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# Political Regimes and the 'War on Terror' in Southeast Asia

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## Abstract

The U.S.-led 'war on terror' has been depicted as necessary to protect human security and the values of democracy. But what are the implications for political regimes in Southeast Asia – a region commonly referred to as the 'second front' in the war against terror? In particular, what does the new geopolitics mean for authoritarian regimes and those forces attempting to entrench more democratic systems? This paper examines developments in Singapore and Malaysia, to argue that the war on terror is providing new opportunities to consolidate or revive authoritarianism, with the potential to exacerbate rather than resolve underlying conflicts in the region.

## Introduction

In East and Southeast Asia, the fear of communism during the Cold War helped facilitate a range of political regimes, with few in the liberal democratic mould. In fact, authoritarian regimes, some of them quite brutal – as in Indonesia under Soeharto, in South Korea under Park Chung-hee and in Thailand under a succession of military leaders – were encouraged by Western powers, so long as they promoted political stability, were anti-communist, and protected the development of economic systems that were broadly capitalist. However, the end of the Cold War represented a watershed. US foreign policy security pre-occupation gave way to a more aggressive and focused expansion of international capitalism that was less tolerant of obstacles to capital mobility.[\[2\]](#) In this context, economic regimes in East and Southeast Asia that stood in the way of the neo-liberal ideal came under increased scrutiny and Western support for authoritarian political regimes was more difficult to rationalize.[\[3\]](#)

The advent of another watershed, the Asian financial and economic crisis in 1997, introduced new conflicts. It generated confident neo-liberal attacks on 'Asian capitalism', the developmental state and authoritarian regimes. These assaults came from both within and beyond the region and involved a conjuncture of forces for economic and political liberalism, sometimes intersecting with each other's reform agendas but not always. As neo-liberals saw it, the crisis had demonstrated the need for a convergence towards the same institutional arrangements of the advanced capitalist economies.[\[4\]](#) Yet while political liberals seized on the crisis as evidence of a positive functional link between liberal civil societies and sustainable, advanced capitalist market systems[\[5\]](#), economic liberals did not target authoritarianism *per se* for reform. The principal targets for these critics were regimes identified as 'crony capitalist' or where rent seeking was identified as endemic.

Arguably the aftermath of September 11 – the so-called 'war on terror' – represents another important watershed, altering the contexts within which the respective struggles to advance and resist economic and political liberalism across the region are likely to take place. Certainly crucial questions are raised by the war on terror. For instance, does it mean the subordination of the neo-liberal revolution to security imperatives? Or is the scale and nature of the US

response to the events of September 11, particularly the invasion of Iraq, part of the global struggle over neo-liberalism, as Harvey[6] and Lafer[7] argue? And what are the implications for political regimes in the region? Which domestic interests and forces are likely to be advantaged by the new security climate? Will authoritarian regimes be more or less difficult to reproduce in the context of the war on terror?

These questions are difficult to separate, but the focus here is principally on the implications of the war on terror for two authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia: Singapore and Malaysia.[8] It will be argued that various political elites in the region have seized on the new security climate in an attempt to consolidate and extend the obstacles to political pluralism and to embellish or update the ideological rationalisation of authoritarian practices. This includes the expansion or consolidation of official powers of detention and surveillance, but extends to other measures that also have a resonance with the Cold War period, such as the US's linking preferential trade access to security. US Trade Representative Robert Zoellick's[9] blunt declaration that his government was ready to extend free-trade initiatives to 'can-do' Asian countries has provided both an incentive and reward for a range of measures curbing free expression and political competition in these countries.

## Singapore

The political regime in Singapore is authoritarian in that it systematically blocks political competition with the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) and obstructs an independent civil society. However, the means by which this is achieved have changed over time, with increasing emphasis on administrative and legalistic means of repression on the one hand and expanded structures of political cooption on the other. The ideological justification for Singapore's virtual one-party state has also been dynamic, with culturalist notions playing a bigger role from the late 1980s.[10] Among the significances of the war on terror for the political regime in Singapore, the ideological dimension is critical. The PAP has harnessed the war on terror to a synthesis and updating of core themes rationalising a variety of existing social and political controls, as well as the extension of others. The Singapore government has also benefited considerably from the US rewarding members of 'coalition of the willing' with trade deals.

## Rewards to Partners in the War on Terror

Singapore has been a strong US defence and security ally throughout the Cold War and beyond – including at times when others in the region were becoming more wary about too close an alliance. When US forces were withdrawn in the early 1990s from the Clark Air Base and the Subic Naval Base in the Philippines, for example, the Singapore government offered US forces access to military facilities in the city-state. More recently, Singapore developed the largest dock in the region, designed specifically to accommodate and support US aircraft carriers. However, in the wake of 11 September, the actions of Singapore's authorities quickly impressed the US – in a region described as 'the second front in the war on terror' – with an unqualified preparedness to root out suspected terrorists from within and to support the US in international fora on security issues.

