

THE PARTY SYSTEM AND NATIONAL UNITY: A CASE STUDY OF MALAYSIA

Dr. Yasmeen Yousif Pardesi*
Professor Muhammad Yousif Pardesi†
Sajjad H. Channar‡

Abstract

This research paper traces the historical role played by the political parties and their impact on the national unity in Malaysia. This research paper aims to grasp the realities of politics and homogeneity of political alliances in Malaysia, which help to consolidate and mobilize support to achieve social, economic and political goals. The paper gives the conceptual idea about the political parties and their effectiveness for the national integration.

The paper discusses the party's role as catalyst for the communal associations which leads to the 'communal plurality' whereby the political system operates within Malaysia. Since the communal polarization has been on rise which has caused recurring tensions amongst multiple ethnic communities, the communal plurality has been instrumental in diffusing these tensions. The paper highlights the role of political parties in legitimacy and stability in modernizing the political system in Malaysian traditional society. As the significant characteristic of the political parties form and nature is determined by the socio-political framework of the society, the role of political and social modernization could not be undermined.

* Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Sindh, Jamshoro.

† Ex-Chairman, Department of Public Administration & Controller of Examinations, Presently working as Visiting Professor & Advisor, Bureau of STAGS, University of Sindh, Jamshoro.

‡ Assistant Professor, Department of Public Administration, University of Sindh, Jamshoro

In order to grasp the socio-political landscape of Malaysia the paper elaborates on the administrative structure of Malaysia and the detailed analysis of the country's constitution and its implications for formation of political parties and their harmonies effect in communal balance. Along with structural analysis the paper is evaluating the future prospects of Malaysia as state to integrate various ethnically communities, society, politically and culturally.

The paper discusses the shortcomings of the Malaysian political structure to bridge the gap due to want of effective ideology and hence subsequent evolution of nationalism in secular sense. The divergent communities such as Malays, Chinese, and Indians need to be linked within the 'structural nationalism' through the instrument of political parties, as the political parties drive their power from these communities, therefore the potential use of the political parties as the means to end has been long pursued by the Malaysian State so the communal tensions could be eased out and this paper presents the in-depth analysis of such phenomena.

Objectives

In spite of its diversities in demographic composition and geographical configuration, democracy has come to survive in Malaysia. Again, this is an economically prosperous country in the South East Asia. All these factors make it a unique country for study of the relatively stable situation in the developing World. This paper aims to focus on the aspects of the Party System, National Unity and Political stability in this ethnically diversified nation.

This study is an attempt to examine Malaysia's politics from a different perspective leading -hopefully to a clear grasp and classification of some aspects of our theoretical knowledge of politics. So far all the analyses on Malaysia have concentrated on Party System, on Political Dynamics at the national level, or on recent political history. This study represents an attempt to grasp the realities of politics and to comprehend the hegemony of the Alliance in Malaysia.

To achieve the objectives of this study, it will also deal, how the Alliance succeeds in consolidating and maintaining its dominance and in mobilizing support to achieve its social, economic, and political goals. The availability of hard data on the characteristic and behaviour of the Party System in this region makes the study interesting and illuminating.

Concept

The paper plan has been designed to study the characteristics of the political parties, their designed strategies to mobilize public opinion and the overall impact of the party activities on national integration. As all political moves are invariably economically motivated, some focus will be made on the influence of the economic parameters in the political decision-making process. This will be followed by some speculation about the future role of the political system in Malaysia in the integration of socio-cultural patterns and the economic behaviour.

Introduction

Malaysia, strategically located between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, dominates the Straits of Malacca,¹ the main corridor between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Twenty years ago she attracted World attention by proposing the neutralization of South East Asia. It also attracted World attention when it joined Indonesia in rejecting the internationalization of the Straits of Malacca. Earlier, Malaysia was a leader in proposing regional cooperation in South East Asia, which first led to the formation of ASA (Association of South East Asia) in 1961 and later to the formation of ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) in 1967.

It is emerging as one of the most important countries in the South East Asia because of a combination of the basic stability and

resilience of its political system and the relatively variable resource position of its economy. The contributing factors are, it is the third largest producer and exporter in the World of natural rubber (35 percent of the World's natural rubber supply) and tin, as well as the largest exporter of natural rubber, tin, palm oil, tropical woods, and pepper. It is an important exporter of oil as well. It is the United States' major supplier of tin and natural rubber.²

This country has also been pursuing a program of industrialization and encouraging foreign private investment to further strengthen the base of its economy, accelerates its development and diversify its exports. Consequently, it has a favourable investment climate.

Malaysia is one of the few developing countries with a steady balance of payments surplus. Over the past thirty years, it has accumulated substantial net external reserves. It has a strong currency and good credit worthiness. However, it is not without problems.

