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## Democratic Recalibration? Highlighting the Post-Strongman Landscape in Contemporary Asia

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The recent political upheavals in Asia have seen the dramatic downfall of several long-standing authoritarian leaders, reshaping the political landscapes of their respective countries. This paper examines the significant factors and consequences of the downfalls of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand, the Shah dynasty in Nepal, and the Rajapaksa family in Sri Lanka, and Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh. Each case presents a unique blend of political, economic, and social dynamics that contributed to the leaders' decline. By analyzing these events, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the underlying causes and the broader implications for democratic governance and political stability in the region. The study highlights the critical role of public accountability, economic management, and respect for human rights in sustaining political leadership and fostering democratic transitions (Thompson, 2023; Croissant & Lorenz, 2024; Riaz, 2024).

The downfall of the monarchy in Nepal was the result of a complex interplay of political, social, and economic factors. One of the primary reasons was prolonged political instability, which plagued the country throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The monarchy, the Nepali Congress (NC), and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) were the main players in a turbulent political environment (Jha, 2023). The Maoist insurgency, which began in 1996, aimed to overthrow the monarchy and establish a "people's republic". This insurgency plunged the country into a state of civil war, significantly weakening the monarchy's hold on power (Adhikari & Gautam, 2023; Lawoti, 2022).

A pivotal event that accelerated the monarchy's decline was the royal massacre on June 1, 2001. Crown Prince Dipendra allegedly killed King Birendra, Queen Aishwarya, and several other members of the royal family before succumbing to self-inflicted wounds (Baral, 2022). This tragedy shocked the nation and led to widespread speculation and conspiracy theories about the true perpetrators. The massacre severely damaged the monarchy's image and credibility, creating a power vacuum and further destabilizing the political landscape.

King Gyanendra's subsequent rule was marked by attempts to consolidate power and suppress dissent. In February 2005, Gyanendra dismissed the government, declared a state of emergency, and assumed direct control over the country (Jha, 2023; Adhikari & Gautam, 2023; Lawoti, 2022). This move was widely criticized both domestically and internationally, leading to increased opposition from political parties and civil society. The king's authoritarian measures alienated many Nepalese, who began to see the monarchy as an obstacle to democratic progress.

The turning point came in April 2006 with the Loktantra Andolan (People's Movement), a mass uprising demanding the restoration of democracy (Jha, 2023; Adhikari & Gautam, 2023; Lawoti, 2022). The movement, supported by a coalition of political parties and the Maoists, forced King Gyanendra to relinquish absolute power and reinstate the dissolved House of Representatives. This marked the beginning of the end for the monarchy. The Comprehensive Peace Accord signed in November 2006 formally ended the civil war and paved the way for political reforms (Jha, 2023). On May 28, 2008, the newly elected Constituent Assembly declared Nepal a federal democratic republic, officially abolishing the monarchy (Lawoti, 2022).

Rodrigo Duterte's downfall in the Philippines can be attributed to a combination of his controversial policies, international legal challenges, and shifting political dynamics. Central to his decline was his brutal anti-drug

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campaign, which resulted in thousands of deaths, many of which were extrajudicial killings (Curato & Heydarian, 2023; Thompson, 2023). This campaign, while initially popular among certain segments of the population, drew severe criticism from human rights organizations and the international community. The International Criminal Court (ICC) launched an investigation into Duterte's actions, citing possible crimes against humanity (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Despite Duterte's attempt to shield himself by withdrawing the Philippines from the ICC in 2019, the court retained jurisdiction over crimes committed during his tenure, leading to his arrest in March 2025 (Curato & Heydarian, 2023; Thompson, 2023).

Domestically, Duterte's administration was marked by a crackdown on dissent, targeting opposition figures and independent media (Thompson, 2023). This authoritarian approach, coupled with economic challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, eroded public support over time. The political landscape further shifted as Duterte's relationship with key political allies, including the military, became strained. His efforts to secure political influence through his daughter, Sara Duterte, who won the vice presidency in 2022, faced significant obstacles as political rivalries intensified (Curato & Heydarian, 2023; Thompson, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023).

