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The Limits of “Populism”: How Malaysia Misses the Mark and Why That Matters

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Abstract

Politics in Malaysia seems ripe for a populist upsurge. Parties assume fairly exclusive, ethnic boundaries, inviting insider–outsider pandering. Personalities loom large. Economic inequality is among the highest in the region. Regardless, the extent to which Malaysian politics might be understood as “populist” rather than merely polarised, illiberal, and prone to particularism is dubious. I argue that Malaysian politics is neither populist nor likely to veer that way. However, the case offers a useful test of the boundaries between populism and personalisation of politics, the extent to which appeals designed to maximise popular support suffice to code a polity as populist, and which specific illiberal features facilitate or preclude populism. This examination thus clarifies a messy concept by exploring how populism might develop or falter in a multi-party, parliamentary, and hybrid rather than democratic regime – suggesting the relative reach of institutional rather than personalistic or zeitgeist-related explanations.

Keywords

Malaysia, populism, patronage, illiberalism, inequality

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Breathless recent discussions of a new populism, its roots, and its implications throughout much of the world in recent years have largely blown past Malaysia. At first glance, the reasons seem self-evident. The Barisan Nasional (National Front, BN) coalition, dominant since independence in 1957, seemed likely to win yet again in 2018. Incumbent Prime Minister Najib Razak, woefully corrupt and unpopular, seemed sure to hold his berth, through patronage and the incumbency advantage it reinforces, rather than through galvanising ideas. The coalition challenging the BN, Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope, Pakatan), tangled in webs of hard-to-reconcile issues and lacking mutually acceptable, charismatic, eligible leaders, had only roughly cohered around an alternative figurehead as elections approached. Nonagenarian former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad helmed that coalition while erstwhile premier-in-waiting Anwar Ibrahim sat out a prison sentence, but also without much of a motivating message. Malaysia was missing a populist demagogue to kick things off, per the apparent Southeast Asian pattern – Najib, or even still-kicking Mahathir or restless Anwar, was no Rodrigo Duterte. Even once, against all odds, Pakatan won in May 2018, the coalition was anxious simply to prove its programmatic mettle and to train Mahathir to doff his ingrained authoritarian habits. When Pakatan, in turn, fell to a “parliamentary coup” just shy of two years later, former BN deputy prime minister and Pakatan home minister Muhyiddin Yassin came from behind to helm, tenuously, the new Perikatan Nasional (National Alliance, PN) government.

At the same time, the Malaysian system has features that make it seem ripe for a populist upsurge. In Malaysia’s dominant-party electoral authoritarian system – as yet still largely unreformed institutionally – parties outlast their leaders and structure politics. The largest of those parties are organised in fairly exclusive, ethnic terms, inviting the sort of insider–outsider pandering that serves as a common denominator to right-wing populist agendas. Malay or Chinese “chauvinism,” in fact, is a time-honoured feature of the political landscape, with at least some degree of political purchase. Economic inequality, too, is among the highest in the region and intransigent (Lee, 2013), offering left-wing tub-thumpers legitimate grounds for complaint, should any emerge to take up the mantle. Moreover, personalities loom large, effectively anthropomorphising, or at least standing in for, even delicately balanced coalitions, however strong and institutionalised key Malaysian parties may be.

Regardless, the extent to which Malaysian politics might be understood as “populist” rather than merely polarised, illiberal, and prone to particularism is unclear. As Vedi Hadiz cautions, “populism should not be but an umbrella term of convenience for political opportunism” (2014: 130). Both rhetoric and grassroots partisan machinery characterise and situate party leaders from government and opposition alike as personal patrons, with minimal mediation already between politician or party and voter. Ideological leanings matter, from social democracy to neoliberalism to Islamism, but more as broad valences than as sure or enduring premises for the mass of votes. Parties on both sides shore up that instrumental politics by dispensing the sorts of politically pitched programmes and targeted patronage that elsewhere might denote populist outreach (for instance, consider Thaksin Shinawatra’s healthcare policies in Thailand). And although

civil-societal followers stand ready with colour-coded t-shirts, snazzy posters, and martial arts displays, they seem invariably to abscond promptly to (existing) partisan camps.

All told, however commonly the label is used there, I argue that Malaysian politics is neither populist nor likely to veer in that direction. However, the case offers a useful test of the boundaries between populism and personalisation of politics, the extent to which appeals designed to maximise popular support suffice to code a polity as populist, and which specific illiberal features are best understood as embodying or facilitating populism. Such an examination is useful as a novel lens on Malaysia, but also to clarify a messy concept by probing its extension and intension: how far it stretches and how much it explains. And at a more basic level, it offers a test of how populism might develop or falter in a multiparty, parliamentary, and hybrid rather than democratic regime – suggesting the relative reach of institutional rather than personalistic or zeitgeist-related explanations. In an era of populist frenzy, in other words, a case study of where populism falls flat, despite seemingly apt raw materials, is analytically revealing. Indeed, all told, Malaysia’s experience warns that, sloppily deployed, “populism” may be too broad or too poorly conceived to offer more than a heuristic first cut or polemical spin.

Conceptualising Populism

Prevailing scholarly and non-academic accounts regarding the who, what, and why of populism are perplexingly incoherent – though we can identify a common core at least on the academic side, derived from accounts of populisms from across places, periods, and ideologies (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013: 3–4). The main constants are a minimalist premise of society as divided into a good popular *us* and a corrupt elite *them*, and belief in popular sovereignty (albeit only for that rightful *us*) as means to achieve the general will; populism’s obverse would be either elitism, which disparages the people in favour of the superior few, or pluralism, which conceives of multiple legitimate societal groups, with different interests. Also prevalent in contemporary usage is the assumption that populism is dangerous, however hazy the issue of *to whom* (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013: 149–152). Still, populism may be coded as positive. According to Aslanidis,

Analysts who do not sympathize with populism tend to apply the term to the movement they dislike, and protect their favorite from the ominous association. On the contrary, supporters of populism as a progressive notion happily assign its label to the movement they feel to be endearing and refuse its bestowal on ‘reactionary’ ones. (2016: 94)

Indeed, this literature as a whole is highly normative.

