

ASIAN  BAROMETER

A Comparative Survey of

*DEMOCRACY, GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT*

Working Paper Series: No. 106

Jointly Published by

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Malaysia:  
Political Polarization in a Hybrid Regime

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## **Asian Barometer**

A Comparative Survey of Democracy, Governance and Development

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**Globalbarometer**

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## Whither Democracy? Assessing Malaysia's Political Divisions in a Hybrid Regime

Bridget Welsh and Alex Chang<sup>1</sup>

Paper prepared for a Workshop of Political Polarization and Democracy in East Asia  
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For over the past decade, Malaysia has been embroiled in a battle to change its government, to remove the incumbent governing coalition known as the Barisan Nasional (BN or National Front) led the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) from the stranglehold it has held on power since 1957. The BN is now the longest governing coalition in power in the world. This contestation for power has been described as ongoing democratization, as it has indeed been accompanied by greater representation of the opposition in parliament, increased demands for political freedom and an accompanying political liberalization.<sup>2</sup>

It has also led to a deeply divided polity – one in which politics has been showcased as an ‘us versus them’ zero-sum dynamic. The slogan ‘Anything but UMNO’ (ABU) has served as the rallying call for a diverse and fragmented opposition, known as Pakatan Rakyat (PR). The government in turn has focused its efforts on shoring up its support through populist measures and efforts to divide the opposition and marginalize its leaders, notably through the use of the judiciary.<sup>3</sup> In March 2014 the appeal on the highly-politicized conviction of opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim for sodomy was overturned, resulting in the prospect that the opposition leader may be imprisoned again. The incumbent government has responded to the challenge to its power, using its control of the state and political institutions to its advantage. This in turn has evoked even greater criticism and increasing political mobilization in civil society across the political spectrum. Protests, personal attacks and dirty political tactics including the use of race-based threats and charges of sedition have become the norm in the poisonous muck of a divided polity.

This paper examines political polarization in Malaysia, focusing on the manifestation, sources and implications of this division for democracy in the country. Three analytical questions anchor the analysis: 1) Is Malaysia politically polarized? 2) Why do these political divisions exist? 3) What do these divisions and their sources mean for democracy in Malaysia? The argument developed in this paper is that the divisions in Malaysia are significant and are rooted in a complex array of socio-economic and political conditions, but they do not necessarily undermine democracy in Malaysia and are less polarizing for democracy than appears from the recent electoral results and dominant ‘us versus them’ political discourse. Despite the framing of the political divide along racial lines – the dominant Malay majority favoring the incumbent government versus the minority Chinese favoring the opposition – the reality of the country’s political situation is a much more complex and integrated picture. The situation in Malaysia is one of division, rather than polarization.

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<sup>2</sup> See Thomas Pepinsky ‘Tak Nak Mereform: Contemporary Malaysian Politics in Comparative Perspective’ Paper presented at the Asian Studies Association, March 2012 and Bridget Welsh, 2013, “Enabling and Empowering Change” in *Transformations: The Abdullah Badawi Years in Malaysia* (co-edited with James Chin). (Kuala Lumpur: Strategic Information and Research Development Center)

<sup>3</sup> See Bridget Welsh, ‘Change without ‘Change’: Malaysia Post-GE13,’ *Post GE-13 Malaysia*, (Canberra: New Mandela Publication, Australia National University, 2014) Forthcoming.

To understand the nature of political division in Malaysia it is necessary to look beyond ethnicity to urbanization, class, political socialization, political culture and the relationship with the state. Those who support the incumbent regime have very different views of democracy and come from different socio-economic backgrounds. Modernization, values and the state-society relationship underscore the political divide in Malaysia.

The implications of political divisions for democracy in Malaysia are similarly complex. On one level, the politics will remain fragmented and contentious, with the balance of power under current conditions resting in favor of the BN. The incumbent government's ability to capitalize on the levers of power, including its control of elections and electoral districting, the mainstream media, the judiciary and national coffers, have placed in at an advantage in the contestation of power and allowed it to dampened the opposition challenge. It has adopted policies that reinforce the divisions in society. These measures have hardened the political divide and reinforced a 'zero sum dynamic' focused on winning power from highly divisive politicking around elections. Malaysians from different backgrounds see these developments through very different lens. Looking at the balance of power and trajectory of conflicting political perspectives suggests a negative outlook for democracy.

On the other hand, our analysis of the underlying factors accounting for political division among ordinary Malaysians point to more positive trajectory for democracy. The majority of Malaysians want political change. The divisions are not as polarized and splintering as would appear, as they have more to do with values and relations to the state/political that are evolving. Over time, modernization has strengthened support for democracy and undermined the socio-economic and political base of the incumbent regime. These trends are likely to continue. Strains in incumbent government performance will also continue to make the government vulnerable and fuel demands for a more open system. There will be a continued push for a stronger democratic polity, arising from the middle of Malaysia not the poles.

The paper draws primarily from a variety of data for the analysis. The first focuses on data from the 2013 election, specifically the electoral results and post-election polls conducted by Merdeka Center in Malaysia. The analysis of the electoral data is conducted at the smallest unit of analysis, the polling station level, which allows for an in-depth understanding of voting behavior and is supported by election polling.<sup>4</sup> The election poll was conducted in May 2013.<sup>5</sup> These sources provide insight into the socio-economic factors connected with voting behavior and support for the incumbent government. The analysis also draws from the third wave of the Asia Barometer Survey conducted in November 2011 before the election. The Malaysian election campaign was ongoing at this time, as there continued to be speculation on when the election would be held in Malaysia from 2011 through 2013. The ABS data allows for a more robust exploration of values and political socialization and the connection to regime support. This data is used for the statistical multinomial logit analysis developed below. The picture that emerges from these data sources is that political divisions in Malaysia are tied to the broader social and political changes taking place in the country, and are caused by a cross-cutting mosaic of factors.

