ABSTRACT

Worldwide, the trend is towards liberal political development. Political development has occurred in third world countries too, but the context, form, pace and direction is very different. The colonial legacy has a distinct sway over the political development of these countries. In the absence of detraditionalized and secular mass political culture, strong leaders typically supported by armies manipulated the political discourse and established authoritarian rules. Southeast Asian countries typically symbolized this state of affairs. It is against this background that the political development in Southeast Asia has to be delineated, analysed and understood.

Malaysia stands out as a unique case of political development, yet it shares a number of features with the other political systems of the region. Each country got independence at different level of political development. Only two countries, Malaysia and Singapore were able to maintain total civilian control over the military and their political systems have shown tremendous resilience. It has brought various classificatory labels to the Malaysian political system such as “semi-democracy,” “quasi-democracy,” “illiberal democracy,” “democracy without turnover,” or even, “semi-authoritarian” state. The process of political development is intimately connected to the precarious ethnic composition of the country. The political debate is guided as well as constrained by ethnic considerations, in the country. Malaysia acquires special significance and role in the region as it unites northern and southern parts of Southeast Asia so that the region appears as a natural unit in geographical, cultural, ethnic, economic and political terms.
Political development in a country can only be fairly gauged only over a long period of time. Political development just does not take place at the structural level. When the process of political development in Southeast Asia is studied and analyzed in its varied aspects, whatever broad similarities we may find – for instance, commonality of political and socio-economic problems, authoritarian streaks in traditional political culture, the military’s political role, the ethnic pluralism, the influence of religion, outward-looking economies, emergent middle class, patron-client relationships, personalism, multi-party fragmented system, controlled opposition, curbs on civil and political rights or resurgent democratic trends – generalizations still elude us. In short, the historical background and democratic experience vary from country to country. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has reinforced the cultural, economic and political linkages.

Southeast Asia, like South Asia is a region of great diversity and contrast. Each of the ten countries of the region represent distinct culture, tradition, history, language, religion, ethnicity, and stage of economic and political development. The ethnic or communal politics engulfs all the polities of Southeast Asia. This feature has significantly moulded the political development process of these polities.

The party system ranges from single-party communist systems in Laos and Vietnam and single party (bourgeoisie-civilian) monopoly system of Singapore to the transitional open multi-party systems of Thailand, Philippines and Indonesia. Burma is directly ruled by military-junta. In none of the countries, healthy bi-party system prevails. Some states have seen relative political stability, while some others have experienced acute political instability. A single political party, People’s Action Party (PAP), has ruled Singapore, with authoritarian measures curbing the growth of opposition political parties, since 1965. Indonesia has also seen two long bouts of
political stability, but under authoritarian regimes. Doubtless the military has played its role in the politics of most of Southeast Asian countries. The military continues to be one of the most important institution in terms of its bearing upon political stability in countries like Indonesia, Thailand and Philippines etc.

The experience with economic development is also variegated across the region. Singapore and Brunei have been adjudged as High Income countries by the World Development Report. The High Income countries of Singapore and Brunei have the highest ranking, followed by Malaysia, Thailand and Philippines.

The concept of political development is extremely useful and holds great promise. The concept of political development in its application must be able to locate precisely the development of some conceptually specific thing, which for analytic purposes we identify as goals of political development in the present study.

As we scan through the literature, we find that political development is often confused with economic development. Ward and Rustow dealt with the problem of stages of political development. Kenneth Organski suggests that quite different political systems may be able to solve a crucial economic crisis of development. Therefore, his analysis appears to show his concern towards economic development, not towards political development. No doubt, political development and economic development are mutually reinforcing in most cases. Political development is precursor as well as consequence of economic development.

Political modernization is a relatively technical process. The political scientists commit error in using the two concepts interchangeably and often they use the concept of political development for political change without first conceiving properly the goals in direction of which change should be measured.
The notion of capacity of the political system is also introduced by Pye in conceptualizing political development but in a much more inclusive sense. Although Pye does not attempt a definition of political development but he clearly speaks as to what he mean by political development.

