

## The 14th General Elections in Malaysia

### *Ethnicity, Party Polarization, and the End of the Dominant Party System*

#### ABSTRACT

In the 14th general election in Malaysia, the opposition coalition overturned the ruling coalition's entrenched incumbency of over six decades. The ruling coalition suffered from a legitimacy deficit and corruption scandals. The election witnessed four coalitions of parties, but these coalitions have been ephemeral, and Malaysian politics continues to be based on racial arithmetic.

**KEYWORDS:** Malaysia, Barisan Nasional, Pakatan Harapan, race-based politics, 2018 elections

MALAYSIA IS A PLURAL SOCIETY, with ethnic Malays (55%), Chinese (23%), Indians (7%), and others (15%) living relatively peacefully. The Federation of Malaysia emerged fully from the yoke of British colonialism in 1963. It is a constitutional monarchy that uses a Westminster-style parliamentary system. Malaysia has a bicameral legislature composed of a 70-member upper house (Dewan Negara) and the House of Representatives (Dewan Rakyat), which currently has 222 members, elected from single-member districts by universal suffrage. Each of Malaysia's 13 states has a legislature elected in the same manner. The country's constitution stipulates that parliamentary and state elections be held every five years. Since independence in 1957, Malaysia has witnessed 13 general elections with an appreciable degree of public participation reaching 82% in 2018.

The 13th general election (GE) in 2013 was keenly contested between the Barisan Nasional (National Front, BN), the ruling coalition of 13 political parties, and the opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance, PR),

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composed of four parties. Though BN won the election, it failed, as it had in the 12th GE in 2008, to win a two-thirds majority in the parliament. Observers of the government and politics in Malaysia considered these electoral trends a triumph of “new politics” in the making since 1999. In the 14th GE, in 2018, most Malaysians, fed up with rising inflation, paranoia, and absurd levels of graft, voted for the opposition coalition and thus heralded a “new Malaysia.” The national turnover of power through the ballot box and the peaceful transfer of power were significant advances in electoral democracy. Two arguments came forward: one, Malaysian elections are characterized by the emergence of a two-coalition system of parties; and two, ethnicity is gradually receding from the political arena. This study argues that a system of coalition politics in Malaysia has yet to be institutionalized and that ethnicity in Malaysia remains a variable of great import. This argument will be elucidated by analyzing the 14th GE in Malaysia.

Huntington defines institutionalization as “the process by which organizations acquire value and stability.”<sup>1</sup> Institutionalization may be measured by party switching or “any recorded change in party affiliation on the part of a politician . . . holding elective office.”<sup>2</sup> Presumably, parties or party coalitions that fail to retain the allegiance of their members would not be characterized as having acquired value and stability and would not be able to maintain parliamentary representation in consecutive elections, which is essential to institutionalization. Party switching has been rare in most established democracies, but it is prevalent in many non-Western democracies, including Malaysia. Leaders of some non-Western democracies who emphasize a stable party system have advocated laws declaring party switching illegal.<sup>3</sup>

Studies of party systems also stress the significance of ethnopolitical cleavages. Many argue that in multi-ethnic polities, voters overwhelmingly support ethnic parties and multi-ethnic coalitions.<sup>4</sup> Mozaffar, Scarritt, and Galaich claim that when societies are highly divided and parties have

1. S. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968): 12.

2. C. Mershon and O. Shvetsova, “Parliamentary Cycles and Party Switching in Legislatures,” *Comparative Political Studies* 41:1 (2008): 104.

3. K. Janda, “Laws against Party Switching, Defecting, or Floor-Crossing in National Parliaments,” paper delivered at the World Congress of the International Political Science Association, Santiago de Chile, July 12–16, 2009: 3–4.

4. R. Bates, “Ethnic Competition and Modernization in Contemporary Africa,” *Comparative Political Studies* 6:4 (1974): 457–84; K. Chandra, *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed* (Cambridge: Cambridge

geographically concentrated bases of support, ethnic heterogeneity leads to numerous, poorly institutionalized parties.<sup>5</sup> Ethnic politics may be referred to as the contestation and manipulation of political power along ethnic lines. Politics in Malaysia has been based on a “racial arithmetic,” and hence scholars have invariably taken ethnicity into consideration.<sup>6</sup> However, the results of the 12th GE in 2008 led some scholars to wonder whether Malaysia was witnessing the “end of ethnic politics.”<sup>7</sup> The 13th GE perhaps reinforced the “new politics” thesis, lending new credence to the claims of ethnicity’s waning role. Admittedly, the active role of NGOs, the availability of alternative media, and the socioeconomic development that has taken place since 1998 heralded the emergence of a “new politics” in Malaysia, but ethnicity remains a variable of great import. It is not surprising, therefore, that the leaders of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) blamed their poor performance in the 13th GE on the lack of Chinese support. They described the outcome as a result of a “Chinese tsunami” and called for the introduction of policies to further advance Malay economic and political interests.<sup>8</sup>

This study explains these contentions by analyzing the role of parties and coalitions, especially in the 14th GE of May 9, 2018. It provides a systematic overview of the electoral process and an assessment of how it shapes the country’s political environment. The study is based on ethnographic fieldwork preceding and throughout the 14th GE, targeted interviews, and documentary materials distributed by parties and coalitions. The data thus collected are supplemented by prior analysis of Malaysian elections as well as secondary sources.

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University Press, 2004); D. N. Posner, *Institutions and Ethnic Politics in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

5. S. R. Mozaffar, J. R. Scarritt, and G. Galaich, “Electoral Institutions, Ethnopolitical Cleavages, and Party Systems in Africa’s Emerging Democracies,” *American Political Science Review* 97:3 (2003): 379–90.

