

IKMAS Webinar Series

Changing the Electoral System for a More Democratic Malaysia? Challenges and Options



Speakers

Prof. Emeritus Dr. Donald L. Horowitz
Duke University

Assoc Prof Dr Helen Ting
IKMAS, UKM

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Electoral System Reform in Malaysia: Lessons from Other PR Systems
By Prof. Emeritus Dr. Donald L. Horowitz, Duke University

Abstract

Reforming an electoral system requires a careful analysis of the likely effects of the proposed system in the specific circumstances of the country for which the reform is proposed. No system is necessarily better than others in all conditions. Electoral systems affect the calculations of voters, party competition and coalitions (both pre-electoral and post-electoral), the ability to form governments and pass legislation, the relationship of legislators to their constituents, and conciliation or exacerbation of social and ethnic cleavages. After explaining how electoral systems shape the choices available to voters, I will then examine the Malaysian proposal for closed-list proportional representation (PR) system. I evaluate the likely effect of the proposal on Malaysia's pre-electoral multiethnic coalitions and suggest that the proposed PR system would make formation of such pre-electoral coalitions less rewarding. The new system would also be likely to incentivize creation of more political parties, making formation of post-electoral coalitions to govern the country more difficult and time-consuming. Drawing on evidence from other PR systems, I will show that PR elections will not eliminate the impact of the vote-seat disparity that can allow Malaysian governments to be based on a majority of seats but with less than a majority of votes cast. I conclude with an evaluation of several possible electoral systems for Malaysia.

Donald L. Horowitz is the James B. Duke Professor of Law and Political Science Emeritus at Duke University. He holds law degrees from Syracuse and Harvard and a Ph.D. in political science from Harvard. Professor Horowitz is the author of eight books: *The Courts and Social Policy* (1977), which won the Louis Brownlow Award of the National Academy of Public Administration; *The Jurocracy* (1977), a book about government lawyers; *Coup Theories and Officers' Motives: Sri Lanka in Comparative Perspective* (1980); *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (1985, 2000); *A Democratic South Africa? Constitutional Engineering in a Divided Society* (1991), which won the Ralph Bunche Prize of the American Political Science Association; *The Deadly Ethnic Riot* (2001); *Constitutional Change and Democracy in Indonesia*, published in 2013 by Cambridge University Press and issued in a Bahasa Indonesia translation in 2014. His new book, *Constitutional Processes and Democratic Commitment*, was published by Yale University Press in 2021. Professor Horowitz is currently writing a book about ethnic power sharing and constitutional design, particularly for divided societies, a subject on which he has advised in a number of countries

Electoral System Reform: Public Perception and Options
By Assoc Prof Dr Helen Ting (IKMAS, UKM)

Abstract

The Electoral Reform Committee which handed in its report and recommendations on electoral reform in August 2020 has recommended that the electoral system in Malaysia be changed to Closed-List Proportional Representation System. A number of the Members of Parliament on both sides of the political divide have spoken in favour of such change, with some seeing it as a means to prevent party-hopping. Others expressed support for it as PR system could easily integrate some forms of gender quota in order to improve the dismal rate of women lawmakers' representation in Malaysia. Two other arguments that have been raised in favour of integrating a more proportional component into the Malaysian electoral system are to address the problems of malapportionment, gerrymandering and vote-seat proportionality, as well as to provide more space for the representation of small parties.

An eventual change in the electoral system would be a major game-changer for the Malaysian electoral politics. This would exert profound impacts on the future political landscape and dynamics in Malaysia, and this study is done in response to these concerns. While the first presentation will be done in a comparative perspective, this presentation is based on the findings from a nationwide survey of more than 2,600 respondents, whose questionnaire was formulated based on the insights gathered from 12 focus group discussions. The success of any electoral system requires the cooperation and buy-ins from the voters, as ultimately, their acceptance and appreciation of the electoral outcomes would determine the legitimacy of the electoral institution. How would voters regard possible changes in the electoral process and politics? What are the key features in the current electoral system viewed as important by them? The second part of the presentation will assess critically the four reasons put forward in support of an electoral system change.

Helen Ting (PhD in political science, Sciences Po, Paris) is an associate professor at IKMAS, UKM. Her research interests include issues related to identity and agency, national integration, politics of national identity, history education, interethnic and inter-religious relations. She was a visiting scholar at Humboldt University, Berlin (2012-2013) as a recipient of Erasmus Mundus Post-Doctoral Fellowship. Between 2014 and 2017, she was a member of the International Pluralism Advisory Group of Global Centre for Pluralism, Ottawa. She is currently a non-resident Distinguished Research Fellow at the Institute of Malaysia Studies, Xiamen University in Xiamen. Her publications include 'Cross-ethnic Vote Pooling in West Malaysia: The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Democratic Action Party (DAP) Compared' (NUS Press), 'Chinese Politics in the 2016 Sarawak State Elections: Case Studies of Dudong and Bawang