

# The coming of environmental authoritarianism

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## Introduction

The environment has become the defining public policy issue of the era. Not only will political responses to environmental challenges determine the health of the planet, but continuing environmental degradation may also affect political systems. This interaction is likely to be especially acute in parts of the world where environmental problems are most pressing and the state's ability to respond to such challenges is weakest. One possible consequence of environmental degradation is the development or consolidation of authoritarian rule as political elites come to privilege regime maintenance and internal stability over political liberalization. Even efforts to mitigate the impact of, or respond to, environmental change may involve a decrease in individual liberty as governments seek to transform environmentally destructive behavior. As a result, 'environmental authoritarianism' may become an increasingly common response to the destructive impacts of climate change in an age of diminished expectations.

Long before the recent global economic crisis inflicted such a blow on Anglo-American forms of economic organization, it was apparent that there were other models of economic development and other modes of political organization that had admirers around the world. The rise of illiberal forms of capitalism and an apparent 'democratic recession' serve as a powerful reminders that there was nothing inevitable about the triumph of 'Western' political and economic practices or values (Zakaria 2003; Diamond 2008: 36). Nowhere has the potential importance of authoritarian, state-led capitalist development been more evident than in East Asia,<sup>2</sup> the principal empirical focus of this essay. The discussion that follows is necessarily generalized, sweeping at times, and not as nuanced as the reader might like, but an examination of East Asia's development and

the concomitant environmental problems it has generated highlights a number of broad-ranging trends that have widespread relevance.

The point to emphasize at the outset is that the populations and governments of poorer regions of the world like Southeast Asia might have very different developmental priorities than their more affluent counterparts in Europe and North America; they may have very different expectations about the appropriate role of government as a consequence (Mahbubani 2008). The possibility that East Asia's political and economic elites might have distinctive views about politics, economics and the environment merits emphasis because such ideas are often radically at odds with much of the most influential—broadly 'Western'—scholarship about environmental politics in particular and political development more generally. Consequently, after providing a brief snapshot of development in East Asia, I highlight the incongruent nature of some of the most influential strands of western environmental and political theory.

The major lesson that emerges from an examination of the developmental experience of East Asia generally is that powerful, even authoritarian states, have been central components of the region's remarkable economic expansion, and that there is consequently a pre-existing propensity toward authoritarianism that has been entrenched by the region's trajectory of economic and political development (Haggard 1990). In what follows I suggest that the increasingly severe environmental challenges faced by the region, and the possibility that resource-intensive economic development will prove unsustainable, are likely to entrench or encourage the return of authoritarian rule in many parts of the region. Not only is the emergence of an environmentally-conscious, politically-savvy, effective civil society that can transform environmental practices obviated by uncertain economic development and inequality, but economic and environmental failure are likely to give authoritarianism increased salience in a region beset by intractable problems.

As a result, the 'democratic moment' (Acharya 1999) that was expected to sweep through East Asia if not the world will, I argue, prove difficult to sustain in the face of mounting

political, economic and especially environmental challenges. I consider these challenges in the second part of the paper, where I detail some of the forces that are likely to perpetuate and profit from environmental degradation, making a recourse to authoritarianism all the more likely. Tragically, much of Southeast Asia may not only have missed the democratic moment, it may have missed its historical opportunity for widespread, sustainable development, too: just when human beings seem to have discovered what some of the prerequisites of economic development might actually look like (Collier 2007), the particular paradigm that underpinned the 'rise of the West' seems entirely unsustainable and simply unavailable to the billions of poor in Asia and elsewhere (Diamond 2005).

### **Paths of dependence**

Before considering the specifics of the region's current environmental problems and the potential they have to either undermine or frustrate democratic consolidation, it is important to place the region as a whole in some sort of historical and conceptual context. Although there are plainly important differences between North and Southeast Asia (see Beeson 2007a) in terms of historical experiences, state capacities and underlying material circumstances, countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines in southeast Asia and China in the north, share some strikingly similar problems. The central argument developed in this section is that East Asia's broadly conceived developmental experience and the particular challenges it faces as a consequence have predisposed much of the region toward authoritarianism, a proclivity that is likely to be reinforced by the unfolding environmental crisis in the region. I further suggest that mainstream international relations scholarship and environmentally-oriented political theory often fails to recognize the contingent, historically-determined material realities that help to shape distinctive political outcomes in the region.

