

The difficult battle for Malaysia’s democratic soul

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There are two contending visions of democracy in Malaysia – one that demands equal rights for all citizens, and one that infuses democracy with the preservation of the traditional Malay-Muslim status quo, say the writers. In the longer term, unresolved conflict between these two visions means intensifying political conflict and institutional stasis. PHOTO: AFP



The difficult battle for Malaysia’s democratic soul

The challenge isn’t just implementing reforms, but also navigating an ideological split.

Elvin Ong and
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Various reasons have been offered as to why the Pakatan Harapan (PH) government has performed so poorly in Malaysia’s state elections in recent months, despite being the leading coalition in the federal government.

In the Johor and Negeri Sembilan polls held in July and August respectively, the PH coalition was trounced by the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition and its electoral alliance with Perikatan Nasional (PN).

In the upcoming state elections in Melaka, due by November, and Sarawak, due by February 2027, the PH coalition risks suffering wipeouts.

Some analysts have suggested that voters are punishing Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim’s PH for failing to implement the institutional reforms it had promised since winning federal power in 2022. Others have suggested that the rapid rise of identity politics in recent years has led to today’s quagmire.

Still more have opined that a lack of material benefits from Malaysia’s decent economic growth has led to voters turning against the government.

While all these explanations contain a kernel of truth, they do

not address the differing ideological bases between the political parties and alliances since 2018.

There are two contending visions of democracy in Malaysia – one that demands equal rights for all citizens, and one that infuses democracy with the preservation of the traditional Malay-Muslim status quo.

In the short term, this has implications for the PH government’s performance at the ballot box. If PH cannot compellingly persuade voters that it can reconcile these conflicting visions of democracy, its electoral performance will surely suffer.

In the longer term, unresolved conflict between these two visions of democracy means intensifying political conflict and institutional stasis in Malaysia.

UNCERTAIN POLITICAL ORDER SINCE 2018

Ever since BN lost power in the 2018 General Election, its decades-long balancing act – coupling Malay-Muslim dominance with minority inclusion – has come under severe pressure.

This pressure is most intensely reflected in the contrasting perspectives of pro-institutional reform advocates and anti-institutional reform activists since 2018.

In recent years, many civil society organisations have pushed

the government to implement institutional reforms to deepen democracy. These include abolishing the Sedition Act, and enacting a Political Financing Act to regulate how political parties receive and spend money, among many others.

While seemingly technocratic in nature, anti-institutional reformers have charged that such implementation undermines the pre-2018 political status quo under the BN. Abolishing the Sedition Act, for example, may expose the traditional Malay monarchy to open criticism.

The contrasting views of these two groups have left the institutional reform agenda in perpetual limbo. Malaysians are wondering if and how inter-ethnic relations will change, and if democracy will survive.

We argue that the views of these two groups are underpinned by deeper ideological differences over two distinct views of the future of democracy in Malaysia.

THE DEMOCRATIC SPLIT

We term the first vision of democracy in Malaysia classic liberalism and the second, the stability vision.

In the former, elections must be free and fair for all political parties and voters. All Malaysians should also enjoy freedom of speech and expression. Most importantly, a key tenet of this vision of democracy is that all Malaysians should enjoy equal rights, regardless of race or religion.

To people who subscribe to this

vision, “equal rights” mean meritocratic promotion without considering ethnicity, and equal status among all races. Rhetorically and culturally, this vision of democracy celebrates Malaysia’s multiracial and multi-religious communities.

In stark contrast, the decisive victories of BN and PN in the recent state elections portend the emerging triumph of the stability vision.

In this vision, free and fair elections plus the democratic freedom of speech and expression are also the top two most important aspects of democracy. But where it differs is in its third priority.

Rather than emphasising the idea that all Malaysians should enjoy equal rights, regardless of race or religion, the stability vision of democracy in Malaysia prioritises political stability of the inter-ethnic status quo.

