Examining the Political Crisis and Monarchy's Role in Malaysia's Pluralistic Society: The Perspective of the Malaysians Chinese

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Abstract

This article primarily examines the principles of monarchy and how the system functions. It outlines how the head of state addresses and responds to crises, emphasizing the shared principles among rulers, such as traditional values, laws, and an awareness of political realities. Additionally, it explores the role of the monarch in a pluralistic society, particularly in light of the current power struggle, which has led to competing political parties in Islamic affairs that directly impact other ethnic and religious groups. As the second largest ethnic group in Malaysia, Chinese society's development is closely linked to political dynamics. Malaysian Chinese rely on political parties and civil organizations to advocate for democratic reforms, significantly contributing to the democratic transition in 2018. However, the advancement of Chinese society continues to be constrained by the Malay ethnicity and religion, even facing challenges of keeping their rights. During this time, the monarch's crisis management became recognized as a stabilizing force for the nation. They also can be trusted to protect the rights of ethnic minorities. Thus, understanding the monarchy's role, position, and influence during the country's political transition from the Malaysian Chinese perspective is crucial.

Introduction

Malaysia's political landscape is transitioning from an era of authoritarianism to one characterized by de-authoritarianism. However, this shift is accompanied by challenges, particularly as a new generation's consciousness begins to affect the existing interest systems. Meanwhile, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), which has historically dominated Malay political discourse, has seen fragmentation during this political transition. Additionally, Malay Islamists remain wary of sharing power with non-Malays.

From 2018 to 2022, three prime ministers were replaced: Mahathir (seventh), Muhyiddin (eighth), and Sabri (ninth). The cause of the regime change was the power struggle between party leaders. Fortunately, it did not lead to political violence or military seizures like those in Myanmar or Thailand and this consequence became my research motivation. One of the main factors is power of monarchy which to maintain the sustaining of government by appointing a new prime minister and keeping the parliament undissolved during uncertain political times, all of this is carried out under constitutional authority, granted to the head of state. Political parties and the public respect the monarch's power as defined by the Constitution.

Under the Constitution of the Federation of Malaysia, both the monarchy and democracy are empowered to fulfil their respective roles. The monarchy serves as a 'referee' to resolve deadlocked regime disputes and help the nation to prevent political elites from abusing their power and disrupting social order. Because of this, people are becoming more aware of the significance of the Malaysian constitutional monarchy and recognizing it as power to stabilize the country.

The Malays represent the largest ethnic group in the country. The Malay community unites its interests through the royal family, nationalism, and Islamic principles, mutual dependence on a community of destiny. The monarch is viewed as the protector of the Malays; however, the term monarch or ruler, as defined in the constitution, signifies *racial neutrality* (Milner, 2012). So that, Malay rulers should hold their responsibilities and obligations towards the multiracial interests and it is important to note that the Chinese community is also considered part of these national interests and, therefore, falls under the protection of the rulers as well.

Although Malaysia has entered a new democratic milestone, it is still during uncertain political times, especially the current power struggle has led to parties competing in Islamic affairs; it has directly impacted other ethnic and religious groups. As the second largest ethnic group in Malaysia, Chinese society's development is closely linked to political dynamics. Malaysian Chinese rely on political parties and civil organisations to advocate for democratic reforms, significantly contributing to the democratic transition in 2018. However, the advancement of Chinese society continues to be constrained by the Malay ethnicity and religion, even facing challenges of keeping their rights. During this time, the monarch's crisis management became recognized as a stabilizing force for the

nation. They also can be trusted to protect the rights of ethnic minorities. Thus, understanding the monarchy's role, position, and influence during the country's political transition from the Malaysian Chinese perspective is crucial. The Chinese society has consistently expressed loyalty to the monarchy.

The head of state, known as the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, and the deputy head of state are elected by nine hereditary rulers in the Council of Rulers through a voting process. Their terms last for five years, and while they can rotate in the position, they cannot be re-elected. As a result, Malay rulers are less likely to expand their power or develop a political relationship of dependence on their royal authority compared to the prime minister, who does not face any restrictions on re-election.

Nevertheless, these rulers have enough privileges to prevent abuses of power by democratic institutions. For example, they can prevent the prime minister from repeatedly dissolving parliament when he refuses to pass legislation, which could lead to governmental stagnation. However, a strong prime minister might use parliament to amend the constitution, thereby weakening the monarch's ability to intervene. In essence, the powers of the monarchy and democratic institutions are structured to ensure mutual restraint, thereby contributing to the stability of the country's system.

Literature Review

In my research on monarchy, I focus on four key aspects: (I) the abilities of rulers, (II) the perspectives of Malays regarding their rulers, (III) the ways in which rulers promote nationalism and racial identity, and (IV) the evolving role of the monarchy, which has transitioned from being merely a royal family to serving as both the protector of the country and the defender of constitutional rights. Additionally, I examine (V) the interactive relationship between the monarchy and democracy.

In summary, The Malay Peninsula was home to numerous kingdoms in its early history. The earliest of these can be traced back to the Kingdom of Kedah and the Kingdom of Langkasuka, which were influenced by Indian religious culture. The Kingdom of Malacca, established in 1402, is another significant early kingdom.

In the Malay language, the term for the kingdom is *negeri*. According to British scholar J.M. Gullick, *negeri* typically forms around the confluence of a large river basin or a group of adjacent river basins, extending from the coastal areas inland to the central watershed. Milner (1982) further explains that during this time, royal power and governance were inseparable; the term *kerajaan* refers to a government ruled by rajas or princes. Additionally, British missionary Thomas Beighton noted that 'Malays can accept any religion ordered by the rulers', which includes the conversion to Islam under the influence of those in power.

The sultanate went through significant changes as British colonists introduced Western administrative systems and capitalist economic markets to the region. Britain exploited the peninsula's resources by mining minerals and cultivating cash crops on a large scale. They also promoted the development of towns in the Malay Peninsula, improving facilities for health, transportation, education, and communication. These booming economic activities attracted a large number of immigrants, which in turn altered the social structure of the area.

Britain took actual management power away from the monarch and divided the nine Malay kingdoms into Federated and Unfederated Malay States. However, the British did not eliminate the monarchy. Western scholars provide insights into this situation. For instance, Gulick noted that the role of the king in the sultanate did not involve exercising paramount power (1965, p.44); Rupert Emerson described how the rulers became preoccupied with "pomp and ceremony" after the British took substantive power from them (cited in Milner, 2011, p.8); Some claim that the Sultan failed to maintain order due to large-scale Chinese immigration, as noted by Cowan and Trocki (as cited in Milner, 2011, p.8).

In contemporary Malaysia, the social structure is pluralistic, which has sparked scholars' interest in exploring the ethnicity and ideology of the monarchy. Milner noted that rulers possess a flexible ethnic identity, so Sultans are not necessarily of native Malay descent, and culturally, they have not fully adopted the Malay identity. This indicates that the identities of early monarchs and their subjects were not defined by race (Milner, 2011). Consequently, it can be inferred that early monarchs did not hold racial prejudices. It was only when the British transferred control over Malay religion and social customs to the Sultans that the racialization of the monarchy began. During the decolonization period, Malay nationalism fostered an ideology of nationalized monarchs, viewing Malay identity as a form of self-classification, and that further strengthened to promote racial unity throughout the Sultanate.

From the perspective of the sultans, they faced a challenge in countering the ethnic forces initiated by the Malay aristocratic elites. These elites characterized the sultans' strategy of preserving royal power through compromise as a sign of weakness, thereby subtly influencing public perceptions. However, Milner discovered evidence from British archives and research literature showing that the monarchs insisted on maintaining autonomy during the colonial period (Milner, 2011). Records from the 1957 constitution-making process suggest that the rulers often acted as effective political players and even engaged in competition with Malay nationalism. To maintain Malay loyalty, the sultans had to compete with these elites by adopting self-racialized identities.

From the viewpoint of Malay society, a significant national awakening occurred because of their experiences with imperial rule and the world wars. This period led to a re-evaluation of their relationship with the monarchy. When the Sultan agreed to sign the Malayan Union with Britain, many Malays began to feel that the Sultanate was no longer the focal point of their worldview.

Instead, they viewed the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), led by elite aristocrats, as a potential protector of the Malay community (Milner, 2011).

However, aristocratic elite's political concepts are currently being influenced by democratic values. This shift affects the roles of various sultans and aristocratic elites competing in the political landscape. As a head of state, sultan needs to protect not only traditional interests but also the rights of diverse ethnic groups, must adapt to the people's expectations for universal values that transcend racial and religious boundaries in today's political context. It is essential that sultans or monarch do not support Malay chauvinism, as this could marginalize non-Malay interests (Fauzi, 2017) and lead to perceived bias toward established power structures.

