The 2008 Malaysian General Election: Killing the Ghost of 1969?

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Introduction

On 8 March 2008, Malaysians voted in their thirteenth general election. The months leading up to the election had already indicated that Malaysian society was in turmoil. Large street protests in Kuala Lumpur, a strong and unified opposition and the return to politics by Anwar Ibrahim, all combined to raise social and political tensions to an unusually high level. The government was widely expected to receive a punishment for Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi’s years of weak leadership. Yet the results surprised everyone. The gains made by the opposition surpassed even the most optimistic expectations of its supporters. The government, although braced for weakened support from its spectacular victory in 2004 when it won 90% of parliamentary seats, was shocked to find it had won less than two thirds of parliamentary seats, whilst also losing five states to the opposition. The two-thirds majority in parliament had been a self-proclaimed sacred threshold for the government to ensure its legitimacy. Winning the election with only a simple majority, while opposition parties formed government in five state assemblies, including the highly developed industrial states of Penang, Perak and Selangor, shook the ruling coalition to its core. Within four years the Barisan Nasional coalition had gone from its greatest victory ever, to the worst result in its history.

The so called "political tsunami”, as the opposition and its supporters came to call the election, sent aftershocks through Malaysia’s political system. The election set in motion a debate over the future of the ruling coalition, while the weeks and months following the election saw intensified speculation over the possible consequences of the result, largely driven by a confident and emboldened opposition. From predictions of the impending implosion of the Barisan Nasional coalition to questions over the apportioning of blame, the result of the election ensured that the political environment in Malaysia remained charged throughout 2008.

Not a small role in the intensified post-election environment was played by Anwar Ibrahim. Following the election, the one-time deputy Prime Minister and martyr of the reformasi movement was successful in positioning himself once again as opposition leader by bringing the three major opposition parties to form the multi-party coalition of Pakatan Rakyat (PR, the Peoples Alliance). His presence before the election had already re-ignited a sense of the late 1990s reformasi movement, which had temporarily slipped from the political landscape under the early years of Abdullah Badawi’s term as Prime Minister. Apart from various localised factors in early 2008, a broader change in the political discourse at the national level turned the 2008 election into a nightmare for the government.

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Since the 2008 election Malaysia has been in a state of transition. Several paths of contention have opened up the possibility of broader political change, while at the same time the Barisan Nasional ruling coalition, particularly its dominant component party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) has been working hard to reassert its hegemony over Malaysia’s political system. At a highly contentious moment in Malaysia’s history, in this paper I analyse the 2008 Malaysian general election, while making the following claims. Firstly, I argue that the 2008 general election represents a quantitative break from the past by bringing an end to the ‘hegemonic party system’ in Malaysia. This claim is based on an analysis of the outcome of the election through comparisons with previous general elections, and close studies of the Malaysian electoral system, party politics, and the Pakatan Rakyat’s coalition-building success.

Secondly, I claim that the 2008 general election was a display of a fundamental qualitative change in Malaysian society. This claim requires a demonstration of the new political discourse displayed by the opposition and by large segments of civil society in the run-up to the election, which has seen ethnicity pushed towards the margins of the public sphere. This discussion entails an assessment of the state of civil society in Malaysia, from within which one increasingly hears calls to an end of "race-politics", defined as the use of race as an overarching feature of the political system and the most relevant prism to discuss Malaysian society. The entrenched practice of race-politics is increasingly challenged by the new discourse displayed by the opposition in the 2008 general election, specifically, the ideology of Anwar Ibrahim, which entails a more neutral tone in regards to race; for example favouring class-based redistribution of wealth, rather than the current race-based affirmative action program. I will contrast the politics surrounding the 2008 general election with past political and social discourses in Malaysia, and conclude that there has in fact been an underlying qualitative change in Malaysian society that rose to the surface in the 2008 election. Due to the intimate link between ethnicity and political hegemony in Malaysia, the new discourse was crucial to the opposition’s success in bringing an end to the hegemonic party system.

As such the two claims are distinct, yet related. The electoral success of the PR in 2008 would not have been possible without the wider social-political changes occurring in Malaysia. The fundamental shift that occurred in the late 1990s with the birth of the reformasi movement, although temporarily diffused in the 2004 general election, was nonetheless still present in 2008. I argue that Malaysian civil society has reached a critical level of public engagement under which the current system of ‘semi-democracy’ has become highly unstable. Questions over the long-term consequences remain unanswered, at least until the next general election due to take place by 2013. In the meantime Malaysians witness a government trying to reconstruct its hegemony over the political system, and an opposition struggling to keep the momentum of 2008 alive.

The broader aim of this paper is to use the 2008 general election to draw meaningful conclusions over changes taking place in Malaysian society. To do this without a detailed look at Malaysia’s history would risk making an overly simplified and narrow assessment of the 2008 general election, thus I include a historical background to recent events. As well, in line with the vast majority of scholarship on Malaysia, I assume ethnicity as the most prominent feature of Malaysian society. I aim to not only examine why this is the case, but to suggest that this may not necessarily remain so forever.

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Ethnicity permeates Malaysian society to such an extent that it is difficult to discuss any feature of Malaysian public life without reference to it. In particular, the spectre of communal violence became a central theme when race-riots broke out in May 1969, leaving hundreds dead and a nation in shock. The violence followed the poor election result for the ruling Alliance coalition, which had lost support from both Malay and Chinese voters to communal opposition parties. The election results, in combination with the violence that followed, fundamentally altered inter-communal relations. The Malay leadership successfully used the events of 1969 as a justification to establish their hegemony over the ruling coalition, and Malaysia has been haunted by the ghost of 1969 for the past four decades.

Origins and characteristics of the Malaysian political system

Ethnicity and communalism

Malaysia’s multi-ethnic society is the product of European colonialism. The region was originally inhabited by what can generally be referred to as ‘Malays’. The term Bumiputras (Sons of the Soil) more broadly refers to Malays and the Orang Asli – other indigenous groups such as the Penan, Iban and Kadazan who might not identify as Malays but are still considered as the original inhabitants of the region. Colonial and independent governments have distinguished this group from the Malaysian Chinese and Indian communities who arrived in the region mostly during British colonial rule. Under the colonial system, Indians filled the plantations and lower-level civil service while Chinese were dominant in mining, commerce and small scale trade. The Malays’ strong connection to the land, and the Chinese and Indians’ arrival in the region as temporary workers, led to an immediate and lasting socio-economic division. While the vast majority of Malays led a rural lifestyle, a small, educated elite filled the upper strata of the British colonial administration. Under the colonial system, Indians filled the plantations and lower-level civil service while Chinese were dominant in mining, commerce and small scale trade. The Malays’ strong connection to the land, and the Chinese and Indians’ arrival in the region as temporary workers, led to an immediate and lasting socio-economic division. While the vast majority of Malays led a rural lifestyle, a small, educated elite filled the upper strata of the British colonial administration. At the time of independence, Malays saw themselves as the legitimate inhabitants of the region while considering the Chinese and Indians as pendatang – immigrants. Malaysia was thus a classical plural society, as conceptualised by Furnivall:

They mix, but do not combine. Each group holds it own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the marketplace, in buying and selling. There is a plural society, with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately within the same political unit.²

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² I use terminology about ethnicity as it is understood in the Malaysian political discourse and context. For example, the various ethnic-religious communities such as Malay Malaysians, Chinese Malaysians and Indian Malaysians are frequently referred to as races within Malaysia, while Malaysia is referred to as a multi-racial country. Race-politics refers to policies or political rhetoric that is considered to focus on issues of race and ethnicity. I also make use of the convention of referring to Chinese-Malaysians simply as ‘Chinese’ and likewise refer to Indian-Malaysians as ‘Indian’. For a discussion of Malaysian constructions of race and ethnicity see J. S. Kahn, ‘Class, ethnicity and diversity: some remarks on Malay culture in Malaysia’, in Fragmented Vision: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia, J. S. Kahn and F. Loh Kok Wah, (eds.) Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1992, pp. 158-178.


As a result of their diverse economic and cultural histories the various ethnic communities found themselves in vastly contrasting positions inside the colonial political system. A closer look at how the Malay and the Chinese community related to the colonial government reveals insights into the contemporary relationship of each respective group with the state, and with each other.

The Chinese community enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy from the colonial administration because the administration lacked effective means of exerting political control over this internally fragmented and unstructured group. The Chinese community was considered a ‘transient community’ in Malaya, and until World War II were themselves almost completely oriented towards political developments in China. This historical autonomy from the government and strong feeling of self-reliance has had lasting effects on the communal consciousness of the Chinese community. Although incorporated into the political system to some extent after independence, following 1969 the Chinese community again saw themselves as being outside a national political system that became dominated by the Malays.

The Malay community itself had a vastly different experience under the colonial administration, which also explains its contemporary position in the political system. Firstly, despite some different origins, the Malays were a relatively homogeneous group with Malay as a common language and Islam as a common religion. Secondly, due to the close official relationships with the Malay royal rulers, British relations with the Malay community took on a much more systematic as well as paternalistic relationship compared to the ad hoc administration of the Chinese and Indian communities. Furthermore, Malay culture, Kessler argues, with its focus on traditional authority, is ‘distinctly and centrally political in character […] revolving substantially around relations between ruler and ruled’.

While it is a simplification to view Malaysian society purely through ethnic divisions, communal solidarity is an extremely dominant force in Malaysian politics. As Von Vorys explains, although there was undisputedly a great sense of solidarity within the various communities in Malaysia, it was ‘cultural sub-groups’ within these communities that served as the ‘primary sources of identity in daily routines and in most interpersonal relations.’ Linguistic, cultural and even religious differences existed within the Chinese and Indian communities so that identities were primarily focused around common dialects and languages which corresponded to a shared geographical background as well as kinship connection going back to India and China respectively. Significantly, communal solidarity within the groups grew stronger as the interests of the prime communities,

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namely Chinese and Indian, outgrew inter-communal rivalries, such as those amongst various Chinese clans, indicating that, for a long time, the political system has played a significant role in shaping ethnic identity. For example, the enfranchising of the various communities following independence occurred along ethnic lines, while the sort of ‘rapid democratisation’ that occurred as part of the granting of independence did not allow for a gradual maturing of secular ideologies and associations to develop.\(^{14}\) Therefore, although these communities were historically heterogeneous, their communal solidarity has to some extent been created, and most definitely reinforced, by the perception that communalism protects the individuals interest.\(^{15}\) This perception was strongly amplified by the race riots of 1969, when the fears amongst Malaysians that they could not rely on the state during times of crisis (or to avert crisis in the first place) were confirmed, and thus existing mistrust and misinformation were reinforced by real experiences. As such, the events of 1969 led to a worsening of relations between the races in Malaysia and a strengthening of the emphasis and importance of ethnicity in politics.

A careful look at Malaysia’s political history also reveals constant splits within communities. These splits within ethnic groups are of interest when assessing the role of ethnicity in the nation’s political system. When individuals do not cooperate along communal lines, but rather split from their dominant ethnic group to pursue their own interest, sometimes aligning with members of other ethnic groups, there is an opportunity to gain an understanding of what motivates Malaysians to abandon race-politics. These splits are most easily detected in Malaysia’s party politics as well as in elections, and one of the most significant inter-communal splits that was to occur in Malaysian politics was that of the Malay community itself, as discussed later.

**Elections and the construction of hegemony**

British conquest of the region, starting with the Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca and Singapore, and later expanding into the West Malayan peninsular through treaties with the Malay sultans, gradually established a colonial administration with a modern civil bureaucracy.\(^{16}\) As a result, Malaysia inherited a political system that is almost completely modelled after the British system, although it quickly took on characteristics that indicated more limited political freedoms.\(^{17}\) The legitimacy of the Malaysian government is to a great extent drawn from the successful contestation of regular general elections.\(^{18}\) Held within the 5 year period as outlined under the constitution, elections are hotly contested, even though the process is tightly controlled by the government.\(^{19}\) Some appearance of

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\(^{15}\) Collins develops the idea of the ‘security dilemma’ in the context of Malaysia’s communal arrangements. He argues that communalism is largely caused by uncertainty over the other groups’ intentions, leading to communal action, which in turn exacerbates the fears of the other group, thus becoming a self-perpetuating phenomenon. See A. Collins, ‘The ethnic security dilemma: evidence from Malaysia’, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Volume 20, 1998, p. 261-278.


competitiveness is required to uphold the important claims of legitimacy while unofficial outlets for discontent, namely those political activities that occur outside the electoral system, are restricted and discouraged by the state through a range of coercive mechanisms. Laws such as the Internal Security Act (ISA), the Societies Act, the Sedition Act, the Universities and University Colleges Act, allow the government to control both civil and political activities. Through its control over laws and regulations the government pushes the arena of contention out of the comparatively uncontrollable field of civil society, and into the highly controlled field of general elections. Furthermore, the regime surrounds the focus on elections with the ‘language of democracy’, constructing an authoritative narrative that steers political activity away from the types of social activism found in liberal democracies and towards a much more reserved and curtailed activism.