The racial, cultural, ethnic, economic, and religious plurality is one of these problems, as well as an important factor influencing the political, economic, and military trends and the foreign policy of Malaysia. Although both Indonesia and the Philippines have Chinese populations, they are small in relation to the total population. In Malaysia, on the other hand, according to Charles Hector, 2011's official census figures, "Malays were 55.06 percent, Bumiputras 11.3 per cent, Chinese 24.34 percent and the Indians 7.35 percent of the total population, the rest being Dayaks, Kadazans, and other."³ One of the few things common in South East Asia is a deep anti-Chinese sentiment, which is reciprocated by the Chinese. This exists in Malaysia also. The Malay and Chinese communities have grievances against and fear of each other that constitute the major lines of cleavage in politics, social life, and to some extent in economic activity. These deep-rooted communal tensions create ethnic animosity that is a source of discord, although presently there is an uneasy equilibrium between the two.

Historically Malaya⁴ now called Malaysia has been inhabited under the rule of British. In 1896 the Malay states accepted British advisers, and Perk, Selangor, Negri Sembilan, and Pahang formed a federation.

From the 1809s the British invested heavily in Malaya, developing transportation and rubber plantations. In 1941, the Japanese invaded Malaya and captured Singapore in 1942. After World War II, the British tried unsuccessfully to organize Malaya into one state. This led to the birth of Malayan nationalism, which opposed a colonial status. In 1946 the United Malaya National Organization (UMNO) was established with Penang Island. In the same year the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) was formed. In 1955, the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) joined UMNO in an anti-communist, anti-colonial coalition. The British relinquished their powers, and in August 31, 1957 Malayan independence was achieved.

The parties in Malaysia represent the extreme development of communal associations. The communal plurality is reflected in the ruling Alliance party, which is a coalition of the parties of Malay (United Malays National Organization), Chinese (Malayan Chinese Association), and Indian (Malayan Indian Congress) communities as well as in the new National Front coalition. The Alliance was formed in the early 1950s on a tacit agreement or "bargain" mainly between the Malays and the Chinese. According to this agreement, the Malays would be politically dominant and retain some of the traditional Malay features of government and have certain privileges⁵ Chinese were only considered to be a junior political partner.

On the other hand Malaysia has several racial-communal issues among the recurring causes of tension and disturbance in Malaysia. The increased communal tensions, exacerbated by the pre-election politics, caused an outbreak of violence after the 1969 elections. A national emergency was declared, and parliamentary rule and elections in East Malaysia were suspended. Malaysia was ruled by a

National Operations Council until February 20, 1971, when Parliament reconvened in 1971 after 21 months of emergency rule by the National Operations Council, a Constitutional Amendment Act was passed. These amendments were included: extending the rights of the Malays for their higher education and of business permits; giving the Council of Malay Rulers a veto on attempts by the legislature to tamper with the Malay special rights.

In the latter years some opposition parties also joined the National Front, with the inclusion of these parties, political support of the Malay community broadened and led to a better political mobilization of public opinion. This will be explained in the latter part of this paper.

Formation and Role of Political Parties in the Political Modernization

Before discussing the Malaysian Political development let us analyse briefly the formation and role played by Political Parties in the Political Modernization.

The study of Political Parties has become a rather esoteric specialty of research workers who are obsessed by organizational and functional problems and only superficially interested in Political modernization.⁶

The Political Parties are one of the most important factors in the Political modernization of the country. Political Parties are closely associated with the modernization of the developed societies. Some times these are shaped in the form of reformist, revolutionary or nationalist. The Political Party is such a critical force for modernization in all contemporary societies that the particular pattern of modernization in the developing areas of the contemporary World.

The importance of Political Party in providing legitimacy and stability in modernizing political system varies inversely with the

institutional inheritance of the system from traditional society. In the situation where traditional political institutions collapse or are weak or on existent and strong party organization is the only long term alternative to the stability of a corrupt society, the party is not just a supplementary organization but it is the source of legitimacy and authority.⁷ In the absence of traditional sources of authority it is sound in ideology, charisma, popular sovereignty and each of these principles of legitimacy embody in political party for longer lasting. Thus, state becomes the creation of party and the instrument of the party.

