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Southeast Asia

STRONG-STATE DEMOCRATIZATION IN MALAYSIA AND SINGAPORE

Dan Slater

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Malaysia and Singapore have long had authoritarian regimes that looked like no others in the world—except for each other. These neighbors’ shared distinctiveness begins with their dogged defiance of the correlation between economic development and democracy. As Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi put it, “Singapore and Malaysia are the two countries that developed over a long period, became wealthy, and remained dictatorships until now.”¹ Similarly dominated for decades by a seemingly invincible ruling party, these two regimes also long seemed distinctive by virtue of being “hybrid regimes,” where elections at times appear meaningfully competitive yet meaningful amounts of power never change hands. A third reason to group Malaysia and Singapore as a distinctive pair has been the centrality of ethnic considerations in all matters political, given the historically fraught relations between Malay Muslims and ethnic Chinese—the former being the power-wielding majority in Malaysia, and the latter holding that position in Singapore.²

Since the Cold War’s end, however, Malaysia and Singapore have become less globally distinctive along all these dimensions. For starters, the notion that development and democracy do not naturally go together has become utterly unremarkable. Authoritarianism endures in countries with rapidly growing economies (China and Russia, for example), while democracy survives in some of the poorest corners of Africa and Latin America, and struggles to be born in deeply impoverished corners of the Middle East. Second, although “hybrid regimes” used to be thought of as curiosities, “competitive authoritarianism”—or, more broadly, “electoral authoritarianism”—is now one of the world’s most common re-

gime types.³ Finally, ever more countries are now struggling, as Malaysia and Singapore long have, to reconcile electoral politics with ethnic tensions. The apparent contribution of electoral competition to ethnic conflict in cases ranging from Iraq to Kenya to Serbia has vividly shown how the fate of regimes hinges on their capacity to preserve the peace. In all these respects, Malaysia and Singapore increasingly look like the global rule rather than the exception.

To be sure, Malaysia and Singapore differ in degree along all of these dimensions; they have the resemblance (and rivalry) of siblings, not of identical twins. Yet the shared distinctiveness of Malaysian and Singaporean authoritarianism has always run much deeper than their elections, economies, and ethnic politics in any event. It is the extraordinary *strength of the state apparatus* in both countries that most sharply distinguishes their similar brand of authoritarianism, and that best explains why it has proved so stable and enduring on both sides of the Johor Causeway. State strength is the most important feature of Malaysia's and Singapore's politics to keep in mind when pondering whether they might democratize—and if so, what might follow.

Understanding where these extraordinarily durable regimes might be headed requires understanding where their extraordinarily strong states came from. It is most significant that ruling parties in Malaysia and Singapore did not so much *build* their powerful state apparatuses as build them *up*. These powerful Leviathans were initially a product of unusually intense forms of counterrevolutionary collaboration between British and local elites under late-colonial rule during the 1940s and 1950s. Strong states thus *preceded* the rise to dominance of Malaysia's United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and Singapore's People's Action Party (PAP). It follows that impressive levels of state power would also *outlast* these ruling parties were they to loosen their authoritarian controls or even lose power altogether.

State power is a far more reliable source of political stability than authoritarian rule, though it is also immeasurably harder to build.⁴ Once constructed, state power does not depend on regime type; democracies can have strong states as surely as dictatorships can. Since democratization would not debilitate the Malaysian or Singaporean Leviathans, neither would it destabilize politics, as these countries' rulers often assert. Authoritarianism is at its strongest when it is widely perceived as a necessary stabilizer, and authoritarian durability in both Malaysia and Singapore has always rested upon this perception. The prospects for instability *after* democratization are thus critical to whether Malaysia and Singapore will democratize *at all*.

Northeast Asia offers valuable comparative lessons in this regard. The particularities of Malaysian and Singaporean politics notwithstanding, regime change in both cases would constitute new instances of a more general historical process that I call "strong-state democratiza-

tion.” Apart from Western Europe, Northeast Asia has been the world’s trailblazer on this front. Japan underwent strong-state democratization in the 1940s, South Korea followed suit in the 1980s, and Taiwan did likewise in the 1990s. In each case, inherited legacies of state power endured after authoritarianism ended, as did underlying political stability and effective governance. Decades of state-sponsored development and poverty reduction under authoritarian conditions produced moderate, middle-class-dominated electorates that have eschewed radical policies and favored conservative, formerly authoritarian ruling parties at the polls. When strong-state dictatorships foster democratization at times of relative prosperity and stability, as in Korea and Taiwan, stability and democracy coincide. Loosening authoritarian controls does not mean losing Leviathan.

