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INTRODUCTION

South and Southeast Asia have demonstrated mixed results in combating the coronavirus pandemic, yet the COVID-19 pandemic has been a political boon for illiberal leaders. (Illiberal leaders undermine open societies and free political systems; they usually still allow elections, but they damage or outright destroy political institutions and norms and attack civil liberties.) These politicians include leaders such as Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, elected in free and fair elections, and more autocratic leaders such as Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, whose elections have been increasingly unfree and unfair. In South and Southeast Asia, illiberal leaders, many of whom are illiberal populists, have used the pandemic as an opportunity to consolidate political and economic power, regardless of whether these actions contribute to actual public health responses.¹

South and Southeast Asia have had some of the most extreme COVID-19-related democratic regressions in the world. Even before the coronavirus emerged, growing political polarization, illiberal populism and sectarianism, the legacy of authoritarian rule, and the continuing influence of militaries in politics were undermining democratic politics in these regions.² And combating COVID-19 does require some limitations on freedom, at least until an effective vaccine becomes available. In fact, even some longtime democracies in developed regions have struggled to balance addressing public health concerns and protecting citizens' freedoms. Meanwhile, as news media worldwide remain focused on the pandemic, democratic regression in developing countries is receiving less attention.

The COVID-19-era consolidation of political influence should be countered to ensure that politicians cannot use the pandemic to

permanently amass more power. Across South and Southeast Asia, defenders of democratic norms and institutions should support safe elections and work to ensure that, even if leaders have amassed extensive powers to fight the pandemic, these powers are time-limited and that plans for returning to political normality are in place. In countries where the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths have been relatively low, such as Malaysia and Thailand, supporters of democratic rights and institutions should use street protests, parliamentary sessions, and social media, with appropriate health precautions, to pressure governments. In states that have failed to handle COVID-19 effectively, opponents should highlight these mistakes and show that limiting political freedoms does not guarantee better public health outcomes.³

External actors have a role to play as well. The United States cooperates most effectively in these regions with freer countries, and many illiberal leaders, such as the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte, have proved to be mercurial and difficult partners. Leading democracies, which for decades have promoted democratic change in South and Southeast Asia, should highlight flaws in the idea that authoritarian states can better address COVID-19, should support the regions' democrats, and should push back against efforts by leading autocracies to suggest that authoritarian rulers, not democracies, are effective at fighting COVID-19.⁴

BACKSLIDING IN MOTION

South and Southeast Asia's democratic progress has been in reverse since at least the early 2010s, and COVID-19 has sped up the reversal.⁵ In the 1990s and 2000s, Southeast Asia underwent extensive democratization, and, by the early 2010s, countries including East Timor, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and even Cambodia and Myanmar had made substantial political progress. But this progress has faltered. Despite having been led by civilian and relatively democratic governments for most of the 1990s and 2000s, Thailand saw a military coup in 2014.⁶ The junta, when it finally allowed an election in 2019, created an unfair electoral environment: it used constitutional changes and other maneuvering to allow a pro-military party, Palang Pracharat, to win the 2019 election.⁷ When the opposition Future Forward Party performed well in the election and continued to draw sizable popular support after the vote, Thailand's top court dissolved the party.⁸ In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte, elected to a six-year term in 2016, has overseen a bloody drug "war" that has resulted in thousands of extrajudicial killings; he has had political opponents and journalists jailed and has undermined the independence of the Supreme Court and other institutions.⁹ Overall, by the end of the 2010s, seven of the eleven Southeast Asian states were less free than they had been a decade earlier.¹⁰ The exceptions were the tiny East Timor and Singapore; Myanmar, which could hardly become less free than it had been during decades of brutal military rule; and Malaysia, which had its first real transfer of power after an opposition victory in 2018.

In South Asia, too, countries have experienced democratic backsliding over the past decade, although exceptions, such as Bhutan, remain. The government of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has attacked freedom of the press, revoked Jammu and Kashmir's autonomy and

increased repression in the region, and used a range of questionable legal and financial measures to hamper political opponents.¹¹ In Jammu and Kashmir, the government has preventively detained an unknown number of politicians and other Kashmiri leaders without filing any charges against them, in moves that appear to violate protections in the Indian constitution.¹² The Modi government has further undermined independent institutions such as the Reserve Bank of India, the anticorruption ombudsman's office, and the Supreme Court. In Sri Lanka, the Rajapaksa family now controls the parliament, the presidency, and the military and is implementing an increasingly illiberal populist majoritarianism, which crushes the rights of minority Muslims and Tamils.¹³ After a presidential election in 2019 and a parliamentary election in 2020 that returned the Rajapaksas to power after five years—they also had ruled Sri Lanka between 2005 and 2015—the Rajapaksas moved quickly to erode checks on their powers and reduce protections for minorities.¹⁴ Soon after it won a two-thirds parliamentary majority in the election, the Rajapaksa government introduced a bill to repeal the nineteenth amendment to the constitution—the amendment had placed limits on the powers of the presidency—thereby giving the president extensive new powers.¹⁵

