

## **TOWARDS A FEDERALISM THAT SUITS MALAYSIA'S DIVERSITY**

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*This article seeks to draw attention to certain dynamics in Malaysian politics that have exhibited new relevance following the surprising results of the 12th General Election held on 8 March 2008. In identifying them as recurrent, the point is made that the seemingly novel conditions being experienced are, to a large extent, expressions of old fault lines that political constraints, in the form of legislation, suppression of discussions since 1970 and the personality-based conflicts of the Mahathir years have concealed. A proper understanding of these dynamics, in light of the apparently new scenario of the post-2008 period, thus requires a reconsideration of the political exigencies of the 1950s, when Malaya was being formed.*

Keywords: centralism, democracy, opposition politics, election campaign, inter-ethnic relations, post-colonialism, new politics, new media

### **A PROBLEMATIC BIRTH**

It is a truism to say that Malaysia is 'in transition'. However, the stubbornness of certain dimensions of political conflict in deciding policy and limiting discourse suggests that this 'transition' can just as easily be understood as the result of the captured state into which the country was born. What is new about the present situation is that it allows the country's educated class to reconsider those limitations and their negative impact on the country's development as a new political entity.

The polity known as the Federation of Malaya was definitely novel when it came into being in 1948 as a creation of late colonialism. Claims that it was the expression of 'Malayness' had a centrally normative goal. The Malaya that was declared independent in 1957 was new, as was the Federation of Malaysia that it expanded into in 1963. How the disparate geographical parts that went into making Malaysia were put together; how the transfer of power to the ruling classes was achieved; how communism was defeated; how the colonialists withdrew in haste and in damage-control mode on their economic and strategic interests; and how ethnic relations were expediently steered; all of these issues configured the political contests that would take place in the coming decades.

Given this problematic birth, a political movement—issue by issue—towards increasing central control over the federation was inevitable. Resistance against this trend was already strong from the start, with the results of the 1959 elections revealing weaknesses in the Alliance Model that were not apparent before the independence in 1957. The confrontation with Indonesia in 1964 saw the country uniting strongly behind the government. However, once that dangerous situation receded, the fault lines of Malaysian politics came to the fore with a vengeance in the aftermath of the 1969 elections, when the opposition showed itself capable of threatening the central government.

Opposition politics, after the re-opening of parliament in February 1971, was neutered in many ways, with most of the major parties absorbed into the expanded ruling coalition; the opposition stronghold of Kuala Lumpur turned into a federal territory; and the far-reaching policy of Malay-first affirmative action, the New Economic Policy (NEP), implemented.

Any keen observer would see some similarities in the patterns of voting between 1969 and 2008, when Penang, Perak and Selangor were electorally frontline states.

In the 2008 General Election, the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition that had always been ruling the country, lost control of these major peninsular states, as well as its customary two-thirds majority in parliament. Just as importantly, its major non-Malay component parties in West Malaysia suffered severe losses, as had been the case in 1969 when the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) suffered similar fate.

At present, the opposition parties are still officially seeking registration as a coalition. Despite losing the state of Perak through defections, the alliance has survived, and has shown a degree of resilience that many did not think it had. This is new in Malaysian politics. The existence of a Malay-led party advocating multiracialism, Parti KeAdilan Rakyat (PKR), may not be a novelty, but no such thing had existed since the 1950s. The future of this new *de facto* coalition of opposition parties, Pakatan Rakyat (PR), is however, not a given thing, and its many weaknesses continue to be exploited by the politically savvier BN. Perhaps the newest and most significant situation is the policy competition that now exists between states governed by different parties. The playing field is, no doubt, far from level, but attention is drawn to what is perhaps the most important dimension in the conflict of Malaysian politics: centralism versus federalism. Given the cultural, geographical, geopolitical and historical diversity of Malaysia, the centralism that the federal government, using the NEP as its discursive vehicle, implemented since 1970, could not but increase the pressure along the country's many fault lines. One could argue that the election results of 2008 were

tantamount to a delayed but strong reaction, on the part of UMNO and its allies, against the ills of sustained centralism.

