

State Power and Staying Power: Institutional Origins and Durable Authoritarianism in Malaysia and Singapore

Dan Slater
Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
University of Chicago
5828 S. University, Pick 401
Chicago, IL 60637
Tel: 773-702-2941
slater@uchicago.edu

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ABSTRACT

Comparative research on authoritarian institutions has largely neglected to consider state power as a causal influence on authoritarian durability. This essay argues that scholars should pay at least as much attention to variation in state institutions as party and electoral institutions when examining how authoritarian regimes operate and explaining how long they last. The cases of Malaysia and Singapore exemplify how exceptionally durable authoritarian regimes may rest upon the inheritance of state power from an era preceding the emergence of ruling parties and regimes themselves. Originally built in reaction to colonial-era labor unrest in the aftermath of World War II, the highly centralized extractive and coercive institutions of these authoritarian Leviathans have provided postcolonial leaders with extraordinarily powerful apparatuses for stabilizing and sustaining nondemocratic rule.

I. States and the Regimes that Run Them

“You should no more confuse the state with its government than you would confuse a fine Jaguar automobile with the person who drives it.”

Professor Robert Frykenberg

States and regimes are widely shared yet largely separate obsessions in comparative politics. When scholars study the state, they make an intellectual commitment to explore the extent rather than the form of government.¹ Specialists on democracy and authoritarianism undertake the inverse commitment, inquiring into how and why the state’s power is procedurally constrained, rather than how and why it is territorially extended and functionally expanded. The upshot is that comparative politics has developed enormous canons on state types as well as regime types. Yet these extensive literatures rarely overlap.

This intellectual division of labor has produced an unfortunate consequence: relative inattention to *state power as a causal influence on authoritarian durability*.² Even as comparative politics has experienced a decade-long upsurge in studies of authoritarian institutions, it is ruling parties, parliaments, and elections³ – often conceived as quasi-democratic constraints on autocratic power rather than “organizational weapons”⁴ in dictators’ hands – that are capturing the lion’s share of attention.⁵ The state

¹ Huntington 1968: 1.

² The main exceptions are Levitsky and Way (forthcoming), Smith (2007), and Way (2005), who all grant state institutions equivalent importance with ruling parties in sustaining dictatorship. My argument goes a step further in suggesting the greater and prior importance of the state vis-à-vis parties, at least in certain cases.

³ As Snyder puts it, “the burgeoning literature on contemporary nondemocratic regimes...places an overwhelming emphasis on the electoral process,” while “stateness (how much do rulers rule) has been less central to prior work on regimes” (2006: 220, 230 fn5).

⁴ Selznick 1960. For recent arguments that authoritarian institutions such as parties and parliaments exist primarily to serve quasi-democratic purposes such as sharing political

may be “the mountain that all political scientists sooner or later must climb,”⁶ but scholars of authoritarian politics have shown surprisingly little inclination to scale it.⁷

My history professor’s pithy formulation distinguishing states from the governments that run them (or in authoritarian settings, the regimes that run them), as quoted above, proves useful for understanding why the current division of labor is at once essential and lamentable. It is essential because states and regimes are analytically distinct. Cars are not drivers, and drivers are not cars; theories on regimes cannot explain states, and vice versa. It is unfortunate because states and regimes are also empirically intertwined. One can hardly understand the movements of a Jaguar without paying attention to the actions of its driver. Nor can one comprehend how an individual might hurtle oneself down a highway at superhuman speeds without attending to the character of the machine as well as the man. Regime actors are inescapably intertwined with the

influence and constraining executive power, see Gandhi and Przeworski (2007), Magaloni (2006), and Wright (2008). For a critique of such logic, see Slater (2003, 2009).

⁵ This is particularly evident in new institutional typologies of authoritarian regimes, none of which – including my own (Ibid.) – attempt to capture variation in state strength. See also Geddes (1999) and Hadenius and Teorell (2007).

⁶ Migdal 1997: 208.

⁷ Even the classic literatures on “bureaucratic-authoritarianism” (e.g. O’Donnell 1973) and “totalitarianism” (e.g. Linz 1975) were much less focused on questions of state structures and power than one might presume. As Collier summarizes, the “B-A” literature revolved around “the nature of the dominant coalitions, the political regime, and the class and sectoral orientation of public policy” (1979: 30-31) – not state power per se. Snyder considers Linz’s work on totalitarianism an exception to his rule that scholars of nondemocratic politics have ignored stateness; but to my mind, totalitarianism speaks more directly to a regime’s *ambitions* than a state’s *attainment* of total social control. Either way, Linz and Stepan (1996: 40) now consider totalitarian regimes passé, and Snyder considers stateness to be a critical factor because so many states are weak, not strong. In sum, comparativists are currently paying scant attention to state power as a sustainer of authoritarian rule; and variation in state power, inherited or otherwise, was never systematically considered as a factor shaping divergence in the durability of either “B-A” or totalitarian regimes.

state apparatus they operate and, nearly always, inherit. Yet political scientists have not often considered how variation in the power of these state apparatuses might shape variation in the durability of authoritarian regimes.

Distinguishing Durability from Duration

Recognizing the causal significance of state power is essential to explaining why Malaysia and Singapore have produced perhaps the two most durable authoritarian regimes on earth. By *durability*, I do not simply mean *duration*. Rather, I follow Anna Grzymala-Busse in arguing that “we need to disaggregate duration from durability.” While a regime’s duration signifies its “temporal length,” its durability is best measured as “the vector of duration and stability.” This suggests that “duration alone is not the best measure of regime durability, since it tells us little about the stability of the regime, or its ability to meet and overcome potential crises.”⁸ Measuring regime durability thus requires more than counting the number of years that a regime has endured, as is standard practice in nearly all existing quantitative analyses. One must also directly observe how stable and resilient to challenges and crises those regimes have proven to be over time.⁹

By this reckoning, authoritarian regimes in Malaysia and Singapore are not exceptionally durable simply because they have each lasted for over four decades and counting. They are exceptionally durable because they have each shown a remarkable capacity to manage political opposition, maintain political stability, and implement their political objectives throughout their long tenures in power. Malaysia has had the same

⁸ Grzymala-Busse 2008: 1.

⁹ In Russia, for example, Vladimir Putin’s presidency was a more *durable* ruling arrangement than Boris Yeltsin’s, even though Yeltsin’s presidency *endured* for slightly longer.

ruling party (the United Malays National Organization, or UMNO) since independence in 1957, and the same ruling party coalition (the *Barisan Nasional* – BN – or National Front) since the country’s authoritarian turn after 1969. Until 2008, this indomitable coalition had never been forced to govern with less than a two-thirds supermajority in parliament. Even after its recent electoral setback, it continues to hold a commanding, 140-82 seat majority. (Such a lopsided result would be considered a landslide for incumbents in most settings. In the Malaysian context, it is perceived as an anti-government “tsunami.”) An economic downturn in the mid-1980s induced UMNO to split for a time, but this did not spill over into mass political opposition. Conversely, a harsher economic crisis in the late 1990s helped precipitate a brief upsurge in mass opposition; but ruling elites remained amazingly cohesive and managed the crisis with much greater ease than Malaysia’s neighbors.

Singapore has consistently managed to avoid even such modest political ripples. “[T]racking Singapore politics is like observing a shiny new washing machine at work,” muses local academic and journalist Cherian George. “You may marvel momentarily at its smooth, silent operation, its reliability and its cleansing power, but staring at it is not exactly the most thrilling of pastimes.”¹⁰ An obvious source of this stability is the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP). Founded in 1954, the PAP first won elections with the city-state’s transition to self-rule in 1959. After surviving a nasty internal party split in 1961, and an even nastier territorial split after Singapore’s brief and unhappy incorporation into Malaysia from 1963-65, the PAP has maintained power in utterly unmolested fashion. Political opposition and economic crises have been total non-factors as Singapore’s

¹⁰ George 2000: 10.

political-economic “washing machine” has hummed along without so much as a hiccup, even during the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s.

How Strong States Enhance Authoritarian Durability

Ruling parties have undoubtedly been vital to the Malaysian and Singaporean regimes’ endurance, as theory would lead us to expect.¹¹ Yet I would submit that *state institutions have been even more important than party institutions*, especially when we go beyond considering these regimes’ duration and attempt to explain their extraordinary durability. Well before either UMNO or the PAP ever had to win an election or even compose a candidate list, British colonial officials were pressed by labor-led mass unrest to construct highly capable coercive and administrative institutions. This provided the party leaders who inherited these impressive Leviathans at independence with ideal tools for sustaining elite collective action and suppressing regime opponents. While most postcolonial leaders inherited states that looked like jalopies, Malaysian and Singaporean leaders were handed the keys to the political equivalents of Jaguars.

State power is a multidimensional phenomenon; it cannot be adequately captured with any single quantitative measure or proxy variable. This essay focuses on four dimensions of state power that are especially significant for sustaining and stabilizing authoritarian regimes: *registration, extraction, coercion, and centralization*. When an authoritarian regime commands a state that exhibits the infrastructural capacity to register

¹¹ For the original theoretical statement on parties and authoritarian durability, see Huntington (1968). Important recent extensions include Geddes (1999) and Brownlee (2007). While I argue elsewhere that parties were important institutional adjuncts during Malaysia’s early state-building process, they primarily enhanced the state’s capacity to *distribute* rather than *extract* resources (Slater 2008).

its population, it can render society more “legible” and enhance its social control.¹² Effective citizen registration is a precursor to effective extraction, especially of tax revenue. Powerful extractive institutions provide the regimes that run them with bounteous patronage resources and the kind of healthy revenue surpluses that prove so vital during cyclical economic downturns.¹³ Considering how much revenue the Malaysian and Singaporean states have extracted from their societies over the past six-plus decades, it does not seem that authoritarianism has endured due to the absence of a “fiscal contract,” as might be surmised from literatures on the origins of European parliaments and the rarity of democracy in postcolonial rentier states.¹⁴ Weak representation is not due to low taxation – the presence of fiscal *power* better explains the durability of these regimes than the absence of fiscal *contracts*.

Authoritarian durability rests on coercive institutions as well as administrative institutions.¹⁵ It can be all too easy to forget this basic point when a regime repeatedly

¹² On registration and “legibility,” see Scott (1998), Diamant (2001), and Slater (2008). Ruling parties and authoritarian elections may also be helpful in establishing what Magaloni (2006: 20) evocatively dubs a “punishment regime” of selective rewards and sanctions. But as an executor of more universal registration practices, a powerful state apparatus is an even more useful authoritarian weapon for “punishing opponents and rewarding loyalists in pinpoint fashion” (Slater 2003: 98).