When we talk about the performance of the political system we can’t be oblivious to the goals of political development. The development of the capacity is just one dimension, rather a means, howsoever important, in the direction of political development. No doubt, differentiation is an essential attribute of a developed political system. Huntington states five goals of development: growth, equity, democracy, stability and autonomy. The former two pertain to economic development in fact, while the latter three he means as goals of political development. Political development can’t be conceived in terms of merely selected aspects of political development. It is true that political development should be conceived within the context of the overall process of development, at the same time, we should be able to conceptualize political development and also answer as how the different goals can be reconciled to account for political development.

Social mobilization may be a correlate or even a cause as well as a consequence of political development, but it is not political development. Political development as a process has to be located in the political sphere, and that too in terms of certain clear-cut objectives.

Political development, indeed, means the increase in the variables of equality, capacity and differentiation. The concept of political development must clearly show how citizenship building and institution building should go together in the process of development. The political culture and the political process should be oriented towards increased levels of popular participation and popular control. We define
political development as a process by which a political system moves towards increased levels of equality, liberty, capacity and differentiation

The Malay traditions in Malaysia have been accorded special place – their religion, Islam being the state religion, their language, Malay being the National and the official language and Malay sultans accorded privileged constitutional status as Conference of Rulers. This also provides a clue to the Malaysia’s political and economic development since independence. The first elections after Independence for central and state legislatures were held in 1959. These elections led to entirely elected legislatures for both centre and states. The Alliance between three major political parties, the UMNO, the MCA and the MIC representative of three major communities, the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians, emerged a clear victor setting pace for future political development by winning seventy four seats out of 104 seats. The UMNO contested seventy seats and won fifty two seats. The Alliance had won in all the states except Kelantan and Trengganu where the PAS captured power. Thus, the main threat to the Alliance at first General Elections came from the PAS, a Muslim-dominated Malay party, not from Non-Malays-based opposition parties.

The formation of Federation of Malaysia was a great political and economic advance for all the territories concerned. Special Position in the federal scheme was given to the Borneo Territories and Singapore The immigration into Sabah and Sarawak was made subject to the jurisdiction of state governments of those territories.

However, due to conflict between the two, the UMNO and the PAP, over the sphere of influence, Singapore was separated from Malaysia in 1965. The whole episode and the unfolding debate over the official language issue and demand for a Chinese medium University communalized the political atmosphere and led to the riots in 1969. The Emergency was imposed and even the constitution was suspended
for next two years. A New Economic policy was envisaged and national ideology was framed. The politics of accommodation was pursued after that. Many more political parties were brought under the umbrella of Ruling Alliance. Except the DAP, all other political parties have participated in the government process at one time or the other. It has given tremendous leverage to the UMNO to control and shape the course and pace of political change in Malaysia.

Sabah did not have even a political party before the merger talks took place. Most of the local political parties, which had grown in the territories, joined the federal Alliance. An interesting feature having an impact upon the political development of Sabah was that all the parties, ruling as well as opposition, formed part of the Sabah Alliance, which remained part of the ruling Alliance at the Centre. Although, the same pattern of political alignments among different ethnic parties followed in these states as in Malaya, yet the process of political development in these states remained insulated from the direct political activity of the mainstream peninsular national political parties for a long time. At the same time, the role and impact of federal government and bureaucracy steadily increased and the Malay patterns of political culture became more pronounced in these states. The erosion of autonomy of state sphere was imminent, but the development process also encouraged political integration and centralization.

Mahathir rose to prime ministership in 1982. He proved to be very efficient, affective, but a bit authoritarian too. Malay political culture is traditionally characterized by consensus, compromise, reconciliation and accommodation. The Malay consensus within the UMNO was broken when Tengku Razaleh challenged Mahathir for the UMNO presidency while Musa Hitam defended his post of Deputy President against Ghafar Baba, the Deputy Prime Minister. The UMNO General
Assembly elections in had far-reaching implications for the process of political development in Malaysia. Though, the elections endangered unity within the UMNO, yet, further brought the UMNO to centre-stage of Malaysian politics. The UMNO elections became equally important affair in Malaysian politics like the general elections.

Political leadership in Malaysia is provided by UMNO. At the triennial party elections of the UMNO in 1993, Anwar Ibrahim was elected Deputy President (normally, a stepping stone to the leadership of the party). In a blitzkrieg, he increased his hold over the UMNO. However, the huge victory at 1995 General Election helped Mahathir play some balancing act and increase his hold over party organization. Doubtless, the UMNO remains the most vital vibrant and democratic organization in Malaysia.

