BEATING BACKSLIDING? EPISODES AND OUTCOMES OF DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN ASIA-PACIFIC IN THE PERIOD 1950 TO 2018

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Paper prepared for the workshop "Democratic Backsliding in Asia: Resilience,Responses, Revival," Heidelberg University, 8-9 December 2019.

Very preliminary draft

Comments gratefully received

1. INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, democracy faces substantial challenges. Advanced democracies in the West face malaise as globalization and technological progress, political polarization and income inequality transnationalization and multi-level governance structures pose challenges to fundamental principles of national, representative democracy (Rodrick 2011; Boix 2019; Przeworski 2019). Simultaneously, an increasing number of so-called new or "Third Wave Democracies" seems to be experiencing mounting challenges of democratic erosion by those elected to lead it (Diamond 2015). Many students of democratization point out that this new "wave of autocratization" (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019) mainly affects democracies with gradual setbacks. Unlike in past periods of global democratic reversal, the problem of democratic erosion after the third wave of democratization is not abrupt collapse or sudden overthrow but gradual erosion of the pillars of democratic competition.

The "Asia-Pacific" region (comprising South, Southeast and Northeast Asia) is of particular importance for the discussion about the current state of democracy and its future prospects. For one, it is the most populous region of the world which has been home of some of the most impressive success stories of economic growth and human development in the post-World War II period. At the same time, the region seems to contract the widely held view that "democracy does a better job in raising living standards in poor countries than does authoritarian government" (Halperin, Sigle, and Weinstein 2010: 1). By global standards, democracies outperform authoritarian regimes on almost every measure of development (Przeworski et al. 2000) but in Asia-Pacific, many, though not all, authoritarian regimes demonstrate a strong capacity to produce growth generating public goods, economic grown and human development (Croissant and Pelke 2020). In fact, "all the recent examples of successful authoritarian modernisation cluster in East Asia rather than other parts of the world", as Francis Fukuyama (2013: 5) notes. In contrast to predatory autocracies in the Middle East and Sub-Sahara Africa, non-democracies in Asia-Pacific often provide a relatively high level of "rule of law for elites" (North, Wallis and Weingast 2009) and protection of property rights—two of the most important ingredients for economic development in the long-run (Haggard, MacIntyre, and Tiede 2008; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). It comes therefore as no surprise that scholars discuss the possibility of a new Asian – essentially Chinese –alternative to liberal capitalism and democracy (Bell 2016).

Democracy has long been an exception in Asia; instead, the political landscape has historically been dominated by authoritarian systems of government – especially military dictatorships and one-party regimes. The first wave of democratization before and after World War I barely touched the shores of Pacific Asia. The second wave that followed World War II left behind a few electoral democracies (India, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka), but only one consolidated liberal democracy (Japan), though

Japanese democracy did not pass the "two-turnover test" until August 1993 (Vu 2020). It was only with the third wave of democratization, which reached Asian shores in the late 1980s, that the number of democracies in the region tripled from three in 1980 to nine in 2005, and eleven in 2017 (see Table 1).

TABLE 1. THREE WAVES OF DEMOCRATIZATION IN ASIA

	First Wave	**Second Wave** (electoral democracy from … to)	**Third Wave** (electoral democracy from … to)
Bangladesh	--	--	1992-2006, 2009-2012
Bhutan	--	--	2009--
Brunei	--	--	--
Burma / Myanmar	--	--	--
Cambodia	--	--	--
China	--	--	--
East Timor			2003-
India		1952-1975	1978--
Indonesia			2000--
Japan	--	1952--	--
Laos	--	--	--
Malaysia	--	--	--
Maldives	--	--	2009-2012
Nepal	--	--	2009-2011; 2014--
North Korea	--	--	--
Pakistan			1997-1999
Philippines		1952-1972	1988--
Singapore	--	--	--
Sri Lanka		1948-2006	2015--
South Korea	--	--	1988--
Taiwan	--	--	1996--
Thailand	--	---	1992-2005; 2011-2013
Vietnam	--	--	--

Source: Classification as democracy based on the Electoral Democracy Index of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project. Source: Data based by Coppedge et al. (2019) and Lührmann et al. (2018).

The third wave of democratization was remarkable in its impact and reach. Still, the ensuing reform processes resulted in great variation in terms of political regime outcomes across Asia. South Korea and Taiwan are often celebrated as resounding success stories of the third wave of democratization (Diamond 2016). Other democracies such as Indonesia, the Philippines and East Timor continue to face debilitating challenges – including political polarization, the rapid political mobilization of diverse groups, a deinstitutionalizing role of political leaders and the failure of democratic structures to respond to growing social demands.

Moreover, in the past fifteen years or so, scholars noted an alarming trend of eroding qualities of (liberal) democracy in Asian democracies. The extent of weakening varies from country to county. Striking examples are Bangladesh, Pakistan and Thailand, where democracy was subjected to full autocratic reversal. However, the list of countries with democratic erosions includes also Taiwan, South Korea, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, and Mongolia (Sambuu and Menarndt 2019; Keum and Campbell 2018; Wong 2019; Jayasuriya 2018; Warburton and Aspinall 2019; Hadiz 2018 Medina-Guce and Galindes 2018; De Votta 2016; Chacko 2018; Lührmann et al. 2019). However, a closer look at different episodes of democratic erosion in shows that both modes and outcomes of backsliding vary. In short, democratic backsliding in Asia produced three different outcomes: breakdown of democracy, sometimes followed by a quick democratic comeback; "near misses" (Ginsburg and Haq 2018) that became less democratic and more fragile, although backsliding stopped; and cases where the struggle against democratic backsliding helped to revitalize and strengthen democracy.

In this paper, I identify 18 backsliding episodes, that is periods of substantial democracy erosion, in 13 different Asian countries in the period from 1950 to 2018. Democracy did collapse in ten cases and survived in six cases; two backsliding episodes are ongoing. Based on the experience of this sample of cases, this paper aims at generating insights about why some democracies prove more resilient to this gradual form of decline in the quality of democratic institutions. To my knowledge, this is the first effort to systematically comparing all cases of democratic erosion in Asia-Pacific that did result in democratic breakdown with cases that did not. Focusing on cases of breakdown and "near misses" allows for the possibility of cross-case causal inference about why some Asian democracies survive backsliding and revitalize, stagnate or enter new episodes of decline, whereas others are unable to survive periods of crisis. However, excluding cases of no democratic backsliding rules out the possibility of cross-case causal inference about why these democracies began to backslide in the first place.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I develop my conceptual framework and the methods I use for identify episodes of democratic backsliding. Next, I review the extant literature and present my theoretical expectations. Third, I provide a comparative analysis of potential explanations for different outcomes of democratic backsliding in Asia. Fourth, I discuss episodes of democratic backsliding in three countries, which differ in terms of the democracy outcome: Thailand (2001-2005, 2009-2012; South Korea; and Mongolia. What these cases have in common is that they all experienced a gradual erosion of the pillars of democratic competition, such as political freedom, civil society, free press and rule of law. However, in Thailand, the two periods of democratic recession resulted each in the breakdown of democracy and the outcome of the first backsliding episode made it harder for Thai democracy to survive the second one. In contrast, in South Korea, the struggle against autocratization provided the focal point around which political forces would really, revising backsliding and pressing for more democratic shift in the status quo of the political system. Finally, Mongolia in the period 2010 to 2015 represents yet another scenario: Although a vigorous civil society was able to consistently and effectively push back against political elites' abuse of state power (Seeberg 2018), democracy was significantly weakened and is today more vulnerable than before to new attempts to undermine democracy. Finally, I summarize the paper and briefly discuss avenues for further research.

2. CONCEPTUALIZATION AND OPERATIONALIZATOIN OF DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

Classifying democratic backsliding is difficult. There is a plethora of concepts intended to capture forms of democratic decline (cf. Merkel 2010, Lueders and Lust 2017, Tomini and Cassani 2018). The seemingly limitless creativity of scholars in introducing new concepts challenges scientific communication and makes it difficult to compare and replicate research findings. The three most prominent conceptualizations of the dependent variable in the current debate are "democratic backsliding", "autocratization" and "deconsolidation of democracy". Of these, "autocratization" is the most extensive concept. It denotes a "substantial de-facto decline of core institutional requirements for electoral democracy" (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019: 1096). Substantially, "autocratization" encompasses the decline of democratic qualities of any democratic regime and the collapse of democracies, but also the decline of democratic characteristics in autocracies. The high extension of the concept is perhaps a strength, but also comes at the risk of conceptual stretching: the concept conflates very different types of political processes, for example, the decline of liberal democracies into electoral democracies, but also the transition from competitive to closed authoritarianism.

Deconsolidation, on the other hand, is a much narrower concept. Building on the definition of consolidated democracy as "the only game in town" (Linz and Stepan 1996), deconsolidation describes a process by which citizens "who once accepted democracy as the only legitimate form of government could become more open to authoritarian alternatives. Stable party systems in which all major forces were once united in support of democracy could enter into phases of extreme instability or witness the meteoric rise of antisystem parties. Finally, rules that were once respected by all important political players could suddenly come under attack by politicians jostling for partisan advantage" (Foa and Mounk 2016: 15). While the concept clearly focuses on the key characteristics of a consolidated democracy, the behavioral and attitudinal (de)consolidation of a democratic regime is not the same as the actual democratic quality of its institutions and processes. The concept seems therefore to be unable to capture in the extent to which institutional and procedural characteristics of democracy decrease (or increase) in any political regime.

In contrast, the middle-range concept of democratic backsliding "denotes the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy" (Bermeo 2016: 5) At the most general level, backslides are different from autocratic reversals in that the decline in the quality of democracy is not required to coincide with regime change. Conceptualizations of "democratic backsliding" diverge in scope. Bermeo (2016:16) defines it broadly as "the weakening or disassembling of a given set of democratic institutions". Somewhat narrower definitions are restricted to "actions on the part of nominally democratic incumbents that exploit the benefits of office […] to restrict political contestation and civil and political liberties" (Haggard and Kaufman 2016:1). Similarly, Waldner and Lust define democratic backsliding as a "discontinuous series of incremental actions [that] makes elections less competitive without entirely undermining the electoral mechanism, […] restricts participation […] and loosens constraints of accountability by eroding norms of answerability and punishment" (Waldner and Lust 2018: 95).

This study builds on Bermeo's definition of backsliding. Heuristically, we can think of democratic backsliding in the following way: Backslides are constituted by (a series of) signal events, such as restrictions on the freedom of the press or a removal of an incumbent by force, whose initiators can be either ruling elites, opposition politicians, the military or other actors with actual "veto power". While instances of coups and executive aggrandizement can arguably only be the consequence of purposeful behavior of the initiators, the same may not hold for reductions in democratic quality brought about by large-scale (ethnic) violence, political scandals or the intervention of international actors.

To identify empirical episodes of backsliding, I use Michael Coppedge's operationalization of "democratic backsliding" as a decrease in democratic quality of at least 10% of the range of V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) within a period of ten years or less that started when the country was a

democracy.[1] This implies that a country must have already surpassed some minimum threshold of democracy the year before the potential backsliding episode started. I measure regime type using the Regimes of the World classification (Lührmann, Tannenberg and Lindberg 2018).[2] Among countries that meet this scope conditions, I use a drop of more than 0.09 in their liberal democracy score (on a 0 to 1 scale) to constitute a backsliding episode. The criterion of a 10% reduction is implemented because it has been shown to capture those cases well that we usually think of as backsliders and yields very similar sets of cases when reasonably altering the threshold (Coppedge 2017). The more contentious criterion is that the reduction in liberal democratic qualities of at least 10% or more has to take place in ten years or less. Mechkova et al. (2017) and Lührmann et al. (2018a; Laebens and Lührmann 2019) use the same criterion, while others either looked at (up to) five-year differences.

Depending on the breadth of the concept of backsliding and the research question of interest, authors differ in the extent to which backslides are divided into subcategories as well as the criteria employed for doing so. For example, Bermeo (2016) distinguishes between six inductively generated types, including three coup varieties, executive aggrandizement, election-day vote fraud, and "strategic harassment and manipulation". Some authors (Waldner and Lust 2018; Haggard and Kaufman 2016) equate backsliding with executive aggrandizement. Coppedge (2017: 14-15) differentiates backslides in terms of whether the erosion of democratic quality is most closely aligned with freedom of expression and association, the existence of alternative sources of information, deliberation and civil liberties ("rights and freedoms dimension"); or with judicial and legislative constraints on the executive, which constitute horizontal accountability, and clean elections („accountability dimension").

3. ANALYZING OUTCOMES OF BACKSLIDING EPISODES: THEORETICAL EXPECTATIONS

The question of what makes democracies resilient has been at the center of comparative political since the mid twentieth century. Inspired by modernization theory (Lipset 1959), much of the research on this question has focused on the role of structural factors, particularly income, but also the structure of the economy, ethnic, religious or political "subcultures" among the country's population. Seminal studies were presented by Huntington (1968), who identifies the gap between social mobilization and the ability of civilian political institutions to peacefully cope with the new political demands and societal conflicts they face as key factor for the failure of young, often post-colonial democracies. O'Donnell (1973) explained the collapse of democracy (in Latin America) as outcome of repressive, authoritarian-bureaucratic industrialization. In contrast, Juan Linz's seminal multi-volume study on the breakdown of democracy (1978) highlights the role of political elites, showing how their semi- or disloyal behavior can put democracy at risk. More recently, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) proposed a framework to understand how democracies die that is inspired by Linz's work. Ulfelder and Lustik's analysis of the conditions for the backsliding into autocracy in the period 1955 to 2003 finds that affluent democracies are more stable (Ulfelder and Lustik 2008). This finding is supported by recent tests of the exogenous

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[1] V-Dem makes available five "high-level" indices to measure different conceptions of democracy: electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian. Empirically they are not very different because the electoral democracy index is an important component in the formula for calculating the other four (Coppedge et al. 2017). Among these indices, the LDI is the best single measure of most of the attributes being discussed in this paper: In addition to electoral democracy, it takes into account legislative constraints on the executive, judicial constraints on the executive, and respect for civil liberties. This index should therefore drop when executives weaken legislative oversight, disregard judicial rulings, or undermine judicial independence – all actions that we associate with some of the erosions that motivate this analysis.

[2] Following the V-Dem operationalization of electoral democracy, only those regimes qualify as democracies that "(1) hold de-facto multiparty elections ("v2elmulpar_osp">2), (2) hold sufficiently free and fair elections ("v2elfrfair_osp">2) and (3) score higher than .5 on V-Dem's electoral democracy index" (Lührmann et al. 2018b).

variant of modernization theory (Przeworski et al. 2000; Boix 2003). In contrast to Linz (1994) or Kapstein and Converse (2008), who highlight that presidential forms of government is responsible for the failure of democracy, they find no statistically significant relationship between the probability of reversion and forms of government. While Maeda (2010) finds a connection between the collapse of democracy and a poor economic situation only for exogenously induced collapses, but not in endogenously triggered reversions, Eichhorn (2016) identifies significant effects of economic growth and governance performance on the probability of reversion for the period 1996 to 2013.

In contrast, recent economic approaches focus on the importance of distributive conflicts between elites and citizens (Boix 2003; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006), or between old and new economic elites (Ansell and Samuels 2014), as causes of democratic breakdown. The "distributive conflict models" (Haggard and Kaufman 2016) in democratization studies assume that democracies are destabilized by higher levels of income inequality, as relative costs of repression decrease with increasing inequality and the costs of introducing democracy for the elite increase. Besides the fact that inequality and poverty make democracies more fragile, the process of democratization itself often creates conflicts and forces that may break democracy. One source of pressure may be elites, who may try to undermine advances in the rule of law, so that they can "capture" the regime and hamper transformative pressures (Acemoglu and Robinson 2008). Other pressures may come from below, taking the form of a majoritarian, populist assault or insurgency against the elites, but also against democratic institutions. As Slater (2013) puts it, these pressures can lead democracies to "careen", swinging between exclusionary modes with regular alternation of power between elites, and majoritarian populist modes where inclusion seems greater yet horizontal accountability disappears and government abuses its powers. While such careening may create a temporary erosion of democracy that is later reversed, it can also cause a breakdown and the establishment of an authoritarian regime.

