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Social Science Research in Southeast Asia: the Challenges of Studying Parliamentary Institutions

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Abstract

This paper introduces the challenges of studying parliamentary institutions in Southeast Asia. My focus of research is in three countries' institutions: national parliaments of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. While in Southeast Asia, it is widely known that studying issues of politics and institutions face challenges – compared to studying culture, for example, this view is arguably no longer valid, however with certain qualification.

The comparison of parliamentary tradition between three countries – based on observation of the plenary session - reveals that the effectiveness of parliamentary works is related to parliamentary procedure, and even to the culture of work in the countries. Parliamentary structure, procedure and their political culture matters. Therefore, acknowledging these factors will give rise to more research opportunities, if a researcher plans to study the political institution in other countries in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Social Science Research, Southeast Asia, Parliament, Procedure, Political Culture, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore

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Introduction

In the mid-1980s a wave of democratization came to Southeast Asia and the amount of research on its political institutions increased. Accordingly, studies on parliamentary institutions have been recently blooming. As is known widely, studying politically sensitive issues in Southeast Asia, including political institutions, have faced more challenges, in comparison to studies on cultural issues. During the 1990s, the political studies of Southeast Asian region were usually descriptive and chronological (Rüland, 2006, p. 86), implicitly reaffirming what the highly-censored government dictated. The government preferred publication about development and modernisation in their countries (Halib & Huxley, 1996, p. 6). In Southeast Asia, leading up to the year of 2000, parliaments were notoriously known as rubber-stamp bodies. Meaning the governments in the region that could be attributed to authoritarianism, compared to the Western-style liberal democracy. After the Asian financial crisis of 1997-1998, studies about democratization and parliament gained momentum. Ziegenhain (2008) discovered that the role of (Indonesian) parliament actually was greater during democratic transition. However, Aspinall (2014) held the view that patronage politics still ruled the parliaments, especially during the election time. Such contrasting views are interesting to explore. The question as to whether or not the role of parliaments in Southeast Asia has indeed progressing or regressing, the role of other actors or agents distinct from the executive government, such as the parliament and civil society are worth investigating in the Southeast Asia region too.

Furthermore, with an increase of discussion on global governance and the way international organizations impose the importance of global agenda, which emphasizes the involvement of as many actors as possible, the parliament's participation is required even more by the constituents and public. My research topic which studies the role of (Southeast Asian) parliaments in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is related to this new trend, at least in Europe where I am

affiliated. Thus, in Summer (June-August) 2018, I conducted a research visit and went to the parliaments of three countries in Southeast Asia: Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, to observe their plenary sessions and to find out more about parliamentary legislations on SDGs. While this research on parliament and SDGs are still on-going, I find it interesting to share the challenges of researching these institutions, as the main purpose of this volume. Networking and affiliation indeed influence the researcher's access to these bureaucratic offices. But knowledge of parliamentary working organs is helpful for smooth arrangement. Acknowledging these factors will give more research opportunities – and not only challenges, if a researcher plans to study similar parliaments in Southeast Asia. Moreover, based on my observation, I find out that the institutional structure and procedure of these parliaments heavily shape their works, which in turn is influenced by the country's political culture. The general view is that the Southeast Asian politics are shaped heavily by their executive governments (elites and leaders) is confirmed too, endorsing the view of William Case (2002, 2009) and Rüland (2012) on the role of elite in the region.

This paper thus introduces the challenges of studying parliamentary institutions and the typology of parliaments in Southeast Asia, based on observation made from collecting data in the three national parliaments of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. To present this, this paper is organized into, first, discussing the literature on the background of social research challenges over time, and how I managed to research on parliamentary institutions (my research topic). Secondly, I introduce the method that I use for my social research: parliamentary ethnography, and how it helps me to observe and pay attention to parliaments that I study. The third part will explain in detail of the works of three parliaments and how the parliaments' structure and procedure explain the lack of or sufficiency of the arrangement of the institutions, and analyse these arrangements in comparison. This will show the argument on the influence of institutional structure and procedure with the

parliamentary work and tradition, and highlighting the elite's role in parliament, as stated above. The last part is the conclusion of the study.

Are The Southeast Asian Parliaments Weak?

During 1990s, parliaments in the Southeast Asia were considered weak as the executive government were in the spotlight. The emphasis on the countries' leaders and the Asian values were likely the cause. The names of Ho Chi Minh (Vietnam), Lee Kuan Yew (Singapore), Norodom Sihanouk (Cambodia), Ferdinand Marcos (the Philippines), Ne Win (Myanmar), Sukarno and Suharto (Indonesia) and Mahathir Muhamad (Malaysia) are well-known leaders in the region and famous even until today. Asian values also contributed due to the executive hegemony. The importance of communitarianism and collectivism was emphasized over individual freedom. Also respects and loyalties towards authoritarian leaders was required in this region. No wonder "clientelistic" system and "patronage" politics were, and somewhat still are, common in Southeast Asia. The parliament during "authoritarian regime" served as a basis for the legitimacy of the executive's policy. Today, distinguishing from the parliamentary government system, like in Malaysia and Singapore where the executive is part and elected as parliamentary members, usually parliaments are periphery to their executive counterparts.

Furthermore, democratization came a bit late to the regions. It started only when the Asian Financial crisis of 1997/1998 reached Southeast Asia, with Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand needing to adjust their political arrangement. Malaysia's Prime Minister, Mahathir Muhammad's seat survived after the adjustment of the Malaysian economic policy. However, the fall of Indonesia's President Suharto after three decades in reign and the rise of Thailand's populist leader Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra – even only for a short time - offered the hope that democracy had finally arrived in Southeast Asia. This was not the case for rich countries such as Brunei and Singapore. During this time, parliament also influenced democratization, like in the case

of the Indonesian parliament. Nevertheless, the executive government – usually the president or prime minister – has always have central spot in Southeast Asian's politics.

