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Digital Media and Religious Sentiments in Malaysia: Critical Discourse Analysis of Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party and Democratic Action Party Cyberspace Campaigns in the 15th General Election

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Abstract: The challenge arises from Malaysia's struggle to foster peaceful connections among its diverse ethnic groups, mainly due to the prevalence of politics centered around religious and ethnic identities. To examine how racialised political sentiments subtly influence power dynamics, this study analyses four digital excerpts using a critical discursive approach. The primary sources are secondary materials such as videos and social media posts in cyberspace related to the 15th General Election political campaigns. This article demonstrates that language is used to create and reinforce religious and racial divisions in pursuing political power by the two most significant political parties, the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP). It emphasises the underlying power that drives these discourses, where cyberspace linguistic features and access to digital technologies have the "power" to shape audience reactions. The selected analysed excerpts collectively contribute to the primary discourse that fuels racial sentiments, especially those related to race, religion, and royalty (3R sentiments) in electoral competition.

Keywords: Malaysia General Election-15; political campaign; religion; racism; PAS; DAP



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1. Introduction

During the National Day 2022 event in Putrajaya, former 9th Malaysian Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob (21 August 2021–24 November 2022) highlighted the importance of preserving unity within the religiously and ethnically diverse Malaysian community. This effort aims to respect and protect the independence and progress achieved. He stated, "*The customs of brothers, brothers are protected; Family customs, families are protected; The custom of living in a village, the village is guarded; National custom, national unity is prioritised; Indeed, we are all one family; The Malaysian family legacy connector*" (Yaakob 2022, p. 5). This statement underscores the crucial role of upholding traditional values and fostering harmony in the pluralistic Malaysian society through the concept of the "Malaysian Family" (*Keluarga Malaysia*), which forms an integral part of the national identity. Tracing the evolution of Malaysia as a nation that has celebrated 66 years of independence, efforts to integrate these diverse groups in the interests of national unity remain a primary focus of the national agenda. Though various policies have been implemented, such as the New Economic Policy (NEP), the National Integration Plan and the National Unity Policy to instil a culture of integrity and ethics throughout society, the desired unity has not yet been achieved.

It is still apparent to this day that sensitive issues and religious/ethnic conflicts are still on the rise, such as non-Muslims using/learning Jawi script/writing in school, the issue of

Christians using the word “Allah”, as well as racism made by these diverse ethnic groups (Sukumaran 2019; Lim 2019, 2023; Jeyaraman 2023). The National Racial Unity Index 2022 (Ministry of National Unity 2022) study reveals that Malaysia’s social integration level reached 0.629, increasing from 0.567 in 2018. This suggests a moderate and controlled level of unity among ethnicities. Whilst this is true, one cannot ignore the escalation of conflict and tension between the main religious and ethnic groups, particularly the Malay-Muslim and Chinese communities, in the context of the 15th General Election (GE-15), which took place on 19 November 2022. During the GE-15 campaign, insults and racist language were extensively employed and utilised by political candidates (Zurairi 2022). This rise in racial sentiment can be attributed to political parties and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) strategically leveraging the Malay-Muslim/Islam and Chinese demographics in their social media discourse (Abdul Hamid and Che Razali 2022).

The awareness of this issue heightened during the GE-15, as numerous young Malay-Muslim voters expressed racially charged statements on social media platforms such as Facebook and TikTok, garnering over 30 thousand views. They disseminated visual content encompassing weaponry, notably “keris” (a type of Malay dagger), along with the utilisation of hashtags such as #13 May and “Malay Supremacy (*Ketuanan Melayu*)” (Jalli 2023). These manifestations symbolised a state of preparedness for “*jihad*” (a term originating from Arabic denoting endeavour or fight) directed against the ethnic Chinese community. However, it is noteworthy that TikTok successfully eliminated almost all of the detected May 13-related content under the directive of the Malaysian authority (Renushara 2022). This shows that Malaysian politics is unquestionably dynamic, particularly during general elections. This dynamism is attributed to Malaysian society’s intricate sociocultural tapestry, which has resulted in a surge in political competition based on identity, ethnic, and religious divisions for garnering popularity among both elites and political party supporters (Saidin and Othman 2021).

A socioeconomic development model that affirmatively privileges certain races to dominate specific sectors further exacerbates the problems associated with inter-ethnic unity when a particular ethnic group departs from the norm (Welsh 2020). A series of incidents characterised by ethnic conflicts, mainly between the Malays and Chinese, such as Operation Lalang (1987), Kampung Medan (2011), and the most impactful event, the 13 May 1969 riots (Mokhtar 2015; Chin 2022), substantiates the presence of pre-existing tension between these two ethnic groups, eagerly awaiting the ignition of a spark. Some scholars contend that opportunistic political elites who capitalise on populist sentiments play an essential role in escalating ethnic tensions, utilising racial rhetoric to further their political objectives (Welsh 2020). Consequently, if this situation is not managed carefully, it may result in greater disputes and national insecurity.

To this day, Malaysia remains divided along racial and religious lines. As Engelhardt said, “Elites can influence mass predispositions. . .the race-related issues frame may contribute alternatively to positive or negative racial attitudes depending on the frame adopted” (Engelhardt 2021, p. 949). Thus, there is great significance to this article because it will reveal how the racial language used by political parties, particularly during elections, remains a factor that maintains tensions and divisions between ethnic groups in Malaysia. The outcomes and deliberations of this investigation possess the utmost relevance and timeliness. The introduction of the new policy framework and slogan of Malaysia’s “Malaysia Madani” by Malaysia’s 10th prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim, represents sustainability, compassion, respect, innovation, prosperity, and trust, which is one of the goals that reflect the desire to reset the country’s direction when it comes to race and religion (Mamat and Mahmud 2023).

