"Saviour" Politics and Malaysia's 2018 Electoral Democratic Breakthrough: Rethinking Explanatory Narratives and Implications

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Abstract: In understanding Malaysia's surprise 14th General Election, this article argues for the need to rethink how we understand elections. We need to bring together macro socio-political forces with more micro-level evolving phenomena in the campaign, within political institutions, and in voting behaviour. Rather than buck international trends, Malaysia's socio-political conditions before the election – political polarisation, a rise of anger, increasing economic vulnerabilities, as well as increased nationalist and populist sentiments – echoed global trends and served as fertile ground for political change. It was however three sufficient conditions that brought about the political breakthrough: the impact of emotional campaigning through social media, the deinstitutionalisation of the dominant Malay party, United Malays National Organisation, and the failure to win over young voters – all factors that tie closely with the macro forces shaping the country. Given the factors that shaped the electoral outcome and Malaysia's "saviour politics," it is suggested that the government turnover was more about breaking with the past than embracing democracy. As such, there will be constraints placed on expanding democracy going forward.

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Introduction

Malaysia's 14th General Election (GE14), held on 9 May 2018, resulted in the first turnover of federal government in the country's history. The incumbent Barisan Nasional (National Front, or BN) led by Najib Tun Razak lost power to a coalition, led by former prime minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, known as Pakatan Harapan (Coalition of Hope, or PH). PH won 121 seats with its coalition partner Warisan, a regional-based party from the state of Sabah, while BN only captured 79 seats, the majority held by the former dominant party of Malaysia – the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). While most analysts did not predict that a turnover would be possible, given the obstacles in an unfair electoral system and ratcheted-up repression from 2015 (Human Rights Watch 2015; 2016), the opposition was nevertheless able to make a breakthrough and rupture the hold BN had had on power since 1957. As such GE14 has been couched as bucking international trends, as it represents a democratic breakthrough in the face of rising global authoritarianism.

What made this turnover possible? Is it in fact a deviation from the global norm? What does GE14 mean for the future of democracy in Malaysia? Analysts have adopted a variety of explanations to account for electoral behaviour in Malaysia, and these have already been applied to GE14. The dominant explanatory framework revolves around the role of Mahathir, Malaysia's former prime minister from 1981 to 2003, who left his party in 2016 and led the opposition to victory (Abdullah 2018; Krishnamoorthy 2018). Others (Suffian 2018) focus their attention on Najib, whose deep unpopularity served to alienate many within his own party and large sections of the public at large. Najib's involvement in the world's largest kleptocracy scandal to date, 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), was an integral part of voter alienation, especially in urban areas (Gabriel 2018; Steiner 2017; Wright and Hope 2018). The analytical focus has, thus, been primarily on the role of individuals and leaders, in keeping with what is arguably the dominant paradigm for understanding Malaysian politics as a whole. As part of an effort to "Save Malaysia," Mahathir has been described as the country's "saviour" bringing back the country from poor leadership and towards a different future.

Malaysia's GE14 democratic breakthrough merits further exploration, not only because it calls into question different heuristic tools for understanding the country's elections but also because it shapes projections for future trajectories for democracy in Malaysia (and arguably elsewhere in Southeast Asia). In this article I argue that in order to have a more comprehensive understanding of why the 2018 electoral turnover occurred we

need to appreciate how broader societal shifts created necessary conditions for a political rupture with the past, and also the factors that were unique (sufficient) in GE14 to bring about the change in government. I identify three important sufficient factors: the combination of modern campaigning with emotions, the institutional collapse of dominant party UMNO leading to the erosion of its traditional base, and the failure of the government to effectively win over young voters. I illustrate these factors and their synergies with underlying socio-political conditions using an analysis of local polling station data of the results, and draw from months of fieldwork involving focus groups across Malaysia both before and after the 2018 election.[1] In pointing to the combined focus on social conditions and their nexus with the campaign, I further argue for the need to rethink how we understand voters and voting behaviour – namely, to do so in a more holistic manner. In fact I suggest that, given the factors that brought about political change, "saving Malaysia" may not promise the level of democratic opening in the future that the initial positive hype around GE14 suggests.

Voting Behaviour in Malaysia: Different Heuristic Frameworks

The study of elections in Malaysia is arguably the richest area of political science research in the country (Welsh 2015). Every election leads to multiple publications, drawing from a variety of different perspectives. This special issue follows this tradition. Theoretically, the explanations can been differentiated into five interrelated arenas of focus: 1) agency (role of leadership and opposition pact-making); 2) rules of the game (electoral system, three-corner contests, coalitions structures); 3) campaign mobilisation (money (patronage), machinery and media environment) and policy engagement); 4) voting behaviour shifts (usually along ethnic and regional lines); and, 5) broader socio-political features (regionalism, demography, class structure, and globalisation). Of these, the last is perhaps the least developed – and thus a dimension that is particularly elaborated on in my own argument below.

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1   Special thanks to my research assistant Chong Hua Kueh for work with the data analysis. The local polling station analysis is based on findings for all of Malaysia and uses ecological interference, while the focus groups were conducted throughout the country from April to August 2018.

