Undermining Democracy

Elites, Attitudes, Norms, and Behaviors in Southeast Asia

Amy Freedman

Abstract

Threats to democracy are not new in Southeast Asia. Manipulated elections, press and assembly controls, weakening of public attitudes and values toward democracy, elite stoking of populist illiberalism—Southeast Asia has it all. We saw the fracturing of democratic norms in the 2014 coup in Thailand, Rodrigo Duterte's victory in the Philippines, the rise of extrajudicial killings, the horrific atrocities committed against the Rohingya in Myanmar (Burma), and the rise of religious populism in the Jakarta governor's election and this year's presidential race. How should we understand these regional dynamics? Is populism and the rise of appeals to religion always antithetical to democracy and tolerance? What is the role of elites in stoking or dampening antidemocratic behavior? What institutional features (the nature of elections, the military, unitary vs. federal power, the political party system) might make democracy stronger or weaker and why? And, what is the impact of renewed populism? This article looks at public opinion and attitudes about religion and about democracy across Southeast Asia. The article will discuss how larger global dynamics, underlying structural elements, and public attitudes open the door to political elites who are able to capitalize on malleable attitudes to undermine democracy. Additionally, the article looks at what the implications are for US interests in Asia.

Introduction

There is a loud chorus of voices around the world worrying about the demise of democracy.[1] But, what do we mean when we say that democracy is being undermined or weakened? Are threats to democracy the same across different countries? And, how can we explain the perceived backsliding? From 1998 to 2008, it looked as if a number of countries in Southeast Asia were making a genuine transition to democracy. Literature on transitions from authoritarian rule found that political transitions were often the result of elite behavior.[2] When elites thought they could benefit from political reforms, they were more willing to side with reform-minded leaders or to initiate political reforms themselves. Hard-liners (*standpatters* in Samuel Huntington's terminology) who were able to maintain support from other elites (usually business and military leaders) had less need to make changes or

support efforts at democratization. Southeast Asia fit the transition models. Indonesia and Thailand underwent democratization after the 1997 financial crisis as leaders like Bacharuddin Jusuf "B.J." Habibie and Chuan Leekpai thought that they could benefit from supporting free elections and constitutional revisions (although ultimately they were not able to hold on to power). In Malaysia, Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad was able to outmaneuver his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim's calls for economic (and later political) liberalization by closely maintaining support within his party, the business community, and the judiciary. Thus, in Malaysia there were no democratic reforms in the late 1990s.[3] Many believed that the changes would go only in one direction, toward greater openness, transparency, accountability, and tolerance. In short, that democracy would "stick." This has not been the case. Just like transitions to democracy could be understood as being elite driven, so too, is the undermining of it.

From 2014 to 2018, more countries have seen the undermining and weakening of democracy. Dani Rodrik and Sharun Mukand break down democracy in a useful way, explaining that liberal democracy rests on three sets of rights: property rights, political rights, and civil rights. *Property rights* affect mostly elites, by definition those who own property, businesses, and investments. Property rights protect these citizens and their wealth from state expropriation. *Political rights* are those that enable groups in society to win electoral competition, assume power, and enact their preferred policies. *Civil rights* guarantee equal treatment under the law and equal access to public goods like safety and security, education, markets, and so forth.[4]

In observing threats to democracy, we are most often seeing threats to civil rights and some weakening of political rights. It is rarer to see dismantling of property rights. Property rights have powerful constituents. Property rights directly affect the elite; this group may be small, but they can mobilize their assets, resources, and power to protect their interests. And, if they do not get their say, they can move their money elsewhere, imposing a high penalty on those who cross them. Worryingly, we are seeing some roll back to political rights—rights that protect the masses' ability to participate in the political process. This impacts the ability of groups in society to organize and assert their preferences. The majority may encompass middle class and poorer citizens, but their collective power poses a check on elites—they can threaten uprisings and mass mobilization. The main beneficiaries of civil rights in all societies are minorities, who (by definition) are smaller in number and who may not command great wealth.[5] It is worth noting here that minorities may be religious, ethnic, or linguistic groups, but *minority* can also be anyone who disagrees with the dominant group or who is seeking inclusion in rights regimes. The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, and

queer (LGBTQ) community exemplifies this.[6] In countries around the world, LGBTQ are seeing increased attacks, demonization, and legislation expressly targeting their very persons. It is not surprising that we are seeing significant undermining of civil rights and protections in Southeast Asia for these and other minority communities. While weakening civil rights is problematic and worth decrying in the strongest possible terms, it may not signal the end of other elements of democracy. This article helps explain why we see the patterns we do.

The undermining of democracy is a reflection of elites capitalizing on five interrelated phenomena. Elites have found that it is possible to chip away at democracy because: 1) there is contradictory public support for democratic values, with surveys showing that people simultaneously favor "order" over other issues, while still believing that democracy is a good thing; 2) there are contingent norms of tolerance, in other words, there is public support for protection of civil rights and liberties but not as they apply to all equally; 3) the rise of social media has increased the saliency and potency of hyperbolic rhetoric and fear tactics and has ramped up religious identity and demonization of the "other;" 4) there has been a failure of more moderate and mainstream political elites to strongly make a case for why tolerance and civil rights matter and to back up this rhetoric, and there have been other failures to solve deep underlying problems in society like corruption and failures of governance issues like better provision of public goods; and 5) the international dimension has changed. Under the Trump administration, the United States no longer sees democracy promotion as important, and Southeast Asia seems to be a low priority for the administration. Couple this with the rise of China and Beijing's increased involvement in Southeast Asia, and it means that there is little or no external pressure on Southeast Asian leaders to place a high value on democratic practices and values. These five interrelated factors open the door to antidemocratic elites to make a case for why their "solutions" or message offer a better way to fix society.

