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Hybrid regimes
A social foundations approach

Garry Rodan and Kanishka Jayasuriya

By the turn of the twenty-first century a new concept was gaining traction in accounting for disappointed expectations of the so-called 'third wave' of democratization: the hybrid regime. The now pervasive influence of the concept reflects diverse attempts to describe and explain the absence or partial nature of democratization in many countries around the world. It emphasizes not just the combining of elements of both democracy and authoritarianism, but also the possibility of qualitatively distinct regimes transcending existing categories.

For some, hybrid regimes are necessarily transitory ones, even if their collapse is not imminent. Other theorists countenance the possibility that we may be witnessing the development of sustainable regime alternatives to democracy. Crucially, the very notion of a hybrid regime is a manifestation of transition theory's underlying assumption that capitalism and liberal democracy are natural partners. This has constrained regime analysis, systematically discouraging more open-ended enquiries into the nature and causes of political change outside the West.

Thus, despite greater recognition of the complexity and uncertainty of democratic consolidation and transition, much hybrid regime literature is consumed with developing detailed descriptions and typologies of different hybrid regime variants. Moreover, as per the earlier transition paradigm, analysis remains largely focused on the institutional and strategic incentives of political actors to engage with and support 'competitive authoritarian' or other forms of hybrid regimes, with evaluation of the functional quality of political institutions against democratic criteria a central focus.

There are several problems with this quality of democracy (QoD) approach, which appears to take inspiration from democracy audits on established democracies (Beetham 2004; Morlino 2004; Roberts 2005). First, benchmarking regimes against ideal typical liberal democracies reinforces the questionable assumption that democracy is the natural outcome or measure of political change. Second, definitions of democracy have become expansive and misleading (Morlino 2009; Mazzuca 2010). Third, the crucial question of why particular regimes emerge at all often gets lost or marginalized. At the heart of our problems with this literature is the continuing focus on the 'transition problematic', that is, the question of 'why no effective democratic institutions?' rather than the question 'what explains the particular dynamics of hybrid regimes?'

To move beyond the transition problematic we need to incorporate the analysis of political institutions within a wider analysis of power relations and historical context. To be sure, existing literature contains attempts to analyse social and economic bases of hybrid regimes and associated
political institutions. This includes the importance of civil society and informal institutions for the trajectories of formal political institutions (Ottaway 2005; Slater 2003; Hawthorne 2004; Merkin 2004; Canowths 2006). This literature provides insights about the social foundations of hybrid regimes, such as how the nature and extent of differing organizational coherences of petty and state institutions— including ‘masses of informal advantages’ to dominate political elites — mediate regime directions (Levitsky and Way 2010: 321; see also Bowser 2008). However, the literature remains limited in comprehending the nature of the interests and ideologies combining or competing to create or sustain organizational coherences.

In contrast, our social foundations approach starts with examination of the historical conditions of capitalist development and its implications for alliances and conflicts affecting political regime possibilities. We argue that capitalist development in many recently democratized postauthoritarian societies has failed to produce comparable alliances of social forces to those that led to Western Europe to the consolidation of representative liberal democracy. These relationships influence the nature and trajectory of political institutions. Crucially, our focus is on the effectiveness and/or coherences of political and state institutions but on understanding the social and political relationship that underpins them. This allows for the counternarrative and evaluating of a range of regime trajectories — not just the prospects or otherwise for the flourishing of democratic institutions.

The discussions is structured as follows. First, we examine the emergence of the hybrid regime as a concept, the varying meanings and significances attributed to it and how it has been used to highlight concerns about the democratic quality and effectiveness of institutions. Second, attempts to link political institutions of hybrid regimes to civil society, informal institutions and the coherences of petty and state institutions are examined. Third, in distinguishing and deconstructing our social foundations approach, we analyse regime dynamics in three Southeast Asian countries: Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. The failure to consolidate democratic transition in Thailand has been linked, by QoD authors, to the dysfunctional nature of democratic institutions which we criticise. In our analysis of Malaysia, we distinguish our particular structural approach in going beyond highlighting the social embeddedness and organizational coherences of state and petty institutions to identify the political economy basis of this coherences, allowing us to explain variations among a wide range of regimes — not just hybrid ones — in this coherences. We illustrate this by comparing Malaysia with Singapore.