6. D. Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge, 1996); Sothi S. Rachagan, “The Development of the Electoral System,” in Harold Crouch, Lee Kam Hing, and Michael Ong (eds.), *Malaysian Politics and the 1978 Election* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1980): 255–92.

7. M. M. Maznah, “Malaysia: Democracy and the End of Ethnic Politics?” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 62:4 (2008): 441.

8. W. Case, “Post-GE13: Any Closer to Ethnic Harmony and Democratic Change?” *Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 102:6 (2013): 518.

## PARTIES AND THE PARTY SYSTEM

In the 14th GE, 36 political parties contested parliamentary and state-assembly seats. Of these, 13 were components of the BN coalition. Four opposition parties formed a coalition known as Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope, PH). There were two other coalitions of four parties each: Gagasan Sejahtera (Harmonious Alliance, GS) and Gabungan Sabah Bersatu (United Sabah Alliance). The remaining 11 parties contested the election on their own. In other words, there were four coalitions, instead of two as in the earlier election. Evidently, coalition politics lacks stability.

BN is a multi-ethnic alliance of 13 political parties, but it also constitutes a party in its own right. It has its own constitution, and in elections it behaves like a single party with a flag of its own.<sup>9</sup> The UMNO is the dominant party, followed by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the Malaysian Indian Congress, Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Movement Party, GERAKAN), and other smaller parties. Former Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak has led the coalition since becoming UMNO president in 2009. As a ruling coalition representing various ethnic groups, BN professes multiculturalism; within the coalition, each party safeguards the ethnic interests it represents. BN maintained a two-thirds majority of seats in the lower house, benefitting from Malaysia's first-past-the-post voting system. In the 2008 GE, BN failed, for the first time since 1969, to secure the two-thirds majority of Parliament required to pass amendments to the constitution. In the 2013 GE, it won only 47% of the popular vote; nevertheless, it managed to gain 60% of the 222 parliamentary seats.

As of 2013, the vast majority of BN seats were held by UMNO, which faced a major split in 1998 with the jailing of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who created Parti Keadilan Nasional (National Justice Party), later renamed Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party, PKR). Almost 17 years later, UMNO suffered a second split, resulting in the removal of its deputy president, Muhyiddin Yassin, and vice president, Shafie Apdal, from both party and cabinet posts. In 2016, Mahathir Mohamad, the fourth prime minister and the president of UMNO until 2003, resigned from UMNO membership, and on September 9, 2017, at the age of 91, he formed Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Malaysian United Indigenous Party,

9. Abdul Rashid Moten, "2008 General Elections in Malaysia: Democracy at Work," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 10:1 (2009): 21–42.

PPBM), in Mahathir's words, to fight to safeguard Malay interests. On April 20, 2018, sixteen UMNO members were dismissed after they filed a suit seeking judicial review of a postponement of party elections to the next year. (The suit was dismissed by the Kuala Lumpur High Court.) And a week before the election, two UMNO veterans, Tun Daim Zainuddin and Rafidah Aziz, were sacked for being critical of the party.<sup>10</sup>

The major competitor of BN is PH, which was formed in 2015 as a coalition of left and center-left parties. PH is a direct successor to the three-party PR coalition, which itself was a successor to Barisan Alternatif. In the 2013 GE, PR won a popular majority nationwide, but due to large variations in the number of electors in different parliamentary seats, lost to BN. From the beginning, the PR coalition was plagued by disagreements and conflicts between Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Malayan Islamic Party, PAS) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP). Finally, PAS broke away from PR, leading to the formation of PH. Again, evidently, the coalition lacks cohesiveness.

The component parties of PH include PKR, DAP, the National Trust Party (Amanah), and PPBM. PKR consists mostly of defected UMNO politicians who remained loyal to Anwar Ibrahim after his downfall. Six of the nine members of the first executive committee of the party had defected from UMNO. DAP purports to be a left-of-center democratic party and has been identified mainly with Malaysian-Chinese voters. Amanah is a pan-Islamic party that seceded from PAS. PPBM, the newest member, is composed of recently defected UMNO leaders and helmed by Mahathir.

PH chose Mahathir Mohamad (who served as prime minister from July 1981 to October 2003) as coalition chairman and Wan Azizah (the wife of Anwar Ibrahim, who was deputy prime minister until he was sacked in 1998 by Mahathir) as coalition president. Wan Azizah, a retired ophthalmologist with no previous role in politics, became the leading figure in the opposition and helped the opposition parties unite. She then decided to cooperate with her husband's former nemesis, Mahathir, to contest the 14th general election and thus became Malaysia's first female deputy prime minister. The opposition parties contested the election using the flag of PKR, because the Registrar of Societies declined PH's application to be registered. Mahathir was tipped to be the prime minister if PKR won the election. In return,

10. Suhaila Shahrul Annuar and Noor Atiqah Sulaiman, "Daim, Rafidah, Rais Sacked from Umno," *New Straits Times*, May 5, 2018.

Mahathir pledged during the election campaign to let Anwar Ibrahim succeed him as the prime minister. Mahathir, it may be noted, sacked Anwar Ibrahim as his deputy over a dispute on how to respond to the Asian financial crisis. Subsequently, Anwar was jailed for sodomy, which he denied, then subsequently imprisoned for another sodomy conviction. To Anwar, the charges were politically motivated. For the 14th election, Anwar Ibrahim through Wan Azizah presented a united front to the public. After the election victory, through Mahathir's intervention, the king pardoned Anwar Ibrahim, which allowed him to run for the next open parliamentary seat.

