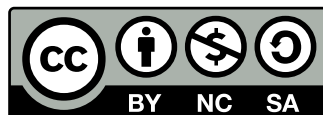# IMAGINING DEMOCRATIC FUTURES: ASIA AND THE PACIFIC FORESIGHT REPORT 2024

Discussion Paper 6/2023

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Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

AI	Artificial intelligence
EV	Electric vehicle
GBV	Gender-based violence
GSoD	Global State of Democracy

Contents

INTRODUCTION

On 19 to 20 October 2023 in Bangkok, Thailand, International IDEA and Asia Centre convened the second annual Democracy in Asia and the Pacific Outlook Forum. The Forum brought together 23 experts, practitioners and activists from a wide range of disciplines and from across the region for two days of foresight discussions to better understand not just the challenges facing democracy in the region over the year to come, but also the long-term shifts and trends that may define the future.

According to data from International IDEA's Global State of Democracy (GSoD) Initiative, democracy in Asia and the Pacific is under significant pressure (International IDEA 2023b). Although many countries' democratic performance appeared to have stabilized in 2022, years of across-the-board declines left most countries in the region below the global average in the GSoD Indices' measures of Rule of Law, Rights and Representation. As seen in Figure 1, only a tiny minority of people in the region live in a high-performing democracy. In the face of weak parliaments and polarized electorates, judiciaries and government agencies like election management bodies have been the core institutions working against democratic decline. Democratic institutions across the region appear, in simple terms, stuck. With key elections forthcoming in 2024 in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, South Korea, Taiwan and elsewhere, the question of what to do about democracy in the region is as acute as ever.

As comprehensive as International IDEA's quantitative data on democracy are, it is not possible to adequately prepare for the future purely by extrapolating from trends in the recent past. To complement the GSoD data, International IDEA gathered experts and practitioners from academia, journalism, civil society and law for a two-day foresight workshop to discuss the possible coming trends and challenges, and the outcomes of that workshop form the basis for this paper.

Figure 1. **Low, mid-range and high performance in measures of democracy by population, Asia and the Pacific, 1975–2022**
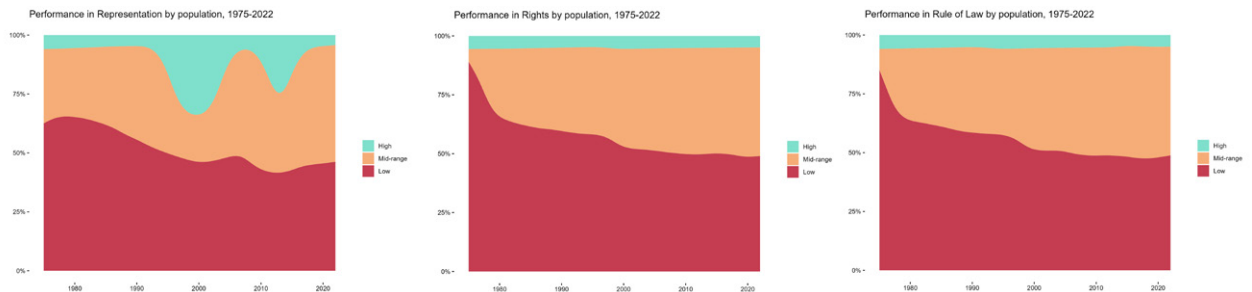
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices, v. 7.1., 2023, <https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices>, accessed 15 November 2023.

WHAT IS FORESIGHT?

Foresight is not one specific methodology, but an umbrella term for forward-thinking, 'out of the box' methods of strategic planning and finding solutions to pressing problems. The purpose of foresight, and the purpose of this paper, is not to accurately predict the course of future human events, but to envision *various alternative futures*. It is by working through these possible futures, and their implications, that we can make better strategic decisions that shape the future. Foresight 'can be a critical tool for helping understand how current and emerging changes might shape the future of democracy and, more importantly, empower stakeholders to make better decisions to strengthen democracy' (EFP n.d.).

In an increasingly complex and interconnected world, key and consequential decisions must be made *in medias res*—in the middle of things. In the words of the historian Adam Tooze:

> Being in medias res it is easier said than done. It is both inescapable and, at the same time, mysterious.
>
> We are in medias res you say? In the middle of things? But which things? And how do those things relate to us and define us? Who or what are we in relation to these things? How do we chart the middle of this world? Who has the map? Who has the compass? (Tooze 2001: n.p.)

This paper represents part of International IDEA's modest effort to contribute to the creation of such a map and compass, to help institutions and governments more adequately prepare for a future that is hazy, out of focus and may seem to be many things at once. We ask questions such as: what kinds of signals, trends and developments are we seeing, and what are the risks and opportunities? What are the implications for decisions we make

about our countries' democracy, global governance and efforts to meet the Sustainable Development Goals?

This paper follows the format of the two-day workshop in Thailand and is built on the intellectual results of the participants. It deals with four major democratic themes discussed at the Forum: the future of elections and representation; gender and sexuality; the protection of civic space; and climate change. These themes were chosen based on the outcomes of discussions in last year's Democracy in Asia and the Pacific Outlook Forum and pre-event semi-structured interviews conducted with the participants in this year's Forum.

This document uses several terms from foresight methodology. *Signals* make up the raw material of more developed *scenarios*. Each section below describes a number of signals identified during this foresight process, before proceeding to an in-depth analysis of key scenarios and possible future trends.

Each issue is addressed sequentially below, although there is necessarily overlap between each section. A brief overview of the foresight methodology used in this process is included in Annex B.

Box 1. **What is a signal?**

In foresight, *signals* are discrete events that could be glimpses of the future visible today. They can be a product, a novel policy, or even a single event from the news. Signals are things that are unexpected, thought-provoking, and anomalous. Several examples of signals that are not included in this paper are:

- Manchester United launches male cosmetics partnership with Estee Lauder for Asia and the Pacific. Could this signal a shift in gender norms in the region and more broadly? (Wray 2023).
- Zimbabwe is tackling mental health issues by building Friendship Benches: public benches where grandmothers provide advice and counselling to passers-by (Samuel 2023). The *New York Times* reports America may be having a 'psychoanalytic moment'. What could a resurgence of seemingly antiquated approaches to mental health suggest might be happening 10 years in the future? (Bernstein 2023)

Chapter 1
ELECTIONS AND REPRESENTATION

The effects of demographic changes, technological shifts and climate change ripple through electoral and political institutions, altering the nature of popular control over decision making. How can actors in Asia and the Pacific adapt to a world where a seemingly ever-increasing amount of everyday life takes place online? How can actors be better prepared for the changing nature and duration of international and domestic migration in the Anthropocene?

