



A Comparative Survey of

***DEMOCRACY, GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT***

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**Re-assessing the Popular Foundation of Asian Democracies:  
Findings from Four Waves of the Asian Barometer Survey**

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## **Asian Barometer**

A Comparative Survey of Democracy, Governance and Development

# **Working Paper Series**

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**Globalbarometer**

The Asian Barometer (ABS) is an applied research program on public opinion on political values, democracy, and governance around the region. The regional network encompasses research teams from thirteen East Asian political systems (Japan, Mongolia, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia), and five South Asian countries (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal). Together, this regional survey network covers virtually all major political systems in the region, systems that have experienced different trajectories of regime evolution and are currently at different stages of political transition.

The ABS Working Paper Series is intended to make research result within the ABS network available to the academic community and other interested readers in preliminary form to encourage discussion and suggestions for revision before final publication. Scholars in the ABS network also devote their work to the Series with the hope that a timely dissemination of the findings of their surveys to the general public as well as the policy makers would help illuminate the public discourse on democratic reform and good governance.

The topics covered in the Series range from country-specific assessment of values change and democratic development, region-wide comparative analysis of citizen participation, popular orientation toward democracy and evaluation of quality of governance, and discussion of survey methodology and data analysis strategies.

The ABS Working Paper Series supercedes the existing East Asia Barometer Working Paper Series as the network is expanding to cover more countries in East and South Asia. Maintaining the same high standard of research methodology, the new series both incorporates the existing papers in the old series and offers newly written papers with a broader scope and more penetrating analyses.

The ABS Working Paper Series is issued by the Asian Barometer Project Office, which is jointly sponsored by the Institute for Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences of National Taiwan University and the Institute of Political Science of Academia Sinica.

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Re-assessing the Popular Foundation of Asian Democracies: Findings from  
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Across the East Asia region, democracies are again under stress. In 2014, democracy was once again overthrown in Thailand by military coup. In the Philippines, voters have elected a presidential candidate to office who has repeatedly expressed vocal support for the extrajudicial killing of suspected drug users and dealers, and has avowed to crack down on corrupt officials without regard to the rule of law. Myanmar's fortunes for democracy are still wrestling with many daunting challenges despite of a peaceful transition from the military-linked Union Solidarity and Development Party in power in various forms since 1962 to the opposition NLD (Welsh, Huang and Chu, 2016).

Even political systems in the region that have achieved a relatively high level of democratic consolidation since the third wave of democratization have suffered from worsening political strife that has the potential to undermine popular support for democratic institutions. In Taiwan, the ruling KMT administration was thrown into crisis in 2014 following the student-led occupation of the legislature in protest against the passage of a trade pact with mainland China without full committee review, while more recently the presidency of Park Geun-hye in South Korea has been embroiled in a massive scandal involving the influence of a daughter of a shaman cult leader over the president.

The recent troubles faced by democracies across the region serve as a timely reminder that the survival and consolidation of democracy is only possible with the support of both political elites and ordinary citizens. Democracy cannot survive if elites do not accept the basic rules of democracy, such as respecting electoral outcomes and abiding by the rule of law. At the same time, democracies cannot survive and flourish if they do not receive the support of their citizens. As Diamond (1999: 65) has put it, democratic consolidation requires that "all significant actors, at both the elite and mass levels, believe that the democratic regime is the most right and appropriate for their society, better than any other realistic alternative they can imagine." When democracy is consolidated, both elites and citizens continue to reject extraconstitutional or nondemocratic alternatives to the regime, even when it faced with severe economic or political crisis. In other words, for democracy to become consolidated, it must become, in the minds of political elites and ordinary citizens, "the only game in town" (Linz and Stepan, 1996).

This paper timely re-assesses support for democracy in East and Southeast Asia over the past fifteen years using data from the Asian Barometer Survey, a comparative study of

democracy that now covers fourteen countries and territories in the region.<sup>1</sup> Although overwhelming majorities of respondents in all the surveyed countries express support for democracy as a normative concept, this only tells part of the story. Our findings can help illuminate whether citizens in the region are committed democrats or consistently support democracy over nondemocratic alternatives, or whether they are in the words of Inglehart (2013), only playing “lip-service to democracy,” and might abandon democracy should a better alternative emerge.

### **Measuring Support for Democracy and Detachment from Authoritarianism**

Democratic consolidation requires both political elites and ordinary citizens to support the democratic order and reject authoritarian alternatives, even during times of political or economic stress. At the mass level, public opinion surveys have commonly measured support for democratic values by gauging support for the idea of democracy, support for democracy as the “best form of government,” and preference for democracy over authoritarian alternatives (Norris, 1999: 16-17). Following Easton’s (1965, 1975) distinction between diffuse support (support for the regime or constitutional order and the political community) and specific support (how members of a political community evaluate the political authorities), the World Values Survey measures both support for democracy as an ideal form of government and support for the democratic regime itself. Similarly, Dalton (1999) and Bratton and Mattes (2001), distinguish between instrumental support for democracy (support for a democratic regime based on the delivery of certain desirable goods) and intrinsic support for democracy and (support for democracy as an end in itself). These two dimensions of support for democracy reflect a longstanding debate in the literature about the origins of political trust. On the one hand, cultural theories emphasize that trust in the political system is exogenous and normative. According to this tradition, trust is thought to originate in deeply rooted cultural norms that individuals are socialized into at a young age. By contrast, institutional theorists argue that trust is politically endogenous; it is produced by the satisfactory performance of institutions (Mishler and Rose, 2001: 31). This debate matters for the consolidation of democracy, because deep rooted intrinsic or exogenous support is necessary for democracy to retain popular support even when democratic institutions are not performing well.

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<sup>1</sup>Please refer to Appendix for the surveyed countries and dates for the four waves of the Asian Barometer Survey.

First, to test the instrumental dimension of support for democracy, the ABS simply asks respondents their level of satisfaction with the performance of democracy in their country and whether democracy is capable of solving the problems in the country. Second, to measure normative support for democracy, the ABS includes two items to measure the desirability of democracy and the suitability of democracy. However, these items may be criticised for social desirability bias, because they capture “questionnaire democrats” (Dalton, 1994) who “pay lip-service to democracy,” (Inglehart, 2003), rather than measuring unconditional support for democracy over nondemocratic alternatives. To identify respondents who have a genuine commitment to democracy, the ABS further probes whether respondents support democracy over alternative regime types and prioritize democracy over other socially desirable goals. For the preferability of democracy over other regime types, we include two items. The first item asks respondents if they agree that democracy is always preferable to other types of government. The second item asks respondents if they agree that democracy is always the best form of government, despite its problems. The remaining two items probe the preferability of democracy. The first item asks respondents to choose between democracy and economic development, while the second item asks respondents to choose between protecting political freedom and reducing economic inequality.

However, although these questions are designed to identify committed democrats by asking respondents to choose between democracy and other regime types, or between democracy and other socially desirable goals, responses may still be affected by social desirability bias and different understandings of what “democracy” means. In particular, regimes across the region proclaim they are “democratic,” despite expert evaluations to the contrary. Democracy has become a “universal good,” even when it is not practiced in reality. One approach to untangling what respondents understand by democracy is to simply ask them to assess how much of a democracy they believe their own country or a major foreign country (such as China or the United States) to be. If there is a significant gap between citizens’ perception and expert evaluations of democracy in a country, this is an indicator that when respondents express support for democracy, they may have something very different in mind to experts or to classic Western understanding of liberal democracy.

Since the word “democracy” may mean different things to different people, the ABS also includes a battery on “detachment from authoritarianism,” asking respondents whether they accept four specific alternatives to democracy. The advantage of this measure is that it allows us to probe the strength of respondents’ support for democracy in practice while

avoiding the potential social desirability bias arising from the use of the “D-word.” For this battery, we measure rejection of strongman rule, one party rule, military rule, and rule by experts. Three of these types of authoritarian rule have been practiced in East Asia (strongman rule, one party rule, and military rule), and while no country has been a pure technocracy, experts have wielded extensive policy influence under other types of regime, notably in the developmental states of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, and more recently in countries such as Malaysia. If respondents reject these alternative to democracy, which they have in many cases have experienced in the relatively recent past, we can take this as a good indication that democracy has become “the only game in town” in the minds of ordinary citizens.

### **Findings from the Asian Barometer Survey**

In this section, we review the findings from four waves of the ABS across three dimensions: performance of democracy, support for democracy, and detachment from authoritarianism.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Performance of Democracy in East Asia**

According to an instrumental view of support for democracy, citizens’ support for democratic institutions is contingent on the delivery of certain desirable outcomes. In recent years, many democracies in the region have performed poorly on crucial measures of political outputs. In particular, the established liberal democracies of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have suffered from periods of stagnant growth and falls in real incomes in the fifteen years since the First Wave of the ABS in 2001. This poor performance is contrasted to the impressive growth figures (albeit from a much lower base) achieved by China over the same period. While democracy in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan appears to be sufficiently consolidated to survive a performance crisis, for citizens in many countries in the region where democracy is only weakly consolidated, the rise of China offers a possible alternative to failing democratic institutions.