Yet herein lies the irony. The same state strength that facilitates stable transitions to democracy also empowers rulers to forestall democratization for much longer than plausible concerns about stability would dictate. Thus the main reason that democratization would go smoothly in Malaysia and Singapore is also the main reason that it might not happen at all.

Hobbesian Origins

To call the state apparatuses in Malaysia and Singapore “Leviathans” is fitting, given the Hobbesian dynamics that drove their formative years.⁵ Japan’s short-term occupation of Southeast Asia during World War II decimated the region’s minimalist prewar colonial state structures, whereas longer and more intensive Japanese colonization in Korea (from 1910 to 1945) and Taiwan (from 1895 to 1945) yielded much stronger administrative and coercive infrastructures. Japanese occupation gave rise to state-building in Southeast Asia as well, but indirectly, by sparking the mobilization of communist-inspired armed resistance movements. After Japan surrendered, these movements presented returning Western colonialists with major challenges, spurring a range of state-building efforts to cope with explosive threats from below.

More than anywhere else in Southeast Asia, Malaya⁶ and Singapore saw wartime anti-Japanese resistance metamorphose into powerful and radical postwar labor movements. Urban militancy sparked extensive state-building efforts by the British and their local collaborators. This initially took the form of reorganizing both states’ coercive apparatuses for purposes of labor control and, in Malaya, full-blown counterinsurgency. By the early 1950s, both British colonies had literally become police states, with effective civilian institutions of coercion to bridle endemic communalism and leftist radicalism.

British authorities also responded to leftist and communal unrest by pushing through major reforms in civilian administration and imposing

direct taxation on economic elites. This put both states—and any regime that would subsequently run them—on solid fiscal ground. State-builders scored their greatest success on this front with the introduction in 1947 of direct taxes on individual and corporate incomes in Malaya and Singapore. This entailed a dramatic shift in fiscal strategy in what had been, before World War II, the only two states in Southeast Asia *not* to have significant systems of direct tax collection. It was during this immediate postwar period that Malaya and Singapore began to surpass neighbors such as the Philippines and Thailand in their capacity to collect direct taxes: a capacity that has distinguished Malaysia and Singapore ever since.

Although they have governed in highly authoritarian ways, both the PAP and UMNO initially gained power democratically.

In 1951, leftist unrest also afforded colonial officials the political opportunity to introduce Malaya's Employees' Provident Fund (EPF), the first fund of its kind in the developing world. British authorities responded similarly to the worsening of Chinese labor and student unrest in Singapore in 1955, implementing a compulsory-savings scheme known as the Central Provident Fund (CPF). These funds subsequently ensured that the preponderance of national savings would remain in public rather than private hands, complementing the fiscal power of highly extractive tax states. State apparatuses that had abundant revenue and were skilled at a wide array of interventions thus emerged *before* the ruling parties that would later commandeer them.

British success in crafting new institutions in late-colonial Malaya and Singapore always depended on the active support of powerful local elites. Such support was grounded in shared elite perceptions that stronger state institutions were necessary to check the considerable combined threat posed by communalism and the radical Left. Because that threat from below persisted into the postindependence period, state power was not only *inherited* in both cases, but would be *intensified* after UMNO and the PAP rose to power.

Although they have governed in highly authoritarian ways, both parties initially gained power democratically. As the bureaucratic politics of late colonialism gave way to the electoral politics of decolonization during the 1950s, both parties cultivated mass support with promises to leverage state power to supply public goods. Since political stability in Malaysia and Singapore is the joint product of robust ruling parties as well as highly effective states, it is noteworthy that these parties first won their stabilizing cross-class backing through the pressures of intense democratic competition and not from a position of authoritarian hegemony.

Malaysia's UMNO gained its dominant position before the PAP, but

saw its performance and popularity slacken more quickly. After securing power in a series of decolonizing elections, the UMNO-led multiethnic Alliance maintained parliamentary supermajorities in the postindependence votes of 1959 and 1964. Yet its unresponsiveness to pressures for redistribution from the Malay and Chinese communities led to a nasty shock in the 1969 elections. The Alliance lost its two-thirds majority as populist challengers made surprising inroads among Malay and, especially, Chinese voters. Postelection riots pitting Chinese working-class oppositionists against pro-UMNO Malays prompted UMNO leaders to declare martial law and suspend Parliament for more than two years. What emerged from this electoral interregnum was a far more authoritarian political arrangement, with the Alliance expanded into a wider party coalition, the Barisan Nasional (BN, or National Front), thereby restoring the government's two-thirds majority (an advantage it would not lose again until 2008).