If a significant number of people are already weakly supportive of democracy, already have waffling confidence in government (versus other institutions like the military or religious organizations), and have low levels of support for minorities in their communities and country, it makes it easier to mobilize support for antidemocratic measures and leaders. And, if solving really deep, intractable problems like corruption and provision of public goods like better infrastructure, schools, health care, and economic growth has not benefited more people in noticeable ways, it contributes to cynicism, distrust, and the likelihood that people may support leaders who promise simple but robust solutions—often ones that involve demonizing or denigrating those who are perceived as part of the problem. So, Duterte's war on drugs has targeted the poorest and most marginalized in Philip-

pine society, blaming them for crime and insecurity. In Indonesia, populist politicians and their supporters increasingly target religious and ethnic minorities—like Ahmadiyya,[7] Christian, Chinese, LGBTQ and others—labeling them as outsiders who should not have equal rights and protections and who should not be allowed to hold elected office. In Myanmar, despite the political reforms of the past few years, both state and nonstate actors have carried out horrific violence against the Muslim Rohingya, and political leaders have steadfastly denied it and have prevented a full accounting of the atrocities. In Thailand, elites within the military and monarchy could not win power through elections and so resorted to destroying all democratic elements of the political system, despite high levels of public support of democracy.

Table 1. Freedom House Rankings

	1999	2003	2008	2013	2017	2018	
Indonesia	3.5 Partly Free	3.5 Partly Free	2.5 Free	2.5 Free	3.0 Partly Free	3.0 Partly Free	⇩
Malaysia	5.0 Partly Free	5.0 Partly Free	4.0 Partly Free	4.0 Partly Free	4.0 Partly Free	4.0 Partly Free	⇧
Thailand	2.5 Free	2.5 Free	5.0 Partly Free	4.0 Partly Free	5.5 Not Free	6.0 Not Free	⇩
Philippines	2.5 Free	2.5 Free	3.5 Partly Free	3.0 Partly Free	3.0 Partly Free	3.0 Partly Free	⇩
Myanmar	7.0 Not Free	7.0 Not Free	7.0 Not Free	5.5 Not Free	5.0 Partly Free	5.0 Partly Free	⇩

1 is the best, 7 is the worst. 1–2.5 ranked "free," 3–5 ranked "partly free," and 5.5–7 ranked "not free." Freedom House, "Freedom in the World Reports 1999–2017, https://freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world.

Table 1 reflects the last 10 years of Freedom House's "Freedom in the World" rankings. Countries can be designated as "free," "partly free," or "not free." The scale goes from 7, the least free, to 1 the most free, and countries are evaluated on about 30 metrics ranging from political rights in elections, rule of law elements, civil rights, as well as economic and social rights and freedoms. The arrows in the last column reflect current trends in each country. Based on recent developments, all countries except Malaysia are trending downward; conditions are getting worse, not better. Why?

Backsliding in Southeast Asia

The explanation for this situation varies to some extent from country to country, but there are certain familiar threads in the case studies.

Thailand

Thailand suffered a military coup in 2014 and instead of a reasonably quick return to civilian rule, the military has held on to power and has engaged in widespread efforts to stamp out any overt (including postings on social media) signs of dissent, clamping down on independent media, rights of peaceful assembly, criticism from intellectuals, student activism, and so forth. Those detained have been questioned in military camps and threatened with "attitude adjustment." Political detentions were ramped up and criticism of the military or the royal family were dealt with harshly. From 2014 to 2019, elections were scheduled and then cancelled. In 2016, the government held a referendum on a draft of a new constitution. Authorities rigidly controlled voting, and the new constitution weakened the role of political parties and the role of elected officials more generally and strengthened the power of unelected institutions like the military and monarchy.[8] Although Thailand held parliamentary elections in March 2019, it has not resulted in a return to democracy. No party won a clear majority, and despite the opposition Pheu Thai Party winning the most seats in the lower house, the upper house remains controlled by the military through its appointed seats. The combined power of the upper house and promilitary parties in the lower house resulted in the selection of retired general Prayuth Chan-ocha, the man who led the military coup in Thailand five years ago, as the country's civilian prime minister, a position he held since the coup anyway.[9]

Philippines

In the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte won the 2016 presidential election (with only 39 percent of the vote). While overt dismantling of institutions that provide for checks and balances, like freedom of the press and the role of the legislature, has not occurred, there are troubling indicators. Senator Leila de Lima, an outspoken critic of the president, was arrested. Many believe her arrest was intended to silence her. Additionally, the president has relentlessly attacked the media for negative coverage, exacerbating an already dangerous environment for journalists in the country. Two reporters were killed in 2017. Despite a high degree of freedom (on paper) for nongovernmental organizations and activist organizations, President Duterte has issued public threats against activists who oppose his policies, and in December 2017, 10 activists were killed—nine by police or military personnel. The most critical violation of rights has been the extrajudicial detention, torture, and killing of those suspected of drug offenses. Since the 2016 election, more than 12,000 people have been killed. Duterte publically encourages

these actions, and few of the perpetrators of these extralegal killings have been charged or convicted.[10]

Photo courtesy Philippine Presidential Communications Operations Office

Figure 1. Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte talks with Myanmar's state counselor Aung San Suu Kyi during his state visit to Myanmar on 20 March 2017.

