



DEMOCRACY IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC OUTLOOK 2023

Discussion Paper 1/2023



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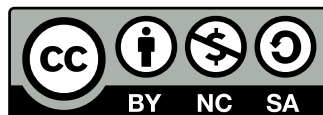
Discussion Paper 1/2023



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SIX TRENDS DEFINING DEMOCRACY IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC IN 2023

On 5–6 December 2022, International IDEA gathered 30 leading experts on democracy, anti-corruption and human rights in Bali, Indonesia, at the inaugural Democracy in Asia and the Pacific Outlook Forum. Representing 23 institutions and organizations from 12 countries, attendees discussed key trends in democracy in the Asia and the Pacific region over the course of seven topical sessions. These sessions were previously defined by a round of consultations and interviews with several experts on democracy and human rights. The sessions—on human rights; regional cooperation; climate change; China; disinformation; electoral authoritarianism and militarization; and political finance—attempted to take stock of the current state of democracy in the region and forecast the determining factors in the year to come.

This Paper is a summary of the discussions, arguments and proposals made by attendees at the Forum. It aims to distil these contributions and resulting conclusions into a single, concise document. Reflecting the assembled expertise, the text aims to focus and guide further discussions and forecasting on democracy in 2023, and to provide a common framework for understanding positive and negative trends across the region.

Out of the interviews and the discussion, six crosscutting trends can be discerned:

1. Politics remains a pathway to personal enrichment, continuing to motivate political and military elites to maintain power by suppressing people's rights. The lingering effects of Covid-19 include openings for the increased militarization of political spaces

Access to power comes with access to resources and enrichment. Concentrations of wealth and power continue to counteract regional political processes and will remain fundamental for understanding political developments in the coming years. The continued interference of the armed forces in politics in many countries is also partly driven by the same dynamic; Myanmar, Pakistan and Thailand are clear examples. Through controlling, or at least notably influencing, politics, the armed forces secure access to state resources, and in some cases private wealth for leading figures. As a consequence, political elites seek to twist and bypass financial regulations, business elites influence the political process through donations and contracts, and state resources are decimated through grand corruption. Unequal access to resources drives human rights abuses and is often the fundamental barrier to more democratic politics.

2. Lessons from the G20 and APEC conferences could reinvigorate multilateralism in Asia and the Pacific

Asia and the Pacific lacks a regional cooperation mechanism that is democratic at its core, which hinders democratic development and the proliferation of democratic norms.

The region has been provided with unprecedented visibility on the international stage in 2022, especially with the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Summit in Phnom Penh, G20 in Bali and APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) in Bangkok (all November 2022). The G20, masterfully driven by Indonesia, managed to achieve both a common declaration on the war in Ukraine and some tangible results—such as the largest climate finance deal to date. In that same line Indonesia, as chair of ASEAN, has stepped up coordination efforts around Myanmar with the creation of the office of ASEAN's special envoy ([Strangio 2023](#)) on Myanmar. Equally, the new Indo-Pacific Quadrilateral Dialogue that includes Australia, India, Japan and the United States is gaining traction, and helping the definition of the Indo-Pacific as a key geopolitical area. In addition, for 2023 India holds the chair of the G20, maintaining the focus on Asia and the Pacific. Yet, Asia and the Pacific lacks a regional cooperation mechanism that is democratic at its core, which hinders democratic development and the proliferation of democratic norms. The region would greatly benefit from having several regional bodies that could maintain democratic standards and exert pressure on autocratizing governments—the Council of Europe and the Inter-American Democratic Charter ([OAS n.d.](#)) would be useful models from other contexts. In the coming year, the lack of such mechanisms will likely become more notable as pressure increases on organizations such as ASEAN and SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) to become more vocal in the face of human rights violations (atrocities) and breaking of democratic norms. In 2023, for instance, ASEAN will face the challenge of the Myanmar junta's elections without the level of coordination needed for a firm and democratic answer.

3. Weaponized disinformation and digital repression continue to erode democratic politics, both maintaining authoritarian regimes in power and contaminating the information environment in democracies

The rise of digital repression and the use of disinformation is increasingly challenging democracy in the Asia Pacific region. The 2022 elections in the Philippines is a stark case. There, a coordinated influx of deceptive narratives and messages comprehensively contaminated the information environment that people relied on to make informed decisions. It is likely that repression of media outlets and journalists, as well as attacks on freedom of expression, will continue apace in more countries. These may take the form of increasingly draconian legislation concerning security, data, fake news or privacy laws (or the misuse of existing legislation thereof) or strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAAPs).

