

# Polarizing Figures: Executive Power and Institutional Conflict in Asian Democracies

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## Abstract

Polarization does not necessarily pit left against right, rich against poor, secular against religious, or ethnicity against ethnicity. Rather than polarizing along deep social or ideological cleavages, today's democracies often polarize over the perceived abuse of power by popularly elected chief executives. We argue that such conflicts are built into the definition and design of democracy, which requires both vertical accountability (i.e., inclusivity) and horizontal accountability (i.e., constraints) and divides sovereignty into separate institutions. We illustrate our institutional theory of polarization through a comparative analysis of polarizing crises in five Asian democracies since 2000. What mattered most for these crises' severity and eventual resolution was not the depth of social cleavages, but how the leading elite opponents of polarizing figures managed their removal from office.

## Keywords

polarization, East Asia, Southeast Asia, accountability, democracy

## Introduction

The greatest global ideological conflict of the interwar and Cold War periods is dead and buried. Worldwide communism no longer threatens to inform (or infect) popular movements for political inclusion, and anticommunism no longer serves as a ready-made rationale (or pretext) for conservatives to crack down on mass movements. Across most of the developing or postcolonial world, electoral competition is not structured along the classic left–right ideological continuum at all. Competitive

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elections and democratic participation are widely portrayed as exercises in patronage distribution, not programmatic differentiation. Political parties compete for power in ways that channel competing demands for access to the state and its resources. They only rarely channel sharply distinctive ideological visions.

One might think that the collapse of the most polarizing ideology of the 20th century would have yielded a parallel decline in democratic polarization. Yet polarization remains a ubiquitous feature of electoral competition across the postcolonial world. Our central argument is that democratic polarization's deepest and most enduring source is not ideological or sociological but *institutional*. Even when leading political parties are virtually indistinguishable in ideological or sociological terms, polarization can arise as a predictable byproduct of democracy's definition and design. It is more accurate to think of polarization as a feature of democracy than a bug.

To understand why, first consider how democracy is *defined*. By definition, democracy entails two very different features that exist in potential if not active tension. In short, democracy requires both vertical accountability and horizontal accountability.<sup>1</sup> That is, democracy demands both inclusivity and constraints.<sup>2</sup> Yet inclusivity and constraints are very different and only loosely related political phenomena. This makes democracies vulnerable—by definition—to backsliding on one of these two dimensions even as the other dimension improves.

This vulnerability is not merely conceptual; it is concrete. It manifests in how democracies are institutionally *designed*. While some institutions are primarily geared to include those who do not hold government power, others exist to constrain those who do. Most important, chief executives are elected by the people in the expectation that they will be responsive and accountable to the people. This is the essence of vertical accountability or inclusivity. But democracy requires protection of defeated minorities as well as accountability to victorious majorities. For that, institutions such as courts and parliaments and procedures such as impeachment serve to constrain chief executives from serving the majority in a manner that attacks minorities or breaks the law. These constraints are the essence of horizontal accountability. Since the natural defenders of vertical and horizontal accountability are housed in different institutions, democracy's intrinsic tension between inclusivity and constraints can blow up in *institutional conflict* at any time.

Institutional conflicts can both spark polarization and sustain it. They can spark it in the sense that new political poles can quickly arise, even when underlying cleavages are mild, in the form of opposing blocs intensely favoring and opposing a particular leader. To the extent that social or ideological polarization is a feature of these institutional conflicts, we argue that it is more a consequence than a cause of the core political dispute: That is, whether a popularly elected executive is acting as democracy's savior or menace. This literally puts a human face on political polarization, and can sustain conflict by making it seem immune to compromise. The hero/villain either stays in executive power or is removed; there is no clear middle ground.

Yet as we shall soon see, opposition elites can sometimes impose horizontal accountability on power-aggrandizing leaders in a manner that dampens polarization rather than fueling it. *It is elite strategies of leader removal, and not the depth of social*

*cleavages, that best explain whether polarization becomes pernicious.* Most important, opposition elites who command electorally powerful parties can afford to pursue leader removal in patient fashion, confident in their ability to win majority support in national elections once the polarizing figure has exited the scene.<sup>3</sup>

Although crises of executive constraint can arise at any moment in any democracy, they always take place against a historical backdrop of political inclusion and exclusion. Not all crises of constraint are crises of inclusivity. When both sides of a polarized conflict over executive powers have already gained mass inclusion in the party system, we call it a “Madisonian” conflict. But in other cases, polarization arises because a power-aggrandizing leader mobilizes new groups into politics, effectively turning a nation’s second-class citizens into his first-class followers. We call these “Machiavellian” conflicts.<sup>4</sup>

Both types of conflict are institutional conflicts pitting a polarizing executive against agencies of constraint. Both also produce an immediate effect of “democratic careening” (Slater, 2013), in which democracy destabilizes through an intense clash between proponents of muscular majoritarian rule (often glossed as “populists”) and defenders of minority protections (usually criticized as “oligarchs”). But Machiavellian conflicts are more severe, since they call into question the very contours of democratic citizenship, and not just whether a chief executive is abusing his powers. We thus argue that *Machiavellian conflicts over both constraints and inclusion should be more severe and more likely to produce pernicious polarization than Madisonian conflicts over constraints alone.*

Histories of political inclusion and exclusion are related but not reducible to either social cleavages or regime type. Mass politics can arise through authoritarian ruling parties, and electoral democracies might remain highly elitist. It is the exclusion of large subsets of the population from full political inclusion that opens the possibility of Machiavellian conflict. Sharp social bifurcation along identity lines might coincide with such political exclusion; but it also might not.

One could thus imagine a scale of outcomes arising out of polarizing institutional conflicts. The conflict may be resolved relatively quickly and decisively, as we will see in Indonesia and Taiwan; persist for much longer, as in the Philippines; or become so irresolvable that democracy collapses altogether, as in our case of Thailand. We argue that the main reason why Thailand and the Philippines experienced the worst outcomes was because their conflicts were Machiavellian and not merely Madisonian in nature. Polarization did not become pernicious in either Indonesia or Taiwan because elite opponents of polarizing figures managed to remove them from office through fully constitutional means, without demonizing or delegitimizing their mass followings. They did so, in large measure, because they were confident that they could win free and fair elections once the polarizing figure had been ejected from the political arena.

## **Institutional Polarization in Asian Democracies**

We explore the dynamics of institutional conflict in four Asian democracies that have suffered polarization crises since the year 2000: Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia,

and Taiwan. These cases capture a range of variation in outcomes that approximates the global population: Thailand experienced two military coups and outright democratic breakdown after a period of Machiavellian conflict; Taiwan rode out its storm of Madisonian conflict and allowed a polarizing chief executive to complete his term before facing legal punishment; Indonesia removed its polarizing figure from the presidency through a gradual impeachment process that lacked popular involvement and amounted to oligarchic reassertion over state resources; and the Philippines experienced a lost decade of Machiavellian conflict when politics perniciously polarized over what to do with two successive presidents—one a classic populist and the other a consummate oligarch—who had both brazenly abused their executive power.

Besides capturing broad and informative variation, our case selection allows us to assess major rival explanations, and finds them wanting. In particular, the variation we uncover calls into question the importance of both *social cleavages* and *electoral systems* as explanations for the onset and persistence of severe polarization.<sup>5</sup> If electoral systems were the best explanation for the institutional conflicts that spark polarization, Thailand should have been most immune to crisis as the only parliamentary system in our sample. Yet despite its lack of purportedly conflict-inducing presidentialist institutions, Thailand is our case where polarization has proven most damaging and extreme. Similarly, if deep social cleavages were responsible for pernicious polarization, we should expect to see worse outcomes in more deeply divided Indonesia and Taiwan than in Thailand and the Philippines: again, the opposite of what we find.

All four of our cases experienced institutional conflict and polarizing crises that called democratic stability—and in most cases even democratic survival—into question. Yet these crises still varied significantly in their severity, and even more dramatically in their downstream consequences. This depended first on whether historical patterns of inclusion and exclusion made them Madisonian or Machiavellian conflicts; and second on how nonexecutive elites managed the leader's removal and treated the leader's mobilized supporters throughout that controversial process. The extreme negative case is Thailand, where the military-led overthrow of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his surrogates, combined with violent repression of his Red Shirt supporters, produced a breakdown of democracy and the continuation of pernicious polarization. Polarization may be a feature of democracy, but Thailand helpfully reminds us that authoritarianism is more likely to exacerbate it than solve it. Our most positive case is Taiwan, where President Chen Shui-bian was permitted to finish his term before he was held to account for illegal abuses of power. His Pan-Green constituents were then allowed to continue contesting for national power unmolested. Polarization persists in Taiwan, but it is not pernicious, and the Pan-Blues and Pan-Greens have proven able and willing to exchange power peacefully and predictably on multiple occasions.