## **THE LEGACY OF CENTRALISM**

Peninsular politics, with its many Malay sultanates, made it expedient for the post-colonial polity to adopt the form of a federation (Wang, 1969). This was a common solution for much of the decolonising world following the Second World War. After the Malayan Union, established in 1946, failed, federalism became the discourse within which centralist tendencies, as well as communal and local interests, could strike a credible pose. Subsequently, the Federation of Malaya was formed in 1948, followed by the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, when Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore joined, with Singapore lasting only two painful years in the Federation. Both occasions were marked by serious contests, and judging by most indicators, federalism was never free of powerful centralist ambitions. With the communists remaining a threat, Indonesia promising to destroy the federation and inter-ethnic conflicts always just around the corner, centralist tendencies were strongly encouraged and accepted. The NEP was, from the beginning, undoubtedly a balancing act between leftist and rightist goals, aiming to end poverty on the one hand, and on the other, using racial concerns as the rationale for the many policies it generated.

What we are forced to conclude in the aftermath of 8 March 2008 is this: The conventional power structure, though badly shaken, did survive, and many of the weaknesses now evident in both coalitions stem from the fact that the transition away from the long-lived One-Coalition System reached a stand-off and has transformed into what may be perceived as a revisionist trench-digging stage. Both sides remain unsure of their voter base. This limbo presents the educated class with an opportunity to re-narrate Malaysia's history, starting with the exigencies of de-colonisation in the 1950s, but ending, necessarily, with a stark analysis of where the centralist policies backed by legislative mufflers and race-based discourse have led the country. This is the legacy of centralism:

1. Lack of accountability and transparency among the powerful has nurtured a culture of arrogance, corruption and incompetence throughout the body politic. Key institutions such as the civil service, the police, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission, the judiciary and even the Election Commission, have been compromised. This is mirrored in the citizenry as a growing lack of confidence in government authorities and in policy argumentations;
2. The discourses of race and religion, on which most major parties are built, have acted as a quick-freeze in debates, especially after sweeping

amendments were made to the Constitution in 1971. The pervasiveness of communal politics has fostered a silent sense of racist complicity throughout the arms of government and the general population, further augmented by the weight of religious correctness;

3. Loyalty to one's own race and defence of one's own religion have undermined respect for the rule of law and overshadowed values that are supposedly of a more universal nature;
4. The growing arbitrariness in the exercise of power, along with tight control over the mass media, has instilled instinctive fear in the public and within institutions;
5. Limits on the freedom of expression and the freedom of information have damaged the debate culture in the country, allowing for populist and parochial sentiments to influence policy to an extent far beyond what one would expect of an educated and otherwise cosmopolitan population and to brutalise public—and certainly parliamentary—debate;
6. The country is, and has been, suffering from a weak oppositional structure that lacks the governing experience and access to resources. Coming into positions of power so suddenly, opposition parties have shown that they have not possessed—and could not have been expected to possess—the ability to govern at the level of quality desired by voters;
7. The actual exchange of power became highly problematic because of a misplaced sense of ownership on the part of incumbents, and the fear of punishment for past arbitrariness and wrongdoings in government; and
8. The conformity demanded of the print mass media over time has resulted in a low standard of journalism. The need to renew publishing rights annually has encouraged obsequiousness in news reporting and analysis. The fact that the ruling parties own all the major newspapers makes matters worse and breeds cynicism among readers.

By styling itself federalist, Malaysian centralism had succeeded in undermining low-level democratic institutions and eroding the power of the states fiscally and administratively. What this has led to is deterioration of public discourse and a form of governance that depends on patronage, personal relations and cloaked bartering of interests.

An idea now prevalent is that, decentralisation of power based on different parties controlling different states is possible, and perhaps even probable. With increasing acceptance of the heterogeneity of the Malaysian society and sustained absence of external and internal threats, devolution of power may be inevitable.

At the moment, increased need for dialogue between the federal power and state power has become undeniable. State-level power is badly overshadowed by

federal power, and this is the major expression of Malaysia's inability to adjust to new economic challenges.