4. Rule by law instead of rule of law remains a favoured tool of illiberal forces repressing human rights

In many countries in the region, the system is rule by law rather than rule of law. This ranges from the strict application of draconian laws, such as *lèse-majesté* in Thailand or blasphemy laws in Pakistan and Bangladesh, to the use of anti-corruption frameworks to prosecute opposition leaders and crack down on civil society organizations. The proliferation of explicitly repressive legislation that curtails the online conduct of private citizens and organizations—such as the Digital Security Act in Bangladesh, the False Information Bill in Kazakhstan and the Singaporean Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, among others—indicates this trend will only solidify in 2023.

5. Illiberal, nationalistic and nativist policies continue to permeate Asia and the Pacific, often fuelled by majoritarianism anchored in religion or ethnicity

Party systems across Asia and the Pacific are increasingly dominated by ethnic nationalistic forces that wield fundamentalist and intolerant rhetoric to achieve power. Nativist and nationalist politics endanger the very foundation of democracy, depriving millions of citizens of their democratic rights and questioning one of the most important principles of democratic politics: economic, social and political equality ([International IDEA 2022](#)). It is also a fast track to corrupt practices disguised under appeals to the ‘national’ or majority interest. The tendency takes diverse forms, ranging from nationalist-driven military confrontations in Central Asia, to Islamization of politics in Indonesia and Malaysia, to attacks on Muslim minorities in Myanmar and India. Even in authoritarian states such as China, foreign policy is driven in part by popular nationalist pressure. Confrontations between inclusive political forces and ethnonationalist ones, and/or between politicized ethnic or religious groups might define politics in Asia and the Pacific in the years to come.

Nativist and nationalist politics endanger the very foundation of democracy, depriving millions of citizens of their democratic rights.

Young people are becoming a powerful countervailing force against the negative outlook for democracy in Asia and the Pacific.

6. Youth in politics as the sliver of hope for defending and advancing democracy in Asia and the Pacific

Young people are becoming a powerful countervailing force against the negative outlook for democracy in Asia and the Pacific. Examples of this can be seen in youth-driven activism in Sri Lanka and Thailand, as well as youth leadership in the fight against climate change in Central Asia and Pakistan. Some young people are running for office in Malaysia, Nepal and the Philippines, exemplifying the increasing importance and political influence of their generation. In 2023, young people will greatly influence elections in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Pakistan and Thailand. They are increasingly acting as the main bulwark against disinformation and ethnonationalism.

Chapter 1

HUMAN RIGHTS

The breadth and scope of human rights violations in Asia and the Pacific is compounded by widespread impunity. Although a lack of access to justice or oversight mechanisms is par for the course in non-democratic regimes, even democracies in the region struggle to maintain rigorous oversight over human rights violations. In rural and forested areas in countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Papua New Guinea, geographic isolation combines with the economic dependency of local economies on extractive industries to create a dangerous climate for local activists working on rights and environmental issues. More broadly, opportunistic politicians have been able to exploit their electorates' dissatisfaction with socio-economic issues (such as crime or immigration) to centralize power and put pressure on governmental and non-governmental watchdogs.

Accordingly, many independent oversight institutions created to fight impunity are often unable or unwilling to fulfil that role. Civil society organizations and the international community also serve as accountability mechanisms, but their limited power means that only through sufficient coordination can effective pressure be brought to bear against ruling elites and habitual offenders.

Looking ahead, human rights violations are increasingly tied up with the growing tendency to stoke nationalist, religious, ethnic or intercultural tensions for political gain. In this context, human rights violations are presented as not only permissible means but desirable outcomes of a larger political project: namely, to fully express a nation's 'true' imagined identity.

Although violations of human rights in Asia and the Pacific are varied in nature, the key issues in the years to come will centre around the following:

- *Freedom of expression* is being criminalized and prosecuted using existing draconian laws as well as newer variants that specifically target online activity. This tendency is likely to continue, including public attacks on

Opportunistic politicians have been able to exploit their electorates' dissatisfaction with socio-economic issues to centralize power and put pressure on governmental and non-governmental watchdogs.

independent media and online dissent, 'lawfare' (Robertson 2023) around defamation laws and more.

