

## Japan's Democracy Support as a Regime Stabilizer: The Case of Malaysia

Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail<sup>1\*</sup>, Maiko Ichihara<sup>2</sup> and Amalin Sabiha Ismail<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Centre of History, Politics and International Affairs, Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43000 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>Graduate School of Law and School of International and Public Policy, Hitotsubashi University, Tokyo 186-8601, Japan

### ABSTRACT

This article addresses a neglected area in Japan–Malaysia bilateral relations: democracy support. While Japan has established itself as a rising democracy supporter after the Cold War and more so in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the country has provided Malaysia with only regime-compatible low-end assistance. Maintaining distance from pro-democracy actors, Japan continued giving *de facto* support to the semi-authoritarian government in Malaysia before the 2018 general election. There are two main causes: First, Japan emphasized democracy in its diplomacy with the intention of expanding its international influence and differentiate its diplomacy from that of China, rather than to promote democracy out of normative commitment. With a view to obtaining respect from and strengthening relations with state actors, Japan sought to nurture friendly relations with the Malaysian government despite its semi-authoritarian nature. Second, Japan saw elections as the most critical institution for democracy and did not intend to address the weak civil liberties in Malaysia. These two

factors led Japanese projects to focus on the capacity building of public administrators as state actors rather than pushing for political change. Hence, Japan's diplomacy and foreign aid to Malaysia have helped stabilize the status quo instead of supporting democratic diffusion.

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received: 23 May 2020

Accepted: 23 August 2020

Published: 25 December 2020

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.28.4.21>

#### E-mail addresses:

taki@ukm.edu.my (Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail)

maiko.ichihara@r.hit-u.ac.jp (Maiko Ichihara)

ellyamalin@gmail.com (Amalin Sabiha Ismail)

\*Corresponding author

**Keywords:** Civil society, foreign aid, governance assistance, Japanese democracy assistance, Malaysian democracy

## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is among the beneficiaries of democracy assistance from various Western actors such as the National Endowment for Democracy, the Open Society Foundations, and German political foundations (*Stiftungen*). While scholars such as Ismail and Abadi (2017, 2019) analyze whether there has been substantial influence from the support activities of these Western actors, analysis on the role of non-Western democracies such as Japan has been missing. Statistics from the Creditor Reporting System database of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD; 2018) indicate Japan as one of the highest contributor of democracy assistance to Malaysia up until 2016, with an amount totalling USD7.591 million. Given this relatively large amount of democracy aid, what kind of assistance has Japan provided? And, what is Japan's role in assisting democratization in Malaysia?

The current work is significant for its potential to open up a new dimension in the literature on the bilateral relationship between Malaysia and Japan, which previously revolved around the Look East Policy (cf. Furuoka, 2007; Jomo, 1983; Khalid, & Lee, 2003; Lee, 1988; Lim, 1984) and popular culture (Mamat et al., 2012; Yamato, 2013). The study most closely related to this topic was conducted by Ismail and Ismail (2019) who examined the role of two Japanese non-state actors, namely The Nippon Foundation and Sasakawa Peace Foundation, in promoting democracy to Malaysia. Given that democracy assistance

is “a set of foreign policy instruments exercised by both governmental and non-governmental actors in the forms of monetary and technical support for strengthening democratic rule and norms” (Hsiao, 2010, p. 585), it is important that the role of Japan as a state actor is also scrutinized. This study is also crucial to increase our understanding on Japan's democracy support to Southeast Asian countries. Past research on this topic includes several case studies on Cambodia (Sato, 2017; Takeda, 1998), Vietnam (Asplund, 2015; Sato, 2017), Indonesia (Ichihara, 2016), and Myanmar (Ichihara et al., 2016). Yet, there is no specific reference made to Malaysia except several brief mentions for comparative purposes.

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

In order to analyze the nature of Japan's assistance and its impact for the Barisan Nasional (BN) government up until the power transition in 2018, this article employed the method of descriptive analysis, utilizing government publications and interviews with policy-makers, activists, and scholars, in addition to secondary sources. To determine the amount of Japanese democracy aid to Malaysia, statistics from the Creditor Reporting System of the OECD database, an authoritative source displaying the amount of democracy assistance, were used for the records from 2003 to 2016. The year 2003 was chosen as the starting year because official recorded data under the OECD Creditor Reporting System commenced in that year. The introduction of Country Assistance Program (CAP

Malaysia) in 2002 was also a factor in the selection of 2003 as the starting year. We set 2016 as the upper limit for our analysis in order to specifically identify the dynamics of Japanese democracy assistance to Malaysia in the BN era before the transition of power to Pakatan Harapan (PH) in 2018.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Democracy Assistance

External support for democracy is provided through multiple routes, which include diplomatic rewards/sanctions, economic rewards/sanctions, and foreign aid (Ichihara, 2017). Although the Iraq war directed attention towards military measures as well, this is normally not available as a democracy support option. Among these three routes, the foreign aid option is termed democracy assistance. There are, in general, three forms of democracy assistance (Carothers, 1999; Santiso, 2001). The first is assistance to a political process—that is, electoral assistance or political party building. Political party assistance is the least favored method among democracy supporters except for actors like the American, German, and Swedish political party foundations, due to the sovereignty issues. The second form is assistance to state institutions—such as the strengthening of police, judiciary, constitution, local governments, and so on. It is closely related to good governance in addition to political liberalism; and depending on the nature of assistance, it could afford the potential to stabilize authoritarian rule. The third is assistance to civil society organizations (CSOs) such

as media, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), trade unions, and think-tanks. This is a popular strategy used to channel assistance, especially from Northern European countries (Ichihara, 2013b).

