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# The 14th General Election, the Fall of Barisan Nasional, and Political Development in Malaysia, 1957–2018

Muhamad M. N. Nadzri

**Abstract:** The results of the recent 2018 general election (GE14) in Malaysia were exceptional. The ruling party – Barisan Nasional (BN) – was ousted from power after over six decades of authoritarian rule, by a new opposition coalition – the Pakatan Harapan (PH). In this historic election, BN lost all the federal states in Peninsular Malaysia except for the two less developed ones of Perlis and Pahang. BN was also defeated in Sabah for the second time since its dramatic recapture in 1995. However, these results are not as surprising if one looks at the outcome from its historical and developmental perspectives. The indication of the breakdown of the one-party dominant state of Malaysia can (at least) be traced back to 10 years ago – since the 2008 general election (GE12). BN then lost several parliamentary seats in the urban centres, even with a less unified opposition. It had also lost four states on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia, and had been fairly incompetent in reclaiming control over Selangor and Penang since that particular election. Five years later, in the 2013 general election (GE13), the results aggravated BN. It had lost its popular votes to the then opposition coalition – the Pakatan Rakyat (PR). The main objectives of this article, therefore, are twofold. First, it intends to shed light on the recent general elections through historical and developmental approaches by linking them to the electoral results, and political development in Malaysia, respective to GE12 and GE13. Second, it strives to make available for analysis the arguments on how the opposition pact managed to unseat BN in GE14. The analysis in this article is based on the data gathered by the author through a mixture of media studies, library research, and direct observation – as this author was one of the official observers appointed by the Election Commission of Malaysia for GE14. The main argument of this article on the breakthrough of PH to the federal government is that the opposition managed to reshape the multiparty electoral system to a “two-plus-one party system” from late 2016, which boosted the level of political competition between the two main parties in Malaysia – namely, BN and PH – in GE14. Four major factors have been identified as constituting the triumph of PH and the fall of BN in the election. These are: the existence of a credible representative and strong

opposition, with the inclusion of Mahathir and two Malay/*Bumiputra* (“the natives”) political parties; the rupture of the elites within the ruling regime; the presence of impactful issues surrounding Najib’s administration; and, the advancement of information and communications technology as well as its impact on the emergence of a digital and much more participative society in Malaysia.

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**Keywords:** Malaysian general election, Barisan Nasional, Pakatan Harapan, Mahathir, Bersatu, United Malays National Organisation, democratisation, electoral system

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# 1 Introduction

The 14th Malaysian general election (GE14), held on 9 May 2018, has attracted much attention. Many observers were predicting that the mighty ruling party, the Barisan Nasional (BN, National Front) would be re-elected to federal power once again, for the fourteenth time since the Malaysian state's independence in 1957. Their predictions, in fact, were not without basis. In mid-2015, the then influential opposition pact of the Pakatan Rakyat (PR, People's Alliance) – which consisted of the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR, People's Justice Party), Democratic Action Party (DAP), and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS, Pan Malaysia Islamic Party) – went its separate ways (*The Star* 2017b). Earlier that year, their charismatic supreme leader, Anwar Ibrahim, was sentenced to five years imprisonment (*The Guardian* 2015). This new configuration of the Malaysian political and electoral system was put to the test when two by-elections were held concurrently in Kuala Kangsar and Sungai Besar, in June 2016. BN won big in the elections even with fewer votes, due to deep cleavages among the opposition parties (*Malaysiakini* 2018a).

Nonetheless, there have been other important developments in Malaysian politics since 2014. These include the emergence of a number of unpopular policies and issues surrounding Najib's administration, the return of Mahathir to Malaysia's political scene, the ruling party's split in 2015, and the gradual establishment of a new and stronger opposition coalition – the Pakatan Harapan (PH, Alliance of Hope). These substantial factors were played down by the Najib's administration and by many political observers, based on their understanding of the “happenings” in the twin by-elections.

Based on these premises, the objectives of this article<sup>1</sup> are two-fold. First, it attempts to shed light on GE14 historically, specifically through the developmental approach of linking the current electoral result and political development in Malaysia with the general elections of 2008 (GE12) and 2013 (GE13) respectively. Second, it strives to provide an analysis and argument on the success of PH in unseating the BN government in this historic election. The analyses in this article are based on the data gathered by the author through a mixture of archival research, media studies, and

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1 I would like to express my gratitude to UKM for providing me with three separate research grants (Young Scholars Grant GGPM-2018-022, Mainstream Project AP-2017-001/1, and Mainstream Challenges Fund DCP-2017-009/1) for the completion of this work.

direct observation as an official observer appointed by the Election Commission of Malaysia (ECM).<sup>2</sup>

This article is divided into three main parts, reflecting the three phases of development in post-independence Malaysian politics and the country's electoral system. The first phase can be referred to as that of "one-party dominance," beginning in 1957 and running up to February 2008. The second phase is the "two-coalition party system," lasting from March 2008 up to the split in the PR in mid-2015. The third phase is the contemporary one in Malaysian politics, beginning from mid-2015 and continuing at present – being the period of a multiparty system that has paved the way for the formation of a "two-plus-one party system" towards – and underlying the regime change in – GE14.

## 2 The Construction of a One-Party Dominance System through the Practice of Electoral Authoritarianism, 1957–February 2008

Malaysia's electoral system has always been a multiparty one. But in practice, it never comes to that (except for a brief period in 2016). From its independence in 1957 until February 2008, Malaysia's electoral system can be best characterised as "electoral authoritarianism" (Schedler 2006: Chapter 1). This scholar describes how:

[...] electoral authoritarian regimes play the game of multiparty elections by holding regular elections for the chief executive and a national legislative assembly. Yet they violate the liberal-democratic principles of freedom and fairness so intensely and systematically to deliver elections instruments of authoritarian rule rather than instruments of democracy. (Schedler 2006: 3)

Malaya's (since 1963 known as Malaysia) independence was practically the work of the then hegemonic Malay-based nationalist party known as the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and of the British (Crouch 1996: 17). The party formed in 1946, in opposition to the British's Malayan Union plan of earlier that year. The UMNO elites, many of whom were working as officials within the British colonial government, managed to

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2 For GE14, the ECM appointed 14 organisations in Malaysia as its official observers. UKM was one of these organisations. There were 14 researchers representing the UKM's team, and the author was one of them.

galvanise Malay support to the extent that the plan was abolished less than two years after its inauguration (Cheah 2012: 286). In fact, in establishing the new framework for state independence, the British colonial government had favoured UMNO elites and the representatives of the Malay rulers having key control, specifically through the Anglo-Malay Working Committee (*Straits Times* 1946). As a result, the Federation of Malaya Agreement (FMA) was declared in September 1948 and was made the foundation for the construction of the future constitution of Malayan independence.

