

The Decline of Democracy in The South East Asian Region

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Abstract: *The decline of democracy in Southeast Asia is a pressing concern, with several countries in the region experiencing significant setbacks in recent years. The rise of authoritarianism and military coups has led to the erosion of democratic institutions and the suppression of opposition voices. The international community must continue to monitor these developments and hold governments accountable for any human rights violations or attempts to suppress dissent and opposition. Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia has used brutal forces to suppress opposition, the use of draconian laws to silence critics, imprisonment of activists, and the use of lethal violence against protesters. The rising of authoritarian tendencies in The Philippines and Indonesia is also a huge influence in the declining democracy index in the region.*



Keywords: Democracy, Southeast Asia, Elections, Military Coups

1. Introduction

Southeast Asia is a region where diverse tropical countries between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean gathers with hundreds of ethnic groups and languages. Differences in their traditional cultures and in their colonial and post-colonial histories have produced dissimilar results in their political systems and governance. Political homogeneity is not really huge in this area. Composed of eleven countries with different backgrounds, they consist of Brunei Darussalam, Myanmar, Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, The Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam which are all united together in an association known as ASEAN.

Southeast Asia's nations have been conquered by European powers almost entirely. The political borders erected by the imperial powers in many other regions colonized by Europe were wholly arbitrary and had nothing to do with prevailing cultural norms. This led to the formation of naturally unstable multi-national nations. The modern political landscape of Southeast Asia does have certain similarities to pre-colonial political patterns, albeit this is not totally accurate. That is to say, before colonization, the majority of the present-day countries in Southeast Asia existed in a comparable manner.

Southeast Asia is a heterogeneous grouping of countries with a very diverse governance system. Generally, the existence of democracy is quite prominent in this region. Democracy as an ideal is conceptualized as a system in which all members of the political community have equal chance and equal rights to participate in setting the laws under which they live. whether directly or through representatives elected by people who are responsible to the citizen body. A government by the people for the people. This concept of democracy could be track down to more than 2,400 years ago in ancient Greece. It came from the word Demos and Kratos which means people and government. While this definition tells us that the citizens of a democratic country govern their nation, it seems like most countries who practice this failed to fully implement its essential ideas of democracy. The principal purposes of a democratic government are the protection and promotion of their rights, interests, and welfare. Democracy requires each individual to be free to participate in the political community's self government. The overall concept

of modern democracy has three principal parts: “Democracy”, “Constitutionalism”, and “liberalism”. These three points must exist in a political system for it to be a genuine democracy.

Five out of Southeast Asia’s countries are democratic countries, although imperfect in its implementation. Malaysia ever since its independence has always been a constitutional monarchy, although there have been numerous high-profile corruption scandals, its citizens have long enjoyed free, multi-party elections. The Philippines as well, has been a democratic country since 1986, after the downfall of the longtime dictator Ferdinand Marcos. The country has held free elections since then, but is still somewhat unstable, suffering through corruption, mass demonstrations, and threatened coups. The recent president, Rodrigo Duterte, has been accused of ordering more than 7,000 extrajudicial killings. In 2022, Ferdinand Marcos’s son, Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr. was elected president, further fueling concerns of a drift toward authoritarianism. Similar to Indonesia with the same struggles in corruption, ethnic separatism, and the signs of potential authoritarianism led by Jokowi’s presidency. Since 2007, Timor-Leste has also held free and fair elections but as the poorest nation in the region, the government there faces enormous obstacles. The most stable nation in the region is arguably Singapore. From its independence, it has been a democratic republic. It is a tranquil state, if a little too well ordered, that has been dominated for many years by a single political party.

Thailand and Cambodia, two nations in Southeast Asia, have partial democracies. Though it was essentially administered by the military until 1992, Thailand has been an officially recognized constitutional monarchy since 1932. A more transparent, multi-party democracy developed in the 1990s, and multiple free elections were conducted. Nonetheless, the military toppled democratically elected governments in both 2014 and 2006. Although there have been free elections since the previous coup, Thailand's democratic institutions seem to be going in the wrong way, and the country's administration is still largely controlled by the military. The majority of Thai people were still granted fundamental liberties even under the country's protracted military dictatorship. However, the government has detained a great deal of critics in recent years, including journalists, academics, and students, and many of them passed away while in detention. Additionally, in an effort to keep an eye out for dissident content, the government redirected all national internet traffic through government servers.

