

The Asian Barometer Survey & the Challenge of Populism in Asia



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Introduction to the Asian Barometer Survey

The Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) began in 2001, and after four survey waves has grown into a major cross-national survey project focused on democratization covering 14 countries and territories in East and Southeast Asia and around a quarter of the world's population. The ABS is based at National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan, and works with local partners in each of the surveyed countries and territories to implement national surveys under a common research framework and methodology. Survey data from each of the countries and territories are cleaned and merged by staff at the ABS headquarters, and are subsequently made freely available to scholars, policy makers, practitioners, and other interested members of the public. As of November 2018, the ABS has received more than 5,000 applications to use its data from more than 40 countries. For applications for survey data by country and information on how to apply for survey data, please visit the ABS website at <http://www.asianbarometer.org>.

History of the Asian Barometer Survey

The ABS traces its history back more than 30 years to a research project established by Fu Hu, a renowned professor of political science at National Taiwan University and academician of Academia Sinica. In 1993, the research team under Professor Hu's leadership launched a research project on "Political Culture and Political Participation in the Different Chinese Cultural Areas: A Comparative Study of Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong" with the support of the Henry Luce Foundation. In 2000, the East Asia Barometer (EAB) was established with the support of the Ministry of Education's Program for Promoting Academic Excellence in Universities. The First Wave of the EAB was conducted between 2001 and 2003, adding five further countries to the survey (Japan, South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, and Mongolia). For the Second Wave of the survey, conducted between 2005 and 2008, a further five countries were added (Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore), and the name of the project was changed to the Asian Barometer Survey. The Third Wave of the survey was carried out between 2010 and 2012 in the same 13 countries and territories as the Second Wave. The Fourth Wave of the survey was carried out between 2014 and 2016 in the same 13 countries and territories, plus Myanmar. The Fifth Wave survey is currently in the field or

under preparation, and will be conducted in all of the 14 countries and territories in the Fourth Wave plus Australia, New Zealand, and East Timor, expanding the reach of the survey to Oceania for the first time.

Further information on the survey waves and surveyed countries can be found on the ABS website. The ABS is currently operated under the auspices of the Program for East Asia Democratic Studies under the leadership of Yun-han Chu, professor of political science at National Taiwan University and academician of Academia Sinica. In addition to the ABS, the Program for East Asia Democratic Studies also serves as the headquarters of the Global Barometer Surveys (GBS), which brings together six regional barometer surveys (including the ABS) to produce comparative data on political attitudes covering 70% of the world's population.

Research Findings from the ABS

Over the years, the ABS team has gathered rich longitudinal data on the attitudes of citizens in the region. Starting from the First Wave, the ABS has covered a range of topics related to democratization and political values, including trust in institutions, social capital, political participation, meaning of democracy, support for democracy, satisfaction with democracy, and preference for democracy. Over the four waves of the survey, the ABS steadily expanded the range of survey topics beyond the initial focus on democratization and political values. For instance, starting from the Third Wave, the ABS included a battery on international relations. In the context of the rise of China and its growing challenge to American dominance in the region, the international relations battery probes respondents' views on the most influential power in the region and in their own country (now and in the future), which country offers the best model for their own country's development, and whether China's influence is positive or negative. The findings from the international relations battery provide us with valuable empirical data on how ordinary people in the region view the rise of China and how they assess great power competition between China and the United States. More information on the key findings of the ABS can be found on the ABS website.

Achievements of the ABS

In the three decades since Fu Hu launched the predecessor to the

ABS, the research team can boast a number of significant achievements. The 1994 mainland China survey carried out as part of the research project on “Political Culture and Political Participation in the Different Chinese Cultural Areas: A Comparative Study of Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong” was the first time a national randomized survey in mainland China had been carried out by political scientists. The Fourth Wave survey in Myanmar conducted in 2014 was also the first national survey of its type in Myanmar. The ABS is the first cross-national survey project led by East Asian scholars and the first survey project of its type in East Asia. The ABS survey data provide a valuable resource for social scientists and have been used in numerous academic publications. In addition, the research project has done important work in developing social science research capacity in East Asia, for example by offering training on survey methodologies and providing opportunities for scholars from the region to collaborate with colleagues from the US and other Western countries. Finally, the ABS has also expanded the influence of the research project beyond the scholarly community by reaching out to practitioners and policy experts through collaborative projects with organizations such as the Henry Luce Foundation, the United Nations Development Programme, and the World Bank.