The conflicting interests between established authorities and new policies pose significant challenges for national reform. However, as aristocratic elites face the threat of de-authoritarianism, the monarchy has started to regain its importance. Rulers have made decisive interventions in public affairs to demonstrate the monarchy's real power amid the political transformation associated with de-authoritarianism (Fauzi, 2012). A crucial factor in this is that Malay society, from top to bottom, continues to view the monarchy as a protector of both ethnicity and religion.

The challenges faced during the regime change from 2018 to 2020

In 2018, the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition received strong support from the Chinese community. This shift demonstrates a significant change in political thinking among Chinese voters, who nearly absolutely abandoned the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) by chose the Democratic Action Party (DAP). This support greatly contributed PH gained good results in both of 2008 and 2013 elections and ultimately overthrow the Barisan Nasional coalition in 2018.

On May 9, 2018, Malaysia's 14th general election, The Pakatan Harapan (PH) secured one hundred and four seats out of two hundred and twenty-two in Parliament, successfully ending the Barisan Nasional (BN) government, which had been in power for sixty-one years. Yang Di-Pertuan Agong approved Mahathir, the leader of Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (BERSATU), whom PH alliances nominated as the seventh prime minister. At the same time, Yang Di-Pertuan Agong approved his request to pardon Anwar, the de facto leader of PH, who was still serving his sentence.

Of the one hundred and four seats won by PH, the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP) secured forty-seven and forty-two seats, respectively; Party AMANAH and BERSATU won eleven and thirteen seats, respectively. Meanwhile, BN ended up with seventy-nine seats, of which UMNO held fifty-four, making it the largest opposition party in Parliament. However, Some UMNO members later switched to BERSATU, which altered the seat count for both parties. Another opposition coalition led by the PAS, known as the Gagasan Sejahtere, won eighteen seats. Despite its losses, BN continued to hold thirty-seven seats in the

Senate and could still oppose the bills proposed by PH.

In the states, BN retained power only in Perlis and Pahang, while PAS won in Terengganu and maintained control in Kelantan. Meanwhile, PH governed seven states (Penang, Selangor, Johor, Sembilan, Kedah, Perak, and Malacca). In East Malaysia, Sarawak United Conservative Party (PBB), Sarawak People's Party (SUPP), Sarawak People's Resource Party (PRS), and the Democratic Progressive Party being allowed to continue governing but withdrew from BN Alliance and supported PH by re-forming the newly established Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS). In Sabah, the Parti Warisan, which backs PH, won a majority, and became the Chief Minister. However, both GPS and Parti Warisan chose not to join PH to maintain their political autonomy of East Malaysia.

However, under Mahathir's leadership, the PH coalition lasted only twenty-two months before collapsing due to a crisis stemming from the *Sheraton Move*.

There are three key factors that contributed to PH's decline: a lack of experience, internal conflicts over interests and ideologies among the parties, and challenges from right-wing and conservative forces led by UMNO and PAS. For instance, the government planned to sign The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) was opposed by the Sultan of Johor and conservatism include UMNO and PAS, they even threatened to call on ten thousand people to hold a rally in Kuala Lumpur. Finally, it made the government give up signing the convention.

PH's lack of administrative experience

Most members of the PH cabinet have solid political ideas, but they lack administrative experience. For instance, Mahathir appointed a religious minister as the Minister of Education and due to this minister's lack of sensitivity to racial issues and narrow perspective caused him to introduce education policies that did not undergo proper feasibility studies, leading to criticism from non-Malay education groups.

Additionally, the government's decision to abandon sovereignty over the Pulau Batu Puteh, the cancellation of the East Coast High-Speed Rail (ECRL) project financed by China, and The Attorney General recognized the claimants of descendants of the Sulu Sultan without cabinet approval in 2019. These issues highlight the new government's inexperience. Moreover, PH struggled to fulfil its promises to voters, such as abolishing highway tolls, eliminating the Goods and Services Tax (GST), and closing the Lynas plant.

In addition to the above issues, for Chinese society, the recognition of the Unified Examination Certificate, an "election promise" made by political parties every five years, yet fulfilling it remains challenging.

The Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition is no exception to this. Even in their second term in

power, they struggle to address this issue effectively. The influence of Malay Islam continues to be significant, and attitudes toward Chinese education have not changed. They still see Chinese education as a foundation of Chinese nationalism, which is viewed as detrimental to Malaysia's nation-building efforts. The government cannot ignore the influence of this largest ethnic group.

In summary, Insufficient reforms and administrative errors have led to the prime minister's approval ratings dropping to forty-six percent from seventy-one percent after ten months in office (*Reuters*, 2019, April 26). On the other hand, BERSATU's seats in Parliament rank behind the PKR and DAP, so they are not dominant. Mahathir was constrained by his allies in governing and struggled due to pressure from conservative groups.

