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The Politics of Manipulation: Malaysia 2018-2020

Abdul Rashid Moten

Abstract: The 14th General Election (GE-14) held on May 9, 2018, ended the 61-year uninterrupted rule of the *Barisan Nasional* (National Front, BN), since the nation's independence in 1957. The ruling coalition lost to the opposition coalition, *Pakatan Harapan* (PH). The BN lost the power despite all the trickeries used by Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak. Mahathir Mohamad manipulated and lured the opposition coalition and was sworn in as the seventh Prime Minister of Malaysia. However, after 22 months, Mahathir resigned, and succeeded by a new National Alliance. The 2018-2020 crises were triggered by personalities and their political manoeuvrings. This study brings political manipulation to the fore to explain the dramatic political transitions in Malaysia resulting from the general elections held in 2018, and the dramatic change in the political landscape two years after the GE-14. It provides a systematic overview of the electoral process and an assessment of how manipulation shaped the country's political environment. The study is based on a mixture of media studies, library research, and weeks of fieldwork conducting focus group interviews with party activists across Malaysia both before and after the 2018 election. Some of the actors who were affected by this politics of manipulation were interviewed.

Keywords: Malaysia, GE-14, Mahathir, Manipulation

Abstrak: Pilihan Raya Umum ke-14 (PRU14) yang diadakan pada 9 Mei 2018, mengakhiri pemerintahan Barisan Nasional (Barisan Nasional, BN) selama 61 tahun, sejak kemerdekaan negara pada tahun 1957. Gabungan pemerintah telah kalah dari gabungan pembangkang, Pakatan Harapan (PH). BN kehilangan kuasa walaupun terdapat segala tipu daya yang digunakan oleh Perdana Menteri, Najib Tun Razak. Mahathir Mohamad telah memanipulasi dan mempengaruhi

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pakatan pembangkang dan dilantik sebagai Perdana Menteri Malaysia ketujuh. Namun, setelah 22 bulan, Mahathir mengundurkan diri, dan digantikan oleh Perikatan Nasional yang baru. Krisis 2018-2020 dicituskan oleh keperibadian dan gerakan politik mereka. Kajian ini telah memanipulasi politik ke depan untuk menjelaskan peralihan politik yang dramatik di Malaysia akibat pilihan raya umum yang diadakan pada tahun 2018, dan perubahan dramatik dalam lanskap politik dua tahun selepas PRU 14. Ia memberikan gambaran sistematik mengenai proses pemilihan dan penilaian bagaimana manipulasi itu dapat membentuk persekitaran politik negara. Kajian ini berdasarkan daripada hasil gabungan kajian media, penyelidikan perpustakaan, dan mingguan kerja lapangan telah yang dilakukan menemubual kumpulan fokus dengan aktivis parti di seluruh Malaysia sebelum dan selepas pilihan raya 2018. Beberapa pelakon yang ditemuramah terpengaruh dengan manipulasi politik.

Kita-Kita Kunci: Malaysia, GE-14, Mahathir, Manipulasi

Introduction

Malaysia is a plural society where Malays, who are constitutionally defined as Muslims, form a majority (55%) followed by Malaysians of Chinese origin (23%), Indian Malaysians (7%), and others (15%). It is a constitutional monarchy that uses a Westminster-style parliamentary system with a bicameral legislature composed of a 70-member upper house (*Dewan Negara*) and the House of Representatives (*Dewan Rakyat*), which currently has 222 members. The *Dewan Rakyat* elects its members from single-member districts by the universal franchise. Since independence in 1957, Malaysia has witnessed 14 general elections with an appreciable degree of public participation reaching 82% in 2018.

The 14th General Election (GE-14) held on May 9, 2018, saw 36 political parties contesting parliamentary and state assembly seats. Of these, 13 were components of the BN coalition dominated by UMNO which was led by Najib Tun Razak since becoming UMNO president in 2009. Four opposition parties, Democratic Action Party, People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat, PKR), National Trust Party (AMANAH) and Malaysian United Indigenous Party (*Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia*, BERSATU) formed a coalition known as *Pakatan Harapan* (Alliance of Hope, PH). The PH chose Mahathir Mohamad (who served as Prime Minister from July 1981 to October 2003) as the coalition