One of the significant characteristics of the Political Party is that their form is determined by the entire socio-political frame work of the society. It depends upon the degree of modernization in a society for their pluralism and diversity and upon the groupings in the society for its membership. Second important aspect of political party is intervening variables between public and government. The entire representative principles of the government rest on the relationship of the party and the public, for internal cohesion and mutual understanding between the leaders and the government. Third significant aspect of political party is its obvious importance as subgroup in the system with their own means of generating power, which is most critical in the new nation, particularly, of Asia and Africa, where party is often microcosm of the future society, then society and government become dependent on the party organization, the decisions of the party leaders and the frame work of the party are imposed on society. Guinea, Tanzania and Egypt are good examples in this regard.⁸

Political Parties may be defined by the two functions which they perform in the body politic. In the first place,

"they aim at the conquest or exercise of power. In this respect, they are compelled to demonstrate a sense of responsibility in the drafting of their programs or in their day-to-day actions. Secondly, the parties perform

a function of mediation between the governors and the governed."⁹

This is a two-way process, since the parties pass on those in power the wishes expressed by the electors (passive function) in so far as they take steps to select, harmonize or place in order of priority the issues brought to their attention for inclusion in their program or for immediate action.

In examining the party system, it is desirable to know as to how a political system dominated by a single party works in a state. One party state may be a state in which one political party enjoys such large support of the country's population that the parties which may be existing are submerged by the presence of the former, or it may be a state in which all other political parties are outlawed to perform political functions of a society. The first state may be referred to as one party dominant system and the second as one party-legal system.

One party dominant system embodies party competitiveness and pluralism. The system allows other parties to participate in parliamentary elections in which they are normally defeated. The dominant political party is supposed to observe carefully the rise and render full support in respect of minority parties so that it can adjust its strategies in order to maintain its dominant position. By maintaining its dominant position by elections some one has rightly observed that, "the dominant party tends to be absorptive rather than destructive in its relationship with the minority parties and other pressure groups."¹⁰ Another distinctive characteristic of one party dominant system is the absence of ideology. The system is centralized, and the party normally emphasizes policies freedom. Malaysia and Mexico are good examples of one dominant party system. India was also regarded in the same category before the election of March 16, 1977, where Congress Party has controlled government since independence.

Role of Political Parties in Mobilization of Public Opinion

Organization of public opinion is one of the functions performed by Political Parties. In this regard a party has been described that, "a primary function of political parties is to organize public opinion and test attitudes and transmit these to government officials and leaders so that ruled and ruler, public and government, are in reasonably close accord."¹¹

In competitive and pluralistic system, public opinion is organized into opposing groups. In party states either dominant, authoritarian, totalitarian or mobilization type, there is a tendency to organize public opinion into a harmonious entity. This is due to the fact that these systems lack effective opposition or opposition is illegal. In one party dominant state such as in Malaysia the minority parties are not effective enough to organize a strong opinion to oppose the popular opinion of the dominant party. In authoritarian and totalitarian system divergent opinion from the official opinion is suppressed such as in Guinea and China respectively. In one party mobilization system as in Tanzania the organization of public opinion is part of mobilization process. In all these systems, the political parties are effective in organizing the public opinion. But the trend of organization is towards a homogeneous public opinion.

One party authoritarian, totalitarian and mobilization system carries out mobilization functions more intensively than the one party dominant and competitive system. Those political parties which use mobilization extensively also seek to eliminate any political opposition. One party totalitarian system such as China and Vietnam use mobilization to rally political support and to politicize the masses to party's communist ideology. In mobilization system such as that in Tanzania, the political parties seek to have as many people as possible into the party. Mobilization is, therefore, used to transform the only political party into mass party.

One of the major aims or goals of political parties particularly in one

party state is to achieve integration. Many of the one party system in modernizing states are integration parties. They seek to create a homogeneous society, and the role of opposition turns out negative as it takes society back to heterogeneous entities. In order to achieve integration, such political parties emphasize unity and less political freedom or the rights of the individuals. They emphasize policies of development and modernization in order to achieve that goal. One Party system has burdened the party with multiplicity of function in addition to the electoral and parliamentary functions. There is tendency for such political parties to fuse with the government and the state, and are difficult to disentangle from the government or the state.

Malaysian politics is dominated by rivalry among ethnic groups. The present-day political divisions date from the Japanese occupation, when Pan-Malay nationalism arose, Indian independence movements were formed, and the Chinese communities united against Japan. After the World War II, the Chinese challenged Malay hegemony. The introduction of electoral processes under British rule in 1948 paved the way for the creation of political parties in Malaysia. As some measure of unity was a prerequisite for independence, the United Malay National Organization, the Malayan Chinese Association, and the Malayan Indian Congress joined together to form the Alliance party. The Alliance owned majorities in the election of 1955, 1959 and 1964. In 1974 the Alliance was joined by three former opposition parties, the Pan Malaysian Islamic Party, the Gerakian Rakyat Malaysia, and the People's Progressive Party in a National Front. This left the Democratic Action Party, a primarily Chinese organization, as the only major opposition party. The Communist Party is banned. "The National Front owned sweeping victories in the 1974, 1978, and 1982 elections, capturing more than 85 percent of the seats in the Dewan Rakyat in 1982."¹² Since 1955 successive leaders of the United Malay National Organization, the main party in the National Front has acted as prime ministers.

