

Fragmentation in Liberalism and Japan's Role



It was in 2010 that the Internet's potential seemed most powerful. A resistance that occurred in Tunisia became the Jasmine Revolution, which spread throughout the country through Facebook, and spread throughout the Arab region as the "Arab Spring." The Internet was called liberation technology. But now there is an awareness that the Internet also has a "repression technology" dimension. Photo shows M60 tank in front of the Cathedral of Tunis, during the Jasmine Revolution.

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Repression and resistance

Freedom on the Internet has declined for the twelfth year in a row. This was reported in Freedom House's annual "Freedom on the Net" (FOTN) statistics released in October 2022.¹ Twelve years ago, in 2010, the potential of the Internet was at its strongest. That year, a young vegetable seller self-immolated in Tunisia, with his message being shared via Facebook and calls for demonstrations spreading throughout Tunisia, eventually overthrowing the dictatorship of Ben Ali and coming to be known as the Jasmine Revolution. The movement spread throughout the Arab world, dubbed the "Arab Spring." Larry Jay Diamond, an expert on democracy, called the Internet "liberation technology" that enables mobilization for freedom.²



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Twelve years have passed since then, and now there is an awareness that the Internet also has a "repression technology" dimension.³ As AI-based face recognition technology expands, it has begun to be

¹ Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net 2022: Countering an Authoritarian Overhaul of the Internet" (October 2022). <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2022/countering-authoritarian-overhaul-internet>

² Larry Diamond, "Liberation Technology," *Journal of Democracy* 21-3 (July 2010), pp. 69-83

³ Anita R. Gohdes, "Repression Technology: Internet Accessibility and State Violence," *American Journal of Political Science* 64-3 (July 2020), pp. 488-503.

used by governments to monitor their citizens. With the advent of social media, public speech activities in the public sphere have expanded, simultaneously becoming a target of government crackdowns. The Chinese government created a huge list of terms prohibited on the Internet, and the Myanmar Army cracked down on people's social media activities to prevent the army's human rights violations from coming to light.

But this does not mean that people are becoming more accommodating of authoritarianism. Around the world, people's protest demonstrations against their governments are in fact on the rise. According to statistics from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, as of October 2022, 78% of authoritarian states face demonstrations of a non-negligible scale.⁴ The Thai people, opposed to the royal family's endorsement of the rule of the Royal Thai Armed Forces, risked *lèse-majesté* to hold demonstrations demanding royal reform. When the Myanmar Army overturned the election results in a coup, countless citizens joined the civil disobedience movement, risking their lives to shelter the National Unity Government and the People's Defence Force. In Afghanistan, where the Taliban regime was restored in August 2021, women whose human rights were violated continuously protested for equal education and employment opportunities. In Iran, protest demonstrations by young women in solidarity with women arrested and killed over wearing headscarves have continued, resulting in more than 140 deaths.

These facts show that people pursue freedom, human rights, and dignity under any political system. Malaysia's Mahathir bin Mohamad and Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew once argued that Asia has "Asian values" that do not mix well with individualism. According to their claim, there can be no movements seeking dignity of individuals in Asia.

But these political leaders overlooked human beings' fundamental desire for dignity. Everyone wants to live according to their own will. They want to make choices of their own volition. This desire is common to all people, and the psychology of pursuing freedom to make your own decisions is a "universal value." Amartya Sen, a proponent of this view, is also Asian, which is proof that freedom and human rights are universal values in Asia as well.⁵

Fragmentation and social media

If repression and resistance against it only occur in a government vs citizens setup, then citizens will prevail at least in terms of numbers. Confronting government repression as it mobilizes the police and military is not easy, but mobilizing a wide range of civilians can still lead to revolution. In fact, this is what we saw in the Arab Spring.

Yet what is troubling today is that fragmentation in society is deep-rooted, with citizens who oppose and support the authoritarian government strengthening their beliefs in the same society, as if they were heathens who cannot understand each other. Some Filipinos oppose former Philippine dictator Marcos' son Bongbong Marcos to win freedom, while others support Bongbong, believing in the Marcos camp's discourses that speak of the dictatorship era as if it were a golden age.