Another dimension for classifying democracy assistance is binary. Ottaway (2003) divided democracy assistance based on its type of program, i.e., low-end and high-end. Low-end programs tend to be less aggressive, accommodating the sensitivity of recipient governments, and take state sovereignty into account; whereas high-end programs are more aggressive such as displaying direct support towards opposition parties and democracy advocates. Another typology adopted by Carothers (2009) divides democracy assistance into political and developmental approaches. On the one hand, political democracy assistance tends to be based on a narrow interpretation of democracy such as democratic elections, political freedom, and the necessity for democrats to challenge anti-democratic forces. On the other hand, the developmental approach focuses on the larger context of democratic governance, including questions pertaining to equality, economic and social justice, as well as gradual change. This approach is also shared by Fukuyama and McFaul (2007) who argued that democracy support must be implemented in the context of advancing economic development, eradicating poverty, and improving good governance. In her latest study, Bush (2015) classified democracy assistance into regime-compatible and non-regime-compatible approaches based on programs

implemented. A regime-compatible program is a soft approach program that would not escalate into regime change (good governance, constitution, women's groups, rule of law and conflict resolution), whereas a non-regime-compatible program focuses on creating political mobilization and competition that may lead to regime change (elections, human rights, media, political parties and youth).

### **Evolution of Japanese Foreign Policy: From Foreign Aid to Democracy Assistance**

The defeat of Japan in the Second World War has caused the country to not only cease its policy of militarism but also refrain from conducting foreign policy based on abstract values, ideas, or concepts (Ichihara, 2017). Japan adopted a strategy known as the Yoshida Doctrine that emphasized economic development, while relying heavily on the US for security (Wan, 1995). In Southeast Asia, Japan emphasized the principles of rehabilitating and promoting friendly relations with the countries it has colonized through the payment of monetary compensation from the mid-1950s (Sudo, 1992). Although the total cost of war compensation was only about USD1 billion, it enabled Japan to bring in Japanese financial institutions and create a market for Japanese goods in Southeast Asia (Brooks & Orr, 1985). Japan began to introduce a comprehensive official development assistance (ODA) program to Asian countries with the help of a public grant started in 1969. However, some

Southeast Asian countries' dissatisfaction with Japanese dominance of the economy led Japan to take significant steps by issuing the Fukuda Doctrine, underpinned by heart-to-heart diplomacy and also positive cooperation with ASEAN countries as equal partners (Sudo, 1992). This doctrine at the same time confirms the special status of ASEAN for Japan to date, and forms the basis of Japan-ASEAN relations in various fields. Japan also signed the Treaty of Amity Cooperation (TAC) in Southeast Asia in 2004, even though the TAC non-interference principle would potentially affect Japanese diplomacy on issues related to democracy and human rights (Shoji, 2009).

Within this context, Japan's concern over the implications of TAC is understandable because Japan has begun to use the idea of promoting democracy as a tenet of its foreign policy. Japan began showing the intention to support democracy in 1992 when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFAJ) introduced the ODA Charter, acknowledging the responsibility to promote democratization as well as consolidation of human rights and freedoms in recipient countries (MOFAJ, 1992). The introduction of the Japanese ODA Charter was significant for Japan in that it provided clarification by addressing the explicit definition of economic and political assistance, which was previously obscure (Ryo, 1999). The ODA Charter was later revised in 2003 with the inclusion of the theme of human security to complement global democracy promotion (Potter, 2012). With the subsequent 2015 revision, sharing

of universal values such as “values such as freedom, democracy, respect for basic human rights and the rule of law” was positioned as one of the priority policies (MOFAJ, 2015). Criticism for Japan’s lukewarm response to the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989 and the lack of recognition for its checkbook diplomacy during the Gulf War in 1991 led the country to seek to change its international cooperation and enhance its international reputation (Ichihara, 2020).

Furthermore, in the 2000s, competition with China for influence became fierce, and Japan began seeking to differentiate its diplomacy from China’s by implementing a series of diplomatic initiatives under the Abe administrations, from the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity in 2006, to value diplomacy in 2012, and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision in 2017, all of which underscored democracy, freedom, human rights, and the rule of law as universal values (Ichihara, 2017, 2020). Pragmatic motivation is driven by international reputation and influence, rather than a normative commitment to value, led Japan to support democracy.

When it comes to Japan’s approach to the support for democracy, Japan employs regime-compatible low-end programs using a developmental approach geared towards state institutions. Its approach thus differs significantly from that of Western supporters. Japan tries to save face, refraining from naming and shaming, and acts behind the scenes to persuade target governments to restore democracy or stop human rights violations. Japan’s government-to-government aid leads the

country to assist state institutions for good governance, holding the belief that the responsibility to implement change in a country rests with state actors (Ichihara, 2017).

Japan’s regime-compatible approach to the support of democracy can be parsed into the historical, resource-related, and geopolitical reasons that serve as stumbling blocks, alongside a theoretical rationale promoting its adoption of such an approach. As a historical factor, Japan’s reflection on its aggressiveness in realizing its national interest during the two world wars has held it back from providing political support, as argued by Akaha (2002). Thus, Japan’s interpretation and definition of democracy differs from the norm of democracy in that it prioritizes social order and stability rather than liberalism with emphasis on individual rights and freedoms. When it comes to international support, Japan understands democracy procedurally in line with Joseph Schumpeter’s definition and considers elections to be the prime requisite for democracy (Schumpeter, 1976). This differs significantly from the substantial or liberal definition of democracy, which considers civil liberties and political rights, in addition to elections, as the core constituting elements of democracy (e.g., Dahl, 1971, 1989). Japan’s seemingly procedural understanding has been criticized for underestimating civic participation and does not reflect the manipulation of new electoral democracies in the course of an election (Ichihara, 2017). Scholars and experts on democracy assistance, for example, make the criticism

that Japan continued election assistance to Cambodia in 2018 even at the time of Hun Sen's power concentration (Expert Groups for the Reconsideration of Japan's ODA and Democracy, 2018).