The long-term effects of the authoritarian style of government exercised by Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamed between 1981 and 2003 are intertwined with the issues just mentioned. His penchant for conflict saw him opposing every prime minister and deputy prime minister in Malaysia's history except for Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, whom he saw as his patron. After his retirement, Mahathir continued steering politics and was a sworn opponent to Abdullah Badawi's style of running the country. Although he has, at times, shown dissatisfaction with the present Prime Minister, Najib Razak, he has yet to engage in any open arguments with the Deputy Prime Minister, Muhyiddin Yassin.

When Najib Razak took over the country's leadership on 3 April 2009, there were two general directions along which he could choose to go. One was for him to adopt the Political Struggle Perspective: he consolidates his party and his coalition, carries out as much damage control as possible, even regarding scandals that threaten to involve him, and undermines the vulnerable opposition as much as he can. The second way is the Nation Building Perspective, in which he learns from the results of the general elections, identify where BN strategies must have gone wrong and takes long-sighted measures to bring things back on track.

Apparently, the path he chose was to have easy reforms and fast rhetoric that suggest the second alternative, such as 1Malaysia and macro-economic reforms concerning foreign investments. This took place even as he allowed the arms of government to move against the opposition, and avoided the institutional reforms, the absence of which had caused voters to turn against the Abdullah Badawi administration. This strategy runs the risk of not satisfying any party, leading, on the one hand, to increased distrust of the government and on the other, to heightened racialist and religion-based sentiments.

This new lose-lose scenario can be discussed within certain dimensions that have gained renewed relevance in Malaysian politics.

## **THE BEGINNING OF A TWO-COALITION SYSTEM**

Basically, what makes the post-8 March pattern different from earlier eras is that a Two-Party System is now visible. This present transition pits parties and coalitions holding power in different constituencies against each other, not only on the ability to hang onto power and instigate intrigue, but also in the formulation and implementation of policies. Each of the opposition parties

controls at least one state government and has opportunities to realise, to a significant extent, what their rhetoric had been pronouncing.

Opposition coalitions did appear in the early days. Following the introduction of elections in 1951, parties were formed, and they immediately began seeking allies. The Alliance, Pan-Malayan Labour Party and Socialist Front can be seen as such items, with the last two, in turn, later combined to form Party Rakyat. In the 1960s, there was the Malaysian Solidarity Council that Singapore's People's Action Party (PAP) formed with several smaller opposition parties on the peninsular, as well as the electoral understanding between Democratic Action Party (DAP), Peoples Progressive Party (PPP) and Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan) in contesting the 1969 polls. The days of coalition formation among opposition parties ended with the expansion of the Alliance into the Barisan Nasional in 1973, with Gerakan, PPP and Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) as new members.

Opposition politics turned coalitional again only in 1990, when a split in UMNO saw DAP joining the newly created Semangat 46 to form Gagasan Rakyat to challenge BN. Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah, a group of Muslim parties, also campaigned against BN at that time. Opposition politics developed further with the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim and the initiation of the Reformasi Movement. After Anwar was arrested, Parti KeAdilan Nasional was formed and together with PAS and DAP, the three attempted to topple BN in 1999 through the formation of a coalition termed as Barisan Alternatif. The elections strengthened PAS but weakened DAP seriously.

Interestingly, the opposition's success in 2008 was more due to an electoral understanding rather than creation of a formal coalition. Forming a coalition became attractive only after all the major opposition parties did well in the election.

## **GEOGRAPHICAL DIVIDES**

Since the formation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963 and more clearly since 1969, the central government had, in its various configurations and with few exceptions, controlled the thirteen states. Major exceptions are Kelantan, which PAS has ruled since 1990, and Sabah, which was governed by Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) between 1985 and 1994. Terengganu also fell to PAS in 1999, though only for one term. What was so extraordinary about 8 March 2008 was that opposition parties collectively managed to take over Penang, Kedah, Perak and Selangor to add to the PAS-controlled state of Kelantan (Perak has since been taken over by the central government through defections).

Significantly, all the five opposition states lie in the peninsular's northern and north-western region. In effect, a pattern of political divide appeared that cut the country neatly into an opposition-controlled north and a centrally controlled south, with the exception of the tiny government stronghold of Perlis on the Thai border. The country's most important urban and industrial centres are also found in these states, especially in Penang and Selangor. In addition to this, the three opposition parties also won ten of the eleven parliamentary seats in the federal territory of Kuala Lumpur.

What has become an undeniable feature in the political equation is how young urban Malays have been deserting UMNO. In Penang, Perak and Selangor, broad urban support for DAP and PKR played major influence in the outcome of the 2008 elections. In Penang, DAP and PKR together won 28 of the 40 contested seats. In Selangor, they controlled 33 out of 56 seats. In semi-urban Perak, the two secured 25 out of 59 seats.

PAS had been hoping to regain control over the oil-rich state of Terengganu, which it had lost to BN after governing it between 1999 and 2004. It failed on that score, winning only 16 seats. In Kedah, with the help of PKR's four seats, it now controls the 36-seat assembly and rules the state for the first time.

The party's hold of its home state of Kelantan tightened spectacularly, with its majority increasing from 37 to 45 seats. The urban-rural divide in Malaysia reflects, to a large extent, how different parts of the country are involved to differing degrees in the global economy. Tension between rural and urban areas may be common to all modernising countries, but in Malaysia's case, the race factor had always clouded the issue, just as it had clouded the class issue. A greater acceptance of paradigms other than race is therefore to be expected. UMNO, despite being a modernising party, has its strongest support in rural areas. This contradiction will continue to influence Malaysian discourse, even if UMNO should lose power.

At the same time, any claim that an urban-rural political divide became manifest in the 8 March election must be qualified by the fact that most inhabitants of the northern states of Kelantan, Kedah and Perak are rural folks. One should therefore note that a rural-rural divide also exists and is a reflection of differences in the politicisation of 'Malayness.'

Geopolitical divisions are intrinsic to the country. One can study the case of the southernmost peninsular state of Johor, which is incidentally the place of UMNO origin. In 1969, when the Alliance suffered electoral setbacks in the northern states, it retained all parliamentary seats in Johor and even increased its voter percentage. At the state level, its share of votes dropped only slightly from 67.4%

in 1964 to 65%. It had won 67.1% in the first national elections in 1959. Where state seats were concerned, it won 30 out of 32 contested seats, two less than in 1964 but two more than in 1959 (Bass, 1973: 93–93). So, all in all, BN power was extremely steady in those days, at both electoral levels.

In 2008, almost 40 years later, the ruling coalition, now BN, once more suffered grave electoral setbacks, again in the northern states. However, in Johor, it won all but one of the 26 parliamentary seats, with an embattled Johor MCA losing the relatively large constituency of Bakri (with 56,371 registered voters) to DAP by a slim margin of 722 ([www.undi.info](http://www.undi.info)). Although it lost six state seats—it dropped only one in 2004—BN's control over the 56-seat state assembly remains firm.

This fundamental division in political preference between the peninsular's north and south is now not only made manifest but looks set to maintain the status quo.

Of greater long-term significance is the fact that the political, historical, and cultural diversity of the different parts of the country is not only greater than normally supposed, but also more unchanging. This has made federalism a popular issue for public discussion in recent months, encouraged further by arguments over unfair redistribution of taxes and oil revenues.

## **NEW CONCEPTUAL INNOVATIONS**

The new situation also calls for new ways of 'bracketing' Malaysian history, which will lead to innovative ways of looking at the past and the future (for example, 'the BN period', 'the Abdullah transition', 'the rise of the states' and 'the rise of East Malaysia', etc.). Some degree of deconstruction of basic concepts, such as 'race', 'coalition', 'federalism', 'unity' and 'inter-cultural tolerance' is unavoidable in this new political terrain.

With the success of the opposition parties, we see that parties that are based on racial principles were all founded before Merdeka, while the multiracial parties were founded after Merdeka. This suggests a huge divide in how they and their supporters view history and how their aspirations are configured.

The fact that the PKR became the strongest opposition party after 8 March 2008, may have been a critical reason why no violence erupted after the federal government suffered such great losses in the northern states. The riots that followed the elections on 10 May 1969 were closely connected to the fact that opposition parties, except for PAS on the east coast, were largely supported by non-Malays. The electoral results back then traced a racial line that was easily

exploited by politicians and others. This was not the case in 2008. Not only is the PKR a Malay-led party, it also has a multiracial platform, which appeals across racial lines. The political division created in March 2008 was therefore not racial based, and any attempt to exploit it from a racial angle could not gain much support. The fact that the Islamist PAS was also battling against BN blurred racial lines even further.

While PAS called for a welfare state instead of an Islamic state, as it had always done before 2008, PKR, under Anwar Ibrahim, wanted the NEP to be replaced with a need-based affirmative action plan. Both of these changes were acceptable to non-Malay voters, which greatly benefited DAP, the non-Malay-supported ally of the two parties. With the Malays so clearly divided in their political sympathies, Malaysian politics has become much more complicated than simple race concepts. What has emerged instead is an embryonic two-coalition system that seeks to replace the seemingly unchallenged BN.

### **THE RISE IN IMPORTANCE OF EAST MALAYSIA**

In contrast to the situation in Peninsular Malaysia, voters in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak did not show any change in their habits (Sarawak's state elections are held separately, the most recent in 2011). The voters' revolt did not include these states, and BN remained comfortably in power. In Sabah, 24 of 25 parliamentary seats went to BN, while in Sarawak the corresponding figures were 30 of 31. Of the 140 federal seats that BN retained in 2008, 54 (38.6%) of them were in East Malaysia. At the state level, "voters' loyalty" to BN was even more impressive. Only one of the 60 state assembly seats in Sabah was won by the opposition. BN succeeded in winning the rest.

However, this support for BN in Sarawak would show itself to be less solid than assumed when the state next held its elections three years later, on 16 April 2011. Although it retained a two-thirds majority, BN lost 16 seats, 12 of which went to DAP, three to PKR, and one to an independent. BN component party in Sarawak, the Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP), saw two of its leaders voted out, and its role as the representative of the Chinese in Sarawak was severely undermined by the DAP. In the event, BN lost a shocking 8% of the popular vote, down from 63% to 55% (*Malaysiakini*, 18 April 2011).

While in 2004 64% of all votes cast in the country went to BN, that figure shrank to 50.14% four years later. In fact, the government actually won only 49% of the vote on the peninsula itself (Johan, 2008: 53).

This new balance of power is a reflection of at least two new developments, both indicating the increasing political influence of East Malaysians. First, BN assemblymen on this side are in a position to demand more representatives in the Cabinet and more favours where the federal distribution of national wealth and projects is concerned. Second, they have also become the centre of attention for the opposition parties, which, under Anwar Ibrahim, have been coaxing them to cross over to PR. The longer these politicians play the coy and courted maiden, the longer they can keep their future loyalties hidden, and the more leverage they have on both BN and PR.

Anwar Ibrahim's ploy of picking 16 September 2008 as the date he would take federal power was aimed at charming the East Malaysians into joining him. On this date 45 years ago, Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore joined Malaya to form Malaysia. In spite of this, the federal government continue to celebrate 31 August, the day independence was won in 1957, as National Day. The consideration given to 16 September by Anwar was meant to indicate that greater respect would be paid to the East Malaysians should PR take power. Anwar's deadline came and went without major crossovers to PR by East Malaysian lawmakers. The Sabah Progressive Party, with its two members of parliament, did leave BN on 17 September, but chose not to join PR. This hurt Anwar's credibility badly.

Another consequence of the importance that is being attributed to the East Malaysian states is that the categorisation of race in the country becomes more complicated in public space and in politics. For example, the term '*bumiputera*' (native), technically applied in affirmative action contexts and often loosely used to mean 'Malay', will become a much more complicated concept and may have to be deconstructed or even discarded in the longer term.

### **SEVERE LOSSES BY SMALLER BN PARTIES**

The setback for the Abdullah administration went beyond the mere loss of the two-thirds majority. The sudden, sharp fall of BN's popularity—from 90.4% of the parliamentary seats in 2004 to 63.1% in 2008 (see Table 1)—expressed a downward momentum that heartened the opposition to seek toppling the government altogether by persuading BN members of parliament to switch sides (DAP, 2004). Although UMNO remains the largest party, it represents only 35.6% of the parliamentary seats. The PR's three parties together held 36.9% (several defections from PR in 2010 would later change this quotient).

Table 1: Parliamentary seats won in 2004 and 2008, by party

POLITICAL PARTIES	GE 2004		GE 2008	
	Seats	%	Seats	%
<b>Barisan Nasional (BN)</b>	198	90.4	140	63.1
UMNO	109	49.8	79	35.6
MCA	31	14.2	15	6.8
MIC	9	4.1	3	1.4
Gerakan	10	4.6	2	0.9
Others	39	16.9	41	18.5
<b>Pakatan Rakyat (PR)</b>			82	36.9
DAP	12	5.5	28	12.6
PAS	7	3.2	23	10.4
PKR	1	0.5	31	14.0
<b>Others</b>	0	0.0	0	0.0
<b>Independents</b>	1	0.5	0	0
Total	219	100	222	100

Source: Data from *The Star* (2004) and Saravanamuttu (2008).

Overall, BN lost 58 parliamentary seats compared to the 2004 elections. More tellingly, its share of actual votes cast went down from 63.9% to 50.14%. UMNO alone shrunk by 30 seats, down to 79; MCA by 16 seats, down to 15; Gerakan by seven seats, down to two; and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) by six seats, down to two. The tiny PPP lost the only seat it had won in 2004 ([www.undi.info](http://www.undi.info)).

As mentioned above, BN's losses were heaviest in the northern part of the peninsular. In tiny Perlis, it retained all three seats, but managed to win only four of 15 seats in Kedah, two of 14 in Kelantan, two of 13 in Penang, 13 of 24 in Perak and five of 22 in Selangor. In the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, it kept only one of 11 seats.

Viewed in terms of its individual component parties, the picture in the peninsular's northern region gets even more upsetting for the ruling coalition. In Kedah, UMNO won 12 state seats (down from 23 in 2004) and three parliamentary seats (down from 12), and MCA won one state seat (down from four) and one federal seat (down from two). Gerakan won one state seat (down from two), while MIC lost the two state seats it held since 2004.

In Perak, UMNO has eight federal seats (down from 11 in 2004), Gerakan has one (down from three), MCA has 3 (down from four) and MIC has one (down from two), with the party leader Samy Vellu losing his constituency. PPP

president M. Kayveas lost the party's only federal seat. At state level, UMNO now has 27 state seats (down from 34), and MCA has one (down from 10). Both Gerakan and MIC used to have four state seats each but ended up with none.

In Penang, UMNO was the only party from the federal ruling coalition that managed to win constituencies, both at the state level (11 seats, down from 14 in 2004) and the federal level (two seats, down from four). The two federal seats were won by Abdullah Badawi, the then Prime Minister, and Nor Mohamed Yakcop, the former second finance minister, who managed to retain their constituencies. In 2004, Gerakan had 13 state seats and three federal seats, MCA had nine state seats and one federal seat, and MIC had one state seat. All were lost to the opposition.

In Selangor, the ruling coalition held all 22 parliamentary seats in 2004, but saw it reduced to only five. It also held 54 of the 56 state seats in 2004, but controls only 20 of them after the 8 March election. UMNO now has 18 state seats (down from 35) and four federal seats (down from 10), and MCA has two state seats (down from 12) and one federal seat (down from seven). MIC lost the three state seats and four federal seats it used to hold, as did the Gerakan, which lost the four state seats and one federal seat it won in 2004.

In Kelantan, UMNO has six state seats (down from 21) and two federal seats (down from eight).

