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Overseas Voter Mobilisation in Singapore: Implications from Malaysia's 13th General Election

James Gomez and Rusdi Omar

Abstract: This paper discusses voter mobilisation and other election-related activities of Malaysian voters living, studying and working in Singapore in the context of Malaysia's 13th general election (GE13). According to the World Bank, nearly 400,000 Malaysians reside in the city-state. Thus these figures represent a significant Malaysian voter pool based in Singapore. Efforts to mobilise these voters for general elections or other causes have political implications for both countries, which became apparent following Singapore-based Malaysians' activities to encourage Malaysians to return home to cast their votes during the 13th general election. Singapore's strict public assembly laws led to several legal issues related to the voter mobilisation and election campaign activities undertaken by Malaysians in the city-state. These legal issues became a source of friction between the two countries during the elections as government leaders and authorities on both sides of the causeway accused the other of interfering in domestic political matters. Given the growing number of Malaysians in Singapore and the likely repeat of Malaysian voter mobilisation activities in Singapore in the run-up to the fourteenth general election (GE14) in 2018, issues related to the election activities of Malaysian voters in Singapore stand to be another set of factors that will shape the health of bilateral relations between these two countries.

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Keywords: Malaysia, Singapore, general elections, overseas voters, voter mobilisation

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Introduction

In Malaysia's 13th general election (GE13), only 6,298 out of over 700,000 Malaysians abroad registered as overseas voters (*The Straits Times* 2013a). In spite of a strong push by the electoral reform lobby Bersih¹ to urge overseas Malaysians to register to vote, the number of overseas voters was low. It was a small number compared to the 13,268,002 registered voters countrywide (<www.idea.int>). The Malaysian election authorities lamented that in spite of their best efforts the overseas numbers were low – although pro-electoral reform groups put the low numbers down to the late announcement of the new rules by the election authorities (Su-Lyn 2013).

Nevertheless, the low number of overseas voters does not provide a full picture of overseas voters during GE13, as election authorities specifically disqualified Malaysian voters from the following countries and territories from casting their ballots from abroad: Brunei, Kalimantan (Indonesia), Singapore and southern Thailand (the provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, Yala, Songkhla and Satun). In an interview with *ABC Radio Australia*, Wan Ahmad Wan Omar, the deputy chairman of the Malaysian Election Commission (EC), said that overseas voters in Singapore, Brunei, Kalimantan (Indonesia) and southern Thailand:

are excluded in this category of overseas voting rules, because the position of those countries are close to Malaysia, they can come back easily. People like people in Singapore, for example, they just cross the causeway and come back to where they are registered to vote, so are those in Brunei. So most Malaysians who are in Brunei, they are mostly from either from Sarawak or from the state of Sabah, and those who are in Kalimantan, they are mostly Malaysians from Sarawak (Wan Omar 2013).

Some analysts have suggested that the EC imposed such strict conditions because citizens abroad, especially those in Singapore, are likely to vote for the opposition (*The Malaysian Insider* 2013). Some explained that Malaysians overseas would vote for the opposition because they wanted to change their experience of discrimination, injustice, bureaucracy, and inefficiency in Malaysia (*Free Malaysia Today* 2013a). Exit polls of overseas Malaysians in Melbourne and London on 28 April 2013 conducted by non-governmental

1 Bersih is a coalition of NGOs pushing for electoral reform (BERSIH started out as the Joint Action Committee for Electoral Reform, which was formed in July 2005, and the coalition's objective was to push for a through reform of the electoral process in Malaysia). It is credited with facilitating a high voter turnout in the 2013 general election.

organisations, including Bersih, showed that the majority of overseas voters chose Pakatan. Each survey had a sample size of about 600 voters. In Melbourne, 69 per cent of voters opted for Pakatan; in London, 71 per cent did (Wong 2013a).

