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## ***The Member of Parliament and His Constituency: The Malaysian Case***

This paper attempts to examine the ways and means through which the Malaysian MP maintains contact with his constituency, and to evaluate his effectiveness. It is based on informal interviews with 55 current MPs and 19 former MPs. In addition, the writer accompanied MPs in their constituency tours and attended their "meet the people sessions" between July 1974 and January 1975. The findings are that the MPs used three methods to maintain constituency contact depending on the type of constituency, i. e., rural, urban, or semi-urban. Their effectiveness is limited to dealing with personal and individual problems.

The role of the legislator in developing countries appears to have been by-passed by political and social scientists in their search for the conditions under which political stability and order could be achieved. In their haste to fill "the political gap" (Huntington, 1968, pp. 1-8), they have sought to find answers in other variables. Nevertheless, given the prevalence of legislatures in developing countries, at the same time acknowledging that they are often held to be "rubber stamps" or "minimal legislatures" (Mezey, 1972, pp. 686-687), it cannot be denied that the legislator is an important link between the elite and the masses and therefore worthy of more attention.

The goals of this paper are to examine the ways and means through which the Malaysian MP maintains contact with his constituents and to evaluate what he does for them. Since the nature of constituency services are informal or even private dealings between the MP and his constituents, this study will not be concerned with statistical data; rather, it will seek to examine the range and depth of services undertaken and, hopefully, provide a "feel" of the environment in which the MP operates.

Malaysia is a multi-racial country with a population of 10.4 million, composed of *Bumiputras* (55.5 percent), Chinese (34.1 percent), Indians (9.0 percent) and others (1.4 percent). The *Bumiputras* (Malays and natives of Sabah and Sarawak) live largely in rural areas, while the Chinese and Indians generally live in the urban and semi-urban areas. Politics in Malaysia has always been dominated by communal issues; consequently, all political parties tend to appeal to different communities despite their claims of being

non-communal (Ratnam, 1965; Milne, 1967; Means, 1970). In terms of MPs, rural constituencies return *Bumiputra* candidates, and urban constituencies generally return Chinese candidates. Non-*Bumiputra* opposition parties tend to represent urban areas, and until 1973, when the Parti-Islam se Malaysia (PAS) joined the National Front (NF), the PAS represented the more rural northwest Malaya, with the Sarawak National Party (SNAP) representing rural Sarawak. In semi-urban constituencies, MPs tend to come from non-*Bumiputra* parties within the NF. For these reasons I have selected three MPs of various races and parties in three different types of constituencies—urban, rural, and semi-urban. It is not suggested here that the three MPs are representative of their racial groups or political parties. However, interviews with other MPs suggest that they use similar methods and are confronted with similar problems. Needless to say, the range of activities and diligence of the individual MP does vary widely even within the same party. In order to provide more information, comments and observations made by other MPs in similar situations will be included.

This paper is divided into a brief outline of the Malaysian political system, followed by separate examinations of the three MPs and their constituencies; it concludes with an evaluation of their work.

### The Malaysian Political System

Malaysia, a federation of fourteen states, has a constitutional monarchy with a Parliament modeled on British traditions. Parliament consists of the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* (the King); the *Dewan Ra'ayat* (House of Representatives), which is directly elected by the people every five years; and the *Dewan-Negara* (Senate), which is partly elected by the State Assemblies and partly appointed by the King on the advice of the government.

Until 1969, the government had been formed by the Alliance Party, a coalition of three parties—the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). The Alliance had always been dominated by UMNO and, when Malaysia was formed, it ruled the country with the support of the Sabah Alliance and the Sarawak Alliance.<sup>1</sup> Between 1970-1973, the Alliance was expanded to become the NF, a coalition of nine parties.<sup>2</sup> In the 1974 general elections, the NF was returned with an overwhelming majority, winning 135 of the 154 seats with 47 of its candidates unopposed.<sup>3</sup> The opposition parties in Parliament consist of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), with 9 seats, SNAP, with 9 seats, and the Parti Keadilan (Pekemas), with 1 seat.

### The Rural MP and His Constituency

The main problems faced by rural MPs in Malaysia are those dealing with land and the general economic backwardness of the rural areas. With UMNO dominating the government, rural areas have been receiving special attention in the five-year plans and from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development.<sup>4</sup> As part of the government machinery, various committees have been established to ensure that the needs of the people are not ignored (Ness, 1967, Ch. VI); these include the Village Development Committee, the Rural District Development Committee and the State Development Committee, which are all linked to the National Development Committee.

The NF MP is an *ex-officio* member of the Rural District Action Committee, whose function is to ensure that the problems and requests for amenities are made known and that projects are implemented as planned. The NF MP is also a member of the NF State Liaison Committee, which is headed by the *Menteri Besar* (Chief Minister). In these committees, the influential MP is able to achieve more for his constituency. Since land is a state matter under the federal Constitution, cooperation between the MP and the State Assemblymen (SA) is often very close.

Interviews with MPs indicate that an increasing share of requests for assistance are from individuals seeking help, while in the past most problems reflected community needs. This is probably the result of greater mobility among the rural Malays and the general increase in the level of education and expectations since independence.<sup>5</sup> Where there are non-Malays in the constituency, the general impression is that they do not seek the help of the Malay MP unless "they have exhausted all other sources." However, when help is given, the non-Malay, particularly the Chinese, tend to be "very grateful and appreciative."<sup>6</sup> The rural MPs spend most of their time with the Malay community because they form the overwhelming majority in their constituencies. The MPs are held in high regard by the Malay community because many of them are either teachers or former civil servants. As MPs, they are the "*orang besar*" ("big men") (Kahar Bador, 1973) and are addressed as *Yang Berhormat* (the Honourable).

The rural MP interviewed in depth for this paper is 43, and was born and bred in the constituency. He is married with six children and lives in the same *kampung* (Malay village) as his father, a retired customs officer. He was educated in the local Malay school, and his career includes being a taxi operator, supervisor of adult education, and government information officer prior to his election as MP. He has been a non-active member of the UMNO since his youth and is now a committee member of the local branch

which nominated him. He is also the secretary of the General Cooperative Society and is normally to be found in this office. He was elected unopposed despite the fact that it was his first attempt; according to the MP, the primary reason for his success was the complete loyalty of the constituency to the UMNO.

His constituency is on the Malaysian-Thailand border and includes 2 townships, 5 local councils, 45 *kampongs*, and 8 Orang Asli (Aborigines) *kampongs*. Most of the area residents work on the land and are small-holders although some are labourers and others are in the army. According to the MP, while there is little local politics in his constituency, there are personality differences and cliques within the UMNO branches that support different leaders both at the state and the national levels. The Parliamentary constituency includes two state seats, both of which are held by UMNO. One of the State Assemblymen (SA) is the *Menteri Besar* of the state while the other is a member of the State Executive Council. The MP seems to be on very good terms with both of them although obviously not on terms of equality. Nevertheless, this connection stands him in good stead with the local population and the local authorities.

Our MP maintains contact with his constituents through three main methods: regular meetings with the *Ketua Kampongs* (KK—village headmen), regular visits to individual *kampongs* for *ceramahs* (“talk-ins”), and through his office. Apart from these methods he is “available 24 hours a day” and his home is always open to his constituents. Of these methods the most important are his meetings with the KKS. He tries to meet them “at least twice a month,” either in their *kampongs* or in the main township where the district office is situated, about 30 miles from his house. According to the MP, KKS are all heads of UMNO branches in their *kampongs*, and as a former government information officer, he knows all of them personally.

The KKS are important to the MP in several ways. They are, in the first place, the representatives of the state government, being appointed by the *Menteri Besar*, and hence are the local authority to the villagers. They are the means through which the government can learn of local problems and, as party officials, can be relied on to inform the MP of new problems in the area. In effect they are his “eyes and ears.” Secondly, they are the first point of contact when the villagers are confronted with problems; they either deal with these personally or bring them to the notice of the MP who, in turn, can notify the proper authorities. Our MP has encouraged the villagers to see their KKS before coming to him; in this way, he sees fewer people and is able to use his time more effectively. The KKS are also chairmen of the Village Development Committee where requests for amenities are made (Sanusi, 1969). These are forwarded to the District Action Committee via *penghulus*

(the head of several villages). This committee is chaired by the district officer and includes all heads of government departments, *peghulus*, and the elected representatives, i.e., the MP and SAs. Since the two SAs hold important positions in the state hierarchy and the MP is on very good terms with local officials, by virtue of being a former member of the service, it seems highly unlikely that the committee would refuse reasonable requests.