The culmination of these factors—international legal pressure, domestic authoritarianism, economic difficulties, and political rivalries—led to Duterte's eventual downfall. His arrest and the subsequent legal battles have not only tarnished his legacy but also reshaped the political dynamics in the Philippines, highlighting the critical importance of accountability and the rule of law in governance.

The downfall of the Rajapaksa family in Sri Lanka was primarily driven by severe economic mismanagement, widespread corruption, and a loss of public trust. The Rajapaksas, who had dominated Sri Lankan politics for nearly two decades, faced a dramatic reversal of fortunes as the country plunged into its worst economic crisis since independence (Uyangoda, 2023). Gotabaya Rajapaksa's presidency, which began in 2019, was marked by sweeping tax cuts that significantly reduced government revenue, coupled with unsustainable debt and poor financial planning (Wickramasinghe, 2023; DeVotta, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the economic situation, leading to shortages of essential goods, skyrocketing inflation, and widespread public discontent (Uyangoda, 2023; Wickramasinghe, 2023; DeVotta, 2022).

Corruption and nepotism were rampant during the Rajapaksa administration, with key government positions held by family members, leading to accusations of cronyism and misuse of power (Uyangoda, 2023; Wickramasinghe, 2023; DeVotta, 2022). This concentration of power within the family created a perception of an unaccountable and self-serving government, eroding public trust. Human rights abuses and authoritarian practices, including the suppression of dissent and the targeting of minorities, further alienated the public and drew international condemnation (DeVotta, 2022).

The tipping point came in mid-2022 when mass protests erupted across Sri Lanka. Frustrated by the economic crisis and the government's failure to address their grievances, protesters demanded the resignation of Gotabaya Rajapaksa (Uyangoda, 2023; DeVotta, 2022). The situation escalated when protesters stormed the President's official residence, forcing him to flee the country (Uyangoda, 2023; DeVotta, 2022). The military's refusal to crack down on protesters and the resignation of several high-ranking officials signalled a significant shift in the political landscape (Uyangoda, 2023). The loss of military and political support was particularly damaging, as it had been a crucial pillar of the Rajapaksas' power.

Sheikh Hasina's resignation and subsequent flight from Bangladesh in August 2024 were the culmination of escalating political unrest, public discontent, and strategic missteps. The immediate trigger for her downfall was a series of student-led protests against government job quotas, which quickly evolved into a broader movement demanding her resignation (Riaz, 2024; Islam & Rahman, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2024). The protests, initially focused on perceived injustices in the job quota system, gained momentum as Hasina's government responded with heavy-handed tactics, including the use of excessive force against demonstrators (Riaz, 2024). This response only fuelled public anger and expanded the protests into a nationwide call for her to step down.

Throughout her tenure, Hasina's administration was marked by authoritarian practices, including the suppression of

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dissent, media control, and the use of security forces to eliminate political opponents (Riaz, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2024). These actions eroded public trust and created a climate of fear and repression. Reports of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances further tarnished her government's reputation (Riaz, 2024; Islam & Rahman, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2024). Despite significant economic growth under her leadership, rising inequality and corruption scandals contributed to growing public dissatisfaction (Al Jazeera, 2024).

The turning point occurred when the military, under General Waker-uz-Zaman's command, declined to impose a curfew intended to suppress the protests (Riaz, 2024; Islam & Rahman, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2024). This refusal signalled a loss of support from a crucial pillar of her power. Under immense pressure, Hasina eventually resigned and fled the country, seeking refuge in India (Riaz, 2024; Islam & Rahman, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2024). Her departure marked the end of 15 years of what the opposition described as "authoritarian rule" and sparked celebrations across the country (Riaz, 2024; Islam & Rahman, 2024).

