



Fostering Democracy in Southeast Asia: Emerging Challenges

Abstract

On Thursday, October 13, 2022, the US-Japan NEXT Alliance Initiative hosted a bilateral dialogue on fostering democracy in Southeast Asia. This event took advantage of the Washington visit by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) Senior Vice President Keiichiro Nakazawa, who shared his views on Southeast Asia democratization, ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific, and recent US policies and efforts. The discussion covered JICA's strategies specifically in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar. The goal of the discussion was to compare JICA's approach with current US attitudes and consider potential opportunities or challenges for alliance policy coordination in these areas. The hybrid event was attended by a dozen Washington-based think tank and government representatives.

Mr. Nakazawa opening remarks

Mr. Nakazawa opened the dialogue by asking; how can democracy be promoted in partner developing countries while authoritarian regimes continue to rise. He then explained JICA's approach and efforts to support democratization in Southeast Asia including the challenges and

obstacles they have encountered. He also reviewed independent assessments and data on the state of democracy in the world and the pressure it is under. Finally, he provided some historical context regarding the evolution of democratization in Japan and other countries to help provide insights into how burgeoning democracies can be helped today.

At the core of Mr. Nakazawa's message was that JICA puts a lot of emphasis on promoting democratic institutions, fostering a positive outlook on democracy among citizens and stakeholders, and supporting a well-functioning government that can deliver for the people. He emphasized that holding an election is not the hallmark of a democracy, and that there must be associated with them universal suffrage, freedom of expression and association, and an overall sense of fairness and transparency. He continued, saying that when these systems are established, people realize it is in their own interests to conform to them. It is the reliability of systems that build confidence, which in turn encourages people to follow the rules. Building strong institutions, the hallmark of a strong liberal democracy, can be done but takes time and will benefit from cooperation with international partners.

Mr. Nakazawa underscored that the process of sowing democratic seeds is slow, complicated, and requires a tailored approach to each nation. He said it is vital for all partner nations involved in democratization efforts to have a deep understanding of what each nation needs and what obstacles they face on the road to democracy. Legal and judicial capacity building has been one of JICA's main areas of focus. Mr. Nakazawa said that Japan tries to avoid telling partner countries how they should modernize their laws and judicial systems but instead offers various practices from multiple countries and highlights key components that make them valuable and sustainable. The partner country can then adapt based on its own history and culture, but with an eye toward harmonizing with other nations.

Mr. Nakazawa noted that democracy-support efforts face roadblocks such as a lack of trust. Vietnam, for example, was initially hesitant to share information about its legal systems and host foreign experts from Japan's universities and from the Ministry of Justice, but with time and effort it was resolved. He used Myanmar as an example of where democracy took hold but never found deep roots, true democratic growth was stymied by inadequate democratic institution building.

Mr. Nakazawa said that democratization often requires small historic steps taken over time, and he cited Japan and the United States as good examples. Japan took a long time to become a full liberal democracy, and there were setbacks in understanding what institutions were necessary and how best to implement them in Japanese society. Shifting to the United States, he asked all to consider that it took until the 1960's for universal suffrage to be realized. He closed by saying that major democracies should be patient with the process of establishing democracy as a universal value, particularly with countries like Myanmar. Offering a path ahead and for future democratic development in such countries, he suggested that Japan and other countries should engage with young and mid-career people including with exchange programs to give them the tools they need to pursue democracy in their home countries.

Discussion summary

The discussion section began with an American participant commenting on recent attacks on democracy across the world saying that it is important to move away from the idea that democracy is in retreat and instead to say it is under attack. He cited the ground swell of people across Asia fighting for democracy from Hong Kong and Myanmar to mainland China. He called for all to be clear on where the attacks are coming from, so that we can strategize and launch programs to counter. In his opinion, the root of attacks is multi-fold and includes corruption and authoritarians learning from each other. He suggested that allies describe to developing partners what that authoritarian playbook looks like, i.e., China indebting countries. He closed by saying there is an opportunity for complementarity efforts on programming and strategy.