This is achieved through a number of tactics. Firstly, warnings of Malaysia’s constant risk of racial violence - such as that of 1969 - are repeated by leaders to discourage unofficial political activity. Invoking the ghost of 1969 discourages mass participation in national debates, especially those debates that touch on questions over communal arrangements. Rather than taking place in the open, political protest is limited to official forums where it can be controlled and guided along an acceptable framework. Secondly, leaders warn that political turmoil will have an adverse effect on the economy, specifically in regards to foreign investment. Threats of economic loss to the country are therefore used to emphasise the need for political stability which is then used to legitimise authoritarian policies.

For example, in July 2008 Prime Minister Abdullah assured Malaysians that he would ‘continue to take whatever measures necessary to ensure that the investment climate in Malaysia will continue to be favourable’. In response to being asked whether he was ‘prepared to crack the whip’ he responded that ‘if we think its necessary, at the right time, why not?’. Thirdly, by describing dissenting political activities as ‘uncivilised’ or simply ‘rude’, the regime portrays protesters or political oppositions as displaying disrespectful behaviour. Respect for authority is considered a virtue in most Malaysian cultures so that suggestions of distinct Asian values are put forward as a justification for why activities that are considered essential to the democratic process in Western democracies might not be appropriate in Malaysia. Keeping opposition within the tightly controlled boundaries of the electoral system allows the ruling party to soundly defeat oppositional forces while at the same time claiming that Malaysia is a democratic

24 After thousands protested against the Internal Security Act in the streets of Kuala Lumpur, Prime Minister Najib urged ‘We can provide them stadiums where they can shout themselves hoarse till dawn, but don’t cause disturbance in the streets’. See Lau, L., ‘Najib defends cops, calls mass rally and inconvenience’, The Malaysian Insider, 2 August 2009.
26 PM: political stability will soon be restored’, The Star, 2008.
country. Opposition in the form of street protests and radical campaigns are too blatant a symbol of discontent, and are usually dealt with swiftly and severely.\textsuperscript{29} Although regular elections have taken place in Malaysia for six decades, the institutions that are generally associated with broader democratic principles are largely missing. Jomo points out that:

\begin{quote}
although suggesting some accountability of elected rulers to the ruled, [democracy in Malaysia] also implies the apparently voluntary surrender of control over public life by the ruled to the rulers. By reducing the meaning of democracy to voting in highly circumscribed circumstances offering limited choice (where the possibility of changing the regime, let alone the terms and nature of governance itself, is very rarely an option), elections have been largely reduced to what may well be a ritualistic and orchestrated exercise legitimating the surrender of many other democratic rights.\textsuperscript{30}
\end{quote}

Likewise, Crouch argues that ‘in view of the ruling coalition’s unbroken record of success, at least at the national level, it might be argued that elections in Malaysia are really no more than a ritual providing a cloak of legitimacy for what is really authoritarian rule.’\textsuperscript{31} Furthermore, the first-past-the-post system ensures the dominance of large parties, and privileges the desirability of stability over fairer representation.\textsuperscript{32} Despite gaining only between 53\% to 63\% of the popular vote in the last twelve general elections (with the exception of 1969, where the Alliance only gained 45.3\% of the popular vote) the Alliance/BN coalition has secured between 71\% to 87\% of seats.\textsuperscript{33} In other words, the electoral system allows the dominant coalition to govern a proportionally higher number of seats than the popular vote might suggest. Furthermore, the electoral system is said to weight rural voters more heavily than urban voters, advantaging the Malay vote.\textsuperscript{34} In light of the above description of Malaysia’s plural society, it is therefore noteworthy to point out what the Malaysian electoral system lacks, namely any institutional or constitutional guarantees, or mention of, equitable communal representation.\textsuperscript{35} The electoral system, thus, while appearing neutral in regards to ethnicity, has inadvertently played a major role in Malaysian ethnic relations. By adapting its electoral methods to demographics, the Barisan Nasional coalition, and before that the Alliance, consistently won over two-thirds of parliamentary seats until the 2008 general election.

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**Hegemony in a plural society**

As with most dichotomies in social sciences, the one that places a state on a continuum between a pure liberal democratic state on one end, and a totalitarian state on the other, is bound to restrict understanding the true character of a regime. Crouch argues that authoritarian and democratic characteristics do not necessarily contradict each other because ‘a regime can become more responsive and more repressive at the same time’. Malaysia is highly ambiguous in this regard and a multitude of labels have been used to describe its regime type. Jesudason describes Malaysia as a ‘Statist Democracy’; a situation where power-holders have much leverage in determining the rules of political competition, allowing the incumbents to entrench themselves in society but without employing a high degree of coercion. Case classifies Malaysia’s system as ‘semi-democratic’; a regime in which elections play a key role, but where both the elections, as well as the space outside elections, is tightly controlled. Case argues that this is the most stable form of authoritarianism and crucial in its maintenance is ‘a single dominant party that fuses with the state bureaucracy and then mediates patronage’. As such, the term ‘regime’ seems justified when making reference to a system of power that goes well beyond the UMNO or the Barisan Nasional. In short, while the basic institutions associated with democracy are present, the regime nevertheless administers a ‘soft-authoritarianism’. In Malaysia’s case, these ambiguous regime characteristics to a great extent stem from the aforementioned complexities of the plural society. The political problems created by a plural society within a democratic framework have led to a system of governance known as consociationalism.

Consociational theory argues that conflict is not inherent to plural societies, but that ‘distinct lines of cleavage amongst subcultures may actually help, rather than hinder peaceful relations among them’. By reinforcing the position of different groups, the opportunity for conflict decreases. Conflict arises only when there is a contestation of public space, which does not routinely occur in Malaysia, where the interaction between groups is limited and controlled to such an extent that the regime simply does not allow situations to arise where conflict might to occur. The regime therefore excuses its authoritarian inclinations as a necessity to prevent existing inter-communal arrangements from being challenged, which, it claims, is likely to lead to conflict and possibly violence. Political hegemony is thereby created almost entirely on the assumption that ethnicity is the defining feature of society, and that it is the government’s responsibility to keep the communities ‘in check’. Communal leaders are encouraged to work within the established parameters of the political system, which favours communalism.

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39 W. Case, ‘New uncertainties for an old pseudo-democracy: The case of Malaysia’, *Comparative Politics*, Volume 37, Number 1, 2004, p.84. (pp. 83-104
The view that democracy is unlikely to function in a divided society because political parties are systematically inclined to engage in race politics has been summarised by Crouch as follows:

The central political issues in ethnically divided societies always involve questions that polarise politics along ethnic lines. In a democracy, politicians cannot avoid taking ethnic stands on ethnic issues. To mobilise ethnic votes, they have little choice but to give voice to sentiments felt deeply by their constituents while there is a strong incentive to stir up ethnic feelings further in order to outbid rival politicians from the same ethnic group. In circumstances where politicians from all communities feel compelled to adopt rigid policies on ethnic issues compromise becomes almost impossible to achieve with the result that multi-ethnic coalitions either break apart or cannot be formed in the first place.  

Unfortunately, this does not offer any insight into why the central issues must be divisive along ethnic lines in the first place. While in Malaysia this has obviously been the case, pointing out that it is so, does not answer why it is so. Part of the answer lies in the fact that in Malaysia ethnic issues are often almost impossible to separate from non-ethnic issues, as almost all parts of the public sphere are saturated with communal concerns. Therefore, political parties have been inclined to emphasise communally specific needs rather than the shared needs of all the communities, offering views that will be welcome by one group in particular while appearing exclusionary to another group.

Lustick argues that in divided societies such as Malaysia it is not the occurrence of violence and conflict that warrants attention, but rather how political and social stability can be maintained despite such divisions. In that sense, Malaysia’s national history is remarkable not for the rare outbreaks of communal society, such as those of 1969, but for the absence of routine outbreaks of violence in general. It is over this point, however, that Malaysia’s semi-democratic system of government connects with its plural social composition. It may have been its authoritarian characteristics that have prevented conflict. The communal divisions in Malaysian society are so clear that in most spheres of public life the boundaries are well known. According to consociational theory, this clarity of communal distinction, which was often reinforced by the political system and through its communal parties, has to some extent worked to prevent conflict, rather than induce it.

The vastly different historical experiences described earlier, have brought the various ethnic groups in Malaysian society to quite distinct contemporary consciousnesses, with each group perceiving their claims as natural and just. This can be seen by how both the Malay and Chinese community argue their case through the language of rights.

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44 Even cooperation in areas such as labour relations, poverty reduction and education is prevented by disagreement and competition between different ethnic groups over fundamental questions of national rights. Consequently, most civil interests are inevitably articulated by communal leaders in ethnic terms. See Muhammad Ikmal Said, ‘Ethnic Perspectives of the Left in Malaysia’, in Fragmented Vision: Culture and Politics in contemporary Malaysia, Kahn, J. S., Loh Kok Wah, F., (eds.) Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1992, pp. 254-281.


leaders from respective communities to make considerable compromises. The assumption of the pre-eminence of ethnic issues over non-ethnic issues stems from the presupposition that different groups have different needs, which is of course true, but which ignores the reality that there is also an overlapping field of public policy that is of equal concern for all communities. In the past, the field of shared concerns has been too small, so that ethnic issues have trumped non-ethnic issues. At independence, the establishment of a grand coalition comprising the leadership of Malaysia’s separate communities was possible when the leadership of various communal groups shared an ‘elite political culture’. Bargains were struck and enforced within each community by strong leadership. Today elite consensus is breaking down. There are now strong opposition forces who do not share the mainstream political culture of the current regime - while at the same time much wider parts of the population are making their way into politics through a more engaged civil society. Before discussing recent challenges, however, I will discuss how the regime has maintained hegemony in the face of many challenges from communal parties as well as multi-ethnic coalitions.

The Malaysian Opposition in General Elections

In pre-war Malaya the British colonial administration was considered the undisputed arbitrator for communal arrangements. British defeat and the Japanese occupation were experienced very differently by the Malay, Chinese and Indian communities, while both of these events accelerated the process of independence that saw communal groups posturing and competing for the best deal in an independent Malaya. Within a decade, Malayan society went from relative political passivity under British patronage, to holding competitive elections with local, mostly communally-based parties competing against each other. In this section, I analyse the opposition in Malaysia from the time of independence until the beginnings of the reformasi movement, dividing the evolution of the hegemonic system into pre- and post- 1969 because of the fundamental shift which events of that year generated for ethnicity in Malaysian politics.

Pre-1969

The introduction of elections in post-war Malaya promptly led to the formation of the Alliance, a coalition of ‘elitist, multietnic conservative or “moderate” nationalists’ with three component parties, namely the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC). The arrangement of a multi-ethnic coalition which drew support through its communal parties turned out to be the most effective arrangement for success in Malaysia’s early electoral system. As Ratnam and Milne point out, rather than campaigning on multi-ethnic matters, the key to the Alliance’s success lay in its choosing to highlight one of the component

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parties, namely the UMNO, MCA or MIC, appropriate to the ethnic composition of a
certain area.\(^{51}\) In this way, what might appear like a multi-ethnic coalition at the national
level, where leaders proclaim inter-communal slogans, was a highly communal party
system in the way it functioned in individual seats. The Alliance was thus able to gain
support from the non-Malays through the MCA and MIC, while at the same time win
Malay grassroots support through UMNO’s dominance of the coalition. While this system
was effective in terms of winning elections, it proved to polarise Malaysian society further
in the long-term.

With the ending of British patronage, Malays felt vulnerable in face of the total
economic dominance by the Chinese. Support for UMNO was thus largely sustained by
fear within the Malay community that the non-Malay minorities, who collectively made
up an almost equal share of the population at the time of independence, would one day
challenge the Malays in the political sphere, on top of their economic domination. Out of
this sense of vulnerability grew the concept of Malay unity, propagated by the UMNO
who relied on their ability to capture the Malay vote for their power within the Alliance
coalition. In return for unified support of UMNO, the party guaranteed the Malays strong
protection of their “special rights” through promises of redistribution of wealth. This
pressure to retain Malay support meant that the BN has brought significant benefits to
large parts of the Malay community, such as through rural development programs.\(^{52}\) The
MCA held some leverage over the otherwise dominant UMNO in the early years through
its funding of the Alliance.\(^ {53}\) This leverage all but disappeared when UMNO began to
establish its own sources of revenue, marginalizing the MCA into a non-confrontational
partner of UMNO.\(^ {54}\) At the same time, the MCA’s and MIC’s support depended on these
parties appearing to gain reasonable concessions for their respective communities, for
example in regards to vernacular language education. The perceived submission of these
parties to the UMNO led to weakened support for the MCA by the Chinese community.
As a result, MCA candidates began to depend increasingly on Malay votes, and thus on
UMNO.

