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Why Regimes in Malaysia and Singapore are so Resilient

Regime Resilience in Malaysia and Singapore, edited by Greg Lopez and Bridget Welsh (Selangor: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre / Singapore: World Scientific, 2023), 328 pages, US$108.

The history of modern Malaysia and Singapore can be traced back to August 1957 when diplomatic negotiations with the British concluded with a deal between the Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities for Malaya to be declared an independent nation. Six years later, in September 1963, North Borneo (later renamed as Sabah), Sarawak, and Singapore merged with Malaya to form the Federation of Malaysia. In August 1965, Singapore was expelled from the Malaysian Federation and became a separate country. Since then, relations between Malaysia and Singapore have been marred by disagreements and tensions arising from geographical, political, economic, and other reasons. Some of these contentious issues remain unresolved, proving to be irritants in the relationship between the two countries.

Rusdi Omar, Professor and Dean of the Ghazali Shafie Graduate School, Universiti Utara Malaysia, identified the contentious issues in his

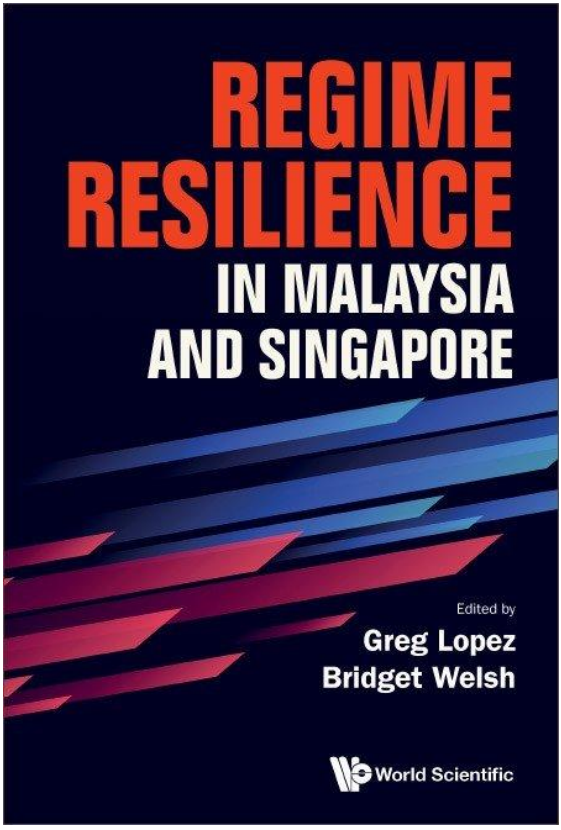
PhD thesis, published in 2014.[1] He listed issues such as the price of water, the overlapping claims of sovereignty of Pulau Batu Putih (Pedra Branca), the development of Malayan railway (KTM) land in Singapore, the Custom, Immigration and Quarantine (CIQ) issue, Central Provident Fund withdrawal by Peninsular Malaysians, Singapore's land reclamation project, the use of Malaysian Airspace by Republic of Singapore Air Force aircraft, and "the bridge to Replace Causeway [sic]." Rusdi Omar further explains, "Beside these key bilateral issues, there are also an extension of military balance aspects and the economic competitions between the two countries that need to be resolved as well."

While the issue regarding Singapore's land reclamation project has since been resolved, the others remain unresolved. Sebastian Strangio, writing about Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's visit to Singapore in *The Diplomat* in January 2023, said that the main contentious issues that still remain unresolved include "the resolution of a long-running and sensitive dispute over the price that Singapore pays to draw water from Malaysia's Johor River, and the outstanding dispute over Pedra Branca," a maritime feature 7.7 nautical miles from Johor and about 25 nautical miles from the east of Singapore.[2] Moreover, he writes, "There are also more mundane but similarly charged issues like Malaysia's export of chicken to Singapore, which Kuala Lumpur

[1] Rusdi Omar, Malaysia-Singapore Relations, PhD Thesis, Research Gate, July 2014. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290810822_Malaysia_Singapore_Relations

[2] Sebastian Strangio, "Malaysian PM Anwar Ibrahim Makes State Visit to Singapore," *The Diplomat,* January 2023. https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/malaysias-pm-anwar-ibrahim-makes-state-visit-to-singapore/

restricted last year [2022] in a bid to shore up domestic supplies and reduce the surging price of chicken."



