Francis Fukuyama declared we’re all liberal democrats now. James Cotton disagrees. He argues the economies and societies of Asia show few signs of adapting to the western model.

According to Francis Fukuyama, capitalism and liberal democracy are triumphant. Yet the difficulties with this view are many—not least the question of whether or to what extent the former socialist and multi-ethnic states will adopt political and economic systems which are both capitalist and democratic. If we can set aside the travails of the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia as the inevitable consequences of transition, an even greater challenge to Fukuyama’s argument is the course taken by the industrialised non-socialist states of Asia.

I want to argue here that, despite decades of rapid economic growth and conscious efforts to adapt a variety of western institutions and practices, the Asian Newly Industrialising Countries (South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong) while capitalist, are far from liberal democratic. As their economies mature they have adopted democratic political forms, but usually without liberal content. Nor is this situation likely to change. Indeed, with greater economic strength providing the basis for increased social and cultural self-confidence, they may be even less inclined in the future to borrow western liberal democratic practices or conform to what are perceived as western standards.

With the exception of Hong Kong, changes of government in the Asian NICs are now determined by formally democratic mechanisms. Singapore has been governed along Westminster lines since 1959, South Korea adopted representative institutions in 1987, and Taiwan embarked upon a thorough refurbishment of its political institutions starting in 1986. Even Hong Kong, though still run as a colony, now accords some role to electoral and representative principles.

However, democratic forms and institutions by themselves are insufficient to produce liberal democracy. Precisely what else is required is a matter of some debate among political scientists. However, they would tend to look to the existence of relatively independent and influential interest groups and interests, or of attitudes and beliefs conducive to individual and group autonomy, or of limitations upon the activities and aspirations of the state itself. Whichever of these factors contributes the most to liberalisation, it is significant that they are still largely absent from the Asian NIC states in the 1990s.

The first possibility to be considered is the possible emergence of autonomous interest groups and those other features of civil society which made possible the democratic revolution of 1989-90 in Central Europe. Here there are some positive signs, most notably the upsurge in South Korea since mid-1987 of labour and of some professionals (including teachers and lawyers) against corporatist state controls. However, these developments do not necessarily constitute a movement towards social and political pluralism. To take a Korean example, a union of teachers (the formation of which has become a cause célèbre) devoted to advancing the class struggle and destroying the government cannot be taken as advancing the mechanisms of social consensus. It must be recalled, however, that until 1987 ruthless (and often technically illegal) methods were customarily employed against such organisations, and that their formation under the new dispensation is still in its learning phase.

In any event, more common has been the single issue mobilisation of inter-
ests in Taiwan and South Korea (against American agricultural imports, environmental problems, and the like), though in the former there are attempts to form a labour-oriented political movement—attempts, as yet ineffective at a time when the organised opposition to the Kuomintang is becoming increasingly fragmented. Here the example of Japan illustrates the possibility that separately organised interests might even constitute their own political party and occupy influential positions in local government and elsewhere without gaining regular access to the policymaking machinery of the central state.

In Singapore, independent trade union or professional bodies are no more likely to appear in the 1990s than in the past. It was enough for the Law Society of Singapore in 1987 to dispute (as was its right and even its duty) the coherence of a draft bill giving the state powers to control publications which sought to interfere in or influence Singapore’s internal politics to move the state to reorganise the legal profession. If anything, the Singaporean state is becoming more ambitious in its desire to control private interests. On the other hand, the unprecedented mobilisation of the population of Hong Kong in 1989—first to support the democracy movement in China, then to advance claims for the democratisation of the territory in advance of 1997—indicates that the quiescence of the past cannot be projected into the future. Unfortunately for liberal democracy, the mechanisms of the post-1997 state will be even more unfavourable to expressions of autonomous social interest than is the colonial state at present.

What of the development in the Asian NICs of popular attitudes and beliefs conducive to liberalisation? It is sometimes argued that with the transformation of society through industrialisation—and particularly as a result of urbanisation and the expansion of the educated sectors of the population—forces and expectations are generated which are favourable to a more participatory political style. There is some general evidence to support that view from Korea and Taiwan—though in the case of Korea regional sentiment is still the single most powerful determinant of voting behaviour (and much else), while in Taiwan the differences in outlook between voters of Taiwanese as against those of mainland origin often obscure the operation of other variables.

In Singapore the extensive degree of voter support for the divided and hamstrung opposition (almost four voters in every 10 in recent elections) could be taken to imply a similar phenomenon. In Hong Kong changes in attitude toward the government and the legal system, particularly among the young and better educated of the population, have been evident. Over time, such developments might permit the emergence of a more participatory view of politics. However, such factors as the conduct of elites, the organisation of political parties, and the relationship between government and bureaucracy suggest that such hopes may well be too optimistic.