Table 2: Number of seats won in 2008 and 2004 by BN parties in the five opposition-held states as a whole, with percentage loss in brackets

BN parties	Parliamentary seats		State assembly seats	
	2008	2004	2008	2004
UMNO	15 (57%)	35	56 (39%)	92
MCA	4 (33%)	6	3 (87%)	23
Gerakan	1 (67%)	3	4 (84%)	19
MIC	1 (50%)	2	0 (100%)	4
PPP	0 (100%)	1	0	0
All BN parties	21 (55%)	47	63 (57%)	148

Source: Computed from data available at <http://thestar.com.my/election/>

The losses suffered by BN and each of its component parties in the five opposition states taken as a whole and tabulated (see Table 2), provide some interesting results. First, the damage suffered by BN was more or less the same at both federal and state levels. This suggests that, in the five northern states taken as a whole, split voting was a negligible factor.

Second, UMNO lost more at the parliamentary level than at the state level, while the reverse was the case for all of the other parties. There is, therefore, basis for the argument that UMNO's grassroots support remained much stronger than was the case for its allies.

The extent to which all BN parties in these states, at both levels, suffered was surprisingly great. PPP no longer has any representation at all, while MIC has no state assemblyman north of Negeri Sembilan. All MIC has in the north now is one parliamentarian from Perak. With the party so seriously reduced in strength, BN will have a hard time convincing the Malaysian Indians that they are adequately represented in the coalition. The opposition, having gained from the Indian desertion of BN, will be doing all it can to retain their loyalty, perhaps to the extent of excessively accommodating more demands by the community. This need to win Indian support is also strongly felt by BN.

Also of great significance is the fact that Gerakan was wiped out, at both levels, in its home base of Penang and in Selangor. It is worth noting that, it was the decision made by Lim Chong Eu, the party's president in the early 1970s, to join the Alliance that helped bring BN into being.

### **BREAKS IN THE ETHNIC VOTING PATTERN**

With new perspectives coming to the fore, the assumed unity in, and between, ethnic groups is being revisited. Unity in diversity requires continuously negotiated distance. Miscalculating the distance between groups jeopardises national unity.

Malay-led multiracialism has become the major alternative to the 'UMNO-led Alliance of Ethnic Parties Model'. For the foreseeable future, Malaysian multiracialism has to be expressed either through UMNO-dominated 'race-based parties' or through a Malay-led coalition of non-racial parties. Race will remain a major factor; the difference lies in how much it is allowed to influence policy and how policies are formulated.

The racialism so strongly embedded in the Malaysian political consciousness becomes most obvious on polling days. The assumption has been that an ethnic community is best represented by someone from that community. This tend to perpetuate racial divides and generate campaign issues that are racially driven. Any electoral platform that is not race-based had difficulties getting anywhere close to the numbers needed for victory. Successful parties that started out as multiracial parties, such as Gerakan, very quickly became race representatives due to ethnocentrism in voting patterns.

BN, and the Alliance preceding it, ingeniously overcame this constraint by not only establishing itself as a coalition of race-based parties, but also registering as a party in its own right. At the ballot box, BN appears only as BN with its weighing scale logo. This neutralises racial divisions in the sense that a Chinese man voting for a BN candidate of another race would, in principle, also be voting for his own race, since that candidate is in alliance with the race-based party of his choice, subsumed under the coalitional umbrella.

During the election on 8 March 2008, no alternative coalition was formally formed, and deals made between the three opposition parties did not amount to anything more than an electoral strategy. Their phenomenal success encouraged the three parties to create an oppositional coalition on 1 April to challenge the government in parliament.

The BN model has, in effect, always enjoyed a decisive edge in mixed-race constituencies. However, this time around, the habit of ethnic voting was broken in certain areas. For example, as Lee Hock Guan discovered in his analysis of voting patterns in the Klang Valley, "the most important feature of the election results in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor was that the Opposition finally overcame the biggest hurdle that had prevented it from winning seats in past elections—the problem of cross-ethnic voting" (Lee, 2008: 114). The opposition actually won in all but one of the statistically classified mixed-race constituencies in Kuala Lumpur and in 15 of 18 such units in Selangor.