Handover of the premiership and the trigger of factional conflict

In 2016, PH and BERSATU established a cooperation framework with seven key agreements, and In January 2018, PH announced a consensus document stating that if they won the election, Mahathir would serve as prime minister and hand over the position to Anwar two years later. However, the document did not provide specific details regarding the timing or plan for the handover, which set the stage for subsequent internal conflicts within PH. When Anwar expressed his willingness to wait for Mahathir to address the country's complex issues, Mahathir was cautious and reminded that successor must be confirmed by a majority in Parliament to support that legitimacy. On the other hand, PKR Deputy Presidents Azmin and his followers was expressing their support for Mahathir's stance, it led to a factional confrontation within PKR, and tensions among the factions intensified by the second half of 2019.

Collaboration between UMNO and PAS

Following the rise of BERSATU, Malay voters who were disappointed with UMNO (as Najib Razak, the sixth prime minister was involved in the 1MDB scandal) supported BERSATU and voted for Pakatan Harapan in the 2018 general election.

However, the UMNO leaders have not addressed the corruption problem within the party. Instead of the reform suggestions from young leaders, Ahmad Zahid, the UMNO President, chose to collaborate with PAS to form a Muafakat Nasional[1] to strengthen the opposition forces. The collaboration between them not only aims to protect the Malay traditional interests but also challenges the new regime established by the PH government. So, when PAS made a friendly gesture to Mahathir and announced its support for the completion of his five-year term as prime minister (Sharifah, 2019, February 19), it further divided the PH.

On the other hand, from the Chinese perspective, although de-authorization has weakened the power of UMNO and fragmented the political landscape, Chinese power has not been significantly

strengthened; the merger of Malay political forces has marginalized Chinese political power. Chinese political forces were divided into MCA, DAP, and the Malaysian People's Movement Party (GERAKAN), which joined PN. Each party relied on their alliances to compete for political positions, resulting in the dispersion of Chinese political influence. Unlike Malay political parties, which often unite for common traditional interests, Chinese political parties rarely could unite because their positions are often constrained by the interests of the alliances. This also weakens their ability to fight for the rights of Malaysian Chinese. Therefore, Malaysian Chinese often work together with civic groups to fight for their rights.

The crisis in 2020 and the Sheraton Move

Negotiations between political parties regarding the handover of the prime minister's position resulted in a split within the PH coalition into two factions: One supports Mahathir's completion of his five-year term and the other opposes Anwar's handing over of the prime minister position. The latter led to the *Sheraton Move*, which ultimately resulted in Mahathir's sudden resignation and triggered a federal government crisis in 2020.

On February 21, the PH presidential council convened a closed-door meeting to discuss the tensions surrounding the transition of the prime ministerial position. Mahathir Mohamad rejected the PH Supreme Council's request to establish a timeline for this handover, arguing that setting a specific date would undermine the significance of his role during his tenure. At that time, BERSATU also expressed dissatisfaction with the pressure PH was placing on Mahathir. Ultimately, the PH Council agreed to wait until Mahathir had presided over the APEC Summit in November 2020 before transferring power to Anwar Ibrahim. Meanwhile, PH proposed a "preferential package" to encourage Mahathir to step down from his position.

However, both the ruling and opposition parties held closed-door meetings the next day. That evening, Chairman Muhyiddin Yassin, UMNO's Chairman Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, PAS's Chairman Hadi Awang, Sarawak PKR's Chairman Abang Johari, Sabah Warisan's Chairman Shafie Apdal, and PKR's Deputy Chairman Azmin Ali met with the King. Meanwhile, that night, party leaders and MPs who opposed Anwar gathered at the Sheraton Hotel in Kuala Lumpur. Mahathir did not appear at the hotel, but the following day, he submitted his resignation as prime minister to the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong (Sultan Abdullah) and expressed his disagreement with the Sheraton Move to public.

Sultan Abdullah appointed Mahathir as the interim Prime Minister under Article 43(2)(a) of the Federal Constitution until a new successor could be named. In addition, his Majesty accepted Mahathir's suggestion to annul the appointments of the Deputy Prime Minister, Ministers, Deputy Ministers, and secretaries, leaving only the interim Prime Minister in the Cabinet.

At that time, Muhyiddin, another leader of BERSATU, led the party's withdrawal from PH. Mahathir resigned from Bersatu, but twenty-five BERSATU MPs still signed a letter pledging

support for Mahathir's appointment as prime minister. On the other hand, Azmin and the ten MPs left PKR, and it caused PH to secure only one hundred and two seats in Parliament, which was insufficient for a majority.

