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## Changing Political Culture and Electoral Behavior in Malaysia

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# Changing Political Culture and Electoral Behavior in Malaysia

ABDUL RASHID MOTEN

**Abstract:** The reform movement of 1998 and the general elections in 1999 are argued by many to have brought about a shift in Malaysian political culture, which became evident in 2008 elections. Studies conducted before 1999, based on fragmentary evidence, pictured Malaysia as having a “subject” political culture. The post-2008 survey data presents a picture of a high level of participation approximating the “participant” political culture. This change in political culture is due, among other reasons, to the poor regime performance, the emergence of civil society and the availability of alternative media. The 2008 elections, which witnessed the emergence of a “strong” opposition in the parliament, reflect the maturity of the Malaysian electorate, noticeably since 2004, which augurs well for democracy in the country.

**Keywords:** alternative media, civil society, Malaysia, participant culture, regime performance

The results of the 2008 elections in which the ruling coalition, the Barisan Nasional (BN or National Front), lost the two-thirds majority that it habitually enjoyed to loosely combined opposition parties, is argued by many to be the extension of the new idiom of politics created in 1998. The electoral change in

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2008, according to several electoral studies, augurs well for the democratization of the country.<sup>1</sup>

Projecting democracy for Malaysia entails an understanding of her political culture. According to Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, "A democratic form of participatory political system requires . . . a political culture consistent with it."<sup>2</sup> Ben Rosamond defines *political culture* as "the set of values, beliefs and attitudes within which a political system operates."<sup>3</sup> Political culture refers to the view not merely of specific actors but to "how people view political system as a whole."<sup>4</sup> To Almond and Verba, it is the "pattern of orientations to political objects among the members of the nation."<sup>5</sup> They divided orientations into cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions. Cognition involves knowledge of and belief about the political system; affection consists of feelings about the political system, while evaluation comprises the judgments and opinions about the political system and usually involves a combination of value standards and criteria with information and feeling. On this basis, Almond and Verba identified three cultural orientations: *parochial*, characterized by general ignorance about political objects; *subject*, in which citizens possess the requisite political knowledge without the sense that they could be effective democratic actors; and *participant* political culture, which combines knowledge about politics with a willingness to participate in the political process.<sup>6</sup> After a period of some disuse, cultural approaches to understanding politics have experienced a revival in recent years, perhaps due to the realization that a nation's political culture impacts its political structures and political behavior.

Political culture, however, is not static; it can and does evolve and change. Studies of political culture since the publication of *The Civic Culture* in 1963 show a serious decline in the "deferential and supportive elements" in the United States and Britain. In contrast, the German survey data from the 1950s through the 1970s show a replacement of the apolitical passive German political culture by a prodemocratic, politicized, and participant culture.<sup>7</sup> Citing these studies, Almond concludes that political culture is "a relatively soft variable, significantly influenced by historical experience and by governmental and political structure and performance."<sup>8</sup> Of the myriad of factors, democratization literature suggests focusing on civil society, media exposure and regime performance to explain evolution of political culture and consequent electoral behavior.

Past scholars have explored the political culture of Malaysia, but with limited empirical evidence owing to the paucity of survey research. The contemporary political culture can, however, be analyzed by using public opinion surveys conducted in Malaysia in recent years. This study reviews the findings of earlier studies on political culture, which were based on "intuitive speculation supported by fragmentary evidence from several highly selective studies."<sup>9</sup> Next, it analyzes the forces and factors that have significant bearing on the political culture of Malaysia. In particular, the emphasis is on regime performance, the civil society, and the availability of the alternative media.

The final section of this study examines the existing political culture with the help of data from the survey conducted from April 12–18, 2008, in peninsular Malaysia among 1,027 adult citizens. This random sample was stratified according to state, ethnicity, age, and gender of the respondents. The distributions over age, ethnic groups, and religions correspond to national figures. The interviews were conducted in Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin, Tamil, and English using the Computer-Assisted Telephone Interview facilities of the International Islamic University Malaysia. Each interview lasted for about twenty-five minutes on average. At a confidence level of 95 percent, the survey results have a statistical precision of  $\pm 2.8$  percent of what they would be if the interviews were conducted with the entire voting age population residing in peninsular Malaysia. The questionnaire contained thirty-eight items. This article uses only part of the data (twenty-four items) dealing with cognitive, affective, and evaluational orientations and voting in the 2008 elections. Scholars agree that electoral participation provides a significant clue to the political culture as well as an important indicator of democracy. This survey did not cover Sabah and Sarawak, the two states located in north Borneo with religion and culture different from those in peninsular Malaysia. It may be noted that unlike peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak voted overwhelmingly for the BN in the 2008 elections. Of the 140 seats, the BN won in 2008 elections, 55 (about 40 percent) came from Sabah and Sarawak. Understandably, the discussion of political culture in this study is not related to the two states in East Malaysia.