Box 2. **Signals for elections and representation**

- Japanese village in shrinking countryside sees first birth in two decades
- Rivers and physical entities granted legal personhood
- Tuvalu sinks underwater and rises online
- Myanmar's democratic government goes virtual

SIGNALS

The Japanese village of Ichinono celebrated the first birth of a child in two decades in 2023, highlighting not only the country's low birth rate but also the steady depopulation of its countryside (*Financial Times* 2023b). As Asia and the Pacific's already rapid urbanization accelerates, democracies in the region will face interlocking public health, food security and environmental challenges (UNICEF 2023). In parallel with this trend, lawyers, judges and governments across the region have explored granting legal personhood to natural entities, such as rivers, as a way of integrating the perpetuation of sustainable natural environments into established democratic institutions (O'Donnell and Talbot-Jones 2018; O'Donnell and Jahan 2023). As demographic trends see people clustering in urban centres, could involving or more directly accounting for nature in the depopulated countryside in electoral processes help societies to manage environmental and climatic challenges?

In late 2022, the Pacific Island nation of Tuvalu began constructing an online record of itself to preserve a memory of the country before it is overcome by climate change (Craymer 2022). By November 2023, the project had created a digital version of Te Afualiku Islet, the first Tuvaluan island that will disappear under rising seas (Tuvalu n.d.). Just as exiled Myanmar activists at the Outlook Forum envisioned a possible future where the primary means of civic engagement was through fully virtual institutions (Naing 2023), what will it mean as climate change makes certain physical countries and communities impossible?

SCENARIOS

Who gets to vote?

As people become increasingly mobile but more concentrated in urban areas, existing systems of political representation and electoral processes risk becoming outdated and vulnerable to fast-evolving stressors. The problem may already be acute—the latest data from the GSOD Indices show that only a small minority of people in Asia and the Pacific live in a country that performs highly in Credible Elections (see Figure 2). People move in search of work, or because their pastoral lifestyles are being made unsustainable by climate change, or to escape violence or persecution (Sasahara and Peri 2019). A country could ensure the continued stability of an increasingly depopulated countryside by more deeply integrating natural entities—to date, most frequently rivers—into democratic structures. While these efforts have largely been confined to the judicial system, are there ways to institutionalize the environmental protection and key questions of sustainability more concretely into electoral processes?

Radical proposals include ideas such as 'animal voting'—not providing individual animals with the franchise, but empowering humans to vote on their behalf (Motoarca 2023). Less abstractly, could an expansion of Indigenous forms of governance result in more democratic results and sustainable policies (Artelle et al. 2019)? A group of researchers at the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies in Hayama, Japan, proposed such a model, which they call 'eco-resurgence': 'a mix of local initiatives, national policies, and inter-regional efforts to ensure that the core economic strategies in every country take into account the environmental priority desired at this time. A multi-layered bottom-up governance mechanism for promoting indigenous knowledge and traditional philosophies in protecting ecological sustainability needs' (IGES n.d.: 2).

Who is a citizen?

Care will also have to be taken to ensure the proper integration of migrant populations into electoral processes, as more and more people move frequently and even reside outside of their nation of citizenship for long periods of time. This responsibility is increasingly transnational, as byzantine global supply chains, the proliferation of special economic zones and other

Figure 2. **Performance in measures of Credible Elections by population, Asia and the Pacific, 2022**
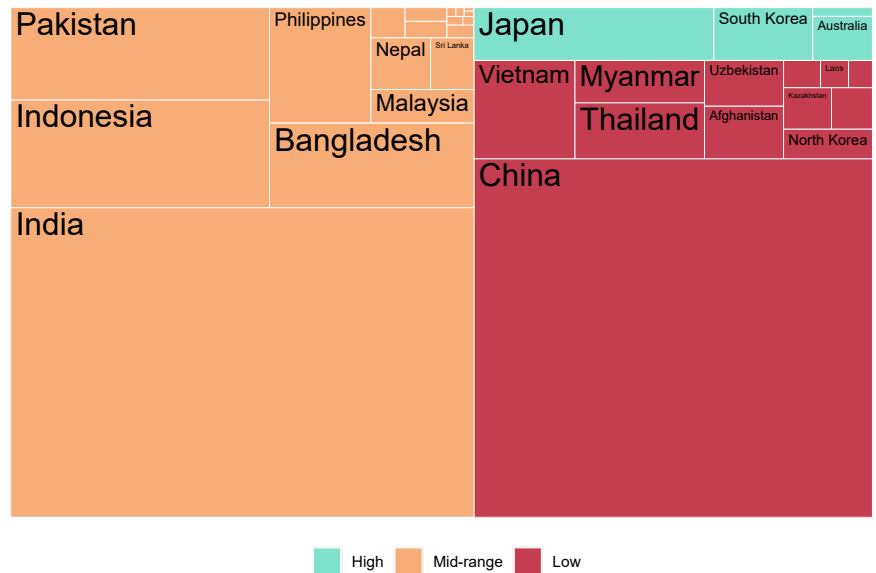
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices, v. 7.1., 2023, <https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices>, accessed 15 November 2023.

economic forces create variegated levels of citizenship, residence and rights, even within sovereign states.

Does sustainable democracy instead entail something akin to mandatory citizenship for immigrants (De Schutter and Ypi 2015)? Or should states work to move beyond the citizen/non-citizen dichotomy in favour of a broader and more encompassing denizenship (Walker 2008)? A third option could be to produce more varied kinds of citizenship (e.g. temporary citizenship, diaspora citizenship etc.—India has 'overseas citizen of India' status available to some people; see India n.d.), to provide electoral and other political rights for long-term non-citizens. Will virtual and mobile democratic institutions be a way for displaced peoples to maintain a connection across borders, as well as to push democratic prerogatives within them? Better labour union outreach could be one force for integration, with the successful strike of Georgian and Uzbekistani truck drivers in Germany in mid-2023 one example (Benedetti 2023). Transnational political parties, such as Ireland's Sinn Féin, might become more the norm than the exception. To address the various burdens of migration that are distributed unequally between regions and countries, states could take efforts to formalize what has been referred to as the longstanding but informal 'transnational social contract' (Sadiq and Tsourapas 2023).

What makes a country? What is political?
As the barrier between online and offline life dissipates, Asia and the Pacific may see the rise of 'virtual democracies'—electoral systems, representative bodies and civil society networks that exist primarily online for diasporas

prevented from exercising their democratic rights in their country of origin by authoritarian governments or forces of climate change or civil war. Participants at the Outlook Forum spoke of a 'virtual Myanmar', referring to the likelihood that a significant portion—if not the outright majority—of citizens of states such as Bhutan, Nepal or Pacific Island nations might reside outside their nation's borders in the decades to come.

