

CHAPTER 8

MALAY MIDDLE CLASS POLITICS, DEMOCRACY AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Introduction

The problem of middle class politics, and the role of the new middle class in championing democracy and civil society has attracted the attention of many scholars studying the new middle class in the West as well as in Asia (Huntington 1991; Hsiao 1993; Vidich 1995; Robison & Goodman 1996; Hsiao & Koo 1997; Cox 1997).¹ 'Civil society', as used here, refers to the space between the individual and family on the one hand, and the state and market on the other, and that this space exerts a certain degree of autonomy, counter-balancing the power of the state and market. Such space becomes the realm of autonomous group action distinct from both corporate power and the state, and that within this space exist "autonomous groups articulating the views and interests and fears of the less powerful" (Cox 1997: 10). In Asia, capitalist development in various countries has generated the class basis for a development of civil society. The middle class as well as the working class are considered to be the main social forces involved in

¹ This introduction is, in part, based on the analysis of Malaysian middle class politics contained in a chapter by the author, which is due to appear in a forthcoming volume on the Southeast Asian middle

this emerging civil society, and are expected to play the role of expanding such space.

Scholars researching and writing on civil society in Asia draw attention to the growth of what is called the non-profit sector, and the role of the new middle class in leading non-profit organizations, or NGOs (Yamamoto 1995; Lee 1995; Corrothers & Suryatna 1995). They argue that the emergence of a sizable urban middle class serves to provide leadership in the non-profit sector, which has been critical to the emergence of private non-profit organizations. In Indonesia, for example, "NGOs have been able to reflect on and articulate more general concerns for the environment, human rights and democratization now emerging most obviously, but by no means exclusively, among the middle class" (Yamamoto 1995: 11). As summed up by Huntington (1991: 67), "Third wave movement for democratization were not led by landlords, peasants, or (apart from Poland) industrial workers. In virtually every country the most active supporters of democratization came from the urban middle class."

The preceding arguments exude a kind of "developmental optimism" that the middle class has an historical role to play in the democratization process and in expanding civil society in Asian countries, as the latter embark along the road of industrialization and modernization.² This "democratization thesis" -- which posits

class edited by H.H. Michael Hsiao. (See Abdul Rahman (forthcoming)).

² Samuel Huntington, the leading advocate of the third wave democratization thesis (i.e. democratization of the late twentieth century), argues that rising incomes led to changes in social structures, beliefs and culture that have been conducive to the emergence of democracy. "Rapid economic growth creates rapidly the economic base for democracy that slower economic growth creates more slowly. It, however, raises expectations, exacerbates inequalities, and creates stresses and strains in the social fabric that stimulate political mobilization and demands for political participation" (Huntington 1991: 68-69).

the liberal democratic notion of the middle class as a champion of democracy, an agent for democratic transformation, and an advocate of civil society -- is based in part on Western experience, and in part on political struggles waged by the organized sections of the middle class in some post-colonial non-Western societies.

In Chapter 3, we have portrayed the emergence and growth of the new Malaysian middle class, including the new Malay middle class, in historical terms, and discussed its economic basis, as well as the role of the state and capitalist relations in middle class formation. In Chapter 4, the 'new' middle class thesis -- which argues that the Malay middle class is a first generation or new class historically -- was discussed, followed by a discussion of its relative affluence. This was followed by a discussion of the Malay middle class family in Chapter 5, lifestyles and culture in Chapter 6, as well as community and religion in Chapter 7. In this chapter, we discuss the 'democratization thesis' in the context of Malaysia, focusing on the role of the new Malay middle class in Malaysian politics, democracy and civil society.

Parliamentary Democracy, Participation in Political Parties and the Electoral Process

In a study of the political role of the new middle class in Malaysia conducted in the late 1980s, Saravanamuttu (1989) argued that the Malaysian middle class was politically conscious, participated in movements championing democracy, and had emerged as a force to be reckoned with in national politics, posing resistance to the institutionalization of state authoritarianism. Saravanamuttu's study supports the democratization thesis in the context of Malaysia. He predicted that the middle

class would continue to play this role by attempting to expand the space for civil society despite various setbacks imposed by the authoritarian state. However, his sample of 468 respondents consisted of the organized members of the middle class, particularly leading elements in various NGOs. In fact, 78 per cent of the respondents were top leaders of these organizations, serving as presidents/chairs, deputy presidents/chairs, vice-presidents/chairs, and secretaries. It is not surprising, therefore, that his findings suggest active political involvement by the middle class in espousing democratic ideals.

However, while the above findings are tenable if we confine ourselves to the organized or leading middle class elements, a rather varied picture would emerge if the sample is different, e.g. on the basis of their occupational status, as in this study. Though a proportion of the sample in this study consisted of organized elements, the rest were not. Such a sample gives another picture of the role of the middle class in politics and democratization, which is not captured by a sample only of organized elements.

To gain an idea of the role of the new Malay middle class in politics and how far the new middle class has engaged issues of public and national interest in the public domain, this study tries to assess both the respondents' views about politics and public affairs as well as their actual involvement in political parties and public interest associations, including religious organizations. The study differentiates between the level of politicization and actual political involvement -- the former referring to political awareness, interest and concern in public and national affairs that respondents show, while the latter refers to membership and

actual involvement in organized movements. For analytical convenience, organized movements are categorized as political parties and public interest associations, including religious movements.

However, participation in political parties and voting during elections only serves as indicators of the politicization of the middle class and involvement in formal democratic processes respectively. Formal democracy allows citizens to join political parties to participate in elections, which have been held on a regular basis; they can also canvass for candidates, and vote in elections to choose representatives to form the government, or be in the opposition. A high degree of electoral canvassing, or voter turn-out, etc. shows formal democracy exists and that people can exercise some democratic rights, but do not necessarily prove the existence of civil society. Neither does it show the role that members of the new middle class may play in championing democracy and civil society. In the case of Malaysia, the country has held general elections since 1955, but it does not follow that civil society had emerged then. In fact, the ideology and political orientation of some parties taking part in the electoral process, especially the victorious ones, may turn out to be an obstacle to the growth of democracy and civil society. Nevertheless, an analysis of the involvement of the new middle class in political parties and elections should reflect their political mobilization and their party alignment, including their attitude towards the party in power, and whether they are very much bound up with and dependent on the ruling party, or quite autonomous of it.