Myanmar

After much heralded elections in Myanmar in 2015, the events of the past two years have demonstrated that competitive elections are hardly a bulwark against horrific violations of human rights. A military campaign against the Muslim Rohingya minority has included mass rape, murder, and wholesale destruction of villages and has caused more than 650,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh. In 2015, the National League for Democracy (NLD), a civilian party, won 135 of the 168 elected seats in the upper house and 255 of the 330 elected seats in the lower house. The president, Htin Kyaw is a NLD member, as is Aung San Suu Kyi who is state counselor (a position akin to a prime minister); yet, neither of these leaders said nor did much to reign in the violent attacks against the Rohingya nor even to criticize the military and police for aiding and abetting the atrocities. In addition to these horrors, press freedoms, which had increased through 2015, have worsened. Journalists face harassment, violence, and arrest. Online activities and academic freedoms are curtailed. Rights advocates are also at risk. U Ko Ni, a Muslim

lawyer and democracy activist, was killed in January 2017. Police do little in response to threats from hard-line nationalists against rights activists.[11]

Indonesia

Indonesia has long been a (relatively) bright spot in Southeast Asia. After the fall of President Suharto in 1998, the country made a surprising transition to democracy. From 2000 to 2016, Indonesian leaders took many important steps to consolidate the political reforms: allowing for local elections and local control, creating an anticorruption agency, and allowing for a wide range of political and social freedoms. Despite positive changes, troubling elements persisted. Ethnic and religious minorities were targeted for violence while hard-line Islamist groups were tolerated and have more recently been given wider latitude for carrying out rallies, demonstrations, and campaigns against perceived enemies. Over the past two years, these two troubling elements in Indonesia have grown: discrimination and violence against minorities has escalated, and hard-line groups have seen their popularity, influence, and room to maneuver grow. These factors came together in the Jakarta governor's election of 2017. Sitting governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (known as Ahok), a Christian and Chinese politician was accused of blasphemy against Islam during a campaign appearance in September 2016. Despite this, he led in the first round of voting in February 2017. Hard-line Islamist groups like the Front Pembela Islam (FPI, Islam Defenders Front) ramped up rallies and campaign activities against Ahok and pressured the courts to file criminal charges against him. Ahok lost the final April election and was then sentenced to two years in prison for the blasphemy charges. Since then, other political candidates and outspoken activists have been charged with blasphemy. The courts seem unwilling to dismiss these kinds of charges and are increasingly seen as bowing to hard-line pressure. During the 2019 presidential election, the forces of religious intolerance and religious nationalism seemed to have become mainstream. While the incumbent, Pres. Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, won reelection, he chose Islamic hard-liner Ma'ruf Amin as his running mate. This may have given Jokowi cover against charges that he is somehow not pro-Islam enough, but it also normalized and legitimized intolerant rhetoric, discourse, and behavior.[12]

Malaysia

Malaysia is the one positive example in the region of an improved political climate for democracy. After ruling Malaysia since independence, the United Malays Nasional Organization (UMNO), and its coalition partners in the Barison Nasional (BN), lost in the general elections of 2018. An on-going corruption

scandal had plagued UMNO prime minister Najib Razak, and the Pakatan Harapan (PH) opposition coalition led by Mahathir bin Mohamad (who had previously served in numerous positions, including prime minister, in earlier UMNO governments) finally beat the ruling coalition. Freedom House had consistently rated Malaysia's political system under UMNO rule as "partly free." The government had held regular and competitive elections, but these elections were highly distorted to favor the ruling party. Electoral districts were malapportioned and gerrymandered to favor rural and ethnic Malay voters, and a series of laws restricted the media, political speech, gatherings, and other civil and political rights. Since 2008, opposition parties had come close to knocking the BN out of power, but despite winning a majority of votes, they could not topple UMNO rule. Mahathir served as head of UMNO and prime minister from 1981–2003, presiding over both an economic boom and the crash of 1997. Additionally, he helped implement many of Malaysia's antidemocratic laws and practices. Despite this, over the past few years Mahathir has become a vocal critic of Najib Razak. Commentating as an elder statesman, he lambasted Najib for his suspected involvement in the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal and his refusal to step down.[13] Mahathir left UMNO and took the reins of the opposition PH. They won the 2018 election, and at age 93 Mahathir reassumed the role of prime minister. He pardoned his former deputy prime minister and outspoken UMNO critic, Anwar Ibrahim, who then ran in a by-election and won a seat in parliament. The PH took some early steps to roll back some of the most antidemocratic measures, such as the recent "fake news" law. However, many of the needed reforms have stalled in the Senate, which the UMNO still controls.[14]

Southeast Asia has never been a bastion of good governance and democracy. But, how can we explain what we are seeing now? Malaysia has taken a significant step toward greater democracy, but other countries have moved in the opposite direction. What's driving the change? Is it coming from larger structural issues? From changes in attitudes and values (public opinion)? Are changes coming from above (from elites) or below (from genuine changes in mass attitudes)?

