

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

Why Democracies Implement Better Climate Actions: Case Study of India, the Philippines, and Japan

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※ This issue briefing has been published as a sequel to the ADRN-International IDEA Joint Online Seminar, titled "Climate Change and Democracy." **Joo-Cheong Tham** (Professor, Melbourne Law School) spoke about the major findings of the recently-published "Climate Change and Democracy: Insights from Asia and the Pacific" report by the International IDEA, while **Niranjan Sahoo** (Senior Fellow, Observer Research Foundation), **Marlea P. Munez** (President, Women's Initiatives for Society, Culture, and Environment), and **Tsuji Yuichiro** (Professor, Meiji University) presented their respective country cases. For more details of the event, please follow this [link](#).

Asia is the most populous and one of the most climate-vulnerable regions in the world. Long coastline, vast low lying areas comprising many small island nations make it highly susceptible to climate change such as rising sea level and extreme weather events like floods, landslides. For many critics, democracies' response to climate change is much impeded due to their slow decision-making process and short-termism governed by electoral compulsions. Some analysts go as far as to claim that authoritarianism is needed to tackle the crisis more effectively.

However, close examination of different governance system's climate actions strongly supports that democracies are inherently better at handling climate crisis compared to authoritarian regimes. This article explores the multifaceted impact of climate change to democracy and delves into the case studies of India, the Philippines, and Japan to identify strengths as well as areas of improvement that democracies should consider to establish meaningful climate actions.

Climate Change: A Risk and an Opportunity for Democracy

Climate change not only threatens natural systems and the human ecosystem but also undermines the very fabric of democracy. The perils it poses to democratic societies encompass food insecurity, deepening inequality, societal instability, the erosion of democratic values, and threats to the integrity of free and fair elections. The prevalence of short-term thinking, the capture of policies by vested interests, self-referential decision-making, and the weakening of multilateralism all hinder the concerted and efficient efforts required to address the urgent climate crisis at hand.

Nevertheless, research proves that *democracy centrally matters* in addressing climate change (Tham et al. 2023). Democratic governance plays a pivotal role in shaping climate action and

responding to the threats that arise from climate crisis to democratic framework. However, the following circumstances also matter: the level of climate vulnerability; the extent of state capacity and resources; the dependence on international funding; and the structure of the economy, specifically the significance of climate-vulnerable industries and fossil fuel industries.

There are both threats to and from the state regarding the implementation of efficient climate actions. Threats *to* the state manifest as conflicts arising from escalating food and land scarcity, while threats *from* the state stem from top-down decision-making processes. As extreme weather events like floods, droughts, and bushfires become increasingly prevalent, the climate crisis is inevitably rising to the top of the political agenda. Politics will have to grapple with these calamities, leading to an amplified role for the government in managing these emergencies.

The extreme danger that climate change poses to democracy also includes opportunities to improve the quality of democracy. It includes the “democratic planning state,” which stipulates that states can plan for the future in a democratic way (Tham et al. 2023, 27). Additionally, fostering an ethos of solidarity that embraces broad inclusivity and intergenerational collaboration, encompassing solidarity between nature and humans, is essential. Revitalized multilateralism and the promotion of fair and inclusive politics, ensuring a just transition, are also of utmost importance.

In the context where the deep nexus between democratic actors and vested interest groups has been somewhat neglected, there should be more innovations in the democratic planning state. Additionally, policy recommendations encompass revitalizing multilateralism, drawing valuable insights from communities most vulnerable to climate change, and establishing effective democratic mechanisms as the basis for international funding allocation. These measures will enable a path toward more inclusive, accountable, and effective democratic responses to the climate challenges.

Case Study #1: India

Climate change debates are increasingly taking the center stage in India’s policy circles. This is largely because of India’s growing vulnerabilities to climate change events. The world’s largest democracy faces most acute challenges from the vagaries of climate change. There are climate refugees and migrants without economic support to sustain their lives.

While the Indian Constitution has evolved to cover issues relating to environmental protection and sustainable development, comprehensive action against the climate crisis is still hindered due to an absence of overarching national institution and national legislation specifically dealing with the challenges of climate change.

At the federal level, India’s Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change is the most central organization that mobilizes national response and coordinates statutory bodies on the environment. However, its climate response continues to remain centralized and top-down under successive governments at the centre. A noteworthy feature of India’s climate response is that the higher judiciary has been particularly acclaimed for taking hundreds of litigations and cases that shaped the cumulative national response to climate change and environmental protection.

Meanwhile, real actions have also been taking place at the sub-national level. State governments have been building regional partnerships, investing in climate mitigation strategies, and launching green initiatives. Meanwhile, at the local level, the governing bodies are increasingly instituting climate-friendly policies and civil societies are putting great effort into bringing climate change

initiatives to the mainstream. Numerous activists have been at the forefront of innovative environmental movements, and many pioneering civil society organizations are carrying out advocacy work to reframe global debate on climate change.

The major challenges to India's democracy are political short-termism that is exacerbated by hesitancy and incrementalism, competitive populism, and low state capacity. In particular, India's competitive federal structure means the sub-national governments and adversarial politics block a coherent national response. Furthermore, under-funding and limited empowerment of vital institutions mean many of India's areas that are fragile to climate change risks remain extremely vulnerable to frequent climate disasters.

