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Beyond the Barisan Nasional? A Gramscian Perspective of the 2008 Malaysian General Election¹

MICHAEL O'SHANNASSY

The March 2008 general elections in Malaysia have been characterized as a political “tsunami” with opposition parties enjoying stunning electoral success both at the federal and state levels. In the aftermath of these elections further upheavals in the Malaysian political landscape have taken place. However, is Malaysia witnessing a truly progressive moment, one that is long-term and structural, or is this instead a short-term, regressive, “restorative” moment? More specifically, what do the 2008 elections mean as far as the continuing evolution of Malaysia’s national identity is concerned? By adopting a Gramscian perspective and drawing upon some of Gramsci’s key concepts this article endeavours to offer a more nuanced analysis of the recent elections and their meaning vis-à-vis (re)conceptions of national identity. In the process, this article seeks to explore the development and complex operation of hegemony with particular reference to notions of national identity in contemporary Malaysia.

Key words: Malaysia, 2008 general election, civil society, national identity, New Economic Policy, Federal Constitution, Antonio Gramsci.

The 8 March 2008 general election in Malaysia has been characterised as a “political tsunami”.² The ruling Barisan Nasional (National

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Front, BN) coalition³ suffered unprecedented losses while the primary peninsular opposition parties — Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party, PKR), Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Parti Islam SeMalaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, PAS) — posted remarkable gains. This was a particularly stunning result for the opposition considering the outcome of the previous general election in 2004 when the BN swept the Dewan Rakyat, Malaysia's lower house, winning 198 seats to the opposition's combined total of 21, plus all but one state legislature. In contrast, 2008 represents a significant reversal for the BN coalition with its share of seats in the Dewan Rakyat plunging to 63 per cent and its overall popular vote to 51 per cent. Four additional state governments also fell to the opposition.

In the aftermath of March 2008 the Malaysian political landscape has gone through a number of upheavals with questions raised over the continuing viability of BN coalition rule and the future socio-political direction of the country. Two issues in particular stand out. First, the BN coalition has lost its two-thirds majority in parliament and therefore its ability to amend the constitution unimpeded, a critical indicator of political legitimacy in Malaysia. Secondly, on 1 April, PKR, PAS and the DAP officially joined forces to form the Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance, PR).⁴ While the PR does not yet officially have the numbers in parliament to gain control of the government, its *de facto* leader, Anwar Ibrahim, has publicly claimed to have the necessary numbers willing to cross over from the BN and join the PR. Explicitly contained within both issues are questions concerning the evolving nature of national identity and, in particular, the need for all parties to seriously consider the concept of *bangsa Malaysia*, a Malaysian nation that transcends ethnic identity. Such concerns about the constitution of national identity are clearly reflected in the 2008 results, which point to a pluralisation of the political system and a popular desire for a more inclusive, ethnically-neutral political discourse.

However, is this rosy picture accurate? On the surface, the 1999 elections promised similar possibilities for increased socio-political pluralisation only for the ruling BN coalition to recoup its losses in 2004. In other words, is Malaysia now witnessing a truly progressive moment, one that is long-term and structural, or is this instead a short-term, regressive, "restorative" moment? By adopting a Gramscian perspective this article endeavours to offer a more nuanced analysis of the recent elections and, in particular, their meaning *vis-à-vis* conceptions of national identity. In the

process, it seeks to explore the development and complex operation of hegemony in contemporary Malaysia.

This article will proceed in three distinct parts. Part one will outline the rationale for employing a Gramscian perspective, highlighting the relevant key Gramscian concepts useful for raising and answering questions about hegemony and crises. The following section will historicize the 2008 election with reference to the general elections of 1999 and 2004. The final part of the article will examine more closely the 2008 election results and the aftermath of the elections with particular reference to the possibility for transformation in Malaysian politics and society. This article will conclude with thoughts on whether we are witnessing an “organic” (relatively permanent) or “conjunctural” (immediate and ephemeral) crisis in Malaysia today.

A Gramscian Framework

At first glance, it may seem a peculiar choice to invoke Gramsci's conceptual theorizing in order to analyse a general election in contemporary, multi-ethnic Malaysia. However, his concepts offer a distinctive theoretical perspective which can help map out the complex and varying relationships between economy, polity and society in such countries.⁵ Each of the “thinking tools” Gramsci offers is of interest precisely because they provide the vocabulary for considering questions surrounding the complex operation of hegemony in a country like Malaysia, as well as its future prospects for long-term socio-political change.

At the centre of Gramsci's thought is his theory of hegemony, which is based on a rich conceptualization of power. In particular, Gramsci draws upon Machiavelli's metaphor of the ruler as a centaur who “must know well how to imitate beasts as well as employing properly human means”⁶ when exercising power or authority. Gramsci's concept of hegemony critically acknowledges the active role of subordinate people in the operation of power and thus allows for a nuanced conception of political and cultural authority.⁷ *Coercion* alone results in only a “limited” or “dominative” hegemony in which the ruling group seeks to neutralize or decapitate the demands of the subaltern group(s). In order to achieve an “expansive” or “aspirational” hegemony, the hegemonic group must also actively seek the *consent* of subalterns. Gramsci's notion of “hegemony” is sensitive, therefore, to issues of both power *and* legitimacy.

According to Gramsci, consent is created and recreated by the hegemony of the ruling stratum in society. Far from dominating its junior partners, a successful hegemonic group has to thoroughly recreate itself, it must make large parts of its subalterns' worldview its own and in the course of doing so is itself altered. The moment of hegemony then represents the pinnacle of a dynamic and endless process in which the dominant group succeeds in propagating itself through society, bringing about intellectual and moral as well as economic and political unity.⁸ However, this notion of hegemony as a continual process emphasizes the fact that a leading group must be constantly alert to the volatile demands of its subalterns and to the shifting historical terrain upon which it exercises its authority if it is to maintain power. A ruling stratum that asks for consent and yet which cannot give voice to the aspirations of those in whose name it rules will not survive indefinitely.

