

SOUTHEAST ASIA'S DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING AND CHINA'S AUTHORITARIAN APPEAL

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The democratic backsliding prevalent across Southeast Asia underscores the gradual decline in the quality of democracy in several countries. With the exception of those in Laos and Vietnam (both communist one-party regimes), most governments in Southeast Asia have found themselves halting the growth in democracy they previously pursued and even reversed their political course. And as governments display autocratic tendencies, their geostrategic balancing efforts at a time of heightened great power rivalry will likely tilt towards China's authoritarian charm and away from US democratic influence.

Such democratic backsliding has become rampant in most countries in Southeast Asia – a kind of diffusion effect in reverse, in contrast to the waves of democratization that occurred in previous decades. This phenomenon is reinforced by the current generation of Southeast Asian leaders, who show minimal interest in democracy other than at the ballot box. These autocrats emphasize the electoral aspect of democracy, but, once elected, they slowly undermine their country's democratic values and constitutional norms. In Thailand, the military junta led by Prayut Chan-o-cha toppled a democratically elected government in a coup in 2014 and was able

to engineer a parliamentary election in 2019 that instated him as prime minister to prolong his rule. In Indonesia, President Joko Widodo's second election victory instigated the country's democratic decline. This became more pronounced under his administration with the legitimization of a conservative and anti-pluralistic brand of Islam, partisan manipulation of law enforcement, and government efforts to suppress political opposition.

While these democratic setbacks were apparent long before the spread of COVID-19, they became more evident during the health crisis as governments solidified their grip on power. In Malaysia's case, an eight-month nationwide state of emergency was declared last January: it suspended elections until 1 August and granted authority to the current government to introduce new laws on its own. And in Myanmar, a military coup was staged last February even amidst the pandemic, which overthrew a civilian-led government in its quasi-democracy. The alarming military takeover eventually made Myanmar the frontrunner in the region's 'authoritarian race to the bottom'.

This political trend has geostrategic implications that may see countries in Southeast Asia gravitating

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The character of Southeast Asia's governments generally determines the level of engagement with China.

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towards China while moving away from the US. For most leaders belonging to the 'ASEAN dictators' club', their lack of transparency, desire to extend power and propensity to use force dovetail with China's principle of non-interference. Unlike the US, with its proclivity to condemn their political rule, these leaders view China more appreciatively for its neutral and non-judgemental stance in their countries' domestic affairs.

However, China's 'non-interference' paradoxically makes it an implicit supporter of autocratic leaders in Southeast Asia. In the case of Myanmar's recent coup, the Chinese government provided diplomatic cover for the military junta led by Min Aung Hlaing after it blocked a UN Security Council statement condemning the incident, and warned against imposing international sanctions against the country. For Cambodia's Hun Sen, who, after thirty-six years in power, is the world's longest-serving prime minister, China represents a reliable external ally and an important financier for his regime's survival. Thus, Cambodia has since chosen to bandwagon with China and has embraced it almost exclusively as its main patron, with Hun Sen describing China as an 'ironclad friend'.

Moreover, China provides financial assistance without any preconditions requiring the advancement of human rights or the promotion of transparency and accountability. This is in contrast to the US, which in many cases requires political reforms to be undertaken or elections to be held before aid is disbursed to the recipient country. With no strings attached, countries in the region are capitalizing on the opportunities brought about by the "China wave" to boost their economic development, according to Philippines-based economic analyst George Siy. Moreover, China also has a flexible approach to aid allocation that creates substantial leeway for leaders to fund projects that best serve their political agenda.

This availability and attractiveness of Chinese aid has essentially led to a decline in US's economic leverage. This is evident in President Rodrigo Duterte's controversial war on drugs in the Philippines. While the US has sought to suspend aid to the Philippine national police for their alleged involvement in human rights violations and extrajudicial killings, China has granted financial support for drug rehabilitation and law enforcement in the country. Amidst international condemnation of his drug war, Duterte regards China as 'the only country to come out freely ... [with] a firm statement that they are supporting the fight against drugs in my country'.

In addition, China's model of prosperity without democracy is becoming more appealing in Southeast Asia. Its autocratic leaders look at China as an exemplar of an alternative developmental model that has managed to produce unprecedented economic

growth and maintain the legitimacy of its government, while effectively thwarting the growth of democracy in the country. According to American legal scholar Bradley Klein, this phenomenon is a form of Chinese authoritarianism, which suggests that 'state legitimacy need not be founded upon a democratic relationship between the government and the governed, but may rest instead on rising standards of living'. This emphasis forms a new narrative to counter the ideas of liberal democracy.

The political allure of this new narrative is significant in some countries in Southeast Asia, which have been increasingly disillusioned with the chaotic process of democratization and its adverse implications for their economies and societies. While they have sustained economic growth in recent decades, most states continue to suffer from high levels of inequality, widespread corruption, fragile institutions and weak rule of law. The current rise of populist leaders, with their autocratic governments, essentially reveals the discontent with democracy and the fascination with authoritarianism among the people in the region.

These political developments reinforce the ideological tension and great power competition between China and the US in Southeast Asia. China's rising political influence will increasingly undermine the foundation of other fragile democracies in the region. Although China is not yet able to reshape the global order in its own image, the country's growing economic leverage and role in determining rules and norms are set to grow, especially if the US further retreats from being a global advocate of liberal democracy.

The growing admiration for China's authoritarian regime and economic growth essentially puts it at an advantage, especially given the US retrenchment in the region. This was evident in the Trump administration's 'America First' foreign policy, which puts sovereignty and national interests at its core. Although it is still too early to determine whether the current Biden administration will cut back on American democratic rhetoric in Southeast Asia, the chaos during the recent US government transition and its tarnished democratic credentials make Washington even less relevant for countries experiencing democratic backsliding. And as they descend into autocratic rule, these states are implicitly leaving the field wide open for Beijing to take further steps towards regional dominance.

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