

Democracies with Preexisting Conditions and the Coronavirus in the Indo-Pacific Region

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Around the globe, democracy is ailing. In the past 15 years or so, an increasing number of democracies worldwide have suffered from gradual erosion and decay. According to the most recent Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) report,¹ examples can be found in most regions of the world including the United States and the European Union, where Hungary's Victor Orbán used the pandemic as an excuse to establish Europe's first corona dictatorship. The global erosion of democracy preceded the COVID-19 pandemic, but its outbreak is accelerating the dynamics of democratic regression. As governments around the world fight the spread of the coronavirus, the number of countries in which democratic leaders acquire emergency powers and autocrats step up repression is rapidly increasing. The uneven performance of many democracies in containing the pandemic and mitigating its public health effects rekindles debates about the effectiveness of democratic rule compared to authoritarian regimes.

The Indo-Pacific region is of crucial importance for the future of democracy and its global contestation with autocracy in the twenty-first century. The region is home to both two of the three largest democracies in the world, India and Indonesia, and to the world's most powerful autocracy, China. The novel coronavirus burst onto the region against a backdrop of simmering strategic rivalry between the United States and China. While the faith in liberal democracy seems to be waning, Beijing appears to be trying to fill the void.

Whether democratic or authoritarian governments handle the Covid-19 pandemic better is a crucial question for academics and policy-makers. However, two caveats are in order. First, Covid-19 statistics are inherently difficult to compare between countries. In fragile contexts where there may be less reporting and limited testing capacities, and in authoritarian regimes, where there is less political will for transparency, a lack of reliable data may mean that some states are more severely impacted than reporting indicates. It seems fair to conclude that some governments in Asia, e.g., Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam, as well as in the West (e.g., Iceland and New Zealand) performed relatively well so far. By contrast, the record of other governments, for example, the United States, the United Kingdom, Brazil, and the Philippines, is much more uneven. Overall, however, we simply do not have a sufficient amount of valid data to draw robust inferences about the success or failure of different political regimes in containing the pandemic. A comprehensive assessment of the success or failure of different governance models in the pandemic will require an analysis of its impact on the economy and society resulting from government responses. There are different strategies – e.g, China’s strict lockdown followed by highly restrictive reopening of the economy versus Sweden’s combination of moderate social distancing without economic shutdown – but it is too early to say which one is the right strategy or how well governments will handle the socio-economic fallout of the current or subsequent waves of infection.

Instead, this article examines the short-term effects of the Covid-19 outbreak on democratic governance in Asia and discusses potential medium to long-term consequences for democracy in the region. I argue that just as people with pre-existing conditions appear to be at greater risk to suffer from the virus more severely, “democracies with pre-existing conditions” that are already suffering from political ills such as rising polarization and declining respect for the norms of a liberal democracy, are more vulnerable to further degradation. While democracy has been struggling for years, the pandemic has the immediate effect of providing

a window of opportunity for illiberal and anti-democratic forces to devalue democratic institutions.