Geopolitical and security considerations have also influenced Japan's decision to openly support democracy, and while the country began using values-based diplomacy as a strategy to compete with China for influence (Kliman & Twining, 2014; Potter, 2012), it intends to refrain from bringing democracy to the forefront of its diplomacy and foreign aid in order not to force other Asian countries to choose between Japan and China (MOFAJ official, personal communication, July 19, 2018).

These passive reasons have been supplemented by Japan's inclination towards the long-term approach posited in modernization theory whereby economic development will lead to democratization (Ichihara, 2013a). Japanese policy-makers and scholars alike show their belief that a short-term approach to the support of democracy will only destabilize recipient countries. While not denying freedom-centered values, they prioritize the right to development, social rights, and stability over civil liberties, for the sake of stable political development (A. Tanaka, personal communication, August 30, 2018; Cabinet Secretariat official, personal communication, July 11, 2018; Japan International Cooperation Agency [JICA] officials, personal communication, July 24, 2018; R. Hirono, personal communication, August 13, 2018; K. Inoue, personal

communication, August 16, 2018). A Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) report on governance assistance states that providing direct support for CSOs is not desirable, because it entails bypassing state institutions and could weaken the accountability of—and citizens' trust in—the government (JICA, 2004).

### **Malaysia–Japan Relations**

Malaysia–Japan relations are characterized by links in trade, investment, and services as a result of the Japanese war reparation program from 1967 through grants amounting to USD25 million (Katayama, 2013). Since then, Japanese investors have entered the Malaysian market, in line with the latter's interest in attracting foreign investors for development purposes. This has boosted Japan to the position of Malaysia's largest trade partner, surpassing even Britain (Hoong, 1987). Relations between the two countries were further improved through the strengthening of Japan's relationship with Southeast Asia based on the Fukuda Doctrine in 1977, and through Mahathir's Look East Policy in 1982. The policy had the three main objectives of nurturing a positive work ethic, increasing technological knowledge and expertise, as well as adopting management and organizational systems from developed countries in Asia such as Japan, in order to increase Malaysia's productivity and development (Khalid, 1999).

As Japan went into an economic recession in the 1990s, Malaysia began to strike a balance between Japan and

China (Suzuki, 2013). The absence of proactive international and regional security contribution from Japan despite the exacerbated territorial disputes between China and Southeast Asian countries over the South China Sea, in addition to Japan's hesitance in supporting Mahathir's idea of East Asia Economic Caucuses (EAEC, a purely regional group excluding the US), caused psychological distance between Japan and Malaysia. On the other hand, China supported EAEC and expanded its presence as an important market for Malaysia, strengthening the bilateral relations (Suzuki, 2013).

Malaysia–Japan relations continued to prosper during Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's premiership (2003 to 2009), but their cooperation remained centered around economic partnership. Through the theme "Japan–Malaysia Friendship Year 2007," the two countries agreed to promote cooperation in five key areas: politics and security, economics, human resource management, environment and energy sectors, as well as international cooperation (MOFAJ, 2007). While the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity initiative, in which Japan intended to assist other countries towards values such as democracy, freedom, human rights, the rule of law, and market economy, was already in place by that time, there was no substantial development in democracy-related issues. On the other hand, the Abdullah administration increasingly approached China as well (Suzuki, 2013).

Bilateral relations experienced an

increase in momentum during Najib Razak's premiership—as compared to that of Abdullah, who had only maintained the momentum. For Japan, the change of governing party from the Liberal Democratic Party to the Democratic Party of Japan in 2009 shifted Japan's focus towards "Asianism" and led to positive growth in Malaysia–Japan bilateral relations. In 2010 the two countries declared a new level of cooperation known as "Enhanced Partnership," focusing on cooperation in peace and security, energy and environmental sectors, as well as promotion of people-to-people exchange (Zainuddin, 2015). However, such liberal values as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law were not included in the cooperative partnership plan. Furthermore, Malaysia continued to move closer to China, enjoying frequent mutual high-level visits and strengthening bilateral economic ties (Suzuki, 2013).

Malaysia–Japan relations gained another boost after Najib and Abe declared the second wave of Look East Policy in the Japan–Malaysia Summit Meeting in December 2013 (Embassy of Japan in Malaysia, 2013). However, Malaysia regarded the renewed Look East Policy as a part of its economic stabilization strategy, whereas Japan through the Abe administration viewed it as a medium to strengthen Japan–ASEAN ties against the rise of China (Kuik, 2015; Suzuki, 2014). The return of Mahathir as Prime Minister under the Pakatan Harapan government in May 2018 dramatically revitalized the

relationship between the two countries. Harapan's victory sparked exultation among Japanese political and business communities, followed by Mahathir's announcement to renew the Look East Policy. Over the span of fifteen months (May 2018 to August 2019) he made five visits to Japan, announcing the idea of a third national car project, and proposing expanded cooperation in education and trade. Japan also guaranteed a release of RM7.4 billion in Samurai bonds to Malaysia to assist its economic recovery. Despite the historic regime change, however, and the increased necessity to support Malaysia in its transition, the topic of democracy does not occupy an important area in the bilateral cooperation.

