Building Democratic Resilience

A PLAYBOOK



COUNCIL OF ASIAN LIBERALS AND DEMOCRATS


COUNCIL OF ASIAN LIBERALS AND DEMOCRATS
CALD
ESTABLISHED 1993

Building Democratic Resilience

A PLAYBOOK

Building Democratic Resilience

A PLAYBOOK

Writers
Marites Danguilan Vitug & Criselda Yabes

Content Editor
Celito Arlegue

Copy Editor
C.C. A. Balgos

Layout Artist
Narwin Espiritu

Special thanks to the CALD member-parties, the CALD leadership, and to all our distinguish speakers and participants to the 2026 CALD Roundtable on Democratic Resilience in Manila, The Philippines. Our heartfelt gratitude as well to the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom for all the support.

Copyright 2026. Published by the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats (CALD). All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without permission from CALD, except in those instances which qualify as fair use. CALD, Unit 409, 4/F La Fuerza Plaza 2, 2241 Don Chino Roces Ave. corner Sabio St., 1231 Makati City, The Philippines, info@cald.org.

ISBN: 978-971-94005-3-0

Building Democratic Resilience

A PLAYBOOK

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

7 **We cannot eat democracy**
by Francis "Kiko" Pangilinan

PART ONE

15 **Why is democratic backsliding a threat?**

26 How backsliders push democracy into a 'Twilight Zone'

PART TWO

29 **What is democratic resilience?**

40 Lessons on democratic resilience

PART THREE

43 **How can we build democratic resilience?**

45 Thailand: Liberal democracy not yet in sight

48 'Resilience is to keep getting back on our feet no matter how many defeats we've had'

50 Full stars for Taiwan's democracy

53 Resilience against threats from China

CONTENTS

56 Is Malaysia moving toward a new era of democracy?

59 Pillars of resilience: institutions, political parties and citizens

61 The Philippines' window for strengthening resilience

66 'We must build civic power' *by Florencio "Butch" Abad*

69 Fortress of Resilience: The Institutionalization of PDIP *by Hasto Kristiyanto*

73 Democracy in Indonesia is eroding, challenging its resilience

76 Q&A on the military as actor in Indonesian and Philippine politics

79 Hybrid Democracy: 'Singapore has traded democracy for wealth'

83 Hope, meaning and agency are the foundation of resilience *by Chee Soon Juan*

86 Q&A on Singaporean Resilience

89 SPECIAL SECTION
What can we do?

91 "Fix the roof while the sun is shining" *by Leena Rikkila Tamang*

94 Six B's of Democratic Resilience

96 Q&A on democratic resilience

98 What can multilateral institutions do?

100 Quotes from Speakers

References



What enables democracies to resist, recover and renew after the onslaught of shocks that threaten democratic institutions, norms and practices?

Amidst the widening and intensifying global democratic decline, the concept of 'democratic resilience' has found its way into political and academic discourse in recent years. Democratic resilience is defined by political scientist Aurel Croissant as "the ability of a political system to endure external and internal stressors in a non-violent manner through democratic means of political participation, thereby preventing or recovering from a durable loss of democratic qualities of its political institutions, processes and practices."

Southeast and East Asia serves as a fertile ground for a deeper and more empirical analysis of democratic resilience (or lack of it) given the diversity of political regimes and the varying levels of democratic development in the sub-region. Empirically, Croissant has said, democratic resilience can be measured systematically by the extent of change in the level of democratic quality of institutions and processes over a defined period of years, or by the ability of the political system to prevent the onset of an episode of democratic sliding, or democratic breakdown.

Recognizing the importance of enhancing democratic resilience, the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats organized the Policy Roundtable on Democratic Resilience in Southeast and East Asia in March 2026 in Manila, The Philippines, on the sidelines of its biannual executive committee meeting. The roundtable assembled political party leaders, policy analysts, academics, media practitioners, members of civil society and other stakeholders to come up with policy recommendations on how to enhance democratic resilience at the national and regional levels. This playbook draws heavily from the presentations and discussions during the roundtable.

FOREWORD

We cannot eat democracy



Francis "Kiko" Pangilinan
Philippine Senator and Former CALD Chairperson

It's very interesting for us to come together at this very challenging time.

We are meeting at a time when the world feels like it's on fire. War in the Middle East has escalated, driving up energy prices, shaking trade routes, and deepening fear and uncertainty.

At the same time, our social media are flooded by disinformation, turbocharged by artificial intelligence, while climate shocks, heat waves, floods, drought, super typhoons hit our people harder and more often than before. With all these, some people ask us, amidst the crisis that we face, why are we still talking about democracy? We cannot eat democracy. And strictly speaking, those who say so are right. Each of the crises that we face is dangerous on its own. Together, they are also dangerous for democracy.

When prices spike and jobs disappear, when people are afraid for their safety or their children's future, it becomes easier for leaders to say, there is no time for debate, no time for criticism, just trust us and give us more power. And the people, as we have seen, will go along with these leaders. This is why a roundtable discussion on democratic resilience in Asia is relevant, because it is about survival. It is about ensuring that in the middle of all these simultaneous crises, our societies still have the capacity to make collective decisions that are grounded in truth and accountability to the public, that are participatory and peaceful.

Our gathering has two clear objectives. First, to share our country and regional experiences, where democratic resilience is coming from, and what is undermining it. Second, to craft specific policy recommendations, national and regional, to strengthen that resilience. To meet those objectives, we must first be honest about what democracy means today, especially for ordinary folks. For many of us here, democracy is the rule of law, checks and balances, the Bill of Rights. We talk about liberal democracy, backsliding, resilience.

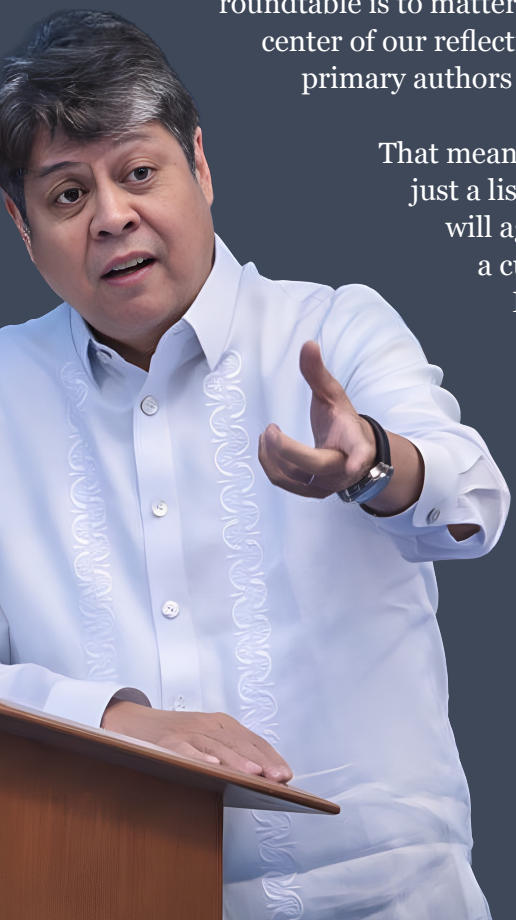
For most ordinary people, democracy is far simpler and more immediate. It is: Can we vote bad politicians out? Will anyone listen to my community if it is flooded? Will my harvests be underpriced? Why are my wages diminished?

In the recent past, in the United States and in the Philippines, we saw something striking. Many Americans and Filipinos told pollsters, "yes, I support democracy," while enthusiastically supporting leaders who



attacked the media, threatened and insulted opponents, and amassed more power with corruption and violence. The word democracy remains popular, but its meaning has shifted toward "a strong leader who I can relate with and who acts for people like me." That gap between the formal promise of democracy and the lived experience of democracy, of ordinary people in a democracy, is where democratic backsliding grows.

When democracy is experienced as chaos, corruption, impotence, or irrelevance, people will trade it away, even just for the promise of order. When democracy is experienced as distant elites talking to each other in a language the public does not understand, people will look for leaders who speak in plain language, who curse and insult, and who make sordid jokes. So if this roundtable is to matter, we must put the public at the center of our reflections, not as beneficiaries, but as the primary authors and guardians of democracy.



That means democratic resilience is not just a list of institutional fixes that we will agree upon in these halls. It is also a cultural and relational project. It is about rebuilding trust and establishing or re-establishing meaningful connections between leaders and the led. It is about renewing the social contract so that people feel democracy in their daily lives as protection, as dignity, as a voice.

What if we are committed not just to criticizing others, but to also ask ourselves, where



have we grown distant from the people we say we represent? When did we last hear, really hear, or listen to those who did not already agree with us? How have our own choices and decisions helped create the conditions in which strongmen, toxicity, and disinformation flourish?

Democratic resilience begins with the humility to say -- and this is I believe – we, too, need to change. It begins when leaders can stand up and say, “I was wrong.” When academics and civil society admit that we have sometimes spoken only to one another or that our efforts have become subcultures rather than movements.

Criticism/self-criticism in a democratic spirit is about solidarity. It is leaders choosing to stand with their people, not above them. It is saying, “We are in this storm together.” We, too, are accountable. We, too, must listen, change, and share power.

In the Philippine context, we have reasons to be optimistic. The Liberal Party in the Philippines in the last decade suffered defeat after defeat after defeat. Beginning

in 2016, we lost the presidential elections and we were defeated resoundingly in the 2019 midterm elections. None of our national candidates made it and we were defeated yet again in 2022, the presidential elections.

Yet while our candidates were defeated in the presidential elections -- me included -- we saw an unprecedented wave of ordinary Filipinos who gave their money, time, creativity, and hope to the campaign. Not out of fear, not because of patronage, but because they believe in politics that could inspire, that could change, that could transform. As the vice presidential candidate of the Liberal Party in that election, I describe the defeat or the outcome as a victorious defeat. Having been an organic vegetable farmer since 2012, I knew then that we were planting seeds and that the harvest would come in time.

Since then, we have seen some democratic, significant pushback against traditional politics and populist authoritarianism. In the 2025 midterm elections, we, together with other reformists and issue-based candidates in several localities, sectors, won. Not just won. We won resoundingly for the national position of senator. Senator Bam Aquino landed second out of a field of about 80, and I landed number five. We won because of a volunteer-driven campaign machinery despite the billions that were thrown at us by our adversaries. We won despite being pilloried, being bullied, being bashed online, being flooded or attacked with disinformation. We won on the winds of hope, good governance, and solutions-focused leadership.

Since then, we have witnessed mass mobilizations against corruption, signaling that ordinary citizens are seeking accountability for the plunder of public money. There are also serious moves to pass an anti-dynasty measure challenging one of the deepest structural roots of our democratic weakness in the country and sending a message that public office is not a family

heirloom but a public trust.

These are not yet victories, but they show that in the Philippines, as in other parts of the world, people are capable of pushing back against populist authoritarianism when given a narrow democratic opening. We must also remember something that is easy to forget in times of hunger and fear: Democracy is not rice. It will not fill an empty stomach.

Again, when people say we cannot eat democracy, they are not wrong. But democracy does something just as essential for a fully human life. It feeds the psyche and nourishes the spirit. It gives each person the sense that they are not simply an object of decisions but a subject in history, a maker of decisions, a bearer of dignity, a participant in a shared story.

I recall a conversation with Nobel Laureate Maria Ressa a week after our victory in the last elections in 2025. And I quote her: "While lies travel faster than the truth, hope travels faster than the lies." That in part may explain how we won in the last elections.

So as we share experiences, let us keep a few commitments. Number one, to speak in concrete granular terms, not just "We must strengthen institutions," but how we can bring down food prices, how our local councils can be empowered to provide the services that we need, how we can regulate AI and disinformation without killing free speech.

The second objective is to center the ordinary citizen in our work, the fisher in a coastal village, the night shift worker in a business-processing outsourcing center, the overseas worker in a Gulf state watching the Middle East burn on her phone. The students scrolling through a toxic feed ask at every turn: how will this reform show up in their lives?

And third, to practice democratic criticism, to be willing here and everywhere today, not only to call out the failures of others, but our own. To leave not just recommendations for governments and institutional commitments, but to talk about how we, ourselves, will act differently.

If we can do that, then this roundtable will be more than just another conference. It will be a small act of democratic self-defense and a small seed of democratic renewal in a region and a world that badly needs both. The world is burning, but as long as people are still willing to gather, to speak honestly, to listen across our differences, to imagine or reimagine a politics that is truly by, of, and for the people, the fire has not yet destroyed everything. There is still time if we choose to make our democracies not just survive, but grow deeper in roots.

Albert Einstein once said that to know the future, you must look to the past. Allow me then to quote a philosopher of 2,500 years ago, which, to my mind, captures the essence of democracy and democratic resilience: "To lead the people, walk beside them. When the best leader's work is done, the people will say, we did it ourselves."

The author delivered this keynote address during the CALD Policy Roundtable on Democratic Resilience in Manila on 27 March 2026.







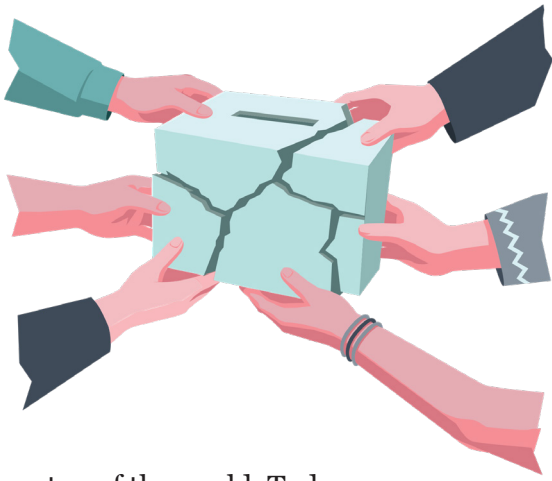
PART ONE

Why is democratic backsliding a threat?



A ***Bamboo*** as a symbol of resilience, it bends deeply in severe windstorms without breaking, showing that flexibility is a core part of survival.

Why is democratic backsliding a threat?



There was once a democratic wave in the post-Cold War era, putting democratic countries on top of the world. Today we might find that sea-change in the past, but it is not necessarily the end of what we know about living in a democracy.

In the mid-1980s, the wave reached Southeast Asia, with the Philippines rising as a grand symbol for freedom after toppling a dictatorship in a peaceful revolt. The Philippines had its shining moment on the international stage, standing out in a region that was largely autocratic.

