Democratic Regressions in Asia-Pacific

*Outline*

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# Introduction

With the global spread of democracy in the last quarter of the twentieth century, the study of democracy and autocracy moved from the periphery to the centre of comparative politics. The democratic euphoria that followed the implosion of the Soviet Union featured prominently in Francis Fukuyama’s late 1980s diagnosis of what he saw as the end of great ideological battles between east and west. In his view, liberal democracy was now the only viable option, eliminating the need to search for alternatives.[[1]](#endnote-1) In fact, the years between 1975 and 2005 marked a phase of the spread of democracy unprecedented in human history, introducing democratic institutions to many societies that, due to a lack of democratic experience, traditions or socio-economic "requisites” of democracy, had previously not been considered candidates for successful democratization. [[2]](#endnote-2) In the wake of the famous third wave of democratization, what Schmitter and Karl dubbed the “proto-science” of "transitology" and "consolidology"[[3]](#endnote-3) became one of the most prolific strands in comparative politics literature. Thirty years later, however, little remains of this earlier democratization euphoria. A new democracy pessimism has gained traction and, consequently, the research field is experiencing a pronounced shift of focus. Comparative authoritarianism studies and autocratization research increasingly complement and sometimes challenge democratic transition and consolidation as popular research foci.

Little illustrates the issue-attention cycle in the study of democracy and autocracy more vividly than the publication trends in *Democratization* and other related academic journals. Founded in 1994, *Democratization* is devoted to the study of the broad phenomenon of democratization – defined as the way democratic norms, institutions and practices evolve and are disseminated or retracted both within and across national and cultural boundaries. Since the mid-2000s, there has been a rapid increase in articles and special issues on "defective democracies" and "hybrid regimes"; dynamics of authoritarian politics; “clusters of authoritarian diffusion”; “authoritarian innovations”; and illiberal and authoritarian-populist challenges to democracy and democracy promotion, as well as democratic responses to such challenges.[[4]](#endnote-4) Reflecting this trend, the percentage of articles in *Democratization* examining issues related to democratic transition and consolidation fell from 72% in 2005 to 57% in 2015. Simultaneously, articles on democratic breakdowns and authoritarianism increased from 7.5% to 23.5%. Other journals with a focus on issues relating to democratic and non-democratic political regimes show a similar development.[[5]](#endnote-5)

This special issue of *Democratization* focuses on democratic regressions and democratic resilience in Asia-Pacific – broadly defined as substantial decline in the democratic quality of political institutions processes in a given democracy and the capacity of a democratic system to prevent or recover from such a downward trend.[[6]](#endnote-6) It seeks to improve our understanding of the sources and consequences of democratic regression and democratic resilience in a region that has received disproportionally little attention in recent scholarly debates, despite its crucial importance both for the future of democracy and its global contestation with autocracy in the twenty-first century. The Asia-Pacific region, comprising South, Southeast and Northeast Asia, is both the most economically powerful and the most populous region in the world. It is home to two of the three largest democracies worldwide, India and Indonesia. On the other hand, almost all recent examples of successful authoritarian modernization can be found in East Asia.[[7]](#endnote-7) Since the early 2000s, the People's Republic of China has become an authoritarian great power with unique "sharp power"[[8]](#endnote-8), and a number of studies in this special issue and elsewhere discuss China’s role as a provider of assistance in autocratic consolidation to dictatorships across the world.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Given Asia-Pacific’s heterogeneity and the large variance of potentially relevant causal factors, the region presents social scientists with a natural laboratory to test competing theories of democratic erosion, decay and revival and to identify new patterns and relationships. Levels of socioeconomic development, paths to state and nation-building, ethnic heterogeneity, colonial heritage, authoritarian legacies and modes of democratization, the structure of governing coalitions and elite formations, the shape of civil society organizations as well as institutional factors like type of government or electoral system all differ widely. There are numerous types of political parties and party systems, vastly different levels of cohesion and professionalism in the national armed forces, and different levels of coercion employed by the governments to uphold their rule. Finally, regimes differ in their levels of democratic quality, religious traditions span a wide spectrum, and national ideologies as well as individual value patterns are highly diverse. Identifying these details and analysing their causes and effects represent the goals of this special issue.

This introductory article offers a brief review of the relevant literature and introduces the different categories of analysis that build the analytical framework considered in various forms in the special issue. We begin by discussing the reasons for the renewed pessimism in democratization and democracy studies. We then proceed with a survey of different conceptualizations intended to capture forms of democratic regression and the autocratization concept to which the contributors to this special issue adhere. After that, we discuss how Asia-Pacific experiences fit into the debate about democracy’s deepening global recession. Next, we examine assumptions about the causes, catalysts and consequences of democratic regression and resilience in the comparative politics literature. Finally, we briefly introduce the remaining twelve articles of this special issue.

# The “crises of democracy” and a new pessimism in democracy studies

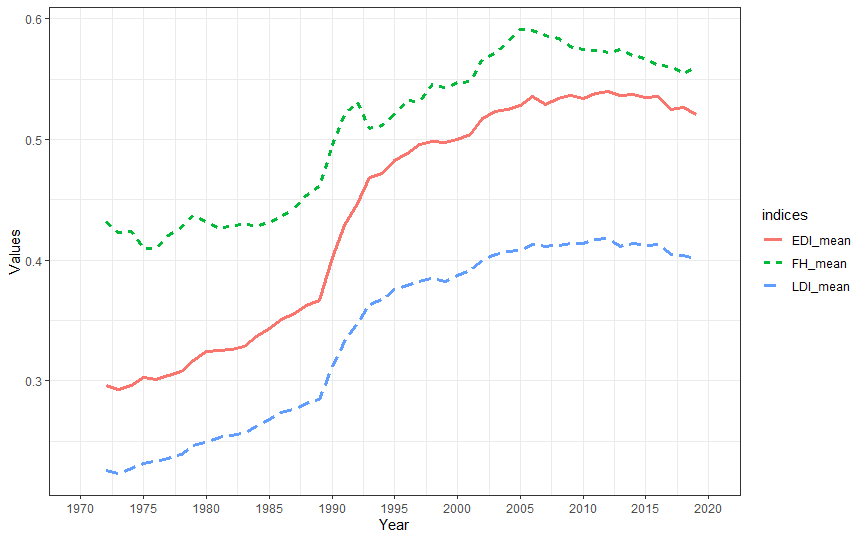
Warnings of a crisis of democracy are almost as old as democracy itself. In particular, the perception of representative democracy is subject to a cycle of high euphoria and deep depression. The current debates about the "crises" of democracy historically fit into this bipolar pattern.[[10]](#endnote-10)

