Nothing lasts forever

And though we keep hearing that its race is run, social democracy can still stage a comeback. Its chance may lie in Asia

Asia is not traditionally a natural habitat for progressive and social democratic parties. The region's political mainstream is liberal conservatism. Centre-left parties have only rarely enjoyed success at elections, while defeats have become increasingly common. In Japan, the largest opposition party essentially imploded after the landslide victory for now prime minister Sanae Takaichi. Since their respectable showing at the last general election, India's Congress Party and its allies have suffered one bitter defeat after another in regional elections, while Thailand's People's Party, a newcomer in which much hope had been invested, has been unable to build on past successes. Asia is also following the global trend, with many countries seeing an increase in polarisation and in the influence of authoritarian and populist actors. The weakness of progressive parties is partly down to structural factors, but some of their problems are self-inflicted.

We should, however, bear in mind the extenuating circumstances before judging them too harshly. In many parts of Asia, there are restrictions on political competition, press freedom and people's right of assembly. Political opponents are put under pressure, and parties and politicians sometimes banned. The spaces in which civil society is able to operate are shrinking. There is often neither a level playing field nor fair rules, though the degree to which this applies varies across the region: Asia has both established democracies and closed political systems, as well as hybrid variants. To ignore these fundamental differences would thus be to compare apples with oranges.

The importance of the rural electorate

History also plays a role. South-East Asian countries in particular associate their foundation and historic development with the fight against the forces of 'socialism', be that parties or unions. Unlike in Europe, parties based on policy platforms are few and far between in Asia.

Instead, parties are often centred around family dynasties and clans, strong individual leaders, business conglomerates or clientelist networks. Sometimes they are also just temporary marriages of convenience. In Asian states, the party-political spectrum rarely follows the conventional left-right axis.

Despite all the above differences, there are some common themes in this crisis facing Asia's progressive parties, and some strategic errors that have helped make it worse. Here are five observations along with ways progressives might get back on the front foot:

It's the (geo-)economy, stupid.

Firstly, broad-based societal coalitions are required; principled activism and the support of the urban educated elite do not alone win you elections. A reformist agenda that provides solutions to the manifold structural crises of our time is essential, as are alliances that extend beyond the progressive camp and can also gain traction in rural areas. This is something Thailand's People's Party and its predecessors understood. With the aid of a charismatic leader and a highly innovative election campaign and social media strategy, it won the most seats in the 2023 parliamentary election, though it was ultimately unable to claim the office of prime minister. In 2026, it was again unable to do so – partly because its opponents succeeded in winning over voters in the provinces via a traditional patronage-based campaign, but also because the nationalist sentiment fuelled by the military conflict with Cambodia benefited conservative actors. On top of that, the second-preference vote, which the progressive camp won, carries comparatively little weight in Thailand's electoral system. All this notwithstanding, there are important lessons to be learned from the successes and setbacks of the People's Party, which was after all operating in a monarchy dominated by conservative elites and the military.

Secondly, it's the (geo-)economy, stupid. Social justice and economic redistribution are fundamental to many progressive parties' DNA – that's true in Asia too, and with good reason. Despite exceptional economic growth and increases in wealth for the burgeoning middle

classes, the gap between rich and poor is widening in many places. Huge informal sectors with precarious forms of employment are still a sad reality. If progressive parties are to offer a strategic vision and be successful in an age of global tectonic shifts, they can't focus solely on condemning these ills and championing relief via social welfare programmes. Instead, they need to also examine the geo-economic conditions required for their development and growth model to succeed. That's why industrial policies, long dismissed by conservatives and liberals but never entirely abandoned by social democrats, are thus making a comeback around the world. Malaysia and its ruling Democratic Action Party offer a blueprint for how a country – even when squeezed between US tariffs and Chinese overcapacity – can pursue such a policy successfully, intelligently exploiting diversification opportunities in key industries such as global AI supply chains.