Let me unpack the different frameworks further.[2] The focus on agency centres on the role of individuals, usually those leading a campaign. When Abdullah Badawi assumed the leadership mantle of BN, his maiden 2004 election was tied to him. Similarly, and more recently, Adenan Satem's role as chief minister in Sarawak was credited to his personality and engagement in BN's victory in the 2016 Sarawak state elections (Chin 2016; Weiss and Puyok 2016). Usually the focus is on the persona and the timing of their leadership, coming after a long-serving leader – Mahathir and Taib Mahmud in the two examples noted above. Yet, analysis has also included the feudal ties and networks of the leader as well. Both Anwar Ibrahim and Mahathir, for example, have been credited with their bridging of social capital in the formation of a more unified opposition in the general election of 2013 (GE13) and in GE14, respectively (Lemiere 2018; Diamond 2018; Hutchinson 2018; Rahim 2018). This fits with tradition pact-making approaches looking at how decisions shape electoral outcomes. The focus on agency implicitly brings with it a top-down approach to politics.

The second framework, prioritising the rules of the game, looks at institutional arrangements. Within this rubric, there have been two areas that have received the most attention: coalition formation and electoral systems. Scholars have argued that the restructured arrangements in Malaysia's political coalitions have affected their electoral support. This is true of BN, which has experienced an erosion of support with a weakening of the non-Malay political parties within the coalition, and for the opposition PH in its various forms from 2008 (Pakatan Rakyat to Pakatan Harapan) (Weiss 2018). The cooperation and representativeness of the coalitions shaped their electoral viability. With the prominence of the Bersih electoral reform movement since 2007, increasingly scholars have paid attention to the impact of the electoral system and its management on electoral outcomes (Wong, Chin, and Othman 2010; Ooi 2018; Ong 2018; Oswald 2018). In fact, the inability of Pakatan Rakyat to win GE13 was blamed on gerrymandering and other controls of the electoral process (Oswald 2013). In GE14, the role of three-corner fights was hotly contested, with this arrangement seen to favour BN as the entry of the Islamic party PAS was seen to take away votes from the opposition. As other essays in this special issue show, this did not occur as this dynamic favoured PAS more than BN and did not necessarily undermine PH's fortunes to the extent predicted. This focus on how elections are contested – the players and process – has gained more attention in recent years.

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2   Space considerations do not allow for a thorough literature review of the election scholarship. The focus is on providing examples, as illustrations of these different approaches.

The third framework, focused on campaigns and engagement with voters, has been the more traditional explanation of Malaysian scholars. The term "3Ms" has long been used to describe Malaysian elections: namely, money, media, and mobilisation. In the past, there was a fourth "M" – Mahathir. This approach, focusing on the interaction between voters and BN, has also acknowledged the important role that the state plays in distributing patronage and projects. Works within this framework centre on "developmentalism," and credit BN's control of states in East Malaysia to the power of the "development" purse (Loh 2014). The use of state resources in campaigns has included vote-buying, and debates have addressed changes in the patterns of patronage – to the use of government revenues rather than party coffers (Welsh 2013a, 2013b; Weiss 2016).

Underscoring these interventions is the government's management of the economy, and the policies and alliances that it puts in place locally to maintain its support. It has been argued that BN's main electoral strength has been its performance in the domestic economy – an issue that came under strain under the latter years of the Najib government, as prices rose. The attention to the political economy has also raised the theme of corruption, which has been the most important reform issue electorally as UMNO became more entrenched in "money politics." The 1MDB scandal and its importance in GE14 is along this vein of analysis. Scholars have also highlighted specific policy issues – education, crime, and ethnic representation/discrimination – as shaping campaigns as well. This framework has often been applied to specific contexts, used as a heuristic tool to describe rich exchange between the government and voters, and simultaneously to show how campaigns have evolved from more traditional ones tied to labour-intensive mobilisation to more slick modern campaigns with social media narratives and more centralised professional management.

If this third framework is the richest arena of electoral scholarship, recent decades have given way to quantitative analysis of voting behaviour. The main cleavage has been ethnicity, but studies have also looked at regional and generational patterns of voting (Welsh 2015). This research has moved the level of analysis from seats to polling stations, allowing for greater depth in findings, and been complemented by the expansion of survey research. Below, the analysis draws from this approach – using GE14 polling station data – but argues that these heuristic tools for how Malaysians voted can be best understood in combination with other frameworks.

It is the last one that is, perhaps, the least thoroughly explored: attention to broader socio-political conditions. Early scholarship focused heavily on the urban–rural divide as the defining cleavage of elections, with the rural areas favouring BN. This geographic lens has persisted, even with Malaysia becoming over 75.5 per cent urbanised by 2017.[3] This has been reinforced by attention to "safety deposit" (safe) states in East Malaysia. GE14 shattered this paradigm. Integrating electoral analysis into other broader forces – Islamisation, globalisation – and social cleavages of class have received less attention, as society-centred approaches are concentrated around quantitative rather than qualitative analysis. Attention to political literacy is a recent exception (Shamsul 2018). Despite repeated focus on the role of religion, little work has been done to look at how religiosity, religious education, and religious outlooks shape voting. Instead, religion has been equated with issues and the actions of leaders or consequent government policies (Rahim 2013; Mohamed 2017). This special issue's focus on civil society is one area where there is a tie between the expansion of a liberal reform movement and electoral outcomes. Making the links between macro forces and micro dynamics is the thrust of this article, as it aims not only to answer the question of why BN was thrown out of office but also what longer-term lessons the 2018 election offers for understanding voting behaviour and democracy in Malaysia.