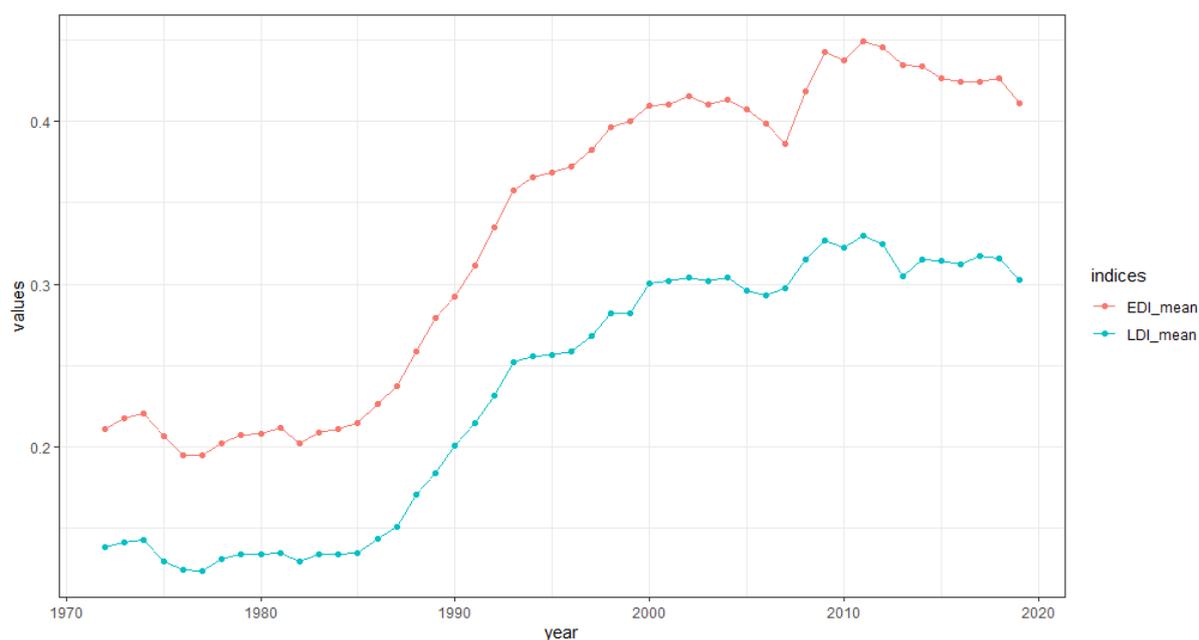
Disagreement on the danger and toll of the pandemic and on policy priorities or appropriate government responses, the corrosive consequences of social distancing on the cohesion of societies, growing economic hardship and an unequal distribution of the risks and costs of the crisis, increasing political polarization and the rise of nationalist and xenophobic sentiments will exacerbate threats to democracy. Yet, the relationship between pandemic and democracy is complex. Since the current crisis reveals the limited ability of populist governments to muster a coherent and consistent response, it may serve as an eye-opening moment for citizens. Therefore, the crisis may also offer chances for democratic renovation and innovation, and those democratic institutions and authorities that act more transparently and credibly can regain trust and approval.

The article proceeds as follows. First, I present the empirical evidence concerning democratic regression in pre-pandemic Asia. Next, I examine which democracies have pre-existing conditions and compare illiberal or anti-democratic measures in the region since the outbreak of the pandemic. I then discuss sources of democratic resilience and resistance in Asia. Finally, I outline the implications of my analysis for the future of democracy and authoritarianism in Asia, as well as its geopolitical implications.

Unhealthy democracies. democratic regressions in pre-pandemic Asia

Although the Asia-Pacific region is much more democratic today than 30 years ago, there is considerable diversity in the levels of democracy in the region, and the V-Dem data in Figure 1 suggest that, with few exceptions, Asia has joined the global wave of democratic regression.

Figure 1: *Asia's Democracy Level, 1973-2019*²



The only three liberal democracies in the region are Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. While Taiwan is widely celebrated as a resounding success story of the third wave of democratization, South Korea has just recently emerged from an extended period of democratic backsliding under presidents Lee and Park from 2008 to 2016.³

Democratizations in Timor-Leste and Mongolia have been relatively successful, given the circumstances, though recent constitutional crises suggest that democracy in the two countries is more prone to executive aggrandizement than previously thought.⁴ Other Asian nations have experienced substantial democratic erosion since the mid-2000s. Examples also include older democracies such as Sri Lanka and—most alarmingly, given its importance as the world's largest democracy—India.⁵ Democratic quality is also in decline in the Philippines, whose polity has perhaps already crossed the line into autocratic territory, and, though less severe, in Indonesia.⁶ In places such as Bangladesh, Pakistan and Thailand, structural challenges, untamed elite struggles and political polarization culminated in coup d'états and

the militarization of politics. In Cambodia, the government of Prime Minister Hun Sen has deployed its full organizational power to ensure complete victory in national elections, intensified its surveillance and repression of journalists and civil society, and eliminated the nation's main opposition party.⁷ Countries such as Myanmar and Malaysia, which recently had embarked on processes of political liberalization, see democratic reforms failing.⁸ Finally, China's hard-line autocracy is increasing its repression of minorities inside its borders and stepping up the crackdown on Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement.⁹

Democracies with preexisting conditions in Asia

As I have argued elsewhere, a number of internal and external factors are weakening democracy in Asia.¹⁰ Internally, the assault on institutions of horizontal accountability, political rights and civil liberties relates to social polarization and the mobilization of diverse cultural and political identities, which feed on local consequences of global trends such as technological change, globalization, and rising levels of economic inequality. Praetorian legacies, "horizontal inequalities" between ethnic, sectarian, or regional groups that coincide with identity-based cleavages and low levels of social cohesion also weaken democratic resilience in many places. The generally low support for liberal democratic values¹¹ and a serious deficit of popular trust¹² in political institutions also raise questions about the sustainability of democratic change. Last, political agency matters, too. A deinstitutionalizing role of political leaders, strategic opportunism, and the failure of elected officials and political institutions to keep pace with growing demands contribute to the rise of authoritarian populist movements and illiberal leaders in countries such as the Philippines, Pakistan, India, and Indonesia.

