Managing Democratic Leadership in Undemocratic Times: Challenges in Southeast Asia

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Over the last decade, Southeast Asia has witnessed an erosion of democracy. This has occurred in three forms – democratic deconsolidation in the region's democracies of the Philippines and Indonesia, democratic decay/reversals in Cambodia, Singapore and Thailand and a hardening of authoritarianism in Brunei, Vietnam and Laos. In the two countries where there have been democratic openings – Myanmar in 2015 and Malaysia in 2018 – reforms to open up the system have slowed and concerns about human rights violations have persisted, notably in the treatment of minorities. The only overall positive democratic story of the region is its smallest country – Timor Leste, which celebrated its twentieth year of independence in 2019 and has witnessed a strengthening of democratic practices and norms.[1]

Southeast Asia's democratic contraction echoes global trends, as scholars have shown that democracy is under increasing threat, both in democracies and other more authoritarian regimes.[2] Yet, there are unique features of the region that help us understand the threats facing Southeast Asian democracy. This article outlines these features, detailing four threats, and fleshes out possible responses for leaders to strengthen democracy in the next decade.

THE ENEMY WITHIN: MINORITY MARGINALISATION

In the West, populist pressures undermining democracy have primarily centred on immigrants as societies have pitted "local" or "native" against "foreigner". In

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[1] For more information on the trajectories of democracy in the region, see *Freedom of the world*, Freedom House (FH), https://freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world. As a matter of disclosure, the author is a senior advisor for FH for Asia.

[2] Larry Diamond, "Breaking Out of the Democratic Slump," *Journal of Democracy*, 31, no. 1 (2020): 36-50.

Southeast Asia, the focus has been on ethnic minorities, locals who were in these countries before their independence. Nowhere is this clearer than in the horrific treatment of the Rohingya in Myanmar.[3] With 745,000 Rohingya forced out by military operations in 2017, and charges of genocide filed in the International Court of Justice in 2019, this minority has not only had its livelihoods and rights stripped, it has become stateless. This internal orientation of populist pressures extends across the region – the Chinese Malaysians and Chinese Indonesians, the indigenous communities of Vietnam, Malaysia and Cambodia, and the Muslims in Thailand and Myanmar. The erosion of rights involves a wide range of developments, from removing citizenship and exclusion from political life to increasingly making these groups targets of violence and harassment.

An important element of this marginalisation has been religion. Traditionally, race is the main underlying issue in corrosive populist pressures in the West, but in Southeast Asia a prime cause is differences over religion. This is because one of the most important developments has been the emergence of the majority religion "protection" movement – a phenomenon where there has been a strengthening of the relationship between the state and the dominant religion – be it Buddhism or Islam.[4] Part of the cause of the treatment of the Rohingya has been the mobilisation by the conservative Buddhist clergy in Myanmar; a similar dynamic underscored the attacks on former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, or "Ahok", in 2017, when he was imprisoned for blasphemy in Indonesia.[5] Accompanying "protection" is a continued religious revival across faiths, as we have seen broadening evangelicalism and a rise of "born again" Muslims (*hijrah movement*).[6] Much of this revivalism brings with it a conservative and exclusionary view of the faith that has cut into the social fabric and fuelled antagonisms toward "the other" religions. Conservative religious mobilisation, for example, has contributed to attacks on the LGBT commu-

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[3] For more information on the Rohingya crisis, see: https://www.unocha.org/rohingya-refugee-crisis (accessed 16 January 2020).

[4] See Matthew J. Walton and Susan Hayward, *Contesting Buddhist narratives: Democratization, nationalism, and communal violence in Myanmar*. Honolulu, HI: East-West Center, 2014.

[5] Charlotte Setijadi, "Ahok's Downfall and the Rise of Islamist Populism in Indonesia," *ISEAS Perspective* 38, no. 8 (2017).

[6] See Terence Chong (ed.), *Pentecostal megachurches in Southeast Asia: Negotiating class, consumption, and the nation*. Singapore: ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018. See also Terence Chong and Evelyn Tan, "Christian Expansionism in Southeast Asia," *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 96 (2019).

nity in Indonesia and Malaysia and constrained the expansion of rights for sexual minorities elsewhere in the region.[7]

This focus on internal enemies has fostered intolerance and fractured societies, undercutting democratic protections of rights and the rule of law. In the Philippines, the pattern of populist attacks deviates from ethnicity, as the focus has been on targeting lower-class men in the Duterte-endorsed "drug war" since 2016.[8] This has resulted in thousands killed by vigilantes. It echoes the "drug war" launched by Thailand's Thaksin Shinawatra – another populist leader – when he first won power in 2003.[9] Similarly, thousands of extrajudicial killings occurred. This common "enemy within" is a prominent feature undercutting democratic practices, one in which Southeast Asian societies are pitted against themselves – a serious challenge for leaders and citizens alike.

