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Research Note

# Liberal World Order in the Age of Disruptive Politics: A Southeast Asian Perspective

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## Abstract

*There is no question that the current liberal world order faces yet another challenge. The upcoming challenge that we are about to confront is an exceptionally different kind of challenge. This challenge is the emergence of what I call a disruptive politics in the heartland of consolidated liberal states. The two main side effects of disruptive politics can be seen at both the domestic and international levels. Domestically, there is growing rise of populism in stable western democracies epitomized with the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States of America. Internationally, there is a growing rejection of globalization and integration, exemplified by the UK leaving the EU. Many commentators and pundits have observed that the rise of disruptive politics is the very threat to the liberal world order that could eventually cause it to collapse from within. While the side effects of disruptive politics should be addressed with caution; however, it is misleading to equate the disruptive politics with its side effects such as the rise of populism and the growing contend with the globalization. I would argue that disruptive politics is necessary for the survival of the liberal world order. Disruptive politics is a way to make us realize that liberal democracy is not perfect, and we need to fix it. This essay explores the notion of disruptive politics and the challenge it poses. It begins by unpacking the notion. It then offers three insights on how to maintain the liberal world order in an age of disruptive politics.*

Key words: disruptive politics, Liberal World Order, Donald Trump

## The Challenges from within

There is no question that the current liberal world order faces yet another challenge. Indeed, since its inception by the western power from the ashes of World War II, the liberal world order has always been challenged, by the spread of communism during the Cold War, and the rise of terrorism after 9/11, which is becoming even more diffused and decentralized. Despite the challenges, the liberal world order has survived and flourished. It provides a relatively more stable world than before it existed. Even

the non-western rising power that seemingly challenges the liberal world order has, for the most part, accepted this order and hugely benefitted from it.

Nevertheless, the upcoming challenge that we are about to confront is an exceptionally different kind of challenge. Many have thought that the main challenges of the liberal world order come from *the without* especially pressure from the others. Surprisingly the challenge in fact comes from *the within*. This challenge is the emergence of what I call a disruptive politics in the heartland of

consolidated liberal states. The two main side effects of disruptive politics can be seen at both the domestic and international levels. Domestically, there is growing rise of populism in stable western democracies epitomized with the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States of America. Internationally, there is a growing rejection of globalization and integration, exemplified by the UK leaving the EU.

Many commentators and pundits have observed that the rise of disruptive politics is the very threat to the liberal world order that could eventually cause it to collapse from within. International experts like Stephen Walt (2016), Ian Buruma (2017), and the New York Times' Roger Cohen (2017) have warned about the dark times facing the liberal world order with the recent disruptive politics happening in the western liberal democracies. Joe Biden even stated that the liberal world order is at risk of collapsing in his last international remarks as US Vice President at the World Economic Forum in Davos (Biden, 2017).

While the side effects of disruptive politics should be addressed with caution; however, it is misleading to equate the disruptive politics with its side effects. I would argue that disruptive politics is necessary for the survival of the liberal world order. Disruptive politics is a way to make us realize that liberal order is not perfect, and we need to fix it.

This policy note explores the notion of disruptive politics and the challenge it poses. It begins by unpacking the notion. It then considers the way in which global leaders should manage the liberal world order in the age of disruptive politics. This note concludes that there is a need for world leaders to rethink the way in which

the liberal world order should be maintained.

### **Understanding Disruptive Politics within the Liberal Order**

In 1995, Clayton Christensen (1997) put forward the notion of disruptive innovation as "an innovation that creates a new market and value network and eventually disrupts an existing market and value network." Borrowing the notion of disruptive innovation, I define disruptive politics as a politics that interrupts the established order of things, particularly in the core constituency of the liberal order.

Disruptive politics is particularly different from conventional contentious politics, defined as "a politics that uses disruptive methods to make a political point or to change particular government policies" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). While contentious politics can be seen throughout both democracies and autocracies, disruptive politics is a slow process within liberal democracy that strikes at the very core of the liberal world order, namely liberal democracy and global capitalism. Just like the call for democracy in an authoritarian regime, disruptive politics within democracies is mainly caused by the politics of resentment, particularly towards the status quo and the elites who undermine the ordinary people.

