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# Elite capture, civil society and democratic backsliding in Bangladesh, Thailand and the Philippines

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## ABSTRACT

While the literature on democratic backsliding has not yet systematically investigated how civil society influences backsliding processes, it generally assumes that civil society organizations (CSOs) act as a counter to democratic backsliding. This article contests this assumption by showing that, despite all three countries having vibrant civil societies, CSOs have so far failed to counter democratic backsliding in Bangladesh, Thailand and the Philippines. It argues that in weakly institutionalized democracies, CSOs are easily captured by political elites, a condition that brings their undemocratic potential to the fore.

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The literature on democratic backsliding is largely unanimous in considering the repression of civil society an important expression of democratic backsliding,<sup>1</sup> defined as “a deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance, within any regime”.<sup>2</sup> However, the question of how civil society influences democratic-backsliding processes has barely been investigated systematically as of yet. The existing research largely assumes that civil society acts as a counter to democratic backsliding. Tusalem, for instance, finds that civil society stabilizes Third-Wave democracies, protecting them from breakdown.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Bermeo argues that, “[w]hen civil society is allowed some space, countermobilization [against democratic backsliding] can occur” and that the government attacks on “associational life” currently underway in backsliding regimes only reflect the respective incumbents’ memories of the civil society-based mass mobilizations that ousted authoritarian regimes during the Third Wave.<sup>4</sup> This positive view resonates with democratic transition theory<sup>5</sup> and normative democratic approaches to civil society,<sup>6</sup> which generally view CSOs as champions of democracy. Contrariwise, critical studies have argued that, in the absence of strong democratic state institutions, civil society mobilization often promotes democratic decline rather than stability.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, research on the dark sides of civil society<sup>8</sup> casts general doubts on the democratic potential of CSOs, stressing that they can resort to undemocratic tactics, be internally hierarchical or be involved in clientelistic networks.<sup>9</sup>

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To disentangle these conflicting views, this article investigates the role of civil society in the democratic-backsliding processes undergone by Bangladesh, Thailand and the Philippines. The three cases reflect the tremendous heterogeneity of Asia, being dissimilar in terms of their colonial legacies (or lack thereof), political systems, ethnic compositions, majority religions and important economic factors. Nevertheless, Bangladesh, Thailand and the Philippines exhibit three striking similarities: first, all three countries have recently experienced severe democratic backsliding, which resulted in democratic breakdowns in Thailand and Bangladesh in 2014 and 2019 respectively<sup>10</sup>; second, prior to the current backsliding processes, all three constituted “weak democracies”<sup>11</sup> in which democratic state institutions had long been captured by political elites,<sup>12</sup> and, accordingly, all had experienced earlier episodes of backsliding<sup>13</sup>; and, third, the three countries all pose the same puzzle regarding the relationship between civil society and the development of democracy. Bangladesh, Thailand and the Philippines all democratized during the Third Wave with civil society mobilization playing a crucial role in the downfall of their former authoritarian regimes<sup>14</sup>; all three countries have long had vibrant civil societies. Nevertheless, in all three cases, civil society has so far failed to act as an effective counter to democratic backsliding. Based on an analysis of the structure of civil society and the role played by CSOs in the respective countries’ incumbent backsliding regimes, this article argues that this is largely because civil society in Bangladesh, Thailand and the Philippines has long been captured by political elites.

### **Asian civil society, political elites and democratic backsliding in weak democracies**

Dominant Western conceptions of civil society rely predominantly on de Tocqueville<sup>15</sup> who postulated a direct connection between voluntary associations and democracy.<sup>16</sup> According to the neo-Tocquevillian view, the associational sphere of civil society protects citizens from undue state interference and generates values, such as trust and tolerance, that sustain liberal democracy.<sup>17</sup> Contrary to this, Gramscian approaches conceptualize civil society as an area of contestation over cultural and ideological hegemony. While Gramsci himself was concerned with the hegemony of the (bourgeois) ruling class over civil society,<sup>18</sup> neo-Gramscians often view civil society positively as an area of counter-hegemonic struggle.<sup>19</sup> According to Alagappa, national civil societies in Asia display both “neo-Tocquevillian *and* neo-Gramscian” features.<sup>20</sup>

Drawing from Alagappa, this study views civil society as “a realm in the interstices of the state, political society, the market, and the society at large for organization by nonstate, nonmarket groups that take collective action in the pursuit of the public good”,<sup>21</sup> whereby “public good” refers to the interests of particular CSOs rather than of society at large.<sup>22</sup> Civil society thus constitutes a “realm of power, inequality, struggle and conflict among competing interests”,<sup>23</sup> which also comprises “anti-democratic” actors.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Ogawa notes that “civil societies in Asia may also include social interests that are highly politically exclusionary and illiberal”,<sup>25</sup> while Guan finds that Western definitions often “downplay the internal conflict character of civil society”<sup>26</sup> and that civil society’s impact on democracy in South East Asia (to which Thailand and the Philippines belong) varies.<sup>27</sup>

While civil society is analytically distinct from the state, the economy and political society, in reality the boundaries are blurred.<sup>28</sup> According to Alagappa, “co-optation

and control” by the state “limi[t] the democratic potential of associations”.<sup>29</sup> Specifically, while not all CSOs are democratic themselves, a lack of autonomy curtails their ability to act as democratic watchdogs by ensuring accountability<sup>30</sup> and controlling the power abuses of political elites.<sup>31</sup>

Against this backdrop, what is the role of civil society in democratic backsliding in Asia? According to Croissant and Haynes, “democratic backsliding in Asia is mainly [...] a feature of weak democracies”.<sup>32</sup> This is in line with the more general finding of Waldner and Lust that “weakly instituted democracies [...] are vulnerable to backsliding”.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Haggard and Kaufman argue that ostensibly different forms of democratic reversion often have “common causal roots in the weak democracy syndrome”,<sup>34</sup> defined as a combination of “praetorianism, weak institutionalization, and poor economic performance”.<sup>35</sup> Drawing on Croissant, Bangladesh, Thailand and the Philippines can be seen as having a history of military intervention in politics (praetorianism) and weak institutionalization.<sup>36</sup>

According to Haggard and Kauffmann, weak institutionalization prompts both incumbents and opposition leaders to resort to extra-constitutional tactics, while praetorianism encourages both actor groups to seek support from the military.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, much of the literature on democratic backsliding stresses that executive aggrandizement and other political elite actions play a direct causal role in backsliding.<sup>38</sup> Specifically, Dimitrova shows that democratic backsliding often constitutes the “outcome of processes of state capture by rent-seeking elites”.<sup>39</sup> This assessment is relevant for Bangladesh, Thailand and the Philippines, where key democratic state institutions, including the electoral process, have long been captured by political elites.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Arugay and Sinpeng note that in South East Asian democracies, democratization “reached the glass ceiling allowed by its ruling elite”<sup>41</sup>, with voters often “forced to choose from [...] unresponsive cliques of political elites”.<sup>42</sup> Drawing on Asseburg and Wimmen, this article views political elites as actors “who yield significant influence over the political process” during political transformations that may lead to either more democracy or increasing authoritarianism.<sup>43</sup> Thus, political elites can include well-established, traditional political elites, military leaders and/or populists who are political newcomers.