There are several reasons behind this growing fragmentation. One is social media. This is because social media algorithms connect like-minded people. So the solidarity of those with close political beliefs is being strengthened more than ever by social media. They share information with each other, express solidarity, and sometimes mobilize. Social media makes direct action easier.

⁴ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "Global Protest Tracker" (last updated on October 7, 2022). <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/interactive/protest-tracker#>

⁵ Amartya Kumar Sen, "Democracy as a Universal Value," *Journal of Democracy* 10-3 (July 1999), pp. 3-17.

On the other hand, this solidarity in social media functions as a tool to strengthen confirmation bias. Seeing so many people they follow sharing similar information makes people feel that the overwhelming discourse, interpretation, and action unfolding in front of them is the dominant truth. By repeatedly witnessing these phenomena, it becomes difficult to understand people of different discourses, interpretations, and actions.

The key to overcoming confirmation bias lies in face-to-face communication. People who share the same time and space try to understand each other, even if they notice each other's differences. Friends from the same class and colleagues who joined the company at the same time are good examples of this. By contrast, as human relationships move to social media spaces, people will look at each other as specks, also looking at political beliefs as an indicator of whether they can understand each other or not. With the explosion of information spaces on the Internet over the past decade, communication in social media spaces has expanded more than face-to-face communication, causing a loss of opportunities to understand each other beyond beliefs. Thus, this fragmentation is not only between authoritarian governments and citizens seeking freedom, but also among citizens, which reinforces the government vs citizen conflict.

Identity

People's need for recognition also needs to be pointed out as a factor that reinforces fragmentation. Francis Fukuyama is the author of *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*. There, he explains the need for recognition of people who move toward populism using three concepts: "thymos," "isothymia," and "megalothymia." According to him, all human beings have "thymos" (the part of the soul that craves recognition of dignity) that seeks self-dignity, which is used in politics. "Isothymia" (the demand to be respected on an equal basis with other people) wants respect as a being equal to other people and is a concrete component of thymos. "Megalothymia" (the desire to be recognized as superior) retains that basic desire but further seeks recognition as a superior being and so drives people toward a further need for recognition.⁶ Need for recognition is relative, not absolute, and as long as need for recognition drives people, human relationships will become more competitive than cooperative, thus underpinning conflict and fragmentation.

According to Michael J. Sandel's argument, meritocracy lies at the root of the politics of isothymia. Credentialism leads to "despotism by meritocracy" that sparks anger among uneducated workers. Workers feel they are looked down upon, and politics is said to use anger.⁷ This phenomenon is particularly evident in the United States, where it is not uncommon for university tuition fees to exceed 6 million yen, but the same can be said in Japan where the group of people economically fatigued has expanded due to the 30-year recession and the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, if Japan is not as deeply divided as the United States, it is probably because the various fault lines do not necessarily overlap. Fault lines, such as the working class and the economically disadvantaged, the less educated and the highly educated, and the church-goers and the non-church-goers, are all strongly linked to party support in the United States. Low-educated workers who attend church are more likely to be Republican Party supporters, while wealthy, highly educated, and more secular persons are more likely to be Democratic Party supporters.

⁶ Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*

⁷ Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020)

By contrast, in the Japanese case, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has historically had a base of supporters ranging from conservatives to liberals. The former Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) similarly had supporters from a diverse range of political beliefs.

However, this trend has changed significantly over the past decade or so, with the alarm sounding in Japan as well. In the LDP, the power of the conservatives expanded under the Abe administration, while the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDPJ), which became the largest opposition party after the split of the DPJ, took the conservatives of the DPJ. Recently, elections are increasingly debated in terms of matters related to political beliefs, such as same-sex marriage or separate surnames, suggesting a shift from focusing on economics and other topics that do not involve political beliefs. This shows that differences in political beliefs between political parties are gradually becoming more apparent. In the future, the link between social fault lines and political support is expected to become stronger in Japan as well.

China's discursive war

This is being exacerbated by China's discursive war. Since the Biden administration's Summit for Democracy in December 2021, China has launched a full-fledged verbal war to distort democracy discourse. It ignores existing definitions of democracy and spreads distorted interpretations. It is claimed that regardless of institutional makeup and protection of rights, democracy is a political system where the voice of the people is reflected in policy. As such, compared to the United States, which suffers from fragmentation, China is touted as truly democratic.