Since late 2001, authorities in Singapore have detained or placed restriction orders on around 50 people for suspected terrorist activities. In December 2001, 15 suspected terrorists were arrested,[11] averting an alleged plot to bomb embassies and commercial interests of the US and other Western countries. This was at a time when the US was having difficulty getting other governments in the region to fully co-operate in combating terrorism. Subsequently, the Singapore government took measures to curb the capacity for money laundering and financial transactions facilitative of terrorism. It also arrested a further 21 suspected terrorists in August 2002.[12] In October 2003, President Bush and then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong jointly announced a Framework Agreement for the Promotion of Strategic Cooperation Partnership in Defense and Security. This would expand bilateral cooperation in counter-terrorism, counter-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, joint military exercises and training, policy dialogues and defence technology.[13]

The closeness of Singapore's co-operation with the US in the fight on terror was further reflected in the opening in the city-state of a legal attaché office of the F.B.I. Moreover, the Singapore government provided strong support for the passage of United Nations Resolution 1441 and, eventually, the invasion of Iraq. As a member of the 'coalition of the willing', Singapore made available transport and equipment support in Iraq as well as police and health care workers to assist with reconstruction. It also allowed US aircraft to fly over Singapore air space and to use Singapore's military bases during the war.

Thus, leading up to and beyond the signing of the United States-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (USSFTA) in early 2003, the alignment between the respective governments on security matters went from strength to strength. The USSFTA had first been agreed to in principle as early as late 2000. However, negotiations became protracted, with critical US attention focussing on Singapore's government-linked-companies (GLCs) – which dominate the commanding heights of the domestic economy – and the governance mechanisms that shore up the GLCs and militate against a level economic playing field. The Singapore government's steadfast refusal to give ground on its right to impose capital controls in the event of an economic crisis was also a stumbling block.

The issues at stake here were not simply economic. The vast economic and social reach of the GLCs, and an equally important array of statutory bodies, is integral to the political economy of the authoritarian regime in Singapore. Ultimately, the capacities for political reward and punishment are affected by the control over resources embodied in these institutions. However, the dynamics of the deliberations altered after 11 September 2001. From this point on, the willingness in Washington to conclude a deal intensified and took just a few months to be complete. It became the first such accord by the U.S. with any Asian country.[\[14\]](#)

Crucially, the security context meant that the major sticking point in negotiations towards USSFTA – the Singapore government's insistence on the right to impose capital controls in the event of a crisis – was one that the US was prepared to concede new ground on. The US Treasury had consistently taken a hard line on the need for provisions to 'ensure that US investors have the right to transfer funds into and out of the host country using a market rate of exchange'.[\[15\]](#) However, after 11 September the Americans settled for an agreement under which both countries guaranteed investors free transfer into and out of both countries, but which also gave Singapore the right to restrict capital flows via the Monetary Authority of Singapore.[\[16\]](#) Although the agreement also contained a number of provisions intended to introduce a more level playing field for competing with GLCs, they were also modest, were not all tied down to clearly defined or tightly scheduled reforms, and are unlikely to fundamentally reduce the power of GLCs within the domestic market.[\[17\]](#)

Emphasis on the security dimension of US-Singapore relations was a feature of the lobbying in the US by business interests associated with investment and trade between the two countries, not least from the USSFTA Business Coalition. The right-wing Heritage Foundation's political campaigning for the deal also highlighted security arguments.[\[18\]](#) This resonated with US politicians. When asked whether the expeditious conclusion amounted to a reward for Singapore's support for the US war in Iraq, Congress Republican Representative Pete Sessions responded: 'Singapore supported us not only on the day of the terrorist attacks, but has since been very involved in our war on terror'. He added: 'Countries which are our friends are those who will continue to reap the rewards of a closer relationship'.[\[19\]](#)

The security-conscious mood in the US during the negotiations of the USSFTA meant, however, that attempts by the Singapore government's human rights critics to influence debate were ineffectual. Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) secretary-general, Chee Soon Juan's efforts in particular to raise such issues aroused little interest among US politicians.[\[20\]](#) The considerable resources and networks of the Business Coalition and other supporters of a rapid conclusion to the agreement also helped ensure such questions were marginalised.

## **Bolstering Repressive Apparatus**

Not surprisingly, the war on terror has been utilised by the Singapore government to consolidate and extend various repressive legislation. This includes the controversial Internal Security Act (ISA), which enables indefinite detention

without trial. In the past it has been used to silence the government's political adversaries,<sup>[21]</sup> although since the late 1980s this technique has given way to the use of defamation and libel suits through the courts.<sup>[22]</sup> Nevertheless, some opposition groups in Singapore had, prior to 11 September, sought to make the repeal of the ISA a major public issue. Now the government was to demonstrate how swiftly it was able to tackle terrorism via the ISA to deflect such calls.

Security concerns were also used to justify amendments in November 2003 to the Computer Misuse Act empowering authorities to take pre-emptive action against 'cyberterrorism'.<sup>[23]</sup> The amendment, carrying sentences of up to three years' jail and a maximum fine of S\$10,000, gives authorities extensive powers to scan the Internet and make arrests in anticipation of possible security threats. The likeness to the ISA prompted criticisms from opposition groups, with the SDP's Chee describing the law as 'another disguised attempt by the ruling party to control the use of the Internet by Singaporeans and to curtail the spread of discussion and dissent in Singapore's cyberspace'.<sup>[24]</sup>

The immediate background to this accusation by Chee included a directive in January 2002 by the Singapore Broadcasting Authority to a group calling itself 'Voice of the Singapore Muslim Community' to register as a political organisation to continue its seven-month old web site, Fateha.com. The site contained a press release by Zulfikar Muhamad Shariff criticising the Singapore government's alignment with the US and for having 'trivialised the concerns of the Muslim community for too long'.<sup>[25]</sup> He also called for the detainees under the ISA to be brought to trial.<sup>[26]</sup> Zulfikar subsequently found himself under police investigations for postings on the web site relating to: the appointment of Ho Ching (wife of the then Deputy Prime Minister and now the Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong) to the state investment holding company Temasek; the banning of Muslim headscarves in schools; and the performance of the minister-in-charge of Muslim affairs.<sup>[27]</sup> With the spectre of charges for criminal defamation – carrying the prospect of up to two years' jail – Zulfikar fled Singapore to reside in Australia, claiming he had no confidence in the independence of Singapore's courts.<sup>[28]</sup> Arguably it was Zulfikar's challenge to the PAP's policies and preparedness to question the system of governance rather than his threat to the peace and security of Singapore that accounted for the authorities' actions against him.

The confrontation with Fateha.com and Zulfikar's experience highlights the problematic and structural nature of the PAP's brand of multiculturalism. As Rahim<sup>[29]</sup> persuasively argues and documents, despite absolute economic gains, ethnic Malays continue to be politically, economically and educationally marginalised relative to the dominant ethnic Chinese communities. This is why they have historically constituted a disproportionate percentage of the non-PAP vote. Government attempts to limit conflict over the relationship between ethnicity and socio-economic distribution include: ethnic quotas for Housing Development Board flats accommodating over 80 per cent of the population, diluting the electoral impact of organised Malay opponents; and state-sponsored ethnic community self-help groups such as Mendaki and other pseudo-corporatist forms of political co-option.<sup>[30]</sup> However, as was suggested before the war on terror by the formation of the independent Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) in 1990 out of dissatisfaction with Mendaki, and its periodic friction with the government thereafter,<sup>[31]</sup> these measures have not completely worked. The accelerated pace of economic restructuring associated with Singapore's fuller embrace of globalisation – and the increasing structural unemployment and social inequality accompanying it – poses additional challenges for corporatist techniques of ethnic conflict management.

It must also be remembered that of the 15 initial arrests in December 2001 that the Singapore government claims foiled planned bombings in the city-state by three *Jl* cells, 13 detainees were Singaporean Malays. The government has argued that since this and subsequent detainees included small business, skilled and semi-skilled people it is religious and ideological extremism and not socio-economic factors that underlie the detainees' motivations.<sup>[32]</sup> However, upwardly mobile Malays are also more likely to encounter any subtle ethnic glass ceilings that exist, which could render them more vulnerable to ideological overtures from extremists. After all, the group was not exactly characterised by corporate high-flyers.<sup>[33]</sup>

In any case, the preparedness of the Singapore government to use the new security context as a rationale for limiting dissent, at times, even embarrassed US officials. US Ambassador to Singapore, Franklin Lavin, explained, for example, that the removal of peaceful protesters from outside the US Embassy in early 2003 who were demonstrating against US policy in Iraq, was unnecessary: 'I don't see why a group of people who want to stand in front of my Embassy and tell me they don't agree with a policy of my country should not be able to do so. The right of peaceful expression of opinion is an important element of a successful society'.<sup>[34]</sup> However, such sentiments were

overshadowed by strong endorsements from the US government of the regime's effectiveness in co-operating in the war on terror.

Importantly, the extensive powers of state surveillance and intimidation may be enhanced through an even more centralised and coordinated set of structures as a result of the war on terror. New agencies such as the Homefront Security Office and the Joint Counter Terrorism Centre are but part of a strategy of 'tighter networking and inter-agency co-ordination', according to the government's official document *The Fight Against Terror: Singapore's National Security Strategy*.<sup>[35]</sup> Indeed, it advocates 'a strategy that brings together the whole of Singapore – the Government, businesses, civil society and individuals'.<sup>[36]</sup>

## Ideological Replenishment

No less significantly, the emergence of the terrorist threat resonates powerfully with the PAP's long-fostered notion of the city-state as exceptionally vulnerable to sudden and unexpected adverse forces. This spectre has been alluded to over recent decades to rationalise highly elitist power structures. Its first manifestation was the ideology of 'survivalism' expounded by Lee Kuan Yew and colleagues in the immediate aftermath of separation from the Federation of Malaysia in the mid-1960s.<sup>[37]</sup> Subsequently, the need to be constantly alert to pre-empt and/or address unforeseen threats has become a pervasive and more generalised aspect of official ideology. As the impact of this ideology waned in the context of social and political stability and rising economic prosperity, it was supplemented by culturalist concepts. Against the background of collapsing authoritarian regimes in South Korea and Taiwan, Singapore's leaders were at the fore of propagating arguments about how Asians were culturally predisposed towards elitist political orders.<sup>[38]</sup>

The advent of the war on terror has presented the PAP with new opportunities to give expression to this ideology of imminent threat – or a politics of fear – and the necessity of powerful political elites. In *The Fight Against Terror*, for instance, the war on terror is incorporated into a broader narrative of state mythology. 'Our Singapore story is the account of how a small island-nation overcame its vulnerabilities and prospered, despite overwhelming odds', it reads, adding that: 'Like our forebears, all of us who call this island-nation home must work together to build a lasting legacy and write another shining chapter in the Singapore story'.<sup>[39]</sup> Historically, though, state rhetoric about 'working together' and 'political consensus' has been accompanied by the blunting of political pluralism through which genuine consensus might be arrived at. The government has also drawn on the war on terror to proclaim legitimacy for contentious policies. According to Defence Minister Teo Chee Hean, for example, Singapore enjoys social cohesion rather than ethnic and religious conflict because of: the ethnic quota for Housing Development Board flats accommodating over 80 per cent of the population; minority representation in parliament through group representation constituencies (GRCs); and state-sponsored ethnic community self-help groups.<sup>[40]</sup> However, some scholars have interpreted these same measures as involving forms of electoral engineering and state political cooption.<sup>[41]</sup>

## Malaysia

The authoritarian political regime in Malaysia is in certain respects comparable to that in Singapore. In particular, although it has the formal appearances of competitive politics, such as regular and free elections, these and broader political institutions are subject to a variety of constraints, including the suppression of civil society. However, civil society's suppression has never been as effective, with pockets of independent activism surviving and the internal cohesion of the ruling party subject to periodic strain by virtue of its' more complicated and dynamic alliances.<sup>[42]</sup>

Indeed, in the wake of the political crisis associated with former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's expulsion and imprisonment in 1998, civil society activism and mobilisation expanded significantly. This is precisely why blatantly repressive legislation such as the ISA, Official Secrets Act (OSA) and the Sedition Act has been more central to ruling *Barisan Nasional (BS)* coalition political controls in recent years. Following the events of 11 September 2001,



these measures have been given both a new rationale and a new respectability in influential international quarters. The war on terror also accentuated divisions within the opposition over Islam, assisting the government's recovery in the polls and, thus, the reproduction of the authoritarian regime.

## Conflict, Mobilisation and Reaction

Anwar's political demise produced widespread alienation among ethnic Malay supporters with the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), the lead party within the *BN*. This combined with, and bolstered, attempts already in train by assorted *BN* opponents and critics who had seized on the 1997-98 economic crisis to call for political change. Out of these circumstances emerged a *reformasi* movement.<sup>[43]</sup> Consequently, the late 1990s and early 2000s were marked by extensive mass political mobilisations and public protests in Malaysia. Against this background, in April 2001 authorities enforced the ISA to arrest 10 prominent figures – including Ezam Mohamad Nor, Youth Chief of the opposition *Keadilan* (National Justice Party). His stirring speeches around the country lambasting the government over government bailouts of UMNO cronies helped attract thousands of people to demonstrations.<sup>[44]</sup> After the detention of strategic *Keadilan* organisers and the fear it instilled in others reduced public demonstrations, an increasingly vocal student movement became a new focus of authorities. Thus, in July of 2001, two student leaders involved in anti-ISA protests were detained under the ISA.<sup>[45]</sup> However, the major targets of repressive measures by this time were organisers within *Parti Islam SeMalaysia* (*PAS*), which had made substantial electoral inroads into the traditional UMNO base among ethnic Malays in the 1999 general elections.<sup>[46]</sup>

First this involved a police campaign to end *ceramahs*, the numerous political-cum-religious nightly meetings within Muslim communities that were held throughout the country and extended to remote rural communities.<sup>[47]</sup> Then, at least six members of *PAS* were among the ten new detainees in another wave of ISA arrests in August 2001. Authorities claimed that they had netted a group of Islamic militants, allegedly belonging to *Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia* (Malaysian Mujahideen Group) or '*KMM*',<sup>[48]</sup> trained in Afghanistan by the Taliban and plotting terrorist activities in Malaysia. Whatever the security risks were, the government used the arrests to try and discredit *PAS* by depicting it as violent and dangerous.<sup>[49]</sup> Those arrested hotly contested the existence of any *KMM* while various human rights groups remained sceptical and called for the charges to be tested in court.<sup>[50]</sup> Following the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, the number held under the ISA in Malaysia increased significantly. By January 2004, around 90 suspected Islamic militants had been detained under the ISA.<sup>[51]</sup> <sup>[52]</sup>

A pretext now existed for further exploiting the ISA for political purposes. This issue had already been taken up with mixed success through the courts. In September 2002, a four-member Federal Court panel ruled on a Habeas Corpus case on behalf of five of the April 2001 detainees that the arrests under Section 73 of the ISA were made in bad faith and illegal.<sup>[53]</sup> Yet the Court also concluded that the detainees were, after the initial 60 days detention, being held under Section 8 of the ISA, leaving it powerless to call for the release of detainees. The court's decision seemed to confirm that blatant political abuses of the ISA were beyond effective legal challenge.<sup>[54]</sup> During 2004, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Nazri Abdul Aziz, reconfirmed that judicial reviews of detention orders were out of the question, claiming that the internal security minister would not have the 'courage' to arrest those suspected of threatening national security if this were possible.<sup>[55]</sup> Having previously been justified on the basis of the communist threat or the threat of racial riots, now the spectre of terrorism is deployed to justify the insulation of the ISA's application from scrutiny.

These and other repressive measures which put the brakes on the mass mobilisation of protest and generally impaired the organisational capacity of opposition parties were assisted by the war on terror context. However, Mahathir and his government also benefited politically from the public bickering between opposition groups that gathered momentum during 2001. This had reached a serious point prior to 11 September terrorist attacks in America, but deteriorated quickly thereafter. Later that month, the predominantly ethnic-Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP) walked out of the opposition coalition *Barisan Alternatif* over *PAS*'s insistence that Malaysia become an Islamic state. *PAS*'s subsequent call for a *jihad* (holy war) against the US served also to alienate non-Muslims and help UMNO leaders' attempts to cast the ruling coalition as one of Islamic moderation. Against the background of a string of political debacles for UMNO that year, now government depictions of *PAS* as the Taliban of Malaysia were resonating with the

electorate in by-elections .[\[56\]](#)· [\[57\]](#)

## A New Appreciation from Washington

Mahathir's uncompromising position on what he depicted as the pre-eminence of security matters was unequivocal. In July 2002 he observed that: 'The dilemma that the Malays and the people's of Malaysia face is whether we should in the name of democracy, allow the country to be destroyed or we ensure that people are not subjected to the point where they will use democracy to destroy democracy'.[\[58\]](#) It was the threat of Islamic extremism that Mahathir used to make his point, with *PAS* the unmistakable exemplar inferred in his warnings about how 'Malays are willing to vote and support a Party which advocates and practices violence'.[\[59\]](#)

This struck a chord in important places, as it was intended to. After all, the talk was delivered at a Harvard Club of Malaysia dinner. In the context of the US's global 'war on terrorism', Mahathir was now an ally and a force for Islamic moderation. A new appreciation of his authoritarian rule reflected in the formation of a Malaysia-America Friendship Caucus (also known as the Malaysia Trade, Security and Economic Cooperation Caucus) in the American Congress initiated by Pete Sessions, a Dallas business person and friend of President George W. Bush. According to Sessions: 'The caucus will assist in educating and informing other members of Congress and government officials about the benefits of a cooperative, anti-terrorist, pro-democracy, free trading, and pro-economic growth relationship with the country of Malaysia'.[\[60\]](#)

Despite the Malaysian government having been a critic of the US-led invasion of Iraq, it has been a significant ally in US counter-terrorism measures. Cooperation includes establishment of a Kuala Lumpur-based Southeast Asian counterterrorism centre, suggested by President Bush in October 2002, and military exercises conducted between the Malaysian Navy and 1,500 US Coast Guard personnel and sailors in July 2004. With Abdullah Badawi replacing Mahathir as Malaysia's Prime Minister in late 2003, relations between Washington and Kuala Lumpur appear to have only further improved. In May 2004, the US signed the trade and investment framework agreement that could lead to a bilateral free-trade agreement.

The shift in emphasis from the US government towards praise of the Malaysian government has been mirrored in other circles, including elements of the international media that had previously been at the fore of the attack on both crony capitalism and human rights abuses in Malaysia. An *Asian Wall Street Journal*[\[61\]](#) editorial in mid-July 2004 generously bestowed the virtues of the regime thus: 'The country is mainly Muslim, but it is also multireligious and multiethnic. Even more important, it has burnished its free-market credentials and has a working democracy where the military has always understood its role is to serve civilian leaders...Malaysia is an example to other Islamic nations of progressive Islam'. In the new security context, it seems, certain authoritarian regimes can assume model status for the containment of religious-inspired violence.

However, both the *BN*'s exploitation of the war on terror to attack *PAS* as an inherently violent and extremist organisation and the way this has contributed to the international credibility of the Malaysia government could have serious implications for conflict management. *PAS* has a history of operating constitutionally and adhering to formal democratic rules of political engagement. However, it is now being stigmatised and the war on terror is producing a climate that appears hostile to various forms of political Islam – or at least bestows new opportunities for authoritarian elites to determine and enforce definitions of Islamic extremism.[\[62\]](#) Yet excluding or discouraging participation in constitutional, and preferably democratic, political processes by Islamic political forces narrows the means for managing conflict in favour of coercion and may well even exacerbate conflict over the long term.

## Conclusion

The above account identifies various ways in which the context of the war on terror has given a new lease of life to, and expanded scope for, repressive legislations in Singapore and Malaysia. The opportunities for the repression of

political threats to the ruling parties have been increased, both by the security context and the enhanced state capacities to enforce these legislations. However, equally important is the revitalisation of state ideologies justifying the respective authoritarian regimes. Official accounts of why limiting the scope for challenging or scrutinising the exercise of state power by ruling elites in Singapore and Malaysia is necessary have required periodic revisions and refinements. Early ideas about the threat of communism and about the rudimentary stage of economic development not affording the 'luxury' of a political free-for-all, for instance, lost currency by the late 1980s. In this climate, culturalist notions about Asian predispositions towards hierarchical and elitist politics were introduced to pre-empt more concerted pressures for democratic change. This ideology, however, has remained problematic. Against this background, the threat of terrorism is opportune for the custodians and champions of authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia – both within and beyond the region.

Indeed, just as during the Cold War democratic forces in Southeast Asia and elsewhere were abandoned by many governments of liberal democratic countries in the West, there is a very real risk that a similar process is unfolding now. So long as leaders of such governments view the war on terror as principally a struggle in the region between fundamentalist and progressive forms of Islam, then it becomes potentially more difficult for the causes of democratic forces to attract external attention and support. Meanwhile, as we have seen above, an opening is created for authoritarian but secular governments to earn new status and privileges in the war on terror. The region has a recent history of modernising elites embracing capitalism, containing religious radicalism and simultaneously curtailing political pluralism.

An important difference in the unfolding war on terror from the Cold War security alignments, however, is the stronger role of shared values between governments from authoritarian and liberal democratic regimes. Declarations by Western government leaders about the threat terrorism poses to 'our way of life' may be vague, but given the composition of the 'coalition of the willing' values of democracy, social justice or human rights would not appear to be definitive of that 'way of life'. Modernising authoritarian elites that embrace a mixture of market values and social conservatism can find numerous points of ideological intersection with the likes of George Bush, John Howard and Tony Blair, much of which has an anti-pluralist basis and eschews the politics of interest and class in favour of culturally-defined notions of community.<sup>[63]</sup>

Whether this is politically sustainable is another matter. The embrace of capitalism and its revolutionising effects in Singapore and Malaysia, as elsewhere, brings with it conflict management challenges as the respective economies are increasingly subjected to the forces of global competition and pressures towards social inequalities. It is not inconceivable that the rewards of greater trade liberalisation vis-à-vis the US for co-operation in the war on terror will accelerate these domestic political challenges. This is not to argue against trade liberalisation, or indeed global economic integration more generally. However, it raises the question of whether in the medium to long-term the many and varied conflicts and tensions invariably associated with major economic and social transformations will be exacerbated rather than defused by authoritarian rule. This is no less an issue of security than the immediate task of nullifying groups and individuals committed to political violence. Any effective address or management of underlying conflict, though, requires institutions facilitating political representation and engagement. Pronouncements of moral absolutism and reaffirmations of cultural values will not provide this.

## Endnotes

[1] Thanks to Kanishka Jayasuriya for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

[2] US dominance within multilateral organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, as well as through the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade/World Trade Organisation (WTO) and other institutions was used to exert pressure on the domestic economic policy of individual states to limit those obstacles. S. Gill, 'New Constitutionalism, Democratisation and Global Political Economy', *Pacifica Review*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1998, pp. 23-38.

[3] J. S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York, Public Affairs, 2004.



- [4] S. Soederberg, 'On the contradictions of the New International Financial Architecture: another procrustean bed for emerging markets?', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 23, no.4, 2002, pp. 607-20.
- [5] S. Lohr, 'Business, Asian Style: A Revaluating of Values; Some Say Market Collapse Shows Democracy is Key to Growth, After All', *New York Times*, 7 February, 1998, p. 9.; J. Rudolph, 'The Political Causes of the Asian Crisis', in U. Johannsen, J. Rudolph and J. Gomez (eds), *The Political Dimensions of the Asian Crisis*, Singapore, Select Books and Friedrich Naumann Foundation, 2000, pp. 13-94.
- [6] D. Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- [7] G. Lafer, 'Neoliberalism by Other Means: The "War on Terror" at Home and Abroad', *New Political Science*, vol. 26 No. 3, 2004, pp. 323-46.
- [8] For an address of the broader questions pertaining to the relationship between neo-liberalism and the 'war on terror', see G. Rodan & K. Hewison, 'Closing the Circle? Globalization, Conflict and Political Regimes', *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2004, pp. 383-404.
- [9] Quoted in S. W. Crispin, 'Safety First', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 30 October, 2003, p.17.
- [10] G. Rodan, 'State-society relations and political opposition in Singapore' in G. Rodan (ed.), *Political Oppositions in Industrialising Asia*, London: Routledge, 1996 pp. 95-127.; G. Rodan, 'The internationalization of ideological conflict: Asia's new significance', *The Pacific Review*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1996, pp. 328-51.
- [11] The Singapore government alleges that 13 of these people were members of *Jemaah Islamiah*. See Chua Lee Hoong, '13 suspected terrorists to be detained 2 years', *Straits Times*, cited at sg\_daily@yahoo.com on 11 January, 2002.
- [12] The Singapore government alleges that 19 of these were members of *Jemaah Islamiah*. For discussions of the extent and nature of terrorist activities in Singapore and Southeast Asia more generally, see Kumar Ramakrishna and See Seng Tan (eds) *After Bali: The Threat of terrorism in Southeast Asia*, Singapore: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang University of Technology and World Scientific, 2004.; D. Wright-Neville, 'Dangerous dynamics: activists, militants and terrorists in Southeast Asia', *Pacific Review*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2004, pp. 27-46.; and B. Desker, 'The Jemaah Islamiyah', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2003, pp. 489-507.
- [13] A. Acharya, 'Waging the "War on Terror": Singapore's Responses and Dilemma', Paper prepared for the *Singapore Perspectives 2004*, Institute of Policy Studies, Singapore, 13 January, 2004, p. 4.
- [14] During approximately the same period, a Singapore-Australia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) was also signed and it too gathered rapid momentum following September 11.
- [15] U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 'Singapore FTA — Almost Concluded — With Free Flow of Capital Caveat', 2003, online at: <http://www.uschamber.com/international/regional/asia/0212aisingfta.htm> (Accessed 12 January).
- [16] The agreement doesn't prevent a country from imposing controls, but it does require compensation for US investors where restrictions that 'substantially impede transfers' incur damages. This provision is based on the framework used in the US-Chile FTA.
- [17] See G. Rodan, 'International Capital, Singapore's State Companies, and Security', *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2004, pp. 479-99.
- [18] Lee Siew Hua, 'Security the Focus of Talks with Bush', *Straits Times*, 2 May, 2002, p. 2.
- [19] Quoted in J. Leinen, 'S'pore Firms Set to Reap S\$200m a Year from US Trade Pact', *Business Times*, 8 May, 2003, p. 1-2.

[20] Chee Soon Juan, Interview, Singapore, 11 July, 2003.

[21] In the case of Chia Thye Poh, he spent 22 years and six months in prison and another nine-and-a-half years under various forms of incarceration without ever having been taken to court. Prior to the 2001 arrests, though, no Singaporean had been jailed under the ISA since 1989.

[22] F. T. Seow, *Beyond Suspicion? The Singapore Judiciary*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004 forthcoming.

[23] Senior Minister of State for Law and Home Affairs, Ho Peng Kee, explained that: 'Instead of a backpack of explosives, a terrorist can create just as much devastation by sending a carefully engineered packet of data into computer systems which control the network of essential services, for example power stations' (quoted in *Reuters*, 'Singapore clamps down on hackers', 13 November, 2003, Online. Available at <http://www.ThinkCentre.org/article.cfm?ArticleID=229> (Accessed 19 November 2003)).

[24] Chee Soon Juan 'Crackdown on the Internet by the Singapore government', 12 November, 2003, cited at sdp2000@pacific.net.sg on 12 November 2003.

[25] Zulfikar Shariff Mohamad 'Terrorism and Singapore', press release, 19 January, 2002, Online. Available at <http://www.fateha.com> (Accessed 21 January, 2002).

[26] *Associated Press*, 'Al-Qaida Arrests Shock Singapore', 9 January, 2002.

[27] K. P. Tan, 'Crisis, Self-Reflection and Rebirth in Singapore's National Life Cycle', *Southeast Asian Affairs 2003*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003, pp. 244-6.

[28] G. Rodan, *Transparency and Authoritarian Rule in Southeast Asia: Singapore and Malaysia*, London: Routledge, 2004, p. 104.

[29] L. Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community*, Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1998.

[30] D. Brown, *Contemporary Nationalism*, London, Routledge, 2000.; D. Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia*, London, Routledge, 1994.

[31] Ahmad Osman, 'AMP drops idea for separate leaders', *Straits Times*, 23 December, 2000, p. 2.

[32] L. Lim, 'JI members: Not poor, not stupid, not marginalised', *Straits Times Weekly Edition*, 28 September 2002, p. 1.

[33] The occupations of detainees included condominium manager, dispatch driver, service engineer, printer, manager, technician and business person. Of the first 21 detainees, one person had a monthly income exceeding S\$5,000 per and two higher than S\$3,000, but 13 were on incomes below \$2,000 per month. See L. Lim, 'JI members'.

[34] Frank L. Lavin, "Building on Success: Adjoining the Singapore Model," remarks to Young Entrepreneurs Organization, 28 May 2003, Online. Available at <http://www.singapore.embassy.govt/speeches/2003/mag28.shtml>.

[35] National Security Coordination Centre, *The Fight Against Terror: Singapore's National Security Strategy*, Singapore: National Security Coordination Centre, 2004, p.15.

[36] *ibid.*, p.16.

[37] Chan Heng Chee, *The Politics of Survival, 1965-1967*, Singapore, Oxford University Press, 1971.

[38] Rodan, 'The internationalization of ideological conflict: Asia's new significance'.

[39] National Security Coordination Centre, *The Fight Against Terror*, p. 66.

[40] *Straits Times*, 'We must show terrorists we won't be cowed', 31 July, 2004, p. H8.

[41] C. Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore*, Oxford, St Martin's Press, 1994.; Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, London, Routledge, 1995.

[42] Khoo Boo Teik, *Paradoxes of Mahathirism: An Intellectual Biography of Mahathir Mohamad*, Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1995.; Khoo Boo Teik, *Beyond Mahathir: Malaysian Politics and its Discontents*, London, Zed Press, 2003. ; H. Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia*, St. Leonard's, Allen and Unwin, 1996.; W. Case, *Politics in Southeast Asia: Democracy or Less*, London, Curzon, 2002.

[43] J. Hilley, *Malaysia: Mahathirism, Hegemony and the New Opposition*, London, Zed Books, 2001.

[44] L. Holland, 'Anwar's children: are Malaysians outraged? Well, not really', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 24 May, 2001, p. 34. Already Ezam had been charged in March with sedition for allegedly calling for mass demonstrations to topple the government by violent means through comments published in *Utusan Malaysia*. According to Ezam, though, he had been misquoted and referred only to peaceful protests against corruption and cronyism. Ezam declared that he would be taking legal action against *Utusan Malaysia* over the article (see Arf'eza A Aziz, 'Ezam to sue Utusan Malaysia over "seditious" article', *Malaysiakini*, 9 August, 2002).

[45] Anil Netto, 'Rights commission throws down the gauntlet', *Asia Times Online*, 4 August, 2001.

[46] The BN won 148 of the 193 seats, However, UMNO's share of the overall popular vote dropped from 36.5 per cent to 29.5 per cent and in the corresponding state elections, the government in the heartland ethnic Malay states of Terengganu and Kelantan was lost to PAS.

