



The March 2004 General Elections in Malaysia: Looking Beyond the “*Pak Lah*” Factor

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ABSTRACT. The mainstream media typically gives credit to the “*Pak Lah*” factor in explaining the spectacular electoral victory of Malaysia’s ruling *Barisan Nasional* (BN) coalition in the March 2004 general elections. Abdullah Badawi, nicknamed Pak Lah, replaced Malaysia’s long-time leader Mahathir Mohamad as Malaysia’s new prime minister. Malaysia’s voters supposedly became impressed with Abdullah’s more endearing public image as well as his impressive reform initiatives. However, this only partially explains the victory. More importantly, the BN always wins because it maintains undemocratic controls over Malaysia’s electoral politics through its possession of large amounts of capital, its more comprehensive electoral machine, and its control over the mainstream media. Moreover, the Mahathir government abused its powers by arresting prominent opposition leaders under suspicious charges, manipulating the courts, and amending the Election Act to terms favorable to the BN but detrimental to the opposition parties. The war on terrorism provided a further opportunity to advance the prestige of the BN as Mahathir emerged as an international symbol for moderate Islam as well as a leader of the Global South. Finally, the powerful new political culture which the author refers to as “developmentalism” also plays a prominent role in the Malaysian electorate’s decision to keep the BN in power. Malaysia’s recent economic growth and political stability has been perceived to result from the BN’s neoliberal policies of privatization, deregulation, and attracting foreign investment. Because of the general improvement in living standards, Malaysians value the development and modernization of their country above ethnicism. Moreover, Malaysians cannot imagine having political stability without BN rule, and the opposition lacks experience in promoting development. Thus, a “self-policing” system has emerged that has led the Malaysian citizenry to rely on the BN for economic growth and stability.

KEYWORDS. Malaysia · elections · *Barisan Nasional* (BN) · “*Pak Lah*” factor · developmentalism

INTRODUCTION

The *Barisan Nasional* (BN [National Front]) coalition comprising 14 component parties scored a spectacular victory in the general elections

held on March 21, 2004. It polled 63.8 percent of the popular vote (up from 56 percent in 1999). In Malaysia's first-past-the-post (or simple majority) electoral system, this translated into 90.4 percent of all parliamentary seats (or 198 out of 219) in 2004, up from 76.7 percent of all parliamentary seats (or 148 out of 193) in 1999. The 2004 general elections was also the eleventh time that Malaysians went to the polls and the eleventh time that the BN emerged victorious.

The dominant approach utilized by researchers to interpret Malaysian politics is based on plural society theories. In this approach, politics in a multiethnic society is considered to be fractured along ethnic lines. The existence of ethnic-based communities with recognizable leaders as well as common interests and goals are assumed as "givens." It follows that electoral politics, too, is presumed to be ethnically determined, and that voters invariably vote along ethnic lines. The BN, being a multiethnic coalition, and its leaders apparently imbued with more moderate and altruistic mores, including being prepared to share power, invariably comes out tops. This is the consociational model of politics, wherein the masses in a plural society are awash in communalism, the opposition leaders extremist and exclusivist in their views, and political stability maintained precariously, thanks to the altruistic and tolerant ruling elites.

Such a perspective underscores most explanations of the BN's lasting domination of Malaysian electoral politics. Apart from this, references are also made to specific events and episodes that occur around the time when elections are held to explain the variations in the BN's victories—sometimes spectacular, other times less so. For instance, the BN's narrow victory in the 1999 general elections was attributed to the "dual crises" that occurred in the run-up to that election—the regional financial crisis of 1997/1998 and the political crisis resulting from then-Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's sacking from the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), both contributing toward a *reformasi* movement. In 2004, the BN's spectacular victory was also explained in terms of the "*Pak Lah*" factor, namely, the ascendancy of Abdullah Badawi (who is informally known in Malaysia as "Pak Lah") as Malaysia's new prime minister just prior to the 2004 polls, replacing Dr. Mahathir Mohamad who had been at the helm for 22 years. It was Abdullah who led the BN into the 2004 polls and, apparently due to his more endearing political style and several reform initiatives, ensured a spectacular victory for the BN.

In this article I shall first present the results of the 2004 elections in a novel format, distinguishing between the peninsula seats from those in Sabah and Sarawak. In turn, the peninsula seats will be differentiated into four types. The 1999 results will also be presented alongside the 2004 ones. This comparison with the 1999 results is important in order to highlight that Malaysia's various ethnic groups do not vote in ethnic blocs. This was less evident in 2004, but very clearly the case in 1999. Contrary to the assumptions of those who utilize plural society theories and/or consociational models to analyze Malaysian politics, I wish to stress that the different ethnic groups in Malaysia are fragmented. In the second part of the article, I elaborate on the "Pak Lah" factor. Although Abdullah Badawi did make a difference in facilitating the BN's victory, I shall also argue that there were several continuities from the Mahathir past which handicapped the opposition and impinged upon the electoral outcome. These factors include the usual BN's greater access to the 3-Ms (money, media, and machine); changes in election laws and electoral boundaries; detentions and convictions of young charismatic opposition leaders; and the war on terrorism, which caused a breakup of the opposition coalition that was forged in 1999. I will end with a brief discussion of the rise of "developmentalism," a new political culture that I have argued elsewhere (Loh 2001, 2002b), increasingly displaces ethnicism and has become the basis of BN support. Taken together, these explanations suggest an alternative interpretation of why the BN always wins, i.e., not because of the BN's consociationalism per se but because of its undemocratic controls over electoral politics, and because of how developmentalism has increasingly overwhelmed Malaysians and rallied them behind the BN.

