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Political Polarization in Asia: Cleavages and Agencies of Polarization in India, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand

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Political "division" is a natural phenomenon in a democracy in which individuals and groups express their opinions freely and coalesce their interests to press politicians. However, "polarization" is a bimodal division of the public into two opposite sides surrounding identity, values, or issues. Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer define polarization as "a process of simplifying politics by presenting either-or-choices to the public, thus consolidating the political field into opposing, increasingly immovable blocs."[1] They argue that polarization becomes pernicious or harmful for democracy by dividing the electorate into two mutually distrustful camps. Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue maintain that polarization "weakens respect for democratic norms, corrodes basic legislative processes, undermines the nonpartisan stature of the judiciary, and fuels public disaffection-intolerance-violence.[2]

The American public has been studied frequently as a typical case of increasing political polarization. According to the Pew Research Center,[3] between 1994 and 2014, the overall share of Americans who express consistently conservative or consistently liberal opinions on a 10-item scale of political values has doubled from 10% to 21%. Additionally, the ideological overlap between Democrats and Republicans has been reduced as Democrats moved further to the left and Republicans moved further to the right. This development of "ideological silos" in the political attitudes of Americans is accompanied by the increasing antipathy against the opposing party; in 2014, 27% of Democrats saw the Republican Party as a threat to the nation's well-being while 36% of Republicans saw the Democratic Party as a threat to the nation's well-being. Moreover, politics got so personal that 63% of consistently conservative and 49% of consistently liberal stated that most of their closest friends share the same political view. People on either end of the ideological spectrum tend to be more politically active and more partisan tied to a political party of their choice. When the public is divided into "us and them" and develops antipathy or even hatred for each other, mutual tolerance and

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[1] Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, "Overcoming Polarization," *Journal of Democracy* Volume 32, Number 1, January 2021, pp. 6-19.
[2] Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue., Introduction in *Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization*, edited by the same authors. Washington, D.C.L Brookings Institution Press, 2019.
[3]   Pew Research Center, "Political Polarization in the American Public," June 12, 2014 report.
https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/

institutional forbearance, two fundamental norms that Levitsky and Ziblatt argue in their book *How Democracies Die* are a part of a functioning democracy,[4] are endangered.

The emergence of political polarization encompasses existing socio-political cleavages and political entrepreneurs use such cleavages for their political gains. McCoy and Somer[5] studied 11 country cases including the U.S. and concluded that pernicious polarization is not attributable to any specific underlying social or political cleavages. Rather, they argue, it arises when political entrepreneurs pursue their objectives by using polarizing strategies. These strategies include mobilizing voters with divisive and demonizing discourse and exploiting existing grievances.

When we take a theoretical perspective of agency matters over cleavage structure, we need to identify two things. The first is identifying whether mobilizing capability and influence of polarizing agencies are symmetrical or asymmetrical. When opposing political elites reciprocate with similar tactics, a tit-for-tat mobilization is likely to develop an immobile political deadlock. On the other hand, if an opposing camp is sidelined due to its incapability of mobilizing its supporters, the other majoritarian camp can infringe the rights of an opposing camp and bend the rule of law. The second is examining whether political polarization essentially remains to be a tug of war among power elites or political polarization is deeper with vertical alignment between elites and masses in each camp. The latter case can be found in countries where formative social rifts have been placed a long time ago or populist leaders develop affective ties with people. While the ultimate driver of polarization is likely to be politicians and political parties, individuals or groups, aided by their own SNS influence or upward fandom mobilization, are increasing their roles in political polarization. Based on the ADRN webinar on political polarization in India, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand,[6] this brief provides a snapshot comparative report on the roots, agencies, and features of political polarization.

India: Polarization Based on the Hindu Nationalism Led by BJP and Modi

India is a case of asymmetrical populist polarization. The two powerful agencies are Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Modi had risen to power in 2001 when he became the Chief Minister of Gujarat state in western India and used his Gujarat development model as a success story. Aided by Modi's populism, the BJP, a right-wing party formed in 1980, has expanded its power. Currently, the BJP makes up 56 percent of the Parliament of India while the major opposition party Indian National Congress (INC) makes up less than 10 percent.