The political system in Malaysia -- formally a parliamentary democracy -- has been aptly described by some writers as "neither authoritarian nor democratic" (Crouch 1993, 1996). It has the institutional framework of a formal democracy, but tends to be authoritarian in dealing with differences and opposition. Thus, in studying the role of the new Malay middle class in promoting civil society in this chapter, it is important to not only study their involvement in political parties and elections, but also to investigate their involvement in certain NGOs which are ostensibly independent of political parties and the state. At the same time, it is also important to analyze their attitudes and positions on major public and national issues, to assess whether they are ideologically inclined towards democracy, or towards authoritarianism. However, since political attitudes and consciousness are not easy to capture in surveys, the author also relies on ethnographic observations and interviews to complement the survey to gain insights into this issue.

Participation in Electoral Process and Party Alignments

The involvement of the new Malay middle class in the electoral process and in political parties is high, far higher than that of the non-Malay, especially the Chinese, middle class. Members of the new Malay middle class have accepted the rules of the game that in a parliamentary democracy, one can exercise one's democratic right, not only by becoming a member of a political party, but also by going to the ballot box to elect candidates to be one's representatives.

Table 8.1
Membership of Malay Middle Class Respondents in Political Parties
and Participation in the 1995 General Election

	KLANG VALLEY (n=108)		KOTA BHARU (n=80)		KUALA TERENGGANU (n=96)		ALL RESPONDENTS (N=284)	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Party member	48.1	51.2	37.5	62.5	43.8	56.3	43.7 (n=124)	56.3 (n=160)
Registered as voter	88.0	12.0	92.5	7.5	92.7	7.3	90.8 (n=258)	9.2 (n=26)
Voted in election	83.3	16.7	88.8	11.2	88.6	11.4	85.9 (n=246)	14.1 (n=38)
Campaigned for a particular candidate	12.0	88.0	21.3	78.7	21.9	78.1	18.0 (n=51)	82.0 (n=233)
Donated to a particular candidate party	12.0	88.0	6.3	93.7	15.6	84.4	11.6 (n=33)	25.1 (n=88.4)

Source: Survey data 1996

As shown in Table 8.1, 43.7 per cent of all new Malay middle class respondents studied were involved in political parties as members. This was highest in the Kelang Valley (48.1 per cent), followed by Kuala Trengganu (43.8 per cent), and Kota Bharu (37.5 per cent). They were either in UMNO, the backbone of the BN government, or PAS, the Islamic party holding power in the Kelantan state since 1959, except for the period of 1978-90. Both these parties are seen as political organizations representing Malay interests. They are able to mobilize support among substantial sections of the Malay middle class, in both provincial towns and rural areas, as well as in certain metropolitan cities.

Contrary to claims often made by UMNO leaders that the new Malay middle class, especially in big towns, abstain from voter registration and voting, this study found that voter registration and voting by all respondents in the three urban centres were high. Over 90 per cent of all respondents registered as voters for the 1995 election, with the highest being in Kuala Trengganu (92.7 per cent) and Kota Bharu (92.5 per cent). Though it was slightly lower in the Kelang Valley,

the proportion of registered voters was still high (88 per cent). Voter turn-out of Malay middle class respondents was high at 85.9 per cent, with the highest being in Kota Bharu (88.8 per cent), followed by Kuala Trengganu (88.6 per cent), and the Kelang Valley (83.3 per cent).

To assess where new Malay middle class voters stand in terms of voter turn-out in relation to other voters, let us briefly examine the overall voter turn-out for all three urban centres. The 1995 election results released by the Election Commission showed that total voter turn-out was 71.1 per cent in the Kota Bharu and 74.1 per cent in the Kuala Trengganu parliamentary constituencies. In the Kelang Valley, voter turn-out was slightly lower; for example, in the Petaling Jaya Selatan parliamentary constituency (where most of our respondents lived), the turn-out was 66.6 per cent (*Utusan Malaysia*, election results special issue, April 27, 1995). From these figures, it is clear that a much higher proportion of the new Malay middle class sample studied came out to vote than the rest of the electorate in their respective constituencies.

Among new Malay middle class respondents, a small core emerged as very active by campaigning for their candidates and donating to their party. This is evidenced by the fact that 18 per cent of all respondents campaigned for their candidates, and a smaller proportion (11.6 per cent) contributed money to their party election fund (Table 8.1). When we compare the participation of new Malay middle class respondents in the Kelang Valley with their counterparts in the two provincial towns, it was found that those in Kota Bharu and Kuala Trengganu were more active. They not only topped the list in terms of voter registration and

turn-out at elections, but also in campaigning for their candidates. In fact, in both Kuala Trengganu and Kota Bharu, more than a fifth of our respondents actively campaigned for their candidates in the 1995 election, while the percentage was much lower, i.e. 12 per cent, in the Kelang Valley.

High involvement in election campaigning among respondents in Kuala Trengganu and Kota Bharu compared to those in the Kelang Valley may be attributed to the keen competition between the two dominant Malay-based parties – UMNO and PAS – and also because candidates and respondents in the two urban centres were from the same ethnic group. During the 1995 election, there were 14 parliamentary and 43 state seats contested between PAS and the UMNO-led BN in Kelantan, while in Trengganu, the figures were eight and 32 seats respectively (Gomez 1996: 19). (Though the now-defunct Semangat 46 Party also contested, it then aligned itself with PAS through the Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah or APU). All the parliamentary and state seats in Kota Bharu and Kuala Trengganu, where the study was conducted, were contested by the two parties. In the Kota Bharu parliamentary constituency, the APU candidate garnered 24,096 votes, easily defeating the BN candidate with a majority of 6,268 votes. In Kuala Trengganu, PAS gave the BN a good fight, and seized one of the three state seats (*Utusan Malaysia*, election results special issue, April 27, 1995).