**Hybrid regimes and the quality of democracy**

The origins of the hybrid regime as a concept can be traced at least as far back at Diamond’s (1989) notion of ‘semi-democracies’ (see also Huntington 1991: 12) and O’Donnell’s (1994) ‘delegative democracies’. Subsequently, though, there is a proliferation of terms intended to characterize regimes thought to be simultaneously composed of democratic and authoritarian elements or appearances. This includes reference to ‘halfway house’ regimes (Case 1996), ‘partial democracies’ (Robinson 2003; Eptas et al. 2006; Timmer 2009), ‘pseudo-democracies’ (Volk 2004), ‘semi-democracies’ (Rich 2002), ‘defective democracies’ (Cronaut and Merkin 2004; Merkin 2004; Baggards 2009), ‘liberal democracies’ (Zakaria 2003), ‘limited democracies’ (Flaynes 2001), ‘competitive authoritarianism’ (Levitsky and Way 2002, 2010), ‘electoral authoritarianism’ (Diamond 2002) and ‘semi-authoritarianism’ (Ottaway 2003). These concepts vary in their level of specificity, some being generic terms that may or may not have associated subtypes others intended to capture only a specific form of hybrid regime. Amidst variations in how hybrid regimes are distinguished, and the conceptual tug with which the concept is applied, scrutiny of political institutions’ democratic integrity looms large in most attempts at specifying hybrid regimes.

When Diamond (1989) first referred to ‘semi-democracies’ and ‘pseudo-democracies’, it was by way of strategy to identify the emergence of new variants of authoritarian rule. He argued that these contained ‘features of formally democratic political institutions, such as multiparty electoral competition, mass parties (often, in part, to legitimize) and the reality of authoritarian dominance’ (Diamond 1989: 111–112). By contrast, O’Donnell (1994) maintained that reitionally installed regimes in Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, South Korea, and the Philippines met Dahl’s (1956) definition of democracy without necessarily being destined for representative democracy. His concept of delegative democracy was meant to capture this ‘new species’ of democracy that involved ‘high stakes’ competitive elections, after which ‘voters are expected to become a passive but chauvinist audience of the president’ (O’Donnell 1994: 99). O’Donnell’s key observation was that, in delegative democracies, vertical and horizontal accountability institutions are ineffective or nonexistent.

Subsequently, authors increasingly opted for conceptualizing such regimes not so much as variants of either authoritarianism or democracy but as a new and separate hybrid category. For example, Vold’s analysis of political regimes in Muslim countries, he argues: ‘“pseudo-democracy” does not imply a deviation from a normative framework and ideological unity — a case of liberal democracy minus “real” or authoritarianism plus “pseudo” — but that it forms a distinct analytical category and political phenomenon’ (Vold 2004: 1061). However, the precise use of authoritarian and democratic elements could vary significantly from case to case. Indeed, speculating and comparing institutional variations of the democratic-authoritarian mix has been the primary preoccupation within much of the hybrid regime literature.

In one of the early explicit elaborations of the hybrid regime concept, Karl (1995) emphasized how these regimes in Central America combined authoritarian clientelism and corruption with the local level with greater pluralism at the national level. These were not merely ‘fake’ democracies, according to Karl (1995: 80), since elections were ‘often free and fair’, but none were genuine democracies. Military may support civilian presidents, he noted, but they also ‘vote’ citizens to control internal military affairs, dictate security policy, make officers subject to the judgment of civil courts, or weaken their role in the structure of armed forces. Integrity is compromised, yet judiciaries remain weak, rights are violated, and contracts are broken.

