

## Changes in Chinese's Political Involvement in Malaysia

Lee Yok Fee

*Department of Government and Civilization Studies,  
Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia,  
43400 UPM, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia  
E-mail: leeyokfee@putra.upm.edu.my*

### ABSTRACT

Malaysian Chinese is the second largest group in the country's population and has been actively involved in politics since their mass immigration during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The main objective of this article is to examine the political involvement of the Chinese, their voting behaviour, bureaucratic participation and reaction to Malay dominance in the country in different periods, i.e. pre- and post-1970, and post-2008 General Elections. This writing is greatly contingent upon a content analysis on secondary data collected from reports, journal articles, book chapters, and newspaper articles. In short, Chinese's involvement and reaction in politics in Malaysia significantly depend on the discourse of Malay dominance. Malaysian Chinese's political participation in the period from 1970 to 1990 indicated both continuity and change. Chinese electorate's voting patterns seem to demonstrate a swing to the opposition candidates, while the parties in the Barisan Nasional government continue to enjoy the confidence of the Malay communities as well as the elites. Meanwhile, the so-called politic tsunami on 8 March 2008 has opened a new phase in the Malaysian political development. The nature of politics is said to have shifted from communal-based politic to multiethnic-based.

**Keywords:** Bureaucratic participation, Malaysian Chinese, Malay dominance, Chinese's political involvement

### INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a highly plural society since ancient times, i.e. the pre-colonial period, in contrast to most scholars theorizing the phenomenon as a product of colonization. As a plural society, nation building has always been a great challenge for Malaysia (Shamsul, 1997). The ethnic composition of this country comprises two major constitutional categories, namely Bumiputera (literally means 'prince of the soil') and non-Bumiputera. Of the total population of Malaysia in Census 2000, Bumiputera made up 65.1 percent. The Bumiputera category consists of the Malays and the indigenous peoples of Peninsula Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak (for

instance, Orang Asli, Kadazan, Iban, etc.). On the other hand, the Chinese (26.0 percent) and Indians (7.7 percent) form the majority of the non-Bumiputera category.

The ethnic distribution has not altered considerably in view of the rapid growth of the Malaysian population. The two main demographic categories of the population, i.e. Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera, have been regarded as critical in sustaining ethnic balance in Malaysia. In particular, the Sino-Malay relationship plays a pivotal role in the politics of Malaysia's nation building. The politics of nation-building in Malaysia is basically the politics of mediating identities. The politics of identity in Malaysia illustrates the prevailing

---

Received: 16 March 2009

Accepted: 20 October 2009

contradictions of various notions of *nation-of-intent* both inter and intra ethnic groups (Shamsul, 1996).

The issue of ethnicity characterizes the very basis of Malaysian politics. This is reflected by the fact that political struggles are often fought on an ethnic basis and the tendency of most political issues to be perceived in terms of ethnics. This is a prevailing phenomenon in Malaysian politics since its independence in 1957. Thus, the main objective of this article is to examine the Chinese's political involvement, both their bureaucratic participation and reaction to Malay dominance in the country in the different periods, i.e. pre- and post-1970, and post-2008 General Elections. This writing is greatly contingent upon a content analysis on the secondary data collected from the reports, journal articles, book chapters, and newspaper articles.

There are four main parts in this paper. The first part is to examine the Chinese's involvement in politic before 1970. The second part scrutinizes Malaysian Chinese's political involvement after the implementation of the New Economy Policy after 1970. In the third part, the author looks further into some critical ethnic-related issues prior to the 2008 general election. In the final part, the author analyzes some latest trends emerging in the Malaysian Chinese's reactions in the midst of the Malay dominance.

### **CHINESE'S POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE PRE-1970 PERIOD**

In order to understand the Chinese's political involvement prior to 1970s, the concepts of "horizontal solidarity" and "vertical division" are useful (Ho, 2002). In Ho's analysis, the coalition of the three ethnic communities in the Alliance which formed the pre-1970 Malaysia a quasi-consociational state happened only at the elite level. Within the political organization of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and Malayan Indian Congress (MIC), the top elites had, albeit disagreements and conflicts of

interests, attempted to strengthen a "horizontal solidarity" among them. They were mostly western-educated, conservative, strongly nationalistic, and deeply committed to communal interests. They shared an experience that was unique in the Malaysian political history. In the framework of "horizontal solidarity", decisions were made with the participation of these leaders, although their roles in policy-making might not be equally significant. Apparently, the Alliance during the initial period of its association was more broadly based in terms of ethnic participatory decisions. Besides this, the coalition of ethnic elites functioned at two levels of the bargaining process: internal and external. The former was the internal bargaining among the ethnic elites themselves. This happened, for example, in the negotiations of the Constitution in 1957. The latter was a united group with an external entity. This was illustrated in 1957 when the UMNO-MCA-MIC Alliance claimed independence from the British.

On the other hand, in the context of "vertical division", the various ethnic groups were segregated in a plural society. Political interactions and communications were extremely limited at individual, group, and organizational levels. While ethnic groups accommodated each other in their daily lives, there was very little exchange of political views. Besides, there were also internal divisions among the ethnic Malaysian Chinese. Indeed, the Malaysian Chinese elites were not homogeneous. There were divided by circumstances and traditions, cultural heterogeneity, and class. Intra-Chinese divisions were also accelerated by pro-Malay policies. UMNO's dominance within the Alliance made the MCA less capable of delivering rewards to their ethnic-group client. While bargaining existed, the decisions were usually in favour of the UMNO. Hence, the MCA consistently failed to satisfy the demands of its Chinese electorate. It, therefore, became alienated from the Chinese grass roots that began to withdraw their support. Indeed, the MCA's inability to deliver cultural, political and economic goods led to elite-mass political divisions within the Chinese community (Ho, 2002).

Meanwhile, Chinese-based opposition parties emerged. They were Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan) (Lee, 1987). DAP was a consistent critic of MCA. Gerakan was inaugurated in 1968 and it brought together key leaders from two other non-Malay opposition parties, United Democratic Party and Labour Party. These two political parties were highly vocal in criticizing the Malay-dominated state and its policies, and championed non-Malay rights in terms of education, language, and culture. With these alternatives, the Chinese voters were able to have a choice in terms of selecting their own representatives. Political divisions within the Chinese community, in particular among the voters, were intensified.

The most distinguishing feature in the Malaysian political system, as far as ethnic Chinese political participation is concerned, was the representation they enjoyed at the elite level. Important cabinet positions, such as the portfolio of the finance ministry, were held by MCA politicians traditionally. However, many important issues were decided in the UMNO's favour. The appearance of the political representation remained as an important selling point for the MCA to its supporters and sympathizers.

### CHINESE'S POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT AFTER 1970

There are two important aspects in the understanding of the Chinese's political involvement after 1970, i.e. the shifting of the Chinese votes and the Chinese representatives' bureaucratic involvement in the government administrative system or bureaucratic participation. The shifting of the votes indicated the response of the Chinese voters towards establishment and the role of MCA in representing the Chinese society. The May 13 riot and the 1969 general election have brought notable impacts on both the Malay and Chinese politics. Compared to the previous general elections, the percentage of votes received by the Alliance for the first time went below 50 percent. The significant shift of the Chinese votes to the opposition in many ways continued in the next two decades with only one or two exceptions (*see* Table 1).

As stated in Table 2, MCA emerged from this election with one of its worst results in the 1986 general election. It contested for 32 parliamentary seats but won only 17. Of the 69 state seats the party contested, it won 43. The 17 parliamentary seats that the MCA won accounted for only 9.6 per cent of the total 177 seats in the parliament, and this was the lowest percentage the party had won in any election.

