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Two Elections to Watch in 2018: Cambodia & Pakistan

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2018 promises to be a big election year for Asia. Several countries in the region, including Afghanistan, Cambodia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Thailand are scheduled to hold general elections while a handful of others, including Indonesia and South Korea, are slated to conduct local contests.

High levels of uncertainty can also prove to be destabilising for democracy especially in unconsolidated settings.

This post will focus on upcoming general elections in two countries—Cambodia and Pakistan—and will shed light on the prospects and challenges of conducting free and fair contests in each nation. It will make the case that whereas the incumbent regime in Cambodia has virtually eliminated all sources of opposition that could threaten its rule, and has thereby strengthened authoritarianism, recent developments in Pakistan have culminated in heightened uncertainty in that nation.

This uncertainty presents a renewed, albeit different, threat to democracy than is present in the Cambodian case. Nonetheless, the 2018 Cambodian and Pakistani elections will be worth watching as they are likely to have important consequences for the longer-term health and quality of democracy in the two countries.

Cambodia: Perfecting Authoritarianism

Hun Sen, the leader of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), has been Prime Minister of Cambodia for over three decades. Since the Paris Peace Accords of 1991, Sen has used a combination of **patronage**, **electoral manipulation and violence**, and most recently the **law** to maintain and consolidate his position. What was once an **electoral authoritarian regime**—with regular elections but little to no prospects of alternation in power—has slowly transitioned into a "**fully authoritarian state**."

In recent months, the incumbent regime detained the opposition politician, Kem Sokha, who is the leader of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) and clamped down on civil society groups, forcing some of them to shut down. The Supreme Court subsequently **dissolved the CNRP** in November 2017 and imposed a five-year ban on 118 members of the opposition. Cumulatively, while all of these developments essentially ensure that Sen will be victorious once again in July 2018, there are many reasons that make the election worth watching.

First, it will be interesting to see the role that Cambodia's youth will play in the election. Whereas existing research has found that Hun Sen enjoys some support among the **older generation**, younger Cambodians are likely to be less easily intimidated by strongman tactics. As such, the dissolution of the CNRP raises important questions about the extent to which the Cambodian youth will participate in the July election.

Second, and in the longer term, whether or not young people in Cambodia will mobilise to demand political liberalisation remains to be seen. As is well recognised by now, **young people were central drivers of the protests** that engulfed the Middle East during the Arab Spring. For their part, officials from the CPP have **warned** that a popular uprising could result in civil war in Cambodia. Such a prophecy should be eerily familiar to scholars and observers of comparative authoritarianism: prior to the reinstatement of multi-party elections in Kenya in the early 1990s, for instance, long-time autocrat Daniel arap Moi had predicted that political competition would result in bloodshed in the country. Ironically, in the founding multi-party elections of 1992, politicians associated with Moi's Kenya African National Union (KANU) party were the ones who **instrumentalised much of the violence** that occurred around that contest.

Finally, while it is unlikely that Hun Sen will be ousted any time soon, the recent move to exclude opposition parties in Cambodia has **garnered criticism** from both the United States—which has ended its election support to the country—and the EU. At the same time, China has held that it is in favour of seeing Cambodia **carve out its own path**. In light of the fact that China is Cambodia's largest aid donor, Sen is likely to feel secure in the short term. But only time will reveal what the longer-term consequences of alienating Western players will be. On the whole, however, and in keeping with the **conventional wisdom on electoral authoritarianism**, Hun Sen's regime stands out as a classic case of an autocracy that far from transitioning into democracy has skilfully combined elections with the tools necessary for authoritarian maintenance.

Pakistan: Renewed Uncertainty

Pakistan experienced its first transfer of power from **one elected government to another** in 2013. Given the prominent place that the **military has occupied in Pakistani politics** since partition—something that has often been **compared** to the more **circumscribed role** played by the Indian military—the frequency with which military coups have occurred in Pakistan, and the executions and assassinations of civilian leaders, including Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1979 and his daughter Benazir Bhutto in 2007, the 2013 election stood out as a be a watershed moment for the country. However, in July 2017, the Supreme Court of Pakistan disqualified Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on corruption charges after the **Panama Papers** linked Mr. Sharif's family with off-shore accounts. This means that Pakistan is yet to see two successive civilian leaders complete their full terms in office.

At the time of his dismissal, keen observers pointed out that celebrating Sharif's ousting was **premature**, as the event could actually expose Pakistan's nascent democracy to renewed instability, especially if the opposition continued to be an undisciplined force. On August 1, 2017, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, the

Minister for Petroleum and Natural Resources under Mr. Sharif, was **appointed as Prime Minister**. Mr. Abbasi was originally meant to serve as a temporary PM for a 45-day period, which was eventually extended until the 2018 general election.

Although a definite date is yet to be set, the Pakistani general election is scheduled to be held within 90 days of June 5. Mr. Sharif's removal has certainly been a blow to the ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party. However, it is unclear whether the two main opposition parties—the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP)—will be able to effectively leverage this development to their advantage.

There is some evidence that suggests that the position of Mr. Imran Khan, the charismatic former cricketer and leader of the PTI has been **strengthened** by the dismissal of Mr. Sharif. But whether this alone will be sufficient for an electoral victory remains to be seen. After all, winning an election is contingent on not only defeating rival parties but also on consolidating support behind one's own banner. And in the latter regard, Mr. Khan has faced **significant challenges** in the past. For its part, the fate of the PPP is also uncertain. Whereas the party **appeared willing** to create a coalition against the PTI late last year, as of late December, the Chairman of the party, Bilawal Bhutto, has stated that **no such alliance** will be crafted.

Democracy has famously been described as a system of **institutionalised uncertainty in which parties lose elections**. As such, some level of unpredictability about electoral results is a defining feature of democratic competition. But high levels of uncertainty can also prove to be destabilising for democracy especially in unconsolidated settings. Given Pakistan's troubles in maintaining democracy in the past, the recent ousting of Sharif will only add to uncertainty around the 2018 election. And while the situation is still unfolding, the months and weeks prior to the election as well as the results of the general contest are likely to have important consequences for the future of Pakistani democracy.

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