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Malaysia' 14th General Election: End of an epoch, and beginning of a new?

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Abstract: The 14th general election in Malaysia held on May 9, 2018 is an historic event that altered the political landscape of the nation. For the first time over sixty years this election has caused to change the government from Barisan Nasional (national front) coalition to another coalition named Pakatan Harapan (Coalition of Hope), formed in 2015. This article has analysed the election results and the probable factors that might have contributed to the historic change. It argued that since 1999 the ruling Malay elites have become permanently divided challenging the dominance of United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) in politics and the prospect for a viable alternative became consolidated with the rise of Parti KeAdilan Rakyat (PKR) offering an avenue for a new generation politics. The return of Mahathir Mohamad to politics and a strategic coalition mainly between his party and PKR, party of the jailed leader Anwar Ibrahim, made an alternative to BN/UMNO a reality through winning the election.

Keywords: The 14th General Elections, Malaysia, Pakatan Harapan, Barisan Nasional, PKR, UMNO

Abstrak: Pilihan raya umum ke-14 di Malaysia yang diadakan pada 9 Mei 2018 merupakan satu peristiwa yang bersejarah yang dapat mengubah landskap politik negara tersebut. Buat pertama kalinya setelah lebih enam puluh tahun,

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pilihan raya umum telah menyebabkan perubahan kerajaan daripada gabungan Barisan Nasional (BN) kepada satu lagi pakatan yang dinamakan sebagai Pakatan Harapan (Gabungan Harapan), yang hanya terbentuk pada tahun 2015. Artikel ini telah menganalisis keputusan pilihan raya dan faktor-faktor yang mungkin menyumbang kepada perubahan yang bersejarah ini. Ia berpendapat bahawa sejak tahun 1999 lagi, golongan elit Melayu yang dulunya berkuasa telah terbahagi secara utuh untuk mencabar dominasi Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu (UMNO) dalam bidang politik. Tambahan lagi, prospek tersebut adalah merupakan satu alternatif yang berdaya maju turut ditubuhkan sebagai Parti KeAdilan Rakyat (PKR) yang menawarkan satu jalan kepada satu bentuk politik bagi genarai baru. Sekembalinya Mahathir Mohamad kepada politik dan dengan gabungan strategik yang terbentuk terutamanya antara parti pimpinan beliau dengan PKR, iaitu parti pimpinan Anwar Ibrahim yang pernah dipenjara sebelum ini, telah mampu membentuk satu alternatif kepada BN/UMNO sebagai satu realiti dengan mendapat kemenangan pada pilihan raya umum baru-baru ini.

Kata kunci: Pilihan Raya Umum Ke-14, Malaysia, Pakatan Harapan, Barisan Nasional, PKR, UMNO

Introduction

On May 9, 2018, Malaysia held its 14th general election for its national parliament (Dewan Rakyat) as well as state legislative assemblies (Dewan Undung Negri). As a parliamentary democracy with constitutional monarchy, Malaysia's general elections are the main occasions for its citizens' political participation and competition. Since its independence over sixty years ago, Malaysia's electoral democracy has undergone regular periodic elections. However, till now, the political parties have been based largely along ethnic lines—a highly sensitive issue, particularly in electoral competitions. Within Malaysia's ethnic mosaic, a tradition of Malay-dominated politics has been the mainstream, while the other major parties fine-tuned their ethnic politics in consociation with the main. This has resulted in a rich and solid tradition of consociationalism—accepting the supremacy of the Malays and their religion—Islam—which has developed into a stable form of its party and government system. For decades, the mainstream Malay political party and its Chinese and Indian partners, along with other smaller components, have controlled the government under a coalition banner, Barisan Nasional (BN) or National Front. Until a decade ago, it was almost unimaginable that there could be an alternative party, or that

a young and upstart coalition could eventually dethrone BN. But that unimaginable became political reality in May 2018.

The GE14, therefore, is the most important election on many grounds. It has altered the entire landscape of Malaysian politics, defying every speculation as to election outcome. The seismic change has generated questions regarding the probable reasons and factors, and these deserve a thorough analysis. This article attempts to analyse why (and how) GE14 came about, and what could possibly have led to such epoch-making results. It argues that Malaysian politics has, for some two decades now, been shifting from an ethnic-based party orientation, to a universal civic party system; and, secondly, the voters are dialing down ethnic affiliation and ethnic concerns in favour of universal political values such as good governance, greater public accountability and political equality in general.

Electoral and party system

Malaysia runs a federal system of government, comprising 13 states and three Federal territories (FT). At the national level, it has a bi-cameral legislative assembly, of which the National Chamber (Dewan Negara) has 70 unelected members, and the Peoples' Chamber (Dewan Rakyat) has 222 directly elected members. At state levels, the assemblies—Dewan Undung Negeri (DUN)—in all 13 states differ in terms of membership composition, depending on territorial and population size. The total number of seats is 505. Both Dewan Rakyat and DUN members are elected for five-year terms.

