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# Policy Paper Authoritarian elections in contemporary Southeast Asia

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# Authoritarian elections in contemporary Southeast Asia – trajectories and policy options

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# Executive Summary

The normative appeal of holding elections is nearly universal – there are very few countries that do not hold elections at all – and today more multi-party elections are held than ever before. In the context of global democratic backsliding, however, so-called **authoritarian elections** are becoming the norm. Authoritarian regimes are characterised by a concentration of power, a lack of political plurality, and infringements of fundamental rights and civil liberties. Most of these regimes *«hold some sort of elections. But not all such contests are created equal .... Some are shams that nobody can take seriously; others are occasions of struggle that nobody can ignore.»*<sup>[1]</sup>

Electoral authoritarian regimes can be distinguished from non-electoral autocracies and single-party autocracies. They allow **degrees of freedom and competition** – the more open the regime, however, the higher the risk that it will be challenged or overthrown. In this context, institutions which are usually considered democratic, such as parliaments and elections, fulfil specific functions. Scholars have outlined a range of reasons why elections are held, including to legitimise a regime domestically and to the outside world; to manage political parties, elites, or adversaries; to orchestrate succession; and to gain information about the degree of popular support a regime has. Over time, authoritarian rulers may become more effective and sophisticated in deriving legitimacy from elections. There are also commonalities in autocrats' strategies and behaviours, which goes to show that they are learning from each other.

This is in particular pertinent in **Southeast Asia**, a region that has been called «the homeland of authoritarian elections». However, elections can also be evaluated according to human rights standards and focusing on the right to political participation. Key areas of assessment may include the infrastructure of electoral processes such as the legal framework (including the electoral system), election management, voter registration, polling procedures as well as the political, media and security environments in which all of this takes place. Inspiration and guidance can be found in the criteria used by international election observers.

This policy paper, which builds on thirty qualitative interviews with political decision makers and civil society, investigates what **options to support democratic elections** remain where there is no EU election observation, and how the international community can obtain information about elections in such situations. Mainland Southeast Asia provides a number of relevant cases to pursue these questions.

<sup>1</sup> Schedler 2002, 38.

**Thailand.** Against the background of a deep dislike of military and royalist elites and a profound distrust of the election administration, on 14 May 2023, Thai voters, in a record turnout of 75 per cent, have clearly voted for progressive change. This was aided by new forms of active citizen participation and civic vigilance at the polling stations during the count – forms of activism that were mainly driven by a younger generation. Ahead of the ballot there had been a rift between the proxy parties of the military, while newer political forces mobilised convincingly in online and offline campaigns, resulting in an opposition victory. Still, by means of constitutional provisions, legal loopholes and the non-elected Senate, the establishment was in control of much of the electoral process, thus blocking attempts by the winning Move Forward Party to form a government, aiding the formation of a coalition between military-backed parties and the Pheu Thai Party, and leading to the selection of Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin.

**Cambodia.** Over the past three decades, Cambodia's elections have become increasingly authoritarian – the election management body is partisan; there is no genuine competition; and the liberties of civil society and the media are ever decreasing. The prolonged rule of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) has resulted in a de facto one-party state, and this was also true for the 23 July 2023 elections. Long-standing prime minister Hun Sen is handing over power to his son, Hun Manet, and this generational shift raises some hope that civic education may contribute to a more democratic future.

**Myanmar.** One decade after Myanmar's military regime organised non-competitive elections, which unexpectedly commenced a period of political reform, the military leadership upended this transitional period with a coup based on a narrative of electoral fraud. The result was a downwards spiral of violence. This electoral narrative has not been merely an underlying tone. The claim that the election had been rigged is central to the military's legitimisation. Since annulling the 8 November 2020 election results which had clearly confirmed the voters' preferences for civilian rule, the military has since employed a menu of manipulation to organise fresh elections while leading a war against the population. For the time being, the situation makes new elections unlikely, yet these myths may well be instrumentalised in the future.

Support for democratisation is a guiding principle of Germany's value-based foreign policy, and the EU's election observation missions are a well-established and effective tool to support democratic electoral processes. However, in the light of a democratic recession, the **leverage and impact** of this instrument is subject to aggravated challenges. The annual number of election observation missions does not parallel the increase in democratic backsliding, and such missions usually do not take place in conditions characterised by severe electoral authoritarianism or in closed autocracies. There is a need to respond more effectively to undemocratic elections.

To close the information gap and function as a watchdog, **Germany and the EU** may support non-governmental international and regional organisations in their efforts to observe

elections, as well as grass-roots election observers in partner countries. In addition, advocacy for constitutional and electoral reforms also requires external support. Programmes run by the Heinrich Boell Foundation (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, hbs) show that civic education with a focus on the right to public participation, in particular for a younger generation, can be maintained in otherwise closed environments. Importantly, such programmes foster a culture of democracy and international solidarity, and they should be used more frequently and become part and parcel of policies such as the German and European Indo-Pacific strategies and the EU-ASEAN Plan of Action.

**Recommendations.** In the context of global democratic backsliding, in the absence of international election observation, and as part of their political dialogues with third countries, German and European decision makers may have to refine their guidelines to assess authoritarian elections and recalibrate measures meant to support democratic actors under such conditions. This may involve:

- Improving the integration and implementation of policies related to electoral integrity in the context of Germany's and the EU's Indo-Pacific strategies;
- Making development aid and trade agreements more conditional on the exercise of fundamental freedoms and the right to public participation;
- Raising awareness of authoritarian elections and developing guidelines for their assessment by personnel at German embassies and EU delegations;
- Making further and potentially increased use of the zivik Funding Programme and other relevant external action instruments to support citizen election observers;
- Supporting citizen election observers between elections to sustain their capacities and strengthen their advocacy and engagement on electoral reforms;
- Supporting election observation by international non-governmental organisations and/or regional civil society organisations such as ANFREL;
- Continuing to provide civic education on the right to political participation, including in closed autocracies, in particular for women and the younger generation;
- Including election-specific modules with practical examples in civic education, and fostering intra-regional exchanges in that regard;
- Showcasing and expanding existing work and projects of German political foundations to strengthen the right to political participation under the conditions of shrinking/closed civic spaces and authoritarian regimes; and
- Developing, on the one hand, for EU and member states' authorities and, on the other, for German political foundations a shared understanding of what instruments are available when dealing with authoritarian elections.



# Introduction

The global level of progress in democracy has been undone by recent autocratisation. Dictatorships are on the rise, with 70% of the world's population, that is 5.4 billion people, living in autocratic countries. This democratic decline is particularly evident in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>[2]</sup> At the same time, the normative appeal of elections is nearly universal – very few countries do not hold any elections at all – and, at a national level, more multi-party elections are held than ever before.<sup>[3]</sup> In this seemingly paradoxical situation, «authoritarian elections» are becoming the norm. Indeed, a «corollary to the triumph of elections as the pre-eminent method for selecting political authority has been its use in authoritarian regimes».<sup>[4]</sup>



<sup>2</sup> Boese et al 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Cheeseman and Klaas 2018, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Morgenbesser 2016, 181.

# 1. What are authoritarian regimes?

Authoritarian regimes are commonly characterised by a concentration of power, a lack of genuine political plurality, and the infringement of fundamental rights and civil liberties. One can distinguish between closed, hegemonic, and competitive authoritarian regimes,<sup>[5]</sup> yet the boundaries between these categories are fluid. Different sub-types of regimes are set apart by the qualities of the electoral process, for example the degree of genuine political competition, or by the extent of civic rights and media pluralism. This will be further spelled out below.

Accordingly, there are many types of authoritarian elections. Andreas Schedler states that most authoritarian regimes «hold some sort of elections. But not all such contests are created equal .... Some are shams that nobody can take seriously; others are occasions of struggle that nobody can ignore.»<sup>[6]</sup> Schedler also offers a further differentiation of regime types, delineating electoral authoritarianism from non-electoral autocracies and single-party autocracies on the one hand, and from electoral and liberal democracies on the other (counting single-party elections among authoritarian elections). It is commonly understood that electoral authoritarianism may permit degrees of liberty and competition, however, the more permissive a regime, the higher the risk that it will be challenged or overthrown.

Figure 1: Classification of regime types (following Schedler 2009, 94)

	Authoritarian elections			
non-electoral autocracies	single-party autocracies	hegemonic electoral autocracies	competitive electoral autocracies	electoral and liberal democracies
		<i>Electoral authoritarianism</i>		
<i>Closed autocracies</i>				
	<i>Electoral regimes</i>			

The new institutionalist school of thought has outlined that under authoritarian rule institutions that are usually considered democratic, such as parliaments and elections, fulfil specific functions.<sup>[7]</sup> In this context, elections are more than mere window dressing:

**5** See for example Croissant 2022, 37. Different analytical approaches result in classifications that will overlap. A common approach is to differentiate between closed and electoral autocracies on the one hand and between electoral and liberal democracies on the other (*Regimes of the World* 2022).

**6** Schedler 2002, 38.

**7** Schedler 2009.

*«Talking about electoral authoritarianism involves the claim that elections matter, and matter a lot, even in contexts of authoritarian manipulation.... In electoral authoritarian regimes, if they are to deserve their name, elections are more than rituals of acclamation. They are constitutive of the political game. Even if they are marred by repression, discrimination, exclusion, or fraud, they are constitutive of the playing field, the rules, the actors, their resources, and their available strategies.»*

(Schedler 2013, 12)

Scholars of authoritarian elections have outlined a range of reasons why such elections are being held at all, including self-legitimation and external legitimation; controlling political parties, elites, or adversaries; orchestrating succession; and the need to know how much popular support a regime enjoys.<sup>[8]</sup> Such reasons may change, and there are indications that, over time, authoritarian rulers do become more effective in deriving legitimacy from electoral processes.<sup>[9]</sup> Simultaneously, autocrats' strategies and behaviours share many traits, indicating that they learn from one another<sup>[10]</sup> – a phenomenon that has been called «authoritarian learning» – and this may well apply to elections too.