THE SOURCES OF THE BN'S SUPPORT

The Barisan Nasional (BN) won 198 of 219 (90.4 percent) parliamentary seats in the 2004 general elections. ¹ This was clearly better than in 1999 when it only won 148 out of 193 (76.7 percent) parliamentary seats. One way to disaggregate the data is to organize it by states (see Table 1). In 2004, the BN won all the seats in seven states, and 87 to 96 percent of all seats in six other states. It only fared less well in Kelantan (57.1 percent), Penang (61.5 percent), and the Kuala Lumpur Federal Territory (66.7 percent). The BN's clear domination of parliament ensures that it will be able to pass all future bills and laws,

Table 1. Performance of BN by percentage of seats gained and popular vote

State	1999		2004	
	Seats gained (%)	Popular vote (%)	Seats gained (%)	Popular vote (%)
Perlis	100	56.2	100.0	63.7
Kedah	46.7	55.7	93.3	59.8
Kelantan	7.1	38.9	57.1	50.0
Terengganu	0	41.2	100.0	56.5
Penang	54.5	51.4	61.5	56.9
Perak	87.0	55.5	87.5	59.6
Pahang	100.0	57.4	100.0	67.7
Selangor	100.0	54.7	100.0	65.5
Kuala Lumpur	63.6	50.2	66.7	58.4
Negeri Sembilan	100.0	59.2	100.0	69.9
Melaka	80.0	56.6	100.0	71.6
Johore	100.0	72.9	100.0	79.6
Peninsula	71.0	55.5	88.5	63.6
Sabah (including Labuan)	85.0	59.7	96.0	61.5
Sarawak	100.0	65.9	96.4	63.1
Total	76.7	56.5	90.4	63.8

as well as amend the constitution (which requires a two-thirds majority) at will. Traditionally, BN legislators have always voted with the ruling BN party, and the few members of parliament (MPs) who have done otherwise have been chastised and ostracized, and disallowed from recontesting in the following election. Put another way, the BN-dominated parliament will be easily swayed by the executive and will not be able in whatever way to play the role of watchdog over the executive. The party whip further ensures that there are no recalcitrants in the BN.

This is one of the unfortunate consequences of the first-past-the-post or simple-majority electoral system practised in Malaysia. As indicated in Table 1, the BN's victory in terms of the popular vote that was polled was not so spectacular. Although it scored 100 percent victories in seven states, it hardly scored anything near 100 percent in terms of votes polled in those states. Its best performance was in Johore (a credible 79.6 percent of votes polled for 100 percent of the seats), but in Terengganu it only managed 56.5 percent of the total votes, yet it took 100 percent of all seats. Indeed, in six states, the BN polled less than 60 percent of the popular vote.

There is another more useful way to organize the electoral results, one that highlights the fragmentation of ethnic groups in elections. We first distinguish the peninsula seats from those in Sabah and Sarawak (in Borneo). It is also useful to divide the peninsula seats into four

major types: generally rural big Malay-majority seats (with more than 67.0 percent Malay voters); urban Chinese-majority seats (with more than 50 percent Chinese voters); and two types of semi-urban seats: small Malay-majority seats (wherein Malays comprise 50 to 66.9 percent of voters) and the mixed seats (wherein no particular ethnic group constitutes more than 50 percent of the voters) (see Table 2).

In 1999, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), which is the dominant party in the BN, had performed poorly in the big Malay majority seats, most of which fall within the states of Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah, and Perlis, also referred to as the Malay heartland states located in the northern part of the peninsula. The Islamic Party of Malaysia or *Parti Islam SeMalaysia* (PAS), an opposition and Islamist political party, had won all eight parliamentary seats in Terengganu and 13 of 14 seats at stake in Kelantan. PAS also performed very well in the contest for state seats and emerged as the ruling party in the Kelantan and Terengganu states. In Kedah, then-prime minister Mahathir's home state, PAS even bested UMNO, winning eight out of 15 parliamentary seats (Loh 2003).²

In fact, BN/UMNO only polled 49.8 percent of the popular vote in the big Malay majority constituencies and won only 27 of the 59 big Malay-majority seats contested in 1999. Its performance in the urban Chinese majority seats was only slightly better. The BN polled 52.4 percent of the popular vote and 15 of the 24 seats contested. In both the rural big Malay-majority and the urban Chinese-majority seats, the popular vote was split almost down the middle. In other words, the ethnic groups did not vote as ethnic blocs.