The new pessimism in democracy research feeds on various partial observations. A first observation is that the tide of the third wave of democratization appears to have turned since the late 2000s. While the promise of a “fourth wave” of democratization related to the "colour revolutions" in post-Soviet Eurasia and the (initially) unarmed mass uprisings in the Arab world did not materialize, today’s autocratic reversals are at the same level or even outnumber earlier regime changes from dictatorship to democracy.[[11]](#endnote-11) At the same time, the rise of authoritarian “sharp power” and the expansion of “authoritarian gravity centers” dovetails with what some observers view as “the loss of U.S. leadership in advancing democracy abroad“.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Another observation is that established democracies in the West are increasingly being affected by both political fatigue and political polarization, to use *en vogue* terms.[[13]](#endnote-13) This suggests that the social and political ramifications of globalization and technological progress, political polarization and income inequality, transnationalization and multi-level governance structures collectively pose threats to fundamental principles of representative democracy around the world. In addition, scholars point to the rise of global financial capitalism, which increasingly calls into question the "happy marriage” between embedded capitalism and liberal democracy that was the hallmark of democratic capitalism after World War Two. [[14]](#endnote-14)

Third, an increasing number of newer democracies are experiencing mounting challenges of democratic erosion. While one democracy after another is seeing its democratic health deteriorating, authoritarianism is “hardening” also in countries that are already non-democratic as democratic openings are aborted and democratic moments lost.[[15]](#endnote-15) In fact, the scores of prominent global democracy barometers such as the Freedom House Index,[[16]](#endnote-16) and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project[[17]](#endnote-17) concur that there is a global decline in many political systems’ democratic quality, though viewed from a comparative historical perspective, the current losses of democratic qualities are still relatively modest (see Figure 1).

*Figure 1*: Global Democracy Scores, 1973-2019



Note: democracy scores are standardized from 0 to 1; higher scores indicate higher level of democracy.

Fourth, in contrast to previous “waves of autocratization”,[[18]](#endnote-18) dramatic events such as military coups that clearly constitute democratic reversals have become less prevalent in the post-Cold War world relative to more subtle erosive processes of democratic backsliding, often driven by elites’ “stealth authoritarianism” from within formally democratic institutions.[[19]](#endnote-19) Assaults on democratic institutions and norms are typically related to social polarization, populist confrontations and identity politics, which feed off deepening economic inequalities, erosion of political trust, declining social cohesion, and the transnationalization of national politics.[[20]](#endnote-20) As Slater and Ding show in this special issue, many democratic regressions lead to “democratic decoupling,” whereby a systematic gap opens up between the constitutive features of liberal democracy: the quality of elections improves, but civil and political rights diminish. “Illiberal juggernauts” such as Narendra Modi in India, Thailand’s Thaksin Shinawatra and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines claim to adhere to free elections but use anti-democratic tactics to exploit the limits posed by democratic institutions often damage rights.[[21]](#endnote-21)

# How to conceptualize and measure democratic regressions?

As Johannes Gerschewski discusses in more detail in this special issue, scholars use different concepts and terminologies to capture democratic decline.[[22]](#endnote-22) Most prominent are “democratic backsliding”, “deconsolidation of democracy”, and “autocratization”. Of these three concepts, “deconsolidation” is the narrowest. Building on the notion of consolidated democracy as “the only game in town”,[[23]](#endnote-23) the concept clearly focuses on the key characteristics of a consolidated democracy, that is the behavioural and attitudinal (de)consolidation of a democratic regime. Building on work by Foa and Mounk, Doh Chull Shin’s analysis in this special issue describes de-consolidation as a psychological process withdrawing the recognition of democracy as the only game in town among a sizable minority of the citizenry or, in other words, a process of erosion of popularly-supported democratic values.[[24]](#endnote-24) At the attitudinal level of democracy consolidation, “rules that were once respected by all important political players could suddenly come under attack by politicians jostling for partisan advantage”.[[25]](#endnote-25)

In contrast, “autocratization” is an extensive concept, an umbrella term for three different processes. All, in different ways, involve a “substantial de-facto decline of core institutional requirements for electoral democracy”.[[26]](#endnote-26) Substantially, “autocratization” encompasses both the decline of democratic qualities of a democratic regime and a decline of democratic characteristics in an autocracy. The wide application of the concept is perhaps both a strength and a weakness: conceptual stretching involves conflating quite different types of political processes, for example, the decline of liberal democracies into electoral democracies, but also the transition from competitive to closed authoritarianism. In order to reduce the risk of conceptual stretching, Lührmann and Lindberg differentiate between (a) the erosion of democratic qualities in democratic regimes (“democratic recession”); (b) the collapse of a democracy towards an autocracy (“democratic breakdown); and (c) the degradation of democratic qualities in authoritarian regimes (“autocratic consolidation”). [[27]](#endnote-27)

There is considerable conceptual disagreement about “democratic backsliding.” At the most general level, backsliding is different from autocratic reversals in that the decline in the quality of democracy does not necessarily coincide with regime change. Nancy Bermeo and Michael Coppedge define it as “the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy”.[[28]](#endnote-28) and limit it to political regimes that have passed a minimum threshold of democracy. According to this conceptual understanding, democratic backsliding entails episodes of democratic recession and democratic breakdown, but no autocratic consolidation.

