

# Intellectual Discourse

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# *Intellectual Discourse*

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Volume 33

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Islamic Book Trust. pp. 252, ISBN: 978-967-26388-4-1.  
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## Transliteration Table: Consonants

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
ب	b		ط	ṭ
ت	t		ظ	ẓ
ث	th		ع	‘
ج	j		غ	gh
ح	ḥ		ف	f
خ	kh		ق	q
د	d		ك	k
ذ	dh		ل	l
ر	r		م	m
ز	z		ن	n
س	s		ه	h
ش	sh		و	w
ص	ṣ		ء	’
ض	ḍ		ي	y

## Transliteration Table: Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
اَ	a		اَ، آ، اِيَّ	an
اُ	u		اُوَّ	un
اِ	i		اِيَّ	in
آ، آَ، اِيَّ، اِيَّ	ā		اُوَّ	aw
اُوَّ	ū		اِيَّ	ay
اِيَّ	ī		اُوَّ	uww, ū (in final position)
			اِيَّ	iyy, ī (in final position)

*Source: ROTAS Transliteration Kit: <http://rotas.iium.edu.my>*



## **Coalition Rule by Pakatan Harapan, 2018-2020: Key Consociational Lessons**

**Muhammad Azzubair Awwam Mustafa\***  
**Kartini Aboo Talib @ Khalid\*\***  
**Nazri Muslim\*\*\***

**Abstract:** This article reassesses Pakatan Harapan’s (PH) 2018–2020 experience through Lijphart’s consociational framework. A qualitative approach is applied, triangulating semi-structured elite interviews with documentary sources and news reports. Findings show that PH built a broad grand coalition across ethnic and regional lines, applied corrective proportionality by granting Malay-based parties disproportionate cabinet weight to secure ethnic legitimacy, relied on improvised rather than institutionalised segmental autonomy and treated mutual veto as informal bargaining rather than a binding safeguard. These design choices produced short-term legitimacy but weak internal cohesion, leaving the coalition vulnerable to defections, culminating in the ‘Sheraton Move.’ The study provides an empirically grounded account of Malaysia’s post-BN hegemonic coalition governance and demonstrates how inclusion without enforceable rules limits the durability of consociational arrangements.

**Keywords:** Coalition politics, consociational democracy, Pakatan Harapan (PH), Malaysia, power-sharing

**Abstrak:** Artikel ini menilai semula pengalaman Pakatan Harapan (PH) pada tahun 2018–2020 melalui kerangka konsosiasional Lijphart. Pendekatan

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kualitatif digunakan dengan menggabungkan data temu bual separa berstruktur bersama elit politik dengan pelbagai sumber dokumen dan laporan berita. Dapatan menunjukkan bahawa PH membentuk satu gabungan besar merentasi garis etnik dan wilayah, melaksanakan pembedahan perkadaran dengan memberi parti berasaskan Melayu perwakilan kabinet yang lebih besar bagi menjamin keabsahan etnik, bergantung pada autonomi segmen yang bersifat sementara dan tidak diinstitusikan serta menjadikan kuasa veto bersama sebagai rundingan tidak formal dan bukannya perlindungan yang mengikat. Keadaan-keadaan ini bukan sahaja menghasilkan keabsahan jangka pendek tetapi kesepaduan dalaman yang lemah lalu menjadikan gabungan tersebut terdedah kepada peralihan sokongan dan akhirnya membawa kepada ‘Langkah Sheraton.’ Kajian ini memberikan penjelasan empirikal terhadap tadbir urus gabungan pasca hegemoni BN di Malaysia dan hasilnya menunjukkan bahawa keterlibatan tanpa peraturan yang boleh dikuatkuasakan menyebabkan ketahanan susunan konsosiasional itu terhad.

**Kata kunci:** Politik gabungan, demokrasi konsosiasional, Pakatan Harapan (PH), Malaysia, perkongsian kuasa.

## Introduction

Coalition politics in divided societies depends not only on the calculation of votes but also on credible power-sharing among significant social groups. Consociational theory identifies four stabilising pillars; grand coalition, proportionality, segmental autonomy, and mutual veto (Lijphart, 1969; 1977). Malaysia provides a useful case. For decades, Barisan Nasional (BN) combined formal inclusion with UMNO dominance, which scholars describe as hegemonic consociationalism (Case, 2013). The 2018 general election disrupted that pattern when Pakatan Harapan (PH) defeated BN and promised a more balanced model of coalition governance. Yet within 22 months, the PH government collapsed in the ‘Sheraton Move,’ raising questions about the limits of coalition stability in a fragmented and polarised system.

This study evaluates PH’s governing design and performance through the lens of Lijphart’s four pillars. The central argument is that PH achieved inclusion through a broad grand coalition and an ethnic-balancing version of proportionality, but failed to institutionalise segmental autonomy and mutual veto. This imbalance created a gap between inclusion and institutionalisation. While PH’s coalition appeared inclusive across ethnic and regional lines, the absence of

binding rules and guarantees meant that elites relied on personal trust and symbolic gestures. This weakness helps to explain both the democratic breakthrough of 2018 and the fragility that led to PH's early collapse.

