

New Villages in Malaysia: Living Conditions and Political Trends

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Abstract

The history, growth and development of New Villages (NVs) in Malaysia are common issues of discussion. The actions of relevant authorities to deal with the persistent problems of NVs have seldom been comprehensive and successful. This paper explores issues that appear to challenge NVs in their present form and to examine whether such challenges will contribute to the growth of NVs or to their stagnation.

Several issues and possibilities concerning NVs are raised and preliminary findings are extrapolated to place the dilemma of the NVs in perspective. Issues of politics, liveability and sustainability are discussed in relation to the future of NVs in this country. The current national housing policy has to divert sufficient attention to address issues concerning the liveability of NVs. The long term neglect of NVs can result in negative political repercussions for the ruling coalition government. As attested by recent electoral votes, the discontentment with living conditions in the NVs is reflected in the inhabitants' voting behaviour and shift of support to the opposition parties. For the ruling coalition to arrest their declining popularity in the NVs, there is a need for the relevant authorities to revitalize new villages and improve the quality of homes and living environment arising from demographic, social and economic changes. It is clear that national development plans should take into account the future of NVs in a comprehensive and more balanced perspective.

Key words: New Villages, urbanization, liveability, housing, political trend

Introduction

The New Villages (NVs) are settlements that were established in Peninsular Malaysia (then known as the Federation of Malaya) at the initial phase of the "Emergency" period between 1948 and 1960. This was a period of anti-colonial insurrection waged by armed guerrilla forces operating from their jungle hideouts.¹ Villages were hurriedly set up in many areas where the Chinese were found in large numbers in rural areas. The intention was to re-locate, and hence to control, these inhabitants who were perceived to be sympathetic to the insurgents who were intent on opposing the British colonial masters when they resumed

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control of Malaya after the Japanese Occupation (see Sandhu, 1964; Nyce, 1973; Voon, 2009). Commonly known as Chinese NVs, they are now placed under the portfolio of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government (Ministry of Housing and Local Government, 2005). Its number is inexact but estimated to be several hundred located especially in the states of Perak, Selangor, Johor and Pahang. The original population of half a million was largely Chinese. In 1995, the NV population was estimated to be 1.68 million but outmigration and declining births have led to a substantial decrease to 1.26 million or one-fifth of the Chinese population by 2002. More than half a century old, many of the NVs are beset with many physical and social problems (Wang, 1988). These problems have manifested themselves as issues that also plague the governments at the federal, state and local levels. Actions taken thus far by the relevant authorities have seldom been comprehensive or successful. Inevitably, the question of the ultimate fate of these NVs has often been raised.

The NVs are not merely the home of a substantial portion of the Chinese but also a political constituency of significant clout. In the context of the multiethnic setting of Malaysia, the NVs are areas of political contest between opposing parties and whose support is of crucial importance in determining the outcome of political elections.

This study will explore the broad issues that appear to challenge NVs in their present form and to examine whether such challenges will contribute to the growth or stagnation of NVs. The discussion will then focus the recent political trend of NVs that is inseparably linked to the prolonged indifference of officialdom to the sentiments of the village people and their crying need for a home that they are proud of.

Positioning New Villages in Malaysia: Development or Stagnation?

A recent study has revealed that some NVs have prospered and others have stagnated (Voon, 2009). In essence, the NVs that are located in the periphery of Kuala Lumpur and major towns have and will continue to progress in line with the economic development of the nation. Those situated outside small towns or in the midst of semi-rural areas tend to occupy the stagnant end of the development continuum. Basically, it is the spill-over effects of the urbanization process that prompt the growth of the “urban” NVs. These NVs tend to be the sites of small and medium industries (SMIs) and retail activities that normally complement the needs and requirements of the industries and economic functions of nearby urban centres. While the large urban centres stimulate the growth of surrounding NVs, much also depends on the initiatives and efforts of the settlers themselves (Ministry of Housing and Local Government, 2005). However, NVs that are favourably located and seemingly showing signs of growth are by no means free of the various problems that confront NVs in general.

The Ministry of Housing and Local Government recently conducted a master plan study of NVs in Peninsular Malaysia to provide clear policy guidelines and strategies for their future development and growth (Ministry of Housing and Local Government, 2005). Unfortunately

little has been translated into successful action. In fact, indications are that the inability of the authorities in rejuvenating the NVs has done nothing to address the serious issues of sustainability, liveability, governance and politics.