The King taking action

The Yang di-Pertuan Agong has decided to summon all two hundred and twenty-two members of Parliament for the selection process for the next prime minister from February 25 to 26, with two weeks left before the parliamentary session on March 9.

At that time, PH, BERSATU, and even BN expressed their willingness to support Mahathir in continuing his role as prime minister, but later, these political parties reconsidered their positions cause of some of Mahathir's suggestions that did not benefit political parties.

First, Mahathir proposed to form a non-partisan government that would go beyond traditional party lines (*Bernama*, 2020, February 26) with the prime minister having sole authority to decide the cabinet members. However, most parties were unwilling to accept a situation where either side would lose the right to nominate cabinet candidates. Second, Mahathir intended to convene Parliament to discuss the candidate for prime minister before Yang Di-Pertuan Agong had decided. The political parties argued that it overstepped his authority, and then the Speaker of the House of Representatives rejected the letter requesting a special parliamentary session (Leong, 2020, February 28).

As a result, BERSATU chose to support Muhyiddin while PH backed Anwar. Meanwhile, BN and PAS favoured the dissolution of Parliament.

Muhyiddin becomes the Prime Minister

On February 28, the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, Sultan Abdullah, met with the Malay rulers and subsequently held discussions with leaders from both ruling and opposition parties. Muhyiddin did not rule out cooperation with UMNO and PAS, which helped him secure support from the majority of Members of Parliament (MPs). Both Sabah and Sarawak expressed their support for Muhyiddin, increasing his chances of becoming the next prime minister. Meanwhile, the PH coalition re-endorsed Mahathir, who then withdrew the statutory declaration he had previously signed in support of Muhyiddin.

Mahathir and Muhyiddin both claimed to have the support of one hundred fourteen Members of Parliament (MPs). However, the Yang di-Pertuan Agong ultimately confirmed Muhyiddin as the Prime Minister. Following this, Muhyiddin formed the Perikatan Nasional (PN) government and joined the Muafakat Nasional alliance to strengthen his collaboration with Barisan Nasional and PAS. Mahathir on the other side established a new party called Parti Pejuang Tanah Air (PEJUANG)

to continue opposing the PN administration.

The crisis has allowed Malay Islamists to regain substantial power, an outcome that the Chinese community least desires. Although Anwar received considerable support from Chinese voters, he still did not have the backing of a parliamentary majority. When he split from BERSATU—whose aim was to replace UMNO—PH lost its advantage among the Malay electorate. Furthermore, although Muhyiddin emphasized his majority in Parliament, the public could not verify this claim. Opposition parties, particularly PH, labelled Muhyiddin's administration as a "backdoor government".

In response to the criticism and to manage the new coronavirus epidemic, Muhyiddin requested a state of emergency from the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, hoping to avoid a motion of no confidence in Parliament. However, after eighteen months in power, Muhyiddin lost support from Barisan Nasional (BN) and resigned voluntarily under the advice of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong. Sultan Abdullah summoned all Parliament members again to the palace and appointed UMNO Deputy Chairman Ismail Sabri as the ninth Prime Minister. It is worthy of mention that despite BN reclaiming its ruling position, a power struggle emerged between the party chairman and the new prime minister.

For society, during the seven days of the federal crisis, society's response took two distinct directions. One aimed to maintain order and stability, while the other sought to prevent politicians from undermining the government. For example, the chairman of *Bersih 2.0* criticized Mahathir's proposal to form a non-partisan government, labelling it as dictatorial and detrimental to the voters who supported the PH coalition. As for Malaysian Chinese groups, such as the LLG Cultural Development Centre (林连玉基金会), the United Chinese School Committees Association of Malaysia (董总), and the United Chinese School Teachers' Association of Malaysia (教总) have also been paying attention to the country's political direction and issued statements urging the restoration of the people's power to enable citizens to be the true masters of their own country. Additionally, they emphasize the importance of perspectives that arise from civil society (董总, 2020, February 25).

State governments shaken by the crisis

The withdrawal of the BERSATU from the PH coalition has led to unrest in several states, resulting in state ministers or chief ministers losing their legitimacy. In Penang, however, the DAP maintains stable control over the state assembly, holding most seats. Under the direction of the Sultan, the Selangor government continues to operate normally, preventing a potential coup. This is different in Johor, where the Sultan summoned all state assembly members to the palace to clarify his position, confirming that the PN member with two additional seats over PH would become the new state minister.