In the case of our MP, two observations can be made about his relationship with his Kks. He is conscious of the need to make them "feel important." He does this by encouraging them to deal with most of the villagers' problems and to bring only the more difficult cases to him. Secondly, he shows their relative importance to him in various ways, for example, the length of time spent talking with one in the presence of other Kks. A distinction was even observed in the offering of cigarettes.<sup>8</sup> To those Kks who perhaps are less important, he gave individual cigarettes whereas he gave a whole packet to an important KK and made this obvious to all present.

What do Kks tell the MP when they meet? It is perhaps useful to describe one such meeting in detail. During a trip to the major township, the MP, after visiting the district office, met three Kks. He invited them for lunch and began by asking them *Apa cerita?* (What is the news?) They told him about the problem of inflation, the economic hardships caused by the heavy rain which resulted in little tapping of rubber, and about the high cost of food and low rubber prices. There were individual problems which required his attention: a girl who was seeking compensation because her hand was amputated while she worked in a timber factory, and complaints by some Malay carpenters that they were paid less than Chinese carpenters employed by a foreign firm, working on a government project. In answer to the problems raised, the MP explained inflation in religious terms, i.e., that it was the will of God and not the fault of the government.<sup>9</sup> He also noted that the government was helping them by subsidising basic foods and stabilising the price of rubber by buying directly from small-holders like them. In the case of the girl, he said that he would approach the manager of the firm and suggested that compensation be made over a period of time so that the money would not be squandered. In the case of the carpenters, he promised to "find out the facts first;" if the charge was true, he would bring it to the notice of the proper authorities. After lunch the MP drove the Kks to their *kampongs*.

The MP tries to visit every *kampung* in his constituency "once every three months." All Malay MPs indicated that these visits deliberately coincide with Friday prayers. The KK is notified of the visit and the villagers are informed. The MP attends prayers with the villagers and it is not unknown for religious MPs to deliver the sermon. The *ceramah* or talk-in may be held

after prayers or, if he is staying the night, during a *kenduri* (feast). Attendance at the *ceramahs* varies from 30 to 100 villagers, depending on the size of the village. The *ceramah* is chaired by the KK and is normally a dialogue between the MP and the village elders. Topics discussed included government policies, party news, and local issues and problems. The *ceramah*, according to the MP, should not be too long or held too often because the villagers may be bored and "he would have nothing to talk about." These talk-ins rarely developed into situations which the MP was unable to control. However, during my visit, the MP held a *ceramah* with a group of local villagers who were obviously affected by news of demonstrations (by Malay villagers) against the government in a neighboring state.<sup>10</sup> The MP claimed that the villagers had been influenced by "outsiders," but after his meeting with them, "they understood the situation."

The third form of contact with his constituents is through his office, which is located in the market. He is normally in the office during the day, except when he is visiting villages, at the main township, or attending Parliament. Constituents who come to the office to see him regarding personal problems include job-seekers, applicants for various licenses, and those requesting testimonials. Constituents and friends also use the offices as a gathering place to discuss the latest news and exchange views.

Until recently, for most rural MPs, the constituency office was located at their home or place of work.<sup>11</sup> However, after the 1974 elections, Tun Razak ordered the NF secretariat to establish state and divisional levels; the MP and SAs were instructed to establish their constituency offices in the divisional headquarters "to act as the nerve centre for meeting and serving the people" (*New Straits Times*, September 3, 1974). The NF MP is an *ex officio* member of each division which coincides with the parliamentary constituency. The divisional committee consists of representatives from each party of the NF in the area, and MPs indicated that this policy is to ensure that the interests of the other races would not be neglected.

Party control over MPs' constituency service is through the constituency office and the monthly program and progress report which all NF MPs must submit to party headquarters. Referring to the monthly report, an old MP remarked that "this is nothing new because the Alliance did that and after a few months no one bothered because the reports were not even read by party officials." However, under the leadership of Tun Razak, this situation will no doubt change. A vice president of UMNO, Tunku Razaleigh, has already warned that MPs and SAs face expulsion if they fail to carry out their responsibilities to the people (*New Straits Times*, August 27, 1974). NF MPs also pointed out that they had to sign an undated letter of resignation, addressed to the Speaker in Parliament, when they accepted nomination

for the elections. If nothing else, this will ensure that present MPs must do more for their constituents than their predecessors.

