

The Strength to Concede: Ruling Parties and Democratization in Developmental Asia

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Authoritarian ruling parties are expected to be exceptionally resistant to democratization. Yet some of the strongest authoritarian parties in the world have not resisted democratization, but have embraced it. This is because their *raison d'être* is to continue ruling, not necessarily to remain authoritarian. Democratization requires that ruling parties hold free and fair elections, but not that they lose them. Authoritarian ruling parties can thus be incentivized to concede democratization from a position of exceptional strength as well as extreme weakness. This “conceding-to-thrive” scenario is most likely to unfold when regimes (1) possess substantial antecedent political strengths and resource advantages, (2) suffer ominous setbacks signaling that they have passed their apex of domination, and (3) pursue new legitimation strategies to arrest their incipient decline. We illustrate this heretofore neglected alternative democratization pathway through a comparative-historical analysis of three Asian developmental states where ruling parties have democratized from varying positions of considerable strength: Taiwan, South Korea, and Indonesia. We then consider the implications of our analysis for three “candidate cases” in developmental Asia where ruling parties have not yet conceded democratization despite being well-positioned to thrive were they to do so: Singapore, Malaysia, and the world’s most populous dictatorship, China.

It has been widely argued and empirically well-established that ruling parties help sustain authoritarian regimes. Explanations for why this is so center either on ruling parties’ distinctive capacities or their incentives. The most influential incentive-centered work theorizes that party cadres possess especially strong motives to cling to power. “The preferences of party cadres are much simpler than those of [military] officers,” Geddes persuasively argues. “Like democratic politicians, they simply want to hold office.”¹ Party cadres are more resistant to surrender-

ing political office than military officers because they have no barracks to which they can safely retreat. Ruling parties thus ensure that dictatorships will exhibit an especially iron will to power.

Yet the implications of this discussion for the likelihood of democratization in party-led regimes have not been adequately appreciated or explored. Critically, it implies that the *raison d'être* of authoritarian ruling parties is to continue ruling, but not necessarily to remain authoritarian. For ruling militaries, withdrawal from office is necessary for democratization to occur. Yet *ruling parties can democratize without losing office*. For authoritarian parties, democratization entails the concession to *hold free*

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and fair elections, but not necessarily to *lose* them. Hence they can maintain incumbency without maintaining authoritarianism. What Przeworski memorably called the “institutionalized uncertainty”² of democracy may mean eschewing certain victory, but neither does it mean accepting certain defeat. Democratization can thus be surprisingly incentive-compatible for authoritarian ruling parties with promising prospects to remain in office under democratic conditions.

This article builds upon this theoretical corrective to explore the following empirical paradox: *Some of the strongest authoritarian regimes in the world have not resisted democratization, but have embraced it.* Even more strikingly, such concessions of democracy have occurred in regimes commanding exceptionally strong state apparatuses tightly fused with powerful ruling parties, providing these regimes with ample “incumbent capacity” to resist democratization if they had so chosen.³ Yet they did not so choose, and history has shown that they chose wisely. In Taiwan, South Korea, and Indonesia, dominant ruling parties conceded democracy without conceding defeat. Rather than conceding and withdrawing, ruling parties in these Asian developmental states *conceded and thrived*. But why, when, and how do such “conceding-to-thrive” scenarios come to pass?

Our causal argument is conjunctural and historical and unfolds in three steps. First, ruling parties are only likely to embark on this inherently uncertain democratization path when they possess substantial antecedent resources and marked relative strength vis-à-vis the opposition. These accrued absolute and relative strengths underpin ruling parties’ “victory confidence” (i.e. their expectation of winning democratic elections) and “stability confidence” (i.e. their expectation that political stability will be preserved under democratic conditions). Second, and in some tension to the first point, ruling parties must more proximately suffer an ominous setback signaling that they have passed their apex of power. This signal typically takes the form of an economic, electoral, contentious, or geopolitical shock, or some combination thereof. Third, party decision-makers must openly acknowledge these setbacks as an incipient lapsing of their party’s authoritarian legitimation formulas,⁴ publicly adopting a forward strategy—and thereby embarking upon what is often a highly contested and contingent process—of conceding democratic reforms. These strategic actions by and interactions among politicians represent the key causal mechanism in our argument. In sum, conceding-to-thrive scenarios require a causal confluence of antecedent *strengths*, ominous *signals*, and legitimation *strategies*.

This argument counsels a fundamental rethinking of the conventional wisdom on Asian democratization. Apologists for Asian authoritarianism have long maintained that the region is distinctly ill-suited for democracy. Such arguments typically rest on the shaky premise that democ-

racy reflects culturally specific Western values. Our analysis suggests, by stark contrast, that Asia’s developmental states possess the kind of antecedent institutional strengths that make them exceptionally *well-suited* for democratization. Ironically, the two cases most often invoked to argue that democracy is incompatible with “Asian values”—Singapore and China—are prime candidates to begin democratizing through strength.

This article’s empirical focus lies in Northeast and Southeast Asia, but its theoretical implications are not region-specific. In the following section, we elaborate a general theory of democratic concessions-through-strength that can be assessed in authoritarian regimes across space and time. After process-tracing our hypotheses in developmental Asia, our conclusion preliminarily considers where else our concepts and causal arguments might best apply. Considering the dozens of party-led regimes that have democratized over the past quarter-century, as well as the dozens that remain in variously precarious positions of power—from Cuba to Ethiopia, from Syria to North Korea, and from Vietnam to Russia—the applicability of our present inquiry is potentially global.

Democratization through Strength vs. Weakness

All authoritarian ruling parties are not created equal. Generally sharing Geddes’ intuition that ruling parties are incentivized to cling to power with tooth and nail, multiple scholars have recently explained variation in ruling-party durability as a function of what Levitsky and Way call “incumbent capacity.”⁵ Only when ruling parties face overwhelming popular opposition, or are abandoned by their superpower patrons, are they expected to negotiate a democratic transition to avoid a violent collapse. Echoing influential arguments that authoritarian regimes only accept democratic elections to avoid violent overthrow⁶ and that authoritarian withdrawals invariably begin with destabilizing ruptures within the regime leadership,⁷ Geddes explains why ruling parties should only be incentivized to concede democracy when essentially standing at death’s door:

“Like [military] officers, single-party cadres can expect life as they know it to continue after liberalization or even regime change. If they cannot avoid regime change, they are better off in a democracy than in some other form of authoritarianism. Previously hegemonic parties have remained important in political life wherever countries have fully democratized, but they have been outlawed and repressed in several that did not. Consequently, they have good reason to negotiate an extrication rather than risking a more violent ouster.”⁸

We concur with this formulation almost entirely, except one vital point: *unlike ruling militaries, ruling parties virtually never “negotiate an extrication.”* When ruling parties initiate democratization, they typically do so by allowing a fairer electoral fight that they could potentially win.

This implies a paradox: When a ruling party enjoys substantial incumbent capacity, this not only *increases its ability* to sustain authoritarian rule, but can *lessen its imperative* to do so. Since the benchmark preference of party cadres is to remain in office and not to remain authoritarian, we need further theorizing as to why some ruling parties concede democratization while others do not.

Our primary argument is that *dominant parties can be incentivized to concede democratization from a position of exceptional strength and not only from a position of extreme weakness*.⁹ Paradoxically, the very strength that helps dominant parties sustain authoritarianism can also help motivate them to end it.¹⁰ Untangling this paradox of “strong-state democratization”¹¹ requires attention be paid, first and foremost, to the historical sources of strength that make this strategy viable for some ruling parties and not others.¹² It also demands sensitivity to the proximate conditions that make a conceding-to-thrive strategy (i.e. the causal mechanism through which this mode of democratization actually unfolds) more likely to arise in some settings than in others.

Our argument combines three types of causal factors: strengths, signals, and strategies.