In Bangladesh, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her Awami League party have turned a once relatively robust democracy into a de facto one-party state, where opposition leaders are jailed and harassed and the media threatened and cowed into acquiescence.¹⁶ In Nepal, the government has increasingly tried to restrict speech online and taken other steps to circumscribe civil liberties.¹⁷

DOMESTIC FACTORS DRIVING BACKSLIDING

Multiple forces drive democratic backsliding in South and Southeast Asia. In Cambodia, Myanmar, and Nepal, which had had long histories of authoritarianism and civil conflict, democratic institutions and norms remained fragile even in the early 2010s. These institutions, never fully formed, came undone easily.¹⁸ In several other states in these regions, armed forces never fully retreated to the barracks even in the 1990s and 2000s. Instead, these militaries continued to meddle in politics. While Thailand was the most egregious example of military intervention—the 2014 coup was the twenty-second coup or coup attempt in the kingdom in a century—Indonesia, the Maldives, Myanmar, Pakistan, and the Philippines also continued to see military intervention in politics.¹⁹

Throughout the 2010s in India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, working- and lower middle-class people also became increasingly dissatisfied with traditional parties and politicians, who often came from elite backgrounds and did not significantly improve social services or foster greater economic equality.²⁰ These voters increasingly became attracted to charismatic but illiberal populist leaders, such as former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Modi, Duterte, and the Rajapaksas. These men—and they were all men—promised a tough type of rule, claiming that a strong hand was necessary to break up elite monopolies on political power, fight inequality, improve services, battle crime, and ensure the will of the majority prevailed in politics and society.²¹ (Not all of the region's illiberal leaders are populists, but many of them today are.) However, many of these illiberal populists, who portrayed themselves as political outsiders, were elites themselves, and their policies could take significant tolls on the poor: Thaksin was a billionaire telecommunications tycoon, and Duterte hails from an elite political family. Meanwhile, Duterte draws some of his strongest support from middle- and lower middle-class voters, even though his so-called drug “war” has exacted an outsize toll on the poor and lower middle class.²²

Many South and Southeast Asian illiberal populists also have used the region's rising sectarianism, polarization, and explosion of social media to bolster their political bases and demonize ethnic, religious, and other minority groups, blaming them for entrenched societal problems.²³ The exponential growth of social media use in South and Southeast Asia, where legal restrictions on online misinformation and disinformation are weak, has allowed leaders such as Duterte, Modi, and the Rajapaksas to use social media platforms to spread conspiracy theories; launch vicious attacks on political rivals, judges, reporters, and minorities; and galvanize supporters, particularly with hateful rhetoric about minority groups—Christians in Indonesia, lower-class drug users in the Philippines, and Muslims in India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.²⁴ Some South and Southeast Asian leaders do not use social media to launch the attacks themselves, the way U.S. President Donald J. Trump does. Instead, leaders such as Modi have allowed a proliferation of unchecked online activity by actors supportive of the ruling party, and these actors launch attacks, galvanize supporters, and spread hateful rhetoric.²⁵

In the past two decades, much of South and Southeast Asia also has undergone greater political polarization along regional, ethnic, and religious lines.²⁶ Now, in many South and Southeast Asian countries,

partisans increasingly shun the compromise necessary for democracies to function and treat every election as a life-or-death event.²⁷ Rising polarization reduces the potential for compromise, which is essential for democracies to function.

INTERNATIONAL FACTORS DRIVING BACKSLIDING

Meanwhile, global democratic powers that, between the 1990s and mid-2010s, had criticized South and Southeast Asian leaders for undermining democracy have mostly stayed silent in recent years. Since the mid-2010s, leading democracies such as the United States, Australia, and Japan have become less focused on democracy promotion, both in Asia and globally, as their publics have become less internationalist, as these wealthy states have elected leaders who have less interest in democracy promotion, and as these leading democracies themselves have become less democratic.²⁸

The Trump administration's approach to the Indo-Pacific region, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept, theoretically supports promoting freedom throughout South and Southeast Asia.²⁹ Yet with a few exceptions, such as pushing hard for democracy in Cambodia, the White House has mostly abdicated responsibility on international democracy promotion. The Trump administration repeatedly has tried to slash the budget for democracy promotion efforts, though Congress usually has restored these funds.³⁰ The president himself has built close links with a series of authoritarian leaders including Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Russia's Vladimir Putin, and Egypt's Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, denigrated alliances with democracies such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and had sour relations with many democratic leaders such as Germany's Angela Merkel and Canada's Justin Trudeau.³¹ In Southeast Asia, President Trump has publicly praised the Duterte administration's bloody and extrajudicial "war" on drugs.³²