Such exit poll results therefore make Malaysian voters in Singapore an important segment to study. The World Bank placed the number of Malaysians in Singapore for 2010 close to 386,000 (World Bank 2011), which reveals an increase of 25 per cent since 2000 when about 304,000 were recorded. In 2000, 85 per cent of the Malaysian diaspora in Singapore was ethnic Chinese; by 2010, this had risen to 88 per cent. In 2010, the World Bank estimated that between 800,000 and 1.4 million Malaysians were living overseas (World Bank 2011), which means that 46 per cent of the global Malaysian diaspora resided in Singapore between 2000 and 2010. At the height of the GE13 campaign, it was also reported in the media that at least 100,000 Malaysians living in the Johor Baru area commuted to Singapore daily for work (Hussain 2013).

To understand the political significance of the Malaysian diaspora in Singapore, their growth in absolute numbers and percentages provide useful indicators. The Malaysian diaspora accounted for 7.6 per cent of the total population (5,076,700) in Singapore in 2010. Although there was no great increase in percentage terms since 2000 – when Malaysians made up 7.5 per cent of the total population of 4,027,900 – there had been a noticeable increase on the previous two decades. In 1990, for instance, there were about 195,000 Malaysians living in Singapore, making up nearly 6.3 per cent of the total population of 3,047,100. In 1980, this number was about 120,000 and represented 4.9 per cent of the population of 2,412,900. Thus, over the last four decades, the Malaysian diaspora in Singapore has grown in terms of absolute numbers and in percentage terms in relation to the total population in Singapore; it thereby constitutes a significant bloc within the city-state’s demographics.

Table 1: Malaysian Diaspora in Singapore

Year	Malaysians in Singapore	Chinese	Malay	Indian
2010	385,979	88%	6%	5%
2000	303,828	85%	9%	5%
1990	194,929	N/A	N/A	N/A
1980	120,104	N/A	N/A	N/A

Source: World Bank 2011 and Esa.un.org 2010.

Collectively, these figures represent a significant Malaysian voter pool based in Singapore. Efforts to mobilise this group for general elections or other causes have political implications for both Malaysia and Singapore, which

became apparent following Singapore-based Malaysians' efforts to mobilise Malaysians to return home to cast their votes during GE13. Singapore's strict public assembly laws led to several legal issues related to the voter mobilisation and election campaign activities undertaken by Malaysians in the city-state. These legal issues became a source of friction between the two countries during the elections as government leaders and authorities on both sides accused the other of interfering in domestic political matters. Given the growing number of Malaysians in Singapore and the likely repeat of Malaysian voter mobilisation activities in Singapore in the run-up to the fourteenth general election (GE14) in 2018, issues related to the election activities of Malaysian voters in Singapore stand to be another set of factors that will shape the health of bilateral relations between these two countries.

Election studies on Malaysia often focus on themes such as election authoritarianism, ethnicity and multiculturalism, policy issues, the role of Islam, media and new media, political parties, and the dynamics of East and West Malaysia. Works emerging from GE13 also generally centre on these issues. There has been little to almost no discussion of overseas voter mobilisation activities, especially in Singapore. This paper, therefore, is a pioneer in the discourse on Malaysian voter mobilisation and other election-related activities in Singapore in the context of academic literature on general elections in Malaysia.

Change in Overseas Voting Rules in Malaysia

Under the Election (Registration of Electors) Regulations 2002, only members of the armed forces, public servants, and students (as well as their spouses) based overseas are eligible to register as absent voters. The momentum for the amendment to overseas voting rules began on 25 August 2011 when the EC announced that it was planning to allow Malaysians overseas to vote in GE13. On 1 December 2011, the Parliamentary Select Committee (PSC) recommended in its interim report that all Malaysians residing overseas should be given the legal right to vote by post (Chooi 2011). Then, on 3 April 2012, the PSC gave the EC a three-month deadline to formulate the methods and regulations to allow overseas voting.

It was on 21 January 2013 that the EC officially released the new overseas voting rules that would come into effect for GE13 (*New Straits Times* 2013a). The announcement of these new rules came following amendment to the postal voting regulations which were almost two years in the making on the back of strong pro-electoral reform lobby spearhead headed by the NGO coalition Bersih.

The new legislation dictated that all Malaysian citizens residing overseas can qualify as voters but must first register themselves as voters at the Malaysian embassies in the countries where they reside. Next, they would have to apply to the EC to become postal voters. The main qualifying criterion was that applicants must have stayed in Malaysia a total of 30 days during the last five years. Upon approval by the EC, these individuals will then be able to cast their votes at their respective Malaysian missions overseas (*The Star* 2012).

