

## 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

traditional, hierarchically oriented society to stay in power; on the other, it needs economical success for its legitimacy. (cf. Merkel 2003: 34)

As a country of the second generation of Asian tiger states, the economic progress is already advanced, but the political and the social system are apparently stable. This research note cannot answer the question how politics and society will change, but it will try to show potential trouble spots. The government – namely the Prime Minister's Office and the Economic Planning Unit – published various papers and programs on future economic and societal challenges and goals, which make it possible to look at the state's development and draw first conclusions on already reached and on assumed results as well as potential conflicts.

This research note is going to describe the actual situation in Malaysia concerning two sides of the suspected conflict, the – traditionally oriented – society on the one hand, and the new education and working methods and goals on the other. Therefore, ideal types of traditional social values and modern working values will be identified and contrasted against each other. One of the results will be the question of the government's ability to deal with such a conflict or respectively the potential for conflict.

## 2 Terms

Before starting with a typology of specific conflicting values, some basic terms have to be taken into consideration. *Knowledge-society* and *knowledge-economy* are words which are absolutely essential in this context. A second central term to be defined is *value*, appearing in the variations of traditional, social values on the one hand and modern working values on the other.

### 2.1 General implications on constructing a knowledge society

As knowledge becomes increasingly important for states, their economies and their societies, the literature on this topic is increasing steadily. Many similar terms and concepts such as knowledge-society, knowledge-based society, knowledge-economy or knowledge-worker are available, but until now a scientifically acknowledged definition has been lacking. For a clear understanding of the arguments, the following definitions are used within this article:

A k-economy can be understood as an economical system „in which the generation and exploitation of knowledge play the predominant part in the creation of wealth“ (Manshor 2001: 105). Main aspects of k-economy are the increase of knowledge for the purpose of a higher production capacity, qualitative and quantitative changes in industrial production and development processes and the focus on investments in fields like human capital and research and development (R&D) capacity. The whole concept of k-economy is based on knowledge and information, which have to be transformed into ideas and then into innovations concerning working processes as well as products. „For Malaysia's purpose, it is proposed that a knowledge-based



economy be defined as an economy in which knowledge, creativity, and innovation play an ever-increasing and important role in generating and sustaining growth.“ (<http://www.epu.jpm.my>)

Relating to this concept, a skilled k-worker is a person who is familiar with the requirements of a modern technologically oriented economy and with the concept of life long learning for adapting new working methods and procedures. He needs more than just *basic skills* such as numeracy, literacy and behavioural skills (perseverance, self-discipline, self-confidence etc.), he also needs *postbasic skills* such as „thinking skills, higher order behavioural skills (decision-making skills, teamwork, the ability to negotiate conflict and manage risks), specific knowledge applied to real-life situations, and vocational skills“. (<http://www-wds.worldbank.org>) In brief, one can describe a k-worker as a person who has to have the ability to use mental power rather than physical power.

More general and encompassing than the term k-economy is the term k-society. UNESCO provides a quite open description: „UNESCO advocates the concept of *Knowledge Societies* that includes dimensions of social, cultural, and institutional transformation, and is centered around a development oriented vision.“ (<http://portal.unesco.org>)

Another general statement about k-societies is given by Evers, who states that a k-society is about the *software*, not the *hardware*. He provides some characteristics which define a k-society and which can fill this description for a better understanding. In a k-society, the average level of education is already high and the amount of k-workers is still increasing. The production of high-level goods and the use of modern technology are not only present in the industrial field, but also in public and private areas. Science centres such as research institutions and universities are crucial for an epistemic production and use of knowledge. (cf. Evers et al. 2004: 16) Nevertheless, these characteristics alone do not constitute a k-society: „Only when the systems of knowledge production and consumption ensure that every interested member of society can participate in them can one talk of a *knowledge society*.“ (Hornidge 2007: 40)

## 2.2 General implications on values

The discussion on traditional and modern values, their (assumed) clash, their potential for persistency on the one hand and power for bringing about a change on the other make it necessary to explain the term's use in this article. To give a short and simple definition, one can describe values as internalized codes of conduct, which a person acquires by his or her education and socialization, which itself is embedded in a certain cultural environment. (cf. Hepp 1994: 4) Once learned, a value system is a guideline to people's behaviour and provides a criterion of selection and decision. The totality of intrinsic values builds a whole value system, which is shared among members of a certain group and which allows them to

cooperate with each other. This constitutes the purpose of values: to enable a given group of people to share their environment and to live with each other peacefully.