Haggard and Kaufman (2016) distinguish between three types of reversal from democracy to autocracy in the period 1980-2007. The first two forms of "populist reversion" and "elite reaction reversion" are based on social conflicts over economic inequality and redistribution demands of the lower social strata. While distributive conflict models assume that income inequality and distributional conflicts are driving forces behind democratization and autocratization, they fail to find empirical evidence that high levels of inequality generally destabilize democracy; neither do distributive conflicts seem to have played a significant role in most autocratic reversions since the 1980s. They therefore argue that reversions are usually not the result of distributive conflicts or the dissatisfaction of the elite with redistributive policies, but rather the result of a "weak democracy syndrome" (WDS). Such "weak" democracies are characterized by a lack of civilian control over the military (praetorianism), weak institutionalization, and poor economic development, which weakens the legitimacy of democracy and makes democracy susceptible to military coups or to the abuse of political power by elites, democratic governments (ibid.).

However, these works as well as many other studies usually describe the evolution of democracies in terms of the dichotomy of survival or breakdown. Accordingly, these analyses focus on events of regime change from democracy to autocracy. However, as mentioned above, recent studies highlight that many declines in democratic quality over the last two decades did not coincide with reversals of democracy (Lueders and Lust 2017; Mechkova et al. 2017; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Theorizing on the causes of the more intermittent or gradual erosion of democracy that does not necessarily lead to democratic breakdown is still in its infancy, with the new literature being "empirically, theoretically and methodologically fragmented" (Tomini and Wageman 2018: 691). Still, most scholars agree that the "incremental and multidimensional regressive change" that is characteristic of democratic backsliding requires multi-causal explanations. For example, Waldner and Lust (2018) identify a comprehensive list of several dozen potential causes for democratic erosion, which they group in six theory families.[3]

[3] Leadership, culture, institutions, economy, social structures and political coalitions, and institutional factors.

In contrast, Laebens and Lührmann (2019) propose a different approach to studying democratic resilience, one that attempts to induce the mechanisms that stabilize democracy during political crisis and democratic recession. Instead of analyzing the effects of particular institutional or structural configurations on the survival of democracy or the specific behavior of politicians, they study processes that damage democratic institutions. They distinguish three kinds of institutions of accountability that can constrain the executive and thus may stop democratic erosion (ibid.; Lührmann et al. 2017): The first one is institutions of vertical accountability (i.e., free and fair elections and the exercise of political rights by activists and citizens). Second, horizontal accountability mechanisms, including the judiciary, legislative oversight and other watchdog institutions. Third, civil society and media constrains on government and politicians constitute "diagonal accountability" mechanisms (ibid.). The three mechanism may play out in different ways. First, political elites may perceive one or more of these institutions as powerful and hence anticipate strong resistance and high potential costs of an autocratization strategy, which dis-incentivizes backsliding strategies. Second, politicians who engage in democratic backsliding may underestimate the strength of accountability mechanisms and thus be sanctioned for democratic erosion, so that accountability mechanisms stop the backsliding episode before democracy will break down. This could be the case if ruling parties split and turn against the incumbent or the incumbent loses elections. Whether or not institutions can work as balancing mechanisms depends on the capabilities of agents and organizations that play a role in shaping electoral and institutional outcomes. Third, elites may reverse their behavior if the contextual factor that enabled democratic erosion to start (by decreasing the cost of backsliding) ceases to exist.

4. DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN ASIA-PACIFIC: THE EMPIRICAL RECORD

I identify 18 episodes of substantial democracy erosion in 13 Asian countries in the period from 1950 to 2018. Table 2 provides descriptive information about these cases. The cases offer rich variation in terms of severity and outcomes of backsliding. Of the 18 backsliding episodes, six ended before democracy broke down. Among these, three (temporarily) recovered at a level of democratic quality similar to that in the year before the start of the backsliding episode. They might be called "true near misses" (Ginsburg and Haq 2018: 18). Three democracies stabilized at a lower level of democratic quality; two more erosion episodes were ongoing at the time of completion of this paper (and may still result in democratic breakdown). Of the 10 episodes in which democracy fell below a minimum threshold of electoral democracy, three autocratizations were reversed within five or less years ("quick comebacks"; Ginsburg and Haq 2018: 18).

Country	Start year	End year	LDI before	Drop in LDI	What aspects of democracy eroded?	Backsliding mode	Democratic breakdown?	Democratic comeback?
Philippines	1969	1972	0.31	-0.27	Gradual decline in liberal democracy due to civil war between communist/Moro insurgent and the AFP. Towards the end of his presidency due to term limit, President Marcos (since 1965) declared martial law that suspended the constitution and gave him dictatorial powers	Executive coup	Yes	Civil resistance (1986)
India	1973	1976	0.49	-0.20	Increasing control of the judiciary by the government of PM Indira Gandhi, student unrest against government policies and intra-INC conflict triggered the declaration of a state of emergency by the prime minister.	Executive Aggrandizement	Yes	Election (1977)
Sri Lanka	1977	1983	0.44	-0.12	Gradual decline in liberal democracy due fundamentally to the civil war between the insurgent Tamil Tigers and increasingly repressive Sinhalese governments under President Jayewardane, who passed a new constitution in 1978, which granted the president sweeping powers.	Executive Aggrandizement	Near miss, followed by stagnation	Election (1986)
Pakistan	1998	2000	0.26	-0.15	During his 2nd term as PM, Nawaz Sharif was accused of manipulating the ranks of senior judges, trying to oust the Chief Justice, and limiting the powers of the president ("Thirteenth Amendment"), which led to constitutional crisis. On 12 October 1999, the military sized control of the government.	Promissory coup	Yes	Not yet
Sri Lanka	2004	2009	0.29	-0.15	Gradual weakening of rights, freedoms and accountability mechanism due fundamentally to the civil war and power grabs by President Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005-2015), which weakened horizontal accountability mechanisms.	Executive Aggrandizement	Yes	Election (2015)
Bangladesh	2002	2008	0.29	-0.19	After the 2001 general elections, the government of PM Khaleda Zia was accused of misuse of political powers. Political confrontation between leaders of the two main parties and internal unrest led to the collapse of the CTG arrangement before the January 2007 elections. Later in the month, the military intervened and a new military-controlled caretaker government (CTG) was formed. Zia lost the 2008 election in a landslide.	Promissory coup	Yes	Election (2009)
Thailand	2002	2006	0.41	-0.22	Gradual weakening of rights, freedoms and accountability mechanism due fundamentally to PM Thakin's "war on drugs", the deepening of ethnic conflict in the South, and the elimination of effective legislative and judicial controls by Thaksin. The failure of the oppsotiion to impeach the PM and mass mobilization led to snap elections in 2006, which were marred by accusations of government manipulation and an opposition boycott. This led to a constitutional crisis and a military coup	Promissory coup	Yes	Election (2012)
Philippines	2001	2005	0.49	-0.15	Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (2001-2010) was the Vice President to President Joseph Estrada, who resigned under the threat of impeachment for corruption. PresidentArroyo herself faced down impeachment attempts motivated by charges of fraud in the 2004 presidential election, and she was accused of corruption as well. In 2006 she declared a state of emergency to prevent a rumored coup attempt	Strategic election manipulation	Near miss, followed by temporary recovery	Civil resistance (2005-2006)
South Korea	2009	2015	0.76	-0.19	Erosion in the liberal quality of democracy under conservative Presidents Lee Myung-baek and Park Geun-hye due to the decay in judicial constraints on the executive, illegal government surveillance of opposition and journalists and corruption, and state power abuse scandals of both administrations	Executive Aggrandizement	Near miss, followed by recovery	Civil resistance and election (2016-2017)