SOCIAL MEDIA DISTORTIONS

Closely associated with the region's marginalisation has been the rise of social media. What is not fully appreciated about Southeast Asia is that it is one of the most "connected" regions in the world – on Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and more. A study in 2019 found that of the 659 million people living in Southeast Asia, 415 million (63%) use the internet, the third highest region in the world.[10] Also illustrative is that Indonesia is the 4th largest Facebook user in the world. Myanmar has seen connectivity rise from essentially nothing to over a third of the population in less than five years. These developments have occurred rapidly and intensively, with

[7] See, for example, Neela Goshal and Thilaga Sulathireh, "The Deceased Can't Speak for Herself: Violence against LGBT people in Malaysia," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 25 July 2019, https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/06/25/deceased-cant-speak-herself-violence-against-lgbt-people-malaysia (accessed 16 January 2020).

[8] Human Rights Watch, "Philippines: No Letup in 'Drug War' Killings," 14 January 2020, https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/01/14/philippines-no-letup-drug-war-killings (accessed 16 January 2020). See also, Bjoern Dressel and Cristina Regina Bonoan, "Southeast Asia's Troubling Elections: Duterte Versus the Rule of Law," *Journal of Democracy*, 30, no. 4 (2019): 134-148; and Nicole Curato, "Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope: Penal Populism and Duterte's Rise to Power," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs,* 35, no. 3 (2016): 91-109.

[9] Human Rights Watch, "Thailand's War on Drugs," Briefing Paper, 12 March 2008, https://www.hrw.org/news/2008/03/12/thailands-war-drugs (accessed 16 January 2020); and Marcus Roberts, Mike Trace, and Axel Klein. "Thailand's 'war on drugs'," *Beckley Foundation Drug Policy Programme, Briefing Paper* 5 (2004).

[10] We are Social, *Global Digital Reports 2019*, https://wearesocial.com/global-digital-report-2019 (accessed 16 January 2020).

higher internet and social media access driven primarily by advances in telecommunications, comparatively lower access costs and the proliferation of smartphones. Unlike in China, the region's most-closed authoritarian regimes of Vietnam and Laos do not heavily regulate social media use. While the wider access to information has dislodged more centralised and authoritarian control of the mainstream media and levelled the playing field for opposition parties and alternative voices, this dynamic has not necessarily strengthened democracy.

Foremost, incumbents with greater access to resources have been able to reverse the equalising trends – hiring organisations that have access to data and target voters, using spy software and, importantly, introducing and applying laws that curb the access of political challengers to different social media outlets.[11] From *lèse-majesté* charges and the banning of Twitter in election campaigns in Thailand to the introduction of the 2019 Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) in Singapore, the space for political criticism on social media has narrowed, limiting free speech and mobilisation. Even when there is access, this has not necessarily guaranteed free speech. Vietnam has allowed social media use but hammered bloggers and critics with legal charges. As of the end of 2019, over 50 bloggers were jailed, with long sentences for criticising the governance in Vietnam.[12]

Another facet undermining democracy has been the rise of "fake news," hoaxes and unchecked hate speech on social media – the misuse of this medium. Attacks on the Rohingya in Myanmar, stories about foreigners being given citizenship in Indonesia and Malaysia and carefully crafted defamations of political figures are sadly common.[13] This abuse of social media has been used to justify the more intrusive government controls, but has also contributed to another impact on democracy: an erosion of trust in information, even among close personal networks. This has come when social media is already serving as "echo chambers", reinforcing political polarisation as users follow reaffirming news sources and participate in communities that reinforce their own views.

Greater use of social media has not necessarily contributed to a more informed citizenry. The use of targeting in political advertising and provocation of emotions

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11 For a discussion of curbs on internet freedom, see the Freedom of the Net reports published by Freedom House, https://freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-net (accessed 16 January 2020).

12 For weekly reports on arrests and overviews of arrests of bloggers see: Vietnam Human Rights Defenders, https://www.vietnamhumanrightsdefenders.net/ (accessed 16 January 2020).

13 See Ibnu Nadzir, Sari Seftiani and Yogi Setya Permana, "Hoax and Misinformation in Indonesia: Insights from a Nationwide Survey," *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 92 (2019).

have deepened the polarisation and fissures in societies. Citizens are increasingly more vulnerable to manipulation, "loyalty group think" and nudging, as opposed to more reflective engagements. It is this lack of substantive dialogues and the superficiality of discussions on social media – what has been coined as P-ADHD (attention disorder tied to social media) – that has been seen to be having detrimental effects on democracy.[14] The need for active and informed citizens is not being filled. Southeast Asia is not alone in these phenomena, but the high level of social media use and internet penetration accentuates these trends.