For example Singapore. The country is considered as semi-democratic country. It has regular elections, but only one party – People's Action Party (PAP) established in 1959 – which has always dominated the politics since its independence in 1965. This one-party government is strong and controls the media and freedom of speech. Yet, Singapore is the most developed country in Southeast Asia with around 320 million USD Gross Domestic Product (GDP). With such big economic power, its citizens do not mind authoritative government as long as people's access to basic needs are covered and fulfilled. Singaporean "competitive authoritarian" style is likely to be accepted by the people as long as the country remains stable and prosperous.

In the democratization era, amidst the executive government hegemony, research on parliaments in the Southeast Asia is increasing (Rüland, 2006, p. 93). Parliaments do not act as rubber-stamp institutions anymore, however, without drastic structural change in parliamentary institution like South Korea's, parliament will remain the same as the previous era. For example, in Indonesia, the continual usage of similar parliamentary procedure means parliamentary research will only report legislative chronology (see Adiputri, 2015).

Asian values, also called 'Asian model of democracy' (Neher, 1994) with the characteristics of superior-inferior relationship, personal characteristics, and hierarchy form the basis of the political and social structure of Southeast Asia (Neher, 1994, p. 950) is obviously seen in the parliament. The three parliaments studied here – Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore – still show the tendency of valuing the position of executive leaders higher than the position of parliamentary leaders. The leadership position is indeed prestigious, with many benefits and opportunities. Leaders may guide certain agenda (bills) and certain discussion; determine legislative priority, even determine whether the

parliamentary discussion is considered a closed or open meeting. This shows the existence of hierarchy, seniority over 'ordinary members' and unequal power relationship among members of parliament (MPs).

These so-called "Asian values" as well as the pattern or procedural frameworks within the parliament are the *products* of the social relationship of the country. This is what social sciences aim to address, the explanation of something, which has arisen a form causal relationship between social phenomena. How can we explain the phenomenon that even when the democratization came to the Southeast Asian region; the parliament still suffers from corruption (in the case of Indonesia and Malaysia) and is ruled by one hegemonic political party (Singapore)? I realize that change does not come overnight, and require timely process, however what I discover – at least from studying the Indonesian parliament – when parliamentary procedure remains the same as before the democratic regime started, the tendency to exercise the similar un-democratic ways persist (Adiputri, 2015).

Despite a difference in structural arrangement, parliament must share certain features. The parliamentary members are selected by the regular election; the members are *representatives* of people from certain constituents, exercising the role of parliament: legislating, overseeing and budgeting. MPs also need to convene at certain time and period throughout the year. There is also the task of *speaking* or debate – which why sometimes parliament is called as "speaking government" (Palonen, 2014); and the elected members will work based on the program of his/her political parties but still need to address the constituents' interests in legislation.

In studying the parliaments of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, I use institution theory, especially historical institutionalism. The theory contends that 'institutions have the ability to influence and determine political strategies and political outcomes...[meaning] that institutions matter due to their ability to shape the strategies and goals of actors, mediate cooperation and conflict and structure political situations'

(Allison, 2015, p. 126, quoted from Steinmo, Thelen & Longstreth, 1992). Specifically in relation to historical institutionalism, the focus of the study is 'the construction, maintenance, and adaptation of institutions' (Sanders, 2006, p. 42). Therefore, in the discussion section below, I will briefly inform the historical background of the parliament and how this history evolve inside the institution, before presenting an observation of these parliaments' plenary sessions.

In addition to historical Institutional theory, parliamentary procedures are also important. The procedure in parliamentary manner sets up and distinguishes the parliament from other institution (Adiputri, 2015, p. 37). British Parliamentary Procedure, in which Malaysia and Singapore adopt for their parliaments as part of their colonial legacy, derived its procedure from *A Treatise upon the Law, Privileges, Proceedings, and Usage of Parliament*, written by Thomas Erskine May in 1844, and the newest version is Blackburn and Kennon's (2003) *Parliament: Functions, Practice and Procedures*. These procedures highlight the parliament's main job of *speaking*. This "speaking" distinguishes the work of Malaysian and Singaporean parliaments, compared to Indonesia's. The Westminster style of parliaments in Malaysia and Singapore have ritual agenda of questioning the government or ministers in the first hour of their plenary session. Even the lay-out of the Plenary rooms are for speaking/debating and divided the government from the opposition sides, which clearly show the debate characteristics. This differs from the Indonesian one – which place emphasize on the "legislature" work, as seen with the lay-out of podium stands in the front – next to Speakers' seats - for political groups or faction (*fraksi*) to deliver overview/speeches for the bills. This type of lay-out is also designed for listening, rather than speaking.

Thus, theoretically, in order to study the parliamentary institution, a researcher must acknowledge such background of the studied institutions, such as the history and procedure. The theories of historical institutions and parliamentary procedure are useful to study, as well

as the parliament's and its ceremonial and routine activities too. The next section will discuss the method used to study the parliament and the challenges that I found when observing the parliaments.