The BN's victory was only secured in the closely contested 1999 general elections because it performed spectacularly in the semi-urban seats. In the small Malay-majority seats, it polled 61.4 percent of the popular vote and won all of the 39 seats. It also did very well in the mixed constituencies where it captured 59.9 percent of the votes and won 21 of 22. Taken together, it won 60 of the 61 semi-urban seats. Finally, the BN won all 28 seats in Sarawak and 18 of 21 seats in Sabah (including Labuan) (Table 2).

In 2004, the BN polled 64.9 percent of the popular vote and claimed 25 of the 26 parliamentary seats in Sabah (including Labuan), and polled 63.1 percent of the popular vote and won 27 of the 28 seats in Sarawak. Again, the BN performed very well in the semi-urban seats. In the small Malay-majority seats, it polled 71.4 percent of the popular vote and took all 48 such seats. In the mixed constituencies, it polled

Table 2. Performance of BN by constituency type

Constituency		1999		2004	
		Popular vote (%)	Seats gained (%)	Popular vote (%)	Seats gained (%)
Peninsula	Big Malay majority (67% Malays)	14.0	49.8	26.0	59.9
	Small Malay majority (50%-66.9% Malays)	20.2	61.4	21.9	71.4
	Chinese majority (50% Chinese)	7.8	52.4	6.4	53.7
	Mixed (no single ethnic group 50% of the voters)	10.9	59.9	12.3	68.8
Subtotal		52.8	55.5	66.6	63.6
Sabah (including Labuan)		9.3	59.7	11.4	64.9
Sarawak		14.5	65.9	12.3	63.1
Percentage of popular vote		76.7		90.4	
Number of seats taken		148		198	
Total number of seats		193		219	

68.8 percent of the votes and won all 27 such seats, acquiring the total 75 available (Tables 3 and 4).

Significantly, the BN also performed very well in the generally rural Malay heartland states which account for the large Malay-majority seats. It won 57 of 65 such parliamentary seats (Table 5). This included all eight parliamentary seats in Terengganu, all three seats in Perlis, eight of 14 seats in Kelantan, and 14 of the 15 seats in Kedah. More than that, the BN recaptured Terengganu state when it won 28 out of 32 state seats, while it narrowly conceded Kelantan state to PAS when it gained 21 to PAS's 24 state seats. The BN further performed very well in the contest for state seats in Kedah (winning 31 of 36 seats) and in Perlis (winning 14 of 15 seats).

The total number of PAS members in Parliament dropped from 27 in 1999 to only seven following the 2004 elections. Meanwhile, the People's Justice Party or *Parti Keadilan Rakyat*, another opposition party, which previously held five parliamentary seats, ended up with only one seat. Of the opposition parties, only the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP) managed to hold its own. It performed well in the urban Chinese-majority seats, winning 12 parliamentary seats, including in Kuching, Sarawak (Table 6). (The final seat went to an independent who defeated the BN candidate in Sandakan, Sabah.)

Hence, in 2004, as in 1999, the BN did extremely well in the semi-urban seats, and in Sabah and Sarawak too. Moreover, whereas it previously performed poorly in the big Malay-majority seats, the BN vastly improved its performance in 2004. It was only in the Chinese-majority seats, where little change in voting pattern occurred, that the BN had to share the seats with the opposition DAP. Be that as it may, the impressive number of seats gained by the BN belies the fact that some 40 percent of Malay voters continued to support the opposition party in the big Malay-majority constituencies, while some 46.7 percent of Chinese voters rallied behind the opposition in the Chinese-majority seats. Hence, although a swing toward the BN occurred in 2004, the ethnic groups did not vote in ethnic blocs. Consideration of the popular vote makes this evident.

At any rate, Abdullah Badawi, the new prime minister, secured the mandate from both non-Malay as well as Malay voters in 2004. He had proved himself more popular than Mahathir, his predecessor, who had lost the popular Malay vote to the opposition in 1999; indeed, under Badawi's leadership, the BN managed to secure victories in Sabah and Sarawak as well as the popular support of non-Malays in

Table 3. Performance in small Malay majority constituencies (50-66.9 % Malays)

Party	1999		2004	
	Seats gained (%)	Popular vote (%)	Seats gained (%)	Popular vote (%)
UMNO	80.0	49.6	50.0	50.8
MCA	15.0	10.1	22.9	16.5
MIC	2.5	1.7	4.2	3.0
Gerakan	-	-	2.1	1.1
PAS	0	12.1	0	15.6
Keadilan	2.5	25.0	0	12.2
DAP	0	0.7	0	0.7
PRM	0	0.8	-	-
Independent	0	0.1	0	0.2
Total number of seats	40		48	

Chinese-majority and mixed constituencies to defeat the opposition. How does one account for this spectacular BN victory in 2004?

THE PAK LAH FACTOR

The mainstream media in particular has explained the BN's victory in terms of the Pak Lah factor. For them, it was the new prime minister that had made the difference. In less than five months after assuming power in November 1, 2003, Abdullah, it has been suggested, stamped his own mark and distinguished himself from Mahathir, thereby attracting back to the BN those who might have been alienated by Mahathir and supported the opposition in 1999.