Subsequently, Levitsky and Way (2002: 52) identified ‘competitive authoritarianism’ as a distinctive form of hybrid regime. Here, ‘democratic institutions are widely viewed as the principal means of obtaining and exercising political authority’, yet formal rules of electoral competition are so systematically violated that the regime ‘fails to meet conventional minimal standards for democracy’ (Levitsky and Way 2002: 52) — something O’Donnell’s delegative democracy is considered to have met (Levitsky and Way 2002: 53). Crucially, though, political competition is not completely absent. ‘Although incumbents in competitive authoritarian regimes may routinely manipulate formal democratic rules, they are unable to eliminate them or reduce them to a mere façade’ (Levitsky and Way 2002: 52).
cases above, is Zakaria’s (1997, 2003) characterization of ‘liberal democracy’. Zakaria (2003: 99), too, observed a post-Cold War expansion of regimes combining elections and authoritarianism, involving varying degrees of limits on political competition – ranging from ‘populist offshootings’, such as Argentina to ‘new-authoritarian’ such as Kazakhstan, with countries such as Romania and Bangladesh somewhere between. However, many of these regimes permit levels of political participation uncharacteristic of authoritarianism: ‘Along much of the spectrum, elections are rarely if ever free and fair as in the West today, but they do reflect the reality of popular participation in politics and support for those elected’ (Zakaria 2003: 23).

Carothers’ (2002) important essay, ‘The End of the Transition Paradigm’, went further in challenging core transition theory assumptions, particularly the notion that most countries are in transition to democracy via a process of opening, breakthrough and consolidation. Yet while Carothers helped disabuse many transition theorists of the view that hybrid regimes may be a mere historical pit stop en route to democracy, the transitions paradigm is far from dead. On the contrary, categorizations and analyses of non-democratic regimes continue to take liberal democratic institutions as the point of reference. Terms such as ‘defective’, ‘semi’ and ‘pseudo’ democracy only make sense in relation to a democratic ideal type.

The persistent adoption of liberal democracy as the reference point for categorizing and evaluating hybrid regimes is well illustrated in the work of Wigll (2008), which compares in our view one of the most sophisticated and detailed typologies of hybrid regimes. His schema is grounded in the understanding of liberal democracy as comprising two constitutive dimensions: electoral and constitutional. On this basis, regimes can be distinguished around four essential regime types: democratic, constitutional-algebraic, electoral-autocratic and authoritarian – and numerous other subtypes. Of the eight conditions Wigll (2008: 237) identifies that must be present for democracy, four relate to electoral institutions – free, fair, competitive and inclusive elections – while another four relate to constitutional institutions – freedom of organization, freedom of expression, freedom from discrimination and the right to alternative information.

However, towards further differentiating between assorted hybrid regimes, Wigll (2008: 238-241) includes another four electoral conditions – electoral empowerment, integrity, sovereignty and accountability – and four constitutional conditions – executive accountability, legal accountability, bureaucratic integrity and local government accountability. However, this typology is accused of normative overtones and a methodological privileging of liberal democracy. Based on a two-dimensional conceptualization of liberal democracy it proceeds to create diminished [or emulating] subtypes that are logically related to each other on the basis of a clear set of defining attributes.

Often, hybrid regime analysis has centered narrowly on trying to establish the existence of effective democratic institutions, presupposing a somewhat technical notion of institutions leading to more emphasis on institutional design and elite choices (see, for example, Robinson 2003: Henderson 2004). Inadequate attention is paid to the relationship between institutional effectiveness, on the one hand, and structural and historical factors, on the other. There are, however, theorists who have attempted just this sort of analysis – whose work we now examine.

Structural approaches to hybrid regimes

As analyses rooted in the transition paradigm gathered momentum, the relative influence of structural analyses from a range of theoretical perspectives declined. However, renewed recognition that structural factors may be essential to explaining the durability of hybrid regimes is evident – particularly through emphasizing the relationship between formal and informal political traditions. Such analyses are especially valuable in bypassing the circular logic inherent in the QoD explanation for the so-called ‘defective’ character of political institutions.