Other leading democracies also have become less focused on democracy promotion, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only added to their shifts to domestic priorities. In the 1990s and early 2000s, for instance, Japan was a powerful advocate for freer politics in regional states such as Cambodia. But in recent years, Japan, focused on combating China's regional strategic influence, has paid far less attention to democratic regression in states strategically vital to Tokyo such as Cambodia, Myanmar, and the Philippines. And overall, as Larry Diamond of Stanford University notes in a new study in the journal *Democratization*, most of the biggest democracies, those that belong to

the Group of Twenty, have suffered democratic regression themselves in the past fifteen years. With their own democracies regressing, they are often inadequate examples for developing countries and are far less focused on supporting democracy abroad.³³

As leading democracies have turned inward and become less democratic themselves, authoritarian powers China and Russia have become more active on the global stage. China has supported illiberal leaders across South and Southeast Asia, often stepping in to provide help when democracies criticize or ostracize illiberal leaders. When Thailand's military overthrew an elected government in 2014, the Barack Obama administration rhetorically criticized Bangkok and imposed sanctions on the coup government. China immediately courted the coup government, demonstrating it would provide rhetorical, military, and economic support—and shore up the junta.³⁴ Similarly, when leading democracies pulled funding and monitors from the Cambodian elections in mid-2018 as it became clear they would not be free and fair, China stepped in. It announced a series of new concessional loans and infrastructure projects, timed to Hun Sen's campaign period, and also provided election funding.³⁵ Hun Sen won the sham election and has continued to crack down on opposition politicians and civil society since then.

ACCELERATING DEMOCRATIC REGRESSION

COVID-Related Factors

Although South and Southeast Asia were already experiencing democratic regression, the pandemic has accelerated the decline. The COVID-era backsliding is even more notable both because it has come about in well-established democracies such as India and Indonesia and because South Asia and Southeast Asia had become two of the freest regions of the developing world in the 1990s and 2000s. Regional leaders have taken advantage of the pandemic to repress freedoms in several ways.

LEADERS USE COVID-19 TO EXPAND THEIR AUTHORITY VIA LEGISLATION

Political leaders across the regions have used the virus threat as an opportunity to enact new legislation, and sometimes issue executive orders, that expands the extent of their authority without clear time limits, reduces bureaucratic checks on government, and even imposes versions of martial law. The Thai government has taken on emergency powers that allow the authorities to arrest people simply for making statements about COVID-19 that could “instigate fear” or “mislead the public.”³⁶ These categories are so broad that they could include nearly any criticism of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha or other top government officials. In the Philippines, Duterte has not only instituted harsh and poorly planned lockdown measures but also taken on expansive emergency powers, granted to him by a compliant legislature.³⁷ The emergency powers include the ability to effect a warrantless arrest against anyone a government-appointed council claims is “suspicious.” The Philippine legislature has extended Duterte’s emergency powers, and whether these powers will be time-limited at all remains unclear.

There has, to this point, been minimal regional pushback from opposition politicians and civil society against pandemic-related legislation and executive actions that could further undermine democracy. This pushback has been limited in part because restrictions on gatherings have largely eliminated space for public protests, and legislatures are barely functioning. Duterte's harsh lockdown in the Philippines, for instance, has prevented a significant public response to his seizure of power. Similarly, India's draconian response to the pandemic has limited opposition to Modi's actions.³⁸ Modi's rapidly enacted lockdown in March, during which people were banned from leaving their homes for three weeks, led to panic among many Indians. Millions rushed across the country to their hometowns before the restrictions set in; once the lockdown had come into force, the police arrested and brutalized people not in their homes.³⁹ On the move, fearful of being deprived of basic necessities and without access to basic safety net programs such as food rations, and facing an increasingly intolerant government, few of these affected Indians have had the time or ability to contest Modi's policies. Although angry migrant workers have held sporadic demonstrations against the harshness of the lockdown, the protests have not gelled into a larger movement.⁴⁰

Moreover, people are fearful of the virus and, sometimes desiring strong containment measures, are inclined to initially rally around their leaders. Populations have become willing, for public health reasons, to tolerate greater surveillance and restrictions on freedom of assembly.⁴¹ Even developed democracies such as South Korea have used cell phone tracking for contact tracing, and wealthy states such as New Zealand have instituted tough lockdowns, albeit with time limits and without abrogating freedom of speech and other rights.⁴² Fear of the virus also

can foster a public desire for strong, even autocratic, rule, particularly in places where the population believes that nascent democracy has not helped improve standards of living or combat corruption and that democratic leaders have been ineffective in their responses to COVID-19. In Indonesia, for instance, surveys by Indikator Politik Indonesia have found falling public support for democracy this year, a drop due in part to public sentiment that Indonesia's democratically elected leaders have handled the pandemic response poorly.⁴³

LEADERS MARGINALIZE OPPOSITION AND ENHANCE CONTROL OF LEGISLATURES

Leaders in South and Southeast Asia's most powerful democracies and hybrid regimes also have been among the most aggressive in the world in using COVID-19 to marginalize opposition political parties and civil society and to centralize political control within legislatures and other governing structures.

