

Recognising Malaysian Soft Power after May 9, 2018

By Dr Khor Swee Kheng (Senior Fellow, Health Cluster)

Executive Summary

- On the one-year anniversary of Malaysia's momentous election on May 9, 2018, the presence and projection of Malaysia's soft power are examined to determine the ways in which it has stature in the world beyond its middle-sized country status
- Malaysia is a relatable "Goldilocks country" in the truly complex region of South-east Asia. With many commonalities with other South-east Asians and their countries, its political trajectory can appear aspirational and attainable
- The relatively harmonious relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims, and between Islam and modernity, democracy and market economics also provide some lessons for Muslim-majority countries around the world
- Malaysia's "non-aligned" political journey since independence in 1957 provides a template for post-colonial countries navigating a "third path" to the development of their society and political economy
- The existence of its soft power, once embraced, can imbue Malaysians with new motivation for nation-building that is regional and global in approach

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Introduction

The international order is under mortal threat. In the last two years alone, populism, nationalism and irrationalism have besieged the supposedly democratic fortresses of Trumpian America and Brexit Britain. In Europe, far-right parties have formed governments in Austria, Italy, Hungary and Poland, and gained ground in Germany, France and Sweden. Other geopolitically-important countries like Russia, Egypt, Turkey and China are autocratic.

The remaining large democracies are occupied with internal politics, like India, Japan, Brazil, Mexico and South Africa. With a "Me First" attitude now prevailing across the former standard-bearers and beneficiaries for that rules-based order, who will now inspire democratic norms in emerging world countries?

Enter Malaysia, on the first anniversary of our momentous elections in 2018. Despite not being traditionally considered as an influential country, it projects soft power above its geopolitical weight in ways that are subtle, but no less weighty and important. For example, Malaysia is the 29th largest contributor to UN peacekeeping missions¹ (despite "only" being the 35th largest economy and 45th most populous country in the world), and its passport is the 4th most powerful in the world².

Another sign was the buzz surrounding last year's elections on May 9, 2018 when Malaysians peacefully voted out an entrenched government of 61 years, despite alleged gerrymandering³, vote-buying⁴ and racial politics⁵. From Google Trends and Google News to Twitter giving the country its own emoji⁶, the country generated countless newspaper articles and 4.2 million tweets⁷ in the 24-hour period of Election Day. There were commentaries in major newspapers of the world (e.g. Al Jazeera, Asahi Shimbun⁸, CNN⁹, Fox¹⁰, and Xinhua¹¹), on Buzzfeed¹², and even in memes¹³. More importantly, GE14 was also covered in print media in countries that are traditionally considered to have a democratic deficit, like Albania¹⁴, Bangladesh¹⁵, Cambodia¹⁶, Egypt, Rwanda¹⁷, and Zimbabwe¹⁸.

Malaysia inspires democratic trends in the emerging world, especially in countries with which we share a close identity. The first shared identity is geographic and cultural; the second is religious; and the third is political.

The message has been sent that democracy and peaceful transitions are possible in South-east Asia (SEA) and for Asians, in Islam and for Muslims globally, and for post-colonial countries in Asia, the Middle East and Africa, and South America. Taken together, all three identities cover nearly the entire world.

Across the (Malay) Archipelago

Let's start with SEA, where Malaysia is a "Goldilocks country" in a truly complex region of 620 million people. The 11 countries range from tiny Brunei (with 400,000 people) to massive Indonesia (250 million). There are hundreds of languages and ethnicities, and tens of religions. They are poor (GDP/capita \$1,100 for Timor Leste) and rich (\$53,000 for Singapore). The political systems range from a constitutional monarchy (Thailand) to single-party socialist republics (Vietnam). The Economist's Democracy Index¹⁹ classifies SEA countries as flawed democracies at best (e.g. the Philippines) to authoritarian regimes at worst (e.g. Laos).

In this archipelago of complexity, Malaysia is easily relatable to all South-east Asians and is considered an attainable "next step" for their aspirations. It is neither too big nor too small (at 32 million people), and it is neither too rich nor too poor. The country has managed to modernise without losing touch with local cultures, traditions and values. Its peaceful multi-racial society is potentially a model for the equally diverse societies in the region, and the economy is well-balanced between sectors, with strong foreign direct investment and enough openness to the world; this economy is an intermediate step for the agrarian economies in SEA and their desired industrialisation. All this creates a moral, civic and role-modelling leadership in the region, even if Malaysians may not be aware of it. It is also a reasonable bet that South-east Asians look at Malaysia as an example for their own countries and future voting choices.

This is because the election issues resonate with them: dignity and living standards; government corruption; and oppression of the media and institutions. These are universal concerns, and are no longer perceived as "Western ideals imposed as a neo-colonialist agenda". These universal concerns, with the addition of Malaysia's relatability, systematically inspire SEA countries toward peaceful democratic transitions, instead of relying on unpredictable and irregular revolutions (as in the Philippines in 1976 and Indonesia in 1998).

The 2018 elections encourage the belief that it is possible to be both democratic and Asian/South-east Asian at the same time, that the region is not condemned to authoritarianism and to revolutions. There is also the intangible but crucial element of civic courage when Malaysians voted out an entrenched government of 61 years. It has become an aspirational case of "if our Malaysian neighbours have similar concerns to us, and they can peacefully vote out their government, so can we".

A Model of Islamic Democracy

The world's 1.8 billion Muslims also look to Malaysia, especially the 1.5 billion who live in any one of the 50 Muslim-majority countries in the world. To them, Malaysia's path shows that Islam is compatible with democracy and modern governance ideals.

It has implemented the Syariah legal system; provided aid to Bosnia²⁰, Palestine²¹ and the Rohingyas²²; is a founding member of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (the founding Secretary-General was also the country's first Prime Minister); permanently host the World Islamic Economic Forum; lead the world in Islamic finance²³; increasingly trade with Muslim-majority countries; and have the strictest halal food certification in the world²⁴.

Simultaneously, Malaysia has demonstrated how modern governance and liberal principles can co-exist with Islam, and how other religions can co-exist with Muslims. Secularism and freedom of religion are enshrined in its Constitution²⁵; it has a full-fledged Islamic party competing in democratic elections; it has Muslim women as Deputy Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers; women comprise 70% of students in public universities²⁶; acts of "Islamic terrorism" (if such a term is reflective of reality) are almost zero²⁷; and the Muslim majority readily accepts vernacular education²⁸ for other ethnicities.

This legacy of tolerance and peace is even more impressive given the fact that a significant 40% of Malaysians are Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Taoists, animists, atheists or people professing other religions. In an impressive marriage of capitalism and religion, Petronas, the country's public-listed national oil company, distributes *zakat*²⁹, charitable contributions that are one of Islam's Five Pillars.

The balance that Malaysia's "Democratic Islam" archetype has found between the immovable force of Islamic tradition and the irresistible force of modernity appeals to Muslim-majority countries struggling to achieve socio-economic growth and increase political freedom, while retaining their Islamic identity. Malaysia is proof that Muslim-majority countries are not fated to be undemocratic, to suffer from a resource curse or to undergo violence, and that Islamist parties can seek a peaceful electoral path to power in a multi-religious society.

It is also possible – in the very long run – that Malaysia's constitutional monarchy could be a model for the six remaining absolute monarchies in the world today, five of which are Muslim monarchies (Brunei, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE).

A Template for A Post-Colonial Journey

Finally, Malaysia's 61-year journey to a peaceful transfer of power and nascent two-party democracy provides a template for post-colonial countries in Asia, the Middle East and Africa. These countries share many similarities with Malaysia. We achieved national awakening after WWII together, and from the same colonial masters. Similarly, we all have artificially-drawn borders that encompass multiple ethnicities, religions and languages.

In general, superficial features of democracy are present through elections, a parliament and through varying degrees of strength in civic institutions. Multi-party coalitions, ideological debates and transfers of power are generally absent, and local politics is largely based on tribal, racial, religious and linguistic lines, or pure patronage. The economy is in varying stages of industrialisation, with a generally unequal low-to-medium income population with varying levels of literacy; examples of these countries include India, Iraq and Rwanda.

