

Separation, Divorce or Harakiri? The “Crisis” of Asian Democracies in Comparative Perspective

Fernando CASAL BÉRTOA

University of Nottingham

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Democracy is currently considered to be in global crisis. This crisis is often specified as one of political parties. This article investigates whether this is true for Asia by comparing the state of Asian and European political parties. It finds that, first, despite some exceptions, Asian political parties are considered comparatively trustworthy and less corrupt. Second, a retreat of political parties into the state (i.e. “ostrich-like political parties”), as has occurred in Europe, is yet undetectable in Asia. Third, the maintained link between party and voter means parties’ active mobilization, which may explain Asia citizens’ sustained faith in electoral politics. Fourth, old continuous democracies (India, Israel, and Japan), affected by perceptions of corrupt parties, appear less consolidated and stable than new ones, the opposite of the case in Europe. Altogether, Asian political parties appear relatively healthy and embedded in society, suggesting a “global crisis” of democracy may be overblown.

Keywords: Asia; Democracy in crisis; Europe; political parties; scorned citizens

Separation, Divorce or Harakiri? The “Crisis” of Asian Democracies in Comparative Perspective

Fernando CASAL BÉRTOA
University of Nottingham

I. Introduction

In a 2010 documentary titled *After Democracy: What is the New Political Model?* five well-known intellectuals (historian John Keane, journalists William Dobson and political scientists Fareed Zakaria, Hilary Wainwright and Cheng-Li) analyzed the state of democracy in the world. The conclusion they all reached was that, no matter the region, the classical model of democracy based on party government and parliamentary representation was facing its most severe crisis since the end of World War II in 1945, at least.

In a remarkable posthumously published book, Peter Mair (2013) linked the current crisis of representative democracy in Europe with the crisis of political parties (Casal Bértoa 2017a). According to him, “The age of party democracy has passed” (2013, 1) because of the divorce between the *demos* (i.e. citizens) and the *kratos* (i.e. parties/government).

The current article constitutes a first attempt to examine the extent to which this is the case in Asia. And, in particular, to see if the “pessimist current” that is now devastating Western European scholarship (e.g. Biezen *et al.* 2012; Webb *et al.* 2002)¹ can be also

applied to Asian—both old and new—democracies. In order to do so, the article will follow Mair’s thesis regarding the “hollowing out” of Western European democracy and see to what extent it can be applied to Asia. For that will be shown party and electoral data for twenty-three Asian democracies in various historical democratic periods covering the years from 1949, when the first free and fair elections took place in independent Israel, to December 2016.

II. Has European “Pessimism” Travelled to Asia?

At the very beginning of his posthumous book, Mair (2013) summarizes the current state of affairs in Western European politics by stating that the golden age of party politics is forever gone. With such an unequivocal, although controversial, assertion he wants to suggest that while parties have not disappeared from the face of the earth, they are now in such a crisis that, paraphrasing Schattschneider (1942, 1), democracy is not “unthinkable save” in their terms anymore.

This is due to the mutual withdrawal of both citizens and political parties from the political arena. In a recent work published “in Mair’s honour” (Müller-Rommel and Casal Bértoa 2016), Müller-Rommel perfectly summarizes this idea in the following way:

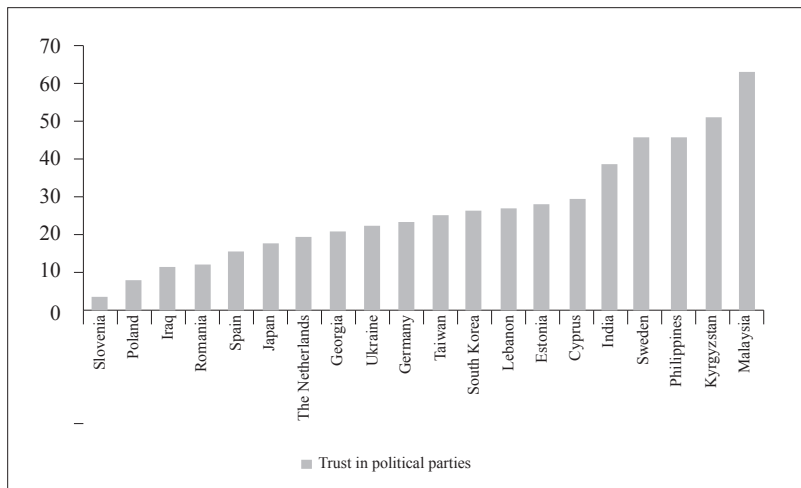
‘Popular democracy’ [has] become ‘hollowed out’.... Political parties are declining or even failing for at least two reasons. First, citizens are obviously withdrawing from conventional political participation. Several empirical studies have shown that... political parties are no longer able to mobilize ordinary citizens.... Citizens either retreat into private life or get involved in new forms of political participation and representation

¹ According to Muller-Rommel, North American scholarship, mainly represented by Dalton *et al.* (2011), is much more optimistic (2016, 4).

with institutions that are clearly located outside the traditional spectrum of party politics. Second, political parties have become more dependent on public funding [as well as] subject to new party laws and regulations.... Former citizen-oriented voluntary party organizations (parties as social agents) turned into new ‘public service agencies’ with decreasing internal organizational autonomy. Finally... political parties have increasingly become ‘governing’ rather than ‘representing’ organizations. (2016, 4-5)

In other words, and at least in Europe, the crisis of democracy is seen as a crisis of political parties themselves. But is this also true for Asia? In order to see if that is the case, figure 1 displays data from the last wave of the World Values Survey (WVS) on the percentage of respondents who expressed their trust in political parties in twenty democracies in both Europe and Asia.

Figure 1. Trust in Asian and European political parties



Source WVS (2014)

As evident in the figure above, and with very few exceptions (i.e. Kyrgyzstan and Malaysia), the level of trust in political parties is rather low; specifically, it does not even reach fifty percent. Interestingly enough, however, the situation in Europe is far worse than in Asia. Thus, the average level of trust in political parties in Europe only reaches 20.7 percent, while in Asia the figure is 13.3 points higher. Moreover, in most European democracies not even a quarter of the respondents consider political parties trustworthy institutions. In post-communist countries like Slovenia, Poland or Romania the situation is certainly worrying. In clear contrast, most Asian countries are at the higher end of the rankings. Only Iraq—not surprisingly—and Japan—very surprisingly—present levels of trust below twenty-five percent.

