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Diversity in Malaysia's Civil Service: From Venting Old Grouses to Seeking New Grounds

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Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim at the monthly assembly with the Prime Minister's Department staff and civil servants in Putrajaya on 29 November 2022. Source: Facebook of Anwar Ibrahim, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=716571503157753&set=pcb.716572633157640>.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- A call for increased minority representation in Malaysia’s civil service recently sparked another fierce public debate. Ethnic Malays, comprising 57 per cent of Malaysian citizens, account for 78 per cent of federal government staff — and 80 per cent of top decision-making positions.
- The lack of diversity, and minority groups’ sense of exclusion, are legitimate concerns. However, the debate remains polarised and deadlocked, with proponents of change decrying the problem in absolute terms of Malay “domination”, “racial policy” and discrimination, while opponents intransigently defend the status quo often through invoking “Malay rights”.
- The government’s muted response to this sensitive topic is understandable. At the same time, promoting diversity in Malaysia’s civil service might be possible with coherent and measured approaches, and critical appraisal of past efforts to increase diversity and current employment practices, including the authorities’ claim that meritocracy already applies in recruitment exercises.
- Policy dialogues can start by clarifying the underlying principles and practical scope for promoting diversity and by cultivating new grounds for facilitating equitable representation of *all* groups.
- Shifting a colossus like Malaysia’s civil service will be difficult, and progress must be slow and incremental for it to be sustained. Nonetheless, such efforts are worthwhile and perhaps even viable — provided the debate dispenses with habitual posturing that detracts from systematic solutions.

INTRODUCTION

The disparity between the ethnic composition of Malaysia’s civil service and the population is a constantly simmering issue that occasionally overflows into public debate.¹ A February 2023 commentary by P. Ramasamy, Deputy Chief Minister of Penang, appealed for the unity government to address the “domination of the civil service by one ethnic community” on the grounds that the underlying “racial policy cannot be defended anymore”.² The assertions hit raw nerves. A backlash ensued, and the government, eager for this storm to pass, has resolved to take no action.

Ethnic Malays comprise a majority of citizens, but a supermajority of the 1.6 million civil servants, and an overwhelming share of top management positions. The under-representation of minority groups is stark; they account for 42 per cent of the population but 22 percent of public service employees. The sense of exclusion and perception of unfair opportunity is particularly acute among Chinese and Indian Malaysians, as well as the indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak who formally share preferential Bumiputera status with the predominantly Peninsula-residing Malays.

This Perspective provides some background to this polarised and deadlocked problem of ethnic disproportionality in Malaysia’s civil service. I then evaluate the debate from the perspective of moral and practical arguments, and Malaysia’s exceptional conditions. Increasing minority representation is desirable and attempted from time to time, but opposing sides of the debate tend to close ranks on strident terms. Referencing public services recruitment data and past experience with increasing minority representation, I consider some policy implications for Malaysia’s governing coalition, which for the first time is led by a multi-ethnic party. Malaysia’s civil service, in encompassing education, health, the military and law enforcement, is more sprawling and complex than that of most federal governments.³ Conditions preclude drastic overhaul; however, incremental change might be possible.

EMBEDDED, COMPLICATED, AND SEEMINGLY INTRACTABLE

Policies addressing ethnic representation in the civil service are deeply rooted, but not indelibly planted. Article 153 of Malaysia’s Constitution provides for the King (Yang di-Pertuan Agong), “in such manner as may be necessary”, to safeguard the “special position” of the Malays and Bumiputera communities of Sabah and Sarawak by reserving for them a “proportion as he may deem reasonable of positions in the public service” and other institutions promoting socioeconomic mobility.⁴ Article 8 expresses an analogous provision for the Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia.⁵ In public discourse, these stipulations tend to be magnified beyond their meaning, particularly with the morphing of “special position” into “special rights”. Engaging the debate on these terms poses a steep and enduring challenge. The cause of defending “rights” continually resonates; invoking the word galvanizes sentiments and usually forecloses further conversation – since “rights” are non-negotiable. Nonetheless, as

shown in the later discussion, there is scope for inclining the conversation toward more objective and substantive matters such as recruitment processes.

The civil service has been leveraged to promote a Malay professional and administrative class for many decades, stretching back to the British colonial era, but such efforts intensified when the New Economic Policy (NEP) was launched in 1971 (Khoo 2005). The civil service has been continuously criticised for its Malay-favouring disposition, whether through quotas or other forms of preferential treatment.⁶ Accordingly, non-Malay representation in the civil service steadily decreased. The share of Chinese and Indians dropped from 18.8 per cent and 15.7 per cent in 1969-70, to 6.0 per cent and 4.3 percent in 2009, respectively, amid widespread and sustained perception that ethnicity factors into recruitment and promotion prospects (Woo 2015). Anecdotal accounts and academic surveys have found these sentiments widely regarded as a major reason that minority groups prefer private sector over public sector careers — along with other factors such as pay differences (Woo 2018). Indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak, who formally share Bumiputera status with the predominantly Peninsula-residing Malays, have also raised displeasure at their under-representation, particularly in high-ranking positions.