Bangladesh	2011	2015	0.25	-0.10	Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League was elected PM in 2009. Parliament passed the 15th amendment to the constitution in 2011, which scrapped certain constitutional constraints and the CGT formula for the conduct of general elections in the future. In addition to the erosion of accountability mechanisms due to election manipulation and delegative practices. Major opposition leaders are banned from politics or jailed and the general elections in 2014 and 2018 were marred by violence, claims of vote rigging and opposition boycotts.	Executive Aggrandizement	Yes	Not yet
Indonesia	2007	2014	0.25	-0.11	Erosion of civil rights due increasing pressure on religious minorities, political polarization and the adoption of a law that restricts the activities of nongovernmental organizations, increases bureaucratic oversight of such groups, and requires them to support the national ideology of Pancasila—including its explicitly monotheist component. President Yudhoyono (2007-2014) was also criticized for his failure to rein in corruption. The 2014 presidential election were marred by controversies and increasing political violence; defeated, populist challenger Prabowo Subianto initially declined to accept the results.	Other	Near miss, followed by temporary recovery	Election (2014)
Timor Leste	2010	2015	0.56	-0.11	There were particular concerns about interference in the judicial system—especially after, in 2014, the government sacked international judges and legal advisers, a feature of the country's justice system dating back to the UNTAET administration. In 2015, parliament approved a highly controversial Media Law severely curbing press freedoms, prompting a strong outcry from civil rights activists and journalists within and outside the country.	Other	Near miss, stagnation	Judicial and civil society resistance
Mongolia	2010	2015	0.58	-0.10	The prevalence of clientelistic networks and lack of financial transparency in major political parties have become serious threats to the democratic institutions. Parliamentary election were plagued by a corruption scandal known locally as the "60 billion tugrik" case, and marred by sudden changes that made it more difficult for independent and third-party candidates to win seats. Moreover, president and government interfered with judicial appointments and dismissals, and the independence of watchdog institutions following conflicts over alleged electoral manipulations in 2015/2016. Mongolia's democratic system is currently facing yet again another constitutional crisis.	Executive aggrandizement	Near miss, stagnation and possible start of new episode	Election (2016)
Thailand	2013	2014	0.44	-0.32	After the 2011 election, a pro-Thaksin government under PM Yingluck Shinawatra, sister of the controversial ex-PM, was formed, which sought to change the constitution to strengthen the executive and legislative branches vis-à-vis the judiciary and extra-parliamentary veto powers. By December 2013, a collection of anti-Shinawatra demonstration groups, occupied parts of Bangkok. Snap elections were disrupted by protest groups and eventually invalidated by the Constitution Court. Army Chief Prayuth Chan-o-cha declared martial law on May 20 and, two days later announced a putsch. The Kingdom remained under direct military rule until early 2019.	Promissory coup	Yes	Not yet
Maldives	2012	2016	0.41	-0.24	In late 2008, Mohamed Nasheed became the Maldives' first freely elected president. While Nasheed himself made authoritarian moves, including arresting officials and opposition politicians to deal with mounting political and economic challenges, opposition elites in politics, state, military and business sought to	Promissory coup	Yes	Not yet

					end Nasheed's government by any means. He was forced to resign in February 2012 after sections of the police and the military mutinied and backed the demand of the opposition for his resignation. An alliance of opposition parties nominated the former dictator's half brother Yameen, to run against Nasheed in the 2013 presidential race. Soon after he took power, Yameen took control of various institutions, hollowed them out and made them subservient to his political agenda. The judiciary has been one of the main targets of Yameen's authoritarian assault on state institutions. Soon after he took power, he used his party's legislative majority to change the law regulating the composition of the country's top court. Yameen managed to remove the chief justice and lower court judge, both of whom were known for their relative independence. This effectively made the judiciary dependent on the executive branch. In the following years, all major political rivals to Yameen were imprisoned on various charges, When his despotic adventurism estranged his coalition partners and the president lost their legislative majority, the courts and the elections body stripped 12 opposition MPs of their seats.			
Nepal	2011	2013	0.45	-0.28	From 2008 to 2012, an elected Constitutional Assembly was in place. When the assembly dissolved in May 2012, there remained no democratically elected governing body at the national level. From May 2012 onwards, Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai presided over a so-called "caretaker government." His democratic mandate effectively expired with the CA's tenure. But, due largely to the lack of other compelling leadership options, Bhattarai managed to maintain his grip on power until a new CA was elected in the following year	Executive aggrandizement	Yes	Election (2013)
India	2012	2018	0.56	-0.14	The erosion of India's democratic institutions under PM Modi (since 2012) extends to Parliament, the reputation of the Supreme Court, the political absenteeism of the army, the Election Commission and the decentralized system of governance. At the same time, civil society is increasingly marginalized, the press silenced or controlled; and the licenses of tens of thousands of NGOs have been revoked	Executive Aggrandizement	Ongoing	Ongoing
Philippines	2016	2018	0.46	-0.14	The presidency of Rodrigo Duterte (elected May 10, 2016) is fundamentally different from post-1986 administrations in its unrelenting use of intimidation to weaken any challenges to its authority. Within weeks of his inauguration, the new president began his murderous war on drugs and ran roughshod over human rights, its political opponents, and the country's democratic institutions. The government weaponized the legal system to attack political opponents, disparaged or threatened the leaders of key accountability institutions, and threatened the mainstream media with lawsuits and nonrenewal of franchises. While this degradation has happened through nominally legal means, groups and institutions opposed to strongman rule have only offered limited pushback to date.	Executive Aggrandizement	Ongoing	Ongoing

One striking finding is that with the exception of Japan and Taiwan, all democracies in Asia-Pacific experienced more or less pronounced backsliding. Another important finding is, however, that some countries went through more than one episode of democratic reversal. In fact, 11 of the 18 cases occurred in only five countries (Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Thailand). In other words, once a democracy enters a period of decline, the chance is high that it remains vulnerable to further degradation. As already mentioned, only few countries saw the quality of their democracy recovering from backsliding and reaching a level near or above the starting level. These include South Korea under the reign of President Moon (since 2017), the Philippines during the presidency of Benigno Aquino III (2010-2016), Nepal from 2014 to 2017, Indonesia under President Jokowi (2014-2017), Sri Lanka during the presidency of Maithripla Sirisena (2015-2018); and Thailand after 2008. With the exception of South Korea, however, democratic recovery was not sustainable, i.e. the positive trend turned negative again within a few years—though it remains to be seen to which extent regression that started again in Sri Lanka in 2018 may continue under the new Rajapaksa government.

The length of these episodes ranged from 18 month to six years. A few cases (i.e., Mongolia, Indonesia, and Timor Leste) barely passed the threshold to be considered a backsliding episode.[4] In contrast, sharp drops of more than 0.20 on a scale of 0 to 1 occurred in the Philippines and India (1970s), Thailand (two episodes), the Maldives and Nepal. Cases very with respect to the starting level of democratic quality at the onset of the backsliding episode as well as the gravity of the crisis as reflected in the LDI score. South Korea has the highest pre-episode LDI score among the cases (2008: 0.76), Bangladesh the lowest (2009: 0.25). Generally, democratic backsliding seems to occur primarily in non-liberal, lower quality democracies: South Korea is the only case with a LDI of .6 or higher, whereas 13 cases had a starting level of lower than .50. There is much less variation in the historical period in which episodes. Although there are a few cases of democratic backsliding in the twentieth century, most cases happened in third wave democracies in the 21st century.

With regard to the dimensions of democracy affected by backsliding, most cases actually suffered losses in both the dimension of rights and freedoms and the accountability dimension. However, the loss of democratic quality was most closely aligned with "rights and freedoms" in eight cases: India and Sri Lanka (two episodes in each country), South Korea, Indonesia, Timor Leste, and the Philippines under President Duterte. The other ten cases primarily suffered primarily declining judicial and legislative constraints on the executive, which constitute horizontal accountability, and clean elections ("accountability dimension"; cf. Coppedge 2017: 14-15). With nine cases (50%), executive aggrandizement, i.e. backsliding through „actions on the part of nominally democratic incumbents that exploit the benefits of office – including economically – to restrict political contestation and civil and political liberties" (Kaufmann and Haggard 2016: 1-2) is clearly the model type of democratic backsliding in Asia-Pacific. This fits in with the findings of comparative research. "Promissory coups" (Bermeo 2016), that is, the illegal seizure of a government by a group of military and civilian elites, who claim to defend democracy and promise to hold elections in order to restore democracy, are also common (five cases). Conceptually, the two are distinct but empirically, their political dynamics can align closely. The case of Thailand illustrates this well. From 2001 to 2006, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra managed to weaken checks on executive power one by one, marginalizing opposition forces, which lacked the power to challenge Thaksin's preferences, and effectively controlling most watchdog organizations. Following nonviolent mass protests (so-called "Yellow Shirt" movement) against the "Thaksinization of Thai politics" (McCargo and Pathmanand 2005), and royal intervention to block manipulation of the electoral process by the government, Thaksin was deposed by a military coup in September 2006. The downfall of the Zia government in Bangladesh exhibits similar traits (Croissant et al. 2013). In Pakistan (1999), Thailand (2014), and the Maldives (2012), the generals who spearheaded the coup also justified it as a correction of the democratic process. The case literature suggests, however,

[4] Using five-year differences would eliminate Indonesia, South Korea and Modi's India from the sample. The available case-related literature suggest that at last the last two are unambiguous cases of democratic backsliding.

that its main purpose was not to stop executive aggrandizement but to foil progressive steps of the government (Maldives), or to protect the political status quo against intra-elite conflicts or deepening tensions between new and vested social interests (Pakistan and Thailand). Other forms of backsliding are rare. Moreover, limits of the empirical usefulness of existing typologies are also evident: cases such as Indonesia and Timor Leste, who barely passed the threshold, do not easily fit any particular type of backsliding.

