Political Parties in Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines: Reflection of Democratic Tendencies

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Cover Page Footnote

POLITICAL PARTIES IN SINGAPORE, MALAYSIA, AND THE PHILIPPINES: REFLECTION OF DEMOCRATIC TENDENCIES

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Abstract

This essay examines the role of political parties in different forms of government. In the three Southeast Asian countries, the different governments have distinctive methods of utilizing the parties according to their needs. The more democratic the country usually the less control the government has on the parties. The more reliant the government on its party, the more systematic its control over it. Consequently, the stronger control of government the less likely the parties would be able to reach democracy.

Keywords: democratic tendencies, political parties, Singapore, Malaysia, Philipines

1. Introduction

Among the three neighboring countries, the Philippines is often seen as the most democratic one, while Singapore and Malaysia are judged authoritarian and semi-democratic respectively.[1] The lives of political parties are influential in determining these 'labels', as will be explained in following sections. Political parties in the three countries have different kinds of roles in the respective political system – where in Singapore and Malaysia the ruling parties determines the countries' policies, the Philippines parties act more as vehicles for individuals to reach top governmental positions.

I will explain the party lives in each country, and then compare them in the last section. The sources of this essay are books on political systems of the three countries, as well as ones that focus on individual parties. The sources treat the parties in the different countries differently. I found various scholarly works on Singapore's main party (PAP or People's Action Party), which look at various aspects and development of the party since its establishment, and they are referred to throughout this essay. The books on Malaysia tend to look at the political life in general and not focus too heavily on its political parties.[2] However, I found two

articles which talk about general elections in Malaysia and have special section on UMNO (United Malaysia National Organization). For the Philippines, although the sources can be considered quite old, they are still very much consultable and relevant.

2. Singapore

Singapore is a remarkable success story of a country. It has recorded enormous economic growth that it has been dubbed one of Asia's strongest economies. In 1959 its per capita GNP was US$ 443, and in 1999 it reached US$ 32,810 (Funston 2001: 294). The images of rubber being transshipped from Malaya to Europe have now been changed with tall sky-scrapers and world-class shopping. Since its independence from Britain in 1963 and separation from Malaysia in 1965, Singapore has been independent for almost 40 years and has achieved great advancements.

For the whole 40 years of independence, Singapore has been governed by the same party. The achievements of Singapore can be associated with the rule of PAP or People's Action Party, its ruling party in ensuring stability in the country. Singapore is an example of a country with a dominant party system. It has one party which rules, with around other 20 parties registered, and usually four to six parties compete in each election

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[1] This statement is explained further in the essay.
[2] See for example, *Malaysia: Mahathirism, Hegemony and the New Opposition* by John Hilley; *Malaysia: The Making of a*

Nation by Cheah Boon Kheng, and *The Mahathir Legacy* by Ian Stewart.

(Mauzy & Milne 2002: 38). The governing party in a dominant party system is responsible to other political actors and the public to maintain its legitimacy (Mauzy & Milne 2002: 38).

The PAP was established in 1955 as a result of the British decision to hold an election that year.[3] The party started small in that particular election, contesting four seats and winning three (Mauzy & Milne 2002: 15). In the 1959 election voting became compulsory and as a result of changes in the leadership of parties, PAP enjoyed a big victory – winning 43 out of 51 seats contested (Mauzy & Milne 2002: 16). Although in general there were mixed feelings about the party, with reservations by ones who thought that it was a bit 'left'-oriented while others were attracted by its programs; PAP gained full confidence from the British (Mauzy & Milne 2002: 16).

Since that victory, PAP has expanded itself by taking form of a mass party and tried to register as many members as possible. They did this in several ways, as Mauzy and Milne explained: through trade unions, by following a rather Communist method of presenting their ideas for the greatest strategic advantage, they also took various associations, defend or recapture party organization from pro-Communist attack, providing attractive programs, and they use their power as government to boost power in inter or intra-party contests (Mauzy & Milne 2002: 17). PAP has managed to retain its dominance by being a 'catchall party that fully controls the large political center' (Mauzy & Milne 2002: 38).

Thus, to sum up, PAP has generally been quite opportunistic in taking advantage of the situation wherever and whenever it can. Although in the beginning it tried to be a mass party, Mauzy and Milne argued that PAP retains control without mass membership or a complex party organization (Mauzy & Milne 2002: 38). Pang Cheng Lian did a study on the party in the 1970s and concluded that – using Maurice Duverger's typology of parties – PAP is both a mass and cadre party (Pang 1971: 50). As a mass party, a member of PAP is defined as someone who pays subscription regularly, accepts, and supports the party constitution (Pang 1971: 51).

In the PAP, its status as a cadre party has been strengthened by the fact that membership requirement is quite strict and it is not easy to be accepted as ordinary members. Lee Kuan Yew – one of the party's founders, did not want a mass party and populist demands and he wished to avoid the members who want financial gains from political affiliation (Mauzy & Milne 2002: 41).

Therefore, to become an ordinary member, one must have some experience in grassroots work, and willing to be an unpaid volunteer (Mauzy & Milne 2002: 41) - and that is on top of the basic requirements of being Singaporean and is above 17 years of age (Pang 1971: 50). Members receive no incentive, except for some member outings; grassroots leaders accept priority in housing, school admissions and parking at HDB estates (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 41). Members also help MPs during their constituency visits, serve on branch sub-committees, and help mobilize mass support for elections (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 41).

In terms of structure, power in the party rests in the Central Executive Committee (CEC), which is led by the Secretary General, the most powerful position in the party.[4] CEC members are often cabinet members. One of the things that are interesting about CEC is that it appoints cadre members, as well as parliamentary candidates who are selected by CEC after a lengthy review process (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 40). The party also arranges the approved candidates to undergo 'basic training', including 'mock press conferences and television appearances, primers on policies, and lessons on how to make campaign speeches and work the crowd' (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 41).

Partly because Singapore is a small party, PAP has a small bureaucracy (Mauzy and Milne (2002: 42). Below the CEC is the Executive Committee or Exco (contains a team of staff of nine party functionaries), which oversees the organization and administration of the party (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 42). The Exco also oversees nine sub-committees in charge of various aspects, such as constituency relations, publicity and publications, political education, and Malay affairs (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 42). The PAP has 84 constituencies that are financially self-sufficient and have some autonomy, and also have elaborate networking (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 43). Despite of that, the functions of the branch and district organization are minimal – which is to help manage grassroots activities during election periods (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 43).

Despite the small bureaucracy, PAP can be considered as having an extensive organization. This is particularly because it has governmental para-political institutions such as People's Association, Management Committees of Community Centres, Citizen's Consultative Committees, and Resident's Committees – which are all linked to the Prime Minister's Office as the nerve-center (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 43). Like the branches, these organizations also help PAP to get in touch with the

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[3] The British wished to promote constitutional advance in Singapore (Mauzy & Milne 2002: 14).

[4] Other officers include a Chairman and Vice-Chairman, a First and Second Assistant Secretary-General, and a Treasurer and Assistant Treasurer (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 40).

grass-roots community, and PAP has managed to keep the opposition out of these organizations (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 44).

The PAP has established its cadre system since 1958 – originally to prevent any invasion from pro-Communists (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 41). At first, there were about 500 'temporary cadre' whom will be screened thoroughly. A potential cadre member usually is nominated by an MP, and the person will undergo a process of rigorous interview by a CEC panel (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 43). Thus, cadre recruitment is an exclusive right of the CEC. The number of cadre has been growing steadily – although the only difference between a cadre and an ordinary member is the cadre's right to vote every two years for the party's top leaders (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 41).