Medina-Guce and Galindes argue that the elite political settlements that underlie democratic state institutions in backsliding regimes shape the space available for CSOs.<sup>44</sup> Horner and Puddephatt show that in Asia the democratic space in which civil society operates is often co-opted by political elites, while democratic state institutions frequently lack autonomy, being controlled by elite camps that may either have been dominating the polity for a long time or compete for dominance with other such camps.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the autonomy of civil society is likely to be circumscribed in weak democracies undergoing backsliding, a condition that limits its democratic potential. In particular, the political elite camps that control democratic institutions in backsliding regimes are often “rent-seeking coalitions”<sup>46</sup> that interact with citizens through clientelistic exchanges<sup>47</sup>; the literature on the dark sides of civil society suggests that CSOs can form part of such clientelist chains.<sup>48</sup>

Civil society’s lack of autonomy is likely to be greatest in contexts of intense polarization between political elites, which constitutes an important driver of democratic backsliding.<sup>49</sup> While polarization is not necessarily ideological, it promotes the “development of rigid and antagonistic political entities”<sup>50</sup> and leads citizens “to trade off democratic principles for partisan interests”.<sup>51</sup> This pattern is bound to be relevant

for CSOs as well. Undemocratic incumbents in backsliding regimes are often elected,<sup>52</sup> and may thus have significant popular support. Consequently, they may enjoy some popularity among CSOs as well. Conversely, CSOs may affiliate themselves with oppositional elites. However, embattled opposition leaders in backsliding regimes often employ undemocratic tactics themselves,<sup>53</sup> a tendency that negatively affects their civil society supporters. In contexts of severe elite competition, civil society is usually fragmented, and mirrors conflicts at the elite level, rather than constituting an independent and alternative social force.<sup>54</sup>

To analyse the prospects of democratic backsliding, Waldner and Lust propose a “balance-of-power framework” focussing on shifts in the power relations between pro- and anti-democratic political coalitions.<sup>55</sup> Thereby, the relative power of each coalition (led by political elites) also depends on “the relative sizes of the[ir] constituencies”.<sup>56</sup> Accordingly, CSOs can either reinforce pro-democratic political coalitions, thereby countering democratic backsliding, or align themselves with anti-democratic political camps, thereby contributing to backsliding processes.

## Bangladesh

Following the “people power” movement<sup>57</sup> that brought down the military regime of Ershad in 1990, democratic state institutions in Bangladesh remained weak, owing to “pernicious” ideological polarization<sup>58</sup> between the country’s two main parties: the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). While the AL, led by Sheikh Hasina, advocates secular “Bengali nationalism”, grounded in the country’s ethnolinguistic Bengali identity, the BNP, led by Khaleda Zia, promotes “Bangladeshi nationalism”, emphasizing the nation’s Islamic character. Between 1991 and 2006, both parties displayed “authoritarian tendencies”, politicizing the bureaucracy, the judiciary and the security apparatus whenever in power.<sup>59</sup>

According to Rahman, ideological polarization in Bangladesh is “elite-driven” – as both parties have constituencies that cut across social classes and use the national-identity cleavage strategically to counter electoral volatility.<sup>60</sup> “[P]olarizing narratives” employed by party elites “prepared the ground for polarized civil society movements that feed on divisive nationalist narratives”, while partisan “civil societies in turn exacerbate and sharpen the existing divide”.<sup>61</sup> Both parties maintain civil society-based front organizations, such as the Chattra League (CL) and the Chattra Dal (CD) – the AL’s and the BNP’s respective student wings.<sup>62</sup> Foreign-funded NGOs are largely depoliticized and service-oriented and often constitute job machines for the educated middle class.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, many NGOs have informally aligned themselves with the AL or the BNP.<sup>64</sup> Concurrently, vicious party politics and the partisan co-optation of civil society have prompted many Bangladeshis, middle-class citizens included, to advocate apolitical approaches to development and to come to view politics as illegitimate.<sup>65</sup>

Following attempts by the then BNP-led government to rig the 2006 elections, massive street battles between AL and BNP supporters led to a promissory coup in January 2007, marking Bangladesh’s first episode of democratic backsliding.<sup>66</sup> Significant sections of the middle class supported the coup,<sup>67</sup> while several non-party-partisan CSOs collaborated with the military-backed Caretaker Government (CTG) that ruled from 2007 to 2008. For instance, some civil society leaders held positions within the CTG, while Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) provided input

into the CTG's anti-corruption agenda. Microcredit pioneer Muhammad Yunus founded a political party and publicly praised the CTG's reform efforts.<sup>68</sup>

In December 2008, the CTG held elections that the AL won. Collaboration between the AL and the military increased, with the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) – Bangladesh's main military intelligence agency – assuming a key role in political decision-making,<sup>69</sup> further weakening democratic institutional foundations. Initially, several CSOs and “eminent citizens” – meaning prominent civil society intellectuals – supported the AL government and enjoyed influence under it.<sup>70</sup> In particular, this included CSOs who were politically loyal to the AL or maintained personal relations with AL leaders. For instance, the National Human Rights Commission was revamped, with eminent citizens being appointed to key posts.<sup>71</sup> Since assuming power, however, the AL has fiercely pursued civil society actors who supported the CTG, ousting, for instance, Yunus as head of Grameen Bank.<sup>72</sup>

In 2010, the AL established the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) to try the war crimes committed by Islamist militias during the War of Independence, a move that secular CSOs supported strongly.<sup>73</sup> However, contestation over the Tribunal enhanced ideological polarization and reinforced the AL's authoritarian inclinations.<sup>74</sup> After a 2013 standoff between the pro-secular Shahbag movement, which the AL soon tried to co-opt, and the Islamist Hefazat movement, which was courted by the BNP,<sup>75</sup> the AL pressed ahead with holding the 2014 elections under its own administration rather than a non-partisan interim government as demanded by the BNP. Consequently, the latter boycotted the polls and repression against the opposition increased. The 2019 elections were deeply flawed, with the AL's alliance bagging 288 out of 300 seats.

Conflict over the Tribunal also enhanced polarization among originally more independent CSOs. In 2014, the ICT convicted the journalist David Bergman, who had criticized the Tribunal, of contempt. Sixty civil society representatives denounced Bergman's trial. However, many CSOs refused to support them, with some joining the AL in accusing the “group of 60” and other government critics of working against secularism.<sup>76</sup>

From 2014 to 2016, the AL government revised the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Ordinance (FDRO) that regulates foreign-funded NGOs. Initially, NGOs were involved through consultation, a process facilitated by the good personal relations many NGO leaders maintained with the AL lawmaker Suranjit Sengupta who headed the parliamentary committee in charge of amending the ordinance.<sup>77</sup> However, in 2015, TIB, which participated in the consultations, published the study “Parliament Watch” that criticized corruption in parliament. Moreover, TIB's Executive Director, Iftekharuzzaman, stated publicly that parliament had become a puppet show. Leading AL lawmakers rejected the statement, terming it proof that TIB was beholden to the BNP and foreign donors.<sup>78</sup> Apparently referring to TIB's role during the CTG, Agricultural Minister Matia Chowdhury stated that “[y]ou [TIB] don't speak when the martial law comes. This government is not loyal to the foreigners. You are”.<sup>79</sup>

While this illustrated the AL's increasing readiness to equate NGO engagement with foreign interference, Iftekharuzzaman's statement also showed that some non-party-partisan NGO leaders overestimated their strength. Following the controversy, Sengupta rejected most NGO demands despite having initially been open to many of them.<sup>80</sup> The final version of the FDRO, passed in 2016, grants the government extensive leeway to deregister critical NGOs and terminate their foreign funding.<sup>81</sup>

Furthermore, some AL parliamentarians have alleged being informed by the intelligence services that, from 2007 to 2008, the CTG used information collected by TIB in its hard-handed anti-corruption drive against influential party politicians and that other NGOs involved with the CTG likewise provided the latter with information with which to punish corrupt politicians.<sup>82</sup>

Since 2016, the AL government has increasingly cracked down on CSOs.<sup>83</sup> While it has tolerated service delivery by NGOs, it has heavily curtailed the latter's involvement in policymaking, largely reducing them to "complementary and supplementary bod[ies] to the government".<sup>84</sup> Human rights CSOs, such as Ain o Salish Kendro<sup>85</sup> and Odhikar,<sup>86</sup> continue to document human rights abuses committed by government agencies. Similarly, Sammilito Samajik Andolan – a network of intellectuals and CSO leaders originally rather close to the AL – has criticized some of the AL's authoritarian practices.<sup>87</sup> Sometimes, critical CSOs connect with international organizations, for instance by engaging with the Universal Periodic Review and other UN reporting mechanisms.<sup>88</sup>

However, even eminent citizens once close to the AL have become largely unable to influence government policy. One lamented, "gradually, we are losing friends in politics".<sup>89</sup> Moreover, even where CSO leaders have maintained good personal relations with individual AL ministers and managed to secure the latter's support for their initiatives, these initiatives have sometimes still been hampered by the DGFI.<sup>90</sup>

In July 2018, public outrage over the death of two students in a traffic accident sparked the "road safety movement", led by independent students. Activists controlled streets in Dhaka and other cities, demanding improvements in the transportation sector, along with broader political reforms.<sup>91</sup> When the AL became afraid of the demonstrations snowballing into anti-government protests, it dispersed the movement by force – with the CL beating up many students and schoolchildren.<sup>92</sup> When some CSOs lamented government repression ahead of the 2019 elections, Prime Minister Hasina dismissed the criticism – accusing them of being beholden to foreign donors.<sup>93</sup> When TIB highlighted irregularities in the electoral process, the AL accused it of siding with the BNP.<sup>94</sup>

Some CSOs that were originally pro-AL have begun to reject the party's growing authoritarianism.<sup>95</sup> Nevertheless, they remain reluctant to mobilize against the AL, given that they despise the BNP. As an eminent citizen formerly close to the AL argued,

[w]ho would come if the Awami League was not there? BNP. [...] We have seen that when BNP comes back [to power] they come back with [a] more repressive attitude towards people. So I don't think that change of government would help [...] I blame the other political parties also. They have not shown any interest in the people's rights [...]. And [...] if it's Tarique Zia [Khaleda Zia's son] in place of Hasina that's even worse.<sup>96</sup>

Similarly, CSOs once close to the AL often continue to reject cooperation with pro-BNP CSOs. Showing how much the ideological polarization at the elite level is mirrored by civil society, the interviewee stated:

[t]hey [pro-BNP CSOs] cannot really stand up for secular Bangladesh, [...] they have no moral authority to become civil society for Bangladesh. [...] [H]ow can you accept them as your allies? [...] [T]hey don't have anything in common with us.<sup>97</sup>

In the run-up to the 2019 elections, Kamal Hossain, an eminent citizen and author of the Bangladeshi constitution once close to Hasina,<sup>98</sup> formed the Jatiya Oikya Front (JOF) as an oppositional electoral coalition. Some CSOs originally aligned with the

AL welcomed this move as long as they perceived it as the emergence of a third force. When the JOF adopted the BNP into its ranks, however, such sympathies ended immediately.<sup>99</sup>

## Thailand

Following the popular demonstrations that triggered the fall of the military regime of Suchinda Kraprayoon in 1992, Thailand's newly established democratic system remained deficient, owing to the continued dominance of traditional bureaucratic, royalist and military elites giving it an "oligarchic character".<sup>100</sup> Recent processes of democratic backsliding have been promoted by the intense political polarization that started during the tenure of Thaksin Shinawatra (2001–2006). According to Kongkirati, this polarization has "two layers": first, the "elite power struggle"<sup>101</sup> between the "royal-military bureaucratic alliance"<sup>102</sup> and Thaksin's camp of rival capitalist elites; and, second, "mass-based conflict",<sup>103</sup> which involves civil society. While the royal-military camp advocates "Thai-style democracy" under the auspices of a benevolent monarch and military, the one around Thaksin promulgates majoritarian "populist democracy".<sup>104</sup>

While middle-class activists supported "elite-driven" democratic reforms in the 1990s,<sup>105</sup> some middle-class civil society representatives also initially supported Thaksin. Several "Octobrists", former leftist student activists who had opposed military rule and often joined CSOs later on, contributed to the electoral platform of Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party or even joined his administration.<sup>106</sup> However, Thaksin soon repressed NGOs and discredited them publicly for relying on foreign funding.<sup>107</sup> Moreover, Thaksin's efforts to integrate the poor into capitalist development contradicted NGO visions of communitarian democracy and community-based development.<sup>108</sup>

In 2006, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), or Yellow Shirts, demonstrated for Thaksin's resignation after attempts to investigate his alleged corruption excesses had failed.<sup>109</sup> The PAD self-identified as a predominantly urban, middle-class movement and drew significant organizational and financial support from the middle class.<sup>110</sup> It also comprised NGOs, as well as farmers' and workers' unions.<sup>111</sup> Owing to the significant role that royalist and other traditional political elites played in its mobilization,<sup>112</sup> Kasian termed the PAD a "royalist" movement.<sup>113</sup> The PAD's demonstrations paved the way for the 2006 military coup, which marked Thailand's first episode of democratic breakdown<sup>114</sup> and further enhanced political polarization.<sup>115</sup> As seasoned observers have pointed out, the events of 2006 showed the readiness of the traditional royalist elite and its middle-class civil society supporters to disrespect the "verdict of the electoral majority"<sup>116</sup> and remove an elected leader by force.<sup>117</sup>

