During the so-called “Third Wave of Democratization” that swept Asia beginning in the 1980s, there was widespread optimism that democracy was developing deep roots in the region. But with growing rivalry between China and the US, and changing political dynamics in many countries in Asia, there are now growing fears of democratic backsliding throughout the region.

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Democratic Backsliding & New Autocrats in Asia

Strings Attached
Introduction: Reflections on Democratic Backsliding in Asia
By Aurel Croissant & Larry Diamond

AROUND THE WORLD, democracy is facing hard times. The empirical scores of prominent global democracy barometers such as the Freedom House Index, the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index, and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project find that the decline of democracy has emerged as a conspicuous global challenge. The quality of democracy is declining in a growing number of both advanced and new democracies, and the pace of democratic failures is accelerating. At the same time, democratic openings are being aborted in political systems that had previously experienced some form of political liberalization, and autocracies are hardening again.

Democratic recessions are not a new phenomenon. Compared to previous waves of democracy reversal, the current losses in democratic quality are still mild and the global levels of democracy remain relatively high by historical standards. Still, the deterioration of democratic rule has become a major concern for policy-makers, activists, academics and citizens across the world.

Scholars use different terms to refer to the degradation of democratic rule. No shared conceptualization has emerged yet, but studies stress some common key features of the current backlash. One is that often, the main perpetrators of crimes against democracy are not military adventurers, armed revolutionaries or foreign governments, but those elected to lead a democracy. The assault on institutions of horizontal accountability, political rights and civil liberties is typically related to social polarization and the mobilization of identity politics, which feed on unintended local consequences of global trends such as technological change and globalization, deepening economic inequalities and declining social cohesion as well as the transnationalization of domestic politics. Finally, while the current democratic recession affects many democracies, authoritarianism is also deepening in already non-democratic systems. Hong Kong is a case in point (see Brian Fong’s essay in this issue). This reflects also the rise of authoritarian sharp power and the loss of US leadership in democracy promotion.

The Asian experiences provide contradictory messages in the debate about global democratic backsliding. On the one hand, the so-called “Third Wave of Democratization,” which reached the Asian shores in the second half of the 1980s, has been remarkable in its impact and reach. While the first wave of democratization before and after the First World War barely touched the region and the second wave left behind a few electoral democracies (India, Sri Lanka and the Philippines) but only one liberal democracy (Japan), the number of democracies tripled from three in 1980 to nine in 2005 and had risen to eleven by 2017. Even though data from Freedom House, the Economist Intelligence Unit and the Bertelsmann Transformation Index all show that current levels of democracy are about the same or slightly lower than their historic highs (see Figure 1), there is a negative trend. On the other hand, the third wave also resulted in great variation in terms of democratic outcomes across the region. South Korea and Taiwan are often celebrated as success stories of third-wave democratization, but most neo-democracies in South and Southeast Asia (such as the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand) continue to face harsh challenges or have been careening back and forth between democracy and authoritarianism. Moreover, most Asian democracies have experienced some degree of democratic erosion. A current study identifies 14 episodes of democratic backsliding in 10 democracies since the early 2000s. As the essays in this issue of Global Asia show, examples include not only new democracies but older democracies such as Sri Lanka and — most alarmingly, given its importance as the world’s largest democracy — India. Modes, gravity and outcomes of democratic backsliding vary across countries. The decline in democratic quality was relatively soft and temporary in Taiwan but has been more severe in India, Indonesia, South Korea and Mongolia, and especially in Bangladesh, Thailand, Sri Lanka and the Philippines (which have become or are about to become autocracies). Some countries such as the Philippines, Thailand and Bangladesh went through more than one democratic recession. In seven of the 14 episodes, democratic forces managed to contain the process before democracy broke down. Among these “near misses,” five temporarily recovered at the level of democratic quality similar to that in the year before democratic erosion started; two (India and the Philippines) are ongoing and
accelerating. In the seven cases that fell below a minimum threshold of electoral democracy Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Thailand saw a “quick comeback” within five or fewer years, though democratic revivals in the last two countries were short-lived.16 Given Asia’s heterogeneity, it is hard to identify a general set of factors that are driving democratic backsliding in the region. It seems to occur and tends to be more severe in poorer, less developed countries and lower quality democracies. But obviously, these explanations do not explain a case such as South Korea, with a more advanced economy and stronger democratic institutions than in most other Asian nations. Finally, once a democracy enters a period of decline, the chance is high that it remains vulnerable to further degradation. Sri Lanka, which saw the drastic weakening of rights, freedoms and accountability mechanisms from 2005 to 2015, is a case in point, though it remains to be seen how far the regression that started again in 2018 will proceed now that the authoritarian Rajapaksa clan is back in power (see Neil DeVotta’s essay in this issue).