## RESULT

Fostering warm and cooperative relations, Japan never tried to exert diplomatic pressure on Malaysia for democracy. Neither foreign ministers nor press secretaries of the ministry have made any comment on Malaysian police crack-downs on peaceful rallies organized by BERSIH (MOFAJ, 2000-2016, 2000-2017, 2000-2018), a tacit signal of support for the Malaysian government in its approach to the rallies. Japan seemed to be uninterested in initiating or discussing democracy-related issues since it considered Malaysia to be a relatively democratic country without excessive violation of democratic principles in terms of its elections and competition between political parties. The 2002 country-based aid plan for Malaysia is an interesting case

in point. Despite the political turmoil after the sacking of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, and alleged serious human rights violations, the plan recognized Malaysia as a stable parliamentary democracy, and assessed Malaysia's political situation to be stable overall despite the temporary shakiness. Japan also considered BN's majority victory in elections as a sign of trust in the latter's credibility as a government (MOFAJ, 2002). High-ranking officials of MOFAJ emphasized in an interview with one of this article's authors the importance of the people choosing their representatives. However, at the same time, they argued that we have to respect the result of elections even if the elections are flawed, and showed reluctance to foster civil liberties beyond the will of local governments chosen through elections (MOFAJ officials, personal communication, July 26, 2018).

When it comes to a prominent actor in the 2018 election, Mahathir Mohamad, Japan does not seem to have exerted a political influence on his comeback. Japan has had weak relations also with Anwar Ibrahim, another key actor for the change in administration in 2018. When Anwar intended to make a personal visit to Japan in 2014, Japanese immigration rejected his entry, claiming that he did not possess a visa required for those who had been convicted in the past. Given that the conviction of Anwar was a result of domestic political strife, this was a diplomatic decision on the side of Japan to keep distance from this figure. Japan gave tacit support to the BN government and helped stabilize its



semi-authoritarian rule, and Anwar held Japan accountable for its minimal role in democratization (Anwar Ibrahim, 2014).

MOFAJ has created country-based aid plans for Malaysia four times so far (MOFAJ, 2002, 2009, 2012, 2017). The plans do not directly identify democracy issues as such, but they target areas where Japan has aimed to assist in democratic governance and point out the importance of assistance for the development of institutions and human resources for the purposes of economic liberalization and improvement of administrative capacities (MOFAJ, 2002, 2009, 2012, 2017). This is a reflection of Malaysia's consecutive development plans which make no mention of issues related to civil liberties and political rights, but indicate the importance of good governance elements such as trustworthiness, integrity, accountability, and productivity (Prime Minister's Department of Malaysia, 2006, 2010, 2015). The Japanese government has focused on these norms because they are important in the contexts of both good governance and democracy, and are acceptable for the Malaysian government, and thus can be underscored without forcing the country to choose between Japan and China.

Table 1 displays the amount of ODA channeled from Japan to the government and civil society sectors in Malaysia. The aid is divided among 13 subsectors largely comprising governance assistance (low-end/developmental/regime-compatible). Five other subsectors fall under the democracy assistance sector more strictly defined

(high-end/political/non-regime-compatible), comprising democratic participation and civil society, elections, legislatures and political parties, media, and human rights.

## DISCUSSION

Japanese aid is mostly allocated for public sector policy and administrative management, public finance management, and legal and judicial development. In other words, Japan's assistance for democracy in Malaysia comes in the form of assistance for state institutions. This can be best explained by Japan's Partnership for Democratic Governance concept of 1996, where the government regards governance assistance as democracy assistance (MOFAJ, n.d.). As observed, Japan allocated USD7.591 million to the sectors from 2003 to 2016, and almost all recipients for the 87 Japanese assistance projects in these sectors are government agencies such as the Inland Revenue Board of Malaysia, Royal Malaysian Custom Department, Royal Malaysia Police, Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC), Public Service Department, and Prime Minister's Department. Most assistance consisted of capacity building, good governance, and transfer of knowledge (Inland Revenue Board of Malaysia, 2018; JICA, 2006, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2017a, 2017b; MOFAJ, 2013a, 2015, 2016a, 2016b). The data reflect Japan's intention to support the capacity of administrative officials.

Behind the change of government from BN to PH we can recall Najib's 1MDB scandal and the public outrage over it,

Table 1  
*Tabulation of Japanese assistance to government and civil society in Malaysia, by subsectors, from 2003 to 2016*

Year	Subsector (USD million)													
	Public Sector Policy and Administrative Management	Public Finance Management	Decentralization and Support to Subnational Local Governments	Anti-corruption Organizations and Institutions	Domestic Resource Mobilization	Legal and Judicial Development	Democratic Participation and Civil Society	Elections	Legislatures and Political Parties	Media and Flow of Information	Human Rights	Women's Equality Organizations and Institutions	Ending Oppression of Women and Children	
2003	1.780	0.095	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.004	-	-	-	
2004	0.713	0.102	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
2005	0.377	-	-	-	0.014	0.014	-	-	-	0.004	-	-	-	
2006	0.237	-	-	-	0.023	0.023	-	-	-	0.004	-	-	-	
2007	0.387	-	-	-	0.026	0.026	-	-	-	0.002	-	-	-	
2008	0.572	-	-	-	0.357	0.357	-	-	-	0.015	-	-	-	
2009	0.798	0.018	-	-	0.499	0.499	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
2010	0.366	0.013	-	-	0.027	0.027	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
2011	0.020	0.015	-	-	0.025	0.025	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
2012	0.187	0.013	-	-	0.014	0.014	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
2013	0.212	0.010	-	-	0.011	0.011	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
2014	0.117	0.009	-	-	0.010	0.010	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
2015	0.065	0.008	-	-	0.073	0.023	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
2016	0.080	0.013	0.091	-	0.144	0.018	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Total (USD million)	<b>5.911</b>	<b>0.296</b>	<b>0.091</b>	-	<b>0.217</b>	<b>1.047</b>	-	-	-	<b>0.029</b>	-	-	-	

Source: Adapted from OECD (2018)

but Japanese assistance does not appear to have influenced either of these issues. Japan has held good governance seminars at the United Nations Asia and Far East Institute (UNAFEI) in Japan annually, focusing on the issue of anti-corruption, where Malaysian anti-corruption officials have participated along with other Southeast Asian officials (UNAFEI, n.d.). A triangular anti-corruption project was also conducted between Japan and Malaysia (MACC and Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs) in Palestine in 2013 (JICA Malaysia, 2013), which might have served as an opportunity for the Malaysian trainers to reconsider the value of anti-corruption. However, Japan's support did not address the fundamental problem of political intervention by the government in the MACC, and it was only after the arrival of the PH government that the MACC began taking prominent actions over the 1MDB corruption case. In addition, public outrage over the 1MDB scandal was not fostered by the MACC investigation, but instead by investigative journalism in the country.

