

An “Asian Democracy” or a Quality Democracy?:
The Divergence Between the Governments of Singapore and Malaysia and Meaningful
Democracy

Sam Brooks

A continuum of the quality of democracies is most comparatively valuable when defined by a broad distribution of political power; democracy is of greater quality when the distribution of power is greater. Conversely, a government proves to be of a lesser quality of democracy when the distribution of power is more concentrated in the hands of a few. Many Southeast Asian

countries refer to democracy in the region as “Asian democracy”, or democracy without much civil society or political opposition, and with elements of “democratic authoritarianism” (L 9/7/16). Both Malaysia and Singapore possess political narratives that harness these principles. However, is an “Asian democracy” a quality democracy?

Singapore and Malaysia are examples of very differently constructed “Asian democracies”, but their models overlap. Each possesses democratic and authoritarian elements by virtue of being declared democracies with essentially single-party leadership. Since equality, free and fair elections, and political freedom are vital elements in a broad distribution of power, as well as democratic legitimacy, both Singapore and Malaysia have “failed” at democracy in some significant ways. **Singapore and Malaysia represent lower-quality democracies because what is relatively meaningful about democracy - political freedom and broadly distributed political power - is fundamentally lacking within them; however, both states show signs of becoming more democratic over time.**

Malaysia has lived the political doctrine of “Mahathirism” instituted by its longest serving and most formative Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamed (L 9/7/16). This political doctrine encompasses policies of race-based politics, economic policy which supports ethnic Malay advancement, and a high prioritization of state security (L 9/7/16). These goals are officially furthered by the dominant Malaysian political party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). While the ethnically-exclusive UMNO created a political coalition, the Barisan Nasional (BN), with other, minor parties, it is understood that the BN represents UMNO’s interests alone. Dr. Darren Zook of U.C. Berkeley explains that “from its inception, [UMNO]

was designed to protect and promote ethnic Malay interests in Malaysian politics and to ensure the effective and continued dominance of ethnic Malay culture” (1145). The policy is referred to as “Malaysia for Malays” (L 9/7/16).

Conversely, Singapore’s People’s Action Party (PAP), which has even less opposition than UMNO in Malaysia, decided to foster a unified Singaporean identity, independent of ethnicity (L 9/21/16). In their article “Singapore: Does authoritarianism pay?”, political scientists Marco Verweij and Riccardo Pelizzo explain how Singapore’s successes are personified by Lee Kuan Yew of the PAP, Singapore’s architect and Prime Minister from 1965 to 1990 who is known by some as “the benevolent dictator” (19)(L 9/21/16). Since 1965, when Singapore gained its independence, it has been governed by the PAP (Verweij 19).

Both Malaysia and Singapore have failed as democracies in some key social and political aspects, and these failures explain growing opposition to them. Singapore is hailed internationally as an example of unprecedented economic success. However, from 1997 to 2006, the country has slipped from the eighth to the thirty-first position in the World Bank’s GDP per capita rankings (Verweij 20). Furthermore, while GDP is high, so is economic inequality, and citizens are required to work extremely long hours for comparatively low wages (Verweij 23). Verweij and Pelizzo explain, “[A] sizeable income gap may in part explain why, in such a seemingly affluent country, more citizens have not insisted on the expansion of political freedoms” (Verweij 22). Additionally, the government’s economic successes have depended on a preference for multi-national corporations as part of its self-realization as a service economy (Barr 10)(L 9/21/16). For example, its top ranking for seven consecutive years for “ease of doing

business” is a source of pride for the PAP (Barr 10). Adversely, this model progresses at the expense of domestic enterprise, and it is becoming apparent that it may prove unsustainable (Verweij 26). Other issues with infrastructure and political balance have begun to have real impact on the PAP-led government’s image: frequent subway breakdowns causing enormous inconveniences to citizens, a lost political prisoner, and a housing bubble, have caused the Singaporean public to question its single-party leadership (Barr 12).

Not only may race-based politics in Malaysia and economic and infrastructure mistakes in Singapore be concerning in terms of PAP and UMNO leadership, but both parties exercise political and electoral coercion. Thomas B. Pepinsky of Cornell explains that in Malaysia “Elections are normally not blatantly fraudulent, although irregularities are not uncommon. Rather, the BN’s advantages in funding and media access make electoral contestation so imbalanced as to prevent elections from approximating fair referenda among candidates” (92). In Singapore, Verweij and Pelizzo assert that “Those who run or vote for parties other than the PAP are discouraged, disadvantaged, and punished in a variety of ways” (19). For example, an astronomical demand for housing exists on the island. Therefore, 80% of residents live in government-subsidized homes. However, these homes are only available to those who support the PAP (L 9/21/16).

Censorship is also an important tool in PAP and UMNO political domination. For example, the Singaporean Constitution guarantees freedom of speech. However, the “Sacrosanct principles that govern public discourse include respecting the judiciary, and maintaining racial and religious harmony” explains Carol Soon in the *Journal of Southeast Asian Affairs* (322).

Therefore, the PAP monitors media content and censors what is deemed politically unsafe (322). Singaporean censorship regulation is coupled with defamation lawsuits, but it is also social; public shaming derived from a doctrine of social discipline and loyalty to the Party assist in controlling opinions (L 9/21/16). In Malaysia, censorship can be more brutish, such as the Internal Security Act (ISA) passed by Mahathir which enables the governments to hold political dissidents without charge (virtually) indefinitely (L 9/7/16).

What a race-based, single-party system produces in Malaysia is a vast political inequality and the undermining of democratic representation. Similarly, in both countries, when a single political party become synonymous with the government itself, core social systems become tools of the party's advancement, such as housing in Singapore, or racial and religious distinctions in Malaysia. This undermines the fundamental significance of democratic governance.

Despite a slow progression toward actual, or high-quality democracy, Malaysia and Singapore have both been socially successful in some aspects as well. In Malaysia, divisive, race-driven political doctrines have morphed into the new "1Malaysia" UMNO slogan; in face of increasing oppositional pressures, the party has backtracked and begun advocating for multi-ethnic unity (L 9/19/16). Also, the process of so called "De-Mahathir-ization" began with the anti-semitic last words of Mahathir when he stepped down from office in 2003; Mahathir's core policies slowly begun to be unbuilt (L 9/7/16).

Singapore surprised the world when it rose from a fledgling economy to a highly developed one so rapidly (L 9/21/16). Verweij and Pelizzo explain, "Robert Kaplan is one among many who are convinced that, 'Lee Kuan Yew... wrought an economic miracle in Singapore'" (Verweij 19).

Singapore's economic development has been responsible for "a sharp increase in literacy and life-expectancy rates and the eradication of hunger and extreme poverty" (Verweij 20).

Furthermore, racial and religious divides in the country are few and the country is known to be far less corrupt than Malaysia (Verweij 19).

In Singapore, Verweij and Pelizzo explain that "A freer society is likely to be more effective than more economic tinkering by the government in ensuring the country's future prosperity" (Verweij 30). This can be hoped for in the breaking-down of Singapore exceptionalism, a process caused by the aforementioned failures of the PAP, among others (Barr). "The deterioration of the myth of Singapore exceptionalism... marks a fundamental paradigmatic shift that has ended the Lee Kuan Yew era and ushered in something that is still of indeterminate shape, but will be fundamentally different" says Barr (8).

Pepinsky declared that "... political liberalization will come from a collapse of Malaysia's deeper cleavage structure, something which has yet to occur" (98). Conversely, it is my opinion that this process *has* begun. Oppositional elements such as Mahathir's support of Anwar Ibrahim and condemnation of the ISA (which he himself enacted), protests by ethnic Indian communities, and the results of the 2008 and 2013 elections suggest that this "deeper cleavage structure" is beginning to collapse (L 9/19/16). Malaysia will continue to develop democratically within "... a confluence of crises and challenges relating to the realignment of religious, social, and economic forces that inform [its] politics." (Zook 1144).

Malaysia and Singapore have failed differently and succeeded differently. Both countries are destined for greater political diversity and freedoms; in other words, for a better quality of democracy.

Sam Brooks is a senior at the University of California, Berkeley. They intend to graduate with a major in political science concentrating in political theory, and they will go on to pursue a doctorate in political theory. Sam hopes to apply critical theories of politics, race, queerness, and gender to social institutions in order to combat oppression and enable folks to thrive. Sam was recently appointed the Operations Director Fellow at the Young Women's Freedom Center of San Francisco, a leadership organization which facilitates formerly-incarcerated young women of color changing juvenile incarceration policy. Sam is the founder and former president of the community group, Sober Long Beach, and currently volunteers in drug and alcohol recovery in the Bay Area.

Works Cited

Barr, Michael D. "Ordinary Singapore: The Decline of Singapore Exceptionalism." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 46.1 (2016): 1-17. Print.

Pepinsky, Thomas B. "The New Media and Malaysian Politics in Historical Perspective." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 35.1 (2013): 83-101. Print.

Soon, Carol. "Managing Cyberspace: State Regulation versus Self Regulation." *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2015): 321-34. Print.

Verweij, Marco, and Riccardo Pelizzo. "Singapore: Does Authoritarianism Pay?" *Journal of Democracy* 20.2 (2009): 18-32. Print.

Zook, Darren C. "The Current State of Malaysia: Elections, New Media, and New Ideas." PS149, Politics of Southeast Asia. University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley. 19 Sept. 2016.

Zook, Darren C. "Making Space for Islam: Religion, Science, and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia." *Journal of Asian Studies* 69.4 (2010): 1143-1166. Print.

Zook, Darren C. "Singapore's Idiosyncratic Democracy." PS149, Politics of Southeast Asia. University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley. 21 Sept. 2016.

Zook, Darren C. "Unification through Division: Malaysia's Peculiar Formation." PS149, Politics of Southeast Asia. University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley. 7 Sept. 2016.