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Dangers to the Region's Democratic Future

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INTRODUCTION

In the 2000s and early 2010s, South and Southeast Asia made significant democratic progress. Countries including Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Timor-Leste became solid democracies or made transitions in that direction. (India, of course, had been a democracy since independence, barring the years of its emergency from 1975 to 1977.) But in the past decade, South and Southeast Asia have suffered some of the sharpest democratic regressions of any regions. In 2021, no countries in Southeast Asia, other than Timor-Leste, were rated "free" by Freedom House in its annual survey of global freedom.[1]

No one factor has caused South and Southeast Asia's democratic regression, part of a broader global trend of fifteen years of democratic rollback.[2] The rise of illiberal populism in South and Southeast Asia has resulted in the election of leaders such as Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and the subsequent corrosion of democratic institutions and norms. The novel coronavirus pandemic has been a boon to illiberal leaders in the region—and around the world.[3] The exponential growth of social media also has contributed to spreading disinformation and exacerbating polarization.[4]

Yet throughout South and Southeast Asia, the revival (or in some places the continuance) of military meddling in civilian governance has become a factor in democracy's retreat. Just ten years ago, no militaries were fully in control of governments in South or Southeast Asia, and it appeared that civilians would gain greater command of armies even in places where the military still wielded significant domestic influence. Today, two armies, in Myanmar and Thailand, are in direct or de facto control of countries. In states such as Cambodia, Indonesia, Pakistan,

and the Philippines, armed forces play growing—even dominant—roles in politics again. This regional trend was capped in February 2021, when the Myanmar armed forces seized power.[5] Yet that coup was only the most visible sign of a revival of military political power in the region.

This military revival, like the broader global democratic regression, is part of an international trend. Around the world, more coups were attempted in 2021 than in the prior five years combined, according to a database compiled by the University of Central Florida and the University of Kentucky.[6] Yet the resurgence of military political power is particularly notable in Southeast Asia, because many Southeast Asian states had previously advanced toward becoming consolidated democracies.

The effects of renewed military meddling on democracies, societies, and economies often are devastating. They tend to make it hard for countries to return to democracy, spark significant bloodshed, and create governments that are terrible at ruling or lead to failed states like Myanmar today. They also potentially spark coups in neighboring states and hurt democratization within an entire region. Indeed, military takeovers often lead to sizable and immediate rises in state violence.[7] They also tend to result in an entrenchment of harsher authoritarian rule than what emerges under illiberal populists.[8] Moreover, while some illiberal populist governments have promulgated significant public policy reforms—Thailand's early 2000s populist government oversaw groundbreaking new social welfare programs, for instance—nearly all military regimes have proven incompetent at governing and often prioritize self-enrichment.[9] Overall, the return of military involvement in governing in the region will set back democracy by years, foster violence, and likely impede development. Worse, coups and other military involvement have been met by a weak and ineffective response from major global and regional powers.

THE END OF THE COLD WAR AND THE DECLINE OF MILITARY REGIMES

During the Cold War, military rule often was the norm in South and Southeast Asia. Countries such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Thailand endured long periods of army rule, in some cases with the explicit backing of the United States.[10] In many of these countries, including Indonesia, Pakistan, and Thailand, the armed forces viewed themselves as the central institution in society. Indonesia's Suharto, for example, explicitly gave the army a dual role in defense and in domestic politics.[11] As the journalist David Hutt has noted, armies in Southeast Asia—some of whose officers had fought colonial powers and helped midwife independent states in the post–World War II era—saw themselves as "guardians of the nation" and "the people's arm[ies]."[12] Even as the world changed and the region democratized, this self-image would prove difficult to dislodge.

Coups and military dictatorships were common during the Cold War in many parts of the world, not just in South and Southeast Asia. Democracy remained limited to a small number of countries, while major powers, including the United States, France, and the Soviet Union, often supported army leaders who seized power and agreed to work with them. The 1960s witnessed sixty-one successful coups worldwide and many more unsuccessful ones.[13]

Yet in the late Cold War and post–Cold War eras, the number of coups began to decrease. In the 2000s, for instance, only ten coups succeeded around the world.[14] Many militaries in South and Southeast Asia seemed to have withdrawn or been pushed out of civilian politics.

In Thailand, 1992 protests in Bangkok against the coup government drew large numbers of middle-class Thais who likely would have been sympathetic to military-monarchical regimes in earlier eras.[15] After members of the armed forces murdered many of these protestors the

Thai king intervened and shamed the top army leader, prompting the Royal Thai Army to be increasingly discredited as a political force.[16] Indeed, Thailand enjoyed an unbroken string of civilian governments between 1992 and 2006, the longest in its modern history. During this period, Thailand built a relatively strong democracy and passed a new constitution, and civil society flourished.

In Myanmar, the military had seized power in 1962, but by the late 1980s, the army's disastrous policies had so ruined the economy that massive protests erupted in 1988 and brought Aung San Suu Kyi to public prominence. The army crushed those protests, but their spirit kindled the next three decades of pro-democracy actions. Similarly, in Indonesia, massive rights abuses by the military in the 1990s and the collapse of the Suharto regime in 1998 cast the armed forces in a horrendous light and revealed the extent of the graft within the regime and the army. And in Pakistan in the early 2010s, the two main civilian parties (whose leaders had been removed in prior coups) openly critiqued the military and diminished the army's domestic political powers.[17]

Meanwhile, the powerful patrons that had often backed military client states during the Cold War shifted away from these policies. The Soviet Union collapsed, and Russia would not play a significant role supporting military regimes outside its near neighborhood until the early 2020s. U.S. presidents began devoting rhetorical attention to the promotion of democracy and the condemnation of military regimes around the world. The U.S. Congress already had passed a law requiring the suspension of military aid to any country following a coup or military takeover of a democratically elected government—if the U.S. government formally declares a coup has taken place.[18] France, which had often backed military regimes in Africa, rhetorically began to change its position. In 2012, President François Hollande declared that he wanted a new French relationship with Africa, seeming to suggest that France would support democracy in Africa rather than the brutal strongmen who had served French interests in the past.[19] The Hollande government went on to condemn such coups as the one in Burkina Faso in 2015.[20]

Some regional organizations began to take a harder line against coups as well, although not in Southeast Asia. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, for instance, the African Union, working with the United Nations, declared a zero-tolerance policy for coups after a 2007 African Union summit declared a new African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance.[21]

THE RETURN OF THE MEN IN GREEN

In recent years, however, militaries have reclaimed power from civilian rulers, either in obvious ways or by regaining influence behind the scenes, as the sizable number of coups in 2021 demonstrates. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who grew up under military rule in Portugal, is increasingly worried about the growing number of military takeovers and has publicly expressed fear of a new "epidemic of coups."[22]

The trend has been prominent in South and Southeast Asia. The Myanmar armed forces openly seized power on February 1, 2021. While at first the military seemed inclined to move toward some kind of elections and not remain in complete control, it has since made clear that it intends to stay in power.[23]

Myanmar is far from unique in the region. The Thai armed forces staged a coup in 2006 and allowed elections the next year, which were won by essentially the same party they had deposed the year before. But in 2014, the Royal Thai Army staged another, much harsher coup; it did not hold elections for five years. In the intervening period between 2014 and 2019, the army quashed opposition and ratified a new constitution that weakened civilian politicians and all but guaranteed continued military control over domestic politics.[24] In addition, as Thai scholar Puangthong Pawakapan has noted, the Thai armed forces have in recent years expanded their power over many traditionally civilian state functions, filling government posts in Thai provinces with soldiers from the Internal Security Operations Command and assigning command to the military over a wide range of areas normally run by apolitical bureaucrats.[25] Finally, in 2019, the army transferred power to what is essentially a military-installed government, headed by Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, the man who led the 2014 coup.[26]

The armed forces have gained power in Cambodia as well, albeit in a different way. They have increasingly strengthened ties to Hun Sen, who has been prime minister or co–prime minister since 1985.[27] Hun Sen's son and presumed successor, Hun Manet, has been groomed by rising through the ranks of the military to the top position in the army.[28]

In Indonesia, the armed forces, which dominated domestic politics during the Suharto era, have again become a driving force in political affairs. Military officers have not directly seized power, but—with the acceptance of President Joko Widodo, also known as Jokowi—have regained control of critical ministries dealing with domestic issues and become omnipresent in civilian politics again. As Natalie Sambhi of the Brookings Institution notes, Jokowi and other post-Suharto Indonesian presidents balked at overhauling the military's territorial structure, which gives it a presence in towns and villages across the country—one totally unnecessary for national defense purposes.[29] The Indonesian military has used that expansive structure to undertake programs, such as teaching in classrooms, that continue to inculcate the idea of the army as Indonesia's essential institution.[30]

In South Asia, militaries have reasserted themselves as well. A coup in the Maldives in 2012 deposed elected leader Mohamed Nasheed, and the military continues to wield outsize power there, even occupying parliament in 2017.[31] In Sri Lanka, meanwhile, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has filled government posts with military men, creating a civilian-military nexus that has given the armed forces much greater power over many domestic issues.[32]

In Pakistan, a country with a long history of military putsches, no textbook coup has occurred since the one in 1999 that overthrew Nawaz Sharif, but the Pakistani military has gained increasing control over civilian politics since the late 2010s. It now operates behind the scenes to control security issues and, to a significant extent, domestic politics.[33] In current Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, the armed forces seem to have found their ideal front man. Some opposition politicians and Pakistani analysts believe that the military interfered in 2018 national elections to help Khan become prime minister.[34] Since then, Khan has extended the terms and thus boosted the powers of army leaders and has been mostly compliant as the army expands its influence over domestic affairs.[35]

WHY THE MILITARIES RETURNED— OR NEVER LEFT

Why have militaries in South and Southeast Asia—and, increasingly, around the world—revived their power over civilian politics? Despite armies' full or partial retreats from politics after the Cold War, most countries, such as Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan, or Thailand, never sustained efforts to curtail their militaries' domestic powers, establish real civilian command over armed forces, or permanently reduce militaries' political influence.

