

Ethnic Attitudes, Political Preferences and the Politics of Stability

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Abstract: Ethnic cleavages have been recognised as a potent force in political system of many developing and advanced countries. Elections are often fought along ethnic and regional lines. Being a multiracial society, any analysis of voting behaviour in Malaysia is bound to take ethnicity into consideration. This article analyses the ethnic attitudes and political preferences among of the three main ethnic groups in the a Malaysian State Legislative Assembly. A survey using questionnaires was conducted from involving a sample of 500 Malays, Chinese and Indian voters. The result of the study shows that the Malay voters were more interested and cared very much which party won the election than the Indian and Chinese voters. The Malays too very concerned about the ethnicity of candidates and the urban Chinese voters were unlikely to vote for DAP if the candidate was not from the same ethnic group. Generally, most of the Malaysian electorate were willing to vote for BN regardless of candidate ethnicity, but the turnout will be higher when the candidate comes from the same ethnic background as the voters. The main reason Malaysian voted for the BN is to preserve comfort of the familiar in the guise of political stability. In conclusion, this study has an impact on ethnic policy, programmes and compromises over differences. Thus, a study on ethnic needs and accommodation is very important to regulate party loyalty and perceptions. The analysis of the Sabak 2004 electoral results showed that ethnic attitudes and political preferences played into the politics of stability in Malaysia. While there had been a desire for reform as testified by the challenge posed to the BN government in the previous 1999 general election, the collective will to see it through - to embrace potential uncertainties that come with an entirely new government scenario- was not strong enough to dislodge Malaysians from their addiction to stability. This was because stability was intertwined with ethnic politics. The politics of ethnicity was about the only way Malaysians knew as to how to co-exist. It would be very interesting indeed for future analyses to look again into the question of ethnic attitudes, political preferences and the politics of stability in Malaysia.

Key words: Ethnic cleavages · Political parties · Elections · Political stability · National unity

INTRODUCTION

Ethnic cleavages have been recognised as a potent force in any multiethnic political system, in particular, the way they are defended and managed to maintain political stability so life of co-existence may go on. In such political systems ethnic attitudes and political preferences-and not just novel and sophisticated electoral strategies [1]-determine who get elected to the seats of power.

In South Africa [2], for example, the Afrikaners voted for the National Party, English-speaking South Africans back the United Party, while the Progressive Party depended heavily upon Jewish support. In Ghana, voting

was undoubtedly patterned along ethnic and tribal lines [3]. In Los Angeles ethnicity was even a better predictor than class for the city's 1973 municipal election [4]. In Indonesia, the Indonesian government still showed its reluctance to elect ethnic Chinese as political leaders because the indigenous elite still thought of the Chinese Indonesians as more Chinese than Indonesian [5]. In Singapore, young, middle-class, highly educated Chinese were found to have replaced working-class Malays as the greatest challenge to continued People's Action Party (PAP) dominance [6]. In Pakistan voting still happened along ethnic lines whereby the PPP (Pakistan People's party) derived its support from the Sindhis (as 'sons of the soil') while the MQM (*Muhajirs Qaumi Mahaz*) from

the Muhajirs or immigrants. Ethnic voting, too, turned out to be quite important in advanced and politically mature societies such as Belgium's Brussels [7].

Malaysia was certainly no exception. Being a highly multiracial society, the preponderance of the ethnic factor was such that any meaningful analysis of the Malaysian electorates' voting behaviour was bound to take ethnicity into consideration [8]. As politics had always been based on a 'racial arithmetic' [9], it was an open secret that political parties typically considered the ethnic composition of the constituencies when short-listing or placing their candidates in general elections.

To examine this point this article analyses the nature of the Malaysian voter's attitudes and political preferences in the 2004 general election with special reference to the case of a state legislative assembly seat.

Methodology

Setting the Background: The first evidence of the practice of ethnic voting in Malaysia was the results of the first general election after independence in 1959. The election results showed that in the multi-racial society of Malaya, most voters supported the candidate of their own ethnic group rather than the party *per se* [10-12]. Recognising this fundamental truth political parties had tended to put up candidates of the same ethnic origin as that of the majority of the voters in the constituency [13-15]. It then became incumbent on the top leadership of each party to secure popular support from ethnic groups that formed the bases of its support [16]. It was not surprising, therefore, that even traditional opposition parties were ethnic-based: the PAS being a Malay party and the DAP basically a Chinese party. Even political parties that did not wear overt ethnic names found themselves unable to escape the ethnic imperative [17-18].

It is no exaggeration to say that because of its endurance, ethnic politics had made ethnic cleavages an impediment to the recognition and significance of other cleavages in Malaysian society, such as class [19-23]. It remains the curse of Malaysian politics in that political parties have not succeeded in deviating from communalism [24-27]. This is the cumulative effect of over fifty years of institutionalisation of the politics of ethnic pluralism, each component driven by its own internal dynamic and cultural logic: for the Chinese it is the politics of economic security, for the Tamils the politics of religion and caste and for the Malays the incipient class antagonisms that are historically rooted in a feudal society [24].

