The State of Democracy in Asia

Has the global narrative of democratic decline held true in the Indo-Pacific region?

By Yun-han Chu, Michael Vatikiotis, Mosharraf Zaidi and Catherine Putz

In November 2020, all eyes are on the United States as it concludes a contentious presidential election. Donald Trump’s original victory in the 2016 presidential polls fed into a growing wave of despair about democracy’s decline around the world: the growth of populism and majoritarianism among politicians coupled with increasingly illiberal and nationalist sentiments in the general public across the world.
This year, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated some of those trends, especially amid the economic chaos resulting from lockdowns and shutdowns around the world. In our cover story, we examine the current health of democracy in our four main coverage regions: East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Central Asia. Which countries are backsliding, and which are avoiding a democratic decline?

**East Asia**

— Yun-han Chu

Around the world, COVID-19 has tested democracies and accelerated trends toward populism and authoritarianism. In East Asia, however, things are playing out much differently. China and North Korea, of course, remain one-party states with little room for free expression, much less political choice. But the region’s democracies have bucked global trends by handling COVID-19 capably and keeping their economies afloat – and, in the process, bolstering their public’s faith in democratic systems.

The three consolidated democracies in East Asia, namely Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic largely unscathed. Their confirmed cases and the resultant deaths per million are among the lowest in the world. Their public health systems have withstood the most severe litmus test of a century. All three political systems managed to flatten the curve within a reasonable time span while having avoided imposing draconian social lockdowns. The rupture to social life and the economy in the three countries was severe but not devastating.

Compared with its East Asian neighbors, Japan was hit the hardest. With the Tokyo Summer Olympics at stake, initially the Abe Shinzo administration had been reluctant to declare a state of emergency until the outbreak of cases in Tokyo topped 1,000 in early April. The Japanese economy is expected to contract by 5.2 percent this year, according to the latest IMF forecast, making it the worst performing economy in the region. But its contraction is still
relatively milder than most EU countries, where the economy is expected to shrink 8.3 percent for the region.

Meanwhile, South Korea and Taiwan undertook prompt and decisive measures at the early stage of the outbreak and managed to limit the damage to the economy. South Korea’s growth rate is expected to contract just 1.9 percent while Taiwan’s growth will be hovering around zero this year, an enviable position to be in under the circumstances.

Four factors explain the resiliency of the three East Asian democracies. First, all three have developed adequate state capacity in coping with all sorts of social or natural contingencies. The political elites in these countries were not swayed by the prevailing ethos of neoliberal ideology, which enshrines the free market while demonizing the state. Over the last few decades, Seoul, Taipei, and Tokyo have been continuously upgrading and investing in the state’s capacity to tackles their countries’ long-term socioeconomic challenges as well as short-term shocks such as financial crises, earthquakes, typhoons, or disease.

Among the three, Taiwan was best prepared to deal with the pandemic. The government had drawn a heartening lesson from combating the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2002-2004 and since established the Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC) to coordinate cross-ministry efforts in handling future epidemics. During a public health emergency, the minister of public health serves as the commanding officer of the CECC and enjoys sweeping czar-like emergency powers, including rationing of facial masks. Also, all major medical centers, which are mostly owned and operated by the government, are required to be equipped with sufficient isolation rooms, which are expensive to maintain and underused during normal times.

Second, in all three countries there is a norm-conforming citizenry conscientious of their moral obligation to sacrifice individual freedom for the sake of social wellbeing and a concomitant reservoir of popular trust in public authorities, especially during a national crisis. These widely shared social norms and predispositions stem from East Asian cultural genes that prioritize
collective welfare over individual rights while keenly recognizing the imperative to regulate externalities (side-effects on other people and surroundings) of individual behaviors in a resourcescarce and densely populated society. In all three societies, observing the guidelines on self-quarantine, social distancing, and wearing facial masks in public has been spontaneous with little resistance.