Across Southeast Asia, power was still in the tight grip of men. The Philippines, for the first time, restored democracy in the hands of a woman. The wave was inviting to the rest of Asia: South Korea gave way to elections that opened a new route to democracy. Pakistan, previously ruled by a general, voted the first woman in the Muslim world into power.

But through the succeeding years, there were touch-and-go moments, cycles turning and upending, historical watersheds that had yet to be defined.

Democratic backsliding came with another wave in the



most recent years, more treacherous and dangerous in the form of illiberalism, which threatened to wipe out the gains of building institutions for justice, equality, and social progress.

Three decades after pursuing liberal democracy, the Philippines succumbed to populism, leading the country into a hybrid regime that scholars have referred to as the 'twilight zone' in the transition to slowly dismantling institutions.

That slow descent where democracy stagnated is "orchestrated by power-concentrating elected leaders in a relatively predictable sequence," said political scientists Licia Cianetti and Sean Henley in a 2021 paper -- when courts are co-opted, free speech is compromised, and the opposition is diminished, in what might appear to be legal moves. They based this on an earlier work by fellow political scientist Nancy Bermeo, who has defined such backsliding as "the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy."

According to Susan Stokes of the Chicago Center on Democracy, the roots of backsliding can be traced to economic and political changes that occurred in the late 20th century, seeds of globalization that would heighten tensions into the current century.

In advanced democracies, such as in the United States, these changes created opportunities for right-wing ethnonationalists (highlighted by the advent of Trumpism). The left-populist type gained power in countries of the Global South, such as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines.

In South Asia, India voted a Hindu ultranationalist in the figure of Narendra Modi, while communist China under Xi Jinping was fast becoming a superpower.

By 2020, backsliding countries displayed a high level of polarization, which in turn feeds ambitious leaders to exploit people's sentiments in order to expand their powers. Wrote Stokes in her 2026 paper, "Why Elected Leaders Subvert Democracy": "A polarized electorate is more tolerant of presidents and prime ministers who attack institutions, even if the public favors democracy. I may not love it when he attacks the press or the courts, a person might reason, but God forbid that the other side come to power."

Another tool used by would-be autocrats: a strategy called trash talking democracy. "They can attempt to persuade voters that their country's institutions are hollow, corrupt, and ineffective, so that little is lost if the leader undermines them," Stokes said.

The voice of disappointment in a democracy articulates voters' feelings of being left out in the disparity of income levels. In Asia, the blame goes to the rich and the privileged, a class of which liberal democrats are seen to be part.

According to Stokes, the countries



Susan Stokes
Director
Chicago Center on Democracy

in which there are backsliders (regardless of their different ideologies) have one feature in common: they tend to have high economic inequality.

And so in the last decade, as international conditions deteriorated and countries in Europe were falling into the arms of the far-right, Asia was not spared of the consequences.

Southeast Asia was susceptible to these changes. The only chance of stemming the flow of democratic backsliding was to fix the erosion of public trust in the ideals coming from the democratic West.



Leaders espousing democracy were suddenly faced with a dilemma: downplay their values for a short-term tactical goal, but with great risks of losing their credibility. Strategists say patience, creative thinking, and broad-based coalitions were key.

The supreme irony in having achieved democracy is that, as soon as polarization sets in, breakdown occurs at the hands of democratically elected leaders, says University of Sydney comparative politics senior lecturer James Loxton.

The ‘democrat-to-dictator’ path is one way of killing democracy. This was the case for the Philippines, which in a span of thirty years plunged from its once-upon-a-time political tale of winning the democratic fight to outright losing it.

In a 2026 paper, Loxton noted that one-fifth of all new democracies since 1974 have either elected a former dictator (a “dictocrat,” said Loxton) or the child of a former dictator (a “dictobrat”). Indeed, nostalgia was an appealing strategy for winning elections, making use of social media platforms to entice

voters with the ‘golden age’ fallacy. The only way to fight them, Loxton said, was to outright ban them, constitutionally, from running for office.

That has yet to happen in the Philippines. In 2022, it even elected the son of the late dictator who was ousted in the mid-1980s -- although Ferdinand ‘Bongbong’ Marcos Jr. has yet to follow in the political ways of his father or carry the authoritarian baggage of his immediate predecessor.

A quick look around the region tells a similar story: a strongman rule, a military rule, a one-party rule.

Thailand raised the stakes in organizing demonstrations against the long-entrenched military rule backed by a monarchy, only for youthful reformers to be outmaneuvered again and again. Malaysia held hope for a new beginning outside of the perpetual ruling party, but reformasi has yet to go beyond being uttered repeatedly during electoral campaigns. Indonesia chose a political commoner who eventually passed on the baton to the vestige of a dictator. Singapore was shaken by the death of its revered leader, but the ruling party stayed the same. In Myanmar, the military was unable to deal with the relative freedom it allowed the people to have at last, and reverted to repression.

Defending liberal democracy must be the stuff of true democrats, according to scholars; without them countries could easily play into the temptations of illiberalism and possibly succumb to instruments of repression.



James Loxton
Senior Lecturer in Comparative Politics
Universityof Sydney

This may mean double the work within an illiberal, often murky, landscape of varied factors – unlike the fight of the old days when it was black and white, the good and the bad. It is a new era of resistance that cannot depend entirely on external help, i.e. Western democratic nations. As an April 2026 Journal of Democracy article put it, it is resistance that will have to be as "local, flexible, and self-directed as it can be."

A homegrown democracy had to be earned and acquired, and when it starts to slip away, the fight to keep it is as hard as finally achieving it. But history has shown that democratic resistance is rarely extinguished.

There remain ways for pro-democracy forces to stop backsliders so long as elements of democracy, though frayed, exist. Elections, while sometimes flawed, are still potent weapons. Stokes also pointed out that would-be autocrats are not at all without vulnerabilities, and elite political strategists should have parties and policymakers reconnect with low-income and working-class voters to help embrace positions that speak of their needs and aspirations.

"Citizens may turn against backsliders when they appear too corrupt or self-serving and when the costs of losing the rule of law and freedoms of expression and assembly appear too high," she said. That, argued Stokes, is when pro-democratic leaders must show the true value of a democracy.

Loxton meanwhile said that combating authoritarian nostalgia, which is just as well a sign of backsliding, has to be done with humility. Pro-democracy forces, he noted, "need to reckon honestly with why this nostalgia exists – even if it is based on a myth – and then do everything possible to address the concerns underlying it."



But Loxton conceded: "By debunking myths and addressing grievances, democratic leaders will not eliminate authoritarian nostalgia altogether."

Democratic backsliding is not unstoppable, Stokes underscored, just as historian and journalist Anne Applebaum has asserted that illiberalism is not inevitable: in early 2026, Hungary turned the tide when it voted out its extreme-right wing leader, heralding a promising impetus of restoring the good name of democracy.

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, there has in fact been a pause in backsliding for the first time in nearly a decade. With the exception of an outlier -- namely the United States, which voted for Donald Trump for a second time in 2024 – EIU said that "the evidence is more promising than not."

The EIU Democracy Index in 2025 showed that stabilization is underway, with a focus on Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa where younger populations are "demanding democratic progress." The Index covered 167 countries and examined the forces shaping elections, governance, and political stability globally.

Table 1: Democratic Performance in Southeast and East Asia based on Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index

Countries	2015 Rank	2025 Rank	Ranking Change
South Korea	22	32	-10
Japan	23	16	+7
Taiwan	31	15	+16
East Timor	44	46	-2
Indonesia	49	59	-10
Philippines	54	62	-8
Malaysia	68	44	+24
Singapore	74	68	+6
Thailand	98	54	+44
Cambodia	113	131	-18
Myanmar	114	166	-52
Vietnam	128	133	-5
China	136	145	-9
Laos	155	159	-4
Brunei*	N/A	N/A	N/A

Brunei is not covered by EIU Democracy Index

In Asia, Sri Lanka recorded the region's largest improvement; India, Pakistan, Nepal, the Philippines showed deteriorations. In general, the region's democratic performance has been on decline for the past six years, with setbacks happening mainly in South Asia. Across these countries, the juxtaposition between rising civic participation and declining government accountability will be under watch in the coming years.

"This reflects the democratic stress in political systems that remain open enough to generate protests but too institutionally weak to translate mobilization into reform," said the EIU in its report on its Index. "How this tension evolves will determine the future democratic outlook for Asia."

Notwithstanding the optimism in our part of the world, Asia will also be watching the maneuverings of the superpowers and how geopolitics will be linked to democratic backsliding.

At the moment, powerful countries are led by authoritarians: Donald Trump of the United States, Vladimir Putin of Russia, Xi Jinping of China. Will autocratic countries and hybrid regimes tempt others to follow suit? Or will the strength of democratic action push back against the threats, to be able to attain a balance once again?



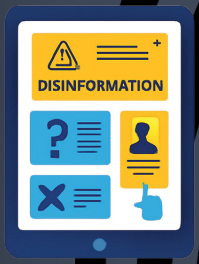
How backsliders push democracy into a 'Twilight Zone'



1 Polarizing the people by raising sentiments of fear and perceived injustice.



2 Creating a false nostalgia of the past by making people believe it was better.



3 Flooding the social media with disinformation to create a narrative.



4 Once in power, the would-be autocrat would bend the system of checks and balances by co-opting or weakening other government branches in what is known as executive takeovers as opposed to outright coups.



5 Blaming 'Others,' i.e. a group, a class, a party, to show why democracy is a failure.



6 Manipulating the electoral machinery strategically, months in advance.



7 Discrediting social and political institutions, as well as the free press.



9 Backsliding in the international context: how the world is made up of autocratic leaders.



8 The electorate itself being the culprit for favoring autocratic governance over liberal democracy.



10 Talk trashing democracy.



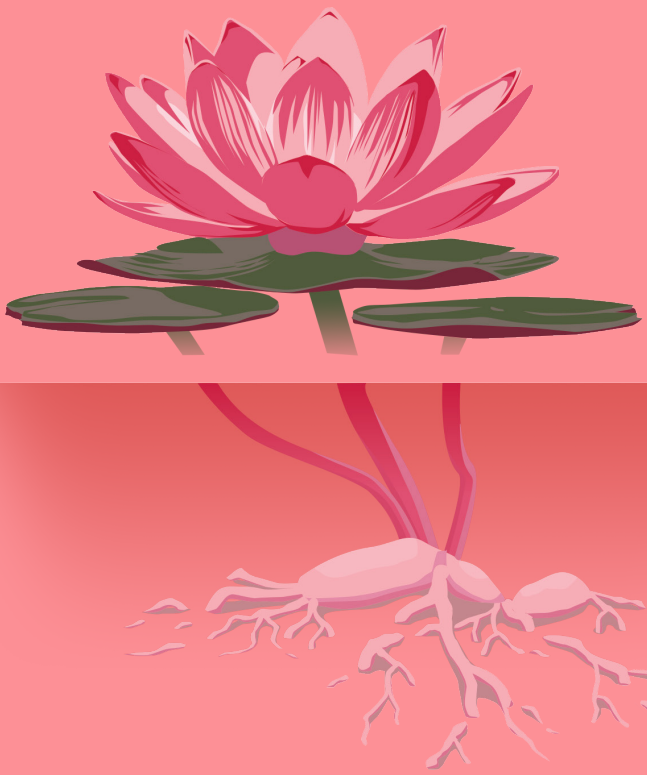
11 Using the idea of ‘change’ for the idea of destabilizing the status quo.





PART TWO

What is democratic resilience?



A ***Lotus flower*** as a symbol of resilience, it roots itself in thick, muddy water yet pushes up to bloom clean and bright in the sun.

What is democratic resilience?

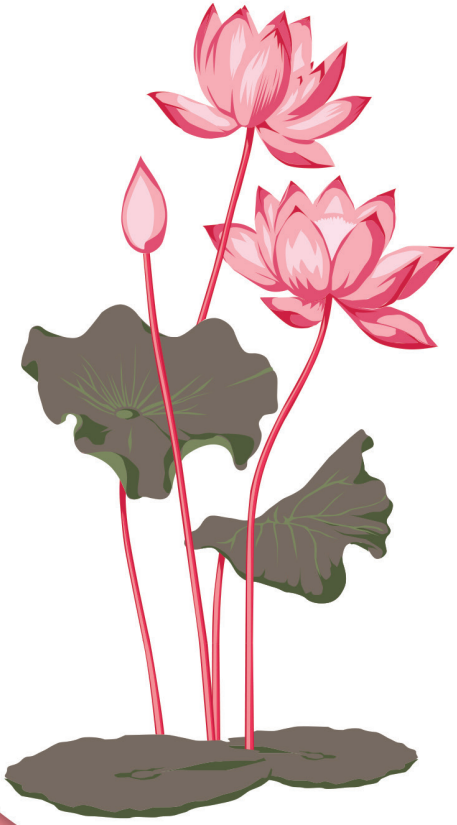


Something relatively new—a concept from the physical sciences—has enriched studies on democracy, lighting up the literature with shafts of hope. It's the concept of resilience, like what is imbued in metals that resist corrosion and wear and tear, such as titanium and platinum. They are strong, with protective layers, enabling them to survive harsh environments.

Scholars have applied the concept of resilience to democracy, a dynamic system with institutions that include the executive and legislature, courts, media, political parties, and the governed, the citizens. The goal is to better understand why and how democratic countries have been hijacked by authoritarian leaders. From this wellspring of data and information, they have found ways countries can resist autocracy and strengthen democracy, making this resilient and preventing a slide into repressive rule.

For democracies that have been taken over by authoritarian

leaders, recovery is a tougher task. But the bright spot is this: Having a breakdown does not prevent a return of democracy. Roughly 50 percent recover shortly in what is known as the 'U-turn episode,' according to the V-Dem Institute. A hopeful sign is that U-turns are on the rise and contemporary democracies are resilient to the onset of autocratization.



The V-Dem Institute points out that recovering of democracy in U-turns is the most common type of democratic resilience: "Majority of contemporary U-turn cases are characterized by varying combinations of institutional safeguards (courts, elections) and societal collective action (civil society, media, political parties, and people) resisting autocracy."

What is critical is active and coordinated resistance by pro-democracy actors and institutions in the early stages of autocratization. Otherwise, a divided and fragmented opposition plays into the autocrats' hands.