### *Historical legacies*

Historicizing the East Asian experience is important because it highlights the path-dependent nature of some of the region's problems. The defining historical experience as far as many of East Asia's most important problems of governance, development and sustainability are concerned has been the impact of European and latterly American intrusion into the region. Incorporation into extant systems of international political and economic order were clearly structural changes of profound importance with enduring long-term consequences for the entire region. The introduction of Western political and economic practices to Southeast Asia in particular transformed the existing social order, even if Western imperialism was mediated by contingent local realities (Elson 1992). Demographic change—especially population expansion and the introduction of migrant labour—has had a major impact on both the domestic politics and more recently the natural environment in Southeast Asia (Tarling 2001). Many of these changes are not, of course, unique to the region, but features of a more generalised process of 'modernisation' that has supported the sort of population growth and economic development that appears to be placing such pressure on the global environment. What is distinctive about much of East Asia though, is the geopolitical context this has occurred in and the concomitant patterns of political order it has encouraged at the domestic level as a consequence. Despite a rhetorical preoccupation with the promotion of democracy and economic reform, the imperative of geopolitical contestation with the Soviet Union meant that the US tolerated—even encouraged—the development of authoritarian political allies in a process that helped entrench authoritarian rule in non-capitalist East Asia, too (Schaller 1990; Woo-Cumings 2005).

Far from ending after the Cold War, history has continued to unfold in distinctive ways that have often circumscribed political liberalism. During the 1990s, when we might have expected increased reformist pressure on the region, the general success of the 'East Asian miracle' and the performance legitimacy that accrued to Asian leaders militated against major political change. Even the Asian economic crisis failed to bring about wholesale political change in the region, despite the noteworthy downfall of Suharto. Whether the democratic transition can be consolidated and entrenched even here is a moot point. On the one hand, the extent of the reform process in Indonesia is

questionable (Robison and Hadiz 2004). On the other, democratic reform and 'good governance' have been further threatened by a deteriorating security situation and the difficulty of managing the complex strategic and political tensions associated with the 'war on terror' (Beeson 2004). The associated geopolitical constraints would have been difficult enough to manage for a country with a large Muslim population, but the growing threat of environmental degradation and food insecurity, further intensified the political pressures on the region's principal democratic success story (Adam 2008).

There is, however, a further, trans-regional development that may make a return to authoritarian practices more likely than not. Even when American influence was at its zenith in the region, it did not guarantee either economic or political liberalism in Southeast Asia. In part, this was a consequence of the sort of East Asian developmental model which revolved around a powerful, interventionist state (Stubbs 2005). Even though Southeast Asian states generally lacked the sort of state capacity enjoyed by their counterparts in Northeast Asia, initial moves toward greater democratisation are likely to *diminish* rather than enhance administrative capability (Back and Hadenius 2008). This is significant in the context of growing pressures on government, because the countries of the region are being presented with an apparently successful model of economic, political, and environmental management by a regional state that is exerting an increasing and direct material influence over their future. It is also a model that is entirely in keeping with East Asia's state-centric, even authoritarian traditions.

The 'rise of China' is already having a major impact on the structure of the regional economy; it is entirely possible that it may come to have an equally significant one on the way political elites in the region view development and governance (Gill and Huang 2006). China's astounding, unprecedented rise has the potential to legitimate very different patterns of economic organisation. Even more importantly for the purposes of this discussion, it is doing so by utilising a model that is unambiguously authoritarian and non-democratic. China's 'pragmatic' approach to development, subsumed under the rhetoric of the 'Beijing consensus' (Ramo 2004) has been predicated on a ruthless exploitation of the natural environment and willingness to repress the growing tide of

spontaneous protest that has emerged as a consequence of rapid environmental degradation (Mallet 2007).

The scale of China's multifaceted environmental problems is difficult to exaggerate, but according to one respected observer, they 'have the potential to bring the country to its knees economically' (Economy 2004: 25). Nevertheless the relationship between China and Southeast Asia is becoming deeper economically and denser institutionally, something that may help to increase China's influence and reinforce an illiberal approach to political and economic development. However, before assessing the specific material circumstances that may encourage a shift toward the pragmatic Beijing consensus, I want to make a few remarks about the failure of much Western scholarship to recognise the long-run trends in parts of the world like Southeast Asia, much less to provide a realistic alternative blueprint for reform.

