Democracy in Southeast Asia: Between Discontent and Hope

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After previous periods of democratic advances in Southeast Asia, a range of developments in individual countries—including Myanmar's troubled transition, rising authoritarianism in Thailand, and concerns about Indonesia's democratic erosion—paired with broader trends such as a perceived global democratic rollback and intensifying U.S.-China regional competition, have coalesced to create a sense of what might be termed "democratic discontent" in the region. Though this may be just one phase within the broader waxing and waning of democracy in Southeast Asia, this democratic discontent is of great significance not just because of the human costs of rising authoritarianism, but also due to the geopolitical implications of democracy's retreat in Southeast Asia would have for strategic trends such as intensifying U.S.-China competition, as well as other intervening events including the global coronavirus pandemic.

This report examines Southeast Asia's democratic discontent and its strategic implications for the region. Drawing on empirical data and informed by conversations with officials and practitioners, it argues that Southeast Asia's democratic discontent is rooted in several key strategic drivers and creates both opportunities and challenges that need to be properly understood and managed by regional states and external actors, including the United States and like-minded partners.

Key Findings

- The current phase of democracy in Southeast Asia is best framed as the region's broader experience of being caught between discontent and hope on this score.
- Democratic discontent in Southeast Asia is real when understood not just in terms of aggregate data, but also the gaps between expectations and realities in the subregion's ongoing experience with political development as well as concerns over democracy's future trajectory.
- Democratic discontent in Southeast Asia is not merely natural or incidental. There are key strategic drivers propelling its development, including regime dynamics in individual countries, regional normative stagnation, and intensifying global ideological competition.
- An environment of democratic discontent creates significant structural challenges for Southeast Asian states and their role in the world, including domestic regime legitimacy, foreign policy autonomy, and regional centrality.
- Democratic discontent also creates opportunities for democracy advocates from within the region and beyond. In particular, it can lead to scrutiny of governance challenges, galvanize efforts to address issues, and provide an opening for outside actors to assist in this regard.

Policy Recommendations

- Individual Southeast Asian countries need to be more attentive to addressing domestic legitimacy gaps and insulating themselves from global challenges such as foreign interference.
- More democratic nations in the region, such as Indonesia, need to work on their own and with others to advance democracy and human rights, as well as slow any potential backsliding.
- Civil society groups need to continue to advance democracy within the subregion, particularly in areas such as fake news and disinformation that require a whole-of-society approach, as well as in cross-national issues of salience such as corruption and land rights.
- Other actors in the Asia-Pacific, including the United States and like-minded allies and partners, should intensify efforts to promote capacity-building, as well as assistance for more independent journalism and polling on democracy and human rights.
- Established Western democracies should reinforce the benefits of democracy in a more contested ideological environment in Southeast Asia, both on their own and with established Asian democracies such as Australia, India, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Introduction

While Southeast Asia has long posed a challenging environment for democracy and human rights, the past few years have seen particularly grim forecasts for the state of freedom in the region. A range of developments in individual countries—including the troubled transition in Myanmar, rising authoritarianism in Thailand, and concerns about democratic erosion in Indonesia—paired with broader trends such as a perceived democratic rollback globally and intensifying U.S.-China competition, have coalesced to create a sense of what might be termed "democratic discontent."

This sense of democratic discontent in Southeast Asia needs to be kept in perspective, particularly given the ebbs and flows we have seen previously, as well as the existence of occasional bright spots such as Malaysia's unprecedented change of government following the May 2018 elections, or the advances made by Singapore's opposition in July 2020 polls. Nonetheless, it deserves attention given its significance not only for the future of democracy in the region, but also its influence on broader dynamics of concern to the United States and like-minded partners, be it the values-based competition between democratic and authoritarian systems or the shaping of the regional normative order in the Asia-Pacific.

This report examines Southeast Asia's democratic discontent and its strategic implications for the region and the wider world. Drawing on empirical data and informed by conversations with officials and practitioners, it argues that Southeast Asia's democratic discontent is rooted in several key strategic drivers and creates both opportunities and challenges that need to be properly understood and managed by regional states and external actors, including the United States and like-minded partners.