After close to 60 years of existence, what was meant to be “temporary” settlements has become an integral part of the Malaysian cultural landscape. One would expect to see the NVs being transformed into modern and liveable settlements with the full complement of infrastructure and services. Yet this is hardly the case as many signs of the temporary nature of NVs have persisted. Far from being the modern settlement that one may expect or envisage, the social and physical conditions in many NVs have instead deteriorated.

The gravity of the situation becomes obvious if one were to visit a typical NV. A case study reveals the existence of many problems and continued official neglect at the federal, state and local levels has not helped to overcome them. The sorry state of the typical NV has been a source of dissatisfaction with officialdom among the villagers who eventually give vent to their frustration in the exercise of their vote.

The Hulu Kepong NV situated just north of the federal capital of Kuala Lumpur portrays the general state of affairs of most NVs. This is a typical NV which exhibits a mixture of its past and elements of current development that have been prompted by its proximity to the expanding town of Kepong (Plate 1). Drawing on interviews with selected villagers and on-site observations, a fairly representative picture of the current conditions of NVs and the sentiments of the inhabitants may be painted.



Plate 1: A General View of Hulu Kepong New Village

Liveability and a Sustainable Settlement

In the context of human settlements, liveability is basically understood as quality living in terms of life, work and play or work-life balance. The desirable settlement is one that provides shelter in a conducive and liveable environment. Understood in this context, human settlements or neighbourhoods should be built and developed on a sustainable basis. The concept of sustainable development not only applies in environmental preservation, but also

takes cognizance of the quality of development of the village and its neighbourhoods. The true test of sustainable development is that the developmental process “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987: 43).

The desirable conditions of a “sustainable” settlement are diverse and hard to pin down. In the context of the typical NV such as Hulu Kepong, the basic requirements would demand that it is able to cope with the changing needs of the times and where both residents and development projects are appropriately environment friendly to contribute positively to a desirable quality of life. Hence among the primary conditions of a sustainable settlement are the presence of an appealing ambience characterized by security to the person and stability of community life, and a cultural landscape that at once invokes a desire or preference for the place as the residence of choice (Tan, 2008). Given the fact that the average NV has existed for more than half a century, it is ripe for renewal to adapt to changing lifestyles and to offer social and personal spaces to reflect the settlement’s image and character (Tan, 2011).

In the wider context, the needs and common vision of the residents are also expressed in terms of explicit expectations of superior conditions not only of the housing area but also of its adjacent neighbourhoods. These needs cover aspects particularly of living, commuting, and working conditions. However, information gathered in Hulu Kepong NV suggests that the residents are dissatisfied with deteriorating living conditions and the decline in the quality of life. A major issue that concerns the residents is the unsightly and unhygienic surroundings of strewn and uncollected garbage, potholed lanes, and clogged drains, all caused by poor maintenance (Plate 2). There is a universal perception among villagers that the authorities concerned are guilty of poor management and neglect of the NV.



Plate 2: Uncollected Garbage, Hulu Kepong NV

Yet another serious social issue that jeopardizes the liveability of the NV is the growing crime rate. Cases of snatch thefts, house break-ins and vandalism are rampant. The villagers feel helpless and bemoan an environment that lacks safety and security and are constantly

exposed to the fear for the safety of life and property. The rising trend of crime is a national phenomenon and the NVs have not been spared the worrying deterioration of social stability that impacts directly on the quality of life.²

Hulu Kepong NV comprises a typical combination of new and old houses and quarters for shophouses and light factories. The village depicts an overcrowded and congested settlement occupied by both migrants and local residents. The dilapidated state of some of the houses and the prevailing ambience are benchmarks of a settlement that is not much more than just a place to sleep. In short, it has failed to appeal to the residents as a place of residence of which they can be proud. The implication of this lack of residential desirability is the undermining of the long-term sustainability of the village.

The idea of a sustainable settlement suggests more than a living environment that is stimulating to the spirit, but also as part of a lively neighbourhood complete with integrated amenities to satisfy the needs of the residents in both the village and its surrounding areas. One of the conditions is that of public transportation to facilitate easy mobility among dwellers especially from the lower income groups. An efficient and integrated public transport system adds value to the quality of life and to reduce the heavy dependence on private transport primarily the motor cycles or, to some extent, the automobiles. As is elsewhere, private transportation in Malaysia is costly and beyond the reach of the poor.