The drinking water problem is illustrative of the fragile relationship. Singapore is dependent on Malaysia to meet its water requirements. The 1962 Water Agreement, which expires in 2061, entitles Singapore to draw up to 250 million gallons a day (mgd) of water from the Johor River for which Singapore pays 3 sen (1/100th of a Malaysian Ringgit) per thousand gallons of raw water, and then sells treated water back to Johor at 50 sen per thousand gallons of water.[3]

[3] Jumrah Wahab, "The 1962 Johor Water Agreement: Lessons Learned," *The Diplomat*, September 2021. https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/the-1962-johor-singapore-water-agreement-lessons-learned/

Malaysia has been demanding a change in the pricing of the raw water, first agreeing to 45 sen per thousand gallons in 2000 and later hiking the demand to 60 sen in 2001. Despite many rounds of negotiations, the matter remains unresolved. Singapore, meanwhile, is working on a plan to become completely self-reliant by 2061 by setting up water treatment plants to produce reclaimed water and also building desalination plants for drinking water.

Geographical proximity, cultural connections, bilateral trade and tourist flows would point to a vibrant relationship that both Singapore and Malaysia will benefit from in the coming years. The return of Anwar Ibrahim as prime minister in November 2022 raised expectations of enhanced cooperation and a further boost to ties. Although there are thorny issues like Johor that remain unresolved, the relationship between the two neighbors has remained stable and resilient, especially from the mid-1980s in spite of changes in government on both sides. The editors of the book under review, *Regime Resilience in Malaysia and Singapore*, state their overarching approach in these words, "The issue of regime resilience has gained salience in political science over recent decades," and that "as democratisation has slowed, scholars have moved to understand how hybrid regimes (those combining democratic and authoritarian features) have persisted rather than democratised. More broadly, scholars have challenged the view that countries across the world are moving towards democracy (p. 6).

The book under review looks at regime resilience, its social and economic impact, and possible solutions to mitigate the adverse effects through seventeen essays by eighteen academics, and is edited by Greg Lopez, Lecturer, Murdoch Business School, Murdoch University in Perth, and Bridget Welsh, Honorary Research Associate, Asia Research Institute, University of Nottingham Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur. Besides

their individual essays, the editors have jointly written an introductory essay and ended the volume with a conclusion.

The first of the seventeen essays, "Change without 'Change': Malaysia after GE 2013" authored by Bridget Welsh, looks at how Najib Tun Razak, elected prime minister in March 2009, held onto power after a weak mandate in the general election held in May 2013 until his coalition was voted out in the 2018 general election. This, in spite of reports that nearly US$700 million from the government-owned 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) was deposited into the prime minister's personal bank account. In fact, the Barisan Nasional coalition, of which his United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) was a constituent, had enjoyed an uninterrupted reign from 1957 when Malaysia gained independence, right up to 2018, making it the world's longest serving political coalition.

The deficiencies in governance and equitable economic development of a multi-ethnic nation did not apparently impact regime continuity. Welsh outlines "ten fundamental political shifts that are taking place in Malaysia in political parties, the political economy and in society." She explains how the 2013 general election showed UMNO's popular vote share stagnating at 29.3 percent, while along with Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) they held 77 percent of parliamentary seats. The subsequent fall in premier Najib's popularity and resultant insecurity prompted the ruling party to use Malay identity (read racial politics) to galvanize public support.

The essay goes on discuss nine other political developments—rise of East Malaysia in terms of political power, shifts in multi-ethnic representation, an unfocused, divided opposition, weakened political institutions, populist reform, new and old political economy alliances, shift from formal to informal politics, shift from loyalty to exit, and the

divided silent nationalists. The author concludes: "Over the last decade Malaysia has experienced considerable attention to its problems, but few credible options for its solutions. Whether Malaysia's leaders move towards better governance and representation will be the key test ahead" (p. 44).