In between these extremes lie Indonesia and the Philippines. Here we see parallel examples of oligarchic reassertion prevailing over executive domineering through legal impeachment proceedings. Both cases saw oligarchic elites nipping polarization in the bud by removing polarizing figures, but not violently repressing their wider support bases in the process. Polarization effectively ended after polarizing figures exited

the stage, though this process took much longer in the Philippines than Indonesia. Neither Indonesia's extreme ethnic and religious diversity nor the Philippines' precipitously steep economic inequality provided lasting grounds for pernicious polarization. Once polarizing figures were dethroned, polarization ceased.

### *Thailand: Machiavellian Conflict and Democratic Breakdown*

The fact that Thailand has suffered the most pernicious polarization among our sample of Asian cases cannot be explained by the severity of underlying social or ideological cleavages. To the contrary, Thailand was renowned before the polarization of the early 2000s for being a clientelist, nonprogrammatic democracy with a hegemonic national religion: very much like the Philippines. In much the same manner that the rise and corrupt abuses of Joseph Estrada will offer the best explanation for sudden polarization in the Philippines in the early 2000s, Thaksin Shinawatra's ascendance to power and sharp turn toward populism shifted Thailand from one of the least polarized democracies in Asia to perhaps its most so in the same period.

Thaksin came to power almost a full decade after the 1991 coup and a middle-class-led mobilization that removed a military junta in 1992. The civilian governments immediately preceding him were political coalitions of disparate elite parties undefined by "formative rifts". Under their charge, the democratically progressive 1997 Constitution was enacted. After the onslaught of the Asian financial crisis, incumbent parties such as the Democrats lost decisively to Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party in 2001.

Thaksin's rise was not due to any hostility toward the political establishment. His campaign was neither divisive nor polarizing since it appealed to different classes in Thai society. The rich and the middle classes were amazed at his successful wealth accumulation and CEO-like credentials, while his draw from the poor rested on his populist programs aimed at improving their welfare. This cross-class support, unprecedented in the kingdom's politics, enabled Thaksin to lead a one-party government devoid of the checks and balances (i.e., horizontal accountability) normally associated with coalitional parliamentary politics in Thailand.

Thaksin became unmindful of executive constraints, which alienated his more affluent supporters in Bangkok, as his populist bent endeared him more to the underclasses and people living in the North and Northeastern provinces. Just like the tragedy of Icarus, he flew higher than what was expected with any Thai politician by criticizing the press, civil society, and powerful unelected institutions. But a stronger electoral mandate in the 2005 elections meant that the Thai voters mostly approved of Thaksin's strong leadership despite his bloody wars against illegal drugs and in the country's deep South as well as his growing disregard for democratic constraints (Phongpaichit & Baker, 2008).

Pernicious polarization defined Thai politics even after its first democratic breakdown after almost 15 years of civilian rule. The 2006 coup was the outcome of a sustained episode of collective mobilization by a pro-monarchy, anti-incumbent movement composed of mostly the middle classes and disgruntled civil society groups in Bangkok

outraged by Thaksin's excesses. Labeled as the "yellow shirts" in tribute to the King's official color, this movement challenged Thaksin's democratic legitimacy in the streets rather than in constitutionally mandated institutions given the "institutional blockage" by a Thaksin-dominated parliament (Sinpeng & Arugay, 2015). The Thai case illustrated that the gridlock curse normally attributed to presidential and majoritarian electoral systems can also occur in parliamentary democracies. Just like in the Philippines, institutional conflict in Thailand took a Machiavellian character when a chief executive swept constraining democratic institutions aside in a bid to mobilize and consolidate mass support. Although polarization between a pro-Thaksin and anti-Thaksin faction was a novelty in Thai politics, it led to a familiar denouement in which traditional institutions and the military would exercise their reserved powers to settle elite squabbles.

Thaksin's populist turn bifurcated Thai society in a depth and magnitude never seen in the constitutional monarchy's existence. The cross-class support he previously enjoyed shifted away from Bangkok and became more concentrated toward the underclasses from Thailand's North and Northeastern provinces. His allies turned adversaries such as the media together with a royalist and Buddhist-inspired movement euphemistically called themselves the People's Alliance for Democracy. Their goal of removing Thaksin by means more foul than fair entailed inviting the military and the monarchy to intervene in the conflict despite the clear electoral mandate he acquired in the 2005 elections.

