

## **The Consociational Model in Southeast Asia Is It (Still) Relevant?**

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### **Abstract**

Ethnic and other enduring, ascriptive, politically salient cleavages mark a host of postcolonial states and, if pundits since at least the 1950s are correct, tend to preclude successful democratization. Arend Lijphart's consociational model offers a resolution, in which elite-led power sharing and moderation may allow even deeply segmented societies to overcome fissiparous colonial and other legacies, to move toward stable accommodation. One of the first states outside Western Europe in which consociationalism took root was Malaysia. After reviewing the relevant parameters of and debates on democracy in plural societies, I ask here to what extent Malaysia was or is consociational, and with what enduring implications for the political terrain, review other cases in the region that exhibit particular patterns and mechanisms of consociational rule, then consider the extent to which these examples might be relevant to democratizing, but deeply divided, Myanmar. My objective is not a comprehensive regurgitation and assessment of consociational theory, but a somewhat speculative consideration regarding political possibilities in a region known since colonial days specifically for its "plural societies."

**Keywords:** Communalism, democracy, consociational, Malaysia, Myanmar, Southeast Asia.

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**B**randishing a ceremonial sword at the 2007 United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) general assembly, party youth chief Hishamuddin Hussein swore to uphold Malay preeminence in Malaysia. He had done much the same the previous two years. But this time, the gesture had electoral consequences, obliging a belated apology: claiming Malay insensitivity and arrogance, among other grievances, non-Malay voters left the ruling Barisan

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Nasional (National Front, BN) coalition in droves.<sup>1</sup> The incident captures a tension at the heart of Malaysian politics: the polity is premised on communal segmentation, but full representation—and yet norms of accommodation and inclusion are increasingly more honored in the breach than in their observance.

That the sort of ethnic and other fragmentation found in Malaysia—clear, enduring, ascriptive, and politically salient—is both endemic among postcolonial states and inimical to democracy and political stability has been a common assumption since at least the 1950s. A few scholars have challenged this orthodoxy, noting circumstances in which extreme fragmentation may be grounds for stable stalemate.<sup>2</sup> Yet, other scholars have suggested institutional remedies to circumvent fragmentation; democracy may then persist not because of, but notwithstanding, deep cleavages. The work of Arend Lijphart, especially on consociational democracy, falls squarely within this vein. These debates are not merely academic; they have real relevance, resonance, and history in “divided” societies: Can these states become and remain democratic while maintaining cultural diversity, or is some combination of assimilation, authoritarianism, or instability inescapable?

While Lijphart developed his consociational model with primary reference to Western Europe, the concept traveled quickly and well to postcolonial new democracies. Among the exemplars was Malaysia. After reviewing the relevant parameters of and debates on democracy in plural societies, I ask here to what extent Malaysia was or is consociational, and with what implications for the political terrain, then consider other cases in the region for which at least certain attributes and mechanisms of consociational rule might be useful. My objective is not a comprehensive regurgitation and assessment of consociational theory, but a somewhat speculative consideration regarding political possibilities in a region known since colonial days specifically for its “plural societies.”

## Consociationalism and Its Critics

While other authors contributed to formulation of the concept of consociational democracy in the 1960s,<sup>3</sup> it is Lijphart who gave the concept wings. This model was one of several—such as “corporate federalism” or segmented pluralism—that attempted to interpret and/or prescribe institutional remedies

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<sup>1</sup> *Malaysiakini*, April 30, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Reilly, “Democracy, Ethnic Fragmentation, and Internal Conflict: Confused Theories, Faulty Data, and the ‘Crucial Case’ of Papua New Guinea,” *International Security* 25, no. 3 (2000-2001): 166-167.

<sup>3</sup> Steiner attributes the initial concept to independent efforts of both Lijphart and Gerhard Lehmbruch in 1967. Jürg Steiner, “The Consociational Theory and Beyond,” *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 3 (1981): 339.

for governance of divided states.<sup>4</sup> Initially, Lijphart set out to refine Gabriel Almond's 1956 Euro-American typology of democracies, identifying a subset of "fragmented but stable democracies" which he labeled "consociational." Lijphart situated these states' distinctiveness in the fact that their political elites<sup>5</sup> cooperate conscientiously to overcome the destabilizing effects of cultural pluralism, usually via a grand coalition cabinet.<sup>6</sup> The key criteria are that no minority be permanently excluded from government and that the prospect of participation stimulate "moderation and compromise" on all sides,<sup>7</sup> even at risk of occasional immobilism.<sup>8</sup> While Lijphart initially considered such accommodation possible in pre- or nondemocratic systems, as well,<sup>9</sup> he qualified that stance later.<sup>10</sup>

The consociational model's four defining attributes are a grand coalition or other form of power sharing; formal or informal mutual veto or concurrent majority; proportionality in representation, appointments, and allocations (albeit with special protection for small minorities); and segmental autonomy to manage matters of one group's exclusive concern. Such a system produces "government by elite cartel designed to turn a democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy."<sup>11</sup> Lijphart advocates more broadly, too, for parliamentary rule, with proportional representation (PR) instead of majoritarian voting, to support multiparty systems, coalition governments, and balance in executive-legislative power—the essence of his consensus model, which "tries to limit, divide, separate, and share power in a variety of ways."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Arend Lijphart, "Consociation and Federation: Conceptual and Empirical Links," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 12, no. 3 (1979): 499, 508. Lijphart himself came to stress different variables, and to prefer different labels, over time. "Consociational" no longer even appeared in the index of the first edition of his *Patterns of Democracy* in 1999, supplanted by the more widely applicable "consensus" model. Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 3-4, and chap. 3.

<sup>5</sup> This literature leaves vague the parameters of "elites." Lloyd Musolf and J. Fred Springer, "Legislatures and Divided Societies: The Malaysian Parliament and Multi-Ethnicity," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (1977): 117.

<sup>6</sup> Arend Lijphart, "Consociational Democracy," *World Politics* 21, no. 2 (1969): 211-214.

<sup>7</sup> Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 30-31.

<sup>8</sup> Lijphart, "Consociational Democracy," 225, and Arend Lijphart, "Cultural Diversity and Theories of Political Integration," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 1(1970): 14.

<sup>9</sup> Lijphart, "Consociational Democracy," 212, footnote 15.

<sup>10</sup> Lijphart, "Consociation and Federation," 509.

<sup>11</sup> Lijphart, "Consociational Democracy," 213-214, 216.

<sup>12</sup> Arend Lijphart, "Constitutional Choices for New Democracies," *Journal of Democracy* 2, no. 1 (1991): 73; also John Fuh-sheng Hsieh, "Arend Lijphart and Consociationalism," in this *TJD* special issue.