Other scholars are trying to better understand what is going on at a micro level. To do this, they analyse elections under authoritarian rule and, specifically, what distinguishes them from one another. Thus they focus less on regime classifications and the purposes of elections and more on the actual election processes, that is, the behaviours of voters, candidates, and incumbents.<sup>[11]</sup> Such an approach allows to focus on what is at stake in the heart of politics, and it helps international democracy supporters to calibrate their actions.

**8** See for example Morgenbesser 2016 and Demmelhuber 2023.

**9** Demmelhuber 2023, 5.

**10** Ibid., 24.

**11** Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Gandhi 2015.



## 2. The regional context of Southeast Asia

In the context of Southeast Asia's great diversity of political regimes, authoritarian elections are not a new phenomenon, but rather the norm. Only six out of the ten members of ASEAN currently hold multi-party elections,<sup>[12]</sup> and in international indices only a few of them are classified as electoral democracies (see Appendix 1). At least the majority of Southeast Asian nations has seen authoritarian elections, and this trend has been confirmed in recent polls;<sup>[13]</sup> the region has even been called the 'homeland of electoral authoritarianism'.<sup>[14]</sup> The persistence of this phenomenon depends, among other things, on the skills of authoritarian leaders to manipulate elections.<sup>[15]</sup>

Since decolonisation Southeast Asia has had a history of authoritarian elections, and in this region the third wave of democratisation, which began in the mid-1970s, was experienced less fervently than in other parts of the world. The late 20th century has seen electoral transitions with different outcomes in the Philippines (in 1986, a civilian movement helped to topple the Marcos regime), in Cambodia (in 1993, managed by UNTAC), and in Timor-Leste (1999, UN-supervised referendum on independence from Indonesia). Cambodia's internationally supervised elections were followed by a coup d'état in 1997 and the gradual development towards an electoral authoritarian regime. The Philippines became an electoral democracy, and Timor-Leste, independent since 2002, also exemplifies this form of government. In Indonesia, the largest country in the region, authoritarian rule ended in 1999, and it has been an electoral democracy ever since, while neighbouring Malaysia has been described as electoral autocracy until recently.

Morgenbesser and Pepinsky, analysing data from across the region for a seventy-year period, argue that «elections under authoritarian rule in Southeast Asia have almost never been followed by a change in government,»<sup>[16]</sup> and they have found no statistically significant short-term or long-term relationship between elections and democratisation. As a consequence, they conclude that authoritarian elections do not predict democratic transitions in this region.<sup>[17]</sup> Embedding these findings in the wider context of authoritarian rule in Southeast Asia between 1975 and 2015, Morgenbesser concludes that there is a trend towards greater sophistication in manipulating elections over time. This means that

**12** Brunei is a Sultanate, Laos and Vietnam are one-party regimes, and Myanmar is under military rule. The electoral democracy Timor-Leste is seeking accession to ASEAN.

**13** Thompson 2019.

**14** Schedler 2006 in accordance with Case 2006.

**15** Case 2006, 98.

**16** Morgenbesser and Pepinsky 2019, 13f.

**17** Morgenbesser and Pepinsky 2019, 24.

practices have shifted away from blatant election rigging and fraud and towards more nuanced administrative and legal measures that seem to comply with international norms.<sup>[18]</sup>

Current electoral trends in the region point to a noticeable divide between the countries of insular Southeast Asia, which are leaning towards electoral democracy, and the countries of mainland Southeast Asia, which have seen more tumultuous developments or have remained under closed or electoral authoritarianism for longer periods of time. This paper takes a closer look at three cases in mainland Southeast Asia that have been characterised as electoral authoritarian regimes past or present, namely Thailand, Cambodia, and Myanmar, as well as at the policy options regarding electoral processes and practices.

**18** Morgenbesser 2020, 48.

### 3. The human right to political participation

The ubiquity of authoritarian elections raises the question of how supporters of democracy understand and evaluate such electoral processes – and in what ways they will support democratic stakeholders and civil society in situations where international election observation is not taking place. Instruments available to Germany and the EU will be discussed below. However, to contextualise the case studies it may be helpful to provide as a reference some globally applicable standards.

To avoid a simplistic «autocracy versus democracy» dichotomy it is helpful to analyse elections using a human rights-based approach. This is also the approach taken by international election observers who adhere to the *Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation* (DoP) and its *Code of Conduct for International Election Observers*, as commemorated at the United Nations in New York in 2005.<sup>[19]</sup> Correspondingly, guidance for the assessment of elections can be found in international human rights law.<sup>[20]</sup> Both domestic and international election observers have been characterised as human rights defenders by two UN Special Rapporteurs.<sup>[21]</sup>

The right to vote and the right to stand in elections are enshrined in the globally endorsed *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR, 1948):

#### **Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 21**

- Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.
- Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.
- The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

This is further spelled out in the binding *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR, 1966) as well as in *General Comment No 25 to ICCPR Article 25* on «the

**19** *Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation*; signatories include the European Parliament, the European Commission and the Council of the European Union. A similar instrument for citizen election observers is the *Declaration of Global Principles* by the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors (GNDEM, 2012).

**20** Cf. also UN OHCHR and The Carter Center: *Human Rights and Election Standards. A Plan of Action*. 2017, and Centre for Civil and Political Rights: *The Right to Participate in Public Affairs. How to bring the issue to the attention of the Human Rights Committee* 2021.

**21** *The Situation of Election Observers as Human Rights Defenders*, 27 October 2022.

right to participate in public affairs, voting rights and the right of equal access to public service» provided by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights:<sup>[22]</sup>

### **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 25)**

Every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity, without any of the distinctions mentioned in article 2 and without unreasonable restrictions:

- a) To take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives;
- b) To vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors;
- c) To have access, on general terms of equality, to public service in his country.

The ICCPR has been ratified by most countries around the world.<sup>[23]</sup> The establishment of the right to political participation in public international law has been subsequently reaffirmed in the *Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW, 1979), and in the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD, 2006).<sup>[24]</sup>

### **Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, Article 7)**

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right:

- a) to vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies;
- b) To participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government;

**22** *OHCHR General Comment No 25.*

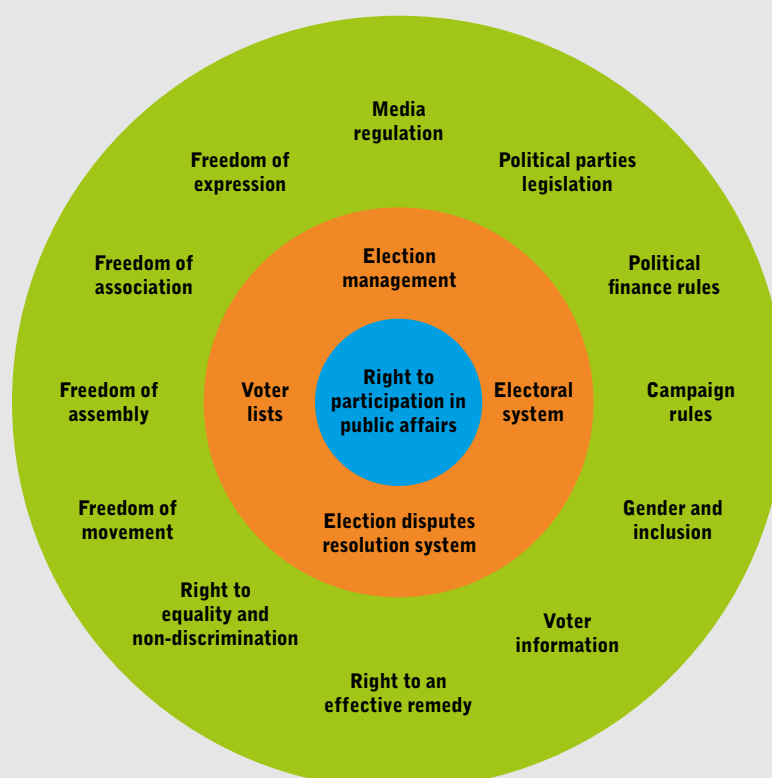
**23** The ICCPR currently (2023) has a total of 173 parties. In Southeast Asia, the ICCPR has not been ratified by Malaysia, Myanmar, and Singapore.

**24** The *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) emphasises the exercise of political rights and electoral participation for persons with disabilities (*CRPD, Article 29*). Both CEDAW and CRPD have been ratified by Cambodia, Myanmar, and Thailand.

- c) To participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.

A recent recommendation states that elections may be better assessed against the benchmark of public participation, and that the European Union and its member states should make active use of the UN human rights mechanisms.<sup>[25]</sup> This is in line with a recommendation of an independent evaluation of EU election observation activities.<sup>[26]</sup>

**Fig. 1: Legal norms typically needed to conduct democratic elections (Saphy and Lidauer 2022, 21)**



Key areas of assessment include the «infrastructure» of electoral processes such as election management, voter lists, the electoral system, and the election disputes resolution system. This infrastructure is commonly embedded in a legal framework that includes fundamental freedoms and provides specific legislation pertaining to elections.

**25** Youngs 2023, 7f and 11f.

**26** Particip GmbH & GOPA Consultants 2017.



International election observers usually assess elections based on the relevant international and regional standards a country has signed up to, as well as on national legislation in a number of key areas such as:<sup>[27]</sup>

- The legal framework for elections must provide for a democratic election process;
- The election administration needs to be impartial, transparent, and efficient;
- The voter register and the voter registration process must be accurate;
- During the process of registering candidates and political parties the freedom of association has to be respected, that is, there has to be genuine competition;
- All campaigns need to be treated equal, and the freedoms of assembly, expression, association, and movement have to be respected;
- Access to state resources for the election campaign has to be fair, and political as well as campaign finance have to be transparent;
- For all candidates and political parties access to the media, in particular state media, has to be fair and election coverage balanced;
- Human rights have to be respected, including women's participation, participation of minorities and of persons with disabilities, as well as of other vulnerable groups;
- Civil society organisations have to be able to participate in public affairs without obstacles;
- There has to be universal and equal suffrage;
- The voting process must safeguard the secrecy of the vote and prevent intimidation or other interference;
- Votes need to be counted and tabulated transparently and accurately;
- If electoral rights are violated, effective legal remedies must be in place and accessible;
- Further issues that may hamper a democratic election process must be resolved, for example election-related violence or flaws to the rule of law.