For one, these countries generally did not address past military human rights abuses, fostering a climate of impunity that sends a message to armies that they can continue to commit abuses. In Thailand, almost no one was held accountable for the killing of protestors in Bangkok in 1992.[36] In Pakistan, despite efforts by civilian governments to try General Pervez Musharraf for treason for leading the 1999 coup, higher courts prevented a trial from occurring at first. Although Musharraf ultimately was found guilty of high treason, he is unlikely to face any punishment. He was allowed to leave Pakistan and reportedly lives in Dubai in a luxury tower with twenty-four-hour security.[37] Current Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's cabinet includes several people who served the Musharraf dictatorship.[38]

In Myanmar, de facto civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who led the elected government prior to the February 2021 coup, did not use her bully pulpit, as by far the most popular politician in the country, to critique army abuses, call for penalties for past army crimes, or set the stage for greater civilian oversight.[39] To be sure, she was limited by the lack of clear lines of control over the military, despite having won massive electoral victories and serving as de facto civilian leader. But instead of working to control the army, bolster officers who accepted greater civilian command, and use her platform to criticize army abuses, she

avoided critiquing the military and even traveled to an international tribunal in The Hague to defend the Myanmar military's widespread abuses of ethnic Rohingya.[40]

Post-Suharto Indonesia also has seen no real punishment for the massive military-initiated abuses of the mid-1960s, military massacres in the former Indonesian colony of Timor-Leste, or alleged ongoing army abuses in the province of West Papua. When Joko Widodo won the presidency in 2014—becoming the first non-elite Indonesian to do so—Indonesians and international human rights advocates alike hoped he would initiate discussions of these abuses.[41] Instead, he declined. He also appointed a former lieutenant general, Prabowo Subianto, as defense minister, even though Indonesia's own human rights commission had determined that Prabowo had overseen the disappearance of rights activists under Suharto.[42] Jokowi also has tried to quash discussion of the 1960s abuses, which led to at least five hundred thousand deaths, and has refused to issue an apology to victims of those crimes.[43]

Partly because there were no real efforts to punish them for past actions, armies in places such as Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Thailand—and to some extent Bangladesh, Cambodia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka—continued to see themselves as playing special roles as guardians of the state's interests. Civilian politicians in the 2000s and early 2010s also failed to downsize armed forces, allowing armies to remain bloated even in places such as Indonesia and Thailand, where militaries had no real external threats. One study released in 2015 found Thailand still had more than 300,000 active military personnel, despite having no clear enemies.[44] By contrast, the U.S. Army has roughly 480,000 active-duty members.[45] Such large militaries not only continue to view themselves as major political players but simply have the manpower to continue to dominate many aspects of society. In addition, their large sizes make them constantly threatening to civilian politicians and create the potential for militaries to stage coups to maintain their massive numbers of troops.

Civilian leaders also did not take serious steps to retrain militaries to accept civilian control. This was never going to be an easy task in places like Pakistan or Thailand, but few democratic leaders made efforts to specifically promote officers committed to civilian control, staff military academies with outsiders who would teach courses about civilian command and undermine the academies' insular nature, or bring in outside curricula for militaries to review. The few politicians who understood the need to curtail army power and promote new types of officers, such as former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, tried

to do so in untransparent and potentially corrupt ways that ultimately backfired. Thaksin made efforts to limit the power of older officers, but he did so while also trying to appoint relatives to military positions, which muddled his message of the need for appointing officers who respected civilian command.[46]

Elected politicians also usually did not hand powers from the military to civilian agencies that would have been easier for elected leaders to oversee. Nor did they create constitutional or legislative limits on armies' powers. They failed to bolster the powers of the police and similar civilian law enforcement agencies. Had they expanded these law enforcement agencies, it would have been easier to make the public argument for shrinking the armed forces, would have allowed politicians to transfer some powers to the police, and could also have created rivalries among security agencies that could make coups harder to accomplish. Elected leaders also failed to institute formal constitutional measures that would have kept armies from returning to major roles in domestic politics. Finally, elected politicians did little to remove military control over state companies. These companies remained tools of influence. And with generals or admirals still in charge of these firms, militaries retain incentives to overthrow civilian governments if they think political leaders might liberalize or sell state firms that often serve as army sinecures.[47]

Global Factors

The major global powers also are to blame for the return of the men in green. By vacillating in their approach to coups, they suggest to potential coup stagers—especially those who can claim some strategic value to Washington or other powers—that there will be little or no punishment for their actions. This then, as Bloomberg's Bobby Ghosh has noted, emboldens other military leaders and potentially destabilizes civilian governments. [48] For instance, although France promised a new relationship with Africa, one in which Paris would support democrats, it has not followed through on its vow. Fearful of Islamist militant groups in the Sahel and West Africa, and perhaps seeking to sustain France's influence in Africa, the Emmanuel Macron administration did nothing as Chadian military officers launched a coup in early 2021. Following the death of longtime autocratic leader Idriss Deby, Chadian military officers installed Deby's son as president, a move that constituted a coup and violated the Chadian constitution.[49] Macron personally attended Deby's funeral and then met with Deby's son, essentially

endorsing the coup.[50] Macron also kept criticism of the 2021 coup in Mali relatively mild, halting joint military operations with Malian forces for only one month.[51]