Public sector recruitment has been subjected to procedural modifications, as well as specific remedial measures to induce minority interest. In 2009, the Public Services Commission, in partnership with Chinese non-governmental organisations, conducted a recruitment drive among the Chinese population, which is credited for an uptick in the community's entry into the service, particularly in management and professional ranks.⁷ In 2010, alongside a move to online platforms, the public services standardised and formalised selection criteria for recruitment based on qualifications and competencies (PSC 2017). Simultaneously, the Government Transformation Programme (GTP) was launched (Woo 2015) as part of Prime Minister Najib's 1Malaysia campaign, which included post-2008 general election outreach to non-Malays. The GTP Roadmap committed to “[a]djust the ethnic mix of the civil service to be more representative of the population, in particular encouraging more Chinese and Indian personnel to join the civil service and upgrading officers of Bumiputera origins from Sabah and Sarawak” (PEMANDU 2010).

The precise mechanisms of this programme were not spelled out, nor was any progress appraised in the GTP Annual Reports. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the Chinese and Indian shares of new recruits inched up from 4.4 per cent and 4.5 percent in 2008, to 8.0 per cent and 5.4 per cent in 2011 (Woo 2015). The early 2010s' reversal of the preceding decades-long decline in minority representation in the civil service was not sustained. However, the Public Services Commission recently explained that recruitment processes involve engagements with higher education institutions and Indian and Orang Asli development agencies, suggesting that mechanisms continue to be in place to increase awareness of public service opportunities and encourage applications.⁸

The stark disproportionalities appear in ad hoc data disclosures through parliament reply, which have provided snapshots of 2005 and 2022 (Table 1). In 2022, Malays comprised 77.5 per cent of the civil service (excluding the police and military), with Sabah and Sarawak Bumiputeras accounting for 12.1 per cent, followed by Chinese (5.7 per cent), Indians (3.8 per cent) and Orang Asli (0.2 per cent). Sabah and Sarawak Bumiputeras are rather proportionately

represented, with their share of all civil service positions mirroring their share of the population. However, in top management — which constitute just 0.3 per cent of all civil service positions but confer influence, prestige and symbolic importance — East Malaysian Bumiputeras are acutely under-represented.⁹ Their share has increased, but at a languid pace from 1.4 per cent in 2005 to 3.1 per cent in 2022. In contrast, Chinese and Indians have a larger relative presence in top management. The shares of Chinese and Indians have inched upward, but appear to be plateauing at around 10 per cent for Chinese and 6 per cent for Indians. The Orang Asli are under-represented across the board, and to a greater extent in top management. These patterns provide important context regarding the current state of the civil service, which informs the discussion of the next section.

Table 1. Ethnic composition of Malaysia’s citizen population and civil service (excluding police and military).

	Malaysian citizens (% of total)	Management, professional and support staff (% of total)		Top management (% total)	
	2022	2005	2022	2005	2022
Malay	57.7	77.0	77.5	84.0	80.4
Sabah Bumiputera	11.6	7.8	7.4	1.4	1.8
Sarawak Bumiputera			4.7		1.3
Chinese	22.8	9.4	5.7	9.3	9.5
Indian	6.6	5.1	3.8	5.1	5.9
Orang Asli	0.6		0.2		0.1
others	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.3	1.0
Total (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total number	30.3 million	897,618	1,269,504	1,632	4,103

Sources: Parliamentary reply of June 2005 tabulated by CPPS (2006); Author’s compilations from *FreeMalaysiaToday* (2022).

Note: Management, professional and support staff (Grades 1-56); Top management (above Grade 56).

Table 2. Ethnic composition within top management, % of total (2022)

	TURUS (Head of Staff)	JUSA (Premier Grades)
Malay	89.1	80.3
Sabah Bumiputera	0.0	1.8
Sarawak Bumiputera	0.0	1.3
Chinese	3.6	9.5
Indian	5.5	5.9
Orang Asli	0.0	0.1
others	1.8	1.0
Total (%)	100.0	100.0
Total number	55	4,048

Source: Parliamentary written answer by Abd Latiff Ahmad, Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department, 18 July 2022 (<https://www.parlimen.gov.my/jawapan-lisan-dr.html?uweb=dr&>).