GS is an informal coalition of opposition Islamist political parties which promote the "ideas of peace" in Malaysia. Formed as a third force in 2016, it consists of PAS, Parti Ikatan Bangsa Malaysia (Malaysia National Alliance Party) the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Front, and the Malaysian Hope Party. This is the first time Malaysia had a third coalition of parties, giving the people an additional choice. The coalition is led by Abdul Hadi Awang, who believes that the Muslim Malays are the dominant race and hence should hold all leadership positions in the country.

Gabungan Sabah Bersatu (United Sabah Alliance) is a coalition of four parties based in the state of Sabah, in insular Malaysia. It was formed by the Sabah Progressive Party (after leaving BN) and the Homeland Solidarity Party (STAR). The two parties were later joined by the Love Sabah Party but left the coalition in 2017 due to some disagreements. Later, the Sabah People's Hope Party and Sabah People's Unity Party joined the coalition. Clearly, party politics in Malaysia has yet to be institutionalized.

#### **THE REDELINEATION EXERCISE AND THE FAKE NEWS LAW**

Elections in Malaysia are conducted by an independent Election Commission. Per Article 113 (sections 1 and 2) of the Federal Constitution, the commission is also empowered to keep electoral rolls and review constituencies. The constitution also contains the principle of "rural weightage." A rural vote counts for more than an urban vote, because on the whole, rural constituencies contain fewer electors. The political significance of this "weightage" is that it ensures domination of the system by ethnic Malays, because the rural areas are predominantly Malay.

The commission submitted its redelineation report on March 28, 2018. It was passed in the lower house, and after the consent of the Yang di-Pertuan

TABLE 1. Constituencies before and after Redelineation

<i>Constituency</i>	<i>Percentage of voters</i>	<i>Before redelineation</i>	<i>After redelineation</i>	<i>Change</i>
Malay majority	70% and above	68	71	+3
	60–70%	27	31	+4
	50–60%	20	15	–5
Mixed seats	Malay majority	16	15	–1
	Chinese majority	13	9	–4
Chinese majority	70% and above	12	11	–1
	60–70%	2	3	+1
	50–60%	7	10	+3
Total		165	165	

SOURCE: Ibrahim Sufyan, “Will There Be a Malay Tsunami?” Paper presented in a seminar on GE 14 at International Islamic University Malaysia, April 26, 2018.

Agong (king), was gazetted into law. The redelineation made major amendments to the electoral borders for every seat, except for four in the northern state of Perlis and in Putrajaya. The redelineation increased the number of Malay-majority parliamentary constituencies from 68 to 71 and from 27 to 31 (Table 1). The non-Malay voters are concentrated in fewer seats. A total of 22 parliamentary seats have been redelineated. The commission also changed the names of 12 parliamentary seats and 34 state constituencies nationwide.

The opposition parties accused the government of gerrymandering. They complained that the redelineation of electoral boundaries resulted in the creation of additional seats where BN had performed well in 2013, especially in the semi-urban areas. All the changes made through redelineation will benefit BN—it tipped constituencies that were narrowly lost in the 2013 election, and shored up majorities in closely held seats. Wan Azizah said: “Pakatan is protesting because it believes the redelineation favors the people in power although the EC [Election Commission] is supposed to be independent and neutral.”<sup>11</sup> The opposition parties complained to the commission, with no positive outcome.

Related to the above is the Anti-Fake News Act, which went into effect on April 11, 2018, a few days before the 14th GE on May 9. This is the latest in

11. Tarrence Tan, “GE14: Opposition Will Be Hit Hard by Redelineation, Says Kit Siang,” *The Star*, March 28, 2018.

a series of legislative acts to address the issue of “false” news and rumor-mongering. It was enacted without exhaustive debate. The government claimed that it was the victim of fake news in the 13th GE and that existing laws were limited in their capacity to address technological advancements. But the seemingly hasty enactment of the law just weeks before the 14th GE was suspicious. Human rights advocates and opposition politicians have criticized the law for undermining free expression and for silencing dissent and opposition to the ruling party during elections. Mahathir Mohamad was the first to be investigated under the fake news law for saying during the election campaign that the private jet he was to board was sabotaged. However, police took no action. Mahathir pledged to repeal the law if elected.

#### CANDIDATES AND PARTIES

Nominations took place relatively smoothly on April 28, 2018. The candidates were required to deposit RM 10,000 (US\$ 2,430) for each parliamentary seat, double the state election deposit. The deposit money would be forfeited if the candidate failed to secure at least 12.5% (one-eighth) of the votes. In all, 2,333 candidates were approved by the Election Commission. The ruling BN nominated candidates for all the parliamentary and state seats. BN won the Rantau State seat in Negeri Sembilan uncontested. UMNO contested more in districts with a strong Malay majority. PKR nominated 191 parliamentary and 448 state candidates. PKR was contesting in districts that are slightly less ethnic-Chinese than it did previously. One of its component parties, DAP, contested mainly in Chinese-majority seats. PAS filed a total of 552 candidates, 158 for parliament and 394 for state assemblies. Unlike earlier elections, PAS nominated candidates primarily in Malay-majority districts; it also nominated candidates in mixed Malay/non-Malay districts where it never had before. There were 24 and 54 independent candidates for parliamentary and state assembly seats, respectively. Among other parties, Parti Warisan Sabah nominated 17 candidates for parliament and 45 for Sabah state assembly. Another Sabah-based party, Parti Harapan Rakyat Sabah, nominated 26 candidates for Sabah state assembly.