As the main principle of recruitment, PAP has always insisted to recruit the 'brightest and the best'. Lee Kuan Yew has a strong preference for those who perform well in school (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 47). As incentives, being recruited by PAP would usually secure ones' position in the government – which is normally a well-paid and steady job. Understandably then, being recruited by PAP is desirable. Frequent and systematic regeneration in the government also guarantees the recruits to enter the government soon. The party continuously replaces older MPs with young talent and work to make sure that political succession is smooth (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 38). Renewal and succession in Singapore is quite unusual. Mauzy and Milne argue that succession was 'painstakingly planned, was predictable and gradual, and that the people who are replaced would voluntarily stepped aside'', thus it never raises the question about stability (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 114).

Despite the obvious reason of joining a ruling party that controls government and bureaucracy, PAP also attracts new members as a solid means of political participation. One research has shown different motivations for people to become members of the party. Although it was done in the 1970s, I believe some of the reasons remain valid until today. People might decide to join because they believe that the party policies were correct (Chan 1976: 129). Others join because their friends are in the party and participation is simply another form of social participation, and some others will join for personal advancement (Chan 1976: 129). There are also people who join for protection, usually when they have businesses to protect legally (Chan 1976: 129).

PAP's public support has also been helped throughout its history particularly by its efforts in limiting its opposition. PAP came to power in 1959 after starting to compete in multi-party elections in 1955 (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 149). By the 1968 election, PAP had emerged as a dominant party by winning every seat and continued its success in 1972, 1976, and 1980 (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 149). Opposition parties in Singapore first returned in Singapore led by the Workers' Party, which managed to defeat PAP in the first electoral campaign directed by Goh Chok Tong and the successor generation (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 149). PAP subsequently suppressed the opposition, but the win proves that PAP is not invincible. As the government, however, PAP has the power to enforce rules that strictly limit the movement of opposition, and thus ensure that it remains in power.[5] Opposition has little hope of taking over power, opposition parties tend to centre on personalities and take the role of pressuring the government to adjust policies (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 146).

PAP has non-ideological program, possibly in order not to alienate particular group of people – in order to be attractive as widely as possible. Mauzy and Milne have also argued that PAP is 'responsive, and obsessive about co-opting talent' (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 38). PAP holds a very strong control over the media, and often represses the opposition, while at the same time deliver economic goods (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 38). To top it off, Singaporeans are generally politically apathetic – proven by the very limited demand for more civil political participation (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 155).

3. Malaysia

Malaysia received independence from the British who left the country with stability, infrastructure and business-friendly environment – which are crucial for building a modern economy (Funston 2001: 161). At the same time, the British also provided Malaysia with a 'strong but authoritarian bureaucratic foundation for independence' – they educated a class of political leaders who are able to take over administration (Funston 2001: 161). As somewhat typical to a country once occupied by the British, Malaysia possesses the basis to build a solid independent government.

A constitutional monarchy with a federal parliamentary governmental system, Malaysian administration is vested in a cabinet led by a Prime Minister. The head of state is the *Yang Di Pertuan Agung* (King, or *Agong*). There is a special commission formally in charge of organizing elections (Funston 2001: 181). Election candidates compete in single member constituencies and are elected for a 5-year term (Funston 2001: 181). The Prime Minister may call elections ahead of schedule and

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[5] For example, PAP is known to delay funding for housing upgrade in constituencies where it lost (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 149-151).

there are no limits on the number of terms a candidate may stand (Funston 2001: 181).

The main party in Malaysia, UMNO (United Malays Nationalist Organisation), emerged after the British tried to introduce a Malayan Union in the late 1940s – and UMNO then headed the independence struggle against the British (Funston 2001: 161-163). UMNO created an agreement with MCA (Malayan Chinese Association) and MIC (Malayan Indian Congress) – together they formed the *Barisan Nasional* (National Front) (Funston 2001: 181). Although Malaysia is not a one-party state, UMNO has 'maintained support by focusing on specifically Malay, communal interests' (Funston 2001: 185).

UMNO's initial strategy was through the targeted dispersion of government funds, and then the strategy broadened to focus on a direct role in economic activities (Funston 2001: 185). UMNO is currently considered a mass party with around 2.7 million members, and consistently has been able to gather the majority support of peninsular Malay votes (Funston 2001: 185). Support for UMNO only expanded to Sabah in 1991, and presence in Sarawak is still very limited (Funston 2001: 185).

UMNO members are all Malays, spread in around 17,000 branches. The local branches hold annual general meetings, electing some of their members to represent them at the UMNO's divisional level (Case 1997: 86). The party has 164 divisions, corresponding with the country's parliamentary districts – and the divisions hold their own annual elections to choose a head a ten committee members (Case 1997: 86). Whenever the party holds its triennial elections, divisions have each nominated persons for positions at the party's national level, then sent their divisional head and committee members to attend as delegates, or to stand as candidates (Case 1997: 86). In turn, these candidates have been able to contest some twenty-five elected positions in the UMNO Supreme Council, the presidency, and deputy presidency of the party's Youth and Women's wings, three elected vice-presidencies, and, at the peak, the party's presidency or deputy presidency (Case 1997: 86-87).

UMNO's positions are attractive because they are important in Malaysia's political and business life – and competition to obtain them has tightened (Case 1997: 87). Because UMNO leader has always served as Malaysia's de facto prime minister, the party's internal election is seen as the country's real election (Case 1997: 86). UMNO's party apparatus often reflects the state's apparatus – a fact that makes UMNO's election even more alike with the country's election. It should be noted that although competition is generally tight for other positions, for positions above vice-presidencies,

Supreme Council seats, and leadership posts competitions have been discouraged – priorities are based on seniority for these posts (Case 1997: 87). Interestingly however, in reality president was challenged twice during 1978-1993, while the deputy president was challenged five times during these years – leading Gordon Means to conclude that 'UMNO remains the most vital and democratic party in either Malaysia or Singapore'.[6]

Opposition in Malaysia has obtained a great boost after the Anwar Ibrahim's case. In the period of the 1999 election, the *Partai Keadilan Nasional* (National Justice Party), led by Anwar's wife – confronted UMNO in urban constituencies (Case 2001: 45). Besides PAS (*Partai Islam se-Malaysia* or Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party) which has always provided strong competition for UMNO, there is also another party, *Partai Rakyat Malaysia* (PRM, Malaysian People's Party), which has overshadowed National Justice Party in terms of appealing for professionals (Case 2001: 45). Another major opposition party is Democratic Action Party (DAP) which is nominally socialist and multi-ethnic although seem to be venting Chinese grievances (Case 2001: 45). The four parties (Keadilan, PAS, PRM, and DAP) then joined together to form *Barisan Alternatif* (Alternative Front). However, Case argued that a great disadvantage of Malaysia's opposition parties has been their inability to bridge the differences among themselves to substantially challenge the government (Case 2001: 46).

Although there have been ups and downs in the total votes, the alliance has generally won in every election since the 1950s (Funston 2001: 163). The Asian economic crisis in 1997 and the Anwar Ibrahim's case have brought intensified tensions in Malaysian politics and more challenges for UMNO. This situation reflected in the November 1999 election when BN won but UMNO lost 22 seats (Funston 2001: 164). There was a stronger opposition coalition, and civil society was livelier, and, as Funston argued, the Malay majority support that UMNO had became less clear (Funston 2001: 165) and thus Malaysian politics became more uncertain. However, support for UMNO is also difficult to measure because opinion polls are banned in Malaysia (Case 1999: 41).

4. The Philippines

The Philippines was occupied by the Spanish for 333 years until the year 1898 (Funston 2001: 252). Although it is the first country that gained independence through a bloody revolution, the Philippines immediately had to

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[6] Subsequently, Mahathir Mohamad tried to tighten the procedures fearing that his tenure would be threatened (Case 1997: 87).

allow American hegemony for another 46 years and Japanese occupation for a short three years (Funston 2001: 252). The country occupied a strategic position, proven by the establishment of powerful American naval and airbases at Subic Bay, Olopongo, and Clark Airfield, Angeles, until nationalistic debate ejected the United States in 1991 (Funston 2001: 256).

The Philippines' political system has similarities with the United States'. As in most Asian countries, personalism is strong in the Philippines society and politics, so much so that Gonzales argued it oftentimes overshadowing political institutions (Funston 2001: 257). The Philippines society is heavily influenced with networks of patron-client which starts with immediate family members, to extended blood and marital relatives, landlord and tenant, boss and subordinate, and well extended to community in general (Funston (2001: 257). This pattern of relationship has proven useful when one wishes to enter political life or maintain political power, as patron-client relationship is essential in gaining support (Funston 2001: 257).

Since the ouster of Marcos in 1986, the Philippines adopted a multi-party system (during Marcos' term the Philippines had become a one-party country), which is considered free and open (Funston 2001: 276). There is a wide-range of parties in the Philippine politics, different than other countries in Southeast Asia, there is even a Communist Party in the Philippines (Funston 2001: 276). Most of new parties decided to form coalitions, although the idea of opposition seems rather trivial considering the fact that voters care more about political figures and less about party affiliations. Parties in the Philippines are means to get individuals power – it is noted that people gather quickly among the figures they support, but dispersed also quickly when the figures lose influence (Funston 2001: 277). The common pattern seems to be, that political parties utilize the complex network of inter-relationships to gather grassroots support (Funston 2001: 277).

Elections in the Philippines are highly organized events. Much like Malaysia, there are constitutionally-mandated body that has the responsibility to organize elections and local and national levels (Funston 2001: 271). The people elect the President, Vice President and Senators every six years and members of House of Representatives every three years (Funston 2001: 272). Elections in the Philippines are relatively peaceful, although the use of 'guns, goons, and gold' (coercion, terrorism, and money) exist – and people who want to be elected usually distribute goods, services, and cash; which as the election date draws near could turn into violence (Funston 2001: 273).

The first political parties in the Philippines emerged in the beginning of the 20h century, with the US system closely imitated by the establishment of Partido Federal (Federal Party) and Partido Conservador (Conservative Party) (Funston 2001: 275). However, after independence in 1946 until 1972, there have been two main political parties in the Philippines – Nationalista Party and the Liberal Party. These parties control the majority of governmental seats, but generally Philippine politics care more about personalities rather than platforms – the two parties have the same platform anyway, which aim to 'help the country achieve economic independence and social equity' (Funston 2001: 276). In fact, the single most distinctive feature of Philippine politics is that these two parties are quite identical – in terms of social, occupational, and regional sources of their support as well as their policies (Lande 1964: 1). It is personalities that distinguished the two parties (Lande 1964: 276). Party loyalty is very low in the Philippines, as persons switch from one party to another when the party fails to give him/her the desired position.

Philippine political parties are organized upward with the local leader holding the biggest power (Lande 1964: 5). One of the consequences of this fact is that in the Philippines parties is effected more by local considerations than national ones, which means that 'the composition and structure of the national parties is affected to a greater extent by the composition and structure of their constituent local and provincial organizations than the reverse' (Lande 1964: 5). Lande explains that the parties that are organized downward tend to recruit members based on their social classes, occupations, or religions (Lande 1964: 5). Parties in the Philippines on the other hand, 'take much of their character from constituent units of local origins', and thus not recruited categorically 'and possess little discreteness or solidarity' (Lande 1964: 6).

