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# The New Media and Malaysian Politics in Historical Perspective

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*This essay is a critical examination of the ability of Malaysia's new media to promote political liberalization. Drawing on a historical approach to Malaysia's political development since independence, it argues that the political effects of the rise of Malaysia's new media are best understood as being parallel to those of modernization and socio-economic change from previous decades, which augured important changes in the political strategies of incumbent and opposition politicians, but did not upset the fundamental logic through which the Barisan Nasional (BN) regime has ruled since the 1970s. That logic of rule is closely attuned to Malaysia's cleavage structure, which centres on ethnicity and the economy and which has pervaded the country's politics since independence. Malaysia's new media — despite being far more open to critical voices than its establishment print and broadcast media — serve as venue in which more basic political conflicts are waged. Although Malaysia's 13th General Elections may spell further losses for the ruling BN, this essay argues that the rise of Malaysia's new media is unlikely to be responsible for political liberalization. Instead, liberalizing pressures are most likely to be effective when groups targeting democratic processes and procedures, thereby superseding Malaysia's cleavage politics.*

**Keywords:** Malaysia, democracy, modernization, media, technology.

Analysts of Malaysian politics since the 1970s have repeatedly anticipated how various socio-economic changes will foster a more democratic, accountable and representative political system.

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In previous decades, modernization and globalization were two key concerns. Today, technological change, most notably the rise of new media and Malaysia's vibrant online society, may augur well for political liberalization. Indeed, since mid-2007, political developments in Malaysia have suggested that political liberalization may be on the horizon. Empowered through technology, ordinary Malaysians, along with the country's official opposition, have together undermined the incumbent Barisan Nasional (BN) regime's organizational and informational advantages, which over time may render the political status quo unsustainable.

This essay argues that any predictions of political change as a result of the rise of Malaysia's new media are premature. Despite truly dramatic changes in Malaysian society — the consequences of modernization, globalization and technological development — the logic of political conflict in Malaysia has remained nearly identical from 1957 until today, and as a consequence the legal and rhetorical tools employed by the incumbent BN regime remain the same as well. Viewed in historical perspective, the basic cleavage structure[1] of Malaysian politics (a Malay/non-Malay cleavage overlaid by a class cleavage) looks strikingly similar to the cleavage structure at independence.

Malaysia's cleavage structure congealed amidst the political contestation preceding independence. Since then, the broader socio-economic context sustaining this cleavage structure has changed, but without upsetting this essential foundation for Malaysian political conflict. The identity of the "players" of Malaysian politics has changed over time, and I argue in this essay that the social, economic, and global political contexts surrounding Malaysian politics have changed in important ways that should not be ignored. But until either a particular individual or event, or a set of social or technological changes, can unsettle the fundamental logic of Malaysian politics, political change will be superficial, any overtures towards political liberalization will not be genuine, and crackdowns on the opposition will continue. Individual elites and important opposition groups may favour political liberalization, but Malaysia's political order will resist because incumbents do not want to reform the policies and institutions that sustain the BN.

This essay therefore interprets the rise of Malaysia's new media as having political consequences that are similar to those generated in previous decades by modernization and globalization. New media help to create new coalitions, place new challenges on the incumbent regime, and introduce new tactics for the political opposition, but

they do not themselves cause political liberalization. Theoretically, these conclusions fit well with existing research on the ambiguities of modernization in the newly industrialized economies of Southeast Asia[2]: despite the emancipatory potential of new technology in Malaysia, political change will most likely occur only after Malaysia's cleavage structure fractures. This argument is also consistent with general theories of democratization as an outcome driven by events rather than one driven by structural preconditions.[3]

After first presenting a brief overview of the origins of Malaysia's cleavage structure, this essay discusses the ways in which socio-economic change has shaped the ethnic and class cleavages that drive Malaysian politics, and in response, how Malaysia's political order has rearticulated these cleavages in ways that protect the existing political order. From there, it uses this historical perspective to interpret three recent political developments: the Hindraf rally of 2007, the March 2008 election, and the 2011 Bersih 2.0 rally. It concludes with an assessment of the prospects for meaningful political liberalization as a direct consequence of any sort of long-term socio-economic changes such as globalization, modernization or technological development. These shape only the tactics through which Malaysia's political actors contest, not the terms of political contestation. Meaningful political liberalization in Malaysia will not take place absent fundamental changes to Malaysia's cleavage structure itself.

## Political Cleavages and the Deep Structure of Malaysian Politics

Malaysia's cleavage structure centres on ethnicity and the economy. Nearly every political issue that has animated political oppositions and motivated incumbent elites over the past sixty years can be reduced to one of these two issues. They are linked in obvious ways.

The origins of Malaysia's political system are well known. Malaysia gained independence as a multi-ethnic state with relatively functional political institutions and a good foundation for economic development. Numerically, ethnic Malays are the largest ethnic group in Malaysia (comprising about 50 per cent of the population). At independence, an elite Malay aristocracy occupied the highest positions in politics, but most ethnic Malays were poor and rural, with little participation in the formal economy. In the local understanding, Malays did not "control" their share of the economy.[4] By comparison, members of the country's substantial ethnic Chinese minority (comprising about a third of the population

at independence) occupied a comparatively higher economic position, and therefore disproportionately "controlled" the Malaysian economy. A third group, denoted "Indians," comprising those immigrant communities and their descendants from the Indian subcontinent, were smaller numerically than both Malay and Chinese communities, but were held, like Chinese, to "control" a disproportionately large share of the Malaysian economy.

