Policy Forum

Introduction

Political Party Institutionalization in Asia

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Political parties play an important role in political systems throughout Asia. Like other regions of the world, parties are vital to political life. They represent social interests, articulate policy programs and ideologies, socialize and channel groups into political agendas and ideals, and execute policy when at the helm of government. When in the opposition, political parties also check and challenge the incumbent government. Parties are thus crucial to the well-functioning of a polity, whether that polity is democratic or authoritarian.

However, the functions that parties can play and the roles that they fulfill depend to a large extent on the degree to which they are institutionalized. Parties that are institutionalized are better equipped to represent social groups, channel political ideas and values, and articulate and execute policy goals in a consistent and sustained manner. Those that are less institutionalized can struggle to pursue coherent agendas, whether in terms of aggregating or organizing interests. Parties and party systems in Asia vary significantly in terms of their level of institutionalization. Thus, the wide range of institutional embeddedness of political parties in Asia provides a valuable analytical lens through which to examine the impact of parties on the political system. Understanding parties through this perspective unveils the varied nature of organized politics and serves as a check on assumptions that parties have similar capacities or roles throughout the world.

The concept of political institutionalization with reference to political parties was first conceptualized in 1968 by Samuel Huntington in his classic work, *Political Order in Changing Societies*.[1] In this ground-breaking book, Huntington argued that the central dilemma in the developing world did not revolve around the attainment of democracy, as much of the modernization school had argued, but rather, centered around the need for governance, and therefore, for strong institutions. This claim was bold and revolutionary,

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[1] Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

precisely because few scholars at that time had visualized institution-building as the most urgent problem that the developing world needed to address.

Huntington's concern in terms of institutions was especially focused on political parties. For him, political parties were essential to the polity because they helped tame social mobilization. Huntington argued forcefully for the value of institutionalized parties. He defined institutionalization as "the process by which organizations and procedures acquire value and stability,"[2] and delineated four indicators to operationalize institutionalization: coherence, adaptability, autonomy, and complexity. Coherence refers to stable procedures being maintained within the party. Adaptability indicates a party's ability to generate new leadership, as well as its capacity to function as both government and opposition. Autonomy refers to a party whose leadership is not captured by social forces. Finally, complexity points to an institution that has value, differentiation, and organizational depth.

Some of the parties that Huntington considered models of institutionalization included Mexico's PRI, the Soviet Communist Party, and the Indian Congress Party. These parties come from different regions of the world, advance different ideologies, and most notably, include both authoritarian and democratic regimes. Party institutionalization thus was a concept that cut across region, ideology, and regime-type.

It is important to note that the core goal of party institutionalization for Huntington was order and stability. Yet, party institutionalization can also serve other ends. In my own work, *The Institutional Imperative*,[3] I argued that party institutionalization, linked with state capacity, can advance equitable development. Analyzing four cases in Southeast Asia, my book showed that Malaysia and Vietnam were able to reduce inequality while maintaining economic growth because they had effective institutions – institutionalized parties and capable states – that could initiate, implement, and sustain policy reform. By contrast, Thailand and the Philippines had weaker institutions that over the long-run made it difficult to advance equitable development.

Institutionalization is crucial for the pursuit of equitable development because it provides three key characteristics that help structure policy output. These include discipline and cohesiveness for the articulation of social interests, a structure to maintain policy continuity, and organizational complexity and value.[4] These attributes ensure that pro-poor reforms do not remain solely in the realm of rhetoric or social movement, but materialize within organization, state, and policy. What ultimately distinguishes successful cases of equitable development is their institutional capacity to actualize policy.[5]

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[2] Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, 12.
[3] Erik Martinez Kuhonta, *The Institutional Imperative: The Politics of Equitable Development in Southeast Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).
[4] Kuhonta, *The Institutional Imperative*, 27-34.
[5] An important study that looks at how parties effectively addressed poverty is Atul Kohli, *The State and Poverty in India: The Politics of Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

An extensive literature on party institutionalization followed in the wake of Huntington's work. Some scholars maintained a clear focus on party qua organization while others shifted their concerns to party systems.[6] Scott Mainwaring and Timothy Scully were instrumental in moving the focus of institutionalization toward the development of party systems.[7] Mainwaring and Scully's work was significant not just because it shifted the axis of institutionalization away from political parties toward the party system itself, but because it focused squarely on the relationship between party system institutionalization and democratic consolidation. Now, institutionalization was being emphasized because it could serve as a basis for democratic strengthening.

Mainwaring and Scully highlighted four variables as central to party system institutionalization. These included: regularity of party competition, as measured by electoral volatility; party roots in society; the legitimacy of the party system in the eyes of the electorate; and solid party organizations. Some of these criteria emphasize the system, while others emphasize the party. Overall, Mainwaring and Scully's conceptualization of party system institutionalization had a huge influence on the literature on party systems, generating extensive conceptual debates as well as efforts to apply the concept to other regions beyond Latin America.[8]

Institutionalization has thus been examined in terms of at least three important outcomes in comparative politics: order and stability; equitable development; and democratic consolidation. In all these areas, Asia has played an important role in the analytical assessment of institutionalization. Although party institutionalization has not been as prominent in studies of foreign policy or international relations, there are a few studies that draw out some important connections. At the core of these studies is the idea that institutionalized party systems provide greater stability and accountability that in turn affects foreign policy.

Hunter and Robbins' study relates domestic politics to war, showing that countries with more institutionalized party systems are less likely to be involved in inter-state conflict. Institutionalized party systems reduce the likelihood of states going to war because they are more accountable to electorates that are generally reluctant to engage

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[6] For a sampling of work focused on institutionalization in terms of parties, see Angelo Panebianco, *Political Parties: Organization and Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Steven Levitsky, "Institutionalization and Peronism: The Concept, the Case, and the Case for Unpacking the Concept," Party Politics 4, no. 1 (1998): 77-92.

[7] Scott Mainwaring and Timothy R. Scully, *Building Democratic Institutions: Party Systems in Latin America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

[8] For a study that builds on Mainwaring and Scully's work through analysis of a wide range of Asian countries, see Allen Hicken and Erik Martinez Kuhonta, eds., *Party System Institutionalization in Asia: Democracies, Autocracies, and the Shadows of the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). See also Andreas Ufen, "Political Party and Party System Institutionalization in Southeast Asia: Lessons for Democratic Consolidation in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand," *Pacific Review* 21, no. 3 (2008): 327-350. For an insightful review of the concept of party system institutionalization, see Juan Pablo Luna, "Party System Institutionalization: Do We Need a New Concept?" *Studies in Comparative International Development* 49 (2014): 403-425.

in inter-state conflict. Furthermore, political leaders in institutionalized party systems are more likely to think in terms of a long-term horizon and therefore not make risky decisions. Overall, institutionalized parties are better able to coordinate and provide stability in decision-making.[9]

Another study by Cooley and Hopkin, examining the relationship between parties and foreign policy in Spain, argues that institutionalized party systems in more consolidated democracies are more likely to be accommodating toward the presence of U.S. bases on their soil. This is because they are more autonomous of social interests, are more likely to have to govern pragmatically, and need to gain voters from wide sectors of the electorate. On the other hand, party systems that are less institutionalized during earlier phases of democratization are more prone to intransigent positions and hardline discourses that push against the presence of foreign military bases. Institutionalized party systems, based on this argument, move the polity toward greater stability, and ideologically, toward the center.[10]

Finally, one can also posit that a more institutionalized party system is more likely to lead to stability, continuity, and consistency in a country's foreign policy. Japan and the Philippines provide a useful contrast here. In the Philippines, sharp fluctuations regarding the country's policy toward China's aggressive claims in the South China Sea may reflect weak party institutionalization. The shift from Benigno Aquino III's successful pursuit of international law contrasts sharply with Rodrigo Duterte's willingness to engage with China, despite a clear legal ruling in 2016 from the Permanent Court of Arbitration at the Hague that had already favored the Philippines. Of course, foreign policy can often change when different governments come to power. Yet, to the extent that parties are less institutionalized, it becomes easier for foreign policy to be susceptible to the personalistic whims of political leaders. In sharp contrast to the Philippines, Japan's foreign policy has been relatively consistent since the post-war period. Japan's institutionalized party system helps anchor a stable foreign policy precisely because the same parties are central to the system and policy positions reflect party programs rather than personalistic choices.

Party and party system institutionalization remains one of the most important concepts in the study of politics. Its effect on order, equity, and democracy has been extensively studied in comparative politics. These works demonstrate that studying the nature of parties and party systems matters significantly for broader outcomes that affect the public interest. In foreign policy and international relations, there have been fewer efforts to chart the effects of party system institutionalization. However, the few studies relating party system institutionalization to foreign policy have emphasized similar points as those in comparative politics: that programmatic consistency, accountability, and pragmatism play a key role in shaping decision-making outcomes. As Huntington forcefully

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[9] Lance Y. Hunter and Joseph W. Robbins, "Party System Stability and Conflict Initiation," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 29, no. 4 (2016): 1344-1374.
[10] Alexander Cooley and Jonathan Hopkin, "Base Closings: The Rise and Decline of the US Military Bases Issue in Spain, 1975-2005," *International Political Science Review* 31, no. 4 (2010): 494-513.

argued more than 50 years ago, political institutionalization remains central to attempts to provide stability and coherence in domestic and international politics.

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