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Democracy Asia

March 2026

Sanae Takaichi:

Japan's Iron Lady takes full control


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Contents

From the quiet streets of Nara to the commanding heights of the National Diet, Japan has handed its 'Iron Lady' unprecedented authority.

With a commanding two-thirds majority, Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi now holds firm control over parliament, party and policy direction. Her landslide victory reshapes Japan's political landscape, strengthening her hand on economic reform, constitutional revision and national defence. Yet as tensions rise in the Taiwan Strait and fiscal pressures mount at home, the true test begins: how she wields that power may define Japan's future for a generation.

It has been a busy month for elections in Asia. In Japan, incumbent prime minister Sanae Takaichi extended her four-month premiership with a resounding victory at the polls, a significant vote of confidence for the country's first female prime minister. In Bangladesh, a comfortable victory for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party led by Tarique Rahman brought to an end a year and a half of non-elected interim government provoked by what has been dubbed the "Monsoon Revolution" of August 2024 precipitated, it is said, by members of the Gen Z generation. Gen Z were also active in bringing about the resignation of the former prime minister in Nepal, which goes to the polls in early March after its own six-month period of non-elected interim rule.

> "From ballot boxes to prison cells, Asia's political landscape this month reveals both the resilience of democracy and the cost of its absence, as elections, transitions of power and struggles for accountability reshape the region in real time."

In Bangladesh it was Nobel Peace Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus who held power during the transition and paved the way for the implementation of new limits on the power and longevity of future governments, correcting what was perceived to have been a major democratic impediment during the long premiership of former prime minister Sheikh Hasina. Another Asian Nobel peace laureate features in our pages this month. José Ramos-Horta, a hero of Timor-Leste's war of independence in the 1990s, has given his support to a project to hold the military rulers of Myanmar accountable for their brutality while trying to extend their control of the troubled nation. A third Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi, has been languishing in a Myanmar jail since being deposed from power in a military coup in February 2021. Another Asian Nobel laureate, Narges Mohammadi, who is being held in an Iranian jail, could become a bargaining counter in talks between the Islamic regime of Ayatollah Khamenei and the US. She was awarded the peace prize in 2023 for campaigning against the oppression of women in Iran.

Away from politics, we take a look at the climate of acceptance or otherwise of homosexuality across Asia where LGBTQ+ individuals often face penalties for expressing their love and sexual orientation openly – though not everywhere. In our business focus, we hear from a former UK business minister Sir Vince Cable comparing economic developments in India and China. And we feature the work of the Chinese dissident writer Jung Chang to mark the publication of a sequel to her famous book *Wild Swans*.

We hope you are enjoying Democracy Asia and will write with your feedback to letters@democracyasia.com.

Nicholas Nugent

Oman's foreign minister meets US officials ahead of Iran talks in Muscat. Photo: Oman Foreign Ministry/Anadolu

US–Iran talks

American and Iranian officials met in Oman and then Geneva for talks amid heightened tension as US warships assembled in a threatening posture around the Gulf. The US is demanding restrictions on Iran's nuclear programme while Iran, which faces cost-of-living protests at home, wants to have trading sanctions removed or reduced.

Epstein fallout reaches Asia

With further prominent names being mentioned in the released Epstein files, it was announced that the chief of Dubai-based DP World, Sultan Ahmed bin Sulayem, has been replaced. The files, released by the US Department of Justice, have sent ripples through the political establishment in the US and political and royal circles in Britain and Norway.

Bomb explodes in Islamabad mosque

Pakistan police arrest several people following what they say was a suicide bombing at a Shia mosque in the capital, Islamabad, that killed 31 and injured more than 150 people. Pakistan's interior minister said an Afghan national planned the bombing.

Thailand's prime minister returned to office

Thailand's prime minister and his Bhumjaithai Party secured re-election and agreed to form a government with the Pheu Thai Party, preserving a fragile coalition between conservative and pro-military factions. Both parties take a strong nationalist position on the dispute with neighbouring Cambodia which broke into open war last year.

North Korea hints at dynastic succession

Kim Jong Un has enhanced the public profile of his daughter, Ju Ae, prompting speculation that she is being groomed as his heir. A formal succession plan would entrench the Kim dynasty for a fourth generation and reinforce the regime's emphasis on continuity over reform.

Yoon Suk-yeol sentenced to life imprisonment for insurrection and abuse of authority

Former South Korean president sentenced

A court in Seoul found the former president of South Korea, Yoon Suk-yeol, guilty of insurrection and abuse of authority for his failed attempt to impose martial law on the country in December 2024 and sentenced him to life imprisonment.

Japan releases Chinese fishing vessel

Following the election which returned Sanae Takaichi's LDP to power, Japan released a Chinese fishing vessel detained in contested waters. The episode could ease tension between the two powers which have been tense since the Japanese Prime Minister made a statement about Taiwan.

Sanae Takaichi walks through the chamber of the National Diet after being elected prime minister, marking a historic transition in Japan's political leadership. Photo: Reuters

Landslide victory strengthens Japan's Iron Lady

The lady known affectionately as Japan's 'Iron Lady' has led the country's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to a landslide electoral victory – the party won more than two-thirds of seats in the House of Representatives or Diet. Having led the party to an unequivocal lead, Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi now faces the formidable task of turning this political capital into concrete policy achievements. Yoshiteru Uramoto reports on what is being seen as a historic victory.

Sanae Takaichi called the election just four months after becoming Japan's first female prime minister. Although analysts first regarded it as a gamble, they now describe it as a historic victory, giving the LDP its largest ever number of seats in the Diet.

According to Professor Izuru Makihara of Tokyo University, the scale of the win reflects positively on the prime minister's personal appeal. Her "straightforward and down-to-earth communication style" helped cultivate an image of decisive leadership at a time when many voters are frustrated by economic stagnation and cautious consensus politics. Her nationalistic rhetoric also appears to have resonated.

Born in Nara and educated at Kobe University, Ms Takaichi does not come from a political dynasty, which is unusual among recent Japanese leaders. First elected to the Diet in 1993, she has held senior cabinet roles, including minister for internal affairs and communications. Supporters cite her unconventional youth – motorcycle riding and playing drums in a heavy metal band – as evidence of a break from traditional political moulds.

During the campaign, she leaned into her reputation as an ideologically clear and firm leader. Commentators have compared her to former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher on account of her emphasis on resolve and policy discipline. Critics argue, however, that her style places less emphasis on consensus-building, which has long been central to Japan's faction-driven system. During campaigning, her platform centred on economic revitalisation, stronger national defence and a more assertive foreign policy amid rising regional tensions. Pre-election opinion polls suggested that LDP approval had softened before the vote; yet the result indicates that voters distinguished between dissatisfaction with the broader establishment and confidence in her leadership.

Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) President Sanae Takaichi stands up to acknowledge the applause after she was selected as Japan's new prime minister. Photo: AFP/Philip Fong

The campaign briefly shifted when the LDP's former coalition partner, Komeito, joined the Constitutional Democratic Party to form the new Centrist Reform Alliance (CRA), raising doubts about whether the ruling party could retain its majority. But the alliance suffered a severe setback at the polls and now struggles for relevance.

With a renewed mandate, Ms Takaichi needs to convert momentum into results. She is regarded as a meticulous policy-maker with firm views on fiscal management, defence, technological innovation and structural reform. Her decisiveness has appealed to core LDP supporters, some of the business community and younger voters who are concerned about Japan's economic future amid demographic decline.

Domestically, Ms Takaichi has pledged measures to ease rising food prices and reduce energy bills, while promoting growth through innovation and investment. Conservative elements welcome her commitment to strengthening defence and reinforcing national sovereignty. But her proposals on migration and constitutional reform, in particular to boost the status of the country's Self Defence Forces, have drawn scrutiny; critics warn against rapid changes that could alter Japan's post-war security posture and cultural integrity.

Economic sustainability remains a key concern. Bunmei Ibuki, a former Speaker of the House of Representatives, has cautioned

Internal LDP dynamics and coalition fragility may shape the longevity of Takaichi's government.

Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi presides over her first parliamentary deputy ministers' meeting on 22 October 2025, illustrating her hands-on approach to economic revitalisation and policy-making. Photo: Japanese Cabinet Public Affairs Office/Wikimedia Commons

that what he describes as Ms Takaichi's "responsible expansionary fiscal policy" may not guarantee durable growth. He argues that heavy reliance on government bond issuance in the latest supplementary budget could deter private investment and weaken the yen, fuelling inflation rather than easing it. He also questions how long the public will tolerate high prices and stagnant wages, suggesting that the administration's longevity depends on its success in maintaining the people's trust.

Foreign policy poses equally complex challenges. Tension with China remains high. In November 2025, Ms Takaichi told the Diet that a potential Chinese naval blockade or military action against Taiwan could lead to a "survival-threatening situation", prompting a sharp response from Beijing. Officials warn that Chinese export controls on certain military-related and medical supplies could expand to rare earth materials, posing serious risks to Japanese industry. Government sources acknowledge there is no clear blueprint for restoring bilateral stability.

Relations with China and the issue of Taiwan remain central to Japan's strategic calculations. Ms Takaichi has reaffirmed adherence to the "one-China policy" – in other words, not to recognise Taiwan as a sovereign state – while stressing peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Security cooperation with the United States has intensified through joint exercises and enhanced intelligence sharing, which officials describe as deterrence.

Ms Takaichi, who met President Trump in Tokyo before the election, is expected to meet him in Washington in March ahead of his planned visit to Beijing for talks with President Xi Jinping. Japanese officials note that Mr Trump has historically favoured leaders with strong domestic mandates, which Ms Takaichi clearly has. Analysts say that the scale of the LDP's victory will strengthen Ms Takaichi's hand in shaping long-term diplomatic strategy.

Beyond China, Japan is deepening cooperation with partners in the Quad –

Tokyo residents face rising food and energy costs as the Takaichi administration seeks to balance fiscal policy and economic growth. Photo: Reuters

Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi talks with Constitutional Democratic Party leader Yoshihiko Noda during a Diet debate on constitutional revision and the Self Defence Forces, 26 November 2025. Photo: Mainichi/Akihiro Hirata

Australia, the US and India – and other alliances. Efforts are under way to enhance collaboration on climate policy, cybersecurity, supply-chain resilience and disaster response through forums such as the G-7, APEC and ASEAN, reflecting Tokyo's commitment to a rules-based international order.

Constitutional issues have returned to the agenda, including debate over the imperial institution. Ms Takaichi has signalled support for renewed discussion of revisions to the Imperial House Law, including proposals to broaden succession options. Government panels are reviewing the legal implications, as Japan confronts demographic change and evolving social expectations. At a post-victory press conference Ms Takaichi expressed her long-held desire to amend the Constitution to recognise the Self Defence Forces.

For supporters, the massive victory renewed stability and political capital to pursue the mandate into results. The firmer her resolve, the fewer will stand in her way. For critics, it raises questions about Japan's economic management, constitutional debate and security policy amid growing regional uncertainty.

Yoshiteru Uramoto is a former career United Nations officer serving most recently as Additional Director General of the International Labour Organisation. He holds an MPA from Harvard Kennedy School and has taught at Sophia University, Tokyo.

Tarique Rahman takes the oath of office as Prime Minister of Bangladesh during the swearing-in ceremony in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on 17 February 2026. Photo: AFP

A new leader takes over

Voters in Bangladesh have delivered a landslide victory to BNP leader Tarique Rahman, who has been sworn in as the new prime minister. The vote came 18 months after a Gen Z-led revolution sent the autocratic leader Sheikh Hasina into exile. Hopes of significant reform inspired by the 2024 uprising have faded amid the rise of Islamist sentiment in the Muslim majority country. Cyrus Naji reports from Dhaka.

A month of official campaigning culminated in the 12 February election, which has given Tarique Rahman's Bangladesh Nationalist Party an overwhelming majority with 212 seats in the 299-seat parliament. Turnout was also striking with 59% of the country's 126 million voters casting their ballots, helping make it a credible election after three non-competitive polls under former prime minister Sheikh Hasina. The last general election, in January 2024, saw low turnout figures under the weight of a dissatisfied young population and allegations of vote rigging. Sheikh Hasina's party, the Awami League, was barred from contesting this poll.

A national holiday contributed to a festive atmosphere. Workers travelled on the roofs of buses and trains from the capital to their outlying home districts to vote. Families boarded launches and walked miles through Bangladeshi rural, riverine hinterland to reach polling stations. The following day young women wore their best saris and stuck flowers in their hair to celebrate the Bengali Pohela Falgun spring festival. One media outlet dubbed it 'Election ul Fitr', referring to the annual Eid holiday. The

prevailing feeling was that the country was restoring democratic rule after a prolonged hiatus.

Uncertainty over an election's outcome was a new thing for Bangladeshis. Many expressed their relief at the BNP's comfortable victory despite the dramatic resurgence of the right-wing Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami. With no comprehensive, nationwide opinion polls to rely on, it had seemed possible that Jamaat – which has never had more than 11 seats in the Bangladeshi parliament – might win outright after it formed an alliance with the National Citizen's Party, or NCP, made up of many of the student revolutionaries of July 2024.