At the same time, there was another constitutional proposal made through a collaboration of a number of political parties and civic associations, known as AMCJA (All Malaya Council of Joint Action). But unlike UMNO, this group was not endorsed by the British and their proposal; the People's Constitution was ignored (Cheah 2002: 20). The British not only favoured UMNO because the party was more popular than the other ones but more importantly its leaders were more lenient and diplomatic with the British (Kaßner 2013: 74). Many UMNO elites, after all, were "British made." The top UMNO leadership in its early years for example – Onn Jaafar, Tunku Abdul Rahman, and Abdul Razak Hussain – were all products of British colonial policy. All of them were not only instructed in the British education system in Malaya and Great Britain, but were indeed also groomed by the colonial power to be the future elites in Malaya. The second British commissioner for the FMA, Henry Gurney, for instance, played a crucial role in cultivating Onn Jaafar, the first president of UMNO, as the future leader in the Federation of Malaya (Lee 2008: 71).

This was in a stark contrast to the UMNO's rivals, like the organisations within AMCJA and the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), who used a much more radical method in confronting the British – that apart from having a much different plan for independence too (Hack 2001: 115). This contestation naturally created uneasiness for the colonial government, as it posed a great risk particularly to British economic control in Malaya – a much-needed resource to rebuild Great Britain's post-war economy. Thus, in parallel with the 1948 Proclamation of Emergency, political control was heavily exerted over the British and UMNO's antagonists. Onn Jaafar, for example, used his position in the colonial government to crush his Islamic opponent in March 1948 (Müller 2014). The British also indirectly assisted the ascendancy of UMNO by banning a number of Malay political organisations that were in direct competition with the party, including the Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM, Malay Youth Union) (Hack and Blackburn 2012: 42).

UMNO and its strategic political pact known as the Alliance Party won the first Legislative Assembly election conducted in 1955 with a landslide victory – capturing all but one seat. But the transfer of power only actually happened in late August 1957, when Malaya achieved its independence from Great Britain. The ruling party elites, led by the nationalist party of the UMNO, inherited significant powers from the British-made political system that had been shaped by colonialism and by the 1948 emergency. The UMNO elites had their own agenda, namely to maintain Malay political hegemony and supremacy in Malaya. To this end, these elites began to construct and reconstruct the country's political and electoral systems to allow UMNO to remain in power – under the pretext of “protecting the interests of the Malays” (Crouch 1996: 36). Accordingly, the Malay(s)ian bureaucracy were Malay-nised and politicalised (party-nised); this saw the gradual enlargement and domination of the Malay sections at all levels within the public sector (Beh 2011: 172). The majority of those appointed heads of government agencies were UMNO loyalists who, more often than not, willingly used their positions and powers for their political masters.

In the political system, various draconian laws were enacted and executed based on the emergence of (potential) threats towards the ruling party – and thus in the name of “security threats” and “protecting the state's stability,” or “racial harmony” (Human Rights Watch 2004: 18). In 1960, under Tunku Abdul Rahman's leadership, the Internal Security Act (ISA) was introduced, which allowed the government to detain any suspected individual believed to pose a security threat without trial. ISA was responsible, according to Lim Kit Siang (2012), for the detaining of more than 10,000 people after 1960; some of these detainees were political dissidents. With the growing assertiveness of students and professors at the local universities, the Razak administration enacted the University and the University College Act (UUCA) in 1971 to depoliticise academia. The Mahathir administration also introduced various laws intended to exert such political control between 1981 and 2003, including the Printing Presses and Publications Act of 1984 and the Communications and Multimedia Act (MCMC) of 1998. These were designed to curb the spread of news and information among the general public (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 113).

At the same time, the electoral system was steadily engineered to ensure the success of the Alliance, in the early 1970s known as Barisan Nasional, with the incorporation of several other political parties into the regime. Beginning with the provision of more weight to rural seats (read: Malay seats) prior to the 1959 general election (Lee and Ong 1987: 119), the electoral system was gradually rigged by the ruling party – with, for



example, the abolishment of the constitutional provision on having a relatively equal apportionment of voters in each constituency after the 1960s (Lim 2002: 105). Further such measures were the practice of voter juggling, including the removal of Kuala Lumpur from Selangor in the early 1970s to allow UMNO's continuing hegemony in the state, and the misappropriation of powers by using government agencies, their personnel, and their resources to persuade voters to favour the ruling party (Loh 2009: 129).

The above *modus operandi*, combined with the other practices of political patronage (Lim 2008), money politics, and the politics of development – alongside too the ruling party's own acquired credibility in managing the economic and socio-political affairs of the state, as well as the opposition's obvious weaknesses – had functionally damaged the original core purpose of conducting elections. On the contrary, the election became the means for the continuation of BN's authoritarian rule. This saw the construction and maintenance of a one-party dominance system from state independence up to GE12, mainly through the practice of electoral authoritarianism.

It is important to note that BN's ability to withstand the pressures of regime change were not solely based on its statecraft, but also on the opposition being relatively weak, ideologically divided, and less organised. The latter simply did not represent a practical option to the general Malaysian voter. On the one hand, PAS's core ideology of building a more Islamic Malaysia was certainly unparalleled among non-Malay voters. On the other, DAP's politics of a multiracial and liberal Malaysia were always terrifying to the majority of Malays.

The only times that the opposition had a better chance of competing with BN were in the general elections of 1990 and of 1999, when there were elite splits within the ruling party. In the 1990 one, the opposition forces came together in a rather odd coalition – or coalitions, to be more precise. Razaleigh Hamzah, a former contender to Mahathir within UMNO, had been appointed to lead the opposition. But due to the deep ideological differences between Islamic-based parties and the non-Malay ones, Razaleigh had to organise two different coalitions to confront BN in the election. The first, known as the Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah (APU), was a cooperation between Razaleigh's party Semangat 46 and three Islamic-based ones – PAS, BERJASA, and HAMIM. At the same time, Razaleigh also fostered a pact with the non-Malay parties – DAP and Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) – that was known as the Gagasan Rakyat. Despite having these rather loose coalitions, the opposition managed to wrest a lot more seats in the parliament – from 83.61 per cent in the 1986 general

election to 70.5 per cent in the 1990 one (Abdul Aziz 1999: 147). In contrast to having a more integrated opposition front, APU moved to the far right – which resulted in the dissolution of Gagasan only a few months before the 1995 general election (Weiss 2006: 108). The opposition parties performed badly in that 1995 election, and many leaders in Semangat 46 – including Razaleigh himself – decided to re-join UMNO in 1996.