[47] Anil Netto, 'Rights commission throws down the gauntlet'.

[48] Aliran noted in a press statement expressing concern at the detentions that the authorities were inconsistent in their declarations of what 'KMM' actually stood for. First it was expressed as 'Kumpulan Mujihideen Malaysia' but then 'Kumpulan Militan Malaysia'. See Aliran 'Release all political prisoners. Abolish the ISA. Respect civil liberties and human rights', Media Statement, Aliran Online, 26 September, 2002, Online, Available <http://www.Malaysia.net/aliran/ms/2002/0410.html> (accessed 28 September 2002).

[49] Prime Minister Mahathir was quick to observe that: 'We believe there was PAS influence among the members [of KMM]. There are party members who are extreme and feel that the democratic process is too slow or did not help them. They are happier using violence to topple the government' (quoted in J. Roberts, 'Islamic party in Malaysia targeted in latest government crackdown', *World Socialist Web Site*, 18 August, 2001, Online, Available <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/aug2001/mal-a18.shtml> (accessed 23 August 2001)).

[50] One of the detainees, Zainon Ismail, later told a Malaysian Human Rights Inquiry that: 'The KMM is the product of the police, the real leader of the KMM is police chief Norian Mai. I am just a victim' (quoted in Leong Kar Yen, 'KMM suspects put media on trial in Suhakam inquiry', *Malaysiakini*, 19 June, 2002, Online, Available at <http://www.malaysiakini.com> (Accessed 23 June 2002)).

[51] *Malaysiakini*, 'Gov't extends detention of Sept 11 terror suspect', 29 January, 2004.

[52] By June 2002 there were 62 known detainees accused of being KMM members. This included 16 lecturers at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) who were among 23 detained between December 2001 and January 2002. In August 2002, authorities detained a further 21 alleged members of a regional-wide and al-Qaeda-connected *Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)*. *JI* was said to be plotting to bring about the overthrow of the Malaysian government as the first step in realising a larger Islamic state that also covered Singapore, Indonesia, the southern Philippine island of Mindanao and Brunei.

[53] Chief Justice Tun Mohamed Dzaiddin Abdullah's report observed that the *reformasi* dissidents had been detained

not on any grounds to do with national security but because of their political activities.

[54] In another controversy in 2002 over the ISA, Nasharuddin Nasir was released from detention under the ISA after succeeding with a habeas corpus application to the High Court, which found that he had been wrongfully detained. However, ten minutes after his release he was rearrested and served with a fresh detention order. Malaysia's de facto Law Minister, Datuk Rais Yatim projected a tightening up of the ISA to curb judicial scrutiny of preventive detention cases (L. Lau 'KI to curb judicial scrutiny of preventive-detention cases', *Straits Times Interactive*, 14 November, 2002, Online, Available <http://www.straits-times.asia1.com.sg/> (accessed 17 November 2002)).

[55] P. Puah, 'Why ISA must not be subjected to review: Nazri', *Malaysiakini*, 27 July, 2004.

[56] P. Martinez, 'Malaysia in 2001: an interlude in consolidation', *Asian Survey*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2002, pp. 133-8.

[57] In July 2001, the BN won the by-election for the seat of Likas in the state of Sabah, where the government incumbent was returned with a substantially increased vote. The in September the BN managed to win 60 of the 62 seats in elections in the state of Sarawak, recapturing seats lost in the 1999 elections.

[58] Mahathir Mohamad, 'The new Malay dilemma', The Harvard Club of Malaysia Dinner. Kuala Lumpur, 29 July, 2002. Available email: [sg\\_daily-owner@yahoo.com](mailto:sg_daily-owner@yahoo.com) (Accessed 5 August 2002).

[59] Mahathir Mohamad, 'The new Malay dilemma'.

[60] Lee Siew Hua, 'Security the Focus of Talks with Bush', *Straits Times*, 2 May, 2002, p. 2.

[61] *Asian Wall Street Journal*, 'Malaysia's Offer', Editorial, 23-25 July, 2004, p. A7.

[62] Khoo Boo Teik, *Beyond Mahathir: Malaysian Politics and its Discontents*.

[63] The intersections between authoritarian leaders' social conservatism and that of Bush and Howard might be more apparent than for Blair. However, Blair not only chose to deliver his January 1996 speech about the 'stakeholder economy' in Singapore, a society in which he clearly believed some progress had been made towards this end, but he prefaced his speech with glowing praise of Lee Kuan Yew's philosophy. See T. Blair, 'The Singapore Speech', 7 January, 1996. Online, available at:

<<http://www.psa.org.nz/library/psa/02%20partnership%20for%20quality%20materials/tony%20blair%20-%20the%20singapore%20speech%201996.doc>> (accessed 25 October, 2004); John Pilger, 'British Prime Minister Tony Blair's press relations', *New Statesman*, 9 August, 1999. Online, available at: <[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0FQP/is\\_4448\\_128/ai\\_59519323](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FQP/is_4448_128/ai_59519323)> (accessed 25 October, 2004). More importantly, Blair's 'Third Way' and moral rhetoric also steers political debate towards values choices, while concepts of 'communitarianism' have proven attractive to Blair and Asian authoritarian leaders ahead of a politics of representation that gives open expression to conflicts of interest.