Looking into all these areas enables international election observers to conduct a thorough and comprehensive assessment of the overall administration of an election, as well as the degree of freedom and access granted to candidates, voters, and the media. However, these categories may also help analyse elections that have no international election observation.

**27** See *Methodology of Election Observation Missions*. Compare also the EU election observation methodology as outlined by *EODS* and in the *EU Election Observation Handbook*.

## 4. Three cases in mainland Southeast Asia

This paper takes a closer look at three countries in mainland Southeast Asia – countries whose governments have been characterised as electoral authoritarian regimes past or present, namely Thailand, Cambodia, and Myanmar, and subsequently looks at policy options for ongoing electoral processes and practices. Despite clear differences in political history and culture, the three countries present some striking similarities – in particular when it comes to coup d'états and the military's role in the governance of the state.

Figure 3. Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar – general election history since 1990

Thailand	Cambodia	Myanmar
1991 <i>coup d'état</i> 1992 March 1992 September	1993 – UN supervised	1990 general elections, followed by <i>coup d'état</i>
1995 1996	1997 <i>coup d'état</i> 1998	<i>Military regime</i> 1990 – 2010
2001	2003	
2005 2006 2006 <i>coup d'état</i> 2007	2008	
2011 2014 <i>coup d'état</i>	2013	
2019	2018	2010 2015
2023	2023	2020 2021 <i>coup d'état</i>

### 4.1 Thailand

Against the background of a deep dislike of military and royalist elites and a profound distrust of the election administration, on 14 May 2023, Thai voters have clearly voted for progressive change in a record turnout. This was aided by new forms of active citizen participation and civic vigilance at the polling stations during the count – forms of activism that were mainly driven by a younger generation. Ahead of the ballot there had been a rift between the proxy parties of the military, while newer political forces mobilised convincingly in online and offline campaigns, resulting in an opposition victory. Still, by means of constitutional provisions, legal loopholes and the non-elected Senate, the establishment was in control of much of the electoral process, thus blocking attempts by the winning Move Forward Party to form a government, aiding the formation of a coalition between military-backed parties and the Pheu Thai Party, and leading to the selection of Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin.

The general election that took place in Thailand on 14 May 2023 was the second time the country had voted since the military coup of 2014,<sup>[28]</sup> as well as the second election held according to the 2017 constitution that had been drafted by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), that is, the military junta which ruled Thailand until 2019. General Prayuth Pan-o-cha, however, continued as prime minister and, based on a constitutional court decision, could have extended his tenure until 2025.<sup>[29]</sup> Late King Bhumibol Adulyadej, whose long reign ended in 2016, was seen as endorsing the coup and subsequent military interregnum, and so was his successor King Maha Vajiralongkorn.

The transitional 2019 general elections were served to extend the rule of the conservative military elites. Details of the electoral system were left uncertain until after the elections, making it possible to influence electoral outcomes after the count.<sup>[30]</sup> The electoral playing field was severely tilted to benefit the traditional and military elites, and important opposition parties were banned before and after the vote.<sup>[31]</sup> Also, ballots were processed in ways that left the integrity of the election administration in doubt. The Election Commission of Thailand (ECT), appointed under the NCPO in 2018, equipped with huge powers and independent from constitutional oversight, was seen in the heart of these manoeuvres.<sup>[32]</sup>

In addition to this electoral history, The 2023 elections also took place following the economic shortfall of the Covid-19 pandemic and youth-led democracy protests in 2020-2021. The ban of the Future Forward Party (FFP) had led to student protests, including demands for the resignation of the Prime Minister, constitutional reforms, and unprecedentedly explicit criticism of the monarchy, which is considered unconstitutional.<sup>[33]</sup> As support for the protests grew, the government responded more forcefully, including by the use of emergency legislation pertaining to the Covid-19 pandemic and the use of the *lèse-majesté* law<sup>[34]</sup> that criminalizes criticism of the royal family. According to Thai Lawyers for Human Rights, close to 2,000 people were charged or prosecuted, among them many youths.<sup>[35]</sup> Because of this and rifts within the opposition, the street protests died down in 2022, yet it seems that their energy was channelled into civic engagement around the 2023 polls.

In the run-up to the 2023 elections the opposition mistrusted the authorities and the ECT in particular. The institutional framework for the elections had barely changed since

**28** Thailand's volatile politics has a long history of military coups. Cf. Farrelly 2011 and 2013.

**29** *Bangkok Post*, 30 September 2022

**30** Tonsakulrungruang 2019.

**31** McCargo 2019 and McCargo and Alexander 2019.

**32** Desatova and Alexander 2021.

**33** Lippert 2021.

**34** Thai Criminal Code, Section 112.

**35** *TLHR* 2023.

2019.<sup>[36]</sup> Thailand's political forces are accustomed to frequently change the electoral system that translates votes into seats. The national assembly consists of a bicameral legislature comprised of an appointed Senate (upper house, 250 seats) and an elected House of Representatives (lower house, 500 seats). The new parallel electoral system for the lower house combines 400 single-member constituency seats elected first-past-the-post (FPTP) with 100 proportional representation (PR) party list seats, resulting in this means, each voter has two ballots.<sup>[37]</sup> Some uncertainties pertaining to the new system, such as the divisor method for the PR list, were left ambiguous until late in the process. However, as the repeat attempts at altering the electoral system demonstrate, they are pursued to «cement certain institutional advantages in a highly uncertain political environment.»<sup>[38]</sup>

A more powerful mechanism to determine the future government are the 250 non-elected senators, the majority of which were appointed by the NCPO in 2019.<sup>[39]</sup> The 2017 constitution gives the senate the authority to take part in the election of the prime minister, who must gain at least 376 votes in the national assembly. The mandate of the – with only 10% women predominantly male – sitting Senate lasts until 11 May 2024, equipping the same upper house with decisive weight to determine the leadership of the state twice, both in 2019 and in 2023. The role of the Senate was one of the most disputed factors in the aftermath of these elections.

With close to 70 political parties and over 6,600 candidates there was clearly political competition<sup>[40]</sup> and reportedly the 2023 elections saw a greater degree of freedom of expression and assembly than had been the case in 2019. The pro-military parties and their cronies have become deeply unpopular, and the two top leaders of the coup split and formed their own political parties, Palang Pracharath (Prawit) and United Thai Nation (Prayuth).<sup>[41]</sup> On the other side, and leading in the opinion polls as always over the past twenty years, the party of the Shinawatra family, the Pheu Thai Party (PTP), was surprisingly overtaken by the progressive Move Forward Party (MFP) that ran an efficient social media campaign.

One of the achievements of the MFP candidates was that they managed to inject criticism of the monarchy into public discourse via televised debates. MFP, however, was not only elected by the youth, but by a more cross-cutting electorate assembling different class, age,

**36** The ECT has remained unchanged since 2019, yet members may have switched party allegiance.

**37** Jatusripitak 2022. As the number of FPTP constituencies was raised from 350 to 400, the ECT had to prepare new constituency boundaries, and there were allegations of gerrymandering.

**38** Ibid., 4.

**39** Kendall 2019.

**40** In addition, 63 individuals were nominated to run for the position of prime minister (We Watch 2023).

**41** Atchanont 2023.

gender and geographical locations, although predominantly in urban centres and taking 32 out of 33 constituencies in Bangkok (losing the remaining one by only four votes). Other parties such as Bhumjaithai (BJT), led by the Health Minister who spearheaded the decriminalization of cannabis during the previous term, also played a role in discussions regarding government formation. Positively, most parties appeared to have taken a conscious decision to field more women candidates,<sup>[42]</sup> resulting in 96 women being elected. While 19 per cent women among members of the national assembly represent a rise, it is still far from gender equity.<sup>[43]</sup>

Public enthusiasm to mobilise for the election and participate was unprecedented, most evident in a strong turnout of 75 per cent of over 52 million eligible voters,<sup>[44]</sup> reportedly the second highest turnout in any Thai election since 1933, resulting in the largest number of voters – close to 40 million – in any Thai election thus far. Already advance voting one week prior to the elections, on 7 May, demonstrated the commitment of the Thai people, with a turnout of 92 per cent amounting to over two million voters on that day. A diverse media landscape gave space to a competitive electoral race during the campaign period. However, Thai civil society also found distinctive new ways to contribute to the transparency of the electoral process and boost participation.<sup>[45]</sup>

*«Thai civil society organizations played a key role in galvanizing voters and delivering a competitive election: An alliance of nongovernmental organizations mobilized a nationwide effort to independently verify the election results through systematic observation. Civil society and volunteer networks across all of Thailand's 77 provinces participated in what may have been the country's biggest crowdsourcing event to date. In a remarkable display of civic participation, some 27,500 photos of results forms were submitted to participating organizations to verify that results announced by Thailand's Election Commission were credible.»*

(Keegan and Kunze 2023)

Above quote refers to the vote62.com platform, which had already been tested in the 2019 elections when, despite adverse conditions, they promoted electoral citizen participation

<sup>42</sup> ANFREL 2023a: 5.

<sup>43</sup> Nachemson 2023. The *Organic Act on Political Parties* states that parties need to consider gender balance when preparing their lists of candidates (*IPU*).

<sup>44</sup> We Watch 2023.

