Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs

Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs

Special Issue Introduction

The 2018 Malