Indo-Pacific Democracy: A Baseline Study of Major Trends and Driving Forces
Cover: Thai anti-government protesters hold up a three-fingered salute during a rally on October 31, 2021, in Bangkok, Thailand. Thousands of anti-government protesters gathered at the Ratchaprasong Intersection in central Bangkok to demand the abolition of Section 112 of the criminal code, which criminalizes defamation, insults, and threats to the Thai Monarchy. (Photo by Lauren DeCicca/Getty Images)
Indo-Pacific Democracy: A Baseline Study of Major Trends and Driving Forces
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A negative trend of democratic recession has steadily unfolded across the Indo-Pacific region since the 2010s. Subregionally, Southeast Asia has suffered from the most severe drop in democracy scores, while East Asia and South Asia have experienced a moderate decrease. Oceania remains the most democratic subregion and has achieved a slight increase in its democracy scores.

There has been a remarkable shift of balance from democratic advancement to democratic backsliding in the Indo-Pacific. In the three years from 2019 to 2021, the percentage of political regimes experiencing democratic backsliding surpassed those making democratic advancement. Evidence also shows that democratic recession is much more pronounced in populous societies than in sparsely populated societies. Overall, both the number and percentage of people living under autocratic-leaning regimes and autocratic regimes have reached record high levels.

Democratic recession in the Indo-Pacific is caused by the coupling of domestic and geopolitical forces. Domestically, democratic recession has principally been driven by deep-rooted cleavages inherent within the countries and territories where illiberal strongmen, including populist leaders, army generals, and nationalist state leaders, exploit such cleavages to reinforce their repression of democracy. Geopolitically, under a multipolar Indo-Pacific, illiberal powers including China and Russia are expanding their spheres of influence by providing support to illiberal strongmen across the region.

Traditionally, “democracy” and “security” are seen as two separate fields in the policy world. The major findings of this report, which documents the coupling of domestic and geopolitical forces in causing democratic recession across the Indo-Pacific, raises questions on the validity of the conventional thought pertaining to democracy promotion and security competition.

Today, the Indo-Pacific region presents the free world with a double-challenge of democratic recession and security competition, indicating that it’s the time to tear down the longstanding artificial wall between democracy and security. There is an urgent need to invest in new knowledge infrastructures that can provide integrated strategic analysis to policymakers and practitioners.
Since the 2010s, an illiberal wave has been hitting democratic institutions around the globe. Increasingly, people are living in a world where executives are unchecked, legislatures are fragmented, judicial courts are sidelined, civil societies are suppressed, scholars are coerced, and journalists are intimidated. This global wave of democratic recession has been conceptualized by comparative political scientists through different terminologies, including “democratic decline,” “democratic rollback,” “democratic backsliding,” “democratic decay,” “democratic regression,” “democratic slump,” “democratic erosion,” and “autocratization.” The trend can be broadly understood as a process of regime change toward autocracy through which the regime’s democratic traits have declined. It can occur in all kinds of political regimes; democracies may experience “a decline in the quality of democracy,” while autocracies may encounter “a decline in democratic qualities of governance.” The Indo-Pacific region—home to a variety of democratic, hybrid, and autocratic regimes—is not immune from this global trend of democratic recession.

This chapter quantitatively maps the temporal and spatial trends in the state of Indo-Pacific democracy, using an aggregate measure called here the Indo-Pacific Democracy Score. Aggregated from three existing global democracy barometers—Freedom House, Varieties of Democracy, and Economist Intelligence Unit—the scores are measured on a 100-point scale, with higher scores indicating a higher level of democracy.

Caption: Police question someone as they patrol the area after protesters called for a rally in Hong Kong on September 6, 2020, to protest against the government’s decision to postpone the legislative council election due to the COVID-19 coronavirus, and the national security law. (Photo by Dale De La Rey/AFP via Getty Images)
From Third Wave to Third Reverse Wave

In his classic book *The Third Wave*, Samuel P. Huntington identified the first wave (1828–1926), second wave (1943–1962), and third wave (1974–) of democratization, and also mapped the first reverse wave (1922–1942) and second reverse wave (1958–1975), in which democratization receded. Completing his book in 1991, Huntington predicted that after the dissipation of the third wave, a third reverse wave would happen.

In the Indo-Pacific, a number of sovereign and nonsovereign entities experienced democratization or quasi-democratization as part of the third wave. To name a few, these included the Philippines (1986), Taiwan (1987), South Korea (1987), Mongolia (1990), Bangladesh (1991), Hong Kong (1991), and Indonesia (1998). Huntington’s prediction of the emergence of a third reverse wave finally came to pass at the turn of the 2010s, when much of the democratic advancement gained in the third wave was found to have been erased in different corners of the world, including the Indo-Pacific region.

The Indo-Pacific Democracy Scores quantitatively show how democratic recession has been unfolding across the region in recent years. Regionally, there has been a moderate negative trend of democratic recession from 2012 to 2021. Subregionally, Southeast Asia suffered from the most severe drop in scores; East Asia and South Asia experienced a moderate decrease in scores; and Oceania remained the most democratic subregion.
and achieved a slight increase in its scores (see figure 1 and table 1).

The Shifting Balance

The overall trend of democratic recession in the Indo-Pacific can be further illustrated by assessing the relative strength of “democratic backsliding” and “democratic advancement” on a year-to-year basis. For this purpose, political regimes that registered net increases in scores in a year (when compared with the previous year) were grouped under “democratic advancement”; political regimes that registered net decreases in scores in a year were grouped under “democratic backsliding”; political regimes that registered no change in scores in a year were grouped under “democratic stagnation.” By regrouping the year-to-year data in this way, we are able to calculate the relative strength of democratic backsliding versus democratic advancement over time.

The resultant graph demonstrates that beginning in the 2010s, the Indo-Pacific underwent a remarkable shift of balance from democratic advancement to democratic backsliding: the percentage of political regimes experiencing democratic backsliding gradually surpassed the percentage making democratic advancement, with such a trend markedly accelerating in the most recent three years, from 2019 to 2021 (see figure 2). In other words, for most of the sovereign and nonsovereign entities in the Indo-Pacific, sliding toward autocracy, rather than moving toward democracy, is becoming a new normal.

Spotlighting Populous Societies

Methodologically, a potential limitation of adopting overall regional and subregional scores is that these measures have treated more populous societies and less populous societies the same. Bringing in population as a factor could reveal trends of democratic recession that have been somehow diluted by the overall measures. To consider the role of population, the year-to-year data set was reorganized into four types of regimes, namely democratic regimes (scores of 76–100), democratic-leaning regimes (51–75), autocratic-leaning regimes (26–50), and autocratic regimes (0–25). Then this categorization scheme was cross-referenced with population figures. The result is a more striking picture of the state of Indo-Pacific democracy: although there is no dramatic change over time in the overall numerical distribution of the four types of regimes (see Figure 3), democratic recession has been found to be much more pronounced in more populous societies than in sparsely populated areas.

Most obviously, the recent democratic recession means that many people in the Indo-Pacific who once lived under democratic-leaning regimes no longer do so. The share of population living under a democratic-leaning regime decreased from 47.14 percent in 2012 to 44.09 percent in 2021, and the share living under autocratic-leaning regimes increased from 7.32 percent to 11.36 percent in the same time period. By 2021, 11.36 percent and 39.02 percent of the population in the Indo-Pacific...
were living under autocratic-leaning regimes and autocratic regimes respectively, which represented in total 50.38 percent of population in the region, or 2.118 billion people (see figure 4). From a historical perspective, these are all record-high figures for the Indo-Pacific since the beginning of the third wave of democratization in the 1970s. In other words, while the overall regional and subregional trends of democratic recession across the Indo-Pacific have remained statistically moderate, on the ground more and more people are actually being exposed to a greater risk of erosion of democratic rights.

More alarming signs of democratic recession are revealed by cross-referencing the population figures with a list of top democratic advancers and top democratic backsliders in the past 10 years. This approach shows that seven of the top-ten democratic advancers are sparsely populated societies, namely Tonga (0.1 million), Vanuatu (0.3 million), Maldives (0.5 million), Solomon Islands (0.6 million), Bhutan (0.7 million), Fiji (0.8 million), and Timor-Leste (1.3 million); only Sri Lanka (21 million), Nepal (29 million), and Malaysia (32 million) have significantly larger populations.

In terms of population share, the top democratic advancers are clearly outweighed by those top democratic backsliders. Aside from Nauru, which is a sparsely populated island country...
(10,834 inhabitants), all the other top democratic backsliders are populous societies, including India (1.380 billion), Indonesia (273 million), Pakistan (220 million), the Philippines (109 million), Thailand (69 million), Myanmar (54 million), Cambodia (16 million), Jammu-Kashmir (12.5 million), and Hong Kong (7 million). It is no exaggeration to say that in the Indo-Pacific region, the number of people who have experienced democratic backsliding over the past decade significantly outweighs the number of people who have experienced democratic advancement (see figure 5 and table 2).

**The Gathering Storm**

The Indo-Pacific region is now overshadowed by a looming storm. As the statistical analysis in this chapter indicates, a negative trend of democratic recession has been steadily unfolding across the region since the 2010s. Worse still, both the number and percentage of people living under autocratic-leaning and autocratic regimes have reached record high levels, with democratic recession becoming a new normal for the majority of the population in the Indo-Pacific region in recent years. Evidently, the third wave of democratization would fare poorly.

![Figure 5: Top Democratic Advancers (left) and Backsliders (right), 2012–2021](source: Indo-Pacific Democracy Scores. For details, see the Methodological Appendix.)
is already giving way to the third reverse wave of democratic recession in the Indo-Pacific, as earlier democratic advance-ments in the region are being erased by democratic backsliding.

Table 2: Top-10 Democratic Advancers and Backsliders in Ten-Year, Five-Year, and Three-Year Intervals

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<td>Top-10 Democratic Advancers</td>
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<td>Top-10 Democratic Backsliders</td>
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Source: Indo-Pacific Democracy Scores. For details, see the Methodological Appendix.
Numbers do not tell the whole story. Behind the statistics on democratic recession in the Indo-Pacific, there are unique and dramatic accounts of democratic struggles—of people fearlessly resisting oppression and fighting for freedom. It is only when we look place by place that the nuanced dynamics of democratic recession in the Indo-Pacific region become more apparent.

Through qualitative case studies, this chapter examines how democratic recession has unfolded in the Indo-Pacific in recent years. The spotlight will be on several top democratic backsliders in the region, namely Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand, Hong Kong, and India (including Jammu-Kashmir). By surveying the backgrounds, constitutional structures, and backsliding episodes of these countries and territories, the case-study analysis creates a more nuanced and detailed picture of the overall democratic recession trends in the Indo-Pacific.

Myanmar: From Hope to Hopeless?

Background

Myanmar is a sovereign country located in mainland Southeast Asia and officially called the “Republic of the Union of Myanmar.” (Myanmar is also called Burma; the two words mean the same thing, but Myanmar is more often used in writing while Burma is more commonly used in speaking.) It shares land borders with China, Thailand, Laos, and Bangladesh. The country is known for its rich culture and diverse heritage. The largest city is Yangon, also known as Rangoon, which is the former capital.

Caption: An armored vehicle drives past the Sule Pagoda, following days of mass protests against the military coup, in Yangon on February 14, 2021. (Photo by AFP via Getty Images)
borders with India and Bangladesh to the west, China to the north, and Laos and Thailand to the east; and it is bounded by the Andaman Sea to the south. Myanmar’s total territory is 676,578 km², including 6,522 km of land boundaries and 1,930 km of coastline. It has a population of about 54 million, and Burmese is the official language. Buddhism is the country’s main religion; as stated in the constitution, it is the faith professed by the majority. Myanmar gained independence from British colonial rule in 1948. It is currently one of the poorest countries in the Indo-Pacific; its per capita gross domestic product (GDP) stood at only USD 1,216 in 2021. The United Nations’ Human Development Index 2020 ranks Myanmar 147th out of 189 countries and territories, with 38.3 percent of its people classified as multidimensionally poor.

Constitutional Structures
Since independence, Myanmar has always been governed under a military-led regime. The armed forces, officially called the “Tatmadaw,” are the most powerful political force in Myanmar. Over the decades, the military junta has been challenged by pro-democracy movements on several occasions, notably during the 8888 Uprising, which broke out on August 8, 1988. But all episodes of resistance have been brutally put down by the Tatmadaw.

