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Published online: 10 Feb 2022.

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The shift to consensus democracy and limits of institutional design in Asia

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ABSTRACT

A 'majoritarian turn' identified by scholars of Asian democracy in the 1990s saw the rise of mixed-member majoritarian electoral systems and more centripetal party competition across both Northeast and Southeast Asia. In this paper, we argue that since the 2000s, the institutional pendulum has shifted, with more consensual approaches to democracy appearing to better represent key identity cleavages of gender, ethnicity, and territory—a trend evident not just in East Asia but South Asia as well. This new 'Asian model' typically involves increasing the proportional components of existing electoral formulas and grafting gender quotas, multiethnic party lists, and quasi-federal elements onto ostensibly majoritarian state structures. We show that these reforms have, as intended, mostly increased female and ethnic minority representation and decentralized governance structures. At the same time, however, these *de jure* changes are not associated with *de facto* political development in terms of greater democratic quality, counter to theoretical expectations. Indeed, democracy has declined across most of Asia at the same time as its democratic institutions have become more consensual.

1. Introduction

During the 1990s, the spread and consolidation of democracy across East Asia led to the development of a distinctive 'Asian model' of electoral democracy. Following the rapid growth of the East Asian 'tiger' economies and their successful interventions in the economic arena, attention turned towards reforming political systems. The spread and growing consolidation of democracy presented opportunities for Asian governments to reshape electoral politics, often with the aim of building more coherent and

programmatic party systems and through them more stable and effective governance. Through interventionist strategies, Asian democracies sought to retool the performance of their representative systems of government via reform of their political architecture and institutions (Reilly, 2007; Rock, 2013).

Starting in South Korea and Japan and spreading to Taiwan, institutional reforms primarily sought to encourage more aggregative and consolidated party politics, often via the introduction of mixed-member majoritarian (MMM) electoral systems and political party strengthening laws. Emerging Southeast Asian democracies such as Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines also adopted variants of this model, which typically advantaged larger, nationally-focused parties of government while constraining smaller parties or new entrants. Reformers often justified these changes as necessary steps for efficient governance and economic development—even if this came at the cost of under-representing women, minorities, and peripheries. In a nutshell, the institutional reforms in the 1990s could be characterized as a shift towards a distinctively Asian form of majoritarian democracy which prioritized decisiveness over consensus (Reilly, 2006).

Around the turn of the century, however, reform trends began to shift. Multiple Asian democracies across Northeast, Southeast, and also South Asia began to take steps to temper the majoritarian bias inherent in their electoral systems. Three distinct avenues of institutional reform were pursued. First, gender quotas, reserved seats for women, gendered 'zipper' party lists, and similar legal restructurings became widespread, driven by campaigns for more equitable representation of women in political parties and parliaments. Second, arrangements to ensure that indigenous communities, ethnic minorities, and historically-discriminated groups were properly represented also multiplied, via new forms of seat reservations and party-list requirements—including in overtly majoritarian parliamentary systems such as India, Nepal, and Singapore. Third, 'federalization' saw a trend away from centralized unitary states towards large-scale devolution, decentralization, and federalism, a trend particularly evident in South and Southeast Asia's multiethnic democracies (Breen, 2018).

Over the same period, a number of emerging democracies including Indonesia, Thailand, and South Korea introduced proportionality-enhancing electoral system reforms, a move which Lijphart (1999) sees as a key step in shifting from a majoritarian to a consensual political system.[1] Collectively, these shifts to more proportional elections and the more inclusive institutions have the effect of diluting and diversifying centralized, winner-takes-all forms of government. Against this backdrop, we argue that, since around 2000, there has been a consensual turn amongst the electoral democracies of Northeast, Southeast and South Asia. More specifically, a

'new' Asian model of democracy may be emerging, in which majority rule sits alongside new mechanisms to improve gender balance, minority representation, and territorial decentralization.

As we show, Asia's revised institutional arrangements have mostly succeeded in meeting their representational aims. However, this does not appear to have improved either the quality or the overall levels of democracy in most countries or across the region as a whole. Indeed, on most indicators of democratic quality, Asia has gone backwards, particularly in recent years (Coppedge et al. 2021; Freedom House, 2021). We illustrate this conundrum by investigating Northeast, Southeast, and South Asian countries where procedural democracy has been in place for at least some period in the last decade, and which met the Freedom House status of 'Free' or Semi-Free' during the period of analysis. As we will show, there is no relationship in Asia between the adoption of consensual reforms and improvements in democracy. If anything, the opposite appears to be the case.

The reasons for this surprising finding speak to long-running debates about the nature of Asian democracy. In the 1980s and 1990s, academics made a sweeping comparison between 'Western' and 'Asian' democracy, characterizing Asia's version by the kind of 'soft authoritarianism' long evident in Singapore and Malaysia or in transitional South Korea and Taiwan (Bell, 2000; Hood, 1998). Long-serving leaders such as Lee Kwan Yew in Singapore justified the erosion of civil liberties and competitive democracy under their leadership by alluding to the dangers of chaotic, disputatious, and identity-driven politics if control was loosened (Zakaria, 1994). However, these claims were vigorously contested by other leaders in the region such as South Korean president Kim Dae-Jung (1994), and faded from prominence after the 1997 Asian economic crisis laid bare the structural weaknesses of the region's political and economic systems (Kim, 1997).

A second influential line of scholarship draws on Arend Lijphart's (1984, 2012) influential distinction between majoritarian versus consensus models of democracy. Adopting this perspective, Reilly (2006, 2007, 2013) argued that East Asia, since the 1990s, had become more majoritarian in electoral and party terms. He also identified the failure of various consociational institutions bequeathed by former colonial powers during Asia's earlier democratic incarnations in South and Southeast Asia (Reilly, 2011). Other scholars disputed these assessments. Hellmann (2014) argued that Asia's electoral changes typically reflected efforts to curb corruption and money politics, resulting in a shift away from hyper-personalistic or hyper-centralized systems in favour of less extreme models more consistent with global norms. Croissant and Schächter (2010) went further, arguing that there is no clear

pattern of democracy across East Asia and that Lijphart's two-dimensional schema does not suit the analysis of Asian democracy.

There is no question that Asia's scale, complexity and diversity both within and between states makes synoptic study difficult—especially when combining such very different regions as Northeast, Southeast and South Asia. Nonetheless, we believe that the basic distinction between majoritarian and consensus democracy—one based on concentrating majority rule, the other on widening and diversifying it—remains relevant, especially given the enduring influence of colonial political models (such as parliamentarism and plurality elections in the former British colonies), and the more recent wave of homegrown reforms which has transformed so many of Asia's political systems. We therefore in this paper seek to build on Lijphart's conception of democratic subtypes—although we differ on his measurement of some concepts—and employ the essence of his two conceptual models of democracy to identify a broad trend that has been unfolding across Asia since the 2000s.

The paper proceeds by first situating our argument in the context of the distinction between majoritarian and consensus democracy in Asia. We then move on to analyze the relevant institutional changes that have occurred across East, Southeast, and South Asia since the beginning of the 2000s. Next we turn to the empirical evidence, detailing the actual changes in inter-party competition, female representation, and minority rights to determine to what extent institutional reforms are associated with substantive changes such as improvements in liberalism. The conclusion summarizes our findings and discusses future research avenues.

2. The shift to more consensual democracy

2.1. The majoritarian turn in the 1990s

For many Asian countries, the 1990s and the early 2000s was a decade of institutional reform. One way to analyze these is to begin with the distinction between majoritarian and consensus democracy. As an ideal type, majoritarian democracies are characterized by winner-take-all election laws, a few large political parties alternating in power, and governments comprised of a single dominant party operating within a unitary state structure. Ideal-type consensus democracies, by contrast, feature proportional elections, multiple parties representing minorities as well as majorities, broad coalition or power-sharing governments, and devolution of power away from the centre (Lijphart, 1984, 1996).

One example of Asia's electoral majoritarianism has been the preponderance of plurality or mixed-member majoritarian (MMM) electoral systems across the region. These systemic types, in place in almost all the region's

democracies bar Indonesia and Timor-Leste, tend to be associated both in theory and practice with particular kinds of political parties and dominant single-party or two-party systems. This association is particularly strong in Asia because most of mixed systems are, in reality, augmented forms of plurality, with only a small minority of seats elected from a national list. Japan, Korea, Nepal, Taiwan, the Philippines, Thailand and (until recently) Mongolia all followed this model, making them unusual in comparative terms: on average, mixed-member systems in Asia elected twice as many seats from single-member districts than mixed systems in other parts of the world (Reilly, 2006).

Even those Asian democracies that did not adopt this model took steps to reduce the proportionality of their electoral systems with an eye to eliminating smaller parties and limiting political fissures. In Indonesia, for example, reforms prior to every election since 2004 have reduced proportionality by shrinking electoral districts, raising thresholds, limiting party numbers, and moving to an open rather than a closed party list. Laws banning local parties in most of the country push minorities to join established parties (Aspinall, 2019). In neighbouring Singapore, the introduction of 'Group Representation Constituencies' in 1988 had similarly mixed consensual and majoritarian effects, with parties needing to include ethnic minorities on their candidate lists but the plurality vote-topper winning every seat in a multi-member district. These rules were introduced by the governing PAP to sand-bag their parliamentary majority and have mostly done just that (Tan, 2013).

Across East Asia, the collective effect of these majoritarian changes was much as scholars would predict: disproportionality increased and party numbers decreased. Throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s, election outcomes became less proportional in Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Taiwan, Thailand, and the Philippines (Reilly, 2006). Other trends, however, defied scholarly predictions. In particular, the pan-Asian preference for oversized coalition governments has continued despite this majoritarian turn, ensuring greater political stability if not accountability. While the institutionalization of majoritarian politics is supposedly associated with single-party governments and dominant executives, this has not been the case in democratic Asia. Rather, coalition governments have been the norm, even when one party has a clear majority of seats, such as the TRT in Thailand in 2005, the NLD in Myanmar in 2015, and the BJP in India in 2019 (Breen, 2020; Reilly, 2018).

2.2. A consensual turn since the 2000s?

In the early 2000s, Asian democracies began to modify the inherent majoritarianism of their systems, embarking on new reforms of a more consensual nature. Table 1 overviews the outcomes of these institutional reforms

Table 1. Overview of democratic institutions in Northeast, Southeast, and South Asia.

Country	Constitutional structure	Unitary/Federal	Cameral structure	Upper house electoral formula	Lower house electoral formula	Minority representation rules	Female representation rules
Northeast Asia							
Japan	Parliamentary	Unitary	Bicameral	MMM	MMM	No	**Yes (2018)**
Mongolia	Presidential	Unitary	Unicameral	—	**SMD (2016)**	No	**Yes (2012)**
South Korea	Presidential	Unitary	Unicameral	—	**MMM (2004, 2019)**[d]	No	**Yes (2000)**
Taiwan	Presidential	Unitary	Unicameral	—	MMM	Yes (1972)	**Yes (2008)**
Southeast Asia							
Cambodia	Parliamentary	Unitary	Bicameral	Elected by communes[c]	PR	No	No
Indonesia	Presidential	**Unitary (but decentralized)**	Bicameral	Open-list PR(2009)	**Open-list PR(2009)**	No	**Yes (2003)**
Malaysia	Parliamentary	Federal	Bicameral	Elected by state assemblies[c]	FPTP	No	No
Myanmar	Parliamentary[a]	**Federal**	Bicameral	Multi-member plurality	FPTP	**Yes (2015)**[e]	No
Philippines	Presidential	Unitary	Bicameral	Block vote	MMM	**Yes (2009)**[f]	No
Singapore	Presidential[b]	Unitary	Unicameral	—	FPTP /PBV	**Yes (2008)**	No[g]
Thailand	Parliamentary	Unitary	Bicameral	Appointed	**MMP (2017)**	No	**Yes (2017)**
Timor-Leste	Presidential	Unitary	Unicameral	—	PR	No	**Yes (2006)**
South Asia							
Bangladesh	Parliamentary	Unitary	Unicameral	—	FPTP	No	**Yes (2004)**
Bhutan	Parliamentary	Unitary	**Bicameral (2007)**	FPTP	FPTP	No	No
India	Parliamentary[a]	Federal	Bicameral	Elected by state assemblies	FPTP	Yes	No (bill pending)
Nepal	Parliamentary[a]	**Federal (2015)**	Bicameral	Elected by state assemblies[c]	**MMM (2015)**[h]	**Yes (2015)**	**Yes (2015)**
Pakistan	Parliamentary[a]	Unitary	Bicameral	PR-STV	MMM	No	**Yes (2002)**
Sri Lanka	Semi-presidential	Unitary	Unicameral	—	PR	No	No

Source: Compiled by the authors based on various sources. See Appendix 1 for the details of the sources consulted.

a There is a president who is chosen by the parliament.

b The president is directly elected but does not have significant authority in comparison to the prime minister.

c In addition to elected representatives, some members are appointed.

d Change from one ballot to two-ballot system in 2004; increase in proportional seats 2019.

e Ethnic Affairs Ministers introduced.

f De facto change in the number of fulfilled seats in the Party List tier occurred due to the Supreme Court verdict in 2009.

g According to Tan (2015), PAP's Women's Wing Chairperson proclaimed a 30% quota for female candidates in 2009.

h Mandated ethnic representation on party lists introduced.

in countries with multiparty elections in East, Southeast, and South Asia.[2] The cells in bold letters indicate institutional changes that have taken place since 2000, either in the form of constitutional revision, new legislation, or amended rules for political parties.

Table 1 reveals that most of the institutional changes since 2000 moved polities in a more consensual direction. Only one country over this period, Mongolia, shifted to a more majoritarian electoral formula. Reforms in the other countries varied widely but were all intended to bring more inclusive participation and/or division of power via (1) electoral formula, (2) minority representation, (3) female representation, or (4) federalization/decentralization. Collectively, we argue that these trends are so widespread as to constitute a shift towards more consensual *de jure* electoral democracy in Asia. However, as we shall show, these changes have not been associated with greater political liberalization or indeed improvements in democracy overall.

The reasons for these shifts varied by country, but some broader rationales can be discerned. The first relates to Asia's wave of democratization that ran from the late 1980s until the early years of this century. Authoritarian regimes were replaced by democratic ones in Indonesia (1998), South Korea (1987), Mongolia (1990), Nepal (2008), Philippines (1986), and Taiwan (1990). In many of these countries, pro-democracy campaigns transformed into broader social movements for political reform (Noor, 2014; Yoon & Shin, 2015). Democratization strengthened accountability institutions such as anti-corruption bodies, electoral commissions, and judicial oversight. The courts also played a role in pushing electoral reform in countries such as South Korea, Mongolia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The increasing influence of constitutional courts and judicial review in Asia has proved to be one of the most important institutional consequences of democratization (Ginsburg, 2003).

The second impetus behind this consensual turn has been the international diffusion of norms, particularly those promoting better minority and female representation. For example, in 1999, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe adopted the Lund Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life & Explanatory Note, a well-cited document calling for greater minority protection and representation (OSCE, 1999). It recommends designing electoral systems that deliver 'the most representative government' (p. 23) and endorses proportional representation electoral formulae and legislative quotas. The Lund document became a reference point for other international organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme's Asia and Pacific Office (UNDP, 2006, p. 33).

Another source of international norms are the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted by the United Nations in 2000, which include gender

equality as one objective and specifically recommend a female quota to elect legislators. These continued under its 2015 successor program, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and have frequently served as focal points for domestic NGOs and policymakers in promoting institutional reforms (Noor, 2014; Yoon & Shin, 2015). The broader world of international development assistance has supported local NGOs who champion institutional reforms consistent with these themes.[3] One collective impact of these global norms may be that Asia's consensual turn is now making it more similar to other world regions such as Europe.

3. Institutional changes since the 2000s

3.1. Electoral formula

Since the 2000s, almost all of Asia's electoral reforms have been moving in a more inclusive direction, providing greater opportunities for female and minority candidates and an expanded set of choices for voters. South Korea, Indonesia, Mongolia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Nepal all changed the way they elect legislators. In South Korea, intervention from the courts forced the government to abandon its restrictive one-ballot form of MMM and shift to a more conventional two-ballot model for the 2004 election, with voters casting separate votes for both their local district and a nationwide PR tier. Before this, the National Assembly was elected by a two-tier system in which the allocation of the second tier of national seats was determined by the district results, leading to extremely lopsided outcomes favouring the strongest party. The Constitutional Court (2006, p. 178) ruled this violated democratic principles ensuring 'the accurate reflection of people's opinions and guarantee people's freedom of choice'. Consequent reforms introduced a two-vote MMM system closer to the Japanese and Taiwanese model, making Korean elections less majoritarian in practice. Further reforms in 2019 extended this proportional trend, with a change in the formula used to distribute 30 of the 47 PR seats to compensate for disproportionality arising from the 253 district seats.

In Indonesia, the Constitutional Court has also played a crucial role in electoral reform, ruling before the 2009 election against the 'closed list' PR system used for decades and mandating that voters be able to choose between candidates and not just parties. This led to a shift to 'open list' PR, vastly increasing voter choice (and the size of the ballot paper) in most cases. While this shift to a 'candidate-centric' electoral system has no doubt increased the accountability of elected representatives to their constituents, it has also had retrograde impacts, undercutting party cohesion as members of the same party compete with each other for votes, and subverting other efforts aimed at building stronger parties (Aspinall, 2019). The courts

have also intervened in multiple other areas of Indonesia's electoral democracy, from party registration rules to election timing, with decidedly mixed results (Butt, 2015).

Courts have been similarly influential in the Philippines, pushing for greater openness and access, particularly regarding the party-list seats introduced in the 1987 Constitution to increase minority and sectoral representation in Congress. Comprising up to one-fifth of all lower house seats, these lists were originally reserved for 'marginalized groups' such as youth, labour, the urban poor, farmers, fishermen, and women, with any group receiving at least 2% of the vote winning a seat, up to a maximum of three seats. However, a 2009 Supreme Court ruling increased the number of party-list seats, dispensed with a prior seat threshold, but upheld a seat cap restricting party-list group representation, changing the original intent. In 2013, eligibility was further expanded to include parties not organized along sectoral group lines but which could nonetheless claim 'a track record in representing the marginalized and underrepresented sectors' (Torres-Pilapil, 2015, p. 86).

In Thailand, perhaps surprisingly it has been the military junta rather than the courts that led the push for a more accommodative electoral system in recent years. These reforms provide an example of how a more consensual electoral formula can be used to undermine rather than strengthen democracy. Their apparent aim was to stop former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai Party from the kind of electoral victories that were achieved in 2001, 2005, and 2011. Widely disliked by the Bangkok elite, Thaksin and his sister Yingluck were ousted by coups in 2006 and 2014, respectively. After several years of military rule, the regime finally allowed governments to be chosen by the people but also wanted to deny Thaksin and his supporters any chance of a comeback. The 2019 election was thus held under a hyper-representative 'mixed member proportional' system aimed at preventing any party from gaining a clear majority and challenging the military's favoured party, Palang Pracharat. A nationwide party list was expanded to 30 percent of the parliament and used to balance for any disproportionality arising from the district seats. This novel form of electoral authoritarianism effectively used consensual rather than majoritarian means to fragment the party system and create an ineffective parliament. Despite this, the 2019 election saw the Thaksin-aligned Pheu Thai Party gain a plurality of seats, and it was only the military's ability to appoint the Senate which enabled the coup leader, General Prayut, to remain as prime minister (Hicken & Selway, 2019).

Perhaps the most striking move towards more inclusive and consensual democracy in recent years has been in Nepal. There, after more than a decade of political instability and low-level civil war, a new 2015 Constitution

introduced a federal democracy and a two-tier MMM system. Previously, a unitary parliament had been elected by plurality rules, leading to highly unrepresentative elite-dominated politics and, ultimately, the failure of democracy. Nepal's transition to a more consensual model included a variety of efforts to increase gender and minority representation. Political parties were required to 'take into account the principle of inclusiveness while nominating the candidates' for the district component of elections and, in the PR tier, include at least 50% female candidates and follow quotas for marginalized ethnic and other identity groups (Bylesjö et al., 2010, pp. 2–3).

Finally, in Mongolia, the electoral system has changed multiple times since the turn of the century—from highly majoritarian to semi-proportional, and back again. Mongolia's democratization in 1990 following the collapse of the Soviet Union saw it use a combination of plurality, two-round and block-vote systems to elect legislators. In 2008, an 'Asian-style' MMM system was adopted, but in 2016 the Mongolian Constitutional Court found this to be unconstitutional, forcing Mongolia to return to plurality rules once again (Maškarinec, 2018).

3.2. Female representation

Institutional reforms aiming for a better gender balance in terms of legislative representation began in many Asian countries in the 2000s. Among the East Asian nations, Taiwan adopted the most drastic institutional changes, through a 2005 constitutional amendment requiring legislation be enacted to improve the representation of women. In 2008, in response, a new law mandating that each political party nominate no less than 50% female candidates for the PR tier of its MMM electoral system was passed.

South Korea's shift to MMM also facilitated the introduction of a gender quota. In 2000, the National Assembly revised the Political Party Act to recommend that parties nominate at least 30% of women in their PR tier. However, a lack of any enforcement mechanism resulted in little impact (Yoon & Shin, 2015). Efforts by civil society to further strengthen female representation saw other amendments recommending that parties nominate women in at least half of all PR seats via a so-called 'zipper system', with a woman placed sequentially at every odd number on the party list, and in at least 30% of the FPTP seats, with financial support provided to parties that did so.

In Mongolia, similarly, the reform which introduced MMM in 2012 was accompanied by a 20% female quota for the PR tier. Since 2016, the electoral formula has reverted to the previous system, but the 20% quota has remained (Maškarinec, 2018).

In 2018, Japan introduced a gender parity law to promote the 'co-participation' of men and women in national and local elections, the Act on

Promotion of Gender Equality in the Political Field. Political parties are encouraged to create numeric targets for female candidates. While the law contains no enforcement provisions or penalties for violation, it represents an unprecedented development for a country that has traditionally resisted liberal reforms concerning gender.

In Southeast Asia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Timor-Leste have also enacted gender quotas. In Indonesia, a 2003 law requiring political parties to nominate at least 30% female candidates turned out to be ineffective, as parties were able to relegate women to unwinnable positions on their list. In response, in 2008, a zipper system for nominating female candidates was introduced, accompanied by penalties for noncompliance: if it failed to meet the quota requirement, the election authority could disqualify that party from running (Bessell, 2010). Timor-Leste also followed this model under their 2006 election law (IDEA, n.d.).

Provisions on female representation in Thailand's 2017 Constitution were a compromise between advocates and conservatives. In the end, a pro-posed gender quota in the draft version was watered-down, with the final text only stating that political parties should consider gender equality when nominating candidates (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019). Nevertheless, this first mention of gender equality in a constitution was unprecedented in Thai history.

Many South Asian countries have also adopted constitutional provisions addressing female representation. In Pakistan, legislative seat reservations for women were a part of post-independence constitutionalism, with six seats in the 1956 and 1962 Constitutions and ten in the 1973 Constitution. The number increased to 20 in a 1985 constitutional amendment; in 2002, it increased again to 60 out of 342 seats for the House of Representatives and 17 out of 104 seats in the Senate—an increase from 9% to 17% for the House, and 0% to 16% for the Senate (PILDAT, 2004).

Bangladesh also provided reserved seats for women in its first Constitution of 1972, increasing from 15 out of 315 parliamentary seats in 1972 to 30 in 1979. After a 20-year hiatus, in 2004, the number of reserved seats grew to 45; in 2011, this number was further increased to 50 out of 300 seats, or 17%. The parliament also enacted the Representation of the People (Amendment) Order Act in 2009, which prescribed a goal of reserving at least 33% of all committee positions for female legislators by 2020 (Akbar, 2018).

The 2015 Constitution of Nepal similarly provides several provisions to encourage the empowerment of women and minority groups, requiring that one-third of members of the House of Representatives be female, a goal to be achieved through federal legislation (Article 84 (8)). The Constitution also mandates that the elected Speaker and Deputy Speaker of the House positions include at least one woman (Article 91 (2)).

Unlike Pakistan and Bangladesh, India did not provide a quota for women when enacting its 1947 Constitution, but it did establish influential electoral quotas for oppressed minorities, discussed below. In 1993, the parliament passed a constitutional amendment that reserved one-third of all elected positions in local-level assemblies for women. In 1996, a 'Women's Reservation Bill' was submitted to the parliament but met with strong opposition by some groups. In 2008, another Constitutional Amendment was proposed; it mandated that 33% of seats in the lower chamber of the National Assembly and all state-level legislatures be reserved for women. While the upper house passed the bill in 2010, the BJP, which has been in power since 2014, have yet to fulfil their promise to enact the measure (Sengar, 2019).

3.3. Minority representation

As one of the most ethnically diverse regions in the world, it is not surprising that Asian democracies have developed special mechanisms for representing ethnic minorities. These include indigenous quotas, reserved seats, and placement mandates requiring representatives of marginalized groups on party lists. Tan and Preece (2021) identified 11 East, South and Southeast Asian countries that have made special provisions for ethnic and religious minority groups at the legislative level, and two with such legal provisions at the executive (presidential) or state/regional levels.

Ethnic seat reservations have a long history in Asia. The wave of British decolonization that occurred after World War II, and the agitation by ethnic minorities for more political equity, led to formal schemes for minority inclusion, in the form of reserved seats and ethnically defined voter rolls in Burma (now Myanmar), India and Pakistan, as well as in Pacific Islands such as Fiji. The introduction of seat reservations for indigenous tribes in Taiwan in 1972 marked the first use of this approach in the Sinitic world, with six seats elected solely by those designated as indigenous members of the electorate (Templeman, 2018).

As democratic systems became more established, most Asian countries adopted a less segmented approach to minority representation, largely abandoning the idea that minority communities be chosen separately to other members of parliament. Most recent adoptions of minority inclusion mechanisms require minority representatives be elected by all voters, not just their co-ethnics, on the principle that they should be acceptable to the majority community as well as their own group. This trend—which is distinctive in global terms (Lublin & Wright, 2013; Reilly, 2020)—began with India's abandonment of its colonial-era separate voter rolls for Muslim and other groups and the 1950 creation of openly-elected seats for the former

'untouchable' castes, as well as some 'scheduled' tribes. These have been successively added to and extended, with recent constitutional amendments declaring new official languages (e.g. 92nd amendment, 2003) and extending seat reservations for scheduled tribes and castes until at least 2030 (126th amendment, 2019).

Since India's pioneering step, most applications of minority quotas in Asia have followed a similar approach. Thus, political parties contesting Singapore's 'Group Representation Constituencies' must field at least one Malay, Indian, or other minority candidate. This approach has recently been extended to Singapore's largely ceremonial office of President, which is now filled by historically underrepresented minorities on a rotating basis. While superficially participatory and inclusive, both initiatives have been critiqued as efforts to sideline the opposition and co-opt critical voices (Rodan, 2018).

Minority representatives in the Philippines (1987/1998) and Nepal (2015) are similarly elected 'at large' and thus depend on the support of all groups, including the majority community, as well as their designated minority group. Both countries' constitutions mandate a certain percentage of candidates from identity groups, including ethnic minorities, which must be included in the closed-list party-list component of their MMM electoral systems. In Nepal, uniquely, this involves *all* ethnic groups, majorities and minorities alike, elected from the 110 party-list seats in proportions specified in the Constitution: Dalit (13.8%), Adivasi Janajati (28.7%), Khas Arya (31.2%), Madeshi (15.3%), Tharu (6.6%), and Muslim (4.4%). Collectively, this encompasses every major ethnic, religious, or caste group in Nepal, not just those considered marginalized or underrepresented. Thus, 'Khas Arya', the largest category, includes Brahmin and other socio-politically dominant groups.

A different path to minority representation was followed in Myanmar, at least until the 2021 coup ended any pretense of democracy. Historically, officially-designated ethnic groups have been encouraged to form ethnic parties, with voters designated according to their ethnicity on the electoral roll. This enabled a new form of minority representation after the transition to elected government in 2015: Ethnic Affairs Ministers, directly elected at a state or regional level exclusively by their co-ethnic voters, in cases where that minority group which can claim a population of 0.1 per cent or greater outside their own home state. Prior to the 2021 coup, Ethnic Affairs Ministers featured in all but one of Myanmar's states and regions, in most cases elected by a small number of their co-ethnic voters, and exclusively accountable to them for the purposes of re-election. This unusual form of minority representation can be considered another kind of ethnic seat reservation.

Table 2. Minority group representation mechanisms in Asian democracies.

Country	Electoral system	Minority groups	No. of seats/total no. (%)	Year introduced
India	FPTP	Scheduled Castes and Tribes	131/543(24.1%)	1950
Myanmar	FPTP	National races who make up more than 0.1 percent of state/ region population	29/879 (3.3%)	2015 (for 'Ethnic Affairs Ministers')
Nepal	FPTP + PR	Dalit, Adivasi Janajati, Khas Arya, Madhesi, Tharu & Muslim groups plus 'backwards' regions and disabled candidates	110/275 (40%)	2015
Philippines	FPTP + Party List	Labour, peasant, urban poor, Indigenous	59/297 (20.0%)	1987/1998 (first use)
Singapore	FPTP + PBV	Malay, Indian, or other minorities	16/89 (17.9%)	2008 (2017 for pres. elections)
Taiwan	FPTP + PR	Indigenous groups	6/113 (5.3%)	1972

Source: Compiled by the authors based on Tan and Preece (2021), p. 7.

Table 2 summarizes these formal mechanisms for ethnic minority representation in Asia.

Across Asia, a key area of difference is the 'selectorate' choosing these minority representatives. In India, for instance, the need for Scheduled Caste (SC) politicians to attract cross-caste votes means many are accused of being unresponsive to their core community, or of being token representatives (Jensenius, 2015). However, it also means that mainstream political parties have an incentive to recruit and support SC politicians, in order to increase their numbers in the legislative assemblies—facilitating the gradual integration of SC politicians into the mainstream political elite (Jensenius, 2017, p. 3). While Kymlicka (1995) argues that having minority representatives chosen directly by their own minority is normatively superior to their election by an open and unconstrained voting public, this needs to be balanced against the propensity for outbidding and extremism that ethnic-census style elections encourage (Horowitz, 1985). A desire to avoid the overt politicization of ethnicity helps explain Asia's more aggregative electoral processes, given the combustible history of ethnic relations in many countries.

3.4. Federalization

A final aspect of Asia's consensual shift comes via what Lijphart called the 'federal-unitary' dimension. Particularly in Asia's multiethnic democracies, large-scale efforts at decentralization, devolution, regionalism and/or federalism—what Breen collectively calls 'federalization' (2020)—have increased

in recent years, often featuring ethnic parties representing peripheral or disadvantaged minorities alongside dominant non-ethnic parties. This has seen long-established Asian federations such as India and Malaysia joined by new entrants. Thus putatively unitary Indonesia, in 2001 began devolving powers to over 500 local government districts in one of the world's most ambitious exercises in decentralization. Nepal enacted a new federal constitution in 2015, while Myanmar, which commenced a transition to democracy and federalism the same year, was similarly strengthening the position of its states and regions prior to the 2021 military coup. Sri Lanka and the Philippines have also elected governments committed to moving to a federal parliamentary system, albeit without making much progress at the time of writing.

Breen (2020) argues that this combination of federalization with coalitions of both ethnic and non-ethnic parties effectively forms its own 'Asian model' of democracy, delivering multiethnic central governments and legislatures while also allowing for the representation of peripheral minorities via ethno-federalism and local parties. Indonesia, for instance, allows local parties to contest elections in far-flung Aceh and Papua—at the eastern and western extremities of the archipelago—but not elsewhere. Myanmar, too, encourages local ethnic parties across its horseshoe-shaped highlands. These and other examples of 'holding-together' federalization in Asia, in which sub-national units are the product of a deliberate devolution from the centre to the provinces, stand in contrast to the Western 'coming-together' federations (Stepan, Linz, & Yadav, 2011), which typically allocate stronger powers to their constituent states. However, this relatively weak form of federalism is counter-balanced to some extent by asymmetric forms of special autonomy as well as the proportional lists, reserved seats, gender quotas, and other special structures discussed earlier. The spread of these mechanisms has shifted the balance between inclusion and stability in much of South and Southeast Asia, providing further evidence for progress along the federal-unitary dimension of consensualism.

4. Consequences

Thus far, this paper has focused on changes to the institutional design and rules of the political game but not on their substantive effects. In this section, we examine the extent to which political representation has changed as a result of the institutional reforms discussed above.

4.1. Party systems

A simple indicator of diversity in representation is the size and number of distinct political parties represented in a legislature. Figure 1(a) therefore

Figure 1. Changing political representation in Asia.
Source: Compiled by the authors using the following: (a) see Supplementary Appendix; (b) '2lgfemleg' in Coppedge et al. (2021); (c) 'v2paminor' in Lührmann, et al. (2020); (d) 'v2xpa_illiberal' in Lührmann, et al. (2020); (e) 'v2x_egal' in Coppedge et al. (2021).
Note: For (c), we calculated the country level average of the illiberalism score of each party by weighing the party's seat share.

compares the average effective number of parties or ENP (Laakso & Taagepera, 1979) for each national legislature[4] over two distinct time periods: 1995 to 2004 and 2005 to 2019. Figure 1(a) shows the result for all the

cases in our survey. Placement above the 45-degree line indicates an increase in ENP in the last 15 years (2005–2019) in comparison to the 1990–2004 period.

Figure 1(a) suggests that countries adopting consensual institutional reforms by and large exhibit the theoretically expected effects of such changes. Thus, Thailand's ENP increased from an average of 2.5 (2001–2011) to 5.4 in the 2019 elections after a much more proportional system replaced its previous MMM and block-vote models. Nepal, which shifted from plurality to MMM in 2015, also saw an ENP increase from 2.5 to 3.8. In Indonesia, which shifted to an open list PR system after the 2009 election, ENP has increased from 5.9 to 7.3. The Philippines also came to embrace a larger number of parties, partly due to the increased number of representatives elected from the party list tier. By contrast, South Korea's 2004 reforms, which introduced a dual ballot MMM system (rather than the old single-ballot system in which results at the district level determined the allocation of seats to the PR tier) may have increased voter choice but did not result in any boost to ENP.

At the same time, there are cases where the electoral formula remained the same but ENP changed. India's ENP decreased due to the BJP becoming a dominant party during the last several elections. Malaysia's ENP increased in recent elections due to coalition splits and the emergence of new parties, which led to the country's first-ever change of government at the 2018 elections. Overall, of 15 countries in our study,[5] nine increased their average ENP in recent years, suggesting a move towards more consensual politics, while six decreased their average ENP, indicating the reverse.

Overall, the tendency towards greater party proliferation is along the lines one would expect as part of a shift towards more consensual politics in Asia. However, an increase in the number of parties does not always lead to enhanced diversity in political representation. The Philippines is one example of this. There, the number of parties has risen in recent elections—but the creation of a new party often results not from the emergence of new groups in need of representation but rather from the formation of new coalitions among local bosses (Kasuya & Teehankee, 2020).

4.2. Female representation

Another key consensual measure is the equity of gender representation. Figure 1(b) compares the percentage of female legislators between the same two periods used in Figure 1(a). As this figure shows, women's representation has increased almost everywhere, following a global trend. Nevertheless, the countries which made the biggest leap in female

representation are mainly but not exclusively those with expansive gender quotas. These include Nepal, Pakistan, Taiwan, and Timor-Leste. This observation suggests that such institutions do have considerable impact on gender-balanced representation.

Some countries without institutional mechanisms to enhance female representation also increased their proportion of female legislators. Singapore and the Philippines are both examples. In Singapore, the PAP increased their nomination of female candidates since the mid-2000s, as the party leadership realized the need to accommodate societal pressures for diversity and its popularity stagnated (Tan, 2015). In the Philippines, the increase in female legislators may be a result of the introduction of legislative term limits in a context of prevalent political families or clans, as a male representative who reaches the limit is typically replaced by a family member, often his wife or daughter (Labonne, Parsa, & Querubin, 2019).

In summary, there is clear evidence that women's representation has increased across Asia's democracies, and that institutional reforms including gender quotas have likely played a role in this process. At least in terms of descriptive representation of women, most Asian countries in our study have made progress during the last decade, with the greatest changes being in countries that have adopted gender quotas or similar rules.

4.3. Minority rights

Another indicator of consensual politics is the representation of ethnic minorities and peripheral regions in the political system. As discussed earlier, there has been a growth in the representation of ethnic minorities, usually via reserved seats, and also significant devolution of power from the centre to the regions via various approaches to federalization, particularly in South and Southeast Asia.

To examine if this process has actually advanced minority interests, Figure 1(c) uses the 'minority rights index' in the V-Party database of the V-Dem Project. We reconstructed this variable to represent each country (the original data uses parties as the unit of analysis), so that a higher value indicates better national protection of minority rights. The periodization is the same as in the previous figures. Countries located above the 45-degree line registered improved minority rights during the period from 2005 to 2019 in comparison to the 1990–2004 period.[6]

Figure 1(c) suggests that despite implementing institutional reforms, most countries have yet to see an improvement in the actual protection of minority groups. India, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, and Nepal have all implemented *de jure* forms of minority empowerment, as discussed earlier. Yet, except for Nepal, all these countries are located below the 45-

degree line, indicating that minority rights have been *less* respected over the past 15 years compared to the previous period (1990–2004). Other countries such as Indonesia have delivered large-scale devolution without a corresponding increase in minority rights. In addition to the poor record of India and the Philippines—both of which elected populist governments in recent years—Figure 1(c) also suggests that minority rights have deteriorated the most in those countries without any ostensive minority-related initiatives, such as Cambodia, Japan, and Mongolia.

The lack of improvement in minority rights suggests that special arrangements for ethnic representation cannot in themselves overcome popular attitudes and political practice, even where minorities are equitably or even over-represented. In most cases, guarantees that ensure minorities will not be overwhelmed by the dominant majority rely on official recognition of their presence to minimize the risks of further marginalization. In Taiwan, for example, indigenous seats have increased to the point where aboriginal groups are now over-represented compared to their numbers in society: 'Although only about 2% of Taiwan's population today holds indigenous status, over 5% of the current legislature (6 of 113 seats) is chosen from 2 separate indigenous constituencies, providing a potentially important avenue of influence in national politics for these historically marginalized peoples' (Templeman, 2018, p. 461).

In Singapore, similarly, the introduction of Group Representation Constituencies in 1988 sought to ensure more multiracial representation in Parliament to better reflect the national social-ethnic composition (74% Chinese, 13% Malays, 9% Indians, and 4% other races). Since 1991, more than a quarter of the parliament has comprised ethnic minorities, exceeding this societal share (Tan, 2013, p. 635). However, these and similar group-based reforms enacted for presidential elections are seen by many Singaporeans as compromising meritocracy through de facto racial affirmative action (Rodan, 2018).

India, whose use of seat reservations, represents the world's largest exercise in affirmative action, is another case in point. Hundreds of seats in state assemblies across the country are reserved for representatives of the former 'untouchables'. These seat reservations have increased over time to reflect the growing proportion of such groups in Indian society—underprivileged minorities comprise roughly 16% of India's population and, today, hold a similar proportion of seat reservations across the country. However, studies have found that although quotas have increased the numerical presence of scheduled castes in politics, they have only a limited impact on how these groups are represented politically. While quotas have played a role in weakening the status hierarchy associated with the caste system and offering opportunities for integration into mainstream politics, there is no evidence

that better representation has itself led to improvement in the basic conditions of life for underprivileged classes (Jensenius, 2017).

Other difficulties come when some minority groups are not recognized in official policy (such as the Chinese in Indonesia) or decreed not to exist (like the Rohingya in Myanmar). Chong (2018, pp. 133–134) found that the number of Chinese holding ministerial positions and elected office had grown steadily over time since Indonesia's democratization in 1999, from just one ethnic Chinese minister in the 1999–2004 period to two in the 2004–2014 period, and three in the post-2014 period. A similar but sharper increase in Chinese representation is evident in representative bodies.[7] However, there is a vast difference between relatively economically privileged minorities, such as the Chinese, and the much more common situation—typified by the plight of the Rohingya—of minorities who are both socially and economically marginalized.

4.4. Illiberal politics

Are consensual institutional reforms associated with more accommodative behaviour by political leaders? To examine this question, we employ the 'illiberalism index' available in the V-Party data. This index measures the extent to which party leaders reject commitment to democratic norms such as respect for opposing ideas, freedom of speech, and nonviolent approaches to politics (Lührmann, et al., 2020). As consensual democracy purports to bring with it a 'kinder and gentler' form of politics, in Lijphart's (1999) words, illiberal politics can be seen as its antithesis. Figure 1(d) shows those countries, located above the 45-degree line, which have become less liberal over recent years compared to the previous 15 years.

Most Asian countries have become less politically liberal and, thus, in practice, less consensual over the past 15 years. This includes not just emerging democracies but also Asia's three longest-established democracies: India, Japan, and the Philippines. For instance, Japan's ruling coalition, holding a dominant legislative majority, has been able to enact illiberal policies such as the 2013 Secret Information Protection Act, a law potentially silencing the opposition. In India, what Lijphart (1996) claimed to be a case of informal consociationalism which explained 'the puzzle of Indian democracy' has apparently disappeared altogether. Since Prime Minister Modi took office in 2014, Indian politics has become increasingly dominated by Hindu nationalism, marginalizing Muslims and other minority groups. As there have been limited institutional changes in India, this shift to more majoritarian politics emphasizes the supremacy of human agency over formal institutions.

Of those countries which adopted consensual reforms in the realm of female quotas, minority representation and federalization, only Taiwan and South Korea have substantially improved their liberalism scores. Elsewhere, ostensibly consensual reforms, as with the switch to proportional representation in Thailand, have been used to sideline the opposition and ensure that military and royalist-aligned forces maintain a grip on power, even as their popularity fades.[8] In the Philippines, President Duterte's aggressive attacks on the press and civil society have overshadowed other problems with minority representation, such as with the 'colonization' of party-list seats by front organizations connected to wealthy families and political dynasties (Hutchcroft, 2019). In Indonesia too, ostensibly consensual reforms—such as large-scale decentralization and the consensual practice of inviting opposition parties into power-sharing 'rainbow' cabinets—have not been enough to avoid the political stasis and democratic decay of the Jokowi presidency (Power, 2018). Indonesia today ranks as only marginally more liberal on V-Dem data than the earlier 1990–2004 period, when the country was under Suharto's autocratic rule until 1998, and then in a period of great instability until 2004.

4.5. A more egalitarian politics in Asia?

Finally, we examine if Asia's consensual institutional reforms have led to more egalitarian politics. Political equality is a hallmark of Lijphart's 'kinder and gentler' claim that consensus democracy outperforms majoritarian democracy. To probe if this is the case in Asia, we deploy the Egalitarian Component Index (ECI) in the V-Dem data. The ECI measures to what extent the egalitarian principles of democracy are achieved by looking at three sub-components: (1) protection of rights and freedoms across all social groups, (2) equal distribution of resources across all social groups, and (3) equal access to power by gender, socioeconomic class and social groups. This index ranges from 0 to 1, with values closer to 1 indicating more egalitarianism. As discussed in Subsection 4.4, a new trend toward illiberal politics started roughly ten years ago in many Asian countries. To capture this current trend better, Figure 1(e) examines a shorter period than our previous figures; we compare the ECI scores of the past ten years (2011–2020) to those of two decades ago (2001–2010). In the Supplementary Appendix (Figure A1), we provide a graph with the same periodization as in our previous figures.

In Figure 1(e), as in our previous scattergrams, a location above the 45-degree line implies that a country's politics became more egalitarian in recent years. However, the figure reveals no discernible relations between consensual institutional reforms and egalitarianism. With the exceptions of Myanmar and Bhutan, both of which were transitioning from non-

democratic regimes, most Asian countries backslid into less egalitarian politics over this period, regardless of consensual reforms.

Surprisingly, the countries with the most consequential consensual reforms delivering better gender, minority and regional representation, such as Nepal and Indonesia, did not show the expected substantive changes towards more inclusive politics. The list of backsliders also includes Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Philippines, Singapore, and South Korea. Each of these countries underwent some consensual reforms, particularly regarding female representation, yet registered little improvement in terms of greater equality of outcomes. As noted in the previous subsection, Asia's increasingly illiberal political practice appears to have so far overwhelmed the more diffuse potential of consensual institutions.

Why this is the case is not easy to identify, given the myriad factors that can potentially impact democratic legitimacy, stability and performance. The period covered in this paper—from the 1990s through to the 2010s—included periods of massive foreign investment, rapid industrialization, and financial collapse during the 1990s; the rise to superpower status of China and its increasing economic domination of the region; and recent years marked by military interventions, pernicious populism, pandemic controls, and severe economic contraction. All of these external factors inevitably affect democracy's trajectory and the cycles of resilience, breakdown and renewal experienced by individual countries.

5. Concluding remarks

Lijphart (1999) identified ten characteristics compressed into two dimensions that distinguish majoritarian and consensus patterns amongst the world's longer-term democracies. The first 'executives-parties' dimension grouped together five characteristics of executive power: relations between the executive and the legislature, as well as the nature of the party, electoral, and interest group systems. Moving from majoritarian towards consensus democracy under this schema meant greater sharing, dispersing, and limiting of political power, including greater pluralism in the party system, increased proportionality in elections, and more power-sharing in government. Lijphart's second 'federal-unitary' dimension also consisted of five elements, the most important of which was the presence of a federalized and/or decentralized state, along with complementary institutions such as bicameralism with two differently-constituted houses of parliament.

At the *de jure* level, there is clear evidence that Asian polities are moving away from their established majoritarian models to include more consensual elements on both the executive-party and federal-unitary dimensions. While maintaining the majoritarian inclination of their party and electoral

structures, today most Asian democracies have incorporated consensual elements which better represent key identity cleavages of gender, ethnicity, and territory. They have also maintained the long-standing preference for oversized multi-party cabinets over single-party executives, a clear consensual practice which now appears embedded in many Asian democracies.

However, these institutional changes have not, in the main, been accompanied by more substantive cultural and behavioural shifts or improvements in democratic quality. Instead, as the illiberalism index makes clear, norms of liberal democracy such as willingness to accept restrictions on majority rule, tolerance of ethnic and religious minorities, accommodation of diverse viewpoints, respect for the rule of law, and acceptance of democracy itself have all been in decline in many Asian states over this same period. Our probe of the egalitarianism index corroborates this interpretation. Clearly consensual reforms on both the executive-parties and federal-unitary dimensions, such as have occurred in Nepal and Indonesia, and more partially in the Philippines and India, have been accompanied by *less* liberalism and egalitarianism overall.

Why the introduction of more consensual institutions has not yet generated a shift towards more consensual politics in Asia is a key question, and challenges the conventional wisdom that typically sees democratization and consensualism as mutually reinforcing (Lijphart, 1991). Lijphart (2008, pp. 269–270), for instance, 'recommends consensus democracy to any country that aims to establish a democratic system of government, or that wants to change its form of democracy', as consensus democracy 'has a substantial advantage over majoritarian democracy with regards to democratic quality'. In Asia, so far, this advantage is difficult to discern.

Notes

1. Looking at the case of Australia, Lijphart (1999) states that changing to a PR electoral system would be enough to shift the country from majoritarian to consensual democracy.
2. As well as the Freedom House threshold noted earlier, for case selection we consulted the Lexical Index of Electoral Democracy (LIED) database created by Skaaning, Gerring, and Bartusevicius (2015). The countries under study were coded as three and higher for at least 10 years between 1990 and 2020 in LIED, denoting that the given country-year had multiparty elections for both legislature and executive branches (although such elections did not necessarily fulfil the competitive election condition, that is, elections were not characterised by uncertain outcomes.) This scope of analysis, which deliberately errs on the side of inclusion, means that both democratic and semi-democratic regimes are included, as long as they held multiparty elections.
3. For example, Nepal's NGOs addressing women's issues operated mainly with funding from international sources. They advocated for the gender quota at the Constituent Assembly deliberations (Falch, 2010).
4. In the case of bicameral legislatures, we calculated ENP for the lower house.
5. Bhutan, Myanmar, and Timor Leste are each located on the 45-degree line because competitive elections started only after the mid-2000s.
6. This is calculated by taking the average minority rights score of parties, weighed by their respective seat shares. We reversed the value to make higher values denote better protection of minority rights.

7. Media reports of the 2014 elections, for instance, reported that 14 Chinese Indonesians were elected as DPR members out of a total of 315 Chinese Indonesian candidates, an increase from the 213 candidates who contested in 2009. See South China Morning Post (2019).
8. It would not surprise if Myanmar follows a similar path now that the generals are back in power in Naypyidaw following the February 2021 coup, in order to give their favoured Union Solidarity and Development Party a chance of forming a power-sharing government with the military, who retain 25% of parliamentary seats.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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