Parliamentary Ethnography

To study the parliamentary institutions in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, I use parliamentary ethnography. I follow the Anthropologist Emma Crewe (2016) who used this (methodological and theoretical) approach to study the House of Lords (1998-2000) and in the House of Commons (2011-2013). According to Crewe, parliamentary ethnography is doing ethnography in parliament. Ethnography itself is a research technique with an aim to engage with people 'to find out how they act, think, talk and relate to each other', added with the ethnographers' reflection as part of the research, rather than attempting to remove their influence from the research findings' (Crewe, 2016). The reflection on social interaction between the ethnographer and informant is important on perception and interpretation in the research (*ibid*). It is useful to use in the parliament, because the politicians have different roles of representation, to their constituents, to their political party, to their peers in the committees etc. Thus, using straightforward data (like interview, reports, minutes) is not enough. Besides, only a small portion of information can be revealed by asking. I agree with Crewe that studying 'people's claims and statements alongside or as part of their culture practices, rituals and conversations' – one of ethnography's specialties – is important. However, it is also important to include the contradiction of the politicians' role and background – the whole process within the parliament – (by informal discussion with secretariat workers and even to MPs themselves, the parliament literature etc.) as well as the researcher's observation and reflection of the study, especially the study of parliamentary institutions that I am doing. Parliamentary ethnography in the three parliamentary institutions, combined with interviews and discussion with secretariats and my own experience as

a former officer within the parliament secretariat provide the whole understanding why things happen as they are, and such is related to the country's political culture in general. My view as a former "insider" must give an advantage (Moser, 2008, p. 385).

In my previous study of the Indonesian parliament (Adiputri, 2015) – similar to Crewe, I found out that politics is entangled with the social and cultural life of the country. Relationships, power and culture can be seen in the ritual procedure of the parliament, and paying attention to details like this, which are often seen as not important actually can imply the structural foundation of the institution. Before going further for the discussion, I must explain my current research topic, working background and the process during my data collection. Altogether, these allowed me to exercise challenges (and opportunities) to study parliaments in Southeast Asia.

My current post-doctoral research is studying the role of parliamentary organization in the Sustainable Development Agenda/SDGs, by focusing Southeast Asian's parliamentary institutions at the different level: *national* parliaments in Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore), *regional* ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (AIPA), the Asian Europe Parliamentary Partnership (ASEP) and *global* Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). While the project is expected to discuss the role of parliament in global agreement such as the SDG, it also discusses the issue of multi-parliamentary governance (globally, regionally, nationally and locally) and Europe-Southeast Asian relations through parliament. This is an upgrade from my previous doctoral project discussing the political culture of Indonesian parliament (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat* or DPR) by studying the minutes of the DPR from 1999-2009.

Studying parliamentary institution has been relatively easy for me as I used to work in the secretariat of Indonesian parliament for a decade (2000-2009). I worked as a government officer in the secretariat of *Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat*/MPR (the People's Consultative Assembly), one

of semi-parliament state body in the country. The members of MPR were (and still are) derived from DPR members. I was involved in the discussion of Constitutional Amendment 2000-2003, which resulted to the other semi-parliamentary body, a new state body called *Dewan Perwakilan Daerah*/DPD (The Regional Representative Council), and the discussion of bills and laws related to parliaments and its reform and local parliaments (e.g. UU *Susduk/MD3* and Local Governance) discussed in the DPR. Thus, I am familiar with legislative process, parliamentary procedure (standing orders, minutes storage etc.) also the compound (including the location of meeting rooms), and most importantly the connection with the members of parliament and the secretariat workers. The networks and connections that I had were useful when I was looking for parliamentary minutes and arranging meetings with DPR members for my previous doctoral research. Access to meetings, interviews and data-collection was relatively quick to be arranged.

For my current post-doc research, my connection was even expanding both from academic and parliamentary networks, through e.g. conference meetings. In Indonesia, when my former working colleagues at the secretariats have reached higher bureaucrat position, usually being heads of section or bureau, my access also enlarges to these colleagues' staff and connections. Moreover, my colleagues inside the Indonesian parliamentary secretariats also know MPs sitting at the leadership seats and colleagues sitting at the similar position from other parliaments in Southeast Asia. They are also usually comfortable to share the contacts with me, knowing that I will use such connection for academic/research purposes. It eases and simplifies the bureaucratic process, as I did not have much time to deal with lengthy arrangements. These colleagues would introduce me to the MPs and informed me a better time for interviews. When I have connected to the senior MPs, they will open easier access to meet new MPs and staffs in a specific committee that I study. Thus, contacts and network within the institution are extremely valuable.

Moreover, my affiliation with the European university (University of Jyväskylä, Finland) have added another chance for easy access. This is important to mention as MPs and secretariat personnel seem more welcomed to me, instead of the researchers from domestic/local universities. My situation is also valid for foreign researchers. They tend to have easier access compared with the domestic researcher, native Indonesian who study in the Indonesian universities. The “colonial-mentality” – a term that researchers use to describe Indonesians (either MPs or secretariat personnel) who tend to be more highly appreciative of foreign institutions – does still exist in the Indonesia parliament, and to some extent also in the Malaysian parliament. The affiliation from Western/European university is highly valued. Moreover in Malaysia, having the “doctoral” title also boost one’s credibility. I did not realize this until a colleague whom used to work in the Malaysian university advised me to use my doctoral title in my business cards before my departure to Malaysia. As common knowledge among Southeast Asians, there is always love-hate relationship between Malaysia and Indonesia and being an Indonesian citizen and coming to Malaysia where many Indonesians serve as maids to Malaysian families, I need a credibility to be taken seriously that can be in the academic title, such as doctoral degree or professorship. When I followed this advice, adding doctoral title before my name and introducing myself using the degree, people that I met are likely to offer more respect. They called my doctoral title, instead of my name though. In Malaysia, most people indeed are called by their titles, like professor, doctor, *makcik* (auntie) *tuan* (Sir), *puan* (Ma’am) etc – and these are not only names – they show respects toward the called persons, but also highlight the importance of status and hierarchy in the society. Thus, when I was introduced to the Malay MPs with the use of doctoral title, the MP showed more respects and a more formal attitude to me, and proceeded with more open attitude toward my activity.