Figure 1 shows respondents’ satisfaction with the way that democracy works in their country. Consistent with the relatively weak performance of the established liberal democracies in the region, respondents from Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan show relatively weak levels of satisfaction with the way that democracy works in their country. However, on

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<sup>2</sup> In this exercise, we exclude the PRC and Myanmar because some of the indicators, such as detachment from authoritarianism, carry somewhat different connotations under a non-competitive one-party regime.

the positive side, satisfaction with the performance of democracy in the three societies has grown consistently over the three waves, from around 50% of respondents who were satisfied in the first wave to above 60% who expressed satisfaction in the most recent wave. Except Indonesia in which satisfaction with democracy remains stable over four waves, satisfaction in Mongolia (the borderline of classification as a liberal democracy) and the Philippines (electoral democracy) fluctuates across four waves. Like the established liberal democracies, in the fourth wave of the ABS around 60% of respondents expressed satisfaction with the performance of democracy. Finally, countries that are classified as limited democracies or authoritarian regime have the higher levels of satisfaction with the performance of democracy, although there is considerable variation within this group, ranging from the highest levels of satisfaction in Thailand and Singapore, to much lower levels of satisfaction in Hong Kong, Malaysia, Cambodia, and Myanmar. Furthermore, while there is still a significant gap in satisfaction with democracy between democratic and nondemocratic regimes, there has been a narrowing of the gap over the four waves of the survey.

Another way to measure democratic performance is to ask respondents to assess whether democracy is capable of solving the problems in their country. Generally speaking, citizens in the region give positive evaluations of the political efficacy of democracy, although we can find some variation between countries (see Figure 2). In particular, citizens in Taiwan, the Philippines, and Hong Kong have the least positive assessments of the ability of democracy to solve the problems in their country. Generally speaking, there is also not much variation over the four waves of the survey, suggesting that evaluations of the efficacy of democracy may be more deep rooted and not subject to short term effects such as a change in the ruling party or an economic or political crisis.

### **Support for Democracy in East Asia**

These items try to capture support for democracy by asking respondents whether they view democracy and suitable their country, preference for democracy over non-democratic alternatives, and finally priority of democracy when compared to other desirable societal goals.

On the measure of suitability of democracy, in Figure 3 we show the percentage of respondents giving a response of at least “6” on a ten-point scale for whether democracy is suitable for their country. The results show that regardless of regime type, most respondents over the four waves believe that democracy is suitable for their country. However, the results



suggest that respondents in the established liberal democracies are increasingly likely to view democracy as suitable for their country (suggesting democratic consolidation), while respondents in the remaining countries are increasingly less likely to view democracy as suitable for their country. The most dramatic fall has come in the electoral democracies, in particular in the Philippines, suggesting frustration with the performance of weakly institutionalized democratic institutions may encourage respondents to consider nondemocratic alternatives. The situation is quite similar in Malaysia, Thailand, and Cambodia. Next, in Figure 4, we find that large majorities of respondents in all of the surveyed countries agree that while democracy may have problems, it is still the best form of government. However, in Figure 5, we find that respondents are more ambivalent when asked whether democracy is also preferable, authoritarian government may be preferable in some circumstances, or whether the regime type does not matter. For instance, despite Taiwan's democratic progress over the last twenty years, only around half of respondents agree that democracy is always preferable. Similarly low scores were also found in Mongolia and South Korea (although South Korea's scores on this item have improved somewhat over the more recent two waves), as well as electoral democracies such as the Philippines. In particular, the chart shows that preference for democracy in Philippines dropped from 64% in Wave 1 to 47% in Wave 4. The problem of corruption has become a threat to democracy in Philippines. The receptivity of many citizens to the demagogic appeals of President Rodrigo Duterte is partly the result of extreme frustration with corruption in the current system. In this sense, more and more citizens begin to consider non-democratic alternatives (Weatherall, Chang, and Wei, 2016).

If we take a look at the breakdown of preference for democracy in Wave 3 and Wave 4 (Figure 5.1), we find that around one-third of respondents in liberal democracies do not believe that democracy is always preferable. In particular, half of the respondents in Taiwan choose either the alternative of authoritarian regime in some circumstances or believe that regime type "does not matter." Similar to Taiwan, around 50% of respondents chose authoritarian alternatives in some circumstances or believe that regime type "does not matter" in Mongolia and Philippines. The trend in Indonesia is quite similar to that of liberal democracies such as Japan and South Korea. For other non-democracies, there is some variation across countries. At least 40% of the respondents in Hong Kong and Singapore do not consider democracy as a priority. In particular, 30% of citizens in Singapore think authoritarianism may be preferable under some circumstances. For other non-democracies

(Thailand, Cambodia, and Myanmar), around 60% to 70% percent of respondents think democracy is preferable to other regime types. The trends in Thailand and Cambodia are different. In Thailand, the percentage of respondents choosing authoritarianism in some circumstances rose from 14% in Wave 3 to 31% in Wave 4. This probably can be attributed to the problem of partisan gridlock and corruption. Corruption has undermined citizens' trust in democracy, enabling the military to present the coup of May 2014 as a solution to the country's crippling partisan gridlock and recurring problems of corruption (Weatherall, Chang, and Wei, 2016). In contrast, the percentage considering authoritarian alternatives or who believe that regime type "does not matter" in Cambodia fell, with preference for democracy rising from 59% in Wave 3 to 74% in Wave 4.

The ABS also asks respondents to choose between democracy and economic development, and between protecting political freedom and reducing economic inequality. Here we find much less consistent support for democracy. When asked to choose between democracy and economic development (Figure 6), we find that only a minority of respondents choose democracy in all of the surveyed political systems across all waves of the survey, with the exception of Japan in Wave 4. In addition, economic development was prioritized by large majorities of respondents even in relatively affluent societies such as South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Similarly, when asked to choose between protecting political freedom and reducing income inequality (Figure 7), in all of the surveyed countries across both waves that include this item (Wave 3 and Wave 4), a majority of respondents prioritized reducing economic inequality. Looking at the region as a whole, we can draw two main conclusions from these findings. First, citizens do not necessarily prioritize political freedoms over economic development or reduction in inequality when a certain level of economic development has been attained. Second, there are no consistent differences between regime type (with the possible exception of Japan). Therefore, there is the worrying possibility that even in democracies, citizens may be willing to sacrifice a degree of political freedom for the promise of economic development.

### **Detachment from Authoritarianism in East Asia**

To supplement the indicators measuring overt support for democracy, the ABS also employed a third way to assess support for democracy, which we call detachment from authoritarianism (DA). This is grounded in an argument by Richard Rose and others about the competitive justification of democratic regimes. Referring to Winston Churchill's famous

line, “Democracy is the worst form of government except all those [other] forms that have been tried from time to time,” they argued that democracies often survive not because a majority believes in the intrinsic legitimacy of that form of government but because there are no alternatives that they prefer. This suggests that detachment from authoritarianism is as important in sustaining a democratic regime as attachment to democracy.

The DA battery consists of a three-item battery measuring disapproval of three non-democratic alternative regime types – one-party rule, military government, and dictatorship under a strongman rule – all forms of government with which most Asian are familiar and to which they can provide experience-based responses. So a fully committed democrat is someone who not only believes in that democracy is preferable and suitable for one's country, but also rejects all three forms of authoritarian rule.

The DA battery enjoys another advantage in terms of measurement quality because these items do not include the “D-word,” so that it can avoid the problem of social desirability bias. In our time, “democracy” has become a “universal good,” even in countries that do not practice democracy or where citizens may conceive of democracy in ways that are not consistent with the classic understanding of the term in the Western tradition. To illustrate this point, we assess whether respondents' views of democracy are consistent with those of experts. Figure 8 shows that respondents in nondemocracies who view their country as a “full democracy” or a “democracy with minor problems” is often higher than that in democracies. This finding suggests that respondents in nondemocracies believe the claims of their leaders that their country is a democracy, even if expert assessments suggest otherwise. This could possibly bias other items measuring support for democracy, which for respondents might simply be cognitively understood as support for the regime (and its claims to democratic legitimacy).