Constitutionally, Malaysia is a multi-party parliamentary democracy. As of late 2017, figures from the Home Ministry show that there are 62 registered and active political parties, with 21 more awaiting approval. However, only a few dominate. Furthermore, not all parties run individually; rather, major and large parties align with each other to form larger coalitions, which are sometimes officially registered as separate parties, such as Barisan Nasional (BN).

The GE14 was basically a competition among three coalitions. BN, formed in 1973, was the largest, oldest, and most powerful, with 13 partner parties, the most important being United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu

(PBB), Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP), Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (GERAKAN), People's Progressive Party (myPPP), Parti Demokratik Progresif (PDP) and Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS).

At the other end, Pakatan Harapan ("coalition of hope"), formed in 2015 and, in the run-up to the election as former archenemies Mahathir Mohamad and Anwar Ibrahim joined forces, was the most contentious. The coalition comprised four parties: Parti KeAdilan Rakyat (PKR), Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM) and Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah).

The third, Gagasan Sejahtera (GS), is a coalition of four Islamic parties formed in 2016: Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), Parti Ikatan Bangsa Malaysia (IKATAN), Barisan Jemaah Islamiah Se-Malaysia (BERJASA), and Parti Cinta Malaysia (PCM).

There were 15 other eligible parties who also contested the election, such as Parti Warisan Sabah (commonly known as WARISAN), which was established in 2016.

The GE14: important facts and figures

The much awaited announcement dissolving Parliament came on Friday April 6, 2018, paving the way for the Election Commission (EC) to hold the general election within sixty days. On April 10, the EC announced that Nomination Day had been set for April 28, and the election would be held on May 9, allowing the candidates eleven days to campaign.

After the nomination process was completed, there were 687 candidates contesting for 222 parliamentary seats, and 1,646 nominees to contest for 505 state assembly seats. The total number of contestants emerged as 2,333, which is 20 per cent higher compared to GE13, when 1,901 candidates contested (579 for the national parliament, and 1,322 for the state assembly seats). This indicated a higher level of participation. In terms of gender representation, there were 251 female candidates, or 10.75 percent of the total number of contestants. Fifteen candidates were in the 26-to-34 age group, while the oldest (and most politically experienced) candidate was 93.

Since the election was basically a fight among three coalitions, each fielding their candidates on behalf of the coalitions, but sharing the seats among the coalition partners. As such, BN contested in

all 222 parliamentary and 505 state seats, while Pakatan Harapan contested in 191 parliamentary and 448 state seats; and PAS fielded 158 parliamentary candidates and 393 state seats. Other smaller and regional parties, such as Warisan, contested only at the state level, but for both state-parliamentary and assembly seats. A total of 37 political parties contested either as part of a coalition, or as a standalone party. Only 23 candidates contested as independents, which is far less than the 270 candidates during the previous election four years earlier.

The EC's official tally shows that 14,940,624 cast their votes, out of 18,359,670 eligible voters. The total population is about 32.26 million. The GE14 budget amounted to RM500 million, which is about RM100 million higher than that in the previous election.

Results

PH won with 113 seats, a simple majority; leaving BN behind with a wide margin at 79 seats. The third coalition GS scored 18 seats. Together, the three coalitions captured 210 of the total 222 seats. The remaining 12 seats were won by Warisan (8), Homeland Solidarity Party (1), and independent candidates (3). In the process of government formation, Warisan extended its support for PH, which raised the winning coalition's total number of seats to 121 (Table 1).

Table 1: GE 14 Results

Party	Pakatan Harapan	Barisan Nasional	Gagasan Sejahtera
	Sabah Heritage Party		
Last election	68 seats, 37.1% (Pakatan Rakyat)	133 seats, 47.38%	21 seats, 14.78% (Pakatan Rakyat)
Seats won	121	79	18
Seat change	↑53	↓54	↓3
Popular vote	5,781,600	4,080,797	2,051,188
Percentage	47.92%	33.80%	16.99%
Swing	↑10.82%	↓13.58%	↑2.21%

In terms of the performance of individual parties vis-a-vis coalition partners, the results show a great variance as well.

Among the four PH partners, PKR won 47 seats, DAP won 42, PPBM 13 and Amanah 11.

Among BN's 12 partners, UMNO secured the highest number of seats (54), PBB secured 13, while its other two influential partners won surprisingly even fewer seats: MIC (3) and MCA (1). The remaining 6 of 79 seats won by BN were shared among five other partner parties. Three of the 12-member BN coalition partners gained no seats at all.

Of the four-party GS coalition, PAS secured all 18 seats. Fourteen of 37 political parties secured no seats at all.