The United States, increasingly distracted by its own domestic problems, has been little better in recent years, and its inaction emboldens potential coup stagers and creates disillusionment among people in South and Southeast Asia.[52] Particularly in Pakistan, the population is intensely disillusioned by U.S. action or inaction, believing that the United States tolerates coups in places it favors and condemns them in places it does not. In 2013, when Egyptian generals launched a coup against an elected, albeit in some ways illiberal, government in Cairo, the Barack Obama administration refused to call it a coup, though it was obviously a military takeover. The White House clearly did not want to antagonize an important strategic partner, and if it called the putsch a coup, Washington would have had to suspend its annual $1.5 billion in aid to Cairo.[53] This sent a signal to other coup stagers that the United States would tread lightly in important strategic states. Although the United States at least initially condemned the 2014 coup in Thailand and froze a minimal amount of security assistance, it and other democratic powers, including Australia and the European Union, moved rapidly to normalize relations with the kingdom, a U.S. treaty ally and a critical regional partner as Washington and Beijing heighten their competition for influence in Southeast Asia.[54] By contrast, a tougher approach to military rule in Myanmar helped prod the transition from junta rule in that country in the early 2010s to a kind of semi-democracy, although that semi-democracy has been overthrown again and the country is collapsing into a failed state.

The United States' ability to limit coups is further undermined because trust in the U.S. version of democracy has significantly declined. The internet and social media have exposed recent democratic backsliding in the United States to the whole world. A recent Pew Research Center study found that only 17 percent of respondents believed that the United States today sets a good example of democracy for other countries to follow.[55] This distrust has made it much harder for the United States to promote democracy abroad and reverse coups.

Regional organizations in Southeast Asia have not helped when confronted with modern-day coups either. Although the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the main Southeast Asian grouping, excluded Myanmar's junta leader from its annual summit in 2021, many ASEAN members are autocrats themselves and seem eager to welcome Myanmar fully back into the group, whether or not

the Myanmar military relinquishes power.[56] Prime Minister Hun Sen of Cambodia—Cambodia is the 2022 ASEAN chair—has said that Myanmar should be invited back to regional meetings.[57] This has always been ASEAN's approach in the past: after the 2014 Thai coup, ASEAN did nothing and took no action against the Thai military.

Even if the United States and other major powers condemn coups, militaries have more of a counterweight today than they did at any time since the Cold War. China and Russia have become more powerful actors on the global stage over the past decade, and militaries that stage coups have learned that connections to Beijing, Moscow, or other autocratic actors can fend off pressure from democracies. Facing broad sanctions from democracies, the Myanmar junta has rapidly expanded its relationship with Russia since its coup; junta leader Min Aung Hlaing has visited Moscow, and the regime has taken new deliveries of Russian weapons.[58]

China also has stepped in after coups to counterbalance pressure from democracies, though it acts more subtly than Russia and does not always appear so favorable toward coups. The Thai military quickly looked to bolster ties with China following its 2014 coup, and Beijing eagerly stepped up strategic relations with the kingdom, likely to drive a wedge in the U.S.-Thailand relationship.[59] In 2021, China has continued to support the coup government in Myanmar, though it has appointed a special envoy to Myanmar and appears more concerned about the effects of the coup and the regional ramifications than Russia.

The Role of Democratic Disillusionment

More broadly, regional democratic disillusionment over the last fifteen years has led to rising popular support in many countries for all types of autocrats. Dissatisfaction with—or at least cynicism about—democracy has risen; people increasingly believe that democratic leaders are failing to solve major challenges such as inequality, crime, immigration, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, a study by Pew Research Center found that only 49 percent of people globally were satisfied with the way that democracy was working in their countries, for reasons ranging from the belief that little changes no matter who is elected to the idea that democratic leaders have not improved economic conditions for most people.[60] As Andrew Nathan shows in an analysis of the Asian Barometer Survey's study of public opinion in Asia, "data show[s] that among fourteen countries surveyed, authoritarian regimes enjoy higher public support than many democratic governments."[61]

The deep dissatisfaction with and mistrust of democracy has facilitated the rise of many types of strongmen, including military rulers. In some cases, illiberal populists, such as the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte, have benefitted from the desire for a strongman and the growing disillusionment with democracy.

In other cases, some populations in the region—particularly upper and middle classes—increasingly distrust democracy, or believe that democratic leaders are either failing to deliver effective governance or delivering governance that threatens entrenched interests. These middle and upper classes further worry that democracy could bring to power illiberal populists who might favor the poor, undermine secular rule, and attack entrenched businesses.