Finally, the case sample offers more variation in terms of what events stopped backsliding in near misses or enabled cases of autocratic reversal to return to democracy. Elections are the most common route to a democratic comeback, often because voters punish those responsible for the erosion of democracy in an election (i.e., Indira Gandhi, Mahinda Rajapaksa, and Khaleda Zia) or those in power do not seek reelection because they face strong opposition from within their own party, civil society and opposition parties (Sri Lanka 1986). However, elections were a device of democratic comeback also in other scenarios, for instance, in Thailand (coup-plotters kept their promise to return to a form of elected government), Nepal (elites compromising to hold overdue elections), as well as Indonesia and Mongolia (some combination of clean and transparent elections, civil mobilization and alternation of power between political parties). In addition to this mechanism of vertical (electoral) accountability, a second one is civil resistance, which, however, usually works only in combination with intra-elite splits (i.e., military defection and party splits in the Philippines), or horizontal accountability (impeachment in South Korea, judicial resistance in Timor Leste).

5. BEATING BACKSLIDING? OUTCOMES OF BACKSLIDING EPISODES IN ASIA-PACIFIC

As mentioned before, selecting cases on the dependent variable and excluding cases without democratic backsliding rules out the possibility of cross-case causal inference about why these democracies began to backslide in the first place. However, low starting levels of democratic quality and recurring incidents of backsliding in many countries suggest that democratic backsliding in Asia is mainly (though, not exclusively) a feature of “borderline democracies” (Levitsky and Way 2015: 47), located in the grey zone of democracy and dictatorship. It is therefore plausible to examine whether democracies affected by backsliding show symptoms of Haggard and Kaufman’s "weak democracy syndrome". As already outlined, the syndrome comprises three core components (Haggard and Kaufman 2016: 224-229). The first component is poor economic performance. Following Haggard and Kaufman, I use per capita income adjusted for power purchase parities in the year before the start of the episode (t-1) and averaged GDP growth rates over the three years before the onset of democratic backsliding (t-3) as measure of economic performance. The second one is political institutionalization, for which Haggard and Kaufman (2016: 256) consider two measures: the average Polity score of a democracy over the entire lifespan of the political regime; and the more focused Polity measure of executive constraints, a measure of checks that they argue are lacking in “weak democracies”. However, Polity scores are conceptually and methodologically problematic (Munck and Verkuilen 2001; Coppedge et al. 2017). Instead, I use the five-year average Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) score of a country (t-5) and the scores of the judicial and legislative constraints on the executive in the year before backsliding onset (t-1). Data for this comes from the Varieties of Democracy project. Haggard and Kaufman (2016: 256) capture the third component, praetorianism, by the existence of a coup history: a 1 indicates at least one successful coup in a period of up to 20 years before the backsliding episode, a 0 indicates no (successful) coup. This is obviously a crude indicator because the absence of coups in a given country can reflect diametrically opposed civil-military relations (Feaver 1999; Svolik 2012). I therefore also use a Civilian Control Score (CCS) that measures the extent to which democratically elected authorities are able to exercise political control over the military in five key decision-making areas of civil-military relations (Kuehn and Croissant 2020). Unfortunately, this measure is not available for all backsliding episodes.

Table 3: "Weak democracy syndrome" in near misses and autocratic reversals

	Economic performance			Political institutionalization			Praetorianism	
	per capita GDP (t-1) (US$)		Average Economic Growth (t-3)	Judicial constraints on the executive index (t-1)	Legislative constraints on the executive index (t-1)	Average EDI score (t-5)	Coup History (20 years before starting year)	Average Civilian Control Score (t-5)
Near misses (n=8)	8454[1]	9718[2]	5.11	0.78	0.73	0.68	25%	0.70
Sri Lanka 1977-83	1800	N/A	4.17	0.81	0.54	0.63	0	N/A
Philippines 2001-05	4187	4224	0.84	0.72	0.81	0.62	1	0.39
South Korea 2009-15	30412	28588	4.93	0.86	0.89	0.83	0	1.0
Indonesia 2007-14	4420	7118	4.28	0.78	0.70	0.72	0	0.70
Timor Leste 2010-15	N/A	9275	7.94	0.77	0.59	0.63	0	N/A
Mongolia 2010-15	6723	7352	7.32	0.73	0.77	0.69	0	1.0
India 2012-18	4768	4624	7.04	0.79	0.77	0.71	0	N/A
Philippines 2016-18	6870	6847	4.41	0.79	0.76	0.60	1	0.41
Reversals (n=10)	4205	6447	2.51	0.62	0.58	0.50	50%	0.44
Philippines 1969-72	2070	NA	2.24	0.79	0.68	0.42	0	N/A
India 1973-76	1238	NA	-0.26	0.71	0.73	0.69	0	N/A
Pakistan 1998-2000	2554	3332	1.90	0.46	0.59	0.42	1	0.26
Sri Lanka 2004-2009	4768	5871	3.41	0.72	0.38	0.58	0	N/A
Bangladesh 2002-08	1384	1745	3.26	0.45	0.18	0.55	1	0.58

Thailand 2001-06	6921	9189	3.37	0.73	0.73	0.51	1	0.53
Bangladesh 2011-15	2421	2518	3.87	0.34	0.21	0.38	1	0.58
Thailand 2013-14	14467	14450	0.35	0.76	0.82	0.47	1	0.00
Maldvides 2012-16	N/A	12486	3.64	0.48	0.76	0.49	0	N/A
Nepal 2011-13	2022	1986	3.68	0.79	0.87	0.40	0	0.73

Sources:[1] Maddison Project (GDPpc); [2] World Development Indicators (GDPpc)

As can easily be seen, the group of autocratic reversions is characterized by stronger legacies of praetorianism, weaker economic performance, and less political institutionalization than the group of near misses. Democracies that did not survive backsliding were twice as likely to have a contemporary history of military praetorianism, have an average CCS of 0.44 compared to 0.70 for the near misses; per capita income is about two-thirds of what it is in surviving democracies,[5] whereas income growth is 2.6 percentage points lower. Surviving democracies also have much stronger judicial and legislative constraints on the executive and the average EDI score is 0.18 (on a scale from 0 to 1) higher in near misses than autocratic reversions.

While Haggard and Kaufman propose the WDS as an alternative explanation for the occurrence of democratic backsliding, my analysis suggests that the WDS may also be relevant for understanding why some democracies survive backsliding and others die. Therefore, the question arises how they might be causally relevant. While Haggard and Kaufman discuss some possible mechanisms, they equate democratic backsliding with events of regime change from democracy to autocracy and, hence, it remains unclear how the WDS would help to explain why democracies survive periods of democratic backsliding. However, I propose that there is a link between the components of a syndrome of weakness and whether, in theory, the mechanisms are in place that should be able to contain destabilizing forces and avert breakdown once a backsliding process has begun.