The above-cited “better-off” situation of political parties in Asia than in Europe is also confirmed by data from Transparency International’s Global Corruption Barometer (GCB). According to figure 2, which displays in red all those countries where parties are considered to be the “most corrupted institution,” this is the case in all (surveyed) European democracies, with just one exception, namely, Denmark.

Figure 2. Institutions perceived to be among the most affected by corruption



Source GCB (2013)

In Asia the situation is once again a bit different. There, out of nineteen democracies surveyed, parties are considered to be more corrupt than other state institutions (e.g. police, military, parliament, judiciary, etc.) in not even half of them; in fact, only in eight, namely, India, Iraq, Israel, South Korea, Nepal, Taiwan, Thailand and Turkey.

All in all, one might wonder to what extent Asian political parties and, by extension, Asian democracies share the crisis of their European counterparts. In fact, also looking at the abovementioned surveys, one could conclude that Asian political parties are still in good shape or, at least, their health is stronger than European ones. Is this due to citizens' political engagement, parties' efforts to keep close to society, or both? In other words, is the process of mutual withdrawal observed by Mair in Europe absent in Asia?

III. Dataset

In order to try to answer the previous questions, this paper employs a totally new database containing information about electoral behaviour and party system development in twenty-three Asian democratic states. The geographical scope stretches from the Black and Red Seas to the Pacific Ocean. One may understand as “democratic” all those countries displaying a score of six or more in the Polity IV index.

As a result, this new pan-Asian database covers all Asian democracies between 1948 and 2016: from post-independence Burma (currently Myanmar) and Ceylon (currently Sri Lanka) to the most recent post-Saddam Iraq, going well beyond any existing database in terms of the number of Asian countries considered.

The number of democratic periods (see table 1) is higher than the number of countries because some countries experienced democratic collapse (e.g. Bangladesh, Laos, Russia, Thailand) or interruption (e.g. Nepal, Pakistan). One of the most extreme cases is Sri Lanka, where civil war, unsuccessful cease-fires and repeated episodes of political violence

led to multiple democratic breakdowns across its history since independence in 1948. Bangladesh, Pakistan, Thailand and Turkey have also had a fragmented history, with different party systems and political parties developing after each coup d'état. Similarly, in Malaysia and Nepal racial and ideological strife, followed by dictatorship and/or civil war, gave way to different party systems.

Table 1. Democratic polities in Asia between 1948-2016 according to region

Country	Period	Country	Period
<i>Central Asia</i>		<i>Southeast Asia</i>	
Kyrgyzstan	2011-2016	East Timor	2002-2016
Russia	2000-2006	Indonesia	1999-2016
<i>South Asia</i>		Laos	1957-1959
Bangladesh I	1972-1973	Malaysia I	1957-1968
Bangladesh II	1991-2006	Malaysia II	2008-2013
India	1950-2016	Myanmar	1948-1961
Nepal I	1999-2001	Philippines	1987-2016
Nepal II	2006-2016	Thailand I	1992-2005
Pakistan I ²	1973-1976	Thailand II	2011-2013
Pakistan II	1988-1998	<i>Middle East</i>	
Pakistan III	2010-2016	Iraq	2014-2016
Sri Lanka I	1948-1981	Israel	1949-2016
Sri Lanka II	2001-2002	Lebanon	2004-2016
Sri Lanka III	2006-2008	Syria	1954-1957
Sri Lanka IV	2015	Turkey I	1946-1953
<i>East Asia</i>		Turkey II	1961-1979
Japan	1952-2016	Turkey III	1983-2013
Mongolia	1992-2016		
South Korea	1988-2016		
Taiwan	1992-2016		

Source Polity IV (2017).

² No democratic elections took place in the period between 1956 and 1970.

Altogether the dataset comprises sixty-eight years,³ thirty-four different historical party systems (see table 3),⁴ and 164 elections.⁵

IV. Peter Mair Travels to Asia: Divorce or Just (Temporary) Separation?

As discussed above, there are two main problems with European political parties. The first involves “scorned” citizens’ increasing lack of involvement, the second refers to parties’ entrenchment in the state as if a protective fortress for their “ostrich-like” attitudes. Each of these problems will be examined in turn.

1. “Scorned” Citizens

Party Membership

One of the first signs of such withdrawal from the political arena can be observed in the fact that citizens do not engage so closely with political parties as they once did, especially during the “golden age” of the “mass party” (Katz and Mair 1995; Casal Bértoa 2016). One of the clear main examples that this is the case is the low levels of party membership observed across Asia.

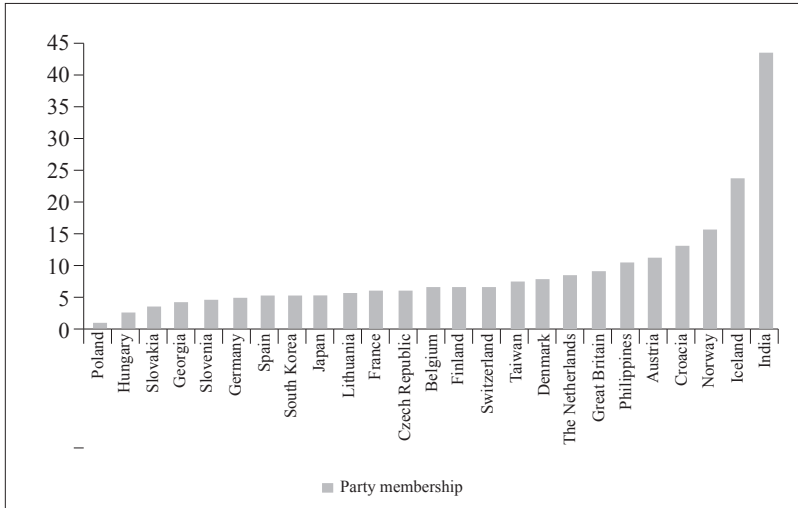
Indeed, as evident in figure 3 displaying data of the last wave (i.e. 2014) of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) study of Citizenship on “participation in political parties,” just above fourteen percent of respondents in Asian democracies were members—either

³ The number of years per country taken into account varies between just two (Iraq and Laos) and almost seven decades (e.g. Myanmar and Sri Lanka).