Third, all three countries have built up a highly efficient and responsive health care service that fulfills many of the socially desirable objectives – universal coverage, affordability, quality service, and easy and equal access. All three democracies have adopted mandatory universal health insurance schemes for decades. The ratio of health-related expenditure, either out of public or private pockets, to GDP was 8.1 percent and 6.4 percent in South Korea and Taiwan in 2018, substantially lower than the OECD average of 8.8 percent. The ratio in Japan (at 10.9 percent) is slightly higher in large part due to its aging population. At the same time the health care systems in all three are highly rated in terms of accessibility, quality, and overall satisfaction. It is very difficult for ordinary East Asian citizens to understand why the British National Health System is always plagued by long waits and why the American health system is notorious for its intrinsic inequality and outrageous medical bills due to the underlying collusion with rent-seeking special interests. Resourceful health care systems provide the public health authorities in the three democracies with critical and strong support during the pandemic.

Fourth, paradoxically, their geographical proximity to the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic, China, turned out to be more a blessing than a curse. Around-the-clock news coverage of the unfolding of the original outbreak in their giant neighbor immediately heightened public awareness about the danger of this unknown virus and prompted government officials to take necessary containment measures. In addition, all three governments closely monitored how the Chinese authorities coped with this unprecedented public health crisis and thus shortened their learning curve. For instance, in February the Chinese authorities constructed two temporary hospitals on the outskirts of Wuhan
with all prefabricated components and parts and added 2,600 modular isolation rooms (which is 40 percent more than the total number of isolation rooms in all of Japan) in less than two weeks. Six weeks later, South Korea’s Kolon Group commissioned a contractor in Shenzhen to deliver a prefabricated hospital with isolated wards to be assembled at the site of the Seoul National University Hospital’s training institute in Mungyeong to prepare for a sudden surge of cases. Last, the four major East Asian economies are closely connected with other with dense and complex production networks. A strong economic rebound in the second and third quarters in China, their top export market, helped pull South Korea, Taiwan and Japan out of their deep recession.

In all three countries, the mechanism of democratic accountability has handsomely rewarded the incumbents for their successful handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. South Korean President Moon Jae-in leveraged his surging popularity to deliver a landslide victory for his party in the April National Assembly elections. In Taiwan, President Tsai Ing-wen started her second term on May 20 with an unheard-of 73 percent approval rate. Japan’s Prime Minister Abe Shinzo was able to hand-pick his political protégé, Yoshihide Suga, to be his successor after his record eight-year tenure abruptly ended in August.

One cautionary note: In a post-COVID-19 era, the opposition in all three places might be too fragmented and too fragile to exert meaningful checks on the entrenched ruling party while the state has newly acquired a vast array of surveillance and regulatory power, not a good mix even for a well-functioning liberal democracy.

**Southeast Asia**

— Michael Vatikiotis

Democracy has had an enduring but troubled relationship with Southeast Asia. After a passionate courtship at the end of the colonial era, there were long periods of argument and estrangement. Then, starting about 20 years ago, there was a
reunion and some reconciliation. However, the past few years have seen old enmities resurface and democracy is now undoubtedly under pressure across the region.

Purists would argue that none of the 10 states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are fully functioning democracies; most maintain limits on popular sovereignty, or have undermined the outcomes of more or less freely expressed popular will. In almost all the countries, the evils of elite political bargaining, resulting social inequality, and chronic impunity have eroded the benefits of having any democratic form of government.

As a result, more mature democratic transitions in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines have generally experienced a deterioration of civil rights and political freedom. More recent democratic transitions in Cambodia and Myanmar have all but stalled, while the region’s only ideologically authoritarian systems, communist-ruled Laos and Vietnam, have proved stable and resilient. Although tiny Brunei remains much as it has always been, a conservative Islamic Sultanate, the region’s most enduring soft authoritarian state, Singapore, has seen remarkable political change that has heralded a modest democratic opening.

Malaysia enjoyed a decent stretch of democratic effervescence after the 2018 elections that saw the end of effective one-party rule. Strange as it was to see former strongman Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad lead the opposition charge against the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) that had effectively ruled Malaysia since independence in 1957, his rainbow coalition soundly beat them at the polls. Of particular importance was the wave of public revulsion toward incumbent Prime Minister Najib Razak on account of his alleged involvement in a massive corruption case, for some part of which he has since been convicted. All the same, UMNO’s revenge came in the form of an internal coup that toppled Mahathir and saw Malaysian politics revert to elite bargaining, popular support be dammed.

