Can the “Halfway House” Stand?  
Semidemocracy and Elite Theory in Three Southeast Asian Countries

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Today, democracy’s progress might seem to be quickening in Southeast Asia, a part of the world which has long resisted it. Analysts can cite the recent democratization in Thailand pushed through by the middle class, a redemocratization in the Philippines fueled by “people power,” and elections in Cambodia that, while launched from abroad, at least briefly calmed warring between local elites. Further afield, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Laos have been deregulating their economies, unleashing new forces that perhaps are poised now to open up politics. Indeed, the rapid industrialization and export performance of many Southeast Asian countries seem to be changing elite relations and social structures in ways that parallel the West in an earlier era, thereby promising the imminent opening of regime forms.

But most area specialists—in sharp contrast to the deductivists—urge caution. They note that, where democratization has recently taken place, it is unstable and vulnerable to new rounds of executive actions, military coups, and mass uprisings. In countries that have remained authoritarian, the growth accompanying economic deregulation, especially when rapid, has tended to do “more for the political power and bank balances of elites than for democratic development.”

Even with time this growth may serve only to entrench authoritarian politics in new ways by aligning top business people and the new middle class with the state, then pitting this coalition against assertive working classes. Finally, antagonism to liberalization still thrives in the region, made plain by Burma, whose ethnic insurgencies and black market activities arise from the military’s refusal to share either political or economic powers.

Patterns of avoiding stable democratic outcomes are still more varied in Southeast Asia. Between today’s unstable democracies in Thailand, the Philippines, and Cambodia, on one side, and the authoritarianism of Indonesia, Vietnam, Laos, and Burma, on the other, lies a third approach of “semidemocracy.” “Semidemocracy” has been practiced in Singapore since the mid 1960s, in Malaysia since the early 1970s, and in Thailand during most of the 1980s. As a distinct regime form, it is more stable than the new, “fuller” democracies in the region. It also relies more on democratic procedures than heavy-handed
authoritarian regimes. Thus, semidemocracies, borrowing cunningly some features of democracy in order substantively to avoid it, present a special challenge to the study of transitions. They also offer a new way to compare politics across countries in Southeast Asia and thus overcome the region’s acclaimed diversity that has discouraged most specialists from making comparisons. Specifically, as discussion about the virtues of “Asian democracies” and single-party-dominant systems mounts in the region, politics will probably evolve in the direction of semidemocracy rather than toward greater regime openness.

This paper investigates semidemocracies, arguing specifically that they can be stable. It then analyzes semidemocratic politics in Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand; these countries have experienced periods when their regimes were more open or closed, thereby offering some data against which to test the claim that they are most stable as semidemocracies. It concludes by summarizing and evaluating prospects for further democratization.

Semidemocracy

Semidemocratic regimes have received scant attention in the literature on transitions. In most overviews they appear only briefly to lend nuance to otherwise black-and-white dichotomies. Accordingly, they are usually presented as a subset of democracy, deviating in some measure from the category’s spirit but distinguishable from the “pseudodemocracies” and vacuous “electoralism” that shade into authoritarianism. Alternatively, they are presented as “half-way houses,” straddling uncomfortably the democratic and authoritarian categories that tug them in contrary directions. Either way, the separate dynamic that can guide semidemocracies is left undetected, thus barring their distinct classification in a better elaborated typology.

Some authors, however, have proposed sets of twin dimensions to measure democracy, thereby supplying the tools that can better capture something less. O’Donnell and Schmitter distinguish between liberalization and democratization. This distinction is reminiscent of Robert Dahl’s earlier discussion of liberalism and inclusion and is akin to Huntington’s more recent differentiation of participation from contestation. O’Donnell and Schmitter note further that one dimension may be more developed than the other, yielding patterns that enable us quickly to grasp the semidemocratic concept. Semidemocracy can not equally be called “semauthoritarianism.” Semiauthoritarianism can be described as liberal participation without electoral contestation. Interest groups and opposition parties are permitted by the government to form but are ignored or suspended in dense webs of patrimonialism or corporatism. Direct opposition to the government’s tenure is even more tightly barred, mainly through the closure of electoral routes to state
power. Indonesia’s “guided democracy” under Sukarno during the early 1960s provides a good example, as does Hong Kong before 1982. Moreover, to the extent that liberalizing concessions are made, O’Donnell and Schmitter argue, they emit from cracks in the governing coalition of elites. Semiauthoritarianism is also intrinsically unstable; each liberalizing concession unleashes social pressures on elites for still greater liberalization.\(^6\) It may easily tip back into a deeper authoritarianism that stamps out both participation and contestation, as in Indonesia under Suharto, especially after opposition parties were fused through pseudodemocracy in 1973.

In contrast, semidemocracies display regular electoral contestation. However, to prevent opposition parties from winning elections and replacing the government as in full procedural democracy, prior limits on liberal participation are kept in place, even tightened. Opposition parties may thus be severed from interest groups, their communications and funding activities may be curbed, and some of their voter constituencies may be disenfranchised. The significance of elections may also be diminished through power sharing between an elected and unelected elite. Through various strategems, power may be shifted to the military, bureaucracy, or top business groups. Nevertheless, elections in these circumstances are not merely formal. While opposition parties are prevented from replacing the government, they remain autonomous enough to mobilize reasonable levels of social support and play at least a minority role in parliament. During campaigning and question time, their criticisms can temper policy outputs. In turn, these semidemocratic features can help the government to dispel social pressures for its replacement. Put simply, electoral contestation offers a very visible outlet for social grievances. If liberal participation has been dampened beforehand, these grievances are prevented from swelling into organized demands for change.

Analysts are either silent about semidemocracy’s prospects for persistence or diagnose it—like semiauthoritarianism—as inherently unstable, perched precariously between democratic and authoritarian regimes. Offering a structural explanation of this instability, Hall suggests that, when electoral contestation occurs without liberal participation, working classes are radicalized by the limits on their organizing. In then venting their radicalism freely at the polls, they prompt the middle class “to support reaction,” thus bringing the semidemocracy down.\(^7\) Burton, Higley, and Gunther view semidemocracy primarily as a constraint upon suffrage rather than rights of assembly but agree that its prospects for stability are slight. While semidemocracies may be sustainable among “isolated and uninvolved . . . mass populations,” such as a “passive peasantry,” they are weakened over time as elites are confronted by more complex societies.\(^8\) Similarly, Pinkney argues that “restricted democracies” may be “relatively durable” in agrarian settings but implies their frailty as society develops.\(^9\) Even O’Donnell and Schmitter, while conceding that semidemocracies “last longer” than semiauthoritarian regimes,
content that they must finally be worn down by “social mobility,” “market vulnerability,” and the “normative standards of contemporary times.”10 In sum, a subgroup or intermediate group of semi- quasi-, limited, restricted, “frozen,” “façade,” and “exclusionary” democracies pops up quite frequently in studies of democracy but only in an underanalyzed cameo role.11 It is usually dismissed as inherently unstable (and normatively undesirable), a mere way station on the road to fuller democracy or authoritarian reversal.

But in his recent study Pinkney also warns that a “danger in focusing on the . . . form of [a regime] is to assume that it is an independent variable.”12 Indeed, implicit so far in this account—and stated expressly in much of the literature—is the prior, logically causal role of elites. Let us draw here on the work of Burton, Gunther, and Higley. They define elites as “persons who are able, by virtue of their strategic positions in powerful organizations, to affect national political outcomes regularly and substantially.”13 Many elites thus gather prominently at the peak of the state apparatus—the most powerful organization of all—while others lead “resource rich” economic and sociocultural groups in society. Further, mainly the character of relations between these elites determines the forms of regimes. Where elites can be classified as “disunified,” waging their personal and factional struggles at all costs, the regime will be unstable and vulnerable to “violent seizures of state power.” Conversely, where elites are “consensually unified,” mutually respecting their prerogatives and the worth of their institutions, the regime will remain stable.14

Burton, Gunther, and Higley contend further that stable regimes will be democratic, at least in countries beyond a “modernization threshold necessary for mass participation.”15 As we shall see, the notion that modernized societies inevitably seek democracy can be challenged. But it does suggest rightly that social constituents help to shape political regimes, whatever their form—a point that, given the tone of the literature on transitions, needs to be sharply underscored. In most recent accounts, whether democratization is associated with inconclusive elite warring followed by quick settlements16 or with prolonged elite rule followed by the breakup of coalitions,17 elites are depicted as commencing and controlling the regime change. But though this approach may explain why elites choose at some point to reorganize their relations and accommodate one another, it explains less well why elites should ever go beyond oligarchic collusion to democratize more deeply. The short answer, rarely developed systematically, is that elites must also share positions and power with their constituents or risk losing their constituents’ support.

And if elites share their power in this way, they must clearly share causality too. Moreover, because elites are elites only in the context of constituents—their status depends on wider acknowledgment—limits exist even on their conceptual separability. In short, despite some autonomy and distinctness, elites are grounded
finally in what are variously conceptualized as mass attitudes, social bases, and structural forces; all must be evaluated in any full account of regime forms. In addition, regimes can develop lives of their own, feeding back into and guiding elites. After consolidating a democracy, for example, elites may follow its procedural rhythms over crises that might otherwise tempt them in authoritarian directions. In sum, elites, as causal agents and explanatory concepts, are more limited by the politics and logics in which they are embedded than most studies of transitions suggest.

Of course, causality among elites, constituents, and regimes doubtless flows most strongly from elites. However, their importance, as well as the strength of elite reappraisals of democracy’s worth, is overstated. “Elites representing groups who were willing to harass and perhaps even kill each other at one time sit down and construct democratic accords at another,” suggests one author.18 Most studies of regime opening thus focus intently on interelite pacts, “crafting,” “accordism,” “settlements,” or *garantismo* that widen in top-down, state-led, or heavily negotiated processes of “transformation” and “transplacement.” More broadly, a distillate of the literature highlights tensions between state elites as the triggering event, set in a stiff milieu of legitimacy “crisis” and serious drops in performance. The transition is then driven by state and social elites who come together in new agreements over democracy’s worth, meshing with mass indignation over authoritarian brutality (a “popular upsurge” that evaporates quickly, however, in *desencanto*).19 To the extent that external forces matter, they have recently been helpful. The end of the Cold War has finally dampened superpower enthusiasm for dictators, whether Marxist or rightist.

But the emphasis on elites qualified by the significance of constituents raises some questions about the democratic inevitability of stable regimes. We have noted that elite unity stabilizes a regime, while the empowerment of constituents democratizes it. But what if constituents are uninterested in empowerment and are motivated less by memories of the state’s authoritarian harshness than by their own violent rivalries with other social constituencies? Here, constituents seek special protection more than popular sovereignty. And what if elites in such settings abandon their own unity, either to pursue constituent support or to assert factional ascendancy? Specifically, unified elites may find that, in appealing to rival constituencies, they win the hearty support of no one, thus granting space to new “outbidders” who weaken elite status, relations, and democratic stability. In these circumstances, elites must draw reluctantly apart, then overtake outbidders to recapture their constituents. Malaysia’s “May 13th incident” provides an example.

On the other hand, warring between already disunified elites can deepen rivalries between their constituents, thus destabilizing their regime even more swiftly, regardless of its democratic or authoritarian form. Singapore’s political record shortly after independence provides an example of such disunity and unstable
democracy. Thailand from 1973 to 1976 provides a second example, while the politics toward which its elites veered for several years after 1976 suggests unstable authoritarianism. In sum, it can not be assumed that social constituencies uniformly seek democracy and that elites will everywhere lead them in finding it. Constituent rivalries, emerging between different clientelist formations, class interests, or ethnic identities, may prompt elites, either with regret or opportunism, to reorganize their relations in ways that erode democratic procedures or the prospects for them.

Elites in these contexts usually descend into or persist in deep syndromes of disunity and unstable authoritarianism. These patterns were investigated in the “pretransitions” era—an agenda that reminds us how the literature oscillates alongside real world regime swings. But this paper addresses configurations of elites who, while abandoning their full unity, stop short of disunity, settling instead into an off-center equilibrium. Further, the ascendant elites, bonding with their constituents through shared outlooks, form a core social linkage that prevails over but does not ruthlessly dominate some subordinate linkages of elites and constituents. Core elites usually wield most state power, enabling them to benefit their constituents directly. At the same time, denial of these benefits to others is equally important and amplifies the bland gratitude of recipients into more highly fevered loyalty. In short, what is lacking in raw numbers is made up with intensities of sentiment, the fidelity of one constituency varying inversely with the resentments of its rivals. In the three cases examined in this paper, core linkages exist between ruling party elites and the middle class in Singapore, between party elites and much of the ethnic Malay community in Malaysia, and between military elites and some rural followings in Thailand. Meanwhile, subordinate elites, perhaps holding some economic or sociocultural power, remain sufficiently able to protect the stakes of their constituents to keep them from outright revolt. Indeed, the economic activities of subordinate linkages may serve quietly to filter surpluses into the resources of core elites. One thinks here primarily of labor leaders and factory workers in Singapore, of the ethnic Chinese community in Malaysia, and of top business people, party leaders, and their urban middle class followings in Thailand.

Moreover, if these elite relations and constituent linkages give rise to a semidemocracy, it can strongly reinforce these patterns. Under semidemocratic cover, core elites dampen liberal participation, discouraging their constituents from straying away and subordinate elites from organizing autonomously. Electoral contestation, however, while set in short campaign bursts spaced years apart, remains comparatively open. The constituents of core elites, undistracted by liberalism, can declare their loyalties regularly as a firm bloc. Subordinate elites and constituents, while unable to win elections, can at least register their grievances. In short, semidemocracy helps some elites and their constituents
solidify their discrimination against parallel linkages, gracing it with at least a display of elections. This display may help stave off doubts over the rightfulness of procedures. And because state elites are able to avoid the wide distributional patterns that in late developing countries seem to impede economic growth, they may avoid crises over performance also. These elections have additional features. They allow core elites peacefully to compete against one another by tallying their levels of constituent support. They also open up some “feedback loops,” informing elites about the minimum levels of benefits and concessions they can offer respectively to constituents and rivals.