In Malaysia, after infighting within the governing coalition, which had defeated the long-dominant United Malays National Organization (UMNO) in 2018, the king in March nominated a new prime minister, Muhyiddin Yassin. Muhyiddin formed a government primarily with backing from UMNO.⁴⁴ Muhyiddin's government, which holds a slim majority in the legislature, has repeatedly prevented parliamentary sessions from convening, citing the pandemic. The irregular meeting of parliament has curtailed opposition leaders' most visible public platform. Curtailing parliament also prevents no-confidence votes and defections from Muhyiddin's coalition.⁴⁵ The government has also dropped criminal charges against several UMNO figures allegedly connected to the massive 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) financial scandal and packed state companies with UMNO allies. (Former prime minister and UMNO stalwart Najib Razak was found guilty and sentenced to up to twelve years in jail for his role in the 1MDB scandal.⁴⁶) When opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim tried to challenge the Muhyiddin government, saying that he and not the prime minister now had a majority of support in the lower house of parliament, Malaysia's king, perhaps demonstrating his desire to keep Muhyiddin in power, declined to support Anwar's efforts.⁴⁷

In South Asia, governments also have cracked down on opposition and bolstered their control of legislatures. The Bangladeshi government has detained political opponents and civil society leaders who have criticized Dhaka's pandemic response, often under the harsh

Digital Security Act, which gives the authorities broad powers to arrest people for making statements online.⁴⁸ Under the law, anyone in Bangladesh can be arrested for posts related to the “coronavirus pandemic to negatively affect the nation’s image” or posts that “cause the law and order situation to deteriorate,” categories that could include a broad range of news coverage and commentary.⁴⁹ In Pakistan, the government has cracked down on dissent and given the military extensive control of the pandemic response.⁵⁰ The Sri Lankan government has used military intelligence to collect data from many Sri Lankans—seemingly also a means of intimidation—and ramped up curbs on political opposition.⁵¹ And the Modi government has in recent months arrested many opposition activists, some of whom had in early 2020 led protests against a new citizenship law they argue discriminates against Muslims.⁵² The opposition activists, many of whom have been arrested on sedition and antiterrorism laws, claim that once the authorities detain them they have little access to legal counsel or ability to contest charges because of restrictions put into place due to COVID-19.⁵³

Even in Indonesia, the most consolidated democracy in Southeast Asia, the government of President Joko Widodo, or Jokowi, has veered toward autocracy during the pandemic, in part by curtailing civil society. As Jokowi has struggled to address the crisis, feuding with provincial governors, the national government has imposed extensive new curbs on free speech.⁵⁴ The Indonesian police, for instance, have implemented new procedures that allow them to bring charges against people who criticize the president’s or other government officials’ COVID-19 response. The police have arrested many critics, including some prominent activists.⁵⁵

LEADERS USE DISINFORMATION IN THE COVID-19 ERA TO HIDE PUBLIC HEALTH FAILURES AND CENTRALIZE POWER

Many regional leaders also have spread disinformation about COVID-19 to obscure their failure to contain the pandemic and to bolster their power. In India, for instance, the administration of Prime Minister Modi, who has stoked cultural and religious divisions since first being sworn in in 2014, has used the pandemic to further foment discord, in part by spreading falsehoods about minority groups.⁵⁶ Top officials of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have repeatedly scapegoated Muslims, Dalits, and other minorities as conduits of COVID-19 despite an absence of scientific evidence to support this claim.⁵⁷ (To be sure, the Tablighi Jamaat proselytizing movement held a large gathering in Delhi

early on in the pandemic, and that gathering became an early super-spreader event, but BJP officials and the media then began scapegoating all Muslims as spreaders of the virus.⁵⁸)

This stigmatization via disinformation, and the already poisonous climate for minorities under Modi, has led to spikes in violence against Muslims since the pandemic took hold.⁵⁹ It also has provided the Modi government with an opportunity to crack down on Muslim civil society activists, with reports of thousands of arrests under the guise of controlling the outbreak.⁶⁰

Leading autocratic states outside of South and Southeast Asia have abetted this disinformation. In recent months, Beijing has increased its use of information and disinformation to attack democracies' response to COVID-19 and promote its own approach to the virus.⁶¹ Claims that authoritarian states have done better in managing COVID-19 are false: No systemic study has shown that autocracy is linked to controlling a pandemic. China, Thailand, and Vietnam, three highly repressive states in East Asia, have developed highly effective pandemic responses. A lower middle-income country with a population of nearly ninety-five million and dense cities, Vietnam has seen roughly 1,100 cases and 35 reported deaths.⁶² By comparison, the United States, with roughly 3.5 times the population of Vietnam, has had over 11.1 million cases and some 246,000 deaths at the time of writing this paper.⁶³ But many autocratic states, including Iran and Russia, have failed to contain COVID-19.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, democracies such as Germany, New Zealand, and South Korea have successfully battled the virus.⁶⁵

THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

Democratic backsliding is not unique to South and Southeast Asia, even though those regions have fallen from greater democratic heights than some other developing regions. COVID-19 has been a boon for many, though not all, illiberal politicians around the world. A recent Freedom House study shows that the condition of democracy and human rights has deteriorated in eighty countries since the pandemic began.⁶⁶ To be sure, not all illiberal leaders have taken advantage of COVID-19 to amass more powers.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, many have. Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro has jailed journalists, activists, and health-care workers for questioning Maduro's approach to the virus—and for generally questioning the government at all.⁶⁸ The government of El Salvador, using COVID-19 as an excuse, has ignored Supreme Court rulings that declared it illegal for the government to seize property of people it accused of disobeying quarantines; El Salvador's government also has used the police for widespread detentions.⁶⁹

In Eastern Europe and other former Soviet states, the story is similar. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has been granted extensive emergency powers by a compliant parliament. Even though the law that gave him these powers was withdrawn in June, he continues to wield essentially the same, almost limitless, powers.⁷⁰ Partly because of COVID-19-related crackdowns in former Soviet states and their neighboring countries, Freedom House's most recent annual report on democracy in the former Soviet Union found fewer democracies across that region than at any time since 1995.⁷¹

In the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa as well, governments have used the pandemic to restrict freedoms. The Algerian government has arrested and used brutal force against many anti-government activists under the guise of stopping the pandemic's spread.⁷² Turkey,

meanwhile, has detained hundreds of people for allegedly writing “provocative” posts about the pandemic online.⁷³ In Egypt, the most repressive state in North Africa, the government of President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi has used the pandemic as an opportunity to amend emergency legislation and give the president and the armed forces even stricter control over Egyptian society.⁷⁴ In sub-Saharan Africa, Zimbabwe’s government has used the threat of COVID-19 to step up detentions of opposition politicians and activists.⁷⁵

LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS

Measures enacted, in theory, to combat COVID-19 could last long beyond the end of the pandemic. History suggests that legislation enacted and executive actions taken in response to national emergencies are rarely repealed, even when those emergencies recede. Sometimes, crisis-era legislation and executive actions are kept in place. Other times, they are repurposed to suit other policy aims while still helping governments maintain sizable powers. In the United States, a more consolidated democracy than countries in South or Southeast Asia, the Patriot Act, passed after 9/11, is essentially still in place nearly two decades later despite criticisms that it has outlived its usefulness, allows law enforcement overly broad surveillance powers, and has been used in ways not envisioned by its drafters in 2001.⁷⁶

In South and Southeast Asia, legislation and executive actions implemented in the COVID-19 era could have similar fates as the Patriot Act. Some opposition Philippine policymakers and civil society leaders, for instance, believe that Duterte, who has already had his emergency powers extended to 2021, could maintain his emergency powers into 2022, when his term ends. He could use these powers to help his favored successor win the next presidential election and then continue Duterte-style strongman policies.⁷⁷ (A Philippine president is limited to one six-year term.) In Cambodia, India, Thailand, and other countries in the region, governments have already extended their initial emergency powers. Leaders in these states will face massive temptations to maintain these powers even after the pandemic is controlled.

POLITICAL POWER, PUBLIC HEALTH FAILURES

Many of these illiberal leaders have become more powerful even as they have failed on the public health front. Many leaders, both in the region and globally, who have mismanaged the pandemic are illiberal

populists, who dislike expertise and employ an improvisational, chaotic governing style. Disdain for expertise and poor policy coordination, challenging even at the best of times, have hindered such leaders in addressing COVID-19. (By contrast, some authoritarian states not led by populists, such as Vietnam, have been able to pursue coherent, coordinated, and effective COVID-19 policies.⁷⁸)

Not all populist leaders have downplayed or mishandled COVID-19: a recent study by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change found that a majority of populist leaders had taken the pandemic seriously.⁷⁹ However, the study also found that populist leaders of some of the largest democracies have not taken the pandemic seriously enough, and even those populists who took the pandemic seriously have degraded democracy as they pursued relatively effective public health policies.⁸⁰ In Brazil, for instance, President Jair Bolsonaro, who has intense contempt for expertise, long denied that the virus was a real threat, mishandled the federal-state relationship in combating COVID-19, and promoted conspiracy theories, even as he himself contracted COVID-19.⁸¹ Under Bolsonaro's chaotic leadership, Brazil has experienced one of the worst outbreaks in the world.⁸² In the United States, the Trump administration's mismanagement of COVID-19 also has stemmed in part from the president's disregard for expertise, undermining of the federal bureaucracy, and improvisational governing style.⁸³ As a result, the United States has had by far the most deaths from COVID-19 of any country in the world, and the virus has ravaged the White House itself.⁸⁴