The super majoritarian BJP electoral power and the popular leadership of Modi illustrate the effectiveness of their mobilization strategy in utilizing Hindu nationalism. Niranjan Sahoo, a Senior Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, writes that the primary source of political and societal polarization in the country has been a fundamental question of nationhood, and adds that this poses

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[4] Mutual tolerance is accepting an equal right of rivals to exist, compete for power and govern, while institutional forbearance is restraining from exercising a legal right that could imperil the existing system. P. 102 and p. 106. Steven Letitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Broadway Books, 2018).

[5] Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, "Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies." The Annals of the American Academy, 681, January 2019, pp. 234-271.

[6] "Political Polarization in Asia an Its Imact on Democracy," (webinar, ADRN, Seoul, South Korea, March 25, 2022).

an existential threat to pluralist democracy in India.[7] The question of should India be a secular country or a Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation) has great national identity driven discursive power that can divide the public into binary camps. Given that more than three-quarters of the population is Hindu, Hindu nationalism dominates other cleavage markers such as caste differences. However, this religious national identity could have been managed in the past through the boundary of plural democracy. The rise of caustic polarization using Hindu nationalism became conspicuous after the BJP won a landslide victory in the general election of 2014. Under the ferocious frame of national vs. anti-national, the BJP further expanded its seats in the 2019 election as the liberals and seculars were pushed to the defensive and as the middle ground was started to disappear. The Indian case shows how the question of nationhood based on the dominant religious identity develops a strong bond between populist politicians and people within a dominant camp.

The features of Indian polarization are ugly and can be characterized by the growing culture of intolerance and hatred between two camps, simplifying politics to religiosity, weakening federal institutions and the rule of law, stereotyping and demonizing minorities, and impunity for violence against them. Starting from 2015, the lynching incidents of Muslims by Hindu locals became more frequent. Ramesh Thakur writes that the "othering" of India's Muslims by Hindu bigots has portrayed them as fifth columnists loyal to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Modi and the BJP pushed through a social agenda that steadily marginalized Muslims and promoted Hindus as more equal than others. The 2019 BJP victory emboldened the party to scrap Article 370 of the Constitution which had guaranteed Kashmir's political autonomy as India's sole Muslim-majority province. Later, in December 2019, the government passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which was arbitrary in the choice of countries of origin and discriminatory in its selection of religious minorities. This further deepened the Muslim community to feel that they were becoming second-class citizens.

All these cases of democratic backsliding have made India fall in rank in various global democracy indexes. During the ADRN webinar, Niranjan concludes that the liberal parties and civil society groups are weak to depolarize the political and social divide and, if not checked soon, the current religious identity driven polarization might be irreversible.

Philippines: Polarization led by Autocratic Populist with Weaker Party Base

In the Philippines, the current polarization emerged with the election of President Rodrigo Duterte in 2016. The once-popular Mayor of Davao City ran a war against drugs upon becoming president. Francisco A. Magno, a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Governance at De La Salle University, writes that Duterte offered bounties for the bodies of drug dealers and guaranteed the police that they would be shielded from prosecution.[8] During the first two years of his presidency, about 4,500 people were killed either in police operations or suspected vigilantism. Massive extrajudicial killings invited criticism and opposition from the liberal press and human rights activists. Duterte's government oppressed free press and tried to silence critics, as in the case of revoking Rappler's registration papers. Duterte also threatened to abolish the Commission on Human Rights and replace officials of

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[7] Niranjan Sahoo, "Hindu Nationalism and Political Polarization in India," in Carothers and O'Donohue eds. (2019).
[8] Francis Magno, "Contemporary Populism and Democratic Challenges in the Philippines," in Sook Jong Lee et als. Eds. *Populism in Asian Democracies: Features, Structures, and Impacts* (Brill: 2021), p.66.

independent bodies who were critical of him.