Despite the introduction of various forms of public transportation such as the light rail transit system, buses and commuter trains in the greater Kuala Lumpur region, the surrounding NVs do not seem to have benefited directly from proper planning. An inter-connected public transport system and other amenities that are planned to ensure accessibility to the villagers will better integrate them into the mainstream of national growth and development. This will also encourage the younger generation of villagers to remain in the NVs and not be lured to live elsewhere and at the same time to enhance the NVs as viable communities.

The numerous problems of the NVs have persisted without signs of abatement in the foreseeable future. One of the principal causes of these problems is the official treatment of NVs as a “stepchild” whose importance is viewed in terms of their role as a source of electoral support during times of general elections. Official oversight may be gauged from the annual allocations for NVs. Between the years 2000 and 2013, a total of RM589.8 million was set aside for NV “development and construction”, or an annual average of RM42 million or so (Table 1). Assuming a rough figure of 450 NVs, this works out as less than RM100,000 per village per year. Given this state of financial plight, the persistence of the problems of NVs and their cumulative effects on the physical conditions and the sentiments of the inhabitants can be appreciated. The long-term social and economic marginalization of the NVs has produced a significant negative impact on the political outlook of the village inhabitants.

Table 1. Official Allocation for New Villages, 2000-2013

Year	Allocation (RM million)
2000	9.8
2001	13.0
2002	15.0
2003	34.0
2004	23.3
2005	29.3
2006	40.4
2007	60.0
2008	59.8
2009	58.7
2010	74.6
2011	50.8
2012	69.4
2013*	51.7
Total	589.8

* January-September

Source: Parliament of Malaysia, 12 November 2013

Political Trends in the New Villages

The lack of improvements in NV life has nursed a cynical outlook among the inhabitants that is reflected in their political views and voting behaviour. The most direct outcome of the dissatisfaction with officialdom is the withdrawal of political support and weakening of the influence of the ruling coalition known as the Barisan Nasional (BN) during recent general elections. The voting trend for 1999, 2004, 2008 and 2013 shows the decline in popularity for the ruling coalition which is clearly an indication of discontentment with living conditions of the NVs.

History and political events of the past, coupled with the current conditions in which the villagers find themselves, have combined to shape the recent trend of politics in the NVs. Since their creation, the NVs have been defined as “a village” and looked upon as special entities but without falling under the clear jurisdiction of any official body. Since they are predominantly Chinese, the NVs have courted the special interest of the Malaysian Chinese Association, popularly known as MCA and a component party of the ruling coalition. In the recent past, the NVs have been placed under the care of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government whose minister has traditionally been appointed from the MCA. Hence the MCA is seen to have a direct link with the NVs where there is invariably a branch office of the party. During the quinquennial national elections, it has been traditionally envisaged that the party can with reasonable confidence rely upon the Chinese villagers for support. Due to a variety of factors emerging over the years, this electoral assurance cannot now be assumed. Among a host of factors, the villagers are genuinely concerned about their tenure in the village with regards to the ownership of the land on which their houses are built and

which is based on what is termed as temporary occupation licence or TOL. This is a land lease issue and the lease period can be for a number of years between 30 to 99 years. At the end of the lease, the official situation does stipulate that the lease can be renewed or otherwise by the Land Office at the state level. A large sum of money will be required as payment for renewing the lease based on a prescribed calculation by the State Land Office.³

Until today, most NVs are plagued by this dilemma which apparently has been perceived as politically challenging to the MCA and a contentious issue during election time. In addition, there are other social and economic issues which the villagers are not satisfied with but have not been given sufficient attention by the relevant authorities. As a consequence, growing disenchantment with the MCA and the BN has been translated into reduced support for the party. The voting pattern of Hulu Kepong NV during the general elections of 1999, 2004, 2008 and 2013 provides a clear illustration of this situation. This NV is situated within the Parliamentary constituency of Selayang and the state assembly constituency of Taman Templer in the state of Selangor. The results from the last three general elections signal a process of change in the sentiments of the village residents. There has been a gradual shift of support to political parties that are aligned to political parties opposed to the BN. The latest results of the 2013 general election have reinforced this sentiment and the trend of voting.

In the contest for the parliamentary constituency of Selayang, there is a consistent decline in the number of votes obtained by MCA, from about 35,000 in 1999 to 27,000 in 2008. It is the opposition parties Pakatan Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and Democratic Action Party (DAP) that made inroads into the village stronghold, increasing their votes from 26,000 to 31,000 during the same period (Figure 1). In 2008, this parliamentary seat was won by the opposition party, having wrestled it from the MCA that held the seat in 1999 and 2004. In the 2013 general election, the opposition party won this seat by an even bigger number of votes of 52,287.