Abdullah did introduce important changes during the five months prior to the 2004 polls. These changes pertained to "improving governance," "fighting corruption," restoring "safety and security," "improving the delivery of services by the civil service," and what might be termed as a "work-with-me," not a "work-for-me," style of politics.

Improving governance and fighting corruption

Significantly, Abdullah reversed or revised decisions involving two mega projects that had been awarded just prior to Mahathir's retirement. The billion-ringgit double-track railway project controversially awarded to a conglomerate without prior experience in railway building was suddenly deemed "not a priority" project and was postponed indefinitely. Abdullah also scaled down by half the size of the Bakun Hydroelectric Power project in Sarawak, which had been restarted (after it had been frozen due to the 1997 financial crisis) by a joint

Table 4. Performance in mixed constituencies (no single ethnic group 50 % of the voters)

Party	1999		2004	
	Seats gained (%)	Popular vote (%)	Seats gained (%)	Popular vote (%)
UMNO	4.8	4.4	14.8	12.0
MCA	47.6	29.2	44.4	32.3
MIC	20.8	13.9	25.9	15.6
Gerakan	19.0	12.4	14.8	8.9
PAS	-	-	0	2.5
Keadilan	0	9.3	0	18.5
DAP	4.8	26.5	0	10.3
PRM	0	3.9	-	-
MDP	0	0.2	-	-
Independent	0	0.1	-	-
Total number of seats	21		27	

venture involving Syed Mokhtar al-Bukhary, apparently Mahathir's new favorite, who had also been a beneficiary to other mega projects in Malaysia since the other favorites fell from grace.

There were then exposés of financial scandals in the mainstream media, normally undistinguished for investigative journalism. Several cases of alleged corruption and/or cronyism made the headlines. The head of a Melaka state government corporation was then arrested on suspicions of bribery. Then came the arrest and charges filed against Eric Chia and Kasisah Gaddam. Chia, who was charged with a Criminal Breach of Trust (CBT) involving MYR 76 million, had been managing director of Perwaja Steel Sdn Bhd, Malaysia's largest steel concern which had lost billions of ringgit. At the time of his arrest, Kasisah was the Minister of Land and Cooperative Development. He was charged with corrupt practices and cheating in 1996 when he was chairman of the Sabah Land Development Board.

Apparently, the cases against these two personalities had been completed years ago during Mahathir's time but had not been acted upon despite repeated calls by the opposition and nongovernment organizations (NGOs) to Mahathir's government to do so. Rais Yatim, the minister in charge of legal affairs, also announced that there were 18 other prominent cases of corruption on the books while Abdullah ordered his attorney-general to speed up investigations and deliberations on these cases. The impression was that whereas the Mahathir government had inveighed against corruption but had not acted decisively, this time, Pak Lah apparently meant business, declaring war against corruption.

Table 5. Performance in big Malay majority constituencies (67% Malays)

Party	1999		2004	
	Seats gained (%)	Popular vote (%)	Seats gained (%)	Popular vote (%)
UMNO	46.6	49.8	87.7	59.9
PAS	46.6	40.5	10.8	34.0
Keadilan	6.9	9.6	1.5	5.8
Berjasa	0	0.02	-	-
Akim	0	0.01	-	-
Independent	-	-	0	0.3
Total number of seats	58		65	

Public safety and security

Another Abdullah initiative was to launch the “Special Commission to Enhance the Operation and Management of the Royal Malaysian Police.” Although presented as an enquiry into how to instill greater professionalism and make the police force a “credible force in the 21st century,” this initiative was actually a response to increasing public indignation concerning the lack of public safety and security, and eroding confidence in the police force among Malaysians. In recent years, the incidence of violent crimes including rapes and murders had been on the rise. There had also been complaints and increased allegations of police abuses in dealing with demonstrators and opposition groups, as well as of deaths of criminal suspects while in police custody. Some of these complainants had taken their cases to Suhakam, Malaysia’s human rights commission, to the Bar Council’s Human Rights Committee, and to human rights NGOs as well.

Within a week after Abdullah took office, he made the important move of changing the police chief. This was followed by an announcement of a pay hike for police personnel. He then announced plans to launch the Special Commission, which was warmly welcomed by the public, although there were criticisms of the commission’s composition (*The Star*, February 5, 2004).

Upgrading the civil service to serve the *rakyat* better

Another initiative was to look into the workings of the civil service from which Abdullah himself had emerged. Abdullah considered the matter to be of some urgency since public criticism of the service was high, and morale within the service low. Under Mahathir, politicization of the civil service had occurred as money politics crept into the body

Table 6. Performance in Chinese majority constituencies (50% Chinese)

Party	1999		2004	
	Seats gained (%)	Popular vote (%)	Seats gained (%)	Popular vote (%)
MCA	50.0	43.6	36.0	40.8
Gerakan	12.5	8.8	16.0	11.1
PPP	-	-	4.0	1.8
DAP	37.5	45.4	44.0	44.2
Keadilan	-	-	0	1.9
MDP	0	0.3	0	0.1
PRM	0	1.8		
Independent	0	0.2	0	0.01
Total number of seats	24		25	

politic. Top students had also been encouraged to join the ranks of the so-called Bumiputera Commercial and Industrial Community (BCIC), rather than join the civil service. As Mahathir adopted neoliberal policies of privatization and designated the private sector as the new dynamo of the economy, he gave greater attention to the needs and concerns of the BCIC, especially his cronies.