- *Freedom of association and assembly* is under attack, as governments seek to constrain civil society through limitations on funding and regulations that are deliberately over-complex or impossible to navigate.
- *Freedom of religion* is at risk in the face of political exploitation of various ethnic, religious and intercultural tensions across the region. Some countries are seeing a nationalist, identity-driven de-secularization (Riaz and Parvez n.d.) of politics and law. Others are witnessing an increase in violence (both systemic and sporadic) targeting religious minorities. The rise of ethnonationalism also goes hand-in-hand with the repression of LGBTQIA+ rights in the region.
- *Migrant rights* are at special risk due to migrants' disadvantaged legal position and widespread historical biases against them; relevant populations include foreign workers in Singapore, South Asians working in the Gulf, and seasonal migrants within countries across the region, among others. Existing risks are likely to be exacerbated by climate-related shifts in migration flows.

Human rights defenders in Asia and the Pacific will find the most success through both working with existing remediation mechanisms and forming broad, transnational coalitions to strengthen and revitalize frequently outdated and disempowered rights institutions.

Human rights defenders in Asia and the Pacific will find the most success through both working with existing remediation mechanisms and forming broad, transnational coalitions to strengthen and revitalize frequently outdated and disempowered rights institutions. These broad coalitions need to use all the levers within their reach, from international name-and-shame campaigns, to trade conditionalities capable of pressuring governments (such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights or the European Banking Authority initiatives), to finding support internationally from like-minded non-state actors.

Chapter 2

REGIONAL COOPERATION IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

Regionalism in the Asia Pacific faces a crisis of declining faith in multilateral organizations and years of conflicted global leadership (Freeman 2021). In 2022, the region saw a resurgence of multilateral dialogues, including the successful organization of ASEAN, APEC and G20 meetings at the end of the year. Asian countries, especially Indonesia, have managed to reassert themselves on the international stage, masterfully handling the delicate balance of geopolitical competition at the regional level. With Indonesia as host, the G20 delegates published a joint declaration 'deploring' the Russian invasion of Ukraine, something that could foreshadow a shift in global attitudes to the war in 2023. It is noteworthy that in terms of global economic and political power, the G20 is the most important multilateral forum beyond the United Nations Security Council. In 2023, India holds the Presidency giving the country an opportunity to also elevate its international position still further. In addition, a major announcement at the G20 Summit was a new 'Just Energy Transition Partnership' (The White House 2022) between Indonesia and a group of wealthy countries and private sector actors. The USD 20 billion finance package for Indonesia's green transition is potentially the single largest climate finance deal in history.

In 2023, geostrategic competition among major powers is likely to intensify, albeit unevenly and with disparate subregions likely to be more or less vulnerable. Pacific Island Countries (PICs) face the double challenge of climate change and increasing geopolitical competition between Australia, China and the United States. Still, the Pacific regional architecture has historically created avenues (Pryke 2021) for small PICs to collectively forge a regional identity and assert a common stance on major issues, even as the current era of geopolitical competition has placed that architecture under great strain (Zhang and Diamana 2021). Malaysia, the Philippines and Timor Leste, for example, have fostered multistakeholder forums in Southeast Asia that brought governments together to share subregional perspectives and measures related to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Asian countries, especially Indonesia, have managed to reassert themselves on the international stage, masterfully handling the delicate balance of geopolitical competition at the regional level.

There is space for a stronger cooperative body or network of states to coordinate pressure to strengthen and defend democratic institutions.

Yet, the lack of cohesive governance structures in the region still poses a threat to democratic development, particularly in South and Southeast Asia. There is space for a stronger cooperative body or network of states to coordinate pressure to strengthen and defend democratic institutions. Regional responses to the Myanmar crisis and South China Sea disputes have thus far yielded limited progress and revealed fractures within regional bodies, such as ASEAN, stemming from divergent member state priorities. Indonesia's 2023 chairship offers hopes of stronger leadership in this regard, although a significant policy shift away from the controversial Five-Point Consensus ([Za Uk Ling 2022](#)) is unlikely.

SAARC is similarly constrained by bilateral tensions between states around territorial issues, and security and power imbalances in the region. A revitalization of SAARC in 2023 looks unlikely unless member states are able to overcome current deficiencies of trust. Some of these tensions jeopardize SAARC's capacity to successfully develop a united position on various regional issues such as cross-border terrorism. SAARC's divided responses to crises such as Covid-19 ([Yhome 2020](#)) and the political and economic crisis in Sri Lanka demonstrate ([Bhabani 2022](#)) the growing need for stronger regional cooperation mechanisms. Moreover, civil society ([Dhaka Tribune 2022](#)) could potentially play a leading role in the revival of regional bodies whereby pressure to cooperate is exerted from below rather than via the prevailing top-down approach.

