"I want myself to become Malaysian"

Political Participation and Identity Construction among Chinese Malaysians

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Abstract

This thesis centers the concepts of citizenship and identity. It is an ethnographic case study focusing on well- educated, urban Chinese Malaysians with the aim to discover to what extent political participation, utilizing one's citizenship rights, affects citizenship identity. Identity has been narrowed down into two categories; national and ethnic identity, based on previous research by Kymlicka and Norman (1994) and Habermas (1994). However, differing from much previous research, this is a qualitative study utilizing interviews as main method for data collection. Through this, it becomes possible to gain an understanding of Chinese Malaysians' own experiences concerning their identities, also in relation to the Malaysian state's vision of what Malaysian national and ethnic identity should be. The thesis finds that, in line with previous research on citizenship as a type of belonging, individuals who participate in politics identifies with a multiethnic national identity, which is viewed as a type of ideal identity. Ethnic identity connected to politics is perceived as negative, while continuously being reinforced by the Malaysian government, especially in relation to *Bumiputera* privileges. National identity is formed on an everyday defined level, while ethnic identity is constructed on an authority defined level.

Keywords: citizenship, rights, political participation, ethnic identity, national identity, nationalism, Malaysia

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1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction

Citizenship is a continuously renewed and discussed topic, connected to several issues on both national and international levels, such as migration, security, globalization and the relative weakening of the nation state (Croucher, 2009:61). The linking between citizenship and these topics has often been in the questioning of citizenship in current contexts as well as the continued resilience of citizenship despite increasing levels of globalization. While in theory citizenship should have a weakened influence in the world, in reality it has been strengthened both as a marker of belonging and as a legal identity (ibid:44).

Malaysia is a particularly interesting case due to the country's multicultural composition and differentiated type of citizenship. This means that the different population groups in Malaysia have different citizenship rights, in this particular case based on ethnic categorization (Young, 1989:251). Ethnicity is a key concept and can be explained as an aspect of a group which considers itself culturally distinct within a society (Hylland Eriksen, 1993:22). This concept will be applied continuously throughout the thesis, while the informants often use the word 'race' instead. The difference in use of the words ethnicity and race is because of the variation between the conceptual uses of the words in relation to the way these words are applied in an everyday manner in Malaysia. Ethnicity and ethnic categories have been emphasized in Malaysia since colonial times, dividing the population into four groups; Malays, Chinese, Indians and Others (Holst, 2012:1). Issues on varying scales are often viewed as a consequence of tensions between the population groups, underlining ethnicity as a reference point in Malaysian society. Thus, élites within each ethnic group have traditionally negotiated disputes between ethnic groups, assuming that each group shares a set of homogenous societal ideals (ibid). This has in turn meant that the foundation of a majority of political parties in Malaysia has been in the own ethnic group, each creating their own sense of separate nationalities tied to ethnic identity (Tan, 2012:1).

The national election in 2008, however, indicated a change in Malaysian politics, when the opposition parties gained significant ground and seized control over several state governments (Tan, 2012:2). This unprecedented turn of politics was quickly dubbed "a political tsunami", where the shift towards the opposition was largely due to a change among Chinese Malaysian

voters (Lee, Suryadinata, 2012:xv, Lee, 2012:45). The outcome of this election has been explained by many Chinese Malaysians rejecting the parties set to defend their interest within the ruling coalition *Barisan Nasional* (BN), combined with a greater access to internet and alternative, non- government controlled media (Lee, 2012:45f, Khor, Beh, Lim, 2012:144). While the trend from the 2008 election has since continued, civil society has simultaneously become increasingly active (Holst, 2012:83). Most notable is *Bersih*, a coalition of civil society organizations working to reform the elections by organizing mass rallies in Kuala Lumpur (Holst, 2012:83, Lee, 2014:904). Looking at these developments, the up and coming generation of Chinese Malaysians is an interesting group to study as they belong to a group that to a large extent has shifted political loyalties while having access to alternative media. This group, to a great degree, utilize internet that provides multiple forums for taking part of information, expressing opinions and organizing and/or getting information on political mobilization such as demonstrations (Khor, Beh, Lim, 2012:144).

Much of previous research on politics and identity formation in Malaysia have focused on an *authority defined* level, meaning it has focused on dominant power structures and influential people within these. This thesis instead seeks to understand these processes on an *everyday defined* level, meaning that the perceptions of 'regular people' are the focal point of this research (Shamsul, 1996:47). Shifting the focus will enable an understanding of how people in the group under investigation understand, relate to and participate in the changing political landscape of Malaysia as well as how this impacts their identities. The use of citizenship in this thesis is thus two- dimensional by combining a citizenship- based rights perspective for context, with citizenship as a concept for the theoretical framework and analysis. At the core are citizenship rights and responsibilities as institutionalized by the Malaysian state through the constitution in addition to citizenship as a type of belonging. This means that one part focuses on the construction and everyday practice of citizenship, while the other utilizes the academic concept and application of theory on empery. As the sample of primary data is relatively small it is not possible to draw any conclusive deductions from this study, but it can indicate a direction and starting points for more extensive future research.

1.2. Aim and research questions

The aim of this thesis is to get an indication of how political participation affects identity formation among urban, well- educated Chinese Malaysians in the ages of 25-35. Identity has been narrowed down to two categories; national and ethnic identity. In order to accomplish

this, it is first necessary to establish how the informants participate in politics. Consequently there are two research questions where the first is more descriptive and the second is analytical.

1. How do Chinese Malaysians participate in politics?
2. How does the extent of political participation affect Chinese Malaysian national and ethnic identity?

1.3. Previous research

The following paragraphs of previous research are to provide an overview of influential theorists on citizenship, while also placing the theoretical framework in the context. Following this, significant research on Malaysia in relation to ethnicity, nationalism and the Chinese Malaysian group will be accounted for.

Traditionally included rights in citizenship are political rights; which are pertaining to political participation, civil rights; the protection of freedoms of the individual and social rights; rights often connected to the welfare state as well as free and equal treatment (Croucher, 2009:48, Marshall, 1950:10). These basic rights and freedoms were initally theorized by TH. Marshall who hoped that the three citizenship rights in combination would lead to basic equality between different social classes (Marshall, 1950:9). Marshall further discussed citizenship as a legal status, meaning full membership in a political community as well as citizenship as a desirable activity, participation in a community (Croucher, 2009:45). Both these perspectives have been researched on their own, opposing each other in the thin description of legal status in contrast to the more thick description of desirable activity, which indicates that citizenship as a desirable activity demands further knowledge of the context (Kymlicka, Norman, 1994:354).

The relationship between the state and citizens is essential to fully understand citizenship. In his research of the concept, Charles Tilly emphasized citizenship as "a transaction between persons and agents of a given state" and theorized that citizenship can be viewed as a category, tie, role or identity (Tilly, 1995:7f). This connects the citizenship concept to a type of belonging, which could be both national and ethnic. Citizenship is then further characterized by a set of rights and obligations that both parties are expected to follow and

depending on how these are emphasized within a specific context, the citizenship is shaped accordingly (Croucher, 2009:45).

Differentiated citizenship was formulated by Iris Marion Young as a critique towards the traditional view on the citizenship concept, which has a basis in Marshall's theory (Young, 1989:250). In Young's opinion, equal citizenship rights had been misinterpreted as 'sameness', meaning that it has been assumed that if every person enjoy the same rights in a society that would equal equality. She argued that while citizenship may be given to all groups, certain marginalized groups within society would still be treated as "second class citizens" (ibid). When theorizing on political participation and democracy, it should be assumed that there are differences between groups, where some may be disadvantaged or oppressed (ibid:261). The solution to fully include these societal groups would be to introduce affirmative action to compensate for the differences, regardless if these are based on ethnicity, culture, socio- economic status, experience or history (ibid:257, 271).

Sheila Croucher has researched the effect of globalization on identity formation. Citizenship is a significant aspect of this, which affects all people in the world to varying extent. In *Globalization and belonging: The Politics of Identity in a Changing World* (2009), Croucher outlines previous research on citizenship in general as well as citizenship as a type of belonging in particular. She emphasizes the continued importance of citizenship in the globalized world, as states are depending on citizens for their existence in addition to citizens wanting to exclude non- citizens from their privileges and rights (2009:61). As such, globalization makes citizenship both less and more relevant simultaneously.

Frederik Holst has studied the process of *ethnicization* connected to identity construction in Malaysia, by utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods (Holst, 2012:3). In his research, Holst emphasizes that ethnic categories and their importance in Malaysia are the result of a conceptual construct of firstly the British colonial power and secondly of the Malaysian government. He calls for a rethinking concerning the importance of race and ethnic categories in current analyses of Malaysia as well as in a historical perspective. Holst argues that by continuously highlighting race and ethnicity in research, these categories are further reinforced and Malaysian society is continuously ethnicized.