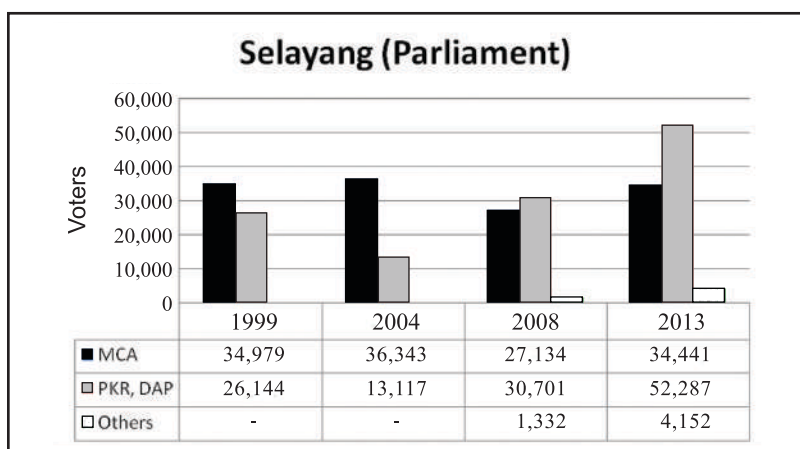


Figure 1. Voting in the Selayang Parliamentary Constituency, 1999, 2004, 2008 and 2013

The voting behaviour is similar in the three state constituencies of Taman Templer, Rawang and Kuang that make up the larger parliamentary constituency. The diagrams depict a substantial loss of votes to the opposition parties; especially with the MCA experiencing decreasing number of votes during the 2008 election and which continued in the 2013 general election. The victory of BN's United Malay National Organization (UMNO) in the 2004 and 2008 elections was by a declining majority while its opponents Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) and PKR registered substantial gains (Figures 2 and 3). UMNO managed to retain its seat in Kuang by defeating PKR with a slight increase in its votes in the 2013 elections. However, PKR had made substantial gains in the number of its votes in each of the elections, from 3,151 in 2004 to 9,772 in 2013, compared UMNO's 8,016 to 11,027 in the same period (Figure 3). In the Rawang state constituency, a clear voter desertion of the MCA led to its loss in 2008 and a major defeat in 2013 (Figure 4).

