

Issue brief South and Southeast Asia are on the front lines of the democracy-autocracy showdown

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Across South and Southeast Asian countries grappling with authoritarianism, the United States must adopt country-specific democracy assistance efforts that preserve civic space, delegitimize authoritarian leaders, and protect free media.

Bottom lines up front

- The region includes resilient, strained, fragile, and collapsed democracies—all benefit from democracy assistance that preserves civic space, delegitimizes authoritarian leaders, and protects free media across the region.
- Key challenges include no-strings-attached Chinese financing, restrictions on political choice, and disinformation.
- Protecting democratic institutions and practices can create governance stability and help the United States fortify important economic relationships.

■ Introduction

How do democracies die? Not with a dramatic coup, but through quiet, intentional dismantling—rules bent just slightly, laws rewritten, oppositions discredited and then disarmed.¹ This warning from political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt has proven prophetic across South and Southeast Asia, where the past decade has witnessed steady democratic erosion.

According to Freedom House's 2025 assessments, nine countries across South and Southeast Asia registered net declines in political rights and civil liberties since 2015—including Cambodia, India, Indonesia, the Maldives, Myanmar, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam—while others such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka saw modest improvements.² The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute also reports significant declines in the

1. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018).
2. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2025: The Uphill Battle to Safeguard Rights*, February 2025, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2025/uphill-battle-to-safeguard-rights>.

Electoral Democracy Index scores of several countries in the region in recent years.³ This trend underscores that even seemingly stable democracies can undergo serious erosion of their democratic institutions.

Yet the pattern is not uniform. From Indonesia’s institutional resilience to Myanmar’s military collapse, the region reflects not a single arc but a mosaic of democratic experiences—some unraveling, others resisting, many caught in an uneasy limbo. To make sense of these divergent patterns, this paper outlines four broad categories of country cases—not intended to simplify, but to reflect recurring traits: democracies that have held firm under pressure (resilient democracies); those that appear intact but are internally weakening (strained

democracies); those whose institutions exist in name more than practice (fragile democracies); and those where the democratic practice has been openly dismantled (collapsed democracies).

With nearly 2.8 billion inhabitants, South and Southeast Asia are on the front line in the contest between liberal and authoritarian governance models. China’s state-led modernization offers an appealing, albeit illiberal template. Russia and other powers lend not just rhetorical support but operational tools to repress, manipulate, and surveil.⁴ The region’s democratic trajectory will carry implications far beyond its borders. As democracy is tested and redefined here, the terms of legitimacy, resistance, and political belonging across much of the world will be as well.

Table 1: Typology of democratic trajectories in South and Southeast Asia

Categories	Definition	Key characteristics	Cases
Resilient democracies	Institutions uphold integrity despite pressure	Regular elections, active civil society, independent judiciary, peaceful transfers of power	Indonesia, Malaysia
Strained democracies	Elected leaders weaken constraints while maintaining electoral institutions	Centralization of power, erosion of checks and balances, shrinking civic space	India, Philippines
Fragile democracies	Institutions exist but lack robustness	Weak rule of law, postponed or manipulated elections, uncertainty over transitions	Bangladesh, Pakistan
Collapsed democracies	Constitutional order decisively overturned	Authoritarian rule, dismantled institutions, suppression of dissent, lack of meaningful elections	Myanmar, Cambodia

3. Marina Nord et al., Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?, V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg, March 2025.

4. Aurel Croissant and Jeffrey Haynes, “Democratic Regression in Asia: Introduction,” Democratization 28, no. 1 (2021): 1–21.

Resilient democracies

Despite facing similar pressures as their neighbors, Malaysia and Indonesia have managed to preserve their democratic institutions through a combination of judicial independence, active civil society, and political cultures that still value competitive elections. Their resilience offers lessons for other countries grappling with authoritarian pressures.

Malaysia

Malaysia has demonstrated remarkable democratic resilience through successive political transitions, most significantly during the watershed 2018 elections that ended Barisan Nasional's sixty-one-year grip on power.⁵ Despite the political instability that followed—including the controversial “Sheraton Move” parliamentary reconfiguration and three changes in premiership between 2020 and 2022—constitutional processes prevailed, ultimately yielding a durable unity government under Anwar Ibrahim after the 2022 elections.⁶ This political settlement between former adversaries reflects a maturing democratic culture where coalition-building efforts trumped winner-takes-all politics. While Malaysia continues to navigate challenges including ethnic and religious polarization, endemic corruption networks, and institutional legacies from its semi-authoritarian past, its judiciary has increasingly asserted independence in landmark cases, most notably in upholding the conviction of former Prime Minister Najib Razak.⁷ Civil society organizations maintain active oversight of governance, even as authorities occasionally

employ outdated sedition laws to restrict political expression.⁸ Malaysia's capacity to weather multiple leadership crises while preserving core democratic institutions stands in sharp contrast to the authoritarian regression evident elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

Indonesia

The fall of Suharto's authoritarian regime in 1998 ushered in democratic reforms in Indonesia, leading to multiple peaceful transfers of power. In February 2024, former General Prabowo Subianto, Suharto's controversial ex-son-in-law, won the presidency in an election widely considered competitive, despite concerns over the outsized influence of his predecessor, Joko Widodo.⁹ Provincial and regional elections in November further demonstrated Indonesia's commitment to regular electoral processes.¹⁰ While Indonesia largely operates within democratic rules, it continues to grapple with systemic corruption and restrictions on religious freedom. Although the constitution guarantees religious freedom, only six religions are officially recognized, and blasphemy laws are enforced, leaving religious minorities vulnerable to discrimination.¹¹ These challenges reflect enduring tensions within the country's democracy. Nevertheless, civil society continues to play an essential role in defending democratic norms. In recent months, rushed legislative processes and Subianto's appointment of an active general to a civilian post prompted mass student protests demanding transparency, demonstrating continued public engagement and resistance in Indonesia.¹²

5. Meredith Weiss, “Malaysia's 14th General Election: Transition and Uncertainty,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 37, no. 3 (2024): 3–20.
6. Francis Hutchinson and Kevin Zhang, “Malaysia's Unity Government: Resilience amid Polarization,” *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 87 (2023): 1–15; and Eileen Ng, “Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Resigns amid Political Upheaval,” *Diplomat*, February 25, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/malaysias-prime-minister-mahathir-resigns-amid-political-upheaval/>.
7. Kikue Hamayotsu, “Judicial Independence and Democratic Consolidation in Malaysia,” *Asian Survey* 64, no. 2 (2024): 213–238.
8. Freedom House, “Malaysia,” in *Freedom in the World 2025*, 2025, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/malaysia>.
9. Thomas B. Pepinsky, “Why Indonesia's Democracy Is in Danger,” *Journal of Democracy*, February 2024, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/why-indonesias-democracy-is-in-danger/>.
10. Freedom House, “Indonesia,” in *Freedom in the World 2025*, accessed June 3, 2025, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/indonesia>.
11. US Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Indonesia 2025 USCIRF Annual Report*, April 2025, accessed June 3, 2025, <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2025-04/Indonesia%202025%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report.pdf>.
12. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, “Indonesia,” in *The Global State of Democracy – Democracy Tracker*, February 2025, accessed June 3, 2025, <https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/country/indonesia>.

■ Strained democracies

India and the Philippines reveal a troubling paradox: Even countries with deep democratic traditions can experience significant erosion while maintaining competitive elections. Their struggles show that democracy's survival depends not just on electoral competition, but on protecting the institutions that make elections meaningful.

India

Since Prime Minister Narendra Modi's election in 2014, India has experienced rising Hindu nationalism, communal tensions, and constraints on civil liberties, alongside a concentration of executive power and weakened checks and balances.¹³ Communal violence has increased rapidly; in 2024, there were fifty-nine communal riots, an 84 percent increase from 2023.¹⁴ Media freedom has deteriorated, with increased censorship of content critical of Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), such as a BBC documentary¹⁵ and films depicting the 2002 Gujarat riots.¹⁶ Independent journalism is under attack,¹⁷ and civil society groups have been targeted through funding cuts and mass shutdowns.¹⁸

In the face of these threats, India's democratic institutions have shown resilience. The 2024 general elections, which were peacefully conducted with over 640 million voters, were widely regarded as free and fair. Although Modi secured

a third term, the BJP underperformed, losing sixty-three seats and failing to secure a parliamentary majority.¹⁹ While the BJP's platform centered religious nationalism, voters prioritized local issues, reflecting the enduring strength of India's electoral processes.

The Philippines

The Philippines has experienced significant political and human rights challenges in recent years.²⁰ Under the populist and illiberal administration of former President Rodrigo Duterte, the country witnessed thousands of extrajudicial killings linked to a brutal drug war. Democratic institutions weakened rapidly, and critics in the judiciary were forced out as the Supreme Court began backing the executive. While the Philippines has a historically strong and diverse civil society, civic space and the media environment were suppressed through regulations, censorship, intimidation, and disinformation.

In 2022, Duterte was succeeded by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the son of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr.²¹ Although human rights have improved slightly under the current president, over 840 extrajudicial killings have occurred since he took office.²² Duterte's March 2025 arrest in Manila on an International Criminal Court warrant exacerbated the tense divide between Marcos Jr. and Vice President Sara Duterte ahead of the May midterm elections. While competitive, the elections exposed institutional vulnerabilities and were

13. Milan Vaishnav, "Legislative Capture in India: Is Democracy Back from the Brink?," *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 705, no. 1 (April 2025): 26–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162241307742>.
14. CSSS Team, "Hegemony and Demolitions: The Tale of Communal Riots in India in 2024," Centre for Study of Society and Secularism, January 22, 2025, accessed June 3, 2025, <https://csss-isa.com/secular-perspective/hegemony-and-demolitions-the-tale-of-communal-riots-in-india-in-2024/>.
15. Rhea Mogul et al., "India Censors BBC Documentary Critical of Modi," CNN, January 23, 2023, accessed June 3, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/23/business/india-modi-bbc-documentary-twitter-youtube-censorship-intl-hnk>.
16. Nikita Yadav, "L2 Empuraan: Why Mohanlal's Latest Film Has Sparked a Controversy," BBC News, March 31, 2025, accessed June 3, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4g2djxj7o>.
17. Reporters Without Borders, *World Press Freedom Index 2024*, 2024, accessed June 3, 2025, <https://rsf.org/en/index>.
18. CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, *India: Submission to the UN Human Rights Committee, 141st Session, May 2024*, accessed June 3, 2025, <https://civicsmonitor.contentfiles.net/media/documents/India.ICCPR.ResearchBrief.2024.pdf>.
19. Lucan Ahmad Way, "India Remains More Democratic Than Not," *Journal of Democracy*, October 2024, accessed June 3, 2025, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/india-remains-more-democratic-than-not/>.
20. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2024: Philippines Country Report*, 2024.
21. Richard Javad Heydarian, "The Return of the Marcos Dynasty," *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 3 (2022): 62–76, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2022.0040>.
22. Human Rights Watch, "Philippines: Terrorism-Financing Charges Abused," February 12, 2025, accessed June 3, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org>.

marked by aggressive disinformation campaigns, concerns about Chinese interference, and deep polarization.²³ The government continues to bring unfounded cases against civil society groups, and “red-tagging” (i.e., accusing individuals and groups of communist sympathies) persists, exposing people to harassment and violence.²⁴ Despite these threats, civil society remains active, criticizing injustices, advocating for reforms, and fighting for accountability.²⁵

■ Fragile democracies

Bangladesh and Pakistan remain caught between democratic aspirations and authoritarian realities. While their institutions remain weak and elections flawed, the persistence of civil society activism and public demands for accountability suggest that democratic possibilities have not been extinguished.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh is amid a pivotal political transition following the ousting of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August 2024. Hasina’s fifteen-year rule and the Awami League’s (AL) increasingly autocratic administration ended after mass student protests and were replaced by an unelected interim government led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus. Although Yunus has pledged democratic reforms and elections, his administration continues to exhibit some of the authoritarian tendencies seen under Hasina.²⁶ AL supporters, who once dominated Bangladeshi politics and suppressed opposition, now face similar harassment under the interim government and its allies.

Despite the erosion of civil liberties and democratic institutions under the AL, Bangladesh’s economy averaged healthy annual growth of 6.5 percent.²⁷ However, following the political instability in 2024,²⁸ foreign investments plummeted, inflation rose, and gross domestic product growth fell below 2 percent per annum. Meanwhile, the interim government has repeatedly postponed the promised elections, likely into 2026, raising concerns. Bangladesh’s democratic transition remains uncertain, with potential for either progression or regression. Opposition leaders have pushed for timely elections;²⁹ this, along with economic and political reform, will be vital to sustaining the country’s democratic aspirations.

Pakistan

Pakistan’s persistent civil-military imbalance continues to hinder democratic prospects, with the military maintaining an outsized influence over the government.³⁰ Judicial activism can act as a counterbalance, as Pakistan’s judiciary maintains remarkable independence despite the entrenchment of the military. Yet the assertiveness of the judiciary may also be a double-edged sword, increasing institutional competition and instability.³¹

Although the majority voted against the military establishment during the 2024 elections, the military continues to act as a veto power. Recent attempts to manipulate election outcomes, such as the rejection of former Prime Minister Imran Khan’s nomination papers, stripping his party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), of its electoral symbol, and manipulating vote counts, were reminiscent of military-engineered elections in

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23. Juliette Loesch, *Mid-term Elections in the Philippines: The Clan War Reaches New Heights*, Briefings de l’Ifri, Center for Asian Studies, Institut Français des Relations Internationales, May 20, 2025.
 24. Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2025: Philippines*, Human Rights Watch, January 2025.
 25. Associated Press, “Philippines Protesters Decry Alleged Injustices under Marcos,” *Voice of America*, December 10, 2022.
 26. International Crisis Group, *Bangladesh: The Dilemmas of a Democratic Transition*, International Crisis Group, February 2025.
 27. World Bank, *Bangladesh Overview*, World Bank, 2025.
 28. World Bank, *South Asia’s Growth Prospects Dimming amid Global Uncertainty: Increasing Domestic Revenues Key to Stronger Fiscal Buffer*, World Bank, April 23, 2025.
 29. Associated Press, “Bangladesh’s Ex-premier Khaleda Zia Returns, Adding Pressure for Elections,” May 6, 2025, accessed June 3, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/246a0a75ae2fcab2e03ddfb13c611491>.
 30. Freedom House, *Pakistan: Freedom in the World 2024 Country Report*, Freedom House, February 2024, accessed June 3, 2025, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/pakistan/freedom-world/2024>.
 31. Bakht Munir, Akhtar Ali Ansari, and Tahir Mahmood, “Judicial Activism in Pakistan and Its Impacts on Tripartite Governance: Lessons from the US Constitutional Construct,” *Global Political Review* 9, no. 3 (Summer 2024): 44–57, <https://gprjournal.com/fulltext/judicial-activism-in-pakistan-and-its-impacts-on-tripartite-governance-lessons-from-the-us-constitutional-construct>.

the 1990s.³² However, the failure of these interventions in 2024 has revealed vulnerabilities in the military's grip, signaling the persistence of democratic aspirations and potential shifts in power dynamics.

■ Collapsed democracies

Myanmar and Cambodia demonstrate how quickly democratic gains can be reversed when authoritarian forces consolidate power. External support from China and Russia has made these reversals more durable, showing that democracy's enemies are increasingly coordinated across borders.

Myanmar

Myanmar's democratic experiment ended abruptly with the February 2021 military coup, which deposed the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi and precipitated the country's descent into widespread conflict.³³ By early 2025, the junta's territorial control had contracted dramatically, with large areas now governed by a patchwork of ethnic armed organizations and People's Defense Forces aligned with the National Unity Government (NUG) operating from exile.³⁴ The military has responded with escalating brutality—deploying airstrikes against civilian populations, systematically torturing political detainees, and implementing scorched-earth campaigns in areas of resistance—resulting in over 5,000 civilian deaths and forcing more than 2.5 million into displacement since the coup.³⁵ Elections promised by the military have been repeatedly deferred, while Suu Kyi's detention was extended for an additional two years in January 2025 through transparently

politicized corruption charges.³⁶ International engagement has fragmented along geopolitical lines, with Western nations strengthening sanctions and extending recognition to the NUG while China, Russia, and Thailand maintain pragmatic relations with the junta.³⁷ Myanmar represents the region's most catastrophic democratic collapse, transforming from an imperfect but functioning electoral democracy into a failing state characterized by civil conflict, economic implosion, and humanitarian catastrophe.

Cambodia

Cambodia's democratic prospects continue to fade under the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), now led by Hun Manet, who succeeded his father, Hun Sen, after uncompetitive elections in July 2023. Cambodian elections have been widely recognized as rigged, with international observers documenting widespread irregularities, fraud, and vote tampering. The disqualification of the main opposition party, the Candlelight Party, over alleged registration issues effectively dismantled meaningful electoral competition.³⁸ The regime has become increasingly repressive, targeting critics like environmental and human rights activists through arbitrary arrests and forced disappearances.

The CPP has also cracked down on independent media by revoking licenses and censoring critical media outlets.³⁹ China's growing influence in Cambodia has further entrenched the CPP's authoritarian rule, as it provides economic support and political backing.⁴⁰ As Cambodia's largest investor, trading partner, and donor, China has been able to exert considerable sway over the administration's policies, and

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32. European Consortium for Political Research, May 20, 2024, accessed June 3, 2025, <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/pakistan-elections-perpetual-instability-in-a-military-controlled-democracy/>.
 33. International Crisis Group, "Myanmar's Civil War: Four Years of Resistance," Asia Report, no. 342, International Crisis Group, January 30, 2025.
 34. Mary Callahan, "The Fragmentation of Myanmar: Territorial Control in Post-coup Myanmar," United States Institute of Peace Special Report, USIP, March 2025.
 35. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Myanmar Humanitarian Needs Overview 2025, UN OCHA, January 15, 2025.
 36. Human Rights Watch, Myanmar: Justice Delayed, Justice Denied, Human Rights Watch, February 2025.
 37. Thitinan Pongsudhirak, "Great Power Competition and Myanmar's Intractable Crisis," *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 2 (2025): 68–79.
 38. Associated Press, "Cambodia's Top Opposition Party Barred from July Elections, Leaving Hun Sen's Party Unchallenged," AP, May 26, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/cambodia-opposition-party-election-hun-sen-63659ff8f2de992d84d2be748afb8b>.
 39. Human Rights Watch, "Cambodia: Hun Sen Extinguishes Media Freedom," February 15, 2023, accessed May 13, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/14/cambodia-hun-sen-extinguishes-media-freedom>.
 40. Bunthorn Khath and Chanrith Ngim, "Cambodia Has Not Tilted Away from China," *Fulcrum*, September 20, 2024, accessed May 13, 2025, <https://fulcrum.sg/cambodia-has-not-tilted-away-from-china/>.

Cambodia has aligned more closely with Beijing's foreign policy interests. Without democratic alternatives to China's influence and aid, this dynamic will leave little room for democratic renewal in Cambodia.

■ Cross-cutting challenges

Across South and Southeast Asia's varied political systems, certain challenges repeatedly surface that make democratic governance more challenging regardless of a country's context. Four of these challenges are particularly salient.

Digital authoritarianism and the rewiring of civic space: The early hopes that digital tools might democratize information have been overtaken by a more sobering reality. Across the region, states now wield surveillance, censorship, and algorithmic distortion not as exceptions but as deft instruments of coercive control. India has deployed surveillance of online speech; Cambodia has centralized digital infrastructure control; and the Philippines has blurred state messaging and disinformation.⁴¹ These tools are part of a broader architecture of control, quietly redefining the limits of dissent and the shape of public discourse.

China's model and strategic recalibration: Beijing's growing regional presence offers political elites a convenient alternative: stability without pluralism, growth without accountability, an undemocratic form of social contract. Chinese financing arrives without governance conditions and provides diplomatic cover against international scrutiny.⁴² Increasingly, the Chinese Communist Party also engages subnational actors—both governmental and nongovernmental—where scrutiny is weaker and institutional vulnerabilities are more pronounced. In Cambodia and Myanmar, this support has emboldened autocratic actors; in more open settings, it narrows strategic space for democratic engagement. Democracy assistance must contend with an emerging geopolitical reality that favors regime durability over democratic deepening.

Developmental absolutism and the erosion of political choice: Democratic rollback is increasingly justified through development discourse. Leaders frame electoral mandates as licenses for centralized control while dismissing institutional checks as inefficiencies.⁴³ In India and Bangladesh, majoritarian governance is defended as a prerequisite for growth; in Thailand and Singapore, technocratic authority substitutes for political deliberation. The result is marginalization of political choice, overtaken conveniently by performance-based legitimacy.

Information disorder and the fragility of shared reality: Across the region, democratic discourse is being reshaped by disinformation; algorithmic self-fulfilling echo chambers; and digitally amplified hate, especially through WhatsApp. In Myanmar, online propaganda fueled ethnic violence; in India and the Philippines, deepfakes and coordinated misinformation campaigns distort elections.⁴⁴ The fundamental problem is the collapse of shared language through which citizens might contest, interpret, or imagine their politics. Democratic institutions cannot function when the conditions for contestation of ideas have eroded.

■ Policy recommendations

US government support for democracy should be targeted and responsive to the different realities of the countries within each of these categories. For instance, countries experiencing democratic breakdown need different support than those still defending democratic space or those working to deepen democratic quality.

For resilient democracies: Deepening democratic quality

Democratic resilience, while encouraging, should not be mistaken for consolidation. In countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, support should move beyond preserving existing

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41. Freedom House. 2024. Freedom on the Net 2024: The Struggle for Trust Online — Digital Booklet. Washington, DC: Freedom House.
 42. Sebastian Strangio, "In the Dragon's Shadow: Southeast Asia in China's Sphere of Influence," *Foreign Affairs* 103, no. 1 (2024): 112–126.
 43. Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy in Asia," *Journal of Democracy* 36, no. 1 (2025): 45–58.
 44. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, *Digital News Report 2024: Southeast Asia Supplement* (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2024).

norms to actively strengthening democratic infrastructure. Fast-tracked visas for civil society leaders—across regime types—could facilitate regional mentorship networks through which democratic lessons diffuse more organically, especially when those lessons emerge from other Asian contexts rather than transatlantic ones. Bilateral trade agreements can be made contingent on demonstrable gains in press freedom and judicial independence. Cross-border investigative journalism, jointly supported by local and international media, can expose corruption networks that threaten institutional integrity.

For strained democracies: Defending democratic space

Where democratic institutions are under strain—as they evidently are in India and the Philippines—US government support must focus on preserving the civic space and avoiding normalization of authoritarian tactics. It should avoid high-level engagement with leaders who are actively involved in prosecuting journalists and/or silencing dissent, even if technical cooperation continues in parallel. Development aid can be redirected from compromised central agencies toward subnational governments that are overtly committed to democratic norms. Targeted sanctions against individuals involved in judicial capture or media repression can also send clear signals of accountability.

For fragile democracies: Building institutional resilience

In fragile democracies like Bangladesh and Pakistan, where institutions exist but often lack independence and/or depth, the priority should be to rebuild credibility. International financial institutions, particularly the International Monetary Fund, should tie future programs to transparent constitutional processes that include the opposition's participation. Funding for civil society-run parallel election observation/monitoring programs can strengthen integrity where official mechanisms fall short. Regional judicial networks can provide both technical assistance and normative pressure to bolster court independence and resist political interference.

For collapsed democracies: Supporting democratic resistance

Where constitutional order has collapsed—as in Myanmar and Cambodia—support must shift toward those still defending democratic legitimacy. Recognition and funding

should be extended to exiled national unity governments and aligned civil society organizations that retain public trust. “Democracy visa” pathways can offer protection and continuity for endangered journalists and activists. Financial sanctions should be imposed on military units and regime-linked families responsible for repression, thus reinforcing pathways for international legal accountability.

Addressing cross-cutting challenges

Support secure communication tools and digital literacy to push back against growing digital authoritarianism. Offer faster, transparent infrastructure financing to counter China's influence while underscoring the material benefits of democracy. Sponsor and fund research that links transparency to economic growth, and support business coalitions that champion the rule of law. Strengthen civic education and fact-checking efforts to resist disinformation and restore shared civic ground. Partner with regional democracies—Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Australia—to jointly support democratic actors across South and Southeast Asia. Such coordination not only amplifies reach but also serves as a visible and forceful counterweight to China's expanding illiberal influence.

Conclusion

The Cold War model of supporting elections and civil society organizations, while still important, cannot possibly address the sophisticated methods that elected leaders employ to dismantle democratic institutions from within. We need a differentiated approach that recognizes the distinct challenges facing countries at different points along the democratic spectrum while addressing the cross-cutting pressures that undermine democratic governance across the region. Democracy assistance must evolve beyond its traditional fixation on electoral processes. Instead of just funding election monitors and civil society training, donors should condition trade agreements on improvements in press freedom, invest in secure communication technologies for activists, and support independent judiciaries through targeted capacity-building programs. Without these foundations, electoral democracy remains symbolic. The future of democracy in South and Southeast Asia will not only shape national destinies. It will quietly, but decisively, alter how the world understands power, legitimacy, and the meaning of democratic resilience. This is where the United States must lead—not only with aid dollars, but also with the political will to make democratic governance a nonnegotiable component of its economic partnerships.

About the authors

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