⁴ The number of historical party systems taken into account varies between just one (e.g. India, Israel, Japan) and four (Sri Lanka).

⁵ The number of electoral cycles taken into account varies between just one (Iraq) and twenty-three (Japan).

Figure 3. Party membership in Twenty-five Asian and European democracies

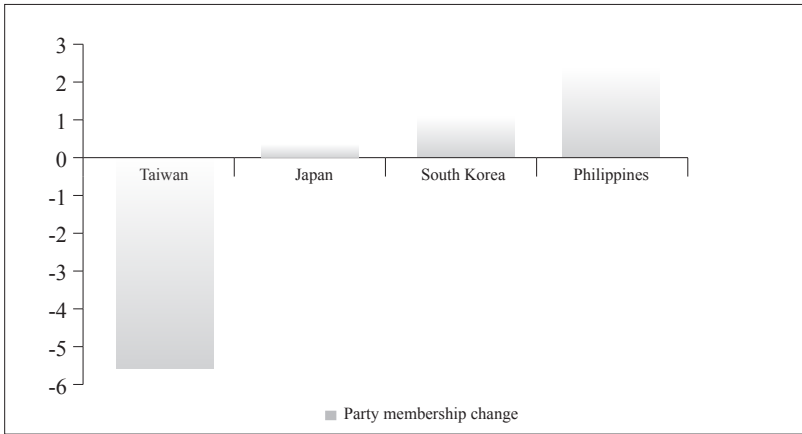


Source ISSP (2014)

active or passive—of a political party. Excluding India, a clear (world) outlier (see Whiteley 2011, 24) with more than forty-three percent of respondents stating they belong to a political party, the average party membership in Asian democracies for which data is available decreases to just 7.2 percent, very similar to the average party membership level observed in European democracies (i.e. 7.6). Even looking at only continuous Western European democracies, the percentage of respondents that declare to be members would be just 9.2 percent.

Although the average scores in figure 3 clearly conceal large variations across Asian democracies, it is surprising to see Japan, one of the most consolidated democracies in Asia, at the bottom of the scale with a bit more than five percent. Clearly, in marked contrast with what happens in Europe, where levels of party membership in new post-communist Eastern European democracies are almost half—on average—that of Western European countries, in Asia there does not seem to be a divide between old (i.e. Japan and India) and new (i.e.

Figure 4. Change in party membership in Asian democracies between 2004 and 2014



Source ISSP (2014)

Philippines, Taiwan and South Korea) democracies. In fact, in Philippines and Taiwan the level of party membership is, respectively, more than and almost double that of South Korea (see figure 3). More surprisingly, the former two, together with India, present higher levels of membership than in many Western European continuous democracies.

What is even more surprising is that, while on average the level of party membership between 2004 and 2014 declined in both European and Asian democracies,⁶ the degree of decline in the latter was much lower (just half a point) than in the former (almost one point).⁷ However, it is important to note that, as displayed in figure 4, much of that decrease comes from just one country (Taiwan), while in the other three party membership increased (e.g. South Korea and Philippines) or barely remained the same (e.g. Japan). This, together with the fact that Asian

⁶ India excluded.

⁷ Exactly two points if one considers only those European democracies for which data is available in both ISSP waves.

parties are much more rooted than many European ones, might lead one to think that even if in crisis, Asian political parties are coping better than European ones. Especially when taking into consideration that in Europe, out of sixteen countries surveyed both in 2004 and 2014, party membership only increased—on average—in three countries, namely, France (barely 1 point), Hungary (0.7) and Germany (0.1).

One might think the aforementioned findings are a result of a lack of data (i.e. only five countries surveyed by the ISSP). However, using a different dataset (e.g. WVS) would produce an outcome pretty much the same. Thus, following from figure A in the Appendix also portraying the level of respondents declaring to be party members, most Asian parties have a higher level of membership than European ones. With the exception of the above-cited South Korea and Japan as well as Iraq,⁸ therefore, all Asian countries are situated above seventeen percent—ten points higher than the European average. Moreover, and what clearly confirms the findings, six of the nine Asian countries surveyed are at the top of the ranking.⁹

Electoral Turnout

Is such a rosy picture also discernible at the electoral level in Asia? In other words, are Asian citizens still more willing to participate in electoral politics than European ones?

Table 2, which displays the level of voter turnout for all twenty-three Asian democracies under study with the exception of Syria,¹⁰ shows that contrary to sixteen European continuous democracies,¹¹ where a

⁸ The very low levels of party membership in Iraq are clearly explained by post-authoritarian legacies (Rangwala 2005).

⁹ Cyprus is the only (European) exception.

¹⁰ Voter turnout data was available for the 1954 parliamentary elections in Syria and the 1946 general elections in Turkey.