RISE OF NON-DEMOCRATIC VALUES

This in part helps us understand another worrying regional trend: more widespread non-democratic values and a lack of understanding of what democracy actually is. Both of these phenomena point to a serious problem: democracy in the region lacks a strong social foundation. Southeast Asia is again not unique in this trend, but here, it has taken on a character that reinforces the internal fissures noted above and corrodes democracy from within.

Survey data, drawing from the last two waves of the Asian Barometer Surveys (ABS) (4th Wave 2014-2016, 5th Wave 2017-2020) conducted in eight Southeast Asian countries,[15] point to three important developments. First is a lack of political literacy and comprehension of what democracy entails.[16] There is a common equation of democracy with non-democratic practices. It is no wonder this is occurring, as autocrats such as Thailand's General Prayut Chan-o-cha are labelling practices democratic when they are not. The democratic deconsolidation in existing democracies further contributes to this conceptual confusion, as non-democratic practices such as "drug war" killings are legitimised for some as part of a democratic system. For those that do have understandings of democracy, the focus is on the substantive dimensions of democracy, namely equality, rather than processes such as elections or rights. Southeast Asians differ in their comprehension of what

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14   Jamie Bartlett, *The people vs. tech: How the internet is killing democracy (and how we save it)*. Random House, 2018.

15   The countries include Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. For more information on the ABS, see: http://www.asianbarometer.org/survey.

16   Doh Chull Shull, "Popular understanding of Democracy." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. 2017.

democracy means when compared to those in the West.[17] There is greater attention to the outcomes of policy, as governments are seen to have more dominant roles in providing solutions to problems.

This Southeast Asian focus on democracy as "equality" helps us understand why faith in democracy in eroding. Regimes are unable to stem the contraction of social mobility and widening of inequality the region has experienced since the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. Regimes are grappling with the negative effects of globalisation as many are being left behind. Politically the impact is growing frustration with democracy, as these regimes allow for more open protest against growing economic exclusion.

At the same time, there is increased support for non-democratic alternatives. With a long history of "strong men", from the likes of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew and Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines to Indonesia's Suharto, there is a tradition of embracing autocratic leadership, one that has been rejuvenated as democracy have delivered mixed results. Filipino president Rodrigo Duterte remains highly popular not in spite of the drug war, but arguably because of it.[18] His language and tough image are integral parts of his persona and have wide appeal. Indonesia's Prabowo Subianto continued to win over 40% of support for the presidency in 2014 and 2019, alluding to his close relationship with, as the son-in-law of, former dictator Suharto. It is not a coincidence that Duterte also has close ties with the Marcos family as well. During Duterte's tenure he has worked to rehabilitate the Marcos family, including allowing a hero's burial for the former dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 2016. Even in Malaysia, which has opened up after the ouster of Najib Tun Razak in 2018, the reelection of Mahathir Mohamad, known for his erosion of political space in his twenty-two-year first tenure, taps into more autocratic sentiments among some of his supporters. It is not a coincidence that the longest serving dictator – Hun Sen of Cambodia, in power for nearly thirty-five years since 1985 – governs in Southeast Asia.

Along with support for autocratic leaders, there is a resurgence of support for the military. With the National League for Democracy led by Aung San Suu Kyi formally removing the military from power in the 2015 election, it appeared that the military's power in Southeast Asia was waning. This is not the case, as militaries

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[17] Min-Hua Huang, Yun-han Chu, and Yu-tzung Chang, "Popular Understandings of Democracy and Regime Legitimacy in East Asia," *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 9, no. 1 (2013).

[18] See Social Weather Station for regular polls on Duterte, https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/home/ (accessed 16 January 2020).

took power in a coup in Thailand in 2014 and has managed to stay in power through a configured election in 2019, gained greater footholds in the corridors of power of Indonesia and the Philippines and held on to key decision-making powers in Myanmar, especially in ethnic minority areas.[19] By the turn of this decade, militaries are seen as resurging in power in Southeast Asia. Public support for this non-democratic alternative has also gained traction, both at the 2019 polls in Thailand and through support for Prabowo in Indonesia as well as in the ABS survey data.

