

Empire: a blunt tool for democratization

On its face, using military occupation as a tool to promote democratization is about as intuitive as forcing people to take a self-improvement class to learn how to be more spontaneous. And yet the two most recent U.S. administrations, though on opposite ends of the political spectrum, have used America's might to try to advance the cause of democracy in Iraq, Bosnia, Kosovo, and, at least nominally, Afghanistan. The Bush administration's major statement of its strategic policy, known mainly for its justification of preventive war, dwells on the need to "shift the balance of power in favor of freedom."¹

Scholars and public intellectuals have played a prominent role as drummers on

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this bandwagon. Historian Niall Ferguson, in a colorful collection of stories that ends with a paean to empire, contends that "without the influence of British imperial rule, it is hard to believe that the institutions of parliamentary democracy would have been adopted by the majority of states in the world, as they are today."² Indeed, most of the postcolonial states that have remained almost continuously democratic since independence, such as India and some West Indian island states, are former British possessions. Still, as Ferguson acknowledges, many former British colonies have failed to achieve democratic stability: Pakistan and Nigeria oscillate between chaotic elected regimes and military dictatorships; Sri Lanka has held elections that stoked the fires of ethnic conflict; Malaysia has averted ethnic conflict only by limiting democracy; Singapore is stuck in a pattern of stable but noncompetitive electoral politics; Kenya is emerging from a long interlude of one-party rule; and Iraq in the late 1940s flirted with electoral politics that played into the hands of violent rad-

1 Office of the President, "National Security Strategy of the United States," September 2002, <www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html>.

2 Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), 358.

icals. The list continues with even more parlous cases, from Burma to Zimbabwe.

Despite this mixed track record, it is worth looking back on imperial Britain's strategies, successes, and failures in attempting to prepare its far-flung possessions for democratic self-government. From the 1920s onward, the British undertook systematic efforts to write transitional democratic constitutions for countries they expected would soon be self-governing. At the same time, they devised political, economic, administrative, and cultural strategies to facilitate this transition.

In other words, they attempted roughly what the United States and the United Nations have been trying to accomplish on a shorter timetable in Iraq, Bosnia, Kosovo, and East Timor. What problems and trade-offs they faced in this enterprise help illuminate, at least in a general way, the kind of troubles that the democracy-promoting empire still confronts today.

To illustrate these processes, I draw on several examples, particularly those of Iraq in the late 1940s, India in the 1930s through the 1940s, Sri Lanka in the 1930s through the 1950s, and Malaysia in the 1940s through the 1960s.

Democratization by imperial fiat sounds paradoxical, and it is. The imperial power insists not only that the society it rules should become democratic, but also that the outcome of democratization should be one that it approves: namely, that the new democracy should continue to abide by the rules laid down by the departing imperial power, should be stable and peaceful, and should maintain good relations with the former overlord. This is difficult enough when the empire has actually succeeded in installing the full set of tools the postcolonial state will need to make democracy func-

tion: a competent civil service; impartial courts and police that can implement the rule of law; independent, professionalized news media; and the rest. Even when these institutions are well established, outcomes may not conform to the empire's wishes, because the self-determining people may have their own ideas and interests that diverge from the empire's.

When democratic institutions are only partially formed, as is commonly the case at the moment of decolonization, the problem is much worse. Transitional regimes typically face a gap between high demand for mass political participation and weak institutions to integrate society's conflicting needs.³ The imperial power may have put in place some of the institutional window dressing of democracy, but daily political maneuvering, energized by the devolution of power, is shaped more by ties of patronage and ethnicity, and by unregulated opportunism, than by democratic processes. This situation is ripe for the turbulent politics of ethnic particularism, coups, and rebellions.

The imperial ruler sometimes imagines that politics will take a holiday while the democratic system is being established – that groups contending for power will not exploit the weakness of transitional arrangements. In Malaya shortly after World War II, for example, the British hoped that a battery of social and economic reforms inspired by Fabian socialism would depoliticize class and ethnic conflicts during democratization. When it turned out that reform intensified the expression of competing demands, the British temporarily reverted to their earlier reliance on indirect rule through undemocratic traditional elites

3 Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968).