The existing constitution of Myanmar was promulgated on April 9, 2008, and approved by public referendum on May 29, 2008. This was a heavily stage-managed exercise directed by the government of General Than Shwe. The 2008 constitution put in place a hybrid regime with a new elected legislature and government on the one hand, while institutionalizing the privileges of the military on the other hand. Under the constitution, 25 percent of seats in the bicameral Union Parliament are reserved for the military; a 75 percent majority is needed to amend the constitution, giving the military de facto constitutional veto power. Through a power-sharing cabinet, the military controls the appointments of minister of defense, minister of border affairs, and minister of home affairs, while the civilian president (who is elected by a simple majority vote of the full Union Parliament) controls only the remaining policy portfolios. An 11-member National Defense and Security Council—with six members controlled by the military—serves as the highest authority in the country, and the military is granted power to take over the government in case of “national emergency.” Consequential to these arrangements, the 2008 constitution is by nature quasi-democratic only, with the military continuing to hold the supreme power. In other words, the military never intended to initiate, nor did it intend to tolerate, full-fledged democratization in Myanmar.

Backsliding episodes
Still, after the 2008 constitution was enacted, Myanmar initially made some democratic gains. The first general election of the Union Parliament was held on November 7, 2010. Yet electoral fairness was challenged both domestically and internationally. The election was boycotted by the largest opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) and criticized by the West for failing to meet international standards. The election turned out to be a huge victory for the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), a newly founded pro-military party led by a long-serving general, Thein Sein; the USDP captured 80 percent of the elected seats of the Union Parliament, and Thein Sein became president. His government introduced a sweeping
process of political and economic liberalization, including the deregulation of media and the internet, the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners, and the re-registration of the NLD. A significant step forward was made in the 2012 by-election held on April 1, 2012, when the NLD won 43 of the 45 seats contested and successfully brought its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, to the Union Parliament.

The quasi-democratization of Myanmar reached its high point in the 2015 general election, when the NLD won a landslide victory—capturing 86 percent of elected seats in the Union Parliament—and got the power to select the president. While Aung San Suu Kyi was constitutionally barred from seeking the presidency because her husband and children are foreign citizens, she was appointed state counselor by NLD-affiliated President Htin Kyaw and functioned as the de facto head of the civilian government. A subtle power-sharing relationship between the military and the NLD government was thus established.

The intensification of the Rohingya crisis in 2017 was the watershed for Myanmar’s quasi-democratization. The crisis exposed the NLD government’s inability to uphold the rights of ethnic minorities and its willingness to use repressive laws such as the Telecommunications Act to silence critical voices in the media and civil society. Most evidently, dozens of reporters were prosecuted and arrested, including two Reuters journalists who were imprisoned for their investigation into the massacre of Rohingyas. The NLD government’s brutal suppression of press freedom was severely criticized by the United Nations’ Human Rights Office, which called it “a political campaign against independent journalism.”

Myanmar’s quasi-democracy came to a dramatic end after the 2020 general election held on November 8, 2020. Despite her diminished personal image, Aung San Suu Kyi still managed to lead the NLD to another victory against the USDP, which secured 83 percent of elected seats in the Union Parliament. But the election results were disputed by the military and the USDP, which alleged widespread fraud. On the morning of February 1, 2021, the Tatmadaw staged a coup d’état, detaining President Win Myint, State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, the cabinet ministers, major NLD leaders, and prominent civil society activists. The acting president, Myint Swe, proclaimed a year-long state of emergency and transferred the power from the civilian government to the commander-in-chief of the military, Min Aung Hlaing.

Shortly after the coup, massive pro-democracy protests broke out across the country. Burmese from all walks of life participated in various forms of protests, including mass demonstrations in major cities such as Naypyidaw, Yangon, and Mandalay; general strikes of civil servants, health care professionals, teachers, railway workers, and truck drivers; countrywide pot-banging events; and boycott campaigns against military-related enterprises. Such waves of pro-democracy protests became known locally and internationally as the Spring Revolution.

Unfortunately, the pro-democracy protests were again brutally put down by the military. Shortly after the coup occurred, the military junta initiated a countrywide internet shutdown and blocked major social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp. When the waves of protests nevertheless continued throughout the country, the military junta began arresting protesters on the street as well as high-profile opinion leaders who helped promote the protests through social media. On February 8, 2021, the military junta imposed martial law in Mandalay and Ayeyarwady and banned gatherings of more than five persons. Martial law was later expanded to other cities, such as Yangon, Monywa, and Sagaing. In March, the military tightened its social control by rescinding the licenses of several independent media outlets and by storming university campuses to arrest student activists and scholars. When protests continued across the country, the military resorted to violent suppression in a more undisguised manner, using rubber bullets, water cannons, tear-gas, and flash-bang devices to disperse protesters at mass rallies. Subsequently, riot police and soldiers escalated their violent crackdowns by
using live ammunition, rifle grenades, and even airstrikes, causing serious injuries and deaths.\(^{43}\)

By mid-2021, the military’s bloody repression had transformed the originally peaceful pro-democracy protests into a civil war. A group of ousted parliamentarians from the NLD and ethnic minority parties joined with several armed ethnic organizations to form a parallel government called the National Unity Government (NUG); subsequently, the NUG established its own armed wing called the People’s Defensive Forces (PDF) to initiate a “defensive war” against the military junta.\(^{44}\) Since the coup d’état on February 1, 2021, an estimated 17,900 have been killed,\(^{45}\) and the military junta has arrested more than 11,000 protesters.\(^{46}\)

**Summing Up**

Myanmar has gone through an extraordinary period of democratic advancement and democratic backsliding over the past decade (table 3). Political reforms in the early 2010s once raised domestic and international hopes for the country’s democratic transition. Unfortunately, the NLD government led by Aung San Suu Kyi missed this historic opportunity. The NLD not only failed to push for further democratic reforms when it was in power, but it also actively covered up organized violence against the Rohingyas and suppressed independent journalism. The hope for Myanmar’s democratic transition was completely dashed in 2021, when the Tatmadaw staged a coup to overturn the 2020 general election results and oust the NLD civilian government.

With Myanmar now sliding into a civil war, its state of democracy is probably going to get worse before it gets better. Democratization has already become a remote, if not unattainable, goal.

**Cambodia: Autocratic Consolidation**

**Background**

Cambodia is a sovereign country located in the southern portion of mainland Southeast Asia. Officially known as the “Kingdom of Cambodia,” it is bordered by Laos to its north, Vietnam to its east, the Gulf of Thailand to its south, and Thailand to its west. Cambodia’s total territory is 181,035 km\(^2\), including 176,515 km of land boundaries and 4,520 km of coastline. It
has a population of about 16 million. Khmer is the country’s official language, and Buddhism is the state religion.47

Colonialized by France in the nineteenth century, Cambodia eventually gained independence in 1953. It is one of the least developed countries in the Indo-Pacific region, with a per capita GDP of USD 1,653 in 2021.48 The United Nations’ Human Development Index 2020 ranks Cambodia 144th out of 189 countries and territories, and about 37.2 percent of its entire population is classified as multidimensionally poor.49

Constitutional Structures

The existing constitution of Cambodia was promulgated in 1993, following the end of the Cambodian-Vietnamese War in 1990 and the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1991.50 Under the administration of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), Cambodia was transformed into a constitutional monarchy in the early 1990s. In May 1993, a Constituent Assembly was mandated by the people of Cambodia through an open election process to spearhead the drafting of a constitution; in June 1993, Prince Norodom Sihanouk was reinstated by the Constituent Assembly as the head of state; and in September 1993, the final draft of the constitution was ratified by the Constituent Assembly and signed into law by Prince Norodom Sihanouk, symbolizing the formal establishment of the Kingdom of Cambodia.51

Under the 1993 constitution, Cambodia has a parliamentary system of government. The Parliament is a bicameral legislature consisting of the upper house (Senate) and the lower house (National Assembly). On behalf of and with the consent of the monarch, executive power is exercised by the Royal Government, which is headed by the prime minister (elected by the members of the National Assembly through a vote of confidence). Under the constitution, the prime minister and his government are directly answerable to the National Assembly.52

Backsliding Episodes

Under the 1993 constitution, the first general election was held in May 1993, resulting in the formation of a coalition government comprising the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC) and the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP). But a coup d’état in 1997 ousted the incumbent first prime minister, Norodom Ranariddh,53 and since then the CPP under the leadership of Hun Sen has been a dominant political force in Cambodia. Although multiparty elections continue to exist and a number of minor parties are allowed to operate, they are too weak to challenge the CPP’s dominance.54 Thus, Cambodia has often been labeled by political scientists as a “one-party dominant state.”55

At the turn of the 2010s, there were signs that the degree of competitiveness within Cambodia’s one-party dominant system had markedly increased, leading to hope that the country might undergo a process of “democratic consolidation.”56 The 2012 founding of a new, formidable opposition party, called the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), was indicative of the trend. The result of merging the Sam Rainsy Party and the Human Rights Party, the CNRP is a pro-democracy party advocating freedom, human rights, and fair elections. In the 2013 general election, the CNRP captured 44.46 percent of votes, securing 55 out of the 123 seats in the National Assembly. Concurrently, the CPP won only 48.83 percent of votes, and its seats were reduced from 90 to 68, marking the largest vote and seat loss of the
CPP since the 1997 coup d’état. Although electoral fraud remained pervasive, the 2013 general election offered hope of an emerging two-party system.57

Unfortunately, what happened in Cambodia was not democratic consolidation, but autocratic consolidation of the CPP one-party dominant regime.58 From July 2013 to July 2014, the CNRP led successive waves of anti-government protests to oppose the CPP’s electoral fraud and human rights violations. In January 2014, the CPP government suppressed the protests by killing several protesters and raiding the protest sites located in the Freedom Park.59 While subsequently—in July 2014—the CPP and the CNRP negotiated a deal to resume the National Assembly and share the chairmanships of parliamentary committees, this proved to be a tactical compromise by Hung Sen to further his larger plan of autocratic consolidation. In 2016, the CPP government launched a prosecution campaign against opposition leaders, human rights activists, and public intellectuals.60 For example, the CNRP leader Sam Rainsy was charged with defamation and was forced to flee the country, while his deputy, Kem Sokha, received a five-month jail sentence for disregarding a court order.61 After rounds of criminal prosecutions against opposition figures, in September 2017 the CPP government stepped up its repression by arresting Kem Sokha for treason and filing a request with the Supreme Court to dissolve the CNRP. The Supreme Court, which was chaired by a CPP central committee member, dissolved the CNRP on November 16, 2017, and banned 118 CNRP leaders from taking part in elections for five years. Consequently, 489 commune chiefs and 55 parliamentarians of the CNRP were forced to leave their offices.62 Concurrently, the CPP government closed down the Cambodia Daily, the most prominent independent newspaper in the country, for failing to pay a tax bill. It also revoked the licenses of 15 independent radio stations, including Mohanokor Radio and Voice of Democracy, and shut down the bureau of Radio Free Asia.63

The 2018 general election marked Cambodia’s move from “one-party dominant state” to “one-party state.” With the absence of credible opposition parties, the ruling CPP won all 125

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**Table 4: Cambodia’s Rankings in Major Global Indices**

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<td>Political rights</td>
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<td>Press freedom</td>
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<td>Academic freedom</td>
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seats in the National Assembly and delivered Hung Sen a sixth term as prime minister. In December 2021, there were clear signs that Cambodia would further deteriorate into some form of family dictatorship, with Hung Sen endorsed by the CPP Congress as the prime ministerial candidate for the 2023 general election and his son Hung Manet unanimously approved as the party’s future leader. Worse still for Cambodia’s democracy, the conflicts between the Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha factions of the banned CNRP have recently developed into open political rifts, indicating the further fragmentation of the opposition forces in the country.

Summing Up

Contemporary Cambodia is a typical case of autocratic consolidation (table 4). The emergence of the CNRP as a formidable opposition party in the 2013 general election proved to be short-lived. Instead, Cambodia’s backsliding changed it from a one-party dominant state into a one-party state. With opposition parties, independent media, and active civil society organizations seemingly things of the past, the blows to Cambodia’s democracy appear to be fatal.

Thailand: Hardening Gun-Barrel Politics

Background

Thailand is a sovereign country located in mainland Southeast Asia and officially known as the “Kingdom of Thailand.” It is bordered by Laos to its northeast, Cambodia to its southeast, the Gulf of Thailand and Malaysia to its south, and the Andaman Sea and Myanmar to its west. Thailand’s total territory is 513,120 km², including 5,673 km of land boundaries and 3,219 km of coastline. It has a population of about 69 million, and Thai is the official language. Buddhism is the primary religion, but the constitution does not name it as the official state religion.

