Assessing Political Dynamics in Contemporary Malaysia:

Implications for Democratic Change

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Abstract: This article examines political dynamics in Malaysia and assesses the prospects for change in the direction of greater political liberalization. It focuses on the 12th General Election of 2008 and its implications for opportunities and challenges for liberal democratic change in Malaysia. It discusses the role of the internet-based new media in shaping an emerging public sphere, and some factors affecting the changing role of non-Malay voters in the political process. This article argues that democratization in Malaysia is already occurring, albeit at a gradual pace; it is being pushed by the new political forces of civil society actors, newly empowered opposition parties, and the internet-based media. The boundaries of this emerging democratic space is simultaneously being shaped and contested by the political competition between status-quo and reformist forces in this society. Some institutional changes have expanded the parameters of democratic space, although the entrenched dominant institutions of the ruling regime continue to wield sufficient amounts of institutional capacity to subvert any consolidation of these democratic changes for now.

Keywords: Malaysia; Southeast Asia; Politics; Democracy; Democratization; Media; Public Sphere

INTRODUCTION[1]

The "Arab Spring" of 2011 has renewed interest in the study of democratization in the Muslim world.[2] While Muslim societies in the Arab world are attracting much attention, progress toward democracy has also been witnessed in Southeast Asia, another region with Muslim majority societies. Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country, experienced its transformation from authoritarianism to democracy in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997. This article examines political dynamics in Malaysia, the second largest Muslim country in Southeast Asia, and assesses the prospects for change in the direction of greater political liberalization.

The 12th General Election (henceforth 12 GE) of March 2008 marked an interesting turn in Malaysia's political development. The outcome of this election was extraordinary in many ways. It was the best showing for the political opposition in almost forty years (since the 1969 GE). Although the incumbent *Barisan Nasional* (National Front, hereafter BN) coalition government won 144 of the 222 seats in the Federal Parliament, it only managed to garner 49.8 percent of the popular vote in Peninsular Malaysia, which almost tied the combined votes won by the three main opposition parties.[3] The shift in electoral outcomes for the ruling coalition in the 12 GE was particularly significant when compared to the out-

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come of the 11th General Election of 2004, in which it achieved its best electoral perform-ance since independence (see Tables 1 and 2 below).

How do we explain the best and worst electoral performances for the ruling BN coali-tion within two electoral cycles? Were there underlying structural and institutional factors that were shaping political development in new directions in Malaysia? This article will situate the 12 GE within a broader political context and provide a preliminary assessment of the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead for liberal democratic change in Malaysia. It will discuss the role of the Internet-based new media in shaping an emerging public sphere in Malaysia and some factors affecting the changing role of non-Malay voters in the politi-cal process.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Malaysia is characterized politically, socially, and culturally by its pluralism. It consists of a multiracial, multireligious, and multi-ethnic society. Demographically, Malaysia's popula-tion of 28.7 million is constituted by Malays (50.4 percent), ethnic Chinese (23.7 percent), ethnic Indians (7.1 percent), other indigenous races (11.4 percent), and other racial/ethnic groups (7.8 percent).[4] The ethnic Chinese and Indians, who are predominantly non-Mus-lim, arrived as immigrants in Malaya (as it was then known) in the early nineteenth century when it was ruled as a British colony. Perhaps one of the most significant features of the Malaysian political landscape is the "special rights" of the Malays. As scholars have written, "special rights" for Malays can be traced back to the British colonial period.

> The British accorded a special status to the Malays. They were regarded as the origi-nal inhabitants, although, as their name suggests, the fifty thousand or so *orang asli* ("aborigines") had been there longer. The British believed that they should offer "protection" to the Malays, thus supplementing the protective role of the [Malay] rulers.[5]

This historical legacy was institutionalized at independence in 1957 through a political compromise whereby the Chinese and Indians were given citizenship status, and the indig-enous Malays retained their "special rights," so that "national and state identification was to be through 'Malay symbols,' such as allegiance to Malay royalty and the declaration of Islam as the official religion."[6] After the racial riots of May 1969, constitutional amendments in 1971 extended Malay special privileges to include, among others, preferential treatment in public service employment, admissions into local universities, and the awarding of business licenses by the government.[7] The New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1970 further institu-tionalized these Malay privileges in the economic sphere. Based on these factors, scholars have labeled the Malaysian state as essentially "a 'Malay-based' polity, both in form and substance."[8] In other words, "Malay political power and dominance is the overriding theme in Malaysian politics."[9] Given this background, for decades scholars have explained away Malaysia's (liberal) "democratic recalcitrance"[10] by pointing to a combination of factors that consist of its deeply divided society along racial, ethnic, and religious lines; a compliant middle class that is politically and economically dependent on the state;[11] and the grip on power by the politically dominant United Malays National Organization (UMNO).[12] All of these have to some degree acted as barriers to greater political liberalization in the direction of liberal democratic governance.

