Political Polarization

in South and Southeast Asia

Old Divisions, New Dangers

Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue, editors

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SUMMARY

Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue

POLITICAL POLARIZATION is growing in South and Southeast Asia—one part of a troubling global trend. From long-established democracies like India to newer ones like Indonesia, deep-seated sociopolitical divisions have become increasingly inflamed in recent years, fueling democratic erosion and societal discord. New political and economic strains caused by the coronavirus pandemic are only reinforcing this worrisome trend.

The roots of polarization in South and Southeast Asian democracies run deep.

This report focuses on six key countries: India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Behind the tremendous diversity of these cases lie illuminating commonalities, alongside revealing differences, in the roots, trajectories, drivers, and consequences of polarization, as well as in the attempted remedies different actors have pursued.

The roots of polarization in South and Southeast Asian democracies run deep, usually dating back to at least the first half of the twentieth century and their formation as modern nation-states. Divisions also tend to be anchored in one or more of three powerful types of societal fissures: ethnic, religious, or ideological. These findings underscore how fundamental political divides are and how hard they are to bridge. Only one of the six case studies, the Philippines, is not suffering from intense polarization, despite the rise of a populist president in a context of ethnolinguistic and regional diversity. Yet the forces mitigating divisions in Philippine politics have been decidedly antidemocratic.

Troublingly, long-standing divides have burst to the forefront of political life in many parts of South and Southeast Asia over the past two decades. In India, the Hindu right's stunning success in the 2014 and 2019 elections has intensified polarization over the role of Hindu nationalism in sociopolitical life. In Indonesia, fierce competition between Islamist and more pluralist forces since 2014 has sharply divided the country. In Thailand, polarization over the legitimacy of monarchical rule and existing social hierarchies erupted after 2001, leading to years of clashing street protests and two military coups.

The drivers behind this wave of polarization are potent and diverse. As in other regions, political leaders often play a critical role in intensifying divisions, not just by employing polarizing rhetoric but more fundamentally by seeking radical changes to the status quo. Opposition forces, too, can escalate polarization by weaponizing mass protests or reciprocating with divisive tactics. Yet political leadership is just one factor amplifying divisions. Deeper, structural forces—including sociopolitical mobilization around religion, the Global War on Terrorism, economic transformation, the design of political systems, and changes involving traditional and social media—have undergirded the rise of polarization across South and Southeast Asia.

The consequences of polarization, from executive abuse of power to the politicization of the military, pose distinct risks for all institutions in a democracy. What is more, political conflicts often reverberate throughout society, fueling intolerance toward and even violence against minority groups. In some countries, these negative effects have proven significant enough to shatter the constitutional order: Polarization culminated in democratic breakdowns in Thailand and a twenty-six-year civil war in Sri Lanka. In other places, such as India, Indonesia, and Malaysia, the democratic erosion caused by harsh political conflict is not yet so serious, but the warning signs are disquieting.

Despite these adverse trends, domestic and transnational actors have responded with efforts to counteract or at least limit the problem. Divisive leaders have at times performed an about-face; opposition politicians have built diverse coalitions; and civil society groups have launched initiatives to reform the media landscape, foster dialogue, and bridge divides. The different remedial efforts examined in this report suggest four overarching guidelines for actors seeking to counter polarization: They should limit objectives and lengthen timelines, develop in-depth local expertise, focus on systemic changes that foster sociopolitical inclusion, and purposefully cultivate credibility across the political divide. The report also distills specific recommendations for supporting inclusive leadership, media reform, and dialogue and bridging efforts.

Attempted remedies have failed thus far to overcome the powerful forces behind rising polarization, but these initial shortcomings should not be cause for resignation. Domestic and transnational actors will need to learn from the limitations of previous efforts and think systematically about countering polarization if they are to come to grips with the gravity of the challenge it presents.

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue

AS WE ARGUE in our recent book, *Democracies Divided*, rising political polarization is a significant element of the global democratic crisis.[1] Intense divisions are tearing at the seams of democratic societies in every part of the world, from Brazil, India, and Kenya to Poland, Turkey, and the United States. The coronavirus pandemic is only exacerbating this trend as contending political camps in many countries clash over responses to the crisis, and leaders determined to monopolize control exploit the emergency to claim sweeping new powers.[2]

South and Southeast Asia, two regions with tremendously diverse democracies, are a vital ground for understanding the swelling tide of polarization, its many

> *Deepening divisions, frequently fueled by majoritarian political agendas, are driving democratic regression in key countries throughout South and Southeast Asia.*

troubling consequences, and the ways in which domestic and transnational actors committed to strengthening democratic governance can try to contain or reduce it. Deepening divisions, frequently fueled by majoritarian political agendas, are driving democratic regression in key countries throughout these regions. In India—the longest-lasting democracy in the Global South—threats to liberal freedoms "are now approaching critical proportions" as the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi advances a polarizing Hindu nationalist agenda.[3] Indonesia and Sri Lanka have also been wracked by majoritarian political forces that are aggravating divisions and eroding democratic institutions.

Elsewhere in these regions, where democracy has recently taken tentative steps forward, entrenched political divides are limiting liberalization. In Malaysia, the opposition stunned the world in 2018 by ousting an incumbent coalition that had held power for more than sixty years. Yet enduring polarization prevented the new government from implementing reforms and led to its dramatic collapse just two years later. Thailand, after years of democratic turmoil and regression, has recently experienced a limited political opening; in 2019, it registered the greatest year-on-year improvement in political freedoms of any country in the world, according to the *Economist*'s Democracy Index.[4] But unhealed divisions after more than fifteen years of polarizing struggles threaten to destabilize democracy once again.

An in-depth grasp of the patterns and dynamics of polarization is thus crucial to understanding politics in South and Southeast Asia, particularly for domestic and transnational actors working to support democratic governance. To help meet this need, we worked with experts from across these regions to explore the topic in detail.

We chose to focus on six key countries: India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. All meet the minimum criteria to be described as an "electoral democracy."[5] However, they differ significantly across a range of axes, including their degree of democracy, the design of their political systems, their societal makeup, and their levels of economic development. They are also experiencing varied degrees of polarization; some have suffered from divided politics for decades, whereas one (the Philippines) has comparatively little polarization despite its significant societal diversity. These differences help illuminate which factors lead to higher or lower levels of polarization and democratic erosion.

We utilized a common definition of severe polarization developed by Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer. In their path-breaking recent work, these scholars define severe or "pernicious" polarization as "a process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in the society increasingly align[s] along a single dimension, cross-cutting differences become reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of 'us' versus 'them.'"[6] As they elaborate in an article with Tahmina Rahman, a defining characteristic of severe polarization is that "distance between groups moves beyond principled issue-based differences to a *social identity* [emphasis added]."[7]

Several of the case studies, such as India and Thailand, clearly meet this definition of severe polarization. Their divisions are structured around a reductive binary cleavage, are rooted in an identity struggle both among political elites and within society more broadly, and are sustained rather than transitory. Yet even when divisions do not reach the threshold of severe polarization, they can still be intense and damaging to democracy. In Indonesia, for instance, bitter political rivalries have poisoned societal relations in recent years, but it remains too soon to tell whether these divisions will be lasting and become an ingrained feature of social identity.

We structured the case studies around a set of common themes and questions, namely, the roots, trajectory, drivers, and consequences of polarization, as well as remedial actions.

- **Roots**: What is the primary dividing line between the two sides? What historical episodes or conflicts set the stage for polarization today?

- **Trajectory**: When did the current phase of polarization begin and why? How has polarization changed over time in its intensity, dividing lines, and sociopolitical manifestations?

- **Drivers**: What factors—such as political leadership and institutions, economic transformations, and changes in the media landscape—have driven polarization? Does polarization stem primarily from the actions of elites, or is it also rooted more widely in society at large?

- **Consequences**: What political and societal effects is polarization having? How is it affecting the functioning of different elements of the political system, such as the executive, judiciary, legislature, and political parties? What kinds of social tensions and conflicts is it producing?

- **Remedial actions**: What efforts have been made to counter polarization? Have any initiatives achieved notable results, and if not, what challenges have they faced?

The report first presents the five country cases that are significantly (if not necessarily severely) polarized. They underscore that polarization is having serious, wide-ranging effects on democratic governance, contributing to outcomes from illiberal majoritarianism and executive abuse of power to military intervention and civil war. They further demonstrate that the sociopolitical strain caused by the coronavirus outbreak has often amplified polarization and its already dangerous consequences.

In India, as Niranjan Sahoo argues, the divide between secular and Hindu nationalist visions of Indian identity forms the crux of polarization today. Although the country's political tensions have been simmering since the 1980s, the Hindu right's landslide electoral victories in 2014 and 2019 brought polarization to a boil. In the current context of toxic partisanship, attacks on independent institutions have increased, violence against minority communities has flared up, and the electoral success of Hindu nationalist parties has rendered the opposition reluctant to defend pluralism and minority rights.

Eve Warburton's analysis of Indonesia similarly shows just how rapidly polarization can intensify and erode democratic institutions. Three major elections since 2014 have left the country more divided than it has been in decades, as opportunistic politicians deploy sectarian, populist campaigns to smear their more secular rivals. Yet divisive leadership alone

cannot explain the growing polarization; disillusionment with Indonesia's political establishment and the gradual Islamization of society also lie behind the rise of polarizing figures. With political strains deepening, the incumbent government has abused its executive powers to crack down on the opposition, most recently during the coronavirus pandemic.

In Malaysia, Bridget Welsh writes, what makes polarization so fraught is that it draws on three deep and distinct divides: an ethnic cleavage between Malays and non-Malay minority groups, a religious one between Islamists and secularists, and a third one between competing visions of state power and reform. These compounding divisions have prevented the adoption of various reforms, fueled political instability, and sustained a political system defined by ethnic majoritarianism and significant democratic deficits. Although the opposition took historic strides toward reducing polarization by building a diverse base of support and winning at the ballot box in 2018, the new governing coalition—the most inclusive in Malaysia's history—soon collapsed under the weight of its internal divisions.

In Sri Lanka, Ahilan Kadirgamar traces how polarization rooted in ethnic and religious identity has fueled recurring bouts of majoritarian politics since the 1930s and even a decades-long civil war (1983–2009). Domestic political actors and institutions have exacerbated divisions, but so too have global forces—including an international push for addressing wartime human rights abuses and the rise of Islamophobic discourse during the U.S.-led Global War on Terrorism. The resulting polarization has entrenched a majoritarian, centralized state structure, fomented violence against minority communities, and pushed parties across the political spectrum to embrace ethnonationalism.

Thailand stands out as a case in which polarization has contributed to military intervention in politics, with the armed forces staging coups d'état in 2006 and 2014. As Janjira Sombatpoonsiri argues, Thailand's pernicious polarization is rooted in an almost century-old divide between two opposing political outlooks. Whereas one camp regards the Thai king as the country's rightful ruler and defends existing social hierarchies, the other seeks a more democratic and egalitarian sociopolitical order. Economic liberalization and democratizing political reforms in the 1990s paradoxically aggravated the struggle between these "two Thailands," while social media and weaponized mass mobilization have only fueled the proverbial fires of polarization.

Polarization is feeding on long-standing political divisions and clashing social identities, including those of majority communities that feel aggrieved or threatened despite their electoral dominance.

Finally, Paul Kenny's chapter on the Philippines offers an interesting negative case, in which polarization shows no signs of emerging in what is an ethnolinguistically and regionally diverse country, despite the rise of a populist president and persistently high

economic inequality. Unfortunately, the factors mitigating divisions in the Philippines are antidemocratic—party labels mean little to voters, since politics revolve around patronage and personalities rather than ideology or identity. Furthermore, President Rodrigo Duterte's signature war on drugs has largely united Filipinos behind him, but at the cost of perhaps tens of thousands of lives.[8]

The concluding chapter distills cross-cutting findings from these diverse case studies, including on how polarization in South and Southeast Asia aligns in important ways with polarization elsewhere. On the whole, our conclusions are sobering. Polarization is feeding on long-standing political divisions and clashing social identities, including those of majority communities that feel aggrieved or threatened despite their electoral dominance. It has intensified during the past two decades, propelled by powerful factors from rapid economic development to gradual societal shifts. It is damaging democracy, civil society, social cohesion, and the rights of minority groups.

Various actors have attempted to limit polarization and mitigate its negative effects, but to date these efforts have not been able to check the negative trend. Nevertheless, the analysis contained herein points to several policy guidelines and opportunities for addressing polarization. We hope that the report will enable engaged political and civic actors and observers in the countries under study—as well as transnational actors seeking to help these countries build more democratic futures—to better understand the dangerous dynamics of rising polarization and formulate effective responses.

NOTES

1 Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue eds., *Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2019).

2 Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue eds., "Polarization and the Pandemic," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 28, 2020, https://carnegieendowment .org/2020/04/28/polarization-and-pandemic-pub-81638.

3 Ashutosh Varshney, "Modi Consolidates Power: Electoral Vibrancy, Mounting Liberal Deficits," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 4 (2019): 76.

4 Economist Intelligence Unit, "Democracy Index 2019: A Year of Democratic Setbacks and Popular Protest," 2020, 25, www.eiu.com/public/topical_report.aspx?campaignid= democracyindex2019.

5 Following the work of Larry Diamond, we employ a minimalist definition of electoral democracy as "a civilian, constitutional system in which the legislative and chief executive offices are filled through regular, competitive, multiparty elections with universal suffrage." See Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 7–10.

6 Murat Somer and Jennifer McCoy, "Déjà Vu? Polarization and Endangered Democracies in the 21st Century," *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 1 (2018): 2.

7 Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman, and Murat Somer, "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities," *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 1 (2018): 19.

8 Howard Johnson and Christopher Giles, "Philippines Drug War: Do We Know How Many Have Died?" BBC, November 12, 2019, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-50236481.

CHAPTER 1

MOUNTING MAJORITARIANISM AND POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN INDIA

Niranjan Sahoo

SINCE THE LATE nineteenth century, the primary source of political and societal polarization in India has been a fundamental question of nationhood: Should India be a secular country or a Hindu *rashtra* (Hindu nation), given that roughly 80 percent of the population is Hindu?[1] Although the political hegemony of the secular, pluralist Congress Party tempered polarization over this issue until the 1970s, the rising prominence of Hindu nationalist organizations in recent decades has sharply increased tensions. Divisive

> *Polarization in India is more toxic today than it has been in decades, and it shows no signs of abating.*

political leadership—coupled with India's economic transformation, changes in the media landscape, and the rise of competitive caste politics—has steadily brought polarization to a boil.

Particularly since the landslide electoral victories of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014 and 2019, the consequences of severe polarization have grown ever more worrisome. Partisan attacks on India's independent political institutions have intensified, opposition parties have become extremely wary of defending pluralism and secularism, and hatred and violence against minority communities have flared up.[2] The coronavirus pandemic has eased this polarization on the surface by engendering more unifying political leadership, yet at the societal level the crisis has only amplified intolerance, particularly against India's Muslim minority community. Although various actors have launched efforts to counter the country's majoritarian turn and improve civic dialogue, polarization in India is more toxic today than it has been in decades, and it shows no signs of abating.

ROOTS

The divide between secular and Hindu nationalist visions of national identity forms the central axis of polarization in India today. This is not to ignore polarization based on differences in caste, class, language, or region; however, these cleavages are more important at the subnational level because no one group is able to predominate nationally. Polarization along these axes thus has never posed an existential threat to Indian democracy, with the exception of one major episode between 1975 and 1977 when the government of prime minister Indira Gandhi suspended basic rights for twenty-one months—a dark chapter in the country's astounding democratic journey. The significance of other episodes of polarization notwithstanding, the divide over Hindu nationalism is seriously endangering liberal freedoms and pluralist democracy in India today.

The current wave of polarization has its roots in the colonial period and the two clashing visions of the "idea of India" that emerged then.[3] One strain of thinking envisioned India as a secular nation, in which membership was defined not by one's faith but by one's place of birth. The most important proponent of this view was Mahatma Gandhi, the principal leader of the Indian independence movement and a president of the Congress Party. Though a devout Hindu himself, Gandhi viewed the Indian nation as a harmonious collection of religious communities that deserved to be treated as equals. Other prominent Congress leaders, including Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, also firmly opposed Hindu nationalism.

In sharp contrast to Gandhi and Nehru's vision, Hindu nationalists argued that Hindu culture defined Indian identity and that minorities needed to assimilate by accepting the strictures of this majority culture. In a landmark 1923 book *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?*, the conservative leader and revolutionary V. D. Savarkar coined the term Hindutva (Hindu nationalism) to challenge the secular conception of Indian nationhood propounded by Gandhi and Nehru. Pro-Hindutva political activists turned Savarkar's idea into a mass movement in 1925 by founding the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a paramilitary volunteer organization dedicated to promoting Hindu nationalism. The RSS, which became the fountainhead of the Hindu nationalist movement, rallied support from a network of sister organizations known as the Sangh Parivar. The tension between these competing conceptions of Indian nationhood has continued to drive polarization in postcolonial India.

TRAJECTORY

Even though divisions over Indian national identity have long festered, Hindu nationalism did not become a politically ascendant force until the late 1980s. Since then, political leadership and especially the polarizing tactics of BJP Prime Minister Narendra Modi (2014–present) have brought polarization to a dangerous level today.

Congress Party Hegemony Tempers Polarization (1947–1977)

Although the bloody partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 escalated sectarian tensions, until the late 1970s, the hegemony of the Congress Party moderated polarization and kept Hindu nationalism from occupying center stage in national politics. Gandhi's assassination by an associate of the RSS in 1948 made the organization very unpopular and considerably dented its polarizing appeal. The able leadership of Nehru, who served as prime minister between 1947 and 1964, further tempered polarization. As a big tent or catchall party that had united diverse groups around the struggle for Indian independence, the Congress Party initially enjoyed unquestioned political dominance, and it used its power to advance a secular, broadly inclusive vision of India.

That said, the politics of the Congress Party should not be idealized. In significant ways, its failings set the stage for the rise of Hindu nationalism. At times, the Congress practiced a form of pseudosecularism, manipulating religion when it benefited the party and using religious minorities as a vote bank rather than treating them as genuine constituencies. The party lost power for the first time in 1977 after the entire political opposition united against the autocratic maneuvers of prime minister Indira Gandhi (1966–1977, 1980–1984).

Rising Polarization and a Rising Hindu Right (1977–2014)

Between 1977 and 2014, divisions over Indian national identity became increasingly prominent with the formation of the right-wing, Hindu nationalist BJP in 1980 and the success of conservative civil society in mobilizing Hindu nationalist sentiment.

The decisive episode catapulting the Hindu right to national prominence was the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, in which the RSS and the Sangh Parivar campaigned to construct a temple to the Hindu deity Ram on the site of a mosque, known as the Babri Masjid, in the city of Ayodhya. Built on the site of a demolished Hindu temple, the mosque had an incendiary history, and in 1989, the RSS launched a national movement demanding that the original Hindu temple be restored. The BJP actively endorsed this campaign and benefited greatly from Hindu nationalist mobilization in the 1989 and 1991 elections. Crucially, the BJP also won greater support from upper-caste Hindus by opposing the implementation of the Mandal Commission report, which sought to redress centuries of caste-based discrimination by reserving a certain percentage of positions in the civil service and higher education for individuals from intermediary castes.[4]

Polarization reached a breaking point in 1992 when Hindu activists violently destroyed the Babri Masjid, leading to bloody communal riots that left more than 2,000 people dead.[5] This episode temporarily turned the BJP into a pariah, and the party realized that it would need to tone down its inflammatory rhetoric to win political power. Subsequently, the BJP adopted a deft strategy of moderating Hindutva and mixing it with promises of economic

development. This approach allowed the party to gain support from coalition partners and run the first non-Congress coalition to complete a full five-year term between 1999 and 2004. During this period, however, polarization remained in check because the BJP depended on its coalition partners and could not advance its most contentious proposals.

The Rise of Modi and the Revival of Hindutva (2014–present)

Since 2014, Modi's polarizing leadership and the BJP's stunning electoral success under his watch have escalated tensions dramatically.

After losing to the Congress Party in the 2004 and 2009 general elections, the BJP staged an astonishing comeback in 2014, securing a majority of seats on its own in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of the national parliament). The real game changer was the rise of Modi, who skillfully combined promises of economic growth with Hindu nationalist appeals. A three-time chief minister in the state of Gujarat, Modi had a reputation for delivering growth and good governance that gave him broad appeal with Indian voters. Yet the single biggest factor explaining the BJP's phenomenal performance was sharp polarization over the issue of Hindu nationalism.[6] Modi was a deeply divisive figure owing to his strong stance on Hindutva and his alleged role in the 2002 Gujarat riots, in which more than 1,000 people—the vast majority of whom were Muslim—lost their lives.[7] His image as an unapologetic Hindu nationalist, whose followers fondly address him as *Hindu Hriday Samrat*, or "ruler of Hindu hearts," greatly added to the BJP's spectacular success at the ballot box.

> *Since 2014, Modi's polarizing leadership and the BJP's stunning electoral success under his watch have escalated tensions dramatically.*

After the BJP's historic victory in 2014, ethnonationalism gained greater traction as a core component of the party's platform. Some BJP members even called for amending the constitution to redefine India as a Hindu nation. And the Modi government began advancing its vision of India by stocking key cultural and educational institutions with party sympathizers, taking a leaf from the Congress Party's book. However, in its efforts to establish ideological dominance, Modi's BJP has differed from Indira Gandhi's Congress Party in a crucial respect: The former has been able to marshal both state and nonstate power. The support of Hindu nationalist social organizations has helped lay the groundwork for a unique brand of ideological hegemony under Modi's watch.

In the run-up to the 2019 general elections, in which the BJP again won an outright majority in the Lok Sabha, the country witnessed an unprecedented level of polarization. The ruling party rekindled sociopolitical divisions by announcing its intention to build a Hindu

temple on the site of the demolished mosque in Ayodhya. Furthermore, Modi turned the election into a referendum on his leadership and relentlessly polarized the electorate for political gain, even accusing the opposition of treason for being insufficiently tough toward Pakistan.

Although many commentators assumed that the BJP would step back from polarizing issues after winning reelection and focus on economic challenges, their expectations have been proven wrong. Emboldened by its victory, the government has adopted numerous Hindu nationalist policies that have inflamed polarization. In August 2019, just days after beginning its new term in office, the Modi government abrogated Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which guaranteed special autonomous status to the state of Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state.[8] Additionally, the ruling party passed legislation to criminalize the long-standing Muslim practice of instant divorce, a move that opponents criticized as targeting Muslims because India's constitution allows Muslim personal law to govern matters of marriage and divorce.

The Modi government's most polarizing decision, however, was the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in December 2019. The law—which grants religious minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan a speedier path to Indian citizenship but excludes Muslims—sparked nationwide protests. The passage of the CAA has led many Indians to fear that the BJP has seriously eroded the country's constitutional principles of equality and secularism. This legislation was particularly alarming because the Modi government has also announced its desire to compile a nationwide register of citizens, which would require all Indians to produce evidence of their citizenship. Muslims who are unable to produce the necessary documentation would be deemed foreigners, and under the CAA they would be denied a path to citizenship.[9] Such policies have put India's very identity at stake and sharply intensified polarization.

The Pandemic, Political Leadership, and Societal Polarization

The coronavirus pandemic has had complex ramifications for polarization in India, alleviating the problem of divisive leadership while also fueling societal tensions.[10] Notably, the crisis has caused Modi to tone down his polarizing rhetoric. During the pandemic, he has sought to cultivate a feeling of "collective resolve and solidarity" by, for instance, asking all Indians to clap together in support of essential workers or to light candles at a designated time.[11] Furthermore, a majority of Indians have enthusiastically embraced Modi's signature policy initiative, a nationwide lockdown, despite issues with its implementation. Likely as a result of the crisis and his skillful public outreach, Modi's net approval rating rose to 68 percent in mid-April 2020, up from 62 percent at the beginning of the year.[12] By this token, polarization has at least somewhat receded.

At the societal level, however, the pandemic has stoked Islamophobia and aggravated religious divides that have been deepening since Modi took office. The catalyst for rapidly growing anti-Muslim sentiment was a coronavirus outbreak connected to a single event organized in mid-March by an Islamic missionary movement called Tablighi Jamaat. When public health authorities identified the event as a hot spot of infections, Islamophobic voices on social media seized the opportunity to promote conspiracy theories that Muslims were intentionally spreading the disease, and "CoronaJihad" became the top trending hashtag on Twitter for days, appearing almost 300,000 times in less than a week.[13]

Tragically, this outpouring of hateful rhetoric has translated into an increase in anti-Muslim discrimination and sporadic violence in some parts of India.[14] The concerted vilification and stigmatization of Tablighi Jamaat's members also resulted in resistance to quarantine measures and a series of violent attacks on healthcare workers, complicating India's efforts to contain the pandemic. Despite Modi's appeals for unity, which have emphasized that the virus "doesn't see religion, language, or borders," his words largely have proved inadequate to stem the rising intercommunal discord.[15]

DRIVERS

Three crucial drivers of increasing polarization have been India's ongoing economic transformation, changes in traditional and social media, and the rise of competitive caste politics. Hindu nationalist organizations have been able to harness the power of each of these drivers in ways that their opponents have found difficult to match.

Economic Transformation

India's economic transformation over the past three decades is the least debated driver of today's polarization. Starting in 1991, a Congress-led government pursued a program of economic liberalization that reshaped the Indian economy, accelerating urbanization and creating a sizable middle class. Paradoxically, however, the Congress Party's reforms proved a huge boon for the identity politics of the BJP, as urban voters tend to be more rather than less supportive of Hindu nationalist narratives.[16] As Christophe Jaffrelot argues, "Urbanization has transformed Hinduism more than any other development. In the village you live together. You can't miss the muezzin or the bells of the temple and you have syncretic (mixed) cults. . . . When you go to the city that's over."[17] Remarkably, even as the BJP has tapped into this new urban middle class, under Modi's leadership it has also been able to win over voters whom liberalization has left behind. The economic inequalities created after 1991 thus have allowed the BJP to build a coalition of odd bedfellows.

Traditional and Social Media

Changes in the media landscape have also fanned the flames of polarization, particularly in the past decade. In the realm of traditional media, biased or partisan-leaning outlets have become increasingly influential, at the expense of nonpartisan news sources. Changes in media ownership likely have played a role in this transformation, as more and more Indian media outlets have been acquired by business houses (corporate conglomerates generally run by prominent Indian families).[18] In this changing media ecosystem, profit-driven organizations openly support particular parties and sensationalize minor issues to create false binaries or divisions.

Compounding these effects, social media has accelerated the pace at which misinformation and propaganda spread. WhatsApp, in particular, has emerged as a favored tool for disseminating misinformation to foment intercommunal discord. Furthermore, the BJP has acted quickly and skillfully to exploit social media to promote its majoritarian message. In the 2019 elections, for instance, the ruling party outspent the opposition Congress on social media advertising by more than a factor of fifteen, and Modi has largely bypassed traditional media outlets by using Facebook and Twitter.[19]

Caste Politics

The increasing importance of caste-based parties, especially the rapid rise of intermediary caste groups or Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in the Hindi heartland, has been a similarly crucial factor fueling polarization and the rise of the Hindu right. As OBC parties began to win a larger share of the vote in the 1980s and 1990s, the BJP and the Sangh Parivar doubled down on religious polarization, mainly by stoking tensions over the Babri Masjid. This strategy has allowed the BJP to separate Hindu Dalits, the class of Indians at the bottom of the Hindu caste hierarchy, and lower OBCs from dominant OBC groups within the caste-based parties.[20] The BJP thus was able to win over Hindus who might otherwise have voted along caste lines. Recent data from the 2014 and 2019 elections suggest that the party's deft use of Hindu nationalism played a key role in blunting caste divisions and securing landslide victories for the BJP.[21]

CONSEQUENCES

The negative effects of India's deepening polarization have been far-reaching and diverse, touching almost every aspect of the nation's political and social life.

Increasing Intolerance and Violence

India's toxic political discourse, in which leaders frequently demonize their opponents and minority groups, has fueled a disturbing rise in intolerance and violence. In recent years, vigilante groups and majoritarian mobs have increasingly attacked minorities, activists, and human rights defenders, often with impunity. Notably, the number of hate crimes against Muslims related to the issue of cow slaughter (a transgression in the Hindu faith) has risen sharply since the BJP assumed power in 2014.[22] Violence against Dalits has also increased dramatically over the past several years.[23] Political elites have often abetted such violence, with one minister in Modi's cabinet giving honorific garlands to vigilantes convicted for lynching a Muslim cattle trader.[24] And, alarmingly, after senior BJP officials denounced anti-CAA protesters as traitors and Pakistani agents, sectarian violence erupted in India's capital in late February 2020; the bloodshed left more than fifty people dead, most of them Muslims.[25]

India's toxic political discourse, in which leaders frequently demonize their opponents and minority groups, has fueled a disturbing rise in intolerance and violence.

Political Marginalization of Minorities

Yet another consequence of rising polarization is the marginalization of minority groups in political life. Indian Muslims have been underrepresented in parliament since independence.[26] Structural factors, such as India's electoral rules and the spatial distribution of Muslims across the country, have contributed to this problem.[27] However, the marginalization of the Muslim community has become more overt since 2014 because the major political parties have shied away from representing Muslims' concerns and including their perspectives through informal mechanisms.[28] Notably, Muslims also have minimal representation in the ruling BJP: Of the party's 303 members elected to the Lok Sabha in the 2019 general elections, none are Muslim.[29]

Increasing Prominence of Identity Politics

The resounding electoral success of the BJP's overt Hindu nationalism has pushed the Congress and other opposition parties to embrace a soft form of Hindutva. For instance, ahead of the 2019 elections, Rahul Gandhi, the former president of the Congress Party, made frequent visits to Hindu temples to woo Hindu nationalist voters. More seriously, major parties have become wary of defending religious minorities, particularly Muslims, and at times they have refrained from speaking out against hate crimes. The February 2020 local legislative elections in Delhi vividly demonstrated how thoroughly the Hindu right has set the terms of political competition. Though the regional party in power won a resounding victory over the BJP, it did so by adopting a softer version of Hindu

nationalism. Thus, even in defeat, the BJP has pushed opposition parties closer to its majoritarian position on identity issues and left few defenders of pluralism remaining.

Politicization of National Security

India's polarized politics have not spared matters vital to national security. Both parties have sought to score political points by attacking one another over issues ranging from the purchase of French-made fighter jets to "surgical strikes" (to use the government's preferred phrasing) against Pakistan-based terrorist camps. Importantly, national security matters are discussed in hyper-nationalistic rhetorical terms. For instance, the BJP and the Congress Party respectively wield terms like "jihadi terror" and "Hindu terror" to try to cast their opponents in the worst light possible.[30] Most notably, the February 2019 Pulwama terrorist attack in Kashmir, in which an Islamist suicide bomber killed forty Indian paramilitary police and precipitated a tense standoff with Pakistan, fueled bitter partisan polarization ahead of India's national elections.[31] Modi and the BJP accused the opposition of treasonously supporting Pakistan, while the opposition denounced the BJP for opportunistically politicizing the crisis.

Attacks on Independent Institutions

In this polarized political slugfest, India's independent institutions have suffered dearly. As the Indian economy has weakened, the government has placed increasing pressure on the Reserve Bank of India. In December 2018, the bank's governor resigned in what many observers viewed as an act of protest. White-hot polarization has also exposed the frailties of Indian institutions tasked with safeguarding accountability. The Modi government has largely ignored the Lokpal, an anticorruption ombudsman body established in 2019; further undermined the corruption investigation efforts of the Central Bureau of Investigation; and eroded the Central Information Commission, which regulates India's Right to Information Act. The Supreme Court, too, has come under heavy partisan attack—a trend that began under Indira Gandhi in the 1970s. During Modi's tenure, the opposition has launched a politically motivated impeachment motion against the chief justice, and the BJP has attempted to pack the higher judiciary. Perhaps most concerning, however, have been the shrill, baseless attacks on the reputation of India's Election Commission. In recent years, politicians from various parties have sowed doubts about the validity of election results.[32]

REMEDIAL ACTIONS

Initiatives to address the causes and consequences of polarization in India can be roughly divided into two categories: those that seek to counter majoritarian politics and those that aim to improve civic dialogue.

Countering Majoritarian Politics

Both political parties and the higher judiciary are key actors resisting India's turn toward majoritarianism. First, political parties, including not only the main opposition but also many regional parties, have begun to form electoral alliances to contain the BJP. Alarmed by the BJP's victory in 2014, various opposition parties united to field joint candidates in 2018 by-elections in the state of Uttar Pradesh. These candidates won decisively, depriving the BJP of three seats it had held in the Lok Sabha. In the 2019 general elections, opposition parties again built coalitions at both the state and national levels, though these efforts failed to prevent the BJP from decisively winning reelection. Despite this defeat, the opposition has continued to form alliances, and paradoxically the BJP's electoral success may facilitate this process by pushing more opposition parties to band together in order to survive. In November 2019, the BJP's oldest ally, the Hindu nationalist party Shiv Sena, forged an unlikely alliance with the Congress to form a government in the state of Maharashtra and secure the position of chief minister for itself.

Another development that may check the BJP's majoritarian politics is the opposition's control of state governments. Although the BJP won a landslide victory in the 2019 national elections, it has lost power in six states in the past two years, including in several key heartland states. The BJP controls just 42 percent of the country's population at the state level, and anti-BJP governments are now in power in twelve of India's twenty-eight states.[33] Most of these states have passed resolutions against the new citizenship law—an indication that federalism may restrain the Modi government.

Both political parties and the higher judiciary are key actors resisting India's turn toward majoritarianism.

Second, India's Supreme Court has actively resisted majoritarianism and the politics of polarization. In 2018, the court created a special bench to monitor hate crimes, especially incidents of mob lynching, and it asked the parliament to enact legislation addressing this issue. On numerous occasions, the court has called on the ruling party to desist from majoritarianism and hate mongering. And in a rare show of defiance, four senior judges on the court held a press conference in 2018 to speak out in defense of the institution's independence.[34]

While India's top court has thus mitigated some consequences of majoritarian politics, many fear that, in the wake of the 2019 elections, it may no longer be as willing to stand up to the Hindu right. In November 2019, for instance, the court ruled that the site of the demolished mosque in Ayodhya rightfully belonged to Hindus, a decision that undermined legal equality between India's faiths. Furthermore, the Supreme Court's slow responses to two major recent events—the lockdown of Jammu and Kashmir and the widespread

misuse of sedition laws and violence by police to curb anti-CAA protests—have significantly eroded public faith in the judiciary as a check on a strong executive.

Improving Civic Dialogue

Other efforts to reduce polarization have focused on countering the divisiveness of political discourse. To begin with, both political and nonpolitical actors have begun to regulate social media and address the role it plays in spreading misinformation and fomenting violence, complex though this issue is in a democracy. In December 2018, in response to pressure from the country's highest court and civil society, the government proposed a series of guidelines to counter fake news and prevent the misuse of social media platforms.[35] Companies such as Facebook and WhatsApp have also responded by regulating and monitoring content on their platforms, particularly by disabling bulk messaging to prevent the mass distribution of fake or incendiary messages.

Furthermore, various elements of Indian civil society—including academics, activists, artists, and journalists—have used public demonstrations to raise consciousness about growing intolerance. Since 2015, writers have publicly surrendered awards on numerous occasions to protest attacks on the freedom of expression, while press associations have held candlelight vigils to call attention to hate crimes and violations of press freedom. Until the coronavirus made it difficult to stage protests, people across India demonstrated against the new citizenship law for several months despite violent police attacks, demonization by rightwing politicians, and the imposition of sedition laws.

These protests, which included the protests in the Shaheen Bagh neighborhood of Delhi, attracted impressive participation from youth, women, and people of all faiths, including the majority Hindu community. In fact, hundreds of thousands of Hindus and Muslims rose together in solidarity against the new citizenship law, embracing symbols like Mahatma Gandhi, the Dalit icon B. R. Ambedkar, and the country's constitution. Although the BJP-led government has shown no signs of withdrawing or amending the citizenship law, the countrywide protests and open resistance from opposition-controlled state governments have forced the ruling party to retract its promise to roll out a nationwide citizenship verification process. These developments show the resilience of Indian civil society in resisting polarizing events, yet a long battle for the soul of the country still awaits.

Finally, activists and civil society organizations have sought to address religious divisions by promoting interfaith dialogues. In recent years, regular interfaith dialogues have proven useful in checking communal riots in several Indian cities, such as Hyderabad and Mumbai. The notable success of such dialogues may be attributed to their ability to draw upon local religious narratives. For instance, in Varanasi and other diverse cities, activists have invoked the much-discussed metaphor of *Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb* (Ganges-Yamuna culture), which

calls to mind the image of two rivers flowing together to suggest the possibility of harmony between Hindus and Muslims. Yet another asset supporting dialogue is the syncretic nature of the Hindu religion, which has historically accepted and incorporated practices from other traditions.

The politics of polarization are keeping India in a permanent state of turmoil, inflaming societal divisions, and straining democratic institutions. With the exception of the National Emergency from 1975 to 1977, Indian democracy has never seemed as fragile as it does today. The main hope for positive change comes from India's resilient society, which has rejected threats to democracy in the past. In addition, the country's diversity, multicultural roots, and strong culture of interfaith dialogue, as well as divisions within the Hindu religion, may act as checks against majoritarianism. Yet time may be running out for India and its democracy, and the BJP's increasing majoritarianism since the 2019 elections offers a dire warning. With polarization now reaching alarming heights, Indian democracy may have entered uncharted territory.

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CHAPTER 2

DEEPENING POLARIZATION AND DEMOCRATIC DECLINE IN INDONESIA

Eve Warburton

FOR MOST OF INDONESIA'S democratic period, which dates from the resignation of the authoritarian president Suharto in 1998, analysts have emphasized and often lamented the lack of ideological competition in Indonesian politics. Within the country's party system, a certain ideological divide has long existed between Islamic parties that seek a larger role for Islamic precepts in public life and pluralist parties that promote a multireligious vision of the Indonesian state. Yet political campaigns have usually been inclusive. Parties and politicians also routinely collaborate across the ideological divide because their overriding objective is to enter government and gain access to the state's patronage resources. As a result, some analysts have concluded that Indonesia is "one of the least polarized democracies in Asia."[1]

Since 2014, however, Indonesia has become more politically polarized. Three major elections have left the country more divided than it has been in decades: the 2014 presidential election, the 2017 gubernatorial election in Jakarta, and the 2019 presidential election. Competition between President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) and his former opponent, Prabowo Subianto, ignited a previously latent political cleavage between Islamists and pluralists.[2]

Various political and societal forces have coalesced since 2014 to divide Indonesian politics, and the ensuing polarization threatens the country's democratic institutions and social fabric. Indonesia's patronage-driven politics have continued to blunt partisan divides to some extent—a dynamic vividly illustrated when Prabowo decided to join Jokowi's govern-

ment after the 2019 election. Yet Prabowo's about-face has not eased the ideological tensions he helped stir over the past five years, as recent political conflicts precipitated by the coronavirus pandemic have demonstrated.

ROOTS

Indonesia's Islamic-pluralist cleavage has deep roots. Even before the country's independence in 1945, political movements mobilized on opposite sides of this divide. Proponents of political Islam advocated a larger and more formal role for Islam, whereas pluralists supported a more—though not entirely—secular state, with laws and institutions to protect the country's many religious minorities. Pluralist leaders prevailed, and thus Indonesia's constitution does not make reference to Islam but instead outlines a general "belief in one God" as one of the nation's five founding principles, together known as the Pancasila.

To this day, the country's political parties have distinguished themselves primarily based on their Islamic or pluralist orientation.[3] In the contemporary party system, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan, or the PDI-P) is the most pluralist party and attracts support from religious minorities, as well as more secular Muslims and those who mix their religion with traditional, syncretic cultural practices. At the opposite end of the ideological spectrum are the conservative Islamic parties, most notably the Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, or the PKS), the United Development Party (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan, or the PPP), and the National Mandate Party (Partai Amanat Nasional, or the PAN). Their constituents tend to come from urban, middle-class Muslim communities, and they typically adhere to more puritan, modernist versions of Islam.

The other major Islamic party, the National Awakening Party (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa, or the PKB), sits somewhere in the middle of the ideological spectrum. The PKB is linked to Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), whose traditionalist orientation has made it historically more tolerant of religious and cultural diversity. Most other contemporary parties are catchall parties with ideologically diverse supporters, and many—including former president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's Democratic Party and Prabowo's Gerindra Party—were established by former generals and wealthy oligarchs to fulfill their personal political ambitions.

Patronage has served as a powerful incentive for compromise and cooperation across ideological lines.

Despite the enduring importance of the Islamic-pluralist divide, electoral competition has been remarkably free of ideological or identity-based conflict for most of the country's democratic period. Crucially, patronage has served as a powerful incentive for compromise and cooperation across ideological lines. Although patronage-based politics weaken

democratic institutions and accountability, in Indonesia this system has cut across potentially polarizing socioreligious cleavages. Parties have been willing to enter into governing coalitions with all sorts of other parties, regardless of their ideological orientation, in pursuit of electoral victory and access to state resources.

The marked absence of polarization for much of the democratic period is also a function of Yudhoyono's style of leadership during his presidency (2004–2014). In the 2004 and 2009 presidential elections, Yudhoyono had the opportunity to run an ideologically polarizing campaign and tar his opponents as insufficiently Islamic. In both contests, Yudhoyono's coalition consisted primarily of conservative Islamic parties, while his rivals were backed by the pluralist-nationalist parties. But the ideological cleavage reflected in those party coalitions did not divide the electorate. Yudhoyono was a pious Muslim, but he was not especially inclined toward Islamist politics and ran inclusive electoral campaigns. As a result, he won a strong majority of votes, including in conservative Islamic communities in Sumatra and West Java, while also enjoying support from religious minorities.

Furthermore, in his approach to governing, Yudhoyono valued compromise and stability over competition and conflict. As Edward Aspinall, Marcus Mietzner, and Dirk Tomsa argue, "Yudhoyono viewed himself as leading a polity and a society characterised by deep divisions, and he believed that his most important role was to moderate these divisions by mediating between the conflicting forces and interests to which they gave rise."[4] Yudhoyono's preference for coopting opponents and compromising meant that he was reluctant to engage in tough or disruptive reform, and as a result, Indonesia's democratic progress stagnated. But these were also years of political stability and a notable absence of polarizing political conflict.

TRAJECTORY

At the end of Yudhoyono's decade in power, Indonesia's political landscape changed dramatically. The old Islamic-pluralist divide has sharpened since 2014, including most recently amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Three Contentious Elections (2014, 2017, and 2019)

In 2014, Jokowi, a member of the PDI-P, ran for president with a coalition of pluralist parties. Jokowi's rival, Prabowo, saw that Jokowi's especially pluralist political orientation made him vulnerable to a religiously themed campaign. Prabowo exploited that vulnerability and allied with conservative Islamic parties, Islamist figures, and hardline Muslim groups. He and his allies spread the message that Jokowi was not a pious Muslim and that his politics were too secular to govern a Muslim-majority nation. A more sinister smear campaign was run in the shadows via anonymous social media accounts and tabloid magazines. It

suggested that Jokowi was a closet Christian and that he and his family had ties to the country's long-banned Communist Party. The strategy proved effective. Although Jokowi ultimately won, Prabowo received a significant boost and came within striking distance in the final weeks of the presidential race.

Jakarta's popular governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (known as Ahok), was the target of a more explicitly sectarian campaign in the 2017 gubernatorial election. As a Christian, ethnically Chinese Indonesian, and Jokowi ally, Ahok attracted vehement opposition from Islamic groups that claimed a non-Muslim had no right to hold high political office in a Muslim-majority country. Ahok's opponent, a Prabowo ally named Anies Baswedan, joined forces with the hardline Islamist groups opposed to Ahok, and these groups spread a sectarian message through online networks, prayer groups, and mosques. That campaign gained broad public traction after Ahok told the press that Jakartans were being "lied to" about the Quran's position on non-Muslim leaders.[5] Hardliners called for Ahok's arrest on charges of blasphemy and rallied hundreds of thousands of Indonesians onto the streets of Jakarta in a powerful display of opposition to a politician who was both a religious and an ethnic minority.

This sectarian campaign delivered Anies a resounding victory. Ahok, who had been the favorite going into the election, not only lost decisively but also was prosecuted for blasphemy and sentenced to two years in prison. Quick count results indicated that religious identity was indeed a central driver of voting behavior. There was a striking divide between Muslim and non-Muslim voters: Muslims were uniformly more likely to vote for Anies regardless of their other characteristics, such as income or education.[6] Non-Muslims, by contrast, overwhelmingly voted for Ahok. The Jakarta election deeply affected Indonesia's wider political landscape. In other regional elections around the country where rival candidates lined up along the Islamic-pluralist cleavage, the more pluralist candidates feared being *di-Ahokkan*—defeated by an Islamist-inspired campaign.

Polarization reached a new zenith in the 2019 presidential election, when Jokowi and Prabowo faced off once more. Prabowo's campaign again depicted Jokowi as an enemy of the *ummah* (the Muslim community) and as a threat to pious Muslims and Islamist organizations. However, this time Jokowi and his coalition went on the offensive and leveraged an equally polarizing narrative about the rival camp, claiming that Prabowo's victory would lead to an Islamic caliphate and that his coalition threatened the essence of Indonesia's pluralist national identity. In this election, NU was a crucial ally for Jokowi, and its leaders helped spread anti-Prabowo and anti-Islamist messages through their network of mosques and boarding schools.

