

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

Historical Background and Current State of the Grassroots Democracy: Case Study of Four Asian Regions

Sri Nuryanti (National Research and Innovation Agency)
Hansu Park (East Asia Institute)

※ This issue briefing has been published as a sequel to the ADRN Online Seminar titled “How Grassroot Democracy Contributes to Make Democracy Works.” **Sam Yip** (Former Hong Kong District Councilor; Spokesperson of the Japan-Hong Kong Democracy Alliance), **Irine Hiraswari Gayatri** (PhD Candidate at Monash University Gender, Peace and Security Centre; Senior Researcher at BRIN), **Khine Win** (Executive Director, Sandhi Governance Institute), and **Mardi Mapa-Suplido** (Chairperson, INCITEGov) presented their respective country cases. For more details of the event, please follow this [link](#).

Democracy’s authority and legitimacy relies on people’s participation. In modern democracies, representatives elected by the people are the main actors in political processes, as society has been more complex and policies have become increasingly specialized. Nevertheless, people’s direct participation is an essential part of democratic governance, especially at the local level. This direct democracy includes referendums, recalls, petitions, as well as participatory planning and budgeting. Moreover, active approaches such as mobilizing civil society organizations (CSOs) or protesting can be considered “grassroots democracy.” The word “grassroots” is mostly used as a metaphor for ‘sub-national level’ or ‘marginalized sectors,’ but citizens’ direct and collective actions for bringing about political change and improving democracy are not confined to a certain region or group.

Citizens in several Asian countries have struggled to resist against authoritarian regimes and establish democratic constitutions and governments. Movements against dictatorship, military regimes, or the suppression of fundamental rights are still ongoing in some regions. In addition, people under democratic regimes continue spontaneous actions to oversee officials, ensure and solidify civil rights, and push politicians to implement policies and budgets in favor of citizens’ common interests. This article will cover cases from four Asian countries, demonstrating how grassroots democracy efforts have incited more democratic and participatory regimes.

Case Study #1: Hong Kong

2014 Hong Kong protests emerged to resist Beijing’s decision to change the electoral system for electing the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. Protesters were concerned that the Chinese Communist Party might pre-screen the candidates to be more cooperative with Beijing. In a political movement called the “Umbrella Movement,” the protestors used umbrellas

to defend against sprinklers and pepper gas from the police. This movement took place in three main regions in Hong Kong: Admiralty, Mong Kok, and Causeway.

One of the key points, and later reason for contention, of the Umbrella Movement is that it was a grassroots movement with an organized, internal hierarchy. Student groups led the overall movement. Other leading groups, led by scholars and activists, organized the “Occupy Central” movement, aiming for civil disobedience through a sit-in protest. Participants from self-organized groups provided barricades and supply bases for the protestors. In this hierarchical structure, participants acted mostly within their roles. However, there were conflicts between the leaders and self-organized participants, as only the latter had the manpower and resources for the movement. This conflict is one of the reasons that the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (ELAB) Movement in 2019 was considered a leaderless movement.

During the Anti-ELAB Movement in 2019, the Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF) organized most assemblies and peaceful rallies, but its decisions were not extended to participants in the front lines of protests. A volunteer group gathered information regarding police movement from the participants and created a real-time map visualization to help participants decide whether to move forward or retreat.

In 2020, COVID-19 restrictions and the enactment of the National Security Law (NSL) caused complications with the democracy movement in Hong Kong. The NSL stipulates that those convicted of sedition to disunite or overthrow the nation can be punished with a three-year sentence. Its enactment led to over 200,000 citizens leaving Hong Kong. Diaspora groups headed to Europe, the United States, Canada, Taiwan, and Japan. They established organizations for protest and policy advocacy.

In terms of the global context, Hong Kong democratic movement activists are seeking international solidarity and support. For example, cooperation with regions such as Taiwan, Uyghur, and Tibet, which have been suppressed by the CCP, could provoke worldwide concern. Moreover, activists have built networks with citizens in Thailand and Myanmar struggling for human rights and democracy, commonly known as the “Milk-Tea Alliance.” Hong Kong citizens who moved to Japan established the “Japan-Hong Kong Democracy Alliance” and have tried to direct the Japanese people’s attention to Hong Kong. Considering the lack of attention to political issues in Japan, the Alliance employs “Art Activism” and expresses their message through art. For example, martial artist and actor Bruce Lee became an artistic symbol of the Hong Kong democratic movement. His quote “Be water” served as a slogan for protestors, implying that the protestors ought to be as ‘voluntary and flexible’ as the flow of water.

Hong Kong’s case demonstrates that despite brutal suppression, citizens’ movement can find avenues for international solidarity. Beyond spoken solidarity, the crucial next step is to connect worldwide attention and support to practical actions, such as sanctions or trade restrictions against the authoritarian regime.

