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Authoritarian expansion in Southeast Asia

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Abstract:

Democracy is in clear decline in Southeast Asia and the quality of the existing democratic systems has worsened ostensibly and there is nothing that points to this situation being reversed in the short and medium term for a series of reasons that we will see throughout the article. The paper will be focused on a country-by-country analysis of the democratic situation starting with those countries in which democracy has suffered a greater erosion or in which it is non-existent, and ending with countries with more or less functional democratic systems.

Keywords:

Southeast Asia, democracy, Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia.

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Introduction

In 2019, a dynamic of increasing and strengthened authoritarianism in Southeast Asia could already be perceived¹. In Myanmar, the democratic advances after the victory of the National League for Democracy in 2016 have ended with the 2021 coup d'état in which the Tatmadaw² has once again taken the reins of power directly. In the Philippines, last May's elections brought Ferdinand Marcos Jr, son of dictator Ferdinand Marcos (deposed in 1986), to Malacañang, evoking an alleged golden age of economic growth and stability during the first years of his father's rule. In Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, authoritarianism shows no signs of cracking and in the elections that will take place in Indonesia in 2024 and in Thailand in 2023, authoritarian candidates and parties with authoritarian tendencies have a good chance of winning the elections. We'll start, then, with a country-by-country analysis regarding the state of democracy in the region.

Myanmar

Myanmar stands out among all the countries of Southeast Asia for the seriousness of the regression experienced in these years. After five years of NLD rule, on February 1st 2021, the Tatmadaw decided to obliterate the process of limited democratization that the country has experienced since 2011. One of the reasons for the military action was the confirmation at the polls of the hegemony of the NLD throughout the country and the severe electoral setback of the party supported by the armed forces, the USDP³.

Relations between State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and Armed Forces Commander Min Aung Hlaing progressively deteriorated throughout the NLD's tenure and mistrust between the government and the armed forces came to a head in early 2021. The Tatmadaw used the USDP's allegations of electoral fraud to stage a coup, to jail NLD leaders and to install Vice President Myint Swe as caretaker President who then proceeded to transfer his powers to Min Aung Hlaing.

¹ LLANDRES CUESTA, Borja. Geopolítica del sudeste asiático: Dinámicas globales y locales. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos. Available at: https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_marco/2019/DIEEEM11_2019BORLLA_SudesteAsia.pdf

² Armed Forces of Myanmar.

³ Union Solidarity and Development Party

Although the Tatmadaw has claimed that its actions have been aimed at guaranteeing the unity of the country, the truth is that the country is increasingly fragmented. On the one hand, the deputies who have not accepted the coup d'état proceeded to create a National Unity Government that has been building a military organization (the popular defense forces, especially active in the Magwe and Sagaing regions). The internal conflict in Myanmar that was previously encapsulated in the peripheral regions of the country has thus moved to the center of the Bamar majority area.

The war between the Tatmadaw and armed ethnic organizations such as the KIA⁴ or the TNLA⁵ has reached a dead end with the coup. The peace process initiated by the NLD in 2016 seems definitively buried as any hope for a lasting and sustainable agreement based on good faith has been lost.

Although the State Administration Council has committed itself to holding elections by August 2023, we can't expect these elections to be free and fair. The NLD has already declared its intention not to contest the elections like other ethnic parties, which would practically leave the way open for the USDP to win the elections.

The big problem for the Tatmadaw from now on will be to manage a country that has fallen back several decades in terms of political and economic progress. Indeed, through the coup d'état, the Tatmadaw may in the short term have regained the direct control of the country that it has longed for so long, however, by derailing the process of political and economic opening, it may have dynamited its chances to solidify and stabilize its power in the medium and long term. The inability to reach agreements, to build bridges that facilitate understanding and to make concessions to civilian governments are mistakes that have erased the economic and political benefits for the military leaders.

Laos and Vietnam

In both Laos and Vietnam, the five-year congress of their respective communist parties took place in 2021. In Laos, the congress appointed Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith as Secretary General, succeeding Bounnhang Vorachith, and Phankham Viphavanh was named number two in the party, later being appointed by the National Assembly as Prime Minister. Within the party structure, the lower echelons underwent a major renewal,

⁴ Kachin Independence Army

⁵ Ta'ang National Liberation Army

allowing the entry of new members who were born under the domination of the LPRP⁶ and therefore they're no longer from the civil war's generation.

