The notion of political legitimacy is imprecise, subjective, and often tautological. Even so, in applying it to Malaysia, we discover some unique utility. Among the countries considered in this volume, Malaysia is the only nation starkly divided along ethnic lines, scored nearly in half between the Malays and non-Malays, the latter a residual, negatively designated category that mainly includes local Chinese, Indians, and social minorities in Sabah and Sarawak. And though this dyad has been muddied somewhat by evolving intraethnic identities, societal perceptions of the government’s legitimacy—or lack of it—have historically possessed clear focus.

In its distributions of public resources, the government has heavily favored the Malays. And it has confirmed its material allocations with appeals to nationalist identity and cultural solidarity, helping bind together a communal Malay profile that might otherwise fragment locally. But these same allocations and appeals have also alienated the non-Malays, belittling them with “second-class” citizenship. Under these conditions, democracy’s significance as a supplementary source of legitimating appeal has mostly remained weak. Many Malays have sooner appreciated the country’s single-party dominance through which their community’s privileges have been enforced. And though the non-Malays may seek rule of law and meritocratic advancement, their minority status has limited the attractiveness of electoral competitiveness.

However, though generally clear, perceptions of legitimacy have occasionally been clouded. We will see that the Malay community has itself been divided, drawn to the material distributions issued by the government and to the more intense Islamic religiosity that emanates...
in opposition. Meanwhile, many non-Malays, though repelled by the government’s skewed distributions and cultural appeals, fear that alternatives might be far less accommodative. They recognize too that despite the social mission with which the government has intervened in the economy, its record of economic management has, by regional terms, been sound. After Singapore, Malaysia has attained the highest level of development in Southeast Asia. Further, after Singapore and Japan, it has displayed the lengthiest record of political stability in all of East Asia. Thus, while perceiving the government to possess little legitimacy, many non-Malays have given it conditional support.

In Malaysia, then, a configuration has long persisted in which most Malays have considered the government to be legitimate. And many non-Malays, both on the peninsula and in East Malaysia, have calculated that the government has been at least worthy of support. But after a half-century of independence, these assessments have grown more critical. In the country’s most recent general election, held in March 2008, the government was supported by only 58% of Malay voters and 35% of the Chinese (Ong 2008). Many Malays had been alienated by the extent to which top politicians in government, under the cover of distributive policies benefiting the Malays, have disproportionately benefited themselves. Further, in amplifying nationalist and cultural appeals in order to reenergize Malay loyalties, the government deepened the alienation of many non-Malays. There was evidence too that members of both communities had grown more vexed over corrupt practices. Notwithstanding, then, the political controls that characterize single-party dominant systems, the government suffered a severe electoral setback. Top politicians in government fell uncharacteristically into deep introspection. And in canvassing significant political reforms, they began to exchange the nationalist and cultural appeals that they had long emitted for more democratic ones, seeking to revive perceptions of legitimacy through greater checks on government’s behavior.

This chapter begins by outlining several dimensions by which citizens in Malaysia evaluate the government’s legitimacy or calculate its worthiness of support. It then provides a short account of legitimacy’s historical origins and social bases. Next, in developing its core argument, this chapter turns to the deficits in legitimacy that have set in and the ways in which the government has managed the dilemmas that result. Throughout, it argues that variations in legitimacy provide a better explanation for the fluctuations of single-party dominance