The analysis uses a qualitative approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with PH's elite politicians. These accounts were cross-checked against coalition agreements, seats distribution, cabinet lists, and online news articles. The study contributes empirically by documenting how PH assembled and sustained an elite pact across communities, analytically by refining the idea of corrective proportionality as a survival strategy, and theoretically by distinguishing between disagreement and mutual veto. Together, the findings show how PH reproduced some elements of consociationalism but lacked the institutional safeguards required for durable coalition governance.

### **Coalition Politics and Consociationalism**

Coalition politics refers to arrangements where several political parties cooperate to form a government, usually in parliamentary systems where no single party can win a majority (Lijphart, 1969). Such cooperation is often driven by electoral realities, shared ideology, or the need for political survival. For societies divided along ethnic, religious, or linguistic lines, Lijphart (1969, 1977) proposed consociational democracy as a more suitable model. This framework rests on four key principles; grand coalition, proportionality, segmental autonomy, and mutual veto. These mechanisms are designed to ensure broad representation and protect minority interests. Evidence from countries such as Belgium, the Netherlands, and Lebanon shows that consociationalism can reduce conflict in divided societies (McGarry & O'Leary, 1993). Norris (2008) further argues that coalition-building in plural societies is not only strategic, but also necessary for stability. However, consociationalism has its critics. Horowitz (1985) notes that it can entrench ethnic divisions. Roeder and Rothchild (2005) suggest that power-sharing may worsen grievances by creating zero-sum politics. Mair (1997) adds that coalitions in fragmented systems often lead to instability, as seen in Italy and Israel.

Malaysia has long attracted interest in debates on consociationalism. For decades, the BN, a coalition dominated by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) with its multi-ethnic partners, was viewed as a consociational arrangement that preserved ethnic balance

while ensuring stability (Case, 1996). Yet many scholars describe it as a hybrid system, combining ethnic bargaining with authoritarian control (Case, 2013). UMNO's dominance meant that power-sharing favoured the Malay majority. Policies such as the New Economic Policy entrenched Malay privilege, limiting genuine pluralism and promoting patronage (Weiss, 2006).

The GE14 marked a turning point. PH, an opposition coalition of PKR, DAP, AMANAH, and PPBM defeated BN for the first time since independence. This was addressed as a democratic breakthrough and a chance to move beyond dominant-party rule (Weiss & Suffian, 2023). Mahathir Mohamad's return as prime minister symbolised reformist hopes but also showed the persistence of personalised leadership (Abaidah & Yusoff, 2021). Scholars note that PH's victory came through unprecedented opposition coordination under restrictive conditions (Ong, 2021). Yet the coalition was fragile. Leadership rivalries, ideological divisions, and unresolved succession plans between Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim weakened its foundations. Within 22 months, the government collapsed in the 'Sheraton Move' of February 2020, which many describe as a democratic reversal and proof of fragile coalition politics (Nadzri, 2022; Ufen, 2021; Tayeb, 2021).

The collapse reflected unresolved leadership conflicts and the inability to reconcile ideological and ethnic cleavages within the coalition (Tayeb, 2021). Weiss and Suffian (2023) note that PH's short rule demonstrated both the promise of ending UMNO's dominance and the limits of sustaining multi-ethnic cooperation in Malaysia's fragmented system. The aftermath saw the rise of Perikatan Nasional (PN), led by Bersatu, UMNO and PAS, which consolidated Malay-Muslim identity politics and deepened polarisation (Weiss & Tayeb, 2024). These developments highlight how PH's experience exposed the structural weakness of consociational practices in Malaysia, where fragile alliances struggle to balance ethnic representation, party competition, and leadership ambitions.

Malaysia's experience since 2018 shows both continuity and change in coalition politics. On the one hand, party competition still follows ethnic and religious lines, confirming long-standing features of Malaysian politics. On the other hand, fragmentation has created uncertainty, with regional actors now shaping national outcomes. The fall

of PH and later developments show how difficult it is to institutionalise stable power-sharing in a society marked by deep cleavages and shifting alliances.

While recent scholarship has examined PH's collapse, PN's rise, and GE15's consequences (Nadzri, 2022; Tayeb & Weiss, 2024), less attention has been given to PH's time in power through the framework of consociational democracy. This study addresses that gap. It evaluates PH's performance between 2018 and 2020 against Lijphart's four pillars: grand coalition, proportionality, segmental autonomy, and mutual veto. The aim is to understand whether PH reproduced, reformed, or rejected consociational practices, and what lessons its fall holds for coalition governance in Malaysia. In doing so, this study contributes empirically by analysing Malaysia's fragile transition from dominant-party rule, and theoretically by testing the relevance of consociationalism in a plural, polarised, and fragmented political setting.

