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Jokowi's Pyrrhic Victory: Indonesia's 2024 Elections and the Political Reinvention of Prabowo Subianto

MARCUS MIETZNER

Prabowo Subianto's victory in Indonesia's 2024 presidential elections was decisive, and it is widely accepted that incumbent President Joko Widodo's de facto endorsement of him played a significant role in this outcome. But the motivations of Widodo (commonly known as "Jokowi") for picking his former adversary as his heir, and the reasons for his determination to get Prabowo elected in a landslide, remain poorly understood. This article demonstrates that Jokowi selected Prabowo after other options had fallen through, and that he made his choice with full awareness of the risks and uncertainties involved. By implication, he also tolerated the danger a Prabowo presidency could pose to Indonesian democracy. Tempted by Prabowo's offer to make Jokowi's son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, his vice-presidential candidate, Jokowi went all-in and mobilized state resources to secure their triumph. Based on interviews with key actors, this article delivers a detailed picture of the factors that made Prabowo president—and that gave Jokowi few guarantees of continued influence.

Keywords: Indonesia, elections, democracy, autocracy, presidentialism.

On 10 February 2024, the state of Indonesia's democracy, the world's third largest, was on full display. It was the last day of campaigning

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in the country's presidential elections, and more than 100,000 people filled the Gelora Bung Karno stadium in Jakarta, the capital, to watch Prabowo Subianto speak.¹ Prabowo, Indonesia's minister of defence and a fixture in its politics for decades, delivered a medley of his biggest hits. His show included the condemnation of foreign interests that tried to manipulate Indonesia, the promise to lift citizens out of poverty, and the singing of nationalist songs. But intermixed with these traditional Prabowo themes were newer, softer tones. For instance, the screen in the stadium switched between real-time images of the profusely sweating Prabowo and video clips of his cartoon avatar—a cute, overweight and smiling uncle figure. The real Prabowo shed tears, raising his hands in prayer to display his new emphatic vulnerability. Most importantly, he promised to continue the policies of outgoing President Joko Widodo (commonly known as “Jokowi”). Everybody in the stadium understood that Prabowo was the president's favourite candidate for his succession, despite Jokowi's repeated protestations of neutrality. Jokowi's son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, was Prabowo's running mate. The president had toyed with the idea of campaigning openly for the pair, including in the stadium, but then decided otherwise.² Instead, he visited the hotel in which the Prabowo camp resided shortly after the stadium event had concluded.

The Gelora Bung Karno stadium was a curious site for Prabowo to celebrate his new alliance with Jokowi. In both the 2014 and 2019 elections, Jokowi had rallied in the exact same location against Prabowo. On both occasions, he had used a highly effective line against his electoral opponent, a former general. “I carry no historical burden”, Jokowi had shouted into the stadium in April 2019 as his supporters erupted in thunderous applause.³ Without spelling out the details, Jokowi's message was clear: Prabowo was a figure associated with the old autocratic regime, accused of kidnapping human rights activists in 1998 and various other transgressions. Jokowi, by contrast, was a post-authoritarian leader without a chequered record. Prabowo had also conducted rallies in the Gelora Bung Karno stadium against Jokowi in the past. In 2014, he had belittled Jokowi as an incompetent newcomer. Five years later, he had assembled his Islamist allies in the same spot, depicting the then-incumbent Jokowi as a president who was hostile to Muslims. “I will end the criminalization of Islamic leaders under this government”, Prabowo had promised in 2014 to the delight of his fans, many of whom wore traditional Muslim dress.⁴ After both the 2014 and 2019 elections, which Prabowo lost, some of his

hardcore supporters protested violently. In 2019, a police crackdown on the protests killed nine people.

What, then, explains the remarkable shift in the relationship between Jokowi and Prabowo? What, on the one hand, convinced Jokowi to not only reconcile with his two-time opponent but to pick him as his heir? And once he had made this choice, what motivated him to mobilize all available state resources to secure a first-round victory for him? What, on the other hand, led Prabowo to drop his populist demand for a complete revamp of the political system and instead heap praise on Jokowi's presidency? The answers to these questions are complex and require contextualization beyond a short-term analysis of the 2024 campaign. Therefore, this article systematically unpacks the structural conditions and the actions of key players that, in combination, shaped the outcome of the 2024 presidential elections. It demonstrates that Jokowi's extraordinarily high popularity allowed him to become the first president in Indonesian history to determine his successor. As well as cashing in on this popularity, he also launched the most intense campaign of state intervention in any national election since the demise of Suharto's New Order regime in 1998. In this, Jokowi displayed his trademark Machiavellian understanding of politics and his pragmatic understanding of democracy. But while he made his son vice president, he received no iron-clad guarantees of post-presidential influence for himself. Indeed, he jeopardized Indonesian democracy's reputation (and his own) in a high-risk game of political poker that could end with his marginalization.

To understand why Jokowi favoured Prabowo, and why he found it easy to get his former adversary elected, this article offers a step-by-step analysis of the process that made Prabowo president. It starts with a discussion of the sources of Jokowi's popularity. It proceeds to describe his initial plans to extend his own stay in power; his subsequent but aborted attempt to promote Ganjar Pranowo, the governor of Central Java, as his heir; and the factors that drove Jokowi to ultimately settle on Prabowo as his preferred successor instead. It then presents a detailed mapping of the migration of Jokowi's 2019 voters to the Prabowo camp and documents Jokowi's interventions to secure a one-round victory for his favourite. The article concludes by discussing the implications of all of this for Indonesian democracy.

Conceptually, the article posits Prabowo's rise as an insightful case of how some of today's largest democracies both formally persist and substantially erode.⁵ Jokowi's autocratic techniques—

which Prabowo is likely to continue—are representative of a pattern in which twenty-first-century democracies do not decline through coups or regime breakdowns, but slowly deteriorate without a dramatic rupture.⁶ This article draws from interviews and background discussions with the leading actors of the 2024 elections, including President Jokowi, Prabowo Subianto, Ganjar Pranowo, Anies Baswedan, cabinet ministers, pollsters, legislative candidates and activists. Some sources are not mentioned in the article, but their input helped shape the author’s analysis. Naturally, the responsibility for any factual or analytical errors rests with the author.

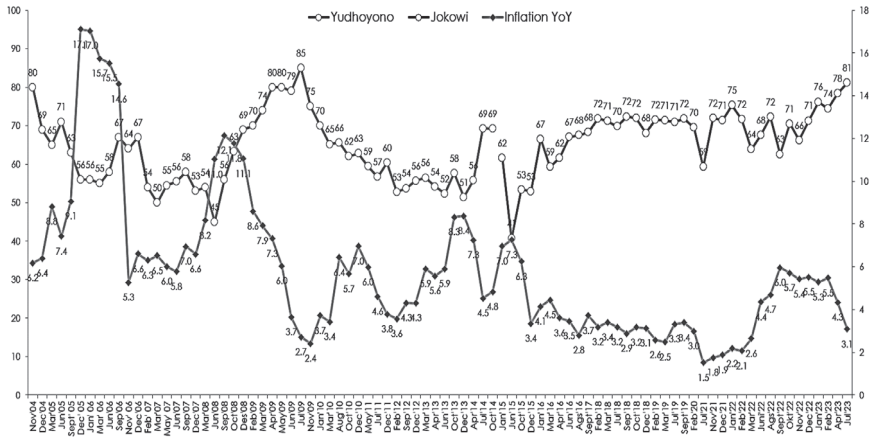
Jokowi’s Popularity

To understand the dynamics of Indonesia’s 2024 presidential elections, one must appreciate Jokowi’s remarkable popularity. Without this factor, he would not have been able to be the dominant player in determining the outcome of the ballot. Moreover, Jokowi fully understood that his approval rating gave him political weight. Throughout his two terms as president (2014–24), he interpreted it as his main competitive advantage over the leaders of political parties and other actors: “The level of trust in legislatures and parties is low. So if we are clean, if we work hard, if we deliver, we get the support of the people when facing them.”⁷ In other words, popularity was his primary political capital; it was something he possessed, and others did not. It could be used to sustain his centrality in Indonesia’s elite landscape, and to dish out rewards and punishments to his allies and foes who lacked his mass appeal. In January 2024, just before the presidential elections, Jokowi’s satisfaction rating among the electorate was 80 per cent. His predecessor, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, only reached 51 per cent at the same stage of his presidency. This difference goes a long way towards explaining why Yudhoyono would have found it hard to successfully engineer his succession, even if he had wanted to. Jokowi, by contrast, sat on a huge reserve of public backing that he could mobilize to move his hand-picked replacement into the electoral pole position.

What were the sources of Jokowi’s popularity? Chief among them was his ability to constrain inflation. Studies of presidential popularity—in Indonesia and elsewhere—have long established a strong link between inflation levels and a president’s approval ratings.⁸ Much more so than longer-term economic indicators such as

GDP growth rates, the impact of inflation is hard and immediate; it creates dissatisfaction among the poor *and* the more affluent. Jokowi grasped this early in his political career: “Even when I was mayor of Solo, I got rewards for keeping inflation low – at the time, it was 1.3 per cent in my city, while it was much higher nationally.”⁹ Back then, he learned that intervening in the market was essential to controlling prices. Releasing major food items from the state’s storehouses, providing additional aid when supplies ran low, and developing an early warning system for price increases became part of Jokowi’s repertoire of managing inflation. As president, he re-strengthened the role of the State Logistics Board, increased food assistance to the poor, and frequently visited markets to inquire about prices.¹⁰ “You always have to go to the market yourself to understand prices; you can’t believe what subordinates tell you”, he proclaimed during a market visit in Samarinda in 2023.¹¹ His special concern for inflation was also the result of an experience early on in his presidency. When he drastically cut fuel subsidies a few weeks after his inauguration, inflation skyrocketed and his approval rating dropped to 41 per cent (see Figure 1). Determined to never go through such a low again, inflation control became his top agenda.

Figure 1
Presidential Approval and Inflation in Indonesia, 2004–23



Source: Indikator Politik Indonesia.¹²

Jokowi's effective inflation control—he kept it at an average of 3.6 per cent during his presidency, compared with 7.1 per cent during the two terms of his predecessor¹³—also offered him an additional instrument to boost his standing. As it turned out, distributing food, cash and other items to the poor not only cushioned the impact of inflation, it created an independent source of societal gratitude. Realizing this, Jokowi increased the social assistance budget substantially and handed out aid personally whenever he could. Between 2015 and 2024, Jokowi doubled the annual social support budget to about 500 trillion Rupiah (US\$31 billion), which came in handy especially ahead of elections. As later sections will show, Jokowi went on a tour to hand out goods in the middle of the 2024 presidential campaign. Asked in a January 2024 survey about why they approved of Jokowi's job performance, 39 per cent of respondents said it was because he “gave aid to ordinary people”. His record in building infrastructure was a distant second (at 24 per cent), and his overall record and humble appearance followed at 8 and 7 per cent, respectively.¹⁴ Jokowi's aides tried to blend all these features into one overarching image of a man close to the people. Senior minister Luhut Pandjaitan explained in an interview during the 2024 campaign that Jokowi distributed aid to the people in person because he was from an ordinary background himself.¹⁵ Of course, Luhut argued, Jokowi gave them better infrastructure for the same reason.¹⁶

But Jokowi's efforts to build and maintain high popularity levels did not only rely on inflation control and the distribution of patronage. Much more so than Yudhoyono, he had no scruples in using his presidential powers to coercively manufacture a positive image of himself. Part of this campaign was the co-optation of major media conglomerates.¹⁷ During the 2014 elections, numerous television stations opposed Jokowi. However, by the 2019 elections, they had switched sides to support him. Some had not done so voluntarily. For example, Hary Tanoesoedibjo, whose television stations controlled about 40 per cent of the market share in 2017,¹⁸ pledged allegiance to Jokowi after being threatened with legal investigations.¹⁹ Aburizal Bakrie, owner of TV One, moved his station into the Jokowi camp for similar reasons.²⁰ As a result, Jokowi enjoyed mostly generous coverage in the mainstream media, with only a few niche outlets offering critical scrutiny. In the social media space, Jokowi also tightened controls. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when Jokowi's popularity was initially under pressure, the police set up a unit that

handled online criticism of the president. Perpetrators were “advised” that any further transgression would be prosecuted.²¹ Consequently, in a September 2020 opinion survey, 69.6 per cent of respondents agreed that citizens were “increasingly” afraid of stating their opinion freely.²² At the same time, most political parties and legislators were incorporated into the government, further narrowing the space for the expression of alternative views of Jokowi.²³ In his second term, 82 per cent of parliamentarians supported his government. With critical voices muted in society and state institutions, it was easy for Jokowi to consolidate his popularity as the foundation of his political power.

The Term Limit Evasion Campaign

Initially, Jokowi did not intend to use his hard-won popularity to handpick a successor. Instead, he wanted to mobilize it for himself. Not long after his second-term inauguration in late 2019, notions began to circulate that Jokowi wanted a third term in office.²⁴ Under amendments to the Constitution after the fall of Suharto’s authoritarian regime in 1998, presidents are limited to two terms. Changing this required another constitutional amendment. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the government’s attempt to push the issue picked up pace. Internally, Jokowi hinted that the pandemic had robbed him of valuable time to complete his agenda. He was most concerned about the fate of the planned new capital, Nusantara, which is being built in East Kalimantan. Convinced that only he could finish it and that his second term was insufficient to achieve this goal, he encouraged his aides to look for ways to let him stay in office beyond 2024. In a familiar pattern—later replicated to conceal his intervention in the 2024 presidential elections—he publicly denied having anything to do with the term limit evasion initiative. He answered questions on the matter by insisting that he was loyal to the Constitution, implying that if the Constitution was changed to allow for a third term, he would still be sticking to the rules. Despite the denials and gaslighting, his aides confirmed that Jokowi was interested in a third term and that his operators interpreted this as an order from him to make it happen.²⁵ Any lingering doubts about Jokowi’s involvement in the scheme dissipated when Luhut, the president’s main political fixer, took the lead and publicly advocated for a third Jokowi term in early 2022. Luhut claimed that “big data” showed around 110 million Indonesians were in favour of this.²⁶

But the third term campaign showed that Jokowi's popularity and his influence among elites, while formidable, had limits. Although citizens appreciated his presidency and most elites were loyal to him because he wielded presidential authority, neither the broader population nor political leaders wanted him to overstay his term. Indeed, voters wanted to uphold the existing constitutional rules, and elites supported leadership regeneration out of pure self-interest: they did not want Jokowi to block their own opportunities for advancement. Consequently, key leaders came out in opposition to the third-term extension. Most importantly, Megawati Sukarnoputri, the chairperson of Jokowi's party, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), refused to endorse the idea. She was unhappy with Jokowi's presidency, complaining that he had not listened to her and the party when governing. Her goal was to make a more loyal party cadre president through the 2024 elections. Meanwhile, Prabowo wanted to run for the presidency himself and, therefore, had no reason to back a third Jokowi term. Other party leaders also had presidential ambitions and hence withheld their endorsement. Even those politicians that Jokowi's office directly asked to make public statements of support only did so half-heartedly, and they quickly informed other elites that they had acted under pressure. In the end, Jokowi had to accept that his supermajority in parliament did not translate into a majority for a constitutional amendment. Noting that opinion polls also indicated popular rejection, Jokowi and his aides grudgingly (and quietly) dropped the initiative.

With a third term off the table, Jokowi's supporters explored other options. The most prominent was a proposal to postpone the 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections by two or three years. This would have not only extended Jokowi's term but also that of every legislator. Jokowi's inner circle hoped that the elites who were reluctant to endorse a third term for Jokowi would find a shorter extension more palatable, and that party politicians active in legislatures would welcome additional time in office without the need for an expensive campaign. With about half of Indonesian legislators losing their posts at each election, the expectations of Jokowi's aides were not unfounded. But the plan for an election postponement also foundered. Megawati, Prabowo and other political elites maintained their opposition. Non-incumbent candidates who had already spent money on preparing their campaigns protested loudly. As the elections drew nearer, the attempts to keep Jokowi in power for longer became increasingly unstructured. In March

2023, a Jakarta court granted a petition from an obscure party to suspend preparations for the 2024 elections because the party had been unduly excluded from running. However, the ruling was later overturned. Parallel to this, some of Jokowi's supporters filed a lawsuit at the Constitutional Court demanding that an incumbent two-term president be allowed to run for vice president. This was an obvious attempt to allow for an option in which Jokowi would run as Prabowo's vice-president. But this plan fizzled out, too. Eventually, electoral preparations progressed so far that any scheme to keep Jokowi in power was no longer feasible.

The failed term-limit evasion campaign is crucial to the understanding of Jokowi's subsequent actions. To begin with, it lowered his expectations as far as his ambitions for a beneficial succession deal were concerned. Because his most favoured scenarios were unworkable, he had to settle for less straightforward and riskier alternatives. Indeed, he had to accept that none of the options would deliver him strong guarantees of continued political influence. Instead, they would require complex negotiations, with the resulting agreements still vulnerable to later betrayal. The deal Jokowi chose at the end must be understood against this background. The events surrounding the collapse of his term-extension plans also helped Jokowi to better identify foes among his formal allies. Most crucially, Megawati's vocal opposition consolidated in Jokowi's mind the opinion that the PDI-P's chair would not look favourably upon him having any form of influence post-2024. Indeed, PDI-P politicians believed that Megawati's role in denying Jokowi a third term in office later led him to turn against her. In October 2023, for instance, party official Adian Napitupulu stated that "if [Jokowi] was angry when we rejected adding another term in office, [...] then that is up to [him]. What's clear is that we did it to protect the constitution."²⁷ On the other hand, Prabowo was gentler in his opposition to Jokowi's plans: he did not support a third term but did not personally attack the president, leaving his relations with Jokowi intact. Thus, with the term extension campaign behind him, Jokowi had a better idea of what sort of succession deal he could seek, and who should and should not be involved.

Endorsing Ganjar?

When analysing Jokowi's choices ahead of the 2024 elections, it is important to remember that political leaders rarely put all their eggs

into one basket. They might favour one specific option and pursue this strongly while keeping other scenarios open.²⁸ Jokowi was no different. While working on the plan to either extend term limits or delay the 2024 elections, he was aware that neither might actually succeed. Hence, he began to identify leaders who he could support as his successor. In doing so, three criteria were crucial. First, the candidate had to have a solid popularity basis from which to build a successful presidential campaign. As a passionate reader of opinion polls, Jokowi knew that a politician's popularity could be increased through electoral strategies, but it could not be manufactured from scratch. This ruled out politicians who were ambitious but lacked the basic foundations of electability. Second, any preferred successor had to commit to continuing Jokowi's policies. Third, nominees hoping to elicit Jokowi's endorsement had to accept that he would retain some influence, in terms of policies and personnel, in their government. Ideally, this understanding would come in the form of a formal agreement and/or from pre-existing personal loyalty. As a pragmatic politician, Jokowi was arguably aware that these three conditions were maximum goals that he would have to compromise on, but they were nevertheless the starting point in his search for a suitable successor.

Early on, Jokowi felt that Ganjar Pranowo ticked all three boxes. The poll numbers of the young, good-looking and energetic governor of Central Java were promising, with voters attracted to his high-profile handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ganjar was a member of Jokowi's PDI-P but, like the president himself, he had a strained relationship with many of the party's leaders. There was also good personal chemistry between the two, with both coming from non-elite backgrounds and having worked their way up from local politics to national prominence. Thus, as early as December 2020, Jokowi instructed his aides to start working with Ganjar on a possible candidature. The key figure in this scheme was Andi Widjajanto, Jokowi's 2014 campaign manager and his first cabinet secretary. According to Widjajanto, the president instructed him in December 2020 to initiate Ganjar's campaign, and the first meeting with Ganjar on this issue took place in January 2021.²⁹ Ganjar, too, was preparing to step into the role of Jokowi's heir. While publicly denying any ambitions, he talked to the president about how to proceed, and pro-Ganjar volunteer groups began to emerge. By June 2022, Ganjar was the top-polling presidential candidate, ahead of Prabowo and Anies Baswedan, the governor

of Jakarta and a Jokowi critic.³⁰ Surveys also showed that Ganjar was the candidate who voters thought was most likely to receive Jokowi's endorsement.

However, Jokowi's enthusiasm for Ganjar began to cool significantly by late 2022. To begin with, Jokowi did not get far in discussing Ganjar's candidacy with Megawati. As PDI-P's chairperson, Megawati, not Jokowi, held the formal authority to nominate the party's presidential candidate. But whenever Jokowi raised the issue with her, she tried to change the topic. In Jokowi's mind, this meant that she had no intention of giving him a role in selecting his successor or, for that matter, in the post-2024 government. Jokowi's inner circle took the view that even if Megawati were to agree to Ganjar's nomination, she would insist that he was her candidate, not Jokowi's. According to Luhut, "Megawati tried to control Jokowi as president and failed. This time, she wanted to take possession of Ganjar."³¹ Responding to this stalemate, Jokowi asked three other parties in his government to form an electoral alliance—the United Indonesia Coalition, consisting of Golkar, the Party of Unity and Development (PPP) and the National Mandate Party (PAN). The main task of this coalition was to nominate Ganjar should this become necessary. However, Ganjar refused to consider this option. "I don't need this vehicle. I am certain that Megawati will come around and nominate me", he told the author in 2022.³² Ganjar's refusal irritated Jokowi and his aides. "[Jokowi] went out of his way to offer Ganjar a non-PDI-P pathway to the nomination. Ganjar did not want it, so that was that", Luhut complained.³³

Adding to Jokowi's frustrations over the PDI-P's stance on the third-term proposal, the interactions with Megawati and Ganjar on an intra-party solution to the succession question left Jokowi with deep doubts. Significantly, he saw these doubts confirmed when in late March 2023 Ganjar sided with Megawati in rejecting Israel's participation in the FIFA Under-20 World Cup that was supposed to be held in Indonesia that year.³⁴ Jokowi had supported the holding of the event with Israel's involvement, while Megawati was opposed. The PDI-P asked Ganjar to take a stance, and he rightly viewed this request as a loyalty test. Siding with Jokowi would have signalled that he was the president's man, while taking Megawati's side would show that he was willing to follow the PDI-P chair's instructions. Ganjar was aware of the dilemma he faced, and his inner circle blamed the PDI-P for putting him in this position.³⁵ Ultimately, he took Megawati's side. (Indonesia would later be

removed as host of the event because of its opposition to Israel's participation.) Supporting Megawati's viewpoint brought Ganjar closer to obtaining her endorsement as the PDI-P's candidate, but it distanced him further from Jokowi. "I was surprised [hearing about Ganjar's decision], and there was no prior communication from him on this", Jokowi recalled.³⁶ For Jokowi, the final straw came in April 2023 when Megawati nominated Ganjar. Megawati did not discuss this with Jokowi but ordered him to attend the announcement on short notice. Clearly irritated, Jokowi tersely commented that he "appreciated" Megawati's announcement and that Ganjar was "close to the people".³⁷ However, he strategically avoided endorsing Ganjar, and instead stepped up his search for an alternative.

Prabowo as Jokowi's Heir

Jokowi's options were limited. As noted, one of the main conditions that Jokowi considered when selecting his favoured successor was that candidate's electability. This criterion massively shrank the field of candidates. Besides Ganjar, just two other contenders were competitive: Prabowo and Anies. Among these two, only Prabowo had friendly ties to Jokowi. While the pair had fought bitter electoral battles in 2014 and 2019, both recognized after the 2019 ballot that they were better off cooperating than attempting to destroy each other. Jokowi did not want to begin his second term with Prabowo still a threat to his regime's stability, while Prabowo accepted that his two defeats as a populist outsider called for a change of strategy if he wanted to run for president again. Hence, Jokowi and Prabowo reconciled their differences following the outbreak of post-election violence in May 2019, when Prabowo supporters protested following his loss. According to Jokowi, "I took the first step reaching out to him through some of my aides."³⁸ In Prabowo's camp, Jokowi's overtures were welcomed. Prabowo recalled that "when visiting my supporters in hospital after the May violence, I knew that we couldn't go on like this. We had to compromise."³⁹ After intense negotiations over what form their reconciliation should take, the pair agreed that Prabowo would enter Jokowi's cabinet as defence minister. The deal was finalized with the inauguration of the new cabinet in October 2019.

It is not clear, however, at what point exactly Jokowi began to seriously consider Prabowo as his heir. The press noticed that the pair had increased the frequency of joint appearances in the

final quarter of 2022.⁴⁰ In November of that year, Jokowi dropped his strongest hint yet. At a public event, he turned to Prabowo and joked that after having beaten him twice in elections, it was Prabowo's "turn" or "allocation" to become Indonesia's next president. But Jokowi's actions around this time must be read in a broader strategic context. In November 2022, Anies had made inroads in the polls while Prabowo's popularity suffered a drop.⁴¹ Had this trend continued, Anies would have become the presidential frontrunner. While Jokowi had not settled on his favoured successor at this stage, he was certain about one thing: he wanted to prevent Anies from becoming president. Jokowi had fired Anies from cabinet in 2016, only for him to run for the governorship of Jakarta a year later. In that election, Anies aligned with the Islamist segment of Indonesian politics and agitated against a close Jokowi ally: the incumbent governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, a Christian of ethnic Chinese descent. Basuki lost the election and was imprisoned for blasphemy.⁴² Famous for holding silent grudges, Jokowi never forgot Anies' role in one of the biggest crises of his presidency. Therefore, it is likely that Jokowi's moves in late 2022 were primarily designed to prop up Prabowo's standing in the polls in order to stop Anies' rise. He began to tell assistants that he could live with either a Ganjar or Prabowo presidency, implying that Anies was not acceptable to him.⁴³

For a brief period in early 2023, Jokowi pursued the option of a joint presidential ticket between Ganjar and Prabowo. This would have had two benefits: it would have created an electoral juggernaut that was certain to trounce Anies in the elections; and if Ganjar was paired with Prabowo, the PDI-P's influence over the former could have been reduced. At the time when Jokowi suggested a joint ticket to both men, Ganjar was leading in the polls and thus was confident that he should be the presidential candidate, with Prabowo his running mate. However, when Jokowi took the two on a trip to the Central Java countryside in early March 2023, Prabowo asked Ganjar to be his vice-presidential candidate. According to Ganjar, "Prabowo said to me that I should be his VP, and that he would only serve for one term. After that, I could be president for ten years."⁴⁴ Ganjar refused. Subsequently, Ganjar's polling numbers fell because many voters blamed him and his party for the cancellation of the FIFA Under-20 World Cup. In the following months, Prabowo overtook Ganjar in opinion surveys, but he did not gain a decisive lead, meaning that both men continued to

insist on their respective chances of being the lead candidate on the hypothetical joint ticket. Jokowi adjusted to this by developing a new scenario: Ganjar and Prabowo would run against each other, with both of their running mates nominated by him. After beating Anies, the two camps would reunite through Jokowi's mediation.⁴⁵ He told visitors in mid-2023 that if Prabowo and Ganjar both ran in the elections with his support, he could "sleep tight" and wait for the election's outcome.⁴⁶

Many in Jokowi's cabinet, and even in his inner circle, believed until very late in the process that this was the president's basic stance going into the elections: he would be formally neutral but lend tacit support to both Prabowo and Ganjar to overcome the challenge posed by Anies. The public took a similar view. Asked in August 2023 who they thought Jokowi supported as his successor, 41 per cent of respondents said Ganjar, 28 per cent Prabowo, and only 6 per cent Anies. A quarter of respondents were unsure, which was understandable given that Jokowi himself seemed to be wavering.⁴⁷ But behind the scenes, Jokowi was increasingly leaning towards Prabowo. As noted, the FIFA Under-20 World Cup affair and the lack of consultation on Ganjar's nomination had left Jokowi disappointed. While he did not fully break with Ganjar, their relationship was severely damaged. Prabowo took advantage of this and intensified his charm offensive *vis-à-vis* Jokowi. After entering the cabinet as defence minister, he had already shed his image as a populist who wanted to dismantle the political status quo. Instead, he portrayed himself as a loyal team player prepared to take orders from Jokowi. Over time, his obsequiousness towards Jokowi intensified, and he began to present himself as the best candidate to protect the president's legacy. Knowing that Megawati and Ganjar offered Jokowi little to no influence after the 2024 elections, Prabowo did the opposite. In a letter to Jokowi in mid-2023, written at the advice of Luhut, Prabowo promised that Jokowi would have an equal say in the formation of his would-be cabinet. Jokowi deemed Prabowo's radical transformation "genuine" and felt exceedingly drawn to him.⁴⁸

Prabowo sealed the deal by making Jokowi's son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, his running mate. Gibran was mayor of Solo—the position in which his father had started his career—but at 36 years of age, was formally too young to be nominated on a presidential ticket. According to the Constitution, the minimum age for a presidential nominee is 40. Nevertheless, Prabowo correctly believed

that pushing for Gibran's nomination would help convince Jokowi of his sincerity. In the end, it proved an offer too tempting for the president to reject. Initially, Jokowi was not sure whether Gibran's poll numbers would be good enough; his pollsters were divided on this. Thus, by August 2023, Jokowi had told Prabowo "four times" that he did not think Gibran was a good idea as running mate.⁴⁹ But Jokowi quietly prepared for the eventuality. Several petitions were filed at the Constitutional Court—chaired by Jokowi's brother-in-law, Anwar Usman—to remove the age barrier that obstructed Gibran's nomination. On 16 October, the court allowed Gibran to run—it maintained the age stipulations but created an exception for local government heads.⁵⁰ In the following days, Jokowi's pollsters told the president that there was no public backlash against this controversial decision and that Gibran's electoral standing was sound. Consequently, on 22 October, Prabowo officially announced Gibran as his running mate. While Jokowi claimed he would be neutral in the elections, it was obvious to elites and the broader population that Jokowi had made his decision: Prabowo was now the anointed heir, with Gibran next in line.

The Migration of Jokowi Voters to Prabowo

Before we analyse the electoral impact of Jokowi's *de facto* endorsement of Prabowo, let us pause for a moment and consider the significance and strategic implications of the president's decision. It is crucial to reiterate that this was *not* Jokowi's first—and certainly not his optimal—choice. Before making the call, he had run through several other options: a third term in office; delaying the election for several years; a Ganjar nomination on Jokowi's terms; and a joint ticket between Ganjar and Prabowo. In other words, Jokowi's support for Prabowo, with Gibran at his side, was not Plan A. It was, in Jokowi's view, the best he could get after other alternatives had fallen through. From a purely Machiavellian point of view, Jokowi's preference for Prabowo over Ganjar was plausible. After all, he had received no assurances from Megawati that he would continue to be influential after the 2024 election, while Prabowo offered an abundance of such guarantees. Thus, Jokowi felt that he would be better off under a Prabowo presidency. However, Jokowi clearly underassessed the likelihood that Ganjar could have emancipated himself from Megawati after becoming president (just as Jokowi had done after 2014). In such a scenario, Ganjar could

have provided a comfortable space for Jokowi in his own presidency, Megawati's protestations notwithstanding. Ganjar rightly felt that Jokowi dismissed this scenario too quickly and too harshly. Indeed, in several meetings in mid-2023, Jokowi told Ganjar bluntly that he would lose the elections if he did not have the courage to stand up to Megawati.⁵¹

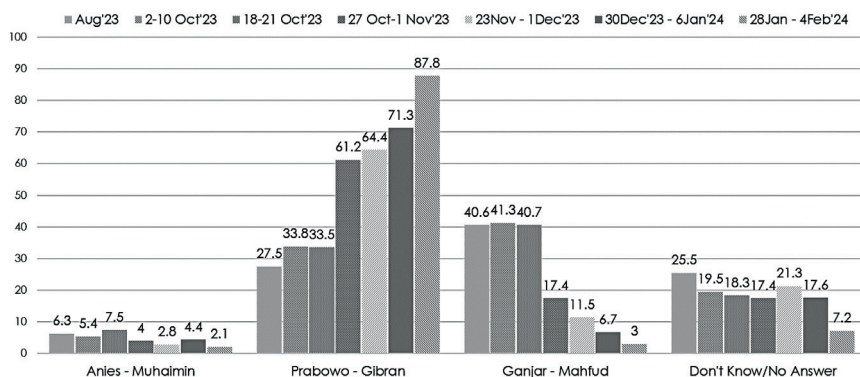
Jokowi, therefore, entered the campaign period with promises made by Prabowo and the prospect of his son becoming vice president, but no waterproof arrangements for his post-2024 influence. Nevertheless, he went all-in. Indonesian voters understood the nomination of Gibran exactly in the way that Jokowi and Prabowo wanted it to be understood—that is, as Jokowi's endorsement of their ticket. Between Gibran's nomination in late October and early December, Prabowo's electability in the three-way race with Ganjar and Anies jumped from 37 per cent to over 45 per cent.⁵² To be sure, other factors played a role, too: Prabowo ran a smart election campaign, which focused on softening his image. As noted, his advisers created a digital avatar of him, whose cheerfulness contrasted sharply with Prabowo's image in the 2014 and 2019 elections as an iron-fisted strongman. Gibran, not blessed with much charisma, was also digitally upgraded to a dynamic youngster.⁵³ Prabowo showed off his new image on stage through a dance specifically developed for him, shrugging off any critical questions by offering entertainment. Polishing his democratic credentials, he dismissed his earlier comments about wanting to restore the constitution of the Suharto era.⁵⁴ In speeches, he introduced himself as part of the "Jokowi team" and as the protector of the incumbent president's achievements. He promised free lunches to underprivileged students and their mothers,⁵⁵ and occasionally threw in a few of the nationalist lines from his 2014 and 2019 campaigns to keep his old base satisfied. Overall, Prabowo put on an effective performance, and especially young voters were fascinated by what they saw.

However, a careful analysis of the election data demonstrates that the primary reason for Prabowo's decisive victory was not the hype surrounding his own campaign, but the systematic migration of Jokowi's voters over to Prabowo. In turn, this migration was the result of Jokowi's actions. To substantiate this argument, let us first look at one of the most important indicators of Indonesia's 2024 polling data: that is, the question of which candidate was, according to respondents, endorsed by Jokowi as his successor. As noted, in August 2023, Ganjar was slightly ahead of Prabowo in this regard,

and a quarter of respondents were still in the dark. However, a significant change occurred after Gibran's nomination. In the last week of October, the percentage of respondents who believed that Jokowi supported Prabowo almost doubled, from 34 to 61 per cent. It then grew to 64 per cent in November, 71 per cent in December, and 88 per cent in January 2024 (see Figure 2). In contrast, the percentage of voters who believed that Ganjar was Jokowi's preferred choice collapsed from 40 to just 3 per cent over the same period. In addition to Gibran's nomination, these numbers were driven by Jokowi's frequent appearances with Prabowo, including one in which the president stood in front of his defence minister at a military airfield and indicated that he was considering formally joining Prabowo's campaign. Hence, the electoral significance of Gibran's nomination was not related to the popularity of the president's son. Instead, its importance was the signal that it sent to Jokowi's supporters about whom to vote for. That message was loud and clear. By election day, everyone had heard it.

