The Big Choices for Asia in the Decades Ahead

Who can say what Asia might look like in 20 years' time? No one with any real degree of certainty, but the events and trends of today give pointers. North Korea’s continuing nuclearization, military build-ups around the region, Japan’s probing constitutional reforms, swelling mega-cities and shifting demographics across Asia — all are examples of changes under way that will see a dramatically different Asia in coming decades.
Nowhere has the explosive growth of cities been more central to modern life than in Asia. In no other region are there more megacities with populations that dwarf the size of many countries. And that process of urbanization is only accelerating.

This presents some stark choices regarding how these sprawling centers of human civilization are to be governed and managed in the future. Mike Douglass makes the case for a move away from corporatized cities to urban centers characterized by inclusive, progressive governance.

As the 21st century moves through its second decade, cities in Asia are at a crossroads: They will either continue on a “globopolis” path of corporatized city-making or turn toward a participatory “cosmopolis” of inclusive governance to make cities responsive to the diverse aspirations of their people. The importance of this choice is underscored by projections showing that from 2015 to 2050 an estimated 1 billion people will be added to cities in Asia, giving cities more than two-thirds of the region’s population. Most of this growth will occur on a limited number of mega-urban areas expanding outward from core megacities with population increases in excess of 200,000 people per year. While much of this growth will be accounted for by cities in the larger mega-urban region beyond the borders of core megacities, it should be seen as the daily field of an expanding urban agglomeration (Jones and Douglass 2006). Thus, while UN data show Jakarta to have a population of about 10 million, the actual size of its mega-urban region, known as Jabodetabek, is now over 30 million. The constituent towns of this region — Bogor, Depok, Tangerang and Bekasi — that send an estimated 3 million commuters to Jakarta daily are among the fastest-growing cities in Indonesia.

The corporatization of governance and the turn toward globopolis in Asia began in earnest in the late 1980s, with a shift toward neoliberal policy regimes aimed at transforming government through business models whose principal job was to facilitate global corporate investment through public-private partnerships. The drive was powered by a new era of mega-projects and new financial instruments to create global land development consortia. With the opening of China by the 1990s (and later India), previously impossible scales of urban projects became common (Flyvbjerg, et al., 2003). Possibly the first private city manifesting the extremes of this new era was Muang Thong Thani in Thailand, which was advertised as a “complete private city run by private-sector people” for 700,000 residents in Bangkok (The New York Times, 1999).

Other examples can be seen throughout Asia: the world’s tallest buildings, mega-shopping malls, big box stores, chain stores and mini-mart franchises, world businesses hubs, global airports, vast private new towns and gated housing enclaves (Douglass and Huang 2010).

Recent corporate projects in Asia are among the largest in the world. Ho Chi Minh City’s private edge city, Phu My Hung (Saigon South), is being built for 1 million high-income residents. Lavasa, near Pune in India, is a wholly private new town covering 100 square kilometers (Kennard and Provost 2015). It has no mayor or elected officials. The US$24 billion Eco-City outside of Tianjin is a joint venture with developers in Singapore and covers more than 30 square kilometers for 350,000 residents. In the core areas of megacities, windowless shopping malls chaotically supplant entire neighborhoods, andmost are connected by new multi-lane highways that link them to suburban new towns.

These developments create a loss of smaller spaces, the vernacular city of lanes, neighborhoods, public spaces, open markets, locally owned shops and productive farm land (Katsu 2011). Reflecting on the vast footprints of these megaprojects, Sassen (2015:1) declares that they signal a new phase in city-making that is eliminating the “urban tissue” of spaces “previously accessible to the public,” changing the “historic meaning of the city” in ways that subvert “equity, democracy and rights.” She concludes that corporatization is de-urbanizing the world by creating agglomerations that have urban density but no longer function as cities.

As corporatization has ratcheted up over time, the impacts on cities have accumulated since at least the 1980s and have stimulated a new vocabulary to summarize their meanings and intentions:

- Geographies of nowhere (Kunstler 1994)
- The city as a theme park (Sorkin 1992)
- Secessionary urban spaces (Graham and Marvin 2001)
- De-nationalization of space and de-urbanization (Sassen 2003, 2015)
- Dystopia (Pinder 2002)
- Privatopolis (Shatkin 2011)
- The “end of curiosity” (Merrifield 2000).

The seismic upheavals of evictions, disposessions and loss of livelihoods that provoke these descriptions have quickly transformed vernacular, or pre-colonial, landscapes into a fragmented, unequal city that both manifests and magnifies four crises of urbanization in Asia, and in the world at large:

- Inclusion. The UN declares that democracy is in retreat throughout the world (Deen 2015), partly through new controls over freedom of speech, but equally through privatization and redesign of urban spaces, including public parks, to inhibit social and public life.
- Distributive justice. Inequalities in income, services and housing are rising across urban Asia (WTO 2012). Labor that had previously negotiated lifetime employment with pensions and health benefits has become the precarious labor force of the 21st century at the same time that the numbers of low-paid, disposable foreign workers increase (Fisher 2012). Despite high economic growth rates across Asia, the number of slum dwellers continues to increase (UNESCAP 2015).
• **Conviviality.** Defined as the “pure sociability” of city life, “conviviality is, indeed, the very nourishment of civil society itself” (Peattie 1998:250). With the privatization of urban space, mega-projects that focus on consumption and overt attempts to create artificial “cultural economies” dominate. Conviviality in social and cultural life for itself, rather than being instrumental to economic competitiveness or other ends such as regime maintenance, is being severely compromised in globopolis. At stake is human flourishing through meaningful social encounters that promote trust and civic identity and are the source of social capital.