Thaksin's popular support base remained strong and TRT successor parties continued to win elections after the end of military rule in 2007. Concurrently, the royalist-military elite controlled key democratic state institutions, as exemplified by the dissolution of parties linked to Thaksin by the Constitutional Court.<sup>118</sup> To legitimate their rule, successive governments run or backed by royalist-military elites from 2006 to 2014 promoted CSOs promulgating a communitarian discourse on democracy that resonated with the traditional elites' vision of "Thai-style democracy". CSOs for their part seized such opportunities for cooperation to spread



their communitarian ideology and gain access to development programmes and state resources.<sup>119</sup>

The 2006 coup had convinced Thaksin's political camp that it needed its own mass movement,<sup>120</sup> leading to the emergence of the "Red Shirts". Political elites of the TRT successor party Pheu Thai would play an important role herein.<sup>121</sup> The Red Shirt movement comprised diverse civil society actors, including public intellectuals, artists and ex-leaders of the 1992 pro-democracy movement<sup>122</sup> – and would mobilize against the Democrat Party (DP) and the royal-military establishment.

Starting in 2013, the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) protested for the ousting of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, the sister of Thaksin. Organized mainly by DP supporters and urban, middle-class citizens,<sup>123</sup> the PDRC was the PAD's direct successor. Buddhist monks, religious organizations, academics, NGOs and trade unions also participated in the movement,<sup>124</sup> which campaigned for "Reform before Election", advocated for a political system replacing elected representatives with appointed "moral" leaders<sup>125</sup> and repeatedly called for military intervention.<sup>126</sup> In 2014, the PDRC launched a violent campaign to sabotage snap elections called by Yingluck, leading to democratic breakdown through the 2014 military coup.<sup>127</sup> Sinpeng and Arugay conclude, "the middle class in Thailand [...] consistently has undemocratic tendencies and only supports democracy when its interests are not threatened".<sup>128</sup>

The military regime of General Prayut Chan-o-cha (2014–2019) repressed the Pheu Thai party and drafted a new constitution cementing the political dominance of the "royal-military power bloc" and providing enhanced powers to unelected institutions.<sup>129</sup> The March 2019 elections, which were marred by interference,<sup>130</sup> installed a quasi-civilian regime; in June 2019, parliament – whose Upper House is appointed by the military – "elected" Prayut prime minister. Both the military regime and the current quasi-civilian government of Prayut have heavily restricted the space for civil society, targeting especially independent CSOs and CSOs close to the Red Shirts; CSOs associated with the Yellow Shirts have enjoyed much more freedom meanwhile.<sup>131</sup>

Following the 2014 coup, the Red Shirts largely disbanded after the decision by its Pheu Thai-based leadership to keep a low profile so as to avoid repression. Consequently, individual activists parted ways with the movement, linking up with more independent CSOs and pro-democracy activists. Already under military rule, some of these new civil society coalitions launched symbolic acts of public defiance;<sup>132</sup> some oppositional activists mobilized "flash mob" protests.<sup>133</sup> Moreover, some CSOs – such as Thai Lawyers for Human Rights – have publicly criticized the human rights abuses committed by both Prayut governments,<sup>134</sup> while other CSOs have advocated for a return to democratic rule. The Democracy Restoration Group (DRG) has launched programmes to rebuild popular support for representative democracy and seeks to promote accountable democratic institutions. In 2018, the People Who Want Elections Movement, which included the DRG, mobilized via demonstrations to pressure the then military government to stick to its promise of holding elections in 2019.<sup>135</sup>

In the run-up to those elections, the DRG and other CSOs participated in the formation of opposition parties, such as Future Forward, led by businessman Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, or the Commoners' Party, which also includes former Yellow Shirt members – among others, NGOs that turned away from the royalist-military

elite after the 2014 coup.<sup>136</sup> Similarly, many former middle-class supporters of the DP in Bangkok shifted their allegiance to Future Forward, which criticized the DP for being “too close to the military”.<sup>137</sup> In December 2019, Future Forward mobilized an anti-government demonstration in Bangkok, which Pheu Thai supported.<sup>138</sup> In January 2020, thousands of people joined a “Run against Dictatorship” organized by Thanathorn in Bangkok.<sup>139</sup> When the Constitutional Court disbanded Future Forward, student protests erupted on many campuses; young activists have since continued to demonstrate for democratic reforms.<sup>140</sup>

Conversely, conservative CSOs have actively participated in the crackdown on oppositional activism. The Rubbish Collection Organization, founded by the ultra-royalist former army general Rienthong Nanna, has committed itself to ridding Thailand of “social rubbish” – launching legal complaints of *lèse-majesté* against people critical of the royalist-military elite, bullying them on social media and, at times, threatening them with physical assault.<sup>141</sup> Social Sanction, the Network of Volunteer Citizens to Protect the Monarchy and the Anti-Ignorance Association have likewise villainized oppositional actors online, branding them “un-Thai” and/or as evil elements linked to the Red Shirts.<sup>142</sup> Similarly, conservative CSOs have labelled foreign-funded NGOs “lackeys” of the West, while pro-government online activists have claimed that United States-based donors, including George Soros, are helping the Red Shirts, human rights CSOs and other oppositional activists to intervene in Thailand’s domestic politics.<sup>143</sup>

## The Philippines

According to Hedman, the “secondary associations” forming the building blocks of the 1986 People Power demonstrations, which ousted the authoritarian Marcos regime, were closely linked to the Philippines’ Catholic Church and oligarchical capitalist class.<sup>144</sup> Similarly, others have depicted People Power as a movement by the middle class,<sup>145</sup> business tycoons<sup>146</sup> and the traditional political elite around later president Corazon Aquino.<sup>147</sup> Accordingly, the 1986 regime change resulted in the establishment of an “elitist and low-intensity democracy”, dominated by the oligarchical elite.<sup>148</sup> Nevertheless, middle-class CSOs<sup>149</sup>, Church-based groups and leftist CSOs, including National Democratic (ND) groups sympathetic to the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People’s Army (CPP-NPA), thrived in the period post-1986.<sup>150</sup>

The 1998 election of Estrada, who appealed directly to the poor, initiated fierce but largely non-ideological “elite-driven” polarization between “oligarchical” and “populist” elites.<sup>151</sup> In 2001, the People Power II protests against Estrada’s corruption led the military to withdraw its support, leading to Estrada’s downfall. Middle-class<sup>152</sup> and non-ND leftist CSOs as well as the Catholic Church, capitalist oligarchs<sup>153</sup> and traditional political elites played a key role in convening the demonstrations, illustrating the readiness of the middle class and oligarchic elites to overturn the verdict of the voting-majority poor.<sup>154</sup> According to Franco, the Estrada interregnum reinforced the development of a “fractious civil society” with “high porosity vis-à-vis an elite-dominated political society”,<sup>155</sup> which has been “bane and boon” for Philippine democracy.<sup>156</sup> Thereby, CSOs have entered into fluctuating alignments with diverse political elites to realize their objectives, while civil society itself has been marked by multiple internal fault lines – including quarrels over strategies<sup>157</sup> and access to state spoils.<sup>158</sup>

The government of the traditional politician Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (2001–2010) initially enjoyed support from CSOs, and several civil society leaders joined her government. However, Arroyo's corruption scandals and massive interference in the 2004 elections further undermined democratic institutions, initiating the Philippines' first episode of democratic backsliding.<sup>159</sup> Frustrated about their limited ability to achieve reform under the country's weak democratic institutions, diverse civil society actors – including middle-class activists, ND and non-ND leftist CSOs, as well as business and Church-based civil society leaders – supported an attempted military coup against Arroyo in 2006.<sup>160</sup> The government of the traditional politician Benigno Aquino III from the Liberal Party (LP) (2010–2016) briefly ended democratic backsliding.<sup>161</sup> Many CSO leaders supported Aquino's electoral campaign and held high-ranking positions in his government.<sup>162</sup>

The 2016 elections, however, brought to power the “illiberal” populist<sup>163</sup> Rodrigo Duterte, who ran on a security and anti-drugs platform. Duterte's strongest support came from elite and middle-class voters worried about crime, corruption and systemic disjunction, with his popularity rates peaking at around 90% in the first year of his war on drugs (WOD).<sup>164</sup> Duterte soon formed a diverse political coalition, including Estrada, former LP members and political oligarchs, such as Arroyo,<sup>165</sup> and recruited several retired military officers into his cabinet.<sup>166</sup> Polarization started intensifying once Duterte began branding the followers of Aquino “incompetent and corrupt elitists”.<sup>167</sup>

Several NGOs supported Duterte's electoral campaign, as he promised social reforms and pro-poor policies.<sup>168</sup> Moreover, several ND CSO activists joined his cabinet, assuming leading positions in the departments of social welfare, labour and agrarian reform.<sup>169</sup> During his campaign, Duterte had employed socialist rhetoric;<sup>170</sup> following his election, he initiated peace talks with the CPP-NPA. This appealed to ND CSOs, whose main goal is to dismantle the “semi-feudal”<sup>171</sup> Philippine system. One ND activist explained that socio-economic reforms were the “crux of the needed change in the Philippines” and that ND activists had joined the Duterte government to pursue such reforms.<sup>172</sup> Conversely, critics have argued that many ND activists joined the Duterte government to receive “transactional” benefits,<sup>173</sup> that is, access to state spoils.

While small sections of the NDs' networks of lawyers and faith-based groups criticized the extra-judicial killings (EJKs) of suspected drug criminals early on, most ND CSOs remained silent where certain ND activists sat in government.<sup>174</sup> Their reluctance to break with Duterte over the EJKs damaged the legitimacy of the ND CSOs, who had previously often been at the forefront of human rights advocacy.<sup>175</sup>

Moreover, many human rights NGOs were initially unable to issue statements against Duterte's abuses because many of their members sympathized with the president. When Duterte pledged to lower the age of criminal liability to 12 years old, even many child rights organizations failed to come up with positions because their memberships were divided over the incumbent.<sup>176</sup> The Catholic Church was likewise slow to criticize the WOD,<sup>177</sup> a tardiness likely related to the fact that since 2017 the president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) has been a friend of Duterte from the diocese of Davao.<sup>178</sup> In addition, the role of the Church in civil society has been weakened by Duterte's threats to reveal its sex and corruption scandals as well as by death threats against leading Church officials, which the Duterte government has done little to prevent.<sup>179</sup>

Many non-ND leftist CSOs were “stunned by the [election] victory of Duterte”, and long remained “not quite sure how to relate to him”.<sup>180</sup> This points to the weakening links between these CSOs and their local constituencies, who have often sympathized with Duterte. Moreover, under Aquino, many non-ND leftist CSOs had engaged with rural and urban poor communities through state development programmes, but under Duterte “those venues [of engagement] disappeared because the program disappeared”.<sup>181</sup>

In November 2017, the peace talks with the CPP-NPA collapsed, leading to the expulsion of all ND activists from the government.<sup>182</sup> Since then, Duterte has engaged in “red-tagging”, persecuting leftist CSOs in general, and ND ones in particular.<sup>183</sup> In 2018, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), the main national agency for regulating CSOs, issued SEC Memorandum Circular 15 that categorizes CSOs as “low”, “medium” or “high-risk” regarding their affinity to (communist) terrorism.<sup>184</sup> Similarly, the Duterte government has denounced foreign-funded CSOs as agents of the West.<sup>185</sup>

Since late 2017, civil society support for Duterte has weakened. His supporters have become the minority in many human rights CSOs, enabling them to criticize the government more openly,<sup>186</sup> while the Catholic Church has also increasingly denounced the EJKs.<sup>187</sup> Moreover, cooperation has strengthened between diverse CSOs and the Philippine Human Rights Commission (PHRC), headed by Chito Gascon, a liberal-democratic human rights activist still appointed by Aquino.<sup>188</sup> The Commission, ND, non-ND and more independent CSOs have collaborated on information sharing, the documentation of rights violations, human rights education and regarding advocacy.<sup>189</sup> Moreover, individual Bishops have supported the Commission’s work and in some dioceses the local social action centres of the Church, which operate under the umbrella of the CBCP’s National Secretariat for Social Action (NASSA), have allowed the Commission to rely on their structures.<sup>190</sup> However, the PHRC ultimately has to refer all human rights complaints to the National Prosecutors Service (NPS), Department of Justice, Ombudsman or to Congress, which are each dominated by Duterte loyalists.<sup>191</sup>

In spite of his authoritarian stance, Duterte remains widely popular. In 2019, pro-Duterte candidates swept the mid-term elections, and opinion polls indicated nearly 80% popular support for the populist president.<sup>192</sup> Accordingly, while several CSOs have staged protests against Duterte’s human rights violations, the demonstrations have mostly remained small and “rarely reach[ed] thousands”.<sup>193</sup> In July 2018, diverse CSOs, Catholic Church organizations and political-opposition groups organized the United People’s State of the Nation Address (SONA) to counter Duterte’s official SONA. In rallies, which drew 15,000 protesters according to the police and 40,000 according to the organizers’ own estimates, CSOs criticized the WOD and the government’s tax programme (among other things).<sup>194</sup> However, the United People’s SONA did not take an openly anti-Duterte stance, as many participating CSOs could not find agreement thereon.<sup>195</sup>

Meanwhile, supporters of Duterte remain dominant on social media,<sup>196</sup> bullying opponents online.<sup>197</sup> While several journalists continue to report critically about Duterte, his government has taken legal measures against critical media outlets, such as the *Rappler*<sup>198</sup> and ABS-CBN, with the latter going off the air in May 2020.<sup>199</sup>