Specifically, the report makes three central arguments. First, democratic discontent in Southeast Asia is real and is driven by a range of factors including evolving regime dynamics in the subregion, regional normative scrutiny, and intensifying global ideological competition. Second, while democratic discontent creates severe domestic and foreign policy challenges for Southeast Asian states, it also presents opportunities for individual countries, for the region, and for outside partners by increasing the attention paid to governance issues and potential solutions. Third and finally, fully contending with the implications of Southeast Asia's democratic discontent will require actions by Southeast Asian states as well as wider actors across a range of areas, including in the economic, security, ideology, and information realms.

## Southeast Asia's Democratic Discontent in Perspective

Southeast Asia has long presented a challenging environment for democracy for a range of reasons, including the endurance of traditional non-democratic institutions and networks, the power and cohesion of the state, and elite perceptions of internal and external threats.[1] After being initially introduced during the "second wave of democratization" in the 1940s and 1950s, electoral democracy essentially collapsed throughout Southeast Asia between the mid-1950s and mid-1970s. Despite commitments made by Southeast Asian states, including in the Bangkok Declaration in 1967 signed with the founding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), none of the countries in the region met even basic democratic standards as late as the early 1980s.[2]

The 1980s and 1990s heightened expectations for democracy in Southeast Asia and also gave rise to the significant regime variation we see today. A series of inroads—most dramatically the downfall of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines in 1986 and the deposing of Indonesian President Suharto in 1998, but also others such as Timor-Leste's eventual independence that took shape in 2002—offered promise for the future of democracy in the region. But there were also limits to this that were evident at the time or soon thereafter in the 2000s, be it the continued resilience of single-party regimes across the region including Brunei, Cambodia, and Laos or the subsequent democratic challenges in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand. Data in the 2000s and early 2010s showed an overall picture of ebbs and flows every few years—punctuated by developments in a few countries such as the 2006 coup in Thailand or Myanmar's democratic opening starting in 2011—rather than a linear trajectory towards democracy.

The past few years have produced democratic discontent in Southeast Asia. A confluence of concerns with respect to individual regime trajectories—from authoritarian resurgence in Cambodia to democratic setbacks in Indonesia—paired with certain developments such as the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar and anxieties about a global democratic recession have led to grim outlooks about democracy in the region, with suggestions of stagnation or regression.[3] Notably, this sense has been evident not just among analysts but also among some seasoned diplomats and practitioners from the region.[4]

While this sense of democratic discontent is multilayered and difficult to quantify entirely, a closer look suggests that its impact is real and that its distribution merits attention. Impact-wise, available data suggests democratic discontent is rooted in reality, even if it is more limited than some sensationalist accounts may suggest. Freedom House's annual rankings of countries in the region

Figure 1: Total Annual Regional Scores in Southeast Asia, Freedom House (2010-2019)
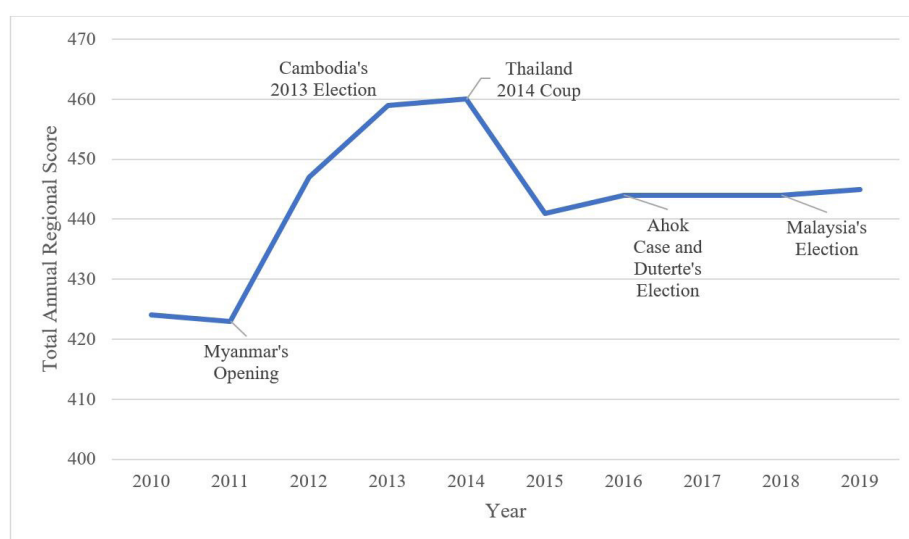
Note: Freedom House scores each country out of a total of 100 with a maximum of 40 points for political rights and 60 points for civil liberties. Total annual regional scores for Southeast Asian states for each year above are the sum of scores for the eleven individual Southeast Asian countries for that year to provide a cumulative regional perspective.

