A People's Victory in New York City

What Democracy means in a country where the word is avoided

Memes as the new battle flags of Gen Z revolts

Democracy Asia

February 2026

Iran on the boil:

Can Ayatollah Khamenei withstand the storm?

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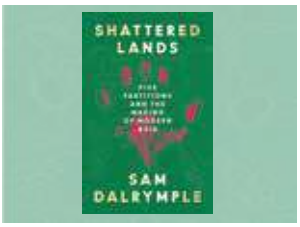
Contents

From Tehran's bazaars to the corridors of power, Iran is on the boil.

As the rial collapses and daily life becomes unaffordable, anger is spilling onto the streets, turning economic despair into political rebellion. At the centre of the storm stands Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, facing the gravest challenge to his rule in more than three decades.



Welcome to the first edition of Democracy Asia, a monthly magazine that – as its title suggests – aims to look at issues of governance across Asia, the continent where well over half the world's population lives. The word democracy comes from two Greek words, *demos* meaning the people and *kratia* meaning power and control. It is usually held to mean a system of government where power resides with representatives voted for by the people, to whom the government is accountable through those elected sitting in an assembly or parliament. The British leader Winston Churchill famously called democracy "the worst form of government except for all the others".

It is not the role of this magazine to judge the quality or purity of democracy in any particular country. There are other organisations that do that. Its purpose is to monitor how democracy works in different countries, to explain that to readers in other countries and to report on the electoral process where people choose their representatives and governments. In this edition we report on elections in Myanmar and those that are due to take place in Bangladesh. Elections are also taking place in Thailand and we report that the country's border dispute with Cambodia has become an issue in the campaign. A look at the election that brought an Asian Muslim to power as mayor of New York City gives an insight into electoral trends in the USA. We report how 'cost of living' protests in Iran since the start of the year have grown into a challenge to the survival of the 47-year old Islamic republic and consider how democracy is understood rather differently in China.

> "Its purpose is to monitor how democracy works in different countries, to explain that to readers in other countries and to report on the electoral process where people choose their representatives and governments."

With so much of the world's attention focused on a small number of places such as Ukraine and Gaza, and more recently Venezuela and Greenland, we consider it part of our role to make sure that on-going confrontations, such as the civil war in Myanmar and clashes along the Thailand-Cambodia border, do not escape attention. Sadly, the world is not as we would like it to be so journalists, including those contributing to Democracy Asia, regard it as their role to "shine a light" on less well understood regions.

We intend also to feature business developments and technology. For example, relations between the USA and China are as much about trade and technological rivalry – which country makes the most advanced semiconductors or 'chips' – as about warships and military might. In this issue we look at India's IT journey towards AI, to use the jargon of modern life. We are open to suggestions on what we might call 'soft' or non-political developments, and intend to feature books which resonate across all or part of the large continent of Asia.

Finally, our own commitment to democracy is that we are happy to hear from you with feedback or suggestions – or to join the debate by being published in our Readers' Letters slot. Please send your thoughts to Letters@democracyasia.com.

I shall keep you from the magazine's content no longer.

Nicholas Nugent

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is the Islamic Republic's second supreme leader. Photo: AFP

Ayatollah in deep water with Iran on the boil

Since early January Iranians have been on the streets protesting as the value of the rial falls, creating a cost of living crisis and raising questions as to whether Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei can survive this latest rebellion against his rule. Kasra Naji reports.

During the 12-day war last June, when Israel first attacked, Iran's beleaguered supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, was taken to a secret hideout for his safety. When he issued a short video statement from hiding a few hours later, the 86-year-old ayatollah in black robe and turban with his flowing white beard, appeared calm and collected, if slightly shaken. "Israel has made a big mistake; it will haunt it for a long time," he said.

Israeli attacks had taken out the entire top brass of the Army and the Revolutionary Guard Corps in the first hour of aerial rocket and bombing attacks and US planes would go on to carry out bombing raids on nuclear sites. There was a real chance that the Ayatollah's whereabouts were being tracked with the aim of eliminating him. But besides recording his video message to reassure his supporters, Ayatollah Khamenei, as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, quickly appointed new commanders. He was telling his supporters and the nation at large – as well as Israel – that he was alive and well and still in charge.

To a vast majority of people in Iran, however, he himself was responsible for creating the conditions for the calamity. He had spearheaded the idea that Israel must be wiped off the map. Iranians did not rally around the leader or the regime as the government later claimed. Instead, they opted to support their families and neighbours at a time of great uncertainty.

In January's unrest across the country, protesters have been calling for the Ayatollah's overthrow, believing he is the main architect of their impoverishment and Iran's misfortunes. The unrest was triggered by the constantly falling value of the currency, the rial, which had made doing

Iranians protest against rising prices and economic hardship, as the country faces its worst cost-of-living crisis in years. Photo: TempoEnglish

business impossible. But it soon became about much more, and especially about the sharply rising cost of living, which has left many feeling destitute.

Over the years, Khamenei has single-mindedly pursued a nuclear policy that has brought Iran the most stringent international sanctions after Russia. Sanctions have brought the economy to its knees, a situation made worse by rampant corruption and poor management. Staunchly anti-Western, Iran's spiritual leader has cut Iran off from much of the world, causing it to lean on Russia and China for support. He pursued a policy of expanding Shi'ite Islam throughout the Middle East, where Sunni Muslims are in the majority. He chose Bashar al-Assad as an ally in Syria. He provided arms and money to Hezbollah in Lebanon and to a variety of Palestinian armed groups. He poured billions of dollars into Venezuela to gain a foothold in Latin America.

Iranians exchange currency as the rial continues to plunge, fuelling inflation and public anger. Photo: The Sunday Guardian File Photo

Ayatollah Khamenei has been in charge since 1989 when the leader of the Iranian revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, died of old age. The so-called Assembly of Experts, a council of dozens of top clergymen, chose Ayatollah Khamenei the next day as the new leader of the Islamic Republic. He was a senior cleric at the time and a trusted aide to the leader of the revolution. As the Friday prayer leader of the capital, Tehran, he had donned military fatigues and spent a considerable amount of time at the front during the war with Iraq. Now increasingly a hated figure within Iran, in his 36 years at the helm "the leader", as he is known to his supporters, has amassed vast powers that have given him control over the government, parliament, the judiciary, and the armed forces. He has created a form of theocracy which he heads with the ideal of building a pure Islamic society.

In parliamentary elections, candidates are vetted by the so-called Guardian Council before they are allowed to stand. This process has increasingly been used to "purify" parliament by barring candidates who are suspected of not being sufficiently in line with the Islamic Revolution. The head of the council is appointed by the supreme leader. It is widely known that before final candidate lists are published, they must have the leader's approval. The result is a parliament of some 290 members who are in effect not elected but selected to align parliament with the leader's policies. The head of the judiciary is also appointed by the leader, usually from among senior clerics he trusts.

The president is the head of government and is elected directly by the people. But here too

candidates must be vetted by the Guardian Council, whose head consults the leader before the names are officially released. In the last election, the name of Massoud Pezeshkian, a relative moderate, was added to the list at the last minute by the leader to avoid the possibility of a major boycott, as many Iranians felt only hardliners favoured by the leader were being allowed to run.

The leader also directly chooses some government ministers while others are selected by the president and presented to the leader for final approval. Only then can parliament give a vote of confidence to each proposed minister. The leader chooses the minister of intelligence, the minister of foreign affairs, and the interior minister, who answer only to him. Ayatollah Khamenei also appoints the top commanders of the armed forces – both the Army and the Revolutionary Guard. They are the main base of support for his regime. Many of them he knows personally from his time at the front during the 1980s Iran-Iraq war. Many are well past retirement age. He is also directly in charge of spending from the strategic reserve fund, billions of dollars' worth of foreign exchange. As the country's top religious leader, he also receives religious taxes and dues from the faithful.

People walk past closed shops following protests over a plunge in the currency's value, in the Tehran Grand Bazaar, Tehran, Iran, December 30, 2025. Photo: Reuters

As he has amassed more power, Ayatollah Khamenei has increasingly taken charge not only of strategic policies but also of decisions on all manner of issues. During the Covid pandemic, when nations around the world including Iran were clamouring for more vaccines, he went on television and publicly ordered the government not to import vaccines made in the United States or the United Kingdom saying he did not trust those countries or their vaccines.

Iran's 12-day war last June was seen by many as a major turning point. They felt things had to change fundamentally if Iran was to avoid another war. Yet Ayatollah Khamenei did not change tack. Instead, he has doubled down on the same policies at the cost of losing even more of his ardent supporters. He is counting on the Revolutionary Guard Corps and other security forces to keep him in power. While Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu focuses on Iran's ballistic missile programme and President Donald Trump threatens to intervene, promising to make 2026 the year to "Make Iran Great Again," Ayatollah Khamenei, who will be 87 in April, is facing formidable forces stacked against him.

Members of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps stand watch during demonstrations, a key pillar of support for the supreme leader. Photo: Reuters

Kasra Naji is Special Correspondent for BBC Persian.

Myanmar's military chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, who called elections amid ongoing civil war and political unrest. Photo: AFP

What are Myanmar's elections for?

The people of Myanmar have been to the polls to choose members of two national and fourteen state assemblies. Nicholas Nugent questions what difference the polls will make in a country riven by civil war.

Myanmar's military chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing called elections in the hope of restoring order to a country riven by conflict since an army coup in February 2021 put it under martial law. A country that has been ruled by its army for longer than it has enjoyed anything close to democratic rule is once again testing the waters of democracy though there is little expectation of significant change.

Many political parties refused to register calling the election illegitimate. They include the National League of Democracy, previously led by Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, which took 82 per cent of the poll at elections in 2020, though the army disputed the result. Hence the party that led the country to qualified democracy in 2015 has not taken part in polling, which was carried out in three phases on 28 December, 11 and 25 January. Hence no party was in a position to beat the military-led Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) for

Voters cast ballots at a polling station under heavy security during Myanmar's national elections. Photo: AFP

seats in the Pyithu Hluttaw or National Parliament, whose membership is in any case supplemented by officers nominated by the military. Preliminary election results show USDP to have a comfortable lead in both national assemblies.

The military government is clear that a main objective of the election is to restore the 2008 constitution, which instituted power sharing between the army and civilian leaders. A law criminalising disruption of polling was introduced and more than 200 people are reported to have been charged with that offence including two in the city of Yangon sentenced to 49 years hard labour each for putting up anti-election posters.

According to International Crisis Group (ICG) Myanmar adviser Richard Horsey these limitations make the elections "devoid of credibility". He calls them a procedural mechanism "for the junta to shift from the post coup state of emergency back to constitutional rule". The military rulers hope to legitimise the military role in government alongside elected civilian bodies, a strategy with which neighbouring Thailand has had some success as, in the 1960s, did the armed forces in Indonesia where they dubbed this military-civilian blend 'guided democracy'.

Encouragement for these elections came from China, Myanmar's northern neighbour. According to Benedict Rogers of Fortify Rights, Beijing sees Myanmar as a crucial geostrategic playground vital for securing its interests. He says China seeks stability in the war-torn country "to protect its economic pursuits: border trade corridors, infrastructure investments, access to rare earth minerals, jade and energy." None of Myanmar's fellow members of ASEAN have supported the holding of the election. By holding it the country's leaders will be hoping ASEAN governments will end their partial boycott of the country.

A main challenge for the authorities was gaining access to the people. The army has had major success over the past year in extending its reach but much

Low voter turnout marked elections boycotted by major opposition parties. Photo: Reuters

of the country remains outside its control because of the insurgency of ethnic armed organisations and People's Defence Force who together control a significant part of Myanmar. The United Nations has estimated that 3.5 million of the country's population of around 53 million have been displaced from their homes as a result of warfare between the army, known as the Tatmadaw, and insurgent armies. According to reports, elections could not take place in as many as 65 of the country's 330 townships or constituencies. Where elections have taken place there were only polling stations in towns under government control.

Families flee their homes as fighting between Myanmar's army and resistance groups continues. Photo: AFP

In northern Kachin state voting took place in only nine of the state's 18 townships as a result of challenges to central authority by the Kachin Independence Army. In the west of the country the government controls so little of Rakhine State, where the Arakan Army hold sway, that voting took place in just 3 of the state's 17 townships. As voting took place there in mid January there were reports of heavy fighting around the state capital, Sittwe. A press release put out by a human rights group in predominantly Christian Chin State to the north says the streets were deserted on election day in the two (out of nine) townships where polling took place. The military-led USDP claimed victory on an exceptionally low turnout.

Flawed though the elections were, Myanmar citizens and foreign governments will be watching to see what happens next. Richard Horsey of the International Crisis Group expects "a resounding USDP victory and a continuation of army rule with a thin civilian veneer". He says this will not ease the country's political crisis nor weaken the resolve of a determined armed opposition. One assumption is that Senior General Ming Aung Hlaing will formalise his own position as president and pass the role of commander in chief of the army to a new occupant. USDP leader Khin Yi, a former general, is expected to be given a senior position in government.

After the 2015 election which brought Aung San Suu Kyi to power as State Counsellor the army clearly thought they ceded to civilians too much of the power they regarded as theirs by right. A key this time will be how much power is genuinely conceded to civilians rather than to soldiers who have discarded their uniforms. Former State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, now aged 80 and denied contact even with her sons, and former president U Win Myint are not expected to be released from prison. They have been held since the 2021 coup with at least 22,000 other political prisoners, though 6186 were released on 4 January, the 78th anniversary of Myanmar's independence. The UN's Special Rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, Tom Andrews, said "You cannot have a free, fair or credible election when thousands of political prisoners are behind bars, credible opposition parties have been dissolved, journalists are muzzled, and fundamental freedoms are crushed."

Former civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi remains imprisoned following the 2021 military coup. Photo: AFP

The people of Myanmar – and before it Burma – have had a sorry existence since the nation came into existence following the end of British rule. The nation's first leader, Aung San – father of Suu Kyi – was assassinated with members of his cabinet shortly before the country gained full independence in 1948. Ethnic insurgency against the government started immediately in reaction to the dominance of government by the overwhelmingly Buddhist 'Bamar' people of the country's central plains.

General Ne Win led a bloodless army coup in 1962, later gaining election and becoming prime minister. Ne Win and his military successor Saw Maung held supreme power until the emergence of Aung San Suu Kyi as a civilian political leader in 1988. Her triumph in a 2012 by-election and at national polls in 2015 and 2020 put her at the head of an army-managed government – army rule with a civilian face – till the February 2021 coup d'état. There are no indications that a change as significant of that of 2015 will take place in Myanmar following the latest polls.

Nicholas Nugent reported from Myanmar and many parts of Asia for the BBC. He is author of several books on Asian subjects and co-author of Culture Smart! Myanmar.

Students take part in mass protests in Dhaka during the 2024 uprising that led to the collapse of the previous government. Photo: AFP

A new era in Bangladesh?

Following the drama of the 'Monsoon Revolution' in 2024 and an eighteen month period of army-backed civilian-led interim rule, Bangladesh goes to the polls this month to choose a new government. Syed Zain Al-Mahmood asks whether the elections can deliver the change the people are demanding.

As Bangladesh faces national elections the country stands at a crossroads. The central question facing its people is whether elections will translate the popular demand for change into a durable and credible democratic order. The protests that erupted in July 2024 were sparked by anger over public sector job quotas which heavily favoured ruling party supporters. Their rapid escalation revealed deeper frustrations. Years of political repression, weakened opposition parties, and shrinking civic space had produced a sense that the political system no longer responded to ordinary citizens, especially young people. Students, professionals, and urban middle-class groups rallied not just against a policy but against what they saw as a closed and unaccountable governing structure.

A security crackdown and attacks on protesters by supporters of the ruling Awami League failed to contain the unrest and instead broadened it intensifying public anger. The state's authority eroded dramatically. The authoritarian playbook of curfews, arrests and an internet blackout raised the stakes – and reinforced the notion of a regime fighting for its survival.

When the violent police crackdown, which left more than a thousand people dead, failed to quell the unrest, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina turned to the army. As armoured personnel carriers rolled out onto the streets, the Gen Z protesters feared the worst.

Demonstrators gather in central Dhaka as nationwide protests spread across Bangladesh in mid-2024. Photo: AFP

Bangladesh's armed forces, after all, were deeply entangled in coups and counter-coups during the 1970s and 1980s.

But the army that confronted the 2024 crisis was not the army of that earlier era. Over the past three decades, it has rebuilt a measure of credibility at home and abroad, in part through playing a prominent role in United Nations peacekeeping missions abroad. As one of the world's largest troop contributors, the Bangladeshi military has developed strong institutional incentives to avoid actions that could damage its international standing or jeopardize future deployments. As mass demonstrations swelled and tens of thousands of protesters marched toward the prime minister's residence, senior generals reportedly concluded that the use of force would only deepen the crisis – and told Hasina that her time was up.

Unlike in neighbouring Pakistan or Myanmar, where political crises have often resulted in direct military rule, the Bangladesh army this time chose not to seize power, instead making way for a civilian interim government. A younger generation of mid-ranking officers, closely attuned to public sentiment and unwilling to use force against protesters, played a critical role in persuading their senior leadership to withdraw support from the Hasina government. The military assumed a behind-the-scenes role creating the conditions for a civilian-led transition.

What followed was not a clean transition but a period of uncertainty. An interim government led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus took charge amid high expectations and fragile conditions. Its mandate – to stabilize the country, restore order, and organize credible elections – has proven far more difficult than anticipated.

Political intimidation, sporadic violence, and localized unrest have exposed how deeply institutions were politicised under prolonged one-party dominance. Reform promises, while ambitious, have run up against practical limits: weakened enforcement capacity, competing political interests, and widespread mistrust of authority. For many citizens, the pace of change feels slow, even as the risks of disorder remain visible.

Economic growth and democratic deficit

International observers have long viewed Bangladesh through the lens of economic performance. Growth rates averaging five to six percent helped reduce poverty, expanded manufacturing and integrated the country more deeply into global supply chains. These gains were real and helped sustain external support for a government increasingly criticised at home for nepotism and corruption. But economic progress did not resolve underlying political tensions. Youth unemployment remained high, corruption perceptions deepened and upward mobility lagged behind expectations.

For a generation raised with digital connectivity and global exposure, economic stability alone was not enough suggesting that development without a political voice is ultimately unsustainable.

The most striking feature of Bangladesh's uprising was the central role played by young people. Students organised protests, shaped messaging, and mobilised support with remarkable speed. Social media allowed grievances to circulate widely and helped forge a shared sense of purpose across regions and social groups.

Bangladesh army personnel stand guard on a street in Dhaka during the political crisis of 2024. Photo: AFP

Yet the post-uprising period has revealed a critical gap: the absence of clear political pathways for this energy. Established parties are dominated by older leadership and entrenched networks, while newer political platforms linked to the protest movement lack organisation and national reach. As a result, much of the momentum that drove the fall of the previous regime has struggled to find institutional expression. Without mechanisms to convert mobilisation into representation, frustration may deepen.

The challenge for Bangladesh's transition is not simply holding elections, but ensuring that a politically awakened generation can participate meaningfully in shaping what comes next. The fragility of the transition was starkly underscored by the killing of Osman Hadi, a prominent figure associated with the post-uprising political landscape. His death sent shock-waves through the country, triggering protests and renewed fears about political violence.

The end of the old political era

The death in December of Khaleda Zia, a former prime minister and long-time opposition leader, has further reshaped Bangladesh's political landscape. For decades, politics revolved around the rivalry between Zia and Hasina, dubbed "the battle of the begums", a rivalry that critics say centred around personalities and crowded out institutional development. With both figures now absent party politics are fragmented and uncertain. Whether new leadership can emerge without replicating old patterns remains an open question.

Bangladesh's internal changes have also affected its external relationships, most notably with India. New Delhi had long backed Hasina, who fled to India after her ouster. Her presence there has fuelled suspicion in Dhaka and contributed to diplomatic strain. Both countries have strong incentives to avoid a lasting rupture. Trade, security cooperation, and regional stability remain shared priorities. How Bangladesh recalibrates its relationship with India – asserting autonomy while maintaining cooperation – will shape the regional impact of its democratic transition.

Elections and their limitations

This month's elections are seen as

Muhammad Yunus, head of Bangladesh's interim government, addresses the nation amid efforts to stabilise the country and prepare for elections.

An inked finger from a past election in Bangladesh, as the nation prepares to vote again amid demands for deeper political change.

a critical test. They are necessary to restore constitutional legitimacy and move beyond interim rule. But elections alone cannot resolve the deeper challenges exposed by the uprising. Credible voting depends on security, trust in institutions, and the acceptance of outcomes by competing forces. Even a well-run election may leave unresolved questions about governance, accountability, and inclusion. The deeper task for Bangladesh, a significant nation of 170 million people, is to rebuild institutions capable of constraining power and accommodating political pluralism over the long term.

Bangladesh's trajectory matters beyond its borders. A successful transition would challenge the notion that economic growth in South Asia must come at the expense of political openness. It could offer a rare example of democratic renewal in a region grappling with polarisation and democratic backsliding.

Failure, by contrast, would reinforce a more pessimistic lesson: that popular uprisings can remove leaders without transforming systems. What is clear is that the demand for change has already been unmistakably voiced. Whether the political process can now honour that demand will define not only Bangladesh's future but its role in shaping democratic norms in South Asia.

Syed Zain Al-Mahmood is a Dhaka-based journalist who writes for the *Wall Street Journal*.

Thailand and Cambodia Clash Amid Rising Tensions Over Disputed Border Area.

A fragile truce: Can the Kuala Lumpur accord survive?

The peace accord signed in the Malaysian capital by Thai Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul and Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet, on 26 October 2025, witnessed by US President Donald Trump, who claimed it as one of his hallmark international peace achievements, has since then come under strain. It broke down completely in December as the neighbours engaged in renewed combat over their disputed border. Pravit Rojanaphruk considers whether the accord can last.

The ceasefire was restored following a meeting in late December in Thailand's Chanthaburi province. A week later a Thai soldier was injured by mortar fire from the Cambodian side. The Cambodian government expressed regret, calling the incident an accident caused by trash burning near the border. The territorial dispute behind the hostilities dates back more than a century in the view of Thailand and much earlier according to Cambodia.

So in the longer term will President Trump's ceasefire hold? The answer depends on both domestic and foreign factors working against this delicate peace.

The Thai perspective

On the Thai side, there is a historical grievance stemming from the colonial era and disputed maps alongside a resurgence in the popularity of the Thai armed forces following a perceived military 'victory'. Additionally, this month's general election is heightening tensions.

The curriculum in Thailand's schools says that Imperial France and Great Britain seized lands under Siamese control, including much of modern-day Cambodia.

Maps recording this seizure remain central to collective Thai grievances and continue to fuel border disputes, most notably regarding the Preah Vihear Temple. Although the

International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled in favour of Cambodia in 1962 and reaffirmed Cambodia's sovereignty over the entire promontory in 2013, the ruling was a sore point among Thais. Many feel the Franco-Siamese maps drawn between 1893 and 1907 were fundamentally unfair.

The 1893 map followed the Paknam Incident, where French gunboats forced their way up the Chao Phraya River, compelling Siam to sign an unequal treaty and surrender territory on the left bank of the Mekong. Thai nationalists view recent border skirmishes as a justified move not just to reclaim the disputed lands and small temples but to go some way towards correcting historical injustice.

Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Manet, Thailand's Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul and US President Donald Trump during the ceremonial signing of a ceasefire agreement between Thailand and Cambodia in Kuala Lumpur on October 26, 2025. Photo: AFP

War for votes

Another dimension of the conflict is a 'war for electoral votes.' With the dissolution of the Thai parliament and an election scheduled for 8 February, campaign rhetoric has become increasingly aggressive. Caretaker PM Anutin Charnvirakul has pledged to build walls and fences if returned to government. Another candidate, Mongkolkit Suksintharanon of the New Alternative Party, declared himself ready for a "swift, decisive war" against Cambodia and even suggested Thailand acquire nuclear weapons. The leader of the progressive People's Party, Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut, declared on 8 January that he supported the use of Gripen fighter jets to bomb targets in Cambodia.

On January 7, anonymous campaign boards urged Thai voters not to vote for the "Cambodian People's Party", taken to be a reference either to the main opposition People's Party of Mr Ruengpanyawut, or possibly to the populist Pheu Thai Party founded by former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. This appears to make the election a choice for Thai voters between anti-Cambodia political parties.

The Cambodian perspective

For Cambodians the 'long memory' extends back a millennium to the Angkor Empire (802–1431) which once occupied much of today's Thailand. Maps of this empire serve as a bitter reminder of how Thailand and Vietnam have historically absorbed Cambodian or Khmer lands.

Modern Thailand is seen as the aggressor, the invader, with an insatiable appetite to absorb more Cambodian land. Along the Thai side of the border in the provinces of Surin and Buriram live many ethnic Khmers who speak a variant of the Khmer language but are Thai citizens loyal to the Thai state. The fact that the Thai army has seized control of a dozen spots, including disputed temples like Prasat Ta Kwai and Prasat Ta Muen Phom, means Cambodia will likely continue its protests on the international stage.

International influences

While the US remains involved, China has also taken an active role as has the regional group of nations, ASEAN, of which both nations are members. China may view the conflict as an opportunity to prove it can exert a stabilising influence in its own 'backyard'. In late December, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi hosted a dialogue in Yunnan province for the foreign ministers of both nations, which contributed to the current pause in fighting.

Another positive factor is the crackdown in Cambodia on 'scam

The Preah Vihear temple, a historic site at the heart of the Thailand–Cambodia border dispute. Photo: PsamatheM/CC BY-SA 4.0, Source: Wikipedia

centres'. In early January, Cambodia handed over the naturalised citizen and 'scam lord' Chen Zhi to Beijing. Cambodia was acquiring a reputation as a centre of financial scamming in the region and beyond. Reducing the influence of these criminal networks may lower tensions, as many Thais see the conflict as a proxy war against Cambodia-based scammers.

The Paris-based exiled Cambodian opposition leader Sam Rainsy suggested on Facebook that Chen Zhi had close relations with the ruling Cambodian People's Party of Hun Sen and his son, the current prime minister Hun Manet. Rainsy cited the Institute of Humanity Research Consultancy as claiming that "a majority of the leaders of the Cambodian People's Party are thugs [who] protect the cross-border crime network (Cybercrime) to collect money [for] the Hun Sen family." He asked: "Is Hun Manet brave enough to arrest his family members who are criminals … or will they remain beyond the reach of accountability?"

Displaced people queue for food at a temporary shelter amid deadly clashes between Thailand and Cambodia along a disputed border area, in Buriram province, Thailand, on December 9, 2025. Photo: Athit Perawongmetha/Reuters

There is no proof of Rainsy's assertion but Chen Zhi is assumed to have enjoyed ties with those high up in the Cambodian political echelon because the physical size of scam centres in Cambodia rival that of large prison with high walls, CCTVs and barbed wire – something that can hardly have escaped the attention of the Cambodian authorities.

Cambodia's Deputy PM Sun Chanthol told Bloomberg in an exclusive interview that scam crimes should not be a reason for war, adding that there's a need to "lower the temperature" between Bangkok and Phnom Penh in order to allow displaced people to return home.

By late January approximately 400,000 Cambodians remained in government displacement sites or with host communities as they wait for security clearances to return to their villages. On the Thai side, most have returned but some of their properties were damaged, just like on the other side of the border. Originally over 700,000 people fled on the Cambodian side while the figure

on the Thai side was around 400,000 people.

In early January, the United States announced a $45 million aid package to support the truce. A top State Department official, Michael DeSombre, visited the region to discuss using these funds for de-mining, fighting scammers, and assisting the nearly one million people who were originally displaced by the conflict.

While Cambodia traditionally enjoys closer ties with China, the United States is making significant inroads through the peace accord to rival China. Last year the Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet announced that a section of a major boulevard will be named after Donald Trump as an expression of gratitude. Hun Manet also wrote a letter to the Nobel Committee to nominate Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Displaced people take shelter at an evacuation centre in Thailand's Sa Kaeo province. Photo: AFP

Other major powers like Japan and the EU have expressed a desire for peace. Japan has seen its supply of goods from Cambodia, such as clothing and shoes, furniture and office supplies, disrupted and urged the two countries to reopen their common border to allow trade to resume, leading to criticism by ultranationalist Thai netizens.

It seems that the survivability of the ceasefire – President Trump's truce – remains in a state of incertitude, at the mercy of ultranationalists on both sides.

Pravit Rojanaphruk is a senior staff writer at Khaosod English, Bangkok, and winner of the 2017 International Press Freedom award by the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists.

Young protesters gather during a demonstration in Nepal, reflecting how Gen Z across Asia is reshaping political dissent through digital culture and symbolism. Photo: Rojen Maharjan/ Alamy

Memes as the new battle flags of Gen Z revolts

The digital realm has given rise to a new lexicon of dissent where ephemeral online artefacts, based on Japanese 'anime' cartoon characters popular with Gen Z, mutate into symbols of political resistance. Madhavi Ravikumar compares modern modes of protest across Asian cities.

In the sweltering summer of 2025, as Indonesia geared up to celebrate 80 years of independence, an unlikely emblem appeared not in comic panels but on Jakarta's streets: a grinning skull wearing a straw hat, the Jolly Roger of Monkey D. Luffy from *One Piece*. Created by Japanese 'manga' artist Eiichiro Oda, *One Piece* is among the world's most popular anime franchises. It follows Monkey D. Luffy, a young pirate who sails across oceans challenging corrupt rulers and authoritarian empires in search of freedom. His straw hat and skull-and-crossbones flag have become globally recognizable symbols of resistance to unjust power, making them easily adaptable as political metaphors.

What began as a protest by truck drivers opposing vehicle-overload regulations quickly evolved into a nationwide symbol of anger against President Prabowo Subianto's administration, spreading in homes, on motorcycles and as graffiti in Javanese cities including Solo, Surabaya and the capital Jakarta. Far from a cultural curiosity, the episode exposed the deliberate

ambiguity of meme-driven activism – accessible enough to evade immediate suppression yet vague enough to risk dissolving demands into spectacle.

The initial trigger was economic. New transport regulations jeopardised the livelihoods of truck drivers already operating at the margins. They responded by flying Luffy's pirate flag. It was fictional resistance against a tyrannical 'World Government' reimagined as protest against a real one. The emblem spread across urban Indonesia amid rising frustration over 16 percent youth unemployment and sweeping budget cuts. The state reacted swiftly. Police confiscated flags and erased murals. Ministers warned of criminal penalties under laws governing the desecration of national symbols.

However, repression only amplified visibility. Protesters responded to accusations of sedition with humour. *"It's just anime,"* became a common retort as well as a playful denial and political provocation. The flag's cartoonish design allowed dissent to hide in plain sight, a strategy referred to by Limor Shifman, a communication professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, as meme "polysemy" – multiple meanings coexisting under a single symbol.

On the ground, meanings were unequivocal. Imam Santoso, a truck driver, explained that he flew the flag because regulations "threatened our economic survival". Student Ryanto Kusnadi added: "The government has forgotten ordinary citizens. Luffy fights injustice—that is how Indonesians feel today." What made this revolt distinctive was its architecture: decentralized, leaderless, organised through encrypted Discord servers and TikTok livestreams. Memes not only symbolised dissent, they orchestrated it.

From meme to regime crisis

By September 2025, the 'Straw Hat' flag leapt across the Himalayas. Nepal's government abruptly shut down 26 social media platforms under new registration rules. Though the ban was lifted within hours, anger had ignited. Youth unemployment hovered near 20 percent; thousands of young Nepalis left the country daily for overseas labour. Gen Z protesters projected the *One Piece* narrative on to local politics, portraying Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli's administration as the oppressive 'World Government'. The flag was draped across Singha Durbar as protesters stormed the parliamentary complex in Kathmandu. Online a parallel 'e-election' emerged, where users voted for interim leaders using Luffy avatars – a "digital plebiscite that foreshadowed Oli's resignation," according to Nepal-based digital rights researcher Anil Gurung.

When security forces opened fire on demonstrators killing dozens, protests escalated. Oli resigned days later. However, the victory proved fragile: the interim government quietly reinstated social media restrictions.

Jakarta, Indonesia. August 29, 2025. The One Piece pirate flag flies as students protest the death of Affan Kurniawan, killed after being hit by a police armored vehicle. Photo: Toto Santiko Budi, Shutterstock

A demonstrator shouts slogans during a protest against corruption and the government's decision to block several social media platforms, in Kathmandu, Nepal, on September 8, 2025. Photo: Navesh Chitrakar/Reuters

Meme-driven mobilisation had toppled a leader but not the system that produced discontent.

The pirate flag's next appearance was in the Philippines. On 21 September, tens of thousands gathered at flooded Luneta Park in Manila for what has been dubbed the *Baha sa Luneta,* protests against corruption in flood-control spending. Waving Luffy's Jolly Roger beside Palestinian flags, protesters held placards reading: "We're not fish, but why do we live in water?"

Here too, the meme adapted seamlessly, absorbing local concerns while retaining a universal anti-authoritarian message. Vendors sold straw hats in tribute to Luffy. A youth protester, Irvan Sodirin, explained that Luffy symbolised fighting injustice despite overwhelming odds. The outcome mirrored Nepal and Indonesia: visibility without structural negotiation. No significant policy reversals followed. The meme's dissemination outpaced its political leverage.

The alchemy of memes

Scholarly research explains why this symbol travelled so effectively. Shifman defines 'memes' as cultural entities that propagate through imitation and remixing, thriving on simplicity and humour. In Asia's Gen Z protests, the 'Straw Hat' flag functioned as visual shorthand –

Protesters hold signs denouncing corruption linked to flood control projects in Manila, the Philippines, September 21, 2025. Photo: Lisa Marie David/Reuters

circumventing censorship while forging collective identity. Memes operate through accessibility, ambiguity, and amplification. In Indonesia, Luffy's hat was superimposed onto national symbols with captions such as "True freedom isn't red and white—it's straw-hatted," referencing the colours of Indonesia's flag. Protesters insisted "It's just anime" while officials accused them of treason. This ambiguity generated what Shifman calls "mimetic logic": emotional engagement that turns spectators into participants.

However, meme activism entails some risks. Shifman cautions that polysemic symbols can become "empty signifiers". In Nepal, a leaderless organisation slid quickly into violence once repression intensified. In Indonesia, raids only amplified visibility – a textbook case of the so-called Streisand effect, where attempts at suppression intensify public attention but fail to produce negotiation channels. Indonesian truck drivers, Nepali students and Filipino environmentalists share the same skull insignia, yet their material requirements diverge. In the absence of institutional frameworks, solidarity is merely symbolic.

Lessons from India

Gen Z in India has weaponised memes to critique policies like the Agnipath recruitment scheme or the repealed farm laws, with viral edits of Modi as an admiral of a World Government attracting millions of views. Movements such as Shaheen Bagh in 2019-20 illustrated that enduring offline organisation – women-led sit-ins, community kitchens, and

Young activists document protests on smartphones, underscoring how digital platforms have become central to contemporary political mobilisation. Photo: AFP

religious solidarity – surpass viral moments. The 2022 Kanjuruhan Stadium incident in Indonesia, where police tear gas incited a crush killing 135, remains as a collective trauma echoed in truck drivers' testimonies, reminding us that meme symbols can humanise rage but not shield bodies from state violence.

Globally, these dispersed emblems "touch a nerve" but lack the institutional cohesion of traditional student-led movements, leaving them vulnerable to fragmentation once the algorithmic spotlight fades. Memes ignite urban centres but bypass villages where landlessness and agricultural distress persist.

Pixels to power—or perpetual spectacle?

Can Gen Z convert meme rage into systemic reform? The record remains thin. Nepal replaced a prime minister but retained restrictive laws. Indonesia's flag protests reshaped discourse but not policy. The Philippines witnessed moral outrage without legislative consequence. These are disruptions, not transformations. Governments trembling before a cartoon pirate confirm its performative dominance, not its diplomatic efficacy. Memes mobilise crowds; they do not formulate budgets, design welfare schemes, or rewrite constitutions.

In *One Piece*, Luffy's voyage succeeds because he has a crew, a ship, and a destination. Real revolutions require unions, federations, policy blueprints, and institutional alliances. For now digital revolts remain performances of dissent rather than architectures of change.

The treasure is not the flag, it is the federation that follows.

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From grassroots outsider to the people's mayor. Photo: AFP

A People's Victory in New York City

On January 1, 2026 Zohran Kwame Mamdani was sworn in as New York City's first South Asian and Muslim mayor, and the youngest in 134 years. Nilita Vachani followed his campaign.

The new mayor took his oath just after midnight with his hand on the Quran in a simple private ceremony at an ornate but defunct subway station underground. By choosing to hold the event within the public transit network, Mamdani was demonstrating his allegiance to the city's working class.

Later that day tens of thousands of supporters converged around City Hall to witness the public inauguration. An open invitation to a "block party" filled several streets with exuberant New Yorkers huddled together in the warmth of jubilation on a bitterly cold day.

Mamdani inherits Punjabi-Hindu and Gujarati-Muslim lineage from his eminent parents, Indian filmmaker Mira Nair and India-born Ugandan political scientist Mahmood Mamdani. His middle name 'Kwame' pays homage to Ghana's visionary pan-Africanist leader, Kwame Nkrumah. Widening his cross-cultural background is his marriage to Rama Duwaji, an American Syrian from Dubai. Gracie Mansion, New York's elegant mayoral abode, is now home to the quintessential American dream. An assemblyman with scant administrative experience and no name recognition until a year

New York Attorney General Letitia James administers the oath of office to Mayor Zohran Mamdani as his wife, Rama Duwaji, holds the Quran and looks on, just after midnight on Jan. 1, 2026. Photo: AFP

ago is now chief executive of the world's financial capital.

In a speech following his electoral victory in November Mamdani demonstrated his ancestry: "A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation long suppressed finds utterance."

Many will have recognised the words uttered by India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, celebrating his country's freedom from colonial rule. By invoking Nehru's words, as well as the clarion call of labor organizer Eugene Debs for the "dawn of a better day for humanity," Mamdani established his socialist legacy drawn from disparate histories.

More than 100,000 volunteers knocked on nearly three million doors, building one of the largest grassroots field operations in New York City history. Photo: AFP

In an extraordinary campaign Mamdani won the hearts, minds, and indomitable energies of more than 100,000 volunteers who knocked on an estimated 3 million doors to bring in 52.3% of the overall vote. A grassroots movement led by the winsome and charismatic candidate was backed by disciplined strategic planning by the Democratic Socialists of America in the largest field operation in the city's history. Fueled through creative digital media, the victory was ultimately sealed through human connections. "This victory is not mine," Mamdani said, "It is ours," as he thanked the "Yemeni bodega owners and Mexican abuelas, Senegalese taxi drivers and Uzbek nurses, Trinidadian line cooks and Ethiopian aunties."

Community groups mushroomed around the candidate, proud to identify through racial, ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious affiliations. There were South Asians for Zohran, Muslims for Zohran, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Blacks, Bangladeshis, Filipinos, Nepalis, even Dalits for Zohran. For once, class was not a barrier. Senator Bernie Sanders, Mamdani's political mentor, told the crowds on inauguration day: "When working people stand together... there is nothing we cannot accomplish."

This triumph of local democracy comes as the US witnesses a decimation of its democratic institutions through unchecked executive power. While the federal government under President

Mamdani's mother, the film-maker Mira Nair, leads a campaign march. Photo: Zayira Ray

Trump impoverishes its own citizens by imposing unauthorized tariffs, cutting social spending and medical subsidies, firing employees, de-funding universities and science labs, dismantling venerable institutions, Mamdani pledges to restore dignity to every New Yorker whether they voted for him or not.

The campaign's focus on affordability resonated deeply in New York City where the cost of living is 132% higher than the national average. According to political analyst Michael Lange, Mamdani won by 13 percentage points over his rival Andrew Cuomo in households earning between $30K-$50K and by 20 percentage points where incomes were between $50K-100K. While Cuomo fared better with the Chinese community, South Asians came out overwhelmingly for Mamdani according to an Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund exit poll. Sixty thousand Trump voters moved over to Mamdani in the mayoral election. The candidate had walked through swing neighborhoods asking people why they had voted Trump. Many cited the high cost of living, others the unconscionable war in Gaza. Trump had promised to cut inflation and end all wars.

Mamdani is that rare breed of politician who is unafraid to stand by his moral conscience. "I am young, despite my best efforts to grow older. I am Muslim. I am a democratic socialist. And most damning of all, I refuse to apologize for any of this." He has not budged from his position that the Israeli reprisal in Gaza is a genocide. He has accused Prime Minister Netanyahu of war crimes as he has India's PM Narendra Modi for his role in the 2002 Gujarat riots.

New York's mayor lost no time putting his economic agenda into action. Legal scholars, regulators and labor experts fill posts in the

Tens of thousands gather in freezing temperatures for Mamdani's public inauguration, turning City Hall into a jubilant neighborhood block party. Photo: AFP

Zohran Mamdani built something New York had not really seen before: a winning citywide campaign for mayor, created from nothing in a matter of months. Photo: AFP

new administration. Many are Asian, many are women. There's a new Department for Economic Justice and an Office of Mass Engagement to ensure that public momentum does not dissipate.

While free universal childcare and the creation of affordable housing can take months if not years, freezing the rent on a million rent-stabilized units, adding a few fast bus lines and a handful of price-capped government grocery stores are within reach. His erstwhile canvassers are lobbying the state to raise taxes on corporations and millionaires in order to raise funds to cover the mayor's more ambitious goals.

'Affordability' is now the new catchword countrywide as voters push back against 'establishment' politics in municipal and primary elections. Gen Zs and millennials, like those who came out in full force for Mamdani, will constitute almost half of the eligible voters nationwide in the congressional elections later this year. A recent poll suggests that 61% of the population disapproves of Trump's handling of the economy (Navigator). If the mid-terms are held freely and fairly, Democrats appear well poised to win back the House of Representatives.

Less than two days after Mamdani's inauguration, the US invaded Venezuela in a surprise attack. That same day Mayor Mamdani called President Trump to lodge his protest at the "violation of federal and international law". 2026 marks the 250th anniversary of the United States of America. At this tumultuous time in the nation's history that witnesses the erosion of its democracy, the positivity and hope unleashed by New York's young mayor, whose name 'Zohran' means radiance, holds the world's attention. Will he be allowed to succeed?

Nilita Vachani is a film-maker and writer affiliated with New York University

Photo: Aly Song/Reuters

What Democracy means in a country where the word is avoided

In the West we talk of democracy as if it is universally understood and incapable of more than one interpretation. As Lijia Zhang explains, it can mean something different to the people of China.

"I'm learning to take control of my own life," Angela, a young white-collar worker in Nanjing, told me during an interview for a project on changing attitudes towards marriage and motherhood. She wasn't talking about elections or grand political ideals, but about the small, essential freedoms, over work, over her body, and over her future. Resisting pressure from her family, she had decided not to have children and to live life on her own terms.

The Chinese Communist Party has increasingly imposed rules that curb the very autonomy people like Angela are seeking. In some ways, the desire for autonomy is a challenge to that kind of rule. Angela never used the word "democracy." Most people don't anymore. But her longing for agency is, in essence, democratic.

These days, *minzhu*, or democracy, from *min* meaning people and *zhu* meaning to be in charge or to decide, is omnipresent in state rhetoric yet largely avoided in daily conversation. President Xi Jinping promotes "whole-process

Everyday life unfolds under watchful eyes in modern China, where political language is avoided but the desire for dignity endures. Photo: Reuters

people's democracy," a system in which the Party listens attentively to the people and acts in their best interest. Ordinary citizens, however, know instinctively that the word is sensitive, even risky. And yet beneath the surface, the desire for dignity and justice persists.

This tension is not new. It stretches back a century to the May Fourth Movement of 1919, which helped shape modern China and introduced "Mr. De" and "Mr. Sai", democracy and science, as cures for China's ills.

In 2019, at a gathering marking the movement's 100th anniversary, Xi urged young Chinese to embrace the "May Fourth spirit". But democracy appeared only briefly, almost as a historical footnote. The emphasis was patriotism and obedience to the Party, another reminder of how contested the legacy of May Fourth has become.

The original protests began when students in Beijing took to the streets to oppose the Western powers' decision to let Japan keep territories in Shandong after World War I. Outrage at foreign bullying and the Chinese government's weakness soon ignited a broader cultural revolution, before Mao's political one, led by intellectuals such as Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi. They rejected stale Confucian values and embraced liberalism, pragmatism, feminism, and individualism. Free thinking and tolerance were celebrated. Chen famously declared that only "Mr De" and "Mr Sai" could rescue China from darkness.

After 1949, the Communist Party reinterpreted the May Fourth spirit as patriotism, progress, democracy and science, though democracy became increasingly symbolic. Under Mao, the country lived under what he called a "people's democratic dictatorship," a contradiction Chinese citizens understood well. After the reform era, personal freedoms expanded but political reform stalled. In 1989, a pro-democracy movement, led by students and participated in by people from all walks of life, once again swept the country, only to be met with tanks and bullets in Tiananmen Square.

I remember those days vividly. As a young factory worker in Nanjing, I organised the largest protest by

For many young urban Chinese, personal autonomy is sought in daily life rather than through formal politics. Photo: AFP

Student protesters during the May Fourth Movement of 1919, when democracy and science were promoted as paths to national renewal.

workers in support of the Beijing students. We believed we were continuing the legacy of our patriotic forebears. That hope was extinguished on the dark night of 4 June. Ever since, the memory of democracy in China has been contested, repressed, half-remembered.

Today, China's economic achievements are extraordinary. Its high-speed rail network is the envy of the world; its space programme reaches the far side of the moon; it leads in mobile technology and green energy and is competitive with the USA in AI. Materially, the nation is transformed. Politically, the trajectory has reversed. Under Xi, censorship has deepened, civil society faces strict controls, independent voices have dwindled, the gender pay gap has widened and feminist activism has been banned. Many young Chinese have learnt to avoid political discussions altogether.

And yet the desire for basic democratic rights continues to surface quietly, in small struggles that rarely make headlines. Parents protest arbitrary school policies on WeChat. Residents petition local governments over pollution, land grabs or unfair relocations. Women speak up about sexual harassment despite enormous pressure. These are not organised political movements, but they reflect something real: a yearning to be heard.

Factory workers during China's reform era, when economic freedoms expanded but political reform stalled. Photo: ILO.

When repression goes too far, people are willing to push back, as seen in the "White Paper Movement" of late 2022. Spontaneous protests erupted nationwide against suffocating Covid rules, pushing the government to abruptly end the zero-Covid policy.

Over the years, I've asked many ordinary Chinese what democracy means to them. Their answers rarely resemble political theory. Instead, they speak of fairness, justice when wronged, protection from abusive employers, the right to speak truth without fear. Migrant workers complain about wage theft and corruption. Young women talk about autonomy over their bodies and life choices. Business owners wish for equal treatment under the law. These everyday aspirations amount to a quiet, unspoken version of democracy, one rooted not in ideology but in human dignity.

Here lies the paradox: China's leaders insist that Western-style democracy is chaotic and unsuited to China's needs. They point to economic performance and political stability — and they are not entirely wrong that democracy is struggling globally. Turkey, Myanmar, Tunisia, Venezuela, Poland and, indeed, the United States have all experienced democratic backsliding. Even in long-established democracies, trust has eroded. In Britain, the endless wrangling over Brexit once made Chinese leaders laugh

Social media platforms in China are tightly monitored, forcing dissent into brief, coded or private forms.

that at least they had no such problem.

But this misses the point. Democracy is not merely a mechanism for decision-making; it is a system of limits. A democratic constitution restrains state power and protects citizens. It ensures that no leader – no matter how capable – rules indefinitely or without accountability. And while democracies may be flawed or inefficient, they tend to be richer, fairer and more content because people have a say in their future.

Is democracy still worth pursuing in China today? I believe so. Not because Western democracies are perfect, but because the desire for voice and dignity is universal. What is striking, after a century of searching, is that democracy in China has never disappeared. It has changed shape. From the bold declarations of the May Fourth intellectuals to the whispered hopes of Angela in Nanjing; from student protesters in 1919 and 1989 to everyday acts of resistance in the digital age, democracy lives on, not as a political system but as a persistent moral instinct. Even in a country where the word is avoided, millions still long for Mr De. So do I.

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

An aerial view shows the vast urban sprawl of Jakarta and its surrounding satellite cities, forming one of the world's largest continuous metropolitan areas. Photo: Akhmad Dody Firmansyah/Shutterstock

Jakarta takes over as the world's largest city

The Indonesian capital Jakarta has overtaken previous front runners Dhaka and Tokyo to become the world's most populous city according to a United Nations report which reveals that all but one of the world's largest cities are in Asia. Rahul Jaywant Bhise reports.

The UN's World Urbanization Prospects report puts Jakarta's population at close to 42 million, compared with around 37 million in Dhaka and 33 million in Tokyo. This reflects a new way of counting. Instead of relying on administrative boundaries, the UN now measures contiguous built-up urban areas, tracing where the city's physical fabric merges into surrounding settlements. A city is defined by uninterrupted streets and neighbourhoods rather than by the borders of municipalities or provinces.

That distinction is crucial. Administrative boundaries are often historical artefacts: too tight to capture dense commuter belts and too loose to reflect lived urban reality. Commuting, water supply, housing markets and flood risk do not stop at jurisdictional lines. Counting built-up areas is an attempt to align statistics more closely with how metropolitan regions actually function.

By that standard, Jakarta no longer looks like a capital with suburbs. It appears as a sprawling metropolitan mass. Indonesians have long described this reality through the acronym 'Jabodetabek', linking Jakarta with Bogor, Depok, Tangerang and Bekasi. The conurbation is held together by commuting patterns, industrial zones, logistics corridors and housing estates that stretch far beyond the city's formal limits. Where one ends and another begins is often a matter of signage, not urban form.

The broader pattern is unmistakable. Nine of the

Commuters crowd a train platform in Jakarta during peak hours, highlighting the intense daily movement across the wider Jabodetabek metropolitan region. Photo: Fajrul Islam/Shutterstock

world's ten largest cities are in Asia. Alongside Jakarta, Dhaka and Tokyo are New Delhi, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Manila, Kolkata and Seoul. The Egyptian capital Cairo is the lone exception. Urban scale, once associated mainly with Europe and North America, has shifted decisively east and south, following demographic momentum and the pull of expanding labour markets.

This goes beyond statistical rearrangement but shows a profound shift in people's lifestyles and occupations. Nearly half of the world's population now lives in cities, and the number of mega-cities has increased significantly in recent decades. Asia is home to more than half. However, size is not the whole picture. With fewer resources and less political focus, many of the fastest-growing urban places are smaller cities dealing with comparable constraints, such as housing, transportation, public services, and climate risk. An extreme example of a broader trend is Jakarta, where institutions are finding it difficult to keep up with the rate of urban transformation.

Heavy traffic clogs a main road in central Jakarta, where rapid urban growth has placed severe pressure on transport infrastructure. Photo: Oryzapratama/Shutterstock

Jakarta's rise has been long in the making. For decades, the city has drawn people from across Java and from other islands such as Sumatra and Sulawesi, pulled by jobs, education and the promise – often elusive – of social mobility. The capital concentrates universities, hospitals, corporate headquarters and state institutions, anchoring Indonesia's finance, trade and media industries. Migration is a rational response to where opportunity and services remain densest even as costs rise.

There is growth everywhere and it manifests itself in different ways. The rapid development of high-rises is changing consumption habits and skylines. Long-standing *kampungs* or villages draw more residents into their set footprints at street level, increasing the number of stories and making daily life more intense. Long commutes and a greater reliance on long-distance travel are caused by new subdivisions and industrial parks encroaching on formerly agricultural area on the outskirts of cities.

These pressures explain Indonesia's decision to move its political capital to Nusantara, a new city being constructed out of jungle on the island of Borneo. The planned move is a reaction to demands on governance and concern that Jakarta is sinking thus increasing the risk of severe flooding. Yet the UN report underlines a reality: shifting ministries does not shift people. Jakarta remains the country's dominant urban and economic centre and the wider metropolitan system will

Residents wade through floodwater in a Jakarta neighbourhood, as land subsidence and rising sea levels increase the city's vulnerability to extreme weather. Photo: RAF.Contributor/Shutterstock

continue to shape national productivity and inequality.

Cities of this scale test the limits of governance. Transport networks, water systems, housing supply and waste management operate across municipal boundaries, while authority remains fragmented. Jakarta is not unique in this respect, but its size magnifies the problem. A rail extension, flood barrier or zoning decision in one jurisdiction can generate effects across the entire urban basin.

High-rise apartments tower over a densely populated kampung in Jakarta, illustrating the stark contrasts created by rapid urban development. Photo: Een Arin Pakaludin/Shutterstock

Inequality sharpens the picture. Opportunity is concentrated, but access to services is uneven. While low-income people are forced to live in places more vulnerable to flooding and environmental stress due to a lack of affordable housing, high-end developments are located near informal settlements. Environmental pressure adds another layer. The UN report notes that, globally, cities have expanded their physical footprint far faster than their populations since the 1970s, often consuming farmland and wetlands. For low-lying coastal cities such as Jakarta, the consequences are already visible as dense settlement collides with flooding, subsidence and rising seas.

Jakarta's new status is therefore more than a headline about size. It offers a concentrated view of Asia's urban future. Almost all global population growth to mid-century will take place in cities, largely in Asia and Africa. The lesson from Jakarta is not simply about scale, but about speed, coordination and the widening gap between urban growth and the institutions meant to manage it.

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From TI to AI: India's semiconductor journey

This month (February) New Delhi hosts the AI Impact Summit, a flagship global conference on artificial intelligence, recognition that India is in the top league of AI. Sham Banerji tells of its journey towards this milestone.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi captured India's new semiconductor priority neatly when he told an Indian audience that "oil was black gold but chips are digital diamonds".

India's semiconductor journey began in the 1960s as a public sector undertaking with companies like Bharat Electronics in Bangalore and Electronics Corporation of India in Hyderabad starting pilot lines for discrete semiconductors and small-scale integrated circuits for domestic use. In 1976 the government approved the domestic production of integrated circuits though it was eight years before Semiconductor Complex (SCL) of Mohali started production. Using 5-micron CMOS technology licensed from American Microsystems, it was within touching distance of the global leading edge. At the time India was not dramatically behind Taiwan or Korea in chip manufacturing.

Then, in February 1989, a fire destroyed the main fabrication line at SCL, temporarily bringing India's chip manufacturing to a halt. The plant was eventually rebuilt as the Semi-Conductor Laboratory but the original dream of a commercial, competitive Indian 'fab' or chip foundry never fully recovered.

Bullock carts and microprocessors

However, there was a parallel story unfolding. In 1985 the American company Texas Instruments (TI) dragged a satellite dish through Bangalore on a bullock cart to wire its new R&D centre to Dallas. Newspapers joked that "high-tech

Satellite dish being unloaded from a bullock cart in 1985. Photo: Texas Instruments

Bangalore arrived on a bullock cart" yet it was the starting shot on India's long, uneven run with semiconductor heavyweights. SCL made the first Indian 'chips' while TI engineers in 1997 created the first microprocessor or chip designed by an Indian team. It was codenamed Ankoor.

Scores of multinationals followed TI's lead. According to government and industry estimates, India now hosts about 20% of the world's chip-design engineers, said to number about 120,000. They produce around 3000 separate designs a year. Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Noida and Pune today host large design centres for Intel, Qualcomm, NVIDIA, Broadcom, MediaTek, Marvell, NXP, Micron and many others.

If TSMC of Taiwan is the world's leading chip manufacturer, India can claim to be the global chip design centre, based on an eco-system of high-value jobs at home plugged into the global semiconductor value chain. Much of the intellectual property in chip design accrues to multinational headquarters, mainly in the US, though this is changing.

Today India hosts around one-fifth of the world's chip design engineers, making it the global nerve centre for semiconductor design. Photo: Bandeep Singh

From lab to fab to cloud

In 2021 the Indian government launched its Semiconductor Mission (ISM) marking a departure from the fragmented, under-capitalised, stop-start policy initiatives of the past. Reinforced by a governmental AI Mission and semiconductor research, design and manufacturing.

In less than four years ISM approved more than ten large projects, resulting in commitments including Tata Electronics proposed US$10bn fab, or semiconductor foundry, as well as Taiwan's PSMC and Micron Technology's plan to build a US$2.75bn manufacturing plant in Gujarat. India is also a major user of semiconductors. Indian companies and consumers purchase around US$45–55bn of semiconductors a year, which is anticipated to rise to around US$100–120 billion by 2030.

What India needs next is good execution — projects that finish on time and training programmes that grow talent, not just headcount. Crucially, regulatory processes must keep pace at silicon-speed, not the paper-speed of the past.

Competing with China and Southeast Asia

Execution alone will not eliminate India's current supply chain dependence on China, nor the fierce regional competition from smaller but established players in Southeast Asia. Malaysia already accounts for roughly 13% of global chip assembly, testing and packaging or ATP in shorthand. Vietnam is a major ATP hub hosting Intel's largest test and assembly plant in Ho Chi Minh

City, and Thailand with mature manufacturing ranks sixth worldwide for semiconductor-based device exports.

However, with US–China tech tensions rising and supply chains under stress, India's sheer skilled workforce make it a natural favourite when companies look for expansion beyond China. Apple and Foxconn's India manufacturing story is now past the experimental stage and India is now Apple's second-largest iPhone production base after China, assembling around US$22bn worth of iPhones or one fifth of the company's global output annually.

Artificial Intelligence

With nearly 900 million internet users and around 1800 global

With Aadhaar, UPI and ONDC generating vast real-world data, India is uniquely placed to deploy artificial intelligence at population scale. Photo: oneindia

Under the Semiconductor Mission, India has approved multi-billion-dollar fabrication and packaging projects to revive domestic manufacturing.

design centres India offers unmatched scale and linguistic diversity for training and deploying AI applications. According to IBM's Global AI Adoption Index, India is among the world's frontrunners with 59% of large organisations already actively using AI, and second only to China of those exploring accelerated roll-out.

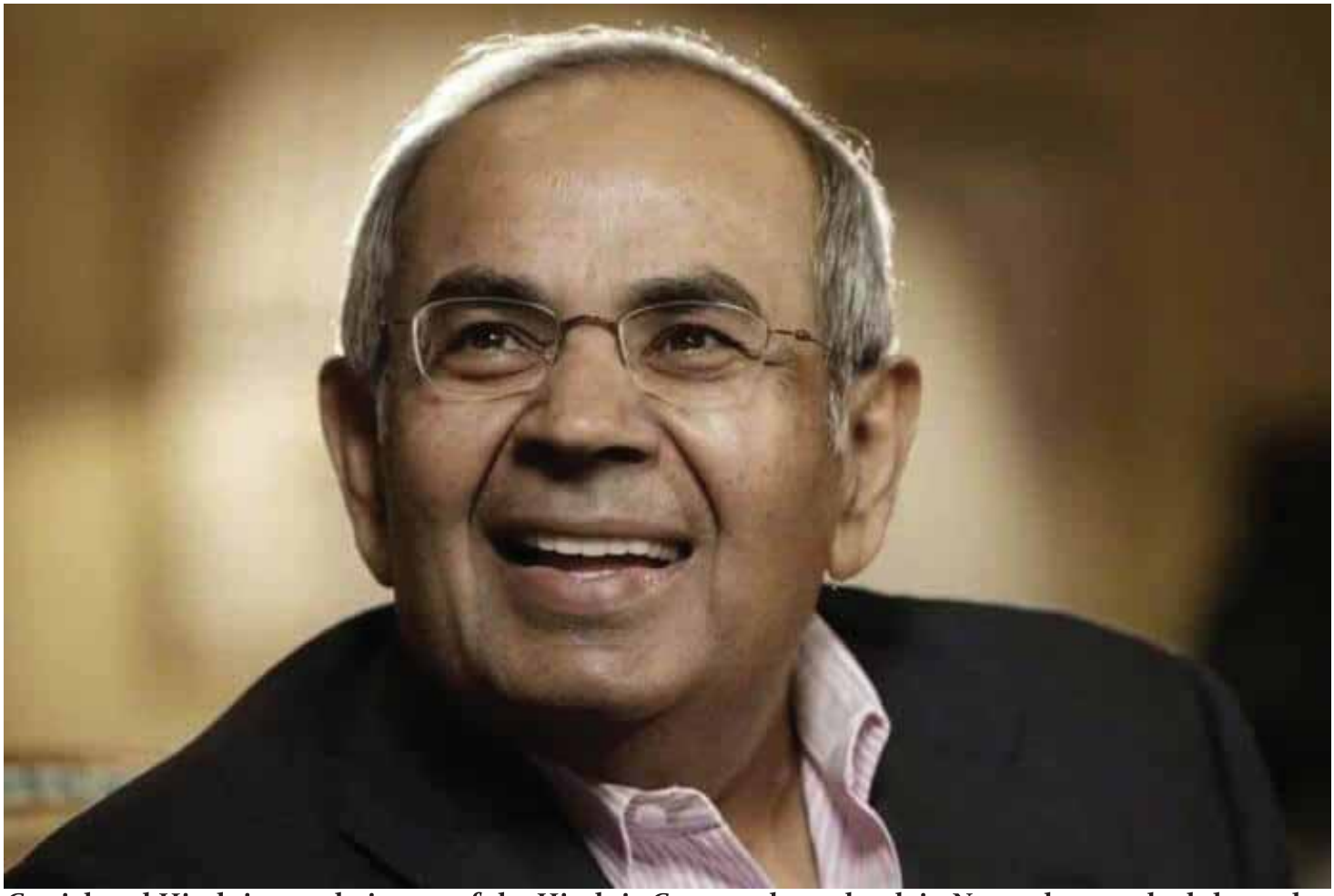
India now operates a large-scale digital public infrastructure that links identity, payments and online commerce. Aadhaar, a biometric-based digital ID system, allows residents to verify who they are; UPI enables instant, low-cost digital payments; and ONDC is an open network designed to connect buyers and sellers across platforms. Together, these systems form a shared digital backbone used daily by hundreds of millions of people. The result is vast volumes of real-world data, live, complex and imperfect, that are especially valuable for developing, testing and deploying advanced AI systems at scale.

Research and Development

Research remains a challenge. As the *Economist* noted, when it comes to spending on R&D India's private sector companies have been notoriously 'stingy'. According to the magazine just 15 of the world's top 2000 corporate R&D spenders are Indian, accounting for about US$5.9bn in 2023.

Indian tech entrepreneur Gani Subramaniam, who founded Yali Capital, frames India's shift in more bullish terms: "We are directing over 50% of our early-stage AI investments into robotics, life sciences and aerospace — away from software services and into products." Twenty years ago Subramaniam was designing chips at TI. His shift today into long-horizon AI investments echoes India's own journey—from TI to AI.

Sham Banerji is a veteran of the semiconductor industry having spent three decades working with Texas Instruments and Philips in the UK, USA and India.



Gopichand Hinduja, co-chairman of the Hinduja Group, whose death in November marked the end of an era for Britain's most powerful family-owned business empire. Photo: Indianlink

Assessing the Hinduja legacy

Gopichand Hinduja of London's powerful Hinduja business family died in November more than two years after his older brother Srichand. The two were the leading lights of the Hindujas' London-based business empire, Britain's richest family enterprise. Ashis Ray recalls their arrival in London and considers their business legacy.

Towards the late 1970s, there was a buzz among Asians in London about two businessmen of Indian descent relocating from Tehran to the British capital. Indeed, they had moved at the nick of time to avert being throttled by the Islamic fervour which was to engulf Iran. They were Srichand and Gopichand Hinduja, popularly known as SP and GP. Both are now no more. SP died in 2023 and his brother GP died last November, thereby ending an era of Asian enterprise in Britain.

Friends of the family described their departure from Iran as "a great escape". The Hindujas were reputedly close to the royal household of the country's ruler Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi whose regime the Islamists led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini overthrew in 1979. GP attributed their timely exit from Iran to 'a celestial message', a reward, he said, for the family being devoutly religious. Logically, it could be ascribed to insider information.

The Hindujas hailed from Shikarpur in Sind province of pre-partition India, now in Pakistan. Their father

The Hinduja brothers: (Standing, from left) Gopichand, Prakash and Ashok (seated) Srichand. Photo: Umesh Goswami

Parmanand, after a pit stop of a few years in Mumbai, moved to the Iranian capital in 1919. The family firm eventually came to be known as Sangam Limited. As film distributors the Hindujas had made a killing with Bollywood's mega film-maker Raj Kapoor's 1964 blockbuster Sangam.

Sindis of Shikarpur were traditionally bankers and financiers. One of SP and GP's early ventures out of London was, in fact, to found a finance company in Switzerland – Hinduja Bank. Much of the investment, it was whispered, emanated from wealthy Iranians, perhaps even the Shah's relatives. It became a regulated bank in 1994, thereafter renamed S P Hinduja Banque Privee SA, continuing to offer private banking and wealth management services.

The Farsi-speaking Hindujas exploded on the London social scene with a high-profile Diwali party in the early 1980s which Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher attended as chief guest. Recognition of the Hindujas immediately catapulted to new heights in corporate and political spheres in the United Kingdom.

The Hindujas were a traditional Indian joint family enterprise with an inbuilt patriarchy. No matter whose idea it was, GP and his younger brothers Prakash and Ashok would defer to SP for a sign-off on any major or new initiative. If banking was SP's ingenuity, the acquisitions of Gulf Oil in 1984 and in 1987 Ashok Leyland – derived from British Leyland – were GP's brainchild.

The purchase and re-development of the Old War Office in London into a super-luxury hotel, managed by Raffles of Singapore, and upmarket residential apartments was also GP's concept. It was a building where Sir Winston Churchill had worked as Secretary of State for Air and War after the First World War, as later did intelligence officer and subsequent novelist, Ian Fleming, creator of the spy hero James Bond.

The buying price of the sprawling structure, with its famous 2.5 miles of corridors in London's government district of Whitehall, was UK £350 million. The Hindujas put the money down with input from a Spanish partner. The total cost of project came to UK £1.4 billion.

The London headquarters of the Hinduja Group, the base from which the family built one of Britain's richest business empires. Photo: Anton Balazh/Shutterstock.com

In six of the past 10 years, the Hindujas have been ranked by Britain's Sunday Times newspaper as the United Kingdom's richest family. Their Group's net worth is calculated to be around UK £35 billion. The Hindujas had an expanding footprint in Asia. In addition to its headquarters in India, Ashok Leyland manufactures in the United Arab Emirates. It is the world's fourth largest maker of buses and a major supplier of armoured vehicles to the Indian Army. Gulf Oil's lubricants and speciality automotive fluids are produced across Asia – in India, the UAE, Singapore and the Philippines. Its marine lubricants division, Gulf Marine, operates out of Singapore.

The Group's integrated product engineering and digital solutions provider Hinduja Tech is based in Bangalore. The Hindujas generate coal-based power in India and are also rapidly expanding their presence in the renewable energy sector there. A spokesman for the Group said they functioned in '12 verticals' in 100 countries, employing 120,000 people. *Eastern Eye* weekly reported no one was made redundant by the Hinduja Group during the Covid pandemic.

After SP's death his daughters Shanu and Vinoo sought a separation of ownership of the Group's businesses, staking a claim to S P Hinduja Banque Privee SA. This deeply hurt GP. Appeals were made even at his funeral to maintain unity. Shanu in her speech at the event sounded reassuring without being categorical. GP was a great lover of Bollywood film music and didn't need prompting to break into a popular number. He was a patron of celebrated singers from India. Indeed, his taste extended to the Sufi tradition in the Indian subcontinent, which flourishes in Pakistan. He played host to Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, dubbed the 'King of Qawwali'.

The Hindujas' mansion in London represents four interconnected residences occupied by the brothers and their families. The Grade I-listed building was in a state of disrepair when the Hindujas bought it in 2006 from the Crown Estate for UK £58 million. They spent another UK £50 million to restore it magnificently to its previous grandeur. The property was constructed on land which had belonged to King George IV. Lord Curzon, a former governor-general of India, once

Vehicles produced by Ashok Leyland, one of India's largest commercial vehicle manufacturers and a cornerstone of the Hinduja business empire. Photo: Coach Builder India

The Hinduja family's Grade I listed mansion in central London, restored to its former grandeur after its purchase in 2006. Photo: Danish Khan

lived in it. It is valued today at over UK £300 million.

Controversies have occasionally dogged the Hindujas. In 1991, they were accused in India of receiving kickbacks in a howitzer deal between the Swedish company Bofors and the Indian government. They were ultimately cleared of all charges in 2005, with the concerned judge commenting that the trial "has caused huge economic, emotional, professional and personal loss to the Hindujas".

GP, who was co-chairman of the Group while SP was chairman, became its supremo after the latter's death. But the succession now is being perceived as being more collective with an emergence of regional or sector-wise chieftains rather than continuation with a big chief. Ashok is expected to hold sway in India, where the Hindujas' assets have incorporated IndusInd Bank since 1994 and now Reliance Capital while his younger brother Prakash will remain primarily a resident of Monaco. GP's sons Sanjay and Dheeraj will continue to administer Gulf Oil and Ashok Leyland respectively.

'GP has left the Group in very good shape,' said Michael Urwick its Director of Communications.

Ashis Ray was CNN's founding South Asia bureau chief and editor-at-large in London. He is the author of *The Trial that Shook Britain: How a Court Martial Hastened Acceptance of Indian Independence.*

Bisinomics

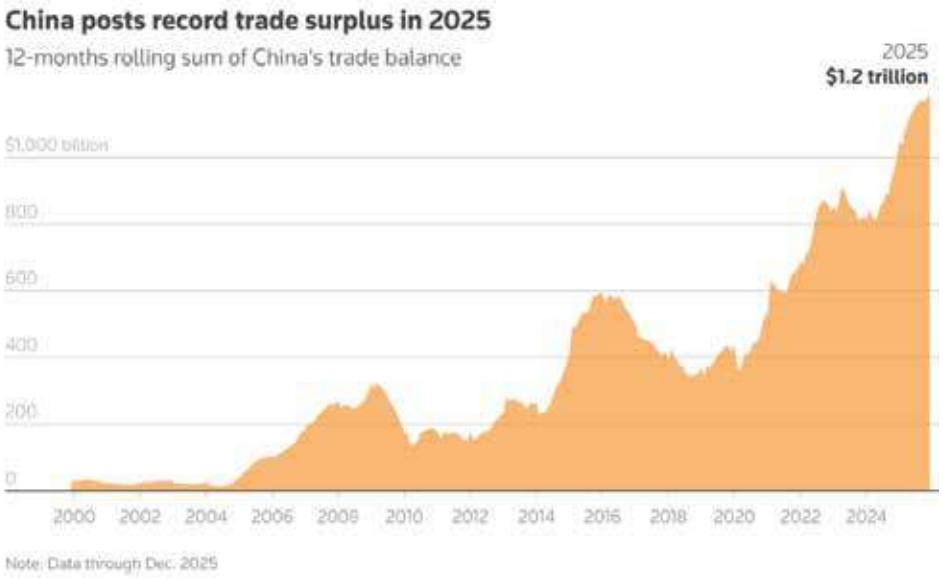
China

The United States' military operation in Venezuela, culminating in the abduction and rendition to New York of its president, Nicolas Maduro, is potentially an economic blow to China. Chinese credit to the South American country amounts to around US$10 billion. The *South China Morning Post*, quoting analysts, reported that Caracas could challenge the very legitimacy of the debts.

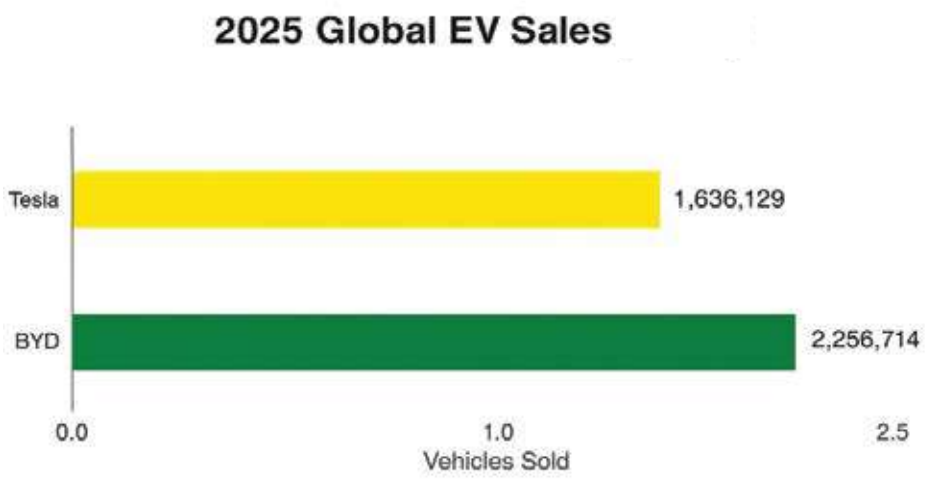
Meanwhile, CNBC reports that China's trade surplus continues to surge as it enters 2026 with the positive balance passing US$1 trillion. Demand for Chinese goods continued their strong growth despite US President Donald Trump's tariffs on China.

BYD, the long-time domestic market leader for electric vehicles, outpaced its major international rival Tesla selling 2.25 million battery EVs in 2025 – a 27.9% year-on-year increase – compared with Tesla's 1.64 million deliveries. Overall, BYD slowed its output increase but still sold 4.3 million vehicles in 2025. Competition from other countries in the EV sector is expected to intensify as manufacturers around the world scale up production and introduce new models.

The Rhodium Group think-tank calculated China's economic growth in 2025 to be 2.5% to 3% driven by a collapse in fixed-asset



Credit: LSEG Datastream, January 2025



Credit: Company filings, Bloomberg

investment in the second half of the year. The World Bank had projected 4.5%. Industrial activity expanded only modestly and retail sales inched upward at their slowest pace in years; demand is not expanding as rapidly as previously; consumer caution lingers; and private sector confidence has been flickering without igniting.

South Korea

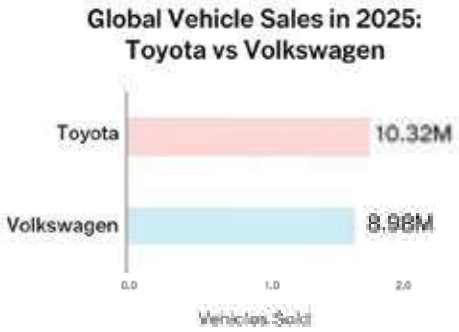
The government in South Korea aims at 2% GDP growth in 2026, betting on strategic high-tech industries and a recovery in investment to drive a rebound, the *Korea Herald* reported. The paper reported that foreign direct investment pledges to the country hit a record high of US$36 billion in 2025.

The paper flagged that South Korea posted its largest-ever current account surplus for November, supported by strong exports amid an upcycle in the semiconductor sector, citing data published by the country's central bank. The margin was US$12.24 billion compared with US$6.81 billion in October.

Samsung Electronics Co. reported a record operating profit of US$13.8 billion in the fourth quarter of 2025 – a 200% rise from the previous year. This was driven by a super-cycle in the chip industry where sales increased by 22.7%. Analysts say that Samsung is expected to maintain its robust performance in 2026. Kim Dong-won, a researcher at KB Securities Co., said Samsung Electronics will enter the supply chain of HBM4 or High bandwidth memory 4 for major tech companies, including Nvidia Corp. and Google.

Japan

The Nikkei 225 stock index hit a new record in advance of February's election the *Japan Times* reported. However, the yield on a 10-year government bond fell to 2.135% and the yen weakened against the US dollar. Japan's finance minister Satsuki Katayama underscored concern to his American counterpart, treasury secretary Scott Bessent, about "one-sided yen moves". Bessent was reported by the *Japan Times* to have "shared that understanding". Katayama said Japanese financial authorities have a "free hand" to intervene.



Credit: The News Wheel, January 2026

Meanwhile, Toyota Motor Corp. remained the world's top-selling automaker in 2025 for six years in a row according to Mainichi Shimbun after the full-year figures released by Volkswagen AG fell short of the Japanese giant's achievement to November. Toyota sold 10.32 million vehicles worldwide between January and November while its German rival sold 8.98 million units over a 12-month period.

Asahi Shimbun noted that Sony Honda Mobility Inc., a joint venture between Sony Group Corp. and Honda Motors Co., unveiled a prototype of its new Afeela electric vehicle in Las Vegas in January.

India

The *Financial Times* headlined: "India needs to import more capital and export fewer workers," adding that "despite strong headline growth numbers, the country is slipping from the global spotlight". The headline introduced a report by Ruchir Sharma, chair of Rockefeller International, saying that "flows of foreign money into the country have dried up, suggesting outsiders believe that the reported GDP growth rate of over 8 per cent masks underlying weaknesses".

Sharma pointed out that India's infamous 'Licence Raj' lingers making it "prohibitively expensive to acquire land or hire and fire workers". Foreign investment in India is currently running at only 0.1% of GDP compared with over 4% in China and Vietnam.

Sharma suggested that India's 'brain drain' is "a loss of exactly the skilled workers it needs to compete in advances fields" and said "employment growth continues to be weak". He reported that 38% of graduates from the famed Indian Institutes of Technology went without a single job offer domestically; also that one-third of the US Silicon Valley's tech workforce is now Indian.

BRICS banknote, as imagined by watcher.guru

The *Hindu* reported that Mr Trump's new Iran-related tariff threat will have limited impact on India as trade between the two countries has declined significantly.

Indonesia

The World Bank certified that the Indonesian economy expanded by its projected annual target of 5% in the first nine months of 2025, because of strong investment and net exports. Its Indonesia Economic Prospects report said "the country's monetary and fiscal policies have become more accommodative, with stimulus measures boosting private credit and consumption while maintaining fiscal discipline and moderate inflation".

The government revoked the operating licenses of 28 companies, including a subsidiary of Jardine Matheson, following serious flooding in northern Sumatra which left more than 1000 people dead. While 22 of those companies are involved in forestry and plantations, including the production of timber and palm oil, six are involved in mining of commodities such as nickel, products vital for Indonesia's fast expanding economy.

Saudi Arabia

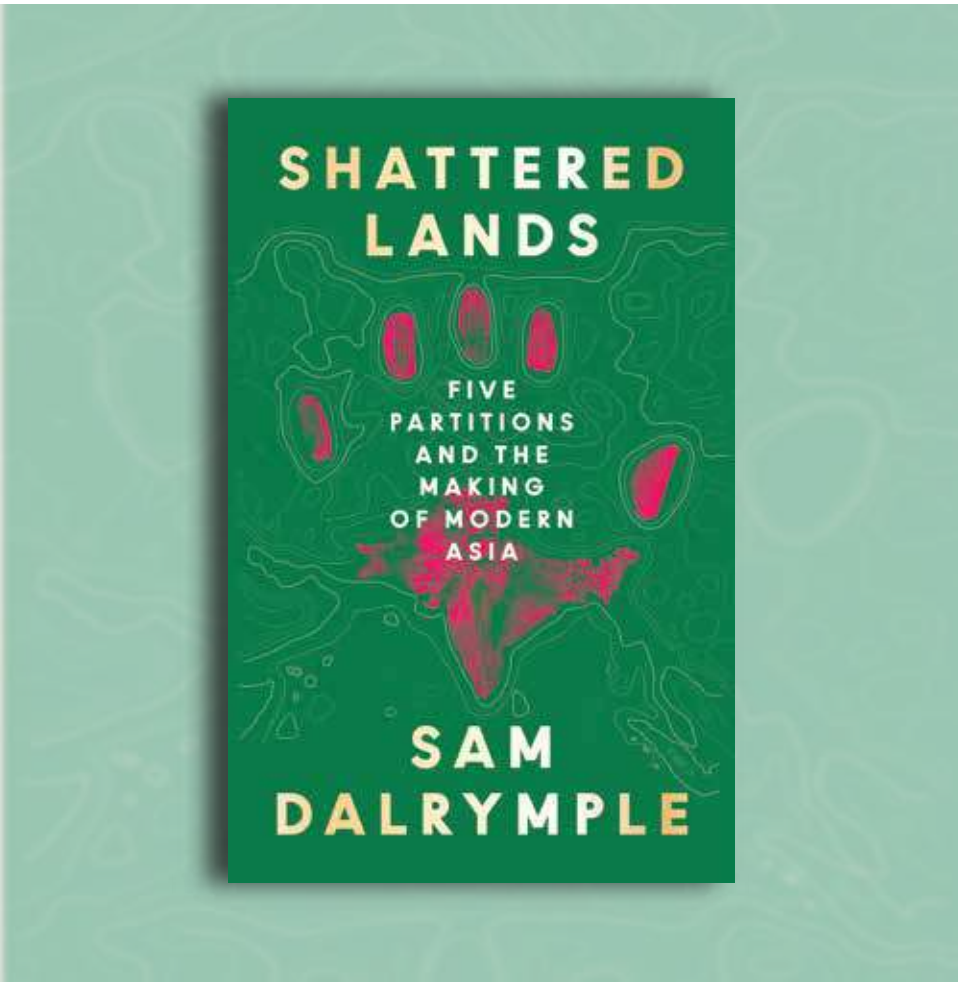
Under its Vision 2030 programme, Saudi Arabia is fast diversifying its economy into non-oil areas like tourism, retail and construction.

Oil remains core to its economic activities. *Arab News* projected the country's non-oil GDP growth will be 4.5% in 2026. S&P Global expects new investments in non-oil segments will increase fiscal and external deficits.

ASEAN

Trump's hostility towards BRICS received a pushback, when nine Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries – Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam – expressed their readiness to use a future BRICS currency.

Credit: Saudi Vision 2030-'The Line', Saudi Vision 2030 Channel



Unfolding the story of the making of post-colonial Asia

Shattered Lands: Five Partitions and the Making of Modern Asia by Sam Dalrymple, London: William Collins, 2025, 504pp, £25, reviewed by Andrew Whitehead.

The story of the unravelling of the Raj (as Britain's Indian Empire was known) has been told time and again: as political history, social history, personal memoir and feature film; as 'end of Empire' ignominy, rebirth of India, the making of a new Muslim nation or a tragic episode of communal frenzy. But never quite like this.

Sam Dalrymple's success in *Shattered Lands* is to find a fresh and compelling way of retelling a familiar narrative. He makes excellent use of personal testimony and oral history to deliver a human dimension to a series of political tremors which remade the map of Asia. And he frames this epic account much more broadly, in timeframe and in geographical scope, than most histories of the demise of British India and the nation-building that stemmed from it.

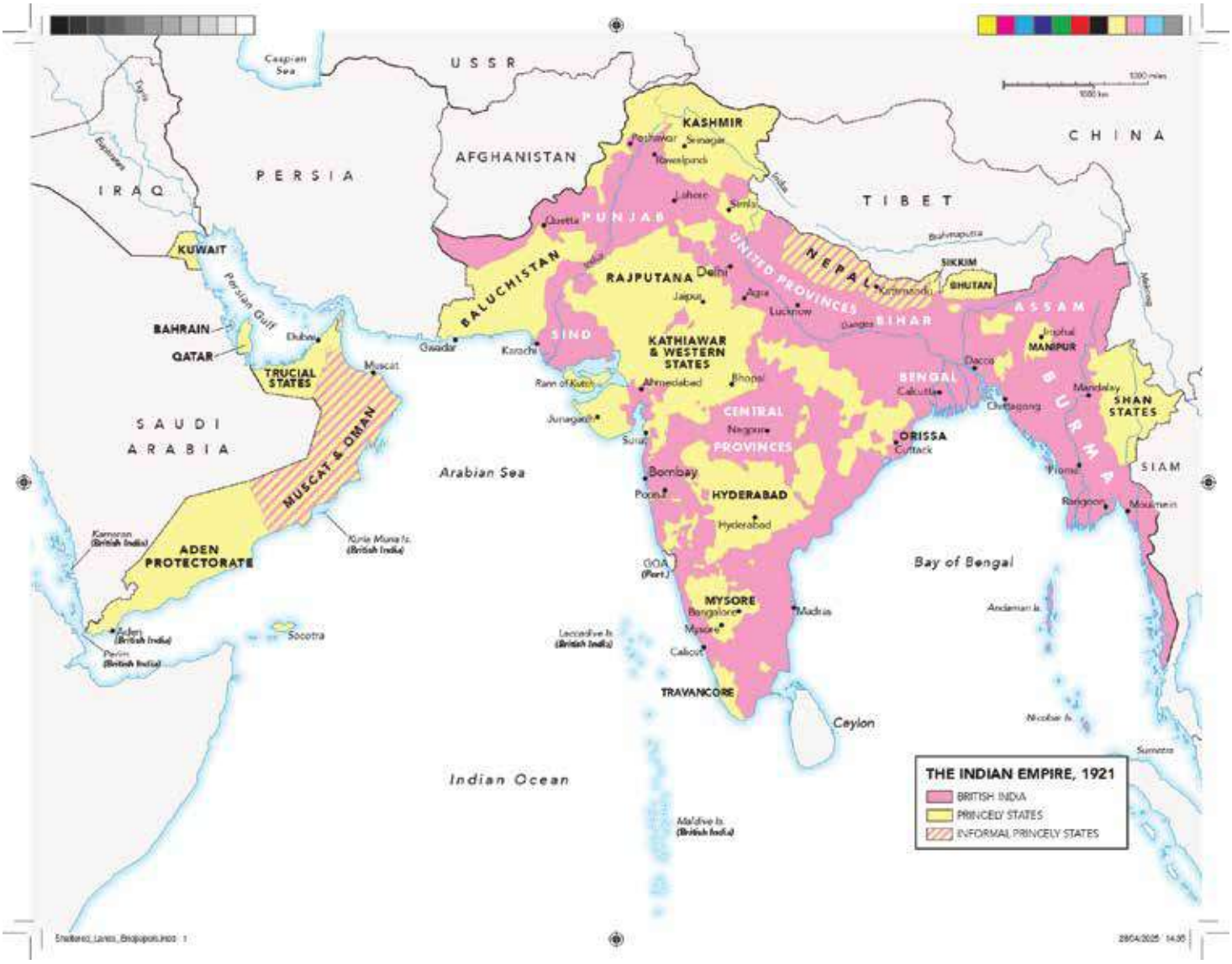
How many partitions delivered independent nations out of the Indian Empire? The conventional answer is two. The 'Great' Partition of 1947 which saw British India dissected to create two independent nations, Hindu-majority India and mainly Muslim Pakistan, unleashed one of the most profound tragedies of a turbulent century. Up to three million people died and perhaps fifteen million became refugees as communities which had long been intertwined set upon each other with appalling savagery. Then in 1971, the two wings of Pakistan were rent asunder and the new nation of Bangladesh was formed amid carnage and forced migration similar in scale to that witnessed a generation earlier. These three successor nations to the Raj – India, Pakistan and Bangladesh – now have a combined population of almost two billion and are home to one-in-four of those who live on our planet. They also share some of the world's most militarised borders.

Dalrymple argues that there were, in all, five partitions which tore apart imperial India and that out of the Raj have come as many as twelve modern nations: not just the three most obvious, but also Burma, Nepal, Bhutan, Yemen, Oman, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait. The argument is at times over-stated, but the basic proposition is well researched and presented. The breaking up of

British India began, the book suggests, in 1937, when Burma (now Myanmar) was carved out from the rest of the Raj. Dalrymple convincingly argues that Burma was linked economically, culturally and by population movement with the eastern flank of India. One of the most impressive aspects of *Shattered Lands* is the surefooted recitation of a history which is not as well-known as it should be: the rise of Burmese nationalism, abetted by Japanese wartime occupation, resulting in the grant of independence in January 1948, followed by a political tailspin, retreat into geopolitical isolation and the expulsion of almost all Indian landowners, merchants and skilled workers.

The second partition is nothing like as clear-cut. This is the uncoupling from India of Britain's territories and protectorates in the Gulf and the southern part of the Arabian peninsula. These had been, largely for administrative convenience, ruled as part of the Raj. There were ancient links between Yemen and Hyderabad and between Oman and coastal Pakistan. Indeed, Oman ruled over the enclave of Gwadar on the Arabian Sea, now the site of the major Pakistani port being built with Chinese support, until as late as 1958. This severing of the Arabian peninsula from India started in 1937 and was completed shortly before the British left the sub-continent a decade later. It was another twenty years before the final British pull-out from what was once the most westerly wing of the Raj with the handing over of Aden to South Yemen. Dalrymple presents the connections between Britain's Arab lands and India in an engrossing manner but to describe this administrative reordering as a partition is stretching the meaning of the word.

The other 'forgotten' partition retold is that of princely India.



When the Raj ended, hundreds of princely rulers had to decide to which independent nation they wished to accede. For most, there was no decision to be made. If they were surrounded on all sides by one or other soon-to-be independent nation, that was the one they had to join. A few of the large states hankered after independence. And the most tricky situations came where princely rulers were of a different religion from most of their subjects, notably in Junagadh (in what is now Gujarat), Hyderabad and Kashmir. The princes were slow to sign up – barely a quarter had done so by the deadline set by the departing British. And India eventually resorted to a military invasion to incorporate Hyderabad in 1948, entailing serious loss of life and triggering large-scale population movement. Kashmir was the only substantial princely state to be split in two, not by colonial diktat but as the outcome of war between India and Pakistan.

If the continuing Kashmir conflict is the most obvious unfinished business of Partition, Dalrymple convincingly argues the other faultlines have arisen in part because of the manner in which the Raj unwound. In Baluchistan, the roots of a decades-long insurgency are to be found in the manner in which Pakistan secured its hold on this vast region on its western flank. The Muslim Rohingyas in Arakan were unhappy to be hived off from their co-religionists in East Bengal, and this encouraged the authorities in Burma/Myanmar to see a long-settled community as outsiders. Naga leaders could not understand how London could countenance full independence for Nepal and Bhutan, two Himalayan monarchies over which the British considered they had informal oversight, without offering the same concession to other hill peoples. To compound the Nagas' sense of grievance, they were split in two by the border between India and Burma.

This is Sam Dalrymple's first book and he writes with a vigour and elegance which is a match, at least, for his father, the distinguished Delhi-based historian, William Dalrymple. *Shattered Lands* offers no new overarching argument for the cause of Partition and does not seek to assess whether religion, language or (to use the academic lingo) imagined community is the most appropriate basis for nationhood. But there is at times a calling to account: a sense of outrage, for example, about the 'vile and contemptible' weaponising of rape by both sides in the 1971 war, the most grievous aspect of which was the herding of Bangladeshi women by the Pakistani army into what amounted to rape camps.

Throughout, Dalrymple displays not simply intellectual curiosity but compassion too. Perhaps the vivisection of Britain's empire in Asia could not have been avoided, but the appalling human consequences of repeated partitions remain a warning: if you tamper with borders, take care!

Andrew Whitehead is a former BBC Delhi correspondent and author of *A Mission in Kashmir*

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