The stark vision of the future conjured by the creation of an online Tuvalu raised the question of a world where concepts like 'virtual citizenship' and 'virtual countries' are not just thoughtful provocations but necessary civic institutions. As noted above, a 'virtual Myanmar' could conduct elections and make policy decisions related to the return of a representative, democratic state. The vision of an underwater Tuvalu is stark and arresting, but climate change will also make increasingly large portions of Asia and the Pacific unable to support their current populations in far less dramatic or immediate ways.

A 'virtual Myanmar' could conduct elections and make policy decisions related to the return of a representative, democratic state.

These changes will result in challenges to existing systems of representation and political participation, and—in extremis—a blurring of the conceptual connection between elected officials and their constituents. With national economies fractured by expanding special economic zones and a depopulated countryside, the nature of representation for key parts of society is changing (Slobodian 2023). Fewer families working in agriculture means fewer voters for whom rural agricultural policy is a core interest, thereby ceding political ground to agribusiness. More workers in areas with limited labour rights changes the balance of labour politics in the same manner.

As economic activities become disconnected from voting blocs, political elites might be tempted to 'depoliticize' areas of decision making and remove them from electoral democratic contestation (Bourdieu 2002). In an age when judges are experimenting with the use of large language models to conceptualize and issue decisions, the 21st century might see the work of clean energy permitting, urban planning and other public activities removed from popular oversight and governed instead by algorithms, large-language models or other technical processes, just as the 20th century saw the rise of ostensibly politically independent central banks (Sud and Patnaik 2022).

We might also see popular movements for replacing human representation in parliament with incorruptible 'virtual' MPs in the face of pervasive corruption and complaints of unreliable politicians, where voters would choose artificially intelligent (AI) politicians programmed to vote according to a strict set of ideological criteria.[1]

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[1]   The only ostensibly serious campaign to replace an elected official with a decision-making algorithm to date took place in Tama City, Japan, in 2018, and failed by a large margin (Cole 2018).

Box 3. **Questions to consider**

In the face of growing mobility among populations within and between countries, what strategies can governments employ to better integrate large non-citizen populations into democratic processes? What might an international democracy framework that is responsive to increased migration and mobility look like? How might the establishment of clear pathways to citizenship or the extension of democratic rights to non-citizens be considered? Additionally, how do parliaments plan on preventing disenfranchisement or unequal representation resulting from internal migration, and in what way can the adaptation of laws and sufficient funding for electoral management bodies contribute to this effort?

How might the structure of elections significantly contribute to adapting and mitigating the effects of climate change? In what ways could parliaments explore incorporating approaches, such as integrating Indigenous forms of governance or granting rights to environmental features, within electoral processes? Additionally, how might the establishment of formal mechanisms, such as advisory groups for youth, gender or Indigenous representation in parliament, enhance political decision making?

Chapter 2
GENDER AND SEXUALITY

The World Economic Forum estimates that, at current rates, it will take 189 years to close gender gaps in East Asia and the Pacific, and 149 years in Southern Asia versus the global average of 131 years (WEF 2023). 'Women's participation is a central element of democracy, and the nature and degree of women's participation is a key indicator of the quality of democratic culture' (International IDEA 2013: 7). With regard to LGBTQIA+ rights, much of the region has historically recognized diverse gender identities, with South and South East Asian cultures recognizing 'third gender' well before it gained attention in the west (Ahmed 2020). How might social norms and biases shape the trajectory of gender justice and democracy in the years to come? How might we identify opportunities and prepare for challenges related to conflicts and crises such as climate change, and how could this impact democratization?

Box 4. **Signals for gender**

- India, Nepal and Sri Lanka take judicial steps towards gender equality
- Spike in gender-based violence web searches
- Rise of AI female news anchors
- Record number of Japanese women in the workforce

SIGNALS

Legislative bodies and courts have been the main forum in which LGBTQIA+ rights have been expanded or restricted in the region in recent years. In 2023, Nepal's Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage, as Sri Lanka's moved towards decriminalizing homosexuality (International IDEA 2023c; 2023e). Pakistan's Sindh Cabinet approved reserved seats for transgender persons on local councils, even as a Federal Shariah Court ruling struck down key provisions in the country's Transgender Rights Bill in May (International IDEA 2023d). Similarly, India's Supreme Court took steps to protect sex workers from

gender-based violence (GBV) in May 2022 (Gupta 2022). How might these judicial interventions, as well as other past-year victories (International IDEA 2023a) and setbacks, impact the possibility of establishing gender equality in Asian societies and democratic institutions moving forward?

In June 2023, a UN Women report found that web searches for GBV occurred more frequently in times of overlapping crises—such as Covid-19 lockdowns and severe weather events—in a study conducted across four Pacific Islands (UN Women 2023).[2] The study also highlighted victims' use of social media platforms to seek help as well as voice concerns about existing laws and the justice system in their respective countries.

In April 2023, an Indian news outlet unveiled the country's first-ever AI-powered female news anchor, named Sana (Kaur 2023). Although China was the first country in the world to introduce AI news presenters in 2018, the recent emergence of AI female news anchors in Indonesia, Malaysia and Taiwan in the last year has raised concerns around job security and the recreation of negative gender stereotypes by AI models trained on datasets where such biases are endemic (West, Kraut and Chew 2019). Gender bias in AI is a growing phenomenon and there is potential for AI newsreaders to reinforce stereotypical and retrograde attitudes towards women and non-binary people (Bender et al. 2021).

In July 2023, a Japanese Government survey revealed that the number of working women in the country reached a record 30.4 million in 2022, up 1.22 million from 2017—however, approximately half of women in the workforce still leave upon the birth of their first child (*Japan Times* 2023b; Adachi 2022). The *Japan Times* had in prior months noted that 'Japan's future depends on empowering women', in the face of the country's ageing population crisis (*Japan Times* 2023a). This presents a daunting task for a country that places 125th among 143 countries for gender parity, according to the World Economic Forum's report released this year (Takenaka 2023). Japan's rate of female political representation is among the world's lowest.

SCENARIOS

Amplifying the ripple effect of gender-sensitive legislation

The spread of gender-sensitive legislation and court victories addressing GBV and LGBTQIA+ rights could foretell a self-reinforcing cycle of progress towards inclusivity and equality, as countries take inspiration from their neighbours' advances. However, advances in one area—such as movement towards gender-equitable political representation—can have limited effect on real-world gender issues (see Figure 3). Steps forward that are confined to the judiciary, without the support of broad-based political and social movements, could lead reactionary leaders to undermine judicial independence to maintain the

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[2]   The four Pacific Islands were Kiribati, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Tonga.

patriarchal status quo—the self-reinforcing cycle could instead become a doom loop. The challenge lies in ensuring that advancements, such as Nepal's same-sex marriage verdict, are not isolated judicial wins and are institutionalized through collaborative efforts between and within countries (Kenny 2023).

Figure 3. **Global gender violence: Representation vs. rights**
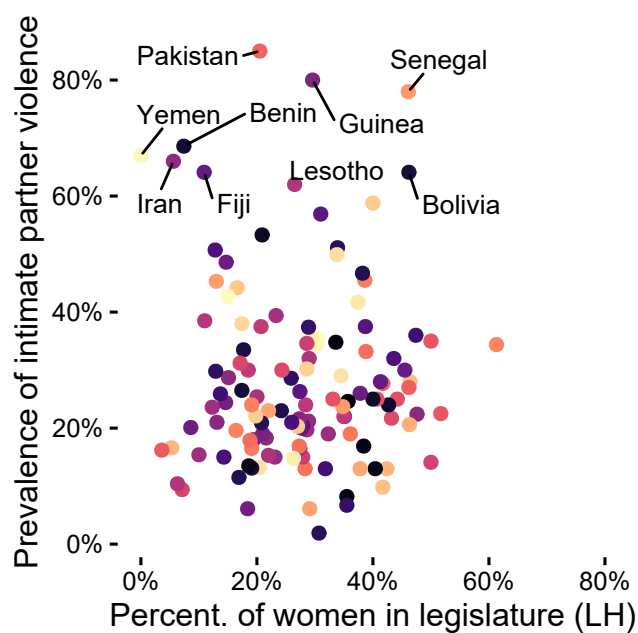
Sources: Inter-Parliamentary Union, Monthly ranking of women in national parliaments, as of 1 February 2023, <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=2&year=2023>, accessed 20 November 2023. OECD Data, Violence against women, [n.d.], <https://data.oecd.org/inequality/violence-against-women.htm>, accessed 20 November 2023.

Along these lines, could small wins—such as Pakistan's decision to allow reserved seats for transgender people in local councils—eventually catalyse the formation of political parties dedicated to advancing transgender rights, akin to Australia's Queensland Labor Party establishing a minimum quota of 5 per cent in winnable seats for LGBTQIA+ persons in its party rules (Australian Labor Party 2021)? How can democracies in the Asia and the Pacific region build on the incremental successes of these movements in the years to come?

A silver lining in an ageing crisis?

At the same time, might the ageing crisis in countries like Japan and South Korea provide an opening for positive transformation for women's economic security (*Japan Times* 2023a)? While the crisis presents an opportunity for countries to ensure more active and equal participation of women in the workforce, there are counteracting influences that could mean a return to traditional gender norms (Minzner 2023), as exemplified in China's recent remarks at the National Women's Congress where delegates were urged to

'actively cultivate a new culture of marriage and childbearing', with no reference to women in the workplace (*The Economist* 2023).

Evidence shows that women's disproportionate care burden is a major barrier to their participation in the workforce and to career progression—including in government (see Figure 4) (UNDP n.d.). Countries with rapidly ageing populations in the region that seek to integrate more women into the workplace could prompt more innovation around child and elderly care, resulting in a more formal and well-enumerated care economy. Could democracies in Asia and the Pacific eventually put in place the kinds of welfare reforms seen in the likes of Sweden, with the development of subsidized child and elderly care, and gender-neutral parental leave benefits, as well as an equal share of the care burden between men and women? The move towards making these services more accessible on both sides of the urban−rural divide would also prove vital (ILO and ADB 2023). Moreover, within the political sphere, countries in the region might consider shifting towards family-friendly parliaments, mirroring examples in New Zealand and Australia where established childcare centres cater to MPs and public servants. Beyond improving political representation, the process of gender mainstreaming demands investment at all levels, including increasing service provision and addressing the societal and cultural norms and attitudes that contribute to maintaining patriarchal norms.

Figure 4. **Women's representation in government globally**

Head of state or government   Members of the cabinet   Members of the legislature

Women   Men
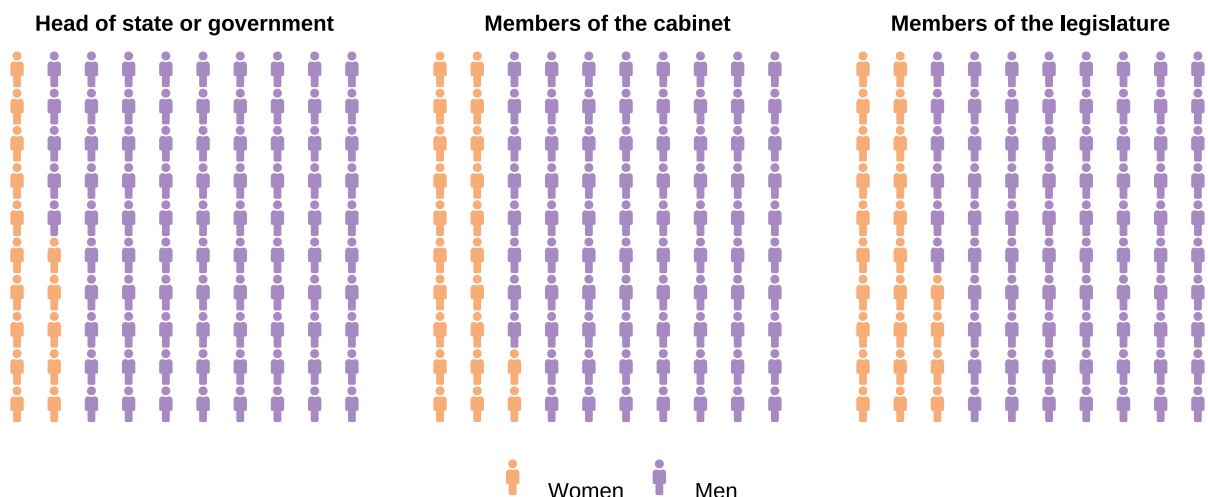
Sources: Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN Women, 'Women in Politics: 2021' (map), 2021, <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2021/Women-in-politics-2021-en.pdf>, accessed 20 November 2023. Inter-Parliamentary Union, Monthly ranking of women in national parliaments, as of 1 February 2023, <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=2&year=2023>, accessed 20 November 2023.

Climate migration unleashes a gender backlash

Climate-induced migration is anticipated to elevate the risk of GBV in the region, causing disruptions to traditional support systems and escalating household tensions. Participants at the Outlook Forum also spoke of the risk of climate change sidelining efforts to eradicate GBV, especially among migrant populations, where the social stress of forced migration contributes to higher levels of GBV from both destination country nationals and members of the migrant community (Freedman 2016). As climate-induced migration increases, anti-migrant politicians could seek to blame migrant communities themselves for incidents of GBV and other social problems (Ozcurumez, Akyuz and Bradby 2021), using them as grounds for inferior treatment or even expulsion, while also opposing interventions to combat GBV in general (Spini 2019).