V-Dem stresses that democratic resilience is unprecedented in historical terms and opposition to anti-democratic incumbents might further increase in the future.

Not all gloom and doom



Democratic resilience became popular in the middle of 2010s because threats to democracy, repression by autocrats, erosion of democratic institutions, coups d'état, violence and armed conflict escalated. In the face of all these, the concept of democratic resilience—what make democracies survive and how to protect democratic institutions and norms—gained traction.

As we have seen in our respective countries and read about in others, backsliding has been a phenomenon in many democracies—and continues to be—even as some have swung back to pre-autocratic times and stage mass protests, campaign for reforms, and vote in a new leader.

Thus, it's not all gloom and doom. Countries are able to bounce back, exhibiting democratic resilience and showing a hopeful path amid the literature lamenting the decline and death of democracy. Even after being nearly suffocated by leaders who assault institutions, political parties, media, civil society, and citizens, democracy can be revived.

As Nobel Laureate and Timor-Leste President Jose Ramos-Horta said at the 2026 CALD policy roundtable on democratic resilience: "These are temporary phenomena…there is no real cause to say democracy is in retreat."



Jose Ramos-Horta
President, Timor Leste
CALD Honorary Individual Member

Nonviolent, continuous process

The discussions at the roundtable brought out incisive views on resilience. For Almut Besold, FNF Philippines country director, resilience is something that must be "ingrained from childhood onward, whether for one's own survival or for the continued existence of what we consider a democratic state."

Cambodian opposition senator and former CALD Chairperson Mardi Seng meanwhile defined resilience as the "ability to adapt, to recover, bounce back from the challenges, trauma, and stress."

"We all go through it," he added, "and I know it too."



Lorenzo 'Erin' Tañada, president of the Philippines' Liberal Party (LP), went a little further: "At its core, democratic resilience refers to the ability of a political system to endure both external and internal stressors in a nonviolent manner through democratic means of participation, thereby preventing or recovering from a lasting erosion of democratic institutions, processes and practices."

"Democratic resilience must be understood not as a one-time achievement but as a continuous process," he also said. "Resilience can be preventive using stress-reducing strategies and institutions, or reactive through mechanisms that absorb shocks and enable recovery...It is the combination of these capacities that determines whether a democracy remains strong or becomes vulnerable."

The recent experience of Thailand's Democrat Party (DP) informed the view of its deputy leader, Isra Sunthornvut. He framed resilience as the capacity to recover after defeat as he reflected on how his party had come back amidst the rise of nationalism and conservatism in Thailand. Groups had rallied around former premier Abhisit Vejjajiva, who boosted the DP's campaign in the February 2026 general elections. Khun Abhisit gave hope to the people, demonstrating how leadership can sustain political movements in adverse conditions.



The critical role of civil society in building democratic resilience was also highlighted at the roundtable. James Gomez, founder of the think tank Asia Centre, even encouraged political parties to deepen their ties with grassroots organizations.

"Strengthening civil society is a key source of democratic resilience," he said.

For her part, Alysa Chiu, deputy head of the International Department of Taiwan' s Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), noted, "Resilience doesn't come from the top leadership but from informed, engaged citizens."

Echoing this was CALD Chairperson Florencio 'Butch' Abad, CALD chairman, who advocated civic education rooted in democratic values as the foundation for an engaged and organized citizenry.

From Taiwan to the Philippines

In East and Southeast Asia, the political landscape is uneven, marked by a diversity of political regimes and varying levels of democratic development. Studies show that Taiwan and Japan demonstrate high resilience. South Korea and Indonesia show moderate resilience while countries like the Philippines and Thailand continue to struggle with weak resilience.

Table 2: Asian Countries and Democratic Resilience
(Croissant, 2024)

Strong Preventive Resilience	Low Preventive Resilience but Substantial Reactive Resilience	Low Preventive or Reactive Resilience
Japan	Indonesia	India
Taiwan	South Korea	Philippines
		Thailand



The threat of invasion from China and its unrelenting disinformation campaign, coupled with the political deadlock between parliament and the president, are putting a stress on Taiwan's democracy.

Yet Taiwan remains a democratic star showing strong resilience, with a high capacity to prevent democratic regression. Freedom House's 2026 Freedom in the World report classifies Taiwan as among 98 Free countries (with 48 considered Partly Free and 59 Not Free). EIU's Democracy Index 2025 had Taiwan as a full democracy, with a rank of12 out of 157 countries.

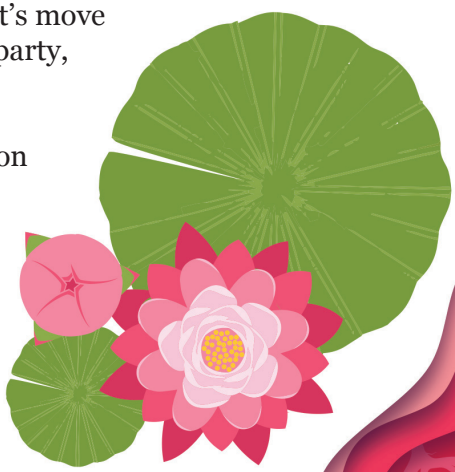
The Atlantic Council considers **Malaysia** and **Indonesia** to be resilient democracies because they have managed to preserve their democratic institutions through a combination of judicial independence, active civil society, and political cultures that still value competitive elections.

The **Philippines** is classified by scholars as having low resilience, but it is trying to recover after six years of democratic backsliding during the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte.

Vulnerabilities persist in **Thailand**, one of which was the Constitutional Court's move to dissolve the leading opposition party, Move Forward, in 2024.

In **Singapore**, severe limitations on freedoms of speech and assembly remain a key vulnerability. Still, while the ruling party has dominated politics for decades, a few opposition political parties exist within the narrow space allowed.

What factors explain these



differences? The Philippines' Tañada pointed out that these are rooted in political culture, the strength of civil society, public trust, and the legitimacy of democratic institutions and actors. At the same time, he said, "resilience is also shaped by concrete governance structures, policies, and institutional designs."

Cambodia's Mardi Seng explained that people's commitment to democracy is important, but having countervailing institutions that can prevent democratic backsliding is equally significant.

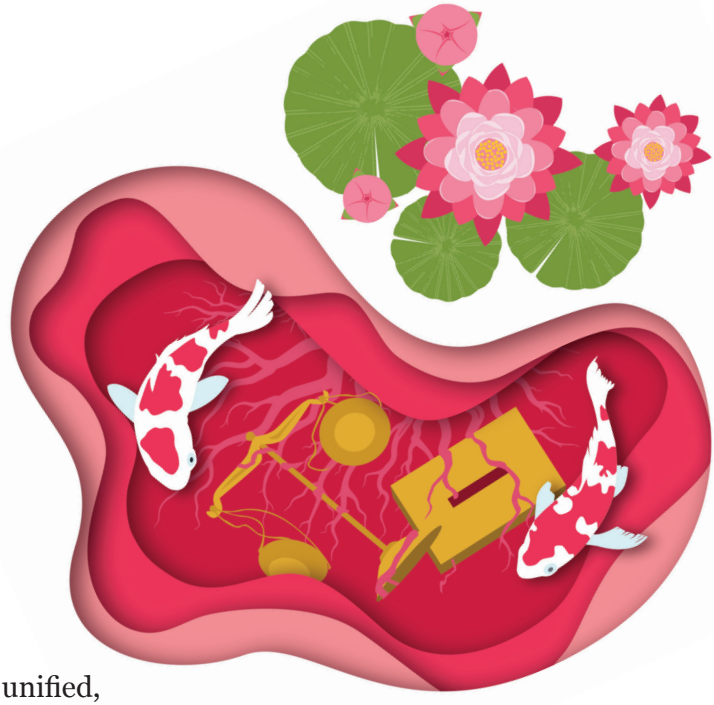
"Sadly, in many parts of Southeast and East Asia, these institutions are still weak or non-existent," he said. "Members of the political opposition are being crushed, a legislature is being packed with political allies, and the judiciary is being twisted to submission."

Today's changing world order provides a wider context to democratic resilience. There are more stresses on democracies -- not necessarily to turn autocratic, but to recalibrate relations with authoritarian countries. A recent example is the U.S.-Israeli war on Iran that led to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, muzzling oil supply to Asia. This dire situation left countries with little choice but to negotiate with the Iranian regime, which has an atrocious human rights record, to let their oil tankers pass, as well as to buy oil from Russia, in a way contributing to Moscow's war coffers.

Free elections, rule of law

Learning from the experiences of various countries, what are needed to make democracies resilient?

Democracy is rooted in various pillars. Holding free elections is one, and includes protecting electoral integrity and the building of pro-democracy electoral coalitions of strong political parties and civil society.



Another pillar is upholding the rule of law with an independent judiciary that safeguards the Constitution and provides a check on executive power.

These pillars are incomplete without collective action and mass mobilization by civil society and political parties—large-scale, unified, and sustained—and a free media pushing for accountability and transparency and fighting disinformation.

As Alexander Stubb, Finland's president, wrote in his book Triangle of Power: "Democracies are not an end state. It is a process that must be constantly protected and developed. It requires participation: voting, standing for election, participating in local boards and decision-making bodies demanding the best from our representatives. Our democratic systems will not last forever if we don't cherish and develop them."

Consensus from the CALD roundtable was this: Democracy will endure but not without struggle, adaptation, and renewal.

"We must not only strengthen democratic institutions in fledgling democracies, but also build them from scratch in authoritarian regimes," said Mardi Seng. "As Ninoy Aquino said, 'The moment you say no to tyranny, you are beginning the struggle, the long, lonely road to freedom.'"

Lessons on democratic resilience

Strengthening democratic resilience must be as much about adapting political systems to make them more robust as about overcoming authoritarian threats.

1

Focusing on democratic resilience exclusively at the national level is unhelpful and misleading. Democracy is also under threat at the local, regional, and international levels. National democratic gains will remain vulnerable if they do not go hand in hand with parallel changes locally, regionally and internationally.



2 There is no silver bullet. It is constellations of mutually reinforcing factors that collectively build resilience such as key democratic institutions that can constrain abuses of power as well as the capacity of citizens and civil society groups to mobilize in defense of democracy.

3 Contexts matter. There is no one-size-fits all set of factors that can be relied on to protect democracy.

4 Democratic innovation is important.

(Source: European Democracy Hub, "How to Strengthen Democratic Resilience: Five Lessons for Democratic Renewal," December 2024)

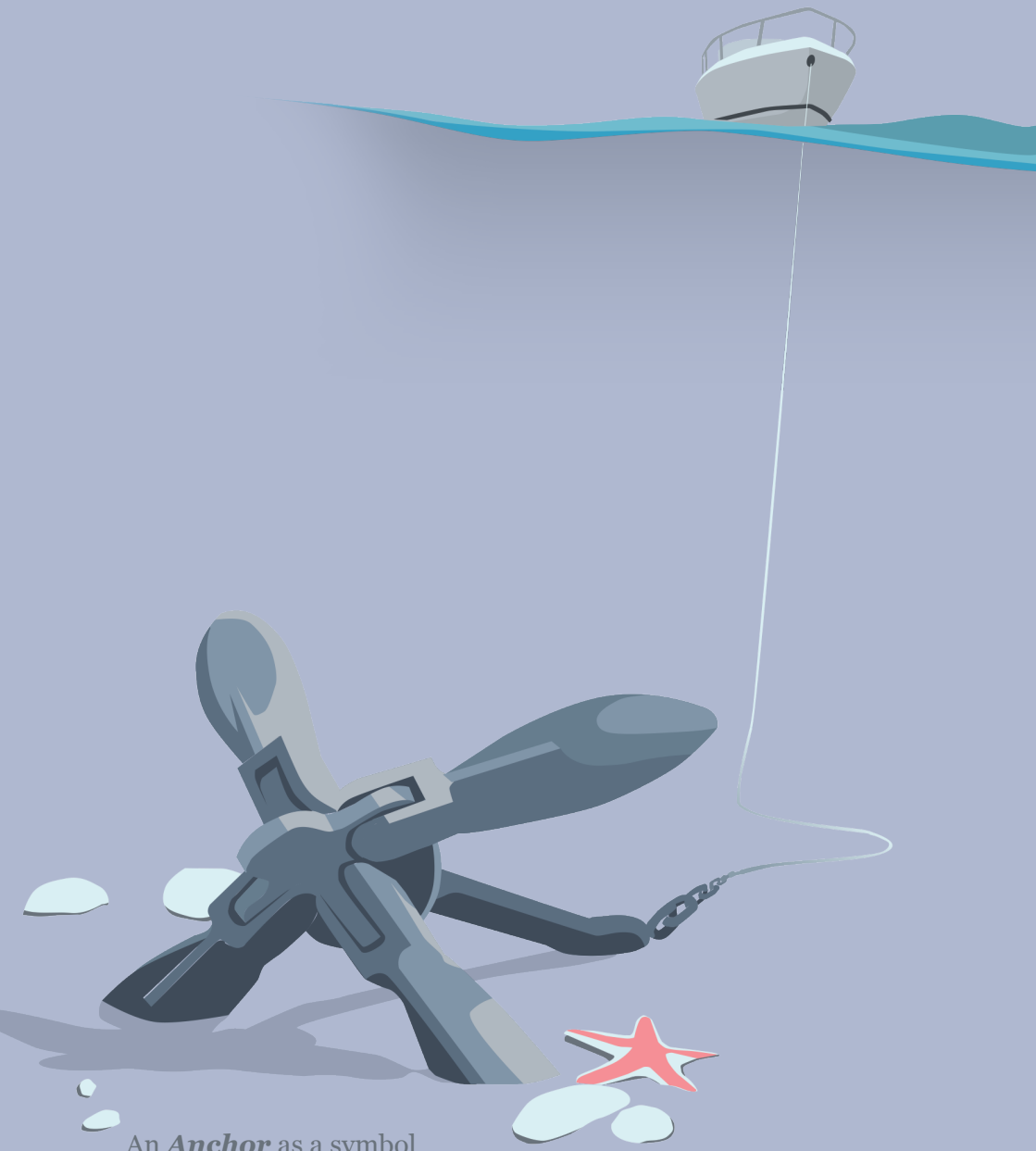






PART THREE

How can we build democratic resilience?



An ***Anchor*** as a symbol of resilience, it holds a ship steady so it does not drift away when a violent sea storm hits.