My background as a former officer at the parliament secretariat also gives me valuable knowledge on how to comprehend how parliament works empirically and it offers relatively easy access to

gather data within that political institution, which would have required an excessive amount of time if I did not have contacts who could assist me in such a bureaucratic arrangement. At the same time, the experience as a parliament officer opens doors for new understanding of the workings of the (Indonesian) parliament through researcher perspective and allows me, as a native scholar, to become an emissary 'explicate lived realities and understanding of normative social sciences concept' (Beng-Lan, 2011, p. 15) of the (Southeast Asian) parliament to outsiders. I have double advantages as a former parliamentary worker and a researcher from Western university to boost my credibility to research in Southeast Asian parliaments. Such advantages are important to open new connection and network, at least for me when visiting the Malaysian and Singaporean parliaments.

By sharing this story, I assure that studying parliaments – or any political institutions in Southeast Asia – *connection* and *networks* are really important. Finding research connection is hard and time-consuming, but once obtained it is well worth it. While building connection, it is also helpful and important to acknowledge ourselves with our current knowledge of the system, structure or organization of the studied parliaments and recent political situation. While the affiliation and favorable perception toward Western university cannot easily be changed, especially in the case of domestic/local academic institution, the researcher may start to build *self-credibility*, like writing popular books or opinions in the national-wide newspaper, for example. This credibility will help a researcher become known.

Apart for the challenges stated above (be it that served as opportunities for me), I also must admit facing the challenge of knowing the subject *too well*. People that I met and interviewed within the parliament also had high expectation. It was a bit intimidating to be seen as having a strong background with the parliament, resulting in many of the informants possibly not giving me the full information, and forcing me to guess what was going on. During the interview, for

example, there was many moments of hesitation in answering. Perhaps the interviewees were to some extent reluctant to explain further, sensing that I must already know more on the subjects being discussed. Here, the observations and confirmations from the secretariat are more useful. In brief, I find that parliamentary ethnography is also suitable for my research method as I can reflect myself as a researcher and a former worker in the parliament, bringing both insider and outsider (academic) views to my research.

Comparison of Three Parliaments: Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore

Drawing on the background above, I studied three parliamentary institutions. Before my research visit, I read the literatures about the parliaments of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, their policy reports, debates and *hansard* (minutes) papers, focusing on what have been discussed about ratifying the SDGs agreement in 2016. I contacted these parliaments before my arrival, thus I was satisfied that my visits to plenary observations and discussion/interviews run according to plans. Observing the plenary sessions and on-site visits in these parliaments certainly supported the literature I had read with new nuances.

Indonesian Parliament

After the 2014 election, the Indonesian Parliament (the DPR) consists of 560 members of parliament (MP) from 10 factions/political groupings. The DPR is chaired by one speaker and five vice speakers, elected among members in the beginning of the session in 2014. While Indonesia has semi-parliamentary bodies like MPR whose members derives from members of DPR and DPD (a national high state body which is tasked with submitting and enacting bills along with the DPR when related to regions) with the task related to the State Constitution, the DPR stands as the sole parliamentary body in the country. Thus, Indonesia has unicameral parliament, the DPR.

In order to smooth the parliamentary working, the DPR has working organs (*alat kelengkapan*) within its institution (DPR website, 2018). They are:

1. DPR Leadership (*Pimpinan DPR*)
2. Steering Committee (*Badan Musyawarah/Bamus*)
3. Commission (*Komisi*) that divided into 11 according to ministerial issues
4. Legislation Council (*Badan Legislasi*)
5. Budget Council (*Badan Anggaran*)
6. House Affairs Council (*Badan Urusan Rumah Tangga/BURT*)
7. Council for Inter-Parliamentary Cooperation/(*Badan Kerja Sama Antar Parlemen/BKSAP*)
8. Council for State Financial Accountability (*Badan Akuntabilitas Keuangan Negara/BAKN*)
9. Council for Honorary Court (*Mahkamah Kehormatan Dewan/MKD*)
10. Special Committee (*Panitia Khusus*)

Each MP must be a member of a Commission (from 11 commissions in point 3 above) and a council/committee above (around 7 councils) from the list. One council or committee has members around 10% from total number, which is around 55 members. Therefore, it would be a struggle for faction with limited members, as they need to come to many meetings compared to members of big factions. During Suharto's time, these work organs were filled with only three political parties and one military faction. Nowadays there are around 14 political parties and it is quite challenging to address the diversity of views ranging from different issues, especially by using the old parliamentary procedure.

It is important to list these working organs here because while it looks like comprehensive structure, in reality it does not change much from the DPR during the Suharto time, when the DPR was considered as a rubber-stamp institution. The main roles of parliament: legislation and budgeting (even overseeing/controlling) are "balkanized" in the forms of

smaller chamber of committee. This means that only members of these councils may contribute to the discussions, and only members of certain commission/council are updated for the works. Instead of exercising in the Plenary Session where all members can access and give their opinions on the issues, the matter is brought to the Plenum – usually legislation – only when bills are ready to be enacted. There is no further discussion because within the smaller committee/commission, all parties – factions and government – have delivered their ‘mini overview’ which basically agree that the bills are ready and can be delivered to the Plenary Session for enactment. Meanwhile the legislative-drafting in the DPR is quite tiring as MP must scrutinize every article, including the wording.

With this “balkanized” arrangement, non-members outside the certain commission/council must actively seek information – if they want to – either from factions or by themselves. It is extra work especially when MPs are not able choose their own interest to be a member of certain council/commission. The *faction* or political party grouping inside the DPR selects the commission/council’s membership, which frequently is contrary to the MP’s wishes. All the works, of course, are delivered to the Plenary Session, but once the bill is scheduled there, it also means that there is no more discussion. The Plenum only reports the result reached from the smaller committee then all members merely legitimize the discussion based on yes-no questioned by the Speaker, or by voting. The Plenary Session then is seen as a ceremonial venue rather than a place for MPs to debate or to deliver their opinions for their constituents on certain issue. The core of parliament to ‘speak’ (*parler*) is not available through plenum. Speaking is more exercised in a mini venue of commission/council which is rarely aired publicly.