Cambodia has been a constitutional monarchy since 1993, when its first free elections were held. Hun Sen, a former Khmer Rouge fighter, was elected prime minister, and has led the country ever since. Subsequent elections are widely believed to have been fraudulent. Hun Sen’s regime has been occasionally tolerant of political dissent, and Cambodians enjoy moderate amount of personal freedom. Still, the imprisonment of political dissidents has been common any time Hun Sen’s regime appears to be under genuine threat. Four of Southeast Asia's nations are non-democracies. Vietnam and Laos are still ruled by their particular communist parties. Human rights infringement stay common place, but are less visit nowadays than in past decades. Brunei may be a sultanate and previous British protectorate that picked up full sway in 1984. It has been ruled inside by the same family for six centuries.

These familiar events throughout Southeast Asia has raised a significant concern in the rate of democracy index of Southeast Asian Nations. Therefore, for the purpose of figuring out what made the democracy index of Southeast Asia Countries declining throughout the years, this writing will examine such cases through literature reviews. This article explores the following research questions; What cases that have reflect flaws in democracy of the Southeast Asia countries? Do these cases effects the countries badly?

2. Method

The methods used in this article are literature reviews; Chronological and Scoping. Scoping literature review is used to identify the scope or coverage of a body of literature on a given topic. Chronological literature review looks at the development of a particular topic or idea over time.

3. Military coups in Southeast Asia throughout the Years

3.1. Myanmar's Coup D'état in 2021

Myanmar as a country ranked the top two lowest index of democracy in the world by an overall score 0.85 in the 166th place. (Economist Intelligence , 2023) This has led to a heavy decline in democracy. Myanmar or also known as Burma has experienced a military coup in early 2021. Min Aung Hlaing, Myanmar's military leader succeeded in carrying out a coup d'état and drowned the hopes of Democracy for a 55 million people. The democratically elected figure Aung San Suu Kyi the state counselor of Myanmar had to back down in public after being under house arrest due to the military takeover. Such military coup has affected the nation and the people badly in every aspect.

The economic downturn is inevitable and the efforts to eradicate poverty that have been made over the past few years have vanished. With the economy plunging by 20 percent in 2021 and the collapse of Myanmar's health care system resulting in soaring hunger levels and large numbers of people fleeing to the border and crossing it. The recent military coup in Myanmar, which occurred on February 1, 2021, marked a significant setback for the country's fragile democratic process. The coup, led by the military, resulted in the detention of democratically elected leaders, including State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint, as well as the declaration of a state of emergency and the takeover of power by the military for at least a year. This event highlights the ongoing struggle for democracy in Myanmar, which has been plagued by military intervention and authoritarianism for decades.

The coup was a direct response to the National League for Democracy's (NLD) landslide victory in the November 2020 elections, which saw the party win 396 out of 476 seats in the combined lower and upper houses of Parliament. The military, led by Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing, claimed that the election was marred by fraud and demanded a power-sharing agreement with the NLD, which was rejected. This move was seen as a desperate attempt by the military to maintain its influence and power in the face of growing civilian control.

The coup has had far-reaching consequences for Myanmar's democracy. The military has used violence and repression to quell opposition, resulting in the deaths of over 1,300 peaceful protesters and the arrest of nearly 11,000 people. The regime has also launched airstrikes against civilians in resistance strongholds and burned villages to the ground, leading to a humanitarian crisis and widespread displacement. The military's actions have been widely condemned by the international community, including the United States, the United Nations, and human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

The coup has also had significant economic and social impacts. The country's economy has shrunk by nearly 20 percent in 2021, and millions of people are facing hunger and poverty. The health-care system has collapsed amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and the military's brutal crackdown has led to widespread human rights abuses. The opposition, led by the National Unity Government (NUG), has formed a shadow government and armed forces, leading to a civil war and a humanitarian crisis that could spill over Myanmar's borders.

The decline of democracy in Myanmar is a result of a complex interplay of factors. The military has long maintained significant influence over the country's politics and economy, and has used its power to suppress civilian opposition and maintain its grip on power. The 2008 Constitution, which was drafted by the military, grants the military significant control over the security apparatus and ensures that it is accountable to no one. The military's ability to act with impunity has been further enabled by international inaction and the lack of accountability for its human rights abuses.

