Malaysia’s *unexceptionalism*

Like elsewhere, elites are fractious

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Most national elites in Southeast Asia must be understood as divided, skirmishing ceaselessly for factional advantage while surging periodically in epic warring. Thus, in countries like Thailand and the Philippines, regimes have been rocked by *autogolpes*, military coups, and social upheavals. In other cases, elites have mostly been contained, but coercively, whether by an enveloping executive as in Indonesia under Suharto or in Cambodia under Hun Sen; an absorptive single party system as in Vietnam and Laos, encrusted with revolutionary origins and ideology; or fearsome security apparatuses as in Myanmar during the generalship of Ne Win. But though regimes in these latter cases might avoid outright breakdown, relations between elites are punctuated still by purges, economic ruin, imprisonment, and exile. Such fractiousness is typical. Surveying elites around the world and across time, Higley and Burton (1989: 19) describe elite-level conflict as the ‘modal condition’. And in focusing more closely on Southeast Asia, Dan Slater (2010: 10) concurs, writing that ‘strong elite coalitions are extremely difficult to construct and consolidate at the national level. In most places and under most circumstances, elite politics is rife with factionalism and parochialism’.

But in Malaysia, elites have been evaluated differently. For reasons canvassed below, their relations have been cast by analysts as comparatively cohesive (see Lijphart 1977; Mauzy 1983; Zakaria 1989; Case 1995; Brownlee 2007). Attuned to sundry legacies, structural pressures, and institutional incentives, elites in Malaysia, though competing avidly for positions, resources, and constituencies, conduct their interactions in accord with rare codes of ‘restrained partisanship’ (Higley and Burton 1989). Hence, the ‘strain points’ in their relations that inevitably set in are depicted as stopping well short of the ruptures that occur in Thailand and the Philippines. Nor has even a posture of ‘semi-loyalty’ prevailed, characterised by Linz and Stepan (1996) as one wherein elites may bide their time, sometimes for long periods, but on first provocation or opportunity, finally defect and collate into factions, revealing that all along they had been quietly divided. The evident rivalries that simmer between the president and prime minister in Vietnam today, as well as the impatience of hard-lining generals with liberalising ministers in Myanmar, might be understood in this way, threatening finally to erupt in open warring if paramount leaders falter or institutions weaken. Hence, in stark contrast, elites in Malaysia are described as avoiding the open or
delayed confrontations that mar relations between most other national elites in Southeast Asia. And hence, the political regime that they operate has long been regarded as one of the most stable in the region.

This account argues, however, that on closer inspection, elites in Malaysia and the regime that they operate have never been so exceptional. Little more than a decade after independence, reasonably even terms of coalescence between ethnic Malay and Chinese elites lost symmetry. And as conciliation gave way to greater Malay hegemony, even if still accommodative, the country’s electoral democracy narrowed into electoral authoritarianism (Schedler 2006). Moreover, during the past decade-and-a-half, as both communal and intra-ethnic fractiousness between elites rose, a social reform movement and opposition coalition emerged, able to press for greater civil liberties and electoral uncertainty, therein recalibrating the regime into competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2010). At this juncture, then, though the playing field remained uneven, an outright victory by the opposition in a general election grew imaginable. But more recently, Malay elites in government have regained their hegemony, then tightly excluded their Chinese rivals. Further, they have begun rolling back their regime once again to a posture of electoral authoritarianism, though this time even more heavily manipulated and coercively applied.

Accordingly, we can identify in Malaysia’s record a sequencing in elite-level relations, tilting over time from coalescence to fractiousness and from a comparative evenness between ethnic communities to more overt Malay dominance. The political regime has changed commensurately, first from electoral democracy to electoral authoritarianism, then to competitive authoritarianism. More recently, it has contracted into electoral authoritarianism once again, though its disequilibrium now requires increasingly muscular enforcement. In addition, throughout this trajectory, relations between elites have bristled with factional battles, purges, and jailings, though so routinely that they fail even to register in regime changes. In blunt terms, then, elites in Malaysia have never been so cohesive, nor their regime so stable, as usually depicted.

In making this case, this account begins by briefly establishing that elites are a valid unit of analysis. Measurement problems abound when proposing indicators and thresholds for elite fractiousness and cohesion. Declaring the extent to which a regime is correspondingly unstable or stable is equally fraught. Next, some common explanations for a purported cohesion between elites in Malaysia are rehearsed. In doing this, we will see that the same sets of factors that are typically designated as encouraging cohesion have gradually promoted fractiousness. Throughout, the determinative pressures of ethnic identification in Malaysia, distinctive in Southeast Asia, are addressed, enabling us to chart changes in elite relations through isolable postures of coalescence, accommodative hegemony, a more symmetrical split, and renewed, though more exclusionary, hegemony.