#### *Alien ideas, contingent realities*

One of the most noteworthy aspects of analyses of broadly conceived 'Asian development' is that it has been understood through theoretical models and concepts that were developed elsewhere, and which overwhelmingly reflect a 'Western' historical experience as a consequence (Acharya and Buzan 2007). At its most extreme and abstract, of course, mainstream international relations (IR) theory barely reflects the Western experience, let alone that of the rest of the world. The criticisms of realism and neorealism are sufficiently well known to need little rehearsal here (see, for example, Legro and Moravcsik 1999), but it is important to emphasise how little help the universal claims, abstractions and assumptions of much Western IR theory actually provide when trying to make sense of the very different historical experience of the states in as diverse a region as East Asia. But what is true of much IR theory is even more evident in the Eurocentric preoccupations of much theorising about environmental issues and their possible political implications.

Much of the theorising about the sorts of political structures, personal practices and normative values that is intended to conceptualise and even address environmental degradation is frequently brilliant and inspiring. It is also often incongruously at odds with the lived experiences of much of the world's population, many of whom find themselves engaged in an increasingly desperate struggle for survival. For example, Andrew Linklater (1998: 8) suggests that 'it is no longer utopian, at least as far as the relations between like-minded states which are exposed to high levels of transnational harm are concerned, to imagine new forms of political community and new conceptions of citizenship which bind sub-state, state and transnational authorities and their loyalties together in a post-Westphalian society'. There is little in the experience of East Asian region to suggest that such transnational responses are likely to emerge from the present crisis. Indeed, where Asia's 'like-minded states' have shown an interest in developing transnational structures they have often been deliberately designed to reinforce the sovereignty of individual states, rather than collective action, and emerged as response to liberalising pressures elsewhere (Beeson 2009). As Laura Campbell (2005: 229) points out, 'the potential for environmental regionalism to increase national political demand for more democratic and transparent environmental policy setting also raises governmental apprehension about the indirect effects of relinquishing sovereignty to a regional institution.'

And yet, whatever we may think about Asia's authoritarian regimes, we need to recognise that they have frequently been associated with a (generally successful) historical pattern of development that has prioritised the economic over the political, and that this model may continue to have appeal and potential efficacy (Beeson 2007b). The possibility that the state will, for better or worse, remain at the centre of attempts at environmental management is recognised by some scholars (Meadowcroft 2005), but even some of the most sophisticated analyses of the state's role, seem overwhelming Eurocentric, highly abstract, and not terribly helpful in explaining current or likely future political and environmental outcomes in places like Southeast Asia. For example, Robyn Eckersley's (2004: 178 [emphasis in original]) belief that there is 'the potential for a vibrant public sphere and *innovative discursive procedures* to lift the horizons of not only

democratic opinion formation but also democratic *will-formation* beyond the territorially bounded community of citizens', has little obvious resonance with the history of much of Southeast Asia. The reality is that the Philippines, the country with arguably the most vibrant civil society in Southeast Asia, also has one of the most appalling environmental records (Fahn 2003: 117).

Even in 'developed' industrial democracies with long traditions of political pluralism and arguably more effective civil societies, it has long been recognised that the exercise of effective 'green' agency is highly problematic and faces fundamental problems of mobilisation, organisation and collective action. The—perhaps understandable—suspicion of traditional politics, hierarchy and political authority—have often rendered green parties politically ineffective (Goodin 1992). Even if we recognise the changes that have taken place in the social structures and even consciousness of many Western societies (Carter 2001), the reality on the ground in much of Southeast Asia and China is very different. Quotidian reality becomes especially important when we consider the potential efficacy of deliberative democracy, which some see as a way of resolving political conflicts over the environment.