TABLE 1  
Percentage of votes in Malaysia's parliamentary elections, 1959-90

Year	Percentage of votes				
	Alliance/BN	DAP	PAS*	Independents	Others
1959	51.8	-	21.30	4.80	22.1
1964	58.5	-	14.60	0.70	26.2
1969	44.9	11.9	20.90	1.80	20.5
1974	60.7	18.3	-	6.00	15.0
1978	57.2	19.1	15.50	4.60	3.4
1982	60.5	19.6	14.50	3.80	1.7
1986	57.6	21.1	15.30	3.20	3.0
1990	52.0	16.5	6.57	3.08	14.4**

\* Pan Malaysian Islamic Party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia)

\*\* Semangat 46

(Source: Ho, 2002)

TABLE 2  
MCA's performance in the parliamentary elections, 1955-86

Year	Parliamentary seats won	Total number of parliamentary seats	Percentage of representation
1955	15	52	28.85
1959	19	104	18.27
1964	27	104	25.96
1969	13	104	12.50
1974	19	114	16.67
1978	17	154	11.40
1982	24	154	15.58
1986	17	177	9.60

Source: Ho (2002)

According to Ho's analysis on 1986 general election, one way to look at the response of the ethnic Chinese voters to MCA and examine its implications for the political process was to look at the support of the ethnic groups in the constituencies (Ho, 1988). The results indicated that of the 17 seats won by MCA, 15 were in the constituencies where Malay voters constituted more than 34 percent. The margin of votes enjoyed by the MCA candidates showed that the seats were won on the strength of the Malay votes. Only two candidates were elected in the Chinese majority constituencies, where ethnic Chinese voters constituted more than 50 percent of the voting population. The analysis also revealed that the 15 parliamentary seats lost by MCA were all won by the DAP candidates. It is worth highlighting the fact that the voter composition of these constituencies consisted of more than 49 percent Chinese voters.

In short, Ho (2002) suggested that the MCA candidates were elected on the basis of the Malay votes. This pattern was repeated in the past few general elections and it likely appeared to be so. The MCA candidates in Chinese-majority constituencies were defeated. This showed that the Chinese voters seemed to have forsaken MCA and a protest movement in the Chinese community against the establishment was taking effect. The Chinese community was less than happy with the administration and the votes of protest by Chinese voters against the government

inevitably were cast against MCA because of the perception of the community at large of growing Chinese helplessness and political impotence to influence policy within the administration.

In spite of the lack of grass-roots Chinese support, MCA appeared to have done well in terms of representation in the coalition government at the cabinet level. Table 3 shows the MCA representatives in the government from 1955 to 2000. The number of the Chinese ministers appeared to be consistent (4), except in 1980-81 and 1986-87 (5 and 6, respectively). The number of deputy ministers increased over the years, and this seemed to be the portfolio which the UMNO was more willing to assign to MCA representatives. The bureaucratic involvement of the MCA in the government increased marginally over time as compared with its popular electorate support which at best remained constant. However, after 1969, important portfolios in the government like finance, international trade and industry, and education were no longer assigned to MCA representatives and this further signified the impotency of MCA in influencing policy making in the administration although the number of their representatives in the government was unchanged.

Besides MCA, Gerakan is another Chinese-based political party. However, the support of the Chinese towards the party was rather inconsistent. In 1969, Gerakan participated in

Changes in Chinese's Political Involvement in Malaysia

TABLE 3  
MCA representatives in government, 1955-2000

Year	Minister	Deputy Minister	Parliamentary Secretary
1955-58	4	1	0
1958-63	4	1	0
1964	4	2	2
1964-66	4	2	2
1967-68	4	3	1
1968-73	4	1	0
1973-74	4	1	0
1974-76	4	3	1
1976-78	4	3	2
1979	4	6	0
1980-81	5	5	1
1982	4	6	1
1983-85	4	6	1
1986-87	6	6	1
1988	4	6	1
1989-90	4	6	1
1997-94	4	6	2
1995-99	4	6	2
2000	4	6	2

Source: Ho, 2002

the general election for the first time and won 8 out of the 14 seats contested. The number of parliamentary seat reduced to 5 after they joined BN and it won only 4 seats in 1978 elections. In 1982 elections, the number increased by one to 5 and this number retained for 1986 and 1990 elections. It received votes from both the Chinese and non-Chinese, as witnessed in the state voting in Penang, although its image was essentially a Chinese-based party. Its influence

in government remained limited, as its political leaders were given less important ministerial portfolios.