The 2019 campaign produced an electorate deeply divided along socioreligious lines. Jokowi won decisively in predominantly non-Muslim regions and in the NU's core constituencies

of Central and East Java. Regions long known as the heartland of political Islam, such as Aceh and West Sumatra, voted overwhelmingly for Prabowo. Moreover, even though Jokowi won reelection by a convincing margin, Prabowo refused for weeks to accept his defeat, and protests over the election results devolved into violent riots in which hundreds were injured and eight protesters lost their lives.[7]

Elite Reconciliation and Enduring Divisions (2019–2020)

In late 2019, just months after the polarizing presidential contest, Jokowi and Prabowo struck a peace deal that initially seemed to alleviate political tensions. Jokowi appointed Prabowo minister of defense, and Prabowo's party, Gerindra, joined the governing coalition. In most politically polarized settings, the government's sudden inclusion of the main opposition figure would be a highly unusual act, particularly so soon after a divisive election. But for close observers of Indonesian politics, Prabowo's pivot was not a major shock.

Negotiations between Prabowo and the government about his potential realignment had begun well before the presidential election. At one stage, Jokowi and Prabowo seriously considered running on the same ticket, but they never reached a mutually agreeable arrangement. Prabowo's decision to join the government was motivated largely by his desire to gain access to state patronage and the prestige of a strategic ministerial post. Jokowi, in turn, sought to separate the Islamic parties and organizations from their charismatic and popular figurehead and in the process weaken opposition to his government. The maneuver was a vivid illustration of how Indonesia's patronage-driven politics can in some ways paper over ideological differences.[8]

There are two reasons to doubt, however, that this elite-level reconciliation has dramatically altered the trajectory of Indonesia's political polarization. First, Prabowo's decision to join the government has not healed the ideological tensions he stoked. Neither Prabowo nor his party is Islamist: He only represented the interests of political Islam in the contest against a more pluralist opponent. Conversations with PKS and PAN politicians during the 2019 election indicated that they viewed Prabowo with suspicion and understood that his political loyalty was potentially fleeting.[9] These parties, as well as Islamist organizations outside the party system, now view Anies as the new leader of the opposition and as the Islamist candidate of choice for the 2024 presidential election. To be sure, without Prabowo, the Islamist opposition may lose some of its appeal, particularly among Indonesians who were attracted to his strongman image. But Indonesians who oppose Jokowi on ideological grounds have a new political figure around whom they can rally.

Second, the Jokowi administration continues to treat Islamist actors and organizations as political threats, a stance that entrenches rather than eases polarization. Even after Prabowo joined the ruling coalition, the government launched efforts to purge the bureaucracy of

people deemed ideologically Islamist (as discussed further below). Prabowo appears to have embraced, rather than tempered, the government's use of illiberal tactics against its Islamist opponents.

Polarization Amid the Pandemic

The crisis caused by the coronavirus has precipitated fresh divisions between Jokowi and his Islamist opponents—a clear indication that Prabowo's about-face has done little to remedy polarization in the country.[10] As of April 2020, Indonesia had the most coronavirus-related deaths in Asia outside China, and experts agree that official figures significantly underestimate the scale of the unfolding tragedy.[11] In March, Anies, the governor of Jakarta and now de facto leader of the opposition groups, directly challenged the central government's data and claimed that Jakarta was experiencing many more coronavirus cases and deaths than national figures suggested.[12] Furthermore, in contrast to Jokowi, who had failed to provide clear guidelines on social distancing, Anies announced plans to lock down the capital to slow the spread of the virus.[13]

Disagreements over the appropriate response to the pandemic quickly ignited a polarizing political conflict. Progovernment buzzers (or social media influencers) were mobilized to spread anti-Anies material and to criticize the proposed lockdown in Jakarta as a dangerous and politically motivated policy.[14] Jokowi then used emergency powers to overrule local governments' coronavirus policy interventions and prevent them from acting independently.[15] The national police also issued new guidelines instructing officers to bring charges against citizens who made negative comments about the president or any public official in relation to the coronavirus outbreak. Government critics have, as a result, been harassed and intimidated, and by early May, more than one hundred

Indonesia's susceptibility to populism and the growing Islamization of Indonesian society gave polarizing political messages widespread traction with the electorate.

people had been arrested for spreading hate speech and misinformation about the virus.[16] Although it is too soon to judge the political effects of the pandemic, if Jokowi continues to work against local leaders and if the security apparatus is perceived to be harassing the opposition, then polarization will likely deepen.

DRIVERS

What explains the striking shift toward more polarized politics in Indonesia? First, political elites' strategies and personalities played a key role in activating a cleavage that had remained dormant during the Yudhoyono years. Second, two structural conditions—Indonesia's

susceptibility to populism and the growing Islamization of Indonesian society—gave polarizing political messages widespread traction with the electorate.

Political Entrepreneurs

Indonesia's story of polarization is, as in many countries, one of leadership and the strategies of particular political entrepreneurs. Prabowo, most notably, aggravated polarization by pioneering a sectarian, populist campaign strategy. In the 2014 presidential election, he ran a "classic populist" campaign, in which he blamed Indonesia's problems on greedy elites and nefarious "foreign agents"—a coded term for wealthy members of the country's Chinese ethnic minority.[17] He also questioned the country's liberal democratic model and promised to return Indonesia to the old 1945 constitution, which heavily favored executive power and had no place for direct presidential elections. His alliance with fringe Islamist groups and his willingness to engage in sectarian-themed smear campaigns were unprecedented in Indonesia's history of presidential elections.

Jokowi, by contrast, contributed indirectly to polarization as a candidate because he was both culturally and politically far more pluralist than the previous president, Yudhoyono. Unlike many Indonesian politicians, Jokowi did not—at least initially—make Islam a prominent part of his political identity, and he was unable to appeal across the Islamic-pluralist divide in the way that Yudhoyono had as president. The 2014 election was, therefore, a competition between a politician willing to enflame divisions and another who was unable to bridge them.

Jokowi's rise caused much anxiety among a class of conservative Muslim elites who had enjoyed generous state funding, ministerial positions, and other patronage opportunities under Yudhoyono.[18] Jokowi was a politician from outside the predominant political class and a member of the PDI-P, Indonesia's most pluralist party, and conservative Islamic groups feared that he would marginalize them and cut off their access to patronage. Prabowo allied strategically with this political faction, enflamed their fears, and framed Jokowi (and Ahok as well) as an existential threat to the prominent political place that Islam enjoyed during the Yudhoyono era.

Those fears were, in many ways, well-founded. During his first term in office, Jokowi attempted to insulate himself from attacks on his Muslim credentials by cultivating a closer relationship with NU. State patronage flowed to NU and its political arm, the PKB, as a result. As NU prospered, modernist Muslim organizations like Muhammadiyah were left out in the cold. Conservative Islamic parties, especially the PKS, no longer enjoyed the rich patronage opportunities offered to them during the previous administration. The 2019 presidential election took place against this backdrop of internal political tensions and gave both urgency and credibility to the Islamist camp's claim that Jokowi and his pluralist allies threatened their existence.

Fertile Ground for Populism

The personalities and elite machinations described above are particular to Indonesia, yet the drivers of polarization in the country are common to other divided democracies. One is the rise of populism, which has deepened divisions in Indonesia as it has elsewhere around the world. As Paul D. Kenny argues, patronage democracies like Indonesia are particularly vulnerable to populism because "populist mobilisation thrives where ties between voters and non-populist parties do not exist or have decayed."[19] When linkages between voters and parties are weak, charismatic individuals at the national level can make direct, personal appeals to the masses and minimize their use of formal party structures.

This is precisely what transpired in Indonesia. By the end of the Yudhoyono era, disillusionment with the political establishment had become widespread.[20] The public's trust in and loyalty toward political parties had deteriorated dramatically: In the years after the democratic transition, around 80 percent of Indonesians identified with a particular political party; by 2014, that figure had fallen to just 7 percent.[21] After almost two decades of democracy, Indonesia's parties had done little to win voters' loyalty, and this dissatisfaction gave populists like Jokowi and Prabowo immense public appeal.

Societal Shifts

What made a more religiously charged campaign style appealing to large sections of the electorate? As outlined earlier, the Islamic-pluralist cleavage is not a new feature of Indonesian politics. Indeed, the polarized map of the 2019 presidential election looks remarkably similar to the results of the 1955 election, which took place during a time of rising socioreligious tensions.[22] Yet the scale of sectarian mobilization in recent elections surprised analysts both within and outside Indonesia.

Some observers have pointed to structural shifts taking place within Indonesian society. Over the past three decades, the country has become far more pious.[23] More and more Muslims attend Friday prayers and participate in neighborhood prayer groups, and there has been a well-documented growth in mosques, Islamic education institutions, and Islamic businesses and banks. Against this backdrop, politicians routinely bring religion into their campaigns, emphasizing their religious identities and presenting themselves as pious community figures. Some studies suggest that as Indonesians have become more religious, they have also become more socially conservative. The Asia Foundation's Sandra Hamid, for example, describes a "decades-long trend . . . towards exclusivism in the practice of religion in the private and public spheres."[24] This trend can be attributed in part to the growing social influence of conservative groups that benefited from Yudhoyono's accommodationist impulses, as described earlier.

The polarizing sectarian campaigns of Prabowo and Anies arguably were effective because their message resonated with a large and growing constituency of pious, conservative Muslims and because they partnered with Islamist organizations and figures that had grassroots followings outside the party system. For example, the campaign against Ahok exploited the networks of popular, hardline Islamist figures, and mosques across Jakarta helped spread the message that good Muslims must not vote for a *kafir* (unbeliever) or a blasphemer.

The expanding reach of Islamist organizations and ideologies has also heightened fears among pluralist Indonesian constituencies. NU's leadership and community of followers, in particular, have watched anxiously over the years as radical Islamic groups like Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) have encroached upon their traditional base. According to Greg Fealy, NU has long seen itself as "under growing threat from 'transnational' and 'fundamentalist' forms of Islam, which it associates with Arabised and intolerant religious expression."[25] This fear has led the Jokowi administration to take polarizing actions to repress Islamist groups (as described in detail below).

Many Indonesians are concerned about the damage that the recent exclusivist, polarizing political campaigns have done to the country's social fabric.

Prabowo and Anies leveraged a strategy of populist mobilization that tapped into religious tensions bubbling up from the societal level. In each major election since 2014, and especially in the 2019 presidential race, candidates allied with competing Muslim organizations outside the party system. Each side claimed to be defending what it saw as the right version of Indonesian Islam and framed the other as an existential threat.

CONSEQUENCES

The polarizing electoral conflicts of 2014, 2017, and 2019 have contributed to a perceptible decline in the quality of Indonesian democracy. Moreover, many Indonesians are concerned about the damage that the recent exclusivist, polarizing political campaigns have done to the country's social fabric.

Democratic Decline

Jokowi's attempts to defuse polarization have in fact undermined core democratic institutions and norms. He has eroded democracy by criminalizing the most extreme figures in the Islamist mobilizations of 2016 and targeting opposition figures involved in the Change the

President protests leading up to the 2019 election. Such figures were charged with treason, corruption, and the spreading of pornographic images. Jokowi then circumvented proper legal processes to ban HTI, whose radical Islamists were involved in the protests against Ahok. In doing so, Jokowi introduced a presidential regulation in lieu of a law that gave immense authority to the executive to ban groups it deemed to be unnationalist or to have contravened the Pancasila.[26]

After winning reelection in 2019, the Jokowi government then encouraged a purge of Islamist elements from state agencies. A Joint Ministerial Decree issued in November 2019, for example, forbade civil servants from engaging in "hate speech" against the Pancasila, the constitution, the country's official national motto of "unity in diversity" (*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*), or the government.[27] It also forbade them from liking, retweeting, or commenting on hate speech on social media or being a member of an organization deemed to be anti-Pancasila or even antigovernment. These vaguely defined terms have made this decree ripe for political manipulation. The coronavirus outbreak has only intensified this trend toward restricting free speech, and several prominent opposition figures have been threatened with criminal charges for criticizing the government's pandemic response.[28]

The Jokowi government's crackdown on opposition figures and ideologically defined threats is unprecedented in Indonesia's history as a democracy since 1998. Not only do such actions entrench the divide between opposition forces, Islamist groups, and the pluralist coalition now in government, but they also erode the country's fragile democratic institutions.

Rising Societal Tensions

Since 2014, Islamist appeals and smear campaigns have become a more prominent feature of Indonesian electoral discourse. Such campaigns can shift public opinion and create a new wedge between different societal groups. Levels of societal polarization are difficult to study, and data on Indonesia remain limited. However, growing evidence suggests that many Indonesians do indeed feel they are living in a more divided political landscape, and those divisions permeate social relations outside election season. Hamid's research, for example, documents the experience of people living in Jakarta in the wake of the 2017 gubernatorial election, many of whom felt marginalized from community and family events because of their support for either Ahok or Anies. A poll conducted by Marcus Mietzner, Burhanuddin Muhtadi, and Rizka Halida also found that political intolerance toward non-Muslims increased after the 2017 Jakarta election.[29]

Another poll conducted in May 2019 following the presidential election suggests that levels of intergroup animus in Indonesia are comparable with those in other deeply divided societies, including the United States.[30] In this survey, one question prompted respondents to imagine that they were moving to a new neighborhood and then asked them how important different factors would be for them. As figure 1 demonstrates, a strong majority

of Indonesians expressed a preference for living among coethnics and people of the same religion. Furthermore, a significant minority of between 30 and 40 percent expressed a preference for political homogeneity: They would rather live in an area where most people vote for their preferred party or presidential candidate. The number is slightly higher among those with strong partisan attachments: 44 percent of Jokowi partisans and 41 percent of Prabowo partisans reported that they would prefer to live in areas with people who vote the same way in presidential elections.[31]

These results are similar to studies of societal polarization in the United States. For example, in 2014, a Pew survey found that 28 percent of Americans feel it is important to live in a place where most people share their political views—fewer than the number of Indonesians who would prefer to live in areas where people vote for their preferred presidential candidate.[32]

FIGURE 1
Indonesians' Preferences When Choosing a New Neighborhood
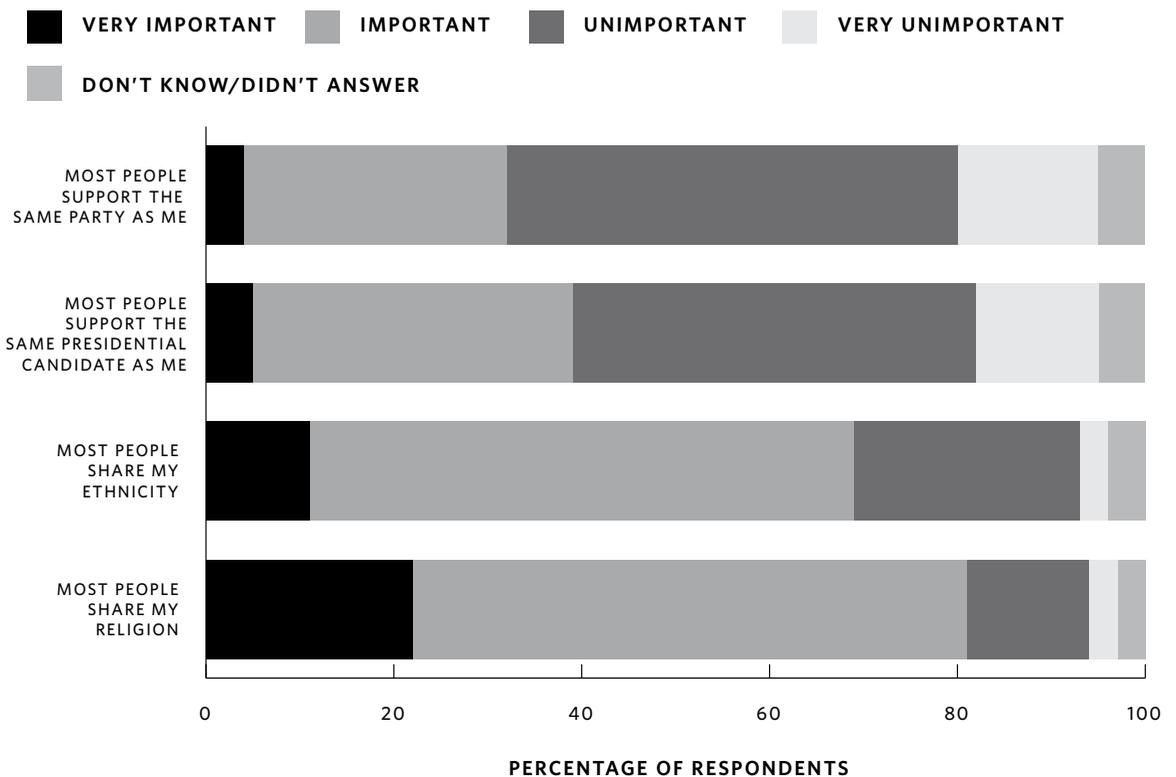
REMEDIAL ACTIONS

One mechanism that may temper polarization in Indonesia is elite-level compromise, usually premised on the government's distribution of patronage resources to its opponents. Yudhoyono's leadership style exemplified this form of compromise and cooptation, as did the recent rapprochement between Jokowi and Prabowo. Yet Jokowi's truce with Prabowo has done little so far to ease divisions between the country's Islamist and pluralist camps.

Outside government, there have been important efforts, particularly since the sectarian campaign against Ahok, to manage polarization at the societal level. Prominent civil society organizations such as the Wahid Institute, the National Democratic Institute, and the Asia Foundation—all groups with a long history of supporting programs for the consolidation of a liberal democracy in Indonesia—fund interfaith dialogues and support community-based initiatives that seek to combat hate speech and religious extremism. New media personalities and small, local media-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as Sabang Merauke and Masyarakat Anti Fitnah Indonesia, have also received funding from international donors to expand their activities. These activities include sponsoring online social media channels that encourage religious tolerance, cultural awareness, fact-based knowledge production, and positive online discourse.

It is unlikely, however, that such efforts will have a measurable impact on political polarization in Indonesia. First, polarization has begun to infect the NGO sector, and in recent years, some of the organizations mentioned above have become deeply politicized. The director of the Wahid Institute, Yenny Wahid, for example, campaigned fiercely for Jokowi in 2019 and is now a government minister. Second, community efforts need genuine buy-in from the country's political elites. Politicians, parties, and Islamic leaders routinely assert their commitment to supporting unity, positive campaigning, and truthfulness while opposing divisive identity politics. But these rhetorical commitments have proved thus far to be disingenuous. To the extent that Jokowi's pluralist coalition sees more benefits than costs from excluding and even repressing Islamist rivals, the incumbent's current approach will continue to deepen the country's Islamic-pluralist divide. The incumbent administration's actions will likely provide fertile ground for an Islamist backlash and a polarizing campaign in the next electoral contest.

NOTES

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CHAPTER 3

MALAYSIA'S POLITICAL POLARIZATION: RACE, RELIGION, AND REFORM

Bridget Welsh

POLARIZATION OVER RACE, religion, and reform has afflicted Malaysia for decades and powerfully shaped its electoral politics. Since the country's independence in 1957, its ethnic Malay majority has enjoyed a constitutionally protected special status, while ethnic minorities have been treated as second-class citizens. But what makes Malaysia's polarization so complex is that two additional cleavages—over religion and competing visions for political reform—overlap with and often intensify ethnic divides.

Political elites regularly appeal to these divides to mobilize their supporters but also make intermittent efforts to downplay one or more of these fissures, with the aim

In February 2020, sharp, identity-driven divisions contributed to the collapse of the most inclusive, secular government in the country's history.

of winning the "center ground" and securing power.[1] Ultimately, however, these polarizing issues have scuttled efforts to reach political compromises, constrained the adoption of much-needed reforms, and fueled political instability. The damaging effects of polarization were evident most recently in February 2020, when sharp, identity-driven divisions contributed to the collapse of the most inclusive, secular government in the country's history. What is more, although polarization is largely confined to the elite level, it is increasingly permeating Malaysian society, endangering interethnic harmony, and eroding social cohesion.

ROOTS

Malaysia's polarization feeds on three primary divisions, each of which has deep historical roots. The country's main dividing line is ethnic. Ever since independence, the dominant narrative of national identity has been that Malaysia is for the Malays—the country's largest ethnic group, which comprises 50.8 percent of the population.[2] Other communities—namely the Chinese and Indian Malaysians, whose families immigrated to the country before independence, and the plethora of smaller indigenous ethnic groups on the island of Borneo—have not enjoyed equal rights and status in various ways. The country's prevailing racial hierarchy has faced repeated challenges, which have exposed ethnic cleavages and led to different levels of inclusion over time.

Malaysia's ethnic divisions date back to the struggle for independence from British colonialism. A key moment came in 1946, when the British formed one administrative unit, the Malayan Union, for the ethnically diverse states that later would become part of Malaysia.[3] In response, Malay elites mobilized, and that same year they formed the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), an ethnonationalist party that defended special privileges for Malays.[4] Nonetheless, UMNO joined forces with political parties from the Chinese and Indian ethnic communities, and it became the leading force in a multiethnic national coalition known as the Alliance, which later expanded and renamed itself the National Front (Barisan Nasional, or BN). This UMNO-led coalition would govern from independence in 1957 through 2018. Although it stood as an example of interethnic political cooperation, it also institutionalized the fundamental role of ethnicity in Malaysian politics and granted Malays special rights.

The country's independence period also saw the emergence of a second divide, this one between Islamists and secularists. Debates over the appropriate role of Islam in public life intensified among Malay elites starting in the 1930s and shaped different conceptions of Malay nationalism. These divisions led Muslim clerics to break off from UMNO and form the Malaysian Islamic Party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, or PAS) in 1951. The enduring push for a less secular state has shaped Malaysian politics for decades, sharpening differences over political Islam. At the same time, divisions between Islamists and secularists have reinforced Malaysia's ethnic polarization. Almost all Malays are Muslim, whereas ethnic minorities predominantly are not, and Islamist groups thus have melded their religious appeals with Malay nationalist messages. Race and religion have increasingly fused, with most (although not all) Malays adopting an Islamist outlook and minority communities being more secular.

A third divide, over the issue of political reform, rooted in different conceptions of state power, has further intensified racial polarization. Malay political elites have propagated the view that they are the "protector[s]" of the Malay/Muslim community and, as such, that they are implicitly entitled to control state resources as they see fit, including for their own personal benefit.[5] Based on a feudal model of politics, this outlook implies that the public

should show loyalty and obedience to their protectors. Other elites and Malaysia's expanding civil society have challenged this view and championed a more participatory system, arguing that the government should respect the inputs, interests, and rights of ordinary citizens. They have called for checks on corruption and abuse of power, directly challenging the behavior of political elites. Both sides, the self-appointed "protectors" and the "participants," advocate for reform, but their ideas of what reform means and whom it should empower differ sharply.

