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Power Sharing in a Divided Nation

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JOHAN SARAVANAMUTTU

Power Sharing in a Divided Nation

*Mediated Communalism and
New Politics in Six Decades of
Malaysia's Elections*

ISEAS YUSOF ISHAK
INSTITUTE



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In memory of

colleagues recently departed, that their work may inspire future
generations of socially engaged scholars

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PREFACE

This is a book I had always wanted to write but had to keep on hold for one reason or another. Arguably, as a “work in progress”, it has been coterminous with my career as, first, a journalist, then as a lecturer and professor, as a senior research fellow and finally as an independent scholar.

Majoring in political science at the University of Singapore in the mid-1960s predisposed me to the intricacies of Malaysian politics and its discontents. Then working as a young journalist in the *New Straits Times* around the time of the May 1969 riots confirmed my belief that studying politics was a vocation I could not elude, which in turn no doubt spurred my desire to pursue graduate studies in political science at the University of British Columbia (UBC), Vancouver from 1970 to 1976. However, at UBC I was drawn to develop my main field of interest in international relations and to write my doctoral thesis on Malaysia’s foreign policy. Thus my interest in electoral politics remained on the back burner, but, in truth, it never waned. Malaysian political developments seemingly climaxed during my years as a lecturer at Universiti Sains Malaysia (Penang) and, with my colleague Francis Loh, I put together a book on the emergence of *new politics* during the 1999 general election. The term, *new politics*, a corollary of the Reformasi Movement, has now earned considerable currency in the Malaysian studies literature. It has been associated with the wave of democratization in Malaysia that saw the salutary engagement of ordinary citizens in the electoral process alongside an unprecedented level of political activism.

New politics in no small way brought about the outcome of the landmark 2008 general election which saw the ruling coalition lose for the first time its two-thirds majority of seats in Parliament. During my second year at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (now known as the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute), I analysed the outcome of this election together with Ooi Kee Beng and Lee Hock Guan in a book published that same year, and wrote many op eds and several articles about its impact. It was evident that the 8 March 2008 election was a critical juncture in Malaysian electoral politics and charted a path-dependent trajectory of future success for the newly emergent coalition of oppositional forces aligned against the ruling Barisan Nasional. Most importantly, the outcome of 2008 signaled the prospect for what political scientists termed the development of a “turnover” political system in Malaysia, wherein voters are able to periodically exercise a reasonable choice of selecting at least two sets of potential ruling parties. Then came the 2013 general election which some may argue was an anticlimax as the “turnover test” of democratic politics failed to obtain. In a volume edited by myself, Lee Hock Guan and Mohamed Nawab Osman, our contributors offer explanations for the 2013 outcome.

By now it seemed perfectly logical for me to finally undertake my own book on Malaysia’s electoral politics. In fact, ISEAS had already kindly agreed in 2012 to my proposal to write such a book, which I had planned to finish writing only after the 13th general election, and which has taken me another two years to complete. In its contents covering six decades of electoral politics in Malaysia, I offer both the specialist and the general reader a thoroughgoing historical and theoretical narrative behind electoral success and failure in Malaysia since the 1950s, and try to answer the perennial question of why the ruling coalition has had a hegemonic grip on the electoral process.

After many years of observation and study I have now come to accept the realist view that ethnic politics or communalism remains at the core of electoral politics in Malaysia because of this country’s unique history and social fabric. Because of this, power sharing through a strategy of *mediated communalism* has always been an imperative of political coalitions seeking electoral success. The book

delves into this question by narrating and theorizing communal politics over six decades of elections, up until the emergence of *new politics*, which has arguably put Malaysia on the track of further democratization. While not superseding mediated communalism, *new politics* offers a pathway to transcend the most deleterious effects of communalism. It is the discursive instrumentality for subverting the overdetermination of ethnicity in Malaysian politics. In these pages the reader will be presented narratives that deliberately tilt towards a critical theory providing pointers for progressive change to Malaysian electoral politics and ultimately to elevate Malaysian social and political discourse. I make no apologies for this bias and I hope the reader will find that the book's long gestation has not been in vain.

