Reassessing Political Polarization and Democratic Development in Southeast Asia

Author

Diego Fossati
Associate Professor
City University of Hong Kong
dfossati@cityu.edu.hk

Abstract

Polarization, an increasing ideological and affective divide between opposing political groups, is a key driver of democratic backsliding, as polarized politics typically erodes democratic norms. While the perils of polarization are undeniable, especially when polarization extends to collective emotions and social identities, ideological polarization is also a prerequisite for a key function of democratic politics, substantive representation. The link between polarization and democratic development is therefore more complex than commonly discussed, as polarization, while disruptive and potentially devastating for democracy, may at times offer unexpected opportunities for democratic advancement. This article illustrates this point with an analysis of six Southeast Asian cases that show sharply diverging trajectories in their relationship between polarization and democratic development. While some of them conform with theoretical expectations about the pernicious effects of polarization, other cases confound them, inviting us to better appreciate the complexity of the nexus between rising polarization and democratic decline.

Introduction

The interplay between democratic backsliding, the rise of populist actors, and increasing partisan polarization has emerged as a central concern in recent years (Arbatli & Rosenberg, 2021). Across various world regions, these phenomena have converged to challenge established democracies and question their foundations, capturing the attention of scholars, policymakers and the broader public. The concept of partisan polarization (Lauka, McCoy, & Firat, 2018), in particular, has come to the forefront as a key explanatory factor for democratic erosion, as academic research has increasingly documented its pernicious effects on democratic politics. The effects of polarization are multifaceted, encompassing a range of challenges that undermine the very essence of democratic governance, including increased political instability and diminished social cohesion. But perhaps the biggest challenge that polarization poses to democratic politics is its ability to erode democratic norms: in polarized politics, defeating the opposing camp can be more important than preserving basic democratic values and procedures.

A substantial body of research has therefore established a negative association between polarization and democracy, using both cross-national data and experimental evidence (Graham & Svolik, 2020; Orhan, 2022). However, while the pernicious implications of polarization are hard to overlook, a certain degree of ideological polarization is also indispensable for the proper functioning of democracy, particularly in terms of representing a range of views and interests in policy making. More specifically, substantive representation (Pitkin, 1967) falls short if political elites fail to articulate sufficiently differentiated and coherent policy platforms, which citizens can choose among at elections. This dual role suggests that polarization is not inherently detrimental, as the relationship between polarization and democracy is more complex than often perceived. The implications of rising polarization for democratic backsliding are therefore multifaceted. While excessive polarization, especially when it extends to collective emotions and social identities, can erode democratic norms and institutions, a moderate increase in polarization may fortify democracy by fostering better substantive representation.

Against this background, this article focuses on Southeast Asia to illustrate the complex interplay between polarization and democratic development, as this region provides a very suitable empirical setting for this purpose. Excluding the most authoritarian cases of Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Brunei, the remaining countries vary substantially both in their degree of polarized politics and in recent trajectories of regime change. Malaysia and Thailand, for example, are typically described as highly polarized political systems, while Singapore and East Timor are not, and some debate exists on whether Indonesia or the Philippines could be described as polarized. As for democratic development, again variation within these six countries is substantial. Beyond democratic collapse in the Thai case, most scholars agree that democratic erosion has taken place in recent years in Indonesia and the Philippines, while stability best describes Singapore and East Timor and Malaysia has arguably been on a trajectory of democratic advancement.

More specifically, two research questions drive the analysis developed in this article. First, to what extent can Southeast Asian countries be described as "polarized"? As mentioned above, the answer to this question has generated some debate among scholars, although there are cases that are more straightforward than others. To begin an analysis of the implications of political polarization for democracy in Southeast Asia, then, a first step is to ascertain the degree of polarization in the six countries covered in this article. To do so, a comparative approach is needed to appreciate how Southeast Asian cases fare when compared to others outside the region. The data this article relies on for this purpose are from the V-Dem dataset,

which includes a suitable indicator of political polarization based on assessments by country experts that covers a wide range of democratic and hybrid regimes.

Second, to what extent has polarization contributed to trends of democratic erosion and autocratization in the region? This is of course a more challenging question to address than the descriptive question outlined above, as it implies a causal relationship between polarized politics and regime change. To be sure, offering a definitive answer to this question is beyond the scope of this article, but a preliminary study can ascertain if, and to what degree, the six Southeast Asian cases conform with theoretical expectations about a negative effect of increasing polarization on the quality of democracy. To this end, this article conducts a longitudinal analysis of the interplay between the aforementioned index of political polarization and other indicators of democratic development since the year 2000. To preview some of the findings, the analysis shows that the answer to the latter question varies substantially across case, as the impact for partisan polarization on democratic development is complex and nuanced, encompassing both negative consequences and less expected beneficial outcomes. This complexity challenges prevailing theories of polarization and democratic decline, revealing a multifaceted nexus that demands more thoughtful consideration and closer engagement with the contingencies of case-specific political processes.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical framework that underpins the analysis, offers a definition of polarization and discusses the link between polarization and democratic backslidings. The following section leverages V-Dem data and offers a quantitative analysis to address the two questions outlined above, putting polarization in Southeast Asia in comparative perspective and studying trajectories of polarization and democratic performance over time. After that, the article offers more qualitative insight on four selected Southeast Asian cases. Contrasting the experiences of the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand allows to highlight the importance of local historical legacies and political dynamics in shaping the outcomes of political polarization and democratic development. In the final section, the article concludes by discussing the implications of the analysis for academic research and democratic practice.