Thailand’s 2019 elections saw the emergence of a hybrid government born of a military coup in 2014, but then elected on
the back of a constitution geared toward strangling support for populist political parties. Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha’s avuncular and unthreatening image may have helped him at the polls, but his uninspiring government, still hobbled by narrow military vision and interests, did nothing for the economy, which is the worst performing in the region. When the leading opposition Future Forward party was banned in early 2020, underlying discontent erupted in the form of a youthful protest movement demanding a return to democracy and, more daringly, reform of the monarchy seen as a hindrance to modern forms of representative government.

In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte’s popularity remains remarkably strong, despite curbs on freedoms, the killing of dozens of journalists, and as many as 12,000 deaths of mostly poor slum-dwellers accused by police of being drug dealers. But as he nears the end of the single six-year term constitutionally permitted, there are increasing signs that he may try to postpone or cancel the elections due in 2022. To protect his flank, Duterte has empowered the army and, as a result, human rights violations have increased.

In Indonesia, civil society activists and many foreign observers have been sounding the alarm about the state of democracy. President Joko Widodo is blamed for dismantling the country’s diligent anti-corruption agency, for banning an Islamic organization that was conservative but not violently extremist, and for permitting hardline security policies to continue taking lives in the country’s eastern region of Papua. Worryingly, the president, elected to a second term last year, has placed more trust in serving and retired military officials than the civilian bureaucracy.

There had been hope that resurgent popular sovereignty during local elections in 2017 in Cambodia and a remarkably free and fair election in Myanmar in 2015 signalled hopes for democracy in both these troubled states. Instead, the banning of the main opposition party in Cambodia ahead of national elections in 2018 indicated that strongman leader Hun Sen was not willing to risk losing his grip on the country. Meanwhile, since winning the election in 2015, Myanmar’s Aung San Suu Kyi has overseen a trimming of
democratic freedoms, in the interest of appeasing the still powerful military and consolidating power. Both countries have seen human rights activists and journalists threatened or killed.

The one bright spot in the democratic firmament has been surprisingly Singapore. In relative terms, the 2020 election was a political tsunami: It saw the ruling People's Action party lose 30 percent of its vote share and opposition parties win an unprecedented number of seats. Younger voters shrugged off the usual fearmongering by the government, and insisted that government needed effective checks on its power in parliament.

Whichever way the democratic winds have been blowing, the COVID-19 pandemic will determine political trends in the coming year. Anger over widening income disparities and impunity will intensify; mass unemployment and the prospect of millions needing to be fed will fuel popular protest. Elections may either be delayed or cancelled altogether. Political leaders will be tempted to use the tools of authoritarian rule to survive.

Intensifying geopolitical rivalry between the U.S. and China in the region will complicate the situation because in a bid to shore up alliances, both superpowers will be more interested in alliance and loyalty than governance and human security.

In short, already battered and under threat across Southeast Asia, democracy faces strong headwinds.

**South Asia**

— Mosharraf Zaidi

In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote (only half disapprovingly) of American democracy: “In America the majority raises formidable barriers around the liberty of opinion; within these barriers an author may write what he pleases, but woe to him if he goes beyond them.” Nearly two centuries later, democracy in South Asia seems to have decided to put on the same majoritarian adornment, weaponized through WhatsApp organized lynchings, political banishments through unproven corruption allegations, outright
religious bigotry, and a public discourse that rewards the coarsest and most asinine characters with the most outsized influence.

Battered by COVID-19, bruised by the economic fallout of the pandemic, and rattled by the continuing fragility of peace, South Asia has not had a very good 2020 on any front. The notion of democracy has continued to slide into an existential crisis of majoritarianism that was supposed to have been resolved during the overthrow of the British Raj and the winning of independence in 1947. South Asia’s biggest countries are in conflict with each other and with themselves, perpetuating the Orientalist zeal with which the region is described by foreigners, and pouring cold water over the dreams of a South Asian century shared by many peaceniks in the region.

If the victory of Narendra Modi in India’s 2014 election represented a turning point for South Asian democracy, 2020 may well go down as the year in which majoritarianism was assumed as the dominant architectural style for the rule of the people. Mobs of religious, nationalist, and sectarian zealots consistently proved either too seductive for the South Asian state to put down or too scary to challenge. From the horrific religiously-motivated violence by right-wing Hindu mobs in India during President Donald Trump’s visit in February, to the continued targeting of religious and sectarian minorities using Pakistan’s blasphemy laws, to the resurgence of the Bodu Bala Sena-backed Rajapaksa brothers in Sri Lanka – majoritarian narratives may only be espoused by a thin sliver of South Asia’s Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists but they seem to generate weaker and weaker resistance every passing day.