The alliance was controversial with some of the student party's female members describing it as a "betrayal", owing to the Jamaat's ambiguous stance on women's rights. In recent interviews, the Jamaat's leader, or Amir, Shafiqur Rahman asserted that women were ineligible for leadership

Bangladeshis across the country turned out in large numbers to vote, with 59 percent participation in the first competitive election in over a decade. Photo: AFP

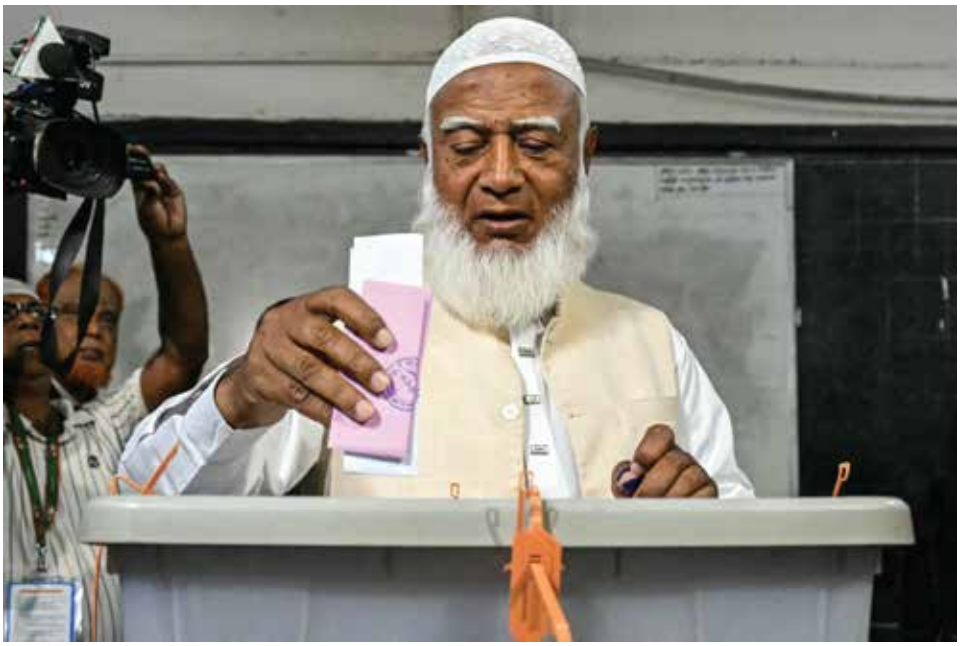
positions, while party leaders have expressed a paternalistic concern for "women's safety", including proposals such as reducing women's working hours with full pay. The party didn't nominate any female candidates, a move they described as contingent on circumstances: "It's difficult for women to travel around the country to political gatherings," said Mardia Momtaz, a civil engineer and prominent member of the Jamaat's women's wing. "But eventually it will happen, Inshallah," she added. "There is no policy to bar women from coming forward."

In the event, the Jamaat won 68 seats, the largest-ever seat share for an Islamist party in South Asia, while the NCP won 6. Together they will form the opposition to Tarique Rahman's BNP government, thanks in part to reforms implemented by the interim government designed to dilute the power of the ruling party and prevent a return to Hasina-style autocracy. These give the opposition control over key parliamentary committees and the power to shape the legislative agenda. With a Jamaat and NCP-led Islamist bloc in Parliament, socially progressive policies will likely recede from the BNP's agenda.

The BNP was founded by Rahman's father, General Zia ur Rahman, in 1978, as he made the transition from Chief Martial Law Administrator to civilian president amid a string of coups and countercoups. After the end of direct military rule in 1991,

Passengers arrive at Kamalapur Railway Station as people begin returning to the capital following the 13th National Parliament Election and nationwide referendum. Travel movement increased after the conclusion of voting and the extended public holidays. Photo: AFP

Bangladeshi politics was dominated by fierce rivalry between the BNP, led by General Zia's widow and Tarique Rahman's mother, Begum Khaleda Zia, and Hasina's Awami League, despite no real ideological differences between them. Both are dynastic, centrist parties intimately associated with the Bangladesh liberation war of 1971 but subsequently implicated in decades of corruption and crony-capitalism. Today, the broad, smiling face of Hasina's father, Bangladesh's first prime minister, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, has been replaced on posters and banners up and down the country with images of the former freedom-fighter General Zia, slim and severe with his military cap and aviator sunglasses.



Shafiqur Rahman casts his vote in the 13th National Parliament election, in which Jamaat-e-Islami secured its largest-ever parliamentary presence. Photo: AFP

The interim government had banned any expression of support for the Awami League though it has been claimed that up to 20% of the country still supports the banned party. From exile in New Delhi, Sheikh Hasina demanded the cancellation of what she called "this voterless, illegal and unconstitutional election" as well as the resignation of the country's interim leader, Nobel peace laureate Muhammad Yunus. The election turnout suggests Awami League supporters will be unable to exert any real pressure on the BNP government.

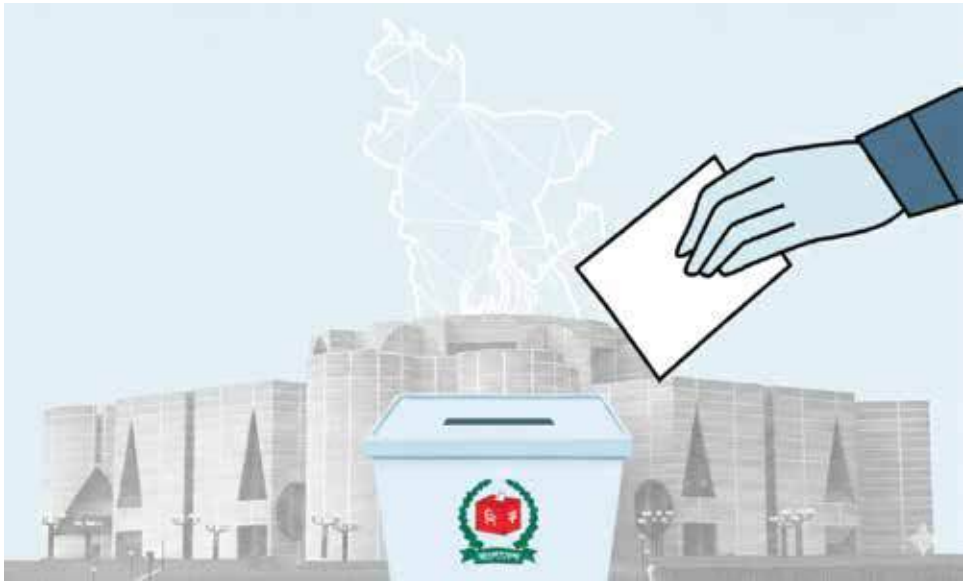
The BNP's first priority will be to reform the state, according to its manifesto. Rahman has been careful to avoid criticising Professor Yunus's interim stewardship of the country but the party's policies offer an implicit rebuke. By his own account, state reform was Yunus's main task in government. He reformed labour and cyber-security law and the structure of the judiciary while packaging other proposed reforms into a referendum held alongside the election, which voters could accept or reject.

Although the 'yes' vote won, the BNP has made clear it will implement only those measures with which it agrees. In coming months Bangladeshi politics will be defined by a struggle between the BNP and the Jamaat-led opposition over the extent of executive authority and the nature of the state. Tarique Rahman has asked the public and the international community to trust his good faith: "Whenever BNP has run the state, it has always practised

Women celebrate Pohela Falgun following the election, as concerns grow over women's rights under a strengthened Islamist opposition.

good governance and also free expression," he said, at a public event days before the election.

Some have a different view of the BNP's credentials: a leaked US diplomatic cable described Rahman as "a symbol of kleptocratic government and violent politics". Rahman represents the old guard of Bangladeshi politics and a decades-old political class that the uprising of 2024 sought to reject. Those close to him insist that he has changed. During 17 years in exile, he gave no live interviews or press conferences.



Bangladesh's National Parliament, where debates over executive power and democratic reform will define the next phase of governance. Photo: AI Generated

When I interviewed him days before the election, he was unwilling to be drawn. The rehabilitation of the Awami League depended "on the people", the appointment of the President depended on "my senior leaders" and he denied communal strife: "As far as my knowledge goes, I don't think in Bangladesh we ever had communal issues," referring to relations between the Muslim majority and Hindu minority. He continued: "Whoever has any issues, the existing law will deal with the matter – everybody has the right to the law." The meaning of those words will become clear over the coming months and years, but the political history of Bangladesh does not inspire confidence in that assertion.

Cyrus Naji is a freelance journalist covering art and politics in South Asia.

Youth protesters gather outside Nepal's Parliament in Kathmandu on 8 September 2025, in demonstrations that triggered the collapse of the government and paved the way for new elections. Photo: AFP

Nepal votes in Gen Z-inspired election

The people of Nepal go to the polls this month (5 March) after last year's violent street protests and army intervention followed by a peaceful period of interim government. Kunda Dixit reports from Kathmandu.

Even by the standards of Nepal's turbulent political history, 2025 was a landmark year. Security forces opened fire on a student-led rally on 8 September, killing at least 19 people as protesters tried to storm Parliament. Anger boiled over into violence the next day.

Parliament, the Supreme Court, government buildings, businesses and hotels – including international chains – burned, shrouding Kathmandu in acrid smoke. Within 30 hours, Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli had resigned and the government fell.

A yawning political vacuum followed until the Nepal Army stepped in to bring the president, youth activists and their nominees together to try to form an interim government.

Tech-savvy youth groups went on the social media platform 'Discord' to vote for an interim prime minister. This may have been the first time anywhere that a social media platform so blatantly shaped the future course of government. Their first choice for prime minister was the populist Kathmandu mayor and rap singer Balendra Shah, but he declined. Their next was former chief justice Sushila Karki, who

was hurriedly sworn in as Nepal's first female prime minister. One of her first acts was to recommend dissolving Parliament.

Karki is known for her integrity and fierce independence, and she laid out an ambitious plan to hold federal elections within six months. Despite some early missteps, she put together a cabinet of capable and respected technocrats.

Fire rages through the Singha Durbar, the main administrative building for the Nepal government, in Kathmandu on September 9, 2025. Photo: AFP

In December, Karki told editors she was facing pressure – even threats – from the very activists who had installed her as prime minister. She also faced opposition from legacy parties that initially refused to take part in the election. Gen Z activists were themselves divided: some demanded that the constitution be scrapped, others wanted Oli and his home minister arrested for the massacre outside Parliament and still others insisted corrupt leaders be tried immediately.

Prime Minister Karki told everyone she met that her primary duty was to hold the election and that she would step down as soon as a new government was sworn in. She worked to get every group that could potentially disrupt the election on board.

She cajoled the two main legacy parties, the Nepali Congress (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist – known as UML) to field candidates; she sought to keep royalists who want a return to the monarchy within bounds; and assured youth leaders that their aspirations would be honoured.

More importantly, she kept postponing the release of the final report from the judicial commission she formed to investigate the killings and arson on 8–9 September until after the election. Naming names and prosecuting the guilty at such a sensitive time could have sparked street protests and jeopardised a free, fair and peaceful vote.

Nepal's digital natives were inspired by student-led protests in Bangladesh in 2024 that brought down the Sheikh Hasina government and by clashes outside Indonesia's parliament in late August 2025. Some of the same 'nepo kids' memes and icons (tagged #NepoKids, #NepoBabies) were used to denounce corruption in high places.

Unlike in Bangladesh – and earlier in Sri Lanka – the 8 September rally in Nepal was not against a despotic regime, but to protest a functioning but flawed democracy in which elected leaders had long ceased to be accountable.

Calling the regime collapse in Nepal a 'Gen Z Uprising' would not be accurate. True it started with a youth-led rally in which an abrupt government ban on social media sites was a tipping point.

Former chief justice Sushila Karki is sworn in as Nepal's first female prime minister, tasked with leading an interim government and organising fresh elections. Photo: AFP

But the following day's violence and vandalism were closer to anarchy. Anyone who had a grievance against anyone else was out on the streets to loot and burn. Some Gen Z activists were themselves shocked by the events of 9 September.

Bangladesh has held its elections in which the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), led by Tarique Rahman, emerged triumphant, while the student leaders who led the 2024 uprising have not done so well. It is too early to tell which way Nepal's own election will go, but early indications suggest the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) and its prime ministerial candidate, former mayor Balendra Shah, will do well.

The RSP was formed a few months before the 2022 federal elections by populist former TV anchor Rabi Lamichhane. Propelled by social media campaigning, the RSP became the fourth-largest party in Parliament and Lamichhane served as home minister in a coalition government. But after scandals involving US citizenship and alleged fraud involving cooperative depositors, Lamichhane found himself behind bars. He is now out on bail, but his legal troubles complicate any bid to lead a future government even if his party wins.

Former Kathmandu mayor Balendra Shah, a populist figure with strong youth support, is emerging as a key contender in the election. Photo: AFP

Rabi Lamichhane, founder of the Rastriya Swatantra Party, remains a polarising figure as legal troubles shadow his political ambitions.

Ex-mayor Balendra Shah also swept the 2022 mayoral race in Kathmandu with a populist digital campaign. After the September protests, Shah and Lamichhane found it mutually beneficial to cooperate. The RSP needs a charismatic prime ministerial candidate to propel itself to victory, while Shah needs a party platform. Both men are ambitious, so it remains to be seen whether the alliance will endure after the election. The RSP does have other competent technocrats and the hope among many Nepalis is that voting for the RSP, despite its past, will help move the country's economy forward.