While remaining low profile, Japan has provided non-regime-compatible support internationally in the form of support for elections, media, and CSOs. However, such support is provided to countries that are in democratization or liberalization processes, where momentum for accepting such support exists on the part of the recipient governments. In the case of democratizing Indonesia from the late 1990s to early 2000s and liberalizing Myanmar in the early 2010s, for example,

Japan's support projects to such institutions as the Supreme Court, Prosecutors Office, elections, and media set their long-term goals as promotion of democracy. When the Indonesian government requested Japan to support CSOs as a part of its electoral assistance, JICA provided grant aid for Indonesian CSOs (Ichihara, 2017).

On the other hand, authoritarian governments have no incentive to seek democracy support, and this is true for the BN government as well (Hyde, 2011). According to one East Asian scholar in Malaysia, "Malaysian leaders are aware that requesting democracy support from any country is to acknowledge that their country is in a state of non-democracy" (Benny Teh, personal communication, June 17, 2018). Thus, Japan's assistance to Malaysia has much less direct political connotation. As shown in Table 1, there is nearly no direct assistance for democracy in the form of aid for democratic participation and civil society, elections, legislature and political parties, as well as human rights in Malaysia. The aid allocation for the media and freedom of information subsector is small, which indicates that this was not a full project.

Japan's approach in supporting democracy seems to marginalize local CSOs championing political and democratic issues. In Malaysia, several NGO recipients of the grant include Women's Aid Organization, Era Consumer, and PT Foundation, none of which work in the fields of democracy and governance. Those actors who played significant roles in the run-up to the 2018

election, such as BERSIH, Center to Combat Corruption and Cronyism, and *Malaysiakini*, did not receive support from the Japanese government. Although the Japanese Embassy provides Grassroots Human Security Grant Aid for CSOs, its priority is limited to non-political areas aiming to improve basic human needs such as healthcare, education, public welfare, and the environment, with a caveat that these areas must adhere to national development plans (Embassy of Japan in Malaysia, 2018).

For local CSOs that fight for democracy, the fact that Japan strictly adheres to the priorities of recipient governments makes it almost impossible for them to highlight ignored but important political agendas and obtain grants for these. If a proposed aid project is not approved by the government of the recipient country, the Japanese government will not provide funding to the Japanese CSO as it fears that this would disrupt bilateral relations (MOFAJ, 2013b). One of the best examples of such consideration is the removal of dissenting artworks from a cultural exhibition held in Kuala Lumpur in 2017. In this incident, Japan Foundation Kuala Lumpur (JFKL) as the organizer removed artworks by local Sabahan artist Pangrok Sulap that contained a political message. The action taken by JFKL was driven by reports made by several political parties, and was heavily criticized by local artists and cultural activists (Ismail & Ismail, 2019).

Political values can be transferred through education and training programs sponsoring local students to attend

educational institutions in democratic countries (Furuoka, 2007). Nevertheless, unlike the American Fulbright scholarship which aims to expose international students to democratic values (Nye, 2004), Japan's scholarships do not aim to promote particular political values (MOFA officials, personal communication, July 26, 2018). From 1982 to 2003, 10,352 students received scholarships for education and training programs such as the Japanese Language Program for Malaysian Teachers, Malaysia–Japan Higher Education Project, Industrial and Technical Training Program, as well as Business Management Training (Embassy of Japan in Malaysia, 2017), most of which revolve around obtaining technical knowledge. While in 2001 Japan began the Young Leaders Program, one of whose purposes is to provide education on public administration, only administrative staffers recommended by the Public Service Department of Malaysia are able to participate, a limitation that effectively precludes the participation of opposition party members or CSO activists (National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies, n.d.). In both cases, therefore, the programs are not intended to transfer democratic values but to nurture pro-Japan people and to support administrative stability and capacity improvement. Reflecting this, our surveys conducted with top officials of pro-democracy CSOs such as BERSIH and Make It Right Movement, and think tanks such as Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs, located almost no Malaysian pro-democracy actors who had

participated in education programs in Japan. Because of the lack of support from Japan for the civil society, those who are involved in activities of pro-democracy CSOs do not hold a democratic image about Japan. In addition, the Japanese government requires applicants for Japanese government's scholarships to indicate whether they have a criminal record, which can alienate civil society actors who have previous record of arrest due to their participation in street demonstrations (Kok Hin Ooi, personal communication, Feb. 25, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

This article has explored the role of Japan as a low-profile democracy supporter in Malaysia. Our finding is that Japan's diplomacy and foreign aid to Malaysia have acted as a regime stabilizer rather than contributing to the diffusion of democratic norms. First, Japan's diplomatic approach to Malaysia has revolved around economic cooperation, and Japan maintained a distance from pro-democracy actors even after it began support for democracy internationally. Japan evaluated Malaysia as a stable democracy, and did not have a motivation either to lend moral support to pro-democracy actors or to expand liberal democratic norms among the general public.

Second, based on such an understanding, the Japanese government has assisted the capacity of Malaysian administrative officials. Together with high sensitivity on the side of the Malaysian government concerning the interference of external actors, aid projects with no or weak political

connotation have been implemented. Focusing on good governance norms, which are necessary for democracy as well, Japan has taken the approach of not rejecting authoritarianism. In other words, Japan has not intended to bring about political change in authoritarian countries.