Accordingly, seasoned civil society leaders, including organizers of People Power I and II, currently exclude the possibility of Duterte being ousted through popular demonstrations.<sup>200</sup> Thereby, his continuing popularity makes the manifestation of People Power not only unlikely but also questionable in terms of ultimate legitimacy, while

also pointing to a serious disconnect between many CSOs and their constituencies. As a non-ND leftist organizer stated:

Killings have continued, yet he [Duterte] is so popular [...].<sup>201</sup> How do you confront an administration like Duterte[s] who continues to have [...] overwhelming support [...]? And that means a lot in terms of whether civil society organizations [can] still connect with the issues and the concerns of the greater population.<sup>202</sup>

In sum, Philippine civil society currently remains both too fragmented and too isolated from the popular majority to pose “an effective counterforce to Duterte”.<sup>203</sup>

## Conclusion

Bangladesh, Thailand and the Philippines are among the most serious cases of democratic backsliding in Asia.<sup>204</sup> Although the three countries are highly heterogeneous regarding important political, economic, social, and religious features, they align in contradicting the dominant assumption that civil society acts as an effective force for democratic stability: CSOs have so far failed to counter democratic backsliding in all three. This article has shown that this is largely because, already prior to the current backsliding processes, all three constituted weak democracies in which CSOs had long been captured by the same political elites that had also captured key democratic state institutions. This lack of autonomy has prevented civil society from acting as an effective accountability mechanism against the power abuses committed by political elites (paralleling a similar trend in Indonesia, as shown by Mietzner<sup>205</sup>) and often brought the undemocratic features of CSOs to the fore. In all three countries, significant sections of civil society initially supported the undemocratic incumbents responsible for the current backsliding. While this tendency was especially strong in Thailand, where the PDRC paved the way for the 2014 military coup, several CSOs also supported the incumbent AL government in Bangladesh and the Duterte government in the Philippines respectively. Moreover, some Bangladeshi CSOs worked with the military-backed CTG of 2007–2008, while certain Philippine CSOs supported an attempted coup against President Arroyo in 2006.

The combination of elite-driven political polarization and alignments between CSOs and political elites has created deep divisions within Bangladeshi, Thai and Philippine civil society. The nature of elite-driven polarization has varied in the three cases though, leading to differing conflicts within civil society. In Bangladesh, elites of the AL and the BNP – parties cutting across social class – have promoted ideological polarization between secular Bengali and more religious-oriented Bangladeshi nationalism.<sup>206</sup> This ideological conflict is mirrored in civil society, and many civil society supporters of the AL have traditionally sympathized with the party’s Bengali nationalism. Conversely, some non-party-partisan, middle-class CSO leaders supported military intervention in 2007.

Thailand since the early years of the new century has experienced severe political polarization between traditional royal, bureaucratic and military elites who advocate “Thai-style democracy” and a capitalist elite around Thaksin that promulgates majoritarian, “populist democracy”.<sup>207</sup> The same ideological fault line long characterized civil society, as exemplified by the middle-class mobilizations of the PAD and the PDRC, which ousted populist governments that enjoyed strong electoral support from the poor.

In the Philippines, polarization has also pitted “oligarchic” against “populist” elites but has remained largely non-ideological.<sup>208</sup> Alignments among political elites as well as between them and CSOs have been more fluid than in Bangladesh and Thailand, with middle-class and leftist CSOs affiliating themselves with diverse populist and oligarchical elites to push their diverse political visions.<sup>209</sup> In 2001, for instance, middle-class CSOs joined oligarchical elites in mobilizing for the ousting of populist president Estrada.<sup>210</sup> However, current “illiberal”<sup>211</sup> populist president Duterte secured major electoral support from the middle class<sup>212</sup> and assembled a broad-based political coalition that initially included radical leftist CSOs. Moreover, in all three countries, CSOs have sometimes aligned with political elites to gain access to state spoils.

While the specific nature of polarization thus differs in the three countries, Thailand, Bangladesh and the Philippines are similar in that in all three cases, less-than-democratic incumbents have deliberately promoted polarization to gain or aggrandize power. Moreover, in all three polarization has prompted CSOs to be “selective in the democracy defence cases they are willing to engage in”<sup>213</sup>, as Mietzner says in reference to Indonesia. This corresponds to Svobik’s finding that less-than-democratic incumbents may “draw political battle lines along societal cleavages that were [previously] only simmering”<sup>214</sup>, with the resulting polarization leading citizens to put “partisan interests” over “democratic principles”<sup>215</sup>, a tendency that diminishes their “ability to resist authoritarianism”.<sup>216</sup> Accordingly, the finding that civil society in the three countries has been captured by political elites does not imply that CSOs have no agency or are merely a function of elite action. Instead, CSOs have often deliberately allowed themselves to become co-opted by different elite camps for ideological reasons and/or to realize their political objectives.

Divisions within civil society have hindered democratic pushback by CSOs. Specifically, while in all three countries many CSOs who initially supported the current undemocratic incumbents have since come to oppose them, the ongoing fragmentation of civil society has hindered broad civil society-based opposition forming.

An important difference between the three countries is the level of popular support for the current undemocratic incumbents, which affects the prospects for civil society resistance. As Thompson notes, in spite of his attacks on civil liberties, populist president Duterte has been largely successful in portraying his rule as democratically legitimate, owing to his electoral mandate, ongoing popularity and “legalistic” rule. Accordingly, no broad-based civil society mobilization against his government has occurred so far.<sup>217</sup> Contrary to this, “coup leader-turned prime minister”<sup>218</sup> Prayut in Thailand lacks a popular mandate and has largely failed to legitimize democratic rollback, which has resulted in relatively strong “pushback” against his rule.<sup>219</sup> The AL government in Bangladesh has no proper electoral mandate but does retain a degree of popular support, leading to some civil society resistance in the electoral and extra-electoral arenas.

Alternative explanations for the inability of civil society to stem democratic backsliding in the three countries include the latter’s relatively low levels of economic development and other economic factors. Moreover, while the majority religion, ethnic composition and other cultural characteristics differ in the three cases, they could theoretically each have an impact vis-à-vis limiting civil society’s democratic potential. However, no causal processes substantiating a clear impact of cultural factors on the democratic potential of civil society could be found in the three cases – which is in line with Arugay and Sinpeng’s finding that in Southeast Asia there is a “weak

impact of structural factors [which] provides much leverage for agency-based explanations of democratization outcomes”.<sup>220</sup> Similarly, the cases yield no clear causal mechanisms linking the less-than-democratic potential of civil society to a lack of economic growth, corresponding to Guan’s finding that in Southeast Asia the strength of civil society is largely unrelated to levels of economic development.<sup>221</sup>

This study has provided evidence that the middle classes in Bangladesh, Thailand and the Philippines are “contingent democrats”,<sup>222</sup> pointing to the intervening impact of social inequalities and class divides, which corresponds to existing studies on the Thai and Philippine middle classes. Specifically, the three countries’ middle classes and their CSOs have repeatedly refused to accept elections as the only game in town – supporting democracy only when it was in their interest to do so.<sup>223</sup> However, I follow Arugay and Sinpeng in advocating for an agency-based approach, as the class aspect has (co-)shaped but not defined political conflicts<sup>224</sup> in the cases studied. Similarly, Thompson (referring to Thailand and the Philippines) found that the “incivility of civil society” and the middle class “can be explained by the nature of the countries’ elite groups”.<sup>225</sup> Nevertheless, complex social phenomena – such as the impact of civil society on democratic development – are never monocausal, and future research should henceforth further investigate the interrelated impacts of social, cultural and economic factors on elite–civil society relations in backsliding regimes.

