

WORKING PAPER

# Southeast Asia's Regression From Democracy and Its Implications

Joshua Kurlantzick  
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## Introduction

Between the late 1980s and the late 2000s, many countries in Southeast Asia were viewed, by global democracy analysts and Southeast Asians themselves, as leading examples of democratization in the developing world. By the late 2000s, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore all were ranked as “free” or “partly free” by the monitoring organization Freedom House, while Cambodia and, perhaps most surprisingly, Myanmar had both taken sizable steps toward democracy as well. Yet since the late 2000s, Southeast Asia’s democratization has stalled and, in some of the region’s most economically and strategically important nations, gone into reverse. Over the past ten years, Thailand has undergone a rapid and severe regression from democracy and is now ruled by a junta. Malaysia’s democratic institutions and culture have regressed as well, with the long-ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition cracking down on dissent and trying to destroy what had been an emerging, and increasingly stable, two-party system. Singapore’s transition toward contested politics has stalled. In Cambodia and Myanmar, hopes for dramatic democratic change have fizzled. Only the Philippines and Indonesia have stayed on track, but even in these two countries democratic consolidation is threatened by the persistence of graft, public distrust of democratic institutions, and continued meddling in politics by militaries.

Southeast Asia’s rollback from democracy reflects a worrying global retrenchment toward anti-democratic political change. The implications of this regression from democracy are significant. On a human level, the regression from democracy means that, compared to a decade ago, more of the world’s people are living today under authoritarian or hybrid, semi-authoritarian regimes. People living under authoritarian rule are more likely to have shorter and less healthy lives, as shown by indicators of human development.

An increasingly authoritarian and unstable Southeast Asia is also a poor partner for the United States. Southeast Asia contains U.S. treaty allies Thailand and the Philippines, increasingly critical U.S. partners Singapore and Vietnam, and potentially valuable strategic partners like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Myanmar. Southeast Asia has become one of the largest engines of global growth, and the United States and several Southeast Asian nations are attempting to complete the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which would be the largest free trade area in history in terms of gross domestic product (GDP).

Regression from democracy will endanger all of this cooperation. History shows that the United States works most effectively around the world with other democracies, as demonstrated in organizations like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The United States’ partnerships with the more democratic nations in Southeast Asia follow this trend—these relationships tend to be more stable than U.S. relationships with more brittle and autocratic Southeast Asian regimes. Stronger democratic governments, including those in Southeast Asia, also usually can deliver the kind of long-term economic liberalization critical to foreign investment, since these economic reforms are not just implemented by fiat. If this democratic rollback continues, it is likely to seriously endanger American

security cooperation in East Asia, undermine the region's growth and economic interdependence, and cause serious political unrest, even insurgencies, in many Southeast Asian nations.

## Southeast Asia's Democratization and Reversal

### *SOUTHEAST ASIA'S ROCKY HISTORY OF DEMOCRACY*

In August 1967, when the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the main regional organization, was founded, the first members—Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Brunei—all were authoritarian states of some form. The international environment did not create pressure for democratization in the region; the Vietnam War was raging, and the priority of major powers such as the United States and the Soviet Union was securing Asian allies and fighting the Cold War, not pressing for democratization. The situation changed little throughout the 1970s and 1980s; brief experiments with democracy in Thailand and the Philippines succumbed to new versions of authoritarian rule. Fear of external threats from China and Vietnam brought the countries together into ASEAN, which was founded with a limited charter that did not include a mandate to promote democracy and human rights. Meanwhile, under development-oriented authoritarian regimes led by longtime rulers such as Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamad, Indonesia's Suharto, and the Thai military and bureaucratic elite, several Southeast Asian nations posted some of the highest growth rates in the world between the 1960s and 1990s, with Thailand growing faster than any other nation in the world between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s. These civilian authoritarians and military rulers, though maintaining tight control over the broadcast media, dissent, and politics, generally allowed economic technocrats, foreign advisers, and central banks to set economic policies, many of which proved to be highly effective.

This growth helped reduce popular pressure for political liberalization, though Southeast Asian governments did not shy away from using repression, if necessary, to maintain political dominance. In 1973, for example, after pro-democracy activists launched street protests in Bangkok that ultimately attracted some five hundred thousand people, Thai army troops massed in the streets and opened fire on demonstrators, killing at least seventy-seven people, although the true figure was probably much higher.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, several factors that had entrenched authoritarian rule in Southeast Asia began to change, paving the way for democracy. The end of the Cold War and the integration of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam into ASEAN made it harder for Southeast Asian autocrats like Suharto or the Thai military to justify repression in the name of forestalling communism. After the end of its civil war, Cambodia held relatively free national elections in 1993, though the candidate clearly defeated, Hun Sen, refused to cede power and used his military strength to force the victor, Prince Norodom Ranariddh, into a power-sharing agreement.

The end of the Cold War also allowed ASEAN to assume a broader mandate. Though the organization still operated by consensus, in the late 1990s and early 2000s it developed a charter affirming its commitment to upholding human rights, and some member-states like the Philippines pushed ASEAN to become more involved in promoting political reform throughout the region.

ASEAN's new charter, adopted by the whole organization in 2007, committed the organization to establishing a body to monitor human rights and a dispute-resolution mechanism that could potentially be used to help solve ASEAN members' internal political conflicts. However, the charter contained no provisions, as exist for other regional bodies, explicitly mandating situations in which members could intervene in other members' affairs, such as gross abuses of human rights.

Moreover, neighbors in the broader East Asian region, such as Taiwan and South Korea, began to democratize by the mid-1980s, spreading into other parts of Asia. This diffusion effect, though not as strong as in eastern Europe in the late 1980s, meant political reform in one part of the region helped catalyze reform elsewhere.

By the 1990s, decades of growth in Southeast Asian nations had created larger, more educated urban middle classes in cities like Bangkok, Jakarta, Manila, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and even Phnom Penh. These new middle classes often traveled widely, including visits to industrialized democracies, and had easy access to news through new technologies like mobile phones, the Internet, and, eventually, social media. The urban middle classes formed the base of new, pro-reform civil society organizations like the region-wide Asian Network for Free Elections, the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (known by its French acronym, LICADHO), and the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, among others. They founded new online media outlets that punctured the control of state media, like *Malaysiakini* in Malaysia and the *Irrawaddy* in Myanmar. They used new technologies to organize against authoritarian regimes; Thais used two-way pagers and mobile phones to organize the 1992 Bangkok protests against the then military government and to call each other with the latest news of regime repression. These trends seemed to suggest that mobile telecommunications would be a critical factor in Southeast Asia's democratization.

More broadly, urban middle-class men and women led a wide range of pro-democracy demonstrations and other activities throughout the region. The influential role of middle classes in Southeast Asian transitions seemed to once again confirm the modernization theory, first proposed by political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset in 1959 and later expanded on by political scientist Samuel Huntington over the next several decades.<sup>1</sup> Lipset argued that countries needed to attain a certain level of economic development to create the conditions for successful democracy. The exact level of development at which democracy supposedly solidifies is difficult to pinpoint, but Lipset and other proponents of modernization theory argued that, once a country reaches the income level, per capita, of a middle-income nation, it rarely returns to authoritarian rule. (Exceptions were states totally dependent on oil wealth, where a small elite class could use oil simply to solidify its control of power.) Economic development would then create such features as a sizable middle class, an educated populace, and greater integration with the rest of the world.

In particular, theorists like Huntington placed their bets on the middle class as the primary moving force behind democratic change. As their sector grew in size, middle-class men and women would build new networks of business and society outside of the control of the state. They would gain more education, build more ties to the outside world of democratic ideas, and increasingly demand more social, political, and economic freedoms. In addition, development would promote higher levels of interpersonal trust, seen as critical to civic participation in politics, to open debate, and to forming opposition political parties.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in the Philippines, the first Southeast Asian nation to democratize, it was primarily Manila's middle class, over a million men and women, who formed the bulk of the People Power movement that forced dictator Ferdinand Marcos to step down in 1986 and

flee into exile. Urban middle-class demonstrators in Myanmar (then called Burma) in part modeled their massive 1988 pro-democracy protests on the People Power movements in Manila.

Responding to this surge in popular protest, civil society activity, and political participation in the late 1980s and 1990s, militaries in the region began to surrender much of their power or have it taken from them by civilian movements; in some Southeast Asian nations like Myanmar, this shift in the military's role would wait until the 2000s. In several countries, such as the Philippines, the military lost its political power by repeatedly launching coups that proved unsuccessful, in part because urban middle-class men and women also helped stop these putsches. When Filipino officers prepared to launch a coup during the presidency of Corazon Aquino (1986–92), Aquino frequently called upon her support among middle-class Manila residents, using televised speeches to rally her faithful, and staving off all of the military's attempted putsches.

In other countries, like Thailand, the military managed to regain power for a time in the late 1980s and early 1990s but then used such bloody tactics that it lost significant middle- and upper-class support. In 1991 and 1992, popular demonstrations of hundreds of thousands of Thais in Bangkok led troops again to shoot protestors in the streets, as the army had done in 1973 and 1976. But this time, the Thai army had killed not just students and left-wing activists but many relatively conservative and wealthy Bangkokians. The army then retreated, as significant sections of Thai society turned against it in 1992. The shootings even drew the censure of the revered Thai king, the biggest loss of face possible for the army. The king sheltered protestors in his palace during the 1992 demonstrations and then publicly called into his palace the protest leaders and the military leaders, and shamed them on national television. Following the king's intervention, Thai military leaders resigned from political office and turned over power to civilians.

The Thai military appeared so humiliated that army commanders throughout the 1990s and much of the 2000s insisted the era of coups had passed and that the armed forces would become a normal military, run by elected civilian ministers. Thailand passed a progressive constitution in 1997. Idealistic young Bangkokians, sometimes working with reform-minded foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), wrote and promoted this groundbreaking constitution, which guaranteed many new rights and freedoms. These youth also created new national institutions to monitor graft and strengthened political parties at the expense of unelected centers of power. These reforms also set the stage for elections in 2001 that were probably the freest in Thailand's history, and which resulted in a political system dominated by two parties, Thai Rak Thai and the Democrat Party. Meanwhile, the Thai media utilized its new freedoms, along with new technologies like the Internet and satellite television, to explore formerly taboo topics like political corruption and labor rights.

