The Odd Couple: Modernization and Democratization in Southeast Asia

Nicholas Anderson
Georgetown University
Security Studies Program, MA Candidate

Nick Anderson is a graduate student, pursuing an M.A. in Security Studies from Georgetown University's Security Studies Program. He received his B.A. from the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, which is where this paper was written. Nick's research interests include Northeast and Southeast Asian politics and security. In addition to his graduate studies, Nick is currently a research intern at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

Introduction

Seymour Martin Lipset's, "the more well-to-do a nation, the greater chances that it will sustain democracy,"¹ has set off over five decades of intense debate over the conditions most conducive to democratic transition and establishment. Variations of what has become known as the modernization theory have been applied to innumerable cases in a variety of ways, in attempts to test its validity. In the process, Southeast Asia (SEA) has emerged as a region which seemingly defies the general thrust of this theory.² With both incredibly rich authoritarian regimes and incredibly poor democracies, on the surface the modernization theory doesn't seem to apply. Yet, despite what appear to be a number of exceptions to the modernization theory in Southeast Asia, it still carries great weight in explaining the state of democracy in the region. While leaders and other powerful political figures surely make a difference, individual agency seems to be secondary to socioeconomic development.³ I will begin by describing the modernization theory of democratization and presenting some data to bolster its validity. With this theoretical base, we will then move into the region at hand and show how each of the eleven cases examined,⁴ in their own way, validates the theory. I will then conclude by discussing some of the implications of the analysis with respect to the future of

democracy in Southeast Asia.

Modernization Theory of Democratization

The modernization theory of democratization's central claim is that higher levels of socioeconomic development will make states more likely to transition to, and sustain democratic forms of government. At its core, it is really a theory about power relations. In poor societies with authoritarian leadership, power is concentrated in the hands of the few at the top, resembling what Lipset calls an "elongated pyramid."⁵ With the increased individual wealth that comes with state modernization, power becomes increasingly diffuse, spread more evenly among the populace. To reemploy Lipset's analogy, rather than a pyramid, society begins to resemble a "diamond."⁶

It must be stated though, that it is not the increase in individual wealth, per se, that spurs a democratic transition. A \$100 increase in per capita gross domestic product (GDP) won't automatically lead to a commensurate increase in a regime's "democraticness" in all places, at all times. Rather, it is what generally accompanies such increases, namely: a market economy; rising literacy and education levels; an increasingly affluent, urban, property-owning middle class; temperance of class divisions; the secularization of the public

sphere; and the rise of a Tocquevillian civil society.⁷ This newly empowered middle class is expected to push for democratic reforms within the favorable structural context created by state modernization. And if a democratic transition does take place, it will be more likely to survive with the support of this newly empowered *demos*.

Simply put, modernization theory predicts that, in most cases, the shift in relative bargaining power from the ruling elites to the middle class allows the latter to prevail and sets democratization in motion.⁸ The body of modernization theory literature though, isn't a coherent whole, as there is some debate as to whether economic modernization is more important for the *initiation* of democratization or for the *maintenance* of democracy post-transition.⁹ There are also competing claims over how much development is required, but commonly cited figures float around \$7000 per capita GDP.¹⁰ Theorists also note that states with a per capita GDP under \$1000 are highly unlikely to transition to or sustain democracy,¹¹ and this range (\$1000-\$7000) of per capita wealth forms something like what Huntington refers to as "the zone of transition."¹² Whatever the case may be, it seems relatively clear that Lipset's famed statement has stood the test of time, as there is broad consensus that socioeconomic development and democracy are positively related,¹³ and the causal arrow runs from development to democracy.¹⁴

An old aphorism warns against allowing exceptions to define general rules, and this advice should be well-heeded with regards to the modernization theory. Like anything else in social science, it is not perfect; neither a silver bullet nor a panacea. Individual agency does matter, and the mere mentioning of names such as Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Ghandi, or Mandela attests to this fact. Yet individuals act within the context of certain levels of socioeconomic development. Popular social movements, for democracy or otherwise, are much more likely to succeed when the people are empowered with increased economic

resources. In cases where social elites initiate democratic reforms, they are most often yielding to bottom-up pressure from a newly empowered middle class, rather than altruistically forfeiting their power positions. It is not that agency doesn't matter; it is that it is most often preceded by structure.

But perhaps I should allow the numbers to speak for themselves. In 2008 the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) developed an index that measures the quality of democracy in 165 states and territories around the world.¹⁵ The index scores states on a scale from zero to ten (zero being perfectly non-democratic and ten being perfectly democratic) based on a fairly rigorous set of criteria¹⁶ and characterizes regimes as "authoritarian" (0-3.9), "hybrid" (4.0-5.9), "flawed democracy" (6.0-7.9), and "full democracy" (8.0-10). Looking over the data for 2008 adds credence to the modernization theory. The average GDP per capita among

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"full democracies" is \$43,096, among "flawed democracies," \$7,537, among "hybrid regimes," \$4,333, and among "authoritarian" regimes, \$7,801. Once primarily oil-producing economies¹⁷ are controlled for, this final category falls to \$2,388 (**See Figure 1**).

Furthermore, of 54 states with a GDP capita above \$10,000, a mere 8 (15%) are authoritarian, all of which are primarily oil-producing economies.¹⁸ Of 69 states with a GDP/capita less than \$3,000, only two (India, East Timor) have democracy scores of 7 or better. In sum, in 2008 if your GDP/capita was above \$7,000, you were most likely a "flawed democracy" leaning towards "full democracy." Figure 2 shows the process of democratic development as one progresses through

(7.02). If it was below \$7,000, you were likely a “hybrid regime” leaning towards authoritarianism (4.71).

Huntington’s “zone of transition.” States with a GDP/capita between \$0 and \$1000 have an average democracy score of 4.04, progressing all the way up to states above \$7,000, which have an average score of 7.02 (**See Figure 2**).

Southeast Asia

We turn now to our region of interest. Here the data seems to continue to support the modernization theory. In 2008, the average EIU democracy score of a Southeast Asian state with a per capita GDP above \$7,000 was 6.69, within the “flawed democracy” range. For states below \$7,000, the score drops to 4.72, a lower-level “hybrid regime” score.¹⁹ Other indices concur with the EIU findings. In

the same year, the average Polity Score of a SEA state above \$7,000 GDP/capita was 4.46, and below \$7,000, 0.85.²⁰ Similarly, the 2008 Freedom House combined Freedom Index scores show states with per capita GDPs above \$7,000 averaging 3.87 (higher), and below \$7,000, 4.93 (lower).²¹ The use of quantitative data in analyzing a mere twelve cases, though, can be highly misleading, so we must examine the cases individually. SEA regional states, for our purpose, can be broadly categorized three ways: those that fit the modernization theory, those that are exceptions to the modernization theory, and those in the “zone of transition.” It is in this order that we will proceed.

Those that fit...

There are a number of regional states which conform nicely to the modernization theory, albeit for somewhat depressing reasons. Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Myanmar/Burma are just as autocratic as the theory would predict them to be. Cambodia’s current GDP/capita rests at \$805,²² its EIU democracy score is 4.87 (low-hybrid),²³ and Freedom House has given it a combined score of 5.5 and labeled it “not free.”²⁴ Laos is also greatly under-developed, with a GDP/capita of \$878,²⁵ and a corresponding EIU democracy score of 2.1 (authoritarian).²⁶ Much like Cambodia and Laos, Vietnam also fits the theory readily. In spite of recent impressive growth levels, it remains relatively poor (GDP/capita \$1060)²⁷ and harshly authoritarian, with a democracy index score of 2.53.²⁸ And unsurprisingly Burma, which has one of the most repressive governments in the world, has a per capita GDP of \$459²⁹ and a democracy index score of 1.77 (authoritarian), the fifth-lowest of the entire dataset.³⁰ As a result of their authoritarian governance then, these four states — Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Myanmar/Burma — are almost exactly as non-democratic as the modernization theory would assume.

The Exceptions...

Southeast Asia also includes a number of states which appear to be exceptions to the modernization theory. The first and most prominent is Singapore, which some insist undercuts the legitimacy of the modernization theory.³¹ Boasting the region’s highest GDP/capita of \$37,293,³² its highest human development rating (0.94),³³ and its highest transparency rating (9.2),³⁴ one would expect Singapore to have a far higher democracy score than 5.89 (hybrid).³⁵ However, there are two very good reasons for its unexpectedly low score. The first is Singapore’s massive civil service relative to its small population and territory. With a population of approximately 4.66 million, Singapore maintains a civil

defense force of 522,800, totaling 11.2% of the entire populace.³⁶ Comparatively, the closest regional state is Vietnam (6.2%), whereas most states in the region, such as, Malaysia (1.7%), Thailand (1.0%), Indonesia (0.4%), and the Philippines (0.3%) have civil defense forces that are *much* smaller. Furthermore, if we add the approximately 66,000 non-defense-sector civil servants to Singapore’s total,³⁷ the

A view of the Singapore skyline; Singapore is considered to be an exception to modernization theory due to its resilient authoritarianism.

number swells to 12.6% of the population officially employed by the regime in power. If we imagine that each potentially has even one dependent at home, we are at nearly a quarter of the population that is structurally dependent upon the success of the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP). So, in this way, the PAP has successfully “co-opted the state”³⁸ to maintain its power. The second reason for the resilience of authoritarianism in Singapore is that, since its independence in 1965, it has been afforded the rare blessing of incredibly capable authoritarian leaders. With the regions highest individual wealth, most transparent government, highest literacy rate (94.4%),³⁹ and longest life expectancy (80.2),⁴⁰ citizens have little reason to throw off their yokes and demand a democratic shift.