Nevertheless, there is still hope that India's democracy will be able to respond to climate change. India's democratic institutions are paying closer attention to climate threats and they are increasingly becoming key electoral issues. Deliberative aspects of democracy led to the National Action Plan of Climate Change (NAPCC) in 2008. India has also expanded its reliance on renewable energy since COP 21 and increasing multilateral efforts such as the Solar Alliance in 2015 and the 2020 Roadmap that is in collaboration with the U.K.

Case study #2: The Philippines

In the Philippines, the discourse surrounding climate change and democracy revolves around the role of natural resources. During the martial law period, there was widespread exploitation of these resources, resulting in significant degradation and a decline in productivity in many regions. The post-martial law era witnessed a concerted effort to democratize access to and management of natural resources.

Climate governance in the Philippines traces its origin back to the implementation of the Bill of Rights, which upholds the rights to life and rights to equal protection under the law. Furthermore, the Constitution recognizes the economic, social, and cultural rights of indigenous cultural communities. The Indigenous Peoples' Act establishes democratic principles that grant them rights to their lands and outlines procedures for land management.

To effectively address climate change, the Philippine government has established a structured approach. The Climate Change Action was reformed to the Task Force on Climate Change, and the Climate Change Commission has been positioned directly under the Office of the President, highlighting its significance. Additionally, a dedicated group was created to focus on adaptation and mitigation efforts. At the national level, the Philippines embraces participatory approaches to planning, involving government bodies, NGOs, and diverse communities in the consultation process for national frameworks and strategies. This inclusive approach ensures that different perspectives are considered in the pursuit of effective climate governance.

However, the performance of democracy in the Philippines has been disappointing. For democracy to work, concrete sets of actions that address the country's specific vulnerabilities are required. The paramount importance lies in crafting rules and laws that are practical and yield tangible results, rather than simply aiming for widespread community consensus. The key is to actively encourage all stakeholders to participate in the implementation of climate actions, as their engagement is vital to achieving meaningful progress.

When considering the ongoing debate between authoritarianism and democracy in effectively addressing the climate crisis, democracies continue to hold an advantage. The democratic framework enables greater public participation, fostering transparency and accountability by allowing individuals to demand due diligence. Democracy also nurtures an environment conducive to innovation and diversity, facilitating the development of novel approaches to combat the climate crisis. Furthermore, democracy upholds the principles of respect for others and recognizes the rights of indigenous peoples.

Case Study #3: Japan

Japan's energy self-sufficiency is low as Japan relies on fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and LNG that are imported from overseas. In fact, Japan is dependent on other countries for nearly 85% of its energy resources. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has further affected Japan's energy policy. Japan aims to increase the usage of power generation methods such as renewable energy and nuclear power to 59% in 2030. This will increase the energy self-sufficiency ratio to 30% by 2030.

One obstacle for Japan's implementation of climate actions is that the government's policy process has been heavily influenced by interest groups such as the Japan Business Federation (Keidanren). Keidanren, in particular, has a significant impact on Japan's political processes and supports policies that maintain thermal power plants. This is an obstacle to democracy as interest groups exerting strong influences on the government can impact policy decisions. If a powerful interest group comes into play, the representatives in parliament will lean toward satisfying its needs over all else.

Another significant challenge for Japan's democracy lies in the lack of sufficient public discourse regarding the public's willingness to bear the risks associated with government policies. In a democracy, "popular sovereignty" implies that the public assumes the risks resulting from their choices, while the government bears the responsibility of explaining policy decisions. Unfortunately, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party of Japan has shown reluctance in being held accountable for policies that directly impact the lives of the public, and has failed to engage the entire nation in comprehensive deliberative discussions.

Japan maintains government accountability through parliamentary politics, where the government elucidates its fundamental national policies and each faction has the chance to pose "representative" questions to the prime minister or ministers. However, in practice, opposition parties sometimes fail to effectively engage in demanding explanations from the government regarding the risks associated with energy policies. In essence, it is imperative that Japan's energy policy becomes a subject of public concern, which can subsequently foster greater government accountability in addressing potential future risks.

Conclusion

In short, it is evident that democratic societies face challenges in effectively responding to the escalating threats of climate change. However, the presence of short-termism driven by competitive

party politics, cumbersome and sluggish decision-making processes, and the intertwining of business interests with politics are impeding the adoption of bold and timely policy responses from key democratic nations in Asia.

Despite the flaws in their responses, it is still reasonable to conclude that democracies, with their inherent openness and robust systems of checks and accountability, are significantly better equipped than authoritarian regimes to address the intricate challenges posed by climate change. The authoritarian system lacks the necessary safeguards against abuse and often conceals key decision-making processes. It is crucial to recognize that climate change is an inter-generational and moral problem. Its holistic nature necessitates a comprehensive approach, making democracy naturally more suitable to effectively tackle these issues. ■

Reference

Tham, Joo-Cheong et al. 2023. "Climate Change and Democracy: Insights from Asia and the Pacific." *International IDEA*. June: 1-239. <https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2023.25>.

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