The recent coup is also a reflection of the military's anxiety about its diminishing economic and political power. The NLD's economic reforms, which encouraged diversification and competition in Myanmar's economy, threatened the military's monopolies in key sectors. Additionally, the NLD's efforts to strengthen civilian oversight of the military were seen as a threat to the military's institutional interests. The military's perception of the NLD as a threat to its power was further fueled by the party's landslide victory in the 2020 elections, which spelled the end of the military's political ambitions.

In conclusion, the military coup in Myanmar is a significant setback for the country's fragile democratic process. The coup has resulted in the detention of democratically elected leaders, widespread violence and repression, and a humanitarian crisis. The decline of democracy in Myanmar is a result of a complex interplay of factors, including the military's long-standing influence over the country's politics and economy, its ability to act with impunity, and its anxiety about its diminishing power. The international community must take a stronger stance in supporting democracy in Myanmar and holding the military accountable for its human rights abuses.

3.2. The 2014 Military Coup in Thailand

The decline of democracy in Thailand is a complex issue that has been exacerbated by a series of military coups. The most recent coup in 2014, which saw the military seize power and detain the country's leader, Prayuth Chan-o-cha, marked a significant setback for the country's democratization process. This essay will explore the historical context of Thailand's struggle for democracy, the impact of the 2014 coup, and the challenges that lie ahead for the country's democratic future.

Thailand's journey towards democracy began in the early 1990s, when the military government, which had ruled the country since 1932, started to transition towards a more democratic system. The 1997 constitution, which was carefully drafted for a stable and efficient governance, marked a significant step forward in this process. However, the military's continued involvement in politics and the rise of anti-democratic forces, such as royalists and the judiciary, undermined the democratic process and led to a series of military coups.

The 2006 coup, which saw the military seize power and detain the country's leader, Thaksin Shinawatra, was a significant setback for democracy in Thailand. The coup was justified by the military as necessary to restore order and stability to the country, but it was widely seen as a power grab by the military and the royal family.

The 2014 coup, which saw the military seize power and detain Prayuth Chan-o-cha, was a further blow to democracy in Thailand. The coup was justified by the military as necessary to restore order and stability to the country, but it was widely seen as a power grab by the military and the royal family.

The decline of democracy in Thailand is not just a result of the military coups but also a reflection of the country's complex history and the ongoing struggle for power between the military and the civilian government. The military has long been the dominant force in Thailand, and its grip on power has been maintained through a combination of coercion, manipulation, and control over key institutions.

The challenges that lie ahead for democracy in Thailand are significant. The military's seizure of power has created a power vacuum, and the country is now facing a deepening political crisis. The military's

brutal suppression of protests and the detention of thousands of people have created a climate of fear and intimidation, making it difficult for the civilian government to function effectively.

Furthermore, the military's control over key institutions, including the judiciary and the economy, has undermined the rule of law and the country's economic development. The military's dominance over the economy has led to widespread corruption and mismanagement, which has exacerbated poverty and inequality in the country.

In conclusion, the decline of democracy in Thailand is a complex issue that is deeply rooted in the country's history and the ongoing struggle for power between the military and the civilian government. The 2014 coup marked a significant setback for democracy in Thailand, and the challenges that lie ahead are significant. However, it is essential that the international community continues to support the people of Thailand in their struggle for democracy and human rights.

3.3. Military Coups in Cambodia

Cambodia has experienced a tumultuous history marked by numerous military coups that have significantly impacted the country's political landscape. The most recent coup in 1997, led by Prime Minister Hun Sen, was a significant event that marked a turning point in Cambodia's transition towards democracy. This essay will explore the historical context of Cambodia's military coups, the impact of the 1997 coup, and the challenges that lie ahead for the country's democratic future.

The 1997 coup was a culmination of years of political instability and power struggles between different factions in Cambodia. The country had been embroiled in civil conflict from the late 1960s until the early 1990s, and the Paris Peace Accords of 1991 had established a transitional government to oversee the country's transition towards democracy. The 1993 elections, which were monitored by the United Nations, had seen the royalist FUNCINPEC Party win a majority of seats, but the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), led by Hun Sen, had refused to relinquish power. The CPP had maintained control of the state apparatus, including the military, and had used this power to undermine the democratic process.

The 1997 coup was sparked by a series of events that had been building up over the previous year. In April 1997, Prince Norodom Ranariddh, the co-premier and leader of the FUNCINPEC Party, had been accused of attempting to overthrow Hun Sen. This led to a series of violent clashes between the two factions, which ultimately resulted in the CPP seizing control of the government.

