

### Barisan Nasional – Political Dominance and the General Elections of 2004 in Malaysia

Lee, Julian C.H.

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## Studie

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# **Barisan Nasional – Political Dominance and the General Elections of 2004 in Malaysia**

Julian C. H. Lee

### **Abstract**

This paper examines how the *Barisan Nasional* (National Front, BN) coalition has held power in Malaysia since that country's independence in 1957. The first of two perspectives taken in this examination looks at the practical impediments to opposition party participation during general elections. This is refracted through the prism of the campaign during the 2004 general elections of a *Parti KeADILan Rakyat* candidate. The second perspective looks at the broader cultural environment in which elections occur in Malaysia. In particular, the BN plays upon popular fears of a recurrence of ethnic violence that occurred in 1969 when opposition parties polled strongly to portray itself as the keeper of the country's peace. The examination of both practical mechanisms and the cultural environment allow a more complete understanding of how the BN maintains its political dominance in Malaysia. (Manuscript received November 12, 2006; accepted for publication February 11, 2007)

*Keywords:* *Barisan Nasional, National Front, Malaysia, UMNO, political dominance*

### **The Author**

Julian C. H. Lee is a doctoral candidate in the School of Social and Environmental Enquiry, The University of Melbourne, Australia. He recently submitted his PhD thesis, *Dilemmas in Democracy: Islam, Politics and Activism*, for examination. At the University of Melbourne, he has been a guest lecturer and tutor in anthropology courses. He has published book reviews in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Association*, *Critique of Anthropology*, and *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*. His article, "The Narrative Imperative", appeared in *Anthropological Forum* in 2005. E-Mail: julianl@unimelb.edu.au

## Studie

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# **Wahlen und politische Dominanz der Barisan Nasional in Malaysia am Beispiel der allgemeinen Wahlen im Jahre 2004**

Julian C. H. Lee

### **Abstract**

Die Partei Barisan Nasional (BN) ist die bestimmende Kraft im politischen Prozess Malaysias seit 1957. Die vorliegende Analyse stellt sich in diesem Zusammenhang die Frage, wie diese Dominanz zu erklären ist. Es wird argumentiert, dass sowohl wahlkampftechnische als auch kulturelle Faktoren die schwachen Chancen der Oppositionsparteien und die Stärke der BN erklären können. Nur durch die analytische Integration beider Variablengruppen können Phänomene wie das schlechte Abschneiden des Kandidaten der Oppositionspartei KeADILan Rakyat sowie die erfolgreiche Kampagne der BN im Jahre 1969, bei der die Angst vor ethnischen Unruhen geschürt wurde, im Hinblick auf die Dominanz der Regierungspartei erklärt werden. (Manuskript eingereicht am 12.11.2006; zur Veröffentlichung angenommen am 11.02.2007)

*Keywords: Malaysia, Parteien, Barisan Nasional, UMNO, Dominanz, Wahlen*

### **Der Autor**

Julian C. H. Lee ist Doktorand an der School of Social And Environment Enquiry der Universität Melbourne, Australien. Seine kürzlich eingereichte Doktorarbeit trägt den Titel *Dilemmas in Democracy: Islam, Politics and Activism*. An der Universität Melbourne war er als Gastdozent und als Tutor für Ethnologie tätig. Lee hat Buchrezensionen in den Zeitschriften *Critique of Anthropology* und *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* veröffentlicht. Sein Artikel, "The Narrative Imperative", erschien im *Anthropological Forum* im Jahre 2005. E-Mail: julianl@unimelb.edu.au

## Introduction

Malaysia's *Barisan Nasional* (National Front, BN) coalition has held power since independence in 1957. During its administration, it has lost its two-thirds majority in parliament only once, in a brief but formative period in 1969. This two-thirds majority enables the BN to make and amend laws unilaterally.

The BN is composed of numerous parties, but is dominated by three ethnically oriented ones: The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). Of these, UMNO is the predominant party. It bills itself as the protector of the interests of the ethnic Malay population of Malaysia. According to a census conducted in 2001, Malaysia's population is 53 percent Malay, 26 percent Chinese, eight percent Indian, and the balance being made up of *Orang Asli* (Original People, indigenous Malaysians) and others (Malaysia 2001). The MCA and MIC portray themselves as representing the interests of the Chinese and Indian communities respectively.

Even though the three major ethnic groups are represented within the BN, William Case writes that,

a set of institutions has emerged that, while formally democratic, in fact yield a pattern of executive supremacy, UMNO party dominance, and ethnic preference for Malays (2001:46).

Although these institutions are formally democratic, Case writes, rule-bending and arbitrary law enforcement have "become so pervasive that the regime must be adjudged as falling outside the 'democratic' category altogether and belonging to a separate category of pseudodemocracy" (2001:46).

In this paper, I seek to describe how the BN and UMNO maintain their dominance of Malaysian politics. My description takes two perspectives, both of which are refracted through the prism of Malaysia's 2004 general elections. The first of these is an examination of the practical impediments to opposition party participation in Malaysian elections. Refracted through the prism of the experiences of the campaign team of the opposition political party, *Parti KeADILan Rakyat* (The People's Justice Party, KeADILan) during Malaysia's general elections in 2004, I describe the various mechanisms at the disposal of the BN, such as the media and state apparatuses. I begin by relating the events of a night during a KeADILan candidate's campaign in the state of Selangor to give a grounded illustration of the practical impediments that opposition parties

face. I also describe in this first section some of the responses of these people to their situation which includes police surveillance and the arbitrary enforcement of law.

In the second section of this paper, I turn to an examination of how UMNO in particular, and the BN secondarily, maintains dominance through its manipulation of certain popular fears; namely, that any usurpation of UMNO or ethnic Malay political precedence will lead to social instability and a repeat of the communal violence that occurred in 1969 when Chinese dominated opposition parties deprived the BN of its two-thirds majority. The approach taken in this section is thus cultural and historical as I examine how this association was formed and how it is maintained. Both the practical and cultural perspectives are important in developing a more complete understanding of the political dominance enjoyed by the BN and by UMNO in particular.