Ripe for Change: Malaysia in the Global Context

Country analysts often point to the unique political features of a country – and Malaysia has many, from its racial and religious political party configuration to its complex regional differences. The GE14 result – one in which a more democratic alternative won in the face of greater authoritarian trends – has similarly been explained to date as the result of unique local circumstances, especially through the lens of the leadership paradigm noted above. A focal point of my argument regarding GE14 is that socio-political conditions and institutional factors influencing the election were strikingly similar to global trends, and ultimately these were the underlying drivers to bring about political change in Malaysia. The country's democratic breakthrough was, in fact, similar to breaks elsewhere from the norm of political arrangements, for example Brexit in the United Kingdom or the election of Donald Trump in the United States. Let us begin

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3   See <www.statista.com/statistics/455880/urbanization-in-malaysia/> (15 December 2018).

with the broader socio-political trends, the necessary conditions noted above.

On the eve of GE14, Malaysia was deeply polarised. For the past decade, Malaysians have been sharply divided in their support of the BN government (Welsh 2013). The place to see this trend is not in the actual results by seats – as Malaysia has a first-past-the-post and highly gerry-mandered electoral system – but in the popular vote. Since 2008, Malaysian voters have been evenly split in support for an opposition alternative – with a ratio of 51:48 favouring BN in 2008, and more Malaysians supporting the opposition in 2013 in a ratio of 47:51. The nature of Malaysia's political polarisation has been reinforced by geography, in that BN maintained its support in more rural areas and in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak. Malaysia has had sharp "red" and "blue" divisions that have physically showcased these splits, with the opposition particularly winning heavily on the west coast of the Peninsula West Coast. Political polarisation has served not only to sharpen political divisions within Malaysian society, but also to create a competitive electoral contest in which small shifts can account for more tectonic movements in the political landscape – as occurred in GE14 (and in other breaks such as Brexit or the Trump election in 2016). Political polarisation has also enhanced zero-sum politics, making elections even more of a one-on-one contest despite the involvement of multiple actors. Through the last two elections, the core dynamic has been that of retention or removal of BN under Najib Tun Razak from power.

Variation in sources of political information and political attitudes have underscored this polarisation. Malaysians who get their political news from the previously BN-linked mainstream media have been more loyal supporters. Malaysians have not only differed in the support of electoral alternatives, but they have sharply differed in three areas: notions of a secular state, support for democratic values more generally, and views of corruption. The last two surveys of the Asian Barometer survey data shows Malaysians hold different ideological positions across a liberal-conservative spectrum, and these are reflected in the political support for different coalitions – with BN (and the Islamist party PAS in 2018) capturing the more conservative views.[4] Liberals, however, have supported Pakatan/PH in its varied forms since its inception in 2008. One of the most important pre-GE14 shifts was the 2015 break-up of Pakatan Rakyat – the opposi-

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4   For more details on the Malaysia Asian Barometer Survey, see: <www.asianba rometer.org/> (15 December 2018).

tion coalition that included PAS, the Chinese-dominant Democratic Action Party (DAP), and Anwar Ibrahim's reformist multi-racial party Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR). The reconfiguration of the political opposition meant that GE14 was a clear ideological choice for those concerned with Islamisation and the empowerment of an Islamist party. This was reinforced by the focus on the perceived corruption of the Najib administration per the 1MDB scandal. This added to the clarity of the choice, making GE14 a clear "us versus them" decision that tied into the different ideological outlooks of Malaysians. Political polarisation thus made for a competitive choice reinforced by rival ideological positions.

The second defining feature was the rise of anger among Malaysian voters. Globally, scholars such as Prakaj Mishra (2017) have described current conditions as the "age of anger" in which negative sentiments are being driven by a sense of alienation and displacement tied to globalisation. He speaks of "*ressentiment*" – suppressed feelings of envy that are unsatisfied – and of religious radicalisation, in which views of victimisation, superiority, and intolerance blend together to produce hatred and feed anger. In pointing to the tie between globalisation and anger, Misha pinpoints these processes as global and divisive. Anger is also seen to be a product of perceived abuses of power and position, notably in the form of corruption.

GE14 took place in a similar context. After the 2013 election, Najib ratcheted up the religious and racial rhetoric – describing that election as a "Chinese tsunami" – and persisted in his efforts to paint the opposition as Chinese-dominated and a potential threat to Malay political power. Repeated incidents heightened ethnic tensions, including differences over the (use of the word) "Allah" case in 2015 and polarised views on the need for an "Islamic" laundry. Malay chauvinists, under the rubric of "Red Shirts," rallied in confrontational, racialised protests in September 2015 and then again in August 2016. Reports also showed increased radicalisation in Malaysian society in support for ISIS and greater terrorist incidents since 2016, when a grenade was thrown into a restaurant in Puchong (Welsh 2018a). A month before the 2018 election campaign there were arrests for a planned attack on a government building in Johore Bharu (Nadirah 2018). The *Global Terrorism Index 2017* ranks Malaysia as 60th in the world in terms of radicalisation, with a steady climb in the past decade (Institute for Economics and Peace 2017).

