

**TOWARD A NEW PARADIGM, SUSTAINABLE HUMAN
DEVELOPMENT: WHAT PERSPECTIVES?**

**ICMICA Pax Romana Study Session
Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
20-22 July, 2009**

**Quality of Democracy: Citizen's participation in Democratic
Governance in Malaysia**

- **Lessons learnt and future perspectives**

Helen Ting,

**Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
(National University of Malaysia)**

Peculiarity of Malaysian Political Situations

One peculiar feature of the Malaysian political development is the fact that there has not been a change of power for the Federal Government since Independence. Despite so, there were two milestone general elections which posed a challenge to the governing coalition parties, the *Barisan Nasional* (BN, literal meaning, the National Front), viz. in 1969 and 2008 general elections. The founding parties of the BN, previously known as the Alliance, consisted of race-based membership. In the aftermath of the 1969 general election whereby the Alliance lost its two-thirds majority in the parliament as well as political control over a number of state governments, regionally-based political parties controlling the respective states were co-opted into the Alliance which renamed itself as Barisan Nasional. The United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) is the dominant Malay party leading the BN.

The lack of another viable, alternative multiracial political force that can be entrusted with the task of governance has hampered further democratization of Malaysia over the decades. From one general election to another, the BN coalition managed to monopolize federal governance by virtue of its success in maintaining and presenting itself as the only functional and viable multiracial political front, no matter how nominal or lopsided its internal racial balance of power was at a given point of time.

In addition, the opposition also suffers from problems of imprisonment or co-optation of its leaders as well as internal conflicts. When university student movement was at its height in 1974 and became its fierce critic, the government took decisive measures to repress it, amended the University and University Colleges Act to prohibit further political involvement of university students.

In 1962, the government made constitutional amendment with regards to the conduct of elections. The power and independence of election commission was significantly reduced. The government also progressively appointed its trusted people into the commission in order to influence its functioning to its favour. Besides, the government removed unfairly limitation to rural-urban weighting for the delineation of election constituencies. The technique of gerrymandering is also used to thwart non-Malay opposition parties.

Hence there has been progressive constriction of democratic space over the decades despite regular organisation of general elections. As a consequence, Malaysian politics after 1969 has been described by various scholars as a “democracy without consensus”, a fettered democracy, a quasy democracy, a modified democracy, a semi-democracy; or even a modified authoritarian state. In other words, while Malaysian political system cannot be described as dictatorship or absolutely authoritarian, yet its functioning also cannot be qualified as fulfilling the criteria of being truly democratic.

The BN politicians propagate a discourse of “developmentism” (ie their ability to deliver economic development and prosperity) and Malay-dominated multicultural accommodation as its strength over weak opposition parties. During election campaign, BN propaganda would hint at choosing BN as a choice for development and progress. During the earlier decades, there has also been a subtle manipulation of Malay fear of Chinese domination in the form of Communist threats. Malay nationalist groups also worked their way to achieve symbolic and cultural domination of nationhood. The clamour of Malay social groups for policies to

enhance socio-economic advancement of the Malay community bore fruit in the form of the implementation of the New Economic Policy.

Over time, the State Institutions deteriorated due to various reasons. The autonomy of the judiciary system suffers a grave blow when premier Dr Mahathir decided to manoeuvre to remove the Lord President and two other supreme judges in 1988. The relatively well-functioning bureaucracy also suffers due to decades of implementation of ethnic preferential policies. One source of recent inter-religious contentions traces its roots to the amendment of Article 121 (1A) of the Federal Constitution which subsequently restricts the sphere of competence of civil court where jurisdiction between the two overlaps.

Citizens' Participation in Democratic Governance

In the Malaysian context, political participation in democratic governance can take place in two forms: secret voting through ballot box and through the action of pressure groups. Malaysian politics tend to take place in the form of communal politics. Given the fact that the UMNO-dominated government needs to consolidate its own power base, it tends to be more responsive to popular demands from the Malay pressure groups. Since independence and over the decades, minority communal group such as the Chinese educationists did succeed partially in preserving Chinese vernacular education. This is especially the case for primary level, which is officially included as an integral part of the national education system, even though it is subject to unequal treatment.

1969 constituted the watershed in terms of the federal government policy orientation. Radical faction of Malay nationalist groups, in the aftermath of the loss of two-thirds majority in the parliamentary general elections and control over several state governments as well as anti-Chinese riots, managed to force Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman into political retirement. The new Prime Minister, Abdul Razak, tried to assert a certain level of political control over the radical faction within his own party, UMNO, by giving in to some of their demands. He also further consolidated the grip of UMNO-led coalition by co-opting regional parties and the Islamic party, PAS, who have taken control over several state level governments. The enlarged ruling coalition is re-named, the Barisan Nasional (BN).

The government initiated what is called the New Economic Policy (1970-1990) with a two-pronged objective of eradicating the poor and restructuring of the Malaysian society in order that ethnicity is no longer identified with specific economic sector of the country. The government also formulated what is called the National Culture Policy, which defined the national culture of Malaysia as pivoted on "indigenous" cultures and Islam. Other cultures regarded as non-indigenous may be incorporated if found to be suitable. In order to appease the unhappiness of Malay teachers association and other radical Malay nationalists, English-medium schools were also abolished progressively from 1970.

Dr Mahathir Mohamed became the Prime Minister of Malaysia in 1982. He launched a comprehensive Islamisation policy, which is his strategic attempt to trump over the Islamic state discourse of the rival Islamic Party. It is also his attempt to use Islam to motivate the Malay to succeed economically, as well as to neutralise the influence of Islamic movements. In a surprise move, he also managed to co-opt Anwar Ibrahim, the founder president of ABIM, into UMNO. Anwar contested and won in the 1982 general election, and was immediately

given the position of a deputy minister. ABIM henceforth became an influential lobby group in advising for Islamisation policy of the government.

1980s saw the emergence of NGO activism based on non-communal principles working on issues in environment, human rights, women's rights, and consumers' concerns. The initial openness during the early year of Dr Mahathir's premiership encouraged them to speak out and campaign on various issues. Their influence suffered a setback in 1987 when the government used the draconian Internal Security Act to detain a large number of them without trial.

1998 constitutes a second milestone in terms of civil society involvement. After the shock destitution of Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim by Dr Mahathir, many participated in mass demonstrations in support of the former. The Reformasi movement managed to garner a lot of support within the Malay community as well as among leaders of NGOs. Subsequently, many among the latter group also joined the National Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Nasional) led by Anwar's wife, Dr Wan Azizah. A number of the prominent NGO leaders contested in the 1999 general elections, but lost. This revealed the weaknesses of the nature of NGO activism in Malaysia, in the sense that they lack popular grassroots support base. In addition, not all the NGO groups are compatible in terms of their background or perspectives.

Despite their failure in 1999 general elections, many continued to be actively engaged within the Keadilan Party framework or on an ad hoc basis during the election times. The political awakening which began in 1998 finally bore fruits in the 2008 general elections. Many of the opposition candidates were swept into power by popular discontentment of the broken promises of reform made by Abdullah Badawi during his 2004 general elections. As a consequence, many of the NGO leaders were unexpectedly propelled into the state governments of Penang and Selangor under the umbrella of the coalition named Pakatan Rakyat (Peoples' Alliance).

In several states, the PR-led state governments, among other things, initiated a policy of greater transparency, open tender for projects, settled long standing problems such as the issue of permanent land titles to long-term Chinese residents in new villages (as well as to Malay villagers).

Evaluation of existing situations

More than a year after the historic March 8 2008 general elections, stock taking indicates rather mitigated results. One of the positive consequences of the electoral results is the possibility for the forging of a two-party system. Even though such scenario has emerged from the 1990s, these attempts have ended in failure.

State governments of PR governing in four states have shown contradictory results in their governance. In general, there is however a greater efforts towards a greater accountability and transparency. Several of the NGO background state assemblymen were appointed as state executive councillors with specific portfolios. They were more open to people's feedbacks and implement more people-friendly reforms.

Nonetheless, the involvement of PR in the business of governance also exposes its own weaknesses in terms of organisation. It is facing a shortage of capable people to fill up positions of responsibility at various levels of local authorities. A number of its elected representatives also proved to be a liability to the coalition as they were not up to their job or found to engage in corrupted practices.

In addition, Malaysian politics has been too concentrated on personalities such as Anwar Ibrahim. The Keadilan Party also needs to consolidate its grassroots support and train its members to adhere to a common vision of the party. In the aftermath of the electoral success of his party, Anwar boldly announced his support for multiculturalism and the ideological replacement of Malay hegemony (ketuanan Melayu) of UMNO with “people’s sovereignty” (ketuanan rakyat). Nonetheless, when it comes to handling concrete issues, he appears to exhibit a certain ambivalence, in particular with regards to inter-religious issues. Hence from the point of view of non-Muslim minority, the extent of commitment of Anwar Ibrahim to multiculturalism and to equitable resolution of inter-religious conflicts remain a question of “faith”. Only time will tell whether PR would make a difference in offering a real democratic, ethnically inclusive alternative to the BN, or just another variation of BN’s Malay-dominated accommodation.