¹¹ These are Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, The Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

Table 2. Voter turnout in twenty-three Asian democracies

Countries	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
<i>Bangladesh</i>				54.9			75	
<i>East Timor</i>							83.2	74.8
<i>India</i>		61.7	58.2	57.9	60.8	59.2	58.2	66.4
<i>Indonesia</i>						93.3	77.6	75.1
<i>Iraq</i>								60.5
<i>Israel</i>	86.9	79.9	82.8	78.9	79.1	78.5	65.4	70.1
<i>Japan</i>		75.9	71.8	71.1	68.8	66.7	64.3	56
<i>Kyrgyzstan</i>								56.6
<i>Laos</i>		78.9						
<i>Lebanon</i>							50.3	
<i>Malaysia</i>		78.1	76.3				76	84.8
<i>Mongolia</i>						92	79.5	69.4
<i>Myanmar</i>	49.8	35.4	66					
<i>Nepal</i>						65.8	63.3	78.3
<i>Pakistan</i>				63	43.1	40.3	44.6	53.6
<i>Philippines</i>					90	73.4	73.9	78.1
<i>Russia</i>						62.3	55.7	
<i>South Korea</i>					75.7	67.9	54.4	56.2
<i>Sri Lanka</i>	55.8	69.9	78.2	85.8			68.7	77.7
<i>Syria</i>		n/a						
<i>Taiwan</i>						69.3	61.3	70.5
<i>Thailand</i>						62	72.6	75
<i>Turkey</i>	n/a	87.8	72.4	68.6	92.8	85.4	81.8	87.6
<i>Asian average (continuous)*</i>	64.2 (86.9)	71 (72.5)	72.2 (70.9)	68.6 (69.3)	72.9 (69.6)	70.5 (68.1)	67 (62.6)	70 (64.2)
<i>European average</i>	82.2	84	85.3	84.6	82.6	78.6	76.5	75.4

* “Continuous” Asian democracies are India, Israel and Japan.

Source IDEA (2017a)

Table 3. Patterns of turnout

Record levels of abstention		Frequency of record high abstention		
<i>Country</i>	<i>Years</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>% (Asia)</i>	<i>% (Europe)</i>
Old democracies				
India	1971, 1962, 1991	1960s	10	6.1
Israel	2006, 2009, 2012, 2003	1970s	10	2
Japan	2014, 2012, 1996	1980s	0	2
		1990s	20	24.5
		2000s	30	40.8
		2010s	30	24.5
		<i>Total</i>	100	100
New democracies				
Indonesia	2004, 2009, 2014	1980s	8.3	
Mongolia	2012, 2016, 2008	1990s	33.3	
Pakistan	1997, 1993, 1998	2000s	37.5	
Philippines	2007, 1992, 1995	2010s	20.8	
South Korea	2008, 2012, 2000	<i>Total</i>	100	
Taiwan	2008, 2004, 2001			
Thailand	1992, 1995, 1996			
Turkey III	1987, 1983, 2011			

Source IDEA (2017a)

steady decline in levels of electoral turnout can clearly be observed since the 1960s, culminating in 75.4 in the 2010-16 period, in Asia—on average—there is no such trend. Thus, while the 2000s present a particularly low level of voter turnout with just sixty-seven percent, just three more than in the 1940s, electoral participation in the last seven years has increased three points on average. In fact, looking at the average level of turnout in each country, one can see that with very few exceptions (i.e. East Timor, Indonesia and Mongolia), the level of electoral participation in 2016 was higher in most Asian democracies. In countries like India, Malaysia, Nepal, Taiwan, and Thailand as well as—

to a lesser extent—Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Turkey, citizens did not vote in legislative elections as they do now.¹² This is in clear contrast with what can be observed in almost every single European country (Casal Bértoa and Rama 2017; Mair 2013).

But this contrast in the extent to which electoral participation differs in both Asia and Europe can also be observed by looking at patterns of abstention, rather than general trends. Table 3 looks at the three elections with record abstention levels in both old and new Asian democracies and compares them with the patterns observed in Europe. The result could not be clearer. While in European continuous democracies the number of elections with very low turnout has exponentially increased over time—concentrating mostly in the last sixteen years—in the three Asian continuous democracies the increase is not so remarkable. Moreover, only in Japan were the most recent parliamentary elections the most sparsely attended since the beginning of democracy at the end of World War II, confirming a critical trend (Kraus et al. 2017) already visible in the previous sub-section (i.e. very low party membership). In India, for example, none of the record abstention elections have taken place during the last quarter of a century. An analysis of voter turnout patterns in new Asian democracies simply confirms what has just been said, namely, Asia citizens have not abandoned the electoral arena to the extent that European voters have. And this can also be observed in four out of five Asian regions: the only exception is East Asia (see table A in the Appendix).

Electoral Volatility

However, the fact that citizens continue to go to the polls every four/five years and cast their votes does not mean that they do so for the same

¹² Even comparing only Asian and European continuous democracies, the decreasing trend in the latter is not so clearly visible in the former.

Table 4. Electoral volatility in eighteen Asian democracies¹³

Countries	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
<i>East Timor</i>						38.4	23.1
<i>India</i>	15.2	18.4	20.3	18.5	15.3	9.1	22.4
<i>Indonesia</i>						21.6	27.6
<i>Israel</i>	15.2	6.1	20.7	17.1	19.7	23.2	24.6
<i>Japan</i>	7.6	6.2	3.6	3.9	16.1	10.4	22.4
<i>Kyrgyzstan</i>							37.7
<i>Malaysia</i>	37.4	22.7					5.2
<i>Mongolia</i>					19.9	14.3	13.4
<i>Myanmar</i>		14.7					
<i>Nepal</i>							19.2
<i>Pakistan</i>					17.5		28.9
<i>Philippines</i>					46.9	55.4	41
<i>Russia</i>						27.2	
<i>South Korea</i>					29	26.5	21.3
<i>Sri Lanka</i>	26.4	13.1	11.7				
<i>Taiwan</i>					9	11.5	19.4
<i>Thailand</i>					21.8	34.2	
<i>Turkey</i>	46.4	17.4	16.5	38.5	20	33	11
<i>Asian average (continuous)*</i>	24.7 (12.7)	14.1 (10.2)	14.6 (14.9)	19.5 (13.2)	21.5 (17)	25.4 (14.2)	23.4 (23.1)
<i>European average</i>	6.9	7.1	8.7	8.4	12	11	16.6

Source Casal Bértoa (2017b).

political party. In fact, and as it has been pointed out by most “party system change” scholarship (Casal Bértoa and Rama 2017; Chiamonte and Emanuele 2016; Mair 2013), the degree to which European voters change their partisan preferences from one election to the next has exponentially increased in the last decades.

¹³ Electoral volatility could not be calculated for Bangladesh, Iraq, Laos, Lebanon and Syria due to the lack of two consecutive democratic elections.