Democracy Under Challenge

When the ABS was first implemented in the first half of the 2000s, the prospects for democracy in East Asia appeared to be relatively bright. Although the region’s largest country, China, remained under authoritarian one-party rule, democracy was on the rise elsewhere in the region following successful transitions to democracy in South Korea, Taiwan, Mongolia, Thailand, and the Philippines. The region’s second-largest country by population, Indonesia, was also soon added to the ranks of the region’s democracies following successful presidential and legislative elections in 2004. However, since the heady days of the turn of the millennium, the progress of democracy in the region has stalled and, in some cases, eroded. Thailand remains under the rule of a military junta following a coup in 2014. Democracy in the Philippines has failed to consolidate, and the rule of law continues to be undermined by extra-judicial killings and threats against civil society under the regime of Rodrigo Duterte. Even in the established liberal democracies in the region, data from the Fourth Wave of the ABS show that significant numbers of respondents do not agree with the statement that “democracy is always the best form of government” — 24% of respondents in Japan, 35% of respondents in South Korea, and 53% of respondents in Taiwan either believe that authoritarian government may be preferable under certain circumstances or that it does not matter if a regime is democratic or not. At the same time as democracy is under threat, a rising China offers a potential alternative model for national development to Western liberal democracy.

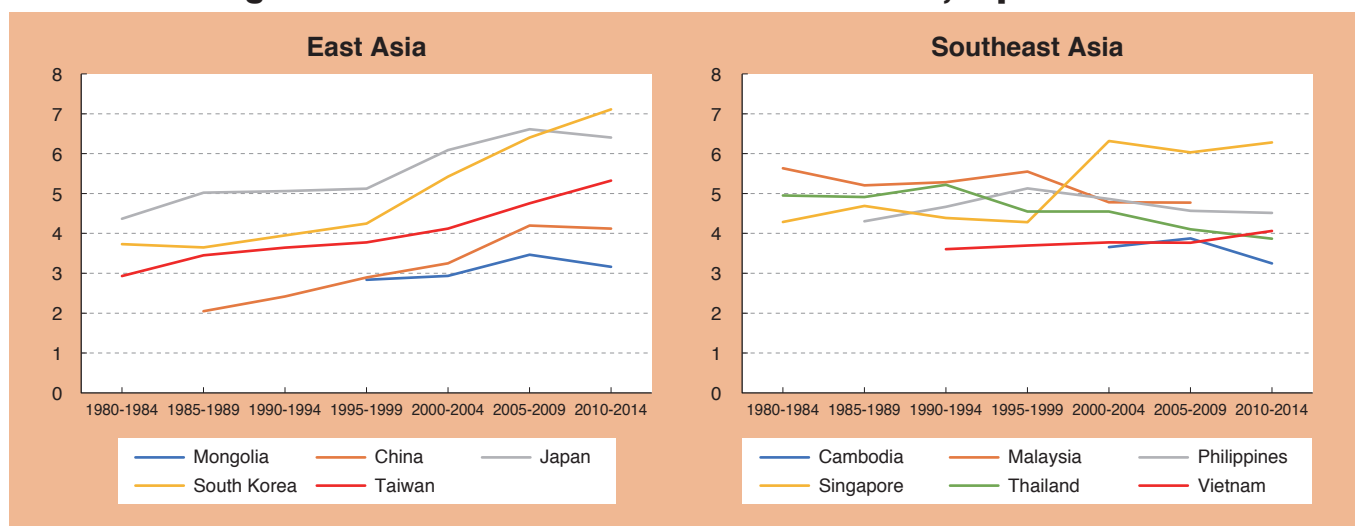
The Rise of Populism in Asia & Elsewhere

In the West, the rise of populism, from the election of President Donald Trump in the US, to the United Kingdom’s vote to leave the European Union and the election of populist leaders across Europe, has been frequently cited as a threat to democracy. A title of a recent book by Yascha Mounk — *The People vs. Democracy* (Harvard University Press, 2018) — expresses the fear that populism could destroy democracy in striking terms. Populism is not only a problem of the developed world; it is also on the rise in democracies in the developing world — the world’s third-largest democracy, Brazil, recently elected a far-right populist, Jair Bolsonaro, as president. Of the countries covered by the ABS, Duterte in the Philippines and Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand were both elected on platforms that proposed to redistribute wealth but also involved a dangerous disregard for the rule of law, including drug crackdowns that involved extrajudicial killings of suspected drug dealers. However, in countries outside Southeast Asia, the tide toward populism does not at first glance appear to be as dramatic. In Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, politics remains dominated by establishment politicians from the main political parties. Yet even in these countries there are signs of growing unrest. In Japan, the former mayor of Osaka, Toru Hashimoto, who first rose to fame as a television personality, has attracted attention for his ultranationalist views and attacks against liberal causes. In South Korea, Lee Jae Myung, mayor of Seongnam, a city near Seoul, has successfully tapped into popular anger against the “establishment cartel” of politicians and big business. In Taiwan, “outsider” politicians such as current independent Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je and current Kuomintang (KMT) candidate for mayor of Kaohsiung Han Kuo-yu have stood on populist, anti-establishment platforms, attracting significant support.

Rising Inequality & Populism

The global rise of populism has been blamed on the failure of mainstream politicians to provide solutions to worsening inequality and the “hollowing out” of the middle class. In 2016, the vote for Brexit and the election of Donald Trump were attributed by some commentators to middle-class anxiety in the face of growing inequality and cultural change under the influence of globalization. Although East Asia has benefited from the outsourcing of production from the West under globalization, as the region has become increasingly integrated within the global economic system, it has also suffered from worsening income inequality. In *Chart 1*, we present the changes in the ratio of incomes of the top 10% compared to the remaining 90% of citizens. We choose the measure of the top 10% compared to the remaining 90% instead of the traditional measure which compares the top 20% to the remaining 80% because we are interested in the so-called “hollowing out” of the middle class, where the only winners of globalization are the very richest in society. The data cover a four-decade period from the start of the modern era of globalization and the integration of the region in the global economy in the 1980s.

CHART 1

Ratio of average income in East Asia & South East Asia, top 10% vs bottom 90%

Source: Adapted from Mark Weatherall, Min-hua Huang, and Taehee Whang, "The Malaise of Globalization in East Asia: Income Inequality, Perceived State Capacity, and Anti-Establishment Attitudes", *Korean Journal of International Studies* Vol. 16, No. 1 (April 2017: 1-27). Data from the World Wealth and Income Database and World Bank World Development Indicators

Comparing the East Asian countries on the left-hand side with the Southeast Asia countries on the right-hand side, we can see contrasting patterns. At the start of the 1980s, levels of inequality in East Asia were relatively low. The lowest ratio of income between the top 10% and the bottom 90% at the start of the 1980s was found in China as the country was entering the period of reform and opening up and had not yet produced clear "winners" and "losers" from the process. Even South Korea and Taiwan, which achieved rapid economic growth after the 1960s, managed this achievement at the same time as keeping levels of income inequality relatively low. The most unequal country in the region at the start of the 1980s according to our measure, Japan, was also its most economically advanced. However, with the exception of Mongolia, all of the countries in the East Asia region have witnessed large increases in inequality since the start of the 1980s, with the most rapid increases in inequality occurring in the 1990s as the pace of globalization and integration of the region into the global economy accelerated.

