

“REGIME TYPE AND PERFORMANCE: A BLIND ALLEY?” Comment on King

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Dwight King's recent article (*Comparative Political Studies*, Volume 13, Number 4, January 1981) on authoritarian rule and inequality in Asia addresses an old question in the field of comparative politics: Can we determine whether democratic (or civilian) regimes or authoritarian (or military) regimes have better "performance"? The usual answer has been that no, we cannot show that different types of regimes on the average perform any differently on the basis of economic growth or the provision of social services (Dye, 1976; Jackman, 1976; Bienen, 1978; Ravenhill, 1980), although Joseph Pluta (1979) argues the opposite point for Latin America. I contend that King's attempt to establish a causal relation running from political democracy to lessened inequality is flawed on several counts and that for developing capitalist or semicapitalist nations in South, Southeast, and East Asia there is no evidence of an association between democracy and lessened inequality or between authoritarianism and heightened inequality. To begin with, the presumption that free elections should lead to governments being more willing to side with the poor against elite groups is not at all convincing. Recently Atul Kohli (1980) has sided with Robert Dahl (1978) in concluding that there is no necessary relationship between political democracy and reduced inequality. Rather, Kohli (1980: 625) claims "democracies have long found solutions for pre-

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serving substantial economic inequalities despite formal political equality."

The selection of countries by King for inclusion in his study represents a puzzle to this observer. King includes four Southeast Asian nations (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand) as well as South Korea and Sri Lanka. The decision to restrict the study to one area of the world seems reasonable, as early studies of regime type and performance have been criticized for including countries from different continents in the same sample (Ravenhill, 1980). Thus, it is understandable why Pakistan and Nepal might be excluded because of distance from Southeast Asia, and the exclusion of Bangladesh on the basis of insufficient data is likewise understandable. But the rationale for exclusion of India while Sri Lanka is included is difficult to explain. While King excludes socialist countries, India is hardly more "socialist" than Sri Lanka. Similarly, it is hard to justify the inclusion of South Korea while excluding Taiwan as too developed, for while it is true that Taiwan has a modestly higher level of per capita income than South Korea (by about a fifth) and has a smaller proportion of population in rural areas, the similarities in the two countries' development paths overwhelm the differences.

Much more serious than the arbitrary inclusion or exclusion of countries to be studied is the questionable interpretation of data by King for those countries that he does choose to look at. King asserts that in recent decades inequality has increased in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, and has decreased in Malaysia (at least since 1970), South Korea, and Sri Lanka. For five of the six cases I am aware of evidence contradicting King's claims. The one exception is the Philippines, the country with which I am least familiar. Furthermore, while King acknowledges the indications of increasing inequality in Malaysia before 1970 and in the Philippines before the imposition of martial law (see Griffen, 1979), he glosses over these apparent discrepant cases of democracy associated with rising inequality as well as the allegedly "deviant outcome" of South Korea in concluding that "democratic-type regimes (Malaysia, Sri Lanka) have performed better than bureaucratic-authoritarian ones (Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand)."

Because of the lack of adequate data, it is not possible to conclusively either prove or disprove an increase or a decrease in inequality in any of the countries in King's study. Yet there are good reasons to doubt that rural inequality rose unambiguously in either Indonesia or Thai-

land (especially the latter). Almost all observers seem agreed that absolute poverty in rural Indonesia has been rising, but there is dispute as to whether rural inequality has been rising as well, although the majority of observers have argued that inequality has increased (Arndt, 1975). King gives prominent attention to case studies which have found rising inequality within certain villages in Java (such as Collier et al., 1973; White, 1976). But a recent study covering 48 villages in different parts of Java concluded that the alarms raised by these studies were not applicable to the majority of villages (Hayami and Hafid, 1979). More seriously, King seems to have ignored the evidence of Indonesian surveys showing a *decrease* in rural inequality between 1970 and 1976 (together with an increase in both urban inequality and rural-urban differentials), although the quality of the data is subject to challenge (Sundrum, 1979, 1980; Dapice, 1980). As for Thailand, the available data show no worsening of rural inequality during the 1960s (Jain, 1975; Griffen, 1979). Furthermore, there is also evidence which challenges King's (1981: 485) contention that "increasing inequality is thus apparent along a regional or geographical dimension." A recent World Bank study (Meesook, 1979) finds a reduction in both rural-urban disparities and regional disparities in Thailand between the early 1960s and the mid-1970s.