A shift on this matter was discernible on day one of Abdullah's rule. In an address to top civil servants and BN leaders, he had stated: "A strong and capable leadership is central to a nation's well-being but the mainstay of government is still the civil service." It was his intention that the "civil service perform to the fullest of their abilities." Directing himself to the top BN politicians who were also present, he then added: "There is no point talking about good leadership to civil servants if the political leaders themselves do not have good work ethics. If political leaders are corrupt or negligent in their work, how can they expect those under them to serve well?" (*The Star*, February 8, 2004). This drew applause from the public at large.

Work with Me

Finally, in comparison to Mahathir's combative, temperamental, and haranguing style of "*selalu marah dan mencaci*," Pak Lah appeared to usher in a more people-oriented, consultative, and more *mesra* (endearing) and *halus* (genteel) style of politics. His appeal to Malaysians to "work with me," rather than "for me," touched many.

In his *Hari Raya* (Day of Celebration) message to the nation after the month of Ramadan, he lamented the number of fatal road accidents in the rush back to the *kampong* (villages). Instead of celebrating Hari Raya, families were gathering to bury the dead. Upon

his instruction, a public forum on finding ways to reduce the number of road accidents was held, involving traffic police, the Public Works Department, transport and related industries, and NGOs. There were also follow-up sessions, suggesting that there was serious interest to address the problem, rather than simply engage in a public relations exercise.

This new style was also evident when he sent greeting cards to all the Christian leaders and Chinese community leaders over the Christmas and lunar New Year festive seasons. A new style was again evident when his wife appeared alongside him when he addressed the nation on New Year's Eve.

On the eve of the 2004 elections, Abdullah also unveiled his "*Islam Hadhari*," a vision of a progressive, tolerant, and modern Islam, which harkened back to the norms and values that prevailed during past Islamic civilizations. It was simultaneously a response to PAS's program of an Islamic state and an assurance to non-Muslims that they would not be discriminated against in whatever way under Abdullah's Islamization policies.

THE THREE Ms

That said, it was not simply the Pak Lah factor and Abdullah's new initiatives in the preceding five months that accounted for the BN's victory. Indeed, there were continuities from the past that also benefited the BN. We refer to the usual 3-Ms. First, compared to the opposition parties, the BN parties had more *money* due to their ownership and control of business corporations, and their access to government projects and tenders (Gomez and Jomo 1997). It was evident that the BN outspent the opposition parties. Second, due to that wealth, the BN parties also possessed more comprehensive electoral *machines* that linked party headquarters to its branches in the outlying areas. Moreover, as the incumbent, the BN also unabashedly availed itself of government facilities and amenities, although as the caretaker of government, it was not supposed to do so. And third, there was also the BN's ownership and control of the electronic and print *media* (Zaharom 2002), which allowed it to package and project the image of a more sincere and warmer Pak Lah and a caring and concerned BN, while either ignoring or dismissing the opposition parties and their leaders.

Wong Kok Keong (2004a, 2004b), a communications specialist who monitored the media, concluded that the two principal dailies carried an overwhelmingly large amount of “news, opinions, letters to the editors and pictures” that were either pro-BN or focused on the BN. This was even more true of the front pages than of the inside pages. His monitoring of the two principal television stations led him to this conclusion: “TV1 acted essentially as a mouthpiece of the BN. About 73 percent of all items in its news bulletins were focused on or pro-BN.” More telling, “Abdullah Badawi appeared in 17 (about 71 percent) of the top three items and 23 (about 37 percent) of all items in the news bulletins during the campaign period.” Wong’s survey showed that the TV3 “was even more zealous than TV1 in promoting BN. Close to 64 percent of all items and 67 percent of the [top] three items were focused on or pro-BN.”

CHANGING THE RULES AND THE BOUNDARIES

Apart from its greater access to the 3-Ms, the BN government under Mahathir also used its two-thirds majority in the last Parliament to amend both the Election Act and the Election Offences Act in April 2002. It also added new seats and redelineated the electoral boundaries in 2003. These amendments to the laws and changes in the electoral boundaries had been favorable to the BN and detrimental to the opposition.

Among other changes to the Election Act, the electoral rolls containing the list of voters can no longer be challenged in a court of law once they have been gazetted, not even when they contain “phantom voters” whom the opposition alleged had packed the rolls in certain constituencies, as in the case of the Sungai Siput constituency, where election fraud was duly proven following the 1999 polls (Devaraj 2003). Another amendment hiked the deposit required of electoral candidates between MYR 5,000 and a maximum of MYR 20,000 for election expenses (Loh 2002a). This increase is a drop in the bucket for the BN parties which list among their assets fancy headquarters, media empires, colleges and universities, and various other companies including several listed on the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange (Gomez and Jomo 1997). The BN parties are also well supported by wealthy tycoons and cronies. For the opposition, however, the hike in deposit meant considerable financial burdens and a cut into their already limited campaign funds.