The sustained economic growth, weak opposition and balancing of ethnic demands disposed the public opinion highly in favour of government in 1995 General Election. Malaysia was hit hard by the East Asian Financial Crisis in 1997. Most of the UMNO-linked conglomerates, which have flourished with the government backing and constitute the core support base of funding of UMNO were at great risk. Many of them were bailed-out by the government. Later, over policy differences with the government and his part of ego-conflict with the Prime Minister, Anwar was dismissed. In the following weeks Mahathir systematically dismantled Anwar’s power-base. A contagion effect from the political development in neighbouring states of Indonesia and Thailand definitely shaped reformasi. The PAS won twenty seven seats to the Parliament and ninety eight seats to the state assemblies in 1999 - a milestone in its evolution as a political force in Malaysia.
Islam has always been used for political purposes by both the UMNO and the PAS. The PAS has espoused its hardcore brand of political Islam. The federal government is also committed to Islam. The UMNO often resorts to championing the cause of Islam for political purposes.

The opposition is very week and a dividend house in Malaysia. The opposition political parties have great difficulty developing a coherent programmatic alternative to the ruling regime. The state has a powerful ability to absorb diverse ideological orientations and ethnics interests in society.

Much of political change in Malaysia is elite-directed. The constitutional-legal development has direct bearing over the process of political development in Malaysia. The Parliament under its power of amending the Constitution can amend the Fundamental Liberties like its other provisions. The rights are limited by the terms and conditions that are ingrained in the constitution itself. The right to the freedom of speech, association, and assembly come within the complete discretion of Parliament. The right to association can be restricted on grounds of security, public order or morality. The right to freedom of speech was curtailed whereby Parliament was empowered to pass laws prohibiting the questioning of any matter or right established or protected by the provisions of Part III (pertaining to citizenship), Article 152 (pertaining to Malay language as the national and official language), Article 153 (reservation of seats for the Malays in government jobs and educational institutions) and Article 181 (related to the prerogatives and powers of the Rulers), otherwise than in relation to the implementation of policies or laws pertaining to such constitutional provisions. These exceptions were made entrenched part of the constitution.

The right to free speech, assembly and association along with other fundamental rights are further subjected to the emergency provisions of the
Constitution. Under Articles 149, 150 and 151, rights can be taken away just by an ordinary process of law making if any Act is enacted by the Parliament under these Articles. An extremely problematic and wide-ranging in its impact upon the fundamental rights as well as other provisions of the Constitution is Article 150 that provides for proclamation of Emergency. It enables the Government with the widest range of extraordinary legislative as well as executive powers, which might contravene any provision of the Constitution except provisions relating to religion, citizenship, language, Islamic law or the customary law of the Malays and native law of indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak. Thus, Article 150 originally, had some limiting grounds, which were removed by subsequent amendments to this Article. However, it must be conceded that the Fundamental Liberties have not been encroached by the Government by taking recourse to emergency powers under this Article.

Instead of operating as a check upon arbitrary misuse of emergency powers under Articles 149 and 150, the Article 151 providing for preventive detention has become an instrument or an adjunct of those Articles. Although, Article 151 was designed as a check upon preventive detention and it envisaged restrictions upon executive power but those restrictions have been gradually removed or diluted. The citizens’ need for security against misuse of government authority was ignored. Unless punishment is prescribed against the detaining authorities for misuse of preventive detention laws, human rights regime and a fuller democracy can’t usher in Malaysia.

Media in some fundamental respects in Malaysia is as free as the government allows it to be. Instead of tightening the laws like the Official Secrets Act, thus, curtailing further the right to free expression, the government should recognize the
citizens’ right to information in a democracy. The Government prohibited public sales of PAS newspaper, *Harakah*, in early 1990s. The ruling parties’ propaganda is unabashedly pedaled to the public through government-controlled media. Although there are national level unions like Malaysian Trade Union Congress, in-house unions are encouraged by the government. The right to strike is highly restricted. The Amnesty International has criticised the government on its poor record in protecting the rights of citizens in its various reports. Malaysia has not even signed the six basic international conventions on human rights. Yet the rights of the citizens to peace and development in context of developing and plural society are fairly protected.