One of the key elements of any hegemonic strategy designed to acquire consent is the formation of links with existing elements of culture. Stuart Hall notes that "culture" should be interpreted here as, "the actual, grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific historical society".⁹ This includes the whole range of questions that Gramsci lumped together under the title "the national-popular" which he understood as constituting a crucial site for the construction of a popular hegemony.¹⁰ Any cultural project, such as the construction of a "national" identity for example, could not be something imposed upon the people from above. Instead, it had to be rooted in the "humus of popular culture as it is, with its tastes and tendencies and with its moral and intellectual world".¹¹ This is what he referred to as "common sense" — the often fragmentary and contradictory "stratified deposits" of more lucid philosophical systems which have become "facts of life". Its significance lies in that it is the "taken-for-granted terrain" upon which, "more coherent ideologies and philosophies must contend for mastery ... if they are to shape the conceptions of the world of the masses and in that way become historically effective".¹²

The (re)creation of and contestations surrounding consent, and therefore hegemony, take place through the institutions of civil society.¹³ Although Gramsci's use of the term varies, civil society can be appropriately thought of as "the network of institutions and practices in society that enjoy some autonomy from the state, and through which groups and individuals organize, represent, and express themselves to each other and the state."¹⁴ As such, it accounts for individual tastes, behaviours and values as well as regulated cultural

institutions. For Gramsci, whoever controls civil society succeeds in manufacturing consent among the masses and, as such, there is a need to pay more attention to ideological rather than coercive domination. As the ruling stratum's hegemony over civil society is never total, a constant re-packaging of ideology is necessary.¹⁵ There are varying degrees of consent but as this consent is never "complete" regimes are sometimes forced to rely on laws, regulations and outright suppression in order to silence dissent. Gramsci is, in effect, expanding the definition of the state; advocating the vision of an "integral" state, one that is, "no longer conceived as simply an administrative and coercive apparatus — it is also 'educative and formative'."¹⁶ It is the complexity of the interrelationships between the state and civil society that demands our attention and rejects any picture of the "post-colonial state" that assumes a simple, dominative or instrumental model of state power. This interactive view of the relationship between the state and civil society not only demonstrates how the state might seek to manufacture legitimacy via civil society but also simultaneously reveals the shape of potential challenges to any such hegemonic strategy.

Perhaps the main challenge that any hegemonic strategy faces is that consent is inherently unstable; a consequence of the historical specificity of any particular "moment" of hegemony. Of critical importance in any analysis of a hegemonic strategy is Gramsci's idea of "the continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria".¹⁷ Hegemony is never imposed aprioristically but is always developed within the social, economic and political relations of a particular situation. There is nothing automatic about any period of hegemonic "settlement"; such moments have to be actively constructed and positively maintained within a context of shifting relations.¹⁸ Societal transformation, then, hinges upon a successful counter-hegemonic struggle in civil society, in which the prevailing hegemony is undermined thereby allowing an alternative hegemonic power bloc to emerge.

Gramsci describes such periods of heightened hegemonic activity in which consensus dissolves into dissensus as "crises". In such instances it becomes apparent that the ruling stratum in society has failed in its attempt to construct an expansive hegemony and runs the risk of allowing counter-hegemonic forces the opportunity to fill the consensual vacuum.¹⁹ Gramsci insists upon the importance of distinguishing between "organic" and "conjunctural" crises in such analyses: the former are a result of deep and incurable problems whereas the latter are more immediate and temporary and can be

settled one way or another by the ruling stratum.²⁰ Gramsci stresses that any particular crisis needs to be understood not only in terms of the immediate economic and/or political concerns but also in the “incessant and persistent efforts” made by the ruling stratum in order to defend and maintain the existing system.²¹ In the case of an organic crisis, such efforts cannot be purely defensive — the ruling stratum must seek to reshape state institutions as well as form new ideologies. In this fashion, and only if the counter-hegemonic opposition forces are not strong enough to shift the balance of power decisively in their favour, will the ruling stratum potentially succeed in re-establishing its hegemony.

In light of the Gramscian framework outlined above, the question now becomes whether or not the current situation in Malaysia following the political upheavals associated with the March 2008 general election can be accurately identified as a conjunctural or organic crisis. Rather than focusing on the immediate moment itself Gramsci suggests that we should concentrate instead on the development over time of any particular social formation.²² A review of the electoral trends from 1999 will put into perspective the 2008 electoral results as well as outline potential shifts in the fundamental structure within society that, in turn, define the present horizon of *possibilities*.²³

Contextualizing 2008: The General Elections of 1999 and 2004

The 1999 general election in Malaysia followed fifteen dramatic months in Malaysian politics which tested the consensual hegemonic authority that the Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, and the BN had cultivated throughout the preceding decade.²⁴ On the economic level, the Asian financial crisis of 1997–98 threatened the prosperity that supplied the material base for Mahathir’s Vision 2020 project designed to ensure that the country achieved newly industrialized country (NIC) status by that year. More critical, however, was the way in which this economic crisis precipitated a political crisis that eventually led to Anwar Ibrahim, the Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister, being sacked from his official government positions on 1 September 1998 and then formally expelled from the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) three days later. On 8 September, Anwar issued a declaration that defiantly called for *Reformasi* — for social and political reforms that opposed Mahathir’s “cronyistic” responses to the financial crisis. After his arrest on 20 September on corruption and sodomy charges, Anwar’s call for

Reformasi resonated beyond most expectations, blossoming into a social movement opposed to Mahathir, UMNO and the BN.