chairman. Four opposition Islamist political parties formed Gagasan Sejahtera (Harmonious Alliance, GS). There was also *Gabungan Sabah Bersatu* (United Sabah Alliance), a coalition of four parties based in the state of Sabah, in insular Malaysia. The remaining 11 parties contested the election on their own. The GE-14 ended the 61-year uninterrupted rule of the *Barisan Nasional* (National Front, BN), since the nation's independence in 1957. The ruling coalition, BN, lost to the *Pakatan Harapan* (PH) which, to many, heralded a "new Malaysia." The BN lost the power despite all the trickeries used by Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Mahathir Mohamad was sworn in as the seventh Prime Minister of Malaysia (Ellis-Peterson, 2018). However, after 22 months of PH rule, Malaysia experienced a dramatic change in the political landscape with the resignation of Prime Minister Mahathir and the splintering of the PH coalition. There emerged a new National Alliance (*Perikatan Nasional*) composed of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Islamic Party (*Parti Islam Se-Malaysia*, PAS), and BERSATU. Muhyiddin Yassin, the President of BERSATU was sworn in as the country's 8th Prime Minister. How was the opposition pact, PH, formed, and how did it manage to unseat the BN in GE-14? What sorts of manipulations were involved in the rise and fall of parties and personalities prior to GE-14 and during the post-election period?

Literature Review

Scholars and activists adopted a variety of approaches and explanations to account for electoral behaviour in Malaysia especially the GE-14. Andreas Ufen explains the success of PH in terms of the opposition coalition being comprehensive, cohesive, and well-rooted in society (Ufen, 2020). W.J. Abdullah and M. Krishnamoorthy focused their attention on the role of the 92-year old Mahathir, the country's saviour, who successfully wrestled power from the entrenched BN (Abdullah, 2018). Ibrahim Suffian and others explained the failure of BN to retain power on PM Najib who alienated many within UMNO and who was allegedly involved in the kleptocracy scandal, 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) (Ibrahim Suffian, 2018; Gabriel, 2018). Invariably the analysts emphasise election manifestos and focus upon the major channels of communication such as the media, door to door campaigning and the like. Inherent in all these analyses is the role of manipulation, though it remained buried as an analytical tool perhaps

because manipulation is considered to be wrong and immoral. Yet allegations of the existence of manipulative practices are commonplace in political life.

Definition of Political Manipulation

Political manipulation is generally found in politics which, to Chilton and Schaffner (2002, p.5), is “a struggle for power between those who seek to assert and maintain their power and those who seek to resist it.” Consequently, politicians use persuasive rhetoric, euphemisms, and the language that arouses political emotions and the like (Chilton, 2008, p. 226). They try to avoid the straightforward presentation of facts. Political discourse concentrates on the issues of power, control, domination, and conflict. “Manipulation in politics has long been with us. Perhaps it will be with us always. Nonetheless, it seems to our advantage to understand exactly what manipulation is, for recognizing how politicians try to manipulate us is our best hope for resisting their manipulation ...” (Mills, 1995, p. 111).

Maoz (1990, p. 77) refers to manipulation as “an attempt by one or more individuals to structure a group choice situation in a manner that maximises the chances of a favourable outcome or minimizes the chances of an unfavourable one.” To Voeten (2011, p. 255), political manipulation is when “politicians or activists strategically engineer a situation to their own advantage; leaving their less accomplished opponents to lick their wounds.” Political manipulation is a “... deliberate action on another person’s field ... in order to secure a definite response, by manipulating rewards and deprivations themselves or both” (Dahl and Lindblom, 1953, p. 25). William Riker coined the term “heresthetics” to refer to such political manipulation. To Riker (1986, p. ix), “Heresthetics is an art, not a science...heresthetician must learn by practice how to go about managing and manipulating and manoeuvring to get the decisions he or she wants.” The goal of political manipulation is obtaining, implementation, and maintenance of power through practice of pre-election technologies and the method for conducting election campaigns.

Most existing research focuses on the role of authoritarian leaders in committing election fraud to retain power. Sara Birch (2011) considers three principal forms of electoral malpractices: manipulation of the rules governing elections, manipulation of vote preference formation

and expression, and manipulation of the voting process. Harvey and Mukherjee (2018, p. 2) include Birch's three forms of manipulation in two broad categories of electoral manipulation: administrative fraud and extra-legal voter mobilization. Administrative fraud is committed by election officials and includes tactics such as vote padding, ballot stuffing, and tampering with ballots. Extra-legal voter mobilization involves vote-buying, patronage, multiple-voting, and similar tactics. Authoritarian leaders choose strategies from this toolkit of institutional manipulation to ensure that nominally democratic institutions - including multiparty elections - remain under their control (Levitsky and Way, 2002).