Thus, as evident in the above table displaying levels of electoral volatility calculated according to Pedersen (1979)¹⁴ since the 1950s, one can observe that the average level of electoral instability in Europe's continuous democracies doubled in the last three decades and almost tripled since the 1950s. This is in clear contrast to the average levels of volatility in Asia, which, even if seven points higher than in Europe, have experienced a small decrease in the 2010-16 period. Electoral volatility in East Timor, Malaysia, Mongolia, Philippines, South Korea and Turkey exhibited lower levels of volatility in 2016 than any other time in their histories.

Interestingly enough, however, unstable politics—at least at the electoral level—seems to be the norm in more consolidated Asian democracies like Israel, India and Japan. In all three countries volatility has increased during the last decade, especially in the latter two, where it has more than doubled. Still, when one looks at the average trend over time, the story is not so straightforward, nor can a general (increasing) trend be detected (see scores in brackets in table 4).¹⁵

Once again an examination of the patterns of electoral volatility in both Asia and Europe, and in particular the number of elections with record volatility levels, makes clear the differentiation between the two continents. Thus, while elections have become more and more unpredictable in Europe, especially in the last two decades when more than half of the most unstable elections have taken place, in Asian old democracies electoral volatility has reached record levels only very recently, i.e. the last elections in Israel and India and the last two in Japan. This is in clear contrast with Asian newer democracies, where

¹⁴ $TEV = \sum |V_{i,t} - V_{i,t-1}|^2$, in which TEV stands for 'total electoral volatility', $V_{i,t}$ is the vote share for a party i th at a given election (t) and $V_{i,t-1}$ is the vote share of the same party i th at the previous elections ($t-1$).

¹⁵ Perhaps with the exception of Japan, characterized by rather stable electoral politics at least until very recently (Mair and Sakano 1998), the story of Asian continuous democracies seems to be one of continuous re-alignment.

Table 5. Patterns of volatility

Record levels of abstention		Frequency of record high abstention		
<i>Country</i>	<i>Years</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>% (Asia)</i>	<i>% (Europe)</i>
Old democracies				
India	1980, 2014, 1962	1960s	11.1	2.9
Israel	2012, 1977, 2003	1970s	11.1	17.6
Japan	1996, 2012, 2014	1980s	11.1	8.8
		1990s	11.1	17.6
		2000s	11.1	23.5
		2010s	44.4	29.4
			100	100
New democracies				
Mongolia	2000, 2016, 1996	1980s	4.8	
Pakistan	2013, 1997, 1990	1990s	28.6	
Philippines	2001, 1992, 2010	2000s	38.1	
South Korea	2008, 1992, 2012	2010s	28.6	
Taiwan	2016, 2012, 2008		100	
Thailand	2001, 1996, 2005			
Turkey III	2002, 1987, 2007			

Source Adeney (2017), Casal Bértoa and Rama (2017), Lee and Casal Bértoa (2017).

“earthquake elections” tended to accumulate during the 2000s.

In terms of the different Asian regions, one can see once again that there is no clear trend (table A in the Appendix). While in Southeast Asia and the Middle East volatility has decreased on average, it has increased exponentially in both South Asia and Central Asia, and remained more or less the same since the 1990s in East Asia. Clearly, the post-communist legacy of Central Asian countries (Epperly 2011) makes their politics the most volatile in Asia.

Electoral Fragmentation

In Europe, as already mentioned, a great part of the volatility has been due to the appearance of new parties on the political scene (Chiamonte

Table 6. Electoral fragmentation in twenty-three Asian democracies

Countries	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
<i>Bangladesh</i>				1.8			2.9	
<i>East Timor</i>							4.1	4.2
<i>India</i>		3.6	4.5	3.9	4.2	6	7.7	6.8
<i>Indonesia</i>						5.1	9.1	8.9
<i>Iraq</i>								n/a
<i>Israel</i>	5.4	5.5	4.7	4.4	4.3	7.1	7.8	8.2
<i>Japan</i>		3.6	2.9	3.8	3.5	4.3	3.6	4.5
<i>Kyrgyzstan</i>								7.7
<i>Laos</i>		n/a						
<i>Lebanon</i>							n/a	
<i>Malaysia</i>		3.6	4.1				5.6	5.5
<i>Mongolia</i>						2.7	2.6	3.4
<i>Myanmar</i>		3.1	2.4					
<i>Nepal</i>						3.9	5.3	5.7
<i>Pakistan</i>				4.8	3.6	3.4	4.7	5.5
<i>Philippines</i>					7.6	4.2		4.6
<i>Russia</i>						11.2	6.6	
<i>South Korea</i>					4.2	3.9	3.7	3.5
<i>Sri Lanka</i>	3.8	3.8	4.4	3.1			2.8	2.6
<i>Syria</i>		3.8						
<i>Taiwan</i>						2.8	3.1	3
<i>Thailand</i>						6	3	2.8
<i>Turkey</i>	1.3	2.2	3.1	3.7	3.5	5.9	4.5	3
<i>Asian average (continuous)</i>	3.5 (5.4)	3.7 (4.2)	3.7 (4)	3.6 (4)	4.4 (4)	5.1 (5.8)	4.8 (6.4)	5 (6.5)
<i>European average</i>	3.9	3.8	3.8	4.2	4.4	5.1	4.8	5.5

Source Casal Bértoa (2017b).

Table 7. Patterns of fragmentation

Record levels of abstention		Frequency of record high abstention		
<i>Country</i>	<i>Years</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>% (Asia)</i>	<i>% (Europe)</i>
Old democracies				
India	2009, 2004, 2014	1960s	0	5.5
Israel	1999, 2006, 2012	1970s	0	7.5
Japan	1993, 2012, 2000	1980s	0	10
		1990s	22.2	27.5
		2000s	44.4	12.5
		2010s	33.3	37.5
			100	100
New democracies				
Indonesia	2009, 2014, 2004	1980s	4	
Mongolia	2012, 2000, 2016	1990s	28	
Pakistan	2013, 2008, 1997	2000s	44	
Philippines	2004, 2007, 1992, 2013	2010s	24	
South Korea	1988, 2006, 2008		100	
Taiwan	2001, 2004, 2016			
Thailand	1995, 1992, 1996			
Turkey III	1999, 1995, 2002			

Source Lee and Casal Bértoa (2017), Casal Bértoa and Rama (2017).

and Emanuele 2015; Mainwaring et al. 2016), which have been “smart” enough to occupy the space left by colluding traditional parties (Katz and Mair 2009) and capture voters’ grievances (Hernández and Kriesi 2016).