Lijphart deemed democracy possible in the decolonizing global South, however “fundamentally divided” the states in question,<sup>13</sup> so long as subcultural leaders sustained counter-centrifugal cooperation.<sup>14</sup> From early on, critics have queried not just the space for such extension, but how aptly Lijphart describes even European cases and the requirements for true “accommodation.”<sup>15</sup> Several offer revised conceptualizations. Jürg Steiner, for instance, sees in the model the seeds of a broader theory of decision making. Treating social pluralism as a continuous rather than dichotomous variable, and considering decision making as occurring with regard to particular issues and at specific levels of government, he proposes a more refined typology of decision making beyond the poles of competitive and consociational.<sup>16</sup> Some types of issues, or issues at a local rather than national level, or debated in public versus sequestered arenas, he suggests, may tend toward one or the other mode. Meanwhile, lack of competition over policy alternatives may indicate conscious power sharing, but could also reveal either amicable agreement or a dominant group’s repression of challengers.<sup>17</sup> We return to these caveats and interpretations in considering alternatives for Southeast Asian states.

Indeed, consociationalism is not the only plausible path for divided societies; integration or conflict is as likely, assuming ethnic and other cleavages even have political relevance. Both elites and masses matter. Rather than just transmitting and navigating cleavages, elites forge the system in which they operate, including molding stereotypes and assumptions at the core of ethnic identities and ethnic relations.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, popular demands may press elites from moderation to ethnic “outbidding,” usually to the advantage of the most vital flank.<sup>19</sup>

But Lijphart avers that it is in precisely such fractured cases, where a wide range of decisions carries high stakes, that consociationalism may be most socially just and, hence, warranted, whatever the difficulties entailed.<sup>20</sup> For

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<sup>13</sup> Arend Lijphart, “Arend Lijphart on Sharing Power in Africa and the Future of Democracy,” *Theory Talks*, no. 8 (2008), <http://www.theory-talks.org/2008/05/theory-talk-8.html> (accessed January 29, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Lijphart, “Cultural Diversity,” 9.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, on Lijphart’s discussion of the Netherlands: Brian Barry, “Political Accommodation and Consociational Democracy,” *British Journal of Political Science* 5, no. 4 (1975): 479.

<sup>16</sup> Steiner, “Consociational Theory.”

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 347-350.

<sup>18</sup> R. S. Milne, “Politics, Ethnicity and Class in Guyana and Malaysia,” *Social and Economic Studies* 26, no. 1 (1976): 28, and Eugene K. B. Tan, “From Sojourners to Citizens: Managing the Ethnic Chinese Minority in Indonesia and Malaysia,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24, no. 6 (2001): 967.

<sup>19</sup> Alvin Rabushka and Kenneth A. Shepsle, *Politics in Plural Societies: A Theory of Democratic Instability* (Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill, 1972), and Milne, “Politics, Ethnicity and Class,” 29.

<sup>20</sup> Lijphart, “Consociational Democracy,” 214.

consociational democracy to work requires strong internal political cohesion within each subculture, including support for their elites and for the principle of government by elite cartel; those elites, in turn, must be able to aggregate and accommodate the full range of interests within their subculture and to work with counterparts across subcultures, as well as be committed to maintaining stability and cohesion.<sup>21</sup> Nor is every plural society equally well-suited. External threats, lack of a single hegemonic subculture or a bipolar balance of power,<sup>22</sup> a relatively low level of mass mobilization, ability to concentrate on less-than-critical policy issues, and sufficient time for norms to take root all favor a turn toward consociationalism. While consociationalism is unlikely to foster deep cultural integration, the more clearly separated and “encapsulated” the segments at the mass level, the less scope for tension.<sup>23</sup> In short, however straightforward and even intuitive the consociational framework may seem, its application is bound to be limited. We turn to Malaysia to see consociationalism in action (and in decline), then consider its extensibility.

### **Malaysia: Consociational and/or Democracy?**

By the late 1970s, Lijphart was able to identify only ten cases of consociational democracy, including Malaysia from 1955-1969<sup>24</sup> (alone in Southeast Asia) and four others that came close.<sup>25</sup> Since that time, Malaysia has remained among the most frequently touted examples of consociational government, both at home and abroad, even as requisite institutions and patterns have withered. Understanding the course of consociationalism, but also its tenacious discursive afterlife, sheds light on the more subtle aspects and effects of this model in practice and on its potential applications elsewhere. While Malaysia is no longer truly consociational in practice, elite power sharing persists to an extent, and, more importantly, informs expectations and norms of how politics “should” be organized. The model thus remains useful as a framework for conceptualizing interests, their relative priority, and the structures for their articulation in Malaysia, as well as the character of political leaders and constituencies and the relative place of elite versus mass participation.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 216, 221-222.

<sup>22</sup> If all subcultures are minorities, the leaders of all will incline toward cooperation. Lijphart, “Cultural Diversity,” 12.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 14, and Lijphart, “Consociational Democracy.”

<sup>24</sup> Lijphart himself contests that finite periodization. In 1996, he labeled Malaysia as among “prominent examples of consociational systems,” apart from the period from 1969-1971. See Arend Lijphart, “The Puzzle of Indian Democracy: A Consociational Interpretation,” *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 2 (1996): 259. Again quite recently, he referred to Malaysia as one of a few exemplars of “power sharing.” See, Lijphart, “Sharing Power in Africa.”

<sup>25</sup> Lijphart, “Consociational Democracy,” 513-514.

John Sydenham Furnivall famously (and pessimistically) delineated how Malaysia (and Indonesia, molded by very different colonial policies under Dutch rather than British rule) fit his definition of a “plural society”: ethnic groups came together only for commercial ends, usually mixing only in the marketplace; there was an ethnic division of labor; and knitted tenuously by colonial will, society lacked shared values and was inherently unstable.<sup>26</sup> Such a society, seemingly marked by “a kind of voluntary *apartheid* policy,”<sup>27</sup> would seem ripe for consociationalism.

That reading overstates the case. Pluralism, even in Malaysia, is permeable. No election has ever been a “segmental census,” for instance, and class and other loyalties have disrupted the congruence of segmental and socioeconomic organizational boundaries.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Malaysia is ethnically bipolar in the sense that two blocs (initially closer in size<sup>29</sup>) together comprise the vast majority of the population—a pattern which tends to produce fiercely competitive ethnic-based parties<sup>30</sup> and which preempts the sort of multipolar balance Lijphart recommends. Moreover, Malaysia’s subcultures are not sufficiently geographically concentrated for federalism itself to serve as a consociational device;<sup>31</sup> heterogeneous component units based largely on precolonial sultanates comprise its symmetrical, centralized federal structure.<sup>32</sup>

Yet, when Malaysia gained sovereignty in 1957, it was as a consociational democracy. Aspects of Malaysian communalism<sup>33</sup> suggest why Malaysia adopted consociationalism (and conversely, why Indonesia never did). Their ties with both business and the traditional aristocracy meant the leaders of the communal parties that formed Malaysia’s first government commanded legitimacy and could claim plausibly to represent their respective segments. Those parties remain in control, although their leadership has shifted, coincident with the decline of consociational politics. Malaysia’s anticommunist history

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<sup>26</sup> Johan Saravanamuttu, “Multiculturalisms in Crisis: Reflections from Southeast Asia,” *Macalester International* 12, no. 1 (2002): 9-10.

