

Between democracy and autocracy 2024 – Asia’s bumper election year

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Bonn, 4 March 2024. When we in Germany think of elections at the moment, our mind often jumps first of all to the US, where Donald Trump might soon be moving back into the White House, or to the upcoming federal state and European Parliament elections, where a shift to the right is a real possibility. Yet 2024 is also a bumper election year in Asia, where the wide-ranging role that elections can play for democracy and autocracy is apparent.

In India, the world’s biggest democracy, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will go into the upcoming general election as the favourite. Meanwhile, the third-largest democracy on the planet – Indonesia – voted for a new president on 14 February, with unofficial quick counts suggesting victory for the former general Prabowo Subianto. 7 January saw an extremely one-sided election in Bangladesh, with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s Awami League (AL), which has been

ruling the country in an increasingly autocratic fashion in recent years, claiming victory. By contrast, in Pakistan – where the military exercises significant influence – the opposition was at least able to use the elections of 8 February as an opportunity to make its voice heard in public.

Elections as a crossroads: for both India and Indonesia this year’s elections could turn out to be something of a crossroads for democracy. Prime Minister Modi was voted to power in both in 2014 and 2019 and enjoys wide popularity. However, discrimination against religious minorities has increased sharply under the BJP; human rights activists are being persecuted and the opposition’s freedoms curtailed. As early as 2021, the V-Dem Institute classified India as an electoral autocracy due not least to its restrictions on freedom of speech and association. Another factor was the deteriorating quality of its elections, which was partly the result of the diminishing autonomy of its electoral management body, shortcomings in its election voter registry and intimidation. If Modi wins another term to take him through to 2029, independent checks and balances could be weakened so severely that India’s descent into autocracy could be hard to reverse.

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Prabowo was backed by between 57 and 59 per cent of Indonesians according to the aforementioned quick counts. This is despite the fact that he is the son-in-law of former military dictator Suharto and has been accused of serious human rights abuses. During the election campaign, Prabowo presented himself as a “cuddly grandpa” who would regularly show off his dance moves. He also formed a tactical alliance with his former arch-rival and current president Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”), who was once seen as a beacon of hope for liberals. Jokowi’s son was picked as Prabowo’s running mate and is now set to become his vice president.

Elections as an instrument of autocratic rule: where autocrats are in power, they often use unfree elections in a targeted way to consolidate their rule and bestow

it with legitimacy. Thus, Bangladesh’s ruling AL party exercised strict control over the outcome of the country’s elections, with AL representatives being put up as independent candidates. The opposition claims that some 20,000 political opponents were thrown in prison in the run-up to polling day. In Cambodia, the Cambodian People’s Party held elections in the summer of 2023 to cement their autocratic one-party rule and carry out a reshuffle within the party and government. Here too, repression was ramped up before the polls opened. For instance, the last independent media outlet in the country, the *Voice of Democracy*, found itself banned.

Elections providing a window of freedom in autocratic regimes: in other autocratic contexts, meanwhile, elections provide a window of opportunity for the opposition and civil society to mobilise support and shine a light on democratic deficits. In Pakistan, for example, the military was itself in power for a time and now dominates politics from behind the scenes. In February’s elections, however, independent candidates linked to the jailed former prime minister Imran Khan won more seats than those apparently backed by the military. Yet they are not permitted to form the government. Already before the elections, Khan’s supporters were denouncing electoral fraud – and continue to do so. Thailand’s military seized power in a coup back in 2014 and proceeded to devise a constitution that cements its role as veto player. Nevertheless, the parliamentary elections in May 2023 were won by the progressive Move Forward Party, which emerged out of a broad-based civic movement. Even though it too has remained excluded from power, the elections still helped it to mobilise supporters and make its demands publicly known.

Many factors affect the role that elections can play for democracy and autocracy. Besides the issue of whether elections are free on polling day itself, these factors also include whether voters have unimpeded access to information and whether the opposition and civil society can act unobstructed. Free and fair elections lie at the very heart of democracy. Yet the subjection of an elected government to the rule of law, the protection of minorities and possibilities for civic participation are also key, because elections can also be a way for undemocratic actors to pursue their aims. In autocratic contexts, elections can become an instrument of repression as well as provide a window of freedom. Across the world, democracy does not just need elections – it also needs democrats.