There are two main causes for such an approach. First, Japan has emphasized democracy in its diplomacy with the intention of expanding its international influence and differentiating its diplomacy from that of China, rather than promoting democracy out of normative commitment. Aiming to gain respect from and strengthen relations with state actors, Japan sought to nurture friendly relations with the BN government despite its semi-authoritarian nature. Second, viewing elections as the most critical institution for democracy, Japan did not intend to address the weak civil liberties in Malaysia. These two factors led Japanese projects to focus on the capacity building of public administrators as state actors rather than pushing for political change. Hence, Japan's diplomacy and foreign aid to Malaysia has helped stabilize the status quo instead of supporting democratic diffusion.

This does not necessarily mean that Japan's role in Malaysia can be considered as insignificant. Rather, Japan's democracy support to Malaysia suits its expertise in the context of democratic transition. Several informants assert that assistance for institutional and bureaucratic reform should be continued, in contrast with sectors more closely related to democratization

(K. Suguira, personal communication, August 27, 2018; T. Inoguchi, personal communication, August 20, 2018; Y. Kasuya, personal communication, August 10, 2018). The recommendation is similar to what was suggested by other democracy supporters such as the International Republican Institute. After the power transition in Malaysia, the Institute urged the West and its allies in the Asia Pacific such as Japan and Australia to provide assistance and expertise in aiding the political transition in Malaysia, particularly expertise assistance for the new state administration with limited governing experience (Hays & Twining, 2018).

However, the (former) Pakatan Harapan government showed disinterest in political programs as a form of cooperation. Press statements by government leaders, particularly Mahathir, on bilateral cooperation were inclined toward issues pertaining to the status quo. Thus, instead of defining democracy merely in terms of elections, Japan should incorporate civil liberties and political rights in its understanding of democracy. Based on such recognition, civil liberties would be emphasized in diplomatic differentiation from China, and support for civil society should naturally increase.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is funded by the Grant for Japan-Related Projects 2017 awarded by Sumitomo Foundation, Asia Centre Fellowship Program (Japan Foundation) 2018, and JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 15K17012. We thank all informants for their

valuable inputs throughout the fieldwork conducted in Japan in August 2018.

## REFERENCES

- Akaha, T. (2002). Japan. In P. J. Schraeder (Ed.), *Exporting democracy: Rhetoric vs. reality* (pp. 89-108). Colorado, USA: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Asplund, A. (2015). *Values vs. interest: Strategic use of Japanese foreign aid in Southeast Asia* (EIJIS Working Paper Series 241). Stockholm, Sweden: The European Institute of Japanese Studies.
- Brooks, W. L., & Orr, R. M. (1985). Japan's foreign economic assistance. *Asian Survey*, 25(3), 322-340.
- Bush, S. S. (2015). *The taming of democracy assistance*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Carothers, T. (1999). *Aiding democracy abroad*. Washington, USA: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Carothers, T. (2009). Democracy assistance. *Journal of Democracy*, 20(1), 5-19. doi: 10.1353/jod.0.0047
- Dahl, R. A. (1971). *Polyarchy*. New Haven, USA: Yale University Press.
- Dahl, R. A. (1989). *Democracy and its critics*. New Haven, USA: Yale University Press.
- Embassy of Japan in Malaysia. (2013). *Japan-Malaysia summit meeting*. Retrieved December 30, 2017, from [http://www.my.embjapan.go.jp/English/bilateral/Japan\\_MalaysiaSummitMeeting.html](http://www.my.embjapan.go.jp/English/bilateral/Japan_MalaysiaSummitMeeting.html)
- Embassy of Japan in Malaysia. (2017). *The Malaysian Look East Policy*. Retrieved December 29, 2017, from <http://www.my.emb-japan.go.jp/English/JIS/education/LEP.htm>
- Embassy of Japan in Malaysia. (2018). *Overview of grassroots human security grant aid*. Retrieved