In comparison with the MCA and Gerakan, DAP as an oppositional party is not much different from the aspect of parliamentary and state elections. Based on the data for the 1969 general elections presented in Table 4, DAP achieved a big win with 13 parliamentary seats and replaced Pan Malayan Islamic Party (PAS)

TABLE 4  
Performance of DAP in general elections, 1969-90

Year	Parliamentary seats	State seats
1969	13	31
1974	9	23
1978	16	2
1982	9	12
1986	24	37
1990	20	44

Source: Ho, 2002

as the biggest oppositional party in the country. In the 1974 election, DAP won only 9 seats and in 1978, we witnessed a shift, i.e. the support went back to DAP as it won 16 seats which were mainly from Penang. Nevertheless, the support for DAP was decreased in 1982 and it was able to maintain only 6 seats. In the 1986 election, DAP won 24 seats, more than the ones won in combination for MCA and Gerakan. In the 1990 election, the number of seats it won slightly decreased to 20.

Even though DAP is a multiethnic party, in reality, majority of the party members are Chinese. Therefore, besides fighting issues on civil rights and promoting corruption free government, DAP plays important role as a defender and fighter for the rights and needs of the Chinese community. With that, DAP is said to continuously exist as a champion of urban and Chinese rights, and is unlikely to shed its image of a Chinese-based party.

Based on Thock's research, the Chinese politic elites in BN were facing a dilemma and this caused the Chinese association (Huatuan) leaders to stand out to fight for the Chinese fate in the form of political protest. The indirect involvement of Huatuan in politics had been identified prior to the independence of Malaya. Before this, Huatuan heavily contingent upon Chinese political parties to fight for the Chinese's right. The failure of the Chinese political parties in fulfilling their mandate had caused the Huatuan leaders to make a decision to be indirectly involved in politic (Thock, 2005).

The implementation of the 3M Scheme (*membaca, menulis* and *mengira*) in 1983 was perceived by the Chinese community as a mean to change and dilute the cultural characteristics of the Chinese schools. This had triggered the Huatuan, especially Dongjiaozong, to protest aggressively to the implementation. The fact that the Chinese politicians failed to convey the needs and appeals of the Chinese in the parliament and to the government had driven the leaders from Dongjiaozong to take a drastic step and become directly involved in politics.

By involving themselves in politics, Dongjiaozong leaders aimed to unite the forces

among the Chinese political parties from multi-levels, i.e. inside (the government), outside (the oppositional parties), and Huatuan, as a strong political coalition to fight for the Chinese's right. This combination of the three main political forces in the Chinese community was named as *Sanjiehe* (Thock, 2005).

In the 1982 election, a group of Chinese education activists in Dongjiaozong was represented by Kerk Choo Ting, Koh Tsu Koon, Kang Chin Seng, and Ong Tin Kin who joined Gerakan individually. The mission entrusted by Dongjiaozong to these candidates was "Enter the Barisan, Modify the Barisan." They were hoped to win in the election and enter the parliament. They were given the mandate to speak and defend for the Chinese's right, and to prevent the policies which might bring injustice to the Chinese community in general, and to the Chinese educational system, in particular. Among the four, only Koh Tsu Koon won in Tanjung, Penang, but the involvement of Dongjiaozong in the elections had influenced the electoral pattern among the Chinese electorates, especially towards MCA and Gerakan. Both parties won tremendously compared to the previous elections.

Huatuan politics of protest was also manifested in a few events. In 1983, they forwarded the Cultural Declaration and National Culture Memorandum to protest against the implementation of National Cultural Policy which was perceived by them as Malay-centric and a threat to the survival of the Chinese culture in Malaysia. During the 1986 election, they suggested the Joint Declaration by Chinese Guilds and Associations of Malaysia 1985 (PBPCM) and the Civil Right Movement (CRC) was formed by 15 Huatuan to achieve PBPCM's purposes. Similar action was taken by the Huatuan in the 1999 election when they submitted "Suqiu", i.e. "Election Appeals", a 17 points memorandum on 16 August 1999 to BN.

At that time, the 15 Huatuan was considered by the main Chinese association to function as a leader in playing pivotal role in protesting against the administration of BN/UMNO. To



contest the political power of BN/UMNO, CRC once suggested Two Parties System so as to enhance a better democratic environment in Malaysia. The effort to achieve the system was evident when 27 leaders and activists of Huatuan joined DAP during the 1990 election, i.e. after the mass political arrest through *Operasi Lalang* in 1987.

As a conclusion, it can be said that after the 1970, the Chinese community has been sidelined in politics. The Malay dominance under UMNO's flagship and the reign of Dr Mahathir were the main factors that contributed to their position remaining in the sidelines only (Thock, 2008). This has resulted in the Chinese community facing many difficulties in the sectors of economy, education, and culture. The degradation of the Chinese's right in these areas has given rise to the dilemma among the Chinese community in Malaysia.

#### **POLITICAL SCENARIO PRIOR TO THE 2008 GENERAL ELECTION**

In 2004, the governing coalition was able to achieve one of its greatest victories in more than 50 years (Wong, 2005). BN won 198 out of 219 seats in the national parliament and 505 of 552 seats at the state level. In total, BN won 64.4 percent of the votes, i.e. 7.2 percent more points than in 1999. The UMNO candidates came first in 109 of 117 constituencies (93.2 percent). PAS, on the other hand, lost the election in the state of Terengganu and has since had only seven seats in the national parliament (six after by-elections). PKR (People Justice Party or *Parti Keadilan Rakyat*) had only one Member of Parliament (MP), while DAP was the only opposition party that reached its goal, with twelve delegates in the national parliament (Ufen, 2008).

The main reason for the BN success in 2004 was the popularity of the Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, who had taken over the PM office in October 2003. He maintained a leadership style which is different from that of his autocratic predecessor, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. Abdullah is an orthodox Muslim and comes from an influential Malay family of *ulama*

(Islamic scholars). Soon after assuming office, he introduced a number of reforms. After 2004, however, it became obvious that he had failed to deliver his promises of fighting corruption and poverty, as well as improving the tensed relationship among religious and ethnic groups. More importantly, expensive prestige projects were mostly not cancelled (Ufen, 2008).

Abdullah has been criticized by his predecessor, Mahathir since 2006. In August 2006, Mahathir even demanded for Abdullah's resignation. Such criticism probably contributed to the weakening of the Prime Minister's position. Furthermore, the opposition criticized the Prime Minister for his half-hearted fight against corruption. Indeed, there was hardly anyone from the political and business elites charged or sentenced for corruption.

In addition, the deterioration of interethnic and interreligious relations was widely debated in the Malaysian public. During the last few UMNO congresses, the Minister of Education, Hishammuddin Tun Hussein, chairman of the UMNO Youth Organization, wielded a *keris* (Malay dagger) as a sign of Malay supremacy (*Ketuanan Melayu*). This was interpreted by the non-Malays, especially the Chinese, as an act of Malay chauvinism. Ethnic minorities have regarded such development with a strong feeling of inquietude.

Brown (2008) suggested that there were three broad sets of political issues which had raised popular discontent to the levels not seen since the political turmoil, following Mahathir's dismissal and the imprisonment of his popular deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, in 1998. The first set of issues revolved around political corruption, particularly two scandals that had dominated the previous year. First, the publicization of a video apparently showing a senior lawyer, V.K. Lingam, brokering the appointment of judges, and secondly, the trial of Abdul Razak Baginda, a political commentator linked to the deputy premier Najib Razak, on the charges of being an accomplice to murder. The victim was a Mongolian citizen – who had seemingly acted as a translator on a defence deal brokered by Abdul Razak Baginda – who had been killed;

the prosecution claimed, by two policemen acting at the defendant's behest. Eventually, Razak Baginda was sentenced not guilty and released in 2009.

The second set of issues related to the startling mobilization of the country's Indian minority. Increasingly seen as politically marginalized, with high poverty rates but lacking access to the affirmative action policies that benefit the majority Malay community, the Indian population has nonetheless been largely politically compliant. However, provocative actions by the government, including the destruction of Hindu temples standing in the way of development projects, provoked a dramatic response, with tens of thousands turning out in a protest rally in November 2007. The responses to this protest – five of its leaders were detained without trial under the country's Internal Security Act (ISA) and 30 protestors were charged with the attempted murder of a policeman – further alienated many Indians from the government.