Chapter 3

THE CHALLENGES OF CLIMATE CHANGE FOR DEMOCRACY

Climate action in much of Asia and the Pacific has taken a back seat to economic issues, a pattern exacerbated by the pandemic—and even in the most climate-vulnerable countries. In South and Southeast Asia as well as in the Pacific, domestic policy responses to rising sea levels, unprecedented floods, and internal displacement (both actual and anticipated) have thus far been largely reactive. This is in sharp contrast to the effective collective efforts of Pacific island nations at the international level.

The region is likely to see a rise in so-called ‘storm autocrats’ (Rahman, Anbarci and Ulubaşoğlu 2022) where in the wake of major storms—such as cyclones, typhoons and hurricanes—political actors exploit disaster situations (and associated aid flows) to their own political advantage. This phenomenon has manifested in the Philippines, Fiji (Ríos, Ivaschenko and Doyle 2019) and (to a lesser extent) Solomon Islands. At the same time, it is reasonable to expect an increase in populist and conservative forces that frame climate action as necessarily deleterious to economic growth and prosperity. Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines and Thailand are just a few countries where climate change exacerbates and realigns existing social and political conflicts, especially in rural areas. Rising inequalities and poverty may potentially give space to more populist policies, and ruling elites may see a rejection of internationalist climate action as an effective political discourse.

Climate change in itself has yet to become a key election issue across many countries in the region, with the economy and cost-of-living crises instead dominating headlines. In this regard, public education campaigns will play an important role in countering misinformation and climate-change-denying policies in 2023. Similarly, the catalytic role that youth can play in calling on their leaders to step up actions to tackle the climate crisis should not be underestimated. Major climate strikes held by students across Southeast Asia, as seen in countries such as Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand and Thailand are likely to exert increasing pressure on governments to prioritize

Rising inequalities and poverty may potentially give space to more populist policies, and ruling elites may see a rejection of internationalist climate action as an effective political discourse.

climate action. The growth of environmental advocacy campaigns on social media will also be something to watch.

Activists pushing for action on climate change are increasingly coming under attack.

Conversely, activists pushing for action on climate change are increasingly coming under attack—in Bangladesh, the Philippines, Vietnam and elsewhere. Measures being used to restrict freedom of expression online, such as the Bangladesh Digital Security Act ([Bangladesh 2019](#)) or Vietnam’s Cybersecurity Law ([Vietnam 2022](#)), pose a threat to citizens and are tactically used to delay and evade climate action. Strengthening accountability mechanisms and the rule of law will remain a priority in the protection of human rights defenders, environmental defenders, Indigenous peoples and climate activists—groups that of course overlap—in 2023.

Chapter 4

CHINA'S GROWING INFLUENCE IN THE REGION

China is an omnipresent actor in Asia and the Pacific; no country in the region is untouched by its political or economic influence. Following the disengagement of the Trump years, the United States is once again focused on the broader region (Aum, Galic and Vandenbrink 2022), signalling a new era of geopolitical contestation between the two countries. But the China of today is very different than the China of the previous Democratic administration, and those changes will be reflected in its regional relations. China's longstanding policy of distributing power internally to prevent a single leader from becoming too powerful has been effectively replaced in favour of President Xi Jinping's centralization of power. A powerful Xi Jinping will have to project his power domestically and internationally in 2023. Internally, his third term has started in parallel with unprecedented public protests against the zero-Covid policy. Startlingly, the government's response has been to gradually reopen the country, effectively eliminating nearly all existing restrictions. The fact that the December 2022 protests were able to obtain concessions from the government relatively quickly might represent a breakthrough in Chinese politics. Citizens, albeit under notable surveillance, re-discovered their ability to influence policy at the national, rather than just the local, level (where protests are much more common). With looming health and economic crises in the country, there is potential for further unrest, but also for further citizen organization.

China has become more assertive internationally in recent years, a trend that is likely to continue in 2023. In trade, diplomacy and military terms, increased Chinese assertiveness is matched by the United States (and, to a lesser degree, Australia), as well as vice versa, to the extent that warnings of a new cold war between the two states are no longer considered hyperbolic (Hiroyuki 2022). China will focus its energies on Taiwan, but also on standing up to the military build-up taking place in East Asia, especially in Japan. It will do so by expanding its commercial and diplomatic influence in Central and Southeast Asia and the Pacific, pushing key regional countries to align more closely with China on the global stage. Assertiveness will be met with regional ambivalence and great-power suspicion (Seah et al 2022), as the world that China is reopening to is more sceptical of Chinese interests and economic growth.