In the late 1990s, Southeast Asia suffered immensely from the Asian financial crisis, and the falling growth rates further diminished the appeal of many longtime autocrats. The crisis hit Indonesia the hardest. The Indonesian rupiah plunged in value; food insecurity and extreme poverty skyrocketed. As prices of staple goods like rice and cooking oil soared and Suharto's administration appeared befuddled and inept in addressing the crisis, street protests grew, eventually drawing in longtime opposition groups like the backers of Megawati Sukarnoputri, daughter of Indonesia's founding father, Sukarno.

The protests ultimately forced Suharto to step down in May 1998. His appointed successor, B. J. Habibie, proved far more willing to midwife a transition. He helped pave the way for free elections and, somewhat unwittingly, a referendum on independence in East Timor, then a province of Indonesia. The referendum, though followed by bloody violence linked to Indonesia's security forces,

eventually allowed for the creation of a new country in Timor-Leste (formerly East Timor), which would also become a democracy. Indonesia appeared a democratic success; in the late 2000s, Thai and Indonesian officials, civil society activists, and academics began leading workshops and other programs on democratization for people from developing countries around the world

Indonesia was not unique, though in some other Southeast Asian nations gerrymandering and other political tricks meant waves of change that erupted from the financial crisis did not result in the removal of governments. In Malaysia, the financial crisis and the cronyistic politics and economic management revealed as Malaysian companies imploded sparked urban street protests, which gave birth to an opposition movement led by former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim. That movement eventually grew into the current opposition coalition in Malaysia's parliament. Even in Singapore, the financial crisis fostered greater public criticism of the long-ruling People's Action Party. That shift in public sentiment allowed opposition parties in Singapore, which had been totally emasculated since the 1960s, to emerge. By the next decade, Singapore's opposition had for the first time won a whole constituency in the city-state, and had garnered around 40 percent of the popular vote.

By 2008, a region that was dominated by authoritarian regimes throughout the Cold War now looked significantly different. In its report on global freedom in 2009, Freedom House ranked the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, and Timor-Leste as "partly free" nations, and ranked Indonesia as "free." Twenty years earlier, only the Philippines ranked as "partly free" in the region; the rest of these countries were graded "not free," while Timor-Leste did not even exist as an independent nation.<sup>3</sup> Many Southeast Asian leaders and foreign observers praised countries in the region as an example to others. "Thailand's freedom, openness, strength, and relative prosperity make it a role model in the region for what people can achieve when they are allowed to," Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly declared in 2002.<sup>4</sup>

### *THE REGRESSION: THAILAND AND MALAYSIA*

Today, few people are touting democracy in Southeast Asia as a democratic success story. Thailand has been mired in political crisis since 2006, when the Thai military, after fifteen years of avoiding politics, once again launched a coup while then prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra was abroad. Since then, Thailand has been consumed by cycles of street protests and counter-protests, rising street violence and political instability, short-lived governments brought down through extra-constitutional means, and the return of harsh crackdowns on dissent. Under former prime minister Thaksin, who served from 2001 to 2006 but remains the most essential—and polarizing—figure in Thai politics, Thailand's security forces killed over 2,500 people in what was termed a war against narcotics trafficking. It emerged that many of these suspects were simply executed by police with no trial, and that the number of dead included a broad range of people with no links to narcotics at all, including many opponents of the government. Later, in 2010, after weeks of antigovernment protests in Bangkok, a government run by the opposition Democrat Party oversaw a crackdown in which the army reportedly killed more than ninety people.<sup>5</sup>

As Thailand's politics have become more unstable and its elected governments shorter lived, its climate of civil liberties and human rights has deteriorated badly. Successive governments have not only attacked protestors but also have instituted harsh laws stifling online discourse. In its latest

ranking of countries' online and print freedom, media freedom monitor Reporters Without Borders ranked Thailand 130th out of 180 countries, alongside notoriously repressive regimes such as Ethiopia and Zimbabwe.<sup>6</sup>

Thai institutions have become increasingly polarized and politicized, and few Thais now trust the integrity of the judiciary, the civil service, or other national institutions. Even the king, once so revered that Thais worshipped him like a god, has had his impartiality questioned; however, harsh *lèse-majesté* laws, increasingly used to crush political opposition, prevent Thais from openly questioning the value of the monarchy. Still, signs of anger with the monarchy and the monarchist elites now abound, including many anonymous postings on social media sites and even loud anti-monarch chants and vulgar anti-monarchical graffiti, unthinkable a decade earlier, during protests in Bangkok in 2010.<sup>7</sup>

As of May 2014, Thailand remains locked in its most recent political stalemate, which has seen the country essentially operating without a functioning government for seven months. The Thai military launched a coup and declared martial law, which is likely to further set back Thailand's democracy. Between late 2013 and the middle of 2014, demonstrations in Bangkok shut down parts of the city for extended periods, blocked voting for a replacement government, and forcefully shuttered government ministries; pro- and antigovernment agitators have participated in grenade attacks, shootouts, and other violent episodes on the city streets. The antigovernment protests succeeded in pushing Thailand's courts, already sympathetic to the elite Bangkok demonstrators, to remove Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's sister, from office, along with nine members of her cabinet; these events sparked the military coup that gave the army total control of policymaking and could further undermine democratic institutions in the country.

Malaysia's regression has been less violent, but no less sharp, than that of Thailand. In the late 2000s it appeared that Malaysia was poised for a peaceful transition from the BN coalition, which had ruled the country since it gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1957, to an opposition coalition. This kind of peaceful transition of power, through elections and parliamentary maneuvers, is often considered a prime sign of democratic consolidation. In 2008 the opposition coalition, led by Anwar Ibrahim, came close to building a majority in parliament, and subsequently won elections to control several state governments. In the 2013 parliamentary elections, Anwar's opposition won a majority of the popular vote, the first time that the BN had lost the popular vote in the history of independent Malaysia.

The period between late 2008 and early 2013 was, however, the high point of Malaysia's democratic progression. Even before the 2013 national elections, in 2011 the BN-led government had returned to the tough tactics of repression used by previous Malaysian governments, but which had largely been abandoned in the 2000s. Following large and peaceful rallies in Kuala Lumpur demanding electoral reforms, the government arrested over 1,600 people, and police beat demonstrators.<sup>8</sup> The following year, police used excessive force on a similar demonstration in Kuala Lumpur, and the government again arrested many opposition leaders.<sup>9</sup>

Then, though the opposition won the popular vote in the 2013 parliamentary elections, the BN coalition held on to power through intimidation, electoral fraud, and gerrymandering. The irregularities allegedly included flying and busing voters from one district to another, where they did not actually live, inflating voter rolls, using preelection postal voting to help BN supporters vote twice, and many other irregularities. Independent and accredited observers who witnessed the election deemed it "partially free but not fair."<sup>10</sup> After opposition leaders held public rallies to protest

the stolen election, the government arrested prominent youth activist Adam Adli and other leading opposition figures.

Following the contested 2013 election, Malaysia's BN government proposed a raft of new legislation designed to suppress opposition voices and entrench economic and political preferences for ethnic Malays, disempowering ethnic Indians and ethnic Chinese, who together comprise about one-third of the country's population. (The BN's narrow victory in the 2013 elections was due to its success with the most conservative and anti-opposition ethnic Malays, who then demanded rewards for their support after the election.) The government essentially reinstated the long-hated Internal Security Act (ISA), a colonial-era law that independent Malaysian governments had retained to crack down on dissent. The law allowed Malaysia's government to detain people without trial indefinitely, often on vague charges. Malaysia had, earlier in Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak's time in office, gotten rid of the ISA. Yet after the 2013 elections the government passed new amendments once again allowing detention without trial. The government also prosecuted blatantly flawed criminal cases against Anwar and prominent human rights lawyer and opposition politician Karpal Singh. In March 2014, a court sentenced Anwar to five years in jail for sodomy (sodomy is a crime in Malaysia), while that same month a Malaysian court fined Singh for sedition. Singh died in a car accident before his sentence could be reviewed; most likely, he would have been hit with further charges by the court.

#### *MYANMAR, CAMBODIA, AND OTHER BACKSLIDERS*

Thailand and Malaysia were the most prominent Southeast Asian nations to regress politically, but they were not unique. In the 1990s, Cambodia, though poor and ravaged socially by the legacy of the Khmer Rouge, built a vibrant NGO sector, a relatively free press, and a political system that accommodated real contestation, even if the country's lawlessness also allowed Hun Sen to repeatedly use force to maintain his party's power within the system. Hun Sen could not, at the time, run Cambodia as a sole autocrat; other parties and civil society organizations created in the 1990s helped hold the government to account (to some extent) and to promote political pluralism. Cambodia's government remained dependent on foreign aid from Western democracies, the United Nations, and Japan, and these donors played a major role in fostering the development of local civil society.<sup>11</sup>

As a new generation of young Cambodians grew up with little memory of the Khmer Rouge era, they also naturally were less attached to Hun Sen and his Cambodian People's Party, which based much of its legitimacy on having provided stability after the fall of the Khmer Rouge. (Hun Sen originally had been a low-level Khmer Rouge officer, but he defected from the movement and participated in the Vietnam-led invasion of Cambodia in 1979 that drove the Khmer Rouge out of Phnom Penh.) This young generation, primarily living in Phnom Penh, active on social media, and not dependent on news from state media, would become the core constituency of the opposition coalition Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP).

Yet at the same time, in the late 2000s and early 2010s, Hun Sen consolidated his hold over the country by skillfully co-opting opposition leaders, crushing Khmer-language media outlets, utilizing increasing amounts of election fraud and thuggery, and building a section of the national armed forces loyal only to him—a section that could be deployed, at his wish, against protestors. In the run-

up to parliamentary elections in July 2013, the government stepped up attacks on CNRP supporters, while hundreds of thousands of people were deleted from the voter rolls. On election day, voting sites in known opposition strongholds saw thousands of people simply being turned away from the polls, with no reason given for not being allowed to vote. The opposition still won almost half the seats in the legislature, yet Hun Sen and his party prevented the opposition from actually obtaining any power in parliament, or any control of ministries. Frustrated at Hun Sen's dominance—the prime minister now has run the country since 1985, making him the longest-serving nonroyal leader in Asia—opposition leaders organized massive rallies in Phnom Penh to protest the fraudulent elections. These demonstrations, which were held almost constantly in public spaces in Phnom Penh between summer 2013 and early 2014, were met by some of the fiercest crackdowns in Cambodia since the early 1990s. In January 2014, security forces stormed several of the protest encampments, firing live ammunition at protestors, burning down homes, and beating demonstrators. The official death toll of the crackdown was four protestors, but many Cambodian activists believe the true death toll was higher and that some of the dead were disappeared by the security forces.<sup>12</sup>

Myanmar, which had seemed poised for extraordinary political change in the early 2010s, also regressed as the decade progressed. In 2010, the Myanmar army, which had ruled the country since 1962, began a transition to civilian government by holding elections that ultimately helped create a civilian parliament and formally renouncing their control of the presidency. Still, the military remains the most powerful actor in the country, and the civilian president, Thein Sein, was himself a senior general before assuming the presidency. Myanmar's opening initially allowed for both opposition parties and the media to blossom. Where once the Myanmar media diet consisted of a bland state-dominated newspaper, a few websites, and state television and radio, in the past two years Myanmar-based sites have opened up. In addition, new print dailies have launched, and the National League for Democracy, the primary opposition party led by Aung San Suu Kyi, has re-formed after years of repression and once again opened offices across Myanmar. Suu Kyi, who had been held under house arrest for nearly two decades, travels freely through Myanmar and abroad.

But after only three years of Myanmar's opening, many of the changes began to be rolled back. Meanwhile, the initial changes had sparked massive instability, including widespread interreligious violence that has led to the internal displacement of over a hundred thousand people and cast doubt on whether the country can avoid nationwide civil conflict. After initially loosening media restrictions, the government has tightened them, and once again arrested journalists. President Thein Sein, who had been hailed as a true reformer in his first three years in office, and had vowed to only serve as a caretaker president, shifted course in 2013 and 2014 and began to attempt to consolidate power. Thein Sein decided to run for another term, and increasingly favored new legislation changes that would boost the power of the president and the military.

Meanwhile, initial hopes that Myanmar's military would take a reduced role in politics have proven unfounded. The military in 2014 wrote clauses into the constitution reserving a quarter of seats in parliament for the armed forces, and essentially preventing the constitution from being changed without the army's approval. Members of the military also allegedly were involved in the new paramilitary groups that sprang up around Myanmar in the early and mid-2010s. These groups launched violent attacks against Muslims, particularly (but not only) in western Myanmar's Rakhine State. Thein Sein increasingly either ignored or defended the paramilitaries. When aid groups in western Myanmar reported a massacre of Muslims in the town of Dee Chu Yar Tan in January 2014—a massacre in which Buddhist gangs and security forces allegedly murdered at least forty

Muslims and left severed heads around the town—Thein Sein's government denied the killings. It then ordered the most prominent aid group in western Myanmar, Doctors Without Borders, to cease working in the state.<sup>13</sup>

Though hopes for political change in Cambodia and Myanmar have faltered, Southeast Asia's most authoritarian states have completely halted all reforms. In 2012 and 2013, Vietnam's regime launched its largest crackdown on activists, religious leaders, bloggers, and other civil society leaders in two decades. Hanoi also passed a law forcing Internet providers to block and filter content more thoroughly; the law was one of the most restrictive online speech laws in the world. Tiny Brunei has moved from authoritarian rule, but one with a modern legal code, to an even harsher type of judicial system. The sultan of Brunei instituted sharia law in 2014 in place of a previous system that had mixed sharia for some civil, social matters with a modern, secular legal system for criminal cases.<sup>14</sup> The new and more complete sharia law proscribed punishments like stoning and flogging for certain crimes, and the death penalty for a broad range of offenses. Many Bruneians believe the not-particularly-pious sultan—in the past, the sultan allegedly had paid tens of thousands of dollars to import exotic dancers for entertainment at his palace—instituted sharia law as a way to silence the media and the increasing public discussion within Brunei of the sultan's governance and his lavish lifestyle.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, in Laos, which had in the 1990s and early 2000s opened up to the world, allowing in foreign NGOs, relaxing controls on the Internet, and building better relations with industrialized democracies, the government has resumed a tight grip over politics and society. In 2012, Laos' government shuttered one of the few radio shows that discussed Lao politics, and began forcing foreign aid workers who made even mildly critical public comments about the government to leave the country. In December 2012, Laos' most acclaimed aid worker, Sombath Somphone, abruptly vanished.<sup>16</sup> Sombath had drawn international attention for his work on environmental awareness—he had won the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership, a prize that is roughly equivalent to an Asian Nobel Prize—and simply drawing attention to any problems in Laos probably made him enemies in the government. Closed-circuit video footage from Vientiane street cameras showed Sombath being stopped by police in the capital and taken into a truck. He was never seen again.<sup>17</sup>

The next two years do not look much more promising for freedom in Southeast Asia, even though some of the biggest and most important countries in the region will hold national elections before the end of 2015. The success of antigovernment protestors in places like Thailand may only embolden other urban middle classes in the region to push back against elected governments. The ability of authoritarian-leaning leaders like Malaysia's Najib Tun Razak and Cambodia's Hun Sen to stifle significant political opposition may embolden other autocrats in the region.

Only Indonesia, of all the major countries in Southeast Asia, has proven largely an exception to this regression from democracy. Since the end of Suharto's regime in 1998, Indonesia has held multiple free and fair national elections, has developed vibrant competition among political parties, and has instituted a nationwide program of political and economic decentralization that has brought tax revenue, spending power, and decision-making over some natural resources projects down to provincial and local authorities. Yet at a national level, the country's biggest political parties, and major political institutions such as the top levels of the judiciary, remain dominated by a small handful of people, many of whom have been in power since the Suharto era. Many of these entrenched political elites also have close ties to the military, as former army or special forces (Kopassus) officers.

Vote-buying and other forms of electoral irregularities also have become more common. In the run-up to Indonesia's July 2014 presidential election, vote-buying was widespread throughout the archipelago. Today, Indonesian political parties are highly competitive, but election monitoring institutions are not highly developed. In parliamentary elections, at least five sizable national parties now contest each election, and handing out money during campaigns has become far more important to success than even a decade ago. One prominent Indonesian academic looked at voter attitudes in several parts of the country, and found that the percentage of people who were paid for their votes had more than doubled between the early 2000s and the late 2000s.<sup>18</sup>

## Why Democracy Stagnated in Southeast Asia

### *THE ELECTED AUTOCRATS*

Although no one factor has caused democratic stagnation in Southeast Asia, a combination of trends has produced this period of regression. Unlike in some more successful young democracies, such as those of Northeast Asia in the 1990s, young democracies in Southeast Asia have not, by and large, been blessed with moderate and foresighted first generations of elected leaders. Although there are exceptions, like the Philippines' former president Fidel Ramos, overall the first generation of elected presidents and prime ministers in Southeast Asia has seen voting as simply a means to dominate the political system. After an election, such leaders use their powers to crush opponents. (The idea of a loyal opposition, then, has not penetrated many Southeast Asian democracies.) These "elected autocrats" thus uphold the electoral components of democracy while ignoring, or actually undermining the constitutional, legal aspects of democracy.

In Thailand, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who led the country from 2001 to 2006 and has dominated Thai politics from exile ever since, fits the description of an elected autocrat perfectly. Thaksin's party has won every free election in Thailand since 2001, in part because of its comprehensive platform of policies designed to decrease inequality and assist Thailand's poor, and in part because of Thaksin's own magnetic political skills. In office, Thaksin's party followed through on several of its major platform promises. Thaksin's government passed a universal health care scheme that, according to World Health Organization (WHO) studies, has saved at least 80,000 Thai families from bankruptcy. It passed a program to provide loans to every village to start microenterprises, and it increased spending on primary education. Income inequality in Thailand has shrunk significantly since the advent of the Thaksin era in 2001, a major success.

But Thaksin also used his power to eviscerate the civil service, silence the media, and allegedly make political opponents disappear. In one horrific incident in October 2004, Thai security forces rounded up hundreds of young men in southern Thailand after demonstrations against the government at a local mosque. The security forces stacked them inside stifling trucks without enough air to breathe; eighty-five people died of suffocation.<sup>19</sup>

Like Thaksin and his allies in Thailand, leaders in other Southeast Asian nations have tended to see democracy as little more than elections—zero-sum games in which electoral winners should gain near-dictatorial powers. Throughout the region, nascent judicial and bureaucratic institutions have been too weak to control these leaders' ambitions. Yet many of these leaders, like former Philippines president (and now Manila mayor) Joseph Estrada and Cambodian prime minister Hun Sen, also have proven savvy and effective politicians, especially in catering to the large numbers of poor in Southeast Asian countries, many of which remain highly unequal. Few Southeast Asian leaders have copied the examples of South African president Nelson Mandela or Brazilian president Luiz Ignacio

Lula da Silva, who managed to balance broad, populist economic and social policies with support for democratic institutions like the judiciary, civil society, and the concept of a loyal opposition.

The first generation of elected leaders has fueled middle-class anger in many countries in Southeast Asia, as middle-class men and women who often had led reform movements during the authoritarian era turn against elected leaders whom they see as corrupt and brutal, or who threaten the prestige and power of the middle and upper classes. Middle classes in the region often have responded with undemocratic means, from violent protests to coups, to oust these elected autocrats. In Thailand, these measures have included multiple rounds of violent protests in Bangkok by middle and upper class Thais, with the demonstrators often openly calling for the armed forces and the royal palace to intervene and topple Thaksin or Thaksinite governments. In 2006, the armed forces responded with a coup, and in 2009 army leaders—and, allegedly, the royal palace—helped broker defections in parliament to topple an elected government. As of May 2014, a new Thai coup is currently underway.