<sup>27</sup> Lijphart, “Cultural Diversity,” 11.

<sup>28</sup> Arend Lijphart, “Consociational Theory: Problems and Prospects—A Reply,” *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 3 (1981): 356.

<sup>29</sup> In 1970, Malays comprised about half Malaysia’s overall population. See, Milne, “Politics, Ethnicity and Class,” 23. Now, *bumiputera* (Malays and indigenous peoples) comprise around 65 percent and Chinese, just over one-quarter of the total population.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>31</sup> Lijphart, “Cultural Diversity,” 10.

<sup>32</sup> Fiscally, Malaysia is among the world’s most centralized federations; the federal government claims most responsibilities and powers, including to override certain state-level decisions; and many key state-level offices are filled by seconded federal officials. See, Francis Hutchinson, “Hidden Counter-Revolution: A History of the Centralisation of Power in Malaysia,” *ISEAS Perspective* 06 (2013): 3-4.

<sup>33</sup> Detailed in Milne, “Politics, Ethnicity and Class,” 23-27.

and lack of experience of widespread class politics has limited awareness of other repertoires for association. The overlap of religious and ethnic cleavages, too, bolstered by Malay claims to indigenosity, discouraged a shift from a communal to class cleavage. Moreover, postcolonial British strategy in conferring leadership on Malaysian communal elites, working in a grand coalition, went far to grant them the initial authority and wherewithal to govern—also conveniently working to ensure the continued political exclusion of class-based mobilization, given the context of the anticommunist Malayan Emergency.<sup>34</sup>

The Alliance coalition formed for Malaysia's first elections in the 1950s united UMNO, the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC), albeit with a tacit agreement that Malays would dominate the polity, while Chinese would enjoy political voice and economic stature.<sup>35</sup> At that point, partly due to the MCA's clout and partly to the character of Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, power sharing really was relatively egalitarian, plus the bureaucracy enjoyed independent authority outside the partisan arena.<sup>36</sup> But few were entirely satisfied; Malay nationalists resented their community's economic subordination, and Chinese, their political subordination.<sup>37</sup>

The Alliance government won, after negotiating distribution of single-member districts among the component parties to ensure proportionality. Voting for a coalition—which competes as a single party—might seem at odds with the segmental party structure at the heart of consociationalism, except that the process essentially works out the “correct” distribution of seats before the (majoritarian) polls, rather than leaving that determination to the voters' preferences.<sup>38</sup> (Still, this system leaves no space for the emergence of alternative cleavages.) Once in power, the Alliance apportioned appointments and largesse, too, roughly per the size of each of the core communal segments. Each community retained significant internal autonomy, particularly in matters of education, language, and religion, at least until 1967, when Malay became the sole official language. Key decisions were negotiated out of the public eye, sustaining the appearance of elite unity.

And yet that sketch misses critical dimensions outside the Alliance core. Various critics have noted Lijphart's relative silence on class dimensions, as

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<sup>34</sup> The choice of majoritarian rather than proportional voting rules likewise effectively precluded the Malayan Communist Party or offshoots' securing a foothold.

<sup>35</sup> Milton J. Esman, “Ethnic Politics and Economic Power,” *Comparative Politics* 19, no. 4 (1987): 402-403.

<sup>36</sup> John Funston, *Malay Politics in Malaysia: A Study of UMNO and PAS* (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational Books [Asia], 1980), 11-17.

<sup>37</sup> Esman, “Ethnic Politics,” 403.

<sup>38</sup> Lijphart, “Indian Democracy,” 260.

well as on other political activities or politics within segments.<sup>39</sup> It is these lacunae that best explain his and others' misdiagnoses of Malaysia. While one can safely say that formal politics was consociational in Malaysia's early years, Alliance politics was never the whole story.

Argues David Brown, the Alliance is best understood as a "class compromise": the two main bourgeois racial class fractions joined forces in an overtly communal partnership. Their strategy of sharing power among three ethnic parties helped to draw in those various constituencies, but on condition of mass accession to a specifically elite-driven order. The Alliance, he explains, "allowed the bourgeois class fractions to disguise the defence of their own class interests as the protection of communal interests."<sup>40</sup> Alliance leaders functioned as communal patrons; "deferential clientelist consciousness" thus crowded out working class consciousness.<sup>41</sup> Alternatively, one might conclude that communal (and colonial) elites actively policed and *suppressed* avenues for noncommunal identification—not that the masses never thought or sought to organize in class terms, but that communal-capitalist elites quashed those options.<sup>42</sup>

Within just about a decade, the consociational balance started to erode. As Indonesian *Konfrontasi* petered out after 1965, Malaysia faced no pressing external threats to rally unity. Meanwhile, on the one hand, tough decisions needed to be made about who should get what resources—both cultural, such as the language of higher education (politically incendiary in the mid-1960s), and material—inevitably raising stakes and resentments. On the other hand, whereas consociationalism rests on *elite* consensus and authority, the masses started to clamor for more of a say. In short, consociationalism requires a tidiness of the political order that Malaysian society could no longer support.

Central to what capsized consociationalism was the combination of perceived interracial zero-sum contests<sup>43</sup> for economic opportunities and intraracial class tensions that encouraged clients to seek better communal patrons. Hence, communal parties fared better than the antibourgeois, noncommunal Parti Rakyat in 1969, while the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, emphasizing Malays' economic marginalization, fared very well.<sup>44</sup> Yet,

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<sup>39</sup> For instance, G. Bingham Powell, Jr., "Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration by Arend Lijphart," *American Political Science Review* 73, no. 1 (1979): 295-297.

<sup>40</sup> David Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge, 1994), 228-229.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>42</sup> I discuss this process at length in Meredith L. Weiss, *Protest and Possibilities: Civil Society and Coalitions for Political Change in Malaysia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006). See also R. K. Vasil, *Politics in a Plural Society: A Study of Non-communal Political Parties in West Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1971).

<sup>43</sup> Note Hsieh's discussion (in this *TJD* special issue) of zero-sum issues as barriers to consociationalism.

<sup>44</sup> Brown, *State and Ethnic Politics*, 231-235.



however corrosive at the mass level, economic inequality may help shore up elite collaboration. Chinese economic dominance,<sup>45</sup> in particular, confirms the community's key role in sustaining national economic growth. The result: rent-seeking "Ali-Baba" Malay-Chinese business agreements, but also continued political cohabitation.<sup>46</sup> As patronage became increasingly salient to political support, however, and in the face of splits within the Chinese community, UMNO worked to mediate the MCA's position as communal designee: by aggressively espousing Malay interests above race-blind assistance, UMNO could (and arguably *did*) fracture Chinese support for intercommunal bargaining.<sup>47</sup>

Politics started to seep outside its communal confines. The ruling coalition has faced noncommunal challengers all along, communal parties face challengers also *within* their own communities, parties in Sabah and Sarawak are not consistently ethnic, and increased government attention to development, particularly among Malays, increased public expectations and demands from across communities, placing a high burden on consociational government.<sup>48</sup> Both the civil service and the military were and are highly Malay-dominated,<sup>49</sup> leaving it largely up to the legislature to balance communal representation in government and link decision makers to constituents.<sup>50</sup> And, yet, communal groups lack the political homogeneity of the parties that profess to represent them.<sup>51</sup> Even when faced with the shared threat of Malay hegemony, for instance, infighting among Indian community elites, plus the MIC's internal divisions and party leaders' disconnect from the grassroots have prevented a united front.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, while the Alliance parties' leaders hailed largely from a "natural" elite of Malay aristocrats and Chinese business leaders, that pattern faltered among non-Alliance and especially non-peninsular parties, more of whom moved directly from varied educational paths to political careers.<sup>53</sup> A new generation of political leaders was rising, lacking innate authority to speak for a community even if willing to do so, just at the time that the "have-nots" across communities were becoming restless.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> The Chinese population has shrunk by around 5 percent since independence, but has doubled its economic share. See Tan, "Sojourners to Citizens," 961.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Musolf and Springer, "Legislatures and Divided Societies," 132.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 116-117.

<sup>49</sup> By 2003, Malays occupied 83 percent of civil service positions; Chinese Malaysians, in particular, were vastly underrepresented. See Vibhanshu Shekhar, "Malay Majoritarianism and Marginalised Indians," *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 8 (2008): 24.

<sup>50</sup> Musolf and Springer, "Legislatures and Divided Societies," 118-119.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 120-121.

<sup>52</sup> Shekhar, "Malay Majoritarianism," 24-25.

<sup>53</sup> Musolf and Springer, "Legislatures and Divided Societies," 121.

<sup>54</sup> Cynthia H. Enloe, *Multi-ethnic Politics: The Case of Malaysia* (Berkeley: Center for South and Southeast Asia Studies, University of California, 1970).

The momentous result: communal riots after unprecedented opposition gains in the May 1969 elections; declaration of emergency, suspension of parliamentary government, rule under a National Operations Council for twenty months, and measures to ensure that Malays remain always politically dominant, with their privileged position now no longer open to discussion or question;<sup>55</sup> then reconstitution of the Alliance as the expanded National Front (BN), albeit still with UMNO, the MCA, and the MIC at its core, and with new members still formally or effectively communal.<sup>56</sup>

And so, Malaysian politics entered a new phase as of 1971. There is still a degree of power sharing in the BN, not least since non-Malay votes still matter intensely for elections, but the balance of power has tipped toward the Malays—who as a numerical majority, constitutionally favored from the outset, and now also the beneficiaries of sweeping affirmative action policies, have always been able to claim, with some merit, that power sharing is on their (magnanimous) terms.<sup>57</sup> Non-Malay parties in the coalition expressed concern with the extent to which UMNO was sincere in its accommodation of non-Malay issues and interests; the Chinese-majority Gerakan, for instance, openly considered withdrawing.<sup>58</sup>

Confounding matters further still is the place of Islam, increasingly the frame for both Malay rights and a top-down model of “national” culture—for instance, per Prime Minister Mahathir’s (retracted) 2001 declaration that Malaysia was an “Islamic state.”<sup>59</sup> While not inherently inimical to ethnic accommodation, Islam has come to advance and signal increased Malay dominance, intruding upon Chinese and other non-Malays’ cultural autonomy.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, even though a rising transethnic middle class came to organize in civil society in the 1980s to protest illiberalism, and the state started to articulate a more integrative message, enjoining a *bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian race),<sup>61</sup> it came under a distinctly Malay-Muslim cultural frame.

A “control” model of power sharing in a plural society better describes Malaysia as of the early 1970s than consociationalism, reflecting also Malaysia’s centralizing turn as Mahathir consolidated his grip on power through the 1980s. Like consociationalism, this model assumes persistent deep vertical cleavages

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<sup>55</sup> Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, “The Emergence of New Politics in Malaysia: From Consociational to Deliberative Democracy,” *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 5, no. 2 (2009): 99.

<sup>56</sup> Milne, “Politics, Ethnicity and Class,” 19.

<sup>57</sup> A gradual decline in the Chinese share of the population suggests a possible long-term withering of what incentives for Malay accommodation remain. See Tan, “Sojourners to Citizens,” 964.

<sup>58</sup> Mohd Azizuddin, “New Politics,” 105-106.

<sup>59</sup> Saravanamuttu, “Multiculturalisms,” 11, 13, and Meredith L. Weiss, “Southeast Asia’s Muslim Majority Democracies: Elections and Islamism outside the MENA Region,” *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 1 (2010): 94.

<sup>60</sup> Tan, “Sojourners to Citizens,” 954-955, 960.

<sup>61</sup> Saravanamuttu, “Multiculturalisms,” 12-13.

and intense intergroup rivalry for social, economic, and political resources, but locates the source of stability not in mutual elite cooperation, but in the strongest group's domination and restraint of its challengers.<sup>62</sup> The difference between models matters, as Lustick explains: Are resources allocated based on group elites' mutual interests or on the interests of just one segment; are linkages in terms of exchange or penetrative extraction; is hard bargaining a necessary fact or a sign of breakdown; do government officials perform more as neutral umpires or as partisan instruments; is the system legitimated in terms of common welfare or a group-specific ideology; are subgroup elites challenged equally by the need to maintain internal group discipline or differentially by ways to either manipulate or cope with manipulation; and is the better metaphor a balanced scale or a puppeteer?<sup>63</sup> Under BN rule, Malaysia shifted decisively toward the control side of this continuum.

Surveying attitudes of Malaysian members of parliament in 1975, Musolf and Springer found clear differences across parties on the one hand—with the major cleavage being the old Alliance three versus the rest (although the BN-opposition distinction also mattered)—and communities on the other hand, suggesting concordance with Lustick's sketch. Malay MPs were less likely to believe in the right to public dissent, for instance, while Alliance MPs were more likely to presume the superiority of “enlightened and experienced leaders,” and far less prone to deem the average citizen politically well-informed.<sup>64</sup> Attitudes differed, too, on policy dimensions: non-Alliance MPs were more concerned with economic equality than with growth, for instance—and development-related issues offered especial scope for noncommunal alignments.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, MPs from different communities tended to interact with their constituencies differently, based on how they derived authority: Malays as communal leaders with traditional authority, non-Malay indigenes from local political cultural traditions, Chinese from service-delivery.<sup>66</sup> Meanwhile, Alliance MPs spent time allocating government resources, while those of other parties, lacking such access and having gained support based on claims of Alliance neglect, focused on representing their districts' interests.<sup>67</sup>

Even so, the persistence of both communalism and elite-dominated coalition politics—and the about-equal repression of participation by majority and minority groups alike—has kept the label “consociational” alive. Malaysian political scientist Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, for instance, proposes that only

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<sup>62</sup> Ian Lustick, “Stability in Deeply Divided Societies: Consociationalism versus Control,” *World Politics* 31, no. 3 (1979): 327-328.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 330-332.

<sup>64</sup> Musolf and Springer, “Legislatures and Divided Societies,” 122-124.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 124-125.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 126-128.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 128-130.

with the 2008 elections, which saw the BN suffer its greatest losses to date, did consociational elite politics finally give way to a new model of “deliberative democracy,” fueled by a combination of unraveling within the BN, civil societal mobilization, and new media outlets.<sup>68</sup> Much of that deliberation, though, may command neither audience nor impact, being located in civil society and (online) media, facing limits in the issues legal to discuss, or focusing on somewhat amorphous initiatives for public feedback on policies.<sup>69</sup>

One might argue that 2008 marks less abrupt a shift than Mohd Azizuddin proposes—1999’s *Reformasi* elections, for instance, saw a similar surge in mass mobilization, albeit with less success—but the argument of a shift from intercommunal elite power sharing to greater belief in popular entitlement to participate in decision making, as well as intracommunal rivalry, holds. Curbs not just on political parties, but also on civil society—channels for mass involvement in politics and policy—are testament to the regime’s reliance on limiting participation. Indeed, consociational democracies generally seek to control information flows, lest the masses accumulate “enough ammunition to be able to stir up trouble against negotiated agreements”;<sup>70</sup> the salience of new media might be read in this light. Yet, even those who argue for a different tipping point—for 1969’s marking the moment when popular inputs overwhelmed and upset the system of elite negotiation<sup>71</sup> rather than 1999, 2008, or some other date—would still fault the same dynamics.

The prominence of elite provocateurs is perhaps the most damning evidence of how far Malaysia is from a consociational balance. Elite culture—and particularly attitudes of tolerance, accommodation, moderation, and conflict-avoidance—is essential to consociational power sharing.<sup>72</sup> Malay chauvinists have claimed an increasingly exalted platform within UMNO in recent years, embodied in strident calls at UMNO meetings (like Hishamuddin’s) for defense of Malay supremacy. As mass mobilization in forms such as 2007’s Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) and BN losses especially among non-Malays in 2008 attest, Chinese and Indian voters no longer feel so confident of their stature within the BN.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, Malay voters have come to see their representatives, however voluble, as more self-absorbed than committed to the good of the community, contributing to a lesser decline in Malay votes for the BN, too, in 2008.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Mohd Azizuddin, “New Politics,” 97.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 120-124.

<sup>70</sup> Barry, “Political Accommodation,” 484.

<sup>71</sup> For instance, Esman, “Ethnic Politics.”

<sup>72</sup> Musolf and Springer, “Legislatures and Divided Societies,” 122.

<sup>73</sup> Shekhar, “Malay Majoritarianism,” 22, and Mohd Azizuddin, “New Politics,” 103-104.

<sup>74</sup> Lijphart, “New Politics,” 105.

Since then, that new PM Najib Tun Razak has so adamantly stressed the integrationist slogan “1Malaysia,” including not just a set of values (perseverance, meritocracy, integrity, and so on), but also performance indicators for government ministers and mechanisms for collecting public feedback<sup>75</sup> implies a BN effort to stress anew the inclusiveness of BN rule. But intracommunal fractures remain wide and deep. Writes Ooi Kee Beng,

the problem of looming economic malaise is minor...when compared to the project of creating a comfortable Malaysian identity, which is of course what building a nation is all about. It is here that the development of the country’s political discourse has twisted itself into a deadlock. ...The key question still echoes in the background: Who has the right to contribute to a future Malaysian culture, and who not?<sup>76</sup>

The combined impact of debates over education and culture, the Constitution’s specific definition and elevation of “Malay,” and functional decisions such as the allocation of electoral districts among BN parties have entrenched ethnic identities, and an ethnic hierarchy, among the general public,<sup>77</sup> rhetoric of “Malaysian” unity notwithstanding.

The shell of consociationalism offers a useful fiction in these semicoherent efforts to privilege one group without completely alienating still-necessary others. Frequent claims to power sharing, often invoking the term “consociational” (at least in more academic treatments), suggest a way in which norms of consociationalism have been embraced: even if the regime is manifestly *not* consociational, Malay elites base political legitimacy, in no small part, on their claim to be so, and thus are bound not to go too far in pushing their own group’s hegemony. (It matters, too, that intracommunal electoral fragmentation has left UMNO at times lacking the votes and seats to govern without its coalition partners.)

At the same time, consociationalism aspires to be a totalizing system: by including all identified segments, the regime includes all citizens; each has his or her niche. Under the banner of consociationalism, then, the BN regime can “legitimately” exclude segments organized otherwise than communally—even if, in fact, Malay, Chinese, Indian, Other is neither mutually exclusive nor collectively exhaustive (even allowing for the rather awkward enumeration of communities indigenous to Sarawak and Sabah).

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 116-117.

<sup>76</sup> Ooi Kee Beng, “Malaysia’s Togetherness Survives Despite Its Leaders,” *Wikibeng*, no. 4, February 2013, <http://wikibeng.com/2013/02/04/malaysias-togetherness-survives-despite-its-leaders/> (accessed March 7, 2013).

<sup>77</sup> Amy L. Freedman, “The Effect of Government Policy and Institutions on Chinese Overseas Acculturation: The Case of Malaysia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 35, no. 2 (2001): 411-440.

In addition, consociational *democracy* is a convenient disclaimer: illiberal praxis, from back-door dealings to patronage flows, masquerades as the mere requirements of power sharing. The model itself poses an oxymoron: a consociational system rests and relies upon the systematic disenfranchisement (or at least, constrained voice) of the masses, including lack of space to choose one's primary political identity. Hence, Cynthia Enloe, for instance, posits that as development penetrates more deeply into society, the masses grow more restless and less inclined to defer to their ethnic elites, even as they also become more chauvinistic and hostile toward other ethnic groups, qua competitors.<sup>78</sup> Lack of a strong political opposition would not be a reason to disqualify a state from the "consociational democracy" ranks; the nature of a grand coalition "necessarily entails either a relatively small and weak opposition or the absence of any formal opposition in the legislature."<sup>79</sup> The BN sees anything less than a supermajority as failure (hence, its palpable dismay in 1969 and 2008), but could as easily frame that hegemonic aspiration as a yen to be absolutely *inclusive*, obviating challenge, as autocratically to *exclude* opponents.

And the consociational label may "excuse" economic inefficiency. Consociational government tends to be slow, opaque, and indecisive, given the requirement of a mutual veto and hence, consensus.<sup>80</sup> It may also be costly, given the necessary proliferation in government bodies and facilities for each subculture.<sup>81</sup> Thus, consociationalism is perhaps inevitably at odds with an impatiently developmentalist agenda. Yet, it is not as though Malaysian development would be fully optimized if not for concessions to the power-sharing process, even given clientelist patterns. Moreover, whereas proportional appointments to administrative service may be at the expense of efficiency, for instance, prevailing policies to favor *bumiputera* likely have the same effect. All the same, while Malaysia seems not to have encountered the immobilism of which Lijphart warns, the ease by which elite-determined proportional appointments may become patronage bonanzas, as well as the curbs power sharing may place on speedy decision making, call into question the model's suitability for a state in which economic concerns are overriding.

In other words, part of what makes Malaysian experience significant to students of consociational democracy is its path out of that model—and what it may have accomplished by then, for whom, and over how long a period. Indeed, Lijphart proposes consociationalism as a sometimes temporary solution, to "resolve some of the major disagreements among subcultures and thus depoliticize cultural divergences," while building "sufficient mutual trust at

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<sup>78</sup> Cynthia H. Enloe, *Ethnic Conflict and Political Development* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973).

<sup>79</sup> Lijphart, *Plural Societies*, 47.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-51.

<sup>81</sup> Lijphart, "Cultural Diversity," 14.

both elite and mass levels to render its own demise possible.”<sup>82</sup> Unfortunately, by structuring governance around social cleavages, consociationalism may evade or undercut efforts to diminish those divisions. Just as colonialism—the economic niches established, the cultivation of capitalist successors—paves a path into consociationalism, the latter structures subsequent regime options. Malaysian consociationalism becomes a tutelary period for internalizing multiracial accommodation without need for continued rigid institutionalization, in one reading, or a genre of electoral authoritarianism, unhelpful for cultivating habits of democratic praxis, in another. Clearly, though, Malaysian consociationalism did *not* depoliticize cultural differences. Rather, it left rewards, and hence loyalties, structured in communal terms, even while demonstrating the inability of well-educated, wealthy communal *elites* effectively to advocate for and represent the full spectrum of their respective communities.

### Lessons and Extensions for the Region

Malaysia is far from the only plural society in the region. While certain aspects of Malaysia’s transition from colonial to independent rule, for instance, help explain why this state and not others adopted consociationalism, consociational institutions could work elsewhere, at certain levels of government, in certain regions, or for particular issue areas.<sup>83</sup> To explore such possibilities, I first consider alternative frameworks for consociationalism, since other postcolonial Asian states have adopted different institutional solutions or pursued partial approaches, then ask whether consociationalism might be an option for Myanmar.

India offers an important alternative model, especially for states with cognate demographic patterns. Lijphart represents India as fully consociational until the mid-1960s and still largely so since then, however challenged (as in Malaysia) by pressure from popular mobilization. Yet, here substance trumps overt form: the government is mainly majoritarian, with frequent one-party cabinets, a heavily centralized federal system, and a highly disproportionate electoral system. It was the Congress Party that at least until 1967, produced a *de facto* grand coalition via the cabinet;<sup>84</sup> with diminished power sharing since has come an increase in Hindu–Muslim violence.<sup>85</sup> Still, linguistic and state boundaries coincide in an asymmetric federation—unlike in Malaysia,

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> For example, per Steiner, “Consociational Theory.”

<sup>84</sup> Singapore’s single-party-dominant People’s Action Party claims to be similarly purposively representative, yet without India’s segmented federalist firmament, and specifically in order to obviate communal loyalties.

<sup>85</sup> Lijphart, “Indian Democracy,” 259–262, 265.

whose cross-cutting federal system offers no check on, for instance, totalizing Islamist cultural aspirations—allowing for cultural and educational autonomy, together with separate personal laws for religious groups.

Or if remaking a state in its entirety is implausible, what about a partial remedy, targeting only certain portions or levels? Ashutosh Varshney, for instance, notes the need to home in on subnational institutions, whether political parties or local civic organizations, rather than hovering at the national level (as ethnic conflict theorists tend to do).<sup>86</sup> Such targeted power sharing may be a less blunt tool than a nationwide approach. Most obvious among such remedies are versions of “special autonomy,” combining asymmetric federalism with localized power sharing and other consociational mechanisms.<sup>87</sup> Thai and Filipino experience is instructive, not just concerning available frameworks, but also regarding the limits to institutional remedies in the absence of cultural buy-in and legitimacy.

The Malay Muslim-majority provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat in southern Thailand have never embraced, and at times have openly resisted, the central Thai state. An elite pact from 1980-1988 created the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center, linchpin of a set of arrangements for consultative governance, Malay Muslim-run private Islamic schools, and political roles for Malay Muslims.<sup>88</sup> Those institutions have been whittled back subsequently, particularly under Thaksin Shinawatra, who declared a state of emergency in the provinces in 2005.<sup>89</sup> Having spiked in 1993 and 1997, violence surged again in 2004-2007, spearheaded by organizations such as the Pattani United Liberation Organization and Barisan Nasional Revolusi (National Revolutionary Force), and targeting government officials and police, as well as local Thai schools, in particular (perhaps hinting at the resonance of education policy). These organizations took advantage, too, of periodic reformist moments within the Thai state, to push for more representative institutions.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Ashutosh Varshney, “Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflict,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*, ed. Carles Boix and Susan C. Stokes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 289-290.

<sup>87</sup> See also, Florian Bieber, “Power Sharing and Democracy in Southeast Europe,” in this *TJD* special issue, on parallel (and similarly fraught) forms of decentralization in Central and Eastern Europe.

<sup>88</sup> Duncan McCargo, “Informal Citizens: Graduated Citizenship in Southern Thailand,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34, no. 5 (2011): 839-840.

<sup>89</sup> Francis Kok Wah Loh, “Procedural Democracy, Partitipatory Democracy and Regional Networking: The Multi-terrain Struggle for Democracy in Southeast Asia,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 9, no. 2 (2008): 131.

<sup>90</sup> Vince Boudreau, “Recruitment and Attack in Southeast Asian Collective Violence,” in *Political Violence in South and Southeast Asia: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Itty Abraham, Edward Newman, and Meredith L. Weiss (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2010), 151-152.



Insurgent campaigns have waxed and waned in response to efforts at institutional accommodation, suggesting the purchase of such initiatives. Regardless, Duncan McCargo argues that the problem runs deeper: unlike Thai Muslims in central Thailand, Malay Muslims in Thailand's southern provinces are not deemed to meet the criteria for Thai citizenship, broadly understood, *de jure* nationality notwithstanding. He notes allegations, especially after 2004, that suggested how strong Thai elite suspicions of Malay Muslims' "loyalty" remained.<sup>91</sup> Any effort to mimic Thai experience, then, needs to keep such affective constraints in mind, as moderation requires trust.

Efforts to quell insurgency in the southern Philippines province of Mindanao similarly offer examples both of creative power sharing and of hurdles not well-addressed by the institutional logic of consociationalism. The *bangsa Moro* (Moro nation) has resisted the central state since Spanish incursions in the sixteenth century, although the dominant Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) have signed agreements for peace and/or provincial autonomy at points since the 1970s. The post-People Power constitution of 1987 established an Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), eventually resulting in a peace agreement with (initially only) the MNLF and the institutional framework for a zone of peace and development.<sup>92</sup>

Compared with the largely integrationist institutional structure of the Philippines, the ARMM represents substantial power sharing, with executive and legislative autonomy on a range of matters and broad administrative and regulatory authority. The ARMM law does not set quotas for Muslims in government, but directs the president to appoint them to public office. Teaching of Arabic in public schools, plus recognition of customary dispute-resolution and other practices protect cultural autonomy. A collective executive includes representatives of the Muslim (Moro), Christian, and *lumad* (indigenous) communities, while at least six of ten members of the regional cabinet must be from different indigenous cultural communities. In practice, though, the governor has tended both to rule independently of the collective body and to appoint to the cabinet and civil service members of his own ethnic group, and being in the majority, Moros dominate the regional legislature.<sup>93</sup>

But coalitional leadership is only part of the story. Provincial and municipal local government units, connected directly to both the federal and regional

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<sup>91</sup> McCargo, "Informal Citizens," 839-840.

<sup>92</sup> Saravanamuttu, "Multiculturalisms," 19-22. As of this writing, negotiations are underway between the government and the MILF for a revamped Bangsamoro to replace the ARMM. The 2012 Framework Agreement is available at <http://www.gov.ph/the-2012-framework-agreement-on-the-bangsamoro/> (accessed March 7, 2013).

<sup>93</sup> Miriam Coronel Ferrer, "To Share or Divide Power? Minorities in Autonomous Regions, the Case of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35, no. 12 (2012): 2101-2102, 2104, 2106.

levels, retain significant political, administrative, and fiscal authority. These units represent a *power-dividing* feature: they embody diverse majorities, but taken in sum, empower a broad range of groups.<sup>94</sup> That diversity is key, given the danger of further marginalization of smaller minorities excluded from power-sharing agreements, especially when based on a static roster of categories. Based on the experience of the ARMM, Ferrer recommends tempering power-sharing with power-dividing measures: for guarantees of minority rights via decentralization to the very local level, proportionality in appointments, and so forth, but also for overarching institutionalized checks-and-balances, shifting majorities, and a firm commitment to individual and group rights. Such a mix redistributes power and promotes participation and trust, while helping to stave off too-strong entrenchment of ethnic cleavages by promoting cross-cutting alignments.<sup>95</sup>

Which brings us to Myanmar. Although among the world's most multinational states, Myanmar has never adopted a multicultural policy framework.<sup>96</sup> Burmans constitute around 60 percent of the population; the other 40 percent includes over one hundred minority groups. Only the largest of these, the Karen (including cultural and linguistic subgroups), comprises over 10 percent of the population.<sup>97</sup> The identification of these groups as distinct, mutually exclusive nations has origins only in the colonial era, making ethnicity per se slippery,<sup>98</sup> yet these categories form the basis of determined, including violent, claims making. The Karen, for instance, first formed the Karen National Union and declared a Free State of Kawthoolei in the mid-1940s, as the Burmese-dominated state was taking shape.<sup>99</sup> Over the next half-century, twenty-four separatist factions, involving twelve main groups, sought autonomy or secession.<sup>100</sup>

Upon independence in 1948, Myanmar wavered between federalism and centralization. Ethnic minorities increasingly resisted the Burmanizing army as it consolidated political control from the late 1950s onward, then, in 1962, formally overthrew the democratic regime, along with pretensions to federalism. The 1974 constitution partitioned the country into seven ethnically defined (though not fully or homogeneously so) states and seven Burman divisions, but for administrative convenience and ultimate assimilation, not to establish autonomy.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 2105.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 2099-2100, 2109. A caveat: the mechanisms put in place must be adequately resourced and empowered, and not stymied by corruption, as Ferrer finds was the case in Mindanao.

<sup>96</sup> Saravanamuttu, "Multiculturalisms," 22.

<sup>97</sup> Curtis N. Thomson, "Political Stability and Minority Groups in Burma," *Geographical Review* 85, no. 3 (1995): 275, 277.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 281-282.

<sup>99</sup> Saravanamuttu, "Multiculturalisms," 23.

<sup>100</sup> Thomson, "Political Stability," 273-274.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 273-274, 277.

As Myanmar now embraces democracy of a sort, national integration remains a challenge. Consociationalism is a possibility. Mary Callahan recommends a mutual veto in decision making; education and mass media in minority languages; and favoring previously excluded minorities in army, university, and bureaucratic recruitment and promotion. The problem, she notes, is that the dominant Burmans—the clear majority—have not been under pressure to cede or share their politically privileged position (at least as of her writing, but seemingly still not today), nor do most know enough about their beleaguered compatriots to feel empathetic generosity.<sup>102</sup> The sort of mistrust plaguing southern Thailand is likely to complicate efforts here, as well, even despite both international encouragement for inclusiveness and domestic anxiety over territorial integrity. Indeed, the most important factors generally weighing against adoption of consociational power sharing are a solid majority that prefers majority rule and the presence of large socioeconomic disparities across segments,<sup>103</sup> both of which apply in Myanmar. Still, were the Burman center willing to share real power, group autonomy via Indian-style territorial federalism would be plausible.

More germane still is the state's institutional legacy. Malaysia and India transitioned from British colonial rule to consociational governance, albeit with different trajectories. Myanmar has the burden of a protracted authoritarian legacy, stretching down to the grassroots; it lacks even local-level democratic traditions akin to India's *panchayat* system to sustain habits of compromise conducive to democracy generally, and especially to consociationalism.<sup>104</sup>

The issue remains, too, of leadership: that is, whether an elite pact could muster legitimacy in Myanmar, given the country's authoritarian past and the fact that, all this while, members of the military arguably have been acting in their own interests, and only incidentally as communal champions, even in the eyes of central Burmans. A Lijphartian elite cartel requires not only well-meaning, but also authoritative, elites. The Burmese case thus begs the question of how set an authoritarian system can be and still be convertible to a power-sharing framework.

Meanwhile, minority groups' long-term exclusion from legitimate political voice in Myanmar has reinforced not only ethnic cleavages, but also disaffection from the state, evinced most starkly in several of those groups' seeking separation and independence, rather than recognition and participation.<sup>105</sup> For pluralism to supplant today's unitarist approach would require not only that the state be willing to allow a fair degree of segmental autonomy, itself already

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<sup>102</sup> Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 225-226.

<sup>103</sup> Lijphart, "Indian Democracy," 262-263.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>105</sup> Thomson, "Political Stability," 270-271.

unlikely, as noted above, but also that these disaffected segments trust in and accede to a reconstituted state. The Myanmar state's intransigent push for political, economic, territorial, and administrative centralization, conceding not even symbolic recognition of minority groups' identities, would pose a hard legacy to overcome. And yet unity among ethnic minorities is just as unlikely, given multidimensional differences; all they have in common is the state as their enemy.<sup>106</sup>

In short, consociational democracy modeled on Malaysia and India—power sharing in the central government, with asymmetrical federalism, segmental autonomy, and a mutual veto—makes institutional sense for Myanmar, but remains improbable and insufficient. The central state is both unyielding and illegitimate to those minorities it would need to embrace, while local traditions and identities offer little ground to assume domestic pressure would seek or accept such a restructuring, regardless. Moreover, key zero-sum or at least highly divisive issues remain to be solved about the structure of the state and the entitlements of citizenship; consociationalism is ill-suited to manage such departures from normal politics. The example of Mindanao recommends instead a reordering that takes seriously different arenas for decision making in order to circumvent the problem of incomplete commitment to power sharing and questions of who is represented or excluded. Myanmar could consider retaining an integrationist federal level, supplemented by consociational mechanisms (at least power sharing and significant cultural autonomy) at the state level, atop majoritarian local governments, ideally all with broader scope than previously for subelite, deliberative engagement within civil society.

## Conclusions

At the broadest level, the comparative cases considered in this essay suggest how much scope for variation and error there is within a consociational framework. However parsimonious on face—Lijphart confidently presents a simple constitutional rubric he deems can effectively fit most divided societies<sup>107</sup>—the consociational model offers room for customization. One obvious example: voting rules. Lijphart recommends PR voting; Malaysia and India function reasonably well with majoritarian voting; other theorists recommend alternative, supplementary, or single transferable vote systems,<sup>108</sup> to force mutual dependence.<sup>109</sup> Yet, as these cases make clear, the devil of

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<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 283-284.

<sup>107</sup> Arend Lijphart, "Constitutional Design for Divided Societies," *Journal of Democracy* 15, no. 2 (2004): 99-106.

<sup>108</sup> For details, see House of Commons Library, "Voting Systems: The Jenkins Report, Research Paper 98/112," (London: House of Commons [UK], 1988).

<sup>109</sup> Benjamin Reilly, "Electoral Systems for Divided Societies," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (2002): 157-158.

consociational success is in the details. For a more realistic than satisfying conclusion, I focus on two such details: the nature of identity required or forged, and the space for participation involved.

As even Lijphart acknowledges, ethnic identities are neither fully endogenous nor inevitably the most salient categories available. Institutions themselves (among other factors) can alter the salience of identities, and constructivists propose identity choice as a dependent variable to be explained rather than an independent variable with explanatory power.<sup>110</sup> Lijphart insists that iterations of his model since around 1980 have taken the constructivist turn into account, including by considering the possibility of both predetermined and self-determined groups in power-sharing systems, and he emphasizes that consociational democracy encompasses a range of institutional solutions, so long as the four core principles (grand coalition, and so on) apply. Still, while determining shares by PR voting offers a workaround, the system is still premised on an assumption of mutually exclusive, collectively exhaustive categories.

The trickiest issue institutionally, then, is to determine at what point and how to define the groups in power sharing; allowing groups to identify and define themselves—as adopted, for instance, in South Africa’s post-apartheid constitution—is usually preferable, to ensure that all accept their group assignation, all are included, and shares are not rigidly fixed.<sup>111</sup> That said, fluidity may prove a one-time thing. As the persistence of communalism in Malaysia—even despite serious intraethnic inequality—suggests, ethnic identities tend to solidify in the course of interaction with others and, especially, conflict: those encounters make the “we” more clear.<sup>112</sup> Even the cleverest consociationalism, then, may find ongoing dynamism impossible and rigidity unavoidable—hence the appeal of power-dividing local governments, as in Mindanao.

Finally, as the breakdown of power-sharing mechanisms in Malaysia and India illustrates, consociational government cannot abide mass mobilization: the system requires that active participation be confined to elites, who, in turn, command their constituents’ trust. Such a requirement seems antithetical to democratic deepening in a transitional state. John Dryzek offers a possible workaround. Consociationalism, he argues, functions by sidestepping key components of democracy, but elections have little meaning when governing elites are predetermined and contentious deliberation is not only reserved to those luminaries, but also conducted largely in secret for fear of riling

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<sup>110</sup> For example, Varshney, “Ethnicity,” 290, and Kanchan Chandra, “Cumulative Findings in the Study of Ethnic Politics,” *APSA-CP* 12, no. 1 (2001): 7-11.

<sup>111</sup> Arend Lijphart, “Constructivism and Consociational Theory,” *APSA-CP* 12, no. 1 (2001): 11-13.

<sup>112</sup> Judith Howard, “The Social Psychology of Identities,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 367-393, and Stephen Van Evera, “Primordialism Lives!” *APSA-CP* 12, no. 1 (2001): 20-22.

the people. Political communication is then restrained to within one's own bloc, purposefully minimizing interactions across group boundaries for any but elites.<sup>113</sup> Such a system essentially freezes, and may magnify or create, cleavages which otherwise might be deconstructed or unlearned over time, and undermines groups' ability to coexist productively.<sup>114</sup> Decoupling politics from the state, Dryzek hence advocates deliberation in the public sphere, informing but at some distance from the decision-making state. Such discourse may help, too, to forestall the rigidifying effects of category politics by encouraging intersubjective understanding and exchange, perhaps percolating up into policy outcomes.<sup>115</sup> Hence, the role of civil society in a possible future Myanmar, for instance, to involve nonstate actors in aspects of institutional design and operation before and apart from partisan politics, even if with curbs to encourage or require civility in the absence of engrained trust.

Taken together, these cases and critiques recommend a holistic approach to managing social pluralism—accepting that: ethnic identities coexist with others, often equally or more politically salient; “the masses” may readily seek voice as well as representation; elite authority may stem from (and be contested from) multiple bases; institutions can only accomplish so much; and the national level may look very different from its component parts. Even so, the essential components of Lijphart's model remain highly germane to Southeast Asia, so long as taken more as starting points than destinations.

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<sup>113</sup> John S. Dryzek, “Deliberative Democracy in Divided Societies: Alternatives to Agonism and Analgesia,” *Political Theory* 33, no. 2 (2005): 222. See also, Baogang He, “Deliberative Democracies and Deliberative Conflict Resolution in the Divided Society,” in this *TJD* special issue.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 222-223, 238.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 223-225, 233-234.