Although the instruments of control wielded by regimes and ruling parties in the Asian NICs have become more sophisticated, the purposes for which they are wielded have remained the same for the past two decades. Institutionalised political parties have
yet to emerge in South Korea; rather, political movements are still dominated by regional (and in the case of the ruling party, military) ingroups held together by ties of personal loyalty. The realignment of South Korean political parties in 1990 is eloquent testimony to the continued prevalence of this situation: one of the key coup-makers of 1979 and the founder of the Korean CIA have combined forces with the leading opposition figure of the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the third figure (Kim Young-sam) now the next presidential candidate.

By contrast, the Kuomintang in Taiwan seems to have taken on the character of a ‘hegemonic’ party on the model of the Japanese Liberal Democratic or Italian Christian Democrats, its leadership sponsoring reforms which would have been anathema only a few years before. Within the Kuomintang, on the other hand, comparable democratic reforms have yet to be fully implemented. A combination of ‘connections’ (guanxi) and money still seems to be at the core of the party power structure. The special conditions of Hong Kong make direct comparison difficult, but contending for power with vocal radical groups are business-led factions dedicated to defusing mass politics in order to deliver an orderly, subservient and profitable Hong Kong to Beijing. The hereditary succession in Singapore speaks for itself. Again, the case of Japan illustrates that it is possible to sustain the politics of personal factions and privileged access to the bureaucracy in an advanced industrial state.

A further obstacle to the development of liberalisation may be seen in the continued influence in the Asian NICs of Confucianism. Central to Confucianism is an ethical view of government (which renders compromise morally repugnant), a belief in the superiority and duty to lead of the educated person (which undercuts notions of the legitimacy of popular interests), and a generally collectivist and organic conception of the state (which is less favourable to the action of individual citizens). While some commentators have demonstrated the existence of an individualist and perhaps even a liberal tradition in East Asian thought, the lack of such notions as individual and human rights cannot be disputed.

These trends are not without some contradictory developments. The achievement of economic goals of nation-building has been the rationale for the strong state in East Asia. With the growing maturity of the Asian economies (requiring the expansion of domestic demand, lower barriers to trade, and the internationalisation of domestic firms) there would appear to be less need for such a state. However, the Japanese state—often taken as the prototype of such a state—indicates that the capacity for a Ministry of International Trade and Industry to impose ‘administrative guidance’ on the private sector remains considerable.

In the 1980s there has been some liberalisation and internationalisation of the Taiwanese and South Korean economies—and in Korea the industrial conglomerates have become so large and far-flung that many of their activities are beyond easy government supervision. Against this, in Korea campaigns orchestrated by the government and ostensibly directed against the consumption of ‘luxuries’ have amounted to a continuation by other means of the policy of managed trade.

There is still a long way to go before the interventionist inclinations of the Seoul authorities are relinquished. And in the political realm the formation of the Democratic Liberal Party suggests an attempt to form a Korean version of that symbiosis of political and bureaucratic personnel and business money which has ruled Japan since 1955. Such a creation would certainly transform the Korean state; after all, it is often claimed that Japan has no policymaking core but, rather, a number of contending bureaucratic centres held together by shared values and practices, whereas the Korean state has a unitary identity. However, even if this project is successful there will be a continuation of the assertion of the state against society. A similar development is much further advanced in Taiwan, where neither the representative organs of the state nor the bureaucracy can function independently without the party. Abandoning its formal monopoly of power will probably ensure that in practical terms the Kuomintang (including members of its military arm) retains its predominance.

In South Korea and, to a lesser extent, in Taiwan, long-maintained corporatist controls have begun to unravel—though in Singapore they are, if anything, growing stronger. Again, in Hong Kong Beijing can be expected to employ its full panoply of corporatist mechanisms after 1997. Discord between the centre and the provinces may, however, temper these somewhat.

From this analysis it can be seen that, while the limits to liberalisation in the Asian NICs are obvious, all of these political and social systems are experiencing considerable change, in some cases including the further incorporation of western social and political practices. But it is equally clear that these systems will not simply replicate the conventions of western liberal representative government. Political evolution should not be directly equated with increasing liberalisation. In the present world trend of democratisation such an outcome might be expected (given favourable conditions) in the former Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and perhaps Poland and the Baltic states. If Romania and the fragments of Yugoslavia (not to mention Turkey) are to escape this trend it is not altogether surprising that the same might be the case with the Asian NICs. Fukuyama should look beyond Europe to Asia.

JAMES COTTON teaches in the Research School of Pacific Studies at the Australian National University. A more detailed version of this argument can be found in the author’s “The Limits to Liberalization in Industrializing Asia: Three Views of the State”, Pacific Affairs 64 (1991).