### **Malaysia as a Plural Society**

Malaysia, with an area of 127,320 mi<sup>2</sup> (329,758 km<sup>2</sup>), is a federation of thirteen states and three federal territories of Kuala Lumpur, Labuan, and the newly created administrative capital for the federal government of Malaysia, Putrajaya. According to the July 2009 estimate, Malaysia has a population of 28.25 million.<sup>10</sup> Malaysia is a multicultural society, with Malays (54.2 percent), Chinese (25.3 percent), Indians (7.5 percent) and others (13.0 percent) living side by side in peace. By constitutional definition, all Malays are Muslim, and they are of the Shafi'ite school. They, along with the natives of Sabah and Sarawak (eastern Malaysia), are officially classified as Bumiputra (sons of the soil, or indigenes). The “nonbumiputras,” consist mainly of the Chinese and the Indians, whose large-scale immigration took place in the nineteenth century with colonization and modernization. The Chinese comprise about a quarter of the population and have historically played an important role in trade and business. Malaysians of Indian descent are mainly Hindu Tamils from southern India, speaking Tamil, Telegu, Malayalam, and some Hindi. Bahasa Melayu is the official language of the country, but English is widely spoken. Malaysia then and now is far from becoming a melting pot. Each ethnic group clings to its traditions, religion, and language.

Ethnic pluralism in Malaysia is the consequence of the British colonial policy of unrestricted and large-scale immigration of the Chinese and Indians to exploit

the tin mines, discovered in the Selangor and Perak state in 1850, and to open new lands for rubber estate cultivation.<sup>11</sup> By the mid-1930s, the immigrant population swelled and became almost equal in size to the indigenous Malay population.<sup>12</sup> The Chinese and the Indians were placed separately in the more developed western coastal areas, whereas the Malays were left in the rural parts of the country farming, working in rice paddies, and fishing. The Chinese were in urban and commercial occupations, where much of the wealth was generated, as opposed to the Bumiputras and Indians who worked in rural villages and plantations. The big plantations and industrial businesses were, in fact, owned by the British. Thus, the Europeans, Chinese, and Indians belonged to the modern sector of the economy; the Malays were mostly engaged in the traditional sector. Indeed, positions in the civil service, the police, and the military were reserved for the Malays. These positions were not attractive to non-Malays because of the relatively low wages compared with earnings in the commercial sector.

Malaysia's political culture is significantly impacted by the British colonial administration. The British viewed the Malays as intellectually deficient and lazy. They admired the Chinese for their industry, entrepreneurship, and greed; the Indians were viewed as cheap and compliant labor. Colonial institutions reflected these views and accordingly adopted policies that reinforced ethnic and class differences.

### The Colonial and Postcolonial Political Culture

British colonialism shaped the Malay mind and their perception of politics and power in relation to *orang asing* (foreigners). Referring to Chinese and Indians, Lucian W. Pye characterized Malaysian politics as a "confrontation of two incompatible cultures" with different systems of values and behavioral norms.<sup>13</sup> Pye, however, did not dwell at length on the Indian culture, perhaps because they were a minority.

Pye defined the Malays as Muslims; they spoke Bahasa Melayu and maintained traditional customs and practices. They generally lived in rural areas and their relations were based on mutual help, self-respect and the concept of "brotherhood in Islam." All these imparted a feeling of solidarity among the Malays. Malays referred to Malaysia, particularly western Malaysia, as *Tanah Melayu* (the land of the Malays), and they were very proud of it. Chandra Muzaffar argued that Malay political culture was a complex mix of elements inherited from the feudal tradition, Western values, and Islam.<sup>14</sup> Elections and the culture that accompanied it, which was the product of Western influence, was an integral dimension of Malay and Malaysian political culture. The factors that influenced voting patterns were the product of Malay feudal history characterized by deference to the royalty, uncritical acceptance of state authority, and subservience to governmental power, among others. Malaysian political leaders expected and received due respect and

appropriate electoral support from the Malay electorate. The Malay government was known as *kerajaan*, referring to the *raja* (king) who ruled from the precolonial courts. Members of parliament and state legislative assemblies were referred to as *yang terhormat* (he who is honored) and sustained remarkable resiliency in office. The Malay political culture was parochial and passive with the tendency to relieve anxieties created by political conflict by “avoidance and silence” and by repressing “emotions in the hope that the problem will go away if matters are smoothed over.”<sup>15</sup>

