

Prospects of Deliberative Democracy in Southeast Asia with Special **REFERENCE** to Thailand and Taiwan



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PG. 76 - 93

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Resetting democracy:
the south side of global deliberation



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Presently an Independent Journalist, he started his career in Marathwada, a lesser-known regional Marathi daily from Aurangabad, a district town in the state of Maharashtra, India. And gradually moving to English newspapers with a brief stint in electronic media. He landed in Reuters, a global leader in news and financial information service in 2006. He was heading the Editorial of Reuters Market Light from 2007 to 2015.

As a journalist, he has traveled the length and breadth of India covering politics, agriculture, and social issues. He won Jagan Phadnis Award for Investigative Journalism. He wrote one book—MarquezChi Gosht. The book introduces Marathi readers to the life and works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and his Magical Realism. He translated two books in Marathi—Free Voice by Ravish Kumar, Magsaysay Award Winner Journalist and 21 Lessons for 21st Century by Yuval Noha Harari.

_Introduction

Trust has been broken in the democratic process mainly because people feel the elites and their institutions have captured it.

The most commonly held view of democracy is a system of free and fair elections and majoritarian rule. In this sense, democracy deepens in South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. But it is in trouble in most of Southeast Asia, the region south of mainland China and east of India. Southeast Asia is culturally diverse, with hundreds of different languages and ethnicities. Historically the area was significantly influenced by Indian, Chinese, Arab, and European Colonial cultures, thanks to the Asian Monsoon. European colonization exploited natural resources and labor from the conquered lands and attempted to spread European institutions in the region. During World War II, several Southeast Asian countries were briefly occupied by the Japanese Empire. After World War II, most of the region got decolonized, and independent nation-states govern today.

Populism, patronage-money politics, and mobilization of ethnic and religious identities, as well as the emphasis on religion, can be identified as the common elements in South and Southeast Asian politics. In Malaysia, hopes of a new democratic era were dashed when the Barisan Nasional Coalition returned to power. Myanmar's military continues to oppose democratic reforms, and large-scale atrocities against the Rohingya people continue unabated. In Sri Lanka, the alleged war criminals voted to power. Prime Minister

Narendra Modi uses his vast majority in India to lead Hindu Nationalism strangulating the free press. According to Reporters Without Borders, India ranks 161 in Freedom of the Press. In this context, deliberative democracy is crucial as it supplements electoral democracy to overcome the tyranny of the majority and promote the force of public reason. It is in this context that I would like to sketch out prospects and processes of deliberative democracy in Thailand and Taiwan based on the two interviews with Onsua Kanhachat, Project Director of Pulang Kampong Foundation in south Thailand, and Yu Pei Chen, Planning Team Leader with Taiwan Reach-Out Association of Democracy (T-ROAD).

_Thailand

Thailand is located in Southeast Asia, where it is blessed with an abundance of incredible fauna and flora, making it one of the world's most unique ecosystems. Thailand has a mixed economy system where the food industry and culture are highly valued. Currently ranked in the 13th place for the largest global food exporters, Thailand is one of the globe's crucial food sources. Hence, the food industry is undoubtedly a pillar of the kingdom.

Thailand is among the oldest democracies in Southeast Asia, yet it has also

witnessed the greatest number of coups. With the introduction of democratic politics in the 1970s, Thailand became the second-largest democracy in Southeast Asia. But Thailand has suffered multiple regime oscillations since military coups were frequent: nineteen attempts from its transition to a constitutional monarchy in 1932.¹⁶

16. Sinpeng, Aim. (2021). *Opposing Democracy in the Digital Age: The Yellow Shirts in Thailand*. University of Michigan Press.

The southernmost multicultural region of Thailand comprises three provinces: Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, with 85% of the population identifying themselves as Muslim. They are distinct from the dominant Thai culture. They draw their identity from three sources: as Malays with their own language and cultural traditions, as Muslims, and as the heirs to the Sultanate of Patani, the historical Malay kingdom that comprised the three southern border provinces. Since 2004 these three provinces have been witnessing insurgency that has deteriorated the region's multicultural character. The ethnic violence can be partly attributed to economic backwardness. According to an opinion article published by Al Jazeera,¹⁷ the Australian anthropologist and counter-insurgency expert Dr. David Kilcullen called the widespread violence in South Thailand between 2004 and 2007 "second only to Iraq and Afghanistan." The Southern Border Police Operation Centre in Thailand reported that between 2004 and 2011, 5,243 people had been killed in the southern border region. The victims include Muslims, Buddhists, Thai, and Malay people, mainly soldiers, police officers, civilians, teachers, monks, and insurgents.

Pulang Kampong Foundation had to overcome these cultural and political barriers to instill confidence in the local Muslim population. It acted as a bridge between the government and local people, since for Onsua Kanhachat, Project Director of Pulang Kampong Foundation in South Thailand, "peace is intertwined with economic development," as she stated in her interview.

Pulang Kampong Foundation was founded by Sanan Kanhachat, father of Onsua Kanhachat. He used to work as a senior officer

17. Ahmed, Akbar & Akins, Harris. (february 27, 2012). *Restoring harmony between Bangkok and the Malay Muslims of South Thailand*. AlJazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2012/2/27/restoring-harmony-between-bangkok-and-the-malay-muslims-of-south-thailand>. (accessed may 18, 2023).

on peacebuilding for the General Border Committee of Thailand-Malaysia and as a senior project officer for the Royal Initiative and Special Project Sub-Bureau of Thailand. Onsua and her colleagues went door to door to understand people's issues and problems. They concluded the development of a sustainable agricultural ecosystem could offer jobs and career prospects and ensure the development of backward Southern Thailand.

They then decided to offer the locals training on permaculture and aquacultural practices, particularly farmers and students in traditional religious institutions. Currently, the region has 409 private religious institutions with almost 250,000 students. The religious institutions imparting training in economic activities amount to "creating a force of reason," a critical initiative in deliberative democracy. This is a welcome innovation, as we all know that in Afghanistan, the Taliban, the religious institution, is the breeding ground of Islamic Fundamentalists and terrorists. The next step was to establish Farmers Councils in Pattani (78 members), Yala (381 members), and Narathiwat (130 members), along with active public engagement of a minimum of 2,000 people across different villages. This brought economic uplift as well as behavioral change in the local population. The farmers' councils and their members got actively engaged with the government on issues related to policies and schemes.

The Pulang Kampong Foundation is planning to establish a community network under the platform "One Family, One Sufficiency Economy," where one successful family leads to another, extending into several family networks, where agriculture, dairy farming, and aquaculture can sustain the

household economy as well as community economy which would blossom into entrepreneurship. This project would undoubtedly politicize families greater common good. This positive response also aims at strengthening deliberative democracy as the minorities would be actively engaged in dialogue with the government.

_Taiwan

"According to Mei-Fang Fan,¹⁸ Taiwanese deliberative practices and democratic innovations offer the rest of the world valuable insights".

Taiwan's history exemplifies the rapid transition and emergence of a democratic polity, illustrating the global trend toward democratization. A situation that is especially rare in Asia, where authoritarian (e.g., China and Vietnam) or strongly technocratic (e.g., Japan) modes of governance predominate.

Growing social movements and a vibrant civil society have become constant forces accelerating institutional reform and influencing governance processes, thus creating new spaces for public participation. Taiwan has integrated Western democratic values with those of its multiple cultures, and institutional change and the promotion of democratic innovation in Taiwan continue to adapt flexibly to emerging technologies and changes in the global environment.

18. Fan, Mei-Fang. (2021). *Deliberative Democracy in Taiwan: Deliberative Systems Perspective*. Routledge.

In addition, Taiwan shares many challenges with other actors around the world, such as the need for energy transition, the problem of nuclear waste siting, resource scarcity, and the emergence of unprecedented risks like climate change or emerging technological risks. As for the democratization of science, citizen activism and the resurgence of social movements have facilitated greater dialogue, deliberative practices, and reflection on such democratization, which has deepened institutional evolution and citizen participation in the policy-making process.¹⁹

Taiwan Reach-Out Association of Democracy (T-ROAD), consisting of a group of practitioners, dedicates itself to civic engagement, social innovation, and democratic deepening. They do this by practicing the democratic values of equity, inclusion, and empowerment. T-ROAD designs various facilitation techniques and methods to foster genuine dialogue and organic collaboration among people of different backgrounds.

The Planning Team Leader of the T-ROAD, Yu Pei Chen, was associated with the Sunflower Student Movement in Taiwan in 2014, making her realize the importance of people's political participation. She participated in online discussions of various issues. The movement also sparked the development of youth participation in politics and deliberative democracy.

Yu Pei Chen told me that in 2015 there was a surge of interest in participatory budgeting in Taiwan. By 2016, she became a member of the participatory budgeting team in Taichung. After the project ended,

19. *Ibid.*

some council members felt that representative democracy was being threatened by participatory democracy. The project faced obstacles in continuing to promote that time, but she and her colleagues were determined to promote participatory democracy, so they founded T-ROAD.

The Taichung Participatory Budgeting project operated at the city level from 2015 to 2018 and was implemented in several administrative districts and opened to public participation. Proposals that included public and urgent issues were accepted, and the maximum funding of each proposal was set at one million Taiwan dollars. From 2017 to 2019, T-ROAD mainly implemented participatory budgeting projects, including Taichung Participatory Budgeting, theme-based projects (entertainment activities for migrant workers, disability welfare services), and community-based projects.