The gradual nature of democratic backsliding and autocratic consolidation in the early twenty-first century also raises serious methodological challenges, including the informed decision on naturally arbitrary thresholds, and the definition of when autocratization periods start and end. However, a major shortcoming of the current debate is the lack of common empirical measurements of autocratization episodes.[[29]](#endnote-29) For example, a recent review of the current scholarship identifies 26 varieties of autocratization measurement, though all build on the same concept of autocratization described above.[[30]](#endnote-30) Unsurprisingly, differences in conceptualization and operationalization lead to non-conforming classifications of cases, making it difficult to compare research findings and to build cumulative knowledge about the causes and consequences of the phenomena at hand.

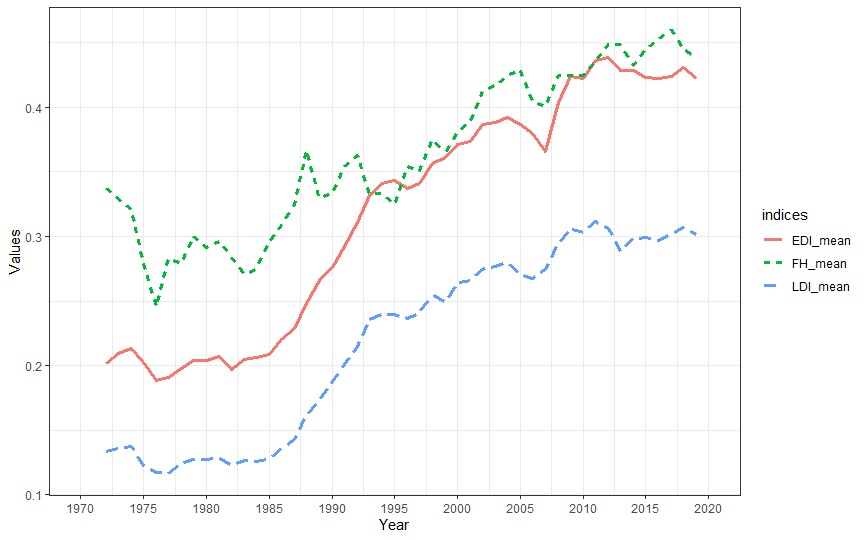
In this introduction, we measure autocratization by applying data from the Varieties of Democracy (-Dem) project.[[31]](#endnote-31) Following Lindberg and Lührmann as well as other scholars, we take an episodes approach to measure the concept of democratic decline rather than modelling democratic breakdown as a discrete outcome.[[32]](#endnote-32) As Pelke and Croissant suggest, we operationalize autocratization as a substantial decline on the V-Dem’s Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) over a connected time span.[[33]](#endnote-33) The index ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating better democratic qualities. We apply a 0.1 threshold (10% decline on a scale between 0 and 1) with testing for overlapping confidence intervals. The 0.1 threshold reduces the risk of conceptual stretching of the autocratization concept. Testing for overlapping confidence intervals of the V-Dem measurement model ensures that the identification of autocratization periods is not based on measurement uncertainty rather than a real erosion of democratic qualities of a political system.[[34]](#endnote-34) An episode starts with a decline on the EDI of 0.01 points or more. A period is interrupted when there is a temporary stagnation on the index with no further decline of 0.01 points in four years or when the index score increases by 0.02 points.

# How much autocratization in Asia-Pacific?

Democracy has long been an exception in Asia-Pacific. The first wave of democratization before and after the First World War barely touched the region and while the second wave led to a few electoral democracies (India and Sri Lanka), only one liberal democracy (Japan) was established, as a result of American pressure. Japan’s democracy did not pass the “two-turnover test” until August 1993. It was only with the third wave of democratization, which reached Asia in the mid-1980s, that the number of democracies increased, tripling from three in 1980 to nine in 2005 and eleven in 2017.[[35]](#endnote-35)

Overall, Asian experiences provide an ambivalent message in the debate about a global retreat of democracy. The region today much more democratic than 30 or 40 years ago. Recent data of different democracy barometers, however, show clear signs of autocratization in the region demonstrating a net decline of democracy.

*Figure 2*: Democracy scores in 24 countries in Asia-Pacific, 1973 to 2019



Notes: including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma/Myanmar, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Maldives, Mongolia, Nepal, North Korea, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Timor-Leste, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Taiwan is often celebrated as a resounding success story of the third wave of democratization[[36]](#endnote-36). While obviously vulnerable to negative external influences, Taiwan’s democracy has shown a remarkable capacity to prevent substantial regression in the quality of democratic institutions and practices altogether. Democratization in Indonesia in Timor Leste and in Mongolia have also been relatively successful, given unpropitious circumstances. On the other hand, recent constitutional crises in Mongolia and Timor Leste suggest that democracy in the two countries is prone to corruption and serious conflicts between political institutions and might soon enter a period of erosion.[[37]](#endnote-37)

On the other hand, most third wave democracies in the region recently experienced substantial democratic decline (see Table 2). Examples include older democracies such as Sri Lanka and—most alarmingly, given its importance as the world’s largest democracy—India.[[38]](#endnote-38) Other examples, discussed in this special issue, are Bangladesh, the Philippines and Thailand.[[39]](#endnote-39) Democratic backsliding in Indonesia “has been significant” too, although “not as severe as” in some other Asian countries.[[40]](#endnote-40) As in India, the rise of populisms has intensified religious-political polarization, worsened corruption and clientelism, and strengthened assertiveness among anti-democratic elite actors.[[41]](#endnote-41)

Overall, democracies in the Asia-Pacific region now experience pressure both internally and externally. Internally, democracies continue to face debilitating challenges, including political polarization, the rapid political mobilization of diverse groups, a de-institutionalizing role of political leaders and the failure of democratic institutions to cope with new political demands and societal conflicts.[[42]](#endnote-42) Pro-democracy forces in Taiwan and Hong Kong face aggressive attempts by Chinese government agencies to promote the alleged virtues of nondemocratic government.[[43]](#endnote-43) Externally, China has become a major source of ideational and material support for autocracies such as Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand, as well as illiberal democracies in Sri Lanka and the Philippines.[[44]](#endnote-44) Collectively, these are worrying signs of regional democratic regression and autocratic hardening.[[45]](#endnote-45)