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Thirdly, Generation Z wants better prospects. The immediate triggers for Gen Z protests in Asia (as in Africa) may have varied – ranging from Sri Lanka's economic crisis and nepotism in 2022, Bangladesh's new veterans' law in 2024, salary increases for Indonesian MPs in 2025 to restrictions on Nepalis' internet accessin the same year – but the underlying causes were broadly similar. There is a lack of job prospects for many young adults, even well-educated ones. They are highly frustrated with the political system and deeply mistrustful of parties, and have a strong desire to see real improvements in public services. In both Bangladesh and Nepal, the fall of the old regime was followed by an interim administration then a general election that ushered in a new government. While Dhaka has again seen one of the country's two historic family dynasties take power, Kathmandu is witnessing the start of a political experiment: here, an ex-rapper and city mayor now heads what is surely the youngest cabinet in Asia, if not the world, with almost all of its ministers being in their 30s and 40s. Clearly, that alone does not guarantee meaningful change, and only time will tell whether they can succeed. All the same, it's a rude awakening for the country's established parties.

Fourthly, renewal is urgently needed. Given the legitimate concerns and demands of younger generations, parties need to find new structural and political solutions if they are to remain relevant. Parties affiliated with global networks such as the Progressive Alliance (PA) or the Socialist International (SI) are often among their countries' oldest political parties. Within established parties such as the Mongolian People's Party and Nepali Congress, younger and older members are now wrangling over the right balance between their party's heritage and the need for modernisation. One thing is for sure: the region's progressive parties certainly need to attract more young people and women – as do many of its trade unions.

Same problems

Lastly, the right is well organised globally, while the left is fragmented. Progressive parties and organisations are affiliated to different and sometimes competing networks (this is also true outside of Asia). Some are members of the traditional SI, others (including Germany's SPD) of the PA and others still of the even newer Progressive International (PI), while there are also overlaps in the memberships of SI and PA. There are various reasons for these differing affiliations. There are parties who want to be seen as 'progressive' but not 'socialist'; there are those with a very activist approach and those that are more pragmatic, and there are also mutual misgivings between individual member parties. One major point of disagreement between parties is their positions on Israel and Palestine. The bigger picture remains that the global left is in a historically weak position, often seeming to devote more energy fighting itself than its political opponents. This is a problem transnational conservative networks such as the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), which is now increasingly active in Asia, don't have.

So where might we still find encouragement? For starters, we can certainly take hope from the resilience shown by South Korean democracy in the face of the previous president's failed coup attempt, and from the new government led by Lee Jae-myung of the socially liberal Democratic Party. On the other hand, South Korean society remains more divided than almost any other in Asia, featuring two implacably opposed camps. The growing strength of the far right is also a concern.

Labour's win in Australia, however, can't mask the fact that, as elsewhere, the appeal of the mainstream

Looking beyond Asia across the Pacific, the historic win for Australia's Labour Party in 2025, which saw the re-election of Anthony Albanese, is also cause for hope. Albanese's campaign was firmly rooted in the centre

parties is waning.

ground, featuring a pragmatic focus on people's everyday economic and socio-political concerns. Prior to the election, the prime minister seemed to have overreached himself with his unsuccessful 'The Voice' referendum on the rights of indigenous people, but the global disruption triggered by Donald Trump and an opposition election campaign lacking in direction proved decisive, giving Albanese a sensational final-straight victory. This success, however, can't mask the fact that, as elsewhere, the appeal of the mainstream parties is waning. The latest shot across their bows came in the South Australian state election; while Labour may have won comfortably, the right-wing populist One Nation party took second place for the first time.

Nothing lasts forever. And though we keep hearing that its race is run, this also means that social democracy can still stage a comeback. Whether it does so will depend on social democrats' ability to offer a vision that combines economic progress, social justice and geopolitical competence. While their circumstances may differ from those in Europe, Asia's social democrats therefore face the same challenge, namely how to bring about strategic renewal.



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