

## Economic Development, Political Stability, and Semi Democracy in Malaysia and Singapore

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### **Abstract**

Meskipun mencapai tingkat perekonomian yang tinggi, Malaysia dan Singapura merupakan contoh kegagalan teori modernisasi dalam menjelaskan munculnya demokratisasi. Alih menjadi demokratis, kedua negara ini menunjukkan performa rezim semi-demokrasi secara persisten. Dengan menggunakan literature semi-demokrasi, artikel singkat ini ingin menunjukkan karakter dasar rezim semi demokrasi di Malaysia dan Singapura. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa di kedua negara tersebut, semi demokrasi merupakan rezim yang *by design*. Mencontoh model Malaysia dan Singapura, saat ini model rezim semi demokrasi *by-design* telah menjadi salah satu alternatif pilihan untuk mengembangkan rezim politik di beberapa negara.

**Keywords:** Malaysia, Singapore, Semi Democracy

### **Introduction**

Singapore (in the Lee Kuan Yew era) and Malaysia (in Mahathir Muhammad era) have conspicuously demonstrated the ability to combine economic growth, social and political stability in a certain sort of semi democratic regime. Instead of becoming a liberal democratic, Singapore and Malaysia show the persistence of their regime performances. Moreover, the success of Lee and Mahathir in economic and stability performances has been becoming a viable alternative model, if not a role model to western-liberal democracy. Using illiberal democracy and hybrid democracy literature, this short essay will show how Singapore and Malaysia maintain their regime persistence and the implication of Singapore and Malaysia exceptional case to the literature of democratisation.

Singapore shows a remarkable economic performance indicated by Singapore's GDP per capita is US\$ 36,537 and on the 2009 Human Development Index, Singapore ranked of 23<sup>rd</sup> out of 182 countries ([http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country\\_fact\\_sheets/cty\\_fs\\_SGP.html](http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_SGP.html)). . Similarly, Malaysia also shows middle to high economic performance indicated by Malaysia's GDP per capita is US\$ 14,700 and On the 2009 Human Development Index, Malaysia

rank of 66<sup>th</sup> out of 182 countries ([http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country\\_fact\\_sheets/cty\\_fs\\_MYS.html](http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_MYS.html)).

Attached with high economic growth and economic affluence, although facilitate to the growing democratic institutions and procedures, do not guarantee Singapore and Malaysia people to enjoy essential civil liberties and political rights. Conversely, restriction on political freedom and human rights become the basic condition to achieve and maintain economic performance. Moreover, this idea highly justified by certain ideology such as “Asian Values” as prominently advocated by Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Muhammad (Mauzy, 2006:49). High economic growth also facilitated the emergence of middle class in Singapore and Malaysia. However, instead of become the linchpin of democratization process, as has been endorsed by modernization theory, the new emerging middle class in Singapore and Malaysia have by and large more concern with political stability and economic performance of the state than struggling for political rights and democratization. Since the middle class are the main beneficiaries of state sponsored economic development, the middle class becomes one of the most important pillars to “the perpetuation of authoritarian rule” (Bell, 1998; 23). That is why abundant middle

classes in Singapore and Malaysia never be a real challenge to the regime. The argument above is a striking evident of the false promise of modernization theory regarding the case of Singapore and Malaysia. The question is what do Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore and Mahathir's Malaysia tell us about the connection between economic development, political stability and semi democracy?

### Semi Democracy Literature

The analysis of Singapore and Malaysia political regime falls under the rubric of semi democracy, illiberal democracy or hybrid democracy (O'Donnel, 1994; 55-69). Within this literature, William Case describes Singapore as "stable-semi democracy" (Case, 2009; 255-269), while Levitsky and Way depicts Singapore as facade electoral regime (Levitsky & Way, 2002; 54). Meanwhile, Case portrays Malaysia as electoral authoritarianism (Case, 2009) and Levitsky categorises Malaysia as a competitive authoritarian (Levitsky & Way, 2002; 51). But why these countries are so recalcitrant to liberal democracy and how do they develop a self assured and yet dynamic combination between economic development, social stability and semi (illiberal) democracy? Relating to this sophisticated combination, it is interesting to consider Engberg and Errson argument on illiberal democracy by design or by (de)fault (Engberg & Errson, 1999). Illiberal democracy by design means that illiberal democratic regime is a result of "deliberate actions" taken by political elites with an aspiration to control the political procedures and in turn the people. While illiberal by (de)faults refers to the consequence of failures and mismanagement in politic, economy and social sphere that tend to dispossess people opportunities to exercise political rights and freedom (Engberg & Errson, 1999; 4). Illiberal democracy regimes by design, as argued by Engberg and Errson would likely to be stable overtime because they could maintain their societal, institutional, public policy and economic performance. It is proven statistically by several quantitative indicators such as high scores on Human Development Index, Lower corruption rate, economic freedom and low political risk in conducting economic business (Engberg & Errson, 1999; 13-17). Singapore and

Malaysia to a certain degree become evident of illiberal democracy by design.

### Singapore and Malaysia: Semi Democracy by Design or by Default?

The design of Singapore political regime has been built through several systematic efforts. Firstly, the government always guarantee that political participation will be arranged and mobilised through single-dominant party, People Action Party (PAP). Singapore government employs a draconian law to restrict civil liberty and political freedom mainly using Internal Security Act (ISA) and Societies Act. Moreover, the PAP uses "artful manipulation" (Case, 2005; 220-227) and "calibrated coercion" (George, 2007; 145)<sup>1</sup> to make sure the long standing of PAP domination. The artful manipulation was implemented through the changing of GRCs (Group of Representative Constituencies)--to reduce opposition capacity by raising minority representation in parliament and by creating town councillors. This manipulation ensures PAP domination without incurring many political costs. The manipulation also accompanied by coercion. Interestingly, even the PAP holds the whole coercive tools, repression and coercion are calibrated to get maximum impact within minimal political and economic costs. Another reason of the PAP domination in Singapore politics is related to political economy of capitalist development. Rodan argues that PAP comes out as a state party as a result of state and party merger. State capitalism creates material benefits and prosperity to the people, and those successful based on state paternalism, the role of technocrat and meritocracy at the expense of political rights and civil liberty (Rodan, 2006). Secondly, geopolitical background affected the design of political regime. Small size is easier to be controlled.

Likewise, to some degree, Malaysia political regime also has been built through several designs. Malaysia also uses the combination of political domination and coercion. Given a divided ethnic composition, parliamentary government system is designed to guarantee the domination of

1 Cherian George, 'Consolidating Authoritarian rule: Calibrated Coercion in Singapore', *The Pacific Review*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2007, pp. 127-145.

UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) among other ethnic based party (Malaysia Chinese Association/ MCA and Malaysian Indian Congress/ MIC) in a permanent consociational democracy alliance within the *Barisan Nasional* (National Front). Political freedom and civil liberties are limited by ISA and Societies law, while the UMNO employs the party machineries based on money politics and patronage towards the Malays through New Economic Policy (NEP). Although less sophisticated comparing to Singapore, UMNO also uses manipulation and coercion, as case called it “unartful manipulation” (Case, 2005). Lastly, as in Singapore, there is a blurring line between the party and the state in Malaysia. State sponsored capitalist development (NEP) gives a large power to the state to control and absorbed many kinds of economic and bureaucratic elements to achieved high economic growth and shortened the economic gap between ethnic groups. The economic growth and social stability (mainly harmonious ethnic relations) could be achieved at the expense of political liberties.

### Conclusion

As the semi (illiberal) democracy growth and remain stable in Singapore and Malaysia, Lee and Mahathir’s recipes could become a “growth industry” (Zakaria, 1997; 22-43). A growing number of African, Asian and Latin American political elites inspired by Lee and Mahathir in combining economic growth, social and political stability and the ability to deal with internal and external pressures. Thailand new style of democracy and populist regimes in Venezuela and Bolivia might become proofs that western-liberal democracy is not the only possible final aspiration of a regime change.

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