The continuity in the upper echelons of the party contrasts with the need for new policies that provide a solution to the serious situation facing the country. Despite the difficult situation in the country, the LPRP maintains a firm control and it is difficult to see the possibility of any democratic progress in the country for several reasons. In the first place, after almost 50 years in power, the LPRP has managed to uproot any attempt to create an opposing democratic movement. Only a few and divided groups exist abroad. Civil liberties continue to be severely restricted and the absolute control of the state's apparatus guarantees the stability of the regime. Internally, although there are families or groups of power within the Party, the truth is that there has been no internal struggle that could break its unity of action or weaken it. Apart from the internal dynamics, there are some external factors that have favored the survival of the LPRP over five decades. Geographically, Laos is blocked and surrounded by dictatorships (People's Republic of China, Myanmar, Vietnam) or countries with a strong presence of authoritarianism (Thailand or Cambodia) that have made it easy for the leadership not to consider the slightest step towards reform as necessary contrary to what happened in Vietnam. In turn, Laos' dependence on economic support from Vietnam and China and its lack of ties with the West or with democratic Asian countries have fostered this political and economic isolationism.

As in the neighboring country, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) also held its XIII Congress in 2021, which proceeded to appoint the most important positions in the party hierarchy. And as in Laos, the trend in Vietnam has been continuity in the leadership positions of the party. The only unprecedented decision has been the re-election of Nguyen Phu Trong as Secretary General. Along with Trong's renewal, the Congress elected Nguyen Xuan Phuc as President (previously Prime Minister), Pham Minh Chinh (former head of the Communist Party Organization Commission) as Prime Minister, and Vuong Dinh Hue (former secretary of the Party Committee in Hanoi) as Speaker of the National Assembly.

Trong's continuity at the head of the party may be due to several reasons. First of all, it is possible that Trong has not found a successor who can continue the fight against

⁶ Lao People's Revolutionary Army.

corruption, his main internal campaign (called “đốt lò”, blazing furnace, in Vietnam). The economic situation in Vietnam, which is leaving behind the most negative effects of covid-19, also seems to play in favor of him remaining in power until 2026 unless his health and his advanced age prevent him from continuing with his duties. In its final declaration, the CPV’s Congress pledged to “*firmly follow the Party’s directives, be consistent with the Party’s building principles to build and safeguard a socialist Vietnam*”⁷.

Cambodia and Thailand

A country that has experienced a progressive deterioration of its democratic system has been Cambodia. The Cambodian CPP⁸ government has shown increasing authoritarianism since disbanding the CNRP⁹, which threatened its control over the country in 2017. The CNRP had an upward trajectory since the 2013 elections and the predictions for 2018 were very positive to the point that the government proceeded to arrest its leader Kem Sokha, to jail party members and activists, to remove their elected officials and to seek their dissolution in court. This allowed the CPP to win all 125 seats in parliament the following year, effectively turning Cambodia into a one-party system with Hun Sen at the helm.

The Cambodian Prime Minister has not only exhibited increasing authoritarianism but has also given clear signs of wanting to turn Cambodia into a dynastic regime. In recent years, Hun Sen has paid special attention to promoting his son, Hun Manet, and consolidating his position within the CPP. The uncertainty about whether the CPP was going to opt for Hun Manet or for another candidate was cleared up on December 24 when the Standing Committee decided to endorse his candidacy as prime minister¹⁰.

The monopoly of power by Hun Sen and the CPP has been reinforced by the growing enmity between the founders of the CNRP, Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha. The inability of both leaders to reach an agreement could be a gift for the CPP since it considerably weakens the opposition, fragmenting it and thus favoring the CPP’s continuation in power.

⁷ Tap Chi Cong San. Communist Review. The 13th National Party Congress Resolution. Available at: https://www.tapchicongsan.org.vn/web/english/focus/detail/-/asset_publisher/FMhwM2oQCZEZ/content/the-13th-national-party-congress-resolution

⁸ Cambodian People’s Party

⁹ Cambodia National Rescue Party

¹⁰ Khmer Times. Hun Manet unanimously elected to be the future Prime Minister. Available at: <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50994699/hun-manet-unanimously-elected-to-be-the-future-prime-minister/>

The local elections of June 2022 have shown the existence of a strong democratic movement in support of the opposition. Rainsy's Candlelight Party won 2,119 of the 11,622 communes up for grabs, taking 18% of the total vote. Despite the fact that the CPP obtained 80% of the communes, the results of the CP are positive taking into account the difficulties encountered by the opposition in developing its campaign and may be an indication of the results of the 2023 general elections¹¹.

Several unknowns remain in the air. The first is whether Hun Sen will be the CPP candidate in 2023 or if, on the contrary, he will proceed to hand over his position to his son in 2028, giving him more time to accumulate experience. The second is the future of opposition leader Kem Sokha and his political role after his trial. Finally, it will be necessary to see what the government's plans are regarding the Candlelight Party, that is, if it is allowed to continue its political activity or if the party is suffocated and dissolved just like the CNRP was in 2017.