In Figures 9-12, we show rejection of four authoritarian alternatives to democracy. In Figure 9, we find that substantial minorities of respondents in many countries (and a majority in Mongolia and Myanmar) would support replacing democracy with the rule of a strong leader. Generally speaking, willingness to consider strongman rule is somewhat lower in established liberal democracies. A similar finding was produced for the item on whether only one party should be allowed to hold office (Figure 10). Generally speaking, citizens in established liberal democracies reject one-party rule, including in Taiwan which has a recent history of one-party rule, but substantial minorities in other countries, including Mongolia,

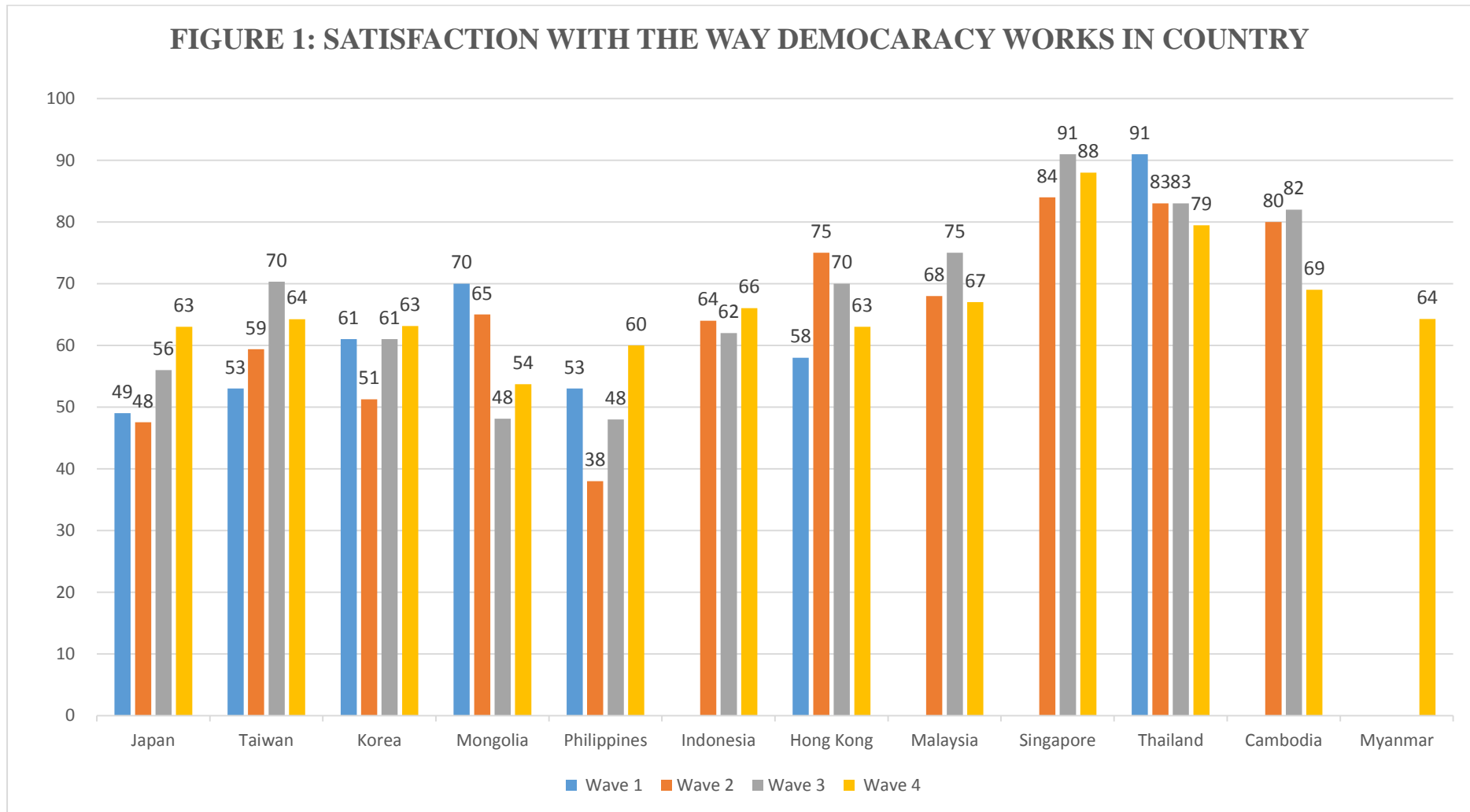
the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Malaysia, Cambodia, and Myanmar would prefer one-party rule to multiparty competition. Similarly, while military rule is strongly rejected by citizens in the established liberal democracies (Figure 11), including in South Korea which has long history of military interventions in politics, it is supported by large numbers of people in many of the surveyed countries, particularly the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, and Myanmar, all of which have a long history of military interventions in politics or periods of military rule. Finally, willingness to accept rule by experts varies substantially across the region (Figure 12). In Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, respondents overwhelmingly reject expert rule, despite the prominent role played by technocratic elites in their rapid economic development. However, in a number of countries, including Mongolia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Myanmar, large numbers of citizens are willing to support getting rid of elections in favour of rule by experts.

## **Conclusion**

Data from the ABS provide us with some interesting insights about support for democracy in East Asia. Citizens in the region's established democracies appear to be quite cynical about democracy, typically expressing lower levels of satisfaction with democracy and less confidence in the capability of democracy to solve society's problems than their counterparts in countries which are not democratic or only classified as limited democracies. Perhaps surprisingly, citizens in the established liberal democracies in the region do not prioritize democracy and political freedom over desirable economic goals such as economic development and reducing inequality, despite the fact that these countries have achieved relative high levels of prosperity. In contrast to their counterparts in democracies, citizens in the region's non-democracies or limited democracies appear to be relatively enthusiastic democrats. However, the finding may be the result of a combination of social desirability bias (a desire to support democracy as a universal value in the abstract sense) and an understanding of democracy that is inconsistent with how democracy is defined in the Western liberal tradition. For instance, citizens in nondemocracies consistently rate their country as democratic, despite expert opinions to the contrary. The four items in the ABS survey measuring "detachment from authoritarianism" appear to support this theory. Despite their apparent high levels of support for democracies, citizens in limited democracies or nondemocratic regimes are often willing to support forms of government that go against all of the principles of democracy – including strongman rule, military rule, and one-party rule. In contrast, despite their widespread dissatisfaction with the performance of democracy and

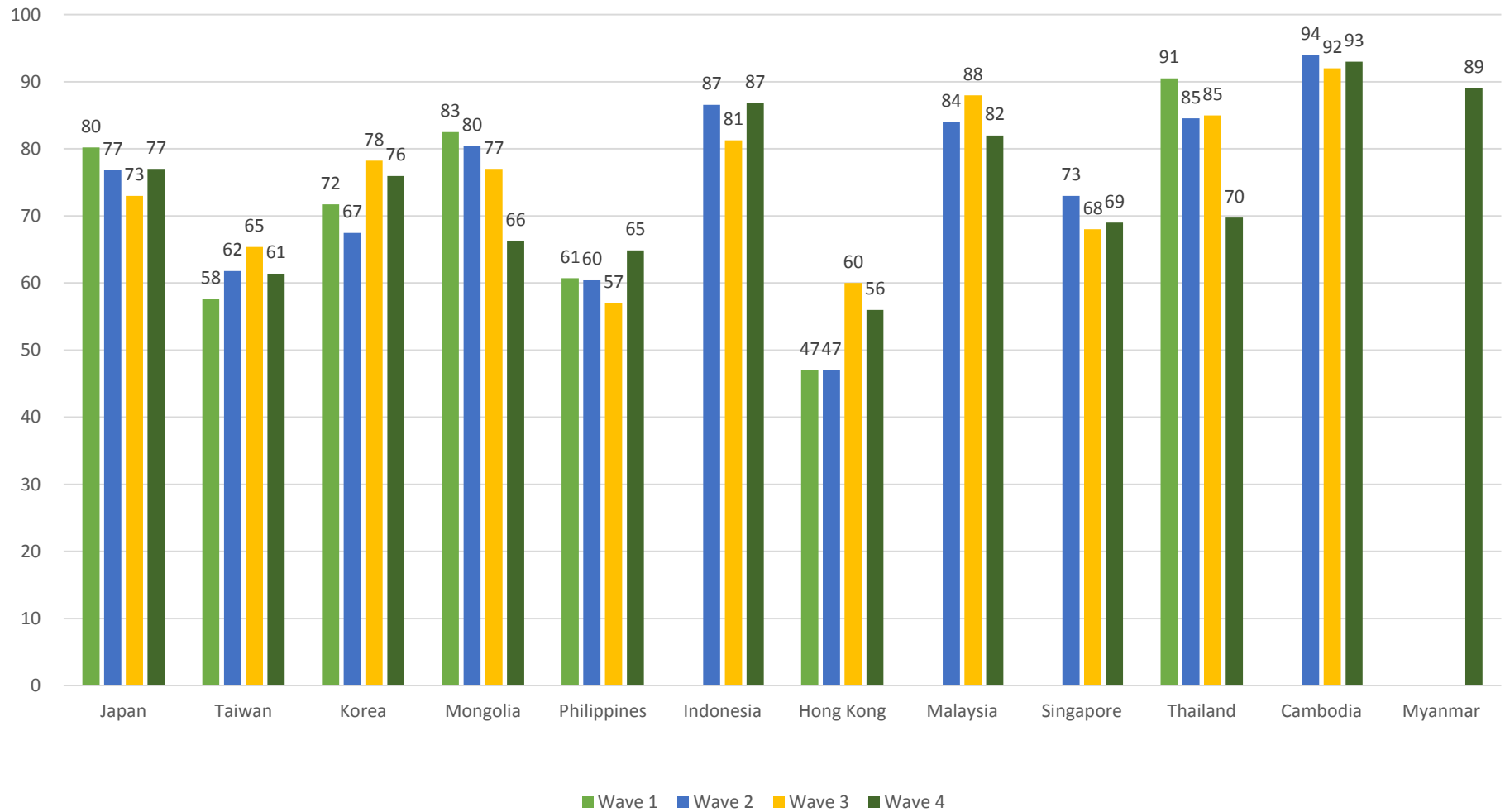
cynicism about the ability of democracy to improve their everyday lives, citizens in established democracies are even more leery of nondemocratic alternatives. For these citizens, democracy truly is, in Churchill's words, "the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

**Figures and Tables**

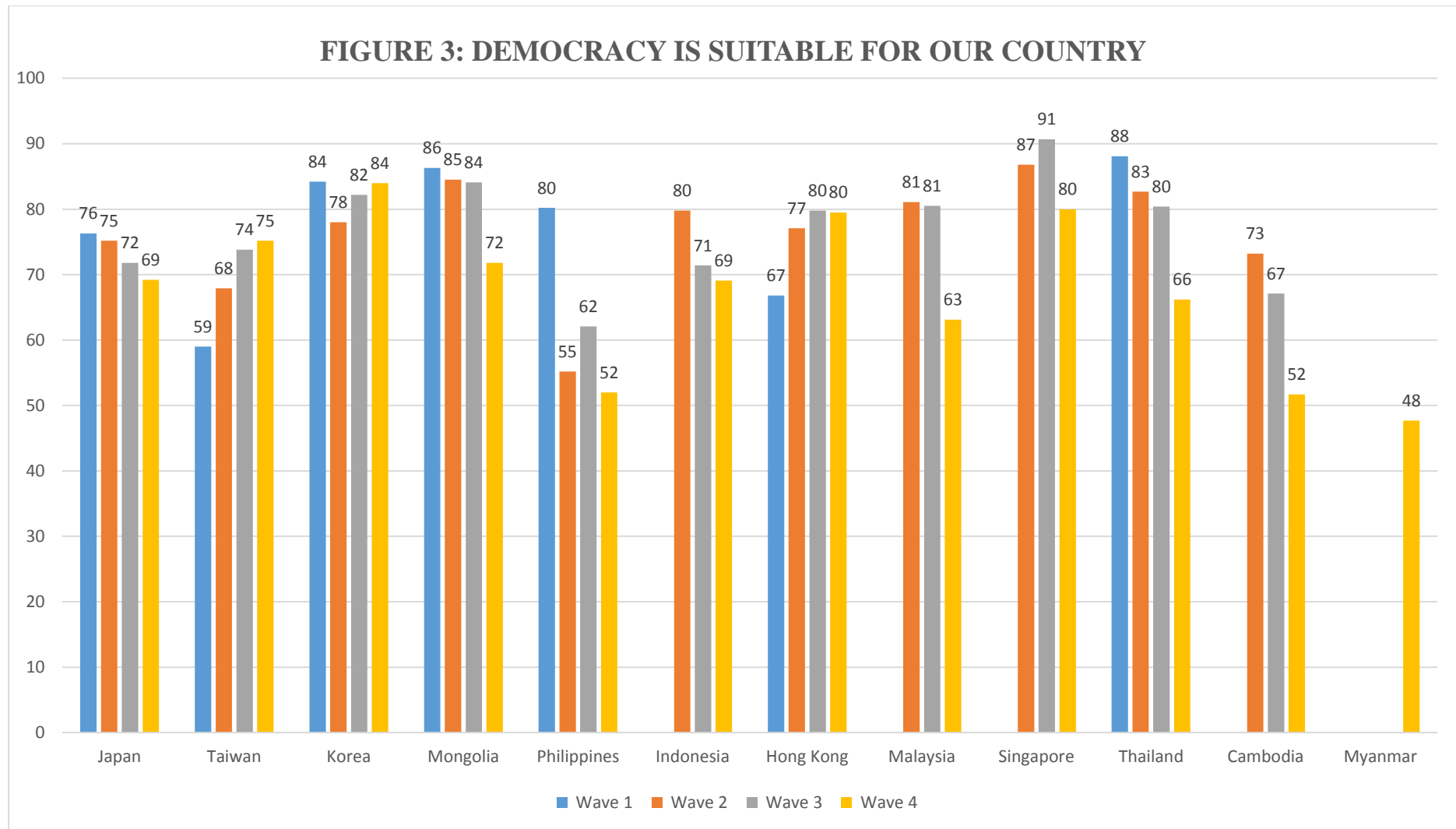


Note 1: Figures are percentages of respondents who are “very satisfied” or “fairly satisfied” with the way democracy works in their country.

**FIGURE 2: DEMOCRACY IS CAPABLE OF SOLVING PROBLEMS OF THEIR SOCIETY**



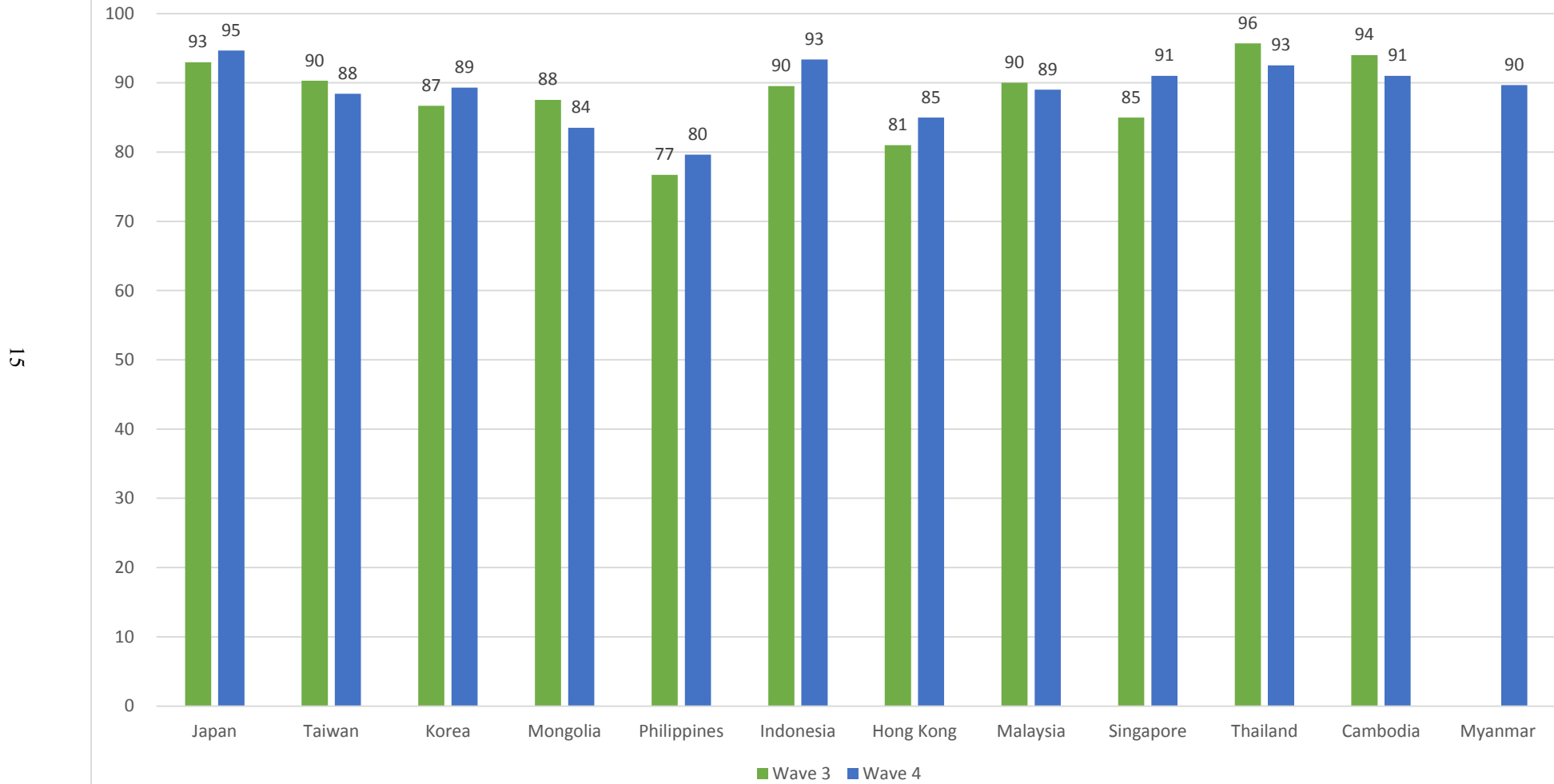
Note 2: Figures are percentages of respondents who agree that democracy is capable of solving problems of their society.



Note 3: Figures are percentages of respondents giving a response of at least “6” on a ten-point scale for whether democracy is suitable for their country.



