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SOUTHEAST ASIA

Regional Dialogue E-Paper Series

# Participatory Democracy in a Time of Democratic Backsliding, Populism, and Polarization

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**Title:** Participatory Democracy in a Time of Democratic Backsliding, Populism, and Polarization
**Published by:** Heinrich Böll Stiftung Southeast Asia Regional Office, Bangkok, January 2026

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## Content

# Introduction

The global political landscape has been shifting towards authoritarian tendencies. In countries that are purportedly democratic, we are seeing democratic institutions and consultative processes disregarded and dismantled. Freedoms are curtailed and the civic space limited. Societies are polarized by inflamed rhetoric from leaders and their followers. The digital space is replete with misinformation and disinformation. Fake news diminishes shared reality creating more deeply divided societies. Instead of states forging democratic commitment, there is a phenomenon of democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016). Across the globe, powerful political and economic elites are recasting the state to promote particular rather than public interests. In many countries, there is increasing polarization along economic, political, religious, and party lines. The election of populists is attributed in some measure to rising levels of distrust towards institutions and criticism that democracy has not led to any substantial changes (de Vreese et al 2018).

Since 2020, Freedom House has been raising the alarm on democratic rollback and decline. Democratic backsliding is the "state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy" (Bermeo, 2016). In Southeast Asia, we are seeing the weakening of democratic institutions especially, horizontal accountability mechanisms or the checks and balances of the different branches of government (V-Dem Accountability in Southeast Asia and Southeast Africa Report, 2019). Individuals and groups, seen as opposition or reformists, are harassed. At times even accused of sympathizing with rebel organizations with the goal of dissuading any form of opposition (Bermeo, 2016). In some cases, freedom of speech and expression are curtailed. Cases of journalists, especially local journalists embedded in areas where political violence is rampant, are censored or threatened. And in some cases, there is a surveillance of dissenting voices on social media (Freedom House, 2019).

This paper examines participatory democracy at a critical juncture. It establishes the current political condition in Southeast Asia that can be characterized as democratic decline, polarization, and support for populism. There is empirical data showing support and appreciation for democratic values, practices, and ideals appear to have waned. In 2016, the Philippines, one of the oldest democracies in Southeast Asia voted for a populist who openly campaigned on illiberal strategies and implemented an anti-illegal drug campaign that clearly violated human rights (Kasuya and Calimbahin, 2022).

The first section of this paper will define participatory democracy and its principles. It will also include a discussion on the practices of participatory democracy and the criticisms against participatory democracy. The second

section looks at the history of participatory democracy in Southeast Asia. The third section examines the challenges of participatory democracy especially in a shrinking democratic space. The fourth section concludes with possible ways to consider and approach the challenges of having meaningful participatory democracy in Southeast Asia. There is a need to rethink and explore how to face the changing and challenging political landscape.

## State of Participatory Democracy in Southeast Asia

A recent study published by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute last January 2025 entitled "Youth and Civic Engagement in Southeast Asia: A Survey of Undergraduates in Six Countries" showed several young people across Southeast Asia having a level of acceptance for a non-democratic government. In the survey, one item was phrased as, "under certain circumstances, a non-democratic government is acceptable" and many respondents agreed. Singapore at 27.6%, the Philippines at 25.3%, Thailand at 24.1%, Indonesia at 24.6%, Malaysia at 19.4%, and Vietnam at 18.9% (Saat et al., 2025).

Similarly, a 2023 survey of young people in twenty-one countries found that there is a positive attitude towards democracy because it fosters international cooperation and supports upholding human rights. However, a large number of young people in the same survey believe in both military rule and having a strong leader who can do away with elections and consult a legislative body (Open Society Foundation, 2023). This survey is reminiscent of the HUMAN Survey Project, in which millennials were the least satisfied with how democracy works (Lewsey, n.d.). Apart from evidence that the youth are embracing strong leadership that is less democratic, there is also evidence across the globe of populism, authoritarianism, and extremism having public support.