Externally, China has become a major source of ideational and material support for autocracies such as Cambodia, Myanmar, and Thailand, as well as illiberal leaders in Sri Lanka and the Philippines. Even in Indonesia, one of the softer cases of democratic regression, government officials openly praise China's authoritarian governance model.¹³ Although not a direct "cause" of democratic decline, the apparently growing influence of China and its governing model throughout the Indo-Pacific, an accumulating body of evidence suggests, is increasingly affecting the domestic politics of both democratic and authoritarian countries in the region. Pro-democratic forces in Taiwan and Hong Kong are facing aggressive attempts by China and its agencies to promote the virtues of nondemocratic government.¹⁴

Beijing's strengthened role as a global provider of economic, military, and diplomatic support for autocratic or authoritarian-minded government contrasts with the erosion of American soft power as a democratic role model under the Trump administration and a loss of US leadership in democracy promotion.¹⁵ At the same time, neither the European Union nor other democratic governments are able or willing to assume Washington's role and fill the void. The crisis of significance and credibility of democracy promotion as a goal of foreign policy on both sides of the Atlantic has palpable consequences, especially in situations of pandemic-driven democratic backsliding, when external support would be needed most.¹⁶

Undoubtedly, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic is not the "cause" of democratic regression in Asia. Yet, it amplifies preexisting problems of democratic political structures in the region. Much like the actual virus affecting people with underlying health conditions, the threat of reversal in democratic governance posed by the pandemic is more severe for

democracies with an already compromised immune system. Such “democracies with preexisting conditions” exhibit common symptoms, including:

A legacy of strong authoritarian leaders and weak mechanisms of horizontal accountability.

Praetorian legacies and the reliance of governments on soldiers to help fight organized crime, to provide public services in rural or remote areas, to assist in development projects and disaster relief in general, and to control mass protest even before the outbreak of the pandemic.

Low political trust and support for liberal notions of democracy.

Polarizing class or identity cleavages.

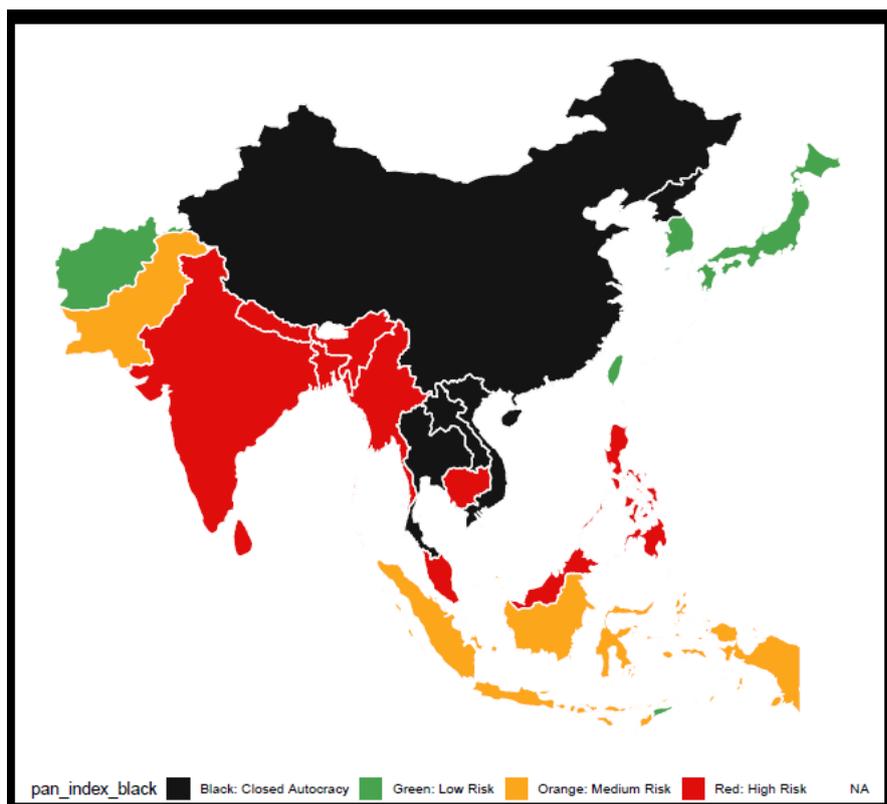
Democratic backsliding in the immediate pre-pandemic period.

