



[ADRN Online Seminar] Democracy Cooperation Series 13: Political Polarization in Asia

Political Polarization in Asia and Its Impact on Democracy

East Asia Institute (EAI)

I. Overview

Political polarization simplifies politics by presenting either-or-choices to the public. It usually has a detrimental impact on democracy as it divides the electorate into two mutually mistrustful camps. Political polarization occurs at both the elite and mass levels; in particular, political elites including the government and party leaders use polarization as a strategy to concentrate their power. With this in mind, EAI hosted an ADRN online seminar and invited panelists from four Asian countries to discuss political polarization and the ways in which it erodes democratic processes in their respective countries.

II. Keynote Speech

Pernicious Polarization: A Global Threat to Democracy

“Polarization is destructive in that it can deepen the binary division of a society”

Pernicious polarization simplifies politics into a zero-sum game. It forces moderates to drop out and depicts the opposite political orientation as existential threats. Pernicious polarization is different from political polarization in that it causes identity bias. This affects societal relationships, which leads to increased stereotyping and decreased communication. Political entrepreneurs use this form of polarization to widen existing social cleavages and gain power, building up reactionary measures that eventually push the population into a downward spiral of obstructionism. Evidently, there is a negative correlation between liberal democratic ideals and political polarization—less polarization enables liberal democracies to flourish.

III. Case Studies: South Korea, Philippines, India, Thailand

South Korea

“South Korea is on the Starting Point of so-called Pernicious Polarization”

A comparison of the 2012 and 2022 presidential election data shows that there have been temporal changes in the cleavage structures of political polarization. In 2012, there were four main cleavage structures: ideological cleavage, regional cleavage, generational cleavage, and occupational cleavage.



The most important and critical one was ideological cleavage; the progressives were strongly aligned with the left party, and the conservatives were strongly aligned with the right party. At the same time, regional cleavage was considerable as well. Voters in Gwangju, Jeollabuk-do, and Jeollanam-do were cloned to the right, while those in Daegu and Gyeongsangbuk-do were cloned to the left. Regarding the generational cleavage, voters under thirty were tilted towards the left, and over sixty to the right. Lastly, among the four different types of cleavages, occupational cleavage had the least correlation with voter characteristics; while student had a preference for the left wing, workers in the agricultural, forestry, and fisheries preferred the right. In 2022, there was clearer correlation between ideological cleavage and voter behavior. The correlation with regional cleavage remained salient; that with generational cleavage weakened. There was no correlation between voter behavior and occupational cleavage in the 2022 presidential elections.

Political polarization can be analyzed from three different dimensions: ideological polarization, programmatic polarization, and affective polarization. Ideological polarization represents general ideology; left or right. Programmatic polarization represents the level of policy differentiation. In South Korea, specifically, voters' perception on engagement policies toward North Korea is one of the most important policy issues. Affective polarization measures the degree to which voters favor a particular party. In 2012, ideological polarization was salient, while programmatic polarization was not a big issue. At the same time, there was a somewhat high degree of affective polarization. In 2022, all three types of polarization were noticeable.

The Political polarization Index of South Korea was 2.69 in 2021, ranked 11th among 38 OECD countries. This was moderately higher than the median value (2.07) of OECD countries. According to the findings from 2022 presidential election, South Korea is possibly on the verge of pernicious polarization, which could be pose a grave challenge for democracy.

Philippines

“Amongst Weak Political Parties, Populist Leader Duterte Arises”

The cleavage structure of political polarization in Philippines was shaped by the rise of authoritarian populism with the election of president Rodrigo Duterte in 2016. This populist campaign strategy elaborates mass media and social media, and thereby allowed Duterte to appeal to the public over the heads of the country's powerful political clans. In the months before the election, Duterte began his campaign on drug-related crimes. He projected that drug-related crimes were severe, regardless of data that the Philippines is one of the countries that are not highly affected by the use of drugs. Under 2% of population is merely affected by such issues. However, following his inauguration, Duterte initiated the “war on drugs” to keep his promise. This was criticized for violating human rights and engaging in extrajudicial killings. Opponents of the drug war were punished. To name a few, senators were jailed, the chief of the Supreme Court was removed from office, and the commission on human rights was threatened with a serial of budget allocation.

The government's inability to tolerate the situation worsened the quality of political debate and discussion. Political discourse remained heavily limited on the binary division between “Us vs. Them” instead of engaging in fruitful debates. Misinformation and conspiracy theories spread amid democratic erosion and the systematic disruption of information channels. Social media propagated fake news. States and private actors manipulated information to utilize votes, and create fake accounts, social media and influencers.



Ideological differences do not play a huge role in social/economical cleavages in Philippines, unlike other highly polarized countries. This is because of its weak political party system. To elaborate, the absence of a strong opposition political party in the Philippines pushed politicians from other parties to transfer to the ruling party. While Duterte had prominent domestic critics, there were no persistent anti-Duterte factions. Therefore, Duterte managed to maintain high popularity ratings even during his last month in his office.

India

“Religion Based Polarization with Populist Leader”

Polarization has been a persistent phenomenon in India, whether based on caste, region, language, religion, and etc. One of the definite features of polarization revolves around ‘national identity,’ which provides a vision for the ‘idea of India’ (secular, pluralist vs. Hindu Rashtra).