Polarization, Democracy and Autocratization

In one of its most straightforward conceptualizations, political polarization refers to the distribution of preferences along a key ideological dimension, such as progressive vs. conservative or left vs. right. A polarized population is one where "individual preferences divide people into clusters that are internally homogenous and distant from each other" (Przeworski, 2019, p. 113). Many, however, have emphasized that, beyond this "cognitive" or "ideological" dimension, polarization is also an affective phenomenon. Polarized individuals display a tendency to divide the world into "us" versus "them" along partisan lines, and develop negative feelings towards those who do not belong to their group (Robison & Moskowitz, 2019). There is therefore an important conceptual distinction that should be drawn between ideological and affective polarization, and it is worth noting that these two types are often empirically as well as conceptually distinct. On the one hand, voters may be polarized into two distinct ideological groups, but not develop a Manichean, emotionally charged view of their opponents. On the other hand, deep partisan division may emerge and sustain themselves even in politics where ideological cleavages are hard to identify.

More pertinently for the purpose of this article, scholars of democratic backsliding often understand polarization as a process rather than a static condition, a process through which

people and political elites become increasingly divided over ideology, public policy and partisan attachments (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021, p. 14). This process is deleterious for democracy because polarization undermines trust in the policy process and the legitimacy of democratic institutions, which is sometimes coupled with the emergence of anti-system populist actors with an authoritarian outlook. Furthermore, partisan polarization may increase tolerance for transgressions of democratic norms and help legitimize incumbents' attempts to curtail civil liberties and impair liberal checks and balances (Graham & Svolik, 2020; Svolik, 2018). Several scholars thus identify partisan polarization as a serious danger to the stability of democratic regimes (Arbatli & Rosenberg, 2021; McCoy, Rahman, & Somer, 2018), and polarization is typically discussed in public debates as one of the more pervasive ailments of contemporary democracy (Klein, 2020). In short, while we can identify a variety of ways in which the concept of polarization is used in existing research, most studies understand polarization as a multi-dimensional construct entailing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects, and they warn against the possibly devastating implications of polarized politics for democratic institutions.

The experiences of countries such as Egypt, Venezuela and Hungary are only some examples of powerful illustrations that such warnings are well-founded. However, while it is hard to see benefits in affective polarization, ideological or cognitive polarization is also closely intertwined with a key aspect of democratic politics, namely representation. A healthy democracy is one in which political parties offer a range of alternative ideological positions on key issues, voters cast their ballots (at least in part) based on their ideological preferences, and parties behave according to their programmatic promises. From this perspective, then, some forms of partisan polarization may also have positive implications for democracy (LeBas, 2018; Lupu, 2015; Wang, 2014). First, more polarized political debates increase the salience of political divisions. As such, they may strengthen perceptions that representative politics offers meaningful political alternatives, and they may clarify the various options available to ordinary citizens. This in turn may increase public satisfaction with democracy by suggesting that the range of political views held by common citizens are mirrored by political elites. Second, when political alternatives become clearer and more salient in public debates, citizens may be more likely to acknowledge meaningful differences between political parties and thus be more inclined to develop partisan affiliations. In turn, mass partisan affiliations are often considered crucial for democratic consolidation, as they contribute to the stabilization of party systems.

The effect of partisan polarization on democracy is thus more complex than often discussed. First, one could argue that at least some aspects of polarization may be beneficial for democratic development, at least in certain empirical settings, given their possibly positive impact on substantive representation. Second, there is an important difference to be drawn between moderate forms of polarization, which could be highly divisive but are physiological to democratic competition, and more severe forms that may paralyze democratic institution and jeopardize democratic norms. To assess the extent to which polarization may lead to democratic decline, then, we need to theorize more precisely what type of polarization is detrimental for democratic institutions.

Several scholars have suggested that polarization may be described as "severe" or "pernicious" when a single cleavage emerges as dominant in political life, one that overrides all other divisions and pits two blocks one against the other in irreconcilable opposition, with members of one block questioning or even denying the legitimacy of the other side (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019; McCoy & Somer, 2019). This type of polarization exhibits three key feature that are important to consider when analyzing the relationship between polarization and democratic backsliding. The first is that this deleterious type of polarization involves not only political elites, but also masses, with substantial levels of affective polarization observed among ordinary citizens. Second, severe polarization entails a binary contraposition between

two large camps, either political parties or party coalitions, that are large enough to dominate politics, so that partisan conflict becomes the dominant feature of political life. Third, severe polarization needs to be rooted in deep-seated social identities to sustain itself beyond the tenure of polarizing political figures.