The Alliance/BN coalition maximised its chances of electoral success in
Malaysia’s plural society by implementing a vote-channelling system that gave
Alliance/BN candidates, regardless of which party or ethnic community they represent, an
enormous advantage over opposition candidates standing for elections individually as
members of their respective communal party. For example, while a Chinese-Malaysian
MCA candidate received the complete BN vote, including the Malay block, a candidate
from the main Chinese opposition party - the Democratic Action Party (DAP) - received
only the opposition Chinese vote, with the opposition Malay vote generally going to the
Islamic Party of Malaysia (Parti Islam SeMalaysia, PAS). This sort of pattern, where
communally based opposition candidates compete against each other, as well as against
the BN candidate, is known as “three cornered fights”. In other words, while the
opposition vote has been split between the Chinese and Malay vote, which were generally

\(^{51}\) K. J. Ratnam, R. S. Milne, *The Malayan parliamentary election of 1964*, University of Malaya Press,

\(^{52}\) H. Crouch, ‘Malaysia: Do elections make a difference?’, in *The politics of elections in Southeast Asia*,
122-123.

\(^{53}\) K. S. Jomo, ‘Election’s’ Janus face: Limitations and potential in Malaysia’, in *The politics of elections in
Southeast Asia*, Taylor, R. H. (ed.), Woodrow Wilson Centre Press and Cambridge University Press,

\(^{54}\) J. Chin, ‘New Chinese leadership in Malaysia: the contest for the MCA and Gerakan presidency’,
*Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Volume 28, Number 1, 2006, p. 72-73. (pp. 70-87)
cast along racial lines for the DAP and PAS respectively, the BN candidate received the total of votes cast for any of the BN component parties. This has put individual opposition parties, especially those that are communal and not in a coalition, at an enormous disadvantage. In effect, the BN candidate was able to win a seat even when actually receiving less than 50% of both the Malay and the Chinese vote. While the DAP might have won the majority Chinese vote, and likewise the PAS candidate might have gained majority support from the Malays, collectively, the BN candidate would still obtain a total majority by combining the pro-BN Malay and Chinese vote.\footnote{For a more detailed scenario see H. Crouch, ‘Malaysia: Do elections make a difference?’, in \textit{The politics of elections in Southeast Asia}, Taylor, R. H. (ed.), Woodrow Wilson Centre Press and Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 116.}

It is thus crucial for the opposition parties, namely PAS and the DAP, to enter into electoral agreements that avoid "three-cornered fight" with the BN candidate. Even this arrangement however, has not been enough to break the BNs dominance. Instead, in the past, it has generally elicited a cross-communal voting pattern, in which MCA candidates won with the support of Malay voters, who prefer a Chinese-Malaysian MCA candidate to a Chinese-Malaysian DAP candidate, since the BN as a whole - through UMNO dominance - is seen as the strongest protector of the Malay rights.\footnote{R. K. Vasil, \textit{Politics in a plural society: a study of non-communal political parties in West Malaysia}, Australian Institute of International Affairs [by] Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1971, p. 32-33.} Likewise, when the contest is between a Malay PAS candidate and a Malay UMNO candidate, Chinese voters – scared off by PAS’s perceived radical Islamism - are more inclined to support the "moderate" UMNO candidate. Significantly, this shows that as a result of multi-party coalition building, cross-communal voting patterns have always been a part of Malaysia’s electoral system.

In short, the success of the Alliance, and after 1971, the Barisan Nasional, hinges on two assumptions. Firstly, its ability to win the bulk of the Malay vote - hence the importance of Malay unity - and secondly, that the opposition is fragmented along communal lines.\footnote{H. Crouch, \textit{Government and Society in Malaysia}, Cornell University Press, New York, 1996, p. 29-30.} Malay unity, expressed in overwhelming Malay support for the Alliance/BN, has the effect that opposition parties inevitably assume a communal character.\footnote{R. K. Vasil, \textit{Politics in a plural society: a study of non-communal political parties in West Malaysia}, Australian Institute of International Affairs [by] Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1971, p. 36.} Lack of Malay support for self-proclaimed non-communal opposition parties led these parties to appear communal, regardless of their claims. This process was amplified by the strong support given to these parties by the Chinese community, who were disenchanted with the MCA’s subservience to the Alliance/BN continuation of Malay supremacy.\footnote{Ibid, p. 36.} Despite these inherent communal tensions in the Alliance formula, the period between independence and the 1969 race-riots is generally regarded as a harmonious period in Malaysia’s history. The following section will explain why this is the case, and why the formula eventually broke down in 1969.

The outstanding issue of Malaya’s first election in 1955 was the question of independence, which allowed the Alliance to secure a strong victory while avoiding the sort of communal challenges facing it in later elections.\footnote{K. J. Ratnam, \textit{Communalism and the Political Process in Malaya}, University of Malaya Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1965, p. 22-23.} Communal issues were so problematic that the Alliance remained largely indecisive on issues such as language and education. Decisions on these contentious issues were seen in zero-sum terms amongst...
leaders, with each decision bringing fierce opposition from one side or another. With these sorts of controversial communal questions polarizing society, the immediate post-independence era saw the Alliance benefit from the presence of non-communal challenges. As von Vorys points out, before 1969 the Alliance remained largely untested in its ability to deal with communal issues, as special issues such as independence itself, the communist insurgency, and Indonesian confrontation dominated the elections of 1959 and 1964. By the late 1960s communal issues such as language policy, education, and the economic situation of the Malays, had shown little progress. When the Alliance was forced to deal with communal issues, such as the National Language Act in 1967, its decisions further polarised society along communal lines.

In brief, the short amount of time that was allowed for the setting of the constitutional contract left most parts of Malaysian society dissatisfied with communal arrangements. Both the Malay/Bumiputra community and the minority groups, namely the Chinese and Indian communities, struggled to convince the other groups, by citing historical evidence, that their claims are legitimate. The Malays claimed that they were the original inhabitants of the land, and thus entitled to a special political position as well as a higher economic status, while the non-Malays claimed that they ought to have equal rights, as they were now all Malaysians. These claims came to a head over the entry and eventual exit of Singapore into the Federation. As leader of the Singaporean based People’s Action Party (PAP), Lee Kuan Yew’s proposal of a ‘Malaysian Malaysia’, where citizens hold equal rights, regardless of race, conflicted with the established notion of ketuanan Melayu (Malay Supremacy). The idea of equality amongst races could not be reconciled with the constitutionally enshrined special position of the Malays so that Lee’s challenge eventually ended in Singapore’s expulsion from the federation in 1965.

This episode inspired communal sentiments both within the Chinese community as well as the Malay community, raising the stakes for the 1969 election.

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61 For example, in 1955 a committee proclaimed Malay as the official language of the nation making it compulsory to be taught at schools while allowing schools to teach a common syllabus in English or other vernaculars. This pleased neither the Malay nationalists who demanded that Malay be given a more prominent role in schools, nor did it please Chinese educationists and the MCA who insisted on having Chinese also proclaimed an official language. See Funston, J., Malay Politics in Malaysia: A study of UMNO and PAS, Heinemann Educational Books, Kuala Lumpur, 1980, pp. 49-51.


63 The National Language Act sought to follow through on the constitutions pledge that Malay would eventually become the only official language of the Federation. Pushed by Malay nationalists, amongst them Mahathir, it didn’t suit the Alliance who favoured a more open ended approach to these sorts of polarizing issues. See Vorys, K. v., Democracy Without Consensus: Communalism and Political Stability in Malaysia, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1975, pp. 200-210.


The significance of May 13 1969

The 1969 election, infamous for the inter-ethnic violence that followed, was a defining moment in Malaysian history. Threatened by the poor election result for the Alliance, Malays saw the election as a breakdown of the *quid pro quo* bargain with the Chinese that supposedly guaranteed them pre-eminence in politics in return for the Chinese control of the economy. The nature of the electoral campaigning meant that the election was effectively a referendum on the nature of the social contract. The Alliance/UMNO was pressed towards an increasingly pro-Malay posture as a result of a challenge from the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) which played on Malay insecurities. At the same time, the DAP campaigned on a ‘Malaysian Malaysia’ slogan as the constitutional articles mentioning the special position of the Malays had increasingly come to be considered a ‘temporary’ provision by many in the non-Malay community.

While race had been a strong factor in Malaysian political life since long before 1969, the scale of the violence that took place in May 1969 was so shocking to Malaysians that they radically changed not only the political system, but the wider social consciousness. Following the events of 13 May 1969, the consociational model of the pre-independence era evolved into a hegemonic party system, with UMNO establishing itself as a dominant party underpinned by growing Malay nationalism. The obvious lack of faith in the Alliance leaders gave rise to the ascendance of a group of Malay nationalists pressing for a stronger Malay government. This group blamed the election results and the violence that followed on the ongoing economic hardship of the Malays calling for policies to address this economic imbalance. As such the NEP became the expression of ‘Malay economic nationalism’.

After 1969 the concept of *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) became the overriding force of Malaysian politics. Internal party elections, Crouch points out, have been particularly controversial in this regard. Non-Malay parties, drawing their support from ethnically defined grassroots, were finding it increasingly difficult to appear to be championing their communities’ interests, while at the same time being part of what was increasingly seen as a Malay-dominated government. Lijphart argues that stability is most likely to be maintained in consociationalist systems when there exists a ‘multiple balance of power amongst subcultures’ as well as ‘subcultural autonomy’. This multiple balance of powers all but disappeared in 1969, when the balance of power swung heavily to the UMNO, where it has remained ever since. While the 1960s saw the rise of a Chinese opposition, inspired by the Malaysian Malaysia concept, the 1970s dispelled all Chinese hopes for a genuine share of political power in the face of complete Malay

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69 Ibid, p. 43-44.
political dominance.\textsuperscript{75} As such, the political system ceased to be one of consociationalism, and became one of ‘control’ – exerted by UMNO. This change in systems occurred as a direct result of the violence of May 1969 which gave rise to the idea of control as a necessity. Lustick points out the desirability of a dominant group by pointing out:

\begin{quote}

it is perfectly reasonable to presume that, in some deeply divided societies, the effective subordination of a segment or segments by a superordinate segment may be preferable to the chaos and disorder that might accompany the failure of consociationalism.\textsuperscript{76}
\end{quote}

It was this sentiment - that control (in this case by UMNO) is desirable in the face of the prospect of ethnic-violence, that became the defining feature of Malaysian politics. Here, I argue this sentiment is breaking down today. The failure of consociationalism became the success of the Malay nationalists. To many, May 13 confirmed a fear that had been entrenched since independence; namely that Malaysia was a society where racial tensions were so high that only a strong state could prevent the society from tearing itself apart. The violence of 1969 thus began the state-run social engineering program known as the New Economic Policy (NEP), which had two purported aims. One was the eradication of poverty, the second was the elimination of identification of race with occupation.\textsuperscript{77} In real terms, the NEP became an affirmative action program for the Malays/Bumiputras with the aim of giving this group a greater share of corporate wealth and equity.\textsuperscript{78} As the NEP began to transform Malaysian society, some of these changes were evident in the ways the political system functioned.

\textit{Post-1969}

Throughout the 1970s, the state became much more active in society. The 13 May incident had precipitated a generational change in Malaysia’s leadership, from the old guard who had seen the nation into independence - personified by Tunku Abdul Rahman - to a younger, technocratic group of Malay leaders who wanted to bring the Malays into economic parity with other races, particularly the Chinese.\textsuperscript{79} One of the leaders of this charge was Mahathir bin Mohamad, who conceptualised these new sentiments in his book \textit{The Malay Dilemma}.\textsuperscript{80} As Malaysian society (and particularly the Malay community) underwent dramatic changes, political parties began to adapt by using new tactics and methods in their electoral organisation. For example, the appearance of larger numbers of Malays in urban areas saw non-Malay parties such as the DAP contest the ‘urban Malay

vote’ for the first time.\textsuperscript{81} Despite great economic advances brought to them by the NEP, the vast majority of urban Malays remained poor, so that the DAP’s socialist rhetoric aimed to find support to contrast with UMNO’s predominantly ethnically centred rhetoric.\textsuperscript{82} In terms of candidates, the DAP realised that if it wanted to contest mixed seats it had to present non-Chinese candidates, so that in the 1978 elections there were 9 Indian, 9 Malay and 35 Chinese candidates, with each candidate’s ethnicity corresponding to the majority ethnic group in the contested seat.\textsuperscript{83} These cross-communal appeals by the DAP were met by the UMNO pointing out the dangers of supporting the opposition - referring to the 1969 election - and branding Malay candidates in the DAP as traitors to their race.\textsuperscript{84} As mentioned, Malay unity was of utmost importance to the continuation of the UMNO/BN-system. In this sense, the NEP began to disrupt the very foundation upon which the post-1969 political order rested; by interfering in the once homogeneous Malay community, Malay unity would become an increasingly elusive concept for UMNO.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Malaysia experienced high economic growth rates and the NEP was having its greatest visible impact on the Malays.\textsuperscript{85} For the first time, ethnic Malays began to play a significant role in the national economy. Those who benefited from this growth, especially the urban Malays, firmly supported Mahathir’s Barisan Nasional. At the same time, however, large segments of the Malay community, especially in the rural areas known as the Malay heartland, felt left behind. This class division amongst the Malays later came to coincide with the division amongst those Malays who supported UMNO, and those who supported PAS, the major Malay opposition party.\textsuperscript{86} Kessler points out that PAS’s strong Islamic credentials have attracted Malays who were disillusioned with UMNO’s excessive materialism so that Malay support for PAS was as much a class factor as it was one based on ideological-religious factors.\textsuperscript{87} At the same time, those who base their support for UMNO on its continuous delivery of economic development, are likely to be drawn to PAS during times of low economic growth.\textsuperscript{88} Nevertheless, Islam began to play an increasingly important role in Malaysian politics, starting in the early 1980s, as a result of a combination of factors, namely the intense contest between PAS and UMNO over the rural Malay vote; the ‘ulama coup’ of 1982 that brought current leaders such as Nik Aziz and Hadi Awang into PAS leadership; and external developments in the Muslim world, most importantly the


\textsuperscript{82} Despite the DAP’s occasional success in terms of gaining Malay support, in general, Malays remained weary of what was perceived to be a Chinese party. See Mohamed Abu Bakar, ‘Communal parties and the urban Malay vote: Perspectives from Damansara’, in \textit{Malaysian Politics and the 1978 Election}, Crouch, H., Hing, L. K., Ong, M., (eds.), Oxford University Press, Petaling Jaya 1980, p. 114.