Thailand is the only Southeast Asian country to have avoided colonization by Western powers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is the second-largest economy in Southeast Asia after Indonesia, and its 2021 per capita GDP stood at USD 7,336, a relatively high level for the region. The United Nations’ Human Development Index 2020 ranks Thailand 79th out of 189 countries and territories, and only 0.6 percent of its people are ranked as multidimensionally poor.

Constitutional Structures

Previously an absolute monarchy, Thailand became a constitutional monarchy after the 1932 Siamese revolution. Since then, Thailand has been ruled under the shadow of the military. Within the overall framework of a constitutional monarchy, the de facto systems of government in Thailand have alternated between quasi-democratic rule and outright military rule according to the scope of intervention of the Royal Thai Army (RTA). From 1932 to 2021, the military has staged 13 successful coups and brought in 20 different constitutions, meaning that on average there is a coup every 6.8 years and a constitution lasts for about 4.4 years. Without doubt, gun-barrel politics is the hallmark of modern Thailand.

Most of the Thai constitutions have adopted a Westminster parliamentary model as the backbone of the whole political system. Typically, the prime minister is the head of Thai government and the leader of the cabinet; he or she is elected by the lower house (House of Representatives) of the National Assembly and appointed by the monarch. Over the decades, however, the National Assembly has been changed from unicameral to
bicameral depending on the constitution, and parliamentarians have been elected, appointed, or returned by hybrid methods. Such political variations are nothing more than a reflection of Thailand’s constant swing between quasi-democratic rule and outright military rule. Under the direction of the military forces, the latest and current constitution was ratified by the monarch on April 6, 2017.

Backsliding Episodes

Thailand in the mid-2000s was characterized by a period of political turmoil. It went through a military coup (which ousted then Prime Minister Thaksin Chinnawat) in 2006 and successive waves of street protests by competing political factions (the pro-Thaksin “Red Shirts” and the anti-Thaksin “Yellow Shirts”) from 2008 to 2010. Moving into the 2010s, the quasi-democracy of Thailand appeared to have been, at least temporarily, restored. In the 2011 general election, Yinglak Chinnawat, the youngest sister of Thaksin, led the Pheu Thai Party (PTP) to win an outright majority in the House of Representatives and became the prime minister. After several years of political upheaval, Thailand under the Yinglak government entered a state of normalcy, and there were substantial improvements in freedom and human rights, such as a significant decline in the number of arrests and convictions for lèse-majesté offences.

But the Yinglak government did not last long, and so neither did the quasi-democracy of Thailand. In October 2013, the Yinglak government proposed enacting an amnesty bill, which was allegedly designed to pave the way for former Prime Minister Thaksin’s return to Thailand from his self-imposed exile. The controversies surrounding the amnesty bill resulted in fresh rounds of street politics in Bangkok, with hundreds and thousands of anti-Thaksin Yellow Shirts mobilized under the leadership of the People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC). Initially, Yinglak tried to resolve the political crisis by dissolving the House of Representatives and calling a new general election. However, her attempts were boycotted by the PDRC and the Yellow Shirt protesters.

Once again, the prolonged political crisis brought about a military coup, putting an end to the short-lived civilian rule. On May 7, 2014, the Constitutional Court removed Yinglak from office for abusing her power in appointing a relative as the national police chief in 2011. In the days that followed, the United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) mobilized the pro-Thaksin Red Shirts to demonstrate their support for Yinglak, while the PDRC-led Yellow Shirts also staged massive rallies and protests. The escalation of street protests pushed Thailand to the brink of violent upheaval. Claiming that he wished to restore peace and stability, Prayut Chan-o-cha, the RTA commander-in-chief, intervened by staging a coup d’état on May 20, removing the caretaker government and revoking the 2007 constitution. The military junta set up a new institution called the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) to take over the executive powers of the government; appointed a 220-member National Legislative Council (NLC) to perform legislative functions; and imposed countrywide martial law to tighten social control, throwing Thailand’s human rights situation “into a free fall.” Social controls under martial law included the establishment of military courts to address lèse-majesté and national security offenses; arbitrary detention of opposition activists; imposition of mass media bans on reports deemed critical of the military junta; establishment of a social media censorship system under which internet services providers were mandated to report anti-junta contents; prohibition of political gatherings of five or more people; questioning of pro-democracy scholars by national security officials; and monitoring of university seminars and activities. Throughout the four years of outright military rule (2014 to 2018), at least 92 people were charged with sedition, and 105 people were prosecuted for lèse-majesté.

To prolong its rule, the military junta repeatedly postponed the next general election and directed the drafting of a new constitution. It set up a 21-member Constitution Drafting Committee to write the draft and put the document to a referendum in August 2016. Before voting, the military junta criminalized all forms of public criticism against the draft constitution and prosecuted at least 120
politicians and activists for criticizing or vowing to vote against it. On August 7, 2016, the draft constitution was approved by 61.4 percent of Thai voters, and it was signed into law by King Rama X in April 2017. Under this new constitution, the supreme role of the RTA is institutionalized through several provisions: the military is empowered to appoint all members of the Senate; senators are prohibited from being members of a political party; the prime minister is elected by a joint meeting of the 250-member Senate and the 500-member House of Representatives; and any constitutional amendment requires the support of not less than one-third of the total number of senators. By virtue of these provisions, the military has firmly established its supremacy over any political parties seeking to form a future government or change the constitution, no matter what the result of general elections may be.

The results of the 2019 general election proved how effective the new constitution was in institutionalizing military rule in Thailand. On March 24, 2019, the first general election since the 2014 military coup was held to elect the 500 members of the House of Representatives. The pro-Thaksin PTP emerged as the largest party with 136 seats, followed by the pro-junta Palang Pracharath Party (PPP) with 116 seats and the anti-junta Future Forward Party (FFP) with 81 seats. Successfully building a voting coalition of appointed senators and elected House representatives from the PPP and other pro-junta parties, Prayut secured enough votes to take over the premiership in the inaugural National Assembly convened on June 5, 2019. In other words, by reinventing himself as an “elected prime minister” by virtue of the 2017 constitution, Prayut has shrouded the military junta in a cover of electoral democracy and prolonged his rule.

After consolidating his powers under the new constitution, Prayut stepped up his repression of political opposition. In particular, the Prayut regime targeted the FFP, the most prominent anti-junta force in Thailand in recent years. Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, the charismatic leader of the FFP, was prosecuted for alleged violation of election laws. His parliamentary seat was first suspended in May 2019 and then formally disqualified by the Constitutional Court in November 2019. In February 2020, the FFP was dissolved by the Constitutional Court for alleged violation of election laws relating to political donations. The dissolution of the FFP immediately triggered fresh rounds of countrywide street protests against the Prayut regime, which lasted for more than two years, from February 2020 to March 2022. Led by university and high school students across the country, the movement not only demanded the resignation of Prayut, dissolution of the National Assembly, and drafting of a new constitution; it also called for reform of the monarchy—the first time such a demand had been made the history of Thailand.

The Prayut regime responded with its typical repression: indiscriminate detention of protesters, widespread prosecution of opposition figures through national security and lèse-majesté laws, targeting of student activists with connections to student unions and the Free Youth Movement, detention of journalists for their coverage of the protests, censorship of anti-junta contents in social media, and countermobilization of pro-junta groups. Records indicate that after the outbreak of the protest movement in February 2020, 151 people were prosecuted for posting anti-junta and anti-royalist contents in social media, and at least 1,100 protesters were prosecuted for violating social distancing measures, curfew restrictions, and other emergency measures.

Summing Up
Long known for its gun-barrel politics, throughout the 2000s and 2010s Thailand remained trapped in the cycle of quasi-democratic rule and outright military rule (table 5). The Yinglak government brought about a short-lived civilian, quasi-democratic regime, which lasted from 2011 to 2013. It was then quickly replaced with four consecutive years of outright military rule (2014 to 2018) and the institutionalization of a military-guided democracy starting in 2019.

In recent years, hundreds and thousands of Thais have taken part in successive waves of pro-democracy protests to fight
for their rights and freedom. Thus far, these heroic struggles have not proved strong enough to break the cycle of quasi-democratic rule and outright military rule in the country. Worse still, the shadow of democratic recession is looming large after the institutionalization of military powers under the 2017 constitution. The long-awaited window of opportunity for democratic reforms remains largely shut in the foreseeable future.

**Hong Kong: The Distant Dream of Democratic Self-Government**

**Background**

Hong Kong is a nonsovereign entity located in East Asia, officially called the “Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China” (HKSAR). It is bordered by the Guangdong Province of China to its north and surrounded by sea to its east, south, and west. Hong Kong’s total territory is 1,108 km², including 73 km of land boundaries and 733 km of coastline. It is one of the most densely populated places in the world, having a population of about 7 million within its small territory. The HKSAR government maintains an official policy of “biliteracy” (English-Chinese) and “trilingualism” (English-Putonghua-Cantonese), and Hong Kong’s culture is well known as a hybrid of East and West.²³

Colonized by Britain in the nineteenth century and eventually handed over to China on July 1, 1991, Hong Kong is one of the

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Table 5: Thailand’s Rankings in Major Global Indices

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<td>Rule of law</td>
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<td>56 (102)</td>
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Map: Hong Kong
leading international financial centers and had a per capita GDP of USD 49,727 in 2021. The United Nations’ Human Development Index 2020 ranks Hong Kong fourth out of 189 countries and territories.

**Constitutional Structures**

Comparative legal scholars have long conceptualized Hong Kong as having “territorial autonomy”—exercising asymmetric autonomous powers within a sovereign country. Bearing the official name of “One Country, Two Systems” (OCTS), Hong Kong’s asymmetric autonomous arrangements under Chinese sovereignty are comparable to those found in Aceh (Indonesia), Åland Islands (Finland), Basque Country (Spain), Catalonia (Spain), Greenland (Denmark), Faroe Islands (Denmark), Macao (China), Northern Ireland (Britain), Québec (Canada), Sabah (Malaysia), Sarawak (Malaysia), South Tyrol (Italy), and Tatarstan (Russia), among others.

Hong Kong’s constitutional system is a hybrid product of international laws and domestic laws, reflecting its transition from a British colony into a Chinese Special Administrative Region in 1997. Pursuant to the Sino-British negotiations held from September 1982 to September 1984, London and Beijing agreed to settle the question of Hong Kong’s sovereignty through the OCTS model. The consensus was enshrined in the form of an international treaty registered in the United Nations, namely the Sino-British Joint Declaration (SBJD). Article 3 and Annex I of the SBJD elaborated China’s basic policies regarding Hong Kong clause by clause and provided an overall framework for Hong Kong’s autonomy after the handover of sovereignty in 1997. China’s undertakings in the SBJD were finally codified in the HKSAR Basic Law, a “mini-constitution” promulgated by the Chinese National People’s Congress (NPC) on April 4, 1990, in accordance with Article 31 of the Chinese Constitution. From this perspective, Hong Kong’s autonomous status cannot be reduced to just one single document, as it is built upon “a complex web of constituent legal instruments,” including the SBJD, the Chinese constitution, and the HKSAR Basic Law.

The political system of Hong Kong under the OCTS model has a unique design. On the one hand, the Basic Law provides a modern system of “indirect rule” through which the HKSAR government’s autonomous powers are exercised by a chief executive, who is selected by an election committee dominated by pro-Beijing elites and substantively appointed by Beijing. On the other hand, the Basic Law also stipulates that the “ultimate aims” are election of the chief executive and all members of the Legislative Council through universal suffrage. Such paradoxical arrangements reflect Beijing’s wish to kill two birds with one stone—i.e., maintain control over Hong Kong (through a system of indirect rule centered on its handpicked chief executive) and pacify the emerging demand of Hongkongers for democratic self-government (through a vague constitutional promise of implementing universal suffrage at an indefinite date).

**Backsliding Episodes**

It has long seemed clear that Beijing’s paradoxical arrangements under the Basic Law could be sustained so long as Hongkongers’ democratic demands remained mild. Once democratic demands escalated, Beijing would be required to make a hard choice—either loosening its political grip by granting Hongkongers the long-awaited right to democratic self-government, or cementing its political control over the territory through repression of democratic movement. Hong Kong’s dramatic democratic recession in recent years illustrates that Beijing has, intentionally or unintentionally, opted for the latter approach.