First, let me take the opportunity to thank the former ISEAS director, K. Kesavapany, who was responsible for my appointment as Senior Visiting Research Fellow in 2007 and also the present director Tan Chin Tiong for extending my stay till 2013. Many thanks go to Head of ISEAS Publishing Ng Kok Kiong, his senior editor Rahilah Yusuf and copyeditor Stephen Logan, who have been very helpful every step of the way to see through this publication. My thanks also go particularly to Malaysia Studies coordinators Ooi Kee Beng (now deputy director) and Lee Hock Guan, and also to Terence Chong who prodded me on and provided constant encouragement. Many other ISEAS fellows and researchers, past and present, have also been supportive of my work and I have enjoyed their camaraderie and goodwill. In particular I would like to mention Tan Keng Jin, Daljit Singh, Rodolfo Severino, Omkar Lal Shrestha, P. Ramasamy, Mark Hong, Tin Maung Maung Than, Leon Comber, Francis Hutchinson, Loh Kah Seng, Rusazlina Idris, Ian Storey, Mustafa Izzuddin, Bernhard Platzdasch, Michael Montesano, David Koh, Geoffrey Wade, Hui Yew-Foong, Lee Poh Onn and Theresa Devasahayam.

Much appreciation goes to the many Malaysian colleagues, friends, interviewees, informants and politicians, and my comrades in the Aliran community, who have spared their time and shared their knowledge and insights on electoral politics with me. In particular I would like to thank all of those who were kind enough to talk with me during my fieldwork for the March 2008 general election, for the

many by-elections I observed after 2008, for the April 2011 Sarawak state election and for the May 2013 general election. There are just too many individuals to mention in the numerous encounters I have had over the period of my fieldwork. I do hope they will forgive me for this mass attribution, but wherever I have found it pertinent and necessary to make attributions, I have done so in my footnotes. I do want to mention that during important stages of the fieldwork, Adil Johan and Robert Oon provided me with much needed assistance and companionship.

A vote of thanks goes to the “Lunch Group” (Choo Liang Haw, Manicam Saravanamuthu, Ten Chin Liew, Tan Keng Feng, Chu Tee Seng and Choo Han Teck), comprised of practising and former distinguished academicians and professionals of impeccable standing. Thanks to the group’s regular discussions about Malaysia, this contributed in no small way to keep my work intellectually primed and on track, with sharp queries and questions about Malaysian developments and with friendly but persistent reminders about progress. I should also mention that my good friend and regular companion, Professor Lim Chin, who has left us, kept my mind engaged about economic issues.

I dedicate this work to former academic colleagues and Malaysian specialists who have passed on in years not long past; namely, Ishak Shari (1948–2001), Hashim Yaacob (1949–2009), Khoo Khay Jin (1948–2011), Barry Wain (1944–2013), Ismail Hashim (1940–2013), Lim Chin (1947–2014), Badriyah Salleh (1942–2015) and Cheah Boon Kheng (1939–2015). Many of these individuals were not just close friends but fellow intellectual travellers and I believe their work will continue to have a profound influence on future generations of critical academics as well as the general reader. Like me, I am sure they would have subscribed to a positioning that writing and research serves not to just explain social phenomena and practices but to critique them in our pursuit of human progress.

Thanks are also due to three anonymous reviewers who gave very helpful suggestions on improving the original manuscript, including ideas to enhance its arguments and its potential contribution to the existing theoretical literature.

Finally, I would like mention the support given by my immediate family. Adil and Rosa often provided solicited feedback for my ideas and I thank them for their love and encouragement. But as always my deepest thanks go to Maznah, whose unsparing intellectual support and selfless assistance were irreplaceable in the writing of this book.