Democracies with preexisting conditions are less resilient against Covid-19’s collateral damage and less likely to recover once the pandemic has waned: In times of crisis, the pressure for executive action is increasing, and there is higher tolerance for power concentration and constraints on people’s rights. Especially with populist governments, which have previously engaged in strategies of executive aggrandizement and weakening of the rule of law, the risk is high that political leaders will further tighten their grip. While populists are an especially dangerous adversary of liberal democracy and the rule of law, they are by no means the only threat. In fact, there is empirical evidence that both populist and non-populist political leaders are likely to abuse an emergency.¹⁷ The corona shock also may boost

autocratic hardening in countries whose authoritarian governments have so far allowed a certain degree of civil and political freedoms (so-called “electoral autocracies”), because autocratic rulers abort political liberalization, reverse democratic concessions, and push for bolstered executive powers.

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, researchers have created a number of databases on the impact of policy measures on democratic norms, procedures, and institutions. One such instrument is the "Pandemic Backsliding Risk Index" of the V-Dem project. It measures the maximum level of risk to democracy (low, medium, high) across nine indicators of government responses to Covid-19.¹⁸ A country is at high risk of backsliding if it had experienced a substantial autocratization trend in 2019 and/or if one or more of the nine criteria indicate a severe violation of democratic standards for emergency procedures. If there had been no substantial autocratization in pre-pandemic times and none of the nine criteria applies, democratic political structures are at low risk. If one (or more) of the nine criteria applies to some extent, it indicates a medium risk. So-called “closed autocracies” like China, Vietnam, and North Korea, are not included because violations of democratic standards are already so severe that the space for further substantial degradation is too limited.

Figure 2. *The Pandemic Backsliding Risk Index (April 2020)*¹⁹



According to the data shown in Figure 2, most democracies and electoral autocracies in the Indo-Pacific region face a high risk of democratic erosion. While Indonesia (electoral democracy) and Pakistan (electoral autocracy) are at a medium risk level, the only five political systems in Asia with a low risk of pandemic-related backsliding are Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Timor Leste, and, somewhat surprising, Afghanistan, which is the only non-democracy in this group.

Moreover, democratic backsliding in pre-pandemic times also increased the risk for poor crisis responses once the virus hit. For example, Marcus Mietzner observes that democratic backsliding in Indonesia had intensified populist anti-scientism; promoted religious conservatism and religious-political polarization; worsened corruption and clientelism, especially in the health sector; and strengthened assertiveness among anti-democratic elite actors.²⁰ Another example is the Philippines. Under populist President Rodrigo Duterte,

democracy had already struggled with a murderous war on drugs, and near constant attacks on human rights, its political opponents, and the country's democratic institutions since 2016. Duterte first played down the dangers posed by the coronavirus before changing course and obtaining emergency powers from Congress in March 2020. Although his administration still seems to lack a strategy for fighting the crisis, he did not wait long to silence critics of his handling of the pandemic, such as ABC-CBS, the nation's biggest TV network.²¹

Protecting public health but making democracy sick. Covid-19 as a tipping point in democratic regression

The V-Dem data measure pandemic-related risks for democratic backsliding. Other databases such as the ICNL's "COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker" monitor government measures that aim to protect public health but whose (unintended) consequence can make an ailing democracy sicker, such as lockdowns, curfew, surveillance, emergency powers, postponed elections, and legislative recess. Yet, as Brown and coauthors note, such actions are often just the tip of the proverbial iceberg because they can do long-term harm to civic freedoms, human rights, and the rule of law.²² Even if temporarily and prudently applied by democratically minded leaders, they can threaten democracy if not withdrawn in time or if available to wannabe autocrats.²³ Building on the ICNL resource database as well as other public sources, we can identify worrisome developments in the Indo-Pacific in five areas: the centralization of executive powers; the closing of democratic spaces; the militarization of public policies; electoral disruptions; and the strengthening of the surveillance state.²⁴

