Asia will be the laboratory for democracy in the twenty-first century. It will be in Asia that the big questions about the universality of democracy will be answered. And it will be in Asia that the proposition that democratic governance can lift both living standards and promote human rights will be best tested.

Today we can count up to ten countries in East and Southeast Asia that hold multiparty elections and of these it could be said that half a dozen are emerging as liberal democracies; Japan, South Korea, Mongolia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Thailand. In this brief presentation I would like to discuss how Asia got to this point and what the future might hold.

The Weight of the Cold War

The early post-colonial years in Asia saw a great intellectual and political effort to make democracy work. Constitutions were drafted, parties formed and elections held. Great statesmen and champions of democracy emerged in this period; Mahatma Ghandi and Jawaharlal Nehru in India, U Nu in Burma and Ramon Magsaysay in the Philippines. Yet it was only in India that democracy took firm root among the people and the political elites.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can today better understand the unbearable weight which democratic systems in the region had to shoulder during the period. This was a period of nation building, often reconstructing societies out of the injustices of colonialism and the ruins of war. It was a period when the burdens of leadership had to be carried by young nationalists who were untested administrators. Leaders had emerged in the anti-colonial struggle but their talents at fighting colonialism were not always the talents needed to build a new society. The people they were leading were struggling for survival with skills that often did not even include literacy. They had to mould themselves into nations from the ethnic jigsaw puzzles that history and colonialism has bequeathed them.
But perhaps the greatest burden was the ideological contestation of the period. The new countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America were confronted by the choice to be made between the great ideas challenging for supremacy in the Cold War years. By the 1970s and throughout most of the 1980s the twin pressures of nation building and ideological confrontation had conspired to force democratic governments from power virtually throughout the continent. The autocrats of the period were heads of communist parties, such as Mao Zedong in China, Kim Il Sung in North Korea or Phan Van Dong in a unified Vietnam, or military strongmen like General Ne Win in Burma, General Suharto in Indonesia and General Chiang Kai-shek here in Taiwan. Civilian leaders understood the new self-serving rules of the game only too clearly and Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, Park Chung Hee in South Korea and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in Pakistan demonstrated their disregard for free elections.

Democracy was in bad shape. By the 1980s in Asia it was practised with difficulty in India and virtually ignored elsewhere. Japan, Malaysia and Singapore went through the processes of elections but their leaders ensured through the powers of incumbency and the cynical manipulation of the law that opposition parties were in no position to exert a challenge.

Ideological and Cultural Challenge to Democracy

The 1980s saw not only the eclipse of democracy in much of Asia but also the rise of the Asian 'tiger' economies. For over a decade Asian countries like South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Taiwan registered the fastest growth rates in the world. With this success came a newfound confidence in their systems of government and an understandable assertiveness in lauding those systems. Democracy did not figure large in these analyses. In its place came new ideas based on Confucianism, Asian Values and the need for strong government.

The answer, Asians were told, was to support strong government committed to economic growth and to give leaders the time they needed to transform Asian societies into modern successful states. Here was a formula for government involvement in virtually all aspects of life. Interventionist industry policies were one side of a philosophy that also called for social engineering policies. Decisions on issues as diverse as subsidies and bailouts, ethnic university quotas and entry of foreign workers, labour conditions and women's rights were all taken by the same
small group of predominantly male leaders whose vision of society, however altruistic, was not subject to any significant political or popular review.

Asians, we were told, put more value on societal harmony and the advancement of the group than on individual rights and were thus prepared to make certain trade-offs for the benefit of society as a whole. This self-sacrificing attitude, it was said, would avoid the fractiousness and petty political intrigue so prevalent in Western society and would allow the government to carry on with its work unimpeded. Individuals would benefit from the high economic growth rates.

Some commentators called this system a flow-on from Confucianism while others referred to it as a part of Asian Values. Underlying the argument was a critical premise: cultural specificities should predominate over universal values where this was judged, in effect by the leadership of the country, to be in the national interest. The error in the Asian Values argument was to translate different values to mean that Asians should have a different set of rights and a different form of governance. Universal rights deal with basic issues that flow from one's inherent dignity as a human being and they sit very comfortably with different cultural traits around the world. One of those universal values is everybody's right to participate in decisions that affect them as articulated in Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and from it flows the basic reasoning for democratic forms of government. It applies in Asia as elsewhere.

