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# **The Transformation in Malaysia's 12th General Election: The End of National Front Hegemony**

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*The End Of National Front Hegemony*

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**ABSTRACT**

The ruling party *Barisan Nasional* (National Front) inherited the trust and tradition initiated by the Alliance Party that achieved the Malayan Independence. The Alliance first test was the Kuala Lumpur Municipal Council's election in 1952 where they won convincingly 12 out of 14 seats. The support continued in the 1955 General Election, where they won 51 out of 52 seats contested. Nevertheless in the 1969 election, the Alliance has experienced a major loss when they failed to get the two-third majority and even lost several state governments to the opposition. This party later changed its name into National Front in 1972 and simultaneously expanded their components into a bigger coalition party. It has become a unique political formula in Malaysian politics to reduce politicking and keeping the divided ethnicized parties together. The National Front kept on winning in 1974, 1978, 1982, 1986, 1990, 1995, 1999 and 2004 elections handsomely. The dominance of National Front in most General Elections proved that its strength cannot be challenged easily. The supremacy however, started to deteriorate in the 2008 recent General Election when the two-third usual majority was suddenly denied. The ability of the opposition to deny National Front its majority has put the National Front into a very difficult position. Using Gramscian concept of hegemony, this paper tries to elaborate how National Front has successfully maintained their power until suffering big loss in 2008.

## Introduction

Malaysia practiced consociational democracy effectively until year 1969. Nidzam (2006: 69) stated that the parliament has been suspended for over a year after the incident of May 13<sup>th</sup>. Before the May 13<sup>th</sup> incident, the political development in Malaysia progressed very well. However, this achievement shows that there was no conflict and coercion involved. During the 6 weeks 1969 elections campaign has created many racial issues among the Malays and non-Malays. In the campaign, the leaders have lack of new formula to fight and difficult to accept provocation from the opposition party such as PAS, DAP, Gerakan and PPP (Comber 1983: 63).

This situation has encouraged Syed Husin Ali (1996: 95) to suggest that conflict is not only common to happen during election but commonly practiced in the institutional monarchy (king or local rulers) to gain undivided loyalty from the masses. For example, the traditional ruling system synonymously uses the concept of “loyalty” and “derhaka”. This brings the impact of psychology of fear and devotion to the rulers. Neo-feudalistic people have the feeling of fear, humble and devoted to the king or rulers. With the power to control the people, enable the rulers to widen their businesses and slim competition among the masses. The political power gave them the opportunity to be involved in the economic sector and fully monopolize the system to maintain their political status.

According to Nidzam (2006: 256-257), the humbleness and consent among the people in respect to their leaders show that the elements of feudalism still practices in Malaysian democracy. Awards and recognition of titles (Tun, Tan Sri, Datuk, Datuk Seri and many more) from the government has awarded to the Malaysian people. They were not only obliged

to be respected but the use of power and status to achieve many opportunity in the economic sector and other sectors commonly practiced among them. The traditional elements applied in the practice of democracy become the actuation of Malaysian democracy successfully practiced. It is undeniable the democracy that has been practiced intertwined with the people's traditional background (adat and istiadat) and the religious affairs.

Apparently, the Malaysian election culture succeeds to construct the structure and its practices. Political hegemony was practically implement by the leaders manage to be powerful and constructed the people including the NGOs, opposition party, media and judiciary system. The voice of modern democracy drowns during the BN rule.

Thus, BN has fully utilized the state agencies in the election including by implementing the acts, enactment, police, army and others to preserve their status quo. Other than that, the introduction of several acts likes Sedition Act, Official Secrecy Act, Internal Security Act and many more is to control Malaysian politics and penalized the executives' intruder (Mauzy 1995: 117).

The BN elite community especially the Malay elites dominate the ruling system in Malaysia which represents the success in winning the seats during election is guaranteed. For example, UMNO is the dominant party represents and seconded by the Malay elites that elected to dominate the important institution such as police, army, judiciary, legislative body and others. With the Malay elite's domination, they were easily control the ruling system process.

## Background of Election and Malaysian Democracy

Malayan people's objective to rule their own country could not be achieved without the consent of the British to held general election. In the beginning, the Malayan's people insisted the British to fulfill to have state level election as a practice to parliamentary democracy (Miller 1965: 151). The election was introduced at the state level in Georgetown (Tanjung), Penang on December 1951 and it is then followed by other states in Ipoh and others.

Electoral system is very significant at that time because UMNO and MCA have consolidated under the party of Alliance Party UMNO-MCA. The first state election 1951 contested 9 seats in Penang City Council. Penang Radical Party, Penang Labor party and UMNO were among the party involved in the election. Radical Party won 6 seats out of 9 seats contested (Means 1976: 132). While the other State Council election also held in Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bahru, Melaka and Seremban in 1952. Alliance Party succeed in many state council election glorious fully has made British realized the support among the people. This shows that the local leaders have the ability to rule Malaya. Hence, the independency must be quickening.