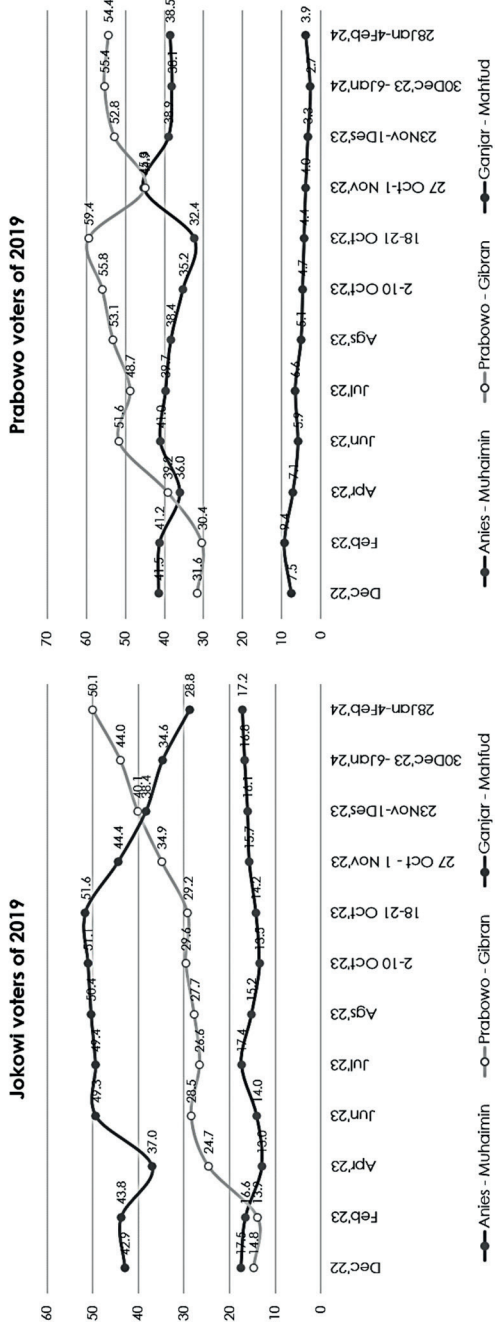
Following Gibran's nomination, voters who had previously voted for Jokowi rapidly and comprehensively migrated to the Prabowo camp. In October 2023, just before Gibran's anointment, 29 per cent of voters who had backed Jokowi at the 2019 elections said they supported Prabowo, up from 15 per cent in February 2023. This was the result of Jokowi's public "flirting" with Prabowo. However, Gibran's nomination changed the extent of this migration entirely. Some 35 per cent of Jokowi's voters said they supported Prabowo

Figure 2
Polls on Who Jokowi Supported in the 2024 Elections



Source: Indikator Politik Indonesia.⁵⁶

Figure 3
2024 Voting Preferences of Jokowi and Prabowo 2019 Electorates



Source: Indikator Politik Indonesia.⁵⁷

in November 2023, rising to 40 per cent in December, and 45 per cent in January 2024. Just before the February 2024 elections, it increased to 50 per cent (see Figure 3). For Prabowo, this inflow of Jokowi loyalists was vital because his own base from the 2019 elections was unreliable. Pre-election polls showed that close to 40 per cent of Prabowo's 2019 electorate were deserting him to back Anies. These were mostly pious Muslim voters who believed that Prabowo had betrayed their cause by joining the Jokowi government. In short, Prabowo overcame the loss of parts of his political base by attracting half of Jokowi's former voters—a voter movement that, on balance, made him the frontrunner. In combination with the public's perception of Jokowi's preferred successor, the data demonstrates that as former Jokowi voters became convinced their patron favoured Prabowo, they followed his lead and pushed the latter over the electoral finish line.

Jokowi's Push for a One-Round Victory

But even though Prabowo was close to the 50-percent mark two months before the February election, and second-round scenarios showed him with an unbeatable 30-percent margin over both Anies and Ganjar,⁵⁸ Jokowi was unhappy. Although he, too, was surprised by the size of Prabowo's lead, he now set a new goal: the election had to be won in one round.⁵⁹ There were two reasons for his anxiousness: first, Jokowi feared that Anies might make a comeback if he was not finished off in the first round. In the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial elections, Anies had come second in the first round but then defeated Purnama in the run-off. Obviously, the 2017 elections had occurred in very different circumstances, and unlike Prabowo, Purnama was part of a vulnerable double minority. Nevertheless, Jokowi did not want to risk an Anies revival, and felt that Prabowo should win the election in the first round. Second, Jokowi's desire was also motivated by his concern for investor certainty. A run-off—necessary if no candidate received more than 50 per cent of the vote in the first round—would have been held in late June. That would have forced investors to wait for more than four months before they knew which government would rule next. For Jokowi, this constellation had particular implications for the development of Indonesia's new capital, Nusantara, which he planned to open with a big bang in August 2024. Private investors were reluctant to put money into the high-risk project, making a quick election outcome essential to address some of their scepticism.

To achieve his goal, Jokowi reached into the authoritarian toolbox.⁶⁰ Even before the final phase of election campaigning in late 2023 and early 2024, there had been widespread talk about Jokowi's undue intervention in the elections. During a visit to Australia in March 2023, Anies told academics that his pre-campaign tours throughout Indonesia were obstructed by authorities. He also called on foreign observer missions to monitor the Indonesian elections.⁶¹ Political and financial sponsors of Anies' campaign complained that people close to Jokowi had pressured them to withdraw their support for Anies and threatened to cut them off from business opportunities if they refused. Above all, the Constitutional Court's decision to allow Gibran to run for the vice-presidency served as a symbol of Jokowi and his aides' ruthless determination to pursue their agenda. In three of the four cases filed with the court, Anwar—Jokowi's brother-in-law and the chief justice of the Constitutional Court—had excused himself because of a conflict of interest. However, he then appeared at the deliberations of the fourth case and manufactured a majority for a clause that favoured Gibran. While Jokowi claimed to have had no knowledge of or influence on the proceedings, his critics found this implausible. Anwar himself was subsequently subject to ethics proceedings and removed from his position as chief justice. Yet, the decision he helped to produce stood. Jokowi did not seem to care much: he got what he wanted and could rely on the indifference of the silent majority. According to one survey, 76 per cent of respondents said they did not know that Anwar was related to the president.⁶²

Jokowi intensified his activism in the last weeks of the campaign. As mentioned, at the heart of his efforts was a nationwide tour in which he distributed social aid—cash and food—to the poor. To be able to do so, he had maintained the level of social assistance funding from the COVID-19 era, although the pandemic was long over. Indeed, some funding was cut from other ministries to beef up the social aid budget. In distributing benefits, Jokowi's main targets were Ganjar's Central Java strongholds, where Prabowo was behind in opinion polls. Post-election surveys showed that a quarter of the electorate received such aid, and 69 per cent of them voted for Prabowo.⁶³ As a result, Prabowo won Central Java, humiliating Ganjar in his home province. Formally, of course, Jokowi's distribution spree during the campaign was not illegal. However, the context in which it occurred made it an example of systematic presidential vote-buying. Other practices were even more

dubious. *Tempo* magazine reported on widespread efforts by state officials, including police officers, to promote Prabowo's candidacy.⁶⁴ It was alleged that bureaucratic underlings were pressured by their bosses to deliver high results for Prabowo or face sanctions. A few days before the elections, a film titled "Dirty Vote" which documented these patterns was released online. People involved in making the film were reported to the police, and a member of Ganjar's campaign team, who had accused the security apparatus of bias, was also questioned. The commentary in the international media on Jokowi's systematic favouritism was devastating. Noting Jokowi's "inglorious exit", *The Economist* commented that the president had "arrived as a breath of fresh air in 2014" but now "leaves behind a rotten smell".⁶⁵

The magnitude and effectiveness of Jokowi's all-out election drive notwithstanding, there were some limits to it. For instance, Jokowi failed to lift the party of his second son, Kaesang Pangarep, over the four per cent threshold it needed to clear to win seats in national parliament. Kaesang had taken over the struggling Indonesian Solidarity Party (PSI) in September 2023, and Jokowi's image subsequently featured on almost all of its campaign posters. The president even met publicly with party leaders during the campaign. But legislative elections in Indonesia have their own dynamics: some voters form long-standing patronage relations with incumbents; others accept one-off bribes and vote accordingly; and others again cast their ballots based on their communal, religious or ideological roots. This pattern favours established parties and candidates, and makes nationwide engineering of results near-impossible. Thus, the 2024 parliamentary results did not look much different from 2019. Eight of the nine parties that previously sat in parliament returned to it; no newcomers made it; the PDI-P again came first; and Suharto's former electoral machine, Golkar, obtained the second-most seats, as it had in 2019. Prabowo's Gerindra party did not benefit greatly from its chairman's popularity and finished third. Partly, this was because Prabowo had told voters that he did not care which party they supported as long as they voted for him as president.⁶⁶ But given Jokowi's meddling in so many other areas, some commentators credited him (rather implausibly) with that outcome, too: the president, so the theory went, wanted to keep Gerindra small to limit Prabowo's leverage as president. Clearly, the elections cemented Jokowi's image as Indonesia's main political puppet-master, and he did not mind.

Conclusion and Outlook: Indonesia under Prabowo

The end result of the elections—Prabowo won with 58.6 per cent of the vote—was primarily Jokowi's victory. His informal endorsement made Prabowo the favourite, and his interventions in the campaign raised Prabowo from a candidate at just below 50 per cent of support in the opinion polls to a solid one-round triumph. Had Jokowi endorsed Ganjar and backed him in the same way, the PDI-P nominee would have become president. But what will Jokowi gain from his success?

There are few reasons to believe that Jokowi fully trusts the promises that Prabowo made to him. In fact, many of Jokowi's closest aides warned him that the pledges were purely strategic in nature. We also already noted Jokowi's awareness that picking Prabowo was far from an ideal option—it was simply, in his judgment, the best available to him. Therefore, we must assume that Jokowi has expectations *vis-à-vis* a Prabowo presidency that are not dependent on Prabowo's supposed long-term gratitude towards him. Jokowi, like many others, closely followed events in the Philippines in 2024: namely, the public disintegration of the alliance between President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and his predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte, whose daughter Sara Duterte is vice president.⁶⁷ Following their victory, Marcos had isolated Sara from government business, but she became more popular than him and is now the frontrunner for the 2028 presidential elections. In Jokowi's mind, then, even the worst-case scenario—that is, Prabowo reneging on all of his promises and cutting Gibran off from power—still holds the promise of giving his son a shot at winning the presidency in 2029. Moreover, there is the statistical possibility that Prabowo, now 72 years old, will not be able to serve out his term, in which case Gibran would become president.

But these are a lot of hypotheticals for a president who invested his entire political capital into a victory for Prabowo and Gibran. It is equally possible that Jokowi will end up with very few returns from his investment. Without a party to exercise influence and lacking the presidential powers to control elites, Jokowi could become a much-diminished figure after Prabowo's inauguration in October 2024. There is little doubt, by contrast, that Jokowi paid a very high price for his election activism. Many of his liberal supporters, who had stayed with him throughout his time in office despite many disappointments, broke with him after his nomination

of the Prabowo-Gibran ticket. This included several of his aides, who subsequently took him to task with unprecedented candour.⁶⁸ In a similar vein, many university professors across the archipelago, appalled by what they viewed as Suharto-style interventions in the electoral process, took the unusual step of issuing a series of highly critical declarations against Jokowi. In short, Jokowi traded in whatever was left of his democratic credentials for some risky gambles on his own and his family's political future. In the arena of international opinion, the "rotten smell" emanating from his electoral interference is set to penetrate any accounts of Jokowi's presidency and broader political legacy. Should Prabowo push Indonesia further towards autocracy, Jokowi will be considered the man who made that possible. In many ways, therefore, Jokowi's victory was a Pyrrhic one: costly and without guaranteed spoils.

On the other hand, Prabowo's prospects are brighter. His political investments have already paid off. For four years, he soaked Jokowi in flattery and accepted being called a sycophant as a result. As a notoriously proud larger-than-life figure, this must have been hard for him. However, unlike Anies, he understood that he could not win the 2024 elections against a candidate endorsed by Jokowi. There was no mood for change in the electorate, and Jokowi's popularity was a tremendous force. In that situation, Prabowo decided to lobby Jokowi to become his heir. It worked. Since his electoral victory, Prabowo holds all the cards. The full powers of the presidency will pass to him in October, and he alone will decide whether he abides by all or parts of the agreements he made with Jokowi. He might do so if he feels it will not hurt him, but he could also decide otherwise. As such, Jokowi will be subject to Prabowo's whim. Therein also lies the uncertainty for Indonesia: Prabowo's attitude towards democracy once in power remains anybody's guess for now. Given the weaknesses of the democracy he will inherit from Jokowi, there are few incentives for Prabowo to fully overturn it. Jokowi has already demonstrated that Indonesia's current minimalist patronage democracy allows a president to establish dominance over the elites and become hugely popular at the same time. Hence, it is likely that Prabowo will refrain from a complete overhaul of the Indonesian polity and, instead, sustain low-quality democracy while continuing its slow-paced decline.⁶⁹ But again, he might also choose a different path: his successful strategizing in the 2024 elections gives him the power to do so.

The story of Indonesia's 2024 elections fits neatly with the narrative of democratic recession globally. In 2023, Freedom House recorded the 18th consecutive year of global decline in political rights and civil liberties.⁷⁰ However, the dominating pattern in this decline is no longer immediate democratic breakdown because of coups or other forms of sudden institutional collapse. Instead, democratic decline is now often incremental and so carefully crafted that the public does not see the need to rise up in defence of democracy.⁷¹ Through his interventions in Indonesia's electoral process, Jokowi pushed the limits of democratic norms—and occasionally overstepped them. Yet, the majority of Indonesians did not see this as a big problem. Most also did not think that Prabowo's past involvement in human rights abuses or his prior threats to dismantle democracy were issues of concern. Similarly, while Jokowi's "inglorious exit" and Prabowo's rise are likely to lead to Indonesia's further deterioration in international democracy indexes, none of them will downgrade the country to an autocracy because of the 2024 election events. Instead, Indonesia remains a key member of the growing cluster of formal electoral democracies whose political substance is hollowed out by consistent trends of autocratization and illiberalism.⁷² In this cluster, democracy survives as the nominal foundation of political competition, but increasingly struggles to uphold its substantive promises of rights and freedoms. For many in Indonesia, this is an acceptable outcome; for others, it is a disappointing deviation from the post-authoritarian journey the country started in 1998.

NOTES

- ¹ Zach Hope, "It Takes a Special Politician to Draw a Crowd of 100,000: This One Has a Chequered Past", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 February 2024, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/it-takes-a-special-politician-to-draw-a-crowd-of-100-000-this-one-has-a-chequered-past-20240211-p5f3ym.html>. The author was also present in the stadium.
- ² Author's interview with Joko Widodo in Jakarta, 16 February 2024.
- ³ Author's notes in Jakarta, 13 April 2019.
- ⁴ Abba Gabrillin and Sandro Gatra, "Beragam Janji Politik Prabowo dalam Pidato Kampanye Akbar di GBK" [The Various Political Promises Prabowo Made in His Speech at the Great Campaign in the GBK Stadium], *Kompas*, 9 April 2014, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2019/04/08/09032101/beragam-janji-politik-prabowo-dalam-pidato-kampanye-akbar-di-gbk>.

- ⁵ For a more conceptual contextualization of the 2024 Indonesian elections within the democracy debate, see Dan Slater, "Indonesia's High-Stake Takeover", *Journal of Democracy* 35, no. 2 (2024): 40–51.
- ⁶ Marianne Kneuer, "Unravelling Democratic Erosion: Who Drives the Slow Death of Democracy, and How?" *Democratization* 28, no. 8 (2021): 1442–62.
- ⁷ Author's interview with Joko Widodo in Jakarta, 14 October 2023.
- ⁸ Michael Berlemann and Sören Enkelmann, "The Economic Determinants of U.S. Presidential Approval: A Survey", *European Journal of Political Economy* 36 (2014): 41–54. In the Indonesian case, Saiful Mujani and R. William Liddle have made this argument more broadly, as far as the correlation between inflation levels and citizen support for the incumbent regime is concerned. See Saiful Mujani and R. William Liddle, "Indonesia's Democratic Performance: A Popular Assessment", *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 16, no. 2 (2015): 210–26.
- ⁹ Author's interview with Joko Widodo in Jakarta, 14 October 2023.
- ¹⁰ An additional element of his price control regime was the import of key food items, including rice. He was often personally involved in such rice import deals. For example, in September 2023, he negotiated the import of one million tons of rice from China. Author's interview with Joko Widodo in Nusantara, 22 September 2023.
- ¹¹ Author's interview with Joko Widodo in Samarinda, 22 September 2023.
- ¹² Indikator Politik Indonesia, "Split-Ticket Voting dan Tren Elektabilitas Bakal Capres dan Partai Politik Jelang Pemilu 2024: Temuan Survei Nasional, 15–21 Juli 2023" [Split-Ticket Voting and Electability Trends of Future Presidential Candidates and Parties Ahead of the 2024 Elections: Findings of a National Survey, 15–21 July 2023], Jakarta, 2023, p. 21, https://indikator.co.id/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/RILIS-INDIKATOR-18-AGUSTUS-2023_.pdf. The graph also drew from data collected by Lembaga Survei Indonesia (LSI) and Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting (SMRC).
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Towards a “Modern Monarchical Welfare Regime”: Identifying the Welfare Regime of Brunei Darussalam

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What sort of welfare regime does Brunei have? How does it compare to other countries' welfare schemes? How will it change as Brunei seeks to diversify away from its dependency on hydrocarbon resources?

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Using the “welfare diamond” framework, this article argues that Brunei currently operates a “protective welfare regime”. However, if it succeeds in reducing its reliance on hydrocarbon resources, that system will transition towards a modern monarchical welfare-regime model wherein self-reliant individuals and resilient communities will play an increasingly significant role while the role of the state will diminish.

Keywords: welfare regime, families, communities, labour market, and Brunei Darussalam.

Brunei Darussalam (hereafter Brunei) has a population of less than 500,000 people inhabiting an area of around 5,700 square kilometres. Because of its vast hydrocarbon resources, it has a gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of around US\$37,100, the second highest in Southeast Asia only after Singapore. As a result, the government, an absolute monarchy, can provide generous social assistance and subsidies to the people, including free education and health services, old-age pensions and subsidized food, petrol, government housing and land.¹

However, the state is not the only source of welfare in Brunei. In the existing literature on social welfare schemes, scholars have conceptualized how four key actors shape a welfare regime through a “welfare diamond”.² The first corner of the diamond is individual citizens and their interactions with labour markets. They work to provide their own welfare; they earn an income—wages, interest, rent or profit—from their involvement in the labour market by producing goods and services. The other three corners of the diamond—the family, the community and the state—are transfer payments to individuals in a one-directional way since individuals do not exchange these payments for goods or services back to the family, the community or the state. The way these four actors provide welfare to individuals is contingent upon the socio-economic-political conditions of the country.

However, a welfare regime is not necessarily static; it can adapt over time to changes in a country’s social, political and economic situation. In Singapore, for instance, the welfare system has been moving towards a more balanced role for all four actors because of the city-state’s rapidly ageing population. This means that the Singaporean state has gradually become more important in providing welfare to individuals through financial assistance programmes and infrastructure spending.³ As a result, direct government intervention has weakened the role of individual Singaporeans and their labour market performance in providing their own welfare.⁴ Brunei’s welfare

regime is also in flux, especially as the government attempts to diversify away from its dependence on hydrocarbon resources, which are currently the primary source of the government's revenue and, thus, of the funds for its welfare regime.

This article begins with a study of the theory of welfare systems and how this has changed over the centuries. It also explores the distinction between a "welfare state" and a "welfare regime". The idea of a "welfare state" primarily emphasizes the state's involvement in providing welfare to individuals and its interplay with economic markets. This is narrower in scope than a "welfare regime", which also explores the role of the family and the community in welfare provisions. The second section focuses on Brunei's socioeconomic and political structures and national philosophy, the Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB), which can provide a contextual background when identifying its welfare regime. With the theories and Brunei's contexts, the third section defines Brunei's welfare regime. It concludes that Brunei will evolve from a protective welfare regime into a "modern monarchical welfare regime", where the state, community, family and labour market will collaborate more equitably to provide welfare.

Welfare States and Regimes

In *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Adam Smith argued for a self-regulating economy without state intervention in social welfare.⁵ According to Smith, the market provides the mechanisms for production and consumption, thus also for people's welfare. In contrast, almost a century later, Karl Marx claimed that people's welfare should not depend on market mechanisms and that welfare is a social right.⁶ According to Marx, the state should have absolute authority over economic activities and protect individuals' welfare. The debate became a little less theoretical when, in the late nineteenth century, German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck laid the foundations of a modern welfare state through his pioneering social welfare legislation, comprising policies such as state assistance for health, accidents, old age and disability. In Bismarck's framework, the state would intervene to ensure that people's welfare is not solely dependent on their performance in the labour market.

Against the backdrop of the Great Depression in the 1930s, a period of vast unemployment and low private investment in the economy, John Maynard Keynes, in *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936), recommended that the state should intervene when the market fails to produce low unemployment, high

investment and high economic growth. Keynes focused on employment and believed that state intervention to increase employment would ameliorate income inequality and alleviate poverty. This Keynesian view became dominant in the United States and much of the West before the Second World War and laid the groundwork for the concept of a modern welfare state.⁷

However, the “Beveridge Report”, a policy study by the British government in 1942, is considered the real starting point of the comprehensive, modern welfare state that typified the latter half of the twentieth century.⁸ The report’s proposals were much more comprehensive than Bismarck’s social welfare reform in assisting those who cannot work. It argued that the state should intervene significantly in the economy to help the unemployed, people in poor health and the elderly. Stemming from the principle that wealth should be transferred from those who are better off to those who are worse off, the plan envisaged a welfare scheme for all citizens, irrespective of income level and lifestyle. According to the report, that vision was “a scheme of social assurance against interruption and destruction of earning power and for special expenditure arising at birth, marriage, and death”.⁹

In general, the main objective of a welfare state is to protect against social risks (sickness, for instance) and ameliorate poverty and inequality.¹⁰ As such, most welfare states have five ways of intervening when the market fails to provide welfare: social insurance; social assistance; publicly-funded social services; social work and personal social services; and economic governance.¹¹ In short, a welfare state seeks to decouple a person’s welfare from their performance in the labour market.

Conceptually, the term “welfare state” narrowly focuses on the dominance of the state’s role in welfare provisions. Therefore, in 1990, Gosta Esping-Andersen introduced the term “welfare regime” to broaden the concept of social welfare.¹² A welfare regime includes transfers of money not just from the state but also from the family to individuals in addition to what individuals earn from the market. According to Esping-Andersen, the typology of a welfare regime is defined by three criteria. The first is “de-commodification”, which indicates how well social policies enable people to live without relying on the labour market for income. In a regime with a high degree of de-commodification, a person’s welfare does not depend on their performance in the labour market. The second typology is “de-stratification”. The higher the degree of de-stratification, the more a person’s welfare is decoupled from their social status. In

other words, a person's social status is less likely to determine their welfare. The third typology is "de-familialization". The higher the de-familialization, the more a person's welfare is decoupled from family support. Thus, a person's welfare is less likely to depend on family support and, possibly, the more it is administered by the state.

Focused on modern industrial Europe, Esping-Andersen also proposed the concept of a "welfare triangle" involving three actors: the market, the family and the state. At the same time, he differentiated between three welfare regimes—liberal, corporatist and social democratic—although a country may have a hybrid of the three regimes. A "liberal" welfare regime is defined as having a low degree of de-stratification, meaning that a person's welfare depends mainly on their social status, and a high degree of de-commodification among low-income people, meaning they rely on means-tested social assistance from the state. A "corporatist" (or "conservative") regime has various degrees of de-commodification but a very low degree of de-stratification, meaning that social and economic status is much more important than social rights, and a high degree of familialization, since religious institutions are vital in preserving socioeconomic stratification through traditional family patterns. A "social democratic" regime has a high degree of de-commodification and de-stratification, and the state provides welfare without waiting to see whether the families can provide welfare to individuals first. Equality is the most important goal, and the state is dominant.

Interestingly, Esping-Andersen also described a "monarchical welfare regime", which existed before the establishment of Europe's modern welfare systems. In such a regime, the monarch provided welfare, reduced social class tensions and maintained labour market productivity. Efficiency, however, was derived from discipline, not market competition. Because European monarchs were considered the "parents" of their subjects, they assumed the parental responsibility for welfare.¹³

However, Esping-Andersen did not discuss the role of the community in providing welfare. According to Geof Wood and Ian Gough, the welfare regimes that Esping-Andersen described encompass only a "formal security regime".¹⁴ Instead, Wood and Gough proposed two alternatives: the "insecurity regime" and the "informal security regime". Both regimes are more commonly found in developing countries where the state and markets cannot sufficiently provide welfare to the people. Thus, communities play

a much larger role in providing social assistance. With the addition of the community as a possible source of financial support for individuals, we expanded Esping-Andersen's "welfare triangle" into a "welfare diamond".

In the "insecurity regime", there is no protection whatsoever for a person's welfare; everyone must provide for themselves. By comparison, in an "informal security regime", the state offers some security to its citizens, but welfare provisions are informal, meaning a person must still depend on their community. In such a system, welfare is provided voluntarily at the community level, as was common in Europe before the advent of the modern welfare state. The extended family also provides welfare in such a regime, with charities and other philanthropic activities playing essential roles. Moreover, in both an "insecurity regime" and an "informal security regime", patron-client relationships play a significant role in providing informal welfare. Because they have low degrees of de-clientelization, a person's welfare depends on support from communities, meaning they rely on patron-client relationships.

According to Wood and Gough, a developing country can transition from an "insecurity regime" to an "informal security regime" and then to a "formal security regime". For that to happen, de-clientelization must be prioritized over de-commodification. In other words, Wood and Gough argued that policies aimed at reducing the influence of patron-client relationships in the community should take precedence over those intended to lessen people's dependence on the labour market. However, this path is not straightforward. Wood and Gough showed that "informal security regimes" often coexist with "formal security regimes" in Latin American countries. Moreover, variations of these regimes can also exist. In Asia, they identified radically different (mainly "productivist") regimes in Singapore, South Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan. In these jurisdictions, welfare provisions primarily depend on market forces, followed by family and community provisions. Because of this, their governments focus on promoting economic growth. Such a welfare regime can be characterized as having a low degree of de-commodification, since the state will only provide welfare after the market, the family and the community have all exhausted their means. This sort of "productivist" regime could also be called a "Confucianist regime" since family and community networks play the primary role in welfare. Some of the essential virtues of Confucianism are self-reliance, mutual obligation and support among family and society members.¹⁵

A “productivist” welfare regime is the polar opposite of a protective welfare regime, which is often found in countries endowed with vast hydrocarbon revenues, such as those in the Arab Gulf.¹⁶ In such a system, the state plays a major role in a person’s welfare by redistributing the hydrocarbon revenue, allowing the state to modernize its economy without taxing its citizens. This sort of regime also recognizes the importance of families and communities, so it has a low degree of de-clientelization and de-familialization.

In his comparison of Southeast Asia’s three Muslim-majority countries—Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia—Tauchid Komara Yuda found that the state plays a minor role in providing welfare in Malaysia and Indonesia. By comparison, the state is far more active in Brunei, principally because of the country’s revenue from hydrocarbons.¹⁷ As such, Muslim-majority countries have different welfare regimes depending on their socioeconomic and political contexts.

Finally, it should be noted that the concept of a welfare regime is fluid. The welfare regime in a country may change over time. Kuwait, for instance, is a small and prosperous country in the Gulf, and the state has typically been the leading welfare provider. However, it has had to alter its protective welfare regime more recently because of global economic changes. Moreover, the volatility of international energy prices and the prospect of declining hydrocarbon sales worldwide mean that Kuwait can no longer rely on hydrocarbon revenue, resulting in an increasingly less protective welfare regime.¹⁸

This article poses the question of whether Brunei can be categorized as a protective welfare regime, similar to the Arab Gulf states, and whether it will have to alter its welfare regime as it attempts to lessen its dependency on hydrocarbons.

The Socio-Economic-Political System in Brunei

The Brunei Sultanate is one of the few remaining absolute monarchies in the world and the only one in Southeast Asia. The Malay Islamic Monarchy (*Melayu Islam Beraja*, or MIB) was declared the national ideology after independence in 1984.¹⁹ Central to MIB are Islam (the official religion and way of life), the Monarch (the head of the state and government) and Malay (the national language and culture of the state administration). This ideology was originally conceived in the 1950s by Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin III. After Brunei gained its independence, his heir, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, who still rules

today, raised the status of MIB to that of a state ideology. Following decades of institutionalization, MIB has become deeply ingrained in the entire public sector and is mandated as a core subject in all educational institutions throughout Brunei.²⁰

According to some scholars, this national philosophy is merely a way for the monarch and political elites to validate and perpetuate their rule.²¹ MIB is, Naimah Talib stated, “seen as an instrument of legitimacy for the Sultan’s rule by marrying the conservatism of Islamic values with that of Malay culture and the traditional unifying role of the monarchy”.²² However, other scholars have focused on the social contract that forms a symbiotic relationship in Brunei between the monarch and the people, a bargain that dictates that the ruler should not harm his people and that the people should obey him.²³ During the Golden Jubilee celebration in 2017, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah addressed the royal family, cabinet ministers and senior government officials:

The bond between the king and the people is inseparable ... The obligation of the king is to the people, and the obligation of the people is to pledge their loyalty to the king ... This is the reciprocal relationship for the well-being of all. The king and the people together hold this great trust ... This is one of the pillars of life in our country, which has existed for the past 600 years — let us preserve this for years to come... My history is also the history of our people and our country, because the king cannot break ties with the people and the country — I firmly share my history with them. That’s why this celebration is shared between myself and the people.²⁴

It can be argued that this social contract has successfully instilled loyalty among Bruneians to the six centuries-old monarchical system. Observers generally agree that Bruneians strongly support their benevolent, paternalistic leadership.²⁵ In modern times, this social contract is maintained through patron-client relationships. Most Bruneians expect the monarch and his government to look after their welfare.²⁶

A similar social contract can also be observed in Malay culture, which is frequently perceived as collectivist. Individuals tend to identify themselves within groups due to their desire to belong and integrate into the broader society. Communal responsibilities are regarded as more significant than individual ones. Moreover, there is a strong emphasis on resource sharing, the promotion of harmony among people, respect for rank and status and submission to those of higher status.²⁷ The primary objective of this social contract is to

promote harmonious human relationships, while social harmony is ensured through reciprocal duties and a structured social hierarchy that emphasizes respect and loyalty. The bonds of kinship and locality encourage community collaboration and cooperation (known as *gotong-royong*), which is further strengthened by Islamic values. Therefore, Brunei has elements of an “informal security regime” with a low degree of de-clientelization.

As an absolute monarchy, Brunei also has a highly stratified social system. One’s social rank plays an essential role in the traditional Bruneian community. This social stratification strongly relates to a person’s welfare because it defines their ability to access jobs, although Brunei also has some modern forms of meritocracy.²⁸ Displays of a person’s position in the social hierarchy function as a means to preserve a symbolic order that is deeply ingrained within society, even as the state apparatus has modernized.²⁹ With a low degree of de-stratification, partly due to the patron-client relationship and society’s collectivist nature, Brunei has a “stratified collectivist society”.

Religion plays an important role, too. Although Muslim-majority countries have different forms of welfare regimes, they are all influenced by what the Qur’an and Sunnah say about welfare.³⁰ According to a verse in the Qur’an (2:107), “the mission of the Holy Prophet is defined to be a merciful blessing (*Rahmah*) for all mankind”. This is often understood as meaning that the role of all institutions, including the state, is to cater to the welfare of everyone in society. Moreover, Islam emphasizes that each person should receive an equitable share of natural resources and that the management of these resources should be dedicated to public services, such as infrastructure, education, healthcare and the population’s overall well-being.³¹ Furthermore, *zakat*, *sadaqat* and alm are the most important philanthropic pillars of Islamic welfare. *Zakat* is a mandatory tax that all Muslims must pay, whereas *sadaqat* is a voluntary contribution. Alm does not have a specific amount, nor is it compulsory.³²

Thus, according to Islam, the state should play a leading role in providing welfare to individuals, indicating a higher degree of de-commodification and collective responsibility for all members of society, so a relatively low degree of de-clientelization in patron-client relationships. On the other hand, the family and market can also contribute to welfare under Islamic teachings, but their roles are not as significant as those of the state and communities.

In short, Brunei has a relatively high degree of de-commodification as the state provides generous social assistance to its people, decoupling their welfare from their performances in the labour market. This high degree of de-commodification is combined with a low degree of de-clientelization. In this regard, Brunei, the only surviving Malay-Muslim sultanate in Southeast Asia, represents continuity from the historic *Kerajaan Melayu* (Malay Kingdom). The concept of *kerajaan* presumes the existence of a *raja* (king) who holds all power.³³ Brunei is also similar to the pre-fifteenth-century absolute monarchies in Europe, where paternalistic kings were expected to provide welfare for their subjects.

Changes Because of Economic Diversification

Oil was discovered in Brunei in April 1929 by the British Malayan Petroleum Company (BMPC).³⁴ This “black gold” was first exported in 1932. Subsequently, the oil industry exerted a profound influence on the economy. By 1938, Brunei was the third largest oil producer within the British Commonwealth. By 1947, revenue from oil royalties alone surpassed the local government’s total expenditure. Unemployment was virtually non-existent, prompting the recruitment of foreign labour—notably Europeans, Chinese and Indians—to bolster the workforce, particularly in the oil-rich Belait District, which borders Malaysia’s Sarawak State.

