Part I
Domestic politics
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within constituencies, has occurred at regular intervals, especially in elections before delineation exercises, most recently in GE13, or in highly competitive contests such as in Terengganu in 2004. These practices are conducted by the EC and deepen concerns over electoral integrity.

A third area in which scholarship on elections has questioned the electoral playing field involves the conduct of the campaign. This area ties into the discussion of the ‘Ms’ noted above, especially money and the media. Financial resources have become more important in political campaigning with the move away from pre-modern campaigning to post-modern practices (Fernandez 2010; Gomez 1996). This shift has impacted the conduct of elections. The advantages of money have significantly benefited the incumbent government. Effectively unregulated campaign financing, vote buying and the abuse of state resources in campaigns have become the norm, although these practices are being challenged. The attention to money in campaigns for its favouring of the incumbent government parallels long-running complaints about control of mainstream media and obvious biases in reporting. Malaysia’s mainstream media outlets are owned by companies linked to the government political parties (Mustafa 2004). There is a lack of access for opposition parties and skewed coverage during the campaign itself.

Finally, scholars have questioned the electoral framework, both the electoral system itself and organisation of constituencies, and the legal framework (Lim 2003; Das 2005; Rachagan 1980; A. Rahman 1994). In 2013, the incumbent government won 47.4 percent of the popular vote but obtained 59.9 percent of the seats (Ostwald 2013). This skew has extended the outcry over how the electoral framework advantages the incumbent. Malaysia’s ‘winner takes all’ first-past-the-post electoral system has been criticised, with calls increasing for the introduction of a more inclusive proportional-representation system. Failure to meet international standards for constituency delineation has generated even more concern, including inconsistent use of standards, heavy malapportionment by creating seats in ‘safe’ areas, and lack of transparency in the delineation process itself. Malaysia has long stood out as an example that does not conform to the global trend of reducing discrimination and bias in drawing constituencies.

**New understandings, persistent question**

Greater scrutiny of voters, voting and the electoral process has brought increased appreciation of the complexity of elections and their importance. Scholars continue to flock to analyse elections and debates have flourished. Yet all these studies have yet to provide a clear answer to the question that has underscored much of the research: whether elections in Malaysia will serve as a means to change the government (Case 1993; Liow 1999). The BN now stands as the longest-serving government in the world. Many Malaysians believe that a change of government will open a path to new forms of governance and greater democracy. Others would like to hold onto what they know.

Contemporary studies of elections suggest that the obstacles to changing the government are high. They have been illuminated in the attention to electoral integrity and in efforts to gain a clearer sense of who constitutes the base of support for the incumbent government and why. Rather than providing a clear trajectory of trends ahead for electoral behaviour and outcomes, these contributions generally point to greater contestation and increasing confrontation over elections. Malaysia’s electorate – as is the case in many parts of Southeast Asia – is polarised and this polarisation is widening. The electoral process itself is now also being contested.
Will this polarised pattern of voting change? What sort of campaign will allow the government to hold onto power? Will electoral reform move forward and how will this happen? Despite contributions to knowledge on elections, the answers to key questions of what motivates Malaysians to vote as they do and whether they can overcome the obstacles embedded in electoral rules remain elusive. If there is one certainty in our understanding of elections in Malaysia, it is that elections will continue to generate interest and debate.

Notes

1 GEs usually coincide with state legislative polls that determine the government in Malaysia’s thirteen states, with the major exception of the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, which have traditionally operated on different calendars. Malaysia has not held local elections since 1965, as they have been suspended. The opposition state government of Selangor introduced elections at the local level in some communities after they won power in 2008.

2 See Loh 2011 for an excellent review of the study of Malaysian elections. He makes the point that electoral analyses have been focused on ethnicity.

Bibliography


Bridget Welsh


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