Malaysians who subscribe to this vision prioritise preserving the existing political order, maintaining Malay bumiputera special rights and privileges, and recognising Islam as the country’s religion as defined in Malaysia’s Constitution.

Rhetorically and culturally, Malaysia’s monarchy system is seen as an important symbol of Malay-Muslim tradition, and the Malay language as the country’s most important working language.

Not only is the idea of equal rights, regardless of race and religion, not an important priority, but this second vision of democracy also ranks this idea as the least prioritised among all

other ideas of democracy, such as majority rule, independent courts and economic prosperity.

GROUND SENTIMENT

We make this argument of the duelling visions of democracy in Malaysia based on our own long-term observations of Malaysian politics, and on a recent survey of 2,200 Malaysians aged between 25 and 40 in June.

We asked respondents to choose the two ideas that they most associate with democracy from a list of nine attributes, such as majority rule, economic prosperity and an independent judiciary. Respondents consistently chose free and fair elections and the freedom of speech and expression as the top two attributes.

It was in the third most popular choice that respondents diverged sharply along racial lines.

Among Malay respondents, political stability was their third most popular choice. Equal rights, regardless of race and religion, were ranked at the bottom.

Among non-Malay respondents, by contrast, equal rights, regardless of race and religion, were their third most popular choice. Political stability was their fifth.

These recent survey findings are not entirely new. They echo similar findings from two years ago. Merdeka Center’s National Youth Survey 2024 similarly found that 73% of Malay respondents insisted on maintaining Malay bumiputera privileges, compared with an estimated 80% of non-Malay respondents who favoured equal treatment regardless of race and religion.

These survey findings suggest an ideological divide along racial lines, but how that divide translates to political action and outcomes in reality is much more nuanced.

Under the current unity government, for example, non-Malay voters support political compromise. The continued resilience in voter

support for the Democratic Action Party (DAP) in its party strongholds, plus the recent internal party vote by DAP party delegates to remain in the current unity government, reflects this.

For Malay voters, so long as institutional reforms contemplated by the current government do not undermine existing Malay bumiputera special rights and privileges, such reforms can be supported.

For instance, in a separate survey fielded in 2025, we found broad popular support for implementing a Political Financing Act to regulate the funds that political parties receive and spend.

Even more, our survey shows that regardless of race, all Malaysians very highly prioritise free and fair elections alongside the freedom of speech and expression.

If existing institutional reforms being contemplated can deepen commitment towards these two goals, then Malaysia’s democratic future is more secure.

THE RHETORICAL NEEDLE

Politicians and political parties that wish to generate broad popular support for institutional reforms to enhance democracy in Malaysia have a tricky task.

They must convince their own supporters that the reforms are substantively pro-democracy enough to be worthy of their support, but not to the extent that they upset the political status quo of Malay bumiputera special rights and dominance.

If they do not thread the rhetorical needle carefully, they end up upsetting everyone and satisfying no one. PH’s recent electoral losses suggest that they are not undertaking this tricky task well at all.

Few people are convinced that PH is doing enough to implement pro-democracy reforms. Even fewer are persuaded that they can implement whatever institutional reforms they have in mind without undermining the Malay bumiputera special rights and dominance.

Post-electoral analyses of the Johor state election, for example, noted how DAP Minister for Housing and Local Government Nga Kor Ming was vilified for promising to resign if former prime minister Najib Razak was freed from jail. His promise sparked significant backlash among Malay voters instead.

PH’s touting of technocratic, administrative reforms, such as its new Budi95 programme capping the amount of subsidised fuel, also fell flat. Most Malaysians saw no change in their pockets and daily lives.

Ultimately, the PH alliance cannot be all things to all people. What it must do instead is find creative and convincing ways to persuade the Malaysian electorate that any positions that it holds and the reforms that it undertakes can reconcile the duelling visions of democracy.

If they cannot, then BN and PN will find their task of seizing political power much easier in the next general election.

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