Between 2010 and 2014, the oil and gas sector accounted for around 66 per cent of GDP. However, it fell to 54.5 per cent between 2015 and 2019 because of declining oil production and lower global oil prices.³⁵ It then dropped significantly to 44.8 per cent in 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, before increasing to 50.4 per cent in 2021 and 50.7 per cent in 2022. However, it declined once again in 2023 to 47 per cent as global oil prices fell by 7.3 per cent and liquefied natural gas (LNG) prices decreased by more than a third. However, the declining contribution of the oil and gas sector to GDP in 2023 was buffered by strong performances in air transportation (which grew by 29.8 per cent), finance (13.9 per cent) and the manufacture of petroleum and chemical products (11.7 per cent).³⁶

Despite effectively managing the COVID-19 pandemic, Brunei’s economy faces challenges. Growth forecasts have been consistently adjusted downward due to significant disruptions in oil and gas production and difficulties in revitalizing offshore fields. In fact, since reaching its peak in 2006, crude oil production has plummeted

from 220,000 barrels per day to under 90,000 in 2023, mirroring a similar decline in natural gas production.³⁷

During a Legislative Council session in March 2024, the Second Minister of Finance and Economy, Dato Dr Hj Mohd Amin Liew Abdullah, disclosed that government revenue had nearly halved from US\$6.3 billion in the 2022/23 fiscal year to US\$3.2 billion in 2023/24. This decline was attributed to decreased energy prices and interruptions in domestic oil and gas extraction. Approximately 75 per cent of the government's income is generated from oil and gas, even though this sector only accounts for about half of the country's GDP.³⁸

Despite abundant hydrocarbon resources, which have fuelled the nation's wealth and economic growth, Brunei's heavy reliance on oil and gas has made the economy vulnerable to global energy price fluctuations. In 2020, Brunei faced a significant fiscal deficit as global oil prices plummeted because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, the fiscal outlook has improved since then. This underscores how oil and gas shapes fiscal revenue and overall fiscal balancing.³⁹

All of this makes Brunei a hydrocarbon-dependent rentier state, similar to the Arab Gulf states, where hydrocarbon revenues pay for the state's generous social protection.⁴⁰ A "rentier state" is typically defined as one in which most of the national income is generated outside the country while a small group of elites or the state controls how this revenue (or "rent") is distributed. Another feature, especially when this rent is collected from natural resources, is that the state does not tax its citizens.⁴¹ The role of governments in most rentier states is limited to distributing revenue to the population through public services and welfare.⁴² A rentier state usually permits foreign or multinational firms to invest in its natural resources. In return, these firms pay royalties (rent) to the state.⁴³

Therefore, the population of a rentier state depends heavily on how the state distributes this rent.⁴⁴ The state's role in people's welfare is decisive.⁴⁵ However, an overreliance on hydrocarbon revenues can produce negative political, economic and social impacts. For instance, it can result in enclaved development, often called the "resource curse" or "Dutch Disease", where a flourishing hydrocarbon sector distorts the development of other sectors of the economy.

Rentier states are also at risk of political upheaval since various groups or elites compete to gain access to the rent. To prevent this, governments usually redistribute rents as welfare to maintain

political stability.⁴⁶ Yet, redistributing rents can also reduce the state's overall power. Utilizing external revenue as the main basis of the state's wealth often comes at the cost of neglecting domestic production. With ample income and no need for taxation, the state lacks incentives to improve productive domestic sectors, thus weakening long-term and sustainable development. There is also the risk of creating a rentier mentality, in which the population perceives status or wealth as unrelated to work, innovation or risk-taking.⁴⁷ According to some scholars, Brunei's youth suffer from a rentier mentality; knowing that the state welfare will provide for them, they are overly selective in job choices and prefer to wait for prestigious employment, such as government jobs, even if this means years of unemployment.⁴⁸

Aware of these problems, Brunei has implemented programmes to diversify its economy and mitigate the negative impact associated with rentier states. These programmes form the *Wawasan Brunei 2035* (Brunei Vision 2035) masterplan, which was announced in 2008 and has three specific goals: increase national revenue from non-hydrocarbon sectors, including promoting foreign direct investment (FDI); encourage growth in the private sector through active community participation in entrepreneurship and innovation; and enhance local employment.⁴⁹ Moreover, in 2020, the Ministry of Finance and Economy issued an economic blueprint containing six aspirations for Brunei to achieve a dynamic and sustainable economy: "productive and vibrant businesses; skilled, adaptive and innovative people; open and globally connected economy; a sustainable environment; high quality and competitive economic infrastructure; and good governance and public service excellence".⁵⁰ As part of its modernizing scheme, the government is also looking for other ways of funding state welfare, such as improving the Bruneian Sovereign Fund. If successful, Brunei may be able to sustain its generous welfare provisions and transform from a hydrocarbon rentier state into a financial rentier state.⁵¹

In essence, achieving the vision of *Wawasan Brunei 2035* demands ambitious initiatives to reshape the nation's identity, foster innovation and nurture a sustainable, digitally driven economy on the global stage. This entails embracing transformative actions and cultivating a diversified economic landscape that thrives on technological advancement while preserving the environment. At the core of this vision is the crucial role of the private sector, whose dynamism and ingenuity can propel Brunei towards global competitiveness. Additionally, fostering greater participation of local

talent in the labour market will enhance economic productivity and ensure a more inclusive and prosperous society.⁵² This could potentially have a profound impact on the country's welfare regime.

The “Welfare Diamond” in Brunei’s Welfare Regime

As mentioned earlier, a person’s welfare depends on each corner of the welfare diamond. The first corner represents the role of individuals themselves through the labour market. The other three corners indicate the transfer of payments or support from family, community and the state. This section discusses the role of each corner of the welfare diamond in providing welfare to the people of Brunei.

Labour Market

The first corner of the welfare diamond is the individual citizens themselves and their engagement with labour markets, which play a critical role in individual welfare by providing employment opportunities and facilitating economic transactions. Through participation in the labour market, individuals earn an income that is used to meet their needs and improve their quality of life. In essence, can they provide their own welfare through employment?

Brunei has faced three major issues with its labour market since independence in 1984: the dominance of public sector employment; a high youth unemployment rate; and reliance on non-local jobs. Since 2005, Brunei has also faced another major issue: an ageing population.⁵³

The public sector has long been a vehicle for distributing hydrocarbon revenue through job security and relatively high salaries. It accounted for 33.7 per cent of total employment in 2019. While some 49.5 per cent of Bruneians are employed in the public sector, only 2.5 per cent of the non-nationals work in this sector. However, the government has been encouraging Bruneians to relocate to the private sector, which, according to the Brunei Economic Blueprint, should be the engine of economic growth in the future, although the public sector will continue to provide services for the public.⁵⁴

The unemployment rate for youths (aged between 15 and 24) stood at 21.3 per cent in 2019, down from 25.2 per cent in 2014. However, that was still considerably higher than the unemployment rate for those aged 25–64 (4.7 per cent in 2019). In 2021, the youth

unemployment rate was 16.3 per cent, compared with 3.4 per cent for those aged 25–64. The high youth unemployment rate could be because young people can afford to be unemployed as they can obtain financial support from their families (especially their parents), the community or the state while waiting for well-paid and prestigious jobs.⁵⁵

To overcome this problem, the government has introduced programmes to widen the availability of better-paid employment outside the public sector. For example, it introduced the *Teguhkan Ekonomi Keluarga Asas berDikari* (TEKAD, or Strengthening the Economy through Independent Households) programme in 2019 to promote skills among welfare recipients. The government has also introduced various curricula and internship schemes in schools and universities to promote employability and reduce dependency on state assistance.

As in many other rentier states, in 2019, Bruneians only accounted for 66.5 per cent of all employed persons, with the remaining jobs occupied by migrant or foreign-born workers. It rose to 72 per cent in 2020 due to pandemic-induced limits on the international flow of people. Regardless of demographics, non-nationals are most likely to work in construction, wholesale and retail trade, and the accommodation and food sectors.⁵⁶ These sectors are unattractive to Bruneians because of their relatively low salaries. One of the goals of Brunei Vision 2035 is to reduce the country's dependency on foreign workers.

Brunei also has an ageing population. The country has had a fertility rate below the replacement level since 2005. In 2020, Bruneians aged 60 and over comprised 8.4 per cent of the population, and this is projected to increase to 19.1 per cent by 2035.⁵⁷ This demographic shift poses challenges for financing social welfare programmes, particularly those related to older individuals. One possible solution is to provide opportunities for older persons to continue working, thereby reducing their dependence on their families, communities, society and the state.

Household and Family

The foundation of the Malay family revolves around Islamic teachings and Malay cultural values. The norm of a large, extended family has existed for centuries and, even today, provides a social safety net. On average, a Bruneian Malay household comprise six people, sometimes including grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles.⁵⁸

However, in recent decades, economic and social modernization and falling fertility rates have resulted in smaller households, while living with one's extended family has become less common.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, the government seeks to maintain the values of an extended family whenever possible. For example, when authorities need to resettle households, families are moved to the same area to preserve the extended family system.⁶⁰

Celebrations—weddings, the birth of children and Thanksgiving ceremonies—are family affairs to which most extended family members are invited and expected to attend. Sombre occasions, such as funerals, are also viewed as social and communal bonding opportunities, fostering stronger familial connections. These gatherings embody the spirit of communal *gotong-royong* (mutual and reciprocal assistance), highlighting a sense of duty and commitment to their families and communities.⁶¹

As in many Asian countries, the family is an important social safety net in Brunei. However, in some countries, such as Singapore, demographic changes—an ageing population and shrinking family and household sizes—have weakened filial piety, with the traditional role of the family in providing a social safety net diminishing.⁶² In Brunei, however, the role of the family as a social safety net has remained largely unchanged as the state has encouraged it through the MIB ideology. Even though the extended family members may not all live under one roof anymore, their relationships are still strongly maintained. Some areas of the country are geographically distant, but Brunei has excellent road infrastructure, which enables rapid travel across the country and facilitates care provision among family members.⁶³ Also because of digital communication, family support networks in Brunei are likely to continue through 2035 and beyond. Therefore, Brunei can be characterized as having a relatively low degree of de-familialization.

Community

Communities are vital in providing financial and emotional assistance in Brunei. Community leaders are expected to serve as intermediaries between the government and the people, charged with safeguarding the welfare of their people within their locality. The government sought to strengthen the sense of communal belonging by establishing the *Majlis Perundingan Kampong* (MPK, or Village Consultative Council) in 1993 and implementing a Neighbourhood

Watch scheme. These initiatives promoted collaborative efforts to uphold peace, security and harmony in a village and the surrounding neighbourhood.⁶⁴

One form of community assistance is *zakat*, a religious obligation that requires Muslims with wealth to pay 2.5 per cent of their assets to charitable causes. The threshold, under which people do not have to pay, is called *nisab* and is equivalent to 85 grams of gold.⁶⁵ In nominal terms, this can fluctuate with the gold market. *Zakat* is collected and distributed by the Brunei Darussalam Islamic Religious Council (MUIB), a department of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, to assist those who cannot care for themselves and their families. Since the state manages the *zakat*, more discussions on *zakat* are referred to in the following subsection.

A growing number of non-government organizations (NGOs) have emerged in recent years to also provide voluntary assistance to communities through moral support, entrepreneurship and education. For instance, the Society for Community Outreach and Training (SCOT), created in 2016, has functioned as a catalyst to help people escape poverty by providing them with resources and basic skills.⁶⁶ The Yayasan Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah, a foundation named after the current sultan and established in 1992, provides housing and education to youths.

The *Majelis Kesejahteraan Masyarakat* (MKM, or Brunei Council of Social Welfare), a self-funded charitable society founded in 2009, focuses on children, persons with disabilities, older persons and underprivileged communities by providing temporary assistance—the cost of students' schooling, for instance—to those waiting for state assistance. It also provides self-empowerment programmes that support single mothers,⁶⁷ offers free legal advice and assists with welfare assistance applications.⁶⁸

Besides NGOs, the government has also initiated community activities to improve village welfare, nurture entrepreneurship and build a cohesive society. One such programme is the *Satu Kampung Satu Produk* (1K1P, or One Village One Product), established by the Ministry of Home Affairs in 1993. The programme is overseen by the MPK, a government body discussed earlier. Another programme is the *Satu Kampung Satu Keluarga* (1K1K, or One Village One Family), which focuses on non-financial social issues and aims to develop self-reliance and reduce welfare dependency among the villagers.

The State

As a rentier state, the Brunei government has established an extensive social welfare system to support its population. This includes free education (up to tertiary level) and health care (including medication), as well as subsidies for housing, fuel, rice (a staple food), utility and telecom services. The provision of comprehensive social welfare is made possible by a monarchical political system and substantial hydrocarbon revenues. The vast public sector has also acted as a social safety net. According to the International Monetary Fund, the total expenditure for public sector employment has risen by about 10 per cent since 2010. It accounted for roughly 35 per cent of total government expenditure in 2020, higher than an average of 25 per cent for Southeast Asian countries.⁶⁹ On the other hand, Brunei has had a fully-funded pensions system—retirees are obliged to save their income during their working period—since 1993, meaning pension payouts do not burden the state budget.

Moreover, the International Monetary Fund estimates that Brunei has the lowest electricity rate and the highest energy and water consumption intensity out of all Southeast Asian states.⁷⁰ The energy subsidy cost around 6 per cent of GDP in 2022, up from 4 per cent in 2018. Furthermore, education is free for Bruneians. The government's expenditure on education accounted for 4 per cent of GDP in 2019, slightly below the average in oil-producing Middle Eastern states. For instance, the Saudi government spends around 7.5 per cent of GDP on education, while Bahrain spent the least (2 per cent). Similarly, in 2021, despite free health services, the Brunei government's health expenditure was about 2.5 per cent of GDP, lower than the average for the oil-producing Gulf states. According to the World Bank, health expenditure per capita in Brunei has fluctuated between 2000 and 2020. It was valued at US\$507 in 2000 before peaking at US\$867 in 2012 and then falling to US\$650 in 2020.⁷¹

Two government institutions are responsible for welfare provision: the *Majelis Ugama Islam Brunei Darussalam* (MUIB, or Brunei Darussalam Islamic Religious Council), a department within the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and the *Jabatan Pembangunan Masyarakat* (JAPEM, or Community Development Department), which is under the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports. The government launched the digitalization of the National Welfare System (*Sistem Kebajikan Nasional / SKN*) in July 2020, providing a unified platform for the public to apply for assistance. Applications

submitted through this new system are processed by the relevant agencies.⁷² The MUIB sets the eligibility criteria for the recipients of *zakat*, which include the poor (*miskin*), destitute (*fakir*), *zakat* collector (*amil*), Muslim converts (*muallaf*), people in debt (*al-gharimin*) and travellers (*ibn al-sabil*).⁷³ All of this aid is distributed to the head of each household and seeks to temporarily alleviate a person's financial burden by providing support until they can meet their daily needs.

The monthly assistance scheme has four forms: financial assistance; basic needs; educational funds; and house rental costs. The financial aid for the head of a family, who is assumed to be the man, is BND200 (US\$148) per month while BND100 (US\$74) to provide for the wife. Monthly support for basic needs and food expenditure is BND65 (US\$48) per family member, while education expenditure per child is BND60 (US\$ 44.50). Older people, defined as those above 60 years of age, are provided with BND250 (US\$185) per month. For housing rental costs, an eligible family receives BND500 (US\$370) each month. As a result, the amount of *zakat* received per month depends on the size and composition of the family and eligibility.⁷⁴

The scheduled assistance scheme also includes financial support for the costs of business equipment, medical treatment and higher education fees, as well as for the repair, construction or purchase of a house. The yearly *zakat* payment scheme also supports the costs of the Muslim Raya celebration (also known as Eid al-Fitr) and perennial school essentials.

The *zakat* fund can be seen as a source of microfinance, used to cover the costs of a person's rent, including electricity and water bills, the construction of homes for those with land, and the repair of houses.⁷⁵ Indeed, the MUIB also implements a scheme called *Program Pengupayaan Asnaf Zakat* (PROPAZ, or Asnaf Zakat Empowerment Programme⁷⁶) that encourages productive activities among welfare recipients by offering skills courses to jobseekers and provides funds to be used to facilitate capital investment and the acquisition of machinery or equipment to promote entrepreneurship.⁷⁷

While *zakat* limits welfare payments from the MUIB to only Muslims, the JAPEM supports all Bruneian citizens, regardless of their religious beliefs or ethnicity. According to the 2021 population census, non-Muslims represent 7.6 per cent of all citizens.⁷⁸ Consequently, Muslim applicants can seek aid from the JAPEM or the MUIB. To be eligible for assistance from JAPEM, a person must prove that they face financial hardship, lack support from the

state or NGOs or have disabilities that prevent them from working. This aid encompasses necessities and educational expenses, with a maximum allowance for four children.

JAPEM categorizes individuals requiring financial assistance as households whose income falls below the minimum cost of basic needs, which is set at BND283 (US\$209) per month, using the OECD-modified scale method. However, JAPEM officials can reassess this criterion on a case-by-case basis. For instance, if a household's income marginally exceeds the basic needs, their eligibility for monthly support may still be considered upon evaluation of their circumstances.⁷⁹

Furthermore, the JAPEM plays a crucial role in enhancing human capital. For instance, it funds basic training and entrepreneurship schemes to promote self-sufficiency and secure sustainable income sources for individuals.⁸⁰

However, the government now recognizes that it must reduce people's dependence on the state. Through its economic modernization programmes, the government aims to empower individuals to lift themselves out of poverty through employment, creating self-reliant individuals and resilient communities. The government conducts regular evaluations to verify the eligibility of welfare recipients so that those who are physically and mentally capable of working are not abusing the system. The government wants to break the cycle of poverty by building human capital for employment and entrepreneurship through a "*Bekarih, Bejarih, and Belurih*" mentality, which can be translated as "having the target to do, working hard to achieve the target, and then reaping the fruit from the hard work".⁸¹

To make welfare recipients self-reliant, monthly welfare assistance is complemented by empowerment programmes focusing on employability, job seeking, skills and training, as well as a small amount of financial support to start businesses.⁸² With a successful shift to more self-reliant individuals and resilient communities, the degree of de-commodification will become smaller as peoples' welfare will depend mainly on their performance in the labour market.

Conclusion

The debate surrounding the nature of social welfare has been ongoing for nearly three centuries. At its core, the debate revolves around the roles of four key entities—the state, the community, the family and the labour market—in delivering welfare. This article demonstrates

the interplay of these four institutions in Brunei and how this will change as the government seeks to reduce its reliance on revenue from hydrocarbon resources.

The article argues that Brunei has a coexistence of formal and informal security welfare regimes. Within the formal security regime, the state is central in delivering welfare primarily funded through hydrocarbon revenues. The state safeguards its citizens through public employment, subsidies and generous social assistance. As such, Brunei can be categorized as having a “monarchical welfare regime”, in which the paternalistic state is the primary provider of social welfare. Brunei exhibits a high degree of de-commodification, meaning that a person’s well-being is not solely tied to their productivity in the labour market but is protected through state-supported transfer payments. Consequently, Brunei can also be described as having a “protective welfare regime”.

Brunei has pronounced social stratification, which is closely linked to a person’s access to economic opportunities and, thus, their ability to provide their own welfare. State aid is distributed to reflect this social hierarchy, resulting in a limited degree of de-stratification within the country. Additionally, Brunei has a significant coexistence of an “informal security regime”, characterized by the informal welfare structure in community support (including *gotong-royong*/mutual assistance spirit) and family support. Traditional customs and cultural norms, particularly those found in Malay communities, and the strong influence of Islam play pivotal roles in this informal security regime. Indeed, the state is responsible for distributing welfare funded by *zakat*, an Islamic obligation for charitable donations. In this context, families, particularly through extended family networks and communities, in addition to patron-client relationships, play a vital role in providing welfare support to individuals. This signifies that Brunei maintains relatively low levels of de-familialization and de-clientelization within its welfare system.

Will Brunei maintain the current functions of these four key institutions in delivering social welfare as the government strives to reduce its reliance on hydrocarbon revenues and foster self-sufficiency within the population? Will Brunei sustain its elevated level of de-commodification, its limited degree of de-stratification, its relatively low degree of de-familialization and its relatively low degree of de-clientelization?

Brunei must identify alternative revenue sources to sustain its high degree of de-commodification and protective welfare regime.

One potential strategy could be to establish profitable state-owned enterprises. Failure to do so could result in a diminished role for the state in welfare provision. Even then, it is most likely that the state will take on a less dominant role in providing welfare in the future, something that the government has anticipated, a reason why the authorities are trying to bolster the influence of the labour market on welfare by fostering self-reliant individuals and resilient communities. Brunei will likely experience a lower degree of de-commodification in the future.

Simultaneously, by upholding traditional Malay and Islamic values, Brunei will maintain significant roles for families and communities over welfare. This will ensure the persistence of the informal welfare security regime, characterized by low degrees of de-familialization and de-clientelization. At the same time, because of its absolute monarchical political system, Brunei is expected to maintain its strong social stratification in the future, which will uphold low de-stratification and require the state to have a prominent role in welfare provision.

If these forecasts are correct, Brunei will evolve from a protective welfare regime into a “modern monarchical welfare regime”, in which the state, community, family and labour market will be more equitable in providing welfare. The specific configuration of these roles will be contingent on socioeconomic and political circumstances.

Irrespective of the future configuration, however, transforming Brunei’s welfare regime into a modern monarchical welfare regime implies that the government will adopt a less paternalistic and protective stance. This transition holds significance in realizing the objectives outlined in Brunei Vision 2035. The precise way Brunei navigates this transformation will only become evident in the future, necessitating further research to scrutinize the social and political factors influencing this potential transition.

NOTES

- ¹ See Ly Slesman and Roslee Baha, “Oil and Gas Dependence of Brunei Economy: Current Progress and Challenges”, in *Stability, Growth and Sustainability: Catalyst for Socio-economic Development in Brunei Darussalam*, edited by Aris Ananta, Chang-Yau Hoon and Mahani Hamdan (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2023), pp. 271–304. A more detailed discussion of state assistance can be found in the subsection “State” in this article.
- ² This article follows the definition of the “Welfare Diamond” as discussed in Jane Jenson, “Social Innovation: Redesigning the Welfare Diamond”, in

- New Frontiers in Social Innovation Research*, edited by Alex Nicholls, Julie Simon and Madeleine Gabriel (New York City, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 89–106.
- ³ Soo Ann Lee and Jiwei Qian, “The Evolving Singaporean Welfare State”, *Social Policy & Administration* 51, no. 6 (2017): 916–39.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ For a discussion on Adam Smith, see Edwin Cannan, *Adam Smith: An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1977).
- ⁶ For a quick reading on *Das Kapital*, see Michael Wayne, *Marx’s DAS KAPITAL for Beginners* (Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press, 2012).
- ⁷ For more discussion on Keynes’ view of the welfare state, see Alvaro de Regil, “Keynesian Economics and the Welfare State”, *Global Economics Development* (April 2001), <https://www.jussempor.org/Resources/Economic%20Data/The%20Neo-Capitalist%20Assault/Resources/KeynesianEconomics.pdf>.
- ⁸ See Thomas Wilson and Dorothy Wilson, “Beveridge and the Reform of Social Security – Then and Now”, *Government and Opposition* 28, no. 3 (1993): 353–71.
- ⁹ Quoted from paras 17–19 of *Beveridge Report: A Plan for Social Security*, cited in “Beveridge Report: A Plan for Social Security Source”, *The British Medical Journal* 1, no. 4283 (February 1943): 17–21.
- ¹⁰ Kees van Kersbergen and Barbara Vis, *Comparative Welfare State Politics: Development, Opportunities, and Reform* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
- ¹¹ David Garland, *The Welfare State: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016).
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Presidential Agency and Indonesia's Ratification of the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution

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Indonesia, the leading source of haze in Southeast Asia, signed the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution (AATHP) in 2002 to demonstrate its commitment to regional cooperation. However, it took another 12 years for the country to ratify the accord, hindering effective collaboration. This delay is puzzling, especially since Indonesia faced pressure from its ASEAN neighbours to take action. At the same time, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–14), as the key decision-maker in Indonesia's foreign policy, wanted his country to play a leadership role within the bloc. While ASEAN's norms of non-interference and consensus may explain why the regional bloc struggled to pressure Jakarta to ratify the agreement, they do not fully explain why it took Indonesia 12 years to do so. Domestic resistance and institutional obstacles are alternative explanations, but they overlook the agency of the Indonesian president in pushing for ratification. Instead, this article uses role theory to argue that domestic contestation prevented President Yudhoyono from mobilizing his power for regional leadership and that he only asserted his institutional authority and resources to support the AATHP once he no longer depended on domestic political support. Thus, this article offers new empirical insights into the role of the Indonesian president in shaping foreign policy and ASEAN

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decision-making, as well as new theoretical insights on how leaders influence their country's international roles.

Keywords: ASEAN, Indonesia, role theory, transboundary haze, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

In 2002, the ten ASEAN member states signed the Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution (AATHP), a legally binding pact designed to enhance regional cooperation on preventing, monitoring and mitigating land and forest fires, the principal causes of transboundary haze pollution. However, Indonesia, the region's leading source of haze, effectively blocked the AATHP by not ratifying the agreement for 12 years. This delay is puzzling as other ASEAN countries had put immense pressure on Indonesia to address the issue, which not only affected its own economy but also had significant economic and social costs for its neighbouring countries, particularly Malaysia and Singapore. Moreover, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–14) was a strong proponent of Indonesia's leadership within ASEAN. So why did it take so long for Indonesia to ratify the AATHP?

This question has both academic and policy significance. Although transboundary haze has receded in recent years, the return of El Niño—a complex weather pattern resulting from variations in ocean temperatures in the Pacific Ocean—and the unprecedented heat waves it is predicted to cause in the coming years have brought back concerns about haze.¹ Moreover, the existing literature on the AATHP does not fully explain why Indonesia delayed ratification. One theory suggests that due to ASEAN's commitment to non-interference and consensus decision-making, the AATHP, despite being legally binding, remained a “soft law” with inadequate incentives for Indonesia to cooperate.² However, while this may explain why external pressure did not fundamentally alter Indonesia's obstructive behaviour, it does not address why Jakarta finally ratified the agreement in 2014. Another theory focuses on domestic factors and points to the political influence of the palm oil sector,³ as Indonesia is the world's largest producer of palm oil. This theory suggests that ratification was delayed by Indonesia's parliament on nationalist grounds, principally to safeguard the country's palm oil sector.⁴ While this perspective explains the institutional constraints on Indonesia's support for the AATHP, it neglects the agency of the Indonesian president, the ultimate decision-maker of Indonesia's foreign policy.

To address these theoretical gaps, this article offers a new explanation that draws on “role theory”, a framework that suggests states hold several foreign policy “roles”, which are social positions defined both by the expectations of other states and the “national role conception” (NRC). In simple terms, an NRC is defined by the views of policymakers on how their state ought to behave on the international stage based on specific historical, normative or material factors. It describes their “definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions suitable to their state, and of the functions, if any, their state should perform”.⁵ Using this theoretical approach, this article argues that “domestic role contestation”—the competing views within Indonesia over the country’s NRC—prevented President Yudhoyono from mobilizing the necessary resources to realize his desire to play an active role in ASEAN, such as on the transnational haze issue. Instead, it led to adjustments in the president’s “role conception”. Yudhoyono only asserted his institutional power to ratify the AATHP during his final years in office when he knew he could not be re-elected due to term limits on the presidency. At this point, he no longer needed to maintain his political standing at home and could focus on building his legacy.

This article makes a two-fold contribution to the existing literature by advancing this novel argument. Research on domestic-level role interactions focuses predominantly on the constraints imposed on leaders by potential domestic contestation.⁶ By instead focusing on presidential agency (or lack thereof), this article applies an individual-level framework that adds to the scholarly understanding of when and why national leaders use their institutional power and resources to alter a country’s NRC. Empirically, the article offers new information about the role of the Indonesian president in overcoming domestic disputes to support Indonesia’s leadership in ASEAN. It draws on primary sources—official speeches and statements, and policy and regulatory documents—to identify how Indonesia’s elites saw their country’s appropriate foreign policy roles. Furthermore, the author conducted 22 interviews with members of Indonesia’s foreign policy community, including active and retired foreign policy officials, academics, analysts and members of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), to gain insights into decision-making processes within the government.

This article proceeds by first reviewing the existing literature on the AATHP and developing a framework to conceptualize presidential agency in Indonesia. It then provides background information on the

origins of the AATHP and the resistance to the agreement within Indonesia. The following section outlines President Yudhoyono's "victim of haze" role conception. The fourth section shows that domestic resistance continued to constrain Yudhoyono even as his "role preferences" shifted. It was only in his final years in office, when he no longer needed to maintain political support and, instead, prioritized building a positive legacy for himself, that he took a bolder stance in supporting the AATHP. The article concludes by summarizing the main findings and discussing their implications.

Theoretical Framework

The shortcomings of the AATHP have been widely discussed in the existing literature. According to one perspective, these shortcomings can be attributed to ASEAN's institutional norms. The focus on non-interference and consensus within ASEAN undermined efforts to create a legally binding agreement to address the issue of haze, resulting in a "soft law" framework that had little impact on the behaviour of individual states.⁷ In other words, the AATHP provided inadequate incentives for Indonesia to comply with its provisions. As Alan Khee-Jin Tan puts it, the AATHP demonstrated "the familiar ASEAN allergy to state accountability and strong, legally enforceable norms", resulting in an agreement that was "largely deficient in material obligations and enforceability".⁸ Given these weaknesses, Daniel Heilmann predicted that the AATHP would have minimal practical impact on regional cooperation, even if Indonesia eventually ratified it.⁹ While this school of thought explains why persistent criticism and pressure from other ASEAN members had little impact on Indonesia's behaviour regarding the AATHP and haze, it fails to fully explain why Jakarta eventually agreed to the ratification of the agreement.

A second strand of research highlights constraints on the AATHP from domestic politics, focusing on the pervasive political influence of Indonesia's palm oil sector. Investors in natural resources are among the wealthiest people in Indonesia and have close ties with decision-makers in the government's forestry agencies.¹⁰ Local political elites and oligarchs have often prioritized profit over environmental concerns, one reason why Indonesia is more heavily affected by forest fires than its neighbours despite all of them inheriting similar colonial legacies of resource extraction.¹¹ According to this view, because Indonesia's political and business elites feared potential liability or sanctions if the AATHP was ratified, they successfully

pressured the country's political institutions to stall it.¹² Jürgen Rüländ argues that Indonesian lawmakers undermined regional integration by opposing the AATHP, claiming that it unfairly criminalized and disproportionately burdened Indonesia.¹³ Some scholars who subscribe to this view suggest that it was only after Indonesia's palm oil corporations adopted sustainability initiatives because of stricter international standards that Indonesian lawmakers faced less pressure to oppose the AATHP, eventually leading to its ratification.¹⁴

However, this explanation overlooks the agency of the president, who holds far-reaching powers over foreign policy.¹⁵ For instance, Article 11 of the 1945 Constitution states that there should be an "agreement" with the legislature on international agreements, but it does not specify what procedures or rules should be followed to reach such an accord.¹⁶ Thus, the president has significant authority to shape the foreign policy agenda and pursue their preferences through executive orders and presidential instructions. On the surface, Jakarta's foot-dragging response to the AATHP contradicted President Yudhoyono's pro-ASEAN stance. At the beginning of his presidency, he identified the regional bloc as the enduring "cornerstone" of Indonesia's foreign policy.¹⁷ During his presidency, he made Indonesia a prominent mediator of regional conflicts and the engine of institution-building. New frameworks championed by Indonesia during Yudhoyono's presidency include the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre), which sought to promote ASEAN cooperation on non-traditional security challenges, including natural disasters like forest fires, which Yudhoyono saw as significant regional threats.¹⁸

This article posits that domestic political institutions explain why Yudhoyono's preference for regional leadership did not translate into his administration's ratification of the AATHP. In Indonesia's democratic system, presidents must balance international expectations with domestic sensitivities. Thus, while the president remains the highest executive authority over foreign policy, electoral politics and the proliferation of diverse political groupings following democratization in 1999 mean there is considerable pressure on a president to formulate foreign policy that is acceptable domestically. Moreover, political loyalty is in short supply in Indonesia. Governing coalitions are often composed of numerous political parties and cabinet positions are strategically awarded in exchange for political

support. Because of this, presidents must accommodate the diverse interests of their political backers.¹⁹ Presidents must also be sensitive to popular sentiments since lawmakers, as the representatives of the people, do play a role in foreign policy. Parliament's interpellation powers and authority to ratify international agreements enable it to challenge the legitimacy of a president's policies.²⁰

"Role theory" is a helpful framework to integrate these domestic interactions into the analysis of foreign policy behaviour, allowing us to account for changes and variations in external decision-making.²¹ The notion of a role borrows from theatre, where a "role" provides an actor with a script or set of expectations according to which they should perform, while this role is also performed in interaction with other actors. Therefore, role theory argues that a state's behaviour is shaped simultaneously by the expectations of other states and its own "national role conception", which comprises "policymakers' definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions suitable to their state, and of the functions, if any, their state should perform".²² The rejection of a foreign policy role conception by domestic actors will give rise to adjustments or changes to the role.²³ The notion of role contestation helps disaggregate the national role conception into different domestic actors with potentially divergent ideas of how their state ought to behave.²⁴

This article argues that President Yudhoyono's changing role conception explains why Indonesia ultimately ratified AATHP. Indeed, it is not unusual for an Indonesian president to change their approach to an issue. For instance, during his first term in office, Yudhoyono took a low-profile approach to regional integration under the ASEAN Economic Community. However, during his second term, he assumed a leading role in negotiations over the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a vast regional free trade deal, and represented ASEAN in these talks with other partners.²⁵ Yudhoyono's successor, Joko Widodo, belatedly supported Indonesia's regional leadership role in constructing an ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, which reaffirmed member states' commitment to ASEAN centrality as well as peace and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. However, this was only after the intensifying US-China rivalry threatened Indonesia's ability to maintain equidistance between the great powers, which could hinder Widodo's goal of attracting foreign investment for infrastructure.²⁶

When and how individual leaders shape the national role conception remains underexamined in the study of role theory.²⁷

However, existing literature highlights how individual leaders' preferences and perceptions impact a country's foreign policy behaviour. Some scholars argue that leaders can impose their role preferences in the domestic sphere by leveraging their political authority and institutional resources even in the face of elite resistance.²⁸ When post-war Germany sought to find its place in the international order, for example, Konrad Adenauer used his political power as chancellor to push through his preferred national role conception of Germany as a faithful ally with an unwavering commitment to integration into Western structures even when this role was, at times, heavily contested from within the government and his own cabinet.²⁹ According to Fredrik Doeser and Joakim Eidenfalk, individual decision-makers with a long-standing desire to change policies can leverage shifts in the international or domestic political environment to initiate their desired policy changes.³⁰

In the case of the AATHP, this article suggests that domestic contestation by elite actors initially prevented Yudhoyono from mobilizing the necessary resources to realize his preference to play an active role in ASEAN, particularly on the issue of transboundary haze. However, he later asserted his institutional power to impose his "role preference" and facilitate ratification of the AATHP once the contestation at home no longer constrained him.

