

ОРИГИНАЛЬНАЯ СТАТЬЯ

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Этнофедерализм и политическая модернизация в Малайзии

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АННОТАЦИЯ

Предмет рассмотрения статьи – способность этнофедерализма эффективно отвечать на вызовы модернизации. Авторы обращаются к опыту Малайзии – одной из азиатских стран, сравнительно успешно практикующей принципы этнического федерализма в государственном управлении. Цель работы – выяснить возможности адаптации малайзийской модели этнического федерализма к изменяющимся условиям и интенсивности политических процессов. В статье показаны основные институциональные, исторические, этнополитические и социальные причины инерционного сопротивления нарастающим тенденциям к изменению сложившейся системы отношений между федеральным центром и регионами. Значительное внимание уделено коренной связи режимных характеристик с ограниченностью федералистских практик, устойчивостью межэтнических отношений и конфессиональным консенсусом. В конце статьи сделан вывод о том, что этнофедерализм в Малайзии стал фактором сохранения политической стабильности в стране и препятствием лавинообразному процессу либерализации внутренней политики.

Ключевые слова: Малайзия; этнический федерализм; авторитаризм; доминирующая партия; политическая стабильность; политическая модернизация

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ORIGINAL PAPER

Ethno-federalism and Political Modernization in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The subject of the article is the ability of ethno-federalism to effectively respond to the challenges of modernization. The authors refer to the case of Malaysia, one of the Asian countries that are relatively successful in practicing the principles of ethno-federalism in state administration. The scope of this work is to find out the adaptive capabilities of the Malaysian model of ethno-federalism to changing conditions and the intensity of political processes. We show the general institutional, historical, ethnopolitical, and social reasons for the inertial resistance to the growing tendencies to change the existing system of relations between the Federation center and the regions. We paid significant attention to the fundamental connection of the regime characteristics with the limitation of federalist practices, the stability of interethnic relations, and confessional consensus. We concluded that ethno-federalism in Malaysia has become a factor in maintaining political stability in the country and an obstacle to the avalanche-like process of liberalization of domestic policy.

Keywords: Malaysia; ethnic federalism; authoritarianism; dominant party; political stability; political modernization

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ETHNO-FEDERALISM AND POLITICAL MODERNIZATION IN MALAYSIA

Ethno-federalism is a specific system of public administration in which territorial units are determined according to ethnic origin. The international organization “The Forum of Federations” (<http://www.forumfed.org>), based in Ottawa, names 14 of the 25 existing federations in the world as ethnic. In such federations, two, a few, or all the subjects are formed according to the ethno-territorial principle [1]. “A state is ethno-federal in such degree, in such its administrative borders coincide with the ethnic group’s borders” [2].

According to M. Burgess, “it is difficult to foresee what alternatives to a federal structure... could be in countries such as Canada, India, Belgium, Switzerland, and Malaysia. Critics of the concept of a multinational federation must... make a strong case for a viable alternative” [3].

Ethno-federalism largely reflects such a phenomenon as the “politicization of ethnicity”, when an ethnic community begins to operate “not only with general elements of culture, but also with certain ideas about national interests” [4].

Ethno-federalism cannot be considered a kind of universal construct. “Certain risks are associated with it, and first of all, when ethnic political elites are trying to use its institutional foundations in their selfish interests” [5]. We can agree with D. Horowitz that federalism itself “can both intensify and soften ethnic conflicts” [6]. As a premise of the enlargement of ethnic federations, the presence in them of the constituent core of the ethnic region (Core ethnic region), which, in comparison with other regions, enjoys superiority in population, most often appears [5]. At the same time, it is recognized that the presence of such an ethnic core region does not at all predetermine the collapse of the ethnic federation, which, in particular, is confirmed by the case of Malaysia. A.N. Mochalov lists a wide range of tools of accommodation of the ethnic communities to the realities of federalism, usually asymmetric: “recognition of the legal personality and collective rights of ethnic communities; language rights and language policy; representation of ethnic communities in public authorities; delimitation of competence between the federation and its subjects; “positive discrimination”; advisory bodies, associations and national-cultural autonomies; legal recognition of the customs and traditional social organization of separate ethnic communities living within the borders of a particular subject of the federation” [1].