If Malaysia's peaceful success does not motivate these countries by itself, there are three additionally compelling motivations to be presented. Firstly, our journey brought us to a sweet spot; successful enough to be an aspirational next step for the abovementioned countries, but not too successful as to be intimidatingly unattainable. Of the 193 member states of the UN, Malaysia is ranked 23rd in competitiveness³⁰, 40th in PPP GDP/capita³¹, and 67th in life expectancy rankings³² that are reassuringly attainable.

Secondly, the journey had involved neutrality and non-ideological progress. This was reflected in the Non-Aligned Movement (where Malaysia provided two Secretaries-General) and ASEAN's ZOPFAN and principle of non-interference; and although Malaysia was pro-democracy during the Cold War, it was not pro-America.

Finally, its nation-building journey has been a series of achievable intermediate steps and patient nation-building. Malaysia pulled ahead due to its luck with natural resources, the building of fairly sophisticated infrastructure, a hard-working and peaceful people, and a relatively forward-looking leadership.

Although there are no neat juxtapositions, Malaysia's journey provides six other lessons to consider, especially after GE14. Firstly, its recent history is further proof that strongmen rule is an ineffective political model that does not last. The country is the latest in a long line of countries (e.g. Taiwan, Mexico and Portugal) that have unseated entrenched governments and dictatorships. Secondly, as Daron Acemoglu elaborated, there is a minimum GDP/capita³³ that predicts successful transitions to true democracy. Malaysia's GDP/capita of \$9,500 is a proxy marker for the strength of its civic institutions, and its patient nation-building prepared its population for that critical juncture of elections.

This leads to the third lesson, that while elections are glamorous markers of democracy, it is the unglamorous work of sustaining institutions which prepares a country for that critical juncture. International aid organisations should consider devoting more resources to the invisible work of institution-building, rather than flashy election monitoring. The fourth lesson is tactical, for opposition parties to enter coalitions before (not after) elections. In an era of fragmented politics, a coalition is difficult, but more likely to be successful because it forces compromise, aggregates votes, and tends to moderate extreme views. As a case in point, in

the six short weeks since Malaysia's election in May 2018, opposition coalitions in Timor Leste³⁴ and the Indian state of Karnataka³⁵ have beaten much larger ruling parties operating singly.

The fifth lesson is in civic courage and patience. Malaysia's opposition forces began experimenting with coalitions in the 1990s, and steadily eroded the popular vote gained by the ruling party over the last three general elections. This prepared Malaysians psychologically for the Big Decision, although it still required courage for that final leap of faith. The final lesson is in magnanimity in victory. Statesmanship is a *sine qua non*; the temptation to destroy the previous regime will be strong. In a democracy, the winning coalition or party should provide space for the losers to become an effective opposition.

These six lessons are relevant for all post-colonial countries to not simply accept the geopolitical and historical hand they were dealt with. Malaysia's aspirational "sweet spot" journey should inspire the thought that "if a country so similar to mine can achieve success through patient and moderate nation-building, with the addition of one courageous leap of faith at a critical juncture, then so can mine".

With Great (Soft) Power, Comes Great Responsibility

There are the three ways by which Malaysia projects significant soft power: culturally and geographically in SEA; with Muslims and Islam globally; and in a politico-economic journey shared with post-colonial countries. None of the three ways should be taken for granted, nor is it a call to arms for the citizens of other countries.

The principles of national sovereignty and non-interference are constant hallmarks of Malaysian foreign policy. However, the interconnectedness of the world today and the weight of Malaysia's example in the world are irrefutable facts; they are as real rationally as they are emotionally and spiritually. Whether accidental or planned, Malaysia's government and people need to be cognisant of the moral leadership they can provide the world at large, e.g. continuing their efforts to build a civic and civil society, treating the migrants with more compassion and generosity, and continuing its patient and moderate nation-building formula.

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