For instance, in the 2000s and 2010s, as populist—but elected—prime ministers ruled Thailand, some middle-class Thais embraced the military as a bulwark against populists, leading street protests denouncing the elected governments and often calling for coups. (The two coups that occurred, in 2006 and 2014, then degraded democracy even further than the populist governments had.)[62] In the Philippines, meanwhile, large numbers of Filipinos gathered in the streets of Manila in 2001 to oust elected—if certainly flawed—populist President Joseph Estrada. The rallies often called for military intervention, and a group of active and retired generals subsequently stepped in and removed Estrada.[63] In Pakistan, as Husain Haqqani of the Hudson Institute notes, Khan's government prioritizes issues and areas that "matter to his support base, which essentially comprises the pro-military salaried class."[64]

In Indonesia, Sambhi notes, while middle- and upper-class Indonesians have not taken to the streets to demand removal of an elected government, national surveys have shown "high levels of public trust in the military," much higher levels of approval than of elected politicians like the president.[65] This trust for the military has facilitated the Indonesian armed forces' return to civilian power and could one day allow the armed forces to directly control the country again.

DESTRUCTIVE EFFECTS OF THE MILITARIES' RETURN

The return of military rule is destructive to recipient countries on multiple levels. For one, it causes serious damage to democracy.

DEMOCRACY

Coups not only provide little stability but almost always slow any eventual transition to democracy and usually prolong dictatorship, sometimes indefinitely. "Coups increase the chance of a new dictatorship but do not exert a noticeable effect on the chance of democratization," notes a statistical analysis of recent coups by scholars Joseph Wright and Barbara Geddes.[66] Some coup leaders claim they are heeding public desires and removing unpopular, illiberal politicians, but the putsches usually make the situation worse. According to a study by Freedom House, "Democratic conditions usually remain worse long after the troops have returned to their barracks. . . . The damage done by an initial coup can leave a [political] system weakened and vulnerable to further disruptions."[67]

Coups also spark brutal violence and crackdowns. These human rights abuses are antithetical to democratic restoration—and make military rulers less likely to step back, because they have now committed abuses. In an era in which coup opponents can use social media and other tools to coordinate and fight back more easily than, say, in the Cold War, coups are often followed by large-scale street protests and then bloody crackdowns or even guerilla wars, such as the one that now has erupted in Myanmar. Wright and Geddes's studies have shown that not only do coups usually foster new autocracies but they also spark high levels of state violence and human rights abuses, a finding echoed by a study from the Center for Systemic Peace.[68] Myanmar's coup-era

military already has been accused of assassinating civilians, using rape as a weapon of war, bombing civilian villages from above, and multiple other serious rights abuses.[69] Since February 2021 it has jailed and killed thousands of people, shut down most independent media, and launched a major offensive across the country. Now that it has committed such massive abuses, it could reasonably fear that, if democracy ever came to Myanmar, military leaders might eventually face some trials or other kinds of punishment.

Coups also can lead to a self-perpetuating "coup culture" among armed forces, which prevents a country from ever fully democratizing. Multiple studies have shown that countries that experience coups have a higher likelihood of suffering future coups.[70] This "coup culture," in which senior military officers teach younger officers that coups are a viable and essential political option, has clearly developed in places such as Pakistan and Thailand, which has had twenty-two coups since the end of its absolute monarchy.[71]

In addition, when democracies fail in one region, they often cause a cascading effect of failures in other neighboring states. It is, in a way, a reverse of the "diffusion effect" of democracy, wherein democratization in one state spreads by encouraging democracy in neighboring countries.[72] Democratic failures within a region breed other democratic failures, as regional norms change and regional organizations accommodate autocracies.

In many ways, military rulers encourage regional autocratization, since militaries often support other regional armies that are meddling in politics. In parts of South and Southeast Asia, for instance, armed forces help keep armies in control in neighboring states. Leaders of the current Thai military enjoy close relations with Myanmar coup leaders and appear to have guided some of the early actions of the Myanmar coup government.[73] Thailand has reportedly been one of the countries within ASEAN most focused on allowing Myanmar to return as a full member, essentially normalizing the Myanmar coup.[74] Meanwhile, in Cambodia, another country that is both authoritarian and increasingly militarized, Thai activists who opposed the 2014 Thai coup have been abducted, harassed, arbitrarily arrested, and forcibly returned, according to a report by Human Rights Watch.[75]

In addition, for democratic opponents, it is more difficult to get rid of military governments than it is to remove illiberal populists or other types of elected strongmen. Although illiberal populist leaders such as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban or Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan do degrade democracy in office—sometimes to the point

(as in Turkey) that the country is now ranked "not free" by Freedom House—they still face elections that are somewhat free and fair.[76] In an environment where even semi-free elections are still held, it is possible, though difficult, to oust such a leader. In the Czech Republic, populist Prime Minister Andrej Babis was defeated in elections in October 2021.[77] Former U.S. President Donald Trump, who fits some of the characteristics of an illiberal populist, was defeated in the 2020 presidential election. But men in green cannot be voted out of office, and if they do agree to hold elections—such as the Thai generals in 2019 and likely the Myanmar generals in the coming years—they create stilted electoral systems (more so even than illiberal populists) that usually ensure the armed forces stay in charge.

GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT

Military rulers also usually are incompetent at actual governance and create major humanitarian problems that impede development at home and spill over into neighboring countries. The governing experiences of illiberal populists vary. Some populist strongmen such as Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro have been destroying their countries' economies and societies. But others have merged antidemocratic political strategies with economic policies that promote growth and social welfare gains. They have done so, most likely, because they still have to face voters, even in elections that are not totally free and fair, and effective economic policies help at the ballot box. Before COVID-19, Philippine President Duterte, for all his abuses, oversaw high annual growth, introduced universal health care, and attempted to bolster the country's decaying infrastructure.[78] Poland's ruling illiberal populist Law and Justice party, while shrinking political freedoms, has delivered an ambitious social spending program designed to help lower-income Poles and presided (before COVID-19) over strong economic growth and low unemployment.[79] During the early 2000s, the government of Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, an illiberal but elected leader, undermined democratic norms and institutions but also passed a universal health care system, which significantly improved Thai citizens' quality of life.[80]

But military rulers, with few exceptions, have produced disastrous governance.[81] They do not need to please at the ballot box and instead center their governance around ensuring that the armed forces remain powerful and well-funded and that senior leaders retain important sources of revenue.

For one, military rulers often pursue policies that foster corruption, with funds flowing to the armed forces, and which often exacerbate inequality, opaqueness, and consolidation in industries, with contracts and deals going to well-connected businesspeople with army links. The Thai coup government of 2014–19, for instance, presided over a widening of inequality in what was already one of the most unequal countries in the world. It created an even more oligarchical economy than before, as allies of the military gained contracts and deals, and corruption reigned. The Thai army also consistently served its own interests, increasing military spending in recent years, even though Thailand has no state enemies.[82] At the same time, the Thai military has become even more enmeshed in a range of civilian political activities and tightened its control over major state firms.

The combination of greater oligarchical rule and misgovernance of the economy and of the COVID-19 response has widened economic inequality and has led to a situation in which it is becoming increasingly difficult for young Thais to get jobs. This poor COVID-19 response and the lack of decent jobs are major factors behind a growing protest movement against the Thai government. But this protest movement, while feisty, has been met by a fierce crackdown, with activists jailed, political parties shuttered, and dissidents tracked down and murdered even in neighboring states.[83]

In other countries too, military governments cut social spending, further exacerbating inequality, and manage the economy and other important areas incompetently. The Myanmar armed forces, while appointing a few technocrats for show, have taken a similar approach as the Thai military. They have enriched themselves, fostered corruption by favoring a small number of tycoons close to the armed forces, and ensured that the army retains control of the biggest state companies (and also maintains its share of illegal activities that fund the junta, such as narcotics and illegal gem mining).[84] The Myanmar military appears to have no coherent plan to address the country's COVID-19 epidemic, failing banking system, and collapsing economy. The military appears to be giving vaccines primarily to supporters of the junta, politicizing the public health response. Because of graft, the favoring of certain tycoons, weak social spending, civil strife across the country, and this failed pandemic response, Myanmar's economy is collapsing. According to the World Bank, the economy is projected to shrink by a massive 18 percent in 2021, and this collapse is hurting the most impoverished, in a country that was already behind its neighbors in development.[85] Indeed, estimates suggest half the country could fall into poverty by the

next year, and with the pandemic ravaging Myanmar, millions of people in the country face hunger.[86]

Coups and other types of military interventions also often implement policies that cause severe humanitarian problems, both within the countries themselves and in neighboring states. Coups cause intrastate violence that can spill over borders as both militaries and anti-coup fighters cross into and out of neighboring states. In Myanmar, anti-military fighters are moving in and out of India and Thailand; the Myanmar military has launched strikes along the Thai border and apparently has become involved in firefights within Thailand as well.[87] Coups also can spread disease, as militaries govern incompetently and their regimes often lose many capable public servants. Since the February 2021 Myanmar putsch, the junta's misgovernment, particularly in relation to COVID-19, has helped spread strains of the disease out of the country and into other parts of Southeast Asia, causing Myanmar to be labeled a "super-spreader state."[88] In addition, the military takeover and the civil strife that has erupted in the country have led to the forcible displacement of over two hundred thousand people.[89] Many have fled into Bangladesh, India, and Thailand, further straining refugee camps and other types of makeshift habitation in these neighboring countries, some of which are already overwhelmed with refugees and have minimal ability to shelter more displaced persons.

THE WAY FORWARD

Although coups and more indirect types of military intervention are becoming more common again, they are nowhere near as common as they were during the Cold War. Moreover, regional organizations, major powers, and democrats within these countries themselves can adapt clear strategies that could help inoculate states against future military interventions and roll back military involvement in civilian politics.

Preventing coups and reducing military interference in domestic politics would have several important effects. It would foster democratization and strengthen democratic institutions in the region. A reduction in coups could eventually shift countries such as Thailand away from "coup culture," which would allow civilian politicians to govern without constantly worrying about being deposed. Less military interference would reduce rights abuses. Preventing coups and other types of military intervention allows for a greater possibility of a democratic diffusion effect, as democrats support each other across the region and prevent militaries from propping up other coup governments.