Polarization in India has led to six consequences. Firstly, it shifted national discourse and narrowed political space. Secondly, it bred the culture of intolerance. The culture of hatred, vigilantism, and impunity became more prominent and has created ground for a frenzied atmosphere. This caused the rule of law to collapse, leading to more hate crimes. Thirdly, identity politics was fortified in India. Parties utilize religion and caste cards to garner votes, resulting in a higher number of crimes based on identity stereotyping. The fourth consequence is an all-out legacy war, which triggers resentment and triggers attacks on each other’s symbols and heroes. The fifth consequence is the politicization of national security. Terrorism is often framed as political attacks. The last consequence is the rise of majoritarianism. Marginalization and weaker political representation of minorities have made minorities prone to stereotypes, stigmatization, and demonization. Such consequences have shattered trust and inter-community relations within India.

To reduce polarization in India, several efforts have been taken. To restrain the hate speech by the ruling party, judicial interventions were held. The civil society has been active in holding protests and campaigns.

Thailand

“Thailand is a tough, representative case for the interplay between polarization and autocratization.”

At the heart of Thailand’s polarization lies the sharp division between supporters of two political orders — royal nationalism and democracy. The two camps persistently dispute over the notions of sovereignty. Royal nationalism, which underpins Thailand’s political and ideological establishment associate sovereignty with the monarchy. This position has historically been contested by the democrats who argue that sovereignty should belong to people. For royal nationalists, the monarchy is the basis of the Thai nation and tradition, whereas the democrats espouse egalitarian values.

Historical spot lines between two camps have developed in three phases. The first occurred during the incomplete transition of the regime in 1932 when the democrats emerged to challenge the royal nationalist order. However, this democratic revolution was later unraveled. The second phase lasted from the 1960s to the 1980s when the royal military consolidated royal nationalism in the face of democratization and communist challenges. The third and recent phase of this ideological struggle



emerged in the early 2000s in light of globalization and modernization. The latest political conflicts played out both in institutional politics and on the streets; supporters of each camp contest that the legitimacy of governments representing the opposing camp. Actors within the democratic camp consist of anti-establishment politicians who have been empowered in the 1990s.

Public reception of these divisive narratives also fluctuated over time, especially depending on how the people perceive the legitimacy of the monarchy. Royalist elites used their image to mobilize support of its political cause. However, things have changed in 2020. For example, during the protests held four years after the late king passed away, protesters critical of the royal institution somehow gained some traction in 2020. This is manifest of how public opinion has changed in Thailand. While there was some pushback from royal supporters and harsh repression from the government, there was some change in public legitimacy towards the monarchy. Generation C, comprised of high school and university students, has been at the forefront of the struggle against the establishment. In this light, polarization in Thailand today is identified with the generational cleavage. ■



IV. Speakers and Moderators Biographies

- **Jung Kim** is an associate professor of political science at University of North Korean Studies (UNKS). Currently, he is a visiting professor at Graduate School of International Studies and Underwood International College of Yonsei University, a regional coordinator of Asia Democracy Research Network, a research member of Social Science Korea Research, “Quality of Government and Varieties of Governance,” an editorial committee member of Asian Perspective and Tamkang Journal of International Affairs, and a policy advisory committee member of Republic of Korea’s Ministry of National Defense and Defense Intelligence Agency. He earned his undergraduate degree in political science from Korea University and graduated from Yale University with his doctoral degree in political science. He has published numerous articles in academic journals, including Asian Perspective, Asian Survey, and Journal of International and Area Studies, and edited volumes, including Adapt, Fragment, Transform: Corporate Restructuring and System Reform in South Korea and Routledge Handbook of Democratization in East Asia.
- **Sook Jong Lee** is a Professor of Public Administration at Sungkyunkwan University and Senior Fellow of the East Asia Institute. She has been directing the Asian Democracy Research Network since its formation in 2015, leading a network of about nineteen research organizations across Asia to promote democracy with the support of the National Endowment for Democracy. Her recent publications include *Populism in Asian Democracies: Features, Structures, and Impacts* (eds. 2021), *National Identity of South Koreans: Trends of the Past 15 Years* (eds. 2020), *Collaborative Governance in East Asia: Evolution Towards Multi-stakeholder Partnerships* (eds. 2020), *Transforming Global Governance with Middle Power Diplomacy: South Korea's Role in the 21st Century* (ed. 2016), and *Keys to Successful Presidency in South Korea* (ed. 2013 and 2016).
- **Francisco A. Magno** teaches Political Science and Development Studies at De La Salle University (DLSU). He is the Founding Director of the DLSU Jesse M. Robredo Institute of Governance. He served as the President of the Philippine Political Science Association from 2015 to 2017. He finished his PhD in Political Science at the University of Hawaii.
- **Jennifer McCoy**, PhD, is a political science professor at Georgia State University and nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. During spring 2022 she is a visiting fellow at Central European University’s Democracy Institute in Budapest and at Koc University in Istanbul. A specialist on democratization and polarization, mediation and conflict prevention, election processes and election observation, and Latin American politics, Dr. McCoy has authored or edited six books and dozens of articles. Her latest volume is *Polarizing Politics: A Global Threat to Democracy*, co-edited with Murat Somer (2019). She teaches courses on democratic erosion, comparative democratization, international norms, and Latin American politics.



- **Niranjan Sahoo** PhD is a Senior Fellow with Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi. He leads ORF's work on political institutions, democracy and campaign finance reform.
- **Janjira Sombatpoonsiri** is a research-oriented assistant professor at the Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, and an associate at the German Institute for Global and Area Studies. Her research has focused on nonviolent activism and social movements in the context of democratization and autocratization, and recently digital repression.



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