Our lack of deeper conceptual consensus concerns not merely what the appropriate starting or vantage point should be, but also what aspect of politics most constitutes or defines populism; it is to such debates that seemingly counter-intuitive cases such as Malaysia are especially useful. Populism may be *discursive*, or a way of homogenising a heterogeneous people vis-à-vis elites, whatever the content of the frame they press. (This approach draws on Laclau’s foundational work, and specifically allows for a more

progressive variant; the content of the populist message may vary.) It may be *ideational*, or focused on populist leaders' proposals or demands, whether demagogic or not. It may be *organisational*, focused on strategies and vehicles, including social movements and parties. Or it may be *class-analytical*, focused on the timing and conditions for populist impulses' emergence (Hadiz and Chryssogelos, 2017: 402–404). Regardless, clearly, populism is *not* a coherent, single ideology, nor is it reasonably understood as dichotomous – as not admitting of degrees (Aslanidis, 2016: 89, 92).

Whether analysts focus on discursive frames, ideas, or tactics, identity looms large in understandings of populism. Some framing of *people* (virtuous, deserving, and downtrodden) versus *elites* (over-empowered, corrupt, and unresponsive) constitutes the standard trope of populism. We may understand populism to present a “moralistic rather than programmatic” emphasis, centring around, rather than merely deploying strategically, an unequivocal friends–foes distinction (Mudde, 2004: 544). Indeed, Gidron and Bonikowski home in on populism as a *moral* politics, given the extent to which its appeals are “predicated on the evaluation of the fundamental worth of entire categories of people,” and intrinsic to a greater or lesser extent to political strategy in any democracy (2013: 24–25). In this vein, Müller proposes populism to represent “a form of *political imaginary*, a way of perceiving the political world which opposes a fully unified – but ultimately fictional – people to small minorities who are put outside the authentic (and potentially, but actually never, fully present) people”; structurally, “it construes an ‘unhealthy coalition’ between the elite that does not really belong and marginal groups that do not really belong either” (Müller, 2012: 21). Much of the hand-wringing over populism thus centres on its absolutist conceptualisation of who does and does not have a rightful claim to agency or empowerment (Müller, 2012: 22).

The breadth of the populist “we” depends on how its actors define “the people” and “the elite.” Populism may be exclusionary, as in much of contemporary Europe; there, sociocultural factors and exclusion of “aliens” are front and centre. Or it may be inclusionary, as in much of Latin America, where populists are more likely to focus on socio-economic factors and the poor (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013: 148, 67). Furthermore, the literature identifies strands of political identity and interest that feed into populism, one centring around the limitations of representation and avenues for political participation; another focused on frustration with neoliberalism, in light of widespread precarity and socioeconomic marginalisation (Hadiz and Chryssogelos, 2017: 400). We should not be surprised, then, to see populism surge where current political institutions seem exclusionary or unreliable, and/or where class systems and power distributions seem rigid and unfair (Hadiz and Chryssogelos, 2017: 400–401). Yet, the core features analysts have attributed to populism have changed over time. For instance, before the 1990s, deficit spending and fiscal irresponsibility seemed essential, and whether charismatic leadership is necessary or merely “facilitating” remains contested (Aslanidis, 2016: 95–96).

And in practice we find a vaguer and more common framing, defining populism simply by those we presume to be populist. In this vein, Duterte is populist because he defies expectations of civil behaviour with his image of “authenticity and masculinity,” and for having the “best-told narrative” (McCargo, 2016: 188–189). We might refine those

assignments by asking less how perhaps populists comport themselves than what they represent; what differentiates *populism* from mere “demagogy and opportunism” (assuming a normatively negative cast) is that it “says something about the relationship between ‘the elite’ and ‘the people’” (Mudde, 2004). Hence, Hewison, for instance, nuances the common classification of Thailand’s Thaksin Shinawatra as populist. Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai won via “perceptive electioneering” – a business-like approach to surveying the “the political ‘market’” to develop a “brand” and platform, and to present well-liked, useful policies. Only after his election did Thaksin start to speak *for* rather than *to* his rural base, yet he himself was reluctant to embrace the “populist” label. His opponents tarred him with the term to signal corruption and abuse (Hewison, 2017: 432–434).

The chief difficulty in assessing where Malaysia fits on a populist spectrum is in identifying the axis and indicators at issue. The problem is endemic to the inquiry rather than unique to Malaysia – but Malaysia, with its abundant have-nots, demagogues, and rabble-rousers, presents an excellent test-case. If populism’s appeal,

lies in the way it resonates with people of varying social positions who none the less commonly *experience* deprivation and who understand that their life chances are similarly being *systematically* constrained within the institutional mechanisms and relations of power of an existing social order (Hadiz, 2014: 132),

who would that people be in Malaysia, and under what organisational vehicle or leader would they mobilise? Or more succinctly: who is the populist “we” and what is the substance of that collective’s cause?

Second, we encounter the dilemma of whether Populism proper (as opposed to a more casual “populism”) is distinct to (once-)liberal democracies and/or, at least in Southeast Asia, presidential systems. It is worth noting that students of populism prevaricate even on the question of whether populism is necessarily antithetical to democracy. In different guises, populism appears both a “threat to democracy” and “a potential corrective for a mode of politics that has somehow become too distant from ‘the people’” (Müller, 2015). Indeed, in Thailand, Thaksin touted his electoral mandate, while his detractors rejected elections as overly susceptible to vote-buying or endemically duped voters; after the military removed him in an anti-democratic coup in 2006, Thaksin became more populist, in tandem with what we might consider an essentially pro-democratic red-shirt movement (Hewison, 2017: 435–436).

But the exclusivity of the populist framework – the differentiation between those who do and do not belong – highlights populism’s incompatibility with “proper democracy” (Müller, 2015). More broadly, populism itself “is inherently hostile to the idea and institutions of *liberal* democracy or *constitutional* democracy”; it offers “a biting critique of the democratic limitations within liberal democracies” in how it interprets majoritarianism, minority protections, and the political independence of state institutions such as the judiciary (Mudde, 2004). That said, populists’ sense of the common good need not default to ethnic lines. While both anti-elitist and anti-pluralist (seeing opponents as not just wrong, but fundamentally illegitimate), populism could approach “epistemic

conceptions of democracy” – but only with the caveat that for representation to work, it must be the case that “the right representatives represent the right people” (Müller, 2015). So the pro-democratic case is a hard one to make. Moreover, the pervasive violent dimension that characterises contemporary populism – at least in discourse, and, especially in “less developed democracies,” in bloody praxis (McCoy, 2017: 515–516) – makes it hard to take seriously a claim to populism as refining rather than subverting or sidestepping democracy.

Regardless, discussions of “democratic populism” have limited relevance to Malaysia, given its competitive electoral-authoritarian regime. Recent transitions notwithstanding, Malaysia has no thriving democracy to subvert. We do see discussion in the literature of “illiberal populism,” referring not to illiberal states marked by populism (i.e. *populist illiberal polities*), but to “bad” (nativist, xenophobic) rather than “good” (progressive, lefty) populisms (Chambers, 2017). We might query whether “good” populism could press an illiberal state *towards* democracy, as counterfoil to illiberal populisms that press “good” states *away* from democracy, but contemporary examples, at least, are elusive.

“Authoritarian populism” offers another variant. Munro-Kua (1996) labels Malaysia as such for the state’s pattern of pitting ethnic groups against each other, to perpetuate communal divisions even while claiming to rectify them – essentially a protection racket à la Tilly (1985). In fact, it is the interests of the ethnic-Malay capitalist class that the system protects with a mix of collaboration and suppression to quiet or co-opt minority and working-class voices; populism here is more a strategy than ideology (Munro-Kua, 1996: 5–7). Moreover, given the state’s manipulation of ethnic divisions and the spoils at stake, key political crises in Malaysia have come far less from inter-ethnic than intra-Malay struggles. The extent to which the state has coercively suppressed these challenges reveals “the class basis of domination”: the system is not merely communal, but also oriented to the benefit of the economic elite (Munro-Kua, 1996: 4). This framing, Munro-Kua argues, allows the state simultaneously to strengthen itself and win elections. If we are to code Malaysia as populist, it is surely in this guise. That said, as detailed below, I would argue that institutional attributes, as well as a more patronage-driven and disunited elite than in the 1980s–1990s, limit the extent to which this label (still) fits.

Relatively little of the populism literature picks up this thread, of populism outside liberal-democratic contexts – presumably not least since much of the frenzy over populism derives from “it can’t happen here”-ism. A related strand does feature in work on Russia – for instance, Robinson and Milne’s exploration of Vladimir Putin’s similarly electoral-authoritarian order. They trace the development there of “official populism,” or when a regime itself propounds populism to offer a new conception of state–society relations (2017: 413). Putin, they argue, has shifted from populist rhetoric to official populism in his presentation of the illegitimate threat from external forces (Robinson and Milne, 2017: 420–422). Their approach is useful in two regards: in offering a (rare) lens on top–down populism specifically within a hybrid-regime context, and in stipulating how we would know this form when we see it.

Having found at least a common tune running through the seeming “conceptual cacophony” (Müller, 2015) around populism, we turn now to Malaysia, to see why this never-liberal-democratic, communally structured, patronage-laden polity fails to register as populist – a finding that helps us make sense of the country’s political path while also fine-tuning our concept by probing its limits.

Situating Malaysia I: Why It Might Look Populist

A significant share of Malaysians display at least a significant share of the attributes, and endure at least a significant dose of the grievances, that characterise contemporary populism and its contexts elsewhere. The term has even come into vogue in Malaysia in recent years, usually with a negative connotation, signalling the other side’s (fiscal) irresponsibility and pandering for votes. Moreover, the rightful “we” of the Malaysian nation will likely never be fully resolved, nor how “Malay” national culture should be, posing an ever-ready set of galvanising us/them tropes. Just on face, Malaysia seems a fine candidate for populism, presumably to render its regime even less inclusive and less liberal than it has been.

Most obviously, the very word “liberal” has taken on the valence of a slur in recent years, at least among a vociferous subset of Malay-Muslims. More broadly and enduringly, communally defined political parties, structuring the national economy largely along ethnic lines, in the name of a constitutional provision for Malays’ *kedudukan istimewa* (special position, as stated in Article 153 of Malaysia’s constitution) or *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay dominance/supremacy; the shift in terminology and translation is itself revealing), have made intolerance of minorities and anti-pluralism hard to avoid, limiting even the new government’s room for manoeuvre. Those sentiments may be especially strong among those in the favoured group (Malays, all of whom are also Muslim, or indigenous *Bumiputera* broadly), but not within its favoured stratum. High intra-ethnic inequality makes a lower-class Malay “ethnoclass fraction” (Brown, 1994) poised for riling up, either along class lines or (more likely) as though the only real culprit were wealthy, non-Muslim Chinese. In other words, like other places experiencing populist upticks, Malaysia has in abundance that heady mix of racialism/racism, oriented around ethnicity as well as religion, and increasing economic have-nots.