Thailand: Liberal democracy not yet in sight

When King Bhumibol Adulyadej died in 2016, Thailand, a nation long attached to the monarchy like an umbilical cord, went into mourning with fears of what might come next. His son, the crown prince, was not as beloved, and there were worries as well over a worldwide trend that had democratically elected leaders trying to be 'kings.'

Illiberalism may be a strange idea for the people of the kingdom, where the monarchy is held in reverence. But then the symbiotic social relationship between monarch and subjects had been threatened by a populist leader. In 2001, the Thai Rak Thai party won a landslide victory, landing its head, business mogul and former police officer Thaksin Shinawatra, the post of prime minister. Thaksin rode high on policies geared for the rural population, yet many of his actions as Thailand's leader would be seen as authoritarian.

Thailand was not familiar with such formidable civilian rule,



but it opened a certain breathing space for rights and freedom as a result of mass protests. That also provided a crack for an army-led coup five years later. It has been said that no coups transpire without the king's blessings in Thailand, however; if in democratic countries the military is the (non-political) arm of the executive power, the military in Thailand is a leading force secured by the monarchy.





Thaksin was forced to live in exile, yet by then his political influence had already spread far and wide; in his absence his allies took over, then his sister, and much later, his daughter. They could not stay in power long enough, though; the army or the court would step in to find reasons not only for their ouster, but also to stifle dissent from growing opposition groups. Twice, in 2014 and 2019, a former general, Prayut Chan-o-cha, was made prime minister amidst constant political crises.

Street demonstrations gathered speed, pitching the 'red shirts' of Thaksin's followers against the 'yellow shirts' of the royalists. The battles went back and forth, with the younger generation later moving to the forefront. There was a call for more democratic space and a change in the constitution to lessen the army's grip. By 2020, protests had swelled; big rallies occupied the daily movement of the Thais, so much so that government had to declare a state of emergency.

In 2023, Thaksin returned to Thailand and played adviser to his prime minister daughter, Paetongtarn Shinawatra. But she did not last long as premier; she was removed from office in 2025 over a controversial phone call she had with Cambodia's former premier Hun Sen. A month later, Thaksin was sentenced to a one-year jail term. In early 2026, new elections were held, giving victory to the conservative but populist Bhumjaithai (BJT) Party. In a February 2026 Bangkok Post opinion piece, political analyst Thitinan Pongsudhirak said: "Thailand's democratic institutions have been repressed and kept weak to the point that confusion still prevails."

If the winning party is able to form a coalition, Thitinan continued, it is likely going to get the backing of the establishment for political stability for the first time in two decades. The Chulalongkorn University international relations professor added that after all those years of "volatility and turmoil in Thai politics – characterized by colored street protests between yellows and reds, two military coups and multiple judicial interventions – the conservative establishment believed to be behind the BJT has finally won a decisive poll victory."

But that's far from saying that liberal democracy is in the offing.



Thitinan Pongsudhirak
International Relations Professor
Chulalongkorn University

‘Resilience is to keep getting back on our feet no matter how many defeats we’ve had’

The Democrat Party of Thailand has seen victory under the helm of Abhisit Vejjajiva, who was prime minister between 2008 and 2011 (between the terms of Thaksin and Thaksin’s sister Yingluck). Abhisit stepped down as DP leader in 2019, after a poor showing in the elections that put General Prayut in power for a second time.

Through the ups and downs of pushing for the ideals of democracy, the effort of staying resilient reminds DP Deputy Leader and House of Representatives member Isra Sunthornvut of the Hollywood movie “Rocky,” about a never-say-die boxing champion.

“It’s not how hard you hit,” said Isra at the CALD roundtable in Manila, “but how fast you can get up when you get hit hard.”

“There are many narratives when you think about Thailand,” he said. “One narrative is, there’s an establishment. There’s an old boys club that is resistant to change. Then there’s a group of people that want to change. And how does the establishment suppress it? They do it through the courts, media





censorship, budget restraints, advertisements, personal relationships, so on and so forth. On the other side of that coin, there is a group that wants to change the establishment. Are we ready for that change? I don't know."

The BJT Party rode on a wave of nationalism, which got it a majority in the House of Representatives. The Democrat Party, Isra said, was stuck "in the middle."

"We understand that there needs to be change, progressive and moderate thinking," he said. "But we don't believe in a radical change for the sake of change. We understand that the monarchy needs to stay under a constitutional monarchy. But we also believe that democratic rules have to be applied as well. Changes must be implemented to get out of our political stalemate."

"We believe that there should still be a monarchy," Isra stressed. "(But we also) believe in incremental change, fundamental change...The resilience of the Democrat Party is to keep standing up, to keep on getting back on our feet, because that's what we've been doing for the past 80 years. No matter how many defeats we've had, no matter how many hits we've taken, we'll still come back."

Isra Sunthornvut
DP Deputy Leader and
Member of Thailand's House of Representatives

Full stars for Taiwan's democracy

In the mid-2000s, a series of events in Taiwan gathered speed and turned the island nation into a political fairy tale of building democracy against all odds.

In 2015, the so-called 'Sunflower Movement' saw a huge protest against parliament for trying to legislate a trade pact with China, the giant that was trying to take Taiwan back and have it under Beijing's control.

In 2016, a woman leader of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) became Taiwan's president. Tsai Ing-wen made it clear early on that she wanted no part of China to interfere in Taiwan's way of life. She was all for independence -- Taiwan for Taiwan.

In 2017, the people of Taiwan aimed to remove symbols of Chiang Kai-shek, the authoritarian leader of the nationalist Kuomintang Party that fled China in a civil war it lost to the communists.

In modern history, that was how the nationalists' retreat in 1949



stood its ground; before then, Taiwan was occupied by Japan until the end of the Second World War. From such a small island protected by a strait from mainland China, Taiwan was meant to be the launching pad to reclaim China again, with support from the United States. But that never happened. Instead, Chiang Kai-shek ruled Taiwan with brutal force, an era now called 'white terror.'

The Taiwanese barely breathed any air of liberty until the mid-1980s. Chiang Kai-shek died in 1975, and his son took his place as Taiwan's president. Chiang Ching-kuo loosened the grip that was martial law. Under his rule, native Taiwanese were also finally allowed to have some say in lawmaking. But it took two more years after Chiang Ching-kuo's death for Kuomintang to finally lose its 50-year monopoly on power, with the opposition DPP winning the 2000 elections.

Taiwan has since had a push-and-pull relationship with China, which now has greater political and economic power to force a small country it considers a renegade province into submission. The last two decades or so have been a continuing test of the determination of the Taiwanese to keep their country as they want it, with a full democracy and a robust economy – thanks largely to its microchips industry – that is almost at parallel with Japan and South Korea.

The DPP has also been leading the country away from its dark past, winning three consecutive terms in office since 2016. Out of that, Tsai Ing-wen won two terms, during which she raised



Lai Ching-te
President
Taiwan

the country's defense against China, enlarged a digital campaign for transparency, and presided over a successful COVID-19 pandemic. Taiwan's current president, Lai Ching-te, is also the DPP's chairperson.

Despite the lack of international recognition as a sovereign nation (because China had demanded this at the United Nations), Taiwan has become a force of its own -- all in the name of the electorate seeking full rights and independence, and brimming with satisfaction over the kind of democracy it has built.





Taiwan has received full stars from organizations on the democracy watch. Its most recent score from Freedom House was 93 out of 100, and marked its 28th year as a country designated as 'Free' in 2026. The International Global State of Democracy ranks Taiwan as eighth in the world in terms of civil-society participation. Taiwan has been recognized as a full democracy by the Economist Intelligence Unit since 2002; EIU recently ranked it second among electorate-based democratic countries in Asia.

Resilience against threats from China

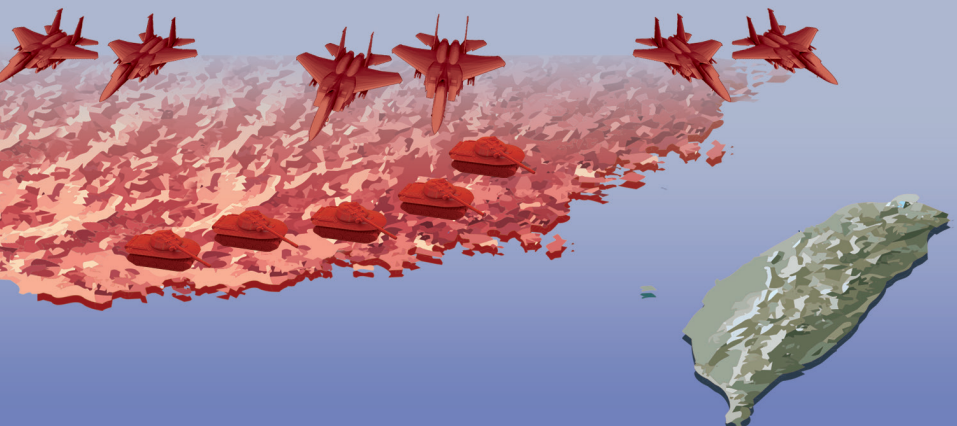


Alysa Chiu, Deputy Director of the Department of International Affairs and the Democratic Progressive Party of Taiwan, recounts how they have put up a fight against threats not only from the authoritarian past, but also from the Goliath that is China, including how they have become resilient against military threats flying over their airspace and surrounding their waters.

In March 2026, Taiwan marked a milestone: its 30th year of holding direct democratic presidential election. Intimidation from China remained in full force, yet majority of Taiwan's citizens went out to vote.

"Our democratic journey has not been an easy one," Chiu says. "It wasn't a stroke of luck. It is a brave choice made by the people of Taiwan."

"We often say that democracy isn't just a voting day, it's our way of life," she adds. "It is a foundation that allows ideas to flow and technology to transform and entrepreneurship to thrive. And it is why our future is shaped."



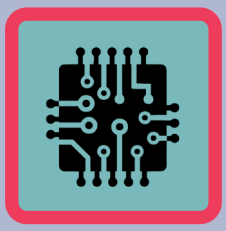
Chiu enumerates three pillars under which this was made possible:

1. **Values**
   Taiwan may not be a perfect democracy, but it is a persistent one. Resilience does not come from the top; it comes from the informed and engaged citizens. The government actively worked with non-government organizations to build trust, which forges unity and confidence. The trust that stems from transparency is considered the greatest security asset in a democracy threatened by China.

2. **Resilience**
   For a country also threatened by natural disasters, resilience comes from a whole-of-country paradigm. This includes a framework of civilian trainings, as well as infrastructure and telecommunication protection, which means securing power, water, data, and other goods against sabotage. Chiu pointed out, “We know that the more we prepare, the safer we are. Our goal is to ensure our society



can function, adapt, and recover quickly during any kind of crisis, even in the event of an invasion."



3. **Technology**
Taiwan plays a central role in the 'silicon shells.' "You cannot talk about Taiwan without mentioning our semiconductor industries," said Chiu. Indeed, it is a country that knows how to use technology to defend democracy. As AI is now being integrated into the global economy, Taiwan is making a move to go beyond being a hardware provider and becoming a solution provider for the next generation of technologies. The government is doing its part to ensure the stability in the region.



At present, the government has announced a budget of TWD 1.3 trillion for defense, an increase of 3.23 percent of the GDP. This is crucial as threats come more and more each day from China, where Xi Jinping says he wants a 'reunification' by 2027, not discounting the use of military might.

"This pressure," says Chiu, "is our daily reality."



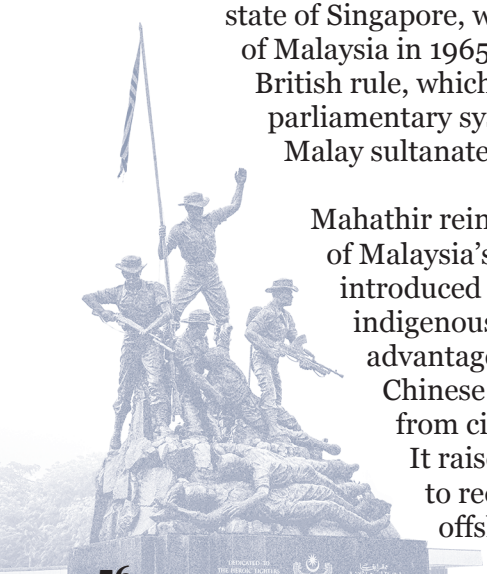


Alysa Chiu
Deputy Director, Department of International Affairs, DPP Taiwan

Is Malaysia moving toward a new era of democracy?

Malaysia is a country of diverse cultures and ethnicities, but for decades it was under the rule of a coalition dominated by one political party: the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), whose political saga combined autocracy and democracy. UMNO's erstwhile leader, Mahathir Mohamad, to this day remains the country's longest serving prime minister (24 years).

Malaysian politics went hand in hand with Mahathir's strong, albeit authoritarian, leadership. He shepherded the country's economy in competition against its neighbor, the island state of Singapore, which separated from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965. Both countries used to be under British rule, which also explains Malaysia's federal and parliamentary system under a titular monarchy of the Malay sultanate.



Mahathir reinforced the Bumiputera foundation of Malaysia's New Economic Policy (NEP), introduced in 1970. The policy gave the indigenous Malays – called the bumis – an advantage over other ethnic groups, such as the Chinese and Indians, in various areas, ranging from civil service, education, and business. It raised the middle class and was meant to reduce racial tensions, but it had the offshoot of delegating special privileges to

a particular ethnic community.

Malaysia on the rise also comes with the story of Mahathir and his embittered rivalry against his former deputy and protégé, Anwar Ibrahim. Popular and deemed more progressive than his mentor, Anwar found himself dismissed in 1998 on charges of corrupt practices, which included alleged sodomy. He was jailed for six years, during which UMNO was running its course to political destruction.

By the time Anwar was freed in 2004, Mahathir had already stepped down. Yet Anwar would again land behind bars in 2015, a maneuver by then Prime Minister Najib Razak, who, like Mahathir, had feared a political threat. Anwar had started his own reformist party and won a popular vote in a general election.





It was also in 2015, however, that a massive corruption and bribery case erupted. Najib was among those accused of stealing money from the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) sovereign wealth fund. The fund's debt and financial commitments reached almost USD 8 billion, sending the country into a political and economic tailspin.

Mahathir, already in his 90s, returned to the scene, ostensibly to save the country he had envisioned by instituting policies largely on his own terms. He ran a four-party coalition – effectively

setting aside UMNO – which brought him back to power in 2018. People went to the streets demanding good governance -- and inevitably gave the old guard another chance.

