

RESEARCH NOTES

Explaining the potential for conflict: Malaysia between tradition and modernity

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Summary

What happens if an authoritarian state strives for economical modernization? Will it be able to stay in power and adhere to the existing system? Or will a transformation process begin which finally leads to a democratisation of state and society? Malaysia faces exactly this kind of dilemma. This research note provides some starting points for a detailed analysis of this process with the aspect of education in the central role. A modern economy asks for highly skilled, i.e. well educated workers and for a certain set of modern values. This might cause a clash with traditional social values. What has to be examined is whether the government can be successful in harmonising both sets of values and what actions it undertakes to avoid a social and, in the end, a political change.

Keywords: Malaysia, modernization, education, knowledge society, value debate

1 Introduction

Technological progress presupposes a certain state of education. If a country strives for economical development, it needs educated citizens with the ability to adapt to new working processes and a willingness for life long learning. In the case of Malaysia, the government has been introducing new forms of education – especially in the field of vocational training and in the tertiary sector – which teach a certain set of working values necessary for the new challenges. But these values are not necessarily consistent with traditional social ones. This might cause a clash of values and end in a break-up of society...and even politics?

There are several aspects which make Malaysia an interesting object of investigation. The government characterizes the state as a democratic nation, which is true if one chooses a minimal definition of democracy (free elections and a multi-party system). But taking other opinions like the one of *Freedom House* into consideration, Malaysia is evaluated at best to be half authoritarian. This might cause problems for the government, as the change into a knowledge-economy with highly skilled workers – at least theoretically – comes with a democratisation of the society and the political system. On the one hand, it relies on the backing of a