In contrast to East Asia, where levels of inequality started off relatively low in the 1980s, and subsequently grew rapidly, some Southeast Asian countries have actually seen modest declines in inequality, albeit from a much higher starting point. At the start of the period, the emerging economies of Thailand and Malaysia had the region's highest levels of income inequality. However, levels of income inequality in both countries have actually declined over the past three decades as the benefits of economic development have spread more widely. In contrast, the Philippines and Vietnam had lower levels of inequality than both Thailand and Malaysia at the start of the period. However, following small increases in inequality over the four decades since the 1980s, the Philippines and Vietnam are now more unequal societies than Thailand and Malaysia. Finally, Singapore, which followed a similar growth trajectory to Taiwan and South Korea, has also seen a large increase in inequality since the

1980s, with the largest jump in inequality occurring in the 1990s.

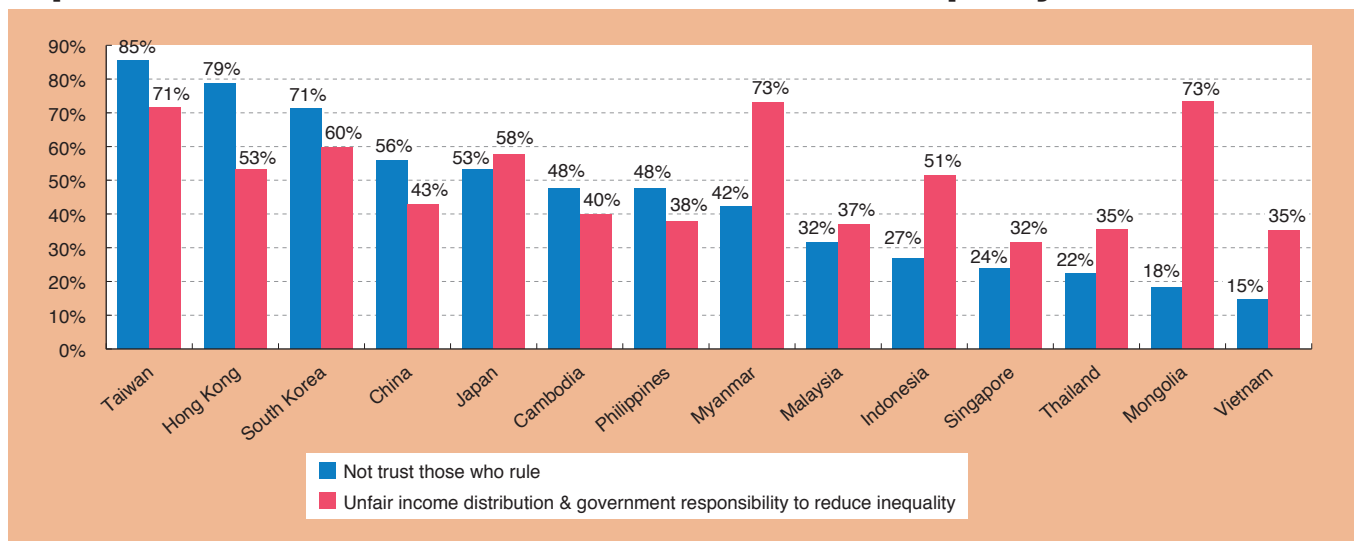
Is Inequality Driving Populism in Asia?

What are the implications of inequality for populism in East Asia? There is no single definition of the term "populism"; however, at the root of populism is a juxtaposition between the morally good "pure people" and corrupt and self-serving "elites". To capture the anti-establishment sentiment that is central to populism, we use a question from the Fourth Wave of the ABS that asks respondents about the proposition: "You can generally trust the people who run our government to do what is right." We chose this statement because it does not specify a particular regime and can therefore hopefully capture general dissatisfaction with the political system and political elites rather than individual leaders or parties. Next, to assess whether anti-establishment sentiment is associated with popular anger about growing inequality, we use a composite measure produced from two questions from the ABS. The first question asks whether respondents think the income distribution in their country is fair. The second question asks respondents whether they agree that it is the responsibility of the government to reduce the differences between people with high income and those with low incomes. This combined measure is designed to capture a sentiment that the government has failed to resolve the problem of inequality.

