

## **ELECTORAL SYSTEMS: A FEW BASIC POINTS OF COMPARISON<sup>1</sup>**

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1. All electoral systems for legislative bodies convert votes into seats. The ways in which they do this affect the calculations of voters, the accountability of elected representatives to their constituents, the tendency of parties to form coalitions before or after elections, the tendency of those parties or coalitions to appeal to voters across social and ethnic cleavages or to focus more narrowly on particular segments of the society, the ability of those parties or coalitions to form governments after elections, and many other features of political life. Before choosing an electoral system, it is necessary to decide exactly what problems in the existing system need to be fixed and then to forecast whether a possible new system would help solve that problem and whether it might create other problems.
2. Malaysia, with its current lineup of multiple political parties, may have difficulty after the next election in forming a government. If no party or coalition wins an election with a majority of seats, there will need to be negotiations, possibly lengthy bargaining, to create a coalition that gets to a majority of seats. It might not be a good idea to choose an electoral system that is conducive to further fragmentation of the party system and that might make it harder to form a government after the next election.
3. Malaysia has a long history of pre-electoral coalitions (BN, then PH), which are incentivized by the need to win the largest number of votes in any constituency. To do this, parties that form coalitions pool the votes of their supporters to get to at least a plurality of votes. That is the incentive structure created by first-past-the-post (plurality) elections, in which contests are decided by asking which candidate has the largest number of votes to win the single seat available for each constituency. By contrast, list-system proportional representation (list PR) creates seats with multiple members to be elected. In such a system, a candidate does not need to receive the largest number of votes to win a seat. Instead, seats are awarded more or less in proportion to the votes cast for each candidate (above a minimum threshold of the percentage of votes needed to win a seat). This means that a candidate can win a seat with much smaller percentages of the votes cast in the constituency, far below a majority. And voters in each constituency can elect several (or many) members from various parties, each of which has some support in that constituency. As a result, many parties may be able to win at least some seats. If this happens, it may be difficult for any party or

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<sup>1</sup> This handout provides a basic framework to follow the lecture. It is not a full summary of the lecture.

parties to secure an overall majority of seats needed to form a government. Under list PR, parties have fewer incentives to form coalitions before elections, because their need to pool votes to get to a plurality or majority in any constituency no longer exists. In fact, PR could lead large parties to split along factional lines, making it even harder to form governments. These possibilities, which could cause problems in Malaysia's politics, need to be considered carefully before reforming the electoral system.

4. First-past-the-post (plurality, single member) elections tend to be conducive to electing relatively moderate candidates and parties, because they are the ones who can build pluralities necessary to win elections. Some PR systems on the other hand, make it possible for both moderate and more extreme candidates to be elected, because they can be elected on smaller fractions of the votes cast in any constituency. In any divided society, this could present a problem. List PR also tends to create weaker bonds between elected representatives and the voters who elected them. This is because in large multimember constituencies, each possibly as large as a Malaysian state, no one representative is accountable to some specific smaller territorial area of the large constituency, and so none has an incentive to deal with the particular concerns and problems of those constituents. Voters accustomed to representatives who deal with problems when brought to their attention could be disappointed.