

Current Electoral Processes in Southeast Asia. Regional Learnings

Edited by Gabriel Facal



**Current Electoral Processes in Southeast Asia.
Regional Learnings**

IRASEC's Occasional Papers

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**Cleo Anne A. Calimbahin, Khoo Ying Hooi, Rui Graça Feijó,
Siripan Nogsuan Sawasdee, Chum Chandarin, Deasy Simandjuntak**

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Foreword

Gabriel Facal

While Southeast Asia is completing a strong geopolitical sequence and the region remains a strategic area in the relations of influence in the Indo-Pacific, several countries are also focused on electoral agendas and the domestic political dynamics they impel. The Philippines saw a presidential election (May 2022) for which an assessment has yet to be made, while the general elections in Malaysia (November 2022) and the presidential one in Timor-Leste (April 2022), followed by the legislative elections in May 2023, open up new dynamics that have yet to be consolidated.

The elections showed important contrasts between countries. The results of the polls in 2023 did not lead to political renewal. In Thailand (legislative elections, 14 May) the electoral process was marked by uncertainty, while in Cambodia (legislative elections, 23 July) it wasn't much surprise. In Indonesia (general elections in February 2024), the campaign is still open, and the results could lead to very different directions.

This book, *Current Electoral Processes in Southeast Asia - Regional Learnings*, provides an opportunity for experts from six countries to decipher the issues and consequences of these elections (including the future ones). Moreover, based on a regional perspective, it tries to draw comparisons, parallels and contrasts, and to identify broad regional trends in the functioning of electoral systems and the political institutions on which they are based.

Current Electoral Processes in Southeast Asia - Regional Learnings follows on from a seminar organised by IRASEC and Heinrich Böll Stiftung-Southeast Asia Regional Office on May 22nd, 2023, hosted by the Faculty of Political Science of Chulalongkorn University and with the support of the King Prajadhipok's Institute, who provided a simultaneous translation in Thai language during the seminar.

The 2022 Philippines Elections: Unity, Continuity, and Impunity

Cleo Anne A. Calimbahin

Elections in the Philippines are free but not necessarily fair or competitive. The high cost of campaign finance in the Philippines limits running for public office to very few. Estimates of campaign expenditure to run for President in the Philippines range from 5 to 50 billion P (90 million to 900 million US\$). Candidates submit a Statement of Contributions and Expenses (SOCE) to the election commission. Many candidates are suspected to under-declare their expenditures to keep to the maximum required by law or not to divulge their campaign strategy and costs. Based on their SOCE in 2019, on average, senatorial candidates spent 190 million P (3.6 million US\$) on political advertisements. In 2022, one senatorial candidate spent 245 million P (4.4 million US\$)¹. These staggering amounts of money starkly contrast with a Filipino family's average annual income of 313,000 P (5,400 US\$)². The rising cost of election campaigns favours incumbents with access to the patronage that flows from national political elites down to significant local political players. There is an increasing number of dynastic families in Congress and across different positions in local government. Filipino economists label these dynasties as “obese,” “fat,” and “thin” dynasties (Mendoza, Juminola, and Yap 2019: 8-9). Election, originally

¹ Dwight de Leon, “Candidates who spent the most based on their SOCEs”, *Rappler*, July 14, 2022.

² Philippine Statistics Authority, “2018 Family Income and Expenditure Survey”, June 4, 2020, <https://psa.gov.ph/sites/default/files/FIES%202018%20Final%20Report.pdf>, retrieved on June 27, 2023.

meant to provide a change in leadership, appears to be a platform of clan continuity in the Philippines. Political families dominate the Philippine political landscape for decades.

Observers of Philippine politics have seen the fall of democracy with Marcos Sr. declaring martial law in 1972, the restoration of democracy in 1986 with Corazon Aquino, and the decline of democracy with the violent populist of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines and now the return of the Marcos name with the overwhelming victory of Marcos Jr. One way to make sense of where we are and why we are where we are is through the lens of election administration and how a democratic institution such as an independent election commission falls short in protecting the democratic space and make it a level playing field for all. Elections are essential to a democracy. Analyses of elections are typically directed toward understanding electoral outcomes rather than the electoral process. The electoral process shapes the dynamics and outcomes of elections. The electoral process matters because the administration of elections cues how free and fair the election is and will be.

When Dynasties Unite

In the 2022 Philippine elections, the results that showed the large margin of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. surprised many. Perhaps most especially observers from outside the Philippines who still remember the ouster of the Marcoses from Malacanang palace. It seemed unimaginable to have, yet again, a Marcos as President. Since the last time much of the world heard of the Marcos family name, it was associated with dictatorship, human rights abuses, images of excesses and a lifestyle so remote to the poverty-stricken country it was running as President³.

Much has been written and said about historical revisionism alongside social media campaigns that utilized disinformation and organized troll farms. Much has also been said about the disillusionment towards the failed promises

³ Pangalangan, R.C., 2021. Human Rights Cases from the Marcos Dictatorship. In *Philippine Materials in International Law* (pp. 262-308). Brill Nijhoff.

that should have come with liberal democracy in 1986. As previously mentioned, elections in the Philippines are often more about continuity than a change of guard. A recently published article shows evidence that voters saw Marcos Jr. as the continuity of the very popular strongman Rodrigo Duterte and the continuity to Marcos Sr., his father's legacy, also strongman rule (Dulay, Hicken, Menon, Holmes 2022: 482-484). The study also shows that Filipinos voted along ethnic lines. The North, bailiwick of the Marcoses, and the South, bailiwick of the Dutertes, voted for the Bongbong Marcos-Sara Duterte UNITY Team as President and vice president, respectively.

However, this UNITY is a coalition of convenience. Dynastic families holding on together until they get through the election. Once the election is over, it will be politics as usual. The UNITY team already shows that it is frayed and rife with factions. In May 2023, one year after the elections, Sara Duterte resigned as chairperson of the Lakas-Christian Muslim Democrats (Lakas-CMD) political party, citing “political toxicity and political power play”⁴. There were insinuations that Sara Duterte sided with former President, now congresswoman Gloria Arroyo who was relegated from senior deputy speaker to deputy speaker. There were allegations of a coup against Speaker of the House Martin Romualdez in the lower house⁵. Romualdez is the President's first cousin and the National President of Lakas-CMD. In the coming months, we can expect more challenges to the united team of Marcos and Duterte. The mid-term elections in 2025 will test loyalties and reveal alliances. It will show signs of what to expect for the 2028 national elections. It will be the same players. But with different principals and party affiliations.

Electoral Fairness and Credible Authority

Some civil society members perceive electoral fraud in the 2022 elections, but these claims have not been substantiated and remain as allegations. However, the Commission on Elections (COMELEC), the country's official Election

⁴ Daphne Galvez, “Sara Duterte Resigns from Lakas-CMD”, *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, May 19, 2023.

⁵ Ellson Quismorio, “Arroyo responds to alleged coup plot vs Romualdez, says she's dropping ‘ambition’ to be Speaker again”, *Manila Bulletin*, May 18, 2023.

Management Body (EMB), could have better managed the entire electoral process. On election day, voters in multiple voting precincts waited in line for three to four hours to cast their ballots. The concern is not just management on the polling day itself. The COMELEC could have secured the integrity of the entire electoral process.

The COMELEC is one of the oldest election commissions in the region. However, the prevalence of vote-buying and patronage disbursement between candidates, supporters, and voters persists, as do allegations of fraud and clientelistic appointments to the Commission on Elections that remain unresolved through multiple election cycles (Calimbahin, 2011).

Despite its label as a constitutional body, the COMELEC is both a bureaucracy and constitutional commission that is, over time, plagued by a three-pronged pathology composed of two types of clientelism and organisational inefficiency. The first deficiency of COMELEC is its vulnerability to external clientelism, in which the patron-candidate, a political-economic elite, looks to acquire favourable election outcomes (*Ibid*: 110). The second deficiency is internally motivated clientelism, where the patron is within the bureaucracy. They act as “entrepreneurial bureaucrats” using their knowledge and network of bureaucrats in exchange for career or financial enrichment (*Ibid*: 113). Lastly, organisational inefficiency refers to the incapacities of the poll body to enforce the rules thoroughly and effectively. Understanding this three-pronged pathology of the COMELEC allows one to see “the bifurcated expectations of the voting public—high normative expectation as a constitutional commission and low-performance expectation as a bureaucracy responsible for election management” (*Ibid*: 105).

The Conduct of the 2022 Elections

COMELEC’s performance in the 2022 Philippine general election is less about fraud and more about organisational efficiency and capacity issues. Two months before the elections, three out of seven commissioners were appointed. For any organisation, leadership changes right before a critical period is challenging. Likewise, personnel changes in the COMELEC field offices occurred one week

before election day. The changes included newly appointed roles and new area assignments. Affected officials, such as some Provincial Board of Canvassers, Provincial Election Supervisors, and Election Officers, have vital roles in the lead-up and on election day. The disruption this caused in the Election Management Body's preparation led to one commissioner publicly disagreeing with this last-minute re-organisation and another commissioner publicly saying it was illegal⁶. The re-shuffling of field personnel does not help alleviate staff and resource issues that affect the monitoring and implementation of electoral administration rules before, during, and after election day.

The 2022 general election saw multiple substitutions and withdrawals leading to election day. Substitutions have become a strategy at national-level positions. The COMELEC appears like a bystander, unable to control what is clearly undermining the electoral system. Campaign finance issues continue to hound the COMELEC. Effectively monitoring campaign expenditures is one way to disqualify over spenders and examine campaign contributors. The Omnibus Election Code requires candidates to submit their “full, true, and itemized” election-related statement of contributions and expenditures to the COMELEC. However, the Campaign Finance Office does not have regular employees and should include accountants who are certified fraud examiners (Ilagan and Simon, 2021). Another issue that persists is election violence. The deputized agency of the COMELEC for security, peace, and order is the Philippine National Police. An alarming pattern that needs more attention is the increasing violence and killings of COMELEC personnel, including election officers, after the conduct of elections. Issues of capacity and more effective administration in an election commission can be remedied with better resource allocation, training, and public management reform. The issue of autonomy is difficult to remedy if there is elite capture and the independence of the election commission is undermined by appointments that the public perceives as partisan.

In the 2022 elections, the COMELEC comprised five commissioners, out of the seven, from Mindanao. Former president Duterte's support comes from

⁶ Dhel Nazario, “Reshuffling gov't personnel before elections without Comelec consent illegal – Garcia”, *The Manila Bulletin*, May 6, 2022

that region. Two of the seven commissioners were from the same Law School as former president Duterte. Moreover, one commissioner is an election lawyer representing two 2022 presidential candidates, Marcos Jr., and Isko Moreno. Because the COMELEC has adjudication duties, the public perceived some partisanship when the commission ruled on the candidacy of Bongbong Marcos. Petitioners filed a disqualification case on the candidacy of Marcos Jr due to a guilty verdict for non-payment and filing of income tax. At the same time, he was still a Governor of Ilocos Norte. The case took longer to resolve and involved a public disagreement between and among commissioners. Insinuations of clientelistic relationships between a commissioner and a pro-administration Senator were lobbed by an election commissioner set to retire one month before the May 2022 elections⁷. The very public spat among COMELEC commissioners, including accusations of partisan ruling in favour of a candidate, erodes voter confidence in an election management body. Perception of autonomy in an election commission is equally essential as conducting fraud-free elections.

Filipino Voters and the 2022 Elections

During election season, a pejorative goes around in social media, characterising voters as ill-informed and not understanding how democracy works for selling their votes to corrupt politicians. The prevalence of vote-buying, after all, offends middle-class sensibilities. Labels for voters who cannot afford to refuse payoffs in exchange for their vote further alienate and breed distaste for liberal democratic ideals. Push-back includes accusations of elitism, further polarising Philippine society. A society that now barely sees any cross-class civil society action.

The popularity of Rodrigo Duterte, despite his very violent drug war and the majority win of Marcos Jr., a name associated with his father's authoritarian rule, has led to the question, are Filipino voters becoming illiberal? (Kasuya and

⁷ CNN Philippines Staff, "Guanzon: Delay of DQ case 'a grand design' in Marcos' favor", *CNN Philippines*, February 2, 2022.

Calimbahin, 2023) Research findings show that at the baseline, Filipinos continue to support democracy but are contingent supporters of authoritarian rulers. The long-term impact of this contingent support for an illiberal rule is the weakening of democratic institutions, especially accountability institutions. The lack of demand for accountability and the enforcement of oversight functions can lead to impunity.

Social Weather Station survey findings show Filipinos are satisfied with democracy. From 1991 to the fourth quarter of 2022, Filipinos responded that they were satisfied with how democracy works. In 2022, 89% responded as satisfied with democracy⁸. Similarly, from 1998 to 2022, respondents gave COMELEC an “excellent” net satisfaction rating. There is an observation that COMELEC exceeds the public’s low expectations (Calimbahin, 2011). Or is it possible that voters are willing to make do with a defective democracy?

Increasing Electoral Integrity: Challenges to Election Officials

The COMELEC is mandated to lead the electoral process with integrity and credibility. However, for this to be a reality, the pace of reforms within the commission needs to pick up. The reforms should combine administrative reforms that do not require constitutional change, an appointment framework that will require constitutional change, and reforms through legislative action.

One possible area of reform is the decoupling of the administration and adjudication duties of the commission. This can address issues of compromised capacity. Experts on election administration can work alongside election law experts who will address electoral cases. Decoupling will mean faster adjudication decisions and a more focused election management body that can build expertise on all matters related to elections, not just crisis managers.

Second, appointments matter. Given the nature of elections, electoral integrity requires non-partisanship among those who lead an election management

⁸ See SWS website for the “2023 SWS Survey Review”.

body. In an increasingly polarised environment, the mere perception of fraud can encourage and justify actions leading to political instability.