Location of Study Area: The state Legislative Assembly of Sabak is located in the state of Selangor and it is one of the constituencies in the parliamentary seat of Sabak Bernam. Currently, It has a total of 18,251 registered voters, consisting of 78.7 percent Malays, 14.8 percent Chinese and 6.4 percent Indian and others. The majority of the Malays are farmers and staying in the rural areas. The Chinese dominate the urban areas doing businesses and most of the Indians are workers in the estate plantations. In 1999 general election BN won the seat with a majority of 615 votes and 67.4 percent turnout. In the eleventh general election of 2004, BN (UMNO) won the seat with an increased majority of 2,256 votes and 75.6 percent of voter's turnout.

The State of Selangor is situated in the Central Region of Peninsular Malaysia. In the election year of 2004 it had a population of 4.5 million (comprising 51.9 percent Malay, 29.2 percent Chinese and 14.9 percent Indian and others) and a total of 1.4 million registered voters. The state's Klang Valley has one of the largest concentrations of industries and urban centres in the country. Consequently it has become the wealthiest and most developed state of Malaysia. Since 1959 and until 2008 the Alliance/Barisan National (BN) party had ruled the state.

Data Collection: A sample of 500 voters in the state legislative assembly constituency of Sabak was selected for the field interviews. The sample was stratified according to ethnic origin. Respondents were chosen by a random procedure in which interviewers visited flats or houses in the study area. The questionnaire was conducted in Malay language and English. It was structured so as to probe into the attitudinal and political preference aspects of the Chinese, Malay and Indian voters with respect to political parties, parties' candidates, issues and other related matters.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ethnic Attitudes: The question of how interested they were as to which particular party would win the election was posed to the respondents. On the whole, the majority of voters from all ethnic groups cared which party won the election and took into account that voting was one of the major civic responsibilities that they had to perform.

The Malays were more interested in politics as compared to both the Chinese and Indians who had a higher percentage of those not sure and not very

Table 1: Attitude towards the winning party (%)

Attitude	Malay	Chinese	Indians
care very much	25.6	10.8	16.4
care	47.5	43.0	44.0
average	23.0	27.5	26.5
a little	4.0	8.5	6.1
do not care at all	4.9	10.2	7.0

interested. The Malays cared very much as to which party won the election followed by the Indians and Chinese. The Chinese had the highest percentage (10.2 per cent) of voters saying they were not bothered at all as to which party won the elections (Table 1).

The high scores of the Malay voters depicting their concern over which party won the election reflected their anxiety that the BN should be returned to power. To them it was only the UMNO or the BN party that looked after their socio-economic interests since Independence. So they must make sure that in each general election the BN will be returned to power. This was one of the reasons why Chinese candidates could win in Malay majority areas. The predominantly rural Malays had been ensuring the BN victory ever since the first post-independence general election of 1959.

The situation in the 1999 election was rather different, however. This year saw the splitting of the UMNO into two groups which meant the Malay unity was at stake. It was the most contentious campaign in the country's 40 years of election history, where the incumbent multi-racial government coalition faced a challenge from a new opposition party, the *KeADILan* and the *Reformasi* movement. The results proved that even under such critical circumstances the Malays supported the UMNO and BN and gave them the mandate to rule the country again. Although in the 1999 election the UMNO had lost 30 per cent of the rural Malay votes the fact that the majority of them were still loyal to the UMNO (BN)--as proven by the over 30% increase in the number of votes garnered by the BN candidate in the 2004 election over that of the 1999 election--cannot be denied.

The Indian voters, being the minority in all the constituencies, were apparently inclined towards the rule of the BN coalition. The pragmatic attitude of taking care that the BN continued to rule the country was perceived by them as the most efficacious approach for securing Indian interests in the country. In fact, the post-1999 political climate was so dire for the BN that it provided golden bargaining opportunities for the Indians to further their ethnic interests in exchange for their staying loyal with the BN.

The Chinese scores were highest in terms of their apparent indifference as to which party won the election. This attitude might harbour the Chinese political calculation that the downfall of the BN would pave the

Table 2: Voters' Ethnic Preference for the BN party

Voter	Candidate	Voted	
		YES (%)	NO (%)
<i>Chinese</i>	Malay	57.2	42.8
	Indian	56.1	43.9
	<i>Chinese</i>	77.3	22.7
<i>Malay</i>	Chinese	68.3	31.6
	Indian	69.9	30.1
	<i>Malay</i>	96.5	3.5
<i>Indian</i>	Chinese	78.1	21.9
	Malay	78.5	21.5
	<i>Indian</i>	90.5	9.5

Table 3: Party Affiliation by Ethnic (%)

Party Affiliation	Malay	Chinese	Indian
BN	73.7	67.7	80.4
PAS	11.9	00.0	00.0
DAP	00.0	11.5	0.8
KeADILan	1.6	00.0	00.0
Don't Know	13.8	20.8	18.8
<i>Total</i>	100.0	100.0	100.0

way for the rise of the DAP. This should augur well for them because it would mean the opportunity for them to complement their already established economic dominance in the country with a political one. This was the kind of thinking-the culture of fear-that persisted among the majority of the Malays vis-à-vis the Chinese and which the UMNO had harnessed all the time to persuade the Malays to stick with the BN.