The same cannot be said of constituencies in Petaling Jaya or Kuala Lumpur in the Kelang Valley. The fight here was not between Malay-based parties, but between the UMNO-led BN and the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP), as in the case of Petaling Jaya Selatan, where the BN fielded a

Chinese candidate from the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA). While a high percentage of new Malay middle class respondents in the Klang Valley came out to vote, involvement was mainly on voting day to support their party candidate, while only a very small proportion would take time off to campaign for any candidate, especially if the latter was not a Malay from UMNO

Table 8.2
Party Alignment of Malay Middle Class Respondents in the 1995 General Election

	KLANG VALLEY (n=90)*	KOTA BHARU (n=71)*	KUALA TERENGGANU (n=85)*	ALL RESPONDENTS (N=246)*
Voted Barisan Nasional	86.7	57.7	60.0	69.1
Voted opposition party	12.2	15.5	23.5	17.1
"My vote a secret"***	1.1	26.8	16.5	13.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Survey data 1996

* The figure only refers to those who voted in the 1995 election

** This is interpreted to mean voting for the opposition.

The party alignment of new Malay middle class respondents in the Kelang Valley and in the two provincial towns is also an important indicator of the different stances they take with regard to the ruling party in the central government, and how prepared they are to stand by their party. As shown in Table 8.2, party alignment also differs quite sharply. While 86.7 per cent of the new Malay middle class respondents in the Kelang Valley voted for the BN, only 60 per cent did so in Kuala Trengganu, while in Kota Bharu, the percentage was even lower (57.7 per cent). This shows that while only a small proportion of the new Malay middle class respondents voted for the opposition in the Kelang Valley, in

Kota Bharu and Kuala Trengganu, their proportion was high – over 40 per cent.³ According to the sample, this means that unlike metropolitan middle class Malays, many new Malay middle class respondents in the two provincial towns were more inclined to vote against the ruling UMNO, and support the opposition PAS.

Table 8.3
Party Membership and Voting of the Kelang Valley Working Class in the 1995 General Election,
by Ethnic Group

	MALAYS (n=133)		CHINESE (n= 58)		INDIANS & OTHERS (n=50)		ALL RESPONDENTS (N=241)	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Party member	23.5	76.5	20.7	79.3	20.0	80.0	20.1 (n=54)	79.9 (n=187)
Registered as voter	84.1	15.9	70.7	29.3	86.0	14.0	81.3 (n=195)	18.7 (n=45)
Voted in 1995 election	74.2	25.8	65.5	34.5	78.0	22.0	72.9 (n=175)	27.1 (n=65)
Campaigned for a particular candidate	9.8	90.2	3.4	96.6	10.0	90.0	8.3 (n=20)	91.7 (n=220)

Source: Survey data 1997

It is interesting to compare the political behaviour of respondents from the new Malay middle class and Malay working class. To see their similarities and differences, the same set of questions was administered by the author to a group of 240 workers in the Kelang Valley in 1997 (comprising 133 Malays, 58 Chinese and 50 Indians).⁴ The study shows that new Malay middle class respondents had far higher involvement in political parties than those from the Malay working class. Among the latter, only 23.5 per cent were party members, 84.1 per cent had registered as voters, and 74.2 per cent came out to vote in the 1995 general election (Table 8.3). All these percentages were much lower than those for the new Malay

³ Those who indicated that their vote was "secret" are assumed here to have voted for the opposition (see Table 8.3).

⁴ Due to shortage of time and funds, the study on Malay workers was only conducted in the Kelang Valley.

middle class; in terms of party membership, it was proportionately lower by less than half.⁵ It is not clear why a much lower proportion of Malay workers were party members compared to members of the new Malay middle class. One plausible explanation is that UMNO is today increasingly dominated by corporate figures, and perceived to be a party of the new middle class and the rich (Gomez 1991, 1994), not a party of, and for, ordinary and small people. Many workers could have stayed away from the party partly because they identified little with it (except as Malays), while this was not so for many new Malay middle class elements. Though this study cannot adduce hard evidence to support this hypothesis, the workers' voting choices in the election lends some credence. It was found that while 72.4 per cent of the Malay working class respondents voted for the BN in the 1995 election, more than a quarter (27.6 per cent) voted against it (Table 8.4), which was very much higher than the 13.3 per cent among Malay middle class respondents in the Kelang Valley. This shows a certain degree of alienation and disillusionment with the BN (in this case, UMNO) among more than a quarter of the Kelang Valley Malay workers.

It is also important to see if there is any difference between the new Malay, Chinese and Indian middle classes with regard to politics. A study of new middle class politics in the Kelang Valley conducted in 1996 (Abdul Rahman, forthcoming), shows that party membership was lowest among the new Chinese

⁵ This phenomenon has not gone unnoticed by UMNO leaders. Of late, UMNO leaders have repeatedly expressed concern that many Malay youth were not joining the party and they urged the UMNO Youth to intensify campaigns to recruit them. Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, UMNO Vice-President who is also the newly-appointed Deputy Prime Minister (replacing former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim) stated this in his nationally televised interview on February 2, 1999 and repeated the statement in Johor a few days later ('Reach Out to Youngsters, Abdullah Tells UMNO Youth', *New Straits Times*, February 8, 1999).

middle class (12.7 per cent), while among the new Indian middle class, it was slightly higher (14.6 per cent). In terms of voter registration and turn-out, it is found that it was manifestly lower among the new Chinese and Indian middle classes, than among the new Malay middle class. However, when it comes to voting alignment, there was a higher proportion of Chinese middle class respondents not supporting the BN in the 1995 election compared to Indian and Malay respondents.⁶

Table 8.4
Voting Alignment of Working Class Respondents in the Kelang Valley
in the 1995 General Election, by Ethnic Group

	MALAYS (n=98)*	CHINESE (n=38)*	INDIANS & OTHERS (n=39)*	ALL RESPONDENTS (N=175)*
Voted for Barisan Nasional	72.4	55.3	71.8	68.6 (n=120)
Voted for opposition party	4.1	15.8	15.4	9.1 (n=16)
"My vote is a secret"***	23.5	28.9	12.8	22.3 (n=39)
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Survey data 1997

Note: * Number who voted in the 1995 election only

** This is interpreted to mean voting for the opposition

Among Chinese and Indian workers, the author's study in 1997 among workers in the Kelang Valley also shows that there was a higher percentage of party membership (Chinese 20.7 per cent, while Indians 20 per cent), higher voter registration, and voter turn-out among Chinese and Indian workers compared to Chinese and Indian middle classes (Table 8.3). It is also important to note that among Chinese workers, only 55.3 per cent voted for the BN, while a sizeable

⁶ This is not to deny that in the 1995 general election, Chinese voters gave greater support to the BN compared to their stand in the 1990 election, whereas there was less change among Malay voters in the

proportion (44.7 per cent) voted for the opposition. Among Indian workers, the proportion supporting the BN was much higher (71.8 per cent), while 28.2 per cent aligned themselves with the opposition.

The sample shows that the new Malay middle class – both in the metropolitan capital and provincial towns – took an active part in party as well as electoral politics, much more than the Malay working class. (Since no study was conducted among Malay workers in Kota Bharu and Kuala Trengganu, such comparison cannot be made for these two towns). In terms of degree, members of the new Malay middle class in the two provincial towns were more politically organized and independent of UMNO than their counterparts in the Kelang Valley, and because of PAS activities, were more prepared to go against mainstream politics. The new Malay middle class is also more politically conscious and involved in politics than their Chinese and Indian counterparts.

Participation in NGOs

As stated above, the growth of NGOs and citizens' participation in these organizations is an important indicator of the opening up of democratic space for civil society. NGOs feature prominently in the emerging civil society, and their leadership is largely -- though not exclusively -- drawn from the new middle class. What is significant is that some NGOs are also part of social movements. And, as argued by some writers, the study of social movements can suggest likely future transformations (Giddens 1991: 158).

In this study, five types of NGOs have been chosen, namely consumer, environmental, professional, resident and religious organizations. Though these organizations are often identified as championing the interests of the new middle class, and are largely middle-class dominated and led -- since members of the new middle class are better educated and believed to have better leadership capabilities than members of the working class -- they are not exclusively new middle-class in composition (except for professional associations) for they also include working class. Consumer associations and environmental organizations are part of national social movements and the issues they fight for involve demands for changes in social arrangements.

Table 8.5 shows the respondents' participation in consumer, environmental, professional, resident and religious associations among new Malay middle class respondents in the Kelang Valley, as well as in the provincial towns of Kota Bharu and Kuala Trengganu. Taking all respondents from the three urban centres together, it is found that their involvement and participation in organizations of direct interest to them (such as resident, professional and religious organizations) was higher than in other organizations. Thus, while almost one-third or 31.8 per cent were involved in religious organizations,⁷ 31.1 per cent in resident associations, and 25.2 per cent in professional associations, their participation in organizations less directly linked to their immediate interests is much lower -- only 11.5 per cent in consumer associations, and lower still in environmental organizations (8.7 per cent).

⁷ See discussion in Chapter 7.

Table 8.5
Participation of Malay Middle Class Respondents in Consumer, Environmental,
Professional, Resident and Religious Associations, 1996

	KELANG VALLEY (n=108)		KOTA BHARU (n=80)		KUALA TERENGGANU (n=96)		ALL RESPONDENTS (N=284)	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Consumer association	10.2	89.8	13.8	86.3	11.5	88.5	11.6 (n=33)	88.4 (n=251)
Environmental association	12.0	88.0	3.8	96.3	9.4	90.6	8.8 (n=25)	91.2 (n=259)
Professional association	39.8	60.2	11.3	88.8	20.8	79.2	25.4 (n=72)	74.6 (n=212)
Resident association	37.0	63.0	27.5	72.5	29.2	70.8	31.7 (n=90)	68.3 (n=194)
Religious organization	31.5	68.5	40.0	60.0	27.1	72.9	32.4 (n=92)	67.6 (n=192)

Source: Survey data 1996

There is some difference in the level of participation in these organizations between the metropolitan new Malay middle class and their provincial counterparts. For example, Malay middle class respondents in the Kelang Valley were more actively involved in both resident and professional associations (37 per cent and 35 per cent respectively), compared to their counterparts in Kota Bharu or Kuala Trengganu. As regards their participation in consumer associations, there was no significant difference between the three urban centres. However, when it comes to environmental organizations, members of the new Malay middle class in the Kelang Valley participated more actively than in the provincial towns, especially in Kota Bharu. A different picture emerged for religious organizations, with the highest involvement being in Kota Bharu (38.5 per cent), followed by the Kelang Valley (31.5 per cent), and Kuala Trengganu (26.5 per cent).

These findings suggest that a portion of the new Malay middle class was being drawn into activities in the public domain, and was getting organized in civil

society organizations. This could translate into positive developments enlarging democratic space – the space between the state on the one hand and the individual and family on the other -- necessary for the growth of civil society, provided they attain some degree of autonomy from the state and corporate power.

Two things that strike out from the data presented above require some explanations. First, there is higher participation rate in religious, resident and professional associations than in consumer and environmental movements. This suggests that many members of the new Malay middle class tend to be more concerned with their immediate material and spiritual interests than with larger interests affecting the public. While resident and professional associations cater to the specific and immediate interests of their members, religious organizations are other-worldly oriented, and provide members with a sense of identification with a spiritual community and promise personal spiritual salvation. Respondents tend to stay away from organizations 'distant' from their immediate interest, especially organizations that suggest an overtly oppositional political stance. In this case, the causes championed by the two other groups (consumer and environmental movements) -- though ostensibly concerning consumer rights and the environment -- are often perceived as political and oppositional in nature. At times, these groups appear to be confrontational with the powers-that-be. Consumer movements and environmental groups in Malaysia (such as the Consumer Association of Penang – CAP; Federation of Malaysia Consumer Associations – FOMCA; and Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia -- EPSM) have been known to be vocal and critical of Malaysian

government policies on consumer affairs⁸ and environmental management (Saliha, forthcoming). This may explain why many Malay middle class elements, whose political views were more oriented towards maintaining security, stability and growth than exercising citizens' rights to determine the affairs of society and political freedom (see discussion below), may shy away from participation in such NGOs. The fact that certain NGOs have often been attacked by many government leaders, accusing them of peddling "Western agendas", has also made them rather nervous about joining such NGOs, and even become suspicious of them.

Second, the high proportion of non-involvement in NGOs should not be equated simply as showing apathy towards public issues and the growth of democracy and civil society. As noted by various scholars, ethnicity is very important factor in Malaysian politics (Brown 1994; Shamsul 1994; Crouch 1996). This is especially so in the Kelang Valley, though in Kota Bharu and Kuala Trengganu it is not a big issue. Several political NGOs, including progressive political parties (e.g. People's Party of Malaysia – PRM) that fight on a multiracial platform have often, rightly or wrongly, been identified by some sections as championing 'non-Malay' interests. Politicised new Malay middle class elements may be active in PAS, or even constitute a democratic faction within UMNO, but they may still perceive things in ethnic terms, and might not be keen in joining or associating with such NGOs other than those championing the interests of Malays and Muslims. Also, there is a small number of new Malay middle class elements

⁸ During the acute water crisis in the Kelang Valley in 1998, the Federation of Malaysian Consumer Associations (FOMCA) threatened to take the Selangor State Government and the Water Supply Department to court for their failure to provide the water supply to the public. The confrontation later cooled down after both sides entered into discussions to resolve the issue amicably, and the Selangor State Government pledged to handle the crisis more

especially intellectuals, who sometimes take independent stances irrespective of their organizational involvement in political parties such as UMNO or other parties. Some may not even be members of any party or NGO. Yet they sometimes provide critical voices over various important issues, and contribute towards the opening of greater political space nationally. In other words, we have to look not only at political parties and NGOs but also beyond them to capture the democratic space representing civil society.

The above points show complexities in the issue of politics, democracy and civil society in Malaysia, which are not easily captured in surveys but could be detected in interviews. These need to be borne in mind when interpreting the survey data in this study.

Views and Stances on Public and National Issues

A separate study by the author on Malaysian middle class political attitudes among the three major ethnic groups (comprising 520 respondents) in the Kelang Valley conducted in early 1996 (Abdul Rahman, forthcoming) found an underlying contestation and tension between demands for development and social order on the one hand, and demands for democracy, greater space for citizens' views and participation on the other. Members of the new middle class wanted development and social order, but at the same time, they also wanted democracy and more political space. The study concluded that a paradox seems to exist in the attitudes of the middle class regarding democracy and authoritarianism. While it

supports democracy, it tolerates and seems not averse to the institutionalization of state authoritarianism. It views the latter, i.e. strong and effective government, often a euphemism for authoritarianism, as necessary for national development and economic growth, provided some degree of democracy prevailed in society.

For this study of the new Malay middle class, a different, though related set of questions was asked to explore the views and stances of the respondents in the Kelang Valley and in the two provincial towns, with regard to certain issues concerning the country's governance in so far as it pertains to wealth distribution, democracy and freedom (see Table 8.6). Though the emphasis is slightly different, this discussion will be compared to the findings of the earlier Kelang Valley study to see if there were certain similarities in the views and stances of the Malay middle class with those of the new Malaysian middle class captured in that study.

Two main concerns have emerged in development discourses in Malaysia since the 1970s, when the government embarked on the NEP, with continuing more than two-thirds majority control of Parliament. The first concerns socio-economic questions of disparity, while the second involves the political questions over the abuse of power and authoritarianism.

The main concern in development planning has not been with growth per se, but rather growth with equitable distribution, namely to address the problem of inter-ethnic disparity, and that of the gap between rich and poor. As shown in earlier chapters, the new Malay middle class is a product of the NEP, and the emergence of this class came about through the government's 'restructuring' and

Table 8.6
Attitudes of Malay Middle Class Respondents To Important Political and Economic Issues in Malaysia, 1996

	KLANG VALLEY (n=108)				KOTA BHARU (n=80)				KUALA TERENGGANU (n=96)				ALL RESPONDENTS (N=284)			
	1	2	3		1	2	3		1	2	3		1	2	3	
1. Do you agree that the government has succeeded in redistributing wealth among ethnic groups?	56.2	38.4	5.5		72.5	22.5	5.0		53.1	35.4	11.5		60.2	32.1	7.6	
2. Do you agree that the government had succeeded in redistributing wealth between rich and poor?	34.2	47.9	17.8		52.5	31.3	16.3		33.3	42.7	24.0		39.8	40.5	19.7	
3. Do you agree that privatisation is beneficial to the people in the long term?	53.4	37.0	9.6		53.8	35.0	11.3		47.9	38.5	13.5		51.4	36.9	11.6	
4. Do you agree that privatisation widens the gap between rich and poor?	39.7	38.4	21.9		38.8	31.3	30.0		51.0	26.0	22.9		43.8	31.3	24.9	
5. Do you agree that the BN government has a good record in upholding parliamentary democracy?	65.8	32.9	1.4		76.3	21.3	2.5		62.5	34.4	3.1		67.9	29.7	2.4	
6. Do you agree that there is political interference in the judiciary?	49.3	30.1	20.5		45.0	20.0	35.0		54.2	25.0	20.8		49.8	24.9	25.3	
7. Do you agree that a government with a two-thirds majority is prone to abuse power?	34.2	38.4	27.4		38.8	31.3	30.0		41.7	32.3	26.0		38.6	33.7	27.7	
8. Do you agree that it is good for the country to have a strong opposition?	38.4	35.6	26.0		41.3	40.0	18.8		45.8	40.6	13.5		42.2	39.0	18.8	
9. Do you approve of workers launching industrial action?	5.5	69.9	24.7		2.5	51.3	46.3		4.2	62.5	33.3		4.0	61.0	34.9	
10. Do you agree that the Internal Security Act (ISA) should be continued?	23.3	65.8	11.0		33.8	57.5	8.8		15.6	72.9	11.5		23.7	65.9	10.4	