In analyzing polarization and democratic development in Southeast Asia, this article will follow this framework and draw from both quantitative and qualitative sources to answer the two intertwined questions presented above. The analysis focuses on six cases, namely East Timor, Singapore, and especially the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. More authoritarian cases in the region are excluded for the obvious reason that the political competition associated with polarization processes is severely constrained in those setting. Yet, it is important to note that the six included cases differ substantially in their political regimes, as further discussed below. With such variation in political institutions both across countries and within countries over time, applying a strict criterion for case selection (for example, a requirement that all cases be at least an electoral democracy over the last several years), risks excluding potentially interesting cases that have never been fully democratic or have oscillated between periods of authoritarian and democratic or hybrid regime rule. For this reason, the analysis only excludes cases that have not had at least partially democratic institutions at some point in the last two decades, as well as cases for which data is unavailable.

Political Polarization and Democratic Erosion in Southeast Asia

How polarized is Southeast Asia? To appreciate how typically or uniquely polarized Southeast Asian cases are, it is necessary to analyze them in comparative perspective. One of the most widely used datasets for political research, V-Dem, includes an indicator of political polarization that may be suitable for this purpose. The panel of experts on whose responses these data are based are asked to assess to what degree society is polarized in antagonistic political blocks, with the further clarification that the focus of the assessment should be on polarization among ordinary citizens in situations that go beyond political activities. Specifically, as reported in the V-Dem Codebook, the statement reads: "Societies are highly polarized if supporters of opposing political camps are reluctant to engage in friendly interactions, for example, in family functions, civic associations, their free time activities and workplaces." (Coppedge et al., 2023, p. 226). This conceptualization and measurement of political polarization is therefore closely aligned with the first two features of severe polarization described above, given the emphasis on mass-level dynamics, affective polarization and the existence of two contraposing partisan blocks. While this indicator does not help in determining if polarization dynamics are rooted in well-established social identities, it is thus a useful first step to study polarization in Southeast Asia comparatively.

Respondents rate the degree of polarization in their country of expertise using a scale with five choices, ranging from the lowest value of 0, meaning that a society is not at all polarized, to a maximum value of 4, denoting societies that are so polarized that supporters of opposing camps generally interact in a hostile manner. Figure 1 reports average estimated political polarization score for selected (mostly Asian) countries during the last decade (2013-2022), showing a wide range of variation in polarized politics. The values in the full dataset range from Ireland's 0.2, the lowest score, to 4 for Turkey, the most polarized country in the world according to the V-Dem panel of experts. Among Southeast Asian cases, too, variation is substantial. The

least polarized country in the region, among those for which data are available,[1] is Singapore, scoring a value of 1.2, closely followed by the Philippines with 1.5. These values suggest that these two countries have fairly low levels of political polarization, and East Timor too, with a score of 2, is below the dataset median of 2.2. The remaining cases include an above-average polarization level for Indonesia (3) and a very high polarization score for Malaysia and Thailand (3.4 and 3.5, respectively). While the next section will discuss further the level of polarization in specific countries with a more nuanced qualitative approach, this first look at the data suggests that a discussion of polarization in Southeast Asia should pay attention to the substantial cross-country variation in the region, which makes it difficult to portray a general picture of the region.
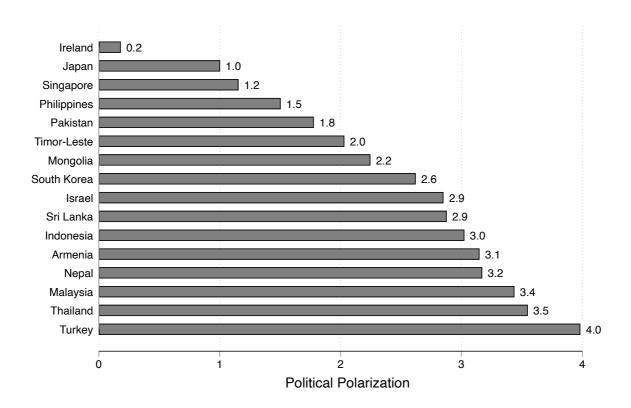

Figure 1. Average level of political polarization in selected countries, 2013-2022

Given its longitudinal format, the V-Dem data can also deliver interesting insight about the trajectory of polarization in the region. As mentioned above, polarization results from changing political dynamics and can fluctuate substantially over time within the same country. How have patterns of political polarization in Southeast Asian counties evolved over time, then, and how closely intertwined are they with processes of democratic advancement and backsliding? To help answer these questions, Figure 2 displays annual estimates of the political polarization score and V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) for six Southeast Asian countries since 2000.

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[1] The figure only displays cases for which V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index score is higher than 0.15. This excludes the Southeast Asian countries of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, while data for Myanmar and Brunei are not available.

Visual inspection of the various panels reveals that in this case, too, variation in the relationship between polarization and democratic erosion is significant across the six cases.

In Singapore, polarization today seems to be on par with what it was in the early 2000s, and this stable pattern is coupled with a very limited upward trajectory of the LDI, therefore suggesting that this case is marked by a high degree of stability. In the Philippines, the two lines do not seem to be closely related either: while the quality of democracy, as captured by the LDI, has decreased dramatically during the two decades, political polarization has increased only slightly, and the most recent trend of democratic backsliding seems to have started before this modest uptick in polarization. East Timor boasts the highest LDI score in the region, a testament to the consolidation of this country into a healthy and stable electoral democracy over the last two decades. While the polarization score does not oscillate much in this case, the chart does show a decrease of polarization in Timorese society starting from 2007, and this decrease unfolds concomitantly with advancements in the LDI. Indonesia is a less liberal democracy today than it was in the mid-2010s, according to the V-Dem index, but the relationship between this trend and political polarization is unclear. While there was a noticeable increase in polarization between 2009 and 2017, Indonesia was rated as a highly polarized society even before 2010, when its LDI was significantly higher than today. Finally, the two highly polarized polities represented in the bottom row show strikingly different patterns. In Malaysia, political polarization has reached a peak around the mid-2010s and has not declined since. Surprisingly, however, more polarized politics in this country has been associated with democratic progress, not decline, as the LDI score is now substantially higher than it was in 2017. In Thailand, by contrast, the much more dramatic increase in polarization observed in the 2000s seems to have ushered in an era of democratic decline, as the high LDI scores of the early 2000s have oscillated wildly before collapsing after 2014.
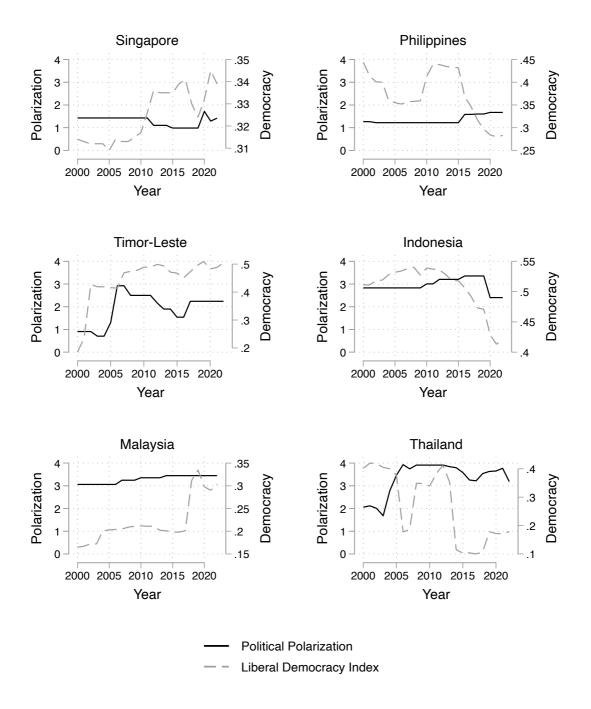
Figure 2. Political polarization and democratic development in Southeast Asia, 2001-2022

To summarize, this preliminary analysis of available quantitative data indicates that Southeast Asia confounds theoretical expectations of a relationship between partisan polarization and democratic decline. Only two cases appear to corroborate this hypothesis, namely East Timor, where a decrease in polarization has unfolded together with democratic advancement, and Thailand, where extreme polarization has led to democratic breakdown. Of the remaining cases, three do not show a close relationship between polarization and democratic development, while one, Malaysia, has seen increased polarization coupled with democratic advancement.

Qualitative Insight from Four cases

Building upon the quantitative analysis presented in the previous section, this section follows a more qualitative approach to analyze the relationship between polarization and democratic development in Southeast Asia. It offers a more nuanced exploration that contextualizes the quantitative findings against the backdrop of historical trajectories, socio-political dynamics, and country-specific contexts, and in so doing, it hopes to deliver a more vivid and comprehensive account of the factors at play in each country.

The Philippines: Elusive Polarization and Democratic Backsliding

Over the last decade, the Philippines have experienced a process of pronounced democratic backsliding, as the rise of Rodrigo Duterte has disrupted established political dynamics. For many scholars, Duterte has embodied a typical mix of authoritarian and populist politics, leading to unsettling developments such executive aggrandizement, an erosion of democratic norms, attacks to independent media, intimidation of opposition figures, large-scale disinformation campaigns and a bloody "war on drugs" with thousands of extra-judicial killings (Curato, 2017; Thompson, 2023). Democratic erosion has been so severe that some have questioned whether the Philippines should still be considered as a democracy (Iglesias, 2022). More recently, the landslide victory of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. in 2022 and widespread feelings of authoritarian nostalgia have raised further concern about the health of democracy in this country (Talamayan, 2021).

To what extent, then, can these dangerous developments be attributed to political polarization? A first observation is that the Philippines are typically described as a political system dominated by powerful families, in which political parties are poorly organized, highly clientelistic and show no significant programmatic or ideological differentiation (Tadem & Tadem, 2016). To be sure, this does not imply that politics in the Philippines is completely devoid of ideological contestation. For example, analysts of Filipino politics often agree that different presidents may have different ideological commitments to supporting liberal democracy, which could bear implications for the policies they implement (Deinla & Dressel, 2019). Yet, this portray of Filipino politics suggests that the degree of political polarization is typically low in this country, as the personalistic nature of the party system has prevented the crystallization of any ideological or partisan differences in political institutions. From this perspective, then, ideological-cognitive polarization in the Philippines is generally negligible, as highlighted by V-Dem data, and so is its contribution to democratic backsliding.

As mentioned above, however, polarization can develop and sustain itself independently from ideological divisions. Arugay and Slater (2019) argue precisely that this has been the case in the Philippines, illustrating their argument with an account of Joseph Estrada's presidency and aftermath in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In that case, two matching oligarchic factions pursued a strategy of mass mobilization in their competition for power, which resulted in a highly polarized political climate despite the absence of programmatic divergence. Partisan polarization, however, was short-lived and did not consolidate into a shared social identity. It may have been intense and paralyzing for a few years, but it evaporated once the intra-elite conflict was settled.

As for more recent developments, Duterte's populist politics has been corrosive and polarizing, like populism often is elsewhere. In his war on drugs especially, Duterte has deployed a vitriolic rhetoric, violently attacking political opponents as corrupt, immoral and complicit with

criminals. This discursive strategy follows the Manichean playbook to breed affective polarization often found in populist mobilization, and in this case too, it has created polarized contraposing camps (Uyheng & Montiel, 2021). However, the extent to which this type of polarization could be described as "severe" is questionable. For one, like the cases of polarization past, the polarization around Duterte does not appear to have survived its presidency. Rather than alienating other powerful political families, Duterte has entered into a coalition with several of them, which was instrumental in securing the election of his daughter Sarah to the Vice-Presidency as Marcos' running mate (Teehankee, 2023). The intra-elite conflict that caused polarization in the past has thus been replaced by a broader coalition of key political dynasties that has produced formidable electoral majorities and marginalized opposition forces.

Furthermore, increased unity at the elite level is mirrored among ordinary voters, a vast majority of whom has sided with Duterte during backsliding and supported some of his most controversial policies (Kenny, 2020). While survey data may have overestimated support for Duterte and his agenda (Kasuya & Miwa, 2022), the results from the last presidential elections, in which Marcos triumphed with a margin of more than 30% on his closest rival, suggest that that the Duterte-Marcos camp has now a substantial mobilization advantage over their opponents. To be sure, this asymmetry in itself is not sufficient to rule out that significant levels of affective polarization may emerge in the near future, especially in the case of a breakdown of the Duterte-Marcos alliance or a growth in support for the opposing camp. But the current lack of electoral competitiveness indicates that political elites may have little incentives, for now, to further polarize their voters with divisive politics, as safer, less disruptive electoral strategies seem effective to secure political office. The Filipino cases therefore presents a case of substantial democratic backsliding that cannot be easily accounted for by polarized politics.

Indonesia: Moderate Polarization and Pluralist Institutions

The Indonesian case contrasts with the Philippines in one important respect, namely the existence of a deep-seated, identity-based ideological cleavage. Since the emergence of the nationalist movement, Indonesians have been divided about the role of Islam in state affairs, with some advocating for various types of Islamist political ideologies and others supporting a more pluralist national community in which no religion would hold a privileged position. Eventually, the latter model prevailed, as Indonesian nationalism developed an inclusive and pluralist character and more radical Islamist ideologies have struggled to gain mass political appeal. Nevertheless, this cleavage is still the backbone of ideological competition in Indonesian politics: it is easily understood by both elites and masses, it is salient, it differentiates political parties, and plays a crucial role in allowing substantive representation (Fossati, 2022).

One of the three conditions for severe polarization is therefore met in the Indonesian context. For the other two, however, namely the existence of two clearly defined partisan blocks and high levels of polarization between elites and masses, the evidence is elusive. For one, Indonesian political elites have been known for engaging in broad, ideologically heterogeneous political coalitions cemented by patronage and a commitment to ideological moderation (Slater, 2018). This system has been challenged by the rise of Prabowo Subianto, who ran in presidential elections in 2014 and 2019 against Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, losing both contests. In both campaigns, Prabowo established a coalition with radical Islamist groups and deployed the typical populist strategy of pitting corrupt elites against virtuous masses, spreading false and defaming information about his opponent, a commitment to make Indonesia great again and

questioning the integrity of elections after his defeat (Aspinall, 2015). This strategy, coupled with the concerning rise of radical Islamist groups allied with Prabowo, effectively polarized political elites and prompted a debate about democratic backsliding in this country (Jati, 2022; Nuraniyah, 2020).

However, while some evidence of affective polarization among voters has been found during electoral campaigns (Soderborg & Muhtadi, 2021), polarizing rhetoric eventually failed to create the two large contraposing camps that are a key feature of severe polarization, and survey evidence of an overall polarized electorate remains mixed (Warburton, 2020). Shortly after the 2019 election, Prabowo joined the Jokowi cabinet, and he ran a presidential campaign for the 2023 elections featuring a much more moderate profile, support from many political parties in Jokowi's coalition and a ticket featuring the president's eldest son as the vice-presidential candidate. Indonesian voters, after rejecting Prabowo twice in highly polarizing campaigns, embraced his more moderate profile and elected him to the presidency. Furthermore, this period of increasing polarization, instead of deepening mass-level animosity and eroding trust in political institutions, has been coupled with a substantial increase with satisfaction in democracy among ordinary Indonesians. As for radical Islamist groups, whose rise to prominence was instrumental in fueling increasingly polarized politics, a government campaign of containment and repression has substantially crippled their mobilizational capacity (Power, 2020).

Indonesian politics therefore presents the paradox of a party system rooted in a long-established social cleavage, but not displaying much polarization because of high political fragmentation and an elite preference for power-sharing agreements. Indonesian voters may sort themselves into parties according to their ideological leanings and can be quite responsive to partisan appeals (Fossati, Muhtadi, & Warburton, 2022), but they show low levels of affective polarization and they generally reject polarized polarizing politics and radical positions. The fact that an identity-based ideological cleavage is readily available means that Indonesia is more predisposed to polarized politics than a country where political parties are more purely clientelistic. But at the same time, the volatile patterns and limited depth of polarization in this country indicate that Indonesia is best understood as a case of moderate polarization.

Malaysia: Deep-Seated Polarization, Democratic Progress and Instability

Like Indonesia, Malaysia has a readily identifiable ideological cleavage that dominates political competition, and once again this division concerns state-Islam relations. An important difference with the Indonesian case, however, is that this cleavage has more entrenched social roots, as it overlaps with Malaysia's ethnic structure. Since the establishment of Malaysia as an independent nation, Muslim Malays have enjoyed a privileged status among Malaysians, while ethnic minorities, especially Chinese and Indian, have been relegated to the role of second-class citizens (Koh, 2015). The result has been a dangerous consolidation of stark ideological divisions underpinned by ascriptive identities, which has threatened social cohesion. Conservative Malaysians are more likely to favor a substantial role of Islam in public affairs and the preservation of the Malay-dominated political status quo, while more progressive individuals and political parties are more likely to support pluralist understandings of nationhood, a more liberal ideology and participatory political reform (Welsh, 2020). It is therefore no surprise that the data displayed in Figure 1 ranks Malaysia as a highly polarized country.

As for the formation of two distinct political blocks that characterize severe polarization, Malaysia has a majoritarian electoral system based on a first-past-the post electoral formula. While this system has not produced consolidation into a two-party system, it has provided strong incentives for political elites to engage in coalition building, despite the challenging coordination problems that such an endeavor has entailed (Ong, 2022). The elections of 2018 marked the emergence, after a highly polarizing campaign, of two dominant blocks in Malaysian politics, namely the pro-status quo Barisan Nasional (BN), defeated for the first time since its foundation, and the reformist winner Pakatan Harapan (PH). These elections were followed by a few year of intense polarization, in which the incumbents' pluralist agenda was denounced by opposition forces as an attempt to strip Muslim Malays of their legitimate rights (Dettman, 2020). Political instability then led to the 2022 elections, where a tripolar system emerged after right-wing challenger Perikatan Nasional (PN) eroded much of BN support among its most conservative Malay constituents. The ensuing unity government between PH and BN signals an important change, as ideological divergence between the two formerly arch-rivals has becomed less salient (Weiss, 2023). The success of PN's Islamic/right-wing populism, however, suggest that a new era of intense polarization may have already started.