Hongkongers never had the right to elect their own government. But during the final years of British rule in the 1990s, Hong Kong was transformed from a colonial autocracy into a quasi-democracy: its legislature became in part a popularly elected chamber; its judiciary was reformed into an independent branch of government; and its civil society, mass media, and academia were liberalized into a vibrant public sphere. Such a quasi-democratic system provided Hongkongers with a high degree of civil liberties on a par with those in Western democracies, and it served as an institutional foundation for
massive democratic mobilization in the territory after 1997, when successive waves of pro-democracy protests began to call for universal suffrage or to defend preexisting civil rights. Drawing massive and mostly peaceful crowds into the streets, these protests included the July 1, 2003, protest against Basic Law Article 23 on national security legislation; the July 1, 2004, protest against the National People’s Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) decision to restrict universal suffrage; the 2010 anti-express railway movement protesting against cross-border socioeconomic integration; and the 2012 anti-national education movement protesting against the national education curriculum. The Beijing and HKSAR governments found it increasingly difficult to contain Hongkongers’ escalating demand for democratic self-government within the territory’s quasi-democratic system.

The fragile balance inherent in Hong Kong’s OCTS model had become untenable since the emergence of the 2014 Umbrella Movement. On August 31, 2014, the NPCSC formulated a highly controlled universal suffrage model for chief executive popular elections from 2017 onward, mandating that the candidates be endorsed by majority members of a Nominating Committee, where pro-Beijing elites firmly held a majority. Criticizing the NPCSC’s model as fake universal suffrage, the pro-democracy camp initiated “occupy” actions to fight for genuine universal suffrage. The protests lasted for 79 consecutive days, from September 28 to December 15, 2014. Yet the Umbrella Movement failed to prompt the NPCSC to change its decision.

From 2015 to 2018, there were increasing signs that the Beijing and Hong Kong governments were attempting to deal with the rising democratic demand of Hongkongers by intensifying repression. During this period, Hong Kong’s quasi-democracy was steadily chipped away. This incremental repression undermined almost all of the major democratic pillars: it reduced the Legislative Council’s checks-and-balances function (through the NPCSC’s reinterpretation of the Basic Law to disqualify opposition legislators and the pro-Beijing camp’s forceful amendment of chamber rules to stop the pro-democracy camp’s filibustering tactics); it reduced the independence of judicial courts (through the pro-Beijing media’s attacks on foreign judges sitting on the Court of Final Appeal); it checked civil society’s power to mobilize (through selective arrest and prosecution of civil society activists and pro-Beijing pseudo-groups’ countermobilization protests); it lessened the monitoring role of mass media (through pro-Beijing tycoons’ acquisition of almost all the major television, radio, and newspaper outlets); and it stifled academic freedom (through pro-Beijing media’s attacks on pro-democracy professors and researchers).

This trend of incremental repression became an outright crackdown in the aftermath of the 2019–2020 Anti-Extradition Bill Movement. In February 2019, the Carrie Lam administration proposed to enact an extradition bill, which aimed to set up an extradition mechanism for transferring fugitives from Hong Kong to Taiwan, Macao, and Mainland China. But the proposal triggered a strong fear within the society, which thought the bill would remove the existing firewall separating the legal jurisdiction of Hong Kong from Mainland China under the OCTS model. Within a few months, legal controversies surrounding the extradition bill had provoked a full-blown resistance movement calling for democratic self-government for Hong Kong. Protests lasted for more than eight months, from June 2019 until the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020. Millions of Hongkongers participated in marches, rallies, and sit-ins; formed human chains and barricaded public spaces; and took part in strikes and boycotts. As protests escalated, the police reinforced their paramilitary suppression, and protesters responded with petrol bombs. Government statistics show that a total of 10,242 protesters were arrested in the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement, the majority of them young people and students.

Responding to Hongkongers’ massive mobilization, Beijing overhauled the OCTS model. By virtue of the supreme powers
of the NPCSC under the Basic Law, Beijing took bold action to eliminate Hong Kong’s political opposition: it imposed the National Security Law in June 2020 (which extended Mainland China’s security apparatus and offenses to Hong Kong), and it revamped the Legislative Council electoral system in March 2021 (which significantly reduced the percentage of popularly elected seats and introduced a rigorous mechanism for vetting candidates). Under this new OCTS model, leading opposition groups were investigated by the police, opposition media such as Apple Daily were shut down, and prominent opposition activists either were arrested or fled. The pro-democracy camp in Hong Kong, which had survived for about four decades since the early 1980s, was wholly suppressed and extinguished.

Summing Up
Hong Kong is a democratic enclave within an autocratic China, and its road to democracy has been unavoidably uneven. Over the past few years, Hong Kong’s political trajectory was further reversed toward democratic recession, with the backsliding fast-tracked in the aftermath of the 2019–2020 Anti-Extradition Bill Movement (table 6). Unfortunately for the Hongkongers, their dream of democratic self-government remains distant, as democratic recession appears to have no end in sight.

India: The Downfall of the World’s Largest Democracy

Background
India is a sovereign country in South Asia, officially called the “Republic of India.” India shares land borders with China, Nepal, and Bhutan to the north, Myanmar and Bangladesh to the east, and Pakistan to the west; it is bounded by the Indian Ocean to the south. India’s total territory is 3,287,263 km², including 13,888 km of land boundaries and 7,000 km of coastline. India’s population is second only to China’s at about 1.38 billion. Hindi and English are the official languages at the federal level. India has no state religion and is characterized by a diversity of religious beliefs, including Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, and Sikhism, among others. But Hinduism has often been seen as a state-supported religion that has been privileged in India.

### Table 6: Hong Kong’s Rankings in Major Global Indices

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<td><strong>Political rights</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Civil liberty</strong></td>
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<td>58 (209)</td>
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<td><strong>Rule of law</strong></td>
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India was colonized by Britain in the nineteenth century and achieved its independence in 1947. Despite its robust economic growth in recent years, India remains a developing economy, and its per capita GDP stood at only USD 2,282 in 2021. The United Nations’ Human Development Index 2020 ranks India 131st out of 189 countries and territories, with 27.9 percent of its people classified as multidimensionally poor.

Constitutional Structures

The Indian constitution is well known as one of the longest written constitutions in the world. Adopted by the Constituent Assembly of India in 1949 and becoming effective in 1950, the current version of the Indian constitution comprises 470 articles in 25 parts, 12 schedules, and five appendices.

India is a parliamentary democracy built upon the British Westminster model. But unlike the British system, which functions within a constitutional monarchy, the Indian system operates under a republican framework—the president serves as the nominal head of state, and the prime minister functions as the head of government. The president is indirectly elected for a five-year term by an electoral college, which comprises members of both houses of Parliament, while the prime minister is the leader of the majority party or majority coalition in the lower house of the Parliament. Ministers of the cabinet, officially known as the Union Council of Ministers, are recommended by the prime minister for appointment by the president.

The Indian Parliament is a bicameral legislature. The upper house, known as the Council of States, is a 245-member chamber elected indirectly by members of the state and union territorial legislatures for six-year terms; the lower house, called the House of the People, is a 545-member chamber directly elected by popular vote through single-member constituencies for five-year terms.

Backsliding Episodes

Indians often take pride in their country as the world’s largest democracy. Since the adoption of the 1950 constitution, India has held regular, competitive multiparty elections and has established itself as a successful model of democracy in Asia. However, moving into the 2010s, there were increasing signs that India was undergoing substantial democratic recession, as reflected by across-the-board downgrading of its level of democracy by Freedom House, Variety of Democracy, and Economist Intelligence Unit.

The watershed for Indian democracy was the 2014 general election. In this election, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), a Hindu nationalist, right-wing coalition led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), won a landslide victory. It decisively defeated its main rival, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), a center-left coalition led by the Indian National Congress (INC). After swearing in the prime minister, the BJP leader Narendra Modi began steadily advancing a Hindu nationalist agenda known as “Hindutva,” an ideology that sees “Hinduness” as part of being a true Indian and seeks to establish the hegemony of Hinduism across the whole of India. The trend was reinforced after the 2019 general election, when Modi led the BJP to win reelection and secured an enormous parliamentary majority.

As a consequence of the Modi government’s aggressive advancement of the Hindutva agenda, “illiberal proclivities” that
undermine Indian democratic institutions and political pluralism have become increasingly common since 2014. One of the major illiberal trends is the increasing violence against Muslim minorities, which is directly or indirectly mobilized by BJP-affiliated politicians and organizations. The rising cow vigilante violence across the country is most indicative of this trend. In these incidents, Hindu nationalist mobs victimize cattle herders on their way to sell bulls, laborers working in the tanneries, and even passengers on trains accused of possessing beef. The Muslim and Dalit communities have usually been targeted in these incidents, because many of them earn their living by skinning and disposing of cow carcasses. This violent trend was given impetus after the 2019 general election, when the reelected BJP government set up a National Cow Commission—fulfilling its campaign promise to protect cows—and several BJP-led state governments legislated to tighten the bans on cattle slaughter. Seeing themselves as “cow protectors” helping to uphold the legal bans, the Hindu nationalist mobs are reported to be active members of the BJP’s right-wing partner organizations, such as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Vishwa Hindu Parishad. From May 2015 to December 2018, at least 44 people were killed and 280 people were injured in over 100 different cow-related violent incidents. Instead of stopping this violent trend, in February 2021 the BJP central government proposed a complete legal ban on the slaughter of cows and on the sale, storage, or transportation of beef products in any form.

Apart from encouraging cow vigilante violence, the BJP government has also maintained a deafening silence about many violent attacks against Muslims, including the 2020 Delhi riots. On February 23, 2020, hundreds of Hindu nationalist mobs attacked the Muslim communities in North East Delhi, killing dozens, firebombing houses, and destroying mosques. Commanded by the BJP government, the Delhi police were found to have acted in a coordinated manner with the armed mobs and on occasions to have joined the attacks on Muslims. After the riots, Home Minister Amit Shah praised the performance of the Delhi police and blamed the INC and Muslim leaders for triggering the rioting.

Further, the BJP government has been trying to silence all voices opposing its Hindutva agenda by suppressing mass media, academia, and civil society. The most prominent trend is the increased violence against press freedom, which includes police brutality against journalists covering street protests, online harassment of reporters who were critical of the BJP government, and the murder of journalists by Hindu nationalists in response to critical reports on the BJP government. Academic freedom is also under attack, with university students and professors intimidated over nationalist and religious issues. For example, several student activists were prosecuted for sedition when their organization held memorial protests on the anniversary of the execution of a Kashmiri separatist in February 2017; and a professor at the University of Mysore was arrested for allegedly insulting a Hindu deity in June 2017. Civil society organizations advocating for minority rights are also facing legal harassment from the BJP government. Nearly 15,000 civil society groups have been de-registered and cut off from foreign grants under the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act since 2015. In August 2018, several left-wing civil society activists who were critical of the BJP government had their homes and offices raided by police on grounds that they were connected with banned Indian Maoist groups. In October 2018, the police raided the offices of Greenpeace India and Amnesty International India and froze their financial accounts.

The people in Jammu-Kashmir are arguably the biggest victims. Guaranteed a territorial autonomous arrangement under Articles 370 and 35A of the Indian constitution, the Muslim-populated Kashmir has since 1954 maintained its own system of government, including its own regional constitution, a separate regional flag, and the regional autonomy to make laws. Calling the territorial autonomous arrangement a “historical blunder,” the BJP government on August 5, 2019, moved a resolu-
tion in the House of the People to revoke Articles 370 and 35A. Consequently, the autonomy of Kashmir was suspended, and the region was divided into two separate centrally administered union territories. To preemptively curb the protests of the Kashmiris, the BJP government imposed a heavy-handed lockdown, deployed thousands of Indian security troops to the region, detained leading Kashmir politicians, activists, and academics, imposed a curfew, expelled foreign journalists, and shut down phone and internet networks. Many of these restrictions remain in place nearly two years later.136

**Summing Up**

In recent years, rising Hindu nationalism in India has dramatically transformed the world’s largest democracy (table 7). Under the BJP government, since 2014, India’s freedom and human rights have been systematically violated, as reflected in increased violence against Muslim minorities, the crackdowns on expressions of dissent (by media, academia, and civil society groups), and revocation of Kashmir’s autonomy. Without doubt, India is now on the brink of being ranked not as the “world’s largest democracy” but as the “world’s largest illiberal democracy.”

### Table 7: India’s Rankings in Major Global Indices

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In the political science literature, democratic recession is often seen as a process of decay endogenously driven by "domestic forces" located within a country or territory. In this view, democratic recession is similar to the natural phenomenon of "endogenous decay," wherein inherently unstable radioactive elements undergo an endogenously driven disintegration. In the same way, a political regime can be understood to contain seeds of its own destruction, and democratic recession to be caused by factors intrinsic to the regime itself.137

According to this explanation, democratic recession is driven by illiberal strongmen, who are products of deep-rooted cleavages inherent within the countries and territories. In other words, to understand the domestic forces driving democratic recession, it is necessary to examine who are the illiberal strongmen and what are the underlying deep-rooted cleavages. The top democratic backsliders in the Indo-Pacific provide us with living examples.

Illiberal Strongmen’s Takeovers
Democratic recession often comes in the form of either executive takeovers or military takeovers, with the former spearheaded by populist leaders and the latter led by army generals.138 Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland are populist leaders who exemplify executive takeovers in their countries; while Constantine Chiwenga in Zimbabwe, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Egypt, and...
Ahmed Gaid Salah in Algeria are all prominent examples of army generals who led military takeovers in their countries.\textsuperscript{139} Evidently, the Indo-Pacific region is not short of such populist leaders and army generals, as shown in the democratic recession of Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand, India, the Philippines, Pakistan, and Indonesia. In addition, another type of illiberal strongmen known as nationalist state leaders can be identified in the democratic recession of Hong Kong and Jammu-Kashmir, two of the nonsovereign territories in the Indo-Pacific region.

Populist Politicians’ Executive Takeovers: India, the Philippines, Cambodia, Pakistan, and Indonesia

Most populist leaders have risen to power by way of inflaming divisions within their countries or manipulating people’s disappointment with the status quo.\textsuperscript{140} During elections, these populist leaders usually position themselves as strongmen representing the will of the “people” (or the “majority”), while accusing the “elites” (or the “minority”) of undermining national unity. By virtue of their electoral mandate, after taking office these populist leaders often heavy-handedly suppress political pluralism\textsuperscript{141} and remove the legislative, judicial, and media checks and balances on executive actions.\textsuperscript{142}

In the Indo-Pacific, these populist leaders are mostly found in countries and territories that hold regular multiparty elections but lack entrenched checks-and-balances mechanisms on executive actions. A textbook example is Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is the principal domestic agent behind India’s democratic recession. Long before entering into electoral politics, Modi was a Hindu nationalist pracharak of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a far-right paramilitary volunteer organization. After rising to the position of chief minister of Gujarat, Modi became infamous internationally for condoning the violence of Hindu rioters in the 2002 Gujarat pogrom, which led to the death of several hundred Muslims. Whether campaigning in Gujarat’s state elections in the 2000s or general elections in 2014 and 2019, Modi has always made Hindu nationalist, anti-Islam rhetoric the center of his campaign messaging and has successfully led the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to unprecedented victories.\textsuperscript{143} Since taking office, Modi has made Hindutva his government’s defining policy agenda. He has appointed a number of Hindu nationalists from the RSS to the cabinet to help advance the Hindutva agenda, and has also silenced opposition voices in the media, academia, and civil society.\textsuperscript{144}

In the Philippines, Rodrigo Roa Duterte, who was elected as the president in 2016, is clearly the domestic agent of the country’s democratic recession. Well known for his brutal treatment of criminals during his mayorship in Davao, Duterte promoted himself as a strongman in the 2016 presidential election.\textsuperscript{145} Throughout his campaign, Duterte blamed drug criminals and dynastic oligarchs for the country’s problems, claiming to make the former “[e]at bullets” and to destroy the latter’s “Imperial Manila.”\textsuperscript{146} After winning the presidency, Duterte staged a war on drugs, leading to the extrajudicial killings of thousands of drug suspects.\textsuperscript{147} Duterte’s strongman persona also emboldened him to abuse state powers to silence his critics—by detaining opposition politicians, removing vocal judges, and prosecuting media outlets.\textsuperscript{148} Characterized by profane language and brutal enforcements,\textsuperscript{149} the Duterte’s populist regime remained popular in the Philippines despite its damage to democratic institutions.\textsuperscript{150} Worse still for Philippine democracy, when Duterte left office in June 2022 he was succeeded by another populist strongman, namely Ferdinand Marcos Jr.—the son of the Philippines’ infamous dictator Ferdinand Marcos, who ruled the country with an iron grip from 1965 to 1986.\textsuperscript{151}

In Cambodia, Prime Minister Hun Sen offers a unique case of how a Machiavellian strongman can integrate terror and populism to advance autocratization. Well known in the West for his repression of dissidents, Hun Sen is less known for his political acumen in courting popularity through populist appeals. Since the 1990s, Hun Sen and his Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) have maintained an organized patronage network in rural areas. By offering generous “gifts” to farmers in the form of food, roads, wells, and schools, Hun Sen has made the countryside
a stable voter support base for his regime. Good at speaking in ordinary people’s language, Hun Sen regularly tours the countryside to attend school events, host ribbon-cutting ceremonies, and visit farmers in rice paddies. After the 2013 general election, when the CPP was almost defeated by the opposition party (the Cambodia National Rescue Party, CNRP), Hun Sen adopted “a two-track strategy” to regain voters’ support, using populist appeals to address supporters and state terror to repress the opposition. While the international community keeps a close watch on his prosecution of opposition leaders and activists, Hun Sen has rebranded himself as a “man of the people” by organizing online and offline populist campaigns. These have included creating an image on his personal Facebook page (with photos that show him cleaning up a park and eating noodles with citizens on the street) and introducing economic populist measures to win over pro-opposition garment workers and urban dwellers (i.e., raising minimum wages and promising to slash electricity prices). All in all, Hun Sen’s brand of “populist authoritarianism,” which combines both terror and populism, is the principal domestic force behind the recent democratic recession in Cambodia.

In Pakistan, the election of Imran Khan as prime minister in August 2018 was found to be the inflection point for the country’s democracy. Hailed as a national hero in Pakistan because of his legendary cricket career, Khan launched his political career by founding the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party in 1996. Positioning himself as an outsider aspiring to break the dominance of the two leading parties (the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz and the Pakistan People’s Party), Khan successfully appealed to the religious and nationalist sentiment in the country through Islamic, anti-Western, and anti-elitist rhetoric. Khan’s populism finally brought him to power in the 2018 general election, when his party secured a plurality in the National Assembly and formed a government together with smaller parties. After entering office, Khan attempted to consolidate his power by directing his populism against critics and dissidents, particularly when his promised reforms were stalling. Khan used the National Accountability Bureau to target alleged corruption of his rivals, enacted new laws to block social media content he considered seditious, and attacked opposition politicians for devising foreign plots against the people. After three-plus years as premier, Khan was finally ousted from office in April 2022 following the passage of a no-confidence motion initiated by a coalition of opposition parties. It remains to be seen whether the democratic recession in Pakistan will be accelerated or decelerated in the post-Khan period.

In Indonesia, President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) was hailed as a “new face of democracy” when elected president in 2014, but he has brought his country to the most serious crisis of democracy since the fall of the Suharto military regime in 1998. During the 2014 presidential election, Jokowi campaigned as a populist candidate, framing himself as a political outsider who came from “the common people.” Since taking up the presidency, Jokowi has attempted to consolidate his power base by continuing to resort to populism. Increasingly, Jokowi has adopted populist rhetoric both to attack his rivals as threatening “the unity of Indonesia” and to rationalize his repression of the political opposition. Under the rhetoric of populism, Jokowi has steadily sidelined democratic norms and moved toward autocracy, particularly ahead of his 2019 reelection bid. This has led to repression of opposition parties, decline of civil liberties, and weakening of checks-and-balances mechanisms—the most serious in the post-Suharto period. Currently, Jokowi’s followers are actively campaigning for the extension of the presidential term limit. Time will tell whether it will become a final straw that breaks Indonesia’s democracy.

Army Generals’ Military Takeovers: Myanmar and Thailand

Apart from populist leaders, army generals are another type of illiberal strongmen. The common characteristic of these army generals is that they have all seized control of civilian governments through so-called “promissory coups,” claiming that their military interventions are necessary steps to preserve constitu-
tional order and promising to restore democratic elections in a not-so-distant future. But in practice, their coups d’état always end up subverting the preexisting democratic institutions and violently suppressing the political opposition.

These army generals are typically found in countries that have an entrenched tradition of gun-barrel politics. In Myanmar, General Min Aung Hlaing, the Tatmadaw’s commander-in-chief who staged the coup in February 2021, is a textbook example. Admitted to the Defense Services Academy in 1974, Min climbed the military ladder and became commander-in-chief in 2011. Why did Min Aung Hlaing stage the coup d’état in 2021? It is arguable that the military coup was motivated by Min Aung Hlaing’s personal ambitions and interests. On the one hand, as a stalwart defender of the military’s continued role in Myanmar’s politics, Min Aung Hlaing had all along demonstrated no interest in transition to full civilian rule and adopted a rather uncooperative attitude toward the Aung San Suu Kyi’s civilian government. On the other hand, given that he would reach the military’s mandatory retirement age of 65 by July 2021, Min Aung Hlaing badly needed to explore a new pathway to extend his political power and influence and protect his family’s business empire. When the pro-military Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) was entirely defeated by Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD) in the 2020 general election, coup d’état seemed to become a plausible option for him. In defense of his decision to stage a military coup, Min Aung Hlaing addressed the country in a televised speech claiming that he was acting only “to maintain and protect the democratic system.”

In Thailand, General Prayut Chan-o-cha played a similar role as the domestic agent who drove the country into democratic recession. A graduate of the Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy, Prayut Chan-o-cha began his military career in 1987 and rose up to the position of commander-in-chief of the Royal Thai Army (RTA) in 2010. Seen as a staunch royalist, on the day he became commander-in-chief he reiterated the army’s twofold mandate to protect the monarchy and to maintain Thailand’s sovereignty. Following the 2011 general election, Prayut Chan-o-cha initially demonstrated his willingness to cooperate with the newly elected civilian government led by Yingluck Shinawatra. But when the enactment of an amnesty bill gave rise to a new political crisis in late 2013, Prayut Chan-o-cha started to hint at the possibility of military intervention. He finally made use of the months-long political crisis to advance his personal ambition by staging a military coup in May 2014. Claiming that the coup d’état would “keep peace and order in the country” but failing to provide any timetable for holding the general election, Prayut Chan-o-cha quickly concentrated all powers in his hands by occupying the three most powerful offices: military commander-in-chief, prime minister, and chairman of the National Council for Peace and Order (official name of the military junta). That Prayut Chan-o-cha’s goal was to stay in power indefinitely was shown by the enactment of a new constitution, which institutionalized the supreme position of the RTA. The 2019 general election, the first election held after the 2014 coup, finally became a platform for Prayut Chan-o-cha the military general to reinvent himself an elected politician.

Nationalist State Leaders: Hong Kong and Jammu-Kashmir

Existing literature on democratic recession principally focuses on sovereign states and pays little attention to the status of democracy in nonsovereign territories. But incorporating both sovereign and nonsovereign entities into the analytical framework reveals an under-studied type of illiberal strongman of democratic recession, namely the nationalist state leader.

The role of Chinese president Xi Jinping in the democratic recession of Hong Kong illustrates how influential a nationalist state leader can be. Since becoming the top leader in 2013, Xi Jinping has amply demonstrated his nationalist ambition to establish centralized control over the Chinese peripheral regions, ranging from Xinjiang and Tibet to Hong Kong and Taiwan. With regard to Hong Kong, Xi Jinping exhibited his uncompro-
mising stance by redefining Hong Kong’s One Country, Two Systems (OCTS) model through a 2014 white paper and imposing a screening mechanism for chief executive popular elections in the 2014–2015 constitutional saga. When millions of Hongkongers rose up to demand democratic self-government during the 2019–2020 Anti-Extradition Bill Movement, Xi Jinping responded by imposing the National Security Law to dismantle Hong Kong’s quasi-democracy. For Xi, national unity in pursuit of the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” takes precedence over Hong Kong’s autonomy and democracy. As he bluntly proclaimed in a landmark speech on the Chinese Communist Party’s 100th anniversary, “We will ensure that the central government exercises overall jurisdiction over Hong Kong and Macao and implement the legal systems and enforcement mechanisms for the two Special Administrative Regions to safeguard national security.”

In Jammu-Kashmir, Prime Minister Narendra Modi played a similar role of nationalist state leader, steering the Muslim-majority territory’s democratic recession. Protected by Articles 370 and 35A of the Indian constitution, the special autonomous status of Kashmir had long been opposed by Modi and his Hindu nationalist allies as an unfair privilege wrongly granted to the Muslims within a Hindu India. Ahead of the 2019 general election, the BJP included the abolition of Kashmir’s special autonomous status on its 75-clause election manifesto. “Nationalism is our inspiration,” Modi said after announcing the election manifesto. After winning a resounding victory in the 2019 general election, Modi claimed a mandate to quickly and unilaterally revoke Articles 370 and 35A. Considering the revocation as part of the unfinished Hindu nationalist project, Modi defended the move in a televised address by describing Kashmir’s special status as a threat to national unity and security: “A new age has begun in Jammu-Kashmir and Ladakh. Now the rights and accountabilities of all the citizens of the country are similar... Articles 370 and 35A have given nothing but secessionism, terrorism, nepotism, and widespread corruption on a large scale to Jammu-Kashmir. Both these articles were used as a weapon by Pakistan to flare up the emotions of some people.” Kashmiris have unfortunately become one of the many casualties of Modi’s aggressive pursuit of the Hindutva agenda.