In South and Southeast Asia, many illiberal populist leaders have struggled to contain the virus, yet this poor governance has not stopped them from grabbing more power. Modi's lockdown, which gave the population and provincial leaders little time to prepare and came while the national government spent little effort creating a safety net, has been a disaster.⁸⁵ The poorly planned lockdown did not flatten India's COVID-19 caseload curve.⁸⁶ But it unleashed societal chaos and cratered the economy, which shrank by roughly 24 percent in the second quarter of the year, even as Modi's administration amassed more power.⁸⁷ (Some Indian states such as Kerala, however, have handled the lockdown effectively, delivering food to people's homes and likely reducing public anger in the process.) In the Philippines, Duterte's approach to COVID-19 has been poorly informed and has badly damaged the economy, while the virus remains uncontrolled. Duterte underplayed the threat of the virus for far too long, telling the public in a national address in March that it would be foolish to be scared of COVID-19 and being seen in public defying guidelines on social distancing, until

he abruptly reversed course and implemented an extensive lockdown. Even now, he fails to provide consistent guidance or support public health experts who could deliver a consistent public message, while amassing power through emergency measures and other efforts.⁸⁸

Although the pandemic has allowed South and Southeast Asian leaders to become more autocratic in the short term, their longer-term failure to adequately address COVID-19 could provide opponents opportunities to challenge them and unwind their concentration of power. Indeed, their governance failures could make them more vulnerable to challenges from political opposition, undermine their abilities to centralize power, and ultimately make restoring democratic institutions and norms easier. Around the world, leaders such as New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and German Chancellor Angela Merkel who have overseen effective responses to COVID-19 have seen their popularity skyrocket, with Ardern recently winning the biggest electoral victory in modern New Zealand history.⁸⁹ Conversely, in countries with severe effects of the pandemic on public health and the economy, leaders' public image and popularity often have declined.

THE WAY FORWARD

Even in developed countries, public health experts predict that the pandemic will not be effectively contained and life will not return to some kind of normality until late 2021.⁹⁰ In South and Southeast Asia, where mass vaccination could be a logistical challenge, a return to normality could take even longer. In the intervening years, illiberal leaders could take further measures to entrench their power and neutralize all opposition, moving their countries closer to outright authoritarian rule—an outcome already achieved in some former regional hybrid regimes such as Cambodia.⁹¹

It is essential, then, that defenders of democratic norms and institutions act quickly to prevent leaders from using the pandemic to entrench their power and undermine democracy and to ensure that governments can protect public health and freedoms at the same time. For leading democratic powers including the United States, taking these measures is in their own self-interest as well. Indeed, illiberal leaders such as Duterte, the Rajapaksas, and even Jokowi, with their improvisational and mercurial styles of governing, often prove unstable partners. In his four years in office, for instance, the Philippine president has veered between condemning the United States while wooing China and warming to Washington while castigating some of Beijing's actions.⁹²

To preserve democratic norms and institutions, even in a pandemic, policymakers and civil society leaders in South and Southeast Asia should take the following steps:

- ***Work to ensure that COVID-19-related restrictions on assembly and speech are statutorily limited.*** Although it is reasonable for leaders to assume some emergency powers to enforce quarantines and lockdowns, legislators and courts in South and Southeast Asia should

ensure that emergency powers come with clear time limitations and nonpartisan oversight, which would help inform policymakers when it comes time to potentially renew the emergency powers.⁹³ Policymakers and activists should also use public campaigns to insist that apps or other online measures used for contact tracing are ended after the virus is contained and do not allow governments to monitor populations for other reasons.⁹⁴ Imposing time restrictions and aggressively scrutinizing potential extension of emergency powers are popular positions and support democracy.

- ***Hold elections during the pandemic and make them both fair and safe.*** Pro-democracy activists in the region should work to ensure that elections are not delayed or canceled and that elections planned for later in 2020 and in 2021 in India and Malaysia can be held, and held safely. If the governments do plan to delay, they should do so only after extensive consultation with opposition parties and civil society, to secure broad support for a delay and ensure that the delay seems nonpartisan and not designed to favor any one party or politician. To hold elections safely during the pandemic, these countries should seek consultation on best voting practices from experts in Singapore, South Korea, and other states in the region that have successfully held elections during the pandemic; offer a wide range of ways to vote, including reserved time slots for in-person voting on Election Day, extended early voting, and mail-in and other types of remote voting in countries that have capable postal services; and invite international election observers to monitor elections.
- ***Limit and counter illiberal leaders' use of disinformation.*** Supporters of democratic norms should take measures to prevent leaders from spreading disinformation and destroying checks on factual discourse, such as the remaining independent media outlets and watchdog organizations. These are critical to combating disinformation and promoting transparency on government decisions, especially in a time of crisis. Efforts to protect these organizations could include public fundraising for media outlets that are losing advertising because of government pressure on businesses; legal actions to protect media outlets and watchdog organizations; and organizing pressure from retired leaders, prominent civil society leaders, and foreign leaders to keep media outlets and watchdog organizations open, among other measures.
- ***Demonstrate and promote ways of protesting that are COVID-19-safe.*** Particularly in countries such as Thailand, which has largely

contained the pandemic, leaders now have less of an excuse to maintain restrictions on freedom of speech and outdoor assembly. Supporters of democratic norms and institutions should show that they can hold parliament sessions, rallies, and other public events without spreading COVID-19. In Thailand, for instance, demonstrators that have gathered for months in favor of democratic reforms have repeatedly highlighted the measures they are taking to protect public health while rallying. Thailand's caseloads have remained minimal despite the swelling protests.⁹⁵ In other countries, anyone organizing public gatherings should do the same, taking best practices from Thailand and other places. Supporters of democracy also should advocate forcefully for ending limits on online speech, which poses no obvious threat to public health.

- ***Promote compromise and reduce polarization.*** Polarization predates COVID-19, but it has helped illiberal leaders stoke tensions and divide societies, making it harder for democratic norms to flourish and for politicians to build broad coalitions that could undermine illiberal tendencies. South and Southeast Asian politicians and civil society leaders, supported by funders from developed countries, should invest in efforts, such as those led by interfaith groups and mediation organizations, to foster dialogue among political parties, ethnic groups, and religious groups. Initial attempts to promote compromise in Indonesia, often led by interfaith groups, have enjoyed some success in building trust among religious leaders, who have then tried to reduce polarization during election seasons.
- ***Highlight the links between illiberal politics and poor governance, including mishandling of COVID-19 and failed economic policies.*** Supporters of democracy are tempted to combat illiberal leaders by highlighting their violations of norms and abuses of power. But the history of illiberalism in Latin America and other regions suggests that illiberal populists in particular, such as the Kirchners in Argentina, ultimately face political downfall because of their inability to actually govern and not because of public disapproval of their norm-breaking.⁹⁶ While taking measures to protect democratic institutions, opponents of illiberal leaders in South and Southeast Asia should focus their campaigns on bread-and-butter economic issues, COVID-19, and poor governance in general, arguing that limits on political freedoms have not produced better public health responses to the pandemic or helped cushion the economic pain.

- ***Develop public campaigns to emphasize the importance of expertise in public health and other areas.*** As a corollary to highlighting the links between illiberal politics and poor governance, regional politicians and civil society activists committed to democracy should emphasize that illiberal leaders are failing to control the pandemic because they are ignoring expertise, not because that expertise is misguided. If expertise is blamed for failed responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders who are even more norm-breaking and autocratic could come to power. Indeed, failed responses to the pandemic could further fuel antiestablishment movements, both regionally and globally, accompanied by greater distrust of expertise on public health and other matters. Worldwide, in the past decade, rising antiestablishment sentiment has sometimes been channeled into support for politicians, such as France's Emmanuel Macron or the United States' Bernie Sanders, who have not attacked democratic practices and institutions. But often it has empowered politicians who disdain expertise, promote conspiracy theories, and have little interest in upholding democracy.

Powers from outside the region, too, can help preserve freedoms in South and Southeast Asia. The United States, Australia, Canada, Japan, and the European Union have regional strategies that rely on fostering freedom. By bolstering democrats, even during a pandemic, the United States can demonstrate a commitment to this approach and also distinguish itself from China, which is expanding its power in the region. Although China has distributed extensive COVID-19-related aid, it has also alienated some South and Southeast Asian populations by buttressing illiberal leaders, such as Cambodia's Hun Sen, and by seeming to take advantage of the distraction of the pandemic to push its territorial claims in the South China Sea.⁹⁷

To help prevent regional leaders from further undermining democratic norms and institutions, the United States and other leading democracies should do the following:

- ***Support efforts in South and Southeast Asia to reduce polarization and foster political dialogue and compromise.*** Reducing polarization and fostering dialogue will help reduce the tendency for politicians and voters to view every election as so decisive that they cannot afford to lose. Democracy cannot thrive without peaceful transition of power, and environments more conducive to compromise and dialogue are less likely to produce illiberal leaders such as Duterte or the Rajapaksas, who polarize countries when they are in power.⁹⁸ To support

efforts at reducing polarization, leading democracies should avoid cutting democracy and rights promotion budgets and actually raise their budgets for emergency funding for rights and democracy groups in the region.⁹⁹ Although reducing budgets seems like a sensible and necessary response to the economic harm of the COVID-19 pandemic, democracy and rights promotion budgets constitute such tiny fractions of national budgets for the United States, Australia, and the European Union that eliminating these monies will have no practical effect on addressing the pandemic or overall budget woes. The United States, for instance, gives about \$2.6 billion per year in democracy promotion funding, allocated in a range of ways.¹⁰⁰ The annual U.S. federal budget for 2020 is projected to be \$6.6 trillion.¹⁰¹