The table above displays the levels of electoral fragmentation in both Asia and Europe. Using Laakso and Taagepera’s (1979) index,¹⁶ one may observe that the “effective” number of parties (ENP) in the electoral arena has steadily increased on average in Europe since the end of World War II. A similar picture can be observed in Asia, especially until the 1990s when the ENP stabilized around five. Interestingly enough, the

¹⁶ ENPP=1/Σvi², where vi is the proportion of seats of the ith party.

only country where electoral fragmentation during the last seven years has substantially decreased is India.

A very similar picture follows from table 7. The percentage of elections with a record high number of parties increases in both old and new democracies until the 2010s, in clear contrast with European democracies where the increase is almost linear—with the 2000s as the only exception. Still, and looking at table A in the Appendix showing how electoral fragmentation has increased in almost all Asian regions, it is possible to conclude that, like in Europe, fragmented politics is the future.

Electoral Turnover

The problem, however, is not so much that new parties are being formed in both Europe and Asia. The formation of new parties can be considered to be a healthy regenerative process (Lane and Ersson 2007). What can be considered to have a negative impact portraying to what extent traditional political parties are in crisis on both continents is the exponential and steady increase in the percentage of votes for new parties. In fact, when one compares continuous Asian and European democracies (table 8) the trend is very clear. What differentiates both continents, however, is the degree of change, especially in the last decade. Thus, while in European consolidated democracies the average support for new parties, understood as those which first began to contest elections no earlier than 1960, has increased on average between six and nine points every decade since 1970, in Asian continuous democracies such an incremental trend (i.e. around nine points) stopped in 2009. Indeed, as can be observed in the last column of the table below, electoral support for “new parties” barely increased in Japan, while it even decreased (by 2.3 points) in Israel.

Interestingly, using a different poll of countries and a different time period does not change the findings whatsoever. Thus, even considering “new parties” only those starting to contest elections no earlier than 1990

Table 8. Percentage of vote for “new parties” in eight Asian democracies

Countries	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
<i>Bangladesh</i>		19.9				
<i>India</i>	4.6	31.1	43.8	54	52.8	60.8
<i>Israel</i>	55.4	82.5	87.7	91.6	92.7	90.4
<i>Japan</i>	11.9	18.8	18.7	32.3	58.5	59.8
<i>Malaysia</i>	12.6					
<i>Myanmar</i>	4					
<i>Pakistan</i>	40.2					
<i>Sri Lanka</i>	1.1	3.4				
<i>Asian average (continuous)</i>	18.5 (24)	31.1 (44.1)	50.1	59.3	68	70.3
<i>European average</i>	4.4	9.1	14.4	22.4	29.3	37.5

Note ““New parties” are here defined as those that, polling at least one percent of the vote, first began to contest elections no earlier than 1960.

Source Casal Bértoa (2017b) and Gallagher et al. (2011).

(see table B in the Appendix), the percentage of vote for new political forces has increased in Asia, like in Europe, over time (some seven/eight points per decade), no matter the region taken into consideration (see also table A in the Appendix).

2. “Ostrich-like” Parties

As evident in the previous sub-section, and notwithstanding the divorce between voters and parties in particular countries (e.g. Japan, Pakistan), representative democracy in Asia seems not to have experienced the type of steady decline observed in most European consolidated democracies. On average, abstention, volatility, and votes for “new” parties are still higher, which is unsurprising given the fact that most Asian countries have either democratized very recently (e.g. Indonesia, South Korea, Taiwan) or suffered from frequent authoritarian interruptions (e.g. Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand). But democracies in Asia have certainly caught up in terms of systemic fragmentation and party membership, to

the point that a certain convergence with European continuous democracies seems to have taken place.

Does this mean that Asian citizens/voters are different from European ones? Or is the state of democracies in Asia perhaps due to the fact that political parties have not (yet) withdrawn from the electoral arena as European parties have (see section one)? Have Asian parties followed their European counterparts' example to the point of becoming "public utilities" (Biezen 2004) or do they still depend on the financial support and legitimacy of their followers?

Unfortunately data regarding party (funding) regulation in Asia and party patronage practices is very still very scarce.¹⁷ However, using data compiled from the International IDEA's dataset, the Comparative Constitutions Project (CCP) and the GCB, one may try to examine the extent to which Asian political parties have become entrenched in the state to find refuge from citizens' "disloyalty".

State Finance

One of the main instruments used by political parties to cope with citizens' increasing tendency (at least in Europe) to withdraw from politics is public subsidies. This allows parties financial independence from citizens and guarantees a minimum annual amount of resources for their political functioning. The result, at least in Europe (Casal Bértoa and Rama 2017), is a very high financial dependency on the state discouraging political parties to search for new members and encourage the political involvement of citizens. In fact, out of all twenty-eight European Union democracies, only three (i.e. Italy, Malta and Switzerland)¹⁸ do not guarantee state aid to political parties achieving a certain minimum level of electoral support.

¹⁷ For example, the largest survey on party patronage up to date (i.e. Kopecký et al. 2016) does not contain any Asian democracy.

¹⁸ Italy only since January 2017.

