

# From Regime to State in Southeast Asia: Are Formal Elections Enough for Democracy in Contexts of Weak State Capacity?

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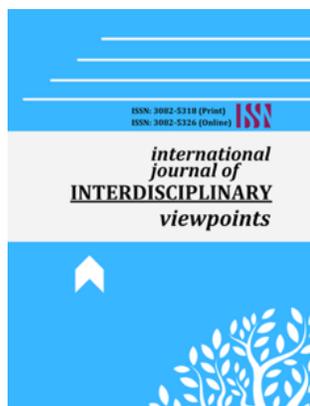
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## Research Article



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## ABSTRACT

This study looks at whether holding formal elections is enough to create real democracy in Southeast Asia, especially when the government is not very strong. Based on David Collier and Steven Levitsky's idea of "democracy with adjectives," this argues that while elections are the basic requirement for democracy, they alone are not enough to guarantee responsible and effective government. Where government, financial, and enforcement systems are weak and unable to effectively carry out laws, hold people accountable, and provide services, electoral competition might lead to clientelism, control by elites, or authoritarian influence instead. The study uses qualitative document analysis to compare Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Myanmar. The results show that there is a relationship between the type of government and how well the state can perform its functions, but it depends on certain conditions. In Indonesia and the Philippines, regular elections happen alongside weak government systems and established elite groups, resulting in low-quality or loose democratic practices. In contrast, Thailand and Myanmar have strong state power focused on coercive institutions. This enables military or authoritarian groups to influence, limit, or change election results. In these cases, weak or uneven state power hurts the rule of law, accountability, and the strengthening of democracy. The study finds that elections are important, but they alone do not create a democracy. Real democratization needs strong, independent, and responsible government institutions that can turn election results into effective and legal governance.

## Keywords

democracy, state capacity, Southeast Asia, elections, democratization

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## INTRODUCTION

In the last thirty years, Southeast Asia has seen a significant growth in electoral politics, causing many experts and observers to expect the steady development of democratic governance in the area. Countries like Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and sometimes Myanmar have set up multiparty elections and regular changes in political leadership. This shows a wider global trend linked to the third wave of democratization. However, establishing competitive elections has not always led to stable or effective democratic government. Ongoing issues like corruption, elite control, weak law enforcement, and divided public administration still influence political results throughout the region. Elections are now a normal part of politics, but the way people are governed still varies and can sometimes go backward. These patterns show a lasting conflict between procedural democracy and weak institutions, indicating that just having elections may not ensure real democratic governance (Carothers, 2002; Collier & Levitsky, 1997). In the early studies of democratization, scholars often viewed the shift to democracy as a straight path moving from authoritarian governments to stable democracies. However, later research has shown that many political systems do not follow this path. Instead, governments often mix electoral systems with unfair practices or weak ways to hold them accountable. Collier and Levitsky (1997) refer to these systems as "democracy with adjectives," highlighting that electoral systems can differ a lot from standard liberal democratic values. O'Donnell (1994) introduced the idea of delegative democracy to explain systems where elected leaders have limited rules to follow while still keeping their official electoral support. Building on this analysis, Levitsky and Way (2010) described competitive authoritarian regimes where democratic institutions are officially present but are regularly manipulated by those in power to keep their political control. These views question the belief that changes in government always result in a stronger democracy. They emphasize the ongoing presence of hybrid regimes, which exist in an unclear area between democracy and authoritarianism (Carothers, 2002; O'Donnell, 1994).

Although these frameworks have greatly helped in studying regime hybridity, they mainly concentrate on classifying regimes instead of looking at the institutional bases that influence democratic results. In response, researchers have placed more focus on the importance of state capacity to explain differences in how well democracies perform. State capacity generally means how well the state can carry out its policies, enforce laws, gather resources, and keep control over its area (Soifer & vom Hau, 2008). From this viewpoint, elections offer a way to establish political legitimacy, but turning election results into good governance relies on the power and independence of state institutions. Fukuyama (2013) says that the quality of governance depends not just on democratic processes, but also on the ability of the state to carry out decisions and maintain the rule of law. Without this kind of institutional strength, electoral competition may strengthen patronage networks, clientelism, and control by elites.

