

1 Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has presented significant challenges to democracies around the world, with some leaders using the opportunity to maximize their power and silence oppositional forces (Diamond 2020a). While even established democracies have been affected, younger post-authoritarian states have shown to be particularly vulnerable towards these autocratization attempts. This is because such polities typically do not (yet) possess well-entrenched democratic institutions, and autocratic actors left over from the previous regime remain deeply rooted in society. Southeast Asia has been no exception in this regard. Three of the region's democracies that emerged as a result of the 'third wave' of democratization in the 1980s and 1990s (namely, the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia) saw their democratic quality declining during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the Philippines, populist President Rodrigo Duterte was given emergency powers that opposition groups described as a 'virtual blank check' (Holmes and Hutchcroft 2020). Similarly, while the Thai government's declaration of a state of emergency helped it to successfully contain the spread of the virus, it also facilitated a 'clampdown on free speech' (HRW 2020). In Indonesia, finally, the national police issued a circular in early April 2020 that asked its officers to particularly scrutinize citizen 'insults' of the president and other state officials over the handling of the pandemic (Ghaliya 2020).

However, while the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated processes of democratic decline in Southeast Asia's third-wave democracies, it did not trigger them. Indeed, in all three countries, democratic erosion was taking place long before the pandemic began. This suggests that leaders aiming to pursue their illiberal ambitions during the pandemic found it particularly easy to do so in polities already damaged by prior anti-democratic campaigns (Croissant 2020). In this pattern of pre-pandemic democratic decline, Southeast Asia once again reflects a much broader trend. Starting in 2006, there had been an intense debate among democracy scholars about the existence and extent of a global democratic recession. This debate focused on the question of whether democracy, globally and as a system, was receding or whether these depictions were needlessly overdrawn. The first camp in this debate believed that the quality of democracy was indeed eroding. Larry Diamond, leading this group, maintained in 2015 that 'the world has been in a mild but protracted democratic recession since about 2006' (Diamond 2015: 144). The authors of the main democracy indexes tended to agree with Diamond. The Economist's 2019 Democracy Index (The Economist 2019), for instance, recorded 'the worst average global score since the index was first produced in 2006'. Similarly, the

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2020 Freedom in the World report warned that ‘2019 was the 14th consecutive year of decline in global freedom’ (Freedom House 2020).

But other authors held a more optimistic view. Wolfgang Merkel (2014: 18), for instance, claimed that analysing the data from several democracy indexes between 1990 and 2010 ‘does not give any evidence to the crisis hypothesis’. Even in 2018, when the post-2010 data had become available, he asked whether ‘the crisis of democracy [is] an invention of theoreticians . . . in pursuit of an exaggerated normative democratic ideal?’ (Merkel 2018a: 3). Answering this question, he and his co-authors concluded that ‘there is no general crisis of democracy but nonsimultaneous developments across different partial regimes and countries that have strengthened and weakened the quality and stability of advanced democracies’ (Merkel 2018b). To some extent, Merkel’s conclusions are the result of his exclusive focus on ‘advanced’ democracies (as opposed to Diamond, who included polities with a wide range of democratic quality). But this difference in scope only partly explains the gap between Diamond’s and Merkel’s judgments, given that the democracy indexes picked up declines in established democracies as well.

Even among those who believed that a pre-pandemic democratic crisis was taking place, there were significant differences when it came to identifying the causes. Some were searching for causes within democracies themselves, such as an increasing crisis of public trust in democratic institutions (Schmidt 2015); escalating inequality (Solt 2008); the struggle of political parties to stay relevant in politics (van Biezen 2014); the rise of identity politics, unleashed partly by social media (Bennett 2012); or apathy with routine democratic procedures, including elections (Blais, Gidengil, Nevitte and Nadeau 2004). Others, by contrast, focused on democracy’s enemies that were intent on eroding it, such as populists (Barr 2009); autocratic strongmen (Lancaster 2014); anti-immigration groups (van Spanje 2010); or oligarchs – and other veto players¹ – who use their power to distort democratic processes (Winters 2011). In short, the debate concentrated on the question of whether democracy was destabilizing itself, or whether it was being destabilized.