Table 7. Change in registered voters and voter turnout by state

State	Registered voters			Voter turnout (%)		
	1999	2004	% change	1999	2004	% change
Perlis	105,733	112,482	6.4	79.1	82.7	3.6
Kedah	731,987	821,901	12.3	75.6	80.9	5.3
Kelantan	641,753	662,722	3.3	76.3	80.5	4.2
Terengganu	389,071	455,924	17.2	81.3	87.4	6.1
Penang	653,572	672,362	2.9	75.4	76.0	0.6
Perak	1,147,949	1,170,351	2.0	66.2	69.2	3.0
Pahang	479,106	570,106	19.0	73.7	75.7	2.0
Selangor	1,096,751	1,422,274	29.7	73.4	72.8	-0.6
Kuala Lumpur	588,878	675,999	14.8	70.6	69.5	-1.1
Negeri Sembilan	406,631	429,786	5.7	72.3	72.8	-0.5
Melaka	313,676	345,917	10.3	76.9	78.8	1.9
Johore	1,068,001	1,249,007	16.9	72.3	73.3	1.0
Sabah	719,131	790,949	10.0	61.3	65.1	3.8
Sarawak	854,912	904,827	5.8	61.0	62.1	1.1

An important amendment to the Election Offences Act made it an offense “to act or to make any statement with a view or tendency to promote feelings of ill-will, discontent, or hostility between persons of the same race or different races or of the same class or different classes...” This amendment was so loosely worded and yet so all-encompassing that the opposition complained that they found it extremely difficult to focus attention on scandals and wrongdoings, or to identify cronies who had benefited from the BN government’s largesse.

A redelineation exercise of electoral boundaries (as required by law after every 8 to 10 years) was also conducted by the Elections Commission (SPR) in 2003. As a result, 26 new parliamentary seats and 63 state seats were added, especially in the states where the BN had performed very well in 1999. Most of these seats were semi-urban mixed seats. These included: five parliamentary seats in Sabah, six in Johore, five in Selangor, three in Pahang, and two in Penang. No additional parliamentary seats were added to Kelantan, Terengganu, and Kedah, where PAS had scored huge successes in 1999 (Ong 2003). In the event, the BN won 25 of the 26 new seats. The exception was the victory of human rights lawyer and DAP deputy leader Karpal Singh in Bukit Gelugor, Penang.

The 2003 delineation exercise also involved a substantive redrawing of the electoral boundaries in all states that were given additional seats, as well as in Kedah and Terengganu where there were no additional seats created. This redrawing, no doubt, benefited the BN more than it did the opposition. Indeed, this 2003 delineation exercise was

probably the most comprehensive that has been conducted since independence in 1957.³ It is not surprising, therefore, that so many irregularities were reported on polling day. For instance, there were numerous complaints by voters that their names had been removed from the electoral roll, or that they had been transferred to another constituency without being informed prior to polling day. In some constituencies in Selangor state, three different versions of the electoral roll were apparently available (Ramdas 2004). There was also the related complaint that there had been uncharacteristically high increases in the number of voters registered in the Malay heartland states where PAS was strong (Table 7). Many of these areas subsequently experienced very high turnout rates, causing upsets for PAS candidates, especially in Terengganu.

ISA, DETENTIONS, AND CONVICTIONS

Another reason for the BN's victory relates to the Mahathir government's use of the Internal Security Act (or ISA, which allows for detention without trial), other coercive laws, and manipulation of the courts to curb the opposition in the period between the 1999 and 2004 elections. First, some of the most charismatic leaders of *Parti Keadilan* (Justice Party) and the *reformasi* movement—including Ezam Mohamed Nor, Tian Chua, Saari Sungib, Lokman Noor Adam, Dr. Badrulamin Bahron, Hishamuddin Rais (and for a while Raja Petra and Gobalakrishnan too)—were detained under the ISA on trumped-up charges of threatening national security. Vice President Mohd Azmin Ali was taken to court and finally sentenced to 18 months in prison for perjury in 2001. Deputy Chief Wanita Irene Fernandez was also taken to court and sentenced to 12 months in jail for publishing allegedly false news. Ezam, the youth leader, already detained under the ISA, was taken to court on a charge of disclosing official secrets and was subsequently sentenced to two years in jail. Ezam, Azmin, and Fernandez, as well as Lim Guan Eng, youth leader of the DAP, were all ruled ineligible to contest the 2004 elections on the grounds of their conviction.

Another group of Malaysians associated with PAS's youth wing were detained under the ISA for allegedly belonging to the so-called *Kumpulan Militan Malaysia* (KMM), allegedly related to the *Jemaah Islamiyah* (Islamic Community [JI]), considered to be al-Qaeda's proxy in Southeast Asia. One of those detained was Nik Asli, allegedly the

KMM's leader and the son of the PAS Menteri Besar (chief minister) of Kelantan.