In the authoritarian setting, disruption often occurred due to the lack of freedom to contend the authoritarian rule and demand on regime change. In liberal democracies with a stable democratic transfer of power, the very same disruption rarely happened. Liberal democracy has embraced protests and dissidents as part of its legitimation strategy and provided democratic platforms that neutralize resistance

towards the status quo. But it does not address the issue of inequality where the accumulation of power in the hands of the few has made the voice of most of the people unheard. An interesting study conducted by political scientist Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page on the US democracy reveals that ordinary citizens have a non-significant influence on public policies compared to the economic elites (Gilens & Page, 2014). With this condition, democracy has been habituated as a ceremonial celebration for the ordinary citizens while the decisions are dominated by rich and powerful elites.

In the long run, just like in authoritarian rule, liberal democracies, instead of being the government of the people, by the people, and for the people, as envisioned by Abraham Lincoln, have metamorphosed to become an oligarchy. The recent predicament in the liberal democracies is perfectly summed up in *Animal Farm's* famous remarks, "all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others" (Orwell, 2003). To tame these circumstances, disruptive politics is needed.

Borrowing from Carol Hanisch (1969), the occurrence of disruptive politics has made politics become more personal and personal is political. While the status quo within democracies has disconnected the politics from the people, disruptive politics could empower people to be more involved in politics for better or worse. Some commentators have even argued that the recent rise of populist nationalism in mainstream western political discourse might have been made possible by a collective loss of faith in democracy.

It is possible to read what I have written here as a defense of the rise of populism and the decline of liberal principles. But my message is the exact

opposite. Disruptive politics can have dangerous outcomes, but this is by no means the end of the liberal world order. It is Janus-faced. On the one hand, it might lead to the decline of liberal democracy with the rise of populist nationalism where angry democratic majorities rule, which might lead to the rise of authoritarian strong men. On the other hand, it could provide us with an opportunity to reform the core principles of liberal world order, which the national and global agenda have been aggressively pursuing, particularly since the end of the Cold War. Disruptive politics is a harsh wake up call to both the elites and the average citizens that the liberal world order is not without its shortcomings. Through disruptive politics, we have been given a chance to step back and reassess the national and global agenda of the liberal world order.

### **Managing Disruptive Politics: A Southeast Asian Perspective**

With the emergence of disruptive politics, what kind of global political order will emerge in the aftermath? This is indeed a very important question that has attracted the attention of the brightest minds. To contribute to the debate, I offer three insights on how to maintain the liberal world order in an age of disruptive politics.

First, the disruptive politics happening in the western world could provide fresh voices from the non-western powers to come up in defense of the liberal world order. Rather than antagonizing over the non-western powers' motives in pursuing global leadership, it is time for western leaders to trust the non-western world in terms of the burden of leadership sharing to maintain the global order. The disruptive politics unfortunately has brought the discourse of protectionism and

anti-globalization into mainstream western politics, with President Trump's statement "Buy American Hire American" (Chu, 2017). Surprisingly it was the Chinese president, Xi Jinping who denounced protectionism and defended globalization (Fidler, Chen, & Wei, 2017). The so-called rising power that is considered illiberal is the one that seemingly holds the principle of the liberal order dearly. This suggests that even though non-western powers may not yet fully embrace the liberal principles, they are aware of the importance of maintaining the liberal world order.

In the case of Southeast Asia, Indonesia has tried to play a constructive role in supporting global world order particularly through the promotion of its democratic values albeit in its own way and with its own caveats (Karim, 2017b). Indonesia has been a promoter of democratic ideals and human rights values at the regional level. This shows that non-western power could become the supporter of western-dominated world order in promoting western liberal norm. other than being supporter of western-dominated liberal order, countries within Southeast Asia also concern on the importance of the western military presence as a force of balancing in the region (Karim & Chairil, 2016).

Indeed that disruptive politics create uncertainty for Southeast Asia given that regional architecture built by ASEAN has been based on US-sponsored liberal international order through which ASEAN aimed to diffuse the norms into its regional norm and mechanisms (Chong, 2017). Moreover, under Obama's leadership, ASEAN has been leveraged into one of the most important agenda within the US foreign policy with its pivot to Asia strategy thus boost ASEAN strategic

important in the region. The disruptive politics with the election of Trump that focus on his "American first" slogan, has indeed shaken this progress and thus might change the balance in favor of China.

However, the disruptive politics certainly create a new space for second-tier countries in the Asia-Pacific to show their willingness to cooperate and initiate their own commitment without the need to have the great power on board. Although Donald Trump has succeeded in getting the United States out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), it does not necessarily make Asia-pacific countries unable to spawn similar things without the United States. At the APEC summit in Danang, Vietnam, Trade ministers from 11 Asia-Pacific countries agreed on to press ahead with a major trade deal without the United States, as they seek to go it alone without the involvement of Donald Trump's America.

Secondly, the disruptive politics has demonstrated how economic resentment towards global capitalism emanating from perceived inequality could tear apart the social fabric of the liberal order. Global capitalism has indeed lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty around the world, especially in Asia. Yet, it also brings huge inequality and social injustice too. In the eastern world, China's embrace of economic globalization has not only made it an economic powerhouse but has also led to it becoming a country with one of the highest levels of income inequality in the world, where one percent of the richest households own a third of the country's wealth. The conundrum that most of the time is happening on the periphery has now reached its core. In the US, inequality has become even greater, reaching its most extreme point since the Great Depression

(Desilver, 2013). In Europe, inequality has risen substantially since the mid-1980s (Fredriksen, 2012). Basically, inequality has become the Achilles heel of the liberal order. I believe that the explanation for the rise of racism and xenophobia as well as the allure for the strong men in western democracies cannot be separated from the growing inequality within society. Inequality will incite fear and insecurity among people. In return they can be easily mobilized for hatred towards others (Karim, 2017a). It is time for the global leaders to genuinely focus on solving the tension between the inequality produced by market capitalism and the equality that is required by democracy.

Southeast Asia is also home for the rise of inequality particularly due to the impact the lack of the government to address market failure and reduce rent-seeking activities. While in general, the case of inequality has been experienced by Southeast Asian countries, however, Lao PDR and Indonesia have inequality trends that should be a cause of concerns (Yap, 2013). In a long run, the economic growth without inequality would only create dissatisfaction that may lead to social unrest. The inequality could also endanger the regional integration project in Southeast Asia once the project deemed to be detrimental toward the poor and vulnerable section of the society given the benefits of economic integration have often been unequally distributed.

It is the time for Southeast Asian countries to find out what is the best way to increase its wealth while at the same time reduce the gap of inequality. To do this, at least, there should be a shift in how the economic elites should see the development paradigm of neoliberal economic agenda which shows its failure in creating wealth with equality. Thus,

ASEAN countries should pay attention to concept of inclusive growth seriously. The inclusive growth could start with the economic policy that focus on investing in public goods such as infrastructure, healthcare and the environment.

Thirdly, we need to reconsider the way in which the core values of the liberal order should be promoted. Democracy will be the most desirable form of government and the global standard for legitimate governance, despite the seemingly democratic decline and the variety of models that might not be particularly liberal (Ikenberry, 2011). And so is capitalism. Though not always subscribing to the notion of a liberal free-market, most of countries will eventually embrace capitalism as the way in which to govern their economy in the foreseeable future. However, the assumption that liberal principles should be universally accepted is not only wrong but also dangerous.

We should learn on how the two decades of liberal interventionist policy have failed and created more instability in some parts of the world. It has even nurtured antipathy from the periphery states of the liberal order. The challenge posed by disruptive politics also cautiously shows us that even mature liberal democracy is not immune from shifting towards an illiberal one. We should learn from history that there is always a danger of imperial overstretch even when it comes to ideas. Liberal principles might be the last man standing in history. Yet just like many other ideas, it is far from perfect. It is time to be humble and let the two core liberal principles evolve into a variety of models that stem from different cultural and historical contexts.

Indeed, that there is a steady decrease of democratic space as well as the protections of human rights in Southeast

Asia. Many countries remain undemocratic, and others have taken a worryingly repressive turn (Edwards & Karim, 2016). This might be caused by the negative views on democratic norm due to the liberal interventionist policies that are failing in any other parts of the world. Rather than seeing it as a failure of democracy alone, disruptive politics should remind us the need to create our own system and norm that also reflect the universality of democratic and human rights norm while at the same time accept the cultural and historical differences. In this case, Southeast Asian countries should be able to increase the role of ASEAN human rights mechanisms as well as enabling its own civil society to foster its local norm on democracy and human rights.

### A Move Forward

It seems quite self-evident to say that change always creates uncertainty, and the way we perceive changes often determines how we respond to them. But this is straightforward advice for us in an age of disruptive politics. Disruptive politics has certainly changed the course of the liberal world order into uncharted territory. We can see it as a threat and hence react accordingly. Or we can see it as an opportunity and thus mitigate its negative side effects. The disruptive politics happening in the western world should remind us that no matter how globalized and integrated our world is, our thousand-year old tribalistic DNA is still there. As long as a large segment of the population do not feel the benefits and feel alienated from the process, liberal principles only strengthen the boundaries and thicken the barrier.

### About the Author

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