Two further breakdowns, within top management and by public service entity, are pertinent. First, top management, in turn, can be stratified into the highest ranking officials in the TURUS category (heads of staff, such as secretaries-general, directors-general, and vice chancellors) and JUSA (Premier Grades, which includes deputy secretary-general and deputy director-general posts, and professors). As shown in Table 2, Malay over-representation is greater in uppermost TURUS positions, where Sabah and Sarawak Bumiputeras are altogether absent. Second, some government bodies — notably, law enforcement and military, where Malay over-representation is exceptionally high — have sought to enlist more non-Malays.¹⁰ In 2014, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC)¹¹ and police force announced various outreach efforts to attract more interest among non-Malays, and specifically Chinese who are acutely under-represented.¹² The armed forces launched a similar initiative in late 2017.¹³

ARGUMENTS AND SENTIMENTS

The current debate sprang from a 10 February 2023 online column by the Democratic Action Party’s (DAP) P. Ramasamy, who is also Deputy Chief Minister II of Penang.¹⁴ The article reproduced familiar objections to civil service employment practices, but was undone by conceptual imprecision and intemperate language that, predictably, triggered fierce reactions — notably, from both political foes and allies.¹⁵ Media reports misrepresenting Ramasamy further inflamed the situation. Nonetheless, the counterproductive effects of that initial piece are underscored by his follow-up column of 15 March in which he reflected on the Penang state government’s experience while offering more sober and substantive policy thoughts.¹⁶ Unfortunately, the backlash from the first article precluded attention to the second.

The debate demands a more methodical approach that critically engages with the arguments for preserving current practices and the arguments for pursuing change.

Keeping the status quo

A popular case for maintaining the status quo lays claim to the civil service as a domain of “Malay rights.” Islamist party PAS’ Perak chairperson Razman Zakaria was the latest to echo this line.¹⁷ The cause of defending rights — without acknowledgement of the specific constitutional provisions and limits — continually resonates. Invoking the term is effective for galvanizing sentiments and pre-empting further conversation. These arguments are prosecuted more on sentimental than intellectual grounds. Nonetheless, their popular resonance is discernibly real and broad-based, stemming from both political rhetoric and personal conviction that Malay presence in the public services safeguards the community’s interests.

Another pre-emptive stance against civil service reform points to the subject’s political sensitivity or adverse reception in the Malay community. Radzi Jidin, opposition MP for Putrajaya, characterised Ramasamy’s view, or versions of it in the media, as insulting to Malays.¹⁸ Sany Hamzan, MP for Ulu Langat and a leader of Parti Amanah, DAP’s partner in the Pakatan Harapan coalition, called for Ramasamy to be sacked as Penang’s Deputy Chief Minister for his supposed verbal indiscretions.¹⁹ The DAP leadership resolved to handle the matter internally while distancing the party from the furore. Ramasamy had lamented that his words were twisted,²⁰ specifically that he had not condemned Malay monopoly nor called for an overhaul, but for change to take place “slowly”. At the same time, this proviso of gradual reform was cryptically worded and overshadowed by his strident claims of discrimination and domination.²¹ The issue is undeniably emotive and baggage-laden, in ways that cross party lines. The challenge for all sides is to avoid spiralling acrimony.

A third defence of the status quo marks a newer development in the debate. This line of argumentation directly rebuts claims of discrimination by maintaining that civil service recruitment decidedly does not discriminate against non-Malays. On 12 February, the chairman of Cuepacs, the public service workers union, asserted that job applicants are evaluated on the basis of merit and competency, and admonished Ramasamy for his claim that minorities are discriminated against.²² The Public Services Commission followed up two days later with a fuller explanation of the procedures for interview selection and job offer, stressing the absence of ethnic quotas. It should be clarified that these processes apply at the recruitment stage, not promotion.

No party has found grounds to dismiss the claim that the recruitment system operates without ethnic quotas. In this vein, the low presence of non-Malays derives from the small volume of applicants to civil service openings. However, this view is too narrow in omitting two inhibiting factors. The first pertains to social compatibility, or non-Malays’ disinclination toward work environments that they may struggle to fit into, due to culture, language and other differences. Second, perceptions or anecdotal evidence of constrained career prospects, together with the dearth of minorities visibly occupying decision-making and top management positions, likely influence non-Malays’ decisions at the entry point. Hence, assurances of “meritocracy” at recruitment will fail to attract sufficient numbers of non-Malay applicants to rebalance the ethnic composition.