Figure 2: Individual Southeast Asia Country Scores, Economist Intelligence Unit (2015-2019)
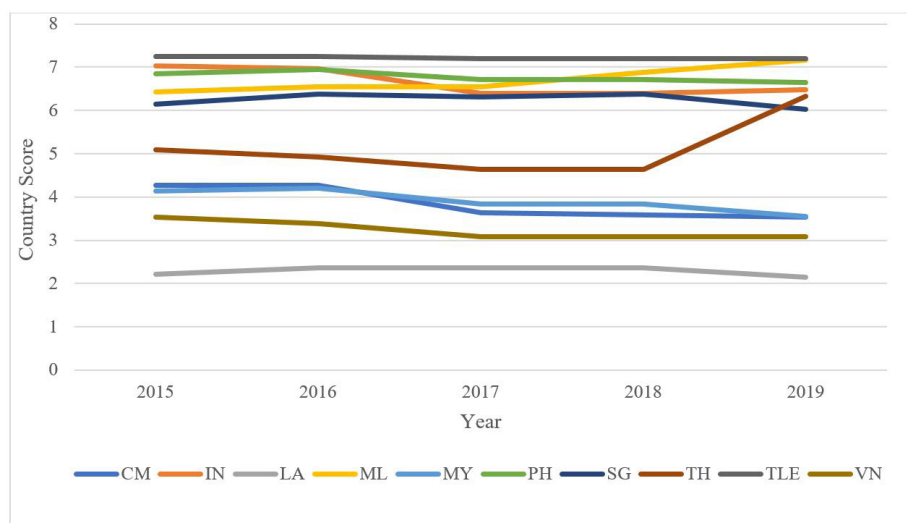
Note: The Economist Intelligence Unit scores countries out of a total score of 10. On the graph, each individual Southeast Asian country is depicted with a different colored line to illustrate individual country trends across the past few years.

from 2014 to 2019 shows a period of decline and stagnation in terms of Southeast Asia's total score relative to the increases recorded from 2009 to 2014.[5] Less dramatically, the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) ranking of Southeast Asian states reveals that after a decade of straight increases from 2006 to 2016, 2016 saw a major score drop that took the region back to pre-2013 levels that it still has not recovered from despite slight rises since then. EIU data also shows that from the period of 2015-2019 more specifically, not a single Southeast Asian country recorded a steady set of increases or remained stable—all encountered decreases of some kind during this time, and, in the case of Thailand, the increase was a consequence of a transition from military rule to a mode of civil-military hybrid form of governance rather than an improvement in a democratic form of governance.

To be sure, one ought to keep this sense of democratic discontent in perspective given both the broader trend of ebbs and flows with respect to democratization in Southeast Asia in the past, as well as the reality that certain developments in country-specific and region-general trends can slow or reverse the current trajectory.[6] But, there is enough evidence to suggest that the perception of democratic discontent in Southeast Asia is real and worthy of investigation: in terms of its sources, the opportunities and challenges it creates, and the policy implications that follow.

Sources of Democratic Discontent

Given that democratic discontent is clearly evident both in terms of perception, as well as reality, it is important to explore what its underlying sources are. While there are no doubt a range of factors that can be listed to explain this, five principle drivers are at play with respect to Southeast Asia and the wider regional and global environment: the erosion of traditional institutions, the suppression of opposition and civil society, the rise of intolerance, growing regional normative scrutiny, and increasing global ideological competition.

The first driver is the growing inability of traditional institutions to keep up with rising societal demands. For instance, in Thailand the period of military rule since the last coup in May 2014—the longest period of such rule since 1932—is part of a broader story of the breakdown in the nexus between the military, monarchy, and the elite that dates back to the reign of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in the 2000s.[7] In the Philippines, despite the focus on the election of Rodrigo Duterte itself, Duterte's victory was also seen as a rebuke of an oligarchic elite's inability to confront many of the challenges that he had focused on during the run-up to the election, including those tied to law and order.[8]

The second driver is the heightened suppression of opposition and civil society. The most dramatic example of this has been in Cambodia where, following opposition gains in the 2013 general election, Prime Minister Hun Sen embarked on a systematic attempt to neuter the opposition and undermine civil society to ensure the ruling party's victory in 2018 polls.[9] This approach is evident in other countries in the region as well. For instance, in Malaysia, the shock and unprecedented ouster of the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition came in spite of systematic attempts by the administration of former Prime Minister Najib Razak to crack down on the opposition to prevent it from securing a victory following its winning of the popular vote in 2013 polls, including the imprisonment of opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim.