### **Grand Coalition of PH, 2018-2020**

When Arend Lijphart first introduced the concept of consociational democracy in the late 1960s and 1970s, he placed the idea of the grand coalition at its core (Lijphart, 1969; 1977). In societies marked by deep ethnic, religious, or linguistic divisions, the stability of democracy cannot be secured by the rule of the majority alone. Instead, all major groups must be represented in the governing coalition so that none feel excluded or dominated. A grand coalition is therefore more than just a collection of political parties coming together for electoral convenience. It is a conscious effort to bring into the same government elites who represent competing communities, ensuring that decisions reflect a broad consensus rather than the will of one segment. In this sense, the grand coalition is not about numbers alone; it is about legitimacy. Only when all the key groups are at the table can stability be maintained.

GE14 provides a fascinating case study to explore this principle. The victory of Pakatan Harapan (PH), a coalition made up of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), the Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Amanah Negara (AMANAH), and Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM), was historic. For the first time since independence, BN was defeated. This moment of political change was hailed by many observers as a democratic breakthrough, yet it also raised questions about whether

PH could sustain a governing arrangement that truly lived up to the demands of a grand coalition in such a divided society.

The road to PH's victory was not straightforward. Only three years earlier, the opposition had suffered a major crisis when Pakatan Rakyat (PR), the coalition formed in 2008, collapsed. The fallout between the Islamist PAS and the secular DAP in 2015 fractured the opposition's unity and left many wondering if a viable alternative to BN could ever emerge. The collapse was particularly damaging because it reinforced the impression that deep ideological and ethnic differences made lasting opposition cooperation impossible.

Out of this crisis, however, a new actor emerged. On 16 September 2015, a group of progressive leaders expelled from PAS formed Parti AMANAH Negara (AMANAH). AMANAH kept an Islamic voice alive within the opposition bloc, filling the void left by PAS. Without AMANAH, the opposition would have appeared lopsided, lacking credible Malay-Muslim representation. The presence of AMANAH, even if numerically small, was symbolically important. It allowed PH to claim that it was still a coalition that reflected the country's pluralism; PKR with its multi-ethnic base, DAP with its strong Chinese-majority support, and AMANAH providing an Islamic anchor. This was the first step towards re-creating a consociational balance after the collapse of PR.

The second major development was the entry of PPBM in 2016. Founded by Mahathir Mohamad and Muhyiddin Yassin, both formerly from UMNO, PPBM was designed to capture support in the Malay heartland. Its inclusion was a turning point. Earlier opposition efforts in 2008 and 2013 had come close to victory, but they failed primarily because of insufficient Malay support. Respondent B, reflecting on this, said: "We (PH) had already attained a peak level of support prior to the GE14, yet we still failed to secure a significant number of Malay votes. Therefore, the involvement of Mahathir and Muhyiddin will strengthen support for PH" (Interview, May 30, 2024). From his prison cell, Anwar Ibrahim also acknowledged this reality. According to Respondent C, Anwar told allies that Mahathir's presence might provide the "six inches needed to reach the fruit" that had remained out of reach in the past (Interview, May 31, 2024). These comments capture the consociational logic in which a credible coalition needs Malay elites to complete the picture of inclusion.

Mahathir's decision to re-enter active politics was not just a personal comeback. It represented a reconfiguration of elite cooperation. The reconciliation between Mahathir and Anwar can be considered the most dramatic illustration of elite accommodation in Malaysian history. Once bitter rivals, their public handshake during a court appearance on 5 September 2016 (*Harian Metro*, September 5, 2016) symbolised a willingness to put aside personal hatred for the sake of a prospective coalition unity. PH institutionalised this accommodation in January 2018 when it announced Mahathir as its prime ministerial candidate, Wan Azizah as deputy, and Anwar as the designated successor pending a royal pardon (*Harian Metro*, January 7, 2018). This arrangement ensured that leadership was shared across Malay and multi-ethnic constituencies, reflecting Lijphart's insistence that grand coalitions must be broad and inclusive.

Mahathir's efforts to reach out to the DAP also showed how seriously PH took the idea of inclusiveness. According to Respondent D, Mahathir's attendance at the DAP's national convention in December 2016, where he praised the party as more "Malaysian" than MCA (Interview, June 11, 2024), signalled a break from decades of UMNO's demonisation of the DAP. It reassured Chinese voters and symbolised a bridging of ethnic divides. Likewise, his participation in Bersih rallies (*MStar*, September 1, 2015; *Berita Harian*, November 19, 2016) demonstrated that he was willing to align himself with civil society demands for reform, another symbolic gesture of inclusiveness.