### The Urban MP and His Constituency

The urban MP in Malaysia is usually Chinese and is likely to be younger than the rural MP. NF MPs tend to be professional men and are involved in various guilds and associations as office holders or advisors. Opposition MPs tend to be younger and are more likely than NF MPs to be full-time politicians. According to many MPs, successful urban MPs, particularly in the NF, must have a private income because the parliamentary allowances do not meet their expenses, which include the cost of renting an electoral office, salaries of staff, and requests for donations befitting their status in the community. Opposition MPs tend to be less burdened financially because, according to one of them, "the public knows that we are a poor party."

The general impression is that problems confronting the urban MP are largely personal, involving housing, illegal squatters, citizenship, and quarrels. They require the personal attention of the MP and are therefore time consuming. One MP said that he had "no time" to do all he wanted and was forced to rely on the telephone in his daily contact with the authorities. Another common complaint is that the constituents expect the MP to accompany them in their meetings with the authorities even though it may be unnecessary. For example, when the son of a constituent is arrested at night, the MP is asked to stand bail before the accused is brought before the magistrate; invariably, the father will not be satisfied until he is told by the police, in the presence of the MP, that this is not possible.

Many MPs admitted that they do not know where to send their constituents' requests for assistance in dealings with the authorities; the result is that letters are often sent to the wrong departments and time is wasted. However, this could be considered as a temporary problem. A more important problem facing the urban MPs is that many of them are not very familiar with the national language, and they have to rely on their clerks or party supporters. This is more difficult when letters must be written to the authorities. Many MPs have no alternative but to write in English in the hope that the letters will be attended to by the authorities.<sup>12</sup>

NF MPs maintain contact with their constituents by visiting their constituency office at least once a week. However, most of the constituents tend to visit the MPs' professional offices or their homes in the hope of seeing them personally.

We now consider an opposition urban MP, whose methods are



generally similar to NF MPs. Our urban MP is aged 27, born in Ipoh, and was elected in a very hard campaign. In 1969 he lost narrowly to a minister, but was elected as a State Assemblyman.<sup>13</sup> As an SA, he worked very hard for his constituency and is known as the “hawkers’ champion.” He is a bachelor and lives with his widowed mother. He was educated in English to the high school level. His career included a year as a teacher and later as an executive secretary of a trade union, before entering politics full-time. He joined the DAP in his late teens and has since held many important positions in the party. He is currently the chairman of his party in the Federal Territory, a member of the Central Executive Committee, and party whip in Parliament. He speaks English, Malay, and Cantonese fluently. He is also an advisor to several Hawkers Associations and Squatters Communities.

His constituency is the city of Kuala Lumpur. The majority of his constituents are labourers, petty traders, hawkers, and shopkeepers. The Federal Territory has no SAs, and he works with the help of friends and party supporters. He is also helping another new DAP MP, whose constituency adjoins his.

Contacts with his constituency take two forms: “meet the people” sessions and constituency visits. He strongly believes in going out to meet his constituents in order to know them better rather than waiting for them to come to him. Hence he is constantly on the move, making it difficult for constituents who want to see him urgently. After the election he distributed an “open letter” to his constituents announcing that he would be available at two of his party branches four times a week, with morning and evening sessions. The public was also invited to tell him their “views, suggestions, problems and grievances.” The following is an example of a meeting with his constituents.

The branch office is situated on the fringe of a very busy market and has one large room above a coffee shop. The room has a large table, benches, and chairs with two small tables, one for the MP and the other for his helper. Four party supporters were also present to deal with the routine task of filling out forms, such as applications for low-cost flats, identity cards, licenses, passports, and citizenship papers.

The MP arrived late explaining that he had been dealing with a problem in the market since 8 a. m. It seemed that City Hall officials had ordered pork-sellers, who were selling on the streets and verandahs of shop-houses near the market, to move to a new site because pork is offensive to Muslims and could not be sold in public thoroughfares. The new site was found to be unsuitable because it was part of a back lane, and, apart from the smells from the latrines, it was cut off from the market. The pork-sellers appealed to the MP for help. He was able to provide a solution by asking

Chinese traders in one part of the open market area to shift a few feet each, thereby creating an area for the pork-sellers. There were objections by some of the traders because they had been doing well in their existing sites and, being superstitious they felt that any change might affect their business. However, the MP's solution was finally accepted. The next problem was to obtain the permission of City Hall, which was granted. Then, because the new area was not large enough to accommodate all the pork-sellers, he suggested that lots should be drawn for the sites. Those who were unsuccessful, though unhappy, accepted the outcome. The case occupied the best part of the morning.

At the branch office, a dozen people were waiting to see him. A girl had lost her work permit and requested his help in obtaining another. Two men wanted to apply for low-cost flats. An old lady whose house was destroyed by fire asked the MP to apply for welfare on her behalf. Two other women came to ask about their citizenship papers. Another man who had sent a postal order to his brother wanted to be assured that his brother would receive the money.

Two cases which occurred that morning merit discussion. In one case, a man came with an official letter for translation and at the same time asked for the MP's recommendation in his application for a low-cost flat. The letter was from City Hall stating that his application for the low-cost flat had been received and his name was on the waiting list. Of particular interest in this case was that a carbon copy of the letter had been sent to an NF MP who had recommended him. The other case involved a group of men who came with a letter appointing the MP to be adviser to their squatter community. The envelope was addressed to the MP, but the letter inside was addressed to the MP's opponent during the election, a prominent NF man with the same surname as the MP. It would appear from these two cases that urban constituents do make use of the MPs of all parties in solving their problems. Constituents were asked why they sought the help of opposition MPs when the Prime Minister had warned during the elections that opposition MPs would not be able to help them. One common reply was that it was "useless going to the NF MP because they and the officials belong to the same gang so they would not help the people but support each other instead." Another common answer given on other occasions was that, "even though opposition MPs cannot help, at least they can ask questions in Parliament." The MP admits that he can do little in terms of changing policy but claims that he is able to help in the execution of the policy, by making sure that the people know their rights and by defending them.

Three common problems faced by the urban MP need further comment: citizenship, hawkers, and squatters. Citizenship in Malaysia is

a very complex issue facing non-Malays, particularly the Chinese. The law has been changed several times since the Second World War and citizenship depends not only on current law but also on the law in force at the time of birth as well as subsequent amendments (Suffian, 1970). Because of its complexity and the fact that it affects many urban dwellers, at least two parties (the DAP and MCA) have briefed their MPs on it, although many of them are still baffled. Our MP is fortunate in that a former DAP MP had made a special effort to understand the law and hence difficult problems are referred to him. The problem of hawkers is a primary concern of the MP and has led to his appointment to the City Hall's *ad hoc* Committee on Hawkers. This committee has agreed that all hawkers should be given licenses on request.<sup>14</sup> Some of the hawkers' problems tend to be vicious circles: hawkers are arrested for hawking in prohibited areas (bus stands and traffic junctions); the MP is then requested to intervene on their behalf; in some cases the MP is successful in reducing the fines only to discover that the hawkers return to the prohibited areas and the process is repeated again. In cases involving squatters, the MP is often asked to help delay the quit notices being brought into effect; if this fails, he is asked to seek fair compensation.

Constituency visits are made to such areas as markets, squatter areas, and New Villages (these are villages established during the Emergency when the country was faced with communist terrorism). Although some of these areas are outside his constituency, the MP feels that they should be contacted for party purposes. During these visits, he distributes his "open letter" freely, stops and talks to individuals, and is introduced to local elders by a party member from the area. During market visits, the same procedure is followed. All problems raised are noted for action. Help may be offered to organise *gotong royong* (self-help) activities such as the clearing of drains, rubbish dumps, and footpaths. While many of the MP's activities are politically motivated, they do help with local problems. He has also been requested by strikers to help negotiate settlements with their employers, has taken the initiative to raise funds for flood and fire victims, and has been called on to settle quarrels.

It must be pointed out that this MP is perhaps an exception, and that some urban MPs work at a less hectic pace and are less keen in seeking out the problems of their constituencies. Since many of these activities are done in private and are informal in nature, it is very difficult to generalise about their effectiveness. However, the problems mentioned and attended to by the urban MP under examination are common to all urban constituencies.

### The Semi-Urban MP and His Constituency

The term semi-urban is used rather loosely and is meant to include those constituencies with medium-sized townships and those where the electoral boundaries divide the town in half. In these constituencies, *bumiputra* voters often decide the outcome of the elections. By considering where the various parties nominate their candidates, and given that the racial breakdown of the new electorates is not available, a calculated guess would be that there are about thirty-five such constituencies. Most, if not all, are held by the NF. These MPs tend to be professional men, who are nonresidents of their constituencies and are from the non-*bumiputra* parties within the NF. They tend to have *bumiputra* and non-*bumiputra* SAs in their constituencies, most of whom are members of the NF. They serve their constituencies by maintaining one or more constituency offices and are represented by local party officials or full-time clerks. These *peribadi* (personal representatives) are therefore very important to the MPs; there are cases where they have become MPs themselves. Yet unless they are reliable, constant checks have to be made. A former MP stated that his *peribadi* worked in collusion with local officials to charge constituents for services rendered through his office, a practice that made the MP unpopular in the area. He also admitted that he rarely visited his constituency. MPs on the average visit their constituencies once a fortnight, during a weekend, although some make more frequent visits. This depends largely on where they reside. It may appear that they have the best of two worlds, continuing with their profession while making regular visits to their constituencies without being confronted by constituents at odd hours as happens with MPs in residence. However, several of them pointed out that they are approached for help in their place of work even though these people may not be their constituents. For those who hold government office, constituents do “drop in to stay” while visiting the capital, an expensive practice when they visit in groups. Some MPs organise trips to the capital for local supporters, which invariably includes a visit to Parliament. For non-*bumiputra* MPs, visits to the Malay areas are often in the company of the *bumiputra* SA. Opposition MPs in this type of constituency tend to neglect the areas where NF supporters are strong. This may be the result of language difficulty although it could also be interpreted as a deliberate act.

The problems in these constituencies are a mixture of the two cases examined above. Malay areas are looked after by the Malay SA and UMNO branches. Their representative in the NF Divisional Committee ensures that their problems are made known to the MP. In the non-Malay areas, problems come from the New Villages, and include requests for amenities, land hunger

as a result of increased population, illegal farming on state land, and funds for local temples. Needless to say, citizenship problems are also numerous.

The MP from a semi-urban district selected for this study is in his late thirties, was born in Penang, and lived near his constituency until becoming a university student in the United States. He is a former lecturer at the University of Malaya and now lives in Kuala Lumpur. His father is a lorry driver and a subcontractor. The MP is married with one child. Although he joined the Gerakan in 1972, he has always been interested in politics, which is his "first love." Despite the fact that he is a new MP, he was appointed Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister.

His constituency, about 200 miles from the capital, has a racial distribution reflecting that of the nation. Most of the Chinese are pig-rearers, fishermen, and vegetable growers. The Malays are small fishermen, padi-growers, and small-holders. The Indians tend to work in the rubber estates. There are several townships and a large number of villages. The major problems in the constituency revolve around the conflict between the in-shore and the trawler fishermen and those of the various cooperatives dealing with the rearing and marketing of livestock. They tend to concern the Chinese more than the other races.

He visits his constituency once a fortnight and this normally takes place during a weekend, although other visits are made as the occasion arises. His *peribadi*, a former SA who was defeated in the last election, is familiar with local problems and perhaps more important, he is known locally and experienced in dealing with the people. Apart from dealing with local issues, the *peribadi* prepares a report and program for the MP when he visits. Thus during one such visit, the MP's program included visits to several pig and poultry farms and an important fishing village, a meeting with a cooperative, as well as appointments with individuals.

On arrival in the constituency the MP went to the NF constituency office, where he checked for messages and confirmed his program with his *peribadi*. Then he chatted with the people in the office and left to visit the farms. During these visits, the objective was to be familiar with the economic problems faced by these farmers. Three farms were visited, differing in size and sophistication. During the evening he addressed a Chinese farmer's cooperative. He had brought a university professor of economics with him to help answer some of the questions raised by the farmers. In his speech, the MP touched on the general policy of the government and plans for the area by the state government with whom he has close contact. He also announced that an appointment had been made with one of the major producers of feed-meal in the country to meet with the cooperative regarding wholesale prices of its products. This had been a point of conflict between

the two parties. During the meeting a representative was elected to go with the MP to the state capital the next day for the appointment. After the meeting, the MP met a wealthy local businessman, who invited him for supper. The object of the meeting was to secure certain business favours from the MP, and obvious hints were made that due appreciation would be shown. In response, the MP emphasised that he was prepared to help only if these services were beneficial to a large number of his constituents and hints of appreciation were tactfully but firmly dismissed.

The following day, the main problems dealt with at the fishing village concerned the running conflict between the in-shore and trawler fishermen. The former claimed the latter had encroached on their fishing areas and hence their livelihood had suffered; they were retaliating by going to the trawler area. This had led to clashes between the two groups. The MP told the fishermen that he had arranged a meeting between the two parties and the authorities to settle the conflict. This was to be held in a fortnight on neutral ground. He also said that he would ask the Chief Minister to be present.