Fukuyama describes the ability to establish a set of values as ‘social capital’. By the choice of this term he consciously establishes a connection to economy: „Like physical capital (land, buildings, machines) and human capital (the skill and knowledge we carry in our heads), social capital produces wealth and is therefore of economic value to a national economy.“ (Fukuyama, 2000: 16) Only if there is a common basis in society, can political or economical success be achieved, as it does not have its origin in the capabilities and skills of a single person, but in individuals embedded in a social network.

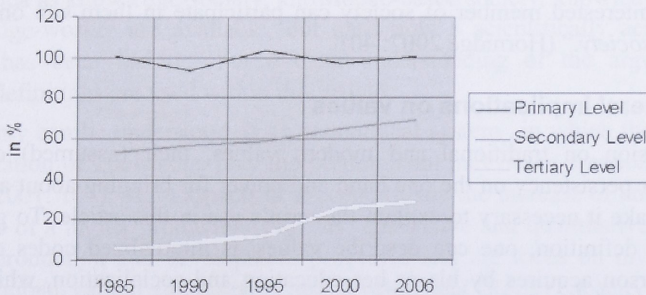
In the case of a modernising Malaysia, one has to investigate how the transformation into a k-society can take place: will it result in a clash of tradition and modernity? Or will it result in a cocktail of traditional and modern values? If this is the case, one has to ask for the proper ingredients.

### 3 Facts

#### 3.1 Constructing a Malaysian k-society

A country which strives to become a k-society has to invest in education, especially in the tertiary sector, as a deep specialized knowledge is an irreplaceable precondition for a highly skilled society. In the case of Malaysia, the initial position in the education sector is not too bad, as the enrolment rates are high in the primary and secondary sector; but the situation in the tertiary sector still shows a deficit. Here the aspired numbers concerning university places and places in vocational training programs have not yet been reached. Nevertheless, the development shows an upward trend. (cf. Kopp 2002: 79-83)

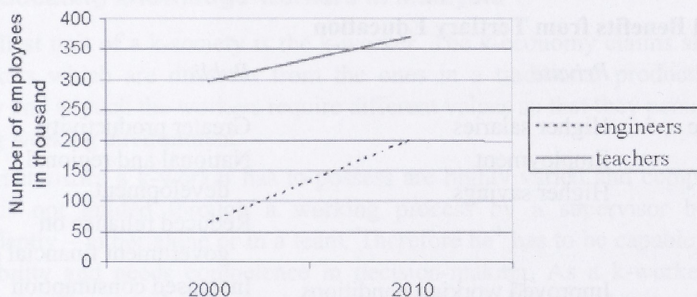
**Figure 1: Gross enrolment ratio**





As Malaysia announces its aim to become an industrialised nation by the year 2020 in its *Vision 2020*, it substantiates its goal in different official papers and plans such as the ‘Malaysian Plan’ (a five year plan; the actual one is the 9<sup>th</sup> Malaysian Plan or 9MP) or the Outline Perspective Plan (OPP – a ten year plan). The OPP itemises some concrete numbers about the development of selected professions. Here the examples of engineers and teachers are chosen as both professions are highly relevant for constructing a k-society:

**Figure 2: Aspired development on the Malaysian job market**



Source: Outline Perspective Plan 2001

Within these ten years, the number of engineers should increase by 213%, the number of teachers by 24%. (cf. 3<sup>rd</sup> OPP, 2001: 155) Whether the realisation of these targets can succeed is highly dependent on the quality and quantity of the educational system. In the tertiary sector – which is relevant for the constructing of a k-economy and -society – a huge number of different programs and measures initiated by the government exists: there are grant programs to send students overseas for studies in the field of engineering or medicine, new universities have been founded or already existing research institutes are extended to gain university status. Following the concept of life long learning, institutions like the Penang Skills Development Centre provide training and educational programmes for industrial workers. Another measure is the implementation and upgrading of centres for vocational training such as the German Malaysian Institute (GMI), which was founded with the goal of developing a dual training system – vocational training in enterprises and theoretical training in schools or training centres.

The GMI is insofar extremely interesting as it explicitly imparts modern working values as well as social and learning competences along side technical skills. With this approach, the GMI follows common sense – at least in the Western world – as the World Bank states that one has to look at „education as a holistic system that includes not only the human capital contribution of tertiary education but also its

critical humanistic and social capital building dimensions and its role as an important global public good“. (The World Bank, 2002: xix) Elements which should be taught besides pure technical skills are, for instance, methodological knowledge, analytical skills, problem solving ability, teamwork, peer teaching, or creativity. The World Bank approach combines both, a humanistic dimension and the ‘hard science’, striving for the implementation and strengthening of „democratic values, attitudes, and cultural norms“ (The World Bank 2002: 42)

The World Bank assesses the extension and improvement of tertiary education as highly rewarding for individuals as well as for the whole society:

### Potential Benefits from Tertiary Education

<i>Benefits</i>	<i>Private</i>	<i>Public</i>
Economic	Higher salaries Employment Higher savings  Improved working conditions Personal and professional mobility	Greater productivity National and regional development Reduced reliance on government financial support Increased consumption Increased potential for transformation from low-skill industrial to knowledge-based economy
Social	Improved quality of life for self and children Better decision-making  Improved personal status Increased educational opportunities Healthier lifestyle and higher life expectancy	Nation building and development of leadership Democratic participation; increased consensus; perception that society is based on fairness and opportunity for all citizens Social mobility Greater social cohesion and reduced crime rates Improved health Improved basic and secondary education

Source: The World Bank 2002: 81; author’s emphasis

The Malaysian government refers to these benefits – at least to the ones in the public economic sector – and supplements them with the goals of opening new sources of growth and a better competitiveness on the global market. Critical factors for



gaining these benefits are the quality of the nation's human resources, the governmental activities in R&D, and the info- and infrastructure and its general availability. Much emphasis is put on the human resource sector, which has led the government to pursue three different strategies: the first one is long-term and sustainment oriented and encompasses the upgrading of the whole educational system. The second one – being effective in the medium term – refers to the fostering of manager and worker (re-)training. The third strategy is short-term with the government trying to recruit foreign talent. (cf. <http://www.epu.jpm.my>)

### 3.2 Educating knowledge-workers in Malaysia

The smallest unit of a k-society is the k-worker. The k-economy claims skills from the workers which are different from the ones in a traditional production-based economy and as such the workers require different values so that they persist in their changing working environment.

The characteristics a k-worker has to possess are highly varied and complex. A k-worker is not guided through a working process by a supervisor but works independently – either alone or in a team. Therefore he<sup>1</sup> has to be capable of taking responsibility and needs competence in decision-making. As a k-worker will be confronted with new tasks like the development of a new product, he must be able to take initiative and has to have creative and innovative abilities at his disposal. The accumulation of new information demands the willingness for life-long learning. The working processes in the k-economy are not subdivided into small, single steps, which require only restricted knowledge and capabilities to that particular segment, but the k-worker must have multi-focus-skills to oversee the complete process of both development and realization. For the development of new products or processes, a k-worker needs trend-orientation and quality thinking: the product has to be needed or desired by the consumers and they have to be satisfied with the quality. But one of the most important characteristics especially in the process of development is the skill of critical thinking, because only by continuously monitoring can mistakes or weak points be detected and eliminated. Due to the electronical support, e. g. internet or e-mail, work requires flexibility in mind, speed, responsiveness and information update. Another highly important characteristic is competence in team-work, for which one can give two main reasons: firstly, there is the whole process, large and very complex, which has to be overviewed, and cannot be mastered by a single person. Secondly, team work provides an enormous advantage, as the team functions as a pool of information and ideas, as a platform for discussion and criticism, and therefore leads to the finding of an (probably) ideal solution to a given problem. (cf. Abdullah 2001, Axmann 2004, Höfner/Koch (o.J.))

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<sup>1</sup> For smoother reading the author decided to use exclusively the male form independent of the person's sex.