As mentioned previously, Laebens and Lührmann (2019) propose three kinds of accountability mechanisms that can stabilize democracy during democratic recession: vertical, horizontal and diagonal accountability. For example, diagonal accountability refers to the ability of the civil society actors and the media to constrain governments and it is plausible to assume that the strength of civil society – its organizational and mobilization capabilities – correlates with the effectiveness of this mechanism. Similarly, whether institutions of horizontal accountability can work as balancing mechanisms depends on the capabilities of agents and organizations that play a role in shaping electoral and institutional outcomes. When bitter conflicts between major political forces are the rule, the interactions among major political actors are not coordinated around the common political expectation that opponents will respect the results of elections, and political actors do not expect horizontal checks on executive authority to be respected, judicial and legislative institutions may not be able to constrain the government. As Haggard and Kaufman explain: "weakly institutionalized systems are vulnerable to strategic interactions among major political actors that resemble a classic security dilemma. Incumbents are unwilling or unable to make fully credible commitments to opposition that they will adhere to the democratic rules of the game, and refrain from evading constitutional constraints when that is in their strategic personal or political interests. Expectations of such behavior similarly shape the strategies of oppositions in ways that are corrosive of democratic rule." In weakly institutionalized systems, it is easier for incumbents to exploit electoral victories to weaken opposition; harder for watchdog organizations to check government overreach; and executive authority is strengthened at the expense of institutions accountability, including legislatures, courts, and opposition parties, but also NGOs and the media (Gibler and Randazzo 2011; Haggard and Kaufman 2016).

Furthermore, while quantitative findings on this factor are limited, case studies demonstrate how poor economic performance and crises are effects as well as cause of weak institutional arrangements and how economic crisis, trigger elite defections from democracy, weakens the ability of democratic governments to maintain the loyalty of civil servants and militaries, and generate more general disaffection among the public. All this makes democracy more fragile, by incentivizing elites to act against democracy and dis-incentivizing citizens, political parties or bureaucratic actors to defend democracy against executive aggrandizement or military intervention.

[5] Of course, South Korea as high-income country is an outlier. Even without South Korea, however, near misses have a higher average per capita income ($4,794 or $6,573) than autocratic reversals.

Finally, societies with a praetorian legacy have a history of recurrent coups and tend to have weaker institutions of civilian control over the military (Croissant and Kuehn 2020). One of the more solid findings in contemporary coup studies is that the occurrence of coups in the past increases the probability of coups in the future; this is called the “coup trap” (Belkin and Schofer 2003). Coups require strategic skills of the coup leaders and the organizational capabilities of (particularly) military units involved in executing the coup d’état. The more often coup attempts have succeeded in the past, the more experience, the more likely it is that would-to-be coup plotters will believe that this attempt will also succeed, and the more likely it is that military officers possess the strategic skills and military units have the organizational capabilities to execute a coup. Moreover, coups tend to undermine civilian institutions, such as legislatures and courts that are necessary for serving as a check against future coups (Belkin and Schofer 2003: 608). In contrast, a military without a history of political intervention is probably a military that, one the one hand, would hesitate to act on its own against a democratic government. On the other hand, it is also less likely that opposition forces and political parties would seek the armed forces support for their respective stances; even if politicians or civil society activists would court the army in a political dispute, military leaders would probably reject any “knocking at the barracks” (Linz 1978) for armed forces support. With regard to the outcome of a backsliding episode, it could be assumed that praetorian traditions make promissory coups more likely. The absence of such traditions, on the contrary, means that key military actors would rather not want to step up quickly in democracy's defense and oppose an executive's move that lead to its erosion.

A systematic test of the assumed relationship between the WDS and accountability mechanisms is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, short case studies are used to illustrate the possible relationship: South Korea (democratic revival after a substantial extent of backsliding); Mongolia (mild backsliding followed by a short phase of stagnation of the quality of democracy at a lower level and the possible beginning of a new phase of backsliding); and Thailand (collapse, comeback and renewed collapse of democracy).

Case study I: South Korea

After more than a quarter of a century of militarized authoritarian rule, South Korea democratized in 1987/88 as a result of nonviolent anti-incumbent mass protests against President Chun Doo-hwan, which triggered elite defection, the resignation of Chun and constitutional reforms negotiated between regime softliners and moderate regime elites (Bedeski 1994). Similar to Taiwan, the authoritarian successor party (DJP) won the first free and fair popular election of the president in 1987, followed by another electoral victory in 1992. However, after two conservative administrations, the election of Kim Dae-jung in 1997 marked the first transfer of power to the liberal opposition. The Kim Dae-jung government and its liberal successor, President Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2007) strengthened democratic institutions by decentralizing political power, consolidating civilian control over the military, improving press freedom, civil rights and political liberties, and honouring judicial independence. Yet, the two liberal governments were also tainted by political corruption and criticized for the adoption of neo-liberal policies that succeeded in helping the economy recover from the devastation of the 1997-98 Asian crisis while contributing to economic inequality (Rhyu 2017; Lee 2017).

After two liberal administrations, South Koreans elected two conservative presidents – Lee Myung-bak, a politician-turned business tycoon and Park Geun-hye, daughter of former dictator Park Chung-hee (1961-1979). Under the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations (2008 – 2016), South Korea experienced many symptoms of a reversal of democracy, across a wide range of areas: in 2008, the year before the backsliding episode, South Korea was a liberal democracy, with an LDI score of 0.76. By 2015, the last year of declines, South Korea’s LDI score had dropped to 0.57. The V-Dem project and other democracy barometers show adverse change in how free and fair South Korea’s elections were in this time period as well as in press freedoms (media censorship, harassment of journalist, and media manipulation). The drop in the media indicators reflects the surveillance scandal that surfaced in 2010, in which the government allegedly used intelligence agencies and an “ethics commission” to illegally

monitor citizens – in particular, journalists –and influence public media. Furthermore, ahead of the 2012 elections, the National Intelligence Service secretly posted comments in online forums favoring the candidate of the ruling party (Cho and Kim 2016: 1186). Since the government agencies are not supposed to engage in partisan activities, this scandal negatively affected perceptions of electoral freedom and fairness. After Park Geun-hye won the 2012 elections, her administration became entangled in a seemingly endless series of political scandals and mishaps. The extent of President Park's detachment from the public and executive incompetency was unabashedly revealed by the Sewol disaster in April 2014 when the government rescue mission completely failed to save the passengers trapped in the sinking ferry. At the same time, the government was increasingly relying on repressive measures to undermine media freedom and to silence political dissent, methods that were not unfamiliar to citizens who experienced her father's draconian rule decades ago (Lee 2017). A major corruption scandal ("Park-Choi-Scandal") surfaced in 2015-16, sparking mass protests which called for her removal. According to Shin and Moon (2017: 119) "[i]n the eyes of much of the public, [Park Geun-hye] stood condemned as a figure who had violated democratic principles and regressed toward practices that smacked of the country's authoritarian past." It was not only the scale of the "candlelight protest" that was unprecedented, but also the diversity of participants, the variety of political demands, and the ingenuity expressed in protest methods and culture that were spectacular to inspire the participants themselves and observers, both local and international.[6]

The corruption scandal revealed major governance problems in South Korea, including collusion between the state and big business and a lack of institutional checks and balances able to prevent presidential abuses of power in a system that concentrates too much power in one office. Particularly striking were the revelations that under conservative Presidents Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye, the political opposition had been systematically suppressed, and the government had colluded with private businesses to create slush funds.

While the protests were to a large degree spontaneous, they were in part driven by the work of vibrant civil-society organizations. News reports, particularly from JTBC TV, also played an important role in uncovering the scandals. The exceptional scale and unwavering tenacity of the protests compelled the National Assembly to impeach Park in December 2016. The Constitutional Court unanimously upheld the impeachment, and new presidential elections consequently took place in May 2017. The elections were won by the leader of the opposition Democratic Party, Moo Jae-in, by a wide margin. The massive political crisis that ended in the removal from office of President Park Geun-hye exposed deep fissures in South Korean society (Rhyu 2017). The election of President Moon Jaein offered a chance for a reset of social integration. The new administration promised major changes with the aim of making South Korea more democratic and improving social justice, including welfare-, justice- and education-system reforms, decentralizing power and putting in place new limits on the constitutional powers of the president. As of the time of writing, many of the policy proposals had not yet been implemented. Nonetheless, the turnover of government initiated a process of restoration and revitalization of democracy, reflected in an increase of South Korea's LDI score from 0.61 (2016) to 0.80 (2018)—the highest score so far in the V-Dem project for South Korea.

