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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IN TODAY’S AGE of democratic recession, Taiwan and South Korea are beacons of hope for democracy in Asia — and beyond. Despite substantial challenges, these democracies have proven resilient, demonstrating a robust ability to cope with democratic backsliding. Preventing or reversing the loss of democratic qualities was possible because citizens fought back, through democratic means. We argue that the resilience of democracy in South Korea and Taiwan rests especially on the interaction of mechanisms of diagonal and vertical accountability. In Taiwan, the combination of public protest, civil society mobilization and free and fair elections was critical to contain democratic erosion before substantial damage had been done. These factors did not prevent backsliding in South Korea, but proved particularly important in stopping it from slipping further towards autocracy under President Park Geun-hye.

DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN SOUTH KOREA AND TAIWAN CONTRASTED

Democrat reverses occur when a country loses some of the democratic qualities in its political system. Types of backsliding vary across countries. Analysts note, however, that unlike in past waves of global democratic reversal, democracies today do not break down abruptly but tend to erode gradually. In Asia, recent examples range from executive aggrandizement in the Philippines to promissory coups in Thailand and from strategic election manipulation in Cambodia to the adoption of new emergency legislation in Mongolia that grants the executive sweeping powers to dismiss members of the judiciary and other watchdog agencies. In Taiwan, a mild but recognizable deterioration of democratic qualities first occurred in the mid-2000s, when the narrowly defeated Pan-Blue Camp, as the alliance between the conservative Kuomintang Party (KMT) and the People First Party was known, refused to concede defeat in the presidential election of March 2004. For a few months, it seemed as if the losing side would resort to intimidation and violence. However, strong condemnation by a free media and civil society organizations as well as an independent judiciary prevented the situation from worsening. A few years later, civil society again played a crucial role in preventing the erosion of democracy. In November 2008, the so-called Wild Strawberry Movement drew waves of students to protest an oppressive Parade and Assembly Law proposed by recently elected President Ma Ying-jeou of the KMT. In 2014, young protestors occupied Taiwan’s parliament for almost a month and brought an estimated 500,000 supporters to the streets to protest against the Ma government signing a service trade agreement with Mainland China, which, critics feared, could degrade political rights and the freedom of the press. Finally, in January 2020, an impressive majority of Taiwanese voters, in perhaps the most consequential election in decades, rejected the populist Han Kuo-yu of the KMT, a pro-China opponent, in a campaign dominated by how to handle growing pressure from Beijing.

In South Korea, substantial erosion in democracy began under conservative President Lee Myung-bak, but became more blatant under
his successor, President Park Geun-hye. In 2007, the year before the start of the backsliding epi-
isode, South Korea had an LDI score of 0.76. By the end of 2015, it had dropped to 0.57. Presi-
dent Lee’s tenure from 2008 to 2013 already saw signs of executive aggrandizement, includ-
ing illegal government surveillance of opposi-
tion members and journalists, and the use of
state power to control the media. The V-Dem
project data also show an adverse change in
free and fair South Korean elections, reflect-
ing illegal interference by the National Intelli-
gence Service (NIS) in the 2012 election. After
Park won the 2012 elections, the use of repres-
sive measures to undermine media freedom and
to silence political dissent became more wide-
spread, while political power was increasingly
personalized around the president. She also
attempted to weaken the legislative branch,
for example by retaliating against the majority
leader of her own party, and through meddling
with the ruling party’s nomination process for
the 2016 parliamentary election.

At first fairly popular, Park lost support over
a seemingly endless series of political scandals. The Sewol ferry disaster in April 2014 revealed
the extent of her detachment from the public
and her executive incompetence. The National
Assembly election of April 2016 became a nar-
row win for the liberal opposition. This encour-
aged media, whistleblowers, opposition parties
and civil society actors to co-operate. Particu-
larly striking was the revelation that the presi-
dent had her government agencies blacklist as
many as 10,000 political opponents and pro-
gressive artists who were critical of her govern-
ment. A major corruption scandal surfaced in
July 2016, when it became known that Park had
allowed Choi Soon-sil, a personal friend hold-
ing no government position, to freely meddle in
the formulation and implementation of govern-
ment policies, and to enrich herself by extorting
bribes from businesses. This triggered the can-
delight protests from November 2016 to March
2017 that brought millions of citizens onto the
streets to demand Park’s impeachment. While
the protests were to a large degree spontane-
ous, the work of vibrant civil-society organiza-
tions played an important role. Civil resistance
forced the National Assembly to indict the presi-
dent in December 2016. The Constitutional
Court unanimously decided to impeach her in
March 2017. In the aftermath, the courts sen-
tenced both Park and Lee to long prison terms
for various offences, including abuse of power
and corruption.