However a bigger split occurred in UMNO in September 1998, this time between Mahathir and Anwar. Mahathir responded to Anwar's growing assertiveness and popularity in the party with a heavy hand. Anwar was not only removed from his cabinet and party posts by Mahathir, but he was also detained under the ISA before being charged for sodomy and the misuse of power. Anwar's supporters, both in the government and the ruling party, retaliated by leaving the party to form a new one, known as Parti Keadilan Nasional (later, PKR) – primarily to seek justice for Anwar. They organised a lot of *Reformasi* protests of various scales and different places, to the extent that they won the sympathy from other opposition parties – namely, DAP, PAS, and Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM). Eventually, a united front of the opposition parties – known as the Barisan Alternatif (BA) – was formed just about one month before the 1999 general election (held in November). Through BA, the opposition acquired significantly more popular votes and won 15 more seats than it had done in the 1995 general election.

Within these political and electoral frameworks, the level of competition was low and victory for BN was always assured. The opposition forces were also divided on their own ideologies, lacked pragmatism, and – more often than not – were fighting among themselves. With this deficiency in the external force and internal dynamics of the opposition parties, they failed to pose a serious threat or become a viable alternative to the incumbent regime. This explains BN's continuous and recurring victories with a two-thirds majority in parliament in the general elections held between 1974 and 2004.

### 3 The Shift to Competitive Authoritarianism and the Rise of a Two-Coalition Party System, March 2008–Mid-2015

The day the government knows best is over. (Najib Razak, in: *The Edge Markets* 2009)

In the previous section, I highlighted how the ruling elite fragmented and how the presence of a united opposition is a significant factor to the enhancing of political competition in Malaysian elections. Nonetheless, these factors are not in themselves enough to move the bulk of the Malaysian voters to favour the opposition. The fact remains that BN still managed to secure, as noted, a continuous two-thirds majority in parliament after 1974, including in the general elections of 1990 and 1999.

Interestingly the breakthrough against BN's domination happened in GE12, when the opposition parties were only modestly organised. BN was denied its two-thirds majority for the first time since 1974, and it only secured 51.39 per cent of the popular vote. BN recorded many losses in urban areas, and also lost out on the popular vote in Peninsular Malaysia. While PAS was able to dominate the majority of the state seats in Kelantan, the opposition advanced to wrest Kedah, Penang, Perak, and Selangor from BN for the first time. Consequently BN's support base was only in rural areas, many of whom were the Malay and the other native peoples. The Chinese (and other urban voters, including the Malays and Indians) were seemingly united in rejecting BN in the election. These outcomes were remarkable as the political system had not undergone any fundamental change under the leadership of the then prime minister Abdullah Badawi, who replaced Mahathir in late 2003. Despite Abdullah's much gentler approach to the public and the opposition in contrast to Mahathir's (Mustafa 2010), his administration was still not free from the use of draconian laws and other authoritarian measures – including in crippling *Bersih* and *Hindraf* demonstrations in 2007 (Murkherjee and Koren 2018).

There were four interconnected factors that contributed to these results, and to making the political and electoral systems in Malaysia much more competitive. First, the pressing economic situation – particularly the rising cost of living in the country, occurring without any significant accompanying change in income level among the populace (Merdeka Center 2008). Second, Abdullah's ineffective policies and weak governance contributed too. He failed to respond to various socio-economic issues faced by the populace, including the mounting price of housing and the problems of income stagnation. Abdullah's weaknesses in the administration

were also observable through his son-in-law's (Khairy Jamaludin) influence in his government (Lee and Nesarurai 2010: 114).

The third factor was the growing utilisation of information and communications technology (ICT) among Malaysian society. With the constraints imposed on the opposition parties vis-à-vis the printed media, they utilised cyberspace extensively instead – particularly through websites, blogs, and YouTube. Failing to acknowledge the growing significance of the Internet in politics, BN only participated in the virtual world rather minimally and continued to rely on the assumed strength of the mainstream media. The opposition was left to capitalise on cyberspace alone. *Malaysiakini.com* and other online news media portals (such as *Malaysia Today*) played a significant role here, particularly in presenting a much more balanced view on the current state of affairs in the country by giving a lot of media coverage to the opposition leaders. The advent of the Internet opened up the previously tightly controlled political space in Malaysia. Apart from providing alternative news, it also enabled the greater participation of many Malaysians in the political processes of the country. The success of the *Bersih* leader in drawing more than 30,000 protesters in late 2007 (Khoo 2016) was made possible, among other things, by the advent of ICT. Nonetheless, access to the Internet was at that time still limited – especially for the rural and the working-class populations, as it was then still considered something expensive and very advanced.

The fourth factor was the decision made by the opposition parties to hold a one-to-one electoral contest against BN. Even though the opposition parties were less united in GE12, there was a loose pact between PKR and DAP. Under the leadership of Anwar Ibrahim, who had been released from jail in 2004, the pact also made an understanding with PAS and the opposition in Sabah and Sarawak to avoid competition among themselves – and thus to contest BN on a one-to-one basis.

These various developments caused BN to lose two of its main support bases: the non-Malays and the urban voters. In the 1999 general election, despite the elite split within UMNO, Mahathir's regime managed to maintain its two-thirds majority in parliament mainly due to the Chinese endorsement of Mahathir's "developmentalism" policy (Loh 2002: 29). In fact, this was the main reason for the increase in the number of Chinese majority and mixed constituencies in 2003, which prompted the BN landslide victory in the 2004 general election. But with the unbearable economic conditions for many Malaysians – particularly in urban areas and for businesses after the 2004 general election, combined with Abdullah's unpopular policy, the growth of the Internet, and the one-to-one electoral contest in GE12 – the decline of BN's supremacy was inevitable.

BN's failure in GE12 caused Abdullah to step down and be replaced by his deputy, Najib Razak, in April 2009. Knowing that the political system had become much more competitive than ever before, Najib – with one of his famous dictums, as quoted at the beginning of this section – worked extremely hard to win back the people's support for BN. On the very day that he took over the premiership, he launched a long-running campaign for damage control and confidence-building in BN with a lot of programmes under the name of "1Malaysia" – the new ideological premise for BN's government under Najib. Addressing the issues surrounding GE12 were prioritised as the main objectives of his government, and situated as the "National Key Results Areas" as well as the basis of his "transformation plans." Apart from responding to the issues facing the nation with various 1Malaysia programmes, BN also started to enter into cyberspace much more seriously – now hiring and recruiting a large number of cyber-troopers. In fact, Najib became BN's biggest superstar by drawing millions of fans to his social media platforms.

Nevertheless, many voters remained critical of Najib's administration – mainly the Chinese, the urban folk, the middle class, and the younger generation too (Merdeka Center 2012). Najib's transformation policies from April 2009 up until GE 2013 failed to achieve the desired impact, however. In the realm of economics, his financial assistance programme for the working class – known as Bantuan Rakyat 1Malaysia (BR1M) – was too insignificant to help improve the standard of living for these individuals. Najib's housing policy for the populace – known as the "affordable housing" programme (PR1MA) – was not really "affordable" for many – even to those in the middle-income group (*Utusan Malaysia* 2014). For many of them, they could only "afford to see" rather than to own these homes (*Malay Mail* 2014). The 1Malaysia Convenience Store (KR1M), designed to provide for the everyday needs of the populace at discounted or subsidised prices, was also rolled out with only ultimately limited success. Many Malaysians rather patronised privately funded convenience stores like Giants and Tesco, which provide better-quality products at competitive prices (*The Edge Market* 2015).

Najib's political transformation programmes were also less effective. Varsity students were practically still not allowed to join the opposition or to participate in any form of public protest. Online news portals like *Malaysiakini* and *The Malaysian Insider* were regularly harassed by Najib's administration, meanwhile (Liu 2014: 47). The abolition of ISA to coincide with the independence day celebrations of 2011 was undermined by the introduction of the Security Offences Special Measures Act (SOSMA) in

2012, with it having a lot of similarities with ISA (Amnesty International 2013).

At the same time, the growth of ICT among the populace accelerated with the advent of smartphones in Malaysia. The majority of users were the middle class, urban dwellers, and the younger generations. Many of them had their own social media profiles on Facebook and Twitter and relied on online news, rather than the conventional media, for information (*News24* 2013). In fact, GE13 was described by Shamsul A. B. as a “smart-phone election” (*Astro Awani* 2013). Even though the numbers of Internet users was growing, however, like in GE12 those involved were still limited mainly to the above-mentioned groups – as the cost of the technology was still prohibitive to many.

The most important development regarding GE13 was the establishment of a united opposition front, the earlier-mentioned PR. Almost like BA in 1999, PR was a coalition of three main opposition parties – PKR, DAP, and PAS – but headed by Anwar himself. As a united opposition and the ruling party of five states in Peninsular Malaysia (BN managed to wrest Perak from PR in 2009 through a party-hopping exercise), the opposition managed to project themselves as a viable future government of Malaysia. They made what could be seen as a “practical” policy for the future of Malaysia under their rule. In fact, BN’s 2013 manifesto consisted of a lot of resemblances with PR’s (*The Star* 2013).

As a result, PR managed to secure many more seats in parliament in GE13 as compared to after GE12. It also won the popular vote, with 50.9 per cent thereof – in contrast to BN’s only 47.4 per cent (*New Straits Times* 2018a). This was the first time that the opposition had won the popular vote since the country’s first election in 1955. The opposition argued that they lost overall because of the electoral-rigging practised by the ruling regime, as discussed in the previous section. This advancement in the political system indicated two important but contradictory developments in Malaysian politics after 2008. On the one hand, the electoral contest in the state had become much more competitive with the emergence and consolidation of the two-party coalition system. But, on the other, authoritarian measures were still being used despite Najib’s transformation and “democratisation” programmes. This included the carrot and stick approaches taken to the populace. In July 2011, for instance, almost 1,700 *Bersih 2.0* demonstrators were arrested – including many leaders of the opposition. But at the same time the government also practiced institutionalised corruption, as highlighted by Terence Gomez, like giving BR1M

money to the B40 groups<sup>3</sup> on the eve of the election (*The Star* 2018e). The hybrid regime of Malaysia, thus, definitely shifted from an electoral authoritarian to a competitive one after 2008.

## 4 The Change to a Multiparty System and the Breakdown of Barisan Nasional, Mid-2015–2018

BN's narrow victory in GE13 brought about two main perceptions on the part of the regime. First, the ruling party regarded the Chinese voters as being totally against BN. Immediately after the results of the election were released, UMNO's official mouthpiece *Utusan Melayu* posed a fiery question to the public: "What else do the Chinese want?" (*Utusan Melayu* 2013). Second, their main support bases were only the Malay voters and the other natives, particularly in the rural areas. Despite its slim majority in parliament, the second term (from May 2013 to May 2018) of the Najib administration was still spirited and marked by high self-confidence (*The Sun Daily* 2018b).

The confidence of BN – or more specifically, overconfidence – was not without basis, however. First and foremost, the opposition was in disarray (*Straits Times* 2017b). The death of Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat (PAS's spiritual leader) in February 2015 allowed the conservative faction within that party to gain control. Headed by Abdul Hadi Awang, this conservative group within PAS was always cautious in their cooperation with DAP and PKR – who they often regarded as *kaafir* (disbelievers) and as liberal respectively. But their loyalty to and reverence for Nik Aziz caused them to become conditional friends with DAP and PKR. With the demise of Nik Aziz, the conservative group conducted a purge during the party election of June 2015 – expelling all of the progressive members who were pro-PR from the party leadership (*The Sun Daily* 2015). Since then, the party president, Abdul Hadi, has pushed for the exercising of Islamic law in Kelantan and eventually also for greater jurisdiction – known as Hadi's Bill – for the Sharia courts all of over the country (*New Straits Times* 2016b). This

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3 The BR1M or 1Malaysia People's Aid was one of the Najib administration's responses to the economic issues surrounding Malaysians since towards the end of the first decade of the new century. The aid targeted the working class, who were officially categorised by the government as the "Bottom 40%," or the B40 group. Even though the money used for BR1M originated from public funds, the hand-over of aid to the B40 groups was nevertheless often done through BN leaders as part of the country's politics of patronage.

polemic, along with other unresolvable issues between the new leadership of PAS and other leaders within PR, finally caused PR to disintegrate on 16 June 2015 (*Straits Times* 2015b). The opposition had also lost its charismatic chief, Anwar Ibrahim, after he was sentenced to a five-year imprisonment term earlier that year. Several other opposition leaders were also slapped with criminal charges, including DAP Secretary-General Lim Guan Eng and Vice President of PKR Rafizi Ramli.