Modes, depth and outcomes of democratic decline vary across countries and over time. Using the operationalization described above, we identify 32 periods of substantial autocratization in 13 countries in the period from 1950 and 2019 with a drop of 0.1 or more on the EDI. Table 2 provides descriptive information about these cases. Although the V-Dem data indicate a breakdown of electoral democracy in 2019, the EDI does not classify the Philippines as a case of autocratization (unlike the Liberal Democracy Index). In fact, the administration of President Rodrigo Duterte since 2016 only classifies as democratic regression if the requirement of non-overlapping confidence intervals is relaxed—indicating an unusual combination of drastic decay of the liberal components of democracy and relatively robust electoral elements.

*Table 1*: Episodes of democratic recession, democratic breakdown and autocratic consolidation in Asia-Pacific, 1950 to 2019

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **EDI drop ≥ 0.1 + CI** | **Begin** | **End** | **EDI before** | **EDI end** | **Drop in EDI** | **Type** | **Quick comeback** | **EDI drop ≥ 0.1 + CI** | **Begin** | **End** | **EDI before** | **EDI end** | **Drop in EDI** | **Type** | **Quick comeback** |
| Indonesia | 1957 | 1961 | 0.564 | 0.207 | -0.357 | Democratic breakdown | No | Bangladesh | 1982 | 1983 | 0.397 | 0.185 | -0.212 | Autocratic consolidation |  |
| Burma | 1958 | 1963 | 0.451 | 0.078 | -0.373 | Autocratic consolidation |  | Thailand | 1991 | 1991 | 0.359 | 0.225 | -0.134 | Autocratic consolidation |  |
| Laos | 1959 | 1965 | 0.328 | 0.163 | -0.165 | Autocratic consolidation |  | Pakistan | 1999 | 2000 | 0.417 | 0.216 | -0.201 | Autocratic consolidation |  |
| Nepal | 1960 | 1961 | 0.217 | 0.108 | -0.109 | Autocratic consolidation |  | Nepal | 2000 | 2003 | 0.389 | 0.208 | -0.181 | Autocratic consolidation |  |
| South Korea | 1962 | 1962 | 0.311 | 0.175 | -0.136 | Autocratic consolidation |  | Philippines | 2001 | 2005 | 0.614 | 0.454 | -0.16 | Democratic breakdown | Yes |
| Malaysia | 1969 | 1970 | 0.312 | 0.146 | -0.166 | Autocratic consolidation |  | Bangladesh | 2002 | 2008 | 0.527 | 0.205 | -0.322 | Democratic breakdown | Yes |
| Philippines | 1969 | 1973 | 0.416 | 0.079 | -0.337 | Autocratic consoldation |  | Sri Lanka | 2005 | 2007 | 0.563 | 0.428 | -0.135 | Democratic breakdown | No |
| Cambodia | 1970 | 1972 | 0.291 | 0.15 | -0.141 | Autocratic consoldation |  | Thailand | 2005 | 2007 | 0.557 | 0.182 | -0.375 | Democratic breakdown | Yes |
| Sri Lanka | 1970 | 1982 | 0.741 | 0.368 | -0.373 | Democratic Breakdown | Yes | South Korea | 2008 | 2016 | 0.859 | 0.698 | -0.161 | Democratic recession | Yes |
| India | 1971 | 1976 | 0.694 | 0.406 | -0.288 | Democratic breakdown | Yes | Cambodia | 2011 | 2019 | 0.357 | 0.238 | -0.119 | Autocratic consolidation |  |
| South Korea | 1971 | 1973 | 0.326 | 0.22 | -0.106 | Autocratic consolidation |  | Nepal | 2012 | 2013 | 0.553 | 0.28 | -0.273 | Democratic breakdown | Yes |
| Laos | 1973 | 1976 | 0.255 | 0.07 | -0.185 | Autocratic consolidation |  | Bangladesh | 2013 | 2019 | 0.516 | 0.279 | -0.237 | Democratic breakdown | ? (right-censored) |
| Bangladesh | 1975 | 1976 | 0.4 | 0.127 | -0.273 | Autocratic consolidation |  | Thailand | 2013 | 2015 | 0.522 | 0.15 | -0.372 | Democratic breakdown | ? (right-censored |
| Cambodia | 1975 | 1975 | 0.172 | 0.069 | -0.103 | Autocratic consolidation |  | India | 2014 | 2019 | 0.71 | 0.507 | -0.189 | Democratic recession | ? (right-censored) |
| Thailand | 1976 | 1977 | 0.299 | 0.118 | -0.181 | Autocratic consolidation |  | Philippines | 2015 | 2019 | 0.59 | 0.48 | -0.11 | Democratic breakdown | ? (right censored) |
| Pakistan | 1978 | 1979 | 0.227 | 0.108 | -0.119 | Autocratic consolidation |  | Pakistan | 2016 | 2019 | 0.482 | 0.351 | -0.131 | Autocratic consolidation |  |

The cases offer rich variation in terms of forms and outcomes of backsliding. One striking finding is that 16 of the 19 episodes that started before 2000 can be classified as autocratic consolidations. In contrast, 10 of the thirteen episodes since 2000 occurred in democracies, including two democratic recessions or what Ginsburg and Huq label “near misses”[[46]](#endnote-46) and eight democratic breakdowns. Another important finding is that some countries, such as Nepal, the Philippines, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh went through more than one democratic breakdown, suggesting that once a democracy enters a period of decline, it is especially vulnerable to further democratic degradation. In fact, each witnessed a “quick comeback” [[47]](#endnote-47) toward democracy within five or fewer years. However, democratic recovery was not sustainable in three of the four countries, i.e. positive trends turned negative again within a few years. This may also be the case in Sri Lanka, though it remains to been seen how far the democratic regression that restarted in 2018 will proceed now that the authoritarian Rajapaksa clan is back in power.[[48]](#endnote-48) South Korea since 2016 is the only example where an electoral democracy was able to recover its democratic quality to the position before the autocratization episode started.