The Asia-Pacific theater also offers some fresh insights into the catalysts and mechanisms that allowed for a return to democracy. Of the three accountability mechanisms discussed by Croissant and Sant in their essay on Taiwan and South Korea,17 institutions of “horizontal accountability” seem to be least effective. Mechanisms of “vertical accountability,” especially transparent and clean elections, are more promising options of democratic resistance, especially if defection of elites from within the political camp aligned with a potential authoritarian weakens the incumbent around election time and opposition parties manage to mobilize voters determined to punish those responsible for the erosion of democracy. Often, however, the weakness of institutions of checks and balances and the ability of

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wannabe autocrats to create an “uneven playing field” in elections by using legislative majorities and administrative powers leaves civil society as the “last line of defense” against democratic erosion and eventual collapse.18

In fact, Asian experiences suggest that what matters most in times of democratic crisis are mechanisms of “diagonal accountability.” In Taiwan and Hong Kong, democracy movements driven by civic activists have played pivotal roles in forestalling backsliding or protesting against government’s ever-tightening control of political space. The political power of ordinary citizens in response to aggrandizement of executive power has also grown in South Korea. Advocacy and civil rights groups, other social organizations, and students as well as concerned citizens have also attempted to act as a bulwark against the rise of authoritarianism, but so far they have often gained less traction and achieved weaker impact. Moreover, in light of shared concern about Chinese influence, pro-democracy actors in Hong Kong and Taiwan have begun to co-operate. Fresh forms of co-operation are beginning to take shape among Asian democracies in the civil society sector,19 and multiple platforms created by civic organizations aim to bring together pro-democratic actors from across the region.

On the other hand, the Asian experiences also offer some worrisome lessons. One is that for “diagonal accountability” to be a mechanism of democratic resilience and resistance, a sufficient number of citizens must still prefer a democratic form of government and have some degree of trust in democratic institutions. At least in some Asian societies, however, popular support for democracy and trust in the core institutions of democracies have been eroding somewhat (see Marlene Mauk’s essay in this issue). Moreover, illiberal and autocratic incumbents may also mobilize their supporters in counter-demonstrations that intimidate opposition, for example in Thailand, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India.

Clearly, the dynamics of democratic backsliding and resilience in Asia need a much fuller treatment than the space available here. Yet, the remaining essays in this issue reveal important sources of democratic recession and revival, how social, political and economic actors inside and outside of individual countries react to it, and how specific events that erode democracy shape domestic and regional politics in the region. This collection builds on discussions at the workshop “Democratic Backsliding in Asia,” hosted by Heidelberg University in December 2019, and previews arguments in a forthcoming special issue of the journal Democratization on the same topic.20 In all likelihood, this is a subject that will continue to demand close scrutiny and rigorous analysis for some time to come.

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Civil Liberties in Decline
Change in BTI figures across 22 Asian countries* between 2006 and 2018

Democracy’s Stalled Global Growth
Since the mid-2000s, the percentage of countries worldwide having electoral or liberal democracies has been shrinking.

EIU Democracy Index 2019
The world coded by regime type on a scale from 0 to 10 points to a dramatic democratic deficit in Asia and Africa.

Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit

* Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, North Korea, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam