The Middle Class and Ethnic Identities in Malaysia: Transcending the Paradox of Malaysian-ness

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# Table of Contents

1. Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1
2. Identity Formation in Malaysia .................................................................................... 8
3. Modernisation Theory and the Middle Class ............................................................. 16
4. Methodology .................................................................................................................. 24
5. Enduring Ethnic Consciousness ................................................................................... 30
6. Transcending Ethnicity ................................................................................................ 37
7. Articulating Malaysian-ness: The Paradox of the Middle Class ................................. 43
8 Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 49
9 Bibliography .................................................................................................................... 52
10 Appendices ..................................................................................................................... 61

- Participation Information Sheet
- Interview Consent Form
- Interview Guide
- Interview Grid: Summary of Interview Notes
1. Introduction

On 28th March 2017, the Malaysian actress and celebrity Sarah Lian shared an Instagram post of a national school exam paper (https://www.facebook.com/imSarahLian/photos/a.180042060049.162621.39954720049/10155066055665050/?type=3&theater). This test required primary pupils to match pictures of places of worship, such as a church, mosque, Buddhist temple and Hindu temple, to a corresponding list of first names. In the ‘comments’ section of her Facebook page, another citizen shared a photo of a page from a national textbook that similarly required students to match pictures of four named children with a religion. Sarah Lian was outraged by this, as she saw it as a state strategy to indoctrinate children into absorbing narrow stereotypical identities. She railed against the idea that Malaysian children are being “reminded what box they fit in”. The post was shared multiple times, and a discussion ensued on whether such exam questions could be considered racist or not.

The outcry and debate over whether such stereotyping was accurate or even useful to teach to children sheds light on a shift in some Malaysians’ perception of their identity. Ethnicity is a prominent marker of identity in Malaysia, with the population classified as those considered indigenous, (known as bumiputeras, which translates to “sons of the soil”), and of whom the Malays are the majority; and then the Chinese and Indians. As evident from the test papers, religion too, is a significant marker of identity. In particular, there is an overlap between ethnicity and religion, where Malays are automatically conferred as Muslims and therefore assume an ethno-religious label, and as such the Malay ethnic identity has become synonymous with Islam. However, in line with the ideology of such nation-building development programmes such as Vision 2020 and 1Malaysia which propagate the notion of “universal citizenship as the primary marker of Malaysian identity” (Noor, 2013:90),

2This will be discussed in the chapter 2.
3 Vision 2020 was introduced by Prime Minister Mahathir in 1991 and aimed to make Malaysia a fully modernised country by 2020. One of the ways this was to be achieved was by overcoming ethnic divisions and establishing a united Malaysian nation. See http://www.isis.org.my/attachments/Vision%202020%20complete.pdf More recently, 1Malaysia was introduced in 2010 by current Prime Minster Najib Razak, and seeks to make Malaysia a harmonious, economically prosperous nation with a national sense of identity. See http://www.1malaysia.com.my/
there seems to be desire to move away from such ethnic and religious classifications of citizens to embrace a more “nationalist, inclusive, non-sectarian identity” (Noor, 2013:26). This can be seen in recent national elections, where the traditionally rigid voting patterns along ethnic lines has seen a reduced ethnic bias, especially the 2008 election (Brown, 2005; Holst, 2012; Lian & Appudari, 2011; Maznah, 2005; Moten, 2009; Noor, 2013). Observers have cited this shift as evidence of a sea change in Malaysians’ conception of their identity, as urban Malaysian citizens embrace a new, singular national identity.

However, the fact that these test papers were being used in national schools indicates incoherence in Malaysia’s state ideology. How can it advocate a universal, singular, non-sectarian notion of citizenship, and yet simultaneously promote ethno-religious profiling for school children? These contradictions are evident within the government too, as the Deputy Prime Minister Muhyuddin Yasin claimed to feel “an ethnic Malay first, and a Malaysian second” (Noor, 2013:98), which is at odds with the national vision of Malaysia promoted by the current 1Malaysia government programme.

Aim and Research Questions

My thesis aims to investigate these contradictory threads in the official state-sanctioned narrative by examining how identity is perceived and articulated by members of the Malaysian middle class. The middle class is often considered at the vanguard of social change (Hewison, Robison, all cited in Case, 2013:11; Huntington, cited in Case, 2013:13; Thompson, 2007), and the Bersih movement, which seeks to reform Malaysian politics, has inspired hundreds of Malaysians to take to the streets in protest.\(^4\) Indeed, observers have credited the Bersih movement as contributing to the recent shifting voting patterns in elections away from ethnic allegiances (Tong, 2016; Weiss, 2009; Welsh, 2011), though a multi-ethnic party has yet to successfully win an election, which indicates such striving for change is limited or restrained. What the movement does symbolise, though, is the potential for

\(^4\) Bersih, or the ‘Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections’, was formed in 2005 and describes itself as a civil society movement which seeks electoral change and good governance in Malaysia (Bersih 2.0, n.d). The middle class membership of Bersih will be discussed in chapter 3.
change, and a shift in discourse that moves beyond ethnicity to class (Rahman, 2007). I propose to examine the attitudes and impact of the Malaysian middle class in relation to transcending ethnic preoccupations and formulations of identity, by using the Bersih movement as a framework of analysis. However, I will not be investigating the Bersih movement per se, or evaluating how successful it has been in achieving its aims. Rather, I will investigate its symbolic meaning as an example of middle class political mobilisation, alongside attitudes from a sample of the Malay and Chinese Malaysian middle class, in an attempt to ascertain the processes at work and any potential shifts in perceptions of identity in Malaysia.

The Sarah Lian incident indicates that issues regarding race and ethnicity remain controversial and ever present in Malaysia, and in order to better understand any potential shifts in perceptions of identity, it is important firstly to understand the context and endurance of such ethnic categories of identity. This informs my first research question: *Why does ethnic consciousness endure in Malaysia?* The outcry and disgust generated by citizens in response to the questions in the national test papers indicates that there may be a change in attitudes towards ethnic identification, in a quest for a more universal, non-ethnically defined national identity, which leads to my second research question: *Is the emergence of a new Middle Class fostering class solidarity that transcends ethnic consciousness?* And if so, a third research question will be explored: *What conceptions of a new national identity are formulated to replace ethnic categorisation?*

I hope to provide possible reasons why ethnic identification remains so stubborn in Malaysia, and to examine how the possibility of middle class affiliation offers an alternative way of imagining identity by transcending previous ethno-religious classifications, and moving to a sense of universal citizenship. This has implications on how Malaysian society will develop, either by compounding the existing distinction between groups based on ethnicity and influenced by Islam, or with a potential shift away from these previous ethno-religious categories towards a more fluid, encompassing ‘Malaysian’ identity.

This positions my thesis in the extensive research already conducted on identity politics. There have been calls to move away from ethnic analyses into Malaysian society, as the persistent focus on race can be seen to perpetuate a discourse
anchored in ethnic framings of identity, and therefore denies alternative possibilities of imagining citizenship and society (Holst, 2012; Mandal, 2003). However, as Rahman points out, Malaysia is the only country to have an official discourse based on ‘race’ (2009), and the outcry about the exam questions on ethno-religious stereotypes indicates that this cannot be dismissed from any analysis of Malaysian society or politics. In addition, the role of class and wealth inequality has not featured much in the socio-political literature of Malaysia (Khalid, 2014:22), and my research locates itself in the juncture between race and class. In formulating a new sense of national identity, my research is also positioned in the current debates and theories about forms of citizenship. In order to better orientate my research within these streams, I will elaborate on them below.

Identity as Belonging

An abundance of scholarly work has been produced on identity. Brubaker and Cooper claim the term is overemployed, and advocate abandoning the concept altogether due to its outwardly essential and knowable, but internally ambiguous and contradictory nature (2000). The convoluted and tired attempts to fix identity as a useful analytical category are raised by Stuart Hall in his essay “Who Needs Identity?” (1996). Hall concludes, however, that “the question, and the theorization, of identity is a matter of considerable political significance” (1996:16), and this means it cannot be dismissed or glossed over. Therefore, in attempting to formulate a useful definition of identity, current debates are increasingly specifying the concept of belonging as a useful framework of analysis (Jones & Kryzanowski, 2008:40). Croucher defines the ‘politics of belonging’ as referring to “the process of individuals, groups, societies and polities defining, negotiating, promoting, rejecting, violating and transcending the boundaries of identities and belonging” (2003:41), and I am interested in these processes in the Malaysian context. More specifically, belonging denotes an emotional attachment and the feeling of being at home (Yuval-Davis, 2011:10); it goes to the core of what is essentially meant by identity, and accommodates a range of attachments, subject feelings, preferences and memberships, including how the ‘banal, mundane’ ways of belonging are expressed (Billig, cited in Jones & Kryzanowski, 2008:42). This makes it a useful lens of
analysis for my research, which centres on individuals’ personal attitudes and observations about their sense of belonging in Malaysian society, and how they position themselves and others in relation to existing collectives or communities (Jones & Kryzanowski, 2008:44). It is the conception of identity as relational, as conceived of by Malaysians at both a micro and macro-level, which is salient to my research.

The ‘Blood’ versus Social Constructivism Debate

Race and ethnicity are commonly ascribed features of identity, and there is a substantial literature devoted to analyzing these concepts (Holst, 2012:6), especially when discussing Malaysia. Scholars have traditionally distinguished between the meaning of ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ as the former being a biological concept with origins in colonial pseudo-science (Mandal, 2003:52), whilst ethnicity has tended to replace it as a modern term used to describe observable, potentially constructed differences between people (Hirschman, 2004:410). However, in Bahasa Malay, the word bangsa is used to denote both race and ethnicity (Holst, 2012:1), and therefore I will use them flexibly for the purpose of my thesis. In addition, two key, albeit contentious notions of ethnic identification are germane to my research as they relate to how Malaysians potentially conceive of themselves: primordial and situationalist conceptions of ethnic identification. Primordial explanations conceive of ethnicity as a fixed, essential identity that is recognisable by physical and genetic attributes such as skin colour, blood ties, as well as cultural attributes such as language and religion (Chee, 2010:4), and this conception has its roots in early anthropological studies. This contrasts with post-structural, situationalist conceptions of ethnic identity, which are viewed as socially constructed and contingent, and are therefore flexible and shifting. More recent scholarship posits the compatibility of both conceptions (Brown, 2003:6; Ratcliffe, 2004:30, Shamsul, 1996), and I will argue that in the case of Malaysia, both conceptions have political currency.

5 As well as nation, state, tribe, community or group (Leow, 2016:189)
The potential formulation of a new sense of belonging based on more universalistic norms instead of ethnic ones locates my research in the current debates on citizenship theory. Scholars have observed that the type of citizenship practiced in Southeast Asia varies to that in European societies and that there is a need for research to examine the specific context and conditions of the region in order to gain a better understanding of this (Berenschot et al., 2016; Embong, 2001). Indeed, many normative concepts such as ‘citizenship’ or ‘democracy’ have grounding in European scholarship, but this is not to say that they should exclusively be defined within such parametres, especially when applied to other regions with their own histories and political processes. An example of this can be seen in the arguments of the Malaysian scholar, Fadlulah Jamel, who argues that such supposedly ‘Western’ concepts such as ‘citizenship’ have a grounding in Islamic texts (Kloos & Berenschot, 2016:192). The point here is not to debate the legitimacy of his claims, but rather to acknowledge the possibility of new conceptions of citizenship that originate from different contexts. Rather than providing a definition of citizenship against which Malaysia’s middle class can be measured, I advocate Berenschot et al.’s advice to “re-examine the normative connotations inherent in our conceptualization of the citizenship ideal...[by starting] from the everyday state-citizen interactions rather than abstract idealized forms” (2016:4). Indeed, Shotter claims that the “basis of citizenship must be located in the everyday, social life, as this is where feelings are” (1993:131), and this ties the notion of belonging as the essence of identity to the grander, formal notion of citizenship. In recognising that the postcolonial Malaysian state has developed along its own particular set of historical and social conditions, my research strives to make inferences based on citizens’ experiences and observations, alongside historical contextualisation.

However, I will present a general observation regarding the nature of citizenship in Southeast Asia. Whilst European models of citizenship are centred on impersonal, neutral and supposedly equal interactions between citizens and the state, in Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, there is a greater emphasis on personal, clientalistic relationships, which foregrounds identity as a key determinate of access to rights and benefits (Berenschot et al., 2016:18). This will be seen in my research
in the form of ‘differentiated citizenship’, which is the result of ethnically defined economic policies and political systems.

Outline

My thesis will firstly give the background to the construction of an ethnic system of organisation in Malaysia, with its roots in colonial categorisations and then as part of a post-independence nation-building strategy (chapter 2). Then, it will examine the construction of the middle class in Malaysia, particularly the ‘New Malay’ middle class, which is the product of affirmative action and differentiated citizenship. I will analyse this development within the framework of modernisation theory, which asserts that the rise of a middle class produces an increased drive for democracy, and with this, a shift away from ethnic or communal group structures towards an ideal, national sense of identity; an attitude that is embodied by the Bersih civil society movement (chapter 3). In analysing this development within the framework of modernisation theory, I do not mean to suggest a teleological view of development, which imposes a Eurocentric ideal of citizenship onto the Malaysian experience. Rather, in using modernisation theory as a starting point, I feel it is useful to compare and understand how, where and why the Malaysian experience might diverge from the course plotted by European development, and propose to do this by generating data based on citizen interactions and opinions. In chapter 4, I describe my approach to this research, where I use interviews with six Malaysians as well as survey results to gain an insight into middle class attitudes towards ethnicity, class and the potential for change in Malaysia. I present and discuss my findings in chapters 5, 6 and 7, where each chapter corresponds to a research question. Finally, in my conclusion, I address my research questions and discuss what implications, if any, this has on Malaysia’s future nature-building project.
2. Identity Formation in Malaysia

In order to evaluate potential shifts in grassroots attitudes towards the traditional ethno-religious organising principles of Malaysian society, we need first to understand the origin of the persistent emphasis on ethnic categorisation; to view it in its historical context, as this has had significant implications on identity-politics and nation-building in Malaysian society today.

Colonial Identity Formation: The Making of ‘Race’

“‘Race…has been very much a state project’.

(Mandal, 2003:54)

Substantial historical literature has already been devoted to locating Malaysia’s current racial classifications in its colonial origins:

“Almost every writer who addresses the “race problem” or the “plural society” of Peninsular Malaysia suggests the roots of contemporary ethnic divisions and antagonisms were formed during the colonial era” (Hirschman, 1986:331).

Although scholars disagree on the impact of colonial classifications, with some claiming these classifications were passively received and internalised by colonial subjects (Derichs cited in Haque, 2003:244; Pannu, 2011), whilst others resent this simplifying and the lack of agency it implies (Ashcroft, 1989; Cooper, 2005), there is consensus that the colonial regime officialised racial categories, and that this has a legacy in modern Malaysia: if it did not wholly create them, it at least “reinforced an ethnic-centred construction of identity” (Nah, 2003:516).

Prior to European colonialism, Southeast Asia was already heavily engaged in trade and commerce, as it was strategically located between India and China. Port cities like Melaka were well established by the seventeenth century, and as a result there was a thriving cosmopolitanism amongst the commercial class:
“...foreign merchants were constantly being incorporated into local society through the medium of marriage and adoption of local language and dress norms” (Reid, 2015:92).

This is supported by Hirschman, who does not deny there was ethnic conflict and segregation in pre-colonial times, but claims there was more acculturation and acceptance of differences, and the potential for more cross-mingling (Hirschman, 1986:356; 1995:29).

European expansion and domination of the region brought about increased racial awareness and suspicion. In British Malaya in the nineteenth and twentieth century, large numbers of Chinese and Indians were brought in to build up a cheap labor force (Cheah, 2009:35; Hirschman 1986:356; Khoo, 2009:14). The British imported notions of ‘race’ and racial superiority based on Social Darwinism, which encouraged the measurement and classification of ‘races’ on a supposed scientific basis. Racial hierarchy was viewed as natural and measurable, and such ethnic labelling was further reified by the introduction of the first comprehensive census in 1891, which listed the various Asian categories of races as: ‘Chinese’, ‘Malays & other’, ‘Tamils & other’, and ‘Other Nationalities’ (Hirschman, 1987:571). However, the fluidity of the concept of ‘race’ is evident by the changing categories in subsequent censuses (Hirschman, 1987), which indicates the arbitrariness and constructed concept of ‘race’.

Nevertheless, the colonial census persisted in attempting to quantify, classify and ‘fix’ identities (Anderson, 2004:166). Many scholars argue that such racial classifications were introduced as a deliberate means of controlling the population by the British:

“The manner in which they sought to establish their control was to categorize this new social world in terms that would allow for the establishment for the effective establishment of their administration” (Pannu, 2011:44).

As a result, ethnic-based legislation which dealt with each group separately was introduced (Nah, 2003:516), and communities that might have mingled and merged were now officially segregated along racial lines (Hirschman, 1986:353). This
fostered mutual suspicion between the groups, and could be seen to exemplify the
renowned ‘divide and rule’ strategy of the British (Holst, 2012:84).

In fixing identity, characteristics and capacities of each race were ascribed. This is
illustrated in Alatas’ influential work *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, which draws on
centuries of colonial sources to show the construction of these racial categories, and
how they have a direct legacy on Malaysian society today (cited in Lian, 1997:62).
The production of knowledge by the coloniser is evident from a colonial guidebook
for British officers: *The Handbook of Malaya* (German, 1935:342). The section
entitled ‘Population’ describes the inhabitants, and it appears after the chapter on
‘Flora and Fauna’ and before “Geography and Minerals”, indicating how people were
classified in the same way as plants and wildlife, and illustrates the As well as
focusing on origins, physical descriptions and habits, this source emphasises the
character traits of the Malays as lazy: “…the Malay has doubtless much to learn in
respect of the value of concentrated effort and firmness of purpose” yet also as
possessing “innate cheerfulness” (1935:31). In contrast, colonial sources determine
the Chinese characteristics as industrious, displaying “extraordinary determination
and perseverance” (Hirschman, 1986:346), but greedy: “…wherever there is money
to be made, you can be sure that the Chinaman is not far away” (Wright and Reid,
cited in Hirschman, 1986:346). As many were brought to Malaya by the colonial
administration, they were viewed as temporary residents (Hirschman, 1986:353),
whilst the Malays were considered indigenous and therefore more ‘legitimate’
members. These colonial classifications in Malaysia formed stereotypes based on
‘race’ (Jesudason, 2001:67; Nair, 2009:86), as well as determining the level of
legitimacy of each race within the state. This has left a residue in postcolonial
Malaysia.

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6 Interestingly, Hirschman observes that there was a lack of such character descriptions in earlier
colonial sources (Hirschman, 1986:342).
Postcolonial Identity Formation: Enduring Ethnic Consciousness

“Malaysia is a nation of ethnics rather than a nation of citizens”

(Ong, 2009:476)

Since independence, ethnicity has still been used as a marker of identity in Malaysia: socially, politically and economically. It is reified through the population census, which continues to reflect primordial classifications of ‘race’. In the most recent census, the Chinese and Indians are each still classified as a homogenous, monolithic group, whilst the Malays have been subsumed under the broader banner of ‘bumiputera’ (Population Distribution, 2011). This merging of the previously labelled ‘aboriginal’ races with the Malays into one category on the basis of indigenity emphasises their legitimacy, whilst continuing to position the Chinese and Indians as non-natives.

Furthermore, the position of these groups has been administratively defined and officialised in the Malaysian Constitution, which privileges the bumiputeras, especially the Malays, whilst recognising ‘peripherally’ the rights and status of other ethnic groups (Balasubramaniam, 2007:37; Shamsul, 1996:483). Key tenets of being ‘Malay’ were sanctified as the normative national identity, so that Bahasa Malay was chosen as the official and national language (Malaysia: Federal Constitution, 1957:Article 152.1); Islam was adopted as the official state religion (Malaysia: Federal Constitution, 1957:Article 3.1); and the rights and special position of Malays and other bumiputeras were specified and protected:

“it shall be the responsibility….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” (Malaysia: Federal Constitution 1957:Article 153.1).

All of these officially enshrined tenets cemented the ethnic differences between the groups, separating the indigenous or ‘native’ citizens from the ‘non-native’ ones, and furthermore, positioning them into a hierarchy of belonging based on indigenity.
An Ethnocratic State

However, the most significant way ethnic separation has been consolidated and reinforced in post-independence Malaysia is by its unique, racially defined political system, which underpins the entire society: “the formation of the state itself is largely founded upon ethnic politics and characterized as an “ethnocratic state” “ (Haque, 2003:240). On negotiating independence for Malaysia, the British initially proposed a constitution that integrated the Chinese and Indians into a single Malaysian polity (Omar, 2009:45), thereby not recognising the difference between Malay and non-Malay groups, and conferring equal citizenship rights to the non-Malays (Pietsch & Clark, 2014:307). However, this was rejected by the Malay nationalists, who feared Chinese and non-Malay domination, and sought to have their indigenity recognised (Cheah, 2002:2; Neo, 2006:96). The resulting political system since the 1950s has been a coalition between three ethnically defined parties (Neo, 2006:95): the United Malays Organisation (UMNO); the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysia Indian Congress (MIC), of which UMNO is the dominant (Balasubramaniam, 2007:37), and has shaped the postcolonial political landscape. This party, the Barisan Nasional (BN), has been in power continuously since independence, having won every election. This communal system is indicative of the notion that people are primarily defined and united by their ethnic background, and the BN mobilises its support along ethnic lines (Mandal, 2003:64), which serves to perpetually reinforce ethnicity in Malaysian society (Tan, 2012:6).

Religion and Ethnicity: Islam as Consolidating Malayness

Although a secular state, Islam has played an increasingly important role in identity-politics in Malaysia (Kortteinen, cited in Pietsch & Clarke, 2014:312). There is evidence that religion was a significant marker of identity in pre-colonial times (Anderson, 2004), but during British colonialisation religion lost its primacy as ‘race’ became the governing marker of identity. This was maintained after independence, as evidenced by the census and Constitution. However, religion, and specifically Islam, has become an increasingly significant marker of Malay and national identity:
“Since the 1980s... religious identity appears to have replaced ethnicity as the central element of nation identity as the society has been systematically...Islamised” (Bar & Govindasamy, 2010:93).

This is visible by the rising popularity of Islamic dress, Islamic schools and universities, the establishment of Shari’ah judicial courts, and the introduction of Islamic banking (Abbott & Gregorios-Pippas, 2010; Noor, 2013), and the rise of Islamist parties such as Parti al-Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), which has compelled UMNO to adopt a more Islamic platform in order to secure the Malay vote (Noor, 2013:91), even resulting in Prime Minister Mahathir boldly declaring that Malaysia was an Islamic State in 2002.

This can be attributed to part of the wider global trend of Islamisation as a reaction to the neoliberal, capitalist, developmental model followed by many postcolonial states (Noor, 2013:91), but in the Malaysian context it is also tied into the notion of ‘Malayness’. The original markers of ‘Malayness’ were language, religion and adit (local customs), as cited in the Constitution: “Malay” is defined as “a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom” (Malaysia: Federal Constitution, 1957:Article 160). However, language and customs have been eroded by urbanisation and globalisation and no longer uniquely serve to identify Malayness (Neo, 2014:766), therefore leaving Islam as the main marker of Malay identity.

This shift to religiosity has consolidated the Malay identity and made it synonymous with being a Muslim. Indeed, all Malays are born Muslims, and cannot change their religion (Neo, 2006:96; Pietsch & Clark, 2014:306). The synonymity of Malay ethnicity with Islam is evident in the Islamic conversion ceremony, which is referred to as ‘Masuk Malay’: literally to become a Muslim is to ‘enter into becoming a Malay’, and illustrates the interchangeability of ethnicity with religion (Tan, 2000:451; Holst, 2012:107). Converting to Islam, along with adoption of the Malay language and customs, is sufficient to qualify for the ethnic label of ‘Malay’ (Hirschman, 1987:555). Islam is therefore a vital, though not usually sufficient, ingredient to obtaining the Malay ethnic label. Whilst the increased prominence of Islam has complicated identity-politics in Malaysia, it serves to consolidate the Malay ethnic identity, rather than to supplant it. Ethnicity can still be seen to be a more prominent marker of
identity than religion in Malaysia, and continues to position other non-Muslim, non-Malay citizens as deviations from the essential national identity.

The New Economic Policy (NEP)

One of the most startling ways the postcolonial government has cemented ethnic consciousness is through the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP). This policy, and its modified successor the New Development Plan (NDP), implements and endorses affirmative action for the Malays and other bumiputera, to the exclusion of the Chinese and Indian Malaysian citizens. Initially conceived as a 30-year plan, it still endures today, and has had a huge impact on the socioeconomic and cultural development of Malaysia and its citizens.

The rationale for such a policy was a reaction to the May 1969 race riots between ethnic Malays and Chinese, following the street celebrations of the success of the Chinese Alliance party in gaining a majority of seats in the recent elections. This led to the interpretation that economic disparity led to ethnic violence, and the NEP was conceived as a strategy to redress the economic inequality between the Chinese and the Malays. Specifically, its two goals were to restructure the economy to eliminate inequality and eradicate poverty (Ratuva, 2013:197; Torii, 1997:212), by introducing restrictions on non-bumiputera in employment, education and corporate ownership, thereby lifting up

“the economic positions of the bumiputera, and particularly the Malays at its core, whose economic positions were historically inferior, to bring them abreast of Chinese and other ethnic groups in Malaysia” (Torii, 1997:212).

This has led to it being labelled as the “Malay-first” policy by some analysts (Horii cited in Torii, 1997:210), and although it might not have eliminated inequality or completely eradicated poverty, it has been successful in reducing overall poverty (Khalid, 2014:2; Ratuva, 2013:217).7

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7 There have been debates about the reliability of data (see Jomo, 2004:19), but according to Khalid (2014:92) and Ratuva, (2013:200) the overall poverty level dropped from ~49.3% in 1970 to ~16% by 1990.
The programme was justified as a solution to inherited ethnic disparity, which had its origins in colonial capitalism (Torii, 1997:196). Under British colonialism, there was an ethnic division of labour whereby each ethnic group was designated a particular function:

“The occupation of the Malay is…agricultural and…fishing…the Chinese form the bulk of the trading, shopkeeping and labouring classes… the Tamils, Telugus and Malayalis who migrate to Malay are of the labouring class” (German, 1935:32).

Therefore, the impact of colonial structuring according to race and occupation has endured in postcolonial Malaysia, as the NEP justifies the preferential treatment of indigenous groups in an attempt to engineer an equal society and ensure peace and stability, thereby producing differentiated citizenship. Additionally, the persistent focus on ethnicity as criteria for potential rights, allocations and economic advancements, ensures ethnicity remains a potent marker of identity in Malaysia, just as it was under British colonialism.
3. Modernisation Theory and The Middle Class

In this chapter, I outline modernisation theory which predicts that democracy and a sense of universal citizenship is cultivated by the middle class as a result of economic development. I then focus specifically on some general characteristics of the Malaysian middle class, and discuss two groups within this class: the New Malays and the Chinese, and the impact the NEP has had on their development and position in Malaysian society. Finally, I present the Bersih movement as an example of Malaysian middle class activism that is potentially pushing back against the constraints of authority-imposed ethnic identification.

Modernisation Theory

A significant American theory of the emergence of a middle class developed in the 1950s-60s, and asserts that with increased economic development and urbanisation, a middle class develops that will have universalistic concerns and seek democracy. This theory aligns modernisation alongside democracy, with a resulting focus on human rights and greater civic participation from the middle class (Case, 2013:12; Chong, 2005a:47, Embong, 2001:15). The reasons for this are due to globalisation and capitalist processes, whereby social relations are intensified globally due to the compression of time and space as a result of modernisation and technology (Giddens, in Salleh, 2000:146). As a result of economic development and increased wealth, people assume a more transnational identity (Gabriel, 2016) as they are exposed to the English language as a lingua franca, might have an overseas education or at least travel abroad, and increasingly share consumer habits and lifestyle aspirations (Chong, 2005b:578). As well as exhibiting capitalist concerns, it is assumed that the middle class in developing countries will also adopt an appetite for liberal democracy, and alongside this, an increased concern for universal citizenship and human rights, moving away from family or tribal allegiances.

This modernisation theory has its origins in the 1950’s in the work of Lipset (1959), and Rostow (1960). However, it has had a recent revival moving away from its teleological, paternalistic, structural nature of analysis to a more agency-centred analysis that acknowledges that modernisation does not automatically guarantee
democracy, but results in ‘social and cultural changes that make democracy increasingly probable’ (Inglehart and Welzel, 2010:6). The civil protest movements in Southeast Asia, such as the ‘People’s Power’ revolution in the Philippines in 1986, the ‘Black May’ protests in Thailand in 1992, the Fall of the New Order in Indonesia in 1998, and more recently the Bersih movement in Malaysia, can be seen as exemplify modernisation theory, and in all these cases, it was mainly the middle class citizens of these countries that pushed for democratic change.

However, many of these movements have not resulted in significant changes, resulting in ‘pseudo-democracies’ or ‘semi-democracies’ (Holst, 2012:62; Thompson, 2007:1), characterised by voting in parliamentary elections but with severe restrictions on media, gerrymandering, vote buying and the de-legitimisation of opposition parties. Observers and theorists have become somewhat disappointed with the lack of sustained effort by the middle class in insisting on durable change and genuine democracy in these movements (Kessler, 2001:36). Adherents to modernisation theory often view it as essential that the middle class, as well as being a consumer class engaged in capitalist processes, should simultaneously exemplify a thirst for democracy. However, the Southeast Asian middle class, including the Malaysian middle class, does not seem to adhere to both aspects of the theory, as envisioned by their common combination of traditionalism and modernisation. This is encapsulated by the ‘Asian Values’ theory, exemplified very successfully by Singapore and extolled by its late Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, which posits that a Confucian ethos prioritising collectivity and harmony is conducive to economic growth.

**New Middle Class in Southeast Asia**

The ‘Middle Class’ can be defined according to a number of criteria: income, occupation, education, lifestyle and consumer choices, accent, and aspirations depending on the analytical focus. What is generally understood is that they are in the middle: in-between the elites and the poor. For economic analysis, particularly for cross-country comparisons, class is measured in either absolute or relative terms related to average income (Who’s in the Middle?, 2009). Although this might be the most concrete way to define class as it is quantifiable, other scholars grounded in the
social sciences reject this empiricist-objectivist approach, claiming such concreteness is a fallacy (Parsons, cited in Kessler, 2001:32), and in simplifying the concept obscures the true nature of it. Thompson’s groundbreaking work adopted the view that class was not so much a structure, but a relationship, and focused on class-consciousness and individuals (Thompson, 1963). This makes class much more difficult to define or measure: Kessler points out the futility in trying to objectively ‘fix’ a definition of class as it is a dynamic social process that is ‘contingent, emergent, fluctuating, and not historically given’ (2001:33). As my research focuses on class as a social phenomenon, and in particular on individuals’ class-consciousness as it pertains to their sense of identity, no single definition of class will be offered, as this would be unhelpful and limiting. Rather, what is germane to my research is the characteristic of class as a ‘bounded phenomenon’, which similarly to ethnicity, operates as a marker of identity (Stockwell, 1982), determining who is included and excluded, and what allegiances are forged.

There is a general acceptance that Malaysia has obtained a significant middle class through rapid economic development, whether this is measured by urbanization (Saravanamuttu, 2001), car and television ownership (Crouch, 1984), consumerist predilections and lifestyles (Saravanamuttu, 2009), employment categories (Embong, 1998) or income/consumption patterns (Key Indicators for Asia and the Pacific, 2010). However, what is also recognised is that there is a persistent rural-urban gap (Khalid, 2014:xiv), and that the lowest economic groups tend to be the Malays and other bumiputeras (Rahman, 2009:429). This is despite more than 40 years of affirmative action through the NEP and NDP, and is generally attributed to corruption, cronyism and poor implementation (Khalid, 2013:147; Milne, 1986:1373; Ratuva, 2013:212).
The NEP as Differentiated Citizenship

“The fact of the matter is that inequality in Malaysia remains as much about race as it is about class”. (Khalid, 2013:xiv)

The New Malays

One of the aims of the NEP was to create a bumiputera middle class, specifically a Malay middle class, and this can be seen to have been achieved by the creation of the Melayu Baru class (New Malays ⁸) (Chong, 2005a:50; Ratuva, 2013:201; Tan, 2012:7). Data indicates that this new class is a successful product of state engineering and the NEP, as bumiputera equity ownership increased from 1.5% in 1969 to 19.4% in 2006 (Gomez, 2009 cited in Ratuva, 2013), and bumiputeras working in white-collar professions increased from 4.9% in 1970 to 38.8% in 2005 (Gomez, 2009 and Lee et al., 2010, both cited in Ratuva, 2013). Indeed, most government and statutory positions are dominated by bumiputeras (Tan, 2012:7). The emergence of this group was a specific goal of Prime Minister Mahathir in his Vision 2020 nation-building programme, and was seen to symbolise Malaysia’s transformation into a modern nation, as well as progress towards equalising economic disparity between the Chinese and Malays.

Chong discusses the complexities of offering a rigid, precise definition of the New Malays (2005b) and summarises the various interpretations by scholars. Under conventional class theory analysis, the New Malays can be viewed as a capitalist class, embedded in the global capitalist system, in conjunction with Robison and Goodman’s definition of Asia’s ‘new rich’ (cited in Chong, 2005b:578). They are considered to be cosmopolitan, possessing English language skills, able to study and travel overseas, and therefore possess increasingly global cultural and consumption tastes (Chong, 2005b:578). ⁹ In terms of occupation, they are “professionals, managers, executives, skilled technicians… [and] corporate elites”

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⁸ They are considered to be a ‘new’ class as they emerged from the rapid industrialisation and economic transformation of postcolonial Malaysia, and specifically from the benefits of the NEP. This contrasts with the pre-NEP Malay elite as described by Shamsul, as these were the Malay feudal and aristocratic class (Shamsul, 1999).

⁹ However, the Malays and bumiputeras also make up the majority of poor Malaysians (Khalid, 2014).
(Chong, 2005b:580), with Shamsul arguing that political elites should also be included (1999:92). All of these characteristics imply a shift towards the global and transnational and therefore, a potential shift away from an ethnic, communal identity.

The notion that the New Malays are not bound by ethnicity is promoted by Saravanamuttu, who claims that the new class-consciousness “carves out a discursive space that goes well beyond ethnic and communal issues” (2001:116). Other observers echo this sentiment: “[the New Malay] is not hung up on parochial, provincial issues like race and entitlements and finds his place in the world” (Asiaweek, cited in Chong, 2005b:573). In no longer being bound by ethnicity and seeking a more cosmopolitan, universal identity, and additionally being secure in having attained a middle class status, there is an implication that the New Malays potentially reject ethnically assigned entitlements and state benefits as epitomised by the NEP.

Mahathir’s description of the New Malays as “modern, educated, disciplined, hard-working, competitive” (Lian, 1997:74) locates them as an urban group, in contrast to rural Malays. This signifies a departure from the stereotype of the ‘lazy Malay’; a colonial determination that continues to have currency as exemplified in Mathathir’s book *The Malay Dilemma* (1970), where he criticises the passive, lazy characteristics of the Malays and seeks to create an entrepreneurial, dynamic Malay class. Whether the New Malays can be seen to be entrepreneurial or competitive is debatable, having been nurtured by state benefits and quotas. However, what is significant is that despite being the product of such benefits, there is evidence that the New Malays are seeking an alternative, non-ethnic based system of rights and benefits based on an idea of non-differentiated citizenship.

**The Non-Malays: Chinese Malaysians**

As the NEP was established in reaction to the perceived threat of Chinese economic and political domination, the impact of the policy on this segment of Malaysian society is important. In terms of economic gain, Chinese Malaysians have not completely lost their dominance despite the NEP restrictions (Crouch, 2001:241; Khalid, 2014:92; Ratuva, 2013:216). This is generally accounted for by the rapid growth and development of Malaysia (Crouch, 2001:239), though a culturalist argument is sometimes still cited, whereby the natural business acumen,
industriousness and strong familial ties of the Chinese has ensured their continued economic success, especially in diaspora communities (Harrell, 1985; Hofstede and Bond, 1988; Redding, 1990). In addition, some Chinese Malaysians have developed ‘by-pass’ strategies to the NEP, such as the Malay-Chinese ‘Ali-Baba’ business arrangement whereby a Chinese Malaysian, unable to obtain a license for a business, runs the business and pays a Malay who has the license. These agreements are perceived to benefit both parties, but result in the Malay earning money from running a business without acquiring any business acumen, feeding into the ‘lazy Malay’ and ‘industrious Chinese’ ethnic stereotypes. Another strategy employed by the Chinese is pointed out by Khalid, who claims the Chinese impose discriminatory hiring practices such as insisting on Mandarin language skills to ensure Chinese Malaysian employment (2014:144). Indeed, some scholars have argued that the NEP has greatly benefitted the Chinese Malaysians (Ye, 2003), or at the very least, has not harmed their economic prospects (Hwang and Sadiq, 2010). Therefore, it cannot be claimed that the NEP has lowered their socio-economic status significantly, although the rise of the New Malay middle class has meant they have to contend with an economically powerful group that is also politically dominant.