In the Philippines, middle-class protestors, and the armed forces, similarly forced then president Joseph Estrada, who was elected primarily by poor voters, to step down in 2001, and then tried to use the same tactics to remove his successor, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. In Indonesia, some middle-class men and women similarly have called for a renewed centralization of power, returning the country to a Suharto-like strongman who could rule by fiat. In Malaysia, opposition leaders, and their mostly middle-class supporters, have sought ways to break the ruling coalition's stranglehold on power without defeating the Barisan Nasional at the ballot box, in the first-past-the-post system.

Extra-constitutional responses to elected autocrats have only further undermined democracy, angering those who voted for toppled leaders and damaging the value of elections. By inviting the military back into politics, the urban middle classes in Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia potentially undermine civil/military relations for generations. Bringing the armed forces back sets the stage for the army to repeatedly undermine civilian leaders, a cycle repeated over and over in Thailand, which has developed what one analyst of Thai politics calls a “coup culture,” in which coups have once again become the default option for resolving any political problems—an option being exercised in Thailand currently.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, by legitimizing the use of street demonstrations to oust elected leaders, the middle class delegitimizes elections and other legitimate democratic institutions; Thailand has not developed a judiciary trusted to mediate political conflicts, in part because of the resort to violent demonstrations and coups.

This use of violent protest is particularly dangerous when the middle class uses demonstrations to oust an elected leader popular with the poor majority of a country. The poor then become convinced that only street demonstrations, rather than democratic institutions, can work to fight back against the middle classes, setting the stage for future showdowns.

### *NO TECHNOLOGICAL MAGIC BULLET*

In the 1990s and early 2000s, many Southeast Asian reformers, like their peers in other parts of the world, believed that new communications technology, which would circumvent state controls and spread information, would play a major role in toppling autocrats and fostering the spread of democracy. This belief in the positive power of technology was not unusual. In 2000, President Bill Clinton said, “in the new century liberty will spread by . . . cable modem,” and other prominent

Western leaders followed up with similarly optimistic projections. Some cyber-activists even got the Internet nominated for the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize, theoretically for its transformative effect on global political life.<sup>21</sup>

Some of this optimism about new communications technology seemed justified. The widespread adoption of high-speed Internet and high-speed wireless text and voice communications throughout the richer countries in Southeast Asia, in the early and mid-2000s, initially seemed at first a positive development for political reform. Filipino activists gathering in Manila in early 2001 to protest against corruption organized their marches through text messages, a template that later rallies in Manila would follow.<sup>22</sup> Mobile phones and other texting devices helped protesters congregate and pass on news to each other during antigovernment protests in Bangkok in 1992, in Jakarta in 1998, and in Kuala Lumpur in 1999. Many new, relatively free media outlets sprang up online throughout the region, and these new online outlets increasingly worked with peers in other Southeast Asian nations, providing content to each other and spreading each individual outlet's reach. As social media took hold in the mid-2000s, it also played a central role in politics: Cambodian opposition demonstrators used social media to organize, and Indonesians rapidly adopted Facebook as a major means of communicating about politics. By the end of the decade, Indonesia had the third-largest number of Facebook users in the world, after the United States and India.<sup>23</sup>

But social media, the Internet, and mobile phones also have contributed to a poisonous, even violent political atmosphere in some Southeast Asian nations. The Thai Internet, which has penetrated most Thai households, has given rise to hard-core, nationalist, royalist activists, who use the web to attack—and sometimes cause the arrest—of anyone who tries to discuss the future of the monarchy, even if they make only the most benign comments about the royal family

Facebook and other social media platforms also have allowed pro- and anti-Thaksin factions in Thailand to create their own echo chambers online on social media sites and media outlets in which only their point of view is heard and applauded. This polarization has made it harder and harder for Thai political leaders to make any compromises, since their increasingly partisan supporters have come to view compromise itself as anathema.

New technologies also have been used by authoritarian leaders throughout Southeast Asia to monitor and crack down on activists and other civil society leaders. Several Southeast Asian governments have developed highly sophisticated methods of monitoring and filtering websites, often based on China's comprehensive "Great Firewall." This type of monitoring and filtering makes it harder for people to use technology to organize or gain access to free news than people expected when the Internet was introduced to the region. Thailand now blocks some hundred thousand websites, according to an analysis by one Thai NGO; theoretically, this blocking is to prevent online discourse harmful to the Thai monarchy, but in reality it serves to censor a wide range of political opposition.<sup>24</sup> Since Thailand's Internet laws banning content offensive to the monarchy are so broad that they could be used against virtually any Internet user, they scare all Internet users, keeping many from even exploring sites that mention the royal family but otherwise are devoted to criticism of the Thai government. Even some of the most prominent Thai academics and writers, who would consider themselves immune from political pressure, now report that they increasingly watch what they say and post online.<sup>25</sup>

Other nascent democracies in the region, like Malaysia, have attempted or considered similar blocks, to prevent opposition parties or other civil society groups from organizing online, and they apparently have used denial-of-service attacks to shut down opposition group's websites and

forums.<sup>26</sup> Singapore has drafted broad Internet laws that could implicate many web users, and has reinforced paranoia by occasionally notifying the public that the government-linked Internet provider has snooped through users' web accounts.<sup>27</sup> Some Southeast Asian governments also seemingly use state-backed commentators to control online discourse and threaten political opponents.

### *FAILURES OF GOVERNANCE*

In addition to failing to build democratic institutions, many elected governments in Southeast Asia over the past twenty years simply have failed to provide effective governance, disappointing high hopes that democracy would change entrenched corruption, networks of power, and cultures of impunity. Many leaders of young democracies in Southeast Asia have presented unrealistic public portrayals of how dramatically democratization might alter their economies.

No young democracy could meet such high expectations, yet Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Myanmar have suffered from particularly poor government performance during democratization. The Philippines remains one of the most unequal economies in East Asia, with more than a quarter of the population still living below the poverty line. Although Myanmar's political opening has led to renewed Western and Japanese investment, particularly in natural resources, growth rates of six to seven percent annually since 2010 have not translated into a demonstrable rise in average income or any real inroads into corruption. In Thailand, though inequality has dropped since 2001, the beginning of the Thaksin period, there has been little change in the endemic corruption that plagues sectors of the economy. Several of these nations' rankings on graft-monitoring organization Transparency International's annual Corruption Perceptions Survey, which ranks every nation from cleanest to most corruption-prone, actually dropped as they transitioned from authoritarian rule.

Indonesia, for one, has witnessed a widening of corruption during democratization, as the breakdown of a centralized Suharto-era system of graft has led to more bureaucrats, officials, and average police officers with their hands out. Corruption has become so commonplace that, when politicians accused the national anticorruption commission of being penetrated by corruption and other crimes itself, few Indonesians were surprised.<sup>28</sup> Decentralization, though potentially an important tool of political empowerment, also has had a pernicious effect on graft in Indonesia. In a number of cities and provinces across Indonesia, newly empowered local officials have built megaprojects, like a \$600 million, fifty-thousand-seat outdoor stadium in East Kalimantan on the island of Borneo, that allegedly have provided innumerable opportunities for contractors, in collusion with local officials, to skim money from projects. From almost none a decade ago, when graft was controlled by Jakarta, today nearly a quarter of the Indonesian leaders charged with corruption come from district- and provincial-level jobs.<sup>29</sup> Overall, Political Economy and Risk Consulting, a leading Asian survey, now routinely ranks Indonesia as the most corrupt country in Asia.

In addition, in some Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, this disappointing government performance stands in contrast to relatively effective governance during periods of authoritarian rule between the 1950s and early 1990s. By comparison, during the period of authoritarian rule in Eastern Europe, governments frequently mismanaged economies, oversaw massive amounts of graft

and highly repressive security states, and created enormous and inept bureaucracies. And even when newly democratic governments are actually taking steps to address inequality, boost growth, or combat corruption, the openness of democratization in Southeast Asia creates perceptions that these problems have become worse.<sup>30</sup> In large part, this is simply because a freer media investigates the government and publishes reports on graft. In the long run, again, this is a positive development; exposing graft could eventually encourage politicians and civil servants to think twice about their actions. But in the short run, the freer media reports tend to increase public perceptions of government corruption.

### *THE REGION*

Any regional diffusion effect that existed in the 1990s, promoting democratization in Southeast Asia, was diluted in the late 2000s, while ASEAN played little role in addressing the region's human rights crises. New members of ASEAN, such as Laos, Vietnam, and Myanmar, have little interest in criticizing rights abuses in neighboring countries, lest they open themselves up to criticism. ASEAN operates by consensus, so these new members can block the organization from even making statements about rights abuses.

Even though Indonesia, the most populous and powerful state in the region, is going through a democratic transition of its own, its leaders also mostly have avoided commenting on regression from democracy nearly everywhere else in Southeast Asia. In part, Indonesia's disinterest in promoting democracy in other parts of the region stems from its desire to focus on its own domestic affairs. This reluctance also stems from Indonesia's history as one of the leaders of the global nonaligned movement during the Cold War, which made noninterference in other countries' affairs a cornerstone.

Meanwhile, the Chinese government built a much closer diplomatic, economic, and strategic relationship with Southeast Asia in the late 1990s and 2000s. China and ASEAN signed a free trade deal in 2002, and by the end of the 2000s China had become the leading trading partner of many Southeast Asian nations. Beijing embarked on a diplomatic charm offensive in the region in the 1990s and 2000s, boosting its cultural and summit diplomacy, upgrading the quality of its diplomats, and purposefully playing down some of the most contentious regional issues, like competing claims to the South China Sea. Beijing embarked on new military-to-military cooperation programs with Thailand, Malaysia, and other countries. China also went from being only a minor aid donor to poorer countries in Southeast Asia to becoming one of the largest aid donors in Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, as well as a significant source of aid in other countries in the region like Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, and Timor-Leste.<sup>31</sup>

Although China's improvement of ties to Southeast Asia in the 1990s and 2000s was not based on Beijing dissuading countries from democratizing—China built close ties with Thailand, one of the freer countries in the region, just as it also developed a close relationship with Myanmar, then the most repressive country in the region—China's increasing influence did have an effect on the region's democratization. With some countries, like Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, China hosted a growing number of judicial, economic, and diplomatic officials for training programs that could last anywhere from two days to several months. Attendees at these sessions have described how their Chinese counterparts explicitly contrasted Beijing's ability to rapidly handle

crises and successfully pursue long-term goals due to China's system—though they did not explicitly say that China is an authoritarian country, of course—with the gridlock of democratic Western governments.