Structural Issues

Have there been larger changes to the political, regional, economic, or international order that help explain what we are seeing? We know that the underlying political systems in Southeast Asia suffer from significant weaknesses: elections are heavily influenced by money and patronage, campaigns are not waged freely and fairly, and press freedoms are questionable (there is a great deal of variation across Southeast Asia in terms of press freedoms). Since the 2014 coup, Thailand has little to no press freedom. The government has tightly muzzled Malaysia's

press, but there has been a sliver of online activity that tries to act as a check on government-sponsored or approved information. Indonesia and the Philippines have relatively free press climate, but in the Philippines there is now a significant amount of risk attached to criticizing Duterte. Observers once viewed the rise of social media as an asset to democracy; however, the opposite appears to be true in many cases. On Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms for election campaigning, misinformation is inflating negative and accusatory behavior that in the past might have had only minor influence. We know from the US, French, Brazilian, and other relatively recent elections that populists and nativists are more likely to read and repost inflammatory articles, and this is playing a role all over the world in increasing support for autocrats.[15] There is good information that this dynamic was at work in the Philippine election, and in Indonesia. Jokowi was targeted by false claims and the government is forced to play a game of cat-and-mouse monitoring and shutting down of fake news sites and provocative material.[16] Human Rights Watch officials and others say that this is barely scratching the surface of what is out there. Interestingly, the region's economy is doing relatively well.

Table 2. Economic Growth, GDP growth per year

	1998	2003	2008	2013	2017
Indonesia	-13%	4.8%	7.4%	6.0%	5.2%
Malaysia	-7.4%	5.8%	4.8%	4.7%	4.5%
Thailand	-7.6%	7.2%	1.7%	2.7%	3.7%
Philippines	-0.6%	5.0%	4.2%	7.1%	6.6%
Singapore	-2.2%	4.4%	1.8%	5.0%	2.5%

Knoema, Virginia. https://knoema.com/atlas/Indonesia/Real-GDP-growth. Site used for all countries.

This is an interesting and counterintuitive finding. Researchers seldom make an argument that links economic growth with populism. Usually, the connection is that populist candidates capitalize on a weak economy to convince people that only they can provide economic gains and greater financial security. In Southeast Asia, economic growth is fine, yet to win elections populist candidates are nonetheless capitalizing on insecurity (writ large) and fear.

Are there regional or global factors that are playing a role in domestic politics? Perhaps, three interrelated phenomena may be important to understand: changes in the United States; the growth of Chinese power, and local contagion. The election of Pres. Donald Trump in the United States has given cover to autocrats around the world. Not only has Trump frequently refrained from criticizing dictators like Putin, and Kim Jung-Un, his criticism of the press as the "enemy of the people" and his public support of using violence and the criminal justice system against his enemies (real and perceived) has given license to others around the

world to do the same or to feel emboldened to do more of what was already happening in more vigorous and systemic ways.[17] Second, with the United States retreating from global commitments and agreements (undercutting the World Trade Organization, exiting the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), renegotiating North American Free Trade Agreement, etc.), countries are left unsure of US partnerships and commitments to economic and security frameworks. China has been happy to fill this void. And, China is rarely concerned with human rights violations or curtailment of political rights and liberties. Third, as more countries in the region undermine democratic norms and practices, the easier it is for others to do the same. Indonesia used to be the leader advocating for democracy and human rights within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—the Bali Forum on Human Rights in 2008 is an example of this—but Jokowi's focus on domestic issues over regional and international politics has put this on a back burner. In 2008, norms were shifting, and it seemed that public demands and regional and international pressure were moving in the same direction toward greater rights and liberties. Now, the opposite is true—regional and international norms have shifted again and there is little or no pressure on countries to protect and promote rights and liberties within their borders.

Public Opinion in Southeast Asia

A number of surveys have been conducted in the region that give us a good deal of information about public attitudes and values relating to democracy. The information gathered is mixed. The results of the World Values Surveys and separate surveys done in Indonesia (not done in Wave 6), Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia demonstrate that, although respondents say they favor democracy, public opinion is lukewarm on values that undergird democracy. Perhaps the best way to summarize findings from the surveys is to say that the findings are often contradictory (see table 3). For example, people across several countries report high levels of support for democracy and respond that democracy is the best way to organize politics. Yet, there are also high levels of support for having a strong leader who does not need to bother with elections and a parliamentary check on their power. And, large numbers of people surveyed prioritize "maintaining order" over giving people more say in government, and both of these answers dwarf "maintaining freedom of speech" as a priority.

Table 3. World Values Surveys, Wave 5 (2006) & Wave 6 (2012)

Which priority is most important to you? v. 62 (responses are from 2012, except for Indonesia, which are from 2006)				
	Philippines	**Thailand**	**Malaysia**	**Indonesia**
Maintaining order in the nation	42.2	31.7	59.1	60.4
Giving people more say in important government decisions	21.8	23.0	17.7	9.0
Fighting rising prices	27.0	33.0	19.0	21.4
Freedom of speech	8.9	9.0	4.2	6.4
No answer	0.1	3.3	0	2.8

