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Challenges of ethnic party adaptation in power-sharing systems: Evidence from Malaysia

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Citation

Challenges of Ethnic Party Adaptation in Power-Sharing Systems: Evidence from Malaysia

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Abstract

In authoritarian systems, ethnic power-sharing arrangements include important ethnic groups in government and decision-making while putting restraints on political competition. However, under conditions of democratization, we might expect power-sharing arrangements to fragment as political parties seize opportunities to expand their base and appeal across ethnic lines. This article draws from the case of Malaysia, where multiethnic coalitions built around ethnic parties ruled for 61 years but where increasing electoral competitiveness has destabilized coalition politics. I focus on the Democratic Action Party (DAP), one of the country's most successful parties, which has sought to build a more multiethnic support base. I show that its attempts have been stymied by enduring norms of ethnically informed coalition building and efforts to protect existing ethnic bases by both rivals and allies. The findings shed light on the barriers to ethnic party adaptation and on why power-sharing practices remain so enduring, even in more fluid and democratic political environments.

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Introduction

In divided or post-conflict societies, ethnic power-sharing arrangements prioritize the inclusion of certain groups in government. Power-sharing arrangements are sometimes imposed in authoritarian settings, placing formal or informal constraints on political competition to enhance autocratic stability. During democratization, ethnic parties may face new incentives to broaden their support as constraints on competition are removed and a wider set of voters is potentially up for grabs. This process can also open up new issues and identities in the political sphere, offering opportunities for political parties to mobilize cross-ethnic support. In democratic contexts, scholars have identified various cases where ethnic parties have embraced deeper forms of party adaptation to more multiethnic (or less ethnically exclusive) politics (Farole, 2022; Ferree, 2010; Madrid, 2012).

At the same time, scholars have also argued that power-sharing arrangements tend to persist far beyond their original goals of preventing conflict or reducing intergroup tensions. Ethnic power-sharing entrenches group divides in political competition, and finding agreement on how to modify or dissolve the power-sharing arrangement is difficult (Horowitz, 2014; McCulloch, 2017b). Thus, while democratization may offer space for party adaptation and a lessening of ethnic polarization, the legacies of power-sharing practices under autocracy may still exert a powerful effect on political competition.

What challenges and trade-offs do ethnic parties in such systems face in expanding their cross-ethnic support? In what ways do practices of power sharing reduce their ability to do so, even under more democratic and competitive electoral conditions? In this article, I answer these questions by examining how informal norms and practices of power sharing developed during authoritarianism, even under subsequently more democratic politics, can raise the costs for ethnic parties to pursue a broader, more cross-ethnic base of support. These norms reward parties that hew to existing ethnically defined bases and incentivize both rivals and allies to engage in "boundary protection" – seeking to maintain their existing monopolies on ethnic support and punishing other parties that seek to make inroads on their ethnic base. As a result, even though more competitive politics allow parties to expand their base of support, a deeper transition toward multiethnic parties is inhibited by legacies of power sharing.

I build this argument in the context of Malaysia. The country was well known for its stable authoritarian regime that centered on a model of ethnic power sharing via electoral and governing coalitions. For more than six decades, a multiethnic governing coalition, known after 1973 as the National Front (BN), ruled the country.[1] The governing coalition was headed by an ethnic party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), which enshrined the dominance of the country's majority Malay ethnic group while ensuring a modicum of minority group participation and representation. Most parties in Malaysia drew core support from specific ethnoreligious and ethnoregional identities while relying on coalitions to garner cross-ethnic support.

Malaysia's stable coalition system, however, has been upended. Beginning in 2008, the BN began losing significant electoral support, prompting the expansion of credible opposition coalitions. In 2018, the main opposition coalition, the Alliance of Hope

(PH), defeated the BN in national elections. Since then, Malaysian politics has featured increasingly fragmented electoral and governing coalitions. After the 2022 elections, an unlikely coalition government was formed between the formerly dominant BN and its former rival coalition PH. As a result, even as most parties continue to draw from ethnic support bases, the significantly more competitive electoral environment has destabilized the country's tightly constructed power-sharing coalitions.

This article first assesses these rapid changes in Malaysia's political landscape since 2008. I show that a more fluid and competitive political environment has provided new opportunities for parties to make inroads at the national level. However, more democratic competition has yet to alter broader norms and practices of ethnic power sharing, inhibiting the ability of parties to engage in diversification of support. I then illustrate the argument by analyzing the case of Malaysia's Democratic Action Party (DAP). The DAP is perhaps the most likely case for party adaptation in Malaysia. The perception of the party is strongly associated with its primarily ethnic Chinese base of support: Although it has always identified itself as a multiethnic party, it was long seen as the champion for minority ethnic issues. But during Malaysia's period of greater electoral competitiveness and electoral turnover, the party saw new opportunities to expand its national presence. DAP leadership explicitly identified the goal of garnering more support from the country's Bumiputera (indigenous) population, particularly among ethnic Malays. I show that although the party broadened its appeals during this period, it lagged in terms of incorporating ethnic Malay candidates, members, and leaders. I argue that further changes have been forestalled because coalition-building practices, predicated on norms of ethnic power sharing and the idea of the "rightful" party to represent different ethnic groups, incentivize the DAP to stick to a more narrow base of support. Additionally, the party has long faced vociferous attacks for seeking to represent or incorporate the country's Malay majority population, given the DAP's reputation as a party representing the interests of non-Malays. These factors have so far limited the effectiveness of the party's attempts to escape its ethnic reputation and take a more forceful role in national politics, even as political competition and coalition building in Malaysia have become more fluid.

The microlevel view of party strategies and party adaptation provided by this study extends existing research on ethnic power sharing and political party adaptation. Scholars have provided persuasive overviews of the features of power sharing in Malaysia and of changes in ethnic power-sharing practices and norms over time (Horowitz, 2014; Saravanamuttu, 2016; Weiss, 2013). At the same time, systems of "informal" or "liberal" ethnic power sharing such as Malaysia, where there are no legal or constitutional requirements for the inclusion of different ethnic groups, are sustained by both the strategic choices of political elites and the outcome of elections (Murtagh, 2020; Reilly, 2006: 146–47). As such, examining how and whether parties within such systems mobilize and incorporate non-coethnic communities is one part of understanding how these systems are sustained over time.

This article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the literature on ethnic parties and power-sharing systems in the context of democratization. I then discuss the

system of ethnic power sharing that emerged in Malaysia, arguing that constraints on ethnic party adaptation persist despite more competitive politics. Next, I illustrate the argument by considering the DAP, describing the incentives for adaptation and the reasons why the party's steps toward becoming a multiethnic party remain halting. I conclude by discussing the implications for the persistence of ethnic power sharing under democratization in Malaysia and beyond.

Party Adaptation, Ethnic Power Sharing, and Democratization

Ethnic power-sharing practices encompass a variety of formal and informal arrangements designed to ensure that major ethnic groups in a divided society are granted some level of participation and representation in decision-making (McCulloch, 2017a).[2] Such arrangements are intended to facilitate democratic governance and ameliorate ethnoreligious conflict or the prospect of civil war (Bormann et al., 2019: 85; Norris, 2008), although evidence of the effectiveness of these arrangements has been mixed (see review in Farag et al., 2022). Not all agree that ethnic power sharing helps to foster democratic governance in pluralistic societies; in many cases, it is made possible only by limiting democratic rights, since it prioritizes elite consensus, and power-sharing agreements often limit electoral competition and full participation by citizens to ensure the agreement's stability (Bochsler and Juon, 2021; Bogaards, 2006).

Democratization may introduce new dynamics into ethnic power-sharing systems. On one hand, it may *increase* the salience of ethnicity in political competition. In some cases, democratization offers new space for political parties to mobilize along exclusive lines, laying the seeds for future conflict (Higashijima and Nakai, 2016). Even when channeled peacefully, greater democratization may lead minority groups to make new demands for political integration (Beissinger, 2008: 91).

On the other hand, democratization may mark a shift in political parties' incentives to rely on monoethnic bases of support. Even while ethnic politics continues to predominate, ethnic parties in more "liberal" power-sharing systems may begin to make appeals along cross-cutting issues and cleavages (Murtagh and McCulloch, 2021). Such systems increase the space for nonethnic or multiethnic "civic parties" (Murtagh, 2020). In cases like Malaysia, for example, more competitive elections have offered an incentive for parties to pursue more nationalized support and have loosened the rigid electoral and governing coalitions that defined the country's politics. In turn, parties may have new incentives to adapt their appeals and organizations.

The adaptations that ethnic parties may undertake to appeal to new audiences range from changes in political campaigns to more fundamental strategies such as organizational restructuring. The former is a common strategy. Ethnic parties often depend on some level of cross-ethnic electoral support, given the multiethnic realities of many states (Madrid, 2012; Reilly, 2021). Yet parties may also go beyond altering campaign messaging to undertake more comprehensive changes in their organization and brand. In South Africa, for instance, parties in opposition to the African National Congress incorporated a more diverse range of candidates and changed their campaign strategies

to broaden their appeal (Ferree, 2010). These strategies do not necessarily lead to full transformation; as Farole (2022) showed in the case of South Africa's Democratic Alliance, the party nominated out-group candidates for difficult-to-win positions, providing symbolic inclusion of new groups while ensuring that the party would not alienate coethnic voters. While these strategies come with potential benefits – expanding the support base of parties and helping them shed unwanted reputations – they also involve trade-offs, such as potentially alienating core voters or requiring significant party resources to undertake.

Scholars have noted that power sharing leaves a persistent legacy. Although power-sharing practices are often intended as transitional devices, they tend to entrench polarizing identities (whether ethnic, ethnoregional, religious, or linguistic) as the primary basis of politics and governance (McCulloch, 2017b: 405–6). Even where power sharing is not a legal requirement, electoral rules may also serve to entrench power-sharing arrangements. Short of large-scale social change, major institutional reform, or external intervention, these arrangements can be "sticky" despite changing conditions (Horowitz, 2014; McCulloch, 2017b). Given deeply rooted divisions (and the persistence of electoral or institutional arrangements that incentivize ethnic divisions), party adaptation by itself is unlikely to produce a transition away from ethnic power sharing toward more "ordinary" politics. At the same time, increasing the presence of "bridging parties" that are less dependent on in-group support can end up "diluting the ethnic character of competitive politics and promoting multiethnic outcomes in its place" (Reilly, 2006: 76).[3] In cases such as Northern Ireland, for example, even as ethnonational cleavages remain salient, they operate more as a way for parties to differentiate themselves instrumentally and less as an ideological or antagonistic identity (Whiting and Bauchowitz, 2022: 103–4).

Despite the "stickiness" of power-sharing institutions, then, it is worth examining whether parties are capable of moving toward more multiethnic party organizations and bases of support, as well as what norms, institutions, practices, and incentives work against processes of diversification. On the one hand, new electoral opportunities often serve as powerful incentives for political parties to change their strategy or direction (Müller and Strøm, 1999). On the other hand, as noted above, power-sharing practices tend to persist over time, even as original conditions change. As we will see later, these legacies of power sharing, particularly in the form of coalitions built around an ethnic logic and the incentives of parties to protect their existing ethnic monopolies, have proven a strong barrier to deeper forms of party change.

Malaysia: Ethnic Parties and Power Sharing in the Context of Majority Dominance

Malaysia is a particularly salient context in which to examine party adaptation within ethnic power-sharing systems. It is an ethnically diverse but divided state, with 69% of the population classified as Bumiputera (indigenous), including 55% Malays. The largest ethnic minorities are ethnic Chinese (23%) and ethnic Indian (7%) populations.

Most of the country's parties either explicitly identify an ethnic group as their primary constituency or are de facto ethnic parties in view of their predominant mobilization of support around ethnic, religious, or ethnoregional identities. Nevertheless, the individual parties vary in the extent of their ethnic inclusivity or exclusivity, and the country also has a smaller number of genuinely multiethnic parties.[4] Moreover, as detailed below, Malaysia's system of informal ethnic power sharing has confronted new challenges in the form of increased electoral competition and the breakdown of stable, dominant authoritarian rule. Though Malaysia's system of power sharing via coalitions has been seriously challenged, practices and norms of power sharing along elite and ethnic lines persist (Weiss, 2013).