Why did South Korea's democracy take this route? Building on the previously presented theoretical argument, it can be argued that blocking and reversing the negative democratic trend through a combination of diagonal and horizontal accountability was essentially favored by: first, a high level of modernization and the overall positive economic conditions in south Korea during the backsliding episode; second, a consolidated civilian control over the military; and, third, a relatively strong institutionalization of democracy. These factors did not prevent backsliding, but prevented democracy from slipping into autocracy. On the one hand, as a highly differentiated economy and society, South

[6] The rally on December 3, 2016, marked the peak, in which an estimated 1.7 million people (about 3.4 percent of Korean population) across the country took to the streets to demonstrate again Park.

Korea has a civil society that is strongly organized by regional standards and capable of mobilization. In fact, South Korea has a tradition of popular upheaval. Waves of mass contention erupted to demand democratic reforms in 1985-87, labor rights in 1987 and again in1997, to blacklist corrupt politicians in 2000, to criticize the terms of the US military presence in 2002 and to resist neoliberal economic policy prescriptions in 2008. These experiences over decades had built the infrastructure for rapid and widespread mobilization of society in 2016.

In view of the acceptance of civilian supremacy now deeply rooted in society and the military, arbitrary intervention by the military to end the protests or on the part of the protesters against the government was not a realistic option.[7] The political system and especially the legislative, judiciary, and political parties were sufficiently strongly institutionalized to put a stop to the president's political will, especially since there is consensus among the political elites on the desirability of a democratic political order despite all political differences (Wong 2019). The decisive action of both legislature and judiciary is an indication for the strength of South Korean institutions of horizontal accountability. However, many observers argue that political parties and parliament only pursued the impeachment process due to the force of the mass protests after initially hesitating (Shin and Moon 2017: 130). Thus, popular protest played an important role in ensuring that actors of horizontal accountability properly perform their duties. South Korea’s constitution grants substantial powers to the executive in general, and especially to the president in particular. The president can initiate legislation, issue decrees and veto legislation. The president’s power is strongest when the governing party controls a majority in the unicameral parliament. Nonetheless, the ruling and opposition parties are relatively balanced in the parliament, and President Park has not attempted to bypass and ignore the parliament, which was often the case under the previous Lee government (Kalinowski et al. 2018). Furthermore, since its establishment in 1989, the Constitutional Court has become a very effective guardian of the constitution, demonstrating its independence from government influence under both conservative and progressive administrations. The decision of the Constitutional Court to confirm the presidential impeachment in March 2017, demonstrated the court’s independence. The candlelight protests, then, created an enlightened, mobilized and empowered citizenry, which will remain a powerful asset for democratic politics in the years to come. Participants’ demands were not limited to bringing Park and her clique to legal justice but called for a fundamental shift in the status quo of the political system. Citizen-protesters also came to realize that their collective action can actually change politics by bringing down an incumbent president and installing a new government (Lee 2017b: 10).

Case study II: Mongolia

Mongolia’s recent development in democracy is consistent qualifies as a mild form of “democratic backsliding” followed by stagnation and resurgence of backsliding within a few years. As mentioned before, Mongolian democracy in the period 2010 to 2015 barely passed the threshold to be a backsliding

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[7] In June 2018, a ruling party lawmaker disclosed a document written by the intelligence arm of the Defense Ministry, called the Defense Security Command, during the final weeks of Park’s presidency. The document, which was later confirmed by the ministry, shows that the military planned to use troops to maintain order if rallies either opposing or supporting conservative then-President Park Geun-hye grew violent after a Constitutional Court ruling on her impeachment over a corruption scandal. Critics view the document as plot to launch a “self-coup” for Park (cf. Kim and Kim 2018). Yet, the political intention behind the contingency planning is not clear and it seems very doubtful whether the president or the military would have been politically able to actually implement these measures against the expected resistance in Korean society.

episode: in 2010, the year before the backsliding episode, V-Dem gave Mongolia a LDI score of 0.58. By 2015, the last year of declines, the LDI score had dropped to 0.48.

In fact, Mongolia stands out among failed democratic experiments and frozen autocracies in post-communist Eurasia because of its relatively stable and well-developed democratic political system (Seeberg 2014, 2018). Not only did the two predominant political parties – the post-communist Mongolia People's Party (MPP) and the Democratic Party founded at the outset of the transition, alternate in power, but media is open and civil society free to organize. Similar to South Korea (and Taiwan), there are two main political blocks. One is the Mongolian People's party (MPP), the successor to the ruling party during the communist period; the other is the (liberal) Democratic Party (DP), founded at the onset of the transition from authoritarian rule to democratic government in 1989-90 (Ginsburg 2003). The semi-presidential (premier-presidential) form of government created situations of divided government but the MPP was in control of both the presidency and parliament/prime minister in 2000-2004 and 2008-209, and the DP in 1996-97 and 2012-2016 (Fish and Seeberg 2017).

Although democracy in Mongolia is relatively stable and deep, at least compared to other post-Soviet countries, it is far from perfect and two areas are of particular concern: the volatility of electoral rules and problems of corruption. First, electoral rules in Mongolia are notoriously fluid. Revisions in electoral rules d not per se violate democratic norms, but relentless changes on the eve of the balloting come dangerously close to doing so. In December 2015, the parliament, in amending the electoral law, dropped a provision that forbids rule changes within six months of the election. The move opened a loophole for very late changes, eventually made in May the following year (BTI 2018). Second, democratic backsliding has also its origins in corruption of serious, perhaps epidemic, proportions. For example, the 2016 parliamentary election was plagued by a corruption scandal known locally as the "60 billion tugrik" case, in which the Mongolian People's Party (MPP) allegedly sold government offices in its future administration to finance its election campaign. Following the MPP's landslide victory in the 2016 election, parliament passed a law making defamation a criminal offense punishable by jail terms of three to six months. Since public figures frequently file defamation cases against journalists, the new law may push journalists to self-censor. Nevertheless, the public outcry over the scandal, fueled by investigative media reporting and civil society mobilization helped President Khaltmaagiin Battulga of the Democratic Party to carry the presidential election in June 2017. Although Mongolian democracy survived the relatively mild backsliding, recent developments suggest that in the first two years or so of the Battulga administration, sliding toward authoritarian rule accelerated (Sambuu and Menarndt 2019). Battulga won the 2017 presidential election through a divisive and populist campaign that accused his political opponents of being part of a secret oligarchy that controls Mongolia's two major political parties. He argued that this allegedly "corrupted" oligarchic group exploits Mongolia's vast mineral resource wealth at the expense of the ordinary people. In March 2019, Battulga induced parliament to grant him extraordinary powers by claiming that he alone can really "drain the swamp" of Mongolia's severe corruption problem. The president pointed to Mongolia's numerous unresolved corruption scandals to argue that the institutions of justice were "serving the officials who nominated and appointed them" (Kohn 2019). The new emergency legislation that grants the National Security Council (dominated by president, prime minister and members personally appointed by the president) sweeping powers to dismiss members of the judiciary, the prosecutor general, and the head of the state anticorruption agency (IAAC). Promptly after the law was passed, President Battulga dismissed the head of the IAAC, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and the Prosecutor General.

Why did Mongolia not take the same route as South Korea? One reason is of course that the extent and depth of backsliding was much more moderate and there was no single event (like the "Park-Choi Scandal) in Mongolia which would have provided the focal point around which political forces could really in their struggle against autocratization, revising backsliding and pressing for more democratic changes. At the same time, slow but steady erosions of democratic quality have been happening for several years. Eliminating the judiciary's independence is not the first sign of democratic erosion. Yet, one key to maintaining pluralism is Mongolia's muscular civil society. The absence of pushback from

within the system does not leave officials unconstrained, since they must grapple with a host of pressures from below. From the first sign of its opening in 1989 to the present day, autonomous interest groups and social movements have helped keep officialdom accountable, at least to some extent, and the polity open. Their vigor provides a key to understanding the persistence of democracy In addition, there is a relatively broad consensus among the main political parties to preserve democratic competition worked as guardrails against more substantial autocratization. In terms of political institutionalization, it seems that there is a basic expectation among Mongolia's political elites that it is in their own interest to preserve democracy. Similar to South Korea, the legislative and judicial constraints on the executive were fairly effective, at last compared to many other post-communist countries. Finally, the 35,000 men large Mongolian army has neither the capabilities, nor the disposition to challenge the government (it has also no tradition of doing so). Yet, the fact that slow decline of democracy remained mild and, at the same time, unchecked may also explain why incumbent President Battulga could find it easier to implement his authoritarian assault on democracy in a more piecemeal fashion. In doing this, he is mainly appealing to Mongolians who have continuously lose faith in their government due to rampant corruption and inefficacy, and are increasingly disillusioned with the country's governing elites and media (Bittner 2019).

