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Democratic Transition in Malaysia:
Prerequisites and Obstacles

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Day 1 Session 1: History of Democratic Transitions

Democratic Transition in Malaysia: Prerequisites and Obstacles

Dr. Syed Farid al-Atas

Abstract

This paper discusses three categories of factors that account for the transition to democracy. They are the absence of peasant/worker resistance to the democratic programme, the presence of a democratic culture among the political elite, and the absence of external interference with the democratic project. The first and third refer to structural conditions, while the second refers to ideal conditions. In the case of Malaysia, the structural conditions that emerged in the late colonial period, that is, the absence of mass movements, allowed for the rise of a relatively democratic postcolonial state. Conditions had been relatively conducive to the development of a democratic political culture among the citizenry up till the premiership of Abdullah Badawi. However, recent years have seen the development and exertion of a more authoritarian trend among the political and religious elite that has accompanied a process of "Islamization" of governance. These developments resonate with a more feudal, hierarchical and authoritarian culture that can be traced to the precolonial past and which has an affinity with a more authoritarian interpretation of Islam so typical of the contemporary state religious establishment. The future of democracy depends on the ability of democratic tendencies within the state as well as civil society to work against authoritarian forces. This would require drawing upon the more egalitarian and humanist tradition of precolonial Islam and the modernist movement of the colonial Malay world. An important condition that determines the future of democracy is also the absence of external interference in the form of imperialism, either through direct intervention or indirectly through financial or other inducement. This paper, however, does not look at the external factor.

Democracy in Malaysia¹

Malaysian state has managed to maintain a relatively democratic regime since independence. Objections are likely to be raised to the characterization of the Malaysian state as democratic. Some have referred to the state in Malaysia as being authoritarian or neither democratic nor authoritarian. Therefore, it is necessary to justify the designation of Malaysia as a democratic state.

While it can be conceded that the Malaysian state does not "live up" to the standards of Western liberal democracies, nor aspires to, it is a system in which democratic procedures and institutions distinguish it qualitatively from many other states normally understood to be authoritarian. Here Aron's discussion on the nature of democracies is insightful. All regimes, whether democratic or authoritarian, are oligarchic in nature. The essence of politics is such that decisions are taken for and not by the community. Popular sovereignty should not be taken to mean that the people are directly involved in decision-making.² If every regime masks an oligarchy, how are democracies distinguished from authoritarian regimes? Important distinctions lie in the manner in which power is wielded, the rules according to which the dominant minority governs, the extent to which the ruling minority is open, and the means by which it is selected. The political system is more democratic to the extent that the ruling minorities of the regime are open for entry by way of democratic procedures. Along these lines of argument it is fair to say that Malaysia, in comparison to liberal democracies, is corrupted by too much oligarchy, which is not to say that it is an authoritarian state. Instead, relatively free elections give power to representatives of privileged minorities.

While it may be true that democratic procedures would only be adhered to as long as the ruling elite maintains its positions of power and continues to advance its ideal and material interests, the conditions under which this is so must be explained. This is to be done in comparison with the Indonesian case.

In Malaysia, since independence in 1957 general elections have been held regularly, the first in August 1959. Subsequently, elections were held in 1964, 1969, 1974, 1978, 1982, 1986, 1990, 1995, 1999, 2004, 2008 and 2013. The post-independence

¹ This section covering the pre-financial crisis period is derived from my Democracy and Authoritarianism: The Rise of the Post-Colonial State in Indonesia and Malaysia, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997.

² Raymond Aron, Democracy and Totalitarianism, London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1968, p. 83.

period of Malaysia has seen six consecutive changes of heads of government and 12 general elections.³ Throughout this period civilian authority in the state has been the rule. Still, the democratic nature of the state must be understood with certain qualifications. Nevertheless, what exists in Malaysia is more than the mere form of democracy. It differs qualitatively from authoritarian states, Indonesia included. Opposition as well as government parties exist at the national as well as regional levels.

Apart from an almost two-year period of “suspended democracy” following racial riots after the 1969 elections, parliamentary democracy has functioned continuously. Whatever the causes of the suspension of democracy were, they did not operate sufficiently long enough nor were they severe enough to result in the appearance of a non-democratic state.