Increasing minority representation

The case for a more representative civil service rests on a set of moral and pragmatic arguments, with some Malaysia-specific considerations. First, government offices, being funded by taxpayers and charged with serving society, should also reflect the population. This principle, which prescribes equitable representation at all levels, from front desks to backroom support, and professional and managerial positions, can be regarded as a “first-best” option.²³

A second argument, premised on the importance of diverse groups being represented in policymaking, oversight and enforcement, underscores the benefit of equitable representation especially in high-level managerial and professional positions — and in key branches such as the police and military. This can be regarded as a “second best” solution, because it is focused on some but not all layers of the civil service. Broader inclusion based on cultural, regional and religious backgrounds is a worthwhile endeavour, nonetheless, because the conspicuous absence of a population group in the higher ranks of the civil service can adversely impact on governance and on public confidence toward the prospects for career advancement among all groups. Malaysia’s attempts at promoting non-Malay career interest in the police and army reflect the moral and strategic value of ethnic representation on the frontlines of law enforcement and national defence. Of course, the hurdles remain, as shown in research that goes beyond anecdotal reportage. Woo’s (2018) survey found that non-Malays on average *perceive* that ethnicity adversely affects their career prospects. It should be noted that they also express various reasons for not choosing the public sector, with survey respondents most frequently stating low pay as the main deterrent, followed by uninteresting jobs, poor promotion prospects, then discrimination.

The third argument, more pragmatically oriented, contends that hiring based on identity can compromise the quality of employees hired or promoted, to the detriment of the organisation as a whole. The argument applies across sectors, but carries weight in Malaysia’s public sector due to its history of majority-favouring practices. The issue is undeniably delicate and complex, and the civil service as a phenomenon is highly heterogeneous. It is imperative to avoid simplistic stances that attribute all shortcomings in the civil service to pro-Malay policies and to recognise that competitive selection and performance monitoring can sustain quality within a group-targeted and diversity-promoting system.²⁴

Fourth, some grounds for increasing diversity in Malaysia’s civil service derive from country-specific factors, particularly related to past rationales that, the argument goes, are no longer valid. One major plank of this critique maintains that pro-Malay policies cannot be justified any longer because the NEP expired in 1990.²⁵ A closer reading of the NEP, however, will discern that its policy timeline was oblique and noncommittal and that, by and large, Malaysia’s mainstays of economic growth, poverty alleviation, and group-targeted, inter-ethnic redistribution have all endured to this day. These national objectives remain relevant and important, with variations in design and mechanism over time, including benefits targeted at the Orang Asli, Indian, and Sabah-Sarawak Bumiputera communities (Lee 2022). Denunciation of “racial policy”, which resounds in some echo chambers, fails to realize that group-targeted policies exist for multiple groups, and sows distrust when people demand the termination of Malay-targeted schemes while advocating minority-targeted assistance.

Another argument, forcefully articulated in Ramasamy's February article, regards an initial justification for Malay dominance in the civil service — namely, to counter Chinese dominance in the private sector — as invalidated by economic footholds that government-linked companies (GLCs) have secured. This argument's general thrust is more cogent than the specific framing of GLCs as the Malay community's economic guardian. Broader socioeconomic developments, from higher education achievement to middle class expansion and economic empowerment, provide more authoritative reference for gauging the Malay community's capability and confidence to undertake change.

The PSC's statement on meritocratic appointment signals a willingness to engage more substantively beyond rhetoric, and may also reflect a readiness to consider incremental reforms. Such dispositions could provide a segue to more conciliatory dialogues. Moreover, campaigning for Malay "dominance" in the civil service to be dismantled because of GLC economic strength draws a misplaced equivalence between indirect Malay 'ownership' of GLCs – through government-linked investment – versus direct Chinese ownership and control of private enterprise. This contention, framed through the lens of implicit ethnic bargains, also risks being viewed askance by Malays who fear that conceding to a reduction of their presence in the civil service may amplify demands for the same change in the GLCs.

The demands for civil service reform based on NEP expiry or Malay GLC guardianship crack under the weight of critical scrutiny. Of course, changing tack is only the start. Fostering equitable representation through other approaches must surmount steep challenges, including Malays' emphatic support for the perpetuation of "Malay rights", which presumably includes civil service positions.²⁶ In light of these realities, Malaysia would do better to carve out space for group-targeted measures for all groups rather than duel over the termination of Malay-targeted policies.

IMPULSIVE REACTIONS, ELUSIVE SOLUTIONS

The interlocutors of the latest round of this debate demonstrate how the discourse repeatedly gets marred by impulsive reactions on both sides. If substantive and constructive exchanges are elusive, one reason might be the lack of novel and more conciliatory approaches. Ramasamy's second, and apparently unread, opinion piece provides an illustration. On 15 March, one month after the first article, he wrote another commentary referencing the Penang state government's experience in clarifying and consolidating recruitment procedures, from job advertisements to interviews and appointments. In sum, he advocated a "holistic perspective on civil service reforms" which is "not just balancing ethnic or religious interests, but about critically examining the needs of the service based on ethnic, gender, merit and social class considerations."²⁷

There is no guarantee that the debate would have transpired more productively had Ramasamy issued this perspective from the start instead of decrying "Malay dominance", "overt and covert discrimination" and "racial policy". What is clear, however, is the debate started out on a

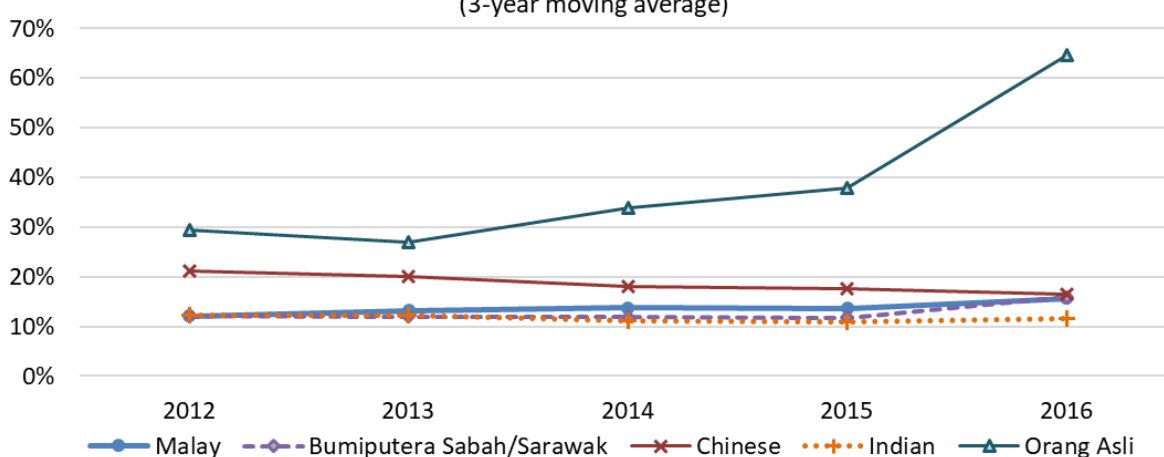
rancorous footing — and approaches more akin to Ramasamy’s second commentary might work better in the future.

It is also worthwhile probing a bit deeper into the post-2008 general election minority-hiring initiatives. Civil service ethnic composition information is incomplete and sporadic, but the Public Services Commission has disclosed data for the period 2011-17, from which we can observe ethnic patterns in applications, calls for interview, interview attendance, and appointments. Due to the volatility of year-to-year figures, the data are converted to three-year moving averages. We must register a caveat that these data merely show the final outcome of the stages of recruitment which we cannot conclusively trace to policy effects, quality of applicants, or amount and area of jobs offered. However, given the dearth of data, these empirical insights remain pertinent exploratory findings.

In general, we can observe a higher rate of call for interview and job appointment in the early 2010s for non-Malay minorities – which tapers off through the decade (Figures 1 and 3). The Orang Asli are rather exceptional, in that the rate of call for interview increases, while interview attendance and appointment per interview both decrease. The higher rates of call for interview and appointments per interview of Chinese and Indian are in line with the GTP’s commitment to facilitating minority recruitment. Importantly, interview attendance rates are high (around 70 per cent) and even across all groups during 2012-13 (Figure 2). These figures decline subsequently in all groups, but more steeply among Orang Asli – even as they are increasingly called for interview.

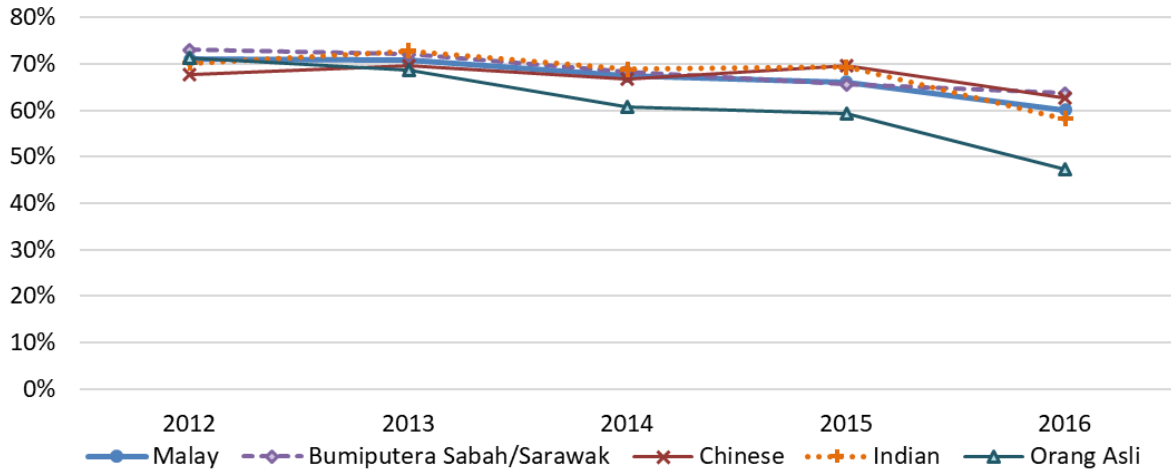
The same data, presented in Table 3 from the angle of the ethnic proportions of the application, interview and appointment stages, align with the possibility that efforts to increase Chinese, Indian, Sabah-Sarawak Bumiputeras were more effective in the 2011-13 period than the latter period — that is, the momentum flagged. Orang Asli recruitment efforts appear to be more sustained, with the group’s share of appointments greatly exceeding their share of job applicants.

Figure 1. Malaysian civil service: Calls for interview per applications (3-year moving average)



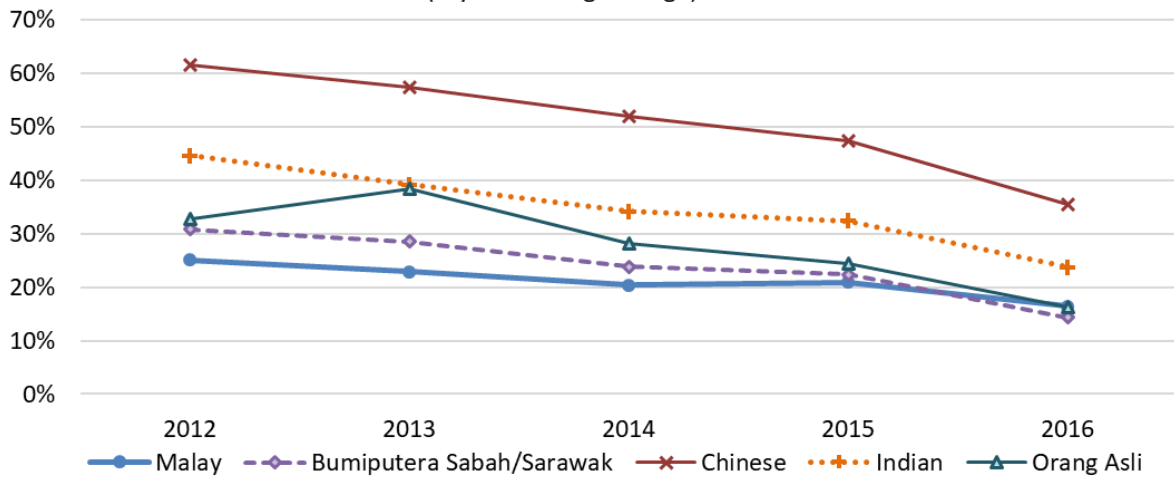
Source: Author’s calculations from Public Service Commission data (data.gov.my)

Figure 2. Malaysian civil service: Attended interviews per calls for interview (3-year moving average)



Source: Author's calculations from Public Service Commission data (data.gov.my)

Figure 3. Malaysian civil service: Appointments per interview (3-year moving average)



Source: Author's calculations from Public Service Commission data (data.gov.my)

Table 3. Ethnic groups' share of applications, interviews and appointments (% total)

	2011-13 (annual average)			2014-17 (annual average)		
	applied	interviewed	appointed	applied	interviewed	appointed
Malay	82.0	80.4	72.8	81.0	81.1	78.3
Sabah/Sarawak Bumiputera	12.3	12.5	13.9	13.6	13.3	12.1
Chinese	2.0	3.3	7.4	1.8	2.2	4.9
Indian	3.5	3.4	5.5	3.5	2.7	4.0
Orang Asli	0.2	0.4	0.5	0.2	0.7	0.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Author's calculations from Public Services Commission data obtained from data.gov.my.

Note: "Others" category omitted due to highly anomalous appointments reported in 2011 and 2012.

CONCLUSION

Can the conversation on ethnic diversity in Malaysia's civil service, long a space for venting dogmas and grievances, break new ground? The ease and efficacy of rallying "Malay rights" confirm that the notion is deeply embedded and especially volatile today. At the same time, sweeping repudiation of "racial policy" and valorisation of "meritocracy" detract from constructive discourse. Arguably, there is much to be gained from exercising restraint in airing minority grievances while focusing on the contributions of Malay-targeted policies to the community's advancement — as the basis for such benefits to be extended to other communities — and recognising the current merit-based recruitment system as a positive institution to build on. Policy discourses would do better to acknowledge that representation of *all* groups matter, and advocate selection policies that apply a blend of methods suited to majority and minority groups. Priority can also be placed on ministries and agencies where diversity can enhance the government's domestic and international outreach, such as in policy-making, delivery of education and health services, and diplomatic ties especially with China and India.

Moving forward requires compromises and further investigations. While principally anchored to the moral arguments favouring a representative civil service, Malaysia's quest for solutions may in the near future need to prioritise "second-best" options of increasing minority representation in the professional and managerial layers or particular ministries where their presence is relatively greater and the jobs more attractive to minority groups. Differences in ethnic composition across ministries and agencies, and in state governments besides the federal civil service, should also factor into analyses of current conditions and policy focus areas. The trade-off of job security in the public sector vs higher pay in the private sector will persist; the civil service should leverage on its advantages and focus on engendering more meaningful

work to draw in talent. The presence of Sabah/Sarawak Bumiputeras and Orang Asli in top management warrants particular attention. The GTP's commitment to increasing minority representation, which coincided with higher rates of their recruitment in 2011-13 but fizzled out thereafter and seemingly suffered political fatigue, should be researched with adequate empirical rigour to draw out lessons.

That experiment, albeit short-lived, suggests that discreet steps rather than conspicuous moves hold out better prospects for incremental progress, and also underscores the imperative of sustained political commitment. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim is studiously sidestepping the slightest provocation of Malaysia's civil service. However, his administration, as the first ruling coalition helmed by a multi-ethnic party, could judiciously steer policy discourses and seek new grounds for fostering diversity.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Less than one year ago, in July 2022, the issue surfaced in parliament (“Govt should push for more racially balanced civil service – Kok”, *Malaysiakini*, 20 July 2022, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/628956>).

² P. Ramasamy, “Unity gov’t must recalibrate racial diversity in Malaysia’s civil service”, *Focus Malaysia*, 10 February 2023 (<https://focusmalaysia.my/unity-govt-must-recalibrate-racial-diversity-in-malaysias-civil-service/>).

³ The civil service is often criticised for its “bloated” size. Based on the 1.6 million baseline, the numbers employed in Malaysia’s civil service are high by international norms. However, Malaysia defines “civil service” very broadly, hence comparisons across countries must be placed in context and handled with caution. Issues surrounding the scale, financial sustainability, and operational efficiency and competency of the civil service also should not be conflated with the questions of ethnic composition and employment policy. The problems are distinct, with inter-relations requiring careful consideration. This Perspective omits the discourses on the size of the civil service, despite their recurrence in the ethnic diversity debate. For an incisive discussion of civil service capacity and modernisation, see World Bank (2021), Chapter 5.

⁴ Article 153 stipulates that the Yang di-Pertuan Agong can exercise his functions, “as may be necessary”, to safeguard the special position of the Malays and natives of Sabah and Sarawak through reserving for these designated groups a reasonable proportion of public sector employment, scholarships, training and licensing. A 1971 amendment added higher education admissions to this list. Importantly, albeit implicitly, the underlying principle for exercising these powers is the necessity for doing so, and a distinctive feature of these areas of intervention is that they involve education, employment, and productive economic activity more broadly.

⁵ Article 8(5)(c) stipulates that safeguarding equality for all does not preclude “any provision for protection, well-being or advancement of the aboriginal peoples of the Malay Peninsula” including “a reasonable proportion of suitable positions in the public service”.

⁶ The Malayan civil service was perhaps the exception in clearly stipulating a quota, of four Malays for every non-Malay (Khoo 2005). The New Economic Policy’s guiding principle for restructuring employment was for all occupations and sectors to be reflective of the national ethnic composition.

⁷ In 2009, the Chinese proportion of management and professional positions was recorded at 10.7 per cent, up from 9.4 per cent in 2005. The share of Indians remained at 5.1 per cent across the same interval (Woo 2015).

⁸ “Public Services Commission insists no racial discrimination in civil servant recruitment”, Bernama article published in *Malay Mail*, 14 February 2023 (<https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2023/02/14/public-services-commission-insists-no-racial-discrimination-in-civil-servant-recruitment/54965>).

⁹ The data reported by CPPS (2006) differentiated management and professional from support staff. The Chinese and Indian shares were identical across both categories. Sabah and Sarawak Bumiputeras were especially under-represented among managers and professionals (3.2 per cent of the total), while constituting 9.0 per cent of support roles.

¹⁰ The ethnic disproportionalities in the armed forces are starkly disproportionate: 85.8 per cent Malay, 11.9 per cent Sabah-Sarawak Bumiputera, 1.4 per cent Indian, 0.5 per cent Chinese and 0.4 per cent Orang Asli (*FreeMalaysiaToday*, “Armed forces looking to recruit more non-Bumiputeras”, 12 April 2023, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2023/04/12/armed-forces-looking-to-recruit-more-non-bumiputeras/>).

¹¹ Ida Lim, “MACC to court Chinese, youths in 2014 publicity drive”, *Malay Mail*, 30 December 2014 (<https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2013/12/30/macc-to-court-chinese-youths-in-2014-publicity-drive/589933>).

¹² Reports in 2014 revealed that the police force was comprised of 85.4 per cent Malays, 3.5 per cent Indian, 1.9 per cent Chinese (“Police relax entry rules on recruitment of Chinese”, *The Star*, 2 March 2014, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2014/03/01/police-relax-rules-on-chinese-recruits/>).

¹³ Armed Forces wants to see more of the other races in the force”, *Bernama* cited in *FreeMalaysiaToday*, 16 December 2017 (<https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2017/12/16/armed-forces-wants-to-see-more-of-the-other-races-in-the-force/>); Persatuan Patriot Kebangsaan, “The low non-Muslim enrolment rates in the armed forces”, *Malaysiakini*, 19 December 2017 (<https://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/405909>).

¹⁴ P. Ramasamy, “Unity gov’t must recalibrate racial diversity in Malaysia’s civil service”, *Focus Malaysia*, 10 February 2023 (<https://focusmalaysia.my/unity-govt-must-recalibrate-racial-diversity-in-malysias-civil-service/>). The author reproduced the text of this article on his Facebook page, which was the reference point for most media reports.

¹⁵ <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2023/02/12/my-statement-on-civil-service-was-twisted-says-ramasamy>

- ¹⁶ P. Ramasamy, “Emulate Penang’s public sector employment model to tackle civil service uproar”, 15 March 2023, *Focus Malaysia* (<https://focusmalaysia.my/emulate-penangs-public-sector-employment-model-to-tackle-civil-service-uproar/>).
- ¹⁷ “Respect ‘Malay special right in civil service’, says PAS leader”, *Malaysiakini*, 13 February 2022 (<https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/654930>).
- ¹⁸ Rohaniza Idris, “Radzi: Ramasamy’s remarks an insult to Malays, civil service”, *New Straits Times*, 12 February 2023 (<https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2023/02/879022/radzi-ramasamys-remarks-insult-malays-civil-service>).
- ¹⁹ “Amanah MP: Ramasamy sabotaging PM with civil service remarks”, *Malaysiakini*, 11 February 2023 (<https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/654745>). Another prominent Pakatan Harapan figure, former Education Minister and for Simpang Renggam MP Maszlee Malik, also urged disciplinary action against Ramasamy (Mohamed Basyir, “Maszlee: Ramasamy becoming a liability, DAP should sack him”, *New Straits Times*, 11 February 2023, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2023/02/878726/maszlee-ramasamy-becoming-liability-dap-should-sack-him>).
- ²⁰ N. Trisha, “My statement on civil service was twisted, says Ramasamy”, *The Star*, 12 February 2023 (<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2023/02/12/my-statement-on-civil-service-was-twisted-says-ramasamy>).
- ²¹ It should be noted that Ramasamy did receive some support, although very few publicly defended him. Pasir Gudang MP Hassan Karim was the rare political voice appealing for less acrimony against Ramasamy and more sympathy toward the underlying minority issues and the salutary intention of civil service reform (Yee Xiang Yun, “Cut Ramasamy some slack, says Pasir Gudang MP over civil service remarks”, *The Star*, 12 February 2023 (<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2023/02/12/cut-ramasamy-some-slack-says-pasir-gudang-mp-over-civil-service-remarks>).
- ²² “Cuepacs chairman: Civil service employment on merit, not racial grounds”, *Focus Malaysia*, 12 February 2023 (<https://focusmalaysia.my/cuepacs-chairman-civil-service-employment-on-merit-not-racial-grounds/>).
- ²³ “Civil service should represent all Malaysians, says activist”, *FreeMalaysiaToday*, 13 February 2022 (<https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2023/02/13/civil-service-should-represent-all-malaysians-says-activist/>).
- ²⁴ For a fuller analysis of systemic issues in the civil service, see World Bank (2021).
- ²⁵ Kua Kia Soong, “Does the civil service need to be reformed?”, *The Vibes*, 13 February 2023 (<https://www.thevibes.com/articles/opinion/85173/does-the-civil-service-need-to-be-reformed-kua-kia-soong>).
- ²⁶ A Merdeka Center survey of March 2022 as part of an ethnic relations study, found that half of all Malaysians and 81 per cent of Malays deemed ‘Malay special rights and privileges’ as a ‘core feature of our society’ and think that they ‘should stay in place forever’ (<https://www.ideas.org.my/publications-item/the-2nd-national-perception-survey-towards-icerd-and-ethnic-relations-in-malaysia/>).
- ²⁷ P. Ramasamy, “Emulate Penang’s public sector employment model to tackle civil service uproar”, *Focus Malaysia*, 15 March 2023 (<https://focusmalaysia.my/emulate-penangs-public-sector-employment-model-to-tackle-civil-service-uproar/>).

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