## **1 Practical Impediments to Opposition Party Participation in Malaysian General Elections**

### **1.1 The KeADILan Ceramah**

On Wednesday 17 March 2004, four days prior to polling day in Malaysia's general elections, KeADILan candidate, Sivarasah Rasiah was to have a *ceramah* (see below) in the federal parliament seat for which he was standing. At the time, that seat, Petaling Jaya South, was held by Donald Lim, a BN coalition candidate from the constituent MCA.

A *ceramah* in the context of an election is essentially a meet-your-candidate session. It is held at a public place and five or so speakers, including the candidate, will introduce the candidate and speak about pertinent issues to those who attend. *Ceramah* are an important means by which opposition party candidates make contact with the electorate because the mainstream media is under the thumb of the BN coalition. Coverage in the print and electronic media (excepting the internet) is poor for opposition parties and, when it does occur, the reporting is often unfavourable. Indeed, control of the media is one of the often cited three M's that the BN has at its disposal, the other two being money and government machinery (i.e. state infrastructure).

Although opposition parties still make appeals to the mainstream media by supplying them with press statements and by having press conferences, opposition party candidates employ other strategies for disseminating their message. These

other means include displaying posters in public places, leafleting mailboxes, “loudhailing” (addressing the public using a megaphone), personally meeting constituents, and holding *ceramah*. *Ceramah* are often held outdoors, in the evening, and require a police permit. This permit is valid only for a particular time and place.

Sivarasa’s campaign team organised a *ceramah* for almost every night of the eight day campaign period. For Wednesday 17 March, a desirable venue had been secured with police permission some days earlier. In addition to claiming a strategic position, various logistical considerations must be taken into account when preparing a *ceramah*, including the provision of a viable stage and appropriate lighting and sound amplification. For Wednesday 17 March 2004, a desirable venue had been secured with police permission some days earlier.

On this day I had been helping Sivarasa by accompanying him and a few others on a meet-and-greet tour of Taman Medan, one of the poorer areas within Petaling Jaya South. When we returned to the *bilik gerakan* (campaign centre) we were informed by a harried campaigner that the police had revoked the permit for the original venue and relocated the KeADILan *ceramah* to a *padang* (field, often used for recreation). The good venue that KeADILan had booked was going to be used by Donald Lim and his team.

Some volunteers went to the new *ceramah* site while other volunteers remained at the *bilik gerakan* to continue other tasks such as making banners out of posters, placing these banners around the constituency, constructing wooden signposts which could be hammered into the ground, monitoring the media and organising the days to come.

When we arrived at the venue, the *padang* was in darkness and looked desolate. Its redeeming feature was that it was bordered by houses from which residents might emerge out of curiosity. None the less, Sivarasa’s team set to work, turning an old lorry into a stage and stringing up as many banners and posters as they could to make it festive and evidently a KeADILan *ceramah*. After some fretfulness during the setting-up of the electrical generator and the lighting and sound, the stage began to take shape and became functional.

Despite the late notice that the residents in the area had of the *ceramah* – some were alerted by a volunteer driving around and loudhailing into houses – *approximately* 20 to 30 people attended it. However, as an effective means of “reaching the people”, and as an effective use of manpower and resources, I had my doubts. Apart from the forced venue change, there are two other aspects of

this *ceramah* that are noteworthy.

First, present at this *ceramah*, loitering behind the rest of the audience, was a member of the Special Branch of the police. He was pointed out to me by some of the other volunteers and was distinctive by his conspicuous attempt to appear inconspicuous. This man who frequently spoke into his mobile phone and who never made eye-contact with anyone was the source of little more than mere recognition by the other volunteers who troubled themselves only in pointing him out to me. Indeed, surveillance by Special Branch officers, who are commonly referred to as SBs, is the norm for any public event organised by an opposition party or a non-government organisation (NGO).

A second noteworthy occurrence at the *ceramah* was that while one of the KeADILan volunteers was taking photographs for the campaign website, he took a photo of a woman who subsequently became distressed. I was told that she was distressed because she did not want to be photographed at an opposition party event.

When the *ceramah* concluded I returned to the *bilik gerakan* and joined a few other dedicated volunteers who sat on the floor, folding leaflets to be distributed the following day. While doing this, a film crew, purportedly from *Bernama*, the government owned news agency, came ostensibly to do a story.

At one point during the film crew's visit, I observed the cameraman filming at close proximity the lists and charts that were posted on the walls and doors. These contained details relating to campaign volunteers, tasks and dates. I asked one of the experienced volunteers why they would be filming the wall so closely. Anne James, Sivarasa's wife, who was sitting next to me, remarked merrily that I had been "corrupted." I asked her what she meant and she explained that now I, too, was suspicious of people but that, indeed, "they could be undercover SBs for all we know."

## 1.2 An Unconditional Triumph

The BN coalition won the 2004 general elections in what has been described as an "unconditional triumph" (Economist Intelligence Unit Viewswire 2004) and "a landslide victory" in which "voters rejected the Islamic conservatism of Pas [the opposition Islamic party] . . . and gave the thumbs up to Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's reformist agenda and moderate Islamic policies" (Jayasankaran 2004). S. A. Jayasankaran of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* cites a number of reasons for this victory including the superiority of the "slick and inoffensive" BN

campaign strategy, the diminution of the Anwar Ibrahim issue (although he was still imprisoned), and a rejection of “the Islamic conservatism of Pas.”

Under the heading “Landslide Victory: The ruling National Front coalition rebounds” was a table (see table 1) with the election’s bare statistical results:

Table 1 Election results

Year	Parliament			
	1999		2004	
Number of seats	193		219	
	Contested	Won	Contested	Won
National Front	193	148	219	198
Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS)	63	27	84	7
Democratic Action Party (DAP)	49	10	44	12
National Justice Party (PKR)	59	5	59	1
Independent	28	0	29	1

Source: Jayasankaran 2004.