Although deliberative democracy has been described as 'the currently hegemonic approach to democracy within environmental thinking' (Arias-Maldonado 2007: 245), it has little obvious relevance to the situation in East Asia. While there is much that is admirable about the underlying precepts of deliberative democracy (see Bohman 1998), its underlying assumptions about the circumstances in which political activity actually occur are strikingly at odds with the lived reality outside of the privileged polities of the North America and Western Europe. This merits emphasis because for some writers rational, informed discourse is central to sustainable environmental management and the resolution of the competing interests that inevitably surround it (Hamilton and Wills-Toker 2006). And yet, as the very limited number of studies that actually examine environmental politics under authoritarian rule demonstrate, the reality is very different and the prospects for the development of progressive politics are very limited (Doyle and Simpson 2006). Even if we assume that political circumstances do actually allow for a

politically-unconstrained and informed discussion of complex issues, as Arias-Maldonado (2007: 248) points out, ‘the belief that citizens in a deliberative context will spontaneously acquire ecological enlightenment, and will push for greener decisions, relies too much on an optimistic, naive view of human nature, so frequently found in utopian political movements.’

In much of East Asia, the population may not have the luxury or capacity to even engage in these sorts of discursive practices, while the absence of effective democracy in much of the region stands as a continuing obstacle to achieving anything approximating deliberative democracy. Even more problematically in the long-run, there is no compelling evidence that democracy of any sort is necessarily going to promote good environmental outcomes (Neumayer 2002), or that rising living standards will inevitably bring about a sustainable environment either (Dinda 2004). On the contrary, there is evidence to suggest that in the initial phases at least, ‘democratization could indirectly promote environmental degradation through its effect on national income’ (Li and Reuveny 2006: 953). In other words, even the best of all outcomes—rising living standards and an outbreak of democracy—may have unsustainable environmental consequences that may prove to be their undoing in the longer-term. In such circumstances, ideas about possible ways of reorganising societies to lessen their impact on the natural environment may not find sufficient support to make them realisable or effective. As Lieberman (2002: 709) point out, ‘an idea’s time arrives not simply because the idea is compelling on its own terms, but because opportune political circumstances favor it.’ In much of Southeast Asia and China the forces supporting environmental protection are comparatively weak and unable to overcome powerful vested interests intent on the continuing exploitation of natural resources.

In short, predominantly Western concerns with ‘thick cosmopolitanism’ and the hope that a ‘metabolistic [sic] relationship with the natural environment’ might bind us to strangers (Dobson 2006: 177), seem bizarrely at odds with lived experience on the ground where climate change is already profoundly undermining sociability within national frameworks, let alone between them (Raleigh and Urdal 2007). The sobering reality would seem to be

that ‘...as the human population grows and environmental damage progresses, policymakers will have less and less capacity to intervene to keep damage from producing serious social disruption, including conflict’ (Homer-Dixon 1991: 79).

### **The preconditions for environmental authoritarianism**

The conclusions that emerge from the following discussion are necessarily impressionistic, speculative and rather dispiriting. The empirical evidence upon which such inferences depend is, by contrast, more and more compelling and unequivocal. There is little doubt that the natural environment everywhere is under profound, perhaps irredeemable stress. Southeast Asia is distinctive only in having already gone much further than the most of the West’s in the extent of the degradation that has already occurred, (see Jasparro and Taylor, 2008). The only issue that remains in doubt is the nature of the response to this unfolding crisis. The extent of the problem, the seemingly implacable nature of the drivers of environmental decline, the limited capacity for action at the national level, and the region’s unimpressive record of cooperation and environmental management do not inspire confidence. Consequently, the prospects for an authoritarian response become more likely as the material base of existence becomes less capable of sustaining life, let alone the ‘good life’ upon which the legitimacy of democratic regimes hinges.

The evidence of catastrophic environmental decline is, alas, all too plentiful. For those that have cared to look, the evidence has been getting steadily worse for decades. What is different now is both the increasingly unambiguous evidence of pollution, global warming, species die-off and the other symptoms of planetary distress, and the fact that the very idea of potentially catastrophic environmental change has become part of mainstream political discourse. The ‘Stern Review’ (2007) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2007) have helped transform the nature of the debate about environmental issues, making them part of public policy rhetoric everywhere, even if their impact on public policy practice has been altogether more difficult to discern. Given that the nature of environmental decline is increasingly recognised, documented

and understood, it will suffice to highlight some of the more distinctive aspects of the East Asian experience. One thing is worth emphasising at the outset, however: as Lee and So (1999: 25) observed ten years ago, ‘while environmental awareness in these [East Asian] societies has been heightened, the governments in the region have, however, all remained deeply committed to the pro-development ideology with the result that environmental conditions in Asia are continuing to deteriorate’. Little has changed in the intervening decade to substantially change this picture. On the contrary, the ‘success’ of China’s development in particular, has meant that environmental problems have grown despite changes in the way environmental problems are managed (Heggelund 2007; Cha 2008).<sup>3</sup>