Without a proactive push for gender equality in the face of climate change and other overlapping disasters, gender issues risk being overcome by oppressive patriarchal norms. The region could witness a gender backlash in response to conflicts, where conservative and authoritarian forces exploit popular anxieties to establish a more hierarchical and gendered social order (Butler 2021). Modern technologies also risk amplifying the spread of gender backlash, as seen in cases of tech-facilitated GBV (UN Women n.d.). Moreover, the question remains as to how specific technologies, such as AI news anchors, might serve to either combat or entrench existing gender bias in the years to come. Conversely, the region might see a rise in targeted initiatives aimed at mitigating GBV as more digital forums become available for survivors to report and bring attention to incidents. Nevertheless, democratic institutions across all levels will need to dedicate serious efforts to disrupting the biases and prejudices that infiltrate these technologies.

Without a proactive push for gender equality in the face of climate change and other overlapping disasters, gender issues risk being overcome by oppressive patriarchal norms.

Box 5. **Questions to consider**

How can the Asia and the Pacific region actively prioritize a renewed focus on gender equality and mainstreaming within parliaments and governments? What nascent openings for greater gender equality can be seen and how can donors focus attention on taking advantage of these opportunities? As stressors like climate change, inflation, migration and economic crises put pressure on democracies in the region, gender mainstreaming in all policy areas will only serve to strengthen democratic resilience, peacebuilding and climate change adaptation and resilience efforts.

Chapter 3
CIVIC SPACE

Civic space is the public arena in which popular democracy is practised—it includes the media we read, the speeches we hear and the ways in which we organize and gather. In recent years, several states, including Bangladesh, Cambodia and South Korea, have restricted the freedom of the press, and many other countries have been slow to return to the pre-pandemic status quo regarding freedom of association. How might we ensure that a shrinking civic space (International IDEA 2021) does not lead to countries reverting to circumstances found before the third wave of democratization (Yun-han 2006)? How could we prepare for the possible deterritorialization of state sovereignty (Herningtyas et al. 2021)?

Box 6. **Signals for civic space**

- Filipinos resist SIM card registration
- Mutual aid in Xinjiang
- Murder of Hardeep Singh Nijjar
- Bigger and better BRICS
- ChatGPT renders a legal verdict

SIGNALS

In 2022, the Philippines passed legislation requiring that every SIM card be tied to a government ID card in order to reduce crime and disinformation. While similar legislation exists in other countries, such as Bangladesh, in this instance it was met with significant civil disobedience, with some operators reporting most customers refusing to register by the initial deadline (*Logic(s)* 2023), and Internet users noting that criminals had smoothly bypassed the process (Palatino 2023).

Turning to an authoritarian context, research on Chinese systems of control of its Muslim Uyghur minority have shown how networks of resistance and mutual aid survive around internment camps and under cutting-edge systems of mass surveillance. The anthropologist Darren Byler writes:

> … a culture of hidden solidarity developed outside of the internment camps. They relied on one another for emotional support as they coped with the sentencing of their loved ones. To avoid detection, they used coded language and sought out locations without cameras or electronic devices to discuss the traumatic events they had witnessed. Despite the intense pressure from the Chinese government to keep silent, these family members found a way to connect and share their experiences with each other, demonstrating resilience in the face of adversity. (Byler 2023: n.p.)

What if online activity can never be regulated so that it mirrors 20th-century political participation?

As every new electoral cycle and political debate takes place more online than the one before it (International IDEA n.d.), governments and authorities like election management bodies often attempt to protect electoral integrity and facilitate civic dialogue by translating the structures and processes that governed elections offline for the online space. But this process of exercising equivalent control over the Internet is far from seamless. The expansion of digital databases gives governments power over civic space, but it is always unevenly distributed and highly contested.

On 18 June 2023, the prominent Sikh separatist activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar was murdered by two masked men in a parking lot outside of Vancouver (Cecco and Berman 2023). The diplomatic crisis sparked by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's claim that he had seen 'credible allegations' (Webber and Rousselle 2023) of India's involvement in the murder has reasonably overshadowed the details of the Sikh separatist Khalistan movement in global media, such as its lack of visible support among Sikhs in India (Jain and Patel 2023). As diasporas grow in size and political organization around the world, and the lines between domestic and international activism further blur, how will democracies negotiate the increasingly complex balance between freedom of expression and association, and respect for security interests?

In August 2023, the BRICS bloc of emerging economies invited Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to join, potentially setting the stage for an influential non-Western geopolitical bloc (Ismail 2023). The expanded BRICS, which stands for Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa—originally coined as BRIC, without South Africa, by a Goldman Sachs banker searching for a snappy title for an investment paper (O'Neill 2001)—is one of several developing geopolitical groupings in what is likely to be a more multipolar future with diverging understandings of the ideal amount of civic space (UN News 2023). On measures like Freedom of

Figure 5. **Variation in Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Association by region of Asia and the Pacific, 2022**
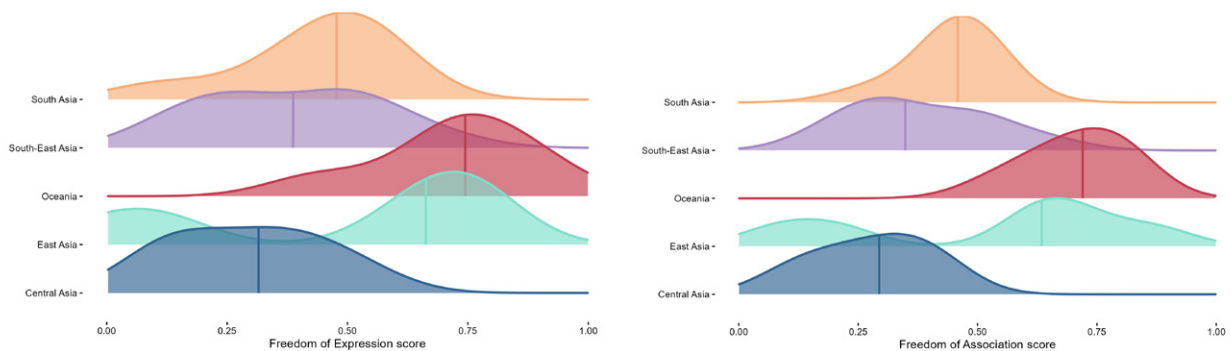
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices, v. 7.1., 2023, <https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices>, accessed 15 November 2023.

Expression and Freedom of Association, the divergence between regions of Asia and the Pacific are already stark. The ability of citizens to vocally and publicly participate in politics varies widely between subregions of Asia and the Pacific, possibly pointing towards a persistent divergence in international norms (see Figure 5).

In March 2023, a Pakistani judge used OpenAI's ChatGPT chatbot to help render his verdict in a relatively minor property dispute, sparking widespread debate among the Pakistani legal community (Iqbal 2023). Are the areas where subjective, human judgement are needed always so clearly delineated from rote, menial tasks performed better by machines (Zhabina 2023)? Can technological advances assist in the administration of justice and the provision of public goods? Or will they reproduce social and political inequality under the guise of algorithmic impartiality (Zajko 2022)? The increasing use of opaque algorithmic tools in policy and governing risks the closing off of areas in which citizens can participate in and influence the institutions that oversee their daily lives.