¹³ State institutions are often portrayed as important to authoritarian durability inasmuch as they provide patronage to regime favorites (e.g. Greene 2007). This argument is not wrong, but it is incomplete. By focusing on the *size* of the state rather than its *strength*, such analyses do not explain where authoritarian regimes gain the resources that they distribute, or how they vary in their capacity to do so. Highly distributive regimes that command states with weak extractive institutions are more prone to economic crises and subsequent cutbacks in patronage than stronger authoritarian Leviathans. On the fiscal exhaustion of many African regimes, see Bratton and van de Walle (1997: 66-68).

¹⁴ Early theoretical statements include Bates and Lien (1985) and North and Weingast (1989). Sophisticated recent extensions to postcolonial authoritarianism include Dunning (2008) and Morrison (2009).

¹⁵ Levitsky and Way (forthcoming) and Bellin (2005) rightly emphasize the importance of coercive institutions in sustaining authoritarianism, but these are hardly the only state

racks up massive electoral landslides and society remains visibly well-fed and quiescent. How can state coercion help explain the durability of authoritarianism in Malaysia and Singapore, when far more repressive and even outright murderous regimes can so often be seen wobbling and collapsing? The key point is that strong and cohesive coercive institutions allow a regime to make its threats to use force against its opponents highly credible and predictable, and to ensure that state repression does not go beyond specified targets and limits. For Malaysians and Singaporeans who ponder taking to the streets to stir up opposition to the ruling BN or PAP, a coercive state response can be expected to be swift and certain – yet not so deadly or indiscriminate as to galvanize many in society to sympathize with the protesters’ plight.¹⁶ Tricky as it may sound for a discipline that rests on empirical observation, political scientists need to recognize that the limited use or even absence of state violence can be an indicator that state coercion is playing its intended, stabilizing political role.

Beyond registration, extraction, and coercion, a fourth mechanism through which state power can enhance authoritarian durability is *centralization*. To the extent that state-building eliminates or weakens subnational political units, it can facilitate the predictable processing of an authoritarian leadership’s top-down commands, while preventing opposition parties from gaining a toehold in elected provincial and local offices.¹⁷

institutions that count. For an analysis of state power in the authoritarian setting of Ukraine which adopts a similar definitional perspective on the state as coercive and administrative institutions, see Darden (2008).

¹⁶ On the causal connection between indiscriminate state violence and political revolutions, see Goodwin (2001).

¹⁷ As with registration, coercion, and extraction, I treat centralization as an expression of state “infrastructural power,” not “despotic power” (Mann 1988). The centralization of decision-making authority is better conceived as the personalization of power than state-

Although federalism has served as a viable framework for political stability in many contexts,¹⁸ in today's age of "electoral authoritarianism,"¹⁹ decentralization comes with the risk that oppositionists might use local elections to build up political reputations and clienteles, and lay the groundwork for pursuing greater ambitions at the national level.

Case Selection and Research Design

The next sections elaborate these arguments as follows. Section II provides an overview of the state-building efforts that commenced in British Malaya²⁰ and Singapore amid the severe outbreaks of contentious politics that rocked these adjacent colonies in the aftermath of World War II. Timing is crucial to establish that my causal argument is not endogenous. If strong states are simply a natural byproduct of either strong parties or strong-willed autocrats – as devotees of powerful leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamad would have us believe – then I have my argument backwards. But the timing of state-building efforts shows that durable authoritarian regimes and cohesive ruling parties can be the product of strong states instead of the other way around. Section III details how UMNO and PAP leaders built upon existing state capacities after the British departure, stepping up extraction from economic elites and expanding the power and purview of coercive institutions. In the Malaysian case, we also see a continuing shift in power from the federal states to the national center.

building, and I see its causal effect on authoritarian durability as indeterminate (Slater 2003).

¹⁸ It is rarely remembered that Huntington saw federalism as the best alternative to the ruling party as a tool for political order (1968: 89, 169).

¹⁹ Schedler 2006.

²⁰ The British colony was always "Malaya," with the renaming to "Malaysia" coming in 1963, six years after formal independence.

Sections II and III thus serve to *establish* Malaysian and Singaporean state power as my independent variable. Given the intrinsic limitations of my limited-variance research design,²¹ they cannot *explain* why labor-led contentious politics seemingly inspired more extensive state-building efforts in colonial Malaya and Singapore than elsewhere. This is an entirely separate explanatory challenge, and must be tackled separately.²² Yet merely establishing concrete variation in state power is itself a major empirical task, as witnessed in political scientists' common reliance on woefully substandard proxies – e.g. GDP per capita²³ – to measure it. A virtue of limiting the empirical analysis to Malaysia and Singapore is that it permits a manageable, temporally grounded comparative-historical analysis of state-building processes and outcomes without ignoring the multidimensional character of state power. Given the absence of either a closely paired contrasting case of democratization or a reliable cross-sectional dataset on state power as understood in this essay, such within-case, process-tracing analysis is an appropriate approach for “intensively testing” my core causal claim.²⁴

Section IV brings my multidimensional understanding of state power to bear for explanatory purposes, showing how state power can enhance an authoritarian regime's

²¹ Malaysia and Singapore can most fruitfully be considered “heuristic cases” (Eckstein 1975) that allow a “parallel demonstration of theory” (Skocpol and Somers 1980). Although they do not serve as a controlled comparison in a Millian sense, the inclusion of both cases helps control for certain alternative hypotheses that would be harder to reject through a case-study of either country alone. For instance, Singapore's hegemonic authoritarian politics is often explained away as a result of the city-state's diminutive size, while Malaysia's durable authoritarianism is often considered politically *sui generis* because of the country's particular ethnic power-sharing arrangement. A comparative approach highlights the limits of such case-specific explanations.

²² I attempt such an explanation in Slater (forthcoming).

²³ Fearon and Laitin 2003.

²⁴ On process-tracing for causal purposes, see George and Bennett (2004); on intensive testing using qualitative data as opposed to extensive testing using quantitative data, see Coppedge (2007).

staying power. It does so through an in-depth analysis of the Malaysian regime's survival amid the greatest upswing of mass political opposition that either Malaysia or Singapore has faced in recent decades: the *reformasi* movement of the late 1990s. Opposition gains in the 2008 elections appear to be directly related to the new prime minister's reduced deployment of state power in perhaps its most important dimension for authoritarian durability – coercion. Section V concludes by reviewing my main claims and considering their implications for other cases and future theorizing on states and regimes.

II. Institutional Origins: State-Building before Party and Regime Formation

As territorially adjacent but administratively separate British colonies, neither Malaya nor Singapore were full-blown modern Leviathans before World War II. Nor did Japan's four-year occupation of Southeast Asia leave behind the kind of administrative and coercive infrastructure that was ultimately bequeathed from its much longer colonization of Korea and Taiwan. To the contrary, the Japanese onslaught decimated the minimal colonial state structures that existed, and precipitated a period of bloody anarchy rather than peaceful stability. Most importantly, the occupation sparked the mobilization of communist-inspired armed resistance movements throughout Southeast Asia, which would confront returning Western colonialists with major political challenges after Japan's sudden surrender in August 1945.

Bridling Labor

More than anywhere else in the region, Malaya and Singapore saw this leftist resistance metamorphose into powerful and radical postwar labor movements.²⁵ Urban labor militancy sparked new, defensive state-building efforts on the part of the British and their local collaborators. This initially took the form of reorganizing the state's coercive apparatus. However, state authorities also pushed through major reforms in the civilian administration and imposed new forms of direct taxation on economic elites, putting both states – and any regime that would subsequently run them – on firm fiscal footing.²⁶

Authorities in both Malaya and Singapore patently lacked the capacity to police the postwar labor movement. In Malaya, “[m]any police records had been lost because of the War and consequently, in the area of security and criminal intelligence especially, the organization was in a state of debility.”²⁷ British officials quickly reorganized Malaya's seven prewar police forces into a single national force, but the Pan-Malayan General Labor Union (PMGLU) was too strong to coerce into submission: “even if Government had wished to prevent the formation of a central trade union organization, it would not have been in a position to do so.”²⁸

Unionists in the Singapore Free Trade Union (SFTU) were an even stronger force to be reckoned with. For more than three weeks in December 1945, the city was effectively

²⁵ Leftist rebellions in the Philippines and Vietnam in this era were primarily products of rural rather than urban areas. For more evidence on this claim and an argument that such rural rebellions were less conducive than urban radicalism for state-building, see Slater (forthcoming).

²⁶ For an analysis that similarly draws a causal linkage from labor mobilization to state fiscal extraction in postcommunist Poland and Russia, see Easter (2002).

²⁷ Zakaria 1977: 68.

²⁸ Gamba 1962: 120.

paralyzed. And Singapore's labor strife worsened appreciably over the next eighteen months, even more dramatically than in Malaya. "In the year following 1 April 1946 there was a total of 713,000 man-days lost as a result of strikes in the Malayan Union, or nearly two days per employee, and in Singapore the extraordinary total of 1,173,000 man-days or over ten days per employee," writes Michael Stenson. "Virtually every type of worker in Singapore was involved in a strike at some stage of the year and many were involved in more than one."²⁹

In both colonies, British authorities responded to labor radicalism with considerable, urban-centered state-building efforts. Hopes for bridling the PMGLU rested first and foremost upon a vigorous effort to register its member unions, as a prelude to tighter state supervision and control. This was a job for administrative rather than coercive institutions; yet such state bodies simply did not exist. The British were thus "obliged to create a new and more elaborate administrative structure,"³⁰ commencing with the appointment of an adviser and registrar of trade unions, as well as the creation of a centralized Department of Labor in early 1946. The registration effort initially foundered, as these new institutions suffered mightily from their lack of trained personnel. As of November 1946, registration was still "largely a matter of form because the registrar's and adviser's departments had not the staff to explain and to supervise the operations of the law."³¹ Meanwhile in Singapore, labor militancy and non-cooperation were so pronounced that it proved politically impossible even to *attempt* union registration in any systematic and vigorous way.

²⁹ Stenson 1970: 105.

³⁰ Ibid. 134.

³¹ Ibid. 137, 164.

Effective labor registration in Malaya required heightened efforts to recruit locals to serve on the front lines of the state apparatus. The Trade Union Adviser “built up a staff of local officials to tour the country persuading managers of the advantages of non-militant unions.”³² By early 1948, state efforts to register and de-radicalize the labor force had proven a considerable success: non-radical unions possessed a larger total membership than PMFTU and “doubtful” unions combined, by a margin of 82,000 to 67,000.³³ British Malayan officialdom doggedly resisted pressures from employers to deny recognition to radical unions, realizing that registration would place more capacity to monitor and suppress labor militancy in the hands of the state – an advantage that would accrue to the postcolonial regimes that would inherit and run it.