While the outbreak of COVID-19 has disrupted this scholarly discussion somewhat, understanding the global patterns of pre-pandemic democratic decline remains key to analysing the trajectory of democracy during the crisis response and its aftermath. In fact, in many cases, it was the particular nature of

¹ Veto players are defined here as individual or collective actors who have the power to extort significant policy or material concessions from central political institutions, often in exchange for lending legitimacy and support to these institutions. Thus, the definition used here does not rise to Tsebelis’ (2002: 19) definitional threshold of a veto player as an actor ‘whose agreement is necessary to change the status quo’.

a polity's pre-pandemic democratic erosion that shaped the way its leaders responded to the COVID-19 crisis. Indonesia, with its host of democratic deficiencies, and the United States, where President Donald Trump attempted systematically to dismantle democratic institutions, are two prime examples of polities in which a pre-pandemic democratic crisis predetermined a poor response to the COVID-19 outbreak (Diamond 2020b; Mietzner 2020a). Similarly, the dynamics of democratic decline prior to the pandemic are intrinsically linked to the effectiveness with which leaders tried to use the COVID-19 crisis to their political advantage, and they are certain to influence the character of democratic life in the post-pandemic order as well.

This Element studies Southeast Asia as a case of pre-pandemic democratic decline. It asks whether democracy in the region was indeed in decline prior to the COVID-19 outbreak; if so, what the extent of that decline was; what its drivers were; and, finally, what Southeast Asia tells us about patterns of global democratic recession. Southeast Asia and specific countries within it were chosen as a case study of democratic crisis for two main reasons. First, historically, the region has shown patterns of democratization similar to those in other world regions. It largely followed both the trend of postcolonial democratic enthusiasm and of the authoritarian surge of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Some of its key countries were then also part of the third wave of democratization in the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, analysing democratic quality in Southeast Asia can deliver insights into broader global trends. Second, unlike Eastern Europe or Latin America, which have largely uniform political systems (parliamentarism and presidentialism respectively), Southeast Asia's political regime types differ widely. In the same vein, the level of economic development of the region's countries is highly diverse, as are their religious patterns. Accordingly, choosing Southeast Asia based on both similarities with other world regions and high levels of internal diversity (Ebbinghaus 2005) allows for an analysis of democratic decline patterns beyond country-specific characteristics.

Conceptually, this Element is most interested in how *democracies* declined prior to the pandemic – and not so much in how some electoral authoritarian regimes (such as Cambodia) slipped towards full autocracy or how others (such as Myanmar and Malaysia) started democratic transitions that were eventually aborted. As Diamond pointed out, this latter set of questions is highly relevant too, but at the heart of the global debate on eroding democratic resilience is the discussion of the specific mechanisms through which democracies get damaged. Thus, this Element uses the lens of democratic consolidation and deconsolidation theory to assess trends of pre-pandemic democratic decline in Southeast Asia's post-authoritarian polities. The usage of this analytical frame provides, in comparison to alternative approaches, a stronger focus on the

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question of how and when decline happens in democratic systems. By contrast, a broader approach of looking at democratic erosion trends – such as the concept of autocratization (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019) – would force us also to explore the decline of democratic quality in autocracies and semi-democracies, which operate under very different conditions. The concept of democratic backsliding, for its part, focuses on ‘state-led debilitation’ of democracies (Bermeo 2016: 5), missing other, more structural drivers captured by the deconsolidation paradigm. Consequently, this Element discusses only those countries in Southeast Asia that experienced processes of democratic consolidation in their contemporary histories: Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand.