Nepal's history is replete with half-finished revolutions, from pro-democracy movements against the absolute monarchy to the Maoist armed struggle from 1996–2006, each promising new beginnings that have never fully materialised.

The fear is that it will be the same this time. A lot will depend on which way people vote. Nepal has always had high turnout in its

Women of different generations wait to cast their ballots in Kathmandu, highlighting the inclusive and high voter turnout expected in Nepal's post-crisis election. Photo: UNDP

elections and this time it is expected to be even higher.

There are nearly a million new first-time voters – mostly young people eager for change. Unlike Bangladesh, where more than 500,000 expatriates cast postal ballots, an estimated 4 million Nepalis abroad cannot vote. Nepalis abroad are migrant workers in India, the Gulf, Malaysia, South Korea and Japan, and they are mostly anti-incumbent, blaming the legacy parties for failing to create jobs at home, which forced them to migrate.

The youth-led regime change has had some positive impact on the legacy parties as well. In January, the centrist Nepali Congress elected 49-year-old Gagan Thapa as party president, ousting Sher Bahadur Deuba, who has been Nepal's prime minister five times since 1995. This has injected new energy into Nepal's 'grand old party'. In the two communist parties, UML and the Nepali Communist Party or NCP, elderly politicians who have served as prime minister multiple times have kept a tight grip on leadership.

Former prime minister Oli, for example, has refused to step down and has not publicly expressed remorse for what happened in September. This is expected to cost him dearly in the election despite the UML's strong organisational base nationwide.

He is up against ex-mayor Balendra Shah, who is contesting in the same constituency. In most past elections in Nepal, incumbents have lost, but the choice has always been restricted to the three main established parties. This time there are new, youthful faces, and Nepal's nearly 19 million registered voters have a real choice.

Kunda Dixit is the publisher and former editor of the *Nepali Times* newspaper in Kathmandu.

How democracy and elective monarchy sit side-by-side in Malaysia

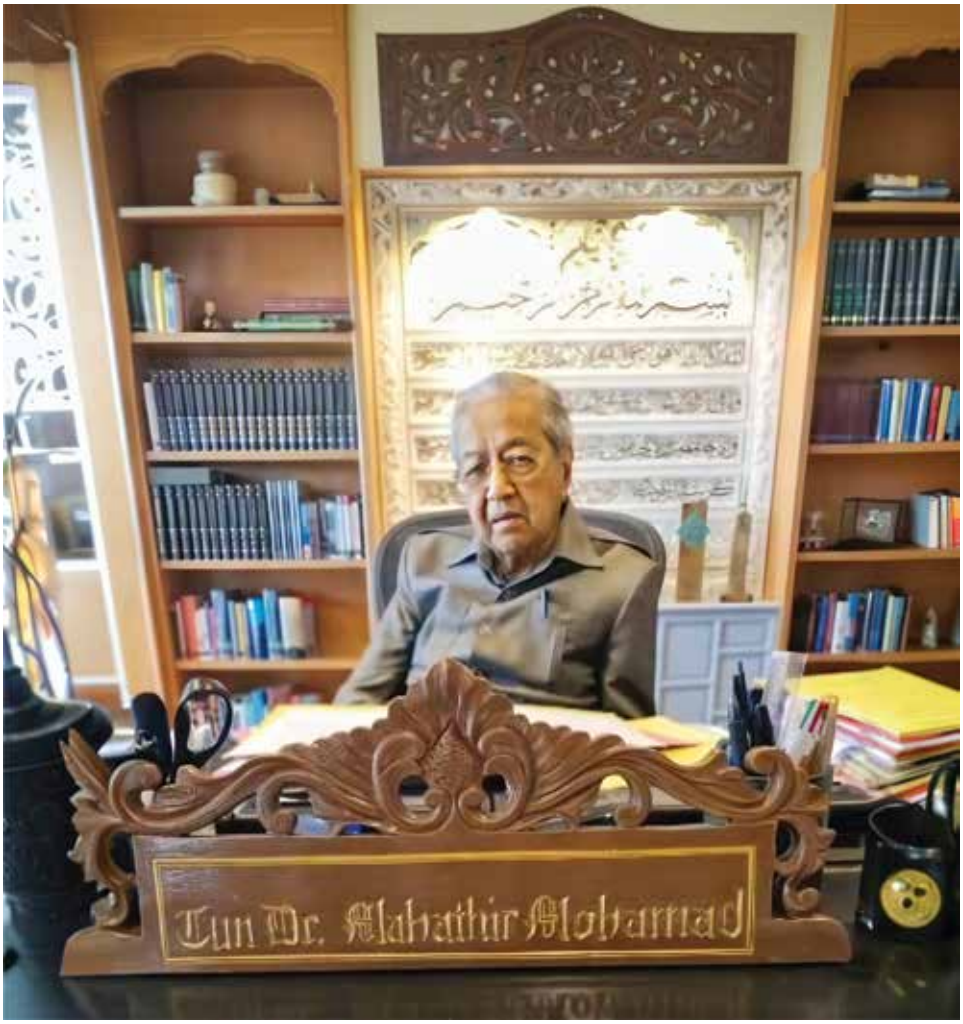
Malaysia has an unusual system of governance in that both its parliament and its monarch are elected. But while adult citizens elect their parliamentary representatives, the king is elected from a field of nine sultans, hereditary rulers of their respective states, and only sultans get to vote. Stephen Woodhouse went to meet former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad, now aged 100, to learn how the system works.

Malaysia is both a monarchy and a fully-fledged democracy with an elected parliament. The prime minister is answerable to the people through their parliamentary representatives or MPs. As with other constitutional monarchies, one of the king's most important roles is to invite the leader of the largest party or coalition in parliament to form a government after an election.

What makes Malaysia unique is that the head of state, the Yang di-Pertuan Agong or king, occupies the post not directly as a hereditary right. He – and it only can be a man – is elected by and from among the nine sultans who rule over their respective states within the Malaysian federation.

This makes for an interesting and potentially contentious relationship between an elected monarch, one of the hereditary sultans, and an elected prime minister and government, though constitutionally most of the power resides with parliament. Monarchs do sometimes express themselves publicly on controversial matters at the risk of being put down by the prime minister of the time.

I sat down with Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was for 24 years



the country's prime minister (1981–2003, 2018–2020), giving him a unique vantage point in assessing how well the system works. He told me that the degree to which successive kings speak out publicly on issues they deem to be important is directly correlated with how powerful the prime minister is perceived to be, as measured by the size of his parliamentary majority. He says that kings tend to be "quieter" when prime ministers have strong parliamentary majorities.

Dr Mahathir said that in the early years of his premiership there were cases in which, as prime minister, he had to rule on matters concerning a king. One had physically abused a hockey coach, while a subsequent king declined to pay an outstanding debt. Such cases led Dr Mahathir's government to establish a special court to try cases of abuse of power by a king. That court and its procedure remains in force today as an instrument for holding the monarch accountable. Dr Mahathir was able to set this court up despite royal objections owing to his strong legislative majority.

Notwithstanding these problem cases, Dr Mahathir believes that the system works well and there are no significant differences or problems between the elected head of state and elected prime minister. Each is fully aware of his power and limitations. In recent years, statements by the ruling king have emphasised the importance of national unity and the showing of equal respect, dignity, and religious tolerance for all the country's citizens. Such statements have often coincided with divisive political statements made by politicians aiming to exploit ethnic and other tensions emanating from the multi-ethnic and economic divisions that reflect Malaysia's make-up.

One reason for such tolerant and progressive statements by the rulers could be that every one of the current batch of sultans has enjoyed an overseas education, mostly in the UK, US, or Australia. They attended establishments ranging from Oxford and Harvard universities to Sandhurst and Fort Benning, military academies in the UK and US respectively. The current king, Sultan Ibrahim Ismail of Johore, attended Trinity Grammar School in Sydney, Australia, followed by military training at Fort Bragg and Fort Benning in the US.

Prior to Malaya's independence on 31 August 1957, British colonial authority was exercised both directly over parts of the Malay Peninsula and indirectly through the hereditary sultans who ruled their own independent sultanates but deferred to British overall control. This was replaced by that of Japan from 1942 to 1945, before Britain again took control from 1945 to 1957. Malaya became Malaysia following the incorporation of Sabah and Sarawak in the federation in 1963.

Malaya's first elected prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, realising the importance of the nine hereditary sultans in governing their respective sultanates, introduced the system of rotating paramount rulers, elected for five-year terms by their peers through a Council of Rulers. The main roles of the paramount ruler or king are to appoint a prime minister on advice from the legislature and to prorogue or dissolve parliament on advice from the prime minister. Additionally, he is empowered to grant clemency or to commute sentences of capital punishment on advice from the Pardons Board and to safeguard the status of Islam as Malaysia's paramount religion.


The present king of Malaysia Sultan Ibrahim of Johor

Nowadays, the presiding king consults the other eight sultans through the Conference of Rulers, which meets regularly to discuss issues of national concern. Dr Mahathir spoke of his regular meetings with a total of five kings during his long tenure, saying that he had a good relationship with all of them and was invariably kept informed of a king's proposed public statements.

The influence of the monarch on national public opinion and policy formulation by an elected government varies according to two factors. First is the relative economic and demographic power of the sultan who is king at a particular time, so the voices of the Sultans of Johor, the current King, and of Selangor – which is economically strong, highly populated, and incorporates the national capital Kuala Lumpur – tend to be more influential than those of the more rural and less economically strong sultanates.

Secondly, as related to me by Dr Mahathir, when the prime minister is dependent on support from a more divided and fractured legislature than was the case during his long tenure from 1981 to 2003, the moral authority and influence of royal statements tend to be stronger.

Thus far the unique system of rotating royal rule or reign and its interface with the elected system of government seems to have functioned relatively smoothly. The role of successive monarchs in promoting a sense of national unity and diminishing the power of narrow political interests seems to have functioned especially well.

A system which has been in place for nearly 70 years has been effective for Malaysian governance, but is open to challenge. The sultans represent

As head of state an image of the king adorns Malaysia's banknotes

the Muslim Malay people in a country with significant Chinese, Indian, and tribal communities. Also the states without sultans, Penang, Melaka, Sabah, and Sarawak, never get a turn to place their representative as overall head of state.

The system could be at risk if a king should overstep his constitutional powers. The last King issued a partial pardon allowing former Prime Minister Najib Razak to serve his sentence under house arrest instead of remaining in jail without showing deference to the views of the official Pardons Board.

The present King enjoys strong popularity among the general public, while the Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, sees the monarchy as adding value to overall governance of Malaysia, playing a similar role to that of the House of Lords in the UK in providing a “second opinion” and as the nation’s moral voice in pursuit of national unity and ethnic and religious harmony.

Stephen Woodhouse, a former UNICEF representative in Southeast Asia, lives in Malaysia.

President José Ramos-Horta greets Chris Gunness, Director of the Myanmar Accountability Project. Photo: CHRO/MAP

Holding Myanmar's rulers accountable

As Myanmar's military rulers attempt to consolidate their hold on the country through elections, intended to restore at least a semblance of civilian rule, an independent programme outside the country known as the Myanmar Accountability Project (MAP) is on a regional mission to hold the military authorities accountable for their brutality. Director of MAP, Chris Gunness, reports on a visit to Timor-Leste.

After a week in Timor-Leste with survivors from Myanmar of some of the most brutal crimes I have encountered, I am more convinced than ever that justice and accountability are key to democracy, stability and peace. Politicians who subjugate the rule of law to economic development – not to mention their own careers – are living on borrowed time.

I went to Dili with representatives of Myanmar's Chin Human Rights Organisation (CHRO), which for over three decades has documented crimes committed by the country's military. Chin State is a Christian region in Myanmar's north-west, on the border with India. Its citizens constitute a minority in an overwhelmingly Buddhist nation. Chin State's depleted population of 370,000 has suffered severely since the military coup of February 2021. Our case was

designed to illustrate the various forms of brutality to which the junta has subjected civilians.

There were five elements to the criminal complaint we filed at the Prosecutor's Office in Dili: the gang-rape of a seven-month-pregnant woman in front of her husband; the massacre of ten people, including a journalist and a thirteen-year-old boy, among a group of eight who had their hands tied behind their backs and their throats slit; a disproportionate and indiscriminate aerial attack on a hospital which killed four medical staff and four patients; the killing of a Christian pastor and three deacons; and a series of deliberate attacks on Christian churches, civilian infrastructure protected under international humanitarian law.

The interior of a Christian church in Chin State after a military attack, one of a series of assaults on civilian infrastructure protected under international humanitarian law. Photos: CHRO

Universal jurisdiction

Action to hold the Myanmar military accountable for these crimes is feasible under Timor's penal code according to the principle of universal jurisdiction, which allows state authorities to take action regardless of where the crimes took place or the nationality of the victims and perpetrators. We have been assigned a Timorese Prosecutor who is looking into the practicalities of a case, as well as their legal ramifications. To be clear, we have initiated action against a group of perpetrators, including the coup leader, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing.

An aerial view showing widespread destruction of civilian homes and infrastructure in the Chin town of Thantlang during military operations. Photo: CHRO

This is the first time a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has formally initiated legal action against a fellow member for atrocity crimes. But we are pushing for more. Our hope is that the authorities will open a formal investigation and issue arrest warrants. We are under no illusions about the political obstacles that lie in our path. Despite ASEAN's Human Rights Declaration promising that "all people are born free and equal in dignity and rights" and are entitled "to equal protection of the law", in reality the Association's infamous injunction to non-interference has trumped justice.

