

A Comprehensive Study of ASEAN Freedom: Analyzing Global Freedom Score Trends in Political Rights and Civil Liberties (2019-2023)

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Abstract: This study examines the progress of freedom in ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries by analyzing political rights and civil liberties trends, using data from the Global Freedom Scores provided by Freedom House from 2019 to 2023. The research identifies clear groupings within ASEAN using the K-means Clustering Algorithm, with countries such as Myanmar, Brunei, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam classified as having low freedom scores based on political rights and civil liberties. Meanwhile, nations in the Malay Archipelago—such as Malaysia, the Philippines, Timor-Leste, Singapore, and Indonesia—show higher freedom scores, with Timor-Leste emerging as the country with the highest level of freedom. A time-series analysis based on an ARIMA model provides insight into the trends of freedom scores by these different Nations for the last five years. It indicates a slight improvement in the ASEAN nation's political rights and civil liberties. With the help of forecasting, slight improvements indicate that ASEAN countries are still finding ways to advance their citizens' freedom. This study sheds valuable insights into how the ASEAN nations balance governance, freedom, and development in an increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords: Freedom Scores, Political Rights, Civil Liberties, ASEAN, Freedom

1. Introduction

Are ASEAN nations progressing toward greater freedom, or do recent trends reveal a different story? Freedom is not a common concept in this modern era of constantly changing world dynamics, various social and technological advancements, and the importance of the people to the nation. According to Zapata (2024), the ancient Greeks (Athenians) founded democracy, a form of government where the people held power, around the eighth century B.C. It established constitutional rules to protect economic (property owners), social, and political gains. This foundational form of government, in which power resides in the hands of the people, established constitutional rules to safeguard economic, social, and political advantage, particularly for property holders, thus defining early democratic governance principles. Citizen rights established then are invoked today as countries worldwide strive for greater freedoms while battling contemporary challenges.

Freedom in the World is a global statistical survey that happens annually. This statistic measures a nation's freedom scores based on political rights and civil liberties. The composition consists of numerical ratings and descriptive texts about a selected group of territories worldwide (Freedom House, n.d.). According to Aristotle and Newman (2010), man is a political animal in nature, and the state he is in is the political organization to which he belongs. Every citizen possesses the political right to participate in political activities. Civil liberties refer to all fundamental rights that shield individuals from the government's overreach of power (Pucheta-Martínez & Gallego-Álvarez, 2024). These two factors play an essential role in measuring freedom in a nation because they highlight the ability to participate in political matters and protect citizens from potential governance abuses.

Global freedom scores have already been the subject of numerous empirical studies. Global freedom has declined significantly over the past years. According to a report, various criminal organizations disrupted Ecuador's elections, hindering peaceful voting which resulted in the decline of their freedom scores from free to partially free. Several countries have detected armed conflicts and the threat of authoritarian aggression in recent years (Gorokhovskaia & Grothe, 2024). Rahman (2014) also carried out a foreign study that focused on the statistical analysis of the

democracy index. The study found no significant changes or advancements in the democracy index over the study period, and it also highlighted the consistent deterioration of political institutions in several nations. These findings revealed the stagnation and decline of freedom worldwide each year.

The ASEAN Development Outlook (2021) documents various developments within the ASEAN Nations. ASEAN Nations have been proactively engaging in various ways to address climate change; they have also put in their efforts to boost education accessibility and launched health initiatives to promote social welfare (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021). Overall, each year reveals the continued development of ASEAN nations. Positive developments in a nation symbolize excellent governance and leadership. Excellent governance impacts public management and national development (Asian Development Bank Annual Report 2021: Toward a Green and Inclusive Recovery, 2022). However, do these positive developments in governance and growth naturally lead to greater freedom for citizens, or is the progress on rights and liberties still a separate, uncharted path? According to (Corbridge, 2002), it is specified that development requires more than economic growth, and freedom is a different matter.

The development of freedom in ASEAN, particularly in political rights and civil liberties, has received little analysis. Numerous reviews have focused on the socio-economic progress of ASEAN, while the enhancement of state liberties has received less attention. To date, most literature and reports have primarily focused on economic development, road infrastructure, and increased education levels, all indicating a lack of progress in studying state freedom. As a result, studies about the progress of these countries in enhancing political rights and civil liberties have been surprisingly limited. This study aims to address this gap by performing an analysis of the ASEAN Global Freedom Scores from 2019 to 2023 and to learn if there is an improvement in political rights and civil liberties. By looking at trends in these particular freedom scores, the study will determine whether there has been any advancement in freedom across ASEAN, whether in political rights or civil liberties.

The following research applies an ARIMA model for the analysis of the dataset of ASEAN Global Freedom Scores on the two elements of political rights and civil liberties. It is among the most often-used techniques for time-series forecasting and will be appropriate as it also considers the trends hidden within the data due to changes over time; it can, therefore, be utilized for trend identification and projection of scores in the future by utilizing values from the past. In this context, the study contributes not only to the understanding of past and present trends in freedom in ASEAN nations but also provides a base for forecasting some future developments in the exercise of political rights and civil liberties by applying ARIMA.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Theory of Civil and Political Rights

The General Theory of Civil and Political Rights is normally based upon the provisions set in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), in which rights have been attributed to enjoying freedoms that guarantee human dignity and self-determination. Some of those freedoms include freedom of speech, the right to join the government, and freedom against discrimination and arbitrary arrests. The ICCPR has been in existence since 1966, and a ratifying state is obliged to respect and uphold these rights. It establishes an accountability framework that obliges state actors in the protection and guarantee of freedom without discrimination (Butt, 2024). The theory is particularly relevant in the context of ASEAN countries, considering recent trends in global freedom scores, since governance styles and political stability may vary across ASEAN and influence the level of civil and political rights available to citizens. Commitments of the ASEAN states to civil and political rights vary, and the ICCPR offers a benchmark whereby one can ascertain whether these countries are stepping forward or retreating regarding issues such as political participation and protection from excesses by the government. This study uses the theory of civil and political rights as a basis for examination concerning ASEAN nations' compliance and performance under these universal standards. Thus, it is designed to point out where improvements might be needed and whether there is a trend toward more freedom across the region.

2.2 Development as Freedom

The "Development as Freedom" by Amartya Sen emphasizes that development is intrinsically related to the freedom of people, meaning that the metric of development could be the enlargement of the capabilities and

choices people have instead of mere economic indicators. True development can be measured as the amount of freedom people have to exercise choices over their lives, free from deprivation and oppression (Corbridge, 2002). Sen argues that freedom must entail civil and political rights, among them, the right to political participation, freedom of speech, and protection from oppressive actions by the state, which are the prerequisites for giving people a better chance of influencing the circumstances of their lives. For ASEAN nations, such a framework enables analysis not limited to economic indicators and allows looking into how human development as a whole fare in response to changes in civil and political rights within the region.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Materials

This study draws its primary data from the "Freedom in the World: Global Freedom Scores" dataset, accessible at freedomhouse.org. The dataset provided the scores for Political Rights, with a maximum score of 40 points, and Civil Liberties, with a maximum score of 60. It also provided the total score for each country with a combined score from Political Rights and Civil Liberties totaling up to 100 points. This total score is classified as Free (71 and above), Partially Free (31 - 70), and Not Free (30 and below). This dataset is a product of the annual Freedom in the World research, which measures a country's freedom levels based on the above-mentioned variables. By leveraging this dataset, the study aims to unravel if there has been genuine progress in ASEAN Freedom for the past 5 years, to identify which country/countries have high freedom levels, and to forecast the progress of Freedom for the next 5 years. This would foster a better understanding of the progression of Freedom in ASEAN countries.

3.2 Methods

The study employed a multifaceted methodology to investigate the Global Freedom Score trends based on Political Rights and Civil Liberties from 2019 to 2023, utilizing the "Freedom in the World: Global Freedom Scores" dataset, accessible at freedomhouse.org. Data preprocessing involves cleaning to ensure data quality. The study harnessed the K-means Clustering Algorithm to group data points into a specified number of clusters. By clustering countries into distinct groups, we can identify patterns or trends in freedom levels across the region, such as clusters of countries with similar political or civil liberties scores. The study also harnessed the Autoregressive Integrated Moving Average (ARIMA) for time series forecasting, enabling the exploration of Global Freedom Scores based on Political Rights and Civil Liberties. The method used in this study for forecasting is the ARIMA model. The ARIMA (Auto Regressive Integrated Moving Average) model forecasts temporal dependencies using historical values and does not ignore the time series data (Talirongan et al., 2021). GRETl (Gnu Regression, Econometrics, and Time-series Library) software was utilized for data analysis, graph plotting, and model comparison. Through these comprehensive methods, the study would uncover patterns in freedom scores and forecast the progress or changes in freedom scores in ASEAN countries for the next five years. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework for analyzing Global Freedom Score Trends in Political Rights and Civil Liberties in ASEAN countries.

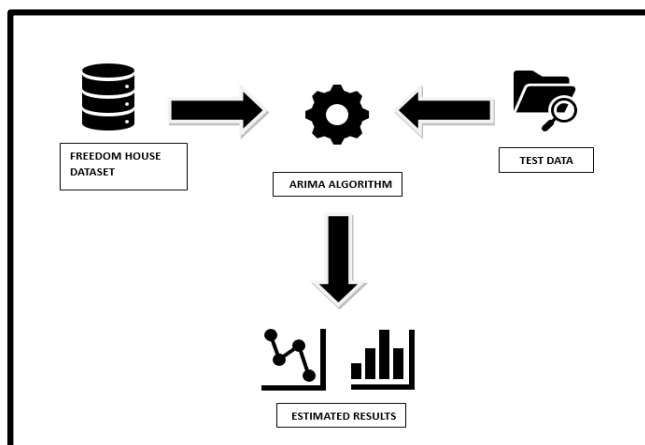


Figure 1. Predicting Political Rights and Civil Liberties Trends

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 K-means Clustering Algorithm

Table 1 represents the average scores for 5 years from the raw data on political rights, civil liberties, and the total freedom scores of ASEAN countries covering the years 2019 to 2023.

Table 1. Average scores for 5 years on political rights and civil liberties (2019-2023)

Country	Political Rights	Civil Liberties
Myanmar	8.4	13.2
Brunei	7	21.2
Laos	2	11.4
Malaysia	21	30.6
Philippines	25.2	32.6
Cambodia	5.2	19.4
Thailand	5.4	24.8
Timor-Leste	32.6	38.8
Singapore	19	29.6
Indonesia	30	29.8
Vietnam	3.2	16.2

The results of the K-means Clustering Algorithm are presented in the following steps.

		Political Rights	Civil Liberties
Centroids	C1	8.4	13.2
	C2	7	21.2

Figure 2. Initial value of the centroids. Denoted by C1 and C2

Objects-centroids distance denoted as D0: The Euclidean distance is used to obtain the distance. The distance matrix at iteration 0 is presented in Figure 3. Political Rights is derived from the formula:

$$= \text{SQRT} ((\text{raw data of Political Rights (country)} - C1)^2 + (\text{raw data of Civil Liberties (country)} - C1)^2). \tag{1}$$

Civil Liberties is derived from the following formula:

$$= \text{SQRT} ((\text{raw data of Political Rights (country)} - C2)^2 + (\text{raw data of Civil Liberties (country)} - C2)^2). \tag{2}$$

Indexed ASEAN Global Freedom Scores based on Political Rights and Civil Liberties covering the year 2019-2023												
	Group	Myanmar	Brunei	Laos	Malaysia	Philippines	Cambodia	Thailand	Timor-Leste	Singapore	Indonesia	Vietnam
D0	Political Rights	0	8.121576202	6.64830806	21.48302	25.663203	6.977105417	11.9816526	35.22782991	19.527417	27.24188	6.0033324
	Civil Liberties	8.1215762	0	11.001818	16.86298	21.475568	2.545584412	3.93954312	31.06638054	14.647867	24.555244	6.2801274

Figure 3. Objects-Centroids distances: Iteration 0 denoted as D0

Each indexed country was assigned based on the minimum distance. Thus, Myanmar, Brunei, Laos, and Vietnam are assigned to group 1. On the other hand, Malaysia, Philippines, Cambodia, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Singapore, and Indonesia are assigned to group 2. The element of the group index below is 1 if and only if the country is assigned to that group.

Indexed ASEAN Global Freedom Scores based on Political Rights and Civil Liberties covering the year 2019-2023													
	Group	Myanmar	Brunei	Laos	Malaysia	Philippines	Cambodia	Thailand	Timor-Leste	Singapore	Indonesia	Vietnam	Group
G0	Political Rights	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
	Civil Liberties	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	2

Figure 4. Object Clustering: Iteration 0 denoted by G0

Compute the new centroid of each group based on the new memberships. Group 1 has 4 members. On the other hand, group 2 has 7 members, hence the centroid is the average coordinate among the four members (Figure 5).

		Political Rights	Civil Liberties
Centroids	C1	5.15	15.5
	C2	19.77142857	29.37142857

Figure 5. New centroids based on new memberships (Iteration 1)

Repeat the process in Figure 3 in order to obtain the new distance matrix based on the new groupings. The results of the process are shown below.

Indexed ASEAN Global Freedom Scores based on Political Rights and Civil Liberties covering the year 2019-2023													
	Group	Myanmar	Brunei	Laos	Malaysia	Philippines	Cambodia	Thailand	Timor-Leste	Singapore	Indonesia	Vietnam	Group
D1	Political Rights	3.98151981	5.992703897	5.17034815	21.89138	26.351708	3.9003205	9.30335961	36.00545098	19.764425	28.67076	2.0718349	
	Civil Liberties	19.7692815	15.16184793	25.2744123	1.737462	6.3160954	17.65661118	15.0809787	15.9207476	0.8045787	10.237546	21.168344	

Figure 6. Objects-Centroids distances: Iteration 1 denoted as D1

Each indexed country was assigned based on the minimum distance. Thus, Myanmar, Brunei, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam are assigned to group 1. On the other hand, Malaysia, Philippines, Timor-Leste, Singapore, and Indonesia are assigned to group 2. The element of the group index above is 1 if and only if the country is assigned to that group.

Indexed ASEAN Global Freedom Scores based on Political Rights and Civil Liberties covering the year 2019-2023													
	Group	Myanmar	Brunei	Laos	Malaysia	Philippines	Cambodia	Thailand	Timor-Leste	Singapore	Indonesia	Vietnam	Group
G1	Political Rights	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1
	Civil Liberties	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	2

Figure 7. Object Clustering: Iteration 1 denoted by G1

Compute the new centroid of each group based on the new memberships. Group 1 has 6 members. On the other hand, group 2 has 5 members, hence the centroid is the average coordinate among the four members (Figure 8).

		Political Rights	Civil Liberties
Centroids	C1	5.2	17.7
	C2	25.56	32.28

Figure 8. New centroids based on new memberships (Iteration 2)

Repeat the process in Figure 3 to obtain the new distance matrix based on the new groupings. The results of the process are shown below.

Indexed ASEAN Global Freedom Scores based on Political Rights and Civil Liberties covering the year 2019-2023												
	Group	Myanmar	Brunei	Laos	Malaysia	Philippines	Cambodia	Thailand	Timor-Leste	Singapore	Indonesia	Vietnam
D2	Political Rights	5.52177508	3.935733731	7.06611633	20.3973	24.940128	1.7	7.10281634	34.58279919	18.222239	27.594383	2.5
	Civil Liberties	25.6614887	21.61573501	31.4809149	4.85963	0.4816638	24.09199037	21.50293	9.595415572	7.0863249	5.0856661	27.541532

Figure 9. Objects-Centroids distances: Iteration 2 denoted as D2

Each indexed country was assigned based on the minimum distance. Thus, Myanmar, Brunei, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam are assigned to group 1. On the other hand, Malaysia, Philippines, Timor-Leste, Singapore, and Indonesia are assigned to group 2. The element of the group index above is 1 if and only if the country is assigned to that group.

Indexed ASEAN Global Freedom Scores based on Political Rights and Civil Liberties covering the year 2019-2023													
	Group	Myanmar	Brunei	Laos	Malaysia	Philippines	Cambodia	Thailand	Timor-Leste	Singapore	Indonesia	Vietnam	Group
G2	Political Rights	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1
	Civil Liberties	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	2

Figure 10. Object Clustering: Iteration 2 denoted by G2

The results showed that G1 is equal to G2. Comparing the groups of the last iteration reveals that the objects do not move groups anymore. Thus, the computation of k-means clustering has reached its stability. The final groupings are presented in the table below:

Table 2. Clustered ASEAN Freedom Scores based on Political Rights and Civil Liberties by countries

Country	Political Rights	Civil Liberties	Group
Myanmar	8.4	13.2	1
Brunei	7	21.2	1
Laos	2	11.4	1
Malaysia	21	30.6	2
Philippines	25.2	32.6	2
Cambodia	5.2	19.4	1
Thailand	5.4	24.8	1
Timor-Leste	32.6	38.8	2
Singapore	19	29.6	2
Indonesia	30	29.8	2
Vietnam	3.2	16.2	1

The results revealed that cluster 1 comprises countries in the eastern part of Southeast Asia. The clustering showed that these countries have relatively low freedom scores compared to other ASEAN Nations. There is a typical pattern of low scores of Political Rights and Civil liberties within these countries. The data from Freedom House backed up these results, showing that these countries are classified as NF (Not Free) according to the total score composed of the scores for Political Rights and Civil Liberties.

The countries that belong to cluster 2 comprise countries that belong to the Malay Archipelago. The clustering showed that these countries have higher freedom scores based on political rights and civil liberties compared to the countries that belong to cluster 1. Timor-Leste has the highest freedom score among these countries, with 32.6 in political rights and 38.8 in civil liberties, making it a free country (F), according to Freedom House. Other countries that belong to this cluster are also considered PF (Partially Free) by the Freedom House.

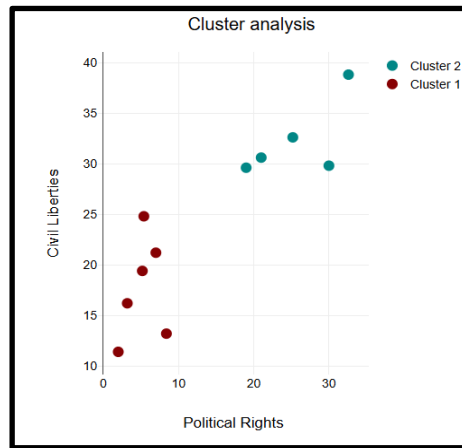


Figure 11. Scattered Plot by Political Rights and Civil Liberties

4.2. Time-series plot

The time-series plot shows the trend of political rights and civil liberties scores of ASEAN Nations. Political rights scores are shown in Figure 12, while civil liberties scores are shown in Figure 13. The 5-year historical data used was from the year 2019-2023.

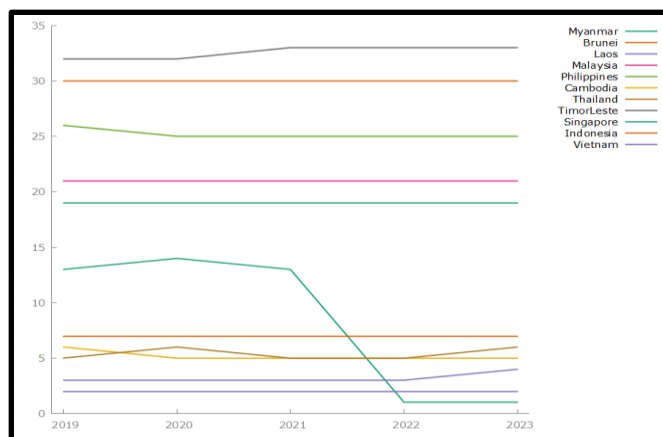


Figure 12. Time-Series Plot of Political Rights Scores among ASEAN Nations (2019-2023)

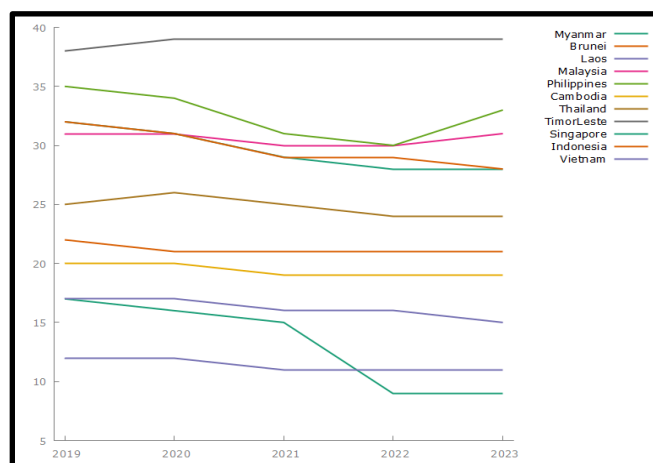


Figure 13. Time-Series Plot of Civil Liberties Scores among ASEAN Nations (2019-2023)

Both figures show that freedom's progression varies from country to country. Data showed that most of the countries are having a decrease in political rights and civil liberties scores from 2019 to 2023. The most noticeable decrease in scores is Myanmar, with a significant lowering of both political rights and civil liberties in 2021. The figures also showed that there is a really slow progression of freedom across ASEAN countries. Some countries maintained their scores while other countries either made little progress or experienced a decrease in scores.

4.3. Forecasting

The following figures present a 5-year prediction on the progression of freedom scores per country, specifically political right scores. These predictions are generated using ARIMA modeling, utilizing historical data from 2019 to 2023.

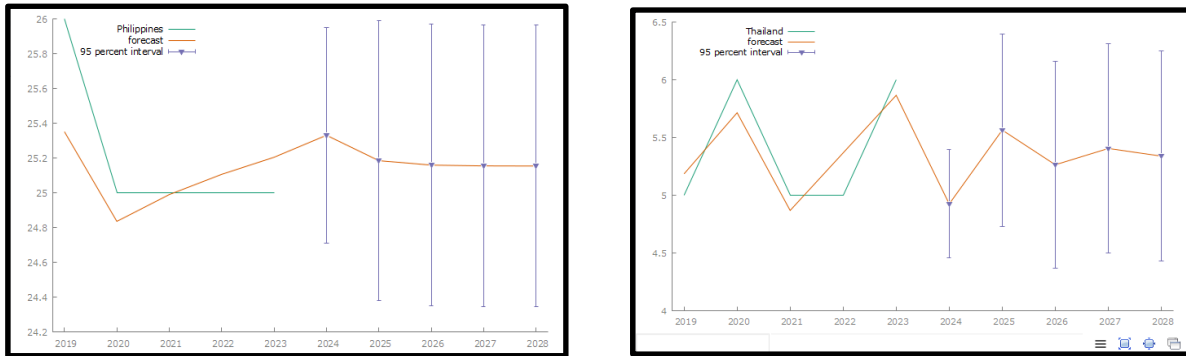


Figure 14. (a) Myanmar: 5-Year Forecast; (b) Philippines: 5-Year Forecast

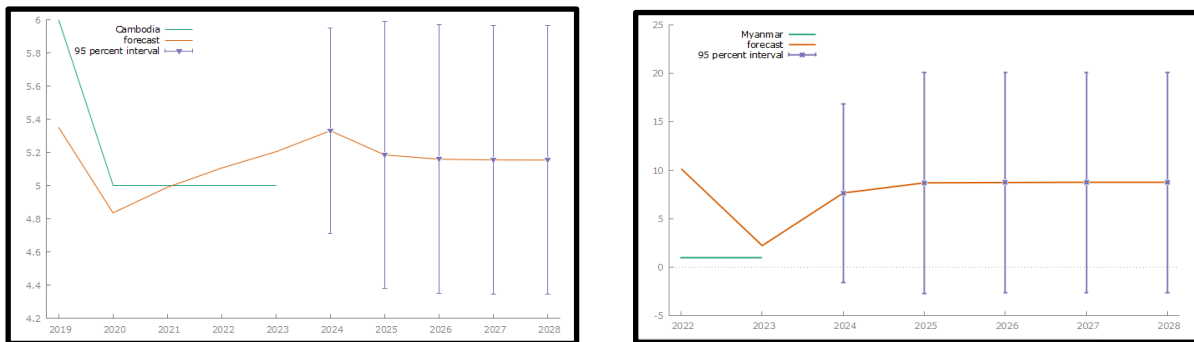


Figure 15. (a) Cambodia: 5-Year Forecast; (b) Thailand: 5-Year Forecast

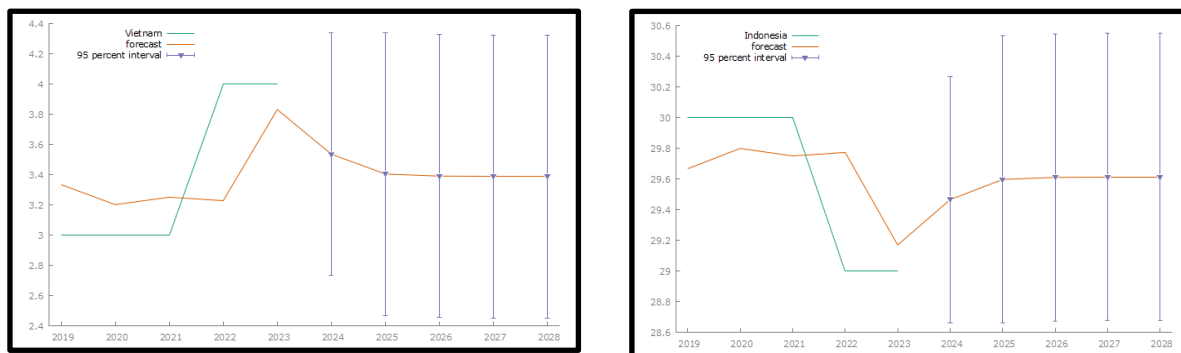


Figure 16. (a) Timor-Leste: 5-Year Forecast; (b) Brunei: 5-Year Forecast

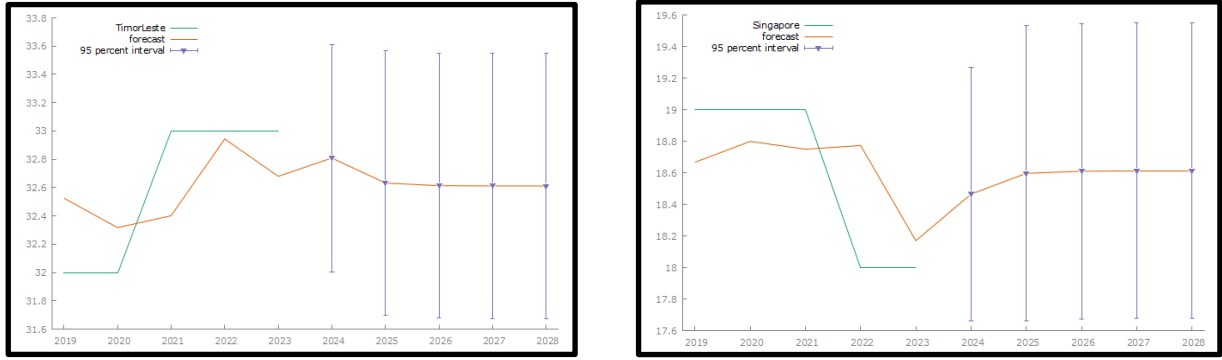


Figure 17. (a) Laos: 5-Year Forecast; (b) Malaysia: 5-Year Forecast

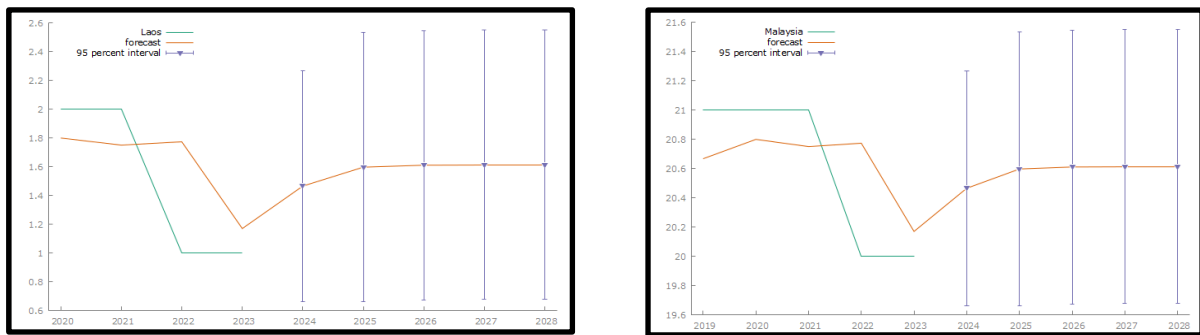


Figure 18. (a) Vietnam: 5-Year Forecast; (b) Indonesia: 5-Year Forecast

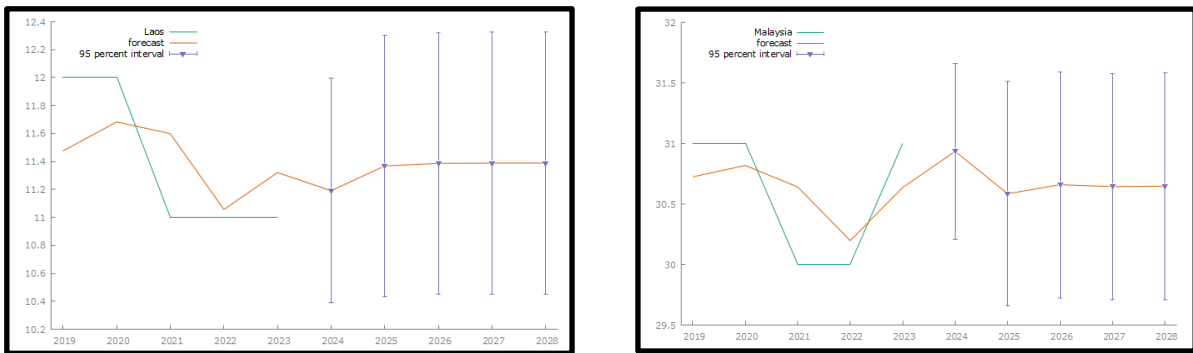


Figure 19. Singapore: 5-Year Forecast

All figures above, from Figures 14 to 19, show the 5-year predictions of freedom scores based on political rights in ASEAN Nations. The ARIMA revealed a subtle increase in political scores before reaching steadiness in all countries, showing a slow progression of freedom within ASEAN Nations. However, there are some parts where the graphs showed a subtle decrease before reaching a steadiness. This suggests that if the government truly wants freedom, it needs to take bold actions to improve the political rights of its country.

The following figures present a 5-year prediction on the progression of freedom scores per country, specifically civil liberties scores. These predictions are generated using ARIMA modeling, utilizing historical data from 2019 to 2023.

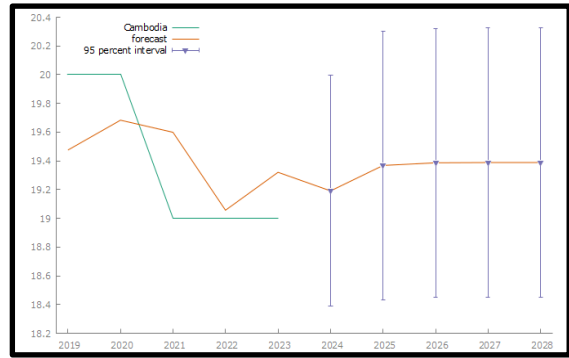
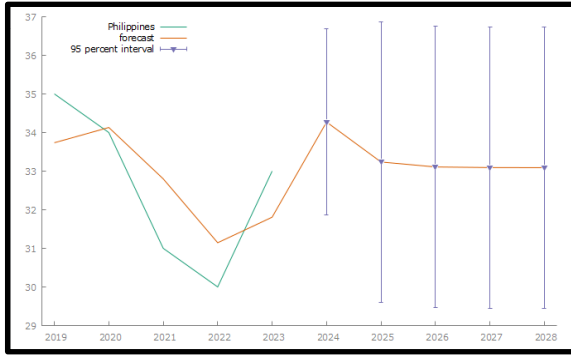


Figure 20. Myanmar: 5-Year Forecast; (b) Brunei: 5-Year Forecast

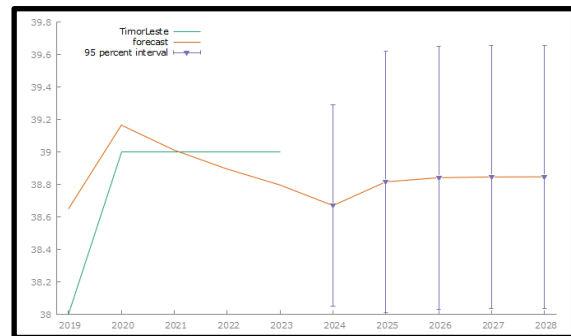
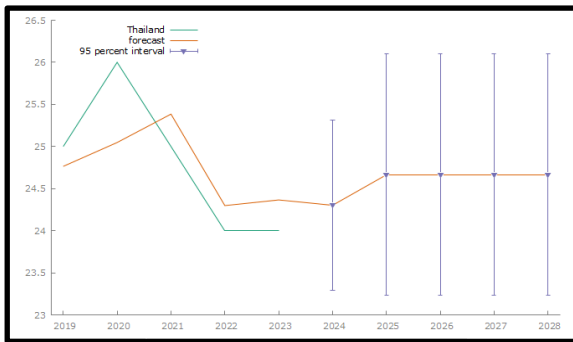


Figure 21. Laos: 5-Year Forecast; (b) Malaysia: 5-Year Forecast

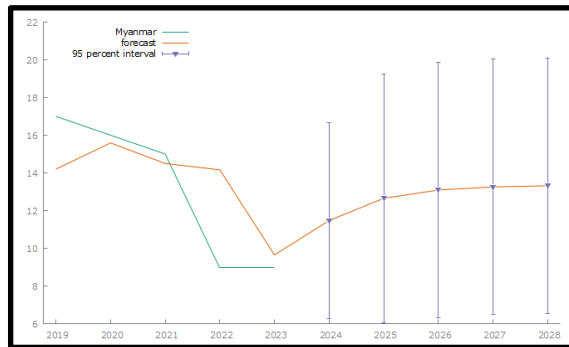
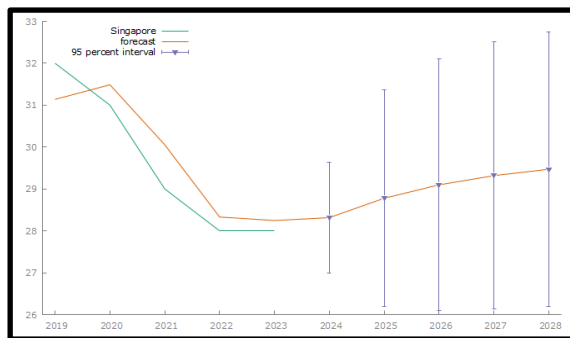


Figure 22. Philippines: 5-Year Forecast; (b) Cambodia: 5-Year Forecast



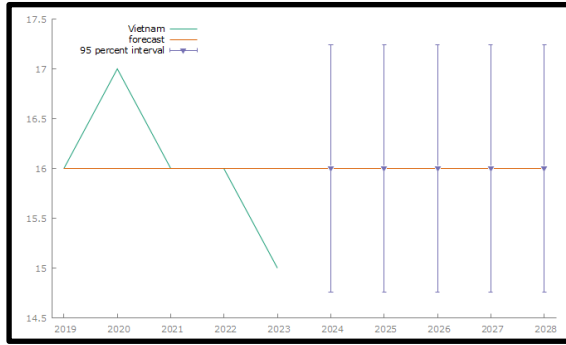


Figure 23. Thailand: 5-Year Forecast; (b) Timor-Leste: 5-Year Forecast

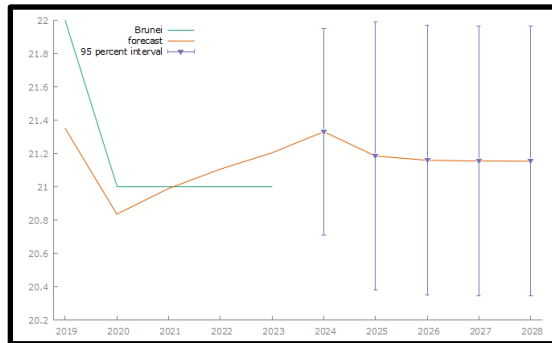


Figure 24. Singapore: 5-Year Forecast; (b) Indonesia: 5-Year Forecast

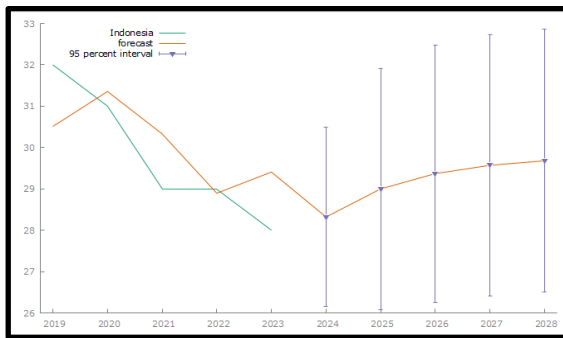


Figure 25. Vietnam: 5-Year Forecast

All figures above, from Figures 20 to 25, illustrate five-year predictions of freedom scores focused on civil liberties across ASEAN Nations. The ARIMA model analysis indicates a subtle upward trend in civil liberties scores, suggesting incremental improvements in freedom before each country reaches a level of stability. This would signify gains in civil rights, perhaps triggered by region-specific reforms, policy changes, or other global factors. The latter suggests that countries maintain this level of freedom constant, thus indicating a consolidation phase after making initial steps forward. Although to achieve significant improvements, the government can consider taking action on promoting the civil liberties of each citizen in the country, especially since, even though there is a slight increase, countries in the ASEAN region still have relatively low freedom scores compared to the other areas which suggest the need for quick actions to achieve a freer country.

5. Conclusion

Using the K-means algorithm, it was revealed that countries with the lowest freedom scores based on political rights and civil liberties are located in the eastern part of Southeast Asia. These countries are Myanmar, Brunei, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam. The Freedom House classifies these countries as not free, which is evident in the

cluster. Countries with higher scores are located in the Malay Archipelago: Malaysia, Philippines, Timor-Leste, Singapore, and Indonesia. The Freedom House labels these countries as partially free countries. The cluster analysis also revealed that Timor-Leste has the highest freedom scores. This is backed up by the statistics in Freedom House labeling Timor-Leste a free country based on political rights and civil liberties scores.

The time-series plot showed the slow progression of freedom in ASEAN countries, which is evident with the subtle increase or decrease of scores, then it reaches a point of steadiness. This suggests that there is slow action each year to achieve global freedom regarding political rights and civil liberties. However, it is evident that many countries, if not all, are making small steps to achieve greater freedom.

The forecasting of ASEAN freedom scores based on political rights and civil liberties utilizing the data from Freedom House spanning from 2019 to 2023 revealed that countries have made subtle progress on freedom scores before reaching a point of steadiness. Although it is only a slight increase in scores, it represents the global effort of these countries to achieve a better environment in which their citizens would be happy to live. Still, countries' freedom scores are progressing languidly, suggesting that there is still much work to focus on. Now, to answer the question, "Are ASEAN nations truly progressing toward greater freedom?" The answer is Yes; even though these are small collective efforts, eventually, ASEAN countries will reach a point of success in achieving greater freedom, creating a peaceful and safe place for their people to live in.

6. Recommendations

In response to the suggestions drawn from the recommendations from the findings of this study, ASEAN nations should follow policies and resource allocation strategies that have allowed for the expansion of political rights and civil liberties. The governments may focus on more transparent institutions and fair application of the rule of law while opening up more spaces of civic discourse without fear for their citizens. It is also possible to liaise with international organizations focusing on democratic governance and human rights. These organizations could provide the needed reforms and assistance in promoting policy ideas. We also encourage further studies to monitor performance trends. This could help evaluate every country's advancement year by year, spot the weaknesses, and point out possible deficiencies where more significant improvement is needed. That way, the policies implemented could be assessed through data analyses for evaluation and adjustments when necessary.

Educational programs could foster more active citizenship through alerts concerning political and civil rights. The government could also focus on educating the youth about political rights and civil liberties. It has been proved that students' attitudes toward government and democracy have significantly impacted their civic engagement (Zabolotna & Pidhaietska, 2021). These recommendations can lead the ASEAN countries to collaborate in creating a democratic and more egalitarian landscape where progress in freedom can become sustainable and meaningful to future generations.

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