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Why Some Countries become Secular State and Some Countries Become a Religious State: Cases of Singapore and Malaysia

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Abstract

This article explores the divergent paths of state formation in Malaysia and Singapore, analyzing why Malaysia became a religious state with Islam as its official religion while Singapore evolved into a secular state. Despite their shared historical, geographical, and ethnic backgrounds, the two nations developed distinct political and religious frameworks. The paper employs comparative historical analysis (CHA), using Charles Tilly's theory of state formation and critical juncture theory to explain these differences. The arrival of ethnic Chinese immigrants in Singapore and the resulting demographic shift is highlighted as a pivotal factor in Singapore's secularism. In contrast, Malaysia's political elite leveraged ethnic and religious identity to form a coalition that shaped the nation's religious character. The study concludes that ethnic politics and elite decision-making during critical moments of national formation led to the current divergence between the secularism of Singapore and the religious orientation of Malaysia.

Keywords: State, state-making, state religion

Introduction

Malaysia and Singapore are two countries that have similar backgrounds. Historically, the two are inseparable from each other. The British once controlled both countries, namely Malaysia which was colonized since 1786 and Singapore which was

colonized since 1819. Both countries also consist of indigenous people of the Malay race. (Pangesti, 2022)

However, the form of state chosen by both is different. Singapore became a parliamentary republic and Malaysia became a federal

parliamentary monarchy. In addition, the relationship between the two countries towards religion is also different. Malaysia chose Islam to be the official religion of the federation, while Singapore did not choose any religion to be the religion of the republic, and chose to be a secular religion with the Malay race being the marginalized ethnicity.

The similarity of several factors such as geography, ethnography, and social structure in Malaysia and Singapore did not lead to unity between the two. In fact, both became independent countries with much different forms of state and government. What caused Singapore not to become a Malay nation-state like Malaysia with Islam as its official religion, and what caused the Malays to be excluded in Singapore? This paper will further review the origins of the Malaysian and Singaporean states using several comparative historical analysis approaches with analysis from state formation theory, and theory of national identity.

Analytical Framework

The first theory used in this paper is the logic of “war making state and vice versa” from Charles Tilly.

According to Tilly, the ruler of a region will always use coercion to fight rebels within its territory. For this reason, wars will always occur and the winner of the war will become the ruler of the region, thus forming a state. This process continues, along with wars with external threats. (Tilly, 1990). According to our argument, this theory can be used to explain how the modern states of Malaysia and Singapore were formed.

In addition to this theory, this paper will also use an analytical framework related to ideas and norms in comparative politics. In this case, Ross's paper entitled "Culture in Comparative Political Analysis" is used. Ross (2019) argues that culture, more specifically expressed in ideas, norms, and conflicts can influence politics and become the main fundamental of causal mechanisms related to interests and structures in a country.

Tilly and Ross' theory will be framed within a short but important period called the critical juncture. Critical juncture theory is used in this method in describing the time concerning decision making of Malaysia and Singapore state formation. This is relevant since the study of "Historical Institutionalism (HI) is inherently concerned with both causality and time" (Mahoney, Mohamedali, & Nguyen, 2016).

In the effort to explain specific outcomes in particular cases, Historical Institutionalists researchers often understand causes as conditions that are necessary for specific outcomes. (Mahoney, Mohamedali, & Nguyen, 2016)

Conditions are very important in comparative historical analysis. For specific outcomes to take place, it needs some specific conditions. (Mahoney, Mohamedali, & Nguyen, 2016). In the same way of thinking, specific conditions are also necessary for a theory or result of research to be generalized. (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003)

When a particular account is extended to a new context, it will sometimes confirm the original explanation, thereby suggesting its generality and perhaps calling for a refinement in the understanding of scope conditions. (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003).

Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach, using the comparative historical analysis (CHA) method. Comparative historical analysis is used to find variations between Malaysia and Singapore in their state-formation, which both have some similarities in historical background and geographical areas, but have different outcomes in religion-related policies. The data used is sourced from secondary data, such as data from magazines that describe the time setting at the time and historical research from various scholars. The data is analyzed using theories related to state formation, ethnic politics, and critical juncture that frame the political life of the two countries until today.

Brief History of Malaya and Singapore

Malacca or Malaya (ancient Malaysia) was a British colony in 1511, controlling the Malayan Peninsula and Southeast Asia. In 1641, they were succeeded by the Dutch. Two centuries later, the British, who originally had bases in Jesselton, Kuching, Penang and Singapore, eventually gained control of the entire Kingdom of Malacca. In 1824, the boundary between British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) was agreed between the British and the Dutch. In 1909, Britain entered into a boundary agreement with Siam (Thailand). Finally, to meet the labor needs due to colonial needs in the Malay Peninsula and Borneo, the British brought in Chinese and Indian workers in the mid-20th century.

Malaysia briefly fell into Japanese hands during World War II. After Japan surrendered to the Seukites, the Union of Malaya was established in 1946 by the British government, but after opposition from ethnic Malays, the union was reorganized as the Federation of Malaya in 1948 and became a British protectorate until 1957. In the Malayan Peninsula, the Communist Party of Malaya rebelled against Britain, leading the British government to establish emergency rule for 12 years, from 1948 to 1960.

Britain finally negotiated with the communist rebels by conducting the Baling Negotiations in 1955 and granted independence to Malaya on August 31, 1957. Tunku Abdul Rahman became the first Prime Minister of Malaysia. In 1960, the emergency government was dissolved as the communist threat declined. Finally, on September 16, 1963, the Federation of Malaya was formed after the merger of the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, and North Borneo (Sabah). (Andaya & Andaya, 2003)

In 1963, after various tensions and uprisings by ethnic Chinese in Singapore, the Malaysian Parliament passed a bill that allowed Singapore to leave Malaysia to become a sovereign state. On August 9, 1965, Singapore declared its independence.

Singapore was a disputed area between Dutch and the British. Conflict between the Dutch and the British ensued due to their struggle for control of the Malay Peninsula. Finally, in 1824, the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 was signed, in which the Malay Archipelago was divided into two regions. The northern region, including Pulau Pinang, Malacca and Singapore, was to be under British influence, while the southern region was to be under Dutch influence. In 1826, Singapore together with Pulau Pinang and Malacca were incorporated into one government, the Negeri-Negeri Selat. (Sejarah Singapura, 2024)

During World War 2, Singapore fell to the Japanese. At that time, immigrants from China arrived in very large numbers, so that the seeds of interracial conflict between Chinese immigrants and ethnic Malays who were native to the Singapore area emerged.

When Japan lost World War 2, Singapore was re-controlled by the British on September 12, 1945, but its status was only a special autonomous region. In 1955, an election was held which was won by pro-independence Singaporean David Soul Marshal. David asked the UK for full independence, but this was rejected by the UK.

In 1959, another general election was held and won by Lee Kuan Yew as Singapore's first Prime Minister. On August 31, 1963, Singapore officially broke away from Britain and joined the federation of Malaysia (Malaya, Sarawak, Singapore and Sabah).

After Singapore joined Malaysia, the leaders of the Malaysian Federation created a policy of Privileges for Bumiputera Residents throughout Malaysia (ethnic Malaysians), at a time when Singapore's inter-ethnic prejudice was quite high. These tensions were compounded by the Malaysian government's often discriminatory treatment of ethnic Chinese in Singapore.

In 1964, Lee Kuan Yew took the bold step of entering his party, the Akhir Hayat Party, which had 75% ethnic Chinese members, into the Malaysian national elections. Tensions were intense from then on until many divisions and riots occurred.

With all the chaos and unrest in Singapore and other parts of Malaysia, the Malaysian parliament made a surprising decision to pass a bill to allow Singapore to leave the Malaysian Federation. By a vote of 126 to 0 in favor, all members of parliament agreed to release Singapore from the Malaysian Federation.