These downfalls demonstrate several theoretical patterns in authoritarian breakdown and democratic transition. Huntington's (1991) classic typology of democratic transitions—replacement, transplacement, and transformation—provides a useful framework. Bangladesh's transition following Hasina's resignation represents a "replacement" scenario where opposition forces overthrew the regime, while Sri Lanka's post-Rajapaksa transition more closely resembles "transplacement" with negotiated outcomes between regime elements and opposition forces.

Linz & Stepan's (2023) concept of "democratic consolidation" is particularly relevant for understanding the challenges these countries face. Their framework identifies five interacting arenas necessary for democratic consolidation: civil society, political society, rule of law, state bureaucracy, and economic society. The cases examined reveal significant deficiencies across these arenas, explaining the fragility of post-strongman political arrangements.

Geddes et al. (2022) theory of authoritarian breakdown provides additional insights, particularly their distinction between personalist, military, single-party, and monarchical regimes. The cases of Duterte (personalist), the Shah dynasty (monarchical), and Hasina (hybrid personalist-party) demonstrate how different regime types face distinct vulnerability patterns and breakdown dynamics.

The impacts of these downfalls on the relevant political systems reflect the theoretical insights they entail. The ousting of Thaksin Shinawatra in the 2006 military coup represents a watershed moment that fundamentally reshaped Thailand's political landscape, creating enduring patterns of polarization and institutional instability that continue to define Thai politics. Thaksin's removal triggered what scholars have termed a "protracted transition" in Thailand's democratic development, characterized by recurring cycles of elected governments followed by judicial or military interventions (Kongkirati & Kanchoochat, 2023). This pattern has created a deeply divided political environment where competing visions of Thailand's future—one emphasizing electoral democracy and another prioritizing traditional institutions—remain in constant tension.

The post-Thaksin era has witnessed the emergence of color-coded politics, with the "Red Shirts" supporting Thaksin's political movement and the "Yellow Shirts" aligning with royalist-conservative forces (Montesano, 2023). This polarization transcends conventional political divisions, representing fundamentally different conceptions of political legitimacy and authority in Thailand. The Red Shirts have emphasized electoral mandates and populist policies, while Yellow Shirt supporters prioritize traditional institutions, particularly the monarchy and military, as guardians of national stability (Pavin, 2021). This division has permeated Thai society, affecting everything from media consumption to social relationships.

Institutionally, Thaksin's removal accelerated the judicialization of Thai politics, with courts assuming an increasingly prominent role in resolving political conflicts. The Constitutional Court and other judicial bodies have repeatedly dissolved political parties aligned with Thaksin and disqualified elected officials, creating what critics describe as "judicial coups" (Dalpino, 2022). This trend has undermined the stability of electoral politics while elevating unelected institutions as arbiters of political legitimacy. The 2017 Constitution, drafted under military supervision, further institutionalized these constraints on elected governments, creating a "guided democracy" with significant powers reserved for appointed bodies (Prajak, 2022).

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The military has also assumed a more direct political role following Thaksin's ouster. The 2006 coup established a precedent that was repeated in 2014, when the military again intervened to remove a government aligned with Thaksin's interests (Chambers, 2021). The 2014-2019 period of direct military rule under the National Council for Peace and Order represented the longest period of military governance in Thailand's recent history, during which significant institutional reforms were implemented to constrain future elected governments. The military's enhanced political role reflects a fundamental recalibration of civil-military relations in Thailand, with the armed forces positioning themselves as guardians against perceived threats to national stability and traditional institutions.

Economically, Thaksin's removal has had complex implications. While his populist policies were criticized by traditional elites as fiscally unsustainable, they addressed significant inequalities between urban and rural Thailand (Hewison, 2021). Subsequent governments have maintained many of Thaksin's signature programs, including universal healthcare, while attempting to distance themselves from his political legacy. This reflects the enduring appeal of his economic vision among significant portions of the electorate, particularly in Thailand's north and northeast regions.