Despite the successes of the Alliance and the National Front, ethnic rivalries persist. Malays, who make up 50 percent of the population, are guaranteed 75 percent of all government jobs, 64 percent of University places, and special scholarships, commercial subsidies, and land grants.¹³ These privileges are designed to raise the Malays to the same economic and educational level as the Chinese, who although less numerous predominate in business, industry, the technical fields, and professions such as medicine. Electoral districts are arranged to maintain the ruling parties in power. Urban Chinese districts may have four times as many voters as rural Malay districts. Non-Malays resent these "special rights", and in the late 1970s some Chinese began leaving the country.¹⁴ Anti-Chinese rioting erupted in Pinang in 1967 and in Kuala Lumpur in 1969. The 1969 disorders led to the declaration of a state of national emergency. The emergency was ended in 1971, but restrictions were retained on the public discussion of racial problems.

After February 1971, when parliamentary government was restored, the government took steps to reinforce the concept of Malaysian nationality. A written "national ideology" called "Rukunegara"; funds were set aside for long-term development projects to increase the participation of the Malays and the indigenous peoples of Sarawak and Sabah in economic life; and open political conflict was reduced by including in the ruling political coalition most of the former opposition parties.¹⁵ The coalition changed its name from the Alliance to the National Front.

In 1973 the governing coalition was broadened by the inclusion of the Pan Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP) which was on the opposition camp. With the inclusion of PMIP, political support from the Malay community broadened and led to a better political mobilization of public opinion, but this did not least.

A general election in August 1974 resulted in a sweeping victory of National Front (a coalition of nine parties), which won 135 out of 154

seats in Parliament. When Tun Abdul Razak died in 1976, he was succeeded first by Datuk Hussain Onn, who is his brother in-law and when he retired in July 1978 because of ill health, it was taken over by Dato Seri Dr. Mahathir Muhammad as a Prime Minister of Malaysia. The 1976 had shown a noticeable increase in communist terrorism in Malaysia, and in March 1977 an agreement was signed with Thailand for joint military operations against the guerrilla forces near their common border. Malaysian communist Party inspired terrorism intended to destabilize the regime began in the mid 1970s.

After election of 1981, more parties joined the National Front. These are Berjaya Party (BP), Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), and United Sabah National Organization (USNO). In Sabah, independent Kadazan leader Joseph Pairin Kitingan's by-election victory in December 1984 prompted the ruling Berjaya Party to call state election in April 1985. In March, Kitingan registered a new opposition party. Parti Bersatu Sabah and it won 25 out of 48 seats to topple the Berjaya party, which had been in power for nine years.¹⁶

The Parti Bersatu Sabah's narrow victory was immediately challenged by defeated chief minister Harris Sallah and his former bitter enemy Tun Mustapha Harun, leader of the United Sabah National Organization. The two schemed to have the state governor swear in Mustapha as the new chief minister. Within hours, the governor renounced his action, claiming to have been coerced, and administered a new oath to Kitingan as chief minister. Court challenges by Berjaya and USNO were pending late in the year. The Parti Bersatu Sabah petitioned for admission to the National Front, but its dependence on Catholic, Kadazan, and Chinese votes raised questions its multiethnic commitment and the question was tabled.

In neighboring Sarawak, the governor and former state leader, Rahman Yakub, relinquished the titular governorship to challenge the chief minister and National Front leader in the state, his nephew Taib Mahmud, for the leadership of the Parti Pesaka Bumiputera

Bersatu.

The Largest Chinese Party in Peninsular Malaysia, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), continued in turmoil as factions led by party president Neo Yee Pan and former vice-president Tan Koon Swan struggled for control of the party. A third faction emerged when Neo's choice for vice-president, Mak Hon Kam, held a meeting in which Neo was replaced as president by Mak. Neo responded that the meeting was not legal and dismissed Mak and party secretary general Tan Tiong Hong from their positions. As an alternative to expelling the party from the National Front, Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohammad fired Neo as cabinet minister and engineered an agreement for party elections late in the year.

The National Front's concern is that the disarray in the largest Chinese party will lead to massive disaffection among Chinese voters in national election, which it is planning for early 1986. During 1985 the opposition parti Islam, primary challenger for Malay votes to the United Malays National Organization, which dominates the National Front, sought to moderate its extremist image among non-Malay voters who hold the key swing votes in many election contests between the two parties.