PH also understood that a genuine grand coalition could not ignore East Malaysia. Sabah and Sarawak have long played a pivotal role in federal legitimacy, often acting as kingmakers. In Sabah, PH worked with Shafie Apdal's WARISAN to avoid splitting the opposition vote (*New Straits Times*, April 2, 2018). In Sarawak, PKR and DAP negotiated seat allocations to prevent clashes. Although WARISAN was not formal members of PH, these arrangements acknowledged the need for Sabah's representation. Moreover, because PH was not officially registered in time for the election, all candidates in Peninsular Malaysia contested under the PKR logo (*Harian Metro*, April 5, 2018). This symbolic move projected unity across the coalition, reinforcing its image as a grand coalition standing for national inclusiveness.

Yet, for all its achievements in constructing a broad coalition, PH's arrangements were fragile after they secured the power after GE14. Elite bargaining held the coalition together, but it was not backed by strong institutions. Respondent F, a former UMNO MP who defected to PPBM recalled how Hamzah Zainuddin coordinated the movement of MPs: "Most of us didn't know each other well... Hamzah acted as the bridge" (Interview, June 14, 2024). PPBM's parliamentary strength grew from 13 to 28 MPs through these defections, but this expansion was based on personal ties and informal deals, not on institutional loyalty.

The contrast with BN is striking. BN had long practised a form of grand coalition, but it was hegemonic. UMNO dominated while other parties played junior roles. Inclusion was formal but unequal (Case, 2013). PH, by contrast, attempted to share leadership more evenly among Malay, Chinese, Indian, and East Malaysian elites. It embodied the principle of grand coalition in a more genuine sense. However, because its inclusiveness rested on elite pacts rather than institutionalised safeguards, it was fragile. The absence of anti-defection laws, for instance, meant that MPs could switch allegiances with ease, undermining coalition stability.

PH's collapse in February 2020 underscored this fragility. Despite successfully creating a grand coalition on paper and in practice, it lacked the institutional depth to sustain itself. Leadership rivalries resurfaced, trust broke down, and defections toppled the government. In consociational terms, PH demonstrated both the potential and the limits of the grand coalition principle in Malaysia. It showed that diverse elites could indeed come together to form a government, ending decades of one-party dominance. But it also revealed that without strong rules and mechanisms to bind elites together, such inclusion remains vulnerable to collapse.

Ultimately, PH's story highlights a broader lesson about coalition politics in divided societies. A grand coalition is necessary for legitimacy, but it is not sufficient for stability. Inclusion must be matched by institutionalisation. Malaysia's experience shows how easily elite bargaining can unravel when it relies too heavily on personalities and symbolic gestures. For PH, the achievement of building a coalition that united some segments of the society was remarkable. Yet its downfall

illustrates the challenge of sustaining such unity in a fragmented and polarised system.

### **Proportionality in PH, 2018-2020**

In Lijphart's (1969, 1977) framework, proportionality is about fairness in making sure that political power and state resources are shared in a way that no community feels ignored or left out. In societies divided along ethnic or religious lines, this principle acts as a safeguard against domination by a single group. Proportionality is not limited to how votes are counted or seats are distributed in parliament, it also extends to the allocation of cabinet positions, senior posts in the public service, and access to government resources. McGarry and O'Leary (1993) argue that proportionality strengthens divided societies because it ties representation to real inclusion, while Norris (2008) reminds us that in polarised contexts, proportionality works less like a mathematical formula and more like a political balancing act that guarantees minorities a meaningful role in power. Of course, the principle is not without its critics. Horowitz (1985) warns that proportionality can freeze ethnic divisions by embedding them in political structures, and Roeder and Rothchild (2005) caution that it may create a zero-sum mindset where communities see every gain by others as a loss to themselves.

Malaysia offers a useful example of these dynamics. Under BN, proportionality was formally present but in practice tilted heavily towards UMNO, which dominated decision-making and reduced its coalition partners to junior roles. Case (2013) describes this arrangement as "hegemonic consociationalism," where the appearance of inclusion masked a system that privileged Malay dominance. When PH took shape before the 2018 general election (GE14), it had to craft a new approach to proportionality without UMNO at the centre. This required a formula that was more balanced, but also more delicate, and ultimately more vulnerable to strain.

The first real test came in the run-up to GE14, when PH leaders had to negotiate how parliamentary seats would be distributed among the coalition's parties. The allocation had to reflect not just the size and strength of each party, but also the ethnic and ideological segments they represented. The outcome of that bargaining process in Peninsular Malaysia is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Distribution of GE14 Parliamentary Seats by PH Component Parties (Peninsular Malaysia)

Party	Allocated Seats	Strategic Basis
PKR	51	Multiethnic reach, strongest opposition party
PPBM	54	Malay-majority constituencies, challenge UMNO
DAP	35	Urban/semi-urban Chinese-majority areas
AMANAH	26	Former PAS strongholds, Islamic reformist profile

(Source: Undi.info; Interview data, March 2023–June 2024)

