

Embittered Authoritarianism: Contemporary Malaysia in Comparative Perspective

Dan Slater

Associate Professor

Department of Political Science

University of Chicago

slater@uchicago.edu

@SlaterPolitics

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Democracy through Weakness vs. Strength

Weakness

Institutional Weakness

Rulers Deeply Divided

Last Resort

Threat of Violence

Conceding Defeat

Reforms Unavoidable

Legitimacy Surrendered

Sudden Collapse (*ruptura*)

Coalitional Upheaval

Strength

Institutional Strength

Rulers Relatively Unified

Proactive Strategy

Expectation of Stability

Conceding Democracy

Reforms Acceptable

Legitimacy Redefined

Gradual Reform (*reforma*)

Coalitional Continuity

Spectrum of Variation in Regime Outcomes

Democratic (or “Concession”) Cases

Japan

South Korea

Taiwan

Indonesia

Thailand

Burma

Authoritarian (or “Candidate”) Cases

China

Vietnam

Cambodia

Malaysia

Singapore

Hong Kong

Malaysia: A Regime Refresher

1957: Independence from UK under UMNO and Alliance rule

1969: Ethnic riots usher in authoritarian Barisan Nasional (BN) regime

1981: UMNO's Mahathir Mohamad becomes Prime Minister

1987: UMNO briefly splits, largely over Mahathir's autocratic style

1998: Amid financial crisis, Anwar Ibrahim sacked, beaten, imprisoned

1998-9: Pro-Anwar "reformasi" protest movement met with repression

2003: Mahathir resigns, replaced by "Mr. Nice Guy" Abdullah Badawi

2004: Anwar released in wake of BN's biggest landslide ever

2008: Pakatan Rakyat (PR) denies BN its 2/3 majority for first time

2009: Najib Razak replaces Badawi after this electoral "tsunami"

2013: PR wins majority of popular vote, but BN retains ~60% of seats

2015: Anwar on verge of reimprisonment under "Sodomy II"

Leading Interpretations of Malaysia's Regime....and Their Limits

Democratic reforms have been....:

- 1) *implemented* by PMs Badawi and Najib;
- 2) *impeded* by Mahathir's UMNO allies;
- 3) *impossible* under BN rule

But these perspectives typically fail to distinguish....:

- 1) authoritarianism as a *style* of rule vs. a *system* of rule;
- 2) *democratic* reforms from *other types* of reforms;
- 3) reformist *rhetoric* from reformist *reality*;
- 4) conceding *democracy* from conceding *defeat*

Reinterpreting Malaysia's Regime

- 1) UMNO/BN have long had ample strength to concede democracy without conceding defeat, at least until 2013 (i.e. democratic reforms not *impossible*);
- 2) Reformist rhetoric and intermittent repressive restraint amount to a transition in *style* from “bad-cop” to “good-cop” authoritarianism, not in *system* from authoritarianism to democracy (i.e. democratic reforms not *implemented*);
- 3) The most fundamental *field-leveling* democratic reforms, such as an independent election commission and a truly free press, are not even on the table (i.e. reforms not *impeded*)

Concepts I: Electoral Authoritarianism and Hybrid Regimes

“[E]lectoral authoritarianism transcends issues of democratic quality. It does not concern the *desirable* attributes of high-quality democracy, but the *indispensable* attributes of minimal democracy....

“When ‘democratic deficits’ cancel the democratic essence of electoral regimes, we should call the animal by its name: autocracy. Clinging to the notion of democracy (even if qualified by disqualifying adjectives) would weaken our sense of authoritarian realities, rather than sharpening our grasp of democratic deficits....

“[E]lectoral autocracies....can fruitfully be described as hybrid regimes. Yet, they are hybrid *authoritarian* regimes, rather than unclassifiable mixed regimes that inhabit a no man’s land between democracy and authoritarianism.”