Origins of the AATHP and Indonesia's Non-ratification

Forest and land fires in Indonesia, especially on the islands of Sumatra and Kalimantan, are widely considered the largest contributors to transboundary haze pollution in Southeast Asia.³¹ The root cause for these fires is agricultural expansion. Indonesia's political and economic development since the 1960s has relied heavily on the country's abundant natural resources, with the forestry sector an important source of revenue. In 1997, forestry and wood processing accounted for 3.9 per cent of Indonesia's gross domestic product (GDP). Exports in this sector were valued at US\$5.5 billion, amounting to 10 per cent of total export earnings.³² From the 1990s onwards, the growing global demand for palm oil prompted the clearing and draining of swathes of land for palm oil plantations. Between 1997 and 2006, around 400,000 hectares of oil palm plantations were established annually.³³ The slash-and-burn land clearing strategies employed by the palm and logging industries—and, to a lesser extent, by small-scale farmers—dry out carbon-rich peatlands by

destroying the vegetation covering them, thus making them much more likely to catch fire.³⁴

Despite the recurring haze problem and its detrimental effects on health, the environment, and the economy,³⁵ Southeast Asian countries have failed to cooperate in finding a solution. Previous agreements made by these nations have not resulted in any significant improvements. Every year, large areas of haze cover several Southeast Asian countries, causing widespread damage. The haze crisis of 1997/98, considered one of the worst, resulted in 527 reported deaths, a high excess mortality rate,³⁶ and an estimated US\$9 billion in damages due to hospitalizations, school closures and disruption to business activity and travel.³⁷

Against this backdrop, Indonesia faced significant pressure to commit to a regional solution. The proposed, legally binding AATHP would have allowed Jakarta to show its regional solidarity and leadership while benefitting from greater cooperation on the haze issue. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs—representing Indonesia during the AATHP negotiations with technical assistance from the Ministry of Environment—was committed to the agreement for these reasons. According to an Indonesian diplomat, haze pollution was “a common problem for ASEAN ... and Indonesia thinks that this merits some regional discussion. That’s why the agreement was made and signed”.³⁸ Negotiations over the AATHP began in March 2001 and were concluded after only four rounds of talks in September of the same year.

However, the Indonesian legislature did not share the foreign ministry’s commitment to regional solidarity. Lawmakers expressed various concerns, notably their belief that if other ASEAN states provided firefighting assistance within Indonesia, it would undermine the country’s sovereignty. Lawmakers also argued that the provisions included in the AATHP burdened Indonesia with obligations, such as a zero-burn policy, that it was not yet ready to fulfil. Moreover, legislators felt that the AATHP unjustly blamed Indonesia for the region’s haze problems.³⁹ Indeed, they continually characterized the AATHP as discriminating against Indonesia while ASEAN turned a “blind eye” to other harmful activities, such as illegal logging.⁴⁰ The matter was further complicated because several companies accused of causing haze were technically owned by Malaysia and Singapore, not Indonesia. For example, Wilmar, one of Indonesia’s major palm oil producers, is registered in Singapore despite more than 65 per cent of its plantations being in Indonesia (as of 2022).⁴¹ This prompted some members of the Indonesian parliament to suggest

that ratification of the AATHP would equate to Indonesia taking full responsibility for the haze problem.⁴² As a result, in 2006, the Indonesian parliament dropped the AATHP from its agenda, arguing that the authorities had not yet implemented the various laws required by the agreement. Although three parliamentary commissions resubmitted a parliamentary bill on the AATHP in March 2007, legislators once again rejected it on the grounds of national interest. As one lawmaker put it, "The benefits of ratifying the pact are smaller than the obligations."⁴³

However, the parliament's concerns were not grounded in empirical facts. For example, Article 12 of the AATHP explicitly states the need for consent from the party requiring assistance.⁴⁴ This would have meant that the AATHP's haze fund would have also benefitted the people of Sumatra and Kalimantan, who were the most directly affected by the fires that caused the haze. Though not without flaws, the haze fund would have also compelled other ASEAN states to financially support Indonesia's efforts in mitigating and managing the haze.⁴⁵ Most importantly, weak enforcement, rather than a lack of laws, are the main problems for Indonesia's forestry sector. By 2003, Indonesia already had a fire brigade, the *Manggala Api*, and laws such as Law No. 23/1997 on Environmental Management and Government Regulation No. 4/2001 that aimed to control damage and pollution from land and forest fires.

Instead, lawmakers' resistance to the AATHP was political. Appeals to nationalism provided them an opportunity to shore up support among constituents.⁴⁶ Yet, one interviewee suggested: "I don't think state sovereignty issues are behind this ... they may play that card. But the business card is much more influential here."⁴⁷ Indeed, natural resource investors are among the wealthiest in Indonesia, with close ties to political decision-makers.⁴⁸ Politico-business elites close to the palm oil sector exerted their influence to undermine efforts to prevent deforestation and haze, which would have also put the palm oil companies at risk of sanctions and other punishments. Notably, this sector is also an important employer. Indonesia's palm oil industry provides direct and indirect employment for more than 17 million people.⁴⁹ As such, the Indonesian parliament's resistance to the AATHP was likely driven by their desire to cater to influential supporters, funders and constituents with vested interests in the palm oil sector.⁵⁰

Indonesia's decision not to ratify the AATHP back then effectively killed the agreement. Azmi Khalid, the Malaysian environment

minister at the time, declared: “Nothing can move forward unless Indonesia ratifies the agreement.”⁵¹ Key provisions of the AATHP, such as the deployment of firefighters and their aircraft without prior diplomatic clearance, remained ineffective without Indonesia’s consent. It also delayed the establishment of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Transboundary Haze Pollution Control (ACC), which aimed to facilitate cooperation and coordination among ASEAN member states.⁵²

It was not until 2014, 12 years after the agreement was signed, that Indonesia finally ratified the AATHP. It was the last country to do so. As the following sections will show, this prolonged process was not only caused by parliamentary resistance. President Yudhoyono was also reluctant to assert his institutional power and resources to support the AATHP until his final years in office. As a result, this also constrained Indonesia’s leadership efforts within ASEAN.

Yudhoyono’s “Victim of Haze” Role Conception

Upon entering office in 2004, Yudhoyono proclaimed his commitment to reinvigorating Indonesia’s leadership role in ASEAN. During his presidency, Indonesia played its traditional role of maintaining regional stability, while also taking on a more active role in promoting new norms and values, particularly democratic and human rights. According to a diplomat in the Indonesian foreign ministry, Yudhoyono wanted to “present Indonesia as a good neighbour, as a regional leader in Southeast Asia”.⁵³

The problem of transboundary haze pollution presented an opportunity for Yudhoyono to demonstrate his commitment to regional cooperation. In 2006, Yudhoyono expressed his commitment to resolving the problem and being a good neighbour by declaring a “war on haze”. He personally updated his fellow ASEAN leaders on Indonesia’s efforts to tackle the problem. At an ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on the Environment in 2006, Jakarta agreed to host a high-level international conference to mobilize international support and assistance for the issue.⁵⁴

However, Yudhoyono seemingly did not use his authority to mobilize resources within Indonesia to support the AATHP, which had been agreed upon two years before he became president. Upon taking office, he publicly declared that the bill for the AATHP’s ratification would be one of the most important pieces of legislation. Yet, little evidence suggests Yudhoyono rallied support for the bill

among lawmakers. His administration prepared the bill, which the Ministry of Environment drafted, and the State Secretariat, another ministry, sent it to parliament in August 2005, shortly after another severe and widespread haze crisis. The bill was rejected. Despite several amendments by the environment ministry, parliament once again rejected it in March 2008. On this occasion, Yudhoyono sided with parliamentarians against his environment ministry, which openly criticized parliament's decisions. Yudhoyono's office then turned down the environment ministry's proposals to resubmit the bill to parliament in 2009, most likely because of changes to his political coalition during that year's presidential elections.⁵⁵

Instead, Yudhoyono formulated a "victim of haze" role conception in an attempt to reconcile his commitment to ASEAN cooperation and regional leadership with the opposition he faced at home. According to a foreign policy expert:

SBY [Yudhoyono] has always been a big supporter of the ASEAN process. However, unfortunately, because of the political sensitivities regarding the haze ... he was not really that eager to push it through or to give the sort of encouragement needed [at home] to push it through.⁵⁶

Indeed, Yudhoyono faced pushback from parliament. Legislators criticized him for his apologies to other ASEAN countries over the haze problem, which, one legislator argued, diminished Indonesia in the eyes of the international community.⁵⁷ This sentiment was also shared across the government. For instance, an official from the Ministry of National Development Planning (Bappenas) expressed frustration that other ASEAN states voiced their concern when a haze crisis happened, but they did not financially support Indonesia in its haze management or forest conservation efforts more broadly. According to the official: "Only when a disaster happen[s] do they say something. When we provide the oxygen or the fresh air from our forest, it seems self-understanding, 'nothing to add – we [other ASEAN members] don't have to pay for your environmental services or any of that'."⁵⁸

During his first term in office, domestic pressure on Yudhoyono was amplified because his political supporters—the "Democratic Coalition", as they were known at the time—did not control a majority of seats in parliament, so he had to continually accommodate various interests to maintain a governing coalition.⁵⁹ According to a policy official: "At the end of the day ... he's a politician.

He depends on the people in charge, the real machinery, the political parties.”⁶⁰ Yudhoyono appointed cabinet posts strategically, enhancing his political support but allowing entrenched interests to pervade his policymaking. In particular, the post of forestry minister was attractive and usually given to career politicians.⁶¹ One interviewee, for instance, argued that “many ministers come from political parties, and you have the heads of political parties who have vested interests telling you, ‘This is what we are going to do, and this is the channel’. So, at the end of the day, the ones that dominate Indonesian politics are the political elites and the oligarchs’ influence.”⁶² This prioritization of political support over technical or environmental considerations weakened government actors working on laws and regulations to prevent haze and hindered cooperation with other ASEAN states under the AATHP. The ministries of foreign affairs and environment were the key actors responsible for Indonesia’s environmental diplomacy, yet the mandate on land and forest policy, as well as enforcement powers, lay with the forestry ministry.⁶³ This undermined support for the AATHP within the government because the forestry ministry was primarily tasked with protecting development interests in the forestry sector. According to an environmental researcher:

The Ministry of Environment, they are more on the conservation side. But for the Ministry of Forestry, they still hold on to the old paradigm, to use forest resources as a resource for development. (...) Although they have this sustainable forest management, the larger part of it is giving license to the businesses to cut down trees and convert forests into palm oil plantations.⁶⁴

In addition, environmental priorities were further weakened by the decentralized nature of forestry management. As part of Indonesia’s democratic transition in 1999, local government agencies obtained the authority to issue conversion and logging permits. Although the central government reclaimed some powers over forestry management in 2004, key responsibilities, including the approval of environmental and social impact assessments, remained with the district heads.⁶⁵ According to an academic, it was not the decentralized governance system itself that meant the haze issue persisted, but the political interests it enabled through weakened accountability and enforcement. The issues with haze management “come from political interests, those particular interests which are embedded in the Indonesian political system”.⁶⁶ Indeed, local

officials often showed greater allegiance to their communities than the central government, due to a lack of capacity. Complicated and inefficient chains of command, as well as pressure from their communities, undermined state intervention to prevent the burning of forests and peatland.⁶⁷

Strong leadership was required to overcome these competing interests. However, Yudhoyono did not use his institutional power and resources to support the ratification of the AATHP. His reluctance to challenge the vested interests of political elites allowed fragmented governance and weak enforcement to continually undermine Indonesia's haze management efforts. According to an environmental researcher: "The problem is the President has a different agenda, different priorities ... The bureaucracy would be effective, would be powerful, if the president really cared and really put that issue as their priority".⁶⁸ For example, Yudhoyono oversaw the ratification of Law No. 32/2009 on Environmental Protection and Management, designed to halt natural resource exploitation and increase government accountability. It was proposed by the parliament and drafted by the Ministry of Environment in consultation with NGOs and experts to introduce new measures, such as a mechanism for issuing permits, protection for activists and greater recognition of indigenous communities' rights to forests. It also outlined new punitive measures for officials who did not fulfil their obligations and would have made corporations subject to environmental criminal law. However, draft regulations to support the implementation of this new framework were rejected by the forestry and agricultural ministries, which saw the proposed strategic environmental assessments as a threat to their activities.⁶⁹ Despite this, Yudhoyono could have leveraged his authoritative voice to unify the cabinet behind a common goal and, as the highest executive authority, created a consensus in his government. But by the end of his presidency, only one of the 19 supporting regulations mandated by Law No. 32/2009 on Environmental Protection and Management was in place.⁷⁰

Time and time again, domestic role demands significantly conflicted with Indonesia's regional commitments. Because of this, Yudhoyono adopted a "victim of haze" role conception to attempt to reconcile these pressures. Although he generally supported Indonesia's leadership in ASEAN, he deflected its responsibility to the regional body by arguing that the haze crisis "was clearly not intentional".⁷¹ He carefully avoided placing responsibility on specific actors inside Indonesia for forest fires. He spoke broadly

about efforts to control the environmental impacts of deforestation and presented forest fires as natural disasters, disregarding their man-made causes.⁷² According to a former government advisor, Yudhoyono was “fantastic in saying all of the right words that international leaders and donors would like to hear” but reluctant to push for the necessary policy change or reform for fear of political conflict at home: “its big, bold commitments but slow implementation”.⁷³

Yudhoyono’s Belated Support for the AATHP

In his second presidential term, Yudhoyono shifted his role conception from a “victim of haze” towards admitting that Indonesia had more agency over environmental issues. This change can be described as adopting a “custodian of the environment” role, driven by Yudhoyono’s desire to enhance Indonesia’s international reputation and build a positive legacy for himself.

As part of his broader effort to position Indonesia as a leader in global climate action and decarbonization, he also promoted new policies to prevent deforestation and enhance forest governance and resource management. For example, Bali hosted the 2007 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP) and helped develop a roadmap for the 2009 conference, held in Copenhagen.⁷⁴ For Yudhoyono, COP was an initial opportunity to promote conversations about Indonesia’s role in the global green agenda.⁷⁵ In 2009, he made international headlines at a G20 meeting with a unilateral pledge to reduce Indonesia’s greenhouse gas emissions by 26 per cent by 2020, which could be further reduced to 41 per cent with the right international support.⁷⁶ From then on, Yudhoyono’s statements and speeches increasingly emphasized Indonesia’s pivotal role as a protector of the environment.⁷⁷

Yudhoyono recruited savvy pro-environment leaders to support this “custodian of the environment” role conception. In 2010, he appointed a special envoy for climate change. The first occupant of this role was a former environment minister, Rachmat Witoelar, whose wife, Erna Witoelar, was an important advocate for environmental justice and the founder of NGOs such as the renowned *Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia* (WALHI, or Indonesian Environmental Forum).⁷⁸ Kuntoro Mangkusubroto, who had successfully led the response and reconstruction efforts in Aceh Province following the 2004 tsunami, was named head of the *Kerja Presiden Bidang Pengawasan dan Pengendalian Pembangunan* (UK4P,

or the President's Delivery Unit for Development Monitoring and Oversight). Yudhoyono relied on Mangkusubroto to create policies amid his shift towards giving Indonesia a greater role in climate change internationally.⁷⁹

Importantly, for the AATHP, forests and deforestation issues became a central component in realizing the "custodian of the environment" role. In 2010, Yudhoyono signed a Letter of Intent (LoI) with the Norwegian government, under which Norway pledged US\$1 billion in funding in exchange for Indonesia's cooperation on forest conservation and emissions reduction.⁸⁰ The Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation Plus (REDD+) scheme, an initiative launched after the 2007 COP in Bali, also provided significant funding for Indonesia to support and incentivize forest protection. REDD+ was a milestone for Indonesia and a key achievement in Yudhoyono's efforts to position his country as an environmental guardian. According to one environmental researcher, through REDD+, Yudhoyono became "one of the pioneers for issues on climate change at that time. ... It actually started a new phase for Indonesia."⁸¹

Despite the shift in his role conception, Yudhoyono continued to be constrained. Contrary to his declared commitment to environmental conservation and haze prevention, he pursued ambitious economic development goals with potentially adverse environmental impacts. For instance, the 2011 Masterplan for the Expansion and Acceleration of the Economy (MP3EI) included the conversion of forest areas to generate profit and tax revenues.⁸² As one interviewee suggested, many domestic constituents expected ongoing efforts to enhance their economic opportunities from the Yudhoyono government: "You have to face the international audience, what they want to hear, and you have to face internally our businessmen and what they want to hear. And, of course, people want economic development."⁸³

However, towards the end of his second and final term in office, Yudhoyono took a bolder stance on the haze issue. This was partly because of changes in public awareness and expectations for improved environmental governance. Surveys by the Pew Research Centre between 2007 and 2010 found a 15 per cent increase in the number of Indonesian respondents who thought ecological protection should be prioritized even when it inhibits economic growth or causes some job losses.⁸⁴ Moreover, in the early 2010s, reputable institutions, such as Greenpeace and the World Resources Institute, published reports that clearly identified fire hotspots and their links to palm oil concessions.⁸⁵ These findings were significant

because they provided a strong counter-narrative to the claims made by pro-industry voices that farmers and smallholders, not the larger corporations who clear and drain forest and peatland for plantations, were primarily responsible for haze.⁸⁶ By 2013, the media was increasingly reporting on connections between palm oil cultivation and haze.⁸⁷ Social media amplified public sentiment and provided new platforms for civil society to pressure the government to tackle the problem. According to an interviewee, Yudhoyono “cared very much about his good image. It would not look good if all social media speaks in one voice accusing his government of being incompetent, that we cannot even stop the fire from our territory.”⁸⁸ Increased awareness about who was actually to blame for an almost annual haze crisis increased pressure on the government to take decisive action to regulate palm oil cultivation. Against this backdrop, Yudhoyono started to promote Indonesia as a leader on environmental issues, attributing his country a “pioneering” position in addressing climate change and frequently underlining its role as a guardian of its vast forests and rich biodiversity.⁸⁹ Naturally, both were linked to Yudhoyono’s desire to maintain a positive image for himself and Indonesia. The “custodian of the environment” role conception put Indonesia on the map, “making it known that Indonesia is very important if you want to combat climate change”.⁹⁰ One interviewee argued that Yudhoyono “wanted to have a strong legacy. And the strong legacy is not just based on the national measurement of success, but it’s also global. So this was a crucial time for the government to move ... [it] made Yudhoyono feel the urgency to do something.”⁹¹ Another interviewee contended that Yudhoyono wanted to “leave Indonesia with a good legacy, that he is a man who is environmentally friendly, who is a globalist, who is an outward-looking foreign policy actor”.⁹²

In this context, according to another interviewee, the AATHP not only remained a “loose end” of Yudhoyono’s presidency, but it was also particularly “awkward” given his vocal commitment to ASEAN.⁹³ Other Southeast Asian states had indeed grown increasingly vocal in their criticism of Indonesia’s inertia since 2011, to the extent that it became a “diplomatic disturbance” in the Indonesian foreign ministry’s interactions with ASEAN counterparts.⁹⁴ External pressure was further amplified by Singapore’s plans for its own Transboundary Haze Pollution Act (THCP), which was drafted after severe fires in 2013. This sought to prevent entities inside or outside Singapore from conducting activities contributing to transboundary haze.⁹⁵ Interviewees pointed out that the THCP was

more of a statement than a practical solution because it would only be effective with cooperation from Indonesia in terms of providing company details and enforcing the law. According to one interviewee, the THCP was “a diplomatic tool to show Singapore is angry at Indonesia”.⁹⁶ As such, Indonesia could use the ratification of the AATHP as a tool to fend off criticism, a “push to debunk what Singapore claimed, that Indonesia is not doing enough to resolve the haze issue”.⁹⁷

Importantly, Yudhoyono was no longer constrained by his political base. In his second term, he was politically on solid ground. At the 2009 elections, Yudhoyono's Partai Demokrat (PD, or Democratic Party) became the single largest party after winning 20.9 per cent of the vote, almost three times more than it achieved in the 2004 elections.⁹⁸ Moreover, Yudhoyono was limited to two five-year terms as per Indonesia's Constitution, so he did not have to worry about re-election. This gave him the freedom to challenge vested political interests and overcome domestic resistance to stricter forest management and law enforcement.

During his second term, Yudhoyono issued numerous instructions and regulations to enhance forest management and conservation. For example, Presidential Instruction No. 16/2011 significantly improved the legal framework for natural resource management by explicitly specifying the role and mandate of different government institutions involved in controlling land and forest fires.⁹⁹ As a critical pillar of REDD+, Yudhoyono imposed a moratorium on new licenses for logging and other potentially negative activity in natural forests and peatland, an important contribution to forest protection. He also requested biannual reviews of the implementation of this moratorium.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, he launched the One-Map initiative, which sought to create a single reference map to collate information on forest licenses, agricultural concessions and other land use claims, as well as to streamline data collection and reduce competition and lack of coordination between the numerous stakeholders involved in forest and land management.¹⁰¹

These regulations and monitoring measures became critical to the ultimate ratification of the AATHP in 2014 because they addressed issues of weak enforcement. Law No. 4/11 on Geospatial Information, for instance, established a base map to alleviate conflicts over data standardization. Presidential Decree No. 94/2011 outlined the responsibilities of the Badan Informasi Geospasial (Geospatial Information Agency), which answered directly to the president and worked to unify different ministries' data into a

single map. According to an interviewee with knowledge of the UK4P Task Force, these efforts forced government agencies to take more stringent actions:

You could see almost in real time what's going on with the implementation of priority issues, like haze and forest fire, in the situation room. Reporting standards applied through delivery measures agreed upon in advance based on the KPI [key performance indicators] of each ministry. This is where the paradigm shifted, where the ministry could not afford to come unprepared to the coordinating meeting with the President.¹⁰²

When Indonesia again came under scrutiny from the rest of ASEAN due to another haze crisis in 2013, Yudhoyono was ready to demonstrate Indonesia's commitment to regional cooperation. He finally used his institutional authority to mobilize support for the AATHP ratification bill in parliament. Because of the consensus-based nature of deliberations in parliament, a president or ministers often approach party and faction leaders to lobby for their proposals. If those leaders agree, other faction members will follow their directives.¹⁰³ As one interviewee argued:

Yudhoyono was in the second term of his presidency; he would not run for the third term. The way I see it, the President was being pressured internally and externally and then he tried to influence his political sphere, because you can see that in his second term around 60 per cent of the parliament were on his side. So he can influence them. ... Whatever he wants to say, parliament will follow him. And that's what really happened during 2014 with President SBY. He was being pressured internally and externally by neighbouring countries and then that was the moment when they [parliament] had to sign.¹⁰⁴

The growing cost of not ratifying the AATHP prompted lawmakers to abandon their politically motivated concerns. In July 2013, they stated they would "welcome" the government's proposals, declaring they were ready to deliberate on the haze agreement if its "purpose is good".¹⁰⁵ One interviewee suggested that "parliament could not come up with a reason to wait. They could not justify not ratifying the haze agreement ... practically it was already enforced in 2013."¹⁰⁶ Amid shifting public awareness at home and criticism from abroad, approval of the AATHP became a low-cost move to acquiesce to calls for Indonesia to tackle its haze problem.¹⁰⁷

However, not all domestic contestation was resolved. While Yudhoyono ultimately rallied support for the ratification of the

AATHP, he did not initiate the more far-reaching and complex changes to the institutional setup nor the monetary incentives needed to reduce conflicting sectoral interests in forestry and palm oil sectors. The One-Map initiative, launched in 2011, has still not achieved its objectives of creating a single reference map. Although most data sets were compiled by 2020, conflicts between government agencies and between the government and local communities have slowed the project. According to an academic, the main reason for this slow process is that overlapping maps create a convenient ambiguity that different stakeholders can exploit.¹⁰⁸ Conflicting land claims and unclear regulations have allowed governmental agencies in production-oriented sectors to exploit natural resources with fewer constraints.¹⁰⁹ At the district level, fragmented environmental governance has encouraged rent-seeking and money politics. For instance, the approval of permits for plantations tends to increase significantly a year before local elections as politicians prioritize short-term electoral benefits through promoting the development of agribusiness or fundraising through the sale of concessions.¹¹⁰ Using a single reference map would significantly reduce opportunities to gain (illicit) economic benefits from issuing permits for resource exploitation.

Even after the AATHP entered into force, conflicting interests within Indonesia mean the country's engagement in regional haze mitigation and prevention efforts remains constrained. As recently as 2023, after a few relatively docile years of forest and peatland fires due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Indonesia saw the return of intense and smoky fires, exacerbated by a dry El Niño season. Air quality across Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore worsened significantly. A diplomatic spat started when Malaysia attributed a decline in its air quality to Indonesia. The Indonesian Minister for Environment and Forestry, Siti Nurbaya, rejected the claim, arguing that "there is no trans-boundary haze to Malaysia" because data from the ASEAN Specialized Meteorological Centre (ASMC) was inconclusive.¹¹¹ Her remarks point to an ongoing conflict over the use and standardization of data in ASEAN. For example, ASEAN members have not agreed on a uniform air quality index. Similarly, the question of whose meteorological data to rely on to ascertain the sources and trajectory of haze pollution is highly politicized. Indonesia and Malaysia have their own national meteorological centres, while the ASMC is based in Singapore. During recent haze episodes, Indonesia has accepted only the data generated by its own centre. While acknowledging that other countries were affected by haze,

Jakarta rejected allegations that Indonesia was the primary source.¹¹² The Indonesian environment ministry has previously also resisted Singapore's proposal to share maps of palm oil concessions. Ministry officials argued that public disclosure of this information would reveal the location of Indonesia's natural resources, thus violating the country's freedom of information law that prohibits the release of data that threatens national security, although the law also enables the government to make exceptions.¹¹³ Data sharing is, however, only one example of ongoing intra-ASEAN differences regarding haze. The ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Transboundary Haze Pollution, a central provision of the AATHP, was only inaugurated in 2023 after more than a decade of negotiations. In part, the delay was caused by differences of opinion among member states over its location.¹¹⁴ Despite ratification of the AATHP, cooperation on the transboundary haze issues thus remains constrained by Indonesia's reluctant engagement.

Conclusion

This article explains why, despite significant external pressure on Indonesia and support from President Yudhoyono for regional leadership, it took Indonesia more than a decade to ratify the AATHP. While the existing literature has emphasized how different factors constrained regional cooperation, it has not fully explained the reason for the lengthy delay. According to one explanation, ASEAN's non-interference and consensus norms meant Indonesia was not incentivized to cooperate within the AATHP framework. However, this does not explain why Indonesia eventually decided to ratify the AATHP in 2014. Another explanation focuses on resistance from domestic actors, specifically pointing to the role of parliament in delaying ratification. While this sheds light on how domestic resistance constrained Indonesia's participation in the AATHP, it overlooks the agency of President Yudhoyono, who held the highest authority on foreign policy.

To address these problems, this article proposed a role theory framework. Earlier research on domestic-level role interactions pointed to the formative role of predominant leaders' preferences in shaping the national role conception due to their institutional power. Furthermore, these roles must resonate with domestic audiences to be successful. This article supports those arguments by showing that even the Indonesian president, the country's highest executive authority, could not act independently. Significant

domestic contestation prevented him from mobilizing the necessary resources to realize his preferences for closer cooperation with ASEAN, including on the AATHP. Yudhoyono only asserted his institutional power to facilitate the ratification of the AATHP once domestic audience expectations enabled him to do so and when he was no longer dependent on the political support of other elites at the end of his final presidential term.

Empirically, the article provides new findings on the role of the Indonesian president in balancing regional and domestic expectations relating to the AATHP. By tracing how Yudhoyono's role conception and agency changed over time, it also tests new hypotheses on when and why national leaders will use their institutional power and resources to alter their national role conception. This contributes to the role contestation scholarship, which has previously emphasized the constraints imposed on decision-makers by domestic politics.

These findings are not only of scholarly significance but also offer practical insights for policymakers. Transboundary haze remains a costly and persistent issue for Southeast Asia. This article underlines both the importance of the domestic drivers of Indonesia's ASEAN policy and the importance of a committed presidential agenda in overcoming intersectoral and interagency competition. However, considering that Yudhoyono's reforms brought about limited progress in regional cooperation, this article also highlights the importance of further research into the importance of the domestic forces that shape environmental governance across all levels. Future research in this field may further investigate how the situation in Indonesia compares to domestic decision-making processes in other ASEAN states and how incentive structures must change to allow for more effective enforcement of regional-level regulations.

NOTES

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No Regime Change in Myanmar, So Far: Exploring the Conceptual Chains between Civil Resistance and Junta Repression

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The 2021 military coup in Myanmar incited widespread civil resistance, including mass street protests, a civil disobedience movement, labour strikes and armed rebellions. Despite more than three years of conflict, the junta maintains power in certain areas of the country. This article employs an outcome-explaining, process-tracing approach to elucidate the junta's persistence. The analysis reveals that civil resistance activities are highly fragmented, with minimal convergence in their operations or long-term visions. This fragmentation stems from divergent views within the movement regarding non-violent versus armed resistance and the varied objectives of different armed ethnic organizations opposing the military. Concurrently, the junta has bolstered its repressive capabilities by developing institutionalized methods for countering adversarial forces. These methods are deeply intertwined with Myanmar's ethnic-political history and the military's entrenched dominance over political institutions. Consequently, this article contends that the evolution of both resistance efforts and the junta's repressive strategies has been markedly asymmetrical.

Keywords: Myanmar, coup, civil resistance, intrastate conflict, state repression.

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On 1 February 2021, Myanmar's military orchestrated a *coup d'état*, seizing power from the democratically elected government just hours before the announcement of the previous year's general election results and the inauguration of a new parliament. The National League for Democracy (NLD), which had led the civilian government since 2016 after decades of military rule, had increased its number of seats in parliament at the 2020 elections. However, immediately after the coup, widespread civil resistance emerged nationwide. Public spaces were transformed into arenas for public protests, and the public sector employees who started a civil disobedience movement (CDM) remained steadfast despite threats of dismissal. Civilians began engaging in armed, guerrilla-like attacks against the junta and its collaborators. Within a few months, these efforts coalesced into the People's Defence Forces (PDFs), comprising irregular groups of predominantly civilian individuals with no prior military training. However, three years on from the coup, the military maintains control over state institutions.

The existing literature on civil resistance provides numerous examples of popular rebellions, both armed and non-violent, achieving their political objectives.¹ It also demonstrates many instances of failure.² Additionally, studies have examined the normative and empirical developments of non-violent resistance.³

Myanmar presents an interesting case study that enriches the existing literature. Roger Lee Huang, Aurel Croissant and Jil Kamerling have explored the role of widespread protests as catalysts for regime change in Myanmar's history.⁴ Alexander Dukalskis has provided an in-depth analysis of 33 armed groups, primarily ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), and the factors influencing their decisions to sign or reject ceasefires with the military government between 1989 and 2011.⁵ Recent scholarship has focused on the post-coup civil resistance, exploring its objective for democratic federalism and the influence exerted by various EAOs.⁶ Additionally, some studies have explored the process of radicalization of Myanmar's civil resistance movement.⁷

However, the existing literature lacks explicit research linking the conceptual connections between civil resistance and the persistence of military-led regimes. This article addresses that gap by arguing that the Myanmar junta's survival can be understood through an analysis of the distinctive patterns that emerged after the 2021 coup and the country's political history. The unique developments in state-society relations in Myanmar require an inductive examination to elucidate why the junta remains in power.

This article examines civil resistance activities and the behaviour of the military regime to identify how specific pathways lead to particular outcomes, focusing on intrastate factors. Using “process tracing”, it draws within-case causal inferences about the relationship between the junta’s inception and the emergence of the popular resistance. Specifically, the article employs an outcome-explaining approach to elucidate the causal patterns and features of the selected case’s outcome by utilizing “within-case evidence”. According to Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel, within-case evidence is “evidence from within the temporal, spatial, or topical domain defined as a case”.⁸ This method enables the formation of theoretical explanations for why certain pathways and interactions in the sequence result in specific outcomes.

In researching this article, the author collected and analysed various documents—media reports, online databases and publications by international and domestic organizations—to reconstruct the sequence of events following the 2021 coup and uncover causal mechanisms. To ensure data reliability, more than one source was reviewed for the same event. The data collection process followed an inductive approach, employing multiple keywords in searches to identify conceptual causal chains within the junta-civil resistance nexus.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The first section explains the analytical framework employed by the author. The second section explores the context of post-coup Myanmar by tracing past observable events. The third section identifies patterns and causal mechanisms that explain the junta’s survival. The article concludes with thoughts on the further exploration of this topic.