The third set of issues related to the basic bread-and-butter economic issues which had risen to the fore, particularly the spiralling rate of inflation, largely a product of global oil price hikes. While the Malaysian government subsidized the cost of fuel – to the tune of some RM40 billion (US\$12.44 billion) in 2007, over 10 percent of the government expenditure – pump prices have risen annually by some 10 percent in the recent years, with effects for other prices, particularly for basic goods and services. In January 2008, a protest organized by the NGO 'Coalition Against Inflation' was violently broken up by the police, with some 50 protestors and opposition activists arrested. Rising international prices have also led to shortages in basic goods, including flour, sugar, and cooking oil.

Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi dissolved the parliament with the consent of the King on February 13, 2008. The Election Commission scheduled the elections for March 8. While BN over and over again highlighted its economic successes throughout the campaign, the opposition highlighted numerous examples of government's neglect, particularly the still

prevalent corruption, the high crime rates, and the government's refusal to reform the police force against the advice of the Royal Commission.

### **THE CHINESE'S REACTION AFTER 8 MARCH 2008**

The outcome of the 2008 general elections revealed that Malaysians were seeking for a drastic change. BN has failed to maintain its two-thirds majority seats in the Parliament. It is the worst ever loss in history for the ruling coalition led by UMNO since the 1959 general election. BN only managed to secure 140 seats out of the 222 seats, i.e. 63 percent seats (BN lost another parliamentary seat in a by-election in Kuala Terengganu on 17 January 2009). The only election which was close to this in its outcome was that of 1969. The then governing coalition under the banner of Alliance won 66 percent of the seats in the Parliament.

The three opposition parties, People's Justice Party (or Parti Keadilan Rakyat, PKR), DAP and PAS, formed an electoral pact with each other prior to the poll, harvested 37 percent of the seats. At present, the three parties formed a post-election alliance, unofficially called as Barisan Rakyat (People's Front). If the outcome is based on total ballots for the seats in the Parliament, BN only gained 51.5 percent of the popular vote from the 7.9 million ballots cast on 8 March.

In the 2008 election, the opposition parties won five state assemblies. These were Kelantan, a poor Malay-dominated state controlled by PAS since 1990; Kedah, another largely Malay state which the opposition had come close to capturing in 1999; Penang, an affluent, Chinese-dominated state that had often voted for the opposition but had fallen to the opposition control only in 1969; Perak, a large ethnically mixed state on the west coast; and Selangor, the urbanized state surrounding Kuala Lumpur, the capital. In addition, BN was roundly defeated in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, which does not have a state assembly, winning only one of the 11 parliamentary seats. In general, BN lost



the popular vote in West Malaysia (49.8 percent), winning exactly the same number of votes as the three main opposition parties combined, as shown in Table 5.

According to an analysis by Brown (2008) on the dynamics of the ethnic voting in Malaysia, BN has traditionally done best in ethnically mixed constituencies, losing support to PAS in the predominantly Malay constituencies and to DAP in predominantly Chinese constituencies. Meanwhile, the urban Chinese-dominated constituencies, the bedrock of DAP support, swung even further away from BN, and in the multi-ethnic seat, where BN typically excelled, the drop in BN support was most evident, for instance, in Wangsa Maju (Kuala Lumpur), Kelana Jaya (Selangor), and Balik Pulau (Penang).

Brown's analysis also showed that the swing to the opposition was smallest among the Malay population, i.e. around 5 percent, but between 20-25 percent of the Chinese voters switched to the opposition. A survey conducted at the end

of January 2008 by Merdeka Centre illustrated that only 38 percent of the Indian and 42 percent of the Chinese population was satisfied with Abdullah Badawi's performance (Brown, 2008). According to Ong (2008), 58 percent of Malays but only 35 percent of Chinese and 48 percent of Indians voted for BN candidates in West Malaysia. The swung votes from BN to the opposition amounted to 5 percent of the points among the Malays, while these were 30 and even 35 percent of the points among the Indians and the Chinese, respectively. However, it is not apparent whether the results are due to protest votes or whether they signify a genuine change in their electoral behaviour (Brown, 2008).