Many new faces ran in the May election. With about 40% of Malaysian voters estimated to be under 40, leaders of both the ruling and opposition coalitions fielded younger candidates. Some parties fielded as many as 55% new faces. In Selangor, a state under PH control, BN fielded 57 fresh

candidates for both state and parliamentary seats.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, some elderly politicians (between the ages of 75 and 92) were nominated for parliamentary and state seats. The oldest was the 92-year-old former prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, running under the PKR flag. PAS nominated candidates for the three parliamentary and 15 state seats in Perlis, fielding almost 40% new faces. Likewise, PAS in Kelantan fielded 11 candidates at the parliamentary level, of whom seven were new.

A total of 251 women were nominated by political parties for a parliamentary or a state seat. Most of these candidates held important positions within the party they represented. There were 15 parliamentary candidates under 35 who took part in the election for the first time. Wan Azizah, president of the PKR coalition, ran for the Pandan parliamentary seat.

### CAMPAIGN ISSUES

For most voters, the choice of whom to vote for was primarily framed in terms of the three political coalitions in Peninsular Malaysia: BN, PH (running under the PKR flag), and GS. The three coalitions sought a mandate from the electorate to implement the policies and programs pledged in their manifestos. In interviews with several BN and PKR candidates, I was told that the “election manifesto is an integral part of the democratic process.” They considered the manifesto important to their chances of being elected. But a young voter told me point blank, “I don’t care about manifestos, I want Najib [Razak] to go.”<sup>13</sup> On further probing I was told: “Najib thrived as prime minister by delivering huge cash handouts at election times. He controls the media and jailed those who disagreed with him. Moreover, he channeled RM 2.67 billion [nearly US\$ 700 million] from 1Malaysia Development Berhad to his personal bank accounts. Najib must go.”

BN issued a 220-page manifesto, on the theme of “With BN for a Greater Malaysia.” It included 364 pledges divided into 14 major points, with a special focus on creating three million jobs, plus developing affordable homes to help Malaysians tackle the rising cost of living, uplifting women’s rights and role in the economy, and good governance and citizen’s participation. PH’s 203-page manifesto was titled “Buku Harapan: Membina Negara, Memenuhi

12. Trinna Leong, Nadirah H. Rodzi, and Hazlin Hassan, “Malaysia Elections: BN Fields Fresh Faces to Boost Chances at Polls,” *Straits Times*, April 23, 2018.

13. Interview with an activist, Kuala Lumpur, May 8, 2018.

Harapan” (Book of Hope: Building the Nation, Fulfilling Hopes). It had five main thrusts: easing the burden of the public, reforming administrative institutions, shaping the nation’s economy in a fair and just manner, reinstating the rights and status of Sabah and Sarawak as equal partners with the peninsula states, thus ensuring equal distribution of wealth across the country and building an inclusive, moderate Malaysia in the international arena. PH made 10 promises to be implemented within the first 100 days, including scrapping the goods and services tax (GST), providing targeted petrol subsidies, eliminating Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) settlers’ debts, introducing an Employment Provident Fund scheme for housewives, setting up a Royal Commission of Inquiry into scandal-ridden institutions, elevating the status of Sabah and Sarawak, and providing a healthcare scheme for all.

PAS unveiled a 20-point manifesto for its GS platform with the theme, “Prosperous Malaysia: Build a Peaceful and Prosperous Country.” The manifesto presented nine points, including forming a trustworthy government with integrity and free from corruption, improving the quality of education, increasing usable income, strengthening the federation by returning state government rights, and harmonizing the legal system and improvising social support system legislation in line with *shari’ah*. As the predominant Malaysian Islamic party, PAS’s manifesto is couched in Islamic terms. In contrast, the manifestos of PH, especially DAP, and the BN were couched in religiously neutral terms.

The three manifestos addressed major issues like taxes, wages and pensions, housing, and administration (Table 2). They differed in their focus. BN focused on development; PH emphasized reforms, and the GS, developing society along Islamic lines. Most of the promises in the manifestos were stated as principles rather than measurable targets.

All three manifestos mentioned taxes, with BN promising several tax exemptions. PH promised to replace the GST with a sales and services tax and other tax reforms. GS also promised to replace the unpopular 6% GST with a savings tax and a tax on stocks traded. On administrative policy, BN was lukewarm and simply promised to add an additional unit to promote racial harmony. PH promised to limit the tenure of prime ministers and chief ministers to two terms, to curb corruption and abuse of power. The GS manifesto emphasized the formation of a government with integrity and trustworthiness, free of corruption, harmonizing the legal system and governance—and to make Bahasa Malaysia the main language in all schools (rather

TABLE 2. Manifestos of the Three Coalitions of Parties

	<i>Barisan Nasional</i>	<i>Pakatan Harapan</i>	<i>Gagasan Sejahtera</i>
Theme	With BN: make our country mightier	Build the nation: fulfilling the hope	Prosperous Malaysia: build a peaceful and prosperous country
Taxes	GST continues; exempt rental income from tax; review individual and corporate tax rate	Replace GST with Sales and Services Tax; tax reduction for building affordable homes; lower import tax for cars below 1,600 cc.	Replace GST with a savings tax and tax on stocks traded
Wages and pension	Minimum wage to increase from RM 1300 to RM 1500 within five years	Minimum wage to be RM 1500; same for Peninsular Malaysia and Borneo	Empower Malaysians to ease the rising cost of living
Welfare	Increase BR1M to RM 2,000 from 1,200; increase health care and cost of living allowance for employees of government-linked companies; implement a universal childcare policy	Maintain BR1M; health insurance scheme for households earning less than 3,900; annual health care subsidy of RM 500.	Increase the number of specialist doctors and hospitals; enhance the effectiveness of social support system for vulnerable groups
Housing	Special bank to facilitate loans for low-cost housing (YR 3,000 and below)	Provide one million affordable houses within 10 years	Build affordable homes, priced between RM 30,000 and RM 180,000
Administrative policy	Establish a non-Muslim unit in the PM's department to promote interracial dialogue	Limit PM to two terms; reduce no. of ministers; lower voting age from 21 to 18.	Strengthen Islam as the federal religion; make Bahasa Malaysia the country's main language in schools; adjust the number of enforcement officers based on the population of a certain area or place

(continued)

TABLE 2. (continued)

	<i>Barisan Nasional</i>	<i>Pakatan Harapan</i>	<i>Gagasan Sejahtera</i>
Federal Land Development Authority	Write off extreme debts; provide special incentives of RM 5,000 each; build more FELDA community houses; upgrade 422 km of roads	Restructure the governance of FELDA; upgrade and modernize settler area; defend the fate of settlers, and abolish all debts of FELDA settlers	Provide immediate cash assistance and daily needs; expand agricultural and agro-based industries; minimize bureaucratic red tape and eliminate corruption
Youth	“Malaysia training scheme 2.0” for employed graduates; special GLC fund to create 10,000 jobs; TN 50 monthly pass for public transport; interim housing project for Malaysia youth	Create 1 million jobs; delay repayment of PTPTN (National Higher Education Corporation Fund loans); build bicycle lanes in cities; build a stadium for e-sports; wedding allowance for couples under 35	Abolish PTPTN taxes; free education; improve the quality of education; establish human development program

SOURCE: BN, *Manifesto Barisan Nasional: Bersama BN, Hebatkan Negara*, Hebatkan Negara, Kuala Lumpur, n.d.; Buku Harapan: *Membina Negara, Memenuhi Harapan*, Pakatan Harapan, Kuala Lumpur, n.d.; Gagasan Sejahtera, *Manifesto: Malaysia Sejahtera*, n.d.

than the Chinese and Tamil currently used in some schools). The three manifestos put special emphasis on rural Malay farmers, who have about 1.2 million votes. They have returned BN to power in almost all of the 54 parliamentary wards where FELDA exists to help these dwellers. In recent years, however, poor management at the 60-year-old agency has led farmers to bear mounting debts, and PH pledged to write these off. BN also promised to write off extreme debts. GS promised to provide immediate cash assistance for daily needs, expand agricultural and agro-based industries, and eliminate corruption.

The proposal by both coalitions to raise the minimum wage to RM 1,500 (US\$ 365) appears to have been made with young voters and people in the bottom 40% of the economy in mind. BN did promise to increase the minimum wage to RM 1,500, but provided no details. BN took the lead in offering youth a bigger voice in government. It proposed to enhance the role of youth in national development by encouraging them to forward fresh and creative policy ideas to the authorities through the MyCadang app. The manifesto also promised to establish local government youth councils to increase youths' engagement with the local authorities. The PH and GS manifestos did not have any clear proposals to include youth in the political process. GS promised to write off youths' study loans and to offer interest-free loans to first-time car buyers.

### CAMPAIGN STRATEGIES

The campaign period for the 14th GE covered only 11 days, from April 28 to May 8, 2018. This meant that BN, with its extensive organization, control of the media, and massive funding, could convey its viewpoints to the electorate more effectively than any opposition party could. Based on observation in four states, campaigning was subdued and orderly. In terms of security, other than minor skirmishes in some places, the overall campaign process took place without violence.

Campaigning took four major forms: poster wars, group discussions (*ceramah*) or political rallies, door-to-door efforts, and electronic media. Posters, leaflets, and billboards appeared throughout the country. The flags and banners of BN and PH could be seen everywhere. BN erected some 3,500 billboards at strategically chosen road junctions and along highways across Malaysia. The BN billboards highlighted the achievements of the Najib

government. Although PKR and PAS did take part in the poster wars, their flags and leaflets were only visible in and around election operation centers.

PKR candidates, in several interviews with the author, admitted that they had printed their posters late and were constrained by limited resources. Parties also bought advertising space in newspapers. BN has significant control over the media. *Utusan Malaysia* (Malaysian Courier) is the main daily newspaper linked to UMNO, but there are many others. Several papers, including the *Malaysia Insider*, the *Edge*, and the *Sarawak Report*, were critical of the government; they were forced to close or had their licenses revoked. Such was BN's control of the media that on the night of the election, election results were not available from papers that were not within UMNO's linked ownership.

BN also relied on *ceramah* focusing on local issues, while PH relied on mammoth rallies, attended by thousands and fronted by well-known leaders highlighting the alleged wrongdoings of caretaker Prime Minister Najib and the BN-led interim government. BN used a "sledgehammer" approach in dealing with political opponents. Najib mocked Mahathir for engaging in politics at the age of 92. Some even questioned the Malay ethnicity of Mahathir, who retaliated by characterizing Najib as a thief who had pillaged every wealth-generating agency in the country. Malaysian politics assumed a vicious personal dimension. The major difference in approach is that PAS relied on *ceramah* to disseminate information to members, and house-to-house canvassing to convince fence-sitters. BN also organized a variety of events, including daily free-food corners a couple of months prior to the election, art performances, informal talks at small cafes and restaurants, and campaign convoys of cars and lorries. In Sabah, most of the campaign issues were based on local concerns. Sabahans I interviewed complained of neglect by the federal government, and the campaigns focused on securing the rights of Sabahans against the Peninsula.