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of the Malay ethnic group. “Colonial policy,” says historian T. N. Harper, “lurched between authoritarianism and a missionary adherence to the rule of law.”⁴

Imperial strategists of the democratic transition often thought of this simply as a problem of the speed of reform. A 1960 Foreign Office memorandum, for example, stated that the task in East Africa was “to regulate the pace of political development so that it was fast enough to satisfy the African desire for self-government but not so fast as to jeopardize economic progress or the security situation.”⁵ Actually, the problem is far more complex than this. Temporarily putting on the brake, as in the Malayan example, often involved ruling undemocratically through traditional elites or minority ethnic groups in the classic strategy of divide and rule. This was not simply a matter of “freezing colonial societies.”⁶ Rather, this process actively created new divisions, altered the political meaning of traditional identities, and distributed power in ways that would complicate subsequent efforts to install a sense of national unity.

Both in public and private, officials of the Colonial Office sounded well meaning: “the present time [1947] is one of unprecedented vigour and imagination”

4 T. N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 378; for other points, see 58, 75, 82–83.

5 Ronald Hyam, “Bureaucracy and ‘Trusteeship’ in Colonial Empire,” in Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis, eds., *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Twentieth Century*, vol. 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 278, quoting a Foreign Office memorandum by William Gorell Barnes.

6 John W. Cell, “Colonial Rule,” in Brown and Louis, eds., *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Twentieth Century*.

in British colonial policy, “one cheerful thing in a depressing world.”⁷ “The fundamental objectives [for 1948] in Africa are to foster the emergence of large-scale societies, integrated for self-government by effective and democratic political and economic institutions both national and local, inspired by a common faith in progress and Western values and equipped with efficient techniques of production and betterment.”⁸ The problem, at least at this stage of imperial stewardship, was not primarily bad intentions. Rather, it was the paradox of promoting democracy by fiat, which often required the adoption of politically expedient methods of rule that undercut the achievement of the ultimate objective of democratic consolidation.

Attempted democratic transitions are likely to turn violent and to stall short of democratic consolidation when they are undertaken in a society that lacks the institutions needed to make democracy work. Such societies face a gap between rising demands for broad participation in politics and inadequate institutions to manage those popular demands. All of this happens at a time when new institutions of democratic accountability have not yet been constructed to replace the old, divested institutions of imperial authority or traditional rule.

In the absence of routine institutional authority, political leaders find they need to rule through ideological or charismatic appeals. Rallying popular support by invoking threats from rival nations or ethnic groups is an attractive expedient

7 Speech by A. Hilton Poynton at the United Nations, October 3, 1947, quoted in Hyam, “Bureaucracy and ‘Trusteeship’ in Colonial Empire,” 277.

8 Colonial Office paper, quoted in Hyam, “Bureaucracy and ‘Trusteeship’ in Colonial Empire,” 277.

for hard-pressed leaders who desperately need to shore up their legitimacy.⁹ The institutional weaknesses of early democratization create both the motive to use this strategy of rule and the opportunity to dodge accountability for its costs.

A common side effect of state weakness during early democratization is a poorly defined sense of the nation. Democracy requires national self-determination, but people in weak states who are just emerging into political consciousness often lack a clear, agreed answer to the question, who are we?

Notwithstanding the typical view among nationalists that the identity of nations is fixed by immutable nature or culture, it is normally the common experience of a people sharing a fate in a strong state that solidifies and demarcates a sense of nationality. Even in France, a country with a long and venerable history, it was only the late-nineteenth-century experience of common military service, national railways, standardized education, and mass democracy that completed the process of forging a culturally diverse peasantry into self-conscious Frenchmen.¹⁰ In the absence of strong state institutions to knit together the nation, leaders must struggle for legitimacy in an ill-defined, contested political arena.

In weakly institutionalized, newly democratizing states, this contestation over national self-determination takes place amid the shifting fortunes of elites and mass groups. Elites left over from the old regime look desperately for strat-

9 Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005); Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: Norton, 2000).

10 Eugene Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1976).

egies that will prevent their fall, while rising elites try to muscle in. Both sets of elites scramble for allies among the newly aroused masses.

Nationalism – the doctrine that a distinctive people deserve to rule themselves in a state that protects and advances their distinctive cultural or political interests – often emerges as an apparently attractive solution to these political dilemmas. It helps rally mass support on the basis of sentiment in lieu of institutional accountability, and helps define the people who are exercising self-determination. It thus clarifies the lines between the people and their external foes, who become available as scapegoats in a self-fulfilling strategy that rallies support in protection against external threats.

Civil or international war may sometimes result from this potent political brew as a direct result of nationalist political objectives, such as the aim of regaining a lost piece of national territory. However, war may also be an indirect result of the complex politics of transitional states. Political leaders may become trapped in reckless policies when uncompromising nationalism becomes the indispensable common denominator that keeps their heterogeneous political coalitions together.