Theoretical ideas from state-building studies enhance this view by identifying various types of state power. Mann's idea of infrastructural power shows how the state can reach into society and carry out political decisions across its area. When a government has weak infrastructure, it may find it hard to enforce rules, control economic activities, or keep its administration organized. On the other hand, states with strong infrastructure have the systems and tools needed to turn political power into effective governance. This difference implies that the effect of elections on democracy largely relies on how strong the state's institutions are. In places where the government's ability is limited, elections can happen alongside problems in governance or areas with authoritarian control. When institutions are strong but controlled by political interests, the ability of the state may strengthen authoritarian rule instead of promoting democratic accountability (Fukuyama, 2013; Soifer & vom Hau, 2008). These patterns are especially clear in Southeast Asia, where political growth has usually been influenced by strong government traditions, elite groups working together, and debated efforts to reform institutions. Research shows that in the region, political order often comes from strong central authority and negotiations among elites, rather than from slowly developing liberal democratic norms (Slater, 2010). Even when electoral institutions have grown, state institutions often stay connected to patronage networks and hierarchical political systems. Indonesia's shift away from authoritarian rule shows both the strength and weaknesses of its democratic institutions. While there has been more competition in elections, the ability of institutions and the impact of powerful individuals still affect how the government operates (Mietzner, 2019, 2020). Thailand's political path shows how powerful institutions, especially the military, can limit the growth of democracy, even though elections happen regularly (Chambers, 2021; McCargo, 2021). In the Philippines, democratic institutions function in a political setting characterized by populist leaders, the influence of elites, and ongoing challenges regarding accountability and the integrity of governance (Curato, 2017; Quimpo, 2008; Brillantes & Fernandez, 2012).

Even though there is more awareness of hybrid regimes in Southeast Asia, there are still significant gaps in understanding how these systems work and why democratic results can vary. Many studies mainly look at types of governments, election competition, or the behavior of elites, and they focus less on how varying state capacity affects how well democratic institutions work. The relationship between how elections are organized and the government's ability to manage, fund, and enforce laws is not yet fully examined in studies comparing different regions. To close this gap, we need to combine ideas from democratization theory and research on state-building. This study looks at state capacity as a key factor that connects electoral processes and democratic governance. It aims to go beyond simply classifying regimes and offers a deeper understanding of why democracy varies. The study presents three main ideas. The Electoral Sufficiency Hypothesis suggests that just having competitive elections is enough to create democratic governance, no matter how strong or weak the state's capacity is. Second, the Conditional Capacity Hypothesis says that elections only lead to meaningful democratic results when there are strong and independent state institutions that can enforce rules and ensure accountability. Third, the Adjectival Democracy Hypothesis argues that weak or problematic government ability leads to mixed forms of government, like electoral, delegative, illiberal, or competitive authoritarian democracies, instead of a fully established liberal democracy (Collier & Levitsky, 1997; Levitsky & Way, 2010; O'Donnell, 1994). This study compares documents from Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Myanmar from 1990 to 2025. These cases show notable differences in the paths of governance and the growth of institutions, all within a common regional setting of democratization. Document analysis is a clear way to study policy records, changes in institutions, and governance reports over time. It allows for organized comparisons of political and institutional changes (Bowen, 2009; Rapley, 2007). This research aims to connect how elections are organized with changes in government abilities to manage, collect money, and enforce laws. It wants to improve the idea of "democracy with adjectives" and help bring together studies on democratization and state-building. In the end, the study suggests that the weakness of democracy in Southeast Asia is more about the unequal growth and control of government institutions than the lack of elections. Elections can give a sense of legitimacy, but only effective and responsible institutions can turn the competition of elections into lasting democratic governance.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Design**

This study adopted a qualitative document analysis design to examine whether the presence of formal elections was sufficient to produce democratic governance in contexts where state capacity remained weak. Document analysis allowed the systematic review and interpretation of written materials in order to understand political processes and institutional patterns across time (Bowen, 2009). In the context of this research, documents provided valuable insight into how electoral systems operated and how state institutions functioned in different Southeast Asian countries. Because the study investigated the interaction between electoral institutions, governance performance, and state capacity, document analysis served as a practical and conceptually appropriate approach. It enabled the researcher to examine both the procedural aspects of elections and the deeper institutional structures that shaped democratic outcomes without requiring direct fieldwork.

### **Approach**

The study followed a comparative and interpretive research approach aimed at understanding how elections and state capacity interacted to shape democratic quality across Southeast Asia. By combining theoretical insights from democratization studies and governance research, the analysis connected the concept of "democracy with adjectives" (Collier & Levitsky, 1997) with contemporary perspectives on state capacity and institutional strength (Fukuyama, 2013; Croissant & Hellmann, 2020). The research applied a most-different systems design (MDS), selecting countries that shared a similar regional environment but displayed significant variation in political institutions and state capacity. Through this approach, the study explored how comparable historical and regional conditions produced different democratic outcomes depending on the strength of state institutions. The nation-state served as the unit of analysis, and the observation period from 1990 to 2025 captured the post-Cold War wave of democratization as well as subsequent political transitions, reversals, and hybrid regimes.