Reducing military power also would create better governance for development and prevent some humanitarian disasters. Because militaries are largely ineffective at domestic governance, relegating them to the barracks could improve the quality of governance within countries. Coups, as we have seen, also often cause humanitarian problems to spread across borders, like the transmission of pandemic disease, fighting that spills over frontiers, and refugee outflows. Reducing military power would curtail these damaging effects on neighboring countries.

Importantly, shifting militaries away from domestic politics could improve these armed forces' abilities to do their primary jobs—defensive and offensive war fighting. In Thailand, for instance, the military's focus on domestic politics has weakened its actual abilities in conflict.

Since the early 2000s, the Royal Thai Army has overseen a counter-insurgency strategy against separatist, ethnic Malay and Muslim militants in the country's southernmost provinces. The Royal Thai Army has badly mismanaged this effort, contributing to a cycle of violence in the southern provinces, further alienating the local population, and generally failing at promoting reconciliation or peace talks.[90]

Reversing the tide of greater military interference in domestic affairs in South and Southeast Asia requires action by regional organizations, leading democracies, and democrats within these states themselves.

REGIONAL AND GLOBAL ORGANIZATIONS

Regional and global organizations should set clear standards for how coups will be treated and isolate coup regimes. Although organizations in Africa like the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States have displayed somewhat muddled responses to coups in the past five years, overall, they have taken much clearer, tougher, well-defined approaches to coup governments in recent decades than ASEAN. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations should follow their lead and make clear that it condemns all coups and that governments toppled by force will be suspended from the organization while the military remains in charge. ASEAN already has moved beyond its traditional policy of noninterference in dealing with the current Myanmar junta, showing that it has the capacity for intervention. This response has won it plaudits on the global stage and has put the organization in a stronger position to deal with other crises that could require intervention. Similarly, the United Nations, which is not seating an envoy from Myanmar's junta, should consistently refuse to seat envoys

from governments overthrown by coups, and global powers should threaten to bring coup leaders to trial in The Hague.[91]

Taking a consistent, tougher, lasting approach to coups would deter putsches in South and Southeast Asia and elsewhere and reduce the governance and humanitarian damage—from refugee flows, flows of disease, and other challenges—to the region caused by military takeovers. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, a regional intergovernmental group in South Asia, is weaker and less coherent than ASEAN and has displayed little interest in mediating disputes, so it is unlikely to develop a coherent, consistent approach to coups.

GLOBAL POWERS

Global and regional powers, including the United States, Australia, France, Japan, and the European Union, can help prevent coups and reduce military interference in politics as well. They can do so in several major ways. Global powers should adopt the following strategies:

Condemn coups unequivocally, even in countries of strategic importance, by applying sanctions to coup regimes. The mixed responses to coups by the United States and France, and to a lesser extent Australia and Japan in East Asia, emboldens more armed forces to become involved in politics and makes leading democracies appear to lack commitment to democratic ideals. A 2017 study found that significant global condemnation of coups, including from powerful actors, reduced the survival time of coup governments.[92]

Taking a tough stand would benefit the interests of major powers as well. Coups often prolong authoritarianism, instability, state violence, and incompetent policymaking, making it harder for major powers to work with the affected states. The major powers have sometimes tolerated or even condoned coups as bulwarks against terrorist groups, but military regimes are largely ineffective at combating terrorism. In addition, condoning coups—especially in places, such as Thailand, where the public has pushed hard for democracy and elected governments—alienates the same democratic politicians and civil society leaders whom the United States, France, and other major powers will need to work with if the affected countries ever return to the path of democracy.

Back coup opponents. Major powers should provide significant amounts of humanitarian aid to the embattled opponents of coups. In the case of Myanmar, the United States and other leading democracies should pressure Thailand to allow large amounts of cross-border humanitarian assistance to be sent into Myanmar. The United States

and other leading democracies also should recognize the National Unity Government (NUG), the parallel government created to oppose the junta. Recognizing the NUG would further catalyze support for it within Myanmar and across the globe and would strike a significant blow to the junta.

Take every step possible to restore democracy at home, to demonstrate to people in other countries that democracy can work to represent the popular will and democratically elected leaders can achieve major policy gains. Within the United States, leaders should prioritize steps such as improving voting rights and ending partisan gerrymandering, which entrenches politicians in power, reduces real political competition, fosters extremism within political parties, and alienates voters. Leaders in the United States and other consolidated democracies also should work to reduce polarization, which is corroding politics and making it harder for democratically elected leaders to pass effective public policy. In addition, leading democracies should work to pass policies that enjoy broad popular support—on COVID-19, lasting issues of inequality, and many other issues—and demonstrate that democracies, most simply, can get things done. This alone would improve the image of democracy within countries and around the world. In countries that have suffered coups, if elected governments ever come to power, they will need to show that democracy works—that democratic governments can get things done—to reduce any popular support for strongman rule.