Islam also had an impact on Malay political attitudes and orientations. Islam brought with it a feudal political culture during the late fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth centuries and reinforced the feudalism of pre-Islamic Malaya. Additionally, Muslims held the *ulama* or religious scholars in high esteem as the paragons of Islamic virtue who articulated a lifestyle guided by Islamic values of modesty and simplicity.<sup>16</sup> According to Yoshiyuki Hagiwara, “the basic value orientations of the Malays are based on Islam and loyalty to the Sultan.”<sup>17</sup>

The Chinese derived their values from Confucian patterns and assumptions. According to Pye, the Chinese concept of power was one of an unambiguous leader or father figure to whom the subordinates dutifully obeyed. Both the omnipotent leader and his dutiful subordinates were assumed to be Chinese. Complaints of all sorts should be aired and redress sought from authority figures. The idea of a Chinese leader becoming the subordinate of a foreigner was culturally unthinkable. Thus, there was no role for minority leadership in a community dominated by a non-Confucian culture. It effectively meant that the Chinese could not be subservient to the Malay majority leadership. As a result, a large number of Chinese felt that “a truly national politics” was unattainable for them.<sup>18</sup> This made the Chinese opt out of the majority system and focus instead “on special parochial groupings.”<sup>19</sup> Pye called the Chinese political culture “aggressive”; the Chinese released anxieties created by political conflict by voicing “anguish to somebody” and sought sympathy even from bystanders.<sup>20</sup>

Of the current population, the Chinese are the most heterogeneous. Most of them follow one or more of the three great religions of mainland China—Buddhism, Daoism, or Confucianism—and speak Hokkien, Hakka, or Cantonese. This heterogeneity is reflected in their politics. Unlike the united Malays, the Chinese were and are divided in their loyalties. Most of the Chinese supported the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a component of the BN, but many also identified with opposition leftist and reformist parties. However, the Chinese are relatively more mobilized socially and politically than the Malays. Living in urban centers and economically better off, the Chinese had easy access to higher education, which tended to make them politically better informed.

Indians are the smallest of the three main ethnic groups and are oftentimes regarded as a minority race; however, they have made significant contributions to the sociopolitical and economic development of Malaysia. The Indian

community was concentrated around the urban areas and rural and suburban rubber estates. There is a general perception that most Indians in Malaysia today are either small-business owners, professionals, or laborers and are politically well informed. They are industrious and entrepreneurial and yet still retain much of their values and traditions and closeness and community awareness. To the Indians, filial piety is of paramount importance and ties to the family and their community are extremely strong. Indians are also a deeply religious people; many are devout Hindus, and others are Christians and Muslims. The earlier immigrants had forged strong ties with their homeland without forming a strong bond with their adopted country. The generation that came of age in the 1970s and 1980s regard Malaysia as their homeland.

Many scholars perceived the Indian community as passive and parochial. C. W. Duncan wrote that the Indian coolie "remained amenable to law and order and generally behaved in a most praiseworthy manner. If he had grievances they were borne passively."<sup>21</sup> Occasionally, they did resist their poor conditions, but they did not cause much anxiety to the imperial rulers. The Indians were culturally divided, and their cultural diversity may be identified with their ancestors' places of origin. They are mainly Hindu Tamils from southern India, speaking Tamil, Telegu, Malayalam, and some Hindi. In postindependence Malaysia, the Indians did not form a majority of their own in any Malaysian constituency. Hence most of them opted to support the Malaysian Indian Congress, which is a component of the ruling BN, to gain access to the Barisan system of the ethnic apportionment of political power and material resources. However, a small segment of the Indian community supported opposition.

Malaysia is a plural society consisting of numerous ethnic groups, each with its own language, traditions, and religious norms and value systems. This made it imperative for the elites of each ethnic group to unite in a mutually beneficial fashion. The resultant system is a variant of "consociational" democracy in which elections play an important role to fill in the public positions.<sup>22</sup> In procedural terms, however, Malaysian democracy is considered narrow because it constrains the practice of civil and political rights through restrictions on assembly, the strategic use of detention orders and other legal and emergency powers. Consequently, several studies characterized Malaysian political system as a semidemocracy, a fettered democracy, a quasidemocracy, or a modified democracy.<sup>23</sup> However, the "pioneering" survey of 395 random respondents conducted in November 1994 found Malay respondents happy with the prevailing practice of democracy. The minorities, especially the Indian respondents, favored Western-type democracy, with unrestrained civil and political rights, while the Chinese respondents were more ambivalent.<sup>24</sup> There was some sort of congruence between political culture and regime type. In the elections held between 1959 and 1995, the BN, constantly maintained two-thirds majority of seats in the parliament, as can be seen in table 1.