However, manipulation is also resorted to by the opposition leaders and groups avowedly to avoid multiple opposition candidates competing against the dominant incumbent and thus to eliminate the splitting of opposition votes. Vance Kasten (1980, p. 54) writes that manipulation occurs when there is a difference in kind between what one intends to do and what one actually does when that difference is traceable to another in such a way that the victim may be said to have been misled. The manipulator may resort to emotional blackmail and peer pressure to attain the desired goal. The aim of manipulation here is to encourage voters to turn out and vote strategically for coalition candidate(s) irrespective of their partisan background, thus maximizing vote share and the probability of electoral victory against the dominant incumbent authoritarian leader. The unity among the opposition parties would help to usurp power from authoritarian incumbents, while the strategies it employs would also be instructive in determining its electoral success (Weiss, 2006; Wolchik, 2010). Thus, Howard and Roessler (2006) bring to light the ability of opposition party elites to form a united front as an important factor for the demise of authoritarian incumbents. These scholars, therefore, emphasise the ability of the opposition parties to form tactical alliances, articulate alternate scenarios, or just electorally outmanoeuvre incumbents to explain the fall of dominant parties. They also point out that political manipulation may fail to produce the desired results.

This study contributes to a growing literature on election manipulation by focusing not merely on the role of incumbent leaders in committing election manipulation but also on the way opposition groups manipulate to mobilise the electorate to vote and win the election (Magaloni, 2010;

Bunce and Wolchik, 2010). It brings political manipulation to the fore to explain the dramatic political transitions in Malaysia resulting from the general elections held in 2018, and the dramatic change in the political landscape two years after the GE 14. It provides a systematic overview of the electoral process and an assessment of how manipulation shaped the country's political environment. The study is based on a mixture of media studies, library research, and weeks of fieldwork conducting focus group interviews with party activists across Malaysia both before and after the 2018 election. Some of the actors who were affected by this politics of manipulation were interviewed.

GE-14: Mahathir's Manipulations

The 14th GE is well described and well documented. What is not well known is the way Mahathir ended up as the one who led the opposition to the ruling BN and won. Mahathir was the president of UMNO since 1981 until he retired as the Prime Minister and the President of UMNO on October 31, 2003. Even in retirement, he never really left the political arena. He criticised his chosen successor Abdullah Badawi for releasing Anwar from prison and for his policy of building a "crooked bridge" to Singapore to reduce causeway congestion, and to stop all the projects initiated by Mahathir. After 2008 election in which UMNO performed poorly, Mahathir resigned from UMNO as a way to pressure Abdullah Badawi to leave the post of the PM. He later helped Najib Tun Razak become the Prime Minister and re-joined UMNO. Mahathir's support for Najib soon waned as the latter rejected several of Mahathir's demands including the privatization of Malaysia Airlines, pouring billions in aid to save Proton, Malaysia's national car, and of placing his son in high positions in the party and the government. Additionally, Najib had become embroiled in a massive financial scandal involving Malaysia's state-run development fund 1MDB. Najib, on his part, was unable to tolerate any opposition to his policies and hence sacked many members from UMNO including the deputy prime minister, Muhyiddin Yassin, vice president, Shafie Apdal, and Mahathir's son Mukhriz Mahathir. In 2016, Mahathir resigned from UMNO membership and assembled all the sacked members of UMNO and, on September 9, 2017, formed the Malaysian United Indigenous Party (*Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia*, BERSATU), in Mahathir's words, to fight to safeguard Malay interests (Lemiere, 2018). The word Bersatu can be translated to mean UMNO is Malay-based because, according to Mahathir, "the majority

of Malaysians in the rural and semi-urban areas are comfortable with Umno-type racism” (*Malay Mail*, 2016).

Mahathir, however, knew that he cannot fight UMNO single-handedly. This became further evident by the results of two by-elections held in June 2016 in Kuala Kangsar and Sungai Besar. Despite Mahathir’s support for the opposition candidate, the ruling BN/UMNO candidates won in both constituencies. Mahathir realized that he would have a better chance of winning the forthcoming election if he leads the opposition coalition led by Anwar Ibrahim’s party. Anwar Ibrahim was the deputy prime minister and chosen successor to Mahathir. Their relationship soured during the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997/98 that adversely affected the economies of many developing Asian countries, including Malaysia. Anwar clashed with Mahathir over corruption and the implementation of economic recovery measures. Anwar was dismissed in 1998 who responded by leading a series of mass protests calling for political reform. In 1999, Mahathir had Anwar arrested under the Internal Security Act, beaten by police, charged with sodomy and corruption, and imprisoned for the abuse of power.

In his bid to unseat Prime Minister Najib, Mahathir decided to make a truce with Anwar Ibrahim to forge a united front. The historic meeting took place in a courtroom, on September 12, 2016, where Anwar was mounting a legal challenge to controversial security laws introduced by Najib (*The Straits Times*, 2017). Anwar, confessed to his biographer, Mark Trowell (2018, p. 59), “I was very surprised and very uncomfortable. I was trying to be exceedingly polite, but then we were not ready for that, either me, or Azizah, or the children. We were not prepared for it.” Mahathir used “persuasive rhetoric,” “implied meanings”, and “euphemisms” (Chilton, 2008, p. 226).

Mahathir successfully persuaded Anwar Ibrahim to let him lead the opposition coalition and to assume the position of prime minister-designate. In return, Mahathir promised to secure Anwar’s release from prison through a royal pardon. He also said that his stay would be temporary and pledged to transfer the office to Anwar Ibrahim. Mahathir was seen as a placeholder for Anwar, though how long he plans on retaining power remained a matter of debate. Interestingly, the exact terms of the promised succession were never spelled out.

During the election campaign, the three opposition coalitions sought a mandate from the electorate to implement the policies and programmes pledged in their manifestos. The 203-page manifesto of the PH was titled *Buku Harapan: Membina Negara, Memenuhi Harapan* (*Book of Hope: Building the Nation, Fulfilling Hopes*). PAS unveiled a 20-point manifesto for its GS platform with the theme, “Prosperous Malaysia: Build a Peaceful and Prosperous Country” (Moten, 2019). In interviews with several PKR candidates, I was told that the “election manifesto is an integral part of the democratic process.” They considered the manifesto important to their chances of being elected.

But Mahathir adopted the “negative campaigning” of attacking Najib and UMNO instead of advocating his coalition’s strength and ideas. Negative campaigning may be framed toward the rival’s performance or programme on specific policies and/or toward the rival’s character, personality and behaviour (Elmelund Praestakaer, 2010; Nai and Walter, 2015). Mahathir vehemently criticised specific policies adopted by Najib as harmful for the country, and also attacked the personality of the Prime Minister degrading his character, personality, and behaviour. Mahathir portrayed himself to be the hero, while Najib was the villain; Mahathir claimed to be the protector of the nation, Najib was portrayed as shameful. Mahathir’s criticism of Najib was relentless calling Najib a bandit, liar, and crook (*penyagak, penipu, and penyamum*, in Malay). Mahathir told his voters that he is contesting the election to correct his biggest mistake of appointing scandal-tainted Najib as his successor. “I thought Najib would follow in the footsteps of his father ... but unfortunately, Najib has a different philosophy. Najib believes cash is king” (Baron, 2018).

As for the policies, Mahathir capitalized on two financial scandals. One, he criticised the government-run strategic development company, 1MDB, for reportedly taking on a huge debt burden of 42 billion ringgit, first revealed in July 2015. He pointed out that Najib had endorsed the misuse of public money to fund wrong business decisions. Switzerland’s Attorney General’s report on 1MDB found that US\$4 billion has been misappropriated by the Malaysian government (*Wall Street Journal*, 2016). Mahathir also pointed out another scandal involving Najib himself who allegedly deposited US\$700 million or RM 2.6 billion into his personal account. Mahathir claimed that the money came from the beleaguered 1MDB. Najib did not allow any investigation

related to 1MDB and fired senior members of UMNO who criticized 1MDB. Mahathir also accused Najib of being involved in the murder of Altantuya Shaariibuu, the Mongolian national. He used emotional appeals to build up a sense of sacrifice at the age of 92 to enhance his “saviour” role. Mahathir and others also adopted a coherent message leading up to the election and a consistent mobilisation around the goal of reform and righting the Malaysian economy. There is evidence that under certain circumstances, negative campaigning adversely affects the electoral fortunes of the targeted opponent (Nai and Walter, 2015). A young voter told me point blank, “I don’t care about manifestos, I want Najib [Razak] to go.” On further probing, I was told: “Najib thrived as Prime Minister by delivering huge cash hand-outs at election times. He controls the media and jailed those who disagreed with him. Moreover, he channeled RM 2.67 billion [nearly US\$ 700 million] from 1MDB to his personal bank account. Najib must go.” Most of the young voters, reportedly, were aware of the corruption in the government and desired nothing but a change. “I was in touch with my friends,” said one informant, “and we were sure that we would come out in numbers to vote. We were determined to see that the government is changed.” One lecturer contested a parliamentary seat simply because “I wanted to see that Najib leaves office.” In the opposition coalition’s win in 2018, Anwar “thought Mahathir’s personal contribution did help” (Trowell, 2018, p. 37).