#### *Understanding Democracy and Political Polarization in Malaysia: Assumptions and Approaches*

The color politics in Asia – blue versus green in Taiwan or red versus yellow in Thailand – have brought the issue of political polarization to the forefront of challenges to democracy in the region. A gamut of

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<sup>4</sup> This data set is comprised of half of the election results at the polling nationally where assessments have been made of urbanization and the class background of specific localities. The data set is based on interviews and fieldwork conducted in 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Merdeka Center Survey Release, 3 May 2013, available at [www.merdeka.org/](http://www.merdeka.org/)

conditions have arisen from policy paralysis, intensive partisanship and openings to a return to authoritarianism, as has occurred in Thailand in 2014. The relationship between political polarization and democracy is multi-faceted, resulting from the outcome of democratic practices such as elections and political mobilization as well as shaping perceptions of what democracy means and the quality of governance in democracies. In other words, polarization can be both an independent variable shaping democracy as well as a dependent variable affected by democracy. Unpacking these interrelationships is not simple.

The first step is to assess political polarization. What should be examined to determine whether a system is divided? The level of political competition? The political discourse? Political statements by leaders? Electoral results? Citizen attitudes? Another related problem is what does political polarization mean? Is it determined by the presence of poles or the dominance of political poles? Is it determined by sharp reinforcing political splits within a country or more cross-cutting differences? Finally, at which community should one look in assessing political polarization? Does one look at political society primarily or look at the views of ordinary citizens? The answers to these questions are not easy, as the topic of political polarization remains under theorized. The main approach has been to look at electoral results. This paper takes voting behavior in the last election as a starting point, and brings in citizen attitudes for a more robust analysis. The premise is that one should look beyond the dominant political discourse and politicized society to evaluate political polarization. The views of ordinary citizens are deemed particularly important. This citizen inclusive approach looking at democratization in Malaysia differs from those that emphasize the strength of the state, developments within the dominant hegemonic party or purely election results. Polarization is measured by looking at the strength of the poles vis-a-vis each other and the center as well as the level of reinforcing cleavages around the respective poles.

The second step is to examine what are the factors connected to Malaysia's political division. In this vein, this paper anchors the discussion in regime support as the main dependent variable, namely those who have voted for the incumbent government or profess that support the regime in the ABS polling. Regime support in the ABS is measured through an amalgamation of a number of questions asking to assess the 'system of government'. These questions are detailed in the technical notes labeled as Appendix A. It was assumed that those who supported the government electorally were in more in favor of a more authoritarian political system. By prioritizing the electoral arena and views of the political system, it is assumed that greater democracy is brought about by a change in government. A rotation in political power has long been viewed as a basic threshold for democracy, at least from a procedural perspective. To reinforce the procedural lens used in this paper the assumption draws from the substance of policies and ideological positions of the different political sides. The opposition in Malaysia has adopted more democratically liberal policies toward citizenship (greater equality) and civil liberties as well as practices greater consensus internally, while the BN government has taken more conservative positions in these areas and operates in a more hierarchical manner. Substantively, the BN is less democratic than PR.

In looking at regime support, the paper explored four different clusters of explanations around the second substantive question of this paper, namely why there are political divisions in Malaysia. The first draws from the important socio-economic indicators in Malaysia – ethnicity (race), class (as measured by income), and level of urbanization. These factors are common lenses to examine voting behavior and regime support, and have been tied to modernization.<sup>6</sup> Moves away from primordial politics, rising

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<sup>6</sup> Bridget Welsh. 'Elections in Malaysia: Voting Behavior and Electoral Integrity,' Meredith Weiss (ed.), *Handbook of Malaysian Politics*, (London: Routledge, 2014) Forthcoming.

incomes and greater urbanization have been associated with support for democracy. Differences in these social cleavages may help us understand the social forces contributing to political polarization.

A second related explanation looks at political socialization, how citizens' views of politics are shaped. Here the focus is on education levels and the source of news, particularly the use of the internet. Higher education, believed to be associated with critical thinking and economic opportunities, is held to offer a more sanguine view of authoritarianism. There is also a close relationship between education and class, noted above. What distinguishes primary and secondary education in Malaysia is the heavy burden of a government curriculum that espouses support for the incumbent government. The universities, although also challenged by academic freedom, are more open environments for political discourse. Closely connected to socialization is where information about politics is obtained. Traditionally, the internet has been the domain of more critical views of the incumbent government, in large part due to the control and ownership of the mainstream media. In the 2013 election, the BN has a greater presence in social media and on the net, although this arena remained that of more diverse and critical voices. Thus, it is projected that internet use will be associated with political polarization along the same lines as education, higher levels associated with lower regime support and higher support for democracy.

A third cluster looks at political culture. Attitudes towards politics have long been tied to views on democracy, with attention to 'traditional' values, religion, and nationalism. The ABS repertoire of questions provides a good foundation to examine the interrelationship between political culture and political polarization. The focus is on 'political traditionalism,' namely more conservative views of the role of government. It is premised that high levels of political traditionalism are associated with high levels of regime support. As religion overlaps closely with ethnicity (the majority group Malays are Muslims) in Malaysia, attention moves to the practice of religion, notably religiosity. Citizens reporting high levels of religiosity are believed to be more closely aligned to the Islamist party of the opposition coalition and more Christian factions of the Democratic Action Party of the opposition which has openly defended religious rights and thus have low levels of regime support. Another important attitude is nationalism, which measures patriotism and connection to the country. These views are believed to be closely tied to regime support. Political culture is believed to be strongly connected with the underlying reasons accounting for political divisions in Malaysia, a factor largely ignored in assessments of Malaysian politics to date.

The final explanatory cluster looks at the relationship between the state and individuals in society, with particular attention to how connected an individual is with the performance of the government or the government itself. In this regard, governance/economic performance, party/coalition affinity and patronage are used for analysis. Citizen assessments of economic performance and perceptions of corruption, the main governance concern in the ABS survey, are held to be connected to regime support, with positive assessments buttressing regime support. The line between the regime, the incumbent government and the BN has long been blurred with over fifty years in power. It is expected that those with high levels of party affinity to the BN (winning camp) are likely to have high levels of regime support. A parallel can also be found with those who report receiving patronage from the government. The BN has used its control of state coffers to its advantage. Citizens who have a large network of support do not rely on government to the same degree and thus report less regime support. The interaction between the governance and the state-society relationship draws attention to the role of political institutions in affecting democracy. Earlier studies of regime support in Malaysia found these factors to be

dominant in understanding the foundation of support for the BN.<sup>7</sup> This approach gives a premium to the interaction with citizens rather than factors within the state itself.

The analysis then turns to examine how the character of the country's political divisions and the underlying sources affect democracy in Malaysia, the third question of the paper. The implications of the analysis are fleshed out, suggesting that Malaysian politics in spite of the deep divisions do point to a trajectory of continued democratization, albeit through a highly conflictual and difficult process.

### *Zero-Sum Polarized Politics Manifested: More Centered Than Meets the Eye*

We begin with a discussion of Malaysia's political divisions. In May 2013, Malaysia's election results were revealing. A 51% of the country supported the opposition, with the incumbent government winning only 47% of the vote.<sup>8</sup> Electorally, the country was split down the middle. The first-past-the-post and the control of the electoral machinery contributed to the BN winning 60% of the seats in national parliament. An estimated swing of another 5% in the popular vote could have yielded a change of government at the national level, but measures were taken to assure that this did not happen.<sup>9</sup> This election result was the lowest popular vote and seat share that the BN had received in the thirteen general elections since independence in 1957.

GE13 was immediately characterized as a 'Chinese tsunami'. The country's electoral divide was portrayed as an ethnic divide. The government mainstream media used an ethnic lens to frame voting behavior, blaming the losses on the 'betrayal' of the largest non-Malay ethnic group. Rather than acknowledge any decline among the majority group or Malays, the simplest route was to blame the 'pariah' ethnic community that had been targeted in the past. In the 1960s similar race-baiting contributed to the 1969 racial riot. This ethnic 'us versus them' frame was used, as anything else would damage the legitimacy of the government that had only managed to hold onto power through a massive mobilization of its base and the extensive use of patronage. After all, this was the worst performance in the government's history. In the months since GE13, open racism, supported by religious divisions, have increased in public life. Political discourse has become highly fractious and divisive.

Racialized framing of the election results was also reinforced by attention to another features of the political polarization, geography. The urban-rural divide has often been used to interpret Malaysia's voting behavior. Historically, the cities have been on the coastlines, as the economy has been closely linked to trade. Through the 1970s, the urban areas have been predominated by non-Malays, so the ethnic lens was superimposed on the urban-rural divide, with the Chinese portrayed as less loyal. After the 1970s, economic growth and urbanization have transformed the cities, where now due also in part to higher population rates and tax policies that favor large Malay families, these areas have become more diverse. In fact, in some cities Malays now outnumber other ethnic communities. For example in the urban state of Penang, Chinese are no longer the absolute majority ethnic group. The greater ethnic pluralism of urban areas makes the issue of urbanization separate from ethnicity. Irrespective of these more nuanced realities, geography has been used to emphasize difference and portray a polarized reinforcing divided Malaysia.

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<sup>7</sup> Bridget Welsh, 2013, "Fault Lines: Regime Support in Malaysia" in *Does Democracy Matter? Regime Support in Southeast Asia* (Co-edited with Yun-han Chu and Alex Chang). Forthcoming.

<sup>8</sup> The remainder was won by regional parties in East Malaysia.

<sup>9</sup> Bridget Welsh, *Democracy Denied: Malaysia's 2013 Elections*. (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2015). Forthcoming.

The mapped electoral results below illustrate the concentration of the opposition wins (in red) with the incumbent BN regime (in blue). Similar to the coastal-heartland divide of US politics, Malaysians are divided between the coasts and the more interior areas. These maps should be read with a note of caution, as Malaysia has a first-past the post system and many of the contests were keenly competitive. The maps do not fully capture the pattern of the results. Also, over 70% of Malaysia is now considered to be urban. Nevertheless, the blue-red divide is striking. It is enhanced by the fact that the rural areas hold considerable political weight. The electoral system is heavily skewed toward rural areas and the dominant incumbent party UMNO's strongholds. The maps show that in almost all the major cities the opposition won seats, with the regime losing support in the key economic centers.

*Figure 1: Maps of Malaysia's May 2013 Election Results*

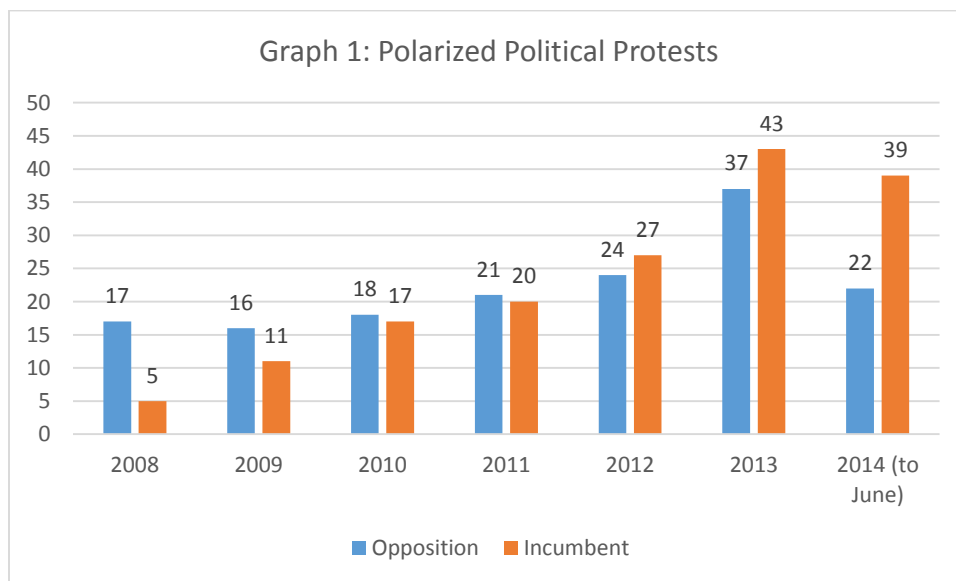


Another element of the geographic pattern of the polarized electoral regime support lies in limited opposition victories in the two East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak. These states have been called the 'fixed deposit' states for the incumbent BN government. They joined the Federation later in 1963, and as part of the agreement they hold a quarter of the seats in the national parliament. Over the years they have contributed to the electoral base of the regime. Today, seats from East Malaysia make up a third of the overall seats for the BN. The electoral maps illustrate graphically Malaysia's political divisions. By all accounts, Malaysia appears from the election results to be a polarized polity.

This polarized view is buttressed by patterns of political mobilization and political discourse. Party politics has been highly competitive, with the dominant mode to appeal to the base supporters of the party rather than the middle ground. Both the BN and the opposition are locked in a battle to destroy each other rather than seeking common ground. In the five years under the Najib Tun Razak BN government, there has only been one major incident of bi-partisanship: after the MH17 2014 airline crisis. Within hours, this moment of common ground was quickly used for political salvos by politicians against each other. Competition for political power among the political parties is fierce with constant electioneering. Over the past six years after the government lost its two-thirds majority in parliament in 2008, there has also been a rise in pro-regime civil society groups, effectively matching the largely pro-opposition civil society developing after the strongman Mahathir Mohamad stepped down in 2003. Many of these new pro-regime groups such as PERKASA are seen to be 'uncivil' – highly racist and reactionary and have taken on more liberal groups and activism.



This intensive political competition and broadening of civil society have led to three important developments. First there has been movement on the poles of political life, with mobilization around an ‘us versus them’ framework. This is clear for the BN versus Pakatan. It extends to civil society as well. The BERSIH (Clean) movement on electoral reform and inclusion stands in sharp contrast to the ISMA conservative religious movement made up of former civil servants who call for more exclusionary measures. The racial divide has been superimposed with a religious Muslim-non-Muslim divide as well, making the sensitive concerns over religious practice highly emotive. A second dimension has been the emergence of vibrant ‘echo’ chambers, arenas on cyber space where Malaysians only speak to those who hold the same political views. Malaysia has high internet penetration at over 70% and a vibrant social media space on Twitter, Facebook and more. The mainstream media has lost its readers and viewers, but continues to reach the traditional base of the government, while others ignore it completely. These political fora are highly active. A third feature has been rise in political protests in Malaysia along polarized political lines. Drawing from a dataset of reported political protests in the leading mainstream and media sources, the number of protests of groups ‘opposing’ each other has risen.<sup>10</sup> These groups draw on the support of the incumbent government and opposition in their efforts, with members of both often present in these demonstrations. The incumbent government has admitted to funding many of the organizations that are involved in supporting the policies and positions of the government. The opposition in its part similarly participates in protests opposing the government. While Malaysia’s protests have not been as colorful as those that paralyzed Thailand (with perhaps the Bersih ‘yellow’ protests) they have been contentious and combative over areas such as religious freedom and the election results.

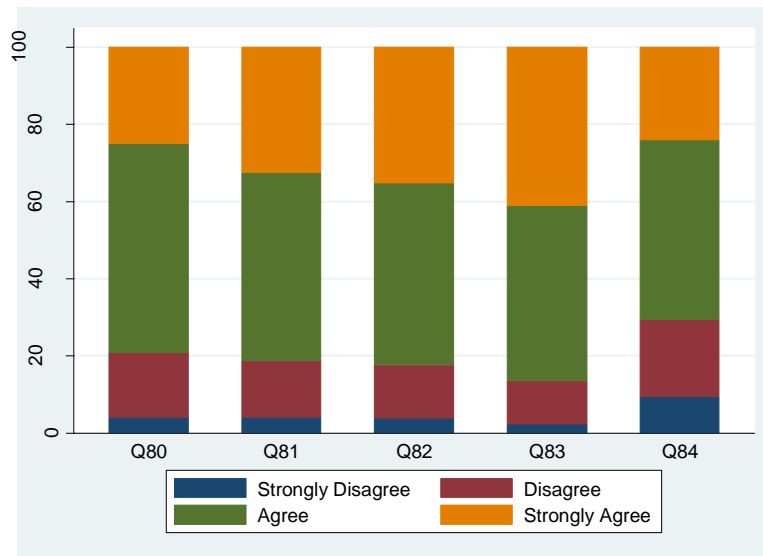


From a look at elections and political society, Malaysia appears to be split, and increasingly so. The latest Malaysia ABS survey data of citizen views presents a less polarized dynamic. Below Graph 2 details the distribution of responses to the questions examining regime support. The poles are comparatively smaller than the center, and regime support weighs more in favor of the current system than against it. In contrast to the election results, a majority of Malaysians appear to support the current political regime. This suggests that equating voting for the incumbent government and regime support is not fully appropriate. When one looks at citizen attitudes, the findings have contradictions and are less consistent. There are

<sup>10</sup> This dataset is based on culling four major news sources – *The Star*, *News Straits Times*, *Malaysiakini* and *Utusan Malaysia* – from 2004 onwards.

Malaysians who support the current system, and vote against the incumbent government, for example. Attention to political attitudes also shows that the range of views is less polarized than is implied in the electoral results and political discourse. For example, when asked (Q84 below) about the system of government and whether the system ‘needed major change/replacement’, ‘minor change’ or ‘works fine,’ Malaysians were divided, with 29%, 47% and 24% of these views respectively. The plurality of Malaysians were in the middle, not the extremes. The 2011 ABS data shows striking consistency to the 2006 results, with more Malaysians adopting middle than periphery positions.