The significance of *Reformasi* lay in the changing nature of processes of legitimation in Malaysia during the 1990s, itself a consequence of a specific conjunction of economic developments, political initiatives and ideological influences.²⁵ In this sense, social control in Malaysia had become organized around a more nuanced mix of state coercion *and* civil persuasion, indicating the growing importance of civil society as a contested space. Again, hegemony is a managed affair and legitimacy involves being able to persuade people, more generally, of the “moral authority” of the prevailing system. It was this “moral authority” of the BN regime, and of UMNO in particular, that *Reformasi* challenged. On one level, the movement represented Malay cultural revulsion at the manner in which Anwar was humiliated and shamed. On another level, *Reformasi* denoted a site of social criticism. At yet another level, it signified a massive erosion of the regime’s hegemony over civil society based as it was on “rapid economic growth and continued prosperity, nationalist vision and popular support, and strong leadership and managed succession” all of which had been battered by the crises of July 1997 and September 1998.²⁶

While initially a predominantly “Malay phenomenon”, the *Reformasi* movement at its height, “achieved a cross-cultural breakthrough that created novel possibilities of multi-ethnic alliance” in the form of the Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front, BA).²⁷ While no summary account of the path from inchoate movement to electoral coalition can adequately canvass the internal problems which paved the way, by November 1999 the BA had become sufficiently unified that it was prepared to offer itself as the alternative to the BN in a general election. Immediate analyses of the election results ranged from those who viewed them as “a watershed in Malaysian politics” to those who cynically observed that they were “much ado about nothing”.²⁸ While on the surface the results apparently confirmed the latter opinion, such a raw interpretation conceals important features which pointed to the emergence of new political realities, ones that lend themselves well to the Gramscian framework outlined above. Most significantly, the election results were the worst electoral setback UMNO had ever experienced.²⁹ Tellingly, perhaps half of the Malay vote went to the opposition as it became apparent that UMNO had lost credibility as the hegemonic Malay party and could not “expect 100 per cent support from a rapidly changing Malay population based simply on its ‘Malay credentials’... [leaving it to]

ponder how it will strategically engage in the contest for the Malay vote".³⁰ The Anwar affair suggested that UMNO's factionalism, a feature of the party since its inception, was, "not only chronic but had become systemic"³¹ and could now be considered the chief source of political instability in the country. Such features would seem to indicate the failure of attempts on the part of the ruling stratum to construct and maintain an expansive hegemony.

Some analysts, taking the results at face value, interpreted them as an instance of the electorate registering a protest vote against the BN coalition, rather than truly seeking to replace it with an alternative.³² However, a deeper Gramscian perspective suggests that while the 1999 election did indeed fail to produce a viable multi-ethnic opposition that could institute a meaningful two-coalition system, a key shift in popular consciousness meant that the situation could not, "return to 'square one': the Anwar affair and the Malay voters' response had exposed the fragility of UMNO's claim to be the principle source of stability in the political system."³³ Undoubtedly, a shift had occurred in Malaysia's socio-political landscape challenging long-established foundations of hegemony and legitimacy: an organic crisis.

On the surface, however, the results of the March 2004 general election would seem to refute such a view of 1999 as an organic crisis. The final election results took most observers by surprise with the ruling BN coalition enjoying its best showing since it was formed in 1974, bouncing back with 90.4 per cent of parliamentary seats and capturing 63.37 per cent of the total vote (up from 56.5 per cent in 1999).³⁴ What is even more significant is that UMNO reversed the losses it experienced in 1999 winning 92 per cent of the seats it contested, a clear indication of its renewed credibility among the Malay population. Other component parties within the BN coalition also performed well. By contrast, PAS and KeADILan suffered crushing defeats. What factors might explain the sheer magnitude of the BN's surprising electoral victory?

Several aspects of the Malaysian political scene are significant in this respect. In the first place, there is the culture of what Hilley has referred to as "insiderism", the features of which permeate all parts of the social order. The subtle filtering of dominant, BN/UMNO-prescribed, national values informs the context within which opposition parties and NGO's operate, encouraging them to address social issues from "within a 'problem-solving' mode of analysis".³⁵ While *Reformasi* provided new space for the articulation of a non-ethnic politics, the potentially counter-hegemonic BA coalition was unable to operate as an organic entity and avoid narrow party

interests. In particular, the BA was unable to manage BN provocation and contain tensions over the role of religion, which eventually led to the departure of the DAP over the issue of an Islamic state. By continuing to operate within the “BN system”, the BA was unable to take full advantage of the new political opportunities that *Reformasi* engendered, in particular, the possibility of a non-BN led government.³⁶

Perhaps even more important were transformations in the relationship between the state and civil society as the ruling stratum reacted to the electoral results of 1999. Arguably the most important element here was the ascension of Abdullah Badawi to the office of Prime Minister in October 2003 following Mahathir's resignation. Abdullah immediately proceeded to carve out his own identity and began 2004 by, “articulating a broad reform agenda including improved governance, stronger political institutions, and a softer approach to human rights”.³⁷ In other words, Abdullah tapped into the prevailing “common sense” and reconstructed the BN's hegemony by successfully co-opting the *Reformasi* momentum of the opposition. This, together with the performance legitimacy afforded the BN government by the upturn in the Malaysian economy along with the considerable perks of incumbency meant that the 2004 election was over before it began. Here then was a clear example of a hegemonic strategy — the “incessant and persistent efforts” — employed by the ruling stratum to defend and maintain the existing system by regaining the active consent of subaltern groups within civil society. The period 1999–2004 can thus be regarded as a restorative moment, one that involved no fundamental structural reorganization as the ruling stratum in control of the state sought to re-articulate, via a “problem-solving” mode of analysis, the hegemonic nexus between power and legitimacy.