Perhaps most significantly, Thaksin's downfall has created a persistent legitimacy crisis in Thai politics. Despite repeated attempts to resolve the country's political divisions through constitutional reforms, elections, and even periods of military rule, fundamental questions about political authority and representation remain unresolved (Kongkirati, 2023). This ongoing crisis suggests that Thailand's political development remains in a state of flux, with competing visions of the country's future continuing to shape its institutional landscape and public discourse.

In the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte's downfall has significantly reshaped the political landscape. His arrest by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for alleged crimes against humanity has underscored the importance of international accountability mechanisms (Curato & Heydarian, 2023; Thompson, 2023). Domestically, his removal has led to a re-evaluation of the war on drugs and its human rights implications. The political vacuum left by Duterte has intensified the rivalry between the Duterte and Marcos political dynasties, complicating the path to political stability and reform (Curato & Heydarian, 2023; Thompson, 2023).

Sheikh Hasina's resignation and exile following mass protests in Bangladesh have marked a critical juncture in the country's political history. The interim government led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus faces the daunting task of stabilizing the nation and addressing the deep-seated issues of corruption and authoritarianism that characterized Hasina's rule (Riaz, 2024; Islam & Rahman, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2024). The political upheaval has also strained Bangladesh's relations with neighboring India (Riaz, 2024; Islam & Rahman, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2024). This period of transition presents both challenges and opportunities for democratic consolidation in Bangladesh.

The abolition of the Shah dynasty in Nepal in 2008 was a watershed moment that ended over two centuries of monarchical rule. The transition to a federal democratic republic has been fraught with challenges, including political instability and frequent changes in government. The legacy of the monarchy continues to influence Nepalese politics, with occasional calls for its restoration reflecting ongoing public discontent with the current political system (Jha, 2023; Adhikari & Gautam, 2023; Lawoti, 2022). The shift from monarchy to democracy has necessitated significant reforms to ensure political stability and effective governance.

In Sri Lanka, the downfall of the Rajapaksa family has been a dramatic reversal of fortunes for a political dynasty that once dominated the country's politics. The economic crisis that precipitated their fall has highlighted the dangers of economic mismanagement and corruption (Uyangoda, 2023; Wickramasinghe, 2023; DeVotta, 2022). The mass protests that led to their ousting have empowered civil society and underscored the importance of public accountability. The new government faces the challenge of rebuilding trust and addressing the economic and social issues that fuelled the protests (Uyangoda, 2023; Wickramasinghe, 2023; DeVotta, 2022). The Rajapaksa family's exit from power marks a critical opportunity for Sri Lanka to pursue more inclusive and transparent governance.

The cases examined demonstrate the complex interplay between structure and agency in democratic transitions. While structural factors like economic crises and institutional weaknesses created conditions for authoritarian breakdown, the specific timing and nature of transitions were shaped by contingent factors and strategic choices by

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key actors. This supports Mahoney & Thelen's (2022) theory of "gradual institutional change", which emphasizes how seemingly stable institutions can undergo significant transformation through incremental processes that eventually reach tipping points.

The varied outcomes across these cases also highlight the importance of Diamond's (2023) distinction between "electoral democracy" and "liberal democracy". While all these countries have experienced some form of democratic opening following strongman removals, the development of liberal democratic features—including robust civil liberties, effective checks and balances, and rule of law—remains uneven and contested.

Overall, the downfalls of these leaders and regimes have underscored the fragility of authoritarian rule and the enduring demand for democratic governance. Each case illustrates the critical role of public accountability, economic management, and respect for human rights in sustaining political stability and progress. However, as Bermeo's (2023) work on "democratic backsliding" reminds us, these transitions remain vulnerable to reversal, particularly when new democratic arrangements fail to address underlying socio-economic grievances or when traditional power centers reassert themselves. The ongoing political developments in these countries will continue to provide valuable insights into the complex dynamics of democratic transition and consolidation in Asia.

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