The Conditions for Democracy

It should be obvious that for most of post-colonial history, the Malaysian state has a number of features which set it apart from Third World authoritarian regimes, which tend to be totalitarian, military-dominated, one-party systems, or bureaucratic authoritarian. The regularity of general elections, universal suffrage, the legal existence of opposition parties, and the degree of political contestation, co-exist with a powerful state which derives legitimacy from the functioning of democratic institutions but which continues to play a dominant role in structuring politics and social life.⁴ As noted by Girling, democratic elections do have substance in Malaysia because “alternative choices to the ruling party alliance still exist”.⁵ The quasi-, semi- or statist democratic nature of the Malaysian state should not allow one to labour under the impression that democracy is merely a facade.

The conditions for democracy in Malaysia are the following.

The lack of armed resistance against the state.

Democracy was implanted in Malaysia from without. One of the conditions under which it can survive is an absence of armed resistance to the democratic program and state. The Malaysian post-colonial state had never been up against mass or armed movements. There was no war of independence and the lower classes were neither participants nor sources of pressure in the negotiations between the British and the Malayan elite for self-rule. The only militant element in Malayan labour was associated with the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM). The emerging Malaysian government, however, had refused to accept the legal existence of the CPM in an independent Malaysia. Meanwhile, during the period of the emergency imposed by the British from 1948 for a period of twelve years, the CPM had failed through guerrilla and terrorist activities to gain the support of the masses.⁶ It was condemned to outlaw status in independent Malaysia as well and never made any inroads in the labour movement.

In Malaya, credit for the success of the government counter-insurgency policy against the CPM must go to the British, as the greater part of the emergency period lasting from 1948 to 1960 was during the period of colonial rule. In fact, in 1956, a year before independence, Tunku Abdul Rahman, the nation's first prime minister declared that the government would only build up a small army so as not to sap the resources of the country.⁷ This indicates that the emerging government of independent Malaya did not see the CPM as a great threat to the security of the country. There were no plans to build up the armed forces and the police on a scale necessary to fight communist insurgency. After the British left, there was no great expansion of the armed forces and police. It does seem that the government of post-colonial Malaya “did not bestir itself unduly over the military threat posed by the CPM...”⁸ The left was heavily suppressed, but most of this suppression took place during the British period. By the time of formal independence, there was not much left of an anti-government movement to suppress.

Internal strength of the state.

³ On the first eight see NSTP, *Elections in Malaysia: Facts and Figures*, Kuala Lumpur: NSTP Research and Informations Services, 1994; Ahmad Fawzi Mohd Basri, “Pilihan Raya Umum 1995: Mandat Baru Menjelang 2000,” *Dewan Masyarakat* May 1995.

⁴ James Jesudason, “Statist Democracy and the Limits to Civil Society in Malaysia,” *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 33, 3, 1995, 335-356.

⁵ John Girling, “Development and Democracy in Southeast Asia”, *The Pacific Review* 1, 4 (1988): 332-340, p. 335.

⁶ The reasons for this are explained later in the chapter, when the impact of capitalism on the peasantry is discussed.

⁷ Chandran Jeshurun, “Government Responses to Armed Insurgency in Malaysia, 1957-82,” in idem, ed., *Governments and Rebellions in Southeast Asia*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985, pp. 134-165: p. 136.

⁸ Ibid., p. 137.

The internal strength of the state can be defined in terms of the resources it can mobilise in situations when its power is challenged,⁹ as well as in terms of the support it receives from the dominant classes, whether industrial or merchant capital, or the landed classes. A democratic regime that is internally strong can withstand opposition without having to respond by suspending the democratic process altogether. Moore referred to the strong bourgeois impulse as a requirement for democracy. What is important is the general principle behind this, that is, strong class backing for the democratic state. In the case of modern capitalist states this backing comes in the form of taxation, the stock exchange and commercial credit.¹⁰

Of course, the question of internal state strength, and the support that the state receives from the dominant classes in particular, cannot be viewed in isolation from the ethnic factor, simply because of the predominance of domestic Chinese capital. In the early years after independence and prior to the launching of the NEP (New Economic Policy), the Chinese fraction of capital was dominant, as Malay capital was significantly undeveloped.¹¹ But the NEP brought a new set of rules, regulations and constraints on Chinese capital, which allowed for the emergence of politically-connected Malay private capital by way of “Ali-Baba” arrangements, appointments to company directorships, and the procurement of government contracts, not to mention the increasing role of foreign capital since the 1970s.¹² In addition, Malay bureaucrat capitalists, that is, those who hold or once held bureaucratic posts and use such posts for initial capital accumulation,¹³ had made their indelible mark on the economic landscape. Nevertheless, in spite of the change in the ethnic composition of capital, and whatever the direction and magnitude of such change in state-capital business relationships since independence, the point is that the state has continuously had a solid financial basis and access to funds. This has provided for some degree of democratic stability. This includes the provision of funds to UMNO politicians from Chinese capitalists, which was as true of the 1950s as it is of today.¹⁴

There is also an ethnic aspect to the role played by capital in maintaining the internal strength of the state. As far as Chinese capital was concerned, this was especially important in the early years of post-colonial state formation, as discussed earlier. This alliance, in the form of the Barisan Nasional (BN) today, is still important in spite of the relative loss of clout of Chinese capital. Although there had been a decline in support from the Chinese community of the MCA since 1959, and the implementation of the NEP resulted in both the MCA losing ground to Chinese-based opposition parties during the last three decades,¹⁵ and the constriction of Chinese capital,¹⁶ the ability of the MCA to bring in votes due to its link with capital is still significant because of the role it plays in “reinforcing Chinese ethnic identity and giving it concrete expression” in economic activity.¹⁷ In spite of a history of Malay-Chinese antagonism, including the riots of May 1969, Malay sentiments towards the Chinese were not such that Chinese capital could not aspire to ruling class status.

Elite cohesion

The question of why and how Malaysia’s style of democracy emerged and stabilised can be further addressed by recourse to an elite perspective on democratic stability.

From 1957 to 1969, the UMNO, MCA and MIC had consensus on vital questions concerning the special position of the Malays, the status of Malay as the official language, and citizenship for non-Malays.¹⁸ The alliance between Malay and Chinese elites broke down temporarily when the Central Working Committee of the MCA said that the party would not join the new Alliance cabinet as Chinese voters “rejected the MCA to represent them in the Government, if the result of the general elections reflect their wishes.”¹⁹ Nevertheless, when the new cabinet was formed on May 20th, the MCA continued to be part of it, providing three “Ministers with Special Functions.”²⁰ Although there was still talk of withdrawing from the cabinet when the situation returned to normal, the Chinese Chambers of Commerce was able to persuade the MCA to reconsider the question of participation in the cabinet.²¹ The potential for protracted elite factionalism between the MCA and UMNO was manifest in the views of some UMNO politicians who were against

⁹ Christopher Chase-Dunn, *Global Formation: Structures of the World-Economy*, New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989, p. 113.

¹⁰ Karl Marx, *The German Ideology: Part One with Selections from Parts two and Three and Supplementary Texts*, New York: International Publishers, 1970, pp. 79-80.

¹¹ James V. Jesudason, *Ethnicity and the Economy: The State, Chinese Business, and Multinationals in Malaysia*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 36-38.

¹² Jomo Kwame Sundaram, *A Question of Class: Capital, the State, and Uneven Development in Malaya*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1988, pp. 266, 269.

¹³ Yoshihara Kunio, *The Rise of Ersatz Capitalism in South-East Asia*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 72-74.

¹⁴ Heng Pek Koon, “The Chinese Business Elite of Malaysia,” in Ruth McVey, *Southeast Asian Capitalists*, Ithaca: Cornell University, 1992, p. 289.

¹⁵ See Heng (ibid.) for a review of the various election results since 1959.

¹⁶ Jesudason, *Ethnicity and the Economy*, ch. 5; Gomez, *Political Business*, pp. 39, 289-290.

¹⁷ Jesudason, *Ethnicity and the Economy*, p. 157.

¹⁸ Chandra Muzaffar, *Freedom in Fetters: An Analysis of the State of Democracy in Malaysia*, Penang: Aliran, 1986, p. 322.

