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Malaysian Chinese Federal Representation: Limited Prospects?

By Nawaljeet Singh Rayar

SYNOPSIS

Earlier this week, an internal debate within the opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP) spilled into the public domain. Ronnie Liu's comments cautioning against the party "dilut[ing] its Chineseness" were swiftly condemned by party leaders who reiterated the party's multiracial platform. This incident reflects the tension within the DAP and the Chinese community, whose national political representation is under stress.

COMMENTARY

AFTER THE ousting of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) government in February 2020 and the resulting removal of the Democratic Action Party (DAP) from government, serious questions were revived on the role and vitality of Malaysia's Chinese-majority parties.

The incumbent Perikatan Nasional (PN) government's component party, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), has but two seats in the Dewan Rakyat (Lower House of Parliament). Amidst a declared state of emergency, raging COVID-19 pandemic and rising Malay ethnonationalism, Malaysian Chinese risk their interests being sidelined altogether. How are they seeking political representation at the federal level?

Demographic Dynamics

Malaysian Chinese make up 22.6% of the country's 30 million citizens. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) projections, Malaysia's annual population growth rate is expected to slow down by 2040. The proportion of ethnic Chinese is expected to shrink while the Bumiputra proportion to grow. The community

has also seen significant emigration over the last few decades. According to DOSM estimates, the ethnic Chinese population will fall to an estimated 20% in 2040.

This will likely lead to a reduction in the number of Chinese-majority seats during federal elections. At the 2013 general election, Chinese-majority seats accounted for 30 of the 220 seats, and 24 out of 222 in the 2018 election. These Chinese-majority seats are mostly in populous urban or semi-urban areas, where voters enjoy less representation due to malapportionment. Gerrymandering may further contribute to a lower number of Chinese-majority seats.

Malaysian Chinese, despite being a polyethnic group, have several common interests in federal politics that are not always race-driven. The business community prioritises the country's business and economic growth. Correspondingly, political stability and clean governance that allow for such growth is highly desired. Access to employment and resulting income levels are connected concerns that drive voter sentiment towards parties that espoused such policies.

Certainly, there are communal concerns. Malaysian Chinese are affected by real and perceived affirmative action policies that privilege Bumiputras in various areas such as quotas for public sector employment, bank loans and public education institutions.

Pakatan Harapan Government (2018-2020)

Having received the support of about 90% Chinese voters and given its multiracial platform, PH had sought to make good on its campaign promises to reform race and religious relations after winning the 2018 general election.

In September 2018, then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad told the United Nations General Assembly that Malaysia would ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). This is a United Nations Convention that condemns discrimination and calls upon states to pursue a policy of eliminating racial discrimination in all its forms. In November, however, the PH government backpedalled on the pledge following backlash from groups who feared it could dilute privileges of the majority ethnic Malays.

Following the initial euphoria of PH's electoral victory and the inclusion of non-Malays in prominent government positions, including the appointment of DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng as finance minister, disappointment began to set in among PH supporters.

Lim's appointment was not perceived to have brought direct economic benefits to PH supporters. Many Chinese expressed outrage at the government's proposal to teach khat, or Jawi script writing, to Year Four students in Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools.

Separately, Mahathir's participation at the Malay Dignity Congress organised by four public universities in October 2019 was slammed by non-Malay parliamentarians and society. Concerns and fear of further strengthening the so-called "Ketuanan Melayu" (Malay supremacy) narrative were abuzz on social media.

Malaysia's Electoral Model

Owing to Malaysia's consociational model, its first-past-the-post system and the ethnic make-up of electoral seats, non-Bumiputra parties can only hope to be in government if they partner with parties that enjoy majority Malay support in a coalition.

However, under the previous Barisan Nasional (BN) government, the MCA and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) were increasingly unable to secure support and seats from their respective bases. In contrast, DAP has received increased support since the 2008 general election; by 2018 it had secured 42 seats which made it the second largest party of the PH coalition.

Yet, the DAP is seen to have provided few corresponding wins in policymaking for its Chinese voter base. For example, the PH government failed to deliver its pre-election promise to recognise Unified Examination Certificates (UEC) for admission to public institutions of higher learning.

This was seen as a failure of DAP to address a longstanding grievance of the Chinese community. (The UEC is an examination certificate issued by Chinese independent high schools. It is an entrance examination to higher education institutes that is recognised by many universities across the globe, but not by Malaysian public universities.)

The Chinese Dilemma

While DAP espouses a multiracial agenda and fields non-Chinese candidates, its leadership and membership are mainly Chinese. For decades, it has criticised MCA and Gerakan – as component parties of the BN coalition – for failing to curb the Malay ethnocentric excesses of their main coalition partner, UMNO, and to advance Chinese and Malaysian interests. Once in government, however, DAP, found its hands tied.

DAP and the Chinese community found themselves the target of a successful campaign by UMNO and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) to present PH as a Chinese-controlled project. Malay confidence in PH was undermined, and this helped to open the door for elements from PH to form the Malay-Muslim-based PN government with UMNO and PAS. DAP is portrayed as a liability for its coalition partners.

DAP, however, reportedly continues to enjoy the support of the majority of the Chinese, even if a small portion may be open to returning to BN or sitting out the next election.

Proponents of BN argue that Malaysia's ethnic Chinese should not put all their eggs in DAP's basket, because this could mean the community being locked out of federal government once again. However, this could be a hard sell if BN appears unwilling and/or unable to deliver the reforms that the Chinese seek, if it remains associated with poor governance and corruption and if it remains in partnership with PAS.

Neither MCA nor Gerakan is expected to be able to represent Chinese interests in a PN- or BN-led government, given the low number of parliamentary seats each could plausibly win.

On its part, DAP would have to convince its supporters to vote for it by showing that the party could do better in advancing Malaysian Chinese interests and broader Malaysian interests if given a second chance. At the same time, it would have to continue diversifying and expanding its voter base beyond just Malaysian Chinese voters – without alienating them.

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