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Electoral Dynamics in Malaysia

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Electoral Dynamics in Malaysia

FINDINGS FROM THE GRASSROOTS

EDITED BY MEREDITH L. WEISS

Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, Malaysia

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Foreword

Malaysia's 13th general elections took place the same year that the country celebrated its 50th anniversary as a confederation formed through the combining of the Federation of Malaya with Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore (Singapore left after two years). This is significant for several reasons.

The election results saw the long-term ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional, staying in power thanks to the support it received from the largely rural East Malaysian states. This increased reliance by the federal government on Sabah and Sarawak had been obvious already in the 2008 elections, but this time around it avoided an excruciating loss of power thanks to them.

The political, demographic, socio-economic and ethnic structure of Sabah and Sarawak is extremely different from that found in Peninsular Malaysia. Thus, the new balance of power forces the central government to give increasing consideration – and respect – to the East Malaysians and the special conditions they live under. Their representation in Cabinet is higher than ever before, and their ability to raise demands on the federal budget is also greatly increased.

That is one significant and rather obvious change. Another is the fact that their raised status in the power calculus of the country will over time have great impact on the basic and greatly simplified concepts concerning ethnicity and religion, which have defined political discourses for decades.

This is borne out by the realization among opposition parties – which won the popular vote but failed to take power due to the distorted nature of the electoral system – that they cannot really dislodge the BN unless they advance from the comfort of their urban strongholds and seriously re-strategise in order to become relevant to rural folk and to voters in Sabah and Sarawak.

To me, this is one of the most important of the new scenarios to consider as Malaysian politics struggles to make the two-party system that has recently come into being in the country credible and sustainable.

Sabah and Sarawak had for decades been neglected in the nation building process, not to say aggressively exploited. The new situation cannot but bring about profound changes in how Malaysians consider their complex and diverse nature, as well as the matrix of their politics.

This present work is thus highly important in that it seeks to hear what the grassroots are saying, and as the title further tells us, it is cognisant of the necessity to discern the new dynamics pervading the country.

Coming so quickly after the elections, it may contain some weaknesses, but this is more than compensated for by the extent of its various individual studies and by the enormous amount of data collected herein for serious scholars of contemporary Malaysia to contemplate and to build upon. Many more aspects of Malaysian politics that will become significant in the coming years other than the one I mentioned above are here to be appraised.

ISEAS is very proud indeed to have been involved in a variety of ways in the production of this volume, and looks forward to more such collaboration in the coming years.

Dr OOI KEE BENG
Deputy Director, ISEAS

Acknowledgements

This project represents a massive collective effort, on several dimensions. As explained in greater detail in the first chapter, the field research data at the heart of this book came from researchers stationed, usually in pairs, in each of over thirty parliamentary constituencies, during Malaysia's 13th general election (GE13) campaign. The research got its start as part of a four-country study on 'money politics' – or more specifically, the role of political networks and patronage flows as part of electoral cycles – in Southeast Asia. While that initiative relies upon a range of methods, this sort of ethnographic data on what exactly transpires during campaigns and elections is critical. However, once we started planning the research in Malaysia, this piece of the project took on a life of its own, not least since Malaysia has so much less a history of elections research than do the other countries in the larger study (Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand). Moreover, sentiment was high that this election was *the* one to watch … and enterprising colleagues at the University of Malaya somehow managed to make possible a far larger-scale research initiative than we had imagined.

Indeed, the research for this volume could not have happened were it not for that support. A generous grant from the University of Malaya funded not just field research in selected parliamentary constituencies in every state, but also a series of pre-election training workshops (covering the theoretical and historical state of the field, research methods and research ethics) and a post-election workshop to launch our contributors into their analysis and writing. We also gratefully acknowledge seed money from the Centre for Democratic Institutions at the Australian National University, which has been critical to getting the four-country comparative study on money politics of which this research in Malaysia is a part off the ground. The challenge this time was all the greater, as Malaysia's GE13 was the first time we put the project framework into action. We look forward to comparative insights yet to come. Finally, a visiting fellowship at the Institute of Southeast

Asian Studies made not just my own part of the research, but the task of getting this book organised, immeasurably much easier.

But the less readily quantified debts this project incurred relate to the enormous amount of effort from so many quarters that have made this research and analysis possible. Again, primary thanks go to the University of Malaya – especially Edmund Terence Gomez, dean of the Social and Behavioural Science Research Cluster and professor of Political Economy, whose enthusiasm for the project, not to mention relevant expertise, propelled the project to fruition; Dr Surinderpal Kaur in the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, who worked tirelessly to pull our small army of research assistants together and keep them on track; and the Research Cluster's staff, especially Jack Ho, who handled complex (and usually last-minute) logistics with skill and a smile. Next, my fellow organisers of the aforementioned regional study not only developed the intellectual framework of the project, but were essential to planning and implementing this ambitious programme of field research – and were also good company for Terence, Surin, and me as we travelled throughout Malaysia during the election campaign. My thanks to Edward Aspinall, Allen Hicken and Paul Hutchcroft.