Results for the state level assemblies were even more sweeping. In addition to keeping the Selangor assembly in hand, PH has taken over six new others (Johor, Kedah, Melaka, Negri Sembilan, Penang, and Perak); PAS retook Terengganu, in addition to retaining Kelantan. A new party Warisan took over Sabah. BN could only hold on to 3 assemblies (Pahang, Perlis and Sabah). The final picture that emerges on state assemblies is that BN lost six of the eight under its control (Table 2).

Table 2: Party Positions at State Assemblies

<u>No. of Seats</u>	BN	PH	PAS	OTH
Johor (56)	19	<u>36</u>	1	0
Kedah (36)	3	<u>18</u>	15	0
Kelantan (45)	8	0	<u>37</u>	0
Melaka (28)	13	<u>15</u>	0	0
Negri S. (36)	16	<u>20</u>	0	0
Pahang (42)	<u>25</u>	9	8	0
Penang (40)	2	<u>37</u>	1	0
Perak (59)	27	<u>29</u>	3	0
Perlis (15)	<u>10</u>	3	2	0
Sabah (60)	29	<u>8</u>	0	<u>23</u>
Selangor (56)	4	<u>51</u>	1	0
Terengganu (32)	10	0	<u>22</u>	0
<u>TOTAL 550</u>	<u>166</u>	<u>226</u>	<u>90</u>	<u>23</u>

Therefore, the implications of these numerical figures are historic. Firstly, for the first time i Malaysia's 61 years of independence, UMNO and BN have been voted out of power; secondly, the new government is to be led by a new party and coalition, which is also the first time in the nation's history; thirdly, there is a simultaneous sweeping change of power at the state levels, mostly in favour of PH. As a result, both the federal government, and most of the state governments, now come under a new party—a historic first since gaining independence.

Analysis

The results of GE14 are crucial for the nation, for its politics and political parties, and election records. This is primarily because, on the surface, the ruling coalition did not anticipate a devastating total defeat; ironically, nor did the main opposing coalition expect an outright victory in its first election. None of the opinion surveys conducted in the previous months by various government and non-government bodies, organisations and political parties had forecast such a game-changing result and political shift. Most of the opinion polls and expert opinions weighed in favour of the ruling party's continuity in power, with a thin marginal victory or, in a worst case scenario, a hung parliament ("All about the polls", 2018; Ananthalakshmi, 2018; Welsh, 2018; "BN to prevail...", 2018). Both situations are indicative of the intensity of the electoral contestation.

However, the results have defied all expectations and calculations, and emerged as painfully shocking for the ruling coalition, and joyfully shocking for the main opposition. It is imperative to analyse what factors could possibly have caused the unexpected to happen. Below we highlight some of the major causes, but first, we analyse what the numbers reveal.

1. Language of the numbers

Table 2: PH Partners' Electoral Performance

Party		Vote		Seats		
		Votes	%	Won	%	+/-
Pakatan Harapan	PH	5,615,822	45.56	113	52.25	↑45
People's Justice Party	PKR	2,096,776	17.10	47	22.52	↑17

Democratic Action Party	DAP	2,098,068	17.38	42	18.92	↑4
Malaysian United Indigenous Party	PPBM	696,087	5.77	13	5.86	↑13
National Trust Party	AMANAH	648,274	5.37	11	4.95	↑11

Source: compiled from various sources.

Table 2 indicates that as a coalition, PH won 45.56 percent of the total vote, resulting in 113 parliamentary seats, or 52.25 percent of the total 222 seats. This translates to an increase of 45 seats for the PKR-led coalition. Individually, all four partner parties performed better. PKR won 47 seats (22.52%), adding 17 seats from the previous election; and DAP secured 42 seats (18.92%), adding 4 more from the previous election. PPBM (13 seats) and Amanah (11), despite being new parties, fared considerably well.

However, in terms of performance, based on the number of seats each party contested, the difference is considerable. PKR succeeded in 47 (66.19%) out of 71 seats contested; DAP succeeded in 42 (89.36%) out of 47; PPBM succeeded in 13 (25%) of 52; and Amanah succeeded in 11 (32.35%) out of 34 seats contested.

So in terms of individual performance rankings, DAP performed best, followed by PKR, Amanah and PPBM. One obvious point becomes clear: neither PH as a coalition, nor the partner parties individually, had the capacity to contest in all 222 seats. Collectively, they could contest in 204 seats, but individually, their ability was much limited. In terms of individual rankings, PKR tops the list, followed by PPBM, DAM and Amanah respectively.

Table 3: BN Partners' Electoral Performance

		Vote		Seats		
		Votes	%	Won	%	+/-
<u>Barisan Nasional</u>	BN	4,080,797	33.80	79	35.59	↓ 54
United Malays National Organisation	UMNO	2,548,251	21.10	54	24.32	↓ 34
United Traditional Bumiputera Party	PBB	220,479	1.83	13	5.86	↓ 1
Sarawak People's Party	PRS	59,218	0.49	3	1.35	↓ 3
Malaysian Indian Congress	MIC	167,061	1.39	2	1.35	↓ 2
Progressive Democratic Party	PDP	59,853	0.50	2	0.90	↓ 2
5 parties 1 seat each- MCA SUPP PBS UPKO PBRs		925,823	7.29	5	2.25	↓ 11
3 other parties- Gerakan LDP myPPP		145,391	1.20	0	0	↓ 1

Source: compiled from various sources.

If PH and its partners all had winning performances then it means the stakes could only have come at the expense of BN and its components. Table 3 indicates the downward performance of the coalition and its partners. BN as a coalition gained only 79 (35.59%) out of 222 seats contested. This means BN lost in 54 seats from the previous parliament, and its share of voters' support decreased by 24.32 percent.

Individually, only UMNO fared best, having 54 wins but, still, this was 34 seats fewer than in the previous election. The second best performer is its partner PBB, which won 13 (one seat less than the previous). PRS won 3 seats, but that is still 50 per cent less than its previous; MIC and PDP won 2 seats each, but again, this was a net negative, as they each lost 2 seats. Of the remaining coalition partners, MCA's incredulous loss is the most prominent, as the Chinese-led party has been a part of the government for decades and, yet, its performance was the weakest, having won just 1 seat, while losing 6 other seats. For several decades, the BN-led government was basically a combination of UMNO, MCA and MIC. In GE14, MCA and MIC were virtually decimated.

The third coalition, GS, effectively turned out to be just a one-party show, with PAS winning all 18 seats, which was 3 seats fewer than previously (Table 4). PAS's performance was hapless, compared with the total number of seats it was trying to retain. Apart from BN, PAS contested the highest number of seats (157), but its 18 total win yielded a success rate of only 11.68 percent. Three of its other members did not win any seats.

Among the other parties that gained parliamentary seats are WARISAN (8) and STAR (1). WARISAN contested 17 seats, which indicates a 47.05 percent success rate, while STAR contested in 5 seats (20 percent success rate).

Fourteen other contesting parties gained no seats at all. Finally, only 12.5 percent of independent candidates won seats (Table 5).

Table 4: GS Partners' Electoral Performance

		Vote		Seats		
		Votes	%	Won	%	+/-
Gagasan Sejahtera	GS	2,051,188	16.99	18	8.11	↓3
Malaysian Islamic Party	PAS	2,041,580	16.91	18	8.11	↓3
Malaysian National Alliance Party	IKATAN	9,025	0.07	0	0	—
Love Malaysia Party	PCM	502	0.00	0	0	—
Pan-Malaysian Islamic Front	Berjasa	81	0.00	0	0	—

Table 5: Other Parties' Electoral Performance

		Vote		Seats		
		Votes	%	Won	%	+/-
Sabah Heritage Party	WARISAN	280,520	2.32	8	3.61	↑8
Homeland Solidarity Party	STAR	21,361	0.18	1	0.45	↑1
14 other parties – PHRS, SAPP PPRS PCS PSM PRM MUP		68,001	0.52	0	0	—
STAR Anak Negeri PEACE PFP PBDSB PBK PAP	IND	70,770	0.59	3	1.35	↑3

2. End of an epoch – (first republic?)

The election result caused a political shift by ending an uninterrupted 61-year long rule by the same political party. Other than the earlier Soviet and the present Chinese communist rule, no democratic nation has maintained a record of a continuous one-party elected government for such a long period of time. Only India, Japan, Singapore, and South Africa hold some records of continuous and long-serving ruling history by the same party, though it is arguable that Malaysia's UMNO surpassed them by several years. Of the four countries, Singapore holds the longest record of 53 years (1965- present) of continuous rule by PAP (People's Action Party); Indian National Congress in India maintained continuous grip on power for about 24 years (1947-1971); Japan's Liberal Democratic Party had uninterrupted rule for about 32 years (1958-1990) and South Africa's ANC (African National Congress) has retained power for 28 years (1990-present). This makes the Malaysian case a unique among democratic countries.

Though ruled under two different banners, Alliance Party and Barisan Nasional, it has been basically the same establishment that maintained its continuity in government from 1955 to 2018. Since the

early 1950s, the trio-club (UMNO, MCA and MIC) has steered and maintained its coalition government, which did not face any viable challenge until a decade ago, making its ruling history an unprecedented epoch in democratic history, which might be called the first republic. BN's loss of power after 61 years, therefore, could be interpreted as an end to an epoch in Malaysia's history.