\textsuperscript{84} Ibd, p. 149.


\textsuperscript{87} Ibid, p. 102.

\textsuperscript{88} C. Kessler, ‘Malaysia in Crisis, 1997-2000’, \textit{Review of Malaysian and Indonesian Affairs}, Volume 34, Number 2, 2000, p. 102
Iranian revolution.\textsuperscript{89} With PAS challenging UMNO for the Malay vote, and the DAP continuing to attract a sizable share of the Chinese vote, Malaysia’s opposition parties continued to challenge the BN from sharply divided positions.

Despite these fundamental changes, especially in Malay politics, the opposition’s electoral success at the national level still depended on the cooperation by the main opposition parties in forming a similar multi-party and multi-ethnic coalition to the BN.\textsuperscript{90} This was first attempted in the 1990 general election in which Semangat 46 (Spirit of ‘46) - a largely Malay political party formed as a consequence of an internal UMNO factional feud - challenged the BN while holding unilateral coalitions with both PAS and the DAP.\textsuperscript{91} For the first time in Malaysia's history, the government was facing a Malay led, multi-ethnic opposition coalition, indicating the reality that Malays were no longer a unified political block.\textsuperscript{92} Neither, however, was the coalition as a whole showing any signs of unity. PAS’s strategy throughout the 1980s had seen it distinguish itself from UMNO almost exclusively on its Islamic credentials, including proclaiming the aim of implementing an Islamic state in Malaysia along with \textit{Hudud} law.\textsuperscript{93} Even with PAS and the DAP showing open hostility to each other, the opposition coalition posed an unprecedented challenge to the BN. With the Malay vote split, the BN began to rely more heavily on Chinese votes (along the pattern described earlier), which it largely received by highlighting PAS’s extremism.\textsuperscript{94}

Although the 1990 election demonstrated important new realities, namely that Malay politics could diverge from the narrow paths set by UMNO under the pretext of Malay unity, it failed to inspire broader change in Malaysian society. By the next general election in 1995 the opposition had fragmented again, handing the BN a sound victory, undoubtedly boosted by an economy that was growing at no less than 8\% for its seventh consecutive year.\textsuperscript{95} For an opposition coalition to be successful, economic conditions would have to change while the gap left behind by the disbanded Semangat 46 - leaving the DAP and PAS drifting, once again, in isolation in Malaysia’s political wilderness - needed to be filled by a uniting cause. As the economy began to crash in 1997, Malaysia’s opposition found its uniting cause - reformasi.

\textit{Reformasi – a new era}

The Malaysian political consciousness as it existed on 8 March 2008 is both the result of the deep ethnic and cultural factors discussed previously, as well as more contemporary factors embodied in the reformasi. Kessler claims that the Malaysian political-social

\textsuperscript{92} ibid, p. 712.
The environment contains a separation so that one finds the ‘underlying socio-cultural currents running through Malaysian society’ exist ‘below the flow of surface political manoeuvres and events’. These underlying currents are the broad, long-term social changes occurring in any society, and which open societies are able to articulate through free national debates. In Malaysia, however, the day-to-day politics are unreflective of the underlying socio-cultural currents. According to Kessler, the two currents have converged only twice in Malaysia’s history: in 1969 and in 1998. During these two moments of political crisis in Malaysia, the state temporarily lost control of the national narrative.

Throughout the 1980s, the state became more authoritarian in its attempt to implement its developmentalist program of ‘Vision 2020’, leading to what came to be described as Mahathirism. As this program reached its height in the mid 1990s, underlying socio-cultural currents increasingly diverged from the official state-led discourse, creating the social conditions for another outbreak of popular discontent. Rapid industrialisation throughout the 1980s and 1990s dramatically transformed Malaysia’s economy, bringing social progress and improving the lives of many Malaysians. The middle classes that emerged - both Malay and Chinese - were uniquely linked to the state through patronage networks, meaning that there was a large group of Malaysian who, in the face of the coming instability, were naturally inclined to support the status quo. As a creation of the ruling political class itself, the majority of middle class Malaysians depended on it for continued prosperity. Indeed the links between the middle classes and the political class became so close that success in business increasingly required political connections, while success in politics required business funding, or a practice of ‘money politics’.

The social implications for those who were left outside this system were enormous. When the Asian Financial Crisis began in 1997 opposition against the system had been precipitating beneath the surface for years. As the hegemonic system seemed at the height of its legitimacy, counter-hegemonic currents began to emerge in different places. For example, dakwah (Islamic revival) groups began to cater to the large

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97 The study by Derichs, involving interviews with twenty think-tank members, NGO activists, academics and politicians, also finds that in Malaysia ‘public and elite discourses do not necessarily overlap, as is usually the case in Western democracies.’ See C. Derichs, ‘Political crisis and reform in Malaysia’, in The State of Malaysia, Gomez, E. T., (ed.) RoutledgeCurzon, London, 2004, p. 120.
104 A 2007/2008 United Nations Human Development Report shows that Malaysia is one of Asia’s most unequal societies with a GINI index of 49.2 compared to China (46.9), Philippines (44.5), Thailand (42.0), India (36.8), Vietnam (34.4) and Indonesia (34.3). See full country list at http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/indicators/147.html
groups of young rural Malays who had been brought onto urban campuses by the NEP’s bumiputra university quotas, and who felt alienated from the modern economy and the class of crony Malay capitalists that it attracted. In this way the reformasi movement, at least for the Malays, was a question of economic reform, while the articulation of their economic grievances were channelled through mosques and Islamic leaders, and thus often couched in Islamic language. To bring communally specific counter-hegemonic discourses into a common movement was going to be the most significant achievement of the reformasi.

Despite widespread criticism against the BN government at the time, the cultural, ethnic and economic diversity of Malaysia meant that during its beginnings the reformasi movement was unable to offer clear, coherent alternatives to Mahathir’s policies. Despite holding the BN and Mahathir in particular as a common target, the opposition could hardly be considered a united group because of the fierce competition amongst civil society groups and opposition parties. Ethnic divisions in Malaysian society lead to corresponding divisions in organisations that do not exist in an ethnically homogeneous society.

The reformasi movement is considered a unique moment where a sense of unity was felt by Malaysian society, yet strong division existed between the largely urban, progressive social elements who perceived reformasi as a push for greater freedom, democracy and justice in the wake of the Anwar trial, and on the other hand the largely rural, Islamic opposition which envisioned many of the same reforms as the secularists, but who also wanted to pursue the implementation of Islamic ideals, with some looking towards an Islamic state as the ultimate achievement. Whatever it meant to different groups, the ‘anti-system reformasi movement’ was more than just a call for a change in policy, but rather, the movement offered a place for many of the groups that during previous decades had been drawn into the governments’ fold, but that had now become alienated. To some extent, modernisation had led to an increasing overlap between the concerns of Chinese and Indian activists, such as human rights and social justice, and the concerns of those Malays who felt excluded from the system.

Yet this did not over-ride ethnic divisions completely. In Malaysia, fear of inter-ethnic violence closely follows periods of political unrest, and is especially prevalent amongst the urban Chinese. The Ghost of 1969 - the belief amongst Malaysian society that race-riots are only one political crisis away - is invoked frequently by a political elite that perpetuates the spectre of ethnic violence in an attempt to narrow public debate and cross-communal cooperation. Fear thus serves to intimidate Malaysians into political passivity. Case notes how this tactic was exploited by the government-controlled media with the coverage of the Indonesian reformasi. The implied parallels to Malaysia in linking the Indonesian reform movement with the brutal anti-Chinese violence there had potent...

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effects on the Malaysian Chinese community. The Ghost of 1969 was therefore still a powerful force in Malaysian politics, even into the early reformasi period.

Nevertheless, the overlap of concerns amongst civil society groups grew firstly around economic concerns, and secondly, around themes such as social justice and non-corrupt governance. These common objectives led to the creation of numerous NGOs, political movements and parties. Weiss points out that some opposition parties in fact functioned much like NGOs in that they targeted narrow causes, such as marginalised communities, rather than making broader attempts to unseat the ruling party, since this, for much of Malaysia’s history, has been almost inconceivable. This observation by Weiss seems true for the initial 1998-1999 period, where parties such as Keadilan were based on narrow calls for justice for arrested former deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. Before showing that the reformasi eventually evolved into a much broader movement, the following section will discuss the philosophy of Anwar Ibrahim.

Anwar Ibrahim

Variously described as a traitor to his race, a sodomist, or as Malaysia’s last hope, Anwar Ibrahim’s unique evolution, from Islamic youth movement leader to the top of the BN/UMNO system, only to become its number one enemy almost overnight, helped to turn Anwar into one of the most enigmatic figures in Malaysian politics. To many, Anwar epitomises the concept of the Melayu Baru - the new class of educated, self-confident Malays who are the creation of the NEP. His personification of a pure Islamic character that at the same time exemplifies a modern, cosmopolitan Asian persona, fits comfortably into Malaysia’s plural society. In his speeches Anwar is as likely to quote from Confucius, Gandhi and Shakespeare as from the Koran. Anwar’s ease with secular doctrines such as human rights and his engagement in inter-faith dialogue, has won him broad respect in the West, as well as Asia and the Islamic world. In his younger years, Anwar’s concern for Malay welfare was based on his personal view of Islam as a complete social system that determined how one should live, rather than merely a set of rituals to be followed. It was through this holistic approach to Islam that Anwar’s politics gained the appearance of being pro-Malay, although Anwar did not see his approach as a contradiction, even in Malaysia’s pluralistic society. When placed in its specific historical context, Anwar’s activism in Malay politics might not necessarily raise doubts over his commitment to a multi-ethnic society.

In the 1980s, in response to the rise of the Islamic resurgence, the government began to increasingly restrict political activity by the introduction of various laws, such as banning political activity on university campuses and the introduction of the Societies Act.

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113 M. Colvin,‘Anwar Ibrahim a possible candidate for UN Secretary-General’, ABC Online, 19 July 2006, http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2006/s1691285.htm
115 Ibid, p. 5.
Youth Movement, ABIM), a movement led by Anwar. The increasing limitations placed on civil society by the state, meant that Islamic student associations were one of the few avenues where young Malays could vent their grievances. In this context, Anwar might be seen as social reformer rather than a proponent of exclusively Islamic principles. His own personal situation, being a young, ambitious Malay, at a time when the socio-economic position of Malays in Malaysia was admittedly poor, inevitably led him to channel his political energy into what might today be interpreted as a pro-Malay stance. In other words, given the social circumstance at the time, it is not surprising that Anwar pursued his ambition of social justice through Islamic and Malay politics.

As we have seen, when Anwar was recruited into UMNO in 1982 he instantly acquired a great deal of influence inside the party due to his value to the BN in countering the growing Islamic opposition movement. As a charismatic leader who had spent his youth fighting for the plight of poor Malays, Anwar constructed the religious and ideological foundation with which UMNO countered the challenge by PAS throughout the 1980s. Until today he is able to retain his deep ‘Islamic credentials’ by pursuing various reform agendas through the prism of Islam. His charisma and sense of humour have helped him deflect allegations of sodomy and he continues to hold considerable respect amongst conservative, rural Malays.

Anwar’s downfall from power began when it became clear to Mahathir that Anwar’s favoured policies would have had major implications on the Malaysian system of state-business patronage networks. Anwar was described as an ‘economic purist’ who was ‘eager for more widely based expansion of Malay corporate power and wealth than Dr. Mahathir’. On the other hand, the system of Mahathir’s ‘contrarian economic strategy’ was based on the role of the privileged Malay elite. Anwar recognised the transformative implications of the financial crisis as an opportunity for wider political change, stating that ‘the process of creative destruction is already working its way through our economies. […] In truth, this process is not confined solely to the market economy.’

Anwar’s reluctance to save government cronies who were destined to suffer economically under a more liberalised economy, earned him powerful enemies in the highest levels of the BN regime.

The brutal way that Anwar was treated during and after his arrest violated the regime’s own continuous discouragement of excesses in the public political arena and was perceived by many Malaysians as ‘evidence of “cruelty” (kezaliman)’. The fierce personal attacks on a respected leadership figure such as Anwar, including a beating by the Inspector general of the Police while in custody, after which Anwar famously appeared in court with a black eye, was seen as ‘un-Malay’. His treatment stirred outrage amongst Anwar’s supporters, and brought embarrassment to the government.