Tan Chee- Beng, who in his research focuses on Chinese Malaysians, has analyzed ethnicity in relation to nation- building, democracy and religion including both historical and current perspectives. He similarly to Holst argues that Malaysia should aim to transcend the ethnically categorized society and instead adopt multicultural nation- building. Tan does this as part of a post- election analysis of the 2008 general election in Malaysia. The 2008 election has, as mentioned above, been regarded as a turning point in the country's political stance, especially in relation to the ethnic Chinese as they are viewed as a major force behind the success of the opposition. Tan argues that if the government does not change its approach to nation- building (which will be deliberated in the background), democracy in Malaysia will corrode further while tensions between ethnic groups will increase (ibid:16).

Historian Lee Kam Hing, who also researches Chinese Malaysians in relation to nation-building, has analyzed the 2008 general election by using a quadrilateral model of power within Malaysian politics (Lee, 2012:47). The four power centers in Malaysia consist of Malay rulers, *Bumiputera* nationalism, Islam and the non- *Bumiputera*. Lee argues that the political space has lessened for the Chinese in Malaysia, due to the resurgence of *Bumiputera* nationalism, thus explaining the shift towards the opposition among Chinese Malaysians. *Bumiputera* and *Bumiputera* nationalism will be discussed further in the background.

In contrast to much previous research on Malaysia, Holst, Tan and Lee are part of an approach that does not accentuate race or ethnicity as a given variable. As ethnicity as a concept is a construct, the continued emphasis of this in research will contribute to reinforcing ethnicity and race in Malaysian society. This thesis seeks to further add to that approach. Citizenship in Malaysia has simultaneously gained more attention from the research community. Notably, the journal Citizenship Studies dedicated the full 18th issue to Malaysia, however emphasizing the situation of migrants in Malaysia as well as the Malaysian diaspora (Lee, 2014:901).

1.4. Background
Malaysia's four ethnic categories, Malays, Chinese, Indians and Others are viewed as primordially decided and tied closely to the concept of race (or *bangsa* in the national language *Bahasa Malaysia*) (Holst, 2012:1f). Malays and East Malaysian indigenous groups, the *pribumi*, together form *Bumiputera* (sons of the soil), giving them all status as indigenous peoples of Malaysia (Tan, 2012:3). In politics, this has served to establish the dominance of

the *Bumiputera* (65,1%) in relation to Chinese (26%) and Indians (7,7%), although *Bumiputera* is foremost associated with the Malays. When Malaysia (Malaya until 1963) was declared independent in 1957, the Alliance, a coalition of three political parties, founded in each of the major ethnic groups, was formed and came into the leading position as government (ibid:4). In 1970, more parties were invited to join the Alliance, resulting in a new extended coalition, *Barisan Nasional* (BN); The National Front, which has been in a government position ever since (Lee, 2012:45). Within both coalitions the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) has had the pronounced power to make decisions concerning prominent government positions as well as national policies, based on the majority of the *Bumiputera* (ibid:46). Chinese Malaysians has within BN been represented by foremost the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) as well as *Gerakan* (Lee and Suryadinata, 2012:xx). The Malaysian government is today opposed by another coalition *Pakatan Rakyat*, the Peoples Front which was formed in 2009 (Wong, 2012:104). It includes *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR), the Democratic Action Party (DAP) as well as *Parti Islam se- Malaysia*, the Pan Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), where the two former claim to be multi- ethnic (Ho, 2012:70).

In terms of nationalism, in the years following the independence there was a strife from the government to construct a common nationality centered on Malay culture while still including non- Malay cultures (Lee and Suryadinata, 2012:xvi). This however changed following the 1969 'racial riots' that are often described as a turning point in Malaysian politics (Holst, 2012:1). At the core of the conflict was the relative wealth of the Chinese compared to the Malays and as a result several amendments were made to the Malaysian Constitution and the *New Economic Policy* (NEP) was introduced in 1971 (ibid:45f). The purpose of the NEP has been to restructure the economy and by doing so eradicating poverty (Tan, 2012:6). However, the policy is solely focused on the *Bumiputera*, emphasizing the included groups as poor and underdogs in society. The special rights in question concern three areas; higher education, business and civil service. Here Malays and the indigenous peoples are to control a minimum of 30% of the economy, ethnic quotas are to raise the percentage of *Bumiputera* in higher education and *Bumiputera* are to be prioritized for civil service work (Crouch, 1996:25). The NEP was supposed to end in 1990, but was prolonged through the New Development Policy (NDP 1991-2009) as well as the National Vision Policy (NVP, 2001-2020), although it is still discussed as the NEP (Tan, 2012:16). This has caused the government to develop and strengthen *Bumiputera* nationalism, which builds on the idea of *Ketuanan Melayu*, Malay

supremacy, and emphasizes Malay culture and Islam only (Tan, 2012:8, Lee, 2012:50). History books have in line with this been rewritten, accentuating Islamic and Malay narratives, thus downplaying the influence of multiculturalism (Tan, 2012:8). Consequently, the state has discursively been redefined and restructured, lessening the political space for non- Malays (Lee, 2012:50f). Nation- building tied to multiculturalism has foremost been in relation to economic development, in the goal of *Wawasan 2020*, Vision 2020, to rank Malaysia as a fully developed country by year 2020 (Lee, 2004:87). To achieve this, the need to create an integrated *Bangsa Malaysia*, a Malaysian race, was accentuated. This has been developed into the nearly identical national unity project 1Malaysia, by current Prime Minister Najib Razak (Holst, 2012:49f). As it is difficult to check these manifestos and the responsibility to achieve them are passed on from prime minister to prime minister, both *Bangsa Malaysia* and 1Malaysia are more of empty words to satisfy all citizens than an aim to achieve true integration.

The current rights framework in Malaysia is based on the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, which is Malaysia's supreme law. It was firstly implemented on *Merdeka* day; Independence Day, on August 31, 1957 for Malaya and then again for Malaysia in 1965 when Singapore left the Federation (Constitution of Malaysia, 2010:2). Following the 'racial riots' of 1969, several clauses in the Constitution were amended in a way that have had severe consequences for democracy in Malaysia (Tan, 2012:5). In order to minimize the risk of similar riots reoccurring, issues related to ethnicity or perceived issues between ethnic groups were banned from public discussion through the Sedition Act (Tan, 2012:12, Holst, 2012:63). This includes discussions on the amendments of Article 153, which contains the special privileges of the *Bumiputera*, as implemented through the NEP. The purpose of Article 153 is to "safeguard the special position of the Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak" (Constitution of Malaysia, 2010:146). Importantly, while the special privileges often are discussed in terms of *Bumiputera* rights, this term is not used in the Constitution. Article 10, which regulates the right to freedom of speech, assembly and to form associations, is another article that was amended following the 1969 riots (Constitution of Malaysia, 2010:23, Khor, Beh, Lim, 2012:145). While the previously mentioned rights are still included in the Constitution, the parliament can impose on these to secure public order, morality or national security (Constitution of Malaysia, 2010:26). To this, the Peaceful Assembly Act was added in 2012, which states that citizens have the right to assemble peacefully with authorization, but they cannot protest or express any type of opinion (Peaceful Assembly Act, 2012).

Civil society organizations in Malaysia have in recent years become increasingly powerful (Lee, 2012:60). The often multi ethnic organizations highlight issues such as human rights, the environment, corruption as well as religious freedom and attract many younger Chinese Malaysians. Thus, Chinese Malaysians are gaining influence in politics when active in civil society organizations, especially in regards to single- issue movements (ibid:61). *Bersih*, the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections, is one of the most notable examples that organize by arranging mass demonstrations (Holst, 2012:83). These have taken place in 2007, 2011, 2012 and most recently in 2015 and are accordingly named *Bersih 1.0*, *Bersih 2.0*, *Bersih 3.0* and *Bersih 4.0* (Lee, 2014:900, Holst, 2012:83, *Bersih*). The organization was originally a partnership between civil society and the opposition parties, but as the movement developed, the aim changed into monitoring all political parties (*Bersih*). Thus the organization changed name to *Bersih 2.0* and today consists only of a coalition of civil society organizations, working to reform the election process and fight corruption. The organization is in the thesis referred to as '*Bersih'* only, to clearly separate the meaning from the *Bersih 2.0* rally when reading.

1.5. Outline

This thesis commences by presenting the topic and issue, including the research questions in the introduction chapter. This is followed by a review of previous research and a background on politics and rights in Malaysia. Chapter 2 is the theoretical framework emphasizing identity and citizenship as a type of belonging followed by chapter 3, which presents the methodology including ontological approach, research design and ethical considerations. The fourth chapter, Findings, features the results from the data collection, which are then analyzed based on the background, previous research and the theoretical framework in chapter 5. Chapter 6, conclusions, summarizes the chapter 5 analysis and aims to answer the research questions. The thesis then concludes by discussing future research possibilities in chapter 7.