A powerful Xi Jinping will have to project his power domestically and internationally in 2023.

China has shown its willingness to use a wide array of tools to pursue its international policy objectives. Among these, the most common are commercial and financial pressures and digital manipulation. China has exerted political pressure on numerous countries through the strategic use of commercial bans and restrictions. A recent example is the recently lifted two-year ban (Russell 2023) on imports of Australian wine and coal, which sought to direct Australia's foreign policy towards China. Commercial pressure has also been exerted, although with mixed results, through development finance and public lending. Although most financial mismanagement in the region is a product of local political dynamics—as was the case with Sri Lanka—China's financial power remains a potential tool of pressure. China's early cooperation with western-led debt restructuring processes—as was the case with Zambia (Cotterill and Wheatley 2022) in 2022—should not necessarily be taken for granted.

Parallel to the use of commercial and financial pressure, China has deployed (Nimmo, Hubert and Cheng 2021) coordinated digital influence operations across the region, and there are no logical arguments suggesting this practice might abate or reverse. Further, the increased use of Chinese-based digital platforms (such as ByteDance's TikTok (Kokas 2022) or the wide array of Tencent and WeChat products) by other countries in the region gives China extra digital soft and hard power (China n.d.). Although public political discourse on the subject can be distorted by historical prejudices and fears, the dominance of Chinese-made digital hardware does present real cybersecurity and geopolitical challenges. Taken together, these various factors combine to create disparate vulnerabilities for the integrity of political debate in Asia Pacific countries, especially during elections.

An element worth monitoring in the coming years is the role, position and perception of ethnic Chinese populations outside China, vis-à-vis both their countries of residence and the central Chinese Government. China expends significant resources to monitor and influence the activities (Safeguard Defenders 2022) of both Chinese nationals abroad and ethnic Chinese citizens of other nations. It has undertaken an especially concerted campaign of transnational repression (The Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs 2021) of ethnic Uyghurs abroad to silence them about its abuse of Uyghur and other Turkic minorities (HRW 2022) at home. These efforts to expand the reach of central government transnationally are concomitant with increased suspicion and scrutiny of ethnic Chinese by their fellow citizens across the region. This is especially important in Southeast Asia, which is home to sizeable ethnic Chinese minorities. In Malaysia, the ethnic Chinese community has been subjected to increasingly frequent attacks and their place in the country's multicultural society has publicly been questioned. Ethnonationalist forces in that country have sought to scapegoat the native Chinese community for what they take to be the malign influence of the Chinese state on Malaysia. In 2023 and beyond, with the increasing assertiveness of China in the region (among other factors), there is potential for further aggression against ethnic Chinese communities in Southeast Asia and beyond.

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Chapter 5

DISINFORMATION AND MEDIA INTEGRITY

Disinformation is plaguing the Asia Pacific region, especially, but not exclusively, during elections. Although a global challenge, disinformation in Asia and the Pacific is exacerbated by the lack of effective regulation in most countries, with an often weak media landscape (Paladino 2018) overlaid with exponential growth and adoption of social media. Elections in the Philippines, often referred to as ‘patient zero’ (Rappler 2022) of the war on disinformation, demonstrate how political disinformation has the capacity (at a minimum) to influence electoral results. Disinformation attacks a core principle of democracy: the right of citizens to cast an informed vote, based on unbiased, impartial and accessible information. When disinformation intentionally contaminates the available flow of information for citizens, this right is severely curtailed.

Disinformation is not new in Asia and the Pacific, and the use of technology to spread it was already seen in Jakarta’s 2017 gubernatorial elections (Indra 2017). With increasing Internet penetration and social media use, disinformation has become ever-present in public discourse and debate across the region, having been adopted by political actors (as in other world regions) to drive and steer those conversations. Foreign influence, although present, is in most cases not as influential as that of political parties, their donors and other domestic actors. The spread and reach of disinformation in many countries is partly thanks to the lack of strong independent media acting as a bulwark.

The Asia Pacific will likely see a rise of manipulation in the information environment in the coming year, especially in those countries preparing for elections—Bangladesh, Cambodia, Pakistan and Thailand. These countries, for instance, might see both national and foreign influence. Most likely, any foreign influence would be part of a bigger coordinated push with national origins.

With increasing Internet penetration and social media use, disinformation has become ever-present in public discourse and debate across the region.

Video is becoming the main vector of manipulation; TikTok videos, memes and YouTube content increasingly dominate political discourse online.