3. End of a tradition, and demise of UMNO?

GE14 results have also brought about an end to its political tradition: the Malay- or UMNO-dominated national politics. Even though Malaysia was governed by a coalition government, in the people's minds, the coalition was synonymous with just one dominant component—UMNO—simply because the party had always maintained the highest number of seats in Parliament. This is evident even in the last three elections, when BN and UMNO's shares of seats had started to decline continuously. Looking at the preceding three elections, in 2008, UMNO controlled 79 (56%) of BN's total 140 seats). In 2013, UMNO retained 88 (66.16%) of BN's 133 seats. By 2018, UMNO's share had dropped to 54 (68.35%) of BN's total 79 seats.

In 2018, UMNO gained just 54 (68.35%) of BN's 79 seats. This statistic may not resonate much until it is juxtaposed against the total number of available seats (222). In essence, UMNO's 54-seat win represents just 21.10 percent of the total number of seats.

This contrasts sharply with the party's share in the tumultuous 9th general election (1999), when it claimed 54 percent of total number of parliamentary seats.

Clearly, by 1999, which marked the end of the first 45 years of UMNO-dominated rule, the ruling party witnessed its Malay elites becoming effectively—and increasingly—divided as they confronted each other politically, speculating aloud that the end of the UMNO regime might soon be approaching (Walsh, 2016). The tendency to divide started to appear in the late 1980s, when a counter-Malay front named Semangat 46 was established, but it was short-lived and ineffective (Milne & Mauzy, 1999). However, the establishment of PKR in 1999 as a potential alternative to UMNO gained ground among the elites as well as the common people, making the divide permanent (Stewart, 2003; Pepinsky, 2009). Fast forward a few years, by which time PKR

had gained political momentum, to the extent that it formed a coalition which presented itself as an alternative, not only to UMNO, but also to the entire BN, under the banner Barisan Alternatif (Moniruzzaman, 2013). In the 2018 election, PKR, along with its coalition partners, has indeed emerged as the chosen alternative. This effectively translates as heralding an end to the UMNO hegemony in Malaysian politics.

4. End of a Malay-only party political mindset, and the beginning of 'Malaysian' finally?

Even prior to Independence in 1957, UMNO had already proven itself as the mainstream political party involved in influencing and negotiating political development (Roff, 1995). In the minds of many Malaysians, is the only political party that overshadowed all others in bringing about and effecting national independence, as well as dominating the political landscape of the nation post-independence. After twenty years of working alongside the political hegemony within the 'Alliance' framework, UMNO was well-placed to continue its dominating presence as it moved along to the 'Barisan' framework starting in the early 1970s. This hegemony of UMNO has undoubtedly stemmed from its role in designing the national constitution and experience in terms of sharing power among the natives (Malays) and non-natives (Chinese and Indians) within the 'Social Contract' framework that defined citizenship issues and rights for the non-natives, while granting special rights to the natives. Undoubtedly, all this has created a dominant political mindset of UMNO as the sole representative of the Malay minds, rights and interests—and that the party is indispensable in Malaysian politics.

The GE14 results have perceptibly shattered that mindset. If this turns out to be true, then GE14 should be considered the culminating point of a process of change that was initiated in 1999 through the establishment of PKR, and its eventual evolution through Barisan Alternatif, Pakatan Rakyat and, finally, Pakatan Harapan. The tectonic political shift in power is indicative of a changing mindset amongst Malays and non-Malays that an alternative to UMNO is a political reality, possibly with the goal of a wider perspective through more inclusive political representation. The alternative should be a true representative of 'Malaysians', rather than that of the Malays only. For Malaysia, this could be the beginning of a 'second republic'.

5. Triggers for change

What explains the change is a core question. One can look perhaps to classical theories that can fully (or partially) explain the phenomenon such as dynastic change (Ibn Khaldun, 2015), governing elites (Pareto, 2017), ruling elites (Mosca, 1939), iron law of oligarchy (Michels, 1911) or power elites (Wright, 1956). However, here we can just afford to highlight some of the major and probable factors that could have contributed in bringing about change.

For a variety of reasons, both the ruling party and political analysts were of the opinion that this election would run its usual course, anticipating that the ruling party would emerge victorious, albeit with a slim majority, and would continue to be in power for another five years or so. This is mainly because until the election, it had appeared that BN's support base was still solid, and that the party could capitalise on its traditional image. A number of arguments can be put forward to support the opinion.

Firstly, since GE13 in 2013, opposition politics in Malaysia had undergone a tumultuous period. The mostly promising Pakatan Rakyat coalition consequently split up due to internal maladjustment of political standpoint on policy issues. This was an immediate advantage for BN in the sense that its political rival was weakened. This also meant that the opposition's shares of votes, as well as parliamentary seats, became reduced (PAS, for instance, had 21 seats in Pakatan coalition), which was very much in favour of a BN win.

Secondly, post-GE13, it appeared that the trend of Chinese support for the opposition in by-elections was dwindling, as BN won successively in a number of constituencies including Teluk Intan and Sungai Besar, despite the fact that many of these constituencies had a substantial percentage of Chinese voters (Teluk Intan, 42% and Sungai Besar, 31%). Some experts interpreted this as an indication that the so-called 'Chinese Tsunami' that hit GE13 in favour of the opposition was receding—which was widely expected to weigh in favour of the ruling party in GE14.