The constitution of Malaysia ensures “equality before law and equal protection of law.” In fundamental respects, rule of law prevails in Malaysia. When Malaysia became independent, the Malays constituted majority but they were the most backward community. The poverty was mainly concentrated among the Malays.

The new Economic Policy was envisaged as a response to 1969-riots to rectify the economic imbalance between the Malays and the Chinese. To increase the Malay percentage of share capital in limited companies, the government set targets of nine percent by 1975, sixteen percent by 1980, twenty three percent by 1985 and thirty percent by 1990.

Malaysia has witnessed reduction in inter-ethnic inequalities on account of successful completion of National Economic Policy in 1990. It has not only considerably eased inter-ethnic tensions but also predisposed the government towards undertaking various minority-friendly steps in the last decade, like liberalization of economic and education policies. However, the intra-group disparities are growing, which portends ill for the Malaysian democracy on the equity scale. What is problematic with the course of political change is that serious curbs on civil and
political rights remain intact; despite the tremendous political and economic stability the system has witnessed post-reformasi. Granting full civil and political rights to the citizens might enhance the responsivity of the state towards people, particularly the disadvantageous classes who have not so far benefited from the economic growth. It will provide the state with opportunity to reduce the equity deficit by getting to the pulse of the ordinary masses. However, the elite led by Abdullah Badawi prefer to continue their rule within the elitist framework of democracy meaning support for the status quo, in other words, crony capitalism.

The persistence of democratic apparatus, stability, peace and equity are very important links in the political development of Malaysia. The institutionalization of political structures and processes, and rule of law are no mean achievement. Further, the strong civil society, educated middle class and pluralism coupled with consociational model, check the state from crossing the threshold of authoritarianism. As crouch pointed out, “Malaysia’s social structure provides substantial barriers to the adoption of a fully-fledged authoritarian system in that economic and social development has produced social groups with distinct interests which they seek to protect and advance.”

There was no particular external power whose model could be copied or which could induce political changes in the political system of Thailand, unlike Malaysia or Philippines, which decisively modelled their political systems on the British and American patterns, respectively. The political process and political culture of the country is constantly evolving and maturing on the path of democratization, though, with occasional setbacks. The process of political development in the country is not unilinear or unidirectional. The absolute monarchy was turn into a constitutional monarchy after a military coup in 1932. By 1938, the military firmly established its
control. The military had tasted the political power and now, was in search of directly controlling the political system. The military regime started introducing policies which smacked of increasing authoritarianism. In 1950s, a fully authoritarian regime by Sarit was established accompanied by persecution of political opponents and communists, and curbs on all sorts of political activism. Thus, while the Thai public was pressing for more responsible government what it got, finally, as a result of yet another military coup was absolute authoritarian government. Tremendous changes took place in Thai politics and economy during Sarit’s regime, but not certainly in the direction of democratization of public policy or political culture. A combination of Military and bureaucrats dominated the political system completely during the 1950’s. People had openly started demanding the widening of democratic space and responsible government. The campaign for increased political participation continued. Much of the increased political activism involved students and academics not the political parties as such. In 1973 a civilian government was established. Political parties were given the freedom to organize and contest the elections. The 1975 elections were contested by as many as forty two political parties. This period witnessed intense political competition, rivalry, conflict and instability. The governments changed frequently, resulting in the failure to maintain effective controls. A military coup was staged in October 1976. Because of democratization of political culture during the brief three-year democratic interregnum, Thai politics quite opened up. Under the democratic constitution of 1974, the government and military officials were for the first time excluded from politics unless they resigned their positions. Political parties operated freely and the Press was also free in publishing conflicting viewpoints. During 1978-1991, under semi-authoritarian
military regime the country witnessed four general elections as well as tremendous political stability.

The ‘People’s Power’ in 1992 successfully overthrew the authoritarian military regime, which paved way for democratic transition. The military leaders sponsored their own political party. Enough money was pumped in. The March 1992 elections were notable for vote-buying, party switching and horse-trading. The pro-military political parties won the elections while the pro-democracy parties fared poorly, mainly because of the narrowed political space, excessive use of money in the elections and the rigging of elections. The democratic ideals had taken strong roots in the political culture of Thailand by that time. The pro-democracy parties won the elections next time. The Leekpai government started with great promises and started deepening the political reforms, and made some progress towards liberal democracy. The balance of power started gradually shifting from previous military-bureaucratic elite towards business elite. It provides a partial explanation for the loosening of military’s hold over the political system and the growing clout of the elected representatives and the business class.