In our case, it is interesting to analyse the reaction of the long-term and extremely conservative system of Malaysia’s ethno-federative system to the political modernization challenges. Since the financial and economic crisis of 1998–1999 in many countries of Southeast Asia, significant socio-political shifts are seen, including quite deep, related both with regime characteristics changes and with transformation at the governmental level.

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK OF MALAYSIAN ETHNO-FEDERALISM

It is known that federalism in Malaysia is conditioned by three fundamental factors: linguistic, cultural, and racial [7]. It acts as a guarantee of the political and cultural rights of minorities. Foreign policy factors also play a significant role in federalization. From the middle of the 19th century, the influence of Siam on the Malay principalities increased significantly, which avoided direct colonial enslavement and pursued a relatively independent foreign policy, at least on a regional scale. Here we can see the implementation of the “defence condition”, which W. Riker called one of the main incentives for federalization [8]. A constant sense of danger, coupled with the proximity to Indonesia — a revolutionary and rapidly nationalizing state, forced the fragmented Malay sultanates to stick together.

Largely, the Federation of Malaysia is the result of British colonialism, which is related to the “looseness” of sociocultural boundaries and the need to form a national identity. Malaysia is often referred to as a quasi-federation. A. Leiphart notes that a broad alliance of ethnic communities was supported by the colonialists and envisaged a certain degree of socio-cultural self-government in 1957–1969. “Leadership in the politics and government fields was given to the Malays in exchange for maintaining the economic hegemony of the Chinese. This exchange was beneficial for both parts” [9].

The independent state was formed in 1963 by uniting the former British possessions: The Federation of Malay, Singapore, Sarawak, and North Borneo. The constitution stipulates the joining of the federation or the formation of new subjects, as well as the change of their boundaries by the decision of the federal parliament. Initially, the Malay elite agreed to include the island states in the Federation, hoping that Kalimantan’s native Malaysians would be able to counterbalance Singapore’s large Chinese community. It should be noted as well that some states in Malaysia have been allocated a disproportionate,

compared with their demographic potential capacity, number of seats in the House of Representatives. [10]. In 1965, for excluding Singapore from the federation, the constitutional procedure was used. The fact that Singapore has always been populated by Chinese and Indians induced an enormous imbalance in the state's economic policy. Hence, religious and ethnic diversity was the main prerequisite for the separation process [11].

The exit of Singapore from the federation, although it reduced the interregional asymmetry, did not at all rid Malaysia of it. The secession of one subject, paradoxically, not only did not contribute to a decrease in ethnic potential for conflict but, on the contrary, became a trigger for the permanent exacerbation of contradictions within other members of the federation.

Since the exit of Singapore from the federation, Malaysia has shown no interest in territorial expansion, due to the need to keep the country's relative unity based on the Malay majority and fears of interethnic conflicts due to a split identity [12].

Now the territory of the federation (329.8 thousand sq. km.) consists of two separate regions: Western (Malacca Peninsula) and Eastern Malaysia (northern part of Kalimantan Island). The population is 32.6 million, while East Malaysia is home to only 17% of the population. According to forecasts, by 2030 the population of Malaysia will be 35.3 million people, and by 2050—39.7 million people. The ethnic and religious composition of the population differs sharply in Malaya and Kalimantan. Malays (50.4%) and indigenous folks of North Kalimantan (Bajao, Dayaks, Dusuns, Kadazans, etc.), autochthonous folks of the Malacca Peninsula (Jakuns, Semangi, Senoi, etc.) make up about 62% of the population; Chinese (Huaqiao) — 20.6%, Indians — 6.2% (data for 2017). Most Malays live in Malaya, the Chinese are mainly settled in Penang state, in the cities of Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh (Perak state). Tamils predominate among Indians. 10.3% of Malaysians are foreigners. The majority of believers are Sunni Muslims (61.3%, mostly Malays), Buddhists (19.8%), Christians (9.1%, mainly represent the indigenous folks of northern Kalimantan), Hindus (6.3%), and adherents of Confucianism, Taoism, and other traditional Chinese religions (data for 2010).¹

