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Bringing Ideology in: Differing Oppositional Challenges to Hegemony in Singapore and Malaysia

This article explores the nature of the main opposition parties to the incumbent hegemonic regimes in Malaysia and Singapore. I argue that the differing characters of these opposition parties should be considered. In Singapore, where there is no ideological challenge to the ruling party, I contend that even if the opposition takes over it will be the end of a hegemonic party but not hegemony. In Malaysia, the opposite is true. This article contributes to the literature on transition theory in two ways: (1) it recognizes the diversity of authoritarian regimes and enhances analyses of various authoritarian regimes by focusing on one type – hegemonic parties; and (2) it brings ideology into the reckoning by focusing on the nature of the opposition parties most likely to take over.

Keywords: democratization, hegemony, transition, Singapore, Malaysia, authoritarian

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN BY SCHOLARS ON THE PROCESS OF democratization and regime transition. Academics have extensively debated the causes of transition or liberalization of authoritarian regimes, different stages of democratization, and conditions under which democratizing regimes succeed (democratic consolidation) or fail. This article intends to contribute to this literature by focusing on democratization in a specific context: the challenge to hegemonic-party regimes in Malaysia and Singapore. Authoritarianism is diverse in practice, and this article aims to analyse a particular type of authoritarian regime (hegemonic parties).

Instead of discussing the causes and stages of democratization in Malaysia and Singapore, I focus on the nature of the opposition party

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which provides the strongest challenge to the incumbents. Differing characters of opposition parties would have different impacts on the democratization processes. The National Front (Barisan Nasional, BN) in Malaysia and the People's Action Party (PAP) in Singapore are the two longest-serving governments with uninterrupted rule in the world, and yet lately their dominance has been waning.[1] However, I posit that there is a significant difference in the decline of the two parties. In Malaysia, the opposition People's Pact (Pakatan Rakyat, PR) poses an ideological challenge to the ruling party, propagating a set of fundamental values that challenge the National Front's version of Malay-led multiracialism; whereas in Singapore, the Workers' Party (WP) does not differ from the People's Action Party in its core beliefs, and in fact challenges the People's Action Party on the latter's own terms. One could make the argument, then, that in Singapore, even if the People's Action Party ceases to be the ruling party and the Workers' Party takes over, it would be the end of a *hegemonic party*, but not the end of *hegemony* per se, because the successor party plays by the rules of the game set by its predecessor.[2] However, if the People's Pact takes over from the National Front, it would signify the end of a hegemonic party *and* hegemony, as the rules of the game would have to be altered significantly. Hegemony is defined as 'an order in which a certain way of life and thought is dominant, in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society in all its institutional manifestation'.[3] A hegemonic party refers to one that continually wins elections and allows other parties to exist, but only as subordinate parties (Sartori 1990: 327). The focus here is the presence or absence of an ideological challenge to an incumbent hegemonic party; this article attempts to contribute to the literature by taking the 'hegemony' in hegemonic parties seriously and by analysing the character of oppositional challenges in such political systems. While I will discuss the implications of the different challenges posed by the opposition on the democratization processes, this is not the main focus of the article and will only be discussed sparingly and in the conclusion.

This article is organized as follows. Firstly, I will briefly review the existing literature on transition theory and identify the gaps my study seeks to fill. Next, I will discuss the political systems, hegemonic ideologies and electoral trends in Malaysia and Singapore. Thirdly, I shall expound on my argument that the main opposition party in Singapore does not take on the People's Action Party on ideological

terms, while the opposite is true in Malaysia. I discuss the implications of this, before concluding.

HEGEMONIC PARTIES AND TRANSITIONS: A BRIEF REVIEW

The initial literature on transitions often depicted democratization as a linear, teleological process, and transition theorists assumed that most non-democracies were in the process of transition (Carothers 2002: 17). While earlier transition theories assumed authoritarianism to be monolithic (Geddes 1999), subsequent works acknowledged the diverse nature of authoritarian regimes and the need to recognize that each type could posit radically different democratic propositions. Linz and Stepan (1996) proposed a typology of authoritarian regimes consisting of four categories: authoritarianism, totalitarianism, post-totalitarianism and sultanism. While the attempt to deconstruct the notion of authoritarianism to account for a more nuanced understanding of transitions is commendable, the typology is problematic. The boundaries of what constitutes 'authoritarianism' are not carefully defined, while the categories 'post-totalitarianism' and 'sultanism' do not seem to apply to a significant number of cases (Snyder and Mahoney 1999).

Hadenius and Teorell (2007) devised a new typology which was highly useful in explicating transitions. Basing their categorization of authoritarian regimes on methods of maintaining political authority, they came up with the following regime-types: monarchies, military regimes and electoral regimes. More pertinently for this article, a sub-category under electoral regimes is the dominant party, whereby one single authoritarian party continues to dominate and rule in spite of the presence of elections. In addition, they argue this is the authoritarian regime most likely to transition to democracy. Numerous works have been written on the dominant party or hegemonic party regime. Levitsky and Way's (2010) seminal contribution on 'competitive authoritarian'[4] regimes discusses the conditions under which these regimes are likely to democratize, introducing the idea of Western linkage and leverage. Magaloni (2006: 20) argues that these regimes survive if they are able to co-opt significant segments of the populace and provide government transfers and redistribution benefits, on top of electoral fraud and strong economic performances. Gandhi (2008) too talks about the

establishment of nominally democratic institutions to perpetuate an authoritarian regime's dominance, since these institutions will induce some form of cooperation from society and have the ability to neutralize political opposition, by co-opting them into the legislature. Greene (2010) argues that sustained state monopoly over public resources would ensure that authoritarian parties would persist, and once parties fail to have such access, their dominance would be in jeopardy. Bunce and Wolchik (2010: 47) focus on the 'readiness' of the opposition to defeat the incumbents, stating that the 'successful defeat of authoritarians depended heavily on the extent to which oppositions and their allies were able to use novel and sophisticated strategies to maximize their chances for winning power'. While these authors tease out the different factors that cause dominant parties to endure or decline, one element has been neglected in their analyses: the existential nature (more than just electoral strategies) of the opposition. Just as scholars now agree that the nature of the *authoritarian regime* has to be properly understood in order to understand the process of transition, and that authoritarian regimes are not monolithic, I argue that the nature of the *opposition* has to be adequately discussed too, precisely because there exist different types of opposition parties in dominant one-party systems.