In some Southeast Asian nations, these trainings have had a significant effect. Combined with the massive Chinese aid and investment flowing into Cambodia, where Beijing is now not only the largest donor but also the biggest investor, these introductions to the China model have had a significant impact on Cambodia's shaky politics, strengthening the political position of Prime Minister Hun Sen.<sup>32</sup>

## The Role of the United States

Since the end of World War II, and the subsequent end of French and British empires in Southeast Asia, the United States has been the preeminent outside power in Southeast Asia. Seeking to balance against the threat of communism, the original, noncommunist members of ASEAN all pursued close ties to the United States. Bangkok and Manila made treaty alliances with Washington, and during the Vietnam War the U.S. military used Thailand as the primary staging ground for air attacks on North Vietnam, intelligence-gathering on all of Indochina, and training for many soldiers heading to Vietnam. Although other countries in Southeast Asia, like Singapore, never made a formal alliance with the United States, they too became close strategic and economic partners. Indeed, by the end of the 1990s Singapore was a *de facto* American ally, and actually had closer intelligence sharing, military-to-military cooperation, and diplomatic cooperation with Washington than any other Southeast Asian nation, a trend that has continued to the present day.

After the end of the Cold War, and ASEAN's integration of new members Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar, the United States reestablished diplomatic ties with Southeast Asian countries like Vietnam, with which it had fought for decades and then broken diplomatic relations. The U.S. military footprint in Southeast Asia remained significant and included joint exercises with Thailand, the Philippines, and other nations. The United States was also, along with Japan, the biggest investor in and trading partner with most ASEAN nations. U.S. support, both rhetorical and economic, was essential for a leader in the region to govern during the Cold War and the early 1990s. For example, after the Reagan administration made clear in 1986 it would no longer back Philippines president Ferdinand Marcos, his government collapsed and the country began a transition to democracy.

In the 1990s, the end of the global ideological conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union helped foster democratic change. With the United States the sole remaining superpower, President Bill Clinton decided to make democracy promotion a core part of his foreign policy. The Clinton administration, he said, would help consolidate young democracies, counter states hostile to democracy, and support the liberalization of undemocratic nations. And although there were exceptions in many other parts of the world, the United States indeed took stands to foster political change in Southeast Asia throughout the 1990s. The White House and Congress offered significant public criticism of authoritarian leaders in the region, such as Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamad, boosted aid for democracy promotion programs in the region, imposed sanctions on countries like Myanmar and Indonesia that had committed severe human rights abuses, and conditioned further aid to countries like Cambodia and Vietnam on improvements in the climate of rights and political freedoms. Overall, between the early 1990s and 2000, U.S. government spending on democracy promotion grew from around \$100 million to over \$700 million annually.<sup>33</sup>

But by the 2000s, the international environment had shifted again, and this shift made it easier for authoritarianism to reemerge in Southeast Asia. After the September 2001 attacks on the United

States, Washington's approach to Southeast Asia changed again, moving away from the 1990s emphasis on democracy and human rights. In Thailand, an American approach that prioritized counterterrorism cooperation over all other issues including human rights allowed first Thaksin, and then the Thai military, to dominate government and commit significant rights abuses with little censure from the United States. Thaksin made himself an important ally in the war on terrorism, allowing the United States to use bases in Thailand to secretly detain and interrogate (and torture) high-value prisoners.<sup>34</sup> The Bush administration invited Thaksin to the United States and offered him a warm welcome; there was little mention of his government's abuses.

After the Thai military coup in 2006, the United States had an opportunity to apply pressure on Thailand to return to a democratic path. But Washington mostly chose not to pressure Bangkok. After the coup, the United States declined to cut off the Cobra Gold joint military exercises with the Thai armed forces, sending a signal of de facto acceptance of the military ouster—and thus that, in the future, the United States might condone similar interventions. The Bush administration put into place some restrictive measures designated by Congress for countries where democracy is overthrown, but it sent the U.S. ambassador in Bangkok to quickly meet with the coup-makers and essentially reassure them that the U.S.-Thai relationship would quickly return to the same level of friendship.<sup>35</sup>

The Bush administration took a similar approach to other Southeast Asian countries, except for international pariah Myanmar. (First Lady Laura Bush reportedly was personally affected by hearing about Myanmar's abuses and became a prominent advocate for change there.) The Bush administration pursued close counterterrorism ties with Singapore and Malaysia, while largely ignoring other bilateral issues. Bush administration senior officials skipped several of the most important ASEAN summits, alienating the organization.

When the Obama administration took office in 2009, one of its major announced initiatives was a plan to work more closely with Southeast Asia, as part of a broader "pivot" to Asia, or shifting of American military and diplomatic assets to Asia. The Obama administration planned to offer a sharp contrast from the previous White House's detachment from the region, but its policies on human rights and democracy in Southeast Asia have changed little from those of its predecessor. The Obama administration has launched more regular high-level diplomatic cooperation with Southeast Asia, a renewed American push toward a free trade agreement with many Southeast Asian nations, closer military ties with partners like Singapore and the Philippines, and an attempt to work with countries, like Myanmar and Cambodia, with which the United States previously had minimal relationships.<sup>36</sup> Southeast Asia had an appetite for greater American focus on the region: Some Southeast Asian nations previously had welcomed Beijing's charm offensive toward the region, but by the early part of the Obama administration's first term, Southeast Asia's relations with China had worsened, and many Southeast Asian leaders openly encouraged a renewed American presence.

Although the renewed American attention to Southeast Asia was welcome, the Obama administration appeared convinced that, in order to forge new connections, such as military to military ties with Cambodia and a broad range of new cooperation with Myanmar, it had to ignore Southeast Asia's regression from democracy and pare back rhetorical and on-the-ground democracy promotion efforts. Across the region, civil society activists and U.S. officials working on human rights and democracy promotion efforts have complained of growing disinterest in Washington and cuts in funding. And while there are exceptions—the administration has tried to support democratic processes and elections at times during Thailand's current political crisis and has condemned the May

2014 coup—at the highest levels, the Obama administration has shied away from criticism of many Southeast Asian leaders’ increasingly autocratic actions.

In Malaysia, where the strategic relationship with the United States has blossomed under Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak, the White House has issued only the mildest of statements as the Kuala Lumpur government fixed elections and increasingly cracked down on opposition politicians. In May 2013, three days after parliamentary elections with significant voter fraud, the White House congratulated Najib’s ruling coalition on its win, only noting “concerns regarding reported irregularities in the conduct of the election.” By contrast, some regional democracies like Indonesia were much more cautious about endorsing the Najib coalition’s alleged victory after widespread reports of election irregularities. Then, in April 2014, when President Barack Obama visited Malaysia, he declined to meet with opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, despite pressure from rights activists and some members of Congress to see Anwar and highlight his unfair trial and sentence. Obama barely mentioned Anwar’s case or other rights abuses during his visit. (During the Clinton administration, by contrast, Vice President Al Gore publicly criticized the Malaysian government at an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit attended by Malaysian leaders for arresting Anwar.)<sup>37</sup> In focusing almost exclusively on Najib and the strategic elements of the U.S.-Malaysian relationship, Obama has risked alienating the fastest-growing pool of Malaysian voters, young men and women who had overwhelmingly backed the opposition in the 2013 elections and who would be critical to the country’s future.

Along with playing down the regression from democracy in Malaysia, the Obama administration mostly has ignored growing climates of repression in Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Myanmar while pursuing closer military and strategic ties with these nations. With Cambodia, the administration launched small-scale joint military exercises and providing training to Cambodian forces from U.S. Special Forces; the Pentagon also facilitated the son of authoritarian ruler Hun Sen’s attendance at West Point. When Cambodia held parliamentary elections in 2013 that were marked by massive irregularities and the beating and killing of opposition activists, the administration did little to alter its stepped-up cooperation with the Hun Sen government. Under Obama, the United States also has begun exchanging defense attachés with Laos, and has launched training programs for a handful of Lao officers. The White House also inked a comprehensive partnership with Vietnam in 2013 that would pave the way for increased economic and military cooperation; although human rights were mentioned as part of the partnership, they were given a low priority.<sup>38</sup>

In Myanmar, where the Obama White House has invested significant political capital restarting relations with the country and convincing Congress to go along, and where the country’s strategic value and enormous untapped market make it a potential prize, this see-no-evil strategy has been the most pronounced. As western Myanmar has degenerated into widespread interreligious violence—violence allegedly abetted by the military—the White House has continued to push military cooperation with Myanmar. President Obama hosted Thein Sein in Washington in 2013 and has invited Myanmar army officers to join Cobra Gold, the Pentagon-led joint exercises that include Thailand, Singapore, and other Southeast Asian nations.

*THE GLOBAL CONTEXT*

Southeast Asia was part of the third and fourth global waves of democratization. The first wave began in the early nineteenth century, as a small handful of countries in Europe and North America began to expand suffrage rights and develop democratic institutions and cultures. The second wave began shortly after the Allied victory in World War II and included parts of southern Europe, Asia, Western Europe, and Latin America. The third wave, which had begun before the end of the Cold War, accelerated after 1989 and swept through the remaining authoritarian regions of Southern Europe, and through eastern Europe, Latin America, and Asia, including the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, and, eventually, Indonesia.<sup>39</sup> The fourth wave began in the late 1990s and included much of the rest of Asia and also much of sub-Saharan Africa. In 2006, monitoring group Freedom House recorded the highest point for the spread of freedom around the world, as calculated by the cumulative result of its country-by-country analysis examining each nation's political, legal, and social freedoms, since the organization began its annual survey of freedom in the world in 1972.<sup>40</sup>

Just as Southeast Asia was part of the third and fourth waves of democratization, Southeast Asia's regression from democracy is part of a larger, global, reverse wave of authoritarianism, concentrated in developing nations. Since the high point of global freedom in 2006, Freedom House has recorded eight straight years of declines in freedom around the world, with nearly all of the backsliding concentrated in developing countries.<sup>41</sup> In addition, many of the countries that are regressing from democracy are regional powers, including Kenya, Argentina, Hungary, Venezuela, Nigeria, and others.

The reasons for this global retrenchment vary somewhat from region to region, but Southeast Asia exemplifies several important global trends. Not only in Southeast Asia but also in many other developing regions, democratization has produced a kind of zero-sum democracy in which little else matters than elections. As a result, politicians and whole parties in countries from Kenya to Venezuela contest elections as if they were life-and-death struggles, hiring armed men to beat and kill opponents and taking every measure possible to control and alter poll monitoring, vote counting, and other procedural aspects of voting.

The zero-sum nature of democracy in these countries also has given rise to elected autocrats in other regions of the world, men and women who emphasize only the majoritarian aspects of democracy but then crush democratic institutions. And as in Thailand, middle classes in many of these countries, like Egypt and Ukraine, have embraced coups or extra-constitutional interventions as ways of removing elected autocrats or leaders tainted by graft—interventions that only further set back political change, as has happened in Egypt.

Focusing only on elections also detracts from governance, and many new democracies have made little inroads into combating graft, boosting growth, providing for social welfare, or any of the other basic challenges of government. Partly because of these failures of governance, popular dissatisfaction with democracy has risen since the early 2000s, not only in Southeast Asia but also in Africa, Latin America, and the former Soviet Union. This dissatisfaction is reflected not only in public opinion polling that demonstrates considerable unhappiness with democratic governance but also in reduced turnout for elections and, among some sectors of society, a tolerance of renewed army rule or other nondemocratic types of government.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the United States and other Western democracies were too quick to label Russia and China and other remaining authoritarian regimes as strategically weak and incapable of halting democracy's spread. Russia recovered from near-bankruptcy in the mid-1990s and, largely because of the high price of oil, built its currency reserves, upgraded its army and special forces, and developed a much more sophisticated approach to the international media, including launching its own global media outlet. China, too, recovered from the isolation of the immediate post-Tiananmen massacre period, relaunched its economic reforms, modernized its military, and upgraded its diplomatic service to make it competitive with other leading powers' diplomats. So, as in Southeast Asia, authoritarian regional powers have pushed back against democracy's spread in other parts of the world.

China has played a role in undermining political reform in its neighborhood. Beijing has trained thousands of judicial, police, and economic officials in Central Asia, one of the most repressive regions in the world. China has also provided critical assistance to the most autocratic Central Asian governments, like that of Uzbekistan, at times when they were most threatened by protest movements and international sanctions, such as after the Uzbekistan regime massacred hundreds of protestors in a town called Andijan in 2005.<sup>42</sup>

Powerful democracies in regions from eastern Europe to Africa to Latin America have proven as uninterested in advocating for democracy as Southeast Asia's biggest power, Indonesia, generally has been. For example, by studying the voting patterns of the major emerging democracies at the United Nations, the Democracy Coalition Project and Ted Piccone of the Brookings Institution have shown that most new democratic giants, including India, Brazil, and South Africa, adhere to strict principles of nonintervention and sovereignty. Indonesia's voting record reveals that it has opposed nearly every human rights and democracy initiative at the United Nations.<sup>43</sup> Turkey also generally has avoided pushing for rights-related measures in its UN votes or in its regional diplomacy, although it has become more critical of Arab autocracies, such as Syria, since the beginning of the Syrian civil war. South Africa's postapartheid leadership repeatedly has allied itself with autocratic regimes in votes at the United Nations, according to the study, while also repeatedly defending autocratic regimes in southern Africa, like Zimbabwe, at international forums and at African Union meetings.<sup>44</sup>

## Why Regression From Democracy in Southeast Asia Matters

The regression of democracy in Southeast Asia has significant implications for people in the region, for regional security, for economic development, and for the United States' strategic interests. At the most basic level, this democratic rollback has human consequences. For civil society in Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, and several other Southeast Asian nations, the democracy crisis has meant increasing crackdowns on journalists, human rights lawyers, opposition politicians, bloggers, activists, and religious leaders. Human Rights Watch has found that in the past three years, attacks on human rights defenders have risen sharply internationally, and that civil society groups have been increasingly threatened across the developing world. The fact that this rise coincided with a democratic rollback was hardly coincidental—the weakening of democratic protections in many countries has left rights activists exposed.

Southeast Asia also can be seen as a template for other regions, an indicator of the global direction of democracy. Since many countries in Southeast Asia, like Malaysia and Thailand, are among the wealthier and most populous nations that recently democratized, they are looked to by countries in Asia and in other parts of the world as potential examples—of progress or regression. Regression in countries as wealthy as Thailand and Malaysia, which have a per capita GDP more than ten times that of the average sub-Saharan African nation, would bode poorly for the fate of democracy throughout the developing world.

Political regression has also contributed to serious internal conflict in Southeast Asia. Overall, numerous studies of political regimes and conflict have shown that hybrid or authoritarian governments are more likely to face prolonged internal conflict or even civil war than democracies. They are more likely to face these conflicts because authoritarian regimes are inherently unstable, prove poor negotiating partners for insurgent groups, and usually are reluctant to make the kind of political and economic compromises that are often necessary to resolve insurgencies.

In Thailand, both Thaksin's overbearing and brutal approach to the insurgency in southern Thailand and the continual political strife in Bangkok have made resolving the southern Thailand conflict far more difficult. As prime minister, Thaksin was so convinced of his majoritarian mandate that he pursued brutal tactics in southern Thailand, where insurgents in the late 1990s and early 2000s revived a violent campaign to separate the three southernmost provinces, which have unique linguistic and cultural histories, from the rest of Thailand. Thaksin's tactics ultimately further inflamed the southern region, drove people into the arms of the militants, and weakened the already weak rule of law in Thailand's deep south. Such tactics included authorizing an attack on insurgents holed up in the revered Kru Se Mosque in southern Thailand, which resulted in a gun battle in which thirty-two people were killed, despite many senior Thai officers' pleas that the standoff be resolved peacefully. Videos of Thai forces destroying the mosque soon became popular DVDs shared around

southern Thailand and used as a tool to recruit new insurgent fighters. Thaksin also eliminated bureaucratic structures that had existed in the south to help resolve local political and social conflicts. Their removal added to the sense of alienation from the rest of Thailand felt by many southern Thais, and further emboldened the insurgents. By the middle of the 2000s, after five years of Thaksin's prime ministership, the insurgency had more than doubled—in terms of the estimated number of insurgents fighting government forces—the broader population in the south had become more radicalized, and the annual death toll, from both insurgent attacks and killings by the security forces, had steadily risen since 2000.<sup>45</sup>

Since Thaksin was ousted in a coup in 2006, Thailand's politics have become even more chaotic and the insurgency has continued to grow, as successive governments in Bangkok have been too preoccupied with their own survival to pursue a sustained peace program in the deep south. (The previous government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra tried to initiate peace negotiations with southern insurgent groups, but failed to find an effective partner and made few concrete proposals that would be acceptable to the insurgents.) In contrast with Thailand, in the Philippines, where President Benigno Aquino III has presided over a period of relative stability, transparency, and strengthening of democratic institutions, Aquino has utilized this stability, and his popular mandate, to personally invest himself in pursuing peace in the southern Philippine island of Mindanao, which has been torn apart by insurgencies for four decades. In early 2014, the Aquino government signed a landmark peace agreement with the largest insurgent group in Mindanao, the ten-thousand-member Moro Islamic Liberation Front.

Besides Thailand, regression from democracy and uncertainty in national politics has contributed to internal conflict in Myanmar as well. The central government, which does not have a popular mandate, is unable to follow through on initial ceasefires signed with several insurgencies. A democratically elected Myanmar government might have the popular mandate to turn the ceasefires into permanent peace deals, to create a more federalized state, and to end all of the ongoing ethnic insurgencies, but Myanmar's 2015 elections well may not be truly democratic, with the armed forces retaining sizable influence over the vote and helping install their preferred candidate as president. Such a government would likely be unable to end Myanmar's ethnic insurgencies and would still be the object of intense suspicion from various ethnic armies, who have fought the Myanmar armed forces for decades. These ethnic militias, after all, have for decades faced an array of brutal tactics employed by the army, including forced labor, summary executions, and rape as a weapon of war, among other tactics. In addition, Myanmar's political instability has helped facilitate the rise of the Buddhist paramilitaries, who now threaten to attack Muslims across the country and to spark a nationwide interreligious war, on top of the country's existing ethnic insurgencies.

A prolonged return to authoritarian rule will also likely do damage to human development in Southeast Asia and throughout the developing world. It is important to distinguish between the short-term effects of democratization in the developing world, which can be destabilizing as compared to some types of autocracy, and the longer-term effects of democratization, which ultimately can create the kind of stability that many countries have enjoyed, such as Taiwan and South Korea. Indeed, in the long run, democratic governments more often make choices that foster broader development and stability. Child mortality, for instance, is one of the best indicators of whether a country is prioritizing health care and social welfare. In a comprehensive study, political scientists Thomas Zweifel and Patricio Navia studied different types of regimes and rates of infant mortality, an indicator of governments' focus on well-being. They found that "almost without

exception, democracies made more of their inhabitants better off than did dictatorships”; perhaps then, it is not a surprise that, taken on average, residents of democracies today live longer than residents of authoritarian regimes.<sup>46</sup> Democracies’ superior social performance, they theorized, was the result of the demand, by voters, for their governments to invest in human capital, a demand fostered by greater freedom of association and expression, and the greater accountability of democratic governments over time.

Other, broader studies suggest the same. In a World Bank analysis of its lending across a wide range of nations, the Bank found that the rate of return on its assistance increased by as much as 22 percent in recipient nations that had strong freedom of association and expression, as compared to those with weak protections of human rights.<sup>47</sup> The value of this openness, in times of crisis, was first examined more than thirty years ago by Indian economist Amartya Sen, in his famous essay on famine and political systems. Sen showed that, even when they face serious crises like famine, democratic governments are better equipped to handle them, ensuring that their citizens do not starve. Democracies have more incentive to learn from their mistakes and adapt, he showed, and are designed to take in information and respond to it, making it highly unlikely that a democratic government can simply ignore a famine or other catastrophe.<sup>48</sup>

Countries that sustain democracy, too, tend to be more stable in their growth rates, even when those rates, over time, were roughly equivalent to those of authoritarian peers. Over time, democracies also tend to provide the kind of transparency and stable growth that investors desire. In the World Bank’s rankings of countries by ease of doing business, nearly all of the countries in the top ten were democracies except for Hong Kong, which is a unique city that has maintained many aspects of a democratic system even though it is ruled by China.<sup>49</sup> This transparency and economic stability makes democratic countries better partners for trade and investment over the long run. In perhaps the most thorough analysis of democracy’s benefits and demerits, political scientists Morton Halperin, Joseph Siegle, and Michael Weinstein found that even in the poorest countries in the world, sustained democracy over decades is linked to “less volatility in growth rates than autocracies.... The strength of democracies’ economic performance is as much their ability to maintain steady growth [i.e., avoid disastrous outcomes] over time as it is to achieve relatively rapid progress.”<sup>50</sup> They found that, going back to the 1960s, only five of the twenty worst-performing economies in the world, in terms of per capita growth rates, were democracies. The rest were all authoritarian regimes.

In Southeast Asia, countries that sustain some degree of democracy will offer better protections for investors and stronger rules of law; they will be more effective partners for the United States in trade agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership, in multilateral trade forums like the World Trade Organization (WTO), and in negotiating potential bilateral trade deals. Already, the more transparent and democratic nations in Southeast Asia, such as Singapore, have worked most closely and transparently with American trade negotiators on the TPP and, previously, on successfully concluding a U.S.-Singaporean bilateral free trade agreement.

Conversely, as Myanmar has regressed politically since 2013, its economic decision-making has become increasingly opaque. Economic policymaking has become harder for outsiders to understand, such as why legislation is being passed or who potential investors need to interact with in the central government to move investments forward. As a result, despite a burst of initial interest in Myanmar from Western investors in the early 2010s, most of the companies initially keen on Myanmar have chosen, for now, not to make major investments in the country, despite its potentially large consumer market. (The oil and gas industry is a notable exception; Myanmar’s potential

offshore gas deposits are so large, and the industry is so experienced in handling situations with high political risk, that many Western oil and gas companies have bid for offshore blocks offered by the Myanmar government.)

Thailand's political uncertainty and regression from democracy also have made its economic decision-making more unpredictable, scaring off new foreign investors and putting existing investments in the country in jeopardy. Thailand is a major hub for U.S. investment: American companies have invested more than \$13 billion in the country in foreign direct investment.<sup>51</sup> Although the Thai economy historically has been resilient to many different types of shocks, the current regression from democracy and political in-fighting has had a serious impact. International ratings agency Fitch has warned that the political turmoil in Thailand will have a long-lasting negative effect on the country's economic performance. Thailand's manufacturing and retail sectors have contracted over the past year, and domestic business confidence in 2013 and 2014 has plummeted sharply.<sup>52</sup> The ongoing Thai political crisis also has caused serious damage to the country's education system and workforce competitiveness; focused on political battles in the street and in parliament, successive Thai governments have failed to revamp the country's aged primary and secondary school curricula or invest in effective new technologies and English classes. As a result, the Thai workforce has fallen behind that of even some poorer countries in the region, in high-end manufacturing skills and in command of English. These weaknesses have made it much harder for Thailand's manufacturing industries to move up the value-added ladder, and for Thai companies to become more innovative.

In Malaysia, political unrest also has hindered economic growth and made the country potentially less attractive to investors, even as the government has tried to lure investors with new packages of incentives. Trying to maintain the Barisan Nasional coalition's stranglehold on power, since the May 2013 parliamentary elections, Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak has shifted away from promises of economic reform that would have opened many sectors of the economy, boosted investment, streamlined state companies, and probably reduced graft. Instead, to maintain the conservative, ethnic Malay base that stuck with the BN in 2013, Najib has slowed down reforms of state companies, expressed more reservations about pursuing the TPP or other trade deals with the United States, and pushed new legislation that would create new economic handouts and privileges for ethnic Malays, further distorting the economy and creating new opportunities for corruption.

On strategic issues, just as with trade and investment, the United States works most effectively with other democracies, which share its transparent political culture and institutions—democracies such as the member-states of NATO and the other democratic permanent and rotating members of the UN Security Council. And since President Obama took office, Southeast Asia also has become both more unstable and more central to American strategic interests, so working with partners in the region is even more important than it was ten years ago. As the region has become more dangerous, the United States has cooperated best—both on human rights issues and on security issues—with the Southeast Asian nations with strong democratic cultures, including Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

In Southeast Asia, which was relatively peaceful in the 1990s and early 2000s, disputes, including violent interactions at sea, between South China Sea claimants China, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia (other claimants including Brunei have not been as involved in disputes) now erupt regularly, and China and Southeast Asian countries have reached no real agreement on a code of conduct for the South China Sea. In recent months, Chinese leaders have used public forums to slam

the president of the Philippines and to openly criticize Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel during a visit by Hagel to Beijing. China also has blockaded Philippine ships operating in the South China Sea near disputed reefs, rammed Vietnamese coast guard ships in the sea that tried to stop China from moving an oil rig into disputed waters, blocked Philippine marines from resupplying fellow marines stationed on a disputed shoal in the South China Sea, and intercepted other Vietnamese and Philippine boats in the sea, significantly raising tensions among South China Sea claimants. Disputes over the South China Sea, as well as general fears of China's military buildup and more aggressive military and diplomatic behavior across East Asia, have sparked an arms race in Southeast Asia over the past decade, with Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines purchasing new submarines, cruisers, fighter jets, and other arms. Indeed, Southeast Asia's arms purchases are growing faster than almost any other region of the world, and overall Asia's military spending rose by 3.6 percent in 2013.<sup>53</sup> Tiny city-state Singapore was, in 2013, one of the five biggest buyers of arms in the entire world.<sup>54</sup>

Tension over the South China Sea also increasingly has drawn the United States into making firmer commitments to its treaty allies and partners in Southeast Asia regarding how the United States would act in case of a conflict in the sea. The Obama administration has boosted arms sales to the Philippines and, in April 2014, signed a new defense agreement with the Philippines that will allow American forces to use Philippine military bases for maritime and other operations. Also in 2014, the Obama administration doubled American assistance to the Philippines to help Manila buy new military hardware. In 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made a landmark speech in which she declared that the South China Sea was a "national interest" of the United States, the first time it had been referred to in this manner.<sup>55</sup>

## Recommendations

The foundations of democracy in Southeast Asia have been eroded, but not completely wiped out. Southeast Asia could return to the democratic progress that it experienced in the 1990s and early 2000s. In countries like Thailand and Malaysia, some institutions, such as a vibrant online media and (in Thailand) a strong judiciary, have survived regression from democracy, while in other countries in the region, like Cambodia, Indonesia, and Myanmar, there is still intense public demand for democratic change, despite recent setbacks.

But for democracy to be restored to health in Southeast Asia, the region's leading powers, as well as ASEAN and the United States, should renew their commitments to political change, and be willing to, at certain times, prioritize political reform over strategic cooperation. For the United States, fostering democratic change in the region will require shifting the mindset in Washington as well—recognizing that democracies in Southeast Asia will, over time, prove the best strategic partners and that the United States has more leverage to foster democracy in Southeast Asia than some in Washington currently believe.

### *RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOUTHEAST ASIA*

- If Southeast Asia's regression from democracy is to be halted, Indonesia will need to leverage its position as a regional power and play a larger role in mediating conflicts and helping to promote democracy and human rights in other Southeast Asian nations. Recently, Jakarta took a positive step toward adopting this role by working with some senior Myanmar military officers to teach them about Indonesia's transition to civilian, democratic rule. But Jakarta will need to play a much larger advocacy role in the region, at ASEAN meetings and bilaterally with troubled democracies throughout Southeast Asia.
- In Thailand, the military will have to quickly return power to an elected civilian government. Both sides of the political divide that has paralyzed the country will eventually have to accept compromises if democracy is to progress. Such a compromise eventually will occur when leaders elected by the country's majority, which remains primarily outside Bangkok, offer greater protections for private property, the rule of law, and, generally, the interests of Bangkok elites, while Bangkok's traditionally powerful elites will eventually have to accept that, in a democracy, they cannot repeatedly subvert the will of the majority and expect the political system to survive.
- In Myanmar, the first generation of elected leaders should attempt to better modulate public expectations of the kinds of social and economic changes that democratization might bring. They can do so by emphasizing that economic reforms will take place over a ten-to-twenty-year

period, and that the government will launch cash-transfer programs to reduce inequality, but that these programs will take time to work. This same management of public expectations will be critical to managing the democratization process in other poor Southeast Asian nations.

