



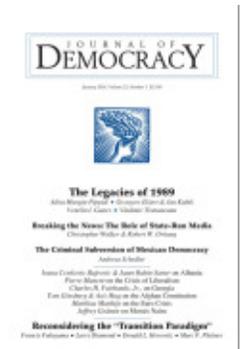
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## Malaysia's Resilient Pseudodemocracy

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# MALAYSIA'S RESILIENT PSEUDODEMOCRACY

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Malaysia and its leader, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, have swum sharply against the tide and regularly gotten away with it. Mahathir prolonged a “reverse-discrimination” program labeled the New Economic Policy (NEP) that favored ethnic Malay businessmen over local Chinese but gradually secured social peace. Despite these ethnic quotas and the voracious rent-seeking to which they gave rise, the economy continued to grow, even gathering pace during the 1990s. Toward the end of the decade, amid the region’s currency crisis, Mahathir jailed Anwar Ibrahim, his cosmopolitan deputy prime minister and finance minister, and imposed a heretical policy of capital controls. Yet despite thereby debasing its legal structures and alienating foreign investors, Malaysia is the only one of Southeast Asia’s so-called “tiger cubs” whose economy appears to have recovered.

What most stands out in Malaysia, however, is its political regime, which has variously been classified as a “pseudo-,” “semi-,” or “quasi-democracy.” While many of the world’s pseudodemocracies have lately made the transition to “unadulterated” democracy, Malaysia has bucked this trend. To be sure, pseudodemocracies offer more to their citizens than plainer authoritarian regimes; their governments tolerate opposition parties and hold elections regularly. Yet because civil liberties remain brittle, indeed retractable, pseudodemocracies “lack . . . an arena of contestation sufficiently fair that the ruling party can be turned out of power.”<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, pseudodemocracies have few of the protections associated with liberal democracy, but also lack the more systematic repression associated with hard authoritarianism. With the rules of the

game so vaguely demarcated and arbitrarily enforced, elites and social forces grow unsure about the acceptability of different behaviors, thus risking miscalculations and destabilizing confrontations.<sup>2</sup> Larry Diamond warns that the low level of institutionalization leaves pseudodemocracies “personalized, coercive, and unstable.”<sup>3</sup> Samuel Huntington states flatly that “the halfway house does not stand.”<sup>4</sup>

These doubts over pseudodemocracy’s capacity to persist have been borne out by some important regime changes during the past decade or so. Korea, Taiwan, Senegal, Mexico, and seemingly Yugoslavia—all one-time examples of pseudodemocracy—have evolved at varying rates into fuller democracies, with their dominant parties finally granting civil liberties and permitting competitive elections, meeting defeat, and then relinquishing executive power. Despite this empirical record, however, such halfway houses *can* endure if institutions are designed appropriately to guide elite and mass behavior along pseudodemocratic lines. Moreover, these institutions may be buoyed by countervailing historical and socioeconomic undercurrents, with some favoring democracy and others authoritarianism, thereby resulting in fewer structural tensions than congenial ambiguities. Finally, artful national leaders can exploit these institutions to make them yield highly complementary strands of democratic legitimacy and authoritarian controls. Malaysia is an example of a country where such a strategy has apparently succeeded.

Malaysia’s political institutions are rooted in a contradictory set of structural forces. On the potentially democratic side of the ledger, there is the legacy of British colonial “tutelage,” which has brought a respect for merit-based advancement and the rule of law, as well as a studied introduction to party systems and electoral processes. Malaysia has also acquired over time the kind of class structure generally seen as favorable for democracy, with a reasonably dynamic bourgeoisie concerned with property rights, a broad middle class that now spans ethnic communities and frets over governance, and a large industrial working class that labors in centralized production sites. With Malaysia’s relatively high educational levels, exposure to globalization, and increasingly rich associational life, it would seem to satisfy the preconditions for democracy posed by modernization theorists. Indeed, with Malaysia’s World Bank status as a middle-income country—earned increasingly through manufacturing rather than extractive industries controllable by the state—the country has long been inside Huntington’s “zone” of likely democratic transition.<sup>5</sup>

As for the structural forces favoring authoritarian controls, one must remember that there was also a darker, “viceregal” side of British colonial rule that bristled with emergency regulations and efficient security apparatuses. Moreover, Malaysia’s bourgeoisie and middle class still support a strong role for the state, seeking government contracts, state bank loans,

and bureaucratic employment during boom cycles, and bailouts, pegged currencies, and controlled interest rates in times of crisis. These classes also remain wary of the potential power of the country's large numbers of industrial workers and farmers, which in part explains their continued support for authoritarian measures.