This complex third divide did not materialize until 1969, when the governing Alliance lost its two-thirds majority in parliament for the first time, leading to racial riots and eighteen months of emergency rule. In the aftermath of this turmoil, rising Malay nationalism became tightly intertwined with a hierarchical, undemocratic model of politics. In this period, Malay special rights became embedded in a social contract through the concept of *ketuanan Melayu* or Malay dominance. The government also introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971, an affirmative action plan nominally based on need but that favored Malays in practice. Crucially, this period also marked a shift in how state power was to be controlled; it was now to be dominated by Malay elites, viewed as the protectors of the community. The government narrowed democratic space and limited civil liberties, seeking to protect Malay rights and those in power. These antidemocratic changes crystallized very different outlooks regarding the state, its legitimacy, and how and by whom it should be controlled and reformed.

TRAJECTORY

These three cleavages—over race, religion, and reform—have intersected in complex ways over Malaysia's postindependence history. Over the years, they have fueled elite divisions and led to shifts in the intensity and dominant mode of polarization.

Incipient Polarization After Independence (1957–1969)

After Merdeka (independence), Malaysia's first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, led the Alliance, ensuring that all ethnic communities had elite representation. Nation building overshadowed the divides of race and religion, and this period was known as one of ethnic harmony in a climate of robust political freedoms. Furthermore, divisions over the usage of state power had yet to fully emerge, as state capacity was weak, the postcolonial bureaucracy was still being developed, and the private sector and commodities were the country's main economic drivers.

Race, however, continued to shape the political narrative. Initially, attention focused on Singapore, which briefly joined the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. From the outset, there were tensions between Rahman and Singapore's prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew. These

territories also had different ethnic compositions, with Singapore being majority Chinese and the federation mostly Malay. In 1965, however, the Malaysian parliament voted to expel Singapore from the federation, after personal antagonisms and racial tensions boiled over.[6] This turning point intensified racial mobilization within Malaysia, especially over vernacular education and economic empowerment. These issues would culminate in the May 1969 postelection race riots, which reflected deep divisions over the representation of ethnic communities.

Elite Polarization Intensifies (1969–1999)

The period of emergency rule after May 1969 marked a rupture for Malaysia. Not only did the special rights of the Malay community become institutionalized through the idea of *ketuanan Melayu* and policies such as the NEP, but the state became a vehicle to maintain ethnic hierarchies and enrich the Malay elite. Opportunistic political elites played a central role in aggravating ethnic tensions. Indeed, the 1969 race riots were as much about elites using race for political ends as about actual racial grievances.[7]

A fusion of Malay nationalism and state power shaped the next thirty years of elite polarization in Malaysia. In the 1970s, the government reframed policies and spending relating to social development, language, and education along racial lines. Political representation reflected the new, institutionalized Malay dominance, as the Alliance became BN, dominated by UMNO but including a larger range of parties. Malay political power became not a responsibility earned at the ballot box, but an entitlement to be protected. The state became the driver of the domestic economy, investing heavily in infrastructure, expanding government-linked companies, and increasing overall spending, aided by discoveries of oil and gas deposits. A by-product of this spending was greater corruption and cronyism, and state resources and positions became a fount of patronage for the parties in power.

During this period, elite ethnic polarization also became increasingly linked to religious divisions. During the 1970s, as political freedoms were tightened, the only major arena left for political mobilization was religion, a space filled by students engaged in a global Islamic revival. To offset opposition from Islamists, in the early 1980s, the BN government, led by Mahathir Mohamad, coopted the Islamist student leader Anwar Ibrahim. Rather than allowing Islamism to challenge their grip on power, Malay nationalist elites instead made the state a promoter of Islam, massively expanding the country's religious bureaucracy and blurring the line between religious and secular authority. Ever since, cooperation between Malay nationalists and Islamists has happened regularly, with racial and religious divisions reinforcing one another.

During this period, as BN coopted or neutralized most opposition parties, a party on the opposite side of Malaysia's polarizing divides became its primary opponent. The predominantly Chinese Democratic Action Party (DAP) largely represents non-Malays, champions

secularism, and implicitly calls for reforms of the unchecked privileges of the Malay-oriented state. Elections between 1969 and 1995 thus pitted two starkly polarized alternatives and elite visions of Malaysia against each other. For most of this period, the overwhelming majority of the electorate stayed loyal to the incumbent government, as BN delivered robust economic growth.

The Opposition Moderates (1999–2018)

The Asian financial crisis of 1997–1999 dealt a blow to the BN government and initiated profound changes within Malaysia's opposition. The economic contraction provoked elite competition within UMNO and a challenge against prime minister Mahathir, led by his own deputy, the former student leader Anwar. In 1998, Anwar was arrested and tried for corruption and sodomy in a politically motivated trial.

These events sparked Malaysia's *reformasi* (reform) movement, which called for better governance, anticorruption measures, greater ethnic inclusion, and political freedoms. The movement transformed the opposition by moving it toward the center and enabling new electoral alliances among the previously fragmented opposition parties. Although race and religion continued to divide Malaysia, the opposition became more inclusive and managed to form a coalition between 2008 and 2015 that included the progressive DAP, former deputy prime minister Anwar's newly founded reformist People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat, or the PKR), and even the Islamist PAS. This diverse coalition began to win elections from 2008 onward, initially taking control of two state governments.

As the opposition gained traction in the center, BN began losing popular support and turned to polarizing tactics to compensate. As UMNO disengaged from its political roots as a mass-membership party and became a vehicle for its elites, it relied ever more on racialized rhetoric.[8] Interethnic cooperation within BN fell apart, as non-Malay electoral support collapsed. Furthermore, corruption allegations severely damaged BN and prime minister Najib Razak, who in 2015 was tied to the world's largest kleptocracy scandal, the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal.[9] To hold on to power, Najib tapped into state and 1MDB funds and ratcheted up rhetoric over race and religion. He even argued that reform would threaten businesses tied to the patronage machine. Although Najib had managed to hold onto power in 2013 despite losing the popular vote, in 2018, BN lost power for the first time.

Crucial to the opposition's success in the 2018 election was the inclusion of Mahathir, a BN prime minister for more than two decades, within the opposition's Alliance of Hope (Pakatan Harapan, or PH). He joined in 2017, leading a new Malay race-based party along with then former deputy prime minister Muhyiddin Yassin, who had been sacked for raising concerns about 1MDB in 2015. Widespread discontent with Najib helped overshadow the divisive issues of race and religion, and the goal of Najib's removal became a broad

umbrella for different visions of reform, especially for non-Malay supporters who envisioned a fairer system. With the promise of a "New Malaysia," Mahathir returned to lead the country's first-ever non-UMNO government.[10]

Destabilizing Divisions and PH's Downfall (2018–2020)

In February 2020, after less than two years in power, the PH government dramatically collapsed, destabilized by internal divisions. As prime minister, Mahathir was unable or unwilling to leave behind racial politics, respond to criticisms that he was selling out Islam to the secularists, and engage in meaningful reform. Anwar's positions on racial inclusion and secularism also differed from those of many other coalition partners. Furthermore, even though personality differences between Mahathir and Anwar and disagreements over power sharing fueled acrimony, it was the deeply entrenched divisions over governance that severed, distracted, and delegitimized PH.

Meanwhile, after their devastating defeat in 2018, the Malay nationalists of UMNO joined forces with their erstwhile Islamist foe PAS and began reigniting the country's polarizing divides. In by-elections, the two parties tapped into Malay resentments over ethnic displacement, stoked antireform resistance, and called for the protection of Islam. Ultimately, they united with disgruntled, less reform-oriented factions within PH to form a new coalition, the National Alliance (Perikatan Nasional, or PN), which took power in March 2020.

Muhyiddin, formerly an UMNO deputy prime minister and home minister in the PH government, became prime minister at the head of a Malay ethnonationalist government. He appointed only one minister each from the country's two largest ethnic minority communities. PN was not elected, opting to come to power through the back door with support from those who argued that power should be overwhelmingly in Malay hands. Casting itself as a Malay-dominant, pro-Islamist protector, PN sustains itself by appealing to all three main divisions in society. Yet PN has an untested, razor-thin majority in parliament and comprises parties that are competing for the same slice of the electorate. As was the case with PH, the fissures inside the coalition on these issues contribute to PN's instability.

Arguably having risen to power by stoking polarization, Muhyiddin is now grappling firsthand with its consequences, even as he faces a historic national crisis: the coronavirus pandemic. Comparatively early healthcare interventions; Muhyiddin's short-lived, crisis-driven boost in public support; and responsive (albeit uneven) policy implementation helped Malaysia impressively flatten the curve of the virus's spread. Yet polarization has remained close to the surface during the pandemic. As xenophobic sentiments have increased, foreign workers and refugees have become a proxy for race-based anger. Large religious gatherings have also been blamed for spreading the virus, often through hostile and otherizing lenses.

Amid this crisis, Muhyiddin remains beholden to his coalition partners, who expect racial preferences, Islamist policies, and patronage—all of which work against the social solidarity and unity needed to respond to the pandemic's public health and economic consequences. The distribution of patronage, including through

Over the past twenty years, Malaysia has witnessed intensive mobilization around polarizing divisions by elites aiming to both hold on to and win power.

appointments blatantly aimed at shoring up Muhyiddin's political majority, has provoked significant controversy. Some observers are critical of them as a waste of public resources in a time of need; others regard them as entitlements necessary for political stability. The coronavirus thus has yet to surmount Malaysia's entrenched divisions. In fact, the virus is already showing signs of becoming a new arena for political jockeying. The period has seen controversial, politicized appointments in government-linked companies, which have undercut governance reforms, as well as the dismissal of criminal charges against those seen to be engaged in corruption under UMNO rule.[11] So far, however, politicians have held off against openly appealing to the poles of race and religion for support, but it may only be a matter of time until they do so given PN's political fragility.

Over the past twenty years, Malaysia has witnessed intensive mobilization around polarizing divisions by elites aiming to both hold on to and win power. Political contests have become zero-sum games that have normalized a destructive takedown political culture. The state continues to serve as a vehicle for elite patronage, even plunder. As political parties lose ground in the center, they return to polarizing rhetoric and mobilization to secure their bases. When elites reach accommodation on these issues to win broader public support, enduring divisions hamper cooperation in office, foster public anger and distrust among their core supporters, and ultimately contribute to political instability. It is too early to assess whether the coronavirus will disrupt this pattern or further reinforce Malaysia's long-standing polarization.

DRIVERS

The sources of the country's polarization extend beyond the interests and strategies of political elites. They involve deep socioeconomic changes that have contributed to different outlooks within Malaysian society.

A Growing Middle Class

Malaysia's economic transformation created new constituencies supportive of reform. As the economy grew by 5 to 7 percent annually on average in the 1980s and 1990s (until

the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s), the middle class expanded, creating a largely urban and cosmopolitan group of voters who tended to be critical of UMNO's policies.[12] This new middle class comprised not only ethnic minorities who faced discrimination but also Malays who aspired to be part of the elite and were shut out. The growth of the middle class also supported an expansion of civil society, which mobilized around issues such as corruption, electoral reform, and human rights. Ironically, the economic changes that BN brought about strengthened the opposition and thereby intensified political competition.

Economic Inequality and Insecurity

At the same time, economic inequality, long seen through an ethnic lens, has fueled support for ethnonationalist appeals. Since 1997, economic divisions in Malaysia have persisted, and inequalities between ethnic communities have become an increasingly salient issue.[13] A large share of those deemed to be in the Bottom 40 percent (B40) are economically insecure, with low wages and high debt. This group is disproportionately composed of Malays and East Malaysians. Using its ethnonationalist rhetoric, UMNO has heightened the insecurities of these voters around elections, using fear to its advantage and reinforcing polarization. BN relied heavily on support from these lower-class and rural voters, often using its control of patronage resources to win their votes. These strategies did not work in 2018, as sharp increases in the cost of living and a series of political scandals battered the ruling coalition. But UMNO continued to tap effectively into economic insecurities after PH came into office, as Mahathir's coalition failed to address economic inequality. The B40 now comprises the base for the Muhyiddin government, and this underlying driver of polarization remains salient.

Religious Revivalism and Islamization

A religious revival across faiths has reinforced polarization. From the late 1970s to the present, levels of religiosity within Malaysian society have been increasing gradually. All the major faiths have strengthened the organization of their religions, including by politically mobilizing their faithful, and more children have been segregated from peers of different faiths through religious schools or home schooling. These shifts have deepened societal divisions, as religious groups have been mobilized around different poles and socialized into righteous outlooks in how they engage with the "other" side.

The expansion of the state's Islamic bureaucracy since the 1980s has further increased sectarian divisions and amplified the Islamist-secularist divide. Today, the federal Islamic religious department, housed in the prime minister's office, has an annual budget of approximately $300 million and thousands of staff involved in monitoring social behavior and regulating the economy.[14] In public education, religious classes often take up almost half the school

day, and students are segregated by religion for these courses, creating resentments. The number of Islamic religious schools has grown exponentially, with many students growing up without friends from other communities.

The state's administration of Islam has been seen to encroach on the rights of non-Muslims and many Muslims, especially in Muslim minority sects that have been targeted by state authorities. At the same time, the growth of the country's religious bureaucracy has created a constituency with a vested interest in promoting religion, particularly the conservative interpretations of the faith predominant among state clerics, and thus has enhanced sharp differences between Islamists and secularists.

A Fragmented Media Environment

Another important catalyst extending polarization into Malaysian society has been changes in the country's media landscape. Up until 1999, before the internet age began, the BN-led government controlled the mainstream media and dominant public narratives. The 1999 election cracked the government's control of information, as opposition speeches about reform were emailed over the internet and in many cases put on CDs to be heard in rural communities. By 2010, the internet was dubbed a "liberation technology," allowing the opposition to circumvent the government's tight media controls.[15] In 2013, flush with funds, BN dominated social media with trolls and targeted communication; in 2018, lacking the same funds and politically damaged, it was unable to counter the opposition's savvy use of social media, including WhatsApp. Social media has enhanced the capacity of political elites to deliver alternative messages, feeding polarization.

New media platforms have amplified tensions surrounding race and religion as well. In 2013, UMNO used highly emotive messaging to convince citizens that voting against the party was selling out their community and religion, both of which needed to be protected. Increasingly, Malaysian citizens get their news from echo chambers that reflect and reinforce their own side of the country's polarized split.

Weak Political Parties

The weakness of Malaysian political parties has exacerbated polarization, as party leaders have turned to divisive rhetoric to compensate for their loss of grassroots connections and patronage resources after 2018. The country's political parties have always been leader-centric, but campaigns from 2004 onward have become more "presidential" and professional, less connected to Malaysian society through personal ties and networks. Political parties have relied more on polarizing tactics to maintain their bases, demonizing the other side to hold on to support. Messages surrounding traditional divides of race, religion, and

reform are much easier to deliver than a clear policy program, and fueling discontent is simpler than engaging with Malaysia's diversity. Common slogans such as "Anything but UMNO," "No DAP [Chinese]," "Save Malaysia [from Najib and UMNO]," and "Protect Islam" have effectively tapped into the insecurities and righteous indignation that have taken root throughout the country.

CONSEQUENCES

Malaysia has been reaping the consequences of elite polarization for decades.

Political Instability

The collapse of PH in February 2020 showcases the debilitating effects of elite polarization, as deep distrust and divisions between parties caused the government to fall apart. Political fragmentation over race, religion, and reform has made postelection coalitions less stable, because polarization narrows the number of politically viable partners and thus constrains the range of possible alliances. The instability of coalition governments means that the attention of officeholders centers on political survival rather than policy solutions to address the country's challenges. Given this insecurity, the default option for parties is to use polarization to reenergize their traditional political bases, a strategy that perpetuates polarization.

Political fragmentation over race, religion, and reform has made postelection coalitions less stable.

Debilitated Policymaking

Both government and opposition figures often myopically view policy issues through the lens of overarching divisions. With political frames and alliances locked in, polarization closes off discussions and the compromises needed to find solutions to the country's challenges, notably structural issues in the economy, inequalities, persistent poverty, corruption, and deficits in education and human capital. Reform has itself been polarizing, as it has been a rallying call for different groups—for those opposed to BN, for Islamists and secularists, and for those demanding inclusion and fairness. The very divisiveness of reform is a serious obstacle to effective policymaking.

Communal Tensions

Elite political divisions have also fragmented Malaysian society. Different communities have deeply held resentments and insecurities about rights, often expressed as open intolerance and systemic exclusion. Racial and religious minorities are on the front lines, but all communities have been affected by the dominance of race and religion over other forms

of political identity. Even though interethnic trust remains strong and quotidian relations remain cordial, more Malaysians live in separate ethnic silos, which furthers interethnic distancing. The mobilization of divisions has worsened ethnic relations, particularly since 2018, as UMNO has amplified its polarizing rhetoric to come back to power.

Overall, Malaysia has lacked the level of ethnic violence seen elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia. However, given the country's history of race riots and the salience of ethnic identity, racial divides remain near the surface. In recent years, there have been a few attacks on religious sites and reports of racialized rage, often widely circulated on social media.[16]

REMEDIAL ACTIONS

Over the past decade, two broad efforts have emerged to redress polarization in Malaysia. The first has come from political elites themselves through the opposition's move toward the center and inclusion of those with different outlooks. Efforts to adopt an inclusive Malaysian national identity have been essential in connecting fragmented parties, and approaches that groom younger leaders with national outlooks and a willingness to engage in new political arrangements offer the promise of easing polarization. According to 2018 United Nations data, more than half of Malaysia's voting-age population is under forty years old, so engaging the youth is essential for ameliorating divisions and reshaping elite outlooks.[17]

A second set of efforts to address polarization has originated within civil society. Groups have worked to bridge differences through interfaith dialogues and cross-ethnic learning programs. Others have pushed for alternative forms of political identity that break out of existing divides and bring attention to needs-based issues such as poverty, gender disparities, and socioeconomic inequality. These initiatives have been effective in forging networks and at times shifting attention away from dominant polarizing paradigms. Facilitating these alternative narratives outside the country's polarizing cleavages strengthens needed social networks.

Now, in the wake of PH's collapse in February 2020, political elites face the difficult task of learning lessons and adjusting to new alliances. Malaysia's polarizing divides remain dominant and seem entrenched. Yet, as the realities of the coronavirus pandemic set in, shocking the system as the 1MDB scandal did, the opportunities for new political arrangements and thinking are real.

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POLARIZATION, CIVIL WAR, AND PERSISTENT MAJORITARIANISM IN SRI LANKA

Ahilan Kadirgamar

POLITICAL POLARIZATION IS NOW a global phenomenon, but its roots, dynamics, and drivers are subject to debate and vary based on context. In Sri Lanka, episodes of polarization have been rooted in diverse social, economic, and political cleavages. Class, ethnic, caste, and regional divisions have marked the country's politics, with different historical conjunctures bringing these cleavages to the fore during different periods. Political leaders and movements have often combined these divides to consolidate a ruling regime, but with time these regimes have unraveled, causing new crises. Furthermore, global dynamics—including economic downturns, geopolitical tensions, and internationalized conflicts—have powerfully shaped the historical conjunctures that engender domestic political change. Most recently, the global coronavirus pandemic has sharpened polarization and intensified the government's efforts to consolidate power.

> *In Sri Lanka, episodes of polarization have been rooted in diverse social, economic, and political cleavages.*

In the Sri Lankan case, a narrow focus on the role of political parties fails to capture the dynamics of polarization. Rather, a broader analysis that takes into consideration ideological dynamics, social movements, and global political and economic forces provides a far more comprehensive picture of the country's polarized domestic political scene.

ROOTS

In Sri Lanka, as in many other countries, polarization cannot be reduced to a contest between two competing forces, but instead involves multiple poles of varying levels of power. One key identity-based cleavage that has roiled Sri Lankan politics is ethnic. As far back as the late nineteenth century, nascent Sinhala Buddhist nationalist and Tamil nationalist forces began instigating polarization as a social and political strategy to mobilize their respective communities. These ethnic divisions gained momentum with decolonization in the mid-twentieth century. Importantly, this cleavage is not merely ethnic but also religious and linguistic. The Sinhala community is overwhelmingly Buddhist, while Tamils are predominantly Hindu, and the two groups speak different languages (Sinhala and Tamil, respectively).

Merely analyzing Sri Lanka's domestic ethnic majorities and minorities in terms of population figures does not suffice. Although the Sinhala Buddhist community represents the majority of the country's population, its ideologues have constructed a worldview based on being a minority on the Indian subcontinent. Mostly Tamil-speaking minorities—particularly Sri Lankan Tamils, Up-Country Tamils (who are of Indian origin), and Muslims (who claim a separate ethnic identity and not just a religious identity)—represent only about 25 percent of the country's population of roughly 20.4 million, while the Sinhala-speaking majority constitutes around 75 percent.[1] But the neighboring Indian state of Tamil Nadu across the Palk Strait has a much larger Tamil population of about 72 million people, and their proximity is the basis of anxiety and fear on which Sinhala Buddhist nationalism feeds.[2]

Although Sri Lankan political leaders have pushed ethnic divisions to the forefront of their country's politics, it is crucial to highlight that class interests strongly influence elite politics and that ethnic communities are themselves divided along class, caste, and regional lines. The emergence of a capitalist class and urban working class centered in Colombo, a petty bourgeoisie in peripheral towns, and a vast small-holding peasantry in rural regions has resulted in significant and at times polarizing class divisions.[3] Such class dynamics in the past have contributed to the emergence of political regimes in which "intermediate" classes have wielded power in conjunction with the capitalist elite.[4] And class considerations continue to shape national politics with the mobilization of rural constituencies.

Movements to address caste and regional differences have also engendered polarization. The construction of a Sinhala Buddhist identity and constituency—despite the regional differences between Up-Country and Low-Country Sinhalese, as well as differences between the Govigama (landowning farmers) and Karava (fishing) castes—was a long process dating back to the colonial period, and it continues to this day.[5] The same can be said of the Tamil

identity, which was fragmented along caste and regional lines.[6] The consolidation of both identities, contributing to identity politics and polarization in the country, was propelled by a nationalist surge in the mid-twentieth century.

TRAJECTORY

Polarization in Sri Lanka has shifted over time as a result of diverse ideological mobilizations linked to political and economic conditions on the ground and societal grievances. Some of the more visible forms of polarization can be categorized as follows.

Late Colonial Rule and Elite Ethnic Politics

In 1931, reforms based on the recommendations of the Donoughmore Commission made Sri Lanka the first country in Asia to adopt universal suffrage, yet these changes also brought about majoritarian politics. Although Sri Lanka's British colonizers aimed for these reforms to install liberal institutions, particularly robust electoral representation, their actions made politics a numbers game dominated by ethnonationalist forces.[7] Another crucial factor that contributed to ethnic polarization in this period was the fact that Sri Lanka, unlike India, never developed a mass anticolonial movement around a common nationalist cause to forge a Sri Lankan identity and unite the island's different ethnic communities.