In its analysis, this Element finds much evidence in Southeast Asia for pre-pandemic democratic deconsolidation. None of the three Southeast Asian countries that began processes of democratic consolidation between the late 1980s and early 2000s was able to sustain its levels of progress, and all have fallen back behind their past democratic peaks. The Element argues that three major factors toxically coincided to produce the outcome of deconsolidation. The first is a set of long-term structural democratic deficiencies that prevented the three polities from turning their early successes of consolidation into further progress. These weaknesses are: persistent clientelistic structures in society and politics; the ongoing politicization of the security forces; and the existence – even at times of democratic peaks – of autocratic enclaves in the broader polity. On their own, however, such defects do not necessarily lead to deconsolidation – they often just result in democratic stagnation or slower progress. In the cases examined here, deconsolidation occurred when these deficiencies combined with the second factor: that is, rising inequality and the politicization of this inequality (mostly by a populist) in the vocabulary of each country’s main identity cleavage. Finally, the long-term impact of this democratic crisis has been sustained by the third factor: namely, a middle class endorsing non-democratic alternatives to secure its material and social status.

The rest of this introduction reviews some important works on the decline of democracy in Southeast Asia; introduces the concepts of democratic consolidation and deconsolidation; explains the selection of the specific countries of analysis; and lays out the structure of this Element.

1.1 Crisis of Democracy in Southeast Asia?

Within the broader debate on a pre-pandemic global recession of democracy, there was an extensive discussion prior to the COVID-19 outbreak about whether such democratic erosion was taking place in Southeast Asia as well. These discussions were hardly surprising, given that the region has traditionally been viewed as a difficult place for democratic practices to take root in (Slater

2008; Rodan 2018). The serial collapses of democracies in Southeast Asia in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s; the long period of almost ubiquitous authoritarianism from the 1970s to the 1990s; the continued endurance of many autocratic regimes since then; and events such as the Thai coups of 2006 and 2014 have made Southeast Asia a highly unlikely candidate for successful, cross-regional democratization. Thus, amid a rich literature on democracy's poor record in Southeast Asia, it is only natural that some academic publications picked up the theme of a (new) democratic crisis in the region in the early 2010s, beginning a discourse that stretched to the COVID-19 outbreak in 2019.

The scholarly contributions to this debate were diverse in their approaches and their identification of possible causes of democratic crises. Chambers and Croissant (2010), for instance, traced the crisis of democracy in Southeast Asia to unresolved problems in the civil–military relations of its key countries. Croissant and Bünte (2011) broadened this perspective, but argued that the crisis of democracy in Southeast Asia was a crisis of democratic governance – thus excluding other possible factors. Conversely, Banpasirichote Wungaeo, Rehbein and Wun'gaeo (2016) offered a wide range of explanatory propositions for democracy's difficulties in Southeast Asia, from 'the legacy of the Cold War, rapid economic development and liberalization, external economic globalization, the important role of informal politics, powerful elites, and weak but emerging middle classes'. Increasingly, authors have also looked at the competition between China and the United States as a driver of democratic crisis in Southeast Asia (Stromseth and Marston 2019: 7). While differing in their specific emphases, all these works agreed that Southeast Asian democracy was indeed trapped in a new crisis, following episodes of democratization in the 2000s. Slater (2017) presented the most pessimistic of these views, writing that 'it feels in Southeast Asia as if democracy could readily be extinguished entirely'.

Others were less gloomy. Thomas Pepinsky (2020: 1), for example, concluded that: '[T]here is no evidence of region-wide democratic erosion in Southeast Asia, in either the short or medium term.' Similarly, some avoided the term 'crisis' altogether, preferring instead to speak of 'challenges' to Southeast Asian democracy. One contribution (Kofi Annan Foundation 2017: 10) found that: '[W]hile an increasing number of ASEAN countries have transitioned towards or adopted democracy . . . , the region still has a difficult relationship with democratic practice.' Although easily dismissible as policy speak, this position took a longer term view, highlighting that ASEAN housed no democracies at all in the late 1960s and 1970s, while there are at least some today. Another more positive angle on the Southeast Asian democracy theme emerged after the elections in Malaysia in May 2018, which (temporarily)

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removed the country's hegemonic ruling coalition from power after more than sixty years. John Watts (2018) called this event, in combination with another competitive election held in East Timor in the same month, a 'cause to celebrate democracy in Southeast Asia'. Indonesia, he pointed out, also completed another round of local elections at about the same time. Others again, such as Case (2017), have differentiated between the various countries, highlighting democratic collapse in Thailand while praising democracy's durability in Indonesia. Is, therefore, the picture of Southeast Asian democracy being stuck in a serious crisis overdrawn?

Embedding itself within this debate about the state of Southeast Asia's pre-pandemic democracy, this Element offers a conceptual and systematic assessment of when the region's democracies saw peaks in their democratic quality; the extent to which this democratic quality has deteriorated over time; and the factors behind this trend. The analysis will also show how pre-pandemic developments in Southeast Asian democracies aligned with illiberal actions of their leaders during their particular COVID-19 responses. As indicated, the paradigmatic frame for this analysis is the theory of democratic consolidation and deconsolidation. The following subsections explain why Linz and Stepan's notion of consolidation, if revised and extended by newer theories of deconsolidation, can equip the analysis of democratic decline in Southeast Asia with effective tools of assessment and interpretation.

1.2 Democratic Consolidation and its Critics

As stated above, this Element is primarily concerned with assessing how Southeast Asian *democracies* declined prior to the pandemic – as opposed to analysing changes in democratic quality in the region's many autocracies and semi-democracies. For this approach, the paradigm of democratic deconsolidation is best positioned to deliver useful insights, as it focuses strictly on the internal dynamics of declining democracies. It is therefore imperative to start the exploration of democratic consolidation and deconsolidation in pre-pandemic Southeast Asia by introducing clear definitions. Chief among them is the definition of democratic consolidation – the contrasting but inseparably linked counterpart of deconsolidation. Among the definitions of democratic consolidation, the most prominent remains that developed by Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan. Based on their conceptual criteria, a democracy can be considered consolidated if no significant actors try to erect a non-democratic order or secede from the state; if a majority of the public supports democracy and rejects anti-system alternatives; and if resolving conflicts within the constitutional regulations set by the democratic state becomes the norm (Linz and Stepan 1996: 16).

This definition, and the frame within which it was placed, soon attracted criticism. Most of the critiques focused on the democratic consolidation model's supposed assumption of a teleological, linear development of democracy towards a fixed end state, namely consolidation. Guillermo O'Donnell, for instance, argued that the notion of consolidation sets an idealized goal that all democracies were (wrongly) assumed to move towards. 'This mode of reasoning', O'Donnell (1996: 38) maintained, 'carries a strong teleological flavor. Cases that have not "arrived" at full institutionalization, or that do not seem to be moving in this direction, are seen as stunted, frozen, protractedly unconsolidated, and the like.' Thus, he claimed, there were only two categories in the consolidation model: first, a vague category of 'unconsolidated' and, second, an idealized aim of 'consolidation'. While some of the critiques overstated the flaws in Linz and Stepan's model, they helped highlight three issues that it indeed overlooked or underemphasized: first, consolidation was conceptualized as a status rather than a process; second, it did say very little about the stages of consolidation that a democratizing polity has to pass; and, third, it underestimated the possibility of regression or deconsolidation.