- Probably the most important job for Southeast Asian democrats is to prevent their growth rates from stagnating and, most importantly, inequality from rising significantly. When citizens of emerging democracies have become disillusioned with democratic government, it is, more likely than not, because growth has stagnated and inequality has risen sharply. Evidence from many emerging democracies actually suggests that programs designed to reduce inequality lessen dissatisfaction with democracy, even if these programs boost deficits and detract somewhat from overall economic growth. Southeast Asian nations also should take stronger steps to combat graft. Emerging democracies that are successful in reducing corruption over time tend to enjoy higher levels of public support for democracy as a political system. One strategy may be to pay higher salaries to senior ministers and civil servants, an approach pioneered in Singapore, where ministers' salaries are indexed to the pay of high-earning professional in the private sector. By paying ministers and civil servants well, the government may reduce the impetus for high-level government corruption.<sup>56</sup> This reward for senior ministers and civil servants could be combined with an independent anticorruption watchdog that is constitutionally protected from political meddling.
- Southeast Asian countries should consider altering their voting systems in order to make elected autocracy less likely. Many of the countries with elected autocrats, like Thailand, have parliamentary systems that now favor two large parties, and in which the eventual prime minister can become—in a system with weak institutions—a de facto autocrat. So, changes that reduce the power of a prime minister would, overall, reduce the possibility of elected autocracy. These could include making more use of proportional representation voting systems, despite the possibility that they could create some gridlock, and switching to a presidential/parliamentary hybrid system, in which an elected president has some minimal powers to check the power of the prime minister. By creating more checks on power, a hybrid system lessens the possibility of one political figure amassing autocratic powers.
- ASEAN could play a much larger role in mediating regional conflicts and promoting democratization, or at least helping to stave off political regression throughout Southeast Asia. For ASEAN to become more effective in promoting democracy and human rights, it will need to find new ways to discontinue the consensual decision-making process. To accomplish this, the organization may need to shed its traditional adherence to consensus, as well as its tradition of rotating ASEAN leadership annually, and giving each member, no matter how small or poor, a chance to head up the organization once every ten years.
- ASEAN also could strengthen its secretariat in Jakarta, to give it more power to mediate political conflicts and potentially foster political reform in the region. It could strengthen the secretariat's power by appointing a leader who is a high-profile former politician with a greater mandate to generally shape ASEAN's positions rather than just report what ASEAN leaders decide during meetings. The organization's wealthier and relatively democratic members, like Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines, also could invest significantly more resources in building the ASEAN secretariat in Jakarta into a powerful and knowledgeable body, with more staff, and far

more sophisticated technical expertise regarding conflict mediation, democracy, and nontraditional security threats.

- ASEAN also could rewrite its charter to emphasize human rights and democratization in the region. This rewriting would have to be prompted by an aggressive effort from the region's democracies, like the Philippines, to get ASEAN to focus more on human rights. The rewriting also could include a clause allowing for the possibility of intervention in the case of gross human rights abuses in one ASEAN member-state. ASEAN also should consider holding public referenda on significant ASEAN decisions in member states, in order to boost public buy-in and build its own democratic credentials.

#### *RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES*

- The United States should support the democratic process in every Southeast Asian nation, by standing up for elected governments in the face of threats, constantly affirming that the United States prefers any conflicts to be solved through the ballot box, and punishing extra-constitutional interventions in democratic systems. If American leaders do not support democratic processes, they risk alienating entire generations of young people in countries like Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Singapore; young men and women throughout the region overwhelmingly support the idea of democracy and, often, parties committed to democratic reforms. This younger generation will soon dominate policymaking and the economy throughout the region, and their views of the United States will be essential to long-term partnerships with Southeast Asia.
- Supporting processes also means avoiding a focus on a sole, supposedly reform-minded individual. When it comes to democracy, U.S. administrations, whether Democratic or Republican, too often tend to associate reform with one supposedly groundbreaking leader in a developing nation, a purportedly democratic “big man.” U.S. administrations should avoid the temptation to personalize reform and confuse supporting change and institutions in a country like Indonesia with supporting one leader.
- The United States should reconsider some of its recent military-to-military cooperation and other involvement with the most repressive Southeast Asian nations—Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Myanmar. The White House should hold off on closer military relations with Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos, which are of less strategic importance than Vietnam. Washington should move more slowly on military cooperation with Vietnam, as long as Hanoi continues to backslide on respect for human rights and freedoms.
- The United States should make clear that future democratic reversals, including coups, in Southeast Asia, such as the current coup in Thailand, will incur a tougher response from Washington than previous coups. The United States should make clearer that such developments would be met with immediate halts to most military-to-military relations, disinvitations to or cancellations of Cobra Gold regional joint exercises and other joint exercises, a halt to new U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) disbursements, and other possible measures such as targeted sanctions applied to the assets of senior military leaders.
- The United States should respect and offer rhetorical support to the winners of elections, as long as those winners adhere to certain guidelines of a democratic society, such as not using their victory to

then legitimize authoritarian rule. The United States has, on previous occasions, failed to offer this respect and support to winners of elections in Cambodia, Thailand, and other countries in the region.

- U.S. leaders should recognize that they have more leverage to promote democracy and human rights in Southeast Asia, and in other regions of the world, than they currently seem to believe. These tougher measures need not prove so costly. Thailand, for instance, would be unlikely to downgrade ties with the United States if the White House were to take a harder line toward the Thai military following this current coup. Similarly, Myanmar's government would be unlikely to tilt strategically toward China even if the United States moved more slowly on reestablishing military-to-military ties.
- As ASEAN grows, the United States should support the creation of a stronger and better-resourced ASEAN secretariat. This can be achieved by increasing aid, supporting extended visits by ASEAN officials to other regional organizations such as the European Union and African Union, and recognizing the importance of ASEAN's secretary-general by holding regular bilateral meetings between him/her and the secretary of state, as the secretary now does with leaders of the European Union. The United States also could encourage ASEAN to update its charter or write a new charter, one in which human rights are given a higher priority, and—as in the African Union—member states are given the right to potentially intervene in other members' affairs if those members are experiencing the overthrow of democratically elected leaders or are committing massive human rights abuses.
- The White House should make the pivot, or rebalance, to Asia more comprehensive. Although the White House insists that the pivot includes shifts in diplomatic, economic, and military assets, in reality only the military shifts have taken place, as a recent study of the pivot by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee showed. As a result, the pivot is perceived by many Southeast Asian opinion leaders as a military policy first and foremost. The White House could make the pivot more comprehensive by shifting diplomatic assets to Asia as well, including increasing the size of the embassies in Myanmar, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines, and adding more foreign service officers focused on human rights and commerce in Southeast Asia.
- Besides boosting the number of foreign service officers in Southeast Asia, the White House should shift the budget of USAID programs focused on democracy, the National Endowment for Democracy, and USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives to cover more of Southeast Asia. Currently, according to a report by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the United States only devotes roughly four percent of its aid spending to Asia, a miniscule amount given the population of developing Asia.<sup>57</sup>
- Washington should recalibrate this funding so that larger percentages of democracy assistance go toward building institutions and less toward organizing and holding national elections. For democracy to thrive in developing nations, it will need many of the institutions discussed above: constitutional courts, anticorruption commissions, an informed populace, a vibrant civil society, a reduced role for the army, and possibly a more fragmented political system. To shift funding toward these foundations of democracy, the United States could shift budgeting for democracy promotion from being renewed annually to being renewed every two or three years, a change some Scandinavian nations already have made. Moving toward funding democracy promotions over a longer cycle would allow projects to develop closer relations with local partners on the ground, set long-term objectives, and have the time to fully assess whether their projects are succeeding.

## Conclusion

Although Southeast Asia's political regression has been sharp and mostly unforeseen, the region could turn around once again. Indeed, Southeast Asia could return to the democratic progress that it had embarked on in the 1990s and early 2000s, once again becoming a standard for other developing regions. The foundations of democracy in Southeast Asia have been eroded, but not completely wiped out. In countries like Thailand and Malaysia, some institutions, such as a vibrant online media and (in Thailand), a strong judiciary have survived regression from democracy, while in other countries in the region, like Cambodia, Indonesia, and Myanmar, there is still intense public demand for democratic change, despite recent setbacks. Young generations in many countries in Southeast Asia, though angered by the disappointing performances of many elected governments, and frustrated with the lack of progress on fundamental rights even under elected leaders, generally remain committed to the idea of democracy. Older generations in Southeast Asia, particularly urban middle-class men and women may not have such commitments, but as long as younger men and women from Myanmar to the Philippines retain this commitment, democracy's health can be restored.

Whether democracy succeeds in Southeast Asia will be determined, first and foremost, by the people and leaders of Southeast Asian nations themselves. The region will need a combination of greater popular pressure for continued political reforms, more farsighted elected leaders, and continued encouragement from the Pacific Rim's most powerful democracies if Southeast Asia is to return to the reform processes launched in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The United States, though challenged by other powers in Asia in a way it was not two decades ago, still will play a critical role in Southeast Asia's political trajectory. Despite the rise of China—and, in fact, partly because of China's rise—the United States remains the preferred strategic and diplomatic partner of most nations in Southeast Asia, including those, like Vietnam, with which the United States has major differences over human rights. Yet for the United States, fostering democratic change in the region will require shifting the mindset in Washington as well—recognizing that democracies in Southeast Asia will, over time, prove the best strategic partners, even if in the short-term democracy can create populist and nationalist pressures that sometimes complicate bilateral relationships. This mindset shift will also require understanding that the United States still has more leverage to foster democracy in Southeast Asia than some in Washington currently believe. Using that leverage will help endear the United States to rising generations in Southeast Asia, and ensure that the United States' partnerships with the region last well into the twenty-first century.

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**Joshua Kurlantzick** is senior fellow for Southeast Asia at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). Kurlantzick was most recently a scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, where he studied Southeast Asian politics and economics and China's relations with Southeast Asia, including Chinese investment, aid, and diplomacy. Previously, he was a fellow at the University of Southern California Center on Public Diplomacy and a fellow at the Pacific Council on International Policy. Kurlantzick has also served as a columnist for *Time*, a special correspondent for the *New Republic*, a senior correspondent for the *American Prospect*, and a contributing writer for *Mother Jones*. He also serves on the editorial board of *Current History*. Kurlantzick is the winner of the Luce Scholarship for journalism in Asia and was selected as a finalist for the Osborn Elliot prize for journalism in Asia. His first book, *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World*, was nominated for CFR's 2008 Arthur Ross Book Award. His most recent book is *Democracy in Retreat*. Kurlantzick received his BA in political science from Haverford College.