In addition, Malaysia's socioeconomic classes are split along ethnic lines between Malays and ethnic Chinese, producing a "classic" divided or plural society, a configuration that, while perhaps resistant to state domination, also perpetuates communal suspicions that the state can exploit. These divisions are reinforced by the country's Islamic resurgence. Moreover, some analysts contend that the political cultures of the Malays and Chinese, respectively interpreted as "neofeudal" and "Confucianist," both encourage acquiescence in authoritarian controls.<sup>6</sup> In sum, with Malaysia's structural forces pressing in opposite directions, a political regime has emerged that is neither authoritarian nor democratic.

### **Stabilizing Institutions**

Which political institutions help to perpetuate pseudodemocracy in Malaysia? A short list would begin with the country's constitution, which ostensibly limits state power, but in reality has been altered repeatedly by the government led by Mahathir's United Malays National Organization (UMNO), which has maintained a two-thirds parliamentary majority. In consequence, the constitution is laden with provisions that restrain civil society rather than the state, thanks to draconian amendments that cut deeply into civil liberties. Though general elections have been held regularly and on time, these limits on civil liberties, together with arbitrary electoral practices, have seriously distorted voter preferences. To a great extent, contestation has been diverted into UMNO assembly elections, giving Mahathir additional scope to modulate outcomes.

Although the government is nominally responsible to parliament, state power has been wielded by the executive in ways more commonly associated with skewed forms of Latin American presidentialism. The UMNO leads a ruling coalition, the Barisan Nasional (National Front), which, while fluctuating in its membership since its founding in 1974, usually embraces more than a dozen different ethnic parties. Top UMNO politicians assert that they are checked by the consultative requirements of the "Barisan way," but in reality the party allows its coalition partners little say in decision making. In campaigning among their Malay ethnic base, these politicians loudly proclaim "UMNO dominance." The military is also made up largely of Malays, but it has not played an overt role in politics, demonstrating a restraint that has historically been rare in Southeast Asia (although elements of Malaysia's police have lately emerged as fearsome defenders of executive prerogatives).

Formally, horizontal accountability is ensured by a judiciary modeled on common law and the English bar, but while Malaysia's courts deal ably with most criminal cases and commercial disputes, their objectivity disappears where the UMNO's political or business interests are involved. The court of final appeal, now labeled the Federal Court, was long ago stripped of its power of judicial review. Malaysia has an election commission, an anticorruption agency, royal commissions of inquiry, and a new human rights body, but the first three institutions are restricted in their powers, and even their ability to report their findings publicly, while the last remains untested. Likewise, although Malaysia boasts a great range of print and electronic media, most are owned by the state or companies linked closely to the government, while more independent outlets are tamed by strict licensing requirements. Only the Internet remains unimpeded, and while its political impact is significant, it is limited by the modest number of local subscribers. In sum, a set of institutions has emerged that, while formally democratic, in fact yield a pattern of executive supremacy, UMNO party dominance, and ethnic preference for Malays.

Guillermo O'Donnell has argued that such discrepancies between formal institutional rules and real-world behavior do not necessarily prevent a democracy from consolidating.<sup>7</sup> As he rightly observes, many democracies in Latin America suffer willful presidents and intricate clientelism, diminishing their quality but not their capacity to persist. In Malaysia, however, rule-bending has become so pervasive that the regime must be adjudged as falling outside the "democratic" category altogether and belonging to a separate category of pseudodemocracy. At this level, discrepancies between rules and behavior grow so glaring that many analysts contend that the regime itself comes under strain. Indeed, O'Donnell warns that when elites in these circumstances pay tribute to democratic ideals, they encourage mass expectations that formal rules will be followed. When elites too casually flout these rules, their hypocrisy precipitates a corrosive mass cynicism.<sup>8</sup> By this logic, discrepancies that may be tolerable in full democracies could result in fatal complications for pseudodemocracies. Leaders of pseudodemocracies are therefore compelled either to permit more robust democratic practices or to clamp down harder with authoritarian controls. Either way, the intrinsic instability that haunts the halfway house finally comes to light.

In Malaysia, however, we have seen that structural forces press for democracy and authoritarianism simultaneously, leaving Mahathir a great deal of maneuvering room. Indeed, even while claiming to respect democratic procedures, he explicitly cites structural forces—in particular, the country's late industrialization, plural society, and communitarian culture—to justify the imposition of authoritarian controls. To be sure, when top Barisan politicians then exploit these controls in ways

that prolong their own tenures and line their pockets, cynicism sets in. Yet social resentment has been tempered with the careerism, consumerism, and relative ethnic peace that Malaysia's long periods of rapid economic expansion have made possible. In short, amid economic growth, Malaysia's political institutions have perpetuated mass complacency. In these circumstances, pseudodemocracy has persisted.

Intervals of economic crisis provide a more convincing test of strength. Battles over dwindling state patronage spark new elite rivalries, while falling employment stirs resentment and ethnic suspicion. At these junctures, however, national leaders can respond by making use of the institutions underpinning their pseudodemocracy. Of course, this may involve no more than crudely tightening civil liberties and punishing dissidents. But leaders may also use a more sophisticated strategy—the practiced calibration of electoral institutions, allowing heightened contestation to take place in one arena, but then containing it in another—thereby demonstrating the resilience of pseudodemocracy even in crisis conditions.

### **“Two-Ring” Elections**

According to a procedural understanding of democracy, elections are democracy's very “essence.”<sup>9</sup> Of course, in Malaysia, Mahathir has organized general elections in ways that have kept him in power, in part by limiting civil liberties and manipulating electoral practices. It is this, after all, that most sharply delineates his regime as pseudo-democratic. Yet Mahathir has also diverted contestation into a second electoral arena, the internal selection processes of his own party. Even during periods of economic crisis, he has blunted various challenges, thereby perpetuating his own rule, the UMNO's incumbency, and the stability of the pseudo-democracy he operates. More specifically, unlike the leaders of other halfway houses, Mahathir has warded off any electoral turnover that would herald the onset of fuller democracy. Equally, he has avoided actions that would amount to deeper authoritarianism, such as repudiating electoral results or suspending electoral contests.

Little research has been conducted so far on the relationship between the democratic procedures associated with a regime and those that characterize its political parties. Larry Diamond's observations about civil-society organizations may take us farthest. In brief, Diamond argues that if “organizations are to function as ‘large free schools’ for democracy . . . they must function democratically in their internal processes and decision making and leadership selection. . . . [Socializing] members into these democratic norms . . . undergird[s] a vibrant and liberal democracy.”<sup>10</sup> This, however, merely posits a cultural factor or demonstration effect, suggesting that when members compete democratically

within an organization, they are encouraged to behave similarly outside it.

I argue that there is a more functional, even mechanical linkage between general elections and dominant-party internal elections: When these institutions are appropriately designed and coordinated, they can help to stabilize pseudodemocracies. This is no static link, with the level of democratic content in one electoral arena correlating tightly with a like amount in the other. Instead, the relationship is dynamic and adjustable, often cutting inversely, with the national leader able to release competitive pressures through one election, after which he can divert some into a second arena where he can contain them. Put another way, the two electoral arenas can be constricted or distended in quite opposite directions, serving as safety valves and compression chambers that, when artfully deployed, permit the leader to gain repeated, if slim victories in both. Malaysia's electoral institutions—appropriately designed, grounded in countervailing structures, and skillfully piloted—have helped Mahathir to perpetuate a pseudodemocratic equilibrium.

General elections have been held regularly in Malaysia, but they have been designed in ways that ensure victory for Mahathir and his UMNO-led government. Severe malapportionment of the country's single-member districts favors rural Malays and, in East Malaysia, "indigenous" voters over more urbanized Chinese by roughly two to one. This rural weighting has enabled the UMNO to instruct its Malay following to support the candidates of its pliable Barisan partners, most notably the Malaysian Chinese Association and the Malaysian Indian Congress. At the same time, a finely calibrated gerrymandering has fractured many of the opposition's urban strongholds, breaking up pockets of alienated Chinese and discontented squatters. Redistricting is undertaken by the Electoral Commission every eight to ten years, though it must be done in ways approved by the parliament.

