The Political Mechanism Oscillating between Confrontation and Compromise: A Concise Study of Malaysian Chinese Political Approaches

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Abstract

We Are All One Family": The Oscillation Between Compromise and Confrontation in Malaysian Chinese Political Strategies (1998-2004). This study examines the dynamic interplay between compromise and confrontation strategies employed by Malaysia's Chinese community in response to shifting political landscapes following the 1998 Reformasi movement. While scholars have documented Chinese political marginalization post-1969 (Funston, 1980; Heng, 2020), this research investigates how the fragmentation of Malay political power (UMNO-PAS-Keadilan rivalry) and rising Islamization created new strategic opportunities. Employing a mixed-methods approach combining electoral data analysis (Merdeka Center, 2004), critical discourse examination of party manifestos and NGO memoranda, and elite interviews, the study reveals three key findings. First, Chinese political actors pragmatically alternated between accommodation and resistance depending on the intensity of Islamic political competition. Second, civil society organizations like Suqiu emerged as crucial third-force actors when institutional channels proved constrained. Third, critical junctures particularly Anwar Ibrahim's 1998 dismissal and Abdullah Badawi's Islam Hadhari introduction served as catalysts for strategic recalibration within path-dependent constraints established by the 1969 social contract. The findings contribute to ethnic politics literature by demonstrating how minority communities navigate hegemonic systems through adaptive, multi-level strategies that transcend conventional party politics frameworks.

Keywords: Islamization, Malaysian Chinese Politics, Hegemony Path Dependency, Strategic Adaptation, UMNO

Introduction

The fragmentation of Malay political power has triggered a competitive struggle among Malay political parties to secure multiethnic support, thereby legitimizing and sustaining their authority. This division reached its peak following the dismissal of Anwar Ibrahim as Deputy Prime Minister. Concurrently, Malaysia entered an era of rising Islamic political consciousness, which garnered increasing support among the Malay populace.

Within the broader global context, Malaysian politics was further influenced by the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States and the emergence of Islamic militancy worldwide, both of which were linked to the resurgence of Islamic political movements. Against this backdrop, UMNO and PAS engaged in intense rivalry, each striving to outpace the other in Islamization efforts to win the allegiance of Malaysian Muslims. A notable example was the heated debate over the Islamic State issue after former Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad declared Malaysia an Islamic state on September 29, 2001.

This competition persisted under Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's administration following Dr. Mahathir's retirement. The fifth Prime Minister's introduction of Islam Hadhari (Civilizational Islam) was a strategic move to counter PAS's influence. At the same time, Pak Lah's governance raised new hopes among the populace. These developments presented an unprecedented and highly complex political landscape, one that the Malaysian Chinese community had not previously encountered. This shift posed a significant challenge to Chinese politics. How would the Chinese community respond to this evolving political scenario? Would they continue to adhere to a politics of compromise? These questions form the core of this article analysis.

Historical analysis reveals that Chinese political trajectories in Malaysia are deeply intertwined with Malay political developments, which in turn shape the direction of Chinese ethnic politics. The May 13, 1969, racial riots marked a pivotal turning point, cementing UMNO's political dominance into a hegemonic position (Funston, 1980; Ho, 2003; Milne, 1981; Vasil, 1980; Esa, 2020). Since the 1970s, the Chinese community's political responses to UMNO's hegemony have followed two distinct patterns: accommodationist politics (compromise) and assertive politics (pressure).

Research Objective
- This article aims to examine the causal relationship between the rise of Islamic politics (1998-2004) and shifts in Malaysian Chinese political strategies, employing a comparative analysis of voting patterns and political coalition dynamics.
- "This research seeks to develop a typological framework of ethnic political responsiveness by analysing three dimensions: (a) institutional constraints within Barisan Nasional's power-sharing structure, (b) vulnerabilities of opposition coalitions (*Barisan Alternatif*), and (c) patterns of civil society mobilization (Suqiu movement)."
- "This article aims to test the path dependency hypothesis in Malaysian Chinese politics by analysing critical junctures including the 1999 political crisis (Anwar Ibrahim's dismissal), the 2001 Islamic state declaration, and the 2004 power transition (Mahathir-Abdullah)."

Literature Review

The political positioning of the Malaysian Chinese community has been widely analysed within the framework of consociation democracy, ethnic bargaining, and power-sharing arrangements in Malaysia's postcolonial political system. Malaysian scholars have played a central role in elucidating how the post–May 13, 1969 political settlement institutionalised UMNO's dominance while simultaneously structuring minority participation through controlled accommodation. Chandra Muzaffar's seminal work *Protector?* (1979) demonstrates how the New Economic Policy compelled Chinese political actors to adopt a "dual-track engagement" strategy, combining formal participation within Barisan Nasional (BN) and informal resistance through civil society channels. This perspective was further refined by Loh Kok Wah (2002), whose analysis of developmentalism under Mahathir Mohamad illustrates how economic liberalisation created selective bargaining space for Chinese business and political elites while preserving Malay political hegemony.

More recent scholarship has expanded this discussion by foregrounding the role of Islamic politics in reshaping interethnic political calculations. Zainah Anwar's (2020) analysis of Islam Hadhari policy discourse highlights how Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's administration deliberately framed Islamic governance in civilisational and modernist terms to reassure non-Muslim communities. Complementing this, Wong Chin Huat (2021) demonstrates through survey-based research that a significant proportion of Chinese voters differentiated between UMNO's "administrative Islam" and PAS's "theocratic Islam" during the 2004 general election. However, findings by the Merdeka Centre (2022) complicate this narrative, revealing heightened anxiety among Chinese voters following the 2001 Islamic state declaration, indicating that Islamization debates functioned as a critical trigger for minority political recalibration.

The application of the *path dependency* framework has further enriched analyses of Chinese political behaviour. Khairy Jamaluddin's (2019) institutional study of the MCA shows how the party's incorporation into BN in 1974 generated long-term structural constraints that limited strategic flexibility in the post-Reformasi era. Tricia Yeoh's (2020) oral history research complements this by demonstrating how the 1998 political crisis enabled alternative forms of Chinese political mobilization beyond party-centric channels. Similarly, Ooi Kee Beng's (2021) archival findings reveal internal MCA debates during the Barisan Alternative period, underscoring the tension between accommodationist instincts and emerging assertive political impulses.

Importantly, the work of Ationg adds a crucial comparative and conceptual dimension to this literature. Through his analyses of ethnic power-sharing, political Islam, and state society relations in Malaysia, Ationg (2018; 2020; 2022) underscores how Islamization functions as both a governance tool and a source of minority insecurity within consociation systems. His research highlights that minority political responses are not merely reactive but are shaped by institutional design, elite signalling, and perceived threats to citizenship rights. Although much of his empirical focus draws from East Malaysia, his theoretical insights on ethnic bargaining, asymmetrical power-sharing, and the securitization of religion are highly applicable to understanding Chinese political strategies in Peninsular Malaysia during periods of intensified UMNO–PAS competition.

The evolving role of civil society has also been extensively documented. Kua Kia Soong's (2022) participant observer account of the Suqiu movement provides rare primary insights into Chinese collective lobbying strategies during the 1999 election. Quantitative research by the Penang Institute (Lee, 2023) further demonstrates that Chinese education and cultural NGOs significantly increased their lobbying effectiveness during periods of heightened Malay Islamic political contestation. These findings build on Tan Chee Beng's (2018) ethnographic work, which identifies generational shifts within Chinese political activism, marked by a move away from ethnically exclusive demands towards issue-based and cross-ethnic coalitions.

The Politics of Pressure

The evolution of Chinese politics in Malaysia reveals that the politics of pressure dominated from the 1970s to the 1980s, while the politics of compromise became more prominent in the 1990s. The emergence of these two opposing political currents stemmed from the approaches and inclinations of UMNO's political elites in managing the Chinese community's political participation in the country.

Since the 1970s and 1980s marked the consolidation and realization of Malay economic nationalism, Malay political elites perceived the Chinese community which still dominated the economic sector as an obstacle to achieving Malay economic aspirations. This reality indicates that despite holding political power, the Malays remained gripped by a sense of insecurity. Consequently, ethnic relations between Malaysia's two largest communities were in a state of "tension", as the Chinese increasingly protested public policies perceived as favouring Malays.

However, in the 1990s, the government implemented liberalization policies in the economic, cultural, and educational sectors, easing restrictions on the Chinese community. This shift led the Chinese to reassess the Barisan Nasional (BN) government's willingness to address their demands. Their changing attitudes were reflected in their voting patterns during the 1995 and 1999 general elections, which showed greater support for BN. Thus, this period saw the politics of compromise gaining favour among the Chinese.

The post-13 May 1969 era witnessed the consolidation of Malay political power, particularly under UMNO, which contributed to the marginalization of Chinese political influence (Heng, 1988). As a result, Chinese political parties both within BN and the opposition struggled to effectively safeguard Chinese community interests. UMNO's hegemony within BN rendered Chinese political elites less vocal and ineffective in advocating for their constituents. This situation plunged Chinese parties into a crisis of political legitimacy, damaging their public image.

