

Nationalist Foundations of Lasting Democracy and Authoritarianism: Lessons from South and Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Nationalism and democracy are both expressions of popular sovereignty. Yet while political scientists increasingly recognize how different types of nationalism affect outcomes ranging from public goods to mass violence to immigration policies, we have not systematically considered how they might shape different types of political regimes. Working from the puzzling democratic behemoth of India, we argue that a relatively egalitarian founding definition of the national community provides an important resource for overcoming inequalities based upon ethnic, religious, and linguistic identities. This helps political actors forge democracy in otherwise unpropitious settings; deepen democracy once it is implanted; and defend it whenever it is under attack. More hierarchical forms of nationalism, such as the kind propagated in Malaysia, have legitimized authoritarian rule and justified assaults against democracy during moments of political crisis. Though historically constructed, the founding narratives of nationalism affect a country's long-term democratic prospects by shaping ongoing battles over political inclusion and citizenship.

I. Introduction and Arguments

Inequality has long been widely and rightly seen as one of the greatest threats to democracy. For most political scientists, the most lethal kind of inequality for democracy is some form of *economic* inequality: e.g. income, land, or wealth inequality. In this essay, we adopt a more historical, sociological, and ideological approach to the question of how inequality threatens democracy.

Our central argument is that another type of inequality can prove especially ominous for a country's democratic prospects: formalized political stratification across ethnic, religious, class, linguistic, and/or regional communities. Drawing from cases across South and Southeast Asia, we argue that the codification of *egalitarian* conceptions of citizenship along key social cleavages at the founding moment of national imagining helps explain puzzling democratic successes. Meanwhile, the codification of a *hierarchical* conception of citizenship at a similar nation-founding moment can shed new light on puzzling cases of authoritarianism. For our purposes in this paper, we detail how egalitarian nationalism has helped India become the steadiest democracy in South Asia, while hierarchical nationalism has powerfully contributed to Malaysia becoming one of the most lasting authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia. The paper's penultimate section cursorily considers how types of nationalism have historically

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influenced regime types in other southern Asian countries such as Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

Recent literature has convincingly argued that when the “national political community” (Lieberman 2001) is defined in relatively inclusive terms through a nation’s “founding narrative” (Straus 2015, Miguel 2004) or census (Lieberman and Singh, 2017), a wide array of virtuous political outcomes becomes more likely: provision of more public goods (Miguel 2004, Singh 2015, Lieberman 2011), incorporation of immigrants from ethnic and religious minorities (Goodman 2015), attraction of foreign direct investment for economic development (Liu 2014), protection of minorities from mass killing or genocide (Straus 2015), and the presence of subsequent conflict and violence (Cederman et. al. 2016, Lieberman and Singh 2017).

Here we extend these valuable insights to the literature on political regimes. We argue that egalitarian forms of nationalism have propitious long-term implications for building and maintaining democracy, while hierarchical nationalism fosters exclusionary (as opposed to more inclusionary, populist and left-wing) forms of authoritarianism. Our comparative-historical analysis below traces the ways in which regime-founding national identities have been repeatedly employed by long-dominant political parties at pivotal regime moments to support democratic and authoritarian regimes in two Asian cases – India and Malaysia. Specifically, an egalitarian conception of the Indian nation has restrained but not quashed the impetus towards unconstrained majoritarianism while hierarchical nationalism has legitimated and expanded the orbit of state repression in Malaysia. In both of these cases, historically articulated forms of national identity have been recurrently harnessed as a legitimating resource in pivotal regime moments.

Our previous work has detailed how South and Southeast Asian nations came into being, birthed during the anticolonial struggles of the mid-twentieth century when most Asian nations were first imagined,² propagated and codified. We build upon these arguments and extend them to the present day to show that where nationalist movements and parties managed to build winning coalitions behind a vision of the “national political community”³ that were relatively *egalitarian* – by granting equal political status to all citizens across class, ethnic, religious, and linguistic divides – the prospects for democracy were stronger than in countries where the victorious founding coalition defined the nation along more hierarchical lines. In countries where more hierarchical terms of citizenship were adopted, political entrepreneurs could more readily find ready-made fault lines along which to assert authoritarian power over the “second-class” citizens whose place in the nation lacked sufficient definition and protection. The foundational definitions of the nation legitimated or undermined ideals and identities and these ideational frames would be resurrected at pivotal moments in a country’s history to legitimate or undermine regime challengers.

² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1983).

³ Evan Lieberman, *Race and Regionalism in the Politics of Taxation in Brazil and South Africa*, (New York: Cambridge University Press 2003).

Our notions of egalitarian versus hierarchical nationalism draws on but also differs from existing nationalist typologies. For instance, Greenfeld argues that nationalism can either be *ethnic* or *civic* in character, distinguishing political communities that grant citizenship only to ethnic “sons of the soil” from those where non-coethnic populations merit equal – and not mere “immigrant” – political status.⁴ Along similar lines, Vom Hau has illuminated the important distinction between *liberal* nationalism, i.e. an elite political-territorial understanding of the nation, and *populist* nationalism, which portrays “popular classes...as protagonists of national history.”⁵ When taken in tandem, then, Greenfeld and Vom Hau suggest that a truly egalitarian nationalism must overcome codified stratification between ethnic and religious communities on the one hand, and between traditional, feudalistic elites and “ordinary people”⁶ on the other. The upshot is a form of nationalism that is simultaneously attentive to majorities through popular inclusion and to minorities through civic protections.

By contrast, hierarchical nationalism legitimizes political stratification along class and/or ascriptive lines by positioning either traditionalist, feudalistic elites and/or representatives of a single ethnic or regional community as the true historical champions of nationhood. Neither vertical cleavages between elites and masses nor horizontal cleavages between ethnic and religious groups are broken down when the nation is defined hierarchically, with deleterious implications for democratic development over the long haul. While we focus on the cases of India and Malaysia because they provide examples of strongly articulated egalitarian and hierarchical nationalisms respectively, our argument extends to post-colonial cases across Asia. (See Table 1 below.)

⁴ Leah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁵ Matthias Vom Hau, “State Infrastructural Power and Nationalism: Comparative Lessons from Mexico and Argentina” in *Studies in Comparative International Development* 43(2008), 336.

⁶ Nancy Bermeo, *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times. The Citizenry and the Breakdown of Democracy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

Table 1. Nationalist Types and Regime Implications

		<u>Communalism</u>	
		Higher	Lower
<u>Elitism</u>	Higher	<p>Hierarchical Nationalism</p> <p>Pakistan – Highest Malaysia – Intermediate</p> <p>* strongest resource for authoritarianism</p>	<p>Aristocratic Nationalism</p> <p>Thailand – Highest Singapore – Intermediate</p> <p>* regime-indeterminant: prone to oligarchy, conservatism, class stratification</p>
	Lower	<p>Majoritarian Nationalism</p> <p>Myanmar – Highest Sri Lanka – Intermediate</p> <p>* regime-indeterminant: prone to populism, ethnic nativism, unsustainable public spending</p>	<p>Egalitarian Nationalism</p> <p>India – Highest Indonesia – Intermediate</p> <p>* strongest resource for democracy</p>

To be sure, all nations are exclusionary projects whose boundaries exclude non-citizens (Tamir 1993, Wimmer 2013). That all nations are exclusionary with respect to outsiders, however, should not obscure key differences as to whether nations formalize hierarchies *within* its citizenry. Just because political leaders almost universally claim that their nation is an egalitarian political community of citizenship does not mean that this promise is even remotely fulfilled in practice. We draw attention to how the founding definition of the national community, once codified, gets activated and employed. We argue that how hierarchical identities are articulated and codified at regime-founding moments can legitimate or undermine subsequent attempts by political entrepreneurs to employ identity politics to marginalize whole categories of citizens.

This argument serves as an important complement to literature asserting the central role of economic inequalities in destabilizing governments and regimes—a literature which has dominated scholarly research into democratization for more than a decade (Boix 2003, Acemoglu and Robinson 2006, Ansell and Samuels 2015), and traces its roots back at least half a century (Moore 1966) and arguably for millennia, starting with Aristotle. In its most updated form (Ansell and Samuels 2015), rising inequality drives democratization because new economic elites push for democratization. But new economic elites in some cases, such as Malaysia, are not able to use their wealth

to push for commensurate political power. In this paper, we lay bare an important way in which historical choices about who constitutes the national political community constrains the possibilities for new economic elite to legitimate their claims to political power.⁷

In the developing world, non-class social groups along dimensions of religion, region, ethnicity and nationality defined regime choices at founding moments. These key institutional choices at founding moments—the choice of national language (Liu 2014), the relationship of religious organizations to the nation (Gryzmala Busse 2016), and the treatment of ethnic and religious communities (Lerner 2013)—matter independently of the constituencies’ promoting them at founding moments because they help to legitimate or undermine certain political goals. The founding narratives and institutional decisions provide ideational resources to politicians grappling for power decades later, even when class structures and ruling coalitions have shifted and evolved.

