
José A. Alemán's *Labor Relations in New Democracies: East Asia, Latin America, and Europe* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

José A. Alemán's *Labor Relations in New Democracies: East Asia, Latin America, and Europe* makes a fine contribution to the broad theorizing of labour relations especially in the third-wave democracies. Alemán observes varying levels of labour conflict in new democracies and tries to explain this variation from the

labour market regulation perspective. He starts from the context of dual transitions where political democratization and economic liberalization are concurrently taking place in young democracies and thus labour relations face conflicting opportunities and challenges. Under these unique circumstances, Alemán identifies “labor market regulation” as the most powerful determinant of labour’s material compensation, labour relations stability, and lasting tripartite agreements. By conceptualising labour market regulation with wage regulation and employment regulation, he finds the former leading to unions’ equal voice with employers and the latter accounting for unions’ willingness to cooperate with employers and the government.

Alemán’s work is built upon his critical reassessment of resource mobilization and partisan alignment approaches, which fail to adequately explain different degrees of labour remuneration and labour conflict in these polities. Instead, he explicates how strong wage regulation leads to better wage compensation (chapter 2), how strong employment protection is associated with labour’s power and low levels of labour disputes (chapter 3), and how such wage and employment regulations enable successful tripartite agreements in new democracies (chapter 4). The book also offers a close comparison of South Korea and Chile where the rising labour market flexibility resulted in more labour conflict although with different degrees of unions’ effectiveness to push their agenda (chapter 5).

In engaging in these empirical examinations, the author deploys a variety of methodologies that range from regression models to fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis and comparative case studies. The book is thus ambitious in its theoretical propositions, broad in its empirical examination, and versatile in its methodological application, which are all praise-worthy in terms of enhancing our understanding of multi-faceted labour relations in emerging democracies.

Yet, the book also leaves several important questions unanswered. First of all, it is unclear what the encompassing dependent variable is in this comparative exercise. While each chapter makes a plausible argument on its own, each tackles a different dependent variable, representing a different aspect of labour relations, and thus requiring a different set of explanatory variables. After finishing the whole book, readers might remain puzzled about the way democratization, labour market deregulation (increased

flexibility), and unions' structural power are altogether causally related to produce specific industrial relations outcomes in a given country. This weakness could have been avoided had the author more clearly articulated the causal logic that links labour market regulation and industrial relations outcomes. In other words, we need to learn more specifically why and how wage and employment regulations produce less labour conflict, more wage moderation, and even more wage increase.

Another large question that emerges from this vagueness are the origins of strong wage regulation and employment regulation. If labour market regulation is such a crucial factor in stabilizing industrial relations in developing economies, what are the conditions that possibly produce the institutionalisation of regulatory measures? While Alemán briefly mentions the possibility of reverse causality, i.e., stronger labour movements are better positioned to obtain more favourable labour regulations, this plausibility is neither seriously considered nor fully rejected. Why would certain governments want to introduce strong wage and employment regulation while others do not? It is possible to speculate that labour unions with strong structural positions buttressed by higher sectoral wage and organizational strength are capable of pressuring the political elite to introduce labour market protection policies. In other words, strong labour market protection is already an outcome of preceding industrial conflict or class politics.

Regarding empirical discussions, Chapter 5 that includes a comparative case study of South Korea and Chile seems to remain the most under-developed. If similar outcomes are observed in democratizing Korea and Chile, it is unclear what additional theoretical or empirical edge the chapter contributes to the arguments already made in the preceding chapters. Also, theoretical language disappears in this case study chapter that chronologically describes the unfolding of labour relations in these two nations. Do both cases exemplify increasing labour market deregulation and concomitantly increasing labour militancy? Then, for the sake of testing the suggested theoretical statements, it would have been better to compare a case like this with a case where labour market deregulation was constrained and produced less industrial conflicts. Alternatively, the author could have highlighted the importance of sequencing in the creation of certain industrial outcomes. In other words, the comparison of South Korea and Chile may represent

different possibilities for labour unions by experiencing political democratization first and labour market flexibility later (South Korea) or vice versa (Chile). Sequencing is an important theoretical component because once a certain path is set, institutions and actors are endowed with different opportunities and constraints.

From a broader perspective, what theoretical implications can be drawn from Alemán's arguments? Do the broad differences between advanced and emerging democracies mark lasting differences formed from the unique historical circumstances of dual transitions in new democracies? Or, are these differences tied to the different stages of development, both economic and political, which can be seen as a rite of passage for new democracies from a historical perspective? Or, as the age of neoliberalism wanes, will the neoliberal prescription for greater labour market flexibility lose its doctrinal authority and perhaps, will old and new democracies be more accepting of labour market regulation and thus create less labour conflict?

Alemán's book definitely offers a broad and important perspective on labour relations in new democracies but the remaining unanswered questions await labour scholars to engage in more rigorous labour studies both theoretically and empirically.

Yoonkyung Lee

Associate Professor of Sociology
State University of New York