The third driver is the rise of exclusivist and identity politics. This driver has been most dramatically seen in Myanmar with the Rohingya crisis putting into focus strains of intolerance and xenophobia that some experts had been warming about when the transition began.[10] Rising intolerance is happening in other places in Southeast Asia as well. Most notably in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority country and the third largest democracy, there have been rising anxieties about the more permissive environment for intolerance and its impact on democracy.[11] While these worries are not altogether new, some aspects have increased in scale and scope and have manifested in high-level incidents, such as the imprisonment of a Christian and ethnically-Chinese Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama for a blasphemy charge and Jokowi's appointment of Maaruf Amin as his running mate in the 2019 elections.

The fourth driver is growing regional normative scrutiny. While Southeast Asia as a region and ASEAN as an organization have long had issues with respect to democracy and human rights, the past decade has seen much disappointment on this score. Institutionally, steps such as the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration of 2012 were taken with little civil society participation, while bodies like the 2009 ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights were severely limited by the powers of governments to appoint representatives.[12] Meanwhile, regional rights flashpoints such as the eruption of the Rohingya crisis in 2017 reinforced the fact that ASEAN's norm of non-interference in the internal affairs of Southeast Asian states continues to paralyze the institution from responding decisively when these issues arise. The perception is echoed in public sentiment as well. For instance, in a recent poll compiled by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), a Singapore-based think tank, most observers said that ASEAN's gap with Southeast Asia's people was its biggest challenge with a majority also disapproving of its response during the Rohingya crisis.[13]

The fifth driver is increasing global ideological competition. The evolution of Southeast Asia's politics has long interacted with wider regional and global developments, be it decolonization after World War II or the so-called Asian Values debate in the 1990s. But the 2010s have produced the perception of a more contested global environment around regime types amidst a series of developments, including the allure of China's rise as an alternative authoritarian model; the perceived challenges in the 'West' as evidenced by rising populism and Brexit; concerns about the fraying of aspects of the rules-based international order; and renewed doubts about the state of democracy.[14] While correlation is not causation and there are still ongoing debates about the implications of these factors, the region has been under greater scrutiny and has also been exposed to manifestations of geopolitical competition, be it in the values-based aspects of growing U.S.-China competition or election interference and influence operations.[15]

These five drivers have combined to create a sense of democratic discontent in Southeast Asia. While there are different ways to characterize this discontent—whether it be a rollback from previous expectations or an ebb in the region's struggle between authoritarianism and democracy—the past half-decade in particular has nonetheless produced an increasing anxiety about both the current state of democracy in Southeast Asia as well as its future prospects. This sense of democratic discontent offers both challenges and opportunities for countries within the region and beyond it which are examined in the next section.

Challenges and Opportunities

Southeast Asia's democratic discontent creates a mix of challenges and opportunities for both the countries involved directly as well

as other interested actors. Understanding their full spectrum, as well as their potential implications, is critical in order to fully grasp the situation at hand, as well as to design the proper policy responses to it.

On the challenges side, the clearest issue is related to domestic regime legitimacy. An environment of democratic discontent widens the gap between a regime's interests and the aspirations of the population which, if left unaddressed, can undermine governance. In Thailand, for instance, beyond the question of regime type, years of junta rule has also deepened questions about the competence of the regime to address various public grievances and demands and led to worries about future political tensions.[16] Beyond individual countries, legitimacy gaps can also exacerbate challenges that governments face during crises more generally, with a case in point being the ongoing global coronavirus pandemic.[17]

Another key challenge is with respect to foreign policy autonomy. While Southeast Asian states have traditionally craved adequate space to cultivate foreign policy maneuverability while engaging a wide range of outside powers, democratic discontent can make this more difficult for countries to preserve this in practice and to do so without scrutiny. The most often-cited case is that of Cambodia, where the deepening authoritarianism of Hun Sen regime and aspects of its growing dependence on China—be it certain economic projects or reports of military presence—have raised questions from the opposition domestically as well as among international observers about negative impacts on Cambodian foreign policy.[18]

The final challenge relates to the region's centrality. Democratic discontent both exposes the continued governance struggles that Southeast Asia and ASEAN

face collectively and exacerbates existing concerns that exist about the region's much-prized centrality in governing the wider Asia-Pacific. A case in point is the Rohingya crisis where ASEAN's difficulties in responding to a major governance crisis as a grouping was exposed, a development that reinforced its limitations as an institution.