The seat-sharing formula was less about strict calculation and more about political strategy. PKR’s allocation recognised its wide multi-ethnic appeal, while DAP was largely confined to its traditional strongholds in urban, Chinese-majority constituencies. AMANAH, though small in size, was brought in to symbolically carry an Islamic voice after the PAS split, ensuring that the coalition could still claim a religious dimension. PPBM, despite being the newest member, received the largest share of seats. This was a deliberate move to place the party in direct competition with UMNO in Malay-majority areas. As Respondent E explained, “Bersatu (PPBM) is a Malay party and must contend with UMNO” (Interview, June 5, 2024). In this way, proportionality within PH was never just about numerical fairness but about ensuring that every significant ethnic segment had a seat at the table. In that sense, PH was already approximating Lijphart’s principle of proportional inclusion, even before a single vote was cast. When the election results finally came in, however, they painted a very different picture of proportionality.

Table 2: GE14 Results – Parliamentary Seats Won by PH Parties

Party	Seats Won	Percentage of Total PH Seats
PKR	48	39%
DAP	42	35%
PPBM	13	11%
AMANAH	11	9%
WARISAN	8	6%
Total	122	100%

(Source: SPR GE14 results from Undi.info, May 2018)

Table 2 shows that PKR and DAP carried most of PH's success in the 2018 election, while PPBM and AMANAH won far fewer seats. If proportionality were applied strictly based on election results, PKR and DAP should have held the greatest influence in government. But proportionality in consociational theory is not simply a numerical calculation. Even though they performed poorly at the polls, PPBM and AMANAH were given a larger share of cabinet posts because they were Malay-based parties and vital for PH's ethnic legitimacy. This approach can be described as corrective proportionality by adjusting representation to reassure the Malay community and to counter the perception that PH was dominated by the Chinese-majority DAP and multiethnic PKR. Weiss and Suffian (2023) note that the tension between electoral proportionality and ethnic proportionality lay at the heart of PH's fragility. The cabinet distribution after GE14 put this corrective proportionality into practice.

Table 3: Cabinet Distribution under PH (2018)

Party	Cabinet Ministers	Percentage of Cabinet Posts	Comparison to Seats Won
PKR	7	28%	Under-represented
DAP	6	24%	Under-represented
PPBM	6	24%	Over-represented
AMANAH	5	20%	Over-represented
WARISAN	3	12%	Proportional (Sabah role)

(Source: Utusan Borneo, July 2, 2018)

According to Table 3, PKR and DAP, despite winning nearly three-quarters of PH's parliamentary seats, were under-represented in the cabinet. By contrast, PPBM, with only 13 seats, received 6 ministries and the prime ministership, while AMANAH, with 11 seats, received 5 ministries. WARISAN, though not formally a PH member, was given 3 portfolios to acknowledge its contribution in reinforcing PH's majority and as the representative from Sabah. These decisions reflected not a failure of proportionality but a reinterpretation of it. The allocation was designed to calm Malay anxieties, counter UMNO's narrative of Chinese dominance, and preserve coalition balance. This is in line with the situation that happened before GE14 where PH needs a Malay party to form a credible opposition against BN.

This interpretation of proportionality was ethnic rather than numerical. PKR and DAP accepted reduced representation to prevent destabilising perceptions, while PPBM was elevated to symbolise Malay leadership. The deliberate over-representation of PPBM thus reinforced the consociational aim of reassuring all these segments of inclusion, even at the expense of strict numerical fairness.

Compared to BN's practice of hegemonic proportionality, PH's approach was nearer to Lijphart's conception of proportionality. Under BN, UMNO dominated, with other partners still receiving portfolios with little power. PH attempted a more balanced formula where smaller parties were over-represented to maintain coalition cohesion and ethnic legitimacy. This was closer to Lijphart's vision of proportionality, where the goal is stability through inclusiveness. However, such compromise generated tensions. PKR and DAP leaders felt their contributions were undervalued despite winning the most seats, while PPBM's inflated role sowed resentment within the coalition.

The effects of PH's approach to proportionality were mixed. On the positive side, it helped the coalition gain legitimacy across ethnic and regional lines, which was key to securing its historic victory in 2018. At the same time, however, it created strains within the coalition. Ufen (2021) and Nadzri (2022) argue that part of PH's downfall came from these disproportional arrangements. The Sheraton Move in February 2020 was not only the result of leadership rivalries but also of discontent over how power was shared. By giving PPBM more influence than its electoral results justified, PH built a fragile balance that quickly collapsed once defections began.

In short, proportionality in PH was both a strength and a weakness. The distribution of seats, the election results, and the cabinet appointments all show that proportionality was treated less as a strict formula and more as a negotiated compromise to keep all major communities on board. This marked a shift from BN's dominance, as PH tried to share power more fairly, where the latter still prioritising ethnic legitimacy over strict electoral proportionality. While this approach made the coalition more inclusive, it also weakened its internal cohesion. PH's experience suggests that proportionality can bring short-term legitimacy, but without safeguards such as anti-defection laws or stronger coalition discipline, it may end up undermining the stability it is supposed to protect.