I am going to name a number of organizations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them: is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence or none at all? The government (in your nation's capital) V.115: Wave 5 & Wave 6						
	Philippines	**Thailand (2006)**	**Thailand (2012)**	**Malaysia (2006)**	**Malaysia (2012)**	**Indonesia (2006)**
A great deal	12.4	5.7	15.8	29.7	19.0	10.8
Quite a lot	45.3	32.8	35.3	45.7	56.1	43.0
Not very much	34.4	53.5	28.1	21.3	19.7	36.2
None at all	7.7	7.9	15.9	3.3	5.0	6.1
No answer	0.2	0.1	0.6	0	0.1	1.4
Don't know	0	0	4.3	0	0.1	2.5

I'm going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing this country: Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with elections or answer to a parliament: V127: Wave 5 & Wave 6							
	Philippines (2001)	**Philippines (2012/13)**	**Thailand (2006)**	**Thailand (2012/13)**	**Malaysia (2006)**	**Malaysia (2012/13)**	**Indonesia (2006)**
Very good	16.9	19.2	16.1	8.2	17.5	15.6	3.8
Fairly good	44.9	39.9	54.4	22.5	42.5	34.7	17.4
Bad	30.0	20.3	26.3	40.6	26.3	32.5	50.4
Very bad	7.1	19.4	2.8	28.4	13.6	17.2	17.8
No answer	1.1	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.1	0	0.3
Don't know	0	1	0.1	0	0	0	10.3

I'm going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing this country: having a democratic political system:

V130: Wave 5 & Wave 6

	Philippines (2001)	Philippines (2012)	Thailand (2006)	Thailand (2012)	Malaysia (2006)	Malaysia (2012)	Indonesia (2006)
Very good	27.9	33.9	44.9	68.3	43.5	47.8	54.5
Fairly good	53.8	40.9	47.3	23.5	48.1	44.9	36.4
Bad	15.3	17.5	6.8	5.5	6.6	5.5	2.1
Very bad	2.2	6.5	0.5	2.3	1.7	1.8	0.9
No answer	0.8	0.1	0.4	0.4	0.1	0	1.5
Don't know	0	1.1	0	0	0	0	4.6

Many things are desirable, but not all of them are essential characteristics of democracy. Please tell me for each of the following things how essential you think it is as a characteristic of democracy. Use this scale where 1 means "not at all an essential characteristic of democracy" and 10 means it definitely is "an essential characteristic of democracy": Civil rights protect people from state oppression:

V136

	Philippines	Thailand (2006)	Thailand (2012)	Malaysia (2006)	Malaysia (2012)	Indonesia (2006)
1 – Not an essential characteristic of democracy	10	5.1	2.8	2.2	3.5	1.9
2	3.6	2.9	2.5	2.5	2.9	0.7
3	3.7	4.2	3.8	3.3	3.3	0.6
4	4.8	6.6	4.7	5.3	4.3	0.9
5	13.6	17.5	11.9	20.8	7.7	3.5
6	8.1	18.3	8.1	15.2	8.8	4.0
7	6.4	16.3	11.4	18.1	9.6	6.1
8	8.4	13.3	14.3	14.7	14.4	10.6
9	7.0	8.5	13.5	7.1	15.9	13.1
10 – An essential characteristic of democracy	34.2	6.6	25	10.7	29.6	53.5
No answer	0.2	0.7	2.0	0.1	0	5.1

How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically? On this scale where 1 means it is "not at all important" and 10 means "absolutely important" what position would you choose? V140, Wave 6 (2012)			
	Philippines	**Thailand**	**Malaysia**
1 – Not at all important	5.0	0.3	0.2
2	0.7	0.3	0.1
3	0.6	0.6	0.2
4	2.5	1.6	0.8
5	9.6	7.4	3.6
6	7.0	10.0	8.6
7	7.3	8.9	8.8
8	9.9	11.8	19.8
9	7.5	10.1	12.2
10 – Absolutely important	49.4	47.0	45.8
No answer	0.5	2.0	0

A similar question was asked in the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) 2017 survey in Indonesia. Respondents were asked if democracy was the best form of government for Indonesia: 79.8 percent agreed that democracy was the best form of government, 4.7 percent disagreed, and 15.5 percent neither agreed nor disagreed.[18]

The ISEAS survey results from Indonesia provide us with additional information on public opinion. When asked what the most important issues/problems facing Indonesia are, answers were as follows: 38.8 percent of respondents chose "corruption," 30.7 percent "economic management and growth," 24.6 percent "infrastructure and transportation," 20.9 percent "price stability," followed by poverty, social welfare, education, unemployment, then "crime, law enforcement, and security" at just 16 percent, followed only by "health care" at 9.53 percent.[19] While this question does not give respondents specific political concerns as answer choices, it is notable that security and law enforcement is the second to the bottom of people's concerns. Often, populism plays on insecurity and uses threats of crime, instability, or economic problems like unemployment; yet, in this survey, those issues rank low on people's priorities. While Duterte has used crime and insecurity as his selling point and justification for antidemocratic measures, in Indonesia the same strategy might not work.

The ISEAS survey also asks people their views on the role of Islam, and here we see important answers. Forty-nine percent of people thought that the government should prioritize Islam over other religions, 37 percent thought that Islamic

religious leaders should play a very important role in politics, 41 percent that that regions should be allowed to implement sharia law at the local level, 39 percent thought that sharia law should be implemented throughout Indonesia, 63 percent thought that blasphemy against Islam should be punished more severely, 58 percent thought that when voting in elections it was important to choose a Muslim leader, and 36 percent responded that Islam should be Indonesia's only official religion.[20] These responses provide a snapshot of a way that an antidemocratic leader could maximize a divisive issue. In playing up Islamic values, identity, and fear of violations of this identity and value system, a politician can come to power democratically and then chip away at, or completely destroy, rights and protections for those outside this majority.

Not only are Islamic values a high priority, there is still a pervasive sense that Chinese Indonesians are outsiders and that they have too much economic power. Sixty-two percent of respondents held such views, and 41.9 percent believe that Chinese also have excessive influence in politics. Although the World Values Survey overwhelmingly shows that Indonesians say they support civil rights, they also have negative views of minorities.[21]

Across the region we see relatively supportive attitudes about democracy yet significant curtailing of democratic rights and procedures. How can we explain this disconnect? What is the driver? There are several possible answers: it could be that democracy means different things to different people. If democracy is solely about competitive elections and nominally open or free competition of ideas within society and from the media, then by that more limited definition, democracy is holding on. Yet, high degrees of civil rights and liberties, and a wide level of acceptance of these rights for others (minority religious or ethnic groups, or those further outside the mainstream like LGBTQ groups) may be either less important or in fact not at all included in what many people think of as part and parcel of democracy. Jeremy Menchik discusses this in his work on tolerance without liberalism. *Liberalism* can be understood economically as a system of free markets and a bundle of civil, social, and religious rights accorded to all equally. Liberalism as equal rights and treatment is not at the heart of Indonesia's democracy.[22] This is a highly circumscribed notion of tolerance. Another answer is an institutionalist one; that the nature of political institutions is shaping and constraining behavior. So, for example, Jokowi may genuinely be a reform-minded leader, but because of his need to maintain support in parliament for his agenda and to keep control over his government, he has been forced to tone down his initial pledge of promoting tolerance and protecting civil rights. Moreover, his need to win reelection led him to choose a conservative Islamist as his running mate.[23] Perhaps this national phenomenon is simply a scaling up of local dynam-

ics that have been under way for more than 10 years. Michael Buehler has shown that local politicians have chosen to adopt sharia laws not because (or not just because) they are pious Muslims but because it enables them access to the *zakat* (religious tithing) to benefit from patronage networks that help them reward supporters and maintain their positions of power.[24] Greater piety and favoring of Islam is more an instrument to maintain support than an end unto itself.

In this view, politicians are trying to capitalize on growing religiosity to maintain political power. In Indonesia there is intrinsic support for Islam having a place in the public sphere. But, people also say they value democracy and civil rights. So, politicians are using this to shape and carry out their campaign. Yes, there are vigorous and mostly free and fair elections in Indonesia, but candidates are using competitive elections simultaneously with increased use of blasphemy laws to stifle and delegitimize some candidates running for office. Underlying public opinion about the importance of Islam is making this a viable electoral strategy, but it is ultimately the elites using this strategy who I believe are the drivers of this dynamic. If we look at leaders since the fall of Suharto, moderate voices like Abdurrahman Wahid—who served as president from 1999 to 2001 and is popularly known as Gus Dur—were important at a moment when sectarian violence was high and there was concern that democracy would not stick. So, his message about the compatibility of Islam and democracy and tolerance was critical. He had credibility as an Islamic leader (of Nahdlatul Ulama, [NU]) and critic of Suharto. Former president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–2014)—commonly referred to by his initials, SBY—and Jokowi in his first election and term in office had more mixed records. Both talked about the importance of tolerance and diversity in Indonesia, but both failed to take significant action to reign in groups like FPI and to speak forcefully when violence was used against unpopular minorities like the Ahmadiyya. Jokowi moved even further away from a tolerant, pluralist position when he selected Ma'ruf Amin as his running mate. For many people, this signaled his acceptance of the conservative Islamist agenda and an acknowledgment that tolerance and a broad array of civil rights for all in Indonesia continues to be a lower priority than winning an electoral victory.

It matters who is running for office, who leaders surround themselves with, and what they choose to do after taking office. Elites who find that they can gain power by playing on underlying attitudes such as a desire for order, a mistrust of others, and group affiliation that views minorities as less than and unequal to the majority, find that it is possible to make political changes detrimental to democracy. So, Duterte empowers the police to engage in extrajudicial killings and makes the Philippines even more dangerous for journalists. Duterte made no secret of his desire to shut down critics or his disdain for following the rule of law. While the

Philippines has been a dangerous place for journalists and for marginal groups in society for a long time, it has become even more so under the current regime.

Thailand's situation also reflects a similar but more blatant phenomenon. Elites in the military and within the bureaucracy of the monarchy had hoped they could hold power through nominally democratic means. However, in relatively fair elections from 2001 to 2006, and again in 2011 Thaksin Shinawatra and then his sister Yingluck Shinawatra won. Support for the Shinawatras threatened and undermined the more traditional elite alliance of bureaucrats, the military, and the monarchy. Unable to win power through elections, judicial activism, or mass protest activity, the military took matters into its own hands in 2014 and carried out a coup. The aftermath of this coup was a far more draconian curtailing of political and civil rights than at any time in Thailand since the 1970s. There is nothing in the World Values Survey data that indicates lower levels of support for democracy. If anything, the opposite is true; prior to the coup there were higher levels of support for democracy in Thailand than in neighboring countries and lower levels of support for "order" as the highest priority in the country. Only through brute force and now the rewriting of the political rules of the game (the new constitution) have antidemocratic elites been able to hold on to power.