In terms of political representation and citizenship, there is evidence that Chinese Malaysians feel like second-class citizens. This is characterised by mistrust in the government, as well as inadequate political representation (Sin, 2015; Pietsch & Clark, 2014; Tan, 2001). In terms of personal identification, research conducted by Sin and Lindstrand with Chinese Malaysian interviewees reveals that they feel a sense of national identity with Malaysia, but that their ethnic identity is imposed onto them by the state and serves to exclude them from being accepted as a full citizen in the way that the Malays and other bumiputeras are (Lindstrand, 2016:38; Sin, 2015). The centrality of Muslim-Malay indiginenity in Malaysia’s nationalist narrative positions the Malays as ‘organically Malaysian’ (Gabriel, 2014:1215), whilst excluding the Chinese Malaysians who have limited or ‘constrained’ citizenship (Esman, cited in Tan, 2001:958). Therefore, there is both an actual and perceived differentiation of citizenship in Malaysia, with the Malays and other bumiputeras enjoying full citizenship and access to rights, and the Chinese, Indians and other supposed ‘non-indigenous’ groups only possessing some of their citizenship rights (Tan, 2012:6).


Bersih: the Emergence of a Middle Class Movement

“Social movements such as Bersih rallies play an important part in engaging the Malaysian public in political issues, which in turn has an effect on the construction of national identity.” (Lindstrand, 2016:33).

Bersih, or the ‘Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections’ describes itself as a civil society movement which seeks electoral change and good governance in Malaysia. The Malay word means ‘clean’, and the organisation is comprised of various non-governmental organisations (94 according to the latest update on their website), who are united in their goals for democratic reform, seeking to improve transparency and accountability in politics, eliminate corruption, improve the electoral process and allow a free media (http://www.bersih.org/about/8demands/). It was initially conceived of as the Joint Action Committee for Electoral Reform in 2005, but was officially launched in November 2006 as a coalition of civil society organisations, NGOs and opposition political leaders, and issued a communiqué in Parliament that demanded electoral change. This culminated in its first rally in November 2007 ahead of the 2008 elections, where an estimated 30 – 40,000 protesters took to the streets in Kuala Lumpur (What you need to know about Malaysia’s Bersih movement, 2015), all wearing the distinctive yellow t-shirts that have come to symbolise the movement: “the colour for citizen actions and people’s power worldwide” (Bersih 2.0, n.d.). After this rally, the official name of the movement was changed to Bersih 2.0, and it declared itself a non-partisan movement: not affiliated to any political party.

Since that first rally, there have been four more rallies over the course of nine years: the second was the march ‘Walk for Democracy’ in July 2011; the third ‘Sit In’ rally in April 2012 ahead of the 2013 general elections; the fourth ‘Bersih 4’ in August 2015 in response to the billion dollar corruption scandal involving the Prime Minister Najib Razak (1MDB); and the fifth ‘Bersih 5’ in November 2016. Many of these rallies were characterised by police violence such as the use of tear gas and water cannons to disperse the crowds, and citizen arrests, and there has been an increasing
authoritarian clamp-down by the government, resulting in increasing difficulties to obtain the right to peaceful protest, and the arrest of key people such as the chairperson, Maria Chin Abdullah, in the last Bersih 5 protest.

A unifying characteristic of the Berish protesters seems to be class affiliation, and it has been categorised as a largely middle class affair (Yeoh, 2015; Höller-Fam, 2015). This is seen in the organisation’s use of English in its communication: during Bersih 3.0 press statements were first given in English instead of Bahasa Malay (Höller-Fam, 2015). In addition, the extensive and effective use of social media by Berish and its supporters also locates it as a middle class movement. The middle class component of the Bersih movement is also highlighted when compared to the opposition anti-Bersih red-shirt protest group, which materialised in explicit opposition to the Bersih 4.0 rally. Unlike Bersih, its members are a much more homogenous group made up of the Malay rural class. The red-shirt protesters have been dismissed as being Malay chauvinists employed by the UMNO party as part of its strategy to maintain power by heightening ethnic divisions (Azlee, 2016; Lourdesamy, 2015; Miller, 2017), and the evidence that they are poorer Malays serves to highlight the wealth and middle class origins of the Malays who joined Bersih.

The participation of these New Malays, alongside Chinese and Indians Malaysians in the Bersih movement, can be seen to be evidence of a burgeoning civic-mindedness amongst Malaysians, as not only did they exercise their democratic rights to peaceful protest, but Bersih’s demands are for better governance and genuine democracy. However, the failure to translate these ideals into a victory for an opposition multi-ethnic party in recent elections indicates that such middle class solidarity is a limited force. Nevertheless, Bersih can be seen as both a manifestation of new middle class values and ideals in Malaysian society, as well as the site for such articulations to be negotiated.

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10 For more information on the role social media played in mobilising Bersih participation and activism, see Lim, 2016.
11 The red and yellow colour scheme of protesters marks out which camp they belong to, with red-shirts being associated with the rural poor, and yellow-shirts worn by the educated middle class. This similarly applies to the two protest movements orientated around the Shinawatra family in Thailand between 2006-2014.
4. Methodology

Research Design

My research aims to investigate whether the new middle class in Malaysia, especially the New Malay middle class, is demonstrating a shift in perceptions of identity away from an ethno-centric focus. In particular, I am examining if the possibility of class affiliation is transcending previous ethnic affiliations, in line with modernisation theory which predicts a shift away from ethnic, tribal and kinship attachments towards a more universal, singular sense of identity which prioritises a sense of equal citizenship.

My thesis is an attempt to understand not only the extent of change in Malaysian society, but also interpret the reasons for such changes, and any potential limitations. Therefore, it employs an interpretivist approach, which acknowledges that the results cannot be generalised as it is contingent on subjective viewpoints and attitudes, as well as my interpretation of this in the role of researcher. As I am interested in the phenomenon of identity categorisation and people’s attitudes towards it, I gathered qualitative data based on both primary and secondary data: I conducted six semi-structured interviews which forms the original research basis of my investigation, and also compared it with three survey results conducted by the Merdeka Centre: Public Opinion on Ethnic Relations (2006); Malaysian Political Values Survey (2010); and Perceptions Towards Bersih 4 Rally (2015).

Whilst surveys allow access to a broader sample of data, I chose to use interviews as the primary tool of investigation in order to gain more detailed responses. This was particularly necessary considering the dense, thorny nature of my research, and allowed the space for nuance and clarification. In then combining these interviews with data from official survey results, I used a triangulation method of data collection to analyse my research questions, which allowed me to gain a fuller, richer and more comprehensive account of the processes at work (Cohen et al., 2000). It also improves the validity of my research, as I was able to compare information and attitudes expressed by my small sample of respondents with earlier attitudes of Malaysians as expressed in the surveys. This allowed me to gain a level of both
depth and breadth, as I was able to establish how my respondents' attitudes fit into the wider context of Malaysian attitudes.

**Primary Data: Interviews**

Much of the data collected for this thesis was based on telephone interviews with six Malaysians conducted between September – December 2017. I conducted semi-structured interviews, as this allowed some freedom for participants to discuss the topics that were most important and relevant for them, whilst ensuring a minimal level of consistency in the topics discussed, as well as avoiding tangential information. The questions were theme-based as follows: Background and Biography; Ethno-Religious groups; Class and NEP; Political Engagement and Identity and Belonging. Rather than exclusively focusing on class and ethnicity, my questions also explored the political situation in Malaysia, as well as perceptions of Bersih, as these issues are all inter-connected, and allowed participants to discuss the issues in the wider context of identity and politics in Malaysia.

The interviews were conducted at times suggested by the participants when they were at home, and were conducted on the telephone using whatsapp, as this was their preferred method of communication. I spent approximately 90-120 minutes speaking with each participant, as this allowed me to establish a rapport with the participants and check they were comfortable before discussing the questions in depth. I needed to follow-up again with three participants to get fuller responses or clarification on certain points.

**Sampling**

As I sought to investigate the beliefs and attitudes of the middle class in Malaysia, and in particular the New Malays, the participants were selected using purposive sampling. This ensured that I was engaging with a representative sample of the demographic under investigation. I found the participants via established contacts in Malaysia, and all the participants fit the criteria of being middle class Malaysians: university educated, white-collar professionals, and except for one, they had all travelled or studied abroad. They were aged mostly in their mid-30’s, except for one older respondent. They were all male, and either Malay, Chinese Malaysian or

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12 See *Interview Guide*, appendices.
mixed-race (Chinese and bumiputera) who were from, or had lived in, urban centres in West Malaysia. More detailed information on the participants is presented below.

The Interviewees

Below is an overview of the six interviewees, focusing on biographical details.\textsuperscript{13}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>1. Chuck</th>
<th>2. Alan</th>
<th>3. Freddie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From</td>
<td>KL</td>
<td>Selangor, West Malaysia</td>
<td>Melaka; studied in the UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>Malay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job</td>
<td>Quantity Surveyor for Singaporean firm</td>
<td>Deputy Head and Chemistry Secondary School Teacher in Sabah</td>
<td>Contractor in civil construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages</td>
<td>English, Malay, Mandarin</td>
<td>English, Malay</td>
<td>Malay, English, Mandarin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra</td>
<td>Has been living in Singapore for 7 years</td>
<td>Born in Singapore, moved to Selangor when 12 years old</td>
<td>Has a Chinese wife who converted to Islam; their children are Malay Muslims.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>4. Alex</th>
<th>5. Dan</th>
<th>6. Frank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From</td>
<td>Sabah, went to school in KL and studied and worked in the UK</td>
<td>Born in Sabah, studied, lived and worked in Johor Bahru since 2005</td>
<td>Sabah, spent 5 years living and studying in West Malaysia (Penang and KL) and studied in the UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Sino-Kadazahn</td>
<td>Javanese</td>
<td>Sino-Dusun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job</td>
<td>Travel Agent, has own business</td>
<td>Associate trainer for off-shore oil rigs</td>
<td>Project Manager in own construction company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages</td>
<td>English, Malay, Mandarin, Cantonese</td>
<td>Malay; English; Bajua; Javanese; Mandarin</td>
<td>Malay, English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra</td>
<td>Father is Chinese Malaysian, from Johor Bahru</td>
<td>Parents from Indonesia (Java)</td>
<td>Grandfather on father’s side came from China</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{13} See Interview Grid, appendices.
Secondary Data: Merdeka Center Reports

My interviews were supported by research from three survey reports conducted by the Merdeka Center for Opinion Research between 2006 - 2015 (available at http://www.merdeka.org/pages/02_research.html). This organisation conducts telephone surveys with randomly selected Malaysian citizens in order to gauge public opinion on pertinent issues, with the aim of supplying policy makers and leaders with this information. These reports gathered data from a wide sample of the population (1000-3000 participants), all of whom were over the age of 20 years old and came from a range of backgrounds and states in Western Malaysia. In all three surveys, respondents were found through a stratified sampling method along ethnic, gender and age. In two surveys (Perceptions Towards Bersih 4 Rally and Malaysian Political Values Survey), a complete respondent profile breakdown is provided, which shows that the Malays were the most interviewed ethnic group (over 50%), followed by the Chinese. There is an even split between male and female respondent participation, and the income ranged from less than 1,500 MR to more than 5,000 MR per month.

- **Public Opinion on Ethnic Relations (2006)**

This is the earliest survey, and focuses on establishing attitudes towards and perceptions on ethnic relations in Malaysia, as well as gauging future expectations on the development of ethnic relations in Malaysia.

- **Malaysian Political Values Survey (2010)**

This survey focused on determining which issues united and divided Malaysians, such as the state of the economy, the government, affirmative action, ethnic relations and a sense of national unity. Some questions were directed only at Malay and bumiputera participants (e.g. affirmative action and national integrity), whilst one question was only for non-Malays/non-Muslims (belief in the 1Malaysia programme).

- **Perceptions Towards Bersih 4 Rally (2015)**

This survey focussed exclusively on ascertaining citizens’ perceptions of the fourth Bersih rally in 2015.
Sources

I have chosen to restrict my research to English sources only, as despite Malay being the official language, English “is the dominant second language and is used for a variety of functions in professional and social transactions not only with the international community but also within the society” (Lindsay & Tan, 2003:93). Furthermore, the developments discussed in this thesis deal with identity-formation amongst different ethno-linguistic groups (Malays and Chinese), and English serves as a neutral mode of communication for these groups. This is evident by the Merdeka Center reports being published in English, and the interviews were also conducted in English as this was a language that all participants felt comfortable using.

Other sources used in my research underpin the background and theoretical framework (chapters 2 and 3). These rely on government documents such as the Population Census (Population Distribution, 2011) and the Malaysian Constitution (Malaysia: Federal Constitution, 1957), as well as the historical source: Handbook to British Malaya (German, 1935), to locate current events in a wider historical context. In addition, as I am examining a contemporary phenomenon, I draw on international and local online newspapers and websites such as Malaysiakini, The Sun Daily, New Mandala, The Straits Times, The Economist and Asian Correspondent, as well as the Bersih website.

Ethical Considerations

Due to the potentially sensitive nature of the topics to be discussed, an information sheet\textsuperscript{14} was supplied to the interviewees before participating, which explained the goal and nature of my research. In this way, they were given sufficient information before deciding whether to participate or not. Only one candidate refused to participate after reading this. To ensure consent from them, I also provided a consent form,\textsuperscript{15} which they each read and signed. On this form, the option to remain anonymous was given, and whilst some of them chose to waive this right, I decided

\textsuperscript{14} See appendices.
\textsuperscript{15} See appendices.
to change all their names to ensure confidentiality. I also made it clear to them that they could stop the interview at any time, or refuse to answer a question.

**Research Limitations**

Due to the interpretivist nature of my research, my findings are not applicable to the entire population, or even the entire middle class. Only a small sample of people were interviewed, and even though this was supplemented with survey data that sampled a much larger sector of the population, all the data generated is not conclusive. Rather, it gives an insight into the processes, attitudes and beliefs at work.

As my research is focusing on ethnic identity in West Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak are not addressed, as these semi-autonomous states have a different context. However, three interviewees are originally from Sabah, yet they have all spent considerable time living, studying or working in West Malaysia, which means they have first-hand experience and insight into the nature of relationships and structures there. In addition, I have not interviewed any Indian Malaysians, but have rather focused on Malays (as the dominant ethnic group in Malaysia) and the Chinese Malaysians (as the dominant economic business group), as it is between these two groups that historically ethnic tensions and resentment have arisen on the basis of economic inequality (Khalid, 2014:7). I acknowledge, however, that the Indian demographic is generally neglected in research into Malaysia, and there is a need for their voices to be represented more. Similarly, whilst I tried to recruit women to interview, none were willing to participate, and therefore all the interviewees are male.
5. Enduring Ethnic Consciousness

There seems to be a prevailing ethnic consciousness in Malaysia that has been internalised by its citizens, even the more cosmopolitan, well-travelled middle class. This has implications both on their perception of their position in society and sense of belonging, and also in the way they behave and treat each other.

The Inviolability of Race

Malaysians still seem to adhere to racial stereotypes: that Malays are lazy and the Chinese are greedy. This is reflected in the survey results of the *Ethnic Relations* Merdeka Center report, where over 50% of Chinese and Malays agreed with these stereotypes, even when it applied to their own ethnic group (2006:20). The interviewees also articulated these stereotypes, though most of them assigned the causes as to the mechanisms of the NEP rather than to any primordial racial characteristics: “It has made the Malays complacent because they know they always have a portion for themselves, and don’t appreciate the opportunity.” (Freddie), and:

“Malays are quite lazy, even with the bumiputera advantage. They sell their licence to the Chinese, so they get money without working. This is really common. It’s bad for them, as they are not helping their own race. The reason it worries me is that it encourages laziness which is bad for the economy.” (Dan)

One interviewee even described the division of labour between ethnic groups, which harks back to the colonial ethnic division of labour: “Most billionaires are Chinese Malaysians (from raw materials: sugar, paper industry). Indian billionaires are in telecommunications. All the races don’t do the same to be rich.” (Freddie)

Therefore, it can be seen that racial stereotypes that were formed under colonial conditions have been maintained, and are reproduced by the NEP which encourages the Malays and bumipiteras to be less competitive, thereby producing group characteristics based on race. It is striking how the conceptions or ethnicity articulated by my interviewees echo colonial constructions of race in British Malaya: that the Malays are lazy and the Chinese are greedy, which Holst explains as the result of the postcolonial government borrowing and maintaining oversimplified
colonial categorisations of race (2012), and the example of racial profiling in
government textbooks highlighted by Sarah Lian indicates that the state is actively
involved in disseminating such notions of race. This can be seen as a continued form
of indigenous colonialism by the postcolonial government (Fanon, 1963). Whilst not
necessarily being the result of elite machinations to maintain their power, it is evident
that these markers of identity have been internalised, in line with Alatas’ theory of the
‘captive mind’ (cited in Rahman, 2009:433), where colonial assumptions and
knowledge have been absorbed by the postcolonial subject, keeping them trapped in
rigid colonial structures of control and dominance.

All the interviewees identified the three main ethnic groups in West Malaysia as:
Malays, Chinese and Indians. When asked how to identity them, they all indicated
that it was easy due to physical characteristics, language and cultural aspects such
as dress and food: “Different cultures such as clothes: the Indians wear saris, the
Chinese the cheongsam. Also the way they eat: Malays with their hands, the
Chinese with chopsticks” (Alan). Most emphasised physical appearance as being the
most prominent marker: “Can differentiate by face first – appearance. That is the
main thing and easy to recognise from this” (Dan), and “It is obvious by their skin
colour, by their look. This is the most obvious way to notice….[also] food, they eat
different traditional food. The way you dress up, Malay Muslims women wear a hijab”
(Freddie).

They all felt these markers of difference were tangible and identifiable, though Frank
acknowledged the ambiguity of these markers of identity: “If they are mixed it’s
harder to know. For example a Chinese-Indian baby (Chindian) looks a lot like a
Malay so it’s hard to tell” (Frank). Freddie, having insisted that religion can be
changed but ethnicity cannot, went on to describe how his mother, an ethnic
Chinese, has a Malay identity:

“My Dad is a Malay, my mum is ethnically Chinese but was adopted by a
Malay family at birth….My mum was registered as a Malay, but she looks
totally Chinese. But her language, culture, that’s all Malay….she has Chinese
blood but all the rest are Malay.”

In addition, his wife is Chinese, but his children are categorised as Malays, despite
being of mixed Malay and Chinese descent, as is the case for Frank’s sister’s
children. Frank and Alex point out how Indonesians and Filipinos are offered citizenship and a Malay identity: “Our deputy PM is originally from Indonesia and can even still speak Javanese, but he is identified as a Malay” (Frank), and: “In Sabah, Filipinos were given citizenship and a Malay identity to bolster the Malay vote…it’s the same with Indonesians” (Alex). This shows the fluidity of racial categorisations, and in particular the expansion of the dominant Malay-Muslim identity.16

Despite evidence of the arbitrariness of these ethnic categorisations, overall all interviewees seemed to conceive of ethnicity as tangible and inviolable, rather than as constructed and fluid: they are attached to a primordial concept of race, even when observing situations where supposedly rigid markers of ethnicity have been shown to be flexible or arbitrary amongst peers or family members. They refuse to adopt a situationalist concept of identity which would account for this flexibility, thereby also rejecting the notion that identity is constructed and shaped by external factors. Instead, they tend to be committed to an idea of ethnicity as a fixed and quantifiable entity. Scott points out that so long as ethnicity is conceived of and felt in these terms, then it will continue to have a significant impact on social relations and society (cited in Chee, 2010:6). Making a comparison with Anderson’s notion of a nation being an imagined community: just because race and ethnic categorisations are imagined, does not mean they do not exist or have a tangible impact on society: being constructed and arbitrary does not make them inconsequential. Therefore, instead of nullifying the effects of ethnicity in Malaysian society, such primordial perceptions reify and preserve ethnicity as a significant marker of identity.

**Ethnic Segregation**

Malaysians tend to socialise and mix only in formal environments, and otherwise remain ethnically segregated. All interviewees stated that different ethnic groups only tend to mix in formal or professional contexts: “…At work they are forced to mix and work together, but socially they can choose and they tend to stick to their own.” (Chuck); “They only meet in formal environments, and after go back home to practice their own culture.” (Alan); and “During working time they mix together with no problem. But the social part - having a tea, coffee, it is rare” (Dan). Interestingly, three participants indicated that there used to be more social mixing between ethnic

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16 For more details on this process, see Afzal, 2017.
groups in the 1960s and 1970s: “In my school days, everyone mingled and there was no polarisation. During festivals everyone celebrated and paid a visit to each other’s homes” (Alan), and:

“My father said back in the 1970s, people mixed more and race relations were better. All races could sit at the same table, but now that’s really rare to see. The Chinese and Malays would only do that if it were for business, not as friends.” (Frank)

This observation was also noted in research conducted by Tan (2012:9).

Therefore, there seems to have been a shift since the 1970s towards more segregated ethnically-orientated socialising, and it is interesting to note that interviewees indicated that this shift occurred after the introduction of the NEP, which implies it has had a divisive impact on ethnic relations.

**Ethnic Suspiciousness**

The NEP and the dominance of Islam have contributed to enduring mistrust between citizens based on their ethnicity. This is confirmed by the interviewees: “Different races and religions are more suspicious of each other” (Alan), and: “people identify as an ethnic group. This identity is based on friction and competition between races….the Malays dominant over other groups and there is suspicion between groups” (Freddie). Freddie goes on to explain how, as a Malay, he has felt discriminated against by the Chinese when doing business: “They give a better price to their own race…the Chinese when speak to each other, they give a special treatment. It’s not really open or fair for other people”. Frank too, describes how his business partner, who is from Papua but speaks Mandarin, got a cheaper quote from a Chinese shop compared to Frank who asked for a quote in English and Bahasa Malay, showing ethnic affiliation over and above a sense of neutral citizenship.

Much of this suspicion seems to be based on perceived economic inequality, with the Chinese generally perceived as the richest ethnic group and the Malays (and other bumiputeras) as the poorest. Only Alex claimed that the Chinese were the poorest group, positioning them alongside the bumiputeras in contrast to the Malays, whom he saw as the wealthiest. All interviewees acknowledged that the rich Malays
had earned their money illegally through government connections, and is an example of a failing of the NEP.

Ethnic suspiciousness was also evident by the analysis of Bersih via the framework of ethnicity, where the dominant participation of Chinese Malaysians was debated and discussed in the media, especially after the Bersih 4 and 5 rallies (Wong, 2015). This observation is supported by my interviewees, who qualify that there were fewer Malays and a majority of Chinese: “It was also mostly Chinese due to the urban setting….but there were also some Malays” (Alan), and Alex specifies that the Malays who did join were the New Malays: “It was not really Malays who joined, generally Chinese and Indians. And 10% of Modern Malays, who are younger or the professionals. Between 20-40 years old”. This is also supported by the Perceptions towards Bersih 4.0 report, where a ‘favourable’ perception towards Bersih was highest amongst the Chinese surveyed (81% compared to only 23% of Malays) (2015: 5), though journalists report that the last Bersih 5 rally showed greater ethnic diversity (Hew, 2016).

The accusations of Bersih as a mostly Chinese movement is significant, in that it insists on ethnicity as a frame of reference for the movement. Several analyses of the Bersih rallies focused on assessing their ethnic composition and in particular strove to determine whether a substantial number of Malays participated, or if it was dominated by Chinese Malaysians (Hew, 2016; Wong, 2015). If it were mostly a Chinese movement, it would indicate that the push for change was coming from a non-indigenous group, thereby invalidating its aims and de-legitimising the movement. What is relevant here is not whether the rallies were attended by a majority of Chinese Malaysians or not, but rather, how the discourse in the media still focused on ethnicity, illustrating how it remains a powerful and legitimising force in Malaysia, even in a movement that sought to dismiss ethnic orientation.

The interviewees also express concern about the dominant influence of Islam and the Malays, which is causing divisions, even those who were Muslims themselves: “Muslim people have negative thinking, and this is a critical problem for Malaysia. They want to universalise the rules and norms they follow” (Freddie), and:

“If a female non-Muslim marries a Muslim, she has to convert, and her children would be Malay. This is not fair, as they are not given a choice. As it
is now, the Malays never have to give up anything and the onus is always on the other to convert” (Frank).

Therefore, there remains strong suspicion between ethnic groups, based on perceived economic benefits and the predominance of Islam, which gives preference to the majority Malay group. This colours discussions even in supposedly neutral organisations such as Bersih, that attempt to move beyond ethnicity.

My research confirms the potency of authority-enforced structures such as the political system and the NEP on ethnic identity. They breed suspicion and competition between different ethnic groups, as they compel Malaysians to submit to ethnic identification and grouping, thereby ensuring ethnicity remains a key marker of identity. The political structuring along ethnic lines is evident in the Barisan Nasional government, which promotes itself as a coalition amongst the three main ethnic groups whereby each party serves the interests of their ethnic group, and seeks support and votes from an ethnically defined base. Many scholars (Holst, 2012:84; Rahman, 2009:429) have argued that this is a deliberate move to maintain power: “politicians play the race card because their survival is dependent on ensuring their power base...[and therefore] the division of races remains intact” (Khoo, cited in Lee, 2017). Others argue that it is a logical, fairly successful way to govern a plural society, which manages to preserve the identity and interests of each ethnic and cultural group (Hwang and Sadiq, 2010:193; Tan, 2001:953). Whilst it may not be the case that it is a deliberate ‘divide and rule’ strategy to maintain power, the persistent reduction to ethnicity in Malaysian politics means that there cannot be a shift away from ethnic concerns and identification.

In addition, the benefits derived for the bumiputeras from the NEP ensure that citizens are embedded in ethnically differentiated levels of citizenship, with different access to rights (Pietsch and Clark, 2016:309). The practices of the NEP and the Malaysian state were deemed to be racist and discriminatory at a structural level in a 2013 report by the Human Rights Foundation Malaysia (Bowling, 2013:1) which posits that the channelling of funds, permits and licenses to one race for the purpose of economic development is discriminatory. However, Young argues that affirmative action is sometimes necessary to ensure equality, as not all citizens are positioned equally in society (1989). This can be seen to be the case with the Malays and
bumiputeras after independence, as they tended to occupy an economically lower position than the Chinese due to the colonial division of labour. Therefore, it can be seen that differentiated citizenship and the bestowing of certain rights to a disadvantaged group can contribute towards ensuring a fairer, more equal society. Yet in the case of Malaysia, as Lindstrand points out, it is questionable whether the Malays can be considered a disadvantaged group, as they are the majority population whose interests are most catered to by the government through the dominance of UMNO, and they have an undisputed claim to indigeneity, with essential features of their identity such as religion and language safeguarded in the constitution (2016:37).

Considering the structural conditions of equality in Malaysia are ethnically defined, and that citizens are compelled to submit to ethnic identification to access rights and participate politically, it is unsurprising that my findings show how citizens are embedded in such notions of race and ethnicity, both conceptually and in their daily lived realities.
6. Transcending Ethnicity

There is evidence that many Malaysian middle class members recognise their confinement within an ethnic grid of identification and citizenship, and are seeking to move beyond this. This is manifested in expressions of a new sense of unity and middle class solidarity, as well as calls for political and economic change.

Belonging as Unity

The Bersih movement seems to have unleashed a palpable sense of unity amongst members of the Malaysian middle class, and this feeling can be viewed as a sense of belonging. Many of the interviewees stressed the tangible sense of unity felt by the participants in the Bersih movement: “All people were united and tried to create a sense of unity from all sides” (Dan), and: “Many of my friends put on yellow on their Facebook wall…there was no separation in this kind of thing…all were united” (Freddie). This was also reported by journalists who were present at the rallies:

“Two days ahead of Merdeka day (independence day) this Bersih rally was awash with Malaysian flags and people singing the national anthem.” (Hoffstaedter, August 2015).

This sense of unity and belonging seemed to transcend ethnic divisions, as many news reports and journals observed that the ethnic make up of participants in all the Bersih protests included Malays, Chinese as well as Indians: “…its support cuts across the country’s diverse ethnic, racial and religious demographics” (Smeltzer and Pare, 2015:121), and:

“Another important feature of the Bersih movement has been its multi-ethnicity, which has gone in the face of efforts in the past three years of racial politics, as Malaysians have shown solidarity across communities” (Welsh, 2011:2).

The interviewers also acknowledged the multi-ethnic make up of Bersih protesters, where Malaysians of all ethnicities came together. It provided an alternative space outside of the formal work environment to mix in: “…it had people from different categories. Different professions, age, the middle class mostly….the ethnicity I saw
was balanced….Bersih has different varieties” (Freddie), and: “The first Bersih you could see there was a variety of people. Chinese and Malays and Indians” (Frank).

The interviewees expressed a desire for further mixing between ethnic groups: “We need to mix more if we want to be the same nation, share culture and mingle. We need to be like one village” (Alan), and this is specified as being a key feature of the New Malays: “These new Malays are vocal and don’t care about these divisions, they come as united….Modern Malays think we are one” (Alex). This is supported by the results of the Ethnic Relations survey, which shows most Malaysians are optimistic about mixing more in the future and consider it beneficial (2006:11-12). The main reasons given why this is considered a positive trend is to ensure peace and avoid conflict (2006:13), and this has implications on how Malaysians conceive of a national identity, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

In the previous chapter, the interviewees all described the limited scope to mingle and socialise across ethnic groups outside of a formal context. The Bersih movement provided a new space for the middle class to assemble and operate outside of a professional work environment. The sociable aspect of popular protest is pertinent here, as my findings indicate that the various groups do not normally socialise or mix informally. It allowed various ethnic groups to occupy the same social space in their leisure time, which is not the typical way they interact, and indicates the scope for realising more mixing. Bersih rallies were described as having a festive atmosphere (Holmes, 2015), with music, food and drink, alongside the more typical ritualistic aspects to protests movements such as flag waving, chanting and singing:

“The mood among those gathered was festive, with drums and vuvuzelas heard along with speeches, songs and chants by participants calling for a "clean Malaysia" and "people power". (Thousands march in ‘Bersih’ protests, 2016).

The sense of solidarity evident in a social movement such as Bersih can be explained by a Durkheimian notion of ‘collective effervescence’, whereby the collective gathering of people in a physical space, united in a shared, specific focus, allows them to share an intense, unifying collective experience (Durkheim, 1912). Therefore, in practising their civic rights to protest, the Malaysian middle class is also
engaging in a ritualistic exercise of solidarity that transcends ethnic divisions, as the perceived common enemy is the government rather than members of another ethnic group. This collective consciousness and dedication to the nation can also be seen to comply with modernisation theory, as Anderson describes the nation state as having replaced religion in being able to summon devotion and loyalty from its subjects (2004).

**Dissolve Ethnic Labels**

As well as desiring to mix more between ethnic groups, some interviewees conceived of transcending ethnicity as involving the dissolution of ethnic categories of identification entirely: “We need to do away with ethnic categories…when it should just be Malaysians” (Alan), and: “Most things involve races, we always have to label our race when we fill in forms or register for absolutely anything. It's all about labelling your race. Maybe we should put these labels aside and so they cease to be important” (Freddi).

A suggestion of how this could be achieved was via marriage, as indicated by Freddie, who has an inter-ethnic marriage, and Frank:

“All there was a funny article that suggested forcing people to only marry people from another race, and forbid someone from marrying their own race. In this way, there would be no more Indian, no more Chinese, no more Malays - these categories would dissolve. It would be nice.” (Frank)

My findings seem to confirm that members of the middle class in Malaysia, including the new Malay middle class, are keen to embody a universal national identity and discard ethnically-orientated demarcations. Although some scholars have observed that the specific nature of citizenship in Malaysia is still bound by allegiances to family and clans which override those with the state (Kessler, 2001:42), my research offers a glimpse of a more universal, undifferentiated conception of citizenship. This fits generally with modernisation theory, which claims the formation of a stable middle class will push for greater civic rights and democratic processes. The extension of modernisation theory by Parson, which focuses on the breakdown of previous organising structures of identification, such as tribal loyalty, is also evidenced by my research. This is observed as occurring in Malaysia by
Saravanamuttu, who claims that the middle class and civil society groups are increasingly engaged in "universalistic concerns and issues...that goes well beyond ethnic and communal issues" (2001:116), as middle class Malaysians seem to identify increasingly less with their ethnic kinship groups, and instead feel a kinship that transcends ethnicity, uniting them in a sense of shared citizenship.

**Transcendence as State-led**

The interviewees tended to argue for state-led, top-down changes, especially abolishing race-based parties and the NEP, as a way of ridding Malaysian society from its ethnic obsession:

> “The political landscape has to change to achieve real harmony and get rid of race based segregation. There would have to be no race based parties; it would have to be possible for an Indian or Chinese to be PM” (Frank).

The increased support of a multi-ethnic opposition party indicates that Malaysians are willing to abandon racially aligned political allegiances for a multi-ethnic party. Support for an opposition party, including a multi-ethnic one, has been building over the past decade (Brown, 2005; Lian & Appudari, 2011; Maznah, 2005; Moten, 2009; Noor, 2013). The interviewees echoed the desire for political change, and the potential support for a multi-ethnic opposition by the middle class: “In the city, perhaps, people would vote for the opposition regardless of their race” (Chuck), and: “Modern Malays, Chinese and Indians want regime change” (Alex).

Some interviewees also advocate terminating the NEP, which assigns rights and benefits according to ethnicity:

> It's total bullshit. It reduces everything down to if you are a Malay or not. The other races see it and feel it, as loans and subsidies are all for Malays and Muslims...[but] the Modern Malays are willing to forgo their privileges, even though they are Malays” (Alex).

Whilst some interviewees feel the NEP and its affirmative action was necessary at the beginning, most felt it should be ended, as it is unfair or has now become obsolete: “Bumiputeras no longer need 100% support and many can stand in their own. Most Malays (the educated ones) feel it is obsolete and unsustainable” (Alan).
Here, the New Malays are cited as being potential agents of change in abolishing a policy that allocates rights based on ethnicity. Some interviewee have benefitted personally from the NEP, and yet still feel it is an unfair policy, demonstrating the perception of the New Malays and other middle class bumiputeras. Other interviewees who also enjoy bumiputera rights felt it was still necessary to ensure the economic success of the Malays and bumiputeras (though they acknowledge it has been mismanaged). It is significant that these members of the Malay and bumiputera middle class, having gained their status from such discriminatory policies such as the NEP and through the political system, and who continue to benefit from these structures, are advocating scrapping them. This indicates the adoption of a universalistic ideology of equal citizenship that transcends communal organisation, as middle class allegiance provides a sense of solidarity amongst citizens that seems to transcend ethnic divisions.

However, the abolishment of race-based parties or the NEP does not seem to be advocated by the majority of bumiputeras and Malays. The Ethnic Relations report shows there is very little support (4-5%) for abolishing race-based parties (2006:45), and this attitude is recognised by the interviewees, even if it is not their personal view. They cite ingrained racial divisions and a lack of unity by the opposition parties as a reason for the maintenance of the status quo: “But the government is still supported by the majority Malays” (Alex), and: “The opposition might come together for the election, but it is too weak and the government will stay. The racial divisions are too strong and people are not united” (Dan).

Enduring support for the Barisan Nasional government and its policies is deemed to come from the less educated, rural Malay group, which is embodied by the counter red-shirt protests. The interviewees echo this assessment: “Red-shirts were funded by politicians, not volunteers. They are young and jobless, blinded by their leaders. All pure Malay, unlike Bersih which has different varieties” (Freddie), and: "The red-shirts opposition were monkeys hired by the government. They were only one race - all Malays, driven by "Malaysia for Malays" ideology. They don't care much about the economy, only about race and Malay supremacy” (Dan). In addition, the Political Values survey shows that most bumiputeras are unwilling to forgo their privileges (2010:12, 20), whilst the Ethnic Relations report shows that whilst the vast majority of Chinese expect for all cultures and religions to be given equal rights in the future,
this contrasts with only 38% of Malays (2006:38), indicating that the majority of Malays do not want to give up their economic or status privileges. Therefore, despite the leanings of the Chinese and Malay middle class to advocate support for a multi-ethnic political party and the termination of the NEP, there is still a majority of support for maintaining the status quo in Malaysia.

My interviewees’ articulations of how transcending ethnic categories can be achieved show an absence of consideration for making micro-level, bottom-up changes, which would involve adapting individual actions or habits to foster more cross-ethnic solidarity, such as socialising together. Instead, nearly all their articulations of transcending an ethnically orientated identity focused on changing the structural conditions, which is the remit of the government. This explains the support for a group such as Bersih, which has a very clear, precise mandate for the legal changes they want to be made, as specified by their ‘8 demands’ (Bersih 2.0, n.d.). The potency of such structural conditions on values, perceptions and attitudes cannot be underestimated, as socialisation into “an ethnic identity…cannot be understood apart from the political processed in which government actions and the ideologies fostered by the state play a role” (Tan, 2000:441). Therefore merely advocating making top-down, structural changes is an understandable and legitimate response.
7. Articulating Malaysian-ness: The Paradox of the Middle Class

An idealised sense of Malaysian identity posits unity, harmony and peace amongst cultural pluralism: “a bubbling, bustling melting-pot of races and religions where Malays, Indians, Chinese and many other ethnic groups live together in peace and harmony” (About Malaysia, n.d.), as well as a striving for development as envisioned in the nation-building programmes. Four interviewees claimed to identify with a Malaysian national identity (the other two identified with Sabah rather than Malaysia, as they were raised there), and described this in terms similar to the official state narrative: “Malaysians know how to get along and respect other cultures and different races” (Dan), and:

“To be Malaysian is to feel like you are one country, one nation, to feel progressive and to strive to be world class. To be proud to live in one country with different ethnic groups, and this unity in diversity makes Malaysia unique as they have remained peaceful” (Alan).

This is supported by the Ethnic Relations report, where 90% of respondents were proud to be Malaysian, and of those 54% gave the main reason for this as peace, stability and having multicultural national unity (2006:31), with only 6% resenting having to be tolerant of a multi-ethnic society (2006:37). The report also specified that educated and higher earning respondents tend to identify as Malaysian rather than with their ethnic group (2006:8).

However, Alex notes that the national conception of Malaysia-ness as described by the interviewees is not the reality, but rather the result of state-fed ideology: “Malayan identity is... where there is no friction between religions and races, and focus on progress and the future. At least that’s what school teaches us, but the reality is different as there is competition between the races and rampant corruption”. This cynicism towards the ideal of a national identity is evident in the interviewees’ attitudes towards such nation-building programmes as Vision 2020 and 1Malaysia, which seem to be met with hostility and suspicion, as despite their aim to unite citizens, it is perceived to create divisions: “It’s a white elephant. It does not really unite people, just pays lip service to this and actually it is used to siphon off money to enrich certain groups. It divides the three groups more.” (Chuck), and:
“It is a political gimmick, used to satisfy people and say nice things. It’s only lip service: marketing but there is no substance. Some patriotic people might think it works, and the government is trying to appease these minorities.” (Alex)

Three interviewees express consent with the intention and concept of the programmes, but feel they fail due to poor implementation:

“There is a good intention, but I’m not sure about the results. It is a good concept and the beginning of bringing people together. It’s a baby step…” (Frank)

“It’s a sound philosophy and well-intentioned, but the implementation is not good so we don’t see a difference. So Malaysians support the concept and idea of the programme, but lose faith in it when they see how poorly it is implemented.” (Alan)

Therefore, there is shared ambivalence and even cynicism directed at such nation-building programmes as Vision 2020 and 1Malaysia, though the ideology encapsulated by such ideologies are generally approved of.

In transcending ethnicity, the interviewees offered a definition of a national identity which chimed with the official, state sanctioned ideal as offered by such nation-building programmes as the Vision 2020 and 1Malaysia programmes, which all emphasise unity amongst diversity. Indeed, their formulations of an ideal national identity were remarkably similar, and are aligned with the image Malaysia presents of itself internationally. This is explained by Alex as due to it being transmitted through school education, and Anderson emphasises the significance and success education has on forming national identity (2004). Therefore my research indicates that the articulation of a national identity is limited to the official state narrative, which is part of authority-imposed identity rather than drawn from everyday lived reality, and there is a paradox in that citizens seem to adopt such a national ideology from a state they highly distrust. Furthermore, the rhetoric of equality in these nation-building programmes seem incoherent in a system that utilises the NEP to prefer a dominant ethnic group (Kessler, 2001; Tan, 2001). When viewed in light of the ethnic
divisions and fault-lines in Malaysia, the national, universal ideal of citizenship appears untenable and superficial.

The possible reasons for this are due to the formulation of national identity based on peace and development, as well as the conditions of the formation of the Malay middle class. In offering up their definitions of an ideal national identity, all the interviewees asserted a sense of unity and harmony amongst diversity. The common motivation for adhering to this formulation of national identity was the need to maintain peace and stability, and to avoid violence. This tenet of peace and harmony is woven into the very definition of what it is to be Malaysian, and along with the memory and trauma of the 1969 race riots, which serve as a ‘continual ethnopolitical narrative’ in Malaysia (Sin, 2015:536), act as a deterrent for any sort of forceful, potentially violent protest in advocating change. This is understandable when viewing the violence and bloodshed that have erupted in neighbouring countries such as Indonesia, which has also had to manage huge ethnic diversity in formulating a united national identity. After the 1997 financial crisis, which saw a flare up of ethnic violence directed at Chinese Indonesians, Crouch cites the lack of ethnic violence in Malaysia as an indication of the success of its ethnic and political organisational structures (2001:225). Indeed, in the 1950s the advent of Malaysian independence was met with some scepticism as to whether it was possible to manage such ethnic diversity peaceably (Cheah, 2002:xvi), and Malaysians might rightly feel relieved and proud that they have not succumbed to similar violence, and therefore cling to their relative history of peace and stability as an essential, sacrosanct part of their national identity.

This seems to contradict modernisation theory, as it indicates that Malaysians are unwilling to push for change in a revolutionary way, unlike Eurocentric models of development towards democracy where the middle class “shattered and blasted away the shackles of feudal society” and created a new socio-economic order (Kessler, 2001:38). The Malaysian middle class does not exhibit the same uncompromising revolutionary fervour, and this is due to cultural and contingent factors (Embong, 2001:15). The creation of a middle class in Malaysia, unlike the emergence of the middle class in Europe, “did not emerge from any locally autonomous process of internal social development” (Kessler, 2001:39). Rather, it was a state-sponsored project that was considered vital for the success of nation-
building. The New Malays, in particular, were nurtured by the state through the NEP, and owe their existence to the structural conditions of the UMNO dominant BN government. Therefore, for them to oppose or challenge the state is problematic, and Yao and Kessler both assert that it makes this class ‘infantile’ and ‘docile’ as it was born out of political servility, rather than in opposition to the political status quo (Yao, cited in Chong, 2005a; Kessler, 2001), and this might explain the lack of sustained, dramatic resistance. Rather, my research implies that the middle class seeks to bring about change only through the existing political and social framework, rather than opposing or trying to dismantle it, and this is evidenced by the expectation of top-down state-led changes by my participants.

Another common thread in the articulation of national identity, both from the Malaysian state and echoed by my interviewees, is the emphasis on development and economic progress. Freddie cites a comfortable quality of life as an essential ingredient of being Malaysian: “Malaysians are happy go lucky. Not so competitive or stressed out. You can have a good, decent, simple life and everyone is committed to make the country better”. This was viewed as an essential strand of being Malaysian, and scholars have argued that it is this striving for continual economic growth that is the motivating factor for members of the Southeast Asian middle class to come together in protest against the government (Berenschot et al., 2016:20; Case, 2002; Thompson, 2007). The key objective of the Bersih movement is to eradicate corruption in the electoral process, and the last Bersih 5 rally was specifically aimed at voicing discontent at Prime Minster’s Najib Razik involvement in a multi-billion dollar corruption scandal (1MDB scandal). Therefore, it can be viewed that the middle class was united and mobilised against corruption and bad governance:

“They are focusing their political engagement more on problems of corruption and governance, and less on strengthening the rule of law or the advancement of citizen rights.” (Berenschot et al., 2016:20).

The motivation for this is because it threatened the economic conditions for their future growth and progress, rather than due to any commitment to the ideals of democracy and citizenship (Thompson, 2007:3). Case argues that there is little
evidence that the Malaysian middle class has any real desire for democracy or the restructuring of society to bring about more equality (2002; 2013).

This seems to undermine modernisation theory:

“…modernization theory is stumped, with recession, rather than steady growth, fueling new middle-class interest in a more competitive party system. Further, with economic recovery, this interest in accountability dissipates rapidly, revealing it to have progressed little beyond a longing for boom times.” (Case, 2002:125).

Rather, both the Malay and Chinese Malaysian business and middle class “valorizes economic progress” (Hwang and Sadiq, 2010:210), and therefore any action calling for democracy is based on the frustration of this capitalist class seeking more access to the global marketplace in their desire to ensure continued prosperity. Indeed, the fall of Suharto’s New Order and subsequent transition to democracy in neighbouring Indonesia was prompted by the 1997 economic crisis, where citizens grew frustrated when promises of development were no longer being met. Therefore, it seems the middle class is motivated to fight for change only when their lifestyles and social mobility is threatened, and whilst they are benefitting from the system, they do not seek to change it.

The contingent nature of the Malaysian middle class could once again explain their lukewarm drive for democracy and equal citizenship. The Malaysian middle class can be viewed as a capitalist class (Chong, 2005b:575), not only located in the global capitalist system, but also formed by such processes. They are therefore inherently bound to and aligned with capitalist processes, which explains their main concern being stability and economic growth. As Embong states, they seek political and societal change, yet also seek comfort and safety, and the New Malays in particular are “security and consumption-oriented, and appreciative of …[the state’s]…benefits” (2001:20). Therefore, their drive for radical change from both middle class bumiputeras and Chinese Malaysians is limited, and they are caught paradoxically between dependence on and opposition to the state. The national narrative prioritises stability and economic development as key tenets of being Malaysian. However, in upholding this, citizens’ efforts to realise another tenet of the
national identity: that of an equal and harmonious sense of citizenship, are hampered.
8. Conclusion

I have sought to investigate the factors that have kept Malaysian citizens’ sense of identity grounded in ethnicity, and the potential for a reimagining of identity that moves beyond ethnicity towards a universal, national sense of citizenship. In focusing on the opinions and perceptions of members of the middle class, who can be considered a cosmopolitan, broadminded and influential sector of Malaysian society that is often at the forefront for pushing for change, I hoped to gain an insight into how far this ethnic consciousness is being transcended, and explore the viability of an alternative, national sense of belonging. However, I am aware that my research is drawn from a small sample, and therefore no firm generalisations can be made. Nevertheless, I hope it has provided a glimpse of the processes at work, and allowed me to infer the potential for change, which I will do in this chapter.

My research has shown that members of this class of citizens carry deeply ingrained racialised perceptions which they identify with, and this ‘reinforces boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ that crosscut citizenship, nationality and ethnicity’ (Sin, 2015:546). This is unsurprising considering how ethnicity permeates and determines all facets of life. Colonial categories of race are maintained and continually reproduced by the postcolonial state, and the NEP in particular, is evidence of structural inequality where access to rights is ethnically defined and based on perceptions of indigenerity. This results in differentiated citizenship that breeds suspicion and competition between ethnic groups. My interviewees did express a desire to move beyond such ethnic consciousness, but they were unable to articulate how this could be achieved, beyond looking to the state to dismantle the structures that produce them. Having been nurtured by the postcolonial state, groups within the middle class are reluctant to defy it, and are accustomed to adapting to and working within its framework, regardless of how displeased or disillusioned they are with it. This undermines modernisation theory, which assumes the middle class will forcefully push for change with little regard for their own comfort or security, as was evident in many European contexts. The specific capitalist conditions that produced the middle class in Malaysia, especially the New Malays, restrains them from forceful action. Additionally, in relating to a conception of national identity which prioritises peace and stability, they are further constrained.
However, what might be occurring is a slower, gradual transition towards a more equitable imagining of society and citizenship (Ufen, 2009; Subramanian, 2011). The fact that Sarah Lian used her platform as a celebrity to voice her disagreement with the state’s formulation and imposition of identity, as well as the participation of citizens in the Bersih rallies, indicates that the desire for change is present and underlying. I feel it is unlikely that such leanings will retreat or disappear, though the momentum to achieve them may fluctuate. The mechanism for realising this might be slow and follow a more restrained, evolutionary path, achieving change in the space within the existing political system rather than through revolution.

A potential obstacle for achieving change, however, is a possible emerging class division. Historically, it has been observed that the middle class tends not to enter into coalitions with the lower classes (Case, 2013:15; Fanon, 1963), and this is seen in my research where the desires and opinions of the red-shirts are dismissed as being ignorant and unfounded. The Malaysian journalist Tricia Yeoh even claims that the middle class is best authorised to determine what is best for society, including what is best for the lower classes. She claims that in seeking a fairer, non-discriminatory society that does not grant rights based on ethnicity, the middle class is also advocating what is best for the lower classes (Yeoh, 2015). However, this seems presumptuous and unqualified. The New Malays have benefited from and been nurtured by the NEP, and having now secured themselves economically, they can afford to advocate abolishing these rights on the grounds that it is discriminatory and racist, assured that there security and status will be maintained. This is not the case for the rural Malays, who remain statistically the poorest group in Malaysia (despite receiving benefits from the NEP), and who therefore feel hugely attached to state benefits (Rahman, 2009:429). This locates future potential fault-lines for tension not on ethnicity, but rather on class and perceived economic need. However, it also has the potential to move the dialogue towards pro-poor policies that are not ethnically weighted, but rather, are based on a class or needs-based criteria.

It remains to be seen what direction Malaysia will take in its transition towards a national sense of identity. I feel that the state’s articulation of national identity is not a particularly workable conception as it is riddled with paradoxes, and this suggests that perhaps the onus lies on its citizens to imagine and negotiate a more coherent ideology. In addition, the state’s attempts at realising its conception of a Malaysian
identity seem to be limited to its nation-building programmes, which citizens seem to simultaneously identify with, and yet are also cynical about. Chomsky describes this sort of duality as exemplifying “Orwell's problem”, which is:

“the ability of totalitarian systems to instill beliefs that are firmly held and widely accepted although they are completely without foundation and often plainly at variance with obvious facts about the world around us.” (1986:xxvii)

Chomsky suggests that the solution to dismantling such structures - a way to transcend the paradox, lies in discovering and understanding the factors that create and sustain them. This thesis is an attempt to do that.
9. Bibliography


9. Appendices

❖ Participation Information Sheet

26-08-2017

Title of Research Project: Identity in West Malaysia

Researcher: Sheza Afzal, Master’s student of Leiden University

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

You are welcome to discuss this project with others if you wish before you make your decision. Please ask me if you would like more information (sheza.afzal@gmail.com / +31 615177383).

What is the purpose of the study?

To understand the experiences of West Malaysians’ sense of identity and citizenship based on ethnicity, religion, culture and economic situation. This is in relation to the Malaysian state’s vision of development and national harmony, represented by ongoing national development projects such as the National Economic Policies (NEPs), Vision 2020 and 1Malaysia. This research combines interviews with 6-8 Malaysians with literature from news sources and existing academic research.

Do I have to take part?

No, you don’t. It is your choice whether or not to take part.

What will happen if I take part?

You will be asked to participate in one interview over the telephone in English. You will be asked several questions. Some of them will be about your personal experiences of school, family and
work. Others will be about your opinion on policies and the future of Malaysia.

How much time will it take?

The interview will take approximately 1 hour.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

This is a chance for you to share your experience of being a Malaysian citizen at a critical point in Malaysia’s development, and to discuss any changes you observe in the way the society is organised (ethnically, religiously, economically).

What are the possible risks of taking part?

No risks are foreseen.

Will the information be confidential?

All your responses to the interview questions will be kept strictly confidential. Your identity will not be published or revealed, unless you give permission for this.

Can I withdraw from the research?

Yes, you can withdraw. Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you can stop at any time, or skip questions you do not want to answer.

What should I do if I want to participate?

Let the researcher (Sheza Afzal) know that you are willing to participate. Then, a suitable time will be arranged for the telephone interview, and you will sign a consent form beforehand (attached).

Thank you for your time.
**Interview Consent Form**

**Title of Research Project:** Identity in West Malaysia

**Researcher:** Sheza Afzal, Master’s student of Leiden University
sheza.afzal@gmail.com / +31 615177383

**Research Participant:** ……………………………………………………………………….

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<td>I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials related to this project to Sheza Afzal.</td>
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Name of participant…………………………………………Signature …………………Date ………

Researcher ………..Sheza Afzal…………………… Signature ………………… Date ......
Interview Guide

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me. This chat will last about 40 minutes/1 hour. I’m going to ask you some questions about yourself first, then about topics of race, religion, class, economics and politics in West Malaysia, which I would like your opinion on. But you can skip any questions you don’t want to answer and you can stop the interview at any time. Do you understand?

Do you have any questions so far?

Ok, good. So let’s start.

1. Background and biography

- What is your full name?
- How old are you?
- Where did you grow up?
- Do you come from a big family? Do you have siblings?
- What do your parents work with?
- What type of school did you go to? Did you like it? Why/ why not?
- Did you attend university? Where? What course?
- What kind of work do you do?
- Where do you live now?

2. Ethno-Religious Groups in West Malaysia

- What are the different ethnic groups in West Malaysia?
- How are they different?
- (If religion not already mentioned) What about the different religions?
- Does each ethnic group also have a particular religion?
- Do these groups mix much?
- Do you think this is overall a positive thing?
- Do you think it overall works to make a harmonious society?
- Do you think there have been, or will be, any changes to the way these groups are interact?
- Does that worry you?
- What is more important in Malaysia: race or religion?
3. Class and NEP

- Since independence, do you think Malaysia’s economy has been developing well?
- Do you think all the groups in Malaysian society are equal economically?
- Who are the rich citizens in Malaysia?
- Who are the poorest citizens?
- Do you think Malaysia has different classes (people with different economic levels)?
- Who are the ‘New Malays’?
- What do you think of the NEP policies?
- Has it been successful so far?
- Do you think Malaysia should keep the NEP in the future? For how long?

4. Political Engagement

- If talking about politics, what is an important issue for you?
- Has this always been an important issue for you?
- Are there any recent issues concerning politics that have in particular caught your attention?
- Are politics in Malaysia the same as always or have there been changes?
- Is Malaysia a democracy?
- What do you think of the Bersih movement?
- Which kinds of people do you think joined it?
- Do you think the people who joined were from the same ethnic group?
- Do you think the people who joined were from the same class?
- Do you think it has been successful?
- Do you think it could be successful in the future?
- What about the anti-Bersih movement (red-shirts)?
- Why did they disagree?
- Do you think the Bersih movement changed anything in Malaysian society or politics?

4. Identity and belonging

- Do you feel Malaysian?
- What is it to be a Malaysian?
- Do you think other Malaysians accept or see you as a Malaysian?
- What do you think of the Bangsa Malaysia and 1 Malaysia government programmes?
- Do you think they help people feel more national harmony?
- Are they necessary to feel united in Malaysia?
Interview Grid: Summary of Interview Notes

**Cheong Man Jin**

- **Background**: Mixed race of Chinese, Malay, and Indian descent.
- **Language**: Mandarin, Malay, and English.
- **School Experience**: Grew up at a majority Chinese school (as his father is a Chinese), but the Chinese never speaks Indian. If you are Chinese, you can speak the other languages. But if you are Indian, you can speak only your Indian language. In 1995, the Chinese and Indians were forced to intermarry so that Chinese and Indians would be one. It is not fair. Chinese must learn to live with each other. If you are Chinese, you can have friends of other races.
- **Ethnicity**: Chinese, Malay, and Indian.
- **Religion**: Christian, Muslim, and Hindu.
- **Migration**: Born and grew up in Sabah (Malaysia), moved to Johor Baru at 18 years old. Moved to London at 25 years old. Moved to Malaysia at 35 years old.
- **Job**: Project Manager in own construction company.
- **Personal**: Ning Poo Woon was forced to convert to Christianity (Lina Joy) when she left the country in the end.
- **Interview**: Malay language is the official language of Malaysia. English is the international language, whilst Malay, is just for Malaysia. Would have a child and want to get bilingual. Malay and English are taught in school. Malay is more important due to religion, but English is more important due to education. Malay is the national language, whilst English is the international language. Religion separates people more than race. Malays = Islam (no other religion). Religion is important due to identity, but people believe in other religions.
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- **Ethnicity**: Chinese, Malay, and Indian.
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**Ismail Effendy Bin Ahmad Nordin Endy**

- **Background**: Malay/Malay = power, money and politics. Overall harmonious, but will need to find ways to control the population this way. Also education keeps people apart too, as each ethnic group is taught in their own language. Malay and English are taught in school. Malay is more important due to religion, but English is more important due to education. Malay is the national language, whilst English is the international language. Religion separates people more than race. Malays = Islam (no other religion). Religion is important due to identity, but people believe in other religions.
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**Jacky Ng**

- **Background**: Male Chinese, Malaysia.
- **Language**: English, Mandarin, Malay.
- **Ethnicity**: Chinese.
- **Religion**: Buddhist.
- **Migration**: Born and grew up in Malaysia (Chinese), moved to Sabah (Malaysia) for an English college - an initiative set up by the MCA Chinese political parties to help poor students in Sabah. Remaining are outsiders: Kelantan, Sabahans. Now in JB living with Chinese friends.
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**Ma Liwu**

- **Background**: Male Chinese, Malaysia.
- **Language**: English, Mandarin, Malay.
- **Ethnicity**: Chinese.
- **Religion**: Buddhist.
- **Migration**: Born and grew up in Malaysia (Chinese), moved to Sabah (Malaysia) for an English college - an initiative set up by the MCA Chinese political parties to help poor students in Sabah. Remaining are outsiders: Kelantan, Sabahans. Now in JB living with Chinese friends.
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Yes, surely. And this is a good thing (couldn’t explain why).

Politicians claim it is Malays, who clearly haven’t benefitted by NEP.

Almost synonymous for this.

There are Chinese/Malay and Indian Malaysians, but most equal to each other. I don’t know who they are! I heard term ‘Melaya Bahru’from our PM. They are Indian/Malay and Indian races.

People who live in their own race kind of do this, so TAP mostly has Chinese,

But mostly Malay/Malays. Patroni Chinese and natives people. Well, mostly Indian. Chinese are also quite rich.

Malays and Indians come from their own villages so seldom see other races.

Lots of separation between the races, as each race has its poor people, and each race has their society structured differently. People who live in their own race kind of do this, so TAP mostly has Chinese.

Do not change much with the policy, so far.

Nonsensical that 1 policy can last for so long, and government needs to review from time to time (it has not changed much with the policy, so far).

People have 2 cars, 1 motorcycle for one family. E.g. Chinese can speak Malay fluently. In cities there is a lot of separation. People go back to their own race kind of do this, so TAP mostly has Chinese.

Chinese/Malaya and Indian, so that they are equal economically. Balanced amount of thinking about the three Malays, and just Malays and Indians are also not equal to each other. There are Chinese/Malaya and Indian, so that they are equal economically.

Chinese/Malaya and Indian, so that they are equal economically.

Everyone who is transferred to urban poverty is the poor. All races.

Malaysian Prime Minister’s office.

Malaysians are also the one village, and urbanisation is good for forced to live together.

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How to transcend racial Malaysia government?

Many of these groups have been dormant for years, and their leaders have been arrested. There is a growing sense of frustration and hopelessness among the people, especially the young. Politicians have failed to address the root causes of these problems, and the government has continued to implement policies that benefit the few at the expense of the many.

Who joined & why?

The 1st Bersih you could see there was a variety of people - Chinese and Malays and Indians. But the last one saw there is a small crowd and it is due to the number being so large that the event was attracted to. There was a lot of police presence, and many people were arrested.

Do not really Malays who joined, generally Chinese and Indians. But 15% of Malaysians.

We need to see the voting pattern in the next election. Anticipates more protests. The opposition must have, or else they will lose faith in it when they see how poorly it is implemented.

Malay is the dominant group, they are the minority of Malaysians and are united. Modern Malays think we are one. Willing to forgo privileges for Malays, but these divisions keep them apart.

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Malaysia is not a 100% democracy, more a guided democracy, but this has been the case for a long time.

neuropsychological analysis of separations (though I face a personal agenda, for helping people together and moving toward no politics). In the city, they have people who want to separate regardless of their race.

A lot of people don't believe in changing government, it is allowed to people voice their disaffection, and make government aware of which is the problem. We need to see the voting pattern in the next election. Anticipates more protests. The opposition must have, or else they will lose faith in it when they see how poorly it is implemented.

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People are a change in government, but the opposition is fractured. The initial motivation and support has dropped as government remained in power. People who wanted a change in government joined. PKR opposition party brought people together.

We need to see the voting pattern in the next election. Anticipates more protests. The opposition must have, or else they will lose faith in it when they see how poorly it is implemented.

Malaysia's people are united. From a young age, they are taught to think of themselves as one people, regardless of race. This is reinforced by the education system, which focuses on the common values and traditions of all Malaysians.

I feel Sabahan, not Malaysian. We are always on our own. Growing up I felt part of Malaysia, but it was an abstract concept. It's not until recently that I began to feel like I was part of something bigger.

I am a Malay, my identity is based on my family's heritage and the culture I was raised in. I identify with the traditions and values of my community, and I feel a deep sense of responsibility to preserve and promote them.

The expression might come together for the election, but it is not a real change and the government will stay. The electoral system is rigged and people are not united.

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We all do not want change. We are fine with the status quo, even if it means continuing to suffer. However, we are not blind to the problems facing our country, and we do want a better future. We just don't know how to achieve it.

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