### **Segmental Autonomy in PH, 2018-2020**

In consociational theory, segmental autonomy means that different social groups whether ethnic, religious, or linguistic, should have the freedom to manage issues that are central to their identity (Lijphart, 1977). The idea is that each group in a coalition retains the right to speak for itself and make decisions in certain areas, rather than being absorbed into a single majority. McGarry and O’Leary (1993) argue that this reduces tensions, since minorities are assured that their interests will not simply be overridden. But critics such as Horowitz (1985) warn that it can also harden divisions, encouraging communities to focus only on their own agendas instead of finding common ground.

BN once reflected a clear, if imperfect, version of this principle. Each party within BN represented a distinct ethnic base; UMNO for Malays, MCA for Chinese, and MIC for Indians; while parties from Sabah and Sarawak stood for their regional communities. This model institutionalised ethnicity as the foundation of politics. It allowed groups to feel represented but also entrenched UMNO’s dominance. By contrast, PH, formed in 2015 after the collapse of Pakatan Rakyat, presented itself as a coalition aiming to move beyond communal politics. Yet when PH came to power in 2018, it found it difficult to balance the consociational principle of autonomy with its reformist rhetoric.

PH’s ethnic alignment was less straightforward than BN’s. AMANAH and PPBM, together with Malay leaders in PKR, represented Malay interests. DAP, despite calling itself multi-ethnic, was still widely seen as a Chinese-majority party because of its membership and candidate profile. Indian representation was thin, with no major party championing their interests. Instead, figures from HINDRAF were brought in through Senate appointments (DAP Malaysia, July 17, 2018). Unlike BN, which locked ethnic roles into place, PH improvised its formula, constantly negotiating how much space each group could claim.

Some interviews we conducted suggest this tension. Respondent B stressed that PH did not want to favour one group over another: “We adhere to the principles that exist in Islam. We cannot prioritize one race over others” (Interview, May 30, 2024). Respondent C added that ethnicity was becoming a weaker marker of identity: “We merely cling to the notion of race; nevertheless, I believe it is weak when we examine

the concept of ethnicity, as external developments significantly influence the evolution of the Malays” (Interview, May 31, 2024). These views suggest that PH leaders wanted to frame their politics around issues, not ethnicity. In practice, however, ethnic balancing continued to shape their decisions.

PH’s leadership depended on a Malay-led anchor in PPBM. Even though PPBM had only 13 seats, it was elevated to give the coalition a clear Malay face, echoing UMNO’s role in BN. This was partly to counter opposition claims that PH was “dominated by non-Muslims.” Out of PH’s 122 seats, 65 were held by non-Muslims and 57 by Muslims, fuelling the perception of under-representation. To manage this, PH overcompensated by giving PPBM more weight in government.

The opposition capitalised on these concerns by painting PH as anti-Malay. Contentious issues such as PH’s initial willingness to ratify ICERD, its support for the Rome Statute, the management of Tabung Haji under a non-Malay Finance Minister, and its perceived sympathy for LGBT rights (Sinar Harian, May 9, 2019) became political weapons. Respondent E noted that appointments like Lim Guan Eng as Finance Minister, Richard Malanjun as Chief Justice, and Tommy Thomas as Attorney General “may be legal, but politically, they caused unease” (Interview, June 5, 2024). For many Malays, autonomy was not only about having a say in policy but also about symbolic control over key institutions. By failing to address this, PH gave its opponents space to attack.

The by-election losses in Semenyih and Tanjung Piai in 2019 suggested PH’s weakening position. PPBM, the party that was meant to represent the Malays, performed better in mixed seats—consistent with PH’s strength—than in Malay heartlands. In consociational terms, the Malay segment did not feel secure within PH despite PPBM’s elevated role.

Mahathir’s leadership also revealed the limits of autonomy. Respondent A observed that unlike his earlier tenure, when UMNO dominance gave him near-total control, Mahathir in PH had to accommodate the demands of partners like PKR and DAP (Interview, March 30, 2023). Respondent E recalled an incident where DAP pressured Mahathir to delist the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and threatened to withdraw support if ignored (Interview, June

5, 2024). This suggested how segmental autonomy operated in practice where DAP could use its weight to push for concessions, while PPBM had to work harder to prove its Malay credentials.

Mahathir's decision to attend the 2019 Malay Dignity Congress illustrated this balancing act. While many cabinet members opposed his participation, he insisted on going. Respondent A explained: "They [PH] are not at ease with this congress, but Mahathir is from Bersatu, a Malay party. He is concerned about the Malays, and that's why he attended" (Interview, March 30, 2023). The congress itself produced little, but Mahathir's presence sent a signal that PPBM would defend Malay interests. This was a symbolic use of segmental autonomy.

