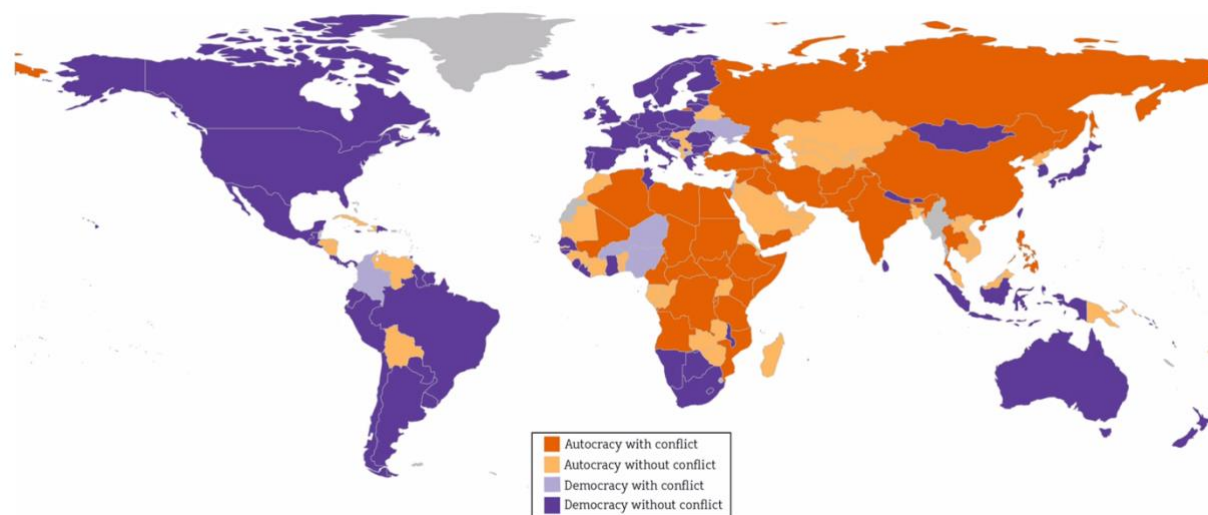


Democracy in South and Southeast Asia in Danger: Are the Democratic Attributes Being Replaced by Autocrats?

By Air Chief Marshal Gagan Bulathsinghala



Map courtesy <https://www.wzb.eu/en/article/autocratization-and-its-consequences>

The current wave of autocratization involves more and economically stronger countries than in the past 120 years. Targeted disinformation, toxic polarization, and autocratization reinforce each other, creating a vicious cycle that affects both democratic and authoritarian regimes. The world map shows democracies as well as autocracies, indicating whether they were involved in armed conflict (domestic and international) in 2021. Most democratic countries were peaceful in 2021 (dark purple).

Abstract

In 2024, elections across 64 nations, representing nearly half of the world's population, will impact international

affairs and democracy worldwide. South Asia, including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives, faces political, economic, and governance

challenges. For instance, Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina secured her fourth term amid controversy and opposition boycott. In Southeast Asia, 11 countries with diverse cultures face similar challenges. Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s election in the Philippines highlights vulnerabilities in democracy, while Indonesia's presidential election saw President Prabowo Subianto and his running mate Gibran Rakabuming Raka win decisively but face legal challenges. These developments raise concerns about democracy and governance. Authoritarian populism and political suppression may weaken democratic institutions. As the 2024 elections unfold, the world will watch how these regions navigate political landscapes and whether democratic principles are upheld. Limiting executive power, broad mobilization, governance changes, united opposition, and international support for democracy are key in resisting autocratic trends. Building on existing research, analysis suggests further study into autocratization and democratization. Despite these efforts, democracy remains under strain, highlighting the need to deepen our understanding of these dynamics.

Elections in South and Southeast Asia

In 2024, elections will take centre stage globally, marked by historic significance. A record number of voters across at least 64 nations are

poised to participate in the polls. These countries represent a combined population of about 49% of the people in the world, and the results of the national elections will prove consequential for years to come. The state of democracy globally seems dire, and unfortunately, the situation could get worse.

South and Central Asia is now the second most autocratic region in the world. More than nine out of ten people, or 93% of the population reside in electoral autocracies like India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Kazakhstan.

Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are closed autocracies, accounting for 4% of the regional population. A mere 3% reside in electoral democracies, including countries like Armenia, and Georgia, while only one country, Bhutan, is a liberal democracy. In 2023, only Mongolia descended from an electoral democracy regime type to the democratic “grey zone”.

https://www.v-dem.net/documents/43/v-dem_dr2024_lowres.pdf

Further South Asia is a region that comprises eight countries, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and Maldives. Most of these countries have a democratic form of governance. Further, Southeast Asia comprises eleven countries of impressive diversity in

religion, culture and history: Brunei, Myanmar, Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. These are also some of the world's most dynamic regions economically, a factor which largely accounts for its growing international significance.

Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina won for the fourth consecutive term in January. However, the country's main opposition party boycotted the election in protest of a month-long crackdown on political dissent. President Prabowo Subianto was formally confirmed as Indonesia's, decisively beating two rivals who have promised to file a legal complaint over February's election. Defense Minister Prabowo and his vice presidential running mate, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, won most of the votes on February 14, winning 59 per cent, or more than 96 million. Further, the electoral victory of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. in the 2022 Philippine presidential election, provides an overview of the structural vulnerabilities of Philippine democracy, and the contingent factors that facilitated Marcos Jr.'s electoral success. Marcos Jr.'s victory was the latest victory of authoritarian populism. " *Democracy is based upon the conviction that there are extraordinary possibilities in ordinary people.*" -Harry Emerson Fosdick.

Gross National Happiness

It is also imperative to note that there is one country in South Asia that has never had a democratic government. Bhutan has never had a democratic government, being a relatively small landlocked country in the Eastern Himalayas. It was ruled by a monarchy until 2008 when it transitioned to a constitutional monarchy. The Wangchuck dynasty has ruled Bhutan since 1907. The kings of Bhutan were absolute monarchs until the 1950s when they started to gradually decentralize power. In 2008, the fourth king of Bhutan voluntarily abdicated the throne in favor of his son and initiated the process of democratization. In 2008, Bhutan held its first-ever parliamentary elections, which resulted in the formation of a democratic government. The king of Bhutan remains the head of state, but the country is now governed by a parliamentary system. The country has now transitioned to a constitutional monarchy and has a democratic government.

Further, the advent and concept of "Gross National Happiness" (GNH) germinated in the mind of Bodhisattva Druk Gyelpo. It was conceptualized by the 4th King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, in 1972 when it was declared as "more important than Gross

Domestic Product. The concept implies that sustainable development should take a holistic approach towards notions of progress and give equal importance to non-economic aspects of wellbeing. The nine domains of GNH are psychological well-being, health, time use, education, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity and resilience, and living standards.

Third Wave of Autocratization

Further, in the past few years, we have witnessed a third wave of autocratization, characterized by the gradual decline of democratic regime attributes. It is indeed unfolding and mainly affecting democracies with gradual setbacks under a legal facade.

The definition of autocratization is a substantial de-facto decline of core institutional requirements for electoral democracy. This notion is more encompassing than the frequently used term democratic backsliding, which suggests an involuntary reversal back to historical precedents. The notion of democracy is based on Robert Alan Dahl's famous conceptualisation of electoral democracy as "polyarchy", namely clean elections, freedom of association, universal suffrage, an elected executive, as well as freedom

of expression and alternative sources of information. Dahl was an American political theorist and Sterling Professor of Political Science at Yale University. He established the pluralist theory of democracy, in which political outcomes are enacted through competitive, if unequal, interest groups, and introduced "polyarchy" as a descriptor of actual democratic governance. In his book *On Democracy*, Dahl addressed the question "Why should we support democracy?" and argued that "democracy has at least democracies: Avoiding tyranny, Essential rights and General freedom. In addition, Dahl sets out five conditions that favor democratic institutions. He deems three of them essential and the remaining two solely favorable. Essential conditions for democracy are; Control of the military and police by elected officials, Democratic beliefs and political culture, and No strong foreign control hostile to democracy. Further, the favorable conditions for democracy are A modern market economy and society and Weak subcultural pluralism.

Huntington and The Third Wave

Additionally, Samuel P. Huntington is a political scientist at Harvard University, published in the *Journal of Democracy* and further expounded in his 1991 book, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Democratization waves

have been linked to sudden shifts in power distribution among the great powers, which created openings and incentives to introduce sweeping domestic reforms. Huntington describes three waves; the first "slow" wave of the 19th century, a second wave after World War II, and a third wave beginning in the mid-1970s in southern Europe, followed by Latin America and Asia. Though his book does not discuss the collapse of the Soviet bloc, several scholars have taken the "Third Wave" to include the democratic transitions of 1989–1991. Further, according to Huntington, the rise of the Third Wave is derived from five main causative factors: decrease in legitimacy of authoritarian regimes due to increased popular expectation of periodic and competitive elections, and/or military failure. Also in Huntington's 1991 book, *The Third Wave*, Huntington defined a democratic wave as "*a group of transitions from non-democratic to democratic regimes that occur within a specified period of time and that significantly outnumber transitions in the opposite directions during that period of time.*" (Huntington 1991, 15)