Indeed, with the BN winning over ninety percent of the parliamentary seats, the victory does appear to be a landslide. The poor result for *Parti Islam SeMalaysia* (The Malaysian Islamic Party, PAS) too would appear to justify the comment from the *Economist Intelligence Unit ViewsWire* that the election results “may herald a shift in the political debate (such as it exists) in Malaysia away from Islam” (Economist Intelligence Unit Viewswire 2004).

However, the results cannot be taken at face value. When citing statistics such as the percentage of seats won by the BN, authors, especially in magazines and newspapers, usually overlook systematic biases that greatly favour the ruling coalition. Similarly, seldom acknowledged are cultural phenomena that inhibit opposition parties and support for them. As my earlier account would attest, some of these phenomena are observable only when on the ground during an election. Jayasankaran, however, does little more than note that the ninety percent victory of seats by the BN came from sixty-four percent of the popular vote and that both these percentages are records for the coalition.

The events I reported above from Wednesday 17 March 2004 are indicative of some obstacles that opposition parties face during general elections. There are many rules and laws that impede opposition parties far more than ruling coalition



parties. Furthermore, laws are often enforced when opposition parties appear to infringe them while they are overlooked when the BN flouts them. Some institutions, such as the police and the Electoral Commission, are demonstrably not independent of the ruling coalition despite being ostensible functionaries of the state and not partisan to particular parties. While I treat the causes of “ethnic preference” for Malays in the second section of this paper, I turn now to an outlining of some of those institutions and practices that impede opposition parties and so enable the maintenance of UMNO-BN political dominance.

### 1.3 The Media

One of these impediments is the biased coverage of political news in the mainstream media. This is the first of the BN’s three M’s. The mainstream print and electronic media require their operating licences to be renewed annually by the government. Thus, those media that are not more or less owned directly by government interests are otherwise cowed by coercive legislation in the form of the Printing Presses Ordinance. As of its latest revision in 1988, judicial review of a minister’s decision to revoke or deny a permit is impossible if the minister is satisfied that public order may be prejudiced by the publication (Annuar 2002:128). The threat of suspension is real as, in 1987, three local newspapers, *The Star*, *Sin Chew Jit Poh* and *Watan*, had their licences suspended. In 2002, some issues of the international newsmagazines *Newsweek*, *Time* and the *Far Eastern Economic Review* were blocked from distribution in Malaysia. The Internal Security Act (ISA) has also been deployed against media staff on the grounds that they compromised national security (see Annuar 2002:151, and *passim*. for a fuller discussion of the state of the media in Malaysia). Otherwise editors have been dismissed for displeasing the wrong minister (Case 2005:218).

Even though Malaysians are often sceptical of news reports and aware that the media is biased in its reporting, it can nevertheless be used to subtly influence the political climate in anticipation of events such as the 2004 elections. In the lead up to those elections, a number of people suggested to me that the extensive news coverage of Haitian riots in the news was not a coincidence. The media also frequently carried stories in separate articles in which BN politicians made references to Malaysia’s inter-ethnic harmony. A number of critics of the government suggested that the intention was to remind people of the riots of May 1969 (see below) which occurred days after the BN lost its two thirds majority in parliament and to fuel the belief that BN rule was necessary for

social stability. Syed Husin Ali, a former academic and current vice-president of KeADILan, has noted that “in every election the government resorts to fear tactics by manipulating public memory of this tragedy” (Ali 2001:126). During the 1999 Malaysian general elections, the media linked the political upheaval in Indonesia with the killings of Chinese there to suggest that any support for the opposition in Malaysia may have a similar effect. The intention was to frighten the Chinese voting bloc in particular into electoral conservatism by recalling the memory of 1969.

Opposition parties have access to the foreign media and their own party organs, however. But the foreign media, whose stories must be especially brief and consumable, frequently simplify matters and take a great deal at face value. The foreign media’s penetration within Malaysia, where it matters in this instance, is limited and an awareness of the sensitivities of the Malaysian government most likely result in self-censorship. Party organs face other restrictions. Ali notes that party papers require permits and that, whereas *Harakah*, the PAS organ, was once a twice a week publication, its permit restricts it now to publication twice a month. Otherwise, inordinate delays in procuring licences are experienced (ibid.:122).

Finally and briefly, although the internet is by and large not restricted, there have been occasions when news websites and bloggers have been threatened for allegedly compromising national security. Otherwise, access to some news sites, such as Malaysiakini.com, are available only to paid subscribers.

#### 1.4 Money

The second of the BN’s three M’s is its access to money. Although Section 19 of the Elections Act constrains candidates from spending more than MYR200,000 (USD56,000)<sup>1</sup> in their campaigns, it is widely assumed that in actuality, the amount spent by BN candidates far exceeds that limit (for similar comments with regard the 1999 general elections see Weiss 2000:432).

It is worth relating here a phenomenon I witnessed in the 2004 elections. One day during the campaign period I brought to the attention of Sivarama’s team that many BN billboards were having sections of them covered over. The sections that were being covered were first those that said, “*Pilihan Yang Bijak: Barisan*

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<sup>1</sup> This and subsequent conversions of Malaysian ringgit to US dollars were correct in May 2006.

*Nasional*” (“The Clever Choice: National Front”), and second, the section which showed the BN symbol next to a checked box, such as one would find on a voting form (see figure 1). One proffered explanation was that if the billboards were to be counted in the cost of the campaign budget, the limit would be evidently exceeded, and just on billboards alone. By covering the sections that indicated that the billboards were directly related to the elections, the BN could claim that they were general advertisements that were not related to any campaign.

*Figure 1* Workers covering up the phrase, “Pilihan Yang Bijak: Barisan Nasional”



*Note: The BN symbol (the scales) and the cross beside it were also covered up.*

*Source: Own source.*

Access to money also buys labour. One KeADILan volunteer and I started chatting to two other BN workers as we all strung up banners between trees for our respective parties. They revealed that they were being paid MYR20 (USD5.60) an hour for their work. None of the workers in Sivarasa’s campaign received any remuneration, and, if anything, faced disincentives to volunteering.

Another important monetary aspect is that candidates must submit a deposit to the Electoral Commission. Malaysia’s deposit is among the most expensive in the world (Brown 2005:433), a fortiori when the earning power of the

ringgit is considered. For a federal parliament candidate, the total deposit is MYR5,000 (USD4,200). By comparison, election deposits in Australia are AUD250 (USD190), in Canada CAD200 (USD180), and in Ireland they are unconstitutional. I might note that in Singapore, Malaysia's neighbour, election deposits are SGD13,000 (USD8,300). The size of the deposit in Malaysia makes it difficult for candidates from poorer opposition parties, as well as independents, to stand. A number of seats were won in walkovers when opposition party candidates failed to source the deposit.

## 1.5 Machinery

The third M refers to machinery. That is, BN access to and manipulation of state machinery. Case notes that the government “makes uninhibited use of state facilities and government workers, especially in the Information Ministry and the Kemas (Community Development) Unit” (2001:48). During the election, other bodies such as the Electoral Commission, which oversees the running of the election, appear to cooperate with the BN. I describe below one example of collusion between the BN and the Electoral Commission that occurred just two days before polling day.

### 1.5.1 The Electoral Commission

Since carrying out its first re-delineation of constituencies in 1960 which dissatisfied the BN, the Electoral Commission has lost ever more of its independence. Graham K. Brown writes that it is “now widely seen by critics as little more than a fig leaf for the government's desired manipulation of constituency boundaries” (2005:433). Brown notes that these re-delineations have, since 1986, increased the political bias of the electoral system in favour of the BN (ibid.:430).

Active collusion of the Electoral Commission with the BN was evident in 2004. Prior to the commencement of the campaign period, the Electoral Commission had made clear that *pondok panas* were not permitted this year. A *pondok panas*, in the context of an election, is rather like a large tent set up nearby to polling stations. At a *pondok panas*, voters can find out where it is they must go to vote and receive other related information.

In the days prior to the election, however, some volunteers in Sivarasa's campaign and I saw structures erected near polling stations that looked as if they would be used as *pondok panas* on polling day. Our suspicion that collusion had occurred between the BN and the Electoral Commission was revealed to

be justified when, two days prior to polling day, the Electoral Commission announced that *pondok panas* were to be permitted. The erected structures were, indeed, used by the BN as their *pondok panas*. Given the late notice, Sivarasa's team was not able to set up their own *pondok panas*, although some opposition campaigns managed to establish some in time.

### 1.5.2 Police and the Special Branch

It is widely accepted that the police and the BN cooperate in ways detrimental to opposition parties. An example of this was given at the beginning of this chapter when the police revoked and reissued a permit for a *ceramah* to the disadvantage of the Sivarasa's campaign and to the advantage of the Donald Lim. But possibly the biggest disincentives to democratic participation come from the activities of Special Branch personnel, as well as other people who act as informants.

In his eminent ethnography, *Weapons of the Weak*, James C. Scott also notes the effect of SBs on political dissent in a rural Malay village. He writes,

[. . .] police from the Special Branch came twice to speak with Bashir and with the headman, Haji Jaafar. The visits had their intended effect, as I suspect they did in countless other villages on the rice plain. Many PAS members knew that a word from Bashir or the [village committee] could spell arrest and feared they would be victimized. As Mustapha noted, "Of course we're afraid; they want to crush (menindas) PAS" (Scott 1985:276-277).

SBs are a fact of life political parties. In an interview, KeADILan candidate Xavier Jayakumar revealed to me that there were a number of people helping in his campaign who were almost certainly informants. They had come "out of the blue" to volunteer and seemed to loiter unnecessarily during meetings. When I asked why he did not get rid of them, he replied that he was so short of helpers that he could not afford to forgo their labour.

It was taken for granted by all the volunteers in Sivarasa's campaign that whatever they did or said could be monitored. When I enquired further about this, members of Sivarasa's campaign team, like some NGO workers with whom I spoke, responded with a relatively uniform nonchalance. "So far as we care," said Latheefa Koya, Sivarasa's campaign manager, "they can listen because we're not doing anything illegal. We don't mind."

On another occasion, Sivarasa explained to me that one thing he does when SBs are at an event is to openly acknowledge their presence. He went on to tell

me that if there are people who are unfamiliar with Malaysia or with SBs he will even personally and politely introduce them to the officers. He does this firstly to make the unacquainted aware of the SBs' presence and also to demystify their potentially menacing aura. This was what occurred when the SB was pointed out to me at the *ceramah* described at the beginning of this paper.

However blasé those who are used to it may be, state surveillance poses a significant deterrent to regular citizens' participation in and support for opposition political parties. The woman described at the beginning of this chapter is a case in point. Being photographed watching a public *ceramah* was enough to distress her. The deterrent would be greater still to actively volunteering for an opposition party candidate's campaign or even standing as a candidate.

The ubiquity of the belief that people around you may be SBs or police informants was made plain to me in a play by Huzir Sulaiman called "Election Day" (published in Suliaman 2002). The play, which I saw in 2004, is set during the 1999 elections and involves four main characters who are spoken about in a monologue: one former rising star in PAS, one Democratic Action Party (DAP) volunteer, the apparently politically unaffiliated monologist (all three of these characters are house-mates) and a love interest. Of pertinence here is that the former two characters suffer repeated setbacks in life which turn out to be the result of the deliberate undermining by the narrator who reveals himself at the end as a police informant.

That an audience could assimilate such a storyline suggests the pervasiveness of the anxiety that even intimate acquaintances could be police informants. Spying and surveillance form a part of the Malaysian national consciousness, especially when it comes to political involvement. I might note that one volunteer revealed to me that over the years, she had uncovered a few informants but had, in the tensivity of the 1999 elections, also wrongly accused a good friend.

## 1.6 Retribution and Surveillance

Retribution for antiestablishment views, and especially the fear of same, is a common concern in Malaysia. In 2005, one academic claimed he lost his job because of his critical views of the government. Another academic who had been likewise critical only won a customarily ongoing tenure after public outcry when it was initially denied (Welsh 2005). In 1999, the tenure of Chandra Muzaffar, former Director of the Centre for Civilisational Dialogue, Universiti Malaya, was not renewed after his prominent role in the demonstrations against and criticisms

of the government during the 1997-1998 Asian economic crisis and the sacking and trial of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. Fear of speaking out is common among those employed by the state, even in non party political circumstances. One Malaysian told me how his brother felt unable to openly protest a staff appointment in his university for fear of negative repercussions.

