Workshop Report

Visions and scenarios of democratic governance in Asia 2030

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Using the Six Pillars foresight workshop process, forty-five Asian political, policy and activist leaders explored the futures of democratic governance. Organized and funded by Oxfam and the Rockefeller Foundation, the organizing hypothesis was that without a change in the nature of governance in Asia, poverty could not truly be uprooted. Changes in governance needed to be imagined and created from the ground up, not just imposed by the past or the elite. Five visions with accompanying causal layered analysis were developed by participants. Generally, these visions focused on more inclusion not just at the level of voting, but in terms of the participatory creation of alternative futures of culture, technology, economy and polity.

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1. Participatory knowledge

"Democratic governance will thrive in Asia, once Asian narratives – myths and metaphors – are used to provide support and give meaning to it."

"Democratic governance in 2030 will be radically different from how we see it today. We need new lenses to see the future."

"Democratic governance will keep on changing as new technologies, demographic shifts and geopolitical transitions challenge reality – prepare for flux!"

Organized by Oxfam, Chulalongkorn University (Thailand) and the Lew Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (Singapore), with support of the Rockefeller Foundation, these and other perspectives were suggested at a two-day forum in Bangkok, March 7–8, 2013 on Visions of Democratic Governance in Asia 2030. While there were certainly key influence makers from around Asia – a minister from Pakistan – leading civil society leaders and intellectuals from Thailand, Cambodia, India, Singapore, Philippines and elsewhere, the meeting in itself was not a typical conference highlighted by long speeches and Ministerial grandstanding. Rather it was an interactive workshop that used the methods and tools from the field of Futures Studies to explore visions of democracy in 2030 and pathways to realize that vision. While the process was highly structured – using the "Six Pillars foresight process" [1] consisting of methods and tools such as the futures triangle, integrated scenario planning, causal layered analysis and backcasting, the process was in itself democratic – participants worked and contributed to the futures they wished to see [2,3]. Each table featured participants from diverse expertise and cultural

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backgrounds and a group facilitator. The overall process and the various futures tools were articulated and conducted by the lead facilitator, Author. The conference was organized by Janepich Cheva-Isarakul with assistance of Paht Tanattanwain.

But why hold such a meeting?

In the past decades, Asia has experienced remarkable changes and two faces of Asia thus emerged: "richer, healthier, more educated, and living longer" and another where many still suffer from poverty, limited access to basic needs and human rights violations. Will these two faces converge creating a new integrated and balanced Asia or will they move in different directions leading to increased inequity, dictatorships and a loss of civil rights? As progressive global citizens, Asia Development Dialogue seeks best approaches to accelerate Asia's achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and beyond. It is within this context that the organization searches for new visions and alternative futures to explore how Asia might develop to 2030 and advocates democratic governance as a key aspect of the post-2015 debate [4].

But why focus on democratic governance?

Democratic governance is cross cutting, it links two different perspectives to the politics of the future – the idealist's belief in "fair elections, accountable leaders, and democratic institutions as the core pillar of every society [4]" and the realist's perspective that development is a sequence and "state-building is a vital first step for the state to provide welfare and security to its citizens [4]." As current reality is polarized between these two positions, by moving to the future, to 2030, it was hoped that alternative futures where there could be both strong governance and strong democracy could emerge, as well as a discussion of scenarios if an integration did not emerge. Thus, the future became a vehicle to begin to imagine visions of Asia where the two faces of Asia could integrate.

2. Conceptual framework and methodology

To ensure the debate on the futures of Asia was robust, the "Six Pillars" conceptual framework was used to elicit visions and recommendations. These tools are structured to help participants question, map, anticipate, deepen, create alternatives to, and transform the futures that they envisioned [5]. For each pillar there is an accompanying method or tool. The first pillar, mapping, uses the futures triangle to map the future. The futures triangle has three vertices: the image or the pull of the future, the quantitative drivers or the push of the future and the qualitative weights of the past. The second pillar, anticipating, attempts to challenge or disturb the image of the future using emerging issues analysis. These issues, for example, real time digital democracy in Asian cities by 2030, are then explored in terms of their first and second order implications through the futures wheel. The map of the future is thus made more robust. Timing the future, the third pillar, explores the structural patterns of history, particularly cyclical, linear, pendulum and spiral models of social change. Macrohistorical structure is thus used to bring insight to the foresight process, for example, will there be a pendulum swing back to face-to-face community modes of democracy by 2030? Deepening the future, the fourth pillar, unpacks images of the future and issues through the causal layered analysis process. Core metaphors are debated and new stories emerge; the future is deconstructed and reconstructed. The fifth pillar, creating alternatives, uses scenario planning to develop alternative futures, to ask what is missing, to search for outliers, for example, a demagogue using digital technologies to reduce democracy and corrupt governance by 2030. Finally, the sixth pillar, transforming the future, focuses on creating texture to the vision of the future; seeing the vision not as a goal but as present, as real. From this reality, the process of backcasting articulates strategic processes and projects that need to be initiated to realize the preferred future.

Participants began the meeting with discussion on the utility of the foresight model. Case studies from other meetings were presented. This led to buy-in. Those sceptical of the futures approach, given the reality of power politics, were willing to suspend their doubts for the two days, that is, to try the methods and learn from each other. Indeed, the entire process was constructed as a learning journey, to explore their hidden assumptions about the future, to work together to create scenarios and visions. Following this, they broke up into small groups and developed a core research question; for example, the role of climate change and governance or poverty and democracy. They then went through a questioning process explained below. From here, participants worked through the logic of the six pillars process. The challenge for facilitators was ensuring that everyone had a chance to speak, that every voice was heard, not just the loudest or the most eloquent. There was a perceivable excitement in the room as participants had rarely the chance to leave their focus on the politics of the present and move to the possibilities of the future.

While the entire methods and tools were used, in this report we do not present on, emerging issues/weak signals [6] that might assist or obstruct the development of democratic governance by 2030 or the futures triangle and the futures wheel. In addition, it is noteworthy that the traditional double variable uncertainty model of scenario planning was not utilized as the goal of the meeting was not to develop particular organizational strategies but to explore alternative futures and challenge core assumptions as to why individuals believe certain futures would arise. The double variable method is weak at creating deeper alternatives since the future results from the two foundational variables. This is especially so in multilateral settings where notions of uncertainty are not shared amongst participants. Developing visions and alternative futures of democratic governance for Asia was the primary goal of the meeting [7]. Most relevant to the report are two tools: (1) causal layered analysis [8] and (2) integrated scenario planning [7].

Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) is a theory of knowledge and methodology that helps transform the future by reframing the problem/issue through deeper causative levels and by constructing the issues through diverse worldviews and stakeholders. This allows the creation of more robust policy solutions, which integrate the perspectives of different stakeholders. CLA