¹⁹ *Straits Times*, 14 May 1969.

²⁰ Goh Cheng Teik, *The May Thirteenth Incident and Democracy in Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 28-29.

²¹ *Straits Times*, 31 May 1969.

continued alliance with the MCA. But what finally took place was a power struggle within UMNO itself. When Tun Tan Siew Sin announced that the MCA would not be in the cabinet, he was openly supported by UMNO “ultra” politicians such as Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Syed Ja`afar Albar and Syed Nasir Ismail, who wished the UMNO to go it alone in the cabinet.²² The elite factionalism was within the Malay leadership and not between Malays and Chinese. Tunku Abdul Rahman told the Malay weekly, *Utusan Zaman*, that Malay extremists within the UMNO wanted to topple him.²³ Nevertheless, the MCA eventually participated in the cabinet, and the problem of leadership within the UMNO was resolved when Tun Razak replaced the Tunku as Prime Minister in September 1970. What is interesting is that whatever elite factionalism surfaced during this period was intra-Malay rather than inter-ethnic. The “ultra” Malay UMNO elite did not move to expel the MCA from the cabinet but simply supported the MCA’s earlier decision not to be in the cabinet. The real conflict was within UMNO, with the MCA issue being used to discredit rival elites.

It should also be noted that the relative elite cohesion in Malaysia during the formative period of the post-colonial state was in the context of an internally strong state and a non-politicized military. The state was, so to speak, politically homogenous even though ethnically divided. The ethnic divisions were, and are, politically united in the interests of state and private capital. There was no serious threat to the status quo after 1969 that could have ended parliamentary democracy.

The State of Democracy Today

In terms of all three prerequisites of democracy, the state seems to be faring well. Mass or armed resistance to the state could result in an authoritarian backlash. Armed resistance in the form of separatist movements and terrorism that have threatened the integrity of other states such as Indonesia and, therefore, provided justification of a prominent role for the military, continue to be absent in Malaysia.

The Malaysian state is still internally strong in the way that I have defined it. To the extent that there is no exodus of Chinese capital from Malaysia, capital will continue to play the role of supporting the state as it did in the past.

Regarding elite cohesion, at this point it would be difficult to speak of a factional split within the Malaysian political elite, even within UMNO itself.

At the same time, there has been a growing authoritarian trend in governance. The real test of our democratic state today lies in its attitude and tolerance towards criticism, opposition, dissent. We have seen a steady decline in such tolerance over the decades. In line with the feudal mentality, our government does not seem to see itself as servants of the people but rather as our masters.

How can we understand this beyond the political economic context?

Obstacles to Democratization

Although it can be said that in terms of the structural prerequisites for democracy, Malaysia has satisfied the conditions for a democratic state in the way we have defined it, there remain obstacles to the further development and consolidation of democracy, which can be seen also as factors causing a regression to authoritarianism Malaysia. Here I discuss three obstacles, that is, the communal gap, the failure of capital to play an historic role, and the persistence of feudal psychology.

The Communal Gap

The nature of Malaysian politics is the divisiveness of ethnicised politics and politicised ethnicity. This is an inheritance of colonial legacy. The British, wherever they went, sought to maintain ethnic and religious differences in the societies that they colonised in order to facilitate political control and hegemony. Generally, there has been a failure of alliances among both political parties and the citizenry along class lines. Association is primarily along ethnic and, increasingly, religious lines. The failure to associate along class lines is evident for middle, urban working class as well as the rural classes. In fact, it is only the elite that associates along class lines. The Malay political-bureaucratic elite and Chinese-dominated capital have forged a level of elite cohesion that is unassailable. While the elite have an interest in promoting and/or being silent over an ethnically and religiously divisive discourse for public consumption, there is little consciousness of

²² Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, *May 13: Before and After*, Kuala Lumpur: *Utusan Melayu Press*, 1969, p. 140; Goh, *May Thirteenth*, p. 30; *Utusan Melayu*, 6 & 7 June 1969.

²³ *Utusan Zaman*, 20 July 1969.

this divisiveness and its impact on the political and economic future of the country among the general population. The lack of such consciousness explains the inability of most Malaysians to think along class lines and is a serious obstacle towards the development of democracy.