Then, slightly over a decade ago, in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 and the subsequent political crisis over then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's sacking and jailing of his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, civil society actors began to mobilize through the

Reformasi movement, seeking to build the political/institutional foundations of an alternative form of governance—one that would be based on the principles of good governance and liberal democratic norms.[13] However, two major developments occurred at this time: (1) the retirement of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in October 2003, who was replaced both as president of UMNO and prime minister by Abdullah Badawi; and (2) the subsequent electoral victory by the ruling BN coalition in the 11th General Election of 2004, in which it won 198 of 219 seats in Parliament, (i.e., 90 percent of the total seats). (See Tables 1 and 2.) The incipient movement toward greater political liberalization appeared to have stalled, reverting back to the primacy of "developmentalism" over liberal democratic governance.[14] Apart from the institutional barriers to greater political liberalization, there appeared to also be a durable political culture working against political transformation. In describing the political culture of "developmentalism," Malaysian political scientist Francis Loh Kok Wah writes,

> The discourse of developmentalism came into its own amidst this economic growth [in the period between the late 1980s and the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997]. It coincided with the consolidation of Malaysia's middle classes involving all ethnic groups. Embraced by the middle classes, the new political culture places value on sustained economic growth that facilitates an improvement in material standards of living while also resulting in the spread of consumerist habits. Its corollary is an appreciation of the value of political stability, which many Malaysians believed could only be guaranteed by a strong BN-governed state even when authoritarian means were resorted to. Developmentalism, therefore, is the cultural consequence of the strong developmental state when citizens begin to enjoy improved living conditions as a result of the economic growth the state has fostered. This developmentalism increasingly displaced the ethnic political discourse and practice in the 1990s.[15]

POST-DEVELOPMENTALISM?

The veil of "developmentalism," however, appeared to have masked some fundamental structural and institutional inequalities underlying Malaysia's political economy and society. The ethnic restructuring of the Malaysian economy and society through the NEP of 1970 and its successor policy, the New Development Policy (NDP) of 1990, and the affirmative action/preferential treatments given to ethnic Malays under their status as *bumiputera* (sons of the soil) have over time solidified a society divided between Malays and non-Malays.[16] So while the discourses of "developmentalism" and political stability have been used repeatedly to explain electoral authoritarianism in Malaysia, political contestation and conflict have never been far from the surface.

Four years after BN's resounding victory at the polls in 2004, the outcome of the 12 GE in 2008 was markedly different, with the ruling coalition losing its two-thirds majority in Parliament as well as its political control of the state legislatures in four states (bringing the total number of state governments under opposition rule to five).[17] For democracy advocates, this turn in Malaysia's political trajectory, as measured by election outcomes, appeared to be the next major phase in the country's political liberalization, in effect, putting it back on the (gradual) path to liberal democratic reform.[18]

TABLE 1: FEDERAL PARLIAMENTARY SEATS WON BY MAJOR POLITICAL PARTIES, 1986 – 2008

Party Name	Year 1990	% Change in Seats (from 1986)	Year 1995	% Change in Seats	Year 1999	% Change in Seats	Year 2004	% Change in Seats	Year 2008	% Change in Seats
Barisan Nasional Coalition	127	-14.2%	162	+27.6%	148	-8.6%	198	+33.8%	140	-29.3%
UMNO	70	-15.7%	89	+27.1%	72	-19.1%	109	+51.4%	79	-27.5%
MCA	18	+5.9%	30	+66.7%	28	-6.7%	31	+10.7%	15	-51.6%
MIC	6	-	7	+16.7%	7	-	9	+28.6%	3	-66.7%
Other BN Parties*	33		36		41		49		43	
Opposition	49	+96%	30	-38.8%	45	+50.0%	20	-55.6%	82	+310%
DAP	20	-16.7%	9	-55.0%	10	+11.1%	12	+20.0%	28	+133%
PAS	7	+600%	7	-	27	+285%	7	-74.1%	23	+229%
PKN/PKR	-	-	-	-	5	-	1	-80.0%	31	+3000%
Other Opposition Parties*	22		14		3		-		-	
Total	180		192		193		219		222	

Sources: (Ramanathan 1986; Zakaria 2000; Khoo 2005; Ufen 2009)[19]

*PBB (Sarawak) (1990, 1995, 1999, 2004, 2008); PBS (Sabah) (2004, 2008); Gerakan (1990, 1995, 2004, 2008)

**Semangat '46 (1990, 1995); PBS (Sabah) (1990, 1995, 1999)

TABLE 2: PERCENTAGE OF THE POPULAR VOTE WON BY BARISAN NASIONAL AND OPPOSITION IN GENERAL ELECTIONS, FEDERAL PARLIAMENTARY SEATS, 1986 – 2008

Party Name	Year 1990	% Change (from 1986)	Year 1995	% Change	Year 1999	% Change	Year 2004	% Change	Year 2008	% Change
Barisan Nasional Coalition*	53.4	-2.4%	65.2	+11.8%	56.5	-8.7%	63.9	+7.4	51.5*	-12.4
Opposition PAS, PKR, DAP	46.6	+5.0%	34.8	-11.8%	43.5	+8.7%	36.1	-7.4	47.3	+11.2

Sources: (Zakaria 2000; Gomez; Khoo 2005; Brown 2008)[20]

*Table 2 includes the votes from BN coalition partners in Sabah and Sarawak.

LOSS OF NON-MALAY SUPPORT

In his assessment of the 12 GE, Thomas Pepinsky identifies one of the main causes of the ruling regime's poor showing as "non-Malay voters' rejecting the incumbent coalition in favor of secular opposition parties."[21] There certainly appears to have been a shift in the level of support for the ruling BN coalition among the Chinese and Indian voters (see Table 3).[22] The two ethnically based component parties in the BN coalition, the Malaysian Chinese Association (hereafter MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (hereafter MIC), were the biggest casualties in the 12 GE.

TABLE 3: ESTIMATED CHANGE IN ETHNIC VOTES FOR BARISAN NASIONAL: 2004 (11TH GENERAL ELECTION) VS. 2008 (12TH GENERAL ELECTION)

Party Name	Percentage of Malays Votes: Split Comparison 2004 vs. 2008 GE		Percentage of Chinese Votes: Split Comparison 2004 vs. 2008 GE		Percentage of Indian Votes: Split Comparison 2004 vs. 2008 GE	
Barisan Nasional Coalition	2004	2008	2004	2008	2004	2008
	63%	58%	65%	35%	82%	48%
Change	-5%		-30%		-34%	

Sources: (Pepinsky 2009; Weiss 2009; Case 2010)[23]

This is arguably one of the most significant political developments in Malaysia coming out of the 12 GE. For over half a century (and at least since the racial riots of 1969), the non-Malay minority appeared to have settled into an implicit social/political compact with the Malay majority whereby they tacitly accepted the status of "second class citizens," subordinated institutionally to the majority Malay-Muslim population. Under the "consociational democracy" model,[24] non-Malay elites had assumed the role of acting on behalf of their respective minority Chinese and Indian constituencies in political negotiations with the dominant UMNO. This, however, put the non-Malay elites in a position that allowed them to join their Malay elite counterparts in exercising control over economic resources and political institutions, often in self-aggrandizing ways. In the 12 GE, the non-Malay elites in the ruling regime appear to have lost their credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of Chinese and Indian voters, especially in their ability to advocate for their respective communities in negotiations within the ruling coalition. The emergence of the opposition alliance (PKR-DAP-PAS)[25] has provided these hitherto politically marginalized voters a viable political alternative, thereby creating sufficient *differentiation* among the choices available for them at the polls. Non-Malay voters are now able to seriously contemplate shifting their support and allegiance away from what was until now their primary (and oftentimes only) political vehicles, their respective ethnic political parties of MCA and MIC.

STREET PROTESTS ON THE EVE OF THE 12 GE

Among the most unprecedented events to take place in the last decade of Malaysia's political history in terms of contentious politics at the mass society level were two major street protests that took place in November 2007, less than five months prior to the 12 GE. (1) On November 10, an estimated 40,000 individuals, consisting of a coalition of seventy civil society groups, joined by members of opposition political parties and concerned individuals, took to the streets of the nation's capital, Kuala Lumpur.[26] Organized under the Coalition of Clean and Fair Elections (BERSIH, which is the Malay word for "clean"), this protest was to petition the king for reforms to the electoral system, which has been criticized as being biased in favor of the ruling coalition;[27] and (2) on November 25, an estimated 30,000 ethnic Indians organized as the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF), an Indian nongovernmental organization, marched peacefully on the streets of Kuala Lumpur to protest the ruling BN coalition's consistent neglect of the Tamil-speaking Hindu working class, by any measure considered to be an economic underclass in Malaysia today. These large scale political protests were significant in at least two respects. First, they broke the psychological barrier among Malaysians (which has existed ever since the May 13, 1969 bloody racial riots) against voicing their political opposition publicly, and second, they emboldened latent political discontent, especially since ethnic Indians have tradition-