Analytical Framework

Most contemporary debates on the relationship between civil resistance and democratic regime transition focus on the assertion that non-violence increases the likelihood of democratic transition and post-transition sustainability, and that violent resistance is associated with autocratic transitions and intrastate conflicts in the post-transition era.⁹ Through a comparative analysis of 323 cases of violent and non-violent resistance between 1900 and 2006, Maria J. Stephan and Erica Chenoweth found that non-violent resistance is more likely to succeed in gaining the loyalty, support and mobilization of the general populace, ultimately increasing the chances of achieving the desired goals.¹⁰

However, Stellan Vinthagen argues that violent and non-violent movements are often intertwined, with their blurred boundaries shaped by the actors involved and their behaviour.¹¹ Thus, it is essential to consider them in terms of their interdependence since the level of repression against popular political action does not necessarily follow a fixed linear process. Resistance activities that begin non-violently can become fragmented because of differing strategies or ideologies and the emergence of more radicalized or violent repression.¹² Indeed, non-violent movements have the potential for violence, especially when violence-inclined actors, such as militaries, are involved and when non-violent strategies fail to achieve their objectives.¹³ According to Espen Geelmuyden Rød and Nils B. Weidmann, public protests in autocracies can escalate into violent conflicts through two mechanisms: a “protest escalation dynamic” driven by escalating confrontations between protesters and state actors, and a “protest capture mechanism”, where protests provide opportunities for other non-state actors to engage in violence.¹⁴

When regime change does not occur despite various forms of civil resistance, it can be due to the state’s behaviour, particularly its engagement in repression. In this article, “repression” encompasses explicit and covert acts by state actors to deter, penalize or punish civil resistance actions, including arrests, physical attacks, property damage, prolonged detention, torture and murder.¹⁵ When civil resistance movements adopt more violent forms, it typically results in higher casualties due to the corresponding coercive response from the state authorities. However, the degrees of violence are not always correlated; violent activities by resistance groups may backfire, justifying increased repression. Therefore, civil resistance groups often oscillate between violent and non-violent strategies in response to repression to garner public support that can be leveraged against the repressive regime.¹⁶

Some studies have examined a state’s ability to repress public uprisings, which typically depends on its bureaucratic and political capacity.¹⁷ According to Michael Albertus and Victor Menaldo, a state’s coercive capacity negatively correlates with the level of democracy and the likelihood of democratic transition in a country.¹⁸ However, while state repression can sustain autocratic rule and enhance a repressive regime’s chances of survival, it also increases the potential for violent rebellion.¹⁹ For instance, in their study of Chinese protests, Yao Li and Manfred Elfstrom found that the relationship between a state’s coercive capacity and overt repression

varies across administrations.²⁰ Kristine Eck and Lisa Hultman found an even more complex pattern: a U-shaped relationship between regime type and the level of violence.²¹ The intentional killing of civilians was more prevalent and intense in autocratic regimes whereas violence by non-state actors, such as rebel groups, was more prevalent in democratic regimes.

Thus, the existing literature provides mixed interpretations of how civil resistance leads to a transition from authoritarianism to democracy. The degree of democracy within a country's institutions and the severity of violent repression against popular political action do not always follow a linear relationship. When a non-democratic regime seizes power illegally, it often triggers mass protests, but civil resistance does not always result in regime change. Therefore, contextualization, rather than abstract generalization, is crucial for explaining the conditions contributing to the cycle of civil resistance and state repression. This article considers state behaviour not merely as an independent variable but as a condition that affects and is affected by ongoing civil resistance within the broader dimension of intrastate conflicts.

Tracing Myanmar's Pathways: From the Coup d'état to the Present

Following the February 2021 coup, widespread public protests broke out across Myanmar. Ordinary people and government employees—healthcare professionals, teachers, bankers and rank-and-file civil servants—participated in acts of civil disobedience, such as abstaining from work, street marches and rallies, boycotts of products associated with military-aligned companies, strikes, noncompliance with tax payments and deliberate non-participation in gatherings organized by state authorities.²² Between 400,000 and a million public sector employees refused to work in the first few months after the coup, risking dismissal and economic hardship.²³

These protests evolved into a broader pro-democracy movement known as the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), gaining momentum through social media platforms like Facebook for communication and coordination.²⁴ The movement received support from networks of activists and groups advocating human rights and social justice, facilitating broader societal alignments against the junta and which are crucial for large-scale political action.²⁵ Notably, defections from the military ranks further bolstered the resistance and engaged in armed resistance activities against the junta and established online groups advocating for further defections among military ranks, with

support from the political opposition.²⁶ One of the key driving factors of defection was the moral outrage over the military's brutal suppression of dissent.²⁷ During the first 100 days after the coup, more than 780 people were killed and 4,930 people were arrested, with the numbers steadily increasing over time.²⁸ By December 2021, more than 8,000 soldiers and police officers had defected and joined the anti-junta movement.²⁹

Concurrently, elected lawmakers joined the protests. On 5 February 2021, Members of Parliament (MPs) who had been elected at the previous year's general elections but removed from office by the coup convened an emergency session. They established the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), a shadow legislature that gained the support of 398 MPs, approximately 90 per cent of parliamentary representatives.³⁰ A month later, 28 political institutions—including the CRPH, the EAOs, ethnic political parties, civil society organizations and civilian activists—formed the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), a platform for inclusive dialogue. NUCC delegates drafted the Federal Democracy Charter, outlining the resistance movement's primary goals: dismantle the military regime; abolish the military-drafted 2008 Constitution; and establish a federal democratic union.³¹ The Federal Democracy Charter was publicly announced on 31 March 2021.

In the following month, the National Unity Government of Myanmar (NUG) was established as the interim executive, a *de facto* shadow government. This development was in response to the junta's formation of the State Administrative Council (SAC), a military-led government. The NUG comprised democratically elected members of the ousted NLD and their allies from several ethnic parties.³² Subsequently, the NUG played a significant role in leading the CDM and collaborating with certain EAOs to provide military training and weapons to resistance groups.³³ However, the NUG's capacity to fully support and command these groups remains limited, even three years after the coup.³⁴ Additionally, the junta designated it a terrorist organization as a way to justify its repression of anti-junta protests.

As tensions escalated, the resistance movement adopted a more confrontational and militarized form. In May 2021, the NUG officially established the People's Defence Forces (PDFs), its armed wing, with the objective of challenging the junta through force.³⁵ The military's relentless crackdown, resulting in increasing arrests and deaths, led many anti-junta protestors to believe that a more revolutionary

approach was necessary. Civilians with no prior experience of military experience voluntarily armed groups, believing that only violent resistance could defeat the junta.³⁶ In September 2021, the NUG declared an all-out “people’s defensive war” against the junta, signalling a robust determination to engage in intensified fighting.³⁷ By November 2022, the PDF was estimated to have around 65,000 troops, most of whom had no prior military experience and were equipped with makeshift and poor quality weapons.³⁸ In December 2021, the NUG formed the People Soldiers Production Team (PSPT) to oversee the production of weapons and equipment logistics, with some defectors from the military joining this group.

The popular resistance also sought to align itself with the country’s EAOs, which had been fighting against the military and the central government for decades. In October 2021, the NUG formed the Central Command and Coordination Committee (C3C) in collaboration with several well-established EAOs, including the Kachin Independence Army, the Karenni National Progressive Party, the Chin National Front and the All Burma Students’ Democratic Front. The C3C aimed to establish a coordinated chain of command structure for joint operations. Additionally, in January 2022, the NUG set up a separate bilateral command structure—the Joint Command and Coordination (J2C)—with the Karen National Liberation Army, one of the largest EAOs but which had not joined the earlier C3C.³⁹ In late January 2022, the NUCC convened its inaugural People’s Assembly, where 388 delegates gathered to adopt multiple resolutions and formally ratify the Federal Democracy Charter, a significant step in endorsing a collectively written and agreed-upon political roadmap.⁴⁰

The military responded with escalating levels of violence and repression against civil resistance movements. Peaceful protesters faced arrest and imprisonment, with repression often disproportionate to the level of violence from protestors. For example, on 14 March 2021, security forces fired upon protesters participating in sit-ins in Hlaing Tharyar township, a suburb of Yangon, killing at least 65 civilians.⁴¹ The military’s use of lethal repression against civilians triggered a shift from non-violent resistance to more radical and armed methods of self-defence.⁴²

Between 1 May 2021 and 12 March 2024, an estimated 2,540 clashes occurred between the military and PDF forces, primarily concentrated in Sagaing Region.⁴³ The military’s brutal repression has perpetuated a vicious cycle, escalating the militarization of the

intrastate conflict. As of 20 May 2024, the junta has reportedly made 26,700 arrests, and 5,107 civilians have been killed.⁴⁴ The military has conducted airstrikes, targeting areas believed to be bases of armed anti-junta groups, and it has been implicated in extrajudicial executions of civilians during raids.⁴⁵ Moreover, forced disappearance, rape, torture and beheading have been committed.⁴⁶ Defectors from the military revealed orders to burn entire villages and kill residents.⁴⁷ Thus, the escalating use of force by the military has created an atmosphere of fear across society.

The military regime has adamantly refused to engage in dialogue with opposition forces. By expressing its intention to hold an election in the future and implementing a “four cuts” strategy—blocking funding, food supply, intelligence and recruitment to opposition forces—it has vowed to crush the resistance and consolidate its rule.⁴⁸ The junta has also developed formal and informal institutions to consolidate its authority. In October 2022, it announced the Organization Registration Law, replacing the former Association Registration Law. This law obliges local or international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to apply for a registration certificate from the government and to meet several requirements, such as submitting annual reports, to continue operating. This enables state authorities to closely monitor them. In January 2023, the junta introduced the Political Party Registration Law, which banned 40 political parties and groups, including the NLD, for their refusal to comply with the junta’s imposed election-related regulations.⁴⁹ Additionally, the military has supported the pro-junta Pyu Saw Htee militias, composed mainly of military veterans and ultra-nationalist civilians.⁵⁰ These militias raided villages, killed civilians and exerted control over various regions.⁵¹ Thus, since the coup, the junta’s institutional and practical repression against dissident societal members has gradually diversified and become more tactical.

Patterns and Mechanisms in the Myanmar Case

Fragmented Coordination in the Strategies and Vision of Civil Resistance

Initially, participants of the CDM adopted non-violence as a normative approach, aiming to uphold their dignity and legitimacy in contrast to the military’s excessive use of violence. They defied the junta by refusing to go to work, while pro-democracy advocates organized

street protests and engaged in collective online activities to raise international awareness. However, as state repression intensified, an increasing number of individuals began to resort to more violent means. Concurrently, the CDM became fractured over participants' commitment to disobedience activities, their collective identities and the departure of some prominent members who favoured armed struggle.⁵² These developments align with the arguments made by Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, who noted that resistance movements, initially non-violent, can become internally divided due to varying strategies, ideologies and increasingly radical or violent approaches.⁵³

Another division was ethnicity, a long-standing political issue in Myanmar. Since gaining independence in 1948, nation-state building has centred on the ethnic and religious majority, the Buddhist Bamar/Burman, resulting in tensions with the other 130-plus ethnic groups.⁵⁴ Many of these groups have been engaged in conflict with Bamar-led central governments for decades. After the 2021 coup, some ethnic groups hesitated to engage in anti-junta movements, particularly the development of the Federal Democracy Charter led by CRPH and the NUG, because they were dominated by NLD representatives and lacked coordination across Myanmar's various ethnic segments.⁵⁵ However, while the EAOs were largely perceived as a threat to public order and stability by the Bamar majority before the coup, there has been increased empathy, support and even participation since the coup, as many ethnic groups share the goal of overthrowing the junta.⁵⁶ Still, this collective goal has not resolved the long-standing ethnic struggles, nor has it firmly united the Bamar and minority ethnic groups into a unified resistance movement, despite near-unprecedented inter-ethnic solidarity against the junta.

The conflict has been further complicated by the involvement of existing and newly formed armed groups. Following the coup, the NUG and the PDFs emerged as key actors, garnering significant recognition and legitimacy among many Myanmar citizens.⁵⁷ Some EAOs—including the United Wa State Party, the Shan State Progress Party, the Karen National Liberation Army and the Kachin Independence Army—have fought against the junta. However, the EAOs are disparate; some fight alongside anti-junta rebel groups, while others maintain their distance. Moreover, the NUG has struggled to forge alliances with all ethnic minority communities, partly due to perceived neglect by the previous NLD-led government

and its treatment of the Rohingya, a Muslim minority group that has been marginalized after being excluded from gaining citizenship under the Nationality Law of 1982. The military engaged in mass human rights violations of the Rohingya in 2016, which has been called a “genocide” by some international actors.⁵⁸ The military has attempted reconciliation efforts with some EAOs and their political wings, such as the Nationwide Ceasefire Accord (NCA), initially signed in 2015 and supplemented in 2018. However, the agreement did not yield the intended outcomes of rebuilding trust and peace, as intrastate conflicts persisted. Since the coup the probability of a ceasefire with the junta for the more established EAOs is low, while other political factors—territorial agency, ideology and the level of trust between the armed groups and the state—have also influenced their decision-making.⁵⁹ New grassroots militant groups have also emerged since 2021, including the Chinland Defence Force (CDF) and the Chin National Defence Force (CNDF). These groups, formed by residents in Chin State, align with the existing armed group, the Chin National Army (CNA), which has been active for decades and is motivated by Chin nationalism and federalism.⁶⁰ The anti-junta resistance hinges upon various actors, all with disparate motivations, collectively agreeing to a post-coup vision of Myanmar that spans across heterogeneous ethnic groups—a vision far from realization today.⁶¹

With limited trust from ethnic minority groups towards the NUG, particularly over the majority Bamar ethnic group’s commitment to federalism, the NUG has found it difficult to develop a unified command structure involving all ethnic minority groups across the entire country.⁶² Although some collaborative operations have taken place, several prominent EAOs have retained their own decision-making and operational systems instead of affiliating with the PDFs or groups associated with the PDFs.⁶³ Moreover, some EAOs have utilized the national crisis to safeguard the autonomy of their respective ethnic communities.⁶⁴ In this context, civil resistance in Myanmar has gradually shifted “from being NLD-centred to a less NLD-centred approach”, with various groups and coalitions emerging and diverse objectives coming into play with minimal centralization.⁶⁵ The divergent visions for Myanmar’s future and pre-existing contextual linkages among various groups have challenged the civil resistance movement in forming a unified and effective strategy to overthrow the junta.⁶⁶

Despite some achievements by various political and ethnic organizations fighting against the junta, such as the announcement

of the Federal Democracy Charter, nationwide support for their initiatives has not been realized. The anti-junta institutions—the CRPH, the NUCC and the NUG—have embodied the norm of inclusiveness by bringing together various actors and groups but have not been substantively inclusive enough to serve as a centralized focal point of resistance. Some ethnic groups initially involved in the NUCC opted out due to disagreements regarding the country’s future political vision.⁶⁷ This lack of coordination has made their resistance efforts uncertain regarding their capability to bring about the collapse of the junta.⁶⁸ Additionally, many EAOs remain reserved about engaging in an all-out war. They are cautious about the implications of frontline warfare and entering into an explicit coalition with the NUG over fears of retaliatory attacks by the military and the need to signal openness to negotiations.⁶⁹

Nevertheless, the behaviour of these groups and alliances has not been static. Instead, they have changed in accordance with the unfolding dynamics in the post-coup era. For instance, in late October 2023, the Three Brotherhood Alliance—formed by the Kokang Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, the Ta’ang National Liberation Army and the Arakan Army—conducted coordinated attacks, known as Operation 1027, against the junta. Initially, after the coup, the members of this alliance were wary of actively contributing to civil resistance activities. That changed in late 2023 when the alliance began destroying military bases and seizing towns in various regions, including Chin State and Shan State. These actions demonstrated the military’s weakness. Even after briefly engaging in China-sponsored talks with the junta, the Three Brotherhood Alliance has reiterated its determination to continue its fight.⁷⁰

Thus, Operation 1027 epitomizes the enduring spirit and resourcefulness of civil resistance and the evolving conduct and perspectives of the EAOs. Initially motivated by self-defence, they have increasingly aligned with the anti-junta movement.⁷¹ Operation 1027 has served as a catalyst, encouraging EAOs to coordinate more closely, albeit temporarily, to enhance their effectiveness and to launch additional offensives against the military in several territories bordering China.⁷² However, significant EAOs, such as the United Wa State Army, still adopt a non-alignment policy, refraining from participating and cooperating in explicit attacks against the military or engaging in negotiations with them despite their significant manpower and military resources.⁷³

Consistent and Incremental Development of Regime Capacity in Repression

Since the coup, the military and security forces have exercised repression against politicians and civilians with impunity. On the day of the coup, the military ousted key leaders, including NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who was detained for nearly two years and later convicted of multiple charges, including corruption, electoral fraud and inciting public disorder, resulting in a 33-year prison sentence.⁷⁴ Moreover, the military regime executed several activists and pro-democracy advocates, imposing the death penalty on individuals accused of terrorist offences and conducting trials without due judicial process.⁷⁵ By labelling its opponents as terrorists, the junta has sought to develop legitimacy for its severe repression.

In response to the resistance's use of social media and other covert networks to raise funds to support the NUG and other anti-junta activities, the junta developed institutional arrangements for digital repression. These include shutting down the Internet, cutting mobile data, freezing transactions and implementing constant online propaganda dissemination.⁷⁶ Although the junta cannot monitor every single digital and transaction activity, comprehensive surveillance measures have been implemented, employing hacking software, cyber monitoring, wiretapping phones and utilizing unmanned aerial vehicles (drones).⁷⁷ The junta's use of nationalist propaganda and the demonization of opposition groups is part of a covert strategy to create a climate of fear and justify its repressive behaviour.

On the ground, the military regime has mobilized full-scale land and aerial attacks, targeting a broad range of civilians. Air strikes and indiscriminate raids have displaced hundreds of thousands of residents in rural areas. The level of violence and brutality against armed combatants and civilians has remained persistent, with the incidence of violence in 2021 six-fold higher than compared with 2020.⁷⁸ Armed civil resistance groups have achieved some success in attacking military outposts, but their activities have mostly been sporadic ambushes and guerrilla tactics, lacking the power to decisively defeat the junta.

Alongside the high level of repression faced by civil resistance, the junta has sought to incorporate potentially hostile forces, including various ethnic nationalities, into its political institutions as part of a tacit co-optation strategy. In establishing the SAC, the junta included civilian members from each of the eight major national ethnicities specified in the Constitution, reflecting its strategy of

“ethnic balancing” and leveraging certain ethnic groups’ displeasure with the former NLD government.⁷⁹ The junta also has reshaped the institutional order in its favour. The Organization Registration Law, introduced in 2022, prohibits contacting or supporting individuals or organizations deemed to be opposed to the regime or designated as terrorists. Similarly, the newly enacted Political Parties Registration Law disqualifies parties or individuals that the junta deems unlawful or terrorist. The criteria and scope for defining terrorist organizations are not clearly defined in the law, while the reformed formal institutions provide sufficient rationale for the military-led regime to suppress those who challenge it, largely at its discretion. Consequently, legal frameworks were institutionalized to solidify the junta’s control and to justify its repression under the guise of upholding the rule of law. The pervasive influence of the military extends to judicial institutions, where recruitment and appointments of judicial personnel are frequently influenced by their affiliation and loyalty to the military.⁸⁰

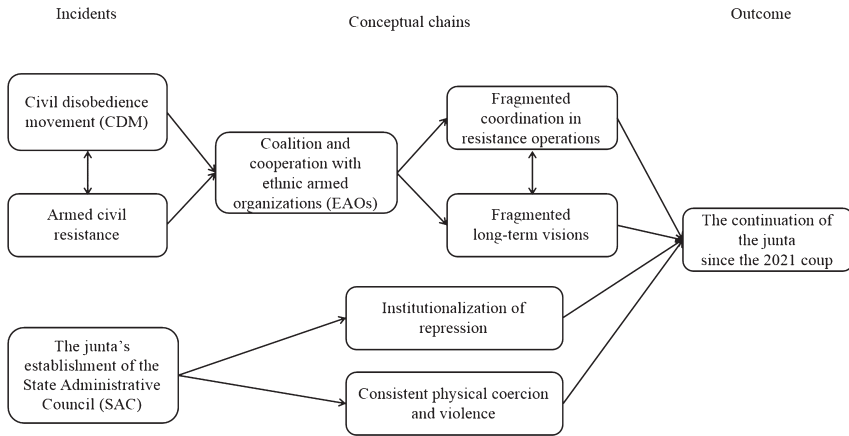
The military’s dominant role in Myanmar’s politics did not emerge solely from the 2021 coup. Myanmar has a history of military takeovers since independence, which has entrenched the military’s predominant role in the country’s politics over decades. Persisting insurgencies and tensions following the 1947 Panglong Agreement on a unified Myanmar (or Burma, as it was known at the time) can be attributed to grievances regarding unresolved demands for autonomy-based federal democracy that ethnic groups had envisaged. The disagreements and instability resulted in a military coup in 1962, led by General Ne Win, who established authoritarian rule, further marginalizing ethnic minorities in the political sphere. This historical course has shaped the country’s enduring conflicts and divisions.⁸¹

In 1998, Myanmar experienced a politically significant moment with the 8888 Uprising, a series of mass pro-democracy protests spread throughout the country. It resulted in the formal resignation of Ne Win—although he retained power behind the scenes—and led to another phase of political uncertainty. In 1990, relatively free and fair general elections compared to preceding ballots resulted in a landslide victory for the NLD, which was founded by Aung San Suu Kyi in 1988. The NLD’s victory signalled an anticipated step towards democratic transition, albeit without substantively resolving the ethnic conflicts.⁸² However, while the NLD won the elections, it was prevented from forming a government and

the military continued to oppress the party until the military formally ended its direct rule in 2011.⁸³ Moreover, achieving a long-standing democratic regime transition has remained elusive, as any institutional reconfiguration was shaped by the military's vested interests, thereby barely diminishing the military's dominance over politics.⁸⁴ For example, its legislative power is established by the 2008 Constitution, which stipulates that 25 per cent of seats in both the House of Representatives (Pyithu Hluttaw) and the House of Nationalities (Amyotha Hluttaw) are reserved for military officials. Even after the transition to a civilian government in 2011, the military maintained control of key political positions and sectors of the economy, thus creating a military oligarchy.⁸⁵ The military has frequently used apparent democratization as a strategy to consolidate power and maintain control through institutional manipulation and power-sharing arrangements, while genuine democratic reforms were rarely implemented.⁸⁶ For example, the 2008 Constitution stipulates that 25 per cent of seats in both the Pyithu Hluttaw and the Amyotha Hluttaw are reserved for military officials nominated by the Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services. This institutionalization helps the military retain its grip on political power. According to Roger Lee Huang, over decades, the military has established "reserve domains", consolidating its organizational coherence and intervention in political governance.⁸⁷ (See Figure 1 for a summary of the causal pathways in the processes that have led to the persistence of the military since the 2021 coup.)

Since the 2021 coup, the civil resistance and junta have exhibited different patterns of behaviour. The involvement of the EAOs in the dynamics of anti-junta civil resistance has led to fragmentation in modalities, visions, and subsequent operations, with little convergence among the various groups. In contrast, the junta has demonstrated consistent institutionalization, reinforcing its rule through systematic and brutal oppression of opposition forces. It is essential to recognize that these contemporary dynamics are deeply intertwined with the country's historical legacies, spanning decades. These legacies include enduring struggles by various ethnic minorities for autonomy within a federalist framework and the persistent retention of power by the military. The processes contributing to the current situation did not originate solely from the 2021 coup. Instead, they are rooted in long-standing sociopolitical conditions that have shaped Myanmar's society well before the recent upheaval.

Figure 1
Process-Tracing: Causal Mechanisms in the Persistence of the Junta



Source: Self-generated by the author.

Conclusion

Myanmar exemplifies the complex interplay between civil resistance and state repression. This article contributes to the existing literature on civil resistance and contentious politics by exploring the non-linear and mutually influencing nature of chain mechanisms. Employing the process-tracing method, it elucidates why the junta has maintained its rule despite ongoing civil resistance, identifying two key conceptual chains.

First, the fragmented strategies and visions of the disparate civil resistance have hindered collective, concerted efforts. This argument goes against scholars such as Kristian Stokke and Nyi Nyi Kyaw, who posited that the resistance movement could employ mutually reinforcing strategies across various dimensions, including economic and armed tactics, to counter the junta's strategy for authoritarian rule.⁸⁸ Non-violent protests arose immediately after the coup, but the heavy-handed, often brutal repression by the junta regime motivated a shift towards more violent forms of resistance. Long-standing ethnic-political divides further complicated the patterns of armed civil resistance. Despite occasional collaboration and joint operations, resistance groups remain localized rather than national.

While sporadic cases, such as Operation 1027, demonstrate the military's vulnerability in some localities, it remains uncertain whether these efforts can accumulate to effectuate regime change.

Second, the junta's capacity for repression constitutes another key conceptual chain. It has targeted non-violent and violent opponents alike, as well as innocent civilians, while air strikes and raids have been conducted nationwide. Moreover, the junta has established formal and informal institutional arrangements to legitimize its rule and maintain power. This has been achieved through legislation, the designation of opponents as terrorists, digital surveillance and the strategic fostering of anti-NLD sentiments. This article suggests that the survival of the military regime is attributable to its institutional capacity, enabling persistent and unchecked repression while containing the resistance by force.

Considering both conceptual chains, civil resistance *and* state repression have developed asymmetrically. Despite some successful territorial gains against the military, civil resistance approaches have remained stagnant, failing to evolve into a more organized command structure with a unified objective. In contrast, the junta has incrementally developed the institutionalization of repression, coupled with consistently brutal violence against the opposition. These patterns have contributed to the junta's persistent rule over the past three years, despite continued resistance from society.

Thus, this article suggests that the junta's rule will likely continue until the conceptual chains are changed. When considering the nine possible scenarios of how this conflict's trajectory, as outlined by Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, it appears that after three years, the situation has not significantly diverged from the initial phase. Myanmar remains in a state of "full resistance" from anti-junta forces and "non-accommodation" from the junta, with neither side showing signs of conceding.⁸⁹ The junta has extended its state of emergency and postponed elections, even suggesting it will hold limited elections only in areas of the country it controls.⁹⁰

However, conditions not explored in this article, such as schisms within the military or international intervention, could significantly alter the conflict's trajectory. Despite not having yet achieved regime change, the people of Myanmar have demonstrated their unwavering determination for freedom and democracy. Their struggle signifies a deep-rooted desire for change and a commitment to democratic principles, which should not be underestimated.

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Strengthening or Weakening Political Parties? Party Financing in Thailand after the 2014 Military Coup

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Thailand's Political Party Development Fund (PPDF) was created in 1998 to provide state subsidies to political parties. Primarily designed to reduce the influence of business conglomerates over parties by providing subvention from the state and to support their development by requiring them to establish local branches and recruit members, unintentionally it has also encouraged small and new parties to maximize their funding by creating inactive branches and registering fake members. In the wake of the 2014 military coup, the junta-appointed drafters of a new Constitution (promulgated in 2017) attempted to solve those problems through new regulations that allowed the state to control and limit parties' freedom over financial management. This article examines these new laws. It finds that they have failed to curb corrupt practices among small parties while creating new obstacles for parties when trying to abide by the onerous reporting and compliance requirements. Thus, the new regulations have not promoted party development and are counterproductive for established parties.

Keywords: Thai politics, party finance, political parties, party development, state subsidies.

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Money is an important element of politics. It is required for electoral campaigns, political activities, political education and parliamentary representation. However, it is prone to misappropriation. If poorly regulated, it can weaken the integrity of political processes and institutions, resulting in weak party organization and political corruption. Numerous countries have introduced regulations on how parties report their finances and how the state oversees them to deter abuses and encourage transparency. In Thailand, the first regulations regarding political party finances were introduced in the 1997 Constitution, often known as the “People’s Constitution”.¹ These allowed the state to intervene in how political parties spend and manage their resources.

Central to this was the creation of the Political Party Development Fund (PPDF), a state subsidy programme designed to strengthen party organizations and encourage their institutionalization. The programme’s drafters hoped that financial support from the state would curb the traditional patron-client structure of party financing and diminish the influence of business conglomerates over parties, issues that had plagued Thai politics for decades.²

However, 26 years on from the creation of the PPDF, evidence suggests that it has failed on both counts. Although distributed disproportionately to larger parties, state funding has been insufficient to conduct campaigns or establish strong party organizations. Meanwhile, the larger parties continue to rely financially on private donations, not the PPDF.³ Although small parties with limited funding can also draw funds from the PPDF, this money has not necessarily allowed them to run successful campaigns. Instead, some of these minor parties use the funds as personal expense accounts for their leaders or members rather than for strengthening their party’s organizational structure.⁴ When the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) does uncover illegal spending by those small parties, it reports them to the courts. If they fail to return the subsidies to the ECT, these small parties face Constitutional Court charges, often resulting in their dissolution. However, these punishments are ephemeral; the parties simply re-establish themselves under new names and start to receive state funding again.

To prevent these problems, party finance laws have been amended several times. Most recently, the committee charged with writing the 2017 Constitution introduced multiple new regulations to enhance the efficacy, streamline the funding allocation process, foster robust party organization and rigorously oversee party expenditures. However, the impact has been far from efficacious,

as witnessed in the 2019 and 2023 general elections. Rather than supporting party development, many of the new regulations became obstacles to advancement. Moreover, while the new regulations have increased the state's control over how parties spend and report their finances, they have also allowed it to interfere significantly in parties' internal affairs.

This article examines the role of these new regulations—chiefly the 2017 Organic Law on Political Parties—on the PPDF and how they impact political party development in Thailand. It begins by reviewing the development of state subsidization for political parties and how policymakers have tried to amend the law over time to ensure the effectiveness of the PPDF. The article moves on to examine the challenges posed by the new regulations on the PPDF. The concluding section offers recommendations for how the ECT can ensure that the PPDF effectively bolsters party development.

Methodologically, this article is based on a series of six focus groups⁵ that were conducted with party branch members, Members of Parliament (MPs), candidates, party staff and ECT officers in the following provinces: Bangkok, Trang, Phuket, Udon-Thani, Khon Kaen and Nan. In addition, the author interviewed politicians, electoral candidates, party staff, scholars and ECT officers to ascertain their views on the pros and cons of current regulations on party financing and the PPDF. Additionally, non-participatory observations were conducted by shadowing parties' political activities in certain provinces and ECT events related to party finance in Bangkok, Udon-Thani and Trang to understand how political parties spent money derived from the PPDF and how the ECT sought to educate political parties on finance regulations and management.

Reform of Party Finance in Thailand from 1997 to 2023

In democratic states, mass-based parties were historically funded through membership fees and contributions from supporters, who would voluntarily participate in the party's activities and engage in its electoral campaign events.⁶ Such a relationship meant the party was not dependent on state subsidies or major donors. These parties were considered voluntary grassroots organizations, and their finances were viewed as their own concern, sparing them from state interference. However, mass-based parties have become a rarity in contemporary politics. Today, only a few political parties can cover all of their expenses through membership fees and internal donations. Instead, state subsidies or contributions from business

conglomerates are now the most significant source of income for political parties globally.⁷

As mass-based parties declined, public financing was introduced. According to Ingrid van Biezen, in Western Europe, where the mass-based party has mostly disappeared, parties now depend on the state as the principal financier of their activities.⁸ However, state funding promotes stronger connections between political parties and governmental entities, making parties less aligned with societal interests.⁹ According to van Biezen: "Parties are increasingly seen as an essential public good for democracy and less exclusive as the private voluntary associations which are the instruments of civil society."¹⁰ On the other hand, the provision of state money aims to prevent large donors from influencing party organizations.¹¹ By one estimate, the state now directly funds political parties and candidates in more than 70 per cent of countries, including some in Southeast Asia, such as Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand and Timor-Leste.¹² Thus, public funding has become an important source of income for political parties in developing democracies.

Aside from providing subvention, states also implement finance regulations to constrain political parties, thus legitimizing, to some degree, the direct intervention of the state in parties' internal affairs and external activities. The state can exercise this role to curb illicit aspects of political finances and corruption,¹³ as well as to support political competition.¹⁴ According to Magnus Ohman, each country's political goals and national context must be considered when designing regulations. For Ohman, these "political goals" refer to "how the people consider politics in their democratic system as a whole, and in particular how political parties and election campaigns should be organized".¹⁵ In other words, finance regulations should be contingent on how the public views political parties and elections. In countries where political parties are considered voluntary grassroots organizations that elevate political participation (such as Sweden), parties should be allowed more independence, leaving them free to exercise internal affairs, including the management of their finances. On the other hand, when political parties and electoral campaigns are perceived as being closely aligned with the government, it becomes imperative to regulate parties effectively to enhance their contribution to the democratic process, potentially through oversight by an independent electoral commission.¹⁶ In such systems, party finance regulations are vital in managing how political parties operate and spend their funds, allowing the state to intervene and monitor a party's financial management. Since the

political goals of countries are different, political finance regulations should vary accordingly.¹⁷

When determining what sort of regulations are needed, Ohman also explores the *context* of each country: the political system and regulatory challenges.¹⁸ The former refers to the political characteristics of countries, including the electoral system, government structure and party system. In countries using proportional representation systems with closed lists, political parties often play a more important role in electoral campaigns than individual candidates. In such circumstances, because internal party politics matters more than the actions of candidates, regulations on party finance may avoid requirements to report how their finances are spent. On the other hand, in countries with a majoritarian electoral system and single-seat system, candidates may matter more than parties. In such cases, party finance laws might be focused on preventing corrupt practices. Different regime types also affect how party finance regulations are designed. If the representative institutions are candidate-centric, meaning parties are weaker, regulations may need to be designed to focus on how candidates, not the party, spend their funds. Similarly, regulations should depend on whether a political system has two or three dominant parties or many viable parties.

The regulatory challenges of a country refer to how money influences politics. Ohman divided challenges into two different aspects: political system challenges and political finance control challenges. The former relates to issues stemming from the negative impacts of party finances, such as corruption, misuse of state subsidies, vote-buying and unequal access to funding for political parties. The latter refers to the capacity of a country's authorities to monitor party finances, including the authorities' independence (or lack thereof), and whether the political will exists to monitor party finances and ambiguous laws. To reform regulations on party finance, lawmakers need to consider both *political goals* and the *country's context*. In an ideal world, states that consider both these factors should be more effective in encouraging stronger party organization and curbing corrupt practices.

In Thailand, most political parties were established as ad hoc organizations for elections.¹⁹ They were built from the top down, based around the personalities of their leaders and factions—groups of local luminaries with economic influence²⁰—rather than ideologies, while also lacking cohesive structures or strong bases among the mass public.²¹ The absence of strong public participation meant that Thai political parties typically relied on their leaders or financiers

from the business sector for the funding necessary to establish their electoral networks. The factional leaders controlled vote canvassers and the networks that allowed candidates to communicate with voters.²² Many financed political parties in exchange for lucrative cabinet positions if their sponsor entered government. Indeed, attracting strong factional leaders has been a short-cut to electoral victory, evidenced by the formation of pro-military parties in the past, such as the Samakhitham Party in 1992, the Saha Pracha Thai Party in 1969 and the new political parties established after the 2014 military coup—the Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) and the United Thai Nation Party (UTN).²³ This political model of Thai parties allows factions, including those linked directly with business leaders, to play a vital role in Thai politics at the expense of strong party organization.

