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Race and Religion in the 2008 Malaysian General Elections

Shahirah Mahmood and
Mohamed Nawab Mohd Osman

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The 12th Malaysian General Election has brought forth various issues ranging from, the alleged marginalisation of minorities to rocketing prices and the curtailing of religious freedom. These issues are threatening to undermine the Barisan Nasional's parliamentary majority. Will this election see a big shift in the non-Malay ground as widely expected?

THE 2008 general election in Malaysia will determine the future direction of Malaysian politics, hitherto characterised by representation and support based on ethnic affiliations. Disputes over ethnic and religious issues not only have exacerbated existing fractures within society; they also erode UMNO's support amongst the Chinese and Indian voters. While it is a forgone conclusion that the BN-led government will lose a substantial majority of Indian and Chinese votes, it is Malay support that will be critical to the outcome and future of Malaysian politics.

UMNO's Malay-Islamic Agenda

UMNO seems to have emerged from various racial and religious issues as the bastion of Malay and Islamic ideals and practices. But this appears to have also come at the expense of the ethnic minorities, thus risking UMNO's chances of retaining the support of many Indian and Chinese voters. Controversies surrounding the burial rights of M. Moorthy, Lina Joy's conversion from Islam and the recent proscription of the usage of the term "Allah" amongst Christians have raised fears amongst non-Muslims. They are concerned about the encroachment of Shariah law into civil law, thereby threatening religious freedom. In response to these developments, non-Malay and non-Muslim groups have come together to demand that the Malaysian government protect non-Muslim rights. A case in point is the demonstration organised by the Hindu Rights Action Front (Hindraf) demanding the government to protect the welfare of the Indian community.

As a result, Chinese and Indian voters especially in the urban areas of Penang and Selangor are likely to vote for the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR). Having struck a deal

to avoid three-cornered fights to bolster opposition votes, both DAP and PKR appear as viable multi-ethnic alternatives to the disgruntled Chinese and Indian communities. Given the growing demands for greater rights by the ethnic minorities, UMNO's support amongst the Malays may in turn be strengthened. Actually, the changing sentiments and affiliations of Malay voters, especially in the urban and rural areas, are getting more complex.

PKR's battle for the Urban- Malay Vote

The 2008 election appears to herald this growing complexity amongst Malay-Muslim voters. The formation of the Bersih rally and the dissatisfaction over transparency and accountability issues surrounding judicial appointments as exposed by the "Lingam tapes" reflect how Malay-Muslim urbanites are increasingly disenchanted with Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's promises for reform.

Such Malay grievances against the Abdullah administration have provided political leverage for the PKR's campaign which has focused on developing a truly multi-cultural and multi-religious society. Anwar Ibrahim was instrumental in bringing together people of various ethnic and religious backgrounds for the Bersih rally. This has encouraged Malay-Muslim voters who want to move away from ethnic-based politics but are still hesitant to vote for a non-Malay-led party which they may not identify with. This is where Anwar's popularity and appeal to a wide segment of society come into play. This is reflected in his role as the middleman and rallying figure between DAP and PAS. If PKR is able to galvanise enough support for its new agenda, it may actually transform Malaysian politics in a significant way, signaling that Malaysians – both Malays and non-Malays – are amenable to non-racialised politics.

PAS' Negara *Kebajikan*

Interestingly the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) has decided to leave its Islamic state agenda to the back burner. PAS' softening of its stance on the Islamic state issue and its subsequent promise to establish a *negara kebajikan* (welfare state) may be perceived as a strategic move to capitalise on ethnic minorities' discontent with the current administration.

Beyond such logic lies a concerted attempt by the party to de-couple religion from ethnicity, a relationship enshrined in the Malaysian Constitution which stipulates that all Malays must be Muslims. Since the religious turn in the party in the early 1980s, PAS has regularly condemned UMNO's brand of racial politics as *assabiyah* (tribalism) which deems it unIslamic. The argument is that UMNO conflates the notion of Malay primacy with Muslim supremacy thereby contravening the universal values of Islam such as, egalitarianism, tolerance and accommodation.

It is in this manner that PAS claims to be more tolerant of non-Muslim rights to build places of worship such as temples and churches. In the most recent controversy over the usage of the word "Allah" in a Malaysian Christian newspaper in reference to god, Chairman of the PAS *Ulama* (Religious Scholars) Council, Ustaz Daud Iraqi, took a different position from the UMNO-led government. It noted that it was indeed permissible for Christians to use the word "Allah". Moreover the fielding for the first time of a non-Muslim candidate, 29 year-old Kumutha Raman, in this week's general election is yet another novel attempt by PAS to transcend racial-religious boundaries.

While PAS is likely to retain control of Kelantan, its prospects of making inroads in Terengganu, Kedah and Perlis are still unclear. If PAS is able to retain its support in the Malay heartland, it is likely that the professional group in the party led by its deputy president Nasharuddin Mat Isa will dominate and define the party's direction in the future.

PAS' dominance in the northern Malay belt will usher in a new brand of Islamic piety divorced from the trappings of Malay supremacist ideas that are now couched in UMNO's *Islam Hadhari* of

Civilisational Islam. This could well lead to a discernible moderation in the Islamist commitment of the party and may even see PAS transforming itself into a “post-Islamist” party similar to the Prosperity Justice Party (AKP) in Turkey. On the other hand an erosion of support for PAS is likely to strengthen the more radical Islamic voices in the party, which now controls the party’s youth wing and religious scholars wing. This would lead the party to re-emphasise its Islamic credentials and push for the establishment of an Islamic state.

Redefining Malaysian Politics?

The 2008 general election could mark a watershed in the history of racialised politics in Malaysia. The ethno-religious nature of Malaysian politics may change depending on the outcome of this election. A significant increase in votes for the opposition will indicate that Malaysians are increasingly crestfallen by racial politics. However, if Malaysians vote even more along ethnic lines (Malays voting for UMNO and the non-Malays rejecting PAS), it is likely that the social compact and political future of the country may be further polarised along ethnic and religious lines.

Shahirah Mahmood is a research assistant with the Contemporary Islam Programme in the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS). She will be pursuing her PhD at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Mohamed Nawab Mohd Osman is an Associate Research Fellow at RSIS currently pursuing a PhD degree in political science at the Australian National University.