Mazrui’s (2010) explanation of the QoD approach to the categorization and analysis of hybrid regimes conflates access to power – defining the character of a political regime – with the exercise of power – concerned more with administrative processes. He argues that aspects of institutional quality – highlighting corruption, disenfranchisement, issues of executive decree authority, and the absence of effective checks and balances on power – are ‘best characterized not as indicators of authoritarianism and deficiencies in democratization but as reflecting the Weberian nexus of patronage networks, and the continuation of other symptoms of low state institutional quality’. Mazrui argues that the timing of Weberian bureaucratic revolutions matters greatly to the completion of contemporary democratic regimes. This has two implications. First, the causes of ‘poor quality’ political institutions may reside in factors beyond the purview of prevailing approaches. Second, so-called institutional failure may be nothing of the sort from the perspective of interests embedded in the regime.

Merkel (2009: 251) also charges that the QoD literature adopts too expansive a notion of political regime, emphasizing the importance of historical legacies. He contends that ‘hybrid regime is always a set of ambiguous institutions that maintain aspects of the past, be these remnants of traditional, authoritarian or democratic rule. Like Mazrui, Merkel too injects more conceptual precision in attempting to understand the effectiveness of political institutions within an historical perspective.

Among the more explicit attempts to link the performance of political institutions to patterns in social and economic relationships is Merkel’s (2004) incorporation of the concept of ‘social embeddedness’ into his account of divergent paths of ‘defective’ regimes. He identifies a range of social structural factors favorable to fully democratic institutions, including a developed economy, the prevention of extreme poverty, social pluralism, and the fair distribution of the material and cognitive resources of society. These are seen to ‘create a climate for democracy and, in most cases, enhance the quality of democracy with regards to the role of law and participation’ (Merkel 2004: 45).

The concept of social embeddedness also features in policy-oriented work intended to inform better democracy promotion strategies in hybrid regimes. In this vein, analysing different variants of semi-authoritarianism in Egypt, Azerbaijan, Venezuela, Senegal and Croatia, Orawy (2003, 2004) highlights such structural factors as the weak link between political and economic reform and the nature of civil society. Orawy’s key contribution is in exposing the complex, dynamic and variable components of civil society that affect the character of formal political institutions. The more extensive of extensive civil societies is not in itself a plus for democracy. Rather: ‘in some countries, organizations of civil society reflect the social pluralism of religion and ethnicity ... Thus, civil society simply ends up reflecting old social divisions’ (Orawy 2003: 18-19).

In her analysis of the Middle East, Orawy (2004) thus emphasizes the importance of broad-based political organizations, including social movements and unions, for democratic institutions to take root. The prospect of democracy in the Arab world depends on the growth of constituencies committed to furthering the democratic goal, ideally because they are truly committed to...
can debate the idea of institutional effectiveness, these authors ensure this is not conducted in isolation from some form of theorization of state power.

The social foundations approach and Southeast Asia

These valuable studies are nevertheless constrained by two limitations. First, analytical interest in structural and institutional relationships is locked into the transition problematics of primarily seeking to explain the absence of democratic institutions. In effect, analysis of informal institutions, civil society and the social distribution of economic resources is harnessed to the same question precogging QoD analysts: what is blocking democratic transition? The difference is that these authors view this problem through consideration of whether or not democratic institutions are, or can be, socially embedded. Meanwhile, exploration of what these structural factors mean for the character and direction of hybrid regimes is far from exhaustive.

Second, notwithstanding important insights by Brownelee (2008), and Levinsky and Way (2010), about the importance of the organizational cohesion of party and state institutions for understanding hybrid regime directions, the social foundations of this cohesion are unexplained. Conspicuously absent from these frameworks is consideration of relationships between the institutional power of political parties or state organizations and the dynamic and complex interests associated with capitalist development. Yet these relationships not only help explain the discrepancy between the persistence of authoritarian rule in Singapore and the extremely strong international linkages of Singapore with established democracies – which Levinsky and Way (2010: 243) admit is starkly at odds with their theory – they also strengthen explanations of regime directions in other Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand and Malaysia.

Our theoretical starting point is that capitalist development fundamentally influences the nature of societal forces and the conflicts between them. Faction associated with capitalist development obviously includes patterns of ownership and control in the economy, around which a host of political conflicts and alliances ensue. But it also encompasses the way that power and authority is exercised to constrain and/or enable certain forms of political organization to function. Thus, through the advent of economic globalization, complex divisions of labour have altered the relative power of capitalist and labour – especially labour’s reduced capacity for collective organization in late industrializing countries.

Geopolitical factors also need to be taken into account in the analysis of political regimes since they are inseparable from the organization of economic power. The Cold War, for instance, not only produced close trade and aid relations between Western countries and various authoritarian governments, but a more general suppression in the region of civil society organizations – especially independent trade unions – with tacit or even active support from Western governments (Dwyer 2006). As Luebbert (1991: 314) points out, in Western Europe ‘the institutions of the modern state, of the economy, and of the party system were the projects of mass movements; they were institutions that reflected the balance of interests those movements contained’. Political institutions have thus developed in a very specific structural context in many late industrializing countries.

Bellin’s (2000) concept of ‘contingent democracy’ is, therefore, especially useful. She maintains that ‘the peculiar conditions of late development often make capital and labour much more ambivalent about democratization than was the case for their counterparts among early industrializers’ (Bellin 2000: 178). In late industrializing countries, middle-class support for democratic consolidation is as contingent as it was in interwar Europe. But this contingency is now in the context of weak working-class movements and generally fragmented, if not underdeveloped, civil societies (Rodan and Jayasuriya 2009).
By way of demonstrating the analytical result of our social foundations approach for regime analysis, the following discussion draws on the respective Southeast Asian countries of Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. Thailand is a fascinating case where social and political forces have embraced reform agendas entirely consistent with, and often in the language of, the QoD literature to legitimate the overthrow of democratically elected government. This puzzle cannot be explained without seeing political institutions as part of complex and wider power struggles of capitalist development. Analytically privileging conflicts and alliances associated with the dynamics of late industrializing capitalism – in the corporatization of Malaysia and Singapore – also affords more precision explaining variations in the nature and impact of organizational power of party and state political institutions within and beyond hybrid regimes.

Thailand: institutions as sites of social conflict

Often referred to as the ‘People’s Constitution’, the 1997 Thai Constitution was widely thought to have marked a democratic highpoint in the country’s political development (Dresel 2009). It explicitly recognized the importance of political participation and expression, Section 76 proclaiming that “The State shall promote and encourage public participation in laying down policies, making decisions on political issues, preparing economic, social and political development plans, and inscribing the exercise of State power at all levels” (Kingdom of Thailand 1997). The 1997 Constitution also incorporated a range of vertical and horizontal accountability institutions, including the Constitutional Court, the Election Commission and the National Counter Corruption Commission, as well as procedures and regulations that governed the appointment of members to regulatory bodies in sectors such as telecommunications. Furthermore, the Constitution was designed to create a strong and stable executive government between elections. To this end, it limited the capacity of parliament to move motions of no confidence in the government, and constrained MPs’ rights to resign from parties. All of this solidified executive power.

Yet, rather than lay the basis for stable, democratic politics, what transpired was a dramatic escalation of tensions between so-called ‘Red Shirts’ and ‘Yellow Shirts,’ to be followed by the abandonment of political pluralism and a return to authoritarianism (Noxikit 2008). Ironically, authoritarianism’s comeback involved extensive checks and balances on the powers of elected officials, presented as a protection of democratic institutions by curbing corruption and money politics. Resonances with various QoD institutional reform prescriptions were striking.

Unlike the QoD theorists who focus on evaluating the ‘effectiveness’ of the 1997 Constitution, we argue that it was an outcome of a political compromise between conservative elites and more liberal middle-class social forces represented by the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and technocrats who were keen to broaden political participation (Connors 2003; Hewison 2007). Under this constitution, greater political participation was accommodated but the possibilities of political contestation and representative democracy were narrowed. Hostility to democratic representation by some liberal NGOs and technocrats, linked to what McGargo (2005) refers to as the ‘network monarchy’, was exemplified by the provision in the 1997 Constitution barring parliamentary candidates without university degrees. As Hewison (2007: 933) points out, retail cynical technocrats and liberal elite proponents of constitutional change argued that while participation must be permitted, it needs to be ‘carefully managed to prevent its radicalization’. It was in this political context that Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) Party captured government, campaigning on a populist platform against the austerity programme of the previous Chuan Leekpai government that damped economic growth. The policies of the TRT were closely aligned to the interests of newly emerging elements of the domestic bourgeoisie, including those in the telecommunications and construction sectors. Indeed, the TRT arose as a kind of insurance for those elements of domestic capitalist capital hit hard by the Asian financial crisis of 1997–8 and the various IMF reform programmes (Jayasuriya and Hewison 2004).

New political institutions under the 1997 Constitution, designed to create strong executive government and parties, enabled the TRT to cement a more centralized system of money politics, which to some extent bypassed or subordinated local systems of political patronage (Papak and Baker 2004). The local system of patronage was part of the network monarchy entrenched within the state apparatus, working through such institutions as the Privy Council and elements of the military (McGarro 2005; Mansley 2006; Hewison 2007). Yet, what was interesting about Thaksin was his and the TRT’s appeal to a broad cross-class coalition that included urban and rural poor groups (Jayasuriya and Hewison 2004; Hewison 2005), which translated into a resounding re-election in February 2005.

Meanwhile, this new populist politics allowed Thaksin to challenge some of the social forces whose interests were protected in the compromise of the 1997 Constitution. Consequently, after the TRT’s 2005 re-election, tensions mounted between the pro-royal middle-class liberals and business interests of the network monarchy, or Yellow Shirts, on the one hand, and Red Shirts, comprising business interests linked to TRT and the urban and rural poor beneficiaries of the TRT’s policies on the other hand.

Soon after Thaksin’s re-election, corruption allegations surfaced, leading to anti-government demonstrations by a complex of urban social forces that were tacitly backed by the network monarchy. Thaksin responded by calling yet another election for April 2006, which was boycotted by major opposition parties. The TRT landslide election result was subsequently annulled by the constitutional court, which ordered new polls. However, before this government could form, a military coup in September 2006 abolished the 1997 Constitution and removed Thaksin and the TRT (Ungkoom 2007). Coup leaders created a commission that drafted a new constitution, approved in a tightly controlled referendum in August 2007. What was to transpire under the 2006 Constitution was a sharp reversal of the previous attempt to strengthen political parties and executive power, with a substantial bolstering of institutions of horizontal accountability – notably through greatly enhanced political powers over politics (Dresel 2009, 2010). Meanwhile, the Constitutional Court disbanded the TRT. Nevertheless, when elections were called under the new constitution, the pro-Thaksin People’s Power Party (PPP) won most seats of any party and formed government.

However, the underlying social conflicts that institutional reforms were meant to contain were yet to fully play out. Instead, the constitutional court, which claimed to be acting as the guardian of democratic institutions, subsequently dissolved the PPP in December 2008. After parliamentary maneuvering, the pro-royalist technocrat Abhisit Vejjajiva of the Democrat Party – the hitherto champions of institutions for greater political participation – was installed as prime minister without a general election. In escalating and increasingly violent clashes, Red Shirts mobilized against the government leading to the occupation of commercial and civic areas of central Bangkok, resulting in a brutal military crackdown authorized by the Abhisit government. Incalculable repression of political opposition followed (International Crisis Group 2010).

Case (2007: 639) has argued that the 2006 coup can be explained in terms of poor quality democratic institutions. According to him:

- executive abuses and corrupt practices failed to share out patronage in ways that encouraged forbearance among elites. Rather, a skewed distribution of favours so excluded some elites that they re-engaged their constituencies in ways that further eroded democracy’s
quality. Spurring downwards, quality was finally so seriously depleted that this in itself formed a pretext for authoritarian reversal.

However, this does not tell us what caused the ‘poor democratic performance’ in the first place. Moreover, apparent institutional dysfunction may be perfectly functional for certain social interests. From a social foundation perspective, the hybrid nature of the regime under Thaksin, and ensuing political instability, resides more in the unravelling of the institutional component embodied in the 1997 Constitution.

Similarly, the 2006 military coup – and what subsequently transpired – needs to be understood in terms of the broader power relationships that found institutional expression within the political regime and the state. This was in part an ideological conflict, pitting a conservative and communard notion of political order against the TKT’s populist politics. The 2006 coup reflected competing notions of representation held by the conservative forces of the network monarchy and by those embracing the populist politics of the TKT. It was a contest that had a foundation in the structure of the broader political economy because, as Hewison (2005) points out, the special economic benefits for Thaksin and his allies threatened the vast business interests of the Crown Property Bureau – the entity that controlled the economic assets of the monarchy. The coup reflected the fundamental absence of a cohesive civil society capable of exerting pressure on the state through intermediary organizations and the powerful role of entrenched social and political interests tied to the monarchical institutions (Keriuk & Hewison 2009).

Interestingly, notions of representation were mediated through an ideological configuration articulated by organized middle-class–led civic groups in Bangkok. As Nelson (2007) points out, the protests against Thaksin that eventually led to his ousting were strongly supported by NGOs with a predominantly middle-class leadership that came together under the banner of the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD). The PAD was the vehicle of Somkiat Limsin, a retired tycoon who had fallen out with Thaksin. Some of the middle-class–led NGOs shared with the conservatives a common distrust of broad-based political participation, arguing that it led to messy politics requiring the protection of democratic institutions.

Trying to make sense of paradoxical claims by Thai civil society activists to be protecting democratic institutions through support for authoritarian measures, Commin (2008: 161) argues that middle-class liberals ‘have entrusted the mission of establishing liberal democracy in the ideologies and institutions simultaneously derived from and legitimated by a mythic social contract embodied in the monarchy’. The social foundation of this middle-class preference for a ‘regulated democracy’ is to be found in historical legacies of the Cold War. Not least of these is the absence of strong intermediary organizations, especially independent labour, linking civil society and the state. Hurther’s (2006: 461) general argument that, middle class people have responded to their impotence in the political sphere by devoting their energies to activism in civil society, and in doing so de–valorize party political activity, is applicable here.

Malaysia and Singapore: state capitalism and constraining organizational power

Some theorists, attempting to explain the reproduction of hybrid regimes by emphasizing structural relationships, have argued that the existence of an organizationalist cohesive set of party and/or state institutions is pivotal. However, here organizational cohesiveness tends to be equated with the institutional management of intra–elite conflict and the coercive capacity of the state, without incorporating into the analysis the dynamic social bases for the conflicts being managed or suppressed. Using the example of Malaysia, we argue that tensions within state capitalism have led to a relative decline in UMNO’s capacity to manage intra–elite conflict, opening up political space for internal and external critics of UMNO. Comparing Malaysia and Singapore, we highlight how different structures and dynamics of state capitalism have produced differing degrees and forms of party and state organizational power, resulting in contrasting degrees of oppositional political space.

For Brovegette (2008), the durability of UMNO and the regime in Malaysia over which it provides enanuates from the capacity of that organization to contain and resolve elite conflicts. Similarly, for Levinsky and Way (2010) state and party organizational cohesion, which extends to the capacity for effective coercion, is pivotal to UMNO’s success. This cohesion is reflected in extensive patronage networks that include control over access to vast economic resources. However, for these insights to realize their full analytical potential they need to be linked with the underlying political economy dynamics of Malaysian development integral to organizational cohesiveness, or lack thereof.

Arguably, organizational cohesiveness – in the way defined by Levinsky and Way (2010) – has been declining in Malaysia, even if it remains sufficient to reproduce the regime for the foreseeable future, as they reasonably maintain. Despite UMNO’s continued political supremacy, increased factionalism and internal oppositional political space has been achieved, reflected partly in the emergence of the multiparty Pakatan Rakyat (PR), under Anwar Ibrahim, and massive opposition gains at the 2008 elections. For the first time since 1969, the ruling coalition was defeated a two-thirds majority (required to legislate constitutional change), winning just 51.2 per cent of the popular vote compared with 64 per cent in 2004. The coalition also went from controlling government in all but case of the thirteen states to controlling only eight.

However, our point is not to contest the degree of UMNO cohesiveness but to contend that Levinsky’s and Way’s framework is ill equipped to detect emerging sources of threat to UMNO’s organizational capacity. Their analytical emphasis is on how conflicts within the elite are managed. Our emphasis is on the underlying dynamics to conflicts requiring UMNO’s management. If the durability in the existing hybrid regime in Malaysia is to continue, this will be in part a function of whether or not tensions inherent to state capitalism can be accommodated through UMNO’s organizational capacity.

Capitalism in Malaysia has involved the active cultivation of an ethnic Malay domestic bourgeoisie through the New Economic Policy (NEP) launched in 1971. However, state patronage has been selectively deployed to promote a centre of politically-oriented entrepreneurs. Factionalism within UMNO pre–dated the NEP, but the NEP gave it a new structural base and dynamic. As Kho (2003: 22) notes, through, in periods of high economic growth, tensions between contesting factions over patronage spoils are politically manageable, but in periods of economic downturns levels of intra–elite frictions have tended to intensify. The triumph from UMNO and subsequent imprisonment of the then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in the wake of the 1997–8 Asian financial crisis was a dramatic demonstration of this point and how UMNO has retained an importance as a site for struggles over state patronage in its own right. Historically, UMNO was involved in direct investments, but subsequently proxy investors on the party’s behalf have assumed a central role. This has meant that a degree of autonomy has been open to de facto state capitalism in Malaysia. However, whereas Levinsky and Way emphasize how such elite tensions have not fundamentally undermined UMNO’s grip on the regime, the question is what produces such tensions and the implications of this for reproducing organizational power over time.

Tensions inherent in Malaysian capitalism translate not just into periodic UMNO factional clashes reflecting personality differences, but structured conflicts that also involve their own dynamic political opportunities for contesting political elites and related business interests
also lays the basis for comprehending the changing institutional and ideological characteristics of authoritarianism, largely ignored by analysts preoccupied with explaining the absence of democracy rather than the character of the regime (see Rodan and Jayawardena 2007; Rodan 2009). The increasing sophistication and range of 'consensus politics' and the expansion of the political space of the state through which these have been institutionalised, including through initiatives such as the Nominated Members of Parliament scheme and assorted mechanisms for public policy feedback and suggestions, reflects not just 'organisational power', but also a particular coalition of interests integral to the PAP brand of state capitalism.

Conclusion

An important benefit of the hybrid regime concept and literature has been a greater acknowledgment that democratic transitions may not only be much more complex and protracted processes than was previously thought, but also that transitions are by no means inevitable. Nevertheless, this literature remains locked within a transition theory problematic in one way or another: either to benchmark institutional progress or lack thereof towards democratic transition; or to locate the socially based impediments to effective democratic institutions. Consequently, the full range of political regime possibilities is not explored. This is precisely the advantage of the social foundations approach illustrated above. It is designed to locate the interests and conflicts driving pressures for and against institutional reform, leaving open for enquiry where regimes might be headed and why.

Moreover, this approach exposes how the popular depiction of struggles for democratic transition and consolidation — as struggles of establishing good quality institutions — omits analysis of politics. Good quality democratic institutions such as judicial review processes are themselves products of particular social coalitions and interests. In the Thai case, the deepening of the judicialisation of politics through the 2007 Constitution, far from ushering in so-called good democratic institutions, has heightened the influence of palace networks (Drews 2009: 312). These networks remain hostile to popular democratic expression. Therefore it is paramount to understand who is actually supporting particular institutional reform projects, why, and what conflicts and interests might be marginalized or privileged as a result. What really matters to politics is not whether a regime is a hybrid form, however that might be conceptualized, but whose interests are being advanced or suppressed through institutional reform agendas.

Note

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