Although Malaysia was included as a case of consociationalism in Lijphart's (1977: 150–53) seminal work, other scholars have argued that the country has never fully fit the framework (e.g. Horowitz, 2014: 9). Malaysia's laws and constitution enshrine the "special position" for the country's Bumiputera population that accords them additional economic, social, and political rights. In practice, the Malay ethnic group has been the largest beneficiary of these rights. The major issue, then, was accommodating minority interests within the context of power sharing in the political system in a context where there was no formal institutional requirement to do so.

Power sharing in Malaysia was traditionally achieved via multiethnic coalitions composed primarily of ethnic parties. After independence in 1957, coalitions headed by the dominant United Malays National Organization (UMNO) governed the country for 61 years. Coalitions serve two important roles in Malaysia. First, incentivized by the country's single-member district plurality (first past the post) electoral system, coalitions nominate a single candidate for a given electoral district to help parties avoid splitting the vote. Second, coalitions allowed parties to project a multiracial image and thus help draw support from across ethnic lines (Ting, 2023). The result was a model of Malay-centric but "conciliatory coalitions" in which UMNO and partner parties relied on their coalition partners to draw electoral support from non-coethnic voters (Horowitz, 1983, 2014; Ting, 2023).

Communal violence took place in 1969, triggered in part by election results that reduced the majority held by UMNO's Alliance coalition. In the wake of this unrest, and deepening authoritarian politics, the ruling government consolidated power under a new expanded coalition, the National Front (BN). This coalition was more heavily weighted toward the interests of ethnic Malays, who already benefited from constitutional provisions plus the addition of powerful new affirmative action policies (Weiss, 2013: 158). It also coopted.

The BN coalition, which ruled from 1973 to 2018, solidified this authoritarian power-sharing arrangement. UMNO controlled the coalition and appointed its prime ministers and most powerful leaders in government, while other BN parties, particularly those representing ethnic minority groups, were awarded cabinet positions and some amount of policy and political influence. Beneath this broad commitment to power sharing via coalitions, the actual level of minority incorporation and influence in representation and governance fluctuated over time (Saravanamuttu, 2016). The BN was noticeably

more responsive to ethnic minority interests when it had electoral incentives to win non-Malay ethnic support (Segawa, 2015: 183). Nevertheless, the BN also sewed up support by using state resources, unfair institutional advantages, and control over the electoral system and district boundaries to ensure that the coalition repeatedly won majorities in the national parliament and at the state level.

The ruling coalition also reinforced ethnic boundaries among its component parties in electoral competition. With some exceptions, the BN (and the coalitions that arose in opposition to it) largely structured the contesting of seats along ethnic lines, with Malay parties contesting in heavily Malay constituencies and non-Malay parties contesting in largely non-Malay constituencies. These coalitions responded in part to the ethnic boundary-making of the ruling government. Gerrymandering and malapportionment of constituencies, a process undertaken during BN rule, divided up the electoral map into a high proportion of heavily Malay/Bumiputera seats, a smaller proportion of non-Malay majority seats, and a limited number of "mixed seats" without an ethnic majority.

This coalitional system was placed under significant strain, however, as a result of greater electoral competition and political instability. This was particularly true after 2008, when election results led to a decisive swing of non-Malay voters away from the BN. In response, the BN increasingly hewed toward Malay-centric political messaging, and UMNO purposely sidelined its non-Malay coalition partners (Sani, 2009). Although Malay-centric coalitions were long a feature of Malaysia's authoritarian politics, more recent configurations have moved even further away from the presumed development of stable competition between two centrist multiethnic coalitions.

In recent years, the system of coalition politics has undergone even further fragmentation. In 2018, a multiethnic opposition coalition, known as the Alliance of Hope (PH), defeated the BN. This electoral result sidelined two prominent Malay Muslim parties, UMNO and the Islamist party PAS, that subsequently formalized their alliance with the stated intention of uniting the Malay Muslim community. This alliance then emphasized a narrative of Malay exclusion under the multiethnic PH government (Dettman, 2020). The PH governing coalition collapsed in 2020 and was followed by two subsequent prime ministers who presided over Malay-dominated coalition governments with little ethnic minority representation. After the 2022 elections, the opposition has again included an overrepresentation of monoethnic Malay Muslim parties as represented in the Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition (which also includes two minor multiracial parties with no national presence). The government represents an uneasy mix of the PH multiethnic coalition, which claims substantial support from non-Malay voters, and its former foes in the increasingly Malay-centred BN coalition, particularly UMNO, which has lost a substantial portion of its non-Malay partner parties and support.[5] As a result, the legitimacy of the government and the balance of ethnic power remain highly contested.

In this environment, parties have had greater opportunity to seek broader support. After 2008, opposition parties sought to nationalize their support, undertaking concerted efforts to attract new audiences around a less ethnically exclusive and broader national

platform (Hwang, 2010; Osman, 2008). Nevertheless, as will be shown later, this process remained limited at the individual party level, and further party adaptation continues to be hindered by power-sharing norms and practices. The country's power-sharing norms had already solidified a system in which individual parties developed strongly ethnic profiles and garnered cross-ethnic support largely through their coalition partners. This was true for both the BN and the coalition which eventually unseated it, PH. The latter coalition (and its predecessor, the People's Alliance (PR)), as it became increasingly large and nationalized, divided up the electoral map among partner parties based on ethnic demographics, much as the BN had done.[6] As a result, coalition parties tend to contest seats where their core ethnic constituency is overrepresented. While coalitions offered a method of vote pooling across ethnic communities, individual parties remained rigidly tied to particular ethnoreligious and regional identities. Thus, despite incremental liberalization, more competitive politics, and the reconstitution of new alliances and coalitions, new and old political parties continue to place themselves within an ethnic continuum for the purpose of electoral competition.

The Democratic Action Party (DAP)

To examine the challenges of party adaptation in the context of democratization, I consider the most likely case for diversification: the Democratic Action Party (DAP) in Malaysia. The DAP has a reputation in Malaysia for depending on non-Malay, particularly ethnic Chinese, support.[7] Yet the party has had clear reasons to pursue a more diverse base of support: its founding mission was as a multiethnic democratic socialist party, its leadership has long identified expansion into new constituencies as a priority, and the party faces strong electoral and demographic incentives to diversify its support. It is thus a good case to examine how and whether parties in ethnic power-sharing systems can indeed diversify effectively.