The coup was marked by widespread violence and human rights abuses. Over 100 people were killed, many of whom were commanders or soldiers loyal to Prince Ranariddh and the FUNCINPEC Party. The CPP had also used extrajudicial executions to eliminate opposition leaders and military officers who had refused to support the coup. The 1997 coup had significant implications for Cambodia's political landscape. It marked a significant setback for democracy in the country and had long-lasting effects on the political process. The coup had also led to a deterioration in human rights and the rule of law, as the CPP had used its power to suppress opposition and maintain its grip on power.

The military coups that have occurred in Cambodia have had significant implications for the country's political landscape. The 1997 coup, in particular, marked a turning point in Cambodia's transition towards democracy and had long-lasting effects on the political process. The challenges that lie ahead for Cambodia's democratic future are significant, but it is essential that the country continues to work towards establishing a stable and democratic government that respects the rights of its citizens..

4. The Rising Back of Authoritarian Government in Southeast Asia

4.1. The elected Marcos "Bongbong" Jr in The Phillipines

The recent election of Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. as the President of the Philippines has raised concerns about the potential rise of authoritarianism in the country. This essay will explore the signs of rising authoritarian government in the Philippines under Marcos Jr.'s presidency.

The Marcos Family's Authoritarian Legacy

The Marcos family has a long history of authoritarian rule in the Philippines. Ferdinand Marcos Sr., the father of Bongbong Marcos Jr., was a democratically elected leader who turned into a dictator in 1972, imposing martial law and ruling the country until his ouster in 1986. During his regime, human rights violations were rampant, with Amnesty International reporting that 3,240 people were killed, tens of thousands more were tortured and imprisoned, and the country's economy was plundered by the Marcos family and their allies.

Despite this dark past, the Marcos family has managed to rebrand itself and re-establish its political position. In 2016, Ferdinand Marcos Sr. was given a hero's burial with military honors, a move that was met with controversy and accusations of historical whitewashing. This move has contributed to a gap in public knowledge about the Marcos regime, particularly among younger generations, which has been exploited by the Marcos Jr. campaign to present the Marcos years as a golden era, downplaying the human rights abuses and kleptocracy[1].

The Election and Its Implications

The election of Bongbong Marcos Jr. as President has been seen as a sign of the country's growing disillusionment with liberal democracy. Despite his family's controversial history, Marcos Jr. won the election with a significant margin, indicating that many Filipinos are willing to overlook his family's past and support his campaign message of unity and rekindling a former greatness.

The election has also been marked by allegations of vote-rigging, vote-buying, and a massive disinformation campaign. However, the overwhelming vote for Marcos Jr. suggests that these allegations have not significantly impacted the outcome of the election. This has led to concerns that the election was not truly free and fair, and that the results may not reflect the genuine will of the Filipino people.

The Rise of Authoritarianism

The election of Marcos Jr. has been seen as a sign of the rise of authoritarianism in the Philippines. His campaign message of unity and rekindling a former greatness has resonated with many Filipinos, who are tired of the constant failures of liberal democracy and are looking for a strong leader who can deliver results. This sentiment is reminiscent of the rise of authoritarian leaders in other parts of the world, such as Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines and Joko Widodo in Indonesia, who have also promised to bring stability and prosperity to their countries through authoritarian means.

The election of Marcos Jr. has also been seen as a sign of the decline of liberal democracy in the Philippines. The country has been experimenting with democracy since the end of the Marcos regime in 1986, but the recent election suggests that many Filipinos are no longer willing to support liberal democratic values and are instead looking for a strong leader who can deliver results, regardless of the cost to democracy.

The Impact on Human Rights

The election of Marcos Jr. has also raised concerns about the impact on human rights in the Philippines. During his father's regime, human rights violations were rampant, and many Filipinos were killed, tortured, and imprisoned for their political beliefs. There are concerns that Marcos Jr. may follow in his

father's footsteps and use his power to suppress dissent and opposition. The election has also been marked by allegations of vote-rigging and vote-buying, which have been used to silence political opponents and maintain the Marcos family's grip on power. This has led to concerns that the election was not truly free and fair, and that the results may not reflect the genuine will of the Filipino people.

The election of Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. as President of the Philippines has raised concerns about the potential rise of authoritarian government in the country. The Marcos family has a long history of authoritarian rule, and the election of Marcos Jr. suggests that many Filipinos are willing to overlook his family's past and support his campaign message of unity and rekindling a former greatness. The election has also been marked by allegations of vote-rigging, vote-buying, and a massive disinformation campaign, which have been used to silence political opponents and maintain the Marcos family's grip on power. This has led to concerns that the election was not truly free and fair, and that the results may not reflect the genuine will of the Filipino people.

Overall, the election of Marcos Jr. is a sign of the decline of liberal democracy in the Philippines and the rise of authoritarianism. It is essential that the international community continues to monitor the situation in the Philippines and holds the government accountable for any human rights violations or attempts to suppress dissent and opposition.

4.2. The Jokowi Legacy in Indonesia

The presidency of Joko Widodo, commonly known as Jokowi, in Indonesia has been marked by a significant shift towards authoritarianism. This trend has been evident since his first term, but it has become more pronounced in his second term, which began in 2019. This essay will explore the signs of rising authoritarianism under Jokowi's leadership, focusing on his legacy in 2023.

The Authoritarian Turn

Jokowi's presidency has been characterized by a gradual erosion of democratic institutions and the consolidation of power in the hands of the executive. This trend has been observed by scholars and analysts, who have noted that Jokowi's approach to governance has become increasingly authoritarian. The politicization of legal and law enforcement institutions, the cooptation of opposition forces, and the suppression of dissent are all signs of this authoritarian turn.

Politicization of Institutions

One of the most significant signs of authoritarianism under Jokowi is the politicization of key institutions, such as the judiciary and law enforcement agencies. The appointment of loyalists to key positions and the use of these institutions to silence political opponents have become common practices. This has led to a blurring of the lines between the interests of the state and those of the government, undermining the independence and impartiality of these institutions.

Cooptation of Opposition

Jokowi has also been successful in coopting his political rivals, including his main opponent in the 2019 presidential election, Prabowo Subianto. By appointing Subianto as his defense minister, Jokowi has effectively neutralized potential opposition and increased his political power. This cooptation has also brought the Indonesian parliament under Jokowi's control, enabling him to push through national laws that support his economic agenda.

Suppression of Dissent

The suppression of dissent has become a hallmark of Jokowi's presidency. Civil society organizations and student activists who have criticized his policies have faced harsh reactions from the government. The revision of the Indonesian criminal code and the new omnibus law on job creation have been used to silence opposition and stifle dissent. These measures have highlighted Jokowi's deepening authoritarian tendency, which was already evident at the end of his first presidential term.

Historical Context

To fully understand Jokowi's authoritarian turn, it is essential to consider the broader historical context of Indonesian politics. The country has been drifting towards authoritarianism since the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998. Jokowi's presidency has accelerated this trend, and his policies have been shaped by the complex historical roots that have fed this rightward drift.

The signs of rising authoritarianism under Jokowi's leadership are clear. The politicization of institutions, the cooptation of opposition, and the suppression of dissent are all indicators of a shift towards authoritarianism. Jokowi's legacy in 2023 is marked by a deepening authoritarian tendency, which has significant implications for Indonesian democracy. It is essential that the international community continues to monitor the situation in Indonesia and holds the government accountable for any human rights violations or attempts to suppress dissent and opposition.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, The decline of democracy in Southeast Asia is a pressing concern, with several countries in the region experiencing significant setbacks in recent years. Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia have all seen significant erosion of democratic institutions and the rise of authoritarianism, often facilitated by military coups and the suppression of opposition voices. Thailand has been a particularly concerning case, with the military staging a coup in 2014 and then manipulating the 2019 elections to ensure a pro-military government took power. Myanmar Military Junta that has used brutal force to suppress opposition, including the imprisonment of activists and the use of lethal force against protesters in 2021. Cambodia has also seen a significant decline in democracy, with the ruling party of Prime Minister Hun Sen using various tactics to maintain power. The main opposition party was dissolved in 2017, and independent media outlets have been shuttered. The country's elections in 2023 were widely seen as a sham, with the ruling party winning nearly every seat.

Meanwhile The Philippines and Indonesia two of the region's most populous countries, have also seen significant declines in democracy. The Philippines has experienced a rise in authoritarianism under President Rodrigo Duterte, who has overseen a brutal drug war and cracked down on civil society and the media. Indonesia has seen a similar trend under President Joko Widodo, who has done little to address the growing power of the military and has used various tactics to suppress dissent. The rise of authoritarianism and military coups has led to the erosion of democratic institutions and the suppression of opposition voices. The international community must continue to monitor these developments and hold governments accountable for any human rights violations or attempts to suppress dissent and opposition.

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