The militarization of public life and non-military sectors of governance preceded the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in states such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and the Philippines, which have a weak capacity to guarantee appropriate public health and sanitation infrastructure accessible to everyone. However, governments in these countries responded to the crisis by involving the military in enforcement measures. The imposition of curfews – such as in Manila and Luzon – and forced quarantine – such as in Pakistan, where security forces quarantined 20,000 people who had attended a Muslim group's gathering in the city of Lahore despite the worsening coronavirus pandemic last month²⁵ – are justified by the need to curb the spread of the coronavirus but may have long-term costs for democracy. In Indonesia, critics argue, the government's approach to the pandemic so far “has been based on military strategy, more particularly on counterinsurgency operations,”²⁶ perhaps a result of the influx of a myriad of former military officers (so-called *purniwarawan*) in the cabinet of President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo as ministers or advisors.²⁷ Similarly, Sri Lanka has seen a militarization of Covid-19 responses when President Gotabaya Rajapaksa (a former military officer and minister of defense from 2005 to 2015), assigned Army Chief Shavendra Silva, who is banned from entering the US because of accusations of war crimes, to lead the nation's response to the coronavirus. In Pakistan, the corona crisis once again made it clear that it is not the civilian prime minister but the chief of army staff (COAS; the army head) who is directing national policy. The military seized the Covid-19 crisis as an opportunity to strengthen the army's public image as the nation's only guarantor of stability and governance.²⁸ Finally, in Myanmar, whose elected government had been increasingly sidelined by the *Tatmadaw* in recent years, there are reportedly parallel military and civilian Covid-19 tasks forces; with their crisis responses, the military and the government are both increasing ethnic divisions in the country.²⁹

Centralization of executive powers and the closing of democratic spaces often go hand-in-hand. As mentioned above, the Congress of the Philippines passed the “Heal as One” Act in March 2020. The new law grants the president nearly limitless emergency powers and makes the spread of “fake news” punishable,³⁰ while the Declaration of a State of Public Health Emergency Throughout the Philippines (Proclamation No. 922 of March 8, 2020) paved the way to the securitization of Covid-19 response in the Philippines.³¹ Similarly, the Cambodian parliament, which is dominated by the ruling Cambodian People’s Party, passed the “Law on National Management in the State of Emergency.” The law gives Prime Minister Hun Sen unlimited access to martial power and new powers to surveil telecommunications, which drastically curtails Cambodians’ political rights, and provides the legal justification for the mobilization of the armed forces.³²

In India, which has been experiencing the erosion of the rule of law and civil liberties and a wave of anti-Muslim discrimination since 2014, the pandemic triggered new regulations through which federal and state governments obtained additional powers to surveil citizens, to restrict the right of citizens to publicize information about the coronavirus, and to ban political and other public gatherings. Looking at a national lockdown, the Election Commission of India decided to postpone the Rajya Sabha elections that were scheduled for March 26 2020 indefinitely.³³

Similarly, parliamentary by-elections in Pakistan and local elections in Indonesia have been postponed, whereas parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka, originally scheduled for April 25, 2020, have been moved to June 20, 2020. Although the postponement does not appear unfounded per se—even the opposition agreed that an election during the pandemic would pose too much risk—critics feared that Sri Lanka’s authoritarian-leaning president and his brother, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa (president from 2005 to 2015), may use the

opportunity to further crack down on dissidents and civil society.³⁴ In contrast, the pandemic certainly had a significant impact on key issues that were at stake in the April 15, 2020 parliamentary election in South Korea. Nonetheless, the National Election Commission succeeded in organizing what International IDEA described as “a technically sound national election under extremely difficult circumstances,” achieving the highest voter turnout since 1992.³⁵

Thailand’s prime minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, who had seized power in a bloodless military coup in 2014 and barely succeeded in managing unfree and unfair elections in 2019, invoked sweeping emergency powers that allow authorities to prosecute critics of the government’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic and empower the government to further limit free speech and ban rallies or protests.³⁶ The federal government in Malaysia activated the Communication and Multimedia Act 1998, which empowers the authorities to arrest and trial individuals who presumably helped in spreading “fake news” to Covid-19.³⁷

