

What's next for Chinese politics in Malaysia?
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KUALA LUMPUR, May 24 — The only way forward for Chinese politics in Malaysia is multiracial politics, according to an article in the Singapore Straits Times today.

Writing in the Singapore daily, James Chin said Chinese politicians must win positions in multiracial parties not because they are Chinese but because they are accepted as Malaysian leaders.

"While many may doubt this will happen given the demise of multiracial parties in recent Malaysian history, they forget that citizens of Chinese descent have successfully been elected by a largely non-Chinese population to the top offices in Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines," wrote the senior visiting research fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

In the article, Chin wrote about the arrival of Chinese in then Malaya in large numbers in the 19th and 20th centuries, and their later involvement in politics through various Chinese-based parties like the MCA, Gerakan and the DAP.

He also detailed the partnership of the MCA with Umno, first in the Alliance party and later in the expanded Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition.

Chin wrote that the New Economic Policy (NEP) caused the Chinese community to ask: should we support MCA or the opposition DAP to show our frustration with NEP's ethnic discriminatory policies?

While the Chinese towkays decided that they had to support BN to "do business", ordinary Chinese wanted it both ways, he said.

He said the Chinese essentially split their vote; a smaller portion voted for the MCA/Gerakan while the majority supported the DAP. Another way was to vote for MCA/Gerakan at the state level while giving the parliamentary vote to DAP. This "split vote" tactic lasted more than two decades — until the 2008 general election.

"In that GE, the Chinese, including the usual apathetic middle class, decided it was time for change and threw their support behind DAP. In this year's May 5 polls, the Chinese hardened their attitude and basically wiped out MCA/Gerakan in all 22 Chinese-majority constituencies. And for the first time in Malaysia's political history, Chinese-majority constituencies in Sabah and Sarawak voted en bloc for the DAP," he said.

He wrote that having it "both ways" no longer works. "A new generation of young Chinese do not want to play it safe. To them, Malaysia is their homeland and they do not see why they should be treated as second-class citizens when it comes to politics. To them, what is wrong in Malaysia is best exemplified by the ethnic-based approach of the BN.

"In a globalised world, the young voters see themselves as global as well as Malaysian citizens. They do not want to participate in ethnic and religious politics, the norm thus far in Malaysian politics," Chin wrote.

He said the most sensible approach is for them to work with enlightened Malay politicians who are willing to accept the Chinese as full citizens and isolate those who continue to call the Chinese pendatang (immigrants).

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