

Electing the government

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IN Malaya, decolonisation happened after political unification and democratisation. In 1946, the 11 states of Peninsular Malaya were organised into a single political unit as the short-lived Malayan Union, which was replaced by the Federation of Malaya in 1948.

The federation had no popularly-elected government until 1951 but the democratisation process quickly picked up momentum.

In the early years, Malaysians elected their public officials at all three levels of government. The gradual expansion of suffrage and voting began with the 1951 to 1952 local elections in major townships. Then there were state elections in Johor, Perenggan and Penang, followed by the 1955 federal elections for a home rule government. The process was completed in 1959 when all Malaysians went to the polls to appoint their representatives for the state governments and the federal Parliament.

The 1952 Kuala Lumpur municipal elections have arguably shaped the democratisation trajectory of Malaya/Malaysia more than any of the national elections, including the 1955 and 1969 elections, and certainly more than the 1990 and 1999 elections.

Prior to the 1952 municipal elections, Datuk Onn Jaafar had resigned as Umno president after members rejected his plan to transform the ethno-nationalist party into a vehicle for all Malaysians.

The multi-ethnic Independence of Malaya Party (IMP) he formed enjoyed the support of many fellow Malay aristocrats as well as non-Malay political leaders, including MCA founder and president Sir (later Tun) Tan Cheng Lock.

Umno's political dominance, which was established with its effective veto of the Malayan Union, might have ended had the Selangor branches of Umno and MCA not teamed up to contest the 1952 Kuala Lumpur polls. The coalition of ethnic parties handsomely beat the multiethnic IMP by nine to two in the 12-seat contest. The victory in Kuala Lumpur, and later in other major towns, sealed the Umno-MCA pact, later known as the Alliance party, which MIC joined in 1954.

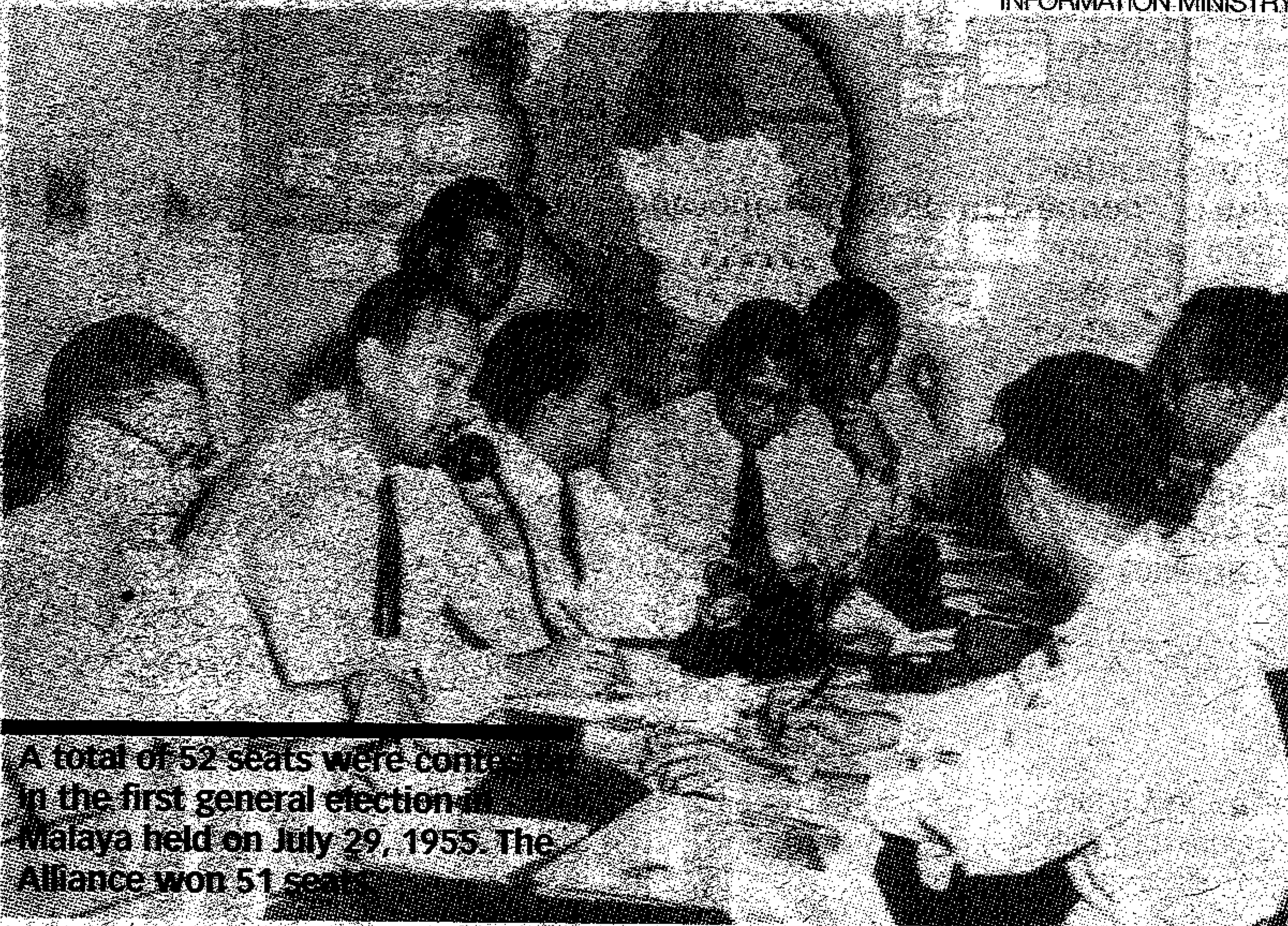
Feeling betrayed by the non-Malays, Onn soon abandoned multi-ethnic politics to return to Malay nationalism with Parti Negara, the effective successor of IMP.