The contesting parties used social media to send their election messages to coastal belts and semi-rural areas with Internet coverage. Internet penetration in Malaysia has increased, from 70% in 2015 to 86% in 2018.<sup>14</sup> Over three-fifths of Internet users (67%) reside in urban areas and 33% in rural areas.<sup>15</sup> In 2016, about 54% of Internet users accessed Facebook daily. Ownership of

14. Alzahrin Alias, "Malaysia's Internet penetration Is Now 85.7 Percent," *New Straits Times*, March 19, 2018.

15. Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, *Internet Users Survey: 2017 Statistical Brief Number Twenty-One* (Selangor: MCMC, 2017): 8, 41.

Instagram accounts was 56%, YouTube 45%, Twitter 27%, and LinkedIn 9%.<sup>16</sup> Najib urged his supporters to use social media more aggressively, saying, “We have long been in defensive mode. Enough. It is now time to attack!”<sup>17</sup> According to Sheralyn Tan, anti-PH tweets with the hashtags “#Say-NoToPH and #KalahkanPakatan were used around 44,100 times by 17,600 users from April 12 to 20, 2018; 98% of the users appeared to be bots.”<sup>18</sup> BN was promoting its prime minister–driven campaign, and “PH supporters were embracing voters in the digital coffee shops with informal, instantaneous responses to issues.”<sup>19</sup> Many political parties had created their own websites long before the elections were announced. PAS, DAP, and PKR have well-designed websites, with much information on party policies and programs. Websites such as Malaysiakini, Aliran.com, Agendadaily, and several others provided a medley of news updates on current affairs and a forum for debate on issues in Malaysian politics and economy.

On the campaign trail, BN cited its successes in governing the country, emphasized its many economic hand-outs, especially to the bottom 40%, in the form of BR1M (Bantu Rakyat Satu Malaysia or 1Malaysia People’s Aid) and one-off cash hand-outs, and pledged more benefits and better policies to lift the country to new heights. BN also employed racial overtones, stating that PH is led by the Chinese-dominant DAP—a fear-mongering tactic to deter Malays from supporting the opposition. As Bridget Welsh observes, “rather than building bridges across the faiths, the campaigns by PAS and to some extent Umno, are more about exclusion and the primacy of one community’s rights over others.”<sup>20</sup>

PH mainly focused on bread-and-butter issues, the draining of financial resources, corruption, and the cost of living. It emphasized the money laundering, involving hundreds of millions of dollars siphoned from state investment firm 1MDB (1Malaysia Development Berhad), which was a Malaysian state fund set up in 2009 to promote development through

16. “Social Media,” *The Star*, May 5, 2018.

17. “Najib Urges Pro-Govt Social Media Activists to Go on Offensive as Malaysia Election Looms,” *Straits Times*, April 15, 2017.

18. Sheralyn Tan, “BN Spent RM20 Mil on Ads but Still Lost to PH’s RM800 Campaign Due to 1985 Strategy,” *World of Buzz*, June 8, 2018, <<https://www.worldofbuzz.com/bn-spent-rm20-million-ads-but-still-lost-to-phs-rm800-campaign-due-to-1985-strategy>>, accessed June 10, 2018.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Bridget Welsh, “GE14 Unknowns: Malaysia’s Highly Competitive Polls,” *Malaysiakini*, April 23, 2018, <<https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/421128>> accessed May 31, 2018.

foreign investment and partnerships. It was chaired by then-Prime Minister Najib Razak. It is alleged that 1MDB was a hub of fraudulent activity, with vast sums (more than US\$ 4.5 billion) siphoned into the bank accounts of Najib and others, in Switzerland, Singapore, and the US. PH also highlighted other mega-scandals such as the loss of RM 5.73 billion (US\$ 1.4 billion) by the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) for the financial year ended December 31, 2017, and Lembaga Tabung Haji's failure to record and explain a loss totaling RM 227.8 million (US\$ 55 million) on its investments in several subsidiaries and associates. PH also lamented the rising cost of living, and discontent with the GST introduced in 2015. Thus, PH broadened its appeal among voters and presented itself as the only alternative to the BN government. Most of the young voters, reportedly, were aware of the corruption in the government and desired nothing but a change. "I was in touch with my friends," said one informant, "and we were sure that we would come out in numbers to vote. We were determined to see that the government is changed." One lecturer ran for a parliamentary seat simply because "I wanted to see that Najib leaves office."<sup>21</sup> GS talked about the vision of how a proper Islamic state could be brought to Malaysia, to enhance the welfare of all.

## THE RESULTS

The 14th GE received a good deal of attention from pollsters, some predicting a two-thirds parliamentary majority for the BN coalition, and others a simple majority.<sup>22</sup> This was repeated a day before the election, predicting that BN would return "to power by retaining the support of Malay voters, yet possibly losing the majority vote."<sup>23</sup> The pollster Invoke Malaysia predicted a simple majority for PH and zero seats for PAS.<sup>24</sup> All such predictions turned out to be wrong.

21. Interview with Maszlee Malik, Malaysian education minister, Kuala Lumpur, May 14, 2018.

22. A. Ananthalakshmi, "Malaysia PM Likely to Win Election but Opposition Could Win Popular Vote: Survey," Reuters, May 2, 2018, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malaysia-election-survey/malaysiapm-likely-to-win-election-but-opposition-could-win-popular-votesurvey-idUSKBN1J3tHR>>, accessed May 31, 2018.

