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Trends in
Southeast Asia

ELECTORAL POLITICS AND THE
MALAYSIAN CHINESE ASSOCIATION
IN JOHOR

LEE HOCK GUAN AND NICHOLAS CHAN

ISEAS YUSOF ISHAK
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Trends in Southeast Asia



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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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Electoral Politics and the Malaysian Chinese Association in Johor

By Lee Hock Guan and Nicholas Chan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Like the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) was known for having its bastion in Johor, with the state containing the highest number of parliamentary seats contested and won by the party.
- Two features of the MCA stand out: (1) its relative resilience in that its near elimination in other states since 2008 did not occur in Johor until the recent 14th General Elections, and (2) that most MCA presidents had some connections to Johor, either as having been born in Johor, contested in a Johor constituency, been chairman of the Johor state liaison committee, or a combination of three.
- Although historical institutional linkages such as the New Villages and the Chinese guilds and associations (CGAs) gave the MCA a strong footing in Johor initially, changing political and socioeconomic circumstances gradually eroded the party's support among the Johorean Chinese.
- As it began to lose appeal as an individual party, the MCA Johor had to depend on a strategy of mixed voter pooling so that the significant loss of support from the Chinese could be compensated for by the Malay electorate that was until recently highly supportive of the Barisan Nasional (BN).
- The strategic dependence of the MCA on the UMNO was rendered void when the latter was defeated in the state. As it stands, the revival of the party's standing both within Johor and nationally is far from certain.

Electoral Politics and the Malaysian Chinese Association in Johor

By Lee Hock Guan and Nicholas Chan¹

INTRODUCTION

Until the shocking results in the 14th General Elections (GE-14) in 2018 that saw the long-ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) being defeated by the opposition coalition, Pakatan Harapan (PH) in parliament and in most states, Johor was always regarded as BN's electoral bastion. Johor has the highest number of parliamentary seats contested and historically won by the two largest BN parties, the ethnic Malay-Muslim-based United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and its Chinese partner, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA). With a mixed racial make-up (60 per cent *Bumiputera*, 33 per cent Chinese, and 7 per cent Indian), clear urban–rural divides, an influential royal house, and a growing and relatively industrialized economy (Hutchinson 2018, p. 2; van Grunsven and Hutchinson 2016), Johor is often deemed to be the bell-wether of BN's support, or rather, its “jewel in the political crown”.²

UMNO's strength in and dependence on Johor as its point of origin, a forging ground for leaders, and base of support has been convincingly documented (Hutchinson 2015*b*; 2018; Funston 1980). Yet, the same cannot be said for the MCA. The party's relative resilience in Johor, albeit amidst a notable decline from 2008 to 2018, remains unexplored. Its resilience can be seen from the fact that Johor MCA managed to

¹ Lee Hock Guan is former Senior Fellow at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore; and Nicholas Chan is currently a PhD student at the University of Cambridge and former Research Officer at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.

² Reme Ahmad and Danson Cheong, “Johor: The jewel in the political crown”, *Straits Times*, 23 October 2017.

hold onto most of its seats in the 2008 elections despite BN as a whole suffering massive losses nationwide. The importance of Johor can also be intimated from the fact that most MCA presidents are in some way connected to Johor — some for the fact that they are Johor-born (Neo Yee Pan, Chua Soi Lek); some for standing for office in the state (Lee San Choon and Ling Liong Sik); and almost all, with the exception of Tan Siew Sin, Tan Koon Swan, and Liow Tiong Lai, for having at some point of time been appointed Chairman of the MCA Johor State Liaison Committee.

This paper examines the MCA's electoral performance in Johor in relation to its history, Malaysia's national politics in general, the state's changing socioeconomic landscape, and most importantly, the unique ethnic-pooling formula that ultimately worked in the MCA's favour. It argues that the MCA's fate in Johor, while at first secured by its local Chinese networks and affiliations, was soon undermined by the party's changing membership structure and the party's progressive loss of influence within BN, especially vis-à-vis UMNO. Thus, as the party faced an across-the-board drop in popularity nationwide, its constituencies in Johor were retained only through the pooling of support across multiple ethnic groups and not through reliance on its traditional "Chinese" base. This signifies that the MCA's performance was contingent on UMNO's strength within the state, and as UMNO lost the state in the 2018 elections, the MCA's fate in Johor was also sealed.

This paper is organized as follows. The first and second sections provide an outline of the history of the MCA in national politics and in Johor state. The third section discusses the institutionalized ties the MCA once enjoyed with rural Chinese in Johor through its control of local councils and overlapping membership with local commercial and educational associations. The fourth section reviews the MCA's electoral performance in Johor and analyses its relative resilience. The final section concludes the paper with the fall of Johor to PH and offers cursory reflections on the MCA's future prospects.

THE MCA AND NATIONAL POLITICS

The MCA was established in February 1949 to provide Malayan Chinese with institutional means to articulate their grievances as well as to protect

and defend their interests.³ The party's founding "bridged the divide between modern and traditional modes of community organization in both ideological and structural terms ... and the gap between the Laukeh and Peranakan political cultures to produce a synthesized Malaya-centred Chinese world-view" (Heng 1988, p. 54). English-educated Peranakan and English-Chinese bilingual-educated Chinese representing the professional and business elites of the community dominated the party's national leadership. But it was only with the inclusion and participation of the multitude of local Chinese guilds and associations (CGAs)⁴ that the party was truly transformed into a credible political force with a mass base and support (Hara 1997, p. 71).

With the participation of local and national CGAs in the party, the MCA managed quickly to expand its membership base. When the MCA was established in 1949 it had 103,000 members, but by the time of political independence in 1957 its membership exceeded 300,000 (Heng 1988, p. 78). In 2006, the party claimed to have about 1.08 million members, making it the second largest party in the country after UMNO, with its 3.65 million members. But, this 1 million figure is deceptive as it was revealed that "70 per cent of its 4,900 branches were in a state of hibernation" and that there were all sorts of problems with the membership list, such as the presence of phantom members, illegal members such as those who were registered without their knowledge, and so on.⁵

While the MCA founding leaders shared the common stance of collaborating with the Malays, one group was willing to do so in a non-ethnic/multiethnic party and another group insisted on doing so only as an ethnic Chinese party. This difference in approach came to a head in

³ See Roff (1965), Heng (1988) and Tan (2015) for more in-depth analyses of the MCA.

⁴ Chinese communal organizations include traditional guilds, clan and regional dialect groups, trade/business associations, and religious and cultural societies. See Ho (1992) and Thock (2008).

⁵ *Nanyang Siang Pau*, "MCA members that existed in name only", 28 September 2016 <<http://www.malaysianchinesenews.com/2016/09/mca-members-that-existed-in-name-only/>>.

the Kuala Lumpur municipal election in 1952. Several leaders, led by Tan Cheng Lock, allied with the multiethnic Independent Malayan Party (IMP) to contest in the Kuala Lumpur election,⁶ while some leaders of the Kuala Lumpur MCA branch, led by H.S. Lee, formed an alliance with the KL UMNO branch to contest in the same election.⁷ The UMNO–MCA alliance, with each component party adopting a communal, or ethnic, approach successfully defeated the IMP and thus “found a winning formula that was to be applied throughout the country” (Khong 1984, p. 173). That winning formula came in the form of pooling votes across ethnicities, thus enabling the UMNO–MCA alliance to overcome the ethnic bloc voting behaviour for racially mixed constituencies. As opposed to the Indian National Congress that functioned as a catch-all party in multiethnic India, the winning formula of the alliance of ethnic parties became the defining feature of the ruling coalition in the Malaysian electoral system.

⁶ Onn Jaafar, the founding president of UMNO, also wanted to convert the party into a multiethnic one. His proposal to open up the party to non-Malays who qualified as Federation citizens was rejected by an overwhelming majority. Subsequently, Onn Jaafar resigned from UMNO in mid-1951 and, in September of the same year, established the first inter-communal party in Malaya, the Independence Malayan Party (IMP). Partly because of its inter-communal politics, the IMP did not attract much support from the Malay and Chinese communities. Indeed, its inter-communal ideas were too radical as they were anathema to the predominantly conservative and communal-minded ethnic communities. Hence, before its demise in 1954, the IMP failed to defeat the communal approach adopted by UMNO and MCA in successive elections.

⁷ The beginning of the UMNO–MCA coalition has been shown to have come about more by accident than by design, especially given that at the national leadership level there existed no signs of the two parties coming to work together (Heng 1988, p. 159). Specifically, it had its origins in the Kuala Lumpur municipal elections in February 1952 when the local MCA decided to form an informal front with KL-UMNO to challenge the IMP. Working together, the informal alliance divided the constituencies among themselves based on the ethnic composition of the constituency; the MCA contested in the Chinese-dominated seats while the UMNO candidates contested in the Malay-dominated ones. Appealing to and manipulating communal fears and anxieties, the MCA and UMNO successfully defeated the IMP in ten of the twelve seats.