For a better overview, the characteristics can be assigned to certain competences:

- Technical competences:
  - know-how
  - multi-skilled
  - quality thinking
  - flexibility in mind
  - speed
  - responsiveness
- Learning and methodological competences
  - life long learning
  - monitoring
  - oversee complex processes
  - information update
  - multi-focus thinking
- Social competences:
  - critical thinking
  - team work
  - take on responsibility
  - take initiative
  - career planning
  - creativity
  - innovative thinking
  - trend-orientation
  - mobility

### 3.3 Traditional values in Malaysia

It is in the nature of values that they are very difficult to grasp. Therefore, in this paragraph a typology of social values existing in Malaysia is outlined. A second remark beforehand is that the values described here are applicable for all Malaysian people, independent of the population's ethnic diversity. Referring to Abdullah's works one can find that the core values of Malays, Chinese and Indians – the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia – correspond with each other, differences might appear in the ranking, a point which can be neglected in this work.

In the Malaysian society, the concept of *collectivism* is one of the highest values, which means that the needs of the family have higher priority than the needs of its individual members, and the needs of the state have higher priority than the needs of the single citizen. Individual goals, wishes and ideas have to be submitted to family or governmental affairs for the sake of the community.

Another value is the *respect for seniority and authority*. Younger people and people of a lower rank in the societal hierarchy have to submit to the education, the experience and the wisdom of elders and higher-ranking persons. Parallels between family and company structures are obvious: within the family, the father is the leader and he makes all necessary and important decisions. In a company, the employer acts in a paternalistic way. That means that the employees are subordinated to him – but he is not only providing jobs and salary, but also has the task of guiding the employees morally. In return, he expects *loyalty and commitment*. A precondition for all those values is mutual *trust* between employer and employee; trust insofar as both parties keep and observe the values of respect, loyalty and commitment.



*Harmony* is a further value in the Malaysian society. This includes above all the avoidance of confrontations, quarrels and even discussions, and further the adaptation of and subordination to social rules without questioning them. Negative messages or criticism (if ever) are delivered in an indirect way only, wrapped in 'sugar coating'. All is done for an easy and smooth togetherness. An aspect, which is subordinated to the value of harmony, is *keeping face*, a very sensitive and important topic. For a good relationship and social harmony it is absolutely necessary not to embarrass another person, especially not in public, and at all costs people try to avoid negative replies. In a situation of criticism e. g. both parties risk to lose credit: the one who criticises, because he seems not to know how to behave well, and the other one seems to have made a mistake which is too obvious or too heavy to ignore or to correct it silently.

As a last value, the *holistic Weltanschauung* describes a balanced world-view: both the material as well as the spiritual world must not be seen as two separate dimensions, but they always appear together, one influences and determines the other. This, too, is valid for Malaysia as a whole, even if the intensity might differ regarding the particular religion. (cf. Abdullah 1996 and 2001, Geiger/Kieserling 2001)

### 3.4 Confrontation: Malaysian Values in the World of Work

It is time now to compare the typical Malaysian values with the values required by the k-economy, thus highlighting the potentials for conflicts. Some of the values have to be modified while others will correspond well with each other. There are, however, also values which are absolutely conflicting.

- The demanded value of *individualism* as a precondition for decision competence by the k-economy is inconsistent with the Malaysian value of *collectivism*.
- The Malaysian interpretation of *face* and *face keeping* is undoubtedly an obstacle for effective team work, because it makes open discussions and the exchange of opinions difficult and means definitely a hindrance of open criticism. Also, the connection between saving face and honesty is at least from a Western point of view a crucial topic.
- The aspect of *teamwork* is in sharp conflict with the *acceptance and respect of hierarchies*: the concept of k-economy asks for flat, horizontal organisations, where the single worker has decision-making powers.
- *Trust* is a core value in both the k-worker approach and the Malaysian society. But the interpretation of trust is extremely different: as in the k-economy, the trust in abilities is dominant, while in the Malaysian traditional value system, trust is related to hierarchy, 'good order' and a stable (hierarchical) system.

Regarding this clash of values, the whole project of establishing a k-economy in Malaysia seems to be quite a difficult one. But there are also values which are not conflicting and can therefore serve as starting point for cooperation.

- The values of *responsibility* and *reliability*, which are essential in the k-economy, can be combined with the feeling of loyalty and commitment; the value of face saving could be used in a positive, supportive way: if an employer and a team of colleagues show trust in an individual worker, this person will do everything not to disappoint them and lose face in case he cannot live up to their expectations.
- *Patience*, *tolerance* and *respect* are qualities required from the k-worker. In the Malaysian society, respect is a well-known concept – namely respect for seniority and hierarchy –, which can be diverted and strengthened to support the team. Harmony is another value that has an effect on the efficiency of group work.
- The important social value of *collectivism* has been exposed as highly detrimental to the k-economy, but concerning the aspect of team-work, collectivism can have a positive effect on network building. Of course, the k-workers have to be able to think and decide individually, but this working structure also demands the ability to establish relationships.

