



## Session Sketch

Asan Plenum 2019: “Korea’s Choice”  
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**Session:** Is Democracy in Crisis?

**Date/Time:** April 24, 2019 / 10:45-12:15

**Rapporteur:**

Jeanne Choi, Johns Hopkins University SAIS

**Moderator:**

Gilbert Rozman, The Asan Forum

**Speakers:**

Ladan Boroumand, Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran

Chu Yun-han, Academia Sinica

Martin Fackler, Ichigo Asset Management

Karen E. House, Harvard Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs

Philip Stephens, *Financial Times*

**Session Sketch:**

Session 2, “Is Democracy in Crisis?” explored the question of whether democracy and its institutions are being strengthened or weakened around the world. Panelists debated the definition of democracy, as well as crisis, and offered reasons for these recent developments. While some speakers shared their optimism for the future, others warned of the challenges that countries will need to address.

The moderator, Gilbert Rozman, began the discussion with the provocation that democracy is indeed in crisis and offered reasons for the rollback of democracy. He contended that a rise in divisive political rhetoric, an increase in national identity extremism, the feeling within western democracies that the system has not delivered on social justice, and the rise of China as an alternative model to liberal democracy were all reasons. Ladan Boroumand used the Islamic Revolution in Iran as a prime example of a threat to liberal democracy that western democracies had misunderstood and mismanaged. She argued that the ideology of the revolution and Islamism is closer to modern totalitarianism than Islam and thus is a challenge to liberal democracy. Chu Yun-han also believes that the norms and values of democracy are being eroded, and cited evidence from large global and regional surveys, especially among younger generations. He explained that the reason for this may be embedded within the openness of democracy itself, that the liberal revolution of the recent past constrained the ability of democratic governments to deliver positive results to the middle class, which must make up the foundation of a democratic society. He also pointed to advances in technology and social media as additional reasons. Philip Stephens shared his perspective from Japan and drew parallels between nationalist, populist movements in Japan and in his home state of Georgia. He contended that the primary dynamic at play in both countries was a sense of loss, pessimism, and the belief that the current system was advantaging others at their expense.

*\* The views expressed herein are summaries and may not necessarily reflect the views of the speakers or their affiliated institutions.*

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Presenting an alternative viewpoint, Karen E. House and Philip Stephens took on the view that democracy is not in crisis. Ms. House pointed to examples in the past when the decline of democracy was agonized over. Her concern was thus not about the future of democracy but the survival of the free market system. She presented the optimistic view that free markets and free people belong together and argued against the model of China as a viable alternative. Philip Stephens refined the debate by clarifying that democracy was not in crisis, but rather was being challenged by the rise of populism. He suggested that a possible solution to the myriad of challenges to democracy is to make the market system fairer to address the sense of injustice felt by those who had gained the least from the economic advances delivered by globalization.

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