For its part, Thailand remains mired in a political crisis that has lasted more than two decades and that began with the election of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2001 and his subsequent overthrow in 2006. As in neighboring countries, in Thailand the model that was imposed with the 2017 constitution was an authoritarian model led by the Thai army that during these years has tried to suffocate the opposition's attempts to force institutional changes that would allow greater liberalization after the rigged elections of 2019.

A month after the last confidence vote, the opposition managed to get the Constitutional Court to provisionally suspend Prayuth's mandate. The opposition considered that he had exhausted the eight years of mandate allowed by the 2017 constitution after appointed as prime minister after the 2014 coup. For their part, Prayuth's lawyers considered that the eight years did not begin in 2014, but in 2019 or, at the earliest, in 2017 after the promulgation of the constitution. The Court ruled in favor of considering that the eight years began in 2017, which would prevent a Prayuth term beyond 2025.

The truth is that, regardless of the candidate who heads the list of the pro-military party, the opposition parties seem headed for a victory at the polls. Although the elections for the governorship of Bangkok cannot be considered as an advance of the national

¹¹ AP News. Cambodian ruling party scores big win in local elections. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/hun-sen-cambodia-elections-government-and-politics-local-891854f5162cde23756003fd4fbc7f6b>

elections, it is no less true that the landslide victory of the former Minister of Transport of the Pheu Thai Party (a party close to the Shinawatra clan) gives indications of the notable dissatisfaction of the citizens with the government coalition¹².

In addition to the Pheu Thai Party, the opposition camp has been expanded with the Move Forward Party which, after the Future Forward Party was outlawed, became a more radical alternative to the military government and whose electorate is mostly young. The two main parties that support the Palang Pracharat¹³ seem to have opposite tendencies. While the Bhumjaithai party is growing in popularity and electoral prospects, the Democratic party is experiencing a slowdown and losing votes in its traditional strongholds in the south of the country. If the electoral predictions come true, the support of Bhumjaithai could be decisive when choosing the next prime minister.

The problem facing Thailand, however, goes beyond the numbers needed to gain a majority in the National Assembly or to form a coalition. The level of polarization to which the country has been subjected during these last two decades has meant that whatever the result of the polls, the most likely result is a political blockade. Over the next few months we will have to observe the government's attitude towards the opposition parties. If the threat of losing control becomes more and more likely, it is possible that institutional maneuvers will be initiated to outlaw parties or their candidates. If the citizen vote translates into a victory for the opposition, a new coup d'état to restore the military junta to power cannot be ruled out, and that would only increase the country's political instability. In short, Thailand is facing a very complicated situation since, on the one hand, the current political system is not perceived as legitimate by the opposition, having been imposed after the coup and, on the other hand, any victory of the opposition is perceived by the military as a threat to their position. This has resulted in an inability of political actors to reach agreements, plunging the country into uncertainty at the worst of times

Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines

The last group of countries have a democratic system that suffers from a series of shortcomings that have led to their inclusion in The Economist's Democracy Index as

¹² Reuters. Bangkok votes in new governor for first time in nine years. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/bangkok-votes-new-governor-first-time-nine-years-2022-05-22/>

¹³ Conservative party founded by an ex-colonel close to Prayuth Chan-o-cha.

imperfect democracies¹⁴. These countries have serious problems that have led to political polarization. The increase in religious intolerance in Indonesia, ethnic politics in Malaysia, the appropriation of the state structure by partisan elites, government ineffectiveness or longing for the authoritarian regimes of yesteryear in Indonesia or the Philippines are some of the factors that have generated political division and a decline in the perception of democracy among citizens.

The third most populous democracy on the planet is already beginning to prepare for the elections that will take place in February 2024 and that promise to be as polarizing or more polarizing than those held in 2014 and 2019. The current president Joko Widodo is prohibited from seeking a third term and, despite this, there had been speculation about the possibility of making an exception or extending his second term, which would have been the culmination of a political path of increasing authoritarian tendencies.

Politics in Indonesia have become more radical and divisive over the years as a result of the increased influence of more conservative Islamic groups in politics and the use of religion as an electoral weapon used to discredit opponents. Such actions reached their climax during the 2014 elections and especially during the Jakarta gubernatorial elections. In the latter, one of the candidates, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (better known as Ahok), suffered a smear campaign with accusations of blasphemy against the Quran that ended his candidacy and earned him a two-year prison sentence.