**TABLE 1. Results of Parliamentary Elections, 1959–1991**

Year	Alliance/BN		Opposition parties		Total seats
	Seats	%	Seats	%	
1959	74	51.8	30	48.2	104
1964	89	58.5	15	41.5	104
1969	66	48.4	37	51.6	103
1974	135	60.7	19	39.3	154
1978	131	57.2	24	42.8	154
1982	132	60.5	22	39.5	154
1896	148	57.3	29	41.5	177
1990	127	54.4	53	46.6	180
1995	162	65.1	30	34.8	192

Note. BN = Barisan Nasional (National Front).

Source: Abdul Rashid Moten and Tunku Mohar Mokhtar, “Elections and the Electoral System” in *Malaysia at 50: Achievements and Aspirations*, ed. Syed Arabi Idid (Singapore: Thomson, 2008), 199.

### Civil Society, the Regime, and Alternative Media

After 1995, Malaysia had to face severe economic and political crises. In July 1997, speculators attacked the Malaysian currency, which eventually plunged the country into its first recession for many years. The financial crisis widened the differences between Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad and his ambitious deputy Anwar Ibrahim, who was seen as conspiring to overthrow the prime minister.<sup>25</sup> Mahathir blamed currency speculators, especially George Soros, for the financial crisis, whereas Anwar Ibrahim blamed it on Mahathir’s obsession with unproductive megaprojects and nepotism.<sup>26</sup> Mahathir would not seek assistance from the international bodies to overcome the crisis, whereas Anwar was fully committed to seeking support from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Anwar was subsequently sacked from all government positions, expelled from the United Malay National Organization in September 1998, and was jailed on charges of sodomy and corruption. This gave rise to an increasingly confident, but fragmented, civil society, demanding “participatory democracy” and “justice for all.”<sup>27</sup>

The civil society in the Malaysian context encompasses nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), Islamist and youth organizations, trade unions, and the alternative media (e.g., blogs). Some of these civil society organizations have been in existence since the independence of the country and even earlier. However, these organizations have multiplied, and their memberships and activities expanded greatly since the 1990s. Simultaneously, these organizations have taken active part



in electoral politics, campaigning and contesting as candidates from the opposition platforms. Many of the groups have allied fruitfully in issue-based networks. Thus, Gagasan Demokrasi Rakyat (Coalition for People's Democracy or Gagasan) and Gerakan Keadilan Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Movement for Justice or Gerak) were composed of various NGOs and the opposition political parties like Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Partai Se-Islam Se-Malaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party or PAS). Some NGOs, like the Pergerakan Keadilan Sosial (Movement for Social Justice or Adil), eventually metamorphosed into the Parti Keadilan Nasional (National Justice Party or keADILan) led by Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah. Subsequently, KeADILan, DAP, PAS and Parti Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Party, PRM) formed an opposition alliance known as the Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Coalition, BA) and contested the November 1999 elections promising a "Just Malaysia," free from widespread corruption, abuse of power and crippling poverty.<sup>28</sup>

In the 1999 elections, civil societies and the contesting political parties made greater use of the Internet to reach voters. For the opposition forces receiving little mainstream media coverage, this new medium provided access to a wider audience. The opposition Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), Democratic Action Party (DAP), and KeADILan had interesting and well-kept Web sites that provided much information about party policies and programs. There also emerged Web sites such as Sangkancil, Laman Reformasi, Free Malaysia, and several others that provided a medley of news updates on current affairs and a forum for debate on issues in Malaysian politics and economy. However, the impact of the Internet on the voting pattern was marginal. First, the Internet was still new in the political arena. Second, the Internet was largely urban-based, and hence, it was not easily accessible to the vast majority of the voters who live in the rural areas. There were about 9 million voters, but the total number of subscribers to Jaring or TM Net was only 650,000. Not all voters were linked to the Internet. The Internet was most popular with the younger generation, most of whom were not eligible to vote, so the 680,000 newly registered voters who claimed to be in the opposition ranks having access to the Internet were unable to vote in 1999. Nevertheless, the opposition forces campaigned on the cyberspace using blogs, SMS, and YouTube. The opposition front won 45 out of 193 seats in the national parliament and controlled two (Kelantan and Terengganu) state assemblies. Most important, "a new discourse and practice of participatory democracy has gained ground among Malaysians."<sup>29</sup> Andres Ufen argues that the Malaysian opposition has succeeded in establishing "a viable pro-democratic political culture that is hardly destructible through sheer repression."<sup>30</sup>