In the pre-independence constitutional negotiations, the MCA successfully obtained “more liberal requirements in acquiring citizenship eligibility and rights for Chinese immigrants” and safeguards for Chinese business, but triggered vigorous disagreements about and objections to the compromises the party made regarding Chinese language, education and culture.⁸ Popular Chinese opinion was clamouring for cultural pluralism, especially the elevation of Chinese to official language status and the equal treatment of Chinese education. The MCA leadership’s failure to fight for Chinese as an official language and for equal treatment of Chinese education led to the departure of many Chinese-educated leaders and their supporters, and many CGAs either withdrew their support or severed their ties with the party.⁹

⁸ As both came from the business-class group, the English- and Chinese-educated leaders could not afford to remain disunited as it would irreparably weaken their class bargaining position vis-à-vis UMNO. Consequently, the two groups reconciled their differences immediately after independence; this was publicly formalized by the Conference of Chinese Associations on 10 November 1957.

⁹ Many leaders of the powerful Perak Chinese Associations and Guilds became disenchanted with, and felt betrayed by the MCA which supported the Razak Report and subsequently the Talib Report. A failed attempt to raise Chinese as an official language by the Laukeh group led by Lim Chong Eu resulted in the first major split in MCA with Lim resigning from the MCA and establishing a new political party, the United Democratic Party (UDP). A number of MCA leaders also left the party and contested as independent candidates in the 1964 election. The Lim-led group also wanted the power to decide on the selection and the transfer of MCA federal and state candidates from the Alliance National Council to the MCA Executive Council. If the MCA retained the autonomy to pick its candidates, it would make the process more “democratic”, and allow Lim and his supporters to pick their own people. Lastly, pressured by the Chinese middle-class, the group proposed that the government increase the intake of qualified Chinese into the Malayized civil service; the existing recruiting quota was four to one in favour of the Malays. Obviously, if the above demands had been accepted, it would have greatly strengthened MCA participation in the Alliance’s decision-making process. Nevertheless, before Tan Siew Sin, the new MCA President, and the other English-educated leaders could reorganize the party and remobilize their mass support, they were dealt another severe blow by the Alliance Government’s new education policy, the Talib Report (1960), named after Abdul Rahman Talib, then Minister of Education. For the reactions of Chinese educationists, see Ang (2014).

Throughout the 1960s, the MCA's increasing ineffectiveness in influencing the Alliance Government's decision-making and policies gradually eroded the support it had had from the Chinese. The party was perceived as weak and incapable of fighting for Chinese political and cultural interests and rights.¹⁰ An increasing portion of middle- and working-class Chinese also became dissatisfied with the business class-dominated MCA leadership's failure to address their socioeconomic welfare. Unsurprisingly, the MCA's popularity suffered a precipitous decline throughout the 1960s, culminating in the disastrous 1969 election when the party failed to win a majority of the Chinese votes. The MCA hence lost its claim as the major legitimate representative of the Chinese community (Vasil 1972).

As a result of its poor performance in the 1969 election, the MCA's role and influence in the ruling coalition and government greatly diminished. It could no longer negotiate with UMNO as the legitimate representative of the Chinese community since it had lost most of its support from the Chinese. The party also lost its most important Cabinet portfolios, namely Finance, and Commerce and Industry. Its diminished role in the coalition was further eroded by the inclusion of the Chinese-dominated Malaysian People's Movement Party (Gerakan) and the People's Progressive Party (PPP) in the new coalition Barisan Nasional (BN).¹¹

¹⁰ When the 1967 National Language Bill was passed by parliament, it led to many more Chinese becoming disenchanted with the MCA. It reinforced their view that the MCA was politically impotent, and incapable of protecting and looking after the Chinese community's rights and interests. For example, when the Chinese Associations and educationists proposed the establishment of a Chinese-medium tertiary institution, the Merdeka University in 1968, the MCA opposed the idea. Consequently, Chinese support for the MCA fell dramatically towards the late 1960s, and ultimately led to the disastrous MCA showing in the 1969 general election, except in Johor.

¹¹ After losing substantial Chinese support in the 1969 election, the MCA tried to revive its link to the Chinese associations which had abandoned the party. Post-1969 saw many young English-educated Chinese joining the party. These young MCA leaders actively sort to revive support for the party among the Chinese grassroots, especially in the new villagers in Perak. In 1971, an emerging group

From 1971 to 1990, the vital issues faced by the party were the New Economic Policy (NEP), Chinese education including the Merdeka University controversy, and Chinese culture. Chinese educational opportunities were greatly curtailed by the introduction of Malay preferential policies especially in relation to admission to tertiary education and the allocation of scholarships.¹² In 1978, the CGAs, led by Chinese educationists, applied to establish the Chinese-medium Merdeka University but this was rejected and their court case in 1982 also ended in failure.¹³ With the implementation of the NEP, Chinese business groups also started to turn away from the MCA and instead forged ties with UMNO and new business groups to advance their interests (Lee Kam Hing 2008).

of young leaders, such as Lim Keng Yaik and Alex Lee, helped to organize a meeting among the leaders of Chinese associations, with more than 1,000 delegates in attendance, and thus was born the Chinese Unity Movement. The MCA-backed Chinese Unity Movement tried to revive active support for the party as well as provide active leadership in the aftermath of the 1969 debacle. However, this unity movement was short-lived when internal MCA party rivalry led Tan Siew Sin, President of MCA, to expel several of the young leaders. A majority of the young turks eventually joined Gerakan, as they wished to continue working within the BN coalition formula.

¹² The MCA launched a scholarship fund called Kojadi and applied for the expansion of Tunku Abdul Rahman (TAR) College. However, the two moves could only assist a small number of Chinese students with a majority denied the opportunity to further their studies. TAR was set up on 4 February 1969 in Kuala Lumpur to cater mainly for Chinese students who did not have the opportunity to pursue tertiary education locally or overseas. In 1991, the Government allocated RM20 million under the Sixth Malaysia Plan for the college. Under Ling's leadership, a total of RM30 million was raised by MCA in a series of fund-raising campaigns. This was matched by the Government on a ringgit-to-ringgit basis, bringing the total to RM60 million. Under a massive development plan, TAR spread its campuses to Johor, Penang, Perak and Pahang. In 1997, the government issued the MCA the licence to establish the bilingual-medium University Tunku Abdul Rahman.

¹³ It was estimated that it received supporting signatures of some 4,238 Chinese guilds and associations throughout the country, and copies were sent to the Prime Minister, the Minister of Education and all Members of Parliament.

From 1969 onwards, the MCA essentially lost its previously close connection with the Chinese traditional clan, guild and business associations, including the powerful Chinese educationist lobby. In 1982, the MCA and Gerakan performed better than it had done in recent elections because of a significant Chinese swing towards the party. The Chinese swing was due partly to the new dynamic Mahathir–Musa leadership and partly due to the decision of a large number of Chinese associations — particularly the educationists — to work within the BN coalition in order to achieve their objectives. The CGAs’ collaboration with the BN was demonstrated by the fact that several key CGAs leaders such as Koh Tsu Khoon, Kerk Choo Ting et al. left civil society and joined the MCA/Gerakan to contest in the 1982 election.

However, after the 1982 election, the CGAs very quickly became disappointed with the failures of MCA and Gerakan in making significant changes in the BN government’s discrimination policies against the Chinese community. In 1985, more than 5,000 CGAs representing all classes and backgrounds endorsed the Malaysian Chinese Union Declaration, a document that opposed a whole range of BN policies. To counter declining support from the CGAs, the MCA marshalled its allies and supporters to gradually take over the leadership of several major CGAs and registered new pro-MCA CGAs such as the Federation of Chinese Assembly Halls in Malaysia (Thock 2008).

From 1990 to 2004, Chinese support for the MCA/BN experienced an upward trend due to a number of positive developments, key of which was the country’s high economic growth. Liberalization of education policies enhanced Chinese educational opportunities especially at the tertiary level, and Chinese schools were given more recognition and better treatment by the BN government. In addition, the privatization of the mass media enabled and empowered Chinese culture and language in society. Above all, Chinese employment opportunities and businesses benefited from the expanding economy and the relaxation of the implementation of Malay preferential policies. Growing Chinese support for the MCA peaked in the 2004 election when the party achieved its best-ever results — winning thirty-one parliament seats and fifty-six state seats. The high hopes of a transition from Mahathir’s strong-armed rule to Abdullah Badawi’s perceivably less corrupt and more open government, bolstered

by a timely, if not temporary, détente of the party's conflicting factions, gave the MCA its biggest electoral victory post-1969 (Chin 2006, p. 75).

Since the 2004 elections, however, worsening political and socioeconomic conditions coupled with internal tensions within BN and UMNO resulted once more in a sense of alienation amongst the Chinese community (Moten 2009). Badawi's perceived softer rule, had, ironically, resulted in UMNO veering towards a more ethno-supremacist position that placed Malaysian Chinese at the centre of its *pendatang* (outsiders) rhetoric and sabre-rattling threats (Chin and Wong 2009, p. 78). The MCA's (as well as Gerakan's) inability and failure to speak out and fight for Chinese rights and interests very rapidly led to the party losing the majority of the Chinese vote in the elections in 2008 and 2013. Consequently, the number of seats held by the MCA dwindled to fifteen parliament and thirty-two state seats and only seven parliament seats and eleven state seats respectively after these two elections. Trapped in a mutually reinforcing cycle of seat and influence loss, the MCA became irrelevant in the eyes of both its coalition partner, UMNO, and Malaysian Chinese voters.

THE MCA IN JOHOR

While the community's Malayan-born, English-educated professional and business elites dominated national leadership, in Johor it was mostly the Chinese-educated and non-educated businessmen¹⁴ who mobilized and led the Chinese in the state to form Johor MCA. The Chinese business leaders' dominance of Johor MCA resulted in the party taking on a more traditional function and outlook, somewhat similar to the CGAs, at the state level. Unsurprisingly, Chinese business leaders were

¹⁴ For example, twenty-seven of the twenty-nine members of the Johor Working Committee for the years 1953–55 were either Chinese-educated or non-educated businessmen with the remaining two being doctors. Due to the small number of top English-educated members in the party, Johor MCA politicians did not play prominent roles at the national level until the 1970s. By the 1970s, Johor MCA had a more balanced membership of Chinese- and English-educated individuals (MCA 1974, p. 8).

also leaders of a large number of the CGAs in the state. For the first thirty years after independence, the majority of Johorean Chinese resided in the semi-urban and rural areas, in the New Villages in particular. The crucial role played by the MCA Johor in providing relief and welfare to Chinese villagers in the state brought party loyalty and support from the rural Chinese community.

MCA's establishment in Johor can largely be attributed to Wong Shee Fun (Table 1), a banker, businessman, and philanthropist who served as Chairman of the MCA Johor State Liaison Committee from 1949 to 1961. Wong was widely regarded as the leader of the Chinese community, evidenced from the fact that he was the President of the highly influential Chinese Association of Johor Bahru (*gonghui*) and a number of prominent CGAs in Johor.¹⁵ As a member of the Council of the State in Johor, he also represented the Chinese community in various state committees and had worked closely with Malay officials and the palace. By virtue of Wong's many "hats" and stature, Johor MCA enjoyed a synergistic relationship with the local CGAs which saw MCA politics and community development being intimately linked. This relationship was gradually lost after Wong's demise in 1979, as we shall see below (Lim 2006, p. 36).

Wong Shee Fun's successor Chua Song Lim (Chairman, 1961–73) was a prosperous rubber baron and leader of various CGAs, and the state assemblyman for Bandar Maharani (1959–64, 1964–69, 1969–74, and 1974–78). As the majority of the prominent early Johor MCA leaders were not English-educated or proficient in English, they did not play important roles at the national level. One exception was the bilingual Lee San Choon.¹⁶ A former teacher and civil servant, he was the first Johor

¹⁵ Wong Shee Fun served as the President of the Johor Chinese Chamber of Commerce, 1949–66, Chairman of the Boards of both Foon Yew Primary and High Schools, 1951–53, chairman of the board of Guangzhao Huiquan, 1946–78, as well as the chairman of the Singapore Chinese newspaper, *Chung Shing Jit Pau* (Lim 2006, p. 49).

¹⁶ "Tan Sri Lee San Choon", MCA website <<https://web.archive.org/web/20110420234247/http://www.mca.org.my/en/about-us/about-mca/history-zone/former-presidents/tan-sri-lee-san-choon/>>.

Table 1: Chairmen of MCA Johor State Liaison Committee, 1949–present

| | Johor MCA | National MCA | Background |
|----------------------|---|---|----------------------------------|
| <i>Wong Shee Fun</i> | 1949–61 | CWC 1949–57 | businessman |
| <i>Chua Song Lim</i> | 1961–73 | Vice-President | businessman |
| Lee San Choon | 1973–77 | President, 1975–83 | school teacher; civil servant |
| Teo Ah Kiang | 1977–83 | — | businessman |
| <i>Neo Yee Pan</i> | 1983–84 | Acting President, 1983–85 | academic |
| Tan Peng Khoon | 1984–87 | Vice-President | |
| Ling Liong Sik | 1987–2002 | President, 1986–2003 | medical doctor |
| <i>Chua Soi Lek</i> | 2002 – Jan 2008; Nov 2009 – Jan 2014 | President, 2010–13 | medical doctor |
| Ong Ka Ting | Mar 2008 – Nov 2008 | President, May 2003 – Oct 2008 | school teacher |
| Ong Tee Keat | Nov 2008 – Nov 2009 | President, Nov 2008 – Nov 2009 | engineer |
| Wee Ka Siong | Jan 2014 – | Deputy President, 2013–18 President, 2018– | urban planner |

Note: Text in italics indicates that the individual was born in Johor.

MCA parliamentarian appointed as a minister. This was in 1971. Lee went on to succeed Chua Song Lim as MCA state leader (1973–77) and Tan Siew Sin as President of MCA (1975–83).

With business leaders bringing in the CGAs, Johor MCA grew its membership rapidly and helped the party in its efforts to secure broad support from the largely rural-based Chinese in the state. The CGAs cooperated and collaborated with the MCA to help disseminate its message and programmes, as well as to mobilize Chinese support for the party.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Johor MCA initially capitalized on, but eventually supplanted, the central role the CGAs played in representing and conveying Chinese interests to the Johor state government and after political independence, to the state and federal governments.

Since the 1970s, however, Johor MCA saw the proliferation and growing dominance of professional politicians in, first, the party ranks, and gradually in its leadership. Since 1973, professional politicians had occupied and dominated the Johor MCA leadership. In fact, Teo Ah Kiang was the last businessman to hold the state party's chairmanship, from 1977 to 1983. Unlike the Chinese businessmen with their extensive network and support in the Chinese CGAs and the community at large, the professional politicians usually did not enjoy such linkages and networks. Thus, the dominance of the professional group can be said to have come at the cost of the party's social capital vested within the Johor CGAs, business and the larger Chinese community.

Nevertheless, Johor remained pivotal to the MCA, as a significant number of national leaders of the party were either Johorean, contested a Johor parliamentary seat, the chairman of Johor MCA, or a combination of all three, as in the case of Lee San Choon, Neo Yee Pan, and Chua Soi Lek (see Table 1). For example, Johor became the base for Ling Liong Sik, the longest serving president of the MCA (September 1986

¹⁷ The CGAs had long played the role as guardian and intermediary for Chinese welfare in Johor, predating even the founding of the MCA. One such organization as singled out by Lim (2000) was the Ngee Heng Kongsi, and its successor after it was banned, the Chinese Association of Johor Bahru. The association was credited with connecting the Chinese community with Malay officials especially, above all, the Sultan.

– May 2003). Originally a Penang parliamentarian, he was the chairman of Johor MCA for more than a decade (1987–2002). Ling contested in one of the safest parliament seats in Johor, namely Labis, where he won easily and was its parliamentarian for four terms (1986, 1990, 1995, 1999). Ling’s long tenure may have weakened the party in Johor, as being non-Johorean and English-educated, Ling had few connections to the local Chinese communities. Being a federal minister, he had to spend much time and energy on national issues.

Johor’s proximity to the MCA’s national leadership also meant that it was particularly vulnerable to factional politics. One notable episode involved the Muar-born Bakri parliamentarian (1986–2008) and former Health Minister Chua Jui Meng contesting for the party presidency unsuccessfully in 2005 and 2008.¹⁸ The split caused Chua to be dropped from his seat in Bakri, which was the only parliamentary seat the MCA lost in Johor in 2008 — a seat that Chua had won with 70 per cent of the total votes in 2004. Chua Soi Lek, another Johorean MCA politician was later involved in a leadership struggle with Ong Tee Keat, which led to him winning the presidency in 2010 but he then had to withdraw from contesting the position in 2013 following another disastrous showing by the MCA in the 13th General Elections.

In any case, the factions congregated around personalities rather than state boundaries. For example, Chua Soi Lek, a supporter of Ling Liong Sik, helped deliver the Johor vote to his protégé, Perak-born Ong Ka Ting, in the 2005 party elections (Chin 2006, p. 77). Nevertheless, the two soon fell out when Ong’s associates were rumoured to have engineered Soi Lek’s sex scandal–led downfall (Chin 2010, p. 154). As the chairman of the MCA state liaison committees is an appointed position, Soi Lek’s clashes with Ong Tee Keat during the latter’s short-lived MCA presidency (2008–09) also saw him being denied the position of Johor chairman despite being a popular figure in the state (Ibid., p. 156). He soon recaptured the position following his ascendancy to the

¹⁸ To read about Chua Jui Meng’s challenge in the context of the MCA’s internal party politics and the infamous Team A–Team B split between Ling Liong Sik and his deputy, Lim Ah Lek, see Chin (2006, 2010).

presidency but relinquished it again following his decision not to contest the position in late 2013.

THE MCA AND RURAL CHINESE IN JOHOR

The resilience of the MCA in Johor cannot be addressed without reference to the party's institutional linkages to the rural Chinese. Historically, and well after Malaysia gained political independence in 1957, the legacy of the Kangchu system meant that the majority of the Chinese population in Johor resided in rural villages and were engaged in agricultural activities (Trocki 1976). The advent of the Emergency in 1948 led the British to establish many New Villages as a counter-insurgency tactic. As a result of the suppression of opposition Chinese political groups, such as the Malay(si)an Communist Party (banned in 1948), and the Labour Party (officially dissolved in 1972 but inactive after 1965), the MCA was the most active and, for a while, the sole political party in the New Villages.

Through its network and linkages with CGAs, the MCA actively assisted in the resettlement of squatters in the New Villages in the state. With British support, the MCA played important roles in helping to maintain peace and security, and to alleviate the hardships of and provide various amenities and facilities for the villagers. Over time, the MCA built up a strong political base among the Chinese in the New Villages.¹⁹ Recognizing the importance of the New Villages to the MCA, the New Villages were placed under the care of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government with the Minister traditionally appointed from the MCA after independence.

Initially, the CGAs played crucial roles in liaising and serving Chinese New Villagers, which helped to secure broad support for the MCA. The MCA would also have direct links to the New Villages where they invariably maintained a branch office. Gradually, however,

¹⁹ The relationship between the MCA and the New Villages was once described as, in the words of Wee Ka Siong, a “nail and finger” interdependency for mutual interests.

the CGAs' roles and functions were undermined and replaced by the appointment of MCA members or operatives to liaise with and serve the local Chinese communities. MCA members were appointed to, and dominated, the New Village committees, in particular, the village security and development committees (JKKK). While the party itself raised and provided considerable funds to develop the New Villages, the government also contributed funding to the New Villages through the Ministry of Housing and Local Government.

After independence in 1957, 70 per cent of the local committees in the rural areas were converted to MCA-controlled Local Councils.²⁰ Through its control of the Local Councils, the MCA could confer patronage through the allocation of licences, the provision of jobs, and the commissioning of public works not just in the New Villages but also generally in the Chinese-dominated small towns. In the mainly agricultural New Village communities, the pressing issues had to do with land and agriculture such as land tenure and acquisition of new land. For instance, since the 1990s, the growing scarcity of land in the state due to the shrinking availability of uncultivated land and growing competition for land from both Federal Land Authority schemes and commercial players meant that it was unlikely that there would be new lands for the Chinese. The MCA played a key role in liaising between New Villagers and the state government over the extension of land tenure and the acquisition of new land.²¹

Such developments are important because, after Perak, Johor has the second largest number of New Villages in the country, 94 in 1954 but declining to 92 in 1970 and 84 in 2002 (Lim and Fong 2005, p. 53). In Johor, the Chinese residing in the New Villages totalled 130,613 in 1954

²⁰ Johor was the first state to introduce Chinese citizens' committees with proportional representation for different dialect groups, which through co-operation with *penghulu* (headmen) were absorbed into local administration in 1951.

²¹ Lee Kaw, a veteran opposition politician, referred to the link between land acquisitions and support for MCA/BN in explaining why the rural Chinese continued to support the MCA. See *The Edge Markets*, “#GE13* DAP veteran says Chinese in Johor ‘no longer indebted’”, 3 May 2013.

and increased to 216,441 in 1970 and 435,557 in 1995 but decreased to 322,141 in 2002. In 2002, Chinese residing in the New Villages still comprised about a third of the total Chinese population in the state.

Since the 1990s several factors and developments have led to a growing scarcity of economic and employment opportunities for the Chinese in the New Villages and the small towns in the state. The agriculture-based occupations in the New Villages no longer appeal to young Chinese, and there is also an infusion of cheaper foreign labour displacing the more expensive local labour force. Increased urbanization and the outmigration of rural Chinese led to a dramatic decline in the rural Chinese population of Johor from 305,861 (51.5 per cent of the total Chinese population in the state) in 1980 to 240,793 (34.2 per cent) in 1991 and to 154,963 (15 per cent) in 2010.²² Correspondingly, the percentage of Chinese aged 15–60 years working in the agricultural sector shrank from 73,292 (34.8 per cent) to 42,907 (16.4 per cent) in 1991 and 22,227 (6.7 per cent) in 2010.

The marginalization of the agricultural sector became more acute as alternative economic activities failed to develop in the New Villages and small towns (Pang and Tan 2012). Voon (2009) argues that the outflow of the younger Chinese population gradually undermined the economic and social viability of the New Villages. Due to Johor's proximity to Singapore, local Chinese (and increasingly other ethnic groups) also experienced tremendous outmigration pressures, with a reported 150,000 out of the 350,000 Malaysians working in Singapore as daily commuters from Johor Bahru (Koh 2010, p. 48). Relocating and working outstation meant that the younger Chinese New Villages would no longer be dependent on the MCA to serve their interests. Without the institutional linkages that integrated the MCA with the economic opportunities and welfare of the local Chinese, the erosion of support of the MCA among the Chinese, including those from the New Villages and small towns, was inevitable. Yet, Johor remained a stronghold for the MCA until 2013, at least electorally that is, for reasons we will see below.

²² These figures are calculated from the National Population and Housing Censuses of 1980, 1991, and 2010.

MCA ELECTORAL PERFORMANCE IN JOHOR

Until 2008, Johor was UMNO's unassailable fortress, illustrated by the fact that the party has won every state and parliament seat it had contested in every election except for the Parit Bakar state seat that it lost to Semangat 46's Abdul Kahar Ahmad in 1990 and the Johor Bahru parliament seat it lost to the then ex-UMNO parliamentarian Shahrir Samad in a by-election in 1988 (Shahrir Samad contested as an independent candidate).²³ In 1999, when UMNO suffered a major erosion in Malay support down to around 75 per cent, the party still won all the seats it contested in Johor.

The MCA also won nearly all the parliament and state seats it contested in every election from 1974 until 2008. It only lost the Kluang parliament seat in 1978 and the Bandar Kluang state seat in 1974 and 1978 to the Democratic Action Party's (DAP) Lee Kaw. Other losses to the DAP include the Maharani state seat in 1986 and 1990, and the Bekok and Jementah state seats in 1990. While all those seats that MCA lost to the DAP were Chinese majority seats, the party, nevertheless, managed to win the majority of the Chinese parliament and state seats in every election until 2013. Indeed, in the 11th General Election (GE-11) in 2004, echoing the nationwide strong support for BN across all ethnicities during Abdullah Badawi's first electoral outing as prime minister, the MCA won all of the eight parliament seats and the fifteen state seats it contested in Johor.

Cracks in BN's Johor fortress emerged in the 2008 election (GE-12) when an anti-incumbent sentiment, especially among Chinese voters, swept across Peninsular Malaysia. The BN lost one parliament seat (Bakri) and six state seats (Bentayan, Mengkibol, Senai, Skudai, Sungai Abong, Maharani) to the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) in Johor. While the BN garnered more than 80 per cent of the Malay vote, the state also experienced a sizeable Chinese vote swing towards the PR; it was

²³ UMNO also lost the Senggarang state seat to the Islamic party PAS on a technicality in 1990.

estimated that the BN won only 35 per cent of the Chinese vote in Johor in 2008. A contributing factor to the BN retaining most of its seats was the voter turnout of about 75 per cent, with a significant percentage of outstation Chinese voters not returning to cast their vote.

Nevertheless, the MCA won 7 of the 8 parliament seats and 12 out of the 15 state seats the party contested in Johor in 2008. It lost the Chinese-majority Bakri parliament seat and the Chinese-majority state seats Bentayan, Mengkibol and Senai to the DAP. Although the MCA won the other Chinese majority seats of Gelang Patah and Kulai, the winning margins were reduced by 19 and 6 per cent respectively. Even the Malay-majority parliament seats Ayer Hitam and Tanjung Piai and the mixed parliament seats Labis, Kluang and Tebrau, were all won by the MCA by reduced margins; Labis — 4,094 majority in 2008 from 10,729 in 2004; Ayer Hitam — 13,909 majority in 2008 from 15,763 in 2004; Kluang — 3,781 majority in 2008 from 18,698 in 2004; Tebrau — 14,658 majority in 2008 from 26,011 in 2004; and Tanjung Piai — 12,371 majority in 2008 from 23,615 in 2004. Similarly, the MCA won the state seats Jementah, Bekok, Tangkak, Yong Peng, Parit Yaani, Penggaram, Paloh, Johor Jaya, Stulang, Pengkalan Rinting, Pulau Sebatang and Pekan Nenas by reduced margins. Thus, while the MCA lost the support of the majority of the Chinese, it managed to win most of the Chinese-majority parliament and state seats in Johor on the back of strong Malay bloc voting, a point we will return to later.

In the 2013 election (GE-13) however, Johor BN retained control of the state government but by only narrowly retaining a two-thirds majority when it lost 18 state seats to PR. With respect to parliament seats, the coalition performed much better, winning 21 out of the 26 constituencies contested. Merdeka Center (2013) estimated that the BN garnered about 81.8 per cent of the Malay vote in Johor in GE-13.²⁴ However, because Chinese support for the BN/MCA remained at a low (20.1 per cent) in GE-13, the MCA was almost decimated in Johor in the 2013 election. The MCA lost the Chinese-majority parliament seats Bakri, Gelang Patah and

²⁴ *The Edge Markets*, “GE14 to see 8% Malay vote swing to Pakatan in peninsula, but BN will prevail, says Merdeka Center”, *The Edge Markets*, 26 April 2018.

Kulai and even the mixed seat (with a Chinese plurality) Kluang to the DAP. It won the mixed seat Labis by a mere 303 votes and the Malay-majority seats Ayer Hitam and Tanjung Piai albeit with even a smaller margin than in GE-12; for Ayer Hitam from 7,853 votes in 2008 to 5,706 votes in 2013 and Tanjung Piai from 12,371 votes in 2008 to 5,457 votes in 2013.

At the state level, the MCA suffered shocking losses, managing to win only 2 of the 15 state seats allocated to the party to contest. The MCA was only successful in winning the Malay-majority seat Pulau Sebatang by a margin of 3,412 votes, down from 5,765 votes in 2008 and the mixed seat Paloh by a mere 103 votes. The party was also defeated by the Islamist Malaysian Pan-Islamic Party (PAS) in the Malay majority state seat of Parit Yaani by 1,188 votes. A significant contributing factor was the high turnout among outstation voters returning to cast their votes in the 2013 elections and the fact that a huge majority of outstation Chinese most likely voted for the opposition.²⁵ The voter turnout for GE-13 was a high 86.7 per cent.²⁶

EXPLAINING MCA'S RELATIVE RESILIENCE IN JOHOR

In terms of BN (and by extension, MCA) support, Johor may be considered an anomaly. The consistently strong electoral performance of BN in Johor until 2018 happened against the backdrop of Johor being an ethnically heterogeneous state, which tended to be a liability for the BN during periods of electoral upheaval, as exemplified by what happened in

²⁵ Liew Chin Tong, the DAP candidate for Kluang in GE13, mentioned that he knew he could win when his informants told him of massive traffic jams in and around Kluang. The traffic jams indicated huge numbers of outstation Chinese returning to cast their vote (private conversation).

²⁶ In Johor, the percentage of ethnic Chinese electorate on the electoral roll was 38 per cent in late 2017, about 5 per cent higher than the population as reported by the census, see *China Press Johor*, “柔總選民182萬617人 僅華裔比例下滑” [Johor’s electorate at 1.8 million people, with only the Chinese ratio dropping], 5 April 2018.

Perak, Selangor, and Penang in 1969 and in 2008 onwards (Ratnam and Milne, 1970 p. 206). According to the 2010 census, Johor has the third highest level of Chinese in Malaysia (33 per cent), after Penang (45 per cent) and Kuala Lumpur (43 per cent).²⁷ Johor also stood out for letting the MCA hold onto its four parliamentary seats during the widely named “Chinese Tsunami” of 2013, which constituted little more than half its total parliamentary yield nationally.

Understanding this trend requires an overview of the seats that the MCA contested in Johor. One feature that stands out for the MCA Johor is that, when compared to other states with substantial Chinese populations, the seats it contested in the state are on the lower spectrum in terms of Chinese voter concentration (see Table 2). The most obvious point is that the MCA was only contesting one seat that has a Chinese supermajority in Johor — the Bentayan state seat. This is in marked difference to Selangor, Penang, and Perak, which had Chinese supermajority seats forming a substantial if not majority portion of the seats contested by the MCA, as seen in the case of Penang and Perak (Table 2). Of all four states, MCA Johor also contested in the highest number of Malay-majority seats, two at the parliamentary level and one at the state level. One such seat is Ayer Hitam (58 per cent Malay voters), the only MCA-controlled seat that remains in parliament today.

Therefore, it is not wrong to say that the logic behind the MCA’s resilience in Johor lies in Johor BN’s traditionally huge Malay voting bloc. This meant that the racially mixed parliament and state seats invariably benefitted the BN parties including the MCA, Gerakan and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC).²⁸ In particular, since Malay bloc

²⁷ *Oriental Daily*, “大马华人的口变化” [The Changes in Chinese Demographics in Malaysia], 30 April 2017.

²⁸ Maznah (2003) shows that the UMNO consistently received strong support from Malay voters in the Malay-majority parliamentary constituencies in Johor. The UMNO garnered 79, 86 and 79 per cent of the Malay votes in the 1990, 1995 and 1999 elections respectively. The Merdeka Center estimated that Malay voter support for the BN in the 2008 and 2013 election were 81.1 and 81.9 per cent respectively.

Table 2: Seats Contested by the MCA Delineated by the Concentration of Ethnic Chinese Voters

| | Johor | Selangor | Penang | Perak |
|--------------------------------------|----------|----------|---------|-----------|
| Parliament | | | | |
| Chinese supermajority (>70% Chinese) | 0 | 1 (14%) | 3 (75%) | 2 (28.5%) |
| Chinese majority (>50% Chinese) | 4 (50%) | 0 | 0 | 2 (28.5%) |
| Mixed (no single majority) | 2 (25%) | 5 (72%) | 1 (25%) | 3 (43%) |
| Malay majority (>50% Malay) | 2 (25%) | 1 (14%) | 0 | 0 |
| State Assembly | | | | |
| Chinese supermajority (>70% Chinese) | 1 (7%) | 2 (14%) | 7 (70%) | 8 (53%) |
| Chinese majority (>50% Chinese) | 10 (66%) | 8 (57%) | 3 (30%) | 6 (40%) |
| Mixed (no single majority) | 3 (20%) | 4 (29%) | 0 | 1 (7%) |
| Malay majority (>50% Malay) | 1 (7%) | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Notes: Figures from undi.info. The 2013 figures are used to demonstrate the longer term trends in terms of seat-type allocation as the redelineation passed in 2018 has significant impact on voter composition in many seats following the BN government's acknowledgement that it has lost the Chinese vote. While Selangor is arguably the most affected by the redelineation, one of the state seats contested by the MCA in Johor, Pekan Nanas, was changed from a Chinese-majority seat to a Malay-majority seat. On the redelineation before GE-14, see Ooi (2018).

voting for the BN had consistently exceeded 70 per cent, it meant that the MCA would not need to garner a majority of the Chinese votes in order to win the Chinese majority parliamentary seats of Bakri, Gelang Patah and Kulai. The MCA needed to garner only 26, 32 and 33 per cent of the Chinese votes to win Bakri, Gelang Patah and Kulai, respectively (see Figures 1 and 2). For the Chinese majority state seats of Jementah, Bekok, Tangkak, Bentayan, Yong Peng, Penggaram, Mengkibol, Stulang, Skudai, Bukit Batu, Senai and Pekan Nanas, the BN parties would have had to garner only 28 to 41 per cent of the Chinese votes to win. Also, as the logic goes, because of vote pooling, the MCA would have received a higher percentage of the Malay votes than the UMNO as their candidates would contest against candidates from the perceived Chinese party, the DAP.²⁹

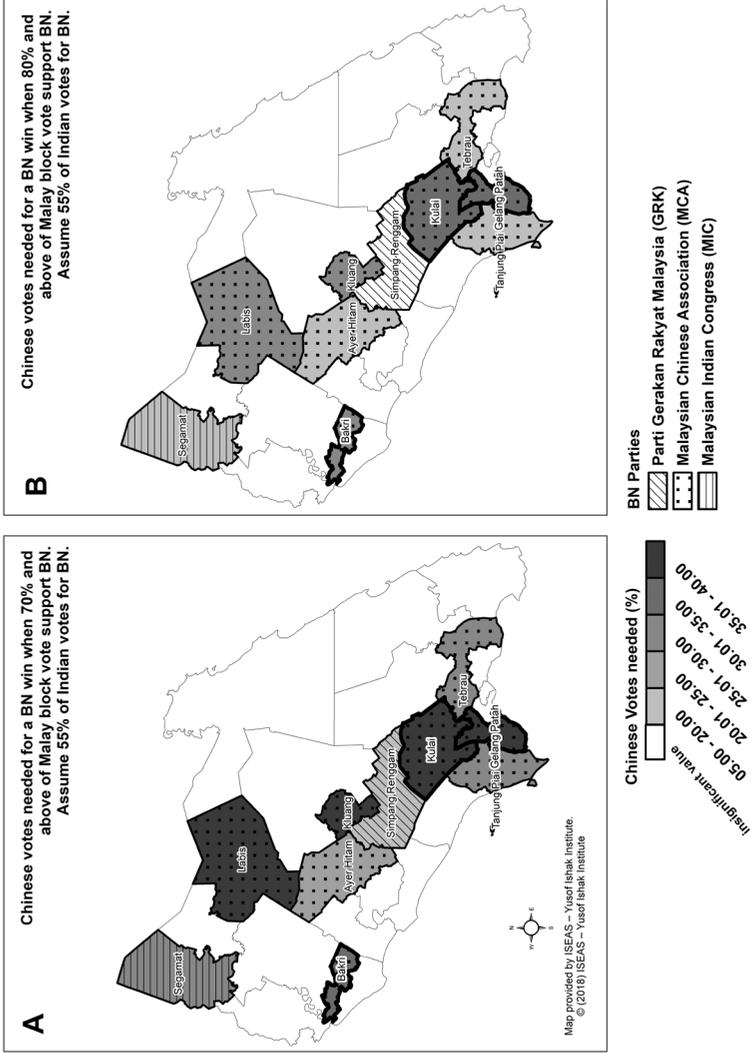
Not having to defend a high proportion of Chinese supermajority seats meant that the kind of electoral gains the DAP made at the expense of the MCA in Penang and Perak, which occurred even during the height of the BN's popularity in 2004,³⁰ was never a problem for the MCA in Johor. It is worth noting that in 2008 when the MCA managed to retain most of its seats in Johor in the face of massive losses in other states, all the seats it lost, with the exception of Bakri (53 per cent Chinese),³¹ were in the upper end of the Chinese-majority category — Bentayan (74 per cent), Mengkibol (62 per cent), and Senai (68 per cent). The higher proportion of Chinese majority seats at the state level (80 per cent of total state seats) as compared to the parliamentary level (50 per cent)

²⁹ It was revealed in a survey that 85 per cent of Malays in Johor were “not in favour” of the DAP (Wan Saiful 2018, p. 28).

³⁰ Split voting between the BN at the state level and the opposition at the federal level had been a key feature of Chinese voting patterns in a state like Penang until 2008. This explained the DAP's relatively high parliamentary seat count in Penang, even in 2004 (when it won four, which is more than what the MCA and Gerakan had won separately), while only winning one seat at the state assembly.

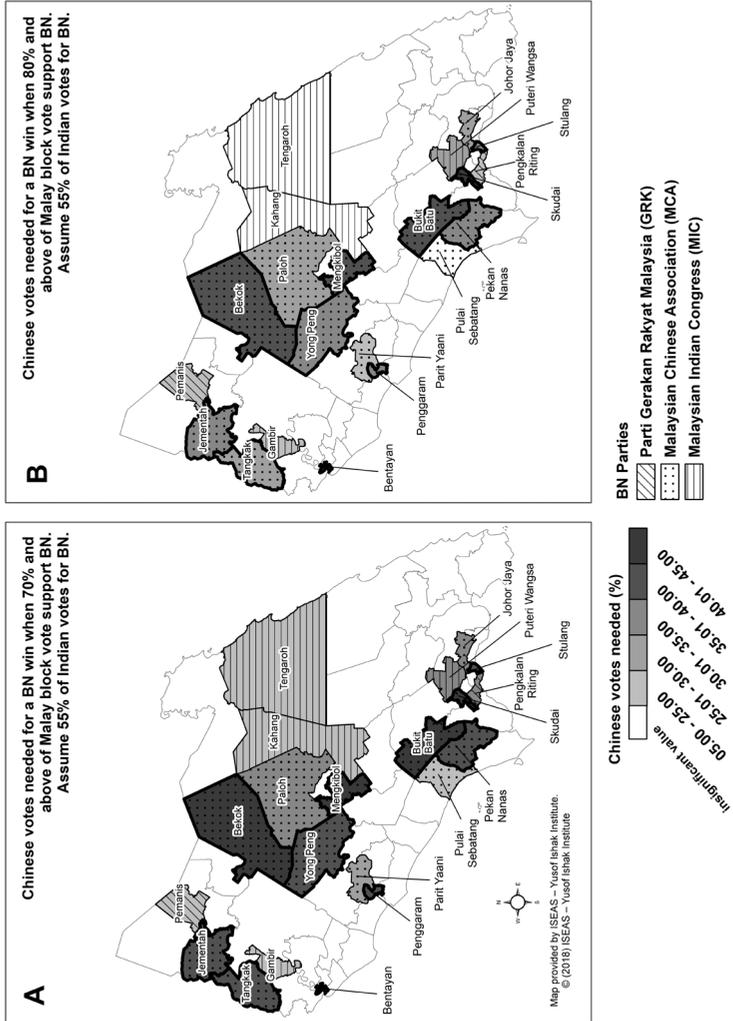
³¹ As alluded to above, the MCA loss of Bakri may be postulated as the consequence of dropping Chua Jui Meng, former Minister of Health and five-term Bakri parliamentarian, as the seat's candidate.

Figure 1: Parliamentary Seats in Johor and the Percentage of Chinese Votes Needed for MCA to Win if Malay Support is (A) >70% and (B) >80%



Note: Calculations can be seen in Appendix A.

Figure 2: State Assembly Seats in Johor and the Percentage of Chinese Votes Needed for MCA to Win if Malay Support is (A) >70% and (B) >80%



Note: Calculations can be seen in Appendix B.

also saw the MCA losing ten out of the twelve state seats it held in 2013, as compared to losing three out of seven in parliament.

To be sure, it is the combination of having both a strongly BN-leaning Malay (and somewhat less DAP-leaning Chinese) electorate and more ethnically mixed seat that explained the MCA's relative resilience in Johor, at least until 2013, that is. Such strategic dependence on the Malay BN-voting bloc could not be replicated in Selangor, where the MCA had a slightly higher combined proportion of mixed and Malay majority seats — 86 per cent of the total number of seats contested at parliament, and 29 per cent for state seats (although the MCA did not contest in any Malay majority state seats). This is because, according to one estimation, BN support in Selangor was only a paltry 44 per cent in 2008 as compared to Johor's 65 per cent, thereby diluting the Malay support that could be “borrowed” by the MCA.³² The fact that the BN could not even win all of the Malay-majority seats in Selangor points to the futility of replicating the strategy in Johor.³³

THE JOHOR MCA DEMOLISHED IN THE 2018 ELECTIONS

In the 2018 election (GE-14), the opposition Pakatan Harapan (PH) surprisingly breached the BN Johor fortress to gain control of the state assembly, winning 36 out of the 56 seats, nearly a two-thirds majority.

³² Ong Kian Ming, “GE2013 results shows that it was a Malaysian Tsunami and not a Chinese Tsunami that increased Pakatan’s popular vote and number of parliament and state seats”, 10 May 2013 <<https://ongkianming.com/2013/05/10/media-statement-ge2013-results-shows-that-it-was-a-malaysian-tsunami-and-not-a-chinese-tsunami-that-increased-pakatans-popular-vote-and-number-of-parliament-and-state-seats/>>.

³³ This is due no less to the sizeable influence of the PKR, the PAS, and Amanah amongst the Malay-Muslim electorate in Selangor. The same cannot be said for these parties in Johor. PKR and Amanah only made substantial gains in the state by GE-14 through their partnership with the DAP and more importantly, the Mahathir-led Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM) that had a strong presence in Johor due to party president Muhyiddin Yassin’s influence.

In terms of the popular vote, the BN vote share dropped to its lowest at 36 per cent, an 11 per cent reduction from its performance in 2013.³⁴ Days before the election, Merdeka Center estimated that Johor would experience the biggest drop in Malay support “falling 20.9 percentage points to 60.9 per cent of Malay votes in GE14, compared with 81.8 per cent in GE13”.³⁵ After the elections, Ong Kian Ming, a DAP leader, estimated that for the first time in history, BN support in Johor at the parliamentary level dropped below the 50 per cent threshold, landing at 38 per cent.³⁶

The significant reduction in Malay bloc voting and the persistent small Chinese vote support for the BN dramatically impacted the MCA’s electoral performance in GE-14, furthering its trend of declining returns in Johor (see Figure 3). While the UMNO remains formidable in the state by winning seven of the sixteen parliament seats contested, its fellow BN coalition parties only won one of the ten parliament seats allocated to them; the MCA won the Malay majority parliament seat Ayer Hitam with a meagre 303 votes. PAS, while never having a formidable presence in Johor, managed to play its role as a potential spoiler. It obtained a total of 4,975 votes in Ayer Hitam and 2,962 votes in Tanjung Piai. These are votes that could have altered the winner of the aforementioned seats although it is difficult to say at this point if those votes were solidly for the PAS and would have gone to PH if it had stayed in the coalition, or if they were non-PH protest votes that would have stayed with the BN had the PAS not contested.