The new leadership in the Commission on Elections is reaching out to electoral reform advocates and is more visible in explaining election matters to the public. These are all promising signs. The youth council elections in October 2023 and the upcoming mid-term elections are worth observing if election officials are serious about promoting electoral integrity and addressing election administration concerns.

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Malaysia's Electoral Processes: Tracing the Path from the Bersih Movement to Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim

Khoo Ying Hooi

There exists a prevailing consensus regarding the phenomenon of democratic backsliding, which has been observed not only globally but also within Southeast Asian nations. In this context, indicators of democratic erosion, such as the curtailment of civil liberties, the subversion of the rule of law, electoral manipulation, and the consolidation of power, have become increasingly apparent. Notably, two recent cases within the region exemplify these trends: the ongoing political upheaval caused by the military junta in Myanmar and the prolonged dictatorial rule of Hun Sen in Cambodia. These instances serve as noteworthy illustrations of the challenges faced by Southeast Asian countries in maintaining and advancing democratic principles and institutions (Khoo, 2022).

Malaysia has undergone a tumultuous yet dynamic trajectory of political development throughout recent decades. Over six decades under the rule of the Barisan Nasional (BN)¹ coalition, Malaysia witnessed a notable expansion of

¹ The coalition of Barisan Nasional or National Front was an extension of the Alliance by incorporating other political parties into the ruling coalition. The Alliance formed before Independence originally consisted of three ethnic parties, namely the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). The expansion project was led by then Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak in the aftermath of the racial riots of 1969. The enlarged coalition had effectively reduced the political influences of MCA and MIC and enhanced the domineering role of UMNO over the government.

executive powers at the expense of judicial independence and the legislature, accompanied by a gradual constriction of the civic space. The leadership of former Prime Minister Najib Razak, who is presently incarcerated on corruption charges, witnessed the BN government's failure to secure a majority in the 14th General Elections (GE14) held in 2018. The GE14 is widely recognised as a watershed moment in Malaysia's democratic history and electoral politics, marking the conclusion of BN's prolonged governance. The election's outcome was hailed as transformative, signifying the demise of a long-standing single-party regime and the emergence of a new government led by Pakatan Harapan (PH), which championed a reform agenda for the nation (Hutchinson and Lee, 2019).

With the advent of a "new" regime, civil society actors expressed a sense of optimism, expecting genuine efforts by the incoming government to initiate comprehensive reforms of existing institutions and socioeconomic policies. Additionally, there was an anticipation for a replacement of old political figures with fresh faces who had committed to constructing a "New Malaysia" (Loh and Netto, 2018). However, this hopeful atmosphere surrounding reforms quickly dissipated in February 2020, as the country witnessed the downfall of the PH government. Since 2018, Malaysians have witnessed an unprecedented turnover of four prime ministers: Mahathir Mohamad, Muhyiddin Yasin, Ismail Sabri, and the current prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim. This rapid succession of leadership changes has left the public disillusioned with regard to the prospect of meaningful reform (Loh and Netto, 2018).

The election of Malaysia's longstanding opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim, as the country's 10th prime minister has sparked waves of reform and is also perceived as a significant victory for democracy. The 15th General Election (GE15), which occurred on November 19, 2022, resulted in an unprecedented scenario of a hung Parliament. In order to form a government, Anwar had to forge unconventional political alliances, notably teaming up with the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), a party that has dominated Malaysian politics since the country's independence. Anwar's ascension to the role of prime minister carries profound emotional significance, particularly for his steadfast supporters who patiently awaited his return to the government for over two decades following his ousting in 1998. During this period, Anwar

predominantly operated as an opposition figure, except for a brief tenure in government from 2018 to 2020 before reclaiming his position in 2022 and assuming the role of prime minister.

Anwar Ibrahim was officially sworn in as prime minister on November 24, 2022, following a series of twists and turns that culminated in the establishment of a unity government comprising the previous ruling coalition BN, Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS), Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS), Parti Warisan, and the PH coalition. Contrary to the reform-oriented reputation associated with Anwar's coalition, UMNO—a historically dominant, primarily Malay party—has been implicated in various scandals, most notably the extensive 1 Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) corruption scandal that led to the imprisonment of former UMNO leader and prime minister Najib Razak.

The Dynamics of Changing Political Coalitions

Political analysts and commentators closely monitoring the trajectory of Malaysian politics are divided into their interpretations concerning several pertinent issues, including political fragmentation and voting behaviour. Within this discourse, certain voices contend that political parties in Malaysia persist in aligning themselves along ethnic or religious lines, thereby representing the distinct interests and concerns of particular communities. Consequently, this exacerbates the phenomenon of political fragmentation within the nation. Conversely, an alternative view posits that notwithstanding the political transformation witnessed in 2018, during which Malaysia experienced a change in administration, there has been limited institutional and structural change within the political system. Nonetheless, there exist optimists who maintain faith in the broader process of democratisation in Malaysia and choose to extend a measure of leniency towards the administration led by Anwar Ibrahim.

The political landscape in Malaysia has been marked by frequent realignments of political alliances and coalitions. Parties and politicians often form new alliances or switch allegiances based on considerations of political expediency, resulting in a fluid and fragmented political environment. Notably, for over six decades following Malaysia's independence in 1957, the country

experienced a consistent continuity of government until 2018. However, from 2018 to 2022, Malaysia underwent a series of leadership changes, with four different prime ministers—Mahathir Mohamad, Muhyiddin Yassin, Ismail Sabri, and Anwar Ibrahim—assuming office during this period. One of the primary factors contributing to these shifts can be attributed to the collapse of coalition governments triggered by the formation of new coalitions and the occurrence of political defections, commonly referred to as “political frogs,” whereby politicians switch their party affiliations. In February 2020, the nation witnessed a significant event known as the “Sheraton Move,” which resulted in the downfall of the ruling PH coalition government and the subsequent resignation of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad after holding office for 22 months.

Within the realm of Malaysian politics, the majority of political observers tend to focus their analysis on the dynamics of coalition politics and the prominent role played by political elites, primarily hailing from established parties such as the UMNO, Malaysian United Indigenous Party (Bersatu), and People’s Justice Party (PKR). Interestingly, it is noteworthy that most of these seasoned politicians trace their origins back to the same root, namely UMNO, which traditionally espouses right-wing conservative Malay politics.

The current composition of the unity government encompasses coalitions and parties that previously found themselves on opposing ends of the political spectrum, as witnessed in the intense rivalry between PH and BN during the GE15. Scepticism has arisen among some political observers regarding the viability and longevity of the unity government. In many respects, Anwar finds himself in a precarious position as the prime minister, given that his deputy prime minister, Zahid Hamidi, faces over 40 charges related to corruption. This situation poses a challenge to the anti-corruption agenda, which was one of the key reform priorities under the previous PH administration.

The Nexus Between Mass Mobilisation and Democratisation

Beyond the realm of coalition politics, the electoral process in Malaysia encompasses a prominent characteristic: the significant role of mass mobilisation, which has played a pivotal role in the country's journey towards democratisation. The significance of mass mobilisation in Malaysia's electoral process underscores the power of citizen engagement and the crucial role of political participation in shaping democratic systems. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that the significance of mass mobilisation is not devoid of challenges and complexities.

The field of political science has long engaged in a debate concerning the implications of mass mobilisation during the process of democratisation, with much focus placed on its impact on elite support for democracy. In the Malaysian context, since the emergence of the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Bersih), the landscape of electoral politics has been characterised by perpetual dynamism. Notably, the connection between protests and electoral outcomes in Malaysia's general elections has been evidenced. Since its inaugural street protest in 2007, the mass mobilisation spearheaded by Bersih has served as a significant catalyst for political change. In contributing to the existing scholarly discourse on the attitudinal consequences of mobilisation, this article posits that the mass mobilisation led by Bersih has played a crucial role in shaping popular perceptions of democracy in Malaysia since its inception in 2005.

These mass mobilisations have played a pivotal role in mobilising support for political change and have contributed to the emergence of a more competitive political landscape. The impact of the Bersih movement in fostering a sense of rights consciousness can be observed through its series of five mass protests conducted in 2007, 2011, 2012, 2015, and 2016, which coincided with Malaysia's general elections held in 2008, 2013, 2018, and 2022. Throughout these years, mass mobilisation continued to exert a significant influence during the electoral process.

Political parties and civil society actors organised large-scale rallies, roadshows, and campaign events to mobilise voters, raise awareness about pertinent issues, and garner support for their respective causes. These mobilisation endeavours effectively energised the electorate, fostered increased political engagement, and encouraged citizens to exercise their democratic rights through voting. An examination of the Bersih movement's outcomes, whether in the short or long term, must take into account the transformation of the cultural domain it has influenced. This includes changes in public values and ideas and the formation of new cultural practices and collective identity (Earl, 2004). Such cultural transformations are integral to understanding the broader impact of mass mobilisation on the democratic fabric of Malaysian society.

Several significant features of Malaysia's electoral politics merit discussion in this context. The question of identity politics remains a subject of debate, particularly with regard to the voting patterns of Malays and the implications of the Undi18 policy, which enabled six million new voters to register for the GE15. Before the GE15, various political observers and politicians believed that these new voters, particularly the youth, might lean towards progressive reforms championed by Anwar's PH coalition, which encompasses parties representing diverse racial backgrounds. However, the election results of GE15 reveal that voters have shown considerable support for right-wing Malay-dominated political parties, such as the PN coalition led by Bersatu and the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). This outcome serves as a concerning signal, particularly for pro-democracy groups aspiring for Malaysia to transcend the dominance of identity politics that has pervaded the political landscape.

The formation of a unity government by Anwar's PH and the dominant political party, UMNO, within the BN coalition has evoked a mixed response from the electorate. Both parties have entered into a Memorandum of Understanding to uphold political stability in the country. This development also highlights the importance of considering the divergent reactions of civil society actors. While some view Anwar's compromises as necessary to avert alternative scenarios, others adopt a more critical stance, urging him to follow through on the reform agenda he has championed for decades. For instance, Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM), a prominent local human rights non-governmental organisation (NGO), has expressed concerns regarding the government's

commitment to amending draconian and outdated laws, noting the slow progress in implementing policies that safeguard human rights (Hariz, 2023).

Although a unity government can contribute to stability by mitigating political polarisation and fostering cooperation among different factions, proving particularly valuable during crises. However, the process of power-sharing and political compromises on certain policy positions come at a cost, namely, public perception and trust.



In a previous study on the Bersih movement (Khoo, 2020), I argue that the emergence and persistence of Bersih, as well as the political participation of Malaysians, are primarily driven by a combination of accumulated grievances against the dominant BN coalition and political opportunities. Civil society actors have been able to mobilise around these issues, exerting pressure on the authorities for reform. This argument adopts a bottom-up approach to understanding the drivers of Bersih while acknowledging that civic activism is also influenced by institutional structures and other contextual factors.

The Malaysian case highlights the involvement of political elites and civil society actors in the democratic process, and their actions shape the extent and forms of individual political participation. As the debate surrounding the survival of a unity government under Anwar Ibrahim alongside its long-time rival, UMNO, continues, the role of mass mobilisation and contentious politics in facilitating democratisation becomes increasingly significant. Democratisation occurs organically as more individuals engage in the political realm (Dahl, 1971). While mass mobilisation plays a crucial role in driving democratisation in Malaysia, it is also subject to change as democratisation alters the mobilisation context (Cho, 2000).

It is noteworthy to recognise that the relationship between mass mobilisation and electoral politics is complex and multifaceted. Mass mobilisation can significantly impact electoral outcomes, but electoral politics also shape the opportunities and constraints of mobilised groups. The interaction between these dynamics is influenced by factors such as the political system, the nature of the

issues at stake, the strategies employed by mobilised groups, and the response of political elites.

The challenge for Malaysia's electoral politics lies in navigating a path of continued political change to avoid democratic backsliding, as witnessed in some Southeast Asian countries. Understanding the interplay between mass mobilisation and electoral politics in Malaysia necessitates considering the specific political context, the issues at stake, the strategies of mobilised groups, and the response of political elites. This complex relationship is influenced by factors such as the political system, government policies, public sentiment, and the organisational capacity of mobilised groups.

With the six state elections concluded on 12 August, all eyes are on how Anwar's PH-BN coalition will sustain itself. The result shows the status quo of six states, with three currently held by Anwar's PH-BN coalition (Penang, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan) and three held by the PN opposition coalition (Kelantan, Terengganu and Kedah). The election results provide insights into the political inclinations of voters, particularly in the peninsula. At the same time, these elections also expose Anwar's greatest challenge, especially in winning the Malay-Muslim votes. Consequently, Anwar faces the formidable task of reconciling the demands of diverse coalitions and governing parties with the aspirations of the electorate.

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Elections in Timor-Leste, 2022-2023

Rui Graça Feijó

Elections are powerful tools to legitimize political power. If they are regular, frequent, free and fair, then they constitute a solid rock upon which to root a democratic polity and perform a decisive role in settling political disputes in a peaceful manner. As from the restoration of its independence, the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste has established a solid tradition of democratic elections based on constitutional prescriptions, a reliable electoral administration, and a massive adherence of the citizenry to this form of ascertaining popular preferences and translate the oscillations of their main options.

However, the nature of individual elections depends on the way they are framed by an overarching government system. Legislative or presidential polls have different meanings in presidential, parliamentary or semi-presidential regimes. Single constituency polls differ from those which take place in countries where the territory is divided in a number of smaller units. Proportional Representation is associated with different outcomes from those prevailing in First-past-the-post voting systems. Limiting candidates to partisan members or allowing for the entry into the fray of individuals without partisan affiliation also generates specific dynamics.

For all these reasons, the present essay begins with a survey of the political and electoral system of Timor-Leste, underlying the differences between presidential and parliamentary polls in the context of a semi-presidential regime, and offering a general survey of their respective rules. Then, two sections

discuss the stakes and the outcomes of the presidential elections of 2022 and the legislative polls of 2023. The final section discusses the avenues opened by this electoral cycle, and offers some insight into the likely developments in the coming years.