Tensions over leadership succession added another layer of strain. PKR and DAP pushed for Anwar Ibrahim's transition to the premiership, while PPBM resisted, fearing that the change would weaken its standing among Malays. Respondent E noted that pressure from DAP and PKR created instability in the PH Presidential Council (Interview, July 4, 2024). In this case, autonomy was not only about ethnicity but also about leadership ambitions, with each party using the principle to defend its position.

The management of UMNO defectors further destabilised PH. PPBM's strategy, coordinated by Hamzah Zainuddin, aimed to strengthen its Malay base by absorbing UMNO MPs. This blurred the lines between PPBM and UMNO, making PH's autonomy arrangements more fragile. What was meant to be an effort to secure Malay representation ended up in mistrust within the coalition.

In the end, PH's attempt to practise improvised segmental autonomy was fragile. While it claimed to transcend communal politics, it still relied heavily on PPBM as a Malay anchor. Autonomy was exercised symbolically through cabinet appointments, ethnic congresses, and defections rather than through firm institutional rules. Mahathir was expected to act both as a national leader and as a defender of Malay interests, a paradox that proved unsustainable.

From a theoretical point of view, PH shows both why autonomy matters and why it is difficult to sustain. Autonomy is necessary to assure groups that their concerns will not be ignored. But when it is improvised rather than institutionalised, it can create more mistrust

than stability. Horowitz's (1985) critique rings true here: instead of encouraging integration, PH's autonomy practices reinforced old divisions. The 'Sheraton Move' of 2020, which ended PH's rule, was the logical outcome of a coalition that could not institutionalise autonomy in a lasting way.

### **Mutual Veto in PH, 2018-2020**

In consociational theory, mutual veto is one of the four key principles that help divided societies remain stable. Lijphart (1969, 1977) describes it not as a bargaining tool but as a guarantee that no group should be forced to accept a decision that threatens its vital interests. McGarry and O'Leary (1993) call it a protective device, while Norris (2008) stresses that its strength lies in inclusiveness in which without it, minority groups might walk away from cooperation altogether. Critics, however, note the risks. Horowitz (1985) warns that vetoes can entrench divisions, while Roeder and Rothchild (2005) show that vetoes can be used opportunistically, creating stalemate rather than compromise. Even so, in plural societies, the veto remains essential because it reassures groups that their core interests will not be sacrificed.

Malaysia's earlier experience under BN only partially reflected this principle. Each ethnic party had some space to negotiate, but UMNO's dominance meant that veto power was not equally shared. When PH was formed, it promised something different with a coalition built on more equal participation and collective decision-making. At the centre of this was the Presidential Council, set up as the main decision-making forum. After PPBM joined in 2017, Mahathir Mohamad became Chairman, Anwar Ibrahim the General Leader, Wan Azizah the President, and Muhyiddin Yassin, Mohamad Sabu, and Lim Guan Eng the deputy presidents, with other party leaders holding vice-presidencies (Malaysiakini, July 14, 2017). On paper, each party was given equal representation, and the arrangement appeared consistent with Lijphart's idea of mutual veto.

In reality, however, the Council did not work as intended. Ministers frequently made announcements without prior agreement. For example, Human Resources Minister M. Kulasegaran proposed bringing in African workers, which Mahathir later rejected (Sinar Harian, June 30, 2019). Similarly, Entrepreneur Development Minister Redzuan Yusof declared the Lynas plant would stay open, contradicting PH's earlier

promise to shut it down (Malaysiakini, November 24, 2019). These episodes showed that there was no binding process to clear decisions through the Council, and no penalties if parties ignored it. Instead of formal vetoes, parties relied on public statements or symbolic dissent after the fact, which weakened unity and credibility.

The ICERD controversy was the clearest example. PH initially supported ratifying the convention, in line with its reformist image. But when Malay-Muslim parties mobilised mass opposition, claiming it threatened Malay privileges and Islam's status, PH quickly backed down. This reversal was not negotiated in the Council; it was a reactive decision to street pressure. Respondent G admitted that "PH made promises without understanding the legal implications of existing contracts" (Interview, July 4, 2024), underlining the lack of careful deliberation. The same happened with plans to downsize the civil service and with the Lynas pledge where promises were made, only to be abandoned when resistance grew. Without formal veto procedures, decisions were taken and reversed haphazardly, undermining coalition discipline.

The leadership succession issue exposed these weaknesses even further. Before GE14, PH had agreed Mahathir would serve only temporarily before handing over to Anwar. But once in power, this agreement was contested. Zuraida Kamaruddin publicly supported Mahathir serving a full term (Malaysiakini, August 3, 2019), while Mahathir himself dismissed the manifesto as "not a sacred text" (Malaysiakini, July 16, 2018). For PKR, Anwar's succession was a core interest, yet without binding veto rights, it could be postponed or ignored repeatedly. Lijphart's theory suggests veto powers exist precisely to prevent such outcomes. PH's inability to enforce them meant that the issue became a running battle that destabilised the coalition.