But whatever the trends to date, the manipulation of public opinion online is an evolving phenomenon. Manipulation operations are complex endeavours involving a significant number of operatives managing diverse accounts and working across multiple platforms. Their technical foot soldiers, often known as ‘political buzzers’ in Indonesia (Sastramidjaja 2021), are hired by political parties and interest groups to create content and push narratives on the Internet. Many are youth (Rasidi forthcoming) forming ‘fanbases’ for politicians (lacking other means to channel their political aspirations), or disaffected journalists (Rasidi and Wijayanto 2021) seeking a way out of the oligarch-dominated media industry. Video is becoming the main vector of manipulation; TikTok videos, memes and YouTube content increasingly dominate political discourse online. Video brings (Sundar, Molina and Cho 2021) more credibility, increasing the risk of disinformation being widely shared and inciting violence. At a communal level, online content interacts with offline rumours and can lead to mob attacks (The Indian Express 2018).

One aspect of the new form of political manipulation is the use of influencers: individual figures with significant following on a particular platform that are hired, usually without disclosure, to promote a political candidate or camp. Although it might be an effective technique for bringing politics closer to young people, influencers’ advocacy is rarely organic or authentic, but rather financially motivated and following an externally scripted narrative. This form of inauthentic behaviour has the ability to influence the voting preferences of many constituencies.

The seemingly uncontrollable growth of influence operations on the Internet provides cover for governments to equip themselves with repressive tools (Fernandez Gibaja 2022) and restrictive legislation. All over the region, governments have passed legislation that restricts freedom online, most frequently under the guise of content moderation. The year 2023 brings with it the possibility of more restrictive laws, even in countries that already have such laws in place, and more aggressive applications of existing legal frameworks restricting freedom of expression.

Investments in media manipulation and repression are also further threatening the role of independent journalism in holding power to account. In Asia and the Pacific independent journalism is increasingly under attack and the security of journalists is at risk. Independent journalism is a key element of accountability and one of the most, if not the most, effective barrier containing disinformation. Unfortunately, press freedoms in the region have registered a dramatic deterioration in recent years, according to Reporters without Borders (n.d.).

Chapter 6

ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIANISM AND THE MILITARIZATION OF POLITICS

Over the past decade, South and Southeast Asia have seen a reassertion of military power in civilian governance. Beyond Myanmar and Thailand, which underwent coups in recent years, the military continues to play a growing role in politics in Cambodia, Indonesia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The military's role in domestic affairs intensified during Covid-19, with the deployment of military forces to enforce health protocols in several of these countries. In some instances, this enabled public authorities to concentrate power in the executive while stripping other branches of government of their responsibilities. These actions reduced checks on government power. Health restrictions were also widely used to silence and criminalize dissent. In Indonesia, the military has not directly seized power, but it did regain control of critical ministries under the Jokowi administration. Therefore, whether military power is properly transferred back into civilian hands will need to be closely monitored in the coming years.

In Myanmar and Cambodia, sham elections scheduled to be held in 2023 pose the risk of being used to institutionalize undemocratic regimes and consolidate authoritarian power bases. In Myanmar, the junta seeks to legitimize its 2021 coup d'état. In Cambodia, Prime Minister Hun Sen is looking to further entrench his power. Elections in these countries are expected to be neither free nor fair, given the current political environments.

Regional experience shows that a necessary, if not always a sufficient, condition for overcoming authoritarianism is a well-organized opposition. The defeats of the Barisan Nasional party in Malaysia in 2018 and 2022, putting an end to its 61 years in power, were made possible by a united and organized opposition. In advance of the Myanmar junta's planned 2023 'election', intra-resistance dialogues have led to the construction of the most inclusive governance organizations in Myanmar's history (the National Unity Consultative Council and the National Unity Government); a democratic political roadmap ([the Federal Democratic Charter](#)); and coordinated military activity to expand their areas of control with the support of the Myanmar

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people. In Cambodia, alliance talks held between five opposition parties led to an [agreement](#) to push for changes to election [regulations](#) and procedures in advance of the 2023 general election. But cooperation—and a concerted crackdown on the Cambodian National Rescue Party, the largest opposition party—remains a challenge ([European Parliament 2022](#)).