The length of these episodes ranged from one to almost 12 years. A few cases of autocratic consolidation barely passed the 0.1 threshold to qualify as a backsliding episode. As expected, the loss of democratic quality in democratic recession is less dramatic than in democratic breakdowns and in autocratic consolidations. Focusing on episodes of democratic recession since 2000, the empirical evidence presented in this special issue suggests that executive aggrandizement, i.e. backsliding through “actions on the part of nominally democratic incumbents that exploit the benefits of office – including economically – to restrict political contestation and civil and political liberties”[[49]](#endnote-49) is the most common type in Asia-Pacific. This fits in with the findings of comparative research. “Promissory coups” are also common, that is, the illegal seizure of a government by a group of military and civilian elites, who claim to defend democracy and promise to hold elections in order to restore democracy[[50]](#endnote-50). However, such classifications are sometimes empirically dubious. This is evident in a case such as Indonesia in the years between 2007-2013 and, again, since 2015, which barely misses the threshold used in Table 1 and does not easily fit any particular backsliding mode.[[51]](#endnote-51) In Bangladesh under the rule of Prime Minister Hasina Wajed (since 2009), in South Korea under Presidents Lee and Park (2007 to 2016) and in Sri Lanka until 2015, elements of executive aggrandizement and strategic election manipulation merged into a wider syndrome of democratic backsliding. Sometimes, the political dynamics of different varieties of backsliding are causally connected. The case of Thailand illustrates this well. From 2001 to 2006, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra managed incrementally to weaken checks on executive power and marginalized opposition forces, which lacked the power to challenge his preferences, while he effectively controlled most democracy-watchdog organizations. Following nonviolent mass protests against the incumbent government and royal intervention to block manipulation of the electoral process by the government, a military coup d’état deposed Thaksin in September 2006. As shown by Riaz in this issue, the downfall of the Zia government in Bangladesh in December 2006 exhibits similar traits.[[52]](#endnote-52) In Pakistan (1999) and Thailand (2014), generals who spearheaded promissory coups also justified it as a correction of the democratic process. The case literature suggests, however, that in the two countries, the main aim was not to stop executive aggrandizement but to protect the political status quo against intra-elite conflicts and deepening tensions between new and vested social interests. [[53]](#endnote-53)

# Causes of democratic regression and sources of democratic resilience

The literature on the causes of democratic regression and sources of democratic resilience is “empirically, theoretically and methodologically fragmented”.[[54]](#endnote-54) There is very little agreement about what causes democratic regression other than that it is not the result of a single factor, but of a combination of multiple variables that might interact in complex ways and a result of the conjunction of structural problems and - potentially long-term - developments with the agency of self-interested political actors.

## *The comparative democratization literature*

Scholars of comparative democratization focus on the importance of: structural and cultural factors,[[55]](#endnote-55) political institutions,[[56]](#endnote-56) political leaders,[[57]](#endnote-57) conflicts between elites and citizens, or between old and new economic elites,[[58]](#endnote-58) pressures from below,[[59]](#endnote-59)and social polarization and political strains.[[60]](#endnote-60) This scholarship, however, tends to focus on changes from democracy to autocracy rather than on the incremental and gradual erosion of democracy characteristic of twenty-first century autocratization.

One important exception is Waldner and Lust’s review of the state-of-the art in backsliding studies, in which the authors identify a comprehensive list of several dozen potential causes for democratic erosion, grouped into six theory “families”.[[61]](#endnote-61) While it is plausible to assume that “incremental and multidimensional regressive change”[[62]](#endnote-62) requires multi-causal explanations, these theories centre on the causes of democratic transitions and democratic consolidation. However, explanations of democracy should be able to distinguish between the (combination of) factors that brought democracy into existence and kept it stable, and the reasons that explain its decline and potential collapse.[[63]](#endnote-63) Moreover, as Diamond’s contribution in this special issue notes,[[64]](#endnote-64) explanation of contemporary democratic regression has to take into account contextual differences between historical waves and current autocratization such as more globally orientated economies, more vibrant civil societies,[[65]](#endnote-65) and the rise of social media, which might improve opportunities for popular mobilization against governments, but can also be manipulated by illiberal or antidemocratic elites and governments.[[66]](#endnote-66) Finally, the decline of democracy may not be geographically uniform, reflecting the national or regional impact of historical, political and other legacies.

Laebens and Lührmann propose a different approach[[67]](#endnote-67). Instead of analysing why democracies begin to backslide in the first place, they attempt to identify the mechanisms that strengthen the resilience of democratic institutions during processes of democratic recession and democratic breakdown. Following Bernhard et al,[[68]](#endnote-68) they distinguishes three kinds of institutions of accountability that can constrain or stop democratic regressions. The first one is institutions of vertical accountability (i.e., free and fair elections and the exercise of political rights by activists and citizens). Second, horizontal accountability mechanisms, including the judiciary, legislative oversight and other watchdog institutions. Third, civil society and media constraints on government and politicians constitute “diagonal accountability” mechanisms. The three mechanisms play out in different ways. They may incentivize pro-democracy activists, political elites and opposition parties to build electoral coalitions which may deter anti-democratic political actors who fear electoral backlash; dis-incentivize government strategies of neutering or taking over the institutions meant to constrain them; or incentivize elites to defy autocratic political actors because nonviolent mass protest push them to join the democratic resistance. Focusing on these three sources of democratic resilience allows for the possibility of cross-case causal inference about why some democracies survive backsliding and revitalize and others do not.