Deep-Rooted Cleavages
It is important to note that populist leaders, army generals, and nationalist state leaders do not emerge in a vacuum but only as a result of deep-rooted cleavages inherent within their countries and territories. On most occasions, these illiberal strongmen have exploited the prevailing cleavages to gain political ascendancy and to subvert the established democratic processes. In other words, what has actually generated the recent democratic recession across the Indo-Pacific is the intensification of those cleavages, which are firmly embedded within the relevant countries and territories—populist leaders, army generals, and nationalist state leaders succeed in subverting democratic institutions only when such cleavages are present.

In Jammu-Kashmir, Prime Minister Narendra Modi played a similar role of nationalist state leader, steering the Muslim-majority territory’s democratic recession. Protected by Articles 370 and 35A of the Indian constitution, the special autonomous status of Kashmir had long been opposed by Modi and his Hindu nationalist allies as an unfair privilege wrongly granted to the Muslims within a Hindu India. Ahead of the 2019 general election, the BJP included the abolition of Kashmir’s special autonomous status on its 75-clause election manifesto. “Nationalism is our inspiration,” Modi said after announcing the election manifesto. After winning a resounding victory in the 2019 general election, Modi claimed a mandate to quickly and unilaterally revoke Articles 370 and 35A. Considering the revocation as part of the unfinished Hindu nationalist project, Modi defended the move in a televised address by describing Kashmir’s special status as a threat to national unity and security: “A new age has begun in Jammu-Kashmir and Ladakh. Now the rights and accountabilities of all the citizens of the country are similar... Articles 370 and 35A have given nothing but secessionism, terrorism, nepotism, and widespread corruption on a large scale to Jammu-Kashmir. Both these articles were used as a weapon by Pakistan to flare up the emotions of some people.” Kashmiris have unfortunately become one of the many casualties of Modi’s aggressive pursuit of the Hindutva agenda.

Political scientists have long recognized the role of deep-rooted cleavages in breeding regime instability, particularly in destabilizing democracy. Generations of political scientists have examined how group conflicts may escalate to the point where they threaten democracy and disintegrate society, how polarization of the society into highly antagonistic groups may put democracy in danger, and how limited consensus and deep suspicions between leading actors may trigger crises within a political system. Such cleavages emerge where enduring divisions exist in class, race, ethnicity, religion, language, or territoriality (or a combination of these), depending on the unique contexts of the countries and territories concerned. It is obvious that almost all the major democratic backsliders in the Indo-Pacific have been structurally trapped in some form of deep-rooted cleavages for decades. In recent years, these cleavages have intensified and become fuel for democratic recession.

Elite-Mass Cleavage
Elite-mass cleavage drives the democratic recession in countries like the Philippines and Thailand. In the Philippines, patri-
Monopolism has dominated the political economy since colonial times. Rent seeking prevails in the state bureaucracy and most of the economic sectors, resulting in the enduring concentration of wealth in the hands of a small group of oligarchic families. It is estimated that 40 of the richest families in the Philippines control almost 80 percent of the country’s wealth. While the Philippines experienced impressive economic growth rates under President Benigno Aquino III (2010–2016), the benefit of growth did not trickle down to ordinary Filipinos—income inequality, corruption, and organized crime were prevalent. This gave rise to a widening elite-mass cleavage, resulting in a popular sentiment of fatigue with democracy and paving the way for the emergence of Duterte’s authoritarian populism in the 2016 presidential election. Despite his high-sounding rhetoric, during his presidency Duterte failed to make any real difference in the problems facing the country. Worse still, Duterte selectively campaigned against those oligarchs he saw as political rivals and created his own new class of “Dutertegarchs.” As the elite-mass cleavage had worsened rather than resolved under Duterte, in 2022 the majority of Filipinos voted for another populist strongman, Ferdinand Marcos Jr. Invoking his dictator father through populist rhetoric, Ferdinand Marcos Jr. successfully appealed to the dissatisfied mass by promising to bring the country back to the “good old days” of the Marcos autocratic regime.

Another version of elite-mass cleavage has prevailed in Thailand, where the pro-royalist military elites have increasingly clashed with the popular demand for mass democracy. In the eyes of the military elites, mass democracy means chaos, and they see themselves as defending the national order. Consequently, from the ousting of the Seni Pramoj administration (1975–1976) and the unseating of the Chatchai Choonhavan government (1988–1991) to the downfall of the Thaksin Shinawatra premiership (2001–2006) and the overthrow of the Yingluck Shinawatra government (2011–2014), the military elites have responded to the challenge of mass politics by resorting to coups d’état, crackdowns, and constitutional overhauls. In recent years, the military elites have found it increasingly difficult to contain the rising mass politics, exemplified by the youth-led Future Forward Party and the 2021–2022 anti-royalist student protests. Refusing to compromise, the military junta led by General Prayut Chan-o-cha has addressed the widening cleavage by reinforcing repression. The recent democratic recession of Thailand is therefore a reflection of the unresolved deep-rooted conflicts between the pro-royalist military elites and the pro-democracy public.

Ethno-Religious Cleavage
Ethno-religious cleavage propagates democratic recession in countries like Myanmar and India. In Myanmar, the cleavage between the Bamar-Buddhist majority and ethno-religious minorities has sowed the seeds of the country’s recent democratic recession. Since its independence, Myanmar has been embroiled in ethno-religious conflicts, and the Tatmadaw have fought with ethnic armed organizations across the country for decades. General Aung San’s vision of a federalist Myanmar, which was enshrined in the 1947 Panglong Agreement, remains unfulfilled. In 2016, the civilian government led by the NLD promised to make the pursuit of ethnic peace its priority. But the NLD government only struggled to broker an inter-ethnic peace, and it failed to protect ethnic minorities during the escalation of the Rohingya crisis. The intensification of inter-ethnic conflicts greatly undermined Aung San Suu Kyi’s political capital, paving the way for General Min Aung Hlaing to stage a coup d’état in February 2021 and end the quasi-democratic experiment. Evidently, the deep-rooted ethno-religious cleavage has made Myanmar a failed state and deconsolidated its quasi-democracy. It has enabled the Tatmadaw to make a political comeback by appealing to national security.

In India, similar ethno-religious cleavage also prevails between the Hindu majority and the Muslim minority, a rift that originates in the partition of British India into a Hindu-dominated India and a Muslim-dominated Pakistan in 1947. Although the preamble of the Indian constitution specifies that India should be “a
Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic,” since its independence the country has been sharply divided on whether it is a sectarian state or a state for Hindus. For many decades, the deep-rooted ethno-religious cleavage was less salient because the predominant Indian National Congress (INC) largely adopted a sectarian and pluralist ideology—though the Muslim minority’s human rights were severely assaulted on occasion, such as Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s declaration of the state of national emergency in 1975–1977. As opposed to the INC’s stronger commitment to secularism and pluralism, the BJP and its parent organization RSS embrace exclusionary Hindu nationalism and derive their ideology from the twentieth-century Hindutva thinker Vinayak Damodar Savarkar.

Before the 1990s, the BJP remained largely peripheral in Indian national politics and was far from a mainstream political force. But against the backdrop of intensifying Hindu-Muslim riots throughout the country, the ideology of Hindutva gained prominence among the Hindu majority. The BJP then emerged as a popular party at both the national and state levels in the 2000s, setting up the ground for the eventual capture of power by Narendra Modi in the 2013 general election.

**Center-Periphery Cleavage**

Center-periphery cleavage prevails in nonsovereign territories such as Hong Kong and Jammu-Kashmir. In Hong Kong, the center-periphery cleavage between Beijing and Hongkongers originates from their radically different expectations about the One Country, Two Systems model—Hongkongers aspire to maintain the “two systems” permanently under a decentralized “one country,” while Beijing perceives the “two systems” as a transitional phase moving toward a centralized “one country.” After its failure to enact the Basic Law Article 23 national security law in 2003, Beijing leaders sought to change the OCTS model in Hong Kong into a more centralized, authoritarian arrangement. Nevertheless, for many years the Hu Jintao regime (2002–2012) largely followed an incremental approach and chipped away at Hong Kong’s quasi-democracy through clandestine forms of autocratization. These included pumping money into pro-Beijing parties for them to outcompete the democrats in the Legislative Council and District Council elections, sponsoring pseudo–civil society groups to intimidate democratic activists, and acquiring local media outlets through pro-Beijing tycoons, among others. Nevertheless, under the Xi Jinping regime (2013–present), Hong Kong has become embroiled in a vicious cycle of center-periphery conflicts. On the one hand, Hongkongers are increasingly frustrated with the prolonged delays in granting universal suffrage and have developed a stronger sense of localism to resist Beijing’s expanding influence in the territory; on the other hand, Beijing is increasingly worried about losing its grip over the territory and has determined to reinforce its centralism. The consequence of such a vicious cycle is an escalation of the center-periphery conflicts, first in the 2014 Umbrella Movement and then in 2019–2020 Anti-Extradition Bill Movement. Both are preparing the ground for the nationalist Xi Jinping regime to accelerate the autocratization of the OCTS model.

In Jammu-Kashmir, the countrywide ethno-religious cleavage between Hinduism and Islam exists in parallel with a center-periphery cleavage between New Delhi and Kashmiris. Almost as soon as the former princely state of Jammu-Kashmir joined India in 1947, its special autonomous status within the country became a source of endless political controversy, with New Delhi attempting to integrate the territory and Kashmiris fighting for full autonomy. While New Delhi’s efforts to integrate Kashmir remained a slow march during decades of INC-led governments from the 1950s to 1980s, calls for a complete revocation of Kashmir’s special status started to gain prominence against the backdrop of surging Hindu nationalism in the 1990s. As the only Muslim-majority state within India, Kashmir’s special autonomous status has been long criticized by Hindu nationalists as an unfair privilege wrongly granted to the Muslims. In the Hindutva view, such a “historical error” should be undone by recovering Kashmir from the Muslim occupiers and completely integrating the whole territory into Akhand Bharat (an undivided India). The Hindu nationalists’ long-standing commitment
to dismantling Kashmir's special autonomous status was finally put into practice after the 2019 general election, when the BJP achieved a landslide victory under the leadership of Narendra Modi. But it is important to note that what Modi has done is not something completely new; he is only continuing and accelerating a decades-long effort to integrate Kashmir into India.219
Indo-Pacific Democracy: A Baseline Study of Major Trends and Driving Forces

Domestic forces are the most popular explanation adopted by political scientists in accounting for the global democratic recession. Apart from domestic forces, political scientists have also increasingly identified the importance of geopolitical forces in causing democratic recession in some countries and territories. Based on this line of reasoning, democratic recession is not only the result of endogenous decay but is also the consequence of a process of “exogenous erosion”—like the process that occurs when a stone is hit by water and wind. Borrowing this metaphor, a political regime’s democratic recession can be exogenously caused by factors extrinsic to its own essential signification.

According to this explanation, democratic recession is driven by illiberal powers whose expanding influence directly or indirectly contributes to the regime’s autocratization. Thus to understand the geopolitical forces driving democratic recession, it is not just necessary to highlight illiberal powers’ influence mechanisms; it is equally important to place the dynamics in the context of structural changes in global power balances. The top democratic backsliders in the Indo-Pacific provide us with living examples of why the geopolitical forces matters.

**Illiberal Powers’ Expanding Sphere of Influence**

Looking around the world, it is evident that several illiberal powers, including Russia, China, and Iran, are now proactively expanding their spheres of influence and rolling back democratic institutions globally or regionally. Conceptualizing these powers as “authoritarian gravity centers” in today’s multipolar world.

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**Caption:** Police fire tear gas to clear pro-Democracy protesters during a demonstration in Hong Kong on August 14, 2019, against the extradition bill. (Photo by Anthony Kwan/Getty Images)
a burgeoning body of literature indicates that global illiberal powers—namely Russia and China—have caused democratic recession globally by exercising their “sharp power” and influencing foreign countries’ political parties, elections, media, internet, academia, and think tanks. In addition, regional illiberal powers such as Iran and Saudi Arabia are gaining prominence regionally by influencing the democratic processes of neighboring countries.

In the context of the Indo-Pacific, China is unquestionably the principal illiberal power with both the intention and the ability to shape the democratic norms of many countries and territories, though Russia is also playing a peripheral role in the region. A closer examination of the major democratic backsliders in the Indo-Pacific will reveal the relevance of China’s and Russia’s influence on democratic recession across the region.