*Graph 2: Distribution of Regime Support in Malaysia*



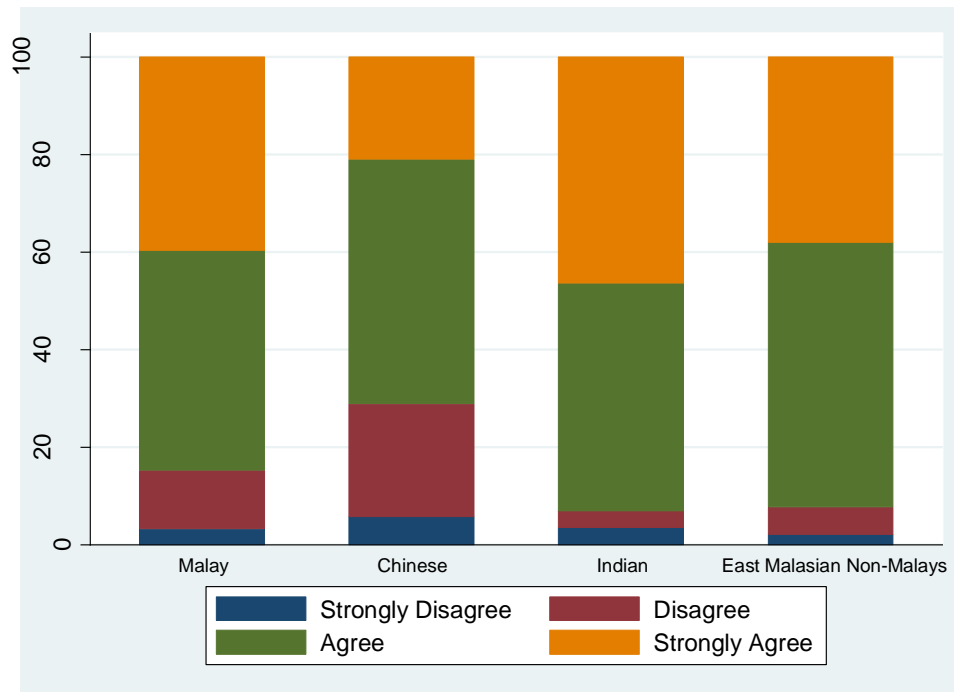
Given the differences between the ABS polling data and the election results and trends in political mobilization and discourse, the issue of assessing political polarization lies with the weight placed on the alternative sources of data and the emphasis placed on particular elements. In light of the framing of politics and activities in political society, there is a tendency to perceive zero-sum dichotomous ‘polarization’. While not dismissing the differences and presence of poles, this analysis places more weight on the shades of the colors or the distribution of views, particularly from the ABS polling data. The key finding when bringing in the views of the public is that Malaysia is less polarized than the electoral results suggest, with the center of politics more predominant than the poles. A more holistic assessment of Malaysian politics points to divisions rather than a clear-cut divide.

*More than Race: Societal Characteristics of Political Division*

In order to understand the underlying Malaysia’s political divisions, it is necessary to explore the underlying factors in more depth. Let’s begin with ethnicity – the dominant paradigm of politics. The post-election polling conducted by Merdeka Center revealed that there was an ethnic divide with the overwhelming majority of 76% of the Chinese supporting the opposition. Pakatan however only captured 60% of Indian Malaysians, 42% of Malays, and 30% of non-Muslim East Malaysians. Disproportionally, more non-Malays supported the opposition as a share of the population, but in real numbers of voters, the highest plurality of Malaysians who voted for the opposition were Malays. Percentage wise the government picked up 3% of support among Malays, but lost more in numbers of voters. The electoral results do suggest that ethnicity is associated with the differences of regime support.

The ABS third wave data detailed below also reveals differences among the different ethnic groups, especially a Malay-Chinese divide. These findings were not evident in the multinomial logit model that brings all the different variables together, however. Ethnicity did matter for regime support, but it was not as divisive as it portrayed. When one brings in values and the relationship with the state, ethnicity becomes less significant in accounting for differences.

*Graph 3: Ethnicity and Regime Support*



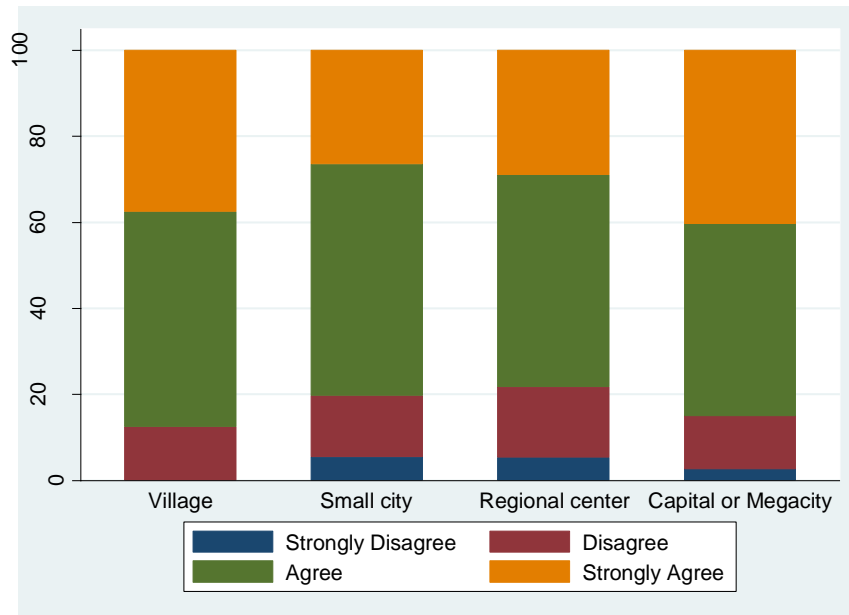
An important question is why is ethnicity important at all? What exactly are the reasons for different ethnic patterns of regime support? A leading explanation has to do with the effectiveness of the opposing political coalitions to represent the different ethnic constituencies. The Chinese representation within the BN has collapsed, while the BN led by UMNO which uses race for political legitimation uses its ‘protection’ of the Malays through government policies such as the affirmative action New Economic Policy expanded to be known as the Bumiputera (sons of the soil and also a referent for the Malays) Empowerment Policy and through patronage. When one delves further, causation lie less with ethnicity per se in a primordial sense, but with how ethnicity is integrated politicized into party representation and the state-society relationship. We will return to this later below.

Along with ethnicity, geography was also closely portrayed to be linked with Malaysia’s political divide. Electoral data shows that the level of support for the incumbent government in East Malaysia was considerably higher in Sabah and Sarawak than in the average for the Peninsula. In the East Malaysian states, 61% of voters support compared to 43% across the South China Sea. Also, the electoral data at the polling station level also supports significant variation among urban and rural areas.<sup>11</sup> Most analyses of the relationship between the urban-rural differences focus on seats, which fail to appreciate that within constituencies there is sharp variation within constituencies. The polling station electoral data set suggests that urbanization is an important reflection of polarization.

<sup>11</sup> Statistical significant was assessed after performing a T-test and the finding less than 0.05.

We find similar supporting evidence in the ABS data, as shown in the chart below where the findings were significant when the relationship between urbanization and regime support was compared. It is noteworthy, however, that in the multinomial logit model urbanization, like ethnicity, was overshadowed by other more significant relationships with regard to regime support.

*Graph 4: Urbanization vs. Regime Support*

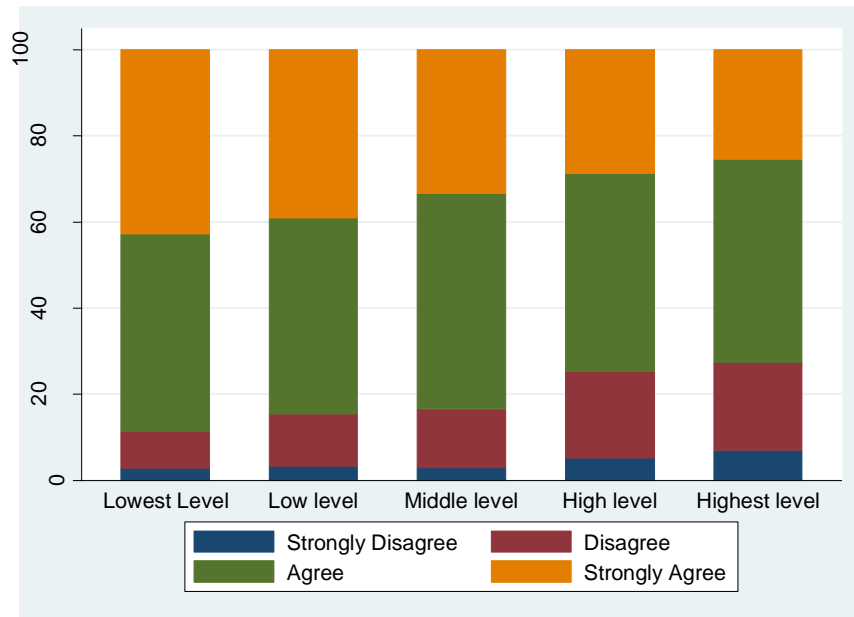


Given that the urban-rural divide is a part of underlying factors associated with regime support, a similar question arises: why? What is about living in urban or rural areas that factor in support for the regime? Is the power of patronage that remains for the dominant incumbent party UMNO in the rural areas, or is this a product of the sources of information and political socialization. Does the urban experience itself lend itself to more oppositional politics? These answers cannot be clearly understood from the survey data available, but what can be gleaned is that the explanations lies with linking the descriptive findings with other factors. They cannot be viewed in isolation, but in the integrated mosaic of multiple factors.

Part of the explanatory mosaic lies with class or the socio-economic positions of Malaysians. Using income as a proxy for class, the findings for both the electoral polling station data and ABS survey data show that income is also significantly related to regime support. A similar pattern emerged with upper and middle class voters more likely to support the regime than lower class voters. This was evident in the post-election polling. An estimated 60% of working Malaysians record less than US\$1,000 a month, so lower class voters make up the majority of the electorate. Disproportionately more of these supported the government in the last election. Many have argued this had to do with the targeted patronage of the incumbent government who handed out an estimated US\$1,500 per voter. The predominant form involved a program known as BR1M, where individuals earning less than the US\$1,000 were given direct payments.

The ABS third wave data described below also shows that as income rises, the support for the regime declines. These results were significant, but also were overshadowed in the multinomial logit model.

Graph 5: Income vs. Regime Support

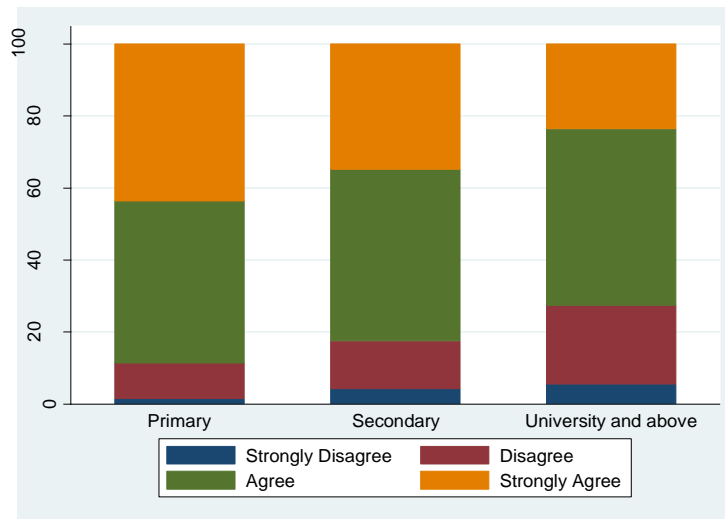


Individually, each of the major social cleavages did relate to regime support, but when integrated with other causal factors were less explanatory than they have been credited. Understanding political divisions in Malaysia requires delving further than social cleavages.

*Political Socialization: Education and Information Sources*

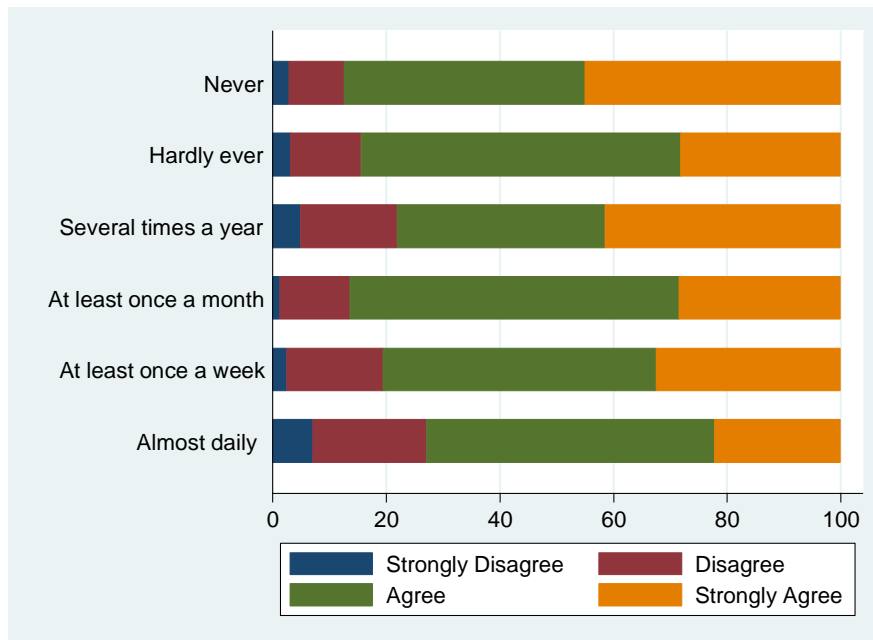
In interpreting income differences and regime support, for example, a look at political socialization is helpful in enriching our understanding. Higher incomes are linked to higher levels of education, and the ABS data shows this pattern is also linked significantly to regime support, as shown in the graph below. Education levels, and the other explanatory factors explored below, were not reported in the post-election polling. What is striking is that education persisted as a factor accounting for political differences when all the explanatory variables were incorporated. Education remained significant in the multinomial logit analysis.

*Graph 6: Education Levels and Regime Support*



Other forms of political socialization also underscored political divisions. Citizens were asked how often they used the internet, and the results show that Malaysians who relied on the internet were more likely to have lower levels of regime support. The internet continued to be a source of alternative information to the government controlled mainstream media. This factor also remained significant in the multinomial logit model.

*Graph 7: Internet Use and Regime Support*



Taken together, political socialization provided more of explanatory understanding of Malaysia’s ongoing political divisions than the socio-economic cleavages.

### *Political Culture: Ideological Dimensions of Division*

Closely associated with the shaping of outlooks are political attitudes, shaped by political socialization over time. Our analysis looks at three political attitudes –religiosity, political traditionalism and nationalism. Of these, the last two proved to be significant in explaining the differences within Malaysia.

Religiosity did not affect regime support. Those who were more religious did support the regime more of less than those who were not religious. This is despite the fact that the opposition has used religion in its appeal to Muslims through the Islamist party and through the Christian faction of the Democratic Action Party. After the GE13, the Islamist party proposed introducing stricter Islamic religious laws. The findings suggest introducing measures geared toward religiosity would not be decisive in changing underlying patterns of regime support.

In contrast, political ideological differences proved to be significant. Using the ABS data, we studied how political traditionalism – conservative views of governance – were associated with regime support. We found those that citizens who were more conservative were more likely to support the regime and this factor continued to remain significant in the multinomial logit model. A similar finding was present for nationalism as well.

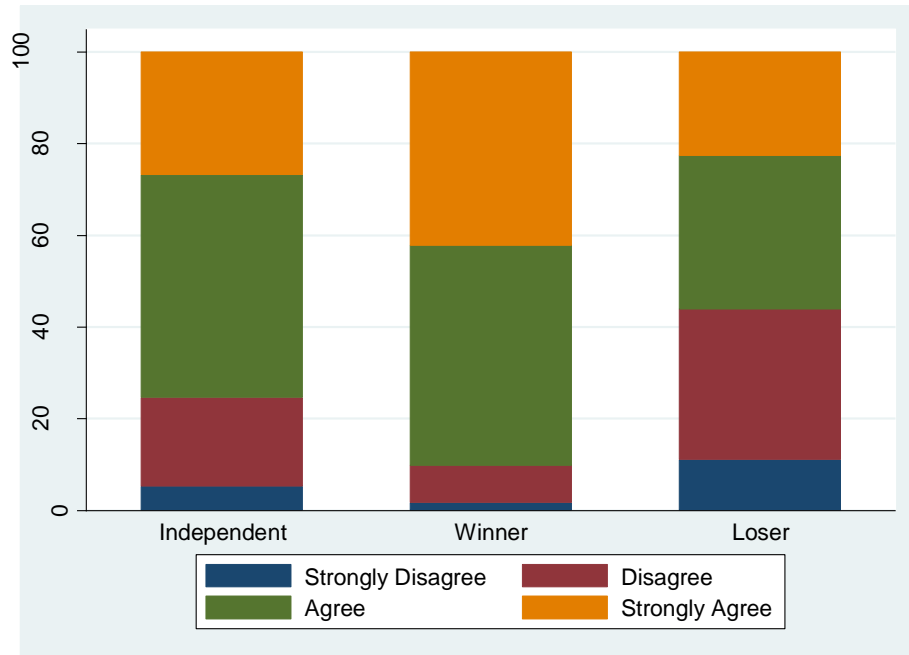
The explanatory importance of political culture reinforces the role of political socialization and values. Political divisions in Malaysia have less to do with who and where the people are, but rather with how their views of politics are shaped and the views themselves.

### *Performance and Party Matters: State-Society Issues*

The relationship with political institutions was equally significant in our understanding of political divisions. Views of how the government performed were closely linked to regime support. Citizens who held positive views of the incumbent government's economic performance and perceived low levels of corruption were more supportive of the regime. These factors also remained significant in the multinomial logit model. Government performance equally importantly underlines regime support.

Another state-society factor examined was party affinity, citizens reportedly close to the winning or losing camps within the two different political coalitions. Malaysia has the largest share of its population in East Asia joining political parties, over 20% of the population. UMNO, for example, reports over 3 million members, with the Islamist party PAS recording nearly 2 million. As shown in graph 8 below, these party ties were connected to regime support; winners had high support, with losers low levels. This variable also proved to be significant in the multinomial logit model as well.

*Graph 8: Winner-Loser vs. Regime Support*



We went further to see if patronage from the state also was linked to regime support. This issue is difficult to measure. The question selected examined the scope of patronage networks. The findings were interesting: citizens with a broader range of social networks were less supportive of the regime, less dependent on the government. The links to the government and the party influenced how citizens connected to the system and were split among themselves. State-society dynamics were as important explanatory factors of political divisions as political values and political socialization.

*Underlying Pressures for Change: Implications for Democracy*

Attention to the views of ordinary citizens in understanding democracy and polarization in Malaysia reveals a very different picture than that found in the press or political analysis. In the press, the predominant image is that Malaysia is ready to implode due to the sharp ethnic divisions and socio-economic cleavages. It is equally fragmented from the bitter contestation among the political parties. In academia, the dominant view is that the strong state will prevent democratization, either through its resources or control of the state apparatus itself.<sup>12</sup> This analysis modifies many of the leading interpretations and these modifications offer different trajectories.

By looking at the views of citizens, rather than just voting and political society, we have found a need to reevaluate how we assess divisions in Malaysia. The polity is less polarized than popularly projected. Poles do exist and are active in shaping national political discourse, but citizens are more in the center of the divide. Malaysia’s middle ground is robust, and this middle ground wants change in the system (greater democracy), although the change is modest in scope rather than major. Malaysian politics has long centered on the calls from reform since the Asian financial crisis of 1998-1999, and continues to follow this trajectory. There is significant unanimity in wanting to make Malaysia more open and democratic, albeit modestly.

<sup>12</sup> See Dan Slater and Joseph Wong. ‘Conceding and Thriving: Strong-State Democratization in Asia,’ *Comparative Democratization Newsletter* 10 (June 2012), 1/12-15. And his *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)



Our analysis of the political divisions in society highlights that views of politics are not rigidly cast in social cleavages such as ethnicity. They are evolving with changes taking place in Malaysia and these changes are pointing to a more democratic trajectory. The rise of the middle class, education levels with more Malaysians in university and greater use of alternative sources for political socialization – all tied to modernization and globalization – are currently dividing the country, but over time point to greater numbers favoring more democratic views and less support for the current regime in its current form. Political socialization and attitudes are important explanations of why Malaysians differ, more important than their race or locality. These factors are changing with modernization and globalization and this evolution favors more political openness.

By bringing in the views of citizens into this analysis, we have been able to move away from the state strength approaches of democratization in Malaysia to substantively look at interaction with society. The link to parties, the ability to have networks for support beyond the government and the views of the government's performance all proved to be significant in underlying political divisions in the society. Similar to the issues of political attitudes, these areas are not static and evolving. The interaction between political parties, the government and citizens will ultimately be the catalyst for (or against) democratic change. Of particular importance will be the ability of parties to maintain loyalty of their political supporters and the government's ability to manage the economy and minimize the perception of corruption. For now, the incumbent government remains in control in setting the parameters of democratization, but citizens are drivers as well. They are divided, but the sources of these divisions are dynamic and evolving, offering modest hope for greater democracy.

## Appendix A: Technical Notes

### Regime Support [Low→High]

80. Over the long run, our system of government is capable of solving the problems our country faces.
81. Thinking in general, I am proud of our system of government.
82. A system like ours, even if it runs into problems, deserves the people's support.
83. I would rather live under our system of government than any other that I can think of.
84. Compared with other systems in the world, would you say our system of government works fine as it is, needs minor change, needs major change, or should be replaced?

### Ethnicity:

1. Malays
2. Chinese
3. Indian
4. East Malaysian Non-Muslim Ethnic Groups

### Income:

1. Lowest Level
2. Low Level
3. Middle Level
4. High Level
5. Highest Level

### Urbanization

Which of the following levels within the country the respondent live?

- 1 Village or countryside
- 2 Small city or town (less than 100,000 people)
- 3 Regional center or Other major cities (100,000 plus)
- 4 Capital or Megacity (1 million population plus)

### Education:

- Level 1. No formal education, Incomplete primary/elementary, Complete primary/elementary.  
Level 2. Incomplete secondary/high school: technical/vocational type, Complete secondary/high school: technical/vocational type, Incomplete secondary/high school, Complete secondary/high school  
Level 3. Some university education, University education completed, Post-graduate degree.

### Internet Usage

How often do you use the internet?

1. Hardly ever
2. At least once a week
3. At least once a month
4. Several times a year
5. Almost daily

### Political Traditionalism [Low→High]

129. We should get rid of parliament and elections and have a strong leader decide things
130. Only one political party should be allowed to stand for election and hold office.
131. The army (military) should come in to govern the country.
132. We should get rid of elections and parliaments and have experts make decisions on behalf of the people.
138. The government should consult religious authorities when interpreting the laws.
139. Women should not be involved in politics as much as men.
140. People with little or no education should have as much say in politics as highly-educated people.
141. Government leaders are like the head of a family; we should all follow their decisions.
142. The government should decide whether certain ideas should be allowed to be discussed in society.
143. Harmony of the community will be disrupted if people organize lots of groups.
144. When judges decide important cases, they should accept the view of the executive branch.
145. If the government is constantly checked [i.e. monitored and supervised] by the legislature, it cannot possibly accomplish great things.
146. If we have political leaders who are morally upright, we can let them decide everything.
147. If people have too many different ways of thinking, society will be chaotic.
148. When the country is facing a difficult situation, it is ok for the government to disregard the law in order to deal with the situation.

#### Religiosity

How often do you practice religious services or rituals?

1. Several times a day
2. Once a day
3. Several times a week
4. Once a week
5. Several times a month
6. Once a month
7. Only during festivals (or several times a year)
8. Once a year
9. Less often
10. Practically never
11. No religion

#### Nationalism [Low→High]

137. A citizen should always remain loyal only to his country, no matter how imperfect it is or what wrong it has done.
154. How proud are you to be a citizen of Malaysia?
155. Given the chance, how willing would you be to go and live in another country?

#### Anti-Corruption [Low→High]

116. How widespread do you think corruption and bribe-taking are in your local/municipal government?
117. How widespread do you think corruption and bribe-taking are in the national government based in Putrajaya?
118. In your opinion, is the government working to crack down on corruption and root out bribery?

#### Economic Evaluation

1. How would you rate the overall economic condition of our country today?
2. How would you describe the change in the economic condition of our country over the last few years?
4. As for your own family, how do you rate the economic situation of your family today?
5. How would you compare the current economic condition of your family with what it was a few years ago?

#### Winner-Loser

Winners: Barisan Nasional, UMNO, MCA, MIC, GERAKAN, PBS, PBB, SUPP

Losers: People Alliance, PAS, DAP, PKR, SAPP

Independent and Others: SNAP, STAR, Other, No Party Identity

#### Patronage Networks

29. If you have a difficult problem to manage, are there people outside your household you can ask for help?

Appendix B: Regime Support and Explanatory Factors

	Regime Support
Economic Evaluation	0.135*** 0.024
Ethnicity	
Chinese	-0.022 0.043
Indian	-0.05 0.055
East Malaysian Non-Malays	-0.026 0.061
Income	0.002 0.014
Urban-Rural	-0.005 0.021
Education	
Secondary	-0.049 0.036
University and Above	-0.096* 0.057
Internet Usage	-0.018** 0.008
Religiosity	0 0.008
Political Traditionalism	0.254*** 0.038
Nationalism	0.174*** 0.031
Low Perceived Corruption	0.234*** 0.026
Patronage/Social Network	-0.045*** 0.014
Winner-Loser	
Winner	0.12*** 0.045
Loser	-0.333*** 0.054
Constant	0.873*** 0.195
N	920