Taxing Elites

Effective state-building requires not just that citizens be *registered*, but that they provide *revenues* to central authorities. In Malaya and Singapore, this required state elites to override the wishes of business elites again, as they had already done in Malaya on the labor registration question. State-builders scored a major success on this front with the simultaneous introduction of direct taxes on individual and corporate incomes in both Malaya and Singapore in December 1947.³⁴ This entailed a dramatic shift in fiscal strategy in what were, before World War II, the only two major states in Southeast Asia *not* to have significant systems of direct tax collection. In Singapore as of 1947, over 78% of revenues derived from indirect customs levies, and less than 5% was generated

³² Gamba 1962: 191.

³³ The raw totals come from Ibid. (155).

³⁴ On the importance of direct taxation to the fiscal power of the contemporary state, see Lieberman (2001).

by direct taxes of any sort. Malaya collected less than 2% of its total revenues directly in that same year. As labor protest and popular demands for greater redistribution gained momentum, even Singapore's conservative *Straits Times* (somewhat hyperbolically) editorialized that Malaya could not remain "the only country in the world which does not impose direct taxation on individual incomes and company profits for the benefit of the community as a whole."³⁵

Although business associations in both Malaya and Singapore engaged in "a bitter and almost hysterical attack upon the concept of income tax,"³⁶ colonial officials would not be denied. Business-dominated legislative councils in both colonies overwhelmingly rejected the tax proposals, but British governors simply vetoed their decisions.

Singapore's ratio of direct to total taxes would skyrocket from 4.6% in 1947 to 36.5% in 1948, while Malaya's ratio would leap from less than 2% in 1947 to over 16% by 1949. As Figure 1 indicates, it was during this immediate postwar period when Malaysia and Singapore began to overtake neighboring economies such as the Philippines and Thailand in their capacity to collect direct taxes³⁷ – with path-dependent political consequences for authoritarian regimes in later decades.

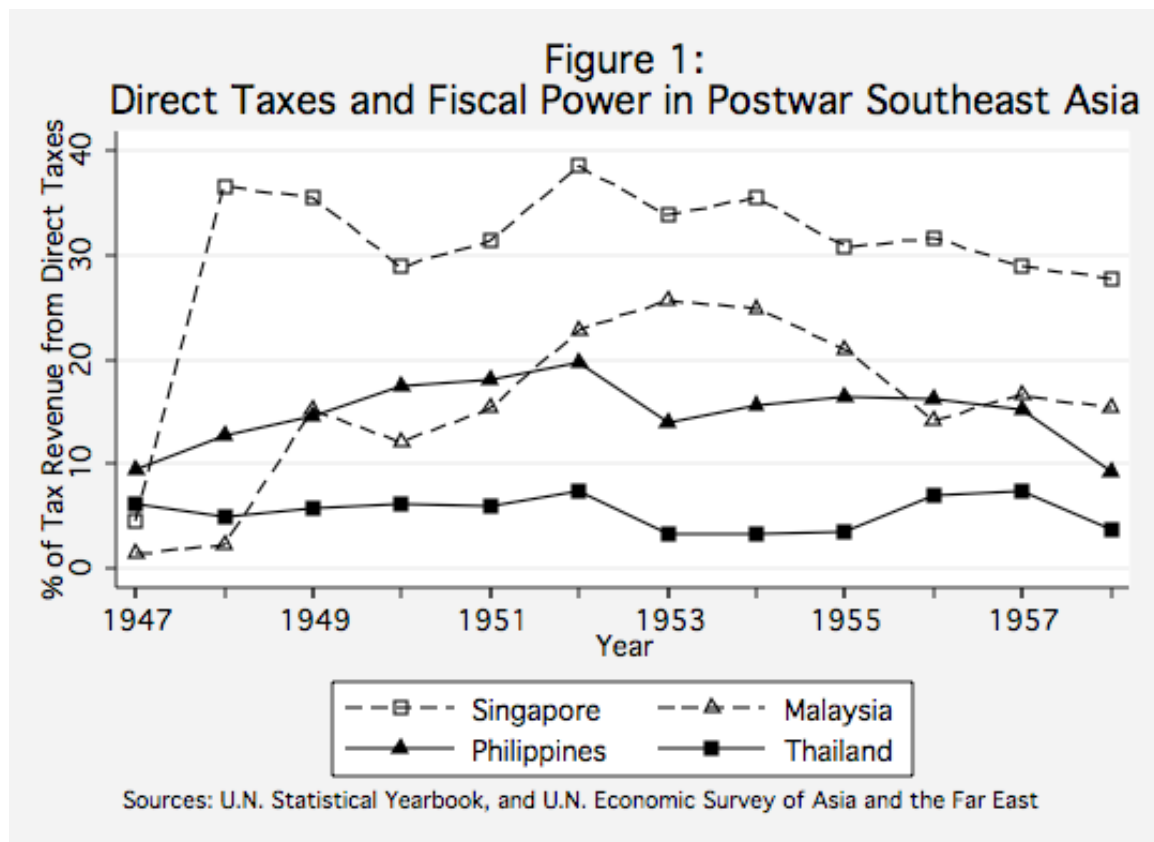
The rise in tax revenues would be well-timed, especially in Malaya. Belatedly realizing that union registration meant a victory for the forces of top-down control over those of bottom-up mobilization, the PMFTU shifted toward more radical tactics in April

³⁵ "An Expert on Income Tax," *Straits Times*, 21 August 1947.

³⁶ Stenson 1970: 174-175.

³⁷ Although I consider both the direct/total tax ratio and the total tax/GDP ratio to be intrinsic measures of fiscal power, I am yet to locate reliable comparative data on the latter for the immediate postwar period. Hence I use the direct/total ratio throughout to preserve data consistency. In this and all subsequent figures, direct taxes include income, corporate, and property taxes, while excluding taxes on sales and trade.

1948. Colonial authorities responded forcefully, introducing a highly restrictive Trade Union Ordinance in late May. After the assassination of three British planters in mid-June, the British declared a colony-wide state of Emergency and banned the PMFTU outright. With its coercive power firmly reestablished in Malaya's major towns, the state quickly uprooted radical working-class elements from their urban nests.



Governing the Jungle: Colonial Malaya, 1948-53

The problem for the Malayan state was that its footprint outside the cities remained minimal, especially in the squatter communities along jungle fringes that had mushroomed during and after Japan's occupation. "During the immediate post-war years, squatters had opened up huge tracts of land miles away from government administrative

centers, and the Malayan Union Government found it lacked manpower in the District Offices and Agricultural Department to control and administer them.”³⁸

State-building in these areas involved further retooling of coercive and administrative institutions. Extending even basic policing capacity into Chinese squatter settlements presented an enormous task, given the utter lack of state presence in such areas. Intelligence-gathering authority was entrusted to the police’s Special Branch; but the unit initially only employed a paltry staff of “12 officers and 44 inspectors (few of them speaking Chinese).”³⁹ The Special Branch was thus described as “chronically understaffed,” and was “perceived as having failed to generate enough intelligence – in some areas virtually any intelligence – to make army action effective.”⁴⁰ An official report in January 1949 concluded that “one of the most striking features of the squatter communities was the fact that they were outside the normal processes of administration.”⁴¹ The report insisted that, for counterinsurgency to be effective, “the provision of effective administration is a *sine qua non*.” This would “entail the provision of adequate communications, police stations, schools and health facilities and the like.”

Most sweepingly, the report endorsed the wholesale resettlement of Malaya’s squatter population into “New Villages,” in “a concentrated effort...to move the entire rural Chinese population into fortified and defended compounds.”⁴² Effective control necessarily preceded effective administration, since the settlements would need to be secured from insurgent raids before they could be provided with improved public

³⁸ Heng 1988: 102.

³⁹ Hack 1999: 7.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 5.

⁴¹ This and subsequent cites in this paragraph are from Osborne (1965: 12).

⁴² Stubbs 1989: 100.

services. Upon his arrival in Malaya in March 1950, Lieutenant General Harold Briggs' first task was thus "to co-ordinate the activities of the police and the military" for the first time.⁴³ "Two years after Briggs' arrival in Malaya, the plan had largely been implemented: 470,509 squatters were now resettled in 440 New Villages."⁴⁴

Most "New Villages" had not received their promised public services as of 1952, however. Forced resettlement thus worsened squatters' antagonism toward the state more than alleviating it. Worsening conditions inspired the appointment in February 1952 of Gerald Templer to become the first official to serve simultaneously as Director of Operations for the Emergency and as High Commissioner of Malaya. "[F]rom the beginning, Templer was armed with some of the most comprehensive powers ever given a British colonial official."⁴⁵ Meanwhile, aggressive recruitment – most notably of Chinese to serve in the Special Branch⁴⁶ – made the Malayan police grow "*easily larger than the rest of the British colonial police force combined.*"⁴⁷ Such growth was not permitted to compromise either capacity or coordination: "At the same time that there was expansion, training was not curtailed."⁴⁸

While important, this revamping of *coercive* institutions could not allay the *administrative* challenges that lay at the root of the insurgency. The Emergency witnessed a "forced growth in administrative capacity," because "the greater emphasis to be placed on delivering services, especially to the rural population, required an

⁴³ Ibid. 98.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 104.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 140.

⁴⁶ "By the end of 1953 Special Branch had 123 officers and 195 inspectors. This represented 20% of all the officers and 18% of all the inspectors in a police force now expanded from around 11,000 (1948) to over 73,000 (1952 peak)" (Hack 1999: 8).

⁴⁷ Zakaria 1977: 79. Emphasis added.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 73.

administrative capability that was obviously not yet in place.”⁴⁹ Thanks in large measure to the “freakishly high commodity prices”⁵⁰ that attended the Korean War, British authorities enjoyed ample funds to finance their new programs. This influx of state revenue represented not merely a pure windfall, but a handsome return on earlier efforts to impose direct income and corporate taxes, as well as export taxes, on economic elites.

Wartime conditions also afforded colonial officials the opportunity to introduce the very first government provident fund in the developing world, in 1951: Malaya’s Employees’ Provident Fund (EPF). The compulsory contribution scheme registered 500,000 employees and 12,000 employers in its first year alone, mobilizing RM18 million in additional government revenue.⁵¹ Given the long time-lag between collections and payouts, the EPF has consistently padded the country’s public savings, providing considerable economic benefits to the state apparatus and concomitant political benefits to the party leaders who command it.

Squeezing a Contentious City: Colonial Singapore, 1948-55

Singapore was fortunate to be spared the violence of the Malayan Emergency from 1948-57. But whereas this jungle insurgency was a direct result of British success at rousting the Malayan Left from its base in the urban labor movement, in Singapore, organized labor had simply proved too strong to defeat. Urban strikes thus ceased in Malaya, but continued in Singapore, after 1948.

⁴⁹ Stubbs 1989: 169.

⁵⁰ White 1996: 112.

⁵¹ Salehuddin 1994: 258.

Mass contention under late colonialism was not limited to radical labor mobilization, however. Singapore's minority Malay community showed it was capable of violent disruption as well when the Maria Hertogh riots of 1950 erupted after British courts returned an adopted Muslim girl to her Christian biological parents. "The violence lasted 48 hours and during it 18 people were killed (nine by the rioters and nine by the police or military), 173 were injured and nearly 200 vehicles were damaged or destroyed."⁵²

When subsequent official investigations into the police response to the riots concluded that "the Malay rank and file, whose sympathies lay with the rioters, had stood idly by in the face of mob violence," Singapore's defense minister called for "drastic steps" to "be sure that our Colonial Administration and Police Forces everywhere are really efficient and adequate."⁵³ One such step was the introduction of compulsory national service registration for all Singaporean males in 1952. Others involved the stepped-up use of Special Branch forces to detain and deport leftist and communalist activists of multiple stripes. A total of 254 activists were deported between 1948 and 1953. The leftist university newspaper *Fajar* howled that "if the conditions in this country are not that of a police state, the distinction is too fine for us to see"; in response, "eight members of the *Fajar* editorial board were arrested by the police for sedition."⁵⁴

The coercive noose only tightened in the mid-1950s, as labor militancy became violently intertwined with Chinese student communalism. The latter form of contention centered on Chinese-educated students' demands for equal treatment vis-à-vis their

⁵² Stockwell 1986: 330.

⁵³ Quoted in Stockwell (1980: 331, 332).

⁵⁴ Wade 2007: 8.

English-educated counterparts: “the student groups were able to mount a series of demonstrations, some of which became full-blown riots,” and “the Singapore Government’s ability to maintain order was severely tested.”⁵⁵ Yet it was ongoing labor militancy that gave state-builders the most cause for concern:

“In 1955 946,354 man-days were lost because of strikes, or approximately 2.15 per man employed, the highest since 1946. Many of the strikes were successful, gaining for workers concessions similar to those of the forties...British officials and employers also became thoroughly alarmed when strikes became associated with militant Chinese economic-cultural-political agitation originating in the Chinese-language high schools and erupted in scenes of violence, notably during the Hock Lee Bus strike of 1955.”⁵⁶

This upswing in contentious politics sparked new state-building efforts.⁵⁷ In fiscal terms, British authorities responded to the worsening of mass unrest in Singapore in 1955 in precisely the same way as they had done in Malaya at the worst point of the Emergency in 1951 – by introducing and implementing a compulsory savings scheme, known in Singapore as the Central Provident Fund (CPF). Like the EPF in Malaysia, Singapore’s CPF has ensured that the preponderance of national savings remains within public rather than private hands, complementing the fiscal power of a highly extractive tax state. A state that was abundant in revenue thus emerged before a ruling party emerged to seize it. As of the mid-1950s, Singaporean elites had become entangled in relationships involving considerable economic extraction, but not political organization.

⁵⁵ Stubbs 1988: 229.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 245.

⁵⁷ Contentious politics sparked party formation efforts as well, but the PAP would not seize the reins of power until after substantial additional state-building had been accomplished. For details, see Slater (forthcoming).

In sum, British authorities had constructed new administrative and coercive colossuses in Malaya and Singapore by the mid-1950s – *before* postcolonial political elites were forced to construct ruling parties to win elections and thereby gain command over those newly refurbished Leviathans. *The majesty of the state preceded the majesty of the ruling party.* The PAP and UMNO would eagerly build upon these state-building successes as they assumed the reins of power, laying the groundwork for exceedingly durable forms of authoritarian rule in postcolonial Malaysia and Singapore.

III. Strengthened Leviathans under Dominant Parties: The PAP and UMNO in the Driver's Seat

State-building in colonial Malaya and Singapore was never strictly a white man's project. British success in crafting new institutions always depended on the active support of aspiring local political elites. As the bureaucratic politics of high colonialism gave way to the electoral politics of the decolonization and postcolonial eras, those local elites stepped into their respective Leviathans' driver seats as leaders of emergent ruling parties, and began steering the state for their own purposes.

State-Building in Postcolonial Singapore

State power was *inherited* in both cases, but it would be *intensified* more in Singapore than in Malaysia. The PAP took the political lead in this regard. Initially a cross-class movement incorporating radical leftists as well as more conservative quasi-nationalists, the PAP romped to victory in elections ushering in Singaporean self-rule in 1959. It quickly began leveraging the fiscal power of the Singaporean state to reward labor for its electoral support.

Yet state provision under capitalist conditions was not what many in the PAP's radical rank and file had in mind. The party's non-communist elites were vastly outnumbered by its pro-communist masses, and "[t]he head was in constant danger of being ingested by the body."⁵⁸ PAP leaders thus precipitated the party's breakup in 1961 by using Emergency-style security laws to crack down on radical unionists. The leftist Socialist Front (*Barisan Socialis*) bolted the party, leaving the PAP with a slim 26-25 advantage in parliament. At the grassroots level, the party was decimated. "Control of nearly all branches slipped from the PAP into Barisan hands," says Thomas Bellows. "The remnants of the party organization in 1961 could not realistically be described even as skeletal."⁵⁹

Having divorced its most powerful constituency in *society*, the PAP survived and flourished through its marriage with an even greater power: the *state*. By crafting "a coalition between political leadership and the civilian bureaucracy,"⁶⁰ the PAP accrued the centralized coercive and administrative power necessary to overwhelm political opposition. Systematic coercion was the bluntest instrument in the party-state's arsenal, most fearsomely deployed when twenty-four Barisan leaders and over a hundred leftist activists were detained in "Operation Cold Store" in February 1963. Subsequent elections delivered 37 of 51 parliamentary seats to the PAP. As the PAP's Toh Chin Chye would later explain his party's landslide victory over the Barisan: "The General Elections were held after Operation Cold Store, when their leaders were all in jail. That was the way it

⁵⁸ Bellows 1970: 21.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 28.

⁶⁰ Khong 1995: 115.

was.”⁶¹ With their position thus secured, PAP leaders quickly ordered more rounds of arrests and deportations to decimate the Barisan’s oppositional prospects even further.

The PAP’s big win in 1963 signified the political power of state administration as well as repression. Among the PAP’s many early initiatives, the most important was the Housing Development Board (HDB). “Of all social activities, the public housing program has been the most important means of ensuring the political legitimacy of PAP and achieving domestic social and political stability,” writes Bae-Gyoon Park. “When Singapore attained self-rule in 1959, the new government inherited an extremely overcrowded city....In the context of housing problems, it began a massive public housing program, which turned out to be an instrument by which to maintain the ideological hegemony of the PAP and incorporate the popular sectors in the state apparatus.” This highly interventionist policy presupposed a highly capable state, resting upon “the effective enforcement of compulsory land-acquisition policies” which “authorized the HDB to acquire, through compulsion, any private land for its development programs.” One cannot understand how the HDB expresses state power without understanding that the Singaporean state owns “almost 80 percent of the entire landmass”⁶²; and one cannot understand its successful appropriation of virtually all national territory from private hands except as an assertion of inherited state power.

Housing was only one early policy manifestation of the Singapore state’s institutional might. The PAP’s first term in office from 1959-63 had witnessed “the construction of 24,000 public housing units, a new school ‘every three weeks,’ every

⁶¹ Quoted in Lau (2003: 30).

⁶² Park 1998: 283-285. On the need for strong state institutions to implement administratively challenging social policies more generally, including in Singapore, see Doner, Ritchie, and Slater (2005).

child provided with free primary education, better business climate, infrastructural improvements, the development of the new Jurong industrial site, and a budgetary surplus of \$400 million after four years of government.”⁶³ After a tumultuous experiment with merger into Malaysia from 1963-65, the PAP cemented its authority by building up state rather than party institutions. The cornerstone of this effort was the creation of Citizens’ Consultative Committees as state agencies at the grassroots level. These bodies “firmly established the Government’s presence amongst the people,” as PAP elites could be seen “rejecting the partisan political structure (the party organization) and concentrating on the spread of legitimacy and influence and scope of the governmental institutions.” As Chan Heng Chee portrays state rather than party preeminence in postcolonial Singapore:

“In contrast to most ruling parties in dominant party systems and one-party systems, the PAP has not nurtured an extensive party bureaucracy, nor has it seriously endeavored to develop the active participation and education of its membership. In fact the evidence from the field research points to a fairly decentralized and lethargic party structure with a modest number of party activists....The essentially dormant and underdeveloped party organization however is more than compensated by the growth of governmental grassroots institutions.”⁶⁴

On the fiscal side, the core of Singaporean state-building since 1965 has been the continued and enhanced mobilization of revenue through the tax system and the CPF. Even as “the departmental structure of the bureaucracy changed very little,” writes Natasha Hamilton-Hart, “[g]overnment revenues escalated....from 16 percent of GDP in the first half of the 1960s to 29 percent in the second half of the 1980s.”⁶⁵ The ruling regime has used compulsory contributions to its highly efficient national provident fund

⁶³ Ibid. 43.

⁶⁴ Chan 1976: 225.

⁶⁵ Hamilton-Hart 2002: 80, 147.

to lessen its financial dependence abroad, and to cultivate political quiescence within. In 1968, the PAP cleverly married its most notable institution for fiscal extraction with its main institution for welfare provision, permitting Singaporeans to withdraw a portion of their CPF savings to purchase HDB condominiums. That same year saw the PAP win a complete monopoly of parliamentary seats in national elections for the first time – a monopoly that has barely been dented in the four decades since.

State-Building in Postcolonial Malaysia

Malaysia's UMNO-led Alliance was far less interventionist following independence in 1957 than Singapore's PAP – and it would pay a heavy price for not leveraging Leviathan's might in search of popular support. Having secured power through a series of decolonizing elections in the mid-1950s, the ruling Alliance of UMNO and its ethnic Chinese and Indian coalition partners maintained parliamentary supermajorities in the national elections of 1959 and 1964. But it suffered a nasty shock in the 1969 elections, losing its two-thirds majority for the first time (and the last time, until 2008). Post-election riots pitting exultant Chinese oppositionists against pro-UMNO Malays prompted the UMNO leadership to declare martial law, suspend parliament, and rule for two years through an interim National Operations Council (NOC).

What emerged from this two-year interlude was a far more authoritarian political arrangement, with the Alliance expanded into a wider party coalition, the BN, hence restoring the government's two-thirds majority. Yet the shift was not simply in the *policies* that defined the *regime*; it also reshaped the *institutions* that defined the *state*.

CENTRALIZATION

First, the political center tightened its grip over the periphery. The period from 1969-1976 has been described by Robert Tilman as a time of “unequivocal centralization”⁶⁶:

“During the period of rule by the National Operations Council (May 15, 1969 – February 20, 1971) there were no legal pretences made about sharing ultimate political authority between the Federal Government and the states...[A]t the end of the emergency some of the ‘temporary’ provisions that granted additional powers to the central government were made a permanent part of the Constitution.”⁶⁷

This means that Malaysia’s political leaders have never been effectively constrained by countervailing power centers at the state or local level – either in the form of internal government critics, or of oppositionists with effective power in parochial bailiwicks. Critically, “local government elections, last held in 1969, were not restored.”⁶⁸ Local officials are instead handpicked by officials at the state level, who are handpicked in turn by BN leaders in Kuala Lumpur. Administrative centralization and consolidation were expressed most vigorously in the Local Government Act of 1976, which dramatically reduced the total number of local government bodies and reinforced the “total dependence of the third tier of administration on the second and first tiers.”⁶⁹

More importantly, the first (federal) tier utterly dominates the second (state) tier – and this domination has grown over time. To be sure, Malay sultans have retained symbolic authority at the state level. Yet the UMNO leadership enjoyed resounding success in its efforts to strip the sultans of any capacity to influence political outcomes at

⁶⁶ Tilman 1976: 63.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 63.

⁶⁸ Faruqi 1995: 13.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 17.

the national level during a series of political maneuvers in the 1980s and 1990s. In sum, the trend Tilman identified in 1976 has become even more pronounced over time: “Among the state units centralization has met only isolated pockets of resistance, each of which has eventually been overcome by the superior force of the center, a superiority that increased with each additional accretion of power.”⁷⁰ State-level resistance to federal encroachments has been made all but unthinkable by the central government’s command over coercive and administrative power in the Malaysian polity.

COERCION

The relative robustness of the Malaysian state begins, but by no means ends, with its coercive institutions. As Simon Barraclough argued more than twenty years ago, the government’s policing powers have long been more than adequate to counter any threats to the ruling regime as it defines them:

“The physical capacity of the Malaysian Government to apply coercive measures is beyond question. At independence, the Alliance Government inherited a sophisticated coercive machine developed by the British to counter both the challenge of Communist insurgency and radical Malay nationalism. Malaysia is reputed to have one of the most efficient Special Branch forces in the region. In the event of demonstrations or acts of civil disobedience, an efficient communication system enables units of the Federal Reserve Unit (FRU) and Light Strike Force to speedily reinforce the constabulary. Should the necessity arise, the Royal Malaysian Police’s para-military wing, the Special Field Force, may be called in. In the event of grave disorder, the army may be deployed, as was the case during the May 1969 communal riots.”⁷¹

Yet military intervention has virtually never been necessary in Malaysia’s authoritarian era. Nor has the BN regime felt a need to mobilize auxiliary security forces to

⁷⁰ Tilman 1976: 1.

⁷¹ Barraclough 1985: 800.

complement its own coercive power. In large measure this is because of the state's success after 1969 at asserting control over both religious and student associations: two especially common sources of organized opposition to authoritarian rule.

Tight control and close supervision of Islamic institutions in Malaysia dates back to the colonial period. Yet government authorities considerably tightened these practices of control and surveillance in the 1960s and 1970s, and strengthened their grip over political Islam even further during the Mahathir era (1981-2003). In line with its centralization drive more generally, the BN government began usurping the power of individual states to regulate religious affairs on the heels of the 1969 riots. "A vast expansion of the Federal religious bureaucracy was projected" in the early-to-mid 1970s, "in part as a response to state prerogative in Islamic affairs."⁷² Amid growing Islamic political awareness throughout the 1970s and 1980s, pre-existing state religious institutions provided the basis for stepped-up control, as "the UMNO government launched an unprecedented degree of restructuring, both in scale and in scope, of Islamic institutions."⁷³ As Shanti Nair argues: "The bureaucratization of religious authority....allowed for the control of increasing religious diversity perceived as a challenge to the Administration's authority."⁷⁴

State power has bridled student oppositionists as well. Malaysia witnessed only one major outbreak of student protest between the inception of BN rule and the *reformasi* movement in 1998-99. As Barraclough vividly describes the regime's response:

⁷² Nair 1997: 31.

⁷³ Hamayotsu 2002: 358.

⁷⁴ Nair 1997: 34.

“In 1974, both prosecutions and detentions without trial were used against students and academic staff involved in mobilizing mass demonstrations. . . . The Government reacted by arresting students for illegal assembly, suspending a number of institutions, and threatening students with the cancellation of their enrolment and scholarships. Following extensive student demonstrations in December 1974, even tougher measures were adopted. A number of marches were dispersed by elements of the Federal Reserve Unit and Police Field Force, more than 1,000 students were arrested for illegal assembly, and a number of student leaders and academic staff were detained under the Internal Security Act. . . . Such stern measures, combined with subsequent legislation further restricting student political involvement, effectively ended campus-based political activism in Malaysia.”⁷⁵

EXTRACTION

Highly capable extractive institutions bankroll and bolster Malaysia’s mighty coercive institutions. We have already seen how the colonial Malayan government imposed direct taxes and introduced the Employees’ Provident Fund (EPF) against the backdrop of mass leftist mobilization in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The riots of May 1969 only increased the UMNO-led regime’s extractive appetite, as authoritarian leaders sought to leverage Leviathan “to promote rapid Malay economic advancement,” writes Clive Kessler. “While this had always been part of UMNO policy, it was now to be pursued with an unprecedented determination, and with vast government resources.”⁷⁶

The cornerstone of this more determined approach was the New Economic Policy, or NEP. “The most salient aspect of the plan was the restructuring of wealth ownership,” notes James Jesudason. “Malays and Malay interests (that is, government trust agencies and state enterprises) were targeted to own at least 30 per cent of the share capital of the corporate sector by 1990, from a base of less than 2 per cent in 1970.”⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Barraclough 1985: 814.

⁷⁶ Kessler 1980: 7.

⁷⁷ Jesudason 1989: 71-72.

The NEP both exemplified and expanded the extractive power of the state. “The NEP itself was in a sense a product of Malaysia’s bureaucracy.”⁷⁸ State cohesion assured the relatively efficient extraction of corporate wealth into government trusts and corporations. While rampant corruption and favoritism have marred the *distribution* of resources from state agencies to their corporate clients, these agencies’ bountiful assets are a tribute to their efficient *collection* in the first place.

This accumulation of corporate assets has thus served to complement the Malaysian state’s fiscal power. Thanks to continued effective collection of income taxes and ever-growing demands upon the corporate sector, Malaysia’s “percentage of government revenue to national income was the highest in South-East Asia” as of the mid-1960s.⁷⁹ As Mukul Asher depicts the spike in Malaysian taxation after the 1969 crisis:

“The tax effort indicator for Malaysia, after generally stagnating in the 1960s, showed a rapid rise in the 1970s...It is more than three times that of Indonesia, if oil revenues are excluded, and almost twice that of Thailand. The main reason for this high ratio is the conscious policy of using the government sector to increase the relative share of national income going to bumiputras.⁸⁰ This policy has resulted in a very high level of government expenditure to G.D.P. (about 35 per cent in 1977), thus necessitating a corresponding rise in the tax effort as well.”⁸¹

While redistributive pressures help explain why Malaysian authorities had such a strong *incentive* to increase their tax yield after 1969, they do not explain the state’s *capacity*, not only to deliver the goods, but to collect them. This was largely a legacy of earlier bouts of state-building, which made it easier for the bureaucracy to be “disciplined and

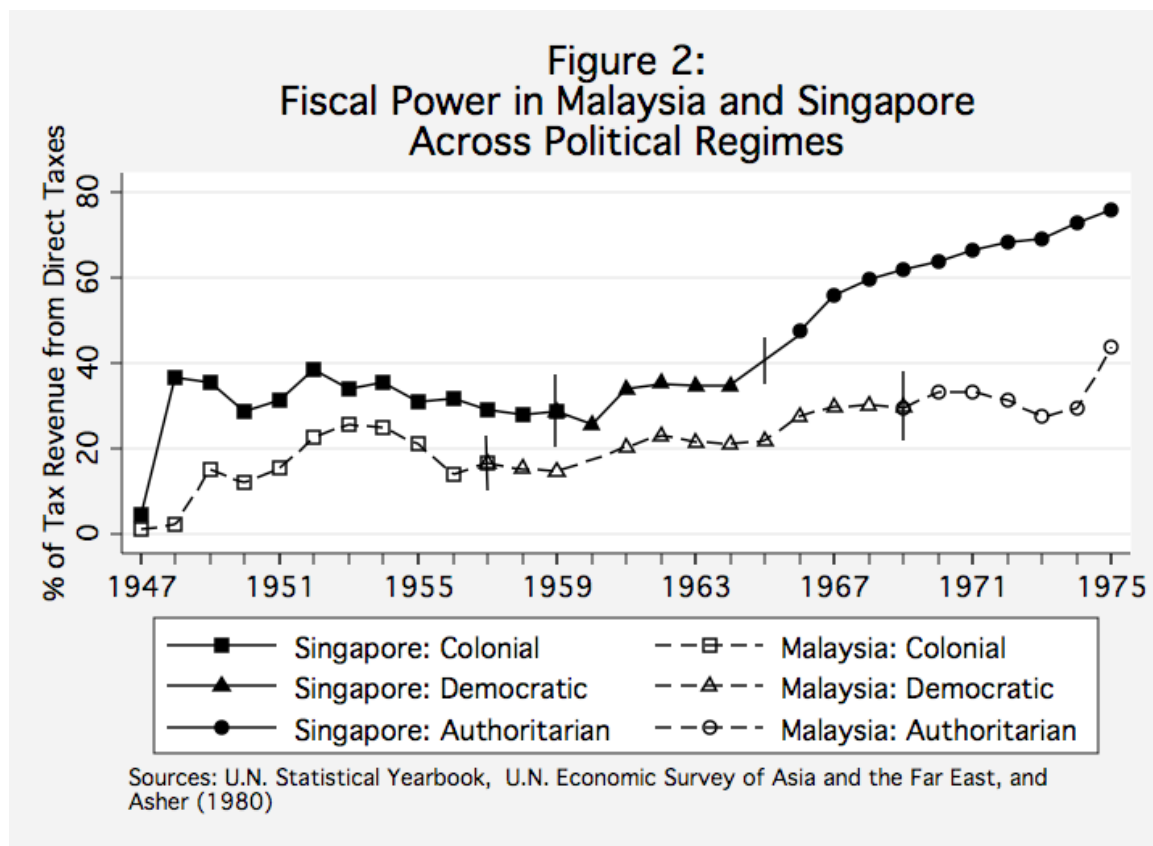
⁷⁸ Hamilton-Hart 2002: 111.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 49.

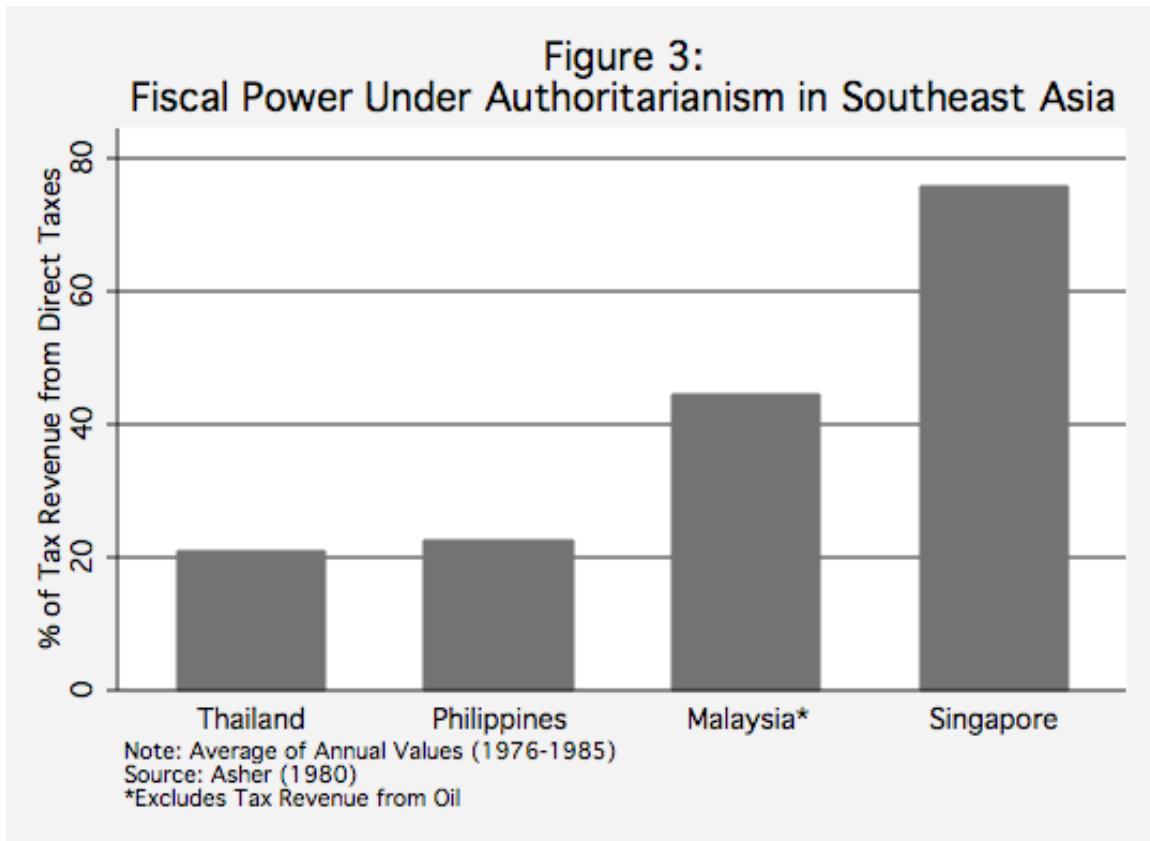
⁸⁰ Bumiputra means “sons of the soil” in Malay, reflecting Malays’ claim to indigenous status.

⁸¹ Asher 1980: 16.

effective when it came to such tasks as revenue-gathering and data-collecting.”⁸² For evidence that this fiscal power represented continuity and not a radical departure from earlier patterns of state-building, consider how fiscal strengthening *preceded* full-blown postcolonial authoritarianism, not only in Malaysia but in Singapore as well. (See Figure 2.) As a gauge on how authoritarian regimes in Malaysia and Singapore possessed mightier extractive Leviathans than their counterparts in the Philippines or Thailand, Figure 3 shows the stark divergence in fiscal power during the decade from 1976-85, when authoritarian regimes held power in all four countries.



⁸² Hamilton-Hart 2002: 111. This author concurs with Asher’s conclusion that post-1969 taxation far outstripped pre-1969 taxation: “An effective tax collection infrastructure raised government revenues from a relatively high (by developing country standards) 19 percent of GDP in the second half of the 1960s to 27 percent or more since the early 1980s” (Asher 1980: 148-149).



Tax revenue and NEP assets by no means exhaust the fiscal power of the Malaysian state. Most notably, the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) has provided an ideal institutional mechanism for the Malaysian state to sink its fiscal claws into the country's growing middle class. "The EPF has been the major source of funds for the government."⁸³ It has played such a prominent role in Malaysian public finance because of its broad scope of coverage, its steep rates of mandatory contribution, and the administrative effectiveness with which compulsory contributions have been collected.

The EPF already held ten times the assets of Malaysia's private pension funds combined by 1965.⁸⁴ In 1971, the government ensured that the EPF would be the only

⁸³ Herbert 1994: 127.

⁸⁴ Edwards 1970: 284.

pension fund in town, as “the law ceased to allow any new private provident funds to be established,” and “all employees irrespective of wages and size of their establishments were covered by the EPF on a compulsory basis.” This ensured that the financial savings arising from Malaysia’s economic boom would accrue to the state more than the private sector. By 1994, the EPF was collecting compulsory contributions from 6.6 million employees and 210,000 employers.⁸⁵

Not only was the EPF collecting contributions from 89% of the Malaysian workforce by the early 1990s.⁸⁶ Its rates of contribution from both employers and employees, along with those in Singapore next door, were described as “the highest in the world.”⁸⁷ Starting at a 5% mandatory contribution from both employers and employees in 1952, rates were raised incrementally in 1975, 1980, and 1993 to extract 10% of paychecks from employees and 12% from employers.⁸⁸ In sum, the Malaysian state was collecting 22% of the salary of 89% of the Malaysian workforce through the EPF, *in addition* to the country’s already high rates of direct taxation.

Since the time-lag between collection and payout on such provident funds is measured in decades, state authorities consistently enjoy a large surplus of funds to play with. Yet these funds do not collect themselves. “The administrative ability to collect and manage funds is a condition of such appropriation,” writes Hamilton-Hart. “To enforce contributions, the EPF developed an active field inspection staff in its early years and

⁸⁵ Salehuddin 1994: 259.

⁸⁶ Hamilton-Hart 2002: 148.

⁸⁷ Asher 1994: 238.

⁸⁸ Salehuddin 1994: 259.

published information on defaulting employers. The 7,236 prosecutions of employers between 1990 and 1994 suggests vigorous enforcement.”⁸⁹

As if Malaysia’s NEP, EPF, and direct tax system were not enough to make the state a paragon of fiscal power, the country was also a beneficiary of the oil booms of the 1970s. Since Malaysia’s extractive institutions had already been performing comparatively well for decades, petroleum wealth has not seemed to suppress tax effort in other areas, as conventional wisdom would lead us to expect.⁹⁰ The state oil firm, Petronas, has been associated with a number of financial boondoggles as it was enlisted to help bankroll Malaysia’s heavy-industry drive of the 1980s and privatization policies of the 1990s. Yet the firm itself has been quite professionally run, helping it maintain enormous financial reserves for the past thirty years. Alongside the EPF and state trust agencies founded under the NEP, Petronas provides yet another bountiful source of patronage funds to help the Malaysian leadership keep politics stable.

In sum, the Malaysian and Singaporean states have served as ideal power apparatuses for the regimes that have controlled them. This largely explains why neither UMNO nor the PAP has ever lost political control, or even allowed major opposition challenges to emerge in the first place. The best way to confirm this point is by showing how little success was gained by what was undoubtedly the strongest mass opposition movement to emerge in either Malaysia or Singapore during their postcolonial history: the Malaysian *reformasi* movement.

⁸⁹ Hamilton-Hart 2002: 148-149.

⁹⁰ A study of Malaysian taxation from 1987-94 found that non-oil corporate taxes amounted to nearly twice the total haul of taxes on oil companies in that period (Kasipillai and Shanmugam 1996: 143-144). For a revisionist argument that oil windfalls strengthen state institutions that already exhibit significant capacity, see Smith (2007).

IV. State Power as Staying Power: *Reformasi* and Regime Durability in Malaysia

“Mahathir invited Anwar onto the bus. Then Mahathir let Anwar sit next to him while he drove the bus. But then Mahathir thought Anwar wanted to drive, so he kicked him off the bus. And now, Mahathir is chasing Anwar....with the bus!”

A Malaysian friend
Kuala Lumpur, September 1998

“From our experience in the ‘50s and ‘60s, we know what we are dealing with....”
Abdul Rahim Noor, Malaysian Inspector-General of Police⁹¹

For all its remarkable political stability throughout its first 40 years of independence and the first 25 years of BN rule, Malaysia seemed potentially ripe for a democratic transition by late 1997. Both economic and political factors were conspiring to weaken the grip of Mahathir Mohamad and his closest allies. First, the Malaysian economy was suffering a crisis of unprecedented proportions. And second, the Mahathir regime had become widely perceived as increasingly personalized and despotic.⁹² While economic collapse and political personalization are widely hypothesized to undermine authoritarian regimes in general, this would not prove to be the case in Malaysia. Political events from 1997-99 would not be a tale of “people power,” but of state power and staying power.

The Asian financial crisis that commenced with the devaluation of the Thai baht in July 1997 had devastated the Malaysian economy by the end of the year. It unleashed a “triple disaster” of currency devaluation, stock market collapse, and the implosion of the real estate market.⁹³ The Malaysian ringgit lost more than 50% of its value in a matter of

⁹¹ Quoted in “Police outlaw all ‘reformation meetings,’” *The Star*, 23 September 1998.

⁹² For details on Mahathir’s personalization of power during the 1988-98 period, see Slater (2003).

⁹³ Hwang 2003: 280.

months. Meanwhile, the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange lost more than 60% of its capitalization, leaving the bourse “littered with penny stocks.”⁹⁴

Thanks to the Malaysian state’s fiscal power, however, public debt remained quite small, and much of the private sector’s gargantuan debt was owed to domestic rather than foreign institutions. So while the Malaysian private sector absorbed a powerful financial punch, it had access to an extraordinarily strong state to cushion the blow. Simply put, Malaysia “managed to stave off an Indonesian-style crisis only because, unlike much of Asia, the bulk of its debt is in local currency.”⁹⁵ Thanks to these stronger initial fundamentals, Malaysian authorities were able to keep interest rates lower than in neighboring countries throughout the crisis, and use domestic funds rather than IMF monies to buy out the banking sector’s enormous overhang of non-performing loans.

Malaysia’s government not only entered the crisis with enviable levels of foreign reserves; it also had direct access to a cornucopia of local funding sources that had gotten more bountiful over the preceding decades. The two most important were the state provident fund, the EPF, and the state oil company, Petronas. Each held far more reserves than the Malaysian central bank when the crisis hit – approximately US\$34 billion in the case of the EPF,⁹⁶ and US\$25 billion in the case of Petronas.⁹⁷ As the currency and stock market crashes sent corporate debt among Malaysian companies through the stratosphere, economic elites looked to these funds – and the UMNO officials who held the purse-strings – for their financial salvation. As a samizdat comedy troupe in Kuala Lumpur

⁹⁴ This phrase and the gross losses of the KLSE are from Eddie Toh, “Mahathir: worst not over but there won’t be racial riots,” *Business Times* (Singapore), 15 July 1998.

⁹⁵ Salil Tripathi, “Savings at Risk,” *FEER*, 30 April 1998.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* The EPF reserves alone amounted to 55% of Malaysia’s annual GDP.

⁹⁷ Choong Tet Sieu and Arjuna Ranawana, “Filling Up at Petronas,” *Asiaweek*, 13 November 1998.

lamponed the lobbying of Malaysian corporate leaders in the halls of power: “[W]e don’t want the IMF. All we need is the EPF.”⁹⁸

The politics of corporate bailouts was far from uncontroversial, however. Disagreements over the proper amount of public support for insolvent firms increasingly drove a wedge between Mahathir and his popular deputy, Anwar Ibrahim.⁹⁹ While Anwar publicly expressed concern that bailouts should not be so excessive as to compromise foreign investor confidence or to risk the savings of EPF contributors, Mahathir was committed to avoiding Schumpeterian creative destruction at all costs. Tensions worsened when Petronas, under Mahathir’s control, announced that one of its subsidiaries was buying a heavily indebted shipping concern. The deal would use US\$220 million in state funds to wipe out the personal debts of the company’s chief executive: Mirzan Mahathir, the prime minister’s oldest son. When Anwar insisted upon an independent audit, he aggravated worries in Mahathir’s inner circle that Anwar might not be a reliable champion should he capture power.

In spite of Anwar’s protestations of loyalty, “Mahathir’s distrust of his protégé became irreversible.”¹⁰⁰ The trick for Mahathir was to dispose of his deputy without sending Malaysia’s financial markets into a tailspin, since Anwar was viewed internationally as the only leading figure in the government committed to pursuing economic reforms. Mahathir found the solution in a one-two punch: on the first day of September, he imposed capital controls and fixed the value of the national currency, making it impossible for foreign investors to repatriate their capital or speculate against

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ For an overview of the Anwar-Mahathir rivalry before the financial crisis, see Hwang (2003: 276-88).

¹⁰⁰ Hwang 2003: 302.

the ringgit. This was only a conceivable strategy in Malaysia – unlike Indonesia or Thailand – because the fiscally powerful government had the capacity to fund the immense cost of economic recovery from within, and because the Malaysian bureaucracy had enough institutional capacity to implement a complex set of controls coherently.¹⁰¹ Once these controls were imposed, Mahathir had Anwar expelled, first from the cabinet, and then from UMNO entirely – ostensibly on the grounds that he was a homosexual, and had abused his political power to stonewall a police inquiry into his private life.

Thus was the battle between Mahathir and Anwar officially joined. Yet it was anything but a fair fight. Anwar’s disadvantage was not individual, but institutional. “Anwar is popular on the ground,” argued Jomo K.S. in the aftermath of the purge; “but organizationally he is weak.”¹⁰² Or, in the more colorful phrasing of my Malaysian friend quoted above, Mahathir was battling Anwar as if he were the driver of a bus chasing down a helpless victim on the road.

The extraordinary cohesion of UMNO and the BN left Anwar virtually friendless at the elite level. Only three out of forty members of UMNO’s supreme council reportedly spoke in Anwar’s defense at the meeting where Mahathir demanded his expulsion.¹⁰³ Demands for unanimity filtered down to state and local branches of UMNO. “Since Perak Umno has taken a stand and unequivocally supported the Prime Minister and the president,” said Perak’s UMNO chief in a typical comment, “no UMNO committee

¹⁰¹ For an argument that variation in state capacity meant Malaysia could impose capital controls while Indonesia could not, see Hamilton-Hart (2002). For an argument that coalitional rather than institutional differences explain this divergence, see Pepinsky (2008).

¹⁰² Quoted in Choong Tet Sieu and Arjuna Ranawana, “A Case of Order and Disorder,” *Asiaweek*, 16 October 1998.

¹⁰³ S. Jayasankaran, “Protege to Pariah,” *FEER*, 17 September 1998.

member should oppose the decision made.”¹⁰⁴ Since expulsion from UMNO would mean exclusion from the patronage networks of the Malaysian state – a state well-heeled enough to stay flush during an epochal regional financial crisis – one cannot ignore the role of state power in facilitating party cohesion.

With any dreams of defeating Mahathir from within the system dashed, Anwar looked to his grassroots support base to help save him from political destruction. Yet at the mass level as at the elite level, individual popularity could not trump institutional weakness. Facing a highly cohesive and compliant police force armed with a battery of coercive regulations against public speech and assembly, Anwar had few options as he sought to take his message to the streets.

Most notably, Malaysian police have the authority to disband any public gathering of more than four individuals unless the group obtains an official permit. For the first week after his dismissal, then, Anwar was mostly relegated to addressing boisterous crowds numbering in the low thousands at his own home in Kuala Lumpur. “Anwar clearly has a lot of support,” reported the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. “Each day since his ouster, thousands of people – ranging from punk rockers with orange-dyed hair to bearded Islamic teachers, businessmen, activists and opposition politicians – have come to visit the former minister at his relatively modest private house in Kuala Lumpur.”¹⁰⁵ Yet his calls for the abolition of the Internal Security Act (ISA), the pursuit of social justice and economic redistribution, and an end to high-level corruption – in a word, *reformasi* – were totally ignored in the government-linked mainstream press, which preserved its long-held state-secured monopoly over the printed journalistic word.

¹⁰⁴ “Get the facts first, Ghani tells Abim,” *The Star*, 10 September 1998.

¹⁰⁵ Murray Hiebert and Andrew Sherry, “After the Fall,” *FEER*, 17 September 1998.

As Anwar ventured cautiously into the wider public sphere, he ran headlong into the tight authoritarian restrictions of Malaysia's highly organized party-state. After addressing a throng of supporters after Friday prayers at a mosque in the Kampung Baru section of KL, UMNO's information chief ominously intoned: "Misuse of mosques can confuse the people particularly during the present economic and political situation." The official sought to seal off campus protest as well, warning Anwar not "to use university students to advance his personal interests," and urging top administrators at Malaysian universities to impart the "correct information" about Anwar's sacking to students to prevent them from becoming "tools" of his political movement.¹⁰⁶ A week later, the Prime Minister's Religious Affairs Department ordered authorities at the same downtown mosque to deny Anwar the use of its sound system after Friday prayers, leaving him to address his 2,000 supporters outside with a portable loudspeaker system.¹⁰⁷

Anwar encountered both significant mass support and significant state restrictions as he commenced a "road show" to drum up backing outside the nation's capital. An estimated 10,000 supporters turned out in a suburb of KL to see Anwar speak at an institute run by a pro-*reformasi* Islamic scholar; but the police shut down the gathering before Anwar could even appear.¹⁰⁸ Before a subsequent rally in Malacca, authorities similarly denied a police permit, then reportedly went on to padlock and cut the electricity to the assembly hall where Anwar had planned to speak, and announce on the radio that the meeting was forbidden to scare off Anwar's supporters.

¹⁰⁶ "Yusof: Don't misuse mosques," *The Star*, 6 September 1998.

¹⁰⁷ "I will keep on fighting: Anwar," *Business Times* (Singapore), 12 September 1998.

¹⁰⁸ "Anwar's Gathering in Bangi Cancelled on Police Directive," *Malaysia General News*, 11 September 1998. Accessed through Lexis-Nexis.

State repression was not limited to public rallies. In response to Anwar's effort to drum up support among Muslim associations, *Pusat Islam* (Islamic Center), "the government's religious watchdog," announced that it was investigating the activities of 55 religious groups, and that leaders of the national police were prepared to do their "own assessment on the danger of such teachings."¹⁰⁹ Police seized hundreds of reproductions of Anwar's speeches after his mass rally in Kajang, Selangor, and the police's deputy commander announced that anyone caught distributing such political materials would be arrested and imprisoned under the Printing Presses and Publications Act.¹¹⁰

On the night of September 19th, Anwar made his clearest threat to launch a full-blown "people power" movement before an audience of 10,000 in Batu Pahat, Johor. "Do you want to resign now," he asked Mahathir, "or do you want to end up like Suharto and Marcos?"¹¹¹ The next day, when Anwar finally brought his "road show" of *reformasi* protests back to KL, the regime's low threshold of tolerance for street politics was breached. Approximately 30,000 protestors gathered with Anwar at the downtown National Mosque after Friday prayers. The throng marched the short distance to Independence Square, where they expected to hear Anwar denounce the Mahathir regime at the symbolic heart of the Malaysian polity. Police threats of a crackdown convinced Anwar not to attend or address the rally, however; the leaderless crowd of approximately 40,000 remained "well behaved" in the face of ten truckloads of riot police.¹¹² When an estimated 5,000 marchers broke off from the crowd and marched toward the prime

¹⁰⁹ "Watch on 55 religious groups," *The Star*, 18 September 1998.

¹¹⁰ "Action against Anwar for speech in Kajang," *The Star*, 18 September 1998.

¹¹¹ Quoted in Eddie Toh and Ruth Wong, "Anwar arrested after day of high drama," *Business Times* (Singapore), 21 September 1998.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

minister's residence to demand Mahathir's resignation, they confronted another phalanx of riot police, who attacked the protestors with tear gas and water cannon.¹¹³ Meanwhile, a police special operations unit forcibly entered Anwar's residence, taking him into custody under the ISA. He would quickly receive a savage physical beating at the hands of the Inspector-General of Police while being held in solitary confinement.

In the days that followed, the Mahathir regime used its coercive power to crush *reformasi* at both the elite and mass level. Although Anwar's public support from elites was minimal, the government took no chances, detaining twenty elite Anwar supporters under ISA restrictions during the remainder of the month.¹¹⁴ Solitary confinement did the trick in puncturing Anwar's paper-thin layer of open elite support. Even UMNO Youth leader Zahid Hamidi, Anwar's most unabashed elite backer, promised to support Mahathir after barely a week in detention, declaring upon his release that "I have never been and will not be involved in the reformation movement."¹¹⁵

For most elite supporters of Anwar, the extreme measure of ISA detention proved unnecessary for evoking expressions of renewed loyalty to the government. Anwar's supporters in civil society quickly came to understand the extent of the BN regime's coercive power as well. The swiftness, certainty, and thoroughness with which the Malaysian police suppressed the demonstrations following Anwar's arrest made it difficult for the protest movement to gain momentum. In William Case's apt phrase, the

¹¹³ All crowd estimates in this paragraph are from Reuters News Service, as cited in "Malaysia police clash with Anwar supporters," *Business Times* (Singapore), 21 September 1998.

¹¹⁴ For biographical information on the twelve figures arrested under ISA during the first two days after Anwar's arrest, see "Background of those detained under ISA," *New Straits Times*, 23 September 1998. Accessed at Lexis-Nexis.

¹¹⁵ Quoted in "Umno Youth chief quits post, severs ties with reform group," *Business Times* (Singapore), 3 October 1998.

Malaysian police proved to be “fearsome defenders of executive prerogatives” throughout the political crisis.¹¹⁶ As one protestor explained his group’s quickness to disperse as the ubiquitous batons, tear gas cannisters, and water cannon (often laced with skin-burning chemicals) approached: “It’s not that we are scared, but we are fighting for reform and we can’t do that if every one of us gets arrested.”¹¹⁷ With no realistic hope that the police might refrain from using force or split into factions, the considerable groundswell of urban opposition to Mahathir could not reach critical mass.

This is not to say that the Mahathir regime was only saved by its coercive institutions. The Malaysian government could draw upon the capacity of its administrative institutions to reduce active support for the *reformasi* protests in the first place. For students, joining protests entailed not just a likely physical beating, but probable professional ruination as well. Education minister Najib Abdul Razak repeatedly reminded students that the Universities and Colleges Act prohibited students from political participation, under penalty of expulsion: in short, “they cannot get involved.”¹¹⁸ Since the Malaysian state’s capacity to monitor student activism is unquestioned, such comments were not mere threats, but promises.

Such infrastructural power is also evident in the administrative regulation of political Islam. Mahathir instantly served notice after Anwar’s arrest that Islam would be no safe haven from which to protest his rule, announcing zero tolerance for any protest activity at the National Mosque.¹¹⁹ Strict government control over the content of

¹¹⁶ Case 2001: 45.

¹¹⁷ “Protesters flee police but vow to fight on,” *Business Times* (Singapore), 22 September 1998.

¹¹⁸ “Stay clear of movement, students told,” *The Star*, 19 September 1998.

¹¹⁹ Wan Hamidi Hamid, “PM: Religion being misused,” *The Star*, 25 September 1998.

discourse in religious institutions has long extended throughout Malaysian territory, thanks to the BN regime's thorough co-optation of powerholders at the state level, where religious doctrines are ostensibly established. The chief minister of Perak served notice that *imams* in his state would be closely monitored to prevent the dissemination of pro-*reformasi* themes, insisting that "mosque officials should only deliver the sermons from the text prepared by the state religious department."¹²⁰

With the economy on the road to recovery and the *reformasi* movement effectively on life support, Mahathir called for elections in November 1999. Public outrage toward Mahathir over Anwar's imprisonment and subsequent conviction to a sentence of 15 years in federal prison cost the BN a sizable share of its Malay support, as UMNO lost twenty of its 92 parliamentary seats. Yet non-Malay voters stayed firmly attached to the BN, helping to deliver it another two-thirds-plus parliamentary supermajority.

Epilogue: The Apparent Death and Rebirth of Reformasi, 2003-08

Thanks to Mahathir's resignation in October 2003, even the modest anti-Mahathir protest vote from 1999 vanished in the general elections of 2004, delivering an unprecedented landslide victory to BN parties across the board. The BN's vote share leaped from 56.5% to 69.3%, and its edge in parliamentary seats swelled from 147-42 to 198-20. By 2004, then, it appeared that Malaysian authorities had succeeded in suppressing the *reformasi* movement and reestablishing their iron grip on power.

Confirmation of the importance of highly coercive and centralized state institutions in *reformasi*'s apparent death can ironically be located in its apparent recent

¹²⁰ Zulkifli Abdul Rahman and Raslan Baharom, "Moral courses for Umno men," *The Star*, 6 October 1998.

rebirth. While the outcome of any single election is always the product of a multiplicity of proximate causal factors, one cannot understand how the BN lost its two-thirds majority in the March 2008 elections without recognizing the reduction in repression that accompanied Mahathir's replacement as prime minister with Abdullah Badawi. Most importantly, Badawi permitted Anwar Ibrahim's release from prison after the BN's landslide 2004 win, permitting much more effective opposition mobilization and coordination than when its leader was behind bars during the 1999 and 2004 campaigns.

My post-election interviews with Malaysian oppositionists, academics, and media analysts confirm that state repression became less swift and certain – if by no means absent – under Badawi's watch. This allowed the opposition to test the limits of the BN regime's tolerance for protest, as seen in the sizable opposition rallies which gradually gathered strength during the 2008 election campaign. This lessening of coercion has made the Malaysian polity less effectively centralized, at least for the time being. Formally a federal system, Malaysia seemed *de facto* unitary so long as the BN kept abusing state power to win electoral landslides. Even when opposition parties captured individual states, regime leaders would routinely deny them access to centralized patronage resources, strong-arming voters to reconsider their decision to freely exercise their ostensible democratic privileges. While local elections remain banned in Malaysia, state-level elections in 2008 placed five of the country's thirteen states under opposition control. An opportunity has thus opened for the Anwar-led opposition to pursue the parochial route to national power – but only if the recent wavering in the regime leadership's willingness to use its powerful iron fist continues.

V. Conclusion: State Power and Durable Authoritarianism

The state may have regained its centrality in comparative politics, but it remains curiously marginal in the study of durable authoritarianism. Especially if we wish to distinguish highly durable regimes such as Malaysia's and Singapore's from more unstable or untested authoritarian arrangements, this neglect is unfortunate. Our rightful emphasis on ruling parties in institutionalist research on authoritarianism should not ignore the point that state power facilitates party cohesion in the first place. Cohesive ruling parties can be a sign of authoritarian stability as much as its source.

My analysis of Malaysia and Singapore suggests that state power enhances staying power through multiple mechanisms – thus requiring that we analyze state power in its multiple dimensions. Attention to administrative institutions is critical because they prove essential for *registering* and extracting *revenue* from the general population. Unlike works stressing fiscal *contracts* as the mechanism through which revenues influence regimes, I have stressed the importance of fiscal *power*. Malaysia and Singapore defy the conventional wisdom that there exists an “interlocking iron triangle of revenue extraction, institutional development, and representative politics,”¹²¹ which purportedly helps explain everything from the origin of European parliaments (no taxation without representation) to the absence of democracy in the oil-rich Middle East (no representation without taxation). Regimes resting on the presence of fiscal power should be more durable than those resting on an absence of fiscal contracts, given their superior capacity to withstand and even avoid cyclical economic crises.

Variation in state *centralization* also has important implications for variation in regime durability. When local and state governments have been rendered politically

¹²¹ Vandewalle 1998: 20.

irrelevant, they cannot serve as stepping stones for challenges at the national level. The presence or absence of local elections would seem to be an especially important source of variation within “electoral authoritarian” regimes themselves. Even in “closed” regimes that have decentralized political and economic power in recent decades, such as China and Vietnam, we might expect more possibilities for political challenges than in more centralized states such as Malaysia and Singapore.

Another mechanism through which state power can enhance a regime’s staying power is through the effective delivery of *coercion*. The critical question is not how *much* coercion happens, but how *predictably* coercion happens. Crude proxies such as military spending cannot hope to capture variation in this critical causal factor,¹²² especially since *non*-reliance on the military can be precisely a sign that civilian institutions are capable of suppressing opposition on their own. Even in regimes such as Malaysia’s and Singapore’s where co-optation is obviously a big part of the equation, we cannot lose sight of the role of effective coercion in making some regimes more durable than others.

Speaking more generally, this essay has suggested that state power should become a much bigger focus of comparative research on authoritarian institutions than it has been to date. Most contemporary authoritarian regimes hold elections, organize parties, and convene parliaments; but whether such institutions tend to stabilize or destabilize authoritarian rule may depend more upon the backdrop of inherited state power against which they are built than any intrinsic features of those institutions.¹²³ Besides exhibiting longer and sturdier tenures in office, authoritarian regimes that enjoy access to a highly developed state apparatus should also generally produce higher rates of economic growth,

¹²² Ross 2001.

¹²³ For a parallel argument focused on parties rather than the state, see Brownlee (2007).

and be capable of dictating the terms of their eventual withdrawal from power – as the gradual and partial retreats of authoritarian elites in cases such as Chile, South Africa, South Korea, and Taiwan attest. In authoritarian regimes where the state power underlying regime durability is less pervasive yet still palpable – China, Cuba, Egypt, Russia, Tunisia, and Vietnam come to mind – theorists of authoritarianism should be as attentive to the inherited, evolving, and uneven capacities of the state apparatus as they are to the institutions that are typically taken to constitute the political regime.

Yet even the most highly developed and centralized coercive and administrative institutions do not function without the guidance and efforts of human agents – just as even the most luxurious automobile cannot simply propel and steer itself. What is needed is an approach to authoritarianism that is attentive both to the machinery of state and the operators of that machinery.¹²⁴ If we want to decipher the prospects for leaders of authoritarian regimes to respond to emergent challenges and crises in consistent and effective, regime-sustaining ways – and to remain cognizant of the potential for repressive reversals during moments of apparent liberalization – we cannot afford to ignore the quality and characteristics of the state machineries that they have inherited and commanded.

¹²⁴ For an initial attempt to mesh considerations of authoritarian institutions and autocratic agency, see Slater (2009).

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