Johan Saravanamuttu
April 2016

ABBREVIATIONS AND GLOSSARY

ABIM	Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, or Malaysian Youth Islamic Movement
ACCIN	Allied Coordinating Committee of Islamic NGOs
Aliran	Aliran Kesedaran Nasional, or National Consciousness Stream
Alliance	Also known as <i>Perikatan</i> in Malay. The original coalition of UMNO, the MCA and the MIC.
API	Angkatan Pemuda Insaf
APU	Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah, or Ummah Unity Front
ASWJ	<i>Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jamaah</i> . The official Sunni-Sha'fie school of Islam practised in Malaysia, prescribed by the Malaysian Department of Islamic Advancement Malaysia.
AWAM	All Women's Action Society
BA	Barisan Alternatif
Barisan Sosialis	Socialist Front of Singapore, formed as a splinter from the PAP
BARJASA	Barisan Ra'ayat Jati Sarawak (Muslim Bumiputera party)
BCIC	Bumiputera Commercial and Industrial Community
Berjasa	Barisan Jemaah Islamiah, PAS splinter party formed in Kelantan in 1978
Berjaya	Parti Bersatu Rakyat Jelata Sabah
BERSIH	The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections

BMF	Bumiputera Malaysia Finance, associated with the BMF scandal of a RM2.5 billion loss to Bank Bumiputera
BN	Barisan Nasional (National Front), which was the successor to the Alliance
bumiputera	A Malaysian term meaning “sons of the soil” referring to the Malays, indigenous peoples of Peninsular Malaysia and the natives of Sarawak and Sabah
CAP	Consumer Association of Penang
CCM	Council of Churches Malaysia, the national body that represents mainstream Protestant churches in Malaysia
<i>ceramah</i>	Political meeting or forum used in electoral campaigns
CFC	Christian Federation of Malaysia
Danaharta	Asset Management Corporation
Danamordal	Special Purpose Vehicle for recapitalizing banking
Darul Arqam	House of Arqam, a group considered deviant by Malaysian Islamic authorities and banned by the Malaysian government
DNU	Department of National Unity
Dong Jiao Zong	Malayan Chinese Education Movement comprising the United Chinese School Committees Association and the United Chinese School Teachers Association
DPU	Department of National Unity
EC	Election Commission, or SPR (Surahanjaya Pilihanraya)
EPSM	Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia
EPU	Economic Planning Unit
FELDA	Federal Land Development Authority
FPTP	First-past-the-post, referring to Malaysia’s electoral system
Gagasan Rakyat	Coalition for People’s Democracy. Also known as “People’s Concept”.

Gerak	Malaysian People's Movement for Justice
Gerakan	Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian Peoples' Movement Party)
HAKAM	National Human Rights Association of Malaysia
Hindraf	Hindu Rights Action Force
HAMIM	Parti Hizbul Muslimin Malaysia, or Muslim People's Party of Malaysia
<i>Kaedah-kadeah hukum sebat hudud</i>	Caning methods sanctioned by <i>hudud</i> law
	The class of punishments under shariah fixed for theft, robbery, illicit sex, consumption of alcohol and apostasy
ICA	Industrial Coordination Act
IFC	Inter-Faith Commission
IUM	International Islamic University of Malaysia
IMP	Independence Malaya Party
ISA	Internal Security Act. The ISA was repealed and replaced by the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 on 18 June 2012.
<i>Islam Hadhari</i>	Civilizational Islam
JAKIM	Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (Malaysian Department of Islamic Advancement)
JAIS	Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor (Islamic Department of Selangor)
JAWI	Jabatan Agama Wilayah Persekutuan (Islamic Department of Federal Territory)
JIM	Jamaah Islah Malaysia
Ketuanan Melayu <i>khalwat</i>	Malay supremacy, or Malay overlordship Term used in Malaysia to mean the compromising proximity of single men and women, chargeable as an offence for Muslims.
KMM	Kesatuan Melayu Muda
Konfrontasi	Indonesia's "Confrontation" against the formation of Malaysia
LDP	Liberal Democratic Party
LP	Labour Party, also known as Parti Buruh Malaya, which disbanded after the 1969 election