These problems are likely to face any society that tries to democratize before building the requisite institutions. This is no less the case when a democracy-promoting empire is overseeing the process. If the empire understands this problem, it may try to maintain its position of domination longer to buy time to put the needed institutions in place. When considerations of rising cost and waning legitimacy finally compel decolonization, the empire may attempt an awkward compromise between authoritarian order keeping and democratic legitimacy, leaving in place a hybrid

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political system based on both traditional and elected authority. This expedient acknowledges the problem but does not necessarily solve it.

The chaotic democratic processes that followed Britain's imperial departure from Iraq provide a telling example of such dilemmas.

Iraq in the 1920s and 1930s was a country undergoing the strains of socioeconomic modernization and decolonization with no coherent identity, tradition, or political institutions.¹¹ Under a British mandate, Iraq's 1924 constitution divided powers between the king and an indirectly elected parliament chosen by universal manhood suffrage. After gaining independence in 1932, Iraq suffered a series of tribal rebellions and leadership struggles. These culminated in a coup by nationalist military officers, which triggered British reoccupation of the country from 1941 to 1945.¹²

Following World War II, the British encouraged the regent Abd al-Ilah, who was ruling on behalf of the young King Faysal II, to liberalize the regime to enhance its popular legitimacy in the eyes of the alienated urban middle class. Press restrictions were removed, opposition parties were licensed, and electoral districts were redrawn to reflect population shifts to urban areas. However, the plan for political liberalization provoked resistance from established elites.¹³ The

11 Reeve Simon, *Iraq Between the Two World Wars: The Creation and Implementation of a Nationalist Ideology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 3–4.

12 Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1985), 55–93.

13 *Ibid.*, 96–100; Matthew Elliot, "Independent Iraq": *The Monarchy and British Influence, 1941–1958* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1996), 25.

Iraqi prime minister told a British diplomat that his government had "decided to allow political parties in order that it should become clear how harmful they are and their abolition be demanded."¹⁴ Reflecting traditions of patronage politics in a still largely rural society, local notables dominated the parliament chosen in the election of 1946.¹⁵

Middle-class nationalists, though thinly represented in parliament, remained loud voices in public debate. Important in government service, in the military, in the economy, and potentially in the streets, these educated urbanites could not be ignored. To appease such critics, Iraqi diplomats took the most radical stance on the Palestine issue at the June 1946 meeting of the Arab League, gratuitously calling for a boycott of British and American trade that they knew the Saudis and Egyptians would have to veto.¹⁶

Such public relations tactics became increasingly entrenched in 1947, as the new Iraqi prime minister Salih Jabr groped to find a rhetorical stance that would reconcile Iraq's diverse constituencies to his weakly institutionalized regime. Jabr faced a general economic crisis, severe food shortages, and a shortfall of money for salaries of civil servants, a prime constituency for Arab nationalist groups.¹⁷ The regent and the traditional ruling elites hoped that

14 Elliot, "Independent Iraq," 26.

15 Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 101; Michael Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict in the History of Modern Iraq* (London: Frank Cass, 1994), 139.

16 Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, *The Crystallization of the Arab State System, 1945–1954* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 36.

17 Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict in the History of Modern Iraq*, 167; Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 103.

British economic and military aid would help them weather the crisis and fend off burgeoning urban radicalism. In pursuit of that strategy, Jabr hoped to renegotiate Iraq's treaty with Britain in order to eliminate the embarrassing presence of British air bases on Iraqi soil and to create a firmer basis for economic and political cooperation.¹⁸

For the nationalists, however, even an improved agreement with the former colonial overlord was anathema. Thus, to immunize himself from nationalist objections, Jabr relied on demagoguery on the Palestine issue. In August of 1947, he broke precedent in calling for the use of the regular armies of Arab states, not just volunteers, to fight against the Jews in Palestine. Nonetheless, amid a worsening of the economy and a shortfall of expected British aid, the strategy of nationalist demagoguery on this issue failed to reconcile Iraqi nationalists to the renewal of the treaty with Britain. The signing of the treaty in January of 1948 provoked a wave of student strikes, demonstrations, and denunciations from political parties, leading to Jabr's replacement by a politician who was untainted by association with the treaty.¹⁹

