What is the future for Bangladesh's Rohingya community?

Vietnam's government grows more like China's

Asian security is discussed at Shangri-La

Democracy Asia

July 2026

INDIA'S COCKROACH SWARM


Remitly™
Nothing beats
Nani's naan
Stay close, even when you're far apart.
One easy app to send money home
GET IT ON Google Play
Download on the App Store
Remitly U.K., Ltd. is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority (Firm Reference No. 728639).

Contents

The Chief Justice of India called unemployed young Indians 'cockroaches'. Within hours, they'd turned the insult into a party. The Cockroach Janata Party has no leader, no manifesto, and no ideology, just a meme, a mask, and a generation of graduates who can't find work. From Jantar Mantar to Pune to Hyderabad, the protests keep spreading.

But beneath the satire sits a harder number: nearly 40 per cent of India's graduates under 25 are unemployed.

What happens when a democracy's youth stop waiting to be heard, and start organising as the thing they were called.

Address:
35 Bow Road, London, England, E3 2AD

Contact Us:
Email: info@democracyasia.com
Web: www.democracyasia.com

Published by:
The Ambassadors World Ltd.

Just how powerful a force for change are young voters? It is a question relevant to youth protest across countries as varied as the Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Nepal, where anger over jobs, corruption and political exclusion has spilled into the streets. In India, young people angered by a controversial remark by the country's Chief Justice have rallied around the Cockroach Janta Party, a satirical protest movement that is the subject of our lead report.

In Bangladesh, we look at the 1.2 million strong Rohingya refugee community, a Muslim minority denied citizenship in Myanmar and forced across the border by military violence and persecution. Most have lived there since 2017, some for much longer. Our coverage includes a first-person account by a Rohingya writer born in the camps of southern Bangladesh, yet still categorised as a refugee.

> "Across Asia this month,the powerless are refusing to stay invisible: young protesters in the streets, refugees without a country, scam trade victims trafficked across borders, testing how much change a voice without power can still demand."

In another powerful essay, regular contributor Lijia Zhang recalls the role she played in Nanjing, in eastern China, during the 1989 protest movement now associated above all with Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

We carry our first report from Vietnam, a country that receives less attention than it deserves, partly because of tight restrictions on media freedom and independent reporting. Another first report, from Kyrgyzstan, tries to unravel the politics of a country still emerging from its Soviet past while navigating the opportunities and pressures of being a Central Asian state sandwiched between Russia and China.

Cambodia, another small nation with complicated relations with a powerful neighbour, is struggling to contain scam centres linked to online fraud, forced labour and money laundering. Many victims are trafficked from abroad, including from Africa, after being promised jobs and a better life. The scam-centre economy has become a regional criminal industry, with similar operations in Laos, Myanmar and the Philippines.

Our coverage this month includes a report on the annual Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Asia's premier defence forum. In Business, we look at the growing role of US-based AI companies such as Palantir and Anthropic in public administration, defence and the management of state data.

In Bookshelf, we close with a sobering account of life for women in Iran's Islamic Republic.

We would love to hear whether you feel *Democracy Asia* is helping deepen understanding of the world's most populous continent and its many nations.

Do tell us at letters@democracyasia.com

Nicholas Nugent

Iran-US

In late June, it remained unclear how much of a reported 14-point memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the United States and Iran had been accepted by both sides, amid competing claims from Washington and Tehran. The ceasefire, which initially came into effect on 8 April, remained broadly intact despite US claims that Iran had downed an American military helicopter near the Strait of Hormuz, followed by US retaliatory strikes on Iranian territory. The MoU provides for the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz and the lifting of some US economic sanctions on Iran. A major obstacle was the continuation of Israeli strikes on alleged Hezbollah targets in Lebanon. Tehran argued that the ceasefire provisions should also apply to Israel and Hezbollah, although neither was a party to the MoU. In June, direct talks between the US and Iran resumed in Switzerland, with Qatar and Pakistan continuing to act as intermediaries.

China

Following separate visits to Beijing by Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping paid his first visit to the North Korean capital Pyongyang since 2019. The Chinese president and Kim Jong-un reaffirmed the close ties and defence pact between their two countries and pledged closer political, economic and cultural cooperation.

Myanmar

Another visitor to Beijing was Myanmar's military leader, Min Aung Hlaing, on his first visit to the Chinese capital since assuming the presidency earlier this year. The two sides signed 18 cooperation agreements, including on cross-border infrastructure, trade, disaster relief, health and media. Many of these issues relate to the Myanmar-China borderlands, where anti-government ethnic armed resistance, smuggling, scam centres and other criminal activity remain major concerns. Min Aung Hlaing had earlier visited India from 30 May to 3 June for talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Chinese mine disaster

A gas explosion at the Liushenyu Coal Mine in Shanxi province killed 82 people. There were 247 workers underground at the time; 128 were injured and hospitalised, 35 escaped unhurt and two remained unaccounted for. It was the worst mining disaster in China since 2009. The authorities promised a rigorous investigation after reports of serious safety violations at the mine.

Philippines

A magnitude 7.8 earthquake off Mindanao in the southern Philippines killed at least 55 people and injured more than 1,100. It triggered tsunami warnings across the region, with waves of about one metre recorded on nearby coasts and smaller waves observed farther away.

Indonesia

Senior officials overseeing the country's $15 billion school meals programme were arrested over allegations of corruption. The programme, initiated by President Prabowo Subianto, aims to provide free meals to about 83 million children and pregnant women. The programme has been popular but controversial, with critics warning about its cost, governance and food-safety problems at a time of weakening investor confidence in Southeast Asia's largest economy.

India

Prime Minister Narendra Modi marked 12 years in office, becoming India's longest continuously serving elected prime minister and surpassing Jawaharlal Nehru's post-1952 elected tenure. Modi, 75, first became prime minister in 2014 and secured further mandates in 2019 and 2024. Nehru's overall tenure, however, remains longer at more than 16 years.

What began as an insult was transformed into a symbol of resistance, as young Indians used the cockroach to express frustration with unemployment, exclusion and unresponsive institutions. Photo: CJP Website

India's cockroach swarm: youth anger and democracy's warning signal

In May an unexpected political emblem emerged in India's increasingly restless democratic landscape: the cockroach. An insect commonly associated with filth, nuisance and extermination was transformed into a symbol of resistance after the Chief Justice of India likened unemployed young activists and online critics to 'cockroaches' and 'parasites'. What might have passed as an insensitive remark sparked an extraordinary act of political reclamation. Within hours, the insult was transformed into a rallying cry. Madhavi Ravikumar reports.

The transformation began when Abhijeet Dipke, a 30-year-old political communications strategist studying in the United States, posted a provocative question on social media: 'What if all cockroaches come together?' Days later, he launched the Cockroach Janata Party (CJP), a satirical political formation that described itself as a movement 'of the youth, by the youth, for the youth'.

What began as a digital joke quickly evolved into a political phenomenon. Millions followed the movement online, hundreds of thousands signed petitions, and the cockroach became a symbol of a generation that feels increasingly ignored, ridiculed and excluded from institutions meant to represent it. The movement's appeal lies not merely in its satire but in its ability to channel a growing sense of democratic exclusion. As Dipke himself put it, 'People are frustrated because they don't feel heard or represented'.

The economic roots of youth anger

The judicial comment may have been the spark, but the fuel had been accumulating for years. India has more than 300 million young people aged 15–29, yet the promise of education as a pathway to social mobility is increasingly fragile. According to Azim Premji University's State of *Working India 2026 report*, nearly 40 per cent of graduates under 25 are unemployed, while unemployment among graduates aged 25–29 stands at around 20 per cent. Half

of all young Indians in this age group are unemployed, underemployed or trapped in insecure work.

Millions of educated young Indians face unemployment, underemployment or insecure work despite rising levels of educational attainment. Image AI generated

These figures challenge a core assumption of post-liberalisation India that education automatically leads to opportunity. For millions of young Indians, degrees have become credentials without guarantees, often resulting in insecure jobs, low wages, or prolonged unemployment. The outcome is not only economic insecurity but a profound sense of betrayal as a generation promised upward mobility confronts shrinking prospects.

Behind these statistics are personal stories. Ankita Sharma, a 24-year-old engineering graduate from Hyderabad, said she was 'overqualified for my job and also underpaid'. Nikhil Sood, a 23-year-old MBA graduate from Bengaluru echoed a similar frustration: 'I have the degree, but where are the opportunities? This feels like the first time someone is speaking for us.'

Examination scandals and the erosion of trust

Repeated examination scandals have deepened this sense of betrayal. Controversies surrounding the medical entrance exam, recruitment examinations in general and evaluation procedures have eroded confidence in systems once viewed as pathways to meritocratic advancement.

The movement's success reflects how political communication has evolved in the digital era. While conventional parties rely on ideology, organisation, and leadership structures, the Cockroach Janata Party thrives on irony, memes, humour, and cultural references familiar to digitally native generations. Its deliberately absurd membership criteria masked serious concerns about employment, educational accountability, media ownership, and political representation. What sets the movement apart from many online campaigns is its transition from digital visibility to physical mobilisation.

The 6 June protest at Delhi's Jantar Mantar drew thousands demanding accountability over examination controversies and educational governance failures, sparking similar demonstrations in Pune and Hyderabad in the days that followed. Many demonstrators wore cockroach masks, transforming a symbol of humiliation into one of defiance. Supporters described the movement as providing a voice where none previously existed. One participant admitted that many young people had 'almost given up' before the movement emerged. 'Now there is a platform for us.'

Digital repression and the politics of visibility

The rise of the CJP has exposed a growing tension in contemporary democracies. As the movement gained momentum online, supporters alleged that some of its social media accounts faced restrictions, suspensions, hacking attempts, and heightened scrutiny. Whether these disruptions stemmed from platform moderation, coordinated


Repeated controversies involving entrance and recruitment examinations have weakened confidence in systems once seen as pathways to opportunity and merit.

Digital platforms allowed dispersed frustrations over jobs, education and representation to coalesce into a nationwide movement. Photo: Britannica Website

reporting, cyberattacks, or administrative intervention remains contested, but their democratic implications are difficult to ignore.

For a movement born on social media, visibility is not merely a communication tool but its primary political resource. The CJP emerged because digital platforms transformed dispersed frustrations over unemployment, examination scandals, and political exclusion to coalesce into a collective voice. When access to those platforms becomes uncertain, questions of free expression, political participation, and democratic accountability inevitably arise.

A regional pattern of youth discontent

The CJP also fits into a wider Asian pattern. From Bangladesh's student protests to Nepal's Gen Z mobilisation and Sri Lanka's Aragalaya uprising, educated young people have used digital platforms to challenge unresponsive institutions. India's context is different, but the underlying tension is familiar: strong growth coexists with anxiety over jobs, education and social mobility. The harder question is whether online solidarity can last. Social media can spread anger quickly, but durable politics requires organisation, trust and long-term commitment. Digital activism can be rapid and powerful, but it often lacks the institutions — unions, parties, campuses and civic associations — that turn anger into sustained political change.

Supporters wearing cockroach masks gather at Delhi's Jantar Mantar during a protest over examination controversies, unemployment and youth representation. Photo: PTI

A democratic warning sign

Indian political commentator R. Jagannathan has argued that the 'cockroach' should be seen not as a nuisance, but as a signal of a larger democratic challenge. India's political establishment remains dominated by older generations, while its future depends on young citizens facing growing uncertainty. The generational disconnect is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. Youth dissatisfaction is no longer merely an economic issue but a democratic one. When young people feel excluded from meaningful participation, democratic legitimacy comes under strain. India's demographic dividend will matter only if young people see credible jobs, fair exams and meaningful representation.

Beyond the swarm

Whether the Cockroach Janata Party survives as a political organisation remains uncertain. Many digital movements fade quickly, while others are absorbed into mainstream politics or reshape public debate. The cockroach is less important than the conditions that produced it: unemployment, exam distrust, insecure work and a sense that institutions are not listening. As one supporter put it: 'The cockroach survives everything—we will too.' For India's democracy, the challenge is not to suppress the swarm but to listen to it. Across Asia, unemployment, economic insecurity and democratic disillusionment are reshaping politics. India's cockroach swarm is unlikely to be the last sign of this trend.

Dr Madhavi Ravikumar teaches at the Department of Communication, University of Hyderabad, India.

Forid Alam, born in Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh, where he continues to live as part of a generation growing up in long-term displacement and statelessness.

Life in an open-air prison camp

My family's journey to the camp began in 1991, when Burma's military launched an exclusionary operation known as Operation Pyi Thaya, or 'Clean and Beautiful Nation'. They crossed into Bangladesh as refugees. In 1993, under an agreement involving UNHCR, Bangladesh and Burma, now known as Myanmar, a process called 'Operation Hope' promised protection and voluntary repatriation. More than three decades later, that hope remains unfulfilled. I am Forid Alam and this is my story.

I was born a refugee in Kutupalong camp in Bangladesh in December 1998. The camp became my first sky, my first road, my first prison. I inherited confinement. I was born into a refugee-hood that for my parents has lasted more than three decades. My story is of a people trapped between survival and rejection, between memory and uncertainty.

People often call the camps 'shelters', but they are open-air prisons in the truest sense. The fences may not always be made of unbreakable iron, but they exist in every part of our lives. We have been denied freedom of movement and expression, proper education, livelihood, dignity, equal treatment and, for many families, unity itself.

We grew up watching roads that we could see but could not walk. The outside world felt

physically close yet unreachable. A refugee born in the camp can spend decades living within a few kilometres of land without ever experiencing freedom. Restriction became normalised, as if movement itself were a privilege rather than a human right. Checkpoints, surveillance and the threat of arrest shaped ordinary life. A Rohingya asking for rights was often treated as ungrateful; one demanding justice could be seen as dangerous.

The camps themselves were overcrowded and suffocating. Families of six, eight, sometimes ten people lived in tiny 12-by-10-foot shelters made from bamboo, tarpaulin and mud. During monsoon seasons rainwater entered homes and destroyed belongings. In summer, the heat became unbearable. Fires regularly turned entire blocks into ashes within hours.

Camp residents gather around a tube well for water and daily washing. Shared facilities and overcrowding are part of everyday life in Kutupalong.

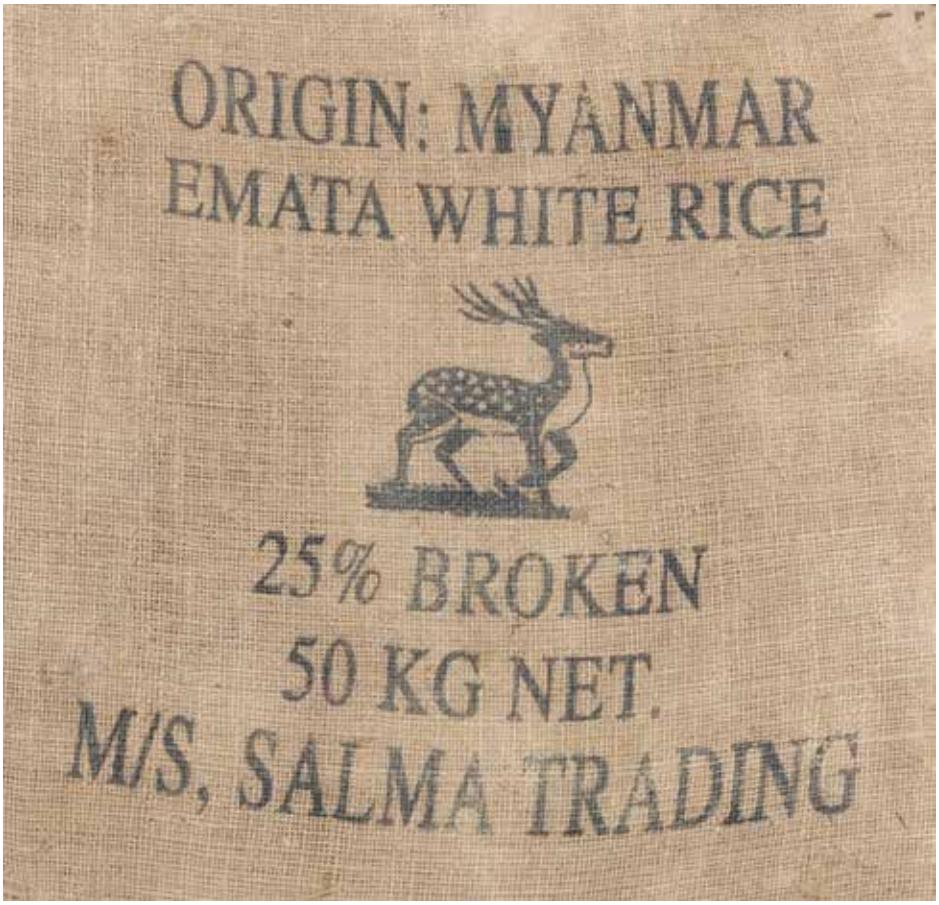
Education was one of the cruellest forms of deprivation. For decades, formal education was heavily restricted. We were allowed only limited learning up to primary, often without recognised curricula, proper certificates, or opportunities for higher studies. A refugee child could dream of becoming a doctor, engineer, teacher, or writer, but the system reminded us every day that such dreams were not meant for us. Those of us who tried to study beyond the permitted limits had to do so secretly, sometimes by hiding our identity within the host community.

Despite restrictions on formal education, many Rohingya students continue to pursue learning as a path toward dignity, opportunity and self-determination.

I remember studying under difficult conditions, fighting against the darkness of refugee-hood, hiding my identity, studying with few books, little electricity and almost no opportunity. Yet education became our resistance. Many Rohingya students studied in secret like me, borrowed books from others, and taught younger children voluntarily inside the camps, even though such efforts were often discouraged or restricted. We believed that knowledge was the only thing the fences could not fully imprison.

But even educated Rohingya refugees faced another painful reality: there was no future waiting for us. We were not allowed meaningful employment. Seeking livelihood was often portrayed as a burden on the host country's economy. Those who tried to work outside the camps risked harassment,

detention, or exploitation. We became dependent on humanitarian aid, not because we wanted dependency, but because policies denied our self-reliance. Poverty inside the camps was not accidental; it was manufactured by restriction.



Rice supplied to refugees bears the label "Origin: Myanmar", a reminder of the country many Rohingya were forced to flee but remain unable to return to safely.

This dependency slowly destroys human dignity. Imagine growing up knowing your food, movement, education, and future depend on decisions made by others. Imagine being treated not as a human being with rights, but as a problem to be managed. That is what concentrated refugee-hood feels like in Bangladesh. Bangladesh is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention, and its government often presents its role as a humanitarian burden carried on behalf of the world. For those of us inside the camps, this does not answer the deeper question: what is the plan for a life beyond dependency, restriction and indefinite waiting?

Asking for justice, fair treatment, or protection was interpreted as ingratitude. Inside the camps, justice was never equal. Power belonged to host administrators, security forces and systems beyond our control. A refugee's voice carried little weight. Complaints often disappeared into silence. Abuse, exploitation, and discrimination became things many endured quietly because speaking out could bring punishment. Back in 2002, my father raised his voice against a government plan for 'forced repatriation' and was jailed three times as a result. My father struggled quietly to preserve our dignity while having almost nothing.

Growing up in the camp also meant growing up stateless. Statelessness, for me, is not only the absence of citizenship. It is the absence of protection, belonging and recognition. It means watching illness, death and hardship pass through a family without the security that others take for granted.

Perhaps the most painful denial has been family unity. Refugee resettlement programmes, while lifesaving for some, also created invisible divisions inside my family. Some were split across continents, leaving behind emotional fractures that never healed. My family carries this wound across generations. Years ago, through a resettlement scheme to the United Kingdom, my grandmother and three of my father's brothers, along with around twenty family members, were resettled abroad. My father, however, remained trapped in the refugee camp with his children. From that moment, an invisible line separated our family into two worlds, those allowed to live with dignity and opportunity, and those left behind in confinement.

My father spent the rest of his life in the camp without seeing his mother again. He watched others rebuild their lives abroad while he remained with the same restrictions, poverty and uncertainty. He died in the camp, separated not by love, but by systems and borders.

Today, I am living through the same experience. After my father's death, two of my elder sisters, who had become the heads of our family, were resettled in Canada. Again, part

Years of displacement and overseas resettlement have separated many Rohingya families, leaving relatives divided across countries and generations.

of the family escaped the camp while the rest remained trapped inside it. I live with my younger siblings in uncertainty, somewhere between hope and abandonment.

This division is not only physical; it is psychological. One family member speaks of university, work, healthcare and freedom; another speaks of food rations, checkpoints, camp violence and survival. Even love struggles to bridge such unequal worlds. Refugee-hood slowly creates emotional distances that geography alone cannot explain.

I grew up with trauma inherited from parents who fled massacre, rape and persecution in Myanmar, only to face confinement in Bangladesh. For my family, hope itself has become a 35-year refugee experience. We have lived generation after generation inside temporary shelters that became permanent prisons. Without rights, my younger siblings and I fear ending our lives in the camp, as my parents and grandparents did.

I constantly struggle with one question: what does it mean to be human if your humanity is always questioned? A child who cannot study. A mother who loses hope. A father who cannot provide. A student whose talent remains trapped behind fences. These are not abstractions. They are the lives around me.

No human being deserves to spend their entire life inside an open-air prison. I do not ask for luxury. I ask for what every human deserves: dignity, freedom, education, safety, justice and the right to live as human beings, not as permanent outsiders to the world.

Forid Alam was born in Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh and continues to live there despite having found a way to gain a university education.

Nearly 1.2 million Rohingya refugees live in camps around Cox's Bazar, as prospects for safe and voluntary repatriation to Myanmar remain distant. Photo: Reuters

Bangladesh's Rohingya community: a crisis without an exit

When Bangladesh's new BNP-led government assumed office, Rohingya refugees once again found themselves listening closely to the language of power in Dhaka. The familiar words had returned: repatriation, shortage of funds, national security, and international cooperation. Sushmita S Preetha reports from Dhaka.

Prime Minister Tarique Rahman said before the election that the Rohingya would be welcome to remain in Bangladesh until it was safe for them to return. His government has since reaffirmed that the only sustainable solution is their 'safe, voluntary and dignified' repatriation to Myanmar. Few would disagree. The Rohingya belong in Myanmar, with citizenship, safety and rights restored. Bangladesh cannot be expected to carry indefinitely a crisis created by Myanmar's persecution and sustained by international failure.

But almost nine years after the 2017 exodus, repatriation has become a way of avoiding the much harder question: what rights and protections will the Rohingya have while safe return remains nowhere in sight? That question has become more urgent as the crisis grows more protracted and international support recedes. In May, the United Nations and its partners appealed for $710.5 million for the Rohingya response in 2026, to support up to 1.56 million Rohingya refugees and Bangladeshi host community members. The appeal is 26 per cent lower than the amount sought in 2025. The UN has itself described the plan as 'scaled-down' and 'hyper-prioritised', covering the minimum required to sustain life-saving assistance.

This is the grim arithmetic of the present moment: more people in need, fewer resources available, no credible path to return, and diminishing political willingness internationally to confront either Myanmar or the humanitarian consequences of its violence. Around 1.2 million Rohingya now live in Bangladesh, while renewed conflict in Rakhine State has pushed further arrivals across the border. In April, food support in the camps was reduced: the most severely food-insecure households continue to receive $12 per

person per month, while others received as little as $7.

While Bangladesh's burden is repeatedly acknowledged by the international community, declining funding has forced the humanitarian response to shift from sustaining lives with dignity to rationing increasingly limited forms of survival. The 2026 appeal, reduced even as the refugee population and its needs have grown, signals the normalisation of long-term containment without the political or financial commitment required to make that containment humane.

Humanitarian agencies have repeatedly warned that declining international funding is forcing reductions in assistance for Rohingya refugees. Photo: WFP

In effect, the absence of progress towards a durable solution is being managed through progressively lower standards of support for a population with little control over the conditions of its own survival. 'Bangladesh always believes in peaceful, dignified and sustainable migration; however, the Rohingya crisis has now become a complex and sensitive issue that poses a threat to our national security', said Bangladesh's Home Minister Salahuddin Ahmed, during a meeting with the UN Resident Coordinator in May. He called for increased humanitarian funding under the UN framework to address the crisis.

Bangladesh has legitimate reasons to demand substantially greater international support. The country did not create the persecution that displaced the Rohingya. Host communities in Cox's Bazar have absorbed enormous social, economic and environmental pressures over the last decade. But Bangladesh's own policies, which include confinement, restrictions on formal education and livelihoods, and the insistence that any meaningful improvement in refugees' lives risks weakening the commitment to repatriation, have helped produce the conditions now being cited as evidence of the crisis.

This is the contradiction that the new government inherits. The Rohingya are repeatedly described as dependent on humanitarian aid, as though dependency were intrinsic to refugee life. In reality, their vulnerability is closely tied to the denial of legal opportunities to work, move and study. As assistance shrinks, many refugees are compelled to find informal work in and around the camps, through small trading, day labour, transport work or poorly paid humanitarian roles. Because this work has little legal recognition, it leaves them vulnerable to exploitation, harassment, unsafe conditions and arrest. At the same time, the absence of recognised education, safe mobility and lawful income leaves young people with fewer routes towards a viable future and greater exposure to trafficking, criminal networks and armed influence.

These are genuine security concerns in the camps, as highlighted by the home minister. But they cannot be separated from a containment policy that restricts the very opportunities that might reduce desperation and insecurity.

For the BNP government, the politics of repatriation also carries


Refugee advocates argue that access to recognised education is essential if Rohingya children are not to lose an entire generation of opportunity. Photo: UNICEF

Restrictions on movement, employment and daily life remain central features of Bangladesh's containment-based approach to the Rohingya crisis. Photo: Rohingya Creative Production

a particular history. Government statements recall the repatriation of Rohingya during the BNP governments of the late 1970s and early 1990s as examples of successful leadership. In parliament, the foreign minister cited the return of 236,000 Rohingya under Khaleda Zia, mother of the present prime minister, after the 1992 influx. But political memory is not shared equally. Dhaka's narrative of earlier repatriation as decisive diplomacy sits uneasily beside Rohingya memories of return without durable rights, safety or any protection against being displaced once again.

Recent reporting from the camps suggests that refugees are not optimistic. Some hope the change of government may bring attention to their rights. Others fear that invocations of past repatriation drives may foreshadow renewed pressure to return before safety and citizenship are secured. Their concerns extend beyond return itself: they want education, livelihoods, movement and dignity while they remain in Bangladesh.

The political terrain in Myanmar has also fundamentally changed. The Myanmar military, responsible for the mass atrocities that forced hundreds of thousands of Rohingya into Bangladesh in 2017, no longer exercises authority in much of Rakhine State. The Arakan Army's rapid territorial expansion has altered power on the ground, particularly in northern Rakhine, while reports of abuse, insecurity and fraught relations with Rohingya communities persist. Any repatriation today faces a basic question: return to whose authority, under what guarantees, and protected by whom?

Ongoing conflict and uncertainty in Myanmar's Rakhine State continue to undermine prospects for a safe, voluntary and dignified return. Photo: Reuters

The new government has inherited an impossible crisis. It has also inherited the temptation to offer old solutions to a radically transformed reality: more diplomatic declarations, more appeals to the international community, more assurances that return remains the answer, even as the conditions for return recede further. There has been no indication that the BNP will consider a rights-based interim policy for the Rohingya, including expanded formal education, regulated income-generating opportunities, safer mobility, meaningful participation in camp decisions, and protection against any return driven by coercion, inducement or desperation. A government that repeatedly invokes repatriation without articulating refugees' rights in the present ends up offering an exit strategy for Bangladesh rather than a durable solution for the Rohingya.

The question before the BNP government is therefore stark. Will it treat repatriation as a promise of justice for the Rohingya, or as justification for denying them a liveable present? A people driven from their homeland cannot be kept in indefinite deprivation to preserve the fiction that their displacement remains temporary.

Sushmita S Preetha is a journalist and researcher based in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

President Sadyr Japarov has consolidated power since the 2020 revolution, but the collapse of his alliance with former security chief Kamchibek Tashiyev presents a new test for Kyrgyzstan's political stability. Photo: Presidential Press Service of Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan's ruling tandem breaks amid new sanctions scrutiny

Kyrgyzstan kickstarted summer with a diplomatic triumph, becoming the second Central Asian state after Kazakhstan to win a non-permanent UN Security Council seat. But new European Union sanctions over trade with Russia and the collapse of the republic's ruling 'tandem' have added a fresh dose of risk for a country where trouble is never far away, as Chris Rickleton reports.

Mountainous, landlocked and impoverished, Muslim-majority Kyrgyzstan endured revolutions in 2005 and 2010, while authoritarian regimes in neighbours such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were busy consolidating power. A third revolt, in 2020, brought hardline populists Sadyr Japarov and Kamchibek Tashiyev to power, following events so fluid that they even surprised the country's partners in the Kremlin.

Yet now the duo, known as 'the two friends', are friends no more; President Japarov dismissed his powerful national security chief Tashiyev in March and placed him under investigation along with dozens of others as part of a coup plotting investigation later in the spring. In June, a defiant Tashiyev appeared in court in the capital Bishkek.

With a current population of 7 million people, Kyrgyzstan was the second-poorest republic after Tajikistan at the time of the breakup of the Soviet Union. Historically those two countries, who reached a historic border settlement last year after bloody clashes in previous years, have vied for the title of the world's most 'remittance dependent' economies with others like Tonga and Nepal. Last year cash transfers sent home to Kyrgyzstan, mostly from Russia, amounted to about $3 billion.

Yet few countries have benefited more from recent geopolitical

instability than Kyrgyzstan. Last year the economy grew 11%. That has partly come from gold, which has nearly tripled in value since 2021, when Japarov realised an ambition he had held since his days in opposition by nationalising the flagship gold mine, Kumtor. But the re-export of goods from third countries to Russia has been another important part of the story.

Former security chief Kamchibek Tashiyev, once part of Kyrgyzstan's powerful ruling tandem, appeared in court after being dismissed and placed under investigation in a widening coup-plot inquiry. Photo: AKI Press

A paper by the Brookings Institution flagged exports to Kyrgyzstan from European countries rising by several thousand per cent in the years after 2022. Kyrgyzstan's exports to Russia rose dramatically, too. The United Kingdom recently sanctioned the A7 network, a Kremlin-backed financial system that London says used cryptocurrency and banking channels, including in Kyrgyzstan, and claimed to have processed more than $90 billion last year. The application to Kyrgyzstan in April of the EU's 'anti-circumvention tool' applies only to specific dual-use goods that could aid Russia's invasion of Ukraine. China, Kyrgyzstan's largest trade partner, is unlikely to pay too much heed.

But the new scrutiny on a government that, according to the EU, demonstrated a 'systematic failure to prevent' transfer of such goods to Russia will give third countries in the Middle East and elsewhere pause for thought before using Kyrgyzstan as a back door for trade with Russia. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development termed the EU anti-circumvention measure a 'dominant near-term risk' for growth, alongside higher energy prices. The IMF warned that rising lending and inflation risked overheating the economy.

Economic and sanctions pressures come at a time when the foundation for the regime's stability – an alliance between northerner Japarov and southerner Tashiyev – has ruptured, apparently with no hope of repair. Both were charismatic and sometimes physically violent politicians, and their political bond transcended a geographic rivalry that remains important in local politics.

Japarov was serving jail time for kidnapping an official at the time protests over a disputed parliamentary vote plunged Kyrgyzstan into another bout of instability in October 2020. The charges – which he always denied – related to a rally against Kumtor's private investor, the Canadian company Centerra Gold that spun out of control in 2013, as a local official was taken hostage and doused in petrol.

As rival groups jostled around embattled then-president Sooronbay Jeenbekov, Tashiyev lobbied for the release of Japarov as their supporters massed in the streets. The two had cut their teeth as oil trading businessmen and both held posts in the government of Kurmanbek Bakiyev, Kyrgyzstan's second president.

When that government was felled in the second Kyrgyz revolution in 2010 – which was bloodier and more destructive than the Tulip Revolution before it – they became the interim government's

Kumtor, Kyrgyzstan's largest gold mine, remains central to the country's economy and a symbol of President Japarov's nationalist economic agenda. Photo: AP

nationalist opponents in a newly emboldened parliament. They had two clear goals: returning to power and nationalising Kyrgyzstan's most impressive economic asset, the Kumtor gold mine.

The China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway is reshaping regional trade routes and deepening Beijing's economic influence in Central Asia. Photo: Kyrgyz Government Handout

Amid the chaos in Bishkek, even Russia was playing catchup. The Kremlin had offered a clear show of support for Jeenbekov during Japarov's remarkable rise from prison to the presidency and reportedly gave a diplomat sent by Japarov's interim administration a cold reception when he visited Moscow. Moscow's discomfort deepened when Tashiyev, a tubthumping nationalist, was handed the post of Chairman of the State Committee for National Security (SCNS), an area of Kyrgyz government where Russian connections run particularly deep. Tashiyev soon showed he was more than just a senior official.

Nowadays, the battle for influence in the country is a head-to-head, with Chinese influence increasing at Moscow's expense since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began. While Russia-dependent trade corridors have suffered as a result of the war, China, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have begun work on a megaproject that offers an alternative: the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, a $4.7 billion link featuring dozens of tunnels and bridges through high-altitude terrain.

At the same time, Japarov's administration went further than others before it in targeting media outlets that the Kremlin regards as proxies for the West. Journalists and civil society leaders who cooperated with foreign organisations have been subjected to long stints in jail. The result is a state becoming more authoritarian at home while trying to remain useful to its two strategic partners abroad. Days after defeating the Philippines for a UN Security Council seat, Japarov called for sanctions to require UN approval — a position that aligns him with Moscow and Beijing's criticism of unilateral Western sanctions.

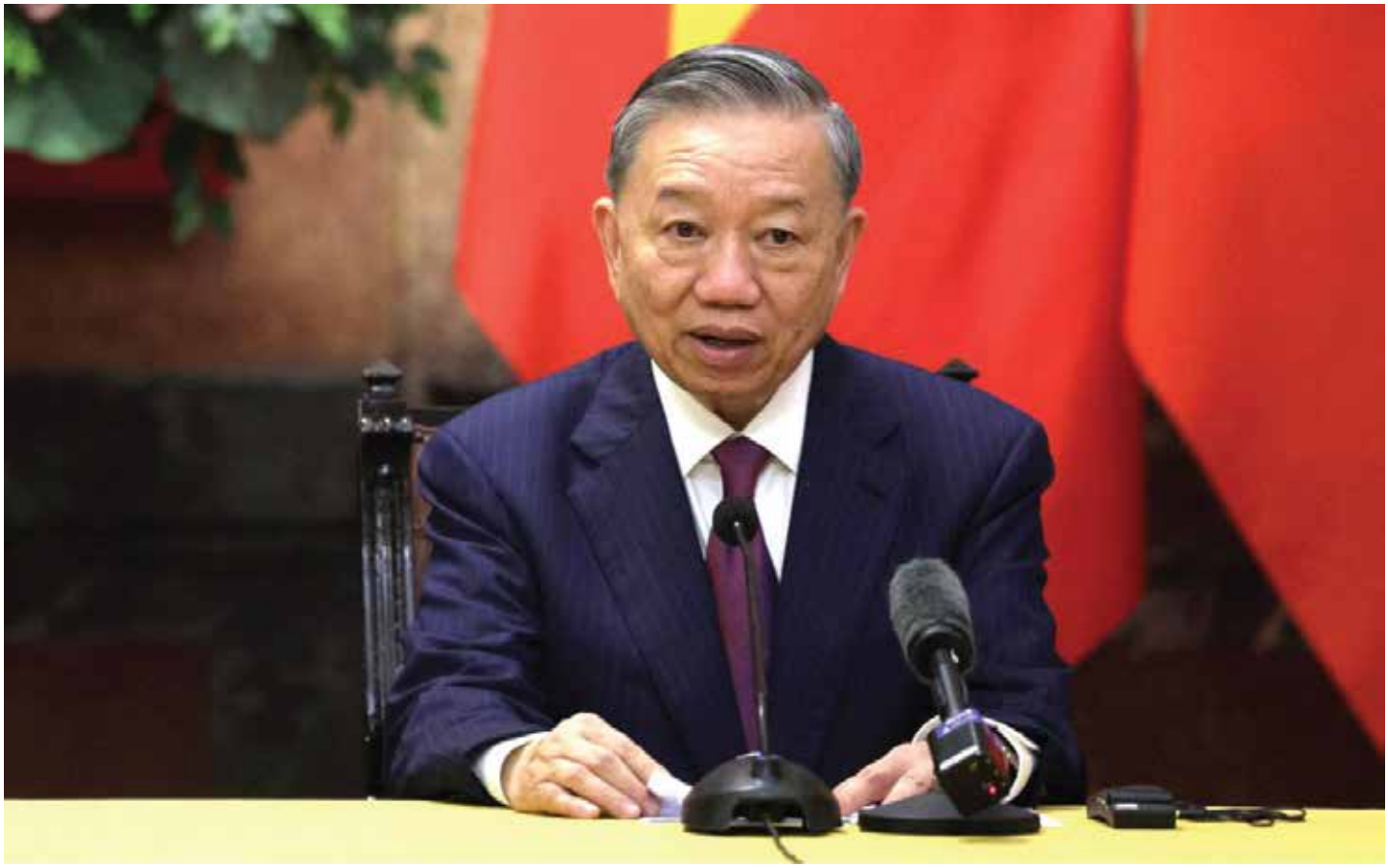
Yet Kyrgyzstan has a long history of confounding expectations, and neither Moscow nor Beijing can ever be entirely sure what the future holds there. At the time of his dismissal, Tashiyev dominated both the security services and a large informal political network centred on his home land in the south.

The charges against him centre on the so-called 'letter of 75', an appeal by former officials and public figures calling for presidential elections to be held in 2026 rather than 2027. While there was no reference to Tashiyev running in such an election, Japarov's team viewed it as the beginning of a mutiny.

The trial of the former security chief is more than a falling-out between former allies. It is a test of whether Japarov can centralise power without provoking the instability that has repeatedly afflicted Kyrgyz politics.

Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov meets UN Secretary-General António Guterres in Cholpon-Ata in July 2024. Photo: Presidential Press Service of Kyrgyzstan

Chris Rickleton was a correspondent for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and earlier was AFP Central Asia correspondent based in Almaty.



Vietnamese leader To Lam has consolidated power while pursuing ambitious economic reforms, prompting comparisons with Xi Jinping's model of governance in China. Photo: Wikimedia Commons/CC BY 4.0

The China-fication of Vietnam

From the history archives to the state media to the presidency, something is happening in Vietnam. New rules, new restrictions and new structures all point to a change in the political system, as Bill Hayton reports.

Nearly 14 years after Xi Jinping took power in China, the leadership in Vietnam is following in his footsteps. While the economy is being encouraged to let rip, political control is being concentrated in fewer hands and the space for independent thinking is shrinking.

In recent months, for example, researchers in Vietnam's history archives have reported that the number of files they are able to access has been shrinking. A new law, which came into effect last year, has resulted in whole subject areas being taken offline with academics no longer able to examine historical records of Vietnam's dealings with foreign countries, among other subjects. The fact that the Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) issued three regulations on the subject tells us this is something the party takes very seriously. The Chinese archives did something similar back in 2014 as a prelude to taking much greater control of the teaching of national history.

State-owned media are also being placed under tighter control. In April, the Voice of Vietnam (VTV) and the Vietnam News Agency were placed under the direct management of the CPV Central Committee. While this might seem like a minor change, given that the government is run by the CPV, it reduces the political space for the expression of even the mildest criticism of official policies. Again, this copies a decision taken by the Chinese authorities back in 2018.

But the most visible China-style change is the decision by the CPV to combine the roles of party general secretary and state president. This is something that has only been done on a temporary basis in recent Vietnamese history. In a vote of the National Assembly in April, the CPV made this a formal arrangement, copying the situation in China. Until this year, the CPV preferred to spread power across four or five senior figures. But the general secretary of the CPV, To Lam, will now hold a key state role in addition to his control of the Communist Party's structures.

In short, the Communist Party is taking direct control of the levers of power in Vietnam. More precisely, a group from the Ministry of Public Security, which considers itself the 'sword and shield' of the party, is taking over. Even more precisely, a group connected with the Hung Yen province department of the Ministry of Public Security is now in charge. This network of To Lam's allies is, in effect, a state within a state within a state within a state.

The main reason for concentrating power in the hands of such a small group is that the CPV knows that it is embarking on a very risky strategy. It has set an extraordinarily ambitious growth target – to achieve high-income status by 2045, the centenary of the declaration of independence by the (communist-led) Democratic Republic of Vietnam. To Lam has declared that this would complete Vietnam's transition to socialism. But to do that, the economy needs to grow at around ten per cent a year for the next two decades.

Recent reforms have brought major state media organisations under more direct Communist Party oversight, narrowing space for independent criticism.

The only way to achieve that is to unleash the country's entrepreneurial spirit. Since taking power in 2024, To Lam has been downsizing the state, restructuring local government and even declaring that officials shouldn't pursue an anti-corruption agenda too zealously if it would inhibit growth. This amounts to a reversal of his predecessor's attitude, for whom corruption was a mortal threat to Communist Party rule. Instead, To Lam is hoping that by keeping the reins of power close to him and his network, he can prevent things getting out of control.

All parts of the state are being told to go for growth. Infrastructure investment will be a big driver of the domestic economy, at least for the next few years. But many developments, like a plan to redevelop the banks of the Red River in the capital Hanoi, will displace thousands of people. Their objections will not be allowed to get in the way of progress. The same is true of the

Vietnam's National Assembly has formally endorsed changes that further concentrate political authority within the Communist Party leadership. Photo: Reuters

plans for a Trump golf course in To Lam's favourite province, Hung Yen.

The skyline of Hanoi, Vietnam's capital, reflects the country's ambitions as its leadership bets on rapid economic growth, infrastructure expansion and investment to achieve high-income status by 2045. Photo: Hieucd

The knock-on effects for freedom of thought and expression are already apparent. Until 2023, it was possible for relatively independent think-tanks to make public comments on policy. But after several climate and energy experts were arrested for criticising Vietnam's plans to expand coal power, that space has closed. The National Assembly, once a venue where government ministers could be held accountable to some degree, has regressed to its previous 'rubber stamp' role.

Like China, the Vietnamese leadership is also working to extend its 'long arm' overseas. It has recently concluded a security agreement with Thailand that will worry the many Vietnamese journalists and activists based in Bangkok and elsewhere. Given that Bangkok is where organisations such as the BBC's Vietnamese Service are based, the move is likely to have a chilling effect on independent media.

For many years, the Vietnamese leadership appeared to be more willing to accept a range of views in society and worked with international partners on many legal and political reforms. Those days now seem to be over. Like China, Vietnam is doubling down on the Leninist model of politics. The Communist Party will be in charge of everything and there will be minimal space for other forces.

Although there are still problems in the relationship between the two countries, not least in the South China Sea, their ruling communist parties co-operate in the 'dark arts' of political control and managing a restive population. The two ministries of public security have frequent meetings to discuss 'safeguarding political security' and other relevant matters.

The risk, of course, is that the Party, or rather the small group currently directing the Party, does not have all the answers and will be found wanting when plans don't work or when a crisis hits. When that happens, the country's modernising spirits may have to be tamed in a very old-fashioned way.

The Ministry of Public Security has become increasingly influential under Vietnam's new leadership, reinforcing the Party's emphasis on political control and stability. Photo: VNA/VNS Photo Phạm Kiên

Bill Hayton is the author of *Vietnam: Rising Dragon* (Yale, 2020) and *A Brief History of Vietnam* (Tuttle, 2022). He was previously the BBC's reporter in Vietnam and is an Associate Fellow with the Asia-Pacific Programme at Chatham House in London.

Large casino and entertainment complexes in Cambodia have become symbols of the country's multibillion-dollar scam economy, which authorities say they are now working to dismantle. Photo: Ken Kobayashi

Cambodia cracks down, but scam networks move on

Cambodia wants to show the world it is finally cleaning up its multibillion-dollar scam economy. But locals and experts warn that the syndicates' roots remain deep, and that the business is dispersing across Southeast Asia rather than disappearing. Nyein Chan Aye reports.

Cambodia's government is trying to show the world that it no longer tolerates the scam economy that turned parts of the country into a global base for online fraud, forced labour and money laundering. The signs are visible: raids, deportations, extraditions, and a new cybercrime law. The money involved is enormous. A 2025 study by the US-based Humanity Research Consultancy estimated Cambodia's scam industry to be worth $12.5 billion to $19 billion a year. An earlier United States Institute of Peace study estimated that Mekong-based syndicates steal more than $43.8 billion annually.

In Phnom Penh, 35-year-old construction worker Sophea is sceptical of government claims: 'The general public believes online scams have not yet been fully and thoroughly cleaned up across the entire country'. He says the masterminds have not all been arrested and without investigations reaching powerful people, the crackdown would only touch 'the fingertips or the tips of the nails.'

The official crackdown

Prime Minister Hun Manet ordered the authorities to attack scam networks 'at the root' without delay, tolerance or exception. In March the National Assembly passed a law criminalising online fraud, scam-centre leadership, recruitment, illicit data collection and scam-linked money laundering, with penalties up to life imprisonment and asset seizure. An April statement said the authorities had handled more than 250 online scam cases since July 2025 involving 91 casino sites and about 1,089 suspects. More than 13,000 foreigners had been deported since early 2025.

But experts say the official timetable itself shows the problem. Jason Tower, senior expert at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime,

Cambodian authorities have launched raids, arrests and deportations as part of a nationwide campaign against online fraud networks. Photo: AP

pointed to the early promise that scam centres could be cleared out within one month. Tower said the industry involves an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 people. He said 'this is not the kind of thing that just simply is shut off overnight.' According to Tower, the short timeline worried observers because it suggested a campaign-style operation rather than a long-term dismantling. Tower described the current situation as 'a state of chaos,' with tens of thousands fleeing compounds: some trafficking victims, others criminal actors, and many stranded or at risk of extortion, re-trafficking or recruitment into new hubs.

Lindsey Kennedy, research director at the Eyewitness Project, sees this crackdown as more meaningful than previous ones. In the past, companies were tipped off and moved workers before raids. She said this time is different because some compounds were truly raided and bosses fled, allowing tens of thousands of victims to escape. But she shares Tower's concern. Many companies have moved to Myanmar or Laos, she said, while 'very few genuinely high-level arrests' have been made, meaning the main players remain free to rebuild elsewhere.

In June a report by Amnesty International echoed those concerns, saying more than 70% of 86 identified compounds appeared to have been bypassed and none of 73 survivors interviewed had been recognised as trafficking victims.

Exporting the crisis

The scam economy has never been only Cambodian. It is a regional business built on borders, casinos, real estate, fake recruitment, crypto laundering and corrupt protection. Victims are global; workers come from across Asia, Africa and beyond.

'This is real disruption, but it is only impacting the visible front end—the compounds—of a deeper problem', said Jacob Sims, a visiting fellow at Harvard University's Asia Center and an expert on transnational crime and human rights in Southeast Asia. 'The elites running the compounds remain unaccountable, and the primary money laundering and underground banking channels remain intact.'

Tower said one of the most serious consequences is that people were allowed to leave Cambodia freely instead of being processed through a law enforcement and victim-screening system. 'Many of these are criminal actors who've flooded across borders into other countries where they've resumed scamming', Tower said. 'This has really become something of Cambodia's gift to the world. They've unleashed this flood of scammers onto other countries.'

Reports of scam suspects and workers have appeared beyond Cambodia, from Vietnam and Indonesia to Sri Lanka and African countries such as Uganda. Cambodia and Myanmar remain major scam hubs, Tower said. 'I don't see that going away anytime soon', he said, pointing to large scam parks along Myanmar's border with Thailand and continuing operations in Cambodia and Laos.

Online scam compounds often feature razor wire fences and barred windows to prevent workers from escaping. Photo: Reuters

Pressure from Beijing

China now sits at the centre of Cambodia's crackdown. Beijing's pressure became more visible in April, when Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Defence Minister Dong Jun visited Phnom Penh. China's Foreign Ministry said Wang told Cambodian officials that combating online gambling and telecom fraud was vital to public safety, and that both sides must 'resolutely and thoroughly remove this cancer.' Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn said Cambodia would 'resolutely combat' those crimes with China.

Experts warn that crackdowns in one country can push scam operators and workers across borders, spreading the problem throughout Southeast Asia. Source: Amnesty International

Kin Phea, director general of the International Relations Institute of Cambodia, said Cambodia's response is driven by both domestic priorities and Chinese engagement. China, he said, wants to protect its citizens, fight transnational crime and protect its regional reputation, while Cambodia wants stability and credibility. China is taking the scam issue more seriously, Sims said, partly because it has become embarrassing for Beijing at home and abroad.

Tower sees a more complicated China story: 'China helped to enable all of this,' he said, referring to Chinese state-owned enterprises that built infrastructure later used as industrial-scale scam compounds and to China-linked criminal actors in Cambodia. But since 2023, China has also increased pressure as the United States, Britain, South Korea and others exposed, sanctioned and indicted scam operators.

Beyond the compounds

The raids have hit the compounds. They have not yet proved that Cambodia can hit the system behind them. Sims said Cambodia's scam economy 'appears to go well beyond a traditional law enforcement issue', and described it as linked to 'the upper echelons of the ruling party's elite patronage system.' The main beneficiaries, he said, are political and economic elites who gained as landlords and protectors of the syndicates.

Workers say the rise and fall of scam-linked developments has left many ordinary Cambodians facing economic uncertainty and debt.

Kin Phea said the issue is now understood in Cambodia as more than policing. It touches governance, national reputation, economic sustainability and social trust. A meaningful response, he said, requires regional coordination, intelligence sharing, financial monitoring, cybercrime enforcement and anti-corruption measures.

For construction worker Sophea, the issue is not abstract. Scam-linked buildings, casinos and Chinese-backed projects may create short-term work for drivers, construction workers and suppliers. But after raids, he said, buildings are shuttered, vehicles are returned damaged, and ordinary people are left with debt and hardship. He wants a cleanup that reaches everyone. 'We want to see a deep, transparent and fair cleanup under the law—one with no exceptions'. Only then, he said, can Cambodia restore trust among citizens and investors, and rebuild an economy known not for scam compounds, but for honest work.

Nyein Chan Aye is a Washington-based journalist who writes on Southeast Asia. He previously worked for the BBC and Voice of America.

Lijia Zhang in her early years in Nanjing. As a young factory worker, she would later become involved in the 1989 pro-democracy movement.

Remembering Tiananmen

In China, 4 June is a sensitive date. As the anniversary approaches, an old ritual unfolds: censors spring into action, social media posts disappear and searches for 'Tiananmen', 'June Fourth', '1989' are scrubbed from the internet. Activists are placed under surveillance, while foreign journalists mark an event that officially never happened. For the writer and former factory worker Lijia Zhang, the date holds special significance.

For more than three decades, the Chinese Communist Party has tried to erase the memory of Tiananmen. The effort suggests how deeply the Party remains haunted by it. I know because I was there. Not in Tiananmen Square itself, but in Nanjing, where I was a 25-year-old factory worker. Like millions of Chinese, I watched events unfold with excitement and hope. The student demonstrations quickly became a broader movement, drawing support from all walks of life. I organised a protest by workers from my missile factory in support of the students.

Poverty had forced me out of school at sixteen and into a factory that produced intercontinental missiles capable of reaching North America. The factory was, in many ways, a miniature communist state. We lived in identical apartment blocks, attended endless political meetings and were forbidden from wearing lipstick or flared trousers.

I spent a decade there but never received a promotion, even after earning a degree in mechanical engineering. My bosses suspected I had a perm, a sign of bourgeois tendencies, though I was simply one of the few Chinese people blessed with naturally curly hair. Every month, women were required to show menstrual blood to the

'period police' to prove they were not pregnant.

Desperate for an escape route, I taught myself English. Looking back, learning English changed my life. What I acquired was not merely a new language, but an entirely different way of seeing the world. As my English improved, I began listening to the BBC, whose broadcasts sounded radically different from the propaganda I heard every day. Gradually, I became more politically aware.

When the student-led pro-democracy movement began in April 1989, my ears were glued to the radio. As it gathered momentum across the country, I felt compelled to do something. For the first time in my life, I felt history opening before me. My fellow protesters and I believed that ordinary people could help shape our country's future.

Then, before dawn on June 4, came the sound of gunfire. The movement was crushed. The hopes of a generation were shattered. Like many others, I learned a painful lesson about the limits of political change in China.

What has fascinated me ever since is not only the crackdown itself but the Party's determination to erase it from public memory. The campaign has been disturbingly successful. Many young Chinese know little or nothing about Tiananmen. Some have never heard of it; others know only fragments.

In 2013, when the political atmosphere was still more relaxed than it is today, I gave a book talk attended by university students. Afterwards,

Nanjing in the 1980s, a period of economic transition when everyday life remained tightly structured by state institutions and work units.

an earnest-looking young man approached me. 'Did the government really open fire on the students on June 4, 1989?' he asked. 'That was just Western propaganda, wasn't it?' I have often been struck by the gap between my memories and their knowledge.

Personally, I have never regretted what I did in 1989. I

A Buddha statue produced by the missile factory where Lijia Zhang worked. In 1988, employees were invited to pose for photographs beside it.

was repeatedly interrogated by the police and suspended from work, yet it remains the most meaningful thing I have ever done. It shaped my understanding of China and gave me a lifelong fascination with politics and power.

Looking back, I do not see June 4 simply as a tragedy. I see it as a watershed. The movement arose not only from a desire for democracy and human rights but also from widespread frustration with everyday life. Corruption was rampant, inflation was rising, and personal freedom was limited.

The Party's response was twofold. Politically, it tightened control. Economically, however, it accelerated reform and allowed people greater personal freedom. Chinese citizens today can choose where to live, what careers to pursue and, to a much greater extent than before, how to live. I have mentioned that I failed to win promotion partly because of my curly hair. Today, you can wear whatever hairstyle you

Workers from a missile factory in Nanjing join a demonstration in support of China's 1989 pro-democracy movement. The bespectacled woman on the far left is the author, Lijia Zhang.

like, dye it pink or shave it off entirely.

The cage remains, but it has grown so large that many no longer notice its bars.

In that sense, the protests of 1989 were not an absolute failure. Some of the grievances that fuelled them were addressed. Without that shock, China's rulers might never have felt compelled to expand the cage. The Party defeated the movement, but it has never fully escaped its legacy. It fears Tiananmen less as an immediate threat than as a memory it cannot control.

What Tiananmen represents, however, is a challenge to the Party's preferred narrative. The official story of modern China is one of stability, prosperity and national rejuvenation under Communist Party rule.

Lijia Zhang later recounted her experiences as a factory worker in her memoir *Socialism Is Great!*, which explores life inside a Chinese missile factory during the reform era.

Tiananmen reminds people that there was another possible path, and another vision of China's future.

When I was young, the Chinese government encouraged us to remember past humiliations and injustices. It understood that memory shapes identity. The same principle applies to Tiananmen. An event of such magnitude cannot be permanently erased. It survives in family stories, private conversations, overseas communities, memoirs and fragments of testimony.

Thirty-seven years later, the Party may have largely succeeded in making Tiananmen invisible. It has not succeeded in making it irrelevant. The desire for dignity, fairness and a voice in public life still persists beneath the surface. When repression becomes too heavy-handed, people can still push back, as they did during the White Paper protests of late 2022.

For me, the events of 1989 remain a reminder of a moment when millions of Chinese briefly imagined a different future. The tanks crushed that dream, but they did not entirely extinguish the questions that inspired it.

That is why, every year, the censors return to work. Not because Tiananmen is remembered too much, but because it is remembered at all.

Lijia Zhang is the author of the memoir *Socialism is Great!* based on the decade she spent working in a missile factory. Her novel *Lotus* explores the life of a Chinese sex worker.

Delegates gather at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Asia's premier security forum. Photo: AthenaLab

Signals from Shangri-La 2026

US allies in Asia, as in Europe, are increasing their military spending in response to President Trump's new doctrine. But three years of signals from Asia's premier security forum tell a more unsettled story than Washington may be prepared to acknowledge. Howard Zhang reports.

When Japan's Defence Minister Shinjiro Koizumi took to the podium at this year's Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on 31 May, the atmosphere inside the well-air-conditioned conference hall felt as heated as the tropical weather outside. Having watched US Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth read out a list of 'model allies' to be rewarded with expedited arms sales and deeper intelligence sharing, Koizumi gently asked Hegseth for a message of reassurance. It was an awkward yet telling moment between two staunch Cold War allies. Tokyo, now under Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, is spending more, coordinating more, and shouldering greater regional security burdens than at any point in the post-war era. And yet Japan still felt the need to ask, publicly, whether America was actually committed.

That exchange got lost in summit coverage which was dominated by headline friction between Washington and Beijing. Yet it was precisely the signal that tells you where things actually stand in the Indo-Pacific. Looking across the three most recent Shangri-La summits, one under Biden and two under Trump, a clear pattern has emerged: Indo-Pacific nations are adapting to Trump's America, but adaptation does not equal alignment, and the region's responses are more varied, and in some cases more unsettling, for long-term American strategy than the surface picture suggests.

Prize list replaces partnership

Where Biden's Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin came to Singapore in 2024 speaking of 'new convergence' and Pete Hegseth in 2025 still framed China as an 'imminent threat' to Taiwan, Hegseth's speech this year was qualitatively different. The new US National Security Strategy had signalled the shift: allies must contribute more, and those that do will be prioritised. At Shangri-La 2026, Hegseth listed his favoured partners – Australia, Japan, India, Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, South Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand. He made clear that 'model allies'

Japan's Defence Minister Shinjiro Koizumi speaks at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore amid growing questions about the durability of the US-Japan alliance. Photo: Reuters

would 'move to the front of the queue'. The partnership had become a prize list.

Equally telling was what he did not say. Taiwan went unmentioned – the first time in more than a decade that a US defence chief had left the island out of his Shangri-La address. AUKUS, the trilateral security pact between the US, UK and Australia built explicitly around countering Chinese power, did not feature. Nor did the Quad, Washington's flagship democratic grouping in the Indo-Pacific. Three of the most visible institutional expressions of America's China-facing strategic architecture, and not one of them named.

Three silences, one signal

These omissions sit alongside other signals that together form a pattern uncomfortable to dismiss. Days after Trump left Beijing, the White House paused a $14 billion arms package to Taiwan that Congress had already cleared. Trump described Taiwan's arms package as 'a very good negotiating chip for us', a framing that broke with every previous administration's public position. Within the same fortnight, Xi met Putin in Beijing and signed more than 40 cooperation agreements, reaffirming their strategic partnership days after hosting Trump. Then came the Xi-Kim summit in Pyongyang, where Xi acknowledged North Korea's 'sovereignty, security and development interests' in language that analysts at the American Enterprise Institute noted implicitly legitimised Pyongyang's demands for sanctions relief.

No formal bargain has been announced, and whatever was or was not agreed in Beijing remains opaque. But the cumulative pattern raises a question the region is quietly asking: if Taiwan's security, AUKUS and the Quad are all too sensitive to mention in public, what exactly is on the table in private, and who was consulted?

China's absence is its argument

Beijing's response across three years is consistent enough to constitute a considered strategy. In 2024, Defence Minister Dong Jun attended in person. He was combative on Taiwan and the South China Sea but present and attempting to shape the room. Since then, Beijing has sent only scholars. Two consecutive absences invite speculation about the PLA's anti-corruption campaign – Dong's two predecessors both received suspended death sentences earlier this year – though his appearance alongside Xi in Pyongyang in early June puts those rumours to rest for now.

The more durable explanation is categorical. A serving PLA general described attending as walking into 'a lion's den intended to directly counter Western disinformation' and China's defence ministry condemned Washington for using the dialogue to 'create disputes, sow discord, provoke confrontation and seek selfish interests'. Senior diplomat

US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth outlined a new approach that rewards 'model allies' with deeper cooperation, signalling a shift from traditional alliance management toward conditional partnership. Photo: Reuters

Wang Yi went to the Munich Security Conference in February rather than Singapore in May, choosing ground where he could contest the normative order on his own terms. Beijing turns up where the argument is worth having.

What it chose to do inside the room at the Shangri-La Dialogue was pointed nonetheless. Chinese delegates directed their sharpest criticism not at Washington but at Tokyo, questioning Japan's standing to speak about regional security given its wartime history – a deliberate effort to pressure the US-led coalition where it is most susceptible to fracture.

As Beijing kept its distance from the Shangri-La Dialogue, China continued to deepen strategic ties with Russia through high-level diplomatic and security engagements. Photo: Reuters

Three ways the Indo-Pacific adapts

The rest of the Indo-Pacific has not waited for clarification. Regional powers have begun adapting in at least three distinct ways.

The first is willing integration. Japan and Australia have broadly aligned with Washington's direction, spending more, deepening interoperability, accepting the burden-sharing logic. Japan's adaptation is the more consequential, involving not just increased defence expenditure but a genuine shift in how Tokyo talks about its security role: less apologetic, more direct about regional threats, more willing to be seen as an independent actor.

The second is transactional autonomy. India's instincts – issue-based partnerships, no formal commitments, cooperation on its own terms – fit the Trump era more comfortably than they fitted Biden's emphasis on rules-based order. At Shangri-La, India's defence secretary held talks with US counterparts while simultaneously engaging NATO officials: India intends to remain indispensable to multiple frameworks by belonging fully to none.

The third is perhaps the most instructive. In 2025 President Macron of France had stood at this same podium and argued that the era of non-alignment was definitively over. Vietnam's president, who leads a communist one-party state sharing a land border with China, delivered remarks pointing in precisely the opposite direction. This year, Washington named Vietnam a trusted partner and placed it on the model-ally prize list alongside treaty allies. Hanoi accepted without allowing the designation to constrain its posture. Speaking two strategic languages simultaneously is an art form Vietnam has been practising for fifty years.

Taiwan continues to strengthen its defences amid growing uncertainty over regional security commitments and the future balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. Photo: AP

The keynote shift nobody mentioned

The reality is that the Indo-Pacific has not coalesced around Trump's security framework. It is adapting to it, which is a different thing. Allies are spending more, but some because the security environment demands it regardless of what Washington does. Partners are lining up, but on terms that preserve their freedom to manoeuvre. China has decided the forum is no longer worth attending to contest. And somewhere in all of this, Taiwan has approved nearly $25 billion in additional defence spending and is waiting to find out whether the silence around it is temporary, or the shape of things to come.

Howard Zhang is a geopolitical analyst and former BBC editor specialising in Indo-Pacific issues.

The Arun-3 Hydropower Project in eastern Nepal illustrates how large-scale hydropower development is increasingly linked to regional electricity trade and cross-border energy cooperation. Photo: Collected

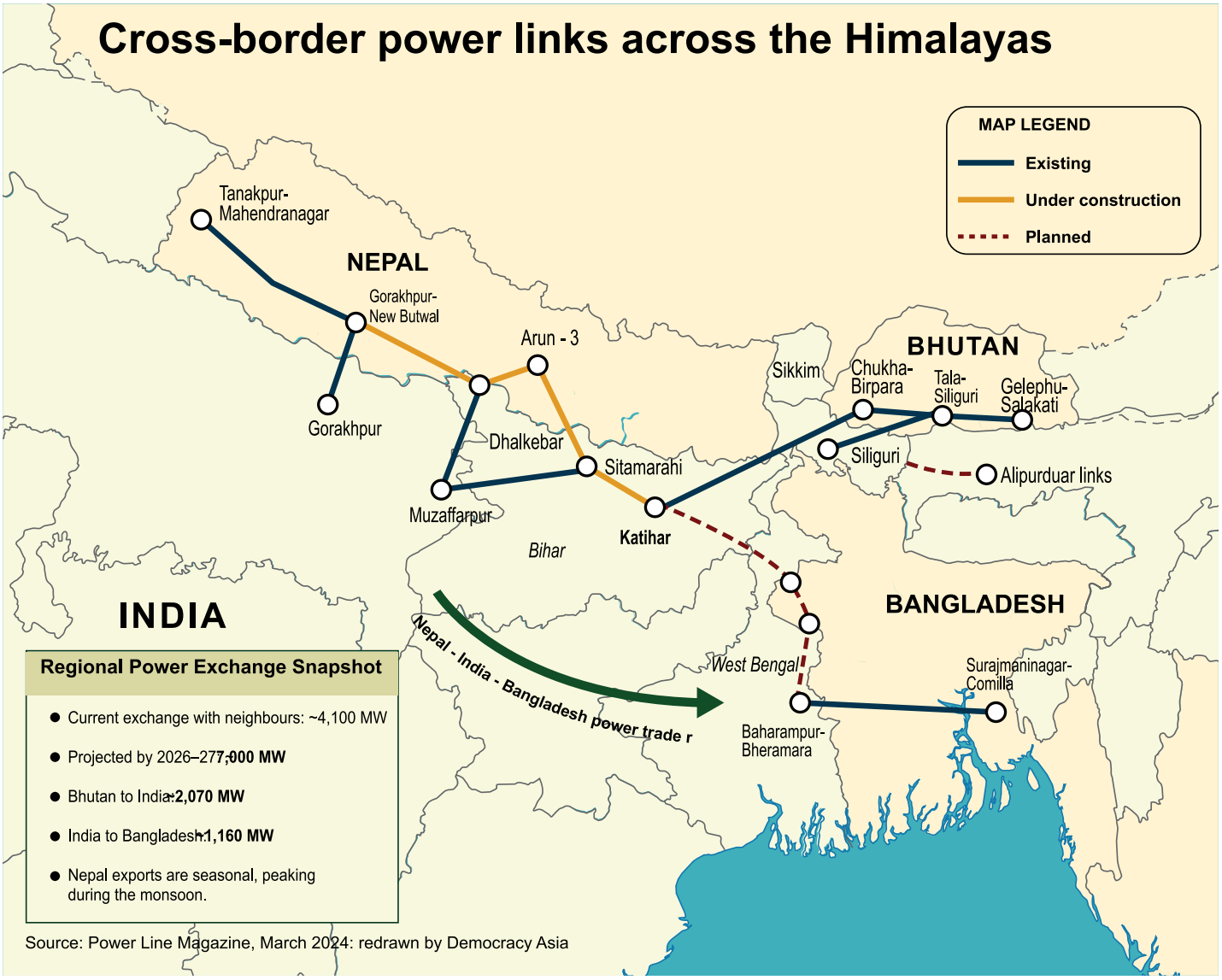
Power lines across the Himalayas

For much of the past two decades, South Asia's energy security has been defined by distance, particularly its dependence on oil and gas imports from the Gulf. Recent volatility in the Middle East has added urgency to a quieter, longer-term trend: the push to trade electricity across the region's own borders. Udisha Saklani reports.

At first glance, the case seems obvious. The region's renewable resources are large and complementary, with tens of thousands of megawatts of untapped hydropower sitting in the Himalayan rivers of Nepal and Bhutan, alongside India's rapidly expanding solar and wind capacity. Cross-border electricity trade has expanded, transmission lines have been built or upgraded, and new bilateral and even trilateral deals are emerging. Yet governance of electricity flows remains fragmented and highly sensitive to politics, producing an energy architecture that is interconnected without being integrated.

Hydropower and the promise of regional trade

Nepal and Bhutan are central to this story. Nepal, which not long ago struggled with daily power cuts, now exports surplus hydropower to India through the wet season, and has recently begun sending small volumes of electricity onward to Bangladesh through India under a new tripartite arrangement. Bhutan's case is more established: hydropower exports to India provide a steady revenue stream that few other small economies in the region can match.



Cross-border transmission corridors are gradually linking South Asian electricity markets, connecting hydropower resources in the Himalayas with growing demand centres across the region.

For both countries, these exports are framed as a development strategy, turning an abundant resource into jobs, royalties and reduced dependence on aid. For importers such as Bangladesh, cross-border trade can offer cheaper and cleaner electricity amid rising demand and constrained gas supplies.

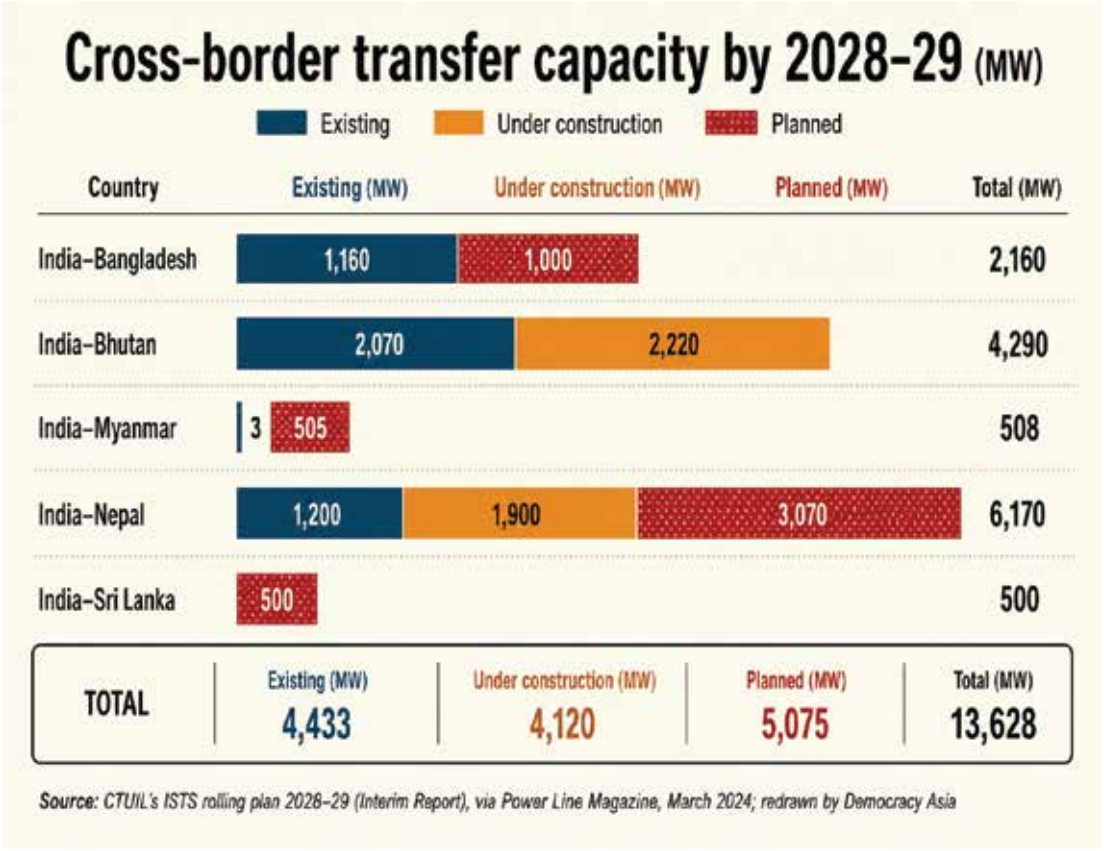
The region's seasonal rhythms also help. Himalayan hydropower peaks during the monsoon, just as solar output in parts of India dips with cloud cover. In principle, this complementarity could support a more flexible and efficient regional system.

A connected system without a common framework

Despite this complementarity, cross-border trade has developed through separate bilateral deals rather than a shared regional system. There is no single set of rules governing how power moves between countries. Instead, each arrangement is negotiated individually, and can change as regulations, politics or foreign policy priorities shift.

India sits at the centre of this system. Much cross-border power trade must pass through India's transmission network and requires its regulatory approval. India is also the main buyer for power from Nepal and Bhutan. This gives India significant influence over project viability, pricing, and timing, while also creating uneven dependencies across the region.

A clear example came in 2018, when India introduced rules that restricted imports from power projects with Chinese ownership or control. Nepal was most directly affected as it had been working with Chinese companies to build new hydropower plants, partly to avoid relying on India as its sole buyer. One such project, the 750 MW West Seti scheme, was being developed by the Chinese company Three Gorges. After Three Gorges withdrew, the project was later reassigned to an



Indian state-owned company, and it became widely understood that India would not buy power from a Chinese-built plant. The episode highlights how a single regulatory shift in India can determine which projects are built and by whom.

Even so, this is not simply a case of one country always holding the upper hand. The balance shifts from project to project. Cooperation has allowed some large schemes to proceed; in other cases, political or regulatory changes have slowed them down or redirected them. What is emerging is less a fixed hierarchy than a constantly shifting set of dependencies.

Development, geopolitics, and the logic of infrastructure

Cross-border trade in South Asia sits at the intersection of development and geopolitics. For smaller countries such as Nepal and Bhutan, exporting hydropower is a way to earn revenue and plan their economies over the long term. For India, building energy links with its neighbours serves that purpose too, but it is also tied to broader strategic goals, such as maintaining regional stability and limiting the influence of outside powers in the region.

These priorities do not always align, but neither are they always in conflict. Nepal's Arun-3 hydropower project illustrates both sides of this. It was shelved in the 1990s because of financial and political uncertainty, then revived years later once financing was restructured and India became involved. No single factor explains its trajectory; it reflected a combination of commercial viability, the terms of financing, and shifting regional geopolitics. Similar tension between long-term development goals and shorter-term political and financial pressures recurs in other large projects across the region.

Electricity generated by Bhutan's hydropower sector is transmitted to India through a growing cross-border grid, highlighting both the opportunities and dependencies shaping South Asia's energy future.

India's rapid expansion of solar and wind capacity is reshaping the region's energy landscape, with implications for future demand for imported hydropower. Photo: EPC World

Underlying all of this is a basic mismatch: infrastructure operates on a much longer timeline than politics. Hydropower projects, transmission lines, and the investments behind them are planned over decades and built to last even longer. Political priorities, by contrast, can shift in a fraction of that time. This mismatch creates real uncertainty for cross-border projects. Large hydropower schemes depend on long-term contracts to buy and sell power, but those contracts exist within diplomatic and regulatory relationships that can change. Infrastructure that requires years of steady cooperation to build can therefore be disrupted by a change of government, a new policy, or a shift in regional relations.

Where does this leave regional cooperation?

None of this suggests that cross-border trade will stall. The economics remain sound, and governments have a strong stake in sustaining it. But how the next phase is governed will matter as much as how far it expands.

So far, the regional cooperation frameworks have focused mainly on technical issues, such as grid standards, pricing rules, and dispute mechanisms, leaving a large question untouched: who gets access to the market, and on what terms. That gap will not close on its own, and treating it as secondary only defers tensions into future negotiations. Clearer rules and more independent dispute resolution would not remove politics, but would offer a steadier basis for planning than the current cycle of approvals, exclusions, and reversals.

The ground is shifting, too. India continues to expand its solar and wind capacity, but it is also leaning more heavily on coal to meet near-term demand, leaving the longer-term energy mix unsettled. This makes it harder for Nepal and Bhutan to assume India will remain a steady, predictable buyer of their hydropower, though the outcome is far from settled.

The real test ahead is not how many dams or transmission lines are built, but whether the connections they create can be developed into lasting institutions, rather than a patchwork of arrangements renegotiated each time the political ground shifts.

Dr Udisha Saklani is a lecturer in human geography and climate at King's College London.

PERCOL®
Carefully Crafted Coffee

ELEVATED COFFEE EXPERIENCE IS BACK

Carefully crafted coffee with a conscience

Available at selected stores

ocado TESCO Morrisons COSTCO WHOLESALE amazon

As governments and corporations gather unprecedented volumes of data, artificial intelligence is transforming information into a strategic source of political, economic and military power.

Data, democracy and the new art of war

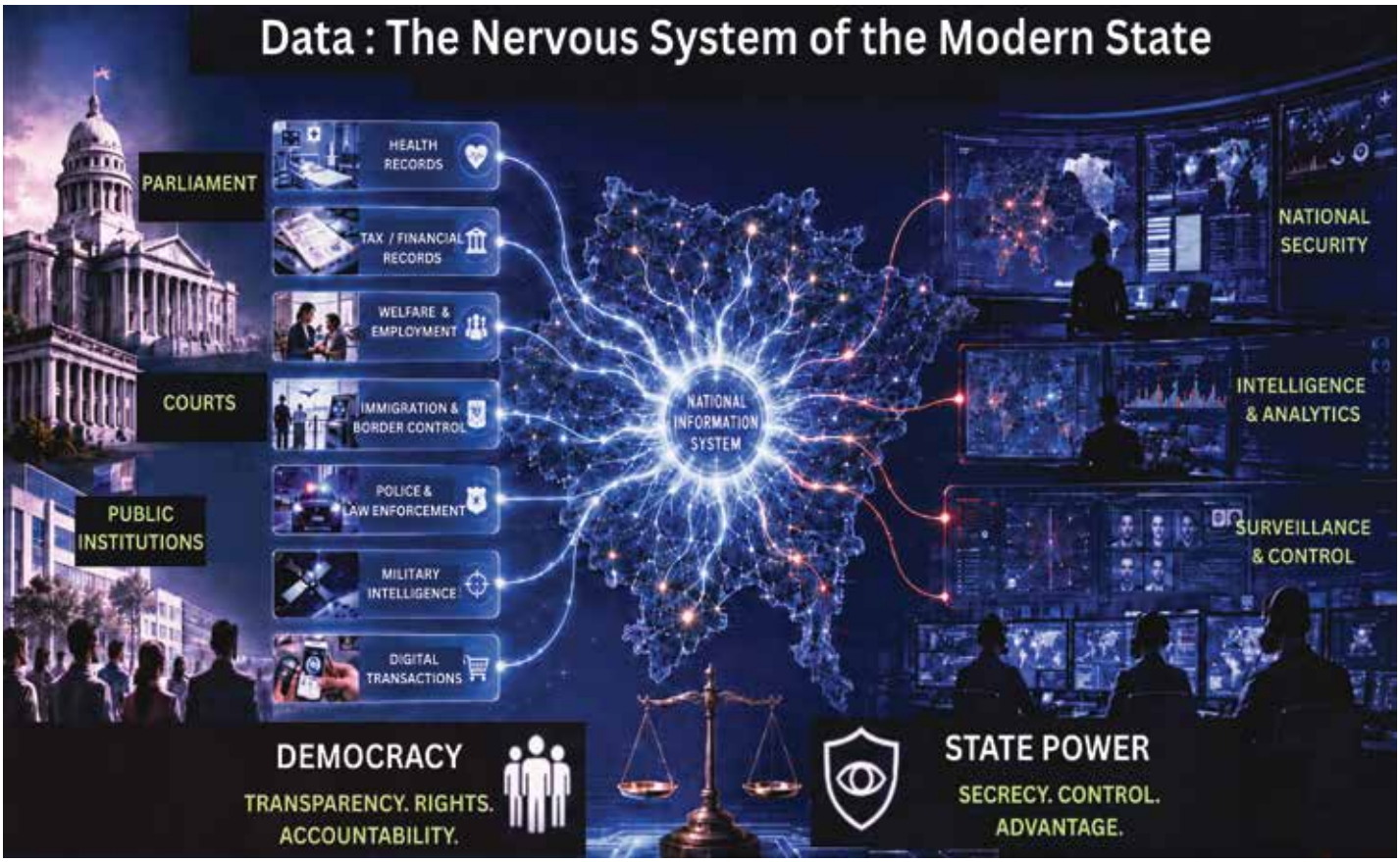
Data is becoming the nervous system of the modern state. AI can help democracies govern better and fight smarter, but it can also turn public service into surveillance, as Sham Banerji reports.

In the recent Vatican statement on the politics of AI, Pope Leo XIV argues that health, genetic and demographic data have become the new 'rare earths' of power. The pontiff warns that data is one of the central political resources of the AI age and should not be controlled by 'a handful of actors'.

At the launch in May the only technologist on the Vatican's panel of listed speakers was Christopher Olah, co-founder of Anthropic, who delivered an unusual confession from inside Big AI: 'Every frontier AI lab, including Anthropic, operates inside a set of incentives and constraints that can sometimes conflict with doing the right thing'. He added that what was needed were 'moral voices that the incentives cannot bend'.

For nations, raw data is no longer the main prize. A live, cross-linked information system, connecting health records, tax files, welfare claims, immigration data, police logs, satellite images and commercial transactions is far more valuable. Once linked by AI software, such systems can give governments powerful, actionable intelligence. This makes citizen data infrastructure as strategic as roads and electricity grids. Its architects are the new contractors of state power.

The *Financial Times* reports that China is in the process of overhauling the world's largest surveillance network with advanced AI, giving the state powers to track people, analyse behaviour and predict potential



Modern governments increasingly link health, tax, welfare, security and financial information into integrated data systems that function as a digital nervous system.

unrest in real time. China's draft law on Cybercrime Prevention and Control, published by the Ministry of Public Security, remains at the draft stage after public consultation closed in March. The danger is not only surveillance after the fact, but prediction: systems designed to identify risk before any offence has taken place.

If enacted, it would consolidate telecoms, internet and banking rules into a single cybercrime framework. Hikvision, China's leader in smart-city surveillance and video analytics, and Huawei, the telecoms and AI chips giant, are expected to provide much of the physical architecture. Human-rights groups are quick to point out how mass surveillance systems, like the 'Integrated Joint Operations Platform' used in Xinjiang, can enable monitoring of minorities, punish 'untrustworthy' behaviour, restrict travel and deny services. They warn against behaviour-modelling software that assess risk or intent. The trigger for state action is not something the citizen has done. It is something the state believes the citizen will do.

By contrast, the 'Digital Masterplan 2025' serving the ASEAN nations is not an AI statute but a flexible framework for countries at different stages of digital development. Singapore's 'Smart Nation Initiative' ensures that while American companies provide the raw computing power and storage, the encryption keys and core citizen data are insulated from extraterritorial

Advances in AI surveillance allow authorities to monitor behaviour patterns and identify perceived risks before any crime has been committed.

Technology firms such as Palantir and Anduril have become influential suppliers of AI-driven military and intelligence systems, borrowing their names from Tolkien's fantasy world.

access. A Brookings Institution report recognises Singapore as the regional hub for AI standards. It points to Indonesia with its large population as having the scale and a formal national strategy to build capacity. It says Myanmar, by contrast, serves as a warning why rules must arrive before the cameras do.

The new Lords of the Rings

Tolkien's 'Lord of the Rings' fantasy is enjoying an unlikely revival in the AI and defence industries. Palantir, which takes its name from Tolkien's magical seeing-stone that can communicate across vast distances, integrates data from satellites, drones, logistics databases and battlefield systems, then turns them into military intelligence. In Britain the company is reported to be helping the government choose which weapons to buy. Anduril, another AI company, takes its name from Tolkien's mythical sword, the 'flame of the West', and builds autonomous AI systems that can sense and strike.

The US military is accelerating adoption of AI. The Pentagon's 'Artificial Intelligence Strategy' made the priority explicit: 'The risks of not moving fast enough outweigh the risks of imperfect alignment'. Palantir's Maven system is becoming part of the core of America's and NATO's command-and-control architecture. Palantir is also one of Ukraine's key AI partners in the war with Russia, supporting intelligence analysis, strike planning, de-mining and air-defence strategy. The company's CEO, Alex Karp, claims he is on the Kremlin's hit list over his support for President Zelensky.

The Pentagon's standoff with another of its key suppliers, Anthropic, is raising concerns about the need for guardrails on military use of AI software. Anthropic insists on contractual safeguards against the use of its AI model Claude for domestic surveillance of Americans and for operating autonomous weapons without humans in the loop. The dispute remains unresolved.

The courts may need to decide whether democracies can allow private companies to restrict the use of their products on moral grounds. Should private companies, rather than elected governments, decide where the state must stop? The same technology can appear heroic on a battlefield and troubling in a hospital, police force or immigration system.

The Palantir dilemma

Software that helps Ukraine identify targets, track drones, and plan strikes provokes suspicion when repurposed for hospital management or domestic policing. Palantir's problem is not simply what its software does but the legacy of fear and suspicion it carries. According to its CEO, Palantir

exists to 'disrupt' and make partner institutions 'the very best in the world' and, when necessary, 'to scare enemies and, on occasion, kill them'.

Published reports in the United Kingdom claim that Palantir is deeply embedded in the state apparatus having secured over 34 contracts across government departments totalling at least £670 million. These include a strategic partnership with the Ministry of Defence, and a highly controversial £330 million contract to run the National Health Service's Federated Data Platform. Concerns in Germany relate to the possibility of data held by US-headquartered companies being subject to US legal demands even when stored abroad. Swiss defence officials have also reportedly concluded that using Palantir software could risk national sovereignty, leading to rejection of the platform.

Europe's Palantir problem is no longer just about privacy. It is about who ultimately controls the data, the software and the intelligence extracted from it. In Japan, Palantir has not produced the same public storm seen in Britain or Germany. But its partnerships with SOMPO and Fujitsu place it close to sensitive health, insurance, infrastructure and government data. South Korea, which has one of the highest densities of cameras and digital tracking systems in the democratic world, offers a concrete example of the risks and massive legal pushback that can challenge the use of biometric information for border control.

AI is increasingly being used to process battlefield intelligence, coordinate military operations and support decision-making in modern warfare.

State voyeurism is not unique to China, the world's most powerful one-party state. A report by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace shows that 51 percent of advanced democracies deploy AI surveillance systems. Democracies without checks and balances are especially vulnerable, because AI rewards centralisation. The world's wealthiest democracy, the United States, with its Palantir-linked systems for immigration and customs enforcement; the world's largest democracy, India, with its twelve-digit Aadhaar biometric identity programme; and the UK and Europe, with their battles over data governance, ethics, and sovereignty, all face challenges of accountability and civic transparency.

The state that knows too little cannot serve its citizens. The state that knows too much may cease to need their consent.

Sham Banerji is a veteran of the high-tech industry, having spent over three decades with Texas Instruments and Philips in the UK, the US, and India.

All images are AI generated

Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), the world's leading producer of advanced chips, reported strong revenue growth as demand for AI and semiconductor infrastructure continued to drive investment across Asia.

Bisinomics

Semiconductors

Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company, which dominates production of the world's most advanced chips, reported May revenue up nearly 30 percent year on year after debuting its advanced A13 process technology earlier this year.

After the volatility caused by the war in West Asia, Asian markets have been recovering strongly in the tech and semiconductor sectors. Stocks in Japan's Nikkei and South Korea's Kospi bounced back, partly as hopes rose of a deal between the United States and Iran over their armed conflict. Chipmakers like South Korea's Samsung were leading the comeback. The country's stock market is approaching developed-market status according to MSCI (Morgan Stanley Capital International).

To add to the buoyancy, chipmaker ChangXin Memory Technologies of China received regulatory approval for a US$4.2 billion initial public offering (IPO). This reflected wider international excitement over AI infrastructure.

Japan

Japan plans to send a delegation to Greenland this summer to

Rare-earth minerals have become strategically important as countries seek secure supplies for advanced manufacturing, clean energy technologies and defence industries. Photo: Resources Review

study the possibility of mining rare earths and other critical minerals, as it seeks to reduce reliance on China. US President Donald Trump had previously threatened to annex the vast Arctic island. So, Tokyo's move, announced on the eve of the G7 summit in Évian-les-Bains, France, was unlikely to please Trump.

On a positive note, Takaichi advanced discussions with British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, on their countries' plan to sign an £18 billion UK-Japan climate-related investment deal as warnings grew that a strong El Niño could disrupt weather patterns and test the UK's climate preparedness. They also talked about how to finance the proposed Anglo-Japanese joint venture to manufacture combat aircraft.

Commercial shipping passing through the Strait of Hormuz, a vital energy corridor where geopolitical tensions continue to influence insurance costs, trade flows and energy security. Photo: Reuters

Strait of Hormuz impact

Insurance Asia quoted Oliver Miloschewsky, head of shipping for Asia at Aon Plc, as saying, 'What has shifted is not demand itself, but how risk is priced, managed and operationalised in delivering that demand.' This was in reference to insurance cover for voyages through the Strait of Hormuz. This suggests, notwithstanding a ceasefire, that insurers remain cautious and high insurance costs may continue.

Asian currencies continued to face an onslaught because of foreign investors preferring to lock in profits from historically high returns from Asian equity and repatriate funds. *Lipper Alpha Insight* reported that 'rising risk aversion has triggered significant foreign selling'. The publication said foreign ownership of Indian equities was 'the lowest in nearly 15 years'. Nearly US$20 billion has been withdrawn in the first half of 2026 from India. Amid the turmoil, the US has become India's top gas supplier after a *force majeure* freeze in exports from Qatar.

China

'China is innovative. Its economy is a mess. Which matters more?' *The Economist* asked, calling that 'A question that will define the 21st century'. This is a moot point, since China is the world's second biggest economy, Asia's largest and a major engine for Asian growth and prosperity.

If Trump leaves the US economy in tatters a sensible successor will likely start undoing the damage and the US will definitely rebound. If China, despite totalitarian stability, is struggling economically, then Asia – indeed the world – will need other props.

'Since 2021 Chinese president Xi Jinping has steered China's economy away from a preoccupation with property (building it, selling it and finishing it) towards high-tech manufacturing and 'new productive forces', as the paramount leader calls them. 'But are the new forces big enough to fill the gap left by the old?,' *The Economist* asked, answering 'Probably not big enough to offset the drag from the old.'

India

In 2010, when Manmohan Singh was India's prime minister and India was still widely discussed as a rising economic power, *TIME* magazine carried a debate on India and China's economic prospects. The cover said, 'INDIA vs CHINA', and posed the question: 'Which Economy Will Rule The World?' and pictured an elephant (representing India) and a dragon (signifying China) locked in a tussle. Within the magazine, some experts bet on

Central Asia is attracting growing international interest as investors look to the region's mineral resources, transport links and expanding role in global supply chains.

India surpassing China this century.

Today, such a suggestion would be treated as a joke. However, resolution of the rivalry between these two economic powers could lie in the potency of the combined strength of Asia's 'tiger' economies, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan.

East Asia

South Korea's president, Lee Jae Myung, appears to have steadied his nation from the turbulence caused by his predecessor, Yoon Suk Yeol, who declared martial law in 2024 before being impeached last year. Referring to the upheaval in an interview with *The Economist*, Mr Lee declared that his country could 'move beyond this normalisation of the abnormal'. The magazine warned that 'challenges loom'.

Japan's JERA signed a 20-year liquefied natural gas supply deal with Malaysia's Petronas. The shock of shutdowns in supplies from the Gulf prompted Japan to diversify its purchases. Malaysia was seen as a trustworthy ally. Analysts said Kuala Lumpur is leveraging its natural resources to rise as a 'middle power'.

Central Asia

Bucking adversity elsewhere, Central Asian economies promise a strong 5.2 per cent growth projection. *The Times of Central Asia* reported that US investors are showing interest in Kazakhstan's critical mineral riches, focusing on both extraction and processing. The paper also reported that Kyrgyzstan and Georgia are exploring ways to connect their transport plans to the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, with Bishkek seeking access to Georgia's Black Sea ports.

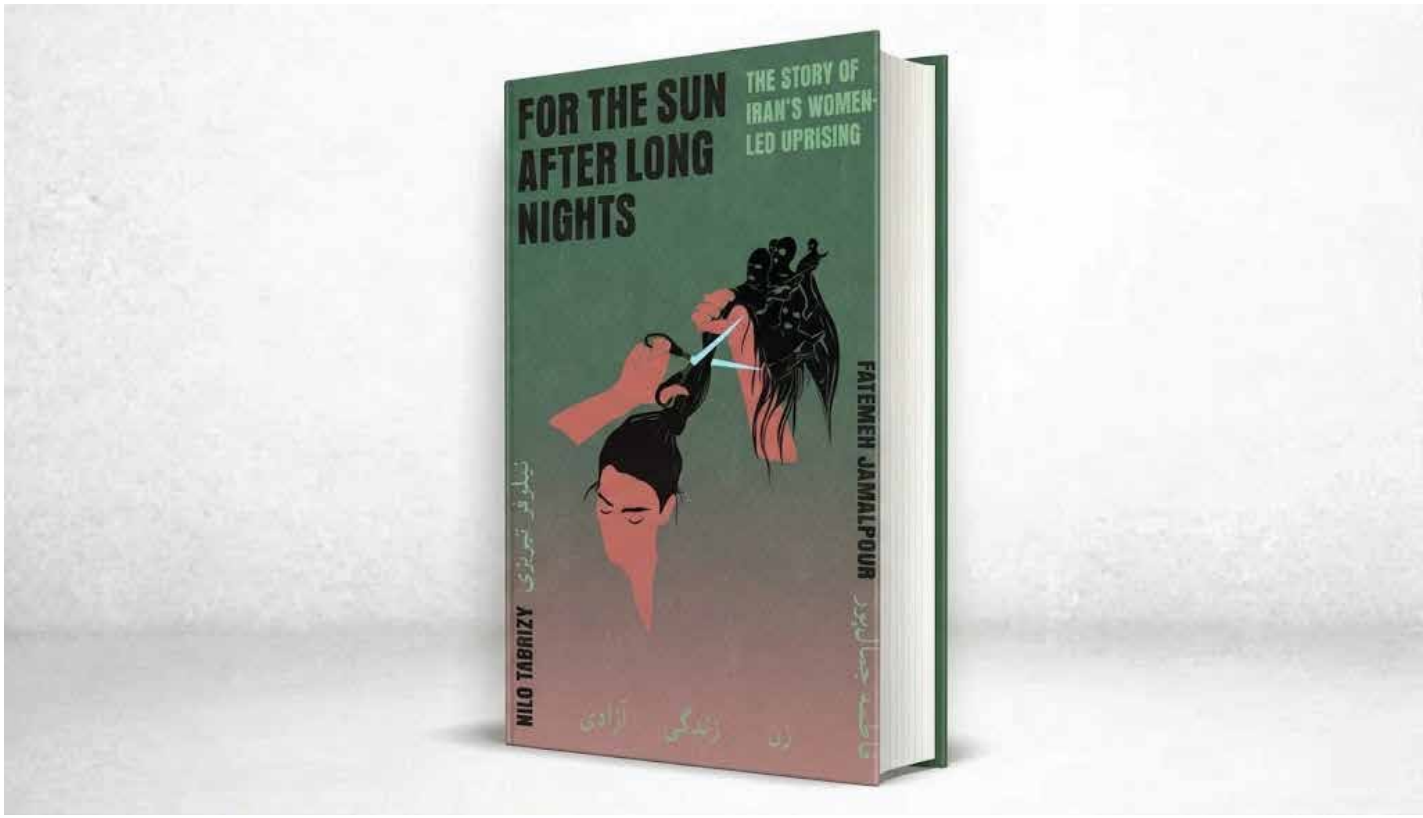
South Korean President Lee Jae Myung has sought to restore stability after the political turmoil that followed former president Yoon Suk Yeol's declaration of martial law and subsequent impeachment. Photo: Reuters

Look up & see the beauty

Premium quality lager.
Beautifully refreshing.

kingfisherbeer.co.uk

KINGFISHER®



For the Sun After Long Nights by Nilo Tabrizy and Fatemeh Jamalpour explores life under Iran's Islamic Republic through personal testimony, historical reflection and the experiences of women, journalists and minority communities.

Two women tell of the painful struggle against Iran's strict Islamic code

For the Sun After Long Nights, by Nilo Tabrizy and Fatemeh Jamalpour, tells the story of life under Iran's Islamic Republic, especially for women and minority communities. Published by Atlantic Books, it is reviewed here by Shahin Bekhradnia.

This 250-page book is a painful read, meticulously detailing recent events in Iran. Written by two young journalists born after the 1979 Islamic revolution, it was prompted by the protests that followed the death of Mahsa (Jina) Amini in September 2022. Amini, a young Kurdish woman, died in police custody after being arrested for allegedly failing to wear the mandatory hijab correctly.

Once the book contract was confirmed, Fatemeh, who was based inside Iran and had gathered material through interviews with eyewitnesses, was advised by her lawyer to leave the country. Nilo, raised in Canada and working for *The New York Times*, used open-source intelligence techniques to verify video footage. The book's claims are carefully sourced, as the extensive endnotes show.

Some readers may find the structure confusing. Chapters alternate between the two authors, interlacing personal memory with national history and culture. Poetry is central: from Ferdowsi, the great Persian poet, to *Baraye*, the protest song that became an anthem after 2022. The reader waits 78 pages before reaching the 1953 coup against Mohammad Mossadegh, the Shah's reforms and the opposition that brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power.

Only here can one perhaps glean a hint of regret that the many advances won for women under the previous regime under the Shah were needlessly lost. Meanwhile we read about the

range of abuses to which journalists and victims' families were subjected following protests in 2009, 2017 and 2019. The death of Mahsa Amini garnered even more demonstrations, defiance and opposition and was met with increasing ruthlessness.

Bludgeoning, rape, threats to family members for speaking out – leading to some going into exile – withholding of corpses to prevent burials, desecration of graves, internet denial, the use of ambulances to transport protesters to prisons in place of their legitimate functions, all feature time and again as individual cases are discussed. One particular aspect which is emphasised throughout the book is the apparent disproportionate targeting of ethnic groups who, like others throughout Iran, had their reasons to vent their frustrations on the streets. Baluchis, Bakhtiaris and Kurds are among the groups who have suffered significantly more brutal suppressions.

Fatemeh, born into a strict Islamic family with strong Bakhtiari tribal ties, lived in the south of Iran. An independently minded young woman, she wanted to break free of the constraints she had experienced and reached Tehran where her reporting career took off. After a run-in with the authorities for reporting protests against the economic difficulties in Mashhad in 2017 and 2020, she obtained a position in London with the BBC but having won a prize for her journalism felt her potential was unappreciated. While there she made around 20 TV packages exposing widespread poverty, prostitution, drug addiction, the extravagant budgets

Authors Fatemeh Jamalpour and Nilo Tabrizy combined eyewitness reporting, personal experience and open-source investigations to document the protests and their aftermath.

devoted to supporting proxy overseas forces, malnutrition in prisons, and the downing of a Ukrainian airliner by Iranian missiles. After only a year, she returned to Iran to look after her father, ill from cancer. On arrival in Tehran, and over the coming weeks, she was subjected to interrogations on suspicion of disloyalty. The book vividly and distressingly describes the interrogation techniques.

On almost every page some act or event is described as so brutal and inhuman that one wonders how or what can bring this Kafkaesque situation to an end. And yet there is irony in this. In 2025 when the book was published, we sensed real optimism that the protests against the hijab were finally succeeding. Sadly, that optimism was short lived. The even greater irony is that Trump's war has produced a regime, ever more defiant and hard-line. Today few people dare go out onto the streets, not least because the forces representing law and order seem to have carte blanche to do whatever they like, and no one can stand in their way. It is estimated that tens of

The death of Mahsa (Jina) Amini in September 2022 sparked nationwide protests that evolved into one of the most significant challenges to Iran's Islamic Republic in decades. Photo: Reuters

A protester burns a hijab and chants slogans outside Iran's consulate in Istanbul following the death of Mahsa (Jina) Amini. The image captures the defiance that fuelled the women-led protest movement chronicled in For the Sun After Long Nights. Photo: The Hill

thousands of demonstrators were massacred within 48 hours in January 2026, with thousands more imprisoned, and with executions at an all-time high. For now, the callous ruthlessness of the regime appears to have cowed the protests – especially as protests will be characterised as unpatriotic or even pro-American.

As if to alleviate some of the relentless accounts of abuse, Nilo describes her sense of longing for an Iran she barely knew, having spent her life in Vancouver where her father relocated his family. She nostalgically recalls her first childhood romance which took place during a trip to Iran as a 10-year-old child; and the sweet memories of her adventures in the strange atmosphere soon after the Iran-Iraq war are evocatively related. Her close affinity to her typically Persian strong family ties, and her sense of dislocation and alienation led to her childhood unhappiness and confused sense of identity – accentuated from 2017 when she started reporting on Iranian politics, and realised that she could not return to connect with her homeland – a realisation that has had a profound impact on her.

Anyone who begins this book unaware of the scale of abuse in Iran, or uncertain whether reports have been exaggerated, is unlikely to finish it with doubts. Its conclusion pays tribute to women political prisoners in Evin Prison, where even amid humiliation, executions, lashings and sexual abuse, prisoners find ways to defy the system: putting on make-up, cooking, creating small gardens and making hand-crafted objects. This is a sad but necessary book, and a testament to the courage and suffering of ordinary Iranians.

Evin Prison in Tehran, where many political prisoners featured in For the Sun After Long Nights endured imprisonment, interrogation and intimidation while continuing to resist in small but meaningful ways. Photo: Reuters

Shahin Bekhradnia is an independent expert on Iranian and pre-Islamic matters based in Oxford.

WATCHDOG

STAYS LOCKED

Powered by BRISANT SECURE

If a burglar snaps your lock and breaks in

£5000 GUARANTEE

★★★

"The Toughest Lock in Town"

★★★

SBD

INSURANCE APPROVED

POLICE APPROVED

Find out more on **www.wdlocks.co.uk** or call us on **08003899965**

Terms & conditions apply.

The Art of Hospitality.

EDWARDIAN HOTELS
LONDON

THE LONDONER
LEICESTER SQ.

THE MAY FAIR
HOTEL

THE EDWARDIAN
MANCHESTER