<sup>45</sup> Following the initiative «Partnership for Democratic Constitution» by a coalition of NGOs, 29 political parties signed a code of conduct for the election campaign, including the responsible use of social media, as well as «electoral campaign practices friendly to women and every person regardless of gender».



with an «I vote» campaign. Under the umbrella of iLaw<sup>[46]</sup> and other civil society organisations, voters were encouraged to monitor election results at their respective polling stations and, in case of questionable official results, provide evidence disproving them. This, together with other initiatives, resulted in greater public vigilance and oversight during the vote and count, and thus created «a new culture of transparent election monitoring».<sup>[47]</sup> Mobilisation and reporting largely took place online through social media including Tik Tok. For the public, vote62.com became a source for election information other than the ECT.

iLaw registered as election observers together with We Watch Thailand, the latter a more traditional citizen election observer group that originated in response to the military coup.<sup>[48]</sup> With regional co-ordinators and locally recruited volunteers, We Watch mobilised young people from across the country to observe polling on election day. In a detailed statement, We Watch concluded that *«the 14 May 2023 election raised concerns in many areas which are emblematic of existing problems and limitations in the operation of the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT), as well as the functioning of Thailand's current electoral system.»*<sup>[49]</sup>

While pointing to improvements of election day proceedings – and similar to the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), the only international election observer organisation accredited by the ECT<sup>[50]</sup> – We Watch stressed that the electoral process lacked transparency. Specifically, there was no publicly available list of polling stations, results were not reported per polling station, there were shortcomings regarding the reconciliation of ballots and the information on ballots used, as well as insufficient access for observers and party or candidate representatives during all stages of the consolidation of results.

We Watch further pointed to infringements of universal suffrage in the legal framework; inconsistencies in the numbering of party lists between the two ballots and the lack of party symbols on the ballot, which confused voters;<sup>[51]</sup> and overly strict rules for ballot validation. There were also shortcomings in advance voting; voters who register for this procedure should not be excluded from the voter list for election day. The 60-day timeframe for the ECT to validate the election results was seen as too long, not least as the ECT was in a position to provide preliminary results a few hours after the polls closed. ANFREL also highlighted the recurrent recurrence of vote buying.<sup>[52]</sup>

**46** iLAW stands for Internet Dialogue for Law Reform and the organisation became known for monitoring NCPO laws; for background compare Supporting Democracy/ICP report (33).

**47** iLAW 2023.

**48** *We Watch Thailand*.

**49** We Watch 2023.

**50** ANFREL 2023a.

**51** As a likely result, the little-known political parties listed numbers one to six on the party list ballot won one seat each (Gotham Arya, presentation at Bangkok FCCT on 17 May 2023).

**52** ANFREL 2023a.

On 19 June, and thus earlier than expected, the ECT certified the results, and confirmed an overwhelming MPF victory, with the PTP coming in second. This meant that the people had voted decisively against military rule. «Voters transfer(ed) their power from the virtual world of the internet to the real world of the electoral arena», analysed a Thai political scientist.<sup>[53]</sup> Together with other parties, MFP and PTP announced a parliamentary coalition with 313 representatives soon after the polls. However, due to different positions on the military and monarchy it was uncertain whether such a pact would hold.

The MFP vowed not to join a government with military proxies and had made a relaxation of the *lèse majesté* laws a priority in their campaign; they did not insist on keeping this commitment as part of the coalition agreement, but agreed to pursue it further as individual party in parliament.<sup>[54]</sup> PTP could get a better deal for themselves from a coalition without MFP, including the premiership and a greater number of ministerial positions.<sup>[55]</sup> As with other opposition leaders in the past, the ECT launched an attempt to disqualify the MFP leader for technical reasons<sup>[56]</sup> which could potentially affect all MPs elect of the party if the judiciary was to take such a politically motivated decision.<sup>[57]</sup>

Anticipating that the «*old power will do something to stay in office*,»<sup>[58]</sup> and deeply convinced that if senators vote for a conservative PM, this will thwart the will of the voters, iLaw kept monitoring the process of government formation. Looking forward, the young generation is demanding a new constitution, as well as a repeal or amendment of laws that have been a major obstacle to freedom of expression and assembly.

The new house of representatives first convened on 3 July and elected a compromise candidate (neither from MFP nor PTP) as speaker. On 13 July, the eve of the election of the prime minister, General Prayut resigned from politics.<sup>[59]</sup> On the same day, the ECT recommended that the MFP candidate for prime minister, Pita Limjaroenrat, be disqualified by the constitutional court, and a lawyer filed a case to disqualify the MFP altogether – similar to what had happened in 2019.<sup>[60]</sup> On 13 July, Pita Limjaroenrat, although unopposed, failed to gain a majority in parliament, with 324 votes in his favour, 182 nays, and 199 abstentions.<sup>[61]</sup>

**53** Siripan Nogsuan Sawasdee at the hbs/IRASEC conference on «Current Electoral Processes in Southeast Asia - Regional Learnings», Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, 22 May 2022.

**54** For this and other MFP policies compare Christensen 2023.

**55** Chalermphanupap 2023.

**56** Campaign violations on the basis of ownership of shares in a long defunct media portal.

**57** Rojanaphruk 2023.

**58** Interview on 24 April 2023.

**59** Phaicharoen and Watcharasakweij 2023.

**60** Tanakasempipat and Bloomberg 2023.

**61** Ratcliffe and Siradapuvadol 2023.

Even before the second vote on 19 July, the Constitutional Court suspended the MFP's prime ministerial candidate from parliament,<sup>[62]</sup> and on that day the National Assembly voted against considering him for another round. A petition demanding the renomination of Pita Limjaroenrat was dismissed on August 16 by the Constitutional Court.<sup>[63]</sup> After the effective blocking of the MFP to form a government, the PTP formed a new coalition with smaller conservative parties, including two military-associated parties and excluding the MFP. The PTP candidate Srettha Thavisin was elected prime minister on August 22, the Thai King endorsed him and his new cabinet on September 2.<sup>[64]</sup>

Interlocutors have widely shared the view that this is not the time for another coup,<sup>[65]</sup> but certain fears remain. Thailand's political landscape will likely evolve into a multi-party system divided into two political camps, with the anti-military factions gaining more than 70 per cent of the electorate's support.<sup>[66]</sup> *«Whichever major party leads the next government, military rule is most likely over, and reformist ideas will increasingly shape public policy and debate. A seismic shift has occurred. The significance of this election result cannot be overstated.»*<sup>[67]</sup>

## 4.2 Cambodia

Over the past three decades, Cambodia's elections have become increasingly authoritarian – the election management body is partisan; there is no genuine competition; and the liberties of civil society and the media are ever decreasing. The prolonged rule of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) has resulted in a de facto one-party state, and this was also true for the 23 July 2023 elections. Long-standing prime minister Hun Sen is handing over power to his son, Hun Manet, and this generational shift raises some hope that civic education may contribute to a more democratic future.

Following the Paris Peace Agreements, Cambodia's 1993 UN-administered elections helped end the civil war and marked the dawn of more peaceful times in the conflict-ridden nation. They resulted in a power-sharing arrangement between two major political factions which, however, was upended by a military coup d'état in 1997. In the 1998 general elections, Cambodian People's Party (CPP) leader Hun Sen became the sole prime minister and has held this position ever since, making him the longest-standing politician in this role worldwide. During the decades that followed, electoral processes have become devoid of

<sup>62</sup> Cai and Doksone 2023.

<sup>63</sup> Post Reporters 2023.

<sup>64</sup> Setboonsarng and Thepgumpanat 2023.

<sup>65</sup> Siripan Nogsuan Sawasdee on 22 May 2023.

<sup>66</sup> Head 2023.

<sup>67</sup> Christensen 2023.

competition and marred by severe restrictions of the freedoms of assembly and expression.<sup>[68]</sup>

Cambodia's bicameral parliament comprises the National Assembly (125 seats), elected based on proportional representation every five years, and the Senate (62 seats) which is elected indirectly. Over time, the electoral legal framework has become ever more restrictive. A 2022 constitutional change has given the political party that holds the majority of seats in the national assembly the authority to designate the prime minister. The Law on Political Parties prohibits the leadership of a dissolved political party from engaging in political activities for a period of five years. Regulations for the twenty-day campaign period restrict political parties' and candidates' outreach,<sup>[69]</sup> and voters who fail to cast their vote will lose the right to stand as candidates in the future. This latter amendment, which was passed less than a month before the polls, was seen as targeted at election boycotts because, in 2018, many opposition voters had abstained.<sup>[70]</sup>

There is plenty of evidence backing up allegations that Cambodia's election management body, the National Election Committee (NEC), favours the CPP,<sup>[71]</sup> and that it has a history of election irregularities.<sup>[72]</sup> The comprehensiveness and accuracy of the 9.8 million voter register – among them around 600.000 first-time voters – has been an issue of controversy for several electoral cycles, seriously affecting the integrity of the process. It has been alleged that voter lists have been manipulated in the past, with potential opposition voters removed and phantom names added.<sup>[73]</sup> In 2023, an audit of the voter register by a local watchdog organization indicated a high degree of accuracy,<sup>[74]</sup> yet the registration mechanism faces challenges in capturing a large number of Cambodian migrant workers overseas.<sup>[75]</sup>

In 2013, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) had emerged as veritable political opposition, yet subsequent political manoeuvres have undermined plurality. The CNRP was disbanded by the Supreme Court in 2017, and its leadership subsequently arrested, forced into exile, or co-opted. Since 2018, the CPP holds all 125 seats in the national assembly. The CNRP's successor, the Candlelight Party (CLP), had seen some successes in the 2022 local elections. However, the CLP was disqualified from running in the 2023 general elections on grounds of a technicality, something that has been viewed as disproportionate

**68** Cf. Croissant 2022 (2. Auflage), 157-200, Morgenbesser 2016, 47-83.

**69** ANFREL 2023b: 7-13.

**70** Strangio 2023a.

**71** This nine-member body does not include a single woman.

**72** HRW 2023a.

**73** EU EOM 2016.

**74** Interview on 29 April 2023.

**75** ANFREL 2023b: 17.

and politically motivated.<sup>[76]</sup> Following the success of Move Forward in Thailand, the CLP's disqualification was also interpreted as risk avoidance.<sup>[77]</sup> Ahead of the July 2023 ballot, the authorities clamped down on the CLP,<sup>[78]</sup> and exiled opposition leaders were banned *in absentia* from running for office in the future.<sup>[79]</sup>

The political environment has further included harassment, arrests, and attacks on the opposition, including explicit threats of physical violence coming from the country's highest leadership: «*There are only two options: one is using legal action, the other is using sticks... What do you want?*» Hun Sen said in a speech. «*Either you face legal action in court or I rally CPP people for a demonstration and beat you guys up.*»<sup>[80]</sup> In addition to such blatant threats, the «judicial system is being utilized as a tool to suppress and intimidate», analysed ANFREL, detecting «*a calculated strategy to weaken the opposition and create a climate of fear*».<sup>[81]</sup> Although 18 political parties ran in the elections, tight surveillance, financial difficulties, and limited access to the media meant there was little competition.

