Sein, who saw that his country's isolation was no longer tenable. By contrast, in India, which has a well-functioning democracy, fast economic growth inspired people from the bottom, especially the poorer and marginalized groups, to make new demands for better inclusion into society and benefit from the fruits of economic growth. In addition to organizing political movements, such groups are also making much more focused demands. For example, they ask to be counted more precisely, which would make them more visible and hence better able to share in the growing wealth of the country.



For the time being, the former Soviet republics in Central Asia are having difficulty keeping up with other Asian

neighbors, both economically and politically. Some of the most authoritarian regimes and closed societies in Asia are in this region. There are, however, signs of political mobilization in these countries as their economic ties with the rest of the world continue to grow. We are likely to see major changes here as well.

The big puzzle in terms of Asia's future continues to be China. With its spectacular growth in the last two decades, China has set the pace not only in Asia, but in the world economy at large. So far, Chinese leaders have taken the path of creating and spreading wealth among the population in return for their political submission. Can this continue?

China's new leaders selected during the 18th Chinese Communist Party Congress in November 2012 face the difficult task of managing economic growth while continuing to suppress dissent in a world in turmoil. This is fast becoming a tall order. It is highly likely that maintaining the high growth rates of the past 10 years in China will be next to impossible. How people will react to an environment of diminishing opportunities and material benefits is hard to predict.

We are on the threshold of an era of change in the world and in Asia — an era full of unknowns and uncertainties. Such periods, however, provide an excellent opportunity to concentrate on the dynamics of change, to look for ways of understanding, and to prepare for a future that is bound to surprise us.



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