The cynicism and disappointment toward democracy have been growing over time. It is easy to believe that democracy has "failed to deliver." When linked with development, democracy has not lived up to the promise that it will usher a better quality of life (Fossati and i Coma, 2023). Accountability in governance is necessary. Corruption is considered one of the key issues facing populations across the world, even in established democracies. Unabated corruption and quality of life issues provide a partial explanation of why many, especially young people, are skeptical of democracy. Part of the problem is that the emphasis has always been on procedural democracy over participatory democracy (Loh, 2008). Procedural democracy needs to be coupled with participatory democracy.

The state-centric approach to democracy, especially one that focuses on the processes and institutions should be coupled with a focus on society and citizen participation. There should be an appreciation of the rights of multiple

stakeholders and interests. The right of citizens to articulate and express their opinion, especially in holding those in power accountable, is essential in encouraging participation in public life. Members of society have to be involved in decision-making. Beyond consultative processes, citizens should be regarded as essential and engaged at different levels of decision-making. This, however, is far from what is happening. In many countries economic and political elites dominate decision-making. There is very little room for alternative voices to be heard. States can easily comply with procedural democracy that benefits those with access to power. One example is holding regular elections because it provides legitimacy. It is easy to understand why elites embrace procedural democracy while downplaying participatory democracy.

## Unpacking participatory democracy

Participatory democracy "stresses that everyday rights, interests, perspectives and involvement of civil society at large must be taken into consideration by the powers that be in between elections" (Loh 2008, p. 127). Effective and meaningful participation include having access to accurate information, addressing the structural issues that create and sustain inequalities. By encouraging participation from the grassroots, not only does it generate awareness that citizens need to hold those in power accountable but it also strengthens the sense of shared responsibility and identity in a community.

These requirements for participatory democracy, to be real and meaningful, are challenged by structural obstacles that are difficult to dismantle. One obstacle is electoralism. There is an overemphasis on elections. And voting is seen by many as the main, or the only participatory avenue in political life. The fallacy of electoralism is "the tendency to focus on holding elections while ignoring other political realities" (Schmitter and Karl 1991, 81). When there is patronage democracy such as countries like the Philippines, it is difficult for citizens to have meaningful political engagement. Instead, "voting remains the primary mode of political participation, notwithstanding the fact that this periodic political exercise has been a less than satisfactory instrument in securing political accountability" (Holmes, 2016, p. 16).

Projects to promote democracy in Southeast Asia emphasized elections. Democracy promotion almost always involves procedural democratic initiatives that will then be followed and trailed by participatory democracy projects. However, it is precisely these key democratic procedures that are contributing to the backsliding of democracy, in part due to electoralism (Schmitter and Karl, 1991; Holmes, 2016) and long-term strategic manipulation of the electoral process (Bermeo, 2016). The high cost of elections in the region both directly and indirectly undermine democratic institutions through democratic procedures.

## Practices of participatory democracy

Participatory democracy involves access to reliable information, and this includes education. It requires consultation at the grassroots level involving all sectors, especially the youth. Dialogue among citizens, elected representatives, and experts are part of participation. What can be challenging is how to bridge and balance of the role of experts and local experience (Krick, 2022). Because the deliberation of policy can be complex, knowledge-based decision-making has a reciprocity dimension. Experts and citizens must share information to arrive at an optimal decision.

Having reliable information, consultation, dialogue and partnership are key practices for participatory democracy in order for the public to be involved in governance outside of the electoral cycle. Ultimately, participatory democracy should generate policy outcomes that will be beneficial to the population. Encouraging participatory democracy will create an environment of transparency and accountability not just for elected representatives but for all. More importantly, providing adequate resources and spaces for participation will give citizens a sense of ownership of the decisions and policies that directly affect them and their communities. Literature on participatory democracy point to the positive effects of engagement i.e., direct participation rather than through proxy through elected representatives (Pateman 1970, 2012). Involvement and meaningful participation will further generate an attitude of civic responsibility. The "plurality of voices" can shape discourse and policy outcomes but also embed accountability mechanisms within the process. Participation encourages "layers of scrutiny, dissenting voice" and includes holding accountable those responsible for poor policy implementation or policy failure (Pateman 1970, 2012). Participatory democracy can also ensure greater accountability if citizens are involved in policy monitoring and evaluation. Policy outcomes can improve in the process because, along the way, there is a mechanism to watch and guard.

## Criticisms against participatory democracy

Some sectors of society find participatory democracy comes with a high cost. To involve multiple individuals, groups, and interests is expensive. Providing information, calling for a consultation, engaging in dialogue, and building partnerships require resources and can take time. There are real, logistical costs to bringing people together. At times legitimate incentives need to be provided to ensure participation. There are social costs that are already in place that can hinder genuine participatory democracy. The cost of knowing about issues, having reliable information requires literacy. This marginalizes those without access to education or information. Citizens prioritize livelihood, earning a daily wage. It can be difficult to participate, where information, consultation, and dialogue

take time. Program design with an embedded incentive can yield grassroots participation. The example of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre illustrates, "In a very significant reversal of the usual pattern of political participation, poor citizens form a large proportion of participants; usually they are marginalized" (Pateman 2012, p. 11).

In some states, participatory democracy can be "hijacked" for the purposes of the incumbent political elites i.e., transforming participatory democracy as one more legitimizing exercise. There is little to no dissenting voice because community leaders and its members have loyalty to a political clan or political dynasty. The transactional nature of the relationship can at times satisfy short-term interests rather than long-term goals. When resources are used to orchestrate disinformation and misinformation, especially in social media, encouraging political participation can be a vehicle for increased polarization and extremism.

While there are unintended outcomes regarding participatory practices, it is still worth noting that empowered individuals drive democracy. Shrinking civic space, restrictive laws, and harassment strategies dissuade individual and collective political participation. To encourage citizens to help steer the state, an assurance that there is a safe space to do so and there are resources to provide them with tools can generate more participation. Legal support, training, and supported public campaigns can be productive interventions to ensure participation from citizens.

With participation, power is dispersed rather than concentrated among a few with economic and political power. States that claim to be democracies should provide an environment conducive to participation and open to demands for transparency and accountability. Democratic societies depend on their members' vigilant and active participation. Citizens are encouraged to form part of the solution and strategies to pursue the state's and society's goals. Upholding the rule of law and respecting human rights complement the right to participate because there is an assurance of a security and protection from abuse or retaliation. Southeast Asia provides multiple examples of successful people power initiatives across time. Sadly, the region also offers examples of flawed democracies wherein participation in democratic processes is curtailed or controlled.

# Historical Participatory Democracy in Southeast Asia

It is worth remembering various examples of pivotal participatory democracy moments in Southeast Asia. The Philippines, known as one of the oldest democracies in the region, experienced a momentous "People Power" movement in the 1980s that toppled a dictatorship. This spontaneous outpouring of support for a democrat candidate triggered the Third Wave of Democratization in the region. The initial post-Marcos years saw the active involvement of multiple sectors. Because the culture of impunity persisted in the post-authoritarian Philippines, so did the threats to participatory democracy. Aquino II tried to bring back participatory democracy through the Bottom-up Budgeting and Open Government initiative, but these proved short-lived after the election of Rodrigo Duterte. Other Southeast Asian democracies like Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia experienced highs and lows in the level of participation by members of civil society during the 1990s, 2000s, and 2020s. At times, pockets of civil society were co-opted by autocrats or threatened in the region. The common themes that drew much participation include corruption, human rights, and the rule of law. Below are examples of participatory democracy across Southeast Asia and across time.

## Philippines and its struggles with democracy

In the Philippines, non-government organizations (NGOs) are often considered distinct from people's organizations (POs), which are "generally involved in grassroots work" (Loh, 2008, p. 129). Despite such a distinction, however, the NGOs and POs frequently undertake crucial roles in the Philippines, the oldest democracy in Southeast Asia. Their impact was greatly demonstrated in February 1986, when they coalesced with actors from across the political spectrum to organize a massive People Power uprising that eventually toppled the Ferdinand Marcos Sr. dictatorship (Loh, 2008; Magadia, 1999). Thereafter, civil society groups assumed active roles in shaping the policy-making arena, including the areas of forest governance (Magno, 2001); women's rights (Francisco, 2021); and indigenous peoples' rights (Rico, 2007). Additionally, some NGOs opted to participate in the elections either through their political parties or by building coalitions with specific candidates. A notable NGO that took such a venture is the Institute for Popular Democracy (IPD). Through its Akbayan Citizens Action Party, they have earned seats in the House of Representatives and contested at the local political offices. By directly partaking in the electoral arena, IPD "believes that it can help to deepen democracy and restore electoral legitimation" (Loh, 2008, p. 129).

The party-list system, which is provided in the 1987 Constitution of the Philippines, provides a viable opportunity for NGOs and civil society in general to partake in democratic policy-making by representing the marginalized sectors in the legislature (Tigno, 2019). This system, however, has historically been exploited by political elites for their particularistic interests (Teehankee, 2019). As per the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, political dynasties have extended their stronghold on power by running as nominees of party-lists. This is evident in the current 19th Congress, where 36 of the 54 (66%) of the party-lists have at least one nominee who belongs to a dynasty (Baluis, Isip, and Fonbuena, 2024). By occupying legislative seats, the elites not only entrench their dominance in Philippine politics, but they also trump other party-lists who could have genuinely represented the interests of the marginalized sectors. Outside the legislative arena, the space for participatory democracy is also constricted and riddled with challenges. Red-tagging, or the blacklisting of figures and groups as underground rebels without credible basis, is a serious predicament that deters civil society's political participation. It was identified by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNCHR) (2020, p. 10) as a "persistent and powerful threat to civil society," resulting in cases of violence against red-tagged personalities or groups. The Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) also threatens meaningful participation in democratic politics in the Philippines. Enacted in July 2020 to "prevent, prohibit, and penalize terrorism," the law's unclear definition of what constitutes acts of terrorism and who can be identified as terrorists pose serious concerns among activists. The ATA holds "the potential to criminalize anyone in the country's rich civil society ecosystem," even those who intend to promote and protect democratic principles (Sajor, 2022, p. 52). It is thus argued that, through the ATA, the executive branch can instrumentalize the legal system for partisan purposes under the guise of addressing terrorism. Given such constraints, social media platforms have emerged as an alternative space for NGOs to promote their advocacies. Unfortunately, these are also being weaponized "to spread misinformation, to troll, to red-tag and to harass civil society and opposition politicians" in the Philippines (UNCHR, 2020, p. 13).

## Indonesia and activism

At the tail end of Suharto's New Order regime, Indonesia saw the formation of several politically inclined Indonesian NGOs. These NGOs played instrumental roles in promoting democracy, calling for constitutional reforms, and safeguarding civil liberties amid the sanctioned role of the military in Indonesian politics (Loh, 2008). Despite their efforts, substantial challenges still exist that preclude further participatory democracy in Indonesia. These include the extensive influence of the military, which has become more empowered amid the threats of separatist and extremist forces (p. 134-135).

NGOs continue to be politically active under incumbent president Prabowo Subianto, who is accused of human rights abuses during his time as a military general during the Suharto dictatorship. In December 2024, Prabowo suggested removing the regional elections and allowing regional legislatures to select the mayors and governors instead, adding that doing so would cut government expenditures (Dianti, 2024; Sood, 2024). Jeirry Sumampow of the Indonesian Voter Committee, an NGO working on election monitoring, opposed Prabowo's proposal, stating that scrapping regional elections would lead to the selection of leaders who would not truly stand for public interests. Nationwide protests opposed the government's intent to slash USD 19 billion worth of government spending, arguing that it will negatively impact support systems (Budiman, Teresia, and Widianto, 2024). More specifically, they put forward thirteen (13) demands, including a thorough review of the government's free meal program to ensure that it will not be used as a political tool; reversion of budget cuts in the education sector; abolition of the military's involvement in civilian affairs; enactment of a law to protect indigenous land and cultural rights; and comprehensive reform within the Indonesian police (Izzuddin, 2025). Protesters labelled their movement "Indonesia Gelap" (Dark Indonesia) to contrast with "Indonesia Emas" (Golden Indonesia), which refers to the government's mission to transform Indonesia into a developed country by 2045. The protests, which are being organized in various cities (Jakarta, Bandung, Surabaya, Semarang, and Bali), have been effective in highlighting the faults in governance. Nonetheless, Nicky Fahrizal of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies expressed doubts about the protests' stating that the "political elites in Indonesia are still comfortable with their positions in [Prabowo's coalitions]" (Yuniar, 2025).

## Thailand and democracy

Thailand has a history of mobilization especially among students. In the 1990's the mobilization of various groups in Thailand was hailed because of the participation of its multi-sectoral nature that included the middle-class. The Campaign for Popular Democracy (CPD), led by human rights NGOs, was organized. The CPD was instrumental in pushing them to guarantee political rights and civil liberties in the constitution. More recently, the extent of the NGO's political participation was evident in 2020-2021. Demonstrations, sparked by the dissolution of a progressive political party, led to widespread calls for democratic changes in the country. Thai students spearheaded the NGOs amid this critical juncture. (Franken, 2024; Sirivunnabood, 2020). The social movement, largely led by Thai students, was initially anchored under three (3) core demands: the dissolution of the parliament, the drafting of a new constitution, and ending harassment against peaceful demonstrators. These demands were announced during a rally at the Democracy Monument in Bangkok in July 2020, where around 2,500 participants attended despite the pandemic restrictions at that

time ("Thai demonstrators", 2020). The student-led movement "signaled a major disruption of national narratives about deference, power, and legitimacy" in Thailand (McCargo, 2021, p. 1). Despite such massive protests, protesters' demands were seen by reformists as unheeded and there is a sense that genuine participatory democracy in Thailand remains elusive. Thai politics has been described as "a deeply compromised democratic system" (Chambers, 2024).

## Malaysia and civil society

Human rights NGOs were instrumental in the repeal of restrictive laws, most especially the Internal Security Act, which sanctioned detention without trial in Malaysia. More importantly, NGOs played critical roles during the "dual crisis" in the late 1990s amid the 1997 financial crisis and the 1998 political crisis following then-deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim's expulsion from office and his subsequent detainment. The NGOs' demand for justice, the rule of law, and measures against corruption, cronyism, and nepotism paved the way for the reformasi movement. This resulted in the emergence of Islamic movements. They later contributed to the formation of a multi-ethnic opposition coalition. Such developments demonstrated the presence of "a genuine crack in the edifice of Malay hegemony" (Loh, 2008, p. 132).

Malaysian NGOs remain active in political reform movements. This includes a coalition of political parties and 25 civil society groups to push for electoral reforms. They have encountered harassment due to their political activism. For instance, ahead of a major protest in November 2016, the Malaysian police raided their offices and arrested NGO officials. The government was criticized, asserting that these were part of "a series of crude and heavy-handed attempts to intimidate Malaysian civil society activists and other human rights defenders." In the aftermath of the corruption scandal that involved the government-linked company 1Malaysia Development Berhad, which came to light in 2015, Malaysian NGO Bersih assumed a pivotal role in coordinating with opposition political parties and organizing protests to call for then-prime minister Najib Razak's resignation. They raised four broad demands (clean elections; clean governments; saving their economy; and right to dissent) and ten institutional reforms (such as, but not limited to, electoral reform, making the election commission accountable to the parliament; and public declaration of the assets of senior public officials) (Chong, 2018). Although Bersih has been a "major force in the development of Malaysian democracy," it is emphasized that the deepening of Malaysia's democracy can be mainly attributed to the continuous coalition-building between the civil society and political parties (p. 128).

## Myanmar contemporary challenges

The National League for Democracy, earned a landslide victory over the military-affiliated Union Solidarity and Development party in the November 2020 elections. But in February 2021, after alleging that the elections were fraudulent, the Tatmadaw (the military of Myanmar) launched a coup (Gravers, 2021; Pietromarchi and Gadzo, 2021). These, in turn, effectively reimposed military rule in Myanmar following a democratic transition that began in 2011. Three months after the coup, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) agreed on a five-point consensus that centred on ending the violence and facilitating peace negotiations in Myanmar. Amid the "underwhelming regional and international response," Myanmar's civil society united in calling for sanctions, an arms embargo, and referral of the crisis to the International Criminal Court (CIVICUS, 2024, p. 85). They also urged the ASEAN to consult not only the military junta but also the civil society and other pro-democracy actors. They lamented, however, that "the international community and states in the region don't seem to want to listen to civil society" (p. 85).

Despite such calls, tensions and clashes involving the Tatmadaw, protesters, and non-state armed groups persist in Myanmar. The return of military rule also paved the way for the "strong politicisation and radicalisation of civil society" (Stokke, 2023, p. 119). This resulted in the creation of pro-democracy alliances between civil society organizations and the National Unity Government, recognized as the country's government-in-exile. The coup also immediately led to the formation of a Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), which "mobilised workers and politicised unions in an unprecedented manner" (p. 132). Consumer boycotts and international sanctions supported subsequently challenged the military regime (p. 132).

There are organizations actively campaigning for urgent resolutions to the Myanmar crisis. Among such groups is the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR), which is composed of advocates and former lawmakers from different ASEAN Member States. In February 2025, the APHR, together with various civil society groups, released an open letter addressed to Malaysian Prime Minister and 2025 ASEAN Chair Anwar Ibrahim. In their letter, the APHR called for an "inclusive and decisive action" in Myanmar, arguing that the crisis "represents not only a national tragedy but also a pressing regional challenge that calls for principled and decisive leadership from ASEAN" (APHR, 2025). Among their suggested actions are the promotion of gender, ethnic, and social equity in ASEAN's Myanmar response; coordination with reliable local and regional organizations in delivering humanitarian needs; and the advancement of good governance and the rule of law in Myanmar. They also asserted the necessity of rejecting "any military-led elections that fail to meet internationally recognized democratic standards," arguing that "sustainable and meaningful resolution" is possible only with "those who truly represent the aspirations of Myanmar's people, rather than those who seek to suppress them" (APHR, 2025).

## Challenges to Participatory Democracy

The contemporary challenges to participatory democracy need examination because of the alarming trend of attraction towards authoritarian and populist rule. Skepticism towards democracy and its perceived failures has led to preferences that can, at times, be both extreme and highly polarizing. If information is a key element and necessary for effective participation, the kind of disinformation and misinformation age we are living in contributes to the kind of polarization and extreme partisanship we are seeing across many parts of the world, including Southeast Asia. The region is home to democracies with multiple adjectives such as weak, fledgling, patronage, hybrid, and compromised, to list a few. Can organized groups contribute to bolstering democracy through participation? In the 1990s, what some consider as the Third Wave of Democratization, there was an explosion of NGOs in the Philippines (Clarke, 1998). The opening of democratic space, coupled with many individuals steeped in organizing during the authoritarian regime, created a vibrant community of NGOs in the country. But even within the NGO community, which challenges the state to provide more participatory mechanisms and consultative partnerships for policy crafting and implementation, there have been issues of co-optation and internal conflict. According to Clarke (1998), "NGOs may simultaneously strengthen and weaken civil society" (p. 24). Southeast Asia has also seen "uncivil society" (Bunte, 2023). NGOs are, at times, left with little choice but to engage in partisan politics for their survival. Finding convergence of interests with parties, political alliances, coalitions, or even political dynasties is, at times, needed to be able to push for interests, programs, and projects, and increase the probability of pushing successfully for policy reforms.

Another challenge is the limited participatory processes extended by the state. There are institutional and structural obstacles that make it difficult for individuals or civil society organizations to participate in. There is also the question of how NGOs can be effective instruments of political reform at a time of diminishing integration and cooperation among states. Additionally, the withdrawal of the United States from providing global assistance in development will be felt in the coming years. Democracy promotion projects of the USAID include programs that are focused on increasing levels of political participation.

The challenge of money politics persists in Southeast Asia, especially during the election cycle. Money politics organizes supporters in a way that mimics participation. Orchestrated by campaign funds coming from incumbency advantage or support from members of the political and economic elite, the role of campaign finance in subverting genuine political participation is a challenge. The combination of electoral violence and the high cost of electoral campaigns also means the political arena is very exclusive to incumbents and those with resources to challenge incumbents.