Religious segmentation in Malaysia is quite high, since the Chinese adhere to Buddhism and

Confucianism, the Malays' majority sticks to Islam, and the Indian population defines themselves as Christian. It should also be noted that these religious groups are socially distant from each other and have a prominent level of labour specialisation. The Malays are generally workers, agriculturalists and civil servants; the Chinese and Indians are mostly involved in commerce and intellectual labour. Consequently, per capita income differs from one ethnoreligious group to another. For example, the Chinese are being twice or three times richer than the Malays. At the same time, community settlement lines are indistinct and do not always match state borders [9].

In 1971, to statistically increase the so-called titular nation, the Malays, the folks of North Kalimantan, and the autochthons of the Malacca Peninsula were united into a single ethnopolitical group of "indigenous inhabitants" — bumiputra (sons of the earth). The constitutionally enshrined inequality of the socio-political statuses of bumiputra and non-bumiputra, the so-called positive discrimination in favour of the first ones is a significant factor in interethnic tension and confrontation [13]. Despite the multi-religious nature of the society, the constitution proclaims Sunni Islam as the state religion of the Federation of Malaysia, although it does not extend this status of Islam to East Malaysia. "Islam does not separate from the state. Spiritual authority over Muslims in some sultanates is recognized for the sultans, and in states where there are no hereditary rulers — for the head of state as the Supreme Ruler" [13]. Religion acts not only as an identification feature, but also serves as an effective mechanism of social adaptation to the changing conditions of coexistence of ethnic groups. "The Malays are consolidating on the basis of Islam and dominating the political life of the country, being the main reserve for replenishing the state apparatus, police, and army. At the same time, the identification of the state religion with the Malay ethnos, together with the political superiority of the Malays, comes into conflict with the desire for equality of other ethnic groups" [12].

Foreign Chinese (Huaqiao) in Malaysia adhere to ethnic positioning, adherence to language and culture, which greatly complicates the difficult process of forming a single political Malaysian nation. Substantial financial and economic resources of the Chinese diaspora, indeed, provide it with effective instruments of pressure on government circles [14]. As a kind of compensation, the Malays, and

¹ Malaysia (10.09.2020). URL: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/geos/my.html>

then the “indigenous folks”, received constitutional guarantees of their privileged position, which is reflected in Art. 153 of the federal constitution.²

The model of “communal democracy” in Malaysia underwent major adjustments during the crisis of interethnic relations in 1969–1971. After several years of the state of emergency, the functioning of the representative body was reconstructed and the Basic Law of the State enshrined the exceptional status of the Malays. The ideological doctrine of the Foundations of State (1970), in which national interests and goals were put above community ones, proclaims the desire to strengthen the unity of a multiracial and socially just society, consolidate democracy, respect for cultural traditions, and the development of the country [15]. “Foundations of the State” include two parts: “Beliefs” and “Principles”. “The Beliefs” lists the goals that Malaysia strives for: achieving greater unity among all its folks; implementation of a democratic way of life; creation of a just society with an even distribution of national wealth; ensuring an unbiased approach to the rich and diverse cultural traditions of Malaysia; building a progressive society oriented towards modern science and technology. To achieve these goals, Rukunegara proclaims the following principles: faith in God; loyalty to the monarch and the state; respect for the constitution; compliance with laws; decent behaviour and observance of moral standards (morality).

Since the Malays, for a number of historical and socio-economic reasons, were seriously inferior to the relatively more developed non-Malaysian communities [16] the policy of so-called positive discrimination became the cornerstone of the construction of the Malaysian federation. Bumiputras enjoy substantial state support in the economic, educational, and other spheres of life; they have a dominant position in public service, in the armed forces, in exchange for the economic leadership of non-Bumiputras.

