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Local elections and democratic backsliding: pragmatic politics in Southeast Asia

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Democratic backsliding is commonly studied on a national scale, but local elections now define the lines of democratic strength or weakness in Southeast Asia. This research provides theoretical insight into how practical political tactics that are used in local elections, including opportunism-based alliances, patronage-based campaigning, and candidate volatility, can lead to the long-term undermining of democracy. The research is based on secondary sources such as academic literature, electoral reports, and media analysis of Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand to identify how local actors negotiate political space based on flexibility instead of ideological allegiance. According to the research, this kind of electoral pragmatism enables the normalization of antidemocratic tendencies at the grassroots to promote the tendency toward broader authoritarianism. It also points out the weaknesses in regulatory safeguards in local electoral systems as a weak spot. This research proposes a new emphasis on subnational politics in the study of democratic backsliding by synthesizing insights on the topic from political theory and regional studies. It ends with a brief conceptual framework to explain the way in which the processes of local-level electoral politics can strengthen or weaken democratic norms over a period of time.

KEYWORDS

authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, Indonesia, local elections, patronage, Philippines, pragmatic politics, Southeast Asia

1 Introduction

In Southeast Asia, the issue of democratic backsliding and the gradual undermining of democratic institutions, norms, and practices by elected leaders has become a major cause of worry (Bermeo, 2016; Croissant and Diamond, 2020). Local elections have been barely studied, even though they are the places where backsliding is born and reinforced with pragmatism and a preference for gaining power over democracy (Mietzner, 2020; Ockey and Talib, 2023), even though national-level analyses prevail in the literature in terms of how the phenomenon originates and spreads through the application of pragmatism and desire to acquire power instead of upholding democratic self-interest (Levitsky and Way, 2002). This point of departure is considerable: subnational polls, which tend to be devolutionary and less often checked, are mini-controversies of hybrid regimes, but research rarely tracks the upward flow of pragmatism at the grassroots, opportunistic alliances, patronage, and candidate fluidity into national autocratization (Aspinall et al., 2022; Dressel and Bonoan, 2024). This perspective focuses on the following research question: How do pragmatic political uses in local elections bring on the phenomenon of democratic erosion in Southeast Asian hybrid regimes? It claims that these are based on rational adjustments in the weak institutions and acclimation to anti-democratic tendencies in the grassroots, establishing causal patterns, through elite capture and norm erosion, of further authoritarian consolidations. The analysis uses peer-reviewed studies in comparative politics and regional studies (Daly, 2025; Quimpo et al., 2005), specifically

Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, where subnational integrity deteriorates as per Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) indices according to national patterns (Coppedge et al., 2019). This article is unique in its synthesis of electoral authoritarianism theory with clientelism one that will, in turn, promote a bottom-up perspective on the backsliding discourse wherein subnational protections are used as intervention tools (Norris, 2017; Garnett and James, 2023).

In Southeast Asia's hybrid regimes, competitive authoritarianism recognizes elections as a means of legitimacy but manipulates the process through pragmatic politics (Levitsky and Way, 2002; Mietzner, 2020). Such strategies thrive in local elections, in less nationalized and less scrutinized local elections, in which patronage and affiliation weaken voter trust and norms of institutional behavior (Hicken, 2013; Iglesias, 2022). As an example, in Pemilihan Kepala Daerah (pilkada) of Indonesia, money politics has gone on a rampage, with reports showing that there is extensive vote-buying that resembles the national oligarchic domination (Aspinall, 2010; Hadiz, 2003). Similarly, Philippine dynasties abuse local polls as a way to promote impunity, as was the case in the 2022 elections under the Marcos-Duterte alliance (Calimbahin, 2023; Iglesias, 2022). Local competition in Thailand is subdued by military patronage enforced by post-coup local contests (Baker, 2016; Sawasdee, 2020).

In order to achieve representativeness, this analysis uses Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand as exemplary cases of hybrid regimes in Southeast Asia to reflect the overall diversity of the region in a post-authoritarian transition. Indonesia, with the third-largest worldwide democracy, is a case of the traps of decentralization into a disjointed multi-party system, as pilkada (regional head elections) are the reflection of national oligarch consolidation (Hadiz, 2003; Aldrich and Griffin, 2010). The Philippines emphasizes elitist patronage in a gubernatorial system, in which local elections in thriving impunity regimes perpetuate elite impunity with populist-oriented presidential races (Quimpo et al., 2005; Calimbahin, 2023). Thailand is a coupprone volatility with military-monarchical forces undercutting electoral competition and providing anticivic transitions to others (Baker, 2016; Sawasdee, 2020). Moved by the V-Dem East Asia-Pacific hotspots of autocratization (Coppedge et al., 2019), these cases can comparatively synthesize with similar pragmatic Enablers, but with contextual disparities disclosed.

The structure proceeds as follows: Section 2 of the article is a description of the theoretical basis of pragmatic politics in local elections, based on the rational choice and electoral authoritarianism models. Sections 3–5 will give a detailed case study of Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand with an example of how pragmatic strategies are used and undermine democratic norms. Section 6 investigates the erosion process, whereas Section 7 looks at regulatory weaknesses. Section 8 suggests a conceptual framework for how to study local-level dynamics, and Section 9 has implications for research and policy through the discussion. This view promotes a bottom-up approach to reversing backsliding by promoting reforms in electoral supervision and the work of civil society.

2 Theoretical perspective on pragmatic politics in local elections

This interaction creates pragmatic politics in local elections, which is based on rational choice theory, where actors maximize utility in the face of uncertainty (Aldrich and Griffin, 2010; Smiley, 1999), combined with electoral authoritarianism, which assumes that elections are a legitimacy mask that hides power consolidation (Levitsky and Way, 2002; Svolik, 2019). These theories act causally: facing weak party systems and post-authoritarian legacies, rational actors use pragmatic instruments to bend to change and opportunity: cross-ideological pacts (gain), patronage (resource exchange in loyalty), and fluidity (party/platform mobility), but this undermines norms by putting personal networks above accountability (Bauer et al., 2021; Haughton, 2008). The causal process occurs through three phases: (1) contextual enablers, such as the uneven capacity of decentralization, incentivize a moratorium approach to ideology (Carbone and Memoli, 2015; Hadiz, 2003), (2) behavioral normalization, the bias toward clientelism, maintains inequality, and alliances splinter opposition, which occurs via (3) institutional feedback, as worn-out local trust goes back to national betrayal through elite capture (Bermeo, 2016; Cianetti et al., 2018). This is increased in Southeast Asia by colonial bureaucracies and high transitions, making local poll erosion amplifiers (Joireman, 2001; Mann, 1984). P1: Weaker safeguards strengthen pragmatic inputs to produce an erosive output (Bäck and Hadenius, 2008) and P2: Fluidity loops make hybrid regimes strengthen authoritarianism (Greene, 2010; Hicken, 2013). This has been synthesized and visualized as a flowchart (inputs → moderated mechanisms →looped outputs), which emphasizes subnational focus on resilience (Dryzek, 1996; Coppedge et al., 2019).

3 Pragmatic strategies in Indonesia's local elections

In Indonesia, pilkada -Pemilihan Kepala Daerah or direct elections since 2005 of regional heads represent a pragmatic politics that supports backsliding in the face of post-Suharto decentralization (Aspinall, 2010; Mietzner, 2020). The fragments of the current system support opportunistic alliances that have over 70% in 2020 winners based on cross-party coalitions at the expense of independents, disturbing ideological consistency (Afrimadona, 2021; Palguna and Bisariyadi, 2023). Based on this, Table 1 consolidates the data of Komisi Pemilihan Umum (KPU) and Bawaslu about pilkada violations (2015–2020) and shows a rapid increase in money politics breaches.

This rise is associated with the downward trend in V-Dem EDI (0.62–0.48, 2015–2020) and is tied to national tendencies, such as Jokowi's strengthening of executive control (Coppedge et al., 2019). In rural Java/Sumatra, routine oligarchy is normalized through 60% of voters saying they were induced to vote, according to surveys by Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), which makes patronage dominant (Kusadarini et al., 2021; Pasaribu, 2019). Fluidity, such as party defections, desensitizes debate, as in the 2017 race in Jakarta (Afrimadona, 2021; Almalibari et al., 2021). This is maintained through judicial favoritism, where in 78% of cases in 2020, the elites controlled over the Ahmad et al. (2025) and Kelliher et al. (2019).

These measures cement in place elites because local offices are taken over by dynasties, and the marginalized populations are not represented (Berg et al., 2019; Faiz, 2018). V-Dem statistics indicate that local electoral integrity has deteriorated since 2014, which is interconnected with the deconsolidation of the country (Coppedge et

TABLE 1 Pilkada irregularities in Indonesia (2015–2020 cycles).

Cycle	Total races	Vote-buying complaints	Alliance shifts (mid-cycle)	Constitutional court disputes resolved in favor of incumbents (%)	Source
2015	269	1,245	42%	65%	KPU/Bawaslu Reports (Mietzner, 2020)
2017	101	892	58%	72%	KPU/Bawaslu Reports (Mietzner, 2020)
2020	224	1,678	71%	78%	KPU/Bawaslu Reports (Mietzner, 2020)

al., 2019; Mietzner, 2021). Indonesia threatens to become subnational authoritarian enclaves without such reforms as campaign finance caps (Daly, 2025; Fatayati, 2017).

4 The Philippines: patronage and dynasties in subnational polls

Dynasties and patronage are strengthened through Philippine local elections, which leads to fast backsliding into an oligarchic patrimonial structure (Quimpo et al., 2005; Case, 2017). To support this, Table 2 represents Commission on Elections (COMELEC) and Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) data on dynastic dominance (2013–2022), where 70–80% of the positions are occupied by families, which is linked to graft surges.

This entrenchment, according to the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) drop (0.45–0.31, 2016–2022), is what local clientelism is linked to national populism (Coppedge et al., 2019). In 2022, Rainbow coalitions weakened opposition divisions, which allowed impunity for Marcos-Duterte through pork-funded aid (Garrido, 2017; Maravilla and Grayman, 2020). Fluidity enables the pivotal platforms of their dynasties, such as Dutertes, and the weak parties to increase inequality (Case, 2017; Dressel and Bonoan, 2024). The ground-level red-tagging of Duterte is biased by the bans that are not carried out by COMELEC, leading to subnational erosion (Bhat, 2021; Cruz, 2015; Iglesias, 2022).

These processes interconnect local erosion with national populism because authoritarian methods, such as red-tagging, are made easier with the help of a dynasty (Iglesias, 2022; Kasuya and Tan, 2024). Gender differences are emphasized by empirical research, as dynasties marginalize women even though quotas are in place (Devasahayam, 2022; Roces, 2022). VDem records the loss of local integrity in the post-2016 period, which is reflective of local centralization (Coppedge et al., 2019; Garnett and James, 2023). There is a need to have reforms that address the boundaries of the dynasty (Daly, 2025; Reyes, 2013).

5 Thailand: instability and pragmatism amid coups

Clamped local elections in Thailand, such as provincial administrative organization (PAO) and municipal party elections, are pragmatic, based on military-royalist influence (Baker, 2016; Sawasdee, 2020). Table 3 presents a synthesis of Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) reports based on 2018–2023 irregularities, where rural areas that buy votes, carry on their activities even after urban liberalization.

The increase in the V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) (0.35 to 0.39, 2017–2023) conceals weakness, and disqualification supports hybrids (Coppedge et al., 2019). Alliances, e.g., the 2023 deals removing the junta proxies of Pheu Thai focus on survival (Raymond, 2025; Thompson and Liang, 2025). Where vote-buying is not an issue, the Northeast rural areas where men are expected to give out cash handouts of up to 500 baht to a voter, lese-majeste laws end up rewarding oppression (Baker, 2016; Hicken, 2013). ECT data indicate that there were consistent anomalies in the data, with rural communities having 20–30% greater rates of inducement, which solidified rural–urban faults (Sawasdee, 2020; Case, 2018). Candidacy fluidity helps to survive in coup-prone cycles; since 2014, politicians have switched to pro-junta parties, adjusting to the EC prohibition of opposition (Raymond, 2025; Shukri, 2023). This supports hybrid authoritarianism, in which elections justify rule (Levitsky and Way, 2002; Croissant and Kuehn, 2024). The problem is opposed by civil society opposition, such as the protests of young people, but repression curtails the effect (Truong et al., 2024; Weiss, 2023). According to V-Dem, there are episodic backslidings that are associated with local manipulations (Coppedge et al., 2019). It is important to strengthen ECT independence (Daly, 2025; Reilly, 2014).

6 Mechanisms of democratic erosion: alliances, patronage, and fluidity

Pragmatic processes systematically undermine democracy: alliances are dismantled through coopting opponents (Haughton, 2008); inequality is entrenched by clientelism through patronage (Gwiazda, 2008); fluidity erodes trust by making politics more personal (Riedl, 2012). These encourage impunity cultures in the countries of Southeast Asia, blowing local scandals country-wide (Mietzner, 2021). Similar trends intersect: Indonesia's oligarchy is disguised by alliances (Hadiz, 2003); Philippine patronage perpetuates dynasties (Quimpo et al., 2005); and Thai fluidity is always adaptive to coups. This is enhanced by social media, which spreads disinformation (Bünte, 2020; Gomez and Ramcharan, 2022). There cannot be judicial protections without independence (Blauberger and Kelemen, 2017).

TABLE 2 Dynastic control and graft in Philippine local elections (2013–2022).

Election year	% Positions held by dynasties	Reported graft cases (local officials)	Pork-Barrel allocations as % of local budget	Source
2013	72%	1,200	25%	COMELEC/PCIJ (Calimbahin, 2023)
2016	76%	1,450	32%	COMELEC/PCIJ (Calimbahin, 2023)
2019	78%	1,620	35%	COMELEC/PCIJ (Calimbahin, 2023)
2022	81%	1,890	40%	COMELEC/PCIJ (Calimbahin, 2023)

TABLE 3 Electoral irregularities in Thai local polls (2018–2023).

Poll Type/Year	Total contests	Vote-buying incidents (rural %)	Candidate disqualifications (opposition %)	Source
PAO 2018	76	28%	45%	ECT Reports (Raymond, 2025)
Municipal 2020	2,000+	32%	52%	ECT Reports (Raymond, 2025)
PAO 2023	76	25% (postbiometrics)	48%	ECT Reports (Raymond, 2025)

7 The vulnerability of regulatory safeguards in local electoral systems

Local elections in Southeast Asia are characterized by regulatory weakness, which contributes to pragmatic erosion in the form that under-resourced bodies are likely to be impacted (Carbone and Memoli, 2015; Lorch, 2017). The cause of decentralization was the absence of checks and balances that increased divides (Piccolino, 2016). The KPU in Indonesia has a low degree of prohibition against bribes, where the 2020 pilkada postponements protect bribers (Ahmad et al., 2025; Faiz, 2018; Kelliher et al., 2019) and discourage watchdogs (Weiss, 2023). The COMELEC of the Philippines disregards dynasties, which allows vote-buying against pork in 2022 (Bhat, 2021; Calimbahin, 2023; Cruz, 2015), which is beneficial to elite loyalty (Quimpo et al., 2005). ECT is used selectively against foes in rural areas in Thailand (Baker, 2016; Raymond, 2025; Sawasdee, 2020). Digital tracking is encouraged by global audits (Daly, 2025; Norris, 2017), yet the elite oppose biometrics despite reducing 20–30% fraud (Gelb and Diofasi, 2019; Reyes, 2013). Judicial and civil fortification is required (Blauberger and Kelemen, 2017; Callahan, 2018). 8 Outlining a Conceptual Framework for Local-Level Dynamics.

To dissect the role of pragmatic politics in backsliding, this systems-theory framework sees local elections as a dynamically evolving node in democratic networks by emphasizing subnational factors for bringing focused changes (Andersen et al., 2014; Mazzuca and Munck, 2014).

Core Elements: It divides it into inputs, such as alliances and patronage, when entering volatile situations (Aldrich and Griffin, 2010; Bauer et al., 2021); moderators, such as oversight, that determine the flow (Bäck and Hadenius, 2008; Daly, 2025); and outputs, which recycle as norm reinforcement or erosion (Bermeo, 2016; Cianetti et al., 2018). Stable moderators bring about trust; weak ones attract corruption, as is the case with oligarchic pilkada in Indonesia (Hadiz, 2003; Kelliher et al., 2019) or ECT biases in Thailand (Baker, 2016; Raymond, 2025; Coppedge et al., 2019; Garnett and James, 2023).

Key Interventions: Poll monitoring curbs irregularities in the Philippines (Callahan, 2018; Weiss, 2023) and ASEAN biometrics (Daly, 2025; Reilly, 2014), tempered by cultural buy-in against resistance (Gelb and Diofasi, 2019; Piccolino, 2016). This allows one to advocate and prepare toward long-term resilience (Fossati and Coma, 2023; Truong et al., 2024).

8 Discussion

To ensure that the analytical and practical value of the article has been unpacked systematically, the discussion is divided into subheadings such as Contributions to Scholarship, Causal Reasoning, Policy Implications, and Directions for Future Research, as a logical development of the article synthesis to the practical application of the knowledge. This structure resembles the bottom-up logic of the perspective in reducing the complicated processes in the region to evidence-based segments.

8.1 Contributions to scholarship

This perspective advances the backsliding literature in three explicit ways. First, it clarifies that there is a causal relationship that runs downward between local pragmatic strategies, including opportunistic alliances, patronage, and candidate fluidity, and national autocratization, linking rational choice theory (Aldrich and Griffin, 2010) and electoral authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way, 2002) to create a conceptualization of the erosion from below as a particular

mechanism. The previous literature focuses on higher-level executive gambit such as it (Khaitan, 2020; Mietzner, 2021), but this analysis shows how subnational manipulations popularize anti-democratic standards as shown in V-Dem declining electoral integrity in the middle of the twentieth decade in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand (Coppedge et al., 2019; Garnett and James, 2023). Second, this pathway is operationalized through a systems framework (Section 8) using testable propositions, e.g., weaker moderators enhance erosive outputs but can be used to establish a heuristic of subnational granularity in hybrid regimes beyond the Southeast Asian case to analogous cases such as Latin American clientelism (Bustikova and Corduneanu-Huci, 2017; Riedl, 2012). Third, it connects the study of region to the study of comparative politics by stressing the unintended effects of decentralization, namely elite capture through patronage, meaning that it bridges a gap in the literature where the relationship between local elections and legitimacy rituals is frequently ignored (Aspinall et al., 2022; Ockey and Talib, 2023).

8.2 Causal reasoning

Institutional volatility (post-authoritarian legacies, uneven decentralization) driven by the incentives of rational pragmatism, damaged norms through fragmented opposition (alliances), commodified loyalty (patronage), and personalization (fluidity) causes effect (Bauer et al., 2021; Haughton, 2008). This is directly proven by local evidence as the leading cause: Tables 1–3 show surging irregularities (e.g., 71% mid-cycle swings in Indonesia, 81% dynastic grip in the Philippines, and 48% opposition disqualifications in Thailand), which are supported by V-Dem LDI/EDI downfalls: a 0.220 in Indonesia via pilkada graft; a 0.44 in the Philippines by pork-clientelism; and a biased +0.184 in Thailand by military fluidity (Copped The favoritism toward and duty to rule by regulatory officials KPU/COMELEC/ECT contribute to the worsening of the situation, allowing elite capture (Ahmad et al., 2025; Bhat, 2021; Raymond, 2025) which is compounded by disinformation and disenfranchisement (Bünte, 2020; Devasahayam, 2022; Weiss, 2023). According to V-Dem trends, local malpractice is turned into systemic autocratization as the outputs circulate on a national scale (Coppedge et al., 2019).

8.3 Policy implications

To reverse such a downward spiral, subnational reinforcement is required: Introduce campaign finance transparency and anti-dynasty caps in the Philippines to stifle clientelism (Cruz, 2015; Iglesias, 2022); impose patronage restrictions in Indonesia's pilkada through biometric validation (Gelb and Diofasi, 2019; Kusadarini et al., 2021) and create ECT checks and balances to neutralize the influence of the military in Thailand (Sawasdee, 2020). The framework assumes that they are "strong moderators" that transform erosion into reinforcement (Daly, 2025). Predominantly, ASEAN coalitions sharing standards, such as pollwatching across borders, may standardize integrity, using civil society adaptive repertoires (Callahan, 2018; Truong et al., 2024). By considering elections as a substantive reform, rather than a ritual, pluralism is restored to turbulence (Dryzek, 1996; Rodan, 2022).

8.4 Directions for future research

Regulating the requisites of secondary sources to measure the effect(s) of patronage: Survey or econometric requirement; case proliferation (e.g., Myanmar juntas and Vietnam repression). The propositions of the framework could be confirmed by mixed-methods methods that include a survey of voters about the perception of fluidity or the econometric study of regulatory interventions (Schnaudt, 2024). Countervailing forces would be unwrapped by qualitative inquiries into which pollwatching operators operating in a specific way are participants in civil resistance (Weiss, 2023). Combining social media amplification and subnational V-Dem variables is likely to provide more insights (Bünte, 2020; Kasuya and Tan, 2024; Rüland, 2021; Fossati and Coma, 2023). Such questions as the existence of local cultural situations that enable patron–client relationships, such as Javanese hierarchies of Indonesia, Hacienda systems of the Philippines, and feudalism of Thailand, should also be examined in the future in case of their contribution to pragmatism and demand historization of special interventions (Joireman, 2001; Mauzy and Funston, 2002). Finally, this mosaic of hybrid resilience might be enhanced by prioritizing the subnational data in the backsliding indices (Coppedge et al., 2019; Fossati and Coma, 2023).

Data availability statement

Publicly available datasets were analyzed in this study. This data can be found at: (1) Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) indices: https://www.v-dem.net/ and https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0759106319854989. (2) Philippines commission on elections (COMELEC): https://comelec.gov.ph/ and https://doi.org/10.1186/S40728-015-0020-Z. (3) Indonesia General Elections Commission (KPU): https://www.kpu.go.id/ and https://ejournal.candela.id/index.php/jlc/article/view/9. (4) Election Commission of Thailand (ECT): https://www.ect.go.th/, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2057891119892321, and https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/18681034251320658. This is a perspective article and not a primary data generation or analysis paper. The secondary sources such as peer-reviewed academic literature, electoral reports, and media analysis of the elections in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand support all the conclusions. The major datasets mentioned include the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) indices (Coppedge et al., 2019) to monitor the erosion of democracy, along with reports on Transparency International, Election Commission of Thailand (ECT), Indonesia General Elections Commission (KPU), and the Philippines commission on elections (COMELEC). These sources are publicly accessible, and all of them are referenced in the list of references in the manuscript. It did not utilize any proprietary data and all of its materials are available through the given DOIs, archives of journals or institutional repositories.

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