Anwar was pardoned at the same time. He was set to take over from Mahathir, but the coalition collapsed two years later. Two short-termed prime ministers later, Anwar finally had his chance to redeem his reputation. He was portrayed as the political underdog who had suffered unfairly because of machinations of those in power.

People expected reforms to start taking place with him leading the new coalition government, to see Malaysia move to a new era of democracy, even with a few flaws.

Three years on, the Pakatan Harapan coalition government led by Anwar's Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) appears to be on shaky ground. Anwar's allies are turning critics and talking to the opposition; his judgments are being questioned as to whether he is fulfilling the reforms he promised. The governance reformist, it seems, is backsliding into the old ways of the old boys' club. Anwar's hold is so tenuous that analysts say he might be pressured to call for a snap election before his term expires in 2028.

Anwar believes Malaysia's institutions are fundamentally sound, but contaminated by corruption that needs to be removed. Reforms will purify it, but other reformists now believe that the Malaysian model is obsolete and that restructuring is needed.

"The disappointment with Anwar isn't inaction," says a Malaysian political analyst. "It's solving the wrong problem. If the structure is sound, trusting him to deliver anti-corruption makes sense. If the structure is outdated, his reforms restore a system that no longer delivers. Anwar may be genuinely reforming Malaysia – just not in the way many think reform is needed."

Pillars of resilience: institutions, political parties and citizens

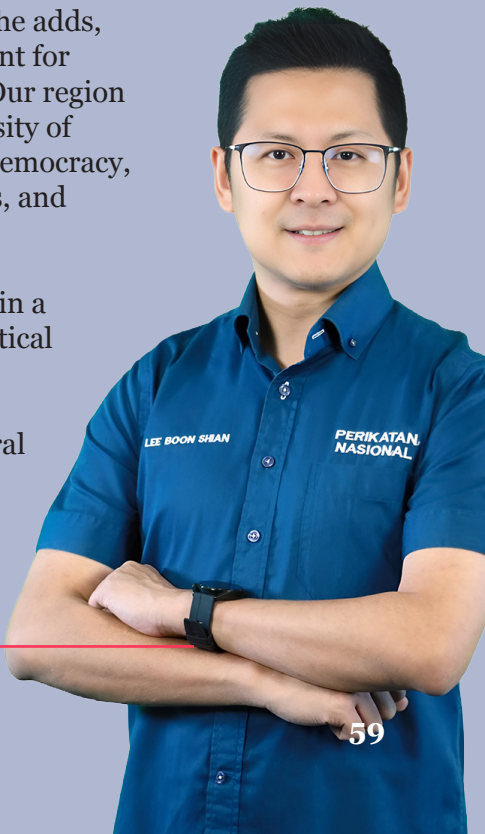
"Democracy always faces crises," declares Lee Boon Shian, Youth Chief of Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia.

"Democratic resilience is not about the absence of political conflict," he says. "It is about the ability of democratic systems to manage conflict, reform institutions, and renew public trust over time."

Countries in Southeast and East Asia, he adds, provides a particularly rich environment for examining this question. Notes Lee: "Our region is characterized by a remarkable diversity of political systems. We see established democracy, emerging democracies, hybrid systems, and other forms of governance."

Malaysia, he says, continues to maintain a competitive election and an active political landscape.

"Electoral competition remains a central mechanism through which political



Lee Boon Shian
Youth Chief
Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia

legitimacy is established," says Lee. "Over the years, Malaysia has experienced significant political transition, demonstrating that peaceful political change is possible within the democratic framework. "

As such, he says that democratic resilience rests on three key pillars:



1. Strong and credible institutions. Independent courts, effective legislators, and professional public institutions are essential to maintaining the rule of law and public confidence.



2. Responsible political leadership and political parties. Political competition is a normal part of democracy, but it must be conducted within the framework of democratic norms and respect for institutions.



3. An active, engaged citizenry. Civil society, organization, media, and ordinary citizens all play a vital role in ensuring that democratic governance remains accountable and responsive.

The Philippines' window for strengthening resilience

Under the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte, the wind of autocratic politics blew hard in the Philippines. The country witnessed a brutal drug war that led to thousands of extrajudicial killings. A foremost critic, then Senator Leila de Lima, was sent to jail on trumped-up charges. Through allies in the Supreme Court, Duterte had the chief justice ousted through questionable legal grounds. Duterte harassed independent media and ordered his allies in Congress to shut down a leading TV network. For six years, democracy was under threat.

In the 2022 elections, the son and namesake of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos ran for president, with Duterte's daughter Sara as his running mate. Theirs was a formidable partnership, an alliance of two powerful dynasties that blended money and political machinery. These, plus the popularity of the authoritarian Duterte and the massive disinformation on Marcos's rule as a 'golden age' in the country, contributed hugely to their victory.



Decades earlier, the Philippines had experienced 14 years of martial rule under strongman Marcos. His regime was marked by corruption in high places, detention and torture of political enemies and activists, and the forced disappearance of others. The dark age of his dictatorship ended only after a historic people power revolt forced him out of power in 1986, pushing him, his family, and a planeload of his cronies into exile.

Looking at the big picture, Liberal Party President Erin Tañada has described the story of Philippine democracy as "resilience tested."

"(Periods) of democratic renewal have been accompanied by episodes of democratic strain, marked by challenges such as corruption, political dynasties, disinformation, and weakening of institutional trust," he said at the CALD roundtable. "More recently, concerns about democratic sliding have underscored how fragile democratic gains can be, even decades after their restoration."



Cambodian Senator Mardi Seng meanwhile pointed out that while resilience is generally a positive trait, it has acquired a negative connotation in the Philippines, particularly in the context of natural disasters, of which the country has many.

"During these difficult

Erin Tañada
President
Liberal Party, Philippines

circumstances, I learned that Filipinos generally rely on themselves and on each other, not on the government—because it is widely perceived as ineffective," Mardi Seng said. "On their own, Filipinos have learned to cope with difficulties on their own, without even bare minimum expectations from their government. This, in turn, resulted in a more complacent government without a modicum of care for its people."

Thus, when Filipinos are described by the government as "resilient," it riles up many. They see it as a convenient way of taking the public's attention away from the authorities' indifference and incompetence.

Resilience as a quality of democracy that keeps it robust, however, is a different context.

Accountability by accident

The Philippines has a six-year window under the presidency of Marcos Jr. (2022 to 2028) to strengthen its resilience. Surprisingly, Marcos Jr. did not follow in his father's footsteps. He has also differentiated himself from the autocratic Duterte by:

- Focusing the drug war on community rehabilitation rather than killing of suspected users.
- Respecting the media, not intimidating and threatening



Mardi Seng
Senator
Cambodia

journalists, political rivals and civil society.

- Setting up a government program to fight disinformation.
- Upholding the rule of law in relations with China.
- Practicing transparency, up to a certain extent.

A big win for accountability was Duterte's arrest, followed by his detention in The Hague in March 2025, plus his trial for crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court. It was the rupture of the Marcos-Duterte partnership that triggered this, strengthening the rule of law and weakening impunity, more by a political accident than design.





Wrote political scientist Aries Arugay in a 2026 paper: "Though framed as a dynastic war, the Marcos Jr. government started invoking democratic norms, human rights, transparency and accountability, and the rule of law against the Dutertes."

Likewise, the impeachment of Vice President Sara Duterte by the House of Representatives in May 2026 on grounds of graft and corruption, unexplained wealth, among others, was an exercise in holding officials to account. This gave the opportunity for civil society to mobilize protests and forge partnerships with political parties.

In domestic politics, the unexpected victory of two opposition senatorial candidates in the 2025 mid-term elections showed a bouncing back from the opposition's showing in the 2022 presidential polls. Then, only one opposition candidate won in the Senate race: Ana Theresia 'Risa' Hontiveros, who barely secured a seat, placing 11 out of 12. Three years later, Paolo Benigno 'Bam' Aquino IV received enough votes to land him 2nd place, while Francis 'Kiko' Pangilinan was in 5th place among 12 winners.

"The results of the midterm elections seem…to be a testament to a surprising regime resilience of Southeast Asia's oldest democracy…the revival of a progressive third force composed of pro-democratic political leaders, [showing] massive mobilization of the youth…" Arugay said.

Can this democratic resilience be sustained should a potentially autocratic leader, like Sara Duterte, win the 2028 presidential election? Hopes remain, banking on collective mass action, courageous politicians and leaders, independent media, and judicial institutions.



Bam Aquino, Risa Hontiveros, and Kiko Pangilinan
Senators, Philippines

We must build civic power

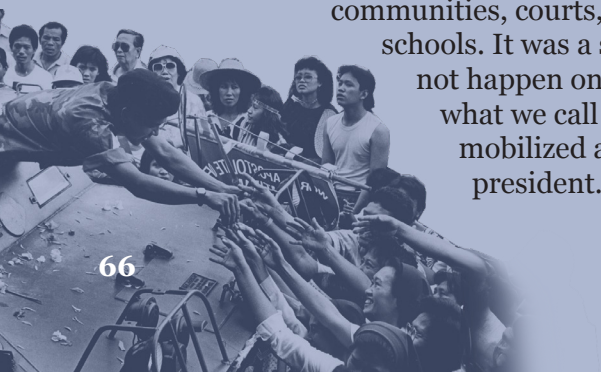


By Florencio 'Butch' Abad

When we speak of democratic resilience, we often begin with institutions, norms, and processes, and how they resist, endure, or recover from shocks that may result in a breakdown or erosion of their quality. And rightly so. But let me begin with a broader and more grounded proposition. The deepest sources of democratic resilience are not institutions, policies, and practices alone. They are citizens, political culture, and the strength of civic life.

Let me illustrate this through the Philippine experience. Late in the evening of February 12, 1986, Jaime Cardinal Sin called on Filipinos to go to EDSA, the main highway of Metro Manila, to stand between soldiers and tanks. Within hours, people came with rosaries, with food, with courage. By the third day, there were millions of people in EDSA. The soldiers hesitated. The dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. fell. We call this the 1986 People Power Revolution in EDSA.

It was not a miracle. It was the product of long years of difficult organizing of civic groups, churches, workers, students, communities, and engagements in the streets, agrarian communities, courts, legislatures, factories, and schools. It was a social movement, and it did not happen only once. In 2001, through what we call EDSA II, citizens again mobilized and removed another sitting president.



So here is the paradox. We have one of the most vibrant civil societies in the world. We pioneered people power. We inspired democratic movements globally. And yet, our democratic resilience remains weak. Why is that so? Because while people power has been able to change governments, it has not been able to transform the system of power and governance. The deeper structures remain. Persistent inequality, entrenched oligarchic control, a culture of patronage politics, and dynastic domination of political power.

While democratic breakdown has been avoided, democratic quality has not significantly deepened. While we have survived, we have not risen.

What must we do? Let me draw briefly from the International IDEA, what it calls the 'Six Bs' of democratic resilience.

Resilient democracies build institutions and practices that block bad laws, broaden political power, blindfold or depoliticize state institutions, balance concentration of power, bolster the bureaucracy, and rebuild holistically. These are essential institutional guardrails.

But they will not work unless they are anchored in civic power. Elections change governments. Institutions constrain power. But only citizens—organized, informed, and engaged—can transform systems.

The real challenge before us is this: How do we connect civic energy with institutional reform? How do we ensure that social movements help reformist leaders win elections?

Electoral victories translate into governance reforms—and those reforms are sustained, deepened,



and protected by active citizen engagement. This is the virtuous cycle we must build.

At the heart of this lies something even more fundamental: civic virtue. A shared commitment to the common good, a sense of responsibility as citizens. This is where our deeper historical challenge lies.

The development of a strong sense of nationhood, rooted in our early communities called barangays, was disrupted by centuries of colonization under Spain and the United States, and later reinforced by elite domination. The result is a political culture where patronage often overrides principle, and citizenship is too often transactional.

If we're serious about democratic resilience, we must go beyond fixing institutions. We must invest in civic education that builds democratic values, a civil society that empowers communities, and political systems that reward integrity over patronage. Without civic virtue, institutions will remain fragile. But with it, even imperfect institutions can endure and improve.

The Philippines has shown the world how citizens can restore democracy. The challenge now is to show that citizens can also sustain and transform it. From people's power, we must build civic power. From episodic mobilizations like elections, we must build sustained participation. From formal democracy, we must move toward substantive democracy: one that delivers justice, equity, and dignity.

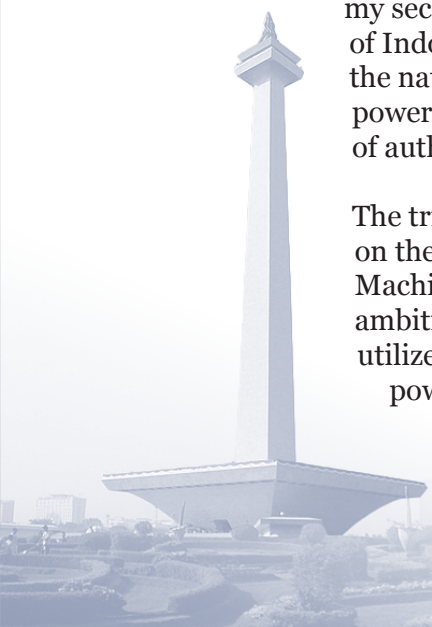


Fortress of Resilience: The Institutionalization of PDIP

By Hasto Kristiyanto

The institution of political parties and their relationship with party resilience and election-winning strategies is highly relevant amidst the declining quality of democracy in many countries, including in Indonesia.

This forum is my first regional event after spending nearly six months in prison. I had been subjected to the criminalization of political law since September 18, 2021, when I first rejected the proposal to extend the term of Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo. (The president is constitutionally prohibited from seeking a third term.) This pressure escalated after my second dissertation defense at the University of Indonesia, in which my research revealed the nature of President Jokowi's ambition for power, a phenomenon I refer to as the 'triangle of authoritarian populism.'



The triangle of authoritarian populism is built on the culture of feudalism, populism, and Machiavellianism, motivated by Jokowi's ambitions. Through his populist nature, Jokowi utilized feudal culture to foster a patron-client power relationship by exploiting cultural symbols to reinforce the perception of himself as a king.