Registered voters visit their respective embassies and present their identity cards or passports to receive their priority envelopes. The marked ballots are placed in the priority envelopes, which are then sent back to Malaysia and handed over to returning officers of the respective electoral divisions.

On 28 April 2013, Malaysians overseas began to cast their postal votes for the first time at various Malaysian embassies. It was reported that nearly 200 votes were cast in New York (*The Straits Times* 2013b), while more than 1,000 ballots were submitted in London (*The Star* 2013a). In Australia, Malaysians turned up in large numbers to cast their votes at polling centres in Canberra², Melbourne (1,700) and Perth (350). These were also attended by Malaysians residing in Sydney, Brisbane and Adelaide, where polling was not held due to the absence of consulate services (*Free Malaysia Today* 2013b).

Voting numbers were more modest in other locations. In New Delhi, for example, only 31 ballots were cast – of which 23 belonged to Malaysian High Commission staff. At the Chennai Consulate-General, only 53 Malaysians – including consulate staff – were expected to vote. In Mumbai, as few as 15 Malaysians cast ballots (*Free Malaysia Today* 2013b). The numbers were similar in China, where only 61 of the 177 registered voters residing in Beijing cast their postal votes at the Malaysian embassy (*New Straits Times* 2013b). Malaysians residing in China also cast their votes through postal ballots at the Malaysian consulates-general in Shanghai, Kunming, Guangzhou and Hong Kong (*MSN Malaysia* 2013). In Taiwan, Malaysians were able to cast their votes at the Malaysian Friendship and Trade Centre in Taipei (*Free Malaysia Today* 2013b).

However, those residing in countries that were not provided with overseas voting, such as those in Singapore, had to resort to other measures.

The Malaysian Voter Mobilisation Campaign *JomBalikUndi*

Usually undertaken by voluntary associations and political organisations, voter mobilisation activities seek to encourage citizens to register and vote

2 No numbers available.

during an election. These efforts can include traditional campaign tactics such as phone calls, door-to-door canvassing, and community and grassroots outreach activities (Vissers et al. 2012). Since the arrival of the Internet, these traditional methods have been combined with new approaches – for example, organising via online social networks and media, online advertising, and email outreach (Vergeer, Hermans, and Sams 2011).

The voter mobilisation campaign in Singapore stemmed from the earlier initiative *JomBalikUndi* (JBU) or “Let’s Go Home and Vote” in Melbourne, Australia, which (before overseas voting had been permitted) encouraged all Malaysians living and working abroad to return home to vote for GE13. The public was urged to participate in the online campaign and help spread the message by taking a photo of themselves holding a sign with a personal message and sending it to the JBU official website (*Malaysiakini* 2013a). Even after overseas voting was approved, JBU organisers continued to urge citizens abroad to return home and vote, if possible, so as to avoid any unexpected issues with registering as overseas voters and in order to minimise the opportunities of electoral fraud (David Teoh, interviewed on 31 July 2013); they also advised registered voters unable to return home to submit their postal voter applications as soon as possible (*The Star* 2013b).

The campaign struck a chord with overseas Malaysians and their enthusiasm to return home was reflected in the response to promotions offered by airline companies. For instance, within 24 hours, AirAsiaX sold tickets to 1,000 global passengers and 30,000 tickets were sold for the Southeast Asian route (not more than four hours route) (David Teoh, interviewed on 31 July 2013). Of those 1,000 global passengers, 80 per cent came from Australia (Interview with Azran Omar-Rani, CEO, AirAsiaX on 11 September 2013). This (special “election” service) also prompted other airlines such as AirAsia, Malaysian Airlines, and Malindo Air to also provide discounts. Malaysia Airlines, accused of carrying “phantom voters”, operated return commercial charter flights from Kuala Lumpur to Sabah and Sarawak and was reported to have sold 34,000 seats (*Malaysia Today* 2013). Malindo Air also announced an extension of its special fares to and from Kuching and Kota Kinabalu, thus enabling voters to return home to vote in the general election (*Malaysiakini* 2013d).

In Singapore, a small group of Malaysians in Singapore got behind a JBU campaign in the city-state following the decree by the EC not to allow overseas voting. According to statement released in late January 2013 by Bersih 3.0 Singapore, barring overseas voting for the selected countries and territories announced by the EC constituted discrimination against Malaysians in Singapore. Furthermore, such a move presented significant “logistical, planning and financial challenges” to Malaysians in Singapore, who would

have to take leave from work or their studies to travel hundreds of miles back to their respective polling stations to vote. There was concern that many who were working in the service industry or in low paying jobs would not be given the time off to return to vote (Lim I. 2013), unlike home-based Malaysians who benefit from a public holiday to cast their vote on polling day (Bersih 3.0 Singapore 2013).

Hence in the months leading to the elections, Bersih 3.0 Singapore initiated the JBU campaign to mobilise all Malaysians in Singapore to return home to cast their votes. One problem faced by returning voters was the availability of bus tickets. Hence, Bersih 3.0 Singapore sought sponsorship from transport booking companies such as Easibook.com to provide discounts on bus travel (*Malaysiakini* 2013b). There was also a coach service back to Malaysia for the polls that was subsidised by up to at least 50 per cent by donations of fellow Malaysian who wanted all Malaysians in Singapore to have the possibility to cast their ballots (*JomBalikUndi* Coach Service 2013). The campaign conducted by Bersih 3.0 Singapore also included a carpooling programme that saw about 300 drivers and passengers link up with another 330 passengers (Wong 2013b).

Public Voter Mobilisation Activities in Singapore

When the voter mobilisation activities in Singapore moved from the Internet into the public domain, it brought the campaigners into a different legal realm and saw them soon fall foul of Singapore's strict public assembly laws. These voter mobilisation activities were spontaneously organized by several persons independently of the official *JomBalikUndi* campaign without fully understanding the implications of Singapore's public assembly laws. Bersih 3.0 Singapore's coordinator, Ong, confirmed that these groups acted independently of Bersih, which was largely focused on organising legally easier carpooling and subsidised bus services (Interview with Ong on 9 September 2013).

According to the media, small teams of activists were spotted around the Jurong East MRT Station on Thursday, 11 April 2013 (*Malaysiakini* 2013c), while other groups were reportedly campaigning in the suburb of Tampines to urge Malaysians to return home and cast their votes for the upcoming general election. These groups consisted of four men and two women who held up placards at various spots in Singapore on Sunday, 14 April 2013.

By the afternoon, these groups were spotted by the police and were requested to immediately assist with the investigation into breaches under the Public Order Act – although no charges were filed against the campaigners at that time (Lim Yan Liang 2013). Under Singapore's Public Order Act,

campaigning by carrying placards in public areas is illegal without a police permit.

On 14 April 2013, the police issued a statement about the persons who gathered with placards in a public space:

Police are investigating the offence under the Public Order Act. Under the Public Order Act, a Police permit is generally required to hold any public assembly or conduct any public procession, regardless of the number of participants, the purpose of which is:

- a) to demonstrate support for or opposition to the views or actions of any person, group of persons or any government;
- b) to publicise a cause or campaign; or
- c) to mark or commemorate any event.

Police would like to remind the public that conducting such activities without a Police permit is illegal in Singapore. Foreigners should also refrain from importing their domestic political activities in Singapore (*Asiaone* 2013).

Liew Sze Ping was one of the six campaigners to be issued a conditional warning by the police under the Public Order Act. Should any of the protestors reoffended under the same Act within 12 months, they will be charged for both the new case as well as the one for which they received the warning (Liew Sze Ping, interviewed on 4 September 2013).

Although these campaigners ran into trouble with the police for contravening Singapore's public assembly laws, the campaigners revealed they undertook such activities even though they knew of the consequences. These campaigners felt that even though they might run into legal trouble, "it did not feel right" to not do anything in the run-up to the Malaysian elections (*Malaysiakini* 2013c).

Cross-Border Election Campaign Activity

Apart from voter mobilisation activities and the associated legal issues discussed above, there were also other election-related issues. This included the visit to Singapore by the then Menteri Besar of Johor, Abdul Ghani Othman, who accompanied Johor residents working in the city-state on their commute across the Second Link bridge during the height of the election campaign.

Abdul Ghani's Gelang Patah constituency was one of the "hot seats" during the GE13 campaign. The opposition sent DAP stalwart Lim Kit Siang from his safe seat to challenge Ghani. The Gelang Patah constituency had 106,864 voters (52 per cent Chinese, 34 per cent Malay, and 12.5 per cent Indian) and was one of the election's most closely watched contests. In

this constituency, dissatisfaction of Chinese and urban voters were important considerations (Quek 2013). Analysts viewed Malaysian Chinese voters living and working in Singapore as possibly having an impact on selected parliamentary seats, such as Gelang Patah (Lim I. 2013).

It was within this context that Abdul Ghani took the opportunity on 2 May 2013 to meet Johor constituents who work in Singapore. He spent the morning meeting Johor commuters on the bus to Singapore, had breakfast at a restaurant in Jurong East MRT station, and spoke to journalists in Singapore before journeying back to Malaysia. Although his visit to Singapore only lasted a few hours, it was well organised and widely publicised on Facebook. Abdul Ghani also told the media that the proposed Rapid Transit System between Johor Baru and Woodlands was expected to be ready by 2018 and would create jobs in Johor Baru in the next five to eight years.

Nevertheless, Abdul Ghani's trip to Singapore was criticised by his challenger Lim Kit Siang. Meanwhile, Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed surprise that Abdul Ghani visited Singapore and discussed connectivity issues between Singapore and Johor with the media. However, the deputy chairman of the Malaysian High Commission, Wan Ahmad Wan Omar, explained that Malaysian election laws allow all candidates to go overseas to canvass for votes.

Soon after, Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement revealing that a police report had been filed (without saying who filed the report) but that "no offence" had been committed – as having breakfast or speaking to reporters does not constitute an offence (Wong 2013b). But the statement did add the following:

In the case of Mr Ghani, it would appear that there was no campaigning, although some members of his team were wearing campaign shirts. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has registered with the Malaysian High Commission in Singapore that campaigning activities by foreigners are not allowed in Singapore. In particular, the wearing of campaign shirts by some of Mr Ghani's team in Singapore during the Malaysian General Election period could be misconstrued and such cases should not recur (Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore 2013a).

The response of the Singaporean authorities to Ghani's activities was different to their reaction to some of the voter mobilisation activities undertaken by ordinary Malaysians living in Singapore.

Voter Mobilisation and Carpooling

As polling day drew nearer, the Malaysian authorities declared that Malaysians returning to vote could only enter the country in a Malaysian-registered vehicle. The EC also urged the Singaporean government to do more to stop expats returning to vote in foreign vehicles (O'Brien 2013). The political tension surrounding carpooling, the identity of vehicle owners, and the identity of passengers came to light when the Singaporean Foreign Affairs Ministry issued a statement that the Singaporean Consulate-General in Johor Baru had received a "memorandum" regarding a Singaporean-registered car in the Malaysian state of Johor, which had logos supporting the campaign of a political party in Malaysia. The EC also warned voters against waving campaign slogans, which is banned under Malaysia's election laws. The EC clarified that slogans cannot be used after the end of the campaign period on the eve of polling day and vehicles transporting voters can only bear party flags but not campaign slogans or party labels.

The issue of car registration arose as voter mobilisation campaigns in Singapore began to urge overseas Malaysians to carpool to return home to vote. According to reports in local newspapers, the EC deputy chair, Dato Wan Ahmad, said that the Singaporean authorities should also investigate whether Singapore cars were being used to help in the Malaysian general election. He also argued that the Singaporean government likewise did not want to see cars from neighbouring countries involved in its own general election. According to Ahmad, there should be mutual respect for and sensitivity towards each other (O'Brien 2013). Ahmad also said that Malaysians travelling in vehicles hired by Malaysians would be fine, but he advised the Singaporean government to investigate the identity of the car owners or the people hiring the vehicles "to avoid the issue of foreigners interfering in the internal politics".