Finally, on August 9, 1965, Singapore declared their independence. After independence from its parent country, Malaysia, Singapore faced many problems such as high unemployment, dominating slums, and the absence of sufficient natural resources that could be used to drive the country's economic sector. (Pangesti, 2022)

Lee Kuan Yew worked hard since Singapore's independence to build Singapore by eradicating corruption, Development in various sectors, maintaining environmental cleanliness, and controlling socio-political stability so that foreign investors and traders are comfortable to stay and transit long in Singapore. Thanks to the hard work of the citizens, today Singapore is one of the most modern and rapidly developing countries in the world.

How Malaysia Nation-Sate is Formed

After Malaysia's ruler in the 1940s, Japan, was defeated in World War II, Malaysia fell back into British hands. These times were characterized by political turmoil in Sarawak, as many Malay tribes opposed the termination of the Brooke government and the handover of Sarawak to the British. In addition, the situation was further exacerbated by the British plan to form the Malayan Union, namely the development of the entire Malayan region except Singapore. The plan also included efforts to give non-Malays equal political and citizenship rights. A tremendous awakening arose among the Malay community to oppose this British proposal, culminating in the formation of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) in 1946 as a vehicle for Malay nationalism. This tremendous upheaval in response to the British plan for the formation of the Union of Malaya occurred throughout Malaya, through various work strikes, demonstrations, and boycotts, which led to the British starting to negotiate with UMNO about the future of Malaya. (Lockart and Bin Ahmad)

Negotiations between the British and UMNO resulted in the formation of the Federation of Malaya in 1948, which unified the

territories in Malaya, with special guarantees for the rights of the Malays, including the position of sultan. This privilege for the indigenous Malay population was envied by some of the radicalized and poorer Chinese community. Consequently, in 1948, the Malayan Communist Party, a Chinese movement formed in 1930 and the backbone of the anti-Japanese resistance, took to the jungles and started a rebellion against the colonial government, sparking 12 years of unrest, called the Malayan Emergency. This uprising was suppressed by the British with the forced relocation of many rural Chinese to the tightly controlled Baru Village which was located by the roadside. (Lockart & Bin Ahmad)

Domestic upheaval and the influence of independence from neighboring Indonesia led the British to negotiate more deeply with various ethnic leaders, resulting in the 1955 legislative elections. Tunku Abdul Rahman, the leader of UMNO, made an alliance with the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) which became known as the Alliance Party or Barisan Nasional and won the election.

These upheavals indicated that there was a lot of violence and conflict between the regional rulers and the petty rulers in the community. This led the government to increase its budget to contain the armed groups, either through coercion or negotiation. Ultimately, it is the winner of the conflict between the rulers or the winner of the negotiation that decides the shape of the state (Tilly, 1990).

Singapore State's Formation

To understand the different outcomes that Singapore and Malaysia have achieved when they share similar historical, ethnic and geographical backgrounds, it is not enough to study the history of the two countries. Rather, it is important to use the state formation framework of the two countries.

Tunku Abdul Rahman was a party leader who managed to gather the elite to unite them in a collective action, on the basis of a shared perception of the threat they faced, namely the British who tried to establish their power in Malaysia. This shared perception is important as a foundation for elites to build coalitions (Slater, 2010).

Studies related to state formation have attracted the attention of many political scientists. One of the most famous is Charles Tilly with his book "Coercion, Capital, and European States 990-1990".

Tilly uses the framework that frequent wars in the 10th to 20th centuries, especially in Europe, led to the formation of new states. In turn, these states also prepared themselves to create new wars, hence the term "war makes states, states make war".

Using Tilly's framework, we can argue that Singapore was formed because of wars, especially small wars between Kingdoms before colonizers such as the Portuguese, British and Japanese came to the Malacca Peninsula. Singapore's entire experience with the various Kingdoms that came to rule it such as the Srivijaya, Majapahit, Ayatthaya, and Malacca Kingdoms that fought each other for power made the social, economic, and political stability in Singapore to become a "country" of the Temasek Kingdom-no matter who the ruler was.