President Ramos-Horta takes a lead

Nonetheless, our case in Timor-Leste offers the hope of change within ASEAN. Tellingly,

after we held a lengthy meeting with President José Ramos-Horta, he issued a statement which took the country's stance in support of democracy and human rights to new heights. The President said our discussions were "dedicated to promoting justice and accountability at the regional level" and that he and our Chin interlocutors had "reflected on their shared history of struggle for self-determination, underscoring the deep bonds of solidarity between Timor-Leste and Myanmar in the defence of democracy, freedom, and human dignity". He stressed Timor-Leste's role as "the moral conscience of ASEAN".

Representatives of the Chin Human Rights Organisation and Myanmar Accountability Project discuss the situation in Myanmar with President José Ramos-Horta. Photo: CHRO/MAP

On the specific question of our criminal complaint, President Ramos-Horta reaffirmed what he called "the fundamental importance of an independent judicial system", saying "that judicial processes must follow their normal course, free from any political interference".

Predictably, the Myanmar junta issued a public statement condemning our case and expelling Timor-Leste's envoy from the country. But subsequent meetings with the Timorese executive and civil society reinforced the view that despite Timor-Leste's inability to come to terms with its own violent past, accountability and the rule of law are indispensable if nations like Myanmar are to transition away from dictatorship and if ASEAN is to deal with the scourge of transnational crime involving drugs, scam centres and human trafficking.

Elsewhere in ASEAN

My organisation has focused its attention on ASEAN, where universal jurisdiction remains under-developed. We have initiated legal action against the Myanmar junta in Manila and Jakarta where, I am sorry to say, political considerations have hampered progress.

In the Philippines we based a criminal complaint on an attack on the Chin town of Thantlang in September and October 2021. At the time we filed, controversy still smouldered over former President Duterte's decision to withdraw the Philippines from the International Criminal Court, which was threatening action against him; there was also concern that our case might highlight the brutal excesses under the regime of former President Ferdinand Marcos, father of the current president, Marcos Junior. The Philippines' Prosecutor would not register our case, and as a result we are moving to appeal.

In Jakarta we petitioned the Constitutional Court, demanding a case be heard in the country's Human Rights Court. The Court was sympathetic to our arguments but ultimately, in what was clearly a politically motivated judgement, our petition was rejected out of hand.

Looking to the future

While Asia is largely hamstrung, international justice mechanisms continue to turn, however slowly, outside the region. The International Criminal Court in The Hague has issued arrest warrants for President Putin and Israel's Netanyahu. At the International Court of Justice, where Rohingya genocide survivors have been testifying, a decision is expected this year on whether Myanmar has violated the 1948 Genocide Convention. A court in

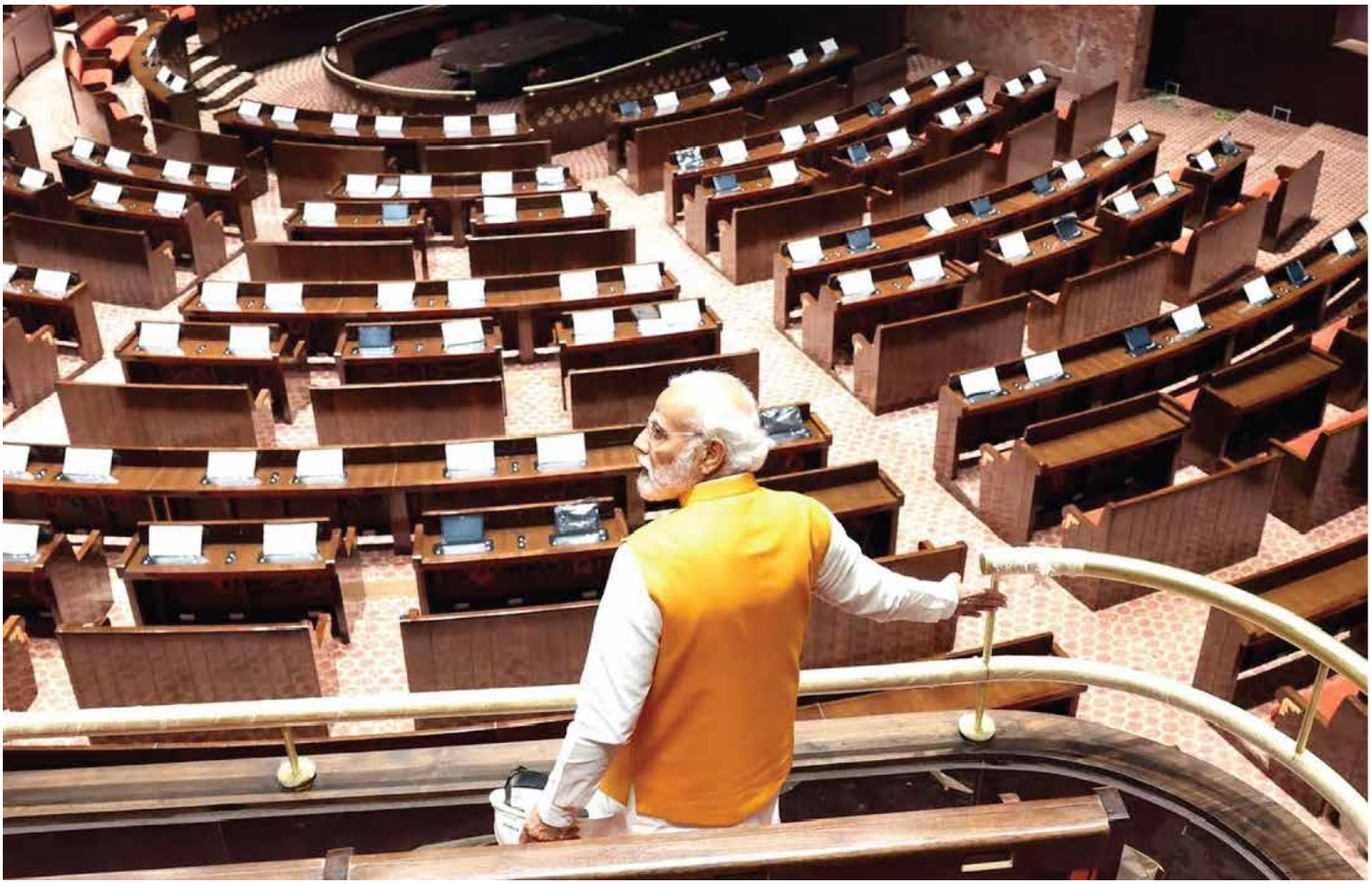
ASEAN member states face growing pressure to engage with justice and accountability mechanisms for atrocity crimes.

Argentina has issued arrest warrants for the Myanmar coup leader, Min Aung Hlaing, and other alleged perpetrators of crimes against the Rohingya, including the imprisoned former State Counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi.

Countries in Asia have a choice: they can either join the conversation about justice and universal jurisdiction and get involved in developing customary international law; or be left behind and play catch-up when rules created outside the region are imposed. By taking the stand that he has, President Ramos-Horta has signalled that the rule of law and accountability are central to his vision of a stable and prosperous ASEAN.

He has thrown down a gauntlet. I urge other ASEAN nations to take up the challenge. They should begin by ditching the false notion that accountability is the enemy of stability and accept that it is the best friend stability ever had.

Chris Gunness reported from Burma (as Myanmar was then known) for the BBC in 1988. He subsequently worked for the United Nations in Gaza and now heads the Myanmar Accountability Project.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the Lok Sabha of India's new Parliament building, where critics say dissenting voices are increasingly sidelined.

Parliamentary democracy in decline

Why has India dipped in recent years in international indices measuring the state of a country's democracy? Kavita Chowdhury set out to investigate.

As the colourful Republic Day tableaux from regional states rolled down Rajpath or Kartavya Path, in Delhi on 26 January, marking the 77th year of India as a Republic, there was a noticeable difference from previous years. While government ministers and their family members occupied the front rows, the leader of the parliamentary opposition, Rahul Gandhi, was seated way back in the third row.

The positioning of Gandhi, who leads the main opposition Congress Party, reflects the deep trust deficit between the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in power and the opposition parties. Congress accused the Modi government of deliberately humiliating the Leader of the Opposition, a constitutionally sanctioned post equal in rank to that of a cabinet minister, describing it as a violation of constitutional "decorum, tradition and protocol".

India takes great pride in calling itself the "mother of democracy", tracing its democratic lineage back to the post-Vedic era of ancient republics and assemblies. So it was natural that the framers of the constitution in 1950 envisioned a democratic republic with elected representatives. The trajectory of Indian parliamentary democracy since then has not

been without its challenges. Resilience helped it bounce back from the infamous 'Emergency' in 1975, when civil liberties were suspended and elections cancelled by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Subsequently, the rise of regional parties and strong regional leaders coincided with the emergence of coalition governments.

The Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA), a coalition led by Dr Manmohan Singh, was in power for a decade (2004 to 2014) ushering in an era of rights-based laws guaranteeing citizens the rights to education, information, food and employment. In the parliamentary election of 2014, the Modi-led BJP came to power with an overwhelming parliamentary majority decimating the UPA coalition. Unsurprisingly, it led to the emergence of an authoritarian Parliament with a single party, the BJP, dominating the government benches.

The past decade has witnessed the frequent suspension of MPs from the opposition benches and the silencing of opposition voices to the extent that their mikes are muted in Parliament whenever they confront the ruling BJP with uncomfortable questions. The government's authoritarianism has been exacerbated by the shrinking numbers of opposition members. There was no designated Leader of the Opposition from 2014 to 2024 as the largest opposition party, Congress, did not have the required 55 seats to lay claim to the post.

Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi seated away from front rows during Republic Day celebrations at Kartavya Path in New Delhi.

It is not surprising then that India's ranking on global democracy indices has been gradually sliding since 2019. The Varieties of Democracy VDem Institute's 2025 report, that produces the largest global dataset on democracy, classifies India as an "electoral autocracy".

Without mincing his words, Professor Manoj Kumar Jha, a parliamentarian and national spokesperson of the Rashtriya Janata Dal, a regional political party, speaking to *Democracy Asia* said: "Numerical majority in the legislature (parliament) should not be construed as a license to go berserk as is the case with the ruling BJP." Jha cites the instances of how the Modi government pushed through the controversial guarantee for work scheme by overruling strong objections from opposition members. Lambasting the government for replacing the existing Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act with what he described as "a watered-down version", Jha said the Modi government is "trying to write the employment guarantee act's obituary".

The Election Commission of India headquarters in New Delhi, whose impartiality has recently been questioned by opposition parties.

Political observers have noted with alarm, the centralisation of

all authority by Prime Minister Modi with even cabinet ministers being emasculated. The Prime Minister appears to be exercising authority with little accountability in parliament or beyond. He has never addressed a press conference unlike his predecessor Dr Manmohan Singh. What also stands out is the Prime Minister's complete disregard for parliamentary accountability, of being answerable for his actions to elected representatives of all parties.

The Supreme Court of India in New Delhi — concerns about constitutional morality have also been raised within the judiciary.

Former judge of the Supreme Court Madan B Lokur, who is known for expressing his views, said the "decline in constitutional morality" is worrisome. Speaking to *Democracy Asia*, Justice Lokur said "Parliament is not functioning the way it should be. The government is focussed on pushing its own agenda. The framers of the Constitution wanted both the treasury [government] and the opposition benches to be working together." He noted: "We often see, in the rules of business in Parliament, issues highlighted by the opposition are not taken up. Moreover, some bills are passed in five minutes without any debate and discussion. The government in power always has the last word."

Legislative business under the present government has become a mere formality with the government benches using its brute majority to pass bills while opposition demands that bills be referred to parliamentary committees for scrutiny, are ignored. The new guarantee for work bill became law within just five days.

While it is not uncommon for election verdicts to be questioned by rival political parties, what is unprecedented is the erosion of trust in the Election Commission (EC) being witnessed now. The EC is a constitutional authority for the election process for parliament and state assemblies. Its effectiveness hinges on its impartiality. During last November's Bihar state assembly polls, and the more recent municipal polls in Mumbai, opposition parties accused the EC of bias towards the ruling BJP government. Congress' Rahul Gandhi labelled it "vote chori" or "vote theft" alleging the EC was carrying out voter deletions and manipulation of voter lists.

Professor Nivedita Menon, a political theorist and former professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), told *Democracy Asia*: "Looking at the past few elections, we see the impossibility of holding free and fair elections now." She contended that there needs to be a campaign to restructure the EC to restore "legitimacy of elections". Professor Menon added: "The Election Commission is now a part of the BJP-led government."

Accountability is the cornerstone of any parliamentary democracy but whenever opposition MPs have been critical of the government, be it Congress leader Rahul Gandhi or Trinamool Congress party's Mahua Moitra, they have been specifically targeted. In a 'political vendetta' the BJP government in 2023 had expelled Moitra from parliament and even evicted her from her official residence. Gandhi too, in 2023 was evicted from his MP residence, after being convicted in a court case and thereby disqualified as MP.

The Modi government, like other totalitarian regimes, has been assertively clamping down on free speech and freedom of expression targeting journalists, university students, rights activists and taking down cartoons critical of the regime. One of the more discreditable

episodes in India's democracy has been the complete capitulation of the media, pejoratively termed as "godi media" or "lap-dog media". The contrast could not be more striking. While newspapers withstood the excesses of the Emergency in 1975, the media today have been acting as loyal mouthpieces of the Modi government.