In addition, the prime minister has the prerogative of setting the date of parliament's dissolution and the holding of elections, often investing the timing with much surprise. The campaign period that follows is then quite brief, usually about a week, during which the government fully exploits its control over the media. The government also makes uninhibited use of state facilities and government workers, especially in the Information Ministry and the Kemas (Community Development) unit. Finally, government candidates appear on the scene, dispensing development grants and project approvals on the spot.

Election day itself, while occurring in the wake of extensive manipulations, has often been viewed as a snapshot of propriety. Yet voters sometimes arrive at polling places only to learn that their names have slipped mysteriously from the electoral rolls. Conversely, votes are sometimes cast in the names of deceased persons that persist on the rolls, a phenomenon known locally as "phantoms." Ballot papers are

**TABLE—RULING-PARTY ELECTORAL DOMINANCE IN MALAYSIA  
(PERCENTAGES)**

ELECTION YEAR	BARISAN NASIONAL POPULAR VOTE	BARISAN NASIONAL PARLIAMENTARY SEATS
1974	60.7	87.7
1978	57.2	84.4
1982	60.5	85.7
1986	57.4	83.6
1990	53.4	70.6
1995	65.1	84.4
1999	56.5	76.7

equipped with numbered counterfoils, potentially compromising secrecy. The counting of ballots takes place at an increasing number of ever smaller voting stations. While all parties may appoint observers to check this counting, there are now so many voting stations that the opposition's volunteers are sorely stretched. Moreover, these observers are forbidden to enter military bases and police compounds, where nearly a quarter of a million postal ballots are cast. Finally, at the end of this process the vagaries of single-member districts, exacerbated by malapportionment, gerrymandering, and a first-past-the-post system, come once more into play, distorting the translation of popular vote totals into legislative seats (See the Table above). It is thus possible for the government, even while taking barely half the popular vote, to maintain its extraordinary two-thirds majority in parliament—necessary for freely amending the constitution, as well as meeting a traditional benchmark of popular support.

On the other hand, the UMNO-led government has shown restraint in some important areas, ensuring that elections have retained at least the semblance of fairness. In particular, the Home Ministry, containing the Registrar of Societies, has usually permitted opposition parties to form and has resisted meddling in their internal affairs or seriously obstructing their recruitment of members.<sup>11</sup> While outdoor rallies have been proscribed since 1969, ostensibly in order to prevent any recurrence of the serious ethnic rioting that took place in that year, the police often grant permits for outdoor *ceramah* (political meetings) during the campaign period. And if the opposition is given little coverage in the local media, it has full access to the Internet and a busy foreign press. In addition, despite the rush of development grants and approvals alluded to above, the government has rarely resorted to outright vote-buying, at least in Peninsular Malaysia. It has made only limited use of *pesta demokrasi* (festivals of democracy)—the rock concerts and celebrity candidates that historically have so seduced voters in neighboring Southeast Asian countries. And though sometimes resorting to veiled threats and intimidation, the government has avoided any systematic deployment of goons, “ninjas,” local *caciques*, and provincial “god-fathers” to menace opposition supporters. Finally, there has been little evidence of ballot-box stuffing, deliberate miscounting, or false

reporting. Indeed, final results have usually been made known the day after elections have taken place.

Accordingly, through the institutional avenues that remain open, opposition parties have vigorously contested Malaysia's general elections. They have typically won 40 to 45 percent of the popular vote, giving them a toehold in parliament and often control over one or two state assemblies as well. Yet, as we have seen, elections have also been designed to put a cap on the opposition's progress; for nearly three decades, they have returned the UMNO-led government reliably to power, both in parliament and in the vast majority of states. This nuanced approach to general elections makes Malaysia's pseudodemocracy something more than base authoritarianism, but much less than robust democracy. It is the government's avoidance of both electoral turnovers and grosser repression—outcomes that would qualitatively change the regime's character—that accounts for the stability of Malaysian pseudodemocracy.

