

The last of the strongmen : even with Mahathir gone, asian authoritarianism is alive and kicking

www.time.com

October 13, 2003

Ian Buruma

Mahathir Mohamad is one of the last of a particular breed. There are hardly any Asian strongmen left. Kim Jong Il still rules as a hereditary despot in the isolation of his starving country. And Lee Kuan Yew still likes to jerk the strings backstage in Singapore. But they are exceptions. Most Asian nations are governed now by colorless men, who look like managers of a provincial bank. This does not necessarily mean they are less oppressive; what is shaping up after the great strongmen leave the scene is a new kind of authoritarianism.

It was long held as a given that Asians needed the firm leadership of charismatic autocrats, for otherwise they would run amok or descend into anarchy. Asians, so their foreign masters in the days of empire used to argue, were not yet ready for self-government, let alone popular sovereignty. And the strongmen who fought to liberate themselves from these masters held much the same view. The modern nation-state was a new and often fragile thing in Asia, and only a Great Leader could hold it together through sheer force of will.

It is a view that served the Great Leaders and their courtiers well. And perhaps there have been cases in which modernization or national unity could not otherwise have been achieved. Malaysia prospered under Mahathir, as did Singapore under Lee Kuan Yew and South Korea under Park Chung Hee. Whether the same would have been true under more democratic governments is impossible to prove. The least one can say is that Japan, the most prosperous Asian nation of all, has also been the most democratic for much of its modern history.

And it is clearly true that dictatorial rule, or misrule, has come at a huge human cost. Mao Zedong was responsible for more deaths than Hitler or Stalin. Long before the Vietnam War, many Vietnamese died violently under the helmsmanship of Ho Chi Minh. Although less murderous, Sukarno was a disaster for Indonesia; Suharto was more successful but also more ruthless. And we need not dwell on the effect that Pol Pot and his henchmen had on Cambodia.

As was the case in Europe, the worst dictatorships often took the place of collapsed monarchies. This is not to argue for the merits of absolute monarchy, but it may not be a coincidence that Japan and Thailand managed to develop relatively democratic institutions before other Asian countries. The image of divine kingship was abused in Japan for bellicose and authoritarian ends, it is true, but even in the dark 1930s Japan never had a great dictator. Perhaps the Sultans in Malaysia, by no means all democratic men, stood in the way of a great Malaysian dictator. Mahathir was never a despot in the way Mao or Sukarno were. And Thai democracy owes quite a bit to royal intervention. Even if the current Thai Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, would like to rule as a benign autocrat, the presence of the King will probably stop him from doing so. What we know for sure is that Mao, like Stalin in the Soviet Union, combined the worst aspects of pseudodivine monarchy with modern political dogmas. So does Kim Jong Il, but it is to be hoped he will be the last of that ill-begotten breed.

Does the demise of Asian strongmen also mean the bright dawn of democracy? Not necessarily. General Ne Win is gone in Burma, but the sinister committee of military men

that has followed him is, if anything, even worse. Ne Win, a reclusive figure who ruled like a superstitious, paranoid monarch, allowed his country to stagnate in poverty. The current ruling junta, in the manner of more modern Asian autocracies, combines a corrupt form of capitalism with brutal oppression. The model for this was South Korea under military regimes. Burma today offers a cruder, more vicious and more corrupt version of what one might call developmental dictatorship.

China has gone the same way. There, too, the age of the Great Leader is over. Today's Chinese Communist Party is led by the same dull managers that run political parties in the rest of Asia—backroom apparatchiks who make no enemies and who know how to make deals. China is still far from democratic, however. What seems to be taking shape is a middle-class dictatorship instead of a proletarian one. The one-party system continues but is dedicated now to economic growth and financial privileges for a vast network of party hacks—and those who are fortunate or venal or sharp enough to cultivate connections with them. The deal is increasing prosperity for the educated classes in return for their political obedience. It has worked in Singapore. Will it work in China? Before we know the answer to that, we may rejoice in the end of great dictators—but not yet in the end of dictatorship.

Copyright © 2007 Time Inc.

Source : <http://www.time.com/time/asia/2003/mahathir/viewpoint.html>