In sum, in divided societies an asymmetrical posture of unity may delineate the most robust kind of elite relations, and semidemocracy may be the most stable regime form. In this configuration, a core linkage of elites and constituents prevails over but does not eliminate subordinate linkages of elites and constituents. Further, if core and subordinate elites ratify their relative statuses through understandings and trade-offs, they may give rise to semidemocratic politics, especially when their constituents are modernized enough to seek democratic access for themselves but divided enough to shut off access to others. Viewed from a different angle, a core linkage of elites and constituents narrows the regime; a subordinate linkage of elites and constituents prevents it from closing entirely. The resulting semidemocracy can then buttress these relations and linkages and perpetuate them over lengthy periods. Let us now explore this thesis in three Southeast Asian countries.

**Semidemocracies in Southeast Asia**

This section records the amount of liberal participation and electoral contestation in the semidemocracies of Singapore since the 1960s, Malaysia since the early 1970s, and Thailand from 1978 to 1988, analyzes the operation of these regimes by showing how they favor some elites over others, explores the constituents to which elites appeal by showing vertical linkages and inequalities between them, and illustrates the greater stability of these semidemocracies by comparing them to periods in their respective national experiences when other kinds of regimes existed.

**Singapore** The small country of Singapore features a nearly ideal-type semidemocracy. Its liberal participation has been tamed by the government through corporatist and coercive techniques. Numerous forums for dialogue including the Feedback Unit, created in 1985, the Government Parliamentary Committees, introduced in 1987, and the Institute of Policy Studies, formed in 1988, have grown up alongside new middle class constituencies and dissuaded them from
seeking more autonomous modes of participation. Labor organizations have been tightly incorporated into the National Trade Union Congress or have been dispersed through a patchwork of in-house unions. Similarly, the government owns or staffs many media outlets, while it constrains independent publications through the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act. When this act was criticized in 1986 by Singapore’s Law Society, the government warned expressly against professional organizations’ participating in politics. It also set up a rival Academy of Law, illustrating amply that a “denser” civil society, far from spawning new liberalism, may open new conduits of state control. The government also acted to prevent transclass alliances. In 1975 it brought the University of Singapore Students’ Union under the firm control of the education ministry after student activists called attention to the plight of retrenched workers. In 1987 it arrested twenty-two members of Catholic church organizations who had promoted middle class awareness of the conditions of foreign workers, charging them with plots to launch a Marxist revolt. The government carried out these preventive detentions through the Internal Security Act (ISA), its final and bluntest weapon against liberal participation.

Singapore has regularly held competitive elections since independence in 1959, thus establishing itself as at least semidemocratic. But as electoral challenges have mounted since the early 1980s, the government has imposed ever more innovative codes on the opposition. For example, after the government lost a by-election in 1981, bringing the first opposition member into parliament since the 1960s, it fabricated a rival opposition. In 1984 it introduced “nonconstituency MPs” up to three carefully selected defeated opposition candidates. In 1989 it created an even more rootless category of “nominated” MPs, drawing on up to six eminent though nonpartisan persons from outside political life. Together, these new members have been permitted to engage in parliamentary debates and thus to “sharpen up” government MPs while addressing mass concerns, but they have been prevented from voting against the government on money or constitutional bills and from inspiring mass followings through opposition parties. Further, in 1988 the government introduced some “group representation constituencies.” These multimember districts, contestable only by slates of four candidates drawn from different ethnic communities, have posed a nettlesome requirement that tests further the opposition’s scant resources. Finally, in 1991 veto power over government spending and bureaucratic appointments was given to the previously ceremonial president, and the office of president was made elective. But because candidates are required to have been top level state or business executives screened by the council of presidential advisers, they are unlikely to come from the opposition. In sum, after suppressing most liberal participation, the government has gradually curbed electoral contestation, too, through contrived electoral barriers and false oppositions that limit Singapore’s semidemocracy still further.
Initially, Singapore had a more fully democratic regime. However, it was operated by elites who were disunified over procedural rules and policy visions, thus making it unstable. Specifically, a faction of middle class professionals led by Lee Kuan Yew and another based on the Chinese-educated working class coalesced in 1954 as the People’s Action Party (PAP). They sought first to wrest independence from Britain, then to contest parliamentary elections. But after winning independence and elections in 1959, the PAP factions quickly turned against each other and split in 1961. The PAP remained in power under Lee, while the new Barisan Sosialis (BS, Socialist Front) went into opposition. The PAP then strengthened its hold on state power, harassing the BS and allied trade unions. Most notably, prior to the 1963 election it used the Special Branch to mount Operation Cold Store, “obliterat[ing] the BS’s top level leadership.” 24 Although it won the election, the PAP continued to jail opposition leaders and deregister trade unions until it consolidated its paramountcy five years later. Since then the PAP has held elections regularly with little fear of turnover. Its history thus shows clearly how disunity among elites and the triumph of one faction over another can transform a democratic regime into a semidemocratic one.

In fusing party organization and state power, the PAP discovered a new constituency: it gained the support of Singapore’s English-educated middle class, much of which was already employed in the state apparatus. This middle class was distinct from, and even suspicious of, the Chinese-educated working class. It was suspicious also of the local bourgeoisie because of the latter’s entrepreneurial character and identification with British capital. PAP elites thus consolidated their linkage to middle class constituencies in the context of rival groups, and this linkage was reflected in new policy directions. Very simply, middle class constituents in the bureaucracy ably assisted PAP elites in pursuing international capital and thus gradually transforming Singapore from a regional shipping node into a center for manufacturing and financial services. The PAP reciprocated, rewarding the middle class with vast opportunities for personal career advancement and shopping mall consumption, fitted out with special education programs and incentives for marriage between graduates. 25

But while consolidating its paramountcy and the well-being of its constituency, the PAP has stopped short of eliminating subordinate elites with other class bases. Most important, after running down working class leaders during the 1960s, the PAP has propped them back up with various corporatist armatures. Since the 1980s the National Wage Council has granted steady pay increases or year-end lump sums to affiliates of the National Trade Union Congress (while prohibiting central bargaining and strike actions). 26 Through the Housing and Development Board the PAP has offered working class families public accommodation (while threatening to cut funds and taking back units for development projects). 27 It has also offered working class children subsidized education (while heavily shaping their
curriculum and steering them away from universities). Finally, the PAP has grudgingly subsidized basic medical care (while quashing broader social welfare schemes). Hence, although life chances for working class elites and their constituents have remained worse than for PAP leaders and the middle class, working class grievances have been moderated.

The PAP has also discriminated historically, if lightly, against Singapore’s bourgeoisie by preferring dynamic international capital and large-scale manufacturing. Local business has thus lingered timidly in banking, hotel development, and office block construction. Moreover, after severing ties to British capital during the 1960s, local business people turned frequently to the Barisan Sosialis which, though socialist, they considered at least to be nationalist. Two decades later, global recession has helped to soften this antagonism. The PAP has recognized the capacity of local businesses to mediate regional trade networks and facilitate “globalization,” thus easing their legacy of suspicion. The PAP began to convene local chambers of commerce and employers’ associations in various committees and sought their input in key blueprints for regional integration and economic master plans for the future. It began also to admit local business people directly into its own organization, even recruiting directors of Singaporean companies to serve as MPs.

On the other hand, Singaporean society has been marked by some divisions that the PAP has refused to activate even briefly. In particular, ethnic Chinese and Malay identities have persisted in Singapore since the colonial period, offering bases that could readily be galvanized by elites into strong sets of constituents and rivals. Of course, the “constructed” quality of ethnicity is now recognized by most scholars. It takes shape through top-down processes of “false consciousness” and bottom-up quests for material benefits or emotive “group worth.”28 Nonetheless, while forming, dissipating, and recurring atavistically, ethnic sentiments can sharpen at times and thus seem very real to the elites and constituents who unite or conflict over them. But elites in Singapore have never seriously mobilized these sentiments. Recalling the Chinese “chauvinism” that fueled the “emergency” during the 1950s and the Malay resentments that sparked serious rioting in 1964, the PAP has assessed ethnicity as a “problem,” not a resource. It has thus dispersed ethnic tensions through corporatist mechanisms, preferring to extend its paramountcy in less risky ways. Indeed, in adopting class strategies the PAP has often set English-educated and Hokkien-speaking segments within the Chinese community against one another, then reached outside that community to embrace Malay constituents through special assistance programs like Mendaki.

We can conclude by showing that these sets of interelite and elite-mass relations translate into a semidemocratic regime, a task that enables us also to look more closely at the role of elections. For core elites in divided societies liberal participation is more threatening than electoral contestation. Subordinate elites and
constituencies, once permitted autonomously to organize, can challenge core elites in ways that are difficult to contain. But if these constituencies are prevented from organizing, though permitted to vote, they may cast their votes in atomistic ways which, while leaving core elites unchallenged, help to dispel political resentments. Thus, in Singapore core elites keep their grip on state power by spreading limits on liberal participation evenly across classes, then holding regular elections. At the same time, they favor the middle class by opening some side channels for dialogue.

Analysts have noted, however, that despite these limits on participation (and increasingly on contestation) subordinate elites have made steady electoral gains against the PAP since the early 1980s. Appealing to working class resentments over cost-of-living increases, as well as to middle class irritation over meddlesome public policies that range from gum sales to eugenics, they have won nearly 40 percent of the popular vote. This vote should not be interpreted as a swelling demand for government turnover. Indeed, since 1986 the PAP has sought to weaken the opposition by placing MPs on new town councils that are responsible for urban services, then challenging opposition MPs to deliver. In the 1991 election the opposition countered with its most effective campaign strategy ever, winning four seats by contesting in less than a majority of districts, thereby assuring beforehand the government’s victory. In short, the PAP has sought to blunt the opposition’s electoral appeal by sharing real power; the opposition has made some electoral gains by refusing to take it.

But if subordinate elites do not seriously contest elections against the government, core elites use elections to contest peacefully against one another. In 1990 Lee Kuan Yew retired as prime minister. He was succeeded by Goh Chok Tong, while Lee’s son, Lee Hsien Loong, became deputy prime minister. In 1991 Goh called snap elections, seeking power in his own right and some “breathing space from [his deputy] whose rise to the top spot appear[ed] inevitable.”30 However, the PAP slipped from 63 percent of the popular vote in 1988 to 61 percent, thus adding to the assessment of Goh as a “seat-warmer.”31 The election showed also that the PAP was losing more support in working class districts than in middle class ones, prompting Lee Kuan Yew publicly to “lecture” Goh about speaking more Mandarin and reading Chinese newspapers.31 Hence, in a quest for “self-renewal,” Goh resigned from his seat in 1992 and staged a by-election in his multimember district of Marine Parade. In a “resounding win” Goh took 72.9 percent of the vote.32 For governments that refuse to hold elections, there can be no resounding wins, thereby suggesting negatively the value of elections even in semidemocracies. Goh Chok Tong now governs Singapore more securely than many analysts had anticipated, and Lee Kuan Yew seems to have shifted his criticisms to democracies overseas.

Malaysia  Malaysia has calibrated its twin dimensions of semidemocracy less
tightly than Singapore has. In terms of liberal participation, the government has eschewed corporatist controls over professional associations, labor unions, and cause-oriented groups, often permitting these organizations autonomy to form and canvas reasonable levels of membership. It has also permitted a broad range of opposition parties and coalitions to emerge. Moreover, these organizations have occasionally been able to raise grievances in popular forums and legislative arenas, to which the government has favorably responded, for example, easing barriers to tertiary education and rolling back unpopular levies on new toll roads. The government has responded also, however, by capping this participation. It has registered and circumscribed these organizations through the Societies Act and has launched such “fronts” as the Islamic Lawyers Association, the Malaysian Labor Organization, and the Institute for Islamic Understanding to distract attention respectively from the Bar Association, the Malaysian Trades Union Congress, and a raft of revivalist dakwah (Muslim missionary) movements. The government has also suppressed student groups more directly, fearing, like the government in Singapore, the emergence of potent transclass alliances. Hence, after students mounted demonstrations in Kuala Lumpur during the mid 1970s to publicize the plight of urban squatters and peasants, the government passed amendments to the University and University Colleges Act, prohibiting them from joining or even expressing support for political parties and labor unions. It has also discouraged free expression by owning or rigorously licensing most of the print and electronic media, while using the Internal Security Act to imprison persistent critics. Thus, while participation has been more open in Malaysia than in Singapore, it has hardly been unrestricted and rarely has been permitted to shape important policies directly.

With respect to electoral contestation, the government has scrupulously dissolved parliaments within the five-year time span specified by the constitution and has broadly enfranchised society. Secret balloting and vote counting have also been fairly carried out, and the results have been accurately reported. The prime minister, put up by the party that wins the elections, has always prevailed over the bureaucracy and military, thus showing the meaningfulness of elected office. And though opposition parties have been seriously hobbled, they have fought elections vigorously, enabling them to get a toehold in parliament. But if opposition parties can enter Malaysia’s parliament, they are blocked from winning enough seats to control it, or even from winning in the assemblies of more than a few states. Election day propriety, then, masks district malapportionment, a short campaign period, bans on open air opposition rallies, and the government’s highly partisan use of media outlets, state equipment, and development grants, all unchecked by the electoral commission. In these circumstances, “the Malaysian electoral system . . . [has been] so heavily loaded in favor of the government that it is hard to imagine that [it] . . . could be defeated in an election.” Further, these iterative electoral victories have extended some legitimating cover for the government’s
often sly legislation, habitual amendments to the constitution, manipulation of standing orders and question time, and elevation of loyalists to the largely ceremonial upper house. In sum, while the government can claim that Malaysia holds the longest unbroken record of elections in the region, it has not been established competitively. As Tun Razak noted in 1971: “So long as the form is preserved, the substance can be changed to suit conditions of a particular country.”

As in Singapore, Malaysia’s regime was more democratic during the 1960s. But unlike Singapore, this regime was operated initially by unified elites, then closed suddenly at the end of the decade by the violent actions of their constituents. Specifically, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) combined during the early 1950s with the Malayan (later Malaysian) Chinese Association (MCA) in a party coalition called the Alliance. Together, the UMNO and the MCA negotiated independence from Britain in 1957, then won general elections in 1959 and 1964. But rather than turning against each other, these parties continued to share many political, economic, and cultural prerogatives. Briefly, UMNO elites drew on their “indigenous” Malay statuses and historical role in the bureaucracy to assert their dominance over the state. They drew also on aristocratic Malay traditions and cultural pastimes to forge national symbols, and they proclaimed Islam and bahasa Melayu as the official religion and language. MCA elites, unlike their social constituents, were usually educated in English rather than Chinese, disposing them to make these cultural concessions easily. They focused instead on their stake in the economy, obtaining some guarantees against state intrusion. These elite trade-offs were labeled informally as “the bargain” and later encoded obliquely in the constitution. They were also elaborated during the 1960s through more nuanced exchanges and personal friendships. The UMNO, led by Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, granted state contracts and licenses that sustained Chinese companies and in return received campaign contributions, “secret funds,” and directorships. The MCA, led by the finance minister, Tan Siew Sin, moderated the UMNO’s development spending and tax requests, thereby defending the Chinese community’s most vital business interests. Thus, “when the whole scene [was] surveyed, in its political, economic, and social aspects, it [was] clear that a kind of short-term rough justice between the claims of the communities [was] in fact attained.”

But because Malaysia’s politics and economy were open during this period, capital continued to concentrate tightly among the Chinese, and resentments were expressed freely by embittered Malays. Constituencies of agrarian and poor urban Malays thus questioned the UMNO’s modest use of state power, “the high expectations [they] had of ‘their’ government helping them [having] failed to be realized.” Chinese constituents replied with grievances of their own. Their political rights lagged behind their economic prowess, while the standing of their cherished cultural practices was
bartered down by the MCA. As the 1969 elections neared, ethnic parties lying outside the Alliance grew stronger. The Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS, Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party) focused attention on the Malays’ stunted birthright, and the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Gerakan focused on “second class” Chinese citizenship, inequities each ascribed to the Alliance’s bargain. The election results did not force the Alliance from office. But they showed that constituent support had sharply eroded, and some UMNO elites, in trying to revive it, sparked fierce ethnic rioting. Though order was soon restored, Abdul Rahman Tunku was afterward sidelined by his deputy, Tun Razak, parliament was replaced by the National Operations Council, and democracy was restricted by new sedition laws.

Heuristically, the 1969 rioting and subsequent regime closure show that elite relations can be overturned by constituents and that elites, to remain elites, may need to recast their appeals. In explaining the rioting, Tun Razak focused on “economic disparities between the racial groups in the country.” Ghazalie Shafie, a rising UMNO ideologue, called succinctly for a new “native-based” system. The UMNO thus exchanged the elite bargain for the New Economic Policy (NEP), abruptly shifting from interelite respect for Chinese property rights to top-down delivery of Malay economic benefits. It mounted “dawn raids” on share markets and forced corporate “restructuring” to carve out holdings in foreign and Chinese-owned companies. It also set up new state enterprises with which to prepare credit, contracts, and infrastructure for Malay firms. In short, through a stream of executive postings and special share issues, the UMNO sought to “breed Malay capitalists” rapidly in newly urbanized settings. It also developed new trust agencies and cooperative schemes through which to spread assets more broadly across mass Malay constituents.

Tun Razak reopened parliament in 1971 but insisted that as a condition it “entrench” a constitutional ban on discussion of “sensitive issues,” namely, Malay “special rights” and the UMNO’s new distributive commitments. During the mid 1970s he also inducted most opposition parties into the Alliance, rechristening it under enhanced UMNO leadership as the Barisan Nasional (National Front). New controls on press freedoms and student activities were also introduced during this period. In these ways liberal participation by alienated Chinese was curbed, while electoral contestation permitted Malay constituents to show revitalized support. Indeed, as Chinese alienation deepened during the 1970s and 1980s, it helped raise Malay loyalties to the pivotal UMNO.

T. J. Pempel notes that, for a dominant party to prevent the softening of its hegemony over time, it must “become something very different from what it was.” It can develop in two ways. First, it may display a “Machiavellian capacity to betray some portions of the party’s original support group in order to attract new, more vital support.” Second, it may follow a route of “less overt betrayal, requiring only that the party, while continuing to make appeals from a clear
ideological position . . . in fact govern far more pragmatically from the political center.”43 Though Pempel is concerned with single party dominance and class relations in fully industrialized democracies, his observations say much about the UMNO’s flexibility in middle income, multiethnic, semidemocratic Malaysia. (Equally, the PAP’s inflexibility may account for its slippage in neighboring Singapore.)

Specifically, as the NEP brought changes to Malaysia’s state and society, the UMNO altered its Malay partnerships and constituent linkages. At the elite level the UMNO turned from “upper class civil servants” to the new Malay bourgeoisie, evaluating it as “the most dynamic and resilient element in society.”44 Similarly, at the mass level it shifted from bureaucratic workers and agrarian populations to middle class Malay business people and professionals. This trend, of course, was uneven, fluctuating with the business cycle during most of Mahathir Mohamad’s rocky prime ministership in the 1980s. But it quickened with new growth toward the end of the decade, then climaxed in the 1993 general assembly election. Here, a victorious slate of candidates called the wawasan (vision) team articulated images of the “new Malay,” indeed, the “global Malay,” ethnically dominant at home and supremely confident abroad, mastering advanced technologies and devouring consumer items. Even the “old guard” agriculture minister, after failing to retain the vice presidency, gauged in his farewell speech that his loss “should be viewed as a success for the country as it reflected a national transition—from an era of agriculture to that of industry, commerce, and the corporate sector.”45 Unmentioned by any assembly speakers, however, were the growing ranks of new Malay factory workers.

With respect to Pempel’s second kind of flexibility, while the UMNO has posed tirelessly as the Malays’ ethnic “protector,” it has continued to make pragmatic concessions to the Chinese. Of course, when preparing for close electoral contests, like the 1990 general election and the 1994 state assembly election in Sabah, UMNO candidates have amplified their harsh “communalist” rhetoric. We have seen, too, that after nearly losing the 1969 election it instituted a long agenda of reverse discrimination. But beneath these campaign appeals and policies the UMNO-led government continued quietly to filter many of its contracts and licenses to the Chinese, using multiethnic partnerships and joint ventures as apertures. Indeed, the success of these undertakings often depended on Chinese capital and business skills. Then, in 1991, amid economic recovery, the government declared its pragmatism more plainly, substituting the NEP with the New Development Policy (NDP) in order to ease the quotas on corporate equity stakes and hiring. In other domains, controls over Chinese entry to universities were relaxed, government funding for Chinese and Tamil medium primary schools was continued, and Chinese and Indian religions and customs were openly permitted, even if denied “official” status.46 In sum, while the government
regained Malay loyalties by discriminating against the Chinese, it did not discriminate so rigidly that the Chinese were driven to revolt, or even to investment strikes and capital flight. Such off-center equilibrium was made manifest in, and was best managed through, a semidemocratic regime form.

However, supportive Malay attitudes and Chinese acquiescence in UMNO policies could be strained during economic recession, giving more meaning to elections than semidemocracy defines. Such strains were evident in the general election 1990, the most competitive since 1969. The Malay middle class had grown rapidly under the NEP. But when the economy stagnated during the mid 1980s, many middle class Malays reassessed the UMNO as less a catalyst than a hindrance for business deals. Partly for this reason the UMNO split in 1988, with the UMNO Baru (New UMNO) faction remaining in power under Prime Minister Mahathir and the Semangat ’46 (the “spirit” of 1946, the year in which the original UMNO was founded) going into opposition. Many analysts speculated that new middle class Malays, made more assertive by the acquisition then abrupt withdrawal of economic benefits and more disposed to join tactically with middle class Chinese, finally confronted the UMNO Baru with a spectre of government turnover and regime replacement.

But later that year it became clear that Malaysia’s economy had begun rapidly to recover. Recovery enabled the UMNO Baru to resume its patronage and reenergize support, showing that many middle class Malays were keener to participate in new economic booms than opposition politics. Thus, by the time the 1990 election was held, most middle class Malays “felt little need to change the government—and even less to press for regime change that would in future make regular democratic changes of government possible.”47 In short, pressures for democracy did not emerge from deep changes in social structure but percolated instead from short-term contingencies. When these contingencies changed, the UMNO-led government was easily returned, restoring elections to their earlier role as trusty legitimator and feedback loop. Thus, as the UMNO Baru contemplates its next general election, the most salient competition will take place between Mahathir and those in his party who wish to succeed him rather than between the UMNO Baru and those dispirited groupings which oppose it.

Thailand Scholars agree that Thailand’s politics from 1978 to 1988 were semidemocratic, labeling its regime variously as a “semi-democracy,” “demi-democracy,” “half-sail’ democracy,” and case of “betwixt-and-between.”48 However, while Thailand’s politics shared key features with Singapore and Malaysia, it also showed some differences. Core elites were based in the military, rather than in ruling parties, thus limiting the mobilizing and validating benefits that could be obtained through elections. Put simply, because voters could see no clear correlation between their own voting and those holding most state power,
electoral turnout was flat. Second, attempts by military elites to organize a constituency involved the peasantry, rather than class interests or ethnic sentiments. But because peasants were often distrustful of the military and because their social standings remained low, no core linkage fully solidified over subordinate ones.

Nonetheless, the military took seats in the legislature and campaigned on behalf of favored politicians and parties. It also sought to energize constituent support by disparaging, though not ruining, other parties and groups. Unequal elite statuses and attempts to forge constituent linkages produced and were reinforced by a semidemocratic regime, thus paralleling Singapore and Malaysia enough so that a part of Thailand’s political record can be analyzed under the same framework. Moreover, within the longer, even more volatile history of Thai politics, semidemocracy has been the country’s most stable regime form.

With respect to liberal participation, Thailand’s semidemocracy featured a desultory mix of freedoms and controls. Its print media, one of the freest in Southeast Asia, offered much critical commentary. However, radio and television stations, more useful in shaping mass attitudes and generating advertising revenues, remained under military ownership. Further, though business associations, student groups, labor unions, and farmers’ movements were permitted to organize, rarely could they participate in politically autonomous ways. Specifically, “privileged organized groups” such as the Bankers’ Association, the Association of Thai Industries, and the Thai Chamber of Commerce were able to consult with government planners, but not as “equal partners.” Instead, they had to thread their way through corporatist openings. Labor unions, already riddled by deep personal and ideological conflicts between elites, were easily “infiltrated” and undermined by military agents. And farmers’ movements, dispersed across the countryside, remained disciplined by the ministries of interior and agriculture, sometimes through the Anticommunist Act. In a similar spirit, political parties were permitted by a 1981 law—indeed, candidates were required to campaign under party banners—but their registration was then hampered by complex residency and membership requirements. Finally, these divergent approaches to liberalism ranged into the state apparatus. The judiciary “has always jealously . . . safeguarded its own administrative autonomy vis-à-vis other branches of government.” At the same time, it has “condoned and retrospectively justified . . . all military coups,” thus sanctioning the military’s higher “right to . . . provide the leadership of the government.” The judiciary, in short, like many organizations in Thailand, was permitted to administer itself, but never to check government activities.

In keeping with the 1978 constitution, which marked the start of this semidemocratic period, electoral contestation occurred regularly. Elections for the national assembly took place in 1979, 1983, 1986, and 1988. Moreover, they presented an image of great competitiveness. The Democrats, Thai Nation Party,
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and Social Action Party vied to attract coalition partners in the house of representatives. Voter turnout, however, remained low; the mass electorate perceived the few powers of their representatives. For example, until 1983 the lower house could not table legislation except through the committee on legislative bills, a joint committee dominated by the senate and cabinet, which in turn were appointed by the military. Even after this restriction was lifted, budget proposals, bills dealing with security and key areas of economic policy, and no confidence motions still had to be screened by joint sessions. Further, the assembly’s agenda was mapped out by its president, who was also based in the senate. And the unelected prime minister was not a member of either house or of a political party; he was selected instead through murky agreements between the military and assembly. In practice, Thailand’s semidemocracy sharply constrained elected assembly members through an appointed senate, and much substantive power was shifted elsewhere.

The marked weakness of political parties in Thailand has drawn scholarly attention. Chai-Anan ascribes their weakness to Thailand’s unique historical position in Southeast Asia of never being colonized. It thus failed to generate nationalist parties and confined state power to administrative institutions, the military and civil service. Heavily influenced by situational variables, the military formed the basis of core elite status in Thailand, at least during the four decades between the “revolution” against the king in 1932 and collapse before student activists in 1973. After 1973 disunity between military elites, long evident in coups and countercoups, was activated in new ways. Cleavages emerged between academy class years and loose ideological groupings. Moreover, during the 1980s business people began to participate in politics more directly, lobbying bureaucrats, financing parties, and joining cabinets. In these circumstances, questions gradually arose over the military’s cohesiveness and political centrality.

In 1980 a faction of “young Turks” from class 7 at the Chulachomklao Military Academy shifted support from General Kriangsak as prime minister to General Prem Tinsulanond. Kriangsak then peacefully stepped down. The young Turks later launched coups against Prem in 1981 and 1985 but failed to dislodge him; they never gained consensus among other military factions or requisite consent from the king. To blunt additional coups Prem sought support from the army commander, Chaovilai Yongchaiyuth, who during the 1970s had been identified with the “democratic soldiers.” Later, however, Chaovilai started his own career as a politician. He thus turned flexibly to the “class 5 conservatives” under General Suchinda Kraprayoon and encouraged them to take top posts in the military and police. Class 5 conservatives were able later to oust Prem’s successor, Chatichai Choonhavan, clearly revealing disunity among elites.

But during Prem’s tenure disunity should not be exaggerated. “The Thai officer corps remained as one in holding on to its convictions [about] Nation, Religion,
and Monarchy."56 Additionally, some tacit understandings restrained elite behaviors by specifying how military elites should climb their hierarchies (for example, taking the "classic route" as commander of the first army, garrisoned in Bangkok57) and how they should mount or put down coups. Hence even violent coups, as in 1985, spared military elites at the expense of constituents. Moreover, members of defeated elites, such as the young Turk leader Colonel Manoon, were permitted to avoid trials by leaving the country, a long established tradition in Thai politics. Indeed, the failure of the two coup attempts during the 1980s, in contrast to the success of the nine before 1978, indicated growing unity among military elites, or at least new levels of forbearance. Moreover, General Kriang sak peacefully left office in 1980—"no previous military prime minister had ever willingly given up power"58—as did Prem in 1988. However, Prem’s transfer of power also involved the free election of Chatichai as prime minister, thus marking a break between Thailand’s semidemocratic regime and the short period of fuller democracy that followed.

For some observers, though, whether military elites were united or not, their political centrality was eroded during this period by the bourgeoisie, the middle class, and the political parties through which they now participated. A "delicate balancing act" emerged among the military, the house of representatives, and the king that was mediated by Prem.59 New business associations lobbied executive agencies directly to lower taxes and tariffs on key industries. However, the military also remained paramount over most other elites.

The support of the armed forces, no less than before, [was] indispensable for a stable government. Consequently, ruling parties invite[d] retired generals to serve as premier or as ministers, holding key portfolios such as defense, interior, finance, and foreign affairs. The government also [had] to take special heed of the monarchy as it and the military [were], in effect, the two most powerful institutions in the country.60

In sum, military elites became more accommodating toward top business people. They valued the rapid economic growth that had resumed in Thailand during the mid 1980s. They also showed more toleration for the politicians who represented big business and the "increasingly confident middle class."61 But these configurations remained uneven and tilted with military preponderance. Moreover, if at some level military elites accepted business activities and parties, they also tried to energize constituent support by denigrating them. Just as General Phibun had focused social resentments against ethnic Chinese during the 1950s and Field Marshal Sarit had targeted Communists during the 1960s, military elites calculated that they too had to generate some source of threat after Communist setbacks in the early 1980s. And having been acquainted with rural discontent during their counterinsurgency, they took up some of the Communist message. In particular,
while avoiding any broad condemnation of free markets, they censured “exploitative big capitalists,” local “dark influences,” and fortunes accumulated through “gambling, smuggling, prostitution, and financial manipulations.” General Chaovarat then extended these criticisms to “unprincipled parliamentarians and some political parties [who] obstruct[ed] the people’s exercise of sovereign power,” thus elaborating the military’s usual dismissal of parties as “latecomers” with “no part in nation building.” The military’s aim was to clarify social divisions, highlighting sharply the inequalities between urban and rural populations, then galvanize new peasant constituencies.

To achieve this goal the military organized mass rural movements (such as the National Defense Volunteers, the Military Reservists for National Security, and the Self-defense Development Villages), some agricultural schemes (Green E-sarn in the north and Harapan Baru in the south), and various ideological programs (such as Dream of Peace). Then, after identifying the peasants as its “partners in development,” the military tried to deepen new paternalist linkages by abandoning corvée labor practices and handing out land titles. It also sought to insulate new constituents against recruitment by opposition parties. For example, Dream of Peace units toured the southern Thai countryside before the 1986 election, campaigning for candidates close to Prem Tinsulanond and Chamlong Srimaung (a reformist military officer serving as governor of Bangkok). They also repeatedly criticized vote buying by opposition politicians, as well as pilloried a local Social Action Party candidate, a college lecturer, “for spending more time in Surat Thani’s nightclubs than he devoted to his students.” But peasants remained ambivalent toward these appeals and defamations. They were wary also of new self-defense villages and resettlement programs. Though acknowledging that politicians often bought votes, peasants retained long memories of the much tougher means the military had customarily used to gain compliance.

But while these core and subordinate linkages, involving military elites and peasants on one side and business and party elites and the urban middle class on the other, remained fairly nascent, they coalesced enough to help explain Thailand’s semidemocracy from 1978 to 1988. Other kinds of relations, reflected in other regime forms, produced much less stability. For example, Thanin Kraivichien operated a harsh authoritarian regime in 1976–77, perhaps “the most repressive in Thai history.” But in resorting even to state assassinations to stifle dissent, Thanin drove students and peasants to support the Communist Party. The military thus recognized that in a rapidly changing social setting it could not perpetuate the earlier authoritarianism of Sarit, Thanom, and Prapth, and it finally ousted Thanin and loosened up politics. Tragically, the military had to relearn this lesson in 1991–92. After overthrowing Chatichai and reimposing strong authoritarian controls, it ignored its own pledges and installed General Suchinda as prime minister. It was quickly confronted by new social organizations, thus sparking the
confrontation of “black May,” the king’s intervention, and the reopening of the regime in September.

However, in both of these cases, 1976–77 and 1991–92, the growing evenness of elite statuses and relations in a democratic setting prompted the military to seek authoritarian reversals. In 1973 student groups tipped divided military elites from power and quickly democratized the regime. But in the following period successive governing coalitions were also divided, enabling the military to return in 1976. In 1988–91 the democratically elected government of Chatichai grew so corrupt that it alienated middle class constituents, again providing the military with a pretext to take power.67 A pattern can be read in these regime swings. When core military elites take all state power or when subordinate elites deny them most state power—when relations between military and subordinate elites are too one-sided or too even—the sharply authoritarian and democratic regimes that result are unstable. In contrast, when the military is preponderant but not starkly dominant, Thailand has had a more stable semidemocracy.

Conclusions

Semidemocracy, as a distinct research agenda, offers a new vantage point from which to critique the literature on democratic transitions. First, by mapping the persistence of semidemocratic regimes it tempers this literature’s early, triumphalist ring.68 Second, while emphasizing the role of national elites, it also acknowledges the significance of constituents, showing how they can pose opportunities or constraints for elites and nudge the latter along semidemocratic pathways. Third, it focuses on a part of the world which, despite its recent economic dynamism, has been bypassed by the comparativist mainstream, thus helping to diversify the focus on South America and Europe, as well as caution those who emphasize the democratic potential of Africa and Pacific Asia. It also holds out more exclusive benefits for Southeast Asian specialists. Because semidemocracy is perhaps better institutionalized in Southeast Asia than elsewhere, it offers a new tool for middle range theorizing about the area’s politics.

This article began by contending that semidemocracy possesses some intrinsically stable characteristics. In particular, it can synchronize a government which refuses to cede power with social demands for highly visible, if only occasional, participation in politics. Society’s participatory impulses are atomized, then purged, leaving intransigent governments more efficiently in place. Moreover, while this kind of regime can probably persist in many national settings, it is especially durable in divided ones. Here, semidemocracy enables some elites to remain ascendant over others; indeed, their social constituents insist on it. Further, while semidemocracy can help stabilize the uneven postures of elites and
constituents, causality flows more strongly from these elites and constituents to semidemocracy.

Core linkages between elites and constituents involved the PAP and the middle class in Singapore, the UMNO and most of the ethnic Malay community in Malaysia, and the military and some rural groups in Thailand. The character of these constituencies evolved within their respective settings, prompting core elites to modulate their appeals over time. The PAP thus experimented continuously with devices to stimulate middle class interest, while the UMNO turned gradually from peasants to urban Malays. Thai military elites tried to overcome long legacies of distrust by appealing to peasants through new development schemes and mass movements. While funneling state benefits to their own constituents, these core elites identified some rival sets of linkages, then discriminated publicly against them. The PAP weakened labor leaders and workers and shunned the country’s disembodied bourgeoisie. The UMNO excluded the Chinese community, most clearly through the NEP’s quotas on university placement, executive hiring, and equity ownership. Thai military elites denigrated “big” capitalists” and “unprincipled” politicians, though they remained ambivalent toward the middle class of Bangkok. State benefits were thus highlighted to heighten support for core elites.

At the same time, core elites avoided or drew back from open rupture with subordinate elites and constituents. Indeed, they maintained a skewed equilibrium that in two cases amounted to improvements in earlier relations. In Singapore the PAP had warred ruthlessly against the leaders of opposition parties and labor unions during the 1960s, finally jailing them under Operation Cold Store. But while later perpetuating class divisions, it also sought to limit tensions, claiming to dissolve class consciousness in open meritocracy. The PAP favored the middle class, but without alienating other classes to the point of political violence or industrial conflict. In this same spirit, though with less skill, Thai military elites bettered their relations with subordinate elites in 1978–88. They showed greater appreciation for business people and a grudging tolerance for politicians, even as they loudly maligned these categories. In contrast, Malaysia slipped from unified elite relations before 1969. More clearly than in the other countries, Malaysia illustrated the limits placed on elites by constituents. Malaysia’s political record showed also, however, that elites can buffer or even restore consensus. While many ethnic Chinese were driven to migrate abroad in the mid 1970s when the NEP was implemented most zealously, today Malay and Chinese elites interact easily, especially in business. In sum, in all three countries core elites raised tensions in ways that energized their own support, without going so far as to risk elite disunity and social disorder.

Finally, the elite relations and constituent linkages that produced semidemocratic regimes reinforced prior patterns. In all three countries core elites restricted liberal participation by social organizations—ignoring them, repressing them, erecting rival
“fronts,” or coopting them through corporatist channels and patrimonialist networks. PAP elites were most innovative, first restricting liberal participation, then placating middle class constituents through tightly monitored side channels. UMNO elites tolerated much freer social organizing, but then sponsored their own organizations to draw off Malay support. Thai military elites spun an eclectic web of restraints in order to secure their rural followings. But these core elites all went even further, pushing past “ideal-type” semidemocracy in order to tinker with electoral contestation. The PAP contrived multimember districts and “false” oppositions and concentrated state power in the PAP executive committee. The UMNO used district malapportionment and short campaign periods to weaken opposition, especially non-Malay, parties. It then shunted vital contestation into its own internal party elections and delivered state power to the party’s supreme council. The Thai military checked the activities of elected politicians through its control over the senate. Most contestation was waged through military intrigues based on academy class years, while state power was lodged in military and bureaucratic arenas.

The key feature of semidemocracy, separating it from semiauthoritarianism, is the containment of liberal participation more than electoral contestation. Rival social constituencies are thus given few venues in which autonomously to bridge their differences, and their vertical orientations are preserved. In these circumstances, elections give the constituents of core elites an outlet through which regularly to declare their support. In turn, subordinate elites and constituents are at least able to vent grievances, though their participation also helps to confirm the freeness of support for the government. These semidemocratic elections are useful in other ways. They enable core elites peacefully to compare their respective levels of support. For example, they smoothed the duel between Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong. They also enable elites to paint their regimes as faithful representatives of regional belief systems. In sum, regular elections in semidemocracies have more than formal importance.

But what are the prospects now for fuller democracy in Singapore and Malaysia, as well as more stable democracy in Thailand, especially as rapid socioeconomic development continues? This discussion is best begun from the top. While elites, constituents, and regimes are deeply intertwined, the dynamic they produce, like a sideweighted ball, wobbles loosely along courses negotiated by elites. On this score, one finds little enthusiasm for democracy among PAP and UMNO elites, especially in its “Western” or “liberal” forms. And military elites in Thailand, though having recently withdrawn to the barracks, seem not to have abandoned old notions about their rightful place in politics. Thus, while it would doubtless be costly for them to mount another coup, they may calculate one day that it is costlier still to stand by while their benefits are withdrawn and their honor besmirched. Nor is it clear that social constituents offer any firmer grounding for democracy in these countries. While middle class populations seek access to state power for themselves, they will not risk
the gains they have made by demanding any grander inclusion of factory workers and peasants. Similarly, even if some elements of the bourgeoisie, after a critical stage of state-led growth, call for liberalization of the economy, many others still depend on state licenses and contracts, thus deterring them from opposing governments publicly. In short, though Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand lack the large landholding classes that have been spotlighted as the most serious roadblock to democracy,69 the propertied bourgeoisie and coopted middle class may rise partly to fill that role, showing annoyance over petty censorship and corruption, to be sure, but hardly spearheading the empowerment of mass electorates.

Thus, in Singapore one can not envision socioeconomic development’s reaching the point where the governing party, the state apparatus, and the middle class constituency—nearly coterminous entities—are prised neatly apart in institutional balance and accountability.70 Indeed, how much more developed can Singapore become? In Malaysia, it is equally difficult to see how development will ease ethnic antagonisms; while in some ways they enable society to resist the state, in other ways they lay society bare to state manipulation. This picture is muddied further by the class tensions that will doubtless emerge in Malaysia, sooner dividing each ethnic community against itself than inspiring any cross-ethnic plea for democracy. Finally, one recalls that in Thailand the middle class welcomed the military’s overthrow of Chatichai’s democratically elected government in 1991, that corporate executives were as ready to join Suchinda’s cabinet during 1992 as they had been Chatichai’s, and that even after “black May” and the country’s redemocratization “satanic” parties have blocked constitutional amendments in the national assembly in an effort to perpetuate military influence in the senate and rural areas.71 There are good reasons, then, for doubting the stability of Thailand’s democracy.

In sum, these sample half-way houses in Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand display much political and structural soundness. They thus deserve far more attention in the debate over transitions to democracy. They may help also to illuminate some newer puzzles of consolidation. And because these semidemocracies are located so prominently in Southeast Asia, overlooking unstable democracies on one side and stable authoritarian ones on the other, they permit those who study the region to enter the debate more fully.

NOTES


2. In pseudodemocracies, in contrast to semidemocracies, opposition parties have been so deeply crippled (as in New Order Indonesia and New Society Philippines) or prohibited outright (as in Vietnam) that all competitiveness has been squeezed from the electoral process. For brief discussions of pseudodemocracy, see Larry Diamond, Juan J. Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds., Comparing

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12. Pinkney, p. 121.


15. Ibid., p. 22.


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26. “Non-confrontational, if not harmonious, labour-management relations may be said to have been achieved in Singapore by the end of the 1970s.” Chris Leggett, “Singapore’s Industrial Relations in the 1990s,” in Rodan, ed., pp. 119, 126.
36. Safeguards for Chinese business activities are contained in article 153, section 9 of the Malaysian constitution.
45. New Straits Times, Nov. 7, 1993, pp. 1, 3.

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53. Likhit, p. 209.


58. Keyes, p. 102.


60. Laothamatas, p. 452.


64. Hirsch, p. 34.


66. Keyes, p. 100.

67. Examining the military’s charges against Chatichai, Duncan McCargo concludes that they amounted “to essentially the same complaint: that the Chatichai government had sought to strengthen the power of parliament at the expense of the army’s institutional interests.” Duncan McCargo, “Thailand’s Democracy: The Long Vacation,” Politics, 12 (1990), 5.

68. One detects, however, that the “theoretical optimism” that marked the literature on transitions is giving way to some anxiety in the writings on consolidation. Giuseppe Di Palma, To Craft Democracies (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 1. Guillermo O’Donnell laments that, whether democratization has been carried out from above or below, it now risks lapsing back into democradura through “slow” or “sudden death.” O’Donnell, “Transitions, Continuities, and Paradoxes,” p. 19.
69. Rueschemeyer et al., p. 58.
70. “Even though the antidemocratic legislation is still in place, the people are not in a hurry to change the government.” Chua Beng Huat, “Beyond Formal Strictures: Democratization in Singapore,” Asian Studies Review, 17 (July 1993), 106.