However, it is important to pay attention to whose voice the Chinese government reflects. It is not the people as a whole. It is none other than those who support the policies of the Chinese Communist Party. Minorities, women, and homosexuals critical of the government, those suffering from the collapse of the real-estate bubble, or those who oppose corona lockdown, are not considered people whose voices should be heard. These people are subject to oppression and their voices are made non-existent in society. Even if we try to measure the degree of democracy by whether or not the voice of the people is reflected, the Chinese government's approach to minorities is hardly democratic.

China's distorted democracy discourse may have an impact primarily in developing countries. Firstly, China's verbal war is unfolding on a large scale, with contributions being made in Asia, Latin America, Europe, and other regions and countries. Secondly, advanced democracies are wary of China's verbal war because they are aware that they are at odds with China over the international order, while developing countries are more tolerant of China's verbal war because they need investments from China.

If China's verbal war is linked to populism, there is a risk that words and actions that deny liberal democracy and the institutions and values of democracy will expand. According to the "China in The World" survey, which measures the extent of China's influence operations, Southeast Asian countries, such as Cambodia, Singapore and Thailand, are particularly exposed to Chinese influence. One of the aims of the authoritarian states in their influence operations is fragmentation of democratic societies. Asia is facing the risk of further division.

What is democracy?

Interestingly, both populists and authoritarians justify their actions and words in the name of democracy. Former President Trump and his supporters, who called for President Biden's election to be invalidated

due to fraudulent results in the 2020 United States presidential election. The Chinese government also enacted the Hong Kong National Security Law to limit Hong Kongers' freedom of speech. Both have argued that their actions are desired by the people and democratic.

So, what is democracy? In comparative politics, the definitions of democracy can be broadly divided into two directions. One is called the procedural definition, which defines democracy in terms of the electoral system. A democracy is a political system with free, fair, and regular elections and where citizens have universal suffrage. This is a definition used mainly by Joseph A. Schumpeter and others after World War II, extracting the minimum elements common to democracies.⁸

By contrast, proponents of another definition, called the real definition, argue that defining democracy in terms of the electoral system is not enough. According to this definition, democracy protects the existence of free, fair, and regular elections and universal suffrage as well as civil liberties as people's innate universal values, including freedom of speech, the press, religion, and assembly. Stanford University's Larry Jay Diamond and others use this definition.⁹

At first glance, the former defines democracy in terms of institutional aspects, while the latter seems to include the consequences of democracy within the scope of the definition. If so, the real definition may seem inappropriate as it includes the consequences of democracy thus defined.

In practice, however, the civil liberties elements of this definition are essential to the establishment of the electoral system that the procedural definition focuses on. For fair elections to be conducted, everyone must be able to run impartially and form political parties. In order to hold free elections, everyone must be allowed to criticize each other and to speak and report critically about government policies. Thus, Robert A. Dahl explains democracy using two concepts: "public contestation" and "participation."¹⁰ If freedom cannot be protected, democracy cannot exist.

Authoritarian governments that use elections lose both public contestation and participation when they control their elections, pretending that their desired policies and political parties have support. The Russian government held rigged elections in four provinces of Ukraine to decide that they should belong to Russia, while the Cambodia government dissolved the largest opposition party, the National Rescue Party, in 2017, arrested independent media journalists, and held elections the following year. Both developments happened because election systems have international legitimacy. That is, they thought that it is easier to maintain the dictatorial system if support for the government can be demonstrated in election results, even if they were rigged elections.

Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way describe authoritarianism using their electoral system in this way as "competitive authoritarianism."¹¹ According to Higashijima Masaaki, authoritarian states using electoral systems in this way have been on the rise in recent years.¹² Discourses that refer to voting behavior that is neither free nor fair as elections are challenging democracy in the sense that it distorts the electoral system itself.

Superficial rigged elections lack the freedom and fairness that elections should have and cannot be called true elections. This is why a political system that allows the government to conduct rigged elections cannot be called democratic. Civil liberties must be ensured for free and fair elections to be held, which is

⁸ J. A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (Harper & Brothers, 1942)

⁹ Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (Iwanami Shoten, 2014)

¹¹ Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹² Higashijima Masaaki, *Kenishugitaisei no henbosuru Tochishuho* (Changing Governance Methods of Authoritarian Systems) (*Chuokoron*, January 2022).

a condition for democracy. In order for what the Cambodia government claims to be elections to be true elections, political participation of the competitive opposition candidates must be recognized, regardless of ruling or opposition party. The media must be allowed to conduct objective reporting.