The election of the liberal Moon Jae-in as presi-
dent in May 2017 offered a chance for a reset. The
new administration promised major changes with
the aim of making South Korea more demo-
cratic and improving social justice. As of this writ-
ing, many of these policy proposals await imple-
mentation. Nonetheless, the turnover of govern-
ment helped to revitalize the country’s democracy,
reflected in an increase of its LDI score from 0.61
(2016) to 0.80 (2018)—the highest score so far in
the V-Dem project for South Korea.

EXPLAINING DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

Why was it so easy for Lee and Park to erode
democracy? What explains the contrast with
Taiwan? Given similar cultural (Confucian-
ism), colonial (Japanese rule) and authoritarian
(strong economic growth under developmental
dictatorships) legacies, and similar post-author-
itarian challenges of rising income inequality
across social classes and generations, one would
have expected similar paths of democratic devel-
opment in the two countries. Nonetheless, major
differences remain. Insights from the emerg-
ing literature on democratic backsliding suggest
that four are perhaps relevant for explaining the
diverging trajectories in the two democracies.

Political parties. The first one is the presence of
well-institutionalized political parties in Taiwan
and the lack thereof in South Korea. Authoritari-
anism in Taiwan was party-based. The pressure
to contest a well-institutionalized ruling party,
the KMT, which conceded democratization from
a position of strength in 1996 and remained in
power until 2000 and again from 2008 to 2016,
forced the opposition to invest in party organi-
zations. While opposition to authoritarian rule
started as a popular movement, the “Dangwai”
(“Outside of the [KMT] Party”) movement event-
ually became the Democratic Progressive Party
(DPP), which became the party in government
view, South Korea’s democracy crises are mani-
fested by the failure of party politics in the rep-
resentative system, which strengthens the role
of personalist leaders and perpetuates the con-
tentious divide between social movements and
political parties.

Political cleavages and ideological polariza-
tion. A second difference concerns politi-
cal cleavages and resultant polarization expe-
rienced in the two countries. Taiwan’s divide
between the Blue and Green camps — the KMT
and DPP, respectively — is not based primar-
ily on traditional left-right ideological polariza-
tion, but concerns their diametrically opposed
China policies and differing ideas about national
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from 2000 to 2008 and since 2016. That the
DPP hailed from the pro-democracy movement
explains its proclivity for protest activism, as
evidenced in its support for civic movements. In
recent years, other political parties grew from a
plthora of protest movements, such as the New
Power Party. In contrast, personalist authoritar-
ianism in South Korea left both political parties
and civil society excluded from the core of poli-
tics. Political parties in post-authoritarian South
Korea are centered on major leaders and link-
ages between social movements and the person-
ality-based opposition parties are weak. In this
China policies and differing ideas about national
identity and the future national status of Taiwan.

The conservative KMT promotes a more concilia-
tory stance toward China, and the liberal Demo-
cratic Progressive Party advocates independence,
creating tensions with Beijing. At the same time,
the open contestation over Taiwanese identity
for three decades after democratization has led
to a “new Taiwanese” identity that is defined less
in terms of ethnicity and more as a commitment
to the interests of the people of Taiwan and the
island’s new civic values and institutions (Lin,
2016). This self-identification is particularly
rooted in shared, common democratic values. The Sunflower Movement in 2014 reflects this. The protesters feared that creeping economic overdependence on China would increase Beijing’s political influence over Taiwan, threatening democratic freedoms.

By contrast, in South Korea, the main areas of contention increasingly fall along the right-left cleavage. The ideological divide between conservatives and progressive liberals concerns many issues, such as the economic debate (growth vs. income/wealth distribution), the North Korea debate, the textbook debate (anti-communism vs. unification) and so on. It also corresponds with a widening generational gap between the younger, more liberal-progressives and the older, more conservative generations in contemporary South Korean society (Joo, 2017). Liberal parties have long advocated for a more reconciliatory policy posture towards North Korea, whereas conservative parties have consistently sought to mobilize support on the basis of a more confrontational policy with the North, using anti-communism to legitimize restricting independent access to information and freedom of expression and assembly (You, 2015). South Korea’s cleavage structure and its ideological basis are therefore more vulnerable to polarization and authoritarian manipulation than in Taiwan.

**Institutions of horizontal accountability.** Third, the personalization of power and dissembling of horizontal accountability mechanisms as well as the candlelight protests reaffirmed a decades-long pattern of very strong civic activism in juxtaposition with weak representative institutions in South Korea. In contrast to Taiwan, South Korea’s democratization has suffered from a system of hyper-presidentialism, which gives presidents an incentive to enhance their power by undermining institutions designed to check their influence. Moreover, judges are aware that the executive or the legislature may refuse to comply with their rulings and, therefore, the courts hesitate to exercise a role as an independent body. In fact, institutions of horizontal accountability played a very different role in the two cases. For example, Taiwan’s constitutional court declared in 2008 that any restrictions on freedom of association and speech associated with communism are unconstitutional. In contrast, in response to a petition filed by the Park government, South Korea’s Constitutional Court in 2014 dissolved the socialist Unified Progressive Party and disqualified its representatives from the National Assembly.