This article aims to shed light on the hidden elements that fuel ongoing intergroup tension, especially between the majority Malay Muslim and the minority Chinese communities, thus advancing a deeper understanding of racial discourse and its impact on inter-ethnic perceptions. By examining perceptual disparities and intergroup conflicts through the lens of digital technologies and social media, it is possible to assess the mag-

nitude of social interactions between these two major groups, facilitating the initiation of proactive measures to resolve this issue.

The importance of this investigation also lies in its profound implications for national stability and societal cohesion. Thus, the findings of this article can be effectively utilised to evaluate, implement, and establish programs or policies that prevent political factions from using racist rhetoric excessively during forthcoming electoral campaigns. Taking a qualitative research approach, this article applies the term “racially charged language” as an analytical tool to social media posts and other online content, including videos and digital excerpts from political campaigns. By focusing on these digital sources, the study explores how cyberspace serves as a platform for the propagation of racially charged political sentiments, particularly in the context of the 15th General Election. This approach underscores the significant role that digital technologies and social media play in shaping racial attitudes and intergroup relations in Malaysia.

The structure of this article is delineated as follows: Sections 2–6 encompass an extensive review of pertinent literature on the subject matter, including racism, racial discourse, and politics, as well as populism and the historical context of politics and ethnicity in Malaysia. Section 7 briefly describes the methodology used in this study—the Critical Discourse Analysis via Fairclough’s 3-dimensional framework. This framework is then used in Section 8 to analyse the obtained data in line with existing relevant academic discourse. Section 9, the concluding section, provides a comprehensive summary of the main findings, appropriately highlighting noteworthy insights gained from the main discussions.

2. Discursive Approach in Public Policy

This article sees the policy subsystem, as Fischer (2003) argued in his writing *Reframing Public Policy: Discursive Politics and Deliberative Practices*. Fischer sees most unsuccessful policies solely emphasising resources and problems (empiricist approach), overlooking the essential exploration of the underlying nature of social problems and their epistemological consequences within policy analysis. As empiricists emphasise visible dimensions of social phenomena, they observe the social world differently than their subjects—unwittingly substituting their perspective for those of social actors, they drift from social reality (p. 52). This view considers policy analysis and policy outcomes as being filled with “sticky problems”—against this awareness, policy analysis is deemed naive (p. 12). Discursive approaches define discourse not only as a tool for interactions but also as the device that frames problems and consequently, formulates or modifies public policies (cited in Fischer 2003; Durnova et al. 2016). Habermas and Foucault have inspired discursive approaches in policy studies by critiquing rationality in policy analysis and emphasising the importance of communicative interactions among the actors for creating meaning.

Habermas’s notion of communicative reason highlights discourse as the site of understanding among actors, whilst Foucault’s insights about discourse as a site of knowledge and power have influenced diverse applications in policy analysis. The latter argued that policies are constructed through discourse, incorporating values, instruments, and consequences. Instead of seeking an objective meaning, they (considered Postempiricist/Postpositivism analysts) focused on how actors interpret policies and engage in interpretive struggles to influence policy choices, including the role of feasibility arguments in shaping policy possibilities. Postempiricism can be understood as a philosophical orientation that seeks to go beyond the “objective” conception of reality; in their view, there are a variety of valid forms of explanation, including empirical and scientific/causal analysis, and no one form is necessarily privileged (Fischer 2003). Theories and approaches developed by these scholars, especially in policy planning and analysis, emphasise language and power as the meta-theoretical focus of the discourse approach. This perspective is important as it recognises the importance of language beyond its linguistic aspects.

In this context, discourse is rooted in the understanding that language profoundly shapes our perception of the socio-political environment rather than solely reflecting it; embedded within societal practices, the discourse’s language remains fluid and open rather

than being a rigid set of predefined rules (Fischer 2003, pp. 21–47). By using deliberative logic that consists of the question of whether a policy is relevant or not to the situation that will be used and how it is related to the existing structure and process of society (Fischer 2003), this study seeks to understand the basic values and normative ideas of the problems which are significant, especially for the agenda-setting process. The study of political speech/writing and ethnic relations allows us to explore the assertion of beliefs, the analysis and clarification of ideologies and ideas, symbolic power, and persuasion that are present in these social actors—the discursive approach not only provides an alternative way to understand the policy creation or transformation that needs to be undertaken but also provides a different approach to examining matters of power, legitimacy and “actual” problems the government deals with (Fischer 2003; Durnova et al. 2016).

3. Discourse and Racism

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is an approach that incorporates the tradition of critical social analysis into the study of language. This approach is essential to critical social analysis, focusing on discourse and its relationship with other social elements such as power relations, ideology, institutions, and social identity (Fairclough 1989). “Discourse” means certain communicative events and the form of interaction, either in writing or verbal form (Van Dijk 2001, p. 146). Fairclough (1989) generally states that critical analysis of texts aims to reveal how language is used to maintain, create, or change power relations in society. This involves understanding how the text affects the reader politically and socially, as well as how the text reflects or reinforces the position of power, ideology, and perception in society. To understand the role of discourse in perpetuating racism, it is crucial to establish a comprehensive understanding of the basic concept of racism. For this article, the framework used is the cognitive subsystem theory of racism, as presented by Van Dijk (1993). This theoretical framework posits racism as a multifaceted social construct where ethnic or “racial” groups exercise power dynamics that lead to inequality. Specifically, the cognitive subsystem theory of racism examines individuals’ prejudiced cognitions and beliefs toward different ethnic groups.