The decline of democratic regime attributes and autocratization has emerged as a conspicuous global challenge. Two key issues are not yet settled in this refreshed field. First, researchers agree that contemporary democracies erode gradually and

under legal disguise. Further, democratic breakdowns used to be rather sudden events, for instance, military coups and relatively easy to identify empirically. Now, multi-party regimes have slowly become less meaningful in practice, making it increasingly difficult to pinpoint the end of democracy. Yet, in the face of this emerging consensus, we lack the appropriate conceptual and empirical tools to systematically analyze such obscure processes. The second key issue is partly a product of the first, which is that analysts disagree about how momentous the current wave of autocratization is. Some draw parallels to the breakdown of democracies in the 1930s and the rise of anti-democratic firebrands. Others maintain that the world is still more democratic, developed and liberated than ever during the twentieth century. The question is how wide and deep does the current autocratization trend cut in? We still lack the appropriate conceptual and empirical tools to diagnose and compare these elusive processes.

Autocratization Syndrome in Asia

Against this backdrop, advances by populist autocrats at the turn of the twenty-first century have intensified apprehension about the state of contemporary democracy. Some have depicted these notable trends in terms of democratic backsliding,

democratic erosion, or democratic regression. Others have dubbed these global tides the “third wave of autocratization” to depict the institutional decline of democratic attributes or regime transitions towards autocracy. Larry Diamond warned of this trend when he concluded; *“We are perilously close to and indeed have probably already entered what Huntington would have called a ‘third reverse wave’, that is, a period in world history in which the number of transitions away from democracy significantly outnumber those to democracy.”* Diamond, L. (2021).

Bangladesh

Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan on December 16, 1971, establishing itself as a democratic nation. Despite initial struggles with democracy under Pakistani rule, the formation of a democratic government in East Pakistan after the 1954 legislative election marked a turning point. Subsequent events, including the 1958 coup, the Six-point movement of 1966, and the 1970 general election, fueled Bengali nationalism and led to the armed liberation struggle, resulting in the birth of Bangladesh with democratic principles at its core. Upon adopting the Constitution in 1972, Bangladesh enshrined nationalism, socialism, democracy, and secularism as fundamental state

policies. Presently, the country operates as a parliamentary representative democratic republic, with the Prime Minister as the head of government and a multi-party system in place. In January 2024, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina secured a controversial re-election amidst opposition boycotts and allegations of irregularities, raising concerns about the election's legitimacy due to the lack of a neutral caretaker government and violent crackdowns on dissent. Despite international pressure, the West seems willing to engage with the regime, while China expands its influence in Bangladesh. The current government's alignment with China and economic challenges, along with growing authoritarian tendencies, worsening economic conditions, and energy crises, could lead to unrest in 2024, potentially strengthening Chinese influence in the country.

India

India is increasingly regarded as slipping into the realm of “electoral autocracy,” witnessing a decline in democratic standards since PM Narendra Modi assumed power in 2014. This decline doesn't follow the traditional pattern of coups or arrests but manifests through legal suppression of opposition, media intimidation, and centralization of executive authority. Under PM Modi's leadership, the legitimacy of the opposition is being undermined, raising doubts about India's status

as the world's largest democracy. Despite differing classifications by democracy watchdogs, India is commonly labeled a "hybrid regime," straddling between democracy and autocracy. This shift was marked by Freedom House's downgrade to "Partly Free" in 2021 and the Varieties of Democracy project categorizing India as an "electoral autocracy." This transition affects a significant portion of the global population, with India's downgrade impacting billions worldwide. The question of India's democratic status is not only pivotal for the country itself but reflects broader global democratic trends. As the world's most populous nation, India's political trajectory shapes the global battle for democracy. While India's formal democratic institutions face pressure, the disqualification of prominent political rivals and restrictions on citizens' freedoms have contributed to its hybrid regime status.

Malaysia

Similarly, in Malaysia, colonial-era legislation that empowered the government of the day to crack down on the opposition has persisted over time. Most notably, the country's Sedition Act of 1948, which empowers the government to investigate and arrest persons who engage in conducts of "seditious tendency," has remained, even with numerous pre-electoral promises to

repeal it. As the dominant autocratic Barisan Nasional's popularity waned after the Asian Financial Crisis in the late 1990s, it used these repressive laws to repeatedly justify repression against anti-government protestors and reform activists over the next two decades. To this day, these laws have remained on the books even as opposition parties toppled the autocratic incumbent for the first time in 2018, and again in 2022.

Maldives

Maldives initially became a republic in 1952 but reverted to a monarchy after seven months. It was under the British as a protectorate from 1887 until 1965. The country embraced democracy in 2008, holding its first multiparty elections and adopting a presidential representative democratic republic framework. President Ibrahim Nasir led Maldives back to republic status on November 11th, 1968, followed by President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's long tenure from 1978 to 2008. Today, Maldives faces significant transitions, including a push for democracy, economic growth, and environmental challenges like global warming. However, democracy in the Maldives remains fragile, marked by coups, judicial interventions, and political unrest since 2008. In the meantime, the transition in 2008, has had various forms of turbulence

and periods of political unrest have been visible in the political fabric. One such is the recent tagline of “*India Out*” campaign by the opposition, which protested against an alleged Indian military presence in Maldives despite controversy and highlighted concerns over free speech limitations. While recent elections were relatively peaceful, issues persist, indicating incomplete adherence to democratic norms since 2008. Depicting Maldives' politics as a rivalry between China and India oversimplifies its complexities. Without cross-party efforts to uphold the constitution and democratic principles, the nation's democracy remains vulnerable.

Pakistan

Pakistan's democracy reflects a complex interplay of historical and contemporary factors, often marked by imbalanced power distribution and a tug-of-war between authoritarianism and democratic governance. Since gaining independence in 1947, Pakistan has operated under an asymmetric federal system, with elected officials at multiple levels. However, political instability, civil-military conflicts, corruption, and periodic military coups have led to fluctuations between civilian and military rule. Challenges to democracy in Pakistan include disparities in voter participation, electoral credibility concerns, and internal issues within political parties. While the

Constitution guarantees fundamental rights such as freedom of speech, religion, and association, their practical realization faces persistent obstacles. Despite being a multiparty democracy, a two-party dominance emerged after the Fall of Dhaka in 1971. The state's counter-terrorism efforts often balance national security with individual liberties, highlighting the delicate nature of upholding constitutional values. Strengthening democracy in Pakistan requires a commitment to respecting constitutional principles and safeguarding citizens' rights.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka boasts Asia's oldest democracy, achieving universal suffrage in 1931, well ahead of its independence in 1948. Despite a history of competitive politicking and high political participation, the country has also grappled with recurring violence, including ethnic riots, insurgencies, and a prolonged conflict with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), lasting nearly three decades. This presents a paradox; while Sri Lankans highly value the franchise and hold free and fair elections, they also tolerate ethno-religious violence. Initially seen as progressing toward a liberal democracy post-independence, true liberal democracy requires more than just elections; it necessitates civil liberties, an independent judiciary, civil society engagement,

minimal corruption, and checks on executive power. Political participation has also been high, with turnout at the 2015 and 2019 presidential elections exceeding 80 percent. Yet this is also a country that has hardly gone a decade since independence without experiencing major violence in the form of ethnic riots and pogroms, left-wing insurgencies, and an internal conflict between the Government and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) that lasted nearly thirty years (DeVotta 2019). Sri Lanka's current trend towards autocratization is linked with Buddhist nationalism, posing a threat not only to democratic and liberal values but also to minority rights and reconciliation efforts in the post-war era.

Singapore

In other cases, autocratization has stretched over a long duration in legalistic institutions. In Singapore, a series of legislations passed in parliament within the past decade have strengthened executive powers to act against state-identified criticisms of the judiciary, online falsehoods, and foreign interference.

Thailand

In Thailand, the first electoral return in 2019 did not signify the

restoration of democracy but rather a step towards the institutionalization of authoritarian rule. The general elections were held in Thailand on 14 May 2023 to elect 500 members of the House of Representatives. The Move Forward Party, led by Pita Limjaroenrat, surprised analysts by winning the most seats, followed by fellow opposition party Pheu Thai who had won the most seats in the 2011 and 2019 elections. Turnout was a record 75.22%. The elections were held using a parallel voting system as in the 1997 and 2007 constitutions, in contrast to the mixed-member apportionment system used in 2019. Like in 2019, the elected prime minister did not need to be a member of the House and would be chosen by the full National Assembly, including the 250 military-appointed members of the Senate, for a total 376-seat majority. Due to the structure of the National Assembly, experts had warned of a possible gridlock scenario in which the current opposition parties secure more than half of the House votes but are obstructed in the Senate. Additionally, the Election Commission had received criticism over untrustworthiness, unprofessionalism, and bias in its conduction of the voting process. The overt seizures of power by the military regimes in Thailand in 2014 marked an abrupt reversal to autocracy after an interregnum of democratic rule.

