

Finding Crosscurrents of Democracy in Asia

By Maxine Tanya Hamada

Around 200 kms north of the Philippine capital, Manila, is Baguio City, a cool temperate mountain plateau 1471 meters above sea level. The cool climate of the city makes it stand out in a tropical country like the Philippines. Baguio was named the summer capital of the Philippines for the annual practice of the bureaucracy transferring to this locale in the early 50s to escape the summer temperatures of the lowlands. While this is no longer the practice, Baguio City remains an important spot in Philippine governance owing to its unique multi-cultural history and its citizens' tendency to actively chart the city's directions.

Near the center of the Baguio cemetery, there is a concrete pylon marker with a Japanese inscription¹. This marks a section in a place of honor where Japanese, who came in 1903, are buried. Many of these Japanese pioneers came with teams to build the Kennon Road, an engineering marvel named after a US Engineering Corps Col. Lyman Kennon. Kennon road opened what had been an impenetrable Cordillera mountain range to the Spanish occupation - and revealed a beautiful mountain plateau. This iconic road infrastructure remains a vital artery from this mountain city to the rest of the country. As I write this piece however, amidst resurging cases of COVID19, Kennon road, is closed to all vehicles except those of residents along its 34 km stretch.

2020 has not been a normal year. In the course of nine (9) months, we have collectively gone through lockdowns and major upheavals in our work, our daily routines, our communities, and our national life. The SARS-COV-2 virus pandemic has closed our roads, caused us loss of loved ones, cut off our circles of friends, and curtailed many if not most of our political, economic and social engagements. Worse, the pandemic has laid bare the vulnerabilities of our democracies. Where institutions and democratic foundations are strong, disruptions caused by the pandemic pushed policies to the edge but were eventually contained. Where institutions and democratic foundations were weak, disruptions caused by the pandemic broke many democratic norms, practices, and safety nets.

In a JCIE talk I gave to an audience just emerging from the first wave of the pandemic in August this year I shared three stories that illustrated the political, social and economic challenges facing Philippine democracy amidst the pandemic - the untimely passage of a vaguely worded Anti-Terror Law that opens up its implementation to abuse, the shutdown of media giant ABSCBN, the oldest and most widely accessible television media company in the country, and the economic disruption on families by the repatriation of hundreds of thousands of overseas Filipino workers because of the pandemic. I also shared three uplifting stories where citizens and democratic leaders like the vice president of the Philippines, Leni Robredo, continue to carve out spaces for democracy to evolve, strengthen and deepen, despite the pandemic - the outpouring of

citizen and private sector donations and service with the office of the vice president to augment government efforts, the launch of a peoples' initiative to directly legislate a franchise renewal for the ABSCBN media company, and the emergence of grassroots community economic initiatives to provide livelihood and support for displaced jeepney drivers and farmers.

This essay picks up from that talk to examine what roles we can play to strengthen democracy in our region. This piece took longer than expected to write. What began as a policy piece on the state of democracy, and the roles of our two countries, Japan and the Philippines - evolved into a reflection essay as a result of such different circumstances we face because of COVID19. Crosscurrents that began to emerge over the past decade, are accelerating in the new normal and force us to reconsider what and how democracy is understood by us, our communities and by our nations. We have to pay more attention to these crosscurrents.

First Crosscurrent: Cross-overs for democracy

First an explanation of my perspective by way of my career track, I am one of a growing number of individuals who have served in leadership positions both in civil society and in government. We "cross-over" to government during and after political transitions and changes in national leadership and key positions in the bureaucracy. We are not usually members of traditional political parties. We come mostly from citizen movements and civil society coalitions that have decided to engage politically for the advocacies we carry. Once we join government, our perspectives are further enriched by understanding and grappling with the challenges of effecting change within the institutions of state bureaucracies. Our challenge shifts, from holding those in power accountable, to wielding power and holding ourselves and our institutions accountable to society. In some instances, the challenge is how to wield power to give it away and strengthen citizen and civil society's capacity.

The challenges to democracy are many and unrelenting. Our ability to surmount each of these challenges depends on the strength of our institutions. When I speak of institutions, I count not only the formal institutions of democratic governance like representative government, impartial courts, or an accountable executive branch. I also count the institutions of active citizens and civil society, a free press, and a responsible private sector. The pandemic showed us the vulnerabilities of each of these institutions. Vested interests and authoritarian leadership quickly took steps to weaken many, if not all, of these pillar institutions to gain more power. In the guise of expediency and emergency, executive issuances and legislation broke many processes of check and balance and measures of accountability. For civil society, the free press and the private sector, resources were extremely strained as each sought to continue their services amidst a lockdown and in the face of increasing state action against any, and all forms of opposition and criticism.

There is a similar idea that comes to mind from a book I recently read. The “Narrow Corridor” by Acemoglu and Robinson takes off from their earlier work “*Why Nations Fail*”. In the *Narrow Corridor*, the authors talk about “statesmen” leaders who work not only to strengthen state institutions but also society and its ability to shackle the state when needed. It is this balance between a strong state and a strong society that keeps countries within the narrow corridor of democracy they argue. I see the same impetus among modern crossover leaders, those who have to grapple not only with working to strengthen the institutions of the bureaucracy to enable positive change to take root in governance – but also with working with society and its institutions to strengthen their ability to hold those in power accountable. Crossovers represent both the state and society because they are a product of both.

Building strong democracies in Asia will entail work on both state institutions and on societal ones. In several political transitions in the region, especially in East Asia, there are a growing number of crossovers. Young activists from social movements run for elective positions or are invited to occupy positions in a newly formed executive. I am not familiar enough with the political transitions in Japan to be able to cite instances of crossover leaders but it would be very important for us to learn about trends in Japan where leadership builds both strong state and societal institutions.

Second Crosscurrent: New communities as the centers of democracy

I have crossed over back to civil society from government. I now find myself more than 200 kms away from the center of Philippine policy and political debate. The lockdown was an opportunity to be wrenched away from the national scene and the national-focused debates and discussions. To be Baguio-based is to be where partisan politics matters less than effective local leadership, where national policy is sometimes seen as a hindrance to efficient service delivery, and where the threat of citizen action is often more palpable, immediate, and influential than at national level.

In Baguio, local artists, artisans and entrepreneurs bore the brunt of disrupted trade, tourism and commerce. Yet these communities built innovative platforms and new forms of economic activity. Barter became a very lively and active economic alternative to enable families to get rice, groceries and essential goods. An online barter group I joined, quickly grew to more than 32,000 members, and continues to provide a platform for exchange of goods amidst the economic and public health constraints in the city. At its core, the barter market becomes the citizens way of returning the market to its basic role of serving the immediate needs of the community and where price and value is dictated by a social contract for a common good.

As the pandemic caused lockdowns of towns, regions and the closure of many roads, the highland farmers in the municipalities and towns surrounding Baguio lost access to their regular buyers. Images of vegetable harvests being dumped and disposed of prompted groups of young entrepreneurs to build online platforms that connected consumers in the nation’s capital directly to the farmers bypassing the usual trading

posts and middlemen. Communities and organized citizen action are strongest where there is a sense of shared identity and purpose. Citizen action is also most effective when collective agency is clear.

These farm-to-consumer initiatives re-energize and modernize the concepts of community-supported agriculture, a practice that we learned from another wave of Japanese who came to Baguio city and the adjoining Benguet province. The early Japanese pioneers in Baguio city were followed by Japan Overseas Cooperation (JOCV) volunteers, these agriculturists, and technical professionals came in the 1960's and 1970's and helped introduce many innovations to the highland crop industry we see today. Both the early pioneers, their descendants, and the JOCV volunteers would lay the foundations of sisterhood localities built between towns and cities in Japan and the towns and municipalities surrounding Baguio City. Many of these sisterhoods of cities would include efforts to strengthen cooperatives. On the ground, the democratic practices of community-supported agriculture, cooperativism and collective agency remain vital seeds in making big concepts like democracy felt in everyday life. Japan already has a footprint in the Philippines in terms of building communities of democratic practice. These openings remain significant opportunities for strengthening our common democratic projects.

Our communities are changing, we find our identities not only within traditional demographic clusters like youth, women, or citizenship – but more so with others who share our same values and interests like producers, consumers, entrepreneurs and innovators that cut across age, gender, geographic location or economic class. It is most apparent at the local level where our choices affect our daily lives -and it deeply drives our narratives about democracy that influence our engagement nationally and globally.