The Political and Electoral System of Timor-Leste

Timor-Leste is the only semi-presidential Republic in Southeast Asia. Robert Elgie's definition—"Semi-presidentialism is where there is a directly elected president and a prime minister and cabinet that are collectively responsible to the legislature" (Elgie 2011: 19-20)—aptly describes the country's government system. As per the Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (CDRTL), both the President of the Republic (section 76) and the National Parliament (section 93) are elected "by universal, free, direct, equal, secret and personal suffrage" for 5-year mandates thus creating a diarchy of powers with independent (and eventually competing) legitimacies that Sartori considers the distinguishing feature of this government system: "The one characteristic that any semi-presidential system must have [...] is a dual authority structure, a dual-headed configuration." (1997: 122). No doubt that Timor-Leste fits this broad model. In CDRTL's terms, the government is responsible both before the president and the assembly (section 107), but in fact holds exclusive executive power. Presidential functions are directed at supervising the "regular functioning of democratic institutions" and may be regarded as a "moderating power" in the wake of Benjamin Constant¹.

Presidential and parliamentary elections, though, are rather different. Although both the president and the assembly are vested with similar, direct legitimacy, the role of presidents and governments are separate, and the terms under which polls are fought are considerably diverse. To start with, presidential elections are open to any "East Timorese original citizen" over 35 in possession of his full capacities, proposed by a minimum of 5 000 voters (CDRTL

¹ An expanded analysis of the distribution of powers among president and prime minister in Timor-Leste is provided in Feijó 2020.

section 75), thus allowing for “independent candidates” to stand, paying respect to the fact that the recent history of the country, including its fight for national independence, was not, strictly speaking, organized by formal political parties but had the concurrence of civil society in many forms.

In the wake of the first elections that returned the charismatic Resistance leader Xanana Gusmão to the job on a landslide (82.7% of the popular vote), in the so-called “friendly election” in which he defeated another national hero—Francisco Xavier do Amaral, the president of the ephemeral independent nation in 1975 who volunteered to fight “for the sake of a democratic poll” (Smith 2004)—a political convention has been established that regards the lack of partisan ties as an attribute of presidents who are supposed to behave above the party fray. In that election, Xanana refused to be associated with any particular party, accepting the endorsement of many organizations and personalities, and stressed he would not act as partisan agent. As John M. Carey (2000) has argued, decisions that are the object of fierce bargaining at the time of creation of a new regime—as well as the terms under which “founding elections” are fought—have long lasting and pervasive implications and tend to frame subsequent forms of political behaviour. These need not be enshrined in any legal document, but may be powerful tools in the political culture arsenal, and configure political conventions deemed highly legitimate.

Presidential elections are fought on a single nation-wide constituency (including voting rights for the East Timorese diaspora), and require an absolute majority of votes to proclaim a winner; should the first round (usually open to a vast array of candidates who successfully overcome the legal and bureaucratic hurdles) fail to return 50% +1 vote to one candidate, a runoff is organised 30 days later between the two best positioned ones. Before the current electoral cycle, this has happened in 2007 and 2012.

In sharp contrast, legislative elections for a single 65-seat chamber (Parlamento Nacional) are the reserved ground for legally registered political parties. The legislation regulating the formation and also—quite important—the survival of political parties is strictly upheld, meaning that any group wishing to compete in national elections must not only observe founding rules, but must also remain significantly active. The whole country—just like in the case of

presidential polls—makes up a constituency (therefore downplaying regional representation). Parties submit closed slates of candidates (65 permanent and several alternate ones), in which one in every three candidates must be of a different gender (up from one in four; law amended in 2011). Seats are allocated through the D'Hondt method (proportional representation with an inbuilt bias in favour of larger parties) to all those who score more than the 4% threshold (up from 3%; law amended 2011).

A brief word on the electoral administration². From the very first national polls, there are two agencies: the National Electoral Commission (Comissão Nacional de Eleições, CNE), notionally an independent body tasked with general supervision, disposing of a grandiose headquarters in Dili, and permanently staffed; and a government department—Technical Secretariat for Electoral Affairs (Secretariado Técnico para os Assuntos Eleitorais, STAE)—that runs the electoral organization on the ground. This dual structure, even though prone to some form of government dependence and/or interference, has discharged its functions rather successfully in most elections (if one judges by the reports of international observation missions).

In the first electoral cycles after independence, presidential elections were held at such a time that it allowed for the inauguration of the new president on Independence Day (20 May), and were soon followed by legislative ones (about three months later). This situation is often referred to as “honeymoon” or “coattails” elections, linking the fate of presidents with that of the parliamentary majority. Even though they may be perceived as rather independent, the likelihood that the political mood in the country expresses itself in converging fashion on both polls is high, giving presidents a theoretical advantage to influence the configuration of parliaments. Recently, though, a disturbance was introduced in the model: after the 2017 cycle was complete, and faced with unexpected difficulties to form a stable government in the extant parliamentary context, president Lu Olo dissolved a recently elected assembly, called early elections for June 2018, and introduced a wider gap between the two polls if terms run their normal time. “Coattails” effect has been blurred if not altogether

² For an extended revision of electoral administration, albeit referring to the last decade, see Feijó (2016a).

abolished. This situation can be reversed if and when a president dissolves the sitting parliament after his election and restores the original formula. In the meantime, both the president and the parliament's terms ran their normal periods, and thus elections were held in 2022 for the presidency and in 2023 for the legislative chamber.

The Presidential Election of 19 March and 19 April, 2022

In 2022, Timor-Leste held its fifth presidential election. The first three presidents (Xanana Gusmão, 2002-2005; José Ramos-Horta, 2007-2012; Taur Matan Ruak, 2012-2017) were all “independent” (i.e. non-partisan) figures who created and sustained a political convention regarding the ways in which the head of state discharges his functions. In 2017, Francisco Guterres “Lu Olo,” the chairman of FRETILIN (Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente, Revolutionary Front for an Independent Timor-Leste) (but not the party's actual leader, a role performed by its secretary-general, Mari Alkatiri) ran for the third time, and insisted on being his party's flag bearer. This time he managed to put together a pre-electoral, informal coalition and was supported by other parties—critically, by the parties sustaining the sitting “government of national inclusion,”³ including Xanana's CNRT (Congresso Nacional para a Reconstrução de Timor-Leste, National Congress for the Reconstruction of Timor-Leste) and the old leader individual endorsement. Lu Olo was returned on the first ballot with a comfortable 57% of the popular vote (three months later, his party would score just under 30%).

Lu Olo discharged a controversial mandate, deviating from the previous convention inasmuch as he was a leading figure of a major party (FRETILIN) and interfered directly with the parliamentary process of choosing and sustaining government (Feijó 2023a; 2023b). He tested the constitutional limits of presidential powers on several occasions—refusing to dismiss the (minority)

³ On the meaning of the “government of national inclusion” (the VI Constitutional Government headed by Rui Maria de Araújo), see Feijó (2016b).

VII Constitutional Government (led by Alkatiri) after it failed parliamentary investiture and keeping it as a caretaker cabinet for more than six months; refusing to offer the parliamentary majority coalition the chance to form a government; after dissolving the parliament for the first time in the country's history and calling fresh legislative elections (which were won by a coalition opposed to FRETILIN), the president was forced to accept a solution excluding his own party, but rejected a dozen ministers from the major coalition partner (Xanana's CNRT) forcing Prime Minister Taur Matan Ruak (TMR) to govern with a cabinet devoid of critical ministers and severely distorting the representation of its parliamentary basis. After a tug-of-war with Xanana, the VIII Constitutional Government was profoundly reshuffled: the president pressed TMR to ditch his pre-electoral alliance, offering him FRETILIN support (and entry into government) in lieu of CNRT. The revamped cabinet lasted until the end of the parliaments term.

Lu Olo's political behaviour was challenged at the Constitutional Court. However, the court's interpretation of the issue resulted in enhancing presidential powers. In fact, the court ruled that presidential decisions and actions can only be legally challenged in case an impeachment procedure—requiring a qualified, two-thirds majority in parliament (CRDTL section 79.3.)—is initiated. Otherwise, presidential actions are not susceptible to legal challenge (see Leach 2021).

In brief: for most of Lu Olo's term in office there was an unprecedented and clear identification between the president and the government, which the president had actively manoeuvred to impose, acting openly as a party agent. Disputes over the legality aside, the legitimacy of his mandate, and the transparency of his chosen methods have been questioned. They entailed a high degree of instability, and political animosity in Dili ran high. For some observers, the perils of “democratic backsliding” were emerging⁴.

Lu Olo ran for a second consecutive mandate (his fourth campaign). As usual in two-round elections, when electors tend to express an ideological or sentimental vote in the first instance and face a tougher, pragmatic choice in the

⁴ I dealt with these issues at length in Feijó (2023b).

second ballot, and therefore pre-electoral coalitions or agreements are not hard pressing, Lu Olo faced the competition from 15 other candidates, several of them from the government support base that saw no need for a unified march and preferred to test their popularity in view of subsequent bargains. Eleven of those ran as “independent”—including a leading figure also associated with FRETILIN (Lieutenant-General Lere Anan Timur who polled 7.8%). Four were women (amongst whom the prime-minister’s wife, who did very poorly: 0.65%). José Ramos-Horta, who had failed his re-election bid in 2012, stood as “independent” with Xanana’s CNRT support. Observers noted that the show had two major actors, the majority of candidates being relegated to subsidiary roles. The crux of the matter was then: how does the electorate judge the course of action initiated by Lu Olo in 2017, which he purported to maintain, and Ramos-Horta frontally challenged?

The first round was staged on 19 March, and as it was widely expected, returned Lu Olo (22.13%, well below his own score in the 2007 and 2012 first rounds) and Ramos-Horta (46.56%) for the runoff on 19 April. In the second round, Lu Olo attracted votes from his allies who failed to qualify, and polled 37.90%; Ramos-Horta cruised to a landslide (62.10%) based on the vote of electors dissatisfied with his opponent’s term in office. Ramos-Horta platform promised the return to the abandoned convention of “president of all the Timorese,” distancing himself from partisan agency. In tune with this stance, he resisted his main supporters’ pressure for the immediate dissolution of parliament and early elections (that would be justifiable in view of the poor results obtained by the government apologists) and kept the prime minister in office. Ultimately, president Ramos-Horta called parliamentary elections to be held roughly five years after the last ones on May 21, 2023. At the moment of announcing his decision, he made a powerful speech reflecting critically on what he regarded as excessive political polarization and urging his citizens to meditate seriously on the sectarian course that was taking hold of the country (Ramos-Horta 2023).

The Parliamentary Election of May 21, 2023

Parliamentary elections took place on May 21, 2023. Unlike the previous poll (2018) in which many parties formed pre-electoral coalitions both to beat the 4% threshold, in the case of smaller parties, or to anticipate post-electoral government formation bargaining given the experience of the previous poll's aftermath (only FRETILIN and PD [Partido Democrático, Democratic Party] went solo), in 2023 there was no single coalition, the Court of Appeals having rejected all three proposals being submitted. A total of 17 parties were finally accepted by the court, most without any previous experience. In the run up to the polls, the three major parties supporting the VIII Constitutional Government⁵, rooted in young sectors of the population with significant ties to “martial arts groups” (MAGs), announced they would endeavour to pursue the political line of the outgoing cabinet and share government responsibilities. Xanana's CNRT campaigned aggressively for an absolute majority and admitted it might look for external support in case its score was not sufficient, but ruled out any agreement with the outgoing cabinet's political bases.

Timor-Leste has a small political elite dominated by the presence of *katuas*, or elders—a rather common feature in many countries. However, a distinctive feature of this group of extremely influential individuals is that they were prominent political actors back in 1974-1975—almost half a century ago—when Portugal initiated the failed decolonisation of the territory which ended up at the time of the Indonesian invasion (December 7, 1975), then followed by 24 dramatic years of neo-colonial and rather brutal rule. These fifty-odd years saw those figures play different roles, converge as often as diverge, support and fight each other, generate a ballast of personal animosity. It is not surprising that, as they remain powerful actors, political platforms are somehow overshadowed by their personal competition and individual ambitions. Generally, observers find it difficult to ascertain the main ideological orientation or pragmatic issues in dispute, and prefer to stress conjunctural proposals and

⁵ These parties comprise FRETILIN, PLP (Partido da Libertação do Povo, People's Liberation Party), led by Taur Matan Ruak, and KHUNTO (Kmanek Haburas União Nacional Timor Oan, Enrich the National Unity of the Sons of Timor).

personality clashes. The major stakes of this election were the survival of the incumbent government and its patronage network, seriously weakened in last presidential poll.

This election mobilized a vast number of East Timorese. Even though the electoral register is poorly updated and tends to include more individuals than actual citizens with voting capacity (due the slow elimination of deceased electors and difficulties in tracking migrants who are sometimes doubly registered), a feature that artificially enhances abstention, official figures suggest a participation rate around 80%. In any case, the actual number of citizens casting a vote was the highest ever—a clear indication that the polls were regarded as highly relevant to the population ways of life.

Xanana's CNRT was the clear winner. Falling just short of an absolute majority (41.5% of the popular vote and 31 seats, close to its goal of 33), CNRT won in 10 of the country's 13 districts, including the heavily populated capital district (Dili), where it polled 52%—a clear indication of its traction among the most dynamic sectors of Timor-Leste. A party with parliamentary representation (PD), rooted in the youth and student's movements of the Indonesian times, strong among the *Gerasaun Foun* (New Generation), standing outside the government base even though it had been supportive of the mid-term reshuffle, and later endorsed Ramos-Horta in the 2022 runoff, marginally increased its performance to finish in third place (6 seats/9.3% from 5 seats /8.1%).