### **Case Selection and Rationale**

Four Southeast Asian countries—Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Myanmar—were selected through purposive sampling because they represented different trajectories of democratization and institutional development. Indonesia represented a relatively successful democratic transition following the collapse of authoritarian rule, although governance challenges and corruption remained persistent (Mietzner, 2020). The Philippines had maintained regular elections for decades, yet its democratic institutions were often constrained by clientelism, political dynasties, and limited bureaucratic capacity (Hicken, 2019). Thailand illustrated cyclical patterns of democratization and authoritarian reversal, where military intervention and constitutional restructuring repeatedly disrupted democratic consolidation (Chambers, 2021; McCargo, 2021). Myanmar represented a case where elections were introduced within a political system still dominated by the military, demonstrating how limited administrative and coercive autonomy restricted the democratic impact of electoral processes.

### **Data Sources**

To strengthen the reliability of the findings, the study utilized a triangulated collection of primary and secondary documents. Primary documents included constitutional provisions, electoral laws, official election commission reports, government policy documents, and judicial decisions related to governance and elections. These materials provided direct evidence of how democratic institutions were structured and

implemented. Secondary sources consisted of scholarly publications, regional political analyses, international governance indicators, and policy reports that offered broader interpretation and context for political developments in Southeast Asia. Drawing from multiple types of documents helped ensure a balanced understanding of political realities, as official records, academic studies, and independent reports presented complementary perspectives (Bowen, 2009; Rapley, 2007).

#### **Document Corpus and Scope**

The document corpus consisted of approximately 240–280 documents collected across the four cases between 1990 and 2025. These materials included constitutional texts, electoral legislation, administrative reform policies, election commission reports, audit reports, judicial decisions, and governance policy documents. The dataset also incorporated peer-reviewed academic studies, regional governance analyses, and international democracy indices such as those produced by Freedom House and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project. Documents were distributed relatively evenly across the four countries, averaging 55–70 documents per case, which ensured comparability in the analysis. The materials were selected based on their relevance to electoral institutions, state capacity indicators, and democratic governance outcomes, enabling both detailed within-case analysis and cross-case comparison.

#### **Analytical Framework and Coding Process**

The document analysis followed three main stages: organization, coding, and interpretation (Bowen, 2009). First, all documents were organized chronologically and categorized by country, year, and document type to trace how electoral institutions and governance structures evolved over time. Second, the documents were coded using a combination of deductive and inductive approaches. Deductive coding was guided by the study's theoretical framework, focusing on electoral institutions, state capacity, and democratic quality. At the same time, inductive coding allowed new themes to emerge from the data, including patterns such as elite capture, electoral clientelism, judicial politicization, and institutional weakening. Coding was supported by qualitative analysis software such as NVivo or Atlas.ti, which facilitated systematic comparison across cases. Finally, the coded materials were interpreted to identify patterns and relationships.

#### **Coding Validation and Reliability Procedures**

To maintain analytical rigor, several procedures were implemented to ensure consistency in the coding process. A detailed codebook was developed to clarify the meaning of each analytical category and provide examples of how codes should be applied. A pilot coding exercise involving a subset of the document corpus was conducted to refine categories before full analysis began. In addition, intra-coder reliability checks were performed by revisiting previously coded documents after a time interval to ensure consistency in interpretation. Triangulation across different document types served as an additional reliability measure, as findings were considered robust only when supported by multiple independent sources. These procedures strengthened the transparency and credibility of the research process.

#### **Operationalization of Key Variables**

The study operationalized three key variables that guided the analysis. Formal elections represented the independent variable and referred to constitutionally mandated multiparty elections conducted at regular intervals according to recognized democratic procedures. Indicators included electoral frequency, voter participation, party competition, and documented irregularities. State capacity, which functioned as a moderating variable, referred to the ability of government institutions to implement policies, collect revenue, maintain administrative authority, and enforce the rule of law. Indicators included bureaucratic effectiveness, fiscal extraction capacity, judicial independence, and control over coercive institutions. The dependent variable, democratic quality, referred to the extent to which governance systems protected civil liberties, upheld the rule of law, and ensured political accountability. These operational definitions aligned with established research on democratization and governance (Fukuyama, 2013; O'Donnell, 1994; Collier & Levitsky, 1997).

#### **Validity, Reliability, and Triangulation**

Several strategies were employed to strengthen the validity and reliability of the study. Data triangulation was used by comparing information from different types of sources, including official documents, academic literature, governance indicators, and independent reports. This approach reduced the risk of relying on a single perspective and allowed the researcher to identify areas of agreement or discrepancy across sources. An audit trail was maintained to document the selection, coding, and interpretation of documents, ensuring transparency in the research process. Reflexive memoing was also used during analysis to track interpretive decisions and monitor potential researcher bias. Together, these strategies helped ensure that the findings were grounded in systematic and transparent analysis.

#### **Limitations of the Study**

Despite its strengths, document analysis presented several limitations. Official documents sometimes reflected an overly favorable account of democratic performance, while reports from advocacy organizations occasionally emphasized governance failures. Although triangulation helped mitigate this bias, it could not eliminate it entirely (Bowen, 2009). In addition, document-based analysis did not allow for direct causal testing in the same way as statistical or experimental methods. Instead, the approach focused on identifying patterns, institutional mechanisms, and contextual explanations. Data availability also varied across countries, particularly in politically restrictive environments such as Myanmar, where access to official information was limited. Nevertheless, qualitative document analysis remained a valuable method for examining institutional dynamics of democratization (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002).

#### **Interpretive Scope and Limits of Causal Inference**

This study therefore advanced interpretive and conditional explanations rather than definitive causal claims. Through systematic comparison and process tracing, the research identified patterns linking electoral institutions with variations in state capacity and democratic outcomes. However, the analysis did not claim that weak state capacity alone caused democratic failure in a deterministic sense. Instead, it suggested that differences in state capacity shaped the conditions under which elections produced meaningful democratic governance. By clarifying these conditional relationships, the study contributed to a deeper understanding of why democratization in Southeast Asia often resulted in hybrid or incomplete democratic systems.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section evaluates the Conditional Capacity Hypothesis by comparing how electoral institutionalization interacts with variations in administrative, fiscal, and coercive state capacity across four cases: Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Myanmar (1990–2025). Rather than treating elections as inherently democratizing, the analysis examines whether and under what institutional conditions electoral competition translates into rule-based governance, accountability, and rights protection. Across cases, the evidence consistently indicates that elections are necessary but not sufficient for substantive democracy. Variations in democratic quality correspond systematically to differences in state capacity configuration. Where administrative and judicial institutions possess partial autonomy and professionalization, electoral regimes demonstrate greater stability, though not necessarily high-quality liberal democracy (Mietzner, 2020; Croissant & Hellmann, 2020). Where state capacity is fragmented or clientelist, elections coexist with weak accountability and elite dominance (Hicken, 2019; Quimpo, 2008). Where coercive institutions retain autonomy from civilian control, electoral processes become vulnerable to manipulation or reversal

(Chambers, 2021; Crouch, 2019). These patterns support a conditional—not deterministic—relationship between elections and democratic outcomes.

### **Indonesia: Institutionalizing Electoral Democracy Amid Uneven Capacity**

Following the collapse of the New Order regime in 1998, Indonesia institutionalized competitive multiparty elections beginning in 1999, accompanied by constitutional amendments strengthening representative institutions. Voter turnout has remained high (over 80% in 2019), and peaceful transfers of power have occurred repeatedly. On procedural grounds, Indonesia meets the minimal electoral criteria for polyarchal competition (Dahl, 1971). However, governance indicators and scholarly assessments demonstrate persistent weaknesses in bureaucratic coherence and rule-of-law enforcement. Post-2001 decentralization reforms fragmented administrative authority, producing uneven regulatory enforcement across regions (World Bank, 2022). Indonesia ranks modestly in global rule-of-law indices, reflecting limitations in judicial independence and in the control of corruption (World Justice Project, 2023). As Mietzner (2020) argues, Indonesia represents a "low-quality democracy" in which clientelistic coalitions and elite accommodation constrain horizontal accountability. Importantly, capacity is not uniformly weak. Institutions such as the General Elections Commission (KPU) and the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) have demonstrated pockets of professionalization and relative autonomy. This selective institutional strengthening aligns with Francis Fukuyama's (2013) argument that state capacity often develops unevenly across sectors. The Indonesian case thus illustrates a partial confirmation of the Conditional Capacity Hypothesis: elections stabilized regime competition, but uneven bureaucratic and judicial capacity has limited democratic deepening. The KPU and the KPK are two institutions with pockets of strength in handling elections. They show that certain parts of the state can develop capacity even when the rest of the bureaucracy lags. This pattern fits the "selective capacity" model of Fukuyama (2013), in which certain institutions can distance themselves from politics and become more effective through public pressure or international pressure. The Indonesian example is what Collier and Levitsky (1997) would call an "electoral democracy" with sound procedural legitimacy but little substantive depth. Regular elections occur in the context of weak accountability enforcement and elite collusion, as well as uneven rule of law, which prevents a liberal democratic consolidation. In short, Indonesia shows that elections can stabilize post-authoritarian regimes but also shows that without bureaucratic capacity and judicial independence, democracy is adjectival, not substantive.

### **The Philippines: Electoral Vibrancy and the Weak State**

The Philippines has conducted regular competitive elections since the adoption of the 1987 Constitution. Voter turnout typically exceeds 70%, and multiparty competition remains robust. Procedurally, the regime fulfills minimal electoral criteria. However, multiple institutional assessments reveal weak administrative and fiscal capacity relative to regional peers. World Bank Governance Indicators (2023) place the Philippines below regional averages in government effectiveness and rule of law. Commission on Audit reports (2023) repeatedly document deficiencies in public financial management. Scholars attribute these patterns to entrenched dynastic politics and localized patronage networks that dominate electoral competition (Hicken, 2019; Quimpo, 2008). This configuration aligns with Guillermo O'Donnell's (1994) concept of delegative democracy: elections legitimize executive authority, but weak horizontal accountability constrains institutional oversight. Episodes such as the Duterte administration's controversial anti-drug campaign illustrate how electoral mandates can coexist with institutional fragility (Curato, 2017). The Philippine case, therefore, demonstrates that high electoral participation does not compensate for limited bureaucratic autonomy and enforcement capacity. Elections are more like contests of elite families than mechanisms for public accountability. Quimpo (2008) noted that the result is a "contested democracy" in which informal patronage coexists with formal rules. This is also reflected in media and NGO reports of widespread vote-buying, violence, and manipulation, which the limited enforcement capacities of the COMELEC cannot appropriately address (Transparency International, 2021). The Philippines has one of the weakest fiscal and bureaucratic capacities in the region. In accordance with Brillantes & Fernandez (2012), local governments rely heavily on the Internal Revenue Allotment (IRA) from the national government and cannot design and fund their programs. The absence of coercive and administrative might is illustrated by ongoing rebelliousness and enforcement malfunction, notably in Mindanao, where state authority is dispersed. In this way, Collier and Levitsky (1997) would qualify the Philippines as a "delegative democracy" where elections confer legitimacy but not real accountability. The president often rules with considerable discretion, while institutions remain too weak to check the executive effectively. Duterte (2016–2022) was elected with a free vote, but human rights violations and attacks on the judiciary characterized his presidency. This shows that elections without capacity can empower populist authoritarianism (Curato, 2017). To sum up, the Philippines shows that electoral vibrancy cannot make up for weak state capacity. The democratic procedure is still functioning, but it lacks the essential capabilities of administration and coercion for effective democratic governance.

### **Thailand: Cyclical Democratization and the Militarized State**

In Thailand, electoral institutions operate within a political order characterized by repeated military intervention (2006, 2014). Although elections resumed under the 2017 Constitution, institutional design provisions—such as the appointed Senate's role in prime ministerial selection—preserve military influence (Chambers, 2021). Unlike the Philippines, Thailand possesses comparatively strong bureaucratic and coercive institutions. However, these capacities are not fully subordinated to civilian democratic control. Judicial interventions, including the dissolution of opposition parties (McCargo, 2021), illustrate how formal institutions can constrain electoral competition. Freedom House (2023) classifies Thailand as "Partly Free," reflecting relatively effective administration alongside limited political rights. This case complicates linear assumptions about state capacity and democracy. Capacity here functions as a stabilizing mechanism for elite dominance rather than democratic accountability. Consistent with Levitsky and Way (2010), Thailand approximates a competitive authoritarian configuration in which institutional strength coexists with restricted contestation. According to an examination of official records and the constitution, the political order of Thailand approximates what Levitsky and Way (2010) term a competitive authoritarian regime: elections exist. However, the incumbent manipulates institutions to stay at the top. The Constitutional Court's judgments, like the dissolution of the last Future Forward Party in 2020, confirm the politicization of the judiciary and reflect the use of formal institutions to limit democratic competition (McCargo, 2021). Thailand shows that if a country has strong authority but no democracy, it does not ensure democracy; it only ensures more authority. According to the typology of Collier and Levitsky (1997), it can be termed as "semi-democracy" or "authoritarian democracy", where elections are used to legitimize elite and military rule. The case illustrates that capacity can be a two-edged sword: though it may be necessary for democracy, it may also entrench authoritarianism when seized by anti-democratic actors.

### **Myanmar: Elections without State**

Myanmar conducted nationally competitive elections in 2015 and 2020 following limited political reforms. However, the 2008 Constitution reserved 25% of parliamentary seats for the military and granted the Tatmadaw control over key ministries (Crouch, 2019). While electoral competition formally occurred, coercive authority remained structurally insulated from civilian oversight. International election observation reports documented procedural improvements alongside persistent disenfranchisement and institutional bias (Carter

Center, 2015; ANFREL, 2016). Governance indicators consistently rank Myanmar among the lowest globally in rule of law and government effectiveness (World Bank, 2022). The 2021 military coup demonstrates the fragility of electoral regimes in the absence of consolidated administrative and coercive control under civilian authority. In this case, weak institutional autonomy prevented electoral outcomes from constraining coercive actors. Myanmar thus represents the strongest confirmation of the Conditional Capacity Hypothesis: elections without state consolidation remain reversible. The Myanmar case shows that merely holding elections is not enough to bring about democracy. A state must exist that will carry out the outcome of the elections, and that has yet to happen in Myanmar, which continues to have a military dictatorship. Reformulating a statement using simple English is often an arduous task. Allied contractors, however, maintain candor with their clientele about their capabilities. The statement at hand captures this essence. The 2021 coup that toppled the NLD government illustrates the theory that democracy requires state capacity to be meaningful. As Fukuyama (2014) and Slater (2010) argue, in the case of weak states, democratization collapses as there are no institutions to keep coercive actors in check. The current crisis in Myanmar shows that elections are fragile and reversible without civilian control of administrative and coercive power.

#### **Cross-Case Comparative Synthesis**

Three comparative patterns emerge. First, electoral institutionalization correlates with democratic stability only where administrative and judicial institutions exhibit partial autonomy (Indonesia). Where such autonomy is fragmented or clientelist (Philippines), elections coexist with weak accountability. Second, strong state capacity does not uniformly enhance democracy. In Thailand, coercive and bureaucratic strength under military influence constrains rather than deepens electoral competition. Capacity, therefore, operates as a conditional resource whose democratic effects depend on institutional control. Third, in the near absence of consolidated civilian authority (Myanmar), electoral regimes remain structurally vulnerable to coercive reversal. Collectively, these findings support the Conditional Capacity Hypothesis and refine the “democracy with adjectives” framework (Collier & Levitsky, 1997). Regime variation in Southeast Asia aligns systematically with configurations of administrative, fiscal, and coercive capacity rather than with electoral frequency alone. We look at Indonesia; it has characteristics of “electoral democracy,” but countries like Thailand have semi-democracy, while the Philippines and Myanmar are called delegative and pseudo democracies because of their low-capacity systems.

#### **Theoretical Implications**

The analysis of the document develops three theoretical implications for democratization more generally. We must comprehend democratization as both a political and an administrative process. Elections create political legitimacy, but state capacity maintains and deepens democracy (Fukuyama, 2014). Second, the sequence of democratization matters. In the Philippines and Myanmar, democracy has not taken root. In places like Indonesia, where state-building overtook liberalization, democracy is more stable. The third challenge is the Southeast Asian experience. It calls into question universal models of democratization that privilege procedural metrics. It instead proposes a relationship framework that locates elections in state-building trajectories and power configurations. The evidence suggests that democracy cannot be attained through mere formal elections and the context of weak state capacity. Elections may bring about competition, but without the administrative, fiscal, and coercive power exercised under civilian control, they will only yield empty democratic outcomes. In the region, institutions exist in form but not in substance, such as democracies with adjectives. A process of state capacity building is needed in Southeast Asia as it democratizes, to translate such process legitimacy into process governance.

The central theoretical finding of this study is that elections are a necessary but not sufficient condition for substantive democracy. Across cases, electoral institutionalization does not independently predict democratic quality. Rather, variations in administrative, fiscal, and coercive state capacity systematically condition whether electoral mandates translate into rule-based governance, accountability, and rights protection. This finding refines David Collier and Steven Levitsky's (1997) concept of “democracy with adjectives” by identifying state capacity as a structural determinant of adjectival regime outcomes. Electoral democracies in Southeast Asia diverge not primarily because of differences in electoral design, but because of uneven institutional strength and autonomy. Consistent with arguments advanced by Guillermo O'Donnell (1994) and Francis Fukuyama (2013), the evidence suggests that democratic legitimacy generated through elections requires institutional capacity to be translated into enforceable governance. Where bureaucratic fragmentation, fiscal weakness, or coercive autonomy persist, elections risk reproducing elite capture or becoming vulnerable to reversal. Thus, democratization and state-building are mutually constitutive processes rather than sequential stages. When power rests with undemocratic institutions, the country cannot make progress towards democracy, and Thailand's experience shows. Thailand's military is the country's strongest institution, with strong organizational coherence and bureaucratic efficiency. The military controls the judiciary and continues to shape politics. According to the definitions of Chambers (2021) and McCargo (2020), “coercive institutionalism” converts such capacity into a mechanism of political exclusion, thereby debasing the democratic potential of elections. Under Pakistan's 2017 Constitution and through the Courts, the use of formal democratic means to lend legitimacy to authoritarian control is evident. This pattern reinforces the idea that state capacity must not exist democratically aligned to serve democratic ends. In Thailand's case, it is not a lack of capacity. Rather, it is the seizure of capacity by non-civilian actors that hijacks elections and turns them into instruments of accountability. Thailand's experience suggests that assuming that strengthening state institutions automatically strengthens democracy is unwise. Capacity can support or undermine democratic governance. Outcomes depend crucially on who controls such capacity and how it is used. On the other hand, Myanmar epitomizes the logical extreme of democracy in the absence of a state. Between 2011 and 2020, Myanmar experimented with liberalization, demonstrating that elections can neither constrain military power nor guarantee democracy in the absence of a coherent and autonomous state. The 2008 Constitution institutionalized the Tatmadaw's power through reserved parliament seats and veto power to change the constitution (Crouch, 2019). The military retained coercive and administrative superiority even under partial civilian rule, making electoral competition largely symbolic. The 2021 coup revealed how fragile this arrangement was. Without state institutions capable of enforcing civilian authority, elections were merely reversible episodes in a longer story of authoritarian continuity. Fukuyama (2014) shows how Myanmar illustrates the first principle of state-building before democracy. Though elections may confer political legitimacy, only state capacity allows that legitimacy to produce rule-based governance. All together, these four cases seem to show a bigger Southeast Asian pattern: the democratic experiences of Southeast Asian states are not defined by a lack of elections; instead, they are defined by a failure or misdirection of state capacity. In places like Indonesia, where state institutions have a fair amount of independence and power, democracy continues to exist, albeit in quite a limited way. When ability is broken down or captured, democracy is bound to either populism or patronage. In Thailand, where authorities dominate, elections are used to legitimize the non-democratic use of power. Elections fail completely when there is almost no capacity, as in Myanmar. These differences support the Conditional Capacity Hypothesis established in the theoretical framework: elections produce democracy when state capacity is adequate and oriented towards democracy.

According to the theory, evidence from Southeast Asia challenges minimalist or procedural definitions of democracy that equate competitive elections with democratic quality. Since at least Collier and Levitsky (1997), we have been aware of the problem of conceptual

stretching. The term "democracy" applied indiscriminately to regimes that hold elections but otherwise lack the institutional backings of democracy conceals more than it reveals. Words such as "electoral democracy," "semi-democracy," and "delegative democracy" do not treat these deficiencies as a matter of nomenclature. They signify genuine structural deficiencies partaking of weak or distorted state capacity. The idea is similar to O'Donnell's (1994) concept of "brown areas" in democracies, where the state's legal and coercive powers are so weak that it is unable to enforce liberal democratic norms. In many parts of Southeast Asia, brown areas persist both geographically (in peripheral areas) and institutionally (in courts, bureaucracies, and police). So, the democratic deficit is not procedural but structural. The findings also show the sequencing problem for democratization. Fukuyama (2014) and Slater (2010) argue that successful democracies emerged from strong states capable of upholding law and order and delivering services, before participation became expanded through liberalization. Southeast Asia's postcolonial and post-authoritarian experiences have mostly reversed this sequence: they have held elections before building capable states. The result is a phenomenon of "premature democratization", in which formal institution-building outstrips the capacity of the state to sustain them. This inverted sequence is illustrated by the Philippines' ongoing weakness and Myanmar's democratic collapse. Unlike Brazil, Indonesia is more resilient owing to its legacy of bureaucratic structures under Sukarno that provide a sufficient institutional framework for democracy. The lesson for other regions is not that elections are unimportant but that they ought to follow—or at least coincide with—processes of state institutionalization. The study suggests that international democratization efforts that prioritize electoral assistance over institutional reform are likely to have a limited long-term impact. While programs targeting election officials, political parties, and campaign monitoring might enhance electoral legitimacy, they do little to strengthen the fiscal and judicial institutions that take the edge off democracy's significant potential. The goal of democratic deepening is often erroneously framed as pushing elections and liberalizing the economy. Instead, donor agencies and domestic reformers should adopt a state-capacity-first approach. They should focus on public sector reform, the development of the rule of law, and fiscal accountability as preconditions for democratic deepening. The analysis of the facts showed that the stronger bureaucratic professionalism and fiscal management of a country influenced the ability to build electorally democratic regimes. For instance, Indonesia has been able to build a relatively stable electoral democracy and a sense of legitimacy, compared to (say) the politicized public administration or the lack of adequate resources in Turkey. In addition, the results of the study contribute to comparative democratization theory by showing that elections—capacity relations—are conditional and multidirectional, rather than linear. Having too much power can help or undermine democracy if it does not follow democratic rules. In the same manner, weak capacity can undermine democracy or foster adaptive, locally participatory governance, as in decentralized regions of Indonesia. As a consequence, future research must move beyond "strong" versus "weak" states and start interrogating the quality and orientation of state capacity: whether it is rule-bound, accountable, and inclusive.

Even though it has methodological limitations, document analysis remains valuable for highlighting the discursive and institutional aspects of democratization. The study seeks to reconstruct the interaction between formal and substantive democracy in Southeast Asia by systematically examining the region's constitutions, electoral laws, governance reports, and academic literature. Democratic institutions cannot simply be procedural – they must be embedded in capable states which can enforce rights, regulate competition, and deliver public goods. Absenteeism marks the state in situations where democracy decays. Capture marks the condition in which democracy distorts. Weakness is what marks the stagnation of democracy. This study finds that formal elections are necessary but not sufficient for democracy in contexts of weak state capacity. Elections can help initiate political pluralism and legitimize governance; they do not ensure substance. Democracy can only survive and flourish if there is an effective, neutral, and answerable state behind it. We see in Southeast Asia that without state structures, a built democracy will only produce hollow democracies with participation but institutional fragility. The challenge now facing the region is not having more elections, but building stronger states: professionalizing bureaucracies, ensuring fiscal integrity, protecting judicial independence, and subordinating coercive power to civilian control. Southeast Asia moves from regime to state, from paper democracy to substantive democracy, only if electoral formalism is converted into institutional strength. The findings carry implications for both domestic reformers and international democracy assistance programs. First, electoral support initiatives—such as election monitoring, party training, and voter education—are unlikely to produce durable democratic consolidation in the absence of parallel investments in bureaucratic professionalization, judicial independence, and fiscal capacity. Prioritizing electoral processes without strengthening administrative and coercive accountability may inadvertently legitimize weak or illiberal regimes. Second, state capacity enhancement must be institutionally aligned with democratic norms. The Thai case illustrates that strengthening coercive and bureaucratic institutions without ensuring civilian oversight may entrench authoritarian resilience rather than promote democratic deepening. Reform efforts should therefore focus not only on increasing capacity, but also on institutional autonomy, transparency, and rule-bound governance. Third, sequencing matters. In contexts such as Myanmar, premature electoral liberalization without prior consolidation of civilian control over coercive institutions increases the probability of democratic reversal. Sustainable democratization strategies should integrate electoral reform with state institutional reform rather than treating them as separate policy domains.

#### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study found that formal elections are needed for real democracy, but they are not enough alone, especially in places where the government's ability is weak or inconsistent. In the Southeast Asian examples studied—Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Myanmar—the results indicated that just having established electoral systems did not ensure good democracy. The success of democratic governance relied mostly on the strength, independence, and cooperation of state institutions that carry out policies, enforce laws, and ensure accountability. When administrative, fiscal, and coercive powers were stable and independent, elections were more likely to promote responsible governance and protect civil and political rights. However, in places where these abilities were weak, divided, or controlled by powerful elites or military groups, elections often strengthened patronage networks, legitimized authoritarian control, or were at risk of being overturned. These findings showed that democratization and state-building are linked processes. The strength of democracy relies not just on how elections are conducted, but also on the state's ability to turn the legitimacy from elections into a government that follows rules.

Based on these findings, the study suggested that efforts for democratic reform should focus on strengthening state institutions while also keeping electoral processes running smoothly. Domestic reform efforts should aim to enhance the professionalism of government workers, better manage finances, ensure that the judiciary operates independently, and increase civilian control over institutions that use force. This will help make sure that electoral mandates are carried out effectively. At the same time, international democracy assistance programs should broaden their help beyond observing elections and educating voters to include lasting changes that improve government effectiveness and responsibility. Improving administrative efficiency and rule-based institutions would lower the chances of elite control, authoritarian interference, and weaknesses in democracy. Future research should look deeper into how various aspects of state capacity affect democratic results, especially in hybrid regimes where there are electoral institutions but their strength varies.

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### Contribution

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