Knowing that they would have less chance to successfully confront BN with the disintegration of PR and without the presence of Anwar, the leaders from PKR, DAP, and the former progressive group within PAS devised a new plan to reorganise the opposition parties. The progressive group that had been ousted by the PAS leadership was encouraged to form a new party, to replace the role of PAS within the new pact. As a result, on 16 September 2015 Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah) was formed – being led by Mohamad Sabu (*Straits Times* 2015a). A week later, a new opposition coalition was formed too – the aforementioned PH (*The Star* 2015).

At the same time, in early 2015, Mahathir Mohamed returned to politics and would become one of the strongest critics of Najib's administration. Mahathir capitalised on the issues surrounding the mismanagement of one of the government's investment arms, the 1Malaysia Development Board (1MDB), particularly on the issue of a MYR 2.6 billion (USD 700 million) deposit in Najib's bank account and the murder of Altantuya Shaariibuu to discredit Najib's administration and personality. Najib's administration retaliated with negative propaganda on Mahathir, exposing Mahathir's past mistakes and attacking his legacy. The administration also removed Mahathir from his positions as the advisor of Petronas and the chairman of Proton. Unhappy with how Najib treated the former statesman and how he dealt with the 1MDB issue, several top leaders in UMNO aired their discontent behind closed doors. Najib quickly reacted to the move by doing a clean-up within the government and the ruling party. In late July 2015, Najib thus sacked Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin and Minister Shafie Apdal in a cabinet reshuffle (*Straits Times* 2015c). Muhyiddin was then deputy president of UMNO while Shafie was one of its vice presidents. Later in February 2016, Mahathir's son Mukriz – who was the head of government of the State of Kedah and one of the top leaders in UMNO – was also removed from both of his posts (*Straits Times* 2016c). Najib used this political reshuffling to strengthen his position, by keeping and appointing his loyalists at both federal and state levels.

In embarking on a united opposition so as to push for Najib's resignation, Mahathir launched the *Malaysian Citizens' Declaration* on 4 March 2016. The declaration was not only supported by the ousted leaders of



UMNO, but also by many opposition leaders and civil groups too (*Straits Times* 2016b). The PKR's president, Wan Azizah, did not turn up at the event, as Anwar and she were still cautious about Mahathir's intentions (*Malaysiakini* 2016a). But she also did not discourage any leader in PH from attending and supporting the cause – which explained the large turnout of opposition leaders including PKR Deputy President Azmin Ali and DAP supremo Lim Kit Siang. The declaration paved the way for the building of a stronger opposition coalition – with the possibility of a merger between Mahathir and the ex-UMNO leaders into PH. Later, several secret meetings were held between Mahathir, ex-UMNO leaders, and certain key figures from PH at Mahathir's office in Putrajaya (*Straits Times* 2016a). In the end, they concluded that a new political party is needed to replace UMNO and strengthen the opposition pact.

But in the course of the process, two by-elections were held in Kuala Kangsar and Sungai Besar, on 18 June 2016. As PAS decided to go it alone, the by-elections became a three-way fight – with BN and PH also in the contest. BN was the incumbent in both constituencies, winning an only slim majority in GE13. The by-elections marked the beginning of a genuine multiparty system in Malaysia and the demise of the two-party coalition one that had been fostered by the opposition parties since GE12. The by-elections were regarded by many as an impression of what would happen in the same three-way fight scenario for the coming general election.

Mahathir lent his hand to the PH's candidate. Nevertheless, the results threw up an easy win for BN in both constituencies. In fact the BN candidate in Kuala Kangsar, Mastura Mohd Yazid, did not even do her own campaigning, as she was observing the Islamic teaching that forbids a widow from going outside the house for four months after the death of their husband. BN's victory in the by-election had given the party some optimism and confidence about its survival in the coming general election (*The Star* 2016a). To BN leaders, their victory in the by-elections was a testament to the fact that the problems surrounding Najib's government were not significant to voters themselves.

At the same time, Najib's administration built a friendly relationship with PAS under the leadership of Hadi Awang – mainly to keep on dividing the opposition parties. BN and PAS leaders were not only often seen together, but they also cooperated on certain issues – particularly ones involving Muslims and Islam (*Malaysiakini* 2016b). In fact, BN once offered to table Hadi's Bill in parliament (*Malaysiakini* 2017a). PAS, on its part, publicly claimed that it no longer had the intention to remove BN at the federal level (*The Star* 2017a). On the contrary, it offered to be an ad-

visor to the BN government and stated that it would henceforth only approach that party through what PAS called “mature politics” – in contrast to its previous policy of being aggressive towards BN (*The Star* 2017a).

At the same time, Najib’s administration put together a number of authoritarian measures to ensure its continuing dominance after GE14. Three of them are worth mentioning here. First, in early June 2016, the National Security Act was introduced – even though it failed to acquire royal assent (*The Star* 2016b). The act, practically, allowed the prime minister to declare an emergency at a designated security site, and thus the application of security laws in the affected area were enforced with the prime minister holding the highest command among the security forces. This move was in direct conflict with the provisions of the Malaysian constitution, whereby the power of declaring an emergency falls under the jurisdiction of the king. As the head of state, the constitution also stipulates that the king plays the role of “Supreme Commander of Malaysian Military Forces.” Second, BN’s government passed a bill – known as the Anti-Fake News Act – just one month before GE14, which would make illegal the spreading of news and information via old and new media forms. This included on Facebook and WhatsApp – the two most popular social media applications among Malaysians (*The Star* 2018d).

Third, the BN exploited government agencies so as to manipulate the circumstances of GE14. The ECM played a major role in this regard. At first, the ECM working under the Prime Minister Department, introducing a new electoral boundary – which was also hastily passed in parliament in late March 2018, about five weeks before GE14, without the opposition being given any room for asking questions and initiating debate on it (*Straits Times* 2018a). The new electoral boundary is also ethnically based, with an increased number of Malay majority constituencies – an obvious move to help BN win the election (*Malay Mail* 2018b). The ECM also rejected the application made by the Malaysian Human Rights Commission (SUHAKAM) – a public body established by parliament to oversee the standards of human rights practices in Malaysia – to be one of the official observing groups during the election. The chairman of the ECM regarded SUHAKAM’s application as “improper” and “unnecessary” (*Malaysiakini* 2018b).