In view of Chinese's bureaucratically involvement in the government administration, although majority Chinese candidates in BN failed in 2008 elections, but the number of Chinese representatives assigned to ministerial post was not reduced. While MCA remained its number, i.e. 4 ministers and 6 deputy ministers, Gerakan was only assigned one deputy minister

TABLE 5  
Seats in the national parliament since 1990 (Most important parties)

Party	Year				
	1990	1995	1999	2004	2008
Barisan Nasional	127	162	148	198	140
UMNO	71	88	72	109	79
MCA	18	30	28	31	15
PBB	10	13	10	11	14
MIC	6	6	7	9	3
Gerakan	5	7	7	10	2
Opposition	49	30	45	20	82
PAS	7	7	27	7	23*
PKN (since 2004: PKR)	-	-	5	1	31
DAP	20	9	10	12	28
PBS (since 2004 part of BN)	14	8	3	**	-
Semangat 46***	8	6	-	-	-
Total	180	192	193	219	222

(Source: Ufen, 2008)

\* Become 24 seats when won another parliamentary seat in a by-election held in Kuala Terengganu on 17 January, 2009.

\*\* Four seats for BN

\*\*\* Breakaway party from UMNO. Most of its members returned to UMNO in 1996.

post. At the state level, albeit Penang has been traditionally dominated by the Chinese representative, Perak has increased the number of the Chinese representatives as the members of the Perak State Executive Council (Exco). Six out of 11 state executive council members are Chinese representatives. This number has increased in double compared to the previous one, which there were only three Chinese in the council but, the number of Chinese representatives was reduced to one in the new state executive council when BN seized power from Pakatan Rakyat in February 2009.

However, most political observers and analysts deem the number of Chinese representative in bureaucratic participation is no longer significant because the country's political pattern is moving towards multiracial (Raviechandren, 19 March 2008). Communal-based politic has become insignificant in its influence to the country's politics. In the 2008 elections, we could observe that the Malays were no longer hesitant in supporting DAP, the Chinese were brave in casting their votes to PAS and the Indians wore PAS t-shirt and supported PAS openly (Thock, 2008).

A political new wave in 2008 elections showed weaknesses in UMNO's performance. This led to BN's component parties, namely MCA and Gerakan have become more vocal in expressing their dissatisfactions. They have started to question about the parties' subordinated position in BN in comparison with UMNO. For examples, the ex-president of Gerakan, Dr. Lim Keng Yek in a newspaper interview had illustrated the status of other BN's component parties is like a beggar compared to UMNO. The formal Minister of Human Resource and formal Vice President of MCA, Dr. Fong Chan Onn too urged for MCA to have an equal position or status as UMNO has. Meanwhile, the formal Minister of Health, Dr. Chua Soi Lek suggested that the rest twelve BN component parties, except UMNO and Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) from Sarawak, to form an alliance to contest against UMNO in BN. Related to this, the formal member of Penang Executive Council, Dr Toh Kim Woon, said that if UMNO

continually suppressed Gerakan, it was better for Gerakan to leave BN during the immediate aftermath of the general elections (Thock, 2008).

The new stand of MCA has become noticeable in its discourse on the issue of "Ketuanan Melayu" or Malay dominance. The former president, Ong Ka Ting openly advocated that he is strongly disagreeing with the Malay political dominance. In the first Parliamentary meeting, in a loud voice, Ong Ka Ting requested the government to ensure larger religious freedom for the non-Muslim and to build new Chinese school in a more systematic and institutional manner. The new elected president of MCA, Ong Tee Keat also criticized that the issue of the Malay dominance is no longer relevant in today context and it should not be manipulated by the Malay politicians. The new MCA leader further illustrated that the manipulations of Malay dominance brought the denotation that the unequal relationship between the Malays and the non-Malays was like master and slave relationship.

Another new trend found in post-2008 general election is the changing of direction in BN's Chinese-based component parties. In a post-elections post-mortem meeting, MCA leaders identified that the previous direction, to be low profile, was no longer useful, and had caused a losing of support from Chinese community. Therefore, in the meeting, the leaders reached a consensus to change the direction of the party struggle to be more vocal and to fight for not only the right of Chinese community but also other racial groups. The then vice president, Ong Tee Keat suggested MCA to change its direction towards multiethnic.