Anger among Malaysians was also stoked over the perceived abuses in the 1MDB scandal, first revealed in July 2015. This USD 4.5 billion kleptocracy case was one of many revelations of corruption by government officials under the Najib administration. Others include allegations

of misused funds in government entities such as MARA (McKenzie, Baker, and Garnaught 2015) and Tabung Haji (Bernama 2017). This frustration with corruption evoked strong reactions both against and in favour of the practice. In November 2016, anti-corruption advocates took to the street in a rally to protest the perceived abuses. An underlying element of the anger involved the ostentatious display of wealth in clothing/accessory choices and shopping sprees by the former prime minister and his wife, Rosmah Mansor. This "greed" tapped into *ressentiment* and intensified the strong reactions witnessed. Najib and his wife were regularly subjected to personal attacks on social media, often responded to through increased state repression – a vicious cycle of confrontation and anger thus evolved.

An important complement to the anger involved increased economic vulnerabilities. Malaysia is in the top-tier of countries suffering from inequality in Southeast Asia, and this trend has widened despite steady growth and an overall rise in gross domestic product income (Khazanah Research Institute 2018). The main problem has been another similarly occurring global phenomenon, a decline in social mobility. Growth has not been accompanied with parallel job expansion and wage increases. Malaysia has a large share of its population – known as the Bottom 40 per cent (B40) – living on income levels of less that USD 1,000 a month. At the same time, Malaysia experienced record levels of inflation under Najib's tenure, hitting an annual rate of 3.8 per cent in 2017 and exacerbated by the 2015 introduction of a goods and services tax (GST) and the poor implementation of this measure.[5] The higher cost of living provoked a tax revolt, feeding into the anger noted above, and exacerbated economic vulnerabilities. As developed below, this economic vulnerability was particularly felt by younger Malaysians and those with lower incomes, the former group critical for an electoral victory given their share within overall voters and the latter group traditionally forming BN's political base.

These socio-political conditions also include a rise in nationalism and populist pressures, in keeping with global trends. The nationalist response in Malaysia has been both to other countries investing in Malaysia and directed towards other ethnic groups within the country itself. The international dimension includes a strong response against infrastructure investment by China, as this was seen to be linked to supporting the BN government – in that is was perceived to provide funds for making payments for debts incurred with the 1MDB scandal (Liu and Lim 2018). Touted as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, investments in railways

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5   See <www.statista.com/statistics/319033/inflation-rate-in-malaysia/> (15 December 2018).

and roads were seen to be highly politicised, padded with additional costs, and to have inadequate spillovers for local suppliers and employment. The China factor was, hence, a key campaign issue in GE14 (Wong 2018).

Another equally important issue, although one less overt in the media, was resentment toward the sharp rise in and changing ethnic composition of foreign workers. These hires were seen to be tied to corruption within the government and evoked reactions among Malaysians who saw the increase of immigrants as changing their country's social fabric. It was reported that there were six million foreign workers brought into Malaysia during the Najib period, out of a total population of 30 million people (Lee and Idris, 2018). Foreign workers were perceived to be given voting rights in claims of electoral fraud in GE14, an issue that similarly percolated in GE14 (Welsh 2013). The composition of the new immigrants – predominantly Muslim – also fed ethnic tensions within Malaysia, as many non-Muslims felt displaced. These perceived changes to the social fabric of Malaysia came after repeated "shaming" in the international arena for the 1MDB scandal, with Najib declared as one of the most corrupt leaders in the world by *Time* magazine in 2016 (Bremmer 2016), and as a result of the handling and tragic loss of two Malaysian Airlines – MH370 and MH17 in March and July 2014, respectively. Malaysia's reputation on the international stage thus took a beating, which contrasted sharply with the build-up of the country's standing under the first Mahathir era.

Nationalism also took on a local character, with regional pressures in both Sarawak and Sabah contributing to opposition to BN – as discussed elsewhere in this special issue. The political use of Malay chauvinism also reinforced the reaction of non-Malays against BN, a pattern that had been in place since 2008. In GE14, based on polling station results, 91 per cent of Chinese and 72 per cent of Indians voted against BN – up from 83 per cent and 60 per cent in GE13, respectively. The hardening of the non-Malays against the government can be seen to be, in part, tied to the use of ethnic nationalism to maintain loyalties within BN's political base as part of the country's ongoing political polarisation. Local nationalist sentiments fed anger as well.

It is thus not a surprise, given these socio-political conditions, that populism came to the fore. BN and Pakatan Rakyat were locked in fierce competition for electoral support after 2008. It was Pakatan who initially introduced measures that were seen to attract votes, subsidies, and other "goodies" as part of their alternative budget. These populist measures gained traction in GE13, with the government offering a politicised cash transfer programme, *Bantuan Rakyat 1Malaysia* or BR1M, and a litany of special subsidies. The BN government's revenue advantage gave it a

stronger position in winning support in 2013, assisted in part with the slush funding from 1MDB for electoral use (Welsh 2013). In 2018, the opposition parties continued to push populist initiatives, calling for an end to the GST and an expansion of social safety nets – with BN repeating its electoral wooing with long lists of promises in its various electoral manifestos.