After winning the General Election in 1961, Lee Kuan Yew declared that Singapore needed to join Malaysia, citing economic reasons. Singapore was too early to become an independent country. This plan, of course, was not immediately accepted by

Malaysia, given that the overwhelming ethnic Chinese in Singapore could make the ethnic Malays throughout the Federation outnumber the ethnic Chinese if Singapore joined. However, eventually Tengku stated that Singapore was welcome to join the Malaysian Federation and he began On May 27, 1961 Tunku Abdul Rahman presented his draft of the formation of the Federation of Malaya, which would include Malaya, Singapore, Borneo, Brunei and Sarawak. It would be a single entity in terms of political as well as economic cooperation. Finally, in September 1963, Singapore officially became part of the Federation of Malaysia.

Separation of Malaysia and Singapore

Further, a more relevant analysis in this regard can be traced to the early days of the Republic of Singapore, when Singapore seceded from Malaysia in 1965. At that time, there was a great upheaval between ethnic Chinese who wanted to gain recognition and equality compared to ethnic Malays who received privileges in Singapore. This fact is in accordance with the basic argument of Tilly's theory in the book "Coercion, Capital, and European States 990-1990".

According to Tilly, based on the experience in Europe in medieval times, countries, are a no-man's-land. These no-man's-lands were then controlled by small landlords. In reality, landlords fought each other for territory and the winner became the local ruler. The territorial lords then imposed coercion on the civilian population, with the help of the military. These rulers continued to expand their buffer zones with neighboring territories, and these expansion efforts were often marked by war. If the war was won, then the local rulers succeeded in expanding their territory. But if they failed, they had to accept the loss of the buffer zone or engage in a prolonged war. The result of these wars led to the existence of states.

Tilly's argument is consistent with the experience in Singapore where the "rulers" of Singapore at that time, the ethnic Chinese majority under the People's Action Party Movement led by Lee Kuan Yew used violent coercion to make people of other ethnicities reluctant to them and create chaos so that it caught the attention of the federal government to liberate them. Tilly implies this by saying "the disarmament of civilians enormously increased the ratio of coercive means in state hands to those at the disposal of domestic rivals or opponents of those currently holding state power." (Tilly, 1990:70).

The Malaysian federation leaders' decision to create privileges for the bumiputera was a way for the Malaysian government to protect the existence of the Malays in Singapore, whose numbers were becoming increasingly marginalized. In this regard, North, Wallis and Weingast (2009) say that,

"To the extent that the threats against which a given government protects its citizens are imaginary or are consequences of its own activities, the government has organized a protection racket."

After riots broke out in Singapore in 1964 and 1965 between Malays and ethnic Chinese plus the police that claimed many lives, the Malaysian parliament negotiated a way to resolve the chaos. Instead of controlling the situation, the parliament voted to disengage Singapore as a sovereign state. This implied that the parliament preferred to approach institutions outside, rather than within, the country to resolve the conflict. This parliamentary decision was not without basis. In 1965, the number of ethnic

Chinese in Singapore was the majority, making it difficult to be controlled by Malaysia as the nation-state of the Malays. This is as stated by North, Wallis, and Weingast that Ways of dealing with violence are embedded in institutions and organizations. (North, Wallis, and Weingast, 2009: 15).

The chaos that occurred in Singapore in the first two years of joining Malaysia shows that the Singapore government also actually "produces" violence, so that its people obey and obey to get authoritarian protection, at the same time also to become a demonstration of the Singapore state to Malaysia, which seems unable to control chaos. (Tilly in Evans, Rueschemeyer, Skocpol, 1985: 173).

Riots as one of the beginnings of the formation of a state further supports Tilly's theory related to "war makes states, states make war". In his book chapter entitled "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime", Tilly argues that

"Early in the state-making process, many parties shared the right to use violence, its actual use, or both at once."
(Tilly in Evans, Rueschemeyer, Skocpol, 1985: 173).