- ***Combat illiberal leaders' disinformation campaigns and efforts to undermine the press and watchdog institutions.*** Leading democracies can combat disinformation in several ways. In South and Southeast Asia, where leaders have increased disinformation efforts during the pandemic, independent media outlets have been effective in revealing such disinformation and uncovering leaders' attacks on democratic institutions. Leading democracies should boost funding for independent media and fact-checking organizations in these regions. In addition, the U.S. Congress should pass the Protecting Human Rights During Pandemic Act, which would prod the executive branch to create a plan for addressing rights abuses during the pandemic.¹⁰²
- ***Combat Chinese and Russian messaging that democracies are failing in the battle against COVID-19 and that authoritarian states are succeeding.*** To combat Chinese and Russian messaging that democracies are failing to address the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States and other leading democracies should apply more pressure on social media platforms to research the activities of state-backed disinformation agents and publicly release information about their activities. If they refuse, democratic governments can more aggressively regulate social media firms. Democracies should also boost funding for their own counterpropaganda activities, such as those of the U.S. State Department's Global Engagement Center.
- ***Ensure the United States' own domestic response to COVID-19 respects democratic norms and institutions and values expertise.*** The United States cannot support rights and freedoms in South and Southeast Asia if it is undermining rights and freedoms at home without

looking blatantly hypocritical. Yet to date the United States has not effectively balanced battling COVID-19 with protecting freedoms at home. President Trump has falsely suggested that efforts to protect the integrity of national elections while also safeguarding public health—expanding voting by mail, for instance—would lead to rampant voter fraud and questionable elections.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, the United States needs to demonstrate that it will uphold the integrity of elections during the pandemic, preserve basic rights at home, and follow public health expertise in addressing the virus.

- ***Hold a major aid conference to focus on the effects of COVID-19.***

In South and Southeast Asia, as in other developing regions, COVID-19 has had a more catastrophic effect on economies than it has on the economies of most developed states. Wealthier countries can more easily roll out stimulus packages funded by international borrowing; few developing countries can afford to match the kinds of stimulus launched in Australia, Japan, Europe, or North America.¹⁰⁴ Although a prolonged economic downturn in South and Southeast Asia could create popular anger against some leaders whose policies have caused economic pain, such downturns risk exacerbating economic inequalities in the long run.¹⁰⁵ The past decade has shown that such rising inequality fuels divisive politics, which could make way for leaders who are even more illiberal to seize on popular anger and possibly further undermine democratic progress. To help prevent even more inequality in South and Southeast Asia, and thus indirectly support democracy, developed states led by the United States, Canada, Japan, and the European Union should hold a major aid conference. It could be modeled on conferences that assisted Afghanistan in the early 2000s and assisted Asian states during the financial crisis of the late 1990s. The conference would be designed to help economies most damaged by the COVID-19 pandemic, including those in South and Southeast Asia. The aid, primarily grants, could be used in part to help pay for vaccines but would mostly go toward stabilizing economies. The donors could appoint an independent overseer to handle the disbursements and an inspector general to produce reports analyzing how the funds are spent.

CONCLUSION

The situation for democratic progress seems grim in South and Southeast Asia. Although failures to address COVID-19 could rebound against incumbent politicians, Duterte and other illiberal populists today are likely more secure in office than earlier populists would have been, because social media makes it easier for them to distort information and because they are more willing to use violent repression to stay in office. Illiberal populists and other illiberal leaders today can bypass traditional gatekeepers, who have lost influence in the last decade, and deliver their often-distorted messages directly to the public via social media and the partisan press. In addition, while a generation of populists in the 1990s and 2000s used techniques such as altering voting systems to wield power but shied away from violently targeting opponents, the current generation is more willing to instigate violence against other politicians and opponents in civil society.¹⁰⁶

Despite the bleakness, the situation in South and Southeast Asia remains less grim than in other parts of the developing world. Although more secure in office than earlier generations of illiberal populists, South and Southeast Asian leaders are more constrained in how far they can repress democracy than peers in places such as Africa, because South and Southeast Asian states had built relatively strong democratic institutions and norms before the pandemic. And South and Southeast Asian illiberal leaders, including many illiberal populists, are not Xi Jinping or Abdel Fatah al-Sisi. Unlike truly autocratic leaders, they maintain a veneer of democratic politics, allowing at least somewhat free and fair elections, tolerating opposition parties while also harassing them, and accepting some degree of civil society activity.¹⁰⁷ These constraints make South and Southeast Asia's illiberal leaders more vulnerable than outright autocrats to real reform efforts. Even partially free and fair

elections, and partially free civil society, provide the foundations for greater democratization.

Preventing a further slide into illiberalism would benefit U.S. strategic interests as well. Most of the United States' treaty allies and closest partners across Asia and the Pacific are democracies, and the United States tends to work more effectively with the region's freer states. And other than India, with whom bilateral relations have flourished even as Modi has undermined democracy, countries in this region where leaders have reversed democratic progress often have become as unpredictable in their relations with Washington as in approaches to other domestic and foreign policy issues.

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Cover photo: A police officer rides atop an armored personnel carrier during the start of a lockdown, owing to a rise in COVID-19 cases, in Navotas, in Metropolitan Manila, Philippines, on July 16, 2020.
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