Meanwhile, the appeals of Anwar Ibrahim, the natural leader of Parti Keadilan, against his conviction by Justice Augustine Paul in April 1999, were rejected by the Appeals Court, and then the Federal Court as well. Anwar's petition described the plot against him, the selective admission of evidence during his trial, and the summary rejection of critical defense witnesses by the judge; but alas, to no avail. In this regard, numerous Malaysian as well as international agencies—including the International Court of Justice, the International Bar Association, the President of the European Union, Amnesty International, Asia Watch, the International Federation for Human Rights, and others—had all voiced their criticisms of the court's decision to set aside Anwar's appeal, the convictions of Fernandez and other Keadilan leaders, and the use of the ISA generally to detain critics without trial. It was evident that the Malaysian judiciary had lost its independence and become beholden to the executive. This, too, Abdullah had inherited.

Yet another setback to the opposition was the difficulty in finalizing the merger of Parti Keadilan and *Parti Rakyat* (People's Party), especially in the absence of the leaders detained under the ISA. There was further frustration when the Registrar of Societies (ROS) delayed and refused to approve the merger even after it had been agreed upon by both parties. Hence, although the new Parti Keadilan Rakyat was launched in August 2003, it was not allowed to contest the 2004 elections as such. Likewise, the Socialist Party of Malaysia or *Parti Sosialis Malaysia*, which had applied to the ROS for registration prior to the 1999 general elections, was also unable to get itself registered some five years later. By contrast, the BN-affiliated Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party, a splinter party of another BN party, got itself registered within weeks.

The above events indicate how Mahathir's BN government had abused its powers to reshape the electoral process, to detain and outlaw charismatic opposition leaders, and to muzzle and constrain the opposition parties. These are additional to the usual 3-Ms. Abdullah benefited from this Mahathir legacy, which helps to explain the BN's clear victory in the 2004 polls.

WAR AGAINST TERRORISM AND OPPOSITION DIFFERENCES

However, the opposition was also weakened due to two other factors not of the BN's design. First, there was September 11, 2001, which was

followed by the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and several incidents of bombings by Islamic radicals in Southeast Asia. In the midst of these developments, Dr. Mahathir, then prime minister—with his support of the US in its war against terrorism on the one hand, and his condemnation of the US invasion of Iraq on the other—emerged as a champion of moderate Islam as well as a leader of the Global South, at home and abroad.

In contrast, there had arisen concerns about PAS's connections to the KMM, and by extension the JI, now held responsible for the bombings in Southeast Asia. Although there is no evidence of such PAS connections, the dramatic change in the international political climate, the hype over terrorism, the loss of lives resulting from the bombings, and the ISA arrests have had their knock-on effects in Malaysia.

This has heightened the fear of PAS's intentions among some Malaysians, particularly non-Muslims. The anxieties have persisted because PAS, instead of combating the undemocratic and unjust policies of the BN, and pursuing more equitable development since its 1999 gains, had focused its attention on introducing *Hudud* (bounds of acceptable behavior) and *Qisas* (retaliation in kind, similar to "an eye for an eye") laws, and Islamic rule in Terengganu generally. Moreover, the BN-owned or -controlled mass media had systematically projected PAS as discriminatory toward women, fixated on the segregation of the sexes, and in favor of curbing so-called un-Islamic forms of dress and entertainment. PAS's lack of consultation and rejection of criticisms vis-à-vis these policies were also often highlighted, leaving the impression that the party was even more authoritarian than UMNO and the other BN parties (Maznah 2003, 79-83). The sudden death of PAS leader Fadzil Noor, popularly regarded as more approachable and open-minded, and his replacement with Abdul Hadi Awang, considered more aloof and close-minded in his interpretation of Islamic injunctions, reinforced these negative impressions of PAS.

In the midst of these developments, the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party finally withdrew from the Alternative Front or *Barisan Alternatif* (BA) coalition of opposition parties. Consequently, the opposition was no longer as united, nor the BA as a multiethnic coalition, as it had been in 1999. By contrast the 14-member BN, although dominated by UMNO, maintained a multiethnic front and appeared united. Many of their intraparty squabbles (in UMNO and the MCA in particular) had also been resolved, at least temporarily.

The transition from Dr. Mahathir to Abdullah Badawi, the latter portraying a warmer and softer image, as discussed earlier, further enhanced the image of the ruling coalition in the eyes of the Malaysian public.

DEVELOPMENTALISM

There was yet another Mahathir legacy that facilitated the BN's victory. This is the emergence of the new political culture of "developmentalism," which in turn has resulted in a reorientation of the meaning of politics among Malaysians (Loh 2001 and 2002b).

