

## The Politics of Democracy in Malaysia

Rainer Heufers

*This article<sup>1</sup> provides a review of the condition of Malaysian democracy after 20 years of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's rule. To this end it looks into issues that were identified as political causes of the Asian crisis in the years after 1997. These are in particular: weak democratic institutions and electoral systems, an executive that dominates parliament, the judiciary, and the media. Considering the Malaysian constitutional background and evolving political trends in recent years of the Mahathir era, the article finds these issues basically unresolved. The country thus seems unprepared for future political challenges and crisis scenarios.*

In Southeast Asia democracy and the rule of law emerge with many stakeholders, who increasingly request democratic institutions to protect their fundamental rights and liberties. In 2001 the Indonesian legislative managed to impeach president Wahid and established his deputy Megawati Soekarnoputri as the new president. During the same year, the "People Power" of the Philippines won sufficient support for the impeachment of president Estrada. Meanwhile, Thailand struggles to implement rules and institutions that were stipulated in its new democratic constitution.<sup>2</sup>

Thinking about the situation in Malaysia makes one realize that only news on the trial against former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and recent arrests of political opposition under the Internal Security Act (ISA) have appeared in the international press. This article looks into current Malaysian politics vis-à-vis the background of the Federal Constitution and the Malaysian democratic institutions. It examines political processes and democratic rights in Malaysia in order to assess the stability and sustainability of the political system. The bulk of literature on the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s concentrated on its economic causes. Now there is an increasing concern with the relevant political causes leading to the inherent instability of Southeast Asian societies. Rudolph identified in particular: corruption, collusion and nepotism; non-democratic systems of government and weak democratic institutions; inadequate electoral systems; a lack of separation of powers; manipulation and dependency of the judiciary; and the role of civil society and the media.<sup>3</sup> This article looks into some of these issues in order to assess the political stabi-

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<sup>1</sup> Written 01.11.2001.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of processes of democratic transition in Southeast Asia until the 1990s, see: Sachsenröder, Wolfgang, Ulrike E. Frings (eds.): *Political Party Systems and Democratic Development in East and Southeast Asia*. Volume I: Southeast Asia, Aldershot 1998; and Johannsen, Uwe, James Gomez (eds.): *Democratic Transitions in Asia*, Singapore 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Rudolph, Jürgen: "The Political Causes of the Asian Crisis", in: Johannsen, Uwe, Jürgen Rudolph and James Gomez: *The Political Dimension of the Asian Crisis*, Singapore 2000, p.13-93.