The next notable exception is the micro-sultanate of Brunei. With its high level of economic development (GDP/capita \$26,325), the modernization theory would predict it to be more democratic than its Freedom House score suggests (combined score 5.5, “not

free"). This anomaly can be explained by the fact that, like those eight highly-developed authoritarian states referred to earlier (see note 18), Brunei is quite literally "floating on oil."⁴¹ According to the CIA, crude oil and natural gas production account for over 50% of Brunei's GDP and over 90% of its exports.⁴² This incredible resource wealth concentrates power in the hands of the state and reverses the old axiom: "no representation without taxation."

The final exception in the region is East Timor. As one of the poorest states in Southeast Asia with a per capita GDP of \$542,⁴³ its democracy index score is surprisingly high (7.22, flawed democracy),⁴⁴ as is its Polity IV score (7).⁴⁵ This contradiction though, can be explained by the fact that East Timor is an embryonic state that only gained official international recognition since 2002 after breaking away from Indonesia in 1997. The fact that it is so democratic has more to do with international pressure, aid, and norms than any natural process of development. It should also be noted that, in spite of its democratic credentials, its abysmal transparency rating of 2.2 is even worse than that of authoritarian Vietnam (2.6),⁴⁶ and, according to the World Bank, its government functions at a lower level than that of Cambodia.⁴⁷ So, for a variety of idiosyncratic reasons, Singapore, Brunei, and East Timor are understandable exceptions to the logic of the modernization theory.

The "zone of transition"...

The final four regional states, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines, fall into what we are referring to as the "zone of transition." In terms of economic development, these four states form a sort of middle ground⁴⁸ between Singapore's affluence and East Timor's poverty. In terms of democratic development these states are also in the middle with EIU index scores all in the 6s,⁴⁹ Polity IV scores between 4 and 8,⁵⁰ and Freedom House combined scores from 4.5 to 2.5.⁵¹ Some states in this category, such

as the Philippines, have had relatively free, fair, and competitive democratic elections, while others, such as Malaysia, have not. Additionally, some states in this category, such as Indonesia, have seen recent improvements in their quality of democracy,⁵² while others, such as Thailand, have seen it decay.⁵³ While Indonesia has progressed considerably further in this process than Malaysia, neither can be said to be fully democratic nor fully authoritarian. What essentially brings these four states together is that they are in a state of flux between somewhat-authoritarian and somewhat-democratic forms of governance. As a group they are somewhat democratic, relatively corrupt,⁵⁴ and have governments that generally function at only mediocre levels.⁵⁵ Effectively, they are *in transition*.

Conclusion

So, it seems the modernization theory applies to Southeast Asia after all. Between the states that are an obvious fit (Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Burma/Myanmar), the states that are understandable exceptions (Singapore, Brunei, East Timor), and the states in the "zone of transition" (Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines), the modernization theory provides a helpful tool for understanding democratization in the region. With this in mind, what can be said about the future of democracy in Southeast Asia?

First, the states to keep an eye on are Malaysia and Vietnam. Malaysia is the most highly-developed among the "zone of transition" states and the least democratic. As it leaves the "zone" and begins to have GDP/capita levels above \$7,000, it will be increasingly likely to take steps in the direction of democracy. In Vietnam's case, it is just entering the "zone of transition" (GDP/capita \$1,060). As it grows rapidly, it will be interesting to see whether increasingly empowered voices for democracy will be heard at the highest levels of government. Second, the fast-paced economic growth in the region is a hopeful

prospect. In authoritarian states, economic growth over the past decade (2000-2010) has been impressive, with Laos averaging 6.73%, Vietnam, 7.46%, Cambodia, 9.25%, and Myanmar a whopping 12.98%.⁵⁶ A number of Southeast Asian states have also weathered the global economic crisis impressively. While the global average was -0.8% in 2009, Vietnam sustained a 5.3% GDP growth rate, Laos, 6.4%, and East Timor, 7.2%, the sixth-highest rate in the world.⁵⁷ As these states grow, according to our analysis, they should become increasingly democratic, and so their rapid growth rates are something that should definitely be encouraged. Third, just because it is possible for all of Southeast Asia, or the world for that