Higher support for authoritarian alternatives parallels trends globally, but a third facet of shifts toward non-democratic norms is more unique to the region and feeds into other non-democratic practices. This is the declining support for secularism. Across Southeast Asia (with the exception of Singapore), majorities support non-secular government – a consultative role for religious leaders in government and in some countries, support for greater use of religious laws. This ties into the strengthening of religious protection movements and the negative treatment of minorities, noted earlier. While it is not clear which of these factors came first, the shifts in values or practices, the reinforcing effect on each other help corrode democracy's foundation.

THE NON-DEMOCRATIC HEGEMON OF CHINA

The region's environment does not help either. Over the last decade, Southeast Asia has witnessed a tectonic shift in the power of China. Not only has China emphatically become the region's hegemon, it has emerged as the leading global power as the United States has declined in influence. The rise of China has also shaped democracy in the region, tilting the balance away from rights and representation.[20]

Within Southeast Asia, the most prominent role that China has played has been in shoring up non-democratic leaders. China's relationship with Cambodia's Hun Sen has been long honed, reinforced by investment and international support. China has also allied with regional autocrats. When Malaysia's Najib Tun Razak became embroiled in the world's largest kleptocracy scandal to date, the 1MDB case,

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[19]   Duncan McCargo, "Southeast Asia's Troubling Elections: Democratic Demolition in Thailand," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 4 (2019): 119-33; and Aaron Connelly and Evan Laksmana, "Jokowi Offers Prabowo a Piece of the Pie," *Foreign Policy,* (2019), https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/31/indonesia-democracy-general-jokowi-offers-prabowo-a-piece-of-the-pie/ (accessed 16 January 2020).

[20]   Larry Diamond, *Ill winds: Saving democracy from Russian rage, Chinese ambition and American complacency.* New York: Penguin, (2019).

he turned to China for loans to assist in the bailout of debts caused by the abuse of power. Both the current leaders in Thailand (Prayut) and the Philippines (Duterte) have become closer to China as they have become more autocratic, relying on Chinese investment and international support. Nowhere is the pattern clearer than in Myanmar, where after Aung San Suu Kyi was lauded by the West when she was elected into power, she moved her government closer to China after international criticism poured in from the Rohingya crisis from 2017 onwards. Ironically, she reversed her country's foreign policy from growing connections to the West, under her predecessor, Thein Sein, to one in which the Myanmar is now reliant on China's support internationally – as had been the case during the height of the military Tatmadaw government.

New alliances coincide with growing perceptions of the positive role that China is playing among many Southeast Asians. Traditionally, the United States was seen to reinforce stability in the region, even during the divisive Vietnam/IndoChina wars where the United States was shoring up non-communist leaders. This is no longer the case. The Trump administration's pull-out from the Trans-Pacific Trade Partnership (TPP) – after years of negotiation to put the treaty in place – and adoption of "transactional politics" in bilateral relations have solidified the view that the United States is unreliable and erratic. While there are deep suspicions of China, among elites and the general publics in Southeast Asia, it is seen as a steadier player in the region. This has been boosted by the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has brought US$11 billion in infrastructure investments into the region in 2019.[21] China has replaced the United States as the region's stabiliser for many in the region and perpetuated the view that the region's economic security and future lies with China rather than the United States. This has affected democracy negatively, as it ties the region with the most powerful global autocratic regime. To many, democracy is no longer intertwined with the region's future to the same degree as it used to be.

In fact, China's model of governance – economic development without democracy – holds sway among large swathes of Southeast Asian publics and leaders. With its economic growth and reduction of poverty, China is now seen as a viable model to follow. The resonance of the "China model" is particularly strong among older Southeast Asians, who have watched the country's transformation, and

[21] Chong Koh Ping, "Belt and Road Investment in Southeast Asia Jumps," *Caixin Global,* 14 August 2019. https://www.caixinglobal.com/2019-08-14/belt-and-road-investment-in-southeast-asia-jumps-report-101450854.html (accessed 16 January 2020).

among those are citizens of Chinese descent who look to their "mother" country with pride. While there is considerable variation in the attraction to China's model of governance, the fact is, China is now a model to reckon with, and it challenges the support for democracy for future governance.[22]

China has worked to strengthen its support for its model of governance with active interventions in Southeast Asia. This goes beyond the alliances noted above, supporting pro-China leaders. It extends into actively supporting different domestic actors vis-à-vis each other. In the 2018 Malaysian election, the China ambassador participated in the hustings, calling on Malaysians to vote for the then incumbent government.[23] As environmental and nationalist concerns over China's investments in Southeast Asia have mounted, China has actively worked to strengthen those who have favoured their growing role and model of governance through social media operations and financing. This has included attempts to reduce criticism of China's violation of human rights in Xinjiang and in Hong Kong, as well as involvement in local political contests in Southeast Asia. In some cases, China has shared technology to support its political allies in their efforts to weaken opponents.[24] China has become a domestic political issue in Southeast Asia, raised in elections and by civil society. The interventions and pressure to dampen criticism on human rights issues have negatively affected democracy. More broadly, Southeast Asian governments that do become more democratic – notably Myanmar and Malaysia – are now operating in a regional and global environment that does not work in democracy's favour.