2. Citizenship theory

The theory chapter aims to comprehensively discuss the theoretical framework, which is based on citizenship as a type of belonging, in addition to its relevance for this thesis. Significant concepts connected to this, such as ethnicity and nationalism will also be deliberated.

2.1. Theoretical relevance

While citizenship at the core is a Western concept, it is still relevant to apply to an analysis of Malaysia. This since Malaysia is a nation- state (although this as well is a Western concept) and the nation- state and citizenship has developed closely together (Croucher, 2009:47). However Western the concepts are, they are a fact in Malaysia and therefore they also should be approached in research. To apply citizenship on a non- Western context can furthermore be important and beneficial if attempting a more holistic use of the concept. As Malaysia has implemented a type of differentiated citizenship, it is significant to research the effects of this on the citizens in addition to previous research focusing primarily on authority defined perspectives and the relations between citizens and non- citizens.

2.2. Citizenship, identity and belonging

Similarly to citizenship, identity is a vast concept. It will be applied throughout the thesis in terms of national and ethnic identity, tied to political participation and citizenship rights with a basis in citizenship theory. In accordance with Young, identity is constructed both individually and in relation to group affiliation (Young, 1989:260). The way others perceive a person affect identity formation, including norms, specific characteristics and stereotypes. The combination of self-perception, group-perception and how a person is perceived by others, both individually and in a group, thus shape that given person's identity. Importantly, persons often have both multiple group and individual identities, which are highlighted in different situations. Therefore it is important to be specific when discussing and analyzing identity. When changes occur within a group, it may lead to an alteration of the individual's identity, which is defined as 'throwness'.

In 1994, Will Kymlicka and Wayne Norman aimed to summarize the development and current stance of research on citizenship (Kymlicka, Norman, 1994:377). Importantly, the authors focused on how the discourse on citizenship had developed to promote the importance of 'good citizens' (ibid:353). The basis for this was new theories concerning the well-being of democracies in connection to the influence and stance of citizens. Citizens' sense of identity and competing identities (ethnic, national, regional, religious etcetera) as well as the ability to live together with others who they did not share identity with were highlighted as crucial in ensuring the stability of democratic states. Participating in politics and checking the accountability of political authorities was also included in addition to taking responsibility for economy, health and environment based on the common good of all citizens and not just

oneself. Regarding citizenship as a type of belonging Kymlicka and Norman argued that "*Citizenship is not just a certain status, defined by a set of rights and responsibilities. It is also an identity, an expression of one's membership in a political community*" (1994:369). This means that political participation, to put one's political and civil rights into practice, is also to showcase belonging to a certain state and/or group. This creates a sense of 'us' and 'them' between citizens and non- citizens (Croucher, 2009:40). In the case of this research, individuals who utilize their citizenship rights will by their participation express that their identity partly is affiliated with the Malaysian state and/ or the group of Malaysian citizens.

Jürgen Habermas has discussed citizenship in relation to nationalism and national identity by tracking the development of citizenship, democracy, nationalism and identity from the formation of the nation- state until contemporary times (Habermas, 1994:21ff). While still accounting for citizenship as a legal status as well as a desirable activity, Habermas conceptualizes the state as the framework within which citizens are to function, and nationalism as a driving force behind the citizens' participation that crosses ethnic and cultural borders and instead emphasizes the nation (ibid:23). Nationalism and the specific form it has taken in Malaysia are thus central to the construction of national identity. Habermas defines nationalism as a type of cultural integration which takes place when social movements coincide with modernization processes, through which a national consciousness is formed (ibid:22). The combination of how history has described cultural traditions and accordingly shaped them is then spread through "modern mass communication" underlining nationalism as a social construct which risks being heavily influenced by political elites (ibid). The Western model of democracy is an assumed variable in this theory, where the constitution of a given state is considered "a formal consensus" of all citizens, irrespective of homogenous or heterogenic contexts (ibid:24). Regardless of this, to understand how nationalism has been constructed in Malaysia is crucial to understand the current shape and developments of national identity.

Concerning national identity, Habermas argues that "*the nation of citizens does not derive its identity from common ethnic and cultural properties but rather from the praxis of citizens who actively exercise their civil rights*" (1994:23). Importantly, this further means that utilizing one's rights affects identity formation, moving focus from ethnic (and cultural) identity to national identity. In the case of this thesis, this means that Chinese Malaysians who participate more in national political activities will also to a larger extent identify themselves

as Malaysian rather than ethnic Chinese. Thus, to understand the extent and how the informants are participating politically are key elements in outlining their citizenship identities. What is included in the national identity, as defined by 'regular people' on an everyday- defined basis, may or may not agree with the state's nation- building project or academic definitions on an authority- defined level.

3. Methodology

The following chapter accounts for ontological approach, research design, the data collection and ethical considerations.

3.1. Social constructivism

At the core of this thesis is a social constructivist ontological approach to research. This means that social interaction creates and affects social phenomena (Bryman, 2012:33). As circumstances such as discourses and knowledge change, so does the phenomenon in question, meaning conditions are never fixed, but rather in a constant flux of change. The way in which both the researcher and social actors in general perceive the world is based on the subjective view of that given person. As a result of that, all research is a subjective interpretation affected by ever- changing perceptions of the world rather than one definite truth (ibid). In the case of this research this means that if any conditions had been different such as another researcher, other informants or simply the research being pursued at a different point in time, the results may have been different. This is especially important to note as the thesis focuses heavily on the personal perceptions of the informants' combined with the researcher's interpretation of these.

3.2. Research design

This is a qualitative study which utilizes an ethnographic approach in its research design, combining semi- structured interviews with participant observation and informal conversations (O'Reilly, 2012:10). Though secondary sources have been used to provide context and background, there is a strong emphasis on the primary data, especially material from interviews, collected during six weeks of fieldwork in Malaysia during January and February of 2014.

The starting point of this research was the observation of how many Malaysians discussed the then upcoming national election in 2013 in social media such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*. This interested me as a researcher, as many Malaysians engaged in encouraging their fellow citizens to vote, and to a certain degree shared critical observations about the government. With this observation in mind, combined with a literature review on the effects of the national election in 2008, the foundation of the thesis was formed. It was with this basis the interview guide was then organized in themes, which will be discussed further in following paragraphs, concerning politics and participation in Malaysia. During the interviews it was striking how often the informants made connections between the political situation in Malaysia and issues of identity. Because of this the focus of the thesis slightly altered, as is common in ethnographic research, to narrow down and focus on national and ethnic identity within the already chosen framework of citizenship theory (O'Reilly, 2012:45). The shape of the research has thus changed with the data collection, making this an inductive study, with its starting point in the empery (Esaiasson, Giljam, Oscarsson, Wängnerud, 2007:124).

3.2.1. Secondary data

While ethnographic research does focus on experiences, perceptions and opinions of the group it aims to study it is important to consider the context as well (O'Reilly, 2012:6). This, as people are inevitably affected by structures and dominant discourses in society. Because of this, it is important to provide an overview of Malaysian society, in particular connected to politics as well as the existing rights framework. Secondary sources have provided this throughout the thesis, while also laying the foundation for the theoretical framework on citizenship theory. The secondary data consists of literature and scientific articles, though newspaper articles were used to track the political development in Malaysia at the time of the data collection. These however, are not part of the final material used for the thesis. Concerning *Bersih*, the organization's official webpage has been used to provide a part of the background of the organization. In addition to this, the 2010 reprint of the Malaysian Constitution and the Sedition Act from 2012 have been included to provide the existing rights framework in Malaysia.

3.2.2. Primary data

As mentioned above, several types of qualitative data collection have been used for this thesis. The analysis will draw on findings from participant observation, informal conversations, but primarily from interviews with six informants residing in or nearby Kuala

Lumpur. The interviews were semi- structured, meaning they were organized around themes with open and broad questions (Bryman, 2012:470f). The loose structure was to enable the informants to elaborate more freely, while the themes were helpful to make sure the interview did not stray off topic. The themes for the interviews were; Background and biography, experiences of citizenship, political participation as well as identity and belonging[1]. Questions concerning political participation and citizenship were operationalized based on existing citizenship rights in Malaysia, as institutionalized through the Constitution, foremost connected to Article 10 and the freedom of speech. The interviews were conducted in English, which all the informants (as well as the researcher) were comfortable speaking in and took place in a variety of locations suggested by the informants themselves; in cafés, outside the workplace and in a conference room. At least one hour was spent with each informant; however, the interviews took place during 30-45 minutes of this total time. Two of the informants were interviewed twice; Steve and Phoebe, as they were not as elaborate in their answers as the other informants. Because of this there was a need to follow up on questions for clarifications. The informants will be presented further down in this chapter.