Two days later, the Singaporean authorities said that "the Consulate-General would like to state that further checks indicate that the owner of the vehicle in question is a Malaysian citizen." Amid reports of Singapore-registered cars driving around Johor bearing logos of the opposition, *Pakatan Rakyat* from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared that Singapore did not interfere in the domestic politics of other countries (Hussain and Hong 2013).

These exchanges of statements via the media by both governments over the issue of carpooling by Malaysian voters in Singapore during GE13 represented a rise in rhetoric between the two countries. For instance, during the incident, it also prompted Malaysia's deputy prime minister Muhyiddin Yassin to state: "We don't want any foreign element to meddle in our election process because we are adopting a transparent election system." His

remarks came in response to the defence minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi's statement that there were indications of foreign interference to thwart the formation of a Barisan Nasional government in Johor (*The Straits Times* 2013c).

In short, the organising of carpooling by the Malaysian diaspora in Singapore ahead of the election led to an increase in the rhetoric of "domestic interference" between the two neighbours.

Post-GE13 Protests in Singapore

The range of election-related public activities did not end with the election, but continued in Singapore; this led to more accusations – especially by Singapore – of "domestic interference". These post-election activities were connected to internal and external protests carried out by Malaysians against election discrepancies during GE13. In Singapore, there were two main demonstrations that were initiated by Malaysians.

The first protest against electoral discrepancies took place on 8 May 2013, when 100 people – reportedly mostly Malaysians – gathered at Merlion Park (Ho and Kwan 2013). During the gathering, placards were held up with slogans such as "*Ubah*" (change) and other "No Racism, Unity, Peace, Harmony" and "We Want *Bersih* (clean)" (Ee and Singh 2013). It was reported in the media, that the police warned nine Malaysians for "actively participating" in an illegal gathering at Merlion Park. The police also stated that the work and visit passes³ of the nine were being reviewed by the authorities, and that their employers would be informed (Tan 2013). The second gathering took place on 11 May 2013 and saw 21 Malaysians arrested at Merlion Park. About two weeks later, it was reported that 18 had received conditional warnings, 2 had had their visit passes cancelled, and 1 had had his or her employment pass cancelled (Sabri 2013).

Following the second incident, the police issued a public statement through the media in which it said that foreigners have to abide by Singapore's laws.

They should not import their domestic issues from their countries into Singapore and conduct activities which can disturb public order. Those who break the law will be seriously dealt with" (Yong 2013).

Similarly, the Malaysian High Commissioner to Singapore, Datuk Md Hussin Nayan, reminded Malaysians living in Singapore to respect the laws or "face the consequences." He hoped that those Malaysians working or

3 A "visit pass" is a type of long time visa (that does not allow one to work) usually given to spouse, children, grandparents, siblings, or work permit holders.

studying in Singapore “reflect more their situation before acting illegally” (*The Straits Times* 2013f).

These arrests soon attracted political attention when those detained in Singapore contacted their representatives in Malaysia for assistance. PKR vice president Nurul Izzah Anwar led a four-member delegation – which included Bayan Baru MP Sim Tze Tzin, Batu Pahat MP Idris Jauzi and Johor PKR chief Chua Jui Meng (Sabri 2013) – to handover to the Singaporean High Commission in Kuala Lumpur a memorandum asking for leniency for those arrested (Teo 2013). The chief minister of Penang, Lim Guan Eng, also made a plea for leniency for those Malaysians, especially Penangites, who had gathered to seek electoral reform in their country (*The Straits Times* 2013e).

In response to these appeals by Malaysian politicians, Singapore’s Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a joint statement:

Foreigners who break the law in Singapore should be prepared to face the consequences, including having their visas or work passes revoked. It is clear that some of the Malaysians who participated in the two illegal gatherings at Merlion Park deliberately ignored repeated warnings that the protests were illegal, and that foreigners should not import the differences that they may have over issues in their countries into Singapore. They broke Singapore laws, and have to be dealt with accordingly.

Some of the Malaysian offenders have since approached Malaysian Members of Parliament and their political parties to petition on their behalf against the measures imposed on them for breaking the law. Their actions to involve foreign parties are attempts to seek special treatment and to further politicise what is essentially a domestic law and order issue in Singapore. This is precisely why we have always taken a strong stand against the importation of foreign issues and politics into Singapore.

Singapore values our strong bilateral relations with our neighbours. These are based on mutual respect and the principle of non-interference in each other’s domestic affairs. Singapore does not interfere in the domestic matters of other countries. In turn, Singapore will not tolerate outside forces interfering in our internal affairs (Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013b).

In a show of solidarity with Malaysians calling for fair elections, Jolovan Wham, a Singaporean migrant workers’ rights activist, organised a demonstration at Speakers’ Corner in Hong Lim Park – an event he had posted on

Facebook. However, he was reminded by the authorities that he would need a police permit if foreigners were going to participate in the rally (Tan 2013). The police reminded the public that only Singaporeans and permanent residents of Singapore were allowed to participate in demonstrations held at the Speakers' Corner.

In sum, even after GE13, election activities organised by Malaysians as well as Singaporeans continued to create legal complications and political friction between the two countries.

Conclusion: Impact of Malaysian Voters in Singapore during GE14

At the next general election in 2018, Malaysian voters living, studying, and working in Singapore will continue to be an influential voting bloc. Based on existing World Bank figures, the number of Malaysian voters residing in Singapore will move closer to the half-million mark over the next four to five years. This represents a significant growth in the Singapore-based Malaysian voter pool. Therefore, efforts to mobilise this demographic for a general election or other political causes can have an impact on Malaysia–Singapore relations.

The voter mobilisation of the largely Chinese-Malaysian diaspora in Singapore is especially significant given that ethnic Chinese voters have significantly dropped in percentage terms vis-à-vis other ethnic groups in Malaysia. From 1970 to 2012, the percentage of ethnic Chinese in Malaysia went from 34 per cent to 24 per cent even though the numbers have nearly doubled in absolute terms. Meanwhile, the *Bumiputera* have increased by 10 per cent in the last four decades and tripled in size in terms of absolute numbers. Thus in political terms, overseas Chinese Malaysians represent a significant bloc of voters – especially those based in neighbouring Singapore – that can influence politics or electoral outcomes in Malaysia. Their vote will be significant vis-à-vis other communities given that the Chinese Malaysians are the largest ethnic group among the Malaysian diaspora.

Under current laws, Malaysian voters residing in neighbouring countries such as Singapore are excluded from casting their ballots from abroad. If there are no changes in the law by the next general election, continued voter mobilisation activities are likely and may strain bilateral relations with Singapore. During GE13, for instance, some Singapore-based Malaysians fell foul of the city-state's strict public assembly laws around cause-related public activities, which saw the authorities on both sides of the causeway issuing statements and accusing each other of domestic political inference.

Table 2: Population Size by Ethnic Group in Malaysia (1970–2012)

Year	Total	Bumiputera		Chinese		Indian	
		Numbers	%	Numbers	%	Numbers	%
1970	10,439,000	5,845,000	56	3,564,000	34	943,000	9
1980	13,745,000	8,060,000	58	4,415,000	32	1,777,000	12
1991	17,574,000	10,647,000	60	4,945,000	28	1,394,000	8
2000	22,082,000	14,349,000	64	5,762,000	26	1,682,000	7
2010	26,264,100	17,676,800	67	6,430,400	24	1,924,900	7
2012	26,974,100	18,251,100	67	6,517,400	24	1,959,900	7

Source: United Nations Development Programme & Department of Statistics Malaysia.

At the same time, given that the Malaysian diaspora now constitutes almost 8 per cent of Singapore’s total population, this community’s activities during GE13 is likely to have had a political knock-on effect for the city-state’s own general elections in 2016. For instance, when Malaysians were undertaking voter mobilisation activities in Singapore, observers were well aware that the Singapore government might be anxious that the spread of Malaysian “anti-establishment sentiments” from Malaysia might make its way into the Singaporean population vis-à-vis its own government (*Malaysiakini* 2013c).

In sum, the combination of the large absolute number of Malaysians in Singapore and the expected voter mobilisation activities by Malaysians in Singapore for GE14 is likely to generate friction between the two countries during the next Malaysian general election. This stands to be another factor that will shape bilateral relations between these two countries and makes for a new topic of study within the field of Malaysian elections.

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