The euphoria created by the departure of the "strong" prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, made the electorate give the BN unprecedented electoral mandate in 2004. These elections were held after the new prime minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, had been in office for only four months and twenty-one days. Abdullah Badawi's fight against corruption; insistence on public accountability and shift

from corporate megaprojects to emphasis on agriculture-based rural projects, as well as his moderate Islamic stance and inclusive multiracial approach went down very well with every community of the Malaysian electorate—and that support translated into votes. Badawi championed all the issues raised by the civil society organizations and promised a just Malaysia free of corruption and poverty. A survey conducted after the elections by the independent Merdeka Center for Opinion Research found that 42 percent of 1,017 respondents voted for the BN because of its promise for material development. The survey also found that “32 percent of the respondents chose to describe [Abdullah] as a ‘man of the people’ while 22 percent described him as having a ‘clean image.’ Another 19 percent saw him in the context of his religious background.”<sup>31</sup>

The postelection scenario was different. Abdullah Badawi retained the most controversial ministers in his cabinet. There were a number of corruption scandals, including the billion-dollar fraud at the Port Klang Free Trade Zone, corruption in the judiciary, and much-flaunted wealth of ministers and ruling party members. These scandals did not receive decisive responses from the prime minister. There were also complaints about one-sided rules and practices in the conduct of elections that favor the ruling coalition, the short campaigning period that disadvantages the opposition, the delimitation (review and recommendation) of constituencies that allegedly have benefited the ruling party, and about phantom (unqualified) and the postal voters casting ballots in favor of the ruling coalition, and about the Election Commission serving the interests of the ruling coalition.<sup>32</sup> The government’s response was lukewarm. Abdullah was also seen as weak on freedom of religion issues, disappointing those who once saw him a “moderate” leader.

The credibility of the regime was severely undermined by developments on the economic front. In an effort to cut government subsidies, fuel prices were significantly increased first by \$0.20 in 2005 and a second time by \$0.90 in 2006, sparking a series of protests in March 2006. In his four years in office, however, Abdullah has managed to maintain the economic growth at 6 percent, underpinned by strong export prices for commodities such as palm oil and crude oil. However, the benefits of the strong economy did not trickle down to the ordinary citizens. “The richest 10% of the population” earned “22 times the income of the poorest 10%.”<sup>33</sup> The Merdeka Center’s survey with 1,026 randomly selected registered voters in peninsular Malaysia in December 2007 showed that about 70 percent of Malaysians were concerned about price hikes and the rising cost of living, 60 percent about crime and public safety, and 63 percent about ethnic inequality in the society. They were also unhappy with the rising incidence of corruption and the government’s management of the economy. Confidence in the government in running the economy was very low among Chinese and Indians. They protested by voting in strong opposition to the parliament.

Understandably, civil societies became active. As in 1999, they formed coalitions on the basis of issues. Thus, twenty-six NGOs and five opposition political

parties formed the Coalition for Clean and Fair Election, known as BERSIH, which organized a demonstration on November 23, 2007 to press for electoral reforms. They demanded the abolition of postal ballots, equal access to the media, a longer campaign period, and the use of indelible ink to prevent multiple voting, among others things. The Election Commission conceded to some of these demands. Equally significant was the rally organized by the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) on November 25, 2007, demanding protection of Hindu rights. A significant segment of the Hindu Indian minority were unhappy about a series of court cases pertaining to consequences emanating from Hindu conversions to Islam, the custody of children, the religious identity of deceased persons, and so on. The demonstrators were chased away by the police, and five of their leaders were jailed under the Internal Security Act, which permits detention without charge or trial. This damaged Abdullah's popularity and the credibility of the BN-led government.

Civil organizations used the opportunities provided by the 2008 national elections to attain their objectives of a just, democratic Malaysia. They took elections much more seriously than before, urged and formed issue-based alliances, and promoted crossethnic campaigns. They drafted, under the leadership of blogger Haris Ibrahim, a "People's Declaration" demanding reforms, among others, to promote democracy, judicial independence, a free press, and equitable and sustainable development. They also asked the opposition parties to close their ranks and form a Barisan Rakyat (People's Front). Simultaneously, civil society activists took an active part in the election. About fourteen NGO activists contested the election on the opposition platform.

In response, PAS, DAP, and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR; People's Justice Party) formed an alliance to contest the 2008 election.<sup>34</sup> This seemed to be a continuation of the process that began in 1999. They highlighted Malaysia's growing crime rate, rising consumer prices, and corruption. They harped on about these issues on a daily basis as they manifested a clear failure of the government. They carried out their campaign through various media outlets relying largely on cyberspace using new technologies such as blogs, SMS, and YouTube. With a population of around 27.1 million in 2007, Malaysia had nearly 14 million Internet users.<sup>35</sup> There has been a proliferation of independent Web sites and blogs such as *Malaysia Today* and *Malaysiakini*, which publicized institutional corruption and other issues, particularly in the judiciary. *Malaysiakini* was set up in 1999 as Malaysia's first commercial Internet newspaper. The site averaged 120,000 visitors a day, of which approximately 80 percent were from within Malaysia, which compared respectably with the circulation of mainstream newspapers such as the *New Straits Times*. The opposition parties nominated bona-fide bloggers who campaigned online, raised funds through their Web sites, and won against the ruling party candidates. The DAP chairman, Lim Kit Siang ran three blogs, which were meticulously updated with multiple posts every day, and many of the party's other leaders

