

"From Arab Spring to Thai Crisis: The Spirit of Global Democratization"

This week the HDFS team attended a public lecture by Dr. Larry Diamond titled, "From the Arab Spring to the Thai Crisis: The Spirit of Globalization". It was held on December 27, 2011, in the Maha Chulalongkorn building at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok.

Dr. Diamond began his lecture by referring to Samuel Huntington's "The Third Wave", which describes a rapid surge of global democratization stretching from the 1970s to the present. Dr. Diamond asserted that from 1974 to 1999, the number of independent states with democratic political systems had more than doubled. However, he distinguishes democracies by those that are merely electoral and those of high quality, which he describes as "liberal". Liberal democracies, he contends, are systems with popular sovereignty, civic culture, rule of law, and equal protections for basic rights. Using these criteria with present data, Dr. Diamond determined there are 77 reasonably high-quality democracies in the world (about 2/3rds of all independent states).

The third wave, according to Dr. Diamond, peaked in 2006, beginning a "democratic recession" in which the total number of democratic states declined concurrent with falling freedom scores. He said there were 26 breakdowns or reversals of democracy globally since 1999. Among the key "strategic" countries to experience such a setback was Thailand. The abrogation of the 1997 Thai constitution, he opined, was not just a loss for Thailand but for the world.

Dr. Diamond made an interesting claim with regards to democracy in China. He predicted that with rising income levels, China's citizens will demand more freedom. And unless the current regime prepares a soft landing for itself in the future – by building more genuine legitimacy – it will disappear. This, he said, could occur in the next 10-15 years.

Following Dr. Diamond's presentation, the lecture opened to a panel of discussants, Professor Likhit Dhiravegin and Professor Suchit Bonbongkarn, of Thammasart and Chulalongkorn University respectively. The two presented their visions of a future moving towards increasing democratization, citing that the forces propelling it are practically inevitable. On the case of Thailand, the two were hopeful and optimistic. And in this regard, professor Likhit was especially adamant that society's institutions need to be flexible and adaptable to the winds of change.

All in all, the lecture was an interesting and intellectually rousing event. The HDFS team intends to make use of said knowledge in future discussions or research.