As Indonesia's former foreign minister Marty Natalegawa has noted, the failure of Southeast Asian states to address their own governance issues at the domestic level can have effects on the ability of ASEAN to engage with partners at the regional and global levels, as well as on reinforcing the synergistic relationship between the various realms of policymaking.[19]

At the same time, it is also important to acknowledge that in spite of the severity of the aforementioned challenges, Southeast Asia's democratic discontent also affords opportunities that deserve highlighting. For one, democratic discontent can increase scrutiny on the general state of democracy in the region and the specific governance challenges that remain. For instance, Malaysia's shock election and its subsequent troubled transition, which saw the downfall of the Barisan Nasional coalition for the first time since independence, generated a contentious discussion initially about what this could mean for other countries such as Singapore's People's Action Party.[20] Similarly, the continuing dynamics in the Cambodian ruling party's suppression of the opposition has led to scrutiny on variations in treatment of opposition figures by Southeast Asian governments.[21]

Furthermore, democratic discontent can serve as a catalyst for actors from within Southeast Asia to reinforce efforts to address governance issues. Over the past few years, a number of grassroots organizations have held engagements to highlight these issues,

be it spotlighting the broader question of the state of democracy in Southeast Asia or specific aspects such as managing the challenges posed by fake news.[22] Some Southeast Asian states have also seen the rise of resistance movements in response to perceived violations of human rights, with a case in point being the anticorruption protests in Indonesia in late 2019. In its recent report on democracy and human rights in the region, Amnesty International noted that this was part of a wider trend where "when governments…attempted to revoke basic freedoms, residents have actually fought back with the young standing on the front line."[23]

Lastly, Southeast Asia's democratic discontent also provides an area for outside actors concerned about democracy to focus their efforts. With respect to ongoing developments, we have seen powers such as the United States, the European Union and Canada play an important and often underappreciated role in evolving dynamics, including the state of the opposition in Cambodia, the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, and the fallout from the 1MDB scandal in Malaysia.[24] There have also been efforts at broader collaboration in aspects of civil society, rule of law, and transparent and accountable governance, including under the banner of the Indo-Pacific with a case in point being the launch of the U.S.-Taiwan Indo-Pacific Democratic Governance Consultation in March 2019.

Policy Implications

In order for the region to fully contend with the implications of Southeast Asia's democratic discontent, policymakers and publics from Southeast Asia as well as other interested parties will have to manage the mix of opportunities and challenges that arise from this. This is especially the case given the

wider trends at play, including governance challenges in the subregion, uncertainties regarding the global regime struggle playing out, and Southeast Asia's role within intensifying U.S.-China competition.

First, individual Southeast Asian countries need to be more attentive to the sources of legitimacy gaps at home and abroad and addressing their wider regional impacts. Even if Southeast Asian governments are keen to preserve the spirit of non-interference in their domestic affairs and to chart their own political futures, this needs to be paired with a recognition of the increasingly synergistic relationship between internal and external developments and the shared Southeast Asian commitment to good governance and democracy enshrined in signed documents such as the Bangkok Declaration and the ASEAN Charter. Particularly in an environment of democratic discontent, we have already seen that global trends such as election interference do affect domestic politics, while domestic political developments such as human rights violations or coups have increasing effects on neighboring countries and on the region's image.

At a minimum, this will require countries actively investing in efforts on their own and with others to protect the legitimacy of their elections from external forces such as foreign interference and internal issues such as human rights that can spill over across borders. Beyond this, all Southeast Asian governments also need to improve their individual commitments to good governance and democracy they have signed up to, including by strengthening rule of law; bolstering relevant judicial, electoral and law enforcement institutions; promoting pluralism and diversity; and protecting the rights of all citizens including minorities.