Unfazed by a corruption scandal, Thaksin continued to use elections as a means of reinvigorating his legitimacy. But the opposition-boycotted April 2006 election that his party won was invalidated by the Constitutional Court. The anti-Thaksin bloc that merged royalist forces, civil society groups, and opposition parties ignored the importance of vertical accountability. They preferred to rely on Thai style nonelectoral ways of imposing horizontal constraint. In September that year, the military staged its 11th successful coup by seizing power and ending Thailand's 16-year stint with democratic rule.

The coup removed an allegedly corrupt and abusive leader who exemplified money politics. But it also brought Thailand from a period of democratic careening into one of democratic collapse. This outcome tragically opened the floodgates for further instability and polarization. Thaksin was a prime minister with a solid electoral mandate granted multiple times by a constituency who felt they were being included in the Thai polity for the first time under democracy.

The military gave up power after the 2007 parliamentary elections to a coalition dominated by Thaksin-affiliated parties. In the span of 3 years, the Thai courts dissolved two governments on charges of corruption and electoral fraud, respectively. The yellow shirts also continued to mobilize against Thaksin's political proxies until the tides changed in May 2010 when an unelected government faced an angry pro-Thaksin movement. The red shirts (the color of Thaksin's party) demanded the government's resignation and new elections. After riots exploded in downtown Bangkok, the Thai army was mobilized to repress the protest that resulted in several deaths and injuries (Montesano, Chachavalpong, & Chongvilaivan, 2010).

In the aftermath of this tragedy, the 2011 elections produced a temporary tempering of polarizing institutional conflict. It handed power to the Thaksin-affiliated Pheu Thai party, this time led by his sister Yingluck Shinawatra. But accusations of corruption and an unpopular executive proposal to give blanket amnesty to everyone implicated in Thailand's institutional conflict since Thaksin took power caused a promonarchy, anti-Thaksin bloc to remobilize against Yingluck. Despite winning reelection, her government succumbed to another military coup in June 2014 in the midst of pernicious polarization. In no other Asian democracy did democracy collapse twice in the span of less than 10 years. Now under a new monarch, a transition toward civilian rule remained uncertain as the approved constitution ensures a weak executive dominated by the military and other unelected institutions. Rather than democratic careening, recent developments in Thailand signify gradual authoritarian consolidation.

Unlike all our other cases, the Machiavellian conflict in Thailand did not end in the executive being held accountable by democratic means. The strategy and behavior of his elite opponents were defined by impatience, praetorian tendencies, and reliance on democracy-eroding actions. This heightened the conflict to a level that destroyed any consensus on democracy. The Thai case suggests that democracy's way out of careening depends not merely on the fact of the polarizing leader being removed, but on the manner in which his opponents collectively manage the political succession.

### *The Philippines: Machiavellian Conflict and Oligarchic Reassertion*

The Philippines democratized in 1986 through the "People Power" movement, toppling Ferdinand Marcos' sultanistic regime. Largely celebrated at home and abroad, this peaceful overthrow lacked a clear ideological imprint. Political actors espousing radical ideologies such as the communist movement and a military faction that staged an abortive coup were no match for the popularity of political widow turned opposition leader Corazon Aquino. A member of the country's entrenched oligarchy, Aquino inspired the crowds that gathered in EDSA<sup>6</sup> as well as the moderate social forces that mobilized since her husband's assassination in 1983. Polarizing ideologies of groups within the extreme left and the extreme right did not capture the imagination of Filipino elites and masses united by a hegemonic Catholic religion whose only familiar political framework before martial law was democracy (Mendoza, 2009). People power ushered a peaceful transition that did not feature a polarizing conflict between ideologies or social cleavages in one of Asia's most unequal societies.

People power, however, started and ended in the streets. Instead of being transformed into a catalyst for democratic deepening, it was helpless in controlling the oligarchic elites and reducing economic inequality. For the next decade, there was no majority party driven by ideology, ethnicity, or any other social cleavage that dominated the Philippine political arena. Just like its premartial law form, post-1986 democracy was defined by the personality of the president as the ultimate dispenser of patronage propped up by political clans and economic elites (Hutchcroft & Rocamora, 2003).

In 1998, the country's democratic regime faced its most challenging stress-test with the electoral victory of populist leader Joseph Estrada. A former movie actor and city mayor, he was known more for his marital infidelity than his effective leadership. But his focus on the needs of the disempowered masses was unprecedented in contemporary Philippine politics, while he simultaneously displaced the liberal elites that had overthrown the Marcos regime. His quest for a more deeply inclusive democratic mold proved to be the spark that ignited a polarized conflict that persisted throughout the country's "lost decade" from 2000 to 2010.

