‘Maximum governments were effective in dealing with political challenges and popular opposition to maintain political stability.’ How far do you agree with this judgement?

The political stability of Southeast Asian states was inextricably tied to their maximum governments’ varying abilities to prevent and withstand challenges from political adversaries and popular uprisings. While authoritarian regimes successfully clung to power in the short term by purging challengers, suppressing movements and courting military and business support, these very tactics would later intensify opposition and contribute to the eventual downfall of regimes in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand. Ultimately, the responses of authoritarian leaders were effective insofar that they averted immediate deposition, but their destructive implications for legitimacy — the bedrock of true political stability — render these superficial victories pyrrhic.

At the start, leaders of maximum governments were ostensibly effective in dealing with political challenges in three ways. First, they purged opponents from political and military institutions, effectively removing key threats to preserve their continued rule and political stability. Such purges were common in the initial phases of Suharto’s New Order: the formerly-influential PKI was exterminated by Suharto’s massacre of over a million communist sympathisers in Jakarta and Java following the Gestapu coup, and the PNI’s leading intellectual Sitor Situmorang was imprisoned from 1967 to 1975. This elimination of opposition extended to the military: Nasution, whose influential stature as an independence war hero could potentially challenge Suharto’s rule, was forced to retire as MPRS (i.e. Parliament) Chairman in 1972. Coupled with similar purges of Secret Service General Sumitro and once-loyal commander Murdani in 1974 and 1988 respectively, Suharto’s effective removal of challengers contributed to his 33-year regime’s temporal durability — a marker of political stability. A similar story unfolded in Thailand: after Phibun’s coup, several northeastern supporters of Pridi were arrested in 1948, and three pro-Pridi MPs were shot while in police custody. Phibun’s response to challenges from the military was even more resolute: an attempted coup by navy soldiers in 1951 prompted Phibun’s lieutenants to bomb and sink the navy’s flagship, deterring any future resistance. Such decisive elimination of opponents enabled Phibun to retain power until 1957, limiting regime change and political instability. Hence, by swiftly eradicating potential challengers via murder or imprisonment, maximum governments could effectively maintain control and, by extension, stability.

Additionally, authoritarian leaders successfully suppressed mass movements through forceful crackdown and legal controls, limiting the scale of popular opposition that entails

instability. In Indonesia, Suharto's forces clamped down harshly on the 1974 Malari Riots, ending the riots within two days by arresting 770 and firing upon the rioters. Ten years later, Suharto would violently suppress the Tanjung Priok Demonstrations with the military killing 28 and the government jailing 30, including prominent ex-military commander Dharsono. Such harsh repression not only allowed the regime to weather these challenges, but also instilled fear among the populace that deterred future mobilisation and resistance. Alongside Suharto's 1974 SK 028 and 1977 NKK/BKK policies that prohibited off-campus protests and political student organisations, it was difficult for mass movements to gain traction, shielding Suharto's regime from popular opposition and preserving political stability. Thailand's maximum leaders carried out similar suppression: Phibun's regime deported politically-active Chinese and arrested over 1000 leftists and student activists in 1952 to counter a growing communist insurgency. Additionally, he introduced a Revolutionary Order which enabled suspected communists to be detained indefinitely and tried in military courts, constraining the movement. Sarit would follow in his predecessor's footsteps, limiting opposition by arresting over 100 intellectuals and journalists after proclaiming martial law in 1958. Thus, draconian laws and coercive crackdowns by maximum governments substantially weakened movements and insurgencies and dampened the threat of popular opposition, ensuring stable rule when challenges are more limited in scale and number.

Perhaps more importantly, beyond successfully weathering challenges from rivals and the masses, authoritarian leaders prevented opposition in the first place by obtaining the loyalty of powerful business and military leaders via patronage and cronyism. Suharto's New Order was accompanied by the rise of his close *cukong* associates: Liem Sioe Liong's Salim Group obtained monopolies in the clove, flour and cement industries, propelling Liem to become Indonesia's richest man. Similarly, Bob Hasan controlled 2 million hectares of prime timber concessions in Kalimantan, earning him the title "Timber King". Such patronage co-opted support from economically-influential business groups for Suharto's regime. In fact, cronyism became a source of leverage for Suharto, who successfully quelled the Petition of Fifty by threatening to exclude its signatories from privileges and rewards. Thus, patronage could mitigate political challenges and preserve stability in the process. This was even more evident in Marcos' New Society: a host of his cronies such as Conjuango, Benedicto, and Floriendo enjoyed export monopolies in coconuts, sugar and bananas respectively, reaping massive profits. Additionally, Marcos promoted his stalwart supporters to prominent military and government posts, making his protégé Enrile Secretary of Defence and loyalist Ver Head of the National Intelligence and Security Agency in 1970; the latter would remain a staunch ally even amidst the 1986 EDSA coup. Hence, by giving economic, political and military influence to their most loyal collaborators, authoritarian leaders bought the continued

support of powerful associates, nipping potential opposition from these groups in the bud and enabling stable rule.