Antecedent Strengths

Ruling parties are only likely to adopt the risky strategy of conceding-to-thrive when their *antecedent resources* provide them with (1) victory confidence and (2) stability confidence. In a nutshell, *democratic concessions become more likely as ruling parties gain confidence that democratic politics will bring neither the party's electoral demise nor political instability*. The decision to concede therefore does not require an imminent threat of a violent overthrow or the emergence of debilitating internal divisions within the party. On the contrary, a conceding-to-thrive strategy requires sufficient antecedent strength to engender confidence that democratization will mean neither a withdrawal from office nor political instability. Whereas the existing literature recognizes that especially *weak* ruling parties might agree to *immunity* concessions (i.e. conceding to save their own skins), we highlight the underappreciated potential for especially *strong* ruling parties to pursue *thriving* concessions.¹³

But where do ruling parties' antecedent strengths come from, and how do they enhance victory confidence and stability confidence? Echoing recent research,¹⁴ we argue that the most important antecedent resource a dominant party can possess is a long-term connection to a highly capable state apparatus: e.g., the “developmental states” of Asia, which have helped produce unrivaled rates of economic growth. To be sure, these Asian party-states are highly diverse, as we have explored at length elsewhere.¹⁵ State capacity has historically been especially impressive in South Korea (hereafter Korea), Taiwan, and Singapore. Party domination has been more pronounced in China, Singapore, and Taiwan than in Indonesia and Korea, where

the military played a central role in authoritarian rule alongside party apparatuses. Yet even if Indonesia and Korea were not as party-dominated as China, Singapore, and Taiwan, for the purposes of studying democratization they were both effectively party-led regimes. Party leaders and not military leaders were best positioned to choose the course of concession and to design new democratic reforms substantially levelling the playing field.

A history of successful state-led development enhances the victory confidence and stability confidence of party decision-makers in a variety of ways. An impressive record of transformative accomplishments in the economic realm provides the kind of “usable past” that aids a formerly authoritarian party seeking “regeneration” under democracy.¹⁶ Decades of state-led industrialization and poverty reduction also tend to incubate a vibrant middle class with moderate and even conservative political leanings (viz., they may reject authoritarianism while still valuing development). This makes citizens less susceptible to the electoral and contentious appeals of radical dissenters who lack any established record of fostering developmental success. To the extent that democratization creates pressure for increased welfare spending, ruling parties are more capable of increasing redistribution without sparking macroeconomic instability when they have access to the robust fiscal apparatuses and accrued public savings of developmental states.¹⁷ Indeed, when ruling parties in developmental states concede and lead democratic reform during relatively good economic times, they can overcome the greatest threat to their popularity and legitimacy: namely, their authoritarian character.

While state power lies at the heart of stability confidence, the institutional strength of the dominant party is the most critical component in victory confidence. Like state power, party power is necessarily built over time. Three dimensions are of particular importance. First, dominant parties will have higher victory confidence for post-authoritarian elections when they have developed *cross-cutting constituencies* (e.g. cross-class, cross-ethnic, and cross-region). Second, party strength is enhanced to the extent that the party has constructed a *territorially encompassing infrastructure* of local branches and cells. Third, parties will have higher victory confidence when they have cultivated *experienced electoral candidates*. Each of these party strengths must be assessed in relative as well as absolute terms. Conceding-to-thrive scenarios become more likely to the extent that opposition parties are lacking in cross-cutting constituencies, territorial infrastructure, and electoral experience, and not only as the dominant party's strengths increase absolutely.

Ominous Signals

Even at the best of times and with the most robust institutional machinery at their disposal, ruling parties encounter new risks whenever pursuing democratic concessions.

For conceding to be perceived as an option worth pursuing, ruling parties must not only have impressive antecedent strength. They must also encounter a strong and clear signal that their apex of domination has passed.¹⁸ A conceding-to-thrive scenario is unlikely to unfold when a ruling party appears either to be maintaining power with unmolested ease or rapidly hurtling toward an irreversible crisis situation. It is more likely when strong and clear signals indicate that the party has passed its prime, but is only *slowly sinking toward parity* vis-à-vis its main rivals.

Specifically, the ruling party will most likely concede democracy when it retains solid prospects to win majority support in a democratic election, partly thanks to authoritarian legacies of malapportionment. Conceding-to-thrive strategies become less likely as “victory confidence” declines, in much the same manner as concessions from a position of extreme weakness become less likely as “immunity confidence” wanes. If the ruling party resists reform for too long while its popularity plummets, its internal cohesion frays and its legitimacy formula becomes discredited, it risks a situation where a democratic election will produce certain outright defeat and likely retribution. In this scenario, the ruling party’s only options are to accept defeat and prepare a comeback from the ranks of opposition or to unleash repression against its opponents in a bid for uninterrupted authoritarian hegemony. The tragedy of dominant-party authoritarianism—both for rulers and their opponents—is that ruling parties too rarely commence democratization before conditions have spiraled out of control in such a manner.

What this all suggests is that there is a “sweet spot” when strongly resourced ruling parties should exhibit *a slowly declining capacity but a rapidly increasing propensity* to concede-and-thrive. Since a party enters this zone upon receiving worrisome signals of declining popularity and lapsing legitimacy, however, we call it a *bittersweet spot*. It is during these periods when ruling parties become pressed to evaluate their post-democratization potential with heightened urgency.

What kind of events present especially clear and strong signals to an authoritarian party that it has passed its apex? Although the critical issue is how signals are publicly acknowledged rather than cognitively interpreted by party decision-makers (see below), we consider some kinds of ominous signals—which in many instances amount to dramatic *shocks*—to be especially likely to commence a conceding-to-thrive pathway.

The first type of shock is electoral. When a long-dominant ruling party first suffers noticeable losses of electoral support in a “competitive authoritarian” or more deeply undemocratic election, either through a decline in vote shares or in voter turnout, it is an especially clear signal that its popularity has begun to wane. To be sure, such results can be blamed on an unpopular individual leader rather than any secular softening of support for the

party writ large and hence not be taken as a clear signal that a party’s apex has passed. Yet since even authoritarian elections can capture shifting partisan preferences of voters, electoral shocks can serve as especially clear and strong signals of incipient decline. Electoral signals are also of particular importance since the dominant party’s post-democratization prospects depend precisely on its electoral prowess.

A second common type of shock is economic. Economic shocks are typically fuzzier signals of regime weakening than electoral shocks, since they can be more credibly blamed on exogenous actors and factors. Yet they tend to increase pressure on (and within) the ruling party for reform and can serve as a strong signal that the authoritarian model has passed its prime. In regimes that are dependent upon their economic track records for their deeper historical legitimacy as well as their proximate popularity, economic distress signals tend to be especially impactful.

Outbursts of contentious politics represent a third kind of shock. The issue here is not simply the *size* of public protest, but its *type*. A signal of party decline is especially strong and clear if protests not only target the ruling party’s policies, but question its right to rule. Such signals are amplified when the opposition is cross-class in composition and nationalist in rhetoric. The cross-class nature of contention indicates the failure of divide-and-conquer strategies, particularly for those regimes originally founded on “protection pacts” aimed at containing and suppressing the forces of the radical Left.¹⁹ The nationalist orientation of opposition challenges the existential core of the ruling party’s legitimacy formula, which often lies in its claim to have saved the nation from chaos and backwardness. This makes it riskier for the regime to crack down since emotionally charged nationalist protests tend to escalate rather than dissipate when violently repressed.²⁰

Finally, a fourth kind of signal that a regime has passed its apex is geopolitical. Most authoritarian regimes have depended to some degree on superpower sponsorship, especially during the Cold War period. The end of that era’s guarantees of unconditional superpower support served as a far-reaching geopolitical distress signal for authoritarian regimes. A conceding-to-thrive scenario becomes more likely when party decision-makers acknowledge that a shift toward a democratic legitimation formula has become necessary to shore up or restore vital superpower support. As with electoral, economic, and contentious signals, geopolitical signals do not make such a decision inevitable. Yet ominous geopolitical signals make conceding-to-thrive strategies more probable, especially in combination with the other three types of signals.

Legitimation Strategies

While essential, strengths and signals are insufficient to force a conceding-to-thrive process to unfold. The

translation from objective strengths and signals into subjective perceptions and from such individual cognitions into collective actions is anything but automatic. For starters, party decision-makers never have perfect information and they can certainly miscalculate their strengths and their prospects. Nor would it be reasonable to expect party decision-makers to be unanimous in their assessment of antecedent resources or the sources and extent of their party's decline. Party apparatchiks are not objective information receptors, but politicians who interpret signals in light of their personal ambitions and factional positions. Hence the bittersweet spot is not a time of calm cognitive reflection, but of heightened strategizing and, in most cases, intensified struggle within the party itself.

A conceding-to-thrive process can thus never be *reduced* to mere cognitive processes of calculation and choice; we insist, nonetheless, that it *requires* such choices. Although individual cognitions are unobservable, we proceed from the assumption that ruling parties are populated by strategic actors who take advantage of all available information when crafting a strategy for reversing their declining fortunes. Here again, we contend that antecedent resources factor significantly. Powerful and encompassing party-state infrastructures provide regimes with useable knowledge of political trends on the ground, reducing the chances for miscalculation through either overconfidence or underconfidence. They also increase the chances that signals of the party's incipient decline will be perceptible enough to galvanize new strategic actions.

Perceptions alone, however, cannot tell us which side will prevail in an internal party dispute over whether to concede-to-thrive. We should expect party strategies to be hashed out through a political process of internal debate and, at times, outright struggle. The bittersweet spot is a temporal window of opportunity, or critical juncture. If missed, it may very well not arise again and, like most critical junctures, it involves a heightened causal role for political agency. Hence we need to consider the causal mechanisms through which strengths and signals become translated *by strategists* into either the preemptive decision to concede or the dogged rejection of reform.

The democratic reforms of interest to us here are concessions of far more liberal laws governing the media, opposition parties, and electoral procedures. The playing field must be substantially leveled through significant reforms in all three of these domains: by giving regime opponents effective access to national media; allowing them to form and mobilize new parties without restriction; and investing a truly independent national commission with the authority and resources to monitor elections and punish electoral abuses. Otherwise, an authoritarian regime can be said to be merely liberalizing or shifting from "closed" into "competitive" authoritarianism, not democratizing.²¹ This is an especially common strategy for ruling

parties that lack the victory confidence to democratize outright, as well as those that do not calculate that a new legitimation formula is necessary to preserve political dominance.

It is these legitimation strategies that most proximately drive the process of conceding democracy from positions of strength. Do recent setbacks signal the old authoritarian legitimacy formula is fraying? Or can the dominant party restore its domination without redefining its rationale for rule? In short, *is this the end of an era, or not?* Since ruling parties are populated by diverse actors driven by individual ambitions and factional concerns and not just by a shared commitment to advance the fortunes of the party overall, these questions tend to fuel intense intra-party debates. The bittersweet spot entails a shifting political game in which incumbent party elites maneuver among a new menu of strategic choices, including the option of conceding-to-thrive as part of a re-legitimation formula. Democratic concessions ultimately require that forces within the ruling party favoring that position prevail in any struggle over those who prefer to respond to recent setbacks by standing pat or by increasing repression.

In our view, no single factor can predict victory for actors favoring democratic reforms during the bittersweet spot. We cannot anticipate with certainty that the structural pressures of the bittersweet spot will compel leaders to favor a concession strategy. Yet we argue that *when setbacks strike directly at the heart of a regime's historical legitimacy formula*, conceding-to-thrive becomes especially likely to occur. This approach allows us to supplement our attention to agency during these critical junctures with consistent sensitivity to structure, since regimes' legitimacy formulas always have historical foundations. It also provides us the empirical advantage of assessing shifts and continuities in the languages of legitimation that authoritarian regimes publicly use to justify the necessity of their rule. Strategies change when rulers begin to *talk* in new ways, no matter whether they have truly begun to *think* in new ways. Public strategies, rather than private strategies, are of the essence. What matters is that autocrats explicitly embrace the idea of a new political era and commence a decisive rhetorical break from the authoritarian past.²²

In the analysis that follows, we do not claim to "read the minds" of leaders, even though the evidence is strongly suggestive of the sort of strategic agency we have just detailed. Rather, our core empirical goals are to demonstrate that these parties have continued to thrive after conceding democracy from a position of relative strength and that these processes were made more likely given the structural parameters of each case's bittersweet spot. In sum, we trace how parties in developmental Asia with the *strength* to concede only adopted the *strategy* to concede after receiving clear and strong *signals* that their power and legitimacy were in incipient decline.

Table 1
Spectrums of Antecedent Party-State Strength in Developmental Asia

	Northeast Asia	Southeast Asia	
Antecedent Strengths	1. <i>Taiwan</i> 2. <i>South Korea</i> 3. China	1. Singapore 2. Malaysia 3. <i>Indonesia</i>	Threshold for Conceding-to-Thrive
	<hr/> Italicized: Positive Case Non-Italicized: Candidate Case		

*Spectrum of authoritarian strength → Spectrum of democratic success

Spectrums of Authoritarian Strength and Democratic Success in Developmental Asia

We flesh out our theory of democratization-through-strength with a comparative-historical analysis of regime development in a diverse sample of Asian developmental states. Since our main goal lies in elaborating a new conjunctural set of hypotheses for how and why authoritarian parties might democratize from a position of strength, our primary attention will be paid to process-tracing these outcomes in three positive cases of strong-state democratization in developmental Asia: Taiwan, Korea, and Indonesia. Yet it is important to note that these cases and their experiences of conceding-to-thrive are far from identical. Rather, they provide an especially useful comparison set because they capture a *spectrum of strength* ruling parties might possess during authoritarian times, thus allowing us to trace how these varying antecedent strengths map onto a *spectrum of success* for these parties after democratization.

Taiwan’s Kuomintang (KMT) is the archetypal example of an authoritarian party conceding democracy when it enjoyed very high levels of stability and victory confidence. The KMT then continued to thrive as a dominant party in the democratic era, consistently retaining a national legislative majority and only losing the presidency by the slimmest of margins in 2000 and 2004 before recapturing it in 2008 and 2012. Indonesia’s Golkar, on the other end of our spectrum, was in a substantially weaker position when embracing democratization and it has predictably not fared quite as well under democracy. Nevertheless, Golkar has more than merely survived, consistently keeping a strong foothold in the national executive, prevailing outright in the 2004 parliamentary elections, and retaining numerous governorships and mayoralties across the Indonesian archipelago. Finally, Korea represents an intermediate case, wherein the incumbent Democratic Justice Party continued to rule after the introduction of democratic elections and into the 2000s, though its initial margin of victory was considerably less than the KMT’s.

As the following analysis shows, the authoritarian strengths and democratic successes of these ruling parties varied in degree, even as they displayed similarities in kind. The bittersweet spot is not a single moment that all countries experience similarly, therefore, but a “zone” in which prospects for conceding-to-thrive scenarios shift in distinctive ways across different cases. Our spectrum of cases suggests that the closer a ruling party is to the apex of its power, the more probable it will thrive and continue to dominate if it concedes democracy (Taiwan). The further the party is from its apex when it concedes, especially in terms of the stock of antecedent resources it still has available, the less thoroughly the party will likely dominate in the democratic era (Indonesia).

After laying out our arguments empirically through these three positive cases, we gain variation on our dependent variable by considering the absence (to date) of strong-state democratization in three additional “negative” Asian cases: Singapore, Malaysia, and China. These might be more precisely termed “candidate cases,” however, since they are prime candidates, in structural terms, for conceding-to-thrive scenarios. In fact, the spectrum of strengths represented by our three candidate cases nicely mirrors that of our positive cases, when rank-ordered by region (see Table 1).

Note that our sample contains both positive and candidate cases at higher (Taiwan and Singapore), lower (China and Indonesia), and intermediate levels of impressive antecedent strength (Korea and Malaysia). This vividly affirms our assertion that antecedent strengths alone are insufficient for producing democratic concessions. It also helps pinpoint our framework’s prediction for how well each candidate case would fare after conceding from its current position of strength. Just as ruling parties in Taiwan, Korea, and Indonesia display a range of authoritarian strengths and subsequent democratic successes, we anticipate that their counterparts in Singapore, Malaysia, and China would translate their strengths into post-democratic successes in similar ordinal fashion. These parallel spectrums of positive and candidate cases also allow us to pursue novel comparisons of democratic transformation across

sub-regional lines. When it comes to the politics of Asian democratization, tiny Singapore can be fruitfully compared with mammoth China, as can ethnically homogenous Korea with deeply divided Malaysia.

Since our argument that Singapore and Malaysia represent prime candidates for strong-state democratization has been laid out elsewhere,²³ we will focus below on the Chinese candidate case. Suffice it to say that if any party-state currently rivals the substantial antecedent resources of Taiwan in the 1980s, it is Singapore. We would argue that Singapore's PAP has only just entered its bittersweet spot, after suffering minor setbacks in the 2012 elections, leaving it with ample opportunity to concede and thrive. Malaysia is a more intermediate case, having long rivalled but never fully matching Singapore's state strength, party cohesion, and developmental success. In our view, Malaysia entered its bittersweet spot during its financial and political crisis of 1997–98. Yet forces inside the ruling UMNO party favoring a concede-to-thrive strategy, arrayed behind ousted Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, were decisively defeated by reactionary forces sticking with autocratic Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. Now more than a decade into its bittersweet spot, UMNO and its ruling BN coalition no longer enjoy the same assuredness of conceding and thriving today that they did during the mid-late 1990s. Nevertheless, UMNO should still expect to fare better in fully democratic elections than Indonesia's Golkar and perhaps even rival the performance of Korea's DJP and Taiwan's KMT, were it to concede-to-thrive at this juncture. Considering the UMNO-led regime's recent partial reforms to some of its draconian laws on political expression, one might even argue that a half-hearted experiment with a conceding-to-thrive strategy is already underway in Malaysia.

Positive Cases: Democratization through Conceding-to-Thrive Strategies

Taiwan

In September of 1986, when Taiwan's opposition leaders formed the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), President Chiang Ching-Kuo of the ruling KMT famously remarked that the "times are changing, the environment is changing, the tide is also changing."²⁴ The DPP was permitted to run its candidates in supplemental legislative elections that December, the first time an organized opposition slate was allowed to challenge the KMT. They won 25% of the vote and claimed 12 of 73 available seats. Emboldened by these results and the KMT's apparent willingness to tolerate the opposition, democratic activists poured into the streets. Chiang not only acquiesced to the creation of the DPP in 1986, he also lifted martial law in the summer of 1987, thus commencing Taiwan's gradual transition to democracy.

The KMT conceded democracy from a position of extraordinary strength, not weakness. This reflected the party's deep reserves of antecedent strengths accumulated during the postwar period. The KMT had ruled over a capable and effective developmental state. Driven by its mission to eventually retake the mainland, the KMT prioritized economic growth and national security. Land reform initiated during the late 1940s broke the landlord class, paving the way for more equitable economic development and giving the regime considerable autonomy from traditionally dominant classes. Thereafter, the KMT-led developmental state mitigated the risks of industrial upgrading, particularly in export-oriented activities.²⁵ The state invested in education, which was instrumental in increasing economic productivity and fostering socio-economic mobility. Consequently, development benefited broad sectors of society, winning the KMT considerable political support.

The emergence of Taiwan's developmental state was tied to the processes of party consolidation, starting with the centralization of power within the party during the 1950s.²⁶ As a Leninist party-state, the KMT's reach penetrated deep into society. Industry, both private sector and state-owned firms, was beholden to the ruling party in corporatist arrangements. The military and security apparatus were under the firm discipline of the party. Civil society was largely co-opted by the KMT. The party and state apparatus were essentially fused in authoritarian Taiwan.²⁷

An additional source of antecedent strength for the KMT came from the early institutionalization of elections. As in other authoritarian regimes, elections in postwar Taiwan were hardly free and fair. Electoral rules were heavily skewed and opposition campaigns were interfered with by the KMT. The institutionalization of limited elections proved useful to the KMT over the longer term. Elections functioned as a feedback loop through which the KMT heard peoples' concerns and meant the KMT could scout and recruit new talent from the grassroots into the party's rank-and-file.²⁸ Regular elections also allowed the ruling party to establish a powerful electoral machine and the opportunity to gain electoral experience, which were important sources of "victory confidence" when the KMT ultimately conceded competitive elections during the late 1980s. And finally, elections provided indications of how people viewed the performance of the KMT.

By the early 1980s, it had become clear the KMT was passing its political apex and that its once unassailable hold on power was diminishing. The 1980 supplementary elections saw for the first time opposition candidates openly run as anti-KMT or *tangwai* (outside the party) candidates. Tangwai candidates gained 8% of the popular vote in 1980 and doubled that vote share in the 1983 supplementary election. In 1986, tangwai candidates won 22% of the vote, while the KMT saw its share of the popular vote decline to 69%. These elections indicated a trending

dip in the party's dominance. Importantly, voters signalled they would consider an alternative, however remote, to the KMT.

The KMT also faced geopolitical signals in the form of international pressure for political reform. Taiwan was expelled from the United Nations in the early 1970s. When the United States normalized relations with China in 1979, Taiwan's already precarious international standing was dealt another debilitating existential blow. The KMT's postwar mission to re-claim China no longer enjoyed superpower support. To make matters worse, the KMT was increasingly chastised by the international community for its authoritarian practices. When overseas Taiwanese democracy activists were detained and some even killed during the early 1980s, international voices, both official and non-governmental, condemned the KMT.

Opposition to KMT authoritarianism was most pronounced in Taiwan's increasingly turbulent domestic politics. After the Kaohsiung Incident of 1979, when the police clashed with local protestors, the frequency and size of popular protests grew rapidly. The opposition crystallized around identity politics, specifically the assertion of a localized ethnic Taiwanese identity and democratic aspirations to realize a sovereign Taiwan. Because of this nationalist orientation, activists were broadly cross-class in their composition and less vulnerable to KMT efforts to discredit them. The democracy movement challenged the presumed necessity, and even the viability, of continued authoritarian rule under the KMT, a government that was increasingly cast in Taiwan's identity politics as an outsider regime.

Taking into account these important signals, the KMT faced a strategic dilemma. It could continue or even expand its practices of authoritarian repression and co-optation to prolong its increasingly precarious hold on power, as conventional wisdom expected. Or, the party could concede democratic transition with the reasonable expectation that it retained sufficient popularity and resource advantages to politically thrive.

Either approach in this bittersweet spot entailed uncertainty. It had become clear, however, that repression was an increasingly untenable option in dealing with the opposition; the KMT seemed to have "lost its nerve and its taste for violent self assertion."²⁹ Reformers within the party, including Chiang, could reason the party's political prospects would be better in democracy and that the KMT could, by conceding then, credibly craft a new legitimacy formula. Chiang hence used his personal power to marginalize hardliners; elevate reformers, most notably with his decision to appoint native-born Lee Teng-Hui as his successor; initiate discussion with opposition leaders; and re-invent the KMT as a party of democracy.³⁰ It must be stressed, however, that the KMT ultimately chose to concede because the party was in a position not of desperation, but of fairly strong confidence that democratic

concession would ensure both the KMT's electoral victory and the maintenance of stability. Party leaders including Chiang himself thus supported the democratic option.³¹

There were several reasons for the KMT's *victory confidence*. Despite growing support for the opposition, the KMT remained a very popular and powerful political party, with massive resources that could be deployed in electoral contests. The KMT was, and remains today, one of the world's richest political parties. Further, with the early introduction of elections, the KMT was well-stocked with experienced electoral candidates and a proven effective election machine.³² The DPP, meanwhile, was resource-poor, fractionalized, electorally inexperienced, and without a deep pool of candidates to run in national elections.

By conceding when it did from a position of strength, the KMT managed and prolonged the process of democratic reform in ways that benefited the ruling party. For instance, it dragged its feet in reforming media regulations allowing the KMT to retain ownership of Taiwan's key media outlets. The KMT also insisted on maintaining electoral rules favoring the ruling party, notably the SNTV multi-member district system which ensured the KMT a huge seat bonus in the countryside where its clientelist ties were strongest. This system also played to the party's strengths in candidate nomination and coordination. By initiating democratic transition, the incumbent ruling party could portray itself as the party of reform, allowing it to begin to distance itself from its Leninist-authoritarian past. Most important, the ruling party was able to appeal to voters by drawing on its postwar record of economic achievement, credibly claiming the KMT delivered prosperity to Taiwan. Rapid economic growth, a relatively equitable distribution of income, a large middle class, and the fact that democratization proceeded during economically good times, allowed the KMT to assemble a broad encompassing coalition of electoral supporters. The KMT turned its developmental legacy into its electoral advantage.

In addition to victory confidence, the KMT also evinced confidence that democratic transition would not lead to social, political, or economic instability. *Stability confidence* derived from Taiwan's developmental state experience and the role the KMT played in steering Taiwan's modernization. The government's efforts to grow Taiwan's economy through industrial upgrading and full employment de-radicalized opposition forces and blunted class-based cleavages.³³ Politically, the KMT began during the 1970s to recruit local Taiwanese into the party and the state apparatus, re-constituting the KMT as a more Taiwanese party. This localization strategy somewhat mitigated prevailing tensions among ethnic Taiwanese and mainlanders associated with the émigré ruling party. And just before the formation of the DPP in 1986, the KMT and the opposition engaged in negotiations which, from the view of the ruling party, "reduced uncertainty about the ultimate goals of the DPP and the likelihood of instability."³⁴

Democratic transition in Taiwan was thus relatively smooth and stable. Indeed, “[g]iven the lack of intense class divisions, and the moderation in intensity if not content of the ethnic division, democracy on Taiwan may be a kind of low-cost benefit the rulers may grant *without fear that society will be torn apart*.”³⁵ Democratic concession by the KMT was thus in no way tantamount to a withdrawal or a negotiated extrication. Rather, *the party conceded democracy without any intention of conceding defeat*. Despite the ruling party’s weakening monopoly on power, it was clear the KMT enjoyed antecedent resources that would likely see the party continue to thrive. And thrive it has. In Taiwan’s first fully contested legislative elections in 1992, the KMT won 59% of legislative seats. In 1996, the KMT claimed Taiwan’s first presidential election with Lee winning 54% of the vote and the DPP slate trailing far behind. Building on a platform of future constitutional reform and the party’s record of economic development, the KMT remained electorally dominant through the 1990s and 2000s. After losing the presidency to the DPP in the wake of a contingent party split in 2000 and 2004, the KMT’s Ma Ying-Jeou was elected to the presidency in 2008 and re-elected in 2012, while the party maintained uninterrupted control over the legislature.

