The Impact of State Capacity and Leadership Changes on National Development: Drawing Comparisons between Malaysia and South Korea

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Since the early 1960s, Malaysia and South Korea have achieved impressive national developments. When Malaysia gained independence in 1957, the country was primarily an agrarian economy. After 30 years, in the early 1990s, Malaysia became a middle-income country. The South Korean development was also remarkable. In the early 1960s. After the end of the Korean Wars, the country was one of the poorest economies in the world. Despite such adversity, South Korea soon grew to be among the 10th largest trading nations, and the 15th largest economy in the world. For these remarkable achievements, the state capacity and its leadership have been singled out by many scholars as key factors that contributed to their success, especially in relation to public administration and the role of the state. The government’s role and priorities in the respective countries have transformed over time in line with the ever-changing political and economic landscapes.

When Malaysia and South Korea became independent nations, the two countries had significantly different backgrounds in terms of their colonial heritages, socio-cultural characteristics as well as religion. Consequently, there were also substantial differences in state capacity and its leadership in the two countries. The success of developmental policies of the Northeast Asian countries in the 1960s and 70s motivated Southeast Asian countries to replicate similar development policies. In particular, Malaysia adopted the ‘Look East Policy’ in the early 1980s to transfer the Northeast Asian development model and benchmark the successful experiences in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. Since then, some similarities emerged in the goals and policy priorities of the governments in