

**Quality of Democracy: Citizen's participation in Democratic  
Governance in Malaysia  
Lessons learnt and future perspectives**

**Helen Ting, UKM**

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

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# 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

- Laissez-faire economy during first decade after independence
- New Economic Policy (1970-1990): wide-ranging state intervention to implement race-based affirmative action policies
- Redistribution through growth
- 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)

# Economy (contd)

- Affirmative action policies partially successful
- emergence of Malay middle class (representation among professionals from 6% in 1970 to 29% in 1990) and *nouveau riche*
- Reduction of absolute poverty (incidence of poverty declined from 49% in 1970 to 17.1% in 1990)
- 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 remains serious
- Affirmative action policies also subject to abuses, leading to patronage and money politics, corruption, wastage of resources

# Peculiarity of Malaysian Political Situations

- No change of power for Federal Government since Independence
- Watershed of challenge to governing coalition parties, *Barisan Nasional* (BN, literal meaning, the National Front), in 1969 and 2008 general elections
- weak opposition due to imprisonment, co-optation of leaders, internal conflicts, manoeuvring of electoral system

# Malaysian Political Development (contd)

- Progressive constriction of democratic space over the decades
- BN propagate discourse of “developmentism” (the ability to deliver economic development and prosperity) and Malay-dominated multicultural accommodation as its strength over weak opposition parties
- Subtle manipulation of Malay fear of Chinese domination
  - Communist threat
  - Clamour for socio-economic mobility
  - Struggle for symbolic and cultural domination of nationhood

# Deteriorating State Institutions

- Relatively well-functioning bureaucracy and autonomous judiciary at independence
- Progressive deterioration of state institutions due to ethnic preferential policies at the expense of quality of personnel and service
- Judiciary system suffers grave blow after 1988
  - removal of Lord President and non-conforming senior judges
  - Amendment of Federal Constitution to restrict the sphere of competence of civil court over syariah court
- Parliament becomes rubber stamp of the Executive

# Citizens' Participation in Democratic Governance

- Two forms of political participation
  - Ballot box voting
  - pressure groups
- Communalist Politics
- UMNO-dominated government usually more responsive to popular demands from the Malay community
- Minority communal groups eg Chinese – relatively unsuccessful

# Citizens' Participation in Democratic Governance (contd)

- **1969 = watershed in federal government policy orientation**
  - Fall of first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman,
  - In order to entrench political hegemony of UMNO,
    - Appease Malay pressure groups
    - marginalise Chinese opposition constituencies
    - co-opt multiracial parties
    - co-opt/weaken PAS
  - Launch of the New Economic Policy (1970-1990),
  - Formulation of the National Culture Policy
  - Abolition of English-medium schools
- 1980s – implementation of Islamisation Policy
  - strategic response of Dr Mahathir to Islamic party, PAS, as well as to offset influence of Islamic movements
  - co-optation of Anwar Ibrahim from ABIM
  - ABIM = influential lobby group

# **Citizens' Participation in Democratic Governance (contd)**

- 1980s – emergence of NGO activism based on non-communal principles: environmental groups, human rights groups, women's groups, consumers' association
  - Setback in 1987 when government detained a large number of them without trial under the Internal Security Act

# Civil society involvement (1998-present)

- **1998 = second milestone in terms of civil society involvement**
  - many joined in the Reformasi protests upon the destitution of Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim
  - they also joined political parties including the newly formed Parti Keadilan Nasional headed by Wan Azizah, the wife of Anwar
  - a number of NGO leaders contested in 1999 general elections but lost
    - not all NGO background and perspectives are compatible with each other
    - they lack popular grassroots base

# Civil society involvement (1998-present) (contd)

- despite failure in 1999 general elections, many continued their activism within party framework or on ad hoc basis during election times
- finally bear fruits in 2008 elections
- participate in Pakatan Rakyat state governments in Penang and Selangor

# Evaluation of existing situations

- **Positive**

- Hope for real two-party system
- Greater accountability and transparency
- Openness to people's feedbacks

# Evaluation of existing situations (contd)

- **Weaknesses**
- Pakatan Rakyat not consolidated enough to carry out effective political reforms
  - Quality and quantity of capable leaders
- Dependent on personalities such as Anwar Ibrahim
- From the point of view of non-Muslim minority, the extent of commitment of Anwar Ibrahim to multiculturalism and resolution of inter-religious conflicts remain a question of “faith”
- Would PR make a difference in terms of a real democratic alternative, or just facilitate structural democratisation?

# Lessons learnt and future perspectives

- need to take a long term perspectives for change
- A change of government is good for democratisation process but is not the solution to all the problems
- An independent and diverse mass media is very important in fostering critical awareness
- Need to evolve from personality-based politics to
  - inculcating a political culture
  - scrutinise political parties based on their political programs

# Lessons learnt and future perspectives (contd)

- institutional reforms urgent (judiciary, anti-corruption agency, police force, election commission, education system)
- Need to encourage more “bridging efforts” among people from diverse backgrounds with similar thinking
- As Christian and minority groups, we may
  - 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

# Lessons learnt and future perspectives (contd)

- Agenda promoted by civil society groups are not necessarily always inclusive and progressive
  - How to resolve conflicting visions of what constitute an ethical social order so as not to degenerate into the “tyranny of the majority” (or accommodation of incompatible ethical practices of dissenting minorities)?
  - How to formulate equitably a coherent synthesis of the collective Good in a context of ethical pluralism?