Lessons learnt and future perspectives

What are the lessons learnt for concerned citizens from this engagement in the democratisation process in Malaysia? In order not to despair, it is important for social activists to take a medium if not long term perspectives of social change. There is a tendency for those critical of the government to put down all initiatives made by the ruling party and to be suspicious of any criticism directed at the opposition. While most people regard a change of federal government as a definitive sign towards a greater democratisation, it must be realised that a change of government would not offer the Malaysians immediate solutions to all the political problems and social reforms that need to be tackled. It is important to foster a two-party system in order to offer the voters alternative choices in times of election. It is also equally important to monitor both coalition parties in terms of their real performance.

On a larger scale, the political awakening of the people was set in momentum from the time of 1998/9 reformasi movement. In the meantime, internet began to offer alternative sources of information at a time when the mass media was still very much muzzled by government control. Subsequently the openness of Abdullah Badawi in allowing a relatively freer media also played an instrumental role in creating critical consciousness of the deteriorating situation of state institutions. Hence it is clear in this process that independent mass media reporting from a spectrum of perspectives and alternative, reliable sources of information is very important in fostering critical awareness among a critical mass of the voters.

In order for Malaysian democratisation process to move forward, Malaysian politics needs to evolve from personality-based politics to inculcating a political culture that rewards politicians who do the right things. Many a time, voters are either forgetful or very forgiving of politicians who may have acted in a sexist, racist or populist way. In addition, voters need to be more meticulous in scrutinising politicians and political parties based on the political programs or platform that they offer and subsequently their corresponding performance.

It is urgent to carry out institutional reforms (judiciary, anti-corruption agency, police force, election commission, education system) which is vital to enable a proper functioning of existing democratic mechanisms

While associations pushing for specific or communal causes may serve the needs of their intended constituencies, we also need to encourage more “bridging efforts” among people from diverse backgrounds with similar thinking

As Christian and minority groups, our challenge may be the following:

- Encourage political awareness and engagement of fellow Christians
- Articulate a perspective which is non-partisan
- a prophetic voice which serve as conscience of society
- foster inter-communal networking and cooperation
- promote inter-religious dialogue and understanding

Popular discourse often refers to the consolidation of civil society as the way forward towards creating a greater democratic space. It is realised that the agenda promoted by civil society groups are not necessarily always inclusive and progressive, as in the case of the role played by a number of Malaysian NGOs with an Islamic agenda. Ultimately, we need to be confronted with the challenge to resolve conflicting visions of what constitute an ethical social order so as not to degenerate into the “tyranny of the majority”. On a more theoretical level, it is an ongoing challenge to find a way to formulate equitably a coherent synthesis of the collective Good in a context of ethical pluralism.

Background Information on Malaysia

- Multi-religious and multi-cultural society
- Secular State with Islam as the “religion of the Federation of Malaysia”, constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy
- Supremacy of Federal Constitution, which provides for the legal basis of all State institutions and guarantee of fundamental rights of citizens

- Economy
 - o From an initially laissez-faire economy to wide-ranging use of state intervention in implementation of race-based affirmative action
 - o Redistribution through growth
 - o From commodity-based economy to export-oriented industrialisation (From 11.1% in 1970, the share of manufactured products in exports by value increased to 58.9% by 1990)
 - o Benefited from the massive shifts in the world economy towards the internationalisation of production, which was accompanied by new patterns of international investment and the operations of multinational corporations
 - o Affirmative action policies are partially successful in bringing about emergence within several decades of Malay middle class (representation among professionals from 6% in 1970 to 29% in 1990) and *nouveau riche*
 - o Significant reduction of absolute poverty (incidence of poverty declined from 49% in 1970 to 17.1% in 1990)
 - o fail to improve livelihood of specific sectors eg rubber smallholders, paddy farmers and fishermen; poverty among Orang Asli, natives in Sabah and Sarawak as well as a large section of Indians remain serious
 - o Affirmative action policies also subject to abuses, leading to patronage and money politics, corruption, wastage of resources