

The rise of a new generation of authoritarian governments raises questions about the future of democracy, writes Mark Beeson

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The striking resurgence of strongmen leaders around the world has overturned some influential political predictions. A couple of decades ago Francis Fukuyama made quite a name for himself by predicting that history was coming to an end. The world, he suggested, was becoming inexorably more democratic as a consequence of successful capitalist development and an expanding educated global middle class. Such people simply wouldn't put up with autocrats and authoritarians.

In the wake of the Cold War's abrupt and largely unpredicted end, it looked a persuasive and normatively attractive thesis – especially when seen from the United States, which had spent nearly half a century championing precisely such liberal political values and economic practices. Vindication and victory, it seemed, were at hand.

When China joined the World Trade Organization in the mid 1990s it really looked like – as former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher famously put it – there was no alternative to some form of capitalist economy in a broadly democratic framework. China, after all, was the only remaining important state that offered a credible alternative to a capitalist economic system that was the greatest wealth creating mechanism the world had ever seen.

Now things look rather different. True, China has essentially become a capitalist economy in all but name, but not only is it still called the 'People's Republic', but Chinese capitalism operates very differently from anything found in the West. The private sector is certainly more important than it used to be, but the Chinese Communist Party maintains close control of what they used to call the 'commanding heights' of the economy.

Even more importantly, perhaps, China's rapidly growing capitalist class has not demonstrated an insatiable thirst for political liberalism, much less a desire to overthrow the existing order. On the contrary, the freedom to make money seems more important than the freedom to speak out. At this stage, at least, there is little sign that China is going to replicate the European experience in the way many outside China assume.

Big countries, fresh faces and bright futures

On the contrary, it should be clear by now that there is nothing inevitable about the direction of historical development. This is especially true of China at present because Xi Jinping is concentrating power in his own person in a manner that is reminiscent of earlier leaders like Mao Zedong. When coupled with a rising tide of nationalism and a desire to reclaim what is widely seen as China's rightful place at the centre of regional and even global affairs the persistence of 'strongman leadership' looks all too possible.

It is a political reality that is not confined to China. Across Southeast Asia, too, a new generation of strongmen leaders and/or authoritarian governments is emerging. Thailand

has long since succumbed to yet another military coup and the effective elimination of political opposition. Singapore and Malaysia have only ever been semi-democracies at best.

But it is the Philippines and the sudden emergence of new president Rodrigo Duterte that really highlights the region's potential to go backwards as well as forwards politically. This is not a phenomenon that is confined to Asia, and the parallels with populists like Donald Trump in America and Marine Le Pen in France are revealing of a much wider disenchantment with democratic politics across much of the world. What is most striking about Duterte, however, is his complete contempt for the rule of law or individual rights.

The Philippines is especially prone to possible democratic rollback, its unique status as an American colony notwithstanding. The Philippine military has never quite understood or accepted its role in a democratic polity. The Philippine people have had an unfortunate habit of electing populists who make improbable claims about their ability to fix the nation's interlocking and growing economic, environmental and demographic problems. Those economists and others who think that a youthful population is the key to economic development should take a close look at the Philippines.

It's not all doom and gloom in the region, of course. Indonesia remains the great hope. Not only is Indonesia an important and much-needed exemplar of successful political reform and economic development in a large Muslim country, but it is also likely to be one of the key countries in the wider East Asian region in the future, as well.

But Indonesia, too, has a still powerful military, endemic corruption and a rapidly expanding population with potentially unrealistic expectations about what their political class can deliver. It's a volatile mix and one that is made worse by the continuing lackluster performance of the global economy.

The reality is that the future of Southeast Asia in particular remains highly dependent on economic developments and relationships over which its governments have limited influence. If key trade partners such as China and even the US are also run by populist strongmen, can we expect the likes of Indonesia to keep the democratic flag flying on their own?