Backed by the Filipino poor who saw a champion in Estrada, the populist president ruled by stretching the limits of executive power. His controversial proposals to honor the late dictator and lift the protectionist economic safeguards in the constitution as well as his rebuke of a highly critical press did not bode well for the country's liberal democratic forces, mostly composed of a robust civil society, media, and middle classes. By 2000, Estrada's alleged involvement in illicit activities such as illegal gambling and money laundering became the tipping point for his critics to mobilize against his perceived abuses of power. It generated public outrage enough to polarize Philippine democracy for the first time since the protracted fight between pro-Marcos and anti-Marcos blocs during the dictatorship.

The stakes became higher as the Catholic Church and Cory Aquino coalesced against Estrada. The demand from these moral pillars revived the dormant political opposition led by then Vice President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo who quickly resigned from Estrada's cabinet. Previously weak and fragmented, minority parties found a reason to bond together while some of Estrada's party stalwarts deserted his coalition. All of these events contributed to a highly charged political atmosphere by October 2000. The stage was set for a confrontation between two blocs with Estrada and his loyal mass supporters on one side and Arroyo, middle class civil society, Catholic groups, and progressive social movements on the other.

This duel between these two factions positioning themselves either defenders of inclusivity or as champions of constraint were the poles that defined the Machiavellian conflict in the Philippines. Despite the country's pervasive economic inequality, the conflict did not polarize so much into rich versus poor, although Estrada's most devoted supporters were certainly poorer on average than his angriest detractors. The cross-class character of the two poles belied the class war that the embattled executive was desperately trying to conjure. Estrada was also not representing a specific political ideology buttressed by a party machinery or social movement. While he claimed to be a victim of persecution by a hegemonic Catholic Church, he did not use this to instigate polarized conflict along religious lines as his main religious adviser was the head of the Church's largest charismatic group. The primary cleavage around which the Philippines polarized was around Estrada himself, with an anti-Estrada bloc clashing against its pro-Estrada rivals.

This Machiavellian conflict was first seen in the pendular mobilizations that occupied the streets of Manila and beyond. With no clarity on which bloc could successfully claim "people power," the arena shifted to the impeachment trial of Estrada. Asia's first impeachment trial centered on corruption allegations and became



possible when Estrada's legislative shield succumbed to popular pressure. However, this process failed to reach any closure as the impeachment court was divided almost equally between pro- and anti-Estrada blocs. Estrada's impeachment trial unraveled before the president's guilt could be proven. This effectively blocked the institutional route of seeking horizontal accountability under polarized settings (Arugay, 2005).

With resolution through impeachment out of the picture, the conflict reverted back to the streets. This prompted the extraordinary intervention of two pivotal institutions: the military and the Supreme Court. When a crowd assembled in the streets with a size unseen since 1986, the military and the court transferred their allegiance to Vice President Arroyo as constitutional successor. Relieved of his position, Estrada left the presidential palace without explicitly tendering his resignation, thereby leaving a legitimacy challenge to Arroyo's assumption of power.

Estrada's removal represented a reinstatement of oligarchic order after a brief populist interlude. Far from a resolution of the Machiavellian conflict, oligarchic reassertion allowed pernicious polarization to continue, this time with President Arroyo as the pole around which her critics and defenders would wage a longer duel. This produced democratic careening since Philippine democracy neither broke down nor did it stabilize until the 2010 presidential elections. Lacking any popular mass base, Arroyo relied on the military apparatus, a patronage-dependent legislature, and even electoral fraud for political survival, much to the dismay of an outraged but divided civil society (Quimpo, 2009).

The Philippine case shows that Machiavellian conflict can continue even after the removal of the polarizing executive, since it brings to surface questions about the nature and consensual foundations of a democratic regime rather than just focusing on rectifying the chief executive's excesses. What also mattered for this case is the impatient strategy of Estrada's political adversaries and their disregard for institutional procedures over more expedient means of political succession. In their desire to cleanse the country's democracy of its unconstrained populist challenger, Estrada's elite opponents were willing to forge broad but unstable coalitions without paying attention to how these can further undermine democratic quality. While Arroyo's departure in 2010 reequilibrated Philippine democracy, the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte's strongman leadership and populist policies might revive institutional conflict with a high potential for pernicious polarization.