followed his example. PAS ran its own online journal, *HarakahDaily.net*, which featured six different online television channels and provided original reporting on the election. PKR leader Anwar Ibrahim wrote his own blog with news links and videos of his party's campaign activities. Through this alternative media, the opposition highlighted Malaysia's rising crime rate, consumer-price inflation, and government corruption. The electorate responded positively and reversed its earlier decision in the 2008 elections. They denied the BN its two-thirds majority in parliament and gave the opposition parties control of five state assemblies. The survey by Zentrum Future Studies Malaysia, conducted from February 20 to March 5, 2008, and involved 1,500 respondents, showed that the alternative media had a big influence on voters. The survey found about 65 percent of the respondents trusted blogs and online media for reliable information against 23 percent who relied on the television and about 15 percent on newspapers.<sup>36</sup>

### Contemporary Political Culture

That Malaysia possesses a participatory political culture is confirmed by the findings of peninsula-wide election survey. The stratified, random sample was composed of the 1,027 respondents, of whom 56 percent were Malay, 34 percent Chinese, and 10 percent Indians. About 35 percent of respondents were between 21 and 40 years old; 17 percent were within the range of 41–50 years, and the rest were older than 51 years. Females constituted 52 percent of the total respondents. The distributions over ethnicity, age, and gender correspond roughly to national figures.

As noted earlier, Almond and Verba categorized citizens as parochials, subjects, or participants. Parochials expect virtually nothing from the political system. Subjects look to government for outcomes, and participants are likely to be "actively involved on the input side of government."<sup>37</sup> The survey found the majority of Malaysians to be informed about political affairs. They had no problem identifying the BN as the ruling party. However, only 27 percent said that they can name all the parties in the ruling coalition. Majority of respondents (67 percent) correctly named the two houses of parliament. Almost all the respondents (98.7 percent) knew that the prime minister is more powerful than the chief minister of a state. They received most of their information from government-owned as well as paid television channels like ASTRO and MiTV. Perhaps due to the popularity of this medium, ASTRO introduced *Bernamea TV* and *Awani* channels for twenty-four-hour local and international news, respectively. About 85 percent of respondents read newspapers on a regular basis. Only about 13 percent of respondents used the Internet as a source of information.

Malaysians (69 percent) are "very proud" to be citizens of their countries. However, the Malays (74 percent) and the Indians (70 percent) are comparatively more proud of their nationality than their Chinese counterparts, 63 percent of whom reportedly were "very proud" to be Malaysians. Nevertheless, majority of

respondents identify with the nation as a whole; some are perhaps more attached to the ethnic community alongside the nation. All ethnic groups in Malaysia (Chinese 54.2 percent, Indians 52.9 percent, Malay 44 percent) on average believe that ethnic diversity is not a threat to the nation.

On the question of democracy, 87.1 percent of the Malaysians believe that it is the best form of government, but only 56.1 percent agreed that Malaysia is a democracy. However, the percentage of Chinese and Indians was 49.3 and 43, respectively, on the question of Malaysia being a democracy. It may be noted that democracy, in Malaysia, is popularly understood in "process" terms of competitive elections and the notion of majority rule.<sup>38</sup> Many respondents, however, considered the Malaysian political system to be narrow because it constrains the practice of civil and political rights through restrictions on assembly, the strategic use of detention orders, and other legal and emergency powers. Harold Crouch considered the Malaysian political system as neither authoritarian nor democratic, but a "modified democracy."<sup>39</sup> Yet the government has regularly conducted elections to periodically measure and reenergize their levels of mass support.

A little more than half of the respondents (54 percent) agreed that elections in Malaysia are free and fair. Almost the same numbers of respondents (53.8 percent) are also satisfied with the conduct of elections by the Election Commission of Malaysia. Malaysians also expressed their trust in various institutions. An average of 61.9 percent of Malaysians expressed their trust in the parliament and the courts. The three communities differed, however, in their opinion about the government and the police. Only 38.2 percent of Indians and 46 percent Chinese expressed their trust in government compared with 61 percent Malays. However, only 37 percent of all respondents expressed trust in the police.