### **The 1999 Contest**

In 1998–99, however, it seemed that the UMNO-led government was as vulnerable as it had ever been. Like many other countries in East Asia, Malaysia had been seriously affected by the region's economic crisis. Differences between Mahathir and his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, over how to resolve the crisis had exacerbated rivalries between them, leading finally to Anwar's removal and arrest. Mahathir, his hand thus freed, introduced a range of capital controls that appeared at least to coincide with the country's economic recovery. Yet Mahathir's harsh treatment of Anwar—a figure who had forged over time a complex set of commitments to democratic procedures, free markets, social activism, and neomodernist Islam—continued to alienate many Malays. In these circumstances, anecdotal accounts suggest that the country's Malay civil servants—dependent on government largesse and thus normally a potent UMNO constituency—came to view Mahathir as repugnant. Moreover, liberal elements within the Malay intelligentsia were disturbed by the government's continuing corruption and curbs on civil liberties, while the more nationalist “Malay lobby” remained disgruntled over Mahathir's having opened tertiary education to English-language instruction. Many Malay university students also appeared to be alienated, taking their government scholarships quite for granted while finding little in the autocratic, septagenarian Mahathir with which to identify.

Most importantly, UMNO strategists had been warning for more than a year that many Islamists, particularly villagers in the northern “Malay states” but also in the federal district of Kuala Lumpur, had grown contemptuous of Mahathir's leadership. Accordingly, Malaysia's strongest opposition party, the Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party (PAS), now allied

its religious appeals with calls for political accountability, greater transparency in business-government relations, and the remedying of “social ills” caused by Mahathir’s ceaseless industrializing. The PAS cooperated with the National Justice Party (Keadilan), formed recently by Anwar’s wife Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, and the Democratic Action Party, made up largely of middle-class and working-class Chinese. Forming a multiethnic alliance labeled the Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front), the opposition came to mirror the UMNO’s Barisan Nasional. Opposition leaders proclaimed a “historic opportunity” to break the UMNO-led government’s two-thirds majority in parliament and perhaps even to defeat it outright.

Mahathir called elections for late November 1999, some six months before the constitution required him to. By holding elections before the end of the year, an estimated 680,000 newly registered voters could be kept off the electoral rolls—a cohort of mostly young adults that was thought overwhelmingly to oppose the UMNO-led government. During the hurried eight-day campaign period that followed, the government announced pay raises for bureaucrats and higher dividends for Malay shareholders in state-run unit trusts, while cabinet ministers campaigned around the country pledging new funding for university branch campuses, sports complexes, community centers, and low-cost housing. The government launched a “media blitz,” using its control over the press to accuse the opposition of risking civil disturbances and ethnic violence. Finally, it resorted to fierce negative campaigning, casting Anwar as a “liar” and a “thief” in league with “neocolonialists” and the IMF.

When results were reported the day after the elections, the exercise appeared to have gone according to plan. The UMNO-led government won 56.5 percent of the popular vote, enabling it to retain its two-thirds parliamentary majority. Thus, in his press conference afterward, Mahathir was able to portray the Barisan as “still the party of choice of the people of Malaysia.” Yet while the government had performed adequately overall, its keystone, the UMNO, had been gravely weakened, losing nearly half the Malay vote. Accordingly, the party’s number of parliamentary seats sagged by some 20 percent—leaving it for the first time with fewer seats than its non-Malay coalition partners. Moreover, the UMNO was routed by the PAS in two state assemblies, Kelantan and petroleum-rich Terengganu, while suffering steep setbacks in four other states. And with its vote majorities eroded even where its candidates had won, the general election was soon interpreted as an expression of deep Malay ambivalence over Mahathir’s national leadership.

In sum, the UMNO-led government was tested in the 1999 general elections. Of course, though mass discontent had intensified, many of the electoral practices associated with pseudodemocracy helped return the government to power, and the first-past-the-post system amplified the government’s vote total into an extraordinary parliamentary majority.

But many other electoral machinations were ineffective this time around. In particular, with the PAS now active throughout the Peninsula's north, existing patterns of gerrymandering proved quite ineffective, while malapportionment weakened the urban Chinese, many of whose districts the UMNO had now come to depend upon. Finally, the UMNO's media blitz and negative campaigning seemed only to fatigue many voters, provoking unprecedented queries about the UMNO's funding and ethics. Indeed, the PAS chief minister of Kelantan observed that the government's campaigning "had backfired and helped us to retain the state with a much more comfortable margin."<sup>12</sup>

Despite the government's victory, mass resentments against Mahathir and the UMNO were now uncorked. Many mid-ranking party members thus began to call openly for fundamental changes in UMNO policies and procedures, leading finally to a timetable for Mahathir's withdrawal. These proposed changes took two forms that would, if implemented, have borne profound implications for Malaysia's pseudodemocracy. First, in order to regain ethnic Malay support from the PAS, some UMNO members contemplated returning to the racial preferences of the 1970s and 1980s, backed by a new campaign of Islamicizing. Such measures might have led to a bidding war for the support of Malays, more systematic discrimination against the Chinese, and a descent into plainer authoritarianism. At the same time, other UMNO members, in order to energize support among liberal reformers, called for greater openness in party dealings. Such openness might have coincided with greater government accountability and the regime's fuller democratization.

Yet Mahathir succeeded in making use of the electoral institutions at his disposal to shore up his standing and keep Malaysia's pseudo-democracy on track. To be sure, the 1999 general elections gave vent to increased social grievances, which then seeped into the 2000 UMNO assembly elections. In this second electoral arena, however, Mahathir managed to contain these pressures. So while some of his loyal elites were defeated in their bids for top posts, his own dominance over the party was confirmed.

### **Elections Within the UMNO**

Today, more than 2.4 million Malays (about 40 percent of the adult Malay population) and some indigenous people in the eastern state of Sabah are members of the UMNO. The party, usually characterized as conservative and nationalist, was formed in 1946, making it one of the oldest noncommunist parties in Southeast Asia. Its membership is arrayed in some 16,500 branch organizations, a network that knits together Malaysia's urban areas and many *kampung* (villages). Local branches hold annual general meetings to elect officers. These branches are incorporated into 165 party divisions, roughly corresponding with the

country's parliamentary constituencies. These divisions then hold their own elections every second year, each choosing five top officials (the so-called "G-5") and seven additional delegates (the "G-7"). This is the level at which UMNO members begin first to make their mark in the party apparatus.

The competition for divisional leadership posts is intense. When the UMNO holds its triennial assembly elections, each division nominates candidates for posts at the party's national level, then sends its 12 officials to attend as delegates, some of whom may run simultaneously as candidates. As delegates, these officials have typically been able to barter their votes, either settling quickly for airfare to the capital, luxury hotel rooms, packets of cash, and perhaps an overseas vacation, or "floating" as long as possible, seeking more lasting assistance in their political or business careers. Candidates may contest one of 25 elected positions on the UMNO Supreme Council, the presidency and deputy presidency of the party's Youth (Pemuda) and Women's (Wanita) wings, one of three elected vice-presidencies, and, at the pinnacle, the party's presidency or deputy presidency.

These positions are so desirable because they closely parallel the hierarchies of Malaysian government and business. During general election years, divisional heads are normally chosen as UMNO candidates for state assemblies or for parliament. As assemblymen, they may be appointed to their state government's executive council or to committees with important regulatory powers. Committees with authority over land usage are especially prized, because they enable their members to win concessions for the construction companies they often own, and then to rezone the land quickly or sell it at great profit. In addition, assemblymen may gather up posts on key municipal councils, football clubs, and charities, positions that offer opportunities for patronage.

Moreover, at the national level, backbenchers in parliament may gain operating licenses or contracts, state bank loans, privatized state assets, and discounted equity through government-ordered restructurings. They may also be appointed to the boards of state enterprises, thereby supplementing their parliamentary salaries with directors' fees. Finally, parliamentary frontbenchers may capture the real "plums," emerging as cabinet ministers, deputy ministers, and parliamentary secretaries. Here, with the approval of the prime minister, they can arrange licenses, tenders, restructurings, and privatizations on a much grander scale, channeling state resources to valued constituents.

Stakes have thus been high in UMNO elections, with candidates able freely to contest vice-presidential posts, Supreme Council seats, and the leadership positions of Pemuda and Wanita. At the highest level, however, members have typically been discouraged from contesting the party presidency and deputy presidency—offices that normally go to the country's prime minister and the deputy prime minister, respectively.

Aspirants have instead been advised that the sedate processes of seniority, retirement, and planned succession should take their course. Despite such warnings, however, the party constitution has historically permitted challenges to top officials so long as they are supported by nominations from two divisions. In scanning the UMNO record, one notes that the deputy president was challenged in five of the party's six elections held between 1978 and 1993, while the president was challenged twice during this period, in 1979 and 1987. Given the close correspondence between these posts and the top state positions, many analysts have characterized UMNO assembly elections as Malaysia's "real" elections.

### **Mahathir's Maneuvers**

In preparing for UMNO assembly elections in May 2000, Mahathir acknowledged his own unpopularity, even if churlishly attributing it to the Malays being "ungrateful." Though he had recently defended his prime ministership in general elections, he now encountered demands within his party for "new blood" and new "second-echelon" leaders. As the party divisions began to contemplate their nominations, a groundswell of support arose for a former finance minister, Tengku Razaleigh, to contest the UMNO deputy presidency, a post occupied after Anwar's sacking by Abdullah Badawi, a Mahathir appointee. Indeed, speculation mounted that Razaleigh might even go further and challenge Mahathir for the UMNO presidency.

Yet while Mahathir was required by the UMNO constitution to hold assembly elections, he also was able to avail himself of authoritarian controls that paralleled, and indeed reinforced, the broader pseudo-democratic regime. In consultation with the Supreme Council, Mahathir first ordered that the UMNO assembly elections, originally scheduled for 1999, be postponed until after the general elections, a delay that he anticipated would strengthen his standing. Next, he produced a Supreme Council "recommendation" that there be no challenges for the UMNO presidency and deputy presidency, purportedly to prevent a party split. When Razaleigh refused to declare himself unavailable for a draft, the Supreme Council invoked a procedural change requiring aspirants to attract a vastly increased number of divisional nominations before their candidacies could be approved. Soon afterward, divisional leaders were summoned to the prime minister's office in Putra Jaya, Malaysia's imposing new capital city, where they were advised to weigh carefully their candidate preferences and their expectations about patronage. In this situation, Razaleigh, far from gaining enough nominations to contest one of UMNO's two top posts, was denied the right even to run for one of the three vice-presidencies. Mahathir's tenure was thus formally extended before the UMNO assembly election had even been held.

Thus attention turned to the vice-presidencies and Supreme Council

seats. Mahathir duly produced a slate of loyal candidates that he wished to see chosen. To better their chances, the Supreme Council placed a ban on campaigning—ostensibly to reduce the likelihood of vote-buying, one facet of the practice locally known as “money politics” that has so besmirched the UMNO’s image among reformers. As delegates began amassing in Kuala Lumpur’s hotels several days before the election, they were ordered by the Supreme Council back out of the city, to cool their heels in rest houses in the hinterland.

Yet although even an unpopular national leader can modulate Malaysia’s pseudodemocratic electoral institutions in ways that perpetuate executive supremacy, the competitive pressures that have been dispersed may still result in some subsidiary challenges. In particular, there is evidence that many delegates remained quite troubled by Mahathir’s treatment of Anwar.<sup>13</sup> They were profoundly alienated by their inability to vote for the party’s top posts, and they resented the ban on campaigning, which denied them the fruits of money politics even as they suspected that the practice still flourished among the party’s elites. Indeed, for most delegates, hailing from upcountry where they operate modestly as government functionaries or small business people, the assembly elections provide a unique opportunity to gain substantial patronage. So while they endured the lengthy passages in Mahathir’s opening address in which he once again roundly condemned Anwar and the “neocolonialist” IMF and then loudly applauded Mahathir’s warnings about the scourge of vote-buying, the delegates subsequently registered their discontent by quietly voting against Mahathir wherever they could.

In filling the vice-presidencies, the delegates dealt Mahathir a double rebuke. First, they rejected Mahathir’s slate in favor of candidates who had all been associated with Anwar during the mid-1990s, making up the former deputy’s so-called “vision team.” In addition, these candidates had all been subsequently linked with corrupt practices involving defense contracts, land deals, or violations of foreign-currency regulations. Clearly, then, Mahathir’s vilification of Anwar and his warnings about money politics had fallen on deaf ears. In explaining their choices, the delegates tended blithely to cite the candidates’ personal “approachability,” open-house policies, and affable managers and handlers. And then, their work completed, the delegates repaired to their upcountry livelihoods.

Nonetheless, even if the UMNO assembly elections in 2000 saddled Mahathir with some unwanted vice-presidents and Supreme Council members, he succeeded in dampening competitive pressures in ways that preserved his own presidency. Indeed, the lifting of some disloyal elites to power, by offering resentful delegates some satisfaction, may have lent greater legitimacy to Mahathir’s own leadership, helping to disperse and contain these pressures carrying over from the general elections. Mahathir is widely regarded now as having gained a new lease

on political life within the UMNO, despite the great ambivalence with which he is viewed.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, a movement in Kuala Lumpur at about this time to protest Anwar's first year in prison, an event billed as "Black 14<sup>th</sup>," appeared to fizzle. In addition, the UMNO-led government won a pair of by-elections during this period, defeating the PAS in one contest and Keadilan in a second, albeit with reduced majorities. And a recent surge in Islamic militancy may enable the government to blacken these two parties further in parliament, despite their relative moderation. Finally, the government's able, if unorthodox, economic management appears again to have stimulated exports and high growth rates, thus restoring mass attitudes to indifference. Indeed, GDP growth rose to 10.3 percent for the first half of 2000 (up from 1.8 percent in the first half of 1999), while unemployment and inflation have each remained at about 3 percent. In sum, Mahathir has artfully deployed the electoral institutions of pseudodemocracy to extend his own paramouncy and that of the UMNO.

### **Can the "Halfway House" Endure?**

In a full democracy, the presence of multiple electoral arenas—general elections, party conventions, and assorted referenda—increases the opportunities for removing national leaders, replacing ruling parties, and changing policy directions. In a pseudodemocracy, however, electoral institutions, when appropriately designed and structurally grounded, enable a national leader to remain in power, even while allowing some competitiveness and pluralism. To be sure, since pseudodemocracy only dampens rather than extinguishes competitive pressures, national leaders are regularly dealt setbacks, especially during economic crises. Opposition parties can gain access to national legislatures, while winning outright in some state-level and local arenas, and disloyal members of the elite may win second-rung posts in dominant parties. But it is precisely because national leaders are mildly burdened by pseudodemocracy that they retain some legitimating cover when they manipulate electoral institutions in ways that perpetuate their tenures. The presence of multiple electoral arenas increases this legitimacy, while providing the leader with additional institutions through which to release, disperse, and contain challenges.

The study of pseudodemocracy thus offers a rich field of inquiry for students of regime change and continuity. Where pseudodemocracies grow unstable, one can investigate the pathways by which they either descend into authoritarianism or evolve into fuller democracies, documenting inappropriate institutional designs, deep structural shifts, or new leadership preferences. In Malaysia, pseudodemocracy has helped to sustain the national leader for two decades and the dominant party for nearly three, despite the country's rapid industrialization and great

socioeconomic changes. As such, Malaysia's halfway house, reinforced rather than weakened by its hybrid construction, poses a stout challenge for analysts awaiting its collapse. Indeed, one can speculate that after Mahathir has finally departed from the scene, even a less artful successor will have available institutional tools capable of perpetuating the country's pseudodemocracy.

## NOTES

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1. Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 15.

2. Richard Gunther, *Jakarta Post*, 27 August 1998.

3. Larry Diamond, "Preface," in Larry Diamond, Juan J. Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds., *Democracy in Developing Countries: Asia* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1989), xviii.

4. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 137.

5. Huntington specifies this "zone" as \$1,000–3,000 per-capita GNP during the mid-1970s. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave*, 62–63. In 1978, Malaysia's per-capita GNP, measured in terms of purchasing power parity, was \$1,937.

6. See Lucian Pye, *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), ch. 9.

7. Guillermo O'Donnell, *Counterpoints: Selected Essays on Authoritarianism and Democratization* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 180–82.

8. *Ibid.*, 182.

9. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave*, 9.

10. Diamond, *Developing Democracy*, 228.

11. Only avowedly leftist parties have been systematically blocked, with the Parti Sosialis Malaysia recently denied registration three times.

12. *The Sun* (Kuala Lumpur), 30 November 1999, 2.

13. Personal attendance at the 2000 UMNO General Assembly and extensive discussions with local journalists and delegates, Putra World Trade Center, Kuala Lumpur, 10–14 May 2000.

14. See "Mahathir Settles in for Long Haul," *The Australian*, 17 July 2000, 9.