Furthermore, federal and state leaders have adopted or expanded in recent years policies that carry a similar potentially populist patina to ones we see elsewhere in Southeast Asia, seemingly designed to style leaders as champions of the poor masses. The unconditional cash-transfer programme Bantuan Rakyat 1Malaysia (BR1M) – among Najib’s flagship initiatives – had been the most common focus for those looking for signs of populism in Malaysia. Introduced in 2012, the (rebranded) programme continued to disburse small payments even after the BN’s ouster (initially MYR500; amounts have increased since), coupled with targeted subsidies for needy, and presumably grateful, groups. Cognate programmes (introduced earlier, and possibly inspiring the BN to develop BR1M) under Pakatan-held states likewise offered single mothers, the elderly, the disabled, the recently bereaved, and others one-time or recurring payments. Any

election year's federal or state budget is laden with goodies for civil servants and other large clusters of voters, and frequently touted as itself "populist" or as a sign of a populist turn (for instance, Loone, 2017; Sipalan, 2017).

Such policies are definitely popular. They are also expensive: opposition-led Penang (when the BN still controlled the federal government) dedicated 12 per cent of its state budget to its *Agenda Ekonomi Saksama* (Equitable Economic Agenda); its goal was to be the first state to ensure all residents have a monthly income at least a smidge above the poverty line.¹ The BN spent an estimated MYR57.7 billion in the initial years of Najib's administration to curry support ahead of the 2013 general elections, including both BR1M and related "1Malaysia" spending and pledges (Welsh, 2013). Voters have come to expect parties on both sides to woo them with their very best economic deal – costs of living have been voters' top concern in recent elections (Weiss, 2019), not Islam, national security, or other issues. Ideally, aspirants will prove their commitment with a campaign-time down-payment, usually in the form of some project announced or launched in the voter's community. So political leaders do appear to be investing heavily in courting have-nots, as good populists might do.

It is worth considering, too, the extent to which the root socioeconomic causes scholars identify for populist upsurge in Europe also apply in Malaysia. Our definition of "populism" may well be too closely tied to European experience – to frustration with European Union dictates, swarming refugees, intractable unemployment, and all the other woes on which Europe's (especially illiberal) populist parties have so assiduously capitalised. But some of these factors are clearly widely germane – particularly economic inequality and human flows. Inglehart and Norris (2017), for instance, explain the *proximate* cause of the current Euro-American populist surge to be not economic, but anxiety over cultural change and eroding norms, given foreigners' intrusion. But the deeper issue *is* economic insecurity; in times of relative precarity, xenophobia ticks upward, emerging in populist expressions. Southeast Asia, and Malaysia specifically, is site to tremendous internal and external migration – 11.5 per cent of Malaysia's population are now non-citizens, not even counting the likely higher number undocumented; Malaysia ranks eighteenth globally for the number of international migrants it hosted in 2019 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2017; United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019). (Of course, inflows of Rohingya notwithstanding, no country in Southeast Asia is experiencing a refugee surge anywhere near so dramatic as parts of Europe.) And about 30 per cent of Malaysia's population had less than MYR500 for an emergency as of late 2017; within the preceding six months, 60 per cent had been unable to pay utility bills on time, a shocking 85 per cent had had to skip meals, and 89 per cent needed to sell or pawn possessions.² The economic effects of 2020's COVID-19 pandemic have only made these already worrisome conditions much worse. Inasmuch as widespread economic precarity, especially coupled with dissimilar newcomers, encourages populism, Malaysia should be primed.

Finally, we might consider the fact of the relative legitimacy or appropriateness of the recently only-narrowly ousted BN government – not least since its key component parties are now back in power, albeit as part of a different (and as of this writing, decidedly

shaky) coalition. Arguments about the righteous “people” versus venal “elites” are not only fairly common, but many Malaysians are likely to find them plausible. First, there is the racist angle: Najib’s BN government did include non-Malays and non-Muslims, whom some in Malaysia deem marginal or second-degree citizens, best pushed to the corners or out altogether. The “Malay unity” premise of the new Perikatan Nasional – with the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and the Malay-Muslim-based Parti Islam seMalaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, PAS) at its core – confirms the punch such ethnoreligious messaging carries. The alternative angle, more in line with current Euro-American rhetoric, stresses corruption. Extreme graft among the upper echelons of power may have convinced Malaysians that those elites themselves did “not really belong” (Müller, 2012: 21) in power. The extent of alignment between maligned masses and elites, though, is another matter. We find countervailing delineations of “we” and “they,” including along existing partisan lines: Malay-nationalists aligned with the communally structured UMNO, anchor of the BN, may jump more readily to a racialist frame (albeit tempered by coalitional dynamics; see below), whereas in seeking both to make the masses feel they have *not* prospered so much as they should have under BN rule and to press a less-communal order, challenger coalitions tend towards the economic-grievance framing. We see both tendencies within Pakatan, imperilling its cohesion, coherence, and, hence, tenure.

In short, Malaysia has what it might take for a populist movement to emerge, per experience elsewhere: ethnic divisions and status-claims, economic inequality and lures, and a remarkably corrupt recently ousted government, key players from which have continued in office (in UMNO, or having jumped ship to Pakatan or other PN parties), combine to offer fertile ground. Granted, these attributes are not new in Malaysia, but inequality and corruption, at least, have noticeably increased in recent years, likely lending volatility. So even if it seems a stretch to say either the BN/PN or Pakatan is populist now, one or both may be angling in that direction. Why should this polity not be considered “populist” or leaning that way?

Situating Malaysia II: Why “Populism” Is the Wrong Frame

Here is where definitions matter. Politics of identity and inequality do loom large in Malaysia, and distributive programmes of all sorts are highly politicised, but that is not to say Malaysia’s parties, leaders, or policies are populist (or at least, not overwhelmingly so). Recognising these limits clarifies where the concept “populism” sheds analytical light, helping us to compare and prognosticate, and where it merely casts shade.

First, there is the *we/they* issue. Mudde offers a conceptualisation that summarises much of the variation described above: populism is “an ideology that separates society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite,’ and that holds that politics should be an expression of ‘the general will’ of the people” (Mudde, 2016: 25–26). Similarly, Müller sees populism as “a particular *moralistic imagination of politics*, a way of perceiving the political world which places in opposition a morally pure and fully unified people against small minorities, elites in particular, who

are placed outside the authentic people”; populists’ core claim is “that they – and only they – properly represent the authentic, proper, and morally pure people” (2015: 83). I would argue that the fact that *either* a racialist *or* a “corrupt elites vs. pure people” frame is equally plausible in Malaysia suggests the difficulty for any would-be populist. Moreover, the ruling elite are overwhelmingly from the dominant ethnoreligious group, so these potential “theys” align poorly.

Structurally, too, Malaysia is a poor fit. Malaysia’s dominant-party framework, even under Pakatan and a not (yet) UMNO-led PN, offers a distinctive institutional block to populism, especially falling as it does within a larger institutionalised party system and an ethnically plural population. (As per Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2017, Malaysia’s population was 68.8 per cent Bumiputera, 23.2 per cent Chinese, and 7 per cent Indian.³) The coalitional dynamics within BN and Pakatan – whose win required forging a coalition of similar breadth – have shaped political discourse and promises. First, coalition member-parties might pitch populist appeals, but generally different ones to Malays, Chinese, and others. Their core message, then, needs to appeal to all members, which rules out exclusionary racialism. Even when we see spikes in depictions of Chinese as *pendatang* (immigrants), for instance, cross-ethnic and cross-national economic entanglements, as well as still-relevant norms, make a shift towards deeper subordination of, or negation of the agency of, “others” unlikely. The yet-nascent PN is too much a cobbled-together coalition of convenience – adding just enough seats beyond its UMNO–PAS core to form a government – to seem a game-changer. Should the coalition endure until the next election, it will still need to appeal to non-Malay voters, and it does include the BN’s Malaysian Chinese Association and Malaysian Indian Congress, regardless.

That said, we could see in stepped-up discourses of Malay cultural supremacy and *kedudukan istimewa*, even if these shifts do not erode formal political rights, signals of a shift in who socio-political elites consider rightfully and fully Malaysian. But that discourse *usually* comes in Malaysia more from second-tier firebrands, at best, to rile up the base and prove their pro-Malay mettle, but then be tamped down subtly or unremarked by the coalition-leading top ranks. Indeed, Robinson and Milne (2017) suggest that from the hybrid-state leaders’ perspective, “cultural values”-based official populism – the us/them framing of Russia/West or Malays/Chinese – is a subpar mode of stabilisation. Its focusing on just one threat limits the frame’s purchase and leaves potentially many groups dissatisfied.

Malaysians *are* polarised, and each side does try to paint the other as unworthy of authority, morally bereft, and misguided. But the key division is not an elite/mass one: depending on one’s vantage point, it is either/both a partisan or an ethnic divide, overlapping closely with a religious one. Whichever lens one adopts, these camps span class – nor does the “corrupt elite” in question (since a cabal so referenced does appear often in Malaysian political discourse) refer to a vertical or horizontal slice of society, or one by and for a disfavoured segment of society; the term references a cluster of overlapping political and economic strongpersons.

Furthermore, all partners from either coalition are unlikely to agree to any radical revisioning or restructuring; indeed, platforms of both propose to keep basic parameters in place, albeit liberalising around the edges. That institutional framework – regular elections at the state and federal level, equal franchise, a mixed economy, etc. – conditions the nature and scope of discourses that can be articulated or gain leverage. Finally, because it is not just one dominant party that is institutionalised and prepared to govern, a range of parties, both government and opposition, have stakes in the system in place, leaving less room to manoeuvre than where parties are weak or merely personal vehicles. (Parties *are* personalised and factionalised to an extent, but not anywhere near to the extent of parties in, say, Indonesia or the Philippines.)

Less determining, but also germane, is the fact of the Malaysian system's being parliamentary, not presidential. Mahathir (and before him, Najib) was a prime minister, not a president; his colleagues in parliament rather than the masses writ large elevated him to that spot. He could still be a populist, even if the people's direct vote was not what granted him executive office, but the fact of rising through a party – which even the charismatic Mahathir had to do – rather than with the chance of unmediated popular acclaim entails at least some check. Of course, the range of European examples (or closer to home, India) attests to the fact that parliamentary systems can support populist parties and demagogues. Inasmuch as regional patterns occur, though, accounts of populism particularly in Southeast Asia tend to focus on national leaders, who develop a full nationalist narrative and construct a “people” on that scale. In this region, the big-name populists are presidents. Presidentialism's institutional framework, by centralising executive power and offering strong incentives to develop a robust personal connection with and base among the mass of voters, may be more conducive to populism, even if the relationship is neither necessary nor sufficient.

But even if parties, leaders, and messages are not clearly populist, might certain policies be? Even here, the record is ambiguous, including for the most likely candidate: BR1M and its fellow cash-transfer schemes. For one thing, their electoral impact is hazy; polling data suggested a reduced bump from the first round of BR1M payments in 2012 to the second in 2013 (Aw, 2013). More to the point, these policies follow class lines. They are remarkable in the Malaysian context less for the sheer sums dispensed than because they do *not* follow the ethnic patterns that motivate and define Malaysia's sweeping preferential policies, in place since colonial times, massively expanded under the New Economic Policy of 1970–1990, and substantially sustained since. That class premise lacks similar articulation in any party's platform save that of the small, feisty Parti Sosialis Malaysia. Moreover, at least on the BN side, the constituencies that leaders and parties court through targeted redistributive policies are loyalists: civil servants and the poor have typically been fairly solid, because of significantly state-dependent vote-banks. The aim seems much less to gin up new anti-someone sentiment than to keep the masses fed and napping. The dislocated, precarious, disenchanting masses (Hadiz and Chryssogelos, 2017: 400) accept these handouts, but have not meaningfully mobilised to demand them – and the payments' conferral suggests more their recipients' consistent political salience than their sidelining, at least so long as they remain quiescent, dutiful

blocs. To label such policies, then, “populist” rather than merely “broad-based” and “vote-wooing” seems needless concept-stretching (c.f. Hewison, 2017: 427).

We might extend the frame, to include other indicators for populism. Diamond (2017) offers a list of defining attributes. Beyond those aspects addressed above – marked by leaders with hegemonic tendencies, anti-pluralist, intolerant of ethnic or other minorities – he suggests populism is anti-elitist, marked by an acute distrust of at least some institutions, plebiscitary (favouring direct over representative democracy), and nativist.

Drawing on that typology, a polity in which politicians from across parties default to assiduously cultivated clientelist linkages is not easily characterised as “anti-elitist,” nor are Malaysians from any significant segment notably anti-institutionalist. Political leaders have gutted many political institutions, but Malaysians do not reject them; in the last two general elections, over 80 per cent of those registered voted, voluntarily, and what groups have, say, hunkered down in self-supporting communes, eschewing the grid of governmentality, have been largely fringe, rare religious sects. The BN government banned the most plausibly threatening antisystemic group, Darul Arqam, led by charismatic founder Ustaz Ashaari Muhammad, in 1994 (see Ahmad Fauzi, 2000). Although no similarly potent challenger has emerged since then, the example – and Malaysia’s long history of Malay parties’ seeking to “out-Islam” one another – suggests that if an “anti-institutionalist” alternative *were* again to arise, it might, too, propose a specifically Islamist framework, perhaps with a “moral” rather than pragmatic premise. For now, though, leading Islamist organisations align with extant parties, and those parties, including PAS, play within the rules – and if anything, seek a *stronger*, if more “orthodox Islamist,” bureaucratic-state apparatus (e.g. Ahmad Fauzi, 2018).

It would be hard, too, to characterise Malaysians as substantially plebiscitary. Politicians, in fact, complain of the difficulty of getting Malaysians to come for town halls or similar discussions; Malaysians vote in impressive numbers, but are less prone to political or policy engagement otherwise. (Civil society is hardly moribund, but enervated also by insecure civil liberties, it is less than exuberant.) The political upheaval of early 2020, when legislators and parties reconfigured themselves into a new government with no pretence of an electoral mandate, may well prove to undermine Malaysians’ belief in elections. Regardless, there is no reason to presume that having been at the mercy of elite machinations will amp up the masses’ feelings of self-agency or commitment to participation.

Nor are leaders or the public conspicuously anti-globalist. One hears anti-American or anti-Western sentiments, but driven overwhelmingly by support for Palestine and the supranational *ummah*, not nativist insularity. In contrast to a proposed East Asian model of populism, which transpires in a context in which “extreme nationalism” is neither verboten nor fringe (Vickers, 2017: 59–61), “nationalism” in Malaysia is far more about internal ethnic contests – specifically, the extent to which the polity and its culture should be defined in the image of, and for the benefit of, Malays rather than minority communities – than a defensive or aggressive Malaysia-versus-the-world posturing. Even that challenge, though, is more cultural than material; Malay-rights groups, for instance, rail at statements or actions by non-Malays (or about equally often, Malays they do not like)

that “insult the sensitivities of” or might “confuse” Muslims – using the term *Allah* in a Malay-language Christian bible, for instance, or critiquing imposition of *syariah*-derived punishments in criminal cases. Hence, whereas in the 1960s, Malay ire targeted ethnic Chinese for supposedly siphoning up an undue share of educational and career opportunities (e.g. Enloe, 1970), we hear less now about Chinese economic dominance (though the theme is not dead), and attention-getting financial scandals are more likely to centre around *Bumiputera* elites.

In sum, while Malaysia has the raw materials for a populist surge, much stands in the way of such a turn. We do have glimmers – diatribes that elsewhere might seem harbingers of an ethnonationalist purge, but in Malaysia, are just standard party-congress rabble-rousing, for instance. However, the combination of demographics and institutions – structural attributes – seem likely to continue to hold the line. Put differently, since to embrace populist discourse, ideas, or methods is never automatic, it is worth contemplating who would have incentive to do so, when. Even when ousted and flailing in 2018, UMNO had the chance to reshape itself so as to destabilise vested elites, yet the party remained committed to a comeback under a phalanx largely of incumbents, a presumption on which it made good in 2020.⁴ Moreover, that UMNO does still need to govern in coalition, since so substantial a share of the population remains non-*Bumiputera* and Malay loyalties are divided, tempers the messages the dominant party might proffer, if it felt pressed to find a new frame. And critically, unlike in liberal-democratic contexts, messages *not* from the coalition in charge still stand to be suppressed, should they become threatening.

Analytical Implications

What analytical purchase does this clarification of Malaysian non-populism allow for students of populism elsewhere? Three lenses or lessons seem most germane. We might ask when populism does (not) emerge, whether region is salient, and where within the polity we should look, if seeking signs of populism.

When Populism Emerges (Or Does Not)

First, how and when does populism emerge, or when and where does it fail to thrive? Populism anywhere emerges only under certain conditions. Globally, those conditions seem to be ones particularly of economic crisis and marginalisation, and in connection with struggles over the distribution of political and economic power (Hewison, 2017: 429). Yet Malaysian experience suggests the emphasis in the literature on *when* trumps a focus on *where*: the structural attributes that might either preclude or stymie populist efforts.

Malaysia’s example suggests that an entrenched norm of power-sharing (however much more a mantra than sincere practice) helps, especially when contenders outside that collaborative coalition cannot rely upon freedoms of speech, press, or association, making the basic mechanics of propagandising and mobilising tricky. Malaysia began with a basically consociational order, including an approximation of Lijphart’s (1969) grand coalition: each of the three components of what was then the Alliance were

represented in the cabinet. By the 1970s, UMNO had grown more dominant; power-sharing was on its terms rather than fairly negotiated (Musolf and Springer, 1977). Yet the normative premise of coalition government, reinforced by ethnic pluralism and the fact that Malaysian voters are *not* neatly pillarised, but may vote on other than ethnic lines, still holds, enforcing at least a degree of moderation. In other words, coalitional politics may be a useful check, whether by tripping up would-be populists or because the fact of multiple parties signals the difficulty of any one boundary-touting leader's uniting a multivalent electorate, deterring would-be demagogues.

To test whether Malaysia is simply *sui generis* or signals a general rule requires comparative study. Do we see similar negative-case moments in other states, of populist might-have-beens that flopped, or of institutional features that held back the tide? And if we do, was it the fact of coalitional dynamics or electoral authoritarian controls and (threat of) coercion that proved the charm? Malaysia may be institutionally overdetermined in this regard. Hadiz and Robison (2017), for instance, note the impact of authoritarian legacies: Islamic populism has gained less traction in Indonesia than in other Muslim-majority states, they suggest, particularly since the pre-democratic authoritarian period kept civil society in shambles, leaving few readymade populist vehicles upon democratisation. Even if we look only to states at least verging on liberal democratic, in other words, wider institutional variation among those polities may suggest constraining and facilitating factors, much as Malaysia's non-populism does.

Does Region Matter?

Second, Malaysia raises questions of regions, in two respects. First, studies of populism that move beyond a single country tend to speak of a region – comparing Latin American and European populisms (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013), for instance, or finding patterns among East Asian states (Vickers, 2017). Inasmuch as there is an Asian or Southeast Asian model, what makes that a meaningful unit? Malaysia differs institutionally from the rest of its sub-region; Singapore comes closer, in at least some dimensions, than do other neighbours, but its hegemonic electoral-authoritarian framework (as well as its differently structured state, society, and economy) sets even Singapore apart. Should we attribute Malaysia's *not* fitting the apparent regional mould to institutional difference – the cases on which attention focuses, after all, are or were (closer-to-)liberal democracies – or to something about Malaysia's political culture or society? An answer, again, would require more systematic attention, but it is worth complicating our looking-to-find regional patterns, particularly when not all cases within range actually fit.

Second, we speak often of “left-wing” and “right-wing” populism in Europe or the United States, for instance, but that very framing presupposes a politics of left and right: parties meaningfully differentiated in terms of economic policies, rather than just in terms of, say, being for or against enhanced civil liberties or more or less mired in feats of corruption, as in Malaysia. However missing a meaningful populist moment in Malaysia, the forms such a movement might take suggest ways we could add nuance to the literature, building on others' useful, but still rare, efforts.

As mentioned above, perhaps the most likely form populism might take in Malaysia – largely absent in the literature on Europe, the United States, and Latin America that dominates the field – would be a populist Islamism. In recent years in Malaysia, the electoral effort has encouraged an inclusive “Islam for all” approach, recognising that close to 40 per cent of the population remains non-Muslim (and hence, again, the imperative of coalitions), notwithstanding sporadic diatribes online or on the streets. But that premise wavers, especially as UMNO seeks a new lease on life and PAS remains a vital third force, currently allied opportunistically with its erstwhile rival. Vedi Hadiz writes of Islamic populism in Indonesia, Egypt, and Turkey, but proposes a different frame: that of a marginalised *ummah*, perhaps organised underground, and tied to an economic base of petty traders and producers (Hadiz, 2014). The extent of Muslims’ socio-political dominance in Malaysia, as well as the state’s explicit and extensive privileging of Malay-Muslims, would seem to mandate a different genesis and strategy. Coupling Islamism with a theme of economic marginalisation works less well in Malaysia than it may elsewhere, given the structure of Malaysia’s political economy; Islamist mobilisation in Malaysia is perhaps notable, in fact, for its lack of a clear class premise or message, on the one hand, and on the other, its imbrication with consumerist and entrepreneurial themes (Sloane-White, 2017; Hew, 2018),⁵ as well as bureaucratic expansion – the state does far more to manage, channel, and even champion Islamism in Malaysia than elsewhere (Maznah, 2010). It may be, too, that the simple fact that Malaysia has not experienced the full power-reshuffling of transitions to democracy elsewhere (Hadiz, 2014: 126) has limited the extent of disruptive transformation.

By now, the chief champions of a Muslim/Malay-rights line are within the government, at the federal or state level; it would be hardly credible to call them populists, with anti-elitist, anti-systemic connotations attached. Yet the case offers potential for comparative study, not just among other Muslim-majority polities, but also where other religious frames offer populist potential (e.g. India, Burma, Sri Lanka, perhaps even the Philippines). Hadiz and Robison (2017) make headway, by differentiating among secular-nationalist and Islamist populisms in Indonesia, and usefully note the extent to which these frames not only differ in ideas and implementation, but may co-exist. But moving the field forward, towards a more systematic and less angstful conceptualisation, calls for more such non-Euro-populist (or non-Euro why-not-populist) explorations.

What Part Is Populist?

Third, the Malaysian case, among others, highlights the need for clarity on what it is we “expect” to be populist. When is a *system* rightly defined as populist, versus simply one or more of its leaders? Should Mahathir (or Muhyiddin, or a challenger) remake himself as a “real” populist, for instance, could he flip the figurative switch in Malaysia, to translate under-employed, over-entitled young Malay (mostly) men’s resentment and anger to a usefully politically weaponised force? More broadly, in tracking and assessing populism, is our unit of analysis a populist leader, party, movement, or ideology – or might we refer merely to one or more populist policies? Or in the sense that “populism” is used today, can we still speak of a state-led “authoritarian populism”? Is a top-down,

institutionalised (and long-term) “official populism” the same sort of beast as a right- or left-wing xenophobic upsurge, just with different substantive content?

Taking populism as an ideology, however minimally, rather than a strategy, we can see it as delinked from demagogues: populism has supply-side and demand-side drivers, and may not even have strong leaders on board (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013: 154). But where there are leaders involved: should we understand or expect to find populist champions as channelling or fomenting populism? In other words, does populist politics (generally tied to leadership) respond to or spark populist ideology or mass thought? Hence, for instance, why is it that firebrands in Malaysia flame out, even when attached to and influential within a party – simply the nature of factionalism or of more strategic heads’ prevailing, or should we be considering more psychosocial factors than institutional ones, of how ideas transmit rather than on what vessels they sail?

Likewise, Malaysia’s federal structure suggests the possibility of subnational populism, if salient ideas resonate more in certain areas, or if a more narrow or homogeneous base simply eases the task of catching on. In a polity such as Malaysia, we have ample space to consider urban versus rural dimensions, or patterns in peninsular West Malaysia versus in the distal Borneo states of East Malaysia, or the possibility of an Islamist populism confined to political Islam’s east-coast heartland. It may be that the structured comparison a within-case analysis allows offers leverage to explore populist people versus vehicles versus ideas, the better to understand at which level the process flares out in Malaysia, or where perhaps it simmers at a lower tier.

Conclusion

Overall, there seems little to recommend labelling Malaysia “populist.” That conclusion itself raises the question of what the utility might be of doing so, even were the concept less stretched. The too-ready usage of the term – and its deployment more as slur than neutral description – suggests often more an effort at moral judgement than an impetus for analytical leverage. Aslanidis worries that, given populism’s having been saddled with “normative baggage” since the 1950s, by now, “The normative implications of populism have plagued the literature and crippled its evolution into a respected theory” (2016: 94). That concern is germane.

Even so, to consider Malaysia’s relative populism presents a useful exercise, not only for refining and testing the boundaries of the concept, but for asking who has standing, and to what extent, in Malaysia: as Rodan (2012) asks, “who should participate in politics and how?” He differentiates among democratic, consensus, and localist, as well as populist, modes of representation, depending upon chains of accountability, the nature and directness of participation, the extent to which intermediary organisations intercede, and the relative discretion communities enjoy (2012: 314–315). From among his types, he considers Malaysia as ethnic “localist,” given the extent to which capitalism and Malay power have developed in tandem, but possibly edging towards the “democratic” mode, in which elected or appointed actors represent and are directly or indirectly accountable to the people (2012: 314, 24–28).⁶ Indeed,

his “populist” mode, which dismisses intermediary bodies, seems a poor fit to characterise Malaysia, including its would-be transformative and/or anti-pluralist social activists. Current praxis suggests parties are unlikely to give way to direct involvement anytime soon.

We might conclude by considering limits. Every party has a “we” and a “they” – such boundary-staking is inherent to collective identity – and all parties facing elections want to be popular. What *is* the cut-off at which we declare, for instance, a message genuinely anti-pluralist rather than merely racist? Assuming a policy can have populist intent, even if the system as a whole is not populist – not least since we cannot expect an overnight transition between modes – how many policies can follow the pattern before we declare a critical mass? And perhaps most importantly, what threat does populism hold in a state already not democratic, or might a populist turn allow a path forward, for those seeking rather than opposing liberalisation? Perhaps the real insight Malaysia adds is to raise such questions, however elusive the answers.

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Notes

1. Lim Guan Eng, <https://www.facebook.com/cmlimguaneng/posts/1558901477473281> and DAP, 2012.
2. Merdeka Centre, National Public Opinion Survey on Economic Hardship Indicators, 4–14 November 2017, slide 5.
3. The more elusive statistic is of the Bumiputera breakdown; the government does not broadcast the fact that Malays remain only a slim, if growing, majority. As of 2015, Malays comprised 54.6 per cent of the population and other Bumiputera, 11.5 per cent (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2017; Leong, 2017).
4. PN Prime Minister Muhyiddin, who took office in 2020, in fact represents Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (United Malaysian Indigenous Party, Bersatu) – but his own and his party’s roots are in UMNO.
5. Even Darul Arqam’s “activist economic ethic” attracted “the new middle class of professionals and technocrats” and burgeoned into a “self-styled business empire” (Ahmad Fauzi, 2000: 33, 35).

6. Rodan characterises Thailand and the Philippines as fitting the populist model and Singapore, the consensus one.

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