Conversely, FRETILIN plummeted to its lowest ever score: 25.75% (previously 34%) and only 19 seats (from 23). It managed to retain the first spot in its traditional eastern districts' stronghold, but in the Special Administrative Region of Oecusse that has been governed by its cadres for a long while, it lost to CNRT. In the capital district, its share of the vote (22.5%) was less than half that of CNRT. Prime minister's PLP's seats were cut in half (4 from 8), and just scored 5.8% of the popular vote, coming last of those that surpassed the threshold. The third party in his government support base, KHUNTO, managed to stick to the same number of seats it had previously (5 from 7.5% of the vote).

From the 17 competing parties, only these five secured seats in parliament. A newcomer, PVT (Partido os Verdes de Timor, Green Party of Timor)—another organization closely linked with the youth and MAGs—, registered in

2022, came close to overtaking the 4% threshold (it scored 3.6%), as did another party in the former government support base, PUDD (Partido Unido para o Desenvolvimento e a Democracia, United Party for Development and Democracy), with 3.2%. All others scored less than 1%. Taken as group, these 12 parties received just below 10%, meaning the elected parliament actually represents more than 90% of electors. In view of these results, President Ramos-Horta has made it clear he will appoint a CNRT designated prime minister as soon as the new parliament convenes for the first time. The outgoing government has tried to push the inauguration of the new assembly to September, arguing the extant parliamentarians ought to be given the right to “terminate the legislative session”—a delaying tactics that did not meet the approval of the judicial authorities that stressed the parliament had been dissolved for the purpose of the May elections, and the new elected members ought to be sworn in according to the law. This attempt delayed by several weeks the normal course of events.

Most likely, the new prime minister would be Xanana Gusmão himself (for what would be his third term as head of government). Two theoretical options were open: to form a minority cabinet, or to entertain a cooperation agreement with PD. Both parties have issued public statements indicating they were ready to share government responsibilities, and a formal coalition government would be formed with majority support in the National Parliament

Where to from Here?

One might expect constitutional rules to prevail in the coming years as democracy in Timor-Leste moves towards consolidation, and regular, free and free elections take place at their opportune moment. That would mean having new presidential elections in 2027 and parliamentary ones in 2028.

The CRDTL enshrines a political principle: that of the necessary renewal of political personnel as it states in section 64: “No one shall hold any political office for life, or for indefinite periods of time.” The pragmatic consequences of the principle, though, are not clear. Contrary to some speculation based on CRDTL’s unclear formulation regarding the renewal of presidential mandates

(CRDTL section 75.3 reads: “The President of the Republic’s term in office may be renewed only once),” by virtue of which some have sustained that Ramos-Horta would not be eligible to stand again, the constitutional expert Pedro Bacelar de Vasconcelos—himself well acquainted with the Timorese fundamental law—sustains that a president exercising his second term in office after someone else’s mandate (that is, in a non-consecutive manner) is eligible for a third one (Vasconcelos 2011: 265). Assuming that the Constitutional Court of Timor-Leste upholds this position, then there is no case to suggest any of the current day politicians will be barred from running again. However, it is most unlikely that *Gerasaun Tuan* (generation of 1974-1975) will seek new mandates.

If for no other reason, the “laws of life” will apply to a key group of individuals now in their mid- to late seventies. Generational turnover is inevitable, regardless of the timing for its manifestation. In terms of official rhetoric, this principle is embraced across the political spectrum; however, actual performance often denies stated goals. Back in 2015, Xanana took a critical step in that direction when he handed over his premiership to an illustrious member of the following generation—Rui Maria de Araújo. The broad approval elicited by the new premier, and the structural solution he embodied, rose hopes it would not be reversed. But hopes proved to be short-lived, as FRETILIN went back on its word and reinstated a premier from the older generation in 2017. As it turned out, Rui de Araujo went on to emerge as an alternative voice within his party to the old guard, trying to challenge it in their congress (but was prevented from standing for a vote on leadership), and has recently called for a reconsideration of his party’s options in face of the “shameful defeat” of last elections, positioning himself as a candidate for a different style of leadership. The fact that the most prominent face of the “renovation” proposed by the current FRETILIN leadership for the last elections was Lieutenant-General Lere Anan Timur (born 1952) suggests there is a long way before accepting a decisive turnover

Xanana will remain at the forefront of politics for some time. However, he is supposed to feel the weight of his age and to keep truthful to his previous desire to pave the way for the next generation. When he does so, a major issue will surface. The rooting of democracy in Timor-Leste has been made through

an original process that combines the development of liberal-democratic practices (namely, free and fair regular elections) with respect for other forms of political legitimation, mainly with charismatic authority (in the precise Weberian sense). As Weber explained over a century ago (1922), charisma may have a critical impact on politics, and it is an attribute of precise individuals who normally are unable to pass it on to others—a feature that renders charismatic authority difficult to articulate with legal-rational legitimacy. However, Xanana has behaved since independence in a manner that reveals his option to develop democratic institutions. Failure to realise the virtues (or even the mere existence) of this association, and the double nature of current political system’s popular legitimacy—as was arguably the case with Lu Olo’s term in office, blatantly ostracizing the old leader—resulted in a crisis that the recent polls put in evidence. As a brilliant student I had in Dili once put to me: “we may do things without *Maun Boot* (Big or Older Brother); but we can hardly achieve anything against Xanana.” His wisdom ought to be heard.

Moving beyond the critical aspect of the fate of personalities, two aspects of national politics deserve special mention. For one, in the quarter century mediating between the self-determination referendum of August 30, 1999 and the most recent elections, the number of registered electors rose from 451,968 to 890,145—almost doubled. The vast majority of new voters are youngsters, some of whom born after independence. A significant number of East Timorese youths are prone to participate in “martial arts groups” activities, which go well beyond the alleged sporting side of things, as James Scambary (2019) has shown. As recently as early 2023, President Ramos-Horta referred in highly critical terms to their activities and their responsibilities in confronting and undermining established, democratic authority, going as far as to suggest he would not be willing to appoint ministers associated with MAGs. Why did he feel compelled to go this far? Because MAGs have close links to at least two registered political parties—KHUNTO, which has been in parliament since 2017, and was part of the VIII Constitutional Government; and PVT, registered in 2022—which have polled almost 10% of the popular vote. For most observers, the radical rejection of established authorities embodied by MAGs is a consequence of the youth’s incapacity to find adequate ways to engage in a prosperous way of life and their frustration at the precarious economic and

social status they enjoy. Policies are urgently required that address the roots of youth discomfort, lest it degenerate in radical populist movements challenging the rule of law.

The second critical issue is economic diversification in a country highly dependent on oil revenues. Statistically speaking, the petroleum sector accounts for approximately 70% of the Timor-Leste GDP, more than 90% of the total exports, as well as more than 80% of the state's annual revenue (Neves 2022). Oil revenues have been channeled to the Petroleum Fund (PF), from which an Estimated Sustained Income (ESI) may be withdrawn every year, guaranteeing its long-term sustainability. In fact, ESI has systematically been overstepped, and more funds diverted to the annual state budget given the lack of alternative economic and financial sources. Both a prudent management of the PF that dispels fears of a “doomsday” (the drying out of PF deposits within a few years unless new fossil fuel fields come in exploration, as has been exposed by NGOs like Lao Hamutuk), and sound investments in diversifying the economy—another example of rhetoric convergence and similar action abstention - are urgently called for.

In this context, one may expect Xanana's new administration to pursue a more “nationalist” approach—in line with what he did in past occasions. For instance, the decision on whether the processing of new oil and gas output from the Greater Sunrise in Darwin or else in a new venue in Timor-Leste's south coast, where a major ambitious infrastructure and industrial plan—the *Tasi Mane* Project (Male Sea Project)—has been devised and progresses with hiccups, cannot wait much longer. Xanana has been a champion of the project, defending it with an aggressive “national independence” rhetoric. However, it does raise some questions as to its economic profitability, and poses diplomatic considerations in the country's relations with its neighbour Australia (with whom the output is to be shared according to an established proportion which that is contingent on the final solution), extending further to the Asia-Pacific security context in view of a possible partnership with the People's Republic of China. A more energetic stance on this project is expected soon.

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Thailand's 2023 General Election: Process, Key Issues, and Future Trajectories

Siripan Nogsuan Sawasdee

On May 14, 2023, Thailand held an election within the framework of a hybrid regime and “competitive authoritarianism” (Levitsky and Way 2010; Schedler, 2013; Diamond, 2002). The 2016 constitution was crafted with the intention of establishing appointed senators as a counter-majoritarian mechanism. In order to form a government, a minimum of 376 legislative votes out of 750 in the two chambers is required. Among these, 250 senators appointed by the military junta also play a part in the selection of the prime minister along with members of the House of Representatives (MPs). Approximately 52 million Thai voters directly elected 500 MPs for a four-year term using the parallel voting system. The first-past-the post method was employed to elect 400 members to represent each constituency. The remaining 100 members were chosen through proportional representation from closed nationwide party lists ranked by political parties. In total, 4,781 candidates ran for constituency MPs, and 1,898 candidates were listed on party ballots from 70 different political parties. Prior to election day, 63 candidates were nominated for the prime minister (*Bangkok Post* 2023). To be eligible for nominating a prime minister, a party needed to secure at least 5% of the House members or 25 seats. Each party had the option to propose up to three candidates.

The Process at a Glance

The electoral process raised some concerns, including the use of state resources, electoral manipulations, gerrymandering, and an uneven playing field favouring ruling parties. These issues were generally less severe than in the 2019 election (Sawasdee 2020). For example, the ballot design assigned different numbers for the party-list ballot and the ballot for constituency candidates, creating confusion among voters. The constituency ballot did not include candidates' names or party affiliations, aiming to reduce the advantage of parties with popular banners and encouraging candidates to focus on personal votes.¹ Additionally, the Election Commission of Thailand implemented a 10% limit on the variation among constituencies to avoid malapportionment, resulting in the redrawing of constituency boundaries that might benefit certain candidates over others.

The electoral campaign period lasted 44 days and was marked by a strong wave of enthusiasm. Political parties employed a range of strategies, such as rallies, door-to-door canvassing, patronage, distributing materials, and digital media to engage voters. Broadcasting debates and the widespread use of social media platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter played a pivotal role in evaluating prime minister and House candidates, shaping public discourse, and capturing voters' attention. Thailand's 2023 general election set a record for voter turnout in the country's history, with 75.71% of eligible voters participating.²

Key Electoral Issues and Party Positions

Classifying Thai political parties as strictly left-wing or right-wing can be challenging, as their primary aim often revolves around securing cabinet positions rather than embodying strong ideological differences. Furthermore,

¹ Allen Hicken, "What's in a Number? The Implications of Thailand's Ballot Design," *Thai Data Points*, Available from: <https://www.thaidatapoints.com/post/what-s-in-a-number-the-implications-of-thailand-s-ballot-design> [accessed May 12, 2023].

² Office of the Election Commission of Thailand, *The 2023 Election Results, an official report by the Election Commission of Thailand*, Official Report available from: <https://ectreport66.ect.go.th/overview>.

Thailand's historical political centre has leaned right, largely due to the absence of a prominent left-wing party. However, when comparing Thai political parties (though not necessarily to parties in other countries), certain distinctions become evident based on campaign policies and positions:

Move Forward Party (MFP): Emerged as the successor to the dissolved Future Forward Party, due to a Constitutional Court order, has a distinct emphasis on tackling Thailand's structural challenges through three core areas: demilitarization, de-monopolization, and decentralization. They believe these changes can bring about significant transformation, as expressed in their slogan, "Choose MFP, and Thailand won't be the same." The MFP exhibits elements of left-wing populism³, combining left-wing politics with populist rhetoric. The party takes a progressive stance on issues like anti-establishment sentiments, military reform, the abolition of conglomerate monopolies, and the amendment of Section 112 (Lèse-majesté legislation that bans criticism of the monarchy), which is seen as a sensitive subject. Its character might alternatively be described as techno-populism (Bickerton and Accetti 2021) as the party actively engages with voters through social media, involving academic leaders and experts.

Pheu Thai Party (PT): As the third incarnation of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's parties, the PT has consistently secured the most seats in five successive general election since 2001. The party's key policy proposals include providing a 10 000 THB (approximately 285 US \$) digital wallet for every individual aged 16 and over and raising the minimum wage to 600 THB (17 US \$) by 2027. The PT has a more centrist stance, emphasising previous economic achievement rather than striving for structural and institutional reforms.

Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP): Characterized as a big-tent party comprising veteran politicians from various factions, including many former members of the PT, and teams of technocrats. The PPRP's main campaign promise centres on increasing entitlements for state welfare cardholders. The

³ Two examples of the left-wing populism are Corbynism in the United Kingdom and Podemos in Spain (see Piquer and Jäger 2020).

party positions itself as a party of reconciliation without strong adherence to any specific ideology. It has nominated General Prawit Wongsuwan, the eldest among the “Three ‘Por’ Brothers” (a group of three former army chiefs) as its premier candidate, in place of General Prayuth Chan-o-cha.

Democrat Party (DP): Being the oldest functioning political party in Thailand, the DP holds a conservative and pro-market stance. However, the party’s popularity has faded, and it has experienced a significant exodus of members. This is owing to the belief that its anti-Thaksin stance proved ineffective, and its previous image as a defender of democracy has been tainted by its cosy relationship with the military.

Bhumjaithai Party (BJT): Known for attracting more than 40 defectors from other parties, is also recognized for its advocacy to legalize marijuana. The BJT takes a conservative populist stance with the motto “said and done.”

United Thai Nation Party (UTN): Established approximately one year prior to the election to endorse General Prayuth Chan-o-cha, the UTN primarily appeals to those who see him as the guardian of national identity and traditional institutions. The party leans much farther right than most traditional parties in Thailand. It places a strong emphasis on conventional morality and upholding national and cultural values.

Leading up to the 2023 election, most parties struggle to effectively communicate with voters and have not made significant efforts in party building. Instead, they rely on old-school practices to garner votes, including providing patronage, co-opting incumbent candidates, and leveraging local political networks. These techniques often require substantial financial resources and become less effective over time.