GE14 increasingly took on other dimensions of populism as well, as both Najib and Mahathir personified their leadership as "defending the people" and "saving the country." In fact, Mahathir's (re-)entry into politics was labelled a "Saving Malaysia" initiative, being launched in March 2016 and with this theme then anchoring his campaign in GE14. The rise of saviour populist politics can recently be found in Mexico and Brazil, as individuals tie their leadership to that of the people as part of a populist strategy to win support (*Economist* 2018). In Malaysia's case, Mahathir embraced his well-honed nationalist credentials, strong record of economic performance, and vast experience so as to take on this role.

Enough Was Enough: Mobilisation of an Emotional Narrative

Political polarisation, anger, economic vulnerability, nationalism, and populism were integral socio-political features contextualising GE14. These alone were not adequate to bring about a political transition, however. The first major sufficient factor involved a nexus of modern campaigning, social media expansion, and emotion. As outlined in this special issue, social media – both Facebook and WhatsApp – played a major role in mobilising voters. Rather than serving as an equaliser – a tool for the ordinary mobilisation of the "weak," as argued – I emphasise instead how social media enhanced the role that emotion played in GE14.

Studies of political psychology have been highlighting the role of emotions in election campaigns for over a decade (Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza 2017; Brader 2006). The research began with the study of emotional appeals in television advertisements. These were seen to provoke two different reactions: enthusiasm and fear. Traditional research argued that the effects from adverts were primarily epiphenomenal, geared toward arousal/attention-seeking and a matter of valence (triggering positive or negative responses to one candidate or another). Scholarship has since challenged these initial findings to suggest that emotions are, in fact, an integral part of voting behaviour, and often critical in decision-making processes – especially for less educated voters. Advertising uses symbolism that include specific cues that capitalise on learned behaviour. The

visual, non-verbal dimensions are especially important, in that they impact behaviour inadvertently.

More recent research has integrated the role of social media, and its synergies with political advertising/campaigns. The Brexit and Trump campaigns, for example, have provoked research into how voters were influenced, especially after the revelations that automated Twitter accounts and targeted algorithms on Facebook (prepared by private companies such as Cambridge Analytica in collaboration with access to user data) were used (Barlett 2018; *Economist* 2017; Persily 2017). This research has pointed to the mobilisation role of anger, and to a lesser extent anxiety. It has also highlighted the role of humour in stimulating responses and evoking support. What has distinguished the emotional appeal diffused through social media is the trust networks that the messages have been built on, as well as the ability to target messages to specific individuals using algorithms measuring political leanings from their use of social media accounts and the Internet (Barlett 2018). These patterns of use of social media are known to the companies using the algorithms and hard to predict given their "emotive" and personal qualities, as they are not captured in polling – and thus, when they are eventually revealed in voting, they come as a "surprise."

Historically, emotion has always been important in Malaysian elections. It is not new, even if it has remained buried as an analytical tool. Fear has been a consistent element in BN campaigns. A famous example is that of the use of images of terrorist attacks in the Sarawak 2001 state elections to discredit the opposition. In GE13, the message of Malay ethnic political displacement was repeatedly used to scare voters so as to maintain support for BN (Welsh 2013). Anger was mobilised in the 1999 campaign too, as Mahathir was attacked for his treatment of then opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim. GE13 also aimed to capture hope and enthusiasm in the "festival" celebratory rallies calling for change. Ironically, the large numbers of Chinese Pakatan supporters in the crowds were used to provoke fear among BN's political base, that feared a displacement of Malay rule, and contributed to BN retaining power in 2013. There is no shortage of political use of emotions in Malaysian electoral campaigns.

This tactic was especially effective in GE14. PH launched clear and consistent attacks on Najib – calling him a bandit, liar, and crook (*penyagak*, *penipu*, and *penyamum*). These terms capitalised on anger. At the same time, Mahathir used emotional appeals – taking his weakness (then being 92 years of age) as, in fact, a strength, to build up a sense of sacrifice so as to enhance his "saviour" role. An emotional video, explaining why Mahathir was returning to politics and running for office, shot of him speaking to

children contained multiple symbolic cues – from music to the use of tears.[6] Mahathir also painted himself as the person under attack, with claims that his campaign was being sabotaged – and thus further evoking sympathy and anger. Who goes after a 92-year-old man? Mahathir was portrayed as the hero, while Najib was the villain; Mahathir was couched as the national protector, Najib as shameful (along with his portrayed "greedy" wife). Similar 'emotion-laiden' videos were used to promote Sabah state nationalism, as themes of displacement and unfairness were highlighted.[7] The behaviour of the BN-friendly Election Commission was also drawn on so as to arouse anger, as disqualifications, perceived unfair treatment of prospective candidates, and the destruction of campaign posters for having Mahathir's photograph on them reinforced a sense that "enough was enough" and this was all an outrage (Lee 2018) – or as described to imply disgust in Malay, "*menyampah*."