Respondents evaluated the prime minister, Abdullah Badawi, as an honest and sincere person. But 52 percent of the respondents perceived him as weak and incapable of implementing reforms he has promised. A large majority of respondents (79 percent) expressed dissatisfaction with the federal government in solving problems in the country. About 51 percent of the respondents felt that the government should tackle the problem of rising fuel prices and other goods. About 49 percent felt the need to fight crime and corruption. On corruption, 57.1 percent reported that it is very much prevalent among politicians, and 61.9 percent believe that public officials are engaged in corruption. Some 49 percent of respondents agreed that the best way to deal with the problems afflicting the country is to elect a new set of leaders who are not corrupt. Some 87.9 percent of the respondents strongly agreed or simply agreed with the statement that voting in the elections is a sacred duty of every adult Malaysians. Likewise, 79.2 percent of respondents agreed that the policies of the government can be changed by voting and electing right people.

The survey shows that majority of the Malaysian electorate are well-informed about their political system, proud of being a citizen of Malaysia; aware of the

input and output of the political system, able to judge the performance of government, and willing to vote the corrupt leaders out of the office through the ballot. The responses to twenty-four items dealing with political culture were assigned points and were added to determine the level of political culture. The points thus summed (ranging from 0 to 47) were divided into three levels. Scores from 0 to 16 are considered as representing “parochial” culture; 17 to 33 as “subject” culture; and 34 and higher as representing “participant” political culture. Thus analyzed, 54.1 percent of Malaysians appear as participants, 35.1 percent as subjects and 10.8 percent as parochial. There were more men (72 percent) than women (57 percent) in the “participant” category. Ethnically, 79.4 percent of Indians belong to participant category as opposed to 67.3 percent of Chinese and 60 percent of Malays. Living in the urban setting and having easy access to education perhaps account for the higher percentage of Indians and Chinese in the participant category. Education is positively related to the level of political culture ( $\chi^2 = 50.02$ ,  $p = .000$  at 0.05 alpha level). Similarly, income is positively related to the level of political culture ( $\chi^2 = 51.18$ ,  $p = .000$  at 0.05 alpha level).

The survey findings on political participation (voting) correlate highly with the findings on political culture. Some 79 percent of respondents confirmed that they had voted in the previous two elections, a figure that loosely mirrors the voting turnout figure of 73.5 percent for 2004 and 76.05 percent for 2008 elections. Interestingly, Indians (94.1 percent) voted comparatively more than their Malay (69.9 percent) and Chinese (71.9 percent) counterparts. However, 62 percent of the respondents agreed that “a strong opposition in the parliament to act as a check on the executive” is good for the country. As table 2 shows, the electorate did vote a strong opposition to the national parliament in 2008 elections.

### Democracy in Malaysia

Observers of the 2008 elections have likened the results to a “political tsunami.”<sup>40</sup> The election has been heralded as a victory for democracy following half a century of “quasidemocratic” rule by the BN. The results show that the BN component parties were not the only ones to represent the large ethnic groups. Using statistical method called “ecological inference,” Ong Kian Ming estimated that only 58 percent of Malays, 35 percent of Chinese, and 48 percent of Indians voted for BN candidates in west Malaysia. The swing vote from the BN to the opposition was estimated to be 5 percentage points among the Malays, 35 among the Chinese, and 30 among the Indians.<sup>41</sup> Evidently, Chinese and Indian voters preferred opposition parties, whereas Malays still had a (reduced) preference for the BN parties. Many Malaysians, in voting for the opposition, crossed ethnic boundaries.

The opposition’s success in denying two-thirds majority to the BN is also described as a revolution and “a new dawn” for democracy in Malaysia.<sup>42</sup> Anwar

**TABLE 2. Results of 2008 Parliamentary Elections**

Party	Votes cast	% vote	Seats	% seats
Registered voters: 10,728,000				
Unreturned Ballots: 41,564				
Spoilt votes: 175,011				
Voter turnout: 76.05%				
<b>Barisan Nasional</b>	<b>4,090,670</b>	<b>50.14</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>63.1</b>
UMNO	2,381,725	29.19	79	35.6
MCA	849,108	10.41	15	6.8
MIC	179,422	2.20	3	1.4
Gerakan	184,548	2.26	2	0.9
Others	495,867	6.08	41	18.5
<b>Opposition parties</b>	<b>3,786,399</b>	<b>46.41</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>36.9</b>
DAP	1,107,960	13.58	28	12.6
PAS	1,140,676	13.98	23	10.4
PKR	1,509,080	18.50	31	14.0
Others	28,683	0.35	0	0
<b>Independents</b>	<b>63,960</b>	<b>0.78</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>8,159,043100</b>		<b>222</b>	100

*Notes.* Registered voters = 10,728,000; unreturned ballots = : 41,564; spoiled ballots = 175,011; voter turnout = 76.05%. DAP = Democratic Action Party; MCA = Malaysian Chinese Organization; MIC = Malaysian Indian Congress; PAS = Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party; PKR = Parti Keadilan Rakyat; UMNO = United Malay National Organization.