This contrasts starkly with all of the southern peninsular states, where BN remained strong in mixed-race constituencies. Now that BN cannot take its advantage in mixed-race constituencies for granted, future elections will be harder to call for its strategists.

In Klang Valley, as much as one third of Malays voted for non-Malay DAP candidates, while many non-Malays, though to a lesser degree, cast their votes for the Islamist PAS. What makes the equation even more interesting is that the Malay-led PKR managed to gain impressive support for its multiethnic platform. Furthermore, it was the astounding success of PKR, going from one parliamentary seat in 2004 to 31 in 2008, that provided the necessary impetus for the three parties to form a formal coalition.

## **SOCIOLOGICAL FACTORS**

Above and beyond the issues discussed above, a series of factors, largely sociological in nature, emerged, that require adaptation from all parties involved if they are to influence voter sentiments in the near future. Malaysia's younger

population is now beginning to exert more influence on the country's politics, and the old discourses based on race and religion do not seem to appeal as easily to this group as to their parents. Urbanisation throughout the country continues, and with it come changes in political priorities and values. This also holds consequences for how politics is played; the politics of patronage, for example, become harder to play, and actually diminish to what we may term as 'cronyism.' Getting the young to register to vote has, therefore, become a major electoral offensive for the opposition, who believes that young urbanites tend to vote against the status quo.

The Internet and the rise of the web newspapers have broken the federal government's monopoly on dissemination of political information over the last 50 years. Indeed, 8 March injected a sense of empowerment into the population that would take a long time for the people to forget.

## **CONCLUSION**

In drawing attention to the dimensions in Malaysian politics that appear most relevant after the 2008 general elections, this article argues that the way in which Malaysia came into being made its diversity not only inevitable, but also permanent. The centralism that has influenced governance over the last 40–50 years is, therefore, an ill-informed and vain attempt at applying nation-state notions. These measures may suppress the diversity and the major fault lines of Malaysian society, but only at the cost of delaying and brutalising responses, thereby diminishing the prospects of peaceful prosperity and development for the country as a whole. The fact that this centralism bases itself on racialist ideas makes political discussion an uncomfortable endeavour.

As a rule, the rate and degree of integration in a new nation needs to consider the diversity of the population in regards to ethnicity, history, geopolitics and other such key areas. Malaya/Malaysia was formed hastily as a result of late colonial expedience, and that hastiness favoured solutions that allowed quick-fix independence for the country. Federalism was, therefore, more a nominal construct than a real one, and the three-tier electoral system evolved into a two-tier one by 1976. The emergence of state governments controlled by the federal opposition demonstrates that governance has been centralised to a high degree.

If Malaysia had possessed a stronger federalism, it would allow coalitions to vary greatly at different levels and in the country's disparate parts. As it is, the penetration of BN into all of the states and into society turns conflicts at all levels into national issues. Diversity is not recognised in practice, and cultural homogeneity is mistakenly presumed to be a prerequisite for national harmony.

This state of mind reveals the need for post-2008 Malaysian society to revive the virtues of federalism and to consider the wisdom of a strong federalism as the best structure for the country, given the sultanates and other territories that constitute it, the ethnic rainbow that populates it and the regionalism of the post-Cold War period.

In an age where diversely talented countries compete against each other economically, the best strategy for a multifaceted country like Malaysia to adopt is one where its diversity is seen as a powerful resource. The political structure that would be suitable, then, would be one that facilitates the full economic and cultural range of that diversity. 'Homogeneity is strength' is a fallacy that history has shown to be foolish and unsuited to a heterogeneous nation like Malaysia.

## NOTES

1. See Ooi Kee Beng, Johan Saravanamuttu and Lee Hock Guan (2008).
2. Election data are collected from 'Malaysia Decides 2008', available at <http://thestar.com.my/election/results/results.html>; Jawatankuasa Pilihan Raya Pusat (2008) and *Malaysiakini's* website [www.undi.info](http://www.undi.info).
3. The population of tiny Perlis was 224,500 in 2005 (Saw, 2007: 23).

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