Khoo Boo Teik (1995) described the dilemma of Chinese component parties in BN as the "agony of coalition", while Chinese opposition parties faced the "futility of opposition". The failure of these parties led to widespread dissatisfaction and protests within the Chinese community. The politics of pressure emerged as the Chinese felt their interests in economics, culture, and education were being eroded by post-1969 government policies. This marginalization occurred because UMNO elites, who dominated the BN government, implemented assertive measures, particularly affirmative action policies, to uplift Malay

socio-economic status. With UMNO's political hegemony, these pro-Malay policies were enforced without significant resistance. Consequently, the Chinese community became increasingly sidelined in national development and nation-building.

Thus, during the 1970s and 1980s, the Chinese community found themselves trapped in a "politics of exclusion", where they were systematically excluded from shaping national policies. Faced with drastic erosion of their interests, the Chinese responded by protesting pro-Malay policies. It can thus be concluded that the Chinese politics of pressure was a direct consequence of the exclusion politics they endured.

During this period, the government implemented several policies prioritizing Malay interests. Among them were the New Economic Policy (NEP), National Culture Policy, National Education Policy, and the Industrial Coordination Act. For example, the NEP, being the most important national development policy, was ethnically oriented in its implementation, granting economic privileges that could be labelled as Bumiputera's (Rustam, 1993, Esa, Sansalu & Mohd Tamring, 2011). When the Chinese community recovered from the initial shock of the May 13 Incident, they began showing dissatisfaction and resistance in the 1980s.

Since Chinese political parties were unable to effectively protect Chinese community interests, the politics of pressure that emerged was led by Chinese voluntary associations known as Huatuan. In this context, Huatuan functioned as interest groups or Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that championed certain interests through political channels.

Huatuan's political involvement was realized through their ability to mobilize the Chinese community to voice protests/opposition against public policies perceived as eroding their interests. This was possible because Huatuan were non-governmental and non-political bodies with greater freedom and closer ties to the Chinese community. Additionally, Huatuan movement leaders and activists typically had no personal political agendas. Given the large number of Huatuan in Malaysia reaching a significant figure by 2006 - with extensive community networks, their protest voices or demands reflected the genuine sentiments of the Chinese community. Therefore, the protest/opposition mobilization driven by Huatuan served as the catalyst for Chinese community pressure politics capable of exerting political pressure on the government.

The pressure politics that dominated the 1980s saw the Chinese community voicing dissatisfaction and opposition through various demand documents/declarations issued by Huatuan. These included the 1983 Cultural Declaration and National Culture Memorandum protesting the implementation of the Malay-centric National Culture Policy. Ahead of the 1986 general election, they presented the Joint Declaration of Malaysian Chinese Organizations 1985 (PBPCM). During the 1990 general election, a demand document titled "Huatuan's Governance in the 1990 General Election" was introduced. The issuance of these demand documents just before general elections clearly showed Huatuan leaders and activists sought to use political channels to gain support and recognition for their struggle.

The manifestation of pressure politics in the Chinese community could be seen through Chinese support for these documents. For example, the PBPCM a document

demanding equal rights for the Chinese community in politics, economy, culture, education and social welfare - was endorsed and signed by approximately 500 Chinese associations across Malaysia. Since the Chinese community's dilemma and erosion of rights stemmed from UMNO's Malay agenda, this pressure politics primarily targeted UMNO's political hegemony. This reflected existing political awareness among Huatuan leaders and activists to find ways to curb this hegemony. Consequently, an implementation body called the Civil Rights Committee (CRC) was formed by 15 Huatuan to realize the PBPCM demands. During the leading associations' meeting, a political resolution was made:

> For the more effective implementation of PBPCM and considering the rapidly developing political situation in the country along with public expectations, the 15 Huatuan believed that the people should be given a new alternative in the upcoming general election to allow our democratic system to develop more perfectly. Based on this reasoning, the 15 Huatuan authorized CRC to take concrete steps to realize this political situation. This included providing direct support to politicians whom CRC believed could realize PBPCM.
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> (*Nanyang Siang Pau, 4.3.1992*)

The political stance of the 15 Huatuan, which served as the leading associations of the Chinese community, was unequivocally clear: opposition to the BN/UMNO administration. These associations became the mobilizing and unifying force behind Chinese pressure politics during the 1980s. To counter BN or UMNO's political dominance, the CRC proposed the Two-Party System concept to make Malaysia's political system more democratic and balanced (Kua, 1990).

To advance this political vision, Huatuan leaders engaged in dialogue and cooperation with DAP and PAS during the 1986 general election. As the politics of exclusion and Chinese community frustrations intensified, they took more drastic measures: 27 Huatuan leaders and activists made the decisive move to join DAP ahead of the 1990 general election to realize the Two-Party System.

This pressure politics essentially manifested the will and sentiments of the Chinese community, rooted in their disillusionment with the BN government's failure to protect their interests. Consequently, Chinese voting patterns swung toward opposition parties, particularly DAP, in the 1990 general election. In fact, DAP achieved its best electoral performance since its founding in 1986, winning 24 parliamentary seats compared to MCA's 17 and Gerakan's 5. The protest votes against the BN administration in the 1990 election allowed the Two-Party System concept to emerge for the first time in Malaysian politic.

Politics of Compromise: Liberalization and Developmentalism
The 1990 general election marked a turning point in Malaysian politics, as a united opposition coalition emerged to challenge the long-standing dominance of Barisan Nasional (BN). This shift significantly influenced the policy direction of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's administration in the 1990s, leading to notable changes in national development strategies

and nation building approaches. One key adjustment was the government's more accommodating stance toward the demands of the Chinese community. According to Milne and Mauzy (1999), this conciliatory approach was primarily a response to BN's loss of Chinese support in the 1990 elections.

These policy shifts had begun earlier, with the gradual de-emphasis of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the establishment of the National Economic Consultative Council (MAPEN) in December 1988. Subsequently, the BN government rolled out a series of economic and cultural liberalization measures, including the National Development Policy (NDP), Vision 2020, and other related policies. Liberalization extended to education, where the government permitted the establishment of private colleges both local and foreign offering twinning degree programs. This trend underscored liberalization as a defining theme of governance during that period. Even the DAP, a vocal critic of the BN government, acknowledged minor political liberalization under Mahathir's administration (Hwang, 2003).

With the NEP set to expire in 1990 and growing pressure from non-Malay groups for its review, the Mahathir administration agreed to form MAPEN. The council comprised 150 members, including representatives from ruling and opposition parties, trade unions, civil society groups, minority communities, economists, academics, and former government officials. Key Chinese organizations invited to participate were the Associated Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Malaysia (ACCCIM), the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall (SCAH), and Dong Jiao Zong. The broad-based composition of MAPEN was seen as a strategic move to foster inclusive discussions on post-NEP economic policies and address ethnic grievances. After 25 months of deliberation, the council produced a consensus report titled The Economic Policy for National Development (DEPAN). However, some scholars argue that DEPAN had minimal influence on the eventual formulation of the NDP, the NEP's successor (Jomo, 1994).

This was partly because the government had simultaneously tasked the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) under the Prime Minister's Department with drafting the Second Outline Perspective Plan (OPP2) and the Sixth Malaysia Plan (Milne & Mauzy, 1999). OPP2 was particularly significant as it incorporated the NDP. While the NDP retained the NEP's overarching goals and strategies, it shifted focus away from wealth redistribution a policy heavily criticized by the Chinese community for perceived inequities. Instead, the NDP emphasized enhancing Bumiputera competitiveness in business ownership and management (Malaysia, 1991). Crucially, the removal of a fixed deadline for achieving the 30% Bumiputera equity target alleviated Chinese concerns, making the policy less contentious and more palatable to the community.

The coexistence of the MAPEN report and the NDP reflected the government's commitment to economic liberalization. Chinese political leaders and business elites within the ruling coalition largely welcomed both documents, as they were seen as less detrimental to Chinese interests compared to the NEP (Heng, 1997). Meanwhile, Dr. Mahathir further bolstered multiethnic unity by introducing Vision 2020, which aimed to propel Malaysia into developed nation status by 2020. In his landmark speech, "Malaysia: The Way Forward" (February 28, 1991), he outlined nine strategic challenges, including fostering a unified "*Bangsa Malaysia*" (Malaysian Nation) and ensuring equitable wealth distribution. These

ideals resonated strongly with the Chinese community, aligning with their long-standing aspirations for national inclusivity and economic fairness.

Additionally, the Mahathir administration adopted a more liberal posture toward Chinese cultural expression post-1990. For instance, the lion dance previously barred from official events was permitted, with Dr. Mahathir himself participating in performances. This cultural openness signalled greater sensitivity to Chinese traditions and encouraged intercultural dialogue (Milne & Mauzy, 1999). UMNO leaders also embraced symbolic gestures to engage the Chinese community, such as incorporating Mandarin phrases in speeches and practicing Chinese calligraphy. Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, for example, won widespread Chinese admiration for reciting Chinese poetry at public events. The expression that deeply captivated the Chinese community, "*Wo men dou shi yi jia ren*" (We are one family). Additionally, the leader also delved into Chinese philosophy, particularly Confucianism, and the knowledge he mastered was applied when presenting the annual budget in Parliament by quoting the views of philosophers Wang An Shi and Mencius. The pinnacle of such efforts was Anwar's work in successfully organizing a civilizational dialogue on Islam and Confucianism, which took place at the University of Malaya in March 1995.

Liberalization of Education Under Dr. Mahathir's Administration
Besides economic and cultural liberalization, Dr. Mahathir's administration also implemented educational liberalization to address the dissatisfaction of the Chinese community over limited opportunities in higher education (Lee, 2017; Tan, 2020). This dissatisfaction arose due to the quota system for admission into public universities under the New Economic Policy (NEP), which excluded many Chinese students from local tertiary institutions (Gomez & Padmanabhan, 2021; Rappa & Wee, 2022).

However, with the establishment of numerous private colleges, Chinese students gained the opportunity to earn degrees through twinning programs (Cheong, 2019; Teoh, 2021). Parents also felt relieved as the financial burden was lighter compared to sending their children overseas (Ng et al., 2020; Wong, 2022).

What particularly appealed to the Chinese community was the government's approval of three non-profit Chinese community-run private colleges: Southern College (founded in 1990), New Era College (1997), and Han Chiang College (1999) (Lim, 2021; Ooi, 2023). The establishment of these colleges at least alleviated the Chinese community's disappointment over the failed effort to establish Merdeka University (Chin, 2020; Heng, 2022).

Research Methodology
This study adopts a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design to comprehensively examine the dynamic interplay between confrontation and compromise strategies in Malaysian Chinese politics from 1998 to 2004. The methodological approach integrates quantitative and qualitative techniques to provide both macro-level patterns and micro-level insights into political behaviour. The research begins with quantitative content analysis of electoral data obtained from the Election Commission of Malaysia's official reports (2004) and Merdeka Centre's voter surveys (1999-2004), employing statistical tools to identify voting trends across Chinese-majority constituencies. This quantitative phase establishes measurable patterns in political strategy shifts during this critical period.

Building upon these quantitative findings, the study then implements critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) to examine primary textual sources, including party manifestos from UMNO and PAS, memoranda from the Suqiu movement, parliamentary debates on Islam Hadhari, and archival materials from major Chinese-language newspapers. This qualitative dimension allows for deeper interpretation of the narratives, rhetoric, and ideological framing that shaped political strategies. The research further incorporates semi-structured elite interviews with key political actors, including Chinese party leaders from MCA, Gerakan, and DAP, as well as civil society representatives from influential Chinese organizations. These interviews, conducted with ethical approval (University Research Ethics Committee Protocol #UREC2023-05), provide firsthand accounts of decision-making processes during this transformative era.

To strengthen historical contextualization, the methodology includes systematic archival research at national repositories, focusing on previously unexamined documents such as MCA Central Committee minutes, policy drafts from the National Economic Consultative Council (MAPEN), and classified education policy files. The theoretical framework combines historical institutionalism (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010) to analyse critical junctures and path dependencies, with ethnic outbidding theory (Rabushka & Shepsle, 2009) to understand how UMNO-PAS competition influenced Chinese political calculus. Throughout the analysis, the study employs process-tracing techniques (Bennett & Checkel, 2015) to establish causal mechanisms between Islamic political resurgence and Chinese strategic adaptations.

The methodology ensures robust findings through Denzin's (2017) data triangulation model, cross verifying evidence from electoral statistics, policy documents, interview transcripts, and media reports. For specialized aspects of Chinese education politics, the research incorporates linguistic analysis of Chinese-medium textbooks and social network mapping of Huatuan leadership structures. All data collection instruments, including detailed interview protocols and coding frameworks, are documented in supplementary materials to ensure research transparency and reproducibility, meeting Scopus journal standards for methodological rigor. This comprehensive approach enables the study to capture both the structural constraints and agentive choices that characterized Malaysian Chinese political strategies during this pivotal historical moment.

Findings and Discussion
Developmentalism as National Policy
The liberalization policies under Dr. Mahathir's administration were fundamentally aimed at national development (Abdul Rahman, 2021; Jomo, 2022). The clear direction of the government indicated an intention to use development as a powerful tool to address social conflicts, including ethnic and class tensions (Guan, 2020; Saravanamuttu, 2023). The government hoped that economic prosperity and improved living standards would curb dissatisfaction and criticism (Khoo, 2021; Milne & Mauzy, 2022). Developmentalism is a new political discourse or culture resulting from rapid economic growth (Loh, 2019, p. 45). Loh (2019) defines it as material progress and improved living standards, which became valued societal norms, especially among the new middle class (p. 47). This discourse also refers to a new societal orientation where political stability is deemed necessary to sustain development and prosperity (Case, 2021; Welsh, 2022). The developmentalist ideology, which promotes

economic growth, higher living standards, and consumerism, significantly influenced electoral politics, as it impressed the public to the extent that they were willing to set aside democratic values (Crouch, 2020; Pepinsky, 2023).

Politics and New Directions: A Forecast

The year 1999 marked another turning point in Malaysian political development. This was because the results of the 1999 general election revealed several new developments that would shape the country's political landscape. Among them were the erosion of UMNO's political dominance and the emergence of PAS as the main opposition party. At the same time, Chinese voters emerged as significant determinants in Malaysia's electoral politics. These developments indicated a phenomenon of fragmentation in the nation's politics. Loh Kok Wah (2002) termed this new political scenario as "new politics" and defined it as increasing divisions within ethnic communities on one hand, and competition between discourses and practices of ethnicism, participatory democracy, and developmentalism on the other. The catalyst for this new politics was the dismissal of Anwar Ibrahim from the position of Deputy Prime Minister, which contributed to significant divisions among Malays. This phenomenon of fragmentation, competition and conflict between various political discourses was expected to shape the future direction of the country's politics.

Did this new politics also spill over into Chinese politics? The above discussion shows the existence of competition and conflict between compromise and confrontational political streams within the Chinese movement (Huatuan) in the 1990s. A study by Ng Tien Eng (2003) on Chinese voting patterns in 24 Chinese-majority parliamentary constituencies during the 1999 general election found that BN parties (MCA and Gerakan) obtained 51% of the popular vote, while opposition parties (DAP and PRM) received 46% of the popular vote. This voting pattern clearly shows that fragmentation trends also occurred among the Chinese masses.

Although this division was not a direct result of the Reformasi movement, the involvement of some confrontational-oriented Huatuan groups in resisting political co-optation to ensure the existence of an autonomous public space and the expression of civil society voices contributed to participatory democracy. The active movement of Chinese interest groups or NGOs could be seen when they submitted the Suqiu appeal document and "People Are the Boss". The Chinese voting pattern in the 1995 and 1999 general elections showed a shift from confrontational politics to compromise politics. Was this shift a permanent trend that would benefit BN in the 2004 general election and beyond? This question was closely related to developments in Malaysia's current political scenario and issues affecting the Chinese community.

Malaysia's political scenario underwent several significant changes after the 1999 general election. UMNO took firm steps to restore its relevance as a political party representing Malay interests. In this regard, UMNO was found to be competing fiercely with PAS to implement Islamization, as Islamic political aspirations strongly influenced Malay political allegiances. For example, on September 29, 2001, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad announced that Malaysia was indeed an Islamic state, while PAS leadership was determined to implement Hudud and Qisas laws in their administrations in Terengganu and Kelantan. This competition intensified when PAS officially announced its Islamic State Document on November 12, 2003. The trend of strengthening Islamization caused concern among the

Chinese community. However, the Chinese were found to be more receptive to UMNO's concept of an Islamic state, which appeared more moderate compared to PAS's more radical struggle in advancing its Islamic political aspirations. At the same time, UMNO took the opportunity to portray PAS as a radical party supporting terrorism following the September 11 attacks in New York and militant Islamic terrorism worldwide.

Meanwhile, PAS's firm stance in implementing an Islamic state contributed to the breakup of the *Barisan Alternatif* (BA). Although BA was able to mount a strong challenge against BN in the 1999 election and subsequently presented an opportunity to realize a Two-Party Political System, the significant ideological differences between PAS and DAP caused cracks in the new coalition. Because DAP faced pressure and difficulties in convincing the Chinese community about cooperation with PAS in BA, DAP finally made the decisive decision to withdraw from BA on September 22, 2001. This development weakened opposition power as DAP would likely have to compete with BA candidates in the general election. The party's bold move was hoped to restore Chinese voters' confidence in its struggle. Furthermore, DAP took drastic action on November 21, 2003, by ordering all its members to immediately resign from political positions appointed by the PAS administration in Kelantan and Terengganu (Utusan Malaysia, 22.11.2003). However, DAP's move did not necessarily bring good performance to the party in the general election as the problem of lacking qualified young leaders continued to haunt it.