After Alliance Party won the majority vote in the 1955 General Election, Tunku Abdul Rahman was elected as the Chief Minister and forms the Cabinet Members (Milne & Mauzy 1992: 42). The triumph was very meaningful to the party and enables them to lead Malaya to independence. This reflects the Malayan people readiness especially Tunku Abdul Rahman and the cabinet members to form coalition government as a preparation to the independent country. However, Alliance Party received many critics from others and this also resulted to

the limitation of space given to the opposition party to influence the national's political decision.

Supposing the election held represent competition among political parties and leaders as well as the voters. This scenario is very pathetic when the party determine by the race, this also leads to the deterioration and discrimination of the dominant party to the opposition party. Sometimes it also involves the change of laws and acts by the winning party in a way to preserve their status and oppress other community.

On 27 July 1955, the first federal elections were held in July 1955. Beside the coalition of UMNO, MCA and MIC in Perikatan (Alliance), several other parties also put up candidates. They were PAS, Parti Negara (National Party), Labour Party and People's Progressive Party (Means 1976: 166). The result of the elections showed convincing support for the alliance of UMNO, MCA and MIC. The Alliance had swept all but one of the 52 seats contested. The sole seat won by the other political party was won by PAS.

The Alliance triumph was very crystallized proven that the leadership and support from other races were one of the core factors to the success. Alliance introduces new policies to produce Western hegemony without the local people realizing it. The Alliance policies show that they were very generous to help the local people. Behind the true colours of their generosity, the leaders were hoping to get support and undeniable loyalty from the people to ensure the success of the policy introduced.

From the above discussion, the upper class (ruling elite) position has been constructed and plays important role in building the competitive space especially during the election. The

construction resulted from the colonial construction as the platform to a new form of competition in the future.

For a glance through the series of elections held in Malaysian democracy, elections were conducted in year of 1964, 1974, 1978, 1982, 1986, 1995 and 2004. These years were a major success to BN in winning the seats contested. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> General Election, 1964 the percentage of voters was the highest and BN won 74 seats out of 104 seats contested. While in the 1974 election, BN successfully swept 87 percent votes. This is followed by 1978 election BN won 130 seats out of 154 seats contested. There is a slightly decreased of 5 seats from the 1974 election results. The reason is resulted from PAS withdrawal from joining the BN coalition. While in the 1982 election, BN swept 132 seats out of 154 seats contested and this is the second highest achievement for BN since the Independence Day. Support from the masses continuously received to ensure their trusted political party won the election.

In the 2004 General Election (11<sup>th</sup>), BN received an increment of popular vote of 63.9 percent from the total number of seats contested. The Malaysian media reported on 23 March 2004 shown that BN has won 198 seats out of 198 parliamentary seats compared to 20 combination seats of the opposition. The result of the general election represents the greatest majority since 1978 election. BN domination was uplifting and BN able to earn two third majority votes. At that time, any upheaval occurs BN still remains to be the popular political party among the people. Malaysia felt the shock of currency and stock-market collapse, social dislocation and political upheaval, culminating in the crisis of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's dismissal, trial and sentencing by April 1999. As pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), foreign capital and Western classes mounted the calls for economic

## Gramsci's Hegemony: Conceptual Definition

The concept of hegemony is an important part in the existing social theory. Gramsci's idea of a 'historical bloc' provides a useful illustration of how power relations develop. However, the power bloc cannot be reduced to a mere set of political coalitions or corporatist alliances. Rather, it represents a more integrated set of state – class accommodations and ideological mediations over a historical phase (Showstack 1980: 121). This allows us to consider more comprehensively, the evolving framework of power from the colonial period in Malaya, through the changing configurations of state-class relations under the Alliance, New Economic Policy and Vision 2020 projects.

The Gramscian meaning of hegemony involves a more qualitative dimension of power involving two main elements for the leading group's interests, ideas and values through civil, moral and intellectual processes (Hilley 2001: 10). While the former may be more instrumental in practice, the latter is vital in serving to articulate such values as national-popular constructs, allowing the leading group to assume the mantle of the national interest. This also denotes the sense in which power is formed along a continuum between domination and hegemony that is through state coercion and/or civil consent. In particular, the leading class's recourse to coercive means in order to maintain power (domination) is inversely related to the quality of its consensual legitimacy (hegemony).

