

Populism and National Unity: A Discourse Analysis of Poverty Eradication Strategies of Three Malaysian Prime Ministers

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Abstract : With the waning support for centrist 'third-way' politics across the Western world, there has been an increase in political parties and individual candidates relying on populist political discourse and rhetoric in order to capitalize on the sense of frustration apparent within the electorate. What is of note is the divergence in the discourses employed. On the one hand, there is a polarization between a growing wave of populist right-wing parties and politicians, employing a mixture of economic populism with divisive nationalistic ideals such as restricted immigration, for example, the UK's UKIP and Donald Trump in the US. On the other hand, there are resurgent, often grassroots-led, left-wing movements and politicians, such as Podemos in Spain and Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, focusing on anti-austerity measures and inclusive policies. In general, the concept of populism is often ascribed in a pejorative way. This is despite the success of populist left-wing governments across Latin America in recent times, especially in terms of reducing poverty. Nonetheless, recently, scholars such as Ernesto Laclau have tried to rethink populism as a social scientific concept which is essential in helping us make sense of contemporary political articulations. Using Laclau's framework, this paper seeks to analyze poverty reduction policies in different iterations in the context of the tenures of three Prime Ministers of Malaysia. The first is Abdul Razak Hussein's New Economic Policy, which focused on uplifting the economic position of Malaysia's majority Malay population. The second is Mahathir Mohamad's stated neo-liberalization of the Malaysian economy, which focused on the creation of a core group of crony elites in order to spearhead economic development. The third is current Prime Minister Najib Razak's targeted poverty eradication strategy through a focused program which directly provides benefits to recipients such as through direct cash transfers. The paper employs a discursive approach to trace elements of populism in these cases and highlight instances of how their strategies are articulated in ways that seek to appeal towards particular visions of national unity.

Keywords : discourse analysis, Malaysia, populism, poverty eradication

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