

TOWARDS FAIR CONSTITUENCIES (PART 1): STATE OF CONSTITUENCIES

by *Danesh Prakash Chacko*

With the implementation of Undi18, around 5.6 million new voters entered the electoral roll (of which 1.2 million new voters are ages of 18 to 20) and this significantly altered the electorate composition of Parliament and State (DUN) constituencies. In this two-part article, we will be examining the current state of constituencies and the key considerations for a fair redelineation process.

Did the malapportionment worsen?

One of the four criteria to ensure fair redelineation in Malaysia is to ensure that constituencies have nearly equal electorate sizes throughout the state. Since population distribution is nonuniform and local community ties have to be considered, it is impossible for a constituency to have an equal population to its neighbours. To prevent malapportionment, constitution ought to have clear limits on constituency's electorate size. Currently, our constitution does not define clear limits for constituency's electorate size (hence, allowing malapportionment). Since every constituency sends one elected representative each, uneven constituency sizes have resulted discrimination for Malaysians. Moreover, our Parliament has received complete control of Parliamentary constituency allocation since 1973. This resulted in constituencies being distributed to states arbitrarily, not on evolving state electorate/population sizes. Our Election Commission (EC) had the powers to add or remove constituencies among Peninsular Malaysian states before 1973 due to population/electorate sizes. This ability was stripped away due to the outcomes of 1960 and 1971-73 redelineation exercises and then political considerations.

This article primarily focuses on studying intrastate malapportionment (unequal constituency sizes within a state) among parliamentary constituencies and its relationship with key demographic features. To find the Parliamentary constituencies that are malapportioned, a constituency that is not within $\pm 15\%$ of State's Parliamentary Electoral Quota (EQ) (average size of Parliamentary constituency in each state) would be considered as oversized (too many electors) or undersized (too little electors) accordingly. We are referring to the 1957 constitutional principles. For Sabah and Sarawak, suggested limits for constituency's electorate size would be $\pm 25\%$ of State's Parliamentary EQ. As Labuan and Putrajaya have one single parliamentary constituency each, intrastate malapportionment cannot be measured.

Did the implementation of Undi18 worsen or at best retain existing malapportionment? With considerations in the above, let us examine the comparison of 2020 (pre Undi 18) and 2021 (post Undi18) electoral rolls.

STATE

RATIO BETWEEN LARGEST AND SMALLEST PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY (2020)

RATIO BETWEEN LARGEST AND SMALLEST PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY (2021)

PERLIS*

1.23

1.24

KEDAH

2.72

2.81

KELANTAN

2.34

2.48

TERENGGANU*

1.49

1.58

PULAU PINANG

1.97

2.26

PERAK

3.77

4.30

PAHANG*

2.74

2.61

SELANGOR

4.69

5.80

WILAYAH PERSEKUTUAN KUALA LUMPUR

1.45

1.55

WILAYAH PERSEKUTUAN PUTRAJAYA

N/A

N/A

NEGERI SEMBILAN

2.40

2.62

MELAKA

2.43

2.37

JOHOR

3.58

4.38

WILAYAH PERSEKUTUAN LABUAN

N/A

N/A

SABAH

2.27

2.63

SARAWAK

4.31

5.04

*This state practices simple multiple where number of DUN constituencies is a multiple of Parliamentary constituencies in a state

Source: Election Commission

Before Undi18, many of the current constituencies were in violation of the principle of equality. The implementation of Undi18 has widened the disparity between the largest and the smallest parliamentary constituencies for all states except Pahang. The widening was more pronounced in states that did not practice simple multiple. Majority of the oversized constituencies covers state capitals and major cities across Malaysia (with some exceptions like Baling, Bachok and Beruas). Half of the oversized constituencies are Malay Majority areas.

The implementation of Undi18 is not one of the three triggers for redelineation. The three triggers for redelineation are:

1. Change of state boundaries/Admission of new states
2. Any time after 8 years from the previous redelineation exercise
3. Change in the number of constituencies (Dewan Rakyat or DUN)

Before we clamour for solutions, we need to grasp the nature of constituencies and how it relates to malapportionment.

Malapportionment and Youth Voters

Among all Parliamentary constituencies, 132 constituencies have 20 to 30% of their electorate coming from ages of between 18 and 30 (youth voter category). Within 164 Peninsular Malaysian (excluding Putrajaya) constituencies, constituencies with 20 – 30 % youth voters are largely classified as equal sized constituencies, followed by undersized constituencies. Within the 56 East Malaysian (excluding Labuan) constituencies, constituencies with 20 – 30% youth voters are largely classified as undersized constituencies, followed by equal sized constituencies.

AVERAGE PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES' SIZE BY YOUTH VOTER PROPORTION (ALL 222 CONSTITUENCIES)

Proportion of Youth Voters per given constituency

Average Electorate Size (2021)

Constituencies with less than 20% Youth Voters

91023

Constituencies with 20 to 25% Youth Voters

100115

Constituencies with 25 to 30% Youth Voters

83606

Constituencies with 30 to 35% Youth Voters

101619

Constituencies with more than 35% Youth Voters

132043

Source: Election Commission

Youth voters found in constituencies with more than 35% of electorate coming from youth background have less voting value compared to youth in constituencies with low presence of youth voters (i.e., <20% of electorate are youth). Constituencies with low youth vote presence are generally Chinese majority or mixed urban constituencies which covers areas of older sections of George Town, Ipoh, KL, Kota Kinabalu and Kuching.

Malapportionment and Ethnicity

Unequal constituencies are inextricably linked to ethnic composition since our parliamentary constituencies were formed at the beginning. The 1960 redelineation exercise tried to rectify the imbalance using population and electorate sizes and this ended EC's independence. Since then, using urbanization and ethnicity factors, Malaysian voters are suffering discrimination through our regular redelineation exercises. The two tables below show the average Parliamentary electorate sizes by ethnic group classification (using 2020 population – not electors – data).

FOR PENINSULAR MALAYSIA (INCLUDING PUTRAJAYA)

Constituency Ethnic Majority group

Average Electorate Size (2021)

Malay Majority (Above 60% of total population)

97771

Malay Majority (50 – 60% of total population)

120108

Chinese Majority (Above 60% of total population)

94342

Chinese Majority (50 – 60% of total population)

127595

Mixed

131049

Source: Election Commission, Department of Statistics, Malaysia

FOR EAST MALAYSIA (INCLUDING LABUAN)

Constituency Ethnic Majority group

Average Electorate Size (2021)

Bajau Majority (Above 60% of total population)

71000

Bidayuh Majority (50 – 60% of total population)

63773

Iban Majority (Above 60% of total population)

39043

Iban Majority (50 – 60% of total population)

78286

Kadazan Majority (Above 60% of total population)

76217

Melanau Majority (Above 60% of total population)

28152

Melanau Majority (50 – 60% of total population)

46692

Murut Majority (Above 60% of total population)

41566

Murut Majority (50 – 60% of total population)

54626

Malay Majority (Above 60% of total population)

65591

Chinese Majority (50 – 60% of total population)

93092

Mixed

66277

Source: Election Commission, Department of Statistics, Malaysia

A common pattern emerges from the tables above. Average parliamentary constituency size which is ethnically more homogeneous (i.e., Malay Majority (Above 60%)) is smaller to the average parliamentary constituency that is mixed or less homogenous (i.e., Malay Majority (50 – 60%)). Within Peninsular Malaysia (excluding Putrajaya), Malay Majority constituencies constitute 26 out of 42 oversized parliamentary constituencies. For East Malaysia, Chinese Majority constituencies are largely oversized, and this mirrors the urban nature of constituencies. Among Bumiputera Sabah and Sarawak majority parliamentary constituencies, certain ethnic groups have greater voting powers compared to others within a state.

Malapportionment and Key Economic Indicators

In this subsection, we will examine three economic features for parliamentary constituencies – inequality, poverty, and unemployment rate.

Malaysian inequality has been declining since 1980s but started to widen from 2016 to 2019. GINI coefficient measures degree of inequality in the distribution of income/wealth and values range from 0 to 1 (0 represents perfect equality and 1 represents perfect inequality). Malaysia's GINI coefficient stands around 0.407 in 2019 while [United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific \(UNESCAP\)](#) aspires a country in this region to have a GINI coefficient of 0.295. Only 15 parliamentary constituencies in Malaysia have attained this target (all in Peninsular Malaysia). Majority of these constituencies are equal sized or undersized constituencies. These constituencies are mixture of rural and urban areas outside the city core (i.e., Jelutong, Wangsa Maju and Pandan).

PENINSULAR MALAYSIA

Malapportionment Type

Attained UNESCAP Gini Coefficient

Did not attain the UNESCAP Gini Coefficient

Undersized Constituencies

6

47

Equal

8

61

Oversized Constituencies

1

41

Putrajaya

1

EAST MALAYSIA

Malapportionment Type

Attained UNESCAP Gini Coefficient

Did not attain the UNESCAP Gini Coefficient

Undersized Constituencies

0

21

Equal Constituencies

0

21

Oversized Constituencies

0

14

Labuan

1

Source: Election Commission, Department of Statistics, Malaysia

While majority of constituencies fall within the Gini coefficient value between 0.3 and 0.4 (irrespective of electorate size), constituencies with larger electorate sizes are marginally more unequal compared to others. If we were to compare GINI coefficient of parliamentary constituencies with their own home state GINI coefficient value, majority of the constituencies in Peninsular Malaysia (excluding Putrajaya) - 116 out 165 – have Gini coefficient values lower (hence more equal wealth distribution) than the state level. For the remaining constituencies in Peninsular Malaysia (48), 21 equal sized constituencies, 17 oversized constituencies and 10 undersized constituencies have GINI coefficient higher (greater inequality) than the state level. For East Malaysian (excluding Labuan) parliamentary constituencies, majority of them have lower GINI coefficient value than their state GINI coefficient value.

