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Abstract

The 12th general election of Malaysia which took place on 8 March 2008 signifies yet another watershed in the political development of Malaysia. This political tsunami has brought about tectonic changes in the political structure of Malaysia and hence many far reaching ramifications. The result of this 12th general election witnessed a drastic erosion of domination by the ruling coalition, Barisan National (BN) and UMNO over Malaysian polity. In the subsequent development, BN especially its main power broker, UMNO has strived hard to regain its political legitimacy. Political contestations between the ruling regime and the opposition front have intensified tremendously. The contenders of power have resorted to manipulate various racial and religious issues in order to garner support. As a result the harmonious social cohesion achieved in Malaysian plural society since independence is now facing threat.

This paper aims at studying the societal changes and development that have occurred in Malaysia after the March 8 general election. This study focuses mainly on political contestations among two rival political coalitions which have impacted on social cohesion of various ethnic groups in Malaysia. Due to strife competition, some political parties have resorted to ethnic and communal politics. This author discusses various issues that have surfaced in the society as the result of escalation of communal and religious politic. The effects of this contestation on social cohesion and the role of civil society in its maintenance will be given a thorough elucidation.

Keywords: Malaysian politics, political tsunami 2008, social cohesion, civil society

Introduction

Malaysia achieved its independence in 1957 through the efforts of the political elites of Malay, Chinese and Indians from the ethnic-based political parties of United Malay National Organization (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). This development further entrenched the British’s legacy of communal politic in Malaysia. The racial bargains between different ethnic groups that took place before independence have paved the way for the emergence of coalition politics which lasted until today. Before 1970, the ruling elites from different ethnic groups practiced what is termed consociational politic. Under the premiership of Tunku Abdul Rahman, the power sharing of Alliance which was based on accommodation had benefited the process of nation-building and racial relationship in Malaysia. Consequently, social cohesion among various ethnic groups in the country was at its best.

The racial riot of 1969 marked a water-shed in Malaysian polity. The consequence of this riot was that the political configurations of the country had undergone palpable changes in favour of the Malay political elites. In the new political order, the UMNO’s elites have fully controlled the state and its apparatus. In elucidating this new political order, Vasil (1980: 222) concludes, “the