Andreas Schedler, *The Politics of Uncertainty* (Oxford 2013)

Concepts II: Working Typology of Authoritarian Reforms

		<i><u>Type</u></i>		
		<u>Economic</u>	<u>Governance</u>	<u>Democratic</u>
<i><u>Depth</u></i>	<u>Superficial</u>	I. (e.g. crony privatization)	II. (e.g. selective anticorruption)	III. (e.g. intraparty elections)
	<u>Substantive</u>	IV. (e.g. welfare expansion)	V. (e.g. judicial review, police reform)	VI. (e.g. leveled playing field)

* Type VI reforms → electoral democratization

From Concepts to Causation

When do Authoritarian Regimes Pursue *Democracy through Strength?*

(1) Strengths



(2) Signals



(3) Strategies

Causal Factor #1: Antecedent Strengths

→ Antecedent **state** strength = main source of *stability confidence* (i.e. socially shared expectation that political stability can be preserved under democratic conditions)

→ Antecedent **party** strength = main source of *victory confidence* (i.e. ruling party's expectation of winning democratic elections)

* Since 2008, Malaysians' **stability confidence** has been increasing while the BN's **victory confidence** has been plummeting (i.e. decline of “protection pact” [Slater, 2010])

* This helps explain why BN leaders have been willing to experiment with reforms of Emergency laws, but not electoral laws

Causal Factor #2: Bittersweet Signals

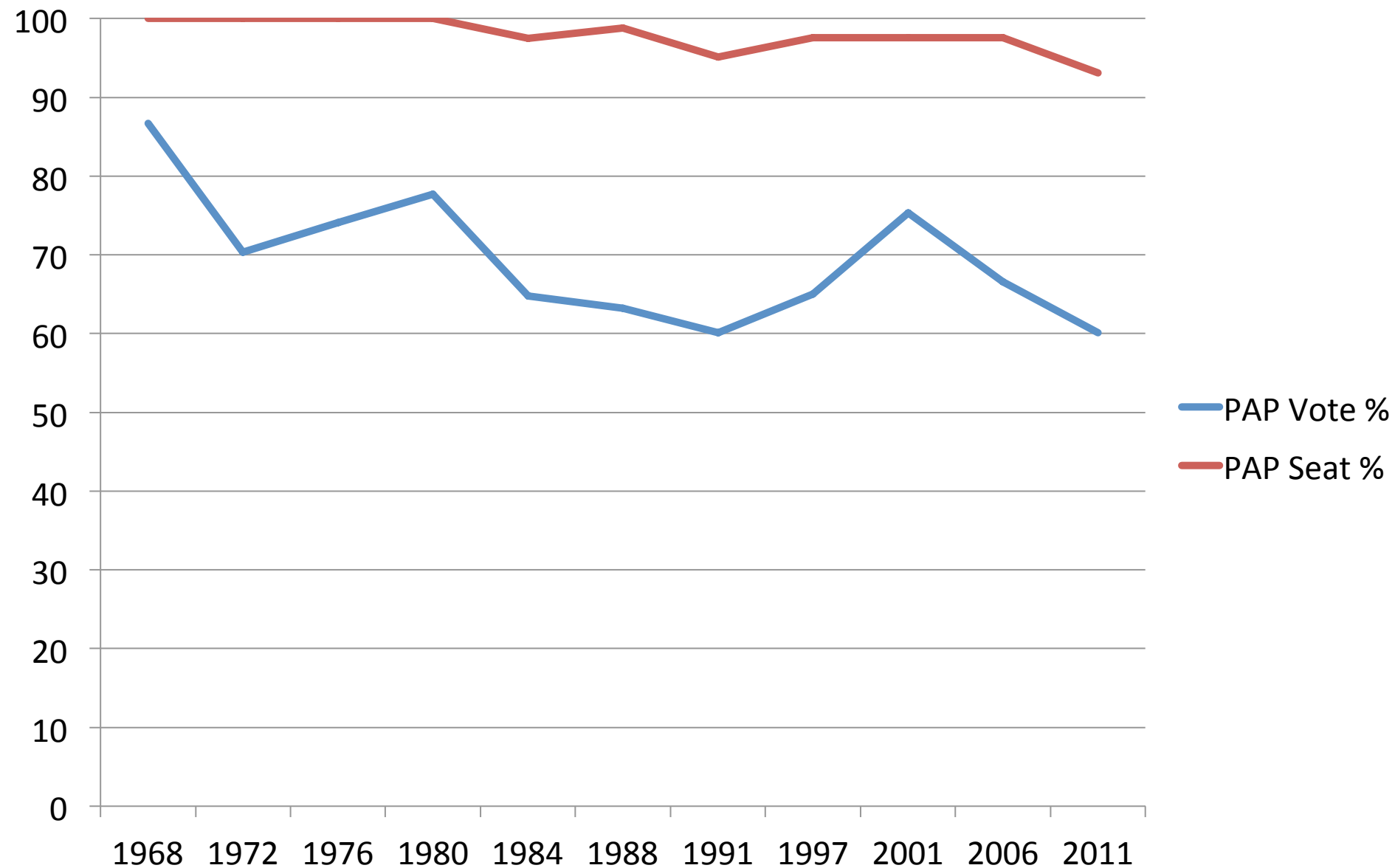
→ Even historically strong authoritarian regimes should not be expected to pursue democracy through strength **when domination seems attainable or collapse seems imminent**

