

**Malaysia's 1986
General Election**
The Urban-Rural Dichotomy

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I Introduction

Malaysia is a federation of thirteen states, the nucleus of which has been the eleven states of the Federation of Malaya, established on 31 August 1957. These eleven states comprise former British colonies, that is, the Straits Settlements of Penang and Melaka and the nine protected Malay states of Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang, Johor, Negeri Sembilan, Selangor, Perak, Kedah, and Perlis, which had earlier become unified as the Federated Malay States in 1948. Subsequently, the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak which had also been former British colonies, joined the eleven states of the Federation of Malaya together with the former British colony of Singapore to form the Federation of Malaysia on 16 September 1963. However, Singapore left the Federation after less than two years (in mid-1965) and Malaysia today has thirteen states — eleven in Peninsular Malaysia and the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak.

Malaysia has a written constitution which is the supreme law of the country.¹ Apart from the Federal Constitution, each state also possesses its own constitution, which contains essential provisions to ensure the supremacy of the federal government. The head of state is the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong, who is elected for a five-year term from among the hereditary rulers of the nine Malay states.

The power of government is however vested with the Prime Minister who is the leader of the party with the most number of seats in the Dewan Rakyat (House of Representatives), for which periodic elections are held every four to five years. At the state level, the power of government vests with elected Chief Ministers (in the states of Sabah, Sarawak, Melaka, and Penang) and Menteri Besar (in the nine Malay states). Thus, Malaysia is regarded as a constitutional democracy, wherein general elections are held at both state and federal levels at periodic intervals.

There have been six general elections held in Malaysia since its formation on 16 August 1963, that is, in 1964, 1969, 1974, 1978, 1982, and 1986. Since elections constitute a vital element in the democratic process, each of the above elections has been the subject of a major study. These studies have largely been based on analyses of the election results and how the various parties fared at the state and federal levels.

The 1986 general election was different from the previous elections for a number of reasons. Firstly, the contest was for a greater number of seats (177 as opposed to 154 previously), based on revisions of electoral