The muscular nationalism that is fueling these majoritarian trends, much like the COVID-19 virus, is irresistible, and has infected the same struggling middle and lower-middle class in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and even Bangladesh as it has in Western Europe and the United States. There is broad elite consensus in the region that it will not cede any more resources or power to the teeming hundreds of millions in the region than it already does. Instead, it is much easier for elites to promote narratives of victimhood among the vast majorities in these countries. It is always somebody else’s fault that you are poor, powerless, and lacking hope for any

Commercial mass media, in which the news is now an entertainment spectacle, may have been invented on the U.S. airwaves through Fox News, but it has graduated to uniquely South Asian heights in the region. Resistance is either rendered impossible through the punitive power of the almighty rupee (as in India), or it is made impossible through unrelenting suppression of dissenting voices (as in Pakistan). The resulting public discourse has normalized whatever majoritarian disaster zone the powers-that-be wish to impose on audiences – just witness the doubling down of India’s repression in the disputed territory of Kashmir. The language and tenor of how wider national conversations are skewed in one direction are remarkably similar. Any challengers to India’s right-wing Hindus are anti-national, any challengers to the military’s dominance in politics and governance in Pakistan are traitors, anyone that questions Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh is an enabler of terrorists.

Patriotism, the last refuge of scoundrels, is the first refuge of the neo-democrat in South Asia. To varying degrees of legitimacy, the authoritarian instincts of majoritarian leaders are underwritten by electoral processes: January 2018 in Bangladesh, July 2018 in Pakistan, May 2019 in India, and November 2019 in Sri Lanka. Even in Afghanistan, the ongoing Doha peace process is going to produce a compromise between the Islamic Emirate represented by the Taliban – as authoritarian as they come – and the Islamic Republic – as feckless and corrupt as they make them.

In many ways, the Afghan peace process mirrors the wider changes to democracy in the South Asia region at large. The dichotomy between the dynastic (and often corrupt) oligarchs of South Asia and its majoritarian hardliners (who are reputedly non-corrupt) are growing starker and starker. The big difference is that in Afghanistan, big ol’ Uncle Sam is sitting between the two, forcing them to get along and arrive at a consensus about how to share power.
No such process is conceivable for the rest of the region. In India, the Rahul Gandhi-led Indian National Congress is completely at sea as it tries to espouse the moth-eaten Nehruvian secularism it stands for in the face of a Modi-backed mass media onslaught of Hindutva propaganda. In Pakistan, an opposition made of traditional politicians meekly protest against Imran Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government, which enjoys unprecedented support from Pakistan’s dominant military establishment – with little hope of dislodging it anytime in the near future.

The embarrassing (and oft allegedly ill gotten) riches of the traditional South Asian elites have inured them to the misery of life on the wrong side of a Rolex, or an Audi, or even an iPhone. Rapid urbanization, even more rapidly growing access to 4G connectivity, and an almost never-ending supply of outrage-prompting “news” has created a permanent critical mass of rage against all political “tradition.” The tradition that suffers the most? Democracy.

The future does not promise any major improvements. South Asian democracies, given the immense diversity of its nations, can only be loud and cantankerous. But the trend, from China to Russia to Turkey and beyond, is to establish less noisy and less colorful national orders. The majoritarian tendencies of South Asian democracies portend an even more profound erosion of pluralist values than we saw in 2020. This won’t matter to the vast majorities in India, Pakistan, and beyond, but it will be life altering for minorities in the entire region. May God – whichever one they pray to – help them all.

Central Asia
— Catherine Putz

Democracy has never been alive and well in Central Asia. If 2020 dimmed the shine of democracy in many corners of the world, in Central Asia the light was never truly plugged in. Amid a tumultuous 2020, with a pandemic and ensuing economic
upheaval, democracy in Central Asia is as it ever was: mostly a masquerade.

The governments of the region have long cloaked themselves in the language of democracy, but a cursory glance at the reality of political life in the region reveals the truth: autocracy dressing up in the trappings of democracy.