The July 1995 elections were vigorously contested among twelve political parties for 391 parliamentary seats. Again, no political party won the absolute majority. The largest number of seats were won by Chart Thai (Thai Nation) Party and its leader Banharn Silapa-Chara headed the coalition of seven political parties. The opposition parties and some ruling coalition partners formed an alternative government. Later, a People’s Constitution was drafted by this Assembly aiming at durability of parliamentary governments, the decentralization of political power and eradicating the ills of vote-buying as well as party defections. The new Democrats-led government matched its political performance with the reforms in the financial sector.
It brought sweeping changes to the political system. The elections under the new constitution took place in January 2001. In order to hasten the extinction of smaller parties to ensure political stability, the Election Commission had relaxed anti-defection provisions for a brief period that benefited Thaksin’s party. Thaksin formed the government with absolute majority but started ruling arbitrarily in certain respects. To overcome his growing criticism he held snap-polls in 2006. The position boycotted these polls. The Constitutional Court’s Ruling declared the parliamentary elections unconstitutional and asked for fresh elections. These developments precipitated a crisis situation and military usurped political power in yet another coup.

The political development is occurring but not exactly along western lines. Thailand is no exception to broad pattern of political development in Southeast Asia. At the same time, it has experienced sixteen constitutions and twenty elections in its chequered history of political development. Its political development has been described as a “vicious circle” patterned by a coup d’etat, military rule, public unrest, constitutional reform, general elections, parliamentary governance, corruption, instability, another coup d’etat, resumption of military rule, and so forth, as a general rule. No military coup occurred for twelve years. In the early 1990s, the competition was between pro-military and pro-democracy parties but later significant changes occurred in the composition of political actors.

Once the elections are announced, former members of Parliament and other prospective candidates are offered financial incentives to switch over their political parties. Multi-party system prevailed but in highly disorganized and disarrayed form with candidates as well as parties kept on changing sides. Regionalization and proliferation of political parties occurred. The 1992-elections saw sixteen parties in the fray, 1995 elections twelve parties and the 2001-elections saw as many as thirty
seven parties in the fray. The regionalization and fragmentation militates against the emergence of pan-national political parties as well as ideologically inspired broad based two-coalition system or healthy two-party system.

The role of the Press in the political development process can’t be ignored. Though the strongest bulwark against the continuance of military rule in Thailand is civil society, the very institution assertion by which led to-political chaos, propelling the military to intervene. However, people didn’t invite the military.

In Indonesia, there was mushrooming of political parties after the independence and no political party gained majority in the first elections in 1955. The political parties were weakened, but retained their independent social bases. Sukarno abrogated liberal democratic structures and replaced them with his own conception of ‘Guided Democracy.’ However, his position also got weakened in the light of military’s growing assertion and he was eased out of office by his Army Chief, Suharto. The New Order Regime was declared and the Army took control over all the political and social forces of the country.

The New Order brought political stability, stabilized the economy, crushed opposition, established military control over the civilian and annihilated the communist threat. As a result, the authoritarian trends and the state’s control increased. Applying the Pancasila to reduce the opposition and friction in society, the government forced nine political parties to amalgate into two after the General Elections of 1971. The electoral opposition to the government assumed state-licensed forms represented by the Islamic United Development Party (PPP) under which four Muslim parties were clubbed together, and the Indonesian Democratic Party which united the five nationalist and other moderate parties. The amalgamated political
parties were forced to work within the ideological framework as determined by the military regime. No third opposition party could be established.

The military increasingly assumed political role. Suharto backed the military to promote his own interest. The military officials held the key positions in Golkar. By the time of 1995, the relative decline of military personnel in political and official positions was discernible. There was no right to free association, particularly at the political level. The financial crisis brought the downfall of Suharto. The military as well as Golkar leadership deserted Suharto at this critical juncture. The MPR session held in November 1998 agreed to a mid-term election in 1999 under new rules that included reduction in military appointments in the DPR, multi-party system, open election for presidency along with reduced powers of the president and promises to investigate the corruption charges against Suharto’s family.

