



**BUILDING COHESIVE NATIONAL
COMMUNITIES AND PARTICIPATORY
POLITICAL SYSTEMS**

BY MUTHIAH ALAGAPPA AND ARJUN
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The hope of an Asian Century persists – a hope based largely on the steady economic growth in many Asian countries. To the contrary, we contend that regardless of economic gains, an Asian Century is unlikely to materialize without comprehensive political reform. These reforms need not come at the expense of economic objectives, but without political reform economic growth will falter.

Epitomizing this argument is the case of China. Backed by some \$3 trillion in foreign exchange reserves, Chinese aspirations such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are seen as proof that China is ready to challenge the United States for global supremacy. That China has experienced rapid growth over the last several years and has a strong economy is not in doubt, but its economic growth is slowing and many have begun questioning the accuracy of Chinese self-reported statistics. Regardless, further growth and competitiveness of the Chinese economy will require additional market liberalization measures that will challenge the control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) – a change the CCP has staunchly resisted.

In addition to placing a ceiling on future growth, the CCP has also failed to deliver on building a strong cohesive Chinese nation. This barrier stands in the

way of inclusive sustainable growth and limits China's international influence. The CCP's formula for building the Chinese nation based on ethnic homogeneity, unquestioning central control, and single-party dominance is failing.

The CCP publicly claims to be committed to a multi-ethnic state, but in practice its policies work toward an ethnically Han nation. This is resisted by Tibetans, Muslim Uighurs, and possibly the Manchus and Mongols; it undermines the country's ability to act as a united nation.

Furthermore, there is little or no consensus on the basis for the Chinese nation or the political system. Although the current Hong Kong protests are ostensibly against the proposed extradition arrangement, at base it is about domination by the CCP, which resists democratic rule in Hong Kong. If Beijing persists with its oppressive policies, Hong Kong could very well become another Taiwan and oppose the belief of "One China" that the CCP has endeavored to create. Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) identifies Taiwan as a separate nation and has strongly held to the idea of democratic rule. Although the island is politically highly polarized, democratic governance is cherished by all. Barring the use of force and Chinese victory in armed conflict, it is unlikely that Taiwan will be unified with the mainland. Contrary to conventional wisdom, we would argue that time is on the side of Taiwan, not China. Even if the CCP policy was successful, democracy in Taiwan could become infectious and affect other parts of China, posing a challenge to the CCP. Its desire to maintain absolute control over all of China could catalyze greater fracturing of the country.

The third challenge that China must address is the limitations of a single-party system. Though efficient in periods of revolution, turmoil, or rapid growth, single-party governments often stand in the way of the country's long-term prosperity. By removing proper discourse and debate, narrowing the lens of analytical thought, and silencing factions of the population, single-party systems prevent countries from capitalizing on their greatest resources, the people.

Without reform, China, like many other Asian countries, will not realize its full potential. To promote a thriving national community – a task essential to future economic and political prowess – China must democratize and allow minority groups to develop their own identities. Some experts argue that this could lead to secession and the dissolution of the country as was the case in the former Soviet Union, but multiethnic nations have been proven to succeed as well – India, the United Kingdom, and the United States to name a few. For their part the minority communities, as the *staatsvolk* of the new countries when they come into existence, must accept all people living within their territorial boundaries as equal citizens to prevent further splintering into disparate and divided states. These political realities require Beijing to embrace participatory democratic rule that recognizes citizens and not groups as the primary unit of politics. This principle and the reforms it entails are ideas that the CCP and many other Asian nations remain reluctant to accept. Thus, Chinese global supremacy and the dream of an Asian Century remain beyond reach.

Only India, Indonesia and Singapore appear on the path to building cohesive nations in Asia, but each face multiple challenges. India has been successful in building a multi-ethnic democratic state, however, if the present BJP government were to veer from this successful policy, a break-up of India is possible. One should not forget that the current states in India were independent countries and some were even longstanding empires. The policies employed by India that integrated most states and defused separatist movements/sentiments in Punjab and Tamil Nadu have not yielded the same success in Kashmir and other Northeastern territories. The ethnic nature of these unresolved disputes has proven to be far harder to mend than previous cases of integration. To address these challenges, India must fully embrace secularism and democracy, and be more flexible in interpreting sovereignty. While it should certainly advocate strongly for its cause, New Delhi must respect the principle of self-determination regarding states' desires to be co-sovereign or independent countries, or risk discouraging trust in the government and resort to violence to keep the minorities as part of India. The political map of a region can change with

time due to internal as well as external factors. The collapse of the former Soviet Union, and dissolution of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia changed the political map of Europe. World War II was the last time European boundaries were forcefully altered; even then, domestic situations were crucial. Today, the Middle East is in the process of change largely due to internal factors. Asia is not immune from such transformations; the key is negotiated peaceful change.

Although Indonesia and Singapore appear as successful models, both face challenges. If the bias toward conservative Islam takes firm hold in Indonesia, the country may splinter as not everyone in Indonesia desire an Islamic state. As with China, the effort to force certain ethno-religious characteristics on a diverse country would worsen national morale and the sense of community. Singapore confronts the problem of continued single-party dominance as did Indonesia under Suharto. It has prospered thus far under one party rule. However, the People's Action Party, like the CCP, is unwilling to cede power. The persistence of single-party dominance risks undermining future harmony, national cohesiveness and prosperity in Singapore, forcing it to explore other political options including rejoining Malaysia.

A few countries like Malaysia are moving forward with much-needed political reform. Political participation and anticorruption measures taken by the new government address important dimensions of political reform, but the country still struggles to establish a society in which all citizens are politically equal. It is still on the path of building a Malay nation in which Malays will be privileged and non-Malays would continue to be second-class citizens, a path that could lead to conflict and separatism especially in East Malaysia.

Political reform is lagging economic growth in Asia, a problem that stands in the way of Asian competitiveness. Asian leaders must be open to new and flexible ideas of sovereignty. They must build cohesive national communities and competitive, participatory political systems where sovereignty and political power reside with the people. An Asian Century is clearly possible, but until the effects of political reform catch up to the efforts of economic growth, it will remain beyond reach.

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