How then from this seemingly secure position in 2004 did the ruling BN coalition fall so far only four years later? If one casts a critical Gramscian eye over the period 1999–2008 some clues become visible, signs that point to a more accurate evaluation of 1999 as an organic crisis. In many ways, the “actual, grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs” in Malaysia changed over this period and the BN coalition, was unable or unwilling to adapt to these changes in “culture”. As Khoo argues, the *Reformasi* ferment of 1998 and the elections of 1999 indicated that UMNO was “fast approaching a state of systemic failure. As it were the ‘party of the Malays’ was trapped.”³⁸ UMNO's dilemma after 1999 was thus, “whether to develop a broader ethnic base [as indicated by

the *Reformasi* movement] or seek to reclaim its lost Malay support through a more pronounced religious agenda”.³⁹ As I argue below, this dilemma remained largely unresolved by 2008 as is reflected in the electoral backlash against UMNO and the BN. Furthermore, despite initial recognition on the part of UMNO leaders and pro-government analysts after the 1999 elections of the need for UMNO to reform and listen to the voice of the electorate, no immediate reform was undertaken by Mahathir. I suggest that even those efforts made by Abdullah to rejuvenate or reinvent UMNO after his ascension as Prime Minister were unable to overcome the systemic deficiencies of the party and, therefore, rather than being interpreted as an unequivocal mandate for Abdullah’s government and its hegemony, the 2004 election results demonstrate Gramsci’s critical notion of the “continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria”. In this sense, 2004 should be considered an aberration, a blip in a direct line between 1999 and 2008, where a combination of factors, both external and internal to the coalition, frustrated the BA’s attempts at genuine reform of the Malaysian political system. A Gramscian perspective reminds us that there is nothing inevitable or inexorable about any (counter-)hegemonic project, a lesson that the 2004 elections amply demonstrated. However, much still remained vague about the trajectory of politics after 2004; tracing this trajectory leads to the elections of 2008.⁴⁰

The 2008 General Elections: Organic or Conjunctural Crisis?

It has been noted that the results of the 2008 general election suggest that the ruling stratum failed to keep pace with some of the fundamental socio-economic transformations occurring in the terrain of Malaysian society.⁴¹ For the purposes of analysing such transformations, Malaysian society can be divided, somewhat crudely, into two groups — Malays and non-Malays. Tensions between the two groups had been simmering since 2004, stirred by a number of factors. Religious controversies, including the destruction of dozens of Indian temples and a series of challenges to non-Muslims’ legal rights, as well as the incendiary pro-Malay and pro-Muslim rhetoric of leading figures in UMNO, particularly at the 2006 UMNO general assembly, all played significant roles in exciting such frictions. In addition, non-Malays had long been frustrated by a sense of socio-economic marginalization fostered by the affirmative action policies of the government in favour of the majority Malay population.⁴² Ironically, these redistributive and developmental policies had also resulted in

an acute spatial and intra-Malay divide with the emergence of a new Malay urban middle-class “comprising independent, dynamic, professional Malays at ease in inter-ethnic economic and social relationships”⁴³ existing together with rural Malays who remained poor despite the presence of policies ostensibly designed to improve their status. Although both rural and urban Malays had returned to UMNO in large numbers at the 2004 elections, by 2008 both sections of Malay society had once again become disgruntled with their leadership, as they had been in 1999. Despite his promises for a more open and inclusive form of governance intended to benefit all Malaysians, the huge swing against the BN can be interpreted as, “Malaysians standing cohesively in opposition to Abdullah for failing to deliver on his pledges.”⁴⁴

However, while the BN knew that the 2008 elections posed a real challenge to its authority, the extent of the ruling coalition's losses took many observers by surprise. The final results were approximately double the predicted swing of less than 15 per cent, or 30 to 40 parliamentary seats. The BN coalition won just 140 of the 222 parliamentary seats on offer and only 51.2 per cent of the valid popular vote.⁴⁵ All of the main component parties of the BN suffered. In fact, the BN majority in parliament hinged upon its support in Sabah and Sarawak where it won 55 of the 57 parliamentary seats on offer. In contrast, all of the opposition parties posted remarkable gains with the PKR increasing its presence in parliament from a solitary seat in 2004 to 31 seats in 2008, PAS secured 23 seats compared to its 7 seats in 2004 and the DAP won 28 seats, up from its previous 12 seats. These gains increased the total opposition presence in parliament to 82 seats from 21 seats in 2004.

Any attempt to make sense of the 2008 general election results centres on accounting for the swing against the BN coalition. The BN lost support across all ethnic communities although this loss was more apparent among non-Malays. It has been estimated that Indian support for the BN plummeted from an estimated 82 to 48 per cent while Chinese support dropped from an estimated 65 to 35 per cent. Malay support, on the other hand, held relatively steady, with only a 5 per cent swing against the government.⁴⁶ A number of points need to be highlighted, however, when interpreting these results. In the first place, the vote swings were not uniformly distributed, with the northern states of Malaysia (Penang, Kedah and Kelantan) and major cities bearing the brunt of the “tsunami” whereas the rest of the country saw some of the old patterns of voting remain intact.⁴⁷ That is, the groundswell for change that the

2008 elections seem to demonstrate has not reached all parts of Malaysia. Secondly, with regard to the non-Malay swing against the BN, it apparently occurred, “almost regardless of the opposition party in question or the race of that candidate”.⁴⁸ Several Malaysian political commentators have drawn upon these points in order to argue for the political maturation of the Malaysian electorate. Not only do the election results point to the disconnect that exists between the ruling stratum and the people whose consent it relies upon but they also indicated how the terrain of Malaysian society and politics is moving to a middle ground of sorts, one less communal in nature.⁴⁹ In many ways this is a return to the promise of 1999. The difference in 2008 is that the BN no longer lays sole claim to the broad middle ground and has now been left behind by an opposition who under Anwar’s leadership has better read the shifts in sentiment among the Malaysian population.