It is important to remember that, the ‘Asian miracle’ notwithstanding, much of Southeast Asia’s population remains poor, and dependent on agriculture. As recently as 1997, more than half of the rural populations of the Philippines, Vietnam and Laos were classed as living in poverty (ASEAN 2002: 16). In 2000, 45% of ASEAN’s total population lived on less than \$2 per day.<sup>4</sup> Despite an overall slowing of population growth in Asia, demographic pressures make the continuing provision of even the most basic provisions challenging and uncertain. Most fundamentally, food insecurity continues to affect over 160 million people or about 15% of the overall population in the Asia-Pacific region despite an impressive overall increase in total output (FAO 2006). Destructive fishing practices and an all too predictable collapse in fish stocks threaten to deprive the region of a critical source of nutrition, even before the current food crisis really took hold (FAO 2006). Other recent developments—partly a consequence of climate change and partly a consequence of the West’s demand for ‘sustainable’ biofuels—have added to such problems and seen a dramatic spike in global commodity prices, and the concomitant spectre of civil disorder across parts of the region as a result (Minder 2008).

The net effect of the relentless exploitation of the natural environment, as Lorraine Elliott (2009: 252) has pointed out in greater detail, is that ‘resources have been depleted and the environment polluted to the extent that so-called renewable resources and environmental services such as clean air and water are being exhausted in much the same way as non-

renewable resources.’ Given the devastating impact of such practices and their potential for fuelling social instability it is worth considering what drives them and what capacity the region as a whole has for ameliorating them.

### *The logic of competition and despoliation*

Continuing population growth in Southeast Asia and a concomitant process of rapid urbanization provide two of the key drivers of political, economic and social change. True, cities are sources of economic growth and rising living standards, but they also encourage rising expectations and demands for services like health, education and power, which many regional states already struggle to meet (Roberts and Kanaley 2006). Cities may also become sites of social instability and mass unrest when expectations are not met and life fails to improve. Noted ‘environmental realist’, Thomas Homer-Dixon (2006: 75) argues that ‘energy is the Achilles’ Heel of today’s megacities...when these flows are constricted in future... we’ll discover that the word’s meagacites, with their surging populations, are powder kegs’. Equally problematically, regional governments must attempt to provide jobs for the burgeoning workforces, where youth unemployment in particular is already high and growing, and where there are growing intra-regional tensions of cross border labor flows (Aglionby 2009).

As with China, the governments of Southeast Asia struggle to maintain the ‘performance legitimacy’ that appeared to vindicate authoritarianism and break-neck development during the region’s high growth era. Unlike China—whose authoritarian government has made population control a major priority for decades—much of Southeast Asia faces a potentially conflict-inducing ‘population bulge’ that threatens to place further political pressure on regional governments (Urdal 2006). Southeast Asia’s political elites face the disconcerting prospect that a Chinese-style model of development based on the ruthless exploitation of the natural environment may be past its use-by date and unable to underpin either extant patterns of economic organisation or the legitimacy of the political regimes that oversee them. The combination of declining economic performance,

demographic pressure, and a degraded environment are, of course, an established recipe for producing state breakdown and/or political repression (Goldstone 2001).

Barring some unprecedented and inherently implausible outbreak of international cooperation over the future of the world's dwindling food and energy supplies, the world and the region faces the prospect of an unattractive and possibly brutal scramble for what's left. At the very least, the intensifying geopolitical contest between the US and China in particular threatens to destabilise the international system and lock up finite supplies of increasingly valuable and expensive resources (Sutter 2005). China's gargantuan appetites have been widely noted (Hale 2004), as has its growing willingness to reinforce its economic clout with diplomatic leverage (Shirk 2007). It is a renewed 'great game' that is driven by a relentless underlying material logic of diminution and competition in which only the most powerful are likely to exercise effective agency, and even then, perhaps, not indefinitely. Either way, the individual states of Southeast Asia—even in the unlikely event that they suddenly become an effective collective actor—are not capable of seriously influencing the outcome of such struggles. It is worth spelling out why, at both the national and transnational levels.