Case Study III: Thailand

Contrary to South Korea and Mongolia, Thailand's democracy did not survive backsliding. Although it made a quick comeback after the first episode of democratic breakdown, this also resulted in autocratic reversal. Democratic failure and renewed autocratization are especially noteworthy given the optimism with which many domestic and international observers had viewed at the Kingdom's political reform process in the 1990s. The 1992 elections marked the beginning of Thailand's longest democratic experiment since the downfall of the absolute monarchy in 1932 (Croissant and Lorenz 2018). However, in the following years, democracy became synonymous with cabinet instability, political corruption, vote buying, and the fusion of provincial crime with party politics. Frustration with the democratic process initiated the emergence of a broad political reform movement which led to the passage of a new constitution in October 1997 accompanied by a broad package of additional reforms including electoral and bureaucratic measures. These measures represented attempts to strengthen democracy in Thailand. However, measures designed to promote political stability contained the potential to have the opposite effect instead (Kuhonta 2008). The most significant of these unintended consequences was the rise of the Thai Rak Thai party, founded in 1998 by billionaire and politician-turned-telecommunications tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra, to near-hegemonic power. Thaksin, who had become Prime Minister after the 2001 parliamentary election, scored a landslide victory in the February 2005 elections.

Observers agreed that this indicated a further consolidation of "Thaksinocracy" (Chambers 2005), a version of electoral democracy characterized by, among other things, a pronounced indifference to human rights violations committed by the police and military, and the misuse of majority rule to marginalize opposition parties. In addition, Thaksin has attempted to compromise the moral and constitutional strength of institutions such as the Constitutional Court and the National Counter Corruption Commission by appealing to his "superior" democratic legitimacy. Thaksin has increasingly eroded the checks and balances that the 1997 constitution had established in order to strengthen liberal democracy: in 2001, the year before the backsliding episode, Thailand was an electoral democracy, with an LDI score of 0.41. By 2006, the LDI score had dropped to 0.19 (though, partially because of the military coup that removed Thaksin from office). The government answered the opposition's call for resignation (which was backed by nonviolent mass protest by so-called "Yellow Shirts" in the capital city of Bangkok) with the dissolution of parliament and called for new elections in April 2006. All major opposition parties boycotted the election, so the TRT's election victory turned out to be Pyrrhic for Thaksin, especially when the king publicly urged the political parties to end the crisis. Almost

immediately after the king's speech, the Election Commission cancelled the election. For the next five months, Thaksin led an unelected caretaker government. On 19 September 2006, units of the Royal Thai Army successfully staged a coup d'état against Thaksin. Immediately after their takeover of power, the junta announced that the aim of its intervention was to strengthen democracy through democratic reform, and they committed themselves to the restoration of democratic government within one year.

In fact, a new constitution was promulgated and legislative elections were held in late 2007, after which a pro-Thaksin party was allowed by the military to take office. However, by late December 2008, the judiciary had swept this government from power and senior officials of the armed forces and the King's Privy Council had helped to bring an anti-Thaksin coalition government to office. The new anti-Thaksin government was in office from 2008 to 2011, at which point new elections took place, which, once again, saw a pro-Thaksin political party, led by Thaksin's sister Yingluck, win a landslide election. In 2012, Thailand's LDI score had risen to 0.47. Yet, towards the end of 2013, extra-parliamentary pro-Thaksin and anti-Thaksin groups mobilized against each other and especially the latter engaged in occupations or violence with apparent impunity. By late December 2013, Yingluck, seeking a popular mandate, dissolved the lower house and called new elections. The February 2014 elections were disrupted by protest groups and eventually invalidated by the Constitution Court. By May, Thailand's economy had shrunken considerably: GDP, tourism and investment had all slumped. In early May, the Constitution Court dismissed Yingluck from office for having violated the constitution. However, her political party remained in power. With the crisis worsening considerably, Army Chief Prayuth Chan-o-cha declared martial law on May 20. On May 22, Prayuth announced a putsch and Thailand's military took over the country. Similar to 2006, the new junta, led by General Prayuth, claimed to be acting in order to save the democratic regime of government with the King as Head of the State. Consequently, Thailand's LDI score fell again to 0.12 points. This time, however, it took almost five years, until March this year, before the military government organized national elections.

Thailand offers a striking contrast to South Korea. The first period of democratic backsliding, under Prime Minister Thaksin, began immediately after the Asian crisis of 1997-98, which basically destroyed the trust of the Bangkokian elites and middle classes in representative democracy. Not least because of the very weak institutionalization of democracy in Thailand - also a consequence of frequent military coups, constitutional changes and discontinuities in the political process - opposition parties and parliament had little to oppose Thaksin's claim to power. The judiciary, which was professional but also traditionally anti-parliamentary, watched the goings-on more or less helplessly, especially as Thaksin managed to undermine important watchdog organizations with his own supporters by co-opting various committees and elites. Given the failure of horizontal accountability mechanisms, it is not surprising that the mobilization against the slide of the political system into autocracy came primarily from outside the parliamentary sphere. Initially non-violent mass mobilization was increasingly dominated by anti-democratic and politically reactionary actors. These finally appealed to the monarchy and the royal military. In this respect, it is quite true that this perverted variant of diagonal accountability is described in literature as a picture book example of a "civil society coup" (Arugay 2011).

The crisis of democracy from 2001 to 2006 and the first military intervention in 15 years had a lasting impact on Thai democracy, especially since the military junta took numerous institutional precautions to prevent Thaksin from returning to government after returning to an elected government in December 2007. The political crisis of 2005 and 2006 and the military coup proved the lack of a pro-democratic consensus among the political elites of the kingdom. While elections and democracy are accepted in principle, in reality, democracy is far from being the "only game in town." Although pro-Thaksin cabinets in 2008 and from 2011 to 2014 ushered in a bevy of new populist policies, they were unable to exert civilian control over the military. Meanwhile, there was a rift in both the lower and upper houses of parliament as opposition Democrats and appointed anti-Thaksin senators unsuccessfully opposed attempts by the pro-Thaksin majority to amend the constitution. Only the anti-Thaksin judiciary was able to temporarily forestall the ruling party from changing the constitution and passing an amnesty, which would discard all charges against Thaksin. However, this further contributed to the politicization

of the judiciary. Politically based social movements (specifically the pro-Thaksin UDD and anti-Thaksin PDRC) virulently opposed each other and were not necessarily supportive of democracy. Ultimately, political divide over Thaksin appeared to be pushing the country towards civil war at a time when the monarchy was facing a potential succession crisis and the military is assuming an ever greater political role. Finally a grand alliance of anti-Thaksin groups formed prior to the 2014 coup, which included the military, palace, PDRC, the Multi-colored Shirts group, the Democrat party, the Election Commission, the Association of University Presidents of Thailand, and some business elites (BTI 2016).

6. TENTATIVE CONCLUSION

The paper presents the first comprehensive analysis of all episodes of backsliding in democratic regime in Asia-Pacific from 1950 to 2018. I identify 18 such episodes and different three types of outcomes. Building on Haggard and Kaufman's framework of "weak democracy syndrome" and the three different kinds of mechanisms of accountability that, in theory, can beat democratic backsliding, my analysis aims to show not only how but also when different accountability mechanisms succeed or fail in stopping autocratization. Focusing on cases of breakdown and "near misses" allows for the possibility of cross-case causal inference about why some Asian democracies survive backsliding and revitalize, stagnate or enter new episodes of decline, whereas others are unable to survive periods of crisis. However, excluding cases of no democratic backsliding rules out the possibility of cross-case causal inference about why these democracies began to backslide in the first place. While I do not provide a systematic test of my theoretical argument, short case studies of South Korea, Thailand and Mongolia seem to support the view that combining both syndromes and mechanisms might help to develop a better understanding of why, when and how democrats succeed or fail in their attempt to save democracy from those elected to lead it.

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