Korea

Around the time the KMT conceded democracy in Taiwan, a similar strategy was being pursued by the authoritarian regime in Korea. However, Korea’s ruling Democratic Justice Party (DJP) commenced its concessions from a position of slightly lesser antecedent strength and when it was much deeper into its “bittersweet spot” than Taiwan’s KMT. Korea’s DJP thus relegated itself to a less-dominant position after democratic transition was completed. Still, considerable authoritarian strengths translated into substantial democratic successes in Korea as in Taiwan.

After the assassination of military dictator Park Chung-Hee in 1979, former general Chun Doo-Hwan assumed the presidency. In the wake of the 1980 Kwangju Massacre, when the state brutally suppressed protestors, he again imposed martial law. Despite a nascent optimism that Park’s death might lead to a democratic opening, the DJP under Chun resumed harsh authoritarian rule. Sensing a potentially weakened regime after the 1985 legislative elections in which the DJP won just 54% of seats, opposition forces re-mobilized, culminating in intense anti-regime protests in 1987. That summer, Chun’s anointed successor, Roh Tae-Woo, was expected to crack down. But Roh, unexpectedly, acted differently. Like Chiang in Taiwan, Roh conceded reform, announcing direct presidential elections in December of 1987, followed by legislative elections in the spring of 1988. Roh readied the DJP for the coming electoral contests and thus initiated Korea’s transition to democracy.

Similar to Taiwan, Korea’s ruling party accumulated a great deal of antecedent strength by dominating, and in

turn leveraging, an effective developmental state. Under Park, Korea experienced rapid economic growth, joining the OECD in the 1980s. The state in Korea intervened in the economy to stimulate industrial deepening and broadly equitable growth. The state was also politically dominated by the ruling party. Under Park’s authoritarian predecessor party to the DJP, the Democratic Republic Party (DRP), the political elite controlled the bureaucracy by deploying the Korean CIA to eliminate dissenters; maintaining a shadow cabinet within the presidential office; and asserting firm hierarchical control over the state apparatus. Korea’s autocratic president governed through his party, though he relied on the professional military to flex the regime’s muscle during times of crisis.³⁶

Elections were another source of antecedent strength in authoritarian Korea. As in Taiwan, elections were neither free nor fair. The dual member district system, in place until reforms in the 1980s, rewarded the ruling party with large seat bonuses, especially in the countryside where it enjoyed rock-solid support. In addition, about one-third of National Assembly seats were directly appointed by the President. The early introduction of elections in Korea, as skewed as they were in any democratic sense, also provided electoral campaigning and mobilization experience for ruling party politicians. And as it was for the KMT, elections generated important feedback from society, giving the party recurrent opportunities to gauge its popular appeal. In 1972 Park imposed the highly repressive Yushin Constitution to consolidate regime power. The ruling DRP continued to control a sizable majority of seats in the National Assembly, though this was due in large part to the unfair electoral rules of the game.

The ruling party arguably passed its apex of power when Park was assassinated in 1979 and the transition to Chun Doo-Hwan portended an opportunity for democratic reform. Chun, upon taking power, initially accommodated popular calls for constitutional reform, though he reneged after the regime’s suppression of the Kwangju uprising of 1980 and the re-imposition of martial law. The Democratic Justice Party (DJP), the DRP’s ruling party successor, fared even worse in subsequent elections, claiming only a slim majority of seats in the 1981 and 1985 National Assembly elections and winning just over one-third of the popular vote. It was clear by the mid-1980s the ruling party’s popularity had waned quite severely. Had it not been for the unfair electoral system in place and the DJP’s ties to big business, the ruling party’s hold on power would have been even more threatened. By the 1980s, the DJP was deeper into its bittersweet spot than Taiwan’s KMT was during the same period.

The electoral signal to the ruling party of its decline was accentuated by the mobilization of the *minjung* movement, a broad-based coalition of middle class activists, workers, church leaders, and students. The cross-class nature of *minjung* made it difficult for the regime to

suppress it. As a broad-based coalition, the minjung, like the Taiwanese tangwai opposition, cut to the regime's existential core. The minjung was explicitly an anti-authoritarian movement, "framed exclusively in the context of state repression and heroic resistance."³⁷ For many Koreans, the state's authoritarian developmental pact, and therefore the legitimacy formula of the regime, had run its course.

International pressure on the ruling party was significant as well. The media specter of the run-up to the Olympics cast attention on the state of affairs in Korea. The U.S. government, long Korea's core ally during the Cold War, began to exert pressure on the ruling party to consider meaningful political liberalization, especially after the Kwangju tragedy. The Korean government received several high-level delegations from the U.S. Congress, signaling that political reform was a high priority for Korea's American allies. The *New York Times* reported Korea's domestic politics as a "war zone,"³⁸ reflecting emergent political instability. America's keen interest in Korea's democratic transition was confirmed when Assistant Secretary of State Gaston Sigur travelled to Korea to facilitate negotiations between the regime and opposition leaders.³⁹

Pro-democratic mobilization came to a head in the summer of 1987. With the regime on the defensive, it was widely expected that the incoming leader would repress the opposition. But Roh, to the surprise of many, pursued a different strategy. Roh "could see that time was running out for the old form of authoritarian politics."⁴⁰ As in Taiwan, significant factions within the leadership felt the era of authoritarian stability was coming rapidly to an end. For some key politicians, notably Roh himself, the time had come for the ruling party to concede democratic reform with the reasonable expectation it would survive, minimally, and, at best, continue to rule a democratic Korea. Indeed, from its position of diminishing strength, the DJP's decision to concede was more uncertain a proposition than it was for the KMT. The ruling party was further into its bittersweet spot, having suffered continually mediocre electoral showings and confronted broad-based opposition mobilization. Simply put, the DJP, by the time Roh was to take power, faced a much more formidable opposition than did the KMT, not only at the ballot box, but also in the streets.

The Roh regime's grounds for confidence in a conceding-to-thrive scenario were weaker than the KMT's. There were, nonetheless, several substantial sources of antecedent strength—the bases for stability and victory confidence—which encouraged the DJP to concede when it did. The most important source of stability confidence was the fact that democratic breakthrough occurred during good economic times.⁴¹ The political and economic legacies of the developmental state meant that Korean society was heavily middle class, socially conservative and politically moderate. A transition to democracy and continued

economic development promised renewed political and economic stability, stemming the tide of radicalized mobilization. From the perspective of the Roh regime, solid industry support for the incumbent party further mitigated the risk of political and economic instability.

The regime's historical bases for stability confidence reinforced the DJP's many sources of victory confidence under more democratic conditions. First, transitioning in economically good times meant the DJP was able to draw on its postwar economic record to legitimate the party's continued leadership moving forward. Second, DJP leaders projected that middle class economic interests were aligned with the ruling party and that, with the introduction of democracy, middle class activists within the minjung opposition would return to supporting the pro-growth policies of the DJP. Third, the Roh regime had reason to anticipate fragmentation among opposition parties and their support bases. The release of dissident leader Kim Dae-Jung in the run-up to the 1985 assembly elections saw opposition loyalists voting along regional or personal lines, thus splitting opposition support. The Kim Dae-Jung and Kim Young-Sam party alliance, the New Korea Democratic Party (NKDP), was "an alliance of convenience," one which showed signs of strain even before Roh's initiation of democratic transition.⁴²

Roh's 1987 strategy cast him as a credible democratic reformer. The process of conceding also shifted the ruling party's legitimacy formula from one of authoritarian development toward democratic development. Cotton notes that "Roh's shrewdness at this juncture cannot be denied," particularly as a political strategy to distance himself from his party's authoritarian past.⁴³ In the 1987 Declaration of Democratic Reform, Roh affirmed that "[t]he new administration that I shall lead will completely repudiate any authoritarian attitude toward the people." In his inaugural Presidential Address in February of 1988, Roh continued this distancing strategy, noting, much like Chiang did in Taiwan, that "there is a strong wind of change of blowing over the country." He added the "day when freedoms and human rights could be slighted in the name of economic growth and national security has ended. The day when repressive force and torture in secret chambers were tolerated is over."⁴⁴ Roh's proclamations signaled the end of an era in Korean politics and credibly positioned the incumbent DJP as a democratic party.