While Jabr's rhetoric on Palestine failed to achieve its intended consequences, its unintended consequences were profound. A British diplomat reported that "the Iraqi Government is now to some extent the victim of their own brave words, which the opposition

is not slow to challenge them to make good."²⁰ In a vicious cycle of outbidding, the regent, the parliamentary notables, and the socialist parties now all competed with the nationalist opposition to adopt the most militant position on Palestine. Since Iraq was not a front-line state, the costs of undermining the chances of compromise in Palestine were low compared to the domestic political costs of being outbid on the Arab nationalism issue. This rhetoric reverberated not just within Iraq, but also throughout the Arab world. Jabr's militant stance on Palestine at the October and November 1947 meetings of the Arab League helped to set off a spiral of increasingly vehement anti-Israeli rhetoric in other Arab states. In the echo chamber of popular Arab politics, Iraq's incompletely democratized regime led the way in adopting a demagogic strategy that increasingly tied the hands of less democratic Arab states that otherwise might have been able to resist such popular pressures.²¹

It would be an exaggeration to say that Britain's inadequate effort to install partially democratic institutions in Iraq was the sole cause of these outcomes; politics in modernizing Iraq might have been fraught with turmoil under any scenario. Nonetheless, this serves as a cautionary tale, demonstrating how a democracy-promoting empire can unleash illiberal forces in societies with weak political institutions.

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18 Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict in the History of Modern Iraq*, 159, 162–163; Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 101–102.

19 Maddy-Weitzman, *The Crystallization of the Arab State System*, 49; Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict in the History of Modern Iraq*, 143, 164–166, 174–175; Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 101–105.

20 Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict in the History of Modern Iraq*, 169.

21 Ibid., 141–142, 158, 181, 193; Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 102; Maddy-Weitzman, *The Crystallization of the Arab State System*, 49. For a related argument, see Michael Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 87–91.

One of the most common charges laid against the British Empire is that it unscrupulously played the game of divide and rule. In order to maintain its authority over millions of colonial subjects with a minimum of expense and British manpower, the British built up elites of local ethnic groups or tribes who served as Britain's agents of indirect rule. The British also armed local ethnic minorities who kept order effectively at rock-bottom prices. Scholars have argued that these tactics contributed to the politicization of ethnicity, which loaded the dice in favor of bloody ethnic conflicts once the empire retreated. Even when the British were trying to prepare a colony for peaceful, democratic self-government, such tactics as institutionalized power sharing or minority representation among ethnic groups tended to politicize earlier ethnic divisions. These latent fissures tended to crack open with the move to independence and true universal-suffrage democracy.

India is often invoked as an example of the divisive legacy of British tactics of divide and rule, but it is by no means unique. In Ceylon (later Sri Lanka), for example, the British relied disproportionately on English-speaking civil servants from Tamil and other minority groups. In Malaya, the British encouraged immigration of Chinese and Indian workers to man the rubber plantations and other enterprises needed to sustain the broader imperial economy and military machine. These measures laid the groundwork in both of these colonies for the envy of the rural ethnic majority groups, the Sinhalese and Malays, that sought affirmative action and language-use privileges to correct perceived injustices.

The British dealt with these problems by oscillating between power-sharing schemes that protected minorities and

universal-suffrage democracy that empowered the majority. The generation of British-trained politicians that took power immediately after independence kept up this balancing game for a time, but in the long run the system's opposed principles turned out to be incompatible. In Malaysia, the problem was solved when the state curtailed the democratic process and civil rights in 1969; in Sri Lanka, democracy spiraled into ever-worsening ethnic warfare. These examples illustrate a widespread pattern in imperial attempts to democratize multi-ethnic societies.

Democratic transitions are most successful and peaceful when undertaken in a context of bureaucratic efficiency, rule of law, mature political parties, and established free press. One of the reasons that India has remained a fairly stable democracy is that all these elements were put in place, largely as a result of British efforts, before its independence in 1947. However, to buy the time to accomplish this (both for Britain's own strategic reasons and arguably to prepare India better for the transition), the empire needed to shore up local allies who supported the continuation of the colonial regime. In India in the 1920s and 1930s, these included traditional Muslim elites who welcomed British rule as a protection against the feared tyranny of the Hindu majority. (A consequence of this policy, many have argued, was the bloody partition of the British Raj into India and Pakistan in 1947, in which it has been estimated that nearly a million people died.²²) To strengthen these allies while gradually introducing democratic reforms in preparation for eventu-

22 Radha Kumar, "The Troubled History of Partition," *Foreign Affairs* 76 (1) (January/February 1997): 26.

al independence, the British established a system of separate electorates and guaranteed numbers of seats in provincial parliaments for Muslims and Hindus. As the political system began to democratize, this system of ethnic representation helped to channel mass loyalties along ethnic lines.²³

British policy promoted the politicization of Muslim identity still further during World War II. When Britain committed India to the war effort against Germany without consultation, Congress Party members in the Indian government resigned en masse. Congress leaders were jailed. The Muslim League, however, continued to see Britain as their protector against the Hindu majority, and so supported the British war effort. Enjoying a clear field for political organizing with no opposition from the Congress, the League emerged from the war with a strengthened hold over the Muslim electorate.

