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Is Malaysia Sliding Toward Dictatorship?

A look at how the rhetoric compares to reality.

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Last week, Malaysia's former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad grabbed headlines when he suggested that the country was heading towards becoming a dictatorship like North Korea under its current premier Najib Razak.

And as I reported over the weekend, Najib's former deputy prime minister Muhyiddin Yassin also warned that the country was witnessing "the collapse of democratic institutions and the emergence of a new dictatorship." Muhyiddin was sacked last year after criticizing Najib amid the 1MDB scandal, a high-profile corruption saga where the premier has been accused of mismanaging funds linked to debt-ridden state investment fund 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB).

The aforementioned statements are no doubt heavily politicized and hyperbolic. But just how close are they to reality?

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While Malaysia has at times received praise for being a moderate Muslim democracy, close observers have long recognized that this is far from the case. In the first iteration of the Economist Intelligence Unit's annual Democracy Index released in 2006, before Najib even assumed power three years later, Malaysia was already classified as a "flawed democracy", with the country ranking 81 among 167 countries (the other three types are "full democracies", "hybrid regimes" and "authoritarian regimes"). It is also worth noting that Mahathir, now one of Najib's fiercest critics, was himself responsible for the same anti-democratic transgressions he now fumes about, including weakening the country's institutions and suppressing dissent, most famously in the case of his then deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim.

Similarly, Freedom House has also consistently characterized Malaysia as "partly free" (somewhere in between the other two categories, "free" and "not free", where countries like North Korea is situated), both in an overall sense and with respect to its two indicators – political rights and civil liberties.

Lastly, in the Polity Index, which examines qualities of democratic and autocratic authority in governing institutions by examining executive recruitment, constraints on executive authority, and political competition, Malaysia is listed as a "democracy," one step below "full democracy" (other categories are "open anocracy"; "closed anocracy", and "autocracy"). It is worth noting Malaysia's score up till 2013 is listed consistently as a 6, which means it barely makes the "democracy" category (scores 6 to 9) and just misses the "open anocracy" one (scores 1 to 5). An anocracy characterizes a regime type with qualities of political instability and ineffectiveness and a mix of democratic and autocratic traits – or, more loosely speaking, 'part democracy and part dictatorship.'

While the question of what Malaysia is and how it fares generally speaking is quite easy to resolve, the claim that the country is sliding towards dictatorship is much more difficult. The claim itself overly broad one relative to the specific metrics used in each of these indexes. Furthermore, the full impact of Najib government's crackdown following the 1MDB scandal has not been captured by the data that we have thus far even though it is clearly evident, whether through the suspension of media outlets reporting on the scandal, the undermining of institutions involved in investigating it, or the arrest of whistleblowers seeking to spill the beans. Nor are all instances of democratic regression necessarily directly linked to the 1MDB scandal either. The Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) and the National Security Council bill are two examples which suggest that viewing the country's democratic troubles through the lens of the scandal alone is rather

myopic, with other trends like the rise of the Islamic State threat also serving as contributing rationales irrespective of their validity.

Nonetheless, there is some support for this anti-democratic slide. For instance, Malaysia's overall score on EIU's Democracy Index did drop from 6.49 to 6.43 from 2014 to 2015, largely because the country did worse on two key sub-indicators – civil liberties and the functioning of government. On civil liberties, Malaysia's score went from 5.88 to 5.59. But the main noticeable change was on the functioning of government sub-indicator, which measures things such as accountability, checks and balances, transparency and corruption. Here, Malaysia went from 7.86 to 6.79, more than a point decrease, which makes sense because the 1MDB scandal would affect many aspects of this sub-indicator.

This is also reflected in Freedom House's data, though that index is more focused on rights and freedoms relative to EIU's. While Malaysia has recorded the same score of 4 (with 1 representing the most free conditions and 7 being the least free in each of the two dimensions measured: political rights and civil liberties) over the past few years, Freedom House has also designated Malaysia as a country with a "downward trend" in each of the last three years because of changes within sub-indicators.

In the latest rankings in *Freedom of the World 2016*, Malaysia was also listed among the ten countries to watch because of Najib's pressure over the 1MDB scandal. Freedom House makes an explicit link between the corruption scandal and the erosion of civil liberties as well as a crackdown on political dissent.

"In response, Najib's government has ramped up repression, purging opponents and using draconian laws to silence critics," the group said. "Meanwhile, authorities have launched a campaign to enforce conservative societal norms, targeting religious minorities, women, transgender Malaysians, and the LGBT community more generally."

So while Malaysia is a far cry from North Korea and its anti-democratic turn is hardly a descent into dictatorship, the country's slide nonetheless a discernable and worrying one.