Third Crosscurrent: Cross-cultural Democratic Dialogue

I am a 4th generation Japanese descendant of a carpenter and foreman who came to the Philippines at the beginning of the 19th century to build the Kennon Road. The early Japanese in Baguio were industrious pioneers. A book has been written about their legacies in the city of pines. My grandfather Sinai Carino-Hamada also wrote a short story about a Japanese farmer and his Bontoc wife. The story “Tanabata’s Wife” has been hailed as “the finest love story ever written by a Filipino” and has recently been interpreted into a movie that won at the To Farm Festival. This is all the more interesting because the story does not talk about idealized romantic love. It speaks of bridging cross-cultural differences and difficulties of farming and surviving in the early Philippine times. A modern version of this love story could very well talk about the cross-cultural challenges of Filipino women married to Japanese men in Japan.

I speak of Baguio, its Japanese community and the story of “Tanabata’s Wife” because it is in these communities, localities, and stories where the big narratives for democracy will find their victories or their defeat. We have seen division and polarized hatred

manifesting in many countries including the recent US presidential elections. We see the same distrust and division here in the Philippines between those who believe the current president is genuinely working for them, and those who genuinely fear his destruction of our nation's institutions and values. We see it between immigrants and locals and we see it between the poor and the rising middleclass.

Indeed, stories are powerful. During the martial law years under Ferdinand Marcos, I was in grade school in Baguio. I vividly remember associating the dictatorship with the banning of one of my favorite shows on TV – a Japanese animated series titled Voltes V. The dictator decreed it was too violent and therefore banned it from Philippine broadcasts just as the series was coming to its last episodes. I remember how we, as a grade school class went to the cinema together to watch the movie. I remember how the opening song would stir my young emotions to fight for what is right. To this day, the theme song sounds like a call to arms, to battle for the good against an oppressive state. I understand why the dictator wanted this show immediately banned. Yet the deeper message of Voltes V was of surmounting impossible differences, of how peace is won, not in battle but in understanding other cultures and in the choices and sacrifices of individuals when they are in positions to make choices that matter.

Voltes V is a Japanese story that has successfully planted something deep in Filipinos. Just as Voltes V and Tanabata's Wife talk of peace and love in the context of cross-cultural relationships, there is a cross-cultural dialogue we should continue about shared democratic values in Japan and the Philippines

The crosscurrents of Democracy in Asia

We are in unfamiliar territory and uncharted waters for democracy. Leadership has to change from state-centered to include societal institutions. Communities have changed from age, gender or geographic location – to communities of shared values. Cross-cultural dialogue has become more important amidst polarization and distrust. I see these three crosscurrents as opportunities for Japan and the Philippines to strengthen each other's role in building democracy in Asia.

Crosscurrents move against the general flow. A temperate city in a tropical country, a citizens' trading platform against trading posts and middlemen, a Japanese animated series in the Filipino consciousness, and the finest love story that is about cross-cultural differences. Democracy is being defined by many crosscurrents today. In a mountain city, far away from the national noise, I find hope in these crosscurrents and I look to Japan, in a sisterhood for democracy.

¹ Image 1: Concrete pylon marker in Japanese section of Baguio City cemetery. Photo by the author



Contact

Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE/Japan)
Meisan Tameike Bldg. 7F, 1-1-12 Akasaka
Minato-ku, Tokyo, Japan 107-0052

[jcie-democracy @jcie.jp](mailto:jcie-democracy@jcie.jp) (Delete the space before @)

Author's Biography



Maxine Tanya Hamada works on governance strategy and innovation. She has almost 2 decades of leadership experience in both civil society and public service. Her work spans the sectors of public fiscal management, civil society engagement, security sector reform, local governance, meaningful devolution, and indigenous peoples' rights. Tanya currently sits on the editorial board of the Institute for Leadership, Empowerment and Democracy (iLEAD) and is a member of the international steering committee of the World Movement for Democracy. She most recently served the Philippine government as assistant secretary for monitoring and evaluation in the Department of Budget and Management where she helped set up a national evaluation policy, oversaw the Grassroots Planning and Budgeting Program and engagements with civil society, and innovated a meaningful devolution program for direct fiscal downloads to performing provincial governments. Her consultancy firm works with sub-national, national and international clients on innovative solutions to governance challenges.