The elite variable

Amid a decade-long resurgence of elite analysis and regime change during the 1980s–90s, elites were variously profiled as soft- and hardliners, swingmen and semi-loyalists, and minimalists and maximalists. Unveiling a New Elite Paradigm, John Higley and Michael Burton (1989: 18) defined elites as ‘persons who are able, by virtue of their authoritative positions in powerful organizations and movements of whatever kind, to affect national political outcomes regularly and substantially’. Further, elites are described as cohesive (or in Higley and Burton’s lexicon, ‘consensually unified’) to the extent that in competing for positions, resources, and organised constituencies, they adhere to
rules and codes of political conduct amounting to ‘restrained partisanship’. . . . [Elites] view decisional outcomes as a . . . ‘politics-as-bargaining’ game, rather than a . . . ‘politics-as-war’ game. . . . They consistently refrain from pushing their differences to the point of violent conflict.

(Higley and Burton 1989: 19)

Conversely, elites are fractious (or ‘disunified’) when they break with the rules and norms that had restrained them, with factions pushing for ascendancy or paramount leadership. In doing this, they resort to ruthless strategies by which to run down the statuses of rival elites, including purges, expropriating resources, jailing, exile, and appropriating or crushing the constituencies arrayed against them. In this way, the regimes that they operate are destabilised, likely collapsing in executive or military coups or instigated social upheavals, hence paving the way for new types of regimes, though not necessarily of any greater stability.

To be sure, inconsistent statuses, uncertain autonomy, fluctuating and immeasurable relations, and a lack of independent referents for elite-level behaviours and regime outcomes seem to bedevil elite analysis, raising questions over rigour and tautology. Hence, in trying to avoid the uncertainty and contingency of leadership, many mainstream theorists have abandoned elites for large-n deductive methods. In brief, they seek to overcome the indecipherability of elite-level behaviours by averaging them out across many cases whose historical, social, and developmental features are more readily apprehended. But this is of little help when trying to understand a particular case like Malaysia, where even brief consideration of a counterfactual makes plain the impact of leadership: the country’s political trajectory would doubtless have been quite different had its prime ministers, with their distinctive leadership styles, been reordered, with Tun Razak or Mahathir Mohamad having been leader at the time of independence, for example, or Abdullah Badawi during the developmentalist decades of the 1980s–90s.

Thus in accounts of regimes in particular cases, we must capture the impact that disproportionately empowered persons impose on regime types and change. In this analysis of Malaysia, elite statuses are limited to those holding high positions in top political parties and state agencies, Next, indicators of elite fractiousness include a confiscation of personal assets, often through partisan tax offices or regulatory bodies, an appropriation or marginalisation of rival constituencies, cultural humiliation, purges, jailing, assaults on elite persons and their family members, disappearance, and forced exile. When enumerated in this way, fractiousness can be understood as distinct from, and causally prior to, their regime’s instability, easing our doubts over the measurability of elite statuses and relations, as well as the risks of tautology. Thus, while fashioned by Higley and Burton more than two decades ago, their paradigm offers a good platform upon which to address questions over elite statuses, relations, and regimes in Malaysia, offering both guidelines about how to proceed and a foil that invites refinement.

Accounting for elite relations in Malaysia

This section canvasses three sets of explanations for cohesion among elites, examining them in the Malaysian setting. We look first at the segmental ‘pillarisation’ and elite coalescence proposed by Arend Lijphart (1977), as well as the legacies of British colonial rule and a ‘tutelary model’ outlined by Myron Weiner (1987). Second, we turn to redistributive pressures and a pact of cohesion that features in recent work by Dan Slater (2010). Finally, we consider a single dominant party, investigated by Jason Brownlee (2007) through a
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historical-institutional approach, as well as the patronage distributions which, though assessed by Beatriz Magaloni and Kenneth Greene during the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)’s tenure in Mexico, also characterise the functioning of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in Malaysia. As we rehearse these explanations, we will see too that the factors that they identify have as readily promoted fractiousness among elites in Malaysia as the cohesion thought more often to prevail.

Segmental pillars and colonial legacies: elite coalescence

Arend Lijphart, in analysing elites and regimes in small multi-ethnic countries in central Europe, contended that in such plural settings, ethnic, religious, linguistic, cultural, and deep-seated ideological affiliations usually segmented society, therein posing grave challenges to elite relations and democratic stability. However, under some conditions, elites might still attain ‘coalescence’, enabling them to cooperate across segmental lines in order to perpetuate a ‘consociational’ form of democracy. Under this framework, a majoritarian, government-versus-opposition, winner-takes-all approach is avoided in order that the leaders of all societal segments might provide for their constituencies, a practice safeguarded in decisional committees by informal understandings, under-mobilisation of followers, and usage of a ‘mutual veto’. Further, these features are reinforced through particular institutions of federalist power sharing, proportional representation in a parliamentary setting, a grand coalition and an ‘oversized’ cabinet.

In accounting for such cohesion among elites, Lijphart scoured the supportive structural features that plural societies might possess. He identified first the desirability of a ‘balance of segmental power’ with key social constituencies similar in size, therein deterring their leaders from striving for paramountcy. Lijphart also cited the helpfulness of distinct and ‘isolated’ segmental ‘pillars’, strengthening support for leaders, but also the need for crosscutting cleavages and overarching loyalties, therein helping to instil a crucial ‘tradition of elite accommodation’. During the 1960s, then, in extending his gaze from Europe to some developing countries, Lijphart espied at least some of these features in Malaysia. They appeared to foster, then, a rare configuration of elite coalescence, hence underpinning what Lijphart (1977: 150) regarded as a ‘reasonably successful consociational democracy in the Third World’.

Myron Weiner (1987: 20) developed these notions of elite cohesion further. Addressing countries that gained independence after World War II, he focused specifically on British colonial experience, in particular ‘the British tradition of imposing limits on government, of establishing norms for the conduct of those who exercise power, and of creating procedures for the management of conflict’. In brief, the British offered in colonial settings what Weiner terms a ‘model of tutelage’ that involved recruiting local elites into bureaucratic structures and representative councils, then gradually introducing them to elections.

In developing an extractive economy in colonial Malaya, the British recruited labour from China, India, and elsewhere, therein articulating a deeply plural society. In this situation, Milton Esman (1972: 228) observed that ‘seldom . . . have people with so little in common been fated to share the same territory and participate in the same political system’. But in addition to the ways identified by Lijphart through which segmental pillars might incentivise elites to cooperate, we see too how the British, while applying the tutelary model conceptualised by Weiner, purposively took additional steps to facilitate trust across ethnic lines. In brief, after dropping the Malayan Union proposal, the British encouraged accommodation by convening local elites in a series of committee meetings during 1949–50, seeking to lay the foundation for political independence and stable democracy. Known as the Communities
Liaison Committee (CLC), the British gathered six Malay representatives, six Chinese, and one member each from the Indian, Ceylonese, Eurasian, and European communities.

Malcolm McDonald, a former governor general of Malaya, mediated all the CLC sessions. He barred ‘subelites’ from UMNO and the newly formed Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) from attending the meetings in order that discussion could be kept secret from mass constituencies. Only after elite agreements had been reached were proposals made to the Federal Legislative Council, then revealed publicly through press statements. Gordon Means (1976: 124) thus noted the CLC ‘demonstrate[d] that significant communal compromise was more likely to emerge from semi-secret and “of-the-record” negotiations conducted by communal leaders’. Lijphart (1977: 155) further observed that the CLC ‘provided valuable experience for the intersegmental bargaining of the Alliance a few years later’. And he concluded that

[Malaysia’s] segments are separated from each other by the mutually reinforcing cleavages of language, religion, culture, and race. The all-important consociational device of Malaysia is the Alliance, a grand coalition of the principle Malay, Chinese, and Indian political parties. . . . Proportionality [is evident] if the political and economic spheres are considered together . . . [with] political and government superiority for the Malays and continued economic hegemony for the Chinese.

(Lijphart 1977: 150–51)

Thus, R.S. Milne (1967: 41) assessed, too, that ‘when the whole scene is surveyed, in its social, economic, and political aspects, it becomes clear that a kind of short-term rough justice between the claims of the communities [was] in fact . . . attained’. Accordingly, ‘the bargain’ had been reached, seemingly providing Malaysia, made independent in 1957, with a propitious start in coalescent elite relations and democratic politics.

But where Lijphart and Weiner saw in Malaysia’s social structure and historical legacies the basis for coalescent elites, other authors predicted ruptures and breakdown. Donald Horowitz (1985), in evaluating relations between the pre-eminent Malay and Chinese constituencies, found less balance in segmental power than a highly volatile bipolar faceoff. Rabushka and Shepsle (2009: 207) stated flatly that ‘history shows that democratic stability and cultural diversity are often incompatible in the post-independence politics of many plural societies . . . [I]ntense ethnic conflict frequently erupts shortly after native peoples obtain their independence’.

Elites in UMNO, the MCA, and an ethnic Indian vehicle, the Malay(s)ian Indian Congress (MIC), collaborated through the Alliance in contesting elections for more than a decade after independence. However, though forming a grand coalition and oversized cabinet, their sharing of state positions could hardly be characterised even at this stage as fully proportional. Put simply, Chinese elites accepted marked under-representation in the government, bureaucracy, and military in exchange for some economic assurances and minimal citizenship guarantees. Stephen Chee (1991: 63–66) observes also that in the Alliance Council and cabinet meetings, UMNO elites never conceded to the Chinese any power of mutual veto over what they held to be vital Malay interests. Additionally, UMNO elites refused to grant the Chinese even firm segmental autonomy over the latter’s own cultural politics and concerns, especially ‘as expressed in . . . demands for linguistic and education pluralism’ (Chee 1991: 66). Thus, while elites in Malaysia appeared more cohesive than in some other Southeast Asian countries during the 1960s, the skewness in the terms of their relations boded poorly for coalescence over time.
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What is more, this weakening of elite relations would remain unchecked by any hint of what Levitsky and Way (2012: 871) posit as a far more powerful source of elite cohesion in developing countries than tutelage and bargaining amid peaceful decolonisation. For them, lasting accommodation must be forged in violence, whether made manifest in wars of independence or revolutionary upheavals. It is through great risks and sacrifice, characteristic of ‘sustained, violent, and ideationally driven struggle’, that elites may forge the ‘enduring partisan identities’ and ‘military-style internal discipline’ that perpetuate their cohesion over time. In Malaysia, however, what political violence occurred during the decade prior to independence was hardly undertaken by local elites. Rather, it was waged by British colonial officials and Commonwealth troops against leftist insurgents in defence of local elites, a campaign known as the Emergency. Thus, with elites avoiding the violence that was waged on their behalf, their tradition of accommodation, derived from ethnic pillarisation, tutelage, and bargaining at independence, gradually faded.

Thus, little more than a decade after independence, the fears of Rabushka and Shepsle were borne out. In the election held in 1969, many Malays, discontented with UMNO’s tolerance of free markets and skewed distributions, voted for PAS, while many Chinese, resentful over their ‘second-class citizenship’, supported new, mostly ethnically Chinese opposition parties. Thus, with the UMNO-led Alliance gravely weakened, the frictions between segmental pillars were brought to the boil, finally erupting in ethnic rioting known locally as the ‘May 13th incident’ (Von Vorys 1975). Elites then reordered relations in ways that were more starkly asymmetrical, then reset their consociational democracy as electoral authoritarianism. In brief, elites in UMNO absorbed almost all opposition vehicles into their coalition, rechristened as Barisan Nasional (National Front), then vastly enhanced their own party’s dominance. What is more, they used their increased state power to make deep inroads in the world of business and finance. Zakaria (1989: 372) once assured us that, despite this tilt, a hegemonic configuration persisted with accommodationist elements. But the strains in relations were declared by the shift in control over key economic ministries and bureaucratic agencies from the MCA to UMNO. It was shortly after this, too, that UMNO unveiled the New Economic Policy (NEP), systematising its assertion of state-owned enterprises and cross-ethnic transfers of private sector assets and positions. In this context, Ian Lustick (1979) observed that uneven relations between elites had grown so skewed that elite coalescence and consociationalism, if they had ever existed, were supplanted now by a ‘control model’.

During the 1960s–70s, we find many more indicators of fractiousness among elites across ethnic lines. The enmity between Alliance leaders and Lee Kuan Yew, chief executive of Singapore, was exacerbated by the latter’s political vehicle, the People’s Action Party (PAP), audaciously contesting general elections in 1964. In mobilising Chinese voters over calls for a ‘Malaysian Malaysia’, Lee struck squarely at indigenous Malay privileges (Means 1976: 347). Further, after the election, the PAP joined with other opposition parties to form the Malaysian Solidarity Convention, invigorating debate in parliament and arousing the sentiments of Chinese constituents. Regarding this as betrayal, the UMNO prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, summarily expelled Singapore from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965. And only after much debate did he permit a local successor to the PAP, the Democratic Action Party (DAP), to be registered in Malaysia.

Inter-ethnic tensions, straining relations between elites in UMNO and the MCA, continued to simmer during this period over political hegemony, economic redistribution, and the cultural role of Malay vernacular, now officially made the national language. But even more than this, fractiousness among Malay elites also began to intensify. Tunku Abdul Rahman, personally conciliatory in his conduct of ethnic relations, was purged as prime
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minister in 1971 by a faction of ‘ultra Malays’ led by his successor, Tun Abdul Razak, shortly before emergency rule was lifted and electoral authoritarianism installed. Further, an Islamist opposition vehicle, the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), which had broken from UMNO in 1951 (Funston 1980: 92–94), was lured into the Barisan in 1973. But soon afterward leaders of UMNO and PAS disagreed over who should become chief minister in the latter’s bailiwick state of Kelantan. In a clear indicator of rising fractiousness, then, UMNO mobilised its followers in Kelantan, fomenting such confrontation that it was able to declare emergency rule yet again, then impose its candidate (Chin 1997). In 1978, PAS abandoned Barisan, returning to opposition. And throughout the 1980s, as PAS grew more Islamist in tenor, its rivalries with UMNO intensified over religiosity, precipitating rancorous disputes in which they accused one another of being kafir (infidels). In the late 1990s, the UMNO-led government arrested the son of the PAS chief minister of Kelantan for terrorism, detaining him and several party associates for long periods without trial under the country’s notorious Internal Security Act (ISA). Imprisonment on such terms registers plainly the deepening fractiousness between elites, not only across ethnic lines but deep within the Malay segmental pillar. Indeed, as we will see below, factional warring would break out even within UMNO, sparking purges, jail sentences, and televised confessions, actions that culminated in the irregular seizures of executive power that Higley and Burton define as regime instability.

Redistributive pressures: accommodative hegemony

After recalling that elites in most national settings are fractious, Dan Slater next contends that they may overcome the collective action problems that inhibit cohesion when threatened sufficiently from below by redistributive pressures. These pressures involve, however, very specific combinations of mass-level sentiments, first made manifest in class-based demands, then ignited by communal resentments, so shaking elites from their lateral warring, usually waged in capital cities, that they come finally to acknowledge one another as elites, rather than as irksome pretenders or unworthy foes. In these circumstances, elites reorganise their relations in a ‘pact of protection’ through which to repress redistributive demands and safeguard their mutual statuses. Moreover, in doing this, elites now so empower and articulate the state with ruling parties, bureaucratic agencies, and security apparatuses that rather than installing a democracy, even a consociational one, they erect instead a sturdy authoritarian ‘Leviathan’. In the Southeast Asian context, Slater cites Malaysia and Singapore, mighty in their tax collection and coercive capacity, as arch examples.