The 1955 home rule elections which chose half of the Federal Legislative Assembly became the battlefield to determine which of the

two Malay aristocrats, Tunku or Onn would lead the nation to independence.

A total of 1,280,000 persons, 84.2% among them Malay, registered as voters. The Alliance won 51 out of 52 seats with 82% of votes, PAS secured the sole opposition seat with 4% voter support, while Parti Negara candidates were wiped out despite winning 8% of voter support.

The dominance of the Umno-led coalition continued in 1959 and 1964 even though its vote shares dropped to 52% and 59% respectively.



In 1959, the Malay proportion of the electorate had fallen to 57% and nearly a third of Malay voters chose to support PAS. Meanwhile, possibly over 40% of non-Malays backed either the Socialist Front or the People's Progressive Party (PPP).

However, thanks to the electoral system, the Alliance still controlled 71% of parliamentary seats and all but two state governments.

Malaysia's establishment in 1963 triggered the Confrontation by Soekarno's Indonesia, which inadvertently strengthened support for the Alliance in the 1964 polls in Malaya as the electorate rallied behind the coalition in the face of a foreign threat.

The Confrontation also gave the federal government a pretext to suspend, in March 1965, local elections, most of which had been won by opposition parties and which had produced some very efficient administrators like the PPP in Ipoh.

The Malaysia project, however, also brought in a fierce competitor for the Alliance - Singapore's People Action Party (PAP), whose initial intention to replace MCA as Umno's Chinese partner was rejected outright.

After the rejection, the PAP planned to challenge the Alliance with a

second coalition - the Malaysian Solidarity Convention with Malaysian and Sarawakian parties that would champion a Malaysian Malaysia. The plan was terminated abruptly when Tunku chose to expel Singapore from the Federation on Aug 9, 1965.

This aborted first attempt at two-party competition in the larger federation has resulted in both Malaysia and Singapore being "electoral one-party states" today. (Malaysians had to wait 25 years for the next attempt when Semangat 46 contested in the 1990 elections).

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meanwhile, pulled out of the BN in 1977, after four years of being a coalition partner with its erstwhile arch rival Umno.

From 1978 to 1986, PAS and the DAP became the only two effective challengers to the BN with about 15% and 20% of total voter support respectively. Their parliamentary strengths in terms of seats were, however, unfortunately low. PAS's strength in Parliament was between 1% and 3% while the DAP's was between 6% and 14%.

The two schisms in Umno in 1987 and 1998, resulting effectively in the purge of Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah and of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, gave birth to new parties which were expected to serve as the core in new opposition coalitions that would bring together PAS and the DAP. Both the new parties, Semangat 46 and Keadilan, however, failed to win enough seats in 1990 and 1999 to command respect and unity from their partners. Since then, the opposition coalitions in 1990 and 1999 have either been dissolved or seriously weakened by the 1995 and 2004 elections. Not surprisingly, the BN has won these elections with phenomenal voter support - 65% in 1995 and 64% in 2004.

While Anwar and Keadilan soldier on and will contest for the third time in a general election, Razaleigh dissolved Semangat 46 to rejoin Umno one year after his second defeat.

The first-past-the-post electoral system has failed to produce bipartisanship in Malaysia as it did in countries like the US and the UK. Many blame it on the ethno-religious cleavage in Malaysian society.

The real root cause might actually be the electoral system itself coupled with excessive gerrymandering and mal-apportionment of constituencies. When united opposition parties are effectively nowhere closer to the seat of government despite winning between 43% (1999) and 46% (1990) of popular votes, what's the good of remaining united?

The 1969 elections saw the boycott of the Labour Party, and the electoral pact of three other non-Malay based opposition parties: the DAP (PAP's successor), Gerakan and PPP. In the peninsula, Umno lost 16 out of the 67 contested seats to PAS, and its two junior partners - MCA and MIC - 21 out of their allocated 36 seats to the opposition trio. At state level, not only did PAS retain Kelantan, Gerakan also grabbed Penang while no party controlled the majority in Perak and Selangor. The changed political landscape unfortunately resulted, not in more competitive legislative politics, but the bloodshed of May 13, the root causes of which still invite debate.

Worse, the post-riot political arrangement severely castrated electoral politics. Not only were certain "sensitive" issues removed from public debate, major opposition parties were co-opted by the Alliance, first through coalition governments in Sarawak (the SUPP), then Penang (Gerakan), Ipoh (PPP) and Kelantan (PAS), and eventually into the enlarged coalition of Barisan Nasional (BN), formally launched in 1974.

The only loyal opposition parties in Parliament were the DAP and the Sarawak National Party (SNAP). PAS,

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