Second, more democratic Southeast Asian states need to do their part to continue to advocate for democracy and human rights. While it is true that each and every Southeast Asian country has a responsibility to live up to previous commitments in this regard, it is also true that democracy and human rights in Southeast Asia has tended to be advanced by democratic countries in a contested environment. For instance, the incremental advances in the ASEAN democracy agenda in the 2000s would not have been possible without key democratic states, be it Indonesia's championing of the ASEAN Political Security Community or Thailand's continued efforts to encourage rethinking the norm of non-interference.[25]

Similar leadership is required today from within Southeast Asia. Indonesia is a natural candidate given both its geopolitical heft and Jakarta's role in this regard since its own democratic transition. While Indonesia would certainly benefit from undertaking domestic reforms to shore up the appeal of its own model, that should not stop Jakarta from also undertaking efforts to advance democracy in the region and beyond. One pathway for this is advancing the Bali Democracy Forum, Indonesia's signature commitment to democracy which can be expanded through the establishment of new chapters and links to other regions to facilitate a more global conversation about the advancement of democracy. Beyond Indonesia, other Southeast Asian countries can also advance more specific aspects drawing on their own path to democracy, with a case in point being Malaysia on anti-corruption given its experience with the 1MDB scandal and the broader traction that the issue has gotten in other countries in the region in recent years.

Third, beyond Southeast Asian states themselves, civil society groups (CSOs) need to continue to advance the democracy agenda within the subregion. To be sure, these groups are already doing important work in the region that may not make the

headlines but are nonetheless fundamental to help advance freedom and rights, be it encouraging participation in the political process—no matter how flawed—or promoting transparency. And CSOs also face their own mounting challenges as well that should not go unrecognized, including those tied to funding and restrictions on their freedom and independence.[26] But the reality is that in an environment of democratic discontent, CSOs will continue to play an indispensable role in both highlighting current challenges related to democracy and human rights as well as pushing for future change.

While continuing to advance their ongoing work in myriad areas, CSOs need to also pay increasing attention to newer areas that democratic discontent has spotlighted. A case in point in this regard is fake news and disinformation, where security-focused, state-directed efforts belie the reality that input will in fact be required from a range of nongovernmental actors as well to address these issues in a holistic, whole-of-society fashion. In addition, CSOs in particular countries should also look for opportunities to increase linkages with those in other Southeast Asian nations on issues that gain traction with a case in point being anti-corruption and transparency, as well as environmental issues such as land rights. CSOs should also continue their ongoing efforts to push for greater inclusion in regionwide efforts including within ASEAN, and make it known when they are unfairly excluded and the unrealized benefits therein.

Fourth, turning to what others can do, Southeast Asia's democratic discontent also puts the spotlight on the need for adequate and properly directed external assistance. Even though democratization and political change in Southeast Asia is rooted primarily in developments within these countries themselves, assistance from abroad has also played an important role for countries and publics to manage regime dynamics in line with their own national interests, be it in terms of preserving civic space in authoritarian settings or addressing gaps in resources and human capital in newly democratizing countries.

To be sure, there is already a lot of assistance from various actors that is ongoing. But given the significant challenges we have seen in Southeast Asia, more efforts are required by a wider range of actors on their own and in concert, particularly when it comes to managing newer challenges that also impact the wider Indo-Pacific region, such as digital authoritarianism and foreign interference. This includes assistance directed at independent media organizations for investigative journalism, as well as CSOs for polling on democracy and human rights, both of which remain challenged and require more support from the international community. Additionally, given what we have seen over the past few years with respect to transitions in Myanmar and Malaysia, it is also clear that more efforts need to be made to properly direct, streamline, and coordinate myriad initiatives to minimize duplication for countries that encounter sudden transitions.

Fifth and finally, key democratic states and other interested actors need to ensure they are doing their best to reinforce the validity of democracy as a system through the power of their own examples as well as through proper messaging to others. As was noted before, the roots of democratic discontent in Southeast Asia lie not just in these countries themselves, but also in the challenges that Western democracies have faced and the issues that democracy has confronted over the past few years. In that vein, more attention needs to be paid to demonstrating the value of democratic systems relative to their competitors as well as illustrating the value that these systems provide to publics as well.

While some of this involves initiatives that individual democratic countries will have to take domestically, there are also opportunities for collaboration. One basic line of effort is reinforcing the link between more democratic systems and the interests of the wider public in an accessible way, drawing on the wealth of academic evidence that is already available. Another is ensuring collaboration with established Asian democracies in the region, such as India, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea—whether it be individually or through minilateral mechanisms such as the so-called Quad—in order to undermine the wrongheaded argument that democracy promotion is being carried out in a contest between Western and Asian values.