Governments in countries with a long history of harsh censorship and repression, such as Vietnam and China, also strengthened their surveillance capacities and restrictions of basic civic freedoms. For example, the government in Vietnam enacted a decree that bans public gatherings and introduced fines for the spread of “Covid-19 misinformation” and “fake news” online.³⁸ In China, national government and local authorities implemented a myriad of new security measures, including acceleration of mass surveillance, in the name of containing the coronavirus outbreak in China. Electronic security monitoring systems that allow authorities easier tracking of all quarantined individuals have also been introduced or refined in Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, and Hong Kong – all countries that are praised by experts as models of tracking potential Covid-19 cases.³⁹ Even though such measures to surveil citizens appear

to be legitimately needed to protect the public today, they are prone to misuse by authorities in the future.⁴⁰

What can be done? Sources of accountability and the short-term vs medium-term resilience of democracy in Asia

Defending democracy against regression is a daunting task even in normal times and more so during a pandemic. Generally, democrats can build on a combination of three accountability mechanisms when facing democratic regression.⁴¹ Mechanisms of “horizontal accountability” refer to the ways in which institutions such as legislatures, the judiciary, auditor generals, ombudspersons, or a human rights commission constrain the executive or one another’s actions. Mechanisms of “vertical accountability” refer to the way in which ordinary citizens, collectively constituted as the electorate, can impose constraints on the rulers when regular elections give them the power to remove them from office. Finally, mechanisms of “diagonal accountability” are similar to vertical ones in that they connect citizens to rulers, though they are exercised informally via direct action, most importantly political mobilization, public protest, and nonviolent resistance.

In pre-pandemic Asia, mechanisms of “horizontal accountability” were the least effective. Often, institutions such as courts, legislatures, anticorruption commissions, ombudsmen, or audit offices lacked institutional capacities and political autonomy, and they were the first to be attacked as bastions of undemocratic elitism and agents of the “deep state.” Contrary to what constitution-builders and institution-crafters had hoped for when writing constitutions and organic laws, supposedly independent watchdog institutions are often the first to fall. In

some cases, the judiciary especially remained under the thumb of (semi)authoritarian leaders (e.g., Pakistan and Bangladesh), whereas in other cases, constitutional courts became embroiled in political controversies which permanently damaged their reputation and autonomy (Thailand, Philippines). Even in a best-case scenario like South Korea, the constitution court did act to protect democracy only when pushed by other political actors and the president had already lost control of the political process.⁴²

Mechanisms of “vertical accountability,” especially transparent and clean elections, offer options of democratic resistance that seem more promising, especially if defections of elites from within ruling coalitions weakens the incumbent around election time.⁴³ However, in pre-pandemic times most countries, in Asia and elsewhere, did not take this road. Elections alone are not an effective tool to stop autocratizers because many autocrats successfully create an “uneven playing field” before voters recognize the threat to their democratic freedoms. To the best of my knowledge, there have been only two cases in Asia since 1950, in which an aggrandizing government lost an election: one is India in 1977, and the other is Sri Lanka in 2015, and both outcomes were preceded by massive elite defections from the ruling coalition.⁴⁴

This leaves mechanisms of “diagonal accountability” as the most, and perhaps only, effective counter-balancing option. For example, Bernhard, et al. suggest that an active civil society and institutionalized political parties represent political safeguards against the rolling back of democratic rules and the distortion of free and fair election results by incumbents. A strong, mobilized civil society and party institutionalization, which come with reliable bases of support and robust organizational structures, disincentivize potential autocrats to degrade democracy and enable democratic activists and party leaders to respond effectively if the former nonetheless start an attempt.⁴⁵ Examples of civic resistance successfully mobilized by

civil society and opposition parties against democratic regression include the Wild Strawberry (2008) and Sunflower Movements (2014) in Taiwan and the 2016 Candlelight Protests in South Korea. Advocacy and civil rights groups, other social organizations, students as well as concerned citizens in Hong Kong and some South and Southeast Asian nations have also attempted to act as a bulwark against the rise of authoritarianism but so far have often gained less traction and achieved weaker impact. Moreover, in light of shared concerns about Chinese influence, pro-democracy actors in Hong Kong and Taiwan have begun to cooperate.