As Professor Nivedita Menon says, "It is impossible to call India a democracy today". Elaborating further she said: "It is true that prior to 2014 parliamentary democracy in India was not perfect but definitely after 2014 there is an authoritarian government in power. Opposition leaders have no right to dissent and when they do, they are labelled as 'anti-nationals'". Professor Menon said there is total misuse of central agencies, like the Enforcement Directorate and the Central Bureau of Investigation. According to Menon, "The big shift post-2014 since Narendra Modi came to power is the complete centralisation of all institutions."

Journalists and activists demonstrate in New Delhi over concerns about press freedom and state pressure on independent media. Photo: Delhi Union of Journalists (DUJ)

Professor Manoj Kumar Jha sums it up aptly, "It seems ironic that the new parliament building in Delhi, which was inaugurated in 2023, was described as the 'temple of democracy' yet its hallowed portals have no space for dissent, dialogue and multiple perspectives, the seeds of a fertile democracy."

Kavita Chowdhury is an independent journalist who writes on politics, gender, visual arts and culture.

Morning light over Tehran, as the Islamic Republic faces mounting political and economic pressure.

Taking a longer view

The Islamic Republic of Iran has just celebrated the 47th anniversary of its founding. Amid the bunting and fireworks foreign reporters detected a sense of foreboding they had not experienced previously. According to some estimates, more than 30,000 demonstrators had been killed in some 400 towns and cities while demanding a change of leadership. Hazhir Teimourian, formerly of *The Times of London*, looks back on what he regards as an experiment in governance by Muslim 'priest-kings' on the model of ancient Babylon.

The first time I predicted the fall of the Islamic Republic of Iran was 43 years ago. Perhaps deluded by medication as I lay in a hospital ward expecting to die, I responded to a question from my editor as to how long the Islamic regime would last. Iran's previous regime, the authoritarian Pahlavi monarchy, had been overthrown in a hugely popular revolution led by an arch-reactionary Shia cleric only four years earlier, but the new rulers were already in the throes of violent internal dissension while also fighting a ruinous foreign invasion.

I replied that I did not think it had much chance of lasting long. It was trying to drive a forward-looking nation back to the seventh century and was, furthermore, beset by the incompetence of its clerics charged with the running of every department of state, people often lacking an elementary education in science. My editor disagreed. Mindful of the return of the English monarchy under Charles II in

1660, he said: “Restorations usually take at least 20 years”. It turned out that even he was being too optimistic.

The leader of the Islamist take-over, the Ayatollah Khomeini, had at first promised not to interfere in politics. He even supported the election of Abolhassan Banisadr, a former student leader in Paris (and friend of mine) to be the country’s first president. But Khomeini soon changed his mind. He tolerated Banisadr’s democratic ideals barely a year, allowed the taking hostage of 52 American diplomats in their own embassy in Tehran for 444 days and ordered the massacre of hundreds of left-wing political prisoners who had been among his most ardent backers. Their leaders had sided with the foreign invader, Saddam Hussein of Iraq.

Khomeini arrives in Tehran on 1 February 1979, days before the collapse of the Pahlavi monarchy.

Khomeini died in 1989, after being forced to accept a humiliating ceasefire in the eight-year war with Saddam. He had also alienated the world by issuing his infamous decree of death against the Anglo-Indian novelist Salman Rushdie, for ridiculing Mohammad, and dismissed his own designated successor, Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, for objecting to his many cruelties. By then, he had set the future course of his Islamist regime firmly in the mould of the priest-kings of ancient Babylon as interpreted through the Islamic caliphate of the late seventh century in Arabia’s Mecca.

Iranian students climb the gates of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979, a moment that came to define the Islamic Republic’s early years of radicalisation, purges, and international isolation.

The regime would accept grudgingly that the nation it commanded had a non-Arab identity and a national memory that went back to classical empires. It set out to denigrate that heritage and, among other policies, began importing a torrent of new Arabic words into Persian, the most potent conveyor of that older loyalty. Calls were made to ban Iranian personal names and achievements of the classical age, like Greek philosophy, were

belittled as the divergence of an Age of Ignorance, to use a Koranic phrase.

It was therefore not surprising that in choosing his successor the old man had leap-frogged over many a venerable ayatollah to nominate a junior mullah by the name of Ali Khamenei to follow him. The firebrand was in his own mould.

At that point I made my second mistaken prediction: I wrote in *The Times* that the new priest-king Khamenei would be only a stopgap, that a more able and more prestigious man would soon push him aside. One of the men I profiled was the wily Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was more influential in the regime despite the fact of his white turban, the turban of those who could not claim descent from the founder of Islam himself. Little did I allow for the possibility that Khamenei would use his official command of the armed forces to elbow aside all such rivals. The process, the struggle to achieve complete predominance, took a long time, but by January 2017, when the lifeless body of Rafsanjani was found in his swimming pool in Tehran, it was unquestioned.

Ruthlessness has thus been the secret of Khamenei's longevity. The brazen recent massacres of unarmed demonstrators in 900 places in 400 towns and cities prove once again that he had determined early in his rule not to make the mistake that the last monarch had made. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, with an eye towards his Western allies, such as President Carter in Washington, had shied away from killing large-enough numbers of demonstrators.

However, this new challenge seems radically different. The overwhelming proportion of Iran's citizens are demanding the eradication of clerical rule. Further, even if Washington recalls its naval task force in return for a reduction in the scale of Khamenei's great-power ambitions, his regime will still have no answer to the economic failures that triggered the protests in the first place. One terrifying prediction is that, despite strong winter rainfall, the capital, a city of 12 million people, will run out of piped water by early summer. Experts say this would be entirely due to mismanagement of resources. Also, the current official rate of inflation at 70% is likely to become even more unbearable. The middle class has already been virtually wiped out, while the rich flaunt their luxurious foreign cars on the streets and the state founders towards the bottom of the international index of corruption.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei consolidated power over decades through the security forces and the elimination of rivals. Photo: Khamenei.ir

Islamism in Iran will collapse or be overthrown before long if it does not give up its leadership role, which Khamenei and those around him refuse to contemplate. They have now begun to arrest even those mild reformists who gather around former presidents Khatami and Rouhani, in case one of these figures becomes attractive as

Iran's Gorbachev. Such is the degree of alienation on the part of the various components of Iran, from the Azeris and Kurds of the north-west through the main body of the country, the Persians, to the Baluch of the south-east,

A man hold up a poster bearing the faces of Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei and his predecessor Ruhollah Khomeini, in a rally to mark the anniversary of the 1979 Revolution, in Qom, Iran, 11 February 2026.

that people see no alternative to risking their lives any longer calling for the removal not just of Khamenei but of Islam itself. In their own words, they have too little to lose. Hope has died among the young.

I fear that any succeeding regime will not be as pretty a sight as we would wish. Iranians are both too angry and too impatient to forgive and forget. Some among them will even see in the collapse of the Islamists an opportunity to avenge Zoroastrianism for its defeat at the hands of Arab armies 1300 years ago. I have seen signs of this among my own people, the Kurds. In the semi-autonomous Kurdish region of northern Iraq, where there is a surprising measure of free expression, significant numbers of young couples exchange their matrimonial vows in newly-sprung Zoroastrian temples, often with little idea of what Zoroastrianism is about. Shia clerics, even those who are not complicit in the Khomeini-Khamenei order, would be advised to flee Iran for an Arab land while they can. I suggest Baghdad and Beirut, though the latter is a little unsafe for its nearness to Israel.

A man withdraws cash from an ATM in Tehran amid runaway inflation and economic strain. Photo: AFP

Hazhir Teimourian's most recent book is *A History of Philosophy in Mesopotamia, Classical Iran and Early Islam.* He is also author of a biography of the Persian poet and mathematician Omar Khayyam.

Asia's Pride and Prejudice with love in the shadows

Gay Asians of both genders were later than Americans and Europeans to campaign for LGBTQ+ rights. Now they lead forceful movements in several Asian countries. Rayeesa Daulah reports.

When Asian American actor BD Wong won a Tony Award for his 1988 Broadway debut as a gender-bending Chinese spy in gay playwright David Henry Hwang's *M Butterfly*, no one imagined that Wong was actually gay.

Back then, LGBTQ+ rights movements were barely unfolding in Asia. The continent witnessed its first 'Pride Parade' in Manila in 1994. The world was still recovering from Tom Hanks's portrayal in Oscar-winning movie *Philadelphia* as a white lawyer fighting discrimination for being gay and HIV-infected.

It took Wong 30 years of 'hiding in the closet' to come out as gay in 2018, while starring as the openly gay Dr. George Huang in NBC's *Law and Order* TV series. Wong later explained that gay characters were often portrayed as negative: "It made me not want to be those things," Wong said: "This is a kind of denial that a lot of ethnic kids, specifically I think Asian American kids have, where they avoid the issue of the truth of them."

At the other end of the 'coming out' spectrum is openly gay Asian Canadian *Saturday Night Live* celebrity Owen Yang, who was affectionately bracketed as "acting too much gay on the show" by actress Cher just last December. Wong and Yang represent extremes of the 'risks and rewards' narratives of divulging sexual orientation by Asians in the West.

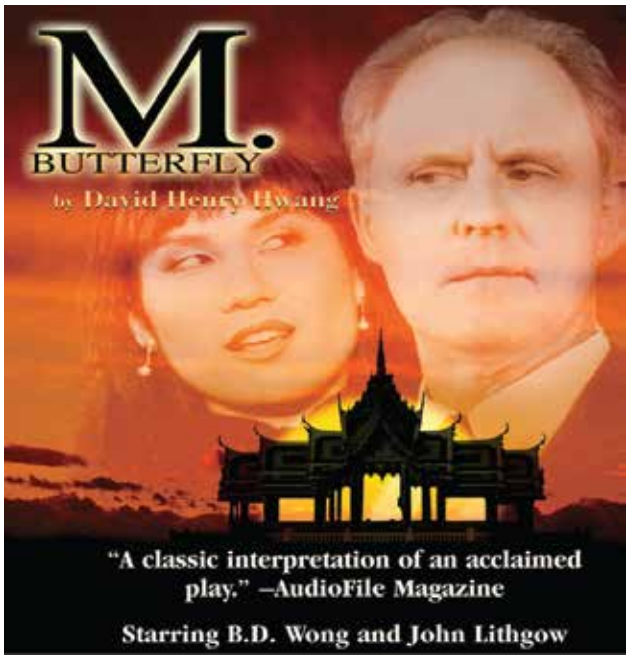
University of Washington research in 2017 combining race and sexual orientation concluded that a hypothetical gay Asian American man was perceived to be significantly more American than an Asian American whose sexual orientation wasn't specified. Sympathy was stronger for those whose ethnic roots were in Asian countries that have discriminatory legislation against LGBTQ+ people as compared to those that do not, such as Japan and South Korea.

Across the Atlantic, a post-empire Britain already grappling with cultural and racial integration challenges, has seen deeper pitfalls towards its Asian LGBTQ+ diaspora. In BBC's 2019 *Big British Asian Summer* it was found that being gay or lesbian in Britain's stigmatised Asian community was considered unacceptable to the extent that a high number of youngsters have been forced into heterosexual marriages out of a fear of social castigation, or have caused a family split in order to marry a same-sex partner.

Living in the closet

So how does Asian LGBTQ+ love and identity operate in Asia, the world's largest continent? The picture is not pretty.

In an age when Western celebrities from Elton John to Ellen DeGeneres and Gen Z Zoomers shape global conversations about freedom of sexual orientation and gender identity, Asia remains perhaps the least LGBTQ+ friendly continent. Asian governments that signed up to the UN Sustainable Development Goals and campaign for LGBTQ+ inclusion remain the last bastions of faith and cultural orthodoxy on sexual orientation.



Three decades after the Manila Pride Parade of 1994, Asia's LGBTQ+ community is far from securing legal or social protection from discrimination, harassment and violence. From the cautious reforms of Japan, cultural censorship in China to the death penalty in Saudi Arabia, the patchwork of laws, religious edicts and social hostility continues to push millions of LGBTQ+ Asians into the closet – even where legal penalties are absent.

Japan, Asia's only G-7 nation, removed all criminal bans on same-sex relations and is inching towards limited partnership recognition, yet social conservatism keeps gay citizens closeted. China, on the other hand, illustrates how tight state

Being openly gay liberated Asian Canadian celebrity Owen Yang to win over the West. Photo: NBC

Being LGBTQ+ in Asia and the Pacific Project. Photo: UNDP

control over media and public discourse results in censorship despite formal legislation existing. Taiwan's legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2019 doesn't count on UN data as it is not recognised as a sovereign state by most UN member states.

Thailand's historic same-sex marriage equality law offers a rare example for Asia, but social stigma and limits on transgender legal recognition persist across all classes.

In Malaysia, religious laws, state crackdowns and online harassment fuel a 'stay in the closet' regime while Singapore's much praised repeal of the infamous section 377A law that criminalised acts of gross indecency between men, coexists with restrictive public policies and political statements against open "promotion".

The South Asian story is shaped by colonial legacies, religion and recent court battles. Yet, paradoxically, Nepal, the world's only Hindu state, set an extraordinary example in making landmark legal advances in South Asia such as the 2007 Supreme Court ruling and the 2015 constitutional guarantee of equality for its LGBTQ+, even though family rejection, workplace harassment, and physical violence continue.

India's 2018 decriminalisation law could not overcome family and workplace discrimination or social stigma and 'coming out' still means fear of losing marriage prospects or family support for gay people. The silver lining lies in the host of vibrant Indian LGBTQ+ celebrities from its *haute couture fashion* industry to Bollywood, including film-maker Karan Johar, openly gay designers Manish Malhotra and Rohit Bal, all being vocal activists, and making the difference in emboldening Indian LGBTQ+ rights, visibility and acceptance.

Contrarily, Muslim-majority Pakistan retains sodomy laws despite transgender recognition

"Pride in India should mean a moment of celebration, a moment to let people know that we exist, that we have the right to live and love with equality, dignity and respect, without being subjected to stigma and discrimination". Openly gay 'royal' HRH Manvendra Singh Gohil speaking on the *Oprah Winfrey Show.*


Prince HRH Manvendra Singh Gohil proudly holds a rainbow flag in his ancestral homeland of Rajpipla, Gujarat, India. Photo: Marcello Bonfanti

A gay pride parade in Bangkok. Photo: AP/Sakchai Lalit

while Bangladesh recognises a third gender and has expanded transgender rights but retains section 377A.

In parts of Central Asia, such as in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan there is acceptance of LGBTQ+ communities but no legal framework exists for protection of their rights and freedoms. While nearly two-thirds of UN member states have decriminalised same-sex relationships, those that continue to criminalise them are mostly Asian, African and Arab nations.

Millions of openly LGBTQ+ people around the world celebrated love on Valentine's Day last month, though in Asia celebrating love takes place in the shadows with fear, shame, and anything but pride. In a world rife with far-rightism, racism and neo-imperialism, Asian governments, faith leaders and civil society must choose whether to cling to old fears and phobias towards gay people, furthering xenophobia, discrimination and social persecution, or to uplift them to equality, dignity, freedoms and inclusion by decriminalising and protecting same-sex relationships. By challenging discriminatory laws and stigma, Asians can bring their LGBTQ+ brethren out of the shadows so they too can love in safety and pride.

Rayeesa Daulah writes on gender, race, culture and history in Asia.

Who will win the AI 'Cold War' between the USA and China?

The rivalry between the United States and China for superiority in Artificial Intelligence, or AI, is so intense that it deserves to be regarded as a war, albeit a technological war, that has the potential to determine where global power lies in the second quarter of the twenty-first century. It can be argued that the development of ever more sophisticated semiconductors or 'chips' – measured in 'nanometres' – is more important in the present age than the building of more powerful warships. We asked techie Sham Banerji to explain.

Knights versus Stones

In his 2011 book On China, former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger used two board games to illustrate the differences between traditional Western and Chinese strategies. The Western mindset, he argued, is associated with Chess, a game of decisive moves, 'royal capitulation', and total victory. Conversely, China plays Wei Qi or Go, a game that begins with an empty board and involves the patient placement of stones to occupy territory and gradually surround the opponent, aiming for relative advantage.

Today, this metaphor is defining the race for AI supremacy. The US plays Chess with a singular focus on 'checkmate', which might be defined as the achievement of Artificial General Intelligence (AGI). China is playing Go, a state-managed consolidation of new and legacy semiconductor nodes and widespread territorial diffusion of AI across industry and civic functions. Winning in AI will depend on which scoreboard you follow.

The performance gap

In frontier AI models, the American companies OpenAI, Google DeepMind, Anthropic and Meta lead on performance. Stanford's AI Index 2025 lists 40 notable AI models from the US versus fifteen from China. American private investment into

AI reached US$109.1bn in 2024, nearly 12 times that of China at US$9.3bn.

However, by early 2026, the performance gap has narrowed.

China is winning on a different board: model efficiency. The 2025 'DeepSeek Moment' proved that China could match frontier performance at a fraction of the cost. The US still leads on general benchmarks, but China dominates 'math-per-dollar' categories. If the race shifts from 'the best model money can buy' to the 'best model you can deploy everywhere', then China's Go strategy is succeeding. Alibaba's Qwen and DeepSeek now lead in worldwide 'open-source' model downloads. On investment, OECD data shows that China's investment in AI startups from 2012 to 2024 at US$276bn was double that of the EU, UK, Canada, and Japan combined, second only to the US.

Semiconductor supremacy

The US maintains its upstream advantage through two critical chokepoints: Electronic Design Automation (EDA) software, which is used to design chips; and Extreme Ultraviolet (EUV) photolithography hardware, which is used to manufacture them. America's Synopsys, Cadence and Germany's Siemens EDA control nearly 75% of the EDA market, while ASML (of the Netherlands) monopolises EUV. These are the 'Knights' the US uses to curb China's advance.

China's response has been both strategic and reciprocal. In May 2025, the US Commerce Department's EDA embargo on trading chips with China was rescinded within weeks, which was seen as a concession to offset China's threatened reciprocal steps on the export of rare-earth magnets critical for all semiconductor manufacturing.

Strategically, China's massive state-level 'Made in China 2025' programme, started over a decade ago, has fortified a core group of domestic companies, focusing on areas like analogue chips and mature manufacturing nodes (for the technical, that is 28 nm to 90 nm). This allows China to secure territory in AI-adjacent industries such as automotive, robotics, and power. According to the International Federation of Robotics, China installed nearly nine times as many industrial robots in 2024 as the US, representing 54% of global deployments. In robotaxis, America's Waymo leads on driverless trips (450,000/week) while Baidu's Apollo Go strategy captures territory across 20 cities in China along with international footprints in the UAE and Switzerland.

With EUV unobtainable because of American embargoes, China has stockpiled older generation Deep Ultraviolet (DUV) equipment. In addition, China has been "sweating" legacy fabrication lines to their limits, while experimenting on

photolithography with emerging indigenous solutions.

The ultimate chokepoint

Nvidia's CEO, Jensen Huang, calls data centres "AI Factories" though it may be more appropriate to regard them as AI Refineries. These facilities do not just store and process data, they refine real-world text, images, and sensor data into inorganic intelligence on an industrial scale. They are the

undisputed markers of AI supremacy, built on thousands of GPU chips (Graphics Processing Units) and gigawatts of power. While Nvidia holds a near-monopoly in GPUs, Huawei's Ascend 910C, fabricated in China at SMIC using legacy tech and smart system integration, is closing the performance gap. As Huang told the Financial Times in November 2025, in the AI race China is now only "nanoseconds behind America".

When it comes to power generation, China has the edge. While the US has been straining under the shift to renewables, China has been leading in solar, wind, and nuclear and has added the equivalent of the entire US power grid since 2011. This allows China to add data centre capacity faster than the US.

The infrastructure of power

'Sovereign AI' is the state-led integration of AI into military, civic, and geopolitical spheres. How fast and how widely the US and China deploy it will determine the final outcome. With its 2025 AI Action Plan and the 2026 Department of War AI Strategy, the US has pivoted to a 'Wartime AI' mindset. It prioritises speed of military deployment over bureaucratic caution and its goal is to achieve unquestioned AI dominance. Geopolitically, the US plans to export what it sees as the 'American AI Technology Stack' (or 'Freedom Stack') to vetted partners.

In contrast, the focus of China's 'AI Plus Directive' is to achieve 70% penetration across state functions such as the judiciary, policing, and healthcare systems. Its military aim is 'Intelligentised Warfare' or zhìnénghuà zhànzhēng. As part of its 'Digital Silk Road' initiative, a term coined by Xi Jinping, China positions itself as the AI partner of choice for the Global South, offering a 'turnkey AI' package of cloud computing, 5G/6G networks, and governance software.

The silicon shield

Alongside AI, another Cold War is raging in which the battle lines are territorial. China considers Taiwan a province to be reunified, potentially by force, while the US sees it as a self-governing democracy that it must protect. Taiwan's outsized strategic semiconductor value deters conflict by creating global interdependence; but its physical proximity to mainland China creates a geopolitical fault line.

Frontier models set the ceiling; efficiency sets the diffusion rate; chips and power set the speed of scaling; sovereign AI sets geopolitical leverage. As the gloves come off, victory in AI will be determined by these "weapons of mass diffusion". The stakes could not be higher.

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

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Shanghai and Mumbai, twin symbols of Asia's rising economic power reshaping the global order. Photo: AI Generated

The Asian Superpowers

Are Asia's superpowers setting the future global economic agenda? Vince Cable, a Liberal Democrat MP and UK Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills in the coalition government under David Cameron's premiership, reports.

I was recently at a global economic conference in Delhi where the mood was decidedly upbeat. India's economy is growing at around 7% p.a. Prime Minister Modi spoke to a cheering business audience about successful trade deals with the EU and the USA and his ambitions for a more business-friendly set of policies designed to make India a 'developed' economy by mid-century – to roughly where China is today.

Cynics may scoff at India's economic pretensions just as cynics scoffed at China a generation ago. I don't scoff and, indeed, thirty years ago I was advising the multinational company I worked for to bet big on both China and India. They followed my advice and haven't regretted it.

My latest book *Eclipsing the West; China, India and the Forging of a New World* looks back at the relative performance of these Asian superstates and looks forward to a world economy which they increasingly dominate, along with the USA – and, just possibly, the EU if

Europe's current malaise and division can be overcome.

That new world is already taking shape. China and India, with 36% of the world's population, account for 27.5% of global GDP, according to the IMF Economic Outlook 2024, only fractionally short of the 28.7% of the 'advanced' world; essentially, Europe, North America and Japan. India and China together accounted for 44% of global growth in 2024 and plausible forecasts have them continuing to drive the global economy.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi outlines India's ambition to become a developed economy by mid-century.

One obvious question in any comparison is why China is so far ahead, close to the living standards of 'advanced' economies, whilst India has only recently emerged into the middle-income category. We are, of course, talking crude averages for vast, diverse countries. One third of Indians, mainly in the southern and western states, already live at Chinese living standards, whilst the remaining two thirds in the East and North remain at desperately poor levels.

Part of the answer is that, even in the chaotic Maoist period, China invested strongly in basic literacy and primary and secondary education but, in India, tertiary education had priority and provincial government, which had responsibility for schools, failed to invest. China also carried through land reform, albeit brutally, allowing Deng's subsequent liberalisation to incentivise an entrepreneurial peasant class. India's gradualist democratic system, by contrast, left semi-feudal, caste-based rural society intact.

Deng Xiaoping's market reforms transformed China into the world's industrial powerhouse.

The other key factor favouring China was that Deng Xiaoping's radical economic reforms were launched in China a decade earlier than Manmohan Singh's in India and went further and faster. India missed out, almost entirely, on the boom in industrial exports which became the basis of China's development. China now has around a third of the world's industrial production; India a dismal 3%. Both countries are best described as 'state capitalist' but the Chinese Communist Party also unleashed competitive capitalism whilst India developed an inefficient, protected 'crony capitalism'.

Looking forward, however, fortunes are changing. China is dealing with the deflationary after-effects of a vast property market collapse. Consumer demand and private, investor confidence are weak. Large-scale public investment in

China now accounts for nearly a third of global industrial production. Photo: Xinhua/Han Chuanhao

infrastructure can no longer be funded by bankrupt local government and is, anyway, subject to decreasing returns. Necessary reforms of the internal passport system – *hukou* – and spending on public services to boost domestic demand are not happening, despite official recognition of the problem. It is possible that even the official 5% growth rate overstates China's growth. It is likely that the success of China's new high-tech industries will feed through into the wider economy, but the days of gung-ho Chinese growth are over.

By contrast, a lot of things are going right for India: broad political consensus on stronger economic reform including tricky areas like agriculture and labour law; the big success of digitisation embracing even the poorest; greatly improved infrastructure; consolidation of India's domestic 'single market'; some relocation of supply chains to India from China and Southeast Asia. Big problems remain including a vast surplus of under-employed labour: sometimes, hopefully, described as a 'demographic dividend'. The yawning gap between the relatively prosperous South – Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Telangana – and the impoverished, populous, Hindi-speaking North – Bihar, Jharkhand and much of the biggest state, Uttar Pradesh – also threatens to create deep political divisions as the South is increasingly milked for tax revenue.

Indeed, politics may be the determining factor in the two

Digitisation — from cities to villages — is reshaping India's economic infrastructure. Photo: DD News

countries' relative success in the long run. China has benefitted from the stability, order and long-term consistency conferred by the Communist Party and its pragmatic approach to business and wider economic policy since the days of Deng. 45 years of prodigious growth and rising living standards is a remarkable achievement, giving the regime a strong underpinning of support. But there is growing worry about the apparent lack of succession planning; Xi's seeming paranoia about his own position; his obsession with 'corruption' which spills over into uncertainty and risk-aversion for business and local officials; and a geo-political confrontation with the USA (albeit that Xi seems to be smarter than Trump).

India's messy, noisy, fragmented democracy is inherently less disciplined and consistent than China's autocracy but has the great advantage of adaptability and flexibility. Wrought iron versus cast iron. Having feedback from an electorate helps to mitigate bad mistakes (like Xi's excessively harsh handling of COVID). The current BJP government under Modi has eroded some democratic safeguards and its anti-Muslim, nationalistic prejudices are divisive. But India's democracy is still remarkably resilient. And it is a major selling point in building bridges with countries in the region like Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, which are nervous of China's growing power.

My book tries to explore some potential long-term scenarios built around these superstates' prospects and the international

Great power rivalry between China and the United States will shape the future global order. Photo: AFP

environment in which they operate. One is the Global West where there is effectively an economic and military alliance lined up against China. India is the new 'poster boy' for the West as its economic strength grows. Trump's clumsy, erratic behaviour makes such a world implausible for now, but will not outlast him.

A second scenario is a multi-polar world of competing states in a fragmenting world order. China, the USA, Russia, the EU, India and perhaps others (Israel? Saudi?) pursue their own agendas with business conducted on a bilateral and regional basis and with few recognised global rules or institutions. This is a grim world for small states and for 'international public goods' like the rules around trade, climate, nuclear non-proliferation, nature conservation and humanitarian assistance.

But the second scenario risks degenerating into a third, what I call the Vortex, when experience of catastrophe – lack of cooperation over a global slump or a pandemic or nuclear weapons or run-away climate change – leads to a revival on multilateralism albeit with a reformed system which places the Asian superstates at its centre.

Sir Vince Cable led the British Liberal Democrat party and served as Business Secretary 2010-2015. His latest book is *Eclipsing the West; China, India and the Forging of a New World.*

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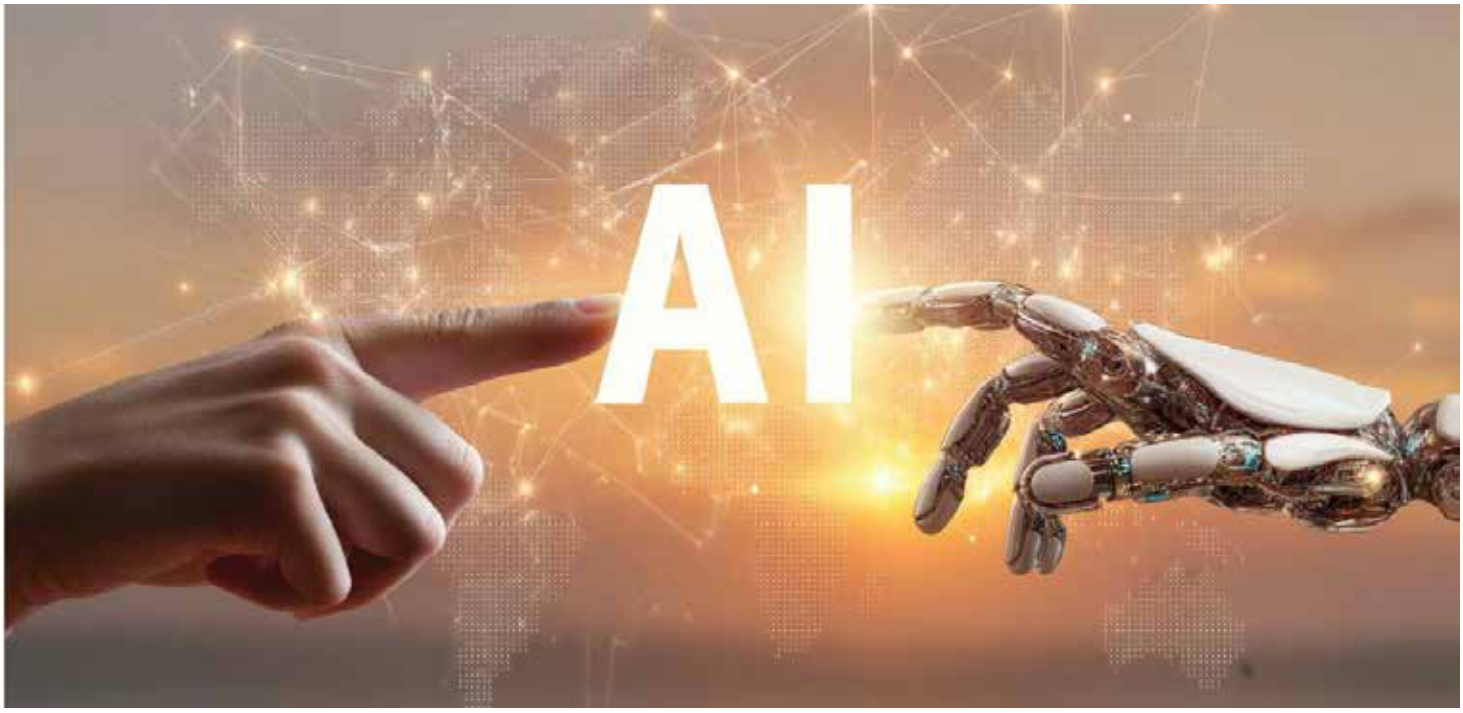


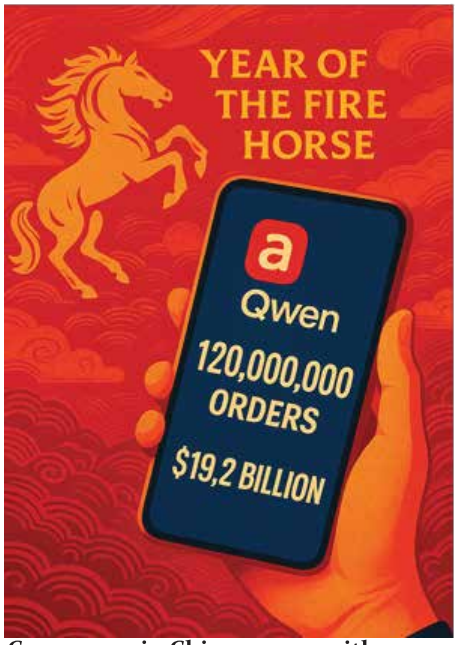
Bisinomics

China

It's the Year of the Fire Horse as the Chinese New Year celebrations commenced on 17 February. It is said to usher vibrant energy, adventure and transformation after the Year of the Snake, which was introspective.

Chinese consumers, the *South China Morning Post* reported, spiritedly placed 120 million orders on Alibaba's flagship artificial intelligence app Qwen in a mere six days. This reflected a growing inclination towards AI-powered shopping. Other Chinese tech giants like Tencent Holdings and Baidu are also in the fray to attract customers to their AI apps in what is being dubbed in China business circles as a 'red packet war ahead of the Spring Festival'.

However, 30 retail banks in Hong Kong, still a gateway to the mainland, recorded lower growth



Consumers in China engage with AI-powered shopping apps during Spring Festival promotions, with Qwen App's CNY campaign drawing over 120 million orders. Data source: Alibabacloud.com

in aggregated pre-tax profit in 2025 compared to the previous year, as per data released by the Hong Kong Monetary Authority. Rising bad debts and a narrower net interest margin offset growing income from wealth management services.

India

India was, meanwhile, on a trade deal spree, albeit eliciting a mixed response from corporate and political circles in the country.

Antonio Costa, president of the European Council, and Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, were serenaded as chief guests at India's Republic Day celebrations on 26 January, following which the two sides jointly announced a trade accord. The 27-nation European

Union and India comprise nearly 25% of global gross domestic product.

An elated von der Leyen said, 'We have delivered the mother of all deals. We have sent a signal to the world that rules-based cooperation still delivers great outcomes.'

European Council President Antonio Costa, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi ahead of their meeting at Hyderabad House in New Delhi, 27 January 2026. Photo: Reuters

EU-India trade already has a turnover of more than 180 billion euros. EU goods exports to India are projected to double by 2032 with the elimination or reduction of tariffs in 96.6% of items under the new arrangement. This is the biggest entry into the comparatively protectionist Indian market New Delhi has ever extended to a trade partner.

The benefit for the EU will apply from aircraft and spacecraft to alcohol and olive oil; not to mention duties on motor vehicles exports, which will be cut from as high as 110% to 10% under a quota of 250,000 vehicles. In lieu of that India will get preferential access for beverages, spices, textiles, leather goods, marine products and jewellery; while continuing to safeguard its sensitive agricultural sector.

Controversy, though, dogged the trade deal proclaimed in the first week of February by New Delhi and Washington. United States President Donald Trump branded it as 'historic' and flagged that America will increase its coal exports to India dramatically, thereby dismissing the bulk of the world's concern over use of fossil fuels.

The Hindu summarised, the two countries 'reached a framework for an interim agreement', adding, 'under which New Delhi will eliminate or reduce tariffs on all American industrial goods, a wide range of food and agricultural products, as well as purchase $500 billion of US products over the next five years'. This, if strictly adhered to, could turn India's current surplus into a deficit. The bottom line is Indian exports will be levied an 18% duty; whereas imports from the US will enjoy a nominal tariff or none at all.

On 12 February, farmers and workers in India observed a day-long strike against, among other issues, the Indo-US pact, which could affect the competitiveness of India's vulnerable farmers. The strikers claimed 300 million people supported the shut-down. Leader of the Opposition in India's Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, and president of the main opposition Congress party, Mallickarjun Kharge, endorsed the protest.

Singapore Prime Minister and Finance Minister Lawrence Wong presents the national budget, highlighting AI investment and global trade expansion. Photo: MDDI

Singapore

Singapore Business Review picked out, the emphasis in AI and internationalisation as among the highlights in Singapore's budget presented its Prime Minister and Finance Minister Lawrence Wong on 12 February. He said, though, 'amidst heightened global uncertainties, we expect a more moderate outlook for 2026; growth is therefore projected at 2–4% with inflation at 1–2%'.

Wong added, 'Later this year we will sign a first of its kind agreement on trade and essential supplies with New Zealand' and 'Step up engagement with fast growing markets, including in Latin America, Africa and the Middle East.'

Not to be left behind, neighbouring Malaysia's economy expanded 5.2% in 2025, with a Q4 growth of 6.3%, which was a three-year high, the Business Times posted.

Gulf

Qatar and Saudi Arabia are to have a high-speed electric rail link, the Saudi Press Agency confirmed. The project will involve construction of a 785-kilometre line between Riyadh and Doha.

It will pass through Al-Hofuf and Dammam and connect Saudi Arabia's King Salman International Airport and Qatar's Hamad International Airport. Trains are expected to operate at speeds exceeding 300 kilometres per hour, reducing travel time between the two capital cities to around 2–3 hours.

Qatar's Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani visited Riyadh to co-chair the Qatar-Saudi Coordination Council, strengthening ties with Saudi Arabia. Photo: The National

The system is scheduled to be completed in six years. Once ready, 10 million passengers will travel on the route annually, generating 30,000 direct and indirect jobs.

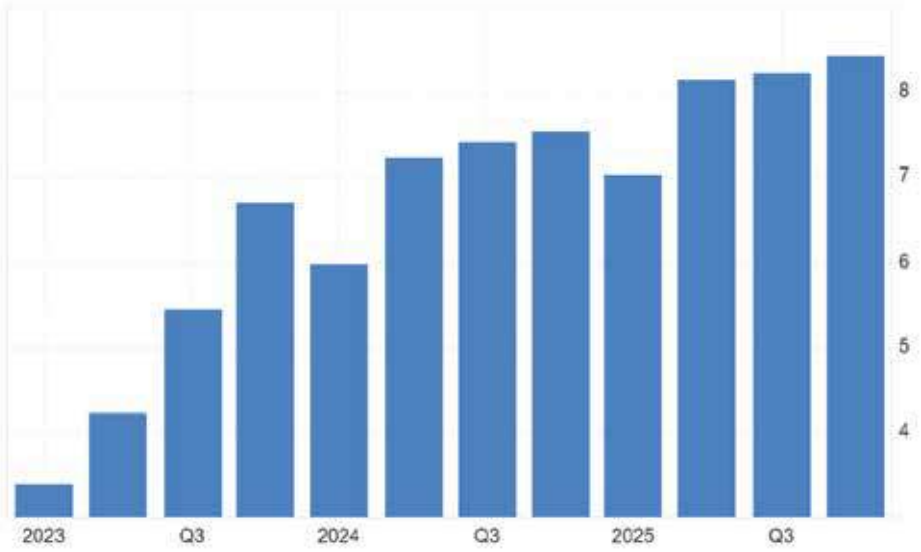
Also, in the region, MGX, the Abu Dhabi investment firm, co-spearheaded a US$30 billion Series G funding in Anthropic, the market leader in enterprise AI and coding, now valued at US$380 billion. Partners NVIDIA and Microsoft joined the financing.

Vietnam

Vietnam's economy, among the Asian tigers in recent decades, could enter an era of unpredictability because of US trade policy shifts.