CONCLUSION

A series of drivers over the past few years have led to a sense of democratic discontent in Southeast Asia, and indications are that several of these underlying dynamics are likely to persist into the future as well. While this is not entirely new and is to be expected given longstanding realities in the region, it also presents opportunities and challenges for Southeast Asian states that these countries as well as other interested parties need to manage by themselves and in collaboration with other entities both at home and abroad.

Doing so will not be easy. It will require the sensitive management of domestic legitimacy gaps by Southeast Asian states, leadership from democracy advocates from within the region, and nimble assistance from key actors in the Indo-Pacific including the United States amid a more contested governance landscape and intensifying geopolitical competition.

This is not to suggest that it will be an impossible task to accomplish. There are already conversations ongoing within Southeast Asia about how to contend with such governance challenges, and these can be supplemented by useful ideas from governments along with research and civil society organizations as well. Additionally, there are also other countries and institutions whose expertise and capabilities can be brought to bear as well as to create the right conditions to support Southeast Asian states' own paths towards greater freedom and democracy in the wider Indo-Pacific region. Ultimately, it is the focus on this broader trajectory, rather than a narrow emphasis on individual regime dynamics, that will prove critical to realizing a truly free and open Indo-Pacific region, of which Southeast Asia will be a crucial part.

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ENDNOTES

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4 See, for example: Surin Pitsuwan, Tsai Lecture at Harvard University, October 2017; Marty Natalegawa, *Does ASEAN Matter: A View from Within* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2018). APHR, "Democracy and Human Rights at Risk as ASEAN Turns 50, Parliamentarians Warn," ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights, September 19, 2017

5 The combined scores of Southeast Asian states declined from 460 to 441 from 2014 to 2015 and remained stagnated at 444 for three years running before recording just a slight increase to 445. This was a marked contrast to what had occurred between 2009 to 2014, where Southeast Asia's combined score had risen from 430 to 460.

6 As an example, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute measures of Southeast Asian states show a much less dramatic pattern when viewed over a decade-long period where the major changes are in Myanmar and Thailand, with only minor shifts detected with respect to other countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines. But this also deemphasizes changes seen *within* that decade-long period. See: V-Dem Institute, "Democracy Facing Global Challenges: V-Dem Annual Democracy Report 2019," 2019.

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21 Prashanth Parameswaran, "ASEAN and Non-Interference: What Do Cambodia's Evolving Opposition Dynamics Reveal?" *The Diplomat*, November 13, 2019; Hannah Beech, "With a Smile, Southeast Asian Nations Protect an Authoritarian," *The New York Times*, November 7, 2019.

22 See, for instance, Conference Report, "Democracy in Southeast Asia: Achievements, Challenges, and Prospects," Kofi Annan Foundation and Suhakam, Kuala Lumpur, 2-3 September 2017; and the series on civil society sponsored by the TIFA Foundation on New Mandala, Kevin Hewison, "Rethinking Southeast Asia Civil Society," *New Mandala*, November 6, 2017. We have also witnessed the rise of new cross-national groups focusing on democracy and human rights over the past few years, be it the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights, which was officially founded in 2013, or New Naratif, which was started in 201

23 Media statement by Nicholas Beguelin, Amnesty International East Asia and Pacific regional director. Comments were drawn from the report of Amnesty International, *Human Rights in the Asia-Pacific: Review of 2019*, Washington, D.C., 2019.

24 While this is a quieter aspect of bilateral collaboration, there have been instances where it has been in the spotlight. See, for instance: US Embassy in Malaysia, "United States Returns More than RM800 Million to Malaysia in Recovered 1MDB Funds," May 7, 2019.

25 These proposals were debated within ASEAN. For instance, Indonesia's initial proposal was met with resistance by some ASEAN member states, For an elaboration of this process, see Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Rizal Sukma, "Political Development: A Democracy Agenda for ASEAN?" in Donald K. Emmerson (ed), *Hard Choices: Security, Democracy, and Regionalism in Southeast Asia* (Washington, D.C: Brookings University Press, 2008).

26 Rosalia Sciortino, "Wielding the Purse Strings of Southeast Asian Civil Society," *New Mandala*, July 11, 2018.