3.2.2.1. Sampling

To find the informants for the interviews, purposive sampling was used. Reasons to use purposive sampling are firstly to find people within a limited set of criteria as well as secondly, to making sure that there is variety within the group under investigation, if that is an important feature in the research question(s) (Bryman, 2012:418, O'Reilly, 2012:44). Both of these reasons were of importance in this thesis. The informants were found through already established contacts in Malaysia and they did not know each other with the exception of Matt and Phoebe. All six informants follow the set criteria of being Chinese Malaysian in the ages of 25-35, living in or around Kuala Lumpur and have achieved some level of higher education. Both women and men were interviewed and they have attended both national as well as Chinese schools. They adhere to different religions; Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, and speak several languages including *Bahasa Malaysia* (the national language), Mandarin and other Chinese dialects as well as English. The second important aspect was that there had to be variety within the group concerning level of political participation to enable answering the second research questions on enhancing national and/ or ethnic identity. Based on both important features concerning the use of purposive sampling, the sampling was mainly done

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[1] Appendix I; Interview guide

before meeting the informants, rather than interviewing a larger quantity of informants and making a selection of which interviews to use in a later stage of the research.

3.2.2.2. Introducing the informants

To enable a further understanding of the informants' thinking and reasoning they will be briefly introduced in this section. The ways in which the informants participate in politics will be more thoroughly accounted for and discussed in the findings and analysis chapters. The names used in the thesis are fictitious, which will be further discussed in the ethical considerations.

Matt is a 27 years old man who is working as an optician. He is originally not from Kuala Lumpur, but moved there to study. In all levels of education before university he attended national school. He is active in politics in terms of being interested and opinionated, but apart from this and voting he does not actively participate in politics.

Steve is a 26 year old man. He has been working as pilot since he finished his education at the flying academy. Steve did not grow up in Kuala Lumpur. In his home town he attended national school. At the time of the interview, Steve was not active in politics apart from voting and discussing current issues, foremost with his friends.

Phoebe is a 27 year old woman who in her home town attended Chinese school, before moving to Kuala Lumpur to pursue her undergraduate degree. She is working as an optician in Kuala Lumpur, but has also previously worked in Singapore. Similarly to Matt and Steve Phoebe was not very active in politics, apart from voting and discussing issues with friends as well as sometimes sharing updates concerning politics on Facebook.

Lara is a 35 year old woman who is currently pursuing her PhD at a Kuala Lumpur university. She has previously been studying in Singapore, but chose to move back to Malaysia. As a child she attended a Chinese primary school and after that a national girls' school. Lara is more involved in politics than Matt, Steve and Phoebe, and was very open about all issues discussed during the interview. Lara has previously participated in a few smaller political meetings, listening to opposition leaders' speeches, apart from voting and utilizing social media.

Jennifer is a 25 year old woman studying law. She is originally from Kuala Lumpur and attended Chinese school for primary education. Jennifer is very active in politics and has been since she was a teenager. This includes everything from not only discussing and sharing information in social media, but doing this as an active attempt to educate the public in political issues. Jennifer has also participated in many political meetings and demonstrations.

Ray is a 26 year old man originally from Kuala Lumpur. Before attending university in the capital he went to national school. Since finishing his university studies, Ray has been working in management. He is quite involved in politics in terms of openly discussing issues, voting as well as participating in demonstrations.

3.4. Ethical considerations

Political issues can be a highly sensitive topic to discuss in Malaysia, connected to the Sedition Act, and because of this the informants were ensured anonymity. Some personal details are included in the presentation of the informants in the former section, but these details are not elaborated enough to enable an identification of any individual. Each informant has been given a fictional name for the readability of the thesis. Further, the informants decided where to be interviewed, so that they would feel comfortable with the situation. They were given some basic information about the topic before meeting so that no one would feel forced to talk about something they did not want to. At the time of each respective interview the informants were informed that they could stop the interview at any time they wanted or choose not to answer a question without explaining why during the conversation. Only one informant chose to not answer one particular question.

3.5. Source criticism

Validity, reliability and replication are the general basis for source criticism or "evaluation for social research" (Bryman, 2012:46). However, both replication and validity are concerned with research being repeatable, meaning that conducting the same research with the same set of variables and circumstances should result in the same conclusions. Validity in particular focuses on the connection between theory and empery, where the results should be applicable on multiple contexts (ibid:389f). As discussed above, research with a social constructivist foundation does not aspire to be general and repeatable, since all circumstances surrounding are constantly changing. Reliability is however important to ensure that there have not been any miscommunication or misunderstanding during the data collection, especially in regards

to the interviews. Due to this, each question was discussed as thoroughly as possible with each informant. Follow up question for clarifying vague answers were asked and in the case and two of the informants, they were interviewed twice. This was as there was a need to elaborate a few of their answers for a more comprehensive understanding of their previous interviews.

3.6. Research limitations

The aim of this thesis is not to find a result that is applicable to the whole Chinese Malaysian population, but merely to get an indication of how identity is constructed within a limited group. It is to get an idea of how the utilization of citizenship rights impact national and ethnic identity on an individual level. As discussed in the introduction chapter that means that no general conclusions about the whole Chinese Malaysian population can be drawn. However, the research indicates important starting points when it comes to understanding the views of the Chinese Malaysian group differing from the state's approach on what national and ethnic identity should be and relate to each other. It is also important to differentiate between West and East Malaysia. Both demographically and politically, Sabah and Sarawak on Borneo diverges from West Malaysia and thus cannot be included in conclusions drawn from this study. Further, the aspect of differences between urban and rural areas is important to consider. Rural areas in Malaysia are poor to a higher extent and people in general have attended higher education to a lesser degree compared to urban areas. Because of this, the demography of the group under investigation was additionally limited.

Another, more practical, limitation in the research has been the time restraint. The concrete consequence of having only six weeks in the field for data collection is that the number of informants is relatively small. This especially since the timeframe not only included conducting the interviews, but also finding the informants.

3.7. My role as a researcher

It is important to note that my personal background do have an impact on this research. Being a woman who grew up in Sweden, being in my mid to late- twenties as well as being highly educated has shaped my perception of what citizenship and democracy should be. This perception can differ from how the informants perceive significant concepts, which makes qualitative methods even more important to use in order to challenge potential presupposed ideas I as a researcher might have. Further, I have been visiting Malaysia since 2007, with

different purposes such as studying, travelling and visiting friends. Many of these friends are Chinese Malaysian which, on one hand contributed to me becoming interested in the topic of the thesis and, on the other hand, may have affected the starting point and direction of the research as well as made me more sympathetic to the situation of Chinese Malaysians. All these aspects have been considered throughout the working process to ensure the informants' voices foremost are heard and not mine.

Being an outsider in the Malaysian context can also be something positive, bringing other perspectives into focus. These perspectives may not be considered to the same extent by a Malaysian researcher or someone who is more emerged in the context of the research. At the same time, being present in Malaysia on and off for almost seven years has given me a long time perspective and deepened understanding of the Malaysian context that could not have been attained in any other way. Several of the informants were positively surprised about my knowledge of Malaysia and this encouraged them to be more open during the interviews.

4. Findings

This chapter presents the data collected during the fieldwork in Malaysia in 2014. The emphasis is on the results from the interviews, although informal conversations and participant observation are also integrated in this chapter. It has been divided into indications of national identity and indications of ethnic identity, and rather than using the theoretical concepts, everyday situations and experiences of the informants as well as how they talk about Malaysia and being Malaysian is the focal point. Type and level of the informants' political participation will be reconnected throughout the text and later be discussed more in depth in the analysis chapter. Notably, in general the informants were positive about the interviews and discussing political issues, as in their experience, their voices are rarely heard.

4.1. Indications of national identity

When discussing living in Malaysia, it became clear that the informants share one overall ideal for how they want society to develop. They want an inclusive society, where nationality is regarded as more important than ethnic belonging. In the view of the informants, to accomplish a more inclusive society it is necessary to move away from ethnically based political parties and instead focus on building a common ground for a Malaysian nationality. While the informants themselves already view their national identity as more important than

their ethnic identity, their experience is that society in general and politics in particular emphasize ethnicity rather than nationality. The importance of creating unity behind a common, Malaysian multicultural nationality is discussed by Ray:

"It's not that we should give up one, my culture or your culture, but obviously in Malaysia there are many things that belongs to only Malaysian. It can only belong to Malaysians, so we should create a Malaysian culture instead of a… We can keep a Chinese tradition and a Malay tradition and an Indian tradition, but in terms of nationality we should have common for one Malaysian nationality [sic]", (Interview Ray)

In some cases the informants perceives that the current political milieu in Malaysia even hinders ethnic Chinese from being fully and truly Malaysian. One of the informants expressing this is Matt. While he feels strongly that he is Malaysian, he struggles with, in his experience, not being regarded as such because of his ethnicity. This makes him angry and has created a negative view of Malaysia, in particular related to politics.

"I want myself to become Malaysian. When people ask me when I go for oversea holiday, like people ask me: 'You are…?'. A lot of people will say I'm Chinese, not Malaysian, but I will just say 'I'm Malaysian'. I'm proud to say I'm Malaysian, but I am not being loved in my own country so, so that's the thing [sic]" (Interview Matt).

Both Ray's and Matt's comments reveals a sense of 'us' and 'them' categorization. Matt in particular experiences that he is considered as 'them' or 'the other' in Malaysia, which ties to the ethnic quota system and will be discussed further in the coming section. Ray on the other hand, highlights that there are parts of society that are indeed Malaysian and common for all Malaysian citizens. This is something he wishes to emphasize to a greater extent in order to create a stronger sense of nationality. Related to this, when informant Lara deliberates on what she enjoys about Malaysia, she also provides an answer to why she primarily feels Malaysian rather than Chinese:

"Because we never stop learning about other people and different people and they are always around us. But we seem to get along really well and what I love about Malaysia is the diversity, the races. /…/ My grandfather was Chinese from China. I don't really know much

about his culture, I'm more rooted in Malaysia, so that's why I like Malaysia, because it's my birthplace and it's where I belong" (Interview Lara).

Lara views the multicultural aspect of Malaysia's population as something positive and she connects it to a comment about her own identity. As Malaysia is the country where Lara is born and raised this is the nation she feels affiliated with, rather than her grandfather's heritage as a Chinese from China. This became even more pronounced to Lara when she for two years pursued her PhD in Singapore before transferring to a Kuala Lumpur university to finish it. Ray similarly to Lara addresses Malaysia's ethnic diversity and argues that separate Chinese, Indian and Malay traditions should be allowed to persist, though Malaysian nationality should be more important as a classification. Another informant who mentions diversity in Malaysia as something positive is Steve who says that "*The best thing about it [living in Malaysia] is mixture of almost all types of people [sic]*" (Interview Steve).

The way in which ethnic diversity was discussed by the informants, it became clear that the multicultural aspect of Malaysian society was important to identity formation. All six informants shared this understanding. However; Lara, Jennifer and Ray who are more actively involved in politics, exhibit an even stronger sense of national identity that is connected to their political participation. In the following paragraphs, a special emphasis is put on demonstrations, in particular *Bersih 2.0* and *3.0*. The reason to why this type of political participation is highlighted is because a majority of the informants have important experiences and strong opinions on the subject, mostly positive but negative as well. Steve has a negative view on demonstrations because at this point such gatherings sometimes develop into riots and he does not agree with potential consequences such as violence and destruction of property. He discusses the *Bersih* movement:

"*Bersih, the movements and all that, personally I don't agree in what they are trying to do as in creating riots all over the place. I don't agree. But I do agree with the initiatives as in they're trying to clean up the election process, I very agree with that [sic]*" (Interview Steve).

Because of this, Steve would not consider joining a demonstration himself. He is content following what is happening in politics from both mainstream and social media. Further, in Steve's opinion, since most political meetings are video documented and available to watch through social media such as *Youtube* and *Facebook*, there is no need to attend political

meetings or demonstrations to access that particular information. In addition to this, none of Steve's friends or family members have joined any demonstrations and, as far as he knows, do not have any interest to. Lara has never joined a demonstration herself either, only smaller political meetings with opposition leaders, but she has a much more positive outlook on demonstrations than Steve after her husband and close friends attended *Bersih 3.0*.

"/.../ Especially when they were there [at the demonstration] it was like very… They were all very charged up because, because it was like a sense of, yeah that was when they felt more Malaysian than any other place, because they say that they gathered with people of all races who felt, who all felt the need to express their… /.../ Their sense of wanting the elections to be free of cheats and to have a fair election, so it was all races and it was all very motivating and very… How do you call that? Liberating [sic]" (Interview Lara).

While Lara's husband and friends had a very positive experience of being in a demonstration, not encountering any violence, Jennifer who has participated in demonstrations since before *Bersih 2.0* has had varied experiences. After seeing the police clashing down on demonstrators during her first demonstration Jennifer say that there was no turning back for her in her political involvement. She also recalls *Berish 2.0* and how people from all ethnic groups supported each other after getting teargas fired onto them by the police, sharing cloths to wipe their eyes and singing the national anthem together. Jennifer states that, that was the point when she has felt the most Malaysian in her life. She explains her motivation for being politically active:

"Just the love of my country. I'm one of the few, but surely growing numbers of Malaysians who do not want to migrate just because we wanna run away from the injustice in this country [sic]. I would like to stay back and actually fight for whatever it's worth" (Interview Jennifer).

Jennifer then deliberates on the importance of demonstrations in Malaysia today. In her opinion, it has changed the political landscape in the country, where the government now is truly challenged.

"I think demonstrations for these past few years has actually helped to awakened the people [sic]. Through these elections, through these demonstrations people are now seeing the bigger picture. Because before Bersih, yeah before Bersih 2.0 no one really cared about these

kinds of things. It was only when Bersih 2.0 came and people found the courage to go out, that's when the people saw how the police were treating the demonstrators and it really ignited this, this sense of, this fire within the people that it is time to come out, so in that way demonstrations are really dangerous for the ruling party in any country actually. It's always very dangerous for the ruling party because you give people a voice and you give people the power to speak out. So in that sense I think it has changed how people think about politics right now" (Interview Jennifer).

Demonstrations not only gather and unite the people participating, but also potentially engage bystanders. This is something that was brought up during several informal conversations as well, where the persons in question witnessed the police and/or military strike down on demonstrators during *Bersih 2.0 or 3.0*. Observing what happened and then seeing how the altercations were misrepresented in mainstream media motivated these people to join later demonstrations as well as political meetings as a means of resistance. In this way, political participation inspires further participation, engaging a rising number of Malaysians in common political strives. Another informant who had a positive view on demonstrations was Ray, who previously has joined the *Bersih 3.0* rally in Kuala Lumpur. As politically active, he connects his political strives directly to his identity when asked why he decided to join a demonstration: "*Why… Because I'm Malaysian*" (Interview Ray). In Ray's opinion, demonstrations are something positive as they showcase peoples' commitment to their country and that they are aware of their rights. Even though currently there is not much visible change in Malaysia's political landscape in Ray's view, demonstrations are a powerful tool to show the government what the people want.

Social media was a topic which was brought up by both the informants and the researcher during the interviews. Due to mainstream media being controlled by the government, social media plays a crucial role in giving access to alternative narratives as well as informing people on, for example, upcoming political meetings or demonstrations (Khor, Beh, Lim, 2012:144). The informants who are more active, Lara, Jennifer and Ray, use social media to share their political opinions through blogs, *Facebook* and *Twitter*. While the less politically active informants, Matt, Steve and Phoebe, foremost focus on accessing information and occasionally sharing an article or a picture. Both Steve and Phoebe mentioned that there is no need for them to join any kind of political meeting, because if they would be interested it would be easy to access what was being said on *Youbtube*. In this way, political participation

has partly been moved off the streets and online instead. At the same time social media makes it possible to arrange large public meetings for citizens who are interested in this. It is thus an important type of political participation taking place online, in turn enabling a strengthening of national identity.

4.2. Indications of ethnic identity

The previous section establishes that the informants aspire to a national identity. While the informants feel primarily Malaysian, a majority of them also experience that in the eyes of other ethnic groups in Malaysia they are still perceived as primarily Chinese. Some of the informants even feel that they are being constricted within their ethnic identity. This will be further discussed in the following paragraphs.

Aspects hindering a more inclusive society with one national identity that were brought up during the interviews were elections not being free and fair, corruption as well as the ethnic quota system. Most critical comments made by the informants concerned the Malaysian government, but the Malay ethnic group was also criticized to a degree and in those cases referred to as "*those people*" (Interview Phoebe), "*[a]certain race*" (Interview Ray) or "*these kind of people [sic]*" (Interview Steve). Follow up questions during the interviews confirmed that it was the Malays being referred to. Matt considers the government in many ways being synonymous with the Malay ethnic group, as the Malays are a numeral majority of the population and UMNO dominates BN. Because of this, in Matt's view, Malaysia is not a democratic country (Interview Matt). One aspect of this is the *Bumiputera* privileges, since these emphasize non- Malay Malaysians as immigrants, or 'the other', rather than 'regular' citizens.

"*We Chinese in Malaysia, we are treated as second class citizens. Second class citizens, that means that, say for example you come from Indonesia and you reside in Malaysia, then you earn the citizenship. We are second class citizens. But for Malaysian, for me, I'm in my fourth generation [sic]. My great grandfather is already here, my grandfather is here, my father is here, I'm here. So we are not treated like citizens*" (Interview Matt).

Discussing her view on the presence and importance of 'race', or in other words ethnicity, in Malaysian society, Lara says that this issue is very evident in everyday life, though she wishes it was otherwise. She wants people to foremost relate to each other through nationality

connected to citizenship rather than their ethnic classification. The ethnic quota system is of concern to Lara, as it fortifies the ethnic divide between the different population groups in Malaysia. To put national identity before ethnic identity is something that is yearned for, yet a goal that is perceived to be far from being accomplished.

"Well I think that it's [race] not important, but reality show that it is important because it is evident everywhere, in the forms we fill, and we need to say what race we are. /.../ So I'm looking forward to that, when race is not important and as important to define our Malaysian identity anymore. /.../ I used to think that I could just be like 'Okay everybody just stop talking about race' and we just related to each other as Malaysians, but no, the reality is not like that. Because still is the quota system and all [sic]" (Interview Lara).

Ray comments on how peoples' perception of politics and society has changed in recent years. His view is that there is a demand for the abolishment of the ethnic quota system, because the quota system creates an unequal power relationship between the ethnic groups, rather than corrects an economic imbalance between these groups. There has also been a change in the discourse where previously differences in rights between ethnic groups should never be discussed, especially not in public. According to Ray, equal political rights and opportunities between ethnic groups is now something that he and some Chinese Malaysians openly are requesting.

"But when it comes to my parents, because they are from the old, older generation so they have a different toss on politics [sic]. For them, they are more conservative, they are worried if they are discuss politics openly in Malaysia [there may be repercussions] /.../ I think now, nowadays we are asking for a fair society, fair community, so we are asking for equality" (Interview Ray).

Phoebe shares a similar view with both Lara and Ray, and highlights the role of the government in creating the current political climate. Malaysian citizens are in her opinion all the same, while the government underlines differences between the major ethnic groups (Interview Phoebe). This again refers to the issue of *Bumiputera* rights, as by their implementation, the ethnic groups are viewed separately from each other and ethnic classifications are further fortified.

"We as citizens Malaysia we are all the same [sic]. So those rules and regulations and the enforcement of law and some things, it's done by the government, it's not by any of us. So for my opinion, it's the government that have to responsible on everything [sic]. It's not the citizens" (Interview Phoebe).

An important issue for the informants was that one's ethnic classification is decided from the moment a person is born (based on the father's authority defined, ethnic identity) and then remains a central part of each person's identity throughout their lifetime. This is not only obvious in a macro perspective, such as the ethnic divide of the political parties, but also on a micro level, in small everyday details such as membership forms at the supermarket (Holst, 2012:1). This further fortifies the importance of ethnicity in everyday life and is discussed by Jennifer in relation to her hopes for the future in Malaysia:

"I would want a country that doesn't need you to always fill in that race column as Indian or Chinese or Malay or whatever" (Interview Jennifer).

While previous quotes show that there is a wish for political change connected to *Bumiputera* privileges, the possibility to accomplish this is questioned by some of the informants. Yet others are positive that it will happen eventually, though perhaps it will not happen in their lifetime. In general, the informants that were more active in politics had a more positive outlook than the informants who were less active. Steve commented the possibility of changes in politics in this way:

"It's not going to change at this time, perhaps, there might be a slight possibility that the next generation might change things". (Interview Steve)

This can be compared with the answer to the same question provided by the very politically active Jennifer:

"Currently it is looking very difficult to accomplish the real democracy, but I believe that it will come in probably 5, 10 or 15 years, but it will come in a very difficult way. We will have to really fight for it first" (Interview Jennifer).

Notably, when comparing Steve's and Jennifer's perspectives it is clear that while Steve wants political change, he does not see himself as part of that process. Jennifer on the other hand is fully involved and engaged in the process of accomplishing political change.

As discussed above, *Bumiputera* privileges were viewed by all the informants as something negative, strengthening the ethnic divide within the Malaysian population. However, the focal point of this negativity was the way the *Bumiputera* rights are implemented by the government. Politicians in general are perceived as corrupt and forwarding an agenda suiting their own interests rather than the best for Malaysia or its citizens, although it is politicians in the government who are subject to the most scrutiny. The ethnic divide or 'racial issues' is then a tool used by the government to maintain a rift between population groups and by this remaining in power, which was discussed by several of the informants:

"I would say [race] it's actually becoming less important, but when the politics party, they know race is getting less important they will actualize it and make advertising and make it more important again [sic]. /…/ I think somehow the political party actually play a very great influence in creating the racist mindset in the people, especially like the, in my view, Barisan Nasional, the UMNO, MCA. So they are, even though they in terms of three integrational parties, they have their own agenda for the different race [sic]" (Interview Ray).

"We were brought up to the point that we don't care what race or which ethnic society you come from. But the current politics, what they are actually trying to do is to bring racial issues to try to boost their political… [agenda][sic]" (Interview Steve).

Ray and Steve's comments relate to what is explained in the introduction as well as background chapters, that the dominating political parties in the ruling coalition BN all have a basis in each of the major ethnic categories in Malaysia. This affects the way these parties are ruling the country as well as how they counter current events. Further, Ray and Steve indicate that BN is responsible for ethnic categories remaining such a fundamental part of Malaysian society. Jennifer similarly to Ray and Steve discusses the government's part in upholding racial sentiments, but deliberate further and include the aspect of colonialism and the impact it has had on the ruling style of BN.

"They [the government] still use the British way of divide and rule, which is very effective. It's not a nice way, but it's very effective to control each other, instill fear in each other and start blaming each other when it's convenient. But I think the population has already gone beyond that, it's just that the politicians are using it for their benefit" (Interview Jennifer).

Jennifer views the Malaysian population as a unity, while politicians use ethnic categorization and racism to remain in power. These categorizes were originally created by the British colonial power and the reason to why this still influences the political arena in Malaysia is because of how the government chooses to govern, according to Jennifer.

All the informants express a wish of being perceived primarily as Malaysian, but are struggling to receive that recognition. The more active informants are trying to achieve change in this area by involving themselves in the process of political change. This because politicians in general and the government in particular are viewed as equivalent to what is negative in society; elections not being free and fair, corruption as well as the ethnic quota system. The less active informants share the same hope as the more active informants, but as their outlook on the possibility for political change is more negative they are more hesitant to get involved. Fear of repercussions is another aspect to consider concerning not getting politically involved, due to the ban on public discussions concerning the ethnic quota system and other topics deemed as sensitive by the government. Thus, it is important to consider the effects of both the informants' political participation as well as the political context in analyzing identity formation, which will be further deliberated in the analysis.

5. Analysis

The following sections link the data collected from the informants in the findings with citizenship theory as presented in the theory chapter. The focus of the analysis is on the second research question discussing how type and extent of political participation affect national and ethnic identity formation. This, as the first research question is descriptive rather than analytical in its purpose and has been dealt with in the previous findings section. The data from the interviews is also elaborated in relation to the Malaysian context and how it impacts identity formation connected to political participation.

5.1. Everyday defined national identity

Ethnic diversity was an aspect of Malaysian society, which was brought up by all the informants during the interviews. In their opinion, this was an important aspect of Malaysian identity. As such, national identity was formed within the group of Malaysian citizens stemming from the common experience of a multicultural coexistence and created a sense of 'us'. This was described as a mutual understanding between Malaysian citizens on an everyday defined level by the informants, something that was shared only by regular people, excluding the government. In line with Habermas' definition, this understanding can be viewed as nationalism from a grassroots level, deriving from everyday situations, interactions and opinions. Negative views on the government's political agenda were a common denominator, contributing to the development of a sense of national consciousness. The everyday interaction between Malaysian citizens of all ethnic categories has thus led to a degree of cultural integration, which combined with modernization processes and increased activity in social movements are the basis for the founding of a common nationalism. However, in order to further achieve a sense of national identity among the citizens, it is necessary that they also participate in politics to some extent.

Kymlicka and Norman have in their analysis of citizenship discussed how political participation is to display membership in a political context. As such, when the informants participate in politics, they are strengthening their national identity while also accentuating their belonging in Malaysia as citizens. On a basic level the informants are demanding their place within the 'us' that is Malaysian citizens in the contrast to the 'them' of non- Malaysian citizens. All of the informants participate in politics to some extent, and importantly, they all vote in the general elections. By doing so, they clearly claim their place as Malaysian citizens and showcase that they identify with a national identity tied to the Malaysian state. When discussing voting, it was a given for all the informants to participate in this manner, expressing an affiliation with Malaysia rather than emphasizing their ethnic and cultural identities.

Notably, all informants indicated that they voted for or otherwise supported the work of the opposition, where one important factor was the multiethnic basis of those parties. This contrasts the government's approach to nationalism, where *Bumiputera* nationalism is highlighted and the multiethnic nationalism projects are perceived as lip service by the informants. However, there are Chinese Malaysians supporting the government, as indicated

by the votes the MCA and *Gerakan* received during the previous elections. That means that there are several separate nationalism movements in Malaysia as well as several national identities, related to political affiliation. While the informants are involved in the construction of national identity on an everyday defined level, the people supporting the government are part of the authority defined definition and further validate it. The difference in these approaches is that the authority defined national identity has been created as a means for the government to stay in power. The everyday defined national identity that the informants aspire to, is part of a movement that has occurred on its own, as a result of multiple processes and happenings in the Malaysian context in recent years, as discussed in the background.

Among the informants, Lara, Ray and Jennifer can be viewed as more active in politics. They have a genuine interest in politics, which is one reason to why they have chosen to be more involved. The ways in which they participate are by discussing politics with family and friends, voting, attending political meetings and demonstrations, blogging, tweeting and facebooking about political issues. Lara, Ray and Jennifer all have a very strong sense of national identity, which can be tied to Habermas' theory on citizenship and national identity. By participating in politics and utilizing their rights, these informants' sense of national identity has grown stronger than their ethnic and cultural identities. Other aspects of their identities are still important, but they choose to accentuate their national identity. When discussing Malaysia's multicultural composition Lara, Ray and Jennifer refers to how well different groups of people get along and the population has developed beyond racial politics and the government's rhetoric.

Social movement initiatives such as the *Bersih* rallies play an important part in engaging the Malaysian public in political issues, which in turn has an effect on the construction of national identity. When social movements lift important issues, such as cleaning up the election process, these issues are also discussed more by the citizens, putting the government in a position where it needs to address those matters. Further, by organizing meetings or demonstrations, social movements provide platforms which enable people to meet and organize in public and not only online. This personalizes the joint struggle concerning the issue at hand, making visible both the number of people supporting potential reforms as well as the giving them faces. Lara, Ray and Jennifer who had joined either political meetings or demonstrations all described this as part of a democratization process, a struggle that in turn fostered a strong feeling of national identity. Participating in politics was one part of this, but

what was also emphasized by the informants themselves was that people from all ethnic categories were represented and working together towards a common goal, this further in line with Habermas' theory on citizenship and national identity. As the citizens participating come from all ethnic groups, they choose to move past perceived borders separating them ethnically and culturally, accentuating nationality instead. This also strengthened the perception of an 'us' which included all citizens irrespective of ethnic categorizations.

As discussed previously in the background and findings chapters, when large demonstrations take place in very public spaces such as the center of Kuala Lumpur, not only the people participating are engaged. Bystanders are confronted with the issues the people attending the demonstration are protesting against or are trying to promote, as well as become witness to the actions of both protestors and police or military. As described during interviews and informal conversations, this has had a type of 'domino effect', where, after seeing protestors being abused by police or military people who witnessed this decided to join later demonstrations. There they in turn experienced the unity between the people attending, leading to increasing numbers in politically participating citizens and the development of a nationalistic movement where a multiethnic national identity is central.

Matt, Steve and Phoebe did not participate in politics to the same extent as Lara, Ray and Jennifer. As mentioned above, the former informants voted and in excess to this discussed politics with family and friends as well as actively searched for alternative information opposed to government controlled media. On some occasions they would share an article or a picture they found online, foremost on *Facebook*. Matt, Steve and Phoebe still felt strongly about their national identity, even though they were not as active as the other informants. A major difference was that the outlook on the political process of the less active informants was more pessimistic. Although Matt, Steve and Phoebe wished for a change in politics in the lessening of corruption and elections being free and fair as well as the abolishment of the ethnic quota system, they did not believe that they could have an impact on the realization of such reforms. Thus they were more isolated in their national identity; they felt Malaysian, but not integrated with the other ethnic groups. The ways in which Matt, Steve and Phoebe did participate did not inspire them to be more active in politics or fully strengthen their sense of national identity. While expressing their belonging to Malaysia through their political participation, these informants do not see themselves as fully included as Malaysian citizens, which will be further discussed in the following section. Importantly, this underlines that not

only to participate, but the form of the participation affects national identity formation and that in the case of Malaysia, the participation of all ethnic groups are of great importance, based on the informants' experiences.

The possibility of spreading information and discussing sensitive issues in social media has had an influence on the development of political participation in Malaysia. Social media has made possible the mobilization of social movements both online and offline. All the informants utilize social media as a means of participating politically to some extent, indicating that this is viewed as a relatively safe political space. As such, social media also has an effect on identity formation, both through making possible more political participation and providing alternative information to government controlled media. By countering claims of misconduct of protestors during demonstrations in social media, civil society movements can in addition to 'regular citizens' also partly delimit the narrative of authoritative sources of information, supported by the government.

5.2. Authority reinforced ethnic identity
Ethnic identity was in contrast to national identity perceived as something negative when related to politics. As the informants want to evolve from a society where ethnic categories are imbued in every part of life and instead emphasize 'Malaysianess', the political approach of the government was, as mentioned above, much criticized. This as the government still demand that ethnic category is included in birth certificates and identity cards, political parties are based in ethnic categories and the ethnic quota system is still in place through the NEP. By continuing down this political path, the government continuously reinforces perceived borders between Malaysia's ethnic groups.

The Malaysian state, which has been uninterruptedly ruled by the BN government, is in accordance with Habermas, the framework within citizens operate. By introducing affirmative action and a differentiated citizenship another level of 'us' and 'them' categories have been established in Malaysia. There is the 'us' of Malaysian citizens and 'them' of non- Malaysian citizens as well as 'us' as in *Bumiputera* Malaysians and 'them' as in non- *Bumiputera* Malaysians. This was discussed by the informants in terms of being viewed as second class citizens or being Malaysian, but not being fully accepted as Malaysian. While foremost the government was criticized for maintaining the ethnic division in society, there was also an aspect of being perceived as 'the other' or immigrants by the *Bumiputera*. This indicates how

identity formation is affected not only by the relationships within the own group, but also how an individual is perceived by 'the others' or 'them', in line with Young's definition of identity construction. However, a majority of the informants, irrespectively of level of participation, stressed that the ethnic division among Malaysians did not occur in everyday life among regular people anymore. The Malaysian people as a whole were instead viewed as a unity striving to develop society beyond politically and socially constructed ethnic lines.

Several of the informants underlined that the government continuously highlighted ethnic or racial issues to actualize its' own importance and relevance in Malaysia. While the Malaysian government needs to satisfy all ethnic groups in Malaysia to a certain extent, to keep in power, fully integrating the population would make it irrelevant. This due to the ethnic division of the BN parties. Maintaining that there are differences between ethnic groups and that these should be negotiated by élites within each group is thus crucial for BN's continued existence. The informants on the other hand, preferred to emphasize ethnic identity only in connection to culture, while national identity as a type of belonging should be deemed as more important. This disconnect is problematic as the informants' citizenship is defined by the relationship to the state, which includes both rights and responsibilities. Because the BN government wants to stay in a leading position, it has used its' power to restrict the citizens' rights by continuously amending the constitution and adding laws such as the Peaceful Assembly Act to the Sedition Act. This is an effective way to dissuade Malaysians from political participation to greater extent than they already are, as to publically expressing opinions would mean breaking the law, or to not follow the responsibilities tied to citizenship. In this way the authority defined level affects the everyday defined level of identity construction in Malaysia to a great degree. As citizens are hindered from participating, their sense of belonging to a national identity lessens; they are more isolated in their sense of national identity, as discussed above. Notably, it can also be the choice of citizens to not be involved in politics. However, concerning the informants in this thesis, especially the less active informants, some of them chose to not be involved because of risks associated with discussing politics in public. Even though participating in politics in various ways, such as joining demonstrations, is against the law, it is simultaneously connected to what Kymlicka and Norman has discussed as 'good citizenship'. Increased integration and a common sense of identity in a context that includes multiple competing identities, is a sign of the well- being of an existing or developing democracy. Political participation in addition to checking the accountability of the government, which is happening in Malaysia to a greater degree today, is

thus positive for the citizens. In a longer perspective this can lead to the political change that the informants are hoping for; a change of government, the removal of Bumiputera rights and lessened corruption tied to politics.

Young based her theory of differentiated citizenship on the assumption that most societies have a level of heterogeneity and that different societal groups have different preconditions, as in the case of Malaysia. Affirmative action, the compensation for disadvantaged groups within the group of citizens, should be aimed to make even the preconditions and thus create an equal citizenry. In Malaysia, affirmative action is based on the idea that the *Bumiputera* are economically disadvantaged in relation to the non- *Bumiputera*. Further, as the Malays are categorized as an indigenous group, their language, *Bahasa Malaysia*, is the national language and their religion, Islam, is the religion of the state. The Malays are also importantly a numeral majority to the Chinese and Indian ethnic groups and thus control the government through UMNO. Because of this, it is questionable if the *Bumiputera*, particularly the Malays, can be viewed as an oppressed or disadvantaged group. It is therefore problematic that affirmative action is continuously applied with a basis in Article 153, rather than economic conditions irrespective of ethnic categories. *Bumiputera* privileges underline ethnic identity as an excluding factor in terms of citizenship, adding negative connotations to ethnic belonging connected to politics. Although the division of the population into ethnic categories in general was perceived as negative by the informants, *Bumiputera* rights were also symbolic for their exclusion from full citizenship.