Since Vietnam-US relations were normalised in 1995, business between the two has grown strongly, Vietnam's Ministry of Industry and Trade portrayed. This has been 'a key driver of economic development, job creation, and strengthened supply chain

Workers in Vietnam's textile sector prepare garments for export to the US market, amid shifting tariff policies. Photo: VNA

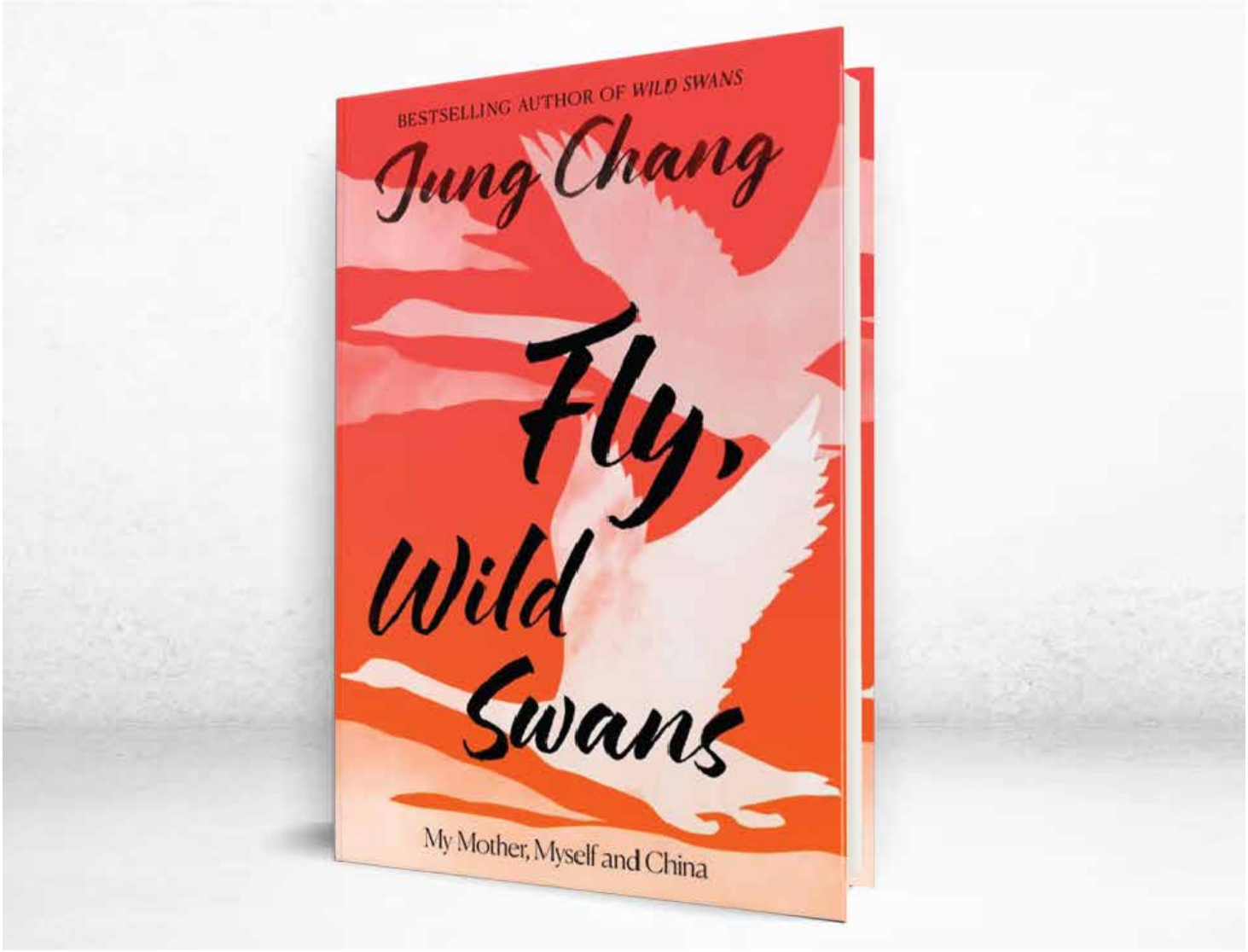


Vietnam GDP Annual Growth Rate (%). Credit: General Statistics Office of Vietnam

integration between two highly complementary economies', it said.

Figures released by Vietnam Customs for the period from January to October, indicated the trade turnover stood at $141.4 billion, up 27.2% from 2024. Vietnam's surplus came to $110.9 billion. Last year, to start with, Trump slapped 46% reciprocal tariffs on Vietnam, before reducing it to 20%. Reuters' take was Vietnam's trade-weighted average Most Favoured Nation tariff was 5.1%, against the US's 2.2%.

Vietnam's export sectors are understandably feeling the pinch. In textiles, the US is Vietnam's biggest market, absorbing 38-40% of its exports. 'We will continue to adapt and grow,' Dang Vu Hung, deputy chairman of the Vietnam Textile and Apparel Association, assured stake.



***Fly, Wild Swans: My Mother, Myself and China* (2025) sees Jung Chang return to her family's story, reflecting on memory, loyalty and the long shadow of modern Chinese history.**

Jung Chang: a grande dame of China writing

Jung Chang, one of the most celebrated writers in English about China, has produced a sequel to her biographical account of growing up in China, *Wild Swans,* which brought her fame. Lijia Zhang, who has written about her own early life in China, met Jung Chang to discuss her books.

In 1988, a decade after settling in Britain, the Chinese-born writer Jung Chang received a visit that would change her life. Her mother, a senior Chinese Communist Party official who had never previously left China, came to London for an extended stay. Freed from political pressures, she began to talk openly with her daughter about her past and that of Chang's grandmother, once a warlord's concubine. Chang started recording the conversations. By the time her mother left, she had amassed over sixty hours of tape.

"I said to myself: I've got to write this down," Chang later recalled. The result was *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (1991), written with her husband, the historian

Jon Halliday. The memoir became an international sensation. Tracing a century of Chinese history through three generations of women, the book sold more than 13 million copies, was translated into 37 languages, and became one of the most successful non-fiction paperbacks ever published. J. G. Ballard called it "an unforgettable portrait of the brain-death of a nation".

Few books have shaped Western perceptions of China so profoundly. At a time when personal accounts of life under Mao – especially women's stories – were rare, *Wild Swans* brought China into the mainstream. It inspired readers to study Chinese, visit the country, and write their own memoirs. "It's impossible to overstate its influence," the British sinologist Julia Lovell told me; reading the book sparked her own fascination with China.

More than three decades later, Chang has returned to that family story with *Fly, Wild Swans: My Mother, Myself and China* (Harper, 2025). Picking up where the earlier book ends, it explores her mother's later life as a formidable Communist official navigating post-Mao politics and Chang's own struggle to reconcile personal freedom abroad with loyalty to family at home. Less a sequel than a reckoning, the book is also an intimate portrait of separation, guilt and ageing. Reviews have been kind, though few expect it to replicate the seismic impact of *Wild Swans*.

I first met Jung Chang many years ago at a China-related event in London. Over the years,

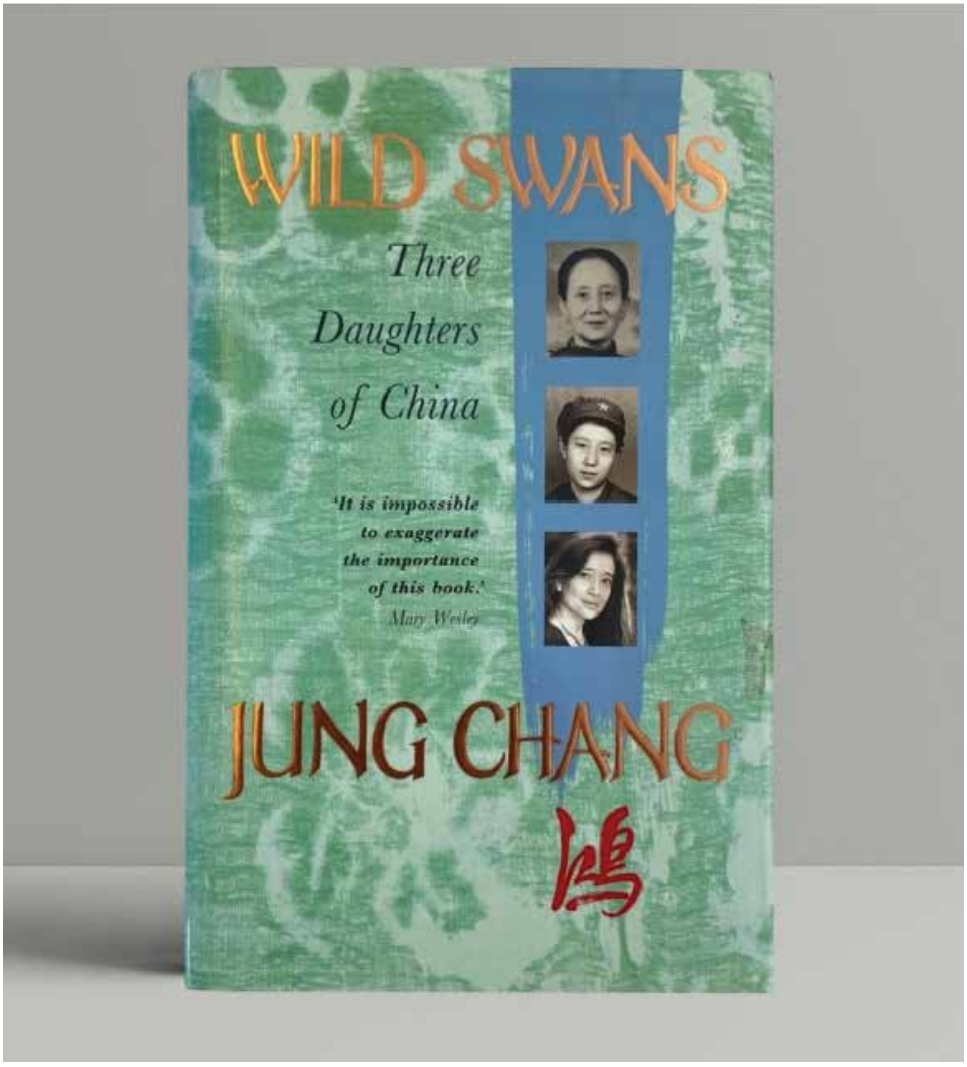
Jung Chang at a restaurant near her home in Notting Hill, where she met Lijia Zhang last summer to discuss her latest book. Photo: Lijia Zhang

we bumped into each other from time to time and even once shared a stage at a book festival in Bali. Last summer, at a restaurant near her home in Notting Hill, we finally sat down for a proper conversation. Wrapped in a purple Chinese-style jacket and turban, she cut an elegant, commanding figure. Now in her seventies, she radiates assurance. In March 2024, she received the British award of a CBE for services to literature and history. Once grand in manner, she is now officially so.

Yet Chang's beginnings were far from privileged in the conventional sense. Born in 1952 in Yibin, Sichuan, she grew up inside a guarded compound thanks to her father's senior role in the provincial propaganda department. A passionate lover of books, he nurtured his children's intellectual curiosity,

buying each of them a dictionary, a rare luxury at the time. Chang devoured translated foreign children's literature and dreamed of becoming a writer.

Chang herself fared better than her parents. Like millions of young urban people, she joined the Red Guards and was later "sent down" to the countryside.



Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China **(1991), Jung Chang's breakthrough memoir, traced a century of Chinese history through three generations of women and became an international publishing phenomenon.**

That dream was shattered by the Cultural Revolution. In 1967, her father was ordered to burn his own books. As they turned to ash, he banged his head against the wall in despair – a scene Chang recounts as one of the darkest moments in *Wild Swans*. Both parents were publicly humiliated, beaten and imprisoned. These passages form the emotional core of the book.

She worked as a barefoot doctor, an electrician and a steelworker – experiences she describes with characteristic understatement as "eye-opening". In 1973, as universities reopened, she entered Sichuan University as a "worker—peasant—soldier" student, majoring in English. A government scholarship took her to Britain in 1978. She went on to earn a PhD from the University of York, becoming the first mainland Chinese scholar in the post-Mao era to do so.

Chang's early writing focused on women who shaped history. Her first book, *Madame Sun Yat-Sen* (1986), co-authored with Halliday, brought the couple together; they married in 1991, the same year *Wild Swans* was published. The memoir's success gave Chang complete freedom. She left her teaching post at SOAS and devoted herself to writing.

Riding high, she and Halliday embarked on a far more ambitious project: *Mao: The Unknown Story* (2005). Twelve years in the making, the book drew on newly opened Soviet and Chinese archives and interviews with Mao's associates. It portrayed Mao as a brutal, power-hungry tyrant responsible for tens of millions of deaths – worse, Chang and Halliday argued, than Hitler or Stalin.

The book was a commercial triumph but a scholarly lightning rod. While journalists admired its scale, academics were scathing. Rebecca E. Karl summarised the critique bluntly: many scholars believed the authors had exaggerated or distorted evidence. Chang remains unmoved. She insists no reviewer identified factual inaccuracies and argues that personal memoirs alone should have settled Mao's moral case long ago.

Controversy followed Chang into her next biography, *Empress Dowager Cixi* (2013), which recast the much-maligned Qing ruler as a moderniser and proto-feminist. Again, reviewers were divided.

Pamela Kyle Crossley dismissed the attempt as historical wish-fulfillment, but Chang stands by her revisionist approach, arguing that no one before her had treated Cixi as a serious political actor.

Her 2019 book *Big Sister, Little Sister, Red Sister,* about the Soong siblings, was more restrained and drew less attention, perhaps, Chang speculates, because it lacked the lurid appeal of her earlier biographies. Or perhaps the pandemic simply swallowed it.

Chang's mother still lives in China, where her daughter's books are banned. Although Chang has been allowed to return, she does so cautiously. "The question is not whether I am allowed to go," she once told me, "but whether I am allowed to get out."

With *Fly, Wild Swans,* Chang returns to what she knows best: the intimate intersections of family, memory and history. When *Wild Swans* appeared, she was among a handful of Chinese-born writers working in English. She paved the way for others – Yiyun Li, Ha Jin, Guo Xiaolu – and stands today alongside Britain's literary establishment.

For me, however, her position remains singular: the writer who introduced China to the West through lived experience, cutting through ideology and cliché to tell a story only she could tell.

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

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