PDI PERJUANGAN

Jokowi's feudal culture aligned with the view that traditional leaders often employ cultural elements and tradition to strengthen their power. Jokowi has an inherent authoritarian populist character, and he took the Machiavellian path, using political deception wrapped in high approval ratings based on surveys. The survey became a tool of the hegemonic regime. This is the most devastating psychological manipulation in the history of democracy in Indonesia.

Jokowi's actions aligned with the teachings of The Prince. First, to maintain power, one must be a great hypocrite and liar. Second, to achieve great things, one must learn to deceive. Third, never lack a valid excuse for breaking promises.

It was the triangle of authoritarian populism that the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) faced in the 2024 election. Election fraud was systematically designed starting with the use of the state budget, a minimum of USD 33 billion, for populist election programs. Dr. Sukidi, a Harvard-trained scholar, analyzed various political lies and the authoritarian populist nature of the 2024 polls that revealed a portrait of Jokowi as the Javanese Hitler, manipulating Javanese culture for the sake of his power.



How did PDIP manage to withstand the various political pressures?

The institutionalization of the party has become a fortress of resilience.

Party institutionalization or PI is achieved through a conscious and systematic effort to establish strategic leadership and ideology that enable all party functions to operate effectively. PI encompasses verification, autonomy in decision making, and party functions. Strategic leadership includes the dimension of leadership, culture, and transformation of the organization. Ideology consists of the dimension of core ideology, members' commitment to the leaders, the internationalization of leaders' values, and shared vision for the future.





As a result, PDIP has greater party resilience. In my research, it builds from a unique combination of strategic leadership, ideology, and PI.

It reveals these findings: First, institutionalized ideology has the greatest significance. Second, strategic leadership affects party resilience through the institutionalization of the party.

After massive party institutionalization beginning 2010, PDIP has faced enormous challenges, including the very brutal practices of the triangle of authoritarian populism backed by a



Hasto Kristiyanto
Secretary General, Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle

USD 31-billion state budget, direct use of state apparatus such as the national police, and widespread intimidation practices. Despite all of this, PDIP was able to survive, and it won the 2024 legislative election.

The institutionalization of the party also enhanced the quality of democracy. It has empowered the PDIP to face the external shocks of geopolitical pressure such as transnational religion-based ideologies. Today PDIP stands as the only political party in Indonesia that has officially condemned the attack by the United States and Israel against Iran.

Party institutionalization provides a comprehensive, systematic, and long-term model for winning the elections. By building the party's resilience, PDIP can manage various shocks through flexibility, adaptability, and a strong capacity for its survival.

Strategic leaders serve as the initial catalyst for resistance against the populist authoritarian. The strategic leadership of PDIP was built through the synthesis of thought between Sukarno and Megawati Sukarnoputri, our chairwoman. The strategic leadership is stated in Megawati's seven principles: critical thinking, vision, direction, core values, biopolitics, alignment, and commitment.



The institutionalization of political parties, from the PDIP perspective, is the readiness to answer the endless journey in fighting for a nation.

Megawati Sukarnoputri
Chairwoman, Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle

Democracy in Indonesia is eroding, challenging its resilience

Indonesia's current president, Prabowo Subianto, has centralized power, surrounding himself with yes men and women. He has shrunk the democratic space, intimidated civil society and the media, as well as marginalized the opposition in the legislature. He sows fear by labelling critics and demonstrators as terrorists, treasonous, anarchists and "foreign stooges." Freedom of expression has increasingly come under threat due to restrictive laws.

In 2025, Prabowo's political party, Gerindra (Partai Gerakan Indonesia Raya), revised the armed-forces law to allow soldiers on active duty to serve in civilian posts. He has expanded the role of the armed forces in Indonesia's politics, reminiscent of the era of the dictatorship.

Since he became president in 2024, the dark clouds of authoritarianism have hovered over the country's politics, posing a threat to the resilience of Indonesia, one of the largest democracies in the world. There is lingering suspicion that Prabowo will return the country to Suharto-era authoritarianism.

Waves of mass protests against Prabowo's controversial policies have swept the country, reflecting increasing discontent and frustration.

"There are few avenues for dissent," The Economist said. "Far too much depends on the instincts of a single, badly advised ex-soldier."

According to political analyst Muhammad Aqshadigrama, Indonesia's transition to autocracy is accelerating through legal means. He noted in a 2025 analysis for East Asia Forum, "Legislation, laws and regulations are slowly changing and democratic institutions like the Constitutional Court are gradually weakening, leading to the downfall of Indonesia's democratic system."





Prabowo's past record has raised concerns. A former general who was reported to have abducted activists protesting the regime of his then father-in-law, the dictator Suharto, he was dismissed from the military.

Widodo, too

The weakening of Indonesia's democracy began with Prabowo's predecessor, Joko Widodo. On Widodo's watch:

- The authority of the formerly independent Corruption Eradication (KPK) to combat corruption effectively was reduced.
- Social organizations were disbanded without due process.
- The constitutional court allowed Widodo's eldest son to run for vice president in the 2024 elections despite falling short of the age requirement. Nepotism was at play:

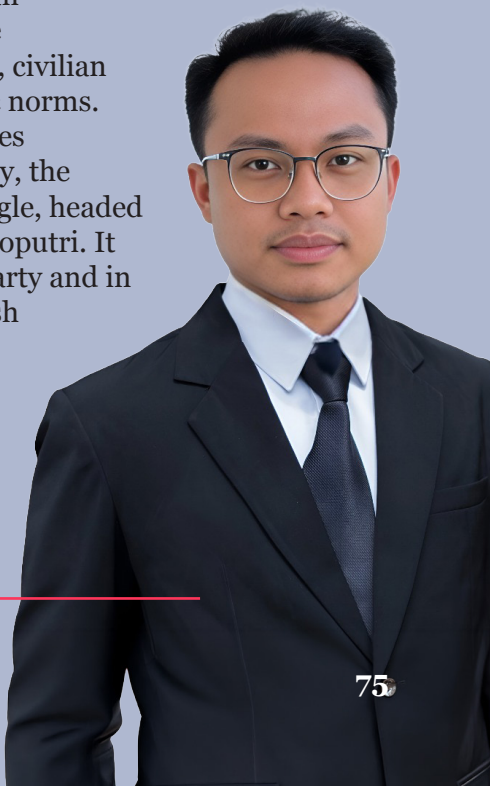
the court's chief justice was Widodo's brother- in-law. Widodo's son became Prabowo's running mate.

- Behaviors such as public demonstrations without a permit were criminalized.

On the economic front, Widodo presided over a period of sustained economic growth, declining poverty and significant investment in infrastructure. He thus remained popular—but civil freedoms and accountability deteriorated. His increasingly authoritarian populism was a stress test for democratic institutions in Indonesia.

Academic Aqida Salma calls Indonesia a democratic paradox: a country with vibrant electoral participation-- a robust electoral democracy wherein political parties compete vigorously-- and open civic engagement, yet also with persistent institutional fragility.

Civil society and the opposition have an increasingly important role, facing the challenge of strengthening democracy, civilian supremacy, and defending democratic norms. Among the political parties, the task lies with Indonesia's main opposition party, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, headed by former President Megawati Sukarnoputri. It has experienced being both a ruling party and in the opposition. The party needs to push back against Prabowo's democratic backsliding to avert a democratic breakdown.



Muhammad Aqshadigrama
Political Analyst

Question and answer:
The military as actor in Indonesian and the Philippine politics

Q&A



Question:
Indonesia and the Philippines face the common challenge of dealing with the military. Indonesia passed a law allowing active-duty officers to serve in civilian positions in government. In the Philippines, retired officers are invited to join the government. The problem is: how do you rein in the politicians or the political elite who treat the military as a tool to boost political support for the government?

Answer:
Hasto Kristiyanto: It's true that in Indonesia, military involvement in the civil government is much higher because this is permitted by a new law. When the bill was ratified, I was in jail. The bill was released without any defenders from the political parties except for civil society because most of the parliament is already controlled by the government. This is one of the challenges in Indonesian democracy and how to face situations like this.



First, it is much more important for civil society to be organized. Second, the student movement. That's why PDIP, when I was released from the jail, directly focused on organizing civil society and the student movement because the bill was already passed by the parliament. The important thing is to remind the student movement and civil society that freedom

of speech, the freedom to organize, and the freedom of press are all under government control. We have to provide the alternative, access to the grassroots and also in the university. It is critical for the party to encourage the student movement to speak. And for the PDIP itself, its progressive character is one of the important magnets for the recruitment of members.

For instance, when we opened the recruitment to the student movement, the first question to them was, “Are you afraid?” If you are afraid, please don’t join PDIP. I would share my experiences that the prison is not enough for people who want to defend our democracy. Sometimes I would say that when I was in the prison, my blood test result was the best one in my life. Prison made me healthy. So my message always is: Please don’t be afraid to be in prison when you are fighting for truth and justice, even if we have to fight the military movement in our Indonesian politics.



Answer:

Butch Abad: The military was strongest during the period of Marcos’s martial rule. Their power was legitimized by a national security ideology that was in response to what was then called the Asian domino wherein a series of countries fell to authoritarian regimes. The Americans supported a greater role for the military to suppress communism in the Philippines.



The military was profoundly changed by the EDSA people power revolution when, in the face of guns and tanks and firepower from the military, the Filipino people refused to back down and leave EDSA.

They brought flowers and gave them to the soldiers, knelt and prayed with the rosary before tanks. They engaged the soldiers in conversations about the future of the country.

I don't think that the soldiers ever expected what they were going to meet in the highway of EDSA. That profoundly changed their attitude about what people power can do. They realized how much power people have when they are resolute in fighting repression by a dictatorship. They have not forgotten the lesson of EDSA that has restored them to an institution that is professional and that is distinctly interested in promoting democracy.

After Marcos left and martial law was dismantled, the military decided that it was time for them to play the role that they should be playing in the service of the people. From then on, although there were a lot of temptations to join and intervene in political processes, they have refused to do so.

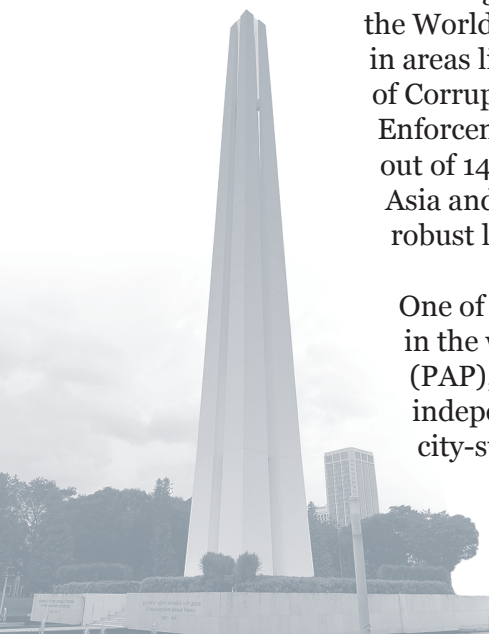
In fact, during the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte, he tried sometimes to very explicitly ask them to join his crusade against drugs in the country to supplement what his police were doing in killing almost arbitrarily anybody suspected of being a drug pusher or a drug user. At the end of the Duterte administration, as many as 30,000 people were killed because of the anti-drug campaign. But at no time during the six-year term was the military tempted to follow Rodrigo Duterte.



Today, under the presidency of Bongbong Marcos, they have continued to behave as professional soldiers.

Hybrid Democracy: 'Singapore has traded democracy for wealth'

Singapore has been classified by annual global surveys as 'partly free' and a 'flawed democracy.' Political scientists have called the city-state a 'hybrid democracy,' a phrase that captures its system of governance, because it combines transparent competitive elections with strict laws that curtail civil freedoms. Singapore is an astounding economic success, a stable place for finance and business, but it lags in liberal politics, restricting free speech and assembly.



Singapore is recognized for its strong rule of law and respect for the courts. It has consistently ranked high in the Rule of Law Index of the World Justice Project, scoring strong in areas like Order and Security, Absence of Corruption, and effective Regulatory Enforcement. In 2025, Singapore ranked 16 out of 143 in the Index and 4th among 15 East Asia and the Pacific nations, reflecting its robust legal framework.

One of the longest-serving political parties in the world, the Political Action Party (PAP), has governed Singapore since its independence in 1965, and has led the city-state to prosperity. Singapore is the

wealthiest country in Southeast Asia, with the highest GDP per capita in the region.

PAP has enjoyed wide support from Singaporeans, particularly from baby boomers who have seen and experienced the country thrive under its rule. A YouGov poll in 2025 showed that their age group was the most satisfied with the May 2025 general election outcome (62 percent) while Gen Z voters were the least satisfied, albeit still expressing a 47-percent approval.

Overall, 50 percent felt optimistic about the country's future under the newly elected government led by Prime Minister Lawrence Wong. Among the Gen Z respondents, however, only 37 percent said they were optimistic.

In the May 2025 general election, PAP won 87 of 97 seats in parliament and 65.57 percent of the vote. This was PAP's best result since 2011, according to the Edelman Global Advisory.

The global communications firm even called it a



"resounding mandate for the ruling PAP which secured extending its unbroken rule…[this] shows strong public confidence in PM Wong's leadership and ensures a predictable policy environment. It reinforces Singapore's status as a stable, well-governed hub in an increasingly volatile global landscape."





Still, it noted that the main opposition party, the Workers' Party, which focused on checks and balances, retained all of its elected seats (10). It said that this confirmed "its role as a credible institutional opposition."

The Workers' Party was the first to break the monopoly of the PAP. But there are smaller opposition parties like the People's Power Party, the National Solidarity Party, Progress Singapore Party, and the Singapore Democratic Party. The opposition camp, however, is said to be fragmented; attempts to create an opposition coalition have so far failed.

Critics say that while elections in Singapore have been open and free from fraud, the PAP maintains an unfair advantage because it keeps a tight control over the media and on free speech.

An independent assessment, the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2026, had this observation: "The government continues to use restrictive laws to curtail political speech it deems inappropriate." The BTI Index 2026 cited

the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), which targets activists and prominent politicians.