Electoral Results: A Tornado of Changes

In the overall picture, a total of 18 political parties were elected to the House of Representatives, among them were seven single seated parties, as demonstrated in Table 1. The MFP won more than 14 million votes (38.4%) nationwide, winning party list votes across 43 provinces, including Bangkok, vicinity, and

Table 1: Electoral Results, 14 May 2023

Political Parties	Constituency			Party list			Total	
	Seats	Votes	%	Seats	Votes	%	Seats	%
Move Forward	112	9,665,433	25.989	39	14,438,851	38.480	151	30.20
Pheu Thai	112	9,340,082	25.114	29	10,962,522	29.216	141	28.20
Bhumjaithai	68	5,133,441	13.803	3	1,138,202	3.033	71	14.20
Palang Pracharath	39	4,186,441	11.257	1	537,625	1.433	40	8.00
United Thai	23	3,607,575	9.700	13	4,766,408	12.703	36	7.20
Democrat	22	2,278,857	6.128	3	925,349	2.466	25	5.00
Chartthaipattana	9	585,205	1.574	1	192,497	0.513	10	2.00
Prachachat	7	334,051	0.898	2	602,645	1.606	9	1.80
Thai Sang Thai	5	872,893	2.347	1	340,178	0.907	6	1.20
Pue Thai Rumphlang	2	94,345	0.254	0	67,692	0.180	2	0.40
Chartpattanakla	1	297,946	0.801	1	212,676	0.567	2	0.40
Thai Liberal	0	277,007	0.745	1	351,376	0.936	1	0.20
New Democracy	0	13,583	0.037	1	273,428	0.729	1	0.20
New	0	1,365	0.004	1	249,731	0.666	1	0.20
The Party of Thai Counties	0	1,202	0.003	1	201,411	0.537	1	0.20
Fair	0	9,653	0.026	1	184,817	0.493	1	0.20
Plung Sungkom Mai	0	20,353	0.055	1	177,379	0.473	1	0.20
Thai Teachers for People	0	4,464	0.012	1	175,182	0.467	1	0.20
Valid Votes	400	37,190,071		100	37,522,746		500	
Spoiled Ballots		1,457,899			1,509,836			
Voter Turnout		39,514,973			39,514,964			
Eligible Voters		52,195,920			52,195,920			

Source: Author's calculation based on the data provided by the Election Commission of Thailand Office of the Election Commission of Thailand, 2023, The 2023 Election Results, an official report by the Election Commission of Thailand, <https://ectreport66.ect.go.th/overview>.

the eastern region. Additionally, it obtained the second highest party list votes in the remaining 33 provinces. The electoral results reflected a thirst for change, especially in urbanized areas across country, where conventional clientelistic and dynastic politics (Nishizaki 2023; Meechan 2023) were being challenged by high mobility and evolving media consumption habits.

The MFP, known for its anti-establishment stance and alignment with the 2020-2021 Youth Movements, received robust support from the younger demographic (Lertchoosakul 2023; Jatusripitak 2023). Notably, six of the MFP's elected Members of Parliament were activists during these movements. Young voters, including more than three million first-time electors, high school and university students and the middle to upper-income segments of the electorate favoured the MFP over other parties. According to my research on the Youth's perspective during 2020-2021, over 75% of young people prioritize democratic values over conservative and traditional principles (Sawasdee 2022).

The MFP's popularity extended beyond the younger generation, resonating across different age groups and spanning both urban and rural areas. Despite spending less than other parties, the MFP's constituency candidates won 112 seats, negating the popular narrative that money is the primary determinant of electoral success. The MFP's extensive use of social media platforms, especially TikTok, have weakened provincial bosses, family politics, and conventional vote canvassing based on patronage.

The PT has experienced a decline in its electoral dominance, slipping to the second place in the House of Representatives with nearly 11 million votes (29.2%) nationwide. While the party was successful in winning the party list votes in 26 provinces and securing seats in its stronghold region of Northeast Thailand, it failed to win any seats in the South and managed just one seat in Bangkok. Several factors contributed to the PT's unexpected loss: 1) The confusion surrounding its prime ministerial candidates. The party fielded three candidates, including Thaksin Shinawatra's daughter Paetongtarn Shinawatra and real estate billionaire Srettha Thavisin. However, the party never stated clearly which candidate would be its top choice for prime minister, and none of them participated in the pivotal prime ministerial debates; 2) the party's ambivalence about forming a coalition with the military-aligned parties; 3) the

disconnection with young voters, who were seeking a more transformative political agenda rather than mere economic policies. These challenges point to the need for the party to reevaluate its goals, messaging, and internal dynamics in order to regain its political standing in the future.

The BJT is the third-largest party, obtaining seats mostly in its heartland of the northeast. Although it also won seats in the South, Central, and North regions, it did not collect the most popular votes in any province under the party list system, receiving just over 1 million votes (3.0%). This underscored the BJT's primary strategy of gaining votes through political brokers and from political network support. The party lacked the potential to establish itself as a national party.

The DP has experienced a significant decay in popularity, with its proportional representation votes plummeting from 12 million (40.4%) in 2007 to 925 245 (2.4%). It won 25 seats in the lower house, and even its stronghold in the southern region faced challenges from the MFP.

The PPRP, once the core coalition party that obtained 116 seats in 2019, has now captured 40 seats and only 537 625 votes (1.4%) from the party list system. The United Thai Nation Party (UTN), a newly created party supporting Prime Minister General Prayuth, received 4.7 million votes (12.7%) from the party list ballot, resulting in a total of 36 seats in the lower house. Together, the two military-backed parties won 76 seats, with their combined vote share dropping from 23.7% in 2019 to 14% in 2023. The internal conflicts among conservative elites that led to the breakup of the PPRP and the UTN highlighted the flaws and limitations of the competitive authoritarian model in maintaining power through the electoral arena. The coalition government was held responsible for economic difficulties and a poor response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is worth noting that the disparity in constituency votes between the MFP (9.6 million), the PT (9.3 million), the BJT (5.1 million), and the PPRP (4.1 million) was less pronounced compared to the difference in party list votes. This implies that political brokerage and clientelistic patterns continue to influence voters at the constituency level in many parts of Thailand, while anti-military sentiments, a desire for change, and programmatic issues play a more

prominent role in shaping voters' decisions at the national level. This underlines Thailand's changing political landscape and the complexity of election campaigns in a country where urbanisation and mobilisation spread into rural areas and the youth versus conservative cleavage is more visible, especially among the MFP supporters.

The Long Road to a Government Formation

Thailand's political landscape post-election was both challenging and intricate. The MFP's leader, Pita Limjaroenrat, formed an eight-party coalition MOU, commanding 312 seats in the 500-seat lower house. However, to become prime minister, Pita needed support from the appointed senators. Many of these senators, who had previously voted for the military-backed government in the 2019 election, refused to vote for Pita due to their opposition to the MFP's progressive stance.

After more than three months of political deadlock, the second-placed PT successfully formed a government, led by Srettha Thavisin, with the support of 11 parties, some of which were backed by its longtime rival, the military. This unusual alliance was a result of a transitional provision in the constitution, which made it highly improbable for election winners not favoured by the traditional establishment to assume power. However, the Senate's authority in selecting the prime minister, as stated in the transitional clause, will cease in May 2024.

The coalition created by the PT and parties affiliated with the previous junta-backed government, along with the return of former Prime Minister Thaksin after 17 years in exile with a royal pardon, represented an audacious attempt to bridge a two-decade political conflicts between the PT and its adversaries in the military and established political circles. The PT made crucial commitments, such as not altering the lèse-majesté law and pledging to defend the monarchy.

However, the alliance with junta-linked parties has infuriated many Thais who believe their votes are being neglected. Consequently, the PT may face

animosity from the MFP's supporters who feel deceived by what they perceive as a collusion with the elite's machinery, as well as some of its own voters who may see the PT's union with pro-junta parties as a deviation from the party's stance as a defender of electoral democracy. This could culminate in the PT losing ground in the electoral arena to the surging MFP. Ironically, for a party like the PT, which has built its reputation on campaign promises and its past accomplishments in improving the economy, the inability to form a government after being out of office for more than nine years could be more damaging than partnering with its old enemy.

The Future Trajectories

The election outcomes in Thailand reflect a growing weariness among the public with prolonged military-dominated governance and a strong desire for a fresh direction. The perception that a pro-military ruling coalition has held power for an extended period and has demonstrated inefficiency in governance has played a significant role in their electoral setback. The MFP, with its progressive agenda, has resonated with voters disenchanted with the leadership of military figures like General Prayuth Chan-o-cha. However, the MFP's commitment to reform powerful institutions, including the monarchy and the military, have alarmed royalist conservatives.

The electoral landscape, traditionally influenced by provincial network politicians, local power brokers, and patronage-based vote canvassing, is being contested by the emergence of the MFP and the growing impact of social media platforms like TikTok, Facebook, and Twitter. The use of digital media has introduced a new sense of intimacy and is increasingly superseding traditional clientelism in influencing voting behaviour. This results in shifting voter expectations and inspirations.

The future trajectory of Thailand's political landscape is likely to evolve towards a multi-party system divided into three major political camps: the left-wing techno-populist MPF, the centrist populist PT, and various clientelistic parties. While both the MFP and PT are generally seen as pro-democracy parties, their key distinction lies in their priorities. The MFP places a strong

emphasis on significant institutional reforms, while the PT focuses on delivering economic performance.

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Hun Sen's Election in 2023

Chandarin Chum

Cambodia had its legislative election in July 2023. Elections in Cambodia, however, have been a subject of controversy and criticism. The election has been merely seen as a tool to convince local people that the kingdom is a democratic country, and members of the elite ruling class widely share this narrative. Public discourse is shaped to present the illusion of choice and citizen participation in decision-making. Behind the façade of democratic elections, the reality often reveals a different story. The electoral landscape is seen as heavily dominated by Hun Sen, one of the world's longest-serving leaders (1985-1993; 1998-2023). As a Cambodian People's Party (CPP) leader, Hun Sen has used political strategies to manipulate the electoral process and weaken political opposition in Cambodia for decades. He has cracked down on political opposition, civil society organisations, and independent media, limiting freedom of expression and assembly. However, there are signs that opposition to Hun Sen's rule is growing, and the government's crackdown on opposition and civil society is unlikely to lead to long-term stability or prosperity for the country, even though Hun Sen successfully managed to replace himself with his son, Hun Manet. This article will discuss how Hun Sen uses political strategies to eliminate his competitors from the election contest and maintain his political power to steer Cambodia into a closed authoritarian country.

Cambodia's Political Landscape

Cambodia has a long history of political turmoil, with numerous power struggles and regime changes over the years. After gaining independence from France in 1953, the country has experienced periods of monarchy, military rule, civil war, and, worst of all, the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime that claimed millions of Cambodian lives in the 1970s. The election in 1993, however, marked a significant turning point as the formation of a multiparty system reemerged. Unfortunately, a violent coup in 1997 resulted in the consolidation of power by the Cambodian People's Party, currently led by Hun Sen.

The Prime Minister, Hun Sen, has held power for 38 years in total, making him one of the world's longest-serving leaders. His Cambodian People's Party (CPP) has dominated the political scene for decades and controls almost every level of government. Under his leadership, Hun Sen has been accused of leading the country toward authoritarianism, corruption, and human rights abuses.

Cambodia has never been labelled as a "Free" or "Partly Free" country by Freedom House for the last decades. The country was consistently marked as a "Not Free" regime. Political rights and Civil liberties scores remain low, at 5/40 and 19/60, respectively. The latest report from V-dem Institute (2021: 11) suggests that Cambodia is in the autocratising moment. Cambodia, in all areas captured by V-dem, indicates severe democratic deficits. Deliberative and Electoral Indices experienced a significant setback if we compare the score in 2011 with 2021.

The Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) emerged as a serious challenger to the CPP in the 2013 and 2017 elections, securing 44% of the vote in both instances. However, the CNRP was dissolved in 2017 by a controversial court ruling that accused the party of plotting the illegal overthrow of the government. CNRP leader Sam Rainsy was forced to exile in France, and the other leader, Kem Sokha, was sentenced to 27 years under house arrest on treason charges.

Election Without Opposition

In the July 2023 election, 18 political parties have competed with the CPP. There have been approximately 9.8 million voters, with 53% of them being female. The number of new voters is estimated to be around 600,000. Unfortunately, the most credible opposition, Candlelight Party (CLP), was excluded from the contest. In the wake of the CNRP's dissolution, CLP formed as an unofficial successor, inheriting many of its members and policies. Despite facing intimidation and harassment, the CLP managed to secure 22% of the vote in the 2022 local election, positioning itself as the sole credible challenger to the CPP. The National Election Committee (NEC) disqualified the CLP from participating in the upcoming national election, citing a paperwork issue as the reason for the decision. According to the NEC, the party failed to provide the necessary documents for registration, specifically, a certified or notarized copy of the party's original registration letter from the Ministry of Interior, which was lost during a police raid in 2017. One would wonder why such a letter was not required in the local election in 2022. NEC declined to explain such a different decision.

Following the disqualification, the Candlelight Party filed an appeal with the Constitutional Council, asking for the decision to be overturned. However, the Council upheld the NEC's decision, deeming the party's complaint unlawful and making the decision final and unappealable. Hun Sen has warned that any demonstration against such a decision would lead to death or detention (Samean, 2023). A legal amendment was made to ensure that CLP cannot call for their supporters not to vote in the election, or they will lose their rights to stand as a candidate to run future elections for up to six years.

Several implications can be made following the disqualification of CLP. First, with the CLP barred from participating in the elections, the CPP has faced no real challenge, as the only remaining contenders are either aligned with the CPP or small, obscure parties that lack a national presence. This situation raises concerns about the fairness and legitimacy of the electoral process, as well as the prospects for a multiparty democracy in Cambodia. Second, the disqualification has also prevented millions of Cambodian voters from choosing their preferred candidates. As a spokesperson for the Candlelight Party stated, "The

absence of the Candlelight Party from the election means the voices of the people are dismissed. Such a move would never occur in a real democratic country” (Chheang, 2023). Finally, the disqualification paved the way for Prime Minister Hun Sen to consolidate power further and establish a political dynasty with his eldest son, army chief Hun Manet, and other relatives.