The increasing influence of the military in politics is another challenge in Southeast Asia. A culture of impunity persists. The use of harassment and violence to curb participation through the Anti-Terrorism Law or the National Security Act or by red-tagging (accusing individuals as members of an outlawed party like the communist party) is rampant. Efforts by the state to quell dissenting voices are evident. These do not only limit the space for participation, but are also effective in dissuading citizens from engaging and participating in a more direct way in political affairs. The repercussions from such actions serve as a disincentive to citizens who seek to engage in or promote participatory democracy. This was particularly true for countries that experienced violent populism.

Another challenge to participatory democracy is disinformation. The manipulation of information by autocrats and populists generates a strong base of supporters, increases polarization, and leaves little room for dialogue and consensus. Because the digital space rewards engagement rather than facts (Ressa 2025), it generates echo chambers, creating silos and diminishes the shared reality of what should be a community. On the other hand, access to information for accountability remains elusive in countries where there is no freedom of information bill. Open government partnership agreements are either discontinued or not given a similar priority by a new administration.

Accountability institutions are either weak or do not address issues of corruption. This is an obstacle to participatory democracy. Those in power avoid mechanisms of scrutiny and will not encourage participation that will bring about transparency. When oversight and regulatory bodies are not performing their mandate, there is little participatory platform offered to citizens and groups.

## Conclusion

Participatory democracy matters more in this critical juncture. It needs to overcome "embedded power relations" (Reid, 2005) by providing an "opposition stance" without having an overly critical view of democracy. Generational preference that finds democracy less attractive and prefers authoritarian rule is deeply troubling. There is a need to be critical of democratic processes without generating skepticism. This skepticism can lead to extreme views that contribute to polarization and an attraction to populism for some individuals and groups. In order to push back from growing acceptance and taste for illiberal rule and extreme views that increase polarization, there is a need to bolster linkages between domestic and international issues-based coalitions. There should be safe spaces, both physical and digital, for discourse and discussion that offer reliable information that can lead to mobilization, volunteerism, and campaigns. However, participatory democracy must also be wary of being used as a vehicle for further polarization and embrace of populism.

Participatory democracy needs to overcome the social dimension of lack of inclusivity, especially for those marginalized. Recent publications suggest that mobilization design, tools, and targets can bring about a more inclusive participatory democracy, especially for the working class (Garcia-Espin, 2024). Citizen participation provides real-life experience to the process of decision making and policy crafting. Left to experts and policy makers with a more rigid perspective and approach, outcomes might not be as appropriate, effective and efficient if citizens had a voice and a way to examine proposed policies and initiatives that affect them directly. The inclusive nature of participatory democracy safeguards procedural democracy.

Successful innovations in participatory democracy need to find platforms for sharing. Community based or digital platforms provide opportunities for people to exchange experiences and lessons learned as the political landscape changes at the local, regional, and international levels. To attract the younger generation, there is also a need to explore ways to use social media for awareness and connections. As it is already, social media is also an arena to contest, convince, mobilize, and pay attention to in terms of trends. If the dominant discourse is being shaped by disinformation, a unified effort from citizens, experts, and government can curb it.

In Southeast Asia, each country and its unique political challenges will need to find short-term and long-term strategies. Electoral systems redesign, for example, will be a long-term goal for the Philippines, given the stronghold of political dynasties in the legislative branch. Adjusting participatory strategies by learning from the past is also essential. This is especially true in cases where

civil society organizations have been in conflict and experienced co-optation and fragmentation. Civil society groups, when pulled into procedural democracy, end up aligning with parties or personalities for a few converging interests. It is also crucial to reach out to young people in ways that will attract them to the principles of participation and democracy. If young people have an understanding of their role and experience of political participation, they might be able to identify their place in the decision-making process across all tiers. Given the current challenging conditions with democratic backsliding, populism, and polarization, groups pushing for an increase in political participation will have to be quicker to adapt and rethink new modalities of mobilization and to effectively take political action related to democracy, equality, and the environment, among others.

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