These messages were forwarded within trusted networks. Not only did they serve to stoke anger, they also reduced the effectiveness of the BN campaign – as shared communities instilled trust and confidence to engage in risk-taking, to vote for change. Social media had more coverage in GE14 than at any previous point in Malaysian history. As such, these affective messages had a greater effect. Without the socio-political context outlined earlier, they would not have been as successful however. The ground for an emotional break campaign was fertile and viable. Ultimately, PH's proved effective.

Death by 1MDB Cuts: An UMNO Tsunami

A broadly held view of GE14 is that political loyalties among Malays changed. Described as a "Malay tsunami," the election is painted as an important change in ethnic support (Liew 2018).[8] This interpretation fits with the dominant ethnic voting behaviour paradigm noted earlier. As a picture, it is simplistic – as it essentialises the Malay community, and does not adequately account for variation within that community as a whole. I argue that the second decisive factor was, in fact, a change in UMNO's

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6   The video can be found online at: <www.youtube.com/watch?v=XzXWBL DstJw> (15 December 2018).

7   The video can be found online at: <www.youtube.com/watch?v=jeiuPHHM qmk> (15 December 2018).

8   The speech given by member of parliament Liew Chin Tong at the Australian National University in October 2018 can be seen here: <www.facebook.com/ liewchintong.my/posts/game-changerthe-may-9th-election-outcome-was-only-possible-because-statesmen-suc/10155796914835911/> (15 December 2018).

political base, a defection within UMNO's Malay political ground that had been evolving for over a decade. It coincided with the deinstitutionalisation of UMNO that was exacerbated by Najib's poor leadership.

The common understanding of the erosion of support for UMNO is to focus on elite splits, specifically the negative impact that the 2016 purge of UMNO leaders who opposed Najib over his handling of the 1MDB scandal had on the party. It is this purge that led to the ousting of former deputy prime minister Muhyiddin Yassin, former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, and of other leaders from UMNO, contributing to the formation of a new Malay-based party Party Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Malaysian United Indigenous Party, or Bersatu) (Lemiere 2018). This party attracted former UMNO members, and served as the vehicle for Mahathir to assume the position of prime minister-designate within PH. Elite splits have long been used to explain why dominant political parties collapse and authoritarian regimes change (O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead, 1986). It is, thus, not a surprise that this framework would be applied in Malaysia's political transition.

While not discounting the impact of elite division, I argue this does not adequately capture the underlying forces that contributed to both the elite split and changes in the support from the historical political base. For this, it is necessary to look at what happened within UMNO post-Mahathir's first era and, in particular, during Najib's tenure. UMNO experienced a deinstitutionalisation, in which the party organs and traditional patronage networks weakened (Welsh 2016). There was a failure of party reform and checks within the party itself to prevent abuses by Najib's corrupt leadership. Najib also failed to effectively rebrand the party (Welsh 2018c). When it opted to ally itself with PAS, Malaysia's Islamist party, in GE14 and the 2016 elite split occurred, this opened up the floodgates for desertion from UMNO's traditional supporters looking for a Malay 'familiar' alternative. GE14 should thus be seen as a UMNO tsunami, as changes in voting patterns point to a decimation of the party's political base.

In measuring the scope of UMNO's erosion of support, I concentrate on traditional seats – its "electoral core" or the constituencies that the party had held for since independence. I trace the support patterns over the last five elections (1999, 2004, 2008, 2013, and 2018). I begin with the 1999 election as this witnessed a large spilt in the Malay vote and UMNO's greatest number of losses in recent decades.. There are two groups of seats: those that the party maintained in GE14 (35) and those that the party lost (21), almost a quarter of the entire seats contested in

GE14.[9] The findings show that UMNO's decline has been ongoing, rather than only occurring in GE14. Table 1 below shows that since 2008 the party has lost 30.7 per cent of its support, close to a third. Half of this erosion occurred before GE14. Most of the losses are concentrated during Najib's tenure, 20.3 per cent. Undisputedly, the loss of 21 UMNO seats was critical in the final GE14 outcome – as PH's majority is only 10 seats, but the losses within UMNO were part of a longer process than just one election.

Table 1. Electoral Changes in UMNO's Electoral Core

UMNO Electoral Core	1999	2004	2008	2013	2018
Base Retained	62.0%	72.1%	64.9%	62.7%	49.9%
Base Lost	66.2%	75.6%	66.1%	58.4%	37.7%
Average	64.10%	73.85%	65.50%	60.55%	43.80%

UMNO Electoral Core	Change 2004	Change 2008	Change 2013	Change 2018
Base Retained	9.5%	-9.1%	-2.7%	-12.9%
Base Lost	9.3%	-11.5%	-7.2%	-17.9%
Average	9.40%	-10.30%	-4.95%	-15.40%

UMNO's deinstitutionalisation involves three factors: weaker party institutions, stymied reform, and failed rebranding. Founded in 1946, UMNO has long been touted as one of the strongest parties in Asia, with a robust patronage base and extensive community ties between the party and the electorate (Slater 2012; Slater and Fenner 2011). Most scholars trace changes within UMNO to the first Mahathir era, when the party expanded its involvement in the economy and became more centralised (Funston 2016). The rise of corruption – or money politics – resulted in a focus of the party on its elites rather than on its members as a whole, and shifts in patronage patterns, while the concentration of power reinforced already strong feudal and centralised tendencies within the party. The Najib era would exacerbate these practices further. As party president, Najib controlled not only political appointments but also centralised patronage around himself as both prime minister and finance minister (Gomez 2017). He appointed loyalists to key party organs, and rather than distribute patronage through these he created parallel processes using his control of the state (Welsh 2016). Patronage moved from party coffers to government funds, in the cash transfer programme 1Malaysia People's Aid (*Bantuan*

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9   For more details of the specific seats, see Welsh (2018).