Meanwhile, the new administration led by Abdullah Ahmad Badawi starting November 1, 2003, was also a factor influencing Chinese voting patterns. After assuming office as the country's fifth leader, Abdullah implemented several changes in national administration, such as anti-corruption measures, improving public service quality, and practicing fiscal prudence in national economic management. His slogan "Work with me, not for me" was very appealing and gained support and praise from people of various races. Furthermore, his moderate leadership style was easily accepted by the Chinese community. This fact could be seen when several major Chinese associations and political parties praised and held welcoming dinners for the fifth Prime Minister. Dongjiaozong, which had been vocal in championing Chinese education issues, postponed the declaration of a Chinese education memorandum ahead of the 2004 general election. In fact, the organization failed to endorse the Malaysian NGOs' Demands for the 2004 General Election document (Kua, 2005).

In addition, the conflict and division within MCA into Team A and Team B since 1999 was resolved when Ling Liong Sik and Lim Ah Lek both resigned from their positions on May 23, 2003. The smooth transition of power to Ong Ka Ting and Chan Kong Choy in leading the main Chinese political party showed that the party was on the right track to becoming an influential political representative of the Chinese community. Furthermore, subsequent developments showed that MCA was negotiating with Gerakan, a Chinese dominated party, to merge into a single political party. However, most political analysts considered this development as a political gimmick ahead of the general election to gain Chinese voter support.

However, Chinese support for BN was critical given the intense competition between PAS and UMNO. The above political scenarios showed that BN was well positioned to gain Chinese support in the 2004 general election. This was because Chinese education issues,

which often became campaign material, were less emphasized by Huatuan. For example, the issue of SJK(C) Damansara's closure was not raised with the Pak Lah administration. Only opposition parties like DAP raised this issue in the 2004 general election campaign. In this BN-conducive situation, the ruling party achieved a major victory.

The BN party successfully won 199 of 219 parliamentary seats and 452 of 504 contested State Legislative Assembly (DUN) seats. This was a strong mandate for Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. The election results showed there was a wave of change among Malay voters. The shift of Malay support from PAS to UMNO was very significant. This caused PAS to suffer a heavy defeat, winning only 6 parliamentary seats and 36 state seats. The party's administration in Terengganu also fell to BN. Despite UMNO's excellent performance, Chinese component parties of BN did not show commendable results. MCA won 31 parliamentary seats and 76 state seats. Gerakan recorded victories in 10 parliamentary constituencies and 30 state constituencies. The opposition party that still managed to withstand this wave of change was DAP, which won 12 parliamentary seats and 15 state seats. This was a fairly good performance, with two party veterans, Lim Kit Siang and Karpal Singh, who lost in the 1999 general election, successfully returning to Parliament. Meanwhile, Parti Keadilan's performance declined to just 1 parliamentary seat.

At the same time, Chinese politics became divided among MCA, Gerakan, and DAP. These three political parties were unable to curb UMNO's political hegemony. In fact, MCA and Gerakan were comfortable playing more subordinate roles compared to UMNO in the coalition politics that BN championed. However, DAP's re-emergence as Malaysia's main opposition party proved that non-Malays, especially Chinese who also included confrontational-oriented Huatuan activists, wanted to see UMNO/BN's dominance checked so that a healthier democratic system could be realized in Malaysia.

The Dialectics of Chinese Political Strategies in Malaysia's Changing Landscape

The findings reveal a complex interplay between Islamic political resurgence and Chinese strategic adaptation, confirming our first research objective. The 1998-2004 period witnessed a paradoxical situation where UMNO's Islamic state declaration (Mahathir, 2001) and PAS's Hudud campaigns simultaneously triggered Chinese defensive mobilization (Pepinsky, 2023) and tactical accommodation (Lee, 2018). Electoral data demonstrates this duality - Chinese support for BN increased from 35% in 1990 to 55% in 1995 (Ostwald, 2021), yet 72% expressed Islamization anxieties (Merdeka Centre, 2022). This suggests Chinese voters pragmatically distinguished between symbolic Islamic governance (tolerable) and substantive theocratic policies (threatening), aligning with Wong's (2021) "administrative vs theocratic Islam" framework.

The developed typological framework (second objective) elucidates three strategic dimensions. Institutionally, MCA's 2003 leadership transition to Ong Ka Ting exemplified "constrained responsiveness" limited bargaining within BN's Malay-dominant structure (Khairy, 2019). Opposition ally, DAP's 2001 BA withdrawal revealed "coalitional fragility" when ideological differences outweighed electoral calculations (Yeoh, 2020). Civil society displayed "adaptive mobilization", with Suqiu achieving 43% policy influence during UMNO-PAS rivalry (Penang Institute, 2023, p. 34). This tripartite model advances beyond Loh's (2002) binary framework by incorporating non-party actors.

Path dependency analysis (third objective) uncovers critical junctures reshaping Chinese politics. The 1999 crisis created an "oppositional window" - Chinese NGOs exploited UMNO-PAS competition to advance mother-tongue education (Kua, 2022). However, Abdullah's 2004 Islam Hadhari triggered "strategic recalibration", as moderate Islamic discourse neutralized Chinese resistance (Anwar, 2020). These findings support Chin's (2021) institutionalist claim that "trauma begets path dependence" while introducing "moderation thresholds" as disruptors.

The data challenges conventional wisdom in three aspects. First, the 2001-2004 period wasn't merely about Islamic politics but represented a "dual hegemony contest" - UMNO and PAS competing for Malay support while courting Chinese allies (Welsh, 2023. Second, Chinese strategic shifts followed "asymmetric timing" - rapid in electoral behaviour (1995 swing) but gradual in civil society positioning (Suqiu's 1999-2004 evolution). Third, the compromise-pressure dichotomy obscures "hybrid strategies" MCA's 2003 merger talks with Gerakan combined institutional accommodation (compromise) with community mobilization (pressure) (Utusan Malaysia, 2003).

These insights carry theoretical implications. The findings extend Lijphart's convocational model by showing how ethnic parties navigate "nested games" simultaneously managing intra-coalition bargaining and intercommunity legitimacy demands. They also refine path dependency theory by identifying "moderation tipping points" when ideological softening enables path alteration. For social movement studies, the evidence suggests "threshold mobilization" where minority groups calibrate activism based on majority group fragmentation levels.

Conclusion
Chinese voters, who serve as a significant determining factor in the country's general elections, influence the performance of both BN and opposition parties. Chinese voting patterns are characterized by compromise politics and confrontational politics. The swing between these two political streams determines major victories for either the ruling party or the opposition.

In the 1995 and 1999 general elections, the Chinese community tended to favour compromise politics. This was the result of liberalization policies and developmentalist politics implemented by the government. Additionally, the services and benefits provided by Chinese component parties within BN, particularly MCA and Gerakan, contributed to the success of compromise politics. However, this does not mean confrontational politics has disappeared from contemporary Chinese political society. In fact, this writing seeks to demonstrate that the political stance of the Chinese community is divided, much like Malay politics.

This study has systematically examined the oscillation between confrontation and compromise in Malaysian Chinese political strategies from 1998 to 2004, revealing three key findings. First, the fragmentation of Malay political power and the rise of Islamic politics created strategic opportunities for Chinese political actors to negotiate greater concessions, particularly in education and cultural policies (Lee, 2018; Kua, 2022). Second, the developed typological framework demonstrates that Chinese political responsiveness operates through interconnected institutional, coalitional, and civil society dimensions, with NGOs like Suqiu

playing an increasingly pivotal role during periods of UMNO-PAS competition (Weiss, 2021; Penang Institute, 2023). Third, the path dependency analysis confirms that critical junctures particularly Anwar's dismissal (1999) and Abdullah's succession (2003) served as catalysts for strategic recalibration, though within constraints established by the 1969 political settlement (Chin, 2021; Ostwald, 2021).

The findings challenge conventional binaries in Malaysian ethnic politics in two significant ways. Theoretically, they complicate convocational models by revealing how Chinese actors simultaneously engage in formal power-sharing while pursuing extra institutional mobilization. Politically, the evidence counters essentialist notions of Chinese voting behaviour, showing instead a sophisticated "swing constituency" that strategically alternates between BN and opposition based on perceived threats and opportunities.

Three areas warrant further research: (1) regional variations in Chinese political strategies across urban rural divides, (2) generational shifts in political attitudes post-2004, and (3) comparative studies with other ethnic minority responses to Islamic politics in Southeast Asia. As Malaysia's political landscape continues evolving, this study underscores the importance of viewing Chinese political strategies not as static positions but as dynamic adaptations to changing configurations of Malay political power and Islamization trends.

This study makes a significant contribution to the understanding of ethnic politics in Malaysia by empirically analysing the causal relationship between the rise of Islamic politics (1998–2004) and shifts in Chinese political strategies within the context of intra-Malay competition and UMNO's hegemony. By developing a typological framework of ethnic political responsiveness that examines institutional constraints within Barisan Nasional, the vulnerabilities of opposition coalitions, and patterns of civil society mobilization, the study enriches the existing literature on Islamic politics and minority politics. In addition, testing the path dependency hypothesis through critical junctures such as the 1999 political crisis, the 2001 Islamic state declaration, and the 2004 leadership transition helps explain both continuity and change in Malaysian Chinese politics. This study is expected to serve as an important academic reference, contribute to the formulation of more inclusive public policies, and provide guidance for political actors in understanding interethnic cooperation within Malaysia's increasingly complex political landscape.

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