Table 9. Party management/colonization by/of the state in twenty-three Asian democracies

Country	Management		Colonization
	<i>Public finance</i>	<i>Constitutionalization</i>	<i>Corruption</i>
<i>Bangladesh</i>	No	Yes	3.4
<i>East Timor</i>	Yes	Yes	n/a
<i>India</i>	No	Yes	4.4
<i>Indonesia</i>	Yes	Yes	4.3
<i>Iraq</i>	No	Yes	3.4
<i>Israel</i>	Yes	Yes	4.2
<i>Japan</i>	Yes	No	4.2
<i>Kyrgyzstan</i>	No	Yes	4.2
<i>Laos</i>	n/a	No	n/a
<i>Lebanon</i>	No	No	3.8
<i>Malaysia</i>	No	No	3.8
<i>Mongolia</i>	Yes	Yes	3.7
<i>Myanmar</i>	No	Yes	n/a
<i>Nepal</i>	No	Yes	4.6
<i>Pakistan</i>	No	Yes	4.2
<i>Philippines</i>	No	Yes	3.7
<i>Russia</i>	Yes	No	4.2
<i>South Korea</i>	Yes	Yes	3.9
<i>Sri Lanka</i>	Yes	Yes	3.4
<i>Syria</i>	No	No	n/a
<i>Taiwan</i>	Yes	Yes	4.1
<i>Thailand</i>	Yes	Yes	4
<i>Turkey</i>	Yes	Yes	3.9
Total (%) Average	11 (47.8%)	17 (73.9)	4

Source IDEA (2017b), CCP (2017) and GCB (2013)

In clear contrast to European political parties, most Asian political parties still rely on the financial help of their supporters. Thus only eleven Asian democracies—i.e. less than half—guarantee public subsidies to political parties. In other words, and in clear contrast to what

happens in Europe, Asian political parties are encouraged to increase their followers so as not to become financially bankrupt and disappear.

Party Constitutionalization

Another way in which European political parties have managed to protect themselves against the crisis of social engagement is by legally guaranteeing their place at the political table. Thus, most European constitutions guarantee the “essential role” of political parties for the healthy functioning of democracy (Biezen 2012). Thus, and with just four exceptions (i.e. Belgium, Denmark, Ireland and the Netherlands), all EU countries have incorporated a reference to political parties in their constitutions.

This is in clear contrast to what can be observed in Asia where, despite the fact that political parties have become more and more constitutionalized, especially after the “Third Wave” of democratization (Möbrant 2017), there are still various countries where political parties remain outside constitutional protection. Japan, with one of the oldest constitutions in Asia, is perhaps the most paradigmatic example. Other examples are Laos, Lebanon, Malaysia, Russia and Syria.¹⁹

All in all, while 83.7 percent of EU countries’ constitutions regulate (and protect) political parties, less than three-quarters do the same in Asia. This means that most Asian political parties still need to attract citizens’ support on a daily basis and cannot rely on the legal protection and legitimacy guaranteed by the process of party constitutionalization observed in Europe.

Party Colonization

Another implication of parties’ withdrawal from the electoral arena to the

¹⁹ The Laos Constitution, though, contains mentions of the “Party” (i.e. Lao People’s Revolutionary Party). Meanwhile, the Russian Constitution mentions (once) the “multi party system.”

state has been their colonization of the latter. Following Kopecký and Spirova (2011), a proxy may be used (i.e. the extent to which parties are perceived to be affected by corruption) to try to measure the extent to which Asian states have been colonized by political parties, and if this degree of colonization is greater than that seen in Europe.

The last column in table 9 clearly shows that with most values around four (of a maximum of five), Asian parties are considered to be highly corrupt. Furthermore, and more interestingly, they seem to be uniformly corrupt: the only exceptions are Bangladesh, Iraq²⁰ and Sri Lanka. This contrasts with the trend in continuous European democracies, where even if the average is very close (3.7), there are important differences: Danish parties, at 2.9, are perceived to be the least corrupt, while Italian ones, at 4.5, are considered the most.²¹

Notwithstanding the fact that this is just a proxy, as the aforementioned scores only capture public perceptions—rather than actual corruption—it seems that Asian parties have been quick learners in terms of state colonization, perhaps influenced by the authoritarian legacies of their recent pasts (Hicken and Kuchonta 2014).

V. Conclusions

This article began with the assumption of a crisis of democracy in general and of political parties in particular. Departing from the European experience, encompassing the higher number of consolidated continuous democracies in the world, it was examined to what extent democracy is also “hollowing out” in Asia. The following is a summary of the findings.

²⁰ However, the survey took place only at the time of transition (before 2013), and certainly before Iraq could be considered to be a democratic country (2014 according to Polity IV).

²¹ The average level for post-communist EU democracies is also very similar to Asian ones, namely, uniformly around four.

First of all, and notwithstanding the deep democratic crisis in some Asian countries, both old (e.g. Japan) and new (e.g. Iraq), most Asian political parties seem to be in a better shape than their European counterparts. Not only on average are they trusted more, in most countries other state institutions are considered to be less corrupt. This is certainly surprising given that most models and empirical tests of the relationship between trust/corruption and democracy assume that the former rises/falls as a democracy matures (Treisman 2000).

Secondly, even if in absolute terms Asian democracies are on average still less consolidated (e.g. lower turnout) and stable (e.g. higher volatility and votes for “new parties”) than European ones, the general tendency observed in the latter regarding a clear divorce between citizens and political parties is still not visible. Thus, not only has voter turnout not decreased in the last decade, but the instability in the patterns of competition at the electoral level have remained more or less the same. Moreover, and in clear contrast to Western European democracies, most record elections in terms of abstention or volatility occurred in previous decades. Not even the vote for “new parties,” although still high, has increased so exponentially as in Europe. The only exception to this rosier picture is fragmentation: Asian party systems continue to be increasingly open decade after decade to newly emerging political forces. Although, and for the first time since the early 1980s, this is only so to a lesser extent than in European democracies.

Thirdly, one of the reasons for Asian citizens continuous faith in electoral politics seems to be Asian parties’ unbroken commitment to mobilization. In particular, these parties seem not to have followed European parties’ “Ostrich strategy” of taking refuge in the state. In most cases, then, they have maintained their legitimacy and, especially, financial links with their followers.²²

²² However, in terms of representation, and as follows from the GCB’s scores, they seem to have

Fourthly, and in clear contrast to what can be observed on the European continent where old continuous democracies continue to be more consolidated and stable than new ones (Enyedi and Casal Bértoa, forthcoming), the three continuous Asian democracies—and especially Japan—have been affected by their citizens’ disloyalty towards what are considered to be very corrupt parties.