The concept of 'membership' in the Philippines political parties consist largely of full-time or part-time professional politicians (Lande 1964: 69). Lande argues further that for the members, political parties serve as the vehicles to obtain, maintain, and exploit public offices, and other functions such as the achievements of the wishes of particular interest groups are of little importance for Philippine parties (Lande 1964: 69). At the same time, the term 'party member' for people other than professional politicians is even less appropriate' in the Philippines, because 'no major political party attempts to create a large and permanent rank-and-file following among the electorate at large' (Lande 1964: 69-70). Ordinary voter are usually loyal to a particular leader figure and is likely to vote for whichever party that leader supports or belongs to (Lande 1964: 70). Parties will not require and not interested in inviting voters to become members because of the same reason (Lande (1964: 70). The definition of a party member is simply that one identifies with a particular party, and

there is no formal procedure of affiliation Lande (1964: 72). Participation in party council is a strong indicator that the person is an *important* member, but that has nothing to do with whether the person is a *loyal* member (Lande 1964: 72).

There are at least two reasons why Filipinos in general are not interested to become party members. First, the two parties are too similar, that most people cannot name any differences between them. One research done decades ago found out that when people can name any differences, they would point to rather trivial aspects (Lande 1964: 70). This lack of distinction between the parties has caused the electorate to have no attachment to the parties – and even among the people who are members they choose to become member because of particular person(s) (Lande 1964: 70). Second, the local political leaders prefer to build loyalty based on personal connections rather than parties – in order to be able to maintain the support even when conflicts with other party leaders arise (Lande 1964: 70).

5. Concluding Remarks

The three countries are different in physical sizes and socio-political systems. Singapore is a small country by comparison with the other two, with around 4 million populations, while Malaysia has 23 millions and the Philippines' population is 77 million populations. Singapore is relatively more economically-advanced than the other two countries, although Malaysia and the Philippines are richer in natural resources. Singapore's has a one-party system, and Malaysia has a dominant-party system; while Philippines has a 'non-dominant' two-party system.

Singapore and Malaysia were both occupied by the British, and as a result were 'educated' politically. The Philippines on the other hand, adopted its political system from the US. If a free election is an indicator, Singapore is seen as an authoritarian or non-democratic country (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 128), and Malaysia as a semi-democratic country. The Philippines is deemed the most democratic among the three countries. However, election fraud and money politics still exist in the countries.

Opposition is treated differently in the three countries. In Malaysia, partly due to the multi-ethnicity of the parties, the differences among the parties are difficult to bridge – and this is the reason why opposition parties have not been successful in gaining support to challenge the government. In Singapore opposition has not been successful for a different reason – the government has been able to suppress the lives of opposition parties, and thus there is very limited contact and knowledge of the opposition. In the Philippines, the concept of opposition is very trivial – as there is no party loyalty.

Succession is most interesting in Singapore, where the mechanism and arrangement of replacement is very 'neat', and there is no resistance against successions. In Malaysia, this issue is more difficult – Mahathir did stay in power for decades. People showed much respect him so much that they begged him not to leave. Leadership in general however, is open for contestation – a positive indicator for democracy. In the Philippines, presidential changes for the past 20 years have been a lot less peaceful with various mass demonstrations dominating the headlines around presidential changes. As for succession within the parties, in Singapore succession is almost 'automatic' and mechanized, and in the Philippines succession is ignorable as public figures are practically not attached to the parties. In Malaysia there seems to be a free and lively competition for UMNO posts, because the posts translates to good business opportunities.

Although the three countries are geographically close to one another, they have different party lives. Considered much less democratic than Western countries, these countries can be said to have adapted a system that is suitable for their circumstances. Singapore would have so much trouble if the government does not control opposition parties, although pro-democracy view would like to see livelier and more active political life there. Malaysia is a delicate society because it is multi-cultural although Malays are the majority there – and scholars believe that democracy is difficult to establish in plural societies (Hefner 2001: 1). In the Philippines, democracy is more consolidated, because although there are uncertainties in terms of leadership, people respect the presidential choices and they know how to exercise their rights when they want changes to be made.

Acknowledgement

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