This non-equilibrium ethnic and social policy also influences the development trajectory of asymmetric federal relations. Their essence lies in the expansion of the managerial powers of some subjects. Thus, the position of the states of Sabah and Sarawak, whose sphere of competence is generally somewhat broader than that of other members of the federation.³ These

states enjoy significant benefits, including the easing of requirements for Islamization and language policy, the right to restrict the migration of Chinese. So, in the last elections to the regional parliament in Sarawak state in 2016, there was a change in the balance of power in the electoral field, as the victory was won by political parties aimed at expanding the autonomy of the state of Sarawak, and the collapse of the BN coalition at the federal level in 2018, only strengthened the processes of regionalization of United parties. Bumiputera Heritage Party and Gabungan Parti Sarawak et al. [17].

A significant gap is noticeable not only in the position of various ethnic groups, but also between agricultural and urban areas. Inequality between the subjects of the federation persists and is still wide. The Gini Index shows a high degree of economic inequality that has developed in Malaysia and is 42.8 points.⁴ This shows that the country is at a dangerous line of socio-political destabilization, the benchmark here is the degree of inequality of more than 44.3 points.

It would not be an exaggeration to conclude that the core contradiction of domestic policy in Malaysia is the desire to preserve the ethnic consensus and the unresolved problems of socio-economic inequality of ethnic groups and races.

FEATURES OF RELATIONS BETWEEN THE CENTRE AND REGIONS

The Federation of Malaysia consists of 13 states (“Negeri”) and three federal territories (“Wilayah Persekutuan”). Nine of the 13 states are hereditary monarchies (inhabited mainly by Malays), four are governed by governors assigned by the head of state. In fact, Malaysia is a federation of nine monarchies and four republics [18].

“The Malays have managed to occupy key positions at almost all governmental levels, including the security, defence and law enforcement agencies. Alongside, there is a discrepancy between the apparent dominance of the Malay ethnos and a craving of other ethnic and religious groups for equality” [12]. Every five years, they elect from their membership the head of state — the supreme ruler (Yang di Pertuan-Agong). The functions of this ruler are weak. The monarch performs mainly representative functions. Yang di Pertuan-Agong is a symbolic figure designed to unite historical

² Federal Constitution. 2010. URL: [http://www.agc.gov.my/agcportal/uploads/files/Publications/FC/Federal%20Consti%20\(BI%20text\).pdf](http://www.agc.gov.my/agcportal/uploads/files/Publications/FC/Federal%20Consti%20(BI%20text).pdf)

³ Конституция Федерации Малайзия. 2013. URL: <https://worldconstitutions.ru/?p=655>

⁴ Gini Index. World Bank. URL: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?view=map&year=2018>

states into a single whole [19]. The powers of the head of state are enshrined in the second chapter of the Constitution and are reduced for the most part to formal procedures, and the system of the federal government in Malaysia resembles the British form of government. The real power belongs to the prime minister, who represents the majority party in Parliament. The Cabinet of Ministers is formed and dissolved with the consent of the Supreme Ruler.

The legislative power is divided between the two chambers: The House of Representatives (the lower house) and the Senate (the upper house). The House of Representatives (*Dewan Rakyat*) currently includes 222 members. They were elected to five-year terms under a majoritarian electoral system in single-member constituencies. Such a system provides a clear advantage to Malay Muslims. The Lower House can pass a non-confidence vote to the government and attain its resignation. By an unwritten law, MPs are privileged to fearlessly put any relevant issue under discussion without repercussions or accusation of defamation afterwards. For inquiries and discussions, the so-called minute of the meeting is specially set for members of the chamber [20].

The Senate (“*Devan Negara*”) consists of 70 senators elected for three years. 26 members are elected by the legislatures of 13 states (two senators each), the remaining 44 are appointed by the head of state on the recommendation of the prime minister. Four senators are appointed from the federal territories (two from Kuala Lumpur, from the rest — one each). Also, the Supreme Ruler assigns another 40 senators at his discretion, this number includes representatives from ethnic minorities. Citizens of the country who are at least 30 years old can become senators. Senators hold office for three years regardless of the term of office of Parliament.