The PAP similarly had to traverse democratic shoals in order to reach the placid shores of authoritarian dominance. Initially a cross-class movement embracing radical leftists as well as more conservative quasi-nationalists, the PAP romped to victory in the 1959 elections that ushered in Singaporean self-rule. The party quickly began leveraging state power to reward labor for its support. Yet state provision under capitalist conditions was not what the PAP's radical rank and file had in mind. The party's noncommunist elites were vastly outnumbered by its pro-communist masses. PAP leaders thus precipitated the party's breakup in 1961 by using draconian security laws to crack down on radical trade unionists. The left-wing Socialist Front split from the party, leaving the PAP without its key mass constituency, organized labor.

Despite divorcing its most powerful constituency in society, the PAP was nonetheless able to flourish through its marriage with the state. By crafting "a coalition between political leadership and the civilian bureaucracy,"⁷ the PAP accrued ample coercive and administrative power with which to overwhelm the opposition. Systematic coercion was the bluntest instrument in the party-state's arsenal, most fearsomely deployed when 24 opposition leaders and more than a hundred leftist activists were detained in Operation Coldstore in February 1963. Subsequent elections delivered 37 of 51 parliamentary seats to the PAP. With their position secured, PAP leaders quickly ordered more rounds of arrests and deportations to further decimate the opposition's prospects. Yet the PAP's dominance was still only at the local level. With Singapore's impending incorporation into the Malaysian federation, the PAP was forced to continue cultivating mass support to compete in democratic national elections.

Singapore's brief period of incorporation into Malaysia (1963–65) went badly. Tensions between the PAP and the UMNO ran high, and communal conflict spiked again. Singapore was ultimately expelled

from the federation, making the island an independent city-state in which the PAP could freely pursue authoritarian single-party rule. Thus in Singapore in 1965, as in Malaysia in 1969, a party that had first gained dominance democratically became the authoritarian ruling party that the world knows today. Like their colonial predecessors, both the PAP and UMNO took advantage of destabilizing leftist and communal conflicts to build the kind of political institutions that best promised to prevent the recurrence of such clashes.

The upshot of these parallel Hobbesian origins was that authoritarianism in Malaysia and Singapore was founded on “protection pacts”—broad elite coalitions unified by shared support for heightened state power and tightened authoritarian controls as institutional bulwarks against especially threatening types of contentious politics.⁸ Yet state power had been heightened long before the two parties’ authoritarian controls had been tightened. While these ruling parties’ sharp authoritarian turns signified regime changes in kind, the state-building that followed only increased state power by a matter of degree.

In processes reminiscent of the mid-to-late 1940s, outbreaks of leftist unrest and communal contention led to new bouts of state-building in Singapore in the mid-1960s and Malaysia in the late 1960s. In Malaysia, the shock of sectarian rioting in 1969 caused the political center to tighten its grip on the periphery, ushering in an era of “unequivocal centralization.”⁹ Malaysia’s political leaders have never since been effectively constrained by countervailing power centers at the state level, even when they lose state-level elections.

In both Singapore and Malaysia, the intensified deployment of inherited coercive and extractive institutions was at the heart of authoritarian state-building. On the fiscal side, both UMNO and the PAP expanded their already impressive extraction of revenue. Most notably, the EPF and CPF have provided ideal mechanisms for both states to sink their fiscal claws into the burgeoning middle class. Both regimes have used compulsory contributions to lessen their financial dependence abroad and to cultivate political quiescence within. Rates of contribution from both employers and employees in Singapore and Malaysia have been described as “the highest in the world.”¹⁰ Since decades lapse between collection and payout, regime leaders always possess a large surplus of fungible reserves that can be put to political use with maximal flexibility and minimal accountability.

State power was inherited and intensified on the coercive side as well. Both governments’ policing powers were initially expanded to cope with the combined threat of communal and leftist unrest, but have long been more than adequate for countering any perceived threats to the regimes as they define them. Authoritarian turns after 1965 in Singapore and 1969 in Malaysia gave the PAP and UMNO the authority on paper to do what they had long been able to do in practice, thanks to the propitious legacies of late-colonial state-building.

In sum, the Malaysian and Singaporean states have served as ideal power apparatuses for the authoritarian regimes that have controlled them. This largely explains why neither UMNO nor the PAP has ever lost political control or even come close to doing so. Since their original *raison d'être* was to preserve political stability in what were widely thought to be endemically unstable polities, prospects for democratization in Malaysia and Singapore hinge on the popular perception that democracy and stability can coincide.

Strong-State Democratization

In Malaysia and Singapore alike, state power has served as the cornerstone of ruling parties' cherished record of political stability. Concerns with ethnic conflict and redistributive radicalism initially motivated authoritarian rule and state-building in tandem. How, then, might authoritarianism and state power become disentangled, and with what consequences for political stability, if Malaysia and Singapore were to undergo strong-state democratization?

None of the *state* institutions discussed above would lose their impressive capacity if Malaysia and Singapore were to undergo a change of *regime*. This includes extractive fiscal institutions such as the EPF, CPF, and ministries devoted to collecting direct taxes. Equally important, democratization would not prevent coercive institutions from preserving public order. Even democracies conduct surveillance and police their citizens, and few new democracies would be better equipped to do so as expertly and effectively. This is not only because coercive institutions in Malaysia and Singapore are efficient, but because they are *civilianized*. Whereas military regimes often see their main institution for repression crumble during democratization, authoritarian regimes with powerful parties and civilian police apparatuses need not suffer any serious hiccup in public order when undergoing regime change.

Of course, Malaysia and Singapore would not be the first strong-state dictatorships with long-ruling dominant parties to democratize in recent Asian history. Taiwan and South Korea present informative regional parallels. In Korea, rising popular pressures for democratization were met with preemptive steps toward liberalization in 1987 by Roh Tae Woo, the designated presidential successor from the ruling Democratic Justice Party (DJP). At virtually the same historical moment, Taiwan's government loosened authoritarian controls even more preemptively, as President Chiang Ching-kuo lifted martial law and abolished single-party Kuomintang (KMT) rule amid weaker popular pressures for regime change. A quarter-century after ruling parties began loosening authoritarian controls in Taiwan and Korea, what lessons might their experiences offer for strong-state democratization in Malaysia and Singapore?

The overarching lesson is that strong-state democratization has not

meant political destabilization. Korea and Taiwan's relative stability has had three primary sources. First, by democratizing politics on their own terms and in a constitutional manner, Taiwan's KMT and Korea's DJP ensured that they would remain major forces—indeed, *the* major forces—in national politics during the new democratic era. Belying the conventional wisdom that ruling parties hold onto power tenaciously to avoid obsolescence under democracy,¹¹ Korea and Taiwan show how authoritarian parties that initiate democratization can thrive under it. Not only did the KMT and DJP and its successors easily win initial democratic elections in the 1980s and 1990s. They came back to power in the 2000s after triumphant opposition parties failed to govern as effectively as their authoritarian predecessors.

This points to the second key source of continuing stability under strong-state democratization. After decades of state-sponsored industrialization and poverty reduction, the Taiwanese and Korean authoritarian regimes each had incubated a vibrant middle class with moderate and even conservative political leanings. Especially in Taiwan, democratization was more a matter of widening political inclusion than of imposing radical redistribution. When democratization seemingly fostered rising labor unrest and steeply increased wages in Korea, middle-class voters became more conservative, abandoning their support for “reforms and democratization . . . in the face of real or perceived threats to economic and political stability.”¹² This has been as true in the 2000s as it was in the 1990s, as the Grand National Party (a successor to the DJP) roared back into control of the presidency and parliament in 2008 after the rocky term of President Roh Moo Hyun (2003–2008) of the Uri Party. This parallels developments in Taiwan, where the relative populism of Democratic Progressive Party rule in 2000–2008 was countered by a decisive electoral return to conservative KMT control.

The recurrent alternations of power and bouts of scandal that have characterized Korean and Taiwanese democracy might seem to support the notion that democracy equals destabilization. Yet beneath the frothy waves of scandal and partisan rancor, Korea and Taiwan possess a deeper source for enduring political stability—an inherited strong state. Herein lies the third reason for continuity after strong-state democratization. The iron cages of authoritarian Leviathans have been redeployed for democratic purposes in Korea and Taiwan, but they have by no means been dismantled. Qingshan Tan's observation about democratic Taiwan has also proven true of democratic Korea: “The bureaucratic state has not withered away.”¹³

One can identify a shift in both Korea and Taiwan from developmental states to welfare states,¹⁴ but not from strong states to weak ones. Like their richer Western counterparts, these Asian democracies confront the chronic challenge of controlling public spending and debt, but not radical challengers to a conservative model of capitalist development. With relatively strong fiscal institutions in place, Korea and Taiwan have

been better equipped to manage pressures to expand the welfare state than countries in Latin America or Southern Europe. Since Malaysia and Singapore enjoy institutional strengths similar to those of authoritarian-era Korea and Taiwan, democratization in Southeast Asia's strongest states would be accompanied by the same sort of party-system continuity, electoral conservatism, and persistent state capacity that we have seen after democratization in Northeast Asia's strongest states.

Strengthening Oppositions, Slackening Regimes?

For strong-state democratization to occur, authoritarian incumbents must be willing to restrain their use of coercion. Such coercive restraint may well depend, in turn, on the capacity of opposition forces to muster a sufficient challenge to press leaders to reconsider their patterns of rule. Yet Malaysia and Singapore have long had exceptionally weak and divided oppositions alongside their exceptionally strong states. This means that both countries have not only been safe *for* democratization; they have been safe *from* it.

Recent years have seen opposition parties become somewhat stronger and more unified in both Malaysia and Singapore. Yet UMNO and the PAP still hold power advantages over their respective rivals that are wide enough to let them forestall democratization for the foreseeable future should they so wish. Only if Malaysian and Singaporean leaders eschew the kind of coercive tactics that have served them so well for so long can the playing field become level and strong-state democratization get truly underway.

Predicting whether and when UMNO and the PAP might countenance an opposition victory is more a task for a soothsayer than for a social scientist. What is much clearer is that state-led development has helped to spawn moderate oppositions. This suggests that, as in Taiwan and Korea, regime-initiated processes of liberalization in Malaysia and Singapore would not prove destabilizing, even if freer and fairer elections were to deliver power into the hands of leading oppositionists.

What is much less clear, however, is whether opposition parties in Malaysia and Singapore are either well-positioned or well-prepared to assume the mantle of power. This could convince UMNO and PAP leaders that liberalization is unnecessary. Yet it should also deepen their confidence that democratization would not necessarily bring their own electoral defeat anytime in the near future.

Political opposition has made greater headway in recent decades in Malaysia than in Singapore. During the first 25 years of BN rule, Malaysia's ruling coalition rhythmically romped to a landslide win every five years, never relinquishing the two-thirds majority it had lost momentarily in 1969. A dramatic 1987 split within UMNO seemed briefly to threaten BN dominance, but the rift made little difference at the voting booth. From the

early 1970s to the mid-1990s, the BN faced fragmented opposition from two parties that had little more in common with each other than with the BN: the mildly Islamist, mostly rural Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and the mildly leftist, mostly Chinese Democratic Action Party (DAP). As

The multiethnic character of the opposition's leading party means that a BN electoral defeat has gone from pipedream to real possibility.

ethnicized parties in a multiethnic polity, they could occasionally win a state or two in national elections. But they could never come close to threatening the multiethnic BN's stranglehold on national power.

Malaysian politics would undergo its first dramatic turn of the BN era in 1998, when the Asian financial crisis sparked a serious political crisis. Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad responded

to the economic crash (and the specter of Suharto's overthrow in neighboring Indonesia) by sacking and imprisoning his popular but untrusted deputy, Anwar Ibrahim. Anwar's dismissal and subsequent beating while in police custody sparked *reformasi*, the largest protest movement in Malaysia's postindependence history, demanding legal justice for Anwar and democratic reforms more generally. Whereas previous prime ministers had tended to mix repression and responsiveness in their reactions to popular protest,¹⁵ Mahathir showed little compunction about using coercion alone, ordering the crushing of *reformasi* by force in late 1998 and early 1999.

