

A study of the national politics of malaysia politics essay



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Since the formation of its constitution in 1956 Malaysia has been a federal parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarch. In theory this would mean Malaysia is indeed a democracy because the king largely only has symbolic functions. In reality the political process has been dominated by one party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), thereby making Malaysia a semi-democracy [2].

In this chapter, a portrayal of the politics of Malaysia will be presented. This description will begin with an explanation of the distribution of power in the political system, followed by a short history of Malaysia's nearly all-powerful political party, the UMNO, and the latest elections in which the UMNO was dealt a decisive blow. Finally, a sketch of Malaysia's political freedom, civil liberties and corruption will be given

Political system

Malaysia is nominally headed by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, who is also called the king, and a bicameral parliament. The parliament consists of a Senate, the Dewan Negara and a House of Representatives, the Dewan Rakyat. The king elects 44 members of the Senate; the other 26 are elected by the assemblies of the thirteen states of Malaysia. Members of the Senate are chosen for three years and those three years are normally extended by another three years, making for a total of six years in-office. Each five years, the 222 members of the House of Representatives are chosen by national elections via a single-member-district system similar to the United States.

Executive power is held by the cabinet, led by the prime minister. The cabinet is chosen from the parliament by the prime minister, with approval

from the king. The prime minister himself is selected from the House of Representatives according to who commands the most support by the members from the House.

On more local level, nine of the states are each headed by a sultan; four – Melaka, Pulau Pinang (Penang), Sabah and Sarawak are each headed by a governor. While sultans are hereditary, governors are chosen by the state governments. All of the thirteen states have assemblies, and a government elected by the population of the state [3], [4]. The political system is visualised in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Head of state

For Malaysia is the king, or Yang di-Pertuan Agong, the official head of state. Aside from being a largely symbolic function, the king does have a few official powers. For instance he chooses 44 of the 70 members of the Senate, he gives approval to the appointment of the cabinet and he signs all laws. The king is also the nominal head of the armed forces and the leader of the Islamic faith in Malaysia.

Each five years, the sultans choose the next king from among themselves, but in practice the post is rotated among the sultans. This system was made by the first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, in order to spread the power among all the sultans who had ruled over fiefdoms on the peninsula of Malaysia prior to its independence.

The current king is Sultan Mizan Zainal Abidin (Figure 2), who is the 13th king and was installed in December 2006. Being made king at an age of 44 makes the former ruler of the oil-rich Terengganu state one of the youngest heads of state yet [3], [5], [6].

Figure 2 – Sultan Mizan Zainal Abidin

Prime minister

The prime minister is selected from the House of Representatives according to who commands the most support by the members from the House.

Because the UMNO has been the largest party since Malaysia's independence, as an unofficial rule the UMNO's leader becomes prime minister.

Figure 3 – prime minister is Najib Abdul Razak

The current prime minister is Najib Abdul Razak (Figure 3). He is the son of Abdul Razak, Malaysia's second prime minister. Mr. Najib has an undergraduate degree in economics from the University of Nottingham and has worked for the national petroleum cooperation, Patronas. Upon the death of his father in 1979 he was elected to take the place of his father in parliament. As a member of parliament he has been a prominent member of the UMNO. Mr. Najib has served in several cabinets, among which as minister of finance and minister of defence. He was deputy prime minister since 2004 till he became prime minister in 2009.

Najib Abdul Razak succeeds Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who resigned in April 2009 after disastrous elections for the UMNO in March 2008. The current

prime minister came to power promising radical reforms, a more transparent government and a fairer treatment of ethnic minorities. Besides this, one of the main problems Mr. Najib faces is the global economic crisis, which has had a dramatic impact on the country's economy.

Though he promised much improvement, Najib Abdul Razak's government has allegedly tried to stifle the opposition with a heavy hand [5], [7].

The United Malays National Organisation and the National Front

The most powerful party of Malaysia, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) has its roots in the independence of Malaysia. As Britain prepared Malaya for independence they decided to transform their earlier administrative system, which was riddled with inequality, into a more even arrangement. This took form in the Malayan Union, where the power of the sultans would be reduced and the disadvantaged Chinese community would be given equal rights. This did not go well with the Malay aristocracy and civil servants, fearing reduction of their power. The result was a series of meetings and mass rallies and led to the formation of the UMNO. The British, surprised by the social uprising, changed the Union to a federalist system where the power of the sultans and the Malays were improved.

After that, the UMNO became a political party that exclusively drew support from the Malay population. As a result other political parties followed suit, creating a political system with mono-ethnic parties. The Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) are two main

examples. Multi-ethnic parties gained little following and it would take about 50 years any serious multi-ethnic political party would appear.

The UMNO and MCA would gain a large majority in the elections and would form a coalition with the MIC called the Alliance, which later became the National front (Barisan Nasional). The political power would mainly reside with the Malays, where the Chinese had the economic power.

The tension between the ethnic groups of Malaysia was highlighted during the May 13 incident. The UMNO dominance would be challenged on May 13th 1969, when, after being abandoned by a significant number of Malay voters, the UMNO would be left clinging to power. The Chinese and Indian parties had taken to the opposition fearing being left out as a result of laws favouring Malays. This also deteriorated the UMNO's delicate position. The Chinese mounted 'victory' processions, which inflamed the Malays. This resulted in huge riots in Kuala Lumpur, where Malays clashed with Chinese and Indians. Two years of emergency rule by the UMNO-led government followed.

The UMNO responded by restricting Chinese business activities and improving Malay standing by far reaching redistribution of wealth and power, called the New Economic Policy (NEP), thereby hoping to win back the support of the Malay population. UMNO restored its political power by getting most of the ethnic parties from the opposition into the coalition, which had been renamed the National Front. The UMNO then subordinated its coalition partners, making its standing in the National Front absolute.