The second essay, "Change and Elections: 1969 and 2013 Similarities" is by John Funston, Visiting Fellow, College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University, who eye-witnessed the 1969 general election in Malaysia. He compares the 1969 and 2013 elections, and comes to some interesting conclusions. "Similar government and opposition parties battled each other. The geographical distribution of support for the two sides was much the same. And in both elections the ruling party lost the popular vote, and failed to gain a two-thirds majority" (p. 47). He goes on to demonstrate that despite the popular discontent, the ruling BN alliance won 133 of the 222 parliamentary seats (60 percent) in the 2013 General Election, while their popular vote share dropped to 47.4 percent from 50.9 percent in 2008, in a first past the post system. This achievement was made possible by aligning with extremist groups, making extensive use of media and government machinery for handouts. "Despite the 'success' of UMNO in GE 2013, Funston's detailed investigation shows that popular support for the long-standing ruling regime fell. The findings of this historical comparison have important implications for understanding how resilient UMNO is (or isn't)" (p. 12).

The next essay, "After 2013: What Happened and Now What?" by Clive Kessler, Emeritus Professor of Sociology and Anthropology, University of New South Wales, looks at the undercurrents and ruthless realpolitik that enabled UMNO to emerge stronger after GE 2013 even though their Barisan Nasional coalition as a whole was in a weakened

position. The central theme of the UMNO campaign that produced these results was 'Malays in danger, Islam under threat,' which was driven by a ruthless pursuit of election victory. "The UMNO campaign cultivated and then appealed to a Malay sense of political and cultural peril, even crisis. It was a campaign of managed panic: that the Malays were now beleaguered in their own land, the tanah Melayu" (p. 66). The author details the side-effects of the UMNO strategy, in terms of the leaders of the Chinese partner parties, Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Gerakan losing credibility and popular support, which in turn was alluded to in the official response as the Chinese rebelling against Malay rule. The reality of course was that the loss of support was more widespread and not limited to the Chinese population.

The fourth essay, "Bersih and Civic Empowerment in Malaysia" by Gaik Cheng Khoo, Associate Professor, Faculty of Arts, University of Nottingham, Malaysia campus, discusses the role of Bersih in engendering a sense of citizenship and inclusion as well as its impact. Bersih (meaning 'clean' in Malay) is a coalition of over eighty NGOs that initially consisted of political opposition party leaders and civil society representatives. It held its first public rally in 2007 following allegations of corruption and discrepancies in the electoral system that favored the ruling Barisan coalition (p. 76). From then on, Bersih, which is actually a coalition for free and fair elections, has organized rallies periodically, the last one being the fifth rally, Bersih 5, in 2016. The author points to the multi-ethnic character of the rallies, and how they have taken up voter education and other activities for civic empowerment. The impact can be seen in the fact that politicians like Mahathir Mohamad made an appearance at Bersih 4.0 on August 30, 2015, positioning himself as a fellow citizen rather than a politician.

The story of Malaysia's principal political party, UMNO, retaining power in spite of deficiencies in governance and public discontent is very similar to what can be observed in next door neighbor and Siamese twin Singapore, where the People's Action Party (PAP) has held onto power ever since independence. This in spite of gaps in expectations between the public and the government, evidenced by the drubbing the PAP received in the 2011 general election to make it the worst ever electoral performance by the party. What is interesting is that the PAP could reverse this trend in the next general election in 2015, but the results of the subsequent general election in 2020 again showed a decline in the PAP's parliamentary seats. Besides benefiting from a wave of sympathy from Lee Kuan Yew's death in March 2015, which benefited the PAP that he founded, the PAP also made positive efforts to align itself with changing public opinion.