For present purposes, Anne Munro-Kua comes closest to this type of hegemonic/state-class approach in Authoritarian Populism in Malaysia. In this view, the Malay state-class has internalized power through repressive functions and populism as a legitimating function of the coercive state, the orientation of the present study places more emphasis on how Mahathir (4<sup>th</sup>

Prime Minister) has sought to create legitimacy by consent through the Vision 2020 (Hilley 2001: 10).

According to Gramsci (1971: 258), the state is “ethical in as much as one of its most important functions is to raise the great mass of the population to a particular cultural and moral level which corresponds to the needs of the productive forces for development, and hence to the interests of the ruling classes’. This shows that it requires considering not only economic and political components of any hegemonic order, but also the integrated role of the intellectual within that process. Here, Gramsci provides a new theoretical understanding of intellectual activity as structural enterprise, a key aspect being the construction of national-popular discourse. The intellectual may be viewed as rather more than an academic, social analyst or purveyor of knowledge.

Furthermore, Gramsci also conceptualized the organic intellectual which denotes practical meaning to the interactive process of legitimating conducted around the term of ‘UMNO network’. This helps to convey the sense in which individuals and institutions, both within and beyond the party, help sustain hegemony through the reification of dominant interests and social meaning. This agency linked to common issues such as policy of ideas, social development and social meaning.

As a conclusion, hegemonic leadership involves developing intellectual, moral and philosophical consent from all major groups in a nation. It involves an emotional dimension too, in that those political leaders who seek hegemonic leadership must address the sentiments of the nation-people and must not appear as strange who are cut off from the masses (Bocock 1986: 37).

### Leadership

The main agenda-setting agency in Malaysia, as elsewhere, is the mass media. According to Hilley (2001: 12), linking state and corporate elites, media institutions represent a vital part of the UMNO network, helping to filter information, entertainment and civil values. While an overt platform for BN messages the Malaysian media also became more attentive to the nuances of market segmentation and the promotion of 'new middle-classes' from the 1980s, encouraging a form of safe 'role model' media discourse based on lifestyle images and social concerns. Hilley also stated that this appeal to 'responsible' middle-class sensibilities has provided a context for managed 'media debate', helping to keep dissent distanced from any meaningful critique of the power structure. However, with a more critical response to biased press and TV output emerging during the crisis, media managers were now engaged in a process of internal reappraisal and adjustment to the new political and social mood.

The practice of neo-feudalistic culture in Malaysian democracy has deteriorated the democratic system. It is not only practiced through questionable transparency of election process, fraud and encroachment of civil rights. The government introduced new policies, acts and imposing laws such as Internal Security Act 1960 (ISA), Official Secrecy Act 1948 (OSA), Sedition Act, College University and University College Act (1970) and many other acts in a way to control the behavior and people's actions. These acts control the role of media and also create the sense of fear among the people. The governmental policies were the major ruling party's agent brings very dominant impact on the psychological and epistemological of the people. The nature of these acts control, discriminate and arbitrary in nature endowed since the Tun Abdul Razak's office until the era of Tun Mahathir Mohamad.

Under the leadership of Tun Mahathir Mohamad, the question of whether UMNO can be considered the leader of the Malays is still puzzled. However, it is undeniable that UMNO succeeded to pioneer the formation of the government since the first General Election in 1955. Hence, the dogmatic approach applied by the Alliance Party (National Front) upholds the concept of power sharing with other component parties was a great success. The Malaysian people accepted that BN has promoted Malaysia to the national and international that can be proud of and they feel that they are obliged to support the ruling party and government.

The turmoil and eventual split within UMNO by 1988 represented not just an internecine power struggle, but a hegemonic crisis. It signified the political showdown of contending class forces and sectoral interests thrown up by the 1980s deregulatory agenda, revealing, in its aftermath, a fundamental shift in the political basis of the bloc. In the ensuing 1990 general election, coinciding with an economic upturn, Semangat 46's (under the leadership of Tunku Razaleigh) poor performance within Malaysia's first ever multiracial electoral pact, the Gagasan Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Front) showed that, while the BN had lost ground (losing Sabah and Kelantan), UMNO's political hegemony was still intact (Gomez 1994: 64). By late 1996, following Semangat's deteriorating political alliance with PAS in Kelantan, Razaleigh himself returned to UMNO (Hilley 2001: 89).

The dynamics of the split had created a more centralized political bloc, with the Razaleigh-Musa camp's 'protectionist' agenda now checked by a new set of state priorities. But the attendant clampdown had also revealed the limitations of ISA repression as a political strategy (Munro-Kua 1996: 105). Thus Mahathir required a return to consensus-building to help consolidate the BN's electoral base.

However, Mahathir able to strengthen his power in the party by applying significant strategies have placed him as the most powerful UMNO President. He has the power to control the executive, legislative and judiciary. The central power of the three bodies is synonymous to the element of feudalism in Malay political culture that brings to modification in the modern political era.