Thirdly, BN still counted heavily on Sabah and Sarawak, with its 56 parliamentary seats, of which the opposition gained only nine seats in GE13. Despite being a heavily Chinese majority in about one-third of

the seats, Chinese support of the opposition during ‘Chinese Tsunami’ showed little gains, making the prospect of a BN win in GE14 even more assured.

A fourth factor that BN was counted on heavily was the country’s economic performance, which had reportedly seen a 5.4% growth rate since 2014. With such a track record, BN repeatedly claimed that it would meet its Vision 2020 target. Over the past decade, the BN government had ambitiously taken on a number of national development projects under the auspices of Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-2010 (9MP), Tenth Malaysia Plan 2011-2015 (10MP) and Eleventh Malaysia Plan 2016-2020 (11 MP) such as BR1M, Rural Transformation Centre, Urban Transformation Centre, 1 Malaysia Clinic, Kedai Rakyat 1Malaysia (KR1M), 1Malaysia Grocery Stores, ECRL, High Speed Railway, and National Transformation 50 (TN50). These projects reportedly created millions of jobs and benefited the nation enormously. In its election manifesto, BN continually enlarged its omnipresent role in people’s everyday lives, clearly presenting an expectation of popular support from the people.

Related to this is the national Budget 2018, which can be considered an additional factor BN could have counted on to win the election, as opinion surveys purportedly showed that 75% people were satisfied with the budget.

The next factor is directly related to electoral politics and the re-delineation of constituencies. Similar to previous elections, the Election Commission (EC) redrew 98 constituencies, this time allegedly in favour of BN, by shifting pro-BN voting districts into neighbouring districts where the opposition had won by a slim majority in GE13. During the 2003 election, BN’s win in re-delineated districts was 90%. A similar win could reasonably be expected based on the GE14 re-delineation exercise.

Finally, even though the 1 Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal has been an ongoing saga in the media, with salacious allegations, in due course, the people had apparently become indifferent towards the scandal, with all the claims, counter-claims and confusing debate. Furthermore, the issues had dragged on for such a long time that people had either lost interest or started to disbelieve it, or so it appeared. This made BN hopeful that it could retain its stranglehold beyond GE14.

Despite these apparently strong factors that were supposed to help BN continue its grip on power, the political equation had changed. The unexpected became reality. What probable factors could be held responsible?

The Mahathir factor

Undoubtedly the most sensational factor in GE14 was the political comeback and presence of legendary Mahathir. A man widely credited for his intelligence, charisma, no-punches-pulled communication style, vision, and political wit in transforming Malaysia into a modern economy; in retirement, he remained immensely popular among the people, especially the Malays, despite some political blemishes during his 22-year premiership. His honesty, capability, clean image and patriotism superseded every other limitations ascribed to him (*Wain, 2010*). If Tuknu Abdul Rahman was the father of the nation, then Mahathir is considered the father of modern Malaysia. He retired from political career in 2002, but remained politically active as a private citizen and UMNO member.

As an architect of modern Malaysia, Mahathir remained a vigilant critic of what he deemed wrong in his successive governments' policies; in particular, he was critical about leadership failure and corruption that were draining the country in a downward spiral (*James & Joern 2016*). His periodic criticisms of Badawi's and Najib's governments often created political tensions, and as the situation turned increasingly worse, Mahathir was also increasingly becoming more visible politically. He contested for a position in UMNO's General Assembly in 2006 from his local division of UMNO, but by then, internal politics within UMNO against Mahathir prevailed. Apparently, his attempt was to revolt against Badawi's premiership from within the party, as his call for Badawi's removal had gone unheeded for several years. Eventually, Mahathir overcame his decades-long emotional attachment with UMNO and resigned from the party, following its loss of a two-third majority in the 2008 election. Rather than fading into the sunset, Mahathir became increasingly active in politics from then on. His first major public appearance was in a massive anti-government rally in mid-2015, following the disclosure of 1MDB corruption.