## *Democratic regression and democratic resilience in Asia-Pacific*

A glance at the list of autocratization episodes a in Table 1 suggests that democratic regression in Asia-Pacific is mainly (though, not exclusively) a feature of “weak democracies”, located in supposedly difficult places for democracy to emerge and thrive. Democratic breakdowns seem to occur more often in poorer, less developed countries and lower quality democracies. Democracies that do not survive backsliding are more likely to have a contemporary history of military praetorianism, have weaker civil societies and political institutions, less economic growth and per capita income significantly lower than in democracies that survive democratic recession. Surviving democracies also have stronger judicial and legislative constraints on the executive and the average start level of democracy (in terms of the EDI score) is higher in near misses than democratic breakdowns (and autocratic consolidators).

The articles comprising this special issue examine specific combinations of causal factors, mechanisms and processes in relation to democratic backsliding in Asia-Pacific, providing additional evidence regarding correlates and mechanisms of autocratization and democratic resilience in the region. Collectively, they suggest that seven sets of factors are especially relevant for explaining diverging trajectories of the region’s democratic regressions: political parties; political cleavages and ideological polarizations; the strength of civil society; political institutions of horizontal accountability; cultural foundations; (middle) class-centred explanations; and “external” or international factors.

Clearly, these factors deserve more extensive examination than the space available in this introduction. Still, regarding the first factor, the presence of well-institutionalized political parties and the lack thereof is an important factor for both the occurrence of democratic regression and the difference between recession and revival on the one hand, and permanent breakdowns on the other.[[69]](#endnote-69) The failure of party politics in the representative system strengthens the role of personalist leaders and perpetuates the contentious divide between social movements and political parties. It weakens the resilience of democratic institutions and provides a window for populist leaders to hijack democracy.[[70]](#endnote-70)

The second condition concerns political cleavages and resultant polarization in different societies. Are cleavage structures and their ideological charge vulnerable to polarization and authoritarian manipulation? For example, increasing ideological polarization in Indonesia is central to understanding why in those countries civil society is “becoming increasingly partisan and thus becoming more selective in the democracy defence cases they are willing to engage in”.[[71]](#endnote-71) Similar developments can be found in Bangladesh and the Philippines.[[72]](#endnote-72)

This relates to the third factor, which is the role of civil society in different Asian cases. Several articles in this issue discuss the often ambiguous roles of civil society organizations in processes of democratic regression and resilience in Asia. For example, Max Grömping’s analysis of cross-national time-series data of all 131 elections held during backsliding and revival episodes in the region shows that “election monitors’ ability to stabilize electoral integrity buttresses vertical accountability [is] a key ingredient to halting backsliding episodes. Additionally, monitors also contribute to diagonal accountability through their mobilization of public opinion around election misconduct.”[[73]](#endnote-73) This suggest that certain types of (trans)national civil society organizations can help to link mechanisms of diagonal and vertical accountability and, thereby, strengthen the resilience of threatened democracies. Other studies in this issue, however, cast doubts at the role of civil society as “last line of defence” against de-democratization. For example, Jasmin Lorch finds that civil society organizations have so far failed to counter democratic regression in Thailand, Bangladesh and the Philippines. She argues in this special issue that this “is largely because, already prior to the current backsliding processes, all three of them constituted weak democracies in which CSOs had long been captured by the same traditional political and populist elites that had also captured the electoral process and key democratic state institutions of the state. This lack of autonomy has prevented civil society in Bangladesh, Thailand and the Philippines from acting as an effective accountability mechanism against the power abuses committed by political elites … and often brought the undemocratic features of CSOs to the fore”. Similarly, in Indonesia elite-driven political polarization “split civil society along primordial and ideological lines, eroding its ability to offer a united pro-democracy front”, as shown by Mietzner in this special issue.[[74]](#endnote-74)

Fourth, the personalization of power and dissembling of horizontal accountability mechanisms seems easier to achieve if a democracy has a system of prime-ministerial hegemony or hyper-presidentialism, which gives presidents an incentive to enhance their power by undermining institutions designed to check it.[[75]](#endnote-75) Moreover, judges are aware that the executive or the legislature may refuse to comply with their rulings and, therefore, the courts hesitate to exercise the role as an independent body. In fact, as the contributions in this special issue demonstrate, institutions of horizontal accountability played a very different role in different cases.

Fifth, some scholars argue that authoritarian features of (East) Asian political cultures prevent both ordinary citizens and political leaders from being emancipated from authoritarian paternalism and norms of social harmony, while reinforcing democratic erosion. This is because norms of political paternalism encourage leaders to believe they can rule their societies like “benevolent” monarchs, and encourage members of their entourage to facilitate their anti-democratic impulses. At the same time, the social norms of conformism and anti-pluralism discourage dissenters to challenge those impulses openly. Another view is that citizens in Asian democracies give almost equal weight to both economic and political quality as twin essences of democracy. At the same time, voters may be skeptical of democracy's ability to solve societal problems and, therefore, may be willing to support political leaders who promise to revitalize the economy despite their use of illiberal means.[[76]](#endnote-76) In this regard, Doh Chull Shin’s analysis of three advanced democracies in East Asia in this special issue suggests that pluralities of citizenries in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan are psychologically disposed to realign themselves with a hybrid or autocratic system. Moreover, he finds that “democratic learning and socioeconomic modernization, two significant influences on democratic consolidation, do little to keep East Asians from joining in the deconsolidation movement.” At the same time, he notes that attitudinal deconsolidation must not be equated with a reversal of institutional or behavioral consolidation in these countries. This suggests another form of “decoupling” – a disturbing lack of or downward trend in attitudinal consolidation that may not correspond with the emergence of anti-democratic elite tactics or the erosion of democratic institutions.[[77]](#endnote-77) Another cultural argument related to Asian democratic regression focuses on how different ethnic and religious groups coexist in plural but increasingly polarized and radicalized societies, notably in South Asia, including India and Sri Lanka. Here, anti-democratic elites and their governments not only strive for political control but also seek religious and cultural hegemony.[[78]](#endnote-78)