However, the efficacy of maximum regimes' responses would wane over time — these very tactics of repression and co-optation ironically intensified political opposition and toppled numerous regimes, eroding political stability. First, leaders' suppression of challengers and crackdowns on movements destroyed their legitimacy in the eyes of the populace, fomenting public discontent and hurting stability. Marcos's regime would suffer such a fate when he relentlessly persecuted Aquino Jr: massive opposition erupted after his 1983 assassination in broad daylight at Manila International Airport, with support coalescing around Aquino's widow and the Catholic Church openly withdrawing support from Marcos. Three years later, Marcos's blatant election fraud led to over a million Filipinos forming a human barricade on EDSA — a revolution that would topple Marcos's New Society and bring Corazon Aquino to power. Hence, Marcos's forceful removal of opposition created destabilising protests that led to his own removal instead. In Thailand, numerous authoritarian leaders were deposed in a similar fashion when their repressive tactics hurt their legitimacy: when Thanom deployed tanks and attack helicopters to quell the 1973 pro-democracy uprising, King Bhumibol intervened and ordered their resignations, leading to regime change. History would repeat itself in May 1992: when Suchinda — having seized control in a 1991 coup — brutally suppressed protests and killed hundreds of demonstrators, the King instructed him to 'reconcile' with Chamlong and compelled him to step down. Thus, the previously-effective tactics of purging challengers and quashing opposition actually fatally compromised their political legitimacy, leading to revolutions destructive to stability.

Likewise, authoritarian leaders' cronyistic practices also corroded their legitimacy and alienated those who lost out, strengthening destabilising resistance to their rule. While patronage secured support from those who benefitted, the zero-sum nature of economic and political opportunities meant that preferential treatment for their associates came at the expense of others. For Suharto, his aggressive prioritisation of Chinese businessmen led to massive discontent among the largely non-Chinese populace, contributing to the anti-*cukong* 1974 Malari Riots and 1984 Tanjung Priok Demonstrations that undermined political stability. Further, Suharto's packing of his cronies into his March 1998 Cabinet — with his associate Bob Hasan appointed as Trade and Industry Minister — fomented public anger that would culminate in a slew of protests in May that compelled Suharto's resignation. Hence, corrupt practices lost Suharto more support from his people than they gained from his cronies. Similarly, Marcos's patronage networks drew ire from those sidelined. Young military graduates, disillusioned with rampant graft among senior officers managing Marcos's development projects, formed RAM, which attempted to bomb Malacanang Palace and

backed the EDSA Revolution that toppled Marcos. Additionally, after Marcos forcefully redistributed the Lopez family's lands and enterprises to his own cronies, the Lopezes publicly criticised him and backed Corazon Aquino towards the end of Marcos's rule. Hence, in co-opting support from their cronies, maximum leaders' inadvertently destroyed their legitimacy and support from other groups, sparking greater political instability when opposition intensified.

Overall, maximum regimes' responses to political challenges enjoyed ostensible success at the start, particularly in Indonesia and the Philippines where leaders' early repression of potential opposition contributed to their longevity. However, it would be clear in the later years of authoritarian rule that these tactics actually intensified opposition below the veneer of efficacy. This is because the strategies of violent repression, legislative control and cronyistic co-optation only targeted the superficial aspects of political stability: they limited the number of internal challenges leaders faced and prolonged the survival of their regime, but they undermined genuine political stability by corroding the legitimacy of leaders. The counter-example of Vietnam evinces the importance of legitimacy: strong VCP leadership through two Indochinese conflicts and dynamic policies to suit changing contexts (e.g. Doi Moi with the impending end of the Cold War) cemented the regime's legitimacy, allowing it to stay in power since reunification without substantial unrest. Hence, maximum regimes' responses to political challenges were ultimately limited in efficacy: their tactics successfully delayed the outbreak of opposition, but made the eventual eruption more destablising for their nation and deadly for their regime.