Government and Politics in Malaysia

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Malaysia operates a parliamentary democracy in which elections play an important role. Since independence in 1957, Malaysia has held elections at regular intervals. Except for an ethnic riot between the Malays and the Chinese following general elections in 1969 (which suspended parliamentary democracy for about two years), elections were held relatively peacefully.

Malaysia holds elections for the lower house (Dewan Rakyat or House of Representatives) of its parliament at the interval of not more than five years. It does not hold elections to the upper house (Dewan Negara or the Senate), where most of the members (43) are appointed by the government, while the rest (26) are elected by the states’ legislative assemblies. The states in the federation have only unicameral legislature, Dewan Undangan Negeri or State Legislative Assembly, and have often held elections together with Dewan Rakyat. Elections are held using the plurality, first-past-the-post, system. Although elections are fiercely contested by many political parties, only one political party—Barisan Nasional (BN), and before 1974, its predecessor, the Alliance—has been successful in winning elections at the federal level. Hence, Malaysia is considered to be operating a dominant-party system. The BN is a coalition

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1 In this chapter, the name ‘Malaysia’ (instead of Malaya prior to 1963) is used for convenience. All references to the country before 1963 are in fact referring to Malaya.
2 See Chapter 6 for details on bicameral legislature.
3 All states in peninsular Malaysia have held their state assemblies’ elections together with the federal parliament. Sabah and Sarawak, because they acceded to Malaysia only in 1963, have held their state assemblies’ elections separately from the federal government. However, Sabah held its state assembly elections together with the states in peninsular Malaysia for the first time in 2004.