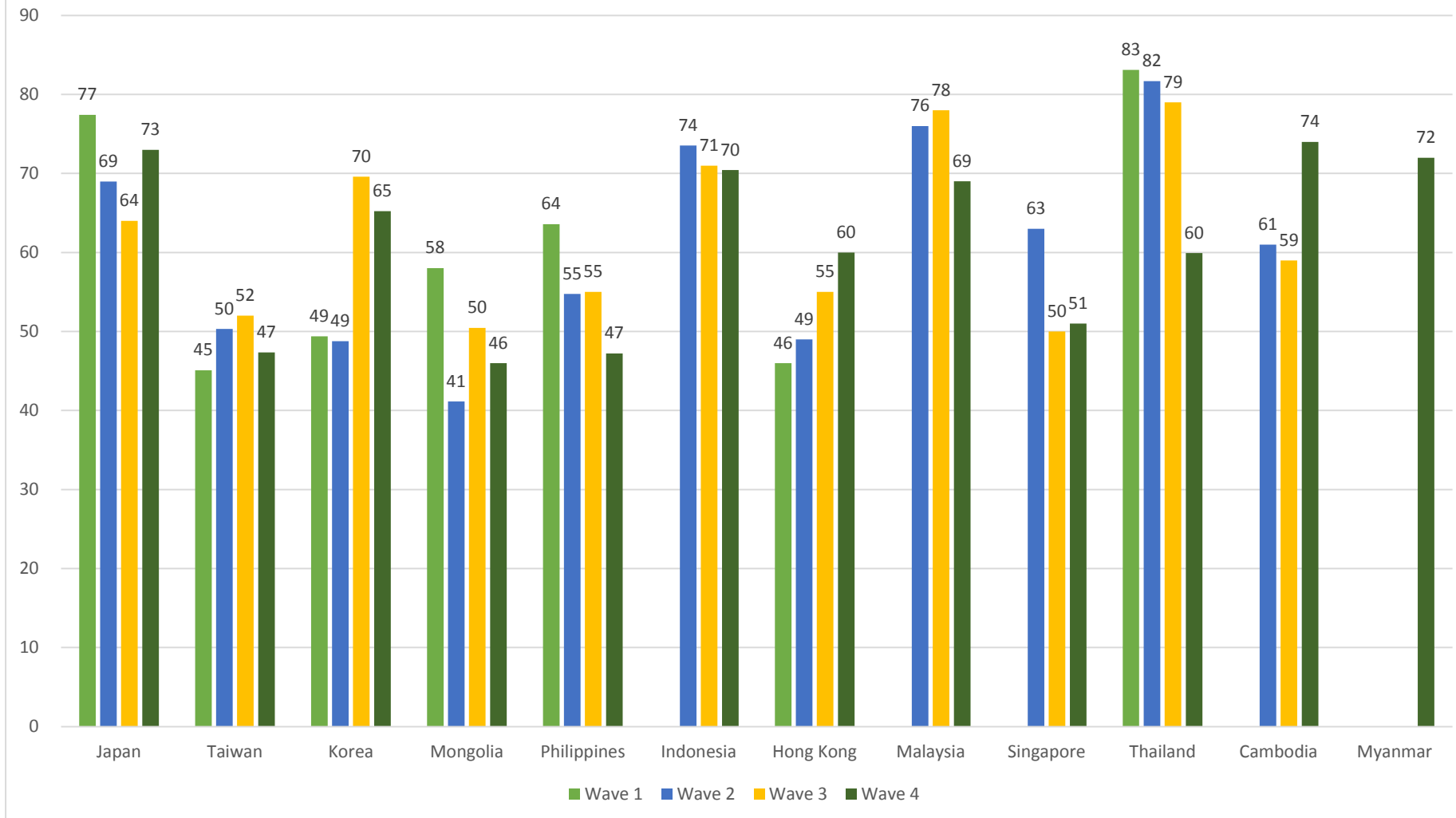
**FIGURE 4: DEMOCRACY MAY HAVE ITS PROBLEMS, BUT IT IS STILL THE BEST FORM OF GOVERNMENT**



Note 4: Percentages who “strongly agree” or “agree”.

**FIGURE 5: DEMOCRACY IS ALWAYS PREFERABLE**

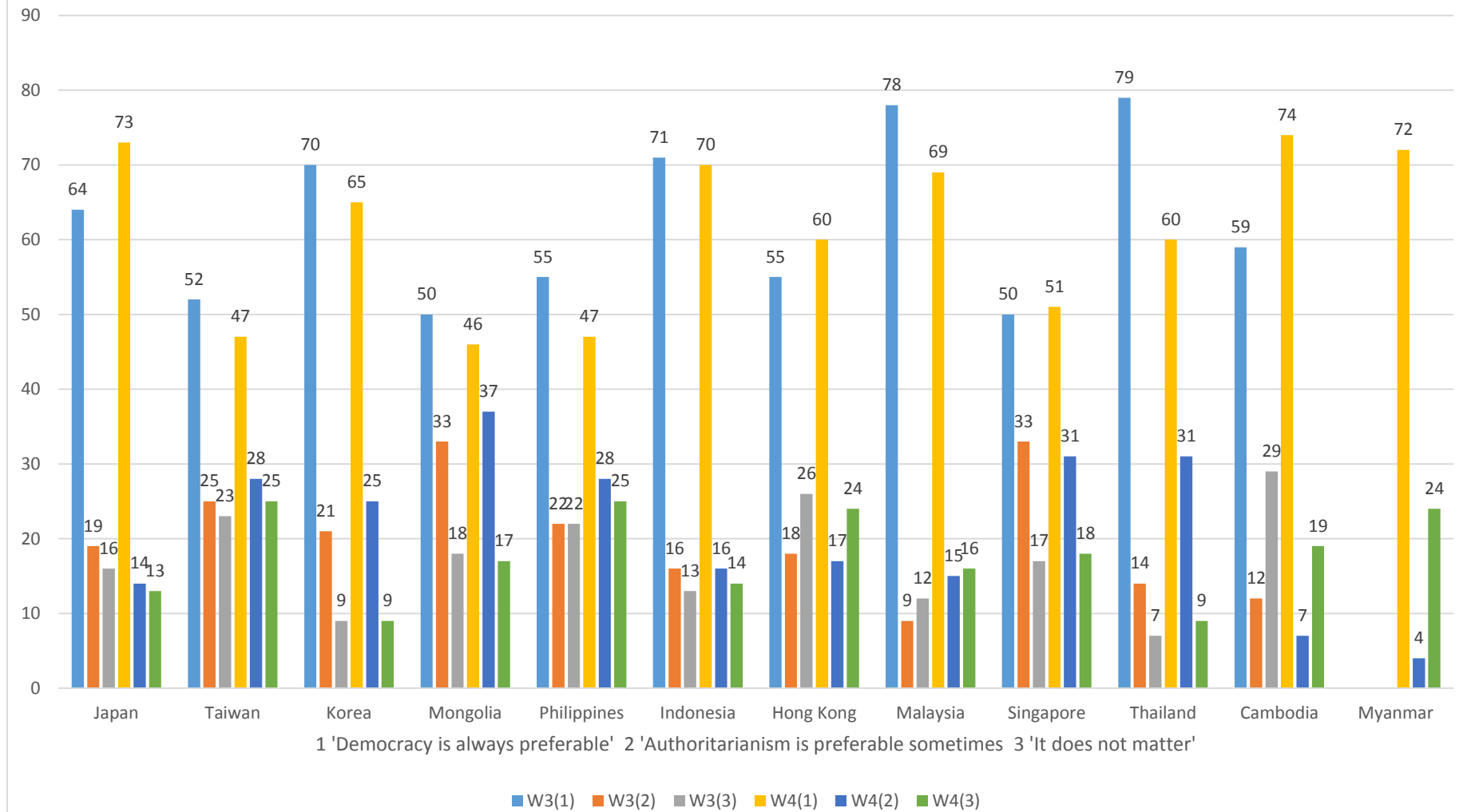
16



Note 5: Percentage of respondents who believe that democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government.

**FIGURE 5.1 PREFERENCE FOR DEMOCRACY VS. AUTHORITARIANISM**

17



Note 5.1: This is the question asking preference for democracy for wave 3 and wave 4.