In Myanmar, political elites have little interest in stopping the violence against the Rohingya, as they have little or no political price to pay for these atrocities. In Malaysia, Mahathir may not be a committed democrat (he certainly was not in the 1980s and 1990s), but he saw a way to capitalize on Najib's weakness and win power for himself and for opposition leaders and groups that do genuinely want to see political reforms in Malaysia.

Analysis and Conclusion

Looking at Southeast Asia now and over the past 20 years, leadership matters. It is important to highlight that when there are reform-minded and tolerant elites in power or vying for power, we see both greater efforts at creating and consolidating democracy and protecting rule of law, and when antidemocratic elites are able to come to power, they then have the opportunity to undermine democracy. This undermining is easier if there are weak institutions to check their behavior, public opinion is only weakly supportive of democracy, or if the public is supportive of democracy while also prioritizing things like in-group favoritism or concerned about order over other public goods. Prodemocracy elites may see greater democratization as working in their favor (for example, leaders like B.J. Habibie, Gus Dur, Anwar Ibrahim, and Mahathir [post-2017] may see democracy or democratic procedures and processes as benefiting them rather than having a steadfast

or committed belief in the intrinsic worth of democracy); yet, regardless of their motivations, such attitudes and behaviors matter.

Figure 2. Eastern Economic Forum, September 2019. Russian President Vladimir addresses the plenary session of the Eastern Economic Forum with Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad, Mongolian President Khaltmaagiin Battulga, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sharing the stage.

This article argues that curtailing of democratic elements is a product of elites capitalizing on five interrelated phenomena: 1) underlying contradictory support for democratic values that simultaneously favor order and democracy; 2) contingent norms of tolerance: public support for protection of civil rights and liberties does not necessarily apply to all equally; 3) the increased use of social media as a source of information has led to greater disinformation and it has increased the power and reach of identity politics and demonization of minorities; 4) failures of more moderate and mainstream political elites to strongly make a case for why tolerance and civil rights matter and who take steps to back up this rhetoric and failure to solve deep underlying problems in society like corruption and failures of governance issues like better provision of public goods; and 5) a shift in structural factors like regional and global norms where US influences has both shifted and shrunk and China's power and influence has grown all to the detriment of democratic norms. These interrelated factors open the door to antidemocratic elites to make a case for why their solutions or message offer a better way to fix society. If a significant number of people are already contingently supportive of democracy, if they already have waffling levels of confidence in government (versus other in-

stitutions like the military or religious organizations) and have low levels of support for minorities in their communities and country, and if they are reading hyperpartisan and possibly fake news, it makes it easier to mobilize support for antidemocratic measures.

In Southeast Asia, populism and the rise of appeals to religion are antithetical to democracy and tolerance. If one defines democracy as having robust protections of civil rights, then populism, which preys on unpopular and weak (politically speaking) elements of society, is highly problematic; people's safety and rights are at stake. What mechanisms might exist for preventing democratic backsliding or minimizing the extent of it? It may be stating the obvious and be unrealistic to say, but the most critical element would be that elites commit to protecting democratic norms and practices and preserving crucial elements of democracy like freedom of the press and protection of civil rights for all citizens. Failing this, what other institutional features may provide a bulwark against creeping authoritarianism? Certainly having a robustly independent judiciary and system of rule of law including freedom of the press and genuine civil rights to allow for opposition groups to gather, plan, and articulate their criticisms would help. This enables critics of the regime to have legal protections to operate and hold elites accountable or at least to raise issues and call attention to violations of democratic norms and procedures. Having a system of local elections and local power sharing can, in theory, provide greater opportunities for local control and localized protection of rights; yet, the opposite can also be true. Local elections and control can heighten populism and demonization of minorities if there are few protections or weak protection from the national government.

Cumulatively, do these disheartening trends signal the end of democracy in Southeast Asia? Civil rights are under assault. It is absolutely critical that civil society groups and activists continue to call attention to this. Not surprisingly, property rights face few challenges; it is political rights that are the open question right now. Will regimes mostly respect the ability of groups to articulate interests and participate in the political process, or will the backsliding also include dismantling of political rights? If the latter occurs to a further extent in Indonesia and the Philippines, like it has in Thailand, we will be witnesses to the end of democracy in Southeast Asia. Civil rights may be the canary in the coal mine. They are often the first rights to go, and in their absence make it easier to chip away at political rights more broadly. Voters can prevent this by choosing leaders who are more likely to respect and promote civil rights and to play by the rules of the game and hold the line on protecting political rights. While Jokowi won reelection in Indonesia, the official announcement of the vote tallies led to rioting and violence in Jakarta. It is too soon to know how he will govern in a second

term. However, given who his vice president is, it seems unlikely that he will push for greater rights protections and more likely that he will continue move to placate conservative religious forces rather than to act as a check on them. We are at a moment in time in Southeast Asia when it is impossible to know if democracy will stick or be further eroded.