Mahathir's increasing political assertiveness against Najib's government, especially in reference to 1MBD, intensified with the

sacking of the then-Deputy Prime Minister and other top UMNO leaders. A major offensive against the government was launched on 4 March 2016 through Citizens' Declaration, signed by prominent opposition leaders including the sacked UMNO high officials ("Malaysia's Mahathir and opposition...", 2016). This created the beginning of an opposition momentum. Soon Mahathir leagued up with the UMNO drop-offs to launch a new political party: PPBM. Thus, at the age of 90, Mahathir created a new platform from which to launch a new mission. This seemed to snap Malaysian society from its apathy; it also placed the ruling authority on notice. Earlier, Mahathir had been stripped of many positions and benefits, one after another, and after the new party was launched, he became a regular target of political offensive by the ruling party's high-ranking officials. Mahathir brushed off the hue and cry and moved on with a solid vision and mission. Soon, he found support from veteran political leaders as well as grassroots people. Mahathir correctly anticipated that he needed a stronger ground to launch an effective electoral offensive, which made him rally and team up with his friend-turned-nemesis, Anwar Ibrahim of PKR, who was serving a five-year prison sentence at the time. The eventual outcome was the establishment of Pakatan Harapan, a combination of PPBM and PKR. This was an even deadlier combination. A new political momentum was in the air as the two enemies shrugged off their differences to become friends in the face of their common enemy. This was a game-changing point in time, and the entire nation started to rally behind the new giants. As election approached, Mahathir found his political obstacles turning into boulders, such as when his party was deregistered on certain technical grounds. Eventually, PPBM applied its plan B and contested the election under PKR. The result was obvious. Only after the prophesied 'Malay tsunami' had inundated the Malaysian political landscape did it become clear that the people had quietly wanted a drastic political change. Mahathir emerged as the symbol of opposition unity and an icon of power.

Eruption against corruption

The second possible factor that might have triggered the change is the corruption factor. Even though Najib's government had tried hard to deny, downplay, cover up and distract people's attentions from the 1MDB issue, numerous inconsistencies in the government's claims, its inability to clear many confusions, intentional interference with

and subversion of investigations, replacing certain key public officials involved in the investigation and, finally, classifying the case as resolved and criminalising any attempts to question the matter had made the issues surrounding the case and its key players utterly suspicious. Apparently, people never believed the government's narratives on the issue, as it only served to generate more questions and debates over time. Mahathir as a fierce critic persistently rejected the government claims and purposively made the issue (specifically) and corruption (generally) the central campaign message. This major financial scandal, along with numerous subsequent corruptions such as FELCRA chairman's use of money to bail out a construction company, suspension of MARA chairman over his financing of a football team, and suspension of FELDA CEO and CFO over suspicious spending of public funds, and finally, leasing out and privatising army land to a private company.

In their election manifesto and campaign trails, the PH leaders promised it would set up royal commission to investigate all these and other corruptions. This could have mobilised the people's support strongly in their favour and against the ruling party.

Passing over PAS?

Since GE13, the ruling BN had resorted to undermining Pakatan Rakyat. PAS fell for the bait. Infighting among PAS members led to its eventual split in 2014 and the formation of a new PAS party (PasMa and, later, Parti Amanah Negara). This was the first step in the political saga of coalition breakup. It was mainly the implementation of *Hudud* (Islamic criminal laws) issue that worked as a breaking chisel and making glue. The issue split PR, but also brought PAS closer to BN, generating speculation on a possible alliance between PAS and UMNO. The government, bent on keeping PR divided, also advocated an abortive move to table a Bill on *hudud* laws in the parliament. Such support of the government kept PAS on its side and thus, it chose to remain almost silent over 1MDB and other scandals. This was unbecoming of an Islamic party such as PAS, which should have been at the forefront in voicing out against even petty corruptions. PAS was literally silent on the 1MDB debate, which could be interpreted as lending moral support to the BN government. This perhaps detached the party from the people in general, and the Malays in particular. In GE14, PAS contested virtually alone (with a namesake coalition) and gained even fewer seats than in

GE13. It is foreseeable that the non-PAS Malay supporters would not have supported PAS. Non-Malay voters are even less likely to vote PAS unless it remained with Pakatan.

Geared up for a new generation politics

For about last three decades, a trend of thought about new-generation politics has been gaining ground in Malaysia (Means, 1991; Hilley, 2001). PKR's establishment and its popularity has initiated a new-generation politics where the Malays could now think of an effective alternative to UMNO, and the entire opposition could think about an alternative to BN. The collision course was sped up by rising opposition success and BN's declining support-base over the past one and a half decades in favour of new-generation politics, where a tech-savvy enthusiastic young generation is the lifeline (Weiss, 2006). The percentage of young non-Malay supporters of PR has also increased in GE14 than previous. This could be indicative of a fact that non-Malay supporters are generally Pakatan-savvy.

Secondly, PH under Mahathir's leadership has received unconditional support from political giants who were at loggerheads with Mahathir for decades. Not only did they extend their support, they also joined him officially, or endorsed his party. These include one-time archenemies including Lim Kit Siang, Zaid Ibrahim, Musa Hitam, Muhammad bin Sabu (Mat Sabu), Syed Ali Alhabshee, Ibrahim Ali, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, and above all Anwar Ibrahim. All of these veteran leaders and politicians saw Mahathir as the main engine, while the PH components could simply be the locomotives toward Putrajaya. Their support added momentum to the new-generation politics.