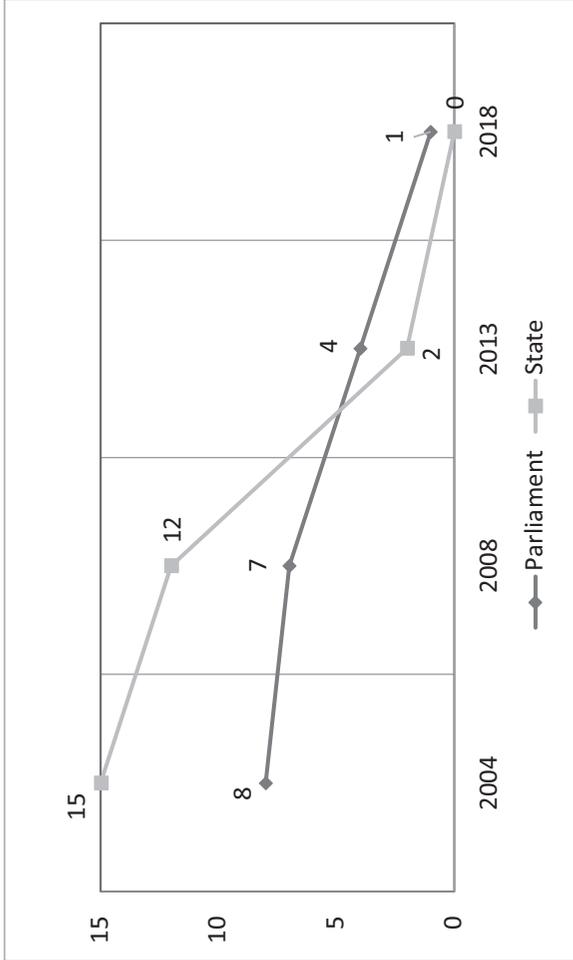
For the state assembly, the MCA failed to win a single seat out of the fifteen seats allocated to the party. With its failure to win any significant

³⁴ *The Malay Mail Online*, “At 36.42pc, BN records lowest popular vote in history”, 11 May 2018.

³⁵ *The Edge Markets*, “GE14 to see 8% Malay vote swing to Pakatan in peninsula, but BN will prevail, says Merdeka Center”, 26 April 2018.

³⁶ Ong Kian Ming, “GE14 – A truly Malaysian Tsunami”, 17 May 2018 <<https://ongkianming.com/2018/05/17/media-statement-ge14-a-truly-malaysian-tsunami>>.

Figure 3: The Parliamentary and State Seat Count of the MCA in Johor, 2004–18



Source: <undi.info>.

Chinese votes,³⁷ the slight Malay vote swing to the PH ensured that the MCA would have almost no chance of winning any of the Chinese majority and mixed parliament and state constituencies. It was even defeated in the Malay majority state seat, Pulau Sebatang, by Amanah and the Malay majority parliament seat, Tanjung Piai, by PPBM. Indeed, the MCA was decimated despite the possibility that fewer outstation Chinese voters returned to cast their vote in this election; the Election Commission estimated a voter turnout of 74 per cent, much lower than the 86.7 per cent in GE-13.³⁸

In the aftermath of the devastating GE-14 results, MCA leaders from Johor were reportedly vying to take over the MCA leadership from the incumbents, namely Party President Liow Tiong Lai (who is also the Chairman of the MCA Melaka State Liaison Committee) and his deputy, Melaka-born Wee Ka Siong (who the Chairman of the MCA Johor State Liaison Committee), who was eyeing for the party's Presidency. Many of the interested parties were supporters of Chua Soi Lek's faction,³⁹ including Tee Siew Kiong (deputy to Wee in the MCA Johor), who eventually contested for the post of Deputy President but lost to Wee's running mate Mah Hang Soon.⁴⁰ Wee similarly prevailed over MCA Kluang division chief Gan Ping Sieu, who received an endorsement from Soi Lek,⁴¹ ultimately cementing his position over the southern challengers through a landslide victory of his team.⁴²

³⁷ It was reported that the PH won a total of 95 per cent of the Chinese vote, see *Straits Times*, "Most Malaysian Chinese voted PH in polls, but Malays in 3-way split", 14 June 2018.

³⁸ *New Straits Times*, "74 percent cast their votes in Johor", 9 May 2018.

³⁹ Soi Lek himself was rumoured to be plotting a comeback, but he denied such news. See *Nanyang Siang Pau*, "吃饱没那么空闲, 蔡细历不攻马华会长" [I am not so free: Chua Soi Lek not vying for MCA Presidency], 26 June 2018.

⁴⁰ *Sinchew Daily*, "证实将竞选马华高职, 郑修强攻老大或老二" [Teh Siew Kiong confirming his interest in the party's top or second top posts], 28 August 2018.

⁴¹ *The Star*, "Chua: Gan has my backing for president", 28 September 2018.

⁴² *The Malaysian Insight*, "Wee Ka Siong, MCA leader in troubled times", 6 November 2018.

CONCLUSION

In the past decade, the MCA became very dependent on its historically strong support from the Malay voting bloc, therefore subjecting its fate to UMNO's performance within Johor. In fact, there are very few seats contested by the MCA in Johor during GE-14 that can be considered competitive (in which a 10 per cent vote change could alter the winner), and those that were, such as Tanjung Piai, Paloh and Pekan Nanas, were mixed if not Malay-majority seats. As the UMNO parliamentary and state assembly seat count dropped close to half — seven and seventeen (from fifteen and thirty-two) respectively in 2018 — the near-elimination of the MCA in Johor was inevitable, considering it lost both the ethnic Chinese and Malay votes.

At the time of writing, such conjectures can only be premature. However, two factors will be pivotal to the MCA's prospects. Internally, the party will have to undergo reorganization and rejuvenation. While the party has expanded its party election system from one that is dependent on over 2,000 delegates to one dependent on over 40,000 delegates,⁴³ the system of having the party leader appoint state-level leaders remains unchanged. This hampered the dynamism of the party as its internal politics continued to revolve around high-stakes contests at the centre, as seen in the Team A–Team B split that began in Ling Liong Sik's time, and the later struggles between Chua Soi Lek and Ong Ka Ting, and subsequently Ong Tee Keat which almost paralysed the party (Chin 2010, pp. 155–59). Without elections that foster the rise of young capable leaders at the local level, such as that of the DAP's Liew Chin Tong who managed to take over the DAP Johor leadership at the age of thirty-seven,⁴⁴ the local party machinery will continue to depend on patronage and winner-picking from the national level.

⁴³ *Sinchew Daily*, “首次采扩大代表制，马华各级党选七月掀幕 [First Time Using an Expanded Delegate System, MCA's Party Elections at the Multiple Level to begin in July]”, 29 May 2018.

⁴⁴ *The Star Online*, “Liew is new Johor DAP chief, Dr Boo ousted”, 12 January 2014.

Moreover, it is uncertain how in the foreseeable future, young ethnic Chinese leaders will be attracted to join a party with an ossified leadership and tarnished reputation after a “near total failure” in three consecutive elections (Weiss 2013, p. 26). Since the 2008 political tsunami, both the PKR and the DAP have emerged as the more enticing avenues for young ethnic Chinese political aspirants. The MCA’s key challenger, the DAP, had reportedly fielded the highest number of young candidates in GE-14, with many under the age of thirty elected into office.⁴⁵

Externally, the party will have to reconsider its position within the BN and its cooperation with the coalition’s hegemon, the UMNO. The latter is observed to be moving towards forming a Malay-Muslim exclusivist alliance with PAS — a party the MCA is uneasy with due to its call for conservative Islamist policies, including the implementation of *hudud* punishments. Hints of a break were suggested when Wee Ka Siong, then deputy president, declared that the BN “ceased to exist except in name”.⁴⁶ Yet soon enough, in a by-election that was the MCA’s to run, the party continued to receive endorsement and support from the BN, and even from PAS.⁴⁷ If the MCA breaks off from the BN, it will have to wean off its dependence on the coalition’s consociational model that delivered the compensating Malay votes it needed so badly. In addition, a stand-alone Chinese party in Malay-majority Malaysia would compel the party to adopt a more hardline position in championing perceived “Chinese” rights, as seen in PAS’s drift towards Malay and Muslim issues when

⁴⁵ *The Malaysian Insight*, “Will younger candidates pull in the youth vote?”, 12 January 2018. Some of the profiles of the young candidates fielded by the DAP can be seen at *Star2.com*, “10 young new politicians in GE14 looking to serve their communities”, 7 May 2018 <<https://www.star2.com/people/2018/05/07/looking-to-serve-their-communities-better/>>.

⁴⁶ *Malay Mail Online*, “Ka Siong: MCA won’t carry water for Umno anymore, BN only alive in name”, 2 June 2018.

⁴⁷ *New Straits Times*, “Balakong by-election candidate says BN, NGOs giving full support”, 24 August 2018; *Malay Mail Online*, “PAS sec-gen stumps for MCA candidate in Balakong”, 5 September 2018.

it decided not to join the PH. Yet, there are multiple reasons that may prevent the success of such a rebranding for the MCA.

First, there are no signs that as a minority that is often reminded of the spectre of the May 13 racial riots,⁴⁸ the Malaysian Chinese electorate is in demand of a more chauvinistically “Chinese” party, even if reactionary voices are sometimes appreciated for the purpose of pushing back against the Malay supremacy discourse.⁴⁹ Also, there is significant diversity within the Chinese population, with many, most prominently the English-speaking intelligentsia and the many Mandarin-speaking civil society activists, unlikely to be attracted to a more communal approach to politics.⁵⁰ Second, even if someone were to step up to lead such an insurgency, there are no credible figures in the MCA with a strong following among Malaysian Chinese.⁵¹ Third, in Malay-Muslim

⁴⁸ The resounding failure of the *Suqiu* movement of the late 1990s that saw many Chinese CGA leaders coming together to demand for “Chinese” and wider Malaysian rights is a good indication of how far “Chinese” communitarian politics can advance in Malaysia. The movement had to drop its appeal after being told “if racial riots broke out they would be held responsible” (Collins 2006, p. 311).

⁴⁹ The same can be said about UMNO too, as seen in its massive losses in GE-14 despite the increased tenor in UMNO’s ethnoreligious exclusivism, the essence of which can be seen in the “*apa lagi Cina mahu*” [what else does the Chinese want?] lament by former Prime Minister Najib after the 2013 General Elections. See Norshahril (2016) for a discussion of UMNO’s role in promoting exclusivist readings of Islam in Malaysia.

⁵⁰ The lack of traction by the Chinese education group, the *dongjiaozong*, in opposing the now-defunct government programme to use English at the medium of instruction in science and mathematics in all primary schools also points to the lack of consensus among the Malaysian Chinese about what constitutes “Chinese” rights (Collins 2006, pp. 311–17).

⁵¹ MCA’s President, Wee Ka Siong, has only 9,000 over likes in his Facebook account. On the contrary, Khairy Jamaluddin, who is playing is the role of a potential reformer for UMNO, has 1.2 million likes on his Facebook page. Lim Guan Eng, the secretary-general of DAP and current Finance Minister, has 650,000 likes. Figures are taken in September 2018.

majority Malaysia, such a strategy will almost definitely backfire, as had been the case historically,⁵² possibly leading to the party's dissolution.

Ultimately, MCA is not (or at least is no longer) a party with strong local roots, such as PAS is in the northern states of east coast West Malaysia, or Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) in Sarawak, or even Sabah's recent wunderkind, Parti Warisan Sabah. MCA support in Johor appears to have no association whatsoever with locally rooted sentiments. As we have demonstrated, its Johor base is tied to the BN's overall strength in Johor, and by extension, West Malaysia. The strong identification with *Bangsa Johor* ("Johor national"; or someone of Johor origins) and the Johor royal family shown in survey results of the Chinese Johoreans did not translate into votes for the BN (Lee 2017), despite the tacit support given by the royals.⁵³ Alas, unable to break free from Malaysia's centralized federalism and pervasive ethnic politics,⁵⁴ the MCA's survival in Johor will inevitably be linked to its survival in Malaysian politics in general.

⁵² The rising ethnic tensions after Chinese education interest groups, as well as the MCA and DAP, protested what was perceived to be government infringements into Chinese primary schools — which was followed by an UMNO counter-protest — became the pretext to *Operasi Lalang* in 1987. The massive clampdown was said to have included the arrest of MCA leaders. See Julian Lee (2008); *New Straits Times*, "Ops Lalang allegedly carried out under Dr M's orders, says MCA man", 30 October 2017.

⁵³ *Channel News Asia*, "Don't 'bring down' government, trust the royal family: Johor crown prince", 8 April 2018.

⁵⁴ For a discussion of how Malaysia's centralized federalism affected intra-party politics of another BN party, UMNO, see Hutchinson (2015a).

APPENDIX A
Parliament Seats Contested by MCA, MIC and Gerakan

| | Constituency | Votes | Malay votes (%) | Chinese votes (%) | Indian votes (%) | A (%) | B (%) |
|------|---------------------|--------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| P140 | Segamat | MIC | 44 | 46 | 10 | 30.00 | 19.35 |
| P142 | Labis | MCA | 36 | 47 | 15 | 35.43 | 29.36 |
| P145 | Bakri | MCA | 44 | 53 | 2 | 34.34 | 26.23 |
| P148 | Ayer Hitam | MCA | 56 | 38 | 4 | 22.89 | 8.68 |
| P151 | Simpang Renggam | GRK | 57 | 33 | 9 | 15.91 | — |
| P152 | Kluang | MCA | 39 | 49 | 10 | 35.31 | 28.37 |
| P158 | Tebrau | MCA | 47 | 38 | 13 | 26.45 | 15.79 |
| P162 | Gelang Patah | MCA | 34 | 52 | 12 | 37.88 | 32.50 |
| P163 | Kulai | MCA | 33 | 56 | 10 | 38.39 | 33.39 |
| P165 | Tanjung Piai | MCA | 51 | 47 | 2 | 28.30 | 17.66 |

Notes: A refers to the Chinese votes needed for a BN win when 70 per cent and above of the Malay bloc vote supports the BN; and B refers to Chinese votes needed for a BN win when 80 per cent and above Malay bloc vote supports the BN. Assume 55 per cent of Indian votes for the BN.

APPENDIX B
State Constituencies Contested by the MCA, MIC and Gerakan

| | Constituency | Party | Malay votes (%) | Chinese votes (%) | Indian votes (%) | A (%) | B (%) |
|-----|---------------------|--------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| N2 | Jementah | MCA | 36 | 55 | 9 | 36.27 | 30.55 |
| N3 | Pemanis | GRK | 56 | 39 | 3 | 23.72 | 9.74 |
| N6 | Bekok | MCA | 26 | 54 | 18 | 40.74 | 37.59 |
| N9 | Gambir | MIC | 55 | 40 | 4 | 23.50 | 10.25 |
| N10 | Tangkak | MCA | 38 | 51 | 10 | 35.29 | 28.82 |
| N12 | Bentayan | MCA | 25 | 73 | 2 | 43.15 | 39.86 |
| N19 | Yong Peng | MCA | 32 | 60 | 7 | 39.75 | 35.00 |
| N21 | Parit Yaani | MCA | 54 | 43 | 2 | 26.05 | 13.72 |
| N23 | Penggaram | MCA | 35 | 62 | 2 | 39.52 | 34.03 |
| N28 | Mengkibol | MCA | 27 | 58 | 14 | 40.52 | 37.07 |
| N30 | Paloh | MCA | 37 | 44 | 17 | 33.75 | 27.27 |
| N31 | Kahang | MIC | 74 | 21 | 3 | 0.00 | — |
| N33 | Tengaroh | MIC | 80 | 13 | 5 | 0.00 | — |
| N41 | Puteri Wangsa | MIC | 40 | 47 | 12 | 32.98 | 25.74 |
| N42 | Johor Jaya | MCA | 43 | 47 | 7 | 34.36 | 25.96 |
| N45 | Stulang | MCA | 39 | 55 | 4 | 37.45 | 30.73 |
| N46 | Pengkalan Riting | GRK | 43 | 45 | 11 | 31.00 | 22.67 |
| N48 | Skudai | MCA | 22 | 65 | 12 | 43.23 | 40.77 |
| N51 | Bukit Batu | MCA | 30 | 62 | 7 | 40.73 | 36.45 |
| N52 | Senai | MCA | 23 | 65 | 11 | 43.00 | 40.31 |
| N54 | Pulai Sebatang | MCA | 62 | 35 | 2 | 16.00 | — |
| N55 | Pekan Nanas | MCA | 39 | 58 | 2 | 37.41 | 30.86 |

Notes: A refers to the Chinese votes needed for a BN win when 70 per cent and above of the Malay bloc vote supports the BN; and B refers to Chinese votes needed for a BN win when 80 per cent and above Malay bloc vote supports the BN. Assume 55 per cent of Indian votes for the BN.

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