These thoughts and beliefs are rooted in racial prejudices and ideologies that further shape their actions and behaviour towards ethnic groups that are different from them (Van Dijk 1993). Van Dijk (2001) further argued that discourse plays a vital role in the cognitive dimension of racism. According to him, prejudices and ideologies are not natural but acquired and assimilated, usually facilitated through communication mediums such as text and conversation. This linguistic exchange serves as a platform where mental constructions of race are commonly expressed, formulated, defended, and certified (Van Dijk 2001, p. 146). As a result, this perpetuates the reproduction, spread, and acquisition of racism and racial discourse within certain ethnic groups. In particular, the spread of racism is mainly associated with symbolic elites, which significantly influence societal narratives, institutions, and organisations through dominant or manipulative discourses (Van Dijk 1993, 2001). In Malaysia, racism can be attributed to two interrelated factors: the institutional framework, exemplified by the affirmative implementation of the NEP, and the widespread use of the 3R concept (Race, Religion, and Royalty) in the country’s political system. The following section will explore how institutional mechanisms and the prominence of the 3R concept contribute to the emergence and consolidation of racism in Malaysia.

4. Pre-History before GE-15

In Malaysia, the historical term “*Tanah Melayu*” referred to the land of the Malays, shaping the nation’s identity (Abdullah 2010). The economic policies introduced by the British colonialists that brought Chinese and Indian migration changed the country’s political and demographic landscape within the framework of a pluralistic society. After independence, a partnership between the UMNO, the Malaysian Chinese Association, and the Malaysian Indian Congress led to the Alliance Party’s success in the 1955 election.

However, the 1969 election almost destroyed the communal model with deadly racial riots between Malays and Chinese due to economic disparities and provocative chanting during the victory parade by the Chinese-dominated opposition party (Chin 2018, p. 176). This triggered the rebranding of the Alliance Party to the BN and the implementation of the NEP to rebuild stability. Nadzri (2018) described the NEP as an affirmative policy involving significant government intervention with quotas, granting special licenses, and establishing government-linked companies to increase the Malays' share of economic participation. The NEP strengthened the BN, especially the UMNO's authority in the government, with its president often becoming the prime minister. The UMNO's growing dominance was maintained through control over political systems, ensuring its continued power (Nadzri 2018; Abdullah and Nadzri 2022). As a result of the GE-14 in 2018, the Pakatan Harapan (PH) consisted of the Malaysian United Indigenous Party (BERSATU), the National Trust Party (AMANAH), the Democratic Action Party (DAP), and the People's Justice Party (PKR) dethroned BN.

The high cost of living, the introduction of the goods and services tax (GST), and the corruption scandal surrounding the UMNO, especially 1Malaysia Development Berhad, led most Malay-Islam voters to vote for the opposition coalition (Nadzri 2018). GE-14 symbolised the aspiration for a transformed Malaysia where electoral choices transcended ethnic and religious affiliations. However, the prospect was marred by internal and external challenges faced by the PH coalition. According to Chin (2020), these issues were exacerbated by the PH government's dysfunctionality and the contentious situation arising from Mahathir's failure to pass on the Prime Minister's position to Anwar Ibrahim, as initially pledged. Mahathir's rhetoric insinuating potential Malay political disempowerment and power-sharing with non-Malays further strained the coalition (Chin 2020). The fall of the PH government also lay in tensions between the Malay and Chinese elite within the government structure (Temby 2020). Later on, the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and UMNO aimed to reinforce the Malay-Islamic influence, citing a threat to "Malay supremacy". The Sheraton Movement precipitated the downfall of the PH government as BERSATU exited the coalition and established a new alliance with the PAS and UMNO, resulting in the formation of the Perikatan Nasional (PN), with the idea of restoring the position of the Malay-Islam in the country (Razak 2022; Saidin 2023).

5. Race, Religion, and Royalty in Malaysia Politics

In most countries, individuals join political parties, evaluate policies, and vote partly based on their ethnic identification; even political parties tend to choose candidates, form alliances, and use rhetoric and symbols to attract voters of certain ethnicities (Brown 2003). Malaysia is traditionally no exception to this rule. Political competition based on race rather than ideology has been going on in Malaysia for decades and has strongly shaped electoral politics. Rajandran and Lee (2023) concluded that racial politics in Malaysia is based on Malay-Islamic dominance defined through the concept of 3R (Race, Religion, Royalty) as the basis of legitimacy in government in Malaysia. According to them (p. 5),

Malaysia inherited and has implemented the Westminster parliamentary democratic system since independence in 1957, but its political culture is mixed because the Malaysian Constitution and norms of belief and practice root and maintain the primacy of the Bumiputera (Malays and other indigenous people), Islam, and Malay Rulers.

The 3R concept depicts "Malaysia as a country of conscience through Malay-Islamic dominance but tries to meet the socio-demographic divide, that is, ethnic, linguistic, regional or religious" (Rajandran and Lee 2023, p. 5). Chin (2022) sees "*Ketuanan Melayu*" (Malay Supremacy) as opening the door to creating a political-institutional system based on racial policies under affirmative action. Malay Supremacy refers to the principle that Malay ethnicity has been recognised as sovereign and privileged in Malaysia. This concept emphasises the protection and maintenance of the political, economic, and social rights of the Malay ethnic group as the majority group in this country. For most Malays, Article 153

in the Constitution confirms their “special” status and reinforces the ideology of “Ketuanan”, where the Malays are “masters”, and this country belongs to them (Chin 2022, p. 454). Whereas non-Malays, especially Chinese and Indians who have been living in Malaysia for a long time, continue to be called “pendatang” (newcomers) and should consider themselves as “guests” (Chin 2022, p. 454; Saidin and Othman 2021, p. 59). Mohamed et al. (2010) confirmed Islam’s significance in Malaysia’s sociology, communication, and political strategy. Islam not only serves as the official religion of the country but is crucial for Malay identity due to the Malaysian Constitution (Article 160); Malays must be Muslim.

This intertwining of race and religion gave birth to the concept of Malay Islam (Mohamed et al. 2010; Chin 2022). Meanwhile, references to “royalty” are used for political power, notably in the UMNO’s alignment with the Malay royal institution (Rajandran and Lee 2023). This alliance strengthens the Malay-Islamic government’s legitimacy. In the context of political party competition, the “Islamic State” sentiment defines the DAP-PAS relationship. As a Chinese-dominated party, the DAP is regarded as a chauvinist organisation that wants to establish a secular Malaysia, whereas the PAS is seen as a fundamentalist/extremist Islamic organisation that wants to establish an Islamic State (Mohamed et al. 2010, p. 404). In Welsh’s (2020) study on political polarisation in Malaysia based on race, religion, and reform, the UMNO and PAS are seen as parties who often “Islamise” their actions and decisions to gain support from Malay-Muslim voters. The UMNO, especially as a dominant and hegemonic party in Malaysian politics, often uses the “divisive” sentiment to attract and mobilise their supporters, especially Malay Muslim, to win the “centre ground” and gain power. Welsh (2020, p. 42) added that the special rights of the Malay community are not only institutionalised through the idea of “Malay Supremacy” and policies such as the NEP, but certain regional areas become a vehicle for maintaining the ethnic hierarchy and enriching the Malay political elite.

Abdullah and Nadzri (2022) concluded that the neo-feudal concept, which is now deeply ingrained in the Malay community’s culture, contributes to the persistence of Malay Islam in Malaysia’s political culture. As Doane (2006, p. 256) argued, through political discourse, individuals and groups—here, the political elite can be emphasised as described by Van Dijk (2001)—racial issues to be understood and perceived by the audience to obtain ideological and political advantages. The UMNO political party, which has ruled Malaysia for over 60 years with a quasi-authoritarian style of government, strategically portrays itself as the “protector” of Malay interests and has used this view as a basis for establishing its legitimacy among Malay voters. This study concluded that the UMNO’s historical foundation, rooted in fighting for Malay rights and using “political party-directed patronage”, remains the main driver behind its ability to secure the loyalty of Malay-Muslim voters. This support continues despite concerns about credibility issues such as corruption, money laundering, and nepotism plaguing many UMNO political leaders.

Additionally, social media’s growth amplifies political competition rooted in the 3Rs, as parties and elites exploit these divisions in online campaigns. Temby (2020) and Saidin and Othman (2021) proposed that ethnocentrism intensifies during elections, with local and national issues framed through racial and religious lenses. The political elite often raises religious and racial issues through various media to create the impression that there is a threat to the “survival” of a race. In the context of the GE-15, Subre et al. (2023) and Abdul Hamid and Che Razali (2022) confirmed political elites’ use of 3R sentiments. Subre et al. (2023, p. 50) found that most millennials (in this case, first-time voters due to the Undi-18 policy) used TikTok to enhance their political knowledge—driving politicians to tap into this platform and engage with 6 million new voters. Abdul Hamid and Che Razali (2022) also found that with the emergence of the PN coalition, the flames of racism intensified during the GE-15, where the PN was seen to be prevalent among Malay-Muslim voters compared to the PH, following the misleading perception that the DAP dominated the coalition. Propaganda targeted issues like subsidy cuts impacting Malays and sensitive DAP statements on Islam and Malay culture (Abdul Hamid and Che Razali 2022, p. 2; Razali and Hani 2022).

6. Racial Sentiments and Political Discourse in Malaysia

In Malaysia, Critical Discourse studies have emerged, yet many focus on “political” discourse rather than racism within elections and political parties. Therefore, this section will analyse political discourses covering this article’s needs. Sankar (2013) studied elite discourse’s role in power retention. Taking a closer look at Prime Minister Najib Razak’s speech during the 2011 UMNO General Assembly, the study revealed discourse strategies like intertextuality, historical analogies, song lyrics, and Quranic quotes bolstered his popularity, dominance, and power within his party and simultaneously moved the complex and delicate balance that makes up Malaysia’s multi-religious and multi-racial politics. Furthermore, to defend power and dominance as the Malay nation, he denied inequality by using the DEB as a justification, subtly asserting Malay supremacy and Islam and the traditional strategy of the political elite in the discourse—highlighting “we” vs. “them” (Sankar 2013, p. 525). Mohamad Jamil (2020, 2023) delved into the nuanced interplay of discourse, fear, and politics in the context of Malaysian elections. In her 2020 work, she explored how discourse strategies invoke fear and are strategically employed to galvanise Malay-Muslim voters in support of the ruling party, BN.

This is achieved by constructing a dichotomy between “Us” (representing Malay Muslims) and “Them” (comprising non-Malay/non-Muslim groups), primarily observed in mainstream Malay-language newspapers during the GE-13 campaign. Within these newspapers, a distinct division emphasised the need for Malay-Muslim support for the UMNO, positioning the party as the safeguard against threats to their collective identity, national security, and Malay unity. Mohamad Jamil pointed out that the discourse within these newspapers was orchestrated mainly by elites and the Malay political establishment, further strengthening the narrative of “Us” versus “Them”. The language and narratives used in editorials and columns evoked emotions, promoted trust, and solidified a sense of belonging among the target audience. Building on her earlier work, Mohamad Jamil’s (2023) study investigated the discursive legitimacy strategies employed during the GE-13 and GE-14 campaigns. This research highlighted the unequal representation of diverse perspectives in mainstream media due primarily to the BN’s considerable control over these mediums. This control resulted in the suppression of alternative voices, limiting the range of viewpoints available to the public.

Her study also highlighted the prevalence of manipulative arguments and fallacies within the discourse; these tactics exploited pre-existing biases and stirred emotions to rally support for the government, often at the expense of balanced, legitimate discussions. Race and religion are undoubtedly used to legitimise these actions and contribute to preserving the social structure and political influence of the government. Tapsell (2018) analyses discourse through digital media. The study recognised the ability of social media sites, especially Facebook and WhatsApp, to shape contemporary Malaysian political discourse. Facebook and WhatsApp have been used as subversive tools to spread anti-government messages, and this was evident in the election campaign that ended Malaysia’s ruling coalition, the BN, which had been in power for 60 years. The study concluded that gossip, rumour, and conspiracy played a central part in Facebook and WhatsApp, which were used as a medium by the opposition coalition to spread information about the corruption and nepotism of Prime Minister Najib Razak.

Research on Malaysian political discourse often employs the 3R concept, as it has become an essential component of legitimacy in governance, manifesting itself in language and dictating what should and should not be said (Rajandran and Lee 2023). The 3R concept forms a relationship and contributes indirectly to institutional and political racism in Malaysia. The analysis showed that discourse here is not just communication or “debate”; government and opposition actors employ discourse to shape representations, evoke national concerns, and convey ideologies (Doane 2006). As Fairclough (1989) and Van Dijk (2006, 2001) argued, discourse wields power, actively moulding reality and social relations. This political discourse highlights the symbolic power held by the BN as the government and the opposition. These also indicated the unique role played by those

with high social positions in reproducing discourse through manipulative control based on expertise, position, resources, and group strength (Van Dijk 2006, 2015). From the racism context, the BN has a vast influence as a government. Therefore, this coalition has already formulated the definition of the ethnic situation first compared to the mass media. This kind of discourse will quickly become official in terms of meaning and is routinely adopted by the media covering these agencies and institutions, thereby spreading the dominant definition of the ethnic situation among the populations (Van Dijk 2006, p. 149).

As discussed above, the presence of 3R politics is the main factor contributing to inter-ethnic harmony in this country. In assessing ethnic cohesion in Malaysia, the concept of “clash of civilisations” by Huntington (2000), which refers to countries that have the potential to be divided due to the heritage of cohesion based on civilisational differences founded on cultural, religious, and historical values, can be applied in the country of Malaysia. He explained that the community in the slip-line zone is exposed to various conflicts that can cause tension and division. A quantitative study conducted by Mokhtar (2015), who examined the views and effects of inter-ethnicity on ethnic relations among Malay and Chinese youth in Peninsular Malaysia, found that the inter-ethnic views can change from negative to positive when they experience positive experiences and specific events. The results of the study involving 231 Malay youth and 230 Chinese youth participants found that even though they have a negative view of each other, it does not affect their daily relationships. Chinese youth in the areas of Kelantan and Terengganu, for example, were found to respect other ethnic members and could work with Malay youth due to strong assimilation in the two states. However, Malays in Kota Bharu preferred associating with members of the same ethnic group.

The report, Pusat KOMAS (2022), which focused on racial discrimination, showed that race and religion had become widespread and effective instruments used by politicians and political parties in Malaysia to achieve political mileage, even to be recognised and regarded as champions of race, ethnicity, and religion. This has led to the most significant percentage of racial incidents in 2021 occurring due to the political arena (28%) (p. 10). A study by Razali and Hani (2022) added evidence to the current race relations situation by arguing that the voting pattern of young first-time voters in the GE-15 was abnormal and youth violence had been normalised. When the GE-15 results saw a hung parliament due to no coalition party being able to achieve a simple majority to form the government, young Malay-Muslim voters, especially those who voted for the first time and supported the PN, revived the 13th May race riots through the TikTok platform using the trending slogan “*If there is a declaration of war, we will respond to the call!*” (Razali and Hani 2022, p. 185). In this extreme situation, as discussed by Subre et al. (2023) and Abdul Hamid and Che Razali (2022), young voters began to split based on ethnoreligious lines—the heat of racial conflict carried out by political parties during the GE-15 campaign increased and left “Malay anxiety”, whether on social media or offline and continues to this day.

Despite extensively exploring scholarly works, more focused research is needed to directly link racialised language and tensions. This study highlights that the 3Rs used by political elites involve economic competition, symbolic power, and political dominance. Malaysia’s racially stratified hierarchy, entwined with inter-ethnic history, reveals divisions and varying levels of inclusivity (Welsh 2020, p. 42). In this context, ethnoreligious sentiments strongly trigger feelings of ethnic identity and loyalty among voters. Malaysia has held elections 15 times from 1957 to 2022. Regardless of the coalition of the ruling or opposition parties, their political discourse may (re)negotiate various concerns. Nevertheless, 3R is always maintained because it is the basis of their legitimacy to governance (Rajandran and Lee 2023, p. 6). Whilst studies exist on political discourse (Sankar 2013; Mohamad Jamil 2020, 2023; Tapsell 2018), they primarily analyse discourse from a political perspective and lack depth on racialised political discourse and its effects on ethnic tensions. This article integrates existing literature to formulate overarching theories. Building on prior research, it critically examines the dimension of political elites’ use of racialised language

during elections. The following section outlines the research methodology employed to address this inquiry.

7. Methodology

To ensure the effective implementation of research, an understanding of the scientific research method is essential, as this facilitates an enhanced interpretation and analysis. This study employed an empirical exploratory approach to contribute to a better understanding of racially charged language use by politicians and electoral candidates from the largest and strongest political parties in Malaysia (PAS and DAP). The Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP) are two of the most significant political parties in Malaysia, each representing distinct community and voter bases. The PAS, founded in 1951, is an Islamist political party that advocates for the implementation of Sharia law and emphasises the role of Islam in public life and governance. Its support base primarily consists of conservative Malay Muslims, especially in rural areas and the northern states of Malaysia. In contrast, the DAP, established in 1965, is a secular, centre-left political party that champions social democracy. The party draws much of its support from urban areas and the Chinese communities in Malaysia. DAP's policies often focus on issues like economic equality, good governance, and the protection of minority rights.