Similarly, there are strong reasons to doubt that inequality has declined in the three countries in which King says that it has. For South Korea the available income distribution data are not trustworthy, as they are based on a combination of samples of urban wage earners and rural cultivators which tend to exclude both the poorest and most affluent strata (Bai, 1978). While inequality is certainly lower in South Korea than it was before a radical land reform was enacted in the late 1940s and early 1950s, a number of observers have concluded that inequality probably rose during the rapid growth of the 1960s and 1970s (Lee, 1979). For Malaysia the data on income distribution for recent years seem to be of acceptable quality, but the conclusion that inequality rose sharply between 1957 and 1970 (Snodgrass, 1975; Lee, 1977b) seems attributable to severe flaws in the 1957 data which render any such comparison very questionable (Anand, forthcoming). But the point at issue according to King is whether inequality has fallen or risen since 1970, and on this count the survey data show an *increase* in inequality rather than the decrease alleged by King (Pang, 1980).

Sri Lanka should be a case of particular interest to political scientists, as the country has a record of unbroken democratic rule since the

establishment of universal adult suffrage in 1931 and possesses what is undoubtedly the most responsive democratic political system in Asia. It would indeed be helpful for King's hypothesis if inequality had declined over time in Sri Lanka. Yet the widespread view that Sri Lanka engineered a massive reduction in income inequality seems sadly amiss. An ILO study (Lee, 1977a) concluded that the data on income distribution in Sri Lanka were suspect and that, if anything, there was probably a marked worsening in rural income distribution in Sri Lanka. In a recent reappraisal of income distribution data in Sri Lanka (Grosse, 1981), I have adduced further evidence to back Lee's rejection of the hypothesis that the distribution of income became noticeably more equal and that the rural poor became better off. It should also be pointed out that the free distribution of food grains and generous price subsidies which made Sri Lanka famous as a Third World "welfare state" have been sharply curtailed by the current freely elected government.

An alternative set of data on rural inequality in a sample of Asian countries likewise fails to support King's hypothesis. These data consist of information on the distribution of land holdings for eight Asian nations during the 1960s, three of which were unambiguously democratic (India, Malaysia, Sri Lanka), three of which were definitely non-democratic (Bangladesh, Indonesia, Thailand) and two of which were democratic regimes which evolved into dictatorships (Philippines, South Korea). According to these data, brought together from various sources by Keith Griffen (1979: 366), the distribution of agricultural land became substantially more unequal in all three of the countries in the first group (India, Malaysia, Sri Lanka) and in two of the countries in the second group (Bangladesh, Indonesia). The data indicate little change in either the Philippines or South Korea, and a sizeable reduction in inequality in rural Thailand. These data are not entirely consistent with data on the distribution of household income in rural areas for many of the same countries as reported in Jain (1975), but the net result is the same: There is no evidence whatever of an association between political democracy and lessened inequality in rural Asia.

In conclusion, I concur with John Ravenhill (1980) in his suggestion that the cross-national regime type-performance field of study may have outlived its usefulness and that in the future comparative political studies should focus on differential performance *within* types of regimes. The relevant question in this case would be the determination of the means by which governments may influence patterns of in-

equality and the reasons why particular governments may see it to be in their own interest to take such steps. Unfortunately, income distribution data from developing countries are of notoriously low quality, and judgments about "performance" on the basis of intertemporal inequality estimates are, as often as not, likely to be mistaken and can only be considered questionable at best. Income distribution data in developed countries tend to be of better quality, and a recent economic analysis of historical trends in income inequality in the United States (Williamson and Lindert, 1980) is recommended to those readers interested in the determinants of changes in income inequality over time.

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