GE-14: Najib’s Trickery

As expected, Prime Minister Najib resorted to election fraud, among others, by altering the rules governing elections, manipulating vote preference formation and expression, tampering with the voting process, and vigorously denying any wrong doings. Najib has always denied the allegations of corruption linked to the 1MDB. He retaliated with negative propaganda on Mahathir, exposing Mahathir’s past mistakes and attacking his legacy. He also removed Mahathir from his position as advisors of Petronas (*Petroleum Nasional Berhad*, a Malaysian oil and gas company) and the chairman of Proton (a Malaysian automotive company and automobile corporation). Police reports were also filed against Mahathir, under Section 500 of the penal code on defamation (*The Straits Times*, 2015).

Najib also came up with several measures to ensure UMNO's dominance after GE-14. For instance, in 2016, he introduced the National Security Act which would allow the prime minister to declare an emergency at a designated security site. However, he failed to acquire royal assent. A month before the 2018 election, Najib's government passed the Anti-Fake News Act, a law against spreading "fake news."

Najib, through the Election Commission (EC), gerrymandered electoral boundaries to sway marginal seats in its favour and create more safe seats for UMNO. He also hastily passed in parliament, five weeks before GE-14, a new electoral boundary with an increased number of Malay majority constituencies to help UMNO/BN win the election (*Malay Mail*, 2018). The opposition was not given any room for asking questions or debating the bill. Additionally, the Commission disallowed PH from using the symbol of the coalition and banned Mahathir's picture from being displayed on election materials outside the constituency he was contesting (*The Star*, 2018). The Registrar of Societies declined PH's application to be registered and hence opposition parties contested the election using the flag of PKR. The commission also decided to hold the election on a weekday, seemingly to reduce voter turnout which tends to favour the opposition, and kept the campaign period to the minimum 11 days required by law.

Nearer to voting day, Najib gave generous cash hand-outs to the public to create "a feel-good factor." He announced an additional one-year annual increment in the salaries of public servants (NSTP, 2018). About two weeks to the dissolution of parliament, Najib distributed "cash cards" valuing about MYR 53.6 million to the country's taxi drivers (Hanis, 2018). In total, Mahathir believed that Najib would distribute about MYR 300 billion to fulfil his electoral promises (Zurairi and Lee, 2018).

The Election Result

Evidently Najib's trickery failed. Elections were held on a weekday, May 9, 2018 allegedly to "ensure" a low voter turn-out boosting the chances of the governing party to win. As shown in Table 1, PH garnered 5.62 million votes (45.56%) and won 113 seats, one more than required for a simple majority in the parliament, leading to Malaysia's first electoral transfer of power since independence in 1957. It is generally agreed that Mahathir's success in voicing the alleged sandals of Najib

administration and for all the wrong-doings have played a decisive role in fostering public anger towards BN/UMNO. The BN's defeat might not have occurred without the personal unpopularity of Najib and the unlikely political reincarnation of then-92-year-old Mahathir as the chairman of the opposition coalition. Though it is difficult to quantify the extent to which the discontent from these scandals translated into actual votes for Pakatan Harapan, UMNO's losses in its traditionally safe seats, particularly in Johor, the birthplace of UMNO, is revealing. Another interesting point to be noted is that Mahathir's PPBM won only 13 seats as against 47 seats won by Anwar-led PKR. The BN secured 4.08 million votes (33.18%), and won 79 parliamentary seats. UMNO, the dominant party in BN, won 54 seats with 2.5 million votes.

Table 1: Parliamentary Results of the Malaysian General Election of 2018

Party	Votes polled	% votes	Seats contested	Seats won
Pakatan Harapan	5,615,822	45.66	204	113
Barisan Nasional	4,080,797	33.18	222	79
Gagasan Sejahtera	2,050,686	16.67	158	18
Parti Warisan Sabah	280,520	2.28	17	8
Homeland Solidarity Party (STAR)	21,361	0.17	4	1
Other/independents	250,328	2.04	24	3
TOTAL	12,299,514	100	629	222

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

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

Two points need to be noted. One, the opposition success in the GE-14 has been attributed to many factors including public anger, economic vulnerability, nationalism, and the role played by social media, Facebook, and WhatsApp. While not discounting the impact of these factors, the role of leadership and political manipulation, in particular, must be incorporated for a broader understanding of socio-political changes regarding voting behaviour. Two, GE 14 proved historic in that it brought an end to the rule of UMNO/BN, which has dominated Malaysian politics for 61 years. It also brought changes to policy

making and political competition in Malaysia. However, the opposition victory did not begin a new democratic era in Malaysia and did not steer Malaysia away from its long trend toward electoral authoritarianism or illiberal democracy.