Mahathir's heavy-handed treatment of Anwar, the *reformasi* movement, and the People's Justice Party (PKR) that emerged under the imprisoned Anwar's banner had mixed consequences. On the one hand, widespread resentment toward Mahathir generated a significant protest vote among Malays in the 1999 elections. UMNO's parliamentary-seat advantage over PAS shrank from 89-7 to 72-27. On the other hand, the BN's support among non-Malays remained practically unshaken, and Mahathir's jailing of Anwar along with five other leading PKR figures prevented this potentially potent multiethnic upstart from making electoral inroads. As long as the main opposition parties were ethnic in character, the BN could not be seriously threatened at the polls. After Mahathir resigned in 2003 and handed power to his less aggressively authoritarian deputy, Abdullah Badawi, the Malay protest vote disappeared, and UMNO and the BN inflicted their biggest-ever rout on the Malaysian opposition in the 2004 elections. Malaysia's UMNO and BN seemed to have returned to their golden era of hegemony.

Singapore's PAP marched from the 1960s through the 2000s with even fewer political bumps and bruises. The PAP won a monopoly of parliamentary seats in the 1968 national elections, thanks to the Socialist Front's understandable but self-defeating decision to boycott the authoritarian election process. The PAP then proceeded to win ev-

ery single parliamentary seat in the elections of 1972, 1976, and 1980. When the PAP finally lost a single parliamentary seat in a 1981 by-election, it was seen by some as “a demonstration that from then on not only was opposition possible but that it would not inevitably break the nation’s will and ability to survive; a threat commonly touted by the PAP.”¹⁶ This gave the opposition little momentum, however. Ongoing legal and political intimidation of oppositionists (and the districts that looked primed to back them) ensured that the PAP would not even face an opponent in more than half of Singapore’s districts until 2006. The opposition finally fielded enough candidates that year to force the PAP to wait until election day to declare victory, yet captured only two seats.

Only in the most recent Malaysian and Singaporean elections has the tide seemed to turn. Malaysia in 2008 provided the biggest shock. With Anwar Ibrahim released from prison, his fledgling People’s Alliance (PR) coalition (uneasily grouping the PKR, PAS, and DAP) denied the BN a two-thirds majority for the first time since 1969 and prevailed outright in an unprecedented five of thirteen states. Equally important, Anwar’s multiethnic PKR resurrected itself to become the largest party in the opposition coalition, winning 31 parliamentary seats to outstrip the DAP’s 28 and PAS’s 23.

The multiethnic character of the opposition’s leading party means that a BN electoral defeat has gone from pipe dream to real possibility. This has had a moderating effect on both the DAP and PAS, which standing alone could never become more than fringe parties but can hope to share national power on the coattails of the multiethnic PKR. To be sure, the PR opposition coalition has struggled mightily to maintain its shaky footing and cohesion since its 2008 successes, and remains perilously dependent on Anwar’s personal leadership. Such is the typical fate of parties and coalitions fighting to break out of the “wilder-ness” of opposition in dominant-party settings. Be that as it may, recent opposition gains represent a sea change in Malaysian politics, if not necessarily an irreversible one.

An imminent electoral defeat of the PAP remains a pipe dream, but a bit less so after the 2011 elections. Though the opposition won only six parliamentary seats (one of them a first-ever PAP defeat in an especially hard-to-win Group Representation Constituency), the 2011 campaign in Singapore bore interesting resemblances to Malaysia’s coercion-light election under Badawi in 2008. First, the vibrancy of new media beyond the government’s chokehold helped opposition parties to gain more voter attention and generate larger campaign rallies. Second, opposition parties made headway in coordinating their candidacies across constituencies, avoiding debilitating three-cornered races. Finally, the themes of the 2011 campaign in Singapore (like the 2008 campaign in Malaysia) centered on bread-and-butter issues of government accountability and performance, and voters increasingly gravitated toward the notion that

checks and balances would be conducive to better governance. Guided by its cleverly unobjectionable slogan (“Towards a First World Parliament”), the Singaporean opposition ironically presented itself as extreme in only one respect—its pronounced moderation.

There is no easy way to predict whether Malaysian and Singaporean leaders will allow these increasingly robust and organized oppositions to flourish. Yet there are several useful ways to analyze the issue. One can start by gauging how repressive or responsive rulers have been in dealing with opposition thus far. On this score, there are ironically greater grounds for optimism in the more closed case (Singapore) than in the case where opposition has had more historical success (Malaysia). In Malaysia, the reduction of repression witnessed under Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi (2003–2009) has been reversed under his successor, Najib Razak, who appears more inclined to follow Mahathir’s than Badawi’s playbook for handling opposition. This is best indicated by the renewed judicial harassment of Anwar (whose acquittal on a new round of sodomy charges is currently under government appeal) and the crackdown on the peaceful “Bersih 2.0” protests for cleaner elections in July 2011. Perhaps because the opposition challenge remains so much weaker in Singapore, and because the Singaporean state’s battery of everyday authoritarian controls remains so much harder to crack, PAP leaders seem to be responding to oppositional gains with relative equanimity. Whether this will remain the case is an open question.

Yet it is not an entirely unanswerable one. Beneath the ebb and flow of particular leaders and their proclivities for repression, both Malaysia and Singapore have undergone a much deeper historic shift. In short, there is strong reason to believe that these countries’ eras of “protection pacts” might finally be a thing of the past. The radical left has long ceased to be a meaningful factor, and there is no longer reason to suppose that freer democratic competition would produce either a minority-group takeover or a radicalization of communal politics. Since the strongest justification of authoritarianism in Malaysia and Singapore has always been as a necessary bulwark against destabilization, the moderate and multiethnic character of the emergent opposition in both countries gives grounds for hope that repression will not be seen as necessary to prevent a return to the Hobbesian days before authoritarian rule. The paradox is that these more moderate and credible oppositions pose a bigger electoral threat to the BN and PAP, perhaps convincing party leaders that repression will be necessary to protect their own political power, if not to preserve social order.

Loosening Authoritarianism, Not Losing Leviathan

An important debate has recently emerged in academic and policy circles over how best to “sequence” democratization and state-building.

One perspective holds that strong states must be built before democratization can proceed smoothly. The top priority in the world's many weak states is thus to strengthen the state, not to install or deepen democracy. Other analysts see no reason to delay democratization until state-building has been accomplished, arguing that the two can go hand-in-hand.¹⁷ Since building a state is harder than changing a regime, waiting for the former to be accomplished before pursuing the latter is as fruitless as waiting for Godot.

For Malaysia and Singapore, more than any other authoritarian regimes on earth, this "sequencing debate" is utterly irrelevant. Even the most democracy-shy observers would be hard-pressed to make the case that Malaysia and Singapore need more state-building before becoming safe for greater democratic competition. To be sure, overall government performance has been far more deeply compromised in Malaysia than in Singapore in recent years, especially since Mahathir's personalization of power in the 1980s and 1990s worsened official corruption and partisan abuses of authority. Yet one must not confuse any particular regime's *performance* with the underlying character of state *power*. Corruption and personalization indicate the abuse and exploitation of the state by political leaders, not a state incapable of doing its job if politically supported in doing so. Like its Singaporean counterpart, the Malaysian Leviathan remains sturdy enough to withstand the disruptions of regime change.

With no credible Hobbesian case to be made for continuing authoritarianism, backers of the current regimes' repressive practices must resort to a more particularistic defense: Democracy is not the regime type that Malaysians and Singaporeans prefer. Such arguments typically rest on culturally relativist, even essentialist notions of political attitudes in East Asia. Yet one need not tar the entire region with the same essentialist brush to conjure a credible argument that, in Malaysia and Singapore specifically, leveling the playing field between regime and opposition might actually make government less representative of popular desires in several critical ways.

According to one line of thinking, Western liberal democracy is simply ill-fitted to conservative societies such as Malaysia and Singapore. This argument falters because democracy does not necessarily entail less conservative policy outcomes—as the policies of many U.S. states amply attest. Democratization is simply a loosening of authoritarian restrictions so that the political opposition can compete on a nearly level playing field without fear of targeted repression or restrictions. This entails broader freedom to organize and express alternative views in public spaces, but it does not require the full battery of human-rights protections that international critics of these regimes understandably prioritize. For instance, Malaysia and Singapore can democratize while preserving their extensive use of the death penalty and nonrecognition

of same-sex relationships. Continued illiberal policies on such issues would keep both countries politically conservative, but not make them less procedurally democratic.