The Failure of Capital to Play a Transformative Role

What has been said above about the path Malaysia has taken towards democracy resonates with the so-called Moore thesis. According to Barrington Moore Jr in his seminal, *The Social Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship*, the absence of a strong bourgeoisie meant the failure of democracy to develop. The argument of the book is that differential strengths of the bourgeoisie creates different paths for state formation. A stronger bourgeoisie made for a democratic outcome while a weaker bourgeoisie made it more difficult to overcoming the power of feudal structures.²⁴

However, there are historical cases in which the bourgeoisie failed to play such a transformative or revolutionary role. A classic case was discussed by Marx in his *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.²⁵ Whereas the bourgeoisie played a revolutionary role in the revolution of 1789, its role in the revolution of 1848 was a farcical attempt to recreate the great revolution of fifty years earlier.²⁶ Marx explains the rise of authoritarian Louis Bonaparte in 1851 as a consequence of the bourgeoisie fearing to have to contend with the subjugated class, the proletariat, in the absence of a powerful state to mediate on their behalf. This is a case of the ruling class not wishing to exert itself forcefully but to give up its power. As Marx put it:

the bourgeoisie confesses that its own interests dictate that it should be delivered from the danger of its own rule; that to restore tranquility in the country its bourgeois parliament must, first of all, be given its quietus; that to preserve its social power intact its political power must be broken; that the individual bourgeois can continue to exploit the other classes and to enjoy undisturbed property, family, religion, and order only on condition that their class be condemned along with the other classes to like political nullity; that in order to save its purse it must forfeit the crown, and the sword that is to safeguard it must at the same time be hung over its own head as a sword of Damocles.²⁷

Indeed, this is what we may be seeing in the case of Malaysia. The presence of capital and its alliance with the state has not succeeded in transforming the political culture of the elite into a genuinely democratic one. In fact, it can be argued that the dominant political culture remains feudal in essence, remnant from the pre-colonial past.

*The Persistence of Feudalism in Malaysia*²⁸

Shaharuddin Maaruf has an insightful analysis that provides us with a means of understanding today's growing authoritarian political culture. Shaharuddin defines tradition as cultural or value systems which have been influential in moulding or shaping the world-view of a given people for a significant period in their cultural history. These cultural or value systems represent the stable core which provides the basis for the society's responses to contemporary and future challenges.²⁹ Tradition can be a negative or positive factor in the development of a society. Speaking about the Malay world, Shaharuddin draws our attention to two opposing traditions in Malay society, that is, the feudal and Islamic traditions. The conflict is rooted in the past but is still present in contemporary Malay society, even after the demise of the feudal polity. Malay feudal values have survived the feudal system. An example is the tendency to spend lavishly on ceremonies and entertainment locally as well as abroad. It was noted by Syed Hussein Alatas in 1968 that "the mood and desire to spend on such objects have been continuous with the feudal past where the ruling power put a high premium on luxury, entertainment and recreation."³⁰ Years ago, the University of Malaya Academic Staff Association and the Students' Union used the term "psychological feudalism" to describe the university council due to its reluctance to seek student opinions on university matters.³¹ Alatas had also referred to a certain practice of promotions as being

²⁴ Moore, 1966, p. 418.

²⁵ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, New York: International Publishers, 1963.

²⁶ James Illingworth, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte", *International Socialist Review*, 74 (November 2010). <https://isreview.org/issue/74/eighteenth-brumaire-louis-bonaparte>. Accessed 15 October 2017.

²⁷ Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, p. 67. The "sword of Damocles" is an allusion to the imminent danger faced by those in positions of power. Damocles was a member of the court of the 4th century BC tyrant, Dionysius II of Syracuse, Sicily.

²⁸ First discussed by Syed Hussein Alatas, "Feudalism in Malaysian society: A study in historical continuity", *Civilisations* 18, 4 (1968): 579-592.

²⁹ Shaharuddin Maaruf, "Some Theoretical Problems Concerning Tradition and Modernization among the Malays of Southeast Asia", Seminar papers, Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore, 2002/2003, p. 2.