Chart 2 shows a strong association between the view that governments have failed to resolve the problem of inequality and anti-establishment sentiment. The correlation between politicians' failure to resolve inequality and populist sentiment is 0.158, significant at the $p < 0.001$ level. Consistent with our finding that inequality has risen sharply in most East Asian countries and fallen or risen only slightly in most Southeast Asian countries, we find that citizens in East Asia are generally less satisfied with their

CHART 2

Populist sentiment & dissatisfaction with income inequality



Source: Mark Weatherall, Min-hua Huang, and Taehee Whang, "The Malaise of Globalization in East Asia: Income Inequality, Perceived State Capacity, and Anti-Establishment Attitudes", *Korean Journal of International Studies* Vol. 16, No. 1 (April 2017: 1-27). Survey data from ABS Wave 4.

government's performance in reducing inequality and express higher levels of anti-establishment sentiment. We find the highest levels of dissatisfaction with the government's performance in reducing inequality as well as the highest levels of anti-establishment sentiment in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South Korea, three economies that have seen large increases in levels of inequality since the 1980s. In contrast, in countries in Southeast Asia such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, which have seen falls or only modest increases in income inequality over the same period, citizens are more satisfied with their government's performance in reducing income inequality and express lower levels of anti-establishment sentiment. The two clear outliers in our analysis are Myanmar and Mongolia, where high levels of frustration at the failure of the government to reduce inequality have not translated into anti-establishment sentiment.

Conclusions & Directions for Future Research

The findings from the Fourth Wave of the ABS show that anti-establishment sentiment (which is central to populist rhetoric) is widespread in the region. Furthermore, our analysis shows a link between a perceived failure of governments to reduce inequality and anti-establishment sentiment. It is also revealing that anti-establishment sentiment is highest in countries in East Asia such as Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea that have seen sharp increases in inequality since the 1980s, whereas many Southeast Asian countries, where inequality has fallen or risen only marginally, have lower levels of anti-establishment sentiment. However, our findings also present a puzzle: why have "outsider" populist leaders failed to emerge in countries with high levels of anti-establishment sentiment such as Taiwan and South Korea, at least at the national level? One possible explanation is that mainstream politicians have effectively co-opted

the policy space of populists. For example, in South Korea, the policy pledges of President Moon Jae In, including sharp increases in welfare spending that opponents claim are unaffordable, have been widely labelled as "populist". Another possible explanation is that while the dam is yet to burst, East Asia may soon succumb to the populist tide. Already, potential leaders of new populist movements in the region have emerged, mostly through municipal governments — from Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike in Japan, Ko Wen-je and Han Kuo-yu in Taiwan, and former Lee Jae Myung in South Korea. It is very possible that this model will be repeated on the national stage in the not too distant future.

When compared to the relentless focus on populism elsewhere in the world, particularly in the US, Europe, and Latin America, there has been less attention to the issue in Asia in both academic research and media reports. However, data from the Fourth Wave of the ABS suggest that anti-establishment sentiment in the region is widespread, showing that the region has not avoided the populist wave affecting other parts of the world. However, further research is needed to further probe populist sentiment in the region. For example, new items could be included in future surveys to measure other aspects of populism aside from anti-establishment attitudes, such as a belief in the "pure" masses as opposed to "corrupt" elites or a belief that political leaders should always follow the "will of the people". On the supply-side of populism, researchers can apply methods such as text analysis of the speeches of leaders or party manifestos. Such research will help scholars and practitioners better understand populist trends in the region and how they compare to populism elsewhere in the world. **JS**

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