- February 26, 2018, from [http://www.my.emb-japan.go.jp/English/ODA/grass\\_hs1.htm](http://www.my.emb-japan.go.jp/English/ODA/grass_hs1.htm)
- Expert Groups for the Reconsideration of Japan's ODA and Democracy. (2018, July). *Proposal regarding Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) and Democracy*. Retrieved July 12, 2020, from [http://www.gpaj.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/180709\\_03-ENG.pdf](http://www.gpaj.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/180709_03-ENG.pdf)
- Fukuyama, F., & McFaul, M. (2007). *Should democracy be promoted or demoted?* Retrieved February 10, 2020, from <https://stanleycenter.org/publications/other/FukuyMcFaul07.pdf>
- Furuoka, F. (2007). Malaysia-Japan relations under the Mahathir administration: Case studies of the "Look East" policy and Japanese investment in Malaysia. *Asian Survey*, 47(3), 505-519. doi: 10.1525/as.2007.47.3.505
- Hays, M., & Twining, D. (2018, May 24). Malaysia's fragile democratic revival. *Nikkei Asian Review*. Retrieved November 19, 2019, from <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Malaysia-s-fragile-democratic-revival2>
- Hoong, K. K. (1987). Malaysia-Japan relations in the 1980s. *Asian Survey*, 27(10), 1095-1108.
- Hsiao, L. C. R. (2010). Democracy assistance in Asia and the role of China. *International Journal: Canada Journal of Global Policy Analysis*, 65(3), 583-599.
- Hyde, S. D. (2011). *The pseudo-democrat's dilemma*. Ithaca, USA: Cornell University Press.
- Ibrahim, A. (2014). *The prospects for democracy in the Asian century*. Retrieved June 7, 2017, from <https://ethz.ch/content/specialinterest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/en/services/digital-library/publications/publication.html/182284>
- Ichihara, M. (2013a). *Understanding Japanese democracy assistance*. Washington, USA: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Ichihara, M. (2013b). Minshuka shien no taisho kettei yoin: Dona koku toshiten no nichibe i hikaku shiron [What determines the targets of democracy assistance?]. *Cosmopolis*, 7, 23-36.
- Ichihara, M. (2016). Japan's democracy support to Indonesia. *Asian Survey*, 56(5), 905-930. doi: 10.1525/as.2016.56.5.905
- Ichihara, M. (2017). *Japan's international democracy assistance as soft power*. London, England and New York, USA: Routledge.
- Ichihara, M. (2020). Universality to plurality?: Values in Japanese Foreign Policy. In Y. Funabashi & G. J. Ikenberry (Eds.), *The crisis of liberal internationalism: Japan and the world order* (pp. 133-166). Washington, USA: Brookings Institution Press.
- Ichihara, M., Sahoo, N., Erawan, I. K. P. (2016), *Asian support for democracy in Myanmar*. Washington, USA: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Inland Revenue Board of Malaysia. (2018). *Akademi Percukaian Malaysia* [Malaysian Academy of Taxation]. Retrieved February 24, 2019, from [http://www.hasil.gov.my/bt\\_goindex.php?bt\\_kump=2&bt\\_skum=2&bt\\_posi=1&bt\\_unit=6&bt\\_sequ=1](http://www.hasil.gov.my/bt_goindex.php?bt_kump=2&bt_skum=2&bt_posi=1&bt_unit=6&bt_sequ=1)
- Ismail, M. T., & Abadi, A. M. (2017). Stiftungen and Political Education in Malaysia. *Asian Survey*, 57(3), 548-570.
- Ismail, M. T., & Abadi, A. M. (2019). The United States democracy assistance in Malaysia: The nature and impact of concurrent strategy. *Pacific Review*, 32(4), 572-602. doi: 10.1080/09512748.2018.1492959
- Ismail, M. T., & Ismail, A. S. (2019). The role of Japanese non-state actors in democracy promotion in Malaysia. *Taiwan Journal of Democracy*, 15(2), 169-194.

- Japan International Cooperation Agency. (2004). *Jaika niokeru gabanansu shien* [Governance Assistance at JICA]. Tokyo, Japan: Author. Retrieved February 11, 2019, from [http://open\\_jicareport.jica.go.jp/pdf/11810272.pdf](http://open_jicareport.jica.go.jp/pdf/11810272.pdf)
- Japan International Cooperation Agency. (2006). *Leadership development programme for middle management level*. Retrieved February 23, 2019, from <https://www.jica.go.jp/>
- Japan International Cooperation Agency. (2009). *Outline of activities*. Retrieved February 24, 2019, from <https://www.jica.go.jp/>
- Japan International Cooperation Agency. (2011). *JICA Annual Report 2010*. Tokyo, Japan: Author.
- Japan International Cooperation Agency. (2012). *JICA Annual Report 2012*. Tokyo, Japan: Author.
- Japan International Cooperation Agency. (2017a). *LEP2.0 Management training program for junior officers*. Retrieved February 23, 2019, from <https://www.jica.go.jp/>
- Japan International Cooperation Agency. (2017b). *LEP2.0 Leadership Development Program for Middle Management Level (Managers)*. Retrieved February 9, 2019, from <https://www.jica.go.jp/>
- Japan International Cooperation Agency Malaysia. (2013). *JICA Mareshia no ugoki* [Activities of JICA Malaysia]. Retrieved December 8, 2019, from <https://www.jica.go.jp/malaysia/office/others/ku57pq000023hqim-att/newsletter1312.pdf>
- Jomo, K. S. (1983). *The sun also sets*. Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: INSAN.
- Katayama, K. (2013). *China's rise and Japan's Malaysia policy*. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: University of Malaya Press.
- Khalid, K. (1999). *Malaysia-Japan relations* (Unpublished doctoral thesis), London School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, England.
- Khalid, K., & Lee, P. P. (2003). *Whither Look East Policy*. Bangi, Malaysia: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Press.
- Kliman, D. M., & Twining, D. (2014) *Japan's democracy diplomacy*. Washington, USA: German Marshall Fund of the United States.
- Kuik, C. C. (2015). Malaysia's relations with major and middle power. *Observatoire Asie du Sud-est*, 1(8), 1-9.
- Lee, P. P. (1988). "Japan incorporated" and its relevance to Malaysia. In K. S. Jomo (Ed.), *Mahathir economic policies* (pp. 35-37). Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: INSAN.
- Lim, H. S. (1984). Japanese perspectives on Malaysia's "Look East" policy. *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 231-245.
- Mamat, R., Yamato, E., Hussin, S., & Tajuddin, F. (2012). Anime viewing among secondary school students in Malaysia. *Global Media Journal*, 2, 40-60.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (1992). *Japan's official development assistance charter*. Retrieved June 30, 2019, from <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/summary/1999/ref1.html>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2000-2016). *Statements by Foreign Ministers*. Retrieved February 11, 2020, from [http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/danwa/d\\_gaimu.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/danwa/d_gaimu.html)
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2000-2017). *Press conference records of the Foreign Ministers*. Retrieved February 11, 2020, from <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/kaiken/gaisho/index.html#archives>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2000-2018). *Statements by press secretaries*. Retrieved February 11, 2020, from [http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/danwa/d\\_gaiho.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/danwa/d_gaiho.html)



- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2002). *Country assistance program for Malaysia*. Retrieved February 13, 2020, from [http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/assistance/pdfs/e\\_malaysia2002.pdf](http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/assistance/pdfs/e_malaysia2002.pdf)
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2007). *Joint statement in conjunction with the 50th Anniversary of Japan-Malaysia diplomatic relations, everlasting friendship and far-reaching partnership: Towards a common future*. Retrieved December 30, 2019, from <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/joint-4.html>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2009). *Country assistance program for Malaysia*. Retrieved August 21, 2019, from [https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/assistance/pdfs/e\\_malaysia2009.pdf](https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/assistance/pdfs/e_malaysia2009.pdf)
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2012). *Tai Mareshia kunibetsu enjo hoshin* [Country-based aid plan for Malaysia]. Retrieved August 21, 2020, from [https://www.my.emb-japan.go.jp/Japanese/bilateral/enjyo\\_houshin.pdf](https://www.my.emb-japan.go.jp/Japanese/bilateral/enjyo_houshin.pdf)
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2013a). *Japan's official development assistance White Paper 2012*. Tokyo, Japan: Author.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2013b). *International cooperation and NGOs*. Tokyo, Japan: Author.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2015). *Cabinet decision on the Development Cooperation Charter*. Tokyo, Japan: Author.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2016a). *White Paper on Development Cooperation 2015*. Tokyo, Japan: Author.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2016b, November 16). *Exchange of notes for the grant of patrol vessels and for the grant aid to Malaysia*. Retrieved February 26, 2019, from [http://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e\\_001355.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_001355.html)
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2017). *Tai Mareshia kunibetsu kaihatsu kyoryoku hoshin* [Country-Based economic cooperation plan for Malaysia]. Retrieved August 21, 2020, from <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/oda/files/000072250.pdf>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (n.d.). *Minshuteki hatten no tameno patonashippu* [Partnership for democratic development]. Retrieved August 21, 2020, from <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/pdd/index.html>
- National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies. (n.d.). *Young leaders program*. Retrieved February 9, 2019, from [http://www.grips.ac.jp/en/education/inter\\_programs/leader/](http://www.grips.ac.jp/en/education/inter_programs/leader/)
- Nye, J. S. Jr. (2004). *Soft power*. New York, USA: Public Affairs.
- Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2018). *Creditor reporting system*. Retrieved January 10, 2019, from <http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?datasetcode=CRS1#>
- Ottaway, M. (2003). *Democracy challenged: The rise of semi-authoritarianism*. Washington, USA: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Potter, D. M. (2012). Japan's official development assistance. *Bulletin of International Education Center*, 12, 11-31.
- Prime Minister's Department of Malaysia. (2006). *Ninth Malaysia Plan, 2006-2010*. Retrieved August 21, 2019, from [https://www.parlimen.gov.my/news/eng-ucapan\\_rmk9.pdf](https://www.parlimen.gov.my/news/eng-ucapan_rmk9.pdf)
- Prime Minister's Department of Malaysia. (2010). *Tenth Malaysia Plan, 2011-2015*. Retrieved August 21, 2019, from [https://www.pmo.gov.my/dokumenattached/RMK/RMK10\\_Eds.pdf](https://www.pmo.gov.my/dokumenattached/RMK/RMK10_Eds.pdf)
- Prime Minister's Department of Malaysia. (2015). *Eleventh Malaysia Plan, 2016-2020*. Retrieved August 21, 2019, from [https://www.pmo.gov.my/dokumenattached/speech/files/RMK11\\_Speech.pdf](https://www.pmo.gov.my/dokumenattached/speech/files/RMK11_Speech.pdf)

- Ryo, O. (1999). Governance, political conditionality, and Japan's aid policy. In S. J. Han (Ed.), *Changing values in Asia: Their impact on governance and development* (pp. 64-75). Tokyo, Japan: Japan Center for International Exchange.
- Santiso, C. (2001). International co-operation for democracy and good governance. *European Journal of Developmental Research*, 13(1), 154-180. doi: 10.1080/09578810108426785
- Sato, Y. (2017). Japan's approach to global democracy support. In M. R. Auslin & D. E. Bob (Eds.), *U.S.-Japan approaches to democracy promotion* (pp. 37-44). Washington, USA: Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA.
- Schumpeter, J. A. (1976). *Capitalism, socialism, and democracy*. New York, USA: Harper & Row.
- Shoji, T. (2009). Pursuing a multi-dimensional relationship: Rising China and Japan's Southeast Asia Policy. In J. Tsunekawa (Ed.), *The rise of China: Responses from Southeast Asia and Japan* (pp.157-184). Tokyo, Japan: NIDS.
- Sudo, S. (1992). *The Fukuda doctrine and ASEAN: New dimensions in Japanese foreign policy*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Suzuki, A. (2013). 30 Years of Japan Malaysia diplomatic relations. *Malaysia Studies*, 2, 57-71.
- Suzuki, A. (2014). *Dissonance in Malaysia-Japan Relations*. Retrieved December 29, 2019, from <http://www.newmandala.org/causes-to-dissonance-in-malaysia-japan-relations/>
- Takeda, Y. (1998). Japan's role in the Cambodian peace process. *Asian Survey*, 38(6), 553-568. doi: 10.1525/as.1998.38.6.01p03633
- United Nations Asia and Far East Institute. (n.d.). *Tonan ajia shokoku no tameno guddo gabanansu ni kansuru chiiiki semina* [Regional seminar on Good Governance for Southeast Asian Countries]. Retrieved December 8, 2019, from [https://www.unafei.or.jp/activities/GG\\_Seminar.html](https://www.unafei.or.jp/activities/GG_Seminar.html)
- Wan, M. (1995). Spending strategies in world politics: How Japan has used its economic power in the past decade. *International Studies Quarterly*, 39(1), 85-108. doi: 10.2307/2600725
- Yamato E. (2013). Appropriating Japanese popular culture in Malaysian. In E. Yamato, S. N. Lim & K. U. Khoo (Eds.), *Studies on Foreign Languages and Cultures* (pp. 166-185). Serdang, Malaysia: Universiti Putra Malaysia Press,
- Zainuddin, Z. (2015). Malaysia-Japan relations. *ISIS Focus*, 13-18.