**Cultural foundations.** In the eyes of some scholars, Confucian features of the political culture in South Korea prevent both ordinary citizens and political leaders from freeing themselves from authoritarian paternalism and norms of social harmony. Confucian legacies reinforced democratic erosion under President Park because norms of political paternalism misled Park to believe that she should rule the country like a benevolent queen and encouraged members of the administration to comply with her antidemocratic impulses. At the same time, the social norms of conformism and anti-pluralism discouraged dissenters from challenging those impulses openly (Shin, 2018). Another view argues that citizens in East Asia, and especially in South Korea, give almost equal weight to economic quality and political quality as the essence of democracy. At the same time, many voters are skeptical of democracy’s capability to solve the problems in South Korean society, and, therefore, they are willing to support political leaders who promise to revitalize the economy, even though these leaders are not particular about the illiberal means they may use to achieve those ends. Yet, some caveats deserve emphasis. The first one is that it is difficult for these cultural arguments to explain why there had been no similar backsliding under previous liberal or conservative administrations, or in Taiwan, despite a similar Confucian heritage and levels of dissatisfaction and institutional distrust. Moreover, other studies identify the tension between the participatory orientation of the public and the authoritarian impulses of the Park government as the main driver of political activism (Cho, Kim and Kim, 2019), a result that somewhat contradicts the “Confucian paternalistic affinity” argument.

**Sources of democratic resilience.** The question of democratic resilience has been at the center of democratization studies for many decades. However, most studies focus on changes from democracy to autocracy, whereas theorizing on the causes of incremental and gradual erosion of democracy that does not lead to democratic breakdown is still in its infancy. However, Laebens and Lührmann recently proposed a fresh approach to studying democratic resilience, one that distinguishes three kinds of institutions of accountability that can stop democratic erosion. The first one is institutions of vertical accountability (i.e., free and fair elections and the exercise of political rights by activists and citizens). Second, horizontal accountability mechanisms, including the judiciary, legislative oversight, and other watchdog institutions. Third, civil society and media constraints on government and politicians constitute “diagonal accountability” mechanisms (Laebens and Lührmann, 2019).

We argue that the sources of democratic resilience in Taiwan and South Korea rest primarily on institutions of diagonal and vertical accountabil- ity, though the different mechanisms played out in different ways in the two countries. In Taiwan, the mechanism of diagonal accountability kicked in early in the process of backsliding. Accordingly, the KMT and the Ma government anticipated the strong resistance and high potential costs of pursuing a strategy of illiberal practices. In addition, vertical accountability mechanisms stopped the backsliding episode before democracy suffered substantial damage. It is important to note that this combination of accountability mechanisms also worked when the DPP was in government. In this regard, Taiwanese voters showed a fine sense when they first punished the DPP for the scandals of President Chen Shui-bian’s government with the loss of power and then voted out President Ma’s KMT government, not least because of the Sunflower Movement’s powerful fears about the negative effects of an overly conciliatory policy towards Beijing on democracy in Taiwan.
In contrast, in South Korea, reversing the negative democratic trend, worked through a combination of diagonal, horizontal and vertical accountability. South Korea’s civil society has a very strong tradition of popular upheaval. These experiences over decades had built the infrastructure for rapid and widespread mobilization in 2016. In particular, popular protest played an important role in ensuring that the actors of horizontal accountability properly fulfilled their duties. Political parties, parliament and the constitutional court only pursued the impeachment process due to the force of the mass protests after initial hesitation. However, these institutions of horizontal accountability on their own were too weak to put democratic backsliders in their place.

CONCLUSION
We conclude with three key points. First, Taiwan and South Korea exhibit significant variations in patterns of democratic erosion. However, in both countries, and especially in South Korea, the struggle against democratic backsliding helped to strengthen and revitalize democracy. The massive political crisis that ended in the removal of President Park from office exposed deep fissures in South Korean society. Yet, through the candlelight protests, citizen-protesters came to realize that their collective action could actually change politics. Second, the reasons for this variation lie especially within structures of cleavages, ideological polarization and political institutions. Where institutionalized political parties are present, and interact with civil society, polarization is moderate, and democratic norms and values are part of a collective identity, such as increasingly in Taiwan, democracy has a greater capacity to avoid democratic decay. However, where weak institutions are present, personality-based parties and social movements follow parallel trajectories and social divides lead to ideological polarization and democracies have less capacity to fight a recession. The third and key point is that mechanisms of diagonal accountability that take place alongside the familiar institutional forms are the most important resources of democratic resilience — in Taiwan and South Korea and, perhaps, elsewhere.

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