While consensus exists that Malaysian political elites are highly polarized, the question of whether high affective polarization could be identified among voters has been more controversial (Ng, Rangel, Vaithilingam, & Pillay, 2015). Recent evidence, however, suggests that ethnicity is still a powerful determinant of voting behavior among ordinary Malaysia, as ethnic affiliation strongly predicts voting choices (Dettman & Pepinsky, 2023). Furthermore, Malaysian of different ethnic groups maintain important differences in crucial political attitudes. For example, Malay Malaysians are substantially less likely than Chinese Malaysians to understand democracy in liberal terms, and trust in state institutions is significantly lower among ethnic minorities than in Malays (Fossati & i Coma, 2023). While these studies do not measure affective polarization directly, they indicate that the difference in political preferences and norms among different ethnic groups are substantial.

Malaysia therefore ticks all the boxes for severe polarization. Interestingly, however, such worrying levels of polarized politics have not translated into democratic backsliding. On the contrary, as mentioned above, 2018 marked the watershed first electoral defeat of BN, the Malay-dominated coalition that had underpinned authoritarian rule in Malaysia since the 1970s. In a further important discontinuity with Malaysia's authoritarian past, the ruling coalition emerging from the 2022 elections has led to the inauguration of Anwar Ibrahim, a long-term reformer and human rights advocate, as Prime Minister. To be sure, the complexity, fluidity and instability that has characterized Malaysian politics since makes it problematic to use blunt labels such as "democratic transition" to describe this period (Weiss, 2022). Yet, at least in one crucial aspect Malaysia has already become a democracy: despite a system biased against more progressive/liberal forces, elections are more competitive than ever, and opposition parties have a clear chance to win them.

Malaysia therefore constitutes a puzzling case of deep-seated mass-level polarization compounded by political elites often ready to exploit such polarization to their own advantage, and yet a case in which a previously authoritarian political system has noticeably liberalized. One could note that this country has achieved significant democratic progress despite high levels of polarization, but perhaps a more accurate reflection is that such progress has taken place not in spite of, but thanks to increasing levels of ideological polarization, which have been instrumental in clarifying differences among the various political coalitions and providing incentives for voters to support the opposition block. As Welsh aptly notes, the highly polarized 2018 campaign climate and the reconfiguration of the opposition camp presented voters with a straightforward "us vs. them" choice that was, for the first time, tied to clearly identifiable policy

positions (Welsh, 2018). For many Malaysian, this was plausibly a powerful encouragement to participate and to support the opposition camp. Malaysia therefore illustrates the importance for polarization for fostering representation and strengthening citizen-politician linkages, which in this case are inextricably linked with democratic advancement.

Thailand: Unsustainable Polarization and Democratic Collapse (700)

For most of its post-war history, Thailand's political regimes have oscillated between electoral democracy and intermissions of military rule, making this country's democracy one of the most unstable in the region. Until the late 1990s, Thailand's democracy had a clear clientelistic character, featuring poorly institutionalized parties and low levels of political polarization. The electoral reform of 1997, however, provided new incentives for political elites to develop programmatic platforms and a stronger national profile (Selway, 2011). Media mogul Thaksin Shinawatra was quick to capitalize on this new opportunity, as his newly established Thai Rak Thai party decisively won the 2001 elections and subsequent elections in 2005 and 2006 relying on populist appeals and high levels of mass mobilization.

The emergence of this new powerful block produced two decades of highly paralyzing politics that perfectly illustrate the devastating effects of severe polarization on democracy. As Thaksin's red shirts increasingly mustered formidable electoral majorities, the opposing yellow shirts eventually turned their back on democracy for the sake of defeating their opponents (Sinpeng, 2021). The outcome was years of instability, social unrest, decay of democratic institutions, weaponization of the judiciary and increasing intervention of the military in politics, which led to a coup in 2014 from which Thailand's democracy has yet to recover.

There is little doubt that such high levels of polarization among political elites have a mass dimension and are rooted in important ideological debates, key among them the contentious issue of the role of the monarchy. Throughout Thailand's political history, the relationship between the monarchy and democratic development has been pivotal (Ferrara, 2015). While the monarchy has long sought to promote an image of the king as a custodian of democracy, monarchical power in contemporary Thailand has authoritarian origins. After years of decline, the monarchy started to rise again as a powerful political actor in the 1950s and under the rule of Sarit Thanarat, the general who seized power in 1957, suspended the constitution and initiated a period of highly repressive and authoritarian military rule. The authoritarian character of monarchical power has become more evident after the 2006 coup, which deposed prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra and was widely perceived as royalist backlash against an emerging political leader who challenged the establishment (Chachavalpongpun, 2014).

The political polarization that has followed the 2006 coup has thus consolidated two blocs with different regime preferences (Norton, 2012). On the one hand, formers supporters of Thaksin, while not necessarily liberal, have advocated the return to democratic politics and free and fair elections. On the other hand, royalists have been increasingly skeptical of democratic processes, and have consolidated in recent years an anti-democratic alliance with the military (Chambers & Waitoolkiat, 2016). Furthermore, the political polarization brought about by the rise of Thaksin and its violent deposition overlaps, to a certain extent, with a social and economic cleavage (Tejapira, 2016), with Thaksin supporters mostly drawn from the poorest regions of the North and the Northeast and royalist support being instead concentrated among well-educated middle and upper classes in urban areas and in the Bangkok region (Unchanam, 2020).

