

Comments on the 2011 ADI Pilot Test

FELIPE B. MIRANDA

“Man is the measure of all things: of things that are, that they are; of things that are not, that they are not.”
- Protagoras (On Truth)

Man, it has been said, is the measure of all things. One must also immediately add that he happens to be the measurer too—the metrician in contemporary social science jargon. Particularly in the past fifty years, democracy has warranted man’s interest and therefore his focused efforts at understanding and measuring it. All over the world, democracy studies and indices have proliferated, with many of them being international attempts at comparing the extent and quality of democratization in cross-sectional as well as time series studies. Others are clearly national ventures; as democracy becomes an iconic concern, more and more polities try to establish their political bona fides with various indicators and indices of democratization.

This particular morning we are offered an opportunity to assess the utility of an Asian Democracy Index (ADI), a collaborative project that the Consortium for the Asian Democracy Index (CADI) identifies itself with. Our University of the Philippines host for today’s conference, the Third World Studies Center (TWSC), is now a member of this scholarly consortium. I must thank both TWSC and CADI for inviting me to react to the overall presentation of the Asian Democracy Index as well as the findings of several national papers using the ADI analytical frame in surveys of experts on democratization.

Several points come to mind as I try to discharge my responsibilities as a reactor today.

First, I wonder whether the ADI has sufficiently explored the concept of democracy in its modern or contemporary guise. The liberal and egalitarian dimensions of modern democracy, even as they signal a welcome expansion

Felipe B. Miranda is professor emeritus at the University of the Philippines-Diliman. He is also a founding fellow of Social Weather Stations and the founder of Pulse Asia, Inc.

of democracy beyond the traditional procedural concerns of regular elections, legal enactments, and formal constitutional structures, could be more explicitly joined by equally essential democratic concerns such as participative politics and accountable governance. To make the conceptualization truly modern, another dimension—a human quality of life—must also be included and join the four dimensions of democracy identified by the consortium. There can be no democracy, Asian or otherwise, if these modern integral elements are not explicitly, and with equal valence, made part of the democratic theoretical frame. A historical fallacy, to give a fuller twist to Philippe Schmitter's felicitous phrase, is not only committed when one demands of past societies what are properly attributes of our current times but also when one fails to apply to our present societies attributes that are already characteristic of our times. A human quality of life, participatory politics, and accountable governance must not only be explored as secondary dimensions of democracy—they must join what ADI has already identified as crucial to all democratic frames: liberalization and equalization.

Furthermore, is it not possible to be a bit more ambitious in embedding these five integrals within a generous but specific time frame (say half a century), such that if no demonstrable improvement in the quality or extent of any of these five basic democratic variables can be seen, a regime assessor, on theoretical grounds, is able to classify a given regime as nondemocratic?

As part of a conceptual clean-up relevant to all functional democratization metrics: democracy and democratization are not the same; neither is democracy and freedom. Democracy is a type of political regime with specific regime properties; democratization, on the other hand, is the process that moves any regime towards democracy or greater and more enduring, "deepened" or "consolidated," democracy, even if the starting of democratization point is antithetical to democracy. Likewise, freedom may be an important feature of liberal democracy and democracy may facilitate freedom but they are not the same. Fareed Zakaria, for instance, outlines a provocative scenario of a world where illiberal democracy exists.

Having suggested in what ways we might make the democratic conceptualization behind the ADI stronger and more salient to our modern times, one can add a few more notes that properly focus on its survey and index design. We are told by ADI paper writers that ADI guidelines prescribe the use of an "expert" rather than a general public survey. For any given country, it would be good to standardize the meaning of "expert" and, as in the Indonesia paper, a profile of those finally selected as survey respondents should be included in the final report.

While an exploratory survey at this point is the most that could be targeted by ADI members, it would be advisable to increase the target number of experts to more than the current 27. The current difficulties of ADI national investigators in locating “experts” across the board result in noticeably skewed profiles leaving critical grid cells without respondents. A more liberal, more realistic time frame might be considered to encourage more “right” experts to participate.

The results of “expert” surveys would do well to be validated by surveys of alternative experts or the same survey in modified Delphi. Ultimately all “expert” surveys should be validated through a general public survey.

Like other indices (Freedom House, Israeli Democracy Index, Economic Intelligence Unit Democracy Index), mean calculations for all values generated in the ADI assume that the categories/variables considered (whether at the highest or lower levels of theoretical generalization) employ at least interval, if not ratio scales. Furthermore, that within any given category, the subcategories have equal significance or weights. This may make for convenient calculation, but it is conceivable that at any given time some variables may really—and should have—more weight than others. The pacing of political or economic democratization may actually reflect threshold effects, i.e., for any given country, it takes more effort to improve as one approaches a threshold point. The general finding across ADI’s national surveys indicating that experts rate liberalization better/higher than equalization and that political liberalization occurs sooner than economic liberalization, suggests that uneven weights and threshold valuation might be more realistically applied than equal weights and categorical estimates for some countries at some critical point(s) in their political or economic development.

Subjective interpretation of the figures generated could be threatening to the avowed goal of relative objectivity in using the ADI. How big a difference in index points makes for a significant difference between and among index scores? Unlike the Korean paper, the Indonesian and Philippine papers report index scores that most of the time do not differ by more than two index points. Also consider: how do we know that midpoint on a scale of 0 to 10 is halfway towards becoming a modern democracy? Even given this numerical eleven-point scale, why cannot a 7 or even an 8 be the legitimate, qualitatively more sensible midpoint in gauging the progress of a country towards reaching democratic status, “consolidated” or otherwise? As has been pointed out in many contemporary examination of prominent democracy-related indices, so much subjective evaluation is usually reflected in international and national democracy index work.

ADI probes allow for individual country definition of its lead categories, e.g., political orientations—the present Indonesian and Korean probes as reflected in the national papers are basically the same, but the Philippine Left and Right orientation does not fall within the same categorization of pro- and anti-government. The issue of standardizing questionnaire design may need another ADI discussion and the possibility of comparative democratic indexing across Asian countries may again be assessed even if, as it now stands, ADI indexing work emphasizes validity primarily within specific national rather than cross-country frames.

The possibility of a Delphi being brought to bear on ADI work requires yet another step, feeding back to the experts their own initial consensus and finding out whether they would conform to it. Even experts may, after this procedure, be said to be vulnerable to Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's "spiral of silence."

Exploratory surveys and nothing more may be realistically expected at this stage for ADI investigators. This pilot indexing work, even given its natural/normal weaknesses at this stage, nevertheless has its proper contribution to make in the challenging study of democratization monitoring. In the social sciences, we still have to appreciate what in the natural sciences one takes for granted: that most initial experimental work discovers what to avoid doing precisely because we make full contact with it.