23. Tan Hui Yee, "Pollster Expects BN to Win Election, but Not Popular Vote," *Straits Times*, May 9, 2018.

24. "Invoke Predicts Slim Win for Harapan, Wipeout for PAS," *Malaysiakini*, May 7, 2018, <<https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/423535>>, accessed May 29, 2018.

According to the Election Commission, 14,940,624 Malaysians were eligible to vote, of whom 50.58% (7,557,187) were women. Postal voters accounted for 212,834. The commission established 8,253 voting centers and 28,115 polling stations nationwide. At stake were 222 parliamentary and 505 assembly seats in 12 of the 13 states. Nominations took place on April 28, 2018. Seven opposition candidates (six from PKR and one from PAS) were not allowed to run, either for bankruptcy or for inability to produce valid identity cards. The highest-profile disqualification was PKR vice president Tian Chua, who was barred from defending his Batu parliamentary seat due to a conviction for insulting a police officer. Despite these restrictions, only one state seat of Rantau went uncontested and was awarded to a BN candidate.

Elections were held as scheduled, on a weekday, May 9, 2018. Candidates and their supporters apparently adhered to the laws and regulations. Police did receive reports throughout polling day, but none dealt with major untoward incidents. The rioting that occurred in the town of Ayer Hitam in Johor was easily controlled by the police. PPBM has filed seven petitions challenging the results for four parliamentary seats and three state seats.<sup>25</sup> Voter turnout was 82.32%, slightly lower than the previous GE's 84.8%.

As shown in Table 3, PH garnered 5.62 million votes (45.56%) and won 113 seats, one more than required for a simple majority in the parliament. It was not a landslide, but it was a clear win over the ruling BN, leading to Malaysia's first electoral transfer of power since independence in 1957. From the 12,299,514 voters, BN secured 4.08 million votes (only 33.8%), and won only 79 parliamentary seats. UMNO, the dominant party in BN, won 54 seats with 2.5 million votes. While the election result was bad for UMNO, it was even worse for its allies. MCA President Liow Tiong Lai lost his seat to a Chinese candidate, Wong Tack, of DAP. Malaysian Indian Congress president Subramaniam Sathasivam lost his seat to Santhara Kumar Ramanaidu of PKR. The Malaysian Indian Congress managed to win only two parliamentary seats. MCA won only one seat, with 639,165 votes. Gerakan, which once formed the government in Penang State, was totally wiped out, garnering only 128,973 votes from the seven Chinese-majority constituencies it contested. Following the dismal performance of BN, 10 component parties withdrew from the coalition, leaving only three. GS won 18 parliamentary

25. Eddie Chua, "Pribumi Files Petitions to Challenge Losses at GE14," *Star Malaysia*, June 15, 2018.

TABLE 3. Results of the Malaysian General Election of 2018

<i>Party</i>	<i>Parliament</i>				<i>State assembly seats won</i>
	<i>Votes polled</i>	<i>% of votes</i>	<i>Seats contested</i>	<i>Seats won</i>	
Pakatan Harapan	5,615,822	45.66	204	113	226
Barisan Nasional	4,080,797	33.18	222	79	166
Gagasan Sejahtera	2,050,686	16.67	158	18	90
Warisan	280,520	2.28	17	8	21
Solidarity	21,361	0.17	4	1	2
Other/independents	250,328	2.04	24	3	0
TOTAL	12,299,514	100	629	222	505

NOTE: Voter turnout, 82%, registered voters, 15,000,000.

SOURCE: Calculation based on *Federal Government Gazette*, Attorney General's Chamber, Kuala Lumpur, May 28, 2018.

seats with 2.05 million votes. All 18 were won by PAS. Warisan scored eight seats in Sabah and allied with PH. Thus, the BN coalition withered, and GS was but a one-party game, showing a deficiency in terms of institutionalization of the party system.

Thus, in Peninsular Malaysia, the competition was between three coalitions of parties. The incumbent BN faced challenges from PH and GS. The 14th GE witnessed a three-way contest in 151 of the 222 parliamentary seats. In 2013, only 57 seats had seen three-way fights. The reason for the increase in three-way contests was the highest-ever number of seats contested by PAS—158 of the 222 seats.

The opposition alliance won 226 assembly seats and formed governments in five states, retaining control of Selangor and Penang and gaining Negeri Sembilan, Melaka, and Johor. BN won 166 state assembly seats, retaining Perlis and Pahang. GS performed well, securing 90 state assembly seats. It retained Kelantan and added the state of Terengganu, as well as 15 seats in Kedah. Three states produced hung assemblies. In the 60-seat Sabah State Legislative Assembly, BN and Warisan each won 29 seats. Subsequently, one BN component party, United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (Party Voicing the Rights of the Kadazan-Dusun and Murut Population of Sabah and the Aborigines of Peninsular Malaysia, UPKO), withdrew from BN and supported Warisan to form the state government. In

the 59-seat Perak State Legislative Assembly, BN won 27 seats, against 29 won by PH. Immediately after the election, PH managed to get the support of two BN assemblymen and succeeded in forming the state government. Kedah also produced a hung assembly, with PH winning 18 seats, half of the total 36. Of the other 18 seats, GS won 15 and BN, three. Eventually, PH formed the government.

In sum, BN and UMNO, which had dominated the government for six decades, lost for the first time since Malaysian independence. It is not difficult to find reasons for this dismal failure. Economically, under Najib's rule, people's income stagnated, but the cost of living was growing rapidly, and made worse by the introduction of an extremely unpopular 6% GST. By thus overburdening the people, BN made themselves extremely unpopular.<sup>26</sup> This destroyed the apathy necessary for their continued legitimacy.