Do the admission of the African Union to the G20 and the expanded BRICS foreshadow a 'post-United Nations' world?

SCENARIOS

A post-United Nations world?
With major democracies unable to agree on the scope of sovereignty and the balance between political expression and security, the years to come could see more reliance on parallel structures and alternative forms of international governance. Do the admission of the African Union to the G20 (Council of Councils 2023) and the expanded BRICS foreshadow a 'post-United Nations' world, where global norms are a thing of the past, and regional blocs are crowded out by groups of countries united by a shared commodity production or through key global supply chains (Shofa 2023; Riofrancos 2020)? If so, how

should state and non-state actors seek to defend civil and political liberties through these new forums? And what does this say about shifting norms of authority and legitimacy? Will the years to come see 'the West versus the rest' (*Foreign Affairs* 2023) and the widespread dismissal of human rights and liberal democracy as a Western construct (Mishra 2018)?

New OPECs and alliances

Alternative arrangements—a 'Nickel OPEC', or supply chains linking lithium miners in South America with electric battery workers in South East Asia and China—open up new areas of civic space and political contestation, both within and across national borders. For democracy advocates, the key to managing these changes will be to protect existing areas of civic space while also not losing opportunities to take advantage of new ones. For labour unions, this may require a shift from negotiating with employers or employer associations to building larger robust networks along transnational supply chains and pushing for more democratized global governance (Riofrancos 2022).

At the Outlook Forum, these new areas for civic and democratic contestation accompanying the green transition were theorized as forums for 'digital governance' or the growth in the importance of 'interregional governments'. These new spaces for communication and debate between citizens could provide wider traction for future iterations of transnational protest groups, such as the Milk Tea Alliance (Wasserstrom 2023).

Revisiting the public option

Democracies will also need to develop more equitable and all-encompassing ways of regulating and managing technological change in order to protect civic space and democratic processes. The ability of foreign nation states, private actors and non-governmental organizations to impact the political discourse and mobilization of citizens in other countries will only increase progressively. Do the decreasing costs and increasing accessibility of tools for digital surveillance and control raise the risk of digital dictatorships, or will countries be able to build robust international safeguards (Sandle and Coulter 2023)?

This could also be taken one step further: rather than protecting democracy by regulating the (often foreign) private actors that control the infrastructure of the Internet, should governments be exploring public options for AI and other core parts of the Internet infrastructure—government-funded and directed variants explicitly tasked with working for the public good (Schneier, Farrell and Sanders 2023)?

The online diaspora

As diasporas grow in size and importance, they may begin to play many of the same roles that democratic participation and collective decision making play in everyday people's lives. While past and current diasporic communities are often united around religious institutions or in deep involvement with the politics of the homeland, what about a future diaspora of an island country that no longer exists, or of a mountain country where the homeland is only slowly emptying further? Will mass online participation lead eventually to shadow

governments, and how will host governments work with or against these online communities?

> ## Box 7. **Questions to consider**
>
> How can governments in Asia and the Pacific ensure that rapidly developing technology, such as AI, strengthens, rather than undermines, democratic processes (Wiley and Nelson n.d.)? What steps should be taken to prioritize a focus on current harms and impacts instead of theoretical ones, and how can regional cooperation be leveraged to make policy approaches like a 'public option for AI' attainable for countries across the region, beyond just China, the European Union and the United States (Schneier, Farrell and Sanders 2023). Could democratic Asian governments consider a 'Bandung Option' for AI (Office of the Historian n.d.)?

Chapter 4
CLIMATE CHANGE

As Asia and the Pacific is one of the most climate vulnerable regions in the world, how will its democratic institutions cope with the security concerns linked to climate change, including impacts on food, water and energy supplies, increased competition over natural resources, and mass displacement? What democratic innovations can be sought from governments to enhance their climate mitigation and adaptation efforts? What would a more climate-friendly political structure look like in Asia and the Pacific?

Box 8. **Signals for climate change**

- Chinese electric vehicles hit the European market
- Low-cost renewable energy becomes the norm
- Infants and one foetus file suit against South Korea over carbon emissions

SIGNALS

Home to 5 of the 10 largest CO_2 emitters globally and accounting for nearly 60 per cent of the world's population, Asia and the Pacific, as it shifts to renewable energy, will play a key role in global efforts to reach net zero (Chhabria 2023). Signals of this energy transition are occurring in countries such as China, Indonesia and India, with the development and trading of cleantech products (batteries, solar panels, wind power) (Chen and Jiang 2023; Tagotra 2023). Indeed, India has positioned itself as a leader in the renewable energy market, leading also the Solar Alliance consisting of several countries to boost solar energy (Jha 2023). China dominates the sector, with the competitive advantage of producing low-cost and affordable renewable energy sources (*Financial Times* 2023a). The expansion of Chinese electric vehicles (EVs) in European markets this year, coupled with President Biden's recent remark emphasizing his intention to prevent China's dominance of the EV market through 'unfair trade practices', speaks to this trend (Harlan 2023;

Keith 2023). At the same time, the USA and China pledged to renew bilateral dialogues on energy policies in tackling the climate crisis ahead of the COP28 climate summit (Moritsugu 2023).

In South Korea, a series of youth-driven lawsuits are actively contesting the government's emission reduction targets, arguing that they fall short and infringe upon the rights of future generations. Among these cases, one involves 61 infants and a foetus, marking the youngest claimant to date in the year 2022 (Kaminski 2022). What impact will these youth-driven cases have on evolving climate litigation in the years to come?

SCENARIOS

Climate cooperation in a new era of energy

The energy transition in Asia and the Pacific readies the way for renewed forms of multilateral cooperation, extending beyond established bodies like the UN, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Collaborations involving regional powers such as China, India and Indonesia have the potential to cut across geopolitical rifts in working towards a shared objective of CO_2 reductions and climate action, potentially filling the climate leadership vacuum and realizing the 'Asian Century'. Such an initiative has not arisen to date and may have to come into being through alternative forms of global or regional governance that are now only in their earliest stages. Indonesia's initiative to establish an OPEC-like group for policy coordination among leading mining nations in the production of battery metals for the EV revolution provides an interesting opening in this regard.

Simultaneously, rising sea levels and floods could trigger mass displacement and instability in the region, further driving urbanization as people seek refuge from uninhabitable lands. As disasters continue to reshape state structures, democracies and authoritarian states alike will have to strategically address accommodating affected populations and ensuring social protection for them. Decision makers will also need to consider the competition for resources, such as water, energy and arable land, as disasters increase, threatening to undermine regional security (Ahluwalia 2023). Countries that prove resilient to these challenges will be those that are able to work together effectively in regional blocs.