Thus, during the late colonial period, the central problem that preoccupied Sri Lankan elites was constructed as the national question, or the problem of addressing the concerns of ethnic minorities after independence and the formation of the Sri Lankan nation-state. By the 1930s, the Sinhala nationalist elite claimed to advocate for the Sinhala peasantry, including their interests on land reform, while expressing anti-Indian sentiments and categorizing the indentured Tamil plantation workers of Indian origin (the Up-Country Tamils) as a fifth column that they wanted to repatriate.[8] This Sinhala nationalist elite was worried about the trade union base of Tamil plantation workers and their electoral support for left-leaning parties. These fears later culminated in the disenfranchisement of the Up-Country Tamils in the first major act of discrimination after independence in 1948. Their disenfranchisement met with little protest from the Sri Lankan Tamil leadership at that time; indeed, the Tamil Congress colluded in the process as part of the government.[9]

Postcolonial Nationalisms and Majoritarianism

After Sri Lanka achieved independence in 1948, the country's Sinhala elite remained divided over competing visions of economic and language policies. The first party to come to power after independence, the United National Party (UNP), chose to pursue pro-Western

economic policies and to continue using English as the language of governance. A particularly important question was whether the new nation would use English as its official language, adopt a bilingual policy that recognized both the Sinhala and Tamil languages, or implement a majoritarian Sinhala-only policy instead.[10]

The UNP's economic policies, however, soon precipitated an economic crisis that led to the government's ouster. The crisis is an illustrative example of how geopolitical forces have shaped Sri Lanka's political trajectory, and it demonstrates that the country's polarization cannot be reduced to purely domestic developments. After decolonization, Sri Lanka was firmly aligned with the West and Western institutions like the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. For example, in 1950, the Central Bank of Sri Lanka was formed with the support of the U.S. Federal Reserve in Washington. Furthermore, a significant mission from the World Bank in 1952 set a problematic trajectory of economic development, including a primary focus on agriculture, a recommendation that served Western interests. The crisis that ensued, with cuts to food subsidies and the Great Hartal (mass protests) of 1953, brought pockets of the country's left-leaning parties closer to the newly formed opposition, which captured power in 1956.

Once in power, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) replaced pro-Western economic measures with import substitution policies and aligned with the Soviet Union, including through active participation in the Non-Aligned Movement. These moves brought out important contradictions within Sinhala constituencies, including between Colombo-centered elites and regional elites. At the same time, the SLFP promoted Sinhala-only language policies, which accelerated the formation of Tamil nationalist politics and heightened Tamil demands for autonomy under a federal system.

Even as Tamil nationalism began gaining ground in the 1950s and 1960s, major caste struggles brought out new divisions within the Tamil community in the late 1960s and early 1970s. But in the face of overtly majoritarian policies resulting in real and perceived discrimination against Tamils in language, employment, and education, national politics became polarized along Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil nationalist lines.

Descent Into Civil War

In the 1970s, Sri Lanka's polarized politics escalated into mass armed struggle. In 1971, a Sinhala rural youth insurrection emerged in the south led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a movement based on a homegrown mix of Marxism and Sinhala nationalism. Though the government crushed the insurrection, at the cost of thousands of young lives, the movement called attention to the gulf between urban and rural communities and the problem of rural youth unemployment.[11]

In addition to suppressing the JVP insurrection, the United Front government (1970–1977), a coalition containing the SLFP and the major left-leaning parties, adopted policies that exacerbated ethnic polarization. Once in the governing coalition, the left colluded with the SLFP and its brand of majoritarian politics to advance its economic agenda. In drafting the country's republican constitution of 1972, the United Front government enshrined the unitary structure of the state, gave Buddhism a newly privileged position, did away with the provision in the 1948 constitution protecting minorities, and entrenched the Sinhala-only language policy constitutionally. In essence, leftist and class politics failed to act as a check on majoritarianism. Such majoritarian national developments greatly alienated Tamil nationalist groups as well as dissenting, left-leaning Tamil constituencies.

From the 1970s into the early 1980s, ethnic tensions rose. After regaining power in 1977 with a sweeping electoral victory, the UNP concentrated power in an executive presidency that was created under another new constitution passed in 1978. In addition, the UNP government shifted Sri Lanka's external relations toward the West, liberalized the economy, and crushed organized labor in the country. A pogrom targeting Tamils living in the south soon after the 1977 elections, state repression against the Tamil community, and an armed response by Tamil youth in the north escalated the patterns of violence in the country. The government declared a state of emergency and passed the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act in 1979, which undermined human rights and strangled democratic freedoms, particularly in the north.

When mobs with state complicity killed thousands of Tamils in July 1983, Sri Lanka descended into a twenty-six-year civil war.

Following another pogrom in July 1983, in which mobs with state complicity killed thousands of Tamils, Sri Lanka descended into a twenty-six-year civil war (1983–2009).[12] India—resentful of Sri Lanka's alignment with the United States under the UNP government—actively supported Tamil armed groups and eventually intervened militarily following the Indo–Sri Lanka Accord of 1987. The accord provided for the deployment of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (1987–1990), and it paved the way for the Thirteenth Amendment to Sri Lanka's constitution, which recognized Tamil as an official language and devolved certain powers to provincial councils.

Although these steps created the contours of a solution based on limited regional autonomy, various political constituencies in the island nation opposed the solution from different positions. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the primary Tamil armed formation, initiated a war against the Indian troops in the north; the JVP used the Indian presence to initiate a brutal insurrection in the south; and the government both sought to crush the JVP

and colluded shortsightedly with the LTTE to end the Indian presence. After the Indian troops left Sri Lanka, the civil war resumed, with the LTTE demanding a separate state in the north and east.

The ensuing violence created its own dynamics of polarization and consolidation, both nationally and within each community. Amid the onslaught of the war, the LTTE wiped out all opposition within the Tamil community and took sole control, while nationalist and militarized factions ascended within the Sinhala community. The LTTE also unleashed attacks against the Sri Lankan Muslim community, including the eviction of the entire Muslim population from the north in 1990.[13]

Ending the War and Entering the Rajapaksa Era

During the presidency of Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005–2015), the government put a brutal end to the war in 2009, as Sri Lankan security forces and the LTTE committed widespread human rights abuses. After the war, media freedom and other liberties remained restricted, and the country was further militarized, particularly in its war-torn regions. Furthermore, a new political problem emerged in the form of anti-Muslim campaigns by chauvinist Sinhala Buddhist forces. This wave of Islamophobia drew on global currents, notably the U.S.-led Global War on Terrorism beginning in 2001, and it gave rise to a narrative that framed Muslims as a dangerous new enemy of the Sinhala community.

In the early 2010s, as the Rajapaksa regime turned authoritarian and the country's postwar infrastructure development boom petered out, a diverse coalition came together to achieve regime change in the 2015 presidential election. The coalition comprised a range of actors, including the Colombo-centered UNP, dissident pockets of Rajapaksa's own SLFP, minority parties, and the Sri Lankan intelligentsia. Although 2015 to 2019 saw a considerable opening of democratic space, even in the country's most heavily militarized districts, the liberal yet fragile cohabitation government was weakened by economic failures and security lapses that culminated in the Easter Sunday terrorist attacks of April 2019.

In the tremendously polarized November 2019 election, Gotabaya Rajapaksa—the brother of the former president—was elected president almost exclusively with Sinhala votes behind the backing of Sinhala Buddhist nationalist groups, retired military leaders, and parts of the business and professional classes. Mahinda Rajapaksa, moreover, became the country's prime minister. With a renewed grip on power, the Rajapaksas have sought to reconsolidate the majoritarian and militarized policies of the years since the country's civil war. Furthermore, they have centered their project on ideologically mobilizing constituencies with Islamophobic discourse and a security mindset linked to the Global War on Terrorism.

The Pandemic, Postponed Elections, and Polarized Politics

The coronavirus pandemic has reinforced the Rajapaksa government's existing push to consolidate power, forestall an economic crisis, and mobilize majoritarian social forces.[14] The virus hit Sri Lanka just as the country was preparing for a consequential parliamentary election. In early March 2020, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa dissolved parliament on the earliest date constitutionally allowed, six months before the end of its term. As confirmed cases of the coronavirus slowly increased, however, the Election Commission postponed parliamentary elections due to public health concerns.[15]

The president aggravated polarization by disregarding calls to reconvene the parliament and address the crisis with the opposition's support. The legislature remains dissolved, and the ruling party has sought to take sole credit for a relatively successful pandemic response, aided significantly by the country's free healthcare system. Nonetheless, the crisis has ravaged Sri Lanka's already fragile and indebted economy, and the government lifted the lockdown in May in hopes of reviving the economy.[16] The Election Commission has since announced its intention to hold elections on August 5.[17]

At the same time, the government's militarized response to the virus has eroded democratic space and reinforced a polarized political culture. Drawing parallels to their efforts during the civil war, which they billed as a "war against terrorism," the Rajapaksa regime has given the military a dominant role in the pandemic response, placing the army's commander in charge of the national coronavirus prevention center.[18] Crucially, the government has also promoted a militarized mindset in dealing with the crisis that draws on a nationalist ideology alienating to the country's minority groups.

In this polarized context, the pandemic has provided fresh fodder for intolerance toward Muslims. The government has mandated the cremation of those who have died from COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, and has denied Muslim families the right to bury their dead, contrary to the World Health Organization's guidelines. In addition, a chauvinist narrative has emerged that scapegoats Muslims for the spread of the virus.[19] Through such means, the government and allied nationalist forces have sought to mobilize the Sinhala community in a bid to consolidate support ahead of the parliamentary elections.

DRIVERS

Polarization in Sri Lanka continues to be driven by the country's political leadership, opinion leaders in society, and the media. State leaders who choose to work toward a political solution to the problem and reconcile communities may be able to greatly diffuse

polarization. However, Sri Lankan political opponents often strategically initiate new cycles of polarization, frequently with the support of sections of the Buddhist clergy, nationalist groups in the Tamil and Sinhala diasporas, and other chauvinist social bases. Indeed, polarizing discourses continue to spread at the societal level within limited constituencies, sustaining discourses that political actors exploit during times of political change. Sri Lanka's polarized media landscape, and more recently the country's social media environment, then provide platforms that can rapidly amplify inflammatory rhetoric. The Sinhala and Tamil media circles often provide diametrically opposed news and opinions on the same national events and issues.

Over the past two decades, external influences have had an important and often polarizing effect on Sri Lankan politics.

The rise of anti-Muslim discourse and periodic pogroms over the past decade illustrate how political actors leverage and capitalize on discourses constructed by chauvinist movements. Widespread, intolerant public discourses then provide impunity to groups that carry out violent attacks with the complicity of the state's security apparatus. Furthermore, such ideologically constructed discourses and fears—like those that prevailed after the 2019 Easter terrorist attacks, for example—eventually translate into major electoral gains.

Competing claims over state institutions and resources have also fueled polarization. After independence, the majoritarian belief that the state belongs to Sinhala Buddhists led to slogans like "*ape anduwa*" (which means "our government"). The country's 1972 republican constitution entrenched the unitary state structure and gave a privileged position to Buddhism and the Sinhala language. Such ideological and constitutional moves have shaped not only public opinion and the media landscape but also the workings of the state bureaucracy and judiciary. Thus, a majoritarian and unitary vision of the state continues to affect the distribution of contested state resources and the devolution of power to various parts of the country.

Notably, over the past two decades, external influences have had an important and often polarizing effect on Sri Lankan politics. Counterterrorism objectives associated with the Global War on Terrorism provided pressure for peace efforts led by the Norwegian government in 2002; when those attempts failed, this punitive mindset culminated in the calamitous military-driven end to the war, billed in Sri Lanka as a war against terrorism.

In addition, the West, led by the United States and using the authority of the United Nations Human Rights Council, applied pressure on Sri Lanka after the war, partly in response to the island nation's shift toward China. The international push for Sri Lanka to address wartime human rights abuses and achieve political reconciliation has played out in unpredictable ways. Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil nationalists alike seek to capitalize

politically on being in the international limelight. In doing so, they deepen polarization in the country between those claiming to defend its sovereignty and those calling for international intervention.

Finally, anti-Muslim and antiterrorism discourses, amplified by the Global War on Terrorism, have been an important driver of polarization. Although Sinhala Buddhist nationalists initially chose to brand the Tamil community with the terrorist label, it was easy to turn the same label against the country's Muslim population, with various actors once again pushing for a solution based on militarization. Significantly, regime consolidation draws on patterns of discourses focused on terrorism and security, giving prominence to the state's security establishment. In this way, the fluid relationships among ideological projects, public discourse, state institutions, electoral politics, and geopolitics have influenced the dynamics of polarization in Sri Lanka.

CONSEQUENCES

Political polarization and its consequences must be analyzed in light of the long arc of history. The legacy of Sinhala-only policies undermining bilingualism in the 1950s has polarized Sri Lankan society in different ways, even if the Indo–Sri Lanka Accord of 1987 and the Thirteenth Amendment to the country's constitution sought to redress this problem by making Tamil an official language. In reality, however, Sri Lanka's state institutions, particularly in Sinhala-majority regions, function in Sinhala and alienate the country's minority communities. Furthermore, not only the public but also Tamil officials in outlying regions find communication with Colombo difficult, as both Sinhala and Tamil speakers have historically rejected bilingualism. Without the capacity for societal-level communication, Sri Lankans have greatly reduced opportunities for interethnic interactions.

Moreover, in recent decades, the social bridges among Sri Lanka's Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamil, Up-Country Tamil, and Muslim communities have weakened. These bridges previously included the English-speaking elite and professional classes, the left-leaning parties and trade unions, and the Christian churches. (There are Christians, at around 7 percent of the country's population, present within both the Sinhala and Tamil communities.)[20] The weakening of these bridges is attributable not only to the language problem but also to political and economic policies that have attacked the left and trade union movement as well as the country's long, protracted civil war, which undermined many of these institutions and created considerable distance between different communities.

Sri Lanka's state institutions, particularly in Sinhala-majority regions, function in Sinhala and alienate the country's minority communities.

Polarization has undermined the impartiality and effectiveness of Sri Lankan public institutions as well. State institutions, particularly the security forces, increasingly recruited personnel from the Sinhala community during the war, making the provision of services for and interactions with minority communities difficult even when the country's political leadership is receptive to minority communities' concerns. Furthermore, Sri Lanka's protracted conflict degraded state institutions and the country's political culture, whether that be in the bureaucracy, the judiciary, or even the parliament, where expediency, patronage, and politicization have become prevalent.

Polarizing conjunctures have also placed tremendous pressure on political parties to embrace ethnonationalism.[21] The proliferation of explicitly nationalist parties, and the morphing of new parties with nationalist agendas, are worrying tendencies. For example, in recent years, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, the party of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, broke away from the SLFP, engulfed it, and became an explicit vehicle of Sinhala majoritarian politics. In the first half of 2020, infighting within the UNP has left the party on the brink of a complete split. Similarly, the Tamil National People's Front and the new Tamil People's Alliance have been vying to consolidate a narrow Tamil nationalist constituency and undermine the historically strong Tamil National Alliance.

At the societal level, polarized worldviews in media outlets, chauvinist social movements, and propaganda networks continue to entrench prejudices and fears, whether through community forums or social media. In recent years, anti-Muslim discourse drawing on global Islamophobic tropes has created constituencies within the Sinhala community that even justify outright violence against Muslims. Mobs led by Buddhist monks, such as those associated with Bodu Bala Sena (the Buddhist Power Force), have attacked mosques and vandalized Muslim-owned businesses.[22] Politically polarizing actors have preyed opportunistically on such societal divisions in their short-term campaigns, which in turn undermine Sri Lankan democracy and minority rights over the long run.

REMEDIAL ACTIONS

Progressive forces seeking to counter polarization in Sri Lanka have engaged in a variety of political efforts, patterns of discourse, and forms of mobilization. In the 1950s, as Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism came to the fore with Sinhala-only language policies and Tamil nationalists sought to counter it with asymmetrical federalism for Tamil regions in the northern and eastern parts of the country, the leftists emphasized the need for bilingualism to resolve the national question. Trotskyite leader Colvin de Silva coined the slogan "one language, two nations; two languages, one nation."[23] Similarly, former Sri Lankan anticolonial leader Handy Perinbanayagam dissented from the Tamil nationalists and warned about the separatist and alienating tendencies of territorial federalist demands.[24]

Other notable efforts to address polarized violence in Sri Lanka came in the 1970s, as activists and intellectuals formed rights groups to check the excesses of the state. The Civil Rights Movement was established in the early 1970s after the JVP insurrection, and the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality was formed in the late 1970s, as Tamil regions suffered from state repression. Local organizations such as citizen committees and peace committees came together as membership organizations. Additionally, intellectual work in the late 1970s and the 1980s introduced the concept of ethnicity to analyze the rising tide of nationalist and exclusivist politics in the country, including by way of seminars and publications by new organizations such as the Social Scientists' Association.[25]

As the country's lengthy civil war raged on and hopes for a solution with the Indo–Sri Lanka Accord of 1987 waned—particularly after the failed efforts at devolving power through the provincial council system—an important debate over the devolution of state power emerged. Various civic actors sought to provide proposals for constitutional reform as part of the peace efforts in the mid-1990s under the government led by then president Chandrika Kumaratunga.[26] Similarly, during the internationalized Norwegian peace efforts between 2002 and 2005, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) advocated for models of federalism. After the country's 2015 change in government, various voices sought to introduce mechanisms to advance reconciliation and transitional justice.

Locally grounded organizations, including trade unions and progressive religious organizations, were responsible for many of those earlier efforts to address polarization. However, in 1980, the regime of president J. R. Jayewardene crushed a general strike and advanced neoliberal policies. These policy choices dealt a major blow not only to the trade union movement and workers' rights but also to democratic rights and interethnic relations, which trade unions could play an important role in supporting. Nevertheless, other social movements such as the Movement for the Defense of Democratic Rights emerged in the 1980s out of the remnants of the crushed youth insurrection and the weakened trade union movement. Yet, given the difficulties of organizing in a climate of war and repression, including in light of the brutal second JVP uprising in the late 1980s, many of these social movements grew to resemble NGOs—dependent on external funding and focused on international advocacy—which, in turn, weakened their capacity to mobilize the Sri Lankan people.

State reforms that decentralize power or strengthen protections for minorities also have the potential to play a role in reducing polarization. The state and the uses of state power are at the heart of the polarization that plagues the country, as different regimes seek to consolidate power for the long haul. Many campaigns have attempted to reform the state structure to make it difficult for any one group to consolidate state power. Proposed reforms have included abolishing the powerful office of the executive presidency, weakening the entrenchment of the unitary structure of the state, devolving greater powers to the regions, and strengthening the independence of the commissions that are responsible for governance.

Any such progressive efforts toward state reform, however, must continue to weaken polarizing politics by constructing a progressive national consensus. These steps also require a polity and an economy that are inclusive along ethnic lines and reduce inequalities related to class, regional differences, and the urban-rural divide. Some successes on this front are parity in language policy; efforts to change the workings of institutions; the resolution of the citizenship rights of the Up-Country Tamils; and the work of various commissions relating to human rights, the right to information, and judicial services. Such changes came after considerable struggles and prolonged advocacy by social movements and political actors. The challenge then is sustaining social movements that can galvanize large segments of society to pressure political actors to enact change; there have been moments of success, as with the waves of democratization in the mid-1990s and mid-2010s.

Political polarization is a dynamic process that mutates and draws on historical changes. For example, the root causes and grievances underlying ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka went through great changes during the country's protracted war, and some would argue that the consequences of the war now overshadow the historical problem that precipitated it. Furthermore, the maneuvers of polarizing actors exploit various divides at different moments.

Efforts to confront polarization also must be dynamic and must deploy new, indigenous discourses and concepts such as coexistence and economic democracy. Alliances across class, ethnic, and regional differences are necessary. This process also must be locally and socially grounded with a democratic ethos. Rigid juridical solutions may not garner social acceptance, and plans to import international frameworks and norms are unlikely to work, particularly in a global moment of increasing polarization. Even as polarizing discourses and movements seek to divide society, Sri Lanka will have to build movements and a national consensus drawing on the country's own progressive history and discourses advocating coexistence, equality, and justice.

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TWO THAILANDS: CLASHING POLITICAL ORDERS AND ENTRENCHED POLARIZATION

Janjira Sombatpoonsiri

THE CRUX OF POLARIZATION in Thailand is a sharp division between two worldviews that seek incompatible political orders. The royal nationalist worldview regards the Thai king as the country's legitimate ruler; the competing democratic outlook contends that sovereignty resides with the Thai people. This clash can be traced back to Thailand's unfinished regime transition of 1932, but tensions have intensified dramatically over the past fifteen years, as the warring camps have weaponized tit-for-tat protests and politicized supposedly independent institutions. Relentless political conflict has split Thai society down the middle, undermining social cohesion and fueling tensions even in moments of crisis like the coronavirus pandemic.

The crux of polarization in Thailand is a sharp division between two worldviews that seek incompatible political orders.

Ultimately, the country's political conflict has morphed into an identity struggle, in which identification with one bloc is based on opposing the values and interests of the other side. The royal nationalists, in particular, view the democrats as an existential threat, and their fears have led them to scrap electoral democracy altogether. Their ongoing repression of prodemocratic networks has not only reinforced Thailand's toxic polarization but also plunged the country deeper into authoritarianism.

ROOTS

The roots of Thailand's current bout with polarization date back to the 1932 revolution, when the political role of the king became a subject of fierce political contestation. Thailand has one of the few monarchies in the world that has retained immense political power even into the twenty-first century. A principal reason for the king's enduring influence is the construction of a royal nationalist ideology, which has mixed historical myths and Buddhist narratives to win popular acceptance of monarchical rule. This ideology has enhanced the king's political legitimacy by placing him at the top of a hierarchical social order as the soul of the nation. Perceived as natural and fixed, this hierarchy also provides a justification for socioeconomic inequality; according to this ideology, charismatic, powerful, and wealthy figures are associated with merits accumulated in their past lives, in accordance with a certain interpretation of Buddhist teachings.[1]

The royal nationalist establishment has faced ideological challenges in three key episodes, all of which have featured sharp polarization. The first episode began in 1932, when young bureaucrats, mostly inspired by the French model of popular revolution, seized power from King Prajadhipok and introduced a constitutional monarchy. The new government sought to transform Thailand into a more egalitarian polity, based on principles of representative democracy, individual autonomy, and equal rights. In essence, the leaders of the revolution envisioned a new notion of sovereignty: "the country [would belong] to the people, not the king."[2] The dichotomy between these hierarchical and egalitarian visions of political order that emerged in this period has powerfully shaped Thailand's two clashing national identities today. Whereas one side embraces the power of the monarchy, national pride, and the uniqueness of being Thai, the other champions social and economic equality as well as liberal, cosmopolitan values.[3]

The second major episode began with the emergence of a new threat to the monarchy: communism. Communism gained traction among workers and rural farmers who had long suffered from entrenched inequality, and in 1959, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat staged a coup to overthrow a revolutionary-led government. Alarmed by the collapse of monarchies across Southeast Asia, he reinvented royal nationalism and systematically propagated it through national media outlets to counter the communist threat. This version 2.0 of royal nationalism depicted the king as a dedicated leader who fostered political stability and rural development. In this new ideological vision, the king was constitutionally above politics, but culturally he was endowed with the moral authority to intervene in politics in times of crisis.[4] Furthermore, the notion of royal morality was deliberately contrasted with the corruption of democratically elected politicians, and this rhetoric contributed to growing mistrust of electoral democracy within the Thai establishment.