**Democracy Returns**

Two events brought democracy back into sharp focus in Asia in the 1990s; the end of the Cold War and the East Asian economic crisis. The fall of communism throughout East Europe demonstrated that these regimes, in spite of all the self-serving propaganda about representing the working people, had no legitimacy domestically. Regardless of how much they insisted on the strength of their democratic credentials and their support from the ‘working people’, the leaders had never subjected themselves to a true electoral test. Without free and fair elections, governments lack international legitimacy among the genuine democracies. The fall of the Soviet bloc shows that they lack legitimacy domestically as well.
With the end of the Cold War came the end of global ideological confrontation and the acceptance that the market system within a liberal democracy was the most proven form of government. Much of Asia was quick to hear the message. The People Power revolution in the Philippines, which had swept Corazon Aquino to power, was a harbinger of a democratic movement that would sweep across Asia. In Burma Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy convincingly won national elections only to have the military refuse to recognise the results. In China the students built the goddess of democracy in Tienanmen Square. In Thailand, the revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej publicly humiliated the military coup leaders and installed Anand Panyaratun to lead the country back to democracy. In South Korea the rule of the ex-Generals came to an end with the election in 1992 of Korea's first civilian President followed by the election of Kim Dae-jung in 1997 at his fourth attempt. And in Japan the complete domination of the Liberal Democratic Party was broken thus allowing the electorate genuine electoral choices.

The East Asian economic and financial crisis of 1997 exposed the shallowness of the argument that Asians accepted benevolent autocrats in the name of rapid economic growth. The crisis demonstrated that economic growth built on political repression was ultimately unsustainable. The most obvious abuse of unfettered political power was best seen in Indonesia where the Suharto regime became synonymous with the battle against 'KKN', standing in the local language for Corruption, Cronyism and Nepotism. The same lesson was learned in Korea, Thailand and Taiwan.

What will the Twenty-First Century Bring?

Having seen so many post-colonial democratic systems in Asia falter, there are no grounds to fall back on triumphalism when looking to the future. Democracies need to work hard to retain broad popular support and widespread belief in the system. Leaders can all too easily squander this support if they are seen to be corrupt or incompetent. The first responsibility of the leadership of the Asian countries in transition to liberal democracy is to build confidence in the system and thus fulfil the people's ambition that democracy will bring with it good governance.

Is the international scene more accommodating to democracy today than it was half a century ago? This is a particularly important question for
Taiwan. The Cold War has been consigned to the history books in most parts of the world but its vestiges remain in East Asia. In Southeast Asia it can be argued that the entry of Vietnam in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1995 formally marked the end of the Cold War in that part of the world. But in East Asia there are two situations that retain their Cold War imprint. One is the divided country of Korea and the other is the question of Taiwan. In each case the division was initially based on an ideological confrontation that has now been complicated by the impact of nationalist considerations. It has been made so dangerous by the respective powerful security responses. So the question becomes whether South Korea and Taiwan can develop as democracies even though they continue to face the uncertainties of unresolved Cold War issues.

The empirical evidence strongly suggests that both South Korea and Taiwan can successfully develop as democratic polities. While shouldering the burden of maintaining high security preparedness, South Korea and Taiwan are now developing systems of governance based on representative democracy, a free press, civil liberties and thriving market economies.

I believe the empirical evidence can be backed by certain theoretical considerations. Whereas the Cold War was the dominant feature of the international political structure in the second half of the last century, over the past ten years there has been a dramatic paradigm shift. Today the question is not on which side of the Cold War divide a country is placed but rather how successfully that country is competing in the global marketplace.

Globalisation is the force that is testing, rewarding and punishing countries. Competitiveness, competence and productivity are the key requirements. Education, innovation and research capacity have become the means to achieve success. Under this new dominant global paradigm, South Korea and Taiwan are resoundingly successful.

One of the reasons for their success is that liberal representative democracy has shown itself to be the best system under which a polity can organise itself to compete under the globalisation paradigm. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen argues cogently that democracy has become a universal value. He explains why democracy is essential to the functioning of
modern society because it carries three key strengths. Democracy has the intrinsic value of allowing people to participate fully in the social and political life of the country. Democracy has instrumental value in sustaining a system that directs political attention and energy to the needs of the voters. Democracy has constructive value by maintaining a political dialogue that allows society to learn and progress.

The dynamism shown by the Asian Tigers economically will be matched by the dynamism of their democratic development. Asia in the Twenty-First Century will see democracy as an essential ingredient in the structure of successful societies.
*Roland Rich is the founding Director of the Centre for Democratic Institutions (CDI) at the Australian National University. This speech is drawn from his chapter entitled 'Democracy in the Balance' in Julian Weiss' Tigers' Roar - Asia's Recovery and its Impact (M E Sharpe New York 2001)*