The party system in the Philippines is fragmented into multiple parties. While being the biggest party, Duterte's party PDP-Laban has only 20.4 percent of 328 representatives of Congress. However, the incumbent president can control Congress since it is common for elected legislators to jump to the party of the new president after the election. Accordingly, the majority bloc supporting Duterte has 271 congressmen while the minority bloc opposing Duterte has meager 24 congressmen. Under this fluid party system, opposition in the electoral institution can be easily marginalized.

Duterte has relied on social media rather than political parties to mobilize his supporters. Rather than developing institutional ties with interest groups or civil society organizations, he used disinformation tactics filled with fake news and conspiracy theories in order to garner popular support for his policies. The liberal intellectuals and activists of the opposition camp, on the other hand, lack institutional safeguards to protect journalists and media freedom.

The polarizing issue such as a drug war or press freedom is not a deep-rooted social rift as it is not a conflicting identity that divides the public. In this sense, the mobilization of supporters by populist leaders like Duterte remains to be mob-like low politics. Moreover, the president can only serve one 6-year term disallowing a long tenure of an authoritarian populist president. Anthony L. Borja and Ian R. Hecita argue that illiberal tendencies in Filipino politics are sustained since ordinary Filipinos are leader-centric as they give primacy to personal leadership and the executive branch over other institutions.[9]

South Korea: Confrontational Party-Driven Polarization with Lesser Social Rifts

South Korean society has become increasingly divided politically as political polarization is led by two competing major parties. When asked about their ideological leaning, about 40 percent of Koreans answered that they are moderate. According to the EAI South Korean Identity Survey, which is conducted every five years starting from 2005 to 2020, 40 percent identified as moderate in 2005, 43 percent in 2010, 49 percent in 2015, and 43 percent in 2020. People who identified themselves as progressive accounted for 33 percent of the total population, 27.5 percent, 20 percent, and 31 percent respectively in these four surveys. The percentage of people with conservative-leaning ideologies was 27 percent, 30 percent, 30 percent, and 26 percent respectively.

However, in reality, politics is led by those on the far ends of the spectrum rather than by moderates. When the conservatives are in power, far-left groups tend to veto the incumbent president while loyal conservative supporters defend their favored political leaders. On the other hand, when the progressives are in power, the far-right opposes the incumbent president while extreme supporters use all means to defend their leadership. This pattern has repeated each time Korea elects a president. The recent presidential election of May 2022 has shown the full mobilization of two camps during the heated race which resulted in an unprecedented even divide.[10] Both camps engaged in worsening negative campaigns during a tight race. Mudslinging and personal attacks were rampant while serious policy dialogues were short.

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[9] Anthony L. Borja and Ian J. Hecita, "The 2022 Philippine Elections Primer: A Democratic Citizenship Perspective." ADRN Issue Briefing, March 4, 2022. http://www.adrnresearch.org/publications/list.php?at=view&idx=236

[10] Jung Kim, "South Korea's 2022 Presidential Election: A *Vox Populi* that is Evenly Divided." ADRN Issue Briefing, March 2022.

Party polarization is a primary engine of South Korea's political polarization. This is due to South Korea's electoral system giving two major parties premiums much bigger than partisan voters aligned to either party. Jung Kim, a professor at the University of North Korean Studies, argues that electoral strategies of mobilizing voters with strong partisan identities intensified as progressive and conservative voters with ideological leanings are more actively involved in politics in general and elections in particular.[11] The two large parties can conveniently rely on such strategies since median voters are pushed to choose either side. The majority of Korea's legislative seats, 253 out of 300 seats, are filled by winners in single-member constituencies based on the first-past-the-post rule. As a result, it is difficult for smaller third parties to sustain. Moving to the opposite direction in the ideological spectrum, the ideological distance between politicians of the two major competing parties has become bigger than voters identifying themselves as progressives or conservatives.