Yet, in the midst of a public health emergency, this mechanism may be less effective than in ordinary times. One reason is that an unsafe health environment drastically exacerbates problems of collective action simply because fewer people will be willing to take to the streets and fight for their rights. This negatively affects one of the main advantages of civic resistance – its ability to generate sizeable and diverse participation, including women and the elderly.⁴⁶ Second, and even more important, many of the emergency measures discussed above are making it almost impossible for citizens to protest against the actions of governments.⁴⁷ Any attempt to hold mass protests and public demonstrations may not only endanger the health of participants but allows for an opportunity to denounce protestors as “troublemakers” who endanger public health and national security. This scenario is already playing out in the Philippines, where President Duterte ordered security forces and local officials to shoot such “troublemakers” protesting during community quarantine.⁴⁸

How could mechanisms of vertical accountability be used effectively when elections are postponed or malicious measures turn a poll into a highly unsafe affair? Even if voters had the option to go to the polls or do home voting (i.e., vote-by-mail) and early voting, the government would still enjoy a huge advantage over the opposition. In times of crisis, executive authorities occupy the central stage. When government officials are present in the

mass media virtually around the clock, it is difficult for the opposition to gain attention. Of course, civil society and opposition parties can try to move their activities into the online arena, but this is unlikely to fully compensate for an unlevelled playing field; and it can certainly not substitute for mass protests in public spaces. It will be interesting, though, to learn how Hong Kong's inventive pro-democracy activists attempt to adjust their repertoire of contentious actions to the changing environment.

What else, then, could be done to prevent democratic breakdowns during and after the Covid-19 pandemic? One alternative is to mobilize international support in defense of domestic democratic rights. But this route is not terribly promising when the traditional providers of democracy aid are increasingly unable or unwilling to do so. With the Trump administration apparently being more interested in a blame game with Beijing and the European Union being preoccupied with its own economic and political problems, including the rapid autocratization in some East European member countries, the window is wide open for autocratic China to expand its position in the Indo-Pacific theater.

The short answer to the question posited above is therefore a pessimistic “not much”—at least not in the short-term and as far as democracies with preexisting conditions are concerned. While scholars note that established democracies and those in democratic neighborhoods are certainly more resilient than young democracies that exist in a regional environment dominated by autocracies, the latter characterizes the situation for most democracies in the Indo-Pacific region more aptly.

However, it is also worth distinguishing between short-term responses to pandemic-related autocratization and the possible medium- or long-term impact. In fact, there is empirical evidence that public demand and support for democracy follow an anti-cyclical pattern—it is

exactly when “elected leaders start dismantling democratic institutions and rights” that the “public mood is likely to swing rapidly toward democracy again”.⁴⁹ While the great recession of 2008/2009 contributed to the erosion of institutional trust and the rise of populism, which began in many democracies, perhaps the poor performance of populists during the corona crisis may serve as an eye-opening moment for citizens?

Democratization in Asia: Quo Vadis?

Clearly, the dynamics of democratic regression and resilience in Asia during the Covid-19 pandemic need a much fuller treatment than the space available here. It is important, however, to emphasize that Covid-19 is not the “cause” of democratic regression in Asia. The causes are primarily internal, and they have more to do with structural and political weaknesses, the strategic behavior of political elites, and the local consequences of global developments than with the coronavirus. The pandemic rather amplifies existing trends by causing seismic shocks to almost all areas of social life.

While the faith in democracy’s superiority is waning in many corners of the world, China’s role as a provider of alternative sources of economic, military, and diplomatic support for governments in Asia and elsewhere decreases the cost of authoritarian abuse and mitigates the potential impact of punitive action by democratic governments in the West. Increasingly, narratives about the Covid-19 pandemic are becoming politicized as the governments in both Beijing and Washington are accusing each other of disinformation and trading conspiracy theories.

While China's political leadership failed to take decisive measures to contain Covid-19 early on, it later succeeded in curbing the pandemic by employing the full might of a highly authoritarian regime. In contrast, many governments, democracies and autocracies alike, in Asia and elsewhere have been awfully unprepared and slow to react. Populist leaders, in particular, engaged in denial and deception and, even worse, some still have not managed to provide a coherent response strategy. Even though populists do not have a monopoly on ignorance and dysfunctional governance, the global health crisis has made very clear that having a populist government is perhaps the worst of all worlds: Aversion to "expertise" and rejection of "establishment" authorities are central elements in the politics of populism.⁵⁰ Populists are prone to pit the "ordinary people" against the entitled mandarins and, just as a free press and an independent judiciary are demonized, there is little appreciation for scientific expertise.