“Fishery-Electricity Symbiosis” is a green energy plan proposed by the Taiwan government in response to global net-zero carbon emissions and energy transformation. It involves installing solar panels on fishing ponds to generate electricity while maintaining existing aquaculture. Due to the lack of successful global examples to reference, the policy needed to balance the interests of the aquaculture industry, green energy industry, fishermen’s rights, and environmental sustainability. With the advocacy of environmental organizations, the new policy “Fishery-Electricity Symbiosis Environmental and Social Inspection” was implemented to conduct environmental and social assessments before installing solar panels near fishing ponds. In 2021, the “Fishery-Electricity Symbiosis Environmental and Social Inspection” was launched for the first time in most fishing pond areas in Taiwan. At that time, six out of seven projects were executed by environmental ecology companies, while T-ROAD was the only social advocacy organization.

At the early stage of the project, T-ROAD visited environmental advocacy organizations to consult their opinions on policy, environment, and conservation. It also conducted related connections and applied deliberative democracy in the project implementation process. From interviews, focus group discussions, and stakeholder meetings to public consultations, T-ROAD gradually expanded the communication targets from individuals and the same group to cross-groups of stakeholders. The process involved multiple adjustments in response to policy implementation and the challenges of the difficult pandemic situation.

“To be honest, my understanding of participatory democracy was limited when I first encountered it in 2016. At that time, I mainly followed Professor Sheng-Wen Shih from Taipei Medical University, who initiated street democracy deliberations during the Sunflower Movement. Most of the team members had a social science background, and besides regular project meetings, we discussed our social concerns and values within the project. This communication mode helped me maintain a more open and equal attitude when working with different teams later on,” she said while responding to my question.

In her opinion, Taiwanese citizens need to deal with misinformation from China in their daily life. “What role should a democratic government play? In 2021 we hosted a civic forum discussing the relationships between freedom of expression and information with

national defense." The forum was titled "Freedom of Reading and Listening and Defence of Democracy - The Impact of China's Cultural Export on Taiwan, and followed the format of a citizen consensus conference, with stages such as regional forums, keynote speeches, and citizen forums. "We invited Taiwanese citizens to think about and discuss the infiltration of Chinese culture from the perspectives of books, movies, and OT," she added.

For Yu Pei Chen, the core of our discussion is "when facing an aggressive foreign country, to what extent should our cultural policy be open or restricted? To what extent should we use the concept of defensive democracy to prevent foreign countries from taking advantage of our democratic environment to undermine and destroy our democracy? But as a country that prides itself on being able to accommodate diverse cultures in Asia, how do we maintain an open and diverse environment?"

As pointed out by Mei-Fang-Fan,²⁰ Taiwan has many lessons to share with the world. These lessons have been gained from its experience with catastrophic events—involving pollution, natural disasters, technological problems, and institutional failures. Moreover, young activists in Taiwan skillfully use digital technology to remake democracy to be more open and digital.

_Closing Remarks of an Indian: Bhoodan, Village Development Board and Mendha Lekha

Interviewing Onsua Kanhachat and Yu Pei Chen was quite enlightening for me as an Indian exposed to completely different kinds of democratic deliberations. In my

20. *Ibid.*

youth, I had great respect for Vinoba Bhave, an ardent follower of Mahatma Gandhi. He initiated The Bhoodan Movement (Land Gift Movement), a voluntary land reform movement in India, in 1951. Vinoba used to walk from village to village persuading wealthy landowners to voluntarily give a percentage of their land to landless people in their village. His mentor, Mahatma Gandhi, was deeply influenced by John Ruskin's book "Unto This Last" and translated it into Hindi with the title Sarvodaya (Everyone's Emancipation). Vinoba founded an organization of Sarvodaya.

The third annual Sarvodaya Conference was held in Shivarampali, a town south of the southern Indian city of Hyderabad. Vinoba walked more than 400 km to attend the meeting. Telangana, the region surrounding Hyderabad, was then the epicenter of the armed communist rebellion. For Vinoba, the future of India was essentially a dispute between the fundamental ideologies of Gandhi and Marx. On the last day of the conference, April 11, 1951, Vinoba announced that, on his way home, he and a handful of his companions would tour the communist areas of Telangana to promote the message of nonviolence. On April 18, Vinoba entered the Nalgonda district, a center of communist activities. After meeting with Vinoba, the untouchables (India's most disadvantaged caste or community) of the Pochampalli village were demanding 80 acres of land for the livelihood of their families. Vinoba stated that if the government couldn't secure the needed land, the villagers should do something about it. Astonishingly, the local landowner offered to give 100 of his lands to those families. And so, the historic Bhoodan Movement (Gift of Land) began.²¹

21. Mehta, Subhash. *Bhoodan-Gramdan Movement - 50 Years: a Review*. Mkgandhi. <https://www.mkgandhi.org/vinoba/bhoodan.htm>. (Accessed May 13, 2023).

Vinoba toured the country and, in 1967, got some 4.7 million acres of land given to him, which were distributed among the landless laborers. The movement spontaneously attracted the attention of many people outside India. For example, the famous American correspondent Louis Fischer called Gramdan the most creative thinking to come from the East at that time. Hallam Tennyson, the grandson of poet Alfred Tennyson, wrote the book "The Saint on the March," recounting his experiences while traveling rural India with Vinoba. Chester Bowles, U.S. Ambassador to India, said the Bhoodan Movement was giving a message of Renaissance in India in 1955 in his book "The Dimensions of Peace." Bowles acknowledged this movement offered a revolutionary alternative to communism, for it was based on human dignity. British industrialist Earnest Bader was impressed by the Bhoodan movement and used the Gandhian concept of trusteeship by giving his industrial workers a 90% stake in the company. Others, such as British Quaker Donald Groom, Rev. Kaithan, David Graham, and Arthur Koestler, joined the movement as volunteers and collaborators.²²

As for the Village Development Board, I went to the tribal state of Nagaland in Northeast India in 1984 to study its Village Development Board Program. This program was the brainchild of the late Shri Achyut Gokhale, a war veteran and administrative officer. Nagaland was then infested by armed insurgency. Village Development Boards (VDB) were formed in all villages in Nagaland from 1976 to 1982. This institution has been the primary vehicle for delivering the government's schemes for rural development. Each VDB may

22. *Ibid.*

design its development plan for villagers. The VDB is about the institutionalization of the idea of common property. It was about creating "common property" and managing it openly and honestly. This institution survived the onslaughts of state-level politics that encroached upon people's autonomy and the ravages of a raging insurgency. The VDB and its associated models had the potential to become a major strategic thrust in the Northeast, and with some modifications, in villages elsewhere in the country as well as in tribal communities across the world.

In order to highlight the significance of this program, it is important to note that Achyut Gokhale was awarded the "Padma Shri" by the President of India for his success in engaging the people of Nagaland with the "Nagaland Empowerment of People through Economic Development" (NEPED) program within the Village Development Boards.

Mendha Lekha Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra in India is famous for its biodiverse dry deciduous forests and tribal communities. The district is more than 700,000 hectares in area. Approximately 80 percent is under forest cover.

Mendha Lekha is a village located 30 km from the district headquarters and is spread over two small and closely situated tolas (hamlets). There were approximately 400 people in the village, mainly without class and caste hierarchies, when I visited it sometime in the 1990s. The entire population is of the Gond tribe, which had ruled and inhabited the surrounding forests since time immemorial. The villages' livelihood mainly depends on subsistence farming and the forest, which provides a range of

food, fuel, timber, and fodder. The average landholding is 5 acres. The primary source of income is from the collection of non-timber forest produce and daily wages from labor work with government and private agencies.

In 1987, the village decided to assert itself under the leadership of villager Devaji Topa. Mohan Hirabai Hiralal, an activist of Sarvodaya, played the catalyst role. The village tribal community in Gram Sabha (Town Hall Meeting) took the following decisions unanimously:

1. All domestic requirements of the village would be met from the surrounding forests without paying any fee to the government. However, this was accompanied by a set of rules for sustainable extraction.
2. No governmental or non-governmental outsider would be allowed to carry out any forest activity without the permission of the Gram Sabha (which includes one member from every household).
3. No commercial exploitation of the forests, except for non-timber forest produce, would be allowed.
4. Villagers would regularly patrol the forests.
5. They would regulate the amount of resources they could extract from the forests.
6. Water and soil conservation efforts followed to arrest soil erosion.
7. Forests would not be set on fire, and villagers would aid in fire-extinguishing activities.
8. An encroachment would not be allowed.

The Forest department that controls the forest opposed it, but after a long struggle, the Government of India finally passed legislation that empowered the Gram Sabhas and the Forest Rights

Act. Today, the village gets revenue in millions from the minor forest produce. Other villages are also following suit, thanks to the 73rd Amendment of the Indian Constitution that envisages Gram Sabhas as the crucial pillar of rural democracy. As noted in *Deliberative Democracy in Asia*, deliberative democracy can contribute to improving the course of democracy in Asia. Many countries in Asia²³ have long traditions of public deliberations in both democratic and undemocratic settings; some of which continues today.

23. He, Baogang, Breen, Michael & Fishkin, James (Ed.). (2022). *Deliberative Democracy in Asia*. Routledge.