### *Indonesia: Madisonian Conflict and Oligarchic Reassertion*

Much like the Philippines, Indonesia democratized in the wake of a mass urban uprising in 1998 that brought the Suharto regime to its knees (or at least Suharto himself). Unlike the Philippines, Indonesia was long afflicted with a variety of highly politicized identity cleavages, which analysts expected to erupt in violence, and possibly even the entire republic's violent dissolution, once military-led authoritarianism was no longer in place to hold the fractious archipelago together. And indeed, Indonesia suffered a series of ethnic riots and regional rebellions in the wake of democratization

that far surpassed anything suffered in the post-Marcos Philippines (Bertrand, 2004). In purely social terms, Indonesia was more severely divided along more lines of cleavage than any other case in our Asian sample.<sup>7</sup>

Yet elite politics in Indonesia in the wake of democratization was only a pale reflection—or perhaps even an inverted mirror—of mass society. The 1999 parliamentary elections spread support rather evenly across five major parties representing Indonesia's parallel Islamic and nationalist identity communities. But rather than sorting themselves into coalitions reflecting these electoral cleavages, all five parties joined hands with the military to anoint a compromise president, Abdurrahman Wahid. They then construct a “cartelized” cabinet in which all significant parties were included (Slater, 2004). Since Wahid hailed from a party that gained fewer than 15% of all parliamentary seats, his fellow oligarchic elites were confident that they had chosen a weak agent instead of a strong principal in his own right.

Yet like Thaksin Shinawatra and Joseph Estrada at a similar historical moment, Wahid quickly proved unresponsive to elite checks on his power. Unpredictable unilateralism was the order of the day. Sometimes this expressed itself in terms of policy, as when Wahid welcomed Aceh and West Papua to follow East Timor by holding referenda on independence, or decreed that communism—the *bête noire* of Suharto's three-plus decades in power—would no longer be illegal. While such actions produced elite *anger*, they were not what galvanized elite *action* against Wahid. It was only when the president undermined the power-sharing agreement that placed him power and began expelling members of the two largest parties, PDI-P and Golkar, that moves toward impeachment gathered steam. Luckily for his elite opponents in parliament, Wahid had committed at least two acts of blatant corruption. This gave them ample grounds for commencing a fully constitutional impeachment process against Wahid, which dragged on from August 2000 to June 2001.

In comparative perspective, Wahid's impeachment produced much less polarization than the removal of either Thaksin or Estrada. To some degree this was because it was a Madisonian rather than a Machiavellian conflict; the parties that most strongly opposed Wahid, PDI-P and Golkar were both cross-class parties with deep mass roots grown during Suharto's electoral-authoritarian dictatorship. Wahid thus could not credibly make the conflict one between the many and the few, especially considering his party's relatively weak performance in the 1999 parliamentary elections. The institutional conflict of 2000-2001 was over constraints, not inclusion.

Yet there was ample raw social material for Wahid's impeachment to spark much more pernicious polarization than it did. It was effective elite management of Wahid's removal, as much as the strictly Madisonian character of the conflict that explains how Indonesia avoided Thai-style or Philippine-style democratic careening. Wahid was by no means devoid of a mass base to mobilize against his elite rivals: he was the long-time leader of the world's largest Islamic organization, the NU, which has had tense relations with the world's second largest Islamic organization, the Muhammadiyah, since early in the 20th century (Bush, 2009). Although Wahid first called on the military to reject parliament's impeachment maneuvers, and then summoned his NU mass supporters in Central and East Java to mobilize in Jakarta in defense of their leader and

president, Wahid's rivals did not take the polarization bait. His leadership of NU and commitment to that group's "traditionalist" Islam was utterly unrelated to why he was impeached. Hence, nearly a century of intense bloc competition among traditionalist, modernist, and nominal Muslims did not spill over into social or ideological polarization when Wahid found himself in parliament's impeachment crosshairs.<sup>8</sup>

In sum, Indonesia fared relatively well through the institutional conflict of 2000-2001. But this was clearly not because it lacked "formative rifts" or deeply politicized social cleavages. It fared well because opposition elites reasserted themselves through legal and constitutional mechanisms, and did not target Wahid's broader support base in their surgical strike to remove him from the national executive. The removal of a polarizing figure from the presidency in 2001 sufficed to remove Indonesia from the specter of pernicious polarization. The cool-blooded presidencies and peaceful transitions from power between Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001-2004), Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004-2014), and Joko Widodo (2014-present) have made Indonesia one of the least polarized democracies in Asia, despite its practically bottomless raw material for polarizing social conflict.<sup>9</sup>

### *Taiwan: Madisonian Conflict and Patient Accountability*

Of the four cases we consider here, Taiwan had the most polarized social cleavages and bifurcated social structure during the long Cold War era of authoritarianism. The "formative rift" between mainland Chinese and Taiwanese was forged and then sharpened when the KMT occupied the island, then cracked down on Taiwanese dissidents in the violent events of February 28, 1947. Hence, if pernicious polarization were merely a function of social cleavages, Taiwan should have careened especially wildly in its institutional conflict of the early 2000s. Yet the earlier success of the KMT at transcending its mainlander base to build a mass party with impressive cross-ethnic reach ensured that the crisis assumed more of a Madisonian than a Machiavellian character. Pendular mobilization would prove to be as intense as what we have seen Thailand and the Philippines; but it did not take on the same stark populist versus oligarchic character.