Political changes in Southeast Asia may further hurt US interests in the region. US interests in Southeast Asia have been consistent: protect regimes friendly to us, protect and facilitate economic and trade interests (particularly freedom of navigation at sea and in the air), and balance against other dominant powers that might threaten the first two interests (during the Cold War this was the Soviets, and now it is China).[25] President Trump's withdrawal from the TPP and his reassessment of core US alliances has signaled to countries in Asia that their interests are of little consequence. If US support is called into question, countries have little choice but to realign their interests more squarely with China. It can hardly be to the America's benefit to have countries in the South China Sea shift their support to China when Beijing aims to have many of the shipping lanes delineated as part of sovereign Chinese territory. Increased Chinese naval power makes Japan and South Korea nervous, and as a result, we may very well see a new arms race in Asia. Moreover, as countries in the region throw their support behind Chinese-led trade deals like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership over the TPP, there will be fewer protections for workers, the environment, and even for US-owned companies more generally. Since the United States is not a party to this agreement and has pulled out of TPP, Washington may find that it has fewer economic opportunities in the region than before and that improved trade links between Southeast Asia and China have hurt US producers and consumers. More authoritarian leaders will have cover in fostering better ties with China, leaving the United States less leverage in fostering its own relationships in the region. For both these economic and geostrategic reasons, it is shortsighted of Washington to pay so little attention to Southeast Asia and to seemingly care so little about domestic political changes. If countries do continue to move away from democratic norms and practices, the United States may find it has lost long-standing friends and allies, and these relationships will be hard to replace. ✪

Dr. Amy Freedman

Dr. Freedman is a professor and chair of the Department of Political Science at Pace University. She earned her BA at Barnard College and her MA and PhD in political science at New York University. Her research focuses on Southeast Asia and questions about ethnic and religious politics. She is interested in larger trends toward and away from democracy and questions about nontraditional security threats.

Notes

1. Recent books warning about this include Madeleine Albright, 2018. *Fascism: A Warning* (NY: Harper Collins); Timothy Snyder, 2017. *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (NY: Tim Duggan Books); and Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018. *How Democracies Die* (NY: Broadway Books).

2. Work on transitions from authoritarian rule includes Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave Democratization in the Late 20th Century*, University of Oklahoma Press, 2012 and Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter et al. *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Comparative Perspectives,* John Hopkins University Press, 1986.

3. Amy Freedman, *Political Change and Consolidation Democracy's Rocky Road in Thailand, Indonesia, South Korea, and Malaysia*. NY:Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

4. Dani Rodrik and Sharun Mukand, "Why Illiberal Democracies are on the Rise." *Huffpost,* May 18, 2015.

5. Rodrik and Murkind, 2015.

6. Just to give one example of this, see Febriana Firdaus, "Indonesia's LGBT Crackdown." *The Interpreter*, the Lowy Institute, June 8, 2018.

7. The Ahmadiyya community originated in British India in the late nineteenth. Although adherents believe themselves to be devout Muslims and follow the Quran, orthodox Muslims consider the Ahmadiyya as heretical because they not believe that Mohammed was the final prophet sent to guide mankind. The Ahmadiyya takes its name from its founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, who was born in 1835 and is regarded as the messiah and a prophet, assertions held to be blasphemous by mainstream Muslims.

8. Freedom House, "Freedom in the World: Thailand" 2018 report.

9. BBC, "Thai Parliament elects ex-military government chief Prayuth as Prime Minister." June 6, 2019. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48537664?intlink_from_url=https://www.bbc.com/news/topics/c4l37mgp4q4t/thailand-election-2019&link_location=live-reporting-story

10. Freedom House, "Freedom in the World: Philippines" 2018 report.

11. Freedom House, "Freedom in the World: Myanmar" 2018 report.

12. Freedom House, "Freedom in the World: Indonesia" 2018 report.

13. In 2015, Najib, then prime minister, was accused of channeling over RM 2.67 billion (nearly USD 700 million) from a government-run strategic development company, 1MDB, to his personal bank accounts.

14. Freedom House "Freedom in the World: Malaysia" 2019 report.

15. Casey Newton, "Why Social Media is Friend to Far-Right Politicians Around the World." *The Interface*, October 30, 2018.

16. Tassia Sipahutar and Karlis Salna "Inside the Government-run War Room Fighting Indonesian Fake News", *Bloomberg*, October 24, 2018.

17. Jason Schwartz, "Trump's 'fake news' rhetoric crops up around the globe." *Politico*, July 30, 2018.

18. Diego Fossati, Hui Yew-Foong, and Siwage Dharma Negara, 2017. "The Indonesia National Survey Project: Economy, Society and Politics." No. 10 in *Trends in Southeast Asia* (Singapore, ISEAS)

19. Diego Fossati, Hui Yew-Foong, and Siwage Dharma Negara, 2017.

20. ISEAS Survey 2017.

21. ISEAS Survey 2017.

22. Jeremy Menchik, 2016. *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism, Cambridge University Press.*

23. Jeremy Menchik, talk at NYU, September 27, 2018 on Indonesian elections.

24. Buehler, Michael. 2008. The rise of Shari'a by-laws in Indonesia districts: An indication for changing patterns of power accumulation and political corruption. *South East Asia Research* 16(2): 255–285.

25. For good work on foreign policy in Southeast Asia see Elizabeth Economy, "China's Rise in Southeast Asia: Implications for the US." *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 14, Issue 44, 2005 and Ann Marie Murphy, "Great Power Rivalries, Domestic Politics and Southeast Asian Foreign Policy." *Asian Security,* Vol. 13, Issue 3, 2017.

Disclaimer