The cases of Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand, and the Philippines are most illustrative: in these countries China’s influence has functioned as an impetus to democratic recession. That is, China’s material and diplomatic support have enabled illiberal strongmen to overcome regime crises or accelerate autocratization projects. Myanmar’s quasi-democratic experiments at the turn of the 2010s and subsequent political backsliding are both closely related to China’s influence. After its harsh crackdown on the 8888 Uprising in 1988, the military junta was diplomatically isolated and economically sanctioned by the West and could turn only to China for economic and military support. By the end of the 2000s, Myanmar’s dependence on China had become so lopsided that it was at risk of becoming a Chinese vassal state. This prompted the Tatmadaw to embark on quasi-democratic reforms to diplomatically and economically engage the West. However, when Myanmar encountered renewed Western pressure and sanctions after the Rohingya crisis in 2017, China exerted its diplomatic influence to protect Aung San Suu Kyi’s civilian government and the Tatmadaw from being sanctioned in the United Nations. China also provided the much-needed economic boost for Aung San Suu Kyi’s government by offering three dozen Belt and Road projects in January 2020. After the military coup in 2021, the West tried to pressure the Tatmadaw by imposing sanctions and suspending economic aid. But such efforts were offset by China, which acted as Myanmar’s geopolitical patron by supporting the military junta across the spectrum of diplomacy (e.g., rejecting all resolutions in the United Nations Security Council deemed critical of Myanmar’s human rights record), the military (e.g., expanding arms sales to the Tatmadaw), and the economy (e.g., ratifying a new bilateral investment agreement). Russia also boosted the military junta by diplomatically partnering with China in the United Nations and militarily expanding arms exports. All in all, Chinese and Russian influence bolstered the resilience of the military junta, enabling it to weather domestic opposition and Western pressure.

In Cambodia, China has performed a similar role in directly supporting the Cambodia People’s Party (CPP) government, enabling it to overcome mounting domestic and international challenges to its autocratization projects. In the aftermath of the 2013 general election, the Hun Sen regime risked losing the West’s long-term economic aid, trading opportunities, and investment projects as it sought to suppress the challenge of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP). In a timely manner, China helped the Hun Sen regime get over the political crisis by enlarging its economic and military support to Cambodia. China is Cambodia’s largest source of foreign investment, and the Belt and Road projects in recent years have helped sustain the CPP’s “crony-capitalist networks of state-party and economic elites,” which serve as the legitimacy foundation of the Hun Sen regime. China also stepped up its aid and training for the Cambodian army, and the two countries have regularly carried out joint military exercises (called the “Golden Dragon”) since 2016. Midway through the 2018 general election, the US and the European Union (EU) tried to pressure the Hun Sen regime by withdrawing sponsorship for the election and threatening to sanction Cambodia’s important garment industry; China immediately stepped in and supported Hun Sen by offering conces-
sional loans for infrastructure projects and providing the Cambodian National Election Committee with funding, computers, printers, ballot boxes, and voting booths. In July 2020, China and Cambodia finalized a free trade agreement, which was intentionally timed to mitigate the impact of the EU’s impending suspension of Cambodian garment products’ preferential trade treatment. With China’s blessing, the Hun Sen regime not only won the 2018 general election handily, but was also bolstered to continue its crackdown on the political opposition in the post-election period.

In Thailand, China has once again played the role of geopolitical patron, helping the Thai military junta weather the domestic and international crises that followed the 2014 coup d’état. As Thailand’s ally as far back as the Cold War, the US had in the past generally tolerated the periodic military coups in the country. But the absence of a timetable for general elections after the 2014 coup prompted President Barack Obama and his administration to openly criticize the military junta. The US also exerted political pressure by downgrading its security partnership with Thailand, including scaling down the “Cobra Gold” military exercise and reducing its arms sales and security assistance to Thailand. Concurrently, the EU suspended its negotiations on a free trade pact with Thailand following the coup. Struggling to secure domestic and international recognition, Prayut Chan-o-chha’s military junta was warmly endorsed by China. Seeing that the US-Thailand alliance was cracking, China courted the military junta by demonstrating its readiness to provide diplomatic, economic, and military support. In this connection, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited Thailand in December 2014—the most prominent foreign leader to visit the country since the military coup. During the visit, Li offered Thailand a Belt and Road high-speed rail project and a purchase agreement for million tons of Thai rubber and rice stockpiles, giving a much-needed boost to the military junta’s economic recovery plan. China also expanded its military ties with Thailand through “Blue Strike” joint exercises, held since 2015, and by selling submarines and tanks to the Royal Thai Army. All in all, China’s warm embrace helped the military junta resist Western diplomatic, economic, and military pressure, allowing it to consolidate its rule and proceed with its crackdown on opposition forces.

In the Philippines, China’s influence appears to have been much less determining in causing democratic recession, as Manila had not encountered any serious regime crisis—but China’s support still indirectly provided its illiberal ruler, President Rodrigo Duterte, with a way to ameliorate Western pressure on his human rights record. Since taking office, Duterte’s war on drugs and his human rights abuses had drawn severe criticisms from the US and many international nongovernmental organizations. In December 2016, the Obama administration pressured Duterte by canceling the shipment of firearms to the Philippine police and postponing the aid package under the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) program. Duterte reacted strongly to US pressure, telling Obama to “go to hell” and claiming to buy arms from Russia and China. In the subsequent months, the Duterte administration signed military pacts with China and Russia, not only securing the two illiberal powers’ support on arms supply, but also establishing institutionalized military-to-military exchanges for training, intelligence sharing, and joint exercises. Meanwhile, Duterte scaled down several long-standing joint military exercises with the US and formally withdrew his country from the MCC program.

Apart from military support, China also provided economic support to Duterte’s signature policies. When Duterte was engaging in a war of words with the Obama administration over his war on drugs in late 2016, China demonstrated its support by building a 10,000-bed mega-rehabilitation center on Luzon island. In November 2018, China signed a memorandum of understanding with the Philippines offering concessional loans to support Duterte’s flagship infrastructure projects through the Belt and Road Initiative. Such economic support boosted Duterte’s Build, Build, Build (BBB) agenda, his signature program that aimed to modernize infrastructure in the Philippines. Throughout the Duterte presidency, Western pressure was found to be counter-
productive in checking the democratic recession in the Philippines. Rather, it only served to push Duterte to seek more from China for his own political survival.\textsuperscript{249}

\textbf{Structural Changes in Global Power Balance}

The impact of China’s expanding influence on democratic recession in the Indo-Pacific should be interpreted within the context of structural changes in global power balances. Traditionally, scholars have investigated democratization and autocratization as domestic phenomena.\textsuperscript{250} Such an approach, however, ignores the fact that domestic political transitions happen within a geopolitical context.\textsuperscript{251} From a historical perspective, it is clear that the changing power balance between democratic and illiberal powers has significantly affected the domestic politics of smaller and weaker countries, shaping the rise and fall of many modern democracies.\textsuperscript{252}

During the early Cold War years of the 1950s and 1960s, the Soviet Union’s rising power multiplied the global spread of communism. In the later Cold War years of the 1970s and 1980s, the US and its European allies gained a relative power advantage, contributing to the beginning of the third wave of democratization. In this period, the US invested extensively in democracy promotion, fostering democratic transitions worldwide not only through economic assistance but also through military interventions. Such interventions include Jimmy Carter’s threatened military action in Dominica in 1978, Ronald Reagan’s invasion of Grenada in 1983, and the threatened military intervention against Marcos’s Philippines in 1986, as well as George H. W. Bush’s invasion of Panama in 1989. The US also used its geopolitical influence to block military coups or to press for democratic reforms in Honduras, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Peru, South Korea, and Taiwan.\textsuperscript{253}

After the end of the Cold War in 1991, the US enjoyed an unprecedented “unipolar moment,”\textsuperscript{254} enabling it to spearhead a further global push toward democratization. For instance, in the post-Cold war years of the 1990s and 2000s, the hegemony of the US-led free-market democracies, multiplied by their conditional aid and punitive sanctions, served as a powerful magnet that pulled many toward the Western camp. The Eastern and Central European countries are examples: during this time period, countries such as Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Slovenia embraced democratic reforms in exchange for the US security umbrella under NATO and the lucrative integrated market of the EU.\textsuperscript{255}

Following the end of the US unipolar moment and the emergence of China as a peer competitor since the turn of the 2010s, the third wave of democratization has been replaced by a new trend of global democratic recession. The narrowing US-China power gap (figures 4.1 and 4.2 show the economic and military power gaps respectively) means that the former is no longer the principal pole of geopolitical influence as it had been during the 1990s and 2000s; instead, China has evolved into an alternative geopolitical patron offering aid to illiberal strongmen without requiring any of the democratic reforms usually demanded by the West. Such a dramatic geopolitical shift has transformed the fate of global democracy. The strategic calculus of illiberal strongmen in the Indo-Pacific region (and elsewhere) has likewise changed dramatically. In the post–Cold War period of the 1990s and 2000s, when the US and its democratic allies were the primary shapers of world politics, many political regimes depended on Western aid to survive. Consequently, there was a strong incentive for illiberal strongmen to refrain from abusing human rights and to gesture toward democratic norms such as presidential term limits and regular elections.\textsuperscript{256} But today, in a world where China pursues its own security interests by competing with the US,\textsuperscript{257} illiberal strongmen in the Indo-Pacific have more options and more ability to maneuver when faced with domestic and Western pressure for democratization.\textsuperscript{258} For many illiberal strongmen, taking Western aid and accepting its preconditions for democratic reforms are no longer an attractive regime option; in-
stead, they can now draw on China’s aid to survive, not only obtaining the resources to bolster their autocratization projects but also mitigating any punitive actions of the US and its democratic allies. The consequence of such geopolitical forces is that the West has effectively lost the leverage to advance democratic transitions through conditional aid and punitive sanction, an important advantage that it had enjoyed during the post–Cold War period. In the current multipolar world, the US-led Western camp has found it increasingly challenging to keep the illiberal strongmen in the Indo-Pacific and elsewhere anchored to democratic values.

The story of Cambodia illustrates how the changing global power balance has significantly altered the strategic calculus of strongmen and contributed to their autocratic tendencies. In Cambodia, the CPP always included moderate and radical factions that took opposite positions on the need to engage with the West. But the continuous flow of economic and military support from China since the 2010s has emboldened Hun Sen and the radical faction, providing them with greater leverage to push back against Western demands for reforms and punitive measures. Able to secure all the required economic and military support from China, Hun Sen no longer has to care much about the human rights concerns of the US and EU, and he can make use of China’s cover to ruthlessly crack down on the political opposition.

The history of the Cold War and the decades afterward indicates that democracy not only grows out of the prominent domestic aspiration of the local population, but it also grows out of the West’s geopolitical hard power of money and gun barrels. In the twenty-first century, the threats to democracy come...
from both within and without. From a changing global power balance to emerging US-China security competition, the geopolitical forces of today are reshaping the state of democracy across the Indo-Pacific region. Domestic politics and geopolitics are, therefore, inseparably intertwined in causing today’s democratic recession.262
The Indo-Pacific is a region with heightened importance in the twenty-first century. This is not only because it is the principal theater of contemporary security competition, where the US and China are competing intensely for relative influence, but also because it constitutes a central arena of global democratic movements where people are dauntlessly resisting a downward spiral of democratic recession.

Traditionally, “democracy” and “security” are seen as two separate fields in the policy world. In the US, for example, the democracy promotion community champions human rights and democracy at a country’s ground level, with limited consideration of security in day-to-day campaigning. Similarly, the national security establishment accords priority to US-China security competition, but has made little effort to integrate democracy promotion with national security strategies. In the US and especially in Europe, the dominant view remains that democracy promotion and national security are separate policy areas, with the former rooted in values-based idealism and the latter in interest-first realism.

But the dichotomous approach does not ultimately serve good policymaking. The major findings of this report, which documents the coupling of domestic and geopolitical forces in causing democratic recession across the Indo-Pacific, raises questions on the validity of the conventional thought pertaining to democracy promotion and security competition. As illustrated by this report, democracy and security have interacted with each other in multiple and complex ways in the Indo-Pacific.

