



#### **IKMAS SEMINAR SERIES NO.1/2014**

**SPEAKER** : **ASSOC. PROF. DR. MEREDITH WEISS**  
(Visiting Scholar at IKMAS)  
**TITLE** : **MALAYSIA - THE ROOTS OF RESILIENCE**  
**DATE** : **14 JANUARY 2015 (WED)**  
**TIME** : **2.30 – 4.30 PM**  
**VENUE** : **IKMAS SEMINAR ROOM, UKM BANGI**

#### **ABSTRACT**

The overriding structural feature of Malaysian politics is a set of strong, enduring parties, arrayed in a stable, institutionalized party system. These parties largely follow dominant ethnic cleavages, formally or informally, and channel most mass participation in politics. The limited variation in electoral outcomes — the fact that the ruling Barisan Nasional invariably wins elections, at least at the federal level — notwithstanding an active, well-supported array of opposition parties, as well as persistent curbs on civil liberties, suggest Malaysia is a classic example of competitive electoral authoritarianism. And yet that characterization may overstate the strength of political parties per se, as compared with non-party networks linking parties to voters. Seen from a different perspective, the case of Malaysia suggests that theories of electoral authoritarianism neglect to consider civil society — not just the extent to which citizens organize and mobilize outside elections, but also the ways in which interests are structured outside formal politics. A key explanatory factor behind the resilience of competitive electoral authoritarianism, I argue, is the way in which parties' reliance on social networks external to themselves, and those networks' strategic self-interest in cultivating such reliance, serves to align the interests of voters and incumbents. The fusion of party and state that marks long-time authoritarian or electoral authoritarian regimes, in other words, becomes all the more difficult to overcome since it essentially encompasses much of society, as well. I will explore these dynamics in Malaysia, across different levels of government, making use of qualitative field research (especially interviews), survey data, party platforms and other documents, secondary sources, and other resources, with comparative reference to Singapore as a fellow, less competitive electoral authoritarian regime, similarly nested in society.

#### **BIODATA**

Dr. Meredith L. Weiss is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University at Albany, State University of New York. Her research is in the field of comparative politics, focusing on Southeast Asia, especially Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. She is the author of *Student Activism in Malaysia: Crucible, Mirror, Sideshow* (Cornell SEAP/NUS Press, 2011) and *Protest and Possibilities: Civil Society and Coalitions for Political Change in Malaysia* (Stanford, 2006), as well as numerous journal articles and book chapters, and editor or co-editor of six volumes, most recently, the *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Malaysia* (Routledge, 2015), *Electoral Dynamics in Malaysia: Findings from the Grassroots* (ISEAS/SIRD, 2014), *Global Homophobia: States, Movements, and the Politics of Oppression* (Illinois, 2013). Her research addresses political mobilization and contention, the politics of development, forms of collective identity, and electoral politics in Southeast Asia. Dr. Meredith Weiss is visiting scholar at IKMAS from 15 December 2014 to 15 January 2015.