At a national level, there is a seemingly inescapable compulsion to exploit the natural environment. Not only is population expansion and subsistence farming transforming the region's ecology, but environmental pressures are reinforced by the logic of commercial exploitation. The rapid reduction in Southeast Asia's rainforests has been a widely noted consequence of its incorporation into the global political economy. Whether such processes are driven by the demand for timber or the even more destructive development of palm oil plantations, the net effect is the same: rapid deforestation and the inevitable further degradation of the environment that follows in its wake (Elliott 2009). It is important to highlight the intersection of national and transnational process that drives such unsustainable outcomes.

In Indonesia, for example, illegal logging is controlled by powerful vested interests, often with corrupt connections in the military or other centres of political power, which

effectively make them immune from regulatory control (Smith et al 2003). The lack of effective state capacity and the ability to address issues like illegal logging is emblematic of a key difference between North and Southeast Asia (see Beeson 2007a). Somewhat ironically, Japan's superior state capacity, which saw the government assist the outward expansion of indigenous companies across the region, has helped to entrench some of the most pernicious impacts of environmental exploitation. Peter Dauvergne (1997) has demonstrated how Japanese multinationals have been at the centre of the ruthless exploitation of Southeast Asia's forests, effectively extending Japan's 'ecological shadow' throughout the region. The point to emphasise here is that, while this may satisfy Japanese demand and preserve Japan's own natural environment (Diamond 2005), it comes at the expense of Southeast Asia's. The ruthless logic of exploitation and predation seems set to continue with the rise of China and its growing demand for timber products (Zhang and Gan 2007). There is, then, a powerful nexus between external commercial interests and entrenched internal economic and political actors, which makes the possibility of sustainable resource management a remote prospect. The net effect of this rampant exploitation is that some predict that the natural forest resources of Indonesia will be exhausted by the 2020s (Shimamoto et al 2004). A similar tale can be told for the Philippines, where only 7% of primary forests remain, something that contributes to that country's chronic problems with flash flooding.

Given the negative, unsustainable impact of such practices on the natural environment, the potential they have to generate social instability, and the apparent inability of national governments to address such issues, we might look to international institutions to tackle what is, after all, an unambiguously transnational problem. The prospects here are, if anything, even less encouraging than at the national level. The notorious 'haze' problem, is both a tangible manifestation of the extent of environmental degradation in Southeast Asia, and of the region's governments inability to do anything about it. A consequence of land-clearing for palm oil production, the haze is a depressing symbol of a contemporary international order which seems destined to reinforce Southeast Asia's long-term subordination and exploitation. Palm oil plantations are being established in even greater numbers to contribute to the West's demand for 'environmentally sustainable' biofuels

(MacKinnon 2007). The net effect is that the region's primary forests are likely to disappear in 15 years or so; the region's governments will have to put up with the resultant pollution that flows from the associated land-clearing until they are gone. ASEAN has demonstrated that it is completely unable to address this most pressing of regional policy issues because of its well known institutional deficiencies and unwillingness to infringe on the domestic sovereignty or the internal affairs of its members (Beeson 2009).

### *The (re)turn to authoritarianism*

ASEAN's indulgent attitude toward the internal affairs of its members, has of course, come in for some scathing criticism (Jones and Smith 2007). Authoritarian rule, it is argued, flourished under, and was legitimatised by, ASEAN's norms and diplomatic practices. This is an especially important claim given that much of the Western scholarship that focuses on the possible impact of ideas and norms implicitly assumes that ideational influences are likely to be 'progressive' and desirable. However, it is equally possible that norms and ideas about appropriate behaviour might reflect less attractive values, especially at a time when illiberal states like Russia and China are becoming much more assertive and influential international actors (Gat 2007).

