

THE RACIALISATION OF ELECTION ISSUES AND THE IDEOLOGY OF MALAY DOMINANCE IN MALAYSIA *

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Abstract

A central ideology in Malaysia since independence – especially after the racialised electoral crisis of May 1969 – is Malay dominance. This paper explores the use of racialised election issues in the construction, reproduction and maintenance of the ideology of Malay dominance in Malaysian society.

The paper focuses on the 2004 General Election, the first held following the end of Mahathir's 22-year administration. Despite calls for a fresh mandate and promises of transparency, accountability and efforts to arrest corruption in society, old election tactics such as the use of race as a rallying point persisted.

This paper analyses news and commentaries gathered from three English-language newspapers in Malaysia, namely the *New Straits Times*, *The Star* and *theSun* for the period of a month before Election Day on 21st March 2004.

This paper investigates the degree to which the use of race as an election rallying point accords with and furthers the ideology of Malay dominance in Malaysian society.

*How do we recognise the shackles that tradition has placed upon us?
For if we can recognise them, we are also able to break them.*

Franz Boas (1858 - 1942)

Introduction

This paper examines themes or trends in news reporting during the 2004 Malaysian General Election in three major English-language newspapers, the *New Straits Times*, *The Star* and *theSun*, focusing on the racialisation of election issues and how these themes contribute to the maintenance of the ideology of Malay dominance in Malaysia. The general election was held on 21st March. There were conscious and consistent efforts

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by political elites – with the assistance from the opinion elites – to further certain themes in society in order to maintain and justify for the present sociopolitical arrangement in Malaysia.

For the purpose of this paper, news and commentaries in three English-language newspapers were collected from 22 February 2004 to 21 March 2004. This study suggests that racialisation of election issues were necessary to enhance, maintain and sustain certain social, economic and political myths in society for the ruling elites to obtain justification to maintain the current sociopolitical arrangement.

The argument draws on a descriptive notation of discursive terms and key phrases used in various news reports, understood in the context of the power relations between the component political parties within the ruling coalition and the prevailing ideology of Malay dominance. This paper notes some obvious features of news reporting during the election period: that the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition government is in full control of the situation, it has done a commendable job in improving the economy, the political coalition speaks with a united voice, and the decisions reached within BN are agreed upon after thorough deliberation with emphasis on consensus and collective concerns. The study argues that though such news angles are designed to secure the political mandate during the election period, they also serve the larger purpose of maintaining the ideology of Malay dominance within Malaysian society.

The first part discusses the dominance of United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) within BN. It is followed by discussion on the media environment in Malaysia and the coverage of election issues.

UMNO dominance in Malaysian politics

Consociational politics is the foundation to political stability in Malaysia (Lipjhart 1977: 151). Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy which practices parliamentary democracy. Malaysia was ruled by the Alliance (and BN after 1971) since independence. BN consists of UMNO, Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and other component parties. Even though Malaysia is called a multiracial society par excellence (Vasil 1971: 3), all the main political parties in BN are ethnic-based and represent the interests of each community. As an extension to this racialised political

arrangement, “even issues not originating as ethnic ones very quickly become ethnic issues” and the situation evolves into a sort of a zero-sum game when the ethnic division in Malaysia “is simply between the Malays and non-Malays” (Zakaria & Suzaina 2005: 44-5).

Within the coalition power structure, UMNO dominates all the top positions of BN. In politics, UMNO is a senior partner, while MCA and MIC are junior coalition partners (Lipjhart 1977: 151-2). In 2004, over 70 percent of ministries are headed by members of UMNO.¹ Sothi Rachagan observed in 1980 that Chinese representation in the ruling Cabinet was already proportionately smaller than Malay representation (Rachagan 1980). Fundamentally, the main issue within coalition is representation of multi-ethnicity within the reality of UMNO domination (Barraclough 1984: 415).

Arend Lipjhart questioned if the political arrangement after 1971 is still considered as democratic because of the restriction on freedom of expression, as well as political and economic discrimination that gives unfair advantages to the Malay community (Lipjhart 1977: 153). The racialised electoral crisis of May 1969 resulted “in a change of the polity’s character from a variant of a multiracial country to that of a Malay-dominant one, an event that set the tone, tempo, and theme for the governance of an ethnically divided society” (Zakaria & Suzaina 2005: 43). The consolidation of Malay political power after 1969 also reduces the Chinese influence in the ruling coalition (Lee & Heng 2000: 194).

The Malay special position is one of the most divisive ethnic issues in Malaysia since comprehensive implementation of New Economic Policy (NEP) (Lee 1990: 486-8). This is ironic when we consider the fact that the very same policy was meant to reduce ethnic tensions through social restructuring and poverty eradication.

Islam is the new Malay

¹ The Abdullah Administration (2006) NST 15 February, p. 22-3. UMNO members head the Prime Minister Office, Deputy Prime Minister Office, Finance I, Finance II, Internal Security, Defence, Home Affairs, Information, Natural Resources & Environment, Agriculture & Agro-based, Foreign, Science Technology & Innovation, Culture Arts & Heritage, Women Family & Community, Rural & Regional Development, Domestic Trade & Consumer Affairs, Youth & Sports, Tourism, Federal Territories, Entrepreneur & Co-operative Development, International Trade & Industry, Education, Higher Education, and two other posts as a Minister’s in the Prime Minister Office. Ten other ministerial posts are shared between ten other component parties. Not every party has their representative as a full minister. Some have to be satisfied with the post of a deputy minister or parliamentary secretary.

The Federal Constitution of Malaysia defines a Malay as someone who speaks the Malay language, practices the lifestyle, and embraces Islam as his or her religion. Over the years, the first two criteria of being Malays have been 'intruded' by non-Malays simply because of /due to the success of Malaysianising Malaysia. Almost all post-independence Malaysians speak the Malay language, as it was the medium of instructions of the national schools in Malaysia. With this development, together with the rise of Islam's revivalism since the early 1980s, Islam has emerged as the last bastion of Malay community. Though there are non-Malay Muslims in Malaysia, their numbers are not significant enough to cause an 'incursion' into this largely-Malay exclusive domain.

Media environment in Malaysia

In an ideal democratic society, the separation of powers acts as an important system of checks and balance to prevent abuse of power and to ensure accountability. The media is supposed to play the role of a watchdog over government institutions. However, the media can only do so *if* they are truly independent and serve the people's interests rather than the ruling elites (Netto 2002: 18). In reality, the media tend to serve the interests of state and corporate power, which are closely inter-linked, framing their reporting and analysis in a manner supportive of established privilege, limiting debate and discourse accordingly (Netto 2002: 18).

Official control over the media has gradually been tightened since independence. Power has increasingly been concentrated around the Executive, especially since 1981 under the former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir. Tight and selective control over media licenses means only vested political and economic interests are allowed to consolidate and perpetuate their control over society through the compliant media.

Media freedom in Malaysia has been restricted through restrictive laws, ownership and self-censorship (Netto 2002: 18). There are a few incidents that have had a direct impact on the media environment in Malaysia. In 1961, the *Utusan Melayu* resisted political interference by UMNO and was subsequently taken over after a strike by *Utusan* staff which lasted 91 days.

The racialised electoral crisis of May 1969 also gave excuse for the government to remind the media to exercise caution when writing on 'sensitive' issues. The 1987 Ops

Lallang also involved the brief closure of three newspapers – *The Star* (English), *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (Mandarin) and *Watan* (Malay). This resulted in politically mild news coverage subsequently and their concentration on “consolidation and expanding their businesses while serving the interests of their political and business masters” (Netto 2002: 18).

The sacking of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in 1998 saw a shift of the battleground of opinion to cyberspace. This was partly driven by an unsatisfactory account of the event by the mainstream media. Anil Netto observed that “many critical Malaysians stopped reading the newspapers out of disgust and started searching for alternative sources of information” (Netto 2002: 19).

Themes of the news coverage of the 2004 elections

Primary data for this study was collected from three English-language newspapers over the period of one month before the 2004 general election. All items related to election coverage were grouped into three categories according to themes used in the news. In addition to that, key semantic devices like headlines and positioning on the page were discussed as the fourth theme. The following discusses the four themes of news coverage of the 2004 General Election.

Component parties are ‘grateful’ with BN’s ‘fair’ seats allocation

It is common for other component parties to voice their satisfaction of ‘fair’ seats allocation by BN leadership through the newspapers, while at the same time, downplaying the complexities and fight for seats within the BN coalition. The general stand among BN politicians on the seat allocation was that it “would be decided based on the principle and tradition of [the BN] in leaving the decision to the leaders” and “component parties in BN should abide by the decision made” (Barisan parties 2004: 2).

The reluctance of each component party leaders to announce their candidates for a general election before the seat allocation was perhaps to avoid contradiction with decisions finally reached by the BN. It indirectly implies the power that the BN chairman had on component parties. For example, NST declared that “the list of the [MIC] candidates will be determined only after the Prime Minister finalises the distribution of

seats to the party” (MIC candidates 2004: 6). MIC president S. Samy Vellu said he would only decide “after the Prime Minister decides how many seats the MIC will get”.

In order to reinforce the message that decisions are the Executive’s prerogative, leaders of component parties particularly, and Malaysians generally were reminded that the Prime Minister – who traditionally is also UMNO president – “has the last say on seat allocations and candidate lists” (Firdaus and Patrick 2004: 1, 7). Deputy Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak also reminded Malaysians that “the best guarantee that the country’s prime minister will always be a Muslim is the ability of UMNO to unite the Malays and the Muslims” (Rosnazura 2004: 2). In another article, Deputy Prime Minister Najib said that “the important thing is that everyone accepts UMNO as the backbone of the coalition” (Mergawati 2004: 4). Even though this statement is contestable, this is the official view being pushed through the mainstream newspapers to general public, which will reproduce and reinforce the perception of Malay dominance in Malaysian society.

Though one cannot ascertain the internal working mechanism of BN, general statements by politicians indicate that the decisions reached regarding seat allocation are final. When we consider these statements with other statements – like the occasional reminder that “even the Chinese, the Indians and other races have accepted that the prime minister of the country should be a Muslim” (Rosnazura 2004: 2) – we would be able to appreciate the influence of the UMNO president over the BN coalition particularly and on Malaysian society generally.

Once seats allocation were finalised, party leaders would line up to express their general satisfaction over the fair seats allocation. This expression of satisfaction is important to imply that despite the dominance of UMNO within the ruling BN coalition, UMNO did not abuse the position it enjoys within the BN. Kalimullah Hassan, the then group-editor-in-chief of NST, reminded readers that UMNO as dominant partner in BN “could have taken all 22 of 25 new parliamentary seats where Malay voters are the majority or dominant. It took only 10. It even gave up a traditional stronghold . . . to [PPP], to ensure no one left the negotiating table dissatisfied” (Kalimullah 2004: 4). By saying that UMNO ‘gave up’ seats, it indirectly imply ownership of seats by UMNO and these seats are up to UMNO to give it out.

On the other hand, message of co-operation among political parties in the BN are being pushed out. PM Abdullah declared that the speed in which seats allocation was finalised by BN “is testimony of the coalition’s true spirit of power-sharing” (Nick & Izatun 2004: 1, 4). UMNO vice-president Muhyiddin Yassin “gave his assurance that all [BN] component parties will give equal focus to the development of all Malaysian, regardless of their race” (BN to 2004: 8). He also said that “Malaysia was for Malaysians and no particular race could claim the country as their own”.

Each community declared their support for BN government

News coverage will usually focus on which community dominated a particular seat, and which political parties contesting in it. Generally, if a seat is dominated by Chinese community, we can expect DAP and MCA to contest in it. A Malay-dominated seat will usually be contested by UMNO and PAS. This reinforces the ethnic arrangement of Malaysian politics. A subtle way of projecting the dominance of Malays in society is to have other communities lining up to declare their support to the Malay-dominated BN ruling government. Each community is duty-bound to support the BN.

The Chinese community on various occasions declared their support for the ruling BN. MCA deputy president Chan Kong Choy said that “party members and the grassroots had promised to abide by all decisions made by the top leadership” (Perak MCA 2004: 5). MCA members were also reminded that “disciplinary action will be taken against MCA members who stand as independent candidates in the general election” (Wani 2004: 3). This intolerance for deviation raised questions on how far dissenting views are tolerated within the BN, especially from junior political partners like the MCA and MIC.

In an analysis, the NST also predicted that the majority of Chinese would likely vote for BN (Chow 2004: 7). According to MCA deputy president, Chan Kong Choy, the Chinese community in Terengganu also had no faith in PAS and did not take the conservative Islamic party seriously (Terengganu Chinese 2004: 4). In another analysis leading to election day, Chow Kum Hor of the NST suggested that “an upbeat economic outlook, a stable political environment, fears for overzealous Islamisation and the absence of any major national issue will boost the [BN]’s chance of garnering the

Chinese votes in the general election” (Chow 2004: 6). This was re-emphasised when PM Abdullah said that the “country’s improving economy was an important factor for the [Chinese] community’s continued strong support” (Foo, Mazni and Ng 2004: 1, 2). It reinforced the general perception of the Chinese as a homogenous community that valued economic and political stability. This idea of the Chinese being pushed by certain party is highly contested. As noted by Mavis Puthuchear, the Malayan Chinese were never monolithic in terms of political fact, outward appearance and political party representation (Puthuchear 2005: 4).

On other occasions, Chinese support for the BN has been indirectly questioned. For example, the NST published an article on 18 March with this lead: “Chinese support for the Barisan Nasional in Johor will be put to the test in the newly-created Bentayan state seat in Muar” (Chong 2004: 11). It implies that the Chinese have the duty to support the BN. The article also positioned the DAP as the nemesis of MCA, thus emphasising the ethnic dimension of the elections and demonstrating the racialised understanding of Malaysia’s political elites.

The Indian community declared their political support for the BN in several occasions and capacities. NST reported on 23 February that Johor MIC was confident that the Indian community will “once again fully support [BN]” (Indian community 2004: 6), and that “Johor [BN] is confident of securing more than 90 per cent of the Indian community’s votes in the coming general election” (Johor BN 2004: 6). In an analysis, Balan Moses of NST speculated that the Indian community would “throw in its lot with the [BN]” (Moses 2004: 6). Yayasan Strategik Sosial’s (YSS) executive director predicted that Indian votes would make an impact because “more Indian voters make up a significant portion of voters in an increasing number of urban areas in many states” (Indian votes 2004: 6). Generally, politicians’ statements and subsequent news reports and analysis are couched within a racialised context and understanding. The ethnic background of the voters seems to be the criteria when these politicians design their election campaigns.

Despite declaring that Malaysia “must prepare itself for a new brand of politics in view of greater participation of youths”, the NST gave prominent coverage on the launch of Putera and Puteri movements of the Indian Progressive Front (IPF) (Sittamparam

2004: 6). The IPF was not a member of BN at the time. Puteri UMNO chief Azalina Othman declared that the movement could “contribute in drawing Indians youth to support the BN”. It would appear that the emphasis on youth participation was regarded as ‘new’, but this ‘new’ element, nonetheless, remain within a racialised political setup. Considering that IPF was not a member of BN at that time, one wonders whether such statement was a hint that the IPF’s membership in BN would depend on their ability and service “in drawing Indian youth to support the BN”.