Government Structure

In order to understand the political and social structure and the contribution of the party system it is important that the government structure (see table) is discussed to a certain length. Malaysia is a Federation of 13 states governed by a constitutional Monarchy. With the exception of Malacca, Penang, Sabah and Sarwak, each state has a Ruler. The Ruler of Perlis is entitled Raja and that of Negri Sembilan the Yang di-Pertuan Besar. The rest of the states are ruled by Sultans. The Heads of the state of Malacca, Penang and Sarwak are governors while the Head of the state of Sabah is designed Yang di-Pegara. He is appointed by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong in the same manner as the Governors of the three states.

Each state has its own written constitution and Legislative Assembly. The nominal head of the Federal Government is the paramount ruler (the Yang di-Pertuan Agong), who is elected by the Conference of Rulers. To qualify for election he must be one of the nine Rulers. He holds office for five years or until his earlier registration or death. When the office falls vacant, the Conference of Rulers meet to elect a successor.

The important house which established by the Malaysian constitution is the Conference of Rulers which consists of the Rulers and Governors. Its prime duty is the election of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong and his Deputy. The Conference must be consulted on the appointments of Judges, the Attorney-General, the Election Commission and the Public Service Commission.

According to the country's constitution of 1957, however, real political power rests with the parliament, comprises the Yang di-Pertuan Agong and two Dewan Negara (Senate) and a Dewan Rakyat (House of Representatives). The Dewan Negara's 58 members include 32 appointed by the paramount ruler and 26 elected by legislative assemblies in the states. The powerful Dewan Rakyat has 154 members elected for five years of the party with the most seats in parliament serves as Prime Minister and names a cabinet, whose members are appointed by the Paramount ruler.

The Federal Parliament is the supreme legislature authority in Malaysia. Unless earlier dissolved, parliament shall function for a period of five years from the date of its first meeting after a general election. It is also responsible for foreign affairs, defense, internal security, justice (except where Islamic and native law prevail), federal citizenship, finance, commerce, industry, communication, civil service, and customs matters.

As the head of the Government, the Prime Minister is charged with the responsibility of keeping the Yan di-Pertuan Agong in touch with the general administration of the country. He holds office at the

Royal pleasure, but may resign at will. The post of Deputy Prime Minister is a conventional one (i.e., it is not established under the constitution or any written law). The Deputy Prime Minister again enjoys a high measure of confidence within the Cabinet and the Party, and is available to take over the administration in the event of the absence or disability of the Prime Minister.

The Yang di-Pertuan Agong appoints a cabinet (a council of Ministers) to advise him in the exercise of his functions with the consent of Prime Minister. Cabinet meets under the Chairmanship of Prime Minister, to formulate the policy of the government.

With reference to the political dilemma, it is necessary to give a look on the political parties of Malaysia. Presently there is a dominant political organization called National Front, a coalition of nine parties namely, United Malays National Organization (UMNO), Malayan Chinese Association MCA), Malayan Indian Congress (MIC), United Sabah National Organization USNO), Sarwak United People's Party (SUPP), Party Gerakan Rakyat GERAKAN), Party Bersatu Berjaya (BERJAYA), Party Muslims Malaysia (HAMIM) and (PPBB) representing the country's three major ethnic groups.

Political Parties - Party System

In the Malaysian politics the party structures may be viewed in the broader frame work of Barisan National, the ruling coalition. In some studies the component party structures are stressed. In other cases the coalition structure is emphasized. A more balanced study in the overall political context of Malaysia would try to present the relationship of the people. Of late, some dynamic role was prescribed for the (BN) Barisan National. Dr. Mahathir announced that the BN would carry out a program "to promote and strengthen unity among its component parties and the People."¹⁷

As a matter of fact, this arrangement will enhance internal cohesion among the component parties. This innovation found support on the

form of the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) Youth General Assembly and attracted practical demonstration. In this context the controversy over the "sign boards issue"¹⁸ may be cited. This issue generated when local councils required that Bahasa Malaysia should be given prominence. The resolution of the issue resulted in an accord between United Malay National Organization and Malaysian Chinese Association Youth.

The guiding principle in resolving such problems must whirl round the capabilities of the component parties to arrive at some negotiations on the basis of give and take. Liberal application of the principle enabled the component parties to integrate themselves within the frame work of Barisan National for solidarity of the coalition.