Viewing the 2008 election results through a Gramscian lens it appears that the legitimacy of the ruling BN coalition’s hegemonic principles diminished to the point where a “crisis of authority” emerged. Gramsci notes that in order to counter such a loss of legitimacy, a ruling stratum has to decide on the balance between coercion and consent in attempting to reassert its hegemony within society, a decision that, in turn, relies on correctly determining whether the crisis is conjunctural or organic in nature. Events in the immediate aftermath of the election suggest that the BN leadership viewed the election results as if they were a conjunctural crisis. Accordingly, the government adopted a range of defensive measures designed to regain consent. One such measure involves throwing money at the problem and the federal government’s 2009 budget proposal, which was presented to parliament on 29 August, offered generous spending increases. On the coercive side, there have been fresh allegations of sodomy levelled at Anwar as well as the arrests of two bloggers and one parliamentarian under the Internal Security Act for allegedly heightening racial tensions. In addition, the UMNO-PAS talks following the elections could be viewed as an attempt by the ruling stratum to keep subaltern social groups fragmented and passive within civil society.⁵⁰

The danger for the ruling coalition and its continuing hegemony lies in a misinterpretation of the nature of the crisis posed by the election results, based on an ahistorical reading of the elections. If it believes, as the actions listed above indicate, that 2008 is a *historically specific* conjunctural crisis and enacts only defensive measures, when it is actually facing an organic crisis, then it runs

the risk of its hegemony closing down and becoming ossified. This would then eventually give rise to a “dominative hegemony” where authority has lost its legitimacy and can only operate as naked coercive power. It is worth reflecting once again on Gramsci’s analysis of organic crises for if, as I suggest, 2008 actually represents the continuation of an organic crisis that finds its genesis in the late-1990s, then state institutions in Malaysia must be reshaped and new ideologies formulated and implemented for the emergence of a new expansive hegemony based on the socio-political transformations first wrought by the events of 1997–98. Whether hegemonic or counter-hegemonic, the power bloc that best reads the shifting political and social terrain and thereby is able to give voice to the aspirations of those in whose name it purports to rule will be better positioned to advance its hegemonic project. If this is an organic crisis then the measures outlined above will not be enough to win back consent and re-legitimize the BN’s hegemony.

One aspect that potentially points to 2008 representing an organic crisis is the notion of national identity in Malaysia, more specifically, the concept of *bangsa Malaysia*, first mooted in 1991 by Mahathir as part of his Vision 2020. While Mahathir’s use of the term remains subject to conjecture, this notion of a Malaysian nation that transcended ethnic identity captured the popular imagination of Malaysians and suggested new forms of identification.⁵¹ As a recent poll indicates, the issue of national identity continues to resonate among the Malaysian population.⁵² Politics, however, remained steadfastly communal in nature despite public endorsements of the *bangsa Malaysia* by politicians of all persuasions. For instance, past and present UMNO presidents while publicly subscribing to the concept have had to contend with repeated calls from within the party for *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy). The elections of 2008 represent something of a change in this regard, particularly as the opposition gains can be seen as a robust public endorsement of their multiracial aspirations. In particular, the stunning revival of the now truly multi-ethnic PKR from its near oblivion in 2004 to becoming the single largest opposition party indicates a real change in the terrain of Malaysian society. Even elements within UMNO have belatedly recognized the need for deeper reform. On 15 July 2008, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, a senior UMNO leader, outlined the challenges facing the party and, by extension, the ruling coalition. Among the factors responsible for the party’s abysmal performance he noted the failure to develop policies transcending race and ethnicity.⁵³ This widespread concern with the notion of

a more inclusive conceptualization of a *bangsa Malaysia* reflects distinct changes in Malaysian society since the ethnic riots of 1969. To put it succinctly, it has become increasingly apparent that the changing nature of wealth and income inequality in Malaysia suggests the need for universal-type policies rather than those that target a specific ethnic community. This, in turn, implies the pluralization of the Malaysian political system, demanding not only a meaningful dialogue on the concept of a truly inclusive *bangsa Malaysia* but also pointing to some possible avenues for such transformation.

If 2008 is, in fact, part of a continuing organic crisis there are any number of potential areas for transformation in the Malaysian socio-political system. In the interests of brevity, however, only two will be touched on. In recent years the National Economic Policy (NEP) has been criticized as an inefficient system that not only unfairly discriminates against non-Malays but has also failed to adequately redistribute wealth to most *bumiputera*. In both cases the NEP has been criticized for not dealing directly with issues of economic inequality; rather than helping the poor, as a class irrespective of ethnicity, it has become an institutionalized system of government handouts for the majority ethnic community in Malaysia. In particular, the practice of categorizing all *bumiputera* as a single group theoretically allows for the possibility of a gross imbalance in the relative holdings of national wealth among individuals within this social grouping and has led to criticism that some *bumiputera* remain economically marginalized.⁵⁴ Although Abdullah did raise this issue during his maiden speech as UMNO president in 2004, his views were not universally shared and no substantive action was taken to address concerns about the NEP. A central campaign pledge of the opposition during the 2008 elections was a promise to scrap the NEP and implement a needs-based system irrespective of one's ethnicity. Since the March elections the NEP has come under increased scrutiny with the new Penang Chief Minister, Lim Guan Eng, vowing to scrap such programmes and consequently attracting the ire of at least one government minister.⁵⁵ In reality, Guan Eng was probably guilty of no more than the poor articulation of what a clear majority of Malaysians believe — that the BN's "race-based affirmative action policy is obsolete and must be replaced with a merit-based policy".⁵⁶ Such sentiments have even been recognized by the government with the Deputy Prime Minister (and Prime Minister-designate), Najib Razak, stating his preparedness to end special privileges for the *bumiputera*, commenting that "if we do not change, the people will change us" and that in the not-too-distant

future, Malaysia would see the NEP being replaced; a stance that would bring the government closer to the position of the *Pakatan Rakyat* (PR).⁵⁷ However, Najib did not offer any specific timetable and cautioned against any expectation of a quick change. Crucially, he explicitly referred to the enormity of the challenge, one that many political analysts believe is beyond UMNO's present capabilities.⁵⁸

