INTRODUCTION: The politics of social policy in Asia

Behind the rhetoric of inexorable economic growth and rising prosperity associated with notions of an 'Asian Century' lies a complex and contingent reality. While Asia's economic rise has led to higher living standards, social exclusion remains a major challenge. Extreme poverty persists in South Asia and to a lesser extent Southeast Asia. At the same time, millions of people in these and some other parts of Asia live on incomes just above the extreme poverty line, leaving them vulnerable to falling back into extreme poverty due to economic crises, natural disasters, or other shocks. Illustrating this risk, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) estimates that COVID-19 drove 4.7 million people into extreme poverty in Southeast Asia alone. Many people in poorer parts of Asia also continue to lack access to basic services such as education and healthcare, notwithstanding dramatic improvements in this respect in recent decades, or only have access to poor quality services. In some Asian countries, including some of the wealthier ones within the region, rising inequality, aging populations, persistent labour precarity, and rural-urban migration have posed additional challenges with regards to poverty and social exclusion. Research and analysis by international organisations suggest that inequality in particular represents a key threat to the region, noting that it is producing political and social tensions that could undermine growth and stability.

In response to this situation, many Asian governments have invested significant resources in new social welfare schemes in recent decades. The need for change was initially highlighted by the 1997-1998 Asian economic crisis which caused massive job losses, rising poverty, deteriorating education and health indicators, and political and social unrest within the region. Several Asian governments impacted by the crisis established new social safety net schemes targeting the poor and the social sectors. Over following years, they built on these schemes to establish more institutionalised forms of social protection including universal health coverage, cash transfer schemes, free education programs, social pensions, and subsidised food programs. Asian countries that were not severely affected by the Asian Economic Crisis followed suit in line with an emerging global norm emphasising the importance of social protection in facilitating economic and social development. The COVID-19 pandemic, which struck the region in 2020, saw many Asian governments ramp up these schemes and introduce new ones to protect citizens from declining

incomes and illness.

Yet, despite these moves, Asia's social welfare systems remain underdeveloped and skewed in favour of particular groups. According to the International Labour Organisation, with the notable exception of Japan, countries in Asia spend much less on social protection and public health than countries in Northern, Southern and Western Europe and North America, with rates of spending being particularly low in South Asia and parts of Southeast Asia. Furthermore, as noted above, the quality of social services, particularly in low and lower-middle-income countries within the region, is often poor. Finally, social protection spending in Asia is heavily weighted towards social insurance, a form of social protection that often benefits civil servants, the military and formal sector workers while social assistance, which tends to target the poor and vulnerable, attracts relatively little spending. Most analysts of Asian welfare systems accordingly suggest that while these welfare systems have become more inclusive and may no longer be 'productivist' in nature—that is, characterised by the subordination of social policy to economic policy—as they were at earlier points of time, they do not yet amount to fully-fledged 'welfare states'.

This edition of *Melbourne Asia Review* seeks to understand the nature and evolution of social welfare systems in Asia, focusing on how they have been, and are being, shaped by political dynamics. Much analysis of Asian social welfare systems has sought to identify clusters of countries with common welfare features inspired by scholar Gøsta Esping-Andersen's pioneering work on 'three worlds of welfare capitalism'. The key debates in the academic literature have accordingly been focused on whether Asian welfare regimes have similar or different attributes to welfare regimes in other parts of the world; whether a single model or multiple models of welfare exist within the region; and whether and in what ways the nature of welfare systems has changed since the Asian financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Alternatively, analysis has focused on diagnosing flaws in social welfare systems within the region and identifying solutions to these flaws, particularly analysis produced by international organisations and technocratic policy analysts.

Some scholars have brought a concern with political dynamics into the analysis when examining how Asian welfare systems have been informed by 'Confucian' values, the late industrialisation, and democratisation and electoral competition. But in general, scholars have given relatively little attention to the role of political dynamics, despite the fact that they are widely acknowledged to be an important determinant of social policy decisions and were a core part of Esping-Andersen's

initial work.

The ways in which contributors bring a concern with political dynamics into the analysis varies considerably, as does their focus in terms of country, sector and issue. Nevertheless, they display a common sense that social policy reform—whether aimed widening access to or improving the quality of public services—runs up against powerful political obstacles, limiting the scope for change. These obstacles include:

1. the interests of entrenched political, bureaucratic and corporate elites for whom social services and social protection constitute a source of rents, political support and political control (see, for instance, Phil King and colleagues' analysis of curriculum reform in Indonesia, Kidjie Ian Saguin's analysis of kindergarten education in the Philippines, Jake Lin and Jingyu Mao's analysis of business contributions to social insurance in Vietnam and China, and Azad Singh Bali's analysis of universal healthcare reform in Asia);
2. variability in the quality of political and bureaucratic leadership, particularly at the local level where implementation often occurs (see Qianjin Zhang's analysis of social service reform in rural China);
3. the low priority given by many citizens to issues of inequality and social policy issues, including at election time (see Oliver Heath and colleagues' analysis of health politics in India and Gyu-Jin Hwang's analysis of inequality and social policy in East Asia);
4. worker skepticism about the presumed benefits of social insurance and lack of trust in government and public service providers (see Victoria Fanggidae's analysis of health insurance in Indonesia); and
5. the low level of trust that politicians may have in medical and educational personnel (see Sumit Kane and Michael Calnan's analysis of the medical profession in India).

At the same time, however, the contributors also show that there are potentially powerful drivers of social policy reform at work within the region. While many voters may give a low priority to social policy concerns at election time, Heath and colleagues' analysis suggests that such concerns still influence voting to some extent. Technocratic officials, backed by international development organisations, have long argued in favour of reforms aimed at improving access to and the quality of social services albeit in line with controversial strategies of marketisation and privatisation, as Phil King et al's analysis of curriculum reform in Indonesia illustrates (see also the book review). In the Chinese case, Zhang shows that central

government directives to local authorities to expand provision of social services through collaboration with private business, volunteer organisations and NGOs have also driven significant change, albeit unevenly. Finally, Adam Fforde suggests that improved access to social services is supported by economic restructuring centred on the servicisation of economies. These analyses complement other work that has pointed to the important role of populist electoral politics and mobilisation by labour organisations, civil society organisations, health and education professionals, and other popular elements in driving social policy reform within the region.

Stefan Kühner argues in his paper that explanatory studies of the evolution of Asian welfare regimes are bedeviled by measurement issues, in particular with regards to how we understand welfare development. Nevertheless, the papers published here show that as well as addressing these measurement issues, it equally important incorporate politics more centrally into the study of social policy in Asia. In so doing, they point to the considerable potential of a research agenda concerned with understanding the politics of change.

Image: Students protesting for Free Education in the Philippines, 2018. Credit: Elmer B. Domingo/Wikimedia Commons.