The first half of 1983 was a period of great disruption within the ranks of United Malay National Organization party, the prominent component of Barisan National. The cause of the rift was attributed to 1981 Deputy Presidential elections of Datuk Musa Hitam and Tengku Razaleigh which was a cause of great concern. The defeated candidates of the party in 1982 in general elections were trying to re-emerge and were doing every thing possible to undermine the leadership of the new leaders at the state and division levels. For example "in Johore, the new Mentri Besar, Datuk Ajib Ahmed faced non-cooperation from supporters of Datuk Jala Abu Baker, the former Deputy Defence Minister, who had expected to be appointed".¹⁹ In some cases, the trouble was monitored by the support of Sultan undermining the support by the party. The conflicts could be witnessed in the states of Johore, Selangor, Perak and the Federal Territory. This was in the wake of 1984 party elections. The situation aggravated so much that" Dr. Mahathir stressed the need for party unity in his chain of speeches in April and May 1983".²⁰ Later on Tunku Abdul Rehman and Tun Hussein Onn besides other prominent leaders joined him and warned that, "Cliques will destroy United Malay National Organization."²¹

It transpires that several leaders were not well disposed off towards party role in the coalition and particularly criticized the government politics such as the, "Look East" policy, the "Clock-in system", the award of contracts to foreigners, and the new Prime Minister's residence which costs M\$ 11 million.²² However, in spite of all these troubles, the party managed to maintain its popularity in the community, as the election results proved.

Datuk Lee San Choon indicated his intentions to resign from the leadership of Malaysian Chinese Association in April 1983, in favor of the acting president Datuk Neo Yee Pan. He found that the party was enjoying a stable position in the Chinese community and there should be no difficulty for the acting President to strengthen the party before party and national elections in 1984 and 1987 respectively. The new leader declared that there will be no major change in policy. In early May, the party announced the Eight Ibin Plan which was to "complement and supplement" the 'Ten Projects of the party started by Datuk Lee. This is according to Acting Deputy President Datuk Mak Hon Kam, "will further strengthen Chinese unity and enable the community to play its part in nation-building".²³ This was a comprehensive attempt to integrate the party system deep into the Chinese community. For this purpose, a Task Force was formed which, according to Datuk Neo aimed to "keep a watch on possible deviation in government policies or misinterpretation of such policies during implementation".²⁴ However, the results of some of the by-elections in the strong holds of the party show that it failed to maintain its position. This has created a gloomy picture for Datuk Neo, as its leader. In the Malaysian Indian Congress a straight fight between its President and vice President greatly damages the image of the party. The President was keen to replace the less educated leaders in the party by more capable and educated ones. But it was found that the less educated leaders enjoyed grassroots' support and therefore, they could not be easily replaced. The main demand of the party included an appeal to the government to "classify Indians as a distinct group in the Mid-Term

Review of the Fourth Malaysia Plan rather than being included in the other non-bumiputras.”²⁵

The abovementioned three parties together formed the ruling Alliance Party. The Alliance was formed in the early 1950s on a tacit agreement or "bargain" mainly between the Malays and Chinese. This provided for domination of Malays in the government and retention of some traditional Malays features and privileges. The Chinese were allowed to continue to dominate the economic scene. The arrangement worked well in the initial phase but there are growing signs of discontent between both the leading communities. The Malays believe that dominance of economic scene by the Chinese amounts to blocking the prospects of Malays in the trade. The Chinese on the other hand believe that the dominance of Malays character of governmental structure and privilege reduces their status and position. This situation may continue to create conflicts and tension between the two communities in general and the political parties representing the communities in the National Alliance in particular. However, the spirit and belief in the policy of negotiation will provide the necessary leverage for resolving the problems. The Malaysian nation has already demonstrated that grave disputes and tensions can be resolved through mutual consultation and negotiation. This principle provides the basis for their strength and solidarity in spite of differences in ethnic and cultural origins and economic status and position.

One of the greatest virtues of the Malaysian political system is that it provides a powerful structure for the mobilization of masses on the basis of ethnic sentiments. Looking at the scene in the South Asian countries, it may be seen that the nation in this part is allergic at the formation of political parties based on ethnic sentiments. They consider that parties formed on regional or parochial basis are likely to tear the country and harm the cause of national integration. These sorts of sentiments are particularly marked in countries like Pakistan and Sri Lanka. In this context, Malaysian political system may be

commended for its pragmatic evolution. It does not have to chase ideologies. In this system there is a great hope for all pluralistic societies for integrating their political system, starting from communal or ethnic level.

Contribution towards National Unity by the Party System

After their independence the problem of national integration has become more conspicuous in most of the South East Asian countries. To a very great extent, the basis of national integration was the personality and views of the dominant leaders like Sukarno of Indonesia, UNU of Burma and of course, Tenku Abdul Rehman of Malaysia played significant roles in the formation of national unity in their respective plural societies. "The fundamental problem of national unity in the newly independent states has affected the vocabulary of politics in South East Asia".²⁶ Most of the leaders find it necessary to concentrate in their public statements on appeals to national unity. The sense of unity is also created through observing the ceremonial occasions of different ethnic groups, national holidays and by avoiding the serious discussions of the sensitive issues that divided people. The leaders, besides their political organization, communicate to their country men for influence of national ideology through the extensive use of radio, television and newspapers.

The unity of the Malays is of the greatest importance. Malays who have ever dared to go out of the ranks of the Malays have been called traitors to the Malay cause. In fact, they become outcasts within the Malay community. There is the case of Data Onn bin Jaafaer, father of Malay nationalism and the founder of the United Malays National Organization.²⁷

Many Malay leaders feel that their community has passed by and there is need to develop and control the economy of their own. While non-Malay-Chinese and Indians look forward to find a solution for their security and future in terms of participation and

property. In order to stabilize the national unity, Alliance government usually appoints finance minister from among the Chinese community (as they have control over the Malaysian business). Many Malay political leaders still think to have a equal balance in the control of business and commerce which is dominantly controlled by non-Malays. While "some non-Malays-Chinese appear eager to have political power but most of them seem content to leave politics to Malays and kept their attention in protecting their economic interest".²⁸

While seeking an accommodation of communal economics and political interests Alliance leaders such as Tanku Abdul Rehman and Tun Abdul Razak looked to educational policy as a chief means of creating the popular unity to maintain the national integrity of the state. In Malaysia's plural society it is difficult to devise a system of education which at the same time prepare young people for the economic development of the nation and also enable them to promote the ideology of national loyalty. Since the birth of Malaysia, Alliance Party has made efforts to establish a national school system in which all schools were financed and operated by the government machinery. Children begin their education with primary school program of six years and are taught in Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil according to the wishes of their parents but secondary education is provided in Malay and English only. It is still dubious whether a national school system with Malaysian-oriented curriculum in long term will serve the problem of national unity of Malaysia. The Alliance has no doubt scored some signal successes to bring the national loyalty among diversified communities of the country. The policy on primary and secondary education which takes into accounts the cultural diversity of the population and the acceptance of the most Malays is beyond doubt a success in strengthening the national unity in the plural society of nation. Equally praise worthy were the provisions through which primary education up to six years is kept free from fees, which ultimately resulted in vast number of students at primary level.

Through the National Alliance the able leadership of Tengku Abdul Rehman and Tun Abdul Razak had wisely called upon to articulate the real interests that divided their people. Their efforts to develop common national identity among different ethnic groups created a firm basis for national integration. "The multiplicity of large number of ethnic groups and smaller in size do not always be an obstacle in the creation of a broader political nationality but provide better chances for effective amalgamation".²⁹ Moreover, it is discussed that such rich pluralism makes dictatorship less likely by providing counter-veiling power centers which can be coerced into a single authoritarian system.

Most Malaysian leaders have assumed that a single Malaysian nationality must be backed by a degree of popular unity, outlook and loyalty if Malaysia were to become strong and viable state. The Alliance has been successful to a great extent at least in creating the sense of national unity among the diversified cultural communities of Malaysia. This unity has been developed and maintained in such a way that various communities can live in peace and country as whole can make progress in all fields.

Future Prospects of Malaysian Political System

In its present shape the Malaysian ethnic communities have joined to the level of ruling coalition through two intrinsic links. This link has been provided by the political parties who represent the respective communities, such as Malays, Chinese, Indians and others. The Parties derive their political power directly from concerned communities and use this power for negotiation in the interest of such groups within the frame work of the National Front or the executive committees constituted by the government.

One thing is evident that this system does not have the tendency or even the objective to integrate the ethnic communities socially and culturally. This feature distinguishes the political system in Malaysia from most other nation states. In the same way, it may be said that

the system provides necessary safeguards against the dominance of one political party or community over other party or community. For want of ideology, the chances of evolution of nationalism in the secular sense are also minimal. The system does not have the political power or to involve the government in the mobilization of masses directly. It has to depend on the public relation potential of the communal parties for the purpose. This limitation on the part of the National Front had been a cause of misunderstanding between the rural population and the government during 1970s. "The people in new villages felt badly cheated and neglected by the government."³⁰

The present leadership believes in the tactics of negotiations for a resolution of problems and issues and wants to preserve the arrangement in the future. As the system provides the mechanism for giving popular support to the Alliance through the representativeness and roots of its component parties in the ethnic communities, there are virtually little possibilities of the replacement of the system in near future. "As long as the National Front remains in unquestioned control of the Malaysian federal government and most of the state governments, it is unlikely that there will be any real attempts to change the present political system"³¹

However, the present political system is not without its problems. It has limited potential to dissipate the build up of tensions and conflicts amongst the different communal factions. The signs of growing ill feelings between the Chinese and the Malays communities have begun to come to the forefront recently. It may explode into violence any time. The cause of the tension has roots in the discriminatory treatment of the Chinese for entry into the civil services and even in case of admissions in the educational institutions.