It is not certain if the majority of Malays held grievances against Chinese and Indian communities for their comparatively superior economic position at the moment of independence. But among many Malay elites, the issue of the disparity in wealth and control between "indigenous" Malays and "immigrant" Chinese and Indians proved a rallying principle through which to articulate a vision of a post-independence Malaysia in which they were accorded special privileges as part of a grand political bargain. These privileges were subsequently written into the country's constitution. It also led most of the country's largest political parties to form around exclusionary ethnic lines. Constitutional privileges, ethnic-based parties, and the numerical superiority of Malays as voters together ensured that the majority of Malaysia's governing elites would be ethnic Malays drawn from an explicitly Malay-based party whose platform at least partly rested on ethnic exclusionism.[5] Prior to 1969, a relatively moderate regime was led by elites from the Malay, Chinese and Indian communities who formed an alliance ("the Alliance") of the largest ethnic parties: the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). After a brief period of inter-ethnic violence following elections in May 1969, and two years of suspended parliament,[6] UMNO elites created the BN, which folded several additional parties into the coalition while further entrenching UMNO dominance.

Motivated by the interrelated pressures of Malay social grievances and economic stagnation that elites believed had motivated the 1969 riots, the new BN regime redoubled its efforts to establish a durable political order. To do this, the regime further politicized ethnicity to maintain control over its opponents, and used the economy to redistribute resources towards its supporters. The politicization of ethnicity means, at base, that no Malaysian may question (either in his words or as a consequence of his actions) the special rights accorded to *bumiputeras* — a term which designates Malays and other "indigenous" groups, and excludes Chinese and Indians.[7] With interethnic disparities in economic prosperity as their

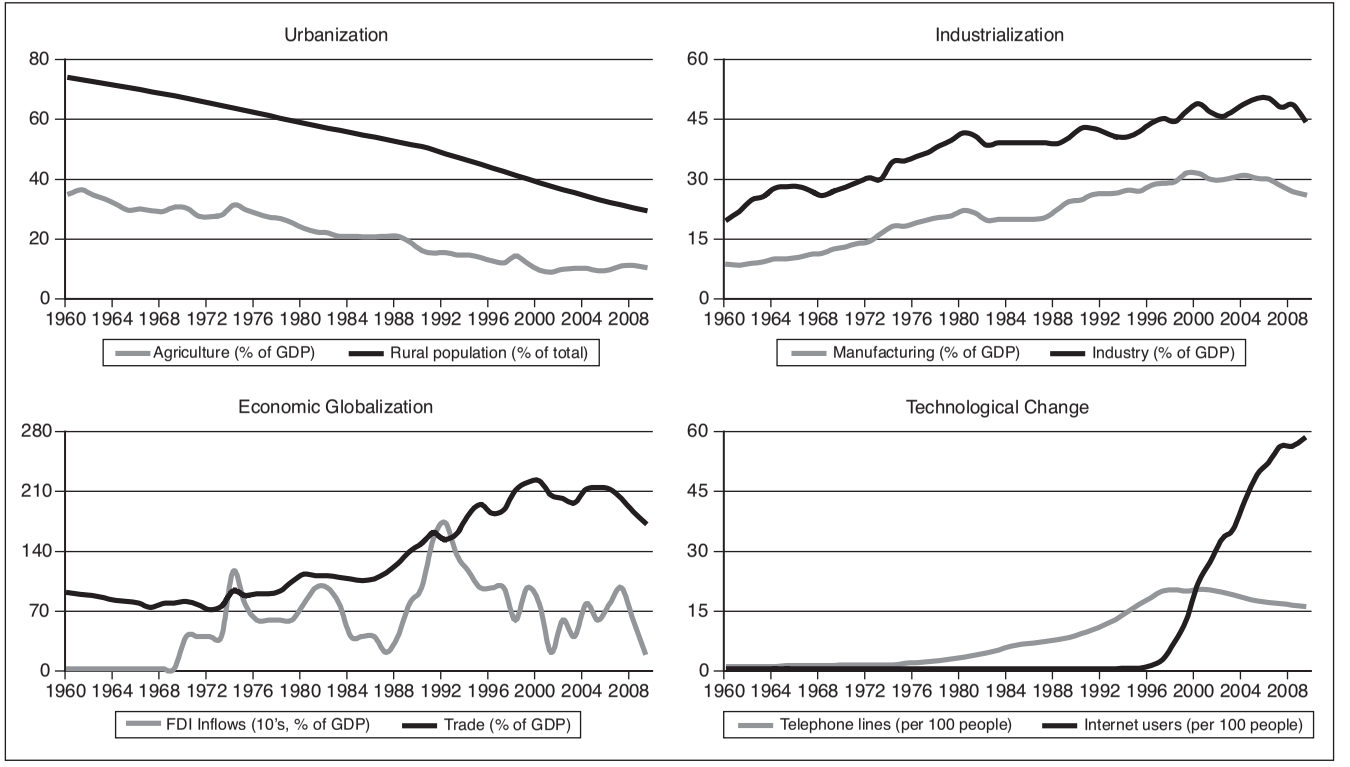
motivation, elites then built an economic system featuring a range of mechanisms to redress economic disparity across ethnic groups. This meant using economic policy to channel both money and opportunities to *bumiputeras*, with the goal of enabling them to participate in the formal economy and ultimately eliminating interethnic disparities in wealth. The key platform through which this was accomplished was the New Economic Policy (NEP, 1971–90),[8] which was superseded by the National Development Policy (NDP, 1990–2010) and later the New Economic Model (NEM, 2010-present). While the NDP and the NEM are on the surface different from the NEP, the essential economic policy and social policy frameworks developed under the NEP remain in place,[9] and many Malaysians today discuss the NEP as if it were still in force.

Beginning in the 1970s, three central planks of the NEP were the government management of equity investments on behalf of *bumiputeras*, government investment in *bumiputera*-run companies, and government owned enterprises that would employ *bumiputeras*.[10] These efforts transformed the Malaysian economy as well as Malaysian society, fostering the emergence of a new Malay business elite and a large Malay middle class. More importantly for the purposes of this essay, such policies also reified the ethnicity/economy cleavage in Malaysian politics: with economic policy now a tool for regime maintenance, and ethnicity the central driver of economic (and social) policy, ethnicity and the economy became inextricably linked the BN regime's political survival. Social and economic changes, in turn, shaped Malaysian political development by transforming the composition of UMNO and introducing new potential cleavages in Malaysian politics. Before addressing political developments, however, it is worth examining broader societal transformations in more detail.

## Globalization, Modernization and Technological Change

It is plain that Malaysia has undergone rapid and thoroughgoing socio-economic change since the 1950s. Globalization, modernization and technological change each have transformed Malaysia, meaning that Malaysia's society and the economy are far different than they were four decades ago, when the BN first emerged. This is easiest to observe by examining four concomitant processes: urbanization, industrialization, technological change and economic globalization. Malaysia's transformation along each of these since 1960 has been striking (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
**Economic and Social Change, 1960–2009**




*Source*: World Development Indicators.

By the close of the 2000s, Malaysia's society and economy looked very different than they did in 1960. Urbanization has more than halved the proportion of Malaysians living in rural areas, while industrialization has prompted a shift from an economy based on agriculture to one dominated by industry and manufacturing. Globalization — measured in economic terms — has integrated Malaysia with the rest of the world. And the spread of new communication technologies (first telephones, but more recently the internet) is indicative of the new ways in which Malaysians can interact with one another and with other global communities.

These social and economic changes mean that Malaysian politics has been forced to adapt to a new socio-economic reality.[11] Today, Malaysia has a large and relatively cosmopolitan Malay middle class. This middle class might be a force for liberalization, and many in this new middle class do indeed favour political change, but middle class Malays on the whole have not pressed for it.[12] Malaysia also has a new Malay "entrepreneurial" class whose rise is the direct consequence of the NEP's concerted efforts to create Malay capitalists.[13] Tied as these new economic elites are to the BN as the architect of the policies that enabled them to amass their wealth and economic power, it is less surprising that they have proven unwilling to upset Malaysia's political status quo. Nevertheless, these socio-economic changes mean that UMNO, founded as a grassroots, rural-based party with an active constituency comprised primarily of teachers and public servants,[14] has been forced to remake itself in a way that can accommodate the economic interests of a rising economic elite whose interests lie primarily in the urban economy.[15] These changes are not trivial, for they strike at the heart of what it means for UMNO to use the political system to advocate for Malay interests. Chinese elites in the MCA have adapted as well to a new socio-economic reality, one in which the party's supporters in the business community must compete with an active industrial policy that does not embrace their contribution to national development.[16] In recent years, some Chinese businesses have adopted new accommodative strategies that allow them to thrive within Malaysia's *bumiputera*-focused political economy,[17] thereby partially but not completely alleviating this tension.

Existing work has chronicled well such changes to Malaysia's society and economy and the ways in which the political system has responded. Comparatively less well understood are the political consequences of technological change, which over the

past fifteen years has led to the growth of diverse online news media and a vibrant online society.[18] Malaysia's political system must perform a delicate balancing act with regards to the media and politics. On the one hand, in the mid-1990s Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad seized upon the internet and information technology as a future growth sector, creating a "Multimedia Super Corridor" and establishing "high-tech" cities of Putrajaya and Cyberjaya.[19] The decision was made at that time not to regulate online communication, both because it was widely believed that censoring the internet would be impossible,[20] and to encourage innovation and investment in this sector.[21]

On the other hand, since independence, an integral weapon of the BN's arsenal has been the restriction of media freedoms to avoid exposing itself to criticism. This is accomplished through licensing regulations that allow the government to revoke the rights of any organization to publish printed materials, and also through the ownership or control of Malaysia's print and broadcast media by politicians and their corporate allies. The internet therefore presents journalists with the opportunity to create new forms of media that are beyond the ambit of state censorship and political control.[22] These allow professional journalists and ordinary citizens alike to not only report on Malaysian politics with a freedom that Malaysia's print and broadcast media have never had, but also to editorialize and debate politics from perspectives that have never been found in print or on television. The regime's efforts to establish wide internet usage among Malaysians, in turn, means that opposition sympathizers (and, indeed, the mass of apolitical Malaysians too) can now access political reporting that is far more independent than that found in the established media, and can debate current events while covering topics considered impermissible by existing regulations on political speech.

These changes deserve to be underscored. UMNO is not the party that it once was. Malays are not the ethnic group that they once were. Chinese political business does not operate the way it once did. The regime no longer has a monopoly on the media, nor does it have the same ability to shape the dominant narrative about political developments as they unfold that it once had. Today there are new potential cleavages that might compete with the ethnicity and class cleavages that animated Malaysian politics in the 1960s and 1970s. One might imagine cleavages between urban and rural Malaysians, between capital and labour, between industrial and post-industrial identities, or others. Many in Malaysia in fact strive

for such an alternative vision of Malaysian political contestation, and the influence of such configurations of interests are visible in civil society and in terms like "New Politics".[23]

Nevertheless, the deep structure Malaysian politics has not fundamentally changed. Instead, Malaysian political elites continue to fight battles which are similar to those that their parents (and, now, grandparents) fought, even as they use new tactics and respond to new kinds of social actors. Modernization, globalization and technological change mean that Malaysia's opposition is not the same as it once was. While middle class Malays have not turned against the BN as a class, the opposition now contains an urban middle class Malay element, and much of this opposition constituency has found a political voice through Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), something almost unthinkable thirty years ago. Opposition movements and NGOs since the mid-1990s are based around new issues, have made use of new technologies, and rely on new repertoires of contention.[24] Still, the fundamental terms of political debate — which reflect, in turn, the essential logic of Malaysian politics and the ethnicity and class cleavages that animate it — have not changed. Much as in 1971, politics centres around an ethnically-based incumbent regime that uses economic policy to reward supporters and punish opponents. Opposition politics centres around political parties that oppose the regime's ethnic particularism, the articulation of this particularism through social and economic policy, or both.

In fact, the real story of Malaysian political development is that the existing political order has proven so accommodating to socio-economic changes. UMNO has remained *primus inter pares* among Malaysian political parties despite periodic leadership tussles, two party splits (Semangat '46 and People's Justice Party [PKR]), the rise of the internet as a tool for opposition mobilization, two substantial economic crises (the mid-1980s crisis and the 1997–98 Asian Financial Crisis), state-led industrialization, crony-driven privatization,[25] and endless petty scandals implicating high and low politicians alike. All of these reflect the political challenges introduced by modernization, globalization and technological change. Fifteen years ago, William Case remarked on the surprising durability of UMNO's dominance as a party, and the strategies through which party leaders adapted to changing political circumstances in order to protect its position.[26] He argued that the BN has accomplished this by forcing its opponents to react to its own political message and rhetoric, creating selective alliances

with various oppositions (real and potential), and incentivizing a sufficient fraction of the Malaysian mass public to vote for it. Today one can tell a similar story.

Malaysian opposition politics is electoral, in the sense that all credible opposition movements believe that the way to unseat the BN is to defeat it at the polls.[27] UMNO and the BN respond accordingly — money politics and intimidation through the state's security apparatus are ultimately tools that BN elites deployed to ensure that elections go their way. Elections are normally not blatantly fraudulent, although irregularities are not uncommon.[28] Rather, the BN's advantages in funding and media access make electoral contestation so imbalanced as to prevent elections from approximating fair referenda among candidates.

Given its advantages in funding and media presence, the BN consistently relies on a single multi-faceted rhetorical strategy with five components. First, it promotes a Malay-based nationalism that equates opposition to Malay special privileges with sedition. Second, it reminds the public that the BN is multi-ethnic and nationalist — despite its domination by UMNO — and claims that no opposition party can play such a role in constructing a similarly representative multi-ethnic coalition. Third, it highlights the differences among the country's opposition parties, painting PAS and Democratic Action Party (DAP) as having nothing in common aside from a quest for power, and each as being too radical (although in different ways) for a moderate country like Malaysia anyway. Fourth, it champions the country's order and economic progress and argues that voting for the opposition would sacrifice both. Fifth, it characterizes individual politicians in the opposition as being (in various combinations) power-hungry, immoral, naïve and insane.

Rhetoric such as this offends many Malaysians and foreign observers alike, but it reflects so transparently the essence of Malaysian politics: reifying the dominant narratives of ethnic conflict and class antagonism. For its part, the opposition has historically found it difficult to transcend these cleavages because its two most popular parties connect with voters in ways that capture only one cleavage (ethnicity *or* the economy) and not both. As a social democratic party, the DAP offers a platform that may appeal to a large bloc of Malaysians on economic grounds, but it does so by threatening the primacy afforded to Malays in the economy. As an Islamist party, PAS can in principle appeal to all Malays on religious grounds, but it distinguishes itself from UMNO

by opposing Malay special privileges, which hinders its broader appeal, particularly among the most powerful Malay capitalists. BN elites have an easy time telling Malays that the DAP will threaten the economic progress that they have made, and they have an easy time telling non-Malays that Islam is a greater threat to their physical security than ethnicity is to their economic position. Over the past decade, the PKR has been the best hope for transcending these cleavages, but until now it has not been able to escape the personal politics of its founder, Anwar Ibrahim.[29] Critically, the problem that the opposition faces is not its inability to make its ideas known to Malaysians — Malaysia's new media allow the opposition to do just that. The problem is that the existing cleavage structure means that the opposition's ideas only resonate with a fraction of the constituency that the opposition needs to defeat the BN.

This argument does *not* mean that all Malaysians are satisfied with a political system dominated by UMNO that directs economic largesse to a favoured ethnic constituency in order to maintain political stability. It is also not that these cleavages explain all political outcomes in Malaysia, nor that there are no competing visions for a post-ethnic, post-class Malaysian political system. Indeed, the 2008 elections suggested to some that the old cleavages of ethnicity and class were finally eroding, and illustrated very clearly the frustration and disgust of many Malaysians with the BN and the system that it has created. Malaysia's political elites certainly do not take the existing cleavage structure for granted.[30] Still, events immediately prior to the 2008 political tsunami, and those that have followed, indicate that Malaysia's cleavage structure remains unchanged.

## Recent Developments

Three recent cases of political upheaval in Malaysia can illustrate the nature of political contestation and prospects for political change: the 2007 Hindraf rally,[31] the 2008 election[32] and Bersih 2.0.[33] The following are not designed to be authoritative reviews of these events. Rather, they are meant to illustrate the ways in which the objects of political contestation fit within the same framework of ethnic and class cleavages that has always defined Malaysian politics, despite the influence of Malaysia's new media on how they unfolded.

*Case 1: Hindraf*

Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) is a coalition of non-government organizations that advocates on behalf of Malaysia's (largely Hindu) Indian community. This community, numerically smaller and poorer than the larger Malay/*bumiputera* and Chinese communities, often finds itself marginalized from political discourse — in Malaysia's cleavage structure, it is the subaltern in both class and ethnic terms. Responding to the demolition of several Hindu temples alleged to have been constructed without appropriate permits by local governments in majority Malay areas, Hindraf led a rally in November 2007 whose consequences were familiar from decades of opposition politics: crackdown, arrest and dismissal by BN elites as little more than disorder. What makes the Hindraf rally different from previous rallies by Malaysian Indians and their supporters is that it presaged the mass rejection of the BN's Indian party by voters in the 2008 election.[34]

New media played an important role in helping to mobilize and organize Hindraf protestors, and provided all Malaysians with information about the Indian community's grievances that would not otherwise be available.[35] In terms of this argument, however, the Hindraf affair is familiar. Malaysia's disenfranchized Indians demanded redress to their central economic and social concerns. The proximate trigger was social policy (temple destruction) but the background conditions were longstanding economic grievances and social dislocation that proceed directly from the regime's focus on pro-*bumiputera* favouritism in economic and social policy. Confronted with the collapse of Indian support for the BN, the regime responded by investing in what it hopes may be a more responsive Indian party, the newly-registered Malaysia Makkal Sakthi Party (MMSP).[36] The party's first years have been tumultuous.[37] While there are seemingly no plans to fold this new party into the BN, many observers allege it to be merely a BN plant to confuse Hindraf supporters.[38] MMSP is best understood as a new experiment in managing Indian politics within the existing cleavage structure rather than as a challenge to that structure.

*Case 2: The 2008 Elections*

Retrospectives of the 2008 elections have called attention to its surprising result — denying the BN a two-thirds majority for the first time since 1969 — and its consequences for subsequent Malaysian

politics. Again, the internet (blogs and news sites in particular) played an important role in the 2008 elections and helping Malaysians to interpret the results.[39] What has not received such close attention is how the results of the election have been interpreted and further contested in its aftermath, with the opposition using new media tools to contest the same issues of ethnic favouritism and economic justice, and the regime responding with new variants on old themes (the aforementioned NEM, and Prime Minister Najib Razak's "1Malaysia" campaign).[40] Unlike the two most notable previous electoral challenges to the BN regime (1990 and 1999), the 2008 elections were not contested by a formal opposition coalition. The reason is that following the opposition Barisan Alternatif's disappointing showing 1999 and opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim's imprisonment, the DAP and PAS found themselves unable to unite on a common platform that could challenge the BN on class/ethnicity terms. Without Anwar, PKR's efforts to develop a post-class/ethnicity logic for political contestation were unsuccessful. Cross-party opposition politics therefore stalled, even as "cyber-networks" of activists and their fellow travellers persisted.[41] Opposition parties only formed a formal alliance in the wake of their surprising electoral success in 2008. Events, rather than long term socio-economic changes that demolished the existing cleavage structure, created the most politically coherent opposition coalition in Malaysia's history.

A penetrating analysis by Ong Kian Ming argues that this new formal opposition coalition (the Pakatan Rakyat, PR) is more likely to endure than its predecessors were.[42] But Ong is clear that this is not because ethnicity and economic policy have ceased to be important issues, nor because DAP/PAS/PKR politicians have found common ideological space (either within the ethnicity/class cleavage structure or as an alternative to it). Rather, the PR is more likely to endure than its predecessors because it has officially registered as an opposition coalition in the same fashion as the BN, making it easier to agree on how to divide constituencies among parties and to allocate campaign effort and resources at election time. These are tactical changes that may yet presage meaningful political change — the next general elections will be the key test — but in the meantime, the opposition and the regime confront one another under the same basic rhetorical framework of ethnicity and the economy that they have always used.

*Case 3: Bersih 2.0*

Shortly before the Hindraf rally in November 2007, a group of NGOs focused on electoral reform, known as Bersih (Malay for "clean"), held a rally in Kuala Lumpur. Like the Hindraf rally, the Bersih rally led to a police crackdown and arrests. In late spring 2011, Bersih organized a follow-up rally which came to be known as Bersih 2.0. This rally was not overtly tied to opposition politics, despite having been endorsed by the PR and its central message of reforming an electoral system that had returned the same incumbent coalition to power since independence. In Malaysia's new political climate, it also promised to be far larger. Bersih 2.0 was declared an illegal society prior to the rally, and the event itself led to the arrest of more than 1,600 protestors as well as a number of Bersih leaders.[43] It is hard to imagine Bersih 2.0 having occurred without either more overt opposition party support or the new media as a tool of organization and mobilization.

It is too early to evaluate what Bersih 2.0 means for Malaysian politics.[44] During the run-up to Bersih, however, the BN's rhetoric about the organization was predictable: the proposed rally was a threat to "peace".[45] UMNO Youth and Perkasa (a conservative pro-Malay rights organization with murky political affiliations) pledged that they would mount counter demonstrations on behalf of the country's *bumiputera* majority. After the rally and the arrests, Deputy Prime Minister Hishammuddin Hussein reported that his "worry over the likelihood of third-party interferences, including foreign associations, did not occur and had no chance to occur because of the police's diligence".[46] In all, the discourses surrounding the Bersih 2.0 rally are consistent with long-term trends in Malaysian politics as defined by ethnicity and the economy, even as new groups like Bersih 2.0 endeavour to change the contours of Malaysian politics by focusing on the institutions of Malaysian politics (such as elections) rather than the substantive policies implemented by the regime.

## Medium-Term Prospects for Political Liberalization

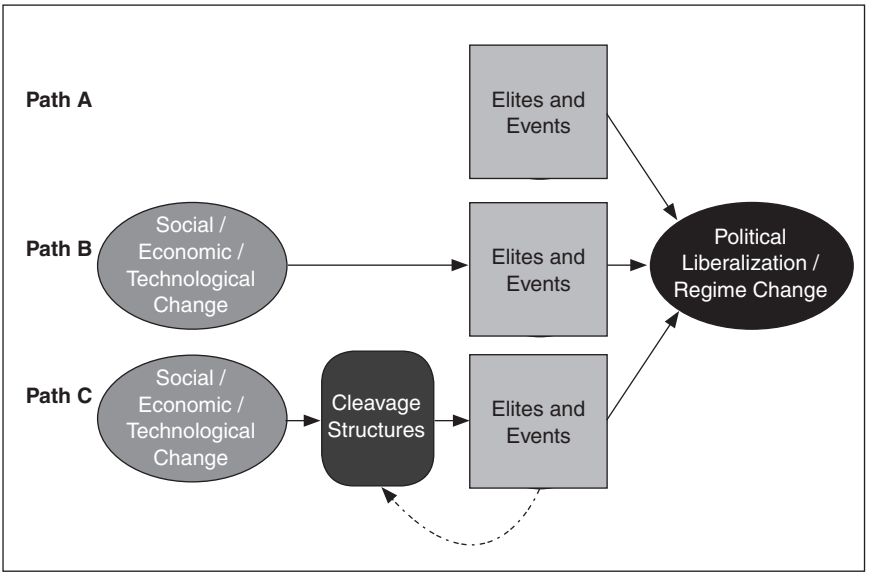
The implications of this argument are simple and straightforward. Over the past five decades, Malaysian politics has changed on the surface, with new actors, new interests and a new social and economic reality forcing the regime and its opponents to compete in new ways. State-led industrialization designed to nurture a new

Malay entrepreneurial class has given way to an uneasy public-private dual economy that is highly exposed to global markets. Middle class Malays worry about how to maintain their traditional identities in Malaysia's relatively cosmopolitan urban spaces. Most recently, the internet and the rise of Malaysia's new media have created a new virtual political space where regime opponents and sympathizers alike can share ideas, argue about politics, and organize themselves for political action in ways that were impossible only two decades ago. But at a deeper level, the objects of contestation — ethnicity and the economy — are the same as they were over fifty years ago. Political liberalization in Malaysia has been minimal, despite numerous events (the UMNO Baru saga, the Anwar Ibrahim affair, the March 8 political tsunami) that had the potential to become critical junctures for meaningful political opening or regime change. This is because the basic cleavage structure animating Malaysian politics has remained intact since the 1950s, the socio-economic and technological changes outlined in this article notwithstanding. This argument implies that political liberalization in Malaysia will come not directly from changes in Malaysia's society and economy — we have seen these in abundance, and the rise of new media is but the latest example. Rather, political liberalization will come from a collapse of Malaysia's deeper cleavage structure, something which has yet to occur.

Figure 2 helps to visualize this idea. The figure contains three ideal-typical theoretical pathways to political change. "Path A" focuses on agents and events as the drivers of political liberalization. Although this essay has not touched on such issues, it follows from the idea that meaningful political change would arrive if only "right politician" were to rise to national prominence.[47]

"Path B" has been the main focus of this essay. The supposition here is that social and economic change leads to political change (although elite action may be an intermediate step along the way). This essay argues that such a pathway is unlikely to generate political change; instead, political change will only arise out of the collapse of Malaysia's deeper cleavage structure, which itself will empower individuals (or generate particular events) that are the proximate sources of regime change. This is shown as "Path C". It is possible that if the fundamental contours of political contestation in Malaysia change, it will be because of accumulated social and economic changes. But I have illustrated ways in which the BN regime has accommodated modernization, globalization and technological change in order to avoid upsetting

Figure 2
**Three Paths to Political Liberalization**




Malaysia's basic cleavage structure. Social and economic change may someday produce a new Malaysian political order, but that will occur *if an only if* it changes the underlying cleavage structure of Malaysian politics. That may happen, or it may not.[48]

## Conclusion

A close reading of recent political developments in Malaysia finds that they do not signify any impending changes to the basic contours of the political cleavages that have long animated Malaysian politics. This could be wrong; it would be hard to demonstrate otherwise. What this argument does *not* dispute is the new energy with which new kinds of oppositions compete in new ways in Malaysia's newly competitive political arena. These new oppositions and their new tactics are a partial result of the socio-economic changes describe above: the rise of new communication technologies, urbanization, industrialization and global economic integration. But if the argument above is correct, these are not sufficient to generate political change. They also may not be

necessary. Economic crises, for example, can fracture the coalitions that support incumbent regimes,[49] an argument which suggests that socio-economic change is not necessarily the proximate factor that leads cleavage structures to collapse. A different kind of economic shock, for instance, could upset the basic contours of Malaysian politics independently of the broad socio-economic development outlined here.

This essay therefore paints a pessimistic vision of the prospects for meaningful political change in Malaysia, one that should sit uneasily with the desire among many Malaysians (and fellow travellers abroad) for a new, post-"ethnicity-and-class" politics. How, if cleavage structures are so entrenched, can activists further political reform?

Bersih 2.0 provides the template for advocacy for political liberalization, not because it represents a diverse community of regime critics but because its target is not the cleavage structure itself and the mechanisms through which it is reproduced, but rather the institutional rules of Malaysian politics. Rather than falling into the old pattern of competing over appeals to particular constituencies (where they are bound to fail as an anti-incumbent strategy), these advocates of political liberalization have shifted their focus to democratic processes and procedures. This is not a new narrative, but it is one that truly supersedes Malaysia's cleavage politics.

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[4] The meaning of "control" is quite opaque in the common Malaysian understanding. When the regime sets targets it normally uses indicators like share ownership in the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange to reflect ethnic "control" of the economy, but this is only one of many ways one might choose to measure control.

[5] This applies even to non-ethnically constituted parties, such as the opposition Democratic Action Party and the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party. The former is largely Chinese in membership, but its platform is social democratic. Its social democratic platform, though, forces it to question many of the ethnically-based policies that undergird the Malaysia's political system. The latter is Islamist, and explicitly *not* an ethnic party, but since Malays are by law Muslims and most non-Malays are not, the party's Islamist platform often collides with ethnic grievances.

[6] Goh Cheng Teik, *The May Thirteenth Incident and Democracy in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1971).

[7] It should be emphasized that all three of the commonly used ethnic categories (*bumiputera*, Chinese, Indian) lump together many different types of people, and obscure important differences within communities. For example, "indigeneity" is the hallmark of *bumiputera*-ism, but this means lumping together with Malays the highland peoples of the Malay peninsula, non-Malay Austronesian communities in Malaysian Borneo, Thais and Portuguese. This is deliberate, for it increases the *bumiputera* numerical advantage over Chinese and Indian communities.

[8] Just Faaland, Jack Parkinson and Rais Saniman, *Growth and Ethnic Inequality: Malaysia's New Economic Policy*, 2nd ed. (Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications & Distributors Sdn. Bhd., 2003).

[9] See, for example, O'Shannassy's description of how the NEM has been received under the 10th Malaysian Plan. Michael O'Shannassy, "Malaysia in 2010: Between a Rock and a Hard Place", *Asian Survey* 51, no. 1 (2011): 173–85, 179.

[10] Edmund Terence Gomez and Jomo K.S., *Malaysia's Political Economy: Politics, Patronage and Profits*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[11] For early analyses, see Harold Crouch, "Industrialization and Political Change", in *Transformation with Industrialization in Peninsular Malaysia*, edited by Harold Brookfield (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1994); Harold Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Robison and Goodman, *The New Rich in Asia*, op. cit..

[12] Abdul Rahman Embong, *State-Led Modernization and the New Middle Class in Malaysia* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002); Joel S. Kahn, "Growth, Economic Transformation, Culture and the Middle Classes in Malaysia", in Robison and Goodman, *The New Rich in Asia*, op. cit.

[13] Bruce Gale, *Politics and Public Enterprise in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya: Eastern Universities Press Sdn. Bhd., 1981); Edmund Terence Gomez, *Politics in Business: UMNO's Corporate Investments* (Kuala Lumpur: Forum, 1990); Gomez, *The State of Malaysia*, op. cit.; Gomez and Jomo, *Malaysia's Political Economy*, op. cit.; Peter Searle, *The Riddle of Malaysian Capitalism: Rent-Seekers or Real Capitalists?* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1999).

[14] N.J. Funston, *Malay Politics in Malaysia: A Study of the United Malays National Organisation and Party Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational Books, 1980); N.J. Funston, "The Mahathir Years: The Rural Malay Heartland", in *Reflections: The Mahathir Years*, edited by Bridget Welsh (Washington, D.C.: Southeast Asia Studies Program, The Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Johns Hopkins University, 2004).

[15] Jomo K.S. and E.T. Gomez, "The Malaysian Development Dilemma", in *Rents, Rent-Seeking and Economic Development: Theory and Evidence in Asia*, edited by Mushtaq H. Khan and Jomo K.S. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[16] Bruce Gale, *Politics & Business: A Study of Multi-Purpose Holdings Berhad* (Petaling Jaya: Eastern Universities Press (M) Sdn. Bhd., 1985).

[17] James V. Jesudason, "Chinese Business and Ethnic Equilibrium in Malaysia", *Development and Change* 28, no. 1 (1997): 119–41.

[18] For some early analyses, see Jason P. Abbott, "Democracy@Internet.Asia? The Challenges to the Emancipatory Potential of the Net: Lessons from China and Malaysia", *Third World Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (2001): 99–114; Jason P. Abbott, "The Internet, Reformasi and Democratisation in Malaysia", in Gomez, *The State of Malaysia*, op. cit.

[19] See Toby Huff, "Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor and Its First Crisis of Confidence", *Asian Journal of Social Science* 30, no. 2 (2002): 248–70.

[20] Cherian George, *Contentious Journalism and the Internet: Towards Democratic Discourse in Malaysia and Singapore* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2006), pp. 68–71.

[21] Abbott, "The Internet, Reformasi and Democratisation in Malaysia", op. cit., p. 82.

[22] George, *Contentious Journalism and the Internet,* op. cit.; Meredith L. Weiss, "Parsing the Power of 'New Media' in Malaysia", paper presented at the workshop "The Jasmine Revolution and the 'Bamboo' Firewall: The Impact of the Internet and New Social Media on Political Change in East Asia", Center for Asian Democracy, University of Louisville, 24–25 August 2011.

[23] On these issues, see Meredith L. Weiss, "Edging Toward a New Politics in Malaysia: Civil Society at the Gate?", *Asian Survey* 49, no. 5 (2009): 741–58; Kok Wah Loh, Francis and Johan Saravanamuttu, eds., *New Politics in Malaysia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003).

[24] Abbott, "The Internet, Reformasi and Democratisation in Malaysia", op. cit.; Meredith L. Weiss, *Protest and Possibilities: Civil Society and Coalitions for Political Change in Malaysia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Meredith L. Weiss and Sahila Hassan, eds., *Social Movements in Malaysia: From Moral Communities to NGOs* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003); Julian C.H. Lee et al., "Elections, Repertoires of Contention and Habitus in Four Civil

Society Engagements in Malaysia's 2008 General Election", *Social Movement Studies* 9, no. 3 (2010): 293–309.

25 Jomo, *Privatizing Malaysia*, op. cit.

26 William Case, "UMNO Paramountcy: A Report on Single-Party Dominance in Malaysia", *Party Politics* 2, no. 1 (1996): 115–27.

27 Or, as Anwar Ibrahim has tried to demonstrate on several occasions, through party-switching.

28 Edmund Terence Gomez, "Electoral Funding of General, State and Party Elections in Malaysia", *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 26, no. 1 (1996): 81–99.

29 See, Farish A. Noor, "PKR Elections: Anwar Strengthens His Hand", RSIS Commentary No. 165/2010, <http://hdl.handle.net/10220/6663>.

30 See O'Shannassy, "Malaysia in 2010", op. cit.

31 Susan Leong, "The Hindraf Saga: Media and Citizenship in Malaysia", in *Communication, Creativity and Global Citizenship: Refereed Proceedings of the Australian and New Zealand Communications Association Annual Conference*, edited by Terry Flew, Brisbane, 8–10 July 2009, <http://www.proceedings.anzca09.org, 2009>.

32 Thomas B. Pepinsky, "The 2008 Malaysian Elections: An End to Ethnic Politics?", *Journal of East Asian Studies* 9, no. 1 (2009): 87–120.

33 Bridget Welsh, "People Power in Malaysia: Bersih Rally and Its Aftermath", *Asia Pacific Bulletin* 128 (2011), <http://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/people-power-malaysia-bersih-rally-and-its-aftermath>.

34 Pepinsky, "The 2008 Malaysian Elections", op. cit.

35 Asha Rathina Pandi, "'Makkal Sakthi' (People's Power): Blogs, Civil Society and the 2007 Hindraf Protest Rally in Malaysia", paper presented at the workshop "The Jasmine Revolution and the 'Bamboo' Firewall: The Impact of the Internet and New Social Media on Political Change in East Asia", Center for Asian Democracy, University of Louisville, 24–25 August 2011.

36 *Makkal sakthi* is Tamil for "People's Power". This is a popular slogan for Malaysian Indians dissatisfied with their treatment in Malaysia today, and was particularly evident during the months surrounding the Hindraf rally.

37 James Chin, "Malaysia: The Rise of Najib and 1Malaysia", in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2010*, edited by Daljit Singh (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010), pp. 164–79, 169.

38 See e.g. *Malaysiakini*, 27 September 2009.

39 Weiss, "Parsing the Power of 'New Media' in Malaysia", op. cit.

40 Ong Kian Ming, "Malaysia in 2010: Resurgent Najib and BN, Stumbling Anwar and PR", in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2011*, edited by Daljit Singh (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011), pp. 131–57; O'Shannassy, "Malaysia in 2010: Between a Rock and a Hard Place", op. cit.

41 Khoo Boo Teik, "Cyber-networks, Physical Coalitions and Missing Links: Imagining and Realizing Dissent in Malaysia 1998–2008", *IDE Discussion Paper*, No. 244 (2010), <http://hdl.handle.net/2344/909>.

42 Ong Kian Ming, "Pakatan Rakyat: What is Different This Time?", *The Round Table* 99, no. 407 (2010): 141–52.

[43] *Malaysiakini*, 9 July 2011.

[44] For one early perspective, see Welsh, "People Power in Malaysia: Bersih Rally and Its Aftermath", op. cit.

[45] Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Ismail Omar instructed the Malaysian people not to take part in the Bersih 2.0 rally: "Do not do anything that will affect the country's peace. Most importantly, do not do something that will damage the country." "IGP says no again to talks with Bersih", *New Straits Times*, 4 July 2011.

[46] "Bersih Rally Lost Direction, says Hishammuddin", *The Malaysian Insider*, 9 July 2011.

[47] Among opponents to the BN, this has at times been associated with figures such as Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, Anwar Ibrahim, and (in the 1980s) Tunku Abdul Rahman.

[48] For a similar conclusion, see Jason P. Abbott, "Malaysia's Transitional Moment? Democratic Transition Theory and the Problem of Malaysian Exceptionalism", *South East Asia Research* 17, no. 2 (2009): 175–200.

[49] Thomas B. Pepinsky, *Economic Crises and the Breakdown of Authoritarian Regimes: Indonesia and Malaysia in Comparative Perspective* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009).