

**Democracy with a difference**  
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In justification of his complaint to the BBC about what he claimed was its biased coverage of the recent 'buy-elections' in Machap and Ijok, Malaysia's information minister made, for a change, a statement I entirely agree with: that democracy here is "not the same" as that in the UK.

But Zainuddin Maidin didn't go on to define the difference, so I set out to examine precisely what kind and degree of democracy Malaysia actually enjoys or aspires to.

Because democracy, like any other species living species of organism or organisation, is continually in a process of change. And in some places democracy has faced the challenge of adapting to formerly alien environments, with predictably mixed results.

Arriving in war-ravaged Japan 60 years ago, in Taiwan shortly afterwards, in South Korea in the 1950s, and today apparently thriving; adopted in post-Soviet Russia much more recently, forced on Iraq more recently still, and so far barely surviving.

In many countries to which democracy has migrated, or been imported by conquerors or colonizers and either imposed on or embraced by their subjects, it's remained pretty much in its pure-bred state.

Democracy as practiced in India, Australia and New Zealand, for example, remains unmistakably reminiscent of its British ancestry. And Canada's highly independent, liberty-loving breed of democracy is still clearly the result of a cross between its British and French progenitors.

But in many other formerly unfamiliar habitats into which it's migrated, democracy has evolved, or rather devolved, into several sub-species that bear very little resemblance to the original. In fact some are such mockeries of democracy that they can be classified as outright democracies.

### **Smother of Parliaments**

The first of these mutants that comes to mind, perhaps because I happen to be currently living in one, is democracy. Domination by a single party, as in Singapore, Nigeria or Zimbabwe, or a single coalition as in Malaysia, dedicated to monopolizing power by hook and if necessary by crook, and if possible forever.

Democracies have a way of establishing political dynasties to help them perpetuate their rule, in the process convincing themselves, their supporters and even some of their less-perceptive citizens, that they're not just the incumbents, but the actual institutions of government.

The greatest dread of the rulers of a democracy short of a military coup, Thai style, is a popular uprising against them like the People Power revolutions that ousted seemingly unassailably-entrenched democrats like Marcos in the Philippines and more recently Soeharto and his Golkar goons in Indonesia.

So, while stridently proclaiming that they're acting in defence of democracy, they'll go to any lengths they can think of to discourage its development, including censoring and suppressing the news media, robbing the judiciary of its independence, insisting on their right to arbitrarily arrest "troublemakers", and above all ensuring there's no political opposition to speak of.

Which leads me to the observation that one of the most obvious differences that Malaysia's information minister might have been referring to between democracy here and in the UK, is that there they have the what's known as the Mother of Parliaments, complete with a vigorous and highly vocal opposition, while Malaysia's legislature could well, like Singapore's, be termed the Smother of Parliaments.

With pitifully few opposition members on the premises, and not a hope in the world of their voices being heard or heeded, or of many more of their kind joining them and upsetting the imbalance of power.

Recent events in Marchap and Ijok have graphically illustrated how a democracy can achieve and sustain this grossly inequitable state of affairs: with every dirty trick in the electoral book, from bribery through fraudulent electoral rolls to outright intimidation.

### **Doomocracy**

Intimidation must have its limits, however. If you take it too far, and things escalate into outright violence and mayhem, you run the terrible risk of turning your democracy into a doomocracy, as currently seems to be occurring in Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe.

Not that Mugabe has achieved doomocracy for Zimbabwe by violence alone. His truly fatal error was to transform his unfortunate nation from a democracy to a dermocracy, a system in which opportunities for achievement of power, wealth and status depend on the colour of peoples' skins.

His seizure of farmland from white ownership and sharing it out between himself, his cronies and supporters first devastated his Nation's formerly thriving agricultural sector and then its entire economy.

A generation ago, Idi Amin brought disaster on Uganda by a similar move to dermocracy, the driving of all the country's Asians into exile.

And Malaysia's current government runs the same kind of risk in condoning or encouraging the taunting, threatening and further alienation of its Chinese and Indian minorities with political keris-waving displays, racist polemics and Mat Rempit rallies.

Vital to the survival of a democratic/dermocratic government like Malaysia's is, of course, an electorate whose perception of democracy amounts to "dimocracy" or outright "dumbocracy".

### **Purse or principle?**

But after 50 years of voting Barisan Nasional into office, and witnessing the damage its incompetence, corruption, nepotism and cronyism are increasingly doing to the country, Malaysia's dumbocrats appear to be getting smarter.

How else to explain a 40 per cent vote for the opposition in a by-election the government did

its damndest to buy outright with "gifts" of everything from the lighting and repair of dark, potholed roads to cash-for-karaoke sessions, sewing machines and promises of more to come?

In any case, even or perhaps especially the greatest of democracies are by definition dumbocracies, as they're dedicated to political equality, not elitism.

So that their entire populations of voting-age citizens, rich or poor, educated or ignorant, wise or foolish, all have equal rights to life, liberty and the option to vote for either their purses or their principles.

Which choice the majority of Malaysians make come the next general election - to finally rally round to turn the nation back toward true democracy, or continue to support its long, slow slide from democracy-cum-dermocracy to utter doomocracy - will be fascinating for me and my fellow democrazies to watch.

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