Rights of future generations

As climate litigation evolves to embrace more youth voices, governments in the region will increasingly be confronted by the need to address intergenerational justice (Wewerinke-Singh, Garg and Agarwalla 2023). Court cases lodged on behalf of youth groups offer a new regulatory pathway for climate action, prompting governments in the region to reconsider their commitments to safeguarding future generations. Combating climate change will require this kind of fundamental change—not just technological innovation, but political innovation (Battistoni 2020). If governments can recognize and grant rights to

nature, as seen in New Zealand and India, can they similarly envision extending rights to those generations who will be impacted the most by climate change in the coming century? The ongoing debates on lowering the voting age in countries like New Zealand may also provide an interesting avenue in this area. Parliaments could also establish youth advisory bodies similar to the UN's Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change (UN n.d.), or set aside a portion of parliament for representatives under a certain age.

Youth should not be viewed as a panacea, however, as burgeoning youth movements across Asia and the Pacific are as often reactionary (Finlay and Song 2021) as they are progressive (see, for example, the Move Forward Party in Thailand). But this also points towards a future with new political and governing institutions, as these movements are likely to accommodate themselves within current political cleavages as frequently as they are to remake the political systems entirely.

Ultimately, a successful democratic approach to climate change entails responding to and channelling marginalized voices into the political arena—potentially sparking a wave of green legislation and lawmaking in the decades to come.

Effective climate litigation will also depend on the independence of judiciaries and increased citizen participation. In the short term, the latter translates to improving the availability of accurate and comprehensible information on environmental changes, so as to foster transparency and promote equitable and productive public participation in decision making.

Democratizing next generation agriculture

Increasing saline intrusion and extreme weather events pose a significant challenge for agricultural production in the Pacific Islands and countries as varied as Bangladesh, Nepal and Vietnam. In response to growing food security threats, participants at the Outlook Forum spoke of the need to move towards rewilding and regenerative farming practices that allow ecosystems to return to a state that accommodates both food production and complex 'wild' ecosystems (Vince 2022). Artificial food production and leveraging AI and other digital tools to enhance crop yields might provide avenues for strengthening food chains (FAO 2023). Democratizing the benefits of science will require governments to push for more control and regulations over developments like genome-edited crops to ensure such technologies are accessible and used for the common good (Pixley et al. 2022). Conversely, the uneven distribution of these kinds of technologies threatens to create new forms of inequality, where certain segments of society enjoy greater privileges—such as food security—than others. A new social cleavage of this form could lead to polarization in ways that undermine trust in democratic institutions and their ability to provide basic welfare to populations. There is no hard-and-fast connection between measures of Basic Welfare, such as average food supply per day, and Political Equality measures—democracies need to do more to differentiate themselves from their authoritarian neighbours (see Figure 6).

Democratizing the benefits of science will require governments to push for more control and regulations over developments like genome-edited crops to ensure such technologies are accessible and used for the common good.

Figure 6. **Kilocalories per person per day versus Political Equality, Asia and the Pacific, 2022**
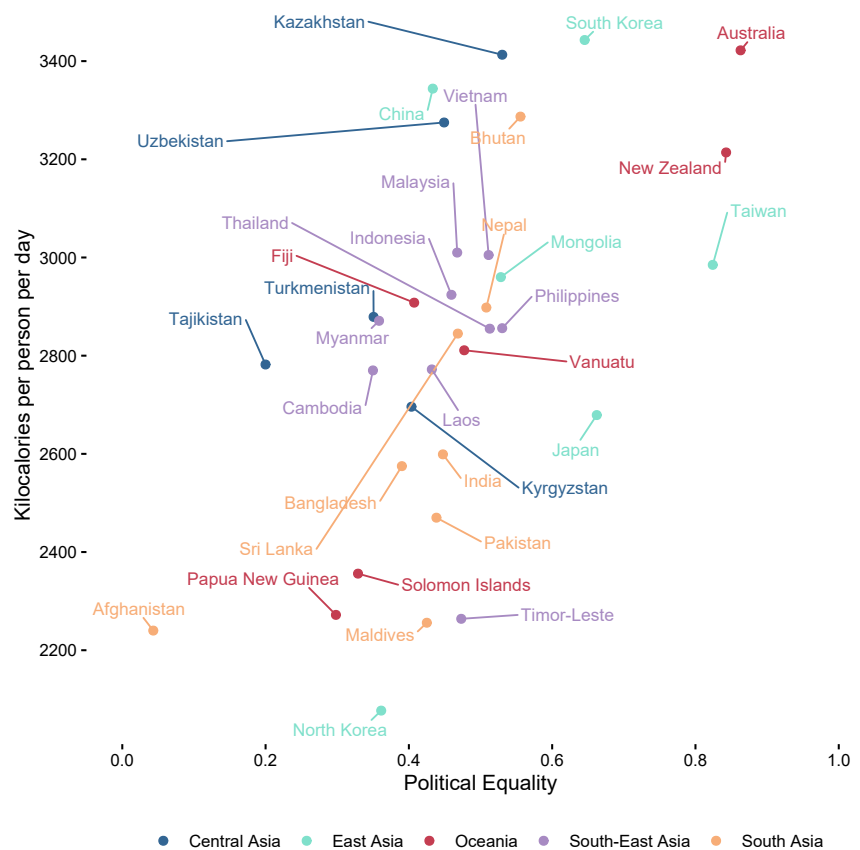
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices, v. 7.1., 2023, <https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices>, accessed 15 November 2023.

Box 9. **Questions to consider**

What new forms of international cooperation can democracy activists and civil society organizations explore that align with developing bonds between countries and regions (such as international supply chains), between special economic zones and among workers in industries vital to the green transition? These burgeoning international connections can provide innovative pro-democracy actors with new tools and leverage to push for reforms and protect human rights in new and effective ways. How should international development donors expand their support for these international networks?

WHAT'S NEXT FOR DEMOCRACY?

This Discussion Paper is only a small snapshot of the complex network of trends, crises and events that make up democracy in Asia and the Pacific. International IDEA welcomes all discussions on the future of democracy in the Asia and the Pacific region, and all enquiries or questions on this topic can be directed to Emma Kenny (e.kenny@idea.int) and Michael Runey (m.runey@idea.int).

Annex A. List of attendees

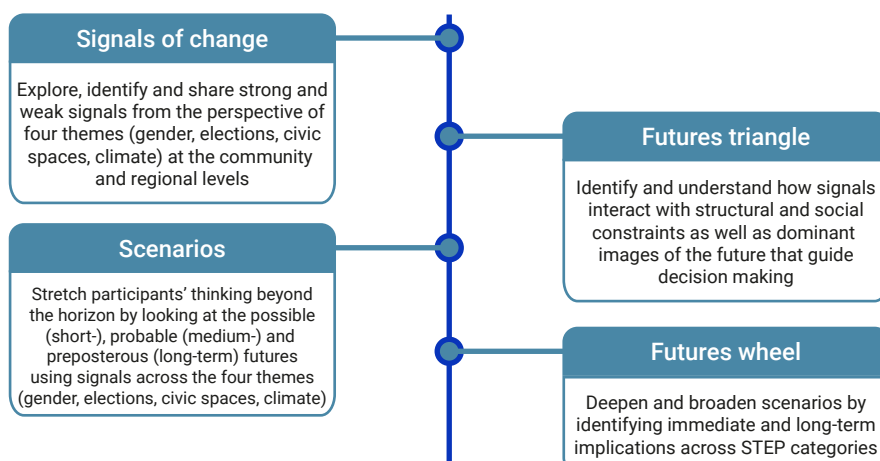| Name	Affiliation
Dr M. D. Abdul Alim	Democracy International
Air Chompunut Chalieobun	Westminster Foundation for Democracy
Anselmo Lee	Kyung Hee University
Atsuko Miwa	Asia-Pacific Human Rights Information Center
Bidhayak Das	Independent consultant
Bhavani Fonseka	Centre for Policy Alternatives
Heroik Pratama	Perludem
Khine Win	Sandhi Governance Institute
Krittaporn Semsantad	Peace Rights Foundation
Kunda Dixit	Nepali Times
Kunthida Rungruengkiat	Progressive Movement Foundation, Thailand
Mardi Seng	Candlelight Movement
Nayyab Ali	Transgender Rights Consultants Pakistan
Dr Niranjan Sahoo	Observer Research Foundation
Phil Robertson	Human Rights Watch
Dr Rahul Verma	Centre for Policy Research
Sairam Prakaikij	Move Forward Party, Thailand
Sanda Thant	SEGRI, Myanmar
Sumaya Saluja	Asia Foundation
Thet Linn Wai	International IDEA
Thinzar Shunlei Li	Myanmar pro-democracy activist
Dr Tom Gerald Daly	University of Melbourne
Daniel Riveong	Plural Futures
Dr James Gomez	Asia Centre
Ekmongkhon Puridej	Asia Centre
Leena Rikkila Tamang	International IDEA
Dr Seema Shah	International IDEA
Michael Runey	International IDEA
Emma Kenny	International IDEA

Annex B. Methodological brief

The Democracy in Asia and the Pacific 2024 Outlook Forum employed a participatory foresight process to enable participants to look beyond the headlines to explore emerging possibilities and their long-term implications, which might represent novel opportunities—as well as challenges—for transforming the region. The process served a dual purpose of producing insights on democracy in the region, as found in this paper, and of providing a space for participants to connect collectively and gain new perspectives and paths for democracy and democratization.

During the two-day event, participants focused on democracy in the Asia and the Pacific region through four thematic lenses: elections and representation, gender and sexuality, civic space and climate change. (Additionally, a virtual pre-event session was conducted to introduce participants to the foresight process and help them to identify critical issues affecting democracy in their region.)

The main output of the process was the development of several scenarios, used by the participants as a vehicle to stretch their thinking and explore more deeply the implications of particular trends and signals of change taking place. Key insights and implications from these scenarios were used to create this paper.

Day 1 and Day 2 were divided between exploratory and converging processes. Day 1 explored signals of change and how they interact with the current system (using a futures triangle). This process relied on both early signals (possible seeds of change that are still early in development) and stronger signals that have been collaborated by multiple sources of evidence. The futures triangle helped participants to consider structural and social factors constraining change (weight of the past) and the dominant images of the future that steer current thinking (pull of the future). On Day 2, participants consolidated and deepened their thinking using scenarios. Scenarios were developed adapting the 'A+B=?' foresight methodology, originally developed by UNESCO Futures Literacy Chair John Sweeney to help create more divergent, innovative thinking. International organizations in finance and security issues have used this tool to help decision makers and policymakers identify opportunities and challenges in more holistic and future-forward ways.

Signals of change

Explore, identify and share strong and weak signals from the perspective of four themes (gender, elections, civic spaces, climate) at the community and regional levels

Futures triangle

Identify and understand how signals interact with structural and social constraints as well as dominant images of the future that guide decision making

Scenarios

Stretch participants' thinking beyond the horizon by looking at the possible (short-), probable (medium-) and preposterous (long-term) futures using signals across the four themes (gender, elections, civic spaces, climate)

Futures wheel

Deepen and broaden scenarios by identifying immediate and long-term implications across STEP categories

The last major step was using a modified futures wheel to help participants explore scenario implications across social, technological, economic, environmental and political categories. A futures wheel is a foresight tool that facilitates exploring how a signal might extend in different directions in a single visualization. Participants worked through how components of various scenarios interacted with each other and developed into the near and mid-future.

Beyond producing this paper, our intention is that participants who took part in the event will also be able to apply the tools used to help develop new insights and strategies in their work supporting democracy-related issues in their communities.

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About International IDEA

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with 35 Member States founded in 1995, with a mandate to support sustainable democracy worldwide.

WHAT WE DO

We develop policy-friendly research related to elections, parliaments, constitutions, digitalization, climate change, inclusion and political representation, all under the umbrella of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. We assess the performance of democracies around the world through our unique Global State of Democracy Indices and Democracy Tracker.

We provide capacity development and expert advice to democratic actors including governments, parliaments, election officials and civil society. We develop tools and publish databases, books and primers in several languages on topics ranging from voter turnout to gender quotas.

We bring states and non-state actors together for dialogues and lesson sharing. We stand up and speak out to promote and protect democracy worldwide.

WHERE WE WORK

Our headquarters is in Stockholm, and we have regional and country offices in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean. International IDEA is a Permanent Observer to the United Nations and is accredited to European Union institutions.

OUR PUBLICATIONS AND DATABASES

We have a catalogue with more than 1,000 publications and over 25 databases on our website. Most of our publications can be downloaded free of charge.

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According to data from International IDEA's Global State of Democracy (GSoD) Initiative, democracy in Asia and the Pacific is under significant pressure. Only a tiny minority of people in the region live in a high-performing democracy. In the face of weak parliaments and polarized electorates, judiciaries and government agencies like election management bodies have been the core institutions working against democratic decline. Democratic institutions across the region appear, in simple terms, stuck. With key elections forthcoming in 2024 in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, South Korea, Taiwan and elsewhere, the question of what to do about democracy in the region is as acute as ever.

To complement the GSoD data, International IDEA gathered experts and practitioners from academia, journalism, civil society and law for a two-day foresight workshop to discuss the possible coming trends and challenges, and the outcomes of that workshop form the basis for this Discussion Paper.