³⁰ Prof. Alatas sees feudalism in non-essential spending", *The Straits Times* 9 August 1968.

³¹ Students' union hits at varsity council", *The Straits Times* 8 October 1966.

based on feudalism. There had been numerous cases of promotions in government departments, institutions of learning, companies, in political parties, and public associations, because the aspirants to higher positions, due to their lack of capacity and talent, resorted to winning the favour of their superiors through sycophancy or through impressive subservience".³² These statements had been made in the 1960s but are probably more relevant today than ever before.

Such values include: (1) a servile attitude towards authority and the acceptance of arbitrary notions of power; (2) the undermining of the positive aspects of individualism and, therefore, the lack of respect for the human personality; (3) the lack of respect for the rule of law; (4) the non-distinction between the public domain and personal domains of life; (5) the emphasis on grandeur and an opulent lifestyle; (6) the indifference to social justice; (7) acceptance of unfair privileges for those in position and power; (8) the obsession with power, authority and privileges for their own sake; (9) the undervaluing of rationalism and the philosophical spirit, and the encouragement of myths which serve the interests of those in power; and (10) the emphasis on leisure and indulgence of the senses and the simultaneous undervaluing of work.³³

These feudal values are not only at odds with the spirit and outlook of modernization but also clash with the fundamental values of Islam. As opposed to such feudal values, Islamic tradition emphasizes (1) a more rational and egalitarian conception of authority; (2) limiting arbitrary power; (3) recognition of positive individualism and respect for the human personality; (4) the rule of law; (5) a more humanistic conception of leadership; (6) ethical integrity and honesty in public office; (7) frugality; (8) social justice; (9) effort rather than unfair privileges; (10) the ideal of excellence for life on this earth; (11) rationalism and the philosophical spirit; (12) disapproval of irrational belief and superstition; and (13) dignity of labour.³⁴

Shaharuddin's argument is that both feudal and Islamic values exist in a conflicting relationship in Malay tradition. The question of progress in the modern era greatly depends on the outcome of such a conflict, that is, "on which value system gains the upper hand in the conflict".³⁵

Conclusion: Theologising Democracy³⁶

As opposed to the alliance of capital and the religious bureaucracy to establish an authoritarian state with the trapping of religio-fascism, there is a need in Malaysia for us to make democracy a part of our culture. One way to do this is by way of theologizing democracy. Such theologizing of democracy would stress egalitarian as opposed to feudal values and the appeal to social justice along the lines of need (class) rather than religion or ethnicity. A basis on which this can be done comes from the thought of Said Nursi (1877-1960), the late Ottoman theologian and thinker who lived well into the Turkish republican era.

The Tanzimat period (1839-1876) was a period of Western-style reform which entailed, among other things, the separation of the religious from worldly functions of the government. Its goal was to halt the economic and political decline of the empire and end its subjection to Europe. In opposition to the Tanzimat, a group known as the Young Ottomans proposed constitutionalism, freedom and representative government while maintaining Islam as the foundation of the state. A leading proponent of the Constitutional Movement was Namık Kemal, who drafted the first constitution. Proclaimed on December 23, 1876, the new constitution was suspended by Sultan Abdülhamid II in 1878, pushing the struggle for constitutionalism underground. The writings of Kemal, by now banned, had influenced many youth, including Said Nursi, who was sympathetic to the idea uniting Islamic thought with ideas of constitutionalism and representative government.³⁷

Nursi was active in the late Ottoman period as an active supporter of constitutional government, educational reforms, and the integrity of the Ottoman Empire during the reign of Abdülhamid's successor, Mehmed Reşad. As part of these efforts, he traveled through the Arab domains of the Ottoman Empire and delivered the famous Damascus Sermon at

³² "Malaysia subscribes to the conception of democracy", *Eastern Sun* 30 December 1966.

³³ Shahruddin Maaruf, "Some Theoretical Problems Concerning Tradition and Modernization among the Malays of Southeast Asia", p. 16.