In the postwar 1946 elections, the League gained 76 percent of the Muslim vote through its irresistible call for the creation of the state of Pakistan.²⁴ When in 1947 the League euphemistically called for “direct action” in the streets to press the Congress for concessions on Muslim autonomy, the new electorate, its loyalties channeled by the system of representation separated by ethnicity, responded by rioting in Calcutta and in other major cities. Looking to extricate themselves through a policy that critics have labeled ‘divide and quit,’ the British abandoned India to a chaotic, bloody

23 Anita Inder Singh, *The Origins of the Partition of India, 1936 – 1947* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 237; Peter Hardy, *The Muslims of British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), chap. 8; H. V. Hodson, *The Great Divide* (London: Hutchison, 1969), 14 – 15, 48.

24 Singh, *The Origins of the Partition of India*, 243.

partition of the extensively intermingled religious communities.

On the one hand, the British legacy of liberal institutions facilitated India’s transition to a fairly stable democracy. On the other hand, the legacy of institutionalized ethnicity, an expedient to sustain British rule while awaiting the transfer of power to the local majority, increased the likelihood that cultural cleavages would become the basis for divisive politics in the transitional state.

In Sri Lanka, the British fostered the development of a small, English-educated, cosmopolitan political and bureaucratic elite who tended to favor the inclusive civic identity of ‘Ceylonese,’ based on loyalty to the governmental system that Britain had established in the colony of Ceylon, rather than the exclusive ethnic identities of Sinhalese or Tamil.²⁵ Because of the success of Christian missionary activities in the Tamil-populated Jaffna region, Tamils constituted a disproportionate share of that elite. Fewer Sinhalese learned English because the powerful Buddhist priesthood blocked British inroads into the traditional monopoly of temple schools over the education of lay children.²⁶

High-level British-trained native officials never sunk deep roots into local communities and thus failed to attract a popular following. During the 1920s, Ceylon’s main representative body, the State Council, was elected under a power-sharing system that restricted suf-

25 K. N. O. Dharmadasa, *Language, Religion, and Ethnic Assertiveness: The Growth of Sinhalese Nationalism in Sri Lanka* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 225 – 226, 254.

26 Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 65 – 66, 79, 155.

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frage and reserved a proportion of the seats for Tamils. This system buffered indigenous officials from full accountability to mass constituencies. In 1931, however, the British Donoughmore Commission, in an attempt to prepare Ceylon for independence and full democracy, stripped away this buffer by eliminating separate minority representation and introducing universal suffrage.²⁷

Despite growing populist ferment, the old cosmopolitan elite managed to prevail in elections to form the first two postindependence governments in 1947 and 1952. Soon, however, the Sinhalese rebellion against proficiency in the English language as a requirement for government employment began to gather force. Sinhalese teachers and Buddhist monks also wanted to exclude Tamil as an official language, arguing that language parity would somehow allow the large Tamil population of South India to swamp Sinhalese culture. Radical monks in the less wealthy temples resented the influence of Western culture and administrative practices, which deprived them of their traditional role as the link between the state and the villages.²⁸ These monks experimented with socialist rhetoric in the late 1940s, but by the mid-1950s they found that nationalist populist themes were a more effective vehicle for expressing their demands.

Given the competitive incentives of universal-suffrage elections, even a secu-

lar, cosmopolitan, Oxford-educated politician such as Solomon Bandaranaike found it expedient to tap into this popular movement. Perceiving an opportunity to gain power in the 1956 elections, the Buddhist political organization offered to support Bandaranaike's challenge to the ruling United National Party, on the condition that he campaign on the platform of making Sinhala the official state language. This marriage of convenience consolidated the ideological shift of Ceylon's Buddhist movement from socialism to ethnonationalism. Through word of mouth, by playing a central role at local political meetings, and by distributing election leaflets, local monks delivered 'vote banks' on behalf of Bandaranaike and the ethnically divisive language policy.²⁹