The result was single-party dominance, limitations of civil liberties and a complete forest of bureaucratic instances and state businesses that would implement the redistributions. This resulted in a near fusion of the UMNO with the state apparatus, thereby further increasing its power [8], [9].

The 2008 elections

While the National Front used to have a two-thirds majority, making it possible to make amendments to Malaysia's constitution and making for an image of all-importance among the population. This all changed in the elections of March 2008, when the government was dealt a decisive blow. The National Front was nevertheless able to claim 63% of the seats in parliament as can be seen in Figure 4, Figure 5, and Figure 6 yet short of the magical two-thirds. This is actually far more than the actual number of votes: 52% of the votes went to the government. The reason for the relatively large share of seats in parliament is the voting system, which heavily favours the sitting administration.

Figure 4 – Results of the 2008 elections [11].

Mounting government corruption, arrogance, rising inflation and high crime rates, coupled with the 'normal' discontent over unfair treatment was cause for a record number of non-Malay voters to switch their vote to opposition parties. The last time the National Front was dealt such a setback was in 1969 and its response was to absorb most of the opposition parties into the National Front, but this time the opposition was more confident and formed its own coalition: the People's Pact (Pakatan Rakyat). It even pondered to

replace the NEP with a more equitable welfare system which was not based on ethnicity.

The opposition is composed of the mainly ethnic Chinese 'Islamic Party Of Malaysia' (PAS), the secular and reformist 'Democratic Action Party' (DAP) and the multi-ethnic 'Peoples Justice Party' (PKR), but which has a large Malay following. Part of the reason for the confidence of the opposition is that these parties were able to form governments in five states, including two of Malaysia's richest [10].

Figure 5 - Election results for the National Front [11].

Figure 6 - Election results for the opposition [11].

Political freedom

Political freedom in Malaysia is, as one can expect from earlier descriptions, not of the same sort as in western countries. Its democratic process has even been described by the government as being different to the 'western' democracies, although they are adamant that Malaysia is democratic, albeit using a different definition of 'democracy'.

Malaysia's form of democracy includes a large arrange of repressive measure. For instance, the government has legal powers to deregister organizations, ban publications and impose preventive detention. The opposition has been no exception to the application of these powers and these have even seen action in conflicts between different government factions.

The federal government also has large control of mass media, including television and radio. For instance both the country itself and the National Front are owner of all television and radio, making sure the UMNO policies and leaders are viewed positively by the media.

Furthermore, restrictions on party activities are more in favour of the UMNO, hindering the opposition more than the dominant party. The UMNO also promises development projects and material benefits to local communities in order to ensure loyalty to the government among population.

Malaysia's version of democracy also includes a version of ethnic and religious favouring of the Malay and Muslim majority of the country. The UMNO managed implement a biased electoral system that heavily reduced the impact of the votes cast by ethnic minorities, even though many of these minorities were represented in the National Front. The UMNO did this by gerrymandering, a way to change the electoral impact of certain districts in favour of a particular political party- in this case the UMNO, where the states with a large amount Malay voters were given more impact on the elections. The country also features a first-past-the-post voting system which strongly favours the largest party. The result of this is a two-thirds parliamentary majority of Malay votes compared to a close absolute majority of Malay voters.

These measures described above have made sure the UMNO has stayed in power - with a two-thirds majority - until the elections of March 2008. We can conclude that Malaysia can at best be called semi-democratic by western standards, but seeing as the latest electoral has diminished the all-

powerful UMNO there is perhaps a chance Malaysia may be on a path to more political freedom [2], [10], [12].

Civil Liberties

Officially Malaysia grants its citizens ' the right to freedom of speech and expression', but as can be concluded from the above section, there is little freedom of the media in Malaysia. The reason for this is the possibility of exceptions to this right. For instance, the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) requires publishers to have an annual operations permit, which can be withdrawn by the prime minister without judicial control. Similarly, the Broadcasting Act gives the information minister the power to decide who can own a broadcast station. The Official Secrets Act (OSA), the Sedition act and defamation laws allow the government to impose restrictions on press and dissidents.

Although there were hopes the elections of 2008 might change the media climate, it actually deteriorated as a result of crackdown instigated by the Prime Minister. Online media received many of the restriction and censorship that were already in place on traditional media like newspapers and television. The reason for this development was the role blogs and online news played in promoting the opposition and criticizing the government.

The Official Secrets Act also curtails the publication of publication of politically sensitive information and reduces the freedom of information in Malaysia [12], [13].

Instigated as a measure to combat terrorism, the Internal Security Act has made it possible for the government to detain suspected terrorists or, more <https://assignbuster.com/a-study-of-the-national-politics-of-malaysia-politics-essay/>

generally, people suspected of connections to terrorist groups. According to Human Right Watch and Amnesty International, these detainees are held for long times lacking a legal process and are grossly mistreated in prison [14], [15].

Malaysia also makes discrimination state policy with the NEP and government backed 'affirmative action policies', which called for far reaching redistribution of businesses, property and education to Malays [10], [15].

The country also has the death penalty and has voted against a moratorium of the UN against the death penalty [15].

Corruption

Even though the prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi promised a far-reaching anti-corruption campaign in the 2007 elections, corruption actually increased for his coalition. Several cases of corruption at high levels of government occurred and the third-highest police official was arrested on the charge of concealing large sums of money. The police inspector general and the deputy minister for internal security also accused each other of corruption [12].

According to Transparency International a lot of corruption takes place on the negotiation of contracts, where 'bribes were paid to government officials to speed up trade licences (sic), for police protection and for loan transactions' [16].

Further, the Corruption Perceptions Index 2009 of Transparency International rates Malaysia the 56th least corrupt country with Somalia the most corrupt country at rank 180 [17].