The DAP, initially registered in 1965, is one of the country's oldest political parties and has also been one of the most successful. Although its support has fluctuated over time, it has formed part of the ruling coalition in two governments since 2018. Following the 2022 election, the DAP is now the party with the most MPs in the ruling coalition, more than the formerly dominant UMNO, and the second-largest party in parliament. Despite its increasing prominence, very few studies have examined the party and its organization in detail (recent exceptions include Aziz et al., 2018; Hutchinson and Zhang, 2021).

The image of the party as centered on ethnic Chinese support has been solidified over time through its electoral campaigns, its organizational profile, and its portrayal by both the media and political rivals. The party was founded as the Malaysian successor to the Singapore-based People's Action Party. In its early years, the DAP found its greatest support in its ethnic Chinese urban base. Its top leadership in the party's Central Executive Committee (CEC) consisted almost entirely of ethnic Chinese Malaysians, with significant connections to the country's trade unions. The party's early growth focused on mobilizing urban voters, a heavily ethnic Chinese constituency at the time (Ong, 1986: 8).

The DAP's goals, as articulated in its Setapak Declaration of 1967, featured a call for a democratic, socialist Malaysia "based on the principles of racial equality, and social and economic justice" (DAP, 1969: 17–30). The party pursued national integration based on common economic interests, rather than ethnic-based affirmative action policies. It also focused explicitly on protecting the use of minority languages (specifically Chinese and Tamil) and minority culture in media and education (DAP, 1969:17–30). As Lim Kit Siang, its long-time Secretary General, stated in 1969, the party did not want non-Malays to be "slaves and second-class citizens" (Kee, 2021: 109).

After ethnic riots in 1969 and deepening authoritarianism, the BN passed constitutional amendments prohibiting speech, acts, or publications that questioned the special rights of Malays, the status of Islam, or the status of the Malay language (Heng, 1996: 511). In response, the DAP's campaigns were carefully couched to reflect the authoritarian restrictions on free speech and on addressing "divisive" issues (Chew, 1980: 231). The party retreated from the most far-reaching reforms implied by the Setapak Declaration, instead criticizing the implementation of ethnically informed policies. Its targets included the New Economic Policy (NEP), a major economic program launched after the 1969 riots that sought to raise living standards for the Malay community and to reduce inequalities between Malay and Chinese populations (Jomo, 2004). The DAP argued that the NEP and similar policies benefited only those connected to UMNO, left out the Malay poor, and heightened ethnic polarization (Chew, 1980; Heng, 1997: 270).

From its inception, the DAP was frequently portrayed as anti-Malay or as a "Chinese chauvinist" party by the governing coalition. In the 1969 elections, the governing Alliance Party coalition, the predecessor to the BN, "singled out the DAP … [as] an anti-Malay communal organization working to deprive the Malays of their rights and status" (Vasil, 1980: 160). This theme was reinforced in subsequent elections, as the BN portrayed itself as the multiethnic governing coalition best positioned to ensure harmony (Kassim, 1978: 45).

Throughout the country's most authoritarian period, the DAP's identity and organization remained stable. This stability is in part due to the centralization of power and personalism of the party (Ufen, 2020: 66), which was led for a combined 47 years by the prominent politician Lim Kit Siang or his son, Lim Guan Eng. After the creation of the BN in 1973, which reconstituted the ruling coalition under UMNO's dominance and co-opted many of its opponents, the DAP was the only significant Chinese party to remain in opposition (Heng, 1996: 512). Its CEC remained majority Chinese; except for its first Secretary-General, Devan Nair, subsequent Secretaries-General were all ethnic Chinese.[8] Similarly, the party's membership was dominated by ethnic Chinese and non-Malays. In 1971, the DAP's organizing secretary claimed that the party's membership was 20% Malay, but this number is likely to have been inflated (Chew, 1980: 208 fn. 90). More recent estimates are significantly lower.

Despite its focus on non-Malay communities, the party did make some efforts in this period to change its reputation. To more credibly appeal to Malay constituencies and discredit UMNO's persistent attacks on it as a largely ethnic Chinese party, the DAP of the

1970s and 1980s sought to recruit Malay politicians and intellectuals (Chew, 1980: 249–50). One of the primary sources of Malay politicians for the party was disaffected members or losing candidates from regime-aligned Malay-majority parties (Ong, 1986: 10). These candidates were of variable quality and were often targeted by the BN for defection back into the ruling government (Chew, 1980). Ultimately, these efforts did not translate into a significant change in the party's identity or organization.

In sum, in its earlier period, the party developed a base of support largely constructed around ethnic minority, particularly ethnic Chinese, support. Viewed from a comparative perspective, DAP's messaging was fundamentally moderate and reformist in nature, even as some of its organization and policy emphases clearly reflected ethnic minority interests. This focus was reinforced by its opponents, who portrayed the party as extremist and narrowly ethnic. As a result, the party's ethnic image tended to overwhelm its multiethnic messaging.

Strategies to Diversify the Party Base

Beginning in 2008, the DAP faced new pressures to diversify its support. One trigger was its increasing national electoral successes, along with those of other opposition parties, as the BN's strength declined. In the 2008 and 2013 elections, the DAP began winning decisively in contests against BN parties, in large part because of a non-Malay swing away from the BN (Pepinsky, 2009). Now the DAP was in the position of dominating the constituencies it contested, with the highest win rate of any major party and ambitions for further growth at the national level.

A number of other factors spurred the party to pursue diversification. Despite greater electoral competitiveness, the 2008 and 2013 elections showed the limits of existing coalitional strategies. At the height of opposition coordination against the BN in the 2013 elections, as the tightly cohesive, multiethnic People's Alliance (PR) coalition presented a coherent challenge, the coalition was still unable to seize power nationally. The need to reach new audiences was also reinforced by the collapse of the PR opposition coalition in 2015 as the DAP fell out with its Islamist coalition partner PAS. Its alliance with PAS in the PR coalition had represented a major source of credibility for the party's attempts to reach Malay voters.

Demographic changes also motivated changes in party strategies. As a result of lower birthrates and the highest levels of out-migration of the country's ethnic groups, Malaysia's ethnic Chinese population has declined since the party's founding. In 1970, ethnic Chinese made up 36% of the population in West Malaysia (Chander, 1975: 16); by 2010, they represented only 24% of the population there and 23% nationally (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010). The second factor was changes in Malaysia's urban environments. In 1970, only 12% of West Malaysia's urban population was Malay (Hirschman and Suan-Pow, 1979: 5). By 2010, the median Malay proportion of West Malaysia's urban council areas had risen to 57% (Dettman, 2023). Urban Malay voters were thus an important constituency for the party to appeal to, given that many of the DAP's constituencies had significant urban populations.

As a result, the DAP began to explicitly identify the goal of expanding its support within the Malay and other Bumiputera communities. As Secretary General Lim Guan Eng stated in a 2008 party meeting, the DAP's "challenge … [is] to transform Malaysia through making DAP more inclusive in terms of ethnic profile. … Our challenge is to consolidate existing support while reaching out intensively to urban Malays, as well as Bumiputeras of [East Malaysia]" (Lim, 2008). The party was well aware of its negative image among Malays. As DAP MP Steven Sim wrote, "Why is DAP's reception among the Malays so poor even after 53 years? Has it just been government propaganda … [or] that we ourselves have also lost the ability to speak to the Malays in a way that makes sense to their worldview?" (Sim, 2018: 5).

The party adopted several strategies to appeal to Malay voters, most notably by turning to economically focused messaging. The DAP was careful to emphasize how its policy offerings, including those in the state governments where it was part of the ruling coalition, benefited Malay populations. As the DAP Secretary General, who was also Chief Minister of the state government of Penang, argued, Malay support depended on proving "that we can take care of the Malays and deliver what BN cannot do in 50 years. … If we succeed, we will have taken an important first step in attracting sizable Malay core support" (Lim, 2008). DAP politicians emphasized the DAP's track record in this regard, with one MP noting the Penang state government gave 70% of state procurement contracts and projects to Malay contractors, and that more than 90% of beneficiaries of the state's poverty eradication program were Malays (Johari, 2016).

Second, the DAP increasingly highlighted its acceptance of Malay Muslim primacy in institutions and Malaysian identity. This message centered on four Malay-centric provisions in the constitution: the position of Islam as the religion of the federation, the Malay language (*Bahasa Malaysia*) as the national language, the status of the Malay rulers as the country's hereditary monarchy, and special rights for Bumiputeras, most of whom are Malays. The party's commitment to these clauses was not new; it had never directly challenged them, and in the various electoral coalitions that the DAP joined starting in 1999,[9] the provisions were included almost verbatim in coalition manifestos. Significantly, however, the party itself began emphasizing these points in its own communications. In its 2012 and 2016 declarations, which the party used to signal its goals and strategic direction, it explicitly affirmed its commitment to the four provisions.[10]

The party's efforts to diversify its organization, however, remained limited. This was particularly clear in terms of its parliamentary candidates, who remained largely ethnic Chinese. As shown in Figure 1, within the ranks of parliamentary candidates, the number of Malay DAP candidates remained low over time. However, the 2022 election, coming after the party had appointed a new Secretary General, did see an uptick in the number of Malay candidates.

Analysis of state-level dynamics reveals a somewhat stronger upward trend, however. In state elections in West Malaysia in 2008 and 2013, the DAP ran a total of 92 and 95 state candidates, respectively; in both elections, the party ran a single Malay candidate. Beginning in 2018, the party ran an increased number of Malay candidates: 9 out of 93 candidates in West Malaysia and 6 out of 42 candidates in the 2022 state elections
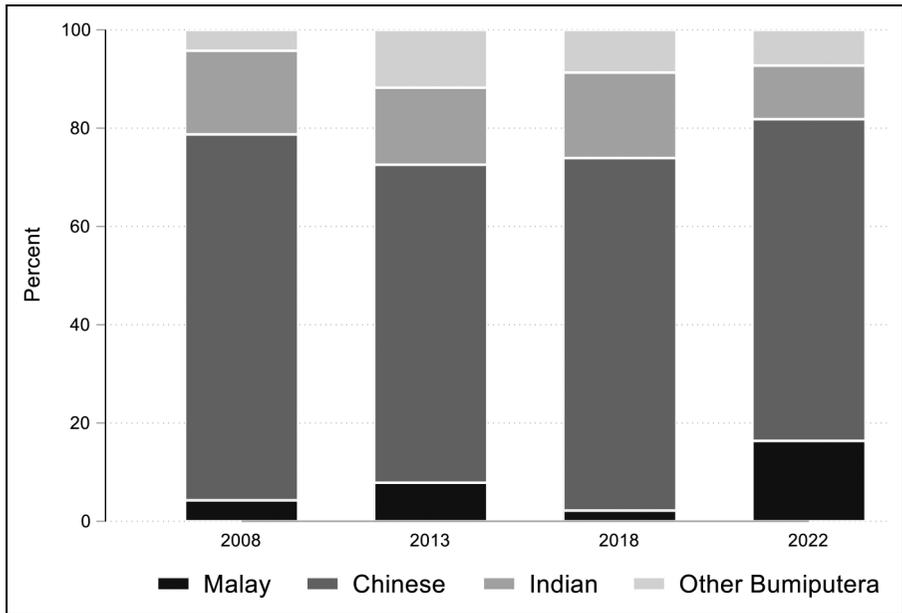
Figure 1. DAP Parliamentary Candidates by Ethnicity, 2008–2022.

that took place in Johor, Perlis, Pahang, and Perak. It does suggest that the party's efforts towards diversification gained greater ground at the state level, a trend that can possibly be attributed to the party's increased focus on building up promising Malay politicians via appointments in local councils prior to contesting at the state and eventually federal level (Dettman, 2023).