By the end of the Cold War in 1991, royal nationalism had become deeply rooted, and its supporters had found ways to tame democracy. Through their expansive networks within

the palace as well as the state bureaucracy, military, and private sector, advocates of royal nationalism occupied "reserve domains," or bastions of nondemocratic political power, that allowed them to constrain the elected government's control over the passage, implementation, and enforcement of its own policies.[5] This veto power remained unchallenged until the emergence of the third threat to the monarchy in the early 2000s.

TRAJECTORY

The current wave of polarization in Thailand began in 2001, when the tycoon-turned-politician Thaksin Shinawatra swept into power and introduced a populist-capitalist revolution that challenged the dominance of the palace. His political party, Thai Rak Thai (TRT), won a landslide victory in the country's 2001 elections, and its innovative policies quickly won the support of rural Thai voters, who increasingly had migrated to urban areas or other countries in search of better lives. For these "urbanized" or "cosmopolitan" villagers, the TRT's provision of universal healthcare, agrarian debt relief, and village funds was seen as a source of not merely social mobility but also social dignity.[6] For this reason, the most economically marginalized regions of northern and northeastern Thailand became TRT strongholds.

The royalist establishment, however, viewed Thaksin's ascent as a threat for two reasons. First, his fast-growing popularity began to rival that of the king, long seen

The royalist establishment viewed Thaksin's ascent as a threat.

as the champion of Thailand's rural poor. And second, the TRT's efforts to promote social mobility challenged the hierarchical worldview of Thailand's establishment, which feared that radical economic change might reconfigure the country's social hierarchy and even encourage a grassroots rebellion.[7]

Beyond royal nationalist circles, some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and segments of academia were hostile to TRT policies deemed to embolden global capitalism at the expense of communal sustainability. In addition, the urban middle class increasingly came to view Thaksin's social mobility policies as economically irresponsible and populist measures that were akin to vote buying.[8] By 2005, the prime minister's diverse range of critics—from royal nationalists and NGOs to Bangkok's middle class and the trade unions—had coalesced to form an anti-Thaksin network.[9] The subsequent clashes between anti- and pro-establishment blocs would set Thailand on a path of intensifying polarization.

The Birth of the Yellow Shirts and the 2006 Coup (2005–2006)

Anti-Thaksin forces banded together in 2005 under the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), whose campaigns set the polarizing tone of subsequent conflict. Despite its diverse

composition, the movement's royalist leaders were most vocal and accused Thaksin of opposing the monarchy. They encouraged supporters to wear yellow t-shirts—yellow being the color associated with King Rama IX's birthday in traditional Thai culture—in order to display their loyalty to the monarchy. The PAD's use of royal symbolism attracted a critical mass of support, and the movement vociferously demanded the use of the royal prerogative to sack Thaksin.

As pro- and anti-Thaksin protests intensified, the prime minister called for snap elections in April 2006, seeking to restore his mandate. He again won at the polls, but an opposition boycott undercut the legitimacy of his victory, and the royalist establishment moved swiftly to corner Thaksin. The Constitutional Court annulled the election results, and meanwhile, in a military gathering, a leading member of the king's Privy Council delivered a speech reminding the army of its allegiance to the monarch. In September 2006, amid rising political tensions, the army staged a coup, which half the country's population applauded as a "good coup."[10] Thaksin subsequently went into exile and began masterminding the emerging political movement against the royalist establishment.

The Rise of the Red Shirts and Judicial Coups (2007–2008)

The 2006 putsch, followed by the Constitutional Court's decision to dissolve the TRT and ban its politicians from running again, enraged TRT supporters and democracy advocates, who coalesced behind a wave of anticoup activism. Led by TRT politicians-turned-activists, the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) mobilized constituents to oppose the military junta and pressure it to hold an election.

This activism sharpened the identity conflict underlying Thai polarization in two ways. First, by denouncing the coup as an elite-led, undemocratic intervention, UDD activists framed themselves as advocates for electoral democracy. They later adopted the color red as a symbol of the democratic struggle. Second, the UDD criticized the social hierarchy that royalist elites were defending by defining themselves as "*prai*," or peasants, who had revolted against the injustice of "*ammart*," or aristocrats. "*Prai*" is, in fact, a taboo word with negative connotations, but the red shirts' proud adoption of the term was intended to challenge and subvert Thailand's traditional social hierarchy.[11]

When the December 2007 elections resulted in a victory for a Thaksin-backed party, the former prime minister's opponents mobilized once again. The PAD took to the streets, creating a crisis of governance, and the Constitutional Court disbanded the Thaksin-affiliated party in 2008. This decision allowed the Democrat Party, a long-time ally of the royalist establishment, to lead the government coalition, setting in motion one of the most violent confrontations in Thai political history.

Street Violence and Dehumanization (2009–2010)

The red shirts' prolonged and disruptive street protests against the Democrat-led government resulted in a crackdown in 2009. When the movement resumed mass protests in 2010, militant factions had become much more prominent. The red shirts' increased vandalism, the yellow shirts' counterprotests, and the ruling elite's growing reliance on the military inevitably created a political impasse.

Toxic political discourse within both camps dramatically escalated polarization. Red shirts were branded as unwashed and unintelligent (*kwai daeng*), while yellow shirts were labeled as royalist fascists (*salim*). In this context, the establishment became convinced that the red shirts were plotting to topple the monarchy, and after an armed attack on a yellow shirt counterprotest, the army received a mandate to cleanse Bangkok of the rural "unwashed" protesters.

The military fired on them, killing more than ninety red shirts.[12] In retaliation, the latter allegedly set fire to a Bangkok mall and a government building in northeastern Thailand, and the establishment thus portrayed the red shirts as "city destroyers" (*phao baan phao meung*).[13] The violent clampdown further severed the red shirts' emotional ties with the monarchy, creating a deep ideological rift with the establishment.[14]

Protest-cum-Coup and Persistent Polarization (2011–present)

Although the current phase of polarization in Thailand has featured a similar pattern of mass protests and elite repression, this time the establishment has sought to secure its dominance by uprooting electoral democracy altogether. In the 2011 elections, the Thaksin-supported party, currently known as Pheu Thai, won a majority in the lower house, but its proposal for an amnesty law that could have facilitated the former prime minister's return from exile sparked renewed protests.

The PAD regrouped in 2013 and rebranded itself as the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), which widened its targets to include not only Thaksin and Pheu Thai but also electoral democracy itself. PDRC leaders contended that democracy empowered corrupt and venal politicians, consistent with the yellow shirts' view that the supposedly unintelligent red shirts were not capable of electing virtuous leaders. The PDRC thus rejected egalitarian principles and defended a hierarchical social order, in which a deserving upper class exercises greater power. Figure 2 visualizes the pro- and anti-establishment cleavages that developed in Thailand from 2005 to 2014.

FIGURE 2
Political Cleavages in Thailand (2005–2014)

Timeline	Triggering Event	Labelling	
		Establishment	Anti-establishment
2005–2006	Thaksin's alleged republicanism, PAD protests, 2006 military coup	Yellow	Red
2007–2008	UDD mobilization, 2007 elections, Constitutional Court intervention	*Ammart* (aristocrat)	*Prai* (peasant)
2008–2010	Red shirt protests, military crackdown	*Salim* (royalist fascist)	*Kwai daeng* (unwashed, unintelligent)
			Phao baan phao meung (city destroyers)
2013–2014	PDRC protests, 2014 military coup	Educated, moral, pro-clean politics	Uneducated, incapable of electing virtuous leaders

With the country again in a state of political crisis, the Pheu Thai government called for early elections in 2014, yet this decision only precipitated a fresh standoff. The PDRC organized a nationwide blockade of polling stations, leading the Constitutional Court to declare the election results void.[15] Meanwhile, violent clashes broke out between PDRC armed guards and red shirt activists. Between late January and mid-May 2014, more than thirty bombings and/or attacks reportedly took place near PDRC protest sites, with one incident killing a five-year-old child.[16] The PDRC accused the red shirts of orchestrating this violence, and the Thai public increasingly feared that the country was on the brink of civil war. In May 2014, the army staged a coup and again assumed political power.

The yellow shirts predictably commended this intervention, while the red shirts criticized it as a step toward military dictatorship. The army claimed that it was nonpartisan, but after the putsch, it unleashed a widespread crackdown on red shirt activists. As a result, after five years of military rule between 2014 and 2019, the red shirt movement has virtually vanished.[17] Nonetheless, anti-establishment sentiments and polarization persist, as was evident

in the country's 2019 elections, in which the pro-establishment Palang Pracharath Party and the opposition coalition were neck and neck. The undemocratic design of Thailand's new constitution prevented opposition parties from forming a government, even though they won a majority of the vote.[18]

Today, Pheu Thai remains the strongest opposition party in Thailand, but the Future Forward Party (FFP) briefly emerged as a new anti-establishment force that offered an alternative to both electoral clientelism and royal nationalism. Representing young and middle-class constituents fed up with authoritarianism and the divide between red and yellow shirts, the party won eighty out of 350 seats in the lower house and became the third-most popular party in the 2019 elections.[19] Its fast-growing popularity intimidates the royalist establishment, which has sought to paint the FFP as opposed to the monarchy and has filed charges against it for numerous alleged crimes, from concocting a republican conspiracy to violating electoral regulations. The latter charge led the Constitutional Court to dissolve the FFP in February 2020 and ban its leaders from politics for ten years.[20] The decision was yet another loss for hopes of greater democracy in Thailand, and it left FFP supporters feeling disheartened and furious over the Thai elite's disregard for their voices.

Enduring Divisions Amid the Pandemic

The political, economic, and societal strains caused by the coronavirus pandemic have had a mixed impact on Thailand's decades-old divide.[21] On the one hand, the pandemic has changed existing dynamics of polarization by creating divisions inside the pro-establishment camp. Leaders in the public health sector, traditionally staunch allies of the establishment, have publicly criticized the government for its sluggish, inept response. Supporters of the monarchy have also voiced rare criticism of the palace for failing to play a larger role in alleviating the crisis, per the example set by the previous king. The urban middle class, too, has lost trust in the government after numerous corruption scandals related to the pandemic.[22] As a result of the government's poor management of public health and economic policies, politically disparate groups now have shared grievances against the establishment.

On the other hand, the country's existing ideological divide has hindered meaningful cross-camp cooperation at both the elite and societal levels. Pro- and anti-establishment civil society groups have launched their own separate charitable programs and at times have even discredited the other side's efforts.[23] The pandemic has reignited debates over clashing notions of Thai identity as well. Anti-establishment voices have attributed the government's poor pandemic response to its exclusive understanding of Thai identity, and these criticisms have provoked pushback from pro-establishment supporters, who argue that their conception of national identity is instrumental to forging a sense of unity during the crisis.[24]

Ideological divisions have also contributed to polarized attitudes toward quarantine measures and economic aid for the poor. Whereas the pro-establishment camp has tended to

support an authoritarian approach to lockdowns and the government's declaration of a state of emergency in March 2020, liberal groups within the anti-establishment bloc have argued that the public health crisis should not supersede basic rights. Similarly, those in the anti-establishment camp mostly sympathize with poorer Thais, while some conservatives, who view wealth as a sign of spiritual merit, oppose the idea of providing unconditional economic assistance to the poor. The coronavirus thus has highlighted how Thailand's deeply rooted and immensely powerful ideological cleavages are creating divided perceptions of the crisis, even when many frustrations are shared.

DRIVERS

Five key factors have driven Thailand's recent wave of polarization. The first and most fundamental is the legacy of the 1932 regime transition. Although the transition created a constitutional monarchy, the notion of Thai sovereignty remained linked to the king, whose legitimacy remained embedded within the country's social fabric. The 1932 revolution thus did not clearly establish whether sovereignty resides ultimately with the king or with the people, and this unanswered question has fueled polarization between establishment and anti-establishment forces ever since.

Second, political reforms in the 1990s created paradoxes that provoked a clash between new and royalist elites. On the one hand, the 1997 constitution included a winner-take-all electoral formula that strengthened large parties like the TRT and gave new democratic elites greater power to challenge the establishment. The new electoral system also left the Democrat Party—the traditional defender of the royalist establishment—weakened in the parliament. On the other hand, the 1997 constitution also created robust checks and balances on the ruling party. These checks became a channel through which the Thai establishment could exercise veto power over the country's new democratic elites, particularly through the Constitutional Court.[25] The 1997 constitution thus set the stage for a struggle between empowered democratic parties and royalist state institutions.

Third, economic and cultural shifts affecting much of Thailand's population have fostered increasing mass support for new elites like Thaksin. As a result of the country's economic opening in the 1990s, those from the provinces have become increasingly connected to global markets. This liberalization unsettled Thailand's rigid socioeconomic hierarchy, as the rural poor could strive to move up the social ladder and seek new opportunities. They have voted for leaders who share this vision, and their growing resistance to existing hierarchies has distressed not only royalist elites but also many Thais who still identify with the establishment.

Fourth, weaponized mass mobilization has added fuel to the fire. Both sides have relied on mass protests and have used them to push for maximalist demands (usually the resignation of a prime minister or new elections). As expected, the government in power at any given

time has rejected such demands and often has mobilized counterprotests of its own. As conflicts have intensified, political demands have morphed into principle-based positions, on which protesters have refused to compromise. The two sides have stepped up their protests, thus exacerbating mutual antagonisms and setting the stage for violent clashes between armed factions of each camp. With every violent protest that occurs, the gulf widens, as traumatized victims blame the opposing side.

Lastly, traditional and social media have aggravated polarization by facilitating mass mobilization, creating partisan information bubbles, and reinforcing feelings of self-righteousness. It is notable that two media moguls, Sonthi Limthongkul and Thaksin, led the PAD and UDD, respectively. Both blocs used their own partisan television channels and media platforms as weapons to propagate their respective agendas and discredit the other side.[26] In addition, both the red and yellow shirts have their own social media accounts, which became breeding grounds for hate speech and vigilante activism when mass demonstrations reached their peak.[27] Ultimately, this color-coded media landscape has created echo chambers in which the two camps only hear information that reinforces their partisan views.

CONSEQUENCES

An immediate outcome of Thailand's latest twenty-year bout with polarization has been democratic erosion and two democratic breakdowns in 2006 and 2014. Although the red shirts often perceive themselves as democratic, their politics are majoritarian and at times illiberal, as exemplified by Thaksin's record of human rights violations.[28] Establishment elites, in turn, have exploited the former prime minister's democratic deficits to discredit democracy altogether and stoke middle-class fears about being subjected to rule by the different socioeconomic classes that the red shirts represent.

Thailand's current constitution epitomizes the establishment's efforts to rig electoral democracy in its favor. Electoral rules are designed to weaken the party system, civil society, electoral integrity, and popular representativeness in the Senate. In effect, while Thailand has resumed elections, political competition is neither free nor fair. This autocratization has bred polarization, as intense repression of the opposition since 2014 has reaffirmed the divide between royalist autocrats who are rewarded and democratic traitors who are oppressed.

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Polarization has also fragmented civil society, making cross-camp solidarity difficult to achieve. For a while, civil society organizations were divided into yellow and red shirt camps, with the former comprising mainly development NGOs and unions and the latter consisting of prodemocracy and human rights organizations. Each blamed the other for

being handmaidens of elites. In particular, red shirt NGOs struggled to forgive their yellow shirt counterparts after the latter's inaction during the Thai military's 2010 crackdown. This rift hindered any collective action powerful enough to counter the aftermath of the country's 2014 coup. Although many yellow shirt NGOs have now turned against the establishment, years of polarization have eroded trust and a sense of solidarity within Thailand's fragmented civil society landscape.

Lastly, political rifts have taken a toll on personal relationships and social cohesion more broadly. At the peak of the protests, Thais often chose to unfriend people on Facebook who expressed opposing political views, and this virtual unfriending at times damaged real-life relationships. Those reluctant to show their color-coded allegiance often were forced to choose a side or risk being shunned. Family members and colleagues frequently avoided discussing politics altogether to maintain domestic or workplace harmony. Five years under the military junta may have diluted red and yellow shirt identities in Thailand, but an ideological rift lingers: In January 2020, for instance, the country again witnessed parallel establishment and anti-establishment protests.[29]

REMEDIAL ACTIONS

A few official initiatives have attempted to breach or at least narrow the political divide. The first is the special parliamentary National Reconciliation Committee, established after the Thai military's 2010 crackdown to investigate its causes and consequences. The committee's report served as a blueprint for the government's compensation of victims, as well as policies to address protesters' grievances.[30] The report, however, drew criticism, particularly from red shirts, who were identified in the report as partly contributing to the violence that year.

In parallel, civil society groups and academics drafted their own report on "Truth for Justice," the findings of which highlighted the excessive use of military force as the main cause of the violence.[31] The two reports thus reinforced color-coded narratives and failed to heal the country's divide. Most importantly, Pheu Thai exploited the committee's recommendations regarding political amnesty in an effort to facilitate Thaksin's return, sparking royalist demonstrations in 2013–2014 that ultimately provided a basis of support for the country's most recent military coup.

The second official effort was carried out in 2015 by the National Reform Council's Committee to Study Approaches on Reconciliation under the purview of the military-led government. Critics of this committee alleged that it failed to represent the voices of those affected by political violence or create effective mechanisms to heal the country's divide. Worse, many felt that the rhetoric of reconciliation was only a veil for ongoing repression. The Internal Security Operations Command, a security organ affiliated with the Thai

military, established centers in Thai villages ostensibly to promote reconciliation by "teaching people to live together harmoniously" and educating them about the importance of the monarchy.[32] However, only red shirts in northern and northeastern Thailand were told to join the program, a fact that betrayed the initiative's implicit bias.

Finally, civil society groups have launched various initiatives, albeit with limited impact. Among others, the Peace Witness Group served as a third party present at protest sites to deescalate conflicts between protesters and the police, as well as between protesters and counterprotesters. Yet polarization was so toxic that both red and yellow shirts were suspicious of the group's presence and motives. Similarly, Mahidol University's Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies mediated a series of peace-focused dialogues between leading yellow and red shirt activists, but these efforts could not prevent clashes in 2010 or 2013–2014.

With Thailand's vicious cycle of authoritarian politics exacerbating resentment against the establishment, polarization continues to fester. A first step toward meaningful reconciliation may entail overcoming the country's authoritarian atmosphere and recognizing that the opposing sides have different political visions for Thailand. Differences do not necessarily have to be adversarial.

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CHAPTER 6

WHY IS THERE NO POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN THE PHILIPPINES?

Paul D. Kenny

EVERYDAY POLITICS IN THE PHILIPPINES usually arouse scant interest in the United States. This changed markedly, however, with the near contemporaneous 2016 elections first of Rodrigo Duterte as president of the Philippines and then of Donald Trump as president of the United States. The similarities between the two candidates were hard to mistake. Both were self-consciously anti-establishment, they regularly insulted their political opponents and consistently violated norms of political correctness, and they styled themselves as law-and-order politicians, promising vigorous and even violent crackdowns on criminal activity.

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Yet when it comes to political polarization—in the sense of politics and society being rigidly divided into two blocs along a single master cleavage—the similarity ends. In the United States, polarization between Republicans and Democrats likely was significant in bringing about Trump's electoral victory. Moreover, polarization in the United States has, if anything, increased since the 2016 election. In contrast, in the Philippines, where political parties are almost nonexistent, there was no evidence of polarization at the time of Duterte's electoral victory. He emerged as the most popular of a diverse group of more or less independent presidential candidates. Since then, despite his government's notoriously lethal campaign against drug dealers and users, mass polarization remains all but absent.

With estimates of those killed in police and vigilante operations between June 2016 and the end of 2018 running as high as 27,000, there has been vocal international and domestic opposition to Duterte's war on drugs.[1] Human rights activists, academics, journalists, and a few politicians have taken the government to task for its violent actions and Duterte's tightening grip on power. Yet, despite these dissenting views, at the level of public opinion, Duterte is so popular that it is almost possible to speak of a *unipolar* political environment in the Philippines. Why is that the case?

Although there is some potential for polarization in the Philippines, the country lacks many of the conditions that have made polarization endemic elsewhere. Filipinos do disagree over some core values, including democracy and religion; the Philippines also has significant ethnolinguistic and regional diversity and one of the highest levels of inequality in the world.[2]

Yet, unlike in highly polarized countries such as the United States, these ideological, religious, and socioeconomic cleavages do not overlap. Political rivalries continue to be based largely on personality and faction rather than on ideology or identity. Additionally, the absence of political polarization in the Philippines stems in part from the remarkable popularity of Duterte's signature war on drugs. Support for this government campaign completely transcends other political and economic divisions and undergirds Duterte's extraordinary personal popularity. Although his popularity is not immutable, there is little indication of a more stable form of polarization emerging in the near term.

BACKGROUND

Traditionally, the Philippines has been a patronage-based or clientelistic democracy, in which political power rests on the distribution of economic benefits to supporters. In the late 1990s, Alfred McCoy, one of the foremost experts on the Philippines, coined the expression "an anarchy of families" to describe a system in which a handful of fabulously wealthy clans use patronage networks to dominate politics and the state itself.[3] Elections were contests between these oligarchic clans, with the victors distributing a share of the spoils to their dependents, mostly the rural and urban poor.

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The rise of a middle class and the saturation of mass media have altered this pattern somewhat since McCoy's writing, but a few wealthy clans continue to have a disproportionate presence in Philippine politics, especially at more local levels. Inequality is extremely high, and politics are largely the purview of the rich. In this patronage-based system, party brands

and loyalties mean little. Indeed, following a presidential election, it is common for many members of Congress to switch to the side that won. Some of the country's best-known presidents, including Ramon Magsaysay and Ferdinand Marcos, switched from one party to another to win elections.

This patronage-based system has largely shaped politics in the Philippines since its independence in 1946. It was reconfigured, but not fundamentally changed, during the Marcos presidency (1965–1986), which included a lengthy term of authoritarian rule—the Martial Law period—from 1972 to 1981. Under Marcos, the main political cleavage was over loyalty to the Marcos clan itself. As he took down some of the country's old political families, new oligarchies were founded on the basis of his patronage. In the mid-1980s, opponents of Marcos, most notably identified with the Aquino clan—first Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino Junior and then his widow, Corazon "Cory" Aquino—mobilized a population that had become increasingly disenchanted with the Marcos government's economic mismanagement, corruption, and human rights abuses. When Marcos supposedly lost the rigged elections of 1986, his tenure was no longer viable, and he was removed from office in the so-called People Power Revolution of that same year.