In Malaysia today, it is not possible to elude ethnic categorizations, based on how society is organized related to politics. On an institutional level it is very difficult for citizens to affect their identity, as it is marked in identity cards and based on the ethnic identity of their biological father. This does not mean however, that society has to continue developing in this manner. As discussed by Holst, the ethnic categories are concepts which were constructed by the British in order to control, in this case, the Malaysian population. These are unremittingly being reinforced by the Malaysian government today, as a means for staying in power. Tan has also emphasized the importance of developing true multiethnic nation- building, not only as part of political campaigns for staying in power. This is an important step to achieve democracy and relieve tensions between the ethnic groups. Research also has an impact on the reinforcement of ethnic categories, as argued by Holst. This thesis, although the group under investigation is Chinese Malaysians, does not aspire to generate an overall view of an ethnic

group, but rather to illustrate the throwness of group identities, tied to political participation. Importantly, even though power structures in society accentuate ethnic identity connected to politics, the informants choose to define themselves firstly by their national identity.

The Western model of democracy is regarded as a type of ideal citizenship by many theorists, although the concept is applied on democratic and authoritative contexts alike. In an authoritarian state, this translates to citizenship without political rights, as noted by Habermas. Even though theorists such as Kymlicka, Norman and Habermas take heterogeneous contexts into consideration, the emphasis is on transcending the notion of separate identities to create an inclusive national identity. While this was aspired to by the informants in this research, an ideal national identity, this is increasingly difficult to accomplish when simultaneously opposed on an authority defined level by the Malaysian government. Further, while addressing the issue of citizenship in both multiethnic and authoritative contexts, the emphasis of citizenship theory is still how to develop from that state to national identity and democracy. Citizenship theory is beneficial when analyzing political participation, identity and belonging in Malaysia, although it needs to be broadened, not only to account for globalization and non-Western contexts, but also for highly ethnicized contexts. This, as it could contribute to move emphasis from ethnic categories to national identity. Theories including differentiated citizenship are highly relevant in Malaysia, even though the *Bumiputera* currently do not fulfill the criteria of an oppressed group, which is the basis for affirmative action in accordance with Young. To understand how this function in Malaysia is thus increasingly important and crucial to fully understand the context.

6. Conclusion - Searching for a comprehensive Malaysian identity

Malaysian national identity is by the informants viewed as a type of ideal identity that includes all Malaysia's ethnic groups. It is based on the idea of a diverse society, which strives for the equal good of all citizens irrespective of ethnic, cultural or religious competing identities. Politically, there is a need for changes as the current government is based on, both in its foundation and policies, the division of Malaysia's population in ethnic categories. By continuously emphasizing differences and potential issues between the ethnic groups, the government on an authority defined level, reinforces conceptually constructed borders between these groups. As such, the informants experience that their ethnic identity forced onto them by the state, in relation to politics.

The informants who are more active in politics, Lara, Jennifer and Ray, do have a more positive outlook on the political situation of Malaysia. They feel united with all ethnic groups in their political strives and have through their participation developed a strong sense of national identity, in line with previous research on citizenship as a type of belonging. Participating in political meetings or demonstrations had a strong impact on the construction of national identity, as these unite a broad variety of people for a common cause. Informants who were less active in politics, Matt, Steve and Phoebe, also emphasized their national identity, but also felt excluded to a certain degree. This was due to ethnic policies, implemented by the government, which separates the ethnic groups. Affirmative action policy, the NEP, was a major concern in this regard as it bestows the *Bumiputera* with special citizenship rights. All the informants perceived the special privileges of the *Bumiputera* as passé, a policy enforced by the government, but that the Malaysian people already had moved passed. Thus, on an everyday defined level, national identity was in focus, rather than ethnic identity.

Previous research by Habermas, Kymlicka and Norman state that political participation is the foundation for the construction of national identity. While political participation indeed lead to a stronger sense of national identity, it is important to note that some types of participation, such as demonstrations, effected identity construction to a greater extent. 'Us' and 'them' reasoning was pervasive among the informants, but not only in regards to citizens and non-citizens, but also *Bumiputera* and non- *Bumiputera*. While theory on citizenship as a type of belonging does take diverse societies into account, the emphasis is put on how to transcend competing identities and only accent national identity. This is to ensure stable democratic states.

Although political participation does strengthen national identity, the government has a pronounced influence in terms of the rights and obligations of citizens. By implementing laws that limit citizens' possibilities to participate in politics, the development of national identity on an everyday defined level is partly contained. This is done to counter the development of a comprehensive Malaysian identity, where ethnic categories are no longer emphasized, as this would make the government irrelevant. Thus, it is in the self- interest of the government to continuously reinforce ethnic categories on an authority defined level.

In order to move away from an ethnically defined Malaysia, as is the desire of the informants, it is necessary to question how ethnicity and ethnic categories are applied. This is not only in regards to the authority defined perspective of the Malaysian government, but also concerning research. While ethnic categories still are influential, these should not be included as a given variable in research, as this also reinforces the ethnicization of Malaysian society.

7. Future research possibilities

Regarding future research possibilities, there are several aspects from this thesis that can be used as starting points. As one more election has taken place since this research was initiated, it is possible to see how the situation in Malaysia has developed. This, both in relation to the construction of national and ethnic identity and the political space of citizens. Another interesting aspect to study would be to study the effect of demonstrations in Malaysia, as these influenced and made a great impression on all the informants of this thesis. It was also widely discussed during many informal conversations. Further concerning Malaysia, it would be interesting to broaden the group under investigation and take more perspectives into consideration, such as the urban – rural dichotomies, education and all ethnic groups in relation to national identity. This as well as how citizenship is related to a broadened group under investigation.

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Appendix I. Interview guide

1. Background and biography

What is your full name?
How old are you?
Where did you grow up?
Do you come from a big family? Do you have siblings?
What do your parents work with?
What type of school did you go to? Did you like it? Why/ why not?
Where did you attend university? What course?
What kind of work do you do?
How do you enjoy living in Malaysia?

2. Experiences of citizenship

If talking about politics, what is an important issue for you?
- Why is this important?
- Is it possible to accomplish? Why/why not?
- Has this always been your opinion?
- What do you talk about the most, if discussing politics?

Are there any recent issues concerning politics that have in particular caught your attention?
- New issue?
- Brought up by media?
- Discussed in social media?
- How about before the election?

→If corruption is mentioned as an important issue, what is the biggest problem area concerning corruption?
- What would be an efficient way of fighting corruption?

Are politics in Malaysia the same as always or have there been changes?
- If changes, what kind of changes?
  - Does it motivate you to take further involved in politics?
- If no changes, do you think there will be in the future?

3. Political participation

Is there any particular issue that makes you want to get further involved in politics in any way? Discuss more, participate in meetings, create more awareness etcetera?

If talking about politics, who do you talk to?
- Friends? Why/why not?
- Family? Why/why not?

- Colleagues? Why/why not?
- A stranger? Why/why not?

In what situation do you talk about political issues? Where?
- Out somewhere?
- At home?
- Online? If yes, how? *Facebook*, posting, sharing, *Twitter*?
- Where do you prefer to talk about it?
- Is there anywhere you wouldn't discuss?

What is the best place to access information about politics in Malaysia?
- Do you access this information?
- Do you actively search for alternate sources of information about Malaysia?

Did you vote in the election?
- Why? Why not?
- Did you feel that your vote could have an impact on the results?
- Why/why not?
- How do you think about the election now?

Have you ever participated in a political meeting?
- If yes, what kind of meeting? Big one or small?
- If yes, how did you learn about it?
- If yes, did you go alone or with other people?
- If no, would you be interested to? Irrespective of yes/no, why/why not?

What do you think about demonstrations?
- Why?
- As a means of affecting the politics, what do you think about it? Why?
- If positive, would you consider joining one?

If you want to influence politics in Malaysia in any way, what is the best way to do it?

4. Identity and belonging

In what way does the current political situation affect how you think about Malaysia as your home country?
- Do you always want to live here or could you consider moving abroad?

How important is race or ethnic belonging in politics in Malaysia today?
- Why would you say it is more or less important?
- Is it more important concerning how politics are today or for how they will develop? Would a shifted focus (if perceived focus) be good or bad for Malaysian politics?