Post-election Manipulations: Mahathir and Anwar

On winning the election, *Pakatan Harapan* was invited to form the government. The King offered the post of the Prime Minister to Anwar's wife, Dr. Wan Azizah as she was heading the largest component of the Alliance of Hope, PKR. Wan Azizah "declined the offer as we held on to our promise that Tun Dr Mahathir would become the Prime Minister and I would be his deputy" (Muhd Izawan, 2018). In one of his first acts in office, Prime Minister Mahathir petitioned the King for a royal pardon for Anwar who was accordingly released from prison on May 16, 2018 (Khairah, 2020).

On becoming the 7th Prime Minister, Mahathir realized that he did not have full decision-making power that he exercised as the Prime Minister of Malaysia from 1981 to 2003. He is used to making authoritative policy and personnel decisions backed by an institutionalized party system, UMNO. His preferred political system is the one that combined personalization and party institutionalization. As the seventh prime minister, he did not have the option to pick and choose the cabinet as he wanted. He told James Massola (2019), "Malaysia has always been ruled by a coalition of parties, the last coalition was 13 parties. But it was dominated by one very powerful party, so making a decision was much easier... We now have five political parties each equally powerful and we need to do things which are supported by all the five." As head of the smallest party in the PH coalition, Mahathir was obliged to heed the voices of his partners in Anwar Ibrahim's People's Justice Party (PKR), the Chinese dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP), and the moderate Muslim National Trust Party (AMANAH), and hence he could not take major decisions. Mahathir was "leading a coalition of parties which were very much against me before, so I have to be rather careful about how their sensitivities are treated (Massola, 2019)." The PKR was founded to dethrone Mahathir and oust UMNO. DAP, PKR and Amanah leaders, till 2016, derided Mahathir as being corrupt, and dictatorial. Hence, Mahathir could not perform well as the Prime Minister and did not outline a plan for economic development. According to

Harapan Tracker (2020) that keeps track of the Malaysian government's performance, Mahathir, after 758 days in office fulfilled only 26 of 556 promises made in the PH Manifesto. On February 25, 2020, Mahathir said that he was no longer committed to fulfilling Pakatan Harapan's election pledges (Loheswar, 2020).

Mahathir's lacklustre performance in office adversely affected public opinion. The PH coalition lost three consecutive by-elections to the BN in 2019 in Peninsular Malaysia. It lost the Cameron Highlands by-election to GN which won the seat with over a 3000-majority margin compared to the 500 majority it won in GE14. The PH lost to the BN in the Semenyih by-election. The BN candidate obtained 50.44 per cent as against 45.58 per cent votes garnered by the PH candidate. On April 14, 2019, the PH suffered another defeat in Rantau by-election resulting from the alliance between a leading national party representing Malays, UMNO, and the Malaysian Islamic Party, PAS, which is popular in rural peninsular Malaysia. In the three by-elections, the BN dominated by UMNO attracted the electorate by raising issues concerning Malay rights, the Malay rulers, and the role of Islam. Many supporters of Mahathir including those in his BERSATU saw PH's close embrace of the Chinese dominated DAP as the reason for the by-election defeats.

These election set-backs did not deter the members of the PKR from insisting on Mahathir to fix the date for the handover of power to Anwar, "the prime minister in waiting." But Mahathir would not commit to a time frame of "... two years or three years, but I will certainly step down as I promised" (Lin, 2019). Though Anwar continued insisting on succeeding Mahathir sometime in 2020, Mahathir had no plan to step down in 2020.

Anwar took all the measures needed to succeed Mahathir as the prime minister. He convinced the incumbent Port Dickson MP, Danyal Balagopal Abdullah, to resign as an MP. Anwar successfully contested the resultant by-election in Port Dickson, which gave him a parliamentary seat. Danyal Abdullah faced criticisms for betraying his voters and for being merely "a piece in the chessboard used in the game of politics to suit his party's convenience (Chow, 2018)." The Anwar episode in Port Dickson was dubbed by the former UMNO Youth chief, Khairy Jamaluddin, as the "PD Move," an attempted coronation of Anwar (*Malaysiakini*, 2018). The next move of Anwar Ibrahim was to get him

officially elected President of Keadilan on November 18. The post was held by his wife Dr. Wan Azizah. The two-step move – returning as MP and as party chief – was the critical precondition to becoming the prime minister. According to Mahathir, “Anwar is always crazy for the PM’s post” and put pressure on Mahathir to fix a date for the transfer power (Chana, 2020). The Otai Reformis, a pro-Anwar group, even threatened to take to the streets if no date was set for the handover of power in the PH council meeting (Nor Ain, 2020).