A second, and somewhat related, possible avenue for socio-political transformation in Malaysia as a result of an organic crisis lies in the Federal Constitution. Any constitution is, in effect, a contract between a government and its citizenry and, like all contracts, is subject to negotiation and compromise. This is apparent in those provisions contained within the Federal Constitution which refer to the special rights of the Malays (and later the native peoples of Sabah and Sarawak). Without denying the existence of such stipulations, it is important to recognize the context within which they were negotiated if they are to be tested now. Article 153(1) states that: "It shall be the responsibility of the Yang-di-Pertuan Agong [Malaysia's constitutional monarch] to safeguard the special position of the Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak and the legitimate interests of other communities in accordance with the provisions of this Article."⁵⁹ In the first place, the report of the independent commission charged with drafting the Federal Constitution noted the difficulty of reconciling such special rights with the notion of a common nationality for the whole of the Federation.⁶⁰ In fact, the Alliance Party, the BN's precursor, advanced a submission that in an independent Malaya, "all nationals should be accorded equal rights, privileges and opportunities and there must not be discrimination on grounds of race and creed";⁶¹ a notion that the Rulers (Sultans) also agreed with in essence. In the end, the commission observed that "the special position of the Malays" had historical precedence and should therefore be reflected in the wording of the Constitution. However, the commission also recommended that while the Malays should be assured that special rights would continue for a substantial period eventually such provisions, "should be reduced and should ultimately cease so that there should then be no discrimination between races and communities".⁶²

The ethnic riots of May 1969 put on hold any such thoughts for the reduction and/or elimination of "the special position of the Malays". Under the NEP there was a clear realignment of both political and economic power that subsequently gave rise to a desire to realign the balance undergirding the Federal Constitution. This becomes

evident when one considers the amount of speeches since that time highlighting the need to protect the special rights of the *bumiputera* as opposed to those that talk of safeguarding “the legitimate interests of the other communities”. However, any talk of a “post-1969 social contract” is misleading as there was no fundamental redistribution of rights under the Constitution. The question now becomes whether the Federal Constitution is fluid enough to reflect the evolution of society and, in particular, desires for a more inclusive expression of what is meant by *bangsa Malaysia*.⁶³ One possible avenue to explore then is the notion that a change in the discourse surrounding conceptions of national identity is required in order to account for the evolution of the social and political landscape in contemporary Malaysia. As the respected jurist, Datuk P.G. Lim observed: “If we were to refer to ourselves as citizens or *rakyat* of Malaysia, this would remove much of the obfuscations that cloud our vision to establish a sense of belonging and nationhood among all citizens on a national level irrespective of race or ethnicity.”⁶⁴ Contained within such visions is the emergence of a genuine popular national culture that could then, according to Gramsci, provide the foundation for the formation of “a popular collective will” which, in turn, would yield the basis for a new hegemonic project.

While such scenarios point to the very real possibility of transformation in the socio-political terrain of Malaysia, a closer reading of Gramsci cautions us against any naive or overly idealistic interpretation of “political moments” such as the 2008 general elections. On the surface, the election results do appear to confirm the existence of the homogeneity and organization necessary in civil society to ensure the operation of just such a “collective will”, something that was apparently lacking in 1999. What Gramsci reminds us, however, is that even an extraordinary degree of organic unity does not *guarantee* the outcome of a specific struggle. Hegemony, in his conception, is a historically specific and temporary moment in the life of a society. Again, there is nothing automatic about hegemony; it has to be actively constructed and positively maintained. Moreover, Gramsci urges us to take note of the multi-dimensional and multi-arena character of hegemony — that it, “represents the installation of a profound measure of social and moral authority, not simply over its immediate supporters but across society *as a whole*”.⁶⁵ Two potential pitfalls loom large in this regard. The first is that the PR coalition members must transcend their ideological differences otherwise it could be a case of “back to the future” and a trouncing at the next elections, just as 2004 followed 1999.

In this sense, coalition-building must recognize that diversity in a plural society is more than a virtue: it is a necessity that invents social and political experiments. Opposition elements must think strategically and avoid narrow party interests while cultivating an open dialogue on issues previously deemed too sensitive such as ethnicity and religion. This means escaping the culture of insiderism and creating new shapes of political representation that lie outside those hitherto conventional structures. So far, the PR seems to holding fast, but it is uncertain how the added responsibility of governing at the state level and of operating as a viable opposition at the federal level will affect its bonds. Secondly, in its current incarnation the BN coalition remains communal in nature. While the ruling coalition does have to contend with demands for non-communal politics from both the urban middle class and non-*bumiputera* poor, it is entirely plausible that UMNO, in an attempt to reinforce its legitimacy as a Malay-based party, pursues race-based policies in order to resolve intra-*bumiputera* class cleavages and mobilize rural Malay support. After all, the relatively small Malay swing against the BN in 2008 suggests that UMNO could well regain control of the Malay heartland states and an increased majority in parliament if it addresses such communal economic needs.⁶⁶ This would only “serve to foreclose other forms of political identification, such as ‘*ketuanan rakyat*’ (people supremacy) that the opposition is trying to promote”.⁶⁷ At the present moment, it is therefore premature to say definitively what shape any future hegemonic settlement in Malaysia will adopt.

Conclusion

It should be emphasized that reading the 2008 Malaysian general election through Gramsci is not intended to provide a definitive interpretation. Rather, it is a matter of bringing a distinctive theoretical perspective to bear on the analytical issues that such historical moments throw up. The strength of a Gramscian conceptual framework lies in its emphasis on the complex operation of hegemony and the critical role that popular consent plays within any successful hegemonic project. The fundamental role accorded to civil society as the primary site for the manufacture of (and challenge to) consent highlights not only the need to focus on ideological leadership but also implies that as the terrain of civil society shifts, so too must the ideological tack of the ruling stratum if it wishes to maintain its hegemony. While such a conceptual framework is unable to

authoritatively determine the exact socio-political path the country will tread, such a nuanced analysis gives greater shape to the horizon of possibilities by examining the complex operation of hegemony and legitimacy in Malaysia over the past decade. The belief that the 2008 general elections herald something qualitatively different in contemporary Malaysia finds support in Gramsci's distinction between East and West and the historical transition from one to the other which he describes. In this sense, it is conceivable that civil society in Malaysia is no longer "primordial and gelatinous" but is instead a much more sturdy structure, one that the opposition forces are now in a better position to take advantage of and fulfil the potential of *Reformasi*. Gramsci's description of the West, "with its mass democratic forms, its complex civil society, the consolidation of the consent of the masses, through political democracy"⁶⁸ no longer seems out of place in a country like Malaysia and this translates into a more consensual basis for the state. At the very least, this is something that all sides now need to account for in contemporary Malaysia.

NOTES

- ¹ A slightly different version of this article was presented at the 15th Malaysia and Singapore Society Colloquium held at the Australian National University, 5–6 December 2008. The author would like to express his gratitude to the organizers and participants of the colloquium as well as to the faculty and students of the Department of International Relations at the ANU for their insightful feedback. Particular thanks must go to the two anonymous reviewers for their perceptive comments and advice.
- ² "Malaysia's Election: Political Tsunami?", *Economist*, 10 March 2008.
- ³ Although a broad coalition, the main players within the BN are the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC).
- ⁴ The discursive significance of this new coalition should not be underestimated. Here the PR presents itself clearly as a potential government and not simply a foil to the ruling BN coalition.
- ⁵ Such a perspective has precedence in the literature on Malaysia. See, Fatimah Halim, "The Transformation of the Malaysian State", *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 20, no. 1 (1990): 64–81 and P. Ramasamy, "Civil Society in Malaysia: An Arena for Contestation?", in *Civil Society in Southeast Asia*, edited by Lee Hock Guan (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2004), pp. 198–216. For two particularly insightful book-length analyses of recent political events in Malaysia employing a Gramscian perspective see, Khoo Boo Teik, *Beyond Mahathir: Malaysian Politics and its Discontents* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 2003) and John Hilley, *Malaysia: Mahathirism, Hegemony and the New Opposition* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 2001).

- ⁶ Nicolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 61.
- ⁷ Steve Jones, *Antonio Gramsci* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 41.
- ⁸ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), p. 182.
- ⁹ Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity", in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, edited by David Morely and Chen Kuan-Hsing (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 439.
- ¹⁰ Roger Simon, *Gramsci's Political Thought: An Introduction* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1982), p. 42.
- ¹¹ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Cultural Writings* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1985), p. 102.
- ¹² Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance", op. cit., p. 431.
- ¹³ Ramasamy, "Civil Society in Malaysia", op. cit., p. 198.
- ¹⁴ Stephen Hobden and Richard Wyn Jones, "Marxist Theories of International Relations", in *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, 3rd ed., edited by John Baylis and Steve Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 235.
- ¹⁵ Ramasamy, "Civil Society in Malaysia", op. cit., p. 210.
- ¹⁶ Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance", op. cit., pp. 428–29.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., p. 422.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p. 423.
- ¹⁹ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, op. cit., p. 210.
- ²⁰ Jones, *Antonio Gramsci*, op. cit., pp. 95–97; Simon, *Gramsci's Political Thought*, op. cit., pp. 37–38.
- ²¹ Gramsci, "Selections from the Prison Notebooks", op. cit., p. 178.
- ²² Ibid., p. 184. For more on the term social formation see Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance", op. cit., pp. 420–21.
- ²³ Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance", op. cit., p. 421.
- ²⁴ For a perceptive enquiry into the changing nature of legitimation and the development of hegemony through the 1990s see Khoo, *Beyond Mahathir*, op. cit., pp. 17–37 and Hilley, *Malaysia*, op. cit., pp. 1–46.
- ²⁵ For a detail synopsis of this conjunction see, Khoo, *Beyond Mahathir*, op. cit., pp. 17–20.
- ²⁶ Khoo, *Beyond Mahathir*, op. cit., p. 107.
- ²⁷ Ibid., p. 112. The BA comprised of KeADILan, PAS, the DAP and Partai Rakyat Malaysia.
- ²⁸ For an example of the former opinion, see Hari Singh, "Opposition Politics and the 1999 Malaysian Election", in *Trends in Malaysia: Election Assessment* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000), p. 33. For the latter opinion, see Zakaria Haji Ahmad, "The 1999 General Elections: A Preliminary Overview", in *Trends in Malaysia: Election Assessment* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000), p. 1.

- ²⁹ UMNO's number of parliamentary seats declined from 94 to 72 and for the first time its total number of seats was less than that of its coalition partners; four ministers and five deputy ministers lost their seats. See John Funston, "Malaysia's Elections: Malay Winds of Change?", in *Trends in Malaysia: Election Assessment* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000), p. 51. Also, Khoo, *Beyond Mahathir*, op. cit., pp. 112–21 and Hilley, *Malaysia*, op. cit., pp. 262–67.
- ³⁰ Ahmad, "The 1999 General Elections", op. cit., p. 5. See also, Funston, "Malaysia's Elections", op. cit., p. 51.
- ³¹ Khoo, *Beyond Mahathir*, op. cit., p. 122.
- ³² Ahmad, "The 1999 General Elections", op. cit., p. 7.
- ³³ Khoo, *Beyond Mahathir*, op. cit., p. 121.
- ³⁴ See Joseph Liow, "The Politics Behind Malaysia's Eleventh General Election", *Asian Survey* 45, no. 6 (2005): 907 and Bridget Welsh, "Malaysia in 2004: Out of Mahathir's Shadow?", *Asian Survey* 45, no. 1 (2005): 154.
- ³⁵ Hilley, *Malaysia*, op. cit., p. 13 (emphasis in the original).
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 268.
- ³⁷ Welsh, "Malaysia in 2004", op. cit., p. 154.
- ³⁸ Khoo, *Beyond Mahathir*, op. cit., p. 123.
- ³⁹ Hilley, *Malaysia*, op. cit., p. 263.
- ⁴⁰ Liow, "Malaysia's Eleventh General Election", op. cit., p. 929.
- ⁴¹ Edmund Terrence Gomez, "UMNO Still Strong in Malay Heartland", *Malaysiakini*, 4 June 2008 <<http://www.malaysiakini.com>>.
- ⁴² The most famous example of this is the New Economic Policy (NEP), implemented in the wake of the ethnic riots of 1969, which had the stated goal of poverty eradication and economic restructuring so as to eliminate the identification of ethnicity with economic function. This was to be achieved through affirmative action in favour of the *bumiputera* (literally, princes of the soil) — Malays and other "indigenous" citizens of Malaysia. Although it officially ended in 1990, much of the tangible benefits it offers to the *bumiputera* are still in effect and it is still referred to in the present tense by many Malaysians. I will use this term to indicate the NEP and any of the subsequent "NEP-like" programmes.
- ⁴³ Gomez, "UMNO Still Strong", op. cit. <<http://www.malaysiakini.com>>.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁵ In fact, the BN coalition garnered just 49.8 per cent of the votes cast on the peninsula and just over half of the parliamentary seats on offer (85 out of 165). See Edmund Terrence Gomez, "Jockeying for Power in the New Malaysia", *Far Eastern Economic Review* (July/August 2008): 30–34 and Ong Kian Ming, "Making Sense of the Political Tsunami", *Malaysiakini*, 11 March 2008 <<http://www.malaysiakini.com>>.
- ⁴⁶ Ong, "Making Sense", op. cit. <<http://www.malaysiakini.com>>.
- ⁴⁷ "Making Sense of the 2008 General Election Results", *Malaysia Votes*, 9 March 2008 <<http://malaysiavotes.com/wp/>>. See also, Bridget Welsh, "Election Post-mortem: Top 10 Factors", *Malaysiakini*, 12 March 2008 <<http://www.malaysiakini.com>>.