According to scholars, weak regulations on party finance, the lack of rigorous enforcement under the law and inefficient monitoring processes have contributed to the rent-seeking behaviour among small parties and the prevalence of conglomerates' influence over parties.²⁴ To curb these corrupt practices, lawmakers must introduce or revise the regulations on party finance over time to enhance transparency and restrain any illegal activities or control inappropriate practices. Thus, legal institutions should become instruments for coping with political challenges. However, in many cases, changes to the law do not solve the problems; in fact, they aggravate the complications within the party financing system. Is this the case in Thailand, where party finance regulations have been revised seven times since 1955?

Development of Party Finance Regulations in Thailand

In Thailand, state subsidies for political parties were first introduced by the Democratic Development Committee (DDC), appointed by Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai's government in 1994 and led by Prawase Wasi, a public intellectual. The 1998 Political Party Act sought to eliminate corruption, curb vote-buying and prevent the influence of interested sponsors by strengthening the monitoring institutions.²⁵ It also created the PPDF to provide financial assistance for small and new parties to strengthen their organization and compete in successive election cycles. Typically, a small party would be created just before an election and then collapse afterwards.²⁶

Under the PPDF rules, parties were allocated subsidies from the ECT based on four measures: constituency seats won in parliament;

electoral votes in the party list system; the number of branches they had; and the number of party members. At first, the ECT gave equal weight to each measure, meaning that small parties that had not won any parliamentary seats were eligible for funding based on the number of local branches and members they had. Because of this, between 1998 and 2004, many small parties established vast numbers of local branches or energetically recruited members to gain more revenue from the state.²⁷ Despite not holding a single seat in parliament, some of these parties boasted more than 200 local branches and almost one million members. For instance, the Thai Is Thai Party, which had no representative in parliament, received 16 million baht (US\$432,432) from the PPDF in 2002. The Better Life Party (*Phak Chewit Tee De Kwa*) and For Heaven and Earth Party (*Phak Phea Fah Din*) received 1.1 million baht (US\$29,000) and 408,300 baht (US\$11,000) in 2005 and 1.6 million baht (US\$43,000) and 643,000 baht (US\$17,000)²⁸ in 2006, respectively, despite neither having ever won a single parliamentary seat, too.²⁹

Table 1
Subsidies allocated to Small Parties with No Seats in 2005 and 2006
(in Thai baht)³⁰

Political Parties	2005				
	Number of branches	Allocations from branches	Number of Members	Allocations from members	Total allocation
Better Life	27	900,000	13,829	37,000	1 million
New Aspiration	8	280,000	17,807	3,000	408,600
For Heaven and Earth	9	360,000	21,910	44,000	408,300
People Debt Release ³¹	229	7 million	535,989	1.2million	9 million
2006					
Better Life	22	1.5million	13,848	28,000	1.6million
New Aspiration	8	540,000	18,078	12,000	1 million
For Heaven and Earth	9	600,000	22,085	43,000	643,000
People Debt Release ³¹	233	13 million	870,652	3 million	16 million

Sources: Developed by the author from the PPDF Report 2005–2006 produced by the Election Commission of Thailand.

To resolve this problem, the ECT revised the allocation formula numerous times, giving extra weight to the number of seats and votes that parties won (over branch or member numbers) to curb

these rent-seeking practices.³² (See Table 2 for the amendments to the PPDF allocation formula between 1999 and the present.) For the most part, revisions to the formula for funding allocation did not reduce the problem of corruption among smaller political parties. Neither have they weakened the role of business conglomerates over the parties nor strengthened party internal structures.³³ Indeed, small parties continue to receive subsidies based on their number of local branches and members. Investigations have found that some have used their public funding on things other than organizational development,³⁴ including the personal expenses of their leaders or members.³⁵ When the ECT discovers such illegal spending, it reports the parties to the courts. If the parties are prosecuted and cannot return the subsidies to the ECT, they face the Constitutional Court, which has dissolved many of them for fraudulent activities.³⁶ However, some small parties quickly re-establish themselves under new names and with new executive committees before reapplying for financial support from the ECT. For example, after being dissolved by the Constitutional Court in 2016, the People Seeking Debt Relief Party reorganized itself as the Thai Is Thai Party.³⁷ In some cases, these reformed parties have again been found to have been illicitly spending state subsidies.³⁸

Table 2
Revisions in PPDF Allocation Formula (1999–present)

Measure	Weight 1999	assigned 2000–6	to measure 2007–14	2017–present	
Number of party list votes won	25%	30%	40%	Number of votes or annual donations ³⁹	40%
Number of constituency seats won	25%	35%	40%		
Number of party members	25%	20%	10%	Membership fee	40%
Number of local branches	25%	15%	10%	Local branches	20%
Total	100%	100%	100%		100%

Sources: The author developed the table using data adapted from the Election Commission of Thailand's Announcements on the PPDF (1998, 1999, 2000, 2011 and 2018) and the 2017 Political Party Act.

The New Law on Party Finance after the Coup and Party Development

After the 2014 military coup, many political parties (and public political activists) were banned.⁴⁰ Political parties were required to return their remaining subsidies to the ECT, which ceased allocating public funds to political parties between 2014 and 2018. Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha, the junta leader, appointed a committee to draft a new constitution and revise the Organic Law on Political Parties.

The 2017 Organic Law on Political Parties maintained state subsidies for parties but revised the PPDF's methods for allocating money and introduced new regulations on financial management designed to encourage parties to use subsidies more effectively to reduce corruption and build stronger party organizations.⁴¹ However, as discussed later, the new rules were cumbersome and created severe obstacles for parties, discouraging some from spending the money on strengthening their organizations. The revised law gave political parties little freedom in deciding how to conduct their activities, resulting in some parties organizing activities because they complied with the rules rather than because they made sense for their own political strategies or policies.⁴² Under the revised law, violations can result in substantial fines, custodial sentences or the forced return of subsidies to the ECT.

According to Ohman, how political party finance is regulated should depend on a country's political goals and context.⁴³ In Thailand, especially since the 2014 coup, policymakers have sought to constrain political parties, so strict regulations were imposed. Indeed, those who drafted the 2017 Constitution and the 2017 Organic Law on Political Parties believed that political parties should be more stringently regulated because of their distrust of democracy and party organizations.⁴⁴

The revised rules divide party finances into two categories: public and private. Public funding refers to the PPDF subsidies the ECT provides to eligible political parties for organizational development. Private financing refers to the income that parties receive from other sources, including membership fees, seed capital from co-founders, donations from individuals and corporations, revenue from goods and services sold at the parties' official shops, fundraising events and interest or income from party assets and investments. The regulations related to public finances are found

in the 2017 Organic Law on Political Parties; those for private funding in the 2018 Organic Law on the Election of the Members of Parliament. Furthermore, regulations on public funding are divided into four sections: allocation of funds; regulations on spending; requirements on reporting; and monitoring processes. The revised rules in the 2017 Organic Law on Political Parties were based on political challenges arising from previous regulations.⁴⁵ While they appeared to increase accountability and transparency in public finance, they have become a double-edged sword since they also prevent political parties from using public funds for activities that strengthen a party's organizational structure. Moreover, parties spend significant time organizing branch meetings and political education seminars for their members on how not to violate party financing rules. Finance officers from the Move Forward Party (MFP), which won the most votes in the 2023 general elections, pointed out that:

Our party tried to organize innovative activities to access young voters. However, it is not an easy task due to many regulations on party finance preventing us from doing so. To ensure we would not violate the law, we had to be careful about what kinds of activities we conducted. Thus, most of our activities aimed to provide political education and party policies to voters around the country. We organized political activities not only for our party members, but also for the general public who were interested in politics in order to provide them with information about our policies.⁴⁶

New regulations in the 2018 Organic Law on Political Parties, which deals with private funding, sought to enhance the transparency of party finances but once again appear to be limiting political parties' freedom to organize innovative activities to mobilize votes and attract more political supporters. As such, party finance laws have become an instrument for the Thai state to dominate the internal affairs of political parties.

A New Formula to Allocate of State Subsidies

Small and newly formed political parties that cannot generate their own incomes rely on state subsidies. However, as we have seen, this is not necessarily spent on improving their organizational structure; instead, it often subsidizes party leaders' personal expenses.⁴⁷ To solve this problem, the 2017 Organic Law on Political Parties amended the allocation method to prevent small parties from creating inactive

branches and false members to inflate their revenue by revising the allocation formula (as shown in Table 2). However, this new system has given additional state benefits to larger parties—which also typically receive more private funding such as donations—because they hold more parliamentary seats—limiting funds for small parties that struggle to attract private donations.

As shown in Table 2, since 2019, when the state began funding parties again after a five-year hiatus, political parties have been allocated funding based on three main measures: the total amount of annual membership fees (with a 40 per cent weightage in the determination of subsidies from the PPDF); the number of votes won in elections (a 40 per cent weightage); and the number of party branches (a 20 per cent weightage). However, between the 2019 and 2023 general elections, instead of allocating subsidies based on votes received, the ECT allocated this proportion based on tax-return donations that parties received annually, along with the number of party branches and the total membership fees paid.

This was the first time that tax-return donations were included in PPDF calculations. Political parties can receive donations in two ways: direct donations from companies or individuals; or donations from income tax refunds. Private donors can donate to one or more parties, capped at 10 million baht (US\$300,000) per donor per year. Parties can use these donations to organize party activities, conduct election campaigns and manage their internal administration.⁴⁸ They can also benefit from income tax refund donations. As stipulated in the 2017 Organic Law on Political Parties, taxpayers can allocate up to 500 baht (US\$15) from their yearly tax return to any political party eligible for such donations. If a voter's tax refund is below 500 baht, they can only donate up to that specific refund amount. After collecting these contributions, the Revenue Department lists the parties selected by taxpayers, calculates the total donations each party has received and then transfers this sum to the ECT. Subsequently, the ECT includes these donations in each party's quota from the PPDF, and the money is dispensed alongside regular payments from the fund. For an improved system, several party finance officers suggested that the Revenue Department should have directly sent these tax-return donations to the respective political parties, given that taxpayers had earmarked their money for specific parties, not the ECT.⁴⁹ However, this new rule prevented small parties from gaining more subsidies from the PPDF due to receiving very few tax donations from voters (see Table 3).

Table 3
PPDF Allocation to Parties by Categories between 2019 and 2022
(in Thai baht)

2019							
Political Parties	Branches	Allocation for branches* (20%)	Membership fee	Allocation for membership fee (40%)	Number of votes	Allocation for number of votes (40%)	Total
Democrat	8	645,000	10 million	7.5 million	3,959,358	5 million	16 million
Future Forward	6	448,000	5.8 million	4.2 million	6,330,617	8 million	12 million
Pheu Thai	4	312,000	2.3 million	1.7 million	7,881,001	10 million	12 million
Phalang Pracharat	4	312,000	2.5 million	1.7 million	8,441,274	10 million	12 million
Thai Rak Tham Party	107	7,260,000	3 million	1.6 million	33,787	40,000	11 million
New Democratic Party	22	1,600,000	868,950	621,000	39,260	50,000	2.3 million
Thai People Power Party	32	2,500,000	976,000	700,000	80,186	100,000	3.3 million
Thai People Justice Party	10	780,000	1.3 million	930,000	48,037	734,000	1.7 million
Thai Power Builds the Nation Party	9	662,000	672,600	481,000	23,094	29,000	1.2 million
2021							
Political Parties	Branches	Allocation for branches* (20%)	Membership fee	Allocation for membership fee (40%)	Tax-refund donation	Allocation for tax-refund donation (40%)	Total
Democrat	13	133,184	3 million	364,000	4.5 million	2.3 million	7.3 million
Move Forward	5	51,000	2 million	247,000	2.4 million	1.2 million	4 million
Pheu Thai	4	40,000	315,000	37,000	2.5 million	1.08 million	3.2 million
Phalang Pracharat	4	40,000	398,000	47,000	2.5 million	1.3 million	3.9 million

Thai Rak Tham Party	5	43,000	87,000	10,000	50	26	82,000
New Democratic Party	20	204,898	219,000	26,000	6,300	3,300	240,000
Thai People Power Party	13	133,000	118,000	14,000	6,000	3,200	156,000
Phalang Thai Rak Chart	11	41,000	55,300	6,500	607	320	57,000
Seri Ruam Thai	4	40,000	1.3 million	158,000	666,000	351,000	1.2 million
2022							
Political Parties	Branches	Allocation for branches (20%)	Membership fee	Allocation for membership fee (40%)	Tax-refund donation	Allocation for tax-refund donation (40%)	Total
Democrat	18	818,000	18 million	4.8 million	3.2 million	4.2 million	13 million
Move Forward	5	227,000	2.8 million	747,000	12 million	16 million	30 million
Pheu Thai	4	182,000	3 million	781,000	1.4 million	1.8 million	4.2 million
Phalang Pracharat	4	182,000	3.7 million	855,000	2.2 million	2.6 million	5.7 million
Seri Ruam Thai	4	182,000	4.9 million	1.2 million	520,000	675,000	2.6 million
New Democratic Party	20	908,000	4.7 million	1.2 million	4,000	5,300	2 million
Thai People Power Party	8	363,000	969,000	252,000	3,800	5,000	625,000
Thai People Party	14	636,000	505,000	131,000	7,200	9,300	784,000
Democrat Power Party	13	41,000	2 million	158,000	5,500	2,100	1.2 million

Note: US\$1 = 37 Thai Baht as of April 2023

Source: Developed by the author from data of the office of the Election Commission of Thailand 2019–22.

The 2017 Organic Law on Political Parties also amended Article 83 so that subsidies are now allocated based on total membership fees received each year rather than the total number of members. This provision was designed to ensure party members were willing to support and be affiliated with their party. In other words, the goal was to eliminate fake membership lists. As the law requires, the minimum annual membership fee is 100 baht (US\$3). Members can also apply for a lifetime party membership for a minimum fee of 2,000 baht (US\$54).⁵⁰ Although this regulation was intended to enhance the sense that members own the party, many Thais, particularly those living in rural areas, consider 100 baht expensive. As such, many party supporters are not willing to pay this fee.⁵¹ During a focus group session with party branch members in Trang Province, some participants expressed similar experiences with membership fees. According to one: “100 baht for membership fee is expensive for members here. We hope that the ECT will reduce this amount to help party members to be able to pay the fee. If not, it will be difficult for political parties to recruit more members.”⁵² To get around this, parliamentarians or parties began paying membership fees on behalf of their supporters, so the total membership fees reported to the ECT do not necessarily come from their members’ own pockets.⁵³

Under the revised rules, the ECT continues to allocate subsidies to parties based on the number of their local branches, although it accounts for a smaller percentage of the overall share of subsidies compared with party members and the seats/votes that a party has won.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, small parties continue to establish numerous inactive branches that have no precise location. Due to the lack of capacity in its regional offices, the ECT cannot monitor all branches across the country, especially those in remote constituencies. That said, because of the ECT’s inspections, branches belonging to small parties, such as the Thai Rak Tham Party and the New Democratic Party, have gradually decreased in number (see Table 3). According to some smaller parties, the funding is insufficient for their political activities, and some exhaust their state allocations on administrative costs alone.⁵⁵ However, the ECT contests that PPDF financing should not be a major source of income for political parties; instead, they should be able to raise their own funds to support their organization and manage political activities rather than relying on state subsidies.⁵⁶ This view seems to contradict the original objective of the PPDF, which was to reduce the role

of business conglomerates in financing parties by providing state subsidies for party development.

By allocating subsidies to political parties based on these criteria—parliamentary seats, number of votes, branches, membership and donations—the 2017 Organic Law on Political Parties gave the state greater control over political parties. Notably, requirements that tax-return donations are transferred from the Revenue Department to the ECT instead of directly to political parties, and that subsidies are distributed according to membership fees rather than membership numbers, grant the ECT authority to more closely inspect parties' financial management.

Moreover, the 2017 Organic Law on Political Parties excluded party representatives from the PPDF committee with the apparent aim to enhance transparency, as indicated in Article 80. Before these revisions in 2017, party members could participate in the ECT's finance committees, often allowing them to offer practical insights when drafting and amending regulations. Their absence after 2017, however, has sometimes resulted in impractical or unimplementable rules due to the lack of experience in party management among the non-party representative committees, such as including membership fees in the PPDF calculation criteria or proposing the three-month financial reports.⁵⁷ Reintegrating party representatives into these committees could ensure more effective and practical regulations.

Spending

Although political parties receive subsidies from the PPDF, they cannot use the funds however they want. According to the revised 2017 law, parties cannot use state subsidies to manage their internal operations, such as hiring party staff and paying for utilities. Instead, they can only use subsidies to conduct political campaigns, develop their respective organizations, promote local branches and provincial representatives, educate members and ordinary people on democratic politics and organize political activities to promote democracy in their region.⁵⁸ Most of the activities that political parties engage in comply with this, such as meetings or seminars with party members to nominate candidates and discuss policies. However, some parties have abstained from activities simply to avoid complications with the regulators. For instance, the MFP received 30 million baht (US\$810,000) from the PPDF in 2022, all of which was spent organizing 458 activities, mostly branch meetings and

seminars on party policy. Other major parties, including the Pheu Thai Party, the Democrat Party and the PPRP—which received 4 million baht (US\$108,000), 13 million baht (US\$351,000) and 6 million baht (US\$162,000) from the PPDF, respectively—chose to use the money for only member meetings and seminars. Aside from organizing political activities, parties can also use 20 per cent of their total PPDF on party branches, such as the cost of renting offices and the salaries of local staff. However, the amount allocated for branch management is insufficient to cover most expenses, and party politicians or MPs frequently spend their own funding to support local branches.⁵⁹

As such, the new rules introduced in 2017 were ostensibly designed to enhance spending effectiveness and transparency. However, to avoid violating funding regulations, parties primarily use the funds for everyday activities rather than innovative political activities. Thus, state intervention in how parties spend their funds limits their capacity to engage in activities that more meaningfully develop the party or promote democracy among voters and party members.

Financial Reports

Under the 2017 Organic Law on Political Parties, parties that receive PPDF funding must submit financial reports to the ECT every three months (per Article 84). Unlike previous laws, in which parties would receive their budgets after submitting their activity plans, political parties now receive their allotted PPDF subsidies at the beginning of the calendar year and without submitting plans on how they intend to spend the funds. Therefore, parties can spend their subsidies without prior approval from the ECT. Parties that submit fraudulent reports to the ECT must return the total amount of their state subsidies within 15 days after receiving notification from the electoral commission. According to an interview with the former director of the PPDF, “the ECT has to send a request to small parties to return subsidies almost every month and parties that fail to do so have to pay a fine”. In 2020, two small parties—one of which was the Thai Rak Tham Party⁶⁰—were requested to return their subsidies to the ECT.⁶¹

While this new reporting arrangement may appear to offer parties more freedom over spending, the requirement to submit a financial report every three months is quite burdensome for party

organizers.⁶² It is especially challenging for political parties, especially new or small ones, that lack the human resource capacity to file timely and comprehensive reports, neither of which is helped by the high rotation of financial staff within parties and the lack of information from the ECT about new financial regulations. The ECT has attempted to solve this problem by organizing yearly training courses for party staff. However, due to its own staffing shortages and tight timelines, the ECT also struggles to monitor paper-based financial reports from the more than 70 registered political parties every three months.⁶³ Contributing to the challenge, some parties, particularly small and new parties, continue to file incorrect or incomplete financial reports.

Because of these challenges, some small parties that had previously received a (relatively small) subsidy, such as the Phattana Chart Charoen Party and the Farmer Network of Thailand, have rejected PPDF subsidies and returned their allocated funds to the ECT, preferring to go without some funding than engage in the complicated reporting requirements.⁶⁴ Thus, the regulation on three-month financial submission reports has not led to greater financial transparency. Instead, it has created additional obstacles for parties and the ECT.

Sanctions on Party System Violations

Unlike the previous iterations of the law, the 2017 Organic Law on Political Parties does not include a provision to dissolve a political party if it commits small transgressions, such as submitting a fraudulent report or the late submission of a financial report.⁶⁵ Those who drafted the new legislation believed that political parties are vital entities in democratic politics.⁶⁶ Therefore, political parties should belong to their members and the people rather than to their leaders or politicians. Dissolving a party due to the misconduct of a few party leaders would go against this belief since most party members may not be aware of the wrongdoing of their party leaders. Therefore, it was decided that the illegal actions of a few party leaders should not result in a party's dissolution.⁶⁷ Under the 2017 revised law, violations and infractions of party finance regulation can result in fines, the loss of PPDF funding or a prison sentence for the individuals involved. Sanctions may be applied for various offences, such as failure to submit a complete financial report (including income and expenditure reports with receipts), failure

to submit a report on time, and failure to comply with PPDF spending regulations.⁶⁸ Political parties dissolved under the revised 2017 Constitution and 2017 Organic Law on Political Parties, such as the Future Forward Party, were punished for actions unrelated to state subsidies or the PPDF. Parties can only be dissolved under other conditions by the Constitutional Court.⁶⁹

Conclusion

In established democracies, political parties often thrive with minimal government intervention, relying instead on their connections to voters who actively participate in party-led activities. Conversely, in less stable democracies, parties tend to be more state-oriented, leading the state to enforce regulations that control party practices. In Thailand, parties predominantly emerged top-down, dominated by political elites and with minimal involvement from ordinary people. Because such parties lack internal oversight, the state has attempted to regulate them to diminish malpractices and reduce potential undue influences of large conglomerates. Since the first law on party finance in the 1950s, Thai lawmakers have drafted regulations based on the political goals and context of the time. Rules were made to control and limit parties' freedoms, allowing the state to increasingly interfere in their internal operations. Over the decades, lawmakers have revised the regulations to address previous challenges, but have failed to anticipate how the new rules would obstruct the development of political parties. Moreover, their effectiveness in curbing parties' malpractices remains debatable. In particular, smaller and newer parties often exploit regulatory loopholes, yet they are also the casualties of more complex and demanding requirements. Usually, the ECT has introduced new regulations to counter transgressions by minor parties, inadvertently complicating matters for the larger, established parties.

Instead of continuous legal revisions, a potentially more impactful alternative would be to empower public monitoring of political parties. By promoting transparency through accessible online systems, parties would face public scrutiny. However, the ECT has never provided the public with clear information on party finances, while it only provides minimal information online about private donations. Even then, that information does not indicate which political parties receive donations and how they utilized them. Information on the PPDF, nor parties' spending habits, has

never been posted online. To access such information, researchers, the media or voters must submit a request to the ECT, although there is no guarantee that the ECT will provide the requested information. Therefore, posting essential information online that allows the public to monitor parties' management, such as how they spend state subsidies, would enable people to access that information, enhancing parties' transparency among the electorate. More importantly, voters could use that information to inform their choices in elections.

NOTES

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- ¹ In Thailand, the constitutional drafters set up subcommittees to write organic laws, providing more details on important issues, including laws on political parties, elections, the Senate and the election commission. The number of organic laws depends upon the constitutional drafters' decision.
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- ³ Punchada Sirivunnabood, "Building Local Party Organizations in Thailand: Strengthening Party Rootedness or Serving Elite Interests?" in *Party Politics in Southeast Asia: Clientelism and Electoral Competition in Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines*, edited by Dirk Tomsa and Andreas Ufen (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2013), pp. 163–85.
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- ⁵ Five of these focus groups were conducted in person and one, in Nan Province, was conducted online.
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- ⁷ Andres Ufen, "Asia", in *Funding of Political Parties and Election Campaigns: A Handbook on Political Finance*, edited by Elin Falguera, Samuel Jones, and Magnus Ohman (Stockholm, Sweden: International IDEA, 2014), pp. 91–95.
- ⁸ Ingrid van Biezen, "Political Parties as Public Utilities", *Party Politics* 10, no. 16 (2004): 701–22.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 702.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.* See also Richard Katz and Peter Mair, "Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party", *Party Politics* 1, no. 5 (1995): 5–28.

- ¹¹ See also Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair, “Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party”, *Party Politics* 3, no. 5 (1995): 5–27; and van Biezen, “Political Parties as Public Utilities”.
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- ¹⁶ Ingrid van Biezen, “Party Finance in New Democracies: Spain and Portugal”, *Party Politics* 6, no. 3 (2000): 329–42; van Biezen, “Political Parties as Public Utilities”.
- ¹⁷ Ohman, “Getting the Political Finance System Right”, p. 16.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ Duncan McCargo, “Thailand’s Political Parties: Real, Authentic and Actual”, in *Political Change in Thailand: Democracy and Participation*, edited by Kevin Hewison (London, UK: Routledge, 1997), pp. 114–31.
- ²⁰ James Ockey divided types of factions based on different degrees of loyalty among members. See James Ockey, “Political Parties, Factions, and Corruption in Thailand”, *Modern Asian Studies* 28, no. 2 (1994): 251–77.
- ²¹ Punchada Sirivunnabood, “The Rules Change But the Players Don’t: Factional Politics and Thailand’s March 2019 Elections”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 3 (December 2019): 390–417; and McCargo, “Thailand’s Political Parties: Real, Authentic and Actual”; Paul Chambers and Napisa Waitoolkiat, “Faction Political in an Interrupted Democracy: The Case of Thailand”, *Journal of Current Southeast Asia Affairs* 39, no. 1 (2020): 144–66.
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- ²⁴ See Jitpanee Naraveerawut, “Legal Measures to Ensure a Fair General Election: A Case Study of Campaign Funds for General Elections”, Master’s thesis, Ramkhamhaeng University, 1997; Punchada Sirivunnabood, “Building Local Party Organizations in Thailand: Strengthening Party Rootedness or Serving Elite Interests?” in *Party Politics in Southeast Asia*, pp. 163–85; Napisa Waitoolkiat and Paul Chambers, “Political Party Finance in Thailand Today: Evolution, Reform, and Control”, *Critical Asian Studies* 47, no. 4 (2015): 611–40.
- ²⁵ James Ockey, “Change and Continuity in the Thai Political Party System”, *Asian Survey* 43, no. 4 (July/August 2003): 663–80; Sirivunnabood, “Understanding Political Party Finance in Thailand”.
- ²⁶ Sirivunnabood, “Understanding Political Party Finance in Thailand”.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Currency rate as of April 2024.
- ²⁹ Political Party Affairs and Referendum Bureau, Office of the Election Commission of Thailand, *Raingan Kan Damnuen Kijjakarn Kong Phak Kanmueng Nai Rob Pee Por-Sor 2548* [PPDF Financial Report 2005–2006] (Bangkok, Thailand: S. T. Press Publishing, 2007).
- ³⁰ In 2024, US\$1 was approximately 36 baht.
- ³¹ It later changed its name to Thai Is Thai Party.
- ³² “Pid Tamnan ‘Phak Khon Kho Plot Ni’ San Ratthatummanoon Sang Yup Pak—Ban Kor-Kor-Bor-Hor 5 Pee” [The End of ‘Khon Kho Plot Ni Political Party’: The Constitutional Court Ordered Dissolution and 5-Year Ban of Executive Committee Members], *MGR Online*, 30 March 2016, <https://mgronline.com/politics/detail/9590000032908>.
- ³³ See James Ockey, “Political Parties, Factions, and Corruption in Thailand”, *Modern Asian Studies* 28, no. 2 (May 1994): 251–77; Prajak Kongkirati and Veerayooth Kanchoochat, “The Prayuth Regime: Embedded Military and Hierarchical Capitalism in Thailand”, *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 6, no. 2 (2018): 279–305.
- ³⁴ Krit Auewong, “Sakha Phakkanmuang: Khotedching Lae Panha” [Party Branch: Facts and Problems], *Worasarn Phakkanmuang* 3, no. 9 (2004): 14–19.
- ³⁵ Author’s interview with the officers of the Election Commission of Thailand in Bangkok, 18 January 2022.
- ³⁶ “San Ror-Tor-Nor Sang Yup Phak Khon Kho Plot Ni” [The Constitutional Court Ordered the Dissolution of Khon Kho Plot Ni Political Party], *Bangkok Biz News*, 30 March 2016, <https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/politics/692869>.
- ³⁷ “San Ratthathammanun sang yub phak khon l=khaw prud ne” [The Constitutional Court Dissolved the People Debt Release Party], *Bangkok Biz News*, 30 March 2016, https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/politics/692869#google_vignette.
- ³⁸ Author’s interview with informants during focus groups with political parties in Bangkok, 21 December 2022.
- ³⁹ During intervals between elections, the Election Commission of Thailand (hereafter ECT) would allocate subsidies to political parties based on the donations that

- parties receive each year—rather than on the basis of votes gained in the general election—and of numbers of local branches and membership fees paid.
- ⁴⁰ In 2014, the military junta led by General Prayut Chan-o-cha, Commander of the Royal Thai Army, staged a coup d'état which ousted the elected government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. The junta claimed the need to restore order in the face of street demonstrations against a populist government linked to telecoms tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in an earlier coup in 2006.
- ⁴¹ Waitookiat and Chambers, “Political Party Finance in Thailand Today”; Andres Ufen and Marcus Mietzner, “Political Finance Regimes in Southeast Asia: Introduction”, *Critical Asian Studies* 47, no. 4 (2015): 558–63.
- ⁴² Author’s discussions during focus groups in Trang and Udonthani provinces, 3 August 2022 and 26 May 2022, respectively, and author’s interview with the former head of the PPDF at the offices of the ECT, 18 September 2022.
- ⁴³ Ohman, “Getting the Political Finance System Right”, p. 16.
- ⁴⁴ Waitookiat and Chambers, “Political Party Finance in Thailand Today”, p. 613.
- ⁴⁵ Ohman, “Getting the Political Finance System Right”, p. 19.
- ⁴⁶ Author’s interview with Move Forward Party officers in Bangkok, 16 June 2023.
- ⁴⁷ Krit Auewong, “Sakha Phakkanmuang: Khotedching Lae Panha”; author interview with a former PPDF director, Bangkok, 27 January 2022.
- ⁴⁸ See Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E. 2560, Section 87.
- ⁴⁹ Author’s interview with informants from the Pheu Thai Party, Democrat Party and Bhumjaithai Party in Bangkok in July 2022.
- ⁵⁰ In 2022, the ECT revised the law on party membership fees by reducing the annual membership fee to 20 baht (US\$0.50) and the lifetime membership fee to 200 baht (US\$6).
- ⁵¹ Author’s interview with party members in Trang Province, 3 August 2022.
- ⁵² Author’s focus group with party representatives in Trang Province, 3 August 2022.
- ⁵³ Punchada Sirivunnabood, “How the Thai State Subsidizes Political Parties”, *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2019/50, 20 June 2019.
- ⁵⁴ According to Article 47 of the 2017 Organic Law on Political Parties, parties are required to set up local branches or party representatives in all constituencies in which they run candidates in elections. However, in 2023, this provision was amended from setting up local branches in all constituencies where parties want to send candidates to only set up branch or party representatives in the province where parties want to nominate their candidates. See “Rajchakijja Peuy Prae Prakad Kor-Kor-Tor Kan Tam Primary—Tang Saka Phak Prajam Jangwad” [The Royal Gazette Released the ECT Announcement on Primary Voting and Provincial Party Branch Establishment], *Siamrath*, 3 February 2023, <https://siamrath.co.th/n/420410>.
- ⁵⁵ Author’s interview with a small party’s committee members in Bangkok, 21 October 2022.
- ⁵⁶ Author’s interview with ECT officers in Bangkok, 18 September 2022.

- ⁵⁷ Author's interviews with party officers from the Pheu Thai Party, Bhumjaithai Party and Move Forward Party, 26 June 2023, 26 June 2023 and 16 June 2023, respectively.
- ⁵⁸ Punchada Sirivunnabood, *Party Finance Assessment of Thailand* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2023), p. 37.
- ⁵⁹ Sirivunnabood, "Building Local Party Organizations in Thailand".
- ⁶⁰ "Kor-Kor-Tor Fong Raek 11 Lan 'Tairaktham' Pom Hai Sabsin Joongjai Samak pen Samachik" [ECT Called for 11 Million Baht from 'Thairaktham' for Using Bribery to Recruit Party Members], *Thairath*, 28 February 2023, <https://www.thairath.co.th/news/local/central/2641948>.
- ⁶¹ Sirivunnabood, *Party Finance Assessment of Thailand*.
- ⁶² Author's interview with party representatives in Khon Kaen Province, 20 July 2023.
- ⁶³ Author's interview with ECT officers in Bangkok, 18 September 2022.
- ⁶⁴ Political parties are allowed to return their state funding to the ECT after receiving the budget by writing a formal letter stating their preference.
- ⁶⁵ See also Duncan McCargo, "Thailand: State of Anxiety", in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2008*, edited by Daljit Singh and Lorraine C. Salazar (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), pp. 333–56.
- ⁶⁶ Author's interview with an ECT officer in Bangkok, 20 April 2023.
- ⁶⁷ Author's interview with ECT officers in Bangkok, 18 September 2022.
- ⁶⁸ Sirivunnabood, *Party Finance Assessment of Thailand*.
- ⁶⁹ ThaiPost, "Thai Rak Tham din su khade yub phak lan mai khong khae mai me ngeun khuen" [Thai Rak Tham Fighting against Party Dissolution, Vows Not to Cheat, Just No Money to Return], 7 January 2022, <https://www.thaipost.net/politics-news/59931/>.

Education Reform in Post-Coup Myanmar: Federalizing or Federating?

ASHLEY SOUTH, EMILY STENNING AND TIM SCHROEDER

Since Myanmar transitioned from direct military rule in 2011, successive governments have attempted to decentralize the primary and higher education systems through top-down “federalizing” initiatives. However, these efforts have largely failed. However, following the February 2021 military coup, the absence of a credible central education authority has led ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and non-state actors, including local communities, to provide education to up to one million of the most vulnerable and conflict-affected children. This represents a new “federating” moment for education in Myanmar, where capacity and alliances are built from the bottom up and which could potentially endure after the ongoing conflict ends. This article explores Myanmar’s

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complex and contested education system since the coup, analysing the difference between “federalizing” and “federating” approaches. It compares the pre- and post-coup approaches to illustrate the importance of an adaptive, bottom-up approach based on local ownership and resilience.

Keywords: federalism, decentralization, non-state education, peace, Myanmar military coup.

The impact of conflict on education in Myanmar is profound, dynamic and understudied.¹ Since independence, the education system has been dominated by the Burmese language and the traditions of the Burman ethnic majority as part of the broader “Burmanization” of a diverse country of more than 130 ethnic groups. Following a peace process between the central government and some of the numerous ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) initiated in 2011, education reform did receive some attention from the central authorities. Between 2016 and 2021, the semi-civilian government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD) also identified education as a critical area for reform. However, these attempts at “federalizing” the education system through limited decentralization largely failed. However, following the military coup that ousted the NLD government in 2021, various local actors, including EAOs and non-state entities, have stepped in to provide education for up to one million of the country’s most vulnerable and conflict-affected children.² These efforts represent a new bottom-up, “federating” moment for Myanmar’s education system.

