



**MALAYSIAN COMMONWEALTH
STUDIES CENTRE (MCSC)**
**CAMBRIDGE MALAYSIAN EDUCATION AND
DEVELOPMENT TRUST (CMEDT)**



Eighteenth Cambridge Conference on Electoral Democracy

Trinity College, Cambridge

Thursday 25 and Friday 26 July 2019

Participants are reminded that the sessions of the Conference are confidential, operating informally under 'Chatham House rules'. In this way participants can be entirely frank and candid in their discussions and learn from each other's experience: the style of our conference is to allow maximum flexibility for participants to converse freely.

In order to make use of the very limited time we have together, we invite participants to submit in advance a very brief summary of important issues arising in their jurisdictions during the past year, to which they wish to draw their colleagues' attention. It will be especially useful to include in these summaries any issues that are particularly relevant to the theme of the Conference.

Background material such as statistics relating to the number of electors, polling stations, electoral equipment, expenditure, legislative references and so on should also be included in these papers rather than orally presented.

*Please note that these papers will be circulated to participants, so **will be taken as read**.*

We have found that this approach – referring in only the briefest terms to the details contained in the papers, and without any formal presentations – means that we can proceed without repetition of material set out in advance, thus encouraging the flexible and open dialogue which has consistently been seen as a strength of our gatherings.

Major theme of this year's Conference

Our discussions in conferences and regional workshops¹ over the last 18 months have focused on identifying strategies to create strong, independent, effective and credible electoral commissions. This ongoing imperative for strong electoral commissions must always be seen in the context of contemporary challenges however. Recent discussions have revealed that as commissions have become more adept at organising and conducting elections and ensuring effective participation of citizens (noting that much more work needs to be done in many jurisdictions²), weaknesses in electoral processes often emerge immediately after election day as ballot counts are compiled and results announced. Weaknesses in these processes make commissions, and the outcome of elections, vulnerable to external attack in an effort to thwart the outcome of an election and/or damage the reputation of the commission. Robust internal governance of commissions and (where relevant) permanent secretariats, becomes paramount.

At the same time, the environment in which election preparations are conducted and electoral announcements made is now complicated by active use social media, both by political parties and third party political actors. Electoral commissions face difficult decisions regarding the legal/constitutional, ethical and political circumstances that might warrant their intervention when misinformation or disinformation is “published” in electronic media, and the effectiveness of attempting to do so. Moreover, weaknesses in electoral process and organisational competence can be magnified beyond a reasonable assessment of their significance.

In addition, the increasing penetration of technology into key electoral processes often introduces weaknesses because of poor design or limited understanding by political stakeholders. Experience suggests that technology used in the creation and management of the electoral roll, voter identification and the tabulation, aggregation and communication of electoral results can be particularly problematic.

Against the background of these contemporary challenges to electoral processes, the major theme of the conference will be to discuss strategies for strengthening the capacity of electoral commissions. In developing thoughts ahead of the conference, participants are encouraged to consider the model outlined in the Appendix to this programme and frame any remarks accordingly.

¹ See <https://www.electoraldemocracy-cambridge.com> for background reading on major themes and discussions of recent conferences and workshops.

² See <https://www.electoraldemocracy-cambridge.com/insights-for-leaders>

Programme for the 2019 Cambridge Conference on Electoral Democracy

Wednesday 24 July

Participants arrive in Cambridge (transport from London airports will be provided). For those staying in the conference hotel, the address is:

*Hotel Felix, Whitehouse Lane, Huntingdon Road, Cambridge CB3 0LX -
Tel: +44 1223 277977*

7.00 pm *Informal drinks (7.00pm) followed by dinner in the Atlas Private Dining Room, Hotel Felix (7.30pm) for participants staying in the hotel.*

Thursday 25 July: Day One

7–9.30 am *Breakfast buffet available in the Dining Room (continental breakfast options available from 6.30 am)*

[9.15 am] *Participants meet in Reception, Hotel Felix to travel to the Seminar Room, Adrian House, Trinity College*

9.30 am *Tea & coffee will be served*

9.45 am ***Welcome, introductions and apologies for absence***

10.00 am **Session I – Reflections on Recent Elections**

In our first session we will hear brief, informal reflections from participants about the issues arising from their recent experience of managing elections and election preparations, leading quickly to an opportunity for general discussion of the issues raised. In the context of these elections, and taking account of the major theme of the conference on *strategies for strengthening the capacity of election commissions to meet contemporary electoral challenges*, we will be particularly interested in hearing about the manner in which Commissioners and Chairpersons have sought to strengthen the administrative capacity of their commissions, established and pursued key policy imperatives, promoted core values inside the commission they lead and fostered key partnerships with local, regional or international organisations.