A feature of Malaysia is the different forms of government in the subjects and their inequality.

Federal territories (Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya Labuan) are administered directly by the federal government. They do not have an independent administrative system.

Each state has its own constitution, its own unicameral Legislature, formed by general elections in single-member constituencies, and governments that perform deliberative functions. Eleven states have Supreme Courts (including those with constitutional review functions) subordinate to federal jurisdictions. The rights of the courts in the states of Sarawak and Sabah are limited. Four states

(former British colonies) — Penang, Malacca, Sarawak, and Sabah — are governed by federal-appointed governors for four years. They also elect legislative assemblies and form governments through general elections. In the republican states, a representative of any ethnic group can head the government. Governors of states and 3 territories are assigned and removed from office by the head of state.

The heads of the nine states are hereditary monarchs (sultans in Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Pahang, Perak, Selangor, Trengganu, Raja Perlis and the great ruler (*yang di pertuan besar*) Negri Sembilan), who have judicial immunity and the status of the head of the religious communities of their region. Monarchs in the states perform representative functions. Each of them is the spiritual head of their state. In monarchical states, on the basis of general elections, legislative assemblies are formed, and governments are created headed by chief ministers (usually ethnic Malays).

The composition of state governments is formed by the will of monarchs and governors from representatives of the party that won regional elections. In monarchical states, the chief minister is assigned by the head of state in consultation with the prime minister of the federation. In the other four states, governors (being assigned by the head of state) independently assign chief ministers.

Malaysia has created a rather flexible model of federalism, in which the interests of the centre and the regions are coordinated within the framework of a “semi-competitive, partially pluralistic regime” [21]. The powers of the federation and the states are enshrined in the constitution, while the powers of the federation prevail — foreign policy, defence and security, the penitentiary system and police, special services, finance and trade, navigation, road infrastructure, media, tourism, gambling, etc. The states control land transactions, agriculture and forestry, river fishing, deductions from alcohol trade, etc. The scope of joint competencies is extremely small (issues related to the exploitation of mineral resources, the entertainment industry, and a few others are subject to agreement). State income is largely dependent on subsidies from the centre, calculated depending on the population and political environment. The federal government often resorts to various forms of intervention in state affairs through the adjustment of regional legislation at the federal level, control over the police, courts, the media, and in a state of emergency, federalism is abolished altogether. In Malaysia, due to the uneven

distribution of financial resources, federalism has been highly centralized since the late 1960s [22].

The central authorities exert constant pressure on the opposition, which from time to time achieve success in elections in individual states. Subsidies to states in which the opposition manages to form regional governments are often cut or frozen. This practice was used at various times most often in relation to the states of Kelantan, Trengganu and Sabah. In the late 1970s. The Islamic Party of Malaysia (IPM), which formed the government in the state of Kelantan, has withdrawn from the ruling party coalition. The federal government first condoned the riots, and then, under their pretext, introduced a state of emergency. The new elections ended with the desired result for the ruling coalition. Declaring a state of emergency (although relatively rarely used) is an effective method of suppression, since this measure, according to the country's Constitution, cannot be challenged in court [3].

During the election campaign in the state of Sabah (1990), the regional United Party of Sabah (OPS), representing the Christianized Kadazan people and advocating the limitation of Islamization, withdrew from the ruling coalition. In 1992, the state of Sabah "for environmental reasons" was banned from the export of unprocessed timber, which significantly replenished its treasury. After the "explanatory" work with local deputies, some of them returned to the ranks of the ruling coalition individually, and the fragile opposition majority in the assembly was lost. In turn, the opportunist group, fearing even greater pressure from the federal authorities, soon reapplied to join the dominant coalition [23].

In 1999, the Islamists from the IPM succeeded in forming a government in the state of Trengganu. The central government abolished regional oil deductions without compensating for lost state revenues. After the IPM lost power in the state (2003), the activities of the Sharia courts were cancelled, and the deductions from oil production were restored.