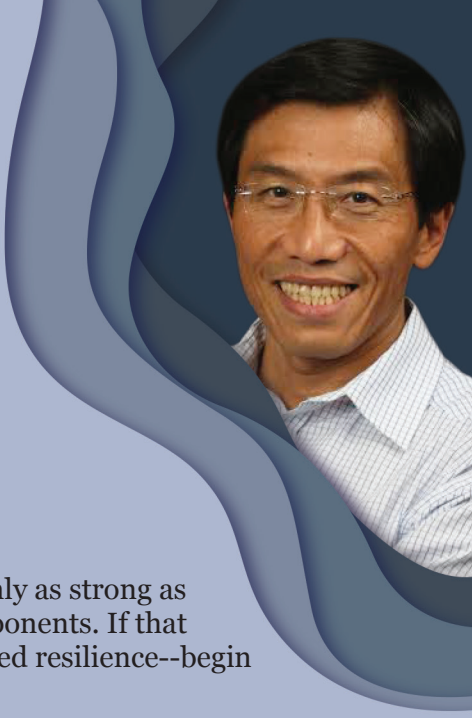
Other restrictive laws include the ISA or Internal Security Act, which enables detention orders to be renewed every two years, as well as the Sedition Act, which criminalizes speech seen to have a seditious tendency. There is also the Societies Act, which limits free speech of independent civic groups; they are only allowed to comment on "political" issues if they register as political societies.

What is interesting, as highlighted by the BTI Index, is that most Singaporeans (80 percent) express a desire for democracy and 85 percent believe democracy is the most suitable form of government for the country. Most Singaporeans still want checks on government power.

In a 2021 Pew Research Center poll, 82 percent of the Singaporean respondents indicated they were satisfied with how democracy was working in their country. Majority also felt that the government resembled a complete democracy, not an authoritarian system. A later survey, the 2023 Asian Barometer, showed that most citizens believed Singapore to be a democracy with "minor problems."

The BTI Index put it aptly: "Singapore has traded democracy for wealth and embraced a way of life in which civil liberties, intellectual debate, and political parties have become casualties of economic development."

Hope, meaning and agency are the foundation of resilience



By Chee Soon Juan

Democratic institutional resilience is only as strong as the resilience of its practitioners, its exponents. If that fails, all the institutions--institutionalized resilience--begin to crumble as well.

The whole idea of resilience is hugely important and fundamental to citizens like civil society leaders, political players, and the general public. Resilience is basically a very unique human trait where we look for meaning. We look for hope and agency.

If you think about it, if you have pets at home, and you talk about meaning, about hope--it doesn't register. But for humans, it's something that is hugely essential in terms of us looking forward and planning and strategizing for a better life.

In that sense, resilience is not just bouncing back from adversity and coming back and starting from ground zero. No -- it's always the search for us to become stronger through learning from our setbacks, our failures, and all the crises that we've experienced.

In that regard, I want to put on my hat now as more of a psychologist, rather than my position in Singapore as a member of the Singapore Democratic Party. In my previous life, I was trained in the field of neuropsychology.

Resilience is not just this abstract idea that we possess or we're

endowed with. It is a skill. From a psychological standpoint, it is a skill that we can acquire, we can cultivate, and we can strengthen. Very much like when you go out and exercise your biceps and your muscles, you get stronger every time you face adversity and you find that you're able to learn from it.

There are physiological correlates in your brain: Psychologists have identified that there are resilience circuits, physical circuits that occur in your brain. That becomes stronger every time you overcome a setback, a crisis.

If the human body, if your mind can begin to appreciate this, then understand that if you situate your whole idea of experiencing a setback or backsliding in the context of a learning process, we begin to find that the entire movement of what we're trying to achieve becomes greater.

Resilience basically is undergirded by three qualities: meaning, hope, and agency. Every time you find yourself undergoing difficulties, if you situate your own experiences in the wider context of meaning in life, what are you fighting for? In our case, many times it's freedom, justice, human rights. You find that the whole process of being able to endure your difficulties is much easier.

The second item that you cannot see is hope. I like to quote this: "Hope springs eternal in the human breast." It's not just this airy-fairy notion of a vague feeling of optimism. It is a discipline that you begin to imagine a future that you can walk toward, that you're willing to fight for. That is hugely important in all human struggles.



My final argument is the most important quality, and that's agency: To be able to find ways and means of achieving our goals, of fulfilling our hopes, and by that I include strategic planning. To be able to find the agency for us to move forward.

In that regard, I think it's very important for us to be able to understand what our members, the leaders of civil society or political leadership, know what resilience is, so that as we go along we are able then to begin to harness on this very human quality that we have, that we possess right now.

More importantly, there are huge repercussions for the general public, when they experience the kinds of situation that's going on around the world, the conflagrations in Europe, in the Middle East, and I dare say in the United States as well. The energy crisis looks like it's going to worsen. And then there's this other side of the advent of artificial intelligence.

I was at the College of St Benilde at De la Salle, and at the Ateneo, and I was talking to the students there. Almost everywhere I go, whether it's in London or the U.S., you find that young people are anguished, anxious about what's coming up in the future. They feel it. And if we fail to address those concerns, as sure as the sun rises tomorrow, you can be sure demagogues and autocrats would step in and fill in the void.

And then we'll find ourselves backsliding again. The point is that we just need to continue to be attuned to what the young people, or at least the wider society, are very concerned about, and things that they want to be able to know.

Resilience training in that whole realm is a huge topic not just in political circles, but believe me, in the corporate world as well. Everybody continues to be very anxious about what society has in store for them going forward. It would be to our own detriment if we ignore this whole realm of cultivating resilience and training ourselves as well as the wider public.

Q&A

Question and answer: Singaporean Resilience



Question:
Senator Kiko Pangilinan said that when politicians speak to their audiences, they need to give programs that are granular and with concrete action. Can you give us concrete examples of what your party does to promote hope and make your citizens more resilient in the light of six decades of the People's Action Party or PAP's dominance?

Answer:
The situation in Singapore has come to a point whereby after half a century or more of one-party rule, and focusing almost exclusively on just GDP and economic growth, issues that are non-tangible have taken a backseat. It has come to the point that it is kicking us in the backside in the sense that mental health has reached crisis proportions in Singapore. The latest polling globally shows that Singapore's burnout rate is highest in the world.



We've gotten to the point where young people, not just the elderly, are facing homelessness. It may surprise or shock you to hear this. We've come to a state where we have the highest number of billionaires per capita in the world. That

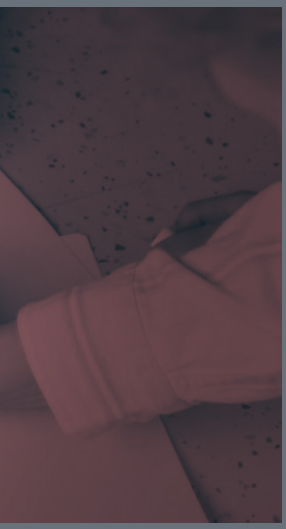
has translated into increasing inequality, according to UBS's latest wealth report. The government strategy is to continue to attract ultra-high net worth individuals, billionaires, where wealth is concentrated.

All these things are beginning to affect the quality of life in Singapore. We propose other ways of running the country in terms of governance. This is where the whole idea of making sure that hope is still there, and providing people with the agency to be able to achieve the things that we set out to do, and then to communicate to them effectively in the most reasonable manner that they can buy in and come with us.






IDEA



SPECIAL SECTION

What can we do?



A ***Lighthouse*** as a symbol of resilience, it shines a bright, constant beam to guide ships safely through dark and dangerous waters.

‘Fix the roof while the sun is shining’



By Leena Rikkila Tamang

I want to focus on a simple question: What can we do? And also briefly touch on why this is often so difficult.

First, one of the central messages of our work is: fix the roof when the sun is shining. As we know, prevention is better than cure.

At present, there are real windows of opportunity in some countries in the region to fix their roofs. In South Korea, for example, there is scope to review legislative frameworks and scrutinize executive powers following what then President Yoon Suk Yeol tried to do. Similarly, in Nepal and Sri Lanka, there may be opportunities—given the electoral mandates—to undertake thorough audits of legal and institutional frameworks. To identify vulnerabilities, strengthen resilience and so prevent future backsliding.

This also raises a key question: What are the core constitutional elements that must be safeguarded to preserve democracy? These should be protected beyond the reach of temporary political majorities. In Finland, for example, amending the constitution requires a simple majority in the parliament and a two-third majority of the subsequent parliament. Core elements of the Indian constitution are unamendable.

Second, increasing resilience once backsliding has begun is not easy. In the report [International IDEA, "Designing Resilient Institutions: Countering Backsliding in Asia], we outline six reflections—the 'Six Bs,' as they all start with letter B -- for designing and strengthening resilient institutions. I will briefly mention two:

Blindfolding backsliders refers to introducing an element of unpredictability into institutional processes, particularly in the selection of office holders. For example, there have been proposals in the United States to select Supreme Court judges by lottery from a pool of qualified candidates.

In Sri Lanka, the inclusion of civil society representatives in the Constitutional Council—which oversees major appointments—has introduced a degree of unpredictability and balance.

Second B is bureaucracy: recognizing bureaucracy as key institutions that can both counter democratic backsliding and also undermine democracy; here the prestige, formal qualifications, appointment process, incentives play a role.

Third, sometimes the most realistic strategy is to delay, stall, and buy time.

In such situations, it is critical to keep the electoral pathway open—to maintain electoral integrity and ensure that citizens retain the ability to "vote the rascals out," as the saying goes. This provides an opportunity for democracy to correct itself.

We can now see this in contexts like Nepal and Bangladesh. People are eager to see whether elections can still deliver a meaningful change. Expectations are very high.

At times, the final line of defense lies not in institutions, but in civil society and the media. We saw this in Indonesia, when discussions around a potential third term for President Jokowi

triggered public protest, after which the idea receded.

Hence the importance of fiercely protecting civic space and the right to protest.

At times it is the pockets of judiciary independence, or the independent institutions, including election commissions, also parliaments and the opposition, which provide the resilience, or the required time out.

To conclude, addressing democratic backsliding once it has begun is difficult. Experiences across Asia highlight several challenges—starting from what we call the "resilience conundrum," or the catch-22 situations, where institutions meant to safeguard democracy are themselves implicated in backsliding.

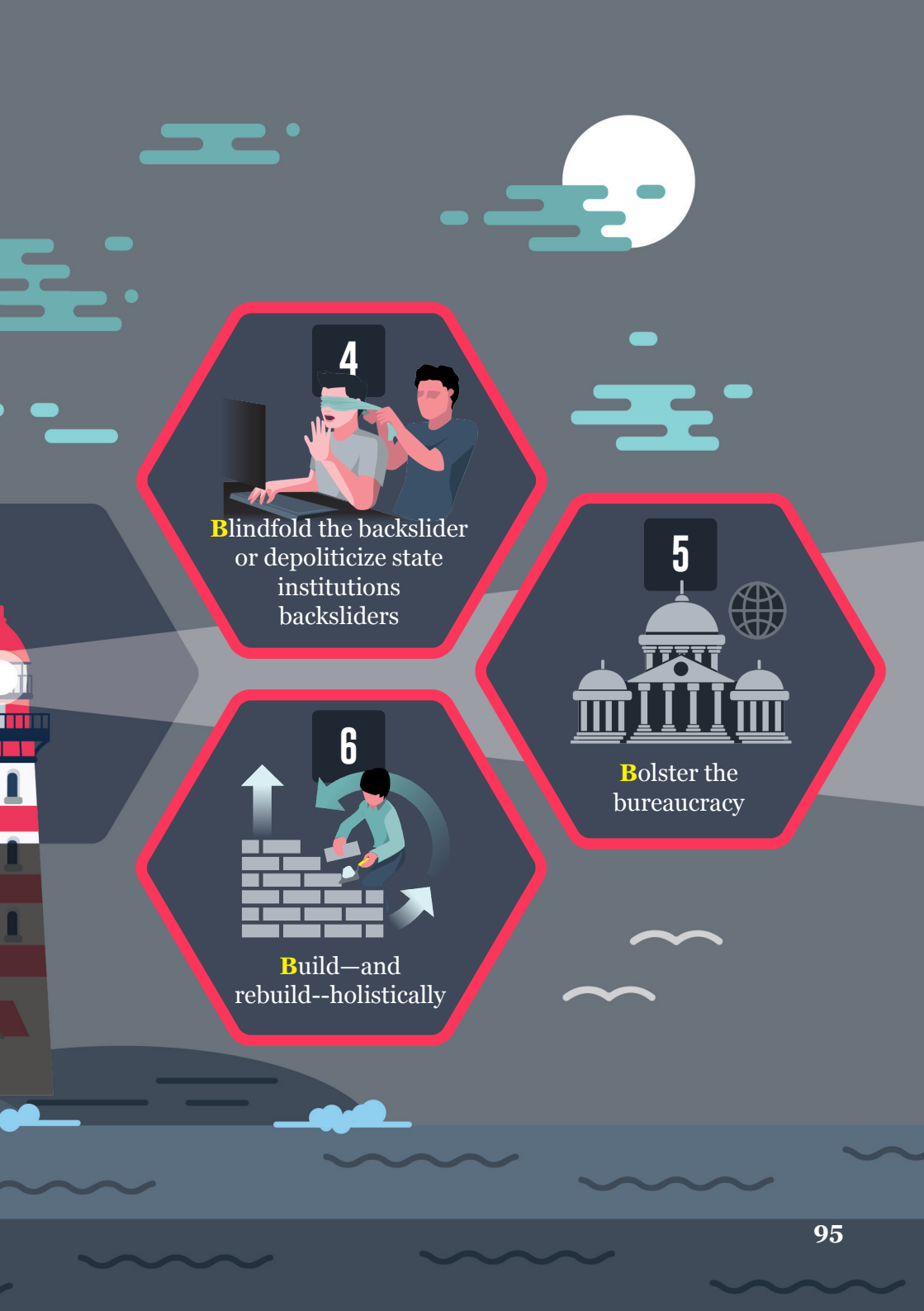
Moreover, backsliding tactics are often sophisticated, adaptive, and difficult to detect. Like a virus, they mutate over time. And if one avenue is blocked, others emerge. So the democrats, too, need to come up with innovative ways to respond. Sometimes it is holding the line, or simply persevering, and other times, reimagining, thinking out of the box through institutional innovations that the situation is calling for.

Democratic resilience is often local. In federal systems, some states, cities, or communities may remain resilient even when national politics is under strain. Local successes—whether in community governance, local media, or grassroots initiatives—matter greatly.