*Source:* Calculation based on Government of Malaysia, "His Majesty's Government Gazette" (Report, no. 52:7, Government of Malaysia, April 8, 2008); "Election Results 2008: A New Straits Times Special," *New Straits Times*, March 10, 2008, Y2–Y40.

Ibrahim called it "a defining moment, unprecedented in our nation's history."<sup>43</sup> It reflects a notable shift in political culture—toward more democratic, transparent, and accountable government. The incumbent BN faced the biggest challenge in the electoral history of Malaysia. The major peninsular opposition parties were united and received the support of a wide range of NGOs and independent activists. The opposition had a unified platform of multiracialism, social justice, democracy, and more equitable development, and a cooperative strategy. The voice of the opposition was more strident and more assertive during and in the aftermath of the election. Conversely, the government seemed more hesitant and in some ways even defensive. The emergence of a strong opposition could help institutionalize the idea of checks and balances in a democratic framework, and would render it difficult for the ruling coalition to opt for repressive policies.

The 2008 elections also witnessed an assertive role played by various NGOs and other civil and political forces in the society. It is extremely important for a stable democracy to have a strong and vibrant civil society. The Malaysian

nongovernmental and civil societies, laced with “new media,” braved various obstacles and persevered in asserting their role. The rank and file of civil societies acted as candidates, campaign workers, and election monitors for the opposition coalition. The contesting parties and affiliated civil societies made greater use of the Internet to express their dissenting views with the ruling coalition. Internet sites have increased significantly, and the amount of traffic on the most popular ones have been tremendous. The Internet will help propel the growth of stable social structures and institutions of democracy. In sum, the 2008 elections have taken Malaysia one step closer to both mature democracy and multiculturalism.

## **Conclusion**

Observers of government and politics in Malaysia had long characterized the Malaysian political system as a semidemocracy in which the ruling coalition, the BN, and its predecessor, the Alliance, had won all the elections at the national level, gaining more than two-thirds the majority seats in parliament. The components of the BN and other political parties were ethnic-based. Consequently, Malaysia for years was intuitively conceived as possessing a “parochial” or at best a “subject” political culture conducive to the entrenchment of authoritarian rule, which claimed legitimacy on narrow procedural terms through the winning of periodic elections.

The 1997–98 financial crises and the 1999 elections are considered by many to be the beginning of a change in Malaysian politics. Although the opposition front, Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front), could not deny the BN its two-thirds majority in the 1999 elections, it did capture sufficient seats to emerge as a strong opposition. The idiom of politics has apparently changed with people expressing their dissatisfaction with the performance of the regime, which was accused of corruption, abuse of power, and the failure of overall development. The replacement of Mahathir Mohamad with mild-mannered, soft-spoken Abdullah Badawi was well received by the public. Abdullah’s promise of everything the civil societies were clamoring for led to the thumping electoral victory for the BN in 2004. However, Abdullah’s failure to reform the system coupled with slow economic growth and soaring prices of essential items led to intense group rivalries and heightened dissatisfaction with the regime. These dissatisfactions were well expressed by reinvigorated civil societies through the alternative media. The traditional bonds of ethnicity and party loyalty waned, and the apolitical passive culture earlier painted transformed into politicized and participation-oriented political culture.

The opinion survey conducted in this study found that most respondents have a high level of political culture. They possess knowledge of the political system and the political process in Malaysia. They have a high level of information about political affairs. Most of them give their primary political loyalties to the nation without necessarily undermining their ethnicity or religion. They value development, but they also desire clean government providing ample democratic



space. They support their leaders but also believe in separation of powers and checks and balances. They also believe that their views and actions can affect the political process. This belief is reflected in the voting turnout figures, which in some constituencies reached up to 90 percent. Malaysians, in the words of Almond and Verba, were “actively involved on the input side of government,” which augurs well for the state of democracy in the country.<sup>44</sup>

The changes in the cognitive, affective, and evaluational dimensions of Malaysian citizens can be explained by referring to regime performance, civil society, and the alternative media, among others. Authoritarianism, and subsequently the regime failure to arrest the economic downturn, combat corruption, and reform the system led to a heightened attention on issues around accountability, justice, equality, and democracy championed by civil societies through an alternative media free from government control. These civil societies allied with opposition forces, mobilized the masses, and significantly affected the political culture of Malaysia. It is difficult to separate out and assign a specific weight to the role played by each of the three factors. It is possible to conclude, however, that regime performance, civil society, and media experience together have produced a change in people’s orientations in Malaysia from subject toward a more participatory politics.

#### NOTES

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