Despite this upheaval and the return of democracy, the country's political system kept its basic clientelistic structure. The new president, Cory Aquino (1986–1992), did little to fundamentally reform the oligarchic nature of Philippine politics. Even as corruption arguably declined at the very top, contemporary reports suggest that it continued to pervade lower levels of government, arguably, in fact, being "democratized" along with the political system itself.[4] Perhaps reflective of the public's widespread disaffection with the political status quo, the vote in the 1992 presidential election was shared across a crowded field of candidates. Fidel Ramos ultimately edged out his competitors with the lowest winning vote share in the Philippines' electoral history.[5] Although Ramos passed some significant liberalization measures during his presidency (1992–1998), severe structural inequalities remained.

The prospects for root-and-branch reform seemed greater with the election of the former actor and populist Joseph "Erap" Estrada (1998–2001) as president in 1998. In the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the economic anxieties of the Philippines' enormous poor population fueled dissatisfaction with the political status quo. Estrada's base was overwhelmingly poor, and his government was the first to see politics in the Philippines take on a cleavage with strong socioeconomic characteristics. In early 2001, however, a series of corruption scandals and a botched impeachment attempt precipitated mass street demonstrations, known as People Power II, which ousted Estrada from office. Estrada was replaced in 2001 by his vice president, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001–2010), but her administration, too, was marked by continual allegations of corruption and the use of patronage to secure political power.

The election of Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino III (2010–2016) in 2010 was a testament to the continued supremacy of family over political party in the Philippines. The son of former president Cory Aquino and of Marcos's assassinated opponent, Ninoy Aquino, the younger Aquino came to office promising socioeconomic reform, his main campaign slogan being: "If there is no corruption, there will be no poverty."[6] Although his administration oversaw an uptick in the Philippines' already impressive economic growth rate from an average of around 5 percent under his predecessor to about 6 percent during his tenure, his approval ratings had declined by the end of his term in 2016, even if he was still the country's most popular outgoing post-Marcos president.[7]

This is when Duterte burst onto the national political scene. He hails from a minor political clan, and his mother's connections allowed him to secure an appointed position as vice mayor of Davao City in 1986. From this position, Duterte became mayor in 1988 when elections were reintroduced. In Davao, he was a controversial but popular mayor of one of the country's most populous cities, a position he effectively held—even though he had to step down occasionally to circumvent term limits—until his 2016 presidential run. His administration gained both plaudits and notoriety for its tough stance on crime, with even minor infractions such as littering attracting stiff punishments.

Although Duterte was no stranger to old-style machine politics, his presidential campaign placed much greater emphasis on direct appeals to voters through the media, in part to transcend his provincial base of support. This populist campaign strategy leveraged mass media and social media and thereby allowed Duterte to appeal to Filipinos over the heads of the country's powerful political clans. He centered his presidential campaign on anti-establishment and law-and-order messages, casting himself as the "man on horseback" who would challenge the elite or, as he characterized it, "Imperial Manila."[8] Furthermore, in the months before the election, Duterte began to campaign aggressively on the issue of drug-related criminality. In a May 2016 television interview, he pronounced that, if elected president, he would pack funeral parlors with thousands of executed criminals and that he would dump 100,000 slain criminals in Manila Bay, where "the fish [would] grow fat."[9]

Duterte's late entry into the race meant that he was polling in fourth place just six months before the election, but he effectively used rallies, mass media, and social media to deliver his message and build support.[10] Social media was a novel and likely important element of his campaign. He had—and has—an army of online supporters who vigorously defend him on social media, shouting down and even threatening his critics—the so-called Diehard Duterte Supporters (DDS). (The acronym is a play on the term Duterte Death Squads, which his opponents have used to criticize his war on drugs.)

However, traditional mass communications tactics remained central to his appeal. Pre-election surveys showed that most registered Filipino voters (up to 77 percent) said that

television was the most influential source of information for them in their choice of president.[11] The significant increase in support for Duterte over the course of 2016 (from 20 percent in January to a 39 percent vote share in the May election) has been attributed to his performance in the second presidential debate—which for the first time in Filipino political history had been broadcast live by major television and radio networks. In an April 2016 survey, a plurality (34 percent) of respondents who watched, listened to, or read reports about the debate believed that Duterte had bested the other contenders.

Beyond the debates, Duterte, given his controversial and often crude behavior, commanded extensive airtime. During his campaign and later his presidency, Duterte has also made a point of making frequent public appearances. On the campaign trail, he went to combat zones, poor urban communities, and areas affected by natural disasters, among other places, to speak directly with regular Filipinos. His language was often divisive, misogynistic, and vulgar, yet it was common to hear his audience applaud or laugh at his controversial statements.

After taking office in June 2016, Duterte quickly made good on his promises to aggressively pursue those involved in the illegal drug trade. Within a month after it was implemented, his antidrug campaign resulted in the surrender of around 330,000 suspected drug users and dealers, more than 9,000 arrests, and 664 deaths.[12] In its most recent report, the Philippine National Police acknowledged that there were 6,600 deaths related to the government's war on drugs from early July 2016 to late May 2019.[13] Other organizations estimate that between July 2016 and December 2018, up to 27,000 people were killed by state security forces or by nonstate groups working with implicit sanction from the authorities.[14]

Faced with criticism over his drug war, Duterte has responded with harsh rhetoric and autocratic maneuvers. For example, when Senator Leila de Lima called for an investigation into the deaths arising from the antidrug campaign, Duterte publicly attacked her, and the Department of Justice charged her with sedition and other offenses. She was arrested in February 2017 and has now spent more than three years in prison.[15] After United Nations Special Rapporteur Agnès Callamard spoke of the need to investigate alleged extrajudicial killings in the country, Duterte threatened to slap Callamard should she persist with an investigation.[16] Supreme Court Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno, another Duterte critic, was forced out of office in 2018.

Meanwhile, the online news outlet Rappler, another fierce critic of Duterte's war on drugs, had its registration revoked by the country's Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), and in June 2020, Rappler's Chief Executive Officer Maria Ressa was convicted of cyber libel and given an indeterminate sentence that could result in up to six years in prison.[17] The Court of Appeals overturned the SEC decision, but the Duterte administration continues to ban Rappler journalists from covering presidential events.[18] The government also

refused to renew the franchise of the independent ABS-CBN television network.[19] Although Filipinos remain attached to the principles of democracy and press freedom, these encounters have not weakened Duterte's public support.

IS THE PHILIPPINES POLARIZED?

Although polarization has often gone hand in hand with the rise of populism around the world, there is little evidence of this confluence in the Philippines. Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman, and Murat Somer define severe or "pernicious" polarization as "a process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in the society increasingly align along a single dimension, cross-cutting differences become reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of 'us' versus 'them.'"[20] According to this approach, one of the main empirical criteria of polarization is that a society is politically divided into two distinct blocs. As Alban Lauka, Jennifer McCoy, and Rengin Firat write, "polarization is low if many people are supportive of a party but very few reject it and vice-versa."[21]

There is little or no partisan polarization in the Philippines.

By this measure, there is little or no partisan polarization in the Philippines. Parties are marginal players in Philippine politics. Only the small parties of the far left adhere to a well-defined ideology. All the largest so-called parties are instead the electoral vehicles of oligarchic clans. The Nacionalista Party is the vehicle of Manuel Villar (the Philippines' second-richest man), the National Unity Party that of Enrique Razon (the country's fifth-richest man), and the Nationalist People's Coalition that of Eduardo Cojuangco Junior (the fourteenth-richest man).[22]

Duterte's party, the Partido Demokratiko Pilipino–Lakas ng Bayan, better known as PDP-Laban, is similarly a personalistic vehicle, whose primary appeal to voters is Duterte himself. In 2016, PDP-Laban secured just three seats in Congress, even though Duterte won 39 percent of the national vote.[23] Even three-and-a-half years into the Duterte presidency, no such party-based polarization exists. In fact, in September 2019, only 4 percent of respondents identified with PDP-Laban, while 94 percent identified with no party at all.[24] As a result of the marginal role played by parties, most measures of polarization, such as the ideological distance between parties or legislative rollcall voting, would imply the near absence of polarization.

However, polarization may be measured in two other ways. First, society could still be split into two relatively coherent and opposed blocs, even if party affiliations do not reflect this cleavage. In the Philippines, however, socioeconomic, ethnoreligious, and regional differences have not structured or dominated politics. For a brief period in the late 1990s, it appeared that social class might form the basis of an enduring political cleavage, but since

the fall of Estrada in 2001, most of the country's political elite has continued to draw support from cross-class, clientelistic coalitions. Similarly, although there are considerable underlying tensions between the country's major ethnolinguistic groups, regionalism has a minimal impact on national politics. Duterte sought to exploit residual anti-Manila sentiment outside the National Capital Region, but in practice he has broad support throughout the country.

A second alternative way to look at polarization focuses purely on support for or opposition to the government. During the Marcos presidency, for instance, the cleaving of both the elite and the masses into pro- and anti-Marcos factions could be seen as evidence of intense (if temporary) polarization, as region, ideology, and interests all momentarily aligned to form a master cleavage. Is there evidence of this kind of pro- and antigovernment polarization under Duterte, a populist and often antidemocratic leader?

In a word, no. Although Duterte has prominent domestic critics, it would be a mistake to say that Filipinos are divided into persistent pro- and anti-Duterte blocs. Duterte began his term in office with high approval ratings, as most presidents in the post–martial law period have. However, Duterte's popularity has proven much more enduring than that of his predecessors. Social Weather Stations polls indicate that, in December 2019, Duterte reached his highest level of popularity to date, with a net approval rating of 72 percent.[25] Furthermore, even though factors such as class, region, and gender may partially predict individuals' attitudes toward Duterte, his approval rating is high across different demographic categories. According to a December 2019 Pulse Asia Research poll, only 4 percent of Filipinos disapprove of Duterte's performance.[26] Opposition to his government is, in the statistical sense, marginal. This does not rule out the possibility that views of Duterte could change in the future, but at present, there is simply no sizable constituency opposed to the president, at least as measured by public opinion polls.

POLARIZATION, DEMOCRACY, AND THE WAR ON DRUGS

Although the existence of regional and socioeconomic inequality could predispose the Philippines toward polarization, the way in which political parties or factions are structured around locally and nationally prominent oligarchs and celebrities tends to preclude the development of political blocs in which multiple salient cleavages overlap. Owing to the lack of enduring political identities, the fate of any national administration depends to a large degree on its performance. Filipinos have repeatedly shown their willingness to turn against once popular leaders. Here the peculiarity of Duterte's appeal comes in.

It is impossible to explain his popularity without considering the war on drugs. It was only after Duterte made crime the signature element of his campaign in early 2016 that he surged to the top of national public opinion polls. The number of respondents stating that "curbing the widespread sale and use of illegal drugs" was the most important issue facing

the nation rose from 36 percent in January 2016 to 41 percent in April 2016.[27] Predictably enough, there is a positive correlation between concerns over criminality and support for Duterte.

Although assessments of Filipino politics often portray law-and-order issues as a creation of Duterte, Filipinos' substantial concerns over crime date back to before his presidential run. As far back as October 2015, respondents were asked, in an open-ended question, to identify the primary problem or issue in their locality that the next president should immediately address. In this survey, a plurality (21 percent) of respondents identified illegal drugs as their primary concern, narrowly eclipsing the second-most important problem, the lack of jobs or a source of livelihood. Similarly, illegal drugs were the top concern for roughly one-third of respondents in the National Capital Region (34 percent) and the country's most affluent socioeconomic class (ABC) (31 percent)—two groups from which Duterte consistently obtained significant support before and in the election. The proliferation of illegal drugs was also the most pressing concern (21 percent) for the largest Philippine socioeconomic class (D).[28]

Prior to Duterte's election, there was, moreover, growing disenchantment with the government's handling of crime. Approval of the Noynoy Aquino government's performance fighting criminality remained constant at 54 percent between March 2011 and June 2014, but then it began declining, falling to around 45 percent even before Duterte declared his candidacy for president.[29] Philippine National Police data indicate that an increase in real reported crime levels preceded this drop in public approval of the government's performance on crime.[30] So crime, and especially drug crime, was already a serious issue before Duterte further popularized it. He thus tapped into a latent demand for law and order.

Support for the war on illegal drugs has remained robust since Duterte's election. In a December 2019 poll, 93 percent of respondents supported the antidrug campaign, whereas only 3 percent did not. Levels of support for Duterte are even higher than those expressed in the first post–drug war survey conducted in September 2016. Surprisingly, this overwhelming support exists despite widespread reservations about police conduct. As of March 2017, about half of respondents believed that the police disregard the rights of drug suspects in conducting their operations. Moreover, in a March 2018 survey, 79 percent agreed that extrajudicial killings occur, and 68 percent were worried that they, a relative, or someone they knew might be killed because of drug war operations. Yet even among this group, support for the campaign remains overwhelming.[31]

Support for the drug war also cuts across other cleavages. Those with populist attitudes—viewing "the people" positively while viewing the "elite" negatively—and those who describe Duterte as a charismatic leader are more inclined to view the drug war positively.[32] However, there is no association between explicitly authoritarian attitudes and support for the antidrug campaign. Belief in the potential necessity of a return to martial law to solve

the country's problems has remained steady at around one-third of respondents throughout Duterte's term in office, and this belief is uncorrelated with support for the drug war. As one recent headline stated, the "drug war is wildly popular."[33]

CRACKS IN THE EDIFICE?

At present, the Philippines shows no signs of emerging political polarization. This does not mean that Duterte is invulnerable. His base of support has little ideology or identity to tie it together. His popularity emanates from his association with his government's signature war on drugs. Were the campaign itself to become unpopular, the support that so quickly flocked to him in 2016 could shift just as swiftly.

Yet there are no indications of such a turn on the horizon. Although there is little evidence that the killings have done much to curb addiction or eliminate high-ranking cartel members, the militarization of the country's antidrug strategy has not resulted in a general deterioration of law and order (unlike in Mexico and Central America), an outcome that might undermine public support for the cause. Indeed, qualitative evidence indicates that people are satisfied with the results to date. Missteps, such as the police's killing of an unarmed seventeen-year-old, Kian Delos Santos, in August 2017, had little perceptible impact on Duterte's popularity. The president turned the blame on the offending police officers, and the boy's parents even posed for a picture with him, publicly absolving Duterte of any guilt. Although the country's drug war is incredibly controversial outside the Philippines, it shows no signs of losing its domestic appeal.

It is also possible that economic or foreign policy issues could undermine Duterte's popularity. The most precipitous drop in Duterte's approval rating occurred as inflation rose on the back of higher rice prices. His administration quickly responded by allowing for the free importation of rice (subject to a tariff), and his approval ratings rebounded above their precrisis levels. However, as of September 2019, inflation remained the top concern of a plurality of Filipinos (21 percent).[34] Filipino voters may also expect Duterte to deliver on his promises to create more and better-paying jobs. So far, he has received the benefit of the doubt while he concentrates on law-and-order issues, but if he fails to show results on the economy soon, it is possible that his support could ebb away.

Another point of vulnerability is foreign policy. Duterte's pivot to China has been unpopular in the Philippines where, according to a 2014 Pew study, 92 percent of the public has a favorable view of the United States. Indeed, Pew found that the Philippines is the most pro-American country in the world.[35] On this issue, however, even though Duterte's seemingly soft stance toward China over the territorial integrity of the Philippines in the South China Sea has caused considerable consternation among politicos, as of September 2019, fewer than 3 percent of Filipinos rated "defending the integrity of the Philippines' territory" as the most important problem facing the country.[36]

Ultimately, however, even if Duterte loses some support over economic and foreign policy issues, it is currently difficult to see this dissatisfaction coalescing into a coherent anti-Duterte opposition. In this respect, the governmental and public responses to the coronavirus outbreak in early 2020 are illustrative. An underfunded public healthcare system and high population density, especially around Manila, make the Philippines particularly vulnerable to the virus. With many workers engaged in the informal economy, large parts of the population also face desperate privation.

The Philippines may chart a political trajectory that more closely resembles the Russian experience, with the massive popularity of the president translating into something even more unipolar, albeit much less democratic.

The government response has been equivocal. Duterte initially downplayed the seriousness of the virus, only to later reverse course and impose a near-total lockdown as the outbreak worsened. It is not yet clear whether the spread of the virus has begun to affect Duterte's popularity, but the longer it persists, the more likely this scenario becomes. National leaders elsewhere in the world who have risen in popularity since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, such as New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, have done so because they have been highly effective in mitigating its impact.[37] Ultimately, the Duterte government's performance will be telling for his popularity.

Should Duterte seek to extend his term in office—through a constitutional amendment, perhaps—it is possible that a more coherent democratic opposition could emerge ahead of the 2022 presidential election. A public emergency, such as the coronavirus outbreak, could provide a pretext for the president to seek expanded authorities. Indeed, on March 24, Duterte signed into law the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act, which greatly enhances his powers to deal with the emergency created by the pandemic.[38] Filipino authorities arrested almost 30,000 quarantine violators in the month prior to April 17, and Duterte warned of a police and military "takeover" should people continue to break quarantine measures.[39] Most recently, in June 2020, Filipino legislators passed a new antiterrorism bill that grants the government broad authority to stifle dissent.[40]

The Philippines is unlike many other countries where populism reigns. In places like Turkey and Venezuela, populist presidents have exploited emergency conditions to consolidate power, intensifying political polarization along a pro- versus antigovernment axis. However, in these cases, polarization was already present. In contrast, given the fractured and personalistic nature of Philippine politics, it does not appear that endemic polarization is likely to develop. Rather, the country may chart a political trajectory that more closely resembles the Russian experience, with the massive popularity of the president translating into something even more unipolar, albeit much less democratic.

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CONCLUSIONS

Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue

AS THE CASE STUDIES in this report illustrate, it would be impossible to understand the contemporary politics of South and Southeast Asia without significant attention to political polarization. In five of the six country cases considered here—India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand—long-standing sociopolitical divisions have become inflamed during the past two decades and clearly represent a threat to democratic governance and social cohesion. In numerous other countries throughout these regions—such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan—the power and dangers of deep sociopolitical and sociocultural divides are similarly evident.

This chapter synthesizes cross-cutting findings in the five focal areas that make up the organizing framework for this study: roots, trajectories, drivers, consequences, and remedial actions. Behind the profound diversity of the countries under study lie some illuminating commonalities in the dynamics of polarization, alongside some revealing particularities. Examining these patterns reveals how polarization in South and Southeast Asia compares to polarization in other regions. The final section offers some guidelines and recommendations for domestic and transnational actors seeking to counter polarization.

ROOTS

In *Democracies Divided*, we found that severe polarization is usually rooted in one or more of three main types of societal fissures: religious, ethnic, or ideological.[1] Other divisions that might dominate national politics—such as caste, regional, or urban-rural divides—tend

to be subsumed by or reinforce one of these overriding cleavages. The cases in this report provide strong evidence of this pattern for South and Southeast Asia.

Religious and ethnic identity form the most common basis for polarization in these regions. In India and Indonesia, the main divide is religious and involves a clash between more majoritarian and more pluralist views of what role the country's dominant religion should play in sociopolitical life. In Malaysia and Sri Lanka, the primary division is ethnic, although it largely aligns with a religious cleavage as well. Over time, Malaysia's polarization between Malays on the one hand and non-Malay minority groups on the other has fused with a divide between Islamists and secularists and with a further cleavage over the issue of political reform. Sri Lanka's schism between the Sinhalese and other ethnic groups is also connected to a divide between Buddhists and religious minorities, especially Hindus and Muslims.

However, the predominance of religious and ethnic divisions is neither natural nor inevitable. It is frequently the result of deliberate efforts by political actors to elevate these identities over other dividing lines, such as caste, class, or region. In India, for instance, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has stoked religious polarization to win over Hindu voters who might otherwise have supported caste-based parties. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, political leaders have pushed ethnic divisions to the forefront of politics and in so doing have subordinated other cleavages that exist within and cut across ethnic communities.

Although religious and ethnic divisions are most prominent across South and Southeast Asia, severe polarization can take root even in relatively homogeneous societies, such as Thailand, where the main divide is ideological.[2] But this divide bears only partial resemblance to a European-style right-versus-left division. It entails a deep-seated and sustained disagreement over the appropriate role of royal nationalism in the country's sociopolitical life. Whereas Thailand's royal nationalist camp defends the enduring political power of the monarchy and a hierarchical social order, the opposing side demands a more democratic and egalitarian polity. This complex divide has important religious underpinnings, since the ideology of royal nationalism has drawn on an interpretation of Buddhist teachings to justify sociopolitical hierarchies. This cleavage has also taken on some socioeconomic left-right dimensions over its long course. During the past two decades, for instance, the rival camps have become increasingly split by social class and support for policies that enhance social mobility.

The Philippines stands out as a case with little to no political polarization, despite its significant ethnolinguistic diversity and high levels of socioeconomic inequality. However, the absence of a stable, overarching partisan division over the past forty years does not indicate that the Philippines has built a highly inclusive or harmonious democracy. Rather, this lack of partisan polarization derives from the dominance of personalistic leadership and powerful patronage networks, two features of the country's political life that have rendered party labels and loyalties practically meaningless. In recent years, the immense popularity

of President Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs has tempered divisions, though at the cost of thousands of lives.[3] Thus, the existence of societal fissures does not make polarization inevitable, but in the Philippines, the forces preventing entrenched political divisions have been decidedly undemocratic.

Finally, it is striking that in all the cases that display significant amounts of polarization, the roots of today's divisions are deep, dating back at least to the first half of the twentieth century. These divides have their antecedents in fierce debates over the basis of national identity that emerged during anticolonial struggles in four of the country cases (and in Thailand's case, during the 1932 revolution against the absolute monarchy). They are thus what Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer call "formative rifts": original cracks in the state as it was being established.[4] This fact underlines how fundamental these divisions are and how hard they are to bridge.

TRAJECTORIES

Over the course of the twentieth century, polarization followed diverse trajectories in the case studies examined here. Although identity-based divides frequently date back to the formation of the modern nation-state, some countries managed to avoid severe polarization for many years after gaining independence. In India, three decades of rule by the Congress Party, with its secular and pluralist agenda, kept divisive Hindu nationalist forces on the sidelines of sociopolitical life, at least until the late 1970s. In Malaysia, an ethos of nation building helped limit racial and religious divisions for more than a decade after independence in 1957. By contrast, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand all experienced intense polarization during the mid-twentieth century, frequently fueled by Cold War divides between communists and anticommunists.