ASEAN's inability or unwillingness to influence Burma's behaviour serves as a powerful reminder of its overall ineffectiveness and highlights the limits of its ideational influence; ASEAN has been completely unable to change the behaviour of Burma's thuggish rulers or socialise them into good behaviour in the way ASEAN elites hoped (Burton and Kazmin 2007). Not only has Burma's leadership proved remarkably impervious to normative pressure, but Burma also provides a salutary reminder of just how important natural resources can be in helping to insulate authoritarian regimes from external criticism: China's support of Burma has been crucial to the regime's survival and has been driven primarily by its desire to ensure continuing access to Burma's increasingly valuable resources (Peel 2007). One of the attractions of the Beijing consensus, and one of the reasons that China's rise is such a potentially important influence over Southeast

Asian economics *and* politics, is that it helps to establish less onerous regional benchmarks on human rights, good governance, transparency and all the other staples of Western best practise. Given China's growing influence in Southeast Asia, it is important to remember that China has responded to its own environmental crises and the increasingly widespread protest movements they have generated by a policy of political repression (Kahn 2007). The combination of China's increased influence and an existing 'authoritarian nostalgia' across much of the region may, some think, have 'made the regional environment more hospitable for nondemocracies.' (Chang et al 2007).

China also provides a stark reminder of the intersection of economics and politics. Despite China's rapidly rising living standards, there has been little pressure from a rising capitalist class for political liberalism. There is now a large literature deals with China's political development, which seem so anomalous and surprising when seen from a Western perspective. Not only has China's expanding bourgeoisie shown little interest in achieving rapid democratisation, but the emergent capitalist class has demonstrated a willingness to work with and support the non-democratic, authoritarian Chinese Communist Party which remains the pivotal force in the country's political life (Chen 2002; Dickson 2003; Tsai 2007). Indeed, there is compelling evidence that the state is becoming *more* powerful rather than less as the government seeks to reassert greater control of the economy (Huang 2008). It is also noteworthy that in the face of the recent economic crisis that threatens to undermine the authority and legitimacy of the ruling elite, China's government has retreated from its rhetorical commitment to good environmental practise and clamped down on political dissent (Cha 2008; Anderlini 2009). It is entirely possible, of course, that the government will prove unable to contain, much less deal with a complex amalgam of political, economic and demographic pressures, but if this precipitates a domestic crisis China's historical record does not suggest that a democratic transformation is the likely consequence.

Some observers consider that there is a proclivity for hierarchical deference, a culturally-determined willingness to tolerate authoritarianism, or a pragmatic willingness to trade off political rights in favour of economic development in much of East Asia (Pye 1985).

But there are even more fundamental reasons for thinking that authoritarianism is likely to persist or stage a comeback in China and Southeast Asia: the magnitude of the environmental crisis threatening the region is likely to undermine the conditions under which democracy and political pluralism can flourish. Not only are governments across the region likely to have to deal with growing social unrest and instability (Vidal 2006), but the very class forces and social structures upon which the development and consolidation of democracy seem to depend are likely to be undermined by the failure of economic development. The connection between economic development and political emancipation, which lies at the heart of much democratic theory (Przeworski et al 2000), is likely to be unravelled and unobtainable as environmental degradation brings a halt to the economic development that makes political progress possible. In short, authoritarianism is likely to persist because of the implacable material limits on economic development.

This possibility poses an especially difficult challenge for both China and Southeast Asia. After all, political legitimacy has been predicated upon economic development and the prospect of rising living standards. It also poses a problem for the wider international order of which Southeast Asia is a part. As Jared Diamond (2005: 496) pointedly asks, ‘What will happen when it finally dawns on those people in the Third World that current First World standards are unreachable for them, and that the First World refuses to abandon those standards for itself?’ The principal impact for the leaders of some East Asian countries with pressing problems and limited resources with which to address them may well be a return to the sort of overarching geopolitical logic that characterized the Cold War and which encouraged authoritarianism: any form of order may be more attractive than disorder, and the West may once again put democracy promotion on hold—this time permanently, perhaps.

The combination of a profoundly degraded natural environment, declining authority, and the erosion of an already modest state capacity provides a bleak outlook. For Robert Kaplan (2000: 22), ‘world environmental stress will present people with a choice that is increasingly among totalitarianism, fascist-tending mini-states and road-warrior cultures’.

Dystopian and gloom-inducing as such visions may be, they need to be taken seriously. Indeed, they are hardly more alarming than the scenarios laid out by sober scientific advisors with impeccable environmental credentials (Fuller 2006). And yet, given the latter's minimal impact on governments in the West which (may) have the resources to address environmental crisis, or the governments of China and India which are making a greater contribution to environmental problems, they are all too likely to be realized. In such circumstances, the prospects for democratic consolidation do not look bright, to say the least.