As at the stage of initial negotiations in the coalition, the Malays had come to occupy dominant position in the administrative structure of the country, and since there has been systematic efforts by them to

enhance their political powers, the Chinese fear and has every reason to do so that the Chinese will be ultimately reduced to second class citizens. They think that besides denial of opportunities in the civil services, the Malays may eventually undermine their position and prospects of being leading business communities and come to share increasing economic gains with the passage of time. They also fear that even if economic parity is achieved, there is no possibility at the present time that there will be political or cultural equality and that they are condemned to second class citizenship.

The inherent obstacle of the system is that it does not allow for the emergence of any opposition in the parliament and therefore, no platform for debate on national issues, considered critical for the promotion of democratic polity. Hence, there exists every apprehension that some underground opposition structure may be growing up, which may turnout to be much more disastrous.

Malaysia has well developed structure depending on market economy. The main economic activities are involved in production and export of Petroleum, Rubber Tin and Palm Oil. The 1970 rights directed against the rich Chinese communities resulted in change of the economic policy with emphasis on reduction of poverty among Malays and other indigenous races. The Chinese and other immigrants dominate the industrial sector. In spite of government's efforts to create better economic opportunities for Malays and other, the present development has failed to satisfy the Malays.

So considering the politico-economic system as a whole, there arises serious doubts in mind about the future prospects of the present system. The major issue is as to whether an integrated socio-cultural pattern can be evolved for ultimate growth of national level parties. In this regard some one rightly observes that, "The long-term need, therefore, is to build up a more normal political party system by gradually defusing the strength of inter-communal feeling. This would permit the emergence of political parties whose differences of programs do not reflect to achieve essentially communal objectives.

This, in fact, seems to be the aim of the policy promoted since 1970 by Tan Sri Muhammad Gazali Shafie".³²

The question still remains whether the outcome will be in the shape of multiple political parties or will just result in the emergence of one authoritarian type political party.

References:

¹ Malaysia 1972, *Official Year Book*, p.17.

² *The World Almanac*, 1986, New York, p.581.

³ <http://charleshector.blogspot.com/2011/05/population-by-sex-ethnic-group-and-age.html>

⁴ Although the term Malaya and Malaysia will be used interchangeably here, depending upon the time period being considered, it should be apparent that most of the generalizations and observations in this paper are based on the interest of the author in the area.

⁵ S. H. Alatas, "The Politics of Coalition in Malaysia", *Current History*, December 1972, p.

⁶ David E. Apter, *The Politics of Modernization*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965, p.179.

⁷ Samuel Huntington, "Political Development and Political Decay", in Claude Welch's edition, *Political Modernization*, California: Wordsworth Publishing Company, 1971, p.271.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.27.

⁹ Almond and Powel, *Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach*, New York: Brown and Company, 1966, P.216.

¹⁰ Apter, *Op. cit.*, p.179.

¹¹ Zakaria Haji Ahmed, "Malaysia in 1980: A year of Political Consolidation and Economic Development", *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1983, p.203.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.204.

¹³ S. Drummond. "Malaysian Politics since the Communal Violence" London: *The World Today*, December 1970.

¹⁴ Alatas, *Op. cit.*, p.

¹⁵ *The Americana: Annual 1986*, p.336.

¹⁶ Ahmed, Op. cit., p.202.

¹⁷ Michael Ong, "Malaysia in 1980: On the Road to Greater Malaysia", *Southeast Asian Affairs 1984*, p.210.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.211.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.211.

²⁰ Ahmed, Op. cit., p. 203.

²¹ Ong, Op. cit., p. 211.

²² Ibid., p.212.

²³ Drummond, Op. cit., p.

²⁴ D. W .Chang "Current Status of Chinese Minorities", *Foreign Affairs*, July 1973.

²⁵ G. A. Almond & J. S. Coleman, *The Politics of the Development Areas*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1960, p.150-151.

²⁶ R. K. Vasil, *Politics in a Plural Society*, London: Oxford University Press, London, 1971, p.7.

²⁷ George Kahin, *Major Governments of Asia*, Ithaca: Cornel University Press, 1963, p.252.

²⁸ S. Husain Ali, *Malay: Pleasant Society and Leadership*, London: Oxford University Press, 1975, p.157.

²⁹ Chang, Op. cit., p.

³⁰ Sevinc Carlson, *Malaysia: Search for National Unity and Economic Growth*, Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1975, p.21.

³¹ Ibid., p. 23.