The next essay, "Gaps Between the Singapore Government and the Electorate" by Bilveer Singh, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, National University of Singapore, examines this political phenomenon. After the drubbing in the 2011 general election, it was obvious that there was a widening gap with the public arising from unfulfilled expectations. Although Singapore is an extremely successful state on almost all fronts, "the main driver of the gaps between the government and the public stems from the ruling party's approach in undertaking various public policies" (p. 91). But then, Singh argues that the widening gap between the perception-expectation from Singaporeans of their government can be traced to PAP governance, and that its ability to narrow the expectation gap is also governance related. Here he is alluding to the measures undertaken by the government to align itself with the changing public opinion in Singapore. The outcome of these measures, as well as the death of founding Prime Minister Lee

Kuan Yew and the disillusionment with the opposition, helped the PAP register a resounding win in the 2015 general election. This essay "ties PAP's regime resilience to PAP's contemporary policy engagement with the electorate" (p. 13).

We get a different perspective on the same topic in the very next essay, "Policy and Political Reform in Singapore" by Lily Zubaidah Rahim, Honorary Fellow, Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, Washington, DC. The author "details the tight control that PAP continues to exercise over Singapore and Singaporeans, and shortcomings in meeting expectations and engaging in reform," and her essay "points to weaknesses rather than strengths in PAP governance (p. 13). She argues that while social policy initiatives like healthcare subsidies for senior citizens, 36 percent cut in the prime minister's salary, tax rebate for middle-income households were introduced with a view to change public perception before the 2015 general election, neo-liberal policies continued to exacerbate the problems faced by workers and middle-income households, in view of the widening Gini coefficient (which measures income inequality). A Reuters report dated June 7, 2013, quotes Human Rights Watch as saying that "Singapore is undercutting its status as a financial centre by expanding media censorship to the web," and it urged the city-state's government to withdraw the new licensing requirement for online news sites."Reporters Without Borders ranked Singapore 149th out of 179 countries in terms of press freedom, down 14 places from 2012 and below many of its neighbours."[4]

The next two essays look at the media. The first, "PAP's Communication Strategy" by Terence Lee, Associate Professor,

[4] Eveline Daubrata, "Online media Licensing undercuts Singapore's financial status-report," Reuters June 7, 2013. https://www.reuters.com/article/singapore-internet-idUKL3N0EJ0P720130607

Communication at Murdoch University, Australia, looks at the communication strategies unveiled after a record boost in the voters supporting Opposition parties in percentage terms, even though the PAP retained power in the GE 2011. "This essay makes the point that the authoritative premise for government communication in Singapore, with just about every communication inlet and outlet historically controlled by the authorities, has gone past its use-by-date and is in desperate need of an overhaul" (p. 116). Eroding public support reflected the communication deficit in an autocratic top-down style of governance, the changing electorate perceptions, as well as technological and other developments in the media space. Various initiatives were launched to correct the negative perception but the communication deficits still remained despite the improved performance in GE 2015. The improvement could well be attributed to the sympathy garnered after the death of Lee Kuan Yew and the feel good generated by SG50, the year-long celebration of Singapore's Golden Jubilee.

The other essay "New Media, Old Rule in Malaysia" by Ross Tapsell, Lecturer, College of Asia and the Pacific, at the Australian National University in Canberra, showcases the Malaysian paradox that while the empowerment of individuals and further democratization of governance has remained virtually stagnant, there are significant advances in communication, information technology, digitization, and mass-accessible video platforms, as well as mobile phones. This is because the regime in power that was accustomed to exercising a high degree of control over traditional media through the licensing mechanism, finds it difficult to do so with the social media platforms. "Nevertheless, the regime seems determined to find ways to implement a culture of self-censorship within Malaysian society which permeates

the digital realm. . . If it is to survive, the regime will have to adapt to more effectively massaging an increasingly transparent media and political sphere in the digital era" (p. 143). The author contends that "while social media may provide for democratic space in the short-to-medium term, media convergence—the synchronisation of media platforms (such as online, broadcasting, print and video)—into media conglomerates will benefit the incumbent rather than oppositional forces," and that "the control of resources and levers of power have enhanced BN's control over the political narrative" (p. 13).

The ninth essay, "The Curious Incident of the Seditious Dog Training Video" by Amanda Whiting, Associate Professor, Asian Law Centre, University of Melbourne, examines sedition laws in Malaysia. In the words of the author, "This short essay analyses the role of sedition law in maintaining UMNO's grip on power, and briefly discusses the earnest—but so far futile—campaign to soften or remove sedition from the statute books" (p. 148). Whiting illustrates this very effectively by referring to a single incident that received prominent attention in the media. It involved a professional dog trainer, Maznah Mohamad Yusof, who maintained a sanctuary for stray dogs. When Chetz, as she was known to her friends, thought of wishing her friends on the occasion of celebrating the end of the fasting month, she posted a video on the internet featuring her training, walking, and bathing some of her animals. There was an outcry, protesting her insult to Islam, and cases were filed in faraway places under the sedition law claiming that she showed treasonous tendencies. The deputy prime minister also intervened and stated that the person must be non-Muslim while others speculated that she was sexually and religiously deviant, a tomboy, since she wore short hair and short pants. The chapter analyzes the national reaction to demonstrate the use of the sedition law to harass and

subjugate any suspected voice of dissent and to tighten the state's grip on power.

The tenth essay, "Malaysia's Management of Petroleum Resources" by Wee Chong Hui, Chairperson Sarawak Family Planning Association and former Professor, University of MAWA in Sarawak, Malaysia, explains that the Petroleum Development Act (PDA, 1974) vests the ownership and control of petroleum resources in the government-owned company, Petroliam Nasional Berhad or Petronas. As the sector grew, petroleum-related government revenues gained significance. Such revenues were estimated at 31 percent of government revenues in 2013 (p. 162). The company is answerable to the prime minister, and its accounts are neither available to parliament nor made public. This opacity gives scope for manipulating the revenue sharing, subsidies, and release of royalty payments to the advantage of the ruling regime leaving opposition-ruled states and parties in a disadvantaged position.

The next essay, "The Politics of Malaysia's B40" by Steven C.M. Wong, Deputy Chief Executive, Institute of Strategic and International Studies, Malaysia, focuses on the bottom 40 percent (B40) of Malaysian households, and how the two coalitions competed for this key constituency in the 2013 General Election (GE2013). "The difference between the average and median household incomes shows the income distribution is skewed towards the lower income ranges," the author explains. In other words, the average income may be high but the inequitable distribution results in a large number of households falling within the low income ranges. He adds, "Another way to show the stark unevenness is to examine the share of total household income. The B40 accounted for just 14.8 percent of the total, whereas the top 20 (T20) households garnered 48.6 percent. The middle 40 percent (M40) share

was the balance of 36.6 percent" (p. 180). As GE2013 drew closer, it became clear to the government that if the BN regime had to continue in power, policies directly targeting the B40 had to be initiated. Budget 2012, therefore, introduced a cash payment of RM500 (known as Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia or BRIM) together with other measures, targeting individuals earning less than RM3,000 a month. To what extent this helped the incumbent regime to swing the election results in their favor is debatable, but the very introduction of this measure brought the BR40 into sharp focus and raised further questions on the economic policies adopted during the preceding five decades.

The next essay, "Managing the Malaysian Economy after the Watershed GE 2008" by Greg Lopez, Lecturer, Murdoch Business School, Murdoch University, in Australia, and Mohamed Ariff, Distinguished Professor of Finance, Sunway University, Malaysia, traces back the impressive economic performance of Malaysia from the time of independence in 1957, with a growth rate averaging 6 percent that lifted the country from a low-income economy to a upper-middle income economy by the 1990s. It also led to full employment and poverty rates below 2 percent. But since then, several external events contributed to a reversal of the earlier trend. The East Asian Financial Crisis in 1997-98, the dotcom bubble in 2001, and the Great Recession in 2008-09 were the big events. The reduced GDP growth rate, increasing economic disparities, unemployment, problems on account of the newly introduced goods & services tax and other reform measures initiated by Prime Minister Najib Razak resulted in a decline in the support base evidenced by the lower percentages in the vote share of the ruling coalition. "Much was made of Najib's intended institutional reforms and economic transformation that would catapult Malaysia from middle to high-income economy befitting his presidential approach towards

leadership and strategy. However, high expectations only led to huge disappointments as actions did not match words" (p. 200).The authors focus on the economic reforms initiated by Najib, and conclude that "these reforms have not achieved as much as promised or projected" (p. 14). This and the preceding three essays examine various aspects of the economy and its management. Together they establish that "a weakened BN government has had to resort to populist measures to remain popular with the electorate, yet it is not prepared to devolve its highly centralised economic powers to the states or to engage in meaningful reforms that restructure the political economy" (p. 14).

The next essay, "Economic Growth, Democratic Participation and Social Welfare in Singapore" by Lee Soo Ann, senior fellow in Economics, National University of Singapore, like the previous three essays focuses on the economy but that of Singapore. Lee Soo San starts with a brief historical background of Singapore politics. The Singapore Government reformed the electoral system by introducing various measures, one of them being "a controversial electoral innovation introduced in 1988 that created a mix of multi-member and at least eight Single-Member Constituencies (SMCs) out of the original 81 SMCs."[5] In the multi-member constituencies, known as Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs), residents vote for entire teams, each consisting of three to six individual MPs from a single party, at least one of whom must be from a designated minority racial community. Officially, this innovation has been explained as a way of institutionally ensuring adequate racial minority representation in Parliament."[6] But critics have never been

[5] Kenneth Paul Tan, "The People's Action Party and Political Liberalization in Singapore, in *Political Parties, Party Systems and Democratization in East Asia*, ed. Liang Fook Lye and Wilhelm Hofmeister (Singapore: World Scientific, 2011), 115.

[6] Ibid., 115.

convinced and observers say that in practice all these measures work to the advantage of the ruling People's Action Party. In fact, in July 2023 a motion was introduced in the Singapore Parliament by Progress Singapore Party Non-Constituency MPs to abolish the GRC system. The motion was, of course, defeated.

The author, Lee Soon San, discusses the 2011 General Election which was a watershed election. In GE2011, the ruling PAP got only 60 percent of the popular vote, although they returned to power with 82 out of 87 seats because of the first past the post electoral system. This prompted the government to initiate a series of course corrections, mainly in the way the economy was managed. What followed was focused attention to key issues: leadership renewal, type of political system (one-party dominance, or two party) minding the income gap, housing affordability, and immigration. The impact could be seen in the 2016 general election when the PAP returned to power with 70 percent of the vote compared to 60 percent in the 2011 GE. With confidence regained, the government continued with its transformative steps in managing the economy. "The 2016 budget was refreshing in three ways: (1) the targeting of encouragement to local industries, (2) the targeting of social support, and (3) a greatly increased reliance on the income obtained from accumulated reserves" (p. 221). In this essay, Lee Soo San offers a detailed treatment of how the PAP has ensured economic growth and social welfare despite Singapore being a small, open economy. His essay contrasts with the others by highlighting the Singapore government's effective use of resources. He presents economic logic explaining how economic policies such as housing, immigration, wages, and increasing productivity had contributed to the economic prosperity of many Singaporeans. In this way, all four essays "flesh out the

important implications of political economy for regime resilience, with different conclusions" (p. 14).

The next essay, "Representation, Literacy and 'Gladiatorism' in Malaysian Politics" by Amri Baharuddin Shamsul, Professor of Social Anthropology, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, one of Malaysia's leading intellectuals and social anthropologists, raises interesting questions about democracy that go well beyond the analysis of voting patterns and trends that psephologists focus on. While one has to be literate first—be able to read and write—but that by itself cannot ensure meaningful debates and informed choices by voters in a modern democracy. For that, political literacy is what matters. In the words of the author, this essay is "an attempt at an analytical exploration of political literacy in Malaysia that we believe has not received the attention it deserves in the overall study of Malaysian politics" (p. 226). He contends that literacy or even education do not ensure political literacy, unless one is formally educated on political matters. According to him, there are four capacities that will generate and provide solid foundation for political literacy: successful learners who can make reasoned evaluations; confident individuals who can communicate their own beliefs and views of the world; responsible citizens who make informed choices and decisions; and effective contributors who apply critical thinking in new contexts. This makes it obvious that developing political literacy involves conscious, detailed, and systematic citizenship education especially by the government of the day (p. 227). The author goes on to explain that in the absence of political literacy in Malaysia, political cockfighting (gladiatorism) of the kind witnessed since 2009 between Najib and Anwar Ibrahim is the result.

The fifteenth essay, "Coalitions in Malaysia: Comparing Party Networks and Dynamics" by Meredith L. Weiss, Professor of Political

Science, University at Albany, State University of New York, looks at the two coalitions—BN and Pakatan—in the context of the 2013 General Election. "These elections revealed clearly, though, the real fragility of even Malaysia's strongest parties. BN in particular, indomitable though it has been, seemed to rely more heavily in certain constituencies on the image and persona of Prime Minister Najib than on the merits of the party itself. . . The solidification of a two-coalition system comes through clearly, all the same" (p. 237). The author concludes that "the election signals a new phase in Malaysian electoral history in which an alternate coalition presents not just different policies and personalities, but also a new way of conceptualising and engaging in politics" (p. 16).

The next essay, "Dislodging Malaysia's Culture of Domination" by Ratna Rueban Balasubramaniam, Associate Professor, Department of Law and Legal studies, Carleton University, Ottawa, focuses on the ethnocratic authoritarian regime of Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak, whose appeal to Malay-Muslim interests ensured his continued grip on power in spite of being implicated in a financial scandal involving misappropriation of state funds and subsequent curtailment of the citizens' freedom of speech. The author argues that "the culture of domination explains the history of authoritarianism, ethnocracy, and general failure of constitutionalism in Malaysia." He adds that,"Despite the fact that Malaysia has a supreme written constitution that imposes legal limits to state power, officials, including judges, have internalised the assumptions of the culture of domination and have thus worked to ensure that the government is relatively unshackled by constitutional limits" (p. 248). The author emphasizes the spirit of democracy enshrined in the constitution and calls for recognizing the importance of social compromise to move forward from a culture of dominance and to ensure better participation by all sections of society for a better

democracy. The author "explains how views of the law and use of the law had contributed to BN's hold on power, and, by appealing to the Federal Constitution, provides a framework to dislodge the culture of domination in Malaysian politics, suggesting a way to strengthen resistance to the BN" (p. 15).

The last of the essays, "Rule by Law in Malaysia and Singapore" by David Martin Jones, Associate Professor, University of Queensland, Australia, looks at how the repeated electoral successes and sustained hold on power for decades by the UMNO in Malaysia and the PAP in Singapore, as well as the political stability and economic growth recorded by these two neighbors, has resulted in a general neglect of the region by comparative political journals. He goes on to tell us about "the manner in which competitive authoritarian regimes have leveraged democratic processes to skew the political playing field in favour of the incumbent regimes in Singapore and Malaysia" (p. 260). It has turned out to be rule by law instead of rule of law as both the political parties running these two countries have altered the constitution and controlled the judiciary so that power is concentrated in the political parties and, therefore, the prime minister. "Lee Kuan Yew, probably the most impressive competitive authoritarian leader, clearly had little time for representative democracy or freedom of speech. Both Mahathir and Najib in Malaysia share his contempt" (p. 284). As the media is controlled, it allowed for unbridled exercise of power in the interests of perpetuating the rule of the single party in power. Which is why the author argues that "party states such as Malaysia and Singapore present a challenge to Western models of democratisation," but Jones is pessimistic that turnover will be possible in both Malaysia and Singapore as their ability to use the levers of power have been successful (p. 15).

The editors, Welsh and Lopez, summarize in the "Conclusion: Challenges to Resilience in Malaysia and Singapore" the divergent views expressed by authors from diverse backgrounds on the methods adopted and factors that facilitated the one-party domination for decades in Malaysia and Singapore. The way out that has been suggested for evolving into a more representative democracy, and the prognosis, looking ahead, are also varied. But finally, the editors argue that "this collection helps enrich our understanding of why the regimes are indeed so resilient. It also points to vulnerabilities ahead." They add, "While all indicators ahead point to continued resilience, the broadening scope of contestation suggests that the political parties will have their work cut out to stay in power in future elections" (p. 295).

Subsequent Developments

As the essays in this volume focus on developments until 2018, it may be relevant to update the developments thereafter. After the first regime change of 2018, Malaysia underwent a period of political instability marked by the fall of the PH government in 2020, which led to the installation of a Perikatan Nasional (PN) government.[7] The PN administration, led by Muhyiddin Yassin from March 2020 until August 2021, also fell apart and was replaced by an UMNO-led government under the premiership of Ismail Sabri. There were three different prime ministers in the space of four years. Contrast this with the first six decades after independence when the country was ruled uninterruptedly by the Malayan Alliance, later rebranded as the Barisan Nasional. During

[7] James Chin, "Anwar's Long Walk to Power: The 2022 Malaysian General Elections," Routledge, The Round Table, Vol. 112, no. 1 (2023): 1–13. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/00358533.2023.2165303?needAccess=true

this period UMNO was so dominant in the ruling BN coalition that Malaysians refer to UMNO and BN as a synonym.

Malaysia witnessed an early general election (GE-15) in November 2022, that ended up with no coalition getting the minimum 112 seats to form the government.[8] The king had to intervene and ask all the parties to come up with a working coalition that could command a majority. Zahid Hamidi, President of UMNO, announced that the BN coalition would support Anwar Ibrahim and the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition. As a result, the 15th general election saw the remarkable comeback after twenty-four years for Anwar Ibrahim, who was deputy prime minister in 1998.

In neighboring Singapore, a general election was held on schedule in July 2020. The PAP, in power since 1965, did manage to retain power, but with a reduced majority, winning 83 of the 93 seats or 61.2 percent of the vote, down from 70 percent in the previous 2015 poll. The opposition won 10 seats to record its best ever performance. These developments indicate cracks in "regime resilience," especially in Malaysia, with possible long-term consequences.

This volume authored by academics provides a muti-dimensional look at the contributory factors and dynamics that facilitate regime resilience even when the governance is far from ideal, with skewed wealth distribution, restricted citizens' freedom, and a hybrid democracy with authoritarian tendencies. The essays provide insights into the reasons why regimes could hold onto power for decades and why democratization need not be a natural course of development.

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[8] Rozanna Latiff, Mei Mei Chu, and A. Ananthalakshmi, "Malaysia's Anwar Seeks Backing of Old Foes to Form Government as Turmoil Drags On," Reuters, November 21, 2022. https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/malaysias-muhyiddin-anwar-race-form-government-turmoil-drags-2022-11-21/

Scholars who are studying different facets of modern Malaysia and Singapore will find these essays useful. The essays could also resonate with what is happening in many other countries and thereby point to similar deficiencies there. It is relevant to mention that these essays are a critical examination of the phenomenon of regime resilience in Malaysia and Singapore against the backdrop of shortfalls in democratization of governance—freedom of speech, equitable economic development, and wider participation—for a more representative democracy that narrows the gaps in public expectations and government performance.

This volume does not focus on the remarkable progress made by Malaysia (now an upper-middle income country with a multi-sector economy), and more particularly Singapore (now a highly developed, free-market economy with a corruption-free government) for which the same regimes deserve credit, presumably in order to keep the thrust on regime resilience in the face of shortfalls in democratization. To place this volume in proper perspective, this reviewer makes the observation that of the 19 chapters, 12 deal with Malaysia, 4 deal with Singapore, and one essay looks at both Malaysia and Singapore. The Introduction and Conclusion by the editors deal with both countries. There is much more in this book that is critical of Malaysia and not much on Singapore.

Overall, the essays are well-researched and edited, offering multiple perspectives, and therefore potentially of great use to scholars, researchers, diplomats as well as the general reader who may find it interesting to relate the insights to what is happening in their own, or other, countries.

Note on the Author

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