Brownlee (2007) argues that elite cohesion due to the institutionalization of parties ensures that authoritarian regimes survive. Interestingly, he uses Malaysia's ruling party as one of his positive cases. He builds upon O'Donnell and Schmitter's (1986: 19) theory, which asserts that 'there is no transition whose beginning is not the consequence – direct or indirect – of important divisions within the authoritarian regime itself'. A split between the 'hardliners' and 'softliners' of the regime will initiate liberalization. Yet the inadequacies of this prominent hypothesis have been exposed: Bratton and van de Walle (1997) analysed 42 African countries and argue that more often than not, democratization was initiated and enabled by the masses rather than disgruntled politicians or military leaders. While Brownlee limited his analysis to authoritarian party regimes, the analysis is still lacking in many regards: Malaysia's ruling party underwent a serious split in 1988, whereby the party almost disintegrated, and yet it managed to remain in power. In 2013, when there was no serious conflict between the ruling Malaysian elites, the party still lost the popular vote, even though it retained power.

For Slater (2012), Malaysia and Singapore are two strong states that could undergo democratization immediately, if the ruling parties so wished, and even if they do undergo this process, state strength would be retained. However, Slater does not take into account the different characters of the opposition to the establishment in the two countries. Many others have written about hegemonic parties, elections and transitions (Kaya and Bernhard 2013; Lindberg 2009; Reuter and Gandhi 2011; Scheiner 2006; Selolwane 2002; Solinger 2001; Svolik 2009). Most such works revolve around two central questions: whether elections serve as democratizing forces in hegemonic party regimes and/or under what conditions hegemonic parties would survive or fall, and these authors typically give more attention to authoritarian institutions.

Another collection of writings gives credence to the nature of opposition forces. Usually, these works are devoted to exploring two facets of oppositional elements in authoritarian regimes: firstly, whether the opposition is 'moderate' or 'radical', and secondly, if it is unified. Greene (2007) mentions that ideological imperatives motivate activists to support, join or form opposition parties in hegemonic regimes. O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986), as well as looking at the level of cohesion between the elites, argued that a transition to democracy would be smooth if the opposition was moderate, whereas a radical opposition would complicate the democratization process. Bermeo (1997) then argued against this hypothesis and, using the cases of Portugal and Spain, attempted to demonstrate that a 'radical' opposition was not necessarily an obstacle to democratization. Higher levels of radical mobilization ensured that the 'broom swept clean' and that a serious set of meaningful democratic reforms would be instituted after the changing of the guard. Bermeo (2003) states that the aversion to 'radical' opposition stems from a scepticism about the ability of the masses to make sound decisions all the time.

According to Slater (2012: 27), the opposition in Malaysia and Singapore has always been disunited and moderate because of state-led development. Significantly for this article, Weiss (2006) argues that the political opposition in Malaysia has been able to transcend ethnic boundaries and provide non-communal opposition to the National Front; Rodan (2009: 184) concurs with her assessment.

These authors have highlighted the salience of ideology in oppositional challenges to hegemonic regimes, and this article aims to build on these influential works. While all of them recognize the

importance of analysing the opposition, I contend that the opposition matters more than simply in terms of being 'unified' or 'moderate': rather, whether the opposition is ideologically different, or distant, from the incumbent matters. Whether 'radical' or 'moderate' methods are used is not as important; although both the Malaysian and Singaporean opposition are moderate, they have challenged their ruling parties in vastly different ways.

SINGAPORE AND MALAYSIA IN COMPARISON: HEGEMONIC IDEOLOGIES AND EMERGING TRENDS

The political systems and trajectories of Singapore and Malaysia share many characteristics, such that their authoritarian regimes are said to resemble no one else's, apart from each other (Slater 2012: 19). While there are regular elections in both countries, the quality of democracy is suspect because some substantive aspects of democracy are absent – such as freedom of media and information, and freedom of speech – and because draconian governing laws exist. Opposition parties and politicians are not allowed to compete on an equal footing with the ruling party: in Singapore, defamation lawsuits have been used by senior ruling elites against opposition politicians (Mutalib 2003), while in Malaysia the Internal Security Act (ISA), which allows for detention without trial, has been invoked against numerous opposition members (Mauzy 1988), and the legal troubles confronting current opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim are well documented.[5] Traditionally, both ruling parties have exercised institutional and ideological domination in their countries.

Recently there has been increasing evidence that the hegemonic reigns of the People's Action Party and the National Front are under threat. While the signs are more ominous for the National Front than for the People's Action Party, the opposition in Singapore is clearly gaining momentum as well. This led to the worst electoral performances for both parties in 2011 (Singapore) and 2013 (Malaysia). A more detailed look at each country is due at this point.

Malaysia

Malaysia is a multiracial society with the Bumiputera (indigenous people or 'sons of the soil') forming the majority with 67.4 per cent

of the population, Chinese constituting 26.4 per cent and Indians making up 7.3 per cent (Department of Statistics, Malaysia 2011). Bumiputeras are entitled to affirmative action and more state assistance, be it in educational or economic terms, by virtue of their indigeneity.[6] Malays form the bulk of the Bumiputeras, and discourses in the country are often framed in terms of Malay rights rather than Bumiputera rights. The minority Chinese have dominated the economy since independence.

Since independence in 1957, ethnicity has been the most significant cleavage and dominates political and social conversations. Malaysia's first ruling coalition, the Alliance, the predecessor to the National Front, explicitly campaigned on a particular version of a multiracial platform. In what was termed the 'bargain', there was an unwritten agreement between the Chinese and Malay elites that the former would be allowed to retain their economic position, while the latter held on to political power (Leifer 1969). Therefore, the coalition was made up of Malay and Chinese ethnic parties, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and the Malaysian Chinese Association, respectively (the Indian party, the Malaysian Indian Congress, and other smaller parties joined the coalition later on). The United Malays National Organization was the de facto leader of the coalition. The president of the United Malays National Organization has always been the prime minister of the country. Even today, the National Front campaigns on such a platform and runs the country through this ideology, and interpretation, of multiracialism, or what might be termed Malay-led multiracialism.

