Expect Asia's Values to Turn Out Much Like Everyone Else's

By Garry Rodan

The notion of cultural homogeneity promotes the mistaken idea of a singular East Asian alternative to liberal democracy. Meanwhile, social and economic transformations in the region are producing changes in the diverse interest groups within Asian societies.

The result is new forms of political contest and opposition, much of it outside the tight circle of established party politics, which will have a significant bearing on political directions in the region.

Authoritarian rule may survive these challenges, but only through political accommodation with the new social forces. The first steps toward consultation by authoritarian regimes are in response to these dynamics.

In contrast with radical student movements and peasant insurgencies of the 1970s, which often operated outside constitutional processes, the agendas of today's dissidents in East Asia have narrowed to reformist goals. They thus stand a better chance of becoming an institutionalized feature of political systems in the region.

Pressures on authoritarian rule are coming from the business, professional and middle classes spawned by economic development and rising levels of education. They are seeking a stronger voice for the rule of law, transparency in government, and curbs on corruption.

Pressure for reform is also coming from organizations representing labor, women, environmentalists, religious movements, and activists for social justice and human rights. Opposition political parties are only part of a growing move to extend avenues for contesting the exercise of state power.

Although all these social forces are agitating for the right to influence public policy, the attraction of liberal democracy varies greatly among them. Some forces are amenable to state co-option through elitist and hierarchical arrangements that give them privileged access to political and bureaucratic decision-making. This is the model Mr. Tung's promoting in Hong Kong. And there are other examples in East Asia where authoritarian rule is being reconciled with sustained growth of the market economy.

The most successful case of state co-option of new social forces is Singapore, where the Societies Act passed by Parliament legally limits the channels for political expression. As an alternative, the Singapore government has introduced nominated members of Parliament, parliamentary committees of inquiry, think tanks and "feed-back" mechanisms that are intended to tap both elite and "grassroots" opinion.

Singapore's governing party, which has been in power since 1959, has also incorporated employers and unions into consultative structures. Such structures create channels for selected elements, chiefly from the professional and business classes, to contribute to public policy. But it is a technical expertise to assist in refining government policy, not the rights of dissenting citizens to representation, that is being tolerated. In fact, civil society is not expanding in Singapore. Rather, the already considerable political reach of the state is being extended.

Attempts to similarly curtail independent political organizations have had less success elsewhere in East Asia. In Indonesia, significant pockets of such activity have surfaced, involving coalitions of labor and student movements and grassroots non-governmental organizations.

In contrast with their counterparts in Singapore, elements of Indonesia's urban middle class are also forming political ties with less privileged sectors, albeit on an insecure basis.

In Thailand, the Philippines, Taiwan and South Korea, independent political and social organizations have flourished.