"Developmentalism" first emerged in the midst of the economic growth and new opportunities that arose during the early 1990s, associated with the neoliberal policies of deregulation and privatization. This new political culture valorizes rapid economic growth, the resultant consumerist habits, and the political stability offered by BN rule even when authoritarian means are resorted to. Since no other party has ever ruled Malaysia, many ordinary Malaysians cannot imagine that political stability can be maintained in multiethnic Malaysia without BN rule. A "self-policing" system in support of BN rule—which is believed to be essential for maintaining political stability, which then attracts foreign investments and facilitates economic growth, and which ultimately results in higher standards of living and consumption—has kicked in. On the other hand, the opposition has had no previous experience in promoting development. In fact, the Kelantan and Terengganu states, which had been ruled by PAS between 1999 to 2004, experienced relatively lower rates of growth than the other BN-governed states.

Developmentalism, therefore, is the cultural consequence of the developmental state when citizens, especially the middle classes, begin to enjoy improved living conditions as a result of the economic growth the state had brought about. Developmentalism increasingly displaced the ethnic political discourse and practice that took place in the 1990s. It is primarily this discourse of developmentalism, not that of ethnicism, which now sets limits to the discourse of democracy.

A redefinition of the role of political parties, and even of the meaning of politics, has further accompanied this developmentalism. During this period of economic progress, the BN component parties not only avoided debate over policies, especially when they involved "sensitive issues," but also de-emphasized political education and

mobilization. Instead, developmentalism embedded itself into the quotidian of local areas through the delivery of public works and services as discussed below.

Significantly, the BN parties transformed themselves into extensions and instruments of the state not merely to assist in the maintenance of the status quo, but to assist in the delivery of public works and services. Additionally, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a Chinese-based BN party, even established its own college—the Kolej Tunku Abdul Rahman. The MCA's Langkawi Project further caters to the educational needs of primary school children while Kojadi, the MCA's savings cooperative, provides low-interest loans for the children of cooperative members to attend universities and colleges. These are roles usually performed by the private sector or by NGOs, not political parties.

The BN political parties also established so-called service centers and complaints bureaus throughout the country. These are partially financed by the constituency development funds allocated by the government only to elected politicians belonging to the BN. Lower-class Malaysians, in particular, have resorted to them, instead of the relevant government agencies, in order to resolve their everyday problems and needs, whether these are of a personal nature or having to do with the local community. These include getting their children into a school of the parent's choice; applying for passports, hawker licenses, and other official documents; seeking help when they have been overcharged for utilities now maintained by privatized entities; and even looking for children and other loved ones who have disappeared.

Finally, the BN parties themselves have ventured into business activities and forged close ties with other captains of industry and commerce. Together with them and their associations like the Chambers of Commerce and Industry and other industry-specific bodies like the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers, the BN parties have initiated various projects in support of the BN government's post-New Economic Policy (NEP) initiatives, which have been friendlier to the private sector in general. In summary, therefore, the BN political parties have assumed very different roles from those they performed at the point of independence whence freedom and justice were clarion calls, and popular mobilization was their *raison d'être*. Ironically, the political parties seem to be encouraging their members to withdraw from popular political participation except in times of election, and to engage in development and business activities instead.

Therefore, the desire for economic growth, better jobs, and improved standards of living, and to enjoy the delivery of services and goods by the BN parties down to the local level—what I call developmentalism—also explains popular support for the BN. The opposition parties do not offer an alternative development strategy. Yet, more and more Malaysians are imbued with developmentalism and increasingly ask what development projects or services the political parties can provide them.

CONCLUSION

The BN won a spectacular victory in 2004. Most significant of all was its victory in the Malay heartland states. This was a reversal of the BN's fortunes in 1999 when it performed badly in the heartland. However, the results of the 2004 elections are not a vindication of ethnic politics; neither is the BN's victory due to its consociationalism. For despite its victory in the Malay heartland, the BN had to contend with a considerable proportion of Malays there who continued to vote for the opposition. Likewise, the BN was forced to share both the popular vote as well as the seats in the Chinese-majority areas. It is evident that the Malaysian ethnic communities are fragmented. Therefore, it can be deduced that other factors explain the BN's electoral success. The Pak Lah factor partially helps explain this victory. More importantly, however, were the benefits that the BN derived from the Mahathir legacy. On the one hand, the Election Commission, the coercive laws, the judicial system, and the 3-Ms continued to be used to stymie the opposition such that Malaysian elections, though relatively free, are never fair. On the other hand, there has emerged a culture of developmentalism. The Malaysian electorate desires rapid economic growth, and they associate this with the BN. Unless the opposition is able to come up with an alternative development plan, it appears that the BN will always emerge victorious, sometimes spectacularly as in 2004, sometimes less spectacularly as in 1999. Hence, although elections are held regularly and opposition parties do contest these elections, electoral politics in Malaysia are clearly dominated by the BN coalition. This article further argues that we have to look beyond plural society theories and consociational models for explaining how the BN wins, time and time again. ❀

NOTES

1. State-level elections were also conducted in March 2004. Except in Kelantan, traditionally an opposition stronghold, the BN won in the remaining 10 peninsula states, as well as in Sabah in Borneo. (State elections were not held in Sarawak state in 2004.) I shall only discuss these state-level elections in passing, and whensoever relevant.
2. However, UMNO gained more state assembly seats than PAS and so formed the state government.
3. On the role of the SPR and previous biases in the delineation exercises, see Lim 2003.

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