UMNO versus PAS Islam

As a response to PAS’ assertion that UMNO is not sincere in implementing Islamic policies and programmes, Prime Minister Abdullah declared that: “We are not a secular Government. The BN Government has set up Islamic institutions that are the envy of the Islamic world” (Moses & Sulaiman 2004: 2). This declaration that Malaysia is not a secular country contradicts with the spirit of the Malaysian Federal Constitution that clearly spells out that Malaysia is a secular nation. UMNO is only able to make such declaration because of its dominant control within BN coalition, described in NST as the “dominant partner in the ruling [BN]”. This article was accompanied by related news about an explanation by Malaysian Institute of Islamic Development’s director-general, Dr Abdul Monir Yaacob on what constituted an Islamic state (Institute explains 2004: 2). In Dr Abdul Monir Yaacob’s opinion, the Malaysian government has succeeded in fulfilling its duty to develop Malaysia into an Islamic state.

Putting the merits of Islam aside, other politicians should have sought clarifications from the Prime Minister on whether his declaration signals a departure from the collectively agreed secular nature of Malaysia. Instead of raising objection to this alarming declaration by the Prime Minister, other political parties declared that their support and share PM Abdullah’s view that Islamisation will not hurt non-Muslims (Tan 2004: 5). MCA’s Youth secretary-general (now chief), Liow Tiong Lai said that Islam should be regarded as a “dynamic and progressive religion”. Gerakan vice-president S. Veejyaratnam said that “there was no harm in inculcating Islamic values into the country’s administration”. PPP president M. Kayveas felt that Abdullah’s pledge would free non-Muslims of fears that Malaysia would veer towards extremism. MIC vice-

president (now deputy president) G. Palavinel said non-Muslims had traditionally been strong supporters of BN and declared Abdullah's statement "full of national consciousness". Such responses from the component political parties are only to be expected in the present political environment where UMNO dominates the BN coalition.

Position of news items of political parties reflect their hierarchy in the coalition

News items on each political party closely reflect their hierarchy in BN coalition. On a typical day, news about UMNO will be given front-page prominence as a reflection of their dominance in BN. This will be followed by news on MCA as the second largest component party, and at times includes the Chinese-dominated Gerakan as well. This is a reflection of the Chinese as the second largest community in Malaysia. News on the MIC will follow after that. News on the other 10 component parties formed the rest of the news reports. For example, news about UMNO candidates was leading the NST's coverage on 11 March. This was followed by news on MCA candidates on Page 2 and Gerakan candidates on Page 3.

In terms of geography, news on Peninsular-based political parties like UMNO, MCA and MIC are given more prominence than news on political parties from Sabah and Sarawak. Even though one can argue this observation from readership viewpoint, these coverage could also be understood in the context of power wielded by the three main component parties in BN. Political leaders in the two states in Borneo are generally given more autonomy in running their political show and records show that they had been able to deliver the votes in every election.

The domination of news on UMNO in the front pages of newspapers ensures that Malaysians will be regularly exposed to news on the Malays, thereby unconsciously promoting UMNO's centrality within society. This will lead to the reproduction and maintenance of UMNO dominance within the Malaysian society.

Conclusion

The discussion above demonstrates the various ways in which electoral issues are racialised in order to sustain and normalise the ideology of Malay dominance in the Malaysian society. The domination of UMNO within the ruling BN coalition are

projected and manifested in various ways. UMNO dominates the top leadership on the political and governmental levels. Other political leaders usually agree or do not contradict with decisions or declarations made by the Prime Minister, which by tradition, is also the president of UMNO. The prominence coverage on UMNO by newspapers helped to normalise and sustain UMNO's domination within the BN coalition specifically and within the Malaysian society generally.

List of abbreviations

BN – Barisan Nasional (National Front)
DAP – Democratic Action Party
Gerakan – Parti Gerakan Rakyat
IPF – Indians Progressive Front
MCA – Malaysian Chinese Association
MIC – Malaysian Indian Congress
NEP – New Economic Policy
NST – New Straits Times
PAS – Parti Islam SeMalaysia
PKN – Parti Keadilan Nasional (National Justice Party)
PPP – People's Progressive Party
UMNO – United Malays National Organisation
YSS – Yayasan Strategik Sosial (Social Strategic Foundation)

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