Malay	Constitutionally defined as those who practice Malay customs (<i>adat</i>), habitually speak the Malay language (<i>Melayu</i>) and are adherents of Islam
MBA	Malaysian Buddhist Association
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MCCBCHST	Malaysian Consultative Council for Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism
MCP	Malayan Communist Party
Menteri Besar	Malay term for chief executive of the state government, equivalent to Chief Minister.
MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
MISC	Malaysian International Shipping Corp
MP	Member of Parliament
NEAC	National Economic Action Council
NECC	National Economic Consultative Council
NEP	New Economic Policy
NOC	National Operations Council
NUJ	National Union of Journalists
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. Formerly the Organisation of the Islamic Conference.
Operasi Lalang	Operation Weeding, in which 106 politicians and activists were detained under the ISA in 1987.
OSA	Official Secrets Act
PAJAR	Parti Anak Jati Sarawak
Pakatan Rakyat	People's Alliance, the political coalition made up of opposition parties that were formed in 2008. The parties in this coalition are Parti Keadilan Rakyat/People's Justice Party (PKR), Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS).
PANAS	Parti Negara Sarawak (National Party of Sarawak)
PAP	People's Action Party of Singapore
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Islamic Party of Malaysia)

PBB	Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu, or United Traditional Bumiputera Party
PBDS	Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak
PBS	Parti Bersatu Sabah
Pekemas	Parti Keadilan Masyarakat Malaysia, or Social Justice Party
PEMBELA	Muslim Organisations in Defence of Islam
PERKIM	Pertubuhan Kebajikan Islam se-Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic Welfare Organization)
Permas	Persatuan Raykat Malaysia Sarawak
Pesaka	Parti Pesaka Anak Sarawak (Dayak party)
PKMS	Persatuan Kebangsaan Melayu Sarawak
PKR	Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party)
PKN	Parti KeADILan Nasional (National Justice Party)
PMIP	Pan-Malayan Islamic Party, predecessor of PAS
PN	Party Negara, also Parti Negara
PPP	People's Progressive Party
PR	Pakatan Rakyat, or People's Alliance, and also known simply as "Pakatan"
PRM	Parti Rakyat Malaysia
PRS	Sarawak People's Party
PSM	Parti Sosialis Malaysia, or Socialist Party of Malaysia
PSRM	Parti Sosialis Rakyat Malaysia (originally, Parti Rakyat of Malaya)
PUM	Persatuan Ulama Malaysia (Association of Islamic Scholars Malaysia)
<i>qisas</i>	Offenses that involve bodily injury or loss of life punishable by death and imprisonment but which can be compensated by money or property
Radical Party <i>reformasi</i>	Party formed for 1951 George Town election Protest and reform movement initiated after Anwar Ibrahim's dismissal from UMNO and from the government in 1968
ROS	Registrar of Societies
<i>Rukunegara</i>	National Ideology or principles

<i>saluran</i>	Voting “streams” organized for each polling centre or district
SAPO	Sarawak People’s Party
SAPP	Sabah Progressive Party
S46	Semangat 46 (Spirit of 46)
SF	Socialist Front formed among opposition parties for 1964 election
SIS	Sisters in Islam
SNAP	Sarawak National Party
SPR	Suruhanjaya Pilihanraya, or Election Commission (EC)
STAR	State Reform Party
SUARAM	Suaram Rakyat Malaysia, Malaysian human rights organization
<i>Sunnah</i>	Teachings, sayings and practices of the Prophet Muhammad.
SUPP	Sarawak United Peoples Party
Suqiu	“17-Point” Election Appeal
<i>Syariah (shariah)</i>	Islamic law
<i>Sy’ia (Shia)</i>	Followers of Ali, who regarded him as the legitimate successor to the Prophet Muhammad
Tabligh groups	Islamic missionary groups springing from the Deobandi movement, Tabligh Jumaat, of the Indian subcontinent
Tabung Haji	Muslim Pilgrims’ Fund
UDP	United Democratic Party
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
UNKO	United National Kadazan Organisation (later UPKO)
UPKO	United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation
USNO	United Sabah National Organisation
UUCA	University and University Colleges Act
WAC	Women’s Agenda for Change
WCI	Women’s Candidacy Initiative
WDC	Women’s Development Collective
Yang di-Pertuan Agong	The Paramount Ruler or King in Malaysia