In addition, a swarm of colleagues helped at different stages of the project. Assisting in the training sessions that all the research assistants attended were not just those individuals mentioned above, but also Julio Teehankee and Ronnie Holmes from the Philippines, Burhanuddin Muhtadi from Indonesia, Noppadon Kannika from Thailand, Kevin McGahan from Singapore, and Sharaad Kuttan, Arnold Puyok, Andrew Aeria, Ibrahim Suffian and Tan Seng Keat from Malaysia. Arnold also organised a training session in Kota Kinabalu, hosted by Anantha Raman Govindasamy at Universiti Malaysia Sabah. Assisting in supervising and trouble-shooting for the field research itself (although also engaged before and after) were Sharaad and Kevin, as well as Tan Beng Hui and Joanne Lim. Related to this book specifically, Terence, Surin, Sharaad, Beng Hui, and Kevin, as well as Greg Felker, Carolina Lopez and Sumit Mandal set aside post-election exhaustion to spend a Saturday with our contributors, enabling them to 'workshop' their preliminary sketches. That highly productive exercise was instrumental in helping the contributors think through not just patterns and processes, but also the nuts and bolts of how to wrestle mounds of field research data into a coherent, pithy whole – and all in record time. I have never before worked with so uniformly hard-working, thoughtful, efficient and cooperative a team of authors!

Which brings me to our greatest debt in crafting this volume: these contributors are part of a larger team of eager and creative research assistants. Those who have contributed chapters are only about one-third of the team of around sixty persons. Many or most of the team were encountering elections research (and sometimes the discipline of political science) for the first time, and many had never before tried their hand at field research. They did a terrific job, collecting a body of data on an election campaign that I am fairly certain is without precedent in Malaysia. Of course, they could not have done their research without the willing participation of a host of candidates, campaign staff, journalists and others across Malaysia. To all those who took time from their hectic campaign schedules to be interviewed, allowed our researchers to shadow them on the campaign trail, or offered information, opinions and leads: thank you very much, not just for assisting our progress, but for supporting the sorely under-appreciated cause of political science research in Malaysia. I sincerely hope not only that many of those who participated in our project will continue on in this field, but that this book will go some way to inspire more such efforts in the future.

Glossary & Acronyms

ADUN	Ahli Dewan Undangan Negeri (state legislator)
Berjasa	Barisan Jemaah Islamiah SeMalaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Front)
Bersih	Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections
bilik gerakan	operations centre
BN	Barisan Nasional (National Front)
BR1M	Bantuan Rakyat 1Malaysia, 1Malaysia People's Aid
Bumiputera	Indigenous peoples (including Malays)
ceramah	political rally or gathering, primarily featuring speeches
ceramah kelompok	small-group (neighbourhood level) political gathering
ceramah perdana	premier (large-scale, high-profile) political rally
DAP	Democratic Action Party
DHPP	Dewan Himpunan Penyokong PAS (PAS Supporters' Club)
DUN	Dewan Undangan Negeri (state legislature)
EC	Election Commission
Himpunan Hijau	Green Gathering (environmental protest)
hudud	Islamic criminal law
JDM	*jawatan kuasa daerah mengundi* (voting district committees)
JKKK	*jawatankuasa kemajuan dan keselamatan kampung* (village development and security committee)
JR	*Jalinan Rakyat* (People's Network)
kampung	village
KDM	Kadazandusun Murut
KEMAS	Community Development Department
KITA	Kesejahteraan Insan Tanah Air (Malaysian People's Welfare Party)
LDP	Liberal Democratic Party
markaz	election centre

MB	Menteri Besar (Chief Minister)
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
Menteri Besar	Chief Minister
MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
MP	Member of Parliament
Muslimat	women's wing of Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS)
NCR	native customary rights
Orang Asli	indigenous peoples
Pakatan	Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance)
PAS	Parti Islam SeMalaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party)
PBB	Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (United Traditional Bumiputera Party)
PBS	Parti Bersatu Sabah (Sabah United Party)
PDM	*pusat daerah mengundi* (voting district centre)
PKR	Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party)
PPP	People's Progressive Party
PTPTN	Perbadanan Tabung Pendidikan Tinggi Nasional, National Higher Education Fund Corporation
Puteri UMNO	young women's wing of United Malays National Organisation
SAPP	Sabah Progressive Party
SMSL	Save Malaysia, Stop Lynas!
STAR	State Reform Party
SUPP	Sarawak United Peoples' Party
TOL	temporary occupation licence
ubah	change
ulama	Islamic scholar
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
UPKO	United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation
UPU	*unit peti undi* (voting units)
Wanita UMNO	women's wing of United Malays National Organisation