Apart from dealing with constituents, the MP talked to various party workers and supporters during the weekend. Local political problems were discussed, one of which involved the acting chairman of the local MCA branch who had supported the opposition candidate (the former chairman, expelled for standing against the official NF candidate). A local MCA man had proof of the acting chairman's activities in the form of photographs taken during the election and wanted the MP to take up the matter with the NF State Committee.

Later that day he left for the state capital with the representative of the farmer's cooperative. At the capital, he went to the Chief Minister's office where local problems raised during the constituency visit were related to the authorities. The next day he returned to his home.

Similar constituency problems include dealing with illegal cultivators on state land, applying for Temporary Occupiers Licenses, seeking lands for New Villages or better land for those who have been given swampy areas, and seeking compensation for those displaced from their lands by government projects. A number of MPs mentioned that, since they are not resident MPs, early contacts with the local authorities were not smooth until they revealed their identity as MPs.

In contrast to the above MP, the MP of the Sarawak National Party (SNAP) in a similar constituency seems to be less concerned with services than with political education. This is not to say that services were not rendered to the constituents as individuals. On the contrary, constituency visits are financial burdens for the SNAP MP. During one constituency visit,

the MP spent most of his time discussing politics in the longhouse. He was less concerned with national issues which are remote to his constituents and hence concentrated his efforts in educating them politically. Discussions in the longhouse continued until the early hours, with local wine and cigarettes consumed freely at the MP's expense. In the more remote areas a feast would be included during the visits. Apart from these visits, the MP spends two days a week at the party headquarters in Kuching where visiting constituents come for help and party workers in the constituency make their reports. More often than not, such a visit means that money has to be given for constituency services, such as medical or funeral expenses. SNAP MPs interviewed claim that because they represent the opposition in Sarawak the government "will do nothing" for their constituency, and even when federal grants for projects were approved, they were often delayed by the state authorities. They stated that their main role "is to offer the federal government a view of the Iban community different from that offered by the state government."

A few words should be said on the role of the Sabah MPs. The urban MPs operate in a more informal way than their West Malaysian counterparts. As in Sarawak, financial assistance tends to replace constituency services. Most of those interviewed stated that they do not know very much about politics but were asked to stand for Parliament by Tun Mustaffa, the former Chief Minister. All but one was elected unopposed. When asked about problems facing their constituency, they mentioned communication facilities, schools, and health services. One of them said he had no problems because "everything asked is granted." Informed sources say that they are provided for financially so that "they will not be corrupted" and that rural MPs are relatively free from constituency tasks because "everything is done by local party boys."

### Conclusions

In an examination of the ways and means through which the Malaysian MP maintains contact with his constituency I found that three different methods are used, depending on the type of constituency. The rural MP tends to work within the traditional system by maintaining close and regular contact with the KKs, who are also heads of UMNO branches in their *kampongs*. He also visits the *kampongs* and holds *ceramahs* with the villagers. The constituency office is a relatively new method; however, with rapid development in the rural areas, it is perhaps likely that the constituency office will demand more of his time in the near future. The urban MP, in contrast, relies heavily on his regular "meet the people sessions" and supple-

ments this with constituency tours. Both the rural and urban MPs are available to their constituents at all times. The semi-urban MP, who tends to be a nonresident, maintains contact with his constituency through his weekly or fortnightly visits and relies heavily on his *peribadi* for the day-to-day problems. He too makes constituency tours.

In trying to evaluate the effectiveness of services performed by MPs for their constituencies, two points should be considered. The first is that, while some of the services performed attract publicity, most are performed privately. Secondly, very few Malaysian MPs keep a record of services.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, any evaluation must be made with caution. Interviews and the three cases examined reveal that MPs do perform a whole range of services and deal with a variety of problems, many of which concern the government and administration of the country only very indirectly, if at all. These are largely personal problems ranging from family quarrels to disputes with landlords over rent increases. In these situations, the MP is often seen as an arbitrator who is trusted to settle issues in a disinterested way. His services are also sought in cases of mishap, such as a fire. Needless to say, he is also involved in the whole range of problems that confront constituents in their dealings with the government; he is asked to champion their causes or plead their case, and is expected to defend not merely political and social but also communal issues.

There is no denial that NF MPs have an advantage in matters involving the government. They have access to ministers and top party leaders. The ruling party had warned that opposition constituencies would not benefit in the delivery of goods and services; thus, opposition MPs would appear to have an impossible task in these matters. However, in practice, this means only delays in amenities provided. As more *bumiputra* become urban dwellers (a policy to which the government is committed) it would seem unlikely that the government would neglect opposition constituencies. While neither opposition nor government MPs have much hope of changing policy, the opposition MP is able, if he is tactful and practical, to help his constituents by providing services to the little man. His effectiveness can be gauged by the number of people who approach him, the services he provides, and the appreciation shown to him. The opposition MP examined in this paper is no doubt effective. This is attested to by the banners given in appreciation for his services by the various groups that he has helped. These lined the walls of his constituency office. Another criteria of effectiveness would be the new groups that request his services—an indication that he will and can help.

The evaluation of government MPs in developing countries poses a problem, particularly if they are backbenchers. Unless they are influential,



it is difficult to say whether projects undertaken in their constituency result from their efforts or from government decisions based on such factors as regional development, which are independent of the MPs' actions. No doubt the MPs may claim the credit, but the reality may be far different. In the case of our rural MP, it is arguable that the government machinery could have suggested projects without his participation. Given the government's stated policy of developing the more backward areas, the MP may in fact be superfluous in such matters. His role therefore is that of a loyal party man and watch-dog for his constituency. He is thus limited to dealing with the personal problems of his constituents.

In the case of the semi-urban MP, his effectiveness is perhaps easier to evaluate insofar as he arranges meetings between various groups to settle local problems and channels their needs to the proper authorities. By virtue of his position he has greater influence and his close relationship with the state authority will no doubt be instrumental in ensuring that projects for his area are implemented. His dealings with the local constituents individually must of necessity be restricted and he must rely heavily on his *peribadi*. His role, therefore, is more of a "fixer" and coordinator.

How important is constituency service to the MP? While all MPs agree that it is important, a surprising number of them feel that it is not decisive in terms of election. Most expressed the view that more important issues are at stake during elections, referring to the communal situation. There is also some evidence that good and loyal service to the constituency is no guarantee that the MP will be renominated. In the last election, several popular MPs, despite strong local support, were asked by their party to step down in favour of new faces. While it is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of MPs, there is no doubt that, in the future, MPs in Malaysia will have to work harder for their constituency. Party policy and control appear to be increasing. The order to establish constituency offices and the mandatory monthly report both for the ruling party and the opposition parties strongly suggest that the present Malaysian MP will have to be worthy of his allowances. Since it is the desire of the government to minimise open politics, constituency services will become more important for all parties, particularly opposition parties.

## NOTES

1. The Sabah Alliance is a coalition between the United Sabah National Organisation and the Sabah Chinese Association while the Sarawak Alliance is a coalition between Party Bumiputra Pesaka Bersatu and the Sarawak Chinese Association.

2. These included four opposition parties: the Sarawak United People's Party, Gerakan Ra'ayat Malaysia, Parti Islam se Malaysia and the People's Progressive Party.

3. There were 10 new seats since the 1969 Elections, all of them in Peninsular Malaysia. Most of the unopposed seats were in the rural areas.

4. Rural development has been the particular concern of the Prime Minister, who until 1969, was the minister-in-charge. Its importance to the government is shown by the fact that the present minister is one of the most senior ministers in the cabinet and one of the vice-presidents of UMNO.

5. Since 1969, the government's policy to modernise the rural areas has been intensified while at the same time the New Economic Policy sought to urbanise the Malays.

6. In contrast, young Malay constituents were seen to demand services "as of right" and were less appreciative of services rendered.

7. The Prime Minister would rather that they be addressed as *Yang Berkhimat* or "those who serve" (*New Straits Times*, October 21, 1974).

8. The cigarettes handed out are specially packed by Rothmans for Parliament and has a picture of Parliament House on the packet. It was observed that after the end of each parliamentary session, MPs bought cartons of these cigarettes.

9. This was repeated several times to different individuals during the two days with the MP.

10. These were the Baling demonstrations in November 1974.

11. This is also true of most government MPs. Constituency offices were the first established by the DAP in 1964.

12. The authorities are legally entitled to reject official letters written in English but in practice, MPs have not experienced this.

13. There is no residential requirement for parliamentary seats but for the State Assembly, candidates must be residents of the state. Most of the opposition MPs stood for both levels and many of them were returned to both seats.

14. Interview with the Hon. Ong Kee Hui, Minister for Local Government and Environment, November 1, 1974.

15. During the 1974 elections, several urban MPs published pamphlets highlighting their services. The most comprehensive is by Walter Loh, formerly MP for Setapak and until his death in 1975 the MP for Selayang.

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