However, at the same time, the ECM appointed several dubious organisations – including Persatuan Pengundi Wawasan Malaysia (PPWM) (*Berita Harian* 2018) – that were founded just a few months before the election.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the three observers from PPWM that I interviewed

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4 Interview with three observers from PPWM in Bentong, 28 April 2018.

during nomination day in Bentong parliamentary constituency informed that me they are “UMNO members at one of its branches in Bentong.”<sup>5</sup> They even “marched with BN supporters to the nomination hall before changing their shirts with the ones provided by the ECM.”<sup>6</sup> Unlike SUHAKAM, the PPWM observers in Bentong are “less educated” and “jobless.”<sup>7</sup> Their responses to the call for being observers were that of having done it “because the UMNO branch chief at their place told them to do so.”<sup>8</sup> Almost the same situation happened in Kuala Terengganu too, as reported by one of UKM’s observers in Kuala Terengganu Abdul Muein Abadi.<sup>9</sup> But this time, the observers were from the Malaysian Youth Council (MBM) – a politicised public council exploited by BN for various political ends. There were cases where the agents of the ECM at the district level rejected a number of applications made by the PH candidates on nomination day, including Tian Chua (one of the PKR’s vice presidents) – which arbitrarily disqualified them from standing in the election (*Malaysiakini* 2018d). But when a problem arose for a BN candidate in one of the state constituencies in Bentong, the ECM’s agents allowed the candidate to contest the election despite objections from the opposition – and without showing any contextual evidence to justify its decision.<sup>10</sup>

Apart from that, the ECM disallowed PH from using the symbol of the coalition and even banned it from using Mahathir’s image outside of his contested seat (*The Star* 2018a). The ECM also wanted each party within PH to use their own party logo rather collectively using PKR’s symbol in GE14 – an attempt to scare-off Malay voters particularly in DAP’s contested seats (*Straits Times* 2018d). Nevertheless, the chairman of the ECM later retracted this instruction, probably after consulting their legal advisors. Other government agencies also played some role in serving the ruling elites. The Registrar of Society (RoS) refused to register PH as a political party, leading to the latter filing a case in court (*Malay Mail* 2018a). To make things much more difficult for PH, RoS also temporarily deregistered Mahathir’s new party – Parti Peribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) – just one day before parliament was dissolved for GE14 (*Straits Times*

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5 Interview with three observers from PPWM in Bentong, 28 April 2018.

6 Interview with three observers from PPWM in Bentong, 28 April 2018.

7 Interview with three observers from PPWM in Bentong, 28 April 2018.

8 Interview with three observers from PPWM in Bentong, 28 April 2018.

9 A phone conversation with Abdul Muein Abadi, 28 April 2018. Abdul Muein was one of 14 official observers from UKM appointed by the ECM. He was assigned to observe the election in Kuala Terengganu.

10 The author’s own observation in Bentong on nomination day, 28 April 2018.

2018c). The Inland Revenue Board (IRB), meanwhile, aggressively hunted down PH-connected donors so as to cut off legitimate political funding to the party (*Malaysiakini* 2017b).

Apart from that, generous cash handouts were also given to the public during and around the election period in order to create “a feel-good factor” regarding the incumbent regime. Najib announced the increment of the BR1M’s funds to one-fold per month before the election (*The Sun Daily* 2018c). He also announced an additional one-year annual increment in the salaries of public servants – with more than 90 per cent of them being Malay (*The Sun Daily* 2018a). About two weeks before parliament was dissolved, Najib gave cash cards worth MYR 53.6 million of public funds to the country’s taxi drivers (*The Star* 2018f). In total, Mahathir reckoned that Najib would be bringing into play some MYR 300 billion to fulfil his electoral promise (*Malay Mail* 2018c).

The mainstream media was heavily biased towards the ruling regime, with almost no positive coverage given to the opposition parties during the election – except for PAS, and also as given autonomously by a number of newspapers that were much more independent from the government. In addition, several government agencies like the Execution Coordination Unit in the Prime Minister Department and the Special Affairs Department (JASA) used public money to publish thousands of booklets propagating the success of the BN government in fulfilling its 2013 electoral manifesto.<sup>11</sup> One of the JASA branches in Kuala Lumpur hired many youngsters for casual work as BN cyber-troopers.<sup>12</sup> The MCMC, meanwhile, actively and aggressively monitored the spreading of news and information on the Internet and via social media, particularly with the new anti-fake news law in place. A number of online news websites were also blocked by the MCMC on the night prior to election day (*Malaysiakini* 2018c).

Despite all of these developments and dynamics, GE14 – held on 9 May 2018 – produced an improbable result that was a real eye-opener. Out of 222 seats in parliament, BN only managed to hold on to 79 – a drastic decline, with now 54 seats less than the 133 in total that it had won in the previous election (*Straits Times* 2018b). Its popular vote count dropped by 10.96 per cent, to 36.42 per cent – that in contrast to 47.38 per cent in GE13 (*Today* 2018). PH, with its pact with the Warisan party in Sabah and independent candidate P. Prabakaran, maintained its popular vote count

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11 AkuJanji Kerajaan Persekutuan 2013–2018: MenepatiJanji, MembawaHarapan’, Unit PenyelarasanPelaksanaan, Prime Minister Department.

12 The author’s own observation at the JASA office in Kuala Lumpur, on 14 March 2018.

at around 50 per cent – with 121 seats taken in parliament (*New Straits Times* 2018a). PH swept up with absolute majorities in all the states on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia, from Johor to Penang. Warisan also made it to the state level in Sabah after party-hopping. PAS maintained its position in Kelantan, and successfully wrested Terengganu back from BN too. It also bagged a considerable number of state representatives in Kedah and Perak.

## 5 What Went Wrong? Four Major Factors Contributing to the Collapse of BN and the Success of the Malaysian Opposition in Shaping the Emergence of a Two-Plus-One Party System for GE14

Najib himself was in a state of total disbelief when the results of each constituency were announced on election night. He contacted Anwar in the early hours of 10 May, asking the latter what he should do – as he was “totally shattered” (*Reuters* 2018). A breakthrough in the transition in political regime happened when two top leaders in the civil service, the Inspector General of Police (IGP) Fuzi Harun and the Chief Secretary to the Government Ali Hamsa decided to uphold the results of the election (most probably with the consent of Head of State Sultan Muhammad V), thus siding with PH. On the night of election day, Najib attempted to use his powers to declare a state of emergency, through the newly enacted National Security Council Act (Hishamuddin 2018). But the IGP did not support the move, and thus effectively averted a possible coup against PH.<sup>13</sup> The IGP, on the contrary, sent a group of police special forces around midnight to protect the safety of PH’s prime minister-designate Mahathir (Hishamuddin 2018).<sup>14</sup> Then Ali, the highest non-political executive in Malaysia, made a public statement at around 3:00 a.m. on 10 May 2018, declaring the 10th and 11th of May 2018 as public holidays – per PH’s electoral pledge (*The Star* 2018b). These acts indirectly recognised PH as ruling the new federal government, and paved the way for a peaceful political transition and regime change occurring late on the night of 10 May 2018.