The fear of personal retribution for voting against an oppressive government or party is certainly why Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that ballots in elections must be secret. Malaysian elections are not strictly secret. The serial numbers of the voters' ballot slips are recorded with the voters' names on the electoral roll so that, in theory, a vote can be traced back to the voter. Whether or not this ever occurs is immaterial in the context of Malaysia where fear of retribution is ubiquitous (see also Case 2005:222).

### 1.7 Counter-surveillance and Counter-manoeuvres

As a digression and counter-point, I should note that the state is not the only surveillant. A necessary component of every opposition campaign is the monitoring of voters and the counting of ballots. Each contesting candidate can send a "polling agent" to sit with the Electoral Commission representative and a BN counterpart to match would-be voters with their names on the electoral roll. These agents would ensure that a voter's name matched that on the role and that the photo on his or her identity card matched him or her. Once someone had voted, their names would be ticked off so that they could not vote a second time.

A "counting agent" was a candidate's representative who counted the ballots along with the Electoral Commission and a BN counterpart to ensure accurate tallying. It is widely assumed that without such opposition party polling agents and counting agents (referred to together as PACA), ballot boxes would be tampered with to the detriment of the non-BN party. However, as was the case in Sivarasa's campaign, opposition parties have difficulty finding enough PACAs for polling day. Case notes that the government has been increasing the number of polling stations to stretch the oppositions' resources so that more counting can occur without opposition observation (Case 2001:49).

On the day prior to polling day, Sivarasa's PACAs assembled to hear a presentation by a former Special Branch agent. At this presentation, the presenter told of tactics used in previous elections by which the BN would cheat. These included orchestrating black-outs during which ballot boxes would be exchanged

or stuffed.<sup>2</sup> Another tactic described was having one helicopter lift off with the ballot boxes to take them for counting but having an altogether different helicopter land with a different set of boxes. Other volunteers in Sivarasa's campaign shared with me stories of polling day in 1999. Zaitun Kasim, DAP candidate for the seat of Selayang in 1999, told of how they followed the official car carrying the ballot boxes to its destination to ensure it duly arrived there and without interference.

Although the efficacy of these counter-measures is significant, they should not be overstated. In all respects, the ruling coalition is better resourced, better organised, and better funded.

### 1.8 Other Unfairnesses

In addition to those described above, there are a few other impediments that are worthy of note. These practical impediments are in distinction to those described in the next section which might be said to refer more to culture, or the national consciousness.

In his analysis of statistics from the Malaysian general elections of 2004, researcher Wong Chin-Huat outlines some systematic biases that advantage the BN. The result of these biases, such as through gerrymandering – the last redelineation of constituencies occurred in 2002 – was that “the opposition's voters are so under-represented that the ‘worth’ of a BN voter is matched only by three DAP voters, seven PAS voters, or 28 Keadilan voters” (2005:317; for a fuller discussion of gerrymandering in Malaysia see Brown 2005).

One of the number of irregularities that occurred on election day 2004 was that thousands of voters could not find their names on the electoral rolls in 17 constituencies (*ibid.*:316). Some constituencies in Malaysia also showed an unusually high number of unreturned ballots “exceeding 10,000 in two constituencies – suggesting instances of ballot stuffing, ballot discarding, or tampering with the numbers” (*ibid.*).

Wong also notes that a new rule had been introduced for the 2004 elections which allowed a candidate to withdraw within three days after nomination day. According to opposition candidates, BN candidates used this period to attempt to bribe opposition candidates to withdraw (*ibid.*). In an interview,

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<sup>2</sup> Sivarasa's PACAs were issued with flashlights and indeed, a blackout occurred in the constituency of Gombak in 2004.



KeADILan candidate Abdul Rahman Othman informed me that the person who seconded his nomination had been “kidnapped” the night after nomination by his opposition. The nominator was taken to the very house of the BN candidate. The BN candidate, Othman told me, tried unsuccessfully to induce the seconder to withdraw his nomination with offers of money, holidays and other incentives.

### 1.9 Two Corner Fights

Finally it must be noted that the winner of any seat is decided on a simple first-past-the-post system. Losing parties cannot award preferences to other parties and the upper house of Malaysian parliament is appointed and is not composed of members of parties in proportion to the popular vote. BN coalition parties never contest the same seat and opposition parties usually agree not to compete against each other for a given seat so as not to divide the anti-BN vote. If, for instance, a PAS candidate and a KeADILan candidate were both to stand against a BN candidate in a given seat, the protest vote against the BN would be divided and the opposition parties would have mutually undermined their chances of winning. As a result, most contests for seats are “two corner fights” because in “three corner fights” opposition candidates tend to knock each other out. For this reason, a voter in Alor Setah in the state of Kedah, for example, would have had to choose in 2004 between voting for either a PAS candidate or a BN candidate for federal parliament. There was no KeADILan or DAP option.

Because seats are contested in two-corner fights, opposition parties must come to agreements regarding which party will contest which seats. However, political parties usually represent or are seen to represent particular ethnic groups. Indeed, in peninsular Malaysia, with the exception of the BN’s Malaysian Indian Congress, the other main parties are associated with either Chinese or Malays. The MCA, Gerakan and the DAP are Chinese oriented. UMNO and PAS (in its religious guise) are Malay oriented,<sup>3</sup> as is KeADILan though to a significantly lesser extent. This means that smaller ethnic groups or special interest parties cannot stand without playing into the hands of the ruling coalition who they may regard as the source of their problems. They cannot ransom their support to another party in exchange for cognisance of their position on an issue. Along with the fact that a protest vote against one party is indistinguishable from an affirmative vote for

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<sup>3</sup> Farish Noor notes that PAS was more clearly a Malay chauvinist party in the 1970s (2003:203).

another, Malaysian general elections are very crude mechanisms for measuring public sentiment and, as I have shown, are greatly biased against opposition parties.