The rise of social media is also contributing to the political polarization in South Korea, as in the cases of other divided societies. People who do not trust government or established media tend to seek alternative media outlets to express or listen to extreme views. Many ideologically leaning bigger print media also reinforce opposing views of the two political camps; progressives and conservatives.[12] In addition, some politically oriented civil society organizations join in binary camp politics which aggravates the situation.

This increasing political party-led polarization is pernicious since the mode of politics becomes confrontational and extremely partisan causing the National Parliament to an immobile deadlock. Nevertheless, the ideological divide at the social level is shallow with no clear socio-economic cleavages. As a matter of fact, the difference in the economic policy platform of the two confrontational parties is becoming narrower as the social service and welfare packages are getting thicker in response to the aging population and deprived youth. North Korean issues and the alliance with the U.S. pose some enduring gaps but these are not formative rifts that divide political society in South Korea.

Regional split and generational gap are often regarded as other fault lines together with ideology. Conventionally, the progressive camp has enjoyed strong support from the Southwestern *Jeolla* provinces (*Honam* region) while the support of the conservative camp has been based in the Southeastern *Gyeongsang* provinces (*Yeongnam* region). But, voters in the Seoul-Incheon metropolitan area, where about half of the population resides, are less tied to regional identity. The cultural and economic inter-generational conflicts also exist, generating different ideological leanings. The older generation is more conservative while the middle-aged, those in their 40s and 50s, are more progressive. Still, generational markers remain secondary reacting to salient contemporary issues rather than a rift dividing politics into two binary camps.

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[11] The opposition People Power Party's Yoon Suk-yeol prevailed over the governing Democratic Party's Lee Jae-myung by a slender margin of a 0.73 percent point–the smallest in the history of the country. Yoon secured 16,394,815 and Lee gained 16,147,738–the largest number of votes obtained by the winner and runner-up, respectively. Jung Kim, "Party Polarization Without Party Sorting in South Korea: The Centrist Voters in Drift," *ADRN Issue Briefings*, September 2020, http://www.adrnresearch.org/publications/list.php?cid=2&sp=%26sp%5B%5D%...

[12] Sook Jong Lee, "The Rise of Political Social Media in South Korea: A Focus on Disinformation and Polarization," in *Social Media, Disinformation, and Democracy in Asia: Country Cases*, ADRN Special Report, October 2020

Thailand: Polarization at Elites and People Over Monarchy vs. Democracy

Political polarization in Thailand is severe as it encompasses multiple institutional agencies and is equipped with deep social rifts. In the ADRN polarization webinar, Janjira Sombatpoonsiri explained that the sharp division lies between supporters of royal nationalism and democracy. If Indian polarization is about the national identity, Thailand is divided over the nation's political system. According to her, royal nationalism underpins Thailand's political and ideological establishment which associates sovereignty with the monarchy. Supporters of this camp are comprised of the monarchy, the military, their allies in the bureaucracy and private sector, and ordinary people who endorse this ideology. The other camp, which she labeled the "democratic camp," consists of anti-establishment politicians, pro-democracy activists, academics/students, and ordinary people critical of the establishment.

The political rise of the Shinawartras developed political polarization in Thailand. The anti-establishment camp was in power through Thaksin Shinawatra (2001-2006) and his sister Yingluck Shinawatra (2011-2014) both of whom were overthrown by the military coup. Their policies for the poor received strong support from rural areas and urban poor. If the establishment camp is comprised of state institutions including the military, the anti-establishment camp relies on its electoral power to mobilize voters. The two competing camps are currently represented in the National Assembly by the pro-military Palang Pracharath Party and the Pheu Thai Party which has 119 and 135 seats respectively. The Future Forward, a new opposition party, has 54 seats.

The two camps could maintain their rather symmetrical party presence due to popular social support. The United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) or "Red Shirts," and the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) or "Yellow Shirts" have launched massive protests. The UDD opposed the 2006 military coup and the royalist movement but was deposed after the military coup in 2014. The PAD supported the 2006 coup and accused Thaksin of corruption, abuse of power, and autocratic tendencies.