Rakyat 1Malaysia or BR1M), for example, and became more concentrated directly within the prime minister's office as opposed to through an array of political bodies. On the ground, party organs were starved of funds and became increasingly irrelevant – that as their dependence on the political favour of the party's centralised leadership increased.

Internal pressures to change UMNO were also thwarted, as party elections were heavily manipulated in 2013 through the use of money – and delayed altogether until after GE14. This prevented conflicts within the party from being resolved, and resulted in infighting within UMNO on the ground – contributing to its losses electorally, especially in the states of Kedah, Terengganu, and Sabah (Welsh 2018c). Najib maintained power through his control of party elites particularly at the division level, losing touch with members who increasingly were unable to have a voice within the party itself and who were frustrated by their exclusion. The 1MDB crisis only served to reinforce the centralised control over the party rather than to allow reform and greater representation from within. The party was unable to correct the abuses of power internally.

To compensate for increased dissent within the party and the ongoing political erosion of support, Najib engaged in a rebranding of the party – aiming to make UMNO more Islamic and thus to woo supporters from its traditional foe, PAS (Welsh 2018c). He began to connect the party with PAS's Islamic agenda, opening away for the perceived close ties of the parties in GE14. He simultaneously adopted a rigid Malay chauvinist position that undercut the party's relationship with its non-Malay partners within BN. The end result in making the party more Islamic was that it served to make PAS more attractive to party members, as UMNO was no longer a more liberal alternative. As UMNO became more Malay chauvinist, it also lost ground as the party representing the middle ground of outreach to non-Malay parties (Welsh 2018d). These shifts contributed to the losses of the party over the longer-term, and can be seen in the GE14 results. UMNO lost political support among Malays, only capturing an estimated 44.5 per cent of their vote in GE14 compared to 61.4 per cent in GE13.[10] The party was no longer able to connect to its base, its members/supporters were increasingly alienated by stymied reform, and many Malays within UMNO no longer saw the party as a national one capable of representing the country as a whole. They left, opting for both PAS

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10   This is based on a national polling station analysis. Voter data is organised around streams capturing when voters register and thus are a proxy for age. The electoral roll also lists years of birth so these sources of information can be used to assess generation voting using ecological inference.

(which captured an estimated 31.7 per cent of Malay voters) and to a lesser extent, PH (at an estimated 23.3 per cent of Malay support).

Youth Support: The "Change" Generation

One particular group that never came to the party in the necessary numbers for UMNO's (and BN's) positive political fortunes in GE14 were young people. As shown in Table 2 below, voters under the age of 40 comprised over 43.6 per cent of the electorate in GE14 – some 6.4 million of the 13.9 million voters. Voters under 30 were a quarter of the electorate. The analysis examining patterns of voting in lower streams (*saluran*) of results shows that young people did not vote for BN in GE14 as they had in the past, with BN only capturing 28.4 per cent of voters under 30 and 29.2 per cent of those aged 31 to 40. The younger the voters, the larger the alienation from BN. The vote share declined 17.1 per cent and 15 per cent from 2013 in the respective age groups. Estimated turnout among young people also declined as well, from 83 per cent to 79 per cent, but the overall impact of younger voter participation was large enough to be decisive in the results. A significant share of the vote swing in GE14 can be seen to be tied to the shift among young voters alone.

Table 2. BN Electoral Turnout and Support by Age in GE13 and GE14

Age Group	21–30	31–40	41–50	51–60	Above 60
Share Voters	20.2%	23.4%	20.1%	17.8%	18.5%
2013 Turnout	83.2%	83.5%	84.7%	85.9%	81.3%
2018 Turnout	79.0%	79.4%	82.1%	84.5%	79.5%
2013 BN Share	45.5%	44.2%	48.0%	45.3%	48.6%
2018 BN Share	28.4%	29.2%	34.6%	33.7%	39.3%
Change Vote Share GE13 to GE14	-17.10%	-15.00%	-13.40%	-11.60%	-9.30%

Why did the young not support the incumbent government? The reasons for this can be tied to the broader socio-political forces noted earlier: namely, increased economic vulnerability among young people and the deinstitutionalisation of UMNO as well as its coalition partners within BN in its engagement with these younger voters.

Younger Malaysians are on the frontline of the negative implications of reduced social mobility. International Labour Organization estimates

suggest that youth unemployment reached 10.8 per cent in 2017, marginally increasing over the past three years.[11] While these numbers are much lower than those in other world regions, Malaysia's youth unemployment rate is one of the highest in Asia. Unemployment is particularly concentrated among those young people who are supposed to be rising economically, university graduates. Nearly a third of university graduates are estimated to be unemployed, highlighting a mismatch between their ambitions and the actual marketplace (Halim 2018). This lack of employment among graduates also highlights the challenges of social mobility among young people.