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13 The author’s own observation at the JASA office in Kuala Lumpur, on 14 March 2018.

14 The author’s own observation at the JASA office in Kuala Lumpur, on 14 March 2018.

But, what went wrong for BN? What could have transpired to cause such an unanticipated and adverse election result? What was the winning factor or formula for the opposition? In this section, I argue for and briefly explore the four major contributing factors, all interconnected with each other, that led to the fall of BN. These are:

1. The existence of a much more credible, representative, and stronger opposition with the inclusion of Mahathir, Bersatu, and Warisan.
2. The rupture among the elites within the ruling regime.
3. The existence of influential negative issues surrounding Najib's administration.
4. The advancement of ICT and its impact on the emergence of a digital and more participative society in Malaysia.

To begin with, the results of the twin by-elections in June 2016 provided a lot of misleading impressions to many. First and foremost, that both the parliamentary constituencies were Malay majority seats and among UMNO strongholds. Thus the settings and the outcomes were skewed, and not representative. There are many types of electoral constituency in Malaysia, ones that can be categorised according to certain criteria. The two most popular categorisations are based on ethnicity and geography (levels of development). The first divides the electoral constituencies into Malay majority, Chinese majority, and mixed constituencies. The second categorises the seats as urban, semi-urban, and rural constituencies. The twin by-elections only fall into two or three of the six total categorisations, and thus the results should not be taken as representative.

Second, PH was at that time still new – being formed less than one year before the election. Mahathir and the ousted BN leaders helped PH in the by-elections for their own individual reasons, as Bersatu was yet to be formed. Wan Azizah and Anwar were, as noted, still cautious about Mahathir and the cooperation between them was yet to materialise.

The defeat in the by-elections struck PH and its allies with a deep awareness and concern about the new situation that they were confronting. The multiparty system would only give an advantage to BN if they could transform their coalition to a much stronger, unified, and representative organisation able to command support from all segments of Malaysian society, to the extent that the influence of PAS is negligible (at least at the federal level). This is to say that they need to push the multiparty system to be rather a “two-plus-one party system,” like is the case in the United States or Australia – where the third party is usually insignificant to the final outcome.

On 5 September 2016, Mahathir made a pragmatic move by meeting Anwar in one of the latter court proceedings – “for the first time in 18 years” (*Straits Times* 2016c). A month before that, Bersatu – UMNO’s splinter party – was formed with the aim to replace UMNO as the political representative of the Malays (*Straits Times* 2016d). Mahathir acted as the chairman and Muhyiddin as the president of Bersatu. Anwar, on his part, welcomed Mahathir’s move, knowing PH was equally in need of his former nemesis and of Bersatu to build a stronger opposition for GE14. The meeting opened up the possibility for greater cooperation between Bersatu and PH, which materialised later that year with Bersatu officially joining the coalition (*New Straits Times* 2016a).

Najib’s complacency and decision to delay GE14 to the very last moment allowed the PH leadership to better organise and strengthen its new coalition. The nationwide road tours and *ceramahs* (public talks) were being aggressively held by the top leaders in PH. In July 2017, PH announced its leadership line-up with Mahathir becoming the chairman, Anwar the supreme leader, and Wan Azizah the president (*New Straits Times* 2017). In this new and enhanced political structure of PH, strategies were formulated collectively to confront BN’s dominance. It was through this setting that a pragmatic move to name Mahathir as PH’s prime minister-designate in early January 2018 was made (*New Straits Times* 2018b). At the same time, close cooperation was also agreed with a new opposition party in Sabah – known as Parti Warisan Sabah (Warisan, Sabah Heritage Party), which had been formed in late 2016. Warisan is headed by Shafie, a former UMNO vice president, close to Muhyiddin. Their cooperation went really well, and Warisan became PH’s strongest ally in Sabah. The inclusion of Bersatu in PH, the cooperation with Warisan, and the decision to name Mahathir as prime minister were bold strategic moves by the PH leadership. PH became stronger with the inclusion of Bersatu, which has substantial influence among the Malays – particularly in the semi-urban and rural areas. These were the UMNO/BN strongholds, which no opposition party could infiltrate (except PAS). At the same time, the pact with Warisan made PH much more representative. Since GE12, Sabah and Sarawak were considered to be BN’s safeholds. In fact, BN’s prolonged life in the federal government from 2008 to 2018 benefited much from the votes of Sabahans and Sarawakians. Therefore, the pact with Warisan was a much-needed cooperation for PH in breaking BN’s dominance in Sabah. With Mahathir’s 22 years of experience and spectacular track record as the fourth prime minister, as well as his popularity among many Malaysians, PH became a much more credible party in the eyes of many Malaysians, in replacing UMNO/BN.

Regarding the second of the four factors, a party split was not only a problem of the opposition; BN also suffered political ruptures. The elite fragmentation within UMNO caused BN to not only lose a number of highly influential leaders, but also led to the formation of new political parties and competition against UMNO/BN – particularly in the Malay/Bumiputra majority seats.<sup>15</sup> Muhyiddin played a significant role in seizing Johor from BN, and Mukhriz and Shafie – with the establishment of Warisan – did the same in Kedah and Sabah respectively. More importantly, the inclusion of Mahathir in PH moved many Malaysians – including the Malays and the Bumiputras – to put more faith in the opposition to be the new government, something that had never be achieved by any opposition forces in the past. The ruling elite rupture, therefore, split the Malay and Bumiputra votes, which were the main and indeed the only support bases for UMNO/BN after 2008.

As for the third factor, there were some fundamental issues surrounding Najib's second term of administration (2013–2018). The top three were: the high cost of living; the introduction of a goods and services tax (GST); and, the problems surrounding the management of 1MDB. The high cost of living remained the most important issue among voters in GE14 (Merdeka Center 2018). Two contributing factors for this issue were the problem of income stagnation (*The Edge Markets* 2018a) and the unacceptable increase in the price of homes (housing bubble) for many Malaysians (*Straits Times* 2017a). Even though Najib's administration did respond to these problems, the initiatives taken were far from adequate (as detailed in the previous section). To make things worse, Najib's administration after their win in GE13 gradually cut government subsidies to the public – including for sugar, flour, cooking oil, and petroleum – as part of its “rationalisation plan.” The government then introduced the GST in April 2014. These two unpopular policies further increased the cost of living in the country. The World Bank notes, “the rising cost hit the urban poor the hardest” (*The Malaysian Insight* 2017). This explains why urban voters had been critical of BN's governance after 2008. The public dissatisfaction with Najib's administration went even further when the 1MDB scandals of mismanagement went viral from early 2015. Many were unhappy particularly with the issue of the laundering of 1MDB funds worth billions of ringgits to Najib's personal account, to his family, and to his cronies. Najib's attempts to frustrate the independent investigations made by several government agencies (the Central Bank, the Attorney General

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15 *Bumiputra* literally means “son of the soil.” In Malaysia the term *bumiputra* is used to refer to the Malays and to the other native peoples.