11.00 am *Break*

11.15 am **Reflections on Recent Elections (continued)**

12.15 pm *Depart for lunch*

12.30 pm *Lunch – Old Kitchen, Trinity College*

1.30 pm *Depart for Adrian House*

- 1.45 pm **Reflections on Recent Elections (continued)**
- 3.15 pm *Break*
- 3.30 pm **Reflections on Recent Elections (continued)**
- 5.00 pm *Close; depart for Hotel Felix*
- 6.45 pm *Participants meet in Reception, Hotel Felix to travel to Trinity College*
- 7.00 pm *Pre-dinner reception in the Cloisters, Trinity College*
- 7.30 pm *Conference Dinner in the Hall, Trinity College (dress: lounge suits/national dress)*

Friday 26 July: Day Two

- 7–9.30 am *Breakfast buffet available in the Dining Room (continental breakfast options available from 6.30 am)*
- [9.15 am] *Participants meet in Reception, Hotel Felix to travel to the Seminar Room, Adrian House, Trinity College*
- 9.30 am *Tea & coffee will be served*
- 9.45 am **Session II - Strengthening the Capacity of Electoral Commissions (i) Administrative Capacity**
- 11.00 am *Break*
- 11.15 am **Strengthening the Capacity of Electoral Commissions (continued) (ii) Policy Imperatives & Core Values**
- 12.15 pm *Depart for lunch*
- 12.30 pm *Lunch – Old Kitchen, Trinity College*
- 1.30 pm *Depart for Adrian House*
- 1.45 pm **Strengthening the Capacity of Electoral Commissions (continued) (iii) Independence & Alliances with External Stakeholders**
- 3.15 pm *Break*
- 3.30 pm **Session III – Concluding discussions and future plans**
- 5.00 pm *Close; depart for Hotel Felix*
- 7.30 pm *Pre-dinner drinks on the Garden Terrace (or in the Orangery if the weather is inclement), followed by informal dinner in the Atlas Private Dining Room, Hotel Felix*

Appendix

Four Possible Elements to Strengthen the capacity of Electoral Commissions

1. Ensuring that the **administrative capacity** of the organisation is up to the challenge of what is, in most cases, the largest civic event to be conducted in a country every three to five years. This includes, but is not limited to, an appropriate organisational structure; clearly articulated, agreed and “lived out” role and responsibility statements, especially where the organisation has both a Commission (comprising one or more commissioners) and a (legally separate) Secretariat (or Chief Executive Officer); ongoing capacity to deliver training programmes, not only for full time commission staff but also part time electoral officials recruited for what is invariably only one or two days work, and sole responsibility to recruit and appoint staff; and ongoing capacity to deliver technology enabled electoral solutions, especially important given that most modern elections now embrace considerable technology in one or more aspects of election operations. Whilst these aspects contribute to a strong organisational backbone, at the same time, a commission will inevitably face stresses or pressures requiring resilience and flexibility, and an ability to recover, adapt and innovate as a consequence of these stresses and pressures.

2. Establishing a handful of key **policy imperatives** or initiatives which form a long term unifying direction for the organisation and its people. Invariably these policy imperatives will be dependent upon the context in which a commission finds itself, whether that be emerging from sectarian or ethnic conflict, authoritarian rule or electoral fraud, to mention just a few. Policy settings might embrace, for example, the need to strengthen electoral integrity and election-related security by ensuring a clear and fair legal framework; providing security at polling stations and protecting the security of election technologies and communications; promoting voter turnout, including that of marginalised groups such as women and youth; or reducing the influence of money in politics. These may be based on what is perceived to be the greatest risk to the credibility of the election taking the unique context of the country into account. Participants are encouraged to outline what particular factors led their commission to adopt one or more of their key policy outcomes and the practical steps adopted to ensure these policies were achieved.

3. Articulating the **core values** of the commission. Like any other organisation, it is the Commissioner or Chair of the electoral body who will inevitably have the most influence on the core values of the organisation and its staff. A critical aspect of any electoral management body is its reputation for fair and impartial administration of electoral law—an impartial administration influences public/voter trust and satisfaction and thereby strengthens the commission. Participants are encouraged to reflect on the core values they brought to their position upon appointment, what strategies they employed to ensure that those values permeated the organisation and its staff, and whether, after some time in the job, the values changed at all in light of the cold reality of conducting contested elections between political rivals.

4. Establish appropriate, supportive and enduring **alliances with external stakeholders**. Whilst the first three elements are inherently internal to the organisation, a commission's ability to withstand political buffeting will be enhanced if it has external allies. Allies might be found in other arms of government within a country, such as the judiciary, or elements of civil society, or international actors.