The electoral machinery of the Indonesian parties has already been put into motion in search of candidates. Polls show three candidates preferred by the public: Anies Baswedan (Governor of Jakarta), Ganjar Pranowo (Governor of Central Java) and Prabowo Subianto (Minister of Defense)¹⁵. The latter was already a candidate for the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections and has a strong authoritarian profile. His electoral campaigns have been characterized by attacks on other candidates for not being Islamic enough, for being communists or Christians, thus fostering religious and political divisions in the country, in addition to having been accused by Human Rights Watch of human rights violations in East Timor¹⁶.

¹⁴ The Economist. Democracy Index 2021: The China challenge. Available at: <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2021/>

¹⁵ Independent observer. Indikator Politik Indonesia Poll: Prabowo Subianto's electability takes lead. Available at: <https://observerid.com/indikator-politik-indonesia-poll-prabowo-subiantos-electability-takes-lead/>

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch. Indonesia: Backsliding on Rights. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/01/14/indonesia-backsliding-rights>

For Malaysia, a country accustomed to single-party rule, the past two years have shown an exceptional instability. The UMNO's (United Malays National Organisation) monopoly on power was broken in 2018 when Najib Razak's government plagued by corruption scandals was defeated by the Pakatan Harapan coalition led by former Prime Minister Mohammad Mahathir. The slowness in the application of the reforms or the inability or unwillingness to initiate them generated a growing dissatisfaction in the citizenry and the internal tension of the coalition led to its implosion 22 months after reaching power. After the events of 2020 that caused the resignation of Prime Minister Mahathir, two other governments have followed. One under the Perikatan Nasional coalition led by Muhyiddin Yassin that lasted 17 months and the current government of Ismail Sabri Yaakob that has brought the UMNO and the Barisan Nasional back to government.

Malaysian politics became polarized due to the persistence of exclusivist and supremacist policies based on the 'ketuanan melayu' (Malay lordship) that consider the Malays as the pre-eminent ethnic group and discriminate against the Chinese and Indian minorities. Furthermore, as in Indonesia, Islamism has a growing presence and has been used as a political weapon to stir up the fears and resentments of the majority of the population against secularist parties. Unlike Indonesia, in Malaysia there is no authoritarian candidate, although it can't be ruled out that in the medium term it could emerge given the complex economic situation that lends itself to radical measures and given that, according to a survey by the Merdeka Center, 47% of young people believe that a strong leader is necessary to bring order and provide stability¹⁷.

The elections in the Philippines returned the political dynasty of the Marcos family to the Malacañang Palace. Marcos Jr's victory is nothing more than the natural consequence of a pattern that began with the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte, whose electoral victory was based on a strong-arm platform against drugs, guerrillas or political corruption. This time the victory of Marcos Jr has been based on the longing for a supposed golden age in the history of the Philippines during the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. In both cases, citizen dissatisfaction with politics, criminality derived from drug trafficking and the economic situation generated by the covid-19 crisis are factors that have favored the appearance of candidates with authoritarian speeches that have further deteriorated the

¹⁷ Merdeka Center. Muslim Youth Survey 2022. Available at: <https://sistersinislam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Muslim-Youth-Survey-2022-News-Release.pdf>

state of the democracy in the Philippines. While it is not to be expected that the Philippine democratic system will collapse, it is true that the attacks on press freedom, the continuation of the war on drugs initiated by Duterte, his refusal to reinstate the Philippines in the International Criminal Court and his revisionist discourse regarding his father's dictatorship do not lead to think of an improvement in the democratic health of the Philippines during the presidency of Marcos Jr.

Singapore

Within Southeast Asia, Singapore stands out as a model of development and economic success that has transformed a country whose initial situation after independence was extremely precarious, both politically and socially, into the most developed country, with the most interconnected and open economy and with the highest standards of living in the area. The political system established and perpetuated by the PAP¹⁸ since independence has been described by analysts as an elective authoritarian regime or illiberal democracy¹⁹.

Despite the progress made by the opposition in Parliament the PAP has in its favor a series of factors that have traditionally facilitated its victory at the polls.

In the first place, if the PAP stands out for something, it is for being a cohesive party not prone to factionalism and fragmentation. The split of the Barisan Sosialis generated huge anxiety within PAP's leadership that led them to create a structure that penalized views contrary to the official line and that favored internal cohesion through promotions²⁰. In addition, Singapore's electoral system severely punishes small parties, so possible splits face an adverse scenario in the elections. In turn, the consensual election of the party leader avoids factional struggles that could weaken the internal structure.

