

***Electoral Reform and Democracy in Malaysia.* Edited by Helen Ting M.H. and Donald L. Horowitz. Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press. Softcover: 294pp.**

Between 1963 and 2018, Malaysia was continuously ruled by one political coalition, making it decidedly an “electoral authoritarian regime”. Then, all that changed quite tumultuously. The years leading up to the May 2018 general elections, when the hitherto impregnable Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition fell from power, saw sustained activism and mounting pressure for electoral reform. Civil society and opposition parties challenged the structural factors that had tilted the playing field in the BN’s favour. Despite these systemic disadvantages, the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition won the 2018 polls and took power with a sweeping manifesto that pledged to remedy the flaws of the electoral system.

A few promises came to pass; most did not. The PH administration formed an Electoral Reform Committee which issued a report recommending amendments and enhancements. Alas, the government lasted a mere 22 months. It fell from power in March 2020 because of defections and realignments among the coalition partners. The next two-and-a-half years of Malaysian politics were marred by instability, with the subsequent two prime ministers in power for just 17 and 16 months respectively. Despite the fluidity, Malaysian politics is still shaped by the enduring effects of malapportionment, the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system and other features of electoral governance, as well as the persistent presence of ethnic politics alongside narratives of race and religion. On the positive side, however, an anti-hopping law was passed, barring elected lawmakers from changing their party allegiance, and various state polls and the 2022 general elections proceeded with widespread confidence in the integrity of the results.

A book written during this chapter in Malaysia’s history is well placed to observe these dynamics of change and continuity, and *Electoral Reform and Democracy in Malaysia* marries opportune timing with outstanding research. The editors, Helen Ting and Donald Horowitz, should be applauded for distilling the fundamental problems and challenges of Malaysia’s electoral system and for assembling a formidable group of scholars who have contributed insightful, authoritative chapters. The book, the outcome of an international workshop at the National University of Malaysia in March 2020, should be a definitive reference for many years to come.

The book comprises two parts, with the first themed “Democratic Impetus and the Politics of Electoral Reform”. Chapters Two and Three within this segment—authored by Meredith Weiss and Khoo Ying Hooi, respectively—chronicle the discourses, agents and outcomes of Malaysia’s political reform process, with a focus, respectively, on the PH coalition’s short-lived administration and on the Bersih movement for clean and fair elections which began in 2006. These chapters elucidate Malaysia’s demonstrable improvements in the conduct of elections but importantly underscore the vast gaps and deficiencies that remain, such as the absence of a political financing law and the disinclination of policymakers to drive democratic progress beyond the “technical and bureaucratic reforms” (p. 51) that have been instituted.

The next three chapters delve into three specific challenges: the anti-hopping law; the Election Commission; and malapportionment. When lawmakers move from the party or coalition they were elected under—a process known as “hopping”—it negates their electoral mandate and destabilizes the policies of their parties or coalitions. In Chapter Four, Wilson Tay and Jaclyn Neo helpfully compare the anti-hopping laws of selected Westminster parliamentary systems and evaluate Malaysia’s efforts to follow suit. They argue that the constitutional amendments of 2022 to mitigate party-hopping marks “a step in the right direction” (p. 80). In Chapter Five, Faisal S. Hazis takes on the premise that the “foremost and urgently needed reform is restructuring the [Election Commission] into an independent, impartial, efficient and professional organization” (p. 88) and then provides an in-depth analysis of this under-researched institution. Malapportionment in the electoral system, in which Malaysia ranks among the worst in the world, receives critical scrutiny by Kai Ostwald in Chapter Six. The exceedingly large number of rural and low-populated constituencies, as well as the concomitant dearth of urban parliamentary seats, have for decades perpetuated “the core parameters of Malaysia’s dominant-party regime” (p. 143). Redressing malapportionment, indeed, is a key element of comprehensive reform.

The chapters in the second part of the book, under the banner “Ethnic Dynamics and the Electoral System”, investigate the rationale, scope and mechanisms of reform, with a focus on the FPTP system. Helen Ting and Benjamin Reilly—in Chapters Seven and Ten, respectively—investigate the defining features of democracy, such as the representation of voters or groups and their interests, through the lens of ethnic politics and the FPTP system.

The authors expound on how the tendency to forge pre-electoral pacts that accommodate various groups' interests has resulted in Malaysian politics gravitating to the centre ground. Although ethnicity was predominant as the organizing factor of political parties, in the past decade they have also been galvanized around other causes such as the struggles against corruption and abuse of power. This heralds the possibility of change, but the enrichment of Malaysian politics beyond ethnicity is far from guaranteed even if proportional representation is introduced to replace or complement the FPTP system.

Chapters Eight and Nine—by Donald Horowitz and Johan Saravanamuttu, respectively—supply erudite insights and even-keeled analysis of the ramifications of proportional or hybrid alternatives to the flawed FPTP model. In Chapter Eleven, regarding Malaysia's unelected, fully appointed local government, Sebastian Dettman explores the composition of local councils and expectedly finds that ethnic patterns mirror those of the political parties making the appointments. Introducing local elections may alter the pattern but the prevailing trends in national party politics will likely trickle down to the local level.

Malaysia continues to be a democratic conundrum and a work in progress. This book helps readers gain a firmer grasp of its complexities and a clearer sense of where and how reform might be possible.

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