→ They must **receive clear and strong signals that they are powerful enough to thrive under democracy, but not to dominate under dictatorship except by using devastating force**. This is the “*bittersweet spot*” where a *democracy-through-strength* strategy is likeliest to unfold.

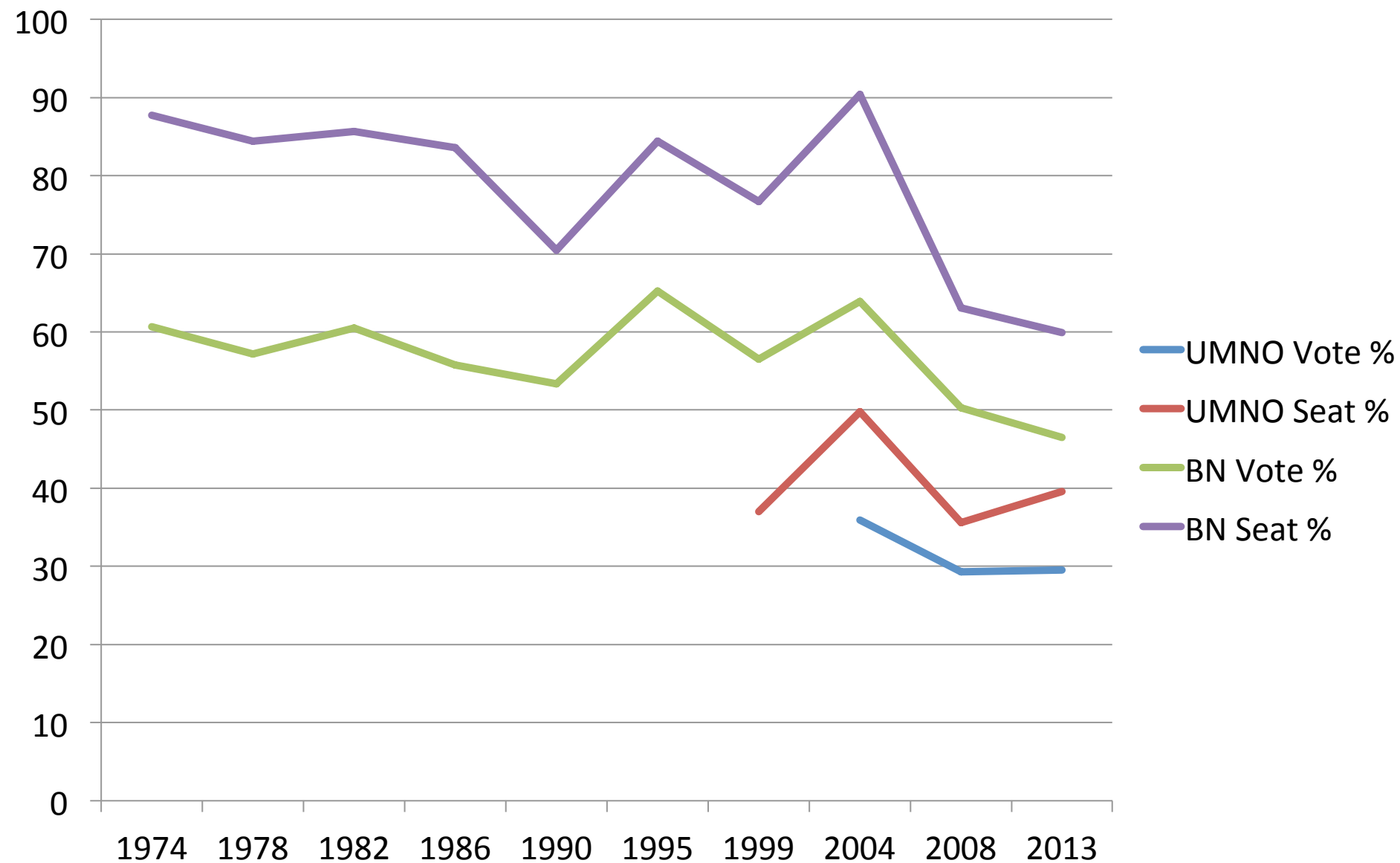
→ Four Types of Signals:

1. Electoral (shift toward parity w/opposition: *clearest*)
2. Contentious (cross-class, nationalist protest: *strongest*)
3. Economic (exhaustion of pure developmental legitimacy)
4. Geopolitical (softening of vital superpower support)

Weak but Clear Electoral Signals: Singapore



Strong but Mixed Electoral Signals: Malaysia



Mixed Signals in Malaysia's Bittersweet Spot

1996: BN apex: post-landslide collapse of opposition coalition

1997: Initial bittersweet signal: but economic only, at least at first

1998: Predicted intraparty struggle over reform: but Anwar ousted

1998-99: Reformasi: contentious signals endogenous to crackdown

1999: UMNO loses electoral ground to PAS: Mahathir referendum?

1999-2003: Economy seems to recover under Mahathir's iron grip

2003: Transition to "Nice Guy" Badawi: autocratic problem solved?

2004: Badawi's landslide: Second apex? Referendum on reform?

2007: "Bersih" and PR gain strong footing under "good cop" rule

2008: BN loses 2/3: Too little reform? Too much? Badawi to blame?

2008-09: Anwar aims to topple BN through backbencher defections

2013: BN loses majority: decline undeniable, but causes debatable

Causal Factor #3: Legitimation Strategies

- *Democracy through strength* is never a structural imperative but a product of **strategic calculation** and **elite struggle** in the “bittersweet spot.”
- Concessions require the **victory of a coalition** interpreting bittersweet signals as “the end of an era” over those who perceive that authoritarian domination remains attainable.
- New and **public legitimation** strategies are the causal mechanism through which strengths and signals are translated into actual concession outcomes.

Conclusion:

Prospects for Regime Change through Strategic Shifts?

On the *Positive* Side:

- Decisive democratic reforms still offer the most plausible revitalized legitimacy formula to attract urban, young, and non-Malay voters whom the BN has otherwise lost;
- Democratic reforms typically seem unthinkable until they happen

On the *Negative* Side:

- Reformist voices are currently muted or absent within UMNO;
- Malapportionment strengthens rural/provincial sides of UMNO;
- UMNO's victory confidence remains stronger than BN's overall;
- "Old-time religion" of development and racialism still available;
- Old tricks to divide and weaken opposition (i.e. trials, defections)

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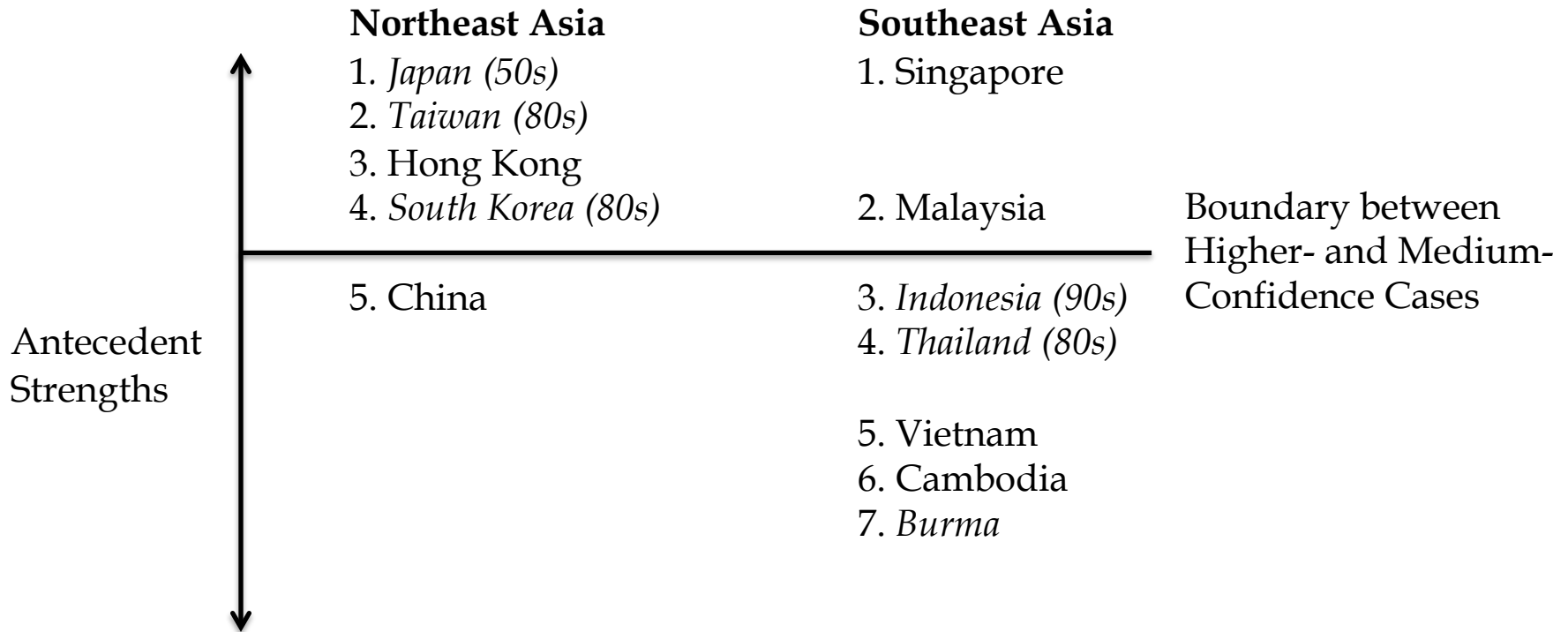
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Antecedent Strengths and Regime Outcomes in Developmental Asia



Italicized: Democratic/Concession Case

Non-Italicized: Authoritarian/Candidate Case

* Spectrum of authoritarian strength → Spectrum of democratic success

Developmental Asia as a Historical Setting

- (1) Imperialism and the Japan-Led Imperative of National Catch-Up
 - Japan becomes leader, inventor of “developmental state” (1858-)
 - Japanese colonialism and example spreads its model *regionally*
- (2) Anglo-American Power and Pressures for Liberalization
 - UK introduces conservative legal/parliamentary systems
 - Cold War gives USA leverage to spread *its* model (incl. Japan)
- (3) Belated Rise of China as Developmental Leader and Model
 - ‘Developmental socialism’ associated with non-electoral systems
 - Despite geopolitical power, weak Chinese influence over regimes

Key Point: *Developmental Asia* is politically, not geographically defined and determined. For instance the Philippines, North Korea, Laos and Mongolia are *not* included.

A First Cut: Tracing Signals to Concession Outcomes

	Electoral	Contentious	Economic	Geopolitical
<i>Taiwan</i>	X	X		X
<i>S. Korea</i>	X	X		X
<i>Indonesia</i>		X	X	
Singapore	X			
Malaysia			X	
China		X		

Initial Finding: The strategy of *democracy through strength* seems minimally to require either an electoral signal (clearest) or contentious signal (strongest) plus one additional signal of any of the four types.

Wider Book Project

Democracy through Strength: Asia's Development and Democratization (with Joseph Wong)

The Setting: “Developmental Asia”: beyond Northeast vs. Southeast

The Puzzle: Lots of development, less democratization

The Question: How can we best explain developmental Asia's uneven historical trajectory away from authoritarian rule?

The Argument: In developmental Asia, the primary mode of democratization has been **democracy through strength**.

Prospects and Conclusion

Question: *How far *might* UMNO go?*

Argument: *Rising stability confidence since 2004 makes a more decisive repeal of outdated security laws a reasonable prospect. Plummeting victory confidence means any leveling of the playing field vis-à-vis opposition is currently off the table.*

Question: *How far *can* UMNO go?*

Argument: *It is not too late for UMNO to concede democracy without conceding defeat. Decisive democratic reforms offer the most plausible revitalized legitimacy formula to attract urban, young, and non-Malay voters whom the BN has otherwise lost. But only if rhetoric is complemented by substance, and authoritarian controls are explicitly disavowed.*

- BN's relative decline is far clearer than UMNO's
- East Malaysia remains an anti-reformist 'fixed deposit' for BN
- 'Chinese' DAP surpasses Malay-led PKR in opposition
- Opposition leader remains 'jailable' at low political cost
- Electoral signals stronger than economic, contentious, geopolitical

....Means the Pursuit of Multiple Strategies

- Prioritize economic performance in pursuit of 'a new apex'
- Toy with and trumpet reforms of types I-V to avoid type VI
- Outsource 'old-time religion' to 'NGOs' like Perkasa, Pekida
- Divide opposition by hook and by crook, seek big defections