In making this argument, we join a growing scholarly community responding to the call to develop a comparative analytic in studies of ethnicity and nationalism that avoids ‘the Scylla of hyperconstructivism as much as the Charybdis of essentialism’ (Wimmer 2013). Though the nation may well be an ‘invented tradition’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) that is open to re-definition at subsequent critical junctures, a nation is not in constant flux. To the contrary, our core argument is that founding codifications and narratives are sticky and, unless interrupted by a profound crisis, will continue to shape political inclusion and exclusion in profound and lasting ways. The virtue of excavating founding definitions of national political communities lies not only in coding their relative inclusivity or exclusivity at nation-founding moments, as we have done in previous work,⁸ but in establishing how these narratives were subsequently employed in pivotal political juncture.

Below, we excavate founding definitions of the nation and process trace how ideational frames are employed by new and old collective actors in subsequent battles for political power.⁹ We do so as a theory-generating exercise in two cases in which two well-organized and institutionalized dominant political parties arise from nationalist movements. This allows us to elide party institutionalization as the explanation for regime outcomes, and to underscore the vital point that this variable explains regime stability but not regime type. India, which came into being as a sovereign nation led by a well-organized nationalist movement, was ideationally defined in an egalitarian manner by virtue of its secular constitution and its institutionalized embrace of linguistic diversity. These egalitarian features of Indian nationalism have been repeatedly attacked by forces of ascriptive hierarchy and exclusion, particularly the propagators of Hindutva ideology who are currently ascendant behind the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. But Hindutva-style ethnoreligious nativism has faced a steeper uphill battle than chauvinist movements in many other southern Asian cases (e.g. Myanmar, Pakistan) because of the relatively egalitarian definition of the Indian nation that was constitutionally

⁷ Bermeo and Yashar. *Parties, Movements and Democracy in the Developing World*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.

⁸ Slater 2010, Tudor 2013, Tudor and Slater 2017.

⁹ Bermeo and Yashar. *Parties, Movements and Democracy in the Developing World*.

codified after independence in 1947. Egalitarian nationalism has thus constituted a lasting democratic resource for India.

Malaysia similarly emerged from colonial rule with a well-organized nationalist movement in power. The ruling UMNO party propagated and codified a hierarchical nationalism that specifies Islam as the official national religion; asserts ethnic Malays as the only group deserving of “indigenous” privileges; grounds this ethnic Malay primacy in the unquestionable position of hereditary sultans as formal sovereigns; and strongly emphasizes language rights of Malays over the English lingua franca in national politics. Whenever forces for democratic inclusion and egalitarianism have clashed with those defending the first-class citizenship status of indigenous Malays, the latter have prevailed by using authoritarian measures to prevent India-style egalitarianism across ethnic and religious lines.

As we have shown in our existing work (Slater 2010, Tudor 2013, and Tudor and Slater 2017), these differing kinds of nationalism *originated* in founding struggles for independence and the acts of constitutional codification that followed them. But critically, they have been *maintained* through ongoing battles for political power. Their relatively egalitarian national identities are an important, under-emphasized reason why India and Indonesia have experienced better democratic fortunes in the 21st century than their most-similar neighbours of Pakistan and Malaysia. An analytic focus on founding definitions of the national community also illuminates the precise struggles over ethnic egalitarianism that threaten to derail the ongoing democratic experiment in Myanmar, while highlighting how surprisingly inclusive ethnic bargains have helped sustain democracy in deeply divided societies like Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Timor Leste. Thus, the vast variation in nationalisms we witness across our two cases here is broadly representative of the variation in nationalism types and regime types seen more broadly across southern Asia, though we lack the space to explore effectively process trace such a wide range of cases here.

Our fine-grained assessment of relative levels of nationalist egalitarianism also sheds original light on how both democracy and authoritarianism are likely to break down whenever they do. When opponents of authoritarianism strive and mobilize to overturn elitist and/or ethnically exclusionary regimes, as in contemporary Malaysia, they are tasked not only with overturning a powerful dictatorship: they are forced to redefine the nation itself through the equivalent of a second nationalist struggle to build a more egalitarian brand of political community than the one that was forged in the early years of independence. Egalitarian nationalism can thus help *inspire* democratic mobilization against authoritarian incumbents. It can also help *defend* democracy against backsliding by giving the widest range of citizens a stake in regime survival, and by denying exclusionary and authoritarian political entrepreneurs raw historical material for dividing and conquering their democratic rivals.

Of all the postcolonial cases across southern Asia, why choose India and Malaysia for special emphasis? As a theory-generating exercise, we wanted to select cases with sufficient party strength to install and cement the egalitarian or hierarchical vision of nationalism that had been expressed by leading nationalist movements. Although types of nationalism also shape regime outcomes in cases such as Indonesia and Pakistan, the effect is harder to discern because relatively weak political institutions could not implement a specific nationalist narrative without confronting constant

political contestation. For nationalism's felicitous (or deleterious) effects on democracy to be realized, egalitarian (or hierarchical) nationalism must become *institutionalized* in a country's political life by a winning coalition committed to furthering and upholding it. Whether the nationalist movement leading the charge for independence managed to further a coherent ideological vision during the initial nation-building process is critical for establishing a clear kind of nationalism. By this standard, both India and Malaysia both abundantly qualify.

The India-Malaysia comparison also allows us to tackle a vital yet underappreciated comparative puzzle in the southern Asian context. Especially from the perspective of theories that see democracy arising from economic development, Malaysia's democratic prospects should be far stronger than India's: the opposite of what we find. Our paired comparison also allows us to control for British colonial legacies. Although a history of British rule is correlated with democracy globally, the post-British record in southern Asia is far more mixed, and in fact mostly negative for democratic development. Colonial legacies cannot readily explain why India has been so durably democratic and Malaysia so durably authoritarian. In both cases, a dominant party rose to install its nationalist vision in political life, and that vision has proved enduring. But whereas India's egalitarian nationalism has fostered lasting democracy, Malaysia's hierarchical nationalism has bolstered authoritarianism for half a century.

II. Theory: Nationalist Origins of Egalitarianism and Hierarchy

Nationalism and democracy are both expressions of popular sovereignty. Yet potential causal linkages between types of nationalism and regime trajectories have remained curiously underexplored in the democratization literature. It is well worth considering whether certain types of nationalism might provide greater support for democracy than others. In line with a long list of recent research, we argue that the founding definition of the nation has profound and lasting implications for the egalitarian or hierarchical nature of political life. While this wide and diverse stream of new research has considered the implications of nationalist types for ethnic conflict, public goods provision, immigrant discrimination, and secularization of family policies, it has not been directly applied to questions of democracy and authoritarianism: a gaping lacuna we seek to remedy here.

Democratic inclusivity has its deepest roots in egalitarian nationalism, which provides a bulwark against democratic backsliding during times of political crisis by arming democratic defenders with the legitimacy of traditionally inclusive symbols and ideas. By contrast, more hierarchical forms of nationalism embolden would-be autocrats and their most fervent supporters to take whatever means necessary to defend their "first-class" citizenship against "second-class" challengers. Crises in such contexts can easily be blamed on communities that are not centrally positioned in the national imagination (Straus 2015), and authoritarianism can readily be justified as essential to keep "sub-national" (i.e. less than fully national) minorities' putative political ambitions in check.

Nationalism offers a baseline definition of who is included in the polity and on what terms: Are all ethnic and religious groups treated similarly? Are the political benefits of citizenship applied fairly across society? Is nationalism primarily defined by old

feudalistic elites with hereditary ties to the colonial-era power structure, or by “new men” who decry existing hierarchical and hereditary relationships? Is a national language chosen that helps unify or at least offer equal access to public education and state employment to different ethnic groups, or that effectively asserts the supremacy of one of them over the others? These kinds of questions profoundly shape what kind of *nation* one lives in; they also shape whether that nation is likely to be a *democracy*, since the robust inclusion of the majority and the consistent protection of minorities are the critical components in any substantive understanding of democratic politics.

It is not only income inequality and land inequality that stand as critical barriers to democracy, as stressed in the literature on the economic origins of regimes. Democracy and authoritarianism are also profoundly shaped by what Tilly calls *categorical inequality*, which denotes the “boundaries separating whole sets of people who differ collectively in their life chances, as is commonly the case with categories of gender, race, caste, ethnicity, nationality, and religion and is sometimes the case with categories of social class. To the extent that such inequalities translate directly into categorical differences in political rights and obligations, democratization remains impossible.”¹⁰ In all societies, of course, different categories of people enjoy divergent “life chances.” To define democracy in terms of such life chances, however, would conflate democracy with the benefits it is purported and hoped to produce. It is instead *the translation of categorical inequalities into unequal political access to the state*, therefore, that has such direct and debilitating consequences for power struggles between collective actors.

While it is widely recognized that categorical inequalities can have deep roots in the founding definition of the nation, this recognition is yet to inform our scholarly understanding of political regimes. We thus argue that the initial, constitutionalized definition of what Evan Lieberman terms the “national political community,” or that group of people “officially entitled to the rights and responsibilities of citizenship,” has important and enduring repercussions for democratic prospects. Definitions of citizenship articulated during founding moments of nation-building matter in a causal sense for subsequent regime trajectories and outcomes because they substantially “vary in terms of how racial, ethnic, and regional identities get configured, and *in what ways certain groups are included or excluded*.”¹¹ When these ideological visions get institutionally codified in founding constitutions by nationalist movements with sufficient power to install and defend them, they stipulate the foundational principles of a polity in path-dependent ways. Powerfully if unevenly, constitutions serve to “provide the citizenry with a sense of ownership and authorship, a sense that ‘We the People’ includes me”¹²; or in many cases, excludes me (or to be more precise, excludes people *like* me).

This powerful insight has recently been shown to shed light on a remarkable range of important political outcomes. Deeply established nationalist narratives of fellow-feeling across categorical divides improve prospects for interethnic peace (Straus

¹⁰ Charles Tilly, *Democracy*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 75.

¹¹ Evan Lieberman, *Race and Regionalism in the Politics of Taxation in Brazil and South Africa*, (New York: Cambridge University Press 2003), 3-4. Emphasis added.

¹² Hannah Lerner, *Making Constitutions in Deeply Divided Societies*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 18.

2015), welfare state development (Singh 2015), and a healthy tempering of religious political influence (Grzymala-Busse 2015). We consider it high time to consider how the egalitarian and inegalitarian features of nationalism might strengthen the democratic and authoritarian character of political regimes.

To be clear, we do not claim that egalitarian nationalism is either a necessary or sufficient condition for democracy. Our more modest, probabilistic causal claim here is that egalitarian nationalism is a “critical antecedent” that *promotes* democracy in a country, but by no means makes democracy *predetermined*.¹³ This is because when the nation is defined in egalitarian fashion upon securing independence, it provides pro-democratization forces with a valuable ideological resource that can be deployed when critical decisions are taken about the political regime after independence. Whenever pro-democratic forces struggle either to defeat authoritarian rivals or to forge difficult compromises with diverse democratic actors, their prospects will be brighter if the nation is defined non-hierarchically. And whenever the nation is defined hierarchically, there exists more latent potential for a country to undergo decisive processes of “de-democratization”¹⁴ than in cases where hierarchical forms of nationalism have been historically superseded. Hierarchical nationalism is an anvil upon which democracy can readily be destroyed.

While modest, our claim that egalitarian nationalism matters is no less portentous than the most important causal associations in the democratization literature. Much like other master variables that have been shown to correlate with democratic outcomes across the globe – such as economic development, British colonialism, natural resource scarcity, and Protestant missionary activity – egalitarian nationalism is one of the more important resources for democracy that a country can possibly possess. As with these other recurring correlates, the key task when it comes to establishing the causal effects of egalitarian nationalism on democracy lies in specifying the mechanisms through which cause shapes effect, and tracing those mechanisms historically through concrete comparative cases.

Conceptions of citizenship must be backed by winning coalitions and become embedded in institutions if they are to prove enduring and exhibit any lasting causal effect. Like any “ism,” types of nationalism cannot become dominant ideological forms within a polity unless they find expression in a country’s most important political institutions. Such institutionalization only occurs if the organized actors who led the charge for national independence managed to further their established ideological visions through founding constitutions. Egalitarian nationalism will not arise in the first place unless anticolonial leaders manage to articulate and channel it through the nationalist movement; and it will not become entrenched as a defining ideological feature of a nation’s political life unless the organized forces supporting it prevail decisively in their initial post-independence struggle for power.

In explaining leading nationalists’ capacity to forge egalitarian (or hierarchical) founding constitutions, several considerations are crucial. First, how strongly *committed* to egalitarianism were anticolonial elites by the time of independence;

¹³ Dan Slater and Erica Simmons, “Informative Regress: Critical Antecedents in Comparative Politics,” *Comparative Political Studies* 43:7 (July 2010), 886-917.

¹⁴ Tilly, 2007.

second, how strongly *positioned* were they after independence to further their egalitarian constitutional agenda; and third, how much *autonomy* did nationalists enjoy to craft a constitutional bargain that fulfilled their own preferences rather than those of the departing colonialists.¹⁵ Colonial independence would typically be granted only if and when nationalist movements could craft majoritarian coalitions that substantiated claims of worthiness and preparedness for national independence. Yet those movements differed decisively in the content and clarity of their ideological commitments. They also differed in how much competition they faced from organized actors with contrasting definitions of the nation on their agendas, and in how much they had to kowtow to colonial preferences in deciding how equal national citizenship would truly be. Where the constitutional nation-building settlement was brokered by outgoing colonialists, as in Malaysia, its egalitarian elements were less solidly grounded in the domestic constellation of power. This made the bargain more vulnerable to being overturned once imperial advocates of equal citizenship had left the stage.

At one level, our argument might be accused of being true by definition. Political egalitarianism is a defining trait of democracy, so naturally egalitarian nationalism is conducive to democracy. But our argument goes beyond pinpointing the organic connection between egalitarianism and democracy – and thereby offering a hopefully useful reminder that democracy means more than just liberalism – in at least two ways. First, we are not simply saying that categorical inequalities produce “de-democratization” in a substantive sense, as Tilly argues, although we certainly agree that a less egalitarian democracy is perforce a less substantive one. Rather, we argue that categorical inequalities have implications for the *very survival* of procedural democracy, and for prospects that authoritarianism might give way to procedural democracy, in ways that Tilly and others have not highlighted.

Second and more importantly, we aim to trace the historical origins of democracy to independence settlements that birthed new nation-states. In so doing, we intend to shed new light on the mechanisms through which regimes arise, evolve, and sometimes collapse. Egalitarian nationalism can serve as the ideological inspiration for protesters seeking to topple exclusionary authoritarian rule. It can also help deepen democracy when opposition actors press for more egalitarian national bargains in the everyday process of challenging exclusionary regimes, be they outright dictatorships or highly oligarchic procedural democracies.

Finally, egalitarian nationalism can serve as a final defense against authoritarian backsliding when elite party politicians stop showing a clear commitment to democratic principles and practices. Below, we seek to demonstrate how much leverage the concepts of egalitarian and hierarchical nationalism give us not only on final regime outcomes, but on historical and ongoing regime dynamics and evolution. Perhaps the greatest virtue of our comparative-historical analysis for making sense of contemporary politics is that it trains our sights on both the *risk factors* and the *risk actors* who threaten democratic prospects across southern Asia.

¹⁵ This positions us centrally in the “founding struggle paradigm” of studies of party development, as seen most prominently in Huntington (1968) and most recently in Levitsky and Way (2013). For a discussion, see Slater and Smith (2016).

III. Nationalism and Regime Types in South and Southeast Asia

India and Malaysia both emerged in the mid-twentieth century as newly sovereign states with an array of socio-economic challenges, including a highly contentious social cleavage between a majority and a minority group. Yet their regime types could hardly be more different. India is the largest and unlikeliest democracy in the postcolonial world. Asia's greatest demographic behemoth has long been riddled with almost every imaginable hypothesized malady for democratic development, such as severe poverty and inequality, extreme ethnic heterogeneity, and violent separatist movements. Despite these long odds, India has remained a democracy nearly without interruption since independence. By contrast, Malaysia is one of the world's longest lasting authoritarian regimes, as its dominant party has ruled with the aid of a wide array of authoritarian controls since 1969. In the empirical discussion that follows, we trace the origins of these similarly stable but divergent postcolonial trajectories to the types of nationalism that became institutionalized in more inclusive or exclusive ways during the early years of independence.

In contrast to influential literatures within comparative democratization studies that primarily stress the *economic* origins of regime outcomes,¹⁶ our argument highlights the *ideological* sources of democracy and autocracy in postcolonial Asia. While classes have the potential to be collective actors in the post-colonial world, there is no guarantee that classes will emerge as collective political actors.

We argue that the particular kind of nationalist ideology that was codified in founding constitutions and backstopped by founding coalitions either provided or denied vital resources for crafting and consolidating postcolonial democracy. In cases where nationalist movements managed to institutionalize this clear political vision, as in India and Malaysia, prospects for post-independence regime durability were greatly enhanced. Yet it was only where independence settlements were *inclusive and egalitarian* in character, as was especially true of India across all post-colonial states, where nationalist movements pushed toward democracy rather than authoritarianism.

Inclusive nationalism is not coterminous with democracy, however. Democracy requires effective liberal constraints on the political executive as well as broad political inclusion. Inclusive nationalism does not necessarily constrain executive abuses of power, except insofar as it reduces the chances for controversies over minority rights and privileges to serve as the occasions for such authoritarian assaults. Our theory thus sheds new light on how democracy broke down when it did in India. As we elaborate below, democracy in India broke down when a populist tried to mobilize popular energies against uncooperative elites, not when an exclusionary authoritarian tried to protect elite privileges against mass demands.

When democracy permanently broke down in Malaysia in 1969, it did so in a fundamentally different way than in India's Emergency. The occasion for Malaysia's authoritarian assault was surprising electoral gains by parties dominated by minority

¹⁶ Carles Boix. *Democracy and Redistribution*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson. *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Ben Ansell and David Samuels, "Inequality and Democratization: A Contractarian Approach," *Comparative Political Studies*, 43:12 (December 2010), 1543-1574.

ethnic Chinese who refused to adhere to the Malay-dominant political bargain. If UMNO had accepted the electoral results, the multi-party Alliance it led would have lost the two-thirds parliamentary majority necessary to amend the constitution at will. Democracy and inviolable Malay primacy had become mutually incompatible, and UMNO leaders prioritized the former over the latter. It would only be in 1998 that a multiethnic opposition movement arose to challenge both Malay primacy and the authoritarian institutions that sustain it. Twenty years into this second pitched historical battle to define the Malaysian nation as fundamentally either egalitarian or hierarchical, the organized forces of hierarchy continue to enjoy the upper hand. And the regime remains decisively authoritarian as a direct result.

India: Egalitarian Nationalism and Lasting Democracy

India is an exceptional case of democratic stability in the post-colonial world, a surprising outcome partly attributable to the unusually egalitarian national identity evolved and developed by India's decolonization movement during the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁷ The nationalist movement—the Indian National Congress—was founded by a predominantly upper-caste, western-educated elite in 1885 that lobbied for expanded political and economic power in the form of elections into nominated colonial councils and the holding of civil service examinations in colonial India rather than in Britain. The reforms were not forthcoming because the colonial regime countered that the nationalist movement was unrepresentative of India's manifold political interests. As late as 1931, Winston Churchill famously retorted, "India. . . is a geographical term. It is no more a united nation than the Equator." In strategic response, Congress began in the 1920s to espouse a more inclusive nationalist identity that could rebut the claim that India was not a community. To do so, it began to articulate the narrative and eventually the programmatic parameters of an egalitarian nationalism.

A. Origins of India's Egalitarian Nationalism (1920-1947)

One of the ways in which the Indian nationalist movement espoused *social* egalitarianism was to campaign against the public recognition of most prominent, pervasive social cleavage of caste. Nineteenth century India was characterized by a caste-saturated social fabric in which an individual's caste category was recognized and reinforced in almost all social interactions, impeding the very possibility of an equal citizenship that was necessarily predicated the acceptance of democratic institutions. Beginning in the 1920s, Congress mobilized against public distinctions of caste, on roads and at wells for example, in order to help meld together a national community that could refute the colonial claim that Congress did not represent a single nation. Gandhi's early interventions in Kheda and Champaran, his ashram experiments, and eventually Congress altogether under his leadership intensively engaged in 'village uplift' activities, such as providing basic sanitation and educational programs, though its mobilizations varied considerably across space and time.¹⁸ Critically, these public engagements consistently and symbolically violated caste hierarchies and in doing so, helped to create a public space in which caste hierarchies could be ignored.

¹⁷ Maya Tudor, *The Promise of Power: The Origins of Democracy in India and Autocracy in Pakistan*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), Chapter 3.

¹⁸ David Low, (ed.) *Congress and the Raj: Facets of the Indian Struggle 1917 - 47* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006).

Congress' rejection of caste hierarchies enabled the nationalist movement to stay unified in the face of determined colonial attempts to fracture it, but it also directly led to Congress' eventual institutionalization of *political* egalitarianism: especially in the form of universal adult suffrage. The colonial desire to divide the Indian nationalist movement motivated the regime's acceptance of separate electorates for Muslims in 1909. To forestall a similar colonial attempt to insulate lower-caste Hindus from political mobilization, Congress mainstreamed universal adult suffrage as Congress policy in its 1931 Karachi Resolution. When the 1932 Communal Award was announced, it suggested separate electorates for lower-castes, which would effectively cleave off lower-caste Hindus from Congress and undermine the latter's claim to represent a national community. The strong reaction, specifically Gandhi's 'resolved fast unto death,' created the extreme pressure which eventually led Dr. Ambedkar, the leader of the lowest-caste movement, to relinquish separate electorates in favor of caste reservations. Universal adult franchise thus represented a strategic compromise accommodation between myriad social communities, one in which a national identity was carefully and deliberately constructed to be open to all religious, caste, class and regional communities.¹⁹

The nationalist movement's inclusivity with respect to the public recognition of caste was complemented by a clear separation between nationalism and religion in a country that was three-quarters Hindu. India had a Hindu majority, but it would not be born as a pro-Hindu hierarchy. Secular ideals were initially written into Congress' founding charter because nationalist leaders were transplanting the liberal ideals of their English education to an Indian context. While secular politics were by no means strictly practiced by all Congress leaders,²⁰ Congress' formal policy by 1931 was nevertheless that it would adopt no constitutional policy to which a majority of either Hindus or Muslims objected and that no Indian citizen should suffer any discrimination 'by reason of his or her religion, caste, creed, or sex.'²¹ During the late 1930s, when electoral competition on approximately a tenth of the franchise was regularized in high colonial India, local political disputes regularly assumed religious overtones. Formally however, the Congress movement rejected any codification of or overt reference to Hinduism as defining of national identity.

Congress' nationalism was also egalitarian in its choice of a national language in a country that spoke over a thousand languages and in which upwards of thirty languages were spoken by a million people or more. Congress' 1920 re-organization, designed to maximize engagement in the national movement, created twenty-one linguistically homogenous regions. By organizing through more local languages,

¹⁹ Separate electorates set aside seats in provincial and central legislatures for the said community and specified that only that community could vote for the said seats.

Reserved electorates also set aside seats for the said community but enabled the entire electorate to vote for those seats. With reserved electorates Congressmen could still mobilize across caste lines by putting up an untouchable candidate whereas separate electorates would likely have led lower castes to mobilize separately from Congress altogether.

²⁰ Indeed, many of the early Congress leaders were also leaders in Hindu reform movements.

²¹ All India Congress Committee Papers Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, G-60 of 1945–1946. 6–8 August 1931.

Congress encouraged the possibility that these different languages would gain formal recognition in independent India. Moreover, Congress made no effort to exclude particular regional tongues from the nationalist movement and explicitly rejected the use of a single national language, which would have politically and economically advantaged the northern Hindi belt of the country.

Particularly because national identities were popularized in a largely illiterate context, it is worth underscoring that Congress also popularized an egalitarian national movement through the wearing of *khadi*, the homespun cloth which became the uniform of the Indian nationalist movement. This crucially enabled the illiterate majority to participate in the movement, helping to further blur socio-economic hierarchies. Between 1920 and 1947, Congress leaders almost exclusively wore khadi and promoted its micro-production.²² The wearing of *khadi* definitionally rejected the hierarchical distinctions of caste and the acceptance of a space in which individuals were encouraged to conceptualize of themselves as political equals.

Finally, though it has received an extraordinary amount of scholarly and public attention, Congress' non-violent mass nationalism, because it also encouraged all castes, classes and regions to participate in the nationalist movement on the basis of equality without fear of forcible redistribution, reinforced an inclusive conception of citizenship.

Upon independence, a popular, egalitarian vision of the nation and its institutionalization explains Congress' decision to codify universal adult franchise within the Indian constitution. Congress leaders dominated the post-independence Constituent Assembly and hailed from largely upper caste and middle class backgrounds. Comprising an elite demographic, these leaders could have chosen to limit adult suffrage through some hierarchical qualification, as a number of African states did in the post WWII period. Yet Congress leaders had organized mass political support through popularizing an inclusive Indian nationalism for decades. Limiting the franchise would therefore have required re-negotiating the terms of national representation, at a clear cost to lower caste support, whilst there was little to gain from renegeing upon its inclusive definitions of the Indian nation because Congress' mobilizations had demonstrated its ability to successfully delimit violent mass mobilization. Thus, because an egalitarian national identity had been long imagined and institutionalized within the movement, the Congress-dominated Constituent Assembly codified universal adult suffrage within the Indian constitution after independence. The egalitarian conceptualization of Indian nationalism critically succored the creation of Indian democracy.

The following sections show how this egalitarian—specifically caste-neutral, secular, linguistically plural and nonviolent—definition of the nation was used in three pivotal political moments in the country's history to succor democracy's defenders: linguistic re-organization of states; the Emergency; and under today's majoritarian government.

B. Inclusive Nationalism Helps Resolve Early Language Stalemate (1947-1956)

²² Lisa Trivedi, "Visually Mapping the Nation: Swadeshi Politics in Nationalist India, 1920-1930," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 62, 1 (February 2003): 11-41 and Tudor (2013).

India's thorniest post-independence problem centered upon the question of language along two dimensions: the questions of whether to select a national language and whether to re-organize colonial states along linguistic borders. These contentious issues were ultimately resolved in extraordinarily egalitarian fashions: through the selection of many official languages and through the creation of new linguistic states. Key elements of the egalitarian national identity were employed to support the proponents of both many multiple languages and the creation of new linguistic states.

The question of what language to select as a national language for India animated the closing and most contentious months of India's Constituent Assembly, with an initial proposal tabled to make Hindi, the language spoken by approximately 40% of the country, the sole national language. This proposal has support from many leaders of the nationalist movement, including Gandhi and Rajendra Prasad, but was opposed by the primarily the southern states which did not use Hindi and would thus be relatively disadvantaged by its adoption relative to the northern states. Speaking at the Constituent Assembly debates, Shri Chettiar stated "Those whose mother tongue is Hindi they learn only Hindi. But, we in the South, we have got to study not only Hindi but also our own mother tongue; we-cannot give up our mother tongue. There is also the regional language; we have to study that. Permanently, forever, you are handicapping us by this arrangement." Speaking at these debates, Shri Munavalli stated: "Language means the very life-blood of the nation. . . .[so] in settling language questions, mere theory of [majority-rules] democracy must not prevail."²³ Invoking the concerns about majoritarian democracy steamrolling the interests of minorities led to the eventual solution, codified in Article 343 of the Constitution, which adopted Hindi and English as dual official languages of the Union, with a 15 year sunset clause for English which has been indefinitely extended since.

The similarly contentious issue of recognizing regional languages was also resolved by recourse to the ideals and methods of the nationalist movement. During the independence struggle, India's nationalist leaders had regularly promised to create new, linguistically homogenous states. Congress had re-organized itself along linguistic lines in 1920 in order to achieve mass popularization and regularly promised linguistic re-organization during the nationalist struggle, including in its 1946 election manifesto. After independence was achieved however, Congress leaders wished to renege upon their earlier commitment to linguistic self-determination because they felt that linguistic re-organization of states would threaten national unity. In a post-Partition environment that witnessed states seeking to secede from the Union of India, Congress leaders worried linguistic re-organization of states would further inflame separatist tendencies. Prime Minister Nehru and other members of the nationalist high command—Patel, Prasad, Rajagopalachari and even non-Congress Ambedkar—opposed any linguistic re-organization of states on the grounds that it would encourage these secessionist tendencies.²⁴

Rather than rejecting linguistic re-organization out of hand however, the government appointed successive commissions to investigate the possibility of re-organization, reluctantly concluding that linguistic re-organization was necessary after the political

²³ Both citations taken from Constituent Assembly Debates of India, Volume IX, 13 September 1949. [Accessed online](#) on 29 August 2017.

²⁴ King (1999).

supporters of state reorganization employed nationalist tactics to legitimate their demands. The 1948 Dar Commission recommended that the reorganization of provinces should be delayed in accordance with a desire for national unity and that the creation of 'provinces on exclusively or even mainly linguistic considerations is not in the larger interests of the Indian nation.'²⁵ A subsequent report, published in 1949, acknowledged that Congress had previously 'given its seal of approval to the general principle of linguistic provinces' but that it was nonetheless 'incumbent upon us therefore to view the problem of linguistic provinces in the context of today. That context demands, above everything, the consolidation of India and her freedom. . . [and] demands further stern discouragement of communalism, provincialism, and all other separatist and disruptive tendencies.'

Because the nationalist leaders had preached and practiced participatory non-violence in achieving political objectives and because the foremost proponents of linguistic organization appropriated Gandhian language and methods, it was difficult for nationalist leaders to wholesale reject the creation of new states while respecting the fundamental ideals of democratic self-determination that had been the central animating claim of the nationalist movement. For Nehru, two contradictory elements of the national identity were at stake in the states' reorganization issue—national unity on the one hand and the principle of democratic self-determination on the other.²⁶ Nehru's opposition to the movement for linguistic re-organization stemmed from the commitment to national unity but his concession to create linguistic states ultimately grew out of the deep belief that self-determination could not be quashed. It was for this reason that the 1949 report left a window open for future accommodation, because nationalist leaders themselves were ideationally steeped in the value of self-determination: 'However, *if public sentiment is insistent and overwhelming, we, as democrats, have to submit to it.* . . [Emphasis added].'²⁷

This Report failed to mollify the advocates of linguistic re-organization however, and by the early 1950s, it was clear that there was insistent and widespread public support for linguistic re-organization of states by regional leaders and through them, by a broader public. Privately, Nehru deplored the linguistic movement and fervently hoped to leave colonial state boundaries in tact. Publicly however, he said that he would eventually accede to its demands at a later date and if the all regional leaders agreed. Not to do so would contradict the principle of self-determination for all that Nehru and other Congress leaders had positioned as central to the claim for an independent India.

The most vigorous advocate for linguistic reorganization were Telegu speakers who petitioned, marched, and ultimately used Gandhian hunger-fasts to force the concession of modern-day Andhra Pradesh. In 1951, after a succession of petitions and protests, a former Congressman Sitaram went on a five-week hunger strike, which intensified pressure. In May 1952, Nehru said before Parliament, "Even

²⁵ Report of the Linguistic Provinces Commission, December 1948, Paragraphs 141 and 152. Central Secretariat Library, New Delhi.

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²⁷Emphasis added. JVP report, for the three members of the committee, Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, and Pattabhi Sitaramayya). Central Secretariat Library, 1949, New Delhi.

though the formation of linguistic provinces may be desirable in some cases, this would obviously be the wrong time. When the right time comes, let us have them by all means.”²⁸ In October 1952, a Gandhi associate Potti Sriramalu undertook a fast unto death for the creation of a separate state of Telegu speakers to protest the vague equivocations of both the Prime Minister and the Chief Minister of Madras. Sriramalu was a Gandhi associate who had not only spent time at Gandhi’s ashram but had also spent 18 months in jail for his participation in the 1940-41 civil disobedience campaign.

Nehru’s opposition to linguistic re-organization was steadfast until this point but gave away under massive protest and the police firing upon civilians in order to maintain order. On December 3, Nehru wrote in a letter: “Some kind of fast is going on for the Andhra Province and I get frantic telegrams. I am totally unmoved by this and propose to ignore it completely.” Nine days later, as these protests and publicity grew, Nehru wrote to the Chief Minister of Madras Rajagopalachari and conceded that the time had come to accept the demand for the Andhra state, “Otherwise complete frustration will grow among the Andhras and we will not be able to catch up with it.”²⁹ Though Nehru had privately conceded that he would have to accept linguistic states, the death of Sriramalu a few days later, on December 15, 1952. Sriramalu’s death led to the breakout of large-scale protests, the attacking of government buildings, and several protesters were killed by police firing on protesters. The very next day, Nehru publicly announced that the state of Andhra would come into being.

At a time when Nehru’s position on every major issue won the day, it is instructive to examine a case when the Prime Minister adopted a policy he clearly opposed. That issue was one in which the fundamental definition of the nation as an inclusive one and in which individual and collective rights to non-violently protest for their view of justice was at stake. These ideals of self-determination were appropriated by advocates of linguistic re-organization to legitimate their cause.

To be sure, the risk of further violence and large-scale unrest was the immediate impetus for the announcement. But it is also absolutely true that Congress leadership, particularly Prime Minister Nehru, was in a strong position to use force to put down such protest. Why did Nehru not simply do so? Forcibly putting down protests that had adopted the nationalist tactics of protest, petition, and civil disobedience would have contradicted the methods and ideals that the nationalist movement Congressmen had espoused years ago to legitimate their call for colonial independence. Instead, a States’ Reorganization Commission (notably composed of non-Congressmen) was created in 1954 to make general recommendations for new states and in 1956, Nehru accepted SRC Commission’s recommendation to organize a variety of new states along linguistic lines, setting in motion the redrawing of the Indian map along linguistic lines. This process continues to the present day.

C. Egalitarian Nationalism Coalesces Autocratic Opposition (1969-1977)

²⁸ Ramachandra Guha, “The Battle for Andhra.” *The Hindu*. March 30, 2003.

²⁹ Guha, “The Battle for Andhra.” *The Hindu*. March 30, 2003.

India's darkest democratic hour to date came in the form of a succession struggle which culminated in the 1975-77 Emergency. This period of narrowing political and civil liberties was perhaps the closest that India came to changing regime type. This underscores the necessity of examining why a populist leader with autocratic tendencies, one that was not restrained by the quashing of civil liberties or recourse to violence, ultimately relinquished power. Here, as in the case of the linguistic states, the inclusive ideology of the nationalist struggle was used by political opposition to effectively rally support for ousting the incumbent.

Following Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's death in 1964, Lal Bahadur Shastri succeeded Nehru, but this successor's sudden death in 1966 led Congress' powerful and conservative state-level leaders to choose Indira Gandhi for the Prime Ministership primarily because she was viewed as a pliant figurehead. Unexpectedly, Indira Gandhi followed in her father's footsteps and asserted her power, which led to a split in the dominant: a break-away socialist Congress faction acknowledging Indira Gandhi's leadership and an old guard of conservative party bosses who maintained the original Congress Party networks.

In order to consolidate her rule in the absence of reliable party support, Indira attacked institutional constraints on her rule whilst still maintaining and even elevating inclusionary appeals to the Indian masses. In the 1971 national elections., Indira Gandhi employed a populist campaign slogan of *garibi hatao* (abolish poverty) which successfully appealed directly to the numerically larger and socio-economically subordinate lower castes. Indira succeeded in winning a large mandate. One of her first acts after the 1971 election was to undermine the judiciary by passing the 24th and 25th constitutional amendments, the effects of which were to weaken the power of the judicial branch to control constitutional amendment procedures as well as to eliminate protections for those negatively impacted by nationalization programs.³⁰ Indira's increasingly autocratic governance culminated in India's darkest political hour since independence—the twenty-one month period of autocracy known as the “Emergency”. Under the pretense of addressing unrest instigated by the political opposition, Indira declared a state of emergency in which civil liberties and political freedoms were suspended. During this time, many members of her political opposition were arbitrarily arrested and personal freedoms were widely curtailed.

Indira's undermining of civil and political constraints did not last long. As is the wont of autocratic leaders, Indira misjudged her popularity and in 1977 called an honest election. Relevant here is that Indira did not attempt to manipulate the election in any way, as was done weeks previously in neighboring Pakistan, in itself a testament to the ideational hegemony of democratic elections as the undisputed arbiter of political legitimacy.

A second relevant fact is that Indira's opponents had largely campaigned on India's identity as a democracy and it was this issue which won a hodgepodge coalition the national election. As Myron Weiner writes, “Janata party candidates campaigned on a single issue: ending the emergency and restoring democracy to India. Economic issues were secondary, except insofar as they illustrated the problems that arose when

³⁰ Jaffrelot. 2003, 140.

individuals were deprived of their rights to protest.”³¹ The opposition Janata Party gained the largest percentage of votes ever gained by a non-Congress Party and Congress even lost the election in its regional stronghold of Uttar Pradesh. But election was not so much a shift of previous Congress voters to the opposition as it was of previously apolitical citizens voting for Congress’ opposition by a huge margin.³²

If India’s democracy had been endangered during the Emergency by the repression of civil and political rights, the decisive rejection of Indira’s autocratic turn re-affirmed Indian democracy as a founding ideal, not only by turning out the offending autocrat but by reaffirming that its most powerful party could lose an election and peacefully relinquish power.

Ultimately Indira called the election because she cared about democratic legitimacy (she scrupulously adhered to constitutional procedures, even if they were ultimately undemocratic in spirit). She lost because “the Indian electorate cared more than she thought for democratic institutions.”³³ In perhaps India’s most pivotal moment to date, the nationalist ideals of the democratic right to protest were successfully claimed by the opposition.

D. Democratic Deepening (1977-2014)

Since the return to fully-fledged democratic politics in 1977, Indian democracy has deepened in two major ways even as it is challenged in a third. First, Indian democracy has deepened most visibly via the gradual decline of Congress’ electoral dominance. In tandem, the 1977 election removing the Congress party from power and the 1980 elections peacefully returning Indira Gandhi to power highlighted the loosening institutional grip of India’s nationalist party. These successive elections showed Indian democracy, by the standard criteria of two transfers of power between competing parties, to be fully consolidated.³⁴ In 1984, when Indira was assassinated, her son Rajiv Gandhi won a large margin of sympathy votes on behalf of Congress to become India’s prime minister. But after a series of corruption scandals during his tenure, the 1989 national election again turned Congress out of power. With this election, the unchallenged hegemony of Congress rule at the hands of Nehru scions drew to a definitive close. The dawn of coalitional politics under the aegis of India’s two major parties, Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) signaled a democratic deepening along the dimension of electoral competition.

A second dimension through which Indian democracy deepened was through the rise of smaller parties representing the concerns of subordinate social groups. Though Congress remained the single largest party in the 1989 election, it won less than half

³¹ Myron Weiner, “The 1977 Parliamentary Elections in India.” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 17, No. 7, (July 1977)

³² William Vanderbok, “Critical Elections, Contained Volatility and the Indian Electorate.” *Modern Asian Studies*, 24, 1 (1990): 189. “The victory of the Janata was not a rejection of Congress by its previous supporters. It was a rejection by the previously uninvolved and the young.”

³³ Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph. “India’s Election: Backing Into the Future.” *Foreign Affairs*. July 1977. Council on Foreign Relations, p. 843.

³⁴ Huntington, 1991: 266-267.

the seats it won five years earlier. That election brought to power a coalition of minority parties with no single party even nearing the threshold for a parliamentary majority. Nine years later, in 1998, the BJP won enough seats to form another coalition government, over which it presided until its defeat in 2004. Between 2004 and 2014, the Congress-led UPA coalition retained power. Every government in power between 1989 and 2014 was composed of a coalition of smaller, regionally based parties in alliance with one of the two major parties. With the rise of regional and caste-based parties, the political representation of subordinate classes has grown.³⁵ Thus, the rise of coalitional politics represents a deepening of democracy in which formerly marginalized social groups and regions have been drawn into the orbit of genuine party competition.

E. The Struggle for India's Religious Identity

If India's democracy has deepened along the criteria of competition, its democracy has been challenged along the dimension of minority rights through the embrace of a Hindu-based identity politics that came decisively to the fore in the 2014 election of Narendra Modi. Modi came to power on an economic reform agenda twinned with a religious nationalism that was unabashedly Hindu in flavor, with regime posters claiming "I am a Hindu. I am a patriot. I am a nationalist," with serious pre-election debates over whether secular Nehru or more religious Patel were more legitimate founding father, and with the beef ban to name just a few.

However, these moves to reinterpret the Indian nation as a Hindu nation faces greater odds than in a context where discrimination against the minority group, however defined, has been historically sanctioned by accepted narrative and constitutional codification. Relatively pronounced protests against these moves by Indian elites, especially when compared with neighboring Pakistan, shows the power of a legitimating inclusive national identity to protect minorities from accepted marginalization even as this narrative faces perhaps its greatest challenge to date.

Malaysia: Hierarchical Nationalism and Lasting Authoritarianism

That Malaysia gained independence in 1957 as a procedural democracy had little if anything to do with nationalism. It was due instead to the colonialists' insistence upon electoral competition as a condition for withdrawal, plus the dominant United Malays National Organization (UMNO) party's overwhelming confidence that it would not lose free and fair elections. As soon as British pressure and UMNO's electoral confidence had waned, Malaysia's dominant nationalist party had no compunction about installing a regime type that better suited its largely nativistic and feudalistic vision of the national community. The subsequent stability of UMNO's authoritarian dominance has had much to do with the fact that, even before independence, UMNO and its coalitional allies had forged a clear bargain about what to do with state power once they had gained it. That hierarchical ethnic bargain would ultimately prove more important to sustain than democracy itself.

A. Origins of Malaysia's Hierarchical Nationalism (1945-57)

Little repression was necessary to stifle anticolonial mobilization in British Malaya before World War II. The majority ethnic group, religiously Muslim Malays, ruled

³⁵ Jaffrelot, 2003.

indirectly, as the British came to peaceful terms in the late 19th century with multiple state-level indigenous rulers, or sultans. This mode of colonialism preserved and entrenched hereditary rural aristocracies.³⁶ Yet at the same time, a massive influx of Chinese and, to a lesser but still considerable extent, Indian migrants dramatically altered the demographic character of “*Tanah Melayu*” (the land of the Malays). Malay-Muslim aristocrats sought colonial protection and patronage before World War II rather than broadly inclusive and egalitarian reforms. The Malay population remained weakly politicized and regionally compartmentalized in conservative state-level ethnic associations, while the swelling Chinese minority was treated as “sojourners” with no real standing in the colonial polity.

Feudalism and nativism thus went hand-in-hand in prewar British Malaya. Only Malays were “indigenous,” and only their sultans were sovereign. The war and Japanese occupation severely rattled this indirect-rule equilibrium, however. While the Malay sultans and their “administocrat”³⁷ (aristocratic administrators) allies collaborated with the Japanese and saw their privileged positions protected, Chinese Malaysians more often resisted and suffered terribly under Japanese rule. When the war suddenly ended in 1945, the upshot was dramatically increased Malay-Chinese conflict and a radical imbalance in political organization across communities: while the Chinese-dominated Malayan Communist Party (MCP) had gained much strength as the leading anti-Japanese resistance movement, the Malay community lacked any organized movement to protect its interests as the British returned.

Considering that massive in-migration had brought the Chinese to practically equivalent size as the Malay population, this Chinese organizational advantage was perceived as existentially threatening to Malay interests. Malay nightmares of losing their protected indigenous status seemed to come to fruition in late 1945 when the British published a white paper calling for fully equal citizenship for all locally born individuals, be they Malay, Chinese, Indian, or other, and for the dethroning of Malay sultans as hereditary rulers. The Malay response was emphatic: hundreds of thousands poured into the streets in early 1946 to reject the British white paper and insist that both that the sultans’ sovereign standing and the privileged position of “indigenous” Malays vis-à-vis “immigrant” Chinese be upheld. The Malay protests of 1946 would have lasting political consequences. From these protests emerged UMNO, essentially a new alliance of the fragmented state-level ethnic associations that had existed before the war. UMNO instantly became the most important nationalist movement in British Malaya, and would quickly become its most powerful political party as independence approached.

Confronted with such forceful Malay mobilization, the British had little choice but to accede to Malay demands on the inviolability of the position of the sultans and the principle of “*ketuanan Melayu*” (Malay primacy or supremacy). As negotiations on a new constitution for an independent Federation of Malaya proceeded, these principles remained inviolate, ensuring that the new nation would be born with an ascriptively tiered definition of political citizenship in which the feudal Malay ruling aristocracy remained constitutionally ascendant. Quite unlike what unfolded in India,

³⁶ Syed Husin Ali, *The Malay Rulers: Regression or Reform?* (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Strategic Information and Research Development Center 2013).

³⁷ Jomo Kwame Sundaram, *A Question of Class: Capital, the State, and Uneven Development in Malaysia*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1986).

a movement to protect the power of colonially entrenched elites resulted in a dominant type of nationalism in Malaysia that was ascriptively defined.

UMNO was not in a position simply to impose its nativist and majoritarian vision when independence came in 1957, however. The British remained on the scene for a full decade longer than in India because there was a powerful ethnic Chinese-led communist insurgency that the Malays, most of all, desperately wished to see definitively defeated. This not only gave the British leverage to insist that UMNO accept electoral politics as well as a multiethnic coalition (dubbed “the Alliance”) with parties representing the sizable Chinese and Indian minorities. It also forced UMNO to accept a similar kind of “neutralized-sharing” language regime as arose in India, as opposed to the sort of “power-concentrating” language policies it preferred (Liu 2015). Although neither Chinese nor Tamil were recognized as official languages, UMNO did accept English as an additional national language to Malay for a minimum period of ten years after independence. This at least allowed English-speaking Chinese and Indian elites to access the state on something resembling equal footing with their Malay counterparts as long as Malaysia remained a functioning democracy (1957-69). But the same could not be said for the Chinese and Indian masses, almost none of whom habitually spoke English, and who saw their languages sidelined in the public education system and silenced entirely in the operations of the postcolonial Malaysian state apparatus. A similar arrangement unfolded for religion, as Islam was recognized as the only official faith, but minority religions were assured of non-intervention if not state sanction or support.

This hierarchical independence bargain was ominous but not immediately fatal for democracy. A majoritarian coalitional compromise emerged during the 1950s, allowing electoral democracy and Malay privilege to coexist as of Malaya’s birth in 1957. To understand why this arrangement emerged and why it was so readily repurposed for autocratic stability after the ethnic riots of 1969, one must consider the programmatic ideological content of the bargain upon which UMNO cemented its initial ruling coalition.

B. Hierarchical Nationalism and Democratic Fraying, 1957-69

Constitutionally enshrined Malay favoritism did not prevent UMNO from forging a stable majoritarian coalition with parties representing Malaya’s Chinese and Indian minorities. “The Alliance” romped to victory in the founding 1955 municipal elections in Kuala Lumpur, and enjoyed a preponderant supermajority in the parliament after independence in 1957. Confronted with an MCP-led insurrection throughout the last decade of British rule, elites from all three major ethnic communities coalesced, with active British assistance, in an elitist “protection pact.”³⁸ The bargain was clear: non-Malay businesses would enjoy protected property rights in a resolutely capitalist and internationalized economic system, and would, in exchange, bankroll both the Alliance parties through campaign financing as well as the Malay-dominated state itself through progressive but not excessive levels of direct taxation. In sum, non-Malays could dominate the economy while Malays dominated the state apparatus and received the lion’s share of public goods that capitalist growth made possible.

Malays were assured of continued political supremacy in this bargain. When this came under challenge, the UMNO-led state set aside its ostensible democratic principles to protect its position. This occurred in 1963 when the formation of

³⁸ Slater, 2010.

Malaysia as an expanded federation brought the Chinese-dominated city of Singapore into the fold, and produced a stern leadership challenge from Lee Kuan Yew's Chinese-dominated People's Action Party (PAP). Emergency was declared and Singapore was expelled from Malaysia, precisely because Lee's PAP refused to adhere to the constitutionally enshrined notion of Malay primacy, and sought to replace "Malay Malaysia" with an ethnically and religiously egalitarian "Malaysian Malaysia." Then in 1969, the death knell was sounded for procedural democracy when Chinese-led labor parties made huge electoral gains against the UMNO-led Alliance, prompting ethnic riots in Kuala Lumpur and other major cities.

The lesson of the 1969 election and riots was as clear as the bargain they had undermined. If democracy could not deliver reliable supermajorities to a Malay-led ruling coalition in a nation that was Malay-dominated by definition, democracy was expendable. Authoritarian controls were imposed before Malaysia returned to electoral politics in 1971 under the leadership of an expanded UMNO-dominated National Front (Barisan Nasional, or BN).

C. Asserting Ethnic Hierarchy through Authoritarian Hegemony, 1971-98

To some degree, the shift from the Alliance era to the BN era simply represented a reassertion of the original bargain exchanging Malay political domination for lightly fettered capitalism, which benefited well-to-do Chinese in economic terms even while marginalizing them politically. The echoes of the foundational hierarchical bargain of the 1950s could thus still be heard; but the pro-Malay tones now entirely drowned out the more ethnically inclusive and egalitarian themes that the British had effectively imposed upon their departure. Most importantly, the BN promised dramatically increased economic redistribution across ethnic lines, from Chinese business to the Malay multitude, under the New Economic Policy (NEP, 1971-90). Contrary to canonical models of authoritarian political economy, the ruling BN did not assert its strong-armed grip to redistribute wealth from the many to an elite few. It did so to extract resources from the second-class citizens in Malaysia's hierarchically defined nation, and redistribute them to the first-class group, the majority Malays.

Hierarchical nationalism asserted itself in the sphere of language as well. To some degree this shift had already taken place as of 1967, when the UMNO-led Alliance government passed a new National Language Act that rescinded the official status of English and anointed Malay the sole language of state. Yet fully vernacular and English-medium schools were still permitted to operate. After UMNO's authoritarian turn, Malaysia's language regime became a full-blown "power-concentrating" one in which all English public schools were forced to switch to Malay, and all Chinese and Tamil schools were compelled to offer courses in Malay for the first time (Liu 2015, 105). Thus the officially recognized lingua franca, so vital in the construction of an egalitarian nationalism, was decisively displaced by the ethnic language of the Malaysia's Malay majority over the course of the 1970s.

Hierarchical nationalism and class conservatism have been tightly married since 1969 in one of the world's most durable authoritarian arrangements. So long as democracy threatens to deliver political equality to Malaysia's ethnic Chinese minority – and thereby to overturn the definition of the Malaysian nation as one where Malays are the only true "sons of the soil" – authoritarianism remains seen by UMNO's leadership as a necessary precaution. From the early 1970s until the late 1990s – a period dominated by the prime ministerial rule of Mahathir Mohamad (1981-2003) – this marriage of hierarchical nationalism with authoritarian rule went practically unchallenged.

D. Authoritarian Hierarchy and Multiethnic Democratic Opposition, 1998-present

The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-98 marked the beginning of the end for Malaysia's heyday of UMNO/BN authoritarian domination. The crash sparked a factional split between Prime Minister Mahathir and his popular deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, who was sacked and imprisoned on highly politicized corruption and sexual misconduct charges in September 1998. It was telling that Anwar had gotten his start in politics in the 1970s as an activist for both rural economic policies and national language policies more decisively favoring the Malay majority. When Anwar was recruited to UMNO by Mahathir in the early 1980s, along with his fellow Muslim Youth Movement (ABIM) foot soldiers, it exemplified how UMNO could combine ethnic chauvinism with pro-Malay economic distribution to keep even Malay youth activists supporting the old-guard authoritarian party.

When Anwar was sacked and slandered, it shattered this Malay-led authoritarian hegemony. During the weeks between his shocking dismissal and expected imprisonment, Anwar sparked the first mass democracy movement in Malaysia's relatively tame and stable postcolonial history. Given Anwar's own history as an activist for rural Malays, the core of his movement came from the Malay-Muslim opposition party, PAS. Yet Anwar also quickly reached out beyond his core ethnic constituency to mobilize support from other nongovernmental organizations and opposition parties as well, including the Chinese-dominated DAP: the descendant of Singapore's PAP, which had so confrontationally challenged Malay supremacy in the 1960s and invited the expulsion of Chinese-majority Singapore from Malaysia itself. The battle royale between Mahathir's UMNO/BN and the Anwar-led "reformasi" movement thus rapidly assumed the character of a fight between the authoritarian regime's favored "Malay Malaysia" ethnic and religious hierarchy against a new and youthful coalition supporting more of an ethnically egalitarian "Malaysian Malaysia."

The fact that Anwar's movement sought not only to topple the Mahathir regime, but to reshape the Malaysian nation from its deeply entrenched hierarchical version into a more egalitarian mold, helps explain the severity and scope of state repression that was leveled against it. For the first time, a genuinely multiethnic movement and coalition had arisen to demand democratic reforms as well as a relaxation of Malay-first politics and economics. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that democratizing Malaysia would require redefining the Malaysian nation, and that the forces of authoritarian continuity remain inseparably wedded to a hierarchical vision of what it means to be Malaysian. Strictly Malay opposition parties like PAS and overwhelmingly non-Malay opposition parties like DAP have always fit into the mold of ethnicized politics in Malaysia, and therefore avoided UMNO-led repression. By contrast, Anwar's new Keadilan (Justice) party traversed ethnic lines and transcended purely ethnic appeals in a manner that had no precedent in Malaysia's postcolonial history, and invited the full wrath of the Malaysian state's coercive apparatus as a result.

Although Mahathir Mohamad stepped aside as prime minister in 2003, the struggle between hierarchical nationalist authoritarian incumbents and egalitarian nationalist democratic opponents has continued to the present day. When the multiethnic opposition coalition made major electoral strides in 2008 and 2013, denying the BN its two-thirds majority for the first time, Prime Minister Najib Razak publicly and in inflammatory fashion blamed the result strictly on disloyal Chinese voters. As the Najib regime seemingly crumbles under the weight of colossal

corruption scandals, it falls back ever more heavily on Malay-first chauvinism to compensate, and steps up its use of authoritarian repression against anyone who dares to question the sovereign status of state-level Malay sultans. Hence the marriage of feudalism, nativism, and authoritarianism remains as tight in Malaysia as the marriage of egalitarianism, secularism, and democracy has traditionally been in India – even as Malaysia’s hierarchical nationalism comes under increasing attack from egalitarian democratic forces, and India’s egalitarian nationalism fights back strengthening challenges from the backers of the hierarchical nativism of Hindutva.

IV. Conclusion

Egalitarian nationalism has supported but not predestined the establishment of robust democracy in India. Conversely, the relatively hierarchical character of nationalism has hindered but not entirely foreclosed the potential for democratic development in Malaysia.

In recent decades, democracy in India has changed in ways that both deepen and challenge it. Perhaps most visibly, Indian democracy has deepened via the gradual decline of Congress’ electoral dominance and the dawn of coalitional politics under the aegis of its two competitor parties, Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Every government in power from 1989-2014 was composed of a coalition of smaller, regionally based parties in alliance with either Congress or the BJP. With the rise of regional and caste-based parties, the political representation of subordinate social groups has grown considerably.³⁹

An additional tectonic shift in Indian democracy has been the embrace of an identity politics characterized by group-based claims to representation. Propelled by the implementation of reservations for ‘other backward castes’ in 1989, this shift has likely driven the rise of the Hindu-promoting BJP and pushed secularist Congress to make accommodations to the Hindu majority. These changes have edged India closer to replacing its secular nationalism with a Hindu nationalism. While Indian democracy today has been firmly entrenched through political parties that are vested in its continuation to date, one of the clearest ways in which the government of Narendra Modi is challenging India’s democratic fabric is through its gradual attempts to re-define the Indian nation as historically Hindu.⁴⁰

Meanwhile in Malaysia, authoritarianism endures because the persistent exclusions of ethnic nationalism helped prevent the emergence of a powerful multiethnic protest movement during the Asian financial crisis in 1998-99, and have continued to help keep most Malays in the authoritarian UMNO camp in the national elections of 2004, 2009, and 2013. It is no coincidence that Malaysian authoritarianism continues to rest upon the nativistic appeals of its dominant party, while the emergent multiethnic opposition coalition must not merely overcome an impressive battery of authoritarian controls, but the legacies of politics being organized along entirely ethnic lines throughout Malaysia’s independent history. No less than in contemporary India, the postcolonial political regime in Malaysia continues to bear the birthmarks of the young nation’s ideological origins.

³⁹ Christophe Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India*. (London, Hurst, 2003).

⁴⁰ Maya Tudor, “India’s Nationalism in Historical Perspective: The Democratic Dangers of Ascendant Nativism.” In *India Politics and Policy*, Vol. 1, No. 1, March 2018.