Although Bandaranaike owed his electoral victory to the support of militant Buddhists, once in power he negotiated a pact with Tamil leaders to establish Tamil as the language of administration in Tamil-majority provinces in the northeast of the country and to allow local authorities to block Sinhalese immigration into their regions. These concessions triggered anti-Tamil rioting in the capital city of Colombo. Bandaranaike gave up his plan to gain legislative approval of the pact, declared an emergency, and implemented the main features of the agreement by decree. Buddhists, claiming the pact would "lead to the total annihilation of the Sinhalese race," only intensified their resistance.³⁰

27 Urmila Phadnis, *Religion and Politics in Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1976), 159; Chelvadurai Manogaran, *Ethnic Conflict and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 8; James Manor, "The Failure of Political Integration in Sri Lanka (Ceylon)," *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 17 (1) (March 1979): 23.

28 Tambiah, *Sri Lanka*, 8, 20; Phadnis, *Religion and Politics in Sri Lanka*, 74.

29 Phadnis, *Religion and Politics in Sri Lanka*, 73–74, 160, 164–165, 183–187; Manor, "The Failure of Political Integration in Sri Lanka (Ceylon)," 21–22; Dharmadasa, *Language, Religion, and Ethnic Assertiveness*, 296–297, 300, 314.

30 Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed? : Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 50.

A monk assassinated Bandaranaike in 1959.

From this point on, the pattern of electoral outbidding among Sinhalese parties was firmly established. Even Junius Jayawardene's hitherto moderate Sinhalese United National Party attacked Bandaranaike's power-sharing agreement with the Tamils. On several subsequent occasions, the Sinhalese party in power sought an agreement with the Tamil minority to achieve a majority coalition in parliament, and the Sinhalese opposition party responded with demagogic attacks to wreck the agreement. Revamping the electoral system in 1977 to reward candidates who appealed across ethnic lines also failed to break the spiral of conflict.³¹ By that time, groups had developed the habit of rioting in the streets against policies they disliked, so conflict was fueled regardless of electoral incentives.

The legacy of British imperialism exacerbated the problems of the democratic transition in Sri Lanka's multiethnic society. In Sri Lanka as elsewhere, this legacy included the contradictory elements of a divide-and-rule preference for ethnic minorities and the subsequent move to universal-suffrage democracy. In this setting, even the Donoughmore Commission's well-intentioned plan turned out to be fraught with unintended consequences.

Malaysia achieved independence from Britain in 1957, a decade after Sri

31 Donald Horowitz, "Making Moderation Pay," in Joseph Montville, ed., *Conflict and Peacemaking in Multiethnic Societies* (New York: Lexington Books, 1991), 463. On the more recent period, see Amita Shatri, "Government Policy and the Ethnic Crisis in Sri Lanka," in Michael E. Brown and Sumit Ganguly, eds., *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 129–164.

Lanka. In many respects, the two started out on similar trajectories. In a process that closely resembled Sri Lanka's transition to independence, the British in Malaysia brokered an agreement for a democratic constitution, which was underpinned by a power-sharing accord between cosmopolitan, English-speaking elites from the Malayan and Chinese communities. Having brought Chinese and Indian immigrants to Malaya to sustain the imperial economy, the British hoped that democratic power sharing could overcome the political divisions this had brought about. But that expectation was too optimistic. As in Sri Lanka over the course of the first decade after independence, the logic of mass electoral competition began to undermine the power-sharing accord, as nationalist parties in both major ethnic groups began to draw votes away from the centrist, cross-ethnic alliance. Inter-ethnic harmony was restored only after democracy was truncated through a suspension of the liberal constitution following the 1969 postelectoral riots.³²

During the early years of the Cold War, an armed rebellion mounted by the Chinese-dominated Malaysian Communist Party had left all Chinese politically suspect. As a result, the Chinese business elite faced difficulties in organizing politically on its own. Moreover, wealthy Chinese found that their interests often coincided more closely with those of Malayan bureaucratic elites than with those of working-class Chinese. As a result, the main Chinese party, the Malaysian Chinese Association, combined with the Malayan elite party, the United

32 Gordon P. Means, *Malaysian Politics: The Second Generation* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), chap. 1; Muthiah Alagappa, "Contestation and Crisis," in Alagappa, ed., *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995), 63–64.