The official list of 135 “national races” (*taingyintha*) is deeply problematic because it represents arbitrary categories of identity, but it does give an idea of Myanmar’s ethnolinguistic diversity.³ For decades, various actors, including the EAOs, have engaged in conflict with predominantly urban and Burman-dominated central governments to defend their respective lands and identities. At the same time, many of these EAOs have developed their own functional subnational governance administrations, including education departments that provide primary and higher education. Since the 2021 coup, these education systems have become crucial components of a nascent federalized education system built from the ground up.

The establishment of locally run education systems has long been a long-standing priority for Myanmar’s ethnic communities in their fight against militarization and centralization and in their quest for federalism. As a system for dividing and sharing power

between a central (federal or union) government and state or regional (or “subnational”) governments, federalism is a contentious topic in Myanmar.⁴ Debates have often focused on the distribution of administrative powers and the definition of federalism along ethno-territorial lines since ethnic communities are spread across different areas of the country and often live side by side with other ethnic groups. However, the post-coup environment has shifted the focus from a top-down approach—the central government designs and implements a constitutional solution—to a bottom-up notion of federalism that is now being experimented by the EAOs, civil society organizations (CSOs) and local communities.

Federalism can emerge through a “federating process”—joining independent units in a union—or a “federalizing process”—a central authority grants constitutional autonomy to local or regional entities.⁵ Examples include the thirteen North American colonies forming the federal United States in 1789 (a federating process) and the creation of the German Empire in 1871 (a federalizing process). Achieving federalism through the radical decentralization of a pre-existing unitary state remains rare. Forms of devolution have occurred recently in the United Kingdom and Spain, but they reflect historic territorial divisions and concepts of nationality.⁶

Ethnic nationalities in Myanmar emphasize that they were historically independent of the pre-colonial Burman monarchy, while colonial rule further consolidated their identities.⁷ The British colonial authorities patronized certain ethnic minorities, such as the Karen, which developed a modern national identity during colonial rule.⁸ However, the association of some ethnic nationality elites with British colonialism was problematic post-independence and the failure to create inclusive political structures during the colonial period (1885–1948) set the stage for ongoing ethnic conflicts.

Contemporary narratives about ethnic politics remain influenced by two conferences in Panglong, a small town in southern Shan State, in 1946 (under British auspices) and February 1947. According to Matthew Walton, when modern-era ethnic nationality leaders call for “a return to the spirit of Panglong”, it encodes conflicting versions of the 1947 Panglong Conference in Shan State that laid the foundation for Myanmar’s independence and for a new constitution that would create the Union of Burma (1948–62).⁹ Despite having fought for independence, many ethnic groups—especially those from lowland areas of the country, known as “Ministerial Burma”, that were ruled directly by the authorities in Rangoon (Yangon)—were

absent from the conference.¹⁰ Nonetheless, it was a foundational moment in Myanmar's history. Although the Panglong Agreement did not use the language of federalism, it recognized the "internal autonomy" of ethnic states. Hence, for many ethnic groups, it symbolized a decision to come together (a "federating process") to form a newly independent union. However, representatives of the Burman majority—in particular, the military—argued that the country was ethnically united and harmonious before the British arrived and destroyed it. For these Burmans, the Panglong Agreement was the manifestation of the historic unity between the ethnic minorities and the Burman majority that had achieved independence. For them, the 1947 accord offered only guarantees from a central government of autonomy to ethnic groups, making it a "federalizing" moment. These fundamentally different historical narratives continue to impact discussions on federalism in Myanmar.

Negotiations leading to independence repeatedly referred to a voluntary federating process, with the "right to secession" enshrined in the 1947 Constitution. However, once the Constituent Assembly convened later that year, the process effectively became decentralization within an expanded Ministerial Burma. The failures of the Panglong Conference and the subsequent centralized rule after the military's 1962 coup meant no federation arrangement existed in Myanmar before the 2021 coup, although some elements of the 2008 Constitution could have moved the country slightly towards federalization.¹¹

This article proceeds as follows. The following section describes attempts to create a more federal education system before the 2021 coup. It then explores the post-coup situation and the open space for a more federating approach. The article concludes with a reflection on the opportunities and challenges moving forward.

Myanmar's Education System Before the 2021 Coup

Since at least the 1960s, the suppression of ethnic minority languages and cultures within a centralizing, militarized state dominated by the Burman majority has been a primary grievance driving armed conflicts. In response, several EAOs have developed basic and further education systems that preserve and reproduce their languages and cultures. Some have partnered with civil society actors, particularly Christian and Buddhist associations and literature and culture committees.¹² International support following the 1988

pro-democracy uprising, which initiated a slow path towards limited democratization, enabled the expansion of EAO education regimes, especially in the Karen, Mon and Kachin areas. Before the 2021 coup, the Karen National Union—the political wing of the Karen National Liberation Army—and its Karen Education and Culture Department directly supported more than 1,500 schools.

A Deep-Seated Legacy of Centralization

Before 2021, Myanmar's education system was highly centralized. The 2008 Constitution categorized education under "Schedule One", a list of administrative areas centrally controlled and without direct representation within state or region-level parliaments. Consequently, whereas the transport and forestry ministries had a state or region-level counterpart, state or region-level education departments could only "informally coordinate"¹³ with state or region-level governments through the Ministry of Social Affairs.¹⁴ These education departments could only function within existing policy frameworks and could not act independently. Dominated by the Burman majority, the central government, per the 2008 Constitution, mandated that Burmese be the language of instruction in all schools.¹⁵

The 2014 National Education Law stipulated that only schools teaching the national curriculum for basic education would be recognized as "legal schools".¹⁶ Thus, before the 2021 coup, the basic education system was divided between centralized education that was recognized by the national government and non-centrally controlled education that was unrecognized. For example, the Ministry of Education did not formally recognize any provider delivering a non-Burman-based curriculum or an international curriculum, such as the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE). This lack of recognition affected the learning process due to a lack of teacher recognition or state funding, and it limited students' learning pathways. The end-of-high-school exam was the only path from basic education to the government's higher education institutes. This was curriculum-based and only available to students in recognized schools. Without this curriculum-based matriculation certificate, students' future learning and job opportunities were restricted. There were some non-state higher education options available for students from non-recognized schools, but there were only a few, and most employers did not recognize certificates from these schools.

Centralized control over education has a long history in Myanmar, dating back to the British colonial era. English was the language of instruction because the colonial authorities wanted English-speaking administrators.¹⁷ Post-independence, under successive military dictatorships between 1962 and 2011, education became a means to impose a sense of unity across a disparate country and to strengthen the military's rule.¹⁸ After 2011, when Thein Sein, a retired general, was elected as the first semi-civilian president since 1962, education was a key pillar of reform, although minimal progress was made towards decentralization.

The Pedagogical and Political Consequences of Centralization

A centralized education system has significant and interlinked pedagogical and political consequences. Pedagogically, children who do not speak the official language (Burmese) as their mother tongue face compromised learning opportunities. They either struggle to understand what is being taught in government-recognized schools or attend an unrecognized school where they understand the lessons but where their educational outcomes are unacknowledged by the central state, restricting their access to higher education and jobs.¹⁹

At best, a non-Burmese-speaking child in a recognized school is less familiar with the national language than their mother tongue. At worst, they do not understand it at all. This means that they cannot fully grasp the foundational concepts that allow someone to learn basic literacy and numeracy, leaving the child without a firm basis on which to understand more advanced skills. By comparison, delivering education in a child's mother tongue allows them to build these foundational concepts, which can later help them learn the national language. This approach, known as Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE), is internationally recognized as the most cost-effective way for children who do not speak the national language to be able to excel in school.²⁰

Politically, a centrally managed education system perpetuates an inequitable society by maintaining the dominance of the ethnic majority over already disadvantaged minorities. The central government's perceived disregard for minority identities and its promotion of Burman culture and language ("Burmanization") have fuelled Myanmar's ethnic conflicts since the 1950s. Ethnic nationality communities view the national education system as a tool of assimilation and marginalization.²¹ These inequalities became stark and weaponized as Myanmar began to democratize in the 2010s.

Pre-Coup Attempts to Federalize

Between 2011 and 2021, successive quasi-civilian governments began to reform the national education system. Reforms in the National Education Strategic Plan of 2016 were wide-ranging and acknowledged the importance of decentralization, while the NLD government (2016–21) identified education as essential to creating a peaceful, prosperous and democratic country.²² It undertook tentative steps towards more inclusive and quality education while moving away from the pedagogical and political disadvantages of the previous system (such as those discussed above). These developments were significant in acknowledging the diversity of Myanmar's students, but their implementation was slow and uneven, highlighting the limitations of the top-down federalization process.

Despite maintaining the centralizing ethos that all schools must follow the national curriculum, the National Education Law of 2014 introduced a semblance of decentralization. It allowed non-Burmese languages to be used in classrooms. "An ethnic language can be used alongside Myanmar [Burmese] as a language of instruction at the basic education level", it stated.²³ Pedagogically, this was a positive move because it allowed teachers to use a student's mother tongue to explain basic concepts. However, because of the 2008 Constitution, the official language of instruction and assessment remained Burmese. Consequently, all textbooks, tests and exams were still in Burmese, meaning the education system continued to benefit Burmese speakers and limited opportunities for non-Burmese speakers. Compounding the problem, most qualified teachers did not speak a minority language.²⁴ At best, the new provisions acknowledged diversity but did not address the pedagogical barriers to learning foundation skills in minority languages.²⁵

The National Education Law of 2014 also granted "freedom to develop the curriculum in each region based on the curriculum standards".²⁶ This allowed 20 per cent of the national curriculum to be defined at the state or regional level. In principle, the languages and history of ethnic minorities could be taught. However, this provision was not effectively operationalized. For instance, the 2016–2021 National Education Strategic Plan sought to create local curricula, but by 2021, the scheme had only been piloted in five ethnic states. Many of the smaller ethnic groups lacked funding and technical support to develop their own curricula.²⁷

Moreover, the drafts of the National Education Law sparked protests by students who objected to the continuing centralization.

A coalition of student groups operating under the National Network for Education Reform submitted an 11-point proposal that, among other demands, called for the promotion of ethnic languages. Education activists and students organized public protests in the county's major cities and a march to Yangon in January 2015. The government subsequently cracked down on the demonstrations, resulting in the arrest of hundreds of protesters.²⁸ However, it did amend the National Education Law in 2015, although the National Network for Education Reform and the All Burma Federation of Student Unions argued that less than 10 per cent of their demands were included in the revisions.

Peace and Education—Towards a Partnership Agreement?

Starting in 2011, President Thein Sein's government and the military agreed or reaffirmed ceasefires with 10 of the 11 largest EAOs, culminating in the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in October 2015. However, not all EAOs signed up to the accord. That included the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), whose 17-year ceasefire with the military broke down in 2011 when the military attacked it.²⁹

The NCA seemingly offered a basis for political dialogue. In 2016, the NLD's Aung San Suu Kyi, the de facto head of the semi-civilian government that took power the same year, convened the Union Peace Conferences, which was billed as the "21st Century Panglong". (Suu Kyi is the daughter of Aung San, the pro-independence leader who led the negotiations for the original Panglong Agreement with the ethnic groups in 1947.³⁰) However, Suu Kyi was less successful than her father in attempting to reach a grand nation-building pact. After some initial success, the idea of a new federal framework for Myanmar was undermined and suppressed by the military.³¹

Before the 2021 coup, the NLD government was working with the education departments of the Karen National Union and the New Mon State Party, the political wings of two EAOs, to develop a framework to recognize mother tongue-based curricula.³² This framework notably excluded requirements for children to study the Burmese language and Burman history and music. These three subjects were identified as being the most culturally problematic among ethnic minorities.³³ The framework was near finalization when the military launched its coup on 1 February 2021. It might have resulted in a more decentralized and inclusive education model if it had been operationalized. Moreover, while the initial discussions

were only with the educational departments of two EAOs, there was the expectation that it would have been expanded to include more ethnic groups.

Why Did These Attempts Fail?

Despite the transition to elected, semi-civilian governments in 2011, the internal mechanics of power remained largely unchanged from the era of military dictatorships. The military-drafted 2008 Constitution ensured that the armed forces automatically controlled 25 per cent of parliamentary seats. Support from 75 per cent of lawmakers is needed to pass the most consequential bills, meaning the military had an effective veto over government policy. Moreover, decentralization was anathema to the military's vision of a unified Myanmar, while elected politicians also opposed significant decentralization in education and beyond.

Although the education system was not an explicit component of the peace process between 2012 and 2021, it became politicized because of the interrelatedness of education and identity. Thus, few politicians within the NLD government wanted to court the political controversy that came from promoting sensitive topics related to ethnic identities, such as language or cultural heritage.³⁴ For example, the NLD government was expected to update the National Education Strategic Plan in early 2021, just before the coup. Despite some drafts of the plan including MTB-MLE approaches, the final pre-coup version prepared for parliament cut out most of the proposed decentralizing schemes.

The overarching problem was “top-down” reform of the education system, with the central government attempting to introduce decentralized elements into a centralized system.³⁵ Critical non-state actors were rarely included in the process, nor was there even a coherent or shared idea of what a decentralized education system should look like. What efforts were made largely failed. The NLD government introduced limited ethnic language and cultural-historical material into the curriculum—mostly out of school hours—in five ethnic states but was largely unsuccessful because of a lack of resources, insufficient political will, and the inherent difficulty of this task.³⁶ Cynically, it could be argued that Myanmar's governments only tolerated discussions about decentralizing the education system to satisfy international donors, on which Myanmar relied for financial support during the 2010s and which advocated for improved learning opportunities³⁷.

As such, before 2021, Myanmar partially attempted to “federalize” a unitary (centrally administered and Burman-dominated) education system, an experiment that largely failed. However, since the 2021 coup, attempts have been made to build a new education system based on locally run schools and colleges, representing a “federating” process.

Myanmar’s Education System after the 2021 Coup

The February 2021 military coup created a power vacuum, resulting in the absence of any governing entity fully controlling the national education system. This vacuum has allowed for the emergence of localized, subnational education providers. Instead of trying to federalize a unified state, as attempted before 2021, the post-coup environment has facilitated the development of a federated education system that may become a driver of peace.

According to official figures, student enrolment in government schools (grades 1–12) dropped from 9 million to 5.7 million in the first year after the coup. In the subsequent 2023 and 2024 academic years, it declined by another 750,000. Approximately 30 per cent of government teachers were dismissed for participating in the civil disobedience movement (CDM) that erupted following the coup.³⁸ Teachers, after medical workers, were the second-largest group of civil servants who participated in the CDM.³⁹ Since February 2021, progressive education reforms have stagnated or been abandoned, especially after international development partners withdrew technical assistance and funding.

Myanmar now has two opposing political regimes—the military’s State Administration Council (SAC) and the anti-junta National Unity Government (NUG)—each reflecting opposing educational approaches. The SAC has reversed earlier attempts to federalize education, reinforcing the centralized and Burman-centric system. For instance, the SAC’s National Education Law of 2023 eliminated provisions for using ethnic languages in classrooms and teaching local curricula in government-recognized schools.⁴⁰ Additionally, the SAC’s Private School Law in 2023, unlike the 2017 draft, imposes strict regulations on all non-government schools, while the Organization Registration Law of 2022 requires all social organizations to register with the junta, making unregistered associations illegal. Interactions with ethnic education providers that are not officially registered—in most cases, they cannot register—are illegal and carry severe penalties. The updated National Education Strategic Plan affirmed

the SAC's centralized vision of education and removed all aspects of decentralization.

In contrast, the NUG has sought to continue federalizing the education sector. Its 2023 Federal Education Policy—developed with the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), an NUG advisory body that includes several ethnic groups—outlines a decentralized system reflecting the self-determination of states.⁴¹ Formed after consultation with various stakeholders, including ethnic education providers, this policy proposes a state-based framework allowing for local requirements, such as using ethnic languages in classrooms. However, while inspiring, the NUG's approach still follows a top-down federalizing approach, highlighting the challenges of “centralized decentralization”. Those problems include questions on calculating state-level funding from a central budget and the deficit of qualified teachers who speak non-Burmese languages and could support an MTB-MLE approach.

The NUG includes several non-Burman leaders from CSOs and EAOs, although most occupy deputy ministerial positions. Unusual for Myanmar, it also includes a relatively large number of women in key leadership positions. However, the NUG's Federal Education Policy was developed with limited input from EAO education departments and largely ignores the realities of education provision on the ground, focusing instead on a future federal education system that could be created if the NUG one day rules the whole country.⁴² This has led to tensions between the NUG and some ethnic education providers.

An Opportunity to Federate

The post-coup power vacuum has created opportunities to federate in the education system. Various community actors, including the education departments of EAOs and other community-based organizations with long histories of delivering education provisions, have stepped in to address the immediate needs of children.

Exact figures on the number of primary education community schools that have emerged since 2021 are unavailable due to security risks. Many of these schools are managed by CDM teachers, who sought community spaces and continue to teach using the existing national curriculum textbooks, mainly old copies or books downloaded from the internet. These schools are demand-driven, with parents opting out of government schools managed by the SAC. The authors visited one such school between December 2023 and January 2024

in the Sittaung River Valley in the eastern Bago Region. Previously a government-recognized school, it was closed at the beginning of the CDM movement. However, it reopened in 2023 under the authority of the Karen National Union (KNU), which had taken control of the area. It allows CDM teachers to reopen schools and to teach using the government curriculum (in the Burmese language) in non-Karen-speaking areas, although teaching the curriculum's contentious history syllabus, which conveys the Bamar majority's view of the past, is disallowed by the KNU.

New non-state higher or further education institutes have also emerged since 2021 to meet older students' needs. The largest is Spring University Myanmar, an open university platform established in May 2021 that now serves more than 17,000 students through virtual courses. Although its diplomas are not recognized domestically, Spring University Myanmar, like many non-state institutions since the coup, has affiliated with international universities, such as Payap University in Thailand and the University of Arizona in the United States, to ensure accreditation.⁴³ The Mon National College (discussed later) has similar partnerships.

The Karen Education and Culture Department's Bureau of Higher Education engages with 20 higher education institutions, 11 of which follow a standardized curriculum. The other nine operate independently with their own curricula and follow their own education policies and systems.⁴⁴ Similarly, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), the political wing of the KIA, has established several higher education institutions in areas of the country it controls. These include the Mai Ja Yangon National College, the Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences and the Mai Ja Yang Institute of Education. In 2022, on the fiftieth anniversary of the creation of the Mon National Education Committee, the New Mon State Party—the political wing of the Mon National Liberation Army—established the Mon National College near its headquarters in Nyisar in southern Mon State. It offers a two-year, post-high school college programme and degree-level courses in seven subjects. Additionally, a dozen or more post-primary education colleges exist in Karen and Karenni refugee camps in Thailand or in Thai cities, such as Mae Sot, Mae Hong Son, Chiang Mai and Bangkok. For refugee children, these are often the only post-secondary education institutions available.

Most teachers in these institutions are female, and women play leading roles in many education departments, CSOs and training institutes, making tertiary education a critical domain of women's

agency. For decades, ethnic higher education institutions have taught vulnerable and marginalized students who would otherwise have had no opportunity to pursue higher education in Myanmar. Therefore, higher education institutions have been crucial for many marginalized ethnic communities in providing further education. However, higher education institutions in ethnic areas do not offer university degrees. No SAC-recognized university in Myanmar and only a few universities abroad (as noted) acknowledge the results of EAO-administered matriculation exams. In the past, international development partners rarely paid attention to higher education initiatives in ethnic areas since most donors focused on primary education. Therefore, funding for ethnic higher education institutions has long been scarce and unpredictable and further exacerbated by the coup.⁴⁵

Expansion of Ethnic Education Providers

For decades, Myanmar's EAOs have demonstrated that they can provide government services, including education, in the areas under their control.⁴⁶ Since 2021, many have become the leading healthcare and education providers. The most established ethnic education departments include the KNU's Education and Culture Department, the New Mon State Party's Mon National Education Committee and the Education Department of the KIO. According to reports, in Mon State, the number of students in schools administered by the New Mon State Party Mon has increased by 1,500 since the coup. Many CDM teachers have relocated to work in these community schools.

The EAOs and their political outfits derive legitimacy for delivering education to their own ethnic groups. While the EAO's education departments typically operate in territories populated by communities of the ethnic nationality they represent, several groups, such as the KNU and KIO, have expanded into areas previously under the central government authority.⁴⁷ Indeed, since the coup, people not from the ethnic group have enrolled their children in EAO-run schools, preferring not to send their children to junta-administered schools. In some instances, this has resulted in greater understanding and sympathy from individuals from the larger ethnic groups, including Burmans, of the repression faced by the smaller ethnic groups.⁴⁸

The teaching methodology adopted by the ethnic education systems, particularly those on the Thai border, is often perceived

as more progressive than that of the government schools, mainly due to their adoption of international teaching practices.⁴⁹ These schools, primarily operated by the KNU and the Karenni National Progressive Party, the political wing of the Karenni Army, formulated their education models in the 1970s and 1980s when many of the schools were in refugee camps. Unlike the teacher-centric rote learning common in Myanmar, they embraced globally established practices such as child-centered learning.⁵⁰ As unrecognized education providers, they have historically operated outside state-level regulations and mostly do not receive state support. An exception is the New Mon State Party's Mon National Education Committee, which had an agreement with the government and received textbooks before the 2021 coup. While international donors provide some funding, local communities predominately support these schools. Teachers often receive stipends, but they are essentially volunteers.

The main EAO education systems exemplify the relevance and viability of a bottom-up federating approach. Some EAOs and their political wings, such as the KNU, have delivered education for over 70 years. These well-established systems have had to adapt to fluctuating contexts and have become increasingly resilient, providing consistent learning opportunities despite challenges, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵¹ Local communities play a vital role, often creating the schools and then seeking support from the EAOs, highlighting the authenticity and local relevance of this bottom-up approach. With a focus on mother-tongue learning, these EAO-run schools lay the foundation for an MTB-MLE approach in a future federal education system.

Operational Challenges

Following the launch of Operation 1027, a coordinated attack against the military by three EAOs in northern Myanmar in October 2023, the junta retaliated by specifically targeting schools and religious buildings. Consequently, education has become further politicized. Enrolment in non-state schools risks retribution from the military, but enrolment in SAC-endorsed schools exposes children to the military's propaganda and reprisals from the anti-junta opposition.

Families and communities are still recovering from the disruptions to education caused by the pandemic. According to a World Bank report, government schools in Myanmar were closed for 532 days between February 2020 and February 2022,⁵² the longest closures in the East Asia and Pacific region.⁵³ This extensive loss of learning

opportunities severely disrupted education programmes already operating in challenging environments.

Another significant issue is the limited and insecure financing of many ethnic organizations. The EAOs' taxation and revenue systems prioritize defence and immediate humanitarian needs, leaving most schools to depend on donor funding and in-kind contributions from communities. Most EAO schools do not charge fees. But this means they are sometimes dependent on the agendas of their donors. While these can align with the education priorities, they can also compromise learning efficacy when they do not match local realities, forcing education systems to focus on securing financing.⁵⁴ Additionally, many previously government-administered schools have been taken over by the EAOs since 2021, increasing the demand for resources to pay teacher stipends and provide learning materials.⁵⁵

Despite the ethnic education sector's strength in providing relevant and resilient learning opportunities, there is a legacy of exclusion and oversight. For example, a comprehensive World Bank report from 2023 on Myanmar's education system did not reference or account for ethnic education provisions.⁵⁶ For the bottom-up federating approach to succeed, these systems need greater acknowledgment, including by international organizations, and should be included in future discussions on research and funding.

Building Blocks of Federal Education

Building a federal education system with inclusive, localized education programmes is complex. Despite the chaos and challenges of the ongoing conflict, there are ample opportunities in post-coup Myanmar. At this stage, it is impossible to define precisely what a future federal democracy imagined by the NUG would look like. The remainder of this article discusses some of the "building blocks" that could make up a future federal education system.

Any federal education system in a multiethnic society must address the language of instruction. The MTB-MLE curriculum developed by some ethnic education providers could provide a strong foundation. MTB-MLE is critical in addressing the pedagogical needs of students and mitigating the political grievances stemming from decades of Burmanization in the classroom. The pedagogical approach is used across multilingual societies to promote inclusion and bottom-up peacebuilding, including in the Philippines, Nigeria⁵⁷ and Nepal.⁵⁸ However, implementing MTB-MLE is complex and

resource-intensive, especially given the 111 languages spoken in Myanmar.⁵⁹ Ethnic groups such as the Karenni and the Shan coexist with smaller minority communities, such as the Kayan, the Gabar, the Pa’O and the Lahu, complicating language status decisions. Unrecognized groups, like the Rohingya, are particularly vulnerable. Historically, only larger local ethnic groups were given the technical support to develop their own curricula, leaving the smaller ethnic groups further behind and forced to learn another language besides Burmese.⁶⁰ This raises questions regarding locally dominant ethnic group identities and interests of the “minorities within minorities”.⁶¹ Using existing MTB-MLE curricula and building on local legitimacy and technical expertise could be a core strategy for a new federal system. For instance, some ethnic education systems are developing materials for students who speak less dominant languages, such as Zaiwa in Kachin State.⁶²

State-level coordination and consultation bodies are other fundamental building blocks for a future federal education system. Since the coup, new state-based political coordination and governance bodies have emerged, redefining resistance and self-determination in Myanmar. Mainly conceived in relation to geographic territories—not the narrowly defined ethnic communities mobilized by EAOs—these are potentially the most inclusive polities in the country’s history. For example, State Consultative Councils have been established in Kachin, Mon, Karenni, Chin and Shan States, and in Tanintharyi, Irrawaddy and Sagaing Regions. People’s Administrative Bodies play similar roles in Burman-majority districts where EAOs do not operate.⁶³ These state-based bodies, often constituent elements of the NUG, were formed by local political organizers and civil society. They remain under-researched and unevenly supported.

In Karenni State, the smallest state in Myanmar, the Karenni State Consultative Council established an Interim Executive Council in June 2023. Composed of different ethnic groups, EAOs and CSOs, it has assumed responsibilities as the interim state government, using a collective leadership model. Having already taken responsibility for delivering public services, the Interim Executive Council is exploring ways of creating a federal education system, including multi-stakeholder discussions around a common curriculum framework to support all ethnic groups in benefitting from an MTB-MLE approach.⁶⁴ In Chin State, education is delivered by decentralized, township-based “education boards” organized by “people’s administrative teams”, an NUG experiment in local governance in preparation for a federal democratic system.⁶⁵

In a federal education system, tensions will exist between maintaining flexibility to ensure local relevance and maintaining common standards. A global common practice is to focus standards on competencies rather than content, allowing flexibility and reducing sensitivity.⁶⁶ Under the NLD education reforms in the 2010s, standards for curricula and teachers were developed but were content-focused and Burman-centric. Since 2021, many ethnic education providers have created their own curriculum and teacher competency standards. Finding common standards among these could allow for standardized accreditation without compromising local relevance. This could be a role for the NUG's Ministry of Education. One critical aspect would be assessing the standards in the matriculation exam without compromising its validity. The West African Senior School Certificate Examination, managed by a central accreditation body and comprising core subjects and localized electives, could serve as a model.⁶⁷

Recognizing non-state students and teachers is another crucial building block. Before the 2021 coup, Myanmar's education system was divided between recognized and non-recognized providers. The central government did not officially recognize ethnic education systems, preventing many students from obtaining the certificates needed to attend government universities or colleges. Consequently, few students from ethnic minority groups could enroll and qualify as recognized teachers.⁶⁸ In a federal education system that reflects diverse linguistic needs, it is essential to diversify the ethnicity of recognized teachers. This will require reformulating education laws and restructuring both teacher qualification processes and student assessments.

Conclusions

Attempts to develop more localized education systems in Myanmar have faced significant challenges in recent decades. Moves to federalize education have been on hold since the 2021 coup, although the anti-junta NUG's federal education policy is a step towards decentralization. However, it largely fails to recognize or build on the roles and systems of ethnic education providers, the organizations that actually administer the schools. This oversight will likely constrain the relevance and implementation of the NUG's approach. Following the federal principle of subsidiarity, education should be a state-level undertaking with limited interference from central authorities, including the NUG.

In conflict-affected areas of the country, the primary difficulty in “federating” education is security, as the military is targeting civilians, including schools. Despite this, local communities, EAO education departments and civil society partners have begun to federate education from the bottom up. Ethnic education providers in Myanmar have developed networks that contribute to the emergence of higher-level alliances and strategies while lobbying and negotiating for realistic federal education policies that reflect the country’s realities and needs.

The arguments in this article relate primarily to ethnic education systems. In lowland and Burman-populated areas, similar roles are played by People’s Administration Bodies, which have taken responsibility for coordinating (and, in places, implementing) delivering services to communities in areas resisting the junta, often operating under the NUG. These subnational governance bodies may emerge as majority community counterparts of ethnic minority education providers in a future federal Myanmar. However, as long as the SAC remains in power, children in Myanmar will lack access to quality education.

Potential conflicts between EAOs and other stakeholders are foreseeable. As central authorities lose power, armed groups may compete to establish their own territories, impacting the delivery of services such as education.⁶⁹ Additionally, there could be challenges related to the treatment of smaller ethnic minorities by larger ones—the “minorities-within-minorities” concern⁷⁰—and the potential for locally dominant EAOs to marginalize other ethnolinguistic and minority groups, particularly regarding language use in education.⁷¹

A coherent federal education system is still a long way off. In the short term, achieving this will be difficult due to the military’s attacks on civilians and schools. However, as identified in this article, some key building blocks—such as the MTB-MLE curricula and state-level coordination and consultation bodies—are being established. Beyond physical safety, the most significant necessity is the accreditation of non-state education. This would allow students from ethnic schools to use their certificates to access higher education and jobs, thereby helping to build an inclusive workforce.

NOTES

¹ Ashley South and Marie Lall, *Citizenship in Myanmar: Ways of Being in and from Burma* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018).

- ² Few detailed studies of service delivery (educational or otherwise) in Myanmar have been conducted since the coup. The figure of one million children comes from the authors' conversations with ethnic basic education providers and education specialists conducted between 2022 and 2024. A well-placed interlocutor interviewed on 20 April 2024 estimated that there are around 8,000 "non-state schools" three years after the coup.
- ³ South and Lall, *Citizenship in Myanmar*.
- ⁴ Ashley South, *Conflict, Complexity and Climate Change: Emergent Federal Systems in Post-Coup Myanmar* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development, Chiang Mai University, 2023), <https://rcsd.soc.cmu.ac.th/publications/conflict-complexity-climate-change/>.
- ⁵ On the history and politics of federalism in Myanmar, see Alan Smith, "Burma/Myanmar: Struggle for Democracy and Ethnic Rights", in *Multiculturalism in Asia*, edited by Will Kymlicka and Baogang He (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005); Alan Smith, *Thinking about Federalism* (Yangon, Myanmar: Covenant Consult and Ethnic Peace Resources Project, 2019). Related but distinct concepts include "decentralization" and "regional autonomy". See Yash Ghai, *Autonomy and Ethnicity: Negotiating Competing Claims in Multi-ethnic States* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 8.
- ⁶ South, *Conflict, Complexity and Climate Change*.
- ⁷ Sarah L. Clarke, Seng Aung Sein Myint, and Zabra Yu Siwa, *Re-examining Ethnic Identity in Myanmar* (Siem Reap, Cambodia: Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, 2019), <https://www.centrepeaceconflictstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/Re-Examining-Ethnic-Identity-in-Myanmar.pdf>.
- ⁸ Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London, UK: Zed Books, 1999).
- ⁹ Matthew J. Walton, "Ethnicity, Conflict, and History in Burma: The Myths of Panglong", *Asian Survey* 48, no. 6 (November–December 2008): 889–910.
- ¹⁰ Clarke, Sein Myint, and Siwa, *Re-examining Ethnic Identity in Myanmar*; Hans-Bernd Zöllner, "The War in the Minds: Some Reflections on the Thorny Peace Process in Myanmar", Covenant Institute, 2020, https://covenant-institute.com/wp-content/uploads/War-in-the-Minds_English_19Oct2023.pdf.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² South and Lall, *Citizenship in Myanmar*; Ashley South and Marie Lall, "Language, Education and the Peace Process in Myanmar", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, no. 1 (April 2016): 128–53.
- ¹³ Hamish Nixon, Cindy Joelene, Kyi Pyar Chit Saw, Thet Aung Lynn, and Matthew Arnold, *State and Region Governments in Myanmar* (Yangon, Myanmar: Asia Foundation, 2013), https://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Report_State_and_Region_Governments_in_Myanmar_CESD_and_TAF_Sept2013.PDF.
- ¹⁴ The details seemingly differ between states and regions. For example, education falls under the Ministry of Social Affairs in Karenni (Kayah) State and under the Ministry of Social Welfare in Chin State.
- ¹⁵ South and Lall, "Language, Education and the Peace Process in Myanmar"; Nicolas Salem-Gervais and Rosalie Metro, "A Textbook Case of Nation-Building:

- The Evolution of History Curricula in Myanmar”, *Journal of Burma Studies* 16, no. 1 (2012): 27–78.
- ¹⁶ Government of the Union of Myanmar, “National Education Law”, Ch 6.34c, 2015, <https://www.mlis.gov.mm/mLsView.do;jsessionid=01A33480229B18DAFA77B8F74220FC6F?lawordSn=9630>.
- ¹⁷ Thein Lwin, *Education in Burma (1945–2000)* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Thinking Classroom Foundation, 2000).
- ¹⁸ South and Lall, “Language, Education and the Peace Process in Myanmar”, pp. 128–53; Mary Patricia Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2012).
- ¹⁹ “[S]tudents who spoke the assessment language at home tended to achieve significantly higher scores in all domains than students who spoke another language.” United Nations Children’s Fund and Southeast Asian Ministers of Education, “SEA-PLM 2019 Main Regional Report, Children’s Learning in 6 Southeast Asian Countries”, 2020, p. 44, <https://www.unicef.org/eap/media/7356/file/SEAPLM%202019%20Main%20Regional%20Report.pdf>.
- ²⁰ UNESCO, “Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education: Lessons Learned from a Decade of Research and Practice”, Asia Multilingual Education Working Group (Bangkok: UNESCO, 2014), <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000231865>; UNESCO, “If You Don’t Understand, How Can You Learn?” Policy Paper 24, Global Education Monitoring Report, 2016, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000243713_eng.
- ²¹ Nicolas Salem-Gervais and Mael Raynaud, “Teaching Ethnic Minority Languages in Government Schools and Developing the Local Curriculum: Elements of Decentralization in Language-in-Education Policy”, *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung*, 2020, <https://www.kas.de/en/web/myanmar/laenderberichte/detail/-/content/teaching-ethnic-minority-languages-in-government-schools-and-developing-the-local-curriculum>; Salem-Gervais and Metro, “A Textbook Case of Nation-Building”; Makiko Takeda, “Language Policy, Ethnic Identity, and Majority-Minority Relations in Myanmar”, in *Myanmar’s Changing Political Landscape: Old and New Struggles*, edited by Makiko Takeda and Chosein Yamahata (Singapore: Springer, 2023).
- ²² Government of the Union of Myanmar, “Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan”, 2018, https://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Core_Doc_Myanmar_Sustainable_Development_Plan_2018_-_2030_Aug2018.pdf.
- ²³ Government of the Union of Myanmar, “National Education Law”, Ch 7.43b, 2015.
- ²⁴ Kim Joliffe and Emily Speers Mears, “Strength in Diversity: Towards Universal Education in Myanmar’s Ethnic Areas”, *Policy Dialogue Brief Series* no. 14 (2016): 8.
- ²⁵ Ashley South, “Towards ‘Emergent Federalism’ in Post-Coup Myanmar”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 43, no. 3 (2021): 439–60.
- ²⁶ Government of the Union of Myanmar, “National Education Law”, Ch 7.39g, 2015.
- ²⁷ South, “Towards ‘Emergent Federalism’”, pp. 439–60.