## Notes

1. E.g. Diamond, “Facing Up,” 149; Lührmann and Lindberg, “A third wave,” 1098.
2. Waldner and Lust, “Unwelcome Change,” 95.
3. Tusalem, “Boon or Bane?”
4. Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” 17, 15.
5. E.g. Diamond, *Developing Democracy*, 218–260.
6. For an overview, see Edwards, *Civil Society*, esp. 37–53.
7. For an overview, see Tusalem, “Boon or Bane?” 366–7.
8. E.g. Ottaway, “Civil Society.”
9. E.g. Roniger, “The Comparative Study.”
10. Croissant, “Beating Backsliding.”
11. *Ibid.*
12. On Bangladesh, see Lorch, *Civil Society*, 71–132; on Thailand, see Slater, “Democratic Careening,” 741; mostly in reference to Kapstein and Converse (2008); on the Philippines, see e.g. McCoy, “An Anarchy of Families;” Medina-Guce and Galindes, *Democratic Backsliding*, 13–14; 36–8.
13. Croissant, “Beating Backsliding.”
14. Alagappa, “Introduction,” 4–5.
15. Edwards, *Civil Society*, 10.
16. Guan, “Introduction,” 5.
17. For an overview, see Edwards, *Civil Society*, 1–20; 36; 40–49.
18. Cohen and Arato, *Civil Society*, 142–52.
19. Alagappa, “Civil Society,” 28–32.
20. Alagappa, “Introduction,” *emphasis added*.
21. Alagappa, “Civil Society,” 32; definition abbreviated.
22. *Ibid.*, 34.
23. *Ibid.*, 33.
24. Alagappa, “Introduction,” 6–7; quote on 6.
25. Ogawa, “Introduction,” 1.
26. Guan, “Introduction,” 8.
27. *Ibid.* 21.

28. Alagappa, "Civil Society," 37–9.
29. *Ibid.*, 48.
30. Edwards, *Civil Society*, 31.
31. Mietzner, "Sources of Resistance."
32. Croissant and Haynes, "Democratic Regression."
33. Waldner and Lust, "Unwelcome Change," 103.
34. Haggard and Kaufman, *Dictators and Democrats*, 222.
35. *Ibid.*, 225.
36. Croissant, "Beating Backsliding?"
37. Haggard and Kaufman, *Dictators and Democrats*, 126–8.
38. Waldner and Lust, "Unwelcome Change," 97–8; Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding."
39. Dimitrova, "The Uncertain Road," 257.
40. See note 12.
41. Arugay and Sinpeng, "Varieties of Authoritarianism," 94.
42. *Ibid.*, 101.
43. Asseburg and Wimmen, "Dynamics of transformation," 5; they speak of "Politically Relevant Elites".
44. Medina-Guce and Galindes, *Democratic Backsliding*, esp. 11.
45. Horner and Puddephatt, *Democratic Space*, 8, 12–5.
46. Dimitrova, "The Uncertain Road", 263.
47. *Ibid.*, 267.
48. E.g. Roniger, "The Comparative Study."
49. E.g. Svobik, "Polarization."
50. Somer and McCoy, "Déjà vu?" quote on 8.
51. Svobik, "Polarization," 24.
52. Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," 10.
53. *Ibid.*
54. Lorch, *Civil Society*.
55. Waldner and Lust, *Unwelcome Change*, 108.
56. *Ibid.*
57. Lewis, *Bangladesh*, 8.
58. Rahman, "Party System Institutionalization."
59. *Ibid.*, quote on 182.
60. *Ibid.*, quote on 175.
61. *Ibid.*, 175.
62. E.g. Lorch, *Civil Society*, 81–103.
63. Feldmann, "Paradoxes of Institutionalisation".
64. Haque, "The Changing Balance of Power;" Quadir, "How 'Civil'?"
65. Rahman, "Development," 465–9.
66. Croissant, "Beating Backsliding."
67. Sinpeng and Arugay, "The middle class," 102.
68. Lorch, "Civil Society Support," 192–6.
69. Interviews, Dhaka: Supreme Court lawyer, March 9, 2017; interviews, March 2017.
70. Interviews: CSO expert, Dhaka, March 9, 2017; civil society leader, Berlin, October 20, 2019.
71. Interview: civil society leader, Berlin, October 20, 2019.
72. ICG, *Bangladesh*, 5.
73. Interview: international development expert, Berlin, May 27, 2015.
74. Rahman, "Party System Institutionalization," esp. 186–8.
75. *Ibid.*, 183–6.
76. Interviews: international aid expert, telephone, April 30, 2015; international development expert, Berlin, May 27, 2015.
77. Interview: CSO expert, Dhaka, March 9, 2017.
78. *Ibid.*; see also Prothom Alo, "MPs slam TIB".
79. Prothom Alo, "MPs slam TIB".
80. Interview: CSO expert, Dhaka, March 9, 2017.
81. Daily Star, "Provision in NGO Bill".
82. Interview: CSO expert, Dhaka, March 9, 2017.