In addition, holding global meetings such as the Biden administration's Summit for Democracy, though they probably will have little effect on democracy's progression or regression on the global stage, can raise the global image of democracy.[93]

Work to convince China to cooperate to prevent coups and reverse military takeovers. Although Beijing generally pursues a stated policy of noninterference in other countries' affairs, in reality—especially in the Xi Jinping era—Beijing has pursued an increasingly interventionist foreign policy in many parts of the world. Beijing likely recognizes that military takeovers often breed instability and damage its own interests. Despite China's close relations with the prior civilian government in Myanmar, Beijing has rhetorically backed the Myanmar junta and provided it with economic and diplomatic support. The coup has destroyed the Myanmar economy, hurt trade relations, led to attacks on Chinese factories in Myanmar, and potentially spread COVID-19 into China.[94] China was prospering in the pre-coup status quo in Myanmar, but now the continued instability threatens Beijing's major investments in the country.[95]

It is unlikely that China would work to roll back the situation in Myanmar to the pre-coup status quo. But a prolonged civil war in the country and pressure from Southeast Asian states and other powers could convince China to take bolder steps to resolve the situation in Myanmar. After all, China did issue a quick denunciation of the coup in Guinea, probably because, as in Myanmar, the coup was detrimental to its interests in the country.[96] Furthermore, there is no real downside to trying to convince China that military takeovers beget the kind of instability that Beijing detests and that hurts its economic interests.

DEMOCRATS WITHIN COUNTRIES THREATENED BY MILITARY RULE

Within countries, democrats, admittedly under great duress, should take several steps to coup-proof their governments when they are in power. Once a coup has happened, it can be hard to reverse without significant outside assistance. In countries where the military is not directly in power but wields vast influence behind the scenes, such as Indonesia, the Maldives, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka, leaders should take steps to undermine the armed forces. And although coups are hard to reverse, democrats could again someday run countries such as Myanmar or Thailand. Once in power, they too should take every step toward coup-proofing.

If democrats are in power they should reduce military involvement in political and civilian affairs and hold the armed forces accountable for past actions. For one, they should *publicly discuss past human rights abuses by the army to reduce the military's sense of impunity.* A leader such as Indonesia's Joko Widodo, who was enormously popular when he was first elected, could have taken these steps, which would have helped curb military impunity. Truth and reconciliation commissions have served this function in other regions in the past.

Democratic leaders, either those in power now or ones who assume power in the future, also should *empower a broader range of security agencies.* They should support other security agencies, such as the police, that can take over many of the civilian law enforcement functions that militaries often claim—and use as stepping stones to launch coups. Creating a multitude of security agencies, especially ones empowered by elected civilian leaders and more loyal to civilian leaders than the armed forces, can reduce the power of the military and make it harder to stage a coup.

Political leaders also should *identify military officers who will accept civilian command.* Popular elected leaders should actively work to identify and promote younger military officers willing to adhere to the principle of civilian command. In Thailand, had the elected governments of the 1990s and early 2000s taken this step of promoting officers who really believed in civilianization—without trying to appoint relatives to crucial army posts—they could have institutionalized effective civilian command and diminished the army's power. At the same time, elected leaders should take every step possible to remove former coup leaders not only from the armed forces but from public life overall, and even put them on trial if doing so is politically feasible.

Wherever possible, elected leaders also should *work to build public support for constitutional changes that dilute the power of the military*. Such changes should establish clear, constitutional provisions that give civilian leaders command of the armed forces; clearly set out the duties of the armed forces (national defense, not involvement in civilian policymaking, for instance); and empower institutions within the armed forces, like inspector generals and anti-corruption commissions, to investigate and punish military men and women who are corrupt or brutal.

Finally, democrats in these countries need to show that, in office, they can produce effective public policies. In some countries, like Pakistan, there is a significant degree of public sympathy for military governments because democratic politicians are viewed as having produced incompetent policies.

CONCLUSION

The recent rise in coups and other types of military intervention is part of a broader global wave of democratic regression. Such coups and other military interventions often are more destructive to effective governance and to democracy's lasting health than other assaults on democracy, such as the spread of illiberal populism.

Major powers and important regional and global institutions have not taken strong enough steps against coups and other types of military intervention. If they draw clear red lines and support popular mobilizations against coups, such as the one happening in Myanmar, they will discourage future coup stagers and embolden people currently fighting coup regimes and military-dominated governments. These global powers also can reduce the appeal of all types of strongmen by demonstrating that democracy remains a responsive system of governance that can produce public policy outcomes that benefit sizable numbers of people.

Within South and Southeast Asian states, democrats failed in the past to take steps that could have prevented this return of military power. For people living in states whose governments have been overthrown by military rulers, such as Myanmar, the path forward is difficult and will likely include significant bloodshed. If and when democrats return to power, they have little time and limited room to reduce militaries' influence. They will need to act quickly and forcefully to limit the men in green and coup-proof their countries for the future.

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Cover photo: After launching a coup on February 1, 2021, Myanmar military personnel participate in a parade on the country's Armed Forces Day in Naypyitaw, Myanmar, on March 27, 2021.
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