## 2 Fears of Ethnic Violence and the Memory of 1969

### 2.1 The Communal Riots of 1969: Causes and After-effects

As noted in earlier, the memory of the communal violence of 13 May 1969 is recalled during election periods in Malaysia. Thus, no analysis of Malaysian politics and elections fail to account for the after-effects of these riots. In understanding the context of the riots, one should note that a census in 1931 revealed that Chinese and Indians, who are sometimes still referred to by some Malays as *pendatang* or *keturunan pendatang* (arrivals or descendants of arrivals), were more populous than Malays in Malaya. Along with the Orang Asli, Malays are administratively classed as *bumiputera*, sons of the soil – that is, indigenous to Malaysia. The sense of Malay ownership over what is now Malaysia (as Malaya became in 1963) is evident in the name sometimes given to it, *Tanah Melayu* (The Land of the Malays). The train network of Malaysia is still called the KTM – *Keretapi Tanah Melayu* (Trains of the Land of the Malays).

With independence in 1957, a compromise known as “The Bargain” gave citizenship rights to Chinese and Indians in exchange for political privileges for Malays to ensure their political primacy in Tanah Melayu. In independent Malaya, the Malays were in effect represented party-politically by UMNO which was (and remains) the main constituent party in its coalition with the MCA and MIC. UMNO’s dominant position within this coalition was to be a reflection of the Malays’ position socio-politically within the nation. In 1969, however, the citizenship rights of the Chinese and the Indians became evident when the Chinese-dominated opposition parties, the DAP and Gerakan, made substantial gains and broke the two-thirds majority held by the UMNO-MCA-MIC alliance in parliament. This prevented the coalition from unilaterally making laws and amending the constitution. It should also be noted that in the 1960s, Chinese-dominated opposition parties were promoting a “Malaysian Malaysia”. This construal of Malaysia gave no ethnic group political precedence and would certainly have been regarded by many Malays as a transgression of “The Bargain”.

As a result of their electoral success in 1969, the DAP and Gerakan, held celebratory rallies at which the Chinese crowds chanted insulting slogans at

Malays. In response, Harun bin Haji Idris, Selangor's Chief Minister called for a pro-government demonstration. At this rally, Malay politicians claimed that "Malay supremacy in government was being challenged by infidels and that they needed to teach the Chinese a lesson" (Munro-Kua 1996:55). Immediately prior to the demonstration, rumours that Malays had been attacked in another part of Selangor reached the assembled crowd and two days of riots ensued. According to official figures, six thousand people were made homeless and 178 people were killed during the days of the riots. Unofficial figures, however, estimate a few times this number of people were killed (ibid.:56). Most of those killed were Chinese.

As noted in the previous chapter, suspicions and animosities had existed between the Chinese and Malays since the time of British colonialism. The UMNO-MCA-MIC coalition attributed the sentiments vented on 13 May 1969 to frustrations over the perceived relative economic "backwardness" of the Malays as compared to the economic (and ascending political) superiority of the Chinese. During the period of emergency which was declared following the riots, the government developed its "New Economic Policy", known as the NEP, which sought, it was claimed, to remove the correlation between race and economic function. It was, in effect, affirmative action that accorded benefits to Malays when it came to, for example, education and business licences.

## 2.2 Melayu dalam bahaya (Malays in Danger)

A reason that continues to be proffered by both Malays and non-Malays for the continuation of privileges is that if Malay benefits were removed, they would be unable to compete against members of other ethnicities (Fenton 2003:139). One commonly cited example is with regard to university placements. As one Malaysian lamented to me, "non-Malays with straight As cannot get in [to local universities] whereas Malays with the poorest of marks do."

In 2004, at the fifty-fifth UMNO General Assembly, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi said that Malays must be able to face the challenges of the global environment. He went on to say that,

Umno has a duty to help the Malays become stronger, more able, confident and courageous [...]. But in undertaking all these efforts, Umno should also prepare the Malay mind to face the realities of this world [...]. If we fail to hone the competitive skills of the race, we will eventually become a defeated race. Malays will always be looked down

upon, always feel insecure and lack confidence and be seen as a burden by others (Badawi 2004).

It is sometimes observed that Malay discourses exhibit an underlying if not overt sense of being under threat. Virginia Matheson Hooker, in an examination of Malay novels until 1980, discovered consistent warnings that the Malay race and homeland were under threat of being overwhelmed by foreign races and of being overtaken in the march towards modernity (2000).

In March 2005, UMNO launched a programme entitled “Melayu Dalam Bahaya” (“Malays in Danger”). The programme consisted of seminars and included postings on UMNO affiliated websites that criticised Malays for their failings and implied that other races were taking advantage of them (Nazirin 2005).<sup>4</sup> Azwanddin Hamzah of KeADILan condemned the sentiments as seditious and said, “if there is a riot, don’t blame the opposition” (ibid.).

What is telling in Hamzah’s statement is the association of opposition parties with riots which required no expounding upon by the journalist. There has thus evolved a complex of closely connected ideas in Malaysian ethno-political discourse: the threat to Malay precedence and security by a Chinese-dominated opposition has developed into a fear of political instability should the BN lose dominance to the opposition per se.

Indeed, the fear of ethnic violence is sometimes less an implicit fear than it is an explicit threat. At the same UMNO General Assembly cited above, UMNO deputy chairperson Badruddin Amiruldin waved a book about the 1969 riots in the air and warned that any challenge to Malay privileges would be akin to stirring a hornet’s nest.

“Don’t poke at this nest, for if it was disturbed, these hornets will strike and destroy the country,” he said to a thunderous applause from delegates attending the party’s 55th annual general assembly at the Putra World Trade Centre in Kuala Lumpur. [. . .]

“Fifty-eight years ago we had an agreement with the other races, in which we permitted them to ‘menumpang’ (temporarily reside) on this land. In the Federal Constitution, our rights as a race have been enshrined.