The inter-ethnic riots in the early days of state-formation in Singapore implied that certain groups in Singapore felt they wanted to gain more power than others. This is what also encouraged the ethnic Chinese to be so ambitious to become social and political rulers in Singapore, because of their dominance in quantity. This is what caused Lee Kuan Yew and the People's Action Party to aggressively fight for the rights of the Chinese, which seemed to be ignored by the Malaysian Federation government at the time. Citing Anderson (1991), Spruyt (2009: 212) says that emerging political elites in ancient states often replaced or attempted to manipulate familial systems, ethnic connections, and religious power in order to establish a fresh allegiance to the state's authority and its public officials.

The Malaysian federation government's failure to deal with the chaos in Singapore during the early days of Singapore's incorporation into Malaysia also demonstrates the Malaysian government's lack of trust and legitimacy, as the holder of the new entity of Singapore's state formation. Related to this, Spruyt (2009:212) said,

"Inevitably the study of any one of these features of state formation will implicate other aspects. Monopolization of violence can only occur if governments are deemed at least partially legitimate. Moreover, the successful monopolization of violence itself will correlate with the ability of central governments to establish some modicum of efficient administration as well as the ability to raise revenue."

Relationship between State and Religion in Malaysia and Singapore

In the constitution of the Federation of Malaysia, article 3 states that, "Islam is the religion of the federation". However, after Singapore separated from Malaysia, Singapore never regulated the religion of the federation. This is understandable as the majority of Singaporeans are Chinese and their ideology is communism-socialism. Thus, Singapore does not need to give importance to religion. Malaysia, on the other hand, needed to regulate religion, not only because of ethnic issues, but also politically. At the time, Malaysia feared the communist stranglehold on Malaysia.

Fearing ethnic Chinese dominance within the Federation of Malaysia, Malaysia imposed restrictions on Singapore, particularly in politics and citizenship. This meant that Singapore was not fully integrated into the Malaysian Federation, as evidenced by the limited citizenship rights granted to Singaporean citizens. They could only vote in Singaporean elections and were excluded from participating in federal elections. Malaysia believed that without these restrictions, the Chinese population would eventually dominate Malaysian politics due to their numerical advantage over ethnic Malays. Consequently, Singapore's involvement in the political arena of the Malaysian Federation was heavily restricted. As argued above, ethnic politics dominated the contentious politics of Malaysia and Singapore relations in the 1960s. as Ross (2019:139) argues, "culture frames the context in which politics occurs".

This racial, political, and economic rivalry led to disharmony between the two countries during their two-year union. Singapore, with its majority ethnic Chinese population and non-communal People's Action Party (PAP), contrasted sharply with Malaysia's Malay majority and the communal Alliance Party. Malaysia's efforts to protect ethnic Malays from economic competition with the Chinese also included measures to prevent Singapore's economic dominance within the Federation. These differences escalated into uncontrollable conflicts and rivalries.

If we look at that time carefully, the Malaysian parliament was convened quite tough in June 1965, even the session became an arena for war of words between the leaders of the Federation of Malaysia and Singapore. Finally, in August 1965, Tunku Abdul Rahman attempted to save Malaysia by separating Singapore from Malaysia, especially because the communist threat in Singapore could not be controlled, so it was feared that the communists could take power in Malaysia (Safira, 1990).

At this point, the period between June 1965 and August 1965 became a critical juncture, which Mahoney, Mohamedali, and Nguyen (2016) refer to as "a relatively short period in time during which an event or set of events occurs that has a large and enduring subsequent impact."

The various upheavals that occurred in Malaysia and Singapore in the early days of independence of the Federation of Malaysia show that the politics played in Malaysia and Singapore at the time were contentious politics. The differences in the two countries can be explained using Slater's (2010) argument, "Variations in the type and timing of contentious politics are national variations in elite collective action, and hence in the resilience of postcolonial states, parties, militaries and regime institutions.

Thus, a causal logic can be established as to why the similarities in the historical, ethnic and geographical backgrounds of Malaysia and Singapore differ. By default, in the beginning, Singapore and Malaysia were both ruled and administered by the same kingdoms such as Srivijaya, Majapahit, Ayutthaya and Malacca. Both also experienced colonization by the same invaders such as the Portuguese, British and Japanese. However, there was one tipping point that changed the fate of the Singapore state forever, which was the massive arrival of ethnic Chinese in Singapore during the British colonial period, increasing during the Japanese colonial period, and reaching its peak after Singapore's independence from the British. Their arrival practically broke the dominance of the Malay race in Singapore.

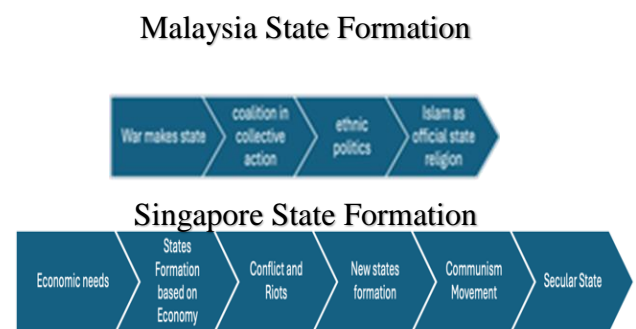
With the dominance of the Chinese race in Singapore until today, the face of Singapore is much different from Malaysia. The Malaysian government embraces Islamic values as the basis of its constitutional monarchy, while Singapore believes more in the values of secularism and authoritarianism for its political stability.

This is also why Malays are marginalized in Singapore. Although every race has equal opportunities before politics and law, but in reality the Singapore PAP makes many policies that are less friendly to the Malays. This is because currently the number of Malays in Singapore is only 13.5%, in contrast to the ethnic Chinese who make up 75.9% of Singapore's population.

Thus, it can be said that the various upheavals that occurred due to the existence of similar threats from outside formed the existence of the Malaysian state, while the Singapore state was formed without any threats or the results of any political upheaval during the self-governing period, but was the result of an upheaval to separate from Malaysia which led to Singapore's independence.

The difference in the form of the state and its relationship with religion between Malaysia and Singapore occurred because of ethnic politics. Malaysia, which is predominantly made up of Malays, wanted a form of state that could guarantee the dominance and rights of the Malays over other peoples such as Chinese and Indians, while Singapore, which has become a Chinese-majority country, decided to become a secular state because religion is not important for the prosperity of a country, but socio-political stability is the most important thing.

Critical junctures that occurred during Malaysia and Singapore's relationship during the state formation period occurred several times, namely when Singapore volunteered to join the Malaysian Federation and when the Malaysian parliament convened to decide on separation or merger from Singapore. The process can be drawn as attached.



Picture 1. Different Mechanism of Malaysia and Singapore State Formation and Its Outcome on Religion

Generalization of the Study

According to Mahoney & Rueschemeyer (2003), generalization needs specific or necessary condition. Thus, the main challenge of this historical comparative study is generalization. Whether the theory generated from this study can be applied to other countries that have similar condition, namely the strength of ethnic-based religions, against other ethnicities that are not indigenous, then whether it will have an impact on the outcome of the official religion or not adhering to any religion as the official religion. In our opinion, generalizations can only be made if there are specific conditions, namely the existence of clashes or conflicts between tribes and the existence of strong leaders who are able to bridge

various ethnicities in a coalition, such as Tunku Abdul Rahman who was able to create a Barisan Nasional coalition consisting of UMNO, MCA, and MIC.

Conclusion

Despite their similarities in terms of history, geography and ethnicity, the outcome of Singapore and Malaysia's state-formation was not the same. It was the series of violence and the dynamics of the arrival of ethnic Chinese to Singapore that brought massive changes to Singapore's state institutions. In time, Singapore eventually became a state-state, which managed to become one of the most successful countries in the world.

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