Meanwhile, former Gerakan president, Lim Keng Yek threw the idea that the non-Malay component parties in BN needed to be combined into a single multiethnic party in responding to the new political scenario in Malaysia. The party veteran also said that the 8 March political tsunami had created a new political scenario which had triggered competition between the Malay parties and multiethnic parties. In actual fact this idea is not new since the party youth

leader Mah Siew Kiong had suggested the idea to combine all parties in BN into one multiethnic party in the party 2007 annual assembly. However, the idea was totally rejected by UMNO deputy president, Najib Tun Razak and its youth chief, Hishammuddin Tun Hussein.

### CONCLUSIONS

In the context of Malaysia, the delicate demography balance between the Bumiputera and immigrant populations inevitably constructed its political reality, in the form of Bumiputera versus non-bumiputera. At the micro and everyday levels, it is dominated by the culture of difference but, at the macro level, it is dominated by a homogenizing ideology. As Shamsul (1997) concludes, there is a clear tension between these two levels articulated in various forms. Hence, Malaysia could be described as a state in stable tension.

Hitherto, the Chinese's involvement and reaction in politics in Malaysia are significantly contingent upon the discourse of the Malay dominance. The Chinese's political mobilization and bureaucratic participation in the governmental administration are important in to be studied in order to understand their political behaviour. The so-called politic tsunami on 8 March, 2008 has opened a new phase of the Malaysian political development. The nature of politics in this country is said to have shifted from communal-based politic to multiethnic-based. It is more interesting now to see how different the Chinese representatives struggle in this 'more open' political environment.

### REFERENCES

- Brown, G.K. (2008). Federal and state elections in Malaysia, March 2008. *Electoral Studies*, 27, 740-773.
- Ho, K.L. (1988). The 1986 Malaysian general elections: An analysis of the campaign and results. *Asian Profile*, 16(3), 239-256.
- Ho, K.L. (2002). Bureaucratic participation and political mobilization: Comparing pre- and post-1970 Malaysian Chinese political participation. In S. Leo (Ed.), *Ethnic Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia* (pp. 137-154). Singapore: Times Academic Press.
- Lee, K.H. (1987). Three approaches in Peninsular Malaysian Chinese politics: The MCA, the DAP, and the GERAKAN. In Zakaria Haji Ahmad (Ed.), *Government and politics of Malaysia* (pp. 71-93). Singapore: Oxford University Press.
- Lee, K.H. and Tan, C.B. (2000). *The Chinese in Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.
- Ong, K.M. (March 11, 2008). Making sense of the political tsunami. Retrieved on September 15, 2008 from [www.malaysiakini.com/news/79604](http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/79604).
- Raviechandren. (March 19, 2008). General elections: 'Political tsunami' creates new political landscape. Retrieved on September 14, 2008 from <http://socialistworld.net/z/bin/kw.cgi/show?id=3108>.
- Shamsul, A.B. (1996). Nation-of-intent in Malaysia. In S. Tonnesson and H. Antloev (Eds.), *Asian forms of the nation* (pp. 323-347). London: Curzon Press.
- Shamsul, A.B. (1997). The making of a 'plural' Malaysia: A brief survey. In D.Y.U. Wu, H. MacQueen and Y. Yamamoto (Eds.), *Emerging pluralism in Asia and the Pacific* (pp. 67-83). Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong.
- Tan, C.B. (2000). Socio-cultural diversities and identities. In K.H. Lee and C.B. Tan (Eds.), *The Chinese in Malaysia* (pp. 37-70). Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.
- Thock, K.P. (2005). *Ketuanan Politik Melayu: Pandangan Kaum Cina*. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya.
- Thock, K.P. (2008). Kegawatan yang mengancam survival UMNO dalam dilema. *Pemikir*, 53, 19-47.
- Ufen, A. (2008). The 2008 elections in Malaysia: Uncertainties of electoral authoritarianism. *Taiwan Journal of Democracy*, 4(1), 155-169.
- Wong, C.H. (2005). The federal and state elections in Malaysia, March 2004. *Electoral Studies*, 24, 311-319.

