

***Pacific Asia: In Quest of Democracy.* By Roland Rich. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007. Softcover: 333pp.**

Pacific Asia: In Quest of Democracy is written by a former Australian diplomat who has served as ambassador to Laos, as well as in embassies in Myanmar and the Philippines. The goal of this book is to examine current issues in Asia's democratization, including democratic institutions, political parties, the rule of law, political culture, the media and politicians. One of the central questions that Rich asks throughout this book is whether democracy can grow sustainable roots in Asia. Although Rich has covered a vast literature in Asian politics, he has not been able to provide any deeper message from it other than a superficial reiteration of "the end of history" thesis that Asia will eventually become fully democratic.

There are two problems that seriously mar this book. First, Rich has a tendency to reach vague conclusions that are not based on facts or analytics but simply on opinion and anecdote. Second, the chapters are peppered with numerous stories from his diplomatic career that do not illustrate broader theoretical questions. Instead, they often end up as long digressions lacking substance or as gratuitous attempts to poke fun at particular individuals or show the author's efforts to instruct Asian authoritarian leaders as to why they should become democratic. Some of the comments veer towards gross generalization and stereotype.

Two major themes that Rich advances are the idea of "systematization" and the importance of a democratic civilization. Rich argues that to understand whether democratic institutions can actually work in developing countries, one should employ the idea of "systematization". He defines this as "the degree to which reality matches society's rules and rhetoric of governance" (p. 43). This concept is so vague as to be unhelpful in analysing how or when institutions work.

Another central theme running across this book is whether there is something inimical in Asian societies with regards to democracy. Rich approaches this question through a civilizational lens, spending the last chapter pondering whether a democratic civilization is emerging in Asia. Instead of taking seriously the argument that there are structural constraints to democratization in developing societies, Rich argues that anyone who says there are "choices" to be made is making up "excuses" (pp. 274–78). He furthermore cites at length the ideas of Amartya Sen to buttress his claim. Dismissing a whole literature on the preconditions of

democracy, Rich concludes: "... wealth, literacy, and development should not be seen as preconditions for democracy but rather as enablers of the process" (p. 275). This is a classic case of twisting theory for a practitioner's agenda. In this whole discussion about civilizations and democracy, it is not at all clear why Rich takes the idea of civilizations so seriously. Why should this be the lens through which to look at the future of democracy in the region? Rich makes no effort to explain the relevance of a civilizational perspective, as opposed to, say a regional perspective that is not culturally bound. At the end of the chapter, Rich claims that China must be the driver of Asia's quest for democracy because it is the civilization's core state. He concludes that eventually China will become democratic because "people with economic freedom eventually insist on having political freedom because one complements the other. It is difficult seeing China as an exception to this process" (p. 286). No in-depth analysis is provided here. Instead, Rich comments that he leaves it to the real China scholars to discuss further this point. The same Pollyannaish prediction is made about Malaysia and Singapore's future in the penultimate chapter.

While such vague analysis can be irritating to those who actually take seriously theoretical debates about economic and political development, even more troubling is Rich's propensity to tell stories and anecdotes from his diplomatic service. Many of these have absolutely no connection to the issue under discussion. I must have counted more than a dozen such instances, but two examples should suffice. In a chapter on "Assessing Politicians", Rich uses a story about a Filipino governor to illustrate Filipino political styles and their tendency to sway audiences through theatrics. At a party he attended, the governor was singing "The Impossible Dream" for the seventh time, and clearly frustrated, Rich, making a play on *The Man of La Mancha's* lyrics, writes: "By the time the governor was in his seventh consecutive rendition I had sunk into a state of deep self-pity and was in no doubt about who was bearing the unbearable sorrow" (p. 157). In a rambling discussion of Asian values, Rich uses up one long paragraph to discuss his presence at the 16th Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur. He writes — for no apparent reason — about Australia's sporting glories: "One night I saw Australian swimmers win every gold medal on offer. Another time it was our field hockey team trashing India. At the velodrome, it was again all Australia, although ... we magnanimously allowed a Kiwi cyclist to win one of the events. Of the 214 gold medals in

competition, Australia won 80, thus demonstrating that our national sport is ... winning" (p. 242).

Finally, most disturbing is the tendency to resort to stereotypes. When discussing female leaders, Rich writes, with no substance to back such a vapid comment: "Women on the list have displayed the qualities one looks for in leadership: strength, resolution, courage, competence, and, indeed, vocational qualities" (p. 166). Then, when noting that most of Asia's women leaders come from political dynasties, he prognosticates: "... the next batch of women leaders of Asia will arise, and they will not necessarily be family relatives of their political predecessors" (p. 167). On what basis is such a conclusion made? Lastly, I must strenuously object to lines such as this: "various traits of the Philippine character ranging from lack of follow-through, inattention to detail, and a national propensity for forgiveness combine to make the law a most uncertain institution" (p. 255). Such condescending remarks reflect a stereotypical view of Asian societies that one had thought had long been banished from intelligent public discourse.