matter, to become democratic, it doesn't mean it is probable. We exist in a world of finite economic resources, and it is likely that Southeast Asian and global democracy, in most cases, will continue to reflect this reality. And finally, the most effective way to promote democracy in Southeast Asia is to encourage further economic growth. Overthrowing authoritarian regimes by force or backing elites who *claim* to be democrats seem to be far too risky ventures to undertake. While economic growth may not automatically lead to democracy at any time in history and in any place in the world, it is by far the most reliable enabling agent for democracy's future.

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Endnotes

1. Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *The American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (March 1959), pp. 75.

2. See William Case, *Politics in Southeast Asia: Democracy or Less* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 19 – 20.

3. "Socioeconomic" is used, rather than simply "economic" to imply the inclusion all of the social changes that generally accompany increased individual wealth in society (discussed below).

4. This analysis includes all ASEAN member-states (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar/Burma, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam), and East Timor.

5. Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy," 83.

6. Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy," 83.

7. For more discussion of the modernization theory see, Seymour Martin Lipset, "The Social Requisites of Democracy Revisited: 1993 Presidential Address," *American Sociological Review* 59, no. 1 (February 1994), pp. 1 – 22.; Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, "How Development Leads to Democracy: What We Know About Modernization," *Foreign Affairs* 88,no. 2 March/April 2009), pp. 33 – 48.; Christian Welzel, "Theories of Democratization," *Worldvaluessurvey.org*, 2009. http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs/articles/folder_published/publication_579/files/OUP_Ch06.pdf(accessed 16 June 2010), 80-81, 86-88.; Larry Diamond, "Economic Development and Democracy Reconsidered." *American Behavioral Scientist* 35, no. 4/5 (March/June 1992), pp. 450 – 499.; Francis Fukuyama, "Do we really know how to promote democracy?" *NED.org*, 2005. http://www.fpa.org/usr_doc/Francis_Fukuyama.pdf (accessed 16 June 2010).

8. Haggard and Kaufman make this argument, bridging the "agency" and "structural" theories. See Stephan Haggard and Robert R. Kaufmann, "The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions," *Comparative Politics* 29, no. 3 (1997), pp. 263 – 283. See also, Diamond, 480.

9. For an argument on the "initiation" side, see Carles Boix and Susan C. Stokes, "Endogenous Democratization," *World Politics* 55, no. 4 (July 2003), pp. 517 – 549. For an argument on the "maintenance" side, see Adam Prezworski and Fernando Limongi, "Modernization: Theories and Facts," *World Politics* 49, no. 2 (January 1997), pp. 155 – 183.

10. Diamond cites a figure of \$6,000 GPD/capita in Diamond, 467.; Fukuyama also cites a figure of \$6,000 GPD/capita in Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 344.; Prezworski and Limongi cite a figure of \$6,055.15 in Prezworski and Limongi, 160.; Boix and Stokes put forth a figure of \$7,000 in Boix and Stokes, 522.

11. See Boix and Stokes, 522.; Prezworski and Limongi, 159 – 160.

12. Huntington claims that in this zone, "traditional forms of rule become increasingly difficult to maintain and new types of political institutions are required to aggregate the demands of an increasingly complex society and to implement public policies in such a society." See Samuel P. Huntington, "Will More Countries Become Democratic?" *Political Science Quarterly* 99, no. 2 (Summer, 1984), 201.

13. Lipset, "The Social Requisites of Democracy Revisited," 2.; Diamond, 466.; Inglehart and Welzel, 34.; Boix and Stokes, 518-519.; Ross E. Burkhart and Michael S. Lewis-Beck, "Comparative Democracy: The Economic Development Thesis." *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 4 (December 1994), 903.; Huntington, 199.; Shinichi Ichimura and James W. Morely, "Introduction: The Varieties of Asia-Pacific Experience," in James W. Morely, eds. *Driven By Growth: Political Change in the Asia-Pacific Region*. Revised ed. (New York, M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1999), 31.

14. Huntington, 199.; Burkhart and Lewis-Beck, 907.; Boix and Stokes, 525.; Inglehart and Welzel, 42.; Diamond, 466.

15. All EIU data can be found at "Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2008," *EIU.com*, 2008. <http://graphics.eiu.com/PDF/Democracy%20Index%202008.pdf> (accessed 16 June 2010).

16. The EIU democracy index combines measurements of: electoral process and pluralism; civil liberties; the functioning of government; political participation; and political culture.