Malaysia also inherited a first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system for its parliamentary elections from its British colonial masters. A first-past-the-post system creates economies of scale for larger and more established parties (Reynolds et al. 2005), creating huge barriers to entry for new or smaller parties to break the National Front's hegemony. The situation is compounded by repression against dissidents or whoever is perceived to be a threat to the ruling party. The media are heavily biased in favour of the government, and the Internal Security Act has been used in the past against political opponents. Even though the law has been recently repealed, it has contributed tremendously towards stunting oppositional growth. In fact, after the repeal of the Internal Security Act in 2012, other new laws were introduced, such as the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act, which essentially works in the same way as the Internal Security Act.

As the party that led Malaysia to independence, the National Front has had a first-mover advantage not only institutionally but, more importantly, ideologically. The Malay-led multiracialism has been justified by many National Front leaders, including those from minority communities, as the only version that could ensure stability and harmony between the ethnic groups. Often using the 1969 riots as a bogeyman (the riots are portrayed as having occurred because of the Malays' unhappiness at the Chinese due to economic inequalities, although, of course, this hypothesis has not been left unchallenged), the National Front justifies favourable policies for the Malays in terms of equitable growth and development. Despite there being much contestation about this concept and understandable disquiet among the ethnic minorities, it can be argued that by and large the Malaysian population has recognized the premise that preferential treatment is needed for social equality. Bajpai and Brown (2013) assert that the language of social justice and equitable development used by the National Front has resulted in the coalition's 'ideational hegemony' over the Malaysian masses, as the citizenry has accepted the idea. In 1999, when Prime Minister Mahathir was at the height of his unpopularity, having recently sacked the popular Deputy Prime Minister Anwar, the Chinese and Indians continued to rally behind the National Front and eventually the National Front retained its two-thirds legislative majority (Case 2004: 89). While other factors did contribute to this phenomenon, it can be said the voting patterns show there was some level of acceptance of the National Front's espoused ideology even by the minorities who did not ostensibly benefit from it. Horowitz (1989) states that the very basis of Malaysia's ethnic stability compared with countries such as Sri Lanka was because of the National Front's unique form of consociationalism. This stability has legitimized the National Front's version of multiracialism and hence has contributed towards the perpetuation of its hegemony. Obviously, the main reason that the National Front has managed to spread its hegemony is via its control over the education system and its near-absolute grip on the media. Virtually no mainstream media outlet is free of government influence, and it is apparent that these media channels perpetuate the ideologies of the state (Anuar 2014). Even more crucial is the National Front's grassroots appeal, and its control over the bureaucracy. Successful grassroots activities have ensured that its agenda and ideologies are transmitted to the masses, while an

effective bureaucracy enables the party to realize its ideational ambitions by translating them into actual policies (Kuhonta 2011).

The combination of these ideological and institutional factors ensured that the National Front continuously dominated the political scene. It was only in 2008 that its two-thirds legislative majority was denied for the first time, and in the subsequent 2013 general election the National Front even lost the popular vote, though it retained incumbency. The National Front won 47 per cent of the vote, compared with the People's Pact's 51 per cent, but due to the disproportionate effects of the first-past-the-post system it won close to 60 per cent of the seats. The charismatic Anwar Ibrahim was undoubtedly a major reason for the People's Pact's success: he was able to unite the secular and Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) – two parties which have radically different views on the rightful position of Islam in governance – which, together with his People's Justice Party (PKR), posed the biggest challenge ever to the National Front. The three parties formed a coalition of their own, the People's Pact. What is most pertinent for this article is that the opposition campaigned on a multiracial platform that was very different from the National Front's: the language of 'race' was minimized in the People's Pact's rhetoric. This will be elaborated on in the next section.

Singapore

Like Malaysia's National Front, the People's Action Party led Singapore to independence. The party set the rules of the game for the city-state, building a nation based on four key principles: multiracialism (a different form to the National Front's), meritocracy, pragmatism and secularism (Milne and Mauzy 2002). In this version of multiracialism, no ethnic group is given preferential treatment, despite the constitution acknowledging Malays as the indigenous inhabitants of the country. Each ethnic group is given space to practise their own customs and traditions, insofar as those rituals or beliefs do not clash with national imperatives (Mutalib 2011). Race is constantly emphasized in all aspects of life: there are quotas for public housing based on ethnicity, the voting system takes ethnicity into account, every governmental form that needs to be filled in will ask for a person's race, *inter alia*. This has been called the

CMIO model (Chinese-Malays-Indians-Others). Chinese form about 74 per cent of the population, with Malays and Indians making up 13 per cent and 9 per cent, respectively. Meritocracy helps to realize the 'equality' between races: no one is due special treatment by virtue of his race or familial status. A corollary of this is that affirmative action has never been discussed and is in fact considered to be a subject that is taboo.[7]

People's Action Party leaders claim that pragmatism is a non-ideological basis on which to run the country. Rather than being bogged down by rigid governing paradigms, the People's Action Party prefers to run the country based on 'what works' (Milne and Mauzy 2002: 52–3). This explains why the party does not profess any fundamental ideology (left or right, liberal or conservative, *inter alia*) and says that it should be judged based on the end results. Of course, this 'non-ideology' itself presupposes that economic growth is the end result and this is what is assumed to be desired by all Singaporeans. Singaporeans have largely sacrificed their personal freedoms and voted for the People's Action Party time and again, precisely because the party has delivered on its promises of material welfare (Wong and Huang 2010).

The People's Action Party has enjoyed an unprecedented amount of power in Singapore. Electorally, it has comfortably secured more than a two-thirds majority in every election. Through providing for the material needs of the Singapore populace and simultaneously suppressing the media and civil society (Mutalib 2002), the People's Action Party has established and entrenched its dominance, making it nearly impossible (or so it seemed) for the opposition to break through.