Each Central Asian state, for example, routinely exercises the most basic action of a democracy: elections. Only Kyrgyzstan manages to muster a real, if messy, competitive atmosphere. Elsewhere potemkin candidates endorse the status quo and fade quietly into obscurity when their performative role has concluded with the landslide victory of the sitting leadership. Nowhere are the concerns of average citizens taken into much consideration.

Look no further than the presidential election in Tajikistan last month. Despite the fact that his government delayed, for more than a month, admitting the presence of the coronavirus this spring and that the country’s economic condition remains precarious given that the more than a million Tajiks who usually travel to Russia for seasonal work each year were barred from doing so, long-time President Emomali Rahmon managed to capture 90.92 percent of the vote. It’s less a measure of his popularity or excellence as a leader than a mark of how tightly Rahmon controls the levers of power in Tajikistan.

If democracy is a government of the people and an autocracy is a government in which all power flows from a single person, it’s not hard to determine which Tajikistan is.

The same goes for Turkmenistan, whose President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov spent time last month doing donuts in a new racecar at an empty track in Ashgabat. (To be precise, in video footage we see him inside a car, apparently driving, interspersed with shots of a car doing donuts – the conclusion we’re led to is that Berdy is one hell of a driver). While Berdimuhamedov doesn’t have to bother with an election until 2024, there is no opposition in the country to speak of who could contest it.

In Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan there are newer presidents in office, but both remain enmeshed in the autocratic architectures from
which they arose and in which they still exist.

Kazakhstan’s President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev marked a full year in office this past summer. His election in June 2019 came in a snap presidential election called for in the month after First President Nursultan Nazarbayev resigned – allowing opposition forces no time to muster their own candidates. But Nazarbayev’s resignation wasn’t a step down or a step back; it was an ascension to a place beyond the presidency, beyond democracy. When you visit the website of the Kazakh presidency, Akorda, under the scroll of recent events sits pictures of Nazarbayev and Tokayev, one on each side of the screen. In the dropdown menu for the “Republic of Kazakhstan” Nazarbayev -- The First President of Kazakhstan - Elbasy (meaning “Leader of the Nation”) -- is listed first, above the country’s sitting president.

In Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev rose to power in 2016 after the death of Islam Karimov with a small side-stepping of constitutional procedure. The speaker of the parliament at the time, Nigmatilla Yuldashev, declined to take on the acting presidency as the constitution dictates and passed the office to Mirziyoyev, who had been Karimov’s prime minister for 13 years running. A few months later, Mirziyoyev cruised to victory in an election without serious challengers. While Mirziyoyev has done considerable work to clean up Uzbekistan’s image, relations, and operations, the political realm remains heavily circumscribed. In the December 2019 parliamentary elections there was new energy and a few new faces, but the Uzbek parliament remains largely a unanimously-voting rubber stamp on the president’s initiatives.

In all four of the above countries, it’s not hard to determine who holds power. Kyrgyzstan, as ever, is the exception, but one that proves the rule.

Last month, Central Asia’s “island of democracy” erupted in protests the day after its parliamentary elections. Although 16 parties ran, the day ended with just four making the cut. President Sooronbay Jeenbekov’s family and the country’s top mobsters, the Matraimovs, were behind two of the parties that captured nearly 50 percent of the vote. The polls were marred by vote-buying
allegations, with Kyrgyz reportedly selling their votes for as little as $25 – a sad commentary on both democracy and the economy in the country. As Bruce Pannier will outline in detail later in this issue, an awful lot happened in Kyrgyzstan’s political arena last month: an election, protests and riots, jail breaks, annulment of the election results, resignation of the president, the shockingly rapid rise of a new leader from prison to parliament to the presidency, and new elections scheduled for December and then unscheduled. Kyrgyzstan remains a category apart from its autocratic neighbors, but its democracy is fatally hamstrung by corruption.

If anything, 2020 and the coronavirus pandemic served as a reminder of how quickly the garb of democracy can be shed when autocratic control is seen as necessary to maintain stability. The Central Asian states that tried to take the coronavirus seriously – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan – nevertheless did so by reverting to autocratic forms of population control enforced by the heavy hand of the security services, investing in or taking advantage of existing digital surveillance systems, and punishing critics with new laws branded as countering “false information” and combatting “panic.” The social and economic conditions with which the people of Central Asia must contend have invariably worsened, but people in most of the region continue to have few or no avenues – like free and fair elections – to influence a change of policy or leadership.

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