The need to understand this significant issue through a discursive approach has led this article to conduct qualitative research, as CDA seeks to understand pressing social problems (Van Dijk 2006, p. 252), and it coincided with the nature of qualitative research that tends to take place in “natural settings” (Marshall and Rossman 2014). Moreover, excerpts and quotes that the CDA analysed—involving in-depth analysis of texts, culture, and society—to assess long-term underlying causes and effects (Mogashoa 2014, p. 105), parallel with qualitative endeavours in explaining the underlying meanings that influence individual actions and their interconnectedness with others. For the data on political discourse, four samples were selected from two sources published around the GE-15: (1) videos from the TikTok platform and (2) writings by political elites on Facebook. These four political discourses contain explicit racist language referring to the Malay or Chinese groups used by the PAS and DAP politicians. To examine the image of the Malays and Chinese as constructed by these two parties, the four samples were divided into two parts, including two related to the Malay and two related to the Chinese.

This study analysed the data using CDA. CDA argues that some specific social processes and practices may be subtly implied in most discourses, such as leadership, power, dominance, racism, solidarity, hegemony, and ideology (Van Dijk 2006, 2015; Fairclough 1992). Specifically, this article employed the CDA framework of Fairclough (1992, 1995), which involves a 3-dimensional analysis: Text, Discursive Practice, and Social Practice. This article also investigated power and ideology regarding the exploration of political discourse that is laden with racial language. The discourse used by political parties/elite during the GE-15 was first analysed by looking for the text. Text is the structure of discourse, such as vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and sentence coherence, as identified by Fairclough (1992) in the Figure 1 below.

A discursive practice then focuses on the texts' production, distribution, and consumption (Fairclough 1992, p. 71). Despite the model's concern with social implications, such as broad discussion of institutions, economics, and politics generated by discourse, the discursive practice focuses on how text choices influence audience interpretations and act as a stage to bridge the gap between the text and the social practice (Nathan 2021, p. 65). Understanding Fairclough's concept of text historicity necessitates grappling with intertextuality and interdiscursivity. When shaping discourse and ideology, intertextuality urges us to think outside of individual clauses and isolated meanings, whilst interdiscursivity involves combining various discourses, genres, or styles with distinct social and institutional connotations (Wu 2011, cited in Nathan 2021). This study's application of discursive practices occurred in identifying how political elites construct racial sentiments in texts by considering complex historical and cultural factors. What words are used to con-

struct racial sentiments, and how are those words used to trigger or arouse anxiety among certain ethnic groups? Findings from these two dimensions were used in the explanation dimension by describing their dialectical relationship with sociocultural practices (which govern these processes).

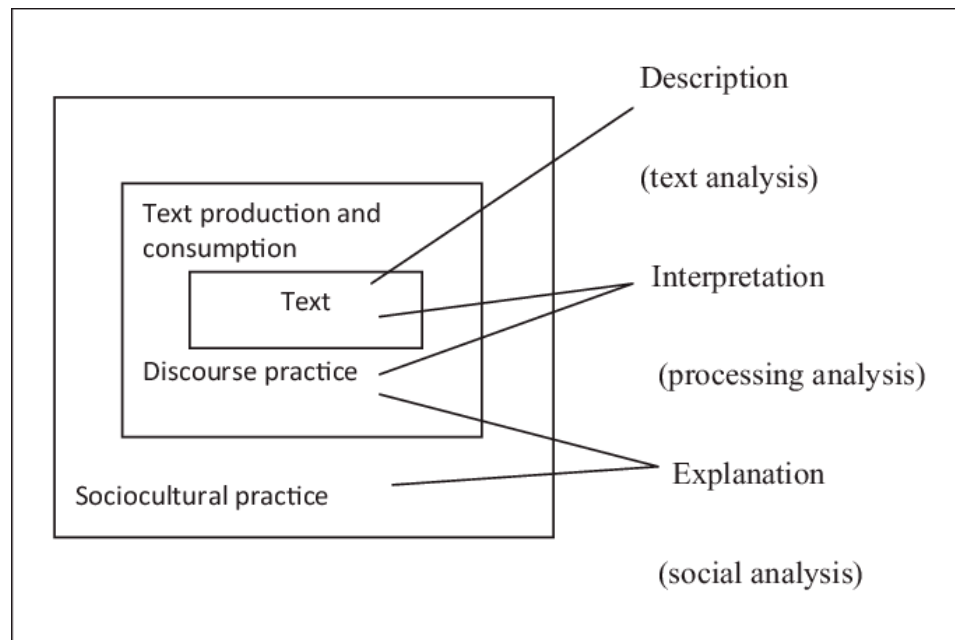


Figure 1. 3-Dimension CDA Fairclough.

8. Finding and Discussion: Critical Discourse Analysis of the PAS and DAP Political Campaigns in the GE-15

The political discourse delivered by the participating political parties contained implicit content that imagined social and political power dynamics through the lens of racial discourse. In this context, power refers to pursuing political power to govern the country, depending on voters' support based on race. This study asserts that the language used in political discourse, which includes a mixture of racial elements, embraces power through racial divisions, with the fundamental objective of ensuring electoral victory veiled in every discourse. This selection focused on the most prominent and influential political discourses that contained racism during the GE-15, which only involved the PAS and DAP. To understand people's reactions to these speeches, we identified the linguistic features salient to the text and the power and political influence that triggered them.

CDA of Text 1: "Vote for BN, PH, will go to hell"—Campaign Talks by PAS Leaders: "Remember my message to all the voters in Sik who want to vote. Go home and cross Perikatan Nasional. Anyone who goes to Barisan Nasional and Pakatan Harapan will go to hellfire. Ustaz, come here and lecture about entering hellfire. I don't want to exaggerate, but if there are people from Barisan Nasional and Pakatan Harapan who say, why am I saying that? So, come see me, I can lecture again. That's all; I apologise for the rough language and unintentional words".

This discourse was delivered by the PAS Youth Leader Sik, Mohd Shahiful Mohd Nasir, in his campaign talk in Sik, Kedah. In this sentence, there is a clear reflection of power based on the use of force. Fairclough (1992, p. 82) saw that the analysis of the force of utterance (the act of speech) can reveal how language is used to influence the views and actions of the audience. First, by asking the public to help him through direct order, "Go home and cross Perikatan Nasional", to the voters in the area, he used a persuasive strategy to mobilise people's actions. Fairclough (1992) also argued that demand and power have a

close relationship. The threat of negative consequences of “*entering hellfire*” for anyone who votes for other parties (BN and PH) was also used. This threat statement with modality “will,” which shows certainty, is another sign of power relations that aimed to intensify the importance of choosing PN. Here, the authority religion strengthened the message by calling “*Ustaz*” (Islamic teacher). Religion is one of the most salient and powerful institutions (Fairclough 1989, p. 56), and this kind of call gives legitimacy and more trust to the audience in the message delivered.

There were several ideological strategies underlying his statement. For example, the words “*hellfire*” and “*Ustaz*” are indicators of his thinking based on the Islamic religion. Religious concepts intensify the consequences of confident political choices (forming the narrative of the PN as the right choice and the BN and PH as the wrong choice), creating a relationship between political choice and religious morality. By using an ideology based on Islamic values, he implicitly introduced himself as the protector of Malay Islam. This analysis helps us see how Islamic values lead to polarising narratives that framed the election as a contest between different ethnoreligious identities. Considering the campaign delivery was given face-to-face and spread on social media, it is another sign of power. Face-to-face discourse reveals the nature of power relations, whilst media contains hidden power relations (Fairclough 1989, p. 46). In face-to-face interactions, the speaker can plan his contribution to the audience. He knew who his audience was (Malay Islam), so he adapted the religious usage and decided to keep this adaptation. This discourse also influenced cultural values. Despite the significant criticism the speaker who represented him received, the candidate who ran in the area won the election by many votes. It might be because of the justifiable appearance and religious thoughts, indicating the social identity of Islamic values in a Malay-Muslim majority state.

CDA of Text 2: “DAP promoting Islamophobia and Communism”—Facebook post by President PAS:

1. “The views of the orientalist and Western media, who are the most hostile and lying towards Islam, which is spread in Western countries, have been imported to Malaysia by DAP. This information is wrong and is reported against PAS”;
2. “PAS is labelled as the Taliban who are fighting America in Afghanistan, whereas America has violently invaded the country and acted excessively through the Western media against the oppressed Taliban, but DAP covers up the actual situation”;
3. “This is evident when they commit slander against Islam by throwing stones in the middle of the crowd in broad daylight, especially against PAS”;
4. “The interethnic violence, as seen in the 13 May 1969 incident, was quelled due to the enduring Islamic characteristics of Malay Muslim society. This has enabled non-Muslim Chinese and Indian families to live securely in Kelantan, Terengganu, and Kedah, but the situation is like releasing a stuck dog”;
5. “In truth, DAP exhibits excessiveness, attempting to deceive by presenting members, candidates, and leaders with Malay Islamic appearances. However, this cannot legitimise their ideology conflicting with Islam, just as the preparation of pork by a cook in Islamic attire with a cap and turban does not make it permissible”;
6. “Who brought the suggestion that the ashes of the late Chin Peng be brought back to Malaysia? Who organised the mass meeting of the Communist Party of Malaya that Islam banned because of its ideology?”

Due to the length of this text, only a few items that appeared to contain racist sentiments were analysed. PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang delivered this written discourse through his Facebook account and received 11 thousand likes and 1613 user shares. In mass media discourse, the nature of power relations is less clear, as Fairclough (1989) called this a hidden power relation. However, the division between the producer and

the audience, this “one-sided” discourse, allowed the speaker to exercise power over the audience (p. 50). A common tactic used by most leaders, “we”, is also found with the inclusive pronouns “Malay Muslim”, “Islam”, and “they” for DAP. It is important to note that “we” indicates the speaker’s modality and attachment to the statement (Van Dijk 2001); in this case, “Malay Muslim” served an ethno-religious ideology that stresses the unity and solidarity of this community, creating a bond with a wider Muslim audience. This analysis showed the high index value of the inclusive pronoun “Malay Muslim” or “Islam” and its possibility to acquire a crucial meaning in the political context of Malaysia. An analysis of this discourse identified the ideology of Islamism that protects and promotes Islamic values and the Malay-Muslim community. Some elements of Islamic doctrine that were reflected in this statement include mistrust of “orientalists” and “Western media” as well as efforts to protect and defend Islamic values and Malay privileges by showing how the “DAP” (as a representation of Chinese ethnicity) was considered to influence the perception of Islam and the position of the Malays in the country.

Two strategies exist in this statement: negation (negative sentences) and power of representation. The negative sentence (here semantically negative) was used for the rising polemic towards the DAP, and this semantically carried a specific type of presupposition that also worked intertextually, combining other texts (DAP’s association with communist influence from the Malayan Communist Party and the May 13 ethnic riot issue) to protest and reject the DAP (Fairclough 1992, p. 121)—representing influence and power (Fairclough 1989). This “brings the viewer’s body into particular alignments with elements in the scene depicted and prior universal embodied experience” (Hart 2014, p. 83). The structure of the “problem-solving” scheme made this writing influential in ensuring the audience was well-informed about the party and its efforts, the threat that the DAP poses to Malay Islam, and was essential for maintaining the party’s power.