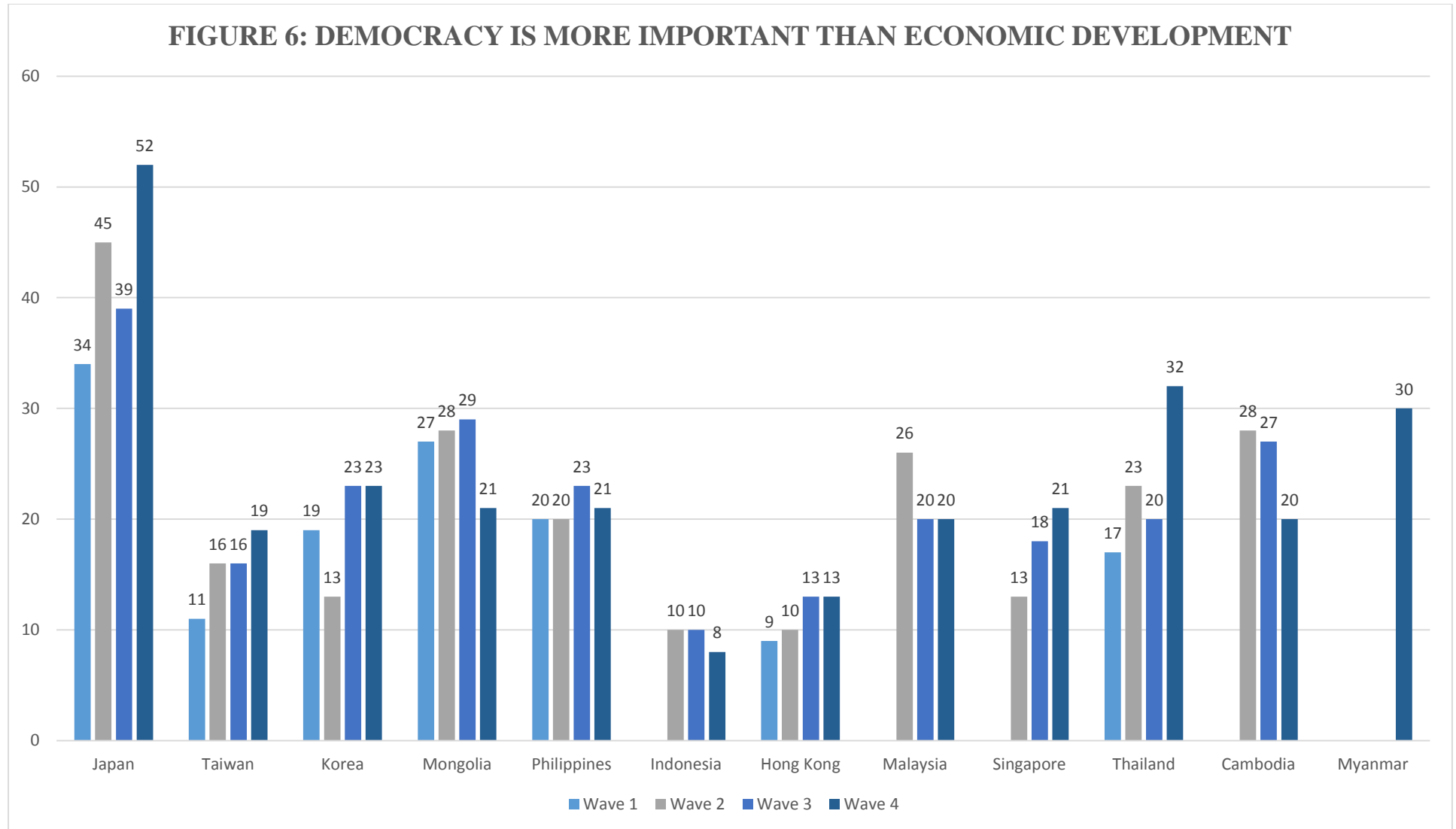
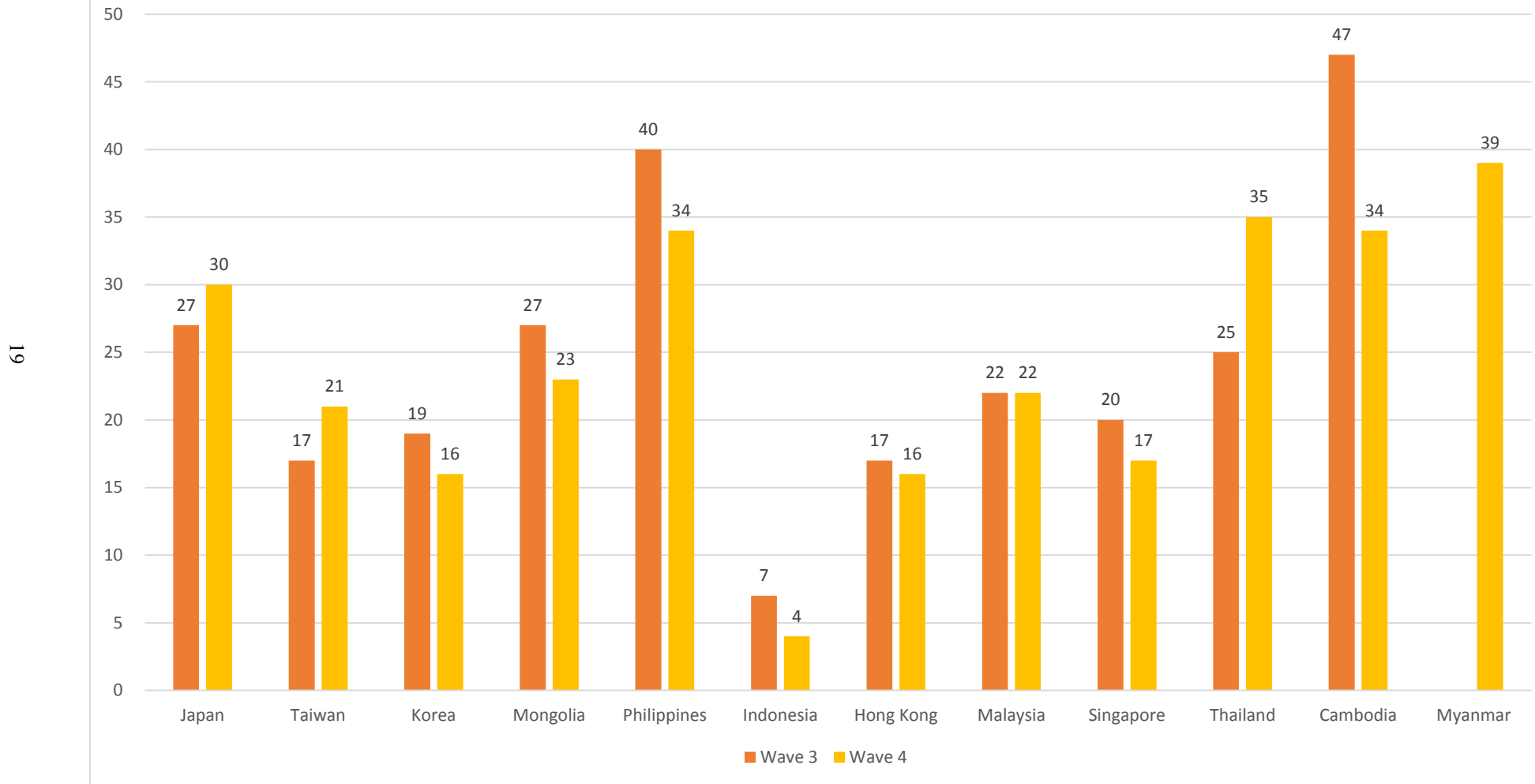


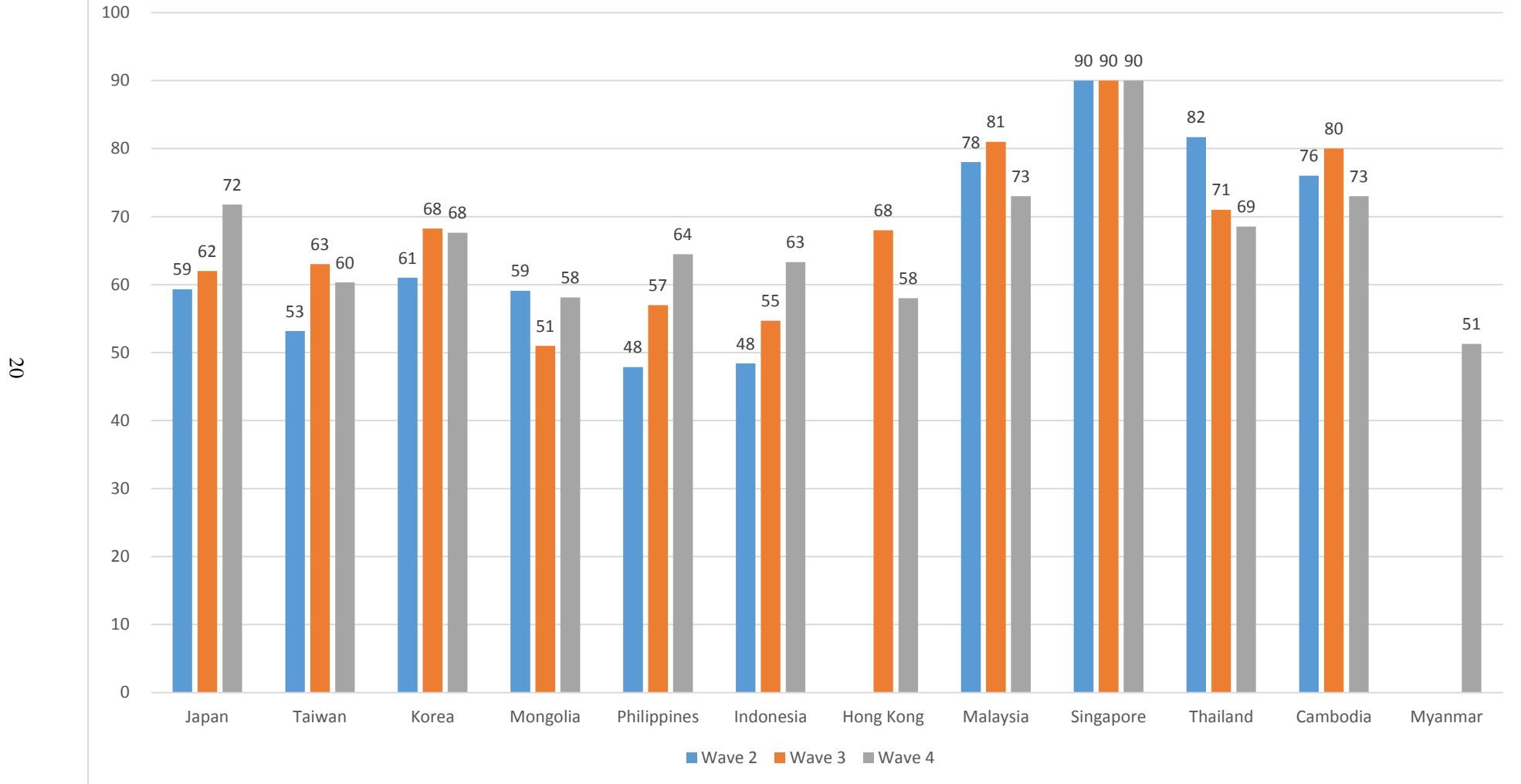
Figure 6: Percentages who think democracy is “somewhat” and definitely more important than economic development.