- 48 Ong, "Making Sense", op. cit. <<http://www.malaysiakini.com>>.
- 49 "Making Sense of the 2008 General Election Results", op. cit. <<http://malaysiavotes.com/wp/>>.
- 50 So far, nothing has come of the talks. See, Beh Lih Yi, "PAS: No to Cooperation, Yes to Meetings", *Malaysiakini*, 31 July 2008 <<http://malaysiakini.com>>.
- 51 Ooi Kee Beng, "Bangsa Malaysia: Vision or Spin?", in *Malaysia: Recent Trends and Challenges*, edited by Saw Swee-Hock and K. Kesavapany (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), pp. 47–72.
- 52 "Public Opinion Poll on Ethnic Relations — Ethnic Relations: Experience, Perception and Expectations", Merdeka Center for Opinion Research <http://www.merdeka.org/pages/02_research.html>.
- 53 Colum Murphy, "Anwar Liberates Malaysian Politics", *Far Eastern Economic Review* (September 2008): 10. It should be noted, however, that after the 1999 elections, Musa Hitam, himself a prominent UMNO "old hand" warned party members that UMNO had to rejuvenate itself. Musa's advice went unheeded by party leaders, in particular, Mahathir. See Khoo, *Beyond Mahathir*, op. cit., pp. 129–30.
- 54 Among the races, the Malay suffers the greatest income disparity with the Gini coefficient within the Malay community increasing from 0.428 in 1990 to 0.4495 in 1997. Hence the income gap between the upper and lower strata of the *bumiputera* has become more pronounced over time. Criticism here centres on the economic advantages that political connections offer with some commentators even referring to "UMNO-puteras" rather than "bumiputeras". See, K.J. Ratnam, "Forging a New National Consensus — Towards a Malaysian Development Agenda", Centre for Public Policy Studies <<http://www.cpps.org.my>>.
- 55 Nash Rahman and Chan Kok Leong, "Zaid: Stop Pitting Malays Against Non-Malays", *Malaysiakini*, 14 March 2008 <<http://www.malaysiakini.com>>.
- 56 See, Shannon Teoh, "Poll Shows Most Malaysians Want NEP to End", *Malaysian Insider*, 9 October 2008 <<http://www.themalaysianinsider.com>>. The poll was conducted by the independent Merdeka Center for Opinion Research between 18 June–29 July 2008. 71 per cent of Malaysians surveyed agreed with the statement (the ethnic breakdown was 65 per cent of Malays, 83 per cent of Chinese and 89 per cent of Indians agreeing with the statement).
- 57 "Najib Ready to End Special Privileges for the Malays", *Malaysian Insider*, 24 October 2008 <<http://www.themalaysianinsider.com>>.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 Abdul Aziz Bari and Farid Sufian Shuaib, *Constitution of Malaysia: Text and Commentary* (Petaling Jaya: Prentice Hall, 2004), p. 328.
- 60 The commission was comprised of five foreign (Commonwealth) constitutional experts.
- 61 In Bari and Shuaib, *Constitution of Malaysia*, op. cit., p. 332.
- 62 Ibid., p. 333.
- 63 See K.J. John, "Integration with Integrity: The Identity Crisis (Pt. 5)", *Malaysiakini*, 22 May 2007 <<http://www.malaysiakini.com>> and K. Pragalath,

“Social Contract: Fantasy to Fiction”, *Malaysiakini*, 28 June 2008 <<http://www.malaysiakini.com>>.

⁶⁴ In Dato’ Dr Ismail Noor, “Building a Bangsa Malaysia — Challenges & Issues”, Centre for Public Policy Studies <<http://www.cpps.org.my>>.

⁶⁵ Hall, “Gramsci’s Relevance”, op. cit., p. 424 (emphasis added).

⁶⁶ Gomez, “UMNO Still Strong”, op. cit. <<http://www.malaysiakini.com>>. Despite its total number of seats having fallen after the recent elections, the fact that UMNO has emerged even more dominant within the BN coalition only serves to heighten such a possibility.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* This does not mean that the meaning and composition of the ‘rakyat’ or ‘people’ remains uncontested. However, use of the term does at least imply a more ethnically-neutral and inclusive basis for legitimate authority in Malaysia.

⁶⁸ Hall, “Gramsci’s Relevance”, op. cit., p. 427.