In Malacca, the situation changed when two UMNO members shifted their support to the BN, leading to the chief minister's position being transferred from PH to BN. In Perak, PH only gained

one more seat in the 2018 general election, resulting in the government falling into the hands of PN without any controversy. In Kedah, the state minister Mukhriz (from BERSATU) lost support from PH and had to relinquish power to PAS, which holds a majority of seats. A few months later, a political crisis emerged in Sabah. Musa Aman, a member of UMNO and former Chief Minister of Sabah, questioned the legitimacy of Chief Minister Shafie Apdal from Parti Warisan and brought the matter to court. In response, Shafie suggested that the Sabah Head of State dissolve the parliament. After receiving approval, a state assembly election was held on September 26, 2020, but Shafie still lost. Hajiji Noor, who represented the BERSATU, became the Chief Minister with the support of local political parties in Sabah and UMNO.

The political landscape since 2020

After the federal crisis in 2020, Malaysia's political landscape shifted from a two-coalition system between Barisan Nasional (BN) and Pakatan Harapan (PH) to a more complex dynamic. BN, which represents various nationalistic views, now competes with Perikatan Nasional (PN), a coalition that leans toward Islamism. PH has the support of Democrat parties, and there are multiple party alliances in East Malaysia. This situation has led to a fragmented political structure, making it less likely for any single coalition to govern independently.

As a result, Pakatan Harapan (PH) did not meet the necessary threshold to form a government during the 15th general election in 2022. Faced with this fragmented political situation, PH's supporters accepted the collaboration between PH and BN to facilitate Anwar Ibrahim's appointment as the 10th Prime Minister. Together, they established a unity federal government known as *MADANI*[2]. However, the collaboration immediately encountered challenges from the Malay opposition, resisting the presence of non-Malay leadership.

The unity government lead by Anwar has adopted certain 'authoritarian innovations' (Dettman, 2020) from the BN era to enhance democracy, formulate policies from a diverse perspective, and balance varied interests. Political competition has prompted a shift in Islamic concepts, leading to a growing demand for halal products. This trend has gradually undermined the country's secular and religious coexistence. As a result, non-Muslims, particularly the Chinese community, have felt pressured by certain Chinese businesses and hawker stalls to adopt halal standards. This situation has placed them in a challenging position. Despite this, they continue to be the major voters for Pakatan Harapan, which relies on the DAP to maintain support among Chinese voters. Nevertheless, the 'Green Wave' and the Israel-Palestine War have energized the right wing that pushing Prime Minister Anwar to alter the perception of Malay Islamists by publicly supporting Islamic causes, including high-profile support for Palestine. The government has adopted a passive stance on halal issues, and public discussions about religious matters were not allowed (*Bernama*, 2024, May

20). Furthermore, racism is exploited by right-wing politicians who use alarmist rhetoric to distort the opinions of non-Muslim MPs, while the strong reactions from Muslims are often labelled as inflammatory.

UMNO is currently the party benefiting the most, while both MCA and MIC remain weak. It seems that UMNO is concentrating on dividing constituencies between itself and the PKR rather than tackling the challenges faced by other member parties in determining whether to continue cooperating with PH in the future. Member parties of the PH operate on an equal basis. However, since aligning with BN, the DAP has emerged as the most controversial party. It has firmly established itself as the second-largest party in Parliament, primarily due to support from Chinese voters. Nevertheless, driven by a collective consciousness, the DAP needs to give way to the leadership of PKR.

With the MCA still weakened, the DAP can continue to enjoy support from Chinese voters unless another trustworthy Chinese-based party emerges to challenge the DAP's ideological dominance. Chinese voters will likely continue to support the DAP given the current political landscape dominated by Malay nationalism, however. if Chinese voters can accept UMNO, there is no need to abandon the MCA. So that, they should be concerned the low voter turnout among Chinese voters who appeared in by-elections suggests an uncertain future for the DAP.

In summary, the power struggle between the political parties remains complex. If the unity government wins the upcoming general election, it could demonstrate that both Malay and non-Malay voters accept the coalition model. However, DAP faces not only ideological conflicts with UMNO but also shares overlapping interests with the MCA. On other hand, PAS and UMNO still have opportunities for cooperation, and Anwar, as leader of PH, is actively trying to win the PAS support for the government to diminish the PN influence and himself reduce dependence on UMNO, but his outreach to the PAS poses a potential threat to the DAP and Amanah in consolidating these parties' supporters.

Monarchy's roles in a plural society

After enduring a turbulent political situation from 2020 to 2022, the de-authoritarianism has led to a weakening of the central government. Malaysians have shifted their expectations for stability from politicians to the Malay rulers, many view the Malay rulers, or kings, as a potential stabilizing force capable of improving the political landscape, addressing economic challenges, and fostering better relations among ethnic groups. Non-Muslim communities particularly hope that the rulers will enhance their interests and identities within Malaysia. In this trend, the monarchy can play a role in maintaining national unity, curbing the spread of ethnic and religious extremism, and preventing the abuse of power by political elites.

Firstly, although political fragmentation has not yet caused a split in the country, it has affected relationships between states due to the rivalry between PN and the federal government lead by Anwar. Both sides have turned policies into tools for political competition. The PN government has implemented a *Halalization* policy, which includes closing entertainment venues and prohibiting the gambling industry, that has contributed to widening social divides among states. In the long term, such actions could threaten national unity and undermine the integrity of the overall system. As we know from the federal constitution, the monarch symbolizes a unified identity, and under the monarch's authority, these territories cannot be divided.

Secondly, to gain political advantage, parties compete to win favour with Malays, the largest ethnic group in the country. A 2018 survey by the Merdeka Center on religious extremism in four Southeast Asian countries indicated a growing support among Malaysian Muslims for extremist groups (Ainaa Aiman, 2018, November 19) While Malay Islamists are concerned about non-Malay governance, non-Malays equally worry that the process of Islamization may threaten the country's diversity. Politicians sometimes exploit ethnic tensions by claiming that 'non-Malay threaten Malays' implying that non-Malays are more supportive of a democratic regime than a Malay one.

It is worth noting that the Chinese community in Malaysia, which retains a unique ethnic identity and language, has been significantly affected by right-wing forces concerned about whether the Chinese violate Islamic teachings or challenge Malay values, and the concern has emerged in various aspects of their lives, including Chinese businesses, education, religious beliefs, and cultural activities. In view of this, Chinese and non-Malays must seek more reliable advocates for their concerns.

Malay rulers always criticize politicians who exploit racial issues and politicize religion; rulers have acknowledged non-Malays' contributions and issued decrees against excessive halal measures and extreme rhetoric. Additionally, the Council of Rulers holds the ultimate authority to interpret Islamic matters, allowing non-Malay people to rely on royal protection.

Thirdly, the rulers acknowledged that UMNO was no longer the exclusive supporter of the royal family; While the hegemony established by UMNO has been fading during this transition period, the rulers have regained some of their 'lost ground' by implementing checks and balances on executive power. In addition to maintaining close ties with aristocratic elites, the royal family has engaged with modern democratic principles and no longer supports Malay chauvinism, which marginalizes non-Malays (Abdul Hamid, 2017). Notably, the rulers support democratization only in a manner that does not diminish royal power. In other words, democracy must not overstep the boundaries of authority, and this approach can prevent elites from using democracy to undermine the monarchy and establish a dictatorship.

It is also worth mentioning that globalization has ushered in an information-rich Internet age, where even royal families face public scrutiny. In contrast to Thailand, where the royal family has

encountered criticism, there has not been any significant movement advocating for reform of the monarchy in Malaysia. This is largely due to the monarchy's generally positive role in Malaysian politics. Not only does Malay society continue to depend on the monarchy to uphold the religion and nationalism of the Malays, but the public is also weary of political power struggles and often looks to the monarch to help resolve these issues. Moreover, the monarch's willingness to adapt to citizens' perspectives and evolving cultural values has enabled the royal family to continue during the democratic transition.

The Malaysian Chinese perspective

The identity and political consciousness of Malaysian citizens are inter-connected, and each ethnic group possesses its own national history and cultural context. For example, the Chinese identity encompasses aspects of clan, culture, nation, and country. In contrast, the Malay identity has evolved from a focus on the Malay Kingdom to a national identity shaped by a symbiotic relationship involving blood, language, and culture. This illustrates how the religious beliefs and nationalism of each ethnic group create a "gap" in the process of diverse integration.

During the Barisan Nasional government, led by UMNO, the Malaysian national identity was primarily shaped by the language and culture of the Malay ethnic group. Malayization was actively promoted across various sectors, including the economy, education, and culture, to strengthen the political and social status of the Malays. Barisan Nasional aimed to maintain balance and foster reconciliation among different ethnic groups during this process of Malayization and diversification. However, since 2008, the Barisan Nasional has experienced a decline, resulting in a diminished role and effectiveness in addressing the needs of ethnic groups.