Thanks to my easy access and personal contacts to the Indonesian parliament, I interviewed around 25 parliamentarians during my research visit. When I asked about the sustainable development topic to these MPs, I also had a chance to update about the DPR’s working mechanism today. As most MPs are new and did not realize the problems

of the “balkanized” arrangements which are a legacy of the previous regime. They did not see problems of procedure. When asked about the lack of speaking time, most MPs responded lightly that they did not find any problems with it and did not think speaking is important. In their mind, it is the tasks of faction to update the MPs. For the SDGs discussion, Indonesia is quite advance and has even hosted two world parliamentary forums on sustainable issue, which IPU appreciated. The parliamentarization of SDG issue will be discussed at different paper.

During the research visit, I also had a chance to observe the DPR Plenum and I think that old tradition had not only not changed much but is has worsened. On 26 July 2018, I observed the DPR Plenary Session discussing the Ministry Accountability Report for the use of state budget in 2017. The official DPR website did not state that it was a plenary meeting and only presented it to look like a regular meeting of a committee. The plenum was supposed to start at 9.00 in the morning, but – as predicted (I have been warned) - it started only two hours later. Lateness is a bad habit in Indonesia. During the session, I was sitting on the open balcony facing down the back of MPs’ seats. The place was packed by many noisy MPs’ assistants and journalists. Financial Minister, Ms. Sri Mulyani Indrayati was scheduled to deliver a speech about the previous year budget. Since it was a parliamentary session, the minister was treated as a guest and she was only “allowed” to enter the Plenum when requested. When the minister and her team went in to the room, they were flooded with applause by MPs. It was such a dramatic entrance. I found it interesting that if the minister was treated this highly, was she popular? Or does the executive government have special place, and the position of the executive is considered more important than legislature? After asking confirmation about this entrance, most MPs said that for Plenum, guests- like ministers – are only allowed to enter the room when given permission but the applause that sometimes happened could be interpreted differently. However, I can see that being

selected as the government minister would be desirable for most MPs, meaning that the executive position is better than the legislative one.

When finishing her accountability speech, the Financial Minister stepped down from the podium and went to the Speakers' seats, handing down the papers she read earlier to the parliamentary Speaker. The exchanging documents or shaking hands was paused for allowing time to the media and press to take their pictures. The shaking-hands moment is important to document in many Indonesian events and ceremonies. Then the follow-up agenda, here the factions delivered opinion regarding the accountability report. The title of agenda seems to report what factions or MPs found regarding the use of state budget, or reaction to speech that the Minister just delivered. This was also the time for the MPs to speak up and ask questions. It is important to note that the DPR's procedure allows for the parliamentary speaking time represented by the factions. Only one MP will read an overview from every group, meaning around nine factions will speak. Then came something quite shocking, the Speaker said, "In order to save time, each faction does not need to read their speeches, but give their speech documents to the Speaker." I was stunned hearing this. This is bad for two reasons: (1) the role of parliament to speak publicly in the plenary session was not created for the reasons of time-saving. The public and constituents were not able to hear how their representatives reacted to the view of the executive government, (2) it cannot be confirmed what happened to the collection of speeches given to the Speakers. Why were the document sent to the speakers? Was there then a follow-up meeting to discuss the speeches or were the speeches only collected? Does this confirm that the position of the Speaker is higher than the ordinary MPs? When I ask about such procedure, even to the Speaker of the plenum himself, Mr. Deputy Speaker Fadhli Zon (in another occasion), he justly lightly reacted that it was indeed to save time (from "listening to boring speeches!"). I did not get my all questions answered, but this showed that parliamentary speaking and constituents unfortunately are not

the MPs' priorities. I did not get the answer for the reasons to collect factions' papers to the Speakers either, which was probably handled by the plenary team (*Bagian Sidang Paripurna*) but it is likely that there are no follow-up events afterwards, meaning that the documents will be left untouched.

To worsen this, after the collection the factions' speeches – along with the picture-taking in front of the Speakers' seats – the Minister was allowed to deliver another speech to address the factions' speeches (which was never been read). How the minister could deliver a speech when she did not even hear the factions' speeches? This remained puzzling. It just showed that the DPR's Plenary Session was indeed purely a ceremonial event. After the agenda with the Financial Minister was over, the Minister and her team were allowed to leave the Plenum, with another dramatic departure.

After that, the agenda continued with the inauguration of new judges and the DPR's Speaker's closing speech to end the working term of DPR 2017-2018, which resulted in only enacting five new laws within that term. The new term would be opened on 16 August 2018, a day before the country's Independence Day as is a ritual in the DPR. The President will also deliver the budget overview of the upcoming year, 2019, marking the opening of DPR official term 2018-2019. This tradition of opening DPR session a day before the Independence Day and the Plenary rituals are maintained and continue to run even though the patrimonial president, Suharto, has long gone.

For me this is interesting and puzzling at the same time. Interesting that the tradition of an old regime is kept running. Although many civil society organizations, also some MPs have stated that the DPR procedure is ineffective, which can be seen in the low number of enacted laws, no one cares to change the situation. The journalists also do not see that plenary session like these a problem. The session highlights the public view of representatives, which is that they say something regarding policy and the MPs do not have a chance to speak up. Newspapers and

online news on the following day after the Plenary only reported the closing speech of the DPR Speaker, the calculation number of how many MPs attended the plenum and how low the number of laws enacted on this official term. No news reported the proceeding in this plenum. It is puzzling that even when MPs know the ceremonial status of plenary session and how the number of laws that DPR enacts annually has always been low which highlights that the DPR's ineffective exercise in the plenary keeps continuing. There has been no efforts to amend the situation, or no one point out has pointed out the ineffectiveness of the parliamentary procedure in the DPR. Only (democratic) leaders may have an opportunity to change this situation, but it is likely to take longer.

Malaysian Parliament

Differing from Indonesia, Malaysia exercised Westminster parliamentary system, which means people who make up the executive government are also members of parliament (MPs). The parliament therefore is more updated with both the works of executive and legislature, especially when the executive government presents the bill or answer MPs' questions during plenary session. The Malaysian Parliament, *Parlimen Malaysia*, has two institution: the Senate or *Dewan Negara* and the House of Representatives or *Dewan Rakyat*. The Senate consists of 70 senators, whom are elected (26) and appointed (44) by the King, *Yang di-Pertuan Agong*; while the House consists of 222 members of parliaments elected every five years. My research focuses on the work of *Dewan Rakyat* or Lower House, thus, Malaysian parliament here refers to *Dewan Rakyat*.

Malaysia has a new government this year after the May 2018 election. For more than four decades, Malaysia groomed a one-party dominant system, United Malays National Organization/UMNO, and had an electoral authoritarian regime, a legacy of racialized government from the British colonialism. Populations has been historically divided over ethnicity – Chinese, Indian, and Malays, with Malays always

enjoying the privilege of hegemony. However, in the parliament, UMNO successfully received the majority seats with support from the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and Malaysian Chinese Associations (MCA) grouping in the coalition of *Barisan Nasional*/BN or National Alliance. This coalition brought the sense that all ethnic groups in the country were represented in BN during the elections and within the parliament. Despite the existence of other parties, such as the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PMIP, later become PAS), a group that broke from the UMNO in 1951 (Case, 2002, p. 104) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP), successor to the Singaporean Party, People's Action Party after seceding from Malaysia in 1965, the BN coalition successfully maintained their hegemony in the government. Being part of the UMNO apparatus means an elite status, like a top position in the state bureaucracy and business conglomerates, which will ensure access to state position, as well as to business opportunities. The hierarchy of the Malaysian government has always been paralleled with the country's business and economy (Case, 2002, p. 112) meaning that when someone is associated with UMNO, they have opportunities in the patronage network. The hegemony of UMNO and its patronage, combined with gerrymandering during election and controlling civil liberty through many acts, has labelled the Malaysia's political system as semi-democracy.

The Asian crises of 1998 came and succeeded in toppling the Indonesian president, Suharto. Malaysia successfully avoided the following political crisis too but not without inevitable strain inside the UMNO. Mahathir Mohamad, the Prime Minister (1981-2003) at that time did not need to ask for help from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – like Indonesia and Thailand – and just adjusted its economic policy. This was not supported by Mahathir's protégé, his Deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, whom had support among the youth and the Islamic groups with connections ranged throughout Southeast Asia. Mahathir then public humiliated Anwar Ibrahim, ousted Anwar from the elite circle, first from the government position then also from the UMNO

party. Anwar mobilized crowds of protesters claiming for *reformasi* – a term borrowed from the Indonesian movement – calling for the step-down of Prime Minister. To which the government responded by jailing Anwar for six years for charging against misconduct and corruption, starting in April 1999 (Case, 2002, p. 134). With the sense of injustice against Anwar growing, the resentment toward the government grew and the public demanded more protection of civil liberty and good governance. This momentum also allowed Anwar's wife to establish a social movement, *Adil* (social justice), leading the movement for good governance in Malaysia, together with PAS and Chinese DAP parties. This *Adil* movement along with other NGOs became the *Partai Keadilan Nasional/PKR* (National Justice Party), led by Wan Azizah (Anwar's wife). Unfortunately, this party did not attract many supporters, and UMNO/*Barisan* won again in the 1999 election, ensuring its hegemony in the parliament. However, PKR became an opposition with a small numbers of their MPs in parliament.

During 2009-2018, Malaysia was led by the Prime Minister Najib Razak, whom was also Mahathir's protégé. At that time, Mahathir supported Najib, when the position of his successor Abdullah Badawi (2003-2008) was weakened. However, Prime Minister Najib Razak had been suspected with corruption since 2015 but his power enabled him to escape from further investigation. Finally, when the country's investment fund 1 Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) was alleged to transfer billions of funds to Najib's personal account and his associates, Mahathir claimed to be fed up by Najib's "kleptocracy" and needed to "restore democracy".

Since 2016, Mahathir resigned from UMNO and together with the former UMNO members established their own party Malaysian United Indigenous Party (*Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia*) and later aligned with the *reformasi* parties PKR, the Chinese DAP, and *Parti Amanah*, a break-up faction which broke off from the Islamic party PAS. They gathered to topple down UMNO/BN by establishing a coalition *Pakatan Harapan* or

PH (Alliance of Hope). The PH Alliance agreed in July 2017 that for the coalition to topple UMNO/BN Mahathir Mohamad stood as the chairman (and Prime Minister candidate), and Wan Azizah – Anwar’s wife as the deputy president. Later after two years, the prime ministership will be transferred to Anwar Ibrahim. The declaration of Mahathir Mohamad as prime ministerial candidate offered a direct challenge towards the UMNO’s Najib. The 2008 election had shaken the hegemonic UMNO with the increasing numbers in their opposition. But only this year, May 2018 with the winning of the coalition PH, has successfully toppled down the rule of the UMNO/BN coalition. With the winning of his alliance, in the 14th election, May 2018, Mahathir is successfully claimed his former seat as prime minister in his 93 years of age, making him the oldest leader in the world. It was a historic moment for Malaysia to move from semi-authoritarian rule to democracy. Although many still suspected Mahathir of being authoritarian especially after tension with Anwar years ago.