At the same time, Cambodia is known for patron-client relationships reaching from highest governmental structures across the state administration to the village level, preventing efforts at democratization.<sup>[82]</sup> A system of threats and rewards means that political opponents are either eliminated or co-opted. Defectors from the opposition are rewarded with government positions, and such defections at the top – including public apologies for «going wrong» – are replicated by the lower ranks.<sup>[83]</sup>

The freedom of expression has long been curtailed, yet during the 2023 elections things have further deteriorated. State-controlled media dominate, and the law on *The Regulation on Website and Social Media Control* (2018) permits the mass surveillance of online activities. Since 2021, at least twenty independent media outlets have had their licenses revoked, one prominent case being the website *Voice of Democracy* (VoD) in February 2023. Journalists are intimidated, subjected to hate speech, and they have limited access to information. In 2023, Reporters without Borders' *World Press Freedom Index* dropped Cambodia from rank 147 to 180.<sup>[84]</sup>

**76** ANFREL 2023b: 19.

**77** Hutt 2023; *The Washington Post* 2023.

**78** HRW 2023b.

**79** VOA 2023.

**80** When Meta's oversight board called for the prime minister's account to be suspended for incitement to violence, Hun Sen abandoned his *Facebook* account (with 14 million followers) and migrated to *Telegram* and *Tik Tok* (Strangio 2023b).

**81** ANFREL 2023b: 26.

**82** Croissant 2016, Morgenbesser 2016.

**83** RFA 2023.

**84** ANFREL 2023b: 35-42.



Civil society organisations have been demanding affirmative actions to enhance the roles and numbers of women in politics. However, the prevalent gender inequality in Cambodian society creates a politically divisive environment. The outgoing National Assembly had 20% women MPs, and in the July 2023 elections 36% of all 3,428 candidates were women. Yet, while some opposition parties fielded over 50% women candidates, the ruling CPP only had 20% – and the disqualified CLP even less with 10%. There is a need for targeted measures to address these challenges.<sup>[85]</sup>

Under the CPP government, civic space has continuously diminished, and this is particularly apparent in the electoral process<sup>[86]</sup> but it also affects political parties, the media, and civil society organisations. A significant factor in this is the *Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organizations* (LANGO) that requires such groups to register with the government and limits their activities.

This situation is also tangible in the field of civil society election observation which has been infringed and discredited in the past.<sup>[87]</sup> The long-standing and reputable Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL) has been facing challenges to recruit volunteers, and not least to issue critical statements.<sup>[88]</sup> Others aimed at observing the elections without accreditation, «under cover», seeing citizen election observation as a form of resistance.<sup>[89]</sup> At the same time, previous elections have seen a steady rise of government-affiliated civil society organisations fielding thousands of «observers», creating the impression of independent scrutiny and public participation while being biased towards the CPP. This trend has continued in 2023.<sup>[90]</sup>

This mirrors the situation for international election observation. the EU has last deployed a full-fledged EOM to Cambodia in 2008, and the last smaller expert mission to communal elections in 2017, as subsequent electoral processes did not allow independent scrutiny.<sup>[91]</sup> International observers must be careful not to lend legitimacy – by their mere presence – to processes that are marred by human rights violations. At the same time, their place may be filled by less principled actors. Since 2013, Cambodia is known for hosting so-called “fake observers” who are specifically invited to provide positive statements on elections, mocking compliance with international norms while issuing false testimony.<sup>[92]</sup> In 2023,

**85** ANFREL 2023b: 43-46.

**86** Compare also the *CIVICUS Monitor Cambodia*.

**87** ANFREL 2023b: 31f.

**88** Interview on 29 April 2023.

**89** Interview on 24 April 2023.

**90** ANFREL 2023b: 32f; cf. Van Socheata 2023.

**91** The European Parliament has firmly spoken out against the restrictive environment in which the Cambodian elections are taking place, considering new sanctions (With Rithi 2023). In 2017 organisations promoting democracy were expelled from the country (*NDJ*).

**92** Debre and Morgenbesser 2017, Morgenbesser 2018.

the EU, the USA, France, and Japan all refused invitations to observe the Cambodian elections, while the Association of World Election Bodies (A-WEB) and (sub-)regional bodies such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Réseau des compétences électorales francophones (RECEF), and the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) did send observers.

Despite the restrictive environment and the challenges facing citizen election observers, some civil society organisations continue to provide citizenship education and emphasise the significance of independent voting. Such programmes are aimed at, among others, young and first-time voters, women groups, and marginalised communities. ANFREL states:

*«In Cambodia's political landscape where civil society faces significant challenges and the civic space is increasingly restricted, these civic education initiatives become even more crucial. They provide a platform for young people to learn about their rights and engage in constructive dialogue. By fostering a culture of civic engagement and democratic values among the youth, these activities contribute to the long-term sustainability of democracy in Cambodia.»*

(ANFREL 2023b, 34)

ANFREL's pre-election assessment also highlighted «the limited participation and representation of marginalised sectors, including women, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, and youth.»<sup>[93]</sup> Unsurprisingly, the 23 July 2023 elections resulted in another national assembly where the CPP is nearly unopposed. Hun Sen is handing over power to his son, Hun Manet, as part of a wider generational shift. This at least gives some hope, as a younger generation may be more open to policy changes in the future.<sup>[94]</sup>

## 4.3 Myanmar<sup>[95]</sup>

One decade after Myanmar's military regime organised non-competitive elections, which unexpectedly commenced a period of political reform, the military leadership upended this transitional period with a coup based on a narrative of electoral fraud. The result was a downwards spiral of violence. This electoral narrative has not been merely an underlying tone. The claim that the election had been rigged is central to the military's legitimisation.

**93** ANFREL 2023b, 5.

**94** Interview on 5 May 2023.

**95** This section is based on a [policy paper for International IDEA](#) by Gilles Saphy and Michael Lidauer (2022) as well as on an article by the author (Lidauer 2023).

Since annulling the 8 November 2020 election results which had clearly confirmed the voters' preferences for civilian rule, the military has since employed a menu of manipulation to organise fresh elections while leading a war against the population. For the time being, the situation makes new elections unlikely, yet these myths may well be instrumentalised in the future.

Following a decade of democratic opening and three general elections organised under the framework provided by the 2008 constitution, Myanmar's military has upended this period with a coup d'état on 1 February 2021. The military leadership established the so-called State Administration Council (SAC) and sought to justify the coup with a narrative of electoral fraud regarding the 8 November 2020 elections. In July 2021, the official election results were cancelled.<sup>[96]</sup> The SAC was quick to announce that it would hold new polls, in 2023 or later, steering in this direction with changes to the legal framework and continuing to claim that the last elections had been manipulated.

Myanmar's military has employed a plethora of tricks to invalidate democratic elections and design future polls in ways that favour them. The 2008 constitution provides the normative foundation for the military's transformation from non-electoral to electoral authoritarianism. It reserves a quarter of all seats – in both chambers of parliament and in all state and regional assemblies – for military appointees, and it gives the commander-in-chief the right to appoint key ministers. The reserved seats in the legislature equip the military with a blocking minority for constitutional changes.

Suffrage rights and voter registration in Myanmar have been extensively criticized by human rights lawyers and election observers in the past.<sup>[97]</sup> The 2008 constitution includes restrictions on the right to vote and to stand as a candidate. Other forms of disenfranchisement concern voters in conflict areas and internally displaced persons.<sup>[98]</sup> Past exclusions from suffrage, including those of the Rohingya, are not expected to be rectified in elections organised by the SAC.

The Union Election Commission (UEC) has the authority to schedule and postpone elections, compile voter lists, regulate political parties, and establish electoral tribunals.<sup>[99]</sup> The law states that the decisions of the UEC are final and conclusive, without and with no recourse to the courts. The UEC, which is appointed by the union president for a five-year term, has a permanent secretariat and administrations in the states and regions. There are no clearly defined criteria for the appointment of sub-commission members spelled out in law.

**96** 13th SAC press conference, 27 April 2022.

**97** For example EU EOM 2016, TCC 2017.

**98** Lidauer 2021.

**99** Lidauer and Saphy 2014, 210.

Already prior to the 2020 polls, commander-in-chief Min Aung Hlaing had expressed distrust in the UEC. In the immediate aftermath of the coup, the UEC Chairman Hla Thein and a commissioner were arrested, and other UEC personnel were temporarily detained, along with close to one hundred members of election sub-commissions. In fact, after the coup, the UEC was the institution most affected by arrests and interrogations.<sup>[100]</sup> The SAC quickly replaced the legitimate office holders with a new five-member UEC, reappointing Thein Soe, who had overseen the 2010 elections, as chairperson.<sup>[101]</sup>

Commonly discussed as a mere technicality, Voter registration is a specific element in Myanmar's menu of manipulation. It used to rest on paper-based household registers, unclear procedures, and insufficient data management technology, leading to criticism of its accuracy and transparency by election experts.<sup>[102]</sup> Aware that voter registration was controversial, The military used this as a pretext to claim fraud in the 2020 general elections. To substantiate and prove its claims, the SAC-appointed UEC published alleged voter list data (alongside data of ballots used) township by township between February and July 2021 in the *Global New Light of Myanmar* (GNLM), the governmental newspaper. The published figures, however, predominantly referring to voters without identity documents and duplicates, are implausible as the sources of the data remain obscure.