Over the past 16 years, systems and values of democracy have been eroded around the world. To regain democracy, liberalism must be restored. Without regaining freedom, even fair elections cannot be held. Democracy that has lost its freedom is no longer democracy. It risks heading straight for authoritarianism.

The need for an Indo-Pacific support framework

As governments repress their own citizens, governments in many countries use force to crack down on these movements. Demonstrators against the Russian invasion of Ukraine and mobilization have been arrested, and Myanmar people who support the pro-democracy protesters against the Myanmar Army's coup continue to be killed in army airstrikes. It's time to think seriously about how we can protect people's lives, liberty, and dignity.

Those who have been engaged in resistance movements in various places are now in exile mainly in Europe and the United States for their own personal security and in order to continue their activism. But in a world where liberalism continues to erode, the number of people in need of support continues to grow explosively. Some people also don't want to flee too far from their home country so that it is easier to continue their activities from abroad.

In Asia, however, only a limited number of governments are able to provide support to such people. Many people active in the civil disobedience movement in Myanmar fled to the Mae Sot district in neighboring Thailand, but passport renewal and visa renewal have not been easy, so they are struggling to continue living there.

If the current erosion of liberalism continues, government repression and people's resistance movements will expand around the world. Asian countries need to be prepared as soon as possible to deal with this eventuality.

However, there are naturally limits to the support that any government can provide on its own. Providing support to those who oppose other governments could lead to a deterioration in relations with those governments. This is why the Japanese government has provided little support to civil society in other countries to support freedom and democracy.

To overcome this, it is desirable to form cooperation schemes between national governments and private actors. NGOs have information and access to those in need of flight. NGOs, universities, and think tanks can host these people. This can be combined with support from foundations to make fleeing even easier. Even actions that are difficult for the government to take can be possible for these private actors.

However, the actions taken by private actors are not enough to save people's lives. There is also a need for visas to enter the country, while government help is needed to cross border areas heavily monitored by governments.

The Sunnylands Initiative explores public-private partnerships

There is an initiative that has been running over the past three years to create a framework for private-sector and government cooperation in Indo-Pacific countries. It's the Sunnylands Initiative. This initiative was launched by the US Center for Strategic and International Studies, the National Endowment for Democracy, and the Annenberg Foundation Council, with private actors from Asian countries such as

Japan, Korea, Indonesia, the Philippines, and India taking part from the outset. Although they are private actors, they include former government officials as people who can be expected to involve governments in this framework in the future. These persons include former Japanese ambassador to the United Nations Takasu Yukio, Indonesia's former Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa, and South Korea's former ambassador to Japan Shin Kak-Soo. I myself am a participant in this initiative.

Participation from Asia is growing every year, but one opinion that is being voiced more and more is that Japan should demonstrate leadership in this area. The United States is deeply divided and is rapidly losing its appeal as a model of liberal democracy. Additionally, it is etched into the minds of people in developing countries how the US supported authoritarian regimes in other countries as part of anti-communist policies during the Cold War. When the US tries to demonstrate leadership in the democracy field, it is always criticized for its double standard compared to past policies. By contrast, Japan has steadily built up political assets since World War II. It has built close relationships with countries in the Indo-Pacific region and has continued to conduct diplomacy that listens seriously to the demands of developing countries. This sincere attitude has been very much appreciated, and Southeast Asian countries always rate Japan highly. In the very difficult field of liberal democracy, it is difficult to provide support without such trust.

The Sunnylands Initiative meeting in August 2022 began preparations to implement the initiative and start substantive activities. It is trying to form a regional framework that supports people who risk their lives and fight for their freedom by establishing foundations in the Indo-Pacific region that operate with private and public funding. Now that the Japan government is formulating an action plan for the Free and Open Indo-Pacific initiative, I would like to advocate that this initiative be led by Japan as a public-private framework.

We must not give up our freedom. Freedom is not a given condition. I hope that Japan will take ownership and the initiative to defend freedom.

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