17. OPEC (Algeria, Angola, Iran, Kuwait, Libya, Nigeria, Qatar, UAE) and OAPEC (Bahrain, Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Saudi Arabia) states and Oman were excluded.

18. The 8 states are: Equatorial Guinea, Libya, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, the UAE, and Qatar.

19. As a microstate, Brunei is not included in EIU’s dataset, which likely skews these results.

20. The Polity IV data measures regimes on a scale from -10 (perfectly authoritarian) to 10 (perfectly democratic). For more, see "Polity IV Project: Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800-2008," *Systemicpeace.org*, 2010, <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm> (accessed 16 June 2010).

21. Freedom House’s Freedom in the World Survey assigns regime’s scores for both Political Rights and Civil Liberties. These ratings run from 1 (full freedom) to 7 (no freedom), and the combined score results from simply adding the two together and dividing them by two. For more, see "Freedom House Freedom in the World Survey," *Freedomhouse.org*, 2010, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=15> (accessed 16 June 2010).

22. *IMF.org*, 2010.

23. *EIU.com*, 2008.

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26. *EIU.com*, 2008.

27. *IMF.org*, 2010.

28. *EIU.com*, 2008.

29. *IMF.org*, 2010.

30. After Burma are Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Chad, and North Korea (in that order).

31. See Case, 81.

32. *IMF.org*, 2010.

33. The United Nations Human Development Index rates member-states, combining measures of GDP/capita, literacy, and life expectancy, on a scale from 0 to 10. "The United Nations Human Development Reports," *UNDP.org*, 2010, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/> (accessed 16 June 2010).

34. The Corruption Perceptions Index measures states for government transparency on a scale from 0 to 10. "Corruption Perceptions Index 2009," *Transparency.org*, 2009, http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2009 (accessed 16 June 2010).

35. *EIU.com*, 2008.

36. These and all of the following defense and population statistics from: "The Military Balance 2010," *The International Institute of Strategic Studies* 110, no. 1 (2010).

37. This number is a UN estimate for the year 2000. "Republic of Singapore – Public Administration Country Profile," *UN.org*, 2005, <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan023321.pdf> (accessed 21 June 2010).

38. Robert Dayley and Clark D. Neher, *Southeast Asia in the New International Era* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2010), 172.

39. *UNDP.org*, 2010.

40. *UNDP.org*, 2010.

41. Damien Kingsbury, *South-East Asia: A Political Profile*, 2nd ed. (England: Oxford University Press, 2004), 281.

42. "The CIA World Factbook," *CIA.gov*, 2010, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/> (accessed 15 June 2010).

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44. *EIU.com*, 2008.

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46. *Transparency.org*, 2010.

47. The World Bank World Governance Indicator measures the functionality of government institutions on a scale from 0 to 100. East Timor’s rating is 19.28 while Cambodia’s is 22.13. See "The World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators, 1996 – 2008," *Worldbank.org*, 2010, <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.asp> (accessed 19 June 2010).

48. Philippines GDP/capita: \$1,745, Indonesia GDP/capita: \$2,238, Thailand GDP/capita: \$4,108, Malaysia GDP/capita: \$6,897. *IMF.org*, 2010.

49. EIU Democracy Index scores – Philippines (6.12), Indonesia (6.34), Malaysia (6.36), Thailand (6.81). *EIU.com*, 2008.

50. Polity IV scores – Thailand (4), Malaysia (6), Indonesia (8), Philippines (8). "Polity IV Project," 2010.

51. Freedom House combined scores – Thailand (4.5), Philippines (3.5), Malaysia (4), Indonesia (2.5). *Freedomhouse.org*, 2010.

52. Indonesia’s 2005 Freedom House combined score (3.5 and "Partly Free"). Indonesia’s 2009 Freedom House combined score (2.5 and "Free"). *Freedomhouse.org*, 2010.

53. Thailand’s 2005 Freedom House combined score (2.5 and "Free"). Thailand’s 2009 Freedom House combined score (4.5 and "Partly Free").

54. Corruption Perceptions Index scores – Philippines (2.4), Indonesia (2.8), Thailand (3.4), Malaysia (4.5). *Transparency.org*, 2010.

55. World Bank Governance Indicator scores – Indonesia (35.48), Philippines (37.38), Thailand (43.48), Malaysia (58.93).

56. "The World Bank Data Catalog," *Worldbank.org*, 2010, <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog> (accessed 28 June 2010).

57. The five highest growth rates preceding E. Timor were Macau, Qatar, Azerbaijan, China, and Ethiopia. See *CIA.gov*, 2010.

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