CDA of Text 3: “We Rejected the Taliban”—Campaign Talks by DAP Leaders:

1. “Who is Ahmad Zahid? Everyone knows his behaviour. Now, do you want him to be the Prime Minister? Can he manage the economy? Does he understand how to strengthen the currency? Increase our wealth? Ensure our salaries can rise? Can he control the prices of goods?”;
2. “If PAS wins, everyone knows it. Our country will regress further. Look at the states governed by this religious detractor party”;
3. “That is why we do not want the Taliban. We reject the Taliban”.

The Perak DAP chairman, Nga Kor Ming, presented this discourse in his speech in Perak. We noticed that this speech had two types of power: (1) face-to-face and (2) hidden power since this speech was recorded and then widely distributed and used through social media platforms, especially on TikTok (as a one-minute video). The use of modalities of ability and uncertainty, such as “Do you want”, “Can he manage”, “Does he understand”, and “Can he control” had an authoritative influence (Fairclough 1989, p. 184) that raised doubts about the abilities and qualifications of Ahmad Zahid (the leader from UMNO) as a leader and a Malay himself. This also used intertextuality—the stereotype is that the Chinese are more efficient economically (Yunus et al. 2023, p. 435). These sentences were also persuasive by creating doubt in the audience’s mind, simultaneously signalling a power relationship. At the same time, these statements reflected interdiscursivity into existing discourses and narratives about this political leader and his capabilities, as a literature review mentioned that the UMNO leader was corrupt (Nadzri 2018). It is in line with the general expectation that political leaders should have expertise in economic matters and be able to manage the country effectively.

Putting the PAS in the context of “If PAS wins, everyone knows” and “Our country will go further back” reveals a cause-and-effect relationship that raised concerns about the influence of religion on national governance. By asserting knowledge generalisations and drawing conclusions, the speaker aligned his argument with widely held beliefs about the negative consequences of a religiously focused government. Using the repetition

of “Taliban” reinforced the speaker’s rejection and strong stance against the PAS, which contained the power to influence the audience. As argued by Fairclough, repetition has logical connectors and can cue ideological assumptions (1989, p. 131). A tactic of “We” to focus on negative information about “Them” (Van Dijk 2001, p. 147) was also used. “We” positions the speaker and the Chinese audience as part of a collective that opposes the Taliban, which implicitly refers to the PAS. This alignment created a sense of shared values and ideology among the speaker and Chinese audience, reinforcing their stance against the PAS.

CDA of Text 4: “Hopes for Malay Ethnic Division”—Campaign Talks by Former DAP Member:

1. “Now, let those Malay nationalists and Islam conservatives die and be divided. When they unite, we Chinese will not be able to survive. When those bastards are divided, we will beat them until they are done for”;
2. “Listen to me. Take a look at my fist. Now that they are divided, let their Malay, racial, and religious politics stab each other”;
3. “They are in disarray. Let us hit them until they are dead”;
4. “Now that they are divided, we need to unite. United like this, PKR, DAP, AMANAH, and MUDA, led by Syed Saddiq, are together”;
5. “On Monday, we will hold a funeral ceremony for all wearing blue shirts”.

This discourse was delivered by former DAP member Hew Kuan Yau when speaking in the election campaign in Raub, Pahang. Our observations indicated that this speech production has two powers: face-to-face and hidden power, as this speech was recorded and spread on social media, particularly TikTok. At the beginning of his speech, he emphasised the dominance and superiority of the Chinese ethnic group over the Malay and Muslim groups. This statement expressed the power through the strength that the Chinese want to take over the Malay ethnicity. By using strong, persuasive, and force of utterances (requests or orders) such as “*We will beat them until they are done for*”, “*Listen to me*”, and “*Let us hit them until they are dead*”, it had the power to influence emotions and perceptions of Chinese community towards Malay political parties (Fairclough 1992, p. 82). In addition, racial and political ideology was highlighted through the emphasis on ethnic identity differences by referring to “Malay nationalists” and “Islamic conservatives” as the basis of conflict and division in the Malay community, where it had the potential to consolidate support from the Chinese voters.

Also, he used phrases such as “we” and inclusive pronouns such as “Chinese” to refer to the speaker and audience and “*Malay nationalists*” and “*Islam conservatives*” to refer to the “them” (Malay), causing the formation of a perception of significant ideological differences between the Chinese and Malays. It is worth noting that this speech was delivered in Hokkien and using “we” or “Chinese” conveyed a sense of solidarity in their group, reinforced antagonistic differences, and fostered a sense of resistance in the Chinese community to the Malay ethnicity. Intertextuality also played an important role, such as “the funeral for all those wearing blue shirts”, referring to the official colours used by the UMNO and the PN coalition. Like other candidates, the speaker focused on the sentiment of division and racism, all of which have the theme of power relations.

9. Conclusions

After critically analysing the selected political discourses from social media platforms, it appears that a number of electoral candidates from the PAS and DAP contributed to the emergence of a hegemonic discourse in their political campaigns. In the context of digital technologies and cyberspace, the findings showed that electoral competition is not only a place where ideology is spread but also a battle arena in the “struggle for racism” through the populist 3R sentiments (race and religion significantly). This demonstrated how digital political approaches can be seen as forces that influence and are utilised by

various parties in society to secure and defend their positions within the social structure. The data presented in this article support Van Dijk's argument that linguistics serves as a platform for the cognitive construction of race, allowing its expression and defence. From one perspective, the analysis showed that although language infused with racism is mainly focused on religion, it is crucial to acknowledge that Islam plays a vital role in shaping the Malay identity as stated in the Malaysian Constitution. Therefore, any discourse involving the Islamic religion indirectly reflects the identity of the Malays. Additionally, this study supported the arguments that the concept of "Negara Islam" became a central racial sentiment in the relationship between the DAP and PAS parties, contributing valuable insights into how racist language is constructed and used in the analysed political discourse on social media to shape racial attitudes in society. This underscores the significant role that digital technologies and cyberspace play in the dissemination and reinforcement of racial and religious sentiments in Malaysia's political landscape.

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