Moving from inequality to poverty levels, the revised Poverty Line Income in 2019 has shown that 5.6% of national households are living in absolute poverty figures. [UNESCAP](#) aspires a

country to keep their national poverty levels to 7% or lower. If we use this aspired target to assess parliamentary constituencies, around 126 parliamentary constituencies have kept their poverty levels lower than 7%.

FOR PENINSULAR MALAYSIA

Malapportionment Type

Poverty Levels below UNESCAP target of 7%

Poverty Levels above UNESCAP target of 7%

Undersized constituencies

34

19

Equal constituencies

48

21

Oversized constituencies

32

10

Putrajaya

1

Source: Election Commission, Department of Statistics, Malaysia

FOR EAST MALAYSIA

Malapportionment Type

Poverty Levels below UNESCAP target of 7%

Poverty Levels above UNESCAP target of 7%

Undersized constituencies

2

19

Equal constituencies

2

19

Oversized constituencies

6

8

Labuan

1

Source: Election Commission, Department of Statistics, Malaysia

Undersized constituencies have higher poverty levels in comparison to oversized constituencies. This difference is very stark in East Malaysia. In Peninsular Malaysia, average absolute poverty rate for undersized constituency is 6.12% while for oversized constituencies, it is 4.61%. In East Malaysia, average absolute poverty rate for undersized constituency is 18.71% while for oversized constituencies, it is 8.78%.

For unemployment rate, [UNESCAP](#) aspires of a rate of 2.6% and 17 (all in Peninsular Malaysia) constituencies nationally have kept the rates lower than 2.6%. These constituencies (i.e., Cameron Highlands, Kota Melaka) come from varied urbanization and economic backgrounds. Let us assess whether there is a pattern of unemployment rate among varied sizes of constituencies (using national level unemployment rate of 3.3% in 2019).

FOR PENINSULAR MALAYSIA

Malapportionment Type

Unemployment level below National Unemployment Rate

Unemployment level equal to National Unemployment Rate

Unemployment level above National Unemployment Rate

Undersized constituencies

17

0

36

Equal constituencies

13

3

53

Oversized constituencies

6

1

35

Putrajaya

1

Source: Election Commission, Department of Statistics, Malaysia

FOR EAST MALAYSIA

Malapportionment Type

Unemployment level below National Unemployment Rate

Unemployment level equal to National Unemployment Rate

Unemployment level above National Unemployment Rate

Undersized constituencies

0

0

21

Equal constituencies

0

1

20

Oversized constituencies

1

1

12

Labuan

1

Source: Election Commission, Department of Statistics, Malaysia

Majority of parliamentary constituencies record unemployment rates higher than the national level irrespective of the electorate size of the constituencies. Among Peninsular Malaysian constituencies, the difference of unemployment rates (on average) among equal, oversized, or undersized constituencies is very small (variation of 0.2%). Among East Malaysian constituencies, an equal sized constituency on average will have 6.9% unemployment rate, followed 5.6% for undersized constituencies and 5.2% for oversized constituencies.

Concluding remarks

From the examination of association of demographic and economic attributes of constituencies and malapportionment, here are the key findings for us to ponder:

1. Undi18 has worsened unaddressed malapportionment
- 2.
3. Malapportionment has indirectly discriminated youth voters in younger constituencies
- 4.
5. Malapportionment has created unnecessary divide among Malaysians whether within or among ethnic groups
- 6.
7. While most of the constituencies have a GINI coefficient value between 0.3 and 0.4, oversized constituencies have marginally higher inequality
- 8.
9. Undersized constituencies generally have higher absolute poverty prevalence compared to other constituencies. The difference is very stark in East Malaysia
- 10.
11. Unemployment rate should be a concern for all constituencies
- 12.

With all these in mind, we can focus on step-by-step process of realizing fair redelineation for all constituencies of the Dewan Rakyat and the DUN.

Danesh Prakash Chacko works as a research analyst at Jeffrey Sachs Center on Sustainable Development (Sunway University). He also serves as the Director of Tindak Malaysia, an electoral reform advocacy group