Three key elections will be held in 2023 in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Thailand. In Thailand, the military-aligned coalition in power since 2019 is expected to face a well-supported pro-democracy opposition in general elections scheduled for May. Although the elections remain relatively open, any scenario that includes a notable defeat of the army-aligned forces may well create upheaval and further undermine national stability. The threat of another coup remains ever-present. In Bangladesh, concerns have already been raised as to how free and fair the presidential and general elections will be, with reports surfacing of crackdowns on opposition parties and ballot box stuffing in favour of the ruling Awami League party. Pakistan's general election, set to be held in October 2023, will similarly be a litmus test of its military's neutrality considering its historical role in civilian politics.

Judicial independence is vulnerable when military-appointed judges and other key positions within public administration entrench a culture of impunity.

Ultimately, strengthening institutions, independent courts and free media remains a critical task. An increase in lawfare and the abuse of constitutional courts to validate illiberal agendas and stifle dissent is underway in several countries, most notably in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand. In many countries, judicial independence is vulnerable when military-appointed judges and other key positions within public administration entrench a culture of impunity. Indonesia and Thailand are just two examples where judges have been captured by traditional military elites through constitutional means. In 2023, the integrity of these institutions will be something to watch.

Chapter 7

POLITICAL FINANCE AND CORRUPTION

Some of the most vulnerable democracies in the region are undermined by the undue influence of money in politics. In general, countries have relatively solid, and highly diverse legal frameworks for governing money in politics. The main problems in political finance are not always found in these legal frameworks, but rather in the capacity of authorities to enforce them—and the capacity of political actors to breach them with impunity.

A clear example is found in the Philippines' 2022 elections. The winning candidate managed to raise the largest campaign budget with only a handful of donors, many of whom were individuals that could reasonably expect to see their business interests benefit from government contracts.

Many countries in the region publicly finance their elections, yet with systems that tend to distribute resources unfairly. In Thailand, state finance is abused by actors in small parties for their personal benefit, such as purchasing TVs or other electronics. The enforcement of existing finance regulations, or lack thereof, is also a persistent problem. Similar issues are found in Indonesia, where business elites and conglomerates can and do significantly influence the relative financial position of their favoured political candidates.

In addition to these longstanding issues, the increasing digitalization of politics opens new vulnerabilities in political finance. Most political finance regimes in the region do not sufficiently regulate or monitor the online activities of candidates and political parties, and in some countries, legislation regulating online political expenditure does not yet exist. Expenditures are often made outside the jurisdiction and oversight of the relevant national agencies, which also sometimes lack the resources to closely monitor online political expenditure in the first place. This has created a rather wide loophole in political finance controls which is exploited by political actors across the region.

Some of the most vulnerable democracies in the region are undermined by the undue influence of money in politics.

Of special interest is the possible unrest fuelled by heavily indebted countries in the region. Countries like Cambodia, Laos, Maldives, Mongolia and Pakistan are highly indebted, usually because of grand infrastructure projects with unsustainable borrowing schemes. Many of these countries might face unrest in the coming year due to the inability of the government to service the debt.

Corruption and political finance can also catalyse public action and mobilize pro-democracy civil society.

Corruption and political finance can also catalyse public action and mobilize pro-democracy civil society, as illustrated in Malaysia, Mongolia and Thailand (Lkhaajav and Bazarsuren 2022). In Mongolia and Thailand, civil society and pro-democracy actors anchored their campaigns in anti-corruption discourses, and in Malaysia, defeated entrenched powerful interests. Media plays a role in such mobilizations, and academic research indicates that a freer press is correlated with lower levels of corruption. Journalists complement often overburdened criminal investigators, anti-corruption bureaus and electoral management bodies by uncovering corrupt schemes, as well as communicating the details to citizens. This allows the general public to demand action and change through democratic processes.

CONCLUSION

This Discussion Paper has aimed to forecast the most important trends that will define the health of democracy in Asia and the Pacific in 2023, based on expert consultations and dialogue.

The year 2023 marks the beginning of a decisive and potentially volatile wave of elections that will define much of the region's politics in the near future. Starting with Thailand in May, some of the most populous and economically powerful countries in the region will undergo tense electoral processes in 2023 and 2024. These include Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and the single biggest electoral process in history to date, India's 2024 election. The Myanmar junta will also stage its bogus electoral process in 2023 with the aim of gaining further international recognition.

All these will take place amid rising inflation, economic stagnation and a possible global recession. The economic powerhouse of the region, China, is also showing worrying economic signals. Inflation and recession, in addition to climate-change-induced disasters and the vulnerability of the food supply chain—mostly because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine—sketch a volatile scenario for Asia and the Pacific in 2023.