Most agree that ‘the bitter legacy of the Anwar trials has caused deep political and religious

121 S. Subramaniam, ‘The dual narrative of “Good Governance”: Lessons for understanding political and cultural change in Malaysia’, Contemporary Southeast Asia, Volume 23, Number 1, 2001, p. 66.
122 Ibid, p. 74.
divisions among Malaysians, particularly amongst Malays’. The crisis, Weiss notes, indicated yet another milestone in the evolution of the Malay’s political culture, from one characterised by a ‘neo-feudal’ adherence to loyalty, to one displaying much more openly critical attitudes.

Anwar’s unique background and characteristics placed him in an unusual position in Malaysian politics. Ian Buruma neatly summarises Anwar’s crucial role for Malaysia’s opposition:

The real Malay dilemma today is that democrats need the Islamists: Malay liberals and secular Chinese and Indians cannot form a governing alliance without religious and rural Malays. And the only serious contender who can patch over the differences between secularists and Islamists for the sake of reform is Anwar, a liberal Malay with impeccable Muslim credentials.

His greatest challenge, perhaps, is to maintain the trust of the Malay community. He does this by emphasizing the need for fair and equitable policies for all Malaysians. To a predominantly Malay crowd chanting ‘reformasi’, Anwar declared in August 2008 that ‘the national economy should be distributed with fairness to all...Malays, Chinese, Indians, Iban, Kasazan...the whole people.’ For this seemingly inclusive approach to politics, Anwar is labelled a ‘traitor to the Malays’. When Anwar was finally brought down by the regime, he had laid the foundation of a new narrative that was initially focused on him personally, but quickly grew into a broader claim to change. In short, the movement went decisively ‘beyond Anwar’.

The groups that united under the banner of reformasi began to organise avenues to voice their criticism, to spread their opinions and to attract wider support. Given Malaysia’s restrictive media, the internet provided a new and unique opportunity for the reformasi movement to express itself. The use of alternative forms of media, predominantly the internet, radically transformed Malaysia’s political and social landscape, and will thus be discussed in some detail.

The New Media

Historically, the print media has played an important role in Malaysia’s political and social development, particularly in how different communities developed a distinctive awareness of themselves. Unsurprisingly, the media in Malaysia has historically been divided along ethnic lines, with publications in a range of languages catering to different communities in Malaysia’s multi-lingual society. Thus, in its appearance in different languages, the print media has both facilitated division amongst the different communities, as well as unity within them. For example, the Malay language press of the early twentieth

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128 The Deputy Prime Ministers accusation was supported by other UMNO MPs as well as a number of Malay NGOs. See ‘Now JB UMNO calls Anwar ‘traitor to Malays’’, Malay Mail, 10 August 2009. http://www.mmail.com.my/content/10378-now-jb-umno-calls-anwar-%E2%80%98traitor-malays%E2%80%99. And ‘NGOs support Muhyiddin’s statement on Anwar’, Bernama, 10 August 2009.
century challenged the authority of individual *kerajaan* (Malay kingdoms) and allowed the Malay *rakyat* (people) to share ideas and finally imagine themselves as one *bangsa* (nation).

There still exists a diverse vernacular press in Malaysia today. While some national papers, such as *The Star* and *The Straits Times* are in English, others such as *Utusan Malaysia* are in Malay. At the same time, there exist numerous publications in Chinese and Tamil. Despite their linguistic diversity, with few exceptions, all the mainstream newspapers, as well as radio programs and television broadcasters, are controlled by Barisan Nasional component parties. The dominance of the mainstream media has allowed the BN to monopolise the distribution of information, especially to rural Malaysians with little access to alternative forms of media. During the *reformasi*, however, Malaysian newspapers experienced a dramatic loss in sales as a result of their obvious pro-government tone. It is into this environment that the so called ‘New Media’ appeared in the wake of the *reformasi*.

Malaysia’s alternative media is almost exclusively found on the internet due to relatively non-existent online censorship laws. English is the language of choice for most online news websites and blogs, which raises important points regarding the role of communalism in the alternative media. The choice of English perhaps stems from most of the sites’ origin, as well as its readership, in Malaysia’s educated classes and urban localities. Furthermore, the egalitarian nature of English means that independent news sites appear more inclusive and less race-based, as well as modern and ‘international’. The strong perception of the Malay print media such as *Utusan* and *Bernama* as generally pro-government or pro-Malay mouthpieces has given the Malay language media a close association with Malay nationalism and the concept of *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy), leaving it inappropriate for the new media.

The online media has thus helped to break down some of the language barriers that had previously existed between the various language groups in Malaysia. In short, most bloggers - Chinese, Malay or Indian - realise that in order to reach the widest possible audience to engage with about national issues involving politics and ethnicity, using English is most appropriate in presenting oneself as an enlightened participant in this new conversation. Writing in one’s ethnic language would instantly ‘out’ oneself as holding communal sentiments and prevent one from being accepted into this ‘post-racial’ debate. While publishing in their respective vernaculars is out of the question for Chinese and Indian Malaysians who wish to reach a national audience, a Malay writing in Malay – despite it being the country’s official language – would likewise too readily be perceived as writing for Malays, rather than Malaysians. This phenomenon is to some extent the


133 ‘Najib: Govt will not censor the internet’ *The Star*, 7 August 2009.

134 For example on 15 April 2009 *Utusan* published a controversial article titled ‘Rise up Malays’ (*Bangkitlah Melayu*) making appeals to ‘Malay unity’ by stating that ‘Malays must rise and unite in the face of challenges by other races who now appear more and more outrageous’ (*Orang Melayu perlu bangkit dan bersatu dalam berhadapan dengan tantutan kaum lain yang kini dilihat semakin keterlaluan)*.
result of the ‘ethnicisation’ of Malay by UMNO, so that English has become a sort of *de facto lingua franca* of the new media and the wider national debate.\(^{135}\)

An example of the facilitation factor of English is found in *The Nut Graph*, an online news website which features a regularly updated segment called ‘Found in Translation’.\(^{136}\) In this feature, articles, editorials and commentary from the Malay, Chinese and Tamil press respectively are re-published in English translation. This allows Malaysian’s of all language backgrounds who visit *The Nut Graph* convenient access to vernacular discourses that had previously been exclusively limited to their respective communities. Giving the different communities’ access to each others’ publications not only places some pressure on these publications to exclude racially insensitive articles, but it allows a divergence of previously disconnected discourses. In other words, communal conversations are merged into a national, cross-ethnic discourse.

Clearly, knowledge of English is a prerequisite for this cross-communal diffusion of opinions, and the fair criticism remains that while this new discourse might cross ethnic boundaries, it creates new boundaries by shutting out those without access to the internet or sufficient ability in English. However, this is in some ways little different to the role of internet media in many other societies, including in the developed West. As such, portrayal of the alternative media as an elitist domain does not contradict the point that the expanding use of the alternative online media in Malaysia has helped to bring the communally divided political and social discourses towards a more unified national discourse. As Malaysia is raising levels of adult literacy and technological development, Malaysia’s ‘digital divide’ is set to further narrow.\(^{137}\) Furthermore, some downloaded material from internet sites does reach into villages, for example that distributed by PAS electoral workers, particularly before the 1999 general election.\(^{138}\) It is this kind of combination of technological advancement, together with the growing awareness of common links amongst Malaysians that has allowed the alternative online media to play such a crucial role in social development. By proving itself such a flexible and open platform for discussion, the internet has allowed Malaysians to engage with each other to an extent that the traditional print media had never allowed, having a direct impact on Malaysia’s electoral arena.\(^{139}\)

The activity of blogging is not limited to journalists, activists and politically engaged students, and it is today common even for Malaysian politicians to keep a regularly updated blog site. For example, former Prime Minister Mahathir,\(^{140}\) current opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim,\(^{141}\) DAP parliamentary leader Lim Kit Siang\(^{142}\) and the spiritual leader of PAS and Chief Minister of Kelantan, Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat\(^{143}\) keep frequently updated blogs. These sites are filled with personal entries on political developments in Malaysia as well as links and posts referring to other sources and media publications. Due to their popularity and wide readership, Malaysian bloggers have

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\(^{136}\) www.thenutgraph.com


\(^{140}\) http://chedet.co.cc/chedetblog/

\(^{141}\) http://anwaribrahimblog.com/

\(^{142}\) http://blog.limkitsiang.com/

\(^{143}\) http://www.blogtokguru.com/
become a source of potential candidates for political parties, with the DAP recruiting ‘Malaysia’s most influential blogger’, Jeff Ooi.\footnote{‘Cyberspace talent search’ \textit{The Star}, 26 November 2007.} Bloggers like Ooi are part of a growing group of professionals consisting not only of online activists, but also IT professionals, lawyers, political scientists and non-governmental organisation leaders that entered the ranks of the DAP.\footnote{‘Blogger Ooi to join DAP and contest in polls’, \textit{The Star}, 29 July 2007.} As such, the internet has become a highly political arena in Malaysia.

As the government can largely limit mainstream media coverage of social unrest or otherwise critical political events, Malaysians increasingly go online to receive news. For example, during large scale protest by ethnic Indians in Kuala Lumpur in November 2007, MalaysiaKini saw its visitor numbers spike to one million page views per day, up from the usual 100,000 daily views.\footnote{L. M. Keong, ‘Techies sidestep Malaysian government’, \textit{ZDNet Asia}, 15 November 2007. \url{http://www.zdnetasia.com/news/business/0,39044229,62034449,00.htm}} In May 2009 scenes of the newly elected PR house speaker for the state of Perak being forcefully ejected from the sitting assembly by members of Malaysia’s Special Branch police appeared on YouTube hours later, taken by a PR parliamentarian’s mobile phone camera.\footnote{‘7 May 2009 - Malaysian Police Drag Speaker Out of Perak Legislative Assembly’, \url{http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=GhHZxXqH-9Y}} Online video posting, through sites such as YouTube, Malaysiakini.tv and Mediarakyat, are forming an important part of the opposition’s strategy to expose government tactics as well as to publicise its own activities. \textit{Media Rakyat - Information for the People} aims to ‘improve the freedom of information in Malaysia’, by featuring on its site ‘informative and interesting video clips concerning current events and speeches that the mainstream newspapers and TV stations may not be able to cover or reluctant to cover.’\footnote{http://mediarakyat.net/} Although clearly pro-opposition, featuring links to the three opposition parties, most of the videos are unedited footage of speeches, rallies or protests that receive no - or heavily distorted - coverage in the mainstream media. Election campaigning activities and speeches given by opposition leaders are almost completely barred from Malaysian television so that sites like \textit{Mediarakyat} are a massive boost to the opposition’s ability to reach voters. Likewise, footage not only of protest rallies, but of the often harsh police actions against them, assists to give Malaysians a more complete view of what is happening than that they might gain from the mainstream media alone.

Malaysiakini.tv has taken the concept of online video one step further, featuring interviews conducted by professional journalists and “street footage” that is edited and presented to resemble modern TV news and current affairs programs.\footnote{http://www.malaysiakini.tv/} Popular videos receive thousands of views within days of being posted on the site. Perhaps not surprisingly, rather than tightly edited reports or interviews of leaders, it is the raw footage of controversial events that attract the most viewers. For example ‘16 arrested at candlelight vigil in KL’ received 250,000 views within 5 days, and ‘Commotion at temple relocation dialogue’ received 85,000 views within the same time.\footnote{‘16 arrested at candlelight march in KL’, 5 September 2009, \url{http://www.malaysiakini.tv/video/17731/16-arrested-at-candlelight-march-in-kl.html}. ‘Commotion at temple relocation dialogue’, 5 September 2009, \url{http://www.malaysiakini.tv/video/17727/commotion-at-temple-relocation-dialogue.html}}

Given the sensitive content of some of its videos, Malaysiakini.tv has come under pressure from the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) to\footnote{http://www.malaysiakini.tv/}
AsiaOnline
Flinders Asia Centre Occasional Paper 2, April 2010

remove some videos from its website, sparking a widespread and united backlash.\textsuperscript{151} The independent online media is constantly under pressure from the regime. Reporters from Malaysiakini have been barred from attending government functions and official press conferences, since ‘under the Printing Presses and Publications Act, Malaysiakini cannot be considered a newspaper as it does not have a publication license’.\textsuperscript{152} Popular *Malaysia-Today*\textsuperscript{153} news site, run by famous blogger and member of Malay royalty, Raja Petra Kamaruddin, was temporarily blocked\textsuperscript{154} while Raja Petra was later arrested under the ISA as he was ‘deemed a threat to security, peace and public order’.\textsuperscript{155} These examples of censorship demonstrate that while the internet in Malaysia offers unique opportunities for a wider dissemination of views, the usual tools of repression and intimidation are used by the regime to narrow the democratic space that the internet created.