A second concern centers on the issue of communal difference, particularly in the realm of religion. One of the most enduring tensions within democracy is that it requires both majority rule and minority protections. To the extent that minorities cannot expect protection from majorities after elections are held, the procedures of democracy threaten to yield the substance of ethnocracy. A democracy that cannot preserve the peace is not a democracy that most people (Asian or otherwise) would consider worth having. More than forty years after Malaysia and Singapore underwent their respective authoritarian turns, however, there is no reason to believe that democratization would produce physical insecurity of any sort in either country. The frequent PAP refrain that authoritarianism is necessary in Singapore due to external threats appears laughable in comparative perspective: Taiwan and South Korea face immeasurably greater and more immediate geopolitical foes, yet each was able to democratize without compromising national security. As for internal threats, no party seeking to overturn longstanding ethnic bargains represents a credible threat to capture power in either Malaysia or Singapore.

A third and final possibility may be that voters broadly perceive authoritarianism to be better than democracy at producing prudent economic policies. But economic policies are made by governing parties and implemented by the state apparatus, not by the regime type. Voters who believe that the BN or PAP can best handle the economy could continue to vote for them after democratization. If the experiences of South Korea and Taiwan are anything to go by, most Malaysian and Singaporean voters would come to precisely this conclusion and stick with the BN and PAP in droves. To the extent that rising popular discontent currently focuses on these parties' repressive practices, loosening those controls would not only be good for democracy. It would be good for the BN and the PAP themselves.

NOTES

1. Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi, "Modernization: Theories and Facts," *World Politics* 49 (January 1997): 155–83. Malaysia's and Singapore's total GDP are virtually even, but Singapore's per capita GDP is approximately five times larger.

2. Lest one take the categories of "Malay" and "Chinese" or the divisions between them as eternal or inevitable, see Anthony Reid, *Imperial Alchemy: Nationalism and Political Identity in Southeast Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), chs. 3–4, for a masterful historical account.

3. On "competitive authoritarianism," see Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge

University Press, 2010). On “electoral authoritarianism,” which more clearly encompasses both Malaysia and Singapore, see Andreas Schedler, ed., *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2006). For an argument that Singapore has recently transitioned from “closed” to “competitive” authoritarianism by Levitsky and Way’s definition, see Stephan Ortman, “Singapore: Authoritarian but Newly Competitive,” *Journal of Democracy* 22 (October 2011): 153–64.

4. On the state-regime distinction in authoritarian settings and the role of state power in sustaining durable authoritarianism, see Dan Slater and Sofia Fenner, “State Power and Staying Power: Infrastructural Mechanisms and Authoritarian Durability,” *Journal of International Affairs* 65 (Fall–Winter 2011): 15–29.

5. The following historical analysis draws upon Dan Slater, *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chs. 4 and 8.

6. Malaya was not renamed Malaysia until 1963.

7. Cho-Oon Khong, “Singapore: Political Legitimacy Through Managing Conformity,” in Muthiah Alagappa, ed., *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia: The Quest for Moral Authority* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 115.

8. Slater, *Ordering Power*, 5.

9. Robert O. Tilman, “The Centralization Theme in Malaysian Federal-State Relations, 1957–75,” Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (Singapore), Occasional Paper No. 39, May 1976, 63.

10. Mukul G. Asher, “Issues in Forced Savings and National Economic Development: The Management of National Provident Fund Systems,” in Al’ Alim Ibrahim, ed., *Generating a National Savings Movement* (Kuala Lumpur: Institute for Strategic and International Studies, 1994), 238.

11. Barbara Geddes, “What Do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years?” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999): 115–44.

12. John Kie-Chiang Oh, *Korean Politics: The Quest for Democratization and Economic Development* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 114, 115. I am very grateful to Sofia Fenner for her insights on voter conservatism in the wake of strong-state democratization.

13. Qingshan Tan, “Democratization and Bureaucratic Restructuring in Taiwan,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 35 (June 2000): 48–64.

14. Stephan Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman, *Development, Democracy, and Welfare States: Latin America, East Asia, and Eastern Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); and Joseph Wong, “Democracy’s Double Edge: Financing Social Policy in Industrial East Asia,” in Yin-wah Chu and Siu-lun Wong, eds., *East Asia’s New Democracies: Deepening, Reversal, Non-Liberal Alternatives* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

15. On Malaysia’s “repressive-responsive regime,” see Harold Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

16. Beng-Huat Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 174.

17. For the more optimistic argument, see Thomas Carothers, “How Democracies Emerge: The ‘Sequencing’ Fallacy,” *Journal of Democracy* 18 (January 2007): 12–27. On the more pessimistic side, see Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, “The Sequencing ‘Fallacy,’” *Journal of Democracy* 18 (July 2007): 5–9.