Sixth, middle class-focused arguments are also crucial to understand the dynamics of democratic regression and, perhaps, revival in (South)East Asia. In a recent book, Joshua Kurlantzick identifies the “revolt of the middle class” as a chief cause of democratic decline, not only in the Philippines and Thailand, but also globally.[[79]](#endnote-79) For some, middle class-led anti-democratic revolts came as a surprise, although some had already noted strong illiberal or anti-democratic sentiments among middle classes in East and Southeast Asia.[[80]](#endnote-80) Yet, as Thompson argues in this special issue, middle classes do not only support the degradation of democracy by illiberal populist or authoritarian military forces. In addition, it may be that disenchantment with executive aggrandizers in countries including the Philippines and South Korea also contributed to a renewed embrace of liberal democracy for some middle class citizens.[[81]](#endnote-81)

Seventh*,* while democratic development is mainly driven by domestic factors, democratization researchers acknowledge that international factors can affect democratic survival, consolidation, erosion and breakdown. A large body of research previously published in this journal examines how and when international factors can help shape the course of democratic regressions and autocratic reversals, e.g. through mechanisms of institutional diffusion, exogenous shocks or the agency of “external” actors. In this regard,Larry Diamond in this special issue emphasizes as a major element in the recent transformation of the global environment, national processes of democratic regression and autocratic hardening which took place after the cold war. While “Russian rage” is a secondary factor in the Asia-Pacific region, “Chinese ambition” is a primary challenge for the liberal values and institutions in the region. Brian Fong’s case study of Hong Kong in this special issue exemplifies this. Introducing the notion of “extra-jurisdictional authoritarianism”, Fong explores China’s strategy of autocratization in the city’s semi-democratic political system through indirect and direct means and mechanisms. In contrast, Nele Noesselt’s study in this special issue of Indonesia, Myanmar, Vietnam and Cambodia argues that the People’s Republic of China is neither actively engaged in nor directly reacting to processes of democratic regression and autocratic hardening or consolidation but “instead responding to the positioning of the United States (and its allies) vis-à-vis these countries”.

The Asian experiences also offer lessons in what stops democratic recession or enables societies to return to democracy. One potential source of resilience could be regional cooperation. As Ishimara notes, fresh forms of cooperation are beginning to take shape among Asian democracies in the civil society sector, and multiple platforms created by civic organizations aim to bring together pro-democratic actors from across the region. In light of shared concern about Chinese influence, pro-democracy actors in Hong Kong and Taiwan have begun to cooperate. At the same time, however, China is becoming more powerful, which provides both a motive for increasing linkages and alliance-building among democratic forces in Asia. Yet, even a focus on democracy building might not suffice to counter China’s geopolitical assertiveness,[[82]](#endnote-82) Policymakers in major Asian democracies such as Japan and Indonesia are notoriously unable (or unwilling) to act as influential democracy promotors in their regions.[[83]](#endnote-83) Jürgen Rüland’s article in this special issue demonstrates that the impact of democratic regression in individual Southeast Asian countries on regional cooperation and democracy promotion within the framework of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is limited “because the ability of ASEAN and its member states to promote democracy has always been strongly curtailed by ideational path dependencies” and democracy promotion policies of the grouping’s democratically most advanced member states, Indonesia and the Philippines, are more ambiguous.”[[84]](#endnote-84)

We suggest that the sources of democratic resilience of democracy in Asia rest primarily in institutions of diagonal and vertical accountability, though the different mechanisms play out in various ways in different countries. Of the three accountability mechanisms referred to above, institutions of “horizontal accountability” seem to be least effective. Mechanisms of “vertical accountability”, especially transparent and “clean” elections, are more promising avenues of democratic resistance, especially if defection of elites from within the political camp aligned with a potential authoritarian weakens the incumbent around election time and opposition parties manage to mobilize voters determined to punish those responsible for the erosion of democracy, such as occurred in relation to the rule of Indira Gandhi (India), Mahinda Rajapaksa (Sri Lanka), and Khaleda Zia (Bangladesh).[[85]](#endnote-85) Elections were a device of democratic comeback also in other scenarios, for instance, in Thailand (coup-plotters kept their promise to return to a form of elected government), Nepal (elites compromising to hold overdue elections), as well as Indonesia (some combination of clean and transparent elections, civil mobilization and alternation of power between political parties). In addition to this mechanism of vertical (electoral) accountability, a second one is civil resistance, which, however, usually works only in combination with intra-elite splits (i.e., military defection and party splits, e.g. Sri Lanka), or horizontal accountability (ie.g., impeachment in South Korea).

Often, however, the weakness of institutional checks and balances and the ability of “wannabe” autocrats to create an uneven playing field in elections by using legislative majorities and administrative powers leaves civil society as the last line of defence against democratic recession and potential breakdown. Or, as Marcus Mietzner argues in his contribution to this special issue, “the ‘democratised’ segments of civil society (…) might be the only thing standing between non-democratic elites and their (declared or undeclared) goal of reversing or undermining democracy“.[[86]](#endnote-86)

Overall, Asian experiences suggest that what matters most in times of democratic regression and autocratization are effective mechanisms of “diagonal accountability”.