In response, a group of prominent bloggers, led by Ahirudin Attan (also known under his blog name ‘Rocky Bru’\textsuperscript{156}) formed the National Bloggers Alliance in April 2007.\textsuperscript{157} The need for some sort of ‘offline’ network between individual bloggers became clear when in early 2007 Ahirudin Attan and fellow blogger Jeff Ooi were sued by the New Straits Times Press for defamation.\textsuperscript{158} The so called ‘blogosphere’ has thus become another ‘zone of contestation’, and as George argues, goes much broader than an alternative news medium:

> In the style of a true social movement, alternative media practitioners show strong social networks. [...] Organisational ideas, material resources, media content, and people flow amongst the groups. Each group may seem small, informal, and unimpressive by mainstream standards, but together they achieve speeds and levels of mobilisation that can take authorities by surprise.\textsuperscript{159}

The role of the new media is thus crucial in the facilitation of new ideas and a new discourse. Rather than merely giving Malaysians an alternative source of news, Funston points out that websites originating from the reformasi movement facilitated the cultural shift that changed Malaysian politics.\textsuperscript{160} The BN’s own response to the online offensive by the opposition has been slow, with few BN politicians blogging and the coalition instead relying on its dominance of the mainstream media to reach its most important


\textsuperscript{153} http://mt.m2day.org/2008/


\textsuperscript{155} ‘RPK arrested under ISA’, *The Star*, 12 September 2008.

\textsuperscript{156} http://rockybru.com.my/

\textsuperscript{157} ‘Bloggers form grouping’, *The Star*, 6 April 2006.


\textsuperscript{159} C. George, ‘Media in Malaysia: zone of contention, *Democratisation*, Volume 14, Number 5, 2007, p. 907.

 constituent: rural Malays. Given these new developments in news media, the broader cultural shift that took place after the Anwar saga, and the energised civil society that appeared to be forming a strong and united opposition, it was surprising that by the 2004 general election the momentum of the reformasi seemed to have disappeared. The next section will therefore explain the “accident” of 2004 and show how it fits into the continuum which I argue existed between 1999 and 2008.

The “accident” of 2004

Explaining how the 2004 general election fits into the broader changes taking place in Malaysia is necessary, as the BN’s capture of 90% of parliamentary seats stands uncomfortably in a theory which argues that the result of the 2008 general election is a consequence of a broader change that has taken place in Malaysia over, at least, the last decade. The 2004 election result came as a shock to all those who predicted a more competitive political environment after the turmoil of the late 1990s. Despite the success of 1999, where the opposition (particularly PAS) made considerable gains, by 2004 the opposition was fragmented and weak. Anwar was in jail, while Mahathir’s 22 year long tenure as Prime Minister had come to an end. These two factors - a fragmented opposition and a BN leadership change - allowed the Barisan Nasional to achieve its strongest ever result, winning 198 out of 219 parliamentary seats. At the time, the notion that permanent change had taken place in Malaysian society was virtually crushed. In the aftermath of the 2004 general election, analysts pointed out that the election was yet further proof of the continuity and stability of semi-democracy in Malaysia. Rather than representing continuity, the 2004 election, however, represents an abnormality in the new realities of Malaysian politics. A permanent shift did in fact occur following the Asian financial crisis and the arrest of Anwar, yet a number of factors combined to overshadow these new sentiments in 2004.

Abdullah’s victory was won largely on a promise of reform and a proclaimed war against corruption. His ‘consultative, soft-spoken style’ style was welcomed by an electorate worn out by Mahathir’s uncompromising style, while his concept of Hadhari Islam (Progressive Islam) hijacked PAS’s more persuasive themes of social justice and distributive equality, while contrasting the more radical Islamic rhetoric coming from PAS at the time. Throughout the reformasi PAS emerged as a more mature and professional political party, that, while still harbouring its more controversial views over the role of Islam in Malaysia, had now built a solid reputation as a promoter of secular ideals such as social justice and transparency. However, by the 2004 election, PAS had all but lost the trust of the non-Malay community. Emboldened after its success in the 1999 election, PAS began advancing some of its more conservative Islamic views while the DAP remained uncompromising on its secular formula. The BN therefore succeeded in presenting itself as the reasonable middle ground between the extreme opposition parties. Furthermore,

161 ‘Malaysia’s ruling party lost in cyberspace’, Business Week, 6 March 2008.
http://www.businessweek.com/globalbiz/content/mar2008/gb2008036_832947.htm?
since many of the grievances of the reformasi movement were directed at Mahathir himself, Case points out that his resignation in 2003 had effectively ended mass grievances against the government. As the economy recovered from the Asian Financial Crisis, opposition parties, specifically Keadilan (later Parti Keadilan Rakyat), lost the backing of urban, middle class Malaysians. Lastly, in 2004, the electoral system was once again made to work heavily in the incumbents favour. The Barisan Nasional thus won spectacularly in the 2004 election by co-opting much of the reformasi rhetoric, by benefiting from better economic conditions, and because of a politically fragmented opposition. 2004 was therefore a classic Malaysian election in the sense that it proved that the opposition must unite and compromise if it wishes to be successful at the national level.

Abdullah’s drive against corruption slowed down dramatically after the 2004 general election, to ensure the loyalties of political elites in the upcoming UMNO assembly election. As such, while the BN’s success in the 2004 general election indicated the regime's ability to respond to voter sentiments in the short term, Abdullah’s inability to follow through with reform shows that the regime's flexibility is limited in the long-term. The lack of real change in terms of openness became more and more evident throughout Abdullah’s tenure, and it became clear that the BN had failed to incorporate important changes in Malaysian society. As the next section will show, analysts who after the 2004 general election proclaimed the death of the reformasi era were proven wrong in 2008. In 2004 Malaysia’s underlying socio-cultural currents were overshadowed by temporary economic and political factors that by 2008 had all but disappeared.

The 2008 Malaysian General Election

In Malaysia’s 12th general election held on 8 March 2008, the government (Barisan Nasional, BN) lost its two-thirds parliamentary majority for only the second time in history, winning 63% of federal parliamentary seats (down from 90% in 2004), and gaining just under 50% of the popular vote in West Malaysia. The nationwide results for Barisan Nasional and the Pakatan Rakyat (including a breakdown of the Pakatan Rakyat component parties) are:

169 For example, the BN increased its advantage vis-à-vis the opposition through constituency delineation exercises carried out in April 2003. States reliable to the Barisan Nasional, such as Johor and Sabah received up to six new seats, while PAS strongholds of Kedah, Perlis and Terengganu received no new seats at all, although voter increases in these states were greater than in those states that did receive new seat allocations. See J. Liow, ‘The Politics behind Malaysia’s eleventh General Election’, Asian Survey, Volume 45, Number 6, Nov-Dec 2005, p. 909.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party/coalition</th>
<th>percentage of popular vote</th>
<th>Seats</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barisan Nasional (BN)</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakatan Rakyat (PR)</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR)</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partai Islam SeMalaysia (PAS)</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Action Party (DAP)</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Source: Election Commission of Malaysia.173

In light of previous elections, the results were considered a disastrous result for the government, particularly the PR’s success in forming 5 out of 13 state assemblies. Although an electoral pact had ensured PR parties would not compete against each other, the PR coalition was formalised only on 1 April 2009, almost a month after the election.174 Individual parties pledged that the five state governments would be known as Pakatan Rakyat governments and would govern in accordance with objectives agreed upon by all member parties, regardless of which party forms the majority in individual states.175 Previously almost unimaginable, a change in national government is today considered at least a possibility in the near future, not only by local and foreign political analysts, but by the ruling party itself.176

The international media hailed the election as ‘a quiet revolution’.177 Although far from unanimous, there has been considerable analysis concluding that ‘communal race-based politics may well be on the wane in the country’.178 International commentary proclaimed that Malaysia may now be ‘on the brink of a liberal, more democratic era’.179 Others reaffirm that ‘the reformasi movement was an unambiguous statement by a society that is ready for change … they want to do away with authoritarian-type politics and introduce a real democracy’.180 As outlined earlier, the 2008 election is seen as ‘something of a sequel to the failed reformasi drive of the late 1990s’.181 The “failure” of the reformasi of the 1990s most obviously manifested itself in the results of the 2004 election, although as previously explained, this turned out to be a premature assessment. Here I will complete the argument that the reformasi movement had neither ended nor failed, as shown by the 2008 results.

174 ‘Statement by the leadership of Keadilan, DAP and PAS on the formation of Pakatan Rakyat’, 1 April 2008. www.keadilanrakyat.org
The End of Hegemony

The poor result for the Alliance in the 1969 election led to the establishment of a pro-Malay affirmative action program that would shape Malaysian politics for the next 40 years. It is thus a telling paradox that a comparatively similar result for the BN in the 2008 general election was surrounded by calls for an abandonment of that same affirmative action program. Furthermore, the 2008 election was not followed by outbreaks of race riots or inter-communal violence, a sign that Malaysian society has changed considerably over the past four decades.\(^{182}\) Malaysian society was heavily engaged in this election so that the success of the Pakatan Rakyat - a political force - emerged in parallel with a much more vibrant civil activism. As noted, the importance of elections meant that this activism was sharply focused on the March 2008 general election. As Ufen argues:

> Any political transition to democracy in Malaysia will most probably occur primarily in the electoral arena. Mass protests are quickly transferred into the party system. Elections - possibly in combination with party-switching - are competitive enough to allow for a change of government and, then, of regime.\(^{183}\)

The result of the 2008 general election is therefore the deepest challenge to the regime's hegemony in its history. While elections have been the main instrument of delivering legitimacy to the state, in the absence of an environment that allows for political opposition to operate freely, such as is the case in Malaysia, election results must be analysed differently than in liberal democracies, where opposition movements and parties enjoy more or less the same avenues of opportunity in promoting their agenda.\(^{184}\) As such, in Malaysia’s case, simply winning elections is not enough for the maintenance of legitimacy by the Barisan Nasional. The biggest challenge therefore to the BN’s hegemony comes from the loss of five state governments to PR parties, transforming the coalition from a marginal opposition to a credible, alternative government. In 1996 Camroux argued that:

> one is tempted to conclude that the existence of a token PAS-controlled state within the Malaysian federation serves a useful function for the federal government as a counter-model. [...] The Mahathir government can thus demonstrate to its Malay and non-Malay constituencies the inappropriateness of the ideal of an Islamic state.\(^{185}\)

The presence of a marginal opposition allowed the regime to highlight that it is the legitimate choice of the people expressed in a democratic system. At the same time, highlighting the opposition's inexperience and unreliability has in the past allowed the regime to convince Malaysians to choose 'development and stability' over the opposition's abstract claims of 'justice and good governance'.\(^{186}\) The BN’s accusations of the PR’s

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inexperience and incompetence rings hollow since the PR successfully administers not only rural states such as Kedah and Kelantan (led by PAS), but two of Malaysia’s most prosperous industrial states of Penang (led by DAP) and Selangor (led by PKR). Forming state governments gave PR the ability to represent itself as a credible alternative to the incumbent regime and has sharply reduced the Barisan Nasional’s previously unchallenged claim to be the only choice of government that can deliver both racial harmony and economic prosperity in Malaysia. Furthermore, the PR has shown that it can carry its momentum beyond the general election by winning seven out of seven by-elections in peninsular Malaysia since March 2008.\(^{187}\)

Although the result of March 2008 was a shock to the regime, the power of elections was perpetuated by Abdullah acknowledging that the BN would ‘accept it [the result] in good faith as it is the outcome of an election that was carried out in a fair and transparent manner’.\(^{188}\) By this statement, perhaps anticipating a period of greater social unrest, Abdullah re- emphasised that elections are the only appropriate way for political expression. As Case writes, ‘under hybrid regimes in which institutions are effectively manipulated, elections record, yet disperse voter grievances, efficiently extending the government’s incumbency’.\(^{189}\) Although highly effective in Malaysia, there is only a certain amount of flexibility the system can cope with, while forces determined to challenge it are increasingly finding opportunities to do so. Unlike in 1999, when the reformasi was focused on personalities, its support for Anwar, and its opposition to Mahathir, by 2008 the entire UMNO/BN system had become a target. With Mahathir gone, yet Malaysians clearly witnessing that nothing much changed, it become easier for the opposition to criticise the entire UMNO/BN-business structure, rather than attacking UMNO on narrow grounds of corrupt leadership.

Indeed, much of the opposition’s success depended on its ability to construct a strong counter-narrative to the BN. As the economy crashed in the late 1990s, voices from the opposition and from civil society began to attack not only the regime’s economic management, but the broader system of corrupt governance which had become a fundamental political problem. The BN’s assurance of continuous economic development created an overarching narrative guiding not only Malaysia’s economic model, but its social and political model too. ‘Good Governance’ thus became a phrase that was used effectively by the opposition to challenge the BN, on economic grounds, and also on its ability to manage the fast-changing realities of Malaysian society.\(^{190}\) During the reformasi political and civil opposition merged in ways that had not been seen in Malaysia before. Before the political crisis of 1998, the extent to which ideas from the public realm permeated into the policy agenda of the government was extremely limited.\(^{191}\) Weiss’s claim that opposition parties in the 1999 election functioned much like NGOs requires rethinking in the wake of the 2008 election, where opposition had evolved from narrowly focused political activism into a much broader narrative that made explicit demands for

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\(^{188}\) ‘Election result a lesson to UMNO, BN, Says Abdullah’, Bernama, 10 March 2008.


