

## **Reading the Signals from a Changing Global Order**

### ***The impact of leadership transitions after a record year of elections around the world***

By Dr Gillian Koh, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore

Presented at the Think Big Leadership Summit organised by Mediacorp, held at Parkroyal Collection Marina Bay, 30 October 2024.

## **Elections around the world**

### ***Japan***

Last Sunday, the 27<sup>th</sup> of October, in a snap election called by Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba, his party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), lost the ruling majority it held for 15 years.

With its coalition partner, Komeito, they secured only 215 seats out of 465 in the Japanese Diet when they needed 233.

The main opposition party, the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, did not do any better and secured 148 seats.

Support from smaller parties, such as the Democratic Party for the People or the Japan Innovation Party, which won 28 and 38 seats respectively, could provide the LDP with a majority, except that their leaders ruled out joining its scandal-tainted coalition.

Ishiba, who had only just been installed as PM on 1 Oct after winning a leadership contest in the LDP, said he too was not anticipating a coalition with other opposition parties but would hold discussions on how to take on some of their policy ideas, presumably to form working majorities on a case-by-case basis.

From the outside-in perspective, we might think the country could use clear economic and fiscal direction from its government, and the region, the signal of firm leadership in the face of an assertive China and North Korea, a week before the U.S. heads into an unpredictable election. But the Japanese offered themselves such comfort.

## ***Taiwan***

This calls to mind Taiwan, where the incumbent party, the Democratic People's Party (DPP) that has held the presidency and the majority in its Legislative Yuan since 2016, faced elections on the 13<sup>th</sup> of January this year.

The DPP's Willian Lai retained the presidency with 40 percent of the vote but lost its majority in the Legislative Yuan securing only 51 seats out of 113, Taiwan's grand old party Kuomintang secured 52 seats, and new "third way" party led by the former Taipei mayor, Ko Wen-je, secured 8.

In other words, neither of the traditional parties secured a majority of 57 seats, allowing Ko's Taiwan People's Party the bargaining power it needs address key bread and butter concerns of its main constituency, young Taiwanese.

Since then, Dr Ko has been under a cloud for charges of corruption which he vehemently denies and is willing to be detained the prosecution tries to substantiate its prima facie case against him.

While wary China may still have found it cold comfort that Lai did not secure the mandate to alter Taiwan's status, the fact remains that the Taiwanese are politically divided. Yet, the plea of their young citizens is for leaders to attend to their day-to-day concerns more earnestly.

[What we see is] Fragmentation, split government, more complex governance.

## ***India***

It might not be politic to say it but there is a tinge of similarity of this to the outcome of the April to June election in the largest democracy of all, India.

In the Lok Sabha of 543 seats, where securing 272 seats equates to a majority, the Bharatiya Janata Party led by Narendra Modi and has been in power since 2014 secured only 240 seats, less than the 303 it scored in the 2019 election and 282 in 2014.

However, it has 293 seats through the National Democratic Alliance it leads which is a majority in the legislature and which surpasses the 232 that the opposition bloc, called INDIA led by Congress Party secured.

While the re-election means Mr Modi is only the second Indian prime minister to win three terms after Mr Jawaharlal Nehru, he will have to depend on key regional allies like the Telugu Desam Party in southern

Andhra Pradesh and Janata Dal (United) in Bihar to get his legislative agenda passed.

Unemployment, especially among the younger set, food insecurity and rural distress – the social justice issues that the opposition campaigned on seemed to outweigh the Hindu nationalist agenda of the BJP even in Ayodhya, where Modi had inaugurated the temple of Ram as a symbol of that. BJP lost its hold on that district.

CNA's own explainer on the election result cited professor in Indian politics at Georgetown University Dr Irfan Nooruddin noting that the BJP performed poorly in north India – particularly Uttar Pradesh state, the country's most populous, and the base of the party's previous majority in the 2014 and 2019 elections.

He said: "A lot of the rhetoric that the BJP had begun to use in this campaign, about anti-Muslim rhetoric and emphasis on religious symbolism, simply didn't resonate - including in places that were really the base constituency. So that was quite a surprise and quite a shocker for many observers." And he added, "You can't distract hungry, poor people (by talking) about God and religion forever."

### ***Sri Lanka***

The same concerns lie behind the surprise outcome of the 21 September presidential election in Sri Lanka.

Anura Kumara Dissanayake of the coalition National People's Power party, won it with 42.3 percent of the vote, up from the desultory 3.2 percent he secured previously in 2019.

Leader of the Opposition Sajith Premadasa received 32.8 percent.

Since neither frontrunner obtained more than 50 percent after the first count, a second tally that took on board the ranked-choice votes which eventually determined the winner — the first time this has ever happened in a presidential race in the country.

Incumbent president Ranil Wickremesinghe, who took over in 2022 after popular protests forced then-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa out of office, took third place, receiving only 17.3 percent.

This was the country's first election since its economic collapse in 2022, and the result was largely seen as a referendum on the previous administration's handling of the crisis.

Dissanayake presented himself as the candidate of change, committed to disrupting the political status quo and dealing with cronyism and corruption.

Since then, the new President has dissolved Parliament and called an election to be held on the 14<sup>th</sup> of November 2024.

This will be an attempt to have the DPP take the majority to achieve alignment for his economic policies and to rebuild national and international confidence in governance in Sri Lanka.

### ***Bangladesh***

In Bangladesh, the incumbent, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina led her party the Awami League to secure 223 seats for a fourth consecutive term in office in the 7 January election this year too.

However, she was dramatically ousted from government on 5 August for being associated with a quota system for jobs in government which would protect up to 30 percent of the spots for children and grandchildren of the “freedom fighters” in the 1971 War of Independence when young people, including the highly-educated, were said to have found that access to jobs was limited and were facing unemployment.

Bangladesh is now led by a caretaker government headed by Nobel Laureate, Muhammad Yunus.

He recently announced that rather than taking three months to call an election, he would like to introduce deeper political reforms that would allow for an inclusive and pluralistic democracy and to create an environment where a free, fair, and participatory election can be held.

He said, “Our task now is to carry out vital reforms in our electoral system, judiciary, local government, media, economy and education.”

Which are the countries that have seen an outright change in leadership?

### ***Indonesia***

Closer to home, we can think of Indonesia where it was not entirely a surprise (as the incumbent president had reached his term limits) that Mr Prabowo Subianto won the presidential election with 58.8 percent of the vote on his third attempt at securing the office.

Last week, he swore in a massive “Red and White” Cabinet of 48 ministers, representing the broad parliamentary coalition that he has

brought together. He is not new to being part of government, having been the Minister of Defence under the previous president, Joko Widodo.

### ***United Kingdom***

Another notable change in government came about in the United Kingdom. After the 4 July election, the Labour Party enjoyed a landslide victory, securing 412 seats out of 650 seats, ending the Conservative Party's 14 years in power.

### ***Russia***

One other election worthy of mention in this short talk, but because the outcome was only to be expected – Vladimir Putin's re-election as President of Russia.

In 2020, after term limits on the office were removed, Putin is into his fifth term with six years ahead of him; he has led the country since 1999, either as president or prime minister.

Securing 87 percent of the votes with a 77 percent turnout, against three other candidates who qualified to run out of the total of 13 who declared their intent to do so, nothing about his economic record nor that of his "special military operation" in Ukraine since February 2022, mattered.

Many who understand the processes and spirit of democracy question the legitimacy of this election – something Putin nonetheless craves, or he would not have held the election in the first place.

### ***United States***

Standing before you today, on the 30<sup>th</sup> of October, we know that there is one election we wish we could all vote in – the US election to be held in less than a week's time, that is, 5 November.

In fact, why don't we do that now. We can do a vote. You have two choices:

**Option A** is a system that starts with the idea that we are all better off if we do things together, working around some generally shared rules,

undergirded by ideals we know are a stretch to achieve, and some days are better than others in attaining to them.

It is a system where the big boys say “we will be competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, adversarial when it must be”.

It is a system that recognises we cannot talk our way out of things but have to work through them a step at a time. However, if the rules are understood and accepted because they are generally fair and inclusive, this side of heaven, we will all benefit by them.

The trick here is to establish those rules in ever-growing circles of the commonwealth of nations, around different issues, and regions to draw more into a rules-bound, ever-predictable, inclusive community for shared peace and prosperity.

**Option B** is a system that recognises that where interests are at stake, the actor with the biggest stick defines what they are and ought to be.

The challenge in this system is to identify what assets different actors have, and what they lack. This is the source of power.

Peace is attained when there is a balance of power and actors know that life is a zero-sum game.

The art of the deal is to know what leverage there is and trade or use those assets to get what promotes one’s interests. The sharper the power, the easier it will be to “get things done”.

It will be up to others to choose to be on the right side of “might is right” and find their way forward under that rubric.

It too is predictable, it is transactional, it will get the job done depending on how you define that job. Do not waste time talking about community-building where it is a world not of permanent friends but of permanent interests.

Now let me make three points to pull this all together.

## **The Changing Global Order**

### ***Not “either/or” but “and”***

First point. Through the voting exercise we just conducted, you will recognise that at the conclusion of the most brutal war that humans

inflicted upon themselves – World War II, and also through the Cold War that followed and then the fall of the Berlin Wall, **the world needed Option A and Option B or rather approach A and B, both, at the same time.**

Self-determination, democracy, collective security, the multilateral trading system, the Bretton Woods system of the International Monetary Fund, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development or the World Bank, the Marshall Plan – all watchwords of this new post-WWII global order. So was the idea of the balance of power, of mutually-assured destruction, deterrence, détente, and so on.

Recognise that peace and prosperity, across the globe, requires both the balance of power among the strongest and most ambitious as well as paranoid actors which is Option B, but also the presence of institutions, incentives, the vision and values that we are stronger and more prosperous together as a global community when we use that sharp power to uphold a fair, inclusive and sustainable set of rules and processes of governance. It is good for small, big, rich and poor nations – one country, one vote. Option A.

So, the realist balance of power approach but also the idealist, communitarian approach with strong institutions were two sides of the same coin.

The thing is that while reconstruction and change are never easy, by 1989, this two-pronged approach worked.

The last holdout – the USSR – conceded the point, dismantled itself, and many of its constituent parts wanted, finally, to prosper through this vision.

Hence, several former USSR states have joined the European Union and NATO.

The People's Republic of China was on the cusp of "take-off".

The East Asian Tigers had already done so.

The balance of power now shifted towards just "a superpower", and there was a fresh sense of legitimacy, not perfect and complete, but a healthy sense of legitimacy had been conferred to the international liberal system of economics as well as politics.

What is the problem today, 35 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall?

At different times, the newcomers to the game found that the door to this vision of a globalised-global order became about joining the West and found that they could be shut out of it.

Also, the system may have served many at different times but leaders and citizens across the world have found in the past few decades that with the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, the 2007-2008 Global Financial Crisis, the Second Gulf War, the raw weaponisation of trade to achieve geopolitical aims, the subversion of democracy, and the double standards in upholding the international rule of law, that it is not all perfect and some actors are more equal than others.

This, when what members of the public the world over just want one thing – secure livelihoods for themselves and their children.

The leaders of a progressing Global South have seen that. They have felt it when their appeals to adjust the institutions and rules of that post-WWII order to accommodate their arrival were rebuffed.

Hence, [for all these reasons,] the disillusionment has set in.

In most systems, as I have recounted, citizens still have faith in the process of democracy. But the traditional parties that stood for certain orthodoxies are now found to be discredited. Those traditional parties will lose their majorities, and third parties that either get back to the basics of delivering good jobs, decent living, or are sheer populists, have arisen.

The young find that it is particularly difficult to get in on the game. They want politics, society and business to be open to them as well.

The global order has lost its legitimacy. An old power has revitalised itself to provide the axis of a counter-system. And, as we saw last week, an old power in decline and this new-old power in ascent are creating a new club of their own.

As many scholars have highlighted – its institutions are nascent, its fire-power is not quite there, but its driving force is to be “anti-establishment” and that is a very powerful motivating force indeed. This effort is called BRICS+ [which met in Kazan, Russia, last weekend].

***Is there redemption of the old global order?***



This leads me to my second point: Do we need to return to some notion of that [post-WWII] “new world order” or “global order” – if nothing else, to the belief that we are better when we are together?

What of that liberal world order is still good, serviceable, noble, and can be improved upon to negate the need for something like BRICS+?

**The answer -- only if it can address the old issues of fair play and inclusion, but also all the new issues that have emerged since.**

It is terribly difficult working to address problems that are bigger than what one country, even one region can solve – climate change, transnational digital crime, but also fair trade and labour rights, for instance.

But it is also terribly wasteful if we cannot set up rules to take advantage of new opportunities presented by artificial intelligence, green energy, e-commerce, for instance.

In fact, we can argue that now more than ever, we need to play as one planet, in that inclusive, integrative, ethical and ecologically sustainable way.

A fair and inclusive multilateral system will ensure that all citizens have a good shot in life – labour conditions and rights are recognised, the cost of damage we inflict on the planet when we grow rich is properly distributed across countries, and the generations of people.

### ***Can we make it work – the local-national-international nexus?***

Third, going back to the outcomes of the elections I mentioned, in our region and so many other countries I did not have the time to talk through [including the election in South Africa in May where the ANC lost its majority] – **do we then have the governance capacity, the quality of leadership but also vision, for global governance to actually work?**

**It does not look like it for now as the constituent parts of what should be this global order are in transition or worse, out of kilter** – citizens and leaders are not connected the way they should be to provide that leadership at the global level; and for it to make sense on the ground from the publics across countries to support it.

The problem lies at the interface of political and policy elites, and citizens – from country to country, region to region, and across the globe.

Democracy, properly institutionalised and exercised, is the only way that presumably, well-informed citizens can ensure that the policy and political leaders act with fidelity to what is often just their all-too-sensible demands and concerns.

But we know that this is a very big assumption that has not been properly fulfilled in many societies.

Instead, we see a large level of democratic backsliding or even the return to autocracy everywhere. According to scholar, Larry Diamond, in his April 2024 article for *Journal of Democracy* called “Power, Performance and Legitimacy”, among countries with populations of more than a million, the share that are at least electoral democracies (a category that includes liberal democracies, but is wider) has declined from a peak of 57 percent in 2006 to around 43 percent in 2023.

Diamond also cited how Freedom House data from 2007 through 2022 showed a steady pattern of many more countries declining than gaining in freedom. The relative decline in 2022 was only very slight, but once again in 2023 Freedom House found that more than twice as many countries declined in freedom as the number that gained, and that the declines were bigger in scale than the improvements.

This is where political and policy leaders act far more so to serve themselves, and in extreme cases, to ensure they are not put away in prison for life!

They barely have the bandwidth or motivation to manage that interaction across the local, the national and the global to put it all in alignment for the common good, or at least in the enlightened self-interest of their countries.

Worse, they use international relations or the weaknesses of the global order to promote their self-interests; to recreate some golden age of which they can be the imperial leader.

As such, we can only anticipate an extremely difficult period of adjustment within each of these societies and polities, knowing also that there are serious implications for international relations. We will see this in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan.

I have only mentioned Indonesia in Southeast Asia, eager to play its leadership role in ASEAN, a critical institution to provide ballast or stability in a world of geopolitical flux. It can be a bright spot for us.

But just think of how each of the other states in ASEAN is managing this interface across the local, national and global, how complex that is, how they will cope. [What hope is there for the sustaining Option A and Option B at the same time?]

Finally, to Singapore:

### ***Singapore – our strategy***

In city-state Singapore, we are conscious that we are “price-takers” of what happens.

It behoves us then to do what strengthens our democracy; to thread our interests very carefully through from citizens at the local level to the national and then the international. This is where we can exercise our sense of agency.

As we are doing today at this seminar, on our part as citizens and leaders, we choose to be well-informed of national and global developments; we choose to gather the facts and quality insights, of the realities of how the game is being played, here and out there.

We opt to strengthen a system that ensures our leaders – in business, politics and society – emerge from among us, and adequately reflect what our concerns us and provide an excellent interface between us and the world.

Truth be told, as a city-state, we have prospered under the older, more liberal orthodoxy of a multilateral, rules-based system; a world where “might is right” will serve us very poorly indeed.

It is why we invest, as a country, in the UN system. We convene the Forum of Small States within it, we do all the heavy-lifting we can to make it a credible and relevant global order – from concluding UNCLOS [in December 1982]; to the 2023 Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement 40 years after UNCLOS; and this year’s WIPO Treaty on Intellectual Property, Genetic Resources and Associated Traditional Knowledge.

There were Singaporean-Global Citizens at the heart of these herculean tasks.

There is no place for cynicism about the international system; Singapore does not have that luxury.

And again, this is where we have agency – we can act to contribute to something we have prospered under and to make sure it stays that way.

But for the realists in the room, the Option B type people, if we are well-informed citizens, we know what side of our bread is buttered – we know where our investments come from; we know where our investments can be held to hostage. Rule of law or rule of an autocrat, which do we prefer?

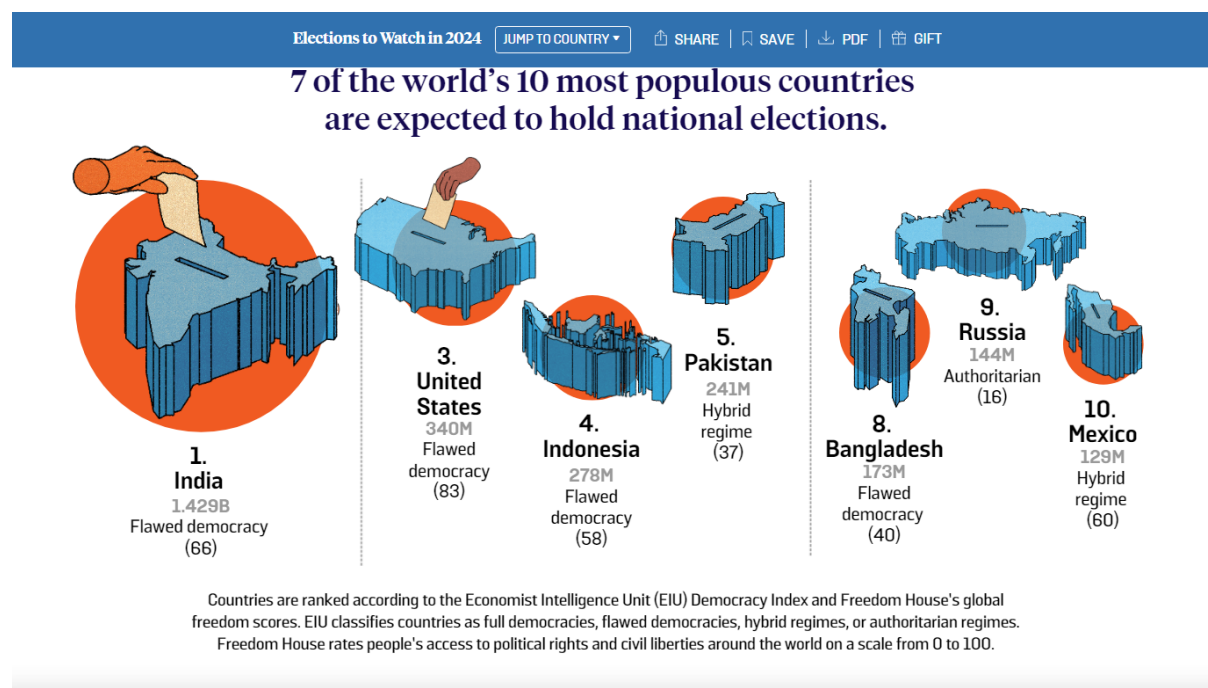
At the end of the day, we can only ensure that our own shop is well run.

We know the world is better off when both approaches of A and B are at play, reinforcing each other, so that it keeps on an even keel.

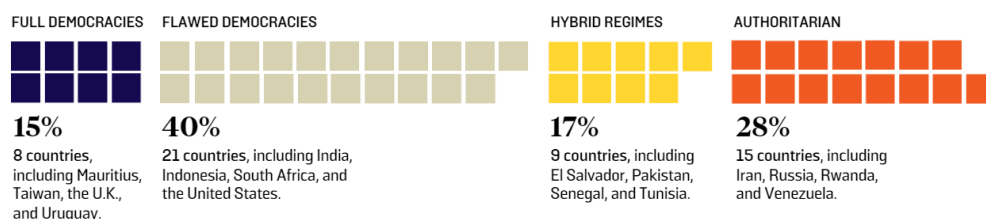
And if we keep our own shop well run, we then have the capacity to adapt and re-balance, whichever axis it shifts to, when the time comes.

. . . . .

Figures 1 and 2



### Just 8 of the countries voting are considered full democracies.



Source: Meakem, A. (2024). Elections to Watch in 2024. In Foreign Policy. 2 January.

[Beyond the U.S.: The World's Most Important Elections in 2024](#) (Accessed on 29 October 2024).

By 2024, more than 40 percent of the planet's population will have cast ballots in more than 50 national contests. It will have been a year as Ravi Agrawal, Editor-in-Chief of the magazine, Foreign Policy put it "the year of rare planetary alignment". Not least, seven of the 10 largest, most populous countries will have held elections – India, US, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Russia and Mexico.

Table 1

TABLE—GAINERS AND LOSERS

	Declining Democracies	Improving Democracies	Oscillation	Worsening Autocracies	Improving Autocracies
Big States	11	2	6	8	0
Others	19	4	6	22	11
Total	30	6	12	30	11
Examples: Big States					
	Bangladesh (-10)	Colombia (+9)	Argentina	Burma (-27)	None
	Brazil (-14)	Taiwan (+10)	Kenya	China (-8)	
	India (-14)		Nigeria	DRC (-6)	
	Indonesia (-7)		Pakistan	Egypt (-13)	
	Mexico (-16)		South Korea	Ethiopia (-8)	
	Philippines (-9)		Vietnam	Iran (-8)	
	Poland (-18)			Russia (-15)	
	S. Africa (-9)			Tanzania (-14)	
	Thailand (-17)				
	Turkey (-30)				
	U.S. (-9)				
Examples: Other States					
	Botswana (-8)	Malawi (+10)	Dom. Repub.	Afghanistan (-25)	Armenia (+19)
	Hungary (-26)	Moldova (+10)	Ecuador	Belarus (-11)	Bhutan (+28)
	Mauritius (-13)	Sierra Leone (+8)	Madagascar	Cambodia (-11)	Gambia (+27)
	Tunisia (-24)	Timor-Leste (+9)	N. Macedonia	Mozambique (-15)	Malaysia (+9)
	Ukraine (-18)		Slovenia	Uganda (-8)	Nepal (+18)
	Nicaragua (-28)		Zambia	Yemen (-15)	Sri Lanka (+12)

*Source:* Author's democracy scale, which averages the three principal annual measures of liberal democracy: 1) the Freedom House combined scale of political rights and civil liberties, 2) the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, and 3) V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index.

*Note:* "Big states" are those with populations greater than 50 million or 2022 nominal GDPs greater than US\$500 billion (according to the IMF). Table lists all countries that experienced declines or gains of at least five points during this period. Number in parentheses indicates

Source: Diamond, L. (2024). Power, Performance and Legitimacy. In *Journal of Democracy*. Vol. 35, No.2. (April). <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/power-performance-and-legitimacy/> (Accessed on 29 October 2024).

"If we want to restore global democratic momentum, we need to prove something. We must prove that democracy, with freedom and law-based rule to set against autocracy's repression and arbitrariness, is a morally and practically superior form of government, and indeed the *only* form of government that has assured or can assure human dignity, peace, and prosperity. It should not be hard to make this case, for it is true.<sup>39</sup> But it requires resources, imagination, and renewed confidence both in the moral imperative behind this cause and in its enduring promise."

Larry Diamond