Taiwan did not democratize suddenly through a Philippine-style popular uprising, but very gradually over the course of the 1980s and 1990s through the ruling KMT's preemptive reforms and slowly mounting electoral setbacks. It would only be in 2000 that the KMT would lose the presidency for the first time to the opposition DPP under Chen Shui-bian. What followed were 8 years of intense polarization between pro-KMT "blues" and pro-DPP "greens." Although polarization found its most dramatic expression in the series of street protests that roiled the island, it originated in institutional conflict between the DPP-controlled presidency and KMT-dominated legislature: "the stage was set for a showdown between these two institutions once they were in the hands of separate political camps" (Mattlin, 2011, p. 61).<sup>10</sup>

Taiwan's polarizing conflict was thus a Madisonian one in which the key question was how much power the newly elected president would wield to change the direction of national politics. Although multiple controversies erupted during President Chen's tumultuous tenure over a wide array of issues, the common terrain of battle in each

instance was over the definitional tension that always lies at the heart of democratic politics: would decisions be made through the assertion of presidential power behind the invocation of popular will, as the DPP insisted? Or would the president's agenda be constrained by an armada of nonexecutive institutions observing the sanctity of constitutional process, as his KMT rivals demanded? For instance, when Chen attempted in 2001 to discontinue the construction of a nuclear plant by decree, KMT lawmakers first refused to pass an annual budget, then explicitly threatened to remove the president and vice president from office for unconstitutional behavior. After Taiwan's Supreme Court sided with the KMT, Chen complied and let construction continue. But he immediately turned his attention to passing a national referendum law "to enable resolution of political disputes in the future by directly asking the public's opinion" (Mattlin, 2011, p. 138). The more Chen invoked popular will for his presidential decrees, the more the KMT fought back with its ample stores of "obstructionist gunpowder" (Mattlin, 2011, p. 206).

Tensions would come to a head in Chen's 2004 reelection campaign. Unlike the anti-Thaksin (yellow) bloc in Thailand, the anti-Chen (blue) bloc in Taiwan was confident it could travel a free and fair electoral route back to presidential power. Yet the hard-fought electoral nail-biter would only worsen polarization instead of resolving it; the KMT-led pan-blues "accused the DPP of 'stealing' by allegedly staging a shooting of the president and vice-president on the eve of the election." Mattlin (2011) calls Chen's hotly contested reelection "an important political milestone," after which "the pan-blues engaged in an all-out political war to block most major government initiatives and to bring down Chen, one way or another" (p. 145).

Yet Taiwan's old regime forces were not as committed as their Thai counterparts to toppling their presidential rival "one way or another." Even after losing the razor-thin 2004 presidential election, the KMT bided its time, undermining Chen's DPP administration in every imaginable (yet constitutional) manner while waiting for its next shot at the presidency. First, the KMT used its legislative majority to prevent President Chen from packing institutions of horizontal constraint, including the aptly named "Control Yuan" with his own loyalists. Second, the pan-blues could back up their horizontal blocking strength with street power of their own, as seen in the recurrent color-splashed mobilization-counter mobilization cycles that roiled Chen's second term. This countermobilizing potential was most dramatically witnessed when the DPP commemorated the anniversary of the 2/28 Incident by mobilizing an estimated two million pan-greens into a human chain, and the KMT followed suit by mobilizing a similar number in defense of Taiwan's nonnegotiable Chinese identity.

This street strength foreshadowed the KMT's most important strength: its electoral might. The pan-blues first flexed their mass muscles in the multiple popular referenda that the DPP called during the Chen years. Rather than rejecting referenda entirely, the KMT used its parliamentary majority to constrain potential excesses in the referendum bill. Ultimately, the KMT even learned to play the referendum game itself, in the service of its core institutional aim: imposing horizontal accountability on the Chen administration. In the 2008 parliamentary elections, the KMT went so far as to launch a counterreferendum on "leadership corruption" (Mattlin, 2011, p. 169).