What PH practised, then, was closer to bargaining than true veto. Parties resisted policies, but their resistance was expressed through brinkmanship or symbolic acts rather than institutional guarantees. As highlighted above, there was unease among Malays at the appointments of Finance Minister Lim Guan Eng, Chief Justice Richard Malanjun, and Attorney General Tommy Thomas. In a genuine consociational model, PPBM could have exercised a veto to block such appointments. Instead, it resorted to symbolism, such as Mahathir's attendance at the

Malay Dignity Congress, to reassure its Malay base. This difference matters. In countries like Belgium or Northern Ireland, veto rights are formalised in law and require cross-community approval. In PH, vetoes were informal, exercised outside institutions, and often through public confrontation.

The lack of a functioning veto weakened PH's stability. Without clear rules, parties pursued unilateral strategies. DAP pushed for reforms such as ICERD and UEC recognition, which alarmed the Malays. PPBM expanded by recruiting UMNO defectors, which PKR and DAP saw as undermining trust. Each party believed its interests were existential, but none had institutional veto power to secure them. The result was fragmentation. Respondents E and G linked these failures partly to inexperienced new ministers who were not used to coalition governance, but the deeper cause was structural where PH lacked the assurance that vital interests would always be protected.

The 'Sheraton Move' in February 2020 marked the collapse of this fragile arrangement. PKR's vital interest on Anwar's succession was never guaranteed. PPBM's interest in securing Malay leadership was not adequately safeguarded inside PH, pushing its leaders to seek protection outside of the coalition. With no institutionalised veto to enforce trust, defections spread and the government fell. PH had the appearance of a system with mutual veto but not its substance.

From a theoretical standpoint, PH illustrates how fragile coalition governance becomes when veto rights are informal rather than formalised. Lijphart argued that veto powers keep minorities engaged; without them, they may withdraw. Horowitz's critique is also relevant: PH's ad hoc vetoes encouraged brinkmanship and public grandstanding instead of compromise. Comparative experience suggests that vetoes work best when tied to formal rules and clear procedures (McGarry & O'Leary, 2006). In PH, however, veto power remained aspirational, reducing the Council to a symbolic committee.

In conclusion, PH's mutual veto was more theoretical than real. The Presidential Council gave the appearance of collective leadership but lacked enforcement mechanisms. Instead of binding guarantees, vetoes were expressed through protests, symbolic gestures, or last-minute manoeuvres. This blurred the line between simple disagreement and true veto, leaving core interests unprotected. Without institutionalised

safeguards, inclusiveness became fragile, and coalition governance unstable. PH's experience shows that genuine power-sharing requires more than broad representation; it requires enforceable guarantees that no segment's vital interests can be ignored. The failure to embed such guarantees goes a long way in explaining PH's instability and eventual collapse.

## **Conclusion**

PH met the spirit of consociational inclusion but struggled to build the institutions needed to make inclusion durable. On the principle of grand coalition, PH managed to bring together historic rivals, incorporate an Islamic reformist partner in AMANAH, add a Malay anchor in PPBM, and coordinate with actors in East Malaysia. These moves reflected consociational breadth. On proportionality, PH practised what can be called corrective proportionality by elevating Malay-based parties in cabinet to reduce perceptions of non-Malay dominance. These choices gave PH the legitimacy to win power and secure initial acceptance across communities.

The same design also created weaknesses. Segmental autonomy was improvised rather than firmly structured, expressed through symbolic acts such as high-profile appointments, attendance at ethnic congresses, or the recruitment of defectors, rather than through clearly assigned domains of authority. Mutual veto remained informal. The Presidential Council lacked binding procedures to protect the vital interests of member parties in areas such as ICERD, Lynas, civil service reform, or leadership succession. Without enforceable guarantees, parties turned to public brinkmanship, mistrust grew, and elite defection became a rational choice leading to the 'Sheraton Move' and the fall of the PH government.

Three lessons can be drawn. First, broad inclusion needs to be paired with written and enforceable coalition rules that define what issues require veto power, how decisions are made, and what sanctions apply when agreements are breached. Second, proportionality formulas must be transparent and reviewed periodically, balancing electoral strength with ethnic legitimacy to prevent discontent. Third, autonomy should be institutionalised through clear portfolios or domains that are protected from routine interference, supported by anti-defection laws and stronger coalition discipline. This study has focused on the design of PH's

coalition, but further research could explore how voters, civil society, and regional parties understood and responded to these arrangements. Malaysia's experience since 2018 shows that while numbers can win elections, only strong and credible institutions can sustain coalition governance in a divided society.

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(i) Al-Bukhārī, 88:204 (where 88 is the book number, 204 is the ḥadīth number)

(ii) Ibn Hanbal, vol. 1, p. 1

Reference:

(i) Al-Bukhārī, M. (1981). *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.

(ii) Ibn Ḥanbal, A. (1982). *Musnad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*. Istanbul: Cagri Yayinlari.

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