Slater is right that when class-based demands for redistribution appeared in Malaysia in the wake of World War II, cumulating in leftist insurgency, elites in UMNO, often aristocratic civil servants, and in the MCA, mainly business tycoons, discovered additional impetus for gathering together under the tutelage of the British. But when mass demands for redistribution gained a more avowedly communal tenor during the late 1960s–70s, the pact of protection, rather than gaining new affirmation, was at least partially shattered. Elites in UMNO, far from joining their counterparts in the MCA to quash redistributive demands, now led the way in heightening them among the Malay constituencies that they sought to re-energise. In brief, through measures collectively designated as the NEP, they introduced pro-Malay quotas on university placements, state enterprise formation and managerial recruitment, corporate hiring, and equity ownership (Jesudason 1989). These quotas were most intensely applied under the Industrial Coordination Act during the 1970s, cheering the Malays, but deepening resentments among the Chinese, to the point that many of those who possessed necessary resources migrated overseas in large numbers during this period. It is difficult to
imagine any surer indicator than flight of eroded constituent loyalties and consequent tensions between elites.

What is more, when fractiousness erupted within UMNO, it seldom unfolded in ways that motivated elites to rekindle old ties to MCA leaders. To the contrary, factions in UMNO would more typically stoop to competing with one another by castigating the Chinese over their business activities, vernacular schools, and cultural displays. Thus, in a fracas canvassed more thoroughly below that erupted between ‘teams’ designated ‘A’ and ‘B’ over succession during the late 1980s, spiralling dynamics gave rise to shrill criticisms of the Chinese. Indeed, as pressures intensified, Najib Razak, associated with Team B, was prodded by factional supporters to lead a rally through which to re-energise Malay support. In view of banners, then, that depicted a Malay ceremonial dagger, the *kris*, and reading ‘soak it in Chinese blood’, Najib was driven to wave a long-bladed sword over his head, while burning an MCA flag and an effigy of the party’s deputy president. The leader of Team A, Mahathir himself, countered finally by ordering a notorious security sweep known as Operation Lalang. Over the course of several weeks, some 106 politicians and activists were detained without trial under the ISA, including members of UMNO’s Youth wing associated with Team B, but more glaringly, the DAP’s secretary-general, Lim Kit Sang, and fifteen other DAP parliamentarians. PAS officials and Chinese educationists were also held, some for long periods.

During the 1990s, as Malaysia’s economy and middle class grew swiftly, fractiousness among elites within UMNO and across ethnic lines subsided. Indeed, Mahathir, in estimating that amid the decade’s buoyancy, the *korporat Melayu* (Malay entrepreneurs) that he had nurtured could now engage more fruitfully with Chinese tycoons, celebrated the convening of *bangsa Malaysia*, a new national identity that connoted ‘people . . . able to identify themselves with the country, speak Bahasa Malaysia, and accept the Constitution’ (*Asiaweek* 1995: 38). Even Lim Kit Siang, leading the DAP, was moved to reply: ‘I concede that Mahathir’s statement was courageous. His remarks are the most enlightened he has made on nation-building for some time’ (*Asiaweek* 1995: 38).

Severe tensions among elites recurred across ethnic lines during the next decade, however. Mahathir’s successor as prime minister and UMNO president, Abdullah Badawi, led his Barisan government to its mightiest electoral victory ever in 2004, drawing robust voter support from across the Malay and Chinese communities. But activists in UMNO, evidently made confident by this win that they had turned back a social reform movement and opposition coalition led by the former deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim, calculated that it was timely now more vigorously to assert Malay special rights. In the next section, we will explore in more detail Anwar’s expulsion from UMNO, his imprisonment, the rise of a social reform movement, and the implications for elite relations. What requires attention here is the renewed burst of communalism in UMNO that was unleashed, highlighted by its Youth leader and also Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein’s raising a *kris* at successive UMNO general assemblies on national television. Abdullah, while having campaigned on a promise to be ‘a prime minister for all Malaysians’, reacted to Hishammuddin’s gestures languidly, remarking that ‘the *kris* is a weapon, but it is a weapon to protect yourself and your friends’ (*Malaysiakini* 2007).

As UMNO’s communalism intensified, it reawakened the suspicions of the Chinese, driving them back into the arms of the opposition, hence eroding constituent support for MCA elites. Thus, when a general election was held in March 2008, Barisan leaders were stunned by the extent to which Chinese voters deserted to the opposition, with PAS, the DAP, and Anwar’s new vehicle, the People’s Justice Party (PKR) forging electoral agreements. UMNO elites were struck, too, by a swing of some 5 percent among Malay voters,
principally members of the new urban middle class who were alienated over the government’s incessant patronage flows. Accordingly, some elites in UMNO underwent a rare period of introspection, reflecting on their party’s eroded popularity, while contemplating significant liberalising reforms.

Unrepentant factions, however, soon regained the upper hand. And in a sharp display of elite fractiousness, they steadily undermined Abdullah, then finally purged him as prime minister and UMNO leader in 2009, replacing him with Najib Razak. Over the next few years, Najib, rather like Abdullah, tried to steer a modest course of reform, easing authoritarian controls, liberalising the economy, and making overtures to the Chinese – promising new support for Chinese-language schools, for example, while campaigning under a banner of ‘1Malaysia’ for the next election in 2013. Yet attitudes had so hardened that in this election the Chinese instead nearly completed their swing to the opposition, with PAS, the DAP, and PKR having drawn more closely together as Pakatan Rakyat (People’s Alliance). The MCA fared badly, then, with Barisan collectively losing even more of the popular vote and parliamentary seats. UMNO, though, had its ‘best election ever’, winning eighty-eight seats, just one shy of Pakatan’s total.

Afterward, Daim Zainuddin, a former finance minister, chastised Najib for his moderate campaigning, declaring that UMNO strategists had known all along ‘that the Chinese majority areas were gone. Why waste time and money?’ (Lim 2013). Even more assertively, A. Kadir Jasin, an influential editor-in-chief associated closely with UMNO, exclaimed, ‘UMNO is particularly upset as we told Najib not to throw money at the Chinese as other constituencies needed the resources and the Chinese wouldn’t vote for us anyway’ (Berthelsen 2013). And a former Court of Appeal judge, Mohd Noor Abdullah, serving currently on the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission and the UMNO Disciplinary Committee, berated the Chinese for their ‘betrayal’, declaring that ‘we gave them recognition and protection and eventually citizenship until they became rich. . . . [W]hen Malays are betrayed, there is a backlash and the Chinese must bear the consequences of a Malay backlash’ (Aw 2013). A group of Islamic NGOs then demanded that the Malay community boycott Chinese-owned companies that had contributed to Pakatan’s campaign (Malaysiakini 2013).

As relations worsened, Najib recoiled from his earlier moderation. He announced a new volley of redistributive measures benefiting the Malays, collectively labelled Bumiputera Economic Empowerment. They include formation of the Bumiputera New Entrepreneurs Start-Up Scheme (SUPERB), more vigorous use of the country’s extensive set of Government Linked Corporations (GLCs) to procure goods from bumiputera vendors, and a second unit trust, Amanah Saham Bumiputera 2 (ASB2), more broadly advantaging ‘middle’ Malay shareowners with favourable returns. Plainly, the fissures between Malay and Chinese communities have widened, indeed so weakening the MCA’s constituencies that the party, holding only seven seats in parliament and initially no ministerial positions in cabinet, is barely able today even to support elite statuses.

To sum up this section, redistributive pressures posed from below failed in Malaysia to inspire any lasting pact of protection through which elites might cooperatively react in defence of their interests. Instead, elites fractured across ethnic lines, with those in UMNO responding avidly to demands in order to re-energise their Malay supporters, but therein undermining the Chinese constituencies, and hence the standing, of their counterparts in the MCA. At the same time, a hardy authoritarian Leviathan was created in Malaysia, but along vectors that sharply depart from Slater’s account. A powerful state apparatus was built by elites in UMNO, but then fused with their party in order to respond fully to redistributive demands, not to repress them, therein delivering the exclusivist benefits that accord with Malay special
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rights. To be sure, for some three decades after the introduction of the NEP, some level of elite cohesion was nonetheless perpetuated across ethnic lines, captured in a refrain of hegemony with accommodativeness. But after the election in 2004, as elites in UMNO asserted Malay special rights more vigorously, they inflamed resentments within the Chinese community. In addition, Abdullah’s utter inability to contain the patronage flows in UMNO that coursed alongside the NEP’s redistributions began to alienate some ‘progressive’ urban middle-class Malays. In these circumstances, a social reform movement and political opposition emerged which, by energising vast popular support, came even to threaten UMNO’s hegemony and the regime’s electoral authoritarianism. Thus, as elites in opposition scaled new heights, a configuration took shape that must be characterised as fractious, but marked by increasingly balanced multi-ethnic coalitions. Thus, for UMNO to recover, relations among its leaders required the renewal of historical-institutional legacies and codes, as well as the practised issuance of patronage, posing serious challenges to the party, to which we now turn.

Patronage and single-party dominance: from even splits to new hegemony

Dan Slater is mainly concerned with the ways in which elites reach cohesion through a pact of protection, then fashion a supportive array of authoritarian institutions. Other authors, however, stress what Slater labels a ‘pact of provision’, with single-dominant parties maintaining cohesion among elites by accessing and mediating flows of state patronage. Kenneth Greene (2007) and Beatriz Magaloni (2006), in developing respectively a ‘resource theory . . . of hyper-incumbency’ and a theory of ‘hegemonic party survival’, narrow their attention to the methods by which party leaders once extracted public sector resources and allocated them across elite-level persons and factions in ways that reproduced elite cohesion. As Magaloni (2006: 18) succinctly puts it, ‘hegemonic parties must distribute ample spoils . . . so as to deter elites from splitting’.

Jason Brownlee (2007) extends this analysis to a variety of hegemonic parties in developing countries, including UMNO. Through his ‘historical-institutional’ approach, he traces the structural forces that first divide elites, the triumph of one set of elites over others (rather than any lasting bargain), and the installation of victorious elites based in a single dominant party. And steeled by historical legacies, this party then regulates reliably the allocation of patronage among elites, while energising constituent loyalties. Thus, while the spoils emphasised by Greene and Magaloni are important for maintaining dominance, Brownlee (2007: 203) argues that UMNO does more than meet material needs. By combining patronage streams with a communally arousing ‘Malay agenda’, it ‘binds together otherwise fractious elites in [a] durable coalition that enable[s] individual advancement amid collective security’.

Accordingly, with its patronage distributions, historical resonance, mediating capacity, and structural grounding, UMNO is depicted by Brownlee as enabling elites to resolve episodic strains in their relations. But even if we acknowledge that relations between elites in UMNO and the MCA were eroded, permitting us to focus solely on UMNO, it is difficult to support a claim of unbroken cohesion between elites in even the latter vehicle. As we noted in the previous section, their dynamics have regularly bristled with upsurges in fractiousness.

Thus, even a brief recount of factional conflicts in UMNO shows that they can amount to much more than mere ‘strain points’, amenable to conciliation. As we have seen, Tunku Abdul Rahman and Abdullah Badawi, their party presidencies and ex officio prime
ministerships supposedly sanctified by Malay cultural notions of authority and grounded institutionally in UMNO procedures, were respectively purged after setbacks in the 1969 and 2008 elections. Further, though the patronage resources said to help underpin elite cohesion swelled during the mid-1970s upon introduction of the NEP, ensuring that distribution was ‘ample’ and reliable, the chief minister of Selangor, Harun Idris, after challenging the UMNO president and prime minister, Hussein Onn, was sentenced to a lengthy jail term for corruption. Conversely, when patronage was depleted by local recession during the mid-1980s, factional warring again broke out, pitting the then prime minister, Mahathir, against his deputy, Musa Hitam.

Brownlee (2007: 138) writes that this episode ‘began with a split’, with Mahathir, evidently fretting over Musa’s greater popularity, so berating his deputy that Musa suddenly resigned. And encouraged by more widespread grievances against the prime minister, a larger ‘anti-Mahathir faction’ soon formed, the leader of which, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, challenged Mahathir for the presidency of UMNO at the party’s polls in 1987. Elites within UMNO then gathered into the teams mentioned previously, with ‘Team A’, led by Mahathir, and ‘Team B’, led by Razaleigh and Musa. More than a political clash between party factions, these teams were egged on by the sections of local, but immobile capital, now starved of patronage, with which they were respectively allied (Khoo 1992). In brief, Mahathir had championed the indigenous korporat Melayu mentioned above, showering them with state contracts, credit, and concessions. On the other side, Razaleigh, notwithstanding his family wealth, had promoted small and medium-sized Malay businessmen who, as contractors and suppliers, were more modest beneficiaries of the NEP.

Mahathir claimed victory in the party poll. However, the conduct of the election and the events that followed intimated none of the ‘restrained partisanship’ that hallmarks elite-level cohesion. Rather, with the vote count close, it triggered suspicions of cheating. Mahathir then purged his cabinet of ministers associated with Team B. Razaleigh retaliated by taking the fight over polling results outside UMNO’s appeal mechanisms to the High Court. The judge, finding that some of UMNO’s branch organisations had been improperly registered, ruled that UMNO was itself illegal and so ordered its deregistration. Mahathir then pressed bureaucratic officials furiously, besting Razaleigh in the race to re-register the party. This enabled Mahathir to gain leadership over what in its new guise was badged ‘UMNO Baru’ (i.e. New UMNO).

Razaleigh next took the fight over UMNO’s ‘name and assets’ to the High Court. Mahathir feared that the court would favour Team B, driving him now to make heavy use of the attorney-general’s chambers and even the king’s royal offices to purge the body of most of its judges. Further, to silence the public outcry that followed, Mahathir arrested top opposition leaders through Operation Lalang, described above. In this way, Mahathir kept control over UMNO Baru, winning the approval of new judges whose installation he oversaw. Unable, then, to make headway, Razaleigh and key supporters in Team B broke with the party outright, registering a new vehicle, Semangat ‘46, named for the year in which UMNO had been founded.

A decade later, patronage again ran thin during the Asian financial crisis. Mahathir this time clashed with Anwar Ibrahim, his deputy at the time, producing momentous elite-level fractiousness. At the UMNO General Assembly in 1998, Anwar openly accused Mahathir of issuing state contracts to family members and cronies. Mahathir retaliated, with Anwar purged from the party, beaten by the police chief, and charged with sexual misconduct, leading to a lengthy jail sentence. Mahathir also purged elites in media organisations and state enterprises in order to deter more defection. But these behaviours again so violated Malay
cultural expectations, specifically the sanctions against humiliating subordinates, that a social reform movement took shape, even inspiring opposition parties to coalesce across ethnic lines in order to contest the 1999 general elections. Thus, one of the conclusions that can be drawn from this episode is that whether patronage resources are plentiful or scarce, far from encouraging accommodation between elites, they may instigate the ruthlessness that characterises splits.

For Brownlee, though, patronage is only part of what keeps elites cohesive. Through his historical-institutional lenses, he observes the more crucial presence of legacies of struggle and ethnic solidarity, culminating in a mentality that enables dominant parties like UMNO to regulate competitions and perpetuate loyalties. But on this count, too, just as patronage flows might fuel fractiousness, ideological consensus has sometimes broken down. During the mid-1970s, as Tun Razak began to implement the NEP, distinct factions emerged of ‘old guards’ led by the Tunku, more communalist, but still traditional ‘ultra-Malays’ associated with Harun Idris, and a fresher cohort of modernising ‘ultra-Malays’, including Ghafer Baba, Tengku Razaleigh, and Mahathir Mohamad, better equipped with the technocratic skills that Tun Razak valued for state-driven ethnic redistributions.

Tun Razak died in 1976 and was succeeded by his deputy, Hussein Onn, who, in later choosing his own successor from among the new ultra-Malay cohort, selected Mahathir over Ghafer, Razaleigh, and the highly ambitious home minister, Ghazali Shafie. Harun Idris, his conviction having been stayed pending an appeal, then mounted a new leadership challenge, prompting Hussein to oust him from UMNO and the Selangor chief ministership, an action regarded by the old guards and old ultras as an ‘abandonment of party traditions’ (Case 1996: 126). These factions then responded, asserting that Hussein’s government was riddled with communist agents, allegations made inflammatory against a backdrop of guerrilla bomb attacks in Kuala Lumpur and bitter recollections of the Emergency. Ghazali Shafie followed up by invoking the ISA, arresting some of Hussein’s top advisors, then televising their confessions over sundry plots and schemes. But shortly afterward, Harun’s conviction was upheld, and his jail term was increased from two to six years. Only at this point, then, did Hussein regain the upper hand, finally quelling the ideologically charged fractiousness between elites that had reverberated within UMNO despite, or even because of, the patronage resources, foundational mentalities, and institutional apparatus that the party possessed.

In short, the material, historical, and institutional features found by Brownlee to underpin a single dominant party can themselves become objects of struggle, therein threatening elite-level cohesion. Over time, fractiousness spread in Malaysia from inter-ethnic and intra-Malay arenas to infect even the internal dynamics of UMNO, rocking the party with epic and iterated warring during the late 1960s, the mid- to late 1970s, the mid- to late 1980s, the late 1990s to early 2000s and 2008 to 2009. Purges, beatings, forced confessions on television and other forms of humiliation, appropriation of constituencies, and long terms of imprisonment stand as ready indicators of fractiousness between elites in UMNO, undiminished by single-party dominance.

Conclusion

Malaysia is often viewed as distinctive in the cohesion between its elites, the stability of its regime, and the resilience of its dominant party. It has thus gained scrutiny for its avoidance of the military and executive coups, social upheavals, and incessant ethnic and separatist conflicts that have roiled Thailand, the Philippines, Cambodia, New Order Indonesia, and
Myanmar. Even so, Malaysia’s record of elite relations and regime outcomes has fluctuated much more than simple notions of cohesion and stability convey.

Despite consociational and tutelary modelling, elite relations began first to slip on an ethnic plane, with the coalescence between Malay elites in UMNO and Chinese elites in the MCA upended by redistributive pressures from below. A new configuration thus emerged, marked by greater Malay hegemony and enhanced UMNO dominance, even if still accommodative. Accordingly, politics were commensurately truncated from electoral democracy to electoral authoritarianism. Next, with Chinese elites subordinated, fractiousness mounted among Malay elites, with UMNO confronting PAS and eventually Anwar’s vehicle, PKR. Further, as PAS and PKR came to collaborate across ethnic lines with the DAP in order more effectively to contest elections, relations among elites changed yet again, with multi-ethnic coalitions in government and opposition, weighted increasingly evenly, standing starkly in confrontation. And when an election was held in 2008, the opposition made such gains that the regime was shown also to have shifted, with electoral authoritarianism widening into a far more competitive hybrid, therein reactivating fractiousness, long endemic, within UMNO.

However, after the most recent election in 2013, elites in UMNO seem to have regained much cohesion and single-party dominance. Yet while vigorously asserted, their unity remains brittle, driven by collective and utter defiance over their party’s ebbing support. Indeed, they blame the shrinkage of their base on desertion by ‘traitorous’ Chinese and ‘ungrateful’ Malays. Further, in clinging to power atop a minority of voters, their regime is shown to have changed yet again, with the extent of social exclusion, electoral manipulation, and the attendant need for coercion now more plainly in view. Accordingly, Malaysia’s politics appear to be nearing the completion of the progress foreshadowed long ago by Rabushka and Shepsle, contracting into a deeply exclusivist form of authoritarian rule. But whether this form will remain any more stable than what it has replaced is doubtful, for Malaysia’s elites, in their fractiousness, are unexceptional.

Bibliography


Malaysia’s unexceptionalism