Based on these critiques, a number of consolidation scholars amended the Linz and Stepan model in order to save the consolidation paradigm. Larry Diamond (1999: 65), for instance, clarified that consolidation was a process rather than a status. Taking this clarification further, Wolfgang Merkel (1998: 39–40), offered a sequential concept of consolidation featuring four stages: first, the establishment of constitutional organs and political institutions, including the electoral system and the catalogue of civil rights; second, the consolidation of the party system and of interest groups; third, behavioural change among veto actors; and, fourth, anchoring of democratic values among civil society and the broader population. With his model, Merkel established that consolidation is a staged process; that it requires certain preconditions to be fulfilled before consolidation can move to the next level; and that this process is reversible if progress in any of the four stages is rolled back. But while Merkel generally viewed the four stages as sequential, he was not dogmatic about this assumption. It is clear that there are overlaps – and interactions – between the various phases. This dynamism in Merkel's model – while overcoming some of the weaknesses inherent in Linz and Stepan's concept – make it a suitable analytical framework for this study. Most importantly, it will be used to measure democratic consolidation and deconsolidation in the examined case studies.

In spite of such modifications to the consolidation model, the impact of the initial attacks remained significant. In essence, the criticism marginalized the concept of democratic consolidation from the centre of democratic theory. To be sure, a number of writers continued to use various elements of Linz and Stepan's

work – such as the discussion on linkages between prior regime type and transition outcome – and students of democracy continued to read and apply their work (Maeda 2016; Kostelka 2017). But the notion of democratic consolidation quickly went out of fashion and was replaced by research on ‘democracy with adjectives’ (such as illiberal, deliberative, delegative or defective democracy) or on combinations between democracy and autocracy (such as competitive or electoral authoritarianism). However, in the context of rising populism and democratic crises, the notion of democratic consolidation has triggered new interest. This is because some authors have introduced the concept of democratic deconsolidation, which builds on but significantly revises the Linz and Stepan framework. And because there can be no deconsolidation without prior consolidation, Linz and Stepan are – as the next subsection demonstrates – again in the spotlight of comparative democracy studies.

1.3 Democratic Deconsolidation

In 2016 and 2017, Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk published two articles in *Journal of Democracy* that introduced the idea that democratic deconsolidation was taking place in many democracies around the world. Foa and Mounk (2017a: 9) proposed that democratic deconsolidation occurs if democracy ceases ‘to be the only game in town [and] when, at some later point, a sizable minority of citizens loses its belief in democratic values, becomes attracted to authoritarian alternatives, and starts voting for “antisystem” parties, candidates, or movements that flout or oppose constitutive elements of liberal democracy’. Thus, Foa and Mounk focused on the scenario that Linz and Stepan ignored, at least according to their critics: that is, the possibility that democracies can not only consolidate, but that they are just as able to regress or deconsolidate.

With their approach, Foa and Mounk added previously missing links to the Linz and Stepan model of democratic consolidation. While they did not invent the term ‘deconsolidation’ (see, for instance, McCoy and Smith 1995), Foa and Mounk developed it into a widely applicable concept. If even full democracies can deconsolidate, then this overcomes all three concerns voiced by Linz and Stepan’s critics: first, deconsolidation negates the notion of a teleological impetus of consolidation; second, it implies the existence of consolidation phases; and, third, Foa and Mounk not only concede the possibility of established democracies experiencing regression (which Diamond and Merkel had touched on), they made this process their primary analytical focus. Hence, while opening up new areas of inquiry, the introduction of democratic deconsolidation also allows us to revisit Linz and Stepan’s concept in a substantially revised and extended form. This is in spite of the fact that Foa and Mounk do not view their work as a revision and extension of the Linz and Stepan model – but as marking

its end (Foa and Mounk 2017b: 18). As suggested earlier, however, consolidation and deconsolidation are inseparably linked.

Although highly innovative, Foa and Mounk's description of deconsolidation as a process in which democracy ceases to be the only game in town remains conceptually vague. Thus, this Element spells out their notion of democratic deconsolidation into a more practical definition that locates deconsolidation within the context of a country's previous record of democratic consolidation. Democratic deconsolidation, then, is defined here as *the process through which existing democracies rewind, lose or otherwise fall behind their achievements in democratic development reached during prior phases of consolidation*. Further operationalizing this definition, and borrowing from Merkel, indicators of 'democratic achievements' being lost can be found in regressions in all four stages of consolidation: institution building; party system consolidation; elite behaviour; and the anchoring of democratic values in society. This definition further clarifies that (a) deconsolidation is not the same as democratic reversal, and deconsolidating democracies often retain their status as an electoral democracy (that is, as a minimalist democracy in which electoral competition takes place but other characteristics of a mature democracy are missing); (b) similar to consolidation, deconsolidation must be conceptualized as a staged process; and (c) deconsolidation, just as consolidation, is reversible.