\(^{190}\) S. Subramaniam, ‘The dual narrative of “Good Governance”: Lessons for understanding political and cultural change in Malaysia’, Contemporary Southeast Asia, Volume 23, Number 1, 2001.

institutional change. Weiss outlines four ways in which civil society may bring about change in the regime:

(1) Encouraging top-down change by exerting pressure on the government through political societies and activist groups.

(2) Pursuing policy advocacy through direct state-level engagement.

(3) Pursuing normative changes to counter or subvert government discourse.

(4) Pursuing systemic reforms targeting the state institutions and bases of legitimacy.¹⁹²

While (1) and (2) have for a long time been part of Malaysia’s political system, and indeed are found even in most authoritarian regimes, (3) and (4) are signs of a much deeper challenge to the government. Rather than aiming to influence policy, an alternative to the normative discourse offered by the regime is presented by non-state actors or opposition parties, while demands go far beyond mere policy changes to wider institutional and systematic reforms. In regards to path (4), Weiss points out that ‘although such system-level initiatives are likely to shift the political ground and could well bring a radical change, they are more prone to yield a combination of concessions and counterstrikes’.¹⁹³

As such, while the demand by civil society groups is for systemic reforms, large concessions by the regime can work to appease this challenge. This sort of challenge is clearly different then, from (1) in that it robs the regime of its ability to set the agenda. Furthermore, the issues at question in Malaysia, such as Malay special rights, are not trivial matters of specific policies, but refer to fundamental features of how the state and society relate to each other. The regime ceases to be a hegemonic party system as it loses its ability to set the national narrative, is unable to define agendas, and is powerless to control national discourses without resorting to overt displays of coercion.

After the 2008 election there is much greater evidence of the BN responding to public pressures. Most obviously, Prime Minister Abdullah resigned to make way for current Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak. Since coming into power Najib had to struggle with popularity polls running against him.¹⁹⁴ By mid-2009 his popularity had risen from the mid 40s during his first year as Prime Minister, to 65%, although only 15% were ‘very satisfied’ while 50% were ‘somewhat satisfied’.¹⁹⁵ Furthermore, along with Malays, Indian-Malaysians seem to most strongly support Najib, which is a radical turnaround from the times of the HINDRAF-led Indian protests of late 2007,¹⁹⁶ while Chinese support lingers at under 50%. In the Malaysian context, however, popularity ratings in the mid 60s are not a sign of a strong leader, with Abdullah, for instance, entering office on a staggering 98% approval rating in 2004, only to bring the BN to its 2008 electoral disaster. Earlier, in 1999 Najib, then as Education Minister, had warned that the (1999) election

was ‘an appropriate wake up call’ while admitting that ‘it is not impossible for UMNO to be defeated’. In 2008 the BN received yet another wake up call. This time it was truly Najib’s turn to respond. Whether UMNO is able to do so, and whether it has the will to keep up with change in Malaysian society, remains to be seen.

As mentioned, another measure of the BN’s hegemony is the extent to which controversial ideas are freely discussed and contested in the public sphere. The open discussion of ideas, especially ideas over identity, religion, the social contract and the legitimacy of the state’s authority, indicates a direct threat to - if not a breakdown of - the hegemony of the BN. Being able to set the agenda is crucial to the BN’s grip on power, particularly if it wishes to avoid more overtly authoritarian techniques of control. Legal coercion, which had been one of the regime’s most potent tools of stifling dissent, had already begun to lose its legitimacy as a result of increasingly blatant abuse, not only of groups and individuals in civil society, but against political opponents in UMNO itself, such as Razaleleigh and Anwar, amongst others. Najib, who had been working hard to build his image as a benevolent reformer, was forced to reveal a more strong fisted side when on 1 August 2009 around 20,000 people took to the streets of Kuala Lumpur in a protest against the Internal Security Act. 3,700 police officers armed with tear gas dispelled the crowd while making the biggest mass arrests since the 1969 race riots. In response to such actions, human rights groups, consumer associations, women’s groups, Islamic organisations and political parties had begun to address ‘state-created politico-legal jargon’ such as ‘rule by law’, ‘developmental justice’ and ‘majoritarian rule’ by bringing their own legal parlance against the regime’s. Terms such as ‘rule of law’, ‘social justice’ and ‘constitutionalism’ were used increasingly by the opposition who thereby hijacked the regime’s moral high-ground. By placing these themes as a continuation of the 1998 reformasi, it becomes clear why they resonated so broadly in 2008. As Hedman points out:

the remarkably crude politicisation of formally independent institutions of state against the seemingly ‘loyal’ opposition within Mahathirs’ own political coalition undermined official claims to legalistic and therefore legitimate government.

Anwar Ibrahim once again galvanised Malaysia’s broad opposition into an increasingly coherent political bloc by speaking out against the BN’s legal coercion in 2008. Reformasi, justice and good governance became overarching themes that enabled discourse to transcend ethnic boundaries. The BN’s hegemony, which had been built on its particular management of ethnic relations since 1969, was now challenged on precisely this question. Hegemony could not be maintained in the face of a changing discourse that saw ethnicity become marginalised, and non-ethnic issues elevated. In the final section I will complete the argument that there is an increasing mood for an ethnically neutral

197 ‘Election a ‘wake-up call’ for Malaysia’s ruling party: Minister’, AFP, 5 December 1999
200 B. Kuppusamy, ‘Why the honeymoon is over for Malaysia’s new PM’, Time, 6 August 2009.
discourse, and that this was utilised by the opposition to create a coherent counter-narrative.

*The end of ethnicity?*

This paper began by highlighting the origins of ethnicity in Malaysian society in the colonial era, and has gone on to describe how ethnicity has been a crucial factor in the political system ever since. Claims to an end of ethnic identity in Malaysia might be seen as overly ambitious. Indeed, by some accounts, race relations after the 2008 election are more tense than at any time since 1969.\(^{203}\) The apparent worsening of race-relations, however, must be carefully examined, and is not necessarily reflective of wider changes in Malaysian society. Race-politics, defined as what is observed in the day-to-day bickering amongst some political parties or various other groups, are distinct from the reality of how Malaysians in general think about the role of ethnicity in politics. Broader social shifts are not always reflected in day-to-day events. I will thus show that ethnicity, while not ‘ending’, is effectively being pushed towards the margins of Malaysian politics by a new discourse that elevates values such as justice and good governance above ethnically driven politics.

Despite the politically charged atmosphere in Malaysia in 2009, there are signs that things are changing. For example, a June 2009 public forum revealed that Malaysians have ‘a huge desire to talk about race’ but feel ‘constrained’.\(^{204}\) Fundamental characteristics of the Malaysian political system that only a few years ago were considered beyond challenge are now more openly debated, largely thanks to the appearance of a free platform for such a debate in the form of the internet. Through the new media, Malaysians increasingly voice their opposition and utter dislike of any form of racial-politics. This was shown in August 2009 in the so called ‘cow-head protest’, where a small group of Malay-Muslims demonstrated against the relocation of a Hindu temple into a predominantly Malay area by dragging a severed cow head through the streets. When Malaysiakini published video footage of the protest, it was directed to remove the footage by the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission.\(^{205}\) At the same time official condemnation of this racially provocative action was not forthcoming, with Home Minister Hishammuddin Hussein appearing to condone the act by stating that all the protesters wanted to do was ‘to voice their unhappiness’.\(^{206}\) Public anger over this double standard was expressed through the newly available online media, and eventually forced the BN to modify its initial response, calling for the protesters to be charged.\(^{207}\)

Furthermore, condemnation of the protesters came not only from the Hindu community, but just as strongly from Malays. Islamic leaders explained that such intolerance for religious minorities is not part of Islam’s teachings, while ordinary Muslims vehemently pointed out that they did not condone such insensitive actions towards other cultures, especially not in the name of their religion.\(^{208}\) Such sentiments are becoming more widespread in Malaysia, both as a result of a more enlightened cross-communal leadership, as well as broader cultural shifts. The ‘cow-head’ episode


\(^{204}\) D. Loh, ‘Reclaiming the race debate’, *The Nut Graph*, 23 June 2009.

\(^{205}\) ‘Malaysiakini asked to remove ‘cow’s head’ videos’, *The Star*, 4 September 2009.


\(^{207}\) ‘Hisham explains his role in the affair’, *The Star*, 13 September 2009.

\(^{208}\) Interview with Dr. Anwar Fazal, chairperson of the Malaysian Interfaith Network (MIN). See Ding Jo-Ann, ‘No Islamic prohibition against temple’, *The Nut Graph*, 11 September 2009.
demonstrated that, in the face of brazen displays of racial chauvinism, whether in street protests or by political leaders, there appears to be a strong mood for inter-communal solidarity. In 2004 Weiss wrote that:

> while Malaysian civil society remains segmented along racial and religious lines, its demonstrated ability to cut across these lines to collaborate on certain issues presents uniquely valuable, if not yet fully realised, contributions to the possibilities for political change.\(^{209}\)

Another example of the growing realisation of such potential since 2004 is the *Saya Anak Bangsa Malaysia* (SABM) campaign.\(^{210}\) Its founders - Malaysians from diverse backgrounds - were disillusioned with the political system after the 2004 election, in which they found parties continued to play the race card. The group holds the view that:

> if indeed we are to become a nation of a single people who embrace our diverse cultures and faiths, it can only be attained through the efforts of ordinary folk like you and me who do not desire political power but only wish to see justice and equality for all.\(^{211}\)

These civil society initiatives are significant in light of the earlier discussion that highlighted how the political system discourages such inter-communal leadership in political parties. Driven by the changing moods amongst Malaysians, however, political parties are changing their tone, with varying success. In 2009, BN created the concept of ‘1Malaysia’.\(^{212}\) The slogan ‘People First, Performance Now’ is an example of Malaysian sloganism, and is often ridiculed by opposition politicians and the new media.\(^{213}\) The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (BERSIH) responded with their own slogans - ‘1BLACKMalaysia’ and ‘Democracy First, Elections Now’ - in reference to the BN takeover of the Perak state assembly.\(^{214}\) Facing effective counter-campaigns that are constructed in partnership between civil society groups and the opposition parties, the BN is increasingly losing its claim to being the only viable ‘arbitrator’ for managing Malaysia’s plural society.

A post-racial society will only be possible when the nation building process triumphs over Malaysian ethnic nationalisms. BN-led nation-building discourses are varied and contradictory as they clash with a distinct Malay nationalism that is essential to the UMNOs legitimacy as the protector and guarantor of Malay rights, especially after 1969. These two forces have been developing in parallel with each other since independence, with the government promoting each respective discourse simultaneously. The new split in the Malay vote means UMNO is today more torn than ever in regards to these two conflicting roles it now has to play. It is essential for the long term survival of the Barisan Nasional that UMNO can regain its position as the party of the Malays, an aim


\(^{210}\) http://sayaanakbangsamalaysia.net/

\(^{211}\) Ibid.

\(^{212}\) http://www.1malaysia.com.my/


that is increasingly at odds with Malaysia’s post-racial national discourse. Vasil noted in 1971 that as long as Malay special rights continue to be a fundamental feature of the political system, Malay leaders will place great importance on Malay unity to protect this arrangement, so that non-communal political parties are unlikely to attract enough Malay support to survive.  

Indeed, since the 2008 election, Najib and other UMNO MPs have amplified rhetoric aimed at appealing to ethnic Malays, such as calling opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, an ethnic Malay, a traitor to the Malay race. In a strategy to put pressure on the PR coalition, mainstream media speculated over so called ‘unit-talks’ between UMNO and PAS in mid-2009.  

This immense pressure on UMNO to win back the Malays, especially those conservative rural Malays supporting PAS, has seen UMNO seeking to detach PAS from the PR. As a result, both UMNO and the PR are increasingly appeasing radical Islamist causes. For example, when a Malay Muslim woman was sentenced to six lashes of the cane for drinking beer, both the Barisan Nasional and Pakatan Rakyat withheld statements opposing the sentence handed out by the Islamic court. Kessler directly connects this crowing assertiveness by Malaysia’s Islamists to the 2008 election which revealed the non-UMNO Malay vote - held by PAS - had become a critical voting bloc for both the UMNO and the PR. Alternative Malay leadership in the form of the opposition parties PAS and PKR signals a significant change in Malaysian politics. Should UMNO fail to get Malays to rally around the party at the next general election, Malaysian politics is likely to remain in a high state of contestation; perhaps settling into what is now a de facto two-coalition system. If this persists, the special position of the Malays is likely to continue being questioned. This will not necessarily result in constitutional changes in the near future, but, as in 1969, could lead to a transformation in interpretation of the constitution. A re-interpretation of Malaysia’s social contract would see the end of ethnicity as the primary feature of Malaysian politics.