Case Study #2: Indonesia

In 1998, Indonesian people protested President Suharto’s despotic government. The protests, primarily led by students, resulted in the collapse of the regime. However, this movement was contextualized by complex political and economic dynamics. In the late 1990s, several Asian

countries suffered from the financial crisis, including Indonesia. Indonesia's economic crisis peaked from mid-1997 to 1998, contributing to impending unrest.

The military regime under Suharto had ruled for 30 years, but it ultimately failed to prevent or deal responsibly with the economic crisis. Students pointed out the government's lack of action and responsibility and responded with protests in major cities. Successive demonstrations in Yogyakarta and Jakarta from May 8 to 9, 1998, resulted in fatalities and therefore increased tensions between the students and the military. On May 12, four students were killed, and eighteen students were injured during the peaceful demonstration at Trisakti University in Jakarta. This incident was later referred to as the "Trisakti Tragedy."

The memorial ceremony the following morning quickly escalated into riots in Jakarta and the surrounding cities. Nationally, peaceful demonstrations continued during this time. Suharto announced he would not run for the next elections but refused to resign immediately. Citizens countered with a massive nationwide protest and students held a sit-in strike at the Jakarta Parliament building. Consequently, Suharto announced his resignation from the presidency on May 21. Students' active participation and sacrifice at the forefront were crucial to the downfall of the authoritarian regime, but their role extended beyond a specific moment in 1997-98. In fact, students have struggled for democracy against the military regime for nearly three decades.

Major political reforms in 1998 established a democratic order in contemporary Indonesian society, institutionalizing the political process of the parliamentary system and discovering future democratic leaders. After democratization, Indonesia emerged as a regional leader in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific region, promoting political freedom and increasing economic prosperity. However, government institutions face challenges in controlling corruption and safeguarding civil rights. Therefore, grassroots democratic movements in Indonesia have been focusing their efforts on confronting corruption and protecting civil rights. CSOs have been involved in various programs aiming to reduce poverty, encourage government accountability, and build democratic resilience, which students are also participating. For example, there have been collective actions pushing for the establishment of the Human Rights Commission and the formulation of human rights norms, along with the enhancement of human rights information systems for more practical policies. Additionally, there have been initiatives to support minority groups such as women, disabled, and Indigenous communities to encourage and increase their influence in the decision-making process.

Thus, Indonesia's grassroots democracy movements have transformed into more organized, specialized, and continuous movements with program-based approaches in the last few decades. Simultaneously, each sector of grassroots democracy seeks inter-sectoral cooperation, as their agendas are linked under aspirations of democracy and human rights.

Case Study #3: Myanmar

Myanmar's modern history is filled with the darkness of military dictatorship and persistent efforts from civil society to restore democracy. Since Ne Win staged a coup and seized power in 1962, citizens have continued their resistance through strikes and uprisings. The Saffron Revolution in 2007 and the Spring Revolution in 2021 can be understood from this historical perspective.

People's aversion to military rule and struggle to live full and free lives triggered multiple protests throughout Myanmar's modern history. In the case of the Saffron Revolution, the

government's decision to increase the price of petroleum directly sparked a nationwide uprising. When monks protested in Pakokku, a town in northern Myanmar, and were arrested in conflicts with the military, the monks displayed their social influence. As most of the populations are Buddhists, monks showed their willingness to act and led the movement.

Following the military coup in 2021, young people, mostly associated with student unions, initiated protests through a Civil Disobedience Movement against the military junta. However, during this period, protestors recognized the limitations of nonviolent actions through civil disobedience and thus organized the people's defense forces (PDF) to combat the military. However, there is more to strategy evolution than just using armament. Protest movements extended from major cities to rural parts of Myanmar and even gained traction online. The junta's intense surveillance and punishment against resisters made consistent protests difficult. However, digital platforms have provided useful venues to reveal the true situations of people and garner their online solidarity.

Citizens in pursuit of democracy in Myanmar continue the hard fight against the military's crackdown. The annual report of the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM) published in August 2023 presents evidence of serious war crimes committed against the people of Myanmar by the junta, including indiscriminate attacks and mass executions.¹ Millions of people have fled Myanmar, mostly seeking refuge in Thailand. Those who successfully escaped the military regime are trying to draw global attention and gather advocacy groups to the situation in Myanmar. However, considerable global public attention has shifted to Ukraine or other countries facing democratic crises. The current situation surrounding Myanmar requires domestic momentum and international solidarity in order to press the military regime to restore democracy.