Relatively, the patron-client relationship practice since the Malay traditional ruling system were applied and adapted in Malaysian democracy. As a reward, the people gave their undoubted loyalty and support their patron by paying tax, involve in voluntary work, offer assistance and many others (Chandra 1979: 78). Other than that, the people have given the consent to the BN government to rule the country. However, the Malays were too dependent on UMNO to strive for their rights and privileges. This enables BN government to impose many policies to ensure the Malays and others preserve their status quo.

Today, the Malaysian political context shown that the human civil rights and freedom of speech stated in the Article 10, Federal Constitution is disregarded. There are draconian laws that have been introduced by the government as a method of controlling the freedom of speech among the Malaysian people (Mustaffa Kamil 2001: 11). According to P. Ramasamy (2001: 5), the control used by the BN regime through the political hegemony was the biggest obstacle towards the development of the Malaysian academic community. He emphasized on this approach that blocks the community from discussing sensitive issues for the sake of others interests. The criticism of the people will end up with traitor, terrorist, violator, anti-government, militant and many more labels to those who did not support the government.

In Malaysia, there is limited space for the critical intellectual. This is evident elsewhere. In Malaysia, to be on the outside is to be not only oppositional, but dysfunctional. And this culture permeates all parts of the social order, from the inclusion of academics in 'national advisory' boards to the 'problem-sharing' discourse taken up by 'media intellectuals' during the crisis. Potential dissent in Malaysian universities has also been mediated through subtle forms of social incorporation, including the characterization of student radicalism as socially deviant. Thus, when the government talks of the need for debate or consultation, it means within the Barisan Nasional. And when the NGOs address social issues, they are encouraged to do so from within a problem-solving mode of analysis.

National Front won many elections (1964, 1974, 1978, 1982, 1995 and 2004) enables the party to gain loyalty and support of the people. The government also rewarded their loyal supporters with important positions in the office, title, status and others. However, for those who against the government will be labeled as a traitor, oppositionist, anti-government and many others. This has shown how the National Front government used any form of power to maintain their status quo in Malaysian politics.

UMNO and National Front parliamentary members always agree and obey the top leader's decision. The attitude of obedience and loyalty has been the tradition in the party and there are two way relationships between the rulers to the ruled whereas the people give their consent to the ruler to administer the government. This has been practiced since the Malay sultanate era before. The two way relationships reflect the democratic system in Malaysia that has always urged the people through the government agents to ensure they become very loyal, obedient and submissive to the government or local leaders. However, the relation between

the ruler and the ruled has resulted into a very limited and controlled freedom for the people to express their rights.

### **Role of Media**

Prime media agencies and bodies such as Bernama or Official National News, Utusan News Corporation, News Straits Times and many more are all under companies affiliated with the ruling party. The main TV stations such as Channel 1, 2 and 3 and all radio stations are also under such control. They constantly portray a good picture of the ruling party and conversely associate bad elements to the oppositions. The oppositions are often described as subversive, national traitor, hindrance to national development and threat to national unity. As the level of tertiary education is still modest in this country, influence and propaganda can easily penetrate the society. This entails the inability of the public to see the reality of both sides of the contesting parties.

Such situation nevertheless has changed as indicated by the results of the 2008 General Elections. The BN's control of the Parliament that used to be more than two third majority has greatly been reduced to only slightly more than half. The People Alliance (Pakatan Rakyat) managed to deny their dominance.

Out of the 222 seats in the Parliament, the ruling party managed to obtain 140 seats, while the opposition managed to garner 82 seats, a difference of 62 seats mathematically. However, the result of the decrease number of BN votes is the emergence of the alternative media in the last general election 2008. Malaysia has experienced a wave of development in Information and Technology in the form of digital technology in the media industry. Although

television, radio and newspaper are still widely used by the public, the rise of internet, email, hand phone, CDs and DVDs have exhibited its importance in challenging the conventional media.

## Conclusion

In the 2008 General Election, BN has lost control of five state legislative assemblies in the last elections and as many as 82 Parliamentary seats. Support towards the opposition parties is growing rapidly and it has become public knowledge that this is going to be the final chance for BN to maintain their rule. Political analysts and common people seem to share the same opinion – the current regime's days are numbered. It is true that there are several factors that lead to the transformation of Malaysia's political climate. The first is the arrogance of power of BN in the office for more than 50 years. Secondly, there are many injustice conducts among the leaders and thirdly, the abuse of power and finally the emergence of media alternatives since the last 2008 General Elections. The expansion appears to be very fast and everyone can predict the result of the 13<sup>th</sup> Malaysian General Election.

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