Thirdly, various frightening speculations about election outcomes could have eventually led to a decisive effect on vote-swing. Had Pakatan's won with a simple majority, BN might not have been ready to concede defeat, which could have led to a number of possibilities: firstly, BN could have taken advantage of the 21-day filing period to petition for a recount of the votes, even after government has been formed and Parliament convened. This would potentially create unprecedented political crisis in Malaysia, even though it happened at the state level. Secondly, the emotionally charged, defeated BN supporters might have become violent, in a replay of history following the 1969 elections, which triggered racial rioting. Speculation about the government's

manipulation of the election was even suggested by Mahathir prior to the election, that in the event of BN's defeat, Najib may declare a state of emergency. Thirdly, a possible BN-PR grand coalition government was plausible, but unrealistic. Such speculations could have had an effect on voters' choices to sway more towards the popular PH.

Pakatan's popular promises

Common people generally weigh more on daily life, in terms of how they are affected by government policies with regard to utility prices, income tax, consumer tax, retirement benefits, rather than focus on with the alleged millions or billions of public dollars embezzled by top government officials. Even though Najib's BN government had extended many monetary benefits to the deserving citizens, its introduction of Goods and Service Tax (GST) in 2014 greatly displeased the people. Every year since 2014, on May 1, in commemoration of May Day, large-scale protest rallies against GST have been held. PH has capitalised on the people's sentiment and made its their campaign promise to abolish GST, along with offering some other government loan schemes such as PTPTN. The impact of such promises on election outcome cannot be ruled out either.

The Big Three Pushes

Looking at the trend of the last three elections—2008, 2013 and 2018—one would notice that with each successive election, the ruling BN was pushed closer and closer to the edge. In the 2008 election, the opposing Barisan Alternatif camp made the first big push to shake BN at its core and establish a common belief that there can indeed be an alternative. This objective was achieved when, for the first time in history, BN found itself denied a two-third majority. Then in 2013 came the second push, with a more charging slogan, "Road to Putrajaya"; thanks to lifeline support extended by Sabah MPs, BN obtained a mere simple majority and was able to survive another term. Then came the third and final push in 2018, by which PH left BN by the wayside and won Putrajaya. So the big three pushes—from denial of a two-third majority, to denial of simple majority to, finally, denial of power—came in successive order, in such a way that how the opposition could maintain their progressive success in achieving the final goal deserves a bigger credit and analysis.

Conclusion

Malaysia has witnessed a historic political change effected through its 14th general election on May 9, 2018. Since independence in 1957, the country has been ruled by a single coalition party under two different labels: Alliance party, and Barisan Nasional. Within the Alliance or Barisan coalition, UMNO was the main controlling engine. For a solid 50 years since it was established in the mid-1940s, UMNO has enjoyed almost unquestionable and unchallenged domination in Malaysian politics. Until 1999, it was almost impossible to think that there could be an alternative to UMNO and, by extension, to BN. Mahathir Mohamad as UMNO and BN chairman for decades turned both parties into even more formidable institutions. However, it was Mahathir himself whose policies in the late 1990s inadvertently created a would-be monster in 1990, which would shake BN and UMNO to the core in subsequent years.

Mahathir's departure from power left his parties embroiled in inefficiency, corruption and decline of public support. Mahathir tried to effect a rescue, first from within, but his failed efforts forced him to leave UMNO forever, and initiated a movement to dislodge UMNO and BN from power. Meanwhile, opposition politics gained momentum through their impressive success in the 2008 and 2013 elections, while BN and UMNO-ruled government's inefficiency, corruption and unpopularity increased geometrically since 2004, which justified Mahathir and the opposition parties' urge to bring about drastic political change immediately. Eventually, Mahathir's newly launched political party (PPBM), in coalition with three other parties (PKR, DAP and Amanah), unseated the BN government through electoral victory in 2018.

In analysing the possible causes and factors that brought about this historic change, this article argued that the new enlightened generation of Malaysia has been eagerly waiting to change the *status quo* politics. What they needed was some strong and powerful engines to violently shake the political landscape. Mahathir apparently reappeared in national politics as a saviour, garnering widespread support even from his one-time political enemies. To make the move even stronger and more solid, Mahathir leagued up with PKR, the political party of then-jailed leader Anwar Ibrahim. It is the combination of these two giants that has created a 'Malay tsunami' to wash out BN and UMNO from power.

Thus, Malaysia has witnessed an end to a historic epoch by dethroning UMNO and BN from power and started a new era where, in light of contemporary electoral experience, the ethnic-based party system may become a tradition of the past (Teik, 1994). Already, immediately after the electoral defeat, all three major BN partners (UMNO, MCA and MIC) have publicly voiced out in favour of dismantling ethnic exclusivism. But that is likely to depend much on how the new PH coalition partners behave, because, thus far, they appear to be lean mostly towards Malay ethnicity, and are controlled by Malay leadership.

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