Restrictions On Civil Society and Media

In recent years, Cambodia has faced increasing restrictions on civil society organisations (CSOs) and media outlets, raising concerns about the country’s shrinking space for freedom of expression, assembly, and independent voices. Prime Minister Hun Sen and his Cambodian People’s Party have implemented various measures that curtail the activities of civil society groups and impose control over the media landscape.

Restrictions on Civil Society

Several regulations have imposed barriers on CSOs, targeting those working on issues such as human rights, democracy, and social justice. For example, the Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organisations (LANGO) was enacted in 2015 with burdensome registration requirements, extensive reporting obligations, and broad discretionary powers to authorities to suspend or dissolve organisations deemed non-compliant. Harassment and intimidation were also noticed toward CSOs critical of the government. Reports of arbitrary arrests, criminal charges, and even violence against activists have led to self-censorship and fear within the civil society sector. The suspension of the Coalition of Cambodian Farmers Community (CCFC) marks the latest crackdown on CSOs since its leaders were arrested, and some were at large under the accusation of plotting a “peasant revolution.”

Tax-related laws were also imposed to restrict international funding for CSOs. Organisations must seek government approval for funding sources and face scrutiny over their financial activities. Both service delivery and advocacy

non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Cambodia face a similar threat. A recent study with 106 NGOs in Cambodia indicates that Cambodian authorities target both kinds of NGOs because they are worried about political activity (Springman et al., 2022). The study discovers that the authority pressures the NGOs until they can confirm their avoidance of political activities. The findings also suggest that standard forms of government repression effectively minimize NGOs' political advocacy but also result in reductions in non-state service delivery.

Simultaneously, the Cambodian government has intensified its efforts to coopt civil society and establish compliant civil society organisations (CSOs). This includes the creation of the Civil Society Alliance Forum (CSAF) through sub-decree 128 ANKr.BK, which was issued on June 22, 2016. CSAF, often referred to as a government-organized non-governmental organisation (GONGO), is known to receive funding from the Chinese government or Chinese GONGOs (Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organisations). CSAF's main office is located within the government cabinet and receives funding from it.

The labour union is also divided, with some unions maintaining their independence while others are perceived as affiliated with or controlled by the CPP or employers. This division raises concerns about the extent of genuine representation and the ability to advocate for the rights and interests of workers. Furthermore, CPP has relied on its youth wing, the Union of Youth Federations of Cambodia (UYFC), registered as an NGO. According to LANGO, an NGO will not be able to do activities as UYFC is doing. In contrast, the UYFC plays a role in recruiting new followers for the party and imposing restrictions on freedom of speech in educational institutions, including schools and universities. Under this arrangement, UYFC members, known as "class monitors", monitor their fellow students and teachers/lecturers, potentially creating an atmosphere of surveillance and self-censorship. In some cases, the UYFC has undermined or coopted the activities of local and international NGOs working on youth empowerment. They have participated in NGO dialogues, training, and capacity-building initiatives, preventing other, more independent youth from accessing these programs. This strategy allows the CPP to influence youth

activities and limit the space for alternative voices and independent youth movements.

These actions by the Cambodian government and the CPP have raised concerns about civil society organisations' genuine independence and autonomy, labour unions, and youth organisations. The ruling party's co-option and control of these entities undermine the principles of a vibrant and diverse civil society and impede the development of a genuinely democratic and participatory society in Cambodia.

Restrictions on Media

The media landscape in Cambodia has also faced significant challenges, with growing restrictions on press freedom and the independent operation of media outlets. In addition to the law on media, adopted in 1995 following several amendments, the sub-decree in February 2021 on the National Internet Gateway has further tightened control of the internet and expanded online surveillance of internet users. This has led to a heightened sense of fear and self-censorship among journalists and media outlets. Several media platforms, such as Radio Free Asia, the Cambodia Daily, and *Voice of America*, were closed down in 2017 under the accusation of not paying taxes. The latest closure of *Voice of Democracy* (VOD) earlier this year has deepened the concerns about the prospects of democratisation and the erosion of fundamental democratic values. VOD has been at the forefront of investigating and reporting crime and violations mostly related to corruption and human rights issues. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported lately that Cambodia's media was in a "perilous state" (UN Human Rights Office, 2022).

The restrictions imposed on civil society and media have significantly impacted Cambodia's overall freedom of expression and assembly. Several arrests and convictions of individuals for their online activities have been recorded, including those who criticize the government's ways of work or express support for opposition parties. This has created a chilling effect on public discourse and dissenting voices in the country. Furthermore, peaceful

protests and assemblies have been effectively outlawed, with the government using the Covid-19 law as a tool to shut down the rights of civil society organisations working to promote human rights in Cambodia. This further narrows the space for the country's fundamental freedoms and civil society engagement.

Electoral Manipulation

Elections in Cambodia have been marred by allegations of electoral manipulation, including gerrymandering, voter intimidation, and vote buying. There have always been reports of irregularities, such as the removal of voters from electoral rolls and the presence of ruling party officials at polling stations, in addition to the legal amendments limiting civil society's freedom to participate in the election campaign that has been highlighted above (COMFREL, 2022). Independent experts and human rights organisations have raised serious allegations of electoral manipulation and irregularities in the 2022 commune elections, which serve as a precursor to the national elections. Reports suggest that ballot forms were tampered with, votes were not correctly counted and reported, and there were widespread instances of intimidation and harassment of opposition party observers.

Human Rights Watch (2013) also noticed a systematic problem undermining Cambodia's free and fair elections. These include, first, the unequal access to media. It is noted that the CPP maintains a near-monopoly on broadcast media, giving it a significant advantage over other parties and limiting access to information for voters. This has led to biased reporting, with state-owned and private stations favouring the ruling party while criticising or ignoring opposition voices. The second marks that Cambodia's national and local electoral apparatus is heavily influenced by the CPP, leading to claims of bias and corruption. The National Election Committee (NEC), responsible for overseeing the electoral process, has been accused of being politically biased and lacking credibility. The NEC's recent decision to exclude CLP and support Hun Sen's latest initiative to amend the election law, which bars those who do not vote from contesting in the future election, has further fuelled concerns about its impartiality. The third issue plaguing Cambodia's electoral process is

the need for an independent and impartial dispute resolution mechanism. The NEC has consistently rejected opposition complaints and sided with the CPP, often without any indication of a serious investigation into allegations of election irregularities. International observers and experts have called for an independent election tribunal or court to address this issue, but the Cambodian government has yet to act on these recommendations. Finally, officers of Cambodia's security forces and officials of the state civil service have been openly campaigning for the CPP and Hun Sen. This partisanship has created an intimidating atmosphere for voters, with opposition leaders and activists expressing fears that the military and police could be ordered to suppress them if they pose a threat to the ruling party.

Before the national election of 2023, countries such as the United States, European Unions, France, and Japan expressed their reluctance to send electoral observers or provide assistance; the legitimacy of the election process, therefore, has been called into question. The absence of such observers raises concerns about the credibility of the election result. As Sam Kunteamy, executive director of the Neutral and Impartial Committee for Free and Fair Elections (NICFEC), stated, "They might not have confidence that the election will be free and fair" (RFA Khmer, 2023). Despite these, Hun Sen won the 2023 election in Cambodia, securing 120 of 125 parliamentary seats. He quickly appointed his son as his successor and urged his old comrades to step down. A new cabinet was established with the former ministers' sons, daughters, and relatives. For example, the Ministry of Interior was given to Sar Keng's son, Sar Sokha, and the Defence to Tea Banh's son, Tea Seiha. However, Hun Sen is still believed to be powerful behind his son as he is the President of the Senate and the Supreme Privy Council to the King.

Hun Manet Assumes Control

Hun Sen's son has been groomed and positioned as a successor in the Hun's reins of power. In December 2021, the CPP central committee endorsed Hun Manet, Hun Sen's eldest son, as a likely prime minister candidate in the future. The perceived dynastic succession has drawn criticism from domestic and

international observers, who argue that it undermines democracy, political pluralism, and fair competition within Cambodia's political landscape. Sam Rainsy (2023) used to argue that Manet is immature and lacks charisma like his father. He further predicted that it was also impossible for the CPP's future generations to work together as their father's comrade did. David Hutt (2023), a columnist, also cited several sources that may hinder the succession plan. This may originate from the internal friction among CPP senior members.

Despite its outward appearance, the CPP is characterized by internal divisions and diversity that are not readily apparent. These differences within the party may become more pronounced under the leadership of Hun Manet, particularly between those who advocate for modernisation and those who view the CPP as a means for personal gain and the consolidation of power through patronage networks. Another challenge for the future leader lies in the generational shift that his ascension implies, as Hun Sen has emphasized that along with his retirement, other long-serving party members must also step aside. This transition is likely to generate resentment among certain members of the older generation who may feel that Manet's seemingly unearned promotion has thwarted their aspirations for higher positions of authority. Al Jazeera (2023) quoted a political analyst suggesting that "there is much unease and unhappiness—expressed privately—among party members that Hun Manet was elevated to the top job despite having no proven track record in Cambodian politics". Nevertheless, it is believed that as long as Hun Sen is there, friction will not likely be a significant challenge for Manet.

External factors are not also very conducive to the power that has been transferred. The increasing influence of China in Cambodia has raised questions about the extent of support from the Chinese government for Hun Sen's succession plan. As noted by Hutt (2023), some sources suggest that Beijing may harbour reservations about fully trusting Hun Manet and could potentially favour an alternative successor. However, China is the first country, including North Korea's Prime Minister Kim Tok-hun, to congratulate Manet on becoming the Cambodian prime minister.

The United States, in contrast, welcomed the 2023 election with punitive measures, citing that the election was "neither free, nor fair" (Miller, 2023).

According to the State Department spokesperson Mathew Miller, the Biden administration will impose visa restrictions on individuals undermining democracy. However, the names of the persons were not revealed. Western countries such as France, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Canada expressed similar disappointment over the election, but specific measures to ensure democratic development have not been highlighted yet.

A Shaky Democratic Future

The question of hope for Cambodian democracy in the future is complex and multifaceted. Planting a democratic seed in Cambodia takes time; maintaining hope is even more critical. The situation is evolving, and several factors can foster the chance to sustain and deepen the democratic space. There is a need for concerted efforts from the international community that signed and witnessed the Paris Peace Agreement (PPA) in 1991 and Cambodian citizens to uphold democratic principles and human rights. The democratic ideals spelled in the PPA and the Cambodian Constitution shall be reviewed and questioned.

International pressure is still relevant and necessary. Cambodia will only survive long with the US or EU's market despite the effort to diversify and build resilience for its economy by expanding its trade relationship with countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN member states. The scrutiny and criticism from the international community, including human rights organisations and foreign governments, can help maintain pressure on the Cambodian government to respect democratic norms and practices. International assistance and cooperation in capacity-building for democratic institutions, promoting good governance, and protecting human rights can contribute to the long-term development of a robust democratic system in Cambodia.

The other key factor that will shape the future of Cambodian democracy is the engagement and mobilisation of the Cambodian people. Civil society organisations, human rights activists, and grassroots movements continue to play a vital role in advocating for democratic principles, defending human rights, and demanding political reforms. These groups are instrumental in raising awareness, promoting civic participation, and holding the government

accountable. Additionally, the younger generation's involvement is crucial for the future of Cambodian democracy. Young Cambodians, with their energy, ideas, and aspirations, can drive change and push for a more inclusive and participatory political system. Empowering youth through education, access to information, and opportunities for political engagement can help shape a new generation of leaders committed to democratic values.

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Indonesia's Upcoming 2024 Presidential Election: Political Binarism and its Impact on Democracy

Deasy Simandjuntak

The years 2022-2024 are political years for Southeast Asia, in which many countries have held and will be holding general elections. Given that almost all Southeast Asian countries are hybrid regimes—or stuck between full democracy and authoritarianism—it is not surprising that these elections have shown mixed results. Malaysia's election in November 2022, for example, demonstrated a reflected the smooth functioning of democratic institutions when the reform-minded opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim was finally appointed prime minister after winning in the election which ended three years of tumultuous political crisis. In Thailand, a new anti-junta opposition party has resoundingly won the May 2023 election. Yet after several weeks, the democratic victory did not translate into political renewal, due to political manoeuvring by the military and pro-royalist camp, but the electoral success gives progressives hope of change in the years to come (cf. article of Sawasdee in this volume). A year before, however, most voters in the Philippines, despite it being the region's oldest democracy, had again opted for a “strongmen” leadership by electing the son and namesake of their former dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. as the new president. Marcos Jr. succeeded Rodrigo Duterte, also democratically elected in 2016, yet whose punitive populism and hard-handed approach in the “War on Drugs” has earned his administration a disrepute in the national and

international human rights circles. The above cases show how elections can either produce democratic triumphs or become a façade of persistent authoritarianism. Despite these mixed results nonetheless, there is something to be said for the fact that elections are still seen as a yardstick for democracy across the region, including in the socialist Vietnam and Laos.

Indonesia, the world's third largest democracy and generally considered as Southeast Asia's democratic beacon, will have its general election on 14 February 2024 followed by local elections on 27 November 2024. With 206 million eligible voters, this will be the world's largest *one-day* election that year. It will also be a simultaneous election wherein voters will vote for the president, representatives in the national and local parliaments, and senators. Of all these elections, voters will likely focus on the presidential one. Learning from the 2019 election, the latter will potentially create a serious rift in the society as voters fervently support and rally behind the candidates of their choice.