Youth economic vulnerability is not just a matter of employment, it is also tied to the cost of living and to wages. Studies show that wage growth in Malaysia is low, especially for young people who are hired in entry-level positions (Chong and Khong 2017). In the past decade there has been no real growth in entry salary wages, while cost of living has increased sharply. Young people also comprise a large share of Malaysia's B40, those in the bottom income percentiles. The impact of higher costs of living is thus particularly acute for young people. Like youth elsewhere, young Malaysians cannot afford to purchase housing at the same level as compared to older generations and cannot expect to attain the same standard of living as their parents. With the 2015 introduction of the GST, and the resulting inflation, BN set itself up for the erosion of its support among young people – as shown in the election results.

Economic factors cannot be seen in isolation from political ones, namely the weaknesses vis-à-vis youth engagement on the part of BN (Welsh 2018b). In GE14, BN lost the comparative populist advantage in engaging youth – especially urban youth. The dominant BN paradigm was to focus on opportunities, with an emphasis on jobs and training. This was coupled with improving facilities for sports and education. With deteriorating economic conditions perceived among youth, BN's economic programme had less resonance. It contrasted unfavourably with PH's call for free higher education and a review of still outstanding unpaid scholarship repayments. At the same time, PH fielded younger people in higher numbers, with a number of prominent young candidates such as Syed Saddiq. While youth voter registration dropped overall, the BN party organs had failed to register younger voters, compared to earlier levels and to PH. Not to be left out from our understanding of the shift in support is also the impact of the emotions generated in the social media campaigning noted

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11   See <www.statista.com/statistics/812222/youth-unemployment-rate-in-malaysia/> (15 December 2018).

above. Younger voters disproportionately obtain their information from social media. The impact of this was that when GE14 arrived, the youth were not with them. An overwhelming majority of young people voted for change.

"New Malaysia": Reflections on Saving Malaysia

In understanding the GE14 results, my argument has pointed to the central role of emotions in a more modern campaign, deinstitutionalisation within UMNO, and an erosion of youth support. These factors cannot be understood in isolation from broader socio-political conditions: political polarisation, increase of anger, greater economic vulnerability, and the rise of nationalism and populism. The combination of micro developments tied to broader macro conditions resulted in the political transition witnessed.

While not discounting alternative explanations – the role of leadership and opposition pacts in particular – this analysis suggests we need to more fully incorporate a broader understanding of socio-political changes regarding voting behaviour. Emotional campaigning would not have been so effective without the rise of anger and nationalism. The deinstitutionalisation of UMNO would similarly not have been so impactful without failures to meet populist expectations within the party and the backlash effect of moving it towards more conservative Islamic and also exclusionary racist political ground. Finally, youth disenchantment with BN must be seen as tied to rising economic vulnerabilities. None of the shifts would not have been as significant without the deeply entrenched political polarisation or zero-sum character of Malaysian politics on the eve of GE14. The prominent role of affect, and changes within UMNO as well as among youth, combined to facilitate a political transition.

Analytically, my combination of socio-political conditions with more micro developments within the campaign and with patterns of voting behaviour suggests that understanding elections in Malaysia and GE14 specifically requires moving out of rigid frameworks focused on leadership. A shift away from narrow dominant explanations that look at ethnic voting and coalition choices is necessary, too. There is a need to appreciate emotions, longer-term changes within political parties, and demographic shifts. In short we need to see Malaysian elections as shaped as much outside of the campaign period itself as within it.

This attention to the factors contributing to "saviour politics" and the return of Mahathir as prime minister suggest that Malaysia is not

unique in being shaped by global trends. Ironically given Mahathir's role in Malaysian political history, GE14 was a break from the past, rather than an emphatic national embrace of a democratic future. While democracy has expanded as a result of the victory of more liberal parties in a coalition and a turnover of government, this development has been driven by similar forces that are breaking the mould of incumbent patterns of leadership elsewhere too. The factors themselves also suggest that Malaysia's new government will also face considerable challenges. Emotional appeals can fade quickly if not replaced by more concrete and substantive engagement. A weaker UMNO does not point to a constructive opposition, and is an unhealthy element in a democracy. And, the power of youth electorally highlights the need for meaningful engagement and changes in policy outcomes that meet the expectations of this "change generation." The young expect deliverables, especially in the economy. Greater democracy in Malaysia has demands to rapidly address; not least among these are the burdens caused by the anger and political polarisation that BN left behind. Lessons from Latin America have shown that "saviours" face difficult times ahead, and are constrained by both the leaders elected and their management of the socio-political conditions that they inherit. In this vein, Mahathir's return comes with high expectations and faces significant obstacles. Saving Malaysia will thus involve moving beyond the efforts of one man, to tackle the underlying socio-political conditions – especially anger and economic vulnerabilities. Anything less will mean that Malaysia's democratic expansion will itself be under possible threat from a new saviour, potentially tapping again into anger and capitalising on more conservative and authoritarian forces that remain an important part of Malaysia's political socio-political fabric.

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