ally been regarded as a passive community that loyally supports the ruling regime, despite their deteriorating economic condition for the past five decades. The sight of these protesters (often relayed through the medium of new media (e.g., *YouTube* video clips over the Internet, SMS messages, cell-phone images) being beaten and sprayed with acid-laced tear gas by the government's security forces marked a turning point in the politics of contention between the ruling regime and the opposition forces in Malaysia.[28] Voters in Malaysia had come to realize that they now had avenues to *circumvent* the dominant institutions of the ruling regime, and that through these alternative avenues they could channel their voices of political dissent. In the case of the Chinese and Indian voters, these political developments have been quite unprecedented.

NEW MEDIA & THE EMERGING "PUBLIC SPHERE"

Among the most significant new institutions that have emerged in shaping the emerging democratic space in Malaysia is *new media*. New media captures both the new medium of information as well as the fledgling "public sphere" that it represents through Internet-based news portals, blogs, e-mails, video clips on the web and cell phones, mobile short messaging service (SMS), and other means. Scholars have traced the introduction of new media into the Malaysian political landscape to the *Reformasi* movement of 1998.[29] In the wake of the 12 GE, there were numerous assessments by election candidates (representing both the ruling regime and the opposition coalition, which were then confirmed by analysts) of the defining role played by new media in BN's poor electoral performance.[30] In this sense, new media came into its own with the 12 GE.

Institutionally, the mainstream media in Malaysia has been firmly in the grip of the ruling regime for decades and continues to be so today, both in terms of its corporate ownership[31] and in its perceived role as a mouthpiece for the ruling BN coalition.[32] In the case of the new media, it has *circumvented* the institutionalized mainstream media to create a parallel "institution" not only for the dissemination of information but also to *facilitate* the role of civil society. For example, one scholar points to the many creative ways in which different kinds of media were used during the campaign period of the 12 GE, especially in "fomenting alternative imaginaries and contesting cultural maps of meanings to Malaysian society at large, and in the process engender[ing] shifts in dominant power relations."[33] He goes on to state, "political parties did not have the monopoly on electoral campaigning. Numerous individuals and civil society groups also took the initiative to engage and educate the Malaysian public on what was at stake in the 12th General Election."[34] Capturing the many platforms through which the new media manifests itself, he writes, "[on] polling day, the hand phone was again indispensable in facilitating timely and contrapuntal informational flow."[35] In short, the 12 GE demonstrated the various forms and broad range of new media in "the cultural production" and "contestations of social power in contemporary Malaysian society."[36]

One of the interesting insights with regard to new media during this past decade is the speed with which it has emerged as a dominant factor in the changing political dynamics in Malaysia. In a study conducted of blogging in Malaysia in 2006, based on the demographic that was actively engaged in it, the authors were not too optimistic of the potential of this form of new media to change the political landscape. They write, "the possibility of blogging to act as a vehicle for political change and democratization should be viewed with caution."[37] Two years later, in their observations of the role of bloggers in the 12 GE, they reassessed their earlier conclusions, sharing the view that bloggers were now assuming the role of "thought leaders for a new generation."[38] They write that, in the context of a

controlled mainstream media, "there is no doubt that, in the recent general election, these 'thought leaders' have become crucial in 'the shaping of opinions' through 'online political discourses' of the nation...."[39] The dynamic and protean nature by which the new media has developed also suggests that its next phase of transformation would be left only to the political imagination of Malaysia's netizens.

The transformation that would allow new media to form a more robust democratic culture and consequently become the next step in the trajectory of liberal democratic reform in Malaysia is through the formation of a "public sphere." Political philosopher Charles Taylor in his discussion of civil society as "public sphere" reminds us that in liberal society there is a social form of power that society wields to counteract the power of the state.[40] Taylor defines a public sphere as:

> A common space in which the members of society meet, through a variety of media (print, *electronic*) and also in face-to-face encounters, to discuss matters of common interest; and thus to be able to form a common mind about those matters. I say "a common space" because, although the media are multiple, as well as the exchanges taking place in them, they are deemed to be in principle intercommunicating (emphasis added).[41]

The "common space" of the public sphere then is seen as a space for discussion, not strictly a physically identifiable place, but rather, the domain in which discussions take place (i.e., through the media, books, pamphlets, and newspapers.)[42] Taylor argues for a view of the public sphere as "a space of discussion which is self-consciously seen as being outside power" with its role expressed in these terms: "It is supposed to be listened to by those in power, but it is not itself an exercise of power."[43] Taylor points to two justifications for this. First, that the public sphere is seen as society's check on power, that is, giving shape to the claim that "political power must be supervised and checked by something outside," so that the check can be seen to be "ideally disengaged from partisan spirit."[44] Second, the rise of the public sphere effectively puts an end to the "old ideal of a social order undivided by conflict and difference."[45] Quite the opposite. The public sphere is a sphere in which constant debate and argument take place; and so that these potentially divisive moments do not signal or even result in a general weakening (or breakdown) of the whole political structure (or order), it is important that the public sphere be maintained as an "extrapolitical" sphere.[46] By carving out an extrapolitical status for the public sphere, it could be defended against accusations (often made by representatives of ruling regimes) that it will have potentially destructive or destabilizing effects on the whole polity. Indeed, this could not be further from the truth since the role of the public sphere is essentially to provide an arena in which potentially divisive issues could be hammered out with the ultimate hope of reaching some form of (unforced)[47] consensus that incorporates the common wishes of the people. Taylor elaborates that "people's views can be altered by the interchange" that transpires in the public sphere, and that "consensus sometimes emerges" through the fact that "citizens frequently understand themselves as [being] part of a community and don't vote out of individual interests alone."[48] A flourishing public sphere then is essential to any democracy because it ensures that a democratic process is maintained in political decision making.[49] Also, it is only if the public sphere is maintained as an extrapolitical domain that it can then be seen as a cluster that could be linked to other extrapolitical spheres, thereby forming the conceptual boundaries of a civil society in its broadest sense.

The next phase of political liberalization in Malaysia should be one where the trajectory of new media as a complementary actor or facilitator of the democratic process is institu-

tionalized by the gradual creation of a "public sphere" as described above. It is only then that the new media could claim to be a "free" uncensored media. In other words, by *circumventing* the current dominant institutions that represent the mainstream media in Malaysia, new media is creating a new democratic institution.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, these are some of the institutional changes that have swept across the political landscape in Malaysia in the wake of the 12 GE:

(1) There is now a higher level of *voter choice differentiation*.[50] This is certainly true for non-Malay (Chinese and Indian) voters, but this is also the case for Malay voters, who now have three choices from which to choose: the status-quo option in UMNO, and two different offerings within the opposition coalition, a liberal choice in PKR, and a more conservative alternative in PAS.[51]

(2) For the first time in recent political history, there is an increasingly viable two-party coalition system in Malaysia, with the BN coalition parties having to face a nascent "shadow government" in the Pakatan Rakyat (People's Coalition). The PKR-DAP-PAS opposition coalition-controlled governments in the state legislatures of Selangor, Penang, Kedah, and Kelantan have provided an opportunity for these state governments to begin building the necessary levels of *institutional density* to create sufficient amounts of institutional capital among themselves to govern effectively.[52]

(3) The new media is beginning to create an Internet-based public sphere in which voices critical of the government are no longer "hidden transcripts" of the oppressed[53] or the politically discontented, but rather are starting to potentially form an "imagined community"[54] of democracy advocates who have become sufficiently emboldened through the act of sharing images in their minds of "the art of the possible."[55] This has resulted in citizens engaging with the political process in more direct ways than merely passively casting their ballots at every election cycle.[56]

When one observes political developments in the run-up to and since the 12 GE, democratization in Malaysia was already occurring, albeit at a gradual pace. Democratization was being pushed by new political forces such as civil society actors, newly empowered opposition parties, and the Internet-based media. In effect, *new institutions* were being formed around *new political forces.* The pace of change is being determined by these new political forces having to challenge structural and institutional barriers representing elite-run institutions such as the dominant political parties. Often times, sites of political contention where political change emerges are situated beyond the arenas in which elite coalitions and power-sharing arrangements are being negotiated and perpetuated. It is in these new political spaces that the contours of emerging democratic space in Malaysia are being (re)delineated, often by *circumventing* conventional institutional barriers to political liberalization and democratization. The democratic space that is emerging in Malaysia today is simultaneously being shaped and contested by the political competition between status-quo and reformist forces in this society. And the boundaries of this new political space are constantly being redrawn depending on the outcomes of these political contestations. Taken together, the institutional changes discussed above have expanded the parameters of democratic space in Malaysia, although the entrenched dominant institutions of the ruling regime continue to wield sufficient amounts of institutional capacity to subvert any consolidation of these democratic changes for now. We will continue to witness these new political dynamics in Malaysia in the upcoming 13th General Election, expected to be held in 2012.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Nineteenth Annual *ASIANetwork* Conference, Oak Brook, IL, April 15-17, 2011.

2. See Marc Lynch, "After Egypt: The Limits and Promise of Online Challenges to the Authoritarian Arab State," *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 2 (June 2011): 301 - 310. Also see the essays on "The New Arab Revolt," in *Foreign Affairs* 90 no. 3 (May/June 2011).

3. Graham K. Brown, "Federal and state elections in Malaysia, March 2008," *Electoral Studies* 27 (2008): 742.

4. Data from CIA, *The World Factbook*. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/my.html. The 2010 Census figures by the government of Malaysia do not provide the breakdown between Malays and other "bumiputera" (or indigenous) groups. The figures are: 67.4% Bumiputera (indigenous races), 24.6% Chinese, 7.3% Indians, and 0.7% others. http://www.statistics.gov.my

5. R.S. Milne and Diane K. Mauzy, *Malaysian Politics under Mahathir* (New York & London: Routledge, 1999), 10.

6. Zakaria Haji Ahmad, "Malaysia: In an Uncertain Mode," in *Driven By Growth: Political Change in the Asia-Pacific Region*, ed. James W. Morley (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 179.

7. These "special rights" for Malays and other indigenous races (*bumiputera*) are entrenched in Articles 152 and 153 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia.

8. Zakaria, "Malaysia: In an Uncertain Mode," 179.

9. Zakaria Haji Ahmad, "Malaysia: Quasi Democracy in a Divided Society," in *Democracy in Developing Countries, Volume 3: Asia*, eds., Larry Diamond, Juan J. Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1989), 375.

10. Donald K. Emmerson, "Region and Recalcitrance: Rethinking Democracy through Southeast Asia," *Pacific Review* 8, no. 2 (1995): 223-248.

11. David Brown and David Martin Jones, "Democratization and the Myth of the Liberalizing Middle Classes," in *Towards Illiberal Democracy in Pacific Asia*, eds. Daniel A. Bell, David Brown, Kanishka Jayasuriya, and David Martin Jones (London & New York: Macmillan/St. Antony's College and St. Martin's Press, 1995), 78-106.

12. See Diane K. Mauzy and Shane J. Barter, "Learning to lose? Not if UMNO can help it," in *Political Transitions in Dominant Party Systems: Learning to Lose*, eds. Edward Friedman and Joseph Wong (London & New York: Routledge, 2008), 211 – 230.

13. Surain Subramaniam, "The Dual Narrative of Good Governance: Lesson for Understanding Political and Cultural Change in Malaysia and Singapore," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 23, no. 1 (April 2001): 65– 80.

14. Francis Loh Kok Wah, "Developmentalism and the Limits of Democratic Discourse," in *Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and Practices*, eds. Francis Loh Kok Wah and Khoo Boo Teik (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2002), 19-50.

15. Francis Loh Kok Wah, *Old vs. New Politics in Malaysia: State and Society in Transition* (Malaysia: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2009), 32. In many ways, "developmentalism" as a political ideology resembles some of the positions associated with the "Asian values" discourse, see Surain Subramaniam, "The Asian Values Debate: Implications for the Spread of Liberal Democracy," *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 27, no. 1 (March 2000): 19–35.

16. William Case writes, "In its distributions of public resources, the government has heavily favored the Malays… But these same allocations and appeals have also alienated the non-Malays, belittling them with 'second-class' citizenship." See William Case "Political Legitimacy in Malaysia: Historical Roots and Contemporary Deficits," *Politics & Polity* 38, no. 3 (2010): 498.

17. In political developments subsequent to the 2008 General Elections, the ruling BN government wrested control of the state of Perak, reducing the total number of states under opposition control from five to four.

18. There have been a few studies of the 12 GE in terms of explaining the factors that have led to the specific electoral outcomes. See Brown, "Federal and state elections in Malaysia, March 2008"; Thomas B. Pepinsky, "The 2008 Malaysian Elections: An End to Ethnic Politics?" *Journal of East Asian Studies* 9, no. 1(January-April 2009): 87-120.; and Andreas Ufen, "The transformation of political party opposition in Malaysia and its implications for the electoral authoritarian regime," *Democratization* 16, no. 3 (June 2009): 604–627.

19. Data drawn from Sankaran Ramanathan & Mohd. Hamdan Adnan, *Malaysia's 1986 General Election: The Urban-Rural Dichotomy* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1988), 50; Zakaria Haji Ahmad, in Trends in Malaysia: Election Assessment (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, January 2000), 8; Khoo Boo Teik, in Mavis Puthucheary and Norani Othman, eds., *Elections and Democracy in Malaysia* (Malaysia: UKM, 2005), 42, 44; and Andreas Ufen, "The transformation of political party opposition in Malaysia and its implications for the electoral authoritarian regime."