One should compare this to the apt and timely reactions of liberal democratic governments in South Korea and Taiwan. Of course, having a democratic political system alone is no guarantee for effective governance during the pandemic. And yet, the examples of Taiwan and South Korea demonstrate that democracies are able to effectively respond to epidemics while minimizing economic disruptions, provided that they have the political will and administrative capacity to implement solutions. Moreover, they prove that the free flow of information, transparent crisis management, civil society engagement, and accountability to public scrutiny are essential treatments for the coronavirus outbreak. Hence, keeping democracy healthy is a key ingredient for preserving public health.

¹ Seraphine F. Maerz, Anna Lührmann, Sebastian Hellmeier, Sandra Grahn, and Staffan I. Lindberg, “State of the world 2019: autocratization surges—resistance grows,” *Democratization*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.175867>

² The sample includes Taiwan, South Korea, Timor-Leste, Mongolia, India, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Philippines, Singapore, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Vietnam, China, Myanmar, Thailand, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Laos, and North Korea. The Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem)-project measures the extent to which the ideal of electoral democracy in its fullest sense is achieved. The Liberal Democracy Index includes indicators on “electoral democracy,” the rule of law, individual and minority rights, and judicial and legislative constraints on the executive. Both indexes have a range from 0 to 1. Source: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/data/data-version-9/>.

³ Aurel Croissant and Jung-eun Kim, “Keeping Autocrats at Bay: Lessons from South Korea and Taiwan,” *Global Asia* 15:1 (2020), <https://www.globalasia.org/v15no1/cover/keeping-autocrats-at-bay-lessons-from-south-korea-and-taiwan_aurel-croissantjung-eun-kim>.

⁴ Aurel Croissant and Rebecca Abu Sharkh, “As Good as It Gets? Stateness and Democracy in East Timor,” in Aurel Croissant and Olli Hellmann, eds. *Stateness and Democracy in East Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 204-33; Boldsaikhan Sambuu and Aubrey Menarndt, “Here’s how democracy is eroding in Mongolia,” *The Washington Post*, Monkey Cage, April 3, 2019, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/04/03/heres-how-democracy-is-eroding-mongolia/>>

⁵ Neil DeVotta “Knocked Down, Getting Back Up: Sri Lanka’s Battered Democracy,” *Global Asia* 15:1 (2020), <https://www.globalasia.org/v15no1/cover/knocked-down-getting-back-up-sri-lankas-battered-democracy_neil-devotta>; Sumit Ganguly, “An Illiberal India”? *Journal of Democracy*, 31: 1 (2020), pp. 193-202.

⁶ Eve Warburton and Edward Aspinall, "Explaining Indonesia's Democratic Regression: Structure, Agency and Public Opinion," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41:2 (2019), pp. 255-85.

⁷ Aurel Croissant, "Cambodia in 2018. Requiem for multiparty politics," *Asian Survey* 59: 1 (2019), pp. 170-76.

⁸ Jonathan T. Chow and Leif-Eric Easley, "Myanmar's Democratic Backsliding in the Struggle for National Identity and Independence," *The Asan Forum*, June 25, 2019, <<http://www.theasanforum.org/myanmars-democratic-backsliding-in-the-struggle-for-national-identity-and-independence/>>; James Chin, "Race and Religion In Command: Malaysia Returns to Identity Politics," *Global Asia* 15: 1 (2020), <https://www.globalasia.org/v15no1/cover/race-and-religion-in-command-malaysia-returns-to-identity-politics_james-chin>.

⁹ https://www.globalasia.org/v15no1/cover/death-by-a-thousand-cuts-democratic-backsliding-in-hong-kong_brian-ch-fong

¹⁰ For a more extensive treatment of this subject, see Aurel Croissant and Jeffrey Haynes, "Introduction: Democratic Regressions in Asia-Pacific," *Democratization*, forthcoming.

¹¹ Doh Chull Shin, "Wie der Autoritarismus in einem Zeitalter der Demokratisierung bestehen bleibt. Zu den kulturellen Wurzeln seines Andauerns im demokratischen Ostasien," in Aurel Croissant, Sascha Kneip, and Alexander Petring, eds., *Demokratie, Diktatur, Gerechtigkeit. Festschrift für Wolfgang Merkel* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2017), pp. 619-47.

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