On 9 January 2023, the junta started a short-lived process to update voter lists through household visits, confusingly called a «pre-elections census». This exercise was intimidating, with soldiers and police accompanying civilian enumerators, and it was quickly targeted by forces opposed to new elections, leading to several casualties.<sup>[103]</sup> Notwithstanding deliberate interruptions, the process makes it unlikely that the voter lists produced under such circumstances generate sufficient trust among the public to form a basis for genuine elections.

In addition to updated voter lists, the military announced a change in the electoral system, albeit within the framework of the 2008 constitution, which established two chambers. The *Pyithu Hluttaw* (lower house) has 440 members, of which 330 are directly elected, with 110 seats reserved for the military. The *Amyotha Hluttaw* (upper house) has 224 members, of which 168 are directly elected, with 56 seats reserved for the armed forces. The president as head of the executive is not elected by the people but by the Presidential Electoral College.

**100** AAPP 2021.

**101** It remains to be seen how the SAC will organise polls at the lowest level of election administration. Poll workers are recruited from among civil servants, usually teachers, many of whom have been practicing civilian disobedience since the coup (ICG 2023: 10).

**102** E.g. EU EOM 2016, TCC 2017, ANFREL 2021.

**103** Frontier 2023.

Previously, discussions on Myanmar's electoral system have largely revolved around the status quo inherited from the colonial period – first-past-the-post (FPTP) in single-member constituencies based on townships – versus some form of proportional representation (PR).<sup>[104]</sup> The new electoral system announced by the SAC-appointed UEC is predominantly based on PR, with multi-member constituencies based on districts.<sup>[105]</sup> However, the 2008 Constitution requires that elected representatives are allocated on the basis of districts and population. How this will be done has not yet been revealed. Overall, twenty-five seats will be shifted from states to regions. This goes against the often-heard claim that a change from FPTP to PR would be beneficial for smaller ethnic groups and parties; depending on their settlement patterns, some may profit from such a change while others may not.

The only political party to succeed in competitive general elections (in 1990, 2015, and 2020) is Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD). However, «(r)ulers who wish to govern through controlled multi-party elections need a party (as well as a subsidiary state) to mobilize voters.»<sup>[106]</sup> Since 2010, this military-proxy party has been the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) that governed the country until the 2015 elections. However, neither in 2015 nor in 2020 the USDP did well at the ballot box. To address this, the military has changed the USDP's leaders and membership, filling its ranks with former officers who are expected to secure seats in future elections (as was the case in 2010).<sup>[107]</sup>

There are also other proxy parties, which, together with the USDP, are meant to create the impression that diverse political forces support the junta. The yet most decisive step in coercing the political party landscape: The SAC's new political party registration law announced on 26 January 2023, which is more restrictive than the previous law.<sup>[108]</sup> It introduces new requirements for parties that seek to run nationwide: Within ninety days of registering they have to enlist 100,000 members, prove that they have funds of 100 million Kyat, and open offices in at least half of all 330 townships.<sup>[109]</sup> The aim is to aim at diminishing eliminate any chances of a democratic opposition in future elections, and to result in create a situation in which only the junta's political party and their allies may form an undemocratically «elected» legislature.<sup>[110]</sup>

**104** For a discussion of these arguments see Saphy and Lidauer 2022: 24-25.

**105** FPTP remains in place for the election of Amyotha Hluttaw representatives from six self-administered areas, as well as for ethnic affairs ministers in state/region hluttaws.

**106** Schedler 2006: 14f.

**107** Frontier 2022b, *The Irrawaddy* 2022.

**108** GNLM 2023, 5.

**109** The requirements are less stringent for parties that only contest sub-national elections.

**110** As of 29 March 2023, sixty-three political parties had applied for registration, twelve on the national level and fifty-one in the states or regions. Of these, fifty had existed previously, however, only eleven of them won seats in the 2020 elections.



Elections in Myanmar do not have much recent history of electoral violence in the form of targeted attacks on the process or violence among contenders and their supporters.<sup>[111]</sup> This is changing, given the unprecedented levels and forms of non-violent as well as armed resistance since the coup, which has extended to areas hitherto largely unaffected by conflict such as regions in central Myanmar and major cities.<sup>[112]</sup> On 22 April 2023, UEC deputy director General Sai Kyaw Thu was shot dead in Yangon. This assassination of the highest-level official to date was attributed to a guerilla group who plans to target not only military commanders «but any collaborators who are helping to sustain their rule».<sup>[113]</sup>

In late 2022, a report by the Special Advisory Council on Myanmar stated that the military controls only a small part of the country.<sup>[114]</sup> At the same time, the junta has been using the perspective of upcoming elections as a pretext to intensify counter-insurgency operations. Many of the long-standing ethnic armed organisations have sided with the political opposition, but some are taking advantage of new concessions offered by the military, which seeks to expand the territories where elections can go ahead without disturbances. The increasing conflicts cast serious doubts on the feasibility of electoral operations, or the legitimacy of results obtained under such conditions.<sup>[115]</sup>

Under Myanmar's electoral legal framework foresees the possibility of cancelling law it is possible to cancel local elections at the local level for security reasons. The basis for this is military intelligence and sub-national information provided by local administrations, has been something that is poorly regulated and handled in a non-transparent manner has been used with little transparency in the past.<sup>[116]</sup> If new elections are held, the widespread use of such cancellations by the SAC-appointed UEC seems likely, which would imply gerrymandering electoral outcomes by conflict. The 2008 constitution has no provisions on the number of voters needed for an election to be valid or on a minimum number of seats that need to be filled to constitute a legislative body.

Since the coup, journalists have been arrested and killed and independent media outlets have been raided and closed,<sup>[117]</sup> while anti-resistance propaganda has been promulgated through a range of state-controlled television channels, newspapers, and other pro-military media.<sup>[118]</sup> The SAC has also clamped down on digital media, and it has become increasingly difficult to obtain independent news, with the result that public opinion is highly

**111** NMF 2020.

**112** This led to the first-ever UN Security Council Resolution on Myanmar, demanding an end to the violence (UN SCR 2669). Cf. Loong 2022.

**113** Han Thit 2023.

**114** This is a group of former United Nations officials. See *SAC-M 2022*.

**115** ICG 2023: 10f.

**116** Lidauer 2021.

**117** Frontier 2022a following RSF 2022.

**118** Nwet Kay Khine 2021.

polarised.<sup>[119]</sup> Against this background, the SAC has sought to justify the coup with a narrative of electoral fraud and the need to hold new elections.

Civil society has responded to the coup with mass protests, civil disobedience, and by joining the armed resistance or the opposition in exile.<sup>[120]</sup> Inside the country, the space for civic action has been quashed. Faced with a major humanitarian and political crisis, election-related activism is not a priority. Nevertheless, civil society is prepared to exercise civil disobedience also in the electoral process. One such initiative is the «Anti-sham election coordination committee (ASECC)». Activists stress that civic education is important for building a new federal and inclusive constitutional framework and a democratic Myanmar. While the military elite is mainly male, the resistance movement is often lead by women.<sup>[121]</sup>

Regional and international actors view the new elections Myanmar's regime has promised very differently. EU member states and the USA appear to be aligned in not recognising the junta's claims. However, the SAC-appointed UEC has received, among others, visits from the Chinese Ambassador, the Indian Ambassador, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Sultanate of Brunei.<sup>[122]</sup> Reportedly, the election commission of India is providing technical support,<sup>[123]</sup> and members of the Russian Duma have visited the UEC to renew ties between their countries, pledging co-operation between their election management bodies.<sup>[124]</sup> The UEC was also invited to a meeting of election management bodies in South Africa.<sup>[125]</sup> Such exchanges risk legitimising the SAC and its appointed election commission in similar ways as fake election observers. As the example of Cambodia shows, such observers may be invited to provide false testimony and lend legitimacy to the junta's elections once they are held.<sup>[126]</sup>

While the electoral narrative was rather prominent in SAC public statements during the two years following the coup, it has receded since, as The military is occupied fighting on various fronts, and neither the operational nor the political environment is conducive for holding elections. However, such plans may eventually return. As the military is likely to build on its narrative of electoral fraud and may prepare elections aimed at legitimizing their hold on power in the future, it is critical that the international community does not

**119** Frontier 2022a.

**120** As an example for an individual account, see for example Thinzar Shunlei Yi 2022.

**121** Ferguson 2023.

**122** 16th SAC Press Conference, 16 June 2022.

**123** Eleven Media Group 2022.

**124** MNA 2023.

**125** MNA 2022.

**126** Debre and Morgenbesser 2017.

forget the disputable basis of these claims and does not provide recognition to the junta's undertakings.

The junta's strategies confirm not only global and regional trends in pursuing elections to consolidate authoritarian rule, but are also in line with historical Burmese pathways regarding such performances. The military plans fresh elections because this strategy has worked before, in 2010. This also illustrates that the junta is not very inventive in developing new strategies, but at large, cruelly and bluntly, resorts to previous methods of using electoral processes for their purpose of self-legitimation. Whether the grand strategy of criminalizing legitimate polls and replacing them with fake elections will be successful depends, apart from the SAC's own skills in operationalizing their plans, on the acceptance by the domestic, regional, and international audiences to whom this performance is directed.