Still more than three months away, excitement has been building up as the manoeuvres of political parties and speculations on who will be the presidential and vice-presidential candidates embellish the daily media reports. This commentary discusses the prospect of various aspects of the Indonesian 2024 presidential election, including the candidacy, political polarisation and what we can expect of Indonesia's politics going forward.

Indonesia's Electoral Politics: Political Parties and their Non-Ideological Coalitions

It is noteworthy that Indonesia's political party spectrum is not ideological: most of the parties are "nationalist" (which in Indonesia is understood as "non-religious") even when some are officially Islamic parties, with the exception of the more Islamist-inspired Prosperous Justice Party (PKS). Albeit having the largest Muslim population in the world—87% of its 274 million citizens are Muslims—, Indonesia it is not an Islamic country, meaning that Islam is not the religion of the state. In fact, Indonesia sanctions six religions (Islam,

Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism) and officially gives them equal protection.

The general “absence” of ideology in party politics means that the latter is largely shaped by the common aspiration to secure governance in order to benefit from the spoils of office. Consequently, the country only has two political “camps”: the government’s and the opposition’s, the latter being a minuscule and fragmented group consisting of only the above Islamist-inspired PKS and the nationalist Democrat Party. The rest of them, twelve nationalist and Islamic parties, formed the government coalition, which is led by the Indonesian Democratic Party for Struggle (PDIP), the country’s largest nationalist party.

Yet, such formation can change in the next months as parties will hop on and off of the coalitions following which presidential candidates, they will endorse in 2024. The Elections Law stipulates that a party or party coalition may nominate its presidential ticket (consisting of a pair of presidential and vice-presidential candidates) if in the previous election it has acquired 20% of the national votes or 15% of the parliamentary seats. The only party fulfilling this requirement is PDIP, thus the only party that can nominate its own presidential candidate without having to form a coalition with others. Herein lies the gist of Indonesia’s party politics: the absence of clear party ideology means that most parties are prepared to form very broad and heterogeneous coalitions consisting of both nationalist and Islamic parties to endorse a popular presidential ticket.

Although seemingly superficial, the polarisation caused by such non-ideological political cleavage can be seriously aggravated by identity politics. The 2019 election showed that the two opposing camps has used religion and/or religiosity as a tool to mobilize votes. As a result, the campaign period which lasted for several months were filled with religious mobilisation and largely devoid of any discourse on important governance issues such as the anti-corruption efforts, accountability, and rule-of-law. This reflects the general reluctance of the political elites to address the country’s important democratic challenges, opting instead to treat election as a mere tool for power succession, without taking this opportunity to examine and improve governance.

The 2019 electoral politics and its superficial polarisation that was based on religious issues/identity-politics will likely underpin the politics approaching the 2024 election. The current manoeuvres by political parties have already reflected the same prioritisation of securing power in the election and neglect of the more substantive issues of democratic challenges. The next section discusses the 2019 election and its polarisation and how this polarisation will shape Indonesia's electoral politics in 2024.

Indonesia's 2019 Election and the Religious Binary Politics

With 193 million voters, 809,500 polling stations and around 6 million recruited election workers, Indonesia's 2019 election was the world's largest and arguably most complicated election. Despite it being a simultaneous election in which voters voted for their president, local and national representatives, and senators, voters mostly focused on the presidential election. This election was dubbed "the most polarized election" in Indonesia's post-reform politics, creating a serious and long-standing rift in the society (Simandjuntak 2022).

Binary oppositions, or polarisation, refers to the divergence of political attitudes into two ideological extremes (DiMaggio, Evans and Bryson, 1996; Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008). In binary politics, 'third' alternatives are less accommodated. US politics, for example, often only allows two parties to participate substantially in governance, leading to binary stances of "Liberal vs Conservative" or "Left vs Right" or disputative issues such as "pro-Life vs pro-Choice." There are typically two levels of polarisation: elite and mass. Elite polarisation refers to the polarisation of the political elites, whereas mass polarisation signifies the societal polarisation of the electorate or the public (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2016). The 2019 presidential election has indeed formed a semblance of political polarisation, at that time between the more Islamic camp and the more religiously "pluralist" camp. The incumbent President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo represented the "pluralist" camp as he was supported by a coalition led by the non-religious party PDIP. The opposition candidate Ret. Gen. Prabowo Subianto, is the populist leader of the nationalist

Great Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra). As Prabowo was also supported by the Islamist-inspired PKS, he was subsequently touted as the representative of the Islamists although he himself was not religious.

The competition between the so-called Islamism vs religious pluralism camp had begun in 2016, when some conservative groups organized massive protests against the Chinese-Christian Jakarta's former governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok). The latter had quoted a verse from the Islamic Holy Book during his re-election campaign and this has angered the conservatives and their supporters. Consequently, in 2017, in the most acrimoniously sectarian gubernatorial election, these groups, supported by Prabowo, launched a massive anti-Ahok movement which not only successfully prevented his re-election, but also jailed him for blasphemy¹. The gubernatorial candidate whom the conservatives have supported and eventually won the election was Anies Baswedan, a former minister of Education and Culture in Jokowi's 2014 cabinet, yet who was discharged in 2016 allegedly for deviating from the President's vision². Anies, whose paternal grandfather was a prominent Arab-Indonesian activist, has suitable credentials to receive support from the conservative Islamic groups. These group, dubbed the "212" movement, later became a semi-consolidated anti-government movement.

Despite the acrimoniously sectarian mobilisation in 2017 and 2019, compared to the established political polarisation in the US between the Republicans and the Democrats, where significantly contentious social issues are profoundly connected to the ideological divergence between the two, Indonesia's 2019 political binarism was transitory and superficial. There was no discussion on what the government would look like if one or the other camp won the election. The Islamist camp, for example, did not have a clear idea of how they would govern the country, except for a vague agreement with Prabowo that he would prioritize the interests of the Muslims if he won the election. The incumbent also did not seem to offer anything new other than the

¹ Deasy Simandjuntak, "Faced with a troubling blasphemy verdict, Ahok at least left Jakarta a legacy of reform," *Channel News Asia commentary*, 11 May 2017, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/commentary-ahok-left-jakarta-legacy-of-reform-8836708>, retrieved on July 3, 2023.

² Ayomi Amindoni, "Jokowi's new cabinet announced," *The Jakarta Post*, 27 July 2016, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/07/27/jokowis-new-cabinet-announced.html>, retrieved on July 3, 2023.

continuation of the ongoing government programs. The 2019 election was thus only about the political cleavage, or the boundary between the two competing camps.

Both camps' strategies also relied heavily on populism, with Prabowo criticising the government elites' alleged incompetence in managing state budget while portraying himself as representative of the suffering "people", and Jokowi promising potential voters of the implementation of various health and education projects—some of which he eventually fulfilled. Prabowo's populism, however, also included criticisms on government's decision to allow many Chinese investments in Indonesia which included a massive influx of Chinese workers. Focusing on China's economic dominant is not an unusual electoral strategy in Southeast Asia, with opposition leaders such as Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia winning elections in the past after criticising their incumbent governments' pro-China policies³. Yet in Indonesia, this strategy bore a considerable risk. While this criticism resonates with Indonesian voters who were increasingly apprehensive of Chinese workers, this was a precarious strategy as voters could associate Chinese businesses with the long-time predominance of Chinese-Indonesian businesses in the country and this could have inflamed anti-Chinese Indonesian sentiments.

Still, religious mobilisation was the main campaign strategy in 2019 as this strategy was not only utilized by the Islamist camp. The incumbent camp, which was considered to support religious pluralism, also benefitted from a religious "card." In a last-minute move, the incumbent President Jokowi decided to appoint Ma'ruf Amin, a prominent conservative cleric of the Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's largest Muslim organisation, as his vice president candidate. This appointment was aimed at first, at "shielding" the president from being accused by the opposition camp of having downplayed the Islamic interests in his political platform, and second, splitting the Muslim votes. Religious voting was

³ Deasy Simandjuntak, "Jokowi's triumph in the 2019 presidential election and the future of binary politics," *Heinrich Böll Stiftung Southeast Asia*, 6 June 2019, https://th.boell.org/en/2019/06/06/jokowis-triumph-2019-presidential-election-and-future-binary-politics#_ftn14.

then unavoidable. An exit poll⁴ conducted on the day of the election revealed that 97% of the voters with minority religious voted for Jokowi. However, Jokowi's strategy of getting a prominent Islamic cleric as running mate successfully split the Muslim votes: 51% of Muslim voters voted for Prabowo. Such division also closely mirrored the overall election result which was won by the incumbent, who gained 55.5% against the opposition, who gained 44.5% with a difference of 11% or almost 17 million votes⁵.

When the 2019 election was won by Jokowi, the “pluralist” camp was elated, as it was considered as a victory for the more “democratic” Indonesian polity. Yet democracy is not about which “label” won the election, but whether the governance afterwards fulfil the prerequisites of substantive democracy which includes rule of law and fulfilment of civil liberties. As is evident in the president's second tenure, the government is not without its own democratic challenges. Even though the Islamist camp lost the 2019 election, religious mobilisation, particularly the question of to which degree the government should prioritize the Islamic interest, has created such a bitter polarisation in the society that the president decided to appease Prabowo's supporters by appointing him as his cabinet's minister of Defence. In a similar gesture a year later, the President also appointed Prabowo's former running-mate Sandiaga Uno as minister of Tourism and Creative Economy. As both Prabowo and Sandiaga are leaders at the opposition Gerindra party, with this move the government has coopted the Gerindra into the ruling coalition, thus further shrinking the already diminutive opposition and subsequently posing a problem in the checks-and-balances mechanism that is important for a democratic governance.

A similar electoral polarisation, albeit transitory and superficial, will likely embellish Indonesia's electoral politics approaching the 2024 election. The next section discusses the current political party manoeuvring pertaining to the potential presidential candidates.

⁴ Callistasia Wijaya, “Siapa saja yang memilih Jokowi dan Prabowo berdasarkan exit poll dan quick count?” [Who voted for Jokowi and Prabowo according to exit polls and quick counts?], *BBC News Indonesia*, 24 April 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/indonesia-48019930>, retrieved on July 3, 2023.

⁵ Wim Tohari Danielaldi, “Scrambling for Jokowi's Blessing,” *Kompas*, 20 June 2023, <https://www.kompas.id/baca/english/2023/06/18/en-berebut-restu-jokowi>, retrieved on July 3, 2023.

2024 Presidential Election: Party Politics and Potential Candidates

The official presidential nomination was finalized at the end of October 2023 and there are three pairs of candidates: Ganjar Pranowo, the current Central Java province governor with his running-mate Mahfud MD, former Chief Justice of the Constitutional Court and current Coordinating Minister of Political, Legal and Security Affairs; Prabowo Subianto, the current Defence Minister with his running-mate Gibran Rakabuming Raka, President Jokowi's son and current Mayor of Solo city; and Anies Baswedan, the current Jakarta governor with his running mate Muhaimin Iskandar, Chairman of the National Awakening party (PKB).

From the three candidates, Ganjar and Anies are the ones with somewhat clearer political platforms. Ganjar is a long-time PDIP cadre and has recently been endorsed by the main government party, making him, for millions of President Jokowi's supporters, the obvious successor of the incumbent government. Ganjar also has a similar background with the president: he is Central Javanese, has the experience of governing an important administrative region, and more importantly for Jokowi's minority religions support based, Ganjar, like Jokowi, exhibits a moderate Islamic outlook which promises the upholding of religious harmony.

Although Ganjar seems to embody Jokowi's political stance, the fact that Jokowi's son Gibran is running as Prabowo vice-presidential candidate has indicated that the President might have always favoured Prabowo, rather than Ganjar, to continue his legacy. Many observers, however, lamented Gibran's controversial nomination, dubbing this an effort to cement Jokowi's political dynasty. Gibran's candidacy was preceded by a controversial ruling by the Constitutional Court removing a minimum age requirement of 40 for presidential or vice-presidential candidates, on the condition they have been elected to regional posts, clearing the way for the 36-year-old mayor of Solo city to run for vice president in 2024. Added to this controversy was the fact that Jokowi's brother-in-law, thus Gibran's uncle, is the Constitutional Court Chief Justice who presided over the ruling. It remains to be seen how this suspected "ethical violation" will be handled by the Constitutional Court.

At the other end of the so-called political spectrum, Anies, whose victory in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election was gained by riding the wave of Islamic mobilisation, is largely seen as representing the Islamic conservative aspiration and the opposition camp. Interestingly, the first party which declared their support for him was not the Islamist-inspired PKS, but rather a former government party the National Democrat party (Nasdem) in 2022. Its controversial declaration of support for Anies then removed Nasdem from the government coalition. Recently, the PKS and the National Awakening Party (PKB) together with Nasdem officially declared support for the Jakarta governor. The PKB joined the coalition as their leader Muhaimin Iskandar became Anies' running-mate. These declarations have cemented Anies' position as the candidate of the opposition camp and the more Islamic polity.

So far, the two opposite camps of the political spectrum have already gotten their men. What about Prabowo? Herewith lies the quintessence of the country's non-ideological politics. From the three candidates, Prabowo is the one with the most flexible political persona. Table 1 shows the quadrant of potential voters' perception of the candidates' characteristics. While Ganjar and Anies have limited support bases, Prabowo is also the only one that can appeal to both the supporters of the government and those of the opposition. In 2019, Prabowo had fronted the conservative religious camp which launched the most bitter sectarian electoral politics in Indonesia's post-reform history, yet he also self-proclaimed of being not religious⁶. After losing the election he even gladly accepted President Jokowi's offer to become the minister of Defence, and thus has very good relations with the president. Prabowo was a general during Suharto's authoritarian regime and also the latter's son-in-law. He was allegedly involved in orchestrating the riots which took place right before Suharto stepped down in 1998, which earned him a disrespect in the national human rights circles. Yet in 2019, as a populist he portrayed himself as part of the people and could gain the trust of many conservative Muslim voters.