The democratic elections have been held since then for the popularly elected House of People’s Representatives with open competition for political power. The provision of pair of presidential and vice-presidential candidates chosen by political parties for direct popular contest is slightly complex. Given the multi-party system in Indonesia, there are remote chances of any pair elected in the first ballot unless the political parties enter into electoral arrangements.

It impinges upon free choice of the voter as well as contestant, when the internal democracy is lacking among political parties. Although, presidential and vice-presidential nominees are elected by the members of the respective political parties at their national conventions, yet, the organizational structures of the parties are not democratic.

Philippines has experienced a very different trajectory of political development than the rest of southeast Asia. Philippines adopted a democratic constitution inspired
by the U.S. constitution. It provided for presidential form of government, unitary structure of state, separation of powers, a bill of rights and independent judiciary. The plurality vote system was adopted for the presidential election. A distinctive feature of the political system of early era that contributed a lot towards stabilizing the system was the growth and persistence of two-party system. The political power revolved between the two political parties, namely, the Nationalists and the Liberals. With the democratization of the governmental structures, the economic and political elite fused together. The political democracy did not lead, significantly, to the erosion of traditional pattern of class divisions. The civilian control over the military was well established.

While strengthening the structural roots of democracy from above, Aquino government failed to strengthen the socio-economic roots of democracy from below. The divisions in society are reflected in party-system. Ramos was successful in consolidating the civilian control over the military. The military was not allowed any role in civilian matters. The party system is very weak in Philippines. When corruption charges were alleged against the popularly elected president, Estrada, extra institutional process unfolded and the former presidents, opposition political parties, Church and business leaders made a covert lobbying even to the military, police and allies to withdraw their support from Estrada. The money politics and the elite character of the democracy dilutes, rather, impedes the process of political development in Philippines. The political and economic power gets fused and perpetuated in the process.

The single dominant political party, the UMNO has never sought power alone. Consequently, the ruling coalition, the UMNO being its patron, has never been displaced from political power. The most remarkable feature of the ruling regime in
Malaysia from the economic as well as political development perspective is that it has been able to continuously deliver. This has become possible due to consociational form of democracy practiced in Malaysia. What is problematic with the course of political change is that serious curbs on civil and political rights remain intact; despite the tremendous political and economic stability the system has witnessed post-reformasi. A very strong middle class autonomous of state control has emerged in Malaysia due to uninterrupted economic development and continuously rising living standards. The biggest obstacle in the liberalization of the political system is the absence of strong opposition. The Malay vis-à-vis the Chinese interests divide the civil society, too. The persistence of democratic apparatus, stability, peace and equity are very important links in the political development of Malaysia.

At deeper level, the isolated democratic transitions in Southeast Asia show a systematic pattern of political development viz. the emergence of a strong middle class, the strengthening of institutions of civil society, increased political consciousness, secularization of political culture, advanced means of communications, the spread of education and the inherent contradictions of an authoritarian regime pushing the political system towards democratization. The evidence across the developing world shows a clear trend towards democratization of political culture in the wake of modernization independent of the political initiative. The general perception is that economic growth strengthens the causative forces of democracy. The economic conditions in terms of development as well as deterioration do have profound impact upon the political development. But the economic development pursued during the authoritarian years cannot lend legitimacy to the argument that people liked or even willingly tolerated the authoritarian regimes. It is not to suggest that economic crisis is a precondition or that economic crisis
necessarily results in democratization of institutional apparatus. No uniform model of political development can be discerned or delineated in Southeast Asia. Malaysia and Singapore stand out unique cases of political development for they can be classified as hegemonic-consociational models of democracy. It is very difficult to classify the political systems of Southeast Asia in the ever changing context into some generalized model of political development.

A very loose pattern of political development can be deciphered in Southeast Asia as it is characterized by absence of liberal elements in general and the authoritarian practices even within procedural- democratic frameworks. All these polities are more or less characterized by strong values traditionally attached to clientelism, communitarianism, deference towards authority, strong state, and even personality cult. Still, the differences remain. Unlike rest of Southeast Asia, the military has never been able to exert supremacy over civilian institutions in Malaysia and Singapore. Likewise, both these systems unlike other Southeast Asian polities, have not generally experienced a breakdown with formal procedural democratic apparatus. It proves the resilience of democratic experience in Malaysia.