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Malays National Organization, to form a coalition, known as the Alliance, for the purpose of contesting the Kuala Lumpur city elections in 1952. The British reinforced this arrangement and made ethnic cooperation a precondition of eventual independence.³³

The cross-ethnic coalition agreement held firm for the first two postindependence elections: In 1959, the Alliance won 52 percent of the vote in free and fair elections and, because of the magnifying effects of single-member districts, 74 out of 104 seats in parliament. In 1964, the Alliance benefited from the rallying effect induced by military threats from Indonesia and increased its margin of victory.³⁴

By 1969, however, the Alliance's power-sharing formula was coming under intense challenge by a second generation of political elites that was more ethnically oriented and less cosmopolitan than the founders of the independent Malaysian state. The Alliance continued to campaign on what in retrospect sounds like an extraordinarily reasonable platform: Alliance politicians offered programs to rectify the economic disadvantages of impoverished, poorly educated Malaysians, and they justified these programs in terms of the need to develop agriculture, not of ethnic favoritism. Malay was to become the sole official language, but other languages could be used for official business as needed. The Chinese would continue to benefit from a liberal policy on citizenship. The Alliance's ideology was one of Malaysian

civic-territorial nationalism, not Malaysian ethnic nationalism.³⁵

This reasonable-seeming formula began to wear thin, however, in the troubled economic context of 1969. Both the Malays and the Chinese had grounds for complaint against the elitist Alliance, whose supporters came disproportionately from the upper-income groups of both ethnicities. By 1969, Malays' per capita income remained less than half that of non-Malays. Opposition parties catering to Malay constituencies believed the solution should be a massive program of employing Malays in new, state-sector industries. Yet they saw that the Malay political power needed to accomplish this was receding, because the Alliance's liberal citizenship policies were swelling the ranks of Chinese nationalist voters. "Racial harmony is only skin deep," the manifesto of the Malay opposition party concluded. "Ninety percent of the nation's wealth is still in the hands of non-Malays."³⁶

At the same time, Chinese economic grievances were rising. A devaluation of the British pound sterling harmed Chinese business interests. Because the Alliance was hard-pressed by the Malay opposition in the hard-fought 1969 parliamentary election campaign, it refused to compensate those who suffered financial losses as a result of the devaluation. This gave added ammunition to the Chinese opposition parties. In a perverse form of interethnic elite collusion, the Malay nationalist and Chinese nationalist parties had agreed not to divide the opposition vote and so refrained from running opposing candidates in districts where one of the two parties held the majority. The Alliance had gained only 49 percent

33 Stanley S. Bedlington, *Malaysia and Singapore: The Building of New States* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978), 85–87.

34 Karl von Vorys, *Democracy Without Consensus: Communalism and Political Stability in Malaysia* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975), 249, 297.

35 *Ibid.*, 268.

36 *Ibid.*, 271.

of the popular vote, though it retained a majority of the seats in parliament. Despite this ‘victory,’ the Alliance government eventually succumbed to tactics of ethnic polarization and suffered ultimate electoral defeat at the hands of the ethnic opposition parties. When riots broke out in Kuala Lumpur between Chinese and Malays in the ethnically polarized atmosphere after this tense election, the government declared an emergency and suspended the constitution.

The government then began to pursue a two-pronged strategy of truncating democracy while implementing a technocratic policy designed to maximize economic growth and increase educational and employment opportunities for ethnic Malays. Heavy government investments would modernize rural areas where Malays were the majority. According to this formula, which was codified in the Second Malaysia Plan of 1971, Chinese businesses could continue to enrich themselves, but national symbolism and government-backed affirmative action would strongly favor Malays. Inflammatory ethnic appeals were made illegal. Political coalitions were arranged through backroom bargaining and patronage deals rather than through open contestation.³⁷ In the jargon of social science, the Alliance instituted an “ethnic control regime” based on a combination of repression and side payments to some of the losers.³⁸

This strategy was so successful that by 1973 even the nationalist opposition par-

ties had been co-opted into the ruling Alliance, which now controlled 80 percent of the seats in parliament. Under this system of sharp limitations on free speech and truncated democratic rights, Malaysia enjoyed three decades of extraordinary economic growth without serious ethnic violence, with the Alliance unassailably in power.³⁹

A key factor in this success was the power of Malaysian state administrators over society. British Malaya had bequeathed an effective central bureaucracy, a powerful tool that Alliance politicians could use to coerce or buy off opponents under the Second Malaysia Plan.⁴⁰ The powers held by the state under the revised 1971 constitution included the ability to distribute patronage to cooperative opposition politicians, to distribute central tax revenues to cooperative localities, and to parcel out economic development projects. The loyalty and efficiency of the Malay-dominated military and police immediately made it possible to repress rioting. Sarawak ranger units, composed of Iban tribesmen brought in from the Malaysian part of Borneo, proved equally ruthless in repressing unruly gangs.⁴¹

Finally, the state had strong powers to bar ethnonationalist messages from the

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37 Ibid., 394–412; Means, *Malaysian Politics*, 439; Bedlington, *Malaysia and Singapore*, 116.