The PH Presidential Council meeting was convened on February 21, 2020, reportedly to discuss the issue of the transition. Anwar confirmed that the meeting would last for no more than half an hour and would “solve the transition issue once and for all (Koya, 2020).” Mahathir was tipped off by his political secretary about a plan by Anwar to demand his resignation at the council meeting. Mahathir chaired the meeting with disdain and came out saying, “There were two opinions, and in the end, everything is left up to me... I have said I will step down after APEC – no time, no date, no nothing ... It is up to me – whether I want to let go or I do not want to let go. That is the belief the coalition has shown me. *Alhamdulillah*” (Koya, 2020). Yet, Anwar insisted, in the meeting “no one questioned the transition, and our decision, that Dr Mahathir is the seventh prime minister and Anwar is the eighth prime minister” (Koya, 2020).

Mahathir’s supporters, however, were unhappy and expressed their displeasure at the behaviour of Anwar and his proxies at the February 21 meeting. The leading members of the *Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia* (BERSATU) held an emergency meeting of its decision-making body, known in the media as the “Sheraton Move,” and resolved to form a backdoor government composed of UMNO, PAS, BERSATU, and a faction of Azmin Ali’s supporters from PKR. The new government will have no representatives from the Chinese dominated DAP and without Anwar pressuring Mahathir for an exact hand-over date. They wanted Mahathir to remain the Prime Minister of this new coalition. Mahathir did not like the idea and resigned as the chairman of the party. “I quit because my own party had rejected me. They made a decision that clashed with my advice. It meant that the party had lost their trust in me (Chan, 2020). Mahathir did not like the idea saying, “I am against any form of cooperation with individuals who are known to be corrupt and

was part of the kleptocratic administration which the Pakatan Harapan Government had worked hard to rid of” (Koyaa, 2020).

Motives Behind Mahathir’s Resignation

On February 24, 2020, Mahathir resigned as Malaysia’s seventh Prime Minister that led to the dissolution of the cabinet as per Article 43(5) of the Constitution of Malaysia. He had an audience with the King who “asked Dr Mahathir not to resign. However, he stuck with his decision” (Sivanandam and Rahimy, 2020). The King accepted Mahathir’s resignation but appointed him as an “interim prime minister” until the constitutional monarch ascertained who should be the next prime minister. BERSATU, the party of which he was the Chairman, along with about 12 members belonging to PKR, withdrew from the coalition. This effectively meant that the *Pakatan Harapan* coalition had lost the majority in the 222-seat parliament.

Mahathir’s resignation was widely perceived as being calculated to prevent a promised handing over of power to Anwar. To be sure, Mahathir never wanted Anwar to be the Prime Minister. He is the one who removed Anwar from the post of the Deputy Prime Minister. “I may have made many mistakes, but removing Anwar was not one of them” (Mahathir, 2011, p. 698). He wrote, “I simply could not have a person of such dubious character succeeding me as Prime Minister of Malaysia, in fact, I could not have him in the Government at all” (Mahathir, 2011, p. 685). However, what solution is there to stop Anwar who has been insisting on the transfer of power? Mahathir knew that Anwar did not have the support of the majority in the parliament. Mahathir explained: “That is why when I resigned (as PM), it meant he could contest, but if people wanted me to contest, I would. If I got more (support), I would return” (Chan, 2020).

The second reason for Mahathir tending his resignation was to acquire full decision-making power. In submitting his resignation letter to the King, Mahathir evidently had no intention of leaving the post of the prime minister. He thought perhaps that the politicians from all the parties would coalesce and request him to continue serving and that he would be back in the prime minister’s chair in a matter of hours. Mahathir’s optimism was based on the support he received from opposition party leaders urging him to continue as the PM. Mahathir took this support seriously and decided to form a unity government. To

his utter surprise, no one approached him to withdraw his resignation. Consequently, he went public and stated, on 26th February that it would be best for the country if he returns as prime minister to lead a unity government drawing rival parties together without favouring any political party. There will be no more succession pact and he could govern unhindered. “It seems there can be only one leader ... no party involvement, no party leaders for check and balance” (*New Straits Times*, 2020). Mahathir’s proposal did not receive support from party leaders mainly because of Anwar’s insistence that he be nominated as Pakatan Harapan’s prime ministerial candidate. “If not, I would have added 60 votes to my existing 90 votes,” said Mahathir (Chan, 2020).