To be sure, the stability of the these two blocks has been put into serious question in the aftermath of the 2022 elections, in which Thaksin appears to have realigned himself with the royalist establishment into a new authoritarian coalition that could spell further trouble for Thailand's fragile democratic institutions (Pongsudhirak, 2023). Yet among the four cases analyzed in this section, Thailand is the textbook example of the perils of severe polarization. Interestingly, this case not only points to the importance of polarized politics in democratic backsliding; it also shows a trajectory in which institutional change is crucial in allowing the emergence of two opposing political blocks. Although not without critics, the constitutional reforms of 1997 were generally welcomed as providing more opportunities for democratic participation and accountability. Yet this was also the opening of a pandora box with unpredictable implications. The transformation of Thai politics from a low-stakes patronage contest into a winner-takes all competition has unleashed new forces that the fledgling democratic institutions were unable to contain (Hewison, 2007). In bringing to the fore previously marginalized groups and allowing previously subdued ideological debates, the new politics have revealed a divided country in which illiberal and anti-democratic sentiments are rooted in substantial segments of both political elites and voters.

Conclusions

Research on democratic backsliding suggests that polarization is a crucial factor to shape the trajectory of a nation's democracy. Polarization creates a challenging environment for democracy to thrive because it pits groups of democrats against one another in a winner-takes-all battle. It contributes to a climate of intolerance and hostility in which democratic norms are sacrificed for the sake of gains in a partisan or ideological competition. There is little doubt that such dynamics can have deleterious implications for the quality and stability of democracy.

As this article has argued, Southeast Asia provides a compelling context in which to examine the intricate relationship between polarization and the health of democratic institutions due to within-region heterogeneity in polarization dynamics and trajectories of political development. To a certain degree, Southeast Asia conforms to theories that see rising polarization and autocratization go hand in hand. Most notably, the case of Thailand could be considered as a cautionary tale about the perils of pernicious polarization. In this country, weak democratic institutions were unable to withstand the pressure of mounting social and political polarization, which paved the way to the eventual military takeover and domination by an authoritarian coalition. The case of East Timor, while not discussed extensively here, shows an opposite trajectory from Thailand but it appears to conform to similar theoretical expectation. While this country's transition from United Nation rule has not so far resulted into a fully liberal democratic regime (Verkhovets & Sahin, 2024), the country has been on an upward democratic trajectory, and it now ranks as one of the most progressive in the region in important areas such as civil society participation and women empowerment (Niner & Loney, 2020), as well as the most liberal democracy in Southeast Asia as measured by the V-Dem index. The demise of the historical political rivalries that dominated East Timor's polarized politics in the first half of the 2000s (Shoesmith, 2003) has plausibly been an important factor in underpinning this consolidation. Finally, in Singapore, where democratic competition is limited by the persistence of authoritarian institutions, we observe stability both in polarization and political regime.

But interestingly, Southeast Asia also includes cases that confound our theoretical priors about the relationship between political polarization and democratic backslidings. Indonesia is a complex case, as a moderate level of polarization may have played a role in democratic decline, especially at time of intense political competition during electoral campaigns. Yet polarization

has not sustained itself either at the elite or the mass level, and it is therefore problematic to identify polarized politics as one of the key factors driving the recent trend of democratic backsliding identified by several scholars. In fact, one could argue that the moderate increase in ideological polarization may have been contributed to increasing levels of democratic satisfaction and legitimacy, precisely because of its positive repercussions for political representation and participation discussed above (Fossati, 2022). Malaysia offers the intriguing glimpse of a process in which very high levels of polarization are coupled with advanced in democratic development. This case not only reminds us that democratic progress is possible even when politics is highly polarized around deep-seated social identity such as ethnicity and religion, but also that ideological polarization may be crucial in fostering the liberalization of an authoritarian political regime. And finally, the Philippines are an instructive case of how populist mobilization can be associated with a severe deterioration of democratic institutions even with low levels of polarization. It reminds us that populism is not always a highly polarizing force, as it could also be one that unifies masses and political elites.

In conclusion, Southeast Asia encourages us to appreciate the complexity of the nexus between rising polarization and democratic decline. The region teaches us that this relationship is contingent on local political dynamics, which in turn are shaped by historical legacies of democratic development. Factors such as deep-seated social divisions, populist mobilization, clientelism, corruption, illiberal sentiments, political fragmentation, authoritarian legacies and the resilience of democratic institutions complicate our straightforward theoretical assumptions. As we reflect on Southeast Asian experiences, it becomes clear that it is essential for scholars and policymakers to adopt a nuanced and context-specific approach to the study of the implications of polarization for democracy.

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