These are stress-tests for a region whose democratic foundations are already shaky. Asia and the Pacific is seeing a rise in nativist and illiberal rhetoric, fed through disinformation and in many cases with the connivance of the military—although not always. More often than not, tailor-made legislation is passed to provide governments with repressive tools to restrict fundamental freedoms, weaponizing the judiciary when necessary. Lack of regional instruments of democratic cooperation and coordination and rising geopolitical tensions add to the instability of the region.

Asia and the Pacific is seeing a rise in nativist and illiberal rhetoric, fed through disinformation and in many cases with the connivance of the military.

Yet it is also home to some of the most progressive democracies and some of the most powerful democratic movements. Its young people are proving to be a force to be reckoned with, making strides into formal politics (as in Nepal or Malaysia) as well as leading struggles for democracy from Central Asia to the Pacific. Hope for democracy rests on them.

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Annex A. List of attendees

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Ms Irina Matvienko	Do Not Be Silent (Ne Molchi)
Dr Imelda Deinla	Ateneo School of Government
Dr Punchada Sirivunabood	Mahidol University
Dr Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu	Centre for Policy Alternatives
Ms Siok Sian Pek-Dorji	Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy
Dr James Gomez	Asia Centre
Dr Niranjan Sahoo	Observer Research Foundation
Dr Benjamin Yh Loh	Taylor's University
Mr Greg Kehailia	Internews (Philippines office)
Mr Phil Robertson	Human Rights Watch
Mr Max Walden	Election Watch, Melbourne School of Government
Ms Elyssa Lopez	Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism
Ms Thresinha Cardoso	Women Caucus Timor Leste
Ms Pricilia Baptista	Women Caucus Timor Leste
Mr Lee Chung Lun	Asian Network for Free Elections
Mr Hadar Nafis Gumay	Network for Democracy and Electoral Integrity Jakarta
Ms Pradipa Rasidi	Engage Media
Mr Feri Amsari	Center for Constitutional Studies, University of Andalas
Ms Titi Anggraini	Perludem
Mr Heroik Pratama	Perludem
Ms Khoirunnisa Nur Agustyati	Perludem
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Ms Theresia Joice	Perludem
Ms Tammy Carolina	Perludem
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Dr Seema Shah	International IDEA
Mr Alberto Fernandez	International IDEA
Ms Emma Kenny	International IDEA

About the partners

ABOUT INTERNATIONAL IDEA

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with 34 Member States founded in 1995, with an exclusive mandate to support and advance democracy worldwide.

What we do?

We produce comparative, policy-friendly knowledge and provide technical assistance on issues relating to elections, parliaments, constitutions, money in politics and political representation, all under the umbrella of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. We assess the performance of democracies around the world through our unique Global State of Democracy Indices and reports. Our work is expanding to address issues related to climate change and democracy.

We use our knowledge to provide technical assistance and expert advice to governments and civil society around the world. We publish books, databases, and primers annually in several languages on topics ranging from voter turnout to Indigenous Peoples' rights in constitution-building. Gender equality and inclusion are mainstreamed in all our work.

We engage in conversations and convene agenda setting dialogues and partner with likeminded organizations, including the African Union, the European Union and the United Nations, to achieve greater impact.

Where we work?

Our headquarters is in Stockholm, and we have regional and country offices in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean. International IDEA is a Permanent Observer to the United Nations and is accredited to European Union institutions.

<<https://www.idea.int>>

ABOUT PERLUDEM

Perkumpulan untuk Pemilu dan Demokrasi (Association for Election and Democracy) is an independent non-profit organization based in Indonesia with the mission 'Manifestation of a democratic country and elections that promote freedom of the people's and uphold the sovereignty of the people's'.

Perludem's scope of activities is divided into three areas: (a) assessment, such as conducting research into election-related issues; (b) training of electoral stakeholders to improve understanding of elections; and (c) monitoring the electoral process to ensure it is in accordance with the existing election regulations.



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On 5–6 December 2022, International IDEA gathered 30 leading experts on democracy, anti-corruption and human rights at the inaugural Democracy in Asia and the Pacific Outlook Forum. Representing 23 institutions and organizations from 12 countries, attendees discussed key trends in democracy in the Asia and the Pacific region over the course of seven topical sessions.

The sessions were previously defined by a round of consultations and interviews with several experts on democracy and human rights. The sessions—on human rights; regional cooperation; climate change; China; disinformation; electoral authoritarianism and militarization; and political finance—attempted to take stock of the current state of democracy in the region and forecast the determining factors in the year to come.