Six B's of Democratic Resilience




4
Blindfold the backslider or depoliticize state institutions backsliders
5
Bolster the bureaucracy
6
Build—and rebuild--holistically

Q&A

Question & Answer:
Democratic Resilience



Question:
Looking at the Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore, do you see such windows of opportunity to fix the roof when the sun is shining?

Answer:
In our report, we refer to fixing the roof while the sun is shining. That is, in anticipation of democratic backsliding when some kind of early signs, warning signs, appear. I would argue maybe in Asia, there are countries -- at the moment like Mongolia, South Korea, Taiwan -- that may fit this window.

However, the challenge in countries like Indonesia and the Philippines is how to strengthen institutional resilience. I fully agree that resilience needs to go beyond only institutional resilience. But if we look at the institutional resilience, the challenge is how do we do that in the context of significant or severe backsliding?



Maybe in the Philippines, there is slightly more opportunity, more operating space at the moment. I would say first priority is holding the line, meaning protecting the very core democratic principles, elections, freedom of speech, assembly, and the rule of law. Use the media, civil society, and courts

strategically to delay or challenge any dubious reforms.

For example, in Indonesia, when then President Jokowi was flirting with the idea of a third term, it was the public protests that really forced him to back down, although a similar mobilization did not occur when his son was nominated as vice president.

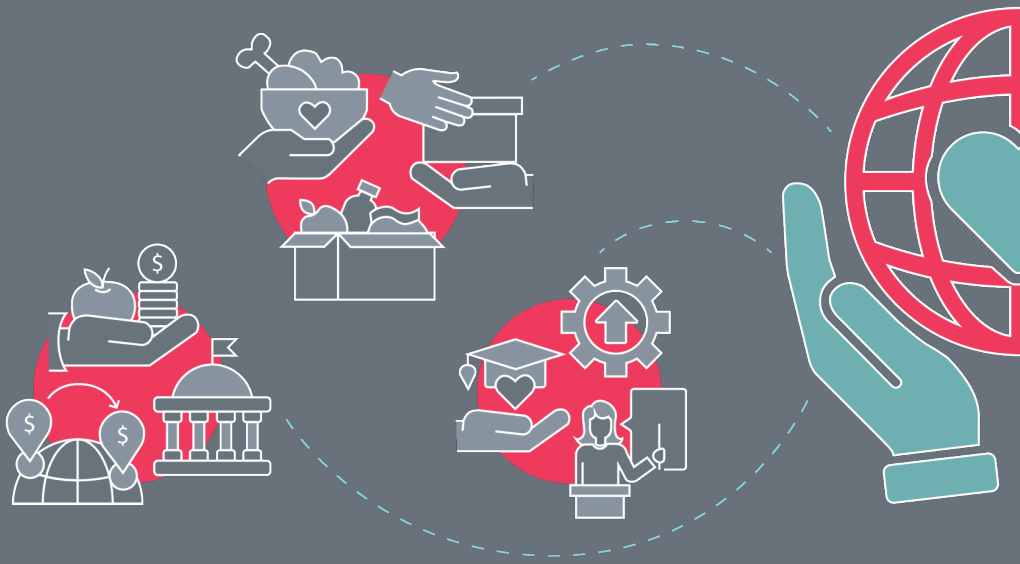
Second, keep the electoral path open, including safeguarding electoral integrity, ensuring independence of the election management bodies, supporting international domestic observation, and so on to allow democracy to correct itself.

It was said earlier that the Philippines has been good at changing the government, but not necessarily transforming it. So the third one relates to that. Strengthening resilience through reforms, looking at what can be done to enhance participation in the parliament, particularly the role of opposition. Is there something that could be done to improve the laws governing protests, protecting civil society, media freedoms, or reforming the political-finance systems, including taming the incumbency to making sure that there is no misuse of state resources? As we know, money plays a major role in all countries.

The core dilemma is that the very institutions tasked with implementing reforms are the ones driving the backsliding. So the opposition, democratic forces, sometimes the bureaucracy, the judiciary, the independent institutions, need to be very clever and strategic. And public influence, public opinion, should still matter.

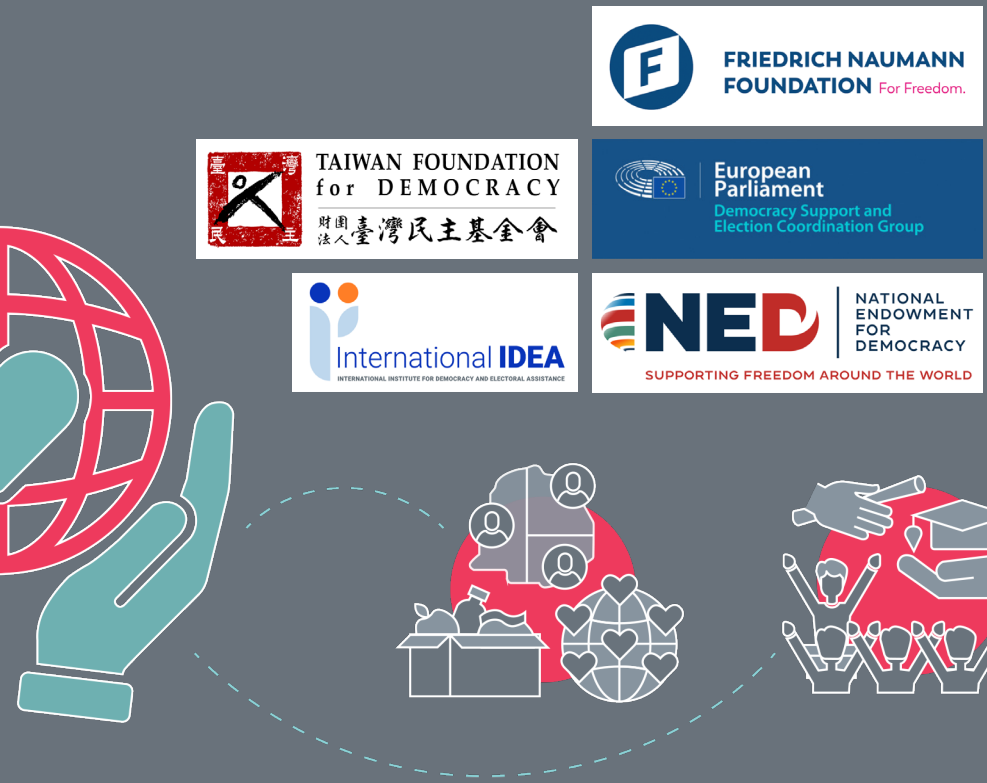


What can multilateral institutions do?



Strengthen democratic coordination and collective action in a contested global order

1. Democracies should exert greater collective leadership at the regional level and within international organizations to defend democratic norms and rules-based international order.
2. Reduce strategic vulnerabilities created by economic dependence on authoritarian regimes.
3. Confront corruption and close financial pathways that sustain authoritarian rule.
4. Withhold legitimacy from authoritarian leaders and undemocratic power grabs.



Reimagine international democracy assistance to help reverse the global decline in freedom.

1. Democracy assistance requires a broader, more diversified, and more coordinated financing ecosystem, including public-private partnerships that draw on governments, philanthropy, and private sector.
2. Stronger donor coordination and alignment on priority issues is essential, and each effort must be customized to the needs on the ground.
3. Strengthen protection and long-term support for at-risk human-rights defenders and embattled civil-society organizations.

Source: Freedom in the World 2026

Quotes from Speakers



Florencio 'Butch' Abad
CALD Chairperson

"We must go beyond fixing institutions. We must inform citizens, invest in civic education that builds democratic values, in a civil society that empowers communities, and political systems that reward integrity over patronage."

"Democratic resilience is a cultural and relational project. It is about rebuilding trust and establishing or re-establishing meaningful connections between leaders and the led. It is about renewing the social contract so that people feel democracy in their daily lives as protection, as dignity, as a voice...[We need] to speak in concrete granular terms and center the ordinary citizen in our work."



Francis 'Kiko' Pangilinan
Senator, Republic of the Philippines



"Party institutionalization is achieved through a conscious and systematic effort to establish strategic leadership and ideology which enable the party to operate effectively... This requires the party to operate with a clear system, good political managerial processes, deliverables, and accountability."

Hasto Kristiyanto
Secretary General, Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle



"We need to be attuned to what the young people, and the wider society, are very concerned about...Make sure that hope is still there, and provide people with the agency to be able to achieve the things that we set out to do and to communicate to them effectively."

Chee Soon Juan
Secretary General, Singapore Democratic Party

"What we have is integrity. That was the rallying point for us and for our supporters. You have to have someone that is sellable, who can be that voice and be that person or that group of people that people would want to support in the face of danger, in the face of imprisonment, in the face of oppression. You need that person. You need that political party."



Isra Sunthornvut
Deputy Leader and Head of Foreign Affairs of the Democrat Party of Thailand



James Gomez
Director of Asia Centre with offices in Thailand, Malaysia and Cambodia

"At this difficult time of democracy backsliding, it is important that we build the relationship and connection between civil society and political parties. There needs to be a seamless flow between individuals from civil society to political parties. Sometimes, it is one way. And when this happens, then civil society is left a little under the weather, so to speak, because their representatives have all gone into political parties. We need a two-way flow. Politicians also, when they want to take a break, they have the experience, the knowledge, the networks, they can also go onto the civil society platform and contribute to that community."



Alysa Chiu
Deputy Director of the Department of International Affairs and Democratic Progressive Party of Taiwan

"We still live under a lot of fears every day, from external threats. But we've been there before. We were the opposition party when it was martial law. Our predecessors were in jail. Their spouses came out to [campaign] for them. So that is courage. There should be a leader willing to come out, to lead the crowd, and to be willing to sacrifice. That is a courageous point we are still working on. This is also a very important thing we want to bring to our next generation. They will protect Taiwan's democracy and our way of life. Maybe 30 years is not old enough for a mature democracy, but we're still working on this every day. It's not a destination, it's an ongoing effort."



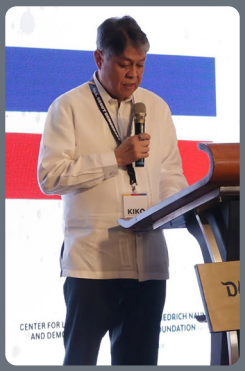
Lee Boon Shian
Youth Chief of the Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia

"Democracy may not be a perfect system. It is complex, sometimes slow, and frequently contested, but the greatest strength lies in its capacity for self-correction. Through institutions, dialogue, citizen participation, democratic systems have the ability to learn, adapt, and renew themselves over time."


Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats
Liberal
FRIEDRICH NAUMANN FOUNDATION
CALD Policy Roundtable on Democratic Resilience
27 March 2026 (Friday) I 08:30 – 13:30 (GMT+8)












UNBROKEN
The Power of Resilience
Unbroken
The Power of
Resilience










Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats
Liberal
CENTER FOR LIBERALISM AND DEMOCRACY


DEMOCRACY Looks Good ON US
EMBRACE
EMPOWER

REFERENCES

Aqshadigrama, Muhammad (2025, October 9). Authoritarianism's dark shadow over Prabowo's Indonesia. East Asia Forum. https://doi.org/10.59425/eabc.1760004000

Arugay, Aries A. (2026). Performative or substantive? Democratic resilience after autocratization in the Philippines (Trends in Southeast Asia, No. 11/26). ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. http://doi.org/10.1355.9789815361575

Bermeo, Nancy (2016). On Democratic Backsliding. Journal of Democracy, vol. 27, no.1, pp. 5-19. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012

_____ (2022). Questioning Backsliding. Journal of Democracy, vol. 33, no.4, pp. 156-59. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2022.0054

Brownlee, Jason and Miao, Kenny (2022). Why Democracies Survive. Journal of Democracy, vol. 33, no.4, pp. 133-49. http://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2022.0052

Cianetti, Licia and Hanley, Sean (2021). The End of the Backsliding Paradigm. of Democracy, vol. 32, no.1, pp. 66-80. http://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2021.0001

Cheeseman, Nic; Desrosiers, Marie.-Eve; Cianetti, Licia; and Gehrke, Manoel (2024, December). How to strengthen democratic resilience: Five lessons for democratic renewal. European Democracy Hub. https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/how-to-strengthen-democratic-resilience

Croissant, Aurel (2024). Introduction: Democratic

REFERENCES

Resilience in Asia. Global Asia, vol 19, no. 1. https://www.globalasia.org/v19no1/cover/introduction-democratic-resilience-in-asia_aurel-croissant [1, 2]

Croissant, Aurel and Lott, Lars (2024). Democratic Resilience in the Twenty-first Century: Search for an Analytical Framework and Explorative Analysis. Varieties of Democracy Institute. https://www.v-dem.net/wp.html

Economist Intelligence Unit (2026). Democracy index 2025: Democracy stabilises after eight years of decline. The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited. https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2025/ [1]

International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2025). Designing resilient institutions: Countering democratic backsliding in Asia. idea.int

Jimenez, Maryhen; Sandoval, Javier; and Power, Timothy (2026). How Global Illiberalism Damages Democracy. Journal of Democracy, vol. 37, no.2, pp. 121-33. DOI: http://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2026.a986024

Loxton, James (2026). Why We Elect Former Dictators and Their Children. Journal of Democracy, vol. 37, no.2, pp. 175-186. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2026.a986028

Merkel, Wolfgang (2025). What Is Democratic Resilience? Democratization, vol. 33, no. 3. https://doi.org/10.1080.13510347.2025.2590677

REFERENCES

Nord, Marina and Lindberg, Staffan I. (2025). U-turns—The hope for democratic resilience (Policy Brief No. 42). Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute. https://v-dem.net/media/publications/PB__42.pdf

Pongsudhirak, Thitinan (2026, February 20). The Gist of Thai Politics Over 20 years. Bangkok Post. https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/3200980/the-gist-of-thai-politics-over-20-years

Sharma, Prakhar and Kaushik, Gauri (2025, October 16). South and Southeast Asia are on the front lines of the democracy-autocracy showdown. Atlantic Council. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/south-and-southeast-asia-are-on-the-front-lines-of-the-democracy-autocracy-showdown

Stokes, Susan (2026). Why Elected Leaders Subvert Democracy. Journal of Democracy, vol. 37, no.2, pp. 49-64. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/986019



FRIEDRICH NAUMANN
FOUNDATION For Freedom.


COUNCIL OF ASIAN LIBERALS AND DEMOCRATS
CALD
ESTABLISHED 1993

www.cald.org