Only the value of *learning* – on the side of k-economy – and the *holistic Weltanschauung* – on the side of typical Malaysian values – have no counterpart, neither in a positive nor in a negative way. They do not seem to stand in contradiction with the two sets of values, and therefore they do not have to be eliminated or modified.

	<b>Modern working values</b>	<b>Traditional Malaysian values</b>
<i>Contradiction</i>	Individualism discussion; exchange of opinions; open criticism; honesty  Flat, horizontal organisations trust in abilities	Collectivism face keeping  respect of hierarchies trust in hierarchies
<i>Modification</i>	responsibility; reliability patience; tolerance; respect team-work; network building	loyalty; commitment; face respect; harmony collectivism
<i>Neutral</i>	Learning	holistic Weltanschauung



## 4 Conclusion

The initial assumption was that the change of values, which is necessary to construct a k-economy and ultimately a k-society, might also be transferred to the private, social sphere and might cause a break-up of the traditional society. The confrontation of modern working values and traditional social values clearly shows a potential for conflict as some values are completely contradictory. Despite these contradictions, the Malaysian government has so far seemed able to harmonize both – economic and social – spheres.

### 4.1 Theoretical predictions

The non-occurrence of a break-up (or at least change) in the traditional society is even more surprising as theoretical concepts assume that a modernization of the economic and educational system is inevitably followed by a transition of the political system into a democracy. Following Merkel's approach, autocratic regimes are stuck in a hopeless dilemma: they need economic success to justify their policy and stay in power. But economic success depends on progress, which can only be achieved through educated workers – who will ask for political participation.

The World Bank and UNESCO take up the same position as they understand „education as a holistic system that includes not only the human capital contribution of tertiary education but also its critical humanistic and social capital building dimensions and its role as an important global public good“ (The World Bank 2002: xix). Educated people are expected to take over responsibility and risks, and are therefore able to bring about change. The democratization of those states, which are investing in education and striving to become a k-economy, is an assumed consequence.

### 4.2 Consequences drawn by the Malaysian government

Having the theoretical assumptions in mind, it is very surprising that the Malaysian political system is still unchanged and tendencies towards democratization are weak. The government seems to be successful in harmonizing the contradicting values of the working and the social sphere. The identification of implemented actions is critical – but here it is only possible to deliver first approaches.

One possible answer is that the Malaysian government consciously steers away from the trend for social change, which becomes obvious in a statement of the Knowledge-Based Economy Master Plan: „The experience in other countries however, is that the transition to a K-based economy exacerbates prevailing socio-economic inequities while creating new ones. The same will happen in Malaysia unless effective countervailing measures are taken.“ (<http://www.epu.jpm.my>) The government draws on three pillars of the society: Firstly, on the education institutions, secondly, on the working environment, and, thirdly, on the family. (cf.

3<sup>rd</sup> OPP: 165 f.) Generally, the efforts rest upon emphasizing (*positive*) values which are inherent in the different religions, cultures and traditions existing in Malaysia. Curricula up to the tertiary sector, for instance, include religious and moral education which comprises the teaching of values like discipline, striving for excellence, loyalty for the country, or respect for elders and leaders. Workers are reached through the implementation of common codes of good work ethics. The family, nevertheless, is estimated as the most important pillar of the traditional society. By running programmes often in cooperation with local NGOs, the government reaches families and neighbourhoods with its message of a tolerant, kind, grateful, and caring society with the goal of promoting national unity and social harmony.

### 4.3 Concluding remarks

So far the Malaysian government seems to be successful in pursuing its strategy of implementing a k-economy without having a change towards a democratic society. Possibly, it has found the proper ingredients for a cocktail: as much of economic modernization as necessary and as little social modernization as possible.

What has to be examined in future research is the question of how the involved actors – government, society, economy – behave in the ongoing process of modernization. Are they interested in moulding the process actively or are they just reacting to changes? Can emerging conflicts be ascribed to the change of values due to economic progress? Will the modernizing tendencies prevail over traditional values? And, finally, will theories and (international) organizations be right in predicting a transformation towards a democratic country due to changes in the economy and education?

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