Political Preferences: Voters were also posed with questions about ethnic issues in the study area in order to find out whether they would vote the BN in if the party's candidates were of different ethnic origin. The results in Table 2 show that generally the majority of the voters would vote for BN regardless of the ethnicity of the candidates, but the chances of voting for BN were higher if the candidate was of the same ethnic origin as the voter.

By comparison, the degree of the candidates' preference for similar ethnic origin was highest among the Malay voters (96.5 percent), followed by the Indians (90.5 per cent) and the Chinese (77.3 per cent).

Table 3 shows party affiliation by ethnic group. It reveals that the Indians had the highest percentage affiliated to the BN although a substantial number of them was affiliated to the DAP. The Malays seemed highly affiliated to the BN and less with PAS. In contrast, the Chinese scored the highest percentage of affiliation to the DAP. As for the new Malay opposition party KeADILan, its support came only from a small percentage of the Malay and Indian voters. One interesting result from the table is that all ethnic groups gave a high percentage of 'Don't know' answers. Who are they? And why such answer?

Table 4: Party choice for the 2004 election by ethnic (%)

Party	voters		
	Malay	Chinese	Indian
BN	77.4	76.9	81.6
PAS	11.7	00.0	00.0
DAP	00.0	5.0	2.0
KeADILan	2.0	00.0	00.0
Don't Know	8.9	18.1	16.4
<i>Total</i>	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 5: Factor Influencing Voters' Choice for the BN in 2004 general election by Ethnic (%)

Factor	Malay	Chinese	Indian
Leadership of new PM	70.3	66.3	69.2
Party Manifesto	16.5	15.2	11.4
Issues	6.9	9.8	14.4
Don't Know	6.3	8.7	5.0
<i>Total</i>	100.0	100.0	100.0

Probably these were voters who did not have any party identification, but it could be the case that they simply refused to tell which party they were affiliated to or that they were not interested in any party at all. It is generally understood that many voters in Malaysia will not confide in anyone, including academic researchers, about their affiliation with opposition parties (PAS, DAP or KeADILan). For them, the secrecy of their votes or the confidentiality of their party affiliation was even more necessary as they might risk their jobs or business opportunities and connections by telling the truth. These potential risks range from getting the sack, the demotion or the transfer to undesirable postings if they were in the government service, and their licences revoked, or their contracts terminated if they were in business. This illustrates the 'patron-client' type of politics which characterises many a developing country such as Malaysia.

In spite of the right to secrecy and confidentiality, the voters were asked to choose which party they would vote for the 2004 election. The majority of them declared that they would give their votes to the BN (Table 4).

The respondents were then asked what were the main factors that motivated them to choose the BN party during the 2004 general election. Most of them pointed to the leadership of the new Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi as the main reason. This was followed by the party manifesto and issues (Table 5).

It is interesting to note that the leadership of Prime Minister Badawi had attracted voters to the BN and become a uniting factor for the divided Malay voters as the aftermath of the 1999 general election. His gentler, kinder and more compassionate image had managed to convince the electorate of the coming of a more accountable government. His declared policies to fight corruption, eradicate poverty and enhance modernisation of the economy through new catalysts such as biotechnology had also given voters confidence of his social and economic reforms. His chairmanship of the Organisation of Islamic Conference and Non-Aligned Movement also helped to boost his leadership image among the Malaysian voters. All this in addition to the sense of security that the country would be able to preserve national unity and political stability that would ensure continued economic growth of the country.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the Sabak 2004 electoral results showed that ethnic attitudes and political preferences played into the politics of stability in Malaysia. While there had been a desire for reform as testified by the challenge posed to the BN government in the previous 1999 general election, the collective will to see it through-to embrace potential uncertainties that come with an entirely new government scenario-was not strong enough to dislodge Malaysians from their addiction to stability. This was because stability was intertwined with ethnic politics. The politic of ethnicity was about the only way Malaysians knew as to how to co-exist.

That was 2004. Things have changed since the general election of 2008 that saw both the ouster of Abdullah Badawi and the loss of Selangor into the opposition hands. It would be very interesting indeed for future analyses to look again into the question of ethnic attitudes, political preferences and the politics of stability in Malaysia.

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