While a de facto communal party arrangement exists in the PR, at least for now it retains a relatively coherent cross-communal narrative based on notions of justice; a new politics. As such, the PR’s successful construction of an alternative political culture is its greatest achievement. Despite continuing challenges, opportunities for greater cross-communal cooperation within the PR exist. Progressive elements in PAS for example, particularly the so called “Erdogan Faction” (also called “the professionals” in reference to their characterisation as politicians, rather than Islamic scholars), stand in contrast to the “Ulama Faction” in advocating an interpretation of Islamic rule that is compatible with a plural society. The Erdogan faction is a group of Malays of a generally younger generation, who are more willing to enter into compromise in order to win political power. Compatible with the wider reformasi movement, this group advances a criticism of the state with a focus on the moral character of the regime, which includes demands for

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216 R. Ahmad, ‘Racial politics heats up in Malaysia’, Reuters India, 17 August 2009.
tolerance of non-Muslims, social justice, accountability, good governance and constructive engagement.\textsuperscript{221}

The realities of electoral politics can thus work to moderate radical political views, as Case argues in relation to PAS.\textsuperscript{222} In instances where individual PAS MPs have made comments that are not compatible with the PR’s agreed values, DAP is quick to reaffirm the secular foundation of the Pakatan Rakyat.\textsuperscript{223} Indeed, Chinese leaders, as well as the wider Chinese community, see the Islamic state issue as the PR's biggest hurdle.\textsuperscript{224} In 2008, PAS showed its capacity to put forward an inclusive side, for example through its ‘PAS For All’ campaign.\textsuperscript{225} The blog site, entirely in English and run by PAS Vice President Husam Musa, portrays PAS as ‘a political platform for all Malaysians, not as a regional political party limited to East Coast or Northern Malaysia only, nor representing a specific religion of Islam [sic] and its believers only.’\textsuperscript{226} Support for PAS - especially from non-Malays - is more likely to come from its self-portrayal as a clean party. By making itself appear more moderate, it is able to capture far more of the non-Malay vote in mixed seats, making it a threat to UMNO not only in the Malay heartland, but increasingly in the semi-urban mixed seats that had traditionally been UMNO’s stronghold.

Welsh notes that one characteristic of elections in the reformasi era was the opposition's increasing campaigning over ‘moral supremacy’.\textsuperscript{227} In 2008, all three major opposition parties campaigned on this moral narrative at some level. By 2008 the PKR’s core philosophy of justice that began in reference to ‘Justice for Anwar’, has evolved into a wider PR philosophy. Focusing on concepts that are held in common by all three parties, such as justice, allows the opposition parties some leeway in what precisely this means in terms of specific policies. This had been successful in uniting the opposition under the banner of \textit{reformasi}, and it worked again in 2008. Clearly, when it comes to implementing specific policies, there will be some disagreement between PR component parties, but this is not to say that an overarching ideology based on justice cannot hold the parties together. As Lopez argues, differences in political parties are overshadowed by the emergence of a ‘counter-discourse of participatory democracy’.\textsuperscript{228} Furthermore, despite differences amongst opposition parties, such the question of whether Malaysia is (or should be) an Islamic state, it must be kept in mind that similar differences exist amongst BN parties,


\textsuperscript{222} W. Case, Chin-Tong L., ‘How committed is PAS to democracy and how do we know it?’, \textit{Contemporary Southeast Asia}, Volume 28, Number 3, 2006, pp. 385-406.

\textsuperscript{223} ‘Pakatan Rakyat not about Islamic State’, Press statement by Karpal Singh, DAP National Chairman, 22 April 2008

\textsuperscript{224} ‘Exclusive interview with Lim Kit Siang: Islamic State the greatest challenge’, \textit{Sin Chew Daily}, 7 September 2009. According to the Democratic Action Party website ‘DAP remains unswerving in its commitment that Malaysia shall remain as a democratic, secular and multi-religious nation.’ […] ‘Unfortunately, the insistence of PAS in forming an Islamic State – an idea deemed incompatible with the pluralistic nature of a Malaysian nation cherished by the DAP – shattered the whole basis of cooperation […] it was no longer tenable for the DAP to continue in the BA’. See DAP website. http://dapmalaysia.org/newenglish/au_vm_pd.htm

\textsuperscript{225} http://pas-4-all.blogspot.com/

\textsuperscript{226} Ibid.


with some UMNO leaders, including former PM Mahathir and current PM Najib, having proclaimed Malaysia to be an Islamic state.\footnote{Malaysia not secular state, says Najib’, Bernama, 17 July 2007. Najib’s statement that Malaysia is an ‘Islamic State’ was later clarified by Badawi who stated in parliament that Malaysia is a ‘Negara Islam’, which can be translated as either ‘Islamic State’ or ‘Muslim Country’. See ‘Malaysia a ‘negara Islam’ but not a theocracy’, The Straits Times, 28 August 2007.}

The 2008 election made it clear to the BN that some moves towards more inclusionary politics were needed to regain the confidence of non-Malay voters, and more importantly, to co-opt what appeared to be the opposition’s main attraction - a post-racial politics. The realisation amongst Malaysians that a change in government is in fact a possibility serves to break down the strong identification of UMNO/BN being ‘the state’ or ‘the government’. As Weiss points out, this conceptual ambiguity between the party and the institutions of the state had served to the UMNO’s advantage.\footnote{M. Weiss, ‘Malaysia: Construction of counterhegemonic narratives and agendas’, in Civil Society and Political Change in Asia: Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space, Alagappa, M., (ed.), Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2004. p. 261.} Any challenge or criticism directed at the party - or the values it claims to protect - could easily be construed as an attack on the state or a challenge to the constitutional contract. As such, the PR is today in a much stronger position than previous oppositions in that the UMNO has lost the ability to claim total hegemony. Previously it could portray any challenge to it not only as an attack on the party, but a challenge to the social contract.

As mentioned, the Pakatan Rakyat coalition is not challenging the constitution - in fact, all PR election manifestos made firm commitments to upholding the constitution\footnote{For the PKR manifesto see ‘ Keadilan Manifesto for 2008 – A new dawn for Malaysia’, 26 February 2008, http://cpps.org.my/resource_centre/index2pkr.pdf. For the DAP manifesto see ‘Just change it!’, 27 February 2008, http://limguaneng.wordpress.com/2008/02/27/2008-dap-manifesto/. For the PAS manifesto see http://pru12.pas.org.my/manifesto/ManifestoPartiIslamSe-Malaysia.pdf.} - but rather how those clauses in the constitution that refer to ethnicity are interpreted and put into practice.\footnote{Von Vorys argues that the same was done by the Malay nationalists after 13 May 1969, who used the incident to implement their \textit{interpretation} of what the constitution requires the government to do in regards to the special position of the Malays. See Vorys, K. v., Democracy without Consensus: Communalism and Political Stability in Malaysia, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1975, p. 371-372.} There is clearly an opportunity for greater emphasis on non-racial politics, with opinion polls revealing that voters see economic issues as of equal importance, or more important, than race issues.\footnote{Peninsula Malaysia voter opinion poll, Merdeka Center for Opinion Research, 1 June 2009. PDF available at http://www.merdeka.org/v2/download/Poll%20Report%201%20June%202009.pdf} However, because of policies largely originating out of the NEP, economic issues are often intertwined with ethnicity, so that voter’s economic concerns often appear to be ethnically specific. Liberalisation of the Bumiputra 30% equity requirement allowed Najib to co-opt what was the opposition’s most attractive feature by addressing both economic concerns as well as the question of ethnic equality.\footnote{‘PM announces slew of liberalisation measures’, The Star, 30 June 2009.} While Najib used the opportunity to present himself as a bold reformer, Anwar Ibrahim dismissed Najib’s economic liberalisations as a necessity given Malaysia’s economic situation.\footnote{‘PM’s bold pragmatism warms and wins hearts and minds’, Bernama, 11 July 2009. And ‘Anwar: Not much has changed under Najib’, The Malaysian Insider, 11 July 2009.} The opposition itself has ended the affirmative action program in some of the states it now controls, with new Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng from the DAP stating after the election that his party ‘will run the government administration free from the New Economic Policy that breeds cronyism, corruption and systemic inefficiency’.\footnote{‘Malaysia’s Penang chief: no to affirmative action’, Reuters, 11 March 2008.} These developments demonstrate that a shift towards a non-racial...
The economy is already taking place, pushed along by the social shifts manifested in the 2008 general election. The clear endorsement of the PR’s proposed reinterpretation of the social contract signals the possibility of a submergence of ethnicity beneath a new political order based on social justice and good governance. Politics without race is inconceivable for most Malaysians and it should be clarified that claims made here to an ‘end of ethnicity’ in no way suggest that all Malaysians are about to embrace a Malaysian identity. However, as discussed previously, non-race issues are found beneath the surface of race-politics and Malaysians display an increasing willingness to manage their relationships in a more rational manner. The links between the emergence of a counter-hegemonic bloc with the desire for a more inclusive political discourse are becoming increasingly clear to many commentators.

The configuration of the PR into a coalition of three essentially communal parties is not surprising in Malaysia’s wider context, while it is important to acknowledge that no PR parties discriminate on grounds of race. In response to the strong ethnic identity of most Malaysians, non-race based representation is unlikely to bring broad electoral success. Indeed, there is nothing inherently wrong with race-based political representation. Naturally, individuals prefer representatives who they believe can best represent their personal views. In general, this is likely to be a member of their own racial-religious community. However, the PR is advocating a shift of emphasis away from race towards more universal concepts, such as social justice. In this new politics, ethnicity, while not disappearing, is taking a secondary position to issues that are universally important, which in Malaysia’s current situation are non-corrupt government, social justice and good governance.

Conclusion

In taking a broad look at Malaysia’s experiment of a multi-cultural society inside a semi-democratic political system, I have argued that particular features of both society and its political system led to the emergence of a consociational model of democracy. The challenges faced by Malaysia as it began its life as an independent nation were enormous. The Alliance formula provided Malaysia with a reasonable chance for navigating a tumultuous era. In 1969, this formula broke down in the face of communal violence, leading the way to the emergence of the hegemonic party system, dominated by the United Malays National Organisation. Over the next three decades, the Barisan Nasional coalition set out to bring Malays into modernity through the New Economic Policy. This policy succeeded in radically transforming Malaysian society, while at the same time, it fundamentally changed the dynamics of the nation's ethnic politics. Contradictions began to emerge, but were ultimately silenced by the hegemonic power of the Barisan Nasional. In the end, it took an economic crisis to allow social discontent to erupt into the open political arena. The reformasi established the ideological framework that was to be so crucial in the 2008 election. Anwar Ibrahim’s dismissal, arrest and incarceration in the late

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1990s as well as Mahathir’s exit in 2003 served to diffuse much of the reformasi’s energy. As the same time, residues continued to simmer beneath the surface. The thriving online media allowed a new national discussion to develop freely, and Malaysians used this new platform to discuss their history, their society, and the future direction of their country. By 2008 Malaysia was once again at a turning point. A variety of factors had combined to turn the general election into a milestone in Malaysia’s history, and indeed, on 8 March 2008 Malaysia changed.

Shortly after the election the jubilant opposition parties and the thundering speeches by Anwar Ibrahim, and the handovers of state governments to the opposition coalition, were signs of a new Malaysia. The shift in political power, shown by the number of seats taken by the Pakatan Rakyat coalition indicated a sharply diminished legitimacy of the ruling coalition, leading to frantic speculation over the possible consequences. Despite the similarities of results between the 1969 and 2008 elections, almost all other surrounding circumstances were different. In 2008, Malaysia would not see a repeat of the communal violence that followed the former election. Given how heavily this event had weighed on Malaysia’s collective consciousness, this was a significant development. The ghost of 1969 is dead and buried.

The arguments I advance, however, go beyond this, and indicate that ethnicity is today becoming marginalised in Malaysian politics. The emergence of ethnicity as a defining feature of the political sphere, especially after the events of 1969, was challenged in 2008. Beginning with the reformasi, the opposition has constructed a consistent counter-hegemonic narrative based around non-ethnic issues such as justice and good governance. It was precisely this change in the national discourse that allowed the Pakatan Rakyat to make such strong gains in 2008. By changing the parameters of debate, the opposition has disrupted long established assumptions of how Malaysians vote. Specifically, the idea that Malays constitute a homogeneous voting block has been challenged by the presence of two Malay-led opposition parties. Furthermore, opposition parties have achieved much closer cooperation than in the past, largely by focusing on ethnically neutral issues.

Looming on the horizon is the question of how UMNO can adapt to these new challenges. What is sure, is that the opposition is biding its time for the next general elections with the clear aim of forming the next national government. There are, however, some doubts about the long-term viability of the Pakatan Rakyat, particularly whether the historically icy relationship between the DAP and PAS can survive another departure from politics by Anwar Ibrahim; a possibility that must be considered given that Anwar is still to face court on sodomy charges. As of October 2009, however, the direction appears to be clearly towards closer cooperation, with Pakatan Rakyat leaders indicating their desire to register the pact as a formal coalition.238

Once again, Malaysia seems to find itself at a crossroads. At least temporarily, Malaysian democracy appears to be on the path towards a competitive bi-party system. For the first time in the nation’s history, Malaysian’s will face the next general election with a real prospect of electing a new national government. The end of hegemonic power is the result of a new political discourse that saw ethnicity become increasingly pushed to the periphery of Malaysian politics. Even without a change in government, Malaysia could find itself with a definite shift in voter sentiment, reflected in a more assertive political opposition and a more critical, ethnically-neutral, national discourse.

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