Case Study #4: The Philippines

The Philippines has a history of civil disobedience against authoritarianism. A series of democratic movements resisting election fraud, commonly known as the "EDSA Revolution" or "People Power Revolution," led to the resignation of then-dictator Ferdinand E. Marcos in 1986. The democratic movements in the Philippines were part of the wave of democratization in other parts of Asia such as Taiwan and South Korea.

Following democratization, a new Philippine Constitution implemented in 1987 emphasizes the importance of participatory civil society in promoting democratic governance. In response, NGO workers continue pushing for collaboration with the government to call for political reforms. Activists seek to establish institutions that open access for marginalized communities to participate in decision-making processes.

President Duterte's tenure from 2016 to 2022 was a challenging period for activists and their efforts. They had to contend not only with strong leadership but also with public fascination towards it. This provided CSOs with an opportunity to recognize the significance of social media marketing and network expansion to influence people's political opinions. During this period, a democracy watchdog organization called *Tindig Pilipinas* ("Stand up Philippines") and women's groups exposed human rights violations and the erosion of the rule of law under Duterte's regime.

¹ United Nations. 2023. "Press Release: War crimes by Myanmar military are more frequent and brazen – Myanmar Mechanism Annual Report." August 8. <https://iimm.un.org/press-release-war-crimes-by-myanmar-military-are-more-frequent-and-brazen-myanmar-mechanism-annual-report/> (Accessed August 18, 2023)

Throughout the concurrent national and local elections period in 2022, the minority and underrepresented groups united to encourage people's meaningful participation in the elections. They fostered active participation in political elections, candidates' forums, electoral watchdog groups, and so forth. These groups included Bangsamoro, an autonomous region with a Muslim majority located on Mindanao Island, as well as youth, women, urban poor, young professionals, development NGOs, and overseas Filipinos.

Despite their efforts to establish more democratic governance, they faced setbacks and the authoritative rule continued under President Bongbong Marcos. Along with the continuation of an oppressive government, civil society is facing disinformation and emerging trends in social media as the new battlefronts of democracy. In these circumstances, CSOs strive to enhance their ability to open spaces for citizens to empower themselves as a political force.

Conclusion

The cases of these four Asian countries suggest several principles for enhancing grassroots democracy in the region. Social media, one of the new battlefronts between democracy and counterpressure, has the potential to be used to promote citizens' participation. It has served as a means of communication to organize protesters, such as a real-time mapping in Hong Kong with police action information and G-Talk messenger used among Myanmar's protest leaders to spread information and rendezvous for protests. Furthermore, it is possible for citizens worldwide to express their support and advocacy for democratic movements via social media. The Milk Tea Alliance shows a new way to build solidarity that originated online.

Effective resistance against anti-democratic powers must include more than just actions at the grassroots level. Grassroots movements can create impacts during the critical junctures and lead to political change. However, many fail to bring sustainable change since they are essentially temporal mobilization. Grassroots movements need representing CSOs and other forms of institutional backups such as media support to reflect their demands to policies. CSOs in Indonesia and the Philippines, which intervene in policy-making processes and elections, demonstrate that grassroots democracy may and ought to evolve into institutionalized actions for the efficacy and sustainability of the movement.

On a global level, solidarity is not only a matter of individual citizens' efforts but also requires pro-democracy governments' cooperation. ASEAN merely took symbolic actions, like banning Myanmar from meetings and stood by meekly. Following the military coup in Myanmar, Japan and South Korea had joined the western democracies in sanctioning the military junta. But, pro-democracy governments have failed so far to push the military to restore democracy. Civil societies of pro-democracy countries should press their government to act firmly against the violation of human rights in Myanmar. Every grassroots struggle for democratization should matter to both pro-democracy governments and global civil society. ■

- **Dr. Sri Nuryanti** is an acting Director of Regional Research and Innovation Policy, The Indonesian National Research and Innovation Agency. She is former Election Commissioner of the Indonesian General Election Commission 2007-2012 whom which successfully conducting the Parliamentary election and Presidential Election 2009, as well as local elections 2007-2012. She is actively participating in various academic activities at national level as well as in international level. She currently serves as Secretary General of APPRA (Asia Pacific Peace Research Association) and executive council member of IPRA (International Peace Research Association).
- **Hansu Park** is a Research Associate at the East Asia Institute.

The East Asia Institute takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the Korean government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

This program was funded in part by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

“Historical Background and Current State of the Grassroots Democracy: Case Study of Four Asian Regions”

979-11-6617-646-3 95340

Date of Issue: 30 August 2023

Typeset by Sandi Khine and Hansu Park

For inquiries:

Hansu Park, Research Associate

Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 204) hspark@eai.or.kr

The East Asia Institute

1, Sajik-ro 7-gil, Jongno-gu, Seoul 03028, Republic of Korea

Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1684

Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr