Clientalism, Institutional Change, and Civil Society Activism in Malaysia

An Interview with Meredith L. Weiss

In Malaysia’s 2018 general election, voters rejected the incumbent Barisan Nasional coalition (BN) in favor of the opposition Pakatan Harapan (PH) and its controversial leader, former Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad. This was the first transition of power since the country gained independence in 1957. To understand the changing direction of Malaysian politics, the Journal sat down with Meredith Weiss, Professor and Chair of Political Science at SUNY Albany, to discuss clientelism, institutional change, and civil society activism. Dr. Weiss also spoke about her forthcoming book, The Roots of Resilience: Party Machines and Grassroots Politics in Southeast Asia.

Journal: What led you to study the political systems of Southeast Asia?

Weiss: It was because of a great undergraduate professor of mine when I was at Rice University. He was a Southeast Asian Studies expert, now deceased, named Fred von der Mehden. [He] had been working in Southeast Asia since the 1950s, had lived all over the region, spent most of his life there, and went back every year through his eighties. He told mesmerizing stories about his travels and showed slideshows, still then on a slide carousel, of the region. He also finished every class with a Southeast Asian feast at his house. He just made Southeast Asia sound fascinating.

When I started my undergraduate years, I did not know anything about any of the countries in the Southeast Asian region. I had always been intrigued by East Asia, having been born right around the time of Nixon’s opening with China, when interest ticked up in the US. I grew up in the Washington D.C. area, so I always went to the Smithsonian, liked the East Asia exhibits, and collected these little knick-knacks from Japan. But Southeast Asia was more just a casual interest than something I thought I would study. I planned to go to law school to either work on civil liberties or something international. When I finally decided to do a Ph.D., it was between women’s literature in English, or else Political Science on Western European welfare states or Southeast Asian social mobilization, and I decided that Political Science, and the latter topic, is so much more fun.
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*Journal:* How have your research interests led you to focus on authoritarian acculturation in your upcoming book, *The Roots of Resilience: Party Machines and Grassroots Politics in Southeast Asia?* What are some key insights you present in the book?

*Weiss:* What led me to this book was another project on money politics in Southeast Asia. That is a collaborative, multi-year project on Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, with a little bit on Timor Leste, Singapore, and Thailand to supplement. That book looks at types of networks and patronage that political parties or politicians might distribute and the ways they vary across institutional and cultural contexts. The initial product from that project was a volume I edited called *Electoral Dynamics in Malaysia: Findings From the Grassroots.* It was more of a research effort around the 2013 Malaysian elections. One theme emerged from all the contributions. We had around sixty researchers on the ground in Malaysia during the election doing research and what they saw was the ubiquity of the personal touch. Personal outreaches by candidates among voters cut across parties and places. That really intrigued me because it is not something we expect to see in a place where we assume a party would focus much more on building the party rather than developing a connection between individual candidates and voters. So I started to delve more deeply into that and realized that there was an interesting contrast with Singapore.

The basic idea I developed as “authoritarian acculturation” is that when you have one party, a dominant party that establishes and maintains an electoral authoritarian system for the course of decades, that changes the habits of participation and expectations of politicians. It changes the nature of internal linkages between politicians and citizens, and it also changes what people look for in political representation. That is [what] I call “authoritarian acculturation,” and it actually shifts the political culture. The upshot of that is even opposition parties learn to adapt over the course of years. They may start with a different ideological premise and they may genuinely want a different sort of politics that is less focused on, for instance, small handouts and attending weddings, and more on policymaking, but it is impossible to get elected that way if people expect that you will do all of these [personal] things to show you are caring and you are a good person. We know that aspect of politicking is ubiquitous across polities. There are many interesting recent works, on China for instance, that suggest that even when there is no need to cultivate electoral support, you still find this disproportionate, unexpected constituency service. So I am really trying to explain why that happens, and what it means for long-term democratization.

*Journal:* Do you think civil society activism can successfully push countries with hybrid regimes, like Singapore and Malaysia, to become substantive democracies? Or do you think the acculturation will just encourage the elected opposition party to end up reproducing rather than subverting key attributes of the same regime?

*Weiss:* Part of what I have studied over the years is the interaction between civil society and political parties, both opposition and governing parties. So we could then ask whether an active civil society might be able to push parties to change [their] way of
doing politics. I think it is possible that civil society does that [with] constant reminders to press for certain issues and to take some risks. Malaysia now has a change of leadership, but there is a lot of frustration in civil society across different groups, with the slowness of institutional change. Repressive laws still remain on the books in terms of civil liberties, Malaysia has not been able to push their commission to investigate police abuses, and it has not signed the ICERD, which the opposition said they would do. A lot of that is because, even if there is pressure from [civil] society, there is a risk of losing electoral support. It was not a strong proactive vote for Pakatan Harapan (PH), the new coalition; it was largely a reactive vote among many who shifted their votes against the past Prime Minister. It is possible that civil society can help, but on the other hand, we should not glorify civil society. In Malaysia, one of the issues that Pakatan now faces in governing is that some of the most vocal and ambitious civil societal groups are not necessarily progressive ones. For example, the Malay rights groups are really helping to boost the fortunes of the former ruling party United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in an alliance with the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party. In that way, there is a role that civil society activism can play, but that requires more than just pro-democratic groups speaking loudly and vociferously. Structural features may make it more difficult for them to play that role, and there may be countervailing groups in civil society as well.

Journal: In 2018, the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition defeated the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition; marking the first time the opposition has defeated the ruling, incumbent party. In your 2019 Democratization journal article “Duelling Networks: Relational Clientelism in Electoral-Authoritarian Malaysia,” you mentioned that “clientelism is intrinsic to partisan competition in Malaysia.” Can you briefly introduce this concept of clientelism and how it helped opposition parties overcome dominant party patronage to secure power?

Weiss: “Clientelism” is defined in different ways and it is classically used in South-east Asia–it is defined in terms of patron-client ties. Some of the earliest work about patron-client ties, or what we now say is “clientelism” or “patronage,” is from Southeast Asia, the work of people like Jim Scott or Carl Lande. Patron-client ties are iterative, face-to-face, enduring, and mutually beneficial. These are the ties between, for instance, landowners and sharecroppers, where if the sharecroppers-- the tenants-- are farming the land, the landowners go [bankrupt]. But if the tenants are taking too much, the landlord will not make a profit, so they count on what Jim Scott called the “moral economy.” The landowner will not necessarily be bound by purely economic logic, but will make sure that he is--he is nearly always a “he” in these cases--is a good patron as well. So [the patron-client relationship] is mutually beneficial and it is over the long term. We see that transmute into electoral politics in complex ways.

The sort of clientelism I look at in the article is what we term “relational clientelism,” which is a longer-term clientelism more akin to these old-style patron-client ties. We are no longer talking about landlords and tenants, but rather about politicians who really

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1 These parties ousted Pakatan Haripan and took power in early March, as part of a new Perikatan Nasional (National Alliance) coalition.
nurse the constituency; they build connections—personal connections—with voters over the long term. What I argue makes it unique is that it is not simply based on a material exchange—it is not just about giving patronage. My colleagues and I have tried to shift the usage to talking about clientelism in terms of human networks and patronage in terms of the material goods that might travel through those networks, whereas much of the literature just uses [these terms] interchangeably.

I argue that in Malaysia, because of that imperative before to woo support through the personal touch, there is a lot of pressure on opposition contenders—now from the BN, previously from Pakatan—to do things for their voters to try to woo support that way. In Malaysia, some of this is just by presence, by being known to be caring, to be concerned. You may not be giving a lot of money or might not be able to confer government projects if you are in the opposition [but] there is that implicit sense that, “look, if I can do this much for you, just by being present, by giving you a small handout. If I know your name and your parents’ names, imagine, once I have access to the state funds...” There is always that implicit material side to this.

At the same time, if [clientelism] is more about presence than gift, that becomes a real part of partisan competition. In Malaysia, what the old government, [from] before 2018, did still continues with only minor tweaks. Where the BN, the ruling coalition, won a seat, it would transfer the “constituency development funds,” or constituency allocation, to its Member of Parliament or member of the state legislature. If it lost that seat, it would appoint a coordinator to that constituency, and it would channel those funds to that coordinator. It would not channel any funds to the opposition Member of Parliament or state legislator. If people needed something—if their mosque needed a new roof, their child needed school fees—they have the incentive to go to the BN coordinator to seek help, which of course builds loyalty to the BN. And so, the opposition has to counter that, and they would do that by offering a mix of that on-the-ground service that people look for. [This] a part of competition, rather than [just] one-sided vote buying.

Journal: Moving forward, how can the leadership of the new Malaysian government ensure the continuation of a multi-party election system? What do you think is the reason for the dropping approval rate for the Pakatan Harapan coalition?

Weiss: This is a really difficult question. I just came [back] from Malaysia last week and I was meeting with some Malaysian politician friends, and they were asking basically the same thing, “what can we do?”

I’ll answer the second part first. One reason for a dropping approval rate is what you would expect in any new government, the end of the honeymoon period. [Another] part of it is that there is more than one way to interpret this result. So one is yes, Pakatan took control of the federal government. The other is Pakatan and the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) together ousted the BN, the former coalition. The Islamic Party controls about one-third of the Malay votes—that is the dominant ethnic group—and one that has the most political sway and economic privilege in Malaysia. They are not
necessarily the wealthiest, but they are favored by the economic policies, so everyone wants the Malay vote. PAS did much better in the elections than anyone but PAS expected. They control some states, but they are also now a strong third force, regionally concentrated, and aligned with UMNO, the leading party of BN. And so part of why approval is dropping for Pakatan is that PAS and UMNO have consolidated to suggest a Malay-oriented, Malay-unity government alternative and support for Pakatan was never that strong and unambiguous. Add to that the fact that many of those who voted for either PAS or Pakatan were really voting against the former Prime Minister Najib. Najib Razak is still in the midst of his trial for corruption and other charges, mostly related to the 1MDB scandal, but it is taking so long that he has actually rebuilt a lot of support. People forgive and forget so the ire against Najib has slipped now that he is not in power. The focus on corruption has dimmed, and in the meantime, you have a government that is just not able to enact all the reforms they had said they would, in part because the majority in the parliament is so slim.

Most real change in Malaysia requires a constitutional amendment. Constitutional amendments require two-thirds of the votes and Pakatan does not have two-thirds of the seats in parliament. The first-ever constitutional amendment passed in Malaysia with bipartisan support was to lower the voting age to eighteen and allow automatic registration of voters in July 2019. This is potentially a very significant change. Malaysia has a fairly young population, so its passage suggests that every party thinks it will get the youth vote. Pakatan also has not been entirely consolidated in terms of what changes it wants, so one big issue for civil society is re-introducing local government elections. It used to be a campaign promise of most of the parties that are now Pakatan, but it fell off the manifesto this election. That is a major institutional change that galvanized many of the supporters of Pakatan, who are from various civil society groups.

In terms of how to ensure the continuation of the system, the best way is probably maintaining strong parties, and that is just so that everyone maintains the stake in a functioning electoral system. For instance, resisting any temptation to deter a PAS-UMNO coalition, which many in Pakatan think would be quite problematic. One of the things that is definitely something to watch is that Pakatan is trying to pursue electoral system reform, possibly for instance, to introduce proportional representation for voting or a mixed-member system, which is partly proportional representation and partly single-member districts. The electoral reform committee has now put forth its recommendations. They have not been made public, which itself is a sign that this government is not quite as transparent as they have promised to be. Beyond that I would like to see more channels for consultation, which helps to increase the sense of stake in the system so that we do not end up with a replication of what we had in the past in Malaysia, which is an extraordinary centralized, top-down system of policymaking. Legislators do not have any real policymaking roles and there is not a sense of negotiation of policies—they come from the top and they are ratified.

**Journal:** In _Student Activism in Malaysia: Crucible, Mirror, Sideshow_ you described how state repression and limited communication infrastructure discouraged student activism
in Malaysia. Has recent technology or widespread use of social media by student activists circumvented the structural problems to communication?

**Weiss**: I would actually say that has been a larger factor throughout civil society, but less on campus than elsewhere, just because students already have other modes of communication. They see each other. That is a part of why students, factory workers, clergy, and military members tend to be differently situated groups for mobilization than the general public. A German sociologist calls them “marginal elites.” They have a particular standing in society, and a sense of their own value, but because of their level of regular face-to-face interaction, they often are less reliant on social media than other sorts of groups. As a comparison, Zhao Dingxin writes about this for Chinese student action. In Beijing, where you have different universities, you can look out a window and see students from another campus start to march and know that it is time to get your campus to mobilize. In that, Malaysia and Singapore are alike, you had student groups that formed in dorm rooms or you have Islamist organizations that form through campus groups. Social media definitely helps, it gets people engaged, but it is a less critical component there.

What has arguably been more important, in terms of student activism in Malaysia, are changes to the laws regulating student politics. Those actually started to change under BN, thanks in large part to Saifuddin Abdullah, who was then the Deputy Minister of Higher Education, and is now the Minister of Foreign Affairs. He was the one who, through really creative and risky moves, basically forced BN to change the laws restricting students from engaging with political parties. [Before], if you were eighteen and not a student, you could join a political party, but if you were an undergraduate student, you could not. One of the relatively limited changes that *Pakatan* has made since coming into power is further decreasing the controls on undergraduate students on campuses. What we see as the democratization of higher education, the massification of higher education, in a way, diminishes students’ automatic or inborn ability to use their student status as validation. When you have two or three percent of the population that has received higher education, they are going to be the future leaders, they are people who have great ideas running through their head. Now if we have fifty or sixty percent of people going on to higher education in some countries, that is something people do just to get a job. It changes the place of students within society. In addition, you have higher costs for education, fewer places where it is free or heavily subsidized, so students are less likely to be willing to take on risks. If they get expelled for activism and they are left with loans, that is very different from getting expelled and simply being back at square one. There are various other factors that matter, too, such as the proliferation of campuses. Students might be more likely to be commuters or complete their education online. [Online education is] probably the single greatest attack on student activism, because online education means you do not meet other students in person. All of those sorts of factors, which are just natural artifacts of the modern economy, make student activism less likely to be a dramatic thing – yet it does still happen.
Journal: In Taiwan’s recent election, Tsai Ing-wen utilized online platforms such as Instagram and Facebook Live streaming to successfully gain support from young voters. Do you think new technology would bring a similar change to social movements in Malaysia?