With this background, I came to observe the very first day parliamentary plenary session after the inauguration of the new parliamentary speaker in July 2018. It was so exciting to see the spirited new MPs and the new atmosphere of hope inside the parliament. Most MPs were ready to work for the new democracy. These new young MPs relatively do not have experience from their senior counterparts of UMNO, now become opposition, have. During the Minister’s Question Time, when PH MPs stated about the corrupt former government, the senior experienced MPs from UMNO tried to obstruct the discussion by stating rules about speaking time, essentially quoting the articles of the Standing Order. This was considered as “bullying” the plenum. One notable statement came from the former deputy speaker – Ismail Mohamed Said from Kuala-Krau-Pahang constituency. He said that plenary procedure was not exercised well enough. He referred to the several articles stated in standing order about speaking order and time, showing how the new Speaker was still inexperienced one. It was a clever move, as the Speaker in charge has indeed not yet fully

comprehended the standing order. Therefore, it is important for the new 14th Malaysian parliament MPs to familiarize themselves with the parliamentary procedure, or better amend that procedure to become more democratic one, moving away from the old procedure practiced by the previous regime.

Due to the newness of parliament, it has understandably has not yet been able focus on any SDGs issue. The parliamentary secretariat officers during my one-week-visit even said that they are now preparing to establish better parliamentary committee (even asked me to share the committee divisions from the Indonesian and Finnish parliaments). Therefore, the working organs in the House - Committee of Selection, Public Accounts Committee, Standing Orders Committee, House Committee, and Committee of Privileges – will probably be updated soon (Parliament Malaysia, 2018).

Singaporean Parliament

Like Malaysia, Singapore continued the legacy of the British colonialism, forming a Westminster style parliamentary government. This means that government ministers are members of parliaments elected through election and representing certain region of constituency. Singapore was part of Malaysia before and seceded in 1965. This country is also stated to be a semi-democratic country, having regular election but restrictions on the voice of civil society. With only one significant party, People's Action Party (PAP) which has always won majority votes, Singapore needs to appoint members from the opposition in parliament to boost their credibility by including all people from different backgrounds. The PAP, which establishes the country's elites, is known to be disciplined and successfully creates an entrepreneurial bureaucracy and with only five million citizens. As the city state island, Singapore tends to have easier control over their socio-economic development (Case, 2002, p. 166). Probably due to its small size, Singapore's elites are able to blur 'the lines between their

ruling party, the state bureaucracy, and the commanding heights of the financial sector' which make the country efficient (Case, 2002, p. 168).

Thus, with this semi-democratic style and Westminster government, the parliament makes the law, and the government (which is also MPs) executes the tasks according to the laws. In Singapore, the Prime Minister leads the government and the President is the head of state. The members of parliament today (the 13th parliament) after 2015 election has 100 MPs, consisting of 88 elected MPs. There are three Non-Constituency MPs appointed from the opposition parties which did not have votes from the election, and nine Nominated MPs, they are appointed by the President from the wider community to contribute independent and non-partisan views in parliament. These appointed members indeed show the semi-democracy of this one-party government, which wants more legitimacy among people or perhaps from the world.

In Singapore's Westminster parliament, the parliamentary procedure are quite simple. This type refers to both Malaysia and Singapore. The parliament usually has three steps of legislative Readings (see Adiputri, 2015). First Reading is the first legislative stage after the bill is introduced. In this stage, a summary of the bill is provided and MPs might debate the general principle of the bill. If it is agreed that the bill will be accepted for further discussion, the bill will be moved to the Second Reading, usually to a committee related to the issue of the bill. The bill will be thoroughly debated at this stage and the wording of the article might be amended. As the general principle had been agreed on, the focus at this stage is the contents of the bill. Amendments are possible. After the Second Reading, the bill will be sent to one or several committees. Experts can be invited to be heard and questioned in the committee, but the members of the committee are the ones who are responsible for the political decisions. If the committees revise the bill, it is sent back to the plenary in the Report Stage of the bill. To avoid the debate at this stage being a repetition of the second reading,

it is advised that proposed motions should be in written format and members of parliaments/MPs are encouraged to work with colleagues to bring similar views together. Other MPs who are not members of the committee might have an opportunity to review the bill in this Report Stage of the bill. If there are no significant changes from the Report Stage, the bill is proposed for a Third Reading. This is the final stage of legislation and is usually in the Plenary Chamber, the (lower) chamber of parliament, attended by all MPs. There is debate again at this stage if necessary, but the debate will be limited to the passing of the bill, to a yes or no vote. The deliberation process and the report stage are acknowledged by all parliamentary members, and if the government is the majority, as the Singaporean case (and to some extent to the Malaysian in the previous section), the bill is usually passed in this final Reading (or sent to the upper house). The committee in Singaporean parliament consists of seven Standing Select Committees (Parliament of Singapore, 2018)

1. Committee of Selection
2. Committee of Privileges
3. Estimates Committee
4. House Committee
5. Public Accounts Committee
6. Public Petitions Committee
7. Standing Orders Committee

Parliament is also allowed to establish a new ad hoc select committee when needed.

When I observed the Singaporean Parliament in July 2018. I attended the Plenary Sessions for the straight three days of that week: 9-11 July. I was impressed how effective the parliament was. The secretariat person that I contacted was really helpful. She showed me around the tiny room of public visitors and informed me how to stay connected with the parliament. All the documents that I need for my research – like contacts of MPs, policy Hansard papers, and public

announcement regarding bills and date of plenary are available through the updated website of the Singaporean parliament. This effectiveness was also shown with handling the visitors who wanted to see the parliamentary sitting. The requirement for attending – like preparing identity cards or passport, and keeping the bags and mobile phones in the lockers – are easily spotted in the wall and in the website, so I was able to prepare coins for locker storage. I only brought a small notebook to the viewing balcony, and left my belongings in the locker before entering the door. The viewers were sitting in the quiet upper part of the Plenary Room, so we looked down the MPs and the scenery of the Plenum down below. No wonder there was no mobile phones or cameras allowed, even a small tiny click sound was heard in the balcony. There were also some people attending, and students sat as public visitors too.

