Chapter 28

Democracy as the Missing Link: Global Rankings of E-Governance in Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

The re-emergence of neoliberalism paved the way for the democratization of Asia at a time when many countries in the region were suffering from one of the worst financial crises in its history. The reluctant acceptance of the Washington Consensus by Thailand and Indonesia, the eager anticipation from the Philippines, and the resistance of Malaysia and Singapore contributed to the dynamic political discourse in the region. In this chapter, I will discuss the concepts of traditional and e-governance and e-democracy that are heavily entrenched in the neoliberalist orientation. More importantly, I will present an argument for the inclusion of e-democracy in all facets of good e-governance.

INTRODUCTION

Besançon (2003) asserts that good governance becomes apparent when “nation-states perform effectively and well on behalf of their inhabitants (p. 1)”. Assessing good governance has had a common set of criteria forwarded by leading scholars and international organizations since Harry Truman spoke of democracy and the dichotomy of ‘developed and underdeveloped’ in the same vein as the ‘Point Four’ in his 1949 inaugural speech. Among the well-known indicators being used by organizations include rule of law, accountability of authorities, inclusion of citizens in decision-making processes, and control of corruption (Grindle, 2007).

However, the gradual shift of governance from traditional practices to those that are assisted and...
enhanced by new information and communication technologies (ICT) has introduced new indicators and neglected some of the more important ones. If governance (pre-ICT and in many cases ICT-free) is measured with particular attention to the nation-state’s inhabitants such as the World Bank’s “interactions among players in civil society, business, and politics”; the UNDP’s “voices of the poorest and most vulnerable are heard in decision-making over the allocation of development resources”; and the USAID’s “transparency, pluralism, citizen involvement in decision-making, representation, and accountability” (Grindle, 2007, pp. 556-557), indicators for e-governance have little to do with measuring how good governance is perceived by the people. For instance, the 2009 Waseda University International e-Government Ranking measured network preparedness, required interface-functioning applications, management optimization, homepage, chief information officer in government, and e-government promotion (Obi, 2009 February 1). In other words, measuring e-governance focuses more on the infrastructure and how the government uses it to ‘govern’ and less on how the people use it to fully participate in the affairs of the nation-state.

This chapter will discuss the impact of worldwide e-governance rankings on the perception of good governance that in some cases leads to the notion that effective e-governance is a reflection of a truly democratic system. Of particular interest are countries in Southeast Asia that are regularly measured for good governance where the difference between their ranks in effective traditional governance and e-governance provides grounds for contentious interpretation. How do we reconcile traditional governance and e-governance? Do ICTs change the mechanics of assessing efficient delivery of services to the people? More importantly, as e-governance is increasingly becoming a fad, has it really enabled a genuine democratic system? For instance when Singapore toppled the four-year reign of the US as the best in e-governement including ‘relationship between government and its stakeholders’ in the Waseda ranking, it was treated with so much adulation that its less than stellar rank of 136th (below Indonesia’s 117th and the Philippines’ 123rd), in the World Bank’s 2008 assessment of ‘voice and accountability’ became almost negligible.

In this chapter, I argue for the importance of including e-democracy in the discussion of e-governance in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

BACKGROUND

Neoliberalism and Governance

The late 1970s to the 1980s saw the dramatic shift of world politics and economics from one that was characterized by heavy government involvement to one that focuses on promoting private individual profit signaled by pivotal moments in history. Neoliberalism is believed to have been initially manifested in Deng’s liberalization of the Chinese economy, Volcker’s daring move to change policies in the US Federal Reserves that won Reagan’s support, and Thatcher’s ‘hands-off’ policy on the British economy (Harvey, 2005). The neoliberalist approach, Chesney (in Chomsky, 1999) believes, appeals to many in the political spectrum from “…the center and much of the traditional left as well as the right (p. 7)” and which became the dominant ideology in the past three decades. Chomsky (1999) explained that neoliberalism is a fusion of new and classical ideas that are basically rooted in the philosophy of Adam Smith and revolves around the general principles of privatization, liberalization of trade and finance, ending inflation, and a market-based system of pricing.

Whether voluntary or through coercive measures, governments saw the neoliberal approach as an emerging trend imposed by the world power and was thereby inevitable that such a system be
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