The institutional design of the Malaysian federation suffers from significant imbalances. "By sharing power with regional governments, the central government only strengthens its political grip. In this case, federalism promotes a half-hearted democracy, debugging the patronage system and at the same time maintaining a certain democratic platform that gives the system more legitimacy" [23].

The political and legal dominance of the federal centre is extremely high due to the fears of the Malay

political elite of the disintegration of territorial administration. "The Malaysian federal system is distinguished by three basic features: the complex differentiation of the society it regulates, the presence of regionally oriented parties in it, and the indisputable hegemony of the central executive power" [3]. It is worth recognizing that the basis of relatively stable relations between the centre and the regions for a long time was the rigid dominance of the same political force, which in 2013–2020 experienced significant overloads, causing shifts in the system of relations between authorities at different levels. The federal government is forced to expand the independence of the states. The current formula "allows the government to ensure governance and maintain a stable majority in parliament, and regional elites and ethnic minority-oriented parties to have representation in parliament, enter the government, receive political and economic benefits, remain loyal to the current government and help maintain a low level of conflict in society" [24]. This state of affairs cannot be called a full-scale reform of federal relations, since the processes of redistribution of power functions are developing too slowly and are still focused on the priority of the unity of the nation and the state. But it is worth mentioning modern researchers who do not share a positive perception of the evolution of federalism in Malaysia and indicate the danger of secession processes and the strengthening of centrifugal tendencies in some regions of the Malaysian Federation. First of all, some authors predict the growth of religious and ethnic nationalism in Sabah and Sarawakeh [25]. Secondly, some researchers predict an intensification of the struggle between traditional and indigenous peoples [26], others talk about the danger of migration processes and the increasing influence of the Chinese ethnic group in the political process in the country, especially in the northern regions.

PARTICULARITY OF THE POLITICAL REGIME AND THE REQUEST FOR ITS MODERNIZATION

Malaysia is an example of a party system that can be used to demonstrate the possibilities and limitations of institutional manipulation and informal rules and practices for maintaining the stability of the political regime and the long-term dominance of one party. The main feature of this system is the "one-pronged concentration," or no-alternative predominance [27] of one party, the United Malays

National Organization (UMNO) and the National Front (FN) led by it, over all other political actors.

Malaysia is characterized by stable ethnic demarcations in resolving socio-political issues. Indeed, “the existence of ethno-national problems or their aggravation is the reason for the formation of political parties along ethnic lines” [28]. Malaysian parties have a clear ethnic orientation towards expressing group interests [29]. D. Horowitz [30] believes that it is precisely the skilful game of erasing ethnic contradictions through the creation of selective incentives for different groups to jointly govern in various spheres of society that provides the dominant party with ample room for manoeuvre and provides significant opportunities to power for a long time in the conditions of functioning of democratic political institutions.

For decades, the role of such a dominant party has been unconditionally and to a certain extent performed by the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) – since 1954, the leader of the Allied Party coalition, and since 1974 – the National Front (NF). However, since 2008, the influence of UMNO has been steadily declining, both at the federal and regional levels. In the 2013 elections, only due to massive violations of electoral rights, the ruling coalition won a relative majority. In the 2018 elections, the NF was defeated, but thanks to intrigues within the government and the “Hope” block, it returned to the helm of power in 2020.

Since its foundation, UMNO has remained the mouthpiece and defender of the interests of the Malay community, the conductor of Malay nationalism. The party seeks to prevent the equality of Bumiputra and non-bumiputra, seeing this as an encroachment on the very national independence of the Malays [31]. The fact that UMNO is not able to outgrow the format of an ethnically oriented Malay party, to become attractive, including for representatives of other ethnic groups, allows us to draw conclusions about the failure of the process of forming modern democracy in Malaysia and about the preservation of the decisive role of the factor of ethnic nationalism” [32].

Monopoly access to state resources allows the party to support its dominant position in the political market for a long time. As K. Greene notes, the dominant parties win repeatedly, since they derive resource advantages from their access to the state budget, which leads to a significant distortion of the field of party competition in their favour [33]. The dominant parties often resort to manipulative

methods in forming the opinions of voters, and often to their direct bribery. “Membership in such a party is attractive not only in terms of selective incentives, but often it becomes a prerequisite for working in a particular government organization. These phenomena are seen in Malaysia as well” [34].

Despite its declining popularity, UMNO still has significant resources, which, together with clientelism and the practice of political patronage, provides significant support for large groups of voters. The source of the party’s influence is its close relationship with the state bureaucracy [35]. This bond has grown stronger over the years that the party has been in power. D. Slater even argues that it is a strong state apparatus that is the main factor in the viability of autocratic practices in the country [36].

A. V. Baranov and S. A. Denisov, independently of each other, pay attention to the socio-cultural specifics of the Islamic world, where federalism takes root with great difficulty. “Relatively successful models of federalism (Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates) modify traditional corporatism and only to a small extent introduce Western norms of competitive democracy” [11]. Institutions of democracy not supported by the population turn into its imitation. “Great Britain introduced democratic institutions (parties, elections, parliament) in Singapore and Malaysia, but democratic consciousness in society and democratic practices never appeared there” [37].

Against the background of its neighbours in Southeast Asia, the development of the political system of Malaysia fits into general regional trends. For example, the Democracy Index, which measures the level of democracy in the electoral process for Malaysia, is quite comparable to other neighbouring countries. By this indicator, in 2019, Malaysia moved up 9 lines with a score of 7.16 points out of 10. East Timor was higher – 7.19. Other neighbouring countries are also included in the group of “imperfect democracies”: the Philippines – 6.64; Indonesia – 6.48; Thailand – 6.32; Singapore – 6.02. Meanwhile, Myanmar (3.55), Cambodia (3.53), Vietnam (3.08) and Laos (2.14) make up the group of autocracies.⁵ While the 2013 elections in Malaysia were recognized by Western experts as “dishonest and only partially free,” the assessment of the 2018 elections was less critical. In the whole region, the voter turnout stays quite high by world standards. So, in Singapore it was 95.81% (2020), in Indonesia – 83.86%

⁵ Democracy Index 2019. URL: <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>

(2019), in Malaysia — 81.38% (2018). According to S.A. Denisov, the autocracy of government in Malaysia is associated with the legal culture of the population, which is significantly influenced by political Islam, paternalism and clientelism in public administration [37]. Does this mean that there is no demand for political modernization in the country?

As shown by public opinion polls, in general, the level of support for democratic innovations in the mass consciousness of the population of Southeast Asian countries is high. Thus, 88.3% of respondents in Malaysia, 88.2% — in Indonesia, 73.7% — in the Philippines positively assess the possibility of liberalizing the political regime, while in Thailand — 60.1%.⁶

Of course, it is worth considering the specific perception of local societies about political democracy and the ways to achieve it. At the same time, the political elite of these countries nevertheless recognizes general democratic norms, such as electivity and turnover of power [13].

The last two electoral cycles in Malaysia have shown a steady demand for political

innovation. The costs of destabilization are stopping reformers, as the 2020 government crisis showed. As L. M. Efimova, “the liberalization of the domestic political atmosphere can lead to the activation not only of supporters of racial and socio-political equality, but also to bring to life a reaction in the form of Malay ultranationalism and Islamic radicalism, and, possibly, Chinese chauvinism...” [38].

The formed complex of ethno-federative relations in Malaysia suffers from significant distortions, weakly responds to the challenges of political modernization. Basically, the party elites (not only the dominant party, but also the parties of the second echelon) strive to maintain macro-political stability, have a negative attitude to the expansion of democratic practices, and tend to pedal the topic of radicalization of public relations. At the regional level, the conservative nature of the perception of the normative nature of ethno-federal practices prevails over the interest in general federal innovations. This is especially true of the traditional way of life of the sultanates, and innovation development centres are removed from the sphere of federal relations and are completely subordinate to the government and bureaucracy.

⁶ World Values Survey Wave 6: 2018–2020. URL: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV7.jsp>

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