Another area of effectiveness that was also shown from the plenary. The meeting started at 12, and indeed it convened on time, opening with small ceremonial session, with the mace was brought in together with the entering of the Speakers, followed by a half-an-hour dedicated for Oral Questions. Then, there was a ceremony of passing the bills, with the mace changing back and forth. There were six bills to be passed on that day and a debate about the bills to be introduced. There was a half-an-hour break between 15.15 to 15.45 during this meeting in which the Speaker remained sitting in his chair for the whole time. When the plenum re-adjourned at 15.45, chaired by the deputy, the meeting last until 19.00. Thus, with such extensive long hours of the meeting, it was no wonder that so much can be accomplished within the parliament. I also heard informally that working hours in Singapore last for 10 hour per day. Such long meeting hours continue for the three consecutive three days, only the last day, the plenum ended at 17.00. I can find most of the parliamentary documents from the website, but visiting the parliamentary plenum gave me a different experience and

understanding, knowing the atmosphere of how the bill is passed and recognizing the MPs' faces in real life.

Challenges of Studying Political Institutions in Southeast Asia

From studying these three parliaments, the institutions' traditions indeed reflect heavily on the country's political culture and confirm the role of leaders as the key position holders and decision makers (Case, 2002, p. 20). In fact in Malaysia's case, "the personalization of the political scene" between three figures: Mahathir, Najib and Anwar, is obvious (Lemière, 2018, p. 115). I think in Southeast Asian in general, the political events with their continuities and changes depend on these leaders and elites. Also, from the proceeding described in the parliamentary plenums above, the procedure, structure and tradition, which derived from the historical legacies and cultural orientations are clearly visible for public. It depends on the role of national leaders and elites who may lead their regime to be more democratic or not, a view that has already been discussed by William Case (2002, p. ix). The (in) efficient practices were also seen from leaders.

As stated above, networking and connection matters for researching the parliamentary institutions. It is relevant to Indonesia and Malaysia, which appreciate "clientelist" relations, and are known to have long bureaucratic arrangement for visiting the parliament or observing the plenary. People appreciate more if you have connections. It is not happening in Singapore, due to its effectiveness and readiness to receive (public) guests to visit the parliament. Singapore has series of security processes before entering the plenum, processing the identity card and that kind of process. I needed to pass at least four check-up points before I reached my seat in the plenum balcony, but at least I could enter and see the plenum. I was not sure if I could visit the plenary of Indonesia and Malaysian parliaments without the help of insiders. Such lack or efficient arrangement reflects the society.

Once inside the plenum, all the institutions' structures, procedures and ceremonies are seen in real live, and this is when the institutional theory and parliamentary ethnography are suitable. During the break or in an informal chat, I can see how higher positions are always appreciated. In these three countries, certain attention is given to senior MPs: speakers or leaders of the committees. The journalists will run to follow these elites to ask for statements. In Malaysia, even the elites UMNO MPs still had a place, even when they are now sitting in the opposition seats. In Indonesia, the speaker can decide on certain matters, including to omit the speaking time of MPs. The important role of the elites is probably one of features in the Asian model of democracy.

The adoption of a Westminster parliamentary style of government, in both Malaysia and Singapore, also show that these parliaments are "speaking government". From the Speaker's seat, the government party (including the ministries) is sitting on the right side, while the Opposition sits on the left side. The lay-out of their Plenary Rooms is designed for speaking and debating. In Malaysia, the room is surrounded by camera so anyone who speaks can be seen on the screen up front before the public. Additionally, they are known from their constituent names. In Singapore, the balcony is above the plenum, so viewers can see everything down below to the MPs, so the MPs who speak are seen clearly, and the map will show who is sitting on such particular seat (and from which constituent stated in the *Hansard* paper). This is different from Indonesia, whose parliamentary plenum is set to listen to speeches, with the podium in the front, next to the speakers' seats. It is not designed for debating at all. When there is a question from an MP, it is not clear who is speaking (from which faction nor constituent). Only the Speaker will know who is talking from the light of the microphone. It is likely referring to many numbers of MPs too. It is clear that from the Indonesia's plenary meeting, constituents and speaking in the plenum are the least priority. It places more emphasis on the ritual series of

events (for example, the minister's speech and inauguration) and passing the legislation (if any), but not accountability before the public.

This section summarizes that as a researcher studying the political institutions as parliament in Southeast Asia, one needs to have credible affiliation and good connection or network from the inside the institution. This is likely to happen in other parliaments too in Southeast Asia. This study also confirms the importance of elites (leaders and decision makers) and the importance of parliamentary structure (and procedure), such as the emphasize on "legislative" work (Indonesia) or "representative" or speaking institutions (as Malaysia and Singapore show).

Conclusion

This paper shows the challenges of studying the parliamentary institutions in Southeast Asia. Using Institutionalism theory and applying parliamentary ethnography research method (knowing how the institutions works, the key persons to approach, and careful observation) I show how connection, research topic and affiliation are important and needed to help get through the layers of bureaucracies, which usually consume time. Have references or friends who can connect to the insiders (the secretariats or the MPs) will be an advantage. Once such bureaucratic preparations are overcome, the art of observing of the events is needed to get data for the research. Based on the three national parliaments that I study: Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, the institution's structure and procedure explain the lack or good arrangement of the institutions. Leaders or those holding key positions in decision-making play a great role in guiding the outcome or legislative results. It is important that these leaders as parliamentary members or as the representatives of the people or constituents. When MPs realize their roles as the channel of people's voice, it is important to voice out the grievance of people publicly, rather than re-iterate the works of the executive government solely. Understanding

the role as parliamentarians, including the game of procedure within the institution, is a part form that needs to be comprehended by most parliamentary members. Hopefully, this approach will also be applicable for other parliaments in Southeast Asia.

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