Disagreeing with Mahathir’s proposal, the three parties of the PH coalition decided to nominate Anwar Ibrahim as the prime minister. They soon realized that Anwar did not have the support of the majority in the parliament and that BN/UMNO will join with others and possibly would form the government. Consequently, Anwar and Mahathir rushed and sealed an eleventh-hour rapprochement to crush at all costs the return of the mantle of power to so-called “kleptocrats” like Najib. The PH coalition requested Mahathir to be the eighth Prime Minister. In the meeting, Anwar requested to be named as the deputy prime minister but Mahathir refused. Thereafter, Mahathir claimed: “This morning I had a meeting with leaders of *Pakatan Harapan*. I am now confident that I have the numbers needed to garner majority support in the *Dewan Rakyat*. I am therefore prepared to stand as a prospective candidate for Prime Minister” (Koyaa, 2020). By then, Muhyiddin along with other party leaders had convinced the King that their *Perikatan Nasional* government enjoys the majority support in the parliament. According to Mahathir, “The King has made the decision not to see me anymore, but to appoint Tan Sri Muhyiddin. So, I did not have the chance to tell the King that he does not have the majority. I cannot communicate with the Palace” (Teoh, 2020). Muhyiddin Yassin was sworn in as Malaysia’s eighth Prime Minister on March 1, 2020.

Mahathir, together with his son, the Chief Minister of the state of Kedah, Mukhriz Mahathir, and four other members of parliament from BERSATU opposed Muhyiddin as the Prime Minister. Mahathir and Anwar pledged to work together to topple Muhyiddin’s government as it stands “without the people’s mandate.” Mahathir had planned to submit a no-confidence motion to parliament but the prime minister

pre-empted the move citing the need to tackle COVID-19 first. The realities of responding to the corona virus may be used to silence those who speak out against the government. The time gained will also be used by Muhyiddin to garner further support in the parliament through manipulation. Should Muhyiddin fail to garner enough support from the members of parliament, he may opt for a snap election.

Conclusion

Political manipulation is clever management of the people's political behaviour to further the interests of the manipulator. To some, politics is the art of manipulating people with the goal of attaining and retaining power. Manipulation may take three forms: as an influence, as a form of pressure and, as a form of trickery. Manipulation is sometimes tied to scandal to bring down a political opponent. In the Malaysian case, politicians have used both trickery and pressure, either simultaneously or in combination, to attain their desired goal of capturing power.

Knowing his inability to dislodge the BN and particularly Najib as the Prime Minister by himself, Mahathir successfully persuaded, his long-standing rival, Anwar Ibrahim, to let him lead the opposition coalition as prime minister-designate. Mahathir lured Anwar by promising to secure Anwar's release from prison and to let him replace Mahathir as the Prime Minister in due course. Mahathir, however, did not spell out the exact terms of the promised succession. During the election, Najib's trickery failed, and Mahathir succeeded in ousting him from power.

Mahathir assumed the office of the Prime Minister but was uncomfortable as the system of rule was not based upon "personalization and institutionalization of power" he enjoyed during his tenure as the fourth prime minister. Furthermore, Anwar Ibrahim was impatient demanding Mahathir to vacate the office in two years. Unhappy with Anwar's "craze" to become the Prime Minister, Mahathir resigned to let Anwar test his support in the parliament failing which he would return as the eighth prime minister. The second reason for Mahathir's resignation as the Prime Minister was to strengthen his hold on decision-making power. He expected the members of parliament to shun party politics and let him run the government as he wanted. To his utter surprise, none of the members of parliament requested him to form a unity government as he desired. The next day when Mahathir publicly asked the members

of the parliament to shun party politics and let him run a new national unity government, none of the parties responded positively to his public plea.

As a last resort, Mahathir agreed to become the eighth prime minister with the support of the PH. The request came from Anwar who could not muster the majority in the parliament. However, Mahathir could not convince the King of his having a majority in the parliament. By then Muhyiddin Yassin, an ardent Malay nationalist backed by the BN, the PAS and others, has emerged as the eighth Prime Minister, to remake the administration without the Chinese-centric Democratic Action Party (DAP) and to side-line Anwar Ibrahim, the standard bearer of multiracial politics, the “Minister in Waiting”. While scholars attribute many reasons for the collapse of the coalition, the 2020 crisis was triggered more by personalities and their political manoeuvrings than by differing visions for Malaysia’s future among the political elites. Malaysia is currently embroiled in triple crisis of coronavirus, economy, and political instability.

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