- ²⁸ Yaw Bawm Mangshang, “Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education: A Vehicle for Building Myanmar into an Equal and Fair Federal Democratic Union”, in *Myanmar After the Coup: Resistance, Resilience, and Re-invention*, edited by Giuseppe Gabusi and Raimondo Neironi (Turin, Italy: Torino World Affairs Institute, 2022).
- ²⁹ Two other EAOs, including the New Mon State Party, signed the NCA in February 2018.
- ³⁰ Bogyoke Aung San, Burma’s independence hero, was assassinated on the eve of independence on 19 July 1947.
- ³¹ South, “Towards ‘Emergent Federalism’”, pp. 439–60.
- ³² Ashley South, Marie Lall, Emily Stenning, Tim Schroeder, Aye Aye Tun, Nicola Edwards, Kim Jolliffe, Axel Schroeder, Vivian Lall, Mi Kun Chan Non, Aung Htun, Nangzing Lu Awn, and Cin Khan Lian, “Myanmar Education Partnership Project Policy Note”, Covenant Consult, September 2020, unpublished manuscript.
- ³³ The authors were directly involved in this project and discussed the issues on numerous occasions with key participants between 2018 and 2020.
- ³⁴ Authors’ interviews with stakeholders conducted between 2018 and 2020.
- ³⁵ Jacques Bertrand, “Education, Language, and Conflict in Myanmar’s Ethnic Minority States”, *Asian Politics and Policy* 14, no. 1 (January 2022): 25–42.
- ³⁶ Ashley South, Nicola Edwards, Tyler Davies, Cin Khan Lian, Rachel Diang Din, Mai Naomi Thang, and Emily Stenning, “Language and Education in Chin State”, Working Paper no. 1, Covenant Consult, 2021, <https://covenant-consult.com/2021/01/language-and-education-in-chin-state/>.
- ³⁷ During the education reforms conducted between 2011 and 2021, several development partners played important and influential roles, including in technical advice and significant funding. For instance, the European Union provided around US\$240 million. See “Launch of the European Union’s First Budget Support Programme in Myanmar: EUR 221 Million to Support Education Reform”, 22 March 2019, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/60752_en. Although the Myanmar government’s budget was used for the education systems’ operating costs, most of the reforms were dependent on donor support. A useful discussion on the influence and tensions of donors within the sector is found in Pyoe Pin, *Political Economy Analysis of Basic Education in Myanmar* (London, UK: British Council, 2014).
- ³⁸ Saurav Dev Bhatta, Saurav Katwal, Sutirtha Sinha Roy, Roy Van der Weide, Uttam Sharma, Aung Phyo Kyaw, and Mar Mar Thwin, *Education in Myanmar: Where Are We Now?* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2023), <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/716418bac40878ce262f57dfbd4eca05-0070012023/original/State-of-Education-in-Myanmar-July-2023.pdf>.
- ³⁹ A report by an anonymous author contends that the highest volumes of participants came from the health and education sectors. See “The Centrality of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) in Myanmar’s Post-Coup Era”, Policy Briefing SEARBO, Australian National University, p. 2, https://www.newmandala.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/SEARBO_CDM-Myanmar_paper.pdf.

- ⁴⁰ Nicolas Salem-Gervais, Summer Aung, Amber Spreelung, Ja Seng, Jung Benatar and Chan, “Amendment of the National Education Law and Other Language-in-Education Developments following the 2021 Military Coup in Myanmar (part 1)”, Tea Circle blog, 8 May 2023, <https://teacirclemyanmar.com/education/amendment-of-the-national-education-law-and-other-language-in-education-developments-following-the-2021-military-coup-in-myanmar-part-2/>.
- ⁴¹ As of 2023, nine NUCC joint coordination committees had been established, including an education committee. However, most ethnic education groups have only participated as observers.
- ⁴² Authors’ interview with representatives of the Karen National Union’s Karen Education and Culture Department in Mae Sot, Thailand, on 30 April 2024.
- ⁴³ For instance, the Spring University Myanmar collaborates with the University of Arizona, Arizona State University and Victoria University of Wellington.
- ⁴⁴ Karen Education and Culture Department, “What We Do”, <https://kecdktl.org/what-we-do/>. For more in-depth analysis of the Karen Education and Culture Department and Karen education since independence, see Hayso Thako and Tony Waters, “Schooling, Identity, and Nationhood: Karen Mother-Tongue-Based Education in the Thai-Burmese Border Region”, *Social Sciences* 12, no. 3 (2023): 9–13.
- ⁴⁵ As of mid-September 2023, the Karen Education and Culture Department had recorded 19 airstrikes and/or artillery attacks on Karen schools since the coup.
- ⁴⁶ Previous research, including some conducted by the authors, indicates that the governance and administration of EAOs in Myanmar is a fairly unique phenomenon globally. See Ashley South, Tim Schroeder, Kim Jolliffe, Mi Kun Chan Non, Saw Sa Shine, Susanne Kempel, Axel Schroeder, and Naw Wah Shee Mu, “Between Ceasefires and Federalism: Exploring Interim Arrangements in the Myanmar Peace Process”, Myanmar Interim Arrangements Research Project, Covenant Consult, 2018, <https://covenant-consult.com/2018/11/between-ceasefires-and-federalism-exploring-interim-arrangements-in-the-myanmar-peace-process/>; Ashley South, “‘Hybrid Governance’ and the Politics of Legitimacy in the Myanmar Peace Process”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 48, no. 1 (2017): 50–66.
- ⁴⁷ South, *Conflict, Complexity and Climate Change*.
- ⁴⁸ Richard Horsey, “Myanmar on the Brink of State Failure”, International Crisis Group, 9 April 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/myanmar-brink-state-failure>.
- ⁴⁹ Thako and Waters, “Schooling, Identity, and Nationhood”.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- ⁵¹ Authors’ interview with representatives of the Karen Education and Culture Department in Mae Sot, Thailand, on 30 April 2024; authors’ interview with a Karen National Union Central Committee member in Chiang Mai, Thailand, on 8 May 2024.
- ⁵² Bhatta, Katwal, Roy, Van der Weide, Sharma, Kyaw and Thwin, *Education in Myanmar: Where Are We Now?*

- ⁵³ Sutirtha Sinha Roy, Roy Van der Weide, Saurav Dev Bhatta, and Mar Mar Thwin, “A Generation of Children Are at Risk of Learning Losses in Myanmar”, World Bank, 24 October 2023, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/eastasiapacific/generation-children-are-risk-learning-losses-myanmar>.
- ⁵⁴ Authors’ interview with representatives of the Karen Education and Culture Department in Mae Sot, Thailand, on 30 April 2024; and authors’ interview with representatives of the Mon National Education Committee, conducted online, on 23 May 2024.
- ⁵⁵ South, *Conflict, Complexity and Climate Change*.
- ⁵⁶ Bhatta, Katwal, Roy, Van der Weide, Sharma, Kyaw and Thwin, *Education in Myanmar: Where Are We Now?*
- ⁵⁷ Sadiq Habiba Alhaji, Ocheido Syvanus, Meseko Samuel Adekunle, Olofinniyi Olaiya Emmanuel, Agada Eleche John, and Ochai John, “Analysis of West African Examination Council and National Examination Council Performance of Senior Secondary School Students Opting Universities Admission in North Central Nigeria”, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention* 9, no. 1 (December 2020): 49–55.
- ⁵⁸ Indra Mani Rai, “Multilingual Education in Nepal: Policies and Practices”, *Siksa Biannual Educational Journal* 2, no. 47 (2018): 131–43.
- ⁵⁹ Salem-Gervais and Raynaud, “Teaching Ethnic Minority Languages in Government Schools”.
- ⁶⁰ South, Edwards, Davies, Lian, Din, Thang, and Stenning, “Language and Education in Chin State”.
- ⁶¹ Marie Lall, “The Value of Bama-Saga: Minorities within Minorities’ Views in Shan and Rakhine States”, <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10120050/1/The%20Value%20of%20Bama-saga.pdf>.
- ⁶² Authors’ conversations with an ethnic education provider in Kachin State, which is supporting textbooks up until Grade 4. This is a relatively recent development.
- ⁶³ South, *Conflict, Complexity and Climate Change*.
- ⁶⁴ Authors’ research into the progress being made by the Interim Executive Council in Karenni areas.
- ⁶⁵ “Chin Communities Establish Local Administrations across the State”, *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 6 December 2023, <https://english.dvb.no/chin-communities-establish-local-administrations/>.
- ⁶⁶ Sinéad Fitzsimons, Victoria Coleman, Jackie Greatorex, Hiba Salem, and Martin Johnson, “Context Matters: Adaptation Guidance for Developing a Local Curriculum from an International Curriculum Framework”, *Research Matters*, a Cambridge Assessment publication, 2020, <https://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/Images/598389-context-matters-adaptation-guidance-for-developing-a-local-curriculum-from-an-international-curriculum-framework.pdf>.
- ⁶⁷ Alhaji, Syvanus, Adekunle, Emmanuel, John, and John, “Analysis of West African Examination Council”.

- ⁶⁸ Salem-Gervais and Raynaud, “Teaching Ethnic Minority Languages in Government Schools”.
- ⁶⁹ For example, several EAOs in northern Shan State have tried to develop their own administrations in areas where territory is contested.
- ⁷⁰ South and Lall, *Citizenship in Myanmar*; Clarke, Myint, and Siwa, *Re-examining Ethnic Identity in Myanmar*.
- ⁷¹ South, *Conflict, Complexity and Climate Change*.

BOOK REVIEWS

***Asian Military Evolutions: Civil-Military Relations in Asia.* Edited by Alan Chong and Nicole Jenne. Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2023. Hardcover: 354pp.**

Over the last 60 years, civil-military relations have been a significant focus in studies of the politics of the “Global South”, particularly in Southeast Asia and elsewhere in Asia—notably Pakistan and South Korea—where the armed forces have played prominent political roles. In their extensive Introduction to *Asian Military Evolutions*, editors Alan Chong and Nicole Jenne note that scholars interested in civil-military relations initially employed a “control, effectiveness and efficiency” framework (p. 3). This approach centred on exploring how civilian politicians can constrain the military in order to defend or promote democracy. Chong and Jenne describe this as “a Western approach to civil-military relations that ignores the many hybridized perspectives that do not necessarily condemn the militarization of society as an unmitigated evil” (p. 5). Subsequent scholarship introduced “vital variation” (p. 11) by examining the role played by militaries in the Global South in terms of national development—or, in the editors’ words, their role in “salvation amid the turbulence of modernization” (p. 9). This approach was particularly relevant to Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia and Myanmar.

However, earlier analytical frameworks that posited the military’s political role as the antithesis of liberal democracy persisted. At the turn of the twenty-first century, amid widespread Western expectations that the “end of history” would culminate in the global triumph of liberal democracy, some scholars prematurely anticipated “the ultimate decline” of political influence for Asian militaries (p. 11). However, Chong and Jenne explore more recent analyses

that argue that militaries remain significant economic actors and that “democratization is not the only political game domestically” (p. 13). They note that such assessments of contemporary Asia show that there is “a permanent window of opportunity for the military to anchor itself into a domestic role equal or greater to the one aspired to by civilians” (p. 15). Furthermore, they assert that, since the end of the Cold War, Asian armed forces have expanded their political activities beyond the domestic sphere through engagement in regional and international defence diplomacy and in “Military Operations Other Than War” (MOOTW).

Having established a focus on the evolution of Asian militaries, Chong and Jenne set various research questions for the authors who wrote the 14 national case studies from Southeast, Northeast and South Asia for this volume. Instead of more traditional matters—such as colonial legacies on civil-military relations and how Asia’s armed forces perceive their own role in promoting developmental goals—these questions focus on whether Asian civil-military relations are “a strength in handling defence diplomacy” (p. 18) and how the military and civilian dimensions of defence diplomacy operate in practice. However, most contributors to the book seem to view these questions as having limited importance for their own case studies, and only some of the chapters engage with them. The main exceptions are the chapters on Bangladesh and Malaysia. Additionally, Jenne’s own chapter—the only one that adopts a supranational perspective—provides a useful assessment of Southeast Asian involvement in international peacekeeping. She concludes, among other things, that the development of peacekeeping activities could potentially give some of Southeast Asia’s militaries a role in designing ASEAN’s Political-Security Community and executing its policies (p. 189).

The general lack of engagement with defence diplomacy does not detract from the value of this volume’s national case studies. Multi-author volumes often suffer from disparate quality between chapters, but those included in *Asian Military Evolutions* are all well-grounded and provide persuasive assessments of the continuing evolution of civil-military relations across Asia. This reviewer was drawn particularly to some of the thought-provoking chapters on Southeast Asia. Because of the nature of Singapore’s political system, Jun Yan Chang and Shu Huang Ho argue that a “civil-military gap” (p. 103) does not exist in the city-state. Alexander Vuving points to the “mutual embeddedness” (p. 145) of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the People’s Army of Vietnam. He credibly contends

that “Vietnam’s military will likely be the last Leninist bulwark” (p. 144) in the country.

Some of the non-Southeast Asian chapters also make crucial points. James Char, for instance, focuses on how Chinese President Xi Jinping has asserted his control over the People’s Liberation Army and concludes that this amassing of power could lead to “insurmountable” challenges in civil-military relations for Xi’s successor (p. 219). Il Wool Lee and Alan Chong argue that South Korea is a “national security state” in which “the disguised features of authoritarian continuity” impede “any reform of civil-military relations” (p. 265).

While the book’s coverage of important national case studies across Asia is quite comprehensive, chapters on Cambodia, Pakistan and Timor-Leste might have been useful considering the liveliness of civil-military relations in those countries, but this is a minor quibble. The editors have successfully compiled a substantial collection of original, well-written and tightly argued case studies.

The editors draw an important conclusion from these chapters: there is “an Asian preference for civil-military fusion to power national development” (p. 344). However, whether this is a substantial, distinct Asian paradigm is less clear. The ambiguity is partly because of the expansiveness of the volume’s case studies, which examine not just Southeast Asia but also Northeast Asia and parts of South Asia. As a result, the extreme diversity of national experiences—stemming from what Chong and Jenne refer to as “the thickness of local contexts” (p. 12)—often stands out more than the commonalities between the countries. Even within Southeast Asia, the differences in civil-military relations between countries are so broad that identifying strong similarities is challenging. Indeed, patterns of civil-military relations in Asian states sometimes seem to have less in common with each other than with those of countries from different regions. Nonetheless, the editors’ approach is sufficiently stimulating, and the individual chapters are sufficiently strong, to make *Asian Military Evolutions* valuable to students, scholars and policy practitioners interested in contemporary civil-military relations across the broad region.

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***The Peaceful Resolution of Territorial and Maritime Disputes.* By Emilia Justyna Powell and Krista E. Wiegand. New York City, New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. Softcover: 274pp.**

For the most part, after the Second World War the use of force to take control of sovereign territory was deemed unacceptable. Instead, states pursued peaceful resolution under international law to settle their territorial and maritime disputes. Although there are multiple examples of forced territorial annexations post-1945, Emilia Justyna Powell and Krista E. Wiegand contend that most states that engaged in conflict preferred “either to maintain the status quo or to actively seek peaceful solutions” (p. 22). The book explores the propensity for pursuing peaceful resolutions through bilateral means (negotiations), non-binding third-party mechanisms (mediation) and litigation or binding mechanisms (arbitration and adjudication). In addition to delving into the terrestrial aspects of disputes, such as how territorial sovereignty is determined, it also considers state rights, privileges and capabilities during maritime disputes.

Powell and Wiegand stress that their book is not intended to explain *why* proposer states—those seeking a peaceful resolution—pursue peaceful settlements but rather *how* they do so (p. 14). It begins by exploring the fundamental aspects of peaceful resolution. Chapter Two provides an extensive review of these methods. Unlike the rest of the book, this chapter is very descriptive, and Powell and Wiegand map out specific features of different peaceful resolution methods by providing a detailed picture of the normative environment in which states pursue their strategies. This highlights the nuances between different resolution methods offered by international law. According to the authors, states employ two main strategies. First, through a “choice-of-venue strategy”, they identify a particular dispute-resolution body, such as the International Court of Justice or International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, that they think best serves their interests. Once they decide on a venue, they design a strategy that helps them navigate that body’s myriad rules and mechanisms. The authors call this the “within-venue strategy” (p. 49). Both strategies are explored in Chapters Three and Four, respectively.

Multiple factors influence which peaceful resolution method a state chooses to settle its dispute. In Chapter Three, the authors theorize that a state shapes its choice-of-venue strategy by forming

hypotheses based on several factors, including the state's legal traditions, past experience of dispute resolution and the relationship between international law and its domestic legal system. Chapter Four demonstrates that within-venue strategic selection is another elaborate process, and two mechanisms shape this decision. States can frame the claim—meaning they focus on certain aspects of the dispute and ignore other factors that might lead to an unfavourable outcome—and/or they can take advantage of the venue's flexible design by shaping the rules and procedures and selecting the actors involved in the proceedings (pp. 101–2).

In Chapter Five, Powell and Wiegand provide an in-depth methodology and research design with the information they collected from the Peaceful Resolution of Territorial Disputes (PRTD) dataset. They present their research design through a mixed-method approach, seeking to provide qualitative analysis from the quantitative data. With this, the book provides original and valuable information, and their quantitative analyses are then tested against specific resolution cases in Chapters Six and Seven.

Powell and Wiegand first examine choice-of-venue strategic selections. They note that the myriad peaceful resolution methods are not equally attractive to all proposer states (p. 205). Using their datasets, they argue that choosing a particular method depends on a specific amalgamation of the proposer state's past experiences and the characteristics of their domestic legal systems *vis-à-vis* the non-proposer state (p. 206). As for “within-venue” strategic selection, Powell and Wiegand argue that once a state decides which peaceful resolution method to pursue, they formulate a strategy to ultimately reduce the uncertainty of the proceedings and maximize their chances of winning the dispute. States do this by navigating the procedures of each venue. Ultimately, states that pursue peaceful resolutions are willing to incur high financial costs—such as assembling a legal counsel to navigate the venue's rules and procedures—to increase the likelihood of winning and prefer to reduce uncertainty in the settlement process (p. 240).

The book offers a comprehensive understanding of how states form their strategic rationale in pursuing peaceful resolution as a solution to territorial and maritime disputes. Helpfully, the authors explore actual disputes, including the case brought by the Philippines against China at the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) over their overlapping jurisdictional claims in the South China Sea. The Philippines-China dispute ended with the PCA finding mainly

in the Philippines' favour, much to China's chagrin. The authors meticulously reveal how the Philippines secured this important decision through choice-of-venue and within-venue strategies.

The Peaceful Resolution of Territorial and Maritime Disputes dispenses practical knowledge on dispute resolution without lumbering too much over legalistic sources. It provides easily digestible information for scholars of International Relations and international law. Hopefully, this will allow readers to consider the diversity of legal perspectives that states adhere to and help them understand how states behave in resolving their disputes.

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***The Coalitions Presidents Make: Presidential Power and Its Limits in Democratic Indonesia.* By Marcus Mietzner. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2023. Softcover: 285pp.**

In May 1998, President Suharto's 32-year strongman rule came to an end. Months earlier, he had been re-elected by the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR)—comprising elected parliamentarians and appointees from so-called functional groups, including the military—but the fallout of the 1997–98 Asian Financial Crisis led to political instability and massive student demonstrations. Suharto fell and was replaced by his vice president, B. J. Habibie, who agreed to bring forward the next election to the following year. Habibie served just over a year in office; his presidential bid was snuffed out after the MPR opposed a speech he gave about political accountability. Instead, the newly constituted MPR, now primarily composed of elected lawmakers from recently established political parties, elected Abdurrahman Wahid as president in October 1999, while Megawati Soekarnoputri became vice president. Wahid did not last long. He was impeached in July 2001, and Megawati completed the presidential term.

In 1990, the academic Juan Linz, an expert on democracy or authoritarianism, published an influential article titled “The Perils of Presidentialism”. As Marcus Mietzner paraphrases it, Linz argued that “a multi-party system was a particularly poor fit for a presidential rule” (pp. 1–2). Because a separation between the legislature and executive produces gridlock in governance, presidents without a controlling majority in parliament are vulnerable to impeachment. The rapid rise and fall of Indonesian presidents in the early years of the democratic transition period (*reformasi*) would seem to prove Linz's point. However, since 2004, Indonesia has enjoyed very stable presidencies, thus disproving Linz's thesis. Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–14), Indonesia's first directly elected president, completed the maximum two terms. His successor, Joko Widodo (2014–24), is set to leave office with very high approval ratings.

Mietzner's meticulously researched book unravels “two interrelated puzzles” associated with Indonesia's post-authoritarian journey. The first relates to the remarkable turnaround “from an unstable presidential regime in the early post-Suharto period into one of the world's most resilient”. The second explores “the link

between the increased stability of competitive presidential systems and eroding democratic substance” (p. 3).

Indonesia has often had minority presidents who face a parliament composed mainly of opposition parties. To understand how these minority presidents establish well-functioning administrations, Mietzner draws on the concept of “coalitional presidentialism”, in which coalition-building is not just an emergency fix but a productive strategy. Indeed, they seek to co-opt potential partners through fear and favour.

Some scholars focus on how presidents build coalitions with political parties in the legislature. For instance, Yudhoyono and Widodo built broad-based rainbow coalitions by appointing representatives from numerous parties to their cabinets to avert impeachment threats and ensure consistent parliamentary support for their policies. Under Yudhoyono and Widodo, there were complaints that Indonesia had created a semi-parliamentary or semi-presidential system. However, *The Coalitions Presidents Make* goes further and explores how Yudhoyono and Widodo also co-opted key state institutions and influential non-state actors.

For instance, they incorporated parliament’s various committees and the military—which remains very powerful and politically influential—into their coalitions. Mietzner highlights the importance of the police, which was separated from the military at the start of the *reformasi* process. Because the police have the authority to begin or end criminal proceedings, presidents have increasingly used it to coerce political support or silence critics. The state bureaucracy is another vital institution whose loyalty a president must secure. Without it, they might be able to pass legislation, but they will find it difficult to convince the civil service to implement their directives. Because of extensive decentralization after the fall of the Suharto regime, a president must also ensure support from local governments. Since presidential elections are expensive, Indonesia’s oligarchs must be brought into the fold. Moreover, Mietzner highlights the importance of the various Muslim organizations, whose support is necessary for anyone seeking political office in Indonesia.

Although this strategy of coalitional presidentialism has made Indonesia’s presidential system stable, Mietzner highlights the downsides, namely Indonesia’s democratic decline that started during Yudhoyono’s second term in office. This continued under Widodo, who sought to build an even larger coalition than his

predecessor. Around 82 per cent of all parliamentarians joined Widodo's coalition, eliminating any checks and balances from the legislature. Another consequence of ever-larger coalitions is that presidents have been forced to stultify or reverse their proposed reforms to appease their partners.

It remains to be seen whether Prabowo Subianto, who will be inaugurated as the next president in October 2024, will strengthen coalitional presidentialism, risking further democratic decline, or will try to revive the spirit of *reformasi* and restore democratic accountability.

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***Cambodia's Trials: Contrasting Visions of Truth, Transitional Justice, and National Recovery.* Edited by Robin Biddulph and Alexandra Kent. Nordic Institute of Asian Studies in Asian Topics, no. 81. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2023. Softcover: 400pp.**

This edited volume is a comprehensive examination of Cambodia's experiments with "transitional justice" following the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s. It delves into the complexities and challenges of applying transitional justice—a concept that "justice, truth and healing" after a mass atrocity are "integrally linked to the establishment of liberal democracy" (p. 7)—in a country with a deeply entrenched system of governance that is resistant to democratic or human rights norms. Through contributions from numerous experts and analysts, *Cambodia's Trials* focuses on how the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), a special United Nations-backed court established in 2001 to prosecute the principal leaders of the Khmer Rouge, interacted with Cambodia's post-conflict society and justice system, as well as the broader historical and cultural context of the country in which these trials occurred.

The volume is structured into three main sections: "Context", "Interactions" and "Beyond". Collectively, they offer a nuanced critique of the ECCC's effectiveness, its impact on Cambodian society and the ongoing struggle for truth and justice beyond the tribunal's scope. The chapters in each of these three sections employ a range of perspectives, from legal analysis to ethnographic studies, to piece together a more comprehensive understanding of Cambodia's trials and tribulations in the aftermath of genocide. Significantly, the book highlights the limitations of the ECCC and the broader international justice system in accommodating Cambodia's complex sociopolitical and cultural realities. It also sheds light on the innovative ways Cambodians have sought to come to terms with their past by highlighting the importance of looking beyond conventional transitional justice mechanisms to truly understand and support a nation's recovery process.

Cambodia's Trials emerges as a pivotal text in the discourse on transitional justice, particularly in the context of Southeast Asia's tumultuous history. It not only scrutinizes the trials of the Khmer Rouge leadership under the ECCC but also critically examines the broader implications of these trials on the national psyche, societal reconciliation and the complex fabric of Cambodian governance.

The volume begins by providing a comprehensive backdrop, detailing Cambodia's historical, cultural and political landscapes that predated the ECCC. This section illuminates the intricate dynamics between global justice mandates and local realities, emphasizing the uniqueness of the Cambodian context. The nuanced exploration of Cambodia's past, including colonial legacies, civil conflict and the devastating reign of the Khmer Rouge, provides a solid foundation for understanding the complexities of the subsequent trials. The analysis is multifaceted, exploring how the ECCC's legal proceedings impacted victims' communities, the role of civil society organizations in navigating the justice process and the public's perception and engagement with the trials. Through this lens, the volume critiques the ECCC's limitations in achieving comprehensive justice and reconciliation, pointing out the gaps between international legal standards and local expectations of justice.

However, it also transcends the courtroom to explore the broader implications of the ECCC on Cambodia's national recovery and the ongoing quest for truth and memory. It critically assesses the role of memorialization processes, educational reforms and community-based initiatives in healing the wounds of the past. The final parts of the volume underscore the importance of local narratives and practices in the broader framework of transitional justice, suggesting that true reconciliation extends far beyond legal judgements. Throughout, *Cambodia's Trials* offers critical perspectives on the efficacy of transitional justice mechanisms in countries like Cambodia, where historical injustices are deeply interwoven with contemporary political and social realities. The contributors collectively advocate for a more nuanced, context-sensitive approach to justice and reconciliation, one that accommodates the complexities of individual and collective memory, cultural practices and political constraints. Its conclusions offer reflections on the lessons learned from Cambodia's experience in the field of transitional justice and provide examples that could be useful for other societies emerging from periods of conflict and repression. As such, the Cambodian case study offers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of implementing transitional justice in a meaningful and transformative way for affected communities.

At the same time, the critical analysis in this volume encourages a rethinking of transitional justice paradigms and advocates for approaches that are more inclusive of local contexts and that support the multifaceted processes of national healing and recovery. According to Laura McGrew, one of the contributors, while time may heal some

wounds, “Cambodians’ deference to Buddhism and karmic justice (in the next life) and their beliefs in ancestral spirits, must also be acknowledged as pathways to local healing and reconciliation” (p. 168). Indeed, whether through Buddhism, Brahmanism or Western notions of norm penetration, Cambodians have sought to reconcile their own truths and justice, especially during a time when, after the 1990s, the country rapidly underwent the processes of modernization, urbanization and industrialization. For instance, Eve Zucker, in Chapter 12, makes the fascinating argument that when people began to perceive an image of a female Khmer Rouge soldier that had been carved onto a boulder instead as a portrayal of the Cambodian tutelary spirit Yeay Mao, it could have been an appeal to Brahmanism “in response to a need to cope with the rapidity of social change wrought by modernity” (p. 343).

While *Cambodia’s Trials* offers comprehensive insights into transitional justice in Cambodia, one could argue that its critical analysis leans heavily towards the limitations and challenges of the ECCC, potentially underrepresenting its achievements and the positive impacts of international legal interventions. (However, this reviewer, having written extensively about the ECCC’s failings as a recognized civil party, feels that such critical analysis is essential.) Additionally, the book’s focus on broader societal and political implications could be seen as insufficiently detailed in discussing the legal intricacies and procedural aspects of the trials themselves. As such, one might reason that there is also the need for a more balanced examination that equally highlights the successes alongside the critiques. Nonetheless, *Cambodia’s Trials* is an essential read for scholars, policymakers and practitioners engaged in transitional justice, Southeast Asian studies and human rights. Its comprehensive analysis, critical insights and forward-looking perspectives significantly contribute to understanding the complexities of reconciling with a troubled past. It not only enriches the academic discourse on transitional justice but also serves as a guide for future efforts to address historical injustices in Cambodia and beyond.

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***Central Asia and Southeast Asia: Exploring the Dynamics of Greater Engagement.* By Paradorn Rangsimaporn. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. E-book: 174 pp.**

At first glance, Central and Southeast Asia appear to have little in common. One is landlocked, the other mostly maritime. One is a region of countries that only achieved independence from Moscow 30 years ago, is dependent on natural resources for economic growth and ruled by a mix of post-Soviet leaders. The other is a region with a varied post-colonial history, mixed democratic heritage and a series of economies that are among the most, and also least, developed in Asia. A closer look, however, reveals a shared set of geopolitical tensions and cultural similarities. This dynamic is explored in detail by Paradorn Rangsimaporn in his compact book *Central Asia and Southeast Asia: Exploring the Dynamics of Greater Engagement*, which examines the potential for cooperation between these regions.

According to Rangsimaporn, cooperation between the two regions will be challenging. Despite broad, logical reasons for partnership, numerous practical and abstract obstacles exist. Geography alone creates significant separation; China lies between them, making direct physical connections feasible but subject to Beijing's influence. Direct flights between the two regions are still scarce and reduced further during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, both regions have relatively poor populations and economies that primarily trade with other parts of the world. Central Asian states, in particular, have incentives to explore opportunities in Southeast Asia's growth markets, but most of their companies lack the maturity to make the leap. Southeast Asian companies are equally interested, but also lack the scale and products to really enable the push. And even if they could, they would face substantial competition from more formidable competitors, primarily China. Some Chinese companies, such as tech giant Alibaba, have envisioned uniting the two regions into a massive Eurasia-plus market, but the practical challenges are significant. And in both regions, other players are also significant; Russia remains a strong force in Central Asia, while Southeast Asia has become a theatre for major power competition. But the challenges of navigating between large powers as developing economies is a shared concern that drives both regions to look at each other for lessons.

In some ways, the idea of bridging Central and Southeast Asia is more compelling at a theoretical level—a theme Rangsimaporn explores thoroughly. Potential organizational structures linking the two regions internally, and lessons each can learn from the other about local governance and managing powerful, overbearing neighbours, are ideas that are discussed in detail. ASEAN was in part born to help Southeast Asia countries manage their internal conflicts, as well as the major powers they sit in-between. Central Asia is a region that still has tense regional relations, and where trade within the region is still held up by awkward border relations. A web of overlapping Russian or Chinese connectivity visions tie them north and south, but do little to help internal coherence. Recently the region has started to have more considered talk about how to improve regional connectivity and cooperation, and often they look to the ASEAN experience to learn lessons.

Central Asians believe they can learn much from Southeast Asia, an observation that recurs throughout the book. They particularly look to Singapore and, to a lesser extent, Malaysia. Central Asian leaders have observed with envy the development of these two Southeast Asian states, considering how they might similarly transform their own countries to create stable and largely accountable bureaucracies that deliver high growth and prosperity. Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamad, the pivotal former prime ministers of Singapore and Malaysia respectively, are frequently mentioned as admired figures in Central Asia for their transformative tenures.

Regarding how small countries in complex neighbourhoods can collaborate to manage their external environment, Central Asia again looks southeast, with ASEAN offering a model for association. Rangsimaporn provides an insightful analysis of how Central Asia could emulate the Southeast Asian experiment. ASEAN presents a more credible template for a regional bloc than the European Union (the two models that are most frequently invoked), as the latter involves substantial power relinquishment to a distant capital—a federation model unlikely to succeed in Central Asia, a region with memories of distant decision-making in Moscow.

Despite these intriguing theoretical connections, the reality is that cooperation will take some time to mature. The world may be globalized, but Central Asia's landlocked geography constrains its options. This geographical challenge is why China's Belt and Road Initiative was so well received in the region; the construction

of new railways and roads offered hope for overcoming geographic limitations and trading with distant countries (and has always been a core self-identifying vision within a region which prides itself as being the heart of the ancient Silk Roads). By contrast, Southeast Asia's position on some of the world's busiest sea lanes has made it much easier to integrate into the global marketplace.

Compounding the difficulty, Central Asia is surrounded by countries facing some form of sanctions from the United States and its Western allies. As Rangsimaporn concludes, the current geopolitical environment further complicates efforts to build connections between the two regions.

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