In Taiwan and Hong Kong, pro-democracy movements led by civic activists played pivotal roles in forestalling backsliding or protesting against government’s ever-tightening control of political space.[[87]](#endnote-87) The political power of ordinary citizens in response to aggrandizement of executive power has also grown in South Korea. In particular, candlelight protests from November 2016 to March 2017 played an important role in ensuring that the actors of horizontal accountability properly fulfilled their duties. Political parties, parliament and constitutional court only pursued the impeachment process due to the force of the mass protests after initial hesitation. However, these institutions of horizontal accountability on their own were too weak to stop democratic backsliders.[[88]](#endnote-88)

Advocacy and civil rights groups, other social organizations, students, and concerned citizens in some South and Southeast Asian nations have also attempted to act as a bulwark against the rise of authoritarianism, but typically so far they have gained less traction and achieved only weak impact. For example, in Indonesia in the late 2000s and early 2010s, mechanisms of diagonal accountability began early in the process of backsliding. In addition, vertical accountability mechanisms stopped backsliding before democracy suffered substantial damage. In this regard, Indonesian voters showed a fine sense when they voted for a democratic populist like Jokowi and against the unequivocally anti-democratic, populist alternative of General Prabowo. Nonetheless, as Mietzner in this special issue emphasizes, Indonesia’s democracy is now in a new phase of democratic regression. Symptoms of Indonesia’s democratic malaise include socio-religious polarization, rising radicalization and creeping undemocratic Islamization of society and the political mainstream; as well as illiberal drift in the regulation of civil liberties and protection of human rights.[[89]](#endnote-89)

Finally, the recent democratic experiences of Asia-Pacific also offer further worries. One is that for “diagonal accountability” to be a mechanism of democratic resilience and resistance, a sufficient number of citizens must still prefer democratic government and trust to some degree democratic institutions. At least in some Asian societies, however, popular support for democracy and trust in democracies’ core institutions seem to be eroding. Finally, illiberal and autocratic incumbents may seek to mobilize their supporters in anti-democratic counter-demonstrations that intimidate oppositions, for example in Thailand, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India.

# About this issue

To our knowledge, this special issue is the first effort to systematically compare cases of democratic erosion in South, Southeast and Northeast Asia that have resulted in democratic recession and breakdown, with cases that have not. The twelve substantial contributions in this special issue address five sets of interrelated questions:

1. How to conceptualize types, modes and mechanisms of democratic regression? There is a plethora of different concepts intended to capture forms of “democratic decay and erosion”[[90]](#endnote-90). The pluralism of concepts and their corresponding operationalization and measurements is also a feature of this issue. Still, most of the contributions focus on cases of democratic recession and democratic breakdown as two specific forms of democratic regression.
2. What are proximate or deep causes for democratic regression in Asia-Pacific? Do types of democratic recession and breakdown differ in the structural conditions under which they occur?
3. How do national, inter- or transnational actors respond to democratic regression in different societies or areas in Asia-Pacific? What roles do populist political parties and movements, civil society organizations, social movements and militaries play in mobilizing support for or against backslide initiators?
4. What are the sources of democracy’s resilience? Why do democratic recessions in Asia-Pacific stop before democracy breaks down, whereas similar development elsewhere have led to collapse of democratic political systems?
5. What are the consequences of democratic backsliding for cooperation, security and stability in Asia-Pacific? In particular, what is the role of regional great powers such as China and Indonesia in promoting autocratization or defending democracy regionally?

The first three articles by Larry Diamond, Johannes Gerschewski and Dan Slater and Iza Ding single out important distinctions between different aspects of the overarching concepts of democratic regression and autocratization and combine conceptual with empirical discussions – either from a cross-regional (Diamond) or intra-regional (Gerschewksi) perspectives or with single case-based illustrations (Slater and Ding). The next four contributions provide comparative studies of the ambiguous roles of civil society (Jasmin Lorch), local election monitors (Max Grömping) dissident political and social forces or organizations (Mark Thompson), and the cultural dimensions of democratic deconsolidation in advanced East Asian democracies (Doh Chull Shin). Three case studies follow on democratic backsliding and/or breakdown and the role of civil society in Indonesia (Marcus Mietzner), anti-democratic tactics from Bangladesh’s political elites (Ali Riaz) and anti-democratic interventions by the Chinese government in Hong Kong (Brian Fong). Finally, the articles by Nele Noesselt and Jürgen Rüland broaden the focus by discussing the impact of “Chinese ambition” (Diamond) and a transformed regional environment on democratic backsliding and autocratic consolidation in Southeast Asia, both at the levels of the nation state and the ASEAN.

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# Endnotes

1. Fukuyama, *The End of History*. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Coppedge et al., *Varieties of Democracy*; Diamond “Democratic Regression in Comparative Perspective”. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Karl and Schmitter, “The Conceptual Travels”. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. ### Merkel and Croissant, *Consolidation*; Jayasuriya and Rodan, *Beyond Hybrid Regimes*; Kailitz and Köllner, *Unpacking Autocracies*; Bank and Weyland, *Clusters of Authoritarian Diffusion*; Curato and Fossati, *Authoritarian Innovations*; Babayan and Risse, *Democracy Promotion*; Taggert and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Dealing with Populists*; Kuehn, *Midwifes or Gravediggers*; Lührmann and Merkel, *Resilience of Democracies*.

   [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Pelke and Friesen, „Democratization Articles Dataset“, appendix. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Gerschewski, “Erosion or decay?”; Diamond, „Democratic Regression“; Burnell and Calvert, “The resilience of democracy”; Boese et al. „Deterring Dictatorship“, [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Fuyama, „Patterns of History“. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Christopher Walker, “What is ‘Sharp Power’?” [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Bader, *China’s Foreign Relations*; Hess and Aidoo, „Democratic Backsliding“; Kroenig, *The Return of Great Power Rivalry*, pp. 170-195; Fong, “Exporting Autocracy; Noesselt, “China’s New Regional Responsiveness”. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For a critical review of the crisis narrative, see Merkel, “Challenge or Crisis. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Haggard and Kaufman, *Dictators and Democrats*; Lührmann and Lindberg, „A third wave”; Diamond, “Democratic Regression”. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Walker, “What is ‘Sharp Power’?”; Kneuer and Demmelhuber, “Gravity centres”, Carothers “International Democracy Support”. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Diamond, „Democratic Regression“; Graham and Svolik, “Democracy in America?” [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Merkel, “Is democracy compatible with capitalism?”; Boix, *Democratic Capitalism*; Przeworski, *Crises of Democracy*; Diamond, “Breaking Out”. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
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83. For Indonesia, see Rüland’s article in this issue. For Japan, see Kingston, “The Emptiness of Japan’s Values Diplomacy”. [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
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86. Cf. Mietzner, this issue. [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
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