While elections are free and regular in Singapore, they are scarcely fair. The group representation constituency (GRC) in particular has been argued to be an enormous obstruction for opposition parties. The group representation constituency is a form of the party block vote (PBV) electoral system, whereby parties compete in multi-member districts, or team MPs, and at least one candidate from each team is required to be from the ethnic minority Malay or Indian groups. Currently, there are 15 group representation constituencies, accounting for 75 of 87 parliamentary seats, while the remaining 12 are single-member constituencies (SMCs). Opposition parties have struggled to put up competent teams to wrest a group representation constituency away from the People's Action Party;

before 2011 no opposition party had ever won a group representation constituency. The group representation constituency poses huge barriers to entry for opposition parties, as each People's Action Party team will be helmed by at least one minister (Mutalib 2002).

In 2011, a noticeable change occurred in Singapore's political scene. In what was termed a 'watershed' or 'milestone' election, the People's Action Party attained the lowest vote share in its history, winning just 60.1 per cent of the valid votes. More significantly, the fortress known as the group representation constituency was no longer unbreakable; the best-performing opposition party, the Workers' Party, captured a group representation constituency, defeating the team led by the extremely popular George Yeo, then the foreign minister. The Workers' Party only managed to win six seats, with the People's Action Party holding on to 81,[8] yet the signs were unmistakable: the People's Action Party was no longer viewed as so formidable and was losing its hegemonic control over Singapore society. The advent of new media had liberalized the political space to some degree, as information was no longer solely controlled by the state. The results were a reflection of dissatisfaction with the People's Action Party as much as they were an endorsement of the Workers' Party: while it was clear that the Workers' Party had planned its campaigns strategically and had fielded candidates of immensely high quality, there was much discontentment towards the government (Ortmann 2011). Concerns about rising income inequality, the influx of foreign migrants, rising housing prices and public transport congestion were being articulated by Singaporeans. The People's Action Party's dominance had always been premised on its delivery of material welfare, and up to this point Singaporeans tolerated the lack of individual freedoms because the People's Action Party had delivered on its material promises (Ong and Tim 2014).

Subsequently, three other elections further pointed towards the erosion of the People's Action Party's dominance. The presidential elections in 2011, a few months after the general election, saw four candidates battling it out. Tony Tan, former People's Action Party heavyweight and deputy prime minister, was publicly backed by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong as the candidate most worthy of the presidency. Yet, despite this vote of confidence, he attained victory via the smallest of margins: he garnered 35.2 per cent of the votes, with the nearest challenger gaining 34.85 per cent. In 2012 a by-election was scheduled for Hougang single-member constituency, which was a

traditional Workers' Party stronghold. The incumbent Workers' Party MP was sacked from the party due to a sex scandal, but this did not diminish the party's support among Hougang constituents – the new Workers' Party candidate comfortably retained the seat with 62.1 per cent of the votes. Contrast this to the situation in Punggol-East single-member constituency in 2013: a by-election was held under similar circumstances, though with different protagonists. The incumbent People's Action Party MP, Michael Palmer, who was also speaker of Parliament, resigned from the party due to another sex scandal. However, in this case the People's Action Party lost the seat to the Workers' Party in the by-election, with a 10 per cent swing in the votes. While Palmer had won 54.5 per cent of the votes in 2011, the People's Action Party candidate in 2013 garnered only 43.7 per cent, with the Workers' Party getting 54.5 per cent. This was an amazing turnaround, especially considering that a sex scandal had not affected the Workers' Party in Hougang. What made matters more intriguing was the fact that most analysts expected a People's Action Party victory. These three elections, together with the 2011 general election, point towards the withering of the People's Action Party's electoral dominance. At the very least, even if a two-party system does not materialize in Singapore in the near future, a more competitive political arena, whereby the People's Action Party is no longer as ubiquitous, is more or less assured.

It is instructive that only these two parties have won elections since the 2006 general election. Four parties contested the Punggol-East by-election, with the other two being the Reform Party (RP) and the Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA). Their candidates garnered very small proportions of the vote share (1.2 per cent and 0.57 per cent, respectively). Another opposition party, the most prominent apart from the People's Action Party and the Workers' Party, the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), initially toyed with sending a candidate to contest the election, but subsequently decided that a three-cornered fight would not be good for its chances. Instead it approached the Workers' Party to reach a compromise on who should be contesting the seat. The Workers' Party completely ignored the Singapore Democratic Party's overtures and did not even respond. The Singapore Democratic Party then decided not to contest the seat. The fact that the Workers' Party was confident enough to ignore the Singapore Democratic Party demonstrates that it knew it did not need the support of other opposition parties – the

Singapore Democratic Party probably knew this too, judging from its eventual withdrawal. Thus it can be seen that the Workers' Party is the only credible challenger to the People's Action Party's dominance.

CHALLENGE TO HEGEMONY VS CHALLENGE TO HEGEMONIC PARTY: MALAYSIA AND SINGAPORE

This article's main contention is that the opposition in Malaysia has successfully caused cracks in the incumbents' ideational hegemony, while the opposition in Singapore has not. This is because the People's Pact puts forward an ideology that is different from the National Front's fundamental worldview: for the People's Pact, the '*Ketuanan Melayu*' (Malay supremacy) concept which manifests itself in affirmative action policies and institutions that are unabashedly pro-Malay is untenable. The People's Pact leaders propose the abolition of Malay-first policies: Anwar Ibrahim suggests that a '*Ketuanan Rakyat*' (citizen supremacy) notion be used to replace '*Ketuanan Melayu*', and class-based affirmative action to replace the National Front's current race-based redistributive policies. This has enabled previously shunned topics to be brought into public arena discussions, including questions such as whether a non-Malay can become prime minister. The challenge posed by the People's Pact was hence at a foundational, ideational level. However, in Singapore, the best-performing opposition party, the Workers' Party, largely propagates and supports the People's Action Party's key ideologies and does not propose alternatives. The Workers' Party has been overt in declaring that the fundamentals of the People's Action Party are sound, and that there is no need for a complete upheaval of the status quo. It could be argued that the ideological distance between the incumbents and main opposition in Malaysia and Singapore differ because of the ideological positioning of the incumbents, rather than that of their opponents: the National Front is more uncompromising in its Malay-first ideology, while the People's Action Party has a more flexible approach to policymaking. Nevertheless, the role of the opposition parties in determining this ideological distance should not be undermined: theoretically, the People's Pact could solely advocate on a platform of anti-corruption and political liberalization without making promises on the ethnic issue and deal with it after getting into office. This strategy would make complete

electoral sense, as the People's Pact could seize anti-incumbency votes without alienating the majority Malay population. Yet, it has chosen the route of campaigning on a different ideological basis to the National Front, at the risk of losing Malay support. Similarly, the Workers' Party could tread the path of the Singapore Democratic Party or Reform Party and question the People's Action Party's core philosophies. Yet, it does not, and by its leader's own admission, behave in a manner similar to the People's Action Party. Interestingly, the Singapore Democratic Party and the Reform Party, both of which challenge the People's Action Party's way of running the country at a fundamental level, did not gain traction and did not win a single electoral contest. The Workers' Party campaigns on the idea that the country needs a party to be a 'check and balance' against the dominant People's Action Party, and unlike the People's Pact, not on a basis of governing the country differently. Hence in Malaysia, there is a challenge to hegemony *and* the hegemonic party, while in Singapore there is only a challenge to the hegemonic party and not its hegemony, or its governing paradigms.

Malaysia

As mentioned earlier, the National Front's dominance has traditionally been premised on its idea of Malay-led multiracialism. This is the building block of all governmental policies. Political power must be primarily in the hands of the Malays, and though the power is to be shared with the other races, Malays will be de facto leaders in this consociational bargain. The official National Front-controlled press strives to portray the National Front's version of multiracialism as the only one that can ensure order and stability in a multi-ethnic country, and any departure from this model would result in the country descending into chaos (Boulanger 1993). Thus not only is '*Ketuanan Melayu*' being framed in terms of indigenous rights, it is also framed as a practical way – the only way – of achieving prosperity for all Malaysians, considering the racial make-up of the nation. This ideology is translated into tangible policy in many fields: there are quotas reserved for Bumiputeras for university entrance, government projects are usually managed by Bumiputera-owned companies, firms listed on the Malaysian stock exchange need to have 30 per cent Bumiputera ownership, key cabinet positions are held by Malays, amongst others.[9]

While it is true that in the lead-up to the 2013 general election, in anticipation of serious electoral competition, the National Front tried to reach out to the non-Malay communities more than it ever had in the past, it is equally true that the party still subscribes to its long-held views on multiracialism. Despite the toning-down of pro-Malay rhetoric, the aggressive promotion of the 'One Malaysia' concept and the giving out of election goodies to all Malaysians regardless of race (Weiss 2013: 1135–6), the National Front maintained its overall outlook on managing the country. Its manifesto promised many policy changes, or rather policy tweaks, but was conspicuously silent on the issue of ethnicity. Clearly, there were not going to be any discernible shifts in its governing paradigm with regard to ethnicity.

Perhaps the United Malays National Organization General Assembly that was held in 2013 before the general election could be instructive. On a couple of occasions during the assembly, United Malays National Organization leaders, including Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak and many cabinet ministers, stood up to sing the rallying-cry anthem associated with the United Malays National Organization's Malay struggle:

Anak kecil main api, terbakar hatinya yang sepi.
Air mata, darah, bercampur keringat, bumi dipijak milik orang.

Indahnya bumi kita ini, warisan berkurun lamanya.
Hasil mengalir, ke tangan yang lain; pribumi merintih sendiri.

(A little child plays with fire, his desolate heart burns.
Tears, blood and sweat; yet the land we step on belongs to others.

How wonderful is our land, with centuries of legacy.
But the riches go to others, while the natives continue to suffer.)

The song aptly encapsulates not only the United Malays National Organization's self-perception but also the National Front's overall worldview; Malaysia belongs first and foremost to the Malays, and therefore affirmative action measures are needed to prevent 'others' from shortchanging the Malays. It is extremely telling that amidst the intensity of the election campaign and promises of inclusivity, Prime Minister Najib and many senior members of his cabinet chose to sing this song vociferously at the assembly, even resulting in tears amongst those present. Therefore, while the rhetorical devices used by the

National Front today may differ from those of its predecessors, the substantive elements of its ideology remain.

This is in stark contrast to the People's Pact's ideological positioning. The People's Pact made it clear from the outset that while the provision for the special position for Islam and Malays will be kept if it comes to power, the People's Pact will run Malaysia through a multiracial outlook, rendering the 'special position' of Islam and Malays more symbolic than substantive. The People's Pact's manifesto is littered with phrases that highlight the importance of the people and citizens, in a lucid bid to redefine the cleavages and give precedence to class over race. It starts with the message that the People's Pact is against all types of discrimination, in an apparent attempt to distance itself from the National Front's 'Malay first' ideology. Emphasizing that 'Pakatan Rakyat offers justice, peace and equality for all', the People's Pact's main objectives are to ensure 'Fraternity of the People, the People's Economy, the People's Well-being and the People's Government' (Pakatan Rakyat 2013: 4–5). The focus on the 'citizen' rather than the 'Malay' was deliberate; senior People's Pact leaders constantly reiterated the concept of 'people's supremacy', explicitly juxtaposing this notion against the National Front's 'Malay supremacy'. The People's Pact questioned the implementation of the National Front's policies based on this idea, stating that ultimately a small group of elites – Malay, Chinese and Indian – benefited from pro-Bumiputera policies while the majority of citizens, regardless of race, continued to languish in poverty or mediocrity (Boo 2013). Anwar himself had led calls for the abolition of the affirmative action for Malays, on numerous occasions. Anwar has gone on record to say that race-based affirmative action 'is no longer relevant; it is obsolete' (Fuller 2005). In almost all of his campaign speeches, including when he was addressing Malay-majority crowds in the rural areas, he advocated the concept of '*Ketuanan Rakyat*' to replace the National Front's '*Ketuanan Melayu*', which according to him only benefited United Malays National Organization elites and its collaborators from the other races (Boo 2010).

Instead, the People's Pact adroitly based its campaign on class-based issues and the National Front's shortcomings. The motivations were quite clear: by championing class ideologies, the People's Pact was trying to break the National Front's traditional support base, the Malays. Rather than 'Malay versus Chinese', the division was now

'rich versus poor', cutting across races. The People's Pact began promoting the idea of 'needs-based' affirmative action to replace the National Front's 'race-based' version, arguing that in the long run the former will benefit all Malaysians more, including Malays themselves. Nurul Izzah, a People's Pact leader and Anwar's daughter, went further by averring that only such a policy can calm racial tensions and that the People's Pact, by propagating the policy, is in the process truly defending 'multiracial politics' in Malaysia (Boo 2013). At the same time, the opposition championed cross-class and cross-race demands for political reform, while reiterating that the current system has allowed the National Front to get away with corruption.

Malaysia's state institutions have largely been shaped around the National Front's version of multiracialism. The ideational hegemony that has permeated Malaysian society is translated in concrete day-to-day affairs via these institutions and the policies they champion. The People's Pact has, for the first time in Malaysian history, offered a serious viable alternative to this ideology. While this new version of multiracialism is expected to resonate with the non-Malays, the election results show that even amongst the Malays, there is substantial support for the People's Pact. Despite Bumiputeras constituting 67 per cent of the population, the National Front garnered only 47 per cent of the votes, showing that a significant portion of Malays voted for the People's Pact. This article does not make the claim that the People's Pact's ideology has been accepted by the majority of Malaysians and has completely replaced the National Front's worldview on race; rather, I argue that the National Front's ideational dominance is severely under threat precisely because the opposition puts forward a contrasting governing paradigm. The more the People's Pact's version of multiracialism gains traction, the closer Malaysia is to witnessing an end to the National Front's hegemony.

It is unlikely that the National Front, with the United Malays National Organization as its head, will relinquish the position of Malays, especially so when Malays form the bulk of its support base. It is equally unlikely that the People's Pact, with the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party as the most powerful component party, will accept any situation other than Indians and Chinese being treated as complete equals in the political and economic system, especially when challenging the National Front's racial policies has earned

the coalition significant electoral inroads. What is more likely to happen – and in fact is already happening – is that the National Front will tone down its Malay rhetoric and make concessions for the Chinese and Indians, without compromising on its core beliefs pertaining to the Malays' position in the country – a change in form but not substance. Already, there has been talk of the possibility of having a non-Malay prime minister. While the National Front refuses to entertain such a possibility, opposition lawmakers, including the Democratic Action Party's Karpal Singh, have stridently expressed their view that non-Malays can and should be considered for the premiership.[10] The contestations over the boundaries of Malay supremacy will persist, and this is in no small part due to the People's Pact's success in redefining some of the existing cleavages. Something that was considered a complete taboo previously (suggesting the possibility of a non-Malay premier) has been broached, even if not embraced wholly by society. Undoubtedly, in the foreseeable future, there is little likelihood of the People's Pact putting forward a non-Malay candidate for premiership. Nevertheless, as I have mentioned, the traditional boundaries of discussions have been breached, at least slightly. One must understand that among the three component parties of the People's Pact, the Democratic Action Party is currently the one which holds the most seats and hence is extremely powerful in the coalition. It is therefore supremely difficult for the Democratic Action Party's ideas and preferences to be ignored; this, coupled with Anwar's flagrant promises of a multiracial Malaysia that is not based on 'Malay supremacy' but 'citizen supremacy', means that it can safely be surmised that the National Front's traditional grip on the arena of ideas is under threat. In the 2013 general election, the Democratic Action Party won 38 seats, as opposed to the People's Justice Party's 30 and the Islamic Party of Malaysia's 21. This is significant because not only will the Democratic Action Party's influence and say in the coalition grow, but the results also reflect the sentiments of the citizens: of the three parties in the opposition coalition, the Democratic Action Party is considered to be the most 'extreme' in terms of departure from the National Front's ideology, and yet the party made significant gains. Candidates such as Karpal and Lim Kit Siang, the party's most senior leaders, were elected, despite stridently expressing their views on abolishing Bumiputera privileges. Lim's case is most instructive: he managed to unseat the chief minister of Johore, Abdul Ghani Othman, who was

widely acknowledged to be one of the United Malays National Organization's better leaders (*The Star*, 2013). Many Malaysians are evidently not averse to a rejection of the nation's – or rather the National Front's – stated precepts. It should be noted that this article does not seek to make a normative judgement on either coalition's values on race; rather what has been explained are the ideological positions espoused by each party.

One could attempt to discredit this argument by putting forward two points of contention: first, there is no guarantee that the People's Pact will eventually come to power as the coalition could disintegrate because of factionalism; secondly, even if the People's Pact does come to power, there is no guarantee that its multiracial proclamations will not prove to be hollow promises meted out as part of electioneering campaigns. However, this article contends that the very existence of a significant counter to the traditional National Front ideology in Malaysia today is enough evidence to show that the National Front's ideological dominance is severely under threat. A majority of Malaysians have shown through the ballot box that they are no longer as accepting of the National Front's version of multiracialism. Whether or not the People's Pact comes to power, or whether it keeps its promises if it does, is secondary; what is more pertinent is that Malaysians now know, and possibly many of them even accept, an alternative ideology, and both the National Front and the People's Pact have to consider this while formulating policies and electoral strategies. This is the new reality that both parties and voters in Malaysia have to contend with. The previous hegemony of the National Front, where only its ideas permeated the minds of Malaysians, is either severely challenged or has even dissipated.[11]

Singapore

The political trajectory in Singapore differs greatly from Malaysia's. The People's Action Party and the Workers' Party, the best-performing opposition party, possess essentially similar core philosophies. The Workers' Party has been accused of being the 'People's Action Party in blue', in reference to their similar ideological stances. The Workers' Party scarcely differs from the People's Action Party in its primary ideologies, unlike other opposition parties in Singapore

which pose an ideological challenge to the People's Action Party. The two parties' disagreements are usually in the economic arena, where for instance, the Workers' Party supports the minimum wage in some areas (though not in all professions), while the People's Action Party had thus far opposed the idea. In non-economic realms, however, the two parties more or less converge. For example, the Workers' Party offers no alternative to the Chinese-Malays-Indians-Others multiracial model. A trademark of the People's Action Party's governing style is that race is institutionalized via this model, and the Workers' Party does not seek to replace it by championing the removal of ethnicity from the identification cards of citizens (Chua 2003). The Workers' Party does not seek to challenge or replace the People's Action Party's accounts of meritocracy, multiracialism and economic pragmatism. In fact, in Singapore we have an unusual situation whereby the strongest opposition party unequivocally states that it wishes the government to remain in power for the foreseeable future, admitting that the People's Action Party is the best party to govern Singapore at this point in time (*Straits Times*, 2014). By doing so, the Workers' Party legitimizes the People's Action Party's governance and governing ideologies. The Workers' Party states clearly that it is not ready to form an alternative government, and it only serves to act as a check and balance against the People's Action Party. Immediately after the Workers' Party's sensational Punggol-East by-election victory, the Workers' Party chief, Low Thia Khiang, purposely downplayed the result, claiming that the victory was not necessarily a harbinger of things to come; rather, it was perhaps the 'by-election effect' in play.[12] He claimed that the Workers' Party was 'not ready' to develop full alternatives to the People's Action Party's model, and that it would just endeavour to 'tilt' policy directions via its oppositional role. More tellingly, he affirmed that the People's Action Party was a 'competent government' (Ong and Chan 2013).

Contrast this with two other opposition parties, the Singapore Democratic Party and the Reform Party. Both have called for a removal of these 'archaic' notions of race (Singapore Democratic Party 2011),[13] while the Workers' Party is more willing to embrace the People's Action Party's version of multiracialism. The Singapore Democratic Party goes one step further in expressing its belief that racial identities hamper the formation of a national identity, and calls for the removal of race from Singaporean identity cards. Similarly,

the Singapore Democratic Party and the Reform Party are vocal in promoting the rights of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transsexuals (LGBT). Both choose to declare their liberal stances towards all minority issues and argue that there should be no discrimination based on sexual orientation. They call for a repeal of the Section 377A law which criminalizes homosexuality.[14] The Workers' Party, like the People's Action Party, chooses neither to champion the cause of LGBTs, nor to oppose it outright. Neither party takes a moral position on the issue of homosexuality. Evidently, this vague stance is designed to maximize the parties' electoral appeal – not alienating the conservative elements of Singapore society while not completely angering the liberal factions that are supportive of the LGBT agenda. Even the choice of opposition candidates for the 2011 general election reveals something of the nature of the parties: the Workers' Party fielded candidates who were highly educated professionals – candidates who were almost People's Action Party-esque – while the Singapore Democratic Party candidates had academic credentials that were just as impressive, but they had previously run into trouble with the People's Action Party and were seen as more overtly 'anti-establishment'. This included James Gomez, someone who had been singled out by the People's Action Party in the previous general election for being a troublemaker, and Teo Soh Lung, who had in the past been detained by the People's Action Party for being a 'Marxist' conspirator (Ortmann 2011: 157). It is unmistakable that the Workers' Party tried to choose competent yet 'safe' candidates, while the Singapore Democratic Party did not conform to such standards.[15]

In the economic domain, where the Workers' Party apparently offers alternative policies, it is still very much unassuming in approaching its strategies. For example, the Workers' Party supports the implementation of the minimum wage (a policy that the People's Action Party has always stridently opposed) but it has only recently expressed such a recommendation, and furthermore, it does not propose the introduction of the minimum wage throughout the labour sector, but rather, only for some professions (Workers' Party 2011). Again, this can be juxtaposed against the Singapore Democratic Party's position, which has been to support the implementation of the minimum wage unequivocally. It then becomes manifestly plain that there is very little ideological distance between the Workers' Party and the People's Action Party.

The ideological distance, or lack thereof, between the two parties can be attributed to the nature of the electorate. The electorate, largely middle-ground voters, does not seem to react favourably to opposition parties or figures that differ radically from the People's Action Party. With the exception of the charismatic J.B. Jeyaretnam, it can be said that no 'radical' opposition politician has ever managed to gain headway with the Singaporean electorate. Figures such as Chee Soon Juan, Jufrie Mahmood, Tang Liang Hong, Francis Seow and Vincent Wijeysinghe, despite having the necessary credentials, have never won an electoral contest. Da Cunha (2012) argues that the majority of Singaporeans are comfortable with the People's Action Party's main ideologies and do not want radical departures from the party's policies; rather they desire tweaks to and improvements on the existing policy positions (Da Cunha 2012). The Workers' Party has been labelled the People's Action Party's 'approved opposition', and this has not gone unnoticed by Low. In fact, Low and the Workers' Party embrace this 'accusation', as is evident in his public pronouncement a day after the 2011 general election: 'This election shows that Singaporeans endorse the approach we have taken although there were some critics over the Internet that you are conservative, PAP-approved … But this election shows that this is the kind of opposition that Singaporeans want – rational, responsible and credible' (Da Cunha 2012: 216).

I argue that Singaporeans and even the Workers' Party have internalized and accepted the People's Action Party's ideational hegemony such that even if Singaporeans and the Workers' Party disagree with the policies, they do so on the People's Action Party's terms. This is evidenced in Low's use and appropriation of terms such as 'rational' and 'responsible', which have long been People's Action Party buzzwords. The protest vote against the People's Action Party and in favour of the Workers' Party was largely based on Singaporeans' discontent with the government, because of material concerns. As mentioned earlier, Singaporeans were unhappy with the state, not because they wanted new ideologies to come to the fore, but precisely because they judged the People's Action Party based on its material promises. The People's Action Party has long claimed that it was the only party that could ensure material prosperity, and thus when it failed to deliver on matters pertaining to public transport, housing, or to curb income inequality, many Singaporeans voted against the party. Most scholars agree that the 2011 results were

not a consequence of Singaporeans clamouring for greater freedoms; rather, the electorate were directing their unhappiness at the People's Action Party with regard to material concerns (Chong 2012; Tan 2012). It does not in any way signal the rejection of the People's Action Party's ideologies; rather I postulate that the fact that the Workers' Party – the party closest to the People's Action Party's ideological positioning – and not the Singapore Democratic Party was the one that became the most successful opposition party was precisely because Singaporeans accept the People's Action Party's hegemony, and measure parties by the People's Action Party's criteria. If the Singapore Democratic Party or Reform Party become the first-choice opposition party, then a substantial proportion of the masses will have indeed rejected the People's Action Party's ideologies.[16]

One could say that the Workers' Party is merely being intelligent about its strategies, and playing the role of a 'moderate' opposition in order to win the median voter. Whether this is true or not, what is most important is that thus far the electoral battle between the People's Action Party and the Workers' Party has been based on the People's Action Party's terms of engagement, and that the major opposition party has not posited an alternative to the hegemonic discourse. In addition, the Workers' Party has not articulated any major directional shifts in party policies since Low has been its leader.

CONCLUSION

This study has sought to fill an identifiable gap in the literature on transition theory. Recent events in Malaysia and Singapore demonstrate the importance of understanding the exact nature of the political opposition to these regimes. Greater attention should be devoted to the ideological positioning of opposition parties in hegemonic party systems.

Often, when democratization or transitions are discussed, the assumption is that there needs to be a fundamental shift in a country's trajectory and outlook. This article calls for a more nuanced approach to the subject, by bringing in the concept of ideological dominance. I contend that for hegemonic party regimes where the opposition poses an ideological challenge, there could be a significant change if the opposition eventually does take over, and even if it does not, the mere ability of the opposition to put an alternative

ideology into the reckoning challenges the status quo to a large extent. However, in hegemonic regimes such as Singapore, where the opposition does not challenge the ruling party ideologically and plays by the People's Action Party's (ideological) rules, even if the opposition does gain traction electorally, the ideological hegemony of the People's Action Party remains intact, and could ironically even survive the party's demise. In such cases, while electorally there could be a different trajectory for the nation, ideologically, it would be safe to suggest that not much would change. The discourses would centre on the same premises that the hegemonic party regime had constructed.

More research could be conducted on the concept of 'hegemony' in hegemonic party systems, especially with regard to the consequences of differing oppositional challenges to such regimes. The purpose of this article has been to highlight the salience of ideology in the entire democratization process, especially in analysing opposition parties.

The theory discussed in this article might also provide some insights into how the two states would behave in response to the oppositional challenges: as the National Front's ideational hegemony wanes, it is likely that more repressive measures will be instituted to counter the rise of the opposition. Whereas in Singapore, what the People's Action Party needs to do is to rectify its mistakes (in housing, transport and so on) rather than resort to more repression; the key is that Singaporeans still judge the People's Action Party by the standards that the party has set, and hence it has less to fear from either the masses or the Workers' Party. Using Slater's terminology, strong state democratization is more likely to happen in Singapore than in Malaysia.

NOTES

[1] Both have also been labelled 'semi-democracies' (Case 1996) or 'electorally authoritarian' (Schedler 2009).

[2] By the perpetuation of hegemony even if the Workers' Party takes over, I mean that the ideas espoused by the People's Action Party in the past have been accepted, internalized and even perpetuated by Singaporeans to the extent that even if the Workers' Party was in power, they will judge the Workers' Party by the standards that have previously been set by the People's Action Party.

[3] Antonio Gramsci, cited in Woolcock (1985: 204).

[4] By the admission of Hadenius and Teorell, Levitsky and Way's 'competitive authoritarian' regime corresponds to their dominant party sub-category, and hence I will use the terms interchangeably.

[5] Anwar has faced numerous charges of homosexual acts (which are illegal in Malaysia) over the years.

[6] Affirmative action is realized via the government's New Economic Policy. See Jomo (1990).

[7] Some have argued that meritocracy entrenches the hegemonic party's dominance. See Tan (2008).

[8] Despite securing only 60.1 per cent of the votes, the People's Action Party won 93 per cent of the seats. Again, this is due to the disproportionate effects of plurality voting systems.

[9] For a discussion on affirmative action and Bumiputera policies in Malaysia, see Nesiah (1997) and Siddique and Suryadinata (1981–2).

[10] The Islamic Party of Malaysia, in the People's Pact coalition, says that it is permissible for a non-Malay to be prime minister, as long he or she is a Muslim.

[11] Many, especially from the People's Pact, have made the claim that a lot of electoral fraud was committed by the National Front during the 2013 general election, which has obviously been denied by the incumbent. While such a strategy can help contribute to the perpetuation of an authoritarian regime, the focus of this article is on the realm of ideas, where the National Front is fast losing ground. Furthermore, in spite of the claims, the People's Pact still managed to win the popular vote.

[12] This refers to the phenomenon whereby citizens are more likely to vote for opposition parties in single by-elections than in general elections, since there is no possibility of government turnover.

[13] Kenneth Jeyaretnam, the leader of the Reform Party, used the term 'archaic' to describe the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other model at a forum organized by National University of Singapore Students' Union on 17 October 2012, at the university.

[14] This law is primarily symbolic and is not enforced.

[15] The case of Gomez is particularly revealing. In 2006, he ran on the Workers' Party ticket, but was accused by the People's Action Party of being untrustworthy due to some issues with the nomination forms. In the subsequent election he was no longer with the Workers' Party. It seems that the Workers' Party prefers candidates with no 'baggage' and is careful in its choices.

[16] Even in Hougang, where the Workers' Party has created a stronghold, its success is due more to grassroots work and appeal, and a down-to-earth approach, rather than 'ideologies' it espouses.

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