**FIGURE 7: PROTECTING POLITICAL FREEDOM IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN REDUCING ECONOMIC INEQUALITY**



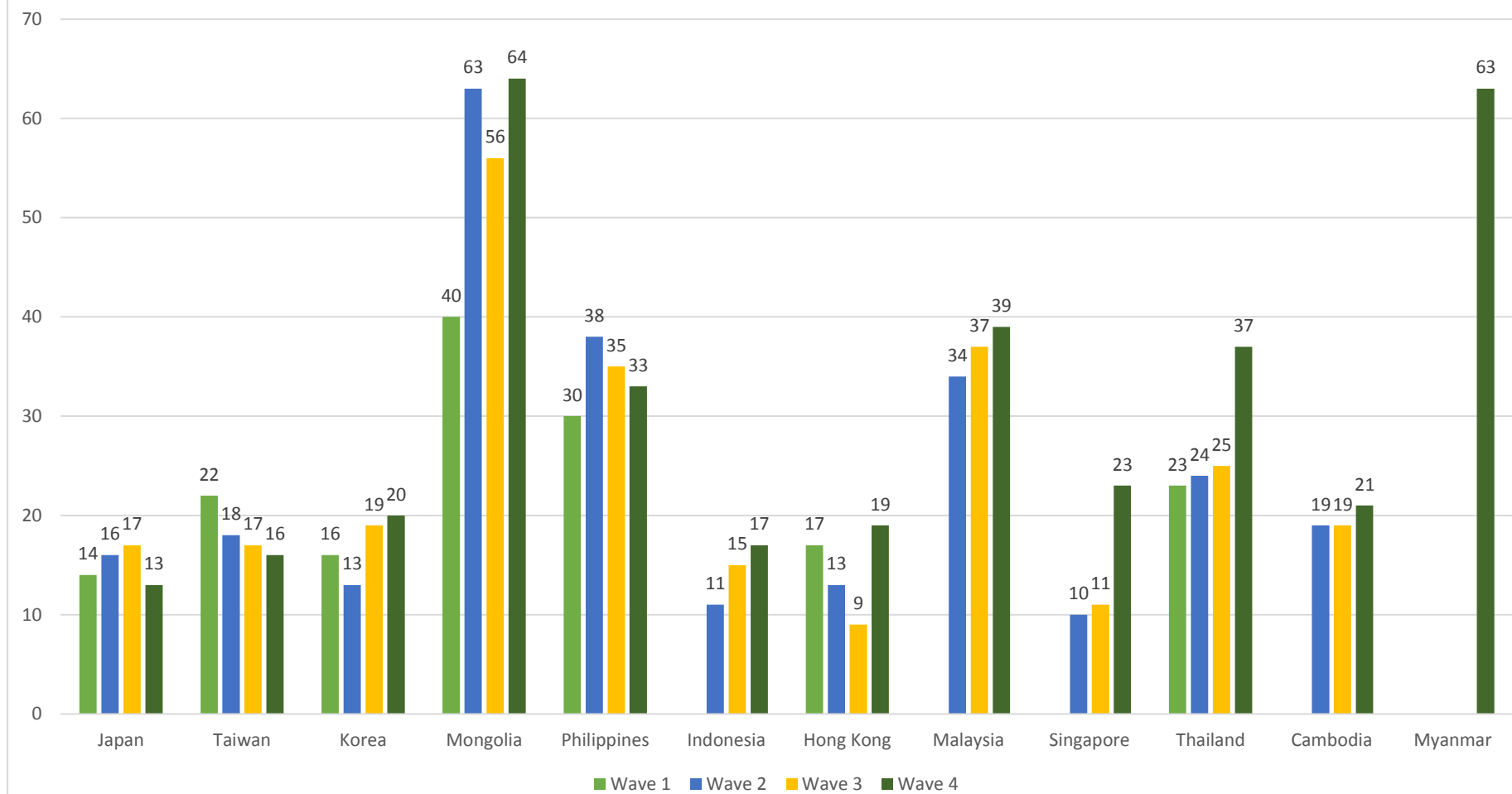
Note 7: Percentages who think protecting political freedom is “somewhat” or “definitely” more important than reducing economic inequality.

**FIGURE 8: HOW MUCH OF A DEMOCRACY IS OUR COUNTRY?**



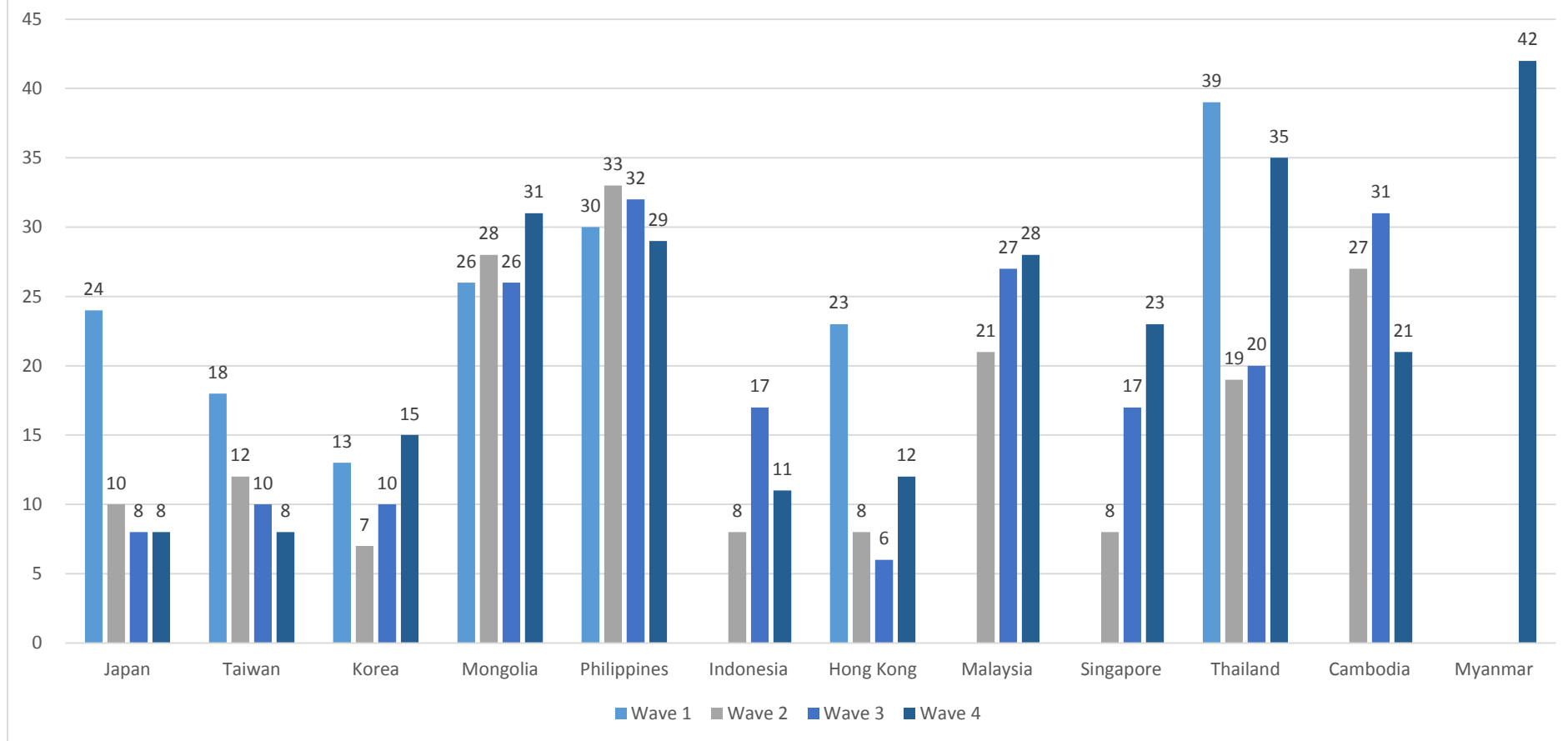
Note 8: Figures are percentage of respondents who view country as a “full democracy” or a “democracy with minor problems”

**FIGURE 9: WE SHOULD GET RID OF PARLIAMENT AND ELECTIONS AND HAVE A STRONGER LEADER DECIDE THINGS**



Note 9: Percentages who “strongly agree” or “agree”.