Malays, who share a common ethnicity and religion, continue to be the political core of the country, and are supported by the royal family. But nowadays, in Malay society, emerging civic values are challenging Malayization. Consequently, the divided Malay political parties are competing to win the support of Malay Muslims. Politicians even use ethnic conflicts to reap political dividends, such as making remarks that 'non-Malay regimes threaten Malays', and the Chinese society always the first to bear the brunt. Therefore, the Malaysian Chinese tends to support the PH, which is willing to share power with non-Malays. But since the landscape changed, it has pushed Prime Minister Anwar from PH to alter the perception of Malay Islamists. Thus, The Chinese community should seek alternative methods to influence politics and counterbalance the power of political elites. This is necessary to prevent the unchecked *Malayization* and *Islamization* of the country.

Unlike modern elite governments, the royal family has significant experience with diverse ethnic groups. The Malay rulers do not perceive non-Malays as a threat to the royal family or the country, despite their emphasis on Malay identity. More importantly, the Chinese national identity

is affirmed by the monarch and does not need to be questioned. This emphasis on equality among all races acknowledges the contributions of non-Malays to the country, making the institution a suitable entity for Chinese society to rely upon.

Looking back centuries ago, the rulers of the Malay Peninsula valued the role of Chinese leaders. In the 19th century, the Sultan of Kedah granted a noble title to a Hakka leader and appointed a socially prominent Chinese businessman as Minister of Finance. Additionally, the Sultans of Pahang and Johor appointed non-Malays to positions as tax collectors and advisors. Most notably, the Johor sultan encouraged Chinese immigrants to reclaim wasteland through the *Kangchu System* (港主制度). As Milner said, the royal family's ability to regulate ethnic social relations is no less than that of political elites.

Furthermore, Sultan Ibrahim, the head of state, has acknowledged China's status, fostering a positive societal attitude towards China, (*Sin Chew Daily*/ANN, 2023, August 26) and strengthening public support for the government's cooperative relationship with the country. The Sultan has always maintained positive interactions with the local Chinese community, and revived *Mejar Cina* (华人宗长) (Tan, 2020; 苏韵鸽, 2020) clearly demonstrated this, making the Chinese community in Johor affirm the authority of the Sultan and express loyalty to the monarch.

Conclusion

The Sheraton Move was an incidental event that significantly altered the political landscape in Malaysia in 2020. It involved changes in government processes that took place within the palace, leading to a division of political power among three factions. A new coalition government emerged, facilitating cooperation between nationalist (BN) and pluralist (PH) parties. The unity government lead by Anwar did not face setbacks in the six state elections in 2023 and managed to achieve a winning record in by-elections; they interpreted this as an acceptance of power-sharing by Malay voters with non-Malays. Non-Malay groups also view the unity government as playing an essential role in repelling the 'Green Wave', then the political situation appears stable (*Bernama*, 2024, September 16).

But in the context of party competition, political elites often politicize Islam to attract Muslim voters has heightens anxieties among non-Muslims and non-Malay communities. Political parties tend to prioritize their own interests, which means that non-Malay groups, particularly the Chinese community, must rely on royal authority for protection. Although there are some associations in the Chinese community have transformed into civic organisations, such as *The Kuala Lumpur and Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall* which established in 1923, to help the Chinese fight for their due interests and rights by participating in discussions on public issues. However, the overall strength of Malaysian civic organisations remains fragmented and weak, with some even acting as extensions of political parties. As a result, the Chinese community cannot rely solely on civic organisations

and political parties to fully protect their rights. Instead, they may depend on the monarch, who represents the highest authority in the country and serves as a symbol that transcends political interests to prevent unchecked *Malayization* and *Islamization*. Rulers always consider the values of a pluralistic society while maintaining Malay tradition. They promote unity, curb extremism, and check power among ethnic communities in the country.

However, excessive reliance on royal protection may create an imbalance of power between democracy and monarchy. It is also an essential topic to discuss. But Malaysian constitution restricts the discretionary powers of the monarch, requiring them to act within the law and adhere to the advice of the head of government. Additionally, any decrees issued by state rulers must be approved by the government before local councils can implement them.

The goal of the Chinese community is not only to find protection from any external force but to become a force themselves in one day that can also protect others and serve as a protector of their own country. Therefore, in addition to relying on royal power for protection, citizens' strength should also continue to be developed to strengthen grassroots democratic forces and autonomy, empowering citizens to counterbalance the ruling class.

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Notes

1 Muafakat Nasional's official website: https://muafakatnasional.org.my/
2 MADANI's official website: https://malaysiamadani.gov.my/

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