MODEST MEASURES MOVING FORWARD

Given that the challenging underlying forces impacting democracy are multi-faceted – creation of internal enemies, distortions by social media, greater adoption of non-democratic values and non-favourable regional contexts – what can leaders in Southeast Asia do to ameliorate and reverse these trends? The answer begins by recognising how serious the long-term erosion of democracy will be on Southeast Asia; a contraction of democratic space will further underlying conflicts, negatively

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[22] Bridget Welsh and Alex Chang, "Choosing China: public perceptions of 'China as a model'," *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 93 (2015): 442-456.

[23] Teck Chi Wong, "Playing the China Card is Unlikely to Save the MCA," *New Mandala,* 8 May 2018, https://www.newmandala.org/mca-china-card/ (accessed 16 January 2020).

[24] Christopher Walker, Shanthi Kalathil, Jessica Ludwig, "The Cutting Edge of Sharp Power," *Journal of Democracy*, 31, no. 1, (2020): 124-137.

affect rights and inclusion and undercut the region's future potential stability and prosperity. The issues are pressing and measures need to be targeted at the specific factors that are undermining democracy. Below are four initiatives that can strengthen democracy associated with the different dimensions identified above. These measures are modest, important first steps, and should be part of a broader programme to rebuild democracy globally.

To address the attacks on minorities in Southeast Asia – religious or otherwise – there needs to be more efforts to promote minority defenders. This can come in different forms, such as funding for civil society groups, fora to discuss minority concerns, or appointments of minority representatives within government bodies. Currently, those that speak up for minority rights face considerable pressure and, in some cases, are "pariahs" within their own community. The aim should be to normalise inclusion, to reduce the demonisation of minority communities. For this to occur, there needs to be greater legitimation of the narratives and protection of rights of minority communities. If domestic environments are not viable for discussions, then measures can extend to the international stage and transnationally, giving minority representatives legitimacy, experience and, as appropriate, platforms to reduce the attacks on minority communities within countries in Southeast Asia.

To support greater inclusion, there also needs to be more active interventions to strengthen democracy on social media. If you cannot reverse the trend, then it is better to join the medium, to introduce emotion-tied campaigns that promote the value of democracy. A critical part of this should be campaigns to foster inclusion, reduce hate speech and address fake news. Governments can create independent bodies to address fake news, to discredit the distortions of information. At the same time, one aim should be to foster more substantive dialogues on governance and democracy; thus the idea of nurturing democratic social media networks and facilitating dialogues on policy issues. This would involve funding initiatives to reorient social media toward democracy strengthening. Technology needs to be an integral part of any democracy-building strategy.

The shift in norms and values calls out for greater civic education in schools and in society in general through public education campaigns. There needs to be more clarity in the understanding of what democracy is (and isn't) as well as more attention given to why rights and elections are important within Southeast Asian societies. Political literacy needs to be developed, especially among younger generations who believe they are informed due to social media, but in fact lack adequate knowledge of democratic practices. Two important dimensions of the civic education curriculum should be its secularity and digital platforms.

Finally, Southeast Asian countries need to introduce laws that limit interference in elections by foreign countries and laws that foster greater transparency about foreign involvement in business ventures involving public spending. China's power and role in regional affairs is increasing, and while it will continue to woo and win allies within Southeast Asia, the ability to shift publics and directly participate in Southeast Asian campaigns and political processes needs to be curbed. Simultaneously, as much of the foreign involvement in the political realm is out of public purview, introducing laws that require greater transparency and provide protections for local companies/actors would improve conditions for a fairer and more open political terrain.

Each of these initiatives – strengthening minority defenders, democracy-oriented social media ventures, civic education and legal protections against foreign political interference – offers Southeast Asian leaders and civil society activists steps to put in place conditions where their citizens can embrace a different political future. The history of the region shows that democracy comes in waves, and after periods of authoritarian rule, there are pressures to open up political life. The past decade was one of democratic contraction, but the next decade does not necessarily have to be one of a continuation of this trend. Working to strengthen the social conditions for democratic narratives and practices can plant the seed for democracy to rejuvenate and, in the process, offer Southeast Asians a more inclusive and empowered future.

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