“Let no one from the other races ever question the rights of Malays

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<sup>4</sup> Similarly in August 2006, the Youth deputy chief, Khairy Jamaluddin, who is also the Prime Minister Badawi’s son-in-law, warned UMNO members that party in-fighting would “pave way for the Chinese Malaysians to make various demands to benefit their community” (Beh 2006).

on this land. Don't question the religion because this is my right on this land," said the fiery orator to another round of applause (F. Aziz 2004). Like any identity, the social construction of Malay identity is contested and variegated. Michael Herzfeld rightly points out, however, that "life consists of processes of reification and essentialism as well as challenges to these processes" and that the strategic character of essentialism should be recognised (1997:26). The words of Amiruldin attempt to arouse the support and mobilisation of an ethnic constituency. On this point and in the context of a discussion on elections, it is worth noting that Jean-Paul Sartre has noted that elections interpolate people as identical with other members of the group to which they are deemed to belong. "[The voter] becomes in essence identical with all the other members, differing from them only by his serial number" (1977:201). Thus, "serial thinking is born in me, thinking which is not my own thinking but that of the Other which I am and also that of all the Others" (ibid.:201-2).

In the fast car of Malaysian politics, differences and details become blurred or ignored as attention is focussed upon landmarks. In the context of inter-ethnic politics these landmarks – pertinent symbols of ethnic identity on to which people imbue their own meanings (see Cohen 1996) – enable people to self-ascribe to ethnic identities just as, by and large, people usually unproblematically self-ascribe to a gender. And just as people regard members of their own and other genders as having stereotypical traits, likewise do members of an ethnicity conceive of themselves and pertinent others according to stereotypes which seem true.

### 2.3 The Malay Stereotype and its Political Ramifications

Unfortunately, in my view, the traits attributed to Malays by both Malays and non-Malays are often negative. One association frequently made is of Malays' and poor performance. An example of such an attribution occurred when a young woman told me that she wanted to travel overseas to Canada or Australia to study architecture. I discovered that she had enrolled and already begun an architecture course locally but stopped. "The education is terrible," she said. In a whisper, she went on to explain, "They are Malays." Not being certain of her meaning I enquired further and she added, "The teachers are Malays and it is easy for them to pass and so they aren't very good. If you ask them a question, they just give any answer. But this is a class and we need proper answers. Also, before exams, they give hints and no-one bothers studying."

It is frequently said that the various affirmative action policies for Malays

have resulted in, as Prime Minister Badawi put it, Malays becoming dependent on crutches. It is also sometimes said that Malays have developed a “subsidy mentality.” The implications are, as evident in Badawi’s address cited above, that Malays are unable to compete with non-Malays on a level playing field whether locally or internationally. There have been various well-publicised attempts by UMNO politicians to craft positive identities for Malays to strive towards. These include the New Malay (Mahathir), the Towering Malay (Badawi) and the Glocal Malay (Najib Tun Razak). These formulations usually emphasise economic competitiveness and Islamic piety. But as models to strive towards, they imply characteristics that Malays are supposed to currently lack; inspiring heights of excellence (Towering Malay), or bravery with a global outlook (Glocal Malay).

The manner in which members of a social category are constituted undoubtedly affects the individuals who are given to belong to that category. Iris Marion Young, in her analysis of feminine bodily comportment, argues that the more a girl assumes her feminine status the more she enacts those behaviours that are socially taken to be feminine (1990:154). The inhibited bodily comportment of females that Young describes has its source “in neither anatomy nor physiology, and certainly not in a mysterious feminine essence.” Rather, it has its source “in the particular *situation* of women as conditioned by their sexist oppression in contemporary society” (ibid.:153; emphasis original). Indeed, Young points out that “*Every* human existence is defined by its situation” (ibid.:142; emphasis mine; cf. Kapferer 1988:19).

With this mind, the Malay situation in the context of Malaysia combines characteristics which could understandably predispose Malays to respond to challenges to their hegemony with outrage. Or, to put it more precisely, which allows Malay politicians to frame with efficacy challenges to their power as a challenge to the wider Malay ethnic in-group by a threatening out-group or other. The situation and characteristics to which I here refer are first a sense of entitlement to privileges in their land, Tanah Melayu, and second, insecurity over the ability of Malays to retain this position on merit owing to their apparent non-competitiveness.

The idea that ethnic Malays may, when they feel threatened, cheated or persecuted, quickly turn to physical violence or rioting entered national consciousness with episodes such as the Maria Hertogh affair (see Hughes 1980) but most importantly in 1969. The capacity for violence of the kind seen on 13 May 1969

has a more famous parallel at the level of the individual in the phenomenon of amok.

## 2.4 Running Amok

The phrase, “to run amok” refers in colloquial English to an act wanton unruly behaviour. The first account of it is from fifteenth century Indonesia. It was described as a condition or phenomenon that is associated with the Malay people (Hatta 1996:505). E. K. Tan and John E. Carr describe amok as,

a standardized form of intense emotional release, accepted by the community and expected of any male individual who is placed for some reason or other in an intolerably embarrassing or shameful situation. The indiscriminate killings are considered a continuation of revengeful feelings [. . .]. The Amok must re-establish himself in the eyes of his fellow man and proceeds to do so by a “violent assertion of his power” – the only court of appeal known to his fathers for countless generations (1977:59). The violence associated with an amok episode is simultaneously regarded as being indiscriminate and yet purposive and revengeful. Carr and Tan note that the subjects aver “that the act is unconscious, indiscriminate, and without purpose” but that several of those who had run amok “exhibited a remarkable degree of purposiveness” (1976:1297). One subject they noted had killed five Chinese in three separate coffee houses frequented by Chinese and that he had previously expressed anger towards the Chinese for the 1969 riots (*ibid.*). All accounts of amok describe the role of the amok in restoring lost dignity or in saving face (see *ibid.*; Kon 1994).

