CHAPTER 8

The Politics of Ethnicity: Authoritarianism, Development, and Social Change in Malaysia

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INTRODUCTION

The results of the general election, held on March 8, 2008, suggested意想不到的 and turncoat change in Malaysia's political system, in particular the beginning of the end of an authoritarian form of government. In contrast to other industrialized countries in East and Southeast Asia, such as South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, and Indonesia, that had begun to democratize from the mid-1990s, Malaysia had not been subjected to the internalization of a similar reform in spite of the rise of the reformist (Sarawak) movement in 1998. The failure of the Malaysian electoral system, particularly the urban middle class, had then been in the forefront of social change, but this movement was eventually subdued through highly authoritarian, even oppressive measures. A decade later, the results of the 2008 general election suggested that the electorate had, through the ballot box, once again voiced a desire for political reforms involving an open, accountable, and nonracialized form of governance.

The results of this general election also drew attention to transitions in a society undergoing economic progress, indicating the need for political parties long in power to review their pattern of organization and mobilization. These socio-economic transitions were also a consequence of key government policies, such as affirmative action, as well as those introduced during the 1980s to rapidly industrialize Malaysia and promote the rise of domestic capitalists.