During the twenty-first century, however, several of these countries have seen intensifying polarization, consistent with the finding in *Democracies Divided* that severe polarization is a defining trend of contemporary political life in many democracies globally.[5] In Thailand, the current wave of polarization began in 2001, when prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra rose to power and challenged the dominance of the royalist establishment. In India, although Hindu nationalist forces have been ascendant since the late 1980s, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's stunning success as the leader of the BJP in the 2014 and 2019 general elections has intensified societal divisions. In Indonesia, after a series of contentious elections starting in 2014, the political divide between Islamist and more pluralist forces has become starker than it has been in decades.

In Malaysia and Sri Lanka, divisions have not necessarily deepened over the past two decades, but alternations in power and even some incidents of governmental instability have occurred. In Malaysia, coalitions led by the ethnonationalist United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) held power from independence in 1957 until 2018, yet since then,

the country has seen two dramatic changes in government. The razor-thin majorities of coalition governments since 2018 have led to fierce power struggles among the parties in parliament, and UMNO and its allies have fanned the flames of polarization to win and maintain support. Sri Lanka has also seen control of government swing back and forth in recent years, with hardline Sinhala nationalist forces losing the presidency in 2015 and then regaining it in 2019. The current president's push to consolidate power and mobilize majoritarian social forces amid the coronavirus pandemic has only raised the stakes surrounding Sri Lanka's 2020 parliamentary elections.

DRIVERS

The case studies point to political leadership as a frequent driver of polarization—a pattern our research has identified in democracies elsewhere.[6] Crucially, several politicians have made the inflammation of a core political divide their basic governance strategy, including Modi in India, Thaksin in Thailand, and Gotabaya and Mahinda Rajapaksa in Sri Lanka. What is more, these leaders and others have aggravated divisions by governing in a majoritarian fashion and infringing on liberal democratic rights.

The strategies of opposition political forces are an important factor in determining whether polarization intensifies or de-escalates. In Indonesia, Eve Warburton highlights that the former opposition politician Prabowo Subianto has been critical in "pioneering a sectarian, populist campaign strategy." In Thailand, as Janjira Sombatpoonsiri argues, both political blocs have aggravated divisions while in the opposition by weaponizing mass protests to pressure or oust the incumbent government. The royal nationalist camp, in particular, has resorted to polarizing, antidemocratic tactics by politicizing the judiciary and the military to remove its opponents from office. Conversely, some opposition strategies have eased polarization. As Bridget Welsh writes, the Malaysian opposition's efforts to move toward the center and build a diverse electoral alliance around calls for reform helped it ease divisions and win a historic victory in 2018.

> *The strategies of opposition political forces are an important factor in determining whether polarization intensifies or de-escalates.*

Important as political leadership may be, its impact should not be overstated. In the Philippines, Paul Kenny notes that the rise of Duterte, a populist president with illiberal tendencies, has not fueled polarization. And as seen in the discussion below, an about-face in the behavior of polarizing leaders often is not enough to reduce divisions, at least in the short term. Attention to deeper, structural forces is thus necessary to fully understand the rise of polarization.

Religious revivalism has been one critical factor driving polarization. As Welsh observes, increasing levels of religiosity in Malaysian society since the 1970s and the expansion of the state's Islamic bureaucracy amplified the country's Islamist-secular divide. In Indonesia, the steady Islamization of sociocultural life, according to Warburton, set the stage for today's polarizing fights between conservative Islamists and more pluralist political figures. Religious revivalism has extended beyond Islam as well. In India, avid and ubiquitous religious practice, institutionalized through numerous forms of community activities, provided an important foundation for the rise of the Hindu right.[7]

The key driver of polarization appears not to be religiosity per se, but rather sociopolitical mobilization around the idea that religion should play a larger role in public life. The Philippines, for instance, also has high levels of religiosity, but potentially charged issues such as sex education have not stirred lasting divisions, as they have in other predominantly Catholic countries like Poland.[8] One reason is that the Catholic Church has limited influence over how ordinary Filipinos vote, as evidenced most recently by its ineffectual opposition to Duterte.[9] In comparative perspective, sociopolitical mobilization around religion seems to be a key variable explaining why some countries become polarized and others do not.

During the twenty-first century, the U.S.-led Global War on Terrorism and intense fears about Islamic radicalism have further fanned the flames of religious polarization. In Sri Lanka, as Ahilan Kadirgamar observes, Sinhala Buddhist nationalist forces have invoked the rhetoric of the war on terror to paint the country's Muslim minority as an insidious enemy.[10] Politicians have latched onto this discourse to promote a militarized mindset in dealing with key political challenges, including the coronavirus pandemic, tactics that are deeply alienating for minority groups. In India, the major political parties have demonized one another with the labels "jihadi terror" and "Hindu terror," and at the societal level, the recent explosion of the Twitter hashtag "CoronaJihad" is just the latest example of how the rhetoric of terrorism has fed Islamophobia.[11] Even in a Muslim-majority country like Indonesia, more pluralist politicians have leveraged polarizing narratives by accusing their opponents of trying to turn the country into an Islamic caliphate.

In several cases, economic transformation has also worsened political polarization. Observers frequently hope that economic growth will ease divisions, but in fact it often deepens them. In India, for example, Niranjan Sahoo argues that urbanization and the growth of the middle class since the 1990s have paradoxically exacerbated sociopolitical divisions, since "urban voters tend to be more rather than less supportive of Hindu nationalist narratives." In Thailand, economic liberalization and growth since the 1990s have created new opportunities for the rural poor and thereby unsettled the country's rigidly hierarchical social order. Thaksin channeled these aspirations for social mobility into what became a polarizing challenge to the political establishment. Finally, in Malaysia, Welsh finds that economic growth has created constituencies for reform that have ended up contesting the country's long-

standing economic and political order. At the same time, however, Malaysia's growth has produced rising economic inequality and insecurity, which ethnonationalist parties have skillfully harnessed to their advantage.

Features of political system design are important as well in creating strengths or vulnerabilities with regard to polarization. First-past-the-post electoral rules have contributed to harsh binary divisions in India and Malaysia. In Sri Lanka, first-past-the-post elections set in motion patterns of ethnic political mobilization that persist to this day, even though the country switched to a proportional representation system after 1978. In Thailand, Sombatpoonsiri notes that the "winner-take-all electoral formula" adopted in the country's 1997 constitution strengthened Thaksin's control of parliament and fueled conflict between the pro- and anti-establishment blocs. Another key design feature is the degree of centralization of political power. In Sri Lanka, Kadirgamar argues, the establishment of a highly centralized unitary state has exacerbated polarization by allowing the Sinhala majority to monopolize control. By contrast, India's federal system has helped keep at least some conflicts revolving around ethnicity, language, or divisive identity issues from rising up to threaten democracy at the national level.[12]

A final driver that has played a significant role in all the cases is a changing media landscape. One dimension of this change has been the rise of social media, with its well-known effects of magnifying extreme viewpoints and allowing opposing camps to inhabit separate informational spheres. In places such as India and Sri Lanka, social media has been a key platform for spreading hateful messages about minority groups, most recently during the coronavirus pandemic. Another and perhaps more significant transformation has been the commercialization of the media over the past several decades. This change has given new prominence to private media outlets that represent narrow partisan views and has reduced the weight of traditional gatekeeper outlets that play more to the political center. Sombatpoonsiri notes this effect in Thailand, as does Sahoo in India.

CONSEQUENCES

The experiences of South and Southeast Asian countries underscore the diverse and serious ways in which polarization degrades democratic institutions and governance. Polarized politics have led to attacks on the independence of the judiciary in India, have debilitated legislative efforts to address various governance challenges in Malaysia, and have prompted executive abuse of power against political opponents in Indonesia. In some countries, such as Sri Lanka and Thailand, fierce competition for power has resulted in the politicization of state bureaucracies and key institutions like the military. At the level of political parties, the success of one camp championing an exclusive vision of national identity has sometimes caused its opponents to adopt certain elements of that vision, allowing majoritarian ideas to gain broader acceptance across the political spectrum.

The negative consequences of polarization often are significant enough to cripple democracy. In some countries, the existing constitutional orders have proven unable to contain or resolve polarizing divisions, resulting in democratic breakdown or even civil war. Thailand's hopes for democracy have been shattered by successive military coups that have grown out of a harsh sociopolitical divide. In Sri Lanka, a civil war born out of deeply rooted polarization endured for twenty-six years and claimed countless lives.

A brief glance elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia indicates that these dire negative outcomes unfortunately are not exceptional. In Bangladesh, as Naomi Hossain writes in *Democracies Divided*, acrimonious partisan competition, particularly in a context with weak institutional checks and balances, contributed to a military intervention in 2007–2008 and subsequently to the consolidation of de facto one-party rule.[13] Nepal's nascent democratic system of the early 1990s was not polarized in a binary fashion, but the radicalization of a faction of the left into an armed Maoist insurgency and the resultant civil war reflected an acute ideological divide. In Afghanistan, deep polarization over ethnicity and the role of religion in sociopolitical life is a major impediment to sustaining electoral politics and negotiating an end to the ongoing conflict.

In other cases, the overall political damage inflicted by polarization is not yet so serious, but the warning signs are worrisome. Sahoo, like many other observers, argues that democracy and pluralism in India are now in serious danger, as the Modi government has made religion a basis for granting citizenship and has provoked fears that Indian Muslims could be stripped of their citizenship rights.[14] In Indonesia, polarizing political conflicts that emerged in 2014 have already eroded core democratic institutions and norms, with the current government now cracking down on political opponents in troubling ways. Festering divisions in Malaysia contributed to the collapse of the governing coalition that took office in 2018, scuttling what many observers viewed as a historic opportunity for the country to advance toward greater democracy and pluralism.

These cases also highlight that political polarization is rarely just an elite game without wider societal consequences. Elite political entrepreneurs frequently foster powerful

Intensifying societal divisions can even spark intercommunal violence.

societal divisions, and remarkably, they can do so within just a few years, particularly when electoral competition is fused with mass mobilization. For instance, after large-scale Islamist mobilization in 2016–2017, the Indonesian public saw a "drastic increase in exclusivist political attitudes."[15] Surveys from before and after the mobilization revealed that in the span of just a year, the share of Muslims who objected to non-Muslims becoming mayor, governor, or vice president rose by eight percentage points.[16] In the most serious cases, intensifying societal divisions can even spark intercommunal violence. In India, vigilante groups and majoritarian mobs have attacked minorities, especially Dalits and Muslims, often with

impunity, and serious sectarian violence gripped New Delhi as recently as February 2020. In Sri Lanka, the costs of societal divisions and violence over the last several decades have been incalculable.

REMEDIAL ACTIONS AND GUIDELINES

These various case studies underscore that severe political polarization does not heal on its own. It usually has deep roots and diverse drivers, meaning that it often lasts beyond the tenure of a particular polarizing leader. Rather than fading or burning out over time, it tends to become self-reinforcing, as divisive actions and reactions feed on each other in a negative spiral. And although the consequences of polarization are punishing, the political and societal actors with the most power to reduce the problem largely benefit from it and are rarely willing or able to bridge divides. Thus, polarization is akin to a disease that, if left untreated, will steadily worsen and spread infectiously throughout sociopolitical life.

The diverse experiences examined in this report suggest four overarching guidelines for domestic and transnational actors designing, implementing, or evaluating efforts to contain polarization. First, expectations for such initiatives should be kept modest and time frames long. Polarization tends to be rooted in long-standing divisions—aiming to overcome or end it altogether is a recipe for disillusionment. It is better to think in terms of trying to manage the problem and mitigate its harmful effects. Doing so will require sustained efforts that eschew high-profile, quick-win activities in favor of patient relationship building and iterative gains over extended periods of time.

Deep-reaching change will require going beyond short-term bridging efforts to modify a country's political and economic systems, usually in the direction of greater inclusiveness.

Second, whoever seeks to engage against polarization should have an in-depth grasp of a country's economic, political, and societal dynamics to understand what might be useful and what might be futile. Polarization exhibits common patterns across different places, but its roots and drivers vary so much by country that all remedial efforts need to be closely tailored to local contexts.

Third, deep-reaching change will require going beyond short-term bridging efforts to modify the underlying rules and structures of a given country's political and economic systems, usually in the direction of greater inclusiveness.[17] Such modifications may range from the decentralization of power to reforms of electoral systems and political party systems to make them favor greater representation and power sharing. Reformers should anticipate and prepare for the fact that dominant groups will fight back against inclusionary efforts, often leading to increased polarization in the short run. But over the long term, given

that polarizing political forces often arise out of grievances rooted in perceptions or realities of exclusion, inclusiveness is key to making the societal terrain less fertile for divisive political agendas.

Fourth, both domestic and transnational actors seeking to play depolarizing roles need to assume that achieving credibility on both sides of a polarized divide will require persistence, skill, and a strong commitment to higher principles. For domestic civic groups, sources of such credibility may include a proven track record of neutral political engagement, outreach to partners on both sides of a divide, transparency about objectives and methods, and a high degree of technical expertise on relevant reform areas.[18] Transnational actors may feel that they have a reasonable chance of finding a point of entry above the fray by relying on a self-definition of being external mediators. Yet they should assume that the heat of polarized conflict will mean that contending camps may well doubt their good intentions and look for even the slightest sign of an agenda that tilts one way or the other.

Unfortunately, international actors are at risk of contributing to polarization even when they adhere to high standards of neutrality and advance laudable goals. In Sri Lanka, for instance, the Norwegian government's various peace efforts between 1997 and 2009 helped broker tentative steps toward a federal solution, which might have eased polarization.[19] But at the same time, international involvement in the peace process "provoked a nationalist backlash" that divisive political entrepreneurs skillfully exploited.[20] More recently, the international push to achieve reconciliation by addressing wartime human rights abuses in Sri Lanka has further polarized the country.

Across the country cases studied herein, domestic and transnational actors have undertaken three main types of initiatives to address polarization. (A comprehensive list of remedial actions, drawn from the global case set in *Democracies Divided*, would also include efforts such as reforming political institutions and strengthening democratic guardrails.)[21] Regrettably, the track record of attempted remedies thus far primarily highlights the limitations of existing approaches rather than any proven solutions. Understanding these initial shortcomings, however, highlights several policy-relevant insights and recommendations regarding each type of remedial action.

Political Leadership

One consequential yet elusive type of remedial action is change in the behavior of polarizing leaders. In India, Modi has toned down his divisive rhetoric during the coronavirus pandemic and emphasized that the virus "doesn't see religion, language, or borders."[22] In Indonesia, President Joko Widodo's former rival Prabowo joined the government as minister of defense in late 2019, although Warburton observes that this about-face was a sign of unproductive elite collusion rather than genuine bridge building. Unfortunately, both cases demonstrate that at least in the short term, political leaders cannot easily walk back the

polarization that they themselves have helped instigate, especially at the societal level. India, for instance, has witnessed a spike of anti-Muslim hatred during the pandemic, despite the prime minister's calls for unity and solidarity. Nonetheless, had Modi chosen to aggravate divisions amid the crisis, as Gotabaya Rajapaksa has done in Sri Lanka, polarization would undoubtedly pose a greater threat to India's democracy and society.

Political opposition forces may also help de-escalate a political divide by forming broad coalitions that include a wide range of opposition voices. India's opposition has recently shown a greater ability to form productive coalitions, particularly at the state level, to resist the hegemony of the Hindu right, although these opposition alliances suffered a major defeat in the 2019 general elections. In Malaysia, the perennial opposition's gradual movement toward the center over the past two decades helped it achieve a historic victory in 2018. However, as that case illustrates, pluralist coalitions that win power frequently lack the cohesion necessary to govern effectively and survive politically. Malaysia's coalition government, wracked by internal divisions, collapsed in 2020 after less than two years in power. In Sri Lanka as well, the diverse opposition alliance that won the presidency in 2015 could form only a fragile cohabitation government, presided over serious governance failures, and lost the next presidential election by more than a ten-point margin.[23]

Although it is difficult for domestic or international actors to influence political leadership if it has already embraced a governing strategy of divisiveness and confrontation, this analysis points to some areas of opportunity. As Carnegie scholars Ashley Quarcoo and Rachel Kleinfeld have argued, the economic and political shocks caused by the coronavirus have created a window for leaders to build solidarity and trust across partisan divides—and for civic organizations and average citizens to throw their support behind such unifying figures.[24] The difficult global context for governance amid the pandemic also underscores the need for organizations that support political party reform to place greater emphasis on preparing opposition parties for the challenges of governing, particularly in coalition governments.[25] Given that the pandemic may lead voters to eject incumbents in many places, funders could invest in rapid response funds that can support political openings that may be produced by this new form of pandemic-era politics, before such openings snap shut.

Media Reform

Initiatives to fight online extremism and political intimidation, flag misinformation, create nonpartisan news sources, and push for regulations on social media platforms are common across the case studies. In India, notably, Facebook and WhatsApp have sought to prevent the spread of incendiary misinformation by disabling bulk messaging and organized spamming. In Indonesia, fact-checking organizations, journalists' associations, media companies, and international partners have collaborated to fight misinformation during election campaigns.[26]

Across these diverse efforts, a common thread is that civil society initiatives, such as fact-checking groups or organizations that support independent journalism, need to dramatically scale up their activities. Funders, in turn, should anticipate that these groups will need considerable resources to make their voices heard in noisy and competitive media landscapes. At the same time, funders should help independent media platforms become self-sufficient by pointing them toward innovative funding models.[27] Research and democracy support organizations should also help and push social media companies to craft misinformation policies, particularly measures to prevent the spread of hate speech.

Dialogue and Bridging Efforts

Finally, everywhere that intense polarization has set in, at least some parts of civil society have worked to bridge these divides. In countries such as India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka, civic actors have organized interfaith or interethnic dialogues. The syncretic nature of many religious communities, whether Hindus in India or Muslims in Indonesia, has proven a valuable asset supporting dialogue initiatives. On the whole, however, most bridging efforts have struggled to gain traction, overwhelmed by the power of polarizing politicians with their ability to mobilize societal divisions. Furthermore, polarization is often so toxic that it undermines the very idea of an apolitical civil society. In Thailand, for instance, the Peace Witness Group formed as a third-party organization to de-escalate conflicts at protests, but both sides of the political divide viewed its claim to neutrality with suspicion.

Actors engaged in or supporting dialogue and bridging efforts should seek to better understand whether such programs have been effective—and if so, under what conditions and at what scale they make an impact. A meta-analysis of such efforts would be invaluable in guiding the activities of civil society organizations and donors.

The case studies examined in this report illustrate that although sharp sociopolitical divisions are not new in South and Southeast Asia, efforts to address polarization have only recently emerged in many countries as the problem has flared up across these regions. The fact that domestic and international actors have begun to generate some initial responses is encouraging, and the shortcomings of their preliminary efforts should not be cause for resignation. The vast majority of these initiatives have been small in scale, and the diverse actors working on this problem from different angles and in different contexts often have not coordinated or communicated with one another. Actors and organizations seeking to support democratic governance in South and Southeast Asia will need to learn from the limitations of previous efforts, develop expanded and collaborative initiatives, and think systematically about countering polarization if they are to come to grips with the gravity of the challenge it presents.

NOTES

1   Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue eds., *Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2019), 257–262.

2   In Thailand, as of 2015, 97.5 percent of the population was ethnically Thai, and 94.6 percent of the population was Buddhist. See the CIA World Factbook, "Thailand," www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/geos/th.html.

3   Howard Johnson and Christopher Giles, "Philippines Drug War: Do We Know How Many Have Died?" BBC, November 12, 2019, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-50236481.

4   Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, "Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies," *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681, no. 1 (2019): 237.

5   Carothers and O'Donohue, *Democracies Divided*, 1–4.

6   Carothers and O'Donohue, *Democracies Divided*, 263–265.

7   Sanjay Kumar and Pranav Gupta, "Why India's Political Parties Are Embracing Hindu Rituals," *LiveMint*, March 9, 2020, www.livemint.com/news/india/why-india-s-political-parties-are-embracing-hindu-rituals-11583733286805.html; and Pradeep K. Chhibber and Rahul Verma, *Ideology and Identity: The Changing Party Systems of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 162–163.

8   In fact, Anna Grzymała-Busse notes that the Philippines and Poland are comparable cases in that both populations display high levels of religiosity but also overwhelmingly reject church influence in politics. Notably, in the Philippines, 99 percent of poll respondents state that they believe in God and 80 percent say that they attend church frequently, but 76 percent oppose church influence on politics. See Anna Grzymała-Busse, *Nations Under God: How Churches Use Moral Authority to Influence Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 6, 36.

9   Paterno Esmaquel II, "When the Catholic Church Flexes Political Muscles," *Rappler*, March 17, 2019, www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/225763-when-catholic-church-flexes-political-muscles-moral-duty.

10 As Kadirgamar notes, at least two domestic factors—the end of the civil war in 2009 and the Easter bombings in 2019—have also driven anti-Muslim sentiment.

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12 For a comparative analysis of how political institutions such as asymmetrical federalism have mitigated polarization in India but exacerbated it in Sri Lanka, see especially chapters 4 and 5 of Alfred Stepan, Juan J. Linz, and Yogendra Yadav, *Crafting State-Nations: India and Other Multinational Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

13 Naomi Hossain, "Winner Takes All: Elite Power Struggles and Polarization in Bangladesh," in Carothers and O'Donohue, *Democracies Divided*, 177–200.

14 Jayshree Bajoria, "CoronaJihad Is Only the Latest Manifestation: Islamophobia in India Has Been Years in the Making," Human Rights Watch, May 1, 2020, www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/01/coronajihad-only-latest-manifestation-islamophobia-india-has-been-years-making.

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16 Mietzner, Muhtadi, and Halida, "Entrepreneurs of Grievance," 169.

17 For an in-depth analysis of how practitioners can design and evaluate programs that alter the rules of a sociopolitical system, see Rachel Kleinfeld, *Improving Development Aid Design and Evaluation: Plan for Sailboats, Not Trains* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015).

18 For a discussion of how civil society organizations can build and defend their legitimacy, particularly in polarized political contexts, see Saskia Brechenmacher and Thomas Carothers, "The Legitimacy Menu," in *Examining Civil Society Legitimacy*, Saskia Brechenmacher and Thomas Carothers eds. (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2018).

19 Notably, after the December 2002 Oslo talks, the parties agreed in a press statement to explore a federal solution. See Jonathan Goodhand, Bart Klem, and Gunnar Sørbø, *Pawns of Peace: Evaluation of Norwegian Peace Efforts in Sri Lanka, 1997–2009*, commissioned by the Norad Evaluation Department, Report No. 5/2011, September 2011, 39–40.

20 Goodhand, Klem, and Sørbø, *Pawns of Peace*, 130.

21 Carothers and O'Donohue, *Democracies Divided*, 277–283.

22 For an analysis of how the pandemic has affected polarization in India, see Niranjan Sahoo, "India: Infections, Islamophobia, and Intensifying Societal Polarization," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 28, 2020, https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/28/india-infections-islamophobia-and-intensifying-societal-polarization-pub-81646.

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