⁶ Marlinda Oktavia Erwanti, "Prabowo: Ilmu Islam saya kurang, tapi..." [Prabowo: I lack Islamic credentials, but...], *Detik*, 27 July 2018, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4137520/prabowo-ilmu-islam-saya-kurang-tapi>, retrieved on July 5, 2023.

Table I. How the candidates cater to different types of supporters

	Pluralism	Conservative Islam
Jokowi's supporters	Ganjar Pranowo Prabowo Subianto	Prabowo Subianto
Opposition	Prabowo Subianto	Anies Baswedan Prabowo Subianto

Indonesians are getting ready for the three-horse race in the 2024 election with Ganjar, Prabowo and Anies as presidential contenders. Political parties' manoeuvres also seem to indicate such tendency. Ganjar has now officially supported by a coalition consisting of PDIP, an Islamic party United Development Party (PPP) and two smaller parties with no representatives in the parliament, the People's Conscience Party (Hanura) and the Indonesian United Party (Perido). With PDIP being the only party that can put forward its presidential ticket without actually having to form a coalition with others, PDIP has the final say of who will be Ganjar's VP candidate, and it has chosen Former Constitutional Court Justice Mahfud MD.

PDIP was essentially interested in making Prabowo the VP candidate for Ganjar, that is why President Jokowi, who was supported by PDIP, sought to create what he termed as a "grand coalition," which would pull together the parties that support Ganjar and those that support Prabowo in one big coalition. If Prabowo had ditched his presidential ambition and was willing to run as Ganjar's VP candidate, PDIP would reap the benefit of having both a presidential candidate who carries Jokowi's qualities and a VP candidate who can cater to the opposition's (and the Islamic) interests. Persuading Prabowo to accept being only a VP, however, was not an easy task, as the latter is more senior than Ganjar and has harboured presidential ambition since 2009 when he ran as Megawati's VP candidate. Yet the fact that he had run with Megawati before means that politically his party Gerindra has no qualms with cooperating with Megawati's party PDIP, much unlike Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's Democrat party which is consistent in being in the opposition.

Nonetheless, Prabowo seemed to be reluctant to run if not as a presidential candidate⁷. In June, there were reports that Gerindra, the country's second strongest party Golkar, the moderate Islamic party National Awakening Party (PKB) and a modernist Islamic party the National Mandate Party (PAN) had created a coalition to nominate Prabowo. However, as always with Indonesia's politics, coalitions can still change following political calculations. To recapitulate, Ganjar will be supported by PDIP, PPP, Hanura and Perindo, Prabowo by Gerindra, Golkar, Demokrat, and PSI, while Anies by Nasdem, PKB and PKS.

Another reason why PDIP was interested in pairing Ganjar with Prabowo, in addition to the benefits of attracting two opposite support bases, was also because a two-round election, which would likely happen if there are three pairs running, would actually be dangerous for the government camp. Indonesia follows a majoritarian two-round system in its presidential elections, meaning, the winner is the one who can garner 50% plus 1 vote. If no one can get 50% plus 1 vote in the election, then an election run-off (or second round) is conducted. The fact that the three candidates are similarly popular leads to the possibility that if the three of them become competitors, then no one would be able to get 50% plus 1 vote in the election. Thus, a second round will have to be conducted between the two candidates who have gained the most votes. Observers speculate that these two candidates would most likely be Ganjar and Prabowo. This would be precarious as Ganjar could lose if he goes head-to-head with Prabowo in the second round, the voters who had voted for Anies in the first round would likely vote for Prabowo in the second round. Again, this is because Prabowo could easily attract the opposition votes as he had fronted the opposition camp in 2019.

⁷ Agus Raharjo, "Prabowo tolak jadi cawapres Ganjar, Sekjen PDIP: tidak ada kawin paksa" [Prabowo refuses to be Ganjar's VP candidate, PDIP's General Secretary: there is no forced marriage here], *Republika*, 24 April 2023, <https://news.republika.co.id/berita/rtm8ki436/prabowo-tolak-jadi-cawapres-ganjar-sekjen-pdip-tidak-ada-kawin-paksa>, retrieved on July 5, 2023.

Perspectives for the Country's State of Democracy

Polarisation will continue to embellish Indonesia's politics. Regarding polarisation, Haggard and Kaufman have argued that it can lead to democratic regression as deep polarisation hinders the government from functioning efficiently (Haggard and Kaufman 2021), resulting in popular disaffection and distrust of institutions. Second, parties in a deeply polarized setting are either captured by extremist elements or displaced by populist movements; and third, the "us" versus "them" competition is a common trait of populism, and this is ultimately illiberal. Yet, Haggard and Kaufman's polarisation regards the situation where political elites and publics become divided over public policy and *ideology*. As argued in this paper, however, Indonesia's electoral politics is *not ideological*, moreover, it is unclear whether the opposition would issue different public policies if they had won the 2019 election. Yet, the fact that Indonesia's political binarism is transitory and superficial is perhaps what prevents the country's (hybrid) democracy from further deconsolidating, as polarisation will intensify mostly only during politically sensitive periods such as the elections. Beyond these periods, it is politics as usual and political elites can change coalitions to suit their power interests.

As mentioned earlier, Indonesia's government faces democratic challenges such as transactional politics, the issuance of controversial laws which curb the freedom of speech, labour rights and anti-corruption efforts, rampant dynastic politics, and the shrinkage of oppositional politics. However, an *Indikator* survey has indicated that more than 77% of Indonesians still believe that democracy is "the best system for Indonesia, even though it is not perfect."⁸ In addition, *ISEAS 2022 Indonesia National Survey Project* indicates that the public satisfaction with the president has risen from 68% in 2017 to 71.8% in

⁸ Indikator, *Trust terhadap institusi politik, isu-isu mutakhir, dan dinamika electoral jelang pemilu serentak 2024* [Trust of political institutions, current issues, and electoral dynamics approaching the 2024 simultaneous elections], *National Survey*, 11-12 February 2022, https://indikator.co.id/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/RILIS-03-04-22_Survei-Nasional_2022_3_APRIL_2022.pdf

2022⁹. Similarly, a *Kompas* survey shows that 70.1% respondent have claimed that they were “satisfied” with the government’s performance¹⁰.

Yet the controversial ruling which paves the way for Jokowi’s son to run for vice president despite his young age could be the straw that breaks the camel’s back concerning people’s support for democracy. The public so far sees Gibran’s nomination as nepotistic and this could undermine Prabowo’s chances, if his camp does not come up with ways to revamp Gibran’s political image soon.

The fact that Indonesians still wholeheartedly support democracy despite the deteriorating democratic fundamentals, for Jefferson Ng, shows the discrepancy of the perception of democracy by Indonesians as compared to the understanding of democracy by international rating agencies¹¹. He mentions that for Indonesians, “democracy success is measured not by the robustness of its checks and balances but by its ability to deliver on concrete policy outcomes”. Indonesians are satisfied with the current government’s track record in infrastructure development and its social welfare initiatives, and they connect these with a democratic triumph.

Although this “instrumental” logic of democracy seems to brush aside the deterioration of democratic fundamentals such as accountability, civil liberties, and checks and balances, for Indonesians the system still guarantees effective redistributive policies. The fact that political polarisation is transitory also means that the competing parties can easily “move on” from the divisive electoral competition for the government to focus on implementing policies. In the long run, however, Indonesia has to encourage the opposition to perform its function of checks and balances, promotes accountability and safeguard democratic freedoms in order to foster a more substantive democracy.

⁹ Burhanuddin Muhtadi, Hui Yew-Foong, and Siwage Dharma Negara, “The Indonesia National Survey Project 2022: Engaging with Developments in the Political, Economic and Social Spheres”, *ISEAS Trends in Southeast Asia* (ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022), https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/TRS3_23.pdf

¹⁰ Bestian Nainggolan, “Survei litbang “Kompas”: kepuasan meningkat, faktor “Jokowi” menguat?” [Kompas survey: satisfaction increases, the “Jokowi” factor strengthens?], *Kompas*, 22 May 2023, https://www.kompas.id/baca/riset/2023/05/22/survei-litbang-kompas-kepuasan-meningkat-faktor-jokowi-menguat?open_from=Tagar_Page

¹¹ Jefferson Ng, “The rise of performance politics in Indonesia?”, *New Mandala*, 21 March 2023, <https://www.newmandala.org/the-rise-of-performance-politics-in-indonesia/>

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Abstracts

The 2022 Philippine Elections: Unity, Continuity, and Impunity

Cleo Anne Calimbahin

Despite the overwhelming support for the winning candidate and the unprecedented speed of transmission of votes, there remains allegations of fraud in the 2022 elections. Calls for a shift for a hybrid system, the Commission Elections held an Election Summit with various stakeholders present to discuss electoral reform issues. This presentation focuses on the examination of election administration during the 2022 Philippine general election. Specifically on the constitutional commission mandated to deliver free and fair elections, the Commission on Elections (COMELEC). In this paper, the following will be examined, the election management performance of the COMELEC in the 2022 election, the issues of capacity and autonomy encountered, and the lack of authoritative voice on matters of election management shaped the conduct of election. By pushing the analysis on autonomy and capacity, COMELEC's lack of authoritative voice and decisive actions as a constitutionally independent body led to its inability to mitigate the challenges concerning election administration in the Philippines. However, it is worth noting that the public satisfaction of COMELEC is high. As the referee and gatekeeper of the electoral arena, it is crucial for COMELEC to resolve issues surrounding its autonomy and capacity in order to administer elections with integrity and address perceptions and allegations of fraud.

Malaysia's Electoral Processes: Tracing the Path from the Bersih Movement to Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim

Khoo Ying Hooi

This article examines the intricacies of electoral politics in Malaysia, specifically focusing on the period spanning from the inception of the electoral reform movement, commonly referred to as the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Bersih), in 2005 to the present administration led by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. Malaysia's electoral politics landscape has been characterised by constant dynamism and engagement throughout this duration. With Anwar's long struggle in Malaysian politics, the anticipation surrounding his assumption of the role of prime minister was significant. Anwar has garnered international acclaim as a prominent figure in the pro-democracy movement and has enjoyed a comparable reputation domestically. Nevertheless, the formation of his unity government in November 2022, which included the former ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN) that he had long strived to topple throughout his political career, has sparked substantial debate. Against this backdrop, this article delves into the trajectory of Malaysia's electoral processes, shedding light on the interplay between popular mobilisation and political compromise that ultimately shape the country's ongoing process of democratisation.

Elections in Timor-Leste, 2022-2023

Rui Graça Feijó

This brief essay introduces the government system of Timor-Leste enshrined in its Constitution and refers the main political conventions operating in its broad framework. Then, it refers the main features of the electoral system, distinguishing presidential and legislative elections, and offering a summary of the electoral administration.

Next, it considers the 2022 presidential elections, placing those polls in the context of the evolution of the previous presidential terms in office and the sharp distinction of the incumbent's mandate. A brief analysis of the results suggest that electors rejected the incumbent's platform and chose a return to conventional forms of presidential rule.

The third section described the framework for the 2023 parliamentary polls, underlining that these were not “coattails” elections as had been the case in 2007, 2012 and 2017, but still were fought along a default line similar to the 2022 presidential ones. The emerging results were in line with that of the previous year, and the way the country had been ruled for the last few years clearly rejected the incumbent's platform and chose a return to conventional forms of presidential rule.

The final section purports to reflect on some major challenges head: generational turnover and the anticipated eclipse of charismatic authority, new policies to address youth unrest, and economic diversification to combat excessive dependence on oil revenues.

Thailand's 2023 General Elections: Processes, Key Issues, and Future Trajectories

Siripan Nogsuan Sawasdee

The Move Forward Party surpassed predictions in the election, with demographic factors, especially the support of the younger generation and advancements in communication technology, playing a significant role in their success. This election marked a departure from the past, witnessing the emergence of various political ideologies and a diverse range of policy platforms. The election results suggested a growing dissatisfaction with the military-backed government and a desire for change among the Thai population. The traditional influence of provincial politics and dynastic patronage was being challenged by the rapid expansion of urbanization and the role of social media. These factors have triggered a transformation in how politics is conducted and

how voters engaged with political parties. Nevertheless, the military-appointed Senate allowed pro-military parties to join in the new coalition government. The coalition government formed between these two opposing factions represented a significant shift and realignment in Thailand's new era of political conflict.

Hun Sen's Election in 2023

Chandarin Chum

This article explores the political landscape in Cambodia, focusing on the last legislative election in July 2023. It examines the dominance of Prime Minister Hun Sen and his Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and their strategies to maintain power and eliminate opposition. The article highlights the history of political turmoil in Cambodia, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) dissolution, and the exclusion of the credible opposition Candlelight Party (CLP) from the election. It discusses the implications of the absence of a genuine challenger to the CPP and the disenfranchisement of Cambodian voters. Additionally, the article explores the restrictions imposed on civil society organizations and the media, including laws and regulations that curtail their activities and control their operations. It also sheds light on the allegations of electoral manipulation, such as gerrymandering and voter intimidation, which undermine the integrity of the electoral process. Finally, the article briefly updates about Hun Sen's son's successor, Hun Manet, and highlights a few challenges he will face when assuming his position. Overall, the article accentuates the challenges to democracy and human rights in Cambodia and raises concerns about the prospects for a multiparty democracy.

Indonesia's Upcoming 2024 Presidential Election: Political Binarism and its Impact on Democracy

Deasy Simandjuntak

Indonesia, the world's third largest democracy and generally considered as Southeast Asia's democratic beacon, will have its general election on 14 February 2024, where 206 million eligible voters will vote for the president, representatives in the national and local parliaments, and senators. Incumbent President Joko Widodo is ineligible to run for a third term due to the term limits established by the Indonesian constitution. For the moment, the coalitions remain open. Local elections will also be held on 27 November 2024 across 548 regions: 37 provinces, 415 regencies and 98 cities. This commentary discusses the prospect of various aspects of the Indonesian 2024 presidential election, including the candidacy, political polarisation and what we can expect of Indonesia's politics going forward.



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