What makes Foa and Mounk's deconsolidation research particularly relevant for this study is their use of post-authoritarian case studies as examples of what could happen to the West's consolidated democracies if they failed to address early warning signs of democratic decline. Foa and Mounk (2017: 10) assert that: '[W]hile the ascent of populist parties and movements is relatively new in North America and Western Europe, other regions show how democratic deconsolidation can signal a real danger for the stability of democratic governance, even in countries that appear to be doing very well according to more traditional measures.' They offer Venezuela and Poland as illustrations, but Southeast Asia's democracies (and former democracies) are suitable case studies as well. This Element analyses selected Southeast Asian polities in the same spirit with which Foa and Mounk looked at Venezuela and Poland. As polities that passed various stages of democratic consolidation in recent times, they deserve to be examined in their own right, but their experiences tell us much about global patterns of democratic development as well.

Foa and Mounk's ideas were met with a wave of protest that was similar in intensity to that attracted by Linz and Stepan twenty years earlier. But most of the critiques were not of a conceptual, but rather of an empirical nature. The thrust of the criticism was that Foa and Mounk exaggerated the extent of democratic decline in Western democracies (Alexander and Welzel 2017;

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Norris 2017). However, whether or not Foa and Mounk overstated the risk of democratic decline in long-established democracies is irrelevant for this study. This Element is more interested in Foa and Mounk's choice of polities such as Poland and Venezuela to illustrate the danger of democratic deconsolidation in non-Western democracies, and its potential replication in Western, fully consolidated democracies. This study, then, explores what the Southeast Asian case studies (which in many ways are comparable to Poland and Venezuela) bring to this discussion, regardless of the current state of Western democracies.

1.4 The Case Studies and Structure of this Element

As indicated earlier, this Element focuses on those Southeast Asian countries that have experienced phases of democratic consolidation in their recent political history. In order to identify such countries, the Element uses a simple but effective measure: it includes all countries for which the Freedom in the World index developed by Freedom House recorded the status of 'free' in five consecutive years at any point in their histories after 1973 (when the index began its assessments).² While the index assesses freedom rather than democracy, a rating of 'free' in five successive years is a strong indication that some form of consolidation in key areas of democratic development was taking place during that timeframe. Based on this approach, the countries qualifying for evaluation in this Element are Indonesia, which entered a period of democratic consolidation in the 2000s (it was rated 'free' by Freedom House from 2006 to 2013); Thailand, whose democracy peaked in the mid-1990s to early 2000s (it was rated 'free' without interruptions from 1998 to 2004); and the Philippines, which began an early phase of consolidation in the late 1980s (when it was rated 'free' from 1987 to 1989 and then again from 1996 to 2004).

The application of the deconsolidation model, and the criteria mentioned above, obviously lead to the exclusion of Southeast Asian nations that never entered periods of consolidation. This exclusion, while reducing the Element's empirical breadth, is necessary to maintain its analytical depth. For instance, while Myanmar and Malaysia began fragile democratic transitions in 2015 and 2018 respectively, these were ended by Myanmar's military coup in February 2021 and the return to power of Malaysia's former government party in 2020 (which later culminated in the suspension of parliament). Similarly, East Timor is excluded as it received its first 'free' ranking in 2018 and thus has not yet recorded five consecutive 'free' ratings. While some observers saw Cambodia on the path towards democratic

² Each year, the index classifies countries as 'free', 'partly free' or 'not free', based on an assessment of their political rights and civil liberties.