Another advantage is the control that the PAP has had over the State since its creation, which has allowed it to infiltrate and to recruit its candidates from all levels of the Administration and its institutions. This has allowed them to give officials an incentive, increasing the Administration's loyalty to the PAP, obtaining the best possible candidates, and also depriving the opposition of the human capital present in the public function.

¹⁸ People's Action Party.

¹⁹ LEVITSKY, Steven. WAY, Lucan. The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism. Elections Without Democracy. Available at: https://scholar.harvard.edu/levitsky/files/SL_elections.pdf

²⁰ TAN, Netina. Minimal Factionalism in Singapore's People's Action Party. Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs 2020, Vol. 39(1) 124–143

In addition, the control by the Prime Minister's Office over the Electoral Department has allowed the PAP to constantly reconfigure the electoral districts, incurring in a common practice in Singapore and in other states such as the United States known as 'gerrymandering', that is, the modification of constituency to ensure victory for the ruling party by diluting the concentration of the opposition vote at the polls and preventing them from conducting effective electoral campaigns. Thirdly, the electoral system in Singapore is based on the so-called 'first-past-the-post' which implies that the winner in a constituency obtains all the deputies favoring the winning party that achieves over-representation. This system has allowed the PAP to enjoy large super majorities in Parliament, legislating without the need to take into account the opposition or seek consensus on its policies. In addition to the electoral obstacles imposed, the PAP has been characterized by using judicial strategies to financially drown opposition candidates and disqualify them in the elections.

Another important factor to take into account has been the traditional fragmentation of the opposition into multiple parties that have been unable to present a credible alternative to the PAP. In addition, Singapore's own social dynamics have favored opposition parties' propensity to bring their political positions closer to those of the PAP. This electoral phenomenon that takes place in Singapore was analyzed by Steven Oliver and Kai Ostwald in their article "Explaining Elections in Singapore: Dominant Party Resilience and Valence Politics" where they explained how the perception of credibility of the PAP was a critical element that influenced, and continues influencing the electoral decisions of the Singaporean voter. All these factors favor the PAP's continuity in power. Despite the progress that the opposition has been making in recent years (excluding the 2015 elections), the truth is that nothing suggests, in the short term, the possibility of a non-PAP government.

Reasons for the survival of authoritarianism in Southeast Asia

One of the most decisive factors in this entire process is the disproportionate influence that armies exert on the political systems in the region. With few exceptions, armies go beyond their typical military functions, assuming the powers of governments. As Kurlantzick points out, "*most countries, such as Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan, or Thailand, never made an effort to curtail the internal powers of their armies, establish civilian control over the armed forces, or permanently reduce the political influence of the*

*military.*²¹ That political power has also expanded to the economy since in several countries the army is one of the main economic actors. In Myanmar, Thailand or Indonesia, the armies control numerous economic sectors, from the banking sector to the tourism sector.

Another reason for the return of authoritarianism in the region has been the weakness of the states and their institutions. This has generated a fertile ground for populist and authoritarian solutions, as happened with Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines. The idea of a strong man who will restore order and will return the country to a lost prosperity has been widely used, favoring the appearance of authoritarian parties and candidates.

At the international level, two factors have allowed the expansion of authoritarianism. The first factor is ASEAN's weakness in promoting democracy and human rights in the region. Despite the fact that one of the purposes of the Asean Charter is the promotion of democracy, the inclusion of authoritarian countries within the organization has diluted any institutional effort to improve the situation of democracy and human rights in the area. The second factor is the ideological competition that is taking place in Southeast Asia between two opposing visions: the American and the Chinese. Authoritarian countries such as Myanmar, Cambodia or Laos have found in China a model of government and development. They have also found partners in China and other authoritarian states like Russia who have offered them international cover against sanctions.

Conclusion

The difficulty in consolidating democracy in Southeast Asia has been a constant in recent decades. The expectations of a continuous process of opening and liberalization since the end of the 1980s have been truncated by a set of factors strongly rooted at the regional level and also in each one of the countries. In practically all of Southeast Asia, an erosion of democratic systems and respect for human rights can be seen, which has found its clearest and most extreme example in Myanmar. If at that time the transition was from authoritarianism to democracy, in recent years the trend has been the opposite. The constant threat under which democracy lives is pointing towards a very complicated political outlook in Southeast Asia, especially when other dynamics are added to it, such

²¹ KURLANTZICK, J. The Revival of Military Rule in South and Southeast Asia. Council on Foreign Relations. Available at: https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/Kurlantzick-RevivalMilitaryRule_0.pdf

as the economic crisis caused by covid, inflation or the economic distortions generated by the struggle that China and the United States are waging in the region.

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