## 4.4 Regional entanglements

The Thai and Myanmar military or military-proxy governments of the last decade have often been compared, not least in regard to their constitutional strategies and electoral legal frameworks. Thai political scientist Siripan Nogsuan Sawasdee has said that election management bodies in the region «would look towards each other» on how to restrain civic space or craft provisions and procedures that are likely to return election results in their favour – «they learn how to play around with it.»<sup>[127]</sup> The reserved domains with unelected, pro-military representatives in the legislatures – here 250 senators, there one quarter of seats at all levels – stand out in this regard. According to one elder statesman, authorities would not copy their neighbour's laws in detail but compare practices, see what works, and thus contribute to regional norm setting.<sup>[128]</sup> Myanmar is looking to Thailand and Cambodia as examples for orientation in that regard. Many in- and outside the region, however, look to modern Thailand – which never experienced dictatorship or large-scale violence comparable to Cambodia and Myanmar past or present – for regional and economic stability, but also as a trendsetter in governance.

The potential of regional impact also became apparent around Thailand's May 2023 elections. With a view to Myanmar, The outgoing Thai government has contributed to slowing down the international response to Myanmar's crisis and has played a role in delaying action by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) since the coup.<sup>[129]</sup> Thailand's Prayut Chan-O-Cha has long been seen as an ally (or at least not a critic) of Myanmar's Min Aung Hlaing. After the Thai elections, when MFP leader Pita Limjaroenrat cast

<sup>127</sup> Interview on 22 May 2023.

<sup>128</sup> Personal conversation with former Thai minister of foreign affairs Kasit Piromya, 11 May 2023.

<sup>129</sup> Samet 2023.

himself as possible prime minister and potential regional leader, he indicated that a government under his leadership would take a different approach towards Myanmar.<sup>[130]</sup> Presumably In response, still prime minister Prayuth called for an ad hoc regional meeting with the SAC.<sup>[131]</sup> His government launched a new initiative in the context of ASEAN, with the Foreign Minister meeting Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar, apparently as the first foreign official who was granted access to her in detention.<sup>[132]</sup> On the other hand, Move Forward's electoral success reportedly triggered the disqualification of Cambodia's Candlelight Party prior to their polls only one day after the Thai elections.<sup>[133]</sup> After Pita Limjaroenrat's run for prime minister failed, Hun Sen warned Cambodia's opposition not to look to Thailand as an example.<sup>[134]</sup>

**130** *The Irrawaddy* 2023, Thai PBS 2023.

**131** Pongsudhirak 2023.

**132** Lamb 2023.

**133** *The Washington Post* 2023.

**134** Hun Sen [tweet](#), 13 July 2023.

## 5. International Responses and Policy Options

The ubiquity of Authoritarian elections additionally raises the question of how supporters of democracy evaluate elections – and how they may support democratic stakeholders and civil society in situations where international election observation is not taking place.

For various reasons, the cases discussed here have not been the subject of international scrutiny in the form of international election observation by the European Union. The EU sent small expert missions to Thailand in 2011 and 2014, however, in 2019 and 2023, no such diplomatic agreement could be reached. Thai officials argued an EU election observation presence would have political implications that could affect Thailand's image. The EU, for its part, said that Thai authorities were unwilling to provide the kind of access necessary for an independent assessment.<sup>[135]</sup>

In the past, the EU has sent missions to observe general and communal elections in Cambodia, and it has also provided technical assistance. However, this was not continued, as recommendations were rarely taken up and elections became more and more marred by human rights violations, resulting in a situation that leaves the role of international (and increasingly also domestic) witnesses to so-called fake observers, as described above.

Between 2010 and 2020, during Myanmar's transitional period, the EU had deployed a number of observation and assessment missions, most recently for the 2020 general elections, and it had provided technical assistance to national stakeholders. However, since the coup, the EU has withdrawn from any formal observation or assistance related to elections organised by the junta. This leaves the question of how authoritarian electoral processes can be assessed or pro-democracy actors supported.

### 5.1 Germany

Support for electoral processes and democratisation is an integral part and guiding principle of Germany's value-based foreign policy.<sup>[136]</sup> Germany supports election observation missions under the aegis of the EU and the OSCE, and it provides technical assistance to electoral processes, predominantly in Africa commonly implemented by agencies such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). In addition, Germany also provides direct support to national actors such as citizen election observers as part of its *zivil*

**135** See the public exchange in [Than Settakij](#) (Thai language).

**136** *Federal Foreign Office: Demokratisierungshilfe und Wahlbeobachtung*

funding programme on civil conflict resolution and peacebuilding.<sup>[137]</sup> President Steinmeier's recent visits have shown that Southeast Asia is important for Germany's foreign policy,<sup>[138]</sup> and this is backed up by Germany's official Indo-Pacific strategy.<sup>[139]</sup>

Where election observation missions or technical assistance programmes are not in place, Germany employs a range of diplomatic approaches and relies on the expertise of its embassies to evaluate electoral processes. Promoting democracy goes beyond election-centred activities, as it aims to strengthen democratic institutions, processes, and values and wants to foster good governance, political stability, and human rights. Here, Germany's political foundations, such as the Heinrich Böll Foundation, may come into play with their expertise and support for a variety of stakeholders and institutions that range from parliaments and political parties to independent media and civil society organisations. In Thailand, Germany has provided financial support to We Watch, indirect support to iLaw, and non-material support to ANFREL. However, not all diplomatic missions have the expertise to engage in such activities.

## 5.2 European Union

International election observation is an integral and visible element of the EU's foreign policy instruments and external support to processes of democratization,<sup>[140]</sup> and it has become a well-established and effective tool to support democratic electoral processes.<sup>[141]</sup> The relevant methodology and approach was first consolidated in 2000,<sup>[142]</sup> and has been continuously updated since to take political, societal, and technological developments into account, for example the use of social media in electoral processes.<sup>[143]</sup>

The EU, in discussion with its member states, periodically decides upon a list of priority countries where international election observation should take place. Each year, this includes ten to twelve Election Observation Missions (EOMs) that provide a comprehensive assessment of the electoral process. These EOMs are visible during the election campaigns

**137** Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen/*zivik: Federal Foreign Office's Funding Concept* (as of January 1, 2021). NGOs and political foundations can apply for *zivik* funding.

**138** Hildebrandt 2023.

**139** *Federal Foreign Office*

**140** *EU Election Observation Missions*; cf. *EP Report on EU election observations missions 2008*, the *Council Conclusions on Democracy 2019*, the *EU Action Plan on Democracy and Human Rights 2020-2024* and its Mid-Term Review, and *International IDEA 2023*

**141** Particip GmbH & GOPA Consultants 2017.

**142** Communication from The EU Commission on EU Election Assistance and Observation of 11 April 2000 (*COM(2000) 191*).

**143** For methodological developments cf. the Election Observation and Democracy Support (*EODS*) project.



and before and after election day, and they provide preliminary public statements on their findings, as well as a final report with recommendations for the host government and its election administration.<sup>[144]</sup> EOMs are typically led by members of the European Parliament and consist of election experts, as well as of short- and long-term observers from EU member states.

In countries where it is determined that the deployment of EOMs will not support the electoral process, or where it is thought not to be feasible or politically advisable, smaller, less visible election expert or assessment missions (so-called EEMs or EAMs) may be deployed to assess the electoral processes and provide feedback to the diplomatic community. However, this will only happen, if the host government grants access to all relevant actors and stages of the electoral process. The European Union is very careful not to legitimise questionable electoral processes by way of its observation activities.

The issue of self- or external legitimation by way of authoritarian elections has indeed become increasingly pertinent,<sup>[145]</sup> while, in the light of a democratic recession and electoral authoritarianism gaining more traction, the leverage and impact of international election observation is subject to aggravated challenges.<sup>[146]</sup> The number of annual EU EOMs and other missions is disproportionate to the increase in democratic backsliding, and such missions usually do not take place in contexts of severe electoral authoritarianism or in closed autocracies.<sup>[147]</sup> In this context, election observation can become a commodity that is negotiated as part of bi- and multi-lateral relations. This was discussed at a workshop held at the European Parliament,<sup>[148]</sup> which made the following recommendation to the European Council, the European Commission, and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy: «*Ultimately, from an EU perspective, there is a need to respond more effectively to undemocratic elections in autocratic regimes both at national and subnational levels with a focus on the relevance of post-election autocratisation.*»<sup>[149]</sup>

**144** The EU and its member states may not always agree on the priority list. In the case of Cambodia, Berlin would have been interested in a deployment whereas this was less considered in Brussels, indicating that communications about election-related external action could be enhanced between the various institutions.

**145** Demmelhuber 2023.

**146** Demmelhuber 2023: 13.

**147** Youngs 2023: 6.

**148** In January 2023, the EP DG for External Policies / Human Rights Subcommittee organised the workshop «Strengthening the right to participate: legitimacy and resilience of electoral processes in illiberal political systems and authoritarian regimes» that was meant to make recommendations for European institutions on how to respond to undemocratic elections, (see Demmelhuber 2023 and Youngs 2023).

**149** Youngs 2023: 14. However, under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) – Global Europe, there are at least eight mechanisms to support citizen election observers.

# Conclusions

The global trend of democratic backsliding becomes particularly manifest in electoral processes. Authoritarian elections, however, are not a new phenomenon. Their outcomes depend on the skills of autocratic leaders to influence and manipulate such processes in order to extend the longevity of their regimes. They craft electoral legal frameworks including electoral systems, instrumentalise election management bodies and voter registration mechanisms, control security and information environments, manipulate balloting procedures, mock compliance with international norms and thus seek national, regional and/or international recognition. In this context, elections are not mere window dressing, but fulfil specific purposes, in particular to extend the power of authoritarian leaders, rendering elections a tool to secure continuity and prevent change. Elections are thus bereaved of their original function, namely facilitating the right to political participation. The toolbox of authoritarian manipulation is also evolving, illustrated by the trend towards «sophisticated» authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia.<sup>[150]</sup>

The cases discussed in this policy paper illustrate that authoritarian elections display a range of possibilities and must be analysed in their respective political context. The greater the liberties allowed, the greater are the risks of unexpected outcomes. Among the cases discussed, Thailand has moved from a hegemonic electoral autocracy to a more competitive electoral autocracy, whereby the interplay of institutional safeguards crafted by the traditional elites with progressive politicians and an active civil society renders the outcomes more uncertain. Cambodia's electoral process illustrates that a once competitive electoral autocracy has become so hegemonic that it resembles a single-party autocracy while mocking competition. Myanmar, where the military attempted to revert a decade of transitional opening including competitive elections, constitutes a case of a non-electoral autocracy that seeks to re-join the regional club of electoral authoritarian regimes by investing not only in brute force, but also in a comprehensive menu of manipulation to orchestrate future elections.