Equally important was the information about corruption. There had been a series of scandals, such as those surrounding the Scorpène-class submarines and FELDA management. But the 1MDB scandal, linked to SRC International, was the key. 1MDB is a story of a government investment fund from which money flowed illegally into personal accounts. Some of the money is alleged to have ended up with Najib and his family. As stated earlier, there was a strong perception that Najib was abusing his power for financial gain. Reports that US\$ 681 million landed in the prime minister's personal bank account shocked the Malaysian population.<sup>27</sup> Prime Minister Najib fired senior members of UMNO who criticized 1MDB and transferred Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission officers investigating the abuses. This, along with the problematic living conditions and massive abuse of power, showed the people that BN was no longer acting in the interests of the community.

Mahathir Mohamad, Muhyiddin Yasin, and others were very vocal in criticizing 1MDB and corruption in the government under Najib. This information was shared widely on social media. Mahathir's PPBM was seen as a credible alternative for Malays. Their focus on reform allowed them to unite with PKR, DAP, and Amanah. They had a coherent message leading

26. Andrea Cassani, "Social Services to Claim Legitimacy: Comparing Autocracies' Performance," *Contemporary Politics* 23:3 (2017): 348–68.

27. Shamim Adam and Arnold Laurence, "Malaysia's 1MDB Fund Spawns Worldwide Probes: QuickTake," *Washington Post*, May 10, 2018, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/malaysias-1mdb-fund-spawns-worldwide-probes-quicktake/>>, accessed June 2, 2018.

up to the election, and consistent mobilization around the twin goals of getting rid of kleptocracy and righting the Malaysian economy. They were assisted by credible mass-movement NGOs such as Bersih, which contributed by increasing transparency around the electoral problems and giving PH greater credibility. PKR rallies drew big crowds, running into thousands. These crowds, when converted into votes, brought about the downfall of BN.

The election results did not reveal a significant change in Malaysia's habitually race-based politics. GS, the Malay-based Islamic party, won all its parliamentary seats from overwhelmingly Malay-majority constituencies in Kelantan, Terengganu, and Kedah. UMNO won all its 54 seats from Malay-majority constituencies. Almost all of these 54 seats were from the 122 smallest seats, averaging 47,000 voters. Similarly, the second-largest party in the PH coalition, DAP, is predominately Chinese and avowedly secular. It won almost all its seats from Chinese-majority constituencies contested by Chinese candidates. The newly formed Malay Muslim-based party, Amanah, won all its 11 seats from Malay-majority constituencies. Similarly, Mahathir-led, Malay-based PPBM won all its 13 seats from Malay-majority constituencies. Thus, Malay voters moved away from UMNO but supported the Malay candidates in the opposition. Gerakan and MCA candidates lost to Chinese candidates from DAP and others. In sum, though the contest was between coalitions, the parties in each coalition resorted to race-based politics.

## CONCLUSION

The 14th general election in Malaysia led to the peaceful replacement of the longest-ruling democratically elected coalition, Barisan Nasional. The polls were conducted relatively smoothly. However, the elections were also lopsided, in the sense that the major media outlets ran pro-BN, anti-PH messages. There were also serious allegations of vote-buying and corruption.

Despite its gerrymandering, BN did not win a majority share of parliamentary seats. Rising prices for essential goods, corruption in the government, the GST, 1MDB, and other grievances were well advertised by PH and GS leaders. The PH won the majority of seats in the parliament and formed governments in five states. The third coalition in Peninsular Malaysia, GS, captured a majority in two state assemblies. Unlike the 2013 elections, which saw a two-party coalition, the 14th GE was between three coalitions of parties

(BN, PH, and GS) in Peninsular Malaysia and a fourth coalition in Sabah. But these coalitions are not yet institutionalized. PH evolved from Barisan Alternatif, to PR, to PH in 2015. PH consists of PKR, DAP, the PAS split-off Amanah, and the UMNO split-off PPBM. Even BN, the longest-ruling coalition of 13 parties, splintered after the election. The GS parties are ideologically compatible, but only PAS performed well in the election.

The parties in Malaysia cohered as coalitions despite ideological incompatibilities and severe pressure from the regime. But these coalitions did not endure for long. In them, race and religion did play a significant role. Malaysia's political fundamentals remain race-based: elections are fought, and power-sharing takes place, along ethnic lines. Some try to transcend the barriers, but it will take time to free Malaysia from discourses and practices based on ethnicity.

The Pakatan Harapan coalition came to power with its promise to uphold principles of justice, equality, integrity, and the rule of law. Accordingly, the government has moved to prosecute those involved in the 1MDB corruption scandal. It has abolished the hated Goods and Services Tax, but, to balance the loss of revenue, introduced a Sales and Services Tax and prioritized its expenditure, as well as careful and tight financial management. The government is constrained by finance and hence it has not been able to ease the people's economic burden. To make matters worse, there are reports in the media that some PH leaders have lied about their credentials and misused public resources. Mahathir and others have welcomed defectors from rival parties, mainly UMNO. Ethnic preferential policies continue to occupy center stage. These policies have made members of the coalition unhappy, and hence there are rumblings of a motion of no confidence against the prime minister.

As promised, Mahathir obtained a royal pardon for Anwar Ibrahim, which enabled him to run in a by-election and become a member of parliament. This has paved the way for him to become Malaysia's eighth prime minister as part of a succession plan agreed to by the ruling PH coalition. However, doubts remain as to whether Mahathir will indeed step down and pass the baton to Anwar.