The DJP's strategy paid off, though, as our framework foreshadows, with less resounding success than the KMT, reflecting the spectrums of strength and success introduced above. Roh won the presidency in 1987 by just a slim edge over his main challengers, Kim Dae-Jung and Kim Young-Sam. The DJP retained the largest seat share (125 of 299) in the 1988 National Assembly elections, though not a legislative majority. As anticipated, Kim Dae-Jung and Kim Young-Sam split the opposition vote in both elections. Also as expected, middle class activists broke

away from the minjung shortly after democratic reforms began and many of them threw their support behind the DJP.

Lingering uncertainty about the electoral prospects of the DJP after its initially modest showing prompted a three-party merger in 1990, which included opposition leader Kim Young-Sam. The coalition, modeled after Japan's powerful LDP, was renamed the Democratic Liberal Party (DLP) and controlled nearly three-quarters of the seats in the National Assembly during the early 1990s. Though the progressive parties of Kim Dae-Jung and Roh Moo-Hyun won power during the late 1990s and into early 2000s, the conservative descendent of the DLP remained consistently competitive, re-claiming the presidency and legislature in 2008.

Indonesia

Indonesia might seem a strange case to compare with Korea and Taiwan. Yet the Indonesian case brings into sharper relief the key factors that shape concede-to-thrive scenarios: antecedent strengths, ominous signals, and legitimation strategies. Whereas Korea's and Taiwan's experiences of strong-state democratization are often explained by these countries' intense security concerns with their communist neighbors, this factor was absent in Indonesia. Nor did Indonesia's ruling Golkar party have any of the "democratic narrative" running through its history that is sometimes invoked to explain the KMT's democratic exceptionalism in Taiwan. Furthermore, Indonesia shows that neither the developmental state nor the ruling party need be *extraordinarily* strong for a concede-to-thrive scenario to be viable. Indonesia's experience suggests that the threshold of antecedent party-state resources necessary for conceding-to-thrive might be lower—and more generalizable to a wider array of cases beyond developmental Asia—than a focus on Korea and Taiwan alone would imply.

Indonesia began its democratization process in May 1998 when long-time dictator Suharto was overthrown by massive student-led protests after more than thirty years in power. Yet a dictator's fall does not democratization make. Democratization lies not merely in the toppling of a hated autocrat (see Egypt), but requires difficult political reforms to make free and fair elections possible. Even when the masses *initiate* democratization through contentious street actions, politicians must still *install* democracy through field-leveling reforms.

These political reforms would be introduced by Suharto's civilian vice-president and presidential successor, B.J. Habibie. With Suharto's fall, Habibie ascended not only to the presidency but to de facto leadership of the long-ruling authoritarian party, Golkar. Although Golkar had always shared the stage with the military under Suharto, the vicissitudes of Suharto's fall left Indonesia with a divided military and a Golkar-dominated civilian government. It

also left Golkar with a leader lacking significant popularity and without any basis of legitimacy for his unexpected presidency.

Golkar was in a far stronger position than Habibie himself, however. Founded in the early 1970s as a civilian (if military-infiltrated) pillar of Suharto's New Order, Golkar's primary functions were to secure the support of civil servants throughout the Indonesian archipelago and to deliver reliable landslides in unfair and unfree elections. And deliver Golkar did, in large measure through the intimidating shadow of coercion, but also because the political and economic successes of the Suharto regime made acquiescence a relatively bearable choice for most Indonesians. As growth rates soared and poverty rates declined, Golkar secured 63% of the popular vote in the regime's inaugural elections of 1971 and gained supermajority vote shares throughout Suharto's reign: 62% in 1977, 64% in 1982, 73% in 1987, 68% in 1992, and 74% in 1997.

Golkar's electoral landslides reflected its impressive, fully nationalized party infrastructure, especially on the "Outer Islands" beyond Java.⁴⁵ Concerned that the restoration of electoral politics in the 1970s could return Indonesia to the kind of mass mobilization that had culminated in the anti-communist genocide of the mid-1960s, the Suharto regime imposed a "floating mass" policy to stifle opposition. This meant that only Golkar could have branches at the local level, while the two state-sanctioned "semi-opposition"⁴⁶ parties could not. It also meant that radical civil and political society was utterly (and at times murderously) uprooted in the countryside.

As patronage, funded by decades of rapid economic growth, flowed from Jakarta to the provinces, Golkar politicians developed reputations in many locales as reliable providers of basic public goods. Hence while elections were always a democratic farce in Suharto's Indonesia, the ruling party was a significant source of authoritarian institutional reach and might. And Golkar was always inextricably intertwined with the state apparatus, which had regained much of its impressive colonial-era functionality after the New Order's rise.⁴⁷ The restored prestige of the bureaucracy and the concomitant devastation of organized radical elements in society lent an important degree of stability confidence to Golkar leaders, even amid the obvious tumult of Suharto's overthrow.

None of this is to say that the Indonesian Leviathan matched the capacities of the Taiwanese or Korean state. Nor was Indonesia's ruling party equivalent in its antecedent resources to Taiwan's KMT. Yet Golkar was sufficiently robust to provide considerable victory confidence to Suharto's successors. As new President Habibie considered how best to hold onto the crown that had been so unexpectedly and precariously perched upon his head, Golkar's territorial advantage over any other party was a crucial strategic parameter. Habibie could thus call within days of assuming office for expedited national elections in

1999 (moved up from 2002) and dramatically liberalize Indonesia's restrictive laws on political parties and the media with relative sanguinity about Golkar's prospects, especially in non-Javanese provinces. Habibie possessed ample information to project that the ruling party would coast to victory across much of Indonesia's vast periphery, even as its reputation in most of Java had been deeply damaged. As a native of Sulawesi, Habibie also had grounds for confidence that such results would strengthen his fellow non-Javanese politicians within the Java-dominated Golkar hierarchy. This democratization strategy went hand in hand with the Habibie-led government's aggressive pursuit of decentralization, which promised to place more authority and resources where Golkar's advantages and hopes of continued incumbency were strongest.

To understand why Habibie so quickly conceded democracy, however, one must go beyond cataloguing Golkar's resource advantages and recognize more proximate signals as well. Of the four common types of shocks that tend to signal a ruling party's entry into the bittersweet spot where a conceding-to-thrive strategy is most likely to arise, Indonesia in 1997–98 had just suffered two massive ones: economic and contentious. Soon after Golkar romped to its best-ever result in Suharto's 1997 electoral swan song, the devastation of the Indonesian economy and subsequent urban protests clearly signaled that epochal changes were afoot. By far the hardest-hit victim of the Asian financial crisis, Indonesia saw its currency free-fall from 2250/\$ to approximately 17,000/\$ in a matter of months. Student-led protests were by no means focused strictly on economic concerns, moreover, as the key legitimacy claim of Suharto to be the nation's "father of development" was obliterated by a crisis that only worsened as his political responses became ever less consistent and coherent.⁴⁸ Once a consummate "protection pact"⁴⁹ enjoying widespread elite support for its success at bridling political instability, the Suharto regime collapsed in the face of cross-class protests that condemned the president for bringing the Indonesian nation to the brink of collapse with his corruption and brutality.

Habibie's ascension to the presidency left him in a perilous position, but not an impossible one. Suharto's resignation had taken the sharpest edge off of the protests, but it did not get either Golkar or himself out of the contentious woods entirely. He also confronted opposition to his leadership within Golkar itself, where many elites saw him as a weak Suharto surrogate undeserving of presidential power. Under the circumstances, a new infusion of democratic legitimacy seemed to offer Habibie his most promising strategy for taming urban protests and solidifying his position as president—particularly because Indonesia's main superpower benefactor, the United States, was sure to keep essential economic aid flowing if democratic elections were in the offing. Hence Habibie's quick announcement of expedited democratic elections not only reflected a strate-

gic response to the whirlwind of economic, contentious, and geopolitical signals that he was receiving; it also represented Habibie's best strategic option for remaining in office. Recognizing his tenuous position atop Indonesia's most powerful party, Habibie resigned as Golkar's executive chairman in July 1998, but helped install an uncharismatic apparatchik, Akbar Tandjung, as the party's new head. Habibie thus put himself in a position to ride Golkar's electoral coattails to a full term as president since the newly elected parliament would select the next president at a special session in October 1999.

The antecedent strength of his Golkar party was thus central to Habibie's strategy to concede electoral democracy (rather than responding to ongoing protests by bringing Suharto and his family to justice, for instance). It also explains why Golkar as a party silently acquiesced to Habibie's democratization strategy. "The holding of a general election under new electoral laws was central to Habibie's efforts to acquire legitimacy and met with no opposition"⁵⁰ in the Golkar-dominated parliament. To be sure, this was partly because Golkar was in almost as serious need of a new brand of legitimacy as Habibie himself. "[I]t was obvious that Golkar would suffer a substantial loss of support, but the party still hoped to remain among the major political forces."⁵¹ More cynically, expedited democratic elections represented an expedited opportunity to reckon with Habibie's fraught party leadership—i.e. trying to replace him—sooner rather than later.

Golkar's mix of active support for and quiet acquiescence to expedited democratic elections thus reflected its considerable (if steeply declining) victory confidence. "[T]he Golkar-dominated government was making the best it could of a bad situation to salvage at least some of its influence and power," Crouch argues. "Although the new election laws were basically damaging to its electoral prospects, it was still able to gain small but significant concessions in its own interest while it appreciated that its long-established nation-wide political machinery would allow it, at least in the short term, to retain a strong position in decentralized regional government."⁵² New elections promised to channel political competition into the electoral arena where Golkar's built-up resource advantages were substantial: not only over Indonesia's fledgling opposition parties, but over the military, which could play no direct role in elections and whose longstanding relationship with the ruling party was legally severed soon after Suharto's downfall. These advantages were backstopped by an electoral system that overrepresented non-Javanese provinces, where Golkar was strongest.

Nevertheless, by failing to concede democracy before the calamitous economic downturn and contentious upsurge of 1997–98, Golkar had narrowly but fatefully missed its most golden moment to concede-to-thrive. This helps explain why the emergent PDI-P, led by nationalist icon Megawati Sukarnoputri, placed first in the June 1999

parliamentary polls, gaining a 33% to 20% edge over second-place Golkar in raw votes. Malapportionment narrowed this PDI-P parliamentary seat advantage to 33% to 26%, however, and the military's appointed seats allowed the ancien regime's two powerhouse institutions to amass nearly 34% of the parliamentary seats, slightly surpassing the PDI-P. Golkar also gained the largest vote share in half of Indonesia's 26 provinces, underscoring its lasting territorial reach.

With its continued control over subnational offices and its command over political networks in Jakarta, Golkar maintained its political centrality while shedding its authoritarianism. Not only would Golkar avoid *obsolescence* under democracy; it would avoid even going into *opposition*. This was despite the fact that Habibie's "accountability speech" was rejected at the October 1999 special session of parliament, at which point the president resigned. Having already been formally led by Akbar Tandjung rather than Habibie for more than a year, Golkar did not miss a beat. Golkar played the key kingmaker role in denying the presidency to Megawati and delivering it to a much weaker figure in Abdurrahman Wahid, whose PKB party controlled only 11% of parliamentary seats. This gave Golkar the leverage necessary to dominate Indonesia's first democratic cabinet, securing seven portfolios to the PDI-P's five. Golkar then took the lead in impeaching President Wahid after he expelled Golkar and PDI-P figures from his cabinet, landing five cabinet posts under President Megawati from 2001–04.

Things got even better for Golkar after the 2004 elections. The party placed first in the parliamentary polls and Golkar veteran Jusuf Kalla gained the vice-presidency under the presidency of retired General Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY). Though SBY fronted a new party called Partai Demokrat (PD), the new president rushed to ally with Golkar in a manner that made the PD look like Golkar's junior partner. Once again, *Golkar gained more cabinet seats than any other party, including the president's*. It was only after the 2009 elections, in which Golkar placed second behind the PD, that newly re-elected President SBY would assert himself vis-à-vis Golkar by choosing a non-Golkar running mate and granting his PD six cabinet seats in comparison to Golkar's three. Even so, more than a decade after President Habibie first conceded democracy, Golkar has remained firmly and uninterruptedly ensconced in the executive branch.

While Habibie himself conceded democracy from a *weak* personal position, the fact that Golkar publicly supported his call for early elections suggests that they rightly perceived the party's enduring relative *strength* in Indonesia's newborn democracy. It is also certainly the case that Golkar has thrived somewhat less than Korea's DJP or, especially, Taiwan's KMT. Yet this ordinal difference in post-democratization success is consistent with our causal framework. Indonesia's developmental state never produced

aggregate improvements in human welfare to rival Taiwan's and Korea's. The personalization of power under Suharto meant that Golkar could not convert the New Order's successes into a "usable past" as readily as KMT leaders could in democratic Taiwan. Given this relative difference in antecedent strength as well as the far stronger distress signals suffered by Indonesia's rulers on the eve of democratization, it should be no surprise that Golkar has thrived less after conceding democracy than its Korean and Taiwanese counterparts. Once again, a ruling party's placement in the spectrum of strength under authoritarianism translates into its positioning in the spectrum of success under democracy.

China: The World's Biggest Candidate Case

What new insights might our framework offer about the biggest question mark of all in Asian democratization: namely, China? Our stress on the relationship between confidence and antecedent resources sheds light on the evolution of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its prospects for leading democratic change. Like other developmental states in Asia, the CCP can credibly claim credit for modernizing what was once an inward-looking economic laggard. Hundreds of millions have been lifted out of poverty, which serves as the basis for a political and economic narrative that simultaneously affirms the CCP's nationalist credentials. Hence choosing to concede democracy might seem unlikely under current circumstances. Conventional wisdom suggests that if democracy is to come to China it will only arrive in not-so-good times. Many wondered, for instance, how long the CCP could survive the aftermath of June 4th, particularly as it coincided with the third wave of democratization. Once it became clear the CCP had weathered that storm, critics proceeded to argue the state capitalist system would eventually foment insurmountable crises of legitimacy for the CCP.⁵³ Others, meanwhile, recognize the tremendous adaptability and enduring legitimacy of the ruling party, reasoning that democratization in China would be the result of a rift, crisis, and subsequent re-alignment within the party's leadership.⁵⁴ Our argument imagines a different pathway, in which democracy could well arise when the CCP is strong, rather than especially weak.

The CCP appears to be entering its bittersweet spot, having passed its apex of power during the late 1990s and early 2000s. The ruling party is not in crisis, yet there are perceptible signals of political and economic trouble on the horizon. Collusion and corruption are high on peoples' grievances against the CCP. Environmental degradation is worsening the quality of life and economic growth has slowed. And inequality is on the rise, surpassing the Gini threshold of what even the CCP considers to be politically dangerous for the regime. Consequently, the number of protests and incidences of contentious politics have risen rapidly and alarmingly in urban and rural areas

alike. Citizens have increasingly turned to village elections as a way to remove corrupt and ineffective local leaders. With reference to the four kinds of signals presented in our theoretical framework, the Chinese example suggests declining performance on three of these four dimensions (economic, electoral, and contentious).

Since China's ruling party appears either to be about to enter or to have entered its so-called bittersweet spot only recently, our framework predicts that it is *very likely* the CCP could concede democracy now and continue to thrive. Despite some slowdown in recent years, China's economy has certainly not fallen on irreversibly bad times. The party's nationalist rhetoric has by no means been clearly discredited as a legitimacy formula, nor has broad-based cross-class social mobilization emerged to usurp such historic nationalist claims. The CCP enjoys ample antecedent economic and political resources to win significant electoral support in free and fair contests. And there is as yet no viable opposition and alternative to the CCP that could meaningfully challenge the ruling party if it conceded democratic reform. With its cross-cutting constituencies and territorially encompassing party infrastructure, the CCP objectively ought to have a relatively high degree of victory confidence.

For now, however, the CCP's dominant strategy appears to be one of standing pat. This is consistent with a context in which signals of incipient decline are quite mixed and muddy. The CCP continues to selectively co-opt nascent opposition forces. Village elections remain primarily an instrument of ruling party dominance, not a feedback mechanism to gauge the popularity of the CCP. That elections are restricted to townships and villages also means that dissent is often dismissed by the central party as an indicator of local frustrations and not as an attack on the legitimacy of the ruling party. Nevertheless, we submit that the CCP is in a good position to concede-to-thrive, given its relatively close proximity to its apex of power. Current discussions about political reform may hasten this process. Tentative reforms launched in the wake of the 2011 "Wukan incident," when provincial authorities facilitated self-organized and autonomous village elections, suggests the CPP may be experimenting with a strategy of gradual and controlled political liberalization, a process which, in the case of Taiwan, preceded democratic transition.

China thus reaffirms the non-determinist nature of our causal framework. Simply *being within* the bittersweet spot never ensures a ruling party's strategic collective decision to concede democratic reform. Signals need to be strategically interpreted in ways that press decision-makers to view democratic concession from a position of strength as the most viable choice to advance the party's fortunes. Amidst what are mixed signals, the CCP-led authoritarian regime seems for now to have chosen to continue to use a mix of repression, co-optation, and nationalist chauvinism to maintain stability and power.

Conclusion

Powerful party and state institutions give authoritarian regimes extra capacity to sustain authoritarianism, but they can also give them extra incentive to end it. Developmental Asia's ongoing (if uneven and uncertain) regional shift from ubiquitous authoritarianism towards increasing democracy, starting with Taiwan and Korea, supports this claim. Even a country with a far shakier authoritarian Leviathan such as Indonesia has shown that democratization in the wake of decades of rapid state-led growth tends to be marked by continuity more than upheaval in governing coalitions. The key implication is that strong-state democratization can similarly deliver greater political liberties without causing greater instability or even the ruling party's near-term defeat in developmental authoritarian party-states such as in Singapore, Malaysia, and China.

Anywhere the power of strong authoritarian ruling parties and state apparatuses combine, a conceding-to-thrive scenario remains an ever-present possibility. This lesson has distant but clear echoes. In prewar and interwar Europe, for instance, highly institutionalized conservative parties with cross-class electoral support facilitated smoother processes of democratization in cases such as Britain and Sweden than in France or Germany.⁵⁵ Indeed, if developmental Asia is the contemporary world's standard-bearer for democratization-through-strength, it may in important ways be following in Europe's footsteps.

Even in Asian party-states exhibiting lesser antecedent strength, such as Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, the prospects for regional *diffusion* of democratic concessions should not be dismissed. If diffusion played such an important role in shaping democratization in Europe, Latin America, Africa, and the former Soviet bloc, why not in Asia? Indeed, might not South Korea and Taiwan themselves have been pursuing a Japanese-style strong-state path to democracy through the rule of a dominant conservative party, much as they learned from Japan's state-led approach to rapid economic development? To the extent that diffusion matters, it offers democratic hope to cases where antecedent authoritarian strengths are practically absent. The contemporary case of Burma is especially illustrative here. Why did the military regime embark on a process of substantial, if still uncompleted, democratization in 2011 at a moment when active public opposition to its hegemony had cooled down, rather than during moments of extreme anti-regime mobilization such as in 1988, 1990, and 2007? Burma's fragile and uncertain experiment with top-down democratization is in important respects a story of growing regime strength since the 2007 crisis and not simply a result of that military regime's much deeper historical weaknesses.

And beyond Asia? Our initial data collection suggests that of the world's 83 authoritarian ruling parties that remained in power as of 1986, 48 have since democratized, while 35 have not. Interestingly, these 48 former

ruling parties exhibit tremendous variation in their post-transition fates. While nearly a third (~15) have become effectively obsolete (e.g. Egypt's NDP, Tunisia's Destour, and South Africa's NP), an equal number remain competitive but without winning parliamentary elections outright (e.g. Kenya's KANU, the Czech KSCM, and Zambia's UNIP). The largest number of all (~18), however, have not only remained competitive, but have placed first in at least one parliamentary election since democratic transition (e.g. Mexico's PRI, Ghana's NDC, Paraguay's Colorado, and Poland's SdRP). In other words, *more formerly authoritarian parties seem to have conceded and thrived than any other outcome*. Hence even when contemporary dictators do not find themselves confronting active challenges to their rule, they should consider pursuing the pathway of a B.J. Habibie or Roh Tae-woo, lest they wind up like a Zine El Abidine Ben Ali or Hosni Mubarak.

Whether we are looking in Asia or beyond, prospects for conceding-to-thrive scenarios will be a matter of agentive choices as much as structural imperatives. In the final analysis, our framework can never determinatively predict that a conceding-to-thrive process is certain to unfold.⁵⁶ What we can more confidently assert, however, is that a meaningful pathway toward the endogenous democratization of party-led dictatorships has been neglected in the theoretical literature, in part because of a collective failure to appreciate the empirical fact that ruling parties can concede democracy without conceding defeat. The major implication of this simple theoretical corrective is that dictatorships can travel a pathway to democracy through strength rather than weakness.

Notes

- 1 Geddes 1999, 129.
- 2 Przeworski 1991.
- 3 Levitsky and Way 2010; Slater and Fenner 2011.
- 4 Legitimation formulas are narrative claims about appropriateness of authority that citizens need not actively or even passively endorse (Wedeen 1999), but that authoritarian regimes strive to coherently craft and credibly profess. These formulas lapse when regimes begin to fail manifestly on their own explicit terms, or when the historical conditions underpinning old formulas become objectively obsolete. There are a variety of authoritarian legitimacy formulas, but in our Asian cases they have tended to center on: histories of anticolonialism and anticommunism; track records of national social and economic development; and claims that authoritarianism is a necessary bulwark against any reemergence of historical patterns of political instability.
- 5 Levitsky and Way 2010; Smith 2007; Brownlee 2007; and Slater 2010.
- 6 Cox 2009; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006. For contrary evidence and argumentation, see Albertus and Menaldo (forthcoming).
- 7 O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986.
- 8 Geddes 1999, 141.
- 9 This should not be taken to imply that a ruling party's strengths are necessarily exceptional *across the board*. Yet whatever strengths the party possesses are more likely to induce a conceding-to-thrive scenario when those strengths are comparatively exceptional.
- 10 This echoes but also differs from Haggard and Kaufman's (1995) claim that authoritarian regimes can democratize during crisis or non-crisis times. In our framework, a party's mode of transition is largely endogenous to its antecedent resources. We also argue that party strength can *incentivize* democratization and not just coincide with it.
- 11 Slater 2012.
- 12 For an intriguingly parallel argument that antecedent party strength smoothed processes of democratization in 19th-century Europe, see Ziblatt (forthcoming).
- 13 On how immunity considerations shape democratic transitions and their aftermath, see Nalepa 2010. On how negotiated transitions allow elites to maintain various safeguards against redistribution after democratization, see Albertus and Menaldo (forthcoming).
- 14 Levitsky and Way 2010; Slater and Fenner 2011.
- 15 Wong 2004a; 2011; Doner, Ritchie, and Slater 2005; Slater 2010.
- 16 Grzymala-Busse 2002, 9.
- 17 Wong 2004b.
- 18 On the concept of authoritarian apex, see Verdugo and Hernandez Company 2012.
- 19 Slater 2010; Wong 2004a.
- 20 Goodwin 2001; Slater 2009.
- 21 Levitsky and Way 2010.
- 22 Grzymala-Busse 2002.
- 23 Slater 2012.
- 24 Cited in Moody 1992, 92.
- 25 Wade 1990; Wong 2011.
- 26 Dickson 1996.
- 27 Moody 1992.
- 28 Rigger 1999, 22.
- 29 Moody 1992, 89.
- 30 Chao and Myers 1998.
- 31 Dickson 1996, 64.
- 32 Mattlin 2011, 62–64.
- 33 Wong 2004a.
- 34 Dickson 1996, 63; see also Chao and Myers 1998.
- 35 Moody 1992, 182 (emphasis added).
- 36 Moon and Jun 2011; Kim 2011.
- 37 Lee 2007.
- 38 Cited in Han 1988, 54.

- 39 Billet 1990, 302, 301.
 40 Cotton 1989, 252.
 41 Haggard and Kaufman, 1995.
 42 Cotton 1989, 253; 254.
 43 Cotton 1989, 252.
 44 Cited in Lee and Campbell 1994, 42, 45, 47.
 45 Harjanto 2010; Tomsa 2008.
 46 Aspinall 2005.
 47 Anderson 1983.
 48 MacIntyre 2001.
 49 Slater 2010.
 50 Crouch 2011, 25.
 51 Crouch 2011, 207.
 52 Crouch 2011, 9.
 53 Pei 2006.
 54 Gilley 2004.
 55 Ziblatt forthcoming.
 56 Contingency is especially pronounced at the initial point of concessions and in their fate through intra-party struggles. The effects of antecedent authoritarian strengths on subsequent democratic successes are more structured, if still probabilistic.

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