Chambers, and the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission) into him and into 1MBD provoked an uproar among the public. Despite the rationalisation policy of subsidy cuts and the introduction of GST, Najib's administration nonetheless continued to spend lavishly on many mega projects – including building two new towers in Kuala Lumpur, and high-speed railway tracks to Singapore (HSR) and also Kelantan (ECRL). The government publicly stated that the ECRL project, costing more than MYR 70 billion, was going to be funded by loans from China. In fact, China's control over the Malaysian economy under the leadership of Najib grew rapidly – principally through developmental and 1MDB projects. These circumstances aroused fears among the Malaysian public. PH leaders cunningly used these issues repeatedly to garner support for the coalition, and to generate anti-Najib sentiment among the public. This partly explains why many channelled their support to PH and PAS instead; many were simply discontent with how Najib was governing the country.

With the advent of much cheaper smartphones and Android devices, ICT – as the fourth contributing factor – became much more accessible to and widely used by the Malaysian public. The technology is no longer exclusive to only urban dwellers, the middle class, and the younger generations. Consequently, the majority of the Malaysian populace has with it been transformed into a postmodern and post-industrialised society characterised by the dominance of ICT in many aspects of life. Malaysians are among the highest users of Facebook and WhatsApp anywhere in the world. According to one survey by MCMC in 2017, the number of Internet users increased rapidly in the immediately preceding years. By 2016, the report revealed that there were 24.5 million Internet users in Malaysia – representing 76.9 per cent of the total Malaysian population (MCMC 2017: 8). Almost 90 per cent of them access the Internet from their smartphones (MCMC 2017: 10).

Online news portals and social media have become the major sources of information to Malaysians, at the expense of conventional media (Netto 2017). They have also become the major platforms for everyday political discussion and debate. Consequently, the masses have become much more informed about and engaged with their surroundings. The intensity of political discussion and sharing of information – particularly through WhatsApp and Facebook – were so widespread that the government took certain measures to uphold political control, including the introduction of the aforementioned anti-fake news law in 2018. One of the new features in Facebook, known as Facebook live streaming (FB live), was used widely by the competing parties to air their *ceramahs* during GE14. On the last

day of campaigning (8 May 2018), Mahathir's FB live from Langkawi managed to attract more than 200,000 viewers – while, at the same time, Najib's FB live from the Pekan parliamentary seat only drew less than 5,000. The presence and the dominance of online and social media in GE14 clearly went some way to rectifying the imbalances in the mainstream media coverage of the opposition, and to thus making the electoral contest much more competitive.

It was the above-cited four major factors that together structured the results of GE14. The incumbent regime has been depicted by James Chin as “running out of tricks” (Lourdes 2018). The much more informed Malaysian public was now very upset about how Najib and BN were running the country. This was the reason why BN lost even after the electoral boundary was gerrymandered. Several days prior to election day, thousands of overseas Malaysians and millions of out-stationed voters returned to their hometowns to exercise their right to their respective political franchises (*The Edge Markets* 2018b). Many were in the spirited mood of “saving Malaysia.” In fact, the “Save My Country” – or #savemycountry and #savemalaysia – campaign went viral on social media. Arrivals to Malaysia from Singapore and via the country's airports were reported as experiencing unusually heavy traffic. So were the roads and highways in all directions from Kuala Lumpur, as many out-stationed voters returned to their polling districts even though the election was being held on a weekday. Consequently, the election recorded a high voter turnout – with 82.32 per cent of the electorate casting their vote (*The Star* 2018c). With the opposition strongly united and the credibility of Mahathir and other notable figures in PH established, the new Malaysian public – transformed by the growth of the ICT – saw the coalition as a viable alternative. Particularly so with the PH's catchy and easy-to-understand manifesto, and thus they voted against BN. PH, through their political strategies, ultimately managed to reshape the Malaysian electoral system to a two-plus one-party system – and thus maintained the level of political competition that allowed them to make a historic breakthrough into the federal government.

## 6 Concluding Remarks: The Dynamics of Political Competition in Multi-Ethnic Malaysia

In this article I have provided a historical survey of the political developments in postcolonial Malaysia, from one-party dominant rule in 1957 evolving to a two-plus-one party system by mid-2018. In each of the eras covered, the levels of electoral competition varied – as they were shaped by the developments within the political system, alongside by other contributing factors too. During the period of the one-party dominant system, from 1957 to 2007, the intensity of electoral competition was low, as the opposition did not pose a serious threat to the ruling regime. The Alliance/BN managed to maintain its two-thirds majority throughout this period (except for in the general election of 1969).

The second phase of Malaysian politics, which can be referred to as one of a “two-coalition party system,” ran from March 2008 to the demise of PR in mid-2015. In this era, the opposition were able to competitively challenge BN’s dominance as they were more united and worked together as one. The opposition took over, in fact, the hegemonic position in the country during this period, controlling the imagination of Malaysian citizens particularly in the urban areas – although BN was nevertheless still dominant, as the ruling government.

The departure of PAS from PR changed the electoral system to a multiparty one after mid-2015. Electoral competition thereafter, once again, became very limited (but not as low as in the one-party dominant era), with the practice of three-way electoral fights – as with the case of the twins by-elections in Sungai Besar and Kuala Kangsar, in mid-2016. But the pragmatic move between the new opposition pact, PH, and the ousted UMNO leaders in Bersatu from late 2016 successfully reshaped the electoral system to be a two-plus-one party system. This drastically increased the level of political competition existing between PH and BN, even with the presence of PAS as the third party/force.

As a final closing remark, based on the overview in this article, any party that wishes to take on the federal power and provide stability in multi-ethnic Malaysia must not only be a representative organisation – defined by making a pragmatic political pact with other parties representing the different segments of Malaysian pluralism. But the party must also be strategic in its political moves, defined by producing an integrated national agenda that reflects the significant diversity of Malaysian society.

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