

**DEMOCRACY AND AUTHORITARIANISM IN  
INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA**

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# **Democracy and Authoritarianism in Indonesia and Malaysia**

**The Rise of the Post-Colonial State**

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**To my parents  
Syed Hussein Alatas and S. Zaharah Alatas  
who give me much love, encouragement and support**

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# Preface

This work on democratic and authoritarian post-colonial states is based on an historical study of the emergence of the dominant forces that shaped the types of regimes found in Malaysia and Indonesia. Both emerged as democratic post-colonial states. However, in Indonesia the democratic process was suspended altogether and after about a decade of independence, an authoritarian state emerged. Meanwhile, Malaysia still retains, comparatively speaking, a functioning democratic system. The contrast between Indonesia and Malaysia, then, is an opportunity to study the conditions under which democracy can be sustained in post-colonial states.

The study provides an empirical field on which to examine the origins of the post-colonial state. The Indonesian and Malaysian cases exemplify two paths that led to authoritarian and democratic states respectively. These cases offer two very different origins of post-colonial states upon which theoretical issues generated by the literature can be brought to bear. The reason for their selection is that the region consisting of what is today known as Indonesia and Malaysia was historically a cultural entity with similar notions of statecraft, religions and language. I will attempt to show that factors such as the level of economic development and modes of colonial administration, must be ruled out as explanations of different post-colonial state forms in these two countries.

This study, in searching for an alternative explanation, looks at how the interplay of three factors, that is, the elite cohesion, internal state strength and armed resistance, led to two different outcomes, that is, authoritarian and democratic post-colonial states.

Three conditions under which democracy can survive in post-colonial states, based on the experience of Malaysia and Indonesia, are (1) the absence of armed resistance against the state, (2) the presence of an internally strong state, and (3) a high degree of elite cohesion.

The imposition of colonialism upon the pre-capitalist societies of Malaysia and Indonesia left several classes and groups with competing interests in these countries upon formal independence. It is against this historical backdrop that the above factors are examined. It is held that the absence of armed resistance, the presence of an internally strong state and a high degree of elite cohesion led to democratic outcomes,

as in Malaysia, while armed resistance in the context of a weak state and elite factionalism led to authoritarian outcomes, as in Indonesia. In this way, two different paths to state forms can be, as it were, mapped.

The theoretical perspective of this study, therefore, focuses on the class composition of the state and the dominant elite. Given that both Malaysia and Indonesia emerged as democratic post-colonial states, the reasons for the struggling persistence of democracy in one and its failure in the other have mainly to do with a relatively stronger state and a higher degree of elite cohesion in Malaysia as compared to Indonesia. In addition to regional instability and communist insurgency, the greatest opposition and obstacle to parliamentary democracy came from the elite itself in Indonesia. Democracy was introduced to Indonesia and Malaysia by the Europeans. In such circumstances, democracy can survive only if certain conditions are fulfilled. All three of the above conditions were fulfilled in Malaysia and Indonesia during and immediately following formal independence. However, in Indonesia a decade after independence, the internally weak state took its toll on democracy. The democratic phase of the Indonesian state failed to solve pressing economic problems and state elites were divided as to the course that should be taken. This culminated in the rise to power of anti-democratic forces. In Malaysia, the political elite were never divided to the extent that the democratic nature of the state was undermined for the long term.

The significance of this study lies in the fact that there has not been any comparative work done on the state in Malaysia and Indonesia. Furthermore, the few works on the state in the two countries tend to focus on issues not directly related to the question of the origins of the post-colonial state. Democracy in post-colonial states was introduced from without. What needs explanation is how and why democracy persisted in some post-colonial states and gave way to authoritarianism in others. This study is an effort in this direction.

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