All in all, and despite being an Asian tradition, it seems that most Asian political parties are not for committing any Harakiri. Nor are they for divorcing society and marrying the state, such has been the case in most European democracies. Conversely, it seems that for the time being they will have to tolerate the initial separation characterizing post-authoritarian democracies, in the hope that this will only be temporary.

pursued their own interests more than those of their voters.

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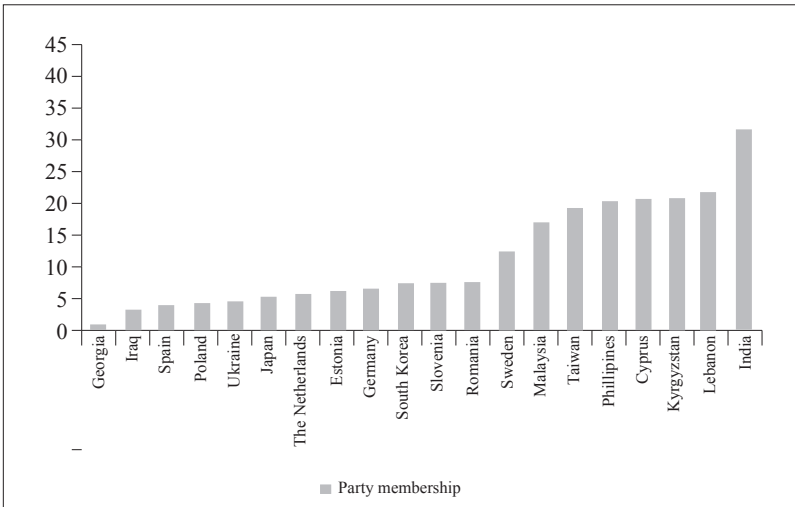
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Appendix

Figure A. Party membership in twenty Asian and European democracies



Source WVS (2014)

Table A. Voter turnout, electoral volatility, electoral fragmentation and percentage of vote for “new parties” in five different Asian regions²³

Countries(N)	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
<i>Voter turnout</i>								
<i>Central Asia (2)</i>						62.3	55.7	56.6
<i>South Asia (7)</i>	55.8	65.8	68.2	65.4	52	55.1	62	69
<i>Southeast Asia (5)</i>	49.8	64.1	71.2		90	76.2	76.7	77.6
<i>East Asia (4)</i>		75.9	71.8	71.1	72.3	74	64.9	63
<i>Middle East (5)</i>	86.9	83.4	77.6	73.4	86	82	65.8	72.7
<i>Electoral volatility</i>								
<i>Central Asia (2)</i>							27.2	37.7
<i>South Asia (7)</i>		20.8	15.8	16	18.5	16.4	9.1	26.8
<i>Southeast Asia (5)</i>		37.4	18.7			34.4	37.4	24.2
<i>East Asia (4)</i>		7.6	6.2	3.6	3.9	18.5	15.7	19.1
<i>Middle East (5)</i>		30.8	11.8	18.6	27.8	19.9	28.1	17.8
<i>Electoral fragmentation</i>								
<i>Central Asia (2)</i>						11.2	6.6	7.7
<i>South Asia (7)</i>	3.8	3.7	4.5	3.4	3.9	4.4	4.7	5.2
<i>Southeast Asia (5)</i>		3.4	3.3		7.6	5.1	5.5	6.2
<i>East Asia (4)</i>		3.6	2.9	3.8	3.9	3.4	3.3	3.6
<i>Middle East (5)</i>	3.4	3.8	3.9	4.1	3.9	6.5	6.2	5.6
<i>Percentage of vote for “new parties”*</i>								
<i>Central Asia (2)</i>						88.7	90	91.1
<i>South Asia (7)</i>						33.3	37	56.2
<i>Southeast Asia (5)</i>						52.2	57.4	57.5
<i>East Asia (4)</i>						41.4	54	57.5
<i>Middle East (5)</i>						29.3	52.1	53.9

* “New parties” are here defined as those that, polling at least one percent of the vote, first began to contest elections no earlier than 1990.

²³ Central Asia includes Russia and Kyrgyzstan; South Asia is comprised of Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka; Southeast Asia refers to East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines and Thailand; East Asia is composed of Japan, Mongolia, South Korea and Taiwan. Finally, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey are clustered in the Middle East.

Table B. Percentage of vote for “new parties” in twenty Asian democracies²⁴

Countries	1990s	2000s	2010s
<i>Bangladesh</i>		7.3	
<i>East Timor</i>		51.5	63.3
<i>India</i>	9.8	15.5	18.7
<i>Indonesia</i>	57.7	67.4	77.9
<i>Iraq</i>			n/a
<i>Israel</i>	49.9	52	56.5
<i>Japan</i>	24.1	58.5	59.8
<i>Kyrgyzstan</i>			91.1
<i>Lebanon</i>		n/a	
<i>Malaysia</i>		19	20.4
<i>Mongolia</i>	45.5	44.2	53.4
<i>Nepal</i>	51.1	67.5	55.9
<i>Pakistan</i>	38.1	45	52.7
<i>Philippines</i>	58.3	85.5	63.8
<i>Russia</i>	88.7	90	
<i>South Korea</i>	87.1	92.8	94.7
<i>Sri Lanka</i>		49.8	97.6
<i>Taiwan</i>	9	20.6	22
<i>Thailand</i>	40.6	63.5	62
<i>Turkey</i>	8.6	52.2	51.3
<i>Asian average</i>	43.7	51.9	58.8

Note “New parties” are here defined as those that, polling at least one percent of the vote, first began to contest elections no earlier than 1990.

Source Casal Bértoa (2017b)

²⁴ Laos (1957-1959), Myanmar (1948-1961) and Syria (1954-1957) are excluded.