

## Introduction to the Special Issue on Electoral Politics in Southeast Asia

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The years 2018–2020 were politically significant years in Southeast Asia. Across the region, countries held elections as a means of political succession, and most of the time, albeit with protests and/or legal struggles, these elections' results were "accepted". Myanmar is an exception this year, as the military coup has ousted its 2020 elected government, exhibiting the region's tendency toward democratic regression. The situation in Myanmar is especially unfortunate, considering that NLD's 2015 sweeping victory had largely been seen as one of Southeast Asia's three democratic milestones – the other two being the Philippines' 1986 People Power Revolution and Indonesia's 1998 *Reformasi* movement.

Despite Myanmar's democratic crisis, elsewhere in the region, where elections are being held and voters flock to the booths to vote, on the surface, elections seem to continue being treated as a yardstick for "democracy". Upon further observation however, these elections' varying degrees of freeness, fairness and administrative efficacy indicate that while some serve the purpose of being the mechanism for a peaceful arbitration of political rivalries, others merely give authoritarian regimes a veneer of legitimacy. Cambodia's 2018 election was held without its major opposition party because it had been banned by the government, and Thailand's 2019 election preserved the power of the military junta. Even in countries generally considered more "democratic", while their elections have fulfilled the freeness and

fairness requirements and have been successfully held, the newly elected governments are challenged by the persistence of the authoritarian nature of their politics. Malaysia held a groundbreaking election in 2018, which succeeded in toppling a corruption-ridden right-wing coalition government. However, in 2020, a series of political maneuvers unseated the elected government and returned the last right-wing government to power, without election. Meanwhile, Indonesia's current government – the result of one of the world's largest elections in 2019 – has begun to issue policies that are authoritarian in nature, which for some observers point at the oligarchic influence in politics.

As is evident in the challenges faced by Malaysia and Indonesia, democracy does not stop at the act of voting. More than mere perfunctory elections, substantive democracy ideally calls for a political system that is marked by free and fair elections, the rule of law, a separation of powers, and the protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion and property (Zakaria, 1997). The following three articles show the practice of democracy in three neighboring countries in Southeast Asia, namely Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. The reason for highlighting these three countries is twofold. The first is that they are multicultural and multireligious. This renders ethno-religious identities influential in politics, especially in Malaysia and Indonesia, where Islam constitutes the largest religion. In Malaysia, where ethnicity (Malay) and religion (Islam) are conflated, the question of the positioning of Malay-Muslim identities in various aspects of socio-political lives has been center-stage in the country's politics. The prioritizing (or lack thereof) of Malay-Muslims' interests has mostly been at the heart of politicians' political campaigns and has to some extent underpinned the recent political crisis and power takeover in the country. In Indonesia, as the "conservative turn", or the rise of Islamic conservatism, continues to dominate the country's mainstream

politics, a political cleavage was formed between conservative Muslims and the so-called “pluralists”, although this, in the long run, as can be inferred from the article on Indonesia in this Special Issue, is not as clear-cut as it initially seemed. Unlike its two larger neighbors, where identity politics are used as political tool, Singapore intentionally avoids the manipulation of identity politics in its elections especially because concerns of racial riots and conflicts continue to dominate the city-state’s national discourse. Here, for example, the system of Group Representation Constituency (GRC) introduced in 1988 was geared at discouraging ethnic voting and promoting “multiracialism through electoral integration” (Tan, 2005). Under this scheme, each political party contesting in a GRC has to field a team of MPs of which at least one member must be from a minority race (Malay or Indian). Voters then, on the basis of a “one person, one vote”, elect a team of members of parliament (MPs), and not an individual MP. In this way, voters are discouraged from ethnic-based voting. This system has worked well in multiracial Singapore, although some observers have also pointed out that although the overall minority parliamentary representation has increased, such representation is perceived as riding on the coat tails of their ethnic Chinese electoral colleagues in the GRC (Tan, 2005).

The second reason for highlighting the electoral politics of the three countries is their sheer differences in party politics. In Indonesia, despite its multi-party system, there is generally no clear platform or ideological distinction between parties. There is one slight ideological difference between the various self-proclaimed “nationalist” parties and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) in that the latter is Islamist-inclined, yet the difference stops there. PKS is not averse to forming coalitions with “nationalist” parties, at both the national and local levels. Another major Islamic party, the National Awakening Party (PKB), was established by the leaders of Indonesia’s largest moderate Islamic organization, the Nahdlatul Ulama, and thus it is inclined

towards moderate Islam-ness, tolerance and harmony. The PKS, together with the Democratic Party (PD) and National Mandate Party (PAN), now form a small and weak opposition camp against the large government coalition led by the Indonesian Democratic Party for Struggle (PDIP), which consists of mostly nationalist parties. Also due to the absence of a clear platform, Indonesia's party politics has mainly been about individual party leaders. Most of the largest parties are synonymous with their prominent leaders, and many of them were established to further these leaders' political interests.

Malaysia's coalitions' platforms, on the other hand, have been clearer, at least until the 14th general election in 2018, where the opposition coalition Pakatan Harapan (PH) managed to oust the then ruling Barisan Nasional (BN). BN, which had ruled the country for over six decades, consisted of three prominent members, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) as well as regional parties from Sabah and Sarawak. The predominance of UMNO in the coalition reinforced the notion of the Malay supremacy (*Ketuanan Melayu*) and this was systematically used to gain the support of the majority of the ethnic-Malay voters (Chin, 2020). The then-opposition coalition, the Pakatan Harapan (PH), consisted of the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Party Amanah Negara (Amanah), Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu). The latter's chairman Mahathir Mohamad eventually became Prime Minister of Malaysia when PH won the 2018 election. During the campaign, PH portrayed a more pluralist platform, especially with the participation of the Chinese-based DAP in the coalition. PH was also seen as the pro-reform coalition, which went against BN's tired strategies of ethnic politics and gerrymandering. In addition to this, the fact that BN's leader Former Prime Minister Najib Razak was involved in a corruption scandal also boosted PH's popularity. However, after ruling

for 22 months, upon the political turmoil which saw Bersatu withdrawing from PH, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad resigned. A new coalition, Perikatan Nasional (PN), was established, whose members included UMNO, Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS) and Bersatu (which had parted ways with PH), and this coalition became the new ruling coalition. Bersatu's leader Muhyiddin Yassin is now Malaysia's prime minister. This political maneuvering means that the recent succession of power in Malaysia took place without election, without the mandate from the people, and can be seen as a challenge to the country's democracy moving forward.<sup>1</sup>

Singapore, again, exhibits a different story. The People's Action Party (PAP), a conservative centre-right party (Mauzy and Milne, 2002), has been the dominant party since 1959, when Lee Kuan Yew became the country's first prime minister. In the parliament in the aftermath of the 2020 election, the Worker's Party (WP) founded in 1956 is currently the leading opposition party. Another opposition party in the parliament is the Progress Singapore Party (PSP) founded in 2019. There are other opposition parties, such as the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), Singapore People's Party and Reform Party, but they do not hold seats in the parliament.

Thus, the three contributions to this Special Issue highlight, among others, these two aspects which influence their electoral politics: the multicultural nature of their societies which encourages identity politics, albeit to varying degrees, as well as party politics that are unique to each country, pertaining also, among others, to the above-

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<sup>1</sup> On 16th August 2021, PM Muhyiddin from the coalition Perikatan Nasional (PN) was forced to resign, as UMNO party withdrew from the coalition in early August. UMNO president Ahmad Zahid Hamidi mentioned that the PM must take responsibility for "the failures under his leadership". UMNO had in July listed these as failures in realising the aspirations of the people and addressing the economic slowdown; as well as coming up with an effective plan to manage the Covid-19 pandemic. See <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2021/08/03/nw-umno-withdraws-support-for-pn/> Economic problems and pandemic aside, however, this is the latest bout in the country's ongoing political upheaval.

mentioned multicultural characteristics.

Deasy Simandjuntak's chapter on democratic challenges in Indonesia highlights the democratic decay that has taken place due to the policies made by the elected government. Dubbed "executive takeover", this is the situation where a democratically elected government, which has grown stronger due to the large mandate it received during the election, and which thus holds enough power to influence the legislature, may issue laws and policies that are authoritarian in nature. In the beginning of this chapter, the Author underscores the initial democratic challenge pertaining to the rise of the influence of conservative Islam in mainstream politics, which had created binary politics with a political cleavage between the conservatives and the so-called "pluralists" during the presidential election. However, the recent development shows that this sectarian politics was less of a challenge to democracy compared to the controversial policies issued by the government, including the passage of laws which weaken antigraft efforts, infringe upon freedom of speech and threaten labor rights, the shrinkage of oppositional voices in the parliament, and the persistence of dynastic politics.

Chee Leong Lee's chapter on Malaysian politics after Sheraton Move 2020 examines two aspects of the country's current coalition politics, namely the intercoalition and intra-coalition rivalries between the current incumbent coalition, the Perikatan Nasional – Lee dubs this the Perikatan Nasional Plus or PN+ – and the previous incumbent, now the opposition, the Pakatan Harapan Plus or PH+. The intercoalition dynamics pertains to the identity marker of each coalition, with the PN+, which consists of UMNO and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia in addition to Bersatu and BN component parties which represent minority races, being a Malay-Muslim-oriented multiracial coalition which prioritizes ethno-religious governance ideology. In contrast, the PH+, a grand multiracial coalition, strives to portray multiculturalism,

especially with the involvement of Parti Warisan Sabah (Warisan) and United Progressive Kinabalu Organization (UPKO). The intra-coalition dynamics, on the other hand, refers to the rivalries between parties within each coalition. In the PN+ coalition, this is represented by the two factions, namely the pro-Muhyiddin Bersatu and pro-Azmin PKR, both of which had been in the previous PH+ government, yet had moved to form the current PN+ coalition. A third faction, independent from the PH+, is the Mahathir group of former Bersatu MPs who refused to join the PN+ government. Meanwhile, the fourth faction consists of those previously in the PH+ government who continued to be “PH-friendly” in the parliament, although they have left PH+ and formed their own political party, in addition to Warisan and UPKO. This article thus offers a very interesting examination of the otherwise complicated political dynamics in Malaysia after Sheraton Move.

Different from the other two chapters which look at the macro level of party politics, Ying-kit Chan’s paper on politics in Singapore focuses on the strategies of a particular MP from the Workers’ Party (WP), the country’s main opposition party, as well as the political life of Hougang, the electoral district (Single Member Constituency – SMC) where he ran. The article highlights the influence of ethno-religious identity, in this case Teochew and Catholicism, in the political preference of the constituents in Hougang. In addition, class identity, especially that of a Chinese-educated and working class, helped create a “Hougang Spirit” which underpins the preference for the WP vis-à-vis the People’s Action Party (PAP), the party of the incumbent government. Chan interestingly mentions that Hougang’s distinctive identity was not “merely the product of the efforts of WP and its supporters alone; it bears the classic characteristics of a collective effort at creating heritage and inventing localized political tradition”. In this manner, thus, “deviant” political preference, together with Teochew-Catholic ethno-religious and working class identities, form a political heritage and

overall unique identity for Hougang, vis-à-vis the seemingly more politically “homogenous” and gradually more English-oriented Singapore.

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