In all three cases, civil society protagonists have asked the international community to postpone or withhold external recognition. This is exemplified by pleas such as «Do not do normal business with such leaders»<sup>[151]</sup> (Cambodia); «Don't give them the legitimacy that they desperately need»<sup>[152]</sup> (Myanmar); and «Thailand is not yet a normal country. Don't recognize the Thai elections as democratic just yet – recognition is a leverage, don't throw

**150** Morgenbesser 2020, 70.

**151** Interview on 18 October 2022.

**152** Presentation on 31 May 2023.

it away.»<sup>[153]</sup> At the same time, they have said «we cannot do this alone», pointing to a need for international support, including good practice examples and civic education.

In the cases discussed, election observation by the European Union and its member states did not take place. In the absence of instruments that would allow gaining detailed information about the electoral processes at hand and providing recommendations to improve electoral integrity in the future, other election-centred mechanisms can be employed to contribute to safeguarding democracy. For example, international election observation can be implemented by other international or regional organisations. In Southeast Asia, in the absence of a regional inter-governmental body that would commonly deploy election observers in other world regions, this place is held by the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), a civil society umbrella organisation. ANFREL's Pre-elections Assessment Mission Report on Cambodia provides a wealth of information to help understand the electoral and political context. ANFREL is also the only international election observer organization that has published a conclusive report on Myanmar's 2020 elections.<sup>[154]</sup> To complement their efforts, citizen election observers are indispensable to provide independent scrutiny, exercise vigilance, and mobilise participants, as seen in Thailand. Their endeavours to advocate for constitutional and electoral reforms also between elections requires external support. And so does civic education in shrinking or closed spaces such as Cambodia and Myanmar where civil society efforts to promote the right to public participation, in particular for a younger generation, constitutes a rare option to foster a culture of democracy and demonstrate international solidarity.

Against this background, this policy paper issues the following recommendations:

- In the context of global democratic backsliding,
- in the absence of international election observation,
- and as part of ongoing political dialogues with third countries,

German and European political decision makers may consider

- refining their guidelines to assess authoritarian elections, and
- recalibrating their toolbox to support democratic actors under such conditions.

**153** Interview on 23 May 2023.

**154** ANFREL 2021.

This may involve

- A better integration and implementation of policies related to electoral integrity in the context of Germany's and the EU's Indo-Pacific strategies;
- Making development aid and trade agreements more conditional on the exercise of fundamental freedoms and the right to public participation;
- Raising awareness of authoritarian elections and developing guidelines for their assessment by personnel at German embassies and EU delegations;
- Continuing with and expanding the use of programmes such as zivik and other instruments to support citizen election observers;
- Supporting citizen election observers in between elections to sustain their capacities and strengthen their advocacy and engagement on electoral reform;
- Actively supporting international election observation by international non-governmental organisations and/or regional civil society organisations such as ANFREL;
- Continuing to provide civic education on the right to political participation, including in closed autocracies, in particular for women and the younger generation;
- Including election-specific modules with practical examples in civic education, and fostering intra-regional exchanges in that regard;
- Showcasing and expanding existing work and projects of German political foundations to strengthen the right to political participation under the conditions of shrinking/closed civic spaces and authoritarian regimes; and
- Developing, on the one hand, for EU and member states' authorities and, on the other, for German political foundations a shared understanding of what instruments are available when dealing with authoritarian elections.

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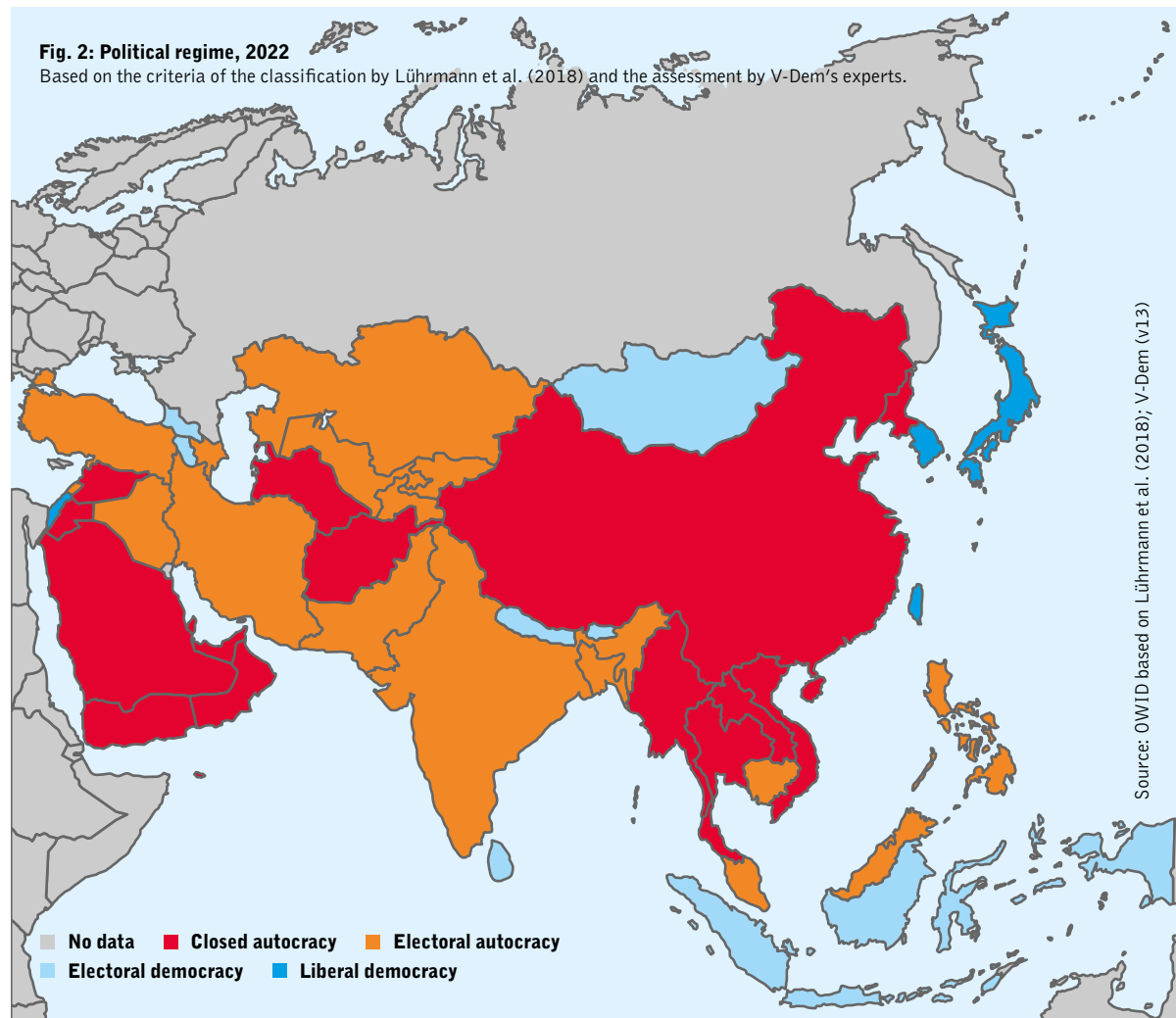
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## Appendix 1. Regime classifications in Southeast Asia (ASEAN Region)



	Regime classifications according to «Regimes of the World» <sup>[155]</sup>				
ASEAN Member State	<b>Electoral Democracy</b> according to Freedom House <sup>[156]</sup>	<b>Closed Autocracy</b>	<b>Electoral Autocracy</b>	<b>Electoral Democracy</b>	<b>Liberal Democracy</b>
<b>Brunei</b> <sup>[157]</sup>	No				
<b>Cambodia</b>	No		X		
<b>Laos</b>	No	X			
<b>Indonesia</b>	No			X	
<b>Malaysia</b>	No		X		
<b>Myanmar</b>	No	X			
<b>Philippines</b>	No		X		
<b>Singapore</b>	No		X		
<b>Thailand</b>	No	X			
<b>Timor-Leste</b>	Yes			X	
<b>Vietnam</b>	No	X			

	Regime classifications according to Croissant (2022)			
ASEAN Member State	<b>Closed Autocracy</b>	<b>Electoral Autocracy</b>	<b>Electoral Democracy</b>	<b>Liberal Democracy</b>
<b>Brunei</b>	X			
<b>Cambodia</b>		X		
<b>Laos</b>	X			
<b>Indonesia</b>			X	
<b>Malaysia</b>		X		
<b>Myanmar</b>	X			
<b>Philippines</b>			X	
<b>Singapore</b>		X		
<b>Thailand</b>	X			
<b>Timor-Leste</b>			X	
<b>Vietnam</b>	X			

**155** Source: *Regimes of the World* data, accessed on 23 March 2023.

**156** Source: *Freedom House* data, accessed on 23 March 2023.

**157** No data in Regimes of the World.

# Methodology

This policy paper is based on over thirty qualitative semi-structured interviews with German and EU diplomatic staff, hbs employees, hbs partner organisations in Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar, civil society representatives, and independent experts, as well as on a review of relevant sources and media reporting and previous research done by the author. The project included an hbs expert talk on «Authoritarian Elections in Southeast Asia» that took place on 31 May 2023 in Berlin.

## Author's Note

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