Weiss: I think there are a couple of ways that we can see this happening. Social movements on social media, especially online news sites, have been incredibly important in Malaysia. In Malaysia, the mainstream media are fully controlled by the state or by parties. They have holding companies that own the main newspapers and so forth. But for online media, they cannot do anything or they would kill a big part of the economy. Online media really allowed people access to new information. Most people in Malaysia now get their news online, especially younger people. Singapore has done a slightly better job of controlling online media, but even there, it is a really important thing. We might actually see even more of a Facebook or YouTube effect, where opposition parties are able to post videos of their rallies and their speeches, which not only gets their message across, but also reassures people that it is not illegal to go to opposition rallies. It can really make a difference, because, unlike in Taiwan, there has not been free media. It is not just a question of mobilizing in general; it is specifically getting the information out. In order to see the impact of this media [we have to see] whether these online pushes help to bring people out into the real world. In Malaysia we had Bersih rallies, the movement for clean and fair elections, and thousands of people took to the streets wearing yellow t-shirts. They were mobilized online, but it is the physical presence, the sea of yellow shirts, that became the real impact. Then those people mobilize to help opposition parties or do civic education in a non-partisan way. A lot of those were young people. I met people helping out opposition campaigns, who had been led into this by Bersih, mobilized through social media, who were not themselves old enough to vote because the voting age was twenty-one until very recently. Social media has just been hugely important. There is not necessarily a direct correlation between reading something on Facebook and voting that way. What this does is to make the information available and spread the culture of mobilization.

Journal: Are new communication methods sufficient to overcome ethnic and religious cleavages in Malaysia?

Weiss: They are not sufficient and they can actually make them worse. Part of what these new methods can do is enhance siloization of populations. Mainstream media, whether print or electronic, are in different languages. In Malaysia, as in many places, people usually follow what is in their own language. You may see very similar news if it is the mainstream media. They just translate the contents into different languages. That is problematic when that news is all state supporting and very filtered. [However] having news online does not mean that everyone is reading the same news. We have online media, for instance, the site Malaysiakini, which is one of Malaysia’s leading news sites, that puts Pakatan-favoring information online in multiple languages. It may be that the language stream in one language subsidizes what may be a less profitable language stream, but people will generally find news that is in the language that they are the most comfortable using, which might be English, Malay, Mandarin, or Tamil. So, what we
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may then find is enhanced cleavages, especially if you augment that online media with social media, with the more conversational or dialogic aspect of online media. People are communicating about news or commentaries with others in one language, and often, exclusive of those who are comfortable in other language streams. Those language streams do not perfectly follow ethnic lines. A lot of Malays are more comfortable in English and you will find Chinese Malaysians who do converse happily in English or Malay, but there is a strong overlap between ethnicity and preferred language. So one of the real problems is, you will find that people sometimes have very different conversations and express different sorts of objectives.

There was a recent [controversy], actually not yet fully resolved, over whether or not schools should be required to teach or enhance the teaching of Jawi script, an older style of Arabic script for writing Malay, instead of the English script for writing Malay. This issue is segmented on ethnic lines, with varying coverage of these issues, and different commentaries on them, across different language streams. It was seen as a potential attack on communal rights or equal space among Chinese Malaysians but Malays saw this as an issue of national pride. And so, there is a possibility that online media, including social media, may give new platforms for issue-based organizing, which can bring people together across ethnic and religious lines, but it also may augment those divides in different ways. It is harder to control the message and it is easier to exploit in different ways. This is not to say that one side is right or one side is wrong, but rather, that there may be less interaction, or less effort to come up with a point of consensus.

Meredith L. Weiss is Professor and Chair of Political Science in the Rockefeller College of Public Affairs & Policy at the University at Albany, State University of New York. Her research addresses social mobilization and civil society, the politics of identity and development, parties and elections, institutional reform, and subnational governance in Southeast Asia, with particular focus on Malaysia and Singapore.