Note:

- 1 = Fully agree
- 2 = Agree to a certain extent
- 3 = Disagree

Source: Survey data 1996

poverty reduction efforts. Thus, it was pertinent to probe into the views of the new Malay middle class on whether they felt the government had succeeded in tackling such disparities.

As shown in Table 8.6, on wealth distribution among ethnic groups as a result of the NEP's implementation, respondents appreciated the achievements of the government's policy. While a tiny minority (7.6 per cent) felt the government had a poor record, the majority (60.2 per cent) were pleased with the progress, and another 32.1 per cent were happy to some extent. However, their views were more divided on wealth distribution between rich and poor. Only two-fifths (39.8 per cent) agreed that the government had succeeded in reducing the rich-poor gap, while a similar proportion (40.5 per cent) only partially agreed, while almost one-fifth (19.7 per cent) felt it had failed -- the latter view was strongest among the new Malay middle class respondents in Kuala Trengganu, with some 24 per cent.⁹ Although a large number (almost half) had voted against the BN in the 1995 election, the new Malay middle class respondents in Kota Bharu felt that the BN government's wealth distribution efforts between ethnic groups as well as between rich and poor had been good. Kota Bharu had the smallest percentage (compared to the other two urban centres) who disagreed or were critical of the achievement. In fact, 72.5 per cent of respondents in Kota Bharu felt that the government's performance was good on inter-ethnic parity, while 52.5 per cent fully agreed that rich-poor differentials had been narrowed.

⁹ In his study, Gomez (1996: 39-40) drew attention to the swing against the BN among rural voters in Trengganu, Kelantan and Kedah in the 1995 election, which he attributed to their frustration that government policies were exacerbating social differentiation and economic disparities in the community. In our study, except for Malay middle class respondents in Kota Bharu, the economic disparity issue also appears to be a major concern among a substantial number of the Malay middle

However, despite being pleased with these economic achievements, there was a continuing concern among respondents over possible widening of the gap between rich and poor. This was expressed with regard to the effects of the privatization policy: while most agreed that in the long run, privatization would benefit the people, they worried over its likely adverse effects on inequality. While a quarter felt that privatization would not widen inequality, a larger proportion (43.8 per cent) felt that privatization would bring about greater inequality, while about almost a third (31.3 per cent) also felt the same, though not as strongly. Again, as in the case of the economic gap between rich and poor, the strongest feelings about privatization causing greater inequality was expressed by new Malay middle class respondents in Kuala Trengganu (Table 8.6).

What about the abuse of political power and authoritarianism? As mentioned earlier, the Malaysian political system has been described as "neither authoritarian, nor democratic" (Crouch 1993, 1996). This description suggests that while the system has the formal institutions of democracy, yet authoritarianism is strong in practice. This systemic paradox is also reflected in the views of Malaysians, including the new Malay middle class.

As also shown in Table 8.6, of all respondents in the three urban centres, more than two-thirds (67.9 per cent) felt that the government had a good record in upholding democracy, another 29.7 per cent felt it was quite good, while only a negligible proportion (2.4 per cent) felt that the government had a poor record. In other words, while slightly more than two-thirds endorsed the BN government's

record, about one-third were still quite unhappy. This view was strongest among respondents in Kuala Trengganu and the Kelang Valley.

The BN government's record in relation to the judiciary has been a matter of concern. This issue relates to the doctrine of the separation of powers and the "checks and balances" between the executive, legislature (parliament) and the judiciary, especially following the sacking the independent-minded Lord President, Tun Salleh Abbas, in May 1988 soon after the UMNO split a year earlier (Tun Salleh Abbas 1989). The incident sparked off a debate over the judiciary's independence, and many people still remember it many years after the event. For this study, the author tried to see how the issue was perceived by the respondents. How independent is the Malaysian judiciary in their eyes? Interestingly, while a quarter of the respondents maintained that the judiciary was independent and there was no political interference in its conduct and decisions, half (49.8 per cent) did not doubt government's political interference, while another quarter said such interference prevailed to some extent.

The respondents were particularly concerned about the implications of the BN continuing to have more than a two-thirds majority in Parliament. Though this was considered necessary by some to ensure a strong government and stable political climate, others believed this situation could lead to abuses of power. While more than a quarter (27.7 per cent) said it had not led to abuses of power, almost 40 per cent said it certainly had, while another 33.7 per cent felt that it might have. Those in Kuala Trengganu and Kota Bharu were more likely to maintain that it might lead to such abuses.

How could such a possibility of abuse be checked? Most new Malay middle class respondents saw the usefulness of a strong parliamentary opposition to keep the ruling party in check. This view was most strongly expressed in Kuala Trengganu and Kota Bharu, where such sentiment was strong; even in the Kelang Valley, a substantial proportion of the respondents (38.4 per cent) also felt that a strong opposition was good for the country, while a quarter was opposed to it.

Various attitudes of the new middle class respondents discussed above suggest that they want democracy, an independent judiciary, and a strong opposition in Parliament to help check abuses of power, and so on, reflecting a desire for the growth of civil society. However, when we probed deeper on a wider range of issues, including workers' rights and individual freedom, their commitment seemed wanting. For example, when asked whether they agreed that "workers could launch industrial action" in an industrial democracy to fight for their interests vis-à-vis their employers, an insignificant number (four per cent) gave unqualified support, while the majority (61 per cent) would only agree to a certain extent or depending on circumstances, and over a third (34.9 per cent) were opposed (Table 8.6). It is significant to note that voting against the ruling party does not necessarily translate into support for basic workers' rights. This is clear from the responses of respondents in Kota Bharu and Kuala Trengganu where though support for the opposition was strongest, the proportions not in favour of workers launching industrial action were largest.

Their views on the Internal Security Act (ISA) – a law allowing for detention without trial which has been criticized as draconian or authoritarian – do not seem

consistent with the other apparently democratic positions. To the question whether they would "agree that the ISA be continued", only a small minority (10.4 per cent) opposed it outright, about a quarter (23.7 per cent) were strongly in favour, while the bulk (65.9 per cent) hesitated to give unreserved support but were willing to support its continuation, depending on circumstances. This suggests that new Malay middle class respondents had mixed views about the ISA. There have been cases, which the author detected through interviews, of some respondents who opposed the ISA, but selectively. For example, they would not oppose the ISA if it was applied only to certain non-Malay or communist elements, whom they regarded as 'chauvinists' or 'extremists', though they would oppose it if they saw there was a clear abuse of the Act. They would, however, not hesitate to oppose it if it was applied to Malays and Muslim organizations (e.g. the action against members of the Arqam movement).¹⁰

These apparently contradictory stances were not peculiar to members of the new Malay middle class, but seem to cut across classes and ethnic groups. As will be shown below, such apparent paradoxes are also seen among Malay, Chinese and Indian workers, as well as the new Chinese and Indian middle class, with differences largely a matter of degree. As shown in Table 8.7, the views of the Malay working class on the continuation of the ISA were almost identical with those of the new Malay middle class -- 10.5 per cent opposed it, 29.3 per cent supported it fully,

¹⁰ Note that this stance on the ISA changed drastically following the arrest of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and several other figures in NGOs and UMNO were arrested under the Act in September and October 1998 (See Chapter 10).

Table 8.7
Attitude of the Kelang Valley Working Class Respondents To Important Political and Economic Issues, by Ethnic Group, 1997

	MALAYS (n=133)			CHINESE (n=58)			INDIANS & OTHERS (n=50)			ALL RESPONDENTS (N=241)		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
1. Do you agree that the government has succeeded in redistributing wealth among ethnic groups?	57.1	29.3	13.5	50.0	29.3	20.7	54.0	32.0	14.0	54.8 (n=132)	29.9 (n=72)	15.4 (n=37)
2. Do you agree that the government has succeeded in redistributing wealth between rich and poor?	46.6	32.3	21.1	39.7	37.9	22.4	48.0	36.0	16.0	45.2 (n=109)	34.4 (n=83)	20.3 (n=49)
3. Do you agree that privatisation is beneficial to the people in the long term?	60.2	30.1	9.8	48.3	39.7	12.1	54.0	28.0	18.0	56.0 (n=135)	32.0 (n=77)	12.0 (n=29)
4. Do you agree that privatisation widens the gap between rich and poor?	37.6	25.6	36.8	55.2	20.7	24.1	40.0	40.0	20.0	42.3 (n=102)	27.4 (n=66)	30.3 (n=73)
5. Do you agree that the BN government has a good record in upholding parliamentary democracy?	82.7	12.0	5.3	63.8	31.0	5.2	88.0	10.0	2.0	79.3 (n=191)	16.2 (n=39)	4.6 (n=11)
6. Do you agree that there is political interference in the judiciary?	29.3	41.4	29.3	32.8	34.5	32.8	26.0	50.0	24.0	29.5 (n=71)	41.5 (n=100)	29.0 (n=70)
7. Do you agree that a government with a two-thirds majority is prone to abuse power?	25.6	36.8	37.6	24.1	32.8	43.1	20.0	46.0	34.0	24.1 (n=58)	37.8 (n=91)	38.2 (n=92)
8. Do you agree that it is good for the country to have a strong opposition?	36.8	39.8	23.3	53.4	31.0	15.5	60.0	28.0	12.0	45.6 (n=110)	35.3 (n=85)	19.1 (n=46)
9. Do you approve of workers launching industrial action?	6.0	55.6	38.3	13.8	51.7	34.5	8.0	44.0	48.0	8.3 (n=20)	52.3 (n=126)	39.4 (n=95)
10. Do you agree that the Internal Security Act (ISA) be continued?	29.3	60.2	10.5	31.0	51.7	17.2	18.0	64.0	18.0	27.4 (n=66)	58.9 (n=142)	13.7 (n=33)

Note: 1 = Fully agree
2 = Agree to a certain extent
3 = Disagree

Source: Survey data 1997

Table 8.8
Attitudes of the Kelang Valley Chinese and Indian Middle Class Respondents
To Important Political and Economic Issues in Malaysia, 1996

	CHINESE (n=62)			INDIANS (n=37)			ALL RESPONDENTS (N=99)		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
1. Do you agree that the government has succeeded in redistributing wealth among ethnic groups?	43.5	40.3	16.1	37.8	37.8	24.3	41.4 (n=41)	39.4 (n=39)	19.2 (n=19)
2. Do you agree that the government has succeeded in redistributing wealth between rich and poor?	35.5	46.8	17.7	35.1	40.5	24.3	35.4 (n=35)	44.4 (n=44)	20.2 (n=20)
3. Do you agree that privatisation is beneficial to the people in the long term?	53.2	30.6	16.1	62.2	35.1	2.7	56.6 (n=56)	32.3 (n=32)	11.1 (n=11)
4. Do you agree that privatisation widens the gap between rich and poor?	40.3	32.3	27.4	32.4	45.9	21.6	37.4 (n=37)	37.4 (n=37)	25.3 (n=25)
5. Do you agree that the BN government has a good record in upholding parliamentary democracy?	54.8	41.9	3.2	54.1	43.2	2.7	54.5 (n=54)	42.4 (n=42)	3.0 (n=3)
6. Do you agree that it is good for the country to have a strong opposition?	51.6	33.9	14.5	54.1	35.1	10.8	52.5 (n=52)	34.3 (n=34)	13.1 (n=13)
7. Do you agree that there is political interference in the judiciary?	50.0	25.8	24.2	40.5	32.4	27.0	46.5 (n=46)	28.3 (n=28)	25.3 (n=25)
8. Do you agree that a government with a two-thirds majority is prone to abuse power?	51.6	30.6	17.7	51.4	24.3	24.3	51.5 (n=51)	28 (n=28.3)	20 (n=20.2)
9. Do you approve of workers launching industrial action?	12.9	54.8	32.3	10.8	59.5	29.7	12.15.98 (n=12)	56.6 (n=56)	31.3 (n=31)
10. Do you agree that the Internal Security Act (ISA) should be continued?	17.7	61.3	21.0	13.5	59.5	27.0	16.2 (n=16)	60.6 (n=60)	23.2 (n=23)

Note: 1 = Fully agree
2 = Agree to a certain extent
3 = Disagree

Source: Survey data 1996.

while another 60.2 per cent gave it qualified support. However, among the Chinese and Indian working class and middle class respondents, the responses were slightly different. A much larger proportion of Chinese and Indian working class respondents opposed it – 34.5 per cent among the former, and 48 per cent of the latter -- but the majority still fully or partially supported it (Table 8.7). The stances of the new Chinese and Indian middle class against the ISA were stronger than among respondents from the new Malay middle class, but somewhat softer than among the Chinese and Indian working class (Table 8.8).

There were some differences between the new Malay middle class and working class respondents with regard to the BN government's record in upholding democracy. While Malay workers had more positive assessments (a view also shared by their Indian counterparts, with over 80 per cent of them fully endorsing the government), the percentage was much lower (55.3 per cent) among the new Malay middle class. The view of Malay middle class respondents on the BN government's record in upholding democracy is matched by new Chinese and Indian middle class respondents; 54 per cent of respondents among both the new Chinese and Indian middle class agreed that the BN government's record was good, and over 40 per cent felt that there was much to be desired, while a tiny minority claimed its record was poor (Table 8.8).

On the government's performance in reducing the economic gaps among ethnic groups and between rich and poor, Malay working class respondents felt that while the government had greater success in narrowing inter-ethnic differences, it had less success in reducing the gap between rich and poor, a view

almost identical with that of the new Malay middle class. Thus, while 57.1 per cent agreed that the government had succeeded in narrowing inter-ethnic gaps, only 46.6 per cent agreed that the government had succeeded in reducing rich-poor class differentials. Chinese and Indian working class respondents also held almost similar views.

Conclusions: Is Civil Society in the Making?

Civil society is a contested concept, though many freely use it, while adducing different evidence in support of their claims. For example, Sloane (1996: 291) argues that in Malaysia, "entrepreneurship is presented as evidence that [the country] *has* produced a modern civil society, defined as social and economic arrangements that counterbalance the power of the state by providing an alternative source of power and prestige to the state itself." She criticises this thesis by contending that entrepreneurship in Malaysia is very state-dependent. As she puts it, "In fact, Malay entrepreneurship serves the needs of the oligarchical state by aligning and organizing Malay political loyalty and justifying its system of economic rewards.... Successful Malay entrepreneurship – in terms of material profit and the rewards of capital-generating participation – does not exist apart from the UMNO-dominated power of the state, nor does it serve ... as any civil society must, as a form of restraint upon the state itself" (Sloane 1996: 291). Her observations -- based on an in-depth ethnographic study of a group of Malay entrepreneurs -- seem to correspond with Gomez's study -- on a more general level -- of the interconnections between Malay business interests and UMNO (Gomez 1994, 1997).

Our findings in the study of the new Malay middle class, however, do not present a monolithic picture. At least two trends had emerged among the new Malay middle class. On one hand, most seemed to accept the overall BN government framework, tolerating its authoritarianism. They wanted the UMNO-led BN to continue ruling the country, because of its development record of having narrowed the gap among ethnic groups and between rich and poor. These achievements had been attained within the context of political stability over the last few decades, and despite its repressive nature, they seemed to see the ISA as a means to ensure political stability. To them, the system was not only effective, but also had legitimacy unlike the situation noted by Scott in the 1960s "What the system lacks in legitimacy it makes up for by its effectiveness" (Scott 1968: 166). While the contemporary new Malay middle class may be different from the Westernised bureaucrats of the early independence years, they had not made any ideological leap from the "tutelary democracy" that Scott (1968: Chapter 10) found to be upheld by the latter then.

On the other hand, an important segment among the new Malay middle class had grown to be critical of the BN government, and voted for the opposition. A smaller number was also active in political NGOs. Though these forces were small, they constantly provided critical voices and served as a restraint upon the state itself. Besides them, we must also take into account other critical voices who were not members of any NGO or political party, and those within UMNO who were in favour of greater democratic space – thus, overall, the forces advocating the growth of civil society could be slightly bigger. The existence of these forces is quite consistent with the finding of Saravanamuttu's study in late 1980s (Saravanamuttu 1989) that the middle class is "a force to be reckoned with" in opposing creeping state

authoritarianism and promoting civil society. This suggests that the “democratization” thesis is valid to a certain extent among the new Malay middle class. Nevertheless, as shown in this study, it is not the whole new middle class, but only its progressive component.

However, things are dynamic and in constant change. While being ideological, consciousness is also historically contingent. The growth of civil society often begins with the beliefs and activities of small groups before drawing support from a majority. It sometimes requires an ‘exogenous’ fillip to carry this process forward more rapidly. This seems to have happened to members of the new Malay middle class two years after the field work was done, with many coming out in support of the reform movement triggered by the sacking in early September 1998 of Anwar Ibrahim, the Deputy Prime Minister and previously annointed successor of Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, an issue we will touch upon briefly in our concluding chapter (see Chapter 10).