Other parts of the organization have seen only modest change. The top leadership of the party, as represented by the CEC, remains largely Chinese (although again, there is a modest upward trend in Malay representatives in the CEC after the 2022 National Congress). Similarly, the party's membership base is still largely ethnic Chinese. In 2014, prominent DAP leader Liew Chin Tong stated that the party should set a goal of having half Malay membership by 2025 (Liew, 2014). Although the party does not make available its membership's ethnic composition, that goal has certainly not been reached. Most estimates have put the percentage of Malay members at approximately 10% (Aziz et al., 2018: 183).

Why Have the DAP's Diversification Efforts Lagged?

As the previous section has shown, although the DAP is more diverse than in previous decades, in terms of candidates, membership, and leadership, it remains heavily ethnic Chinese. As argued previously, one major reason for the party's lack of adaptation is

the persistence of ethnic power-sharing practices. The coalitions that the party joined reinforced existing ways of seeking ethnic support. The DAP has been part of two coalitions since 2008, The People's Alliance (Pakatan Rakyat [PR]; 2008–2015) and The Alliance of Hope (Pakatan Harapan [PH]; 2015–present). Both coalitions were formed in opposition to the BN and emphasized a moderate reform platform, focusing on issues such as good governance, anti-corruption, and reducing the cost of living. Though the two coalitions were multiethnic, their formation continued to reflect an ethnic power-sharing model in how seats were contested. This approach is shown in Figure 2, where in comparison to its coalition partners, the DAP consistently contested the most heavily ethnic Chinese constituencies, while its partner parties (which had stronger bases in the Malay community) contested the most strongly Malay seats. Negotiation between the parties over seat allocation reflected their pre-existing ethnic profiles and their areas of presumed electoral strength (Ong, 2022).

In the party's previous coalitions, including the first coalition it joined in 1990, Gagasan Rakyat, and the Barisan Alternatif coalition that formed in 1999, the coalition parties also largely contested in districts that reflected their pre-existing demographic strengths. Yet in the more cohesive and enduring coalitions it entered starting in 2008, the party faced even greater pressure to adhere to its demographic strengths, given that
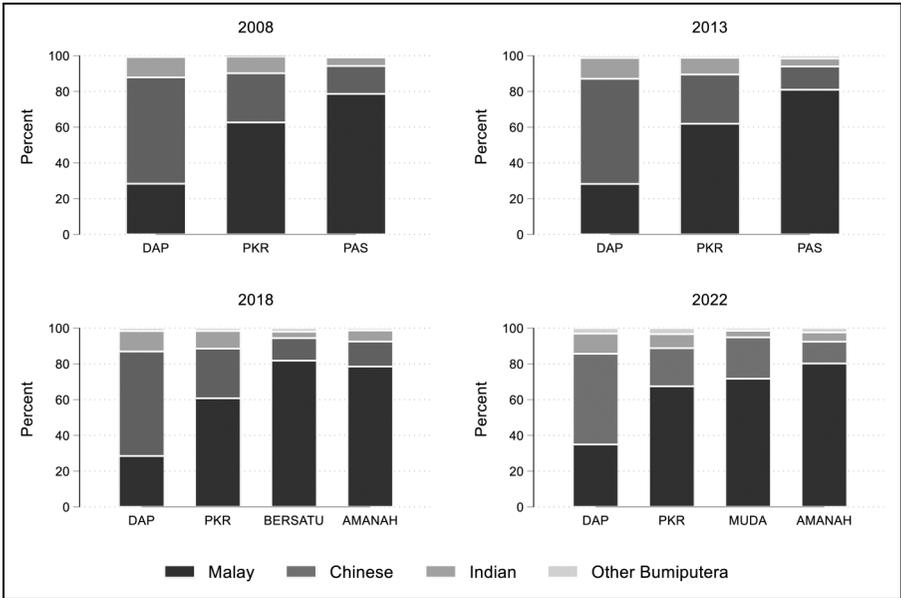

Figure 2. Mean Ethnic Composition of Parliamentary Seats Contested by DAP and Coalition Partners, 2008–2022.
Note: West Malaysian districts only. Although the 2008 election preceded the formation of the PR coalition, the parties were already coordinating their campaigns during that election.

seat allocation was decided more explicitly between the partner parties.[11] This coalitional approach meant that the DAP rarely ran candidates in heavily Malay districts, reducing the need to undertake deeper transformation.[12] Additionally, any attempts to expand into new demographic territory inevitably created conflict among the partner parties. In a speech by former Secretary General Lim Kit Siang at the party's 2016 National Retreat, he criticized the party's choice to refrain from fielding Malay candidates in the state of Perak for two elections in a row, "because some people said that this would offend our [coalition partner and Malay Muslim party] PAS at that time… I think that was a mistake because voters saw that [the DAP] had no Malay candidates at all in Perak" (Lim, 2016). More recently, in response to the DAP's attempt to contest a heavily Malay state seat in the 2022 elections, a politician from Amanah, their coalition partner, commented that "it is not yet time for DAP to expand its wings to the Malay majority rural areas," arguing that such seats should be contested by parties with a more significant Malay base (Ikhsan, 2022).

Another persistent legacy of ethnic power sharing in Malaysia is the use of negative campaigns to reinforce the connection of rivals to particular ethnic bases. During its brief tenure in national power, the PH ruling coalition, which prominently featured the DAP, faced vociferous criticism for its purported elevation of non-Malays above Malays (Dettman, 2020). Despite the DAP's efforts to engage in multiethnic messaging, it was still portrayed as synonymous with ethnic Chinese political interests. One recent manifestation of these campaigns took place during the 2022 elections, where social media posts included allegations that the DAP was responsible for the 1969 riots and that if it gained power, it would banish the Islamic call to prayer and abolish religious schools (Hamzah et al., 2023). These allegations had a long political history; after the DAP gained majority control of the Penang state government in 2008, for instance, the BN sought to portray it as neglecting the welfare of Malay Muslims (Zahiid, 2013). The allegations had little or no basis in reality, since the DAP and the PH coalition did little to change the balance of political power or alter existing institutions significantly.

These portrayals also sought to tarnish the DAP's Malay coalition partners and allies by association. Those parties were portrayed as puppets (*boneka*), lackeys (*barua*), servants (*khadam*), or riding horses (*kuda tunggangan*) of the DAP and, by implication, of ethnic Chinese interests. These critiques were so widespread as to be parodied by the DAP's coalition partners in the 2022 election; at campaign events, candidates would chant "DAP" to lampoon the relentless focus on the DAP by rivals. Similarly, DAP Malay candidates faced attacks calling them part of a DAP public-relations effort or "puppet candidates" (*calon boneka*) for the party.[13] Prior to the DAP and UMNO's post-election matchup in 2022, UMNO's vice president charged that the running of Malay candidates by the DAP was "part of a tactic to show that DAP is a multi-racial party when we all know that the decisions in the party are made by a certain group of individuals only" (Azimi, 2022).

Despite these barriers, to what extent have the party's rebranding exercises been successful in changing its perception among Malay voters? Although these have not been insignificant challenges, in interviews, DAP politicians have cited greater ease in entering

Malay spaces and connecting with Malay voters. This shift has also translated into some electoral successes. In her study of voting for the DAP and its long-time rival, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), in the 2018 elections, Ting (2020) found "greatly enhanced acceptance" of DAP candidates among Malay voters. Nevertheless, scholars have noted that the ethnic demographic structure of constituencies is a consistently strong predictor of outcomes in Malaysian elections: the higher the proportion of Malay/Bumiputera voters in a constituency, the more likely it is that votes will accrue to the candidate and coalition most closely aligned with Malay interests and away from parties with other ethnic bases such as the DAP (Dettman and Pepinsky, 2023; Pepinsky, 2015).

The party also sought to downplay its electoral success and ambitions for national power, apparently in a bid to reduce controversy and allay worries about possible Chinese dominance of the political system. In a Malay-language speech at the DAP's 2016 Congress, the Secretary General announced that the party would never seek the prime minister position, nor would it push for an ethnic Chinese prime minister, instead always supporting an ethnic Malay candidate (Lim, 2016). In the post-2022 government formation process, the DAP initially offered its support for the new government even without cabinet representation, lest the presence of the DAP in government proves to be a "stumbling block" in negotiations (Lim, 2022). In the current government, which resulted from those 2022 negotiations, despite having the most MPs in the government bloc, the DAP holds 4 out of 28 minister positions, fewer than governing coalition partners such as UMNO (8) and PKR (9).

As the DAP entered national government, the approach to power sharing in cabinets recalls the strategy of the BN, where parties representing ethnic minorities, most prominently the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), would provide the majority of ethnic diversity in the cabinet. In the two governments of which the DAP has been part (2018–2020 and 2022–present), the DAP supplied 73% and 72% of the non-Bumiputera ministers, respectively. With the exception of a single deputy minister, all of the DAP's ministerial appointees have been non-Malay.

These patterns were also evident in appointments in state cabinet positions (known as executive councilors, or excos). In Selangor and Penang, where the DAP has been in state government since 2008, the DAP is largely responsible for appointing the majority of non-Malay excos, while its partner parties largely nominate Malay executive councilors. In sum, at both the state and national level, power-sharing practices in cabinet positions reflect (and entrench) the DAP's position as supplying ethnic minority representation, similar to its position within electoral coalitions.[14]

Although this article has emphasized the role of power-sharing legacies, additional factors have contributed to the DAP's inability to initiate more fundamental change. The DAP, along with many other parties in Malaysia, is a relatively institutionalized organization, with coherent internal rules and routinization of procedures. Some scholars have argued that this institutionalization, while desirable for party stability and representation, can inhibit a party's ability to adapt rapidly to new conditions or to implement sweeping changes in direction, leadership, and candidates (Levitsky, 2001).

Indeed, the DAP's system of internal elections has appeared to slow down party diversification. Malay leaders from the DAP have tended to fare poorly in elections for leadership in the CEC. As a result, the most common route by which Malay politicians were brought into the CEC was by appointment. In the 2013 party elections, for instance, all eight Malay candidates failed to win a seat, and instead two Malay leaders were appointed to the CEC. In the most recent election, in 2022, out of nine Malay candidates for leadership, only one won a CEC seat; the other three Malay CEC members were appointed. Interviews with DAP personnel identified multiple possible reasons for this outcome; one suggested that it was due to vote splitting among Malay candidates, and also that Malay candidates tended to be newer and with less experience in the party, resulting in fewer connections to the grassroots.

Additionally, although the DAP has avoided outright ideological splits or factionalism (Ufen, 2020), not all leaders within the party endorse diversification. The trade-offs involved in diversification have been a matter of internal debate, one that occasionally spills out into public view. In 2021, the controversial DAP Selangor state legislator Ronnie Liu argued that the party should not "dilute" its Chineseness in order to appeal to new audiences (Yap, 2021). In response, a DAP press release stated that Liu was the "Chinese chauvinist we do not need" (Pua, 2021). The party "[faces] stiff obstacles internally from loyal, old party stalwarts who are … much more comfortable politicking within the decades-old racial framework constructed by BN. Perhaps, understandably, they [feel] threatened and fear being transformed into irrelevance politically" (Pua, 2021). While some DAP politicians have raised concerns about how efforts to reach Malays would cause the party to abandon its core values and identity (Yap, 2021), and thus alienate the party's core supporters, the DAP continues to monopolize the country's non-Malay, especially Chinese, voter base in West Malaysia. This has continued into the most recent elections in 2018 and 2022 (Chin, 2023), and there is no credible rival party or coalition that can hope to peel away the DAP's base of support in the short term. As a result, these internal debates over potential trade-offs appear to be smaller roadblocks than the factors described previously, especially given the party's coalitions and the demographic realities of the seats that the party contests.

This article has focused on the DAP to examine the process of party diversification in depth. I have argued that the DAP faced strong incentives to diversify its support. However, it is important to note that not all parties in contexts of democratization, and within the context of Malaysia, necessarily pursued party adaptation to build cross-ethnic support. This is clear in the case of PAS, a conservative Islamist party (and former DAP coalition partner). The party undertook well-documented but ultimately limited attempts to broaden electoral support to non-Malay and non-Muslim voters, particularly after the 2008 elections (e.g. Osman, 2008). Much more than the DAP, PAS faced internal tensions over the benefits and trade-offs of diversifying its support base. Given the party's founding mission and strongly Islamic orientation, its geographic base of support in heavily Malay Muslim states, and the sheer size of the Malay Muslim voter base in West Malaysia, the benefits to expansion were much more ambiguous for the party. By 2015, tensions over the party's mission and strategies led to the purge of

progressives from the party, and the party moved away both from multiethnic coalition building and from any attempts to build consistent support among non-Malay voters. PAS's divergent path illustrates that not all parties will face the same pressures to build broader support in contexts of democratization.

Finally, in analyzing the internal and external barriers that the DAP faced in diversifying its support, it is also important to note that there is no "right" level of ethnic diversity for the party to achieve. Against its own ambitious benchmarks for diversifying its organization with the intent of changing its reputation and building wider support among Malay voters, the DAP has yet to fulfill its own aims. Additionally, as argued above, the party's disproportionately small presence in the current government cabinet is evidence that it has yet to escape its ethnic reputation. Yet compared to other ethnic parties in Malaysia, including PAS and UMNO, as well as its longtime rival MCA, the DAP has been more successful in broadening its organization. Recent trends in the party's incorporation of Malay politicians and leaders may suggest further party organizational change, although it remains to be seen whether it will translate into greater Malay electoral support.

Conclusion

In many countries, ethnic power-sharing practices and norms have tended to persist long after the initial achievement of their intended purpose. The effects of democratization on ethnic power sharing, however, remain an area requiring further research. This article has argued that under more democratic politics, with fewer restraints on competition and the prospect of scaling up electoral support, parties may seek to adapt themselves so as to appeal more broadly beyond their ethnic base. These party adaptations may in turn affect the salience of ethnicity and how power sharing is achieved—specifically, through multiethnic parties rather than coalitions. The broadening of party bases ultimately offers the prospect of more substantive representation of different ethnic groups, given that representation will depend less on the stability of coalition politics.

This article highlights these dynamics in Malaysia, showing that more competitive elections did lead some parties to seek broader support. I have examined a most likely case for party diversification, the DAP, and how the party sought to broaden its appeals to the majority Malay ethnic group in the context of a more fragmented and fluid political environment, and as the formerly dominant BN coalition lost political support. Nevertheless, power-sharing practices and norms proved to have a powerful inertia, even after the collapse of dominant authoritarian rule. Political coalitions built around an ethnic logic continued to incentivize parties including the DAP to focus on their demographic strengths. Both coalition partners and political rivals sought to protect their own ethnic monopolies and to limit the DAP to its existing base. These dynamics are undoubtedly reinforced by a lack of institutional change, since the country retains its single-member district plurality system. Nevertheless, the electoral system does not preclude the development of more multiethnic parties, and further democratization or subsequent elections may lead to greater incentives for elite actors to

invest in new bases of support and reduce the salience of ethnicity in the construction of coalitions.

The findings of this article contribute to our understanding of political party strategies and the role of political agency in perpetuating ethnic power sharing. Existing literature has tended to focus on the broad institutional characteristics of power-sharing systems, or on the role of multiethnic coalitions in moderating ethnic politics, while the role of party adaptation has been underappreciated. The article also shows the importance of understanding how ethnic dimensions of a particular political context are channeled. We have seen that even short of major institutional change, parties can make meaningful changes to their party profiles that can lessen the salience of ethnic political logic. Finally, the article shows that in power-sharing systems, parties make strategic decisions about branding, campaigns, and organization not purely based on internal considerations, but also based on their position within the party system. Both rivals and coalition partners may box individual parties into existing ethnic divisions for their own political ends. Future research could elucidate further these relationships between democratization, ethnic power sharing, and ethnic party adaptation in Asian and other contexts.

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Notes

1. Prior to 1973, the coalition was known as the Alliance Party.
2. The literature on power sharing has used a variety of definitions, alternately covering all societies or specifically focusing on ethnically pluralistic or post-conflict societies (Binningsbø, 2013). In this paper, I focus narrowly on ethnic power sharing in the context of a pluralistic society.
3. Reilly argues that both parties and coalitions can fulfill this role; as argued in this paper, these are conceptually and empirically distinct options and lead to different outcomes.
4. The most prominent contemporary example of the latter is the multiethnic People's Justice Party (PKR), the party of the current Prime Minister.

5. The history of coalitions in Malaysia, and the implications of recent changes, are discussed in detail in Wong (2023).

6. However, there were other major differences between the PH (and its predecessor PR) and the BN. The opposition coalitions did not include a single dominant party like UMNO within BN; they also featured a major multiethnic party, the PKR, at their core.

7. As is discussed later, the DAP has also derived significant support from non-Chinese ethnic minority groups. As Chandra (2011) argues, ethnic parties do not necessarily represent a single ethnic group; in this case, the DAP also represents other ethnic minority groups.

8. The party has long had significant representation of Indian Malaysians. Some of the party's longest-serving leaders were of Indian descent, and the party has often fielded Indian candidates.

9. This language was not found in the DAP's first foray in coalition building, in 1990's Gagasan Rakyat.

10. These declarations also indicated after each provision that there was still room for minority rights, including the study of languages other than Malay and protection for religious practices other than Islam. This approach itself mirrors the language of Article 153 of the constitution, which provides the basis for Bumiputera special rights.

11. The PH coalition formalized a "winnability" criterion for the allocation of seats. Its agreement states that "In deciding which party shall represent [the Alliance of Hope]…the Presidential Council shall take into account the factor as to which party has the highest probability of an electoral victory in the said election." While ethnic demographics was not the only factor dictating winnability, it was a major one.

12. Prior to 2008, and even in periods where the party was not in formal coalitions, the DAP was also more likely to contest in seats that reflected its electoral strengths among non-Malay communities. However, the argument of this paper is that the DAP's entry into stable coalitions, particularly after 2008, reinforced a narrow band of seats where it could contest, even in periods where it could appeal more credibly to new audiences.

13. For example, Zairil Khir Johari, a Muslim DAP candidate who is of ethnic Chinese descent but grew up in a Malay Muslim household, was attacked in the media as not a "real" Malay. Other DAP Malay candidates faced similar challenges.

14. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this point.

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