83. Fazli, “Bangladesh’s ‘Zero-Sum’ Political Contest”.
84. Interview: CSO expert, Dhaka, March 9, 2017.
85. Ain o Salish Kendra, “Website”.
86. Odhikar, “Website”.
87. Interview: civil society leader, Berlin, October 20, 2019.
88. Ibid.
89. Conference intervention: civil society leader, Berlin, October 2019.
90. Interview: civil society leader, Berlin, October 20, 2019.
91. Conference intervention: INGO representative, Berlin, October 2019; Fazli, “Bangladesh’s ‘Zero-Sum’ Political Contest”.
92. Conference interventions, Berlin, October 2019; Al Jazeera, “Speaking the Unspeakable.”
93. Abi-Habib and Manik, “Bangladesh elections.”
94. Quadir, “Transparency International.”
95. Interview: civil society leader, Berlin, October 20, 2019.
96. Ibid.
97. Ibid.
98. Abi-Habib and Manik, “Bangladesh elections.”
99. Interview: civil society leader, Berlin, October 20, 2019.
100. Slater, “Democratic Careening,” 746.
101. Kongkirati, “From Illiberal Democracy,” 25; 28.
102. Ibid., 28.
103. Ibid., 30.
104. Ibid., 24.
105. Sinpeng and Arugay, “The middle class,” 110; see also Lertchoosakul, “The Rise”, 156–200.
106. Lertchoosakul, “The Rise”, 201–23.
107. Pasuk and Baker, *Thaksin*, 144–9.
108. E.g. Pitidol, “Redefining Democratic Discourse.”
109. Slater, “Democratic Careening,” 750–1.
110. Sinpeng and Arugay, “The middle class,” 110–11.
111. Pye and Schaffar, “The 2006 anti-Thaksin movement.”
112. See also Bonura, “Political Polarization.”
113. Tejapira, “The Irony of Democratization”, 229.
114. Croissant, “Beating Backsliding.”
115. Kongkirati, “From Illiberal Democracy”, 29.
116. Thompson, “People Power”, 387.
117. Ibid., see also Arugay and Sinpeng, “Varieties of Authoritarianism,” 101.
118. Kongkirati, “From Illiberal Democracy,” 29.
119. Pitidol, “Redefining Democratic Discourse.”
120. Kongkirati, “From Illiberal Democracy”, 31.
121. E.g. ibid.
122. Thabchumpon and McCargo, “Urbanized Villagers.”
123. Sinpeng and Arugay, “The middle class,” 112.
124. Sombatpoonsiri, “Conservative Civil Society.”
125. Ibid.
126. Kongkirati, “From Illiberal Democracy,” 29.
127. Sombatpoonsiri, “Conservative Civil Society.”
128. Sinpeng and Arugay, “The middle class,” 108.
129. Kongkirati, “From Illiberal Democracy,” 38.
130. Suhartono and Ramzy, “Thailand Election Results.”
131. Sombatpoonsiri, “Conservative Civil Society.”
132. Sombatpoonsiri, *Postprotest Pathways*.
133. Thompson, “Pushback.”
134. TLHR “The Attacks.”
135. Civicus, “We are.”
136. Sombatpoonsiri, *Postprotest Pathways*.
137. Thompson, “Pushback.”
138. Deutsche Welle, “Thailand: Thousands Rally.”

139. Deutsche Welle, “Thailand: Thousands Protest.”
140. Sombatpoonsiri, “Thailand’s anti-establishment protests.”
141. Sombatpoonsiri, “Conservative Civil Society.”
142. Sombatpoonsiri, *Manipulating Civic Space*; Sombatpoonsiri, *Conservative Civil Society*.
143. Sombatpoonsiri, *Manipulating Civic Space*, 5-6.
144. Hedman, *In the Name*, esp. 88–115; quote on 113.
145. Sinpeng and Arugay, “The middle class,” 104–5.
146. Thompson, “People Power,” 382–3.
147. Sinpeng and Arugay, “The middle class,” 105.
148. Arugay and Slater, “Polarization,” quote on 123.
149. *Ibid.*, 105.
150. Franco, “The Philippines,” 113–5.
151. Arugay and Slater, “Polarization,” quotes on 134.
152. Sinpeng and Arugay, “The middle class,” 106–7.
153. Hedman, *In the Name*, 167–76.
154. Thompson, “People Power,” 387.
155. Franco, “The Philippines,” quotes on 97.
156. *Ibid.*, 127.
157. *Ibid.*, 100.
158. *Ibid.*, 118.
159. Croissant and Haynes, “Democratic Regression.”
160. Lorch, “Civil Society Support,” 187–92.
161. Croissant and Haynes, “Democratic Regression.”
162. Lorch, *Civil Society*, 157–8.
163. Thompson, “Bloodied Democracy,” 51.
164. *Ibid.*, esp. 41, 58.
165. *Ibid.*, 52; interview: leftist activist, telephone, January 27, 2020.
166. Ranada, “List.”
167. Timbermann, *Philippine Politics*.
168. Telephone interviews: INGO representative, October 29, 2019; Philippine rights activist, November 2019.
169. Thompson, “Bloodied Democracy,” 53.
170. Timbermann, *Philippine Politics*.
171. Interview: ND activist, Berlin, November 28, 2019.
172. *Ibid.*
173. Telephone interview: Philippine rights activist, November 2019.
174. Interview, February 2020.
175. Thompson, “Bloodied Democracy,” 53–4.
176. Telephone interview: Philippine rights activist, November 2019.
177. Thompson, “Bloodied Democracy,” 48.
178. Esmaquel II, “New CBCP Head.”
179. Thompson, “Pushback.”
180. Telephone interview: leftist CSO leader, January 16, 2020.
181. Telephone interview: leftist leader, January 28, 2020.
182. Telephone interview: ND activist, November 5, 2019.
183. *Ibid.*; Skype interview: leftist activist, January 27, 2020
184. Luci-Atienza, “Makabayan Bloc.”
185. Sombatpoonsiri, *Manipulating Civic Space*.
186. Telephone interview: Philippine rights activist, November 2019.
187. Timbermann, *Philippine Politics*.
188. Interview, February 2020.
189. *Ibid.*
190. *Ibid.*
191. *Ibid.*; Skype interview: civil society adviser to the PHRC, January 20, 2020.
192. Santos, “The Philippines.”
193. Skype interview: civil society adviser to the PHRC, January 20, 2020; see also telephone interview: Philippine rights activist, November 2019.

194. Bagayas, “People’s SONA”.
195. Telephone interview: ND activist, November 5, 2019.
196. Thompson, “Pushback.”
197. Sombatpoonsiri, *Manipulating Civic Space*.
198. Thompson, “Pushback.”
199. BBC, “ABS-CBN.”
200. Skype interview: leftist activist, January 27, 2020; telephone interview, leftist CSO leader, January 16, 2020.
201. Conversation on other topics in between.
202. Skype interview: leftist activist, January 27, 2020.
203. Timbermann, *Philippine Politics*.
204. Croissant and Haynes, “Democratic Regression”.
205. Mietzner, “Sources of Resistance.”
206. Rahman, “Party System Institutionalization.”
207. Kongkirati, “From Illiberal Democracy,” 24.
208. Arugay and Slater, “Polarization,” 95.
209. Franco, “The Philippines.”
210. Thompson, “Bloodied Democracy,” 46.
211. Ibid.
212. Ibid.
213. Mietzner, “Sources of Resistance,” 3.
214. Svolog, “Polarization,” 30–31.
215. Ibid., 23.
216. Ibid., 31.
217. Thompson, “Pushback.”
218. Asianews.it, “Pro-democracy students”.
219. Thompson, “Pushback.”
220. Arugay and Sinpeng, “Varieties of Authoritarianism,” 100.
221. Guan, “Introduction,” 21.
222. Sinpeng and Arugay, “The middle class,” 103.
223. On Thailand and the Philippines, see *ibid.*
224. On Thailand, see *ibid.*, 110.
225. Thompson, “People Power,” 381.

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