³⁴ Shahruddin Maaruf, "Some Theoretical Problems Concerning Tradition and Modernization among the Malays of Southeast Asia", p. 17. ⁴⁹ Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, p. 67. The "sword of Damocles" is an allusion to the imminent danger faced by those in positions of power. Damocles was a member of the court of the 4th century BC tyrant, Dionysius II of Syracuse, Sicily.

³⁵ Shahruddin Maaruf, "Some Theoretical Problems Concerning Tradition and Modernization among the Malays of Southeast Asia", p. 17.

³⁶ For a brief discussion on theologizing democracy see Azhar Ibrahim, "Theologising Democracy", in *Power to the People? (Con-)tested Civil Society in Search of Democracy*.⁴⁴ Prof. Alatas sees feudalism in non-essential spending", *The Straits Times* 9 August 1968.

³⁷ Sükran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: an Intellectual Biography of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*, edited and with an introduction by Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 33-5.

the historic Umayyad Mosque in Damascus in the Spring of 1911. At that time there was a need to speak of reform in the language of pan-Islam rather than Ottomanism or Turkish nationalism. This was because of the dissatisfaction of many Arabs with Ottoman rule, partly due to what they perceived to be the marginalization of Arabic as the language of administration and the question of increasing Zionist settlement in Palestine. Nursi's task was to stress the need for commitment to the themes of progress, unity and constitutionalism for the sake of the integrity of the empire.³⁸

At Eskisehir Court Nursi was asked, "What do you think of the Republic?" His reply was:

My biography, which you have in your possession, proves that I was a religious republican before any of you was born, with the exception perhaps of the Chairman of Eskisehir Court. A summary of it is this: like now, at that time I was living in seclusion in an uninhabited tomb. Someone would bring me soup, and I used to give breadcrumbs to the ants. I used to eat my bread with the liquid. Some people heard of this and asked me about it, and I told them: 'The ant and the bee nations are republicans; I give the ants the breadcrumbs out of respect for their republicanism.' They said: 'You are opposing the early leaders of Islam.' I replied: 'The Rightly-Guided Caliphs were both Caliph and presidents of the republic. Surely Abu Bakr the Veracious (May God be pleased with him), was surely a head of state for the Ten Promised with Paradise and the Companions of the Prophet. They were the heads of a religious republic that represented the truth of justice and freedom to the extent limited by the Shari'a, and not some meaningless name and frame.'³⁹

Nursi argues that "it is possible to deduce the truths of constitutionalism explicitly, implicitly, permissibly, from the Four Schools of Islamic Law."⁴⁰ Nursi therefore establishes that there is no conflict between Islam and constitutionalism or democracy). As Çengel notes, Nursi in fact equates constitutionalism with shari'ah in the sense that both are opposed to despotism and oppression. Nursi says "[d]espotism is tyranny and oppression. Constitutionalism is justice and shari'ah."⁴¹ Furthermore, [the] real path of true shari'ah is the truth of constitutionalism that conforms to shari'ah."⁴² At a time when many Muslim scholars opposed constitutionalism on the grounds that it was incompatible with shari'ah, Nursi "accepted constitutionalism with proof from shari'ah."⁴³

This is by far a more enlightened view of politics and the state than any held by our 'ulama. That fact points to a crisis in religious leadership that the country is facing. The situation is all the more critical because the various groups in power and others which wield influence have been far from decisive and vocal in noting the problems and exerting force and pressure on the relevant authorities to bring about the needed changes.

³⁸ Vahide, *Intellectual Biography*, 94-5.

³⁹ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Rays Collection*, Istanbul: Sözlür Publications, 2002, pp. 304-305.

⁴⁰ Şükran Vahide, *The Author of the Risale-i Nur*, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, Istanbul: Sözlür Publications, 1992, p. 73. Cited in Yunus Çengel, "Nursi's Approach to Modern Values, and Justice in Governing". <http://www.bediuzzamansaidnursi.org/en/icerik/nursi%E2%80%99s-approach-modern-values-and-justice-governing>. Accessed 10 October 2017.

⁴¹ Cited in Çengel, "Nursi's Approach to Modern Values, and Justice in Governing".

⁴² Çengel, "Nursi's Approach to Modern Values, and Justice in Governing".

⁴³ Çengel, "Nursi's Approach to Modern Values, and Justice in Governing".



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