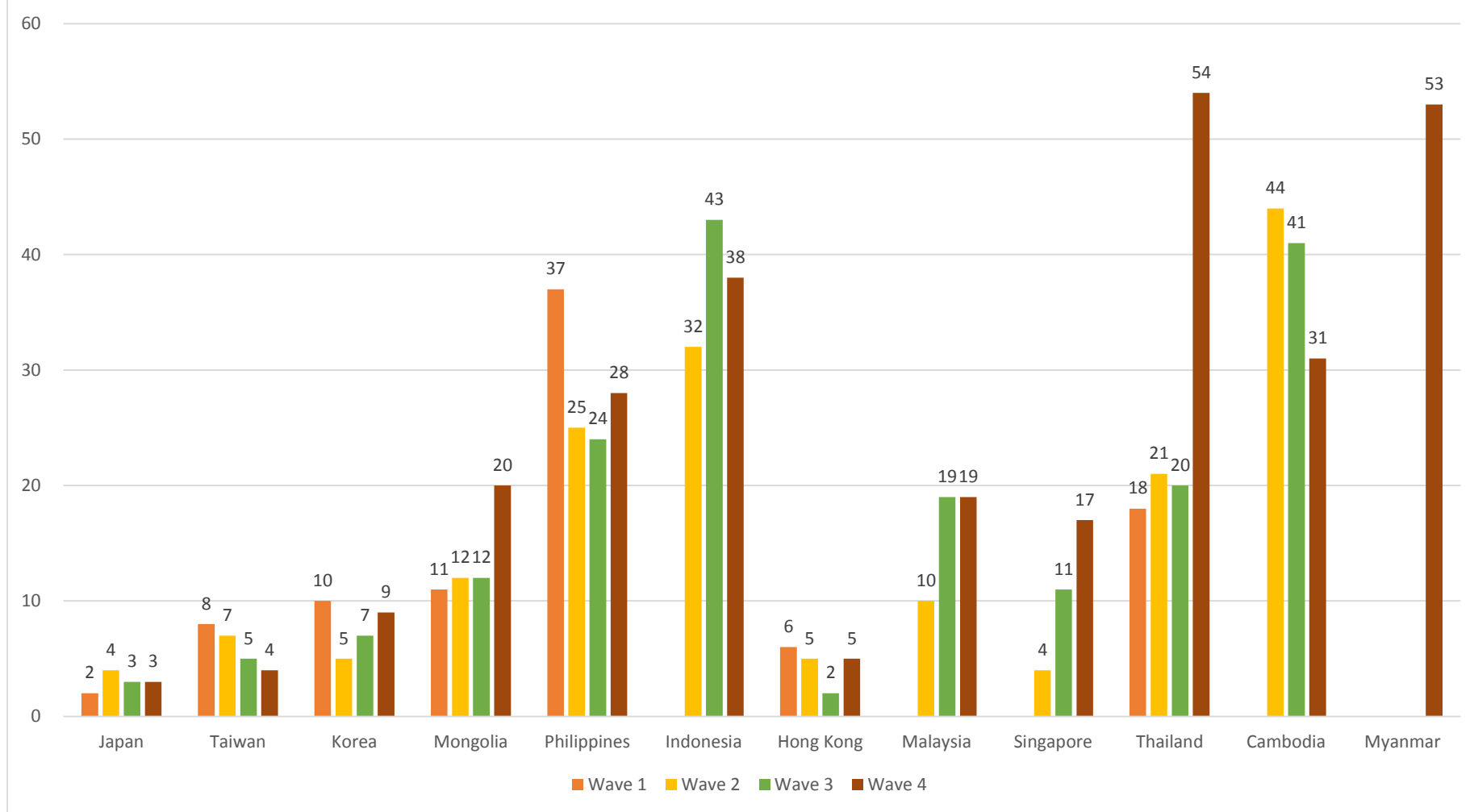
**FIGURE 10: ONLY ONE POLITICAL PARTY SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO STAND FOR ELECTION AND HOLD OFFICE**



Note 10: Percentages who “strongly agree” or agree”; The question in Wave 1 is slightly different. It says “No opposition party should be allowed to compete for power.”



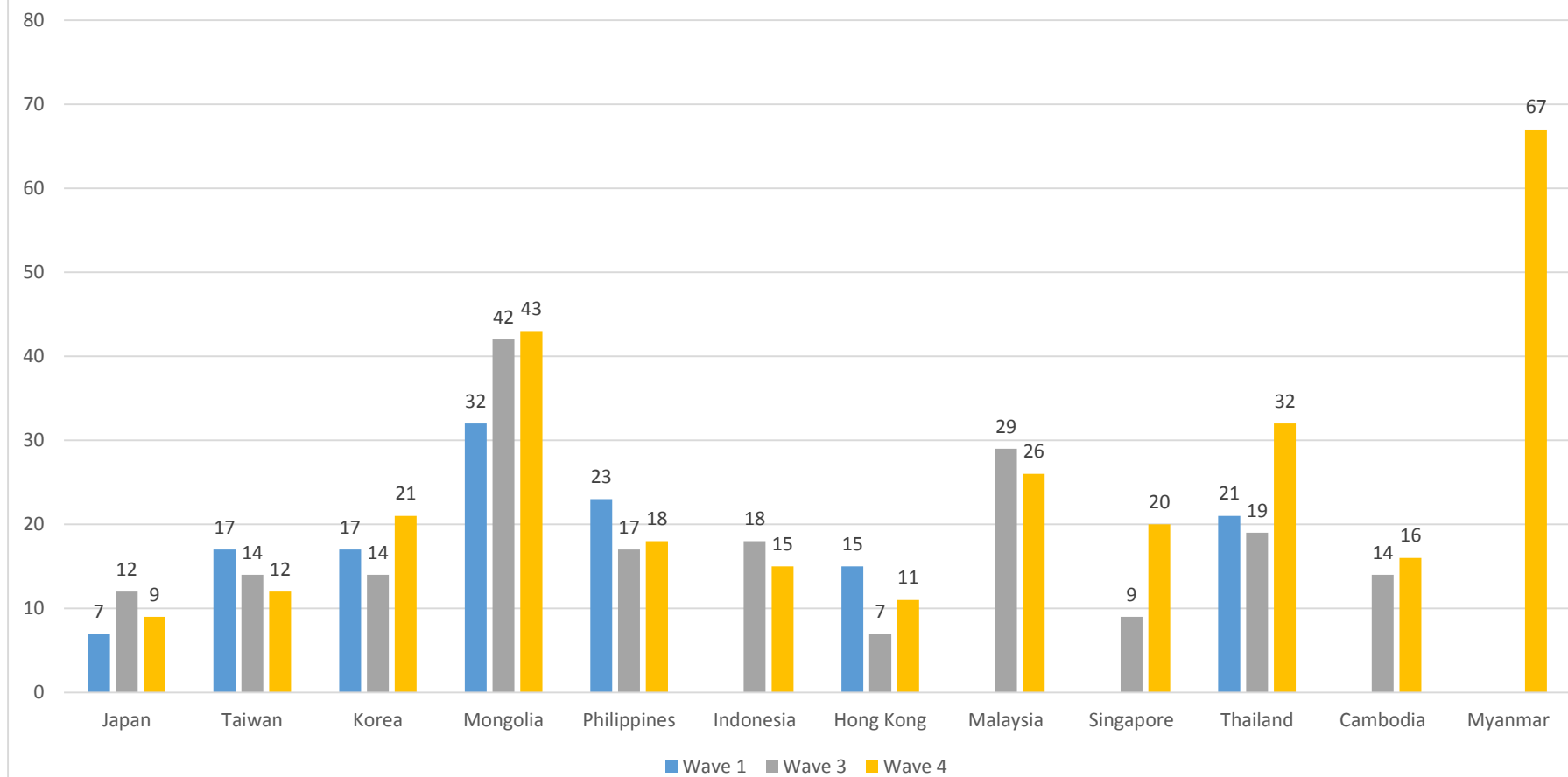
**Figure 11: The Army(Military) Should Come In to Govern the Country**



23

Note 11: Percentages who “strongly agree” or “agree”.

**FIGURE 12: WE SHOULD GET RID OF ELECTIONS AND PARLIAMENTS AND HAVE EXPERTS MAKE DECISIONS ON BEHALF OF THE PEOPLE**



Note 12: Percentages who “strongly agree” or “agree”.

## Appendix: Survey Countries and Dates

	<b>Country</b>	<b>Wave 1</b>	<b>Wave 2</b>	<b>Wave 3</b>	<b>Wave 4</b>
		Period	Period	Period	Period
<b>1</b>	Taiwan	2001.6-7	2006.1-2	2010.1-2	2014.6-10
<b>2</b>	Hong Kong	2001.8-10	2007.9-11	2012.9	2016.2-3
<b>3</b>	Thailand	2001.10-11	2006.4-9	2010.8-12	2014.8-10
<b>4</b>	Philippines	2002.3	2005.11-12	2010.3	2014.7
<b>5</b>	China	2002.3-6	2007.11-2008.12	2011.7-10	2015.7-2016.2
<b>6</b>	Mongolia	2002.10-11	2006.5-6	2010.4-5	2014.6-9
<b>7</b>	Japan	2003.1-2	2007.2-3	2011.12	2016 1-2
<b>8</b>	Korea	2003.2	2006.9	2011.5	2015.10-12
<b>9</b>	Singapore	-	2006.7-11	2010.4-8	2014.10-12
<b>10</b>	Indonesia	-	2006.11	2011.5	2016.1
<b>11</b>	Malaysia	-	2007.7-10	2011.10-11	2014.9-11
<b>12</b>	Cambodia	-	2008.4-5	2012.2-3	2015.10-11
<b>13</b>	Myanmar	-	-	-	2015.1-3

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