20. Data drawn from Zakaria, "The 1999 General Elections: A Preliminary Overview"; Edmund Terence Gomez, "Introduction: Politics, business and ethnicity in Malaysia: a state in transition?" in Edmund Terence Gomez, ed., *The State of Malaysia: Ethnicity, equity and reform* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 12; Khoo, "Limits to democracy: political economy, ideology and ruling coalition"; and Brown, "Federal and state elections in Malaysia, March 2008."

21. Pepinsky, "The 2008 Malaysian Elections: An End to Ethnic Politics?" 87, 98. Pepinsky's findings were based on cross-referencing electoral outcomes of specific political parties (UMNO, MCA, MIC, PKR, DAP, PAS) with the ethnic composition of the political constituencies. Some of his findings include (1) "in both state assembly and parliamentary elections, as the percentage of Malays in an electoral district increases, the likelihood of a BN victory increases. By contrast, as the percentage of Indians and Chinese increases, the likelihood of a BN victory decreases substantially" (105); (2) "Ethnic Chinese appear to have broken for both PKR and

the DAP in substantial numbers; only about a third of Chinese voters are estimated to have voted for the MCA" (108); and (3) "[In] districts where the MIC fielded candidates, only three in ten Indians are estimated to have voted for them." (108). All quotes taken from Pepinsky, "The 2008 Malaysian Elections: An End to Ethnic Politics?"

22. For a critique of the Malaysian Chinese Association, the main political party within the ruling BN coalition that represents the ethnic Chinese constituency, see James Chin, "Malaysian Chinese Association Politics a Year Later: Crisis of Political Legitimacy," *The Round Table* 99 no. 407 (April 2010): 153-162.

23. Data drawn from Pepinsky, "The 2008 Malaysian Elections: An End to Ethnic Politics?"; Meredith Weiss, "Edging Toward a New Politics in Malaysia: Civil Society at the Gate," *Asian Survey* 49, no. 5 (2009): 742-758; and William Case, "Transition from Single-Party Dominance? New Data from Malaysia," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 10 (2010): 91-126.

24. Arendt Lijphart came up with the concept of "consociational democracy" to describe the political arrangement that could be used in ethnically divided societies such as Malaysia, whereby "the main ethnic communities are all represented in the government" in a "grand coalition consisting of leaders of each major ethnic community." "The ethnic parties of the consociational regime have to reach decisions by consensus, taking into account the disparate and conflicting ethnic interests that they represent. Moreover, the principle of proportionality should be observed in areas such as political representation, civil-service appointments, and the distribution of public funds to assure each community that its interests are truly being served," All quotes taken from Harold Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1996), 152, 153. One of the main sources of contention among the non-Malays is that over time, and especially since the NEP, the Malays have benefitted disproportionately from public policies enacted by the ruling BN coalition. In the case of the elites who lead the Chinese (MCA) and Indian (MIC) ethnic parties within the ruling coalition, this has gradually eroded their legitimacy, resulting in the loss of non-Malay support for the BN in the 12 GE. For an assessment of the effects of the NEP on the ethnic Chinese support for the BN, see James Chin, "The Malaysian Chinese dilemma: the Never Ending Policy (NEP), *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies* 3 (2009): 167–181.

25. PKR (Parti Keadilan Rakyat, People's Justice Party); DAP (Democratic Action Party); PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party).

26. Julian C. H. Lee, Wong Chin Huat, Melissa Wong, Yeoh Seng Guan, "Elections, Repertoires of Contention and Habitus in Four Civil Society Engagements in Malaysia's 2008 General Elections," *Social Movement Studies* 9, no. 3 (2010): 294-296.

27. On July 9, 2011, the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (BERSIH), with the support of the opposition coalition, *Pakatan Rakyat* (People's Alliance), held a follow-up demonstration in Kuala Lumpur, BERSIH 2.0., with an estimated 10,000 – 50,000 protesters. The government ordered security forces to clamp down on the protesters, arresting over 1,600 protesters, and firing tear gas and water cannons into the crowds. The government's actions were met with harsh criticism of the ruling regime, both in Malaysia, and abroad, much of the former expressed in the Internet-based new media. See "Bersih turns to social media amid police clampdown," Malaysiakini, June 29, 2011; and "170,000 'like' Facebook page urging PM to go." *Malaysiakini,* July 13, 2011. http://www.malaysiakini.com. One of the many *YouTube* videos capturing scenes from the protest titled, "Truth that Cannot Be Covered – Bersih 2.0" has been viewed 946,683 times. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCetbFLceFI

28. To illustrate this point, one of the many *YouTube* videos capturing scenes from the 2007 HINDRAF protest titled, "Hindraf Rally Report" has been viewed 335,614 times. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rlWmafBG1Mo. Also see "HINDRAF 1 – Samy Vellu 0" http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KXJTqZdlOQ4&feature

29. Subramaniam, "The Dual Narrative of Good Governance: Lesson for Understanding Political and Cultural Change in Malaysia and Singapore."

30. Jun-E-Tan and Zawawi Ibrahim, *Blogging and Democratization in Malaysia: A New Civil Society in the Making* (Malaysia: Strategic Information and Research Development Center, 2008), 83–99.

31. Mustafa K. Anuar, "Media Commercialisation in Malaysia," in *Free Markets Free Media? Reflections on the political economy of the press in Asia*, ed. Cherian George (Singapore: Asian Media Information and Communication Center, 2008), 124-136.

32. In a study of the mainstream media in Malaysia, two scholars write, "Content analyses of election coverage show that the mainstream media in Malaysia pursue a subservient model of political news reporting. Without question, the close relationship between the mass media and the government in Malaysia is responsible for the biased coverage of national elections and the political favoritism afforded to the various parties of the ruling BN coalition," See Ezhar Tamam and Manimaran Govindasamy, "Political Communication Practices and Research in Malaysia: An Overview" in *Political Communication in Asia*, eds. Lars Willnat and Annette Aw (New York & London: Routledge, 2009), 148.

33. Yeoh Seng Guan, "Introduction: Representation, cultural mediation and power in Malaysia," in *Media, Culture and Society in Malaysia*, ed.Yeoh Seng Guan (New York: Routledge, 2010), 12.

34. Ibid., 14.

35. Ibid., 14.

36. Ibid., 15.

37. Jun-E-Tan and Ibrahim, *Blogging and Democratization in Malaysia: A New Civil Society in the Making*, 79.

38. Jun-E-Tan and Zawawi Ibrahim, "Postscript: Rethinking Blogging and the 12th Malaysian General Election," in

Jun-E-Tan and Ibrahim, *Blogging and Democratization in Malaysia: A New Civil Society in the Making*, 92.

39. Ibid., 92-93.
40. Charles Taylor, "Liberal Politics and the Public Sphere," in Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 257-287.
41. Ibid., 259.
42. Ibid., 261.
43. Ibid., 264-265.
44. Ibid., 265.
45. Ibid., 265.
46. Ibid., 265.
47. Charles Taylor, "Conditions of an Unforced Consensus on Human Rights," in *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights*, eds. Joanne R. Bauer and Daniel A. Bell (Cambridge, U.K. & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 124 – 144.
48. Taylor, "Liberal Politics and the Public Sphere," in Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, 276.
49. Ibid., 277, 278.
50. I use the term "voter choice differentiation" to capture the increased menu of choices available now to voters in Malaysia beyond the prior choices that were defined almost exclusively along communal lines. Some of the new categories that could now be used to differentiate the choices open to voters would include ideological differences and various issues-oriented distinctions that transcend the ascriptive identities of both candidates and voters.
51. Operationally, this raises some immediate challenges to the opposition coalition in terms of fielding the most suitable candidate in a given political constituency during elections both at the national and state levels. This does not however diminish my argument that these increased choices at the macro-level have changed the political landscape for voters in terms of the level of differentiation among the options available to them.
52. I use the term "institutional density" to capture the same kinds of institutional capital that has been built up among different groups of elites within the ruling coalition, as discussed in institutionalist models of durable authoritarianism. For the latter, see Dan Slater, *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge, U.K. & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
53. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale, 1990).
54. Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).
55. Jun-E-Tan and Ibrahim, Blogging and Democratization in *Malaysia: A New Civil Society in the Making*, 95.
56. Some of these "transcripts" are powerfully captured in the writings that appeared immediately prior to and since the 12 GE, many of which had their first iteration in web-form over the new media, see Nathaniel Tan and John Lee, eds., *Political Tsunami: An End to Hegemony in Malaysia?* (Malaysia: Kinibooks, 2008); Liew Chin Tong, *Speaking for the Reformasi Generation: A collection of articles & essays*, 2003 – 2009 (Malaysia: REFSA, 2009); Raja Petra Raja Kamaruddin, *Silent Roar: A Decade of Change* (Argyll, Scotland: Argyll, 2009); and Kee Thuan Chye (and fellow Malaysians), *March 8: Time for Real Change* (London: Marshall Cavendish, 2010).