Vietnam

Accordingly, the Asian countries studied in this special issue have shown a syndrome of autocratization that is both familiar and distinct. Regimes like Vietnam have remained staunchly authoritarian. Under Nguyen Phu Trong's leadership, the Vietnamese communist regime has clenched its fists by centralizing party rule, regulating cyberspace, and cracking down on civil society. Elsewhere, autocratization has made measurable advances through the breakdown of the electoral process, disbandment of opposition parties, and volatile regime change that resembles past patterns and conventional autocratic repertoires. *"Autocrats have learned to talk democratically and walk autocratically, maintaining a legal façade of democracy while harassing the opposition and shrinking space for loyal dissent."* - Maya Tudor.

Conceptualisation of "Autocratization"

"Autocratization" is defined as a process of *culminating autocratic qualities* within any regime type, including hybrid and democratic regimes, rather than as the negation of democratic institutional attributes or regime transitions. Thinking of autocratization as a continuous and

overarching concept independently from democratization allows us to locate critical autocratization developments in a porous, elusive, and fluctuating process. Most importantly, it accommodates contemporary developments that have displayed a surplus of innovative authoritarian and illiberal practices that do not uniformly manifest in changes to core democratic institutions. The traction towards autocracy in recent years has been *"substantive and dynamic rather than negative and systemic," "gradual and subtle"* rather than sudden and dramatic. The conceptualisation of "autocratization" is an attempt to avoid emerging debates in the political science literature over regime transition, particularly democratic backsliding. As a first-order concept, this conceptualization accommodates a continuum of characteristics that do not necessarily culminate in specific junctures of autocratic consolidation, democratic breakdown, regression, or backsliding. Moreover, it is also flexible enough to allow us to identify and include in this special issue societal groups' *"perceptions of regime autocratization"* as a second-order variable. We define this variable as the degree to which specific societal groups believe that a regime is undergoing autocratization. This variable is separate and distinct from whether

the regime is substantively autocratizing or not. Let's discuss the democratic architecture of a few of the countries in the Asian region that are very relevant in this context.

Democratic Decline Amidst Autocratic Rise

Autocratization has also unfolded through espoused popular will under democracies. Situated against the institutional failings of heavy-headed repression in response, adhered to the pattern of culminating fine-grained autocratic attributes within democratic systems. The values of democracy, including the right to choose leaders in free and fair elections, freedom of the press, and the rule of law, are under assault and in retreat globally. A quarter-century ago, at the end of the Cold War, it appeared that totalitarianism had at last been vanquished and liberal democracy had won the great ideological battle of the 20th century.

Conclusion

Finally, can we remain hopeful that countries won't revert to autocracy? The answer remains ambiguous. Since 2022, the resurgence of democracy and opposition against democratic regimes has escalated, posing significant challenges to the long-term stability of democratic systems. Therefore, curbing support

for autocracy becomes crucial for sustaining democratic stability and reversing the trend of autocratization. This trend represents a deepening of the unfolding third wave of autocratization indeed. It mainly affects democracies with gradual setbacks under a legal façade. While this is a cause for concern, the historical perspective presented shows that panic is not warranted, the current declines are relative, and the global share of democratic countries remains close to its all-time high.

An analysis of these developments reveals that factors such as limitations on executive power, widespread mobilization, changes in governance, a united opposition aligned with civil society, and international backing for democracy have been pivotal in countering autocratic shifts. Building on existing research, and analysis highlights the conditions conducive to halting or undoing contemporary autocratization. Its risk avoidance is against drawing broad conclusions from a limited set of cases without considering alternative scenarios. Hence, it urges intellectuals and political commentators to conduct supplementary comprehensive analyses, including reviewing instances where autocratization has succeeded. However, still today, democracy finds itself battered and weakened. Our endeavors should be

to enhance our understanding of both the processes of autocratization and democratization.

The writer has demonstrated a commitment to thoroughness by diligently integrating open-source information into this essay. Also commendably recognize and value the personal insights shared within this discussion. In today's complex and ever-changing global and regional landscape, it is imperative to grasp the intricacies of ongoing dynamics. Only through such understanding can effective strategies be formulated and implemented to navigate the complexities of our world.



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