38 D. Rumley, “Political Geography of Control of Minorities,” *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geographie* 84 (1) (1993); Ian Lustick, “Stability in Deeply Divided Societies: Consociationalism Versus Control,” *World Politics* 31 (3) (April 1979): 325–344.

39 Bedlington, *Malaysia and Singapore*, 152; William Case, “Malaysia: Aspects and Audiences of Legitimacy,” in Alagappa, ed., *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia*, 75–76, 79–80, 106; Sumit Ganguly, “Ethnic Politics and Political Quiescence in Malaysia and Singapore,” in Brown and Ganguly, eds., *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*, 233–272.

40 Milton Esman, *Administration and Development in Malaysia: Institution Building and Reform in a Plural Society* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1972).

41 Bedlington, *Malaysia and Singapore*, 166–167; von Vorys, *Democracy Without Consensus*, 348.

media. A 1971 constitutional amendment made it a crime even for legislators to discuss ethnically sensitive questions about Malay language dominance, citizenship, or the constitutionally mandated special rights of Malays as the country's indigenous group. Ownership and staff of the mass media were 'Malaysianized' in the 1970s. This assertion of state authority over the press was legitimized in part by a policy begun under the British, who had required newspapers to apply for annual licenses and had threatened seditious newspapers with closure. Even as recently as 1987, the main Chinese newspaper was closed down for a year after it protested the policy of having Malay principals administer Chinese schools.⁴²

The paired cases of Sri Lanka and Malaysia show that democratization risks the exacerbation of ethnic tensions, especially when imperial policies have fostered envy and promoted politicization along ethnic lines. Ironically, some of the measures that became ethnically divisive were originally adopted as expedients to sustain imperial rule while trying to prepare the ground for democracy. Whereas British-style institutions of representative democracy were a dubious blessing in both cases, the most valuable legacy of empire in Malaysia turned out to be an effective administrative apparatus capable of managing ethnic divisions while overseeing coherent economic policies that benefited all groups.

In countries with weak political institutions the transition to democracy carries

42 Means, *Malaysian Politics*, 137–140; Bedlington, *Malaysia and Singapore*, 150; Jon Vanden Heuvel, *The Unfolding Lotus: East Asia's Changing Media* (New York: Columbia University, Freedom Forum Media Studies Center, 1993), 146–162; von Vorys, *Democracy Without Consensus*, 429.

a higher risk of civil or international war. Nonetheless, when a democratic power militarily occupies a country, it is likely to promote democracy there as part of its strategy of withdrawal. This preference reflects the democratic power's self-image and values, its expectation that democratization will create a cooperative partner after the withdrawal, and its desire to legitimate the military intervention as consistent with the target state's presumed right to national self-determination.

Normally, the imperial state seeks to organize the basic institutional preconditions for democracy before handing power back to the occupied nation. However, while this effort is being undertaken, the empire usually must govern through local elites whose legitimacy or political support is typically based on traditional authority or ethnic sectarianism.

Unfortunately, such short-run expedients may hinder the long-run transition to democracy by increasing ethnic polarization. Even if the empire does not take active steps to politicize ethnicity, the mere act of unleashing premature demands for mass political participation before democratic institutions are ready will increase the risk of a polarized, violent, unsuccessful transition. British imperialists fell prey to these dilemmas between the 1920s and 1960s, notwithstanding their frequently benign intentions. The United States risks falling into the same trap as it tries to promote democracy in the wake of military interventions.

Elections under the U.S. occupation of Iraq in January of 2005 reflected the typical pattern of ethnic and religious polarization in culturally divided societies that attempt democracy before coherent state institutions have been constructed. The United States was not consciously

playing the game of divide and rule, but the elections it sponsored inadvertently complicated efforts to overcome divisions among Kurds, Shia Arabs, and Sunni Arabs. With the Sunni refraining from voting out of fear or protest, and the Kurds and Shia voting strictly along group lines, the assembly elected to write the country's constitution turned out to be less comprehensive in its representation and more culturally polarized than a nondemocratic process would have devised. After the elections, Sunni insurgents increasingly directed their attacks against Shia civilian targets rather than only against U.S. and Iraqi government targets. If the United States continues to try to impose democracy on ill-prepared societies, it can expect more uphill struggles such as this one.

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