Sombatpoonsiri argued that during the tit-for-tat mobilization from 2005 to 2014, the palace and the army devised royal nationalism to drive protests against the anti-establishment governments. They used the narratives of social harmony and relied on cyber troopers to spread disinformation about the overthrow attempt by the anti-establishment force. On the other hand, the anti-establishment camp used the narratives of defending democracy and egalitarian measures. It is also notable that the youth-led public protests erupted from July to December 2020 despite pandemic restrictions. The two events were the final straws triggering the 2020 mass protests that led to the dissolution of the Future Forward Party (FFP) and the disappearance of pro-democracy satirist Wanchalerm in July 2020.[13] Now, protestors changed their narratives from changing government to reforming the monarchy. As a result, many middle-class conservatives withdrew their support for the protests, Sombatpoonsiri says, while some royalists started to endorse parts of the anti-establishment discourses.

The outcome of Thailand's polarization over the past twenty years has been two democratic breakdowns in 2006 and 2014, and the autocratic consolidation by the military rule since 2014. The new constitution in 2016 allowed the military to select 250 seats in the upper house and to stay in

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[13] Janjira Somatpoonsiri, "From Repression to Revolt: Thailand's 2020 Protests and the Regional Implications." GIGA Focus/Asia, Number 1, February 2021. https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/giga-focus/repression-revolt-thailand-s-2020-protests-regional-implications.

power through several clauses. The long-awaited and delayed election happed in March 2019, but it brought more confusion.

Comparison of Four Countries

If we compare the dividing line of the four countries, the cases of India and Thailand are more fundamental as the divide is based on national identity (Hindu nationalism vs. secular pluralism) and political systems (monarchy nationalism vs. popular democracy). Due to the nature of the identity question, the vertical alignment between established politics and civil society within each camp is strong. Accordingly, the confrontation between the two camps is high. However, there are also big differences between the two cases. The two camps in India are asymmetrical as the ruling BJP has great power and strong support from the Hindu majority. The populist prime minister Modi galvanizes the bonding between elites and the mass. On the other hand, in Thailand, the two major confrontational political parties are equally represented in the National Assembly and the two protest movements groups affiliated with each party are both active. The anti-establishment camp could be more dominant if the military did not intervene to oppress it. The less popular monarchy unlike its predecessor and the emerging pro-democracy youth movement can change the equilibrium and this is a new development to keep an eye on.

The cases of the Philippines and South Korea are less severe. The populist president Duterte divided the public through the drug war and the oppression of the free press. This does not lead to a structural cleavage, however, and remains to be pro-and anti-Duterte government. Moreover, the fragmented parties are too weak to build a solid divide between them and the incumbent, and presidency is limited to a single term. The degree of disinformation aimed at the general public is rampant but a liberal segment of civil society can still organize some opposition. On the other hand, political polarization is driven by the ideologically hardening of the two major parties in South Korea. With a single-term presidency, like in the Philippines, the Korean president is likely to be neither an autocrat nor a populist despite his or her bigger executive power. Instead, the power competition between the two major parties, the progressives and conservatives, increased which led to the introduction of a strategy of mobilizing partisan supporters. South Korea's electoral system allows this complacency since the centrist, or non-partisan voters, are pressed to choose a candidate from either of the two major parties. Policy differences such as the remaining regionalism and generational conflict exist. But, none of these are strong enough to become an equivalent formative social rift.

The impact of political polarization also varies. Naturally, deeper social cleavages based on national identity bring autocracy when the power of two camps is skewed to one side. Some cases of such consequences include the democratic breakdowns by the military coups in Thailand and the democratic erosion denying equal citizenship to the Muslim community in India. The other two cases are less pernicious. The case of democratic backsliding in the Philippines has a better chance to reverse if people work for participatory democracy away from the oligarchic elite rule. The party-driven polarization of South Korea also has a chance to depolarize by changing its electoral system to be more responsive to the moderate electorate. ■

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