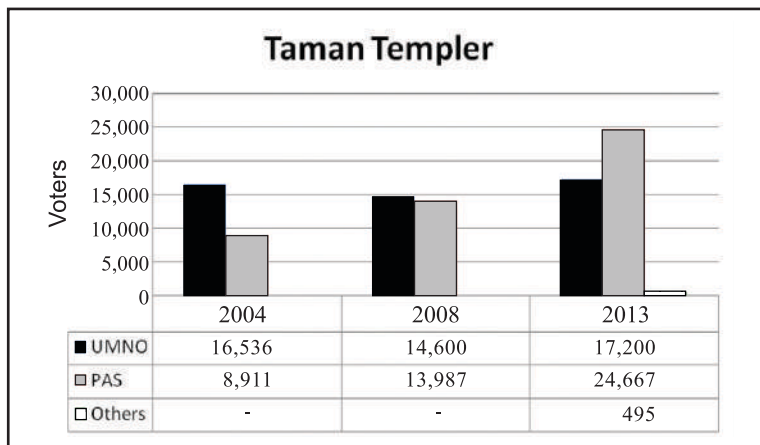


Figure 2. Voting in Taman Templer State Constituency, 2004, 2008 and 2013

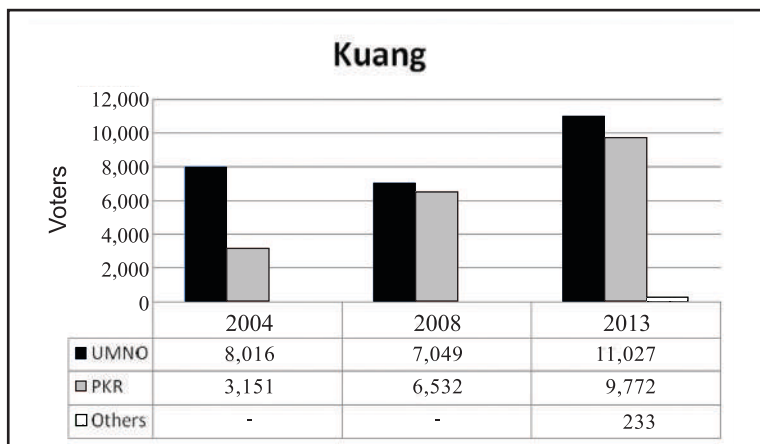


Figure 3. Voting in Kuang State Constituency, 2004, 2008 and 2013

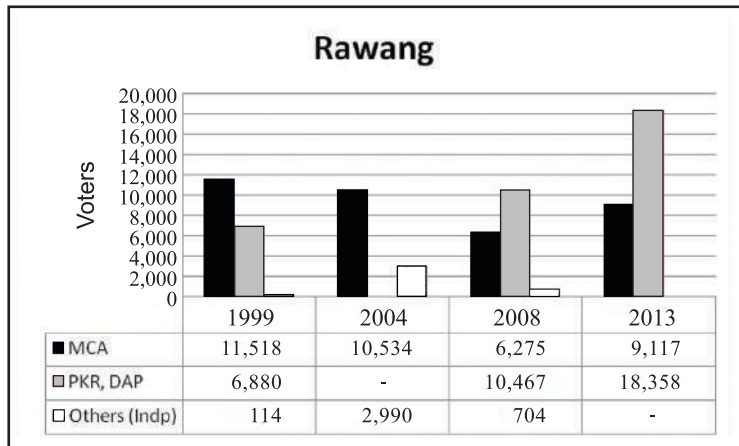


Figure 4. Voting in Rawang State Constituency, 2004, 2008 and 2013

This shift in the political trend in the NV indicates three main patterns. The first is that the NVs, as well as the average small town such as Rawang, can no longer be considered the bedrock of Chinese support for the MCA. The second is that the villagers are disillusioned with MCA and the authorities which have for years been indifferent to the problems besetting the NVs and instead have contributed to their deterioration. Finally, whether the NVs will become a thriving community or a drag on national development is very much hinged on the politics of the nation. In the contest for electoral support, the NV votes may be crucial in determining the final outcome of a general election. It is during times of canvassing for votes that the NVs receive heightened official interest and attention. At other times, they are practically left on their own, neglected and cast aside.

Conclusion

In view of the progress of the nation towards a developed status by 2020, the NVs should be integrated into the nation's National Development Plans (see Malaysia, 1991). NVs should not be viewed in isolation from the overall development of the country; neither should the development plans for the NVs, if any, be carried out based on an *ad hoc* basis which is the current practice. Rather, the redevelopment of the NVs should be planned on a long-term basis using a holistic and an encompassing methodology which puts the NVs as an integral part of the nation's economic growth pattern. For a start, there should be an annual financial allocation from the central government and a budget from the state government for the benefit of NVs. The funds should be funnelled into appropriate channels for the expressed purpose of upgrading and modernization of the NVs. The grass-root, local government, is the appropriate authority to provide better governance to the NVs. It is the level of government that deals with the

community and it will be able to relate to the dilemmas facing the NVs (Phang, 2011).

Properly administered and nurtured, the NVs can be turned into a solid base for development in the form of small and medium industries, traditional activities and innovative enterprises. Only then can the NVs be integrated into the social and economic mainstream and to contribute to national stability and prosperity. The prerequisites are the right policies and guidelines under the care of responsible authorities to tap the aggregate potentials of the several hundred NVs and its substantial population. In essence, the NVs should be sustained and encouraged to grow to become a boon and not a bane to the country. The likelihood of NVs becoming a bane to the nation will manifest in their economic stagnation, continued emigration of the young to aggravate the demographic imbalance, cultural desertion and political instability. In this context, it is necessary to take stock and be reminded that the NVs are a part of the nation that can be an instrument of expansion for the benefit of country.

Notes

- 1 For an account of this period of history, see Short, 1975.
- 2 Between 2006 and 2009, property thefts rose from 31,408 to 42,014, while the number of violent crimes hovers between 165,000 and 174,000. The crime index per 100,000 persons was 767 in 2007 and 746 in 2009 (Performance Management and Delivery Unit, 2011).
- 3 The calculation for lease renewal premium is based on a quarter of the property's current market value, divided by 100 and multiplied by the number of years renewed. The owners would only have to pay about a quarter of the current market value if they decide to sell or transfer their properties on the open market. For those who remain on the property, only RM1,000 is required to renew the lease under the Private Residential Ownership Scheme starting from 2012 (Tan, 2011).

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