CHAPTER 5: INTEGRATED STRATEGY

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Caption: A protester dressed as Lady Justice makes the three-finger salute on February 11, 2021, as she takes part in a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon. (Photo by Ye Aung Thu/AFP via Getty Images)
Democratic recession in some countries has complicated the US efforts to forge security partnership (e.g., the Philippines, Thailand, and India), while stable democratic regimes in other places have consolidated the US-led security architecture (e.g., Japan, Australia, and Taiwan). In some places the rising US-China security competition has made democracy promotion campaigns more challenging and even further exacerbated democratic recession (e.g., Cambodia, Myanmar, and Hong Kong), while in other places security competition has injected a new impetus for allies to work more closely with the US on democracy promotion and aid projects (e.g., the Pacific Islands). These dynamics point to an urgent need to move beyond the existing dichotomous approach, with a view to making better policies across both democracy promotion and security competition domains.

In the policy world today, to deal with democratic recession, we should know the nuances of security competition, and to cope with security competition, we have to grasp the dynamics of democratic recession. For the democracy promotion community, organizing effective campaigns for a specific country at the ground level requires not only a deep knowledge of domestic politics, but also the ability to make adjustments in response to changing geopolitics. For example, it could make sense for campaigns to be offensive—that is, facilitate local activists’ mobilizations—in countries where the free world has the geopolitical upper hand, but defensive—that is, help local activists survive at home and retreat abroad—in countries where the free world is facing geopolitical headwinds. For the national security establishment, planning effective measures to push back against illiberal powers’ influence requires not only a comprehensive understanding of security dynamics at inter-state level, but also a nuanced statecraft attentive to the changing domestic politics at intra-state level. For example, it could make sense to prioritize resources to bolster the democratic norms of Indo-Pacific security allies and partners as part of overall efforts to build a stronger US-led security architecture. Across the free world, such integrated strategies are increasingly required by the democracy promotion community and the national security establishment. Unfortunately, those undertaking the mainstream public policy research seem far from prepared to provide the necessary integrated analyses that could guide policymakers and practitioners.

Today, the Indo-Pacific region presents the free world with a double-challenge of democratic recession and security competition, indicating that it’s the time to tear down the longstanding artificial wall between democracy and security in the policy world. Specifically, both the democracy promotion community and the national security establishment should seek not only to integrate democracy and security in their future endeavors, but also to foster better coordination between the two groups of policymakers.

An integrated approach does not mean that we underestimate the complexity and tension that characterize the undertaking, particularly in the policy world, where democratic values and security interests may sometimes conflict with each other. Nevertheless, it is exactly because of the multidimensional relationship between democracy and security that policymakers and practitioners seeking to develop better and more balanced policies need to adopt an integrated approach. After all, the proposed integrated approach is not something completely new; it originates in the decades-long balancing act between idealism and realism in US foreign policy. As once eloquently put by the late Madeleine Albright, President Bill Clinton’s secretary of state:

The debate between idealism and realism in foreign affairs moves back and forth like a pendulum because neither extreme is sustainable. A successful foreign policy must begin with the world as it is but also work for what we would like it to be. On a globe this complicated, even the purest of principles must sometimes be diluted. Still, we get up in the morn-
ing because of hope, which cold-blooded cynicism can neither inspire nor satisfy. If all America stands for is stability, no one will follow us for the simple reason that we aren’t going anywhere.270

In the face of the double-challenge of democratic recession and security competition, there is an urgent need to invest in new knowledge infrastructures that can provide integrated strategic analysis to policymakers and practitioners in the free world. “In a time of turbulence and change, it is more true than ever that knowledge is power,” President John F. Kennedy remarked in 1962 during the height of the last Cold War, “for only by true understanding and steadfast judgment are we able to master the challenge of history.”271 In the current New Cold War, knowledge remains the power resource that the free world needs to secure in order to prevail.
Unit of Analysis
The unit of analysis in this study is “political entity.” A nonsovereign territory is considered a political entity if it is governed separately from the rest of the relevant country; in this case its state of democracy may be substantially different from that of the country and so requires a separate analysis.

Overall, this study surveys the state of democracy in 40 sovereign and nonsovereign entities across the Indo-Pacific region (table A.1).

Table A.1: Sovereign and Nonsovereign Entities Included in Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>SOVEREIGN STATUS</th>
<th>SUBREGION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. China</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>East Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Japan</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>East Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Mongolia</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>East Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. North Korea</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>East Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. South Korea</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>East Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Hong Kong</td>
<td>Nonsovereign territory</td>
<td>East Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Taiwan</td>
<td>Contested territory</td>
<td>East Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Brunei</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>Southeast Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Cambodia</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>Southeast Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Indonesia</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>Southeast Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Laos</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>Southeast Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Malaysia</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>Southeast Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Myanmar</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>Southeast Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Philippines</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>Southeast Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Singapore</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>Southeast Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Thailand</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>Southeast Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Timor-Leste</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>Southeast Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Vietnam</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>Southeast Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Bangladesh</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>South Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Bhutan</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>South Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. India</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>South Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Maldives</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>South Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Nepal</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>South Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Pakistan</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>South Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Sri Lanka</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>South Asia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Quantitative Data
This study compiles a quantitative measure called “Indo-Pacific Democracy Scores” to empirically map the temporal and spatial trend of the state of democracy in the region, using an aggregate polling approach (also known as poll of polls). Conceptually, aggregate polling as a research approach is far from perfect (e.g., criteria for inclusion of polls are imperfect, and there are discrepancies in the questionnaires of the different polls); nonetheless, it is informative about the tendencies under study.

The Indo-Pacific Democracy Scores are compiled by averaging the democracy scores of the three most credible global democracy barometers, namely the Freedom House Freedom in the World Index (i.e., the total scores of political rights and civil liberties as measured on a 100-point scale over the period 2003

Table A.2: Sample Standardization and Conversion of Indo-Pacific Democracy Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>SOVEREIGN STATUS</th>
<th>SUBREGION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26. Jammu-Kashmir</td>
<td>Nonsovereign territory</td>
<td>South Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Pakistani Kashmir</td>
<td>Nonsovereign territory</td>
<td>South Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Australia</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>Oceania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. Fiji</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>Oceania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. Kiribati</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>Oceania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. Marshall Islands</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>Oceania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. Micronesia</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>Oceania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. Nauru</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>Oceania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. New Zealand</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>Oceania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35. Palau</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>Oceania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36. Papua New Guinea</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>Oceania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37. Samoa</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>Oceania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38. Solomon Islands</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>Oceania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39. Tonga</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>Oceania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40. Vanuatu</td>
<td>Sovereign country</td>
<td>Oceania</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table A.2: Sample Standardization and Conversion of Indo-Pacific Democracy Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>FREEDOM HOUSE’S FREEDOM IN THE WORLD INDEX (100-POINT SCALE)</th>
<th>V-DEM’S LIBERAL DEMOCRACY INDEX (1-POINT SCALE)</th>
<th>EIU’S DEMOCRACY INDEX (10-POINT SCALE)</th>
<th>INDO-PACIFIC DEMOCRACY SCORES (100-POINT SCALE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>73.6 (converted from the original score of 0.736)</td>
<td>81.5 (converted from the original score of 8.15)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
to 2021), the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Liberal Democracy Index (i.e., the liberal democracy score as measured on a 1-point scale over the period from 1789 to 2021), and the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) Democracy Index (i.e., the overall score as measured on a 10-point scale over the period from 2006 to 2021). As these three indices are measured across three different scales and have different starting years, all of the relevant scores are standardized and converted to a 100-point scale before conducting the averaging process (an example of such calculations is shown table A.2).

After the scores of all 40 sovereign and nonsovereign entities are standardized in a 100-point scale, the scores are aggregated into a data set that covers the time period of 2006 to 2021.

**Qualitative Data**

This study also consulted a number of qualitative data sources in examining the state of Indo-Pacific democracy. A mixed-methods research approach was adopted, and the qualitative data collected was used to substantiate the interpretation and analysis of the quantitative measures provided by the Indo-Pacific Democracy Scores.

The qualitative data sources include the United Nations Development Programme’s annual Human Development Reports, the International Monetary Fund’s World Economic Outlook Database, the US Central Intelligence Agency’s World Factbook, the US Department of State’s Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, Human Rights Watch’s World Report series, Reporters Without Borders’ World Press Freedom Report series, the World Justice Project’s Rule of Law Report series, Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index, and Scholars at Risk’s Free to Think series and Academic Freedom Monitoring Project. Relevant scholarly journals, in particular the Journal of Democracy, Democratization, and Democracy and Security, were also widely consulted. News search engines such as Factiva, Google News, and Yahoo News were adopted to locate journalistic accounts of the state of Indo-Pacific democracy.


10. For details, see the Methodological Appendix.


12. Ibid., 290–94.


21. All population figures, except for Jammu-Kashmir’s, are from the latest data set of the United Nations’ Population Division, available at https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Population. For Jammu-Kashmir, the most up-to-date population figure is 12,541,302, officially released by the Indian governments in its 2011 census; see Census 2011, https://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/jammu+and+kashmir.html. The 2021 census is now underway, and findings will likely be released in 2023 at the earliest.


45 Data are from Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project’s dashboard, available at https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#!dashboard.


51 For the full text of the 1993 constitution, see Constitution, https://www.constituteproject.org/countries/Asia/Cambodia?lang=en.


55 In political science literature, “one-party dominant state” is conceptually different from “one-party state.” Under the former system, multiparty elections exist at least nominally and minor parties are allowed to contest, though the dominant party always prevails in the elections. Under the latter system, the ruling party is usually the only legal party, and opposition parties are legally banned. For the classical definition of “one-party dominant state,” see G. Sartori, Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis, vol. 1 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

56 M. Curley, “Developments in Cambodian Democracy: Democratic Consolidation or Authoritarian Durability?,” in Democracy


78 Ibid.


117 For the full text of the Indian constitution, see Constitute, https://www.constituteproject.org/countries/Asia/India?lang=en.


tion-slams-govt-on-delhi-violence.


146 J. Reed, “Rodrigo Duterte and the Populist Playbook,” Financial


194 A. Smith, A Comparative Introduction to Political Science: Contention and Cooperation (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 87.


208 For the full text of the Indian constitution, see Constitute, https://www.constituteproject.org/countries/Asia/India?lang=en.


257 It is important to note that China’s support to the regimes of Min Aung Hlaing, Prayut, Hun Sen, and Duterte is less related to ideology than to security interests. Myanmar is strategically important to China’s attempt to develop an alternative energy corridor (other than the Malacca Strait). Cambodia serves as a strategic foothold for China to project its power in the Gulf of Thailand and the Straits of Malacca. In Thailand and the Philippines, China is principally motivated by its wish to peel the two countries from the US sphere of influence. For details, see I. Saxena, “Myanmar’s Military Coup: Security Trouble in Southeast Asia,” Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs 4, no. 6 (2021): 46–55, https://www.aiuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2747554/myanmars-military-coup-secu-


ic-reversals-favor-china.


263 The democracy promotion community refers to US government institutions (e.g., United States Agency for International Development and National Endowment for Democracy) and nongovernmental organizations (e.g., International Republican Institute, National Democratic Institute, Freedom House, and Human Rights Watch) that seek to spread democracy worldwide.

264 Leading thinkers such as Thomas Carothers have pointed out the need to incorporate a geopolitical perspective to rejuvenate democracy promotion. But this insight has not yet been translated into action in the US and European democracy promotion community. See T. Carothers, “Rejuvenating Democracy Promotion,” Journal of Democracy 31, no. 1 (2020): 114–23.

265 National security establishment refers to those government departments that are closely engaged in national security policymaking and implementation, including foreign policy institutions (e.g., Department of State), military agencies (e.g., Department of Defense and US Armed Forces), and intelligence service (e.g., Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency).

ic-guidance.


tion-hits-wall.


271 JFK Library, “President John F. Kennedy’s Address at the Univer-

272 K. Harvey, Encyclopedia of Social Media and Politics (Los Ange-

273 Freedom House, Freedom in the World Index, https://freedom-
house.org/report/freedom-world.

274 Varieties of Democracy, Liberal Democracy Index, https://wv-
v-dem.net/vdemdns.html.

Neither V-Dem’s Liberal Democracy Index nor EIU’s Democracy Index covers several small countries and nonsovereign territories in the Indo-Pacific, namely Brunei, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Samoa, Tonga, Jammu-Kashmir, and Pakistani Kashmir. For this reason, the Indo-Pacific Democracy Scores of such countries can be measured only by directly adopting the scores of Freedom House’s Freedom in the World Index. Maldives, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu are covered by the V-Dem’s Liberal Democracy Index but not the EIU’s Democracy Index; thus their Indo-Pacific Democracy Scores are calculated by averaging the relevant scores of Freedom House’s Freedom in the World Index and the V-Dem’s Liberal Democracy Index.


288 See the Democratization website at https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/fdem20/current.

289 See the Democracy and Security website at https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/fdas20/current.

290 See the Factiva website at https://www.dowjones.com/professional/factiva.