• **Environmental well-being.** Cities have become the principal centers of anthropogenically-driven global environmental deterioration (Fieldman 2011). This is not only manifested in global climate change and rising sea levels, but also in environmental disasters of unprecedented scale and frequency, most of which are occurring in rapidly urbanizing areas in Asia (Douglass 2014a). The instrumental relations with nature continue to define sustainable development only in terms of human wants (UN 2010). This needs fundamental rethinking about human beings as derived from nature and a lifelong process of engagement in the world. Cities must take the lead in moving in this direction.

**NEW URBAN POLITICS AND THE RISE OF PROGRESSIVE CITIES**

As the crises attending urbanization deepen, they are also generating new urban politics in Asia. These create the potential for an alternative urban future. One factor is the magnitude of urban growth. Following decolonization after the Second World War, the majority of Asian countries had only about 20 percent of their populations living in cities, with cities mostly being centers of agrarian economies. National governments were almost all in the hands of authoritarian regimes, with municipal governments appointed from the center — and even where elected, local governments remained heavily dependent on central governments for finance, personnel and decision-making.

By the late 1990s, a new history was in the making in Asia. Urbanization was approaching 50 percent, and along with industrialization, burgeoning urban working and middle classes mobilized to achieve successful democratic reform that included local elections of mayors. While the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis severely disrupted these advances and even resulted in steps backward in terms of labor rights and inequality, the aftermath of the 2008 global crisis resulted in some cities in some countries putting forth progressive agendas even if governments remained in the hands of strong-arm regimes.

Discontent about current conditions in cities is rising everywhere. On a global scale, recent analysis of big data collected on protests around the world indicate that “the number of highly politically significant protests has reached an all-time high in the past decade” (Herzog 2015:1). Among the reasons identified for protests are political disaffection with the new motivation of “exodus from oppression,” economic inequality and democratization of media. In Asia, insurgencies have broadened beyond democratic reform to now include protests against (global) corporatization of government through, for example, privatization of public services. They are also going beyond places of work to the “right to the city” (Lefebvre 1991, Harvey 2008, Soja 2011). Protests against global economic summits such as APEC, environmental pollution and unfair labor practices now add to those against lack of affordable housing, the loss of public parks, evictions for megaprojects and the loss of livelihoods to mini-marts, among others. In other words, they are responding to all of the crises noted above (Douglass 2014, UCLA 2015).

In all of these expressions of discontent, even in the same country, cities respond differently, and in almost every country, some cities have become known for being more progressive than others. These differences are now of greater importance than ever before as they spotlight the diversion of national governments from the local to the global arena, which magnifies tendencies to “sub-ordinate or devalue the links between individuals and other expressions of community” that fail to relate to “everyday experiences” (Duara 2014:78).

As cities become more central to discontent about everyday life, aspirations for a better world also turn to them for their fulfillment.

In the context of decentralized politics, national political systems are experiencing previously unexpected openings for progressive leaders to rise from municipal government to the national stage. The meteoric ascent of Joko Widodo (known popularly as Jokowi) as a progressive mayor of a secondary city, Solo, to become governor of Jakarta and then president of Indonesia in less than two years is one of the most prominent cases in point, and one that would not have been possible even a decade ago. Now with democratization and a devolved system of government, local people can be propelled toward progressive actions through the electoral process.

Seoul has a parallel experience with the election of Mayor Park Won-soon, an independent activist who had held no other public office and was first elected as an independent candidate. Re-elected by the widest margin of any candidate for public office in 2014, his actions have addressed crucial issues in all four crisis areas. With backing especially from younger voters who said they wanted “a new kind of politics” (BBC News 2011), the city’s move toward progressive policies is well documented (Cho 2014). These include new ave-
nues for direct citizen participation in governance; redistributive mechanisms such as a sharing economy and participatory budgeting; community-organized social and cultural events and new public spaces; and substantial reductions in energy consumption. Other South Korean cities are moving in a similar direction.

While many tendencies and trends, notably the rise of civil society, are crucial dynamics in the emergence of progressive cities through the window of corporatization, they cannot be reduced to one-way causalities. Some cities are better than others in encoding the crises of corporatization, they have recently formed a progressive cities association in South Korea. Other cities, networks of progressive cities are also in the making.

As all of Asia swiftly urbanizes, the need for progressive cities becomes even more paramount. Cities are the major sources of many of the world’s critical problems, including global warming and they must also become sources of solutions. While the push for progressive governance often arises from crises that generate broad social mobilizations, their forward movement is localized at the city level and is task- and project-oriented. In this sense, progressive cities can emerge from non-crisis driven cultural and social forces. This is the hope for the future. In the words of Bell and de-Shalit (2011), as national-level governments become more uniform under the hegemony of global capital, “cities may come to the rescue.” In an age of planetary urbanization (Brenner and Schmid 2014) in which the entire world is part of an interconnected urban matrix, and to which Asia is now the largest contributor, this assertion might seem naive. However, the outcomes of cities not turning toward progressive forms of governance are even more unthinkible.

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