The KMT's electoral prowess would be witnessed in the 2008 elections that returned it to unrivaled national power. Hence, if any single factor explains why Taiwanese democracy (unlike Thai democracy) ceased careening without collapsing, it is that the KMT was able to defend itself in the electoral realm in a manner that no old-guard force in Thailand could match. Its historically established cross-cutting constituencies proved too much for the DPP to withstand. The KMT simply needed to recapture the presidency to put the era of institutional conflict to rest. With its landslide victories in 2008 and 2012, the KMT escaped Taiwan's era of democratic careening through winning freely competitive national elections: a route back to power that old-guard oligarchic Thai elites can currently only dream of traveling themselves.

As in all four cases we examine here, a controversial chief executive was brought to heel. Yet this horizontal accountability was achieved constitutionally during Chen's term, and legally afterward: it would only be after Chen finished his term limits that the KMT-led government brought him to book for high corruption during his presidency. Critically, this process did nothing to hinder Chen's DPP from competing freely for power after his imprisonment. As in Indonesia, a surgical strike against a power-aggrandizing chief executive marked the end rather than an exacerbation of pernicious polarization: even though these two cases almost certainly had more raw social material for open-ended polarization than Thailand and the Philippines, which both polarized far more perniciously.

## **Conclusion**

Democratic polarization is neither inevitable nor eradicable. It is impossible to eradicate because those who most strongly defend democracy's constraints are typically housed in different institutions than those who prioritize democracy's inclusivity. Madisonian conflicts over whether a chief executive is abusing his powers or appropriately serving his electoral majority in muscular fashion can erupt at any time in any democracy. When that majority has long perceived its own political exclusion, Madisonian conflict spills over into Machiavellian conflict, pouring mass fuel on what began as an elitist fire. Yet even when political inclusion has been gained and a nation's cleavages are mild, polarizing figures can produce polarized politics in rapid and dramatic fashion.

On a more positive note, democratic polarization is not inevitable because the actions of agents are necessary to start it and sufficient to end it. When chief executives simply play by the rules, they make polarization less likely. And when they do abuse their powers, their opponents can also keep polarization from turning pernicious by playing by the rules in the process of removing him. The key is for opponents of polarizing figures to focus their ire on the one who is abusing his power, and not on the many on whose behalf he claims to be using it.

The relative success of Asian democracies at curbing executive excesses could offer lessons for other countries in other regions. In all four of our cases, as well as the more recent case of presidential impeachment in South Korea, polarizing executives met an unpleasant end at the hands of the institutions that sought to constrain

them. This is in stark contrast to cases such as Hungary, Turkey, and Venezuela, where polarizing populist leaders have long prevailed over their opponents seeking to constrain them through democratic means. When analysts consider how polarizing and populist figures might be contained under democratic conditions, Asia provides not just cautionary tales, but some encouraging—though not entirely unproblematic—examples.

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### Notes

1. For a classic treatment of vertical versus horizontal accountability, see O'Donnell (1994).
2. To be more precise (and perhaps slightly pedantic), *liberal* democracy requires constraints. Since political scientists now almost uniformly downgrade “illiberal democracies” to “electoral authoritarian” regimes (Schedler, 2013; Zakaria, 2003), we consider democracy a defensible shorthand for liberal democracy.
3. On electoral “victory confidence” as a key ingredient in elite tolerance for democracy, see Slater and Wong (2013).
4. The distinction between Madisonian and Machiavellian conflicts draws on Slater (2013). See Madison's *Federalist Papers* on the importance of constraints and Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* (as well as McCormick, 2011) on politics as a battle between the many and the few.
5. Although the recent impeachment of Park Geun-hye fits our model of polarizing figures and institutional conflicts, we exclude it here because South Korea has weaker identity cleavages than Indonesia and Taiwan. This makes the rapid and successful resolution of the polarizing conflict over determined.
6. EDSA stands for Epifanio de los Santos Avenue. It is the main highway linking the various cities and municipalities comprising Metro Manila.
7. See Horowitz (2011) for an argument that Indonesia's complex multiplicity of identity cleavages hinders bifurcation along any single line of cleavage.
8. The classic account of Indonesia's plural religious “streams” is Geertz (1976).
9. Yet see the recent Islamist–nationalist pendular street mobilization over the polarizing figure of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (or “Ahok”), the ethnic Chinese governor of Jakarta and #2 elected chief executive in the country, for allegedly insulting Islam.
10. The discussion to follow draws heavily on Mattlin's (2011) excellent study of Taiwan's decade of intense polarization during the Chen presidency.

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