

Consolidating Power: Strategies and Tactics of Executive Aggrandizement.

The Autocratic Expansion Model in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand

Inauguraldissertation

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Abstract

What happens when democratically elected leaders, entrusted with safeguarding democracy, begin to erode its very foundation? This study argues that leaders in third-wave democracies, often responding to (perceived) threats, undermine a core pillar of democracy: accountability. By weakening these mechanisms, they not only secure their grip on power but also set the stage for the gradual decline of democratic qualities.

Central to the analysis is a two-pronged framework: *institutional capture* and *social silencing*. Institutional capture encompasses the co-optation or weakening of formal democratic structures, such as the judiciary, legislature, and electoral bodies, while social silencing involves suppressing dissent and neutralizing opposition to foster a culture of compliance. Together, these strategies illustrate how formal and informal strategies interact to enable the steady consolidation of power. Focusing on Southeast Asia, the study situates these processes within unique historical and socio-political contexts. Factors such as authoritarian legacies, socio-economic cleavages, and weak institutionalization are explored as enablers of executive aggrandizement.

A key finding is the significance of *timing* and *strategy* in shaping the trajectory of aggrandizement. Leaders who combine preventive tactics, those establishing legal foundations for autocratization, with reactive tactics, those exploiting crises to justify power consolidation, achieve more enduring executive control. However, over-reliance on reactive measures risks backlash and public unrest, while preventive tactics often erode democratic norms but cannot guarantee indefinite dominance due to possible growing public discontent and the prospect of being voted out of office. A second key finding challenges the assumption that aggrandizement always reflects calculated intent, showing that it can also arise unintentionally from systemic fragilities or crisis responses. This is not to say, however, that aggrandizement, cannot, at one point or another, become a calculated and deliberate move on the part of the incumbent.

Overall, the study is also a call for action by emphasizing that countering executive aggrandizement requires collective resistance, involving both institutional actors, such as the judiciary and legislature, and extra-institutional forces, including civil society, and the media. Fostering resilient democratic institutions and a vigilant civil society are then the roots of deterring aggrandizement. Building institutional strength involves not only safeguarding legal frameworks but also nurturing a political culture that values transparency, accountability, and inclusivity. Similarly, empowering civil society and media to operate without fear of reprisal ensures that dissenting voices and alternative perspectives remain a visible and influential part of public discourse. While these efforts cannot always immediately reverse the tide of democratic decline, they lay the groundwork for long-term recovery and the restoration of democratic governance. A crucial aspect of this recovery is the ability to learn from historical patterns of aggrandizement, using these lessons to preemptively address vulnerabilities in democratic systems. Ultimately, the collective defense of democracy is not only about curbing

executive overreach but also about sustaining a political environment where accountability, plurality, and citizen engagement flourish.