### **Concluding remarks**

While evidence about the implications of environmental degradation and even global warming are increasingly uncontroversial, their possible political consequences are more contentious. Although some of the preceding analysis is necessarily speculative and inferential, the experiences of China and Southeast Asia highlight issues of unambiguously global significance. The central question that emerges from this discussion is whether democracy can be sustained in the region—or anywhere else for that matter—given the unprecedented and unforgiving nature of the challenges we collectively face. Indeed, such is the urgency of the environmental crisis that some have argued—alarmingly persuasively—that ‘humanity will have to trade its liberty to live as it wishes in favour of a system where survival is paramount’ (Shearman and Smith 2007: 4). In such circumstances, forms of ‘good’ authoritarianism, in which environmentally unsustainable forms of behavior are simply forbidden, may become not only justifiable, but essential for the survival of humanity—in anything approaching a civilized form, at least.

Such ideas are difficult to accept, especially for societies that are steeped in traditions of liberalism, individualism, freedom of choice, and personal advancement. In short, in countries such as the US, where an entire national consciousness and way of life is predicated upon such values—values which some consider profoundly inimical to environmental sustainability (Ophuls 1997). It is also the country that has done most to

contribute to global environmental problems like climate change, but which has until now seemed incapable of addressing them politically (Stephens 2007). In China, by contrast, an authoritarian regime has arguably done more to mitigate environmental problems than any other government on earth: without the one-child policy instigated in the 1970s, it is estimated that would be another 400 million Chinese (Dickie 2008)—a country the size of the US—and China's environmental problems (and everyone else's) would be that much worse already. Luckily for the world's non-Chinese population, China does not enjoy the same living standards as the US, and it is impossible to imagine that the vast majority of its citizens ever will. There are, it seems, fundamental, implacable constraints on the carrying capacity of the planet (Cohen 1995). The real tragedy about China's development is not the failure to rapidly democratize, but that at the very moment that human beings seem to have figured out how to generate economic development on a massive scale, it is becoming apparent that it cannot be sustained; or at least not by 6 billion people living Western lifestyles, and certainly not by the 9-12 billion or so that some think will mark the extent of human expansion.<sup>5</sup>

Yet in China the state seems relatively strong and—thus far, at least—in control. The persistence, if not the intensification of authoritarian rule in the face of environmental decline and reduced expectations about the course of economic development seems an all too likely outcome as a consequence. In Southeast Asia by contrast, the picture is more mixed. Thailand has already succumbed to the temptations of military intervention and a return to non-democratic, authoritarian rule, but Indonesia's democracy has shown surprising resilience so far. Whether its fledgling democracy will be able to cope with the inevitable challenges that economic fragility, demographic pressures and environmental decline will bring is a moot point. Despite being hammered by the current economic crisis (Bradsher 2009), Indonesia at least seems better place than the Philippines: here even an 'effective' authoritarian regime that is capable of simply maintaining order may be beyond the capability of local elites (Beeson and Bellamy 2008). The somewhat depressing reality may be that there are even worse possibilities than an all too likely return to authoritarianism in the region.



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### Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> East Asia includes the 'three Chinas' (the PRC, Taiwan and Hong), the two Koreas, Japan, and the countries of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The main focus here is China and Southeast Asia where environmental problems are most acute.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it is important to recognise that changes in governance practices that might look attractive from a Western perspective, may have quite different effects in reality. As Mol and Carter (2006: 156) point out, '...in China, as elsewhere, decentralisation does not automatically result in better protection of the environmental, as local authorities typically give preference to economic growth and investment over the progressive development of environmental policies and stringent enforcement of environmental regulation and standards'.

<sup>4</sup> The relevance of influential Western ideas such as 'ecological modernisation theory' are also questionable in such circumstances. The little research that has been undertaken in this regard suggests that the implementation of good environmental practise is often lacking, despite superficial changes in discourse and appearance. See Frijns et al (2000).

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<sup>5</sup> Noted environmental writer James Lovelock (2006) thinks the optimal human population size that will not adversely affect the natural environment is between 500m and 1 billion.