A Japanese participant responded, saying that it takes time for democratization to be achieved, and that it could be a back-and-forth process similar to the Cold War era. Although in this case he thought that it is less of a monolithic confrontation and more about focusing on individual countries and their needs. He also said the types of attacks on democracy depend upon the country, as the reasons are often different with populists using identity politics to divide and weaken the people. He thought that there are no general answers, although there might be similarities. He cautioned against a cookie cutter approach to democratic promotion, though one consistent theme is good governance practices out to the grassroots level. Strong civil society is important to sustain

democracy, this can be supported through collaboration by donors. Information sharing among allies can be useful in this regard.

An American participant asked about Japan's support for democracy in Vietnam, noting that Japan has tried to assist the country in modernizing its legal system but wondered about implementation. He said that laws are only as good as those who implement them, and people in power in Vietnam seem unwilling to divest this power. Political leaders might be willing to see greater objectivity or professionalism for small-scale civil disputes among citizens, but they want judges who are compliant when it comes to political disputes. In that case, he said "all bets are off." A Japanese participant responded that human resource development at the point-of-service level remains important, but he recognized the limitations when it comes to political leadership. Building up institutions only goes so far. Still, over time more capable institutions can help move the whole system forward when enlightened leaders appear, and they can help prevent backsliding when autocrats return. He also noted that as many as one million Vietnamese citizens have submitted public opinions on various issues to the government, and this puts some accountability on the government.

An American participant agreed with the importance for capacity building but cautioned, as Mr. Nakazawa had remarked earlier, that each country has had its own history, and in the case of Southeast Asia this includes intense violence. Cambodia lost an entire generation when judges were targeted in attacks, for example, so capacity building should take this into account when considering long-term strategies for democratization.

She continued, saying that the concept of democracy should also be examined. "We aren't just promoting elections," she said, "it's the ecosystem around it." She asked the group whether a Western or US approach to democracy should be the goal or are other models like Singapore potentially useful. She added that while protests do happen in non-democratic countries, they rarely "move the needle" on issues, so she wondered how to make these more impactful. A Japanese participant agreed that we should think more about how to help activists amplify their voices on certain issues. Providing a way for citizens to express opinions that can be acted on by the government is a form of democratization.

An American participant wondered whether the US and Japan should work together on many of these issues in Southeast Asia, or would it be better to work more in parallel with a coordinated strategy. If working together, how can they properly balance roles/lines of effort. To this, the Japanese participant responded that aligning objectives between the US and Japan is the most important. Parallel effort is okay and, in many cases, the most practical option, but working together is ideal because it can truly align our efforts and resources. A separate American participant remarked that this might work for building institutions, which is important, but so too is working on the social and political side. In this area joint work might be more difficult.

Overall, the group agreed that the US and Japan are closely aligned in working to help Southeast Asian democracies deliver for their people by employing tools including economic development, good governance, and support for civil society. However, democracy is under fierce attack in part due to increasing economic instability, food and energy insecurity, heightened geopolitical competition, and autocrats wielding new technologies for digital disinformation and population control. The allies have a lot more work to do bilaterally and multilaterally to help sustain democracy in Southeast Asia and allow it to flourish in the future.

The US-Japan NEXT Alliance Initiative is a forum for bilateral dialogue, networking, and the development of joint recommendations involving a wide range of policy and technical specialists (in and out of government) to stimulate new alliance connections across foreign, security, and technology policy areas. Established by Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA with support from the Nippon Foundation, the goal is to help improve the alliance and how it serves shared interests, preparing it for emerging challenges within an increasingly complex and dynamic geostrategic environment. Launched in 2021, the Initiative includes two overlapping lines of effort: 1) Foreign & Security Policy, and 2) Technology & Innovation Connections. The Initiative is led by Sr. Director James Schoff.
