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THE POLITICS OF ACCOMMODATION
An Analysis of the 1978
Malaysian General Election

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I. THE POLITICAL FRAMEWORK

The framework of politics in Malaysia has been based on race ever since the first nationwide election was conducted under British rule in 1955. Independence two years later and five subsequent general elections spanning a period of more than two decades, have not changed the basic structure. Race remains the constant and dominating factor. Most of the political parties are organized along ethnic lines. They mobilize communal support for essentially communal oriented programmes. The rest, though multiracial in structure, are in practice communal oriented and dependent largely on the support of a single community.

The lineup for the fifth general election since independence on 8 July 1978 was in broad outlines identical to those of previous polls except for leadership changes, the appearance of a host of new political parties registered over the last few years and the dissolution of a few of the older ones. Like in past elections, the choice before the electorate was between the ruling group consisting of a number of communal parties allied together in a multiracial framework known as the Barisan Nasional (Barisan) and an array of smaller opposition parties, some even more communally extreme, and some multiracial in name only. And, of course, as in the past, there were numerous Independent candidates too.

The Barisan Setup

In Peninsular Malaysia, the Barisan is made up of six components: the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), the Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan) and the People's Progressive Party (PPP). The last two are multiracial on paper but their leadership and support come from the non-Malay segment of the population. In the opposition are the Chinese-led Democratic Action Party (DAP), the theocratic Partai Islam (PAS), Social Justice Party (Pekemas), Partai Socialis Rakyat Malaya (PSRM), left-leaning and led by Malay intellectuals, Kaum Insaf Tanah Ayer (KITA), Social Democratic Party (SDP), Worker's Party (W) and the United People's Party (UPP). Except for the DAP, PAS and the ideological PSRM, the rest are insignificant fly-by-night parties or, in the case of Pekemas, a one-man party led by Dr. Tan Chee Khoon who retired from active politics because of ill health just before the election.

In Sabah, the Sabah United People's Party (Berjaya), indigenous-led but whose membership embraces all ethnic groups, and the United Sabah National Organization (USNO), a *bumiputra* dominated party, are members of the Barisan. On the opposite

side are the Sabah Chinese Association (SCA), Sabah Democratic Rakyat Parti (Sedar), the Sabah Chinese United Party (SCUP), Parti Perhimpunan Social Bersatu (Pusaka), and the DAP and Pekemas, both of which have set up branches in the East Malaysian state.

In Sarawak, the Barisan consists of three local parties: the Partai Pesaka Bumiputra Bersatu (PPB), the result of a merger in early 1973 between the largely Iban Pesaka party and the indigenous-Muslim Bumiputra party, the Iban Sarawak National Party (SNAP) and the Chinese Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP). Outside the coalition in the Opposition are four newly registered parties -- Parti Negara Rakyat Sarawak (PNRS), Parti Rakyat Jati Sarawak (PAJAR), Parti Umat Sarawak (UMAT) and the Sarawak People's Organization (SAPO).

The concept of the Barisan, like that of its predecessor, the Alliance of UMNO, MCA and MIC, is based on unity at the top and separation at the grassroots level. Implicit in this political arrangement is that each party looks after its own community, restrains the more volatile and extremist elements and formulates communal demands within the context of a multiracial society in order to preserve racial balance and communal harmony.

By implication, parties outside the Barisan, whether communally oriented or otherwise, are a danger to racial peace as their lack of a communal partner make them in practice less encumbered to compromises in the pursuit of communal demands. To the top Barisan leaders especially those from UMNO, there is no way out except coalition politics based on race at this stage of the country's development. They concede quite readily that it is far from ideal, but for the moment, it is the next best alternative. For a single multiracial party as such cannot function effectively, given the complexity of the multiethnic makeup of the population, and the different development priorities of the main communities.

Like the Alliance, the Barisan too is a loose communal coalition. The component parties are linked together at the top by a Supreme Council which is made up of three representatives from each member. The activities of the Council are co-ordinated by the secretary general. The first to hold the post was an MCA leader, Datuk Michael Chen, but he was replaced by an UMNO strongman, Ghafar Baba, after the 1974 general election.

The Council meets on an ad hoc basis whenever necessary under the chairmanship of the UMNO president. Such meetings are usually called to discuss mundane matters like sorting out differences among members, formulating a code of conduct to lessen bickerings between component parties and deciding on electoral matters. It does not deliberate on national policies, much less formulate them, as such functions are deemed to be the prerogatives of the Cabinet.

The linchpin of this political arrangement is UMNO whose dominance is accepted unquestionably by the other ten component parties. In practice, this means that the UMNO president automatically becomes the head of the Barisan. As leader of a communal party (UMNO) and that of the multiparty coalition, his role is that of a balancer of community interests or, in short, the final arbiter on the shape and direction of national policies. To lead the coalition, he has to satisfy Malay aspirations without alienating the non-Malay component parties. In this perpetually balancing job, there are no hard and fast rules. He is only guided by what he deems to be fair to all communities. But, at the crunch, there is no doubt as to which side he will lean if he is to retain his position as undisputed leader of UMNO and hence of the multiracial Barisan.

The Roots of Malay Political Power

The acceptance of the other communal groups to the leadership of UMNO is rooted in the fact that political power rests in the hands of the Malays, the largest ethnic group. In terms of numbers, the Malay community forms 48.5% of the population as at 31 December 1974¹ (see Table 1.1). If the other indigenous groups in Sabah and Sarawak are added, the total *bumiputra* segment comes to 55.7%. In Peninsular Malaysia, the Malays are even more dominant with 53.5%; the rest are Chinese (35.3%), Indians (10.5%) and others (0.7%). For Malaysia as a whole, the Chinese are the second largest ethnic group accounting for 33.8% of the population.²

Malay political power is not based strictly on numerical superiority but also on the distribution of the community -- a fair majority of whom reside in the rural areas. The weightage of the nonurban districts gives the Malays added political weight out of proportion to their numbers, a sore point with opposite parties like the DAP which has repeatedly attacked the huge differences in size between rural and urban constituencies as being unparalleled in other democracies.

In Peninsular Malaysia, 79 out of the 114 constituencies have at least an absolute Malay majority. In only 22 constituencies the Chinese form more than 50% of the votes. Neither community has the absolute majority in the remaining

1 In computing the size of the Malay community, the Melanaus in Sarawak, and the Bajaus and Muruts in Sabah are classified as Malays because the three ethnic groups are largely Muslim.

2 Population figures are obtained from *Malaysia 1975 Official Yearbook* (Department of Information, Ministry of Information, Malaysia).