The violent riots of 1969 may appear to be a social manifestation of Malay amok (for a treatment of such social amok in Indonesia, see van Dijk 2002). Indeed, this association was made explicit by Mahathir Mohamad. In a widely circulated letter to the then Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, Mahathir criticised him for “giving the Chinese what they demand. [. . .] The Malays have run amok, killing those they hate because you have given them too much face” (quoted in Munro-Kua 1996:56). I might note that the amok phenomenon is frequently regarded as being born of culturally emphasised courtesy and self-effacement which “may lead others, interpreting such diffidence as weakness and inferiority, to take advantage of [the Malay]” (Carr and Tan 1976:1298).

Sir Stamford Raffles (1781-1826) noted that the threat of amok protects the dues of a Malay and of the Malays generally. He wrote that the Malay was

“prepared to avenge with the *kris* [traditional dagger] the slightest insult on the spot; but with the knowledge that such an immediate appeal is always at hand, prevents the necessity of its often being resorted to” (quoted in Hatta 1996:506).

## 2.5 Amok as Moral Outrage

This response, I think, can clearly be seen to be a form of existential redress. Indeed, as Jackson has written,

all violence is a form of retribution. A form of payback, driven by the need to reclaim something that one imagines to have been wrongfully taken, that one is now owed. One’s very existence is felt to depend on making good this loss – a legacy stolen, a promise broken, a loved one murdered, one’s honor impugned, a dream betrayed (2004:155).

Amok also fits Ward Goodenough’s description of moral outrage and its causes. Goodenough writes that in all human societies of which there is record,

social relationships are ordered in terms of rights and duties that pertain to comembership in groups and to dealings between various categories of person and categories of subgroups within the larger group (1997:12).

He goes on to say,

we are outraged when inappropriate behaviour is exhibited toward us, or toward those with whom we identify, by people with whom we do not closely identify ourselves – by people we think of as others rather than as us, but as others who are still presumably bound by the same expectations as we are in regard to what is appropriate behaviour (ibid.:15; emphasis original).

Goodenough regards moral outrage in humans as the manifestation of territorial behaviour which is evident in other animals (ibid.:25). Ethologically, territory is that space which an animal is prepared to defend and it does so with what seems to be an “enhanced power or energy” (ibid.:16). The intruder, meanwhile, “seems to be inhibited by its sense that it is intruding and usually withdraws in response to the territorial defender’s aggressive display” (ibid.).

Territoriality in humans, Goodenough argues, “involves (among other things) social identities, rights and privileges in identity relationships, and the immunities the rights and privileges provide” (ibid.:18). Goodenough regards Erving Goffman’s “territories of the self” as describing some of these human territories. These include one’s “informational preserve” which refers to information about



ourselves which we wish to control, and one's "personal space" around one's body. Most relevant to my discussion here is that of "the turn." According to Goffman, the turn refers to,

the order in which a claimant receives a good of some kind relative to other claimants in the situation. A decision-rule is involved, ordering participants categorically ("women and children first," or "whites before blacks"), or individually ("smallest first, then next smallest"), or some mixture of both (Goffman 1971:35).

Thus, elaborates Goodenough,

turns can take many forms, and can be looked upon as the archetype of rights and duties in jural relationships. For me to claim a turn as my right means that others have a corresponding duty to let me have my turn. Turns include such things as having our turn to talk and having our day in court. They include virtually all of what we call our "entitlements" (Goodenough 1997:19).

Returning to the Malays in the Malaysian context we can see why the characteristics of inter-ethnic relations take the dynamics that they do given the way in which these inter-ethnic relations have been articulated. In short, Malays are positioned as *bumiputera*, the "sons of the soil" of their land, Tanah Melayu. Their land was intruded upon by colonial forces and by the *pendatang*. The Malays were not only unable to repel them, but they threatened and still threaten to displace Malays. The Bargain, supplemented by the NEP, articulates the just entitlements of Malays in Malaysia. Threats to the social position or the privileges of Malays by non-Malays are therefore in effect a threat to the entitlements to Malays, an usurpation of their "turn," that is, what is their due. This potential usurpation is threatened by, as Bridget Welsh puts it, a "domestic 'other'" in the form of the Chinese (2004:120). Given what Goodenough tells us of the human territories, we can expect such intrusions and usurpations to elicit an energetic defensive response or a defensive display (i.e. a threat). This is what we see in the events of 1969 and the orations of Amiruldin respectively.<sup>5</sup> The fear amongst

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<sup>5</sup> Why then might it be that other indigenous populations, such as aboriginal Australians, do not display or continue to display such defensive behaviour towards those (or the descendants of those) who dispossessed their forefathers of their land? The answer probably lies in whether members of such groups feel sufficiently confident in winning any show of force they might make. Jackson has described the responses of different people to atrocities committed in Sierra Leone. Whereas

non-Malays of Malay retribution for challenges to their political dominance as represented by the BN plays a significant role in maintaining the BN's political dominance in Malaysia. As suggested earlier, there lingers a lasting association with opposition electoral success and social instability which is manipulated by the BN for electoral success.

### 3 Conclusion

The electoral dominance of UMNO and the BN is maintained by both practical measures and a broader cultural environment. The former entails the creation of various laws and the cooperation of ostensibly politically neutral state apparatuses to hinder opposition parties and to advantage the BN. No less important, however, is the cultural or ideological environment in which support for opposition parties is associated with political instability, and support for opposition parties is hampered by a sense of ubiquitous surveillance and potential retribution.

Whereas the former manipulations are more clearly contrary to fair democratic procedure, the manipulation of popular fears of surveillance and social instability are not. Although inter-ethnic divisions and tensions may have evolved, they have scarcely abated in the years since independence and thus the potential for large-scale ethnic violence to reoccur seems plausible. Thus, the likelihood of electoral support for the BN is enhanced and BN victory made likely through practical obstructions to fair electoral contestation by opposition parties.

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one rural victim sought to move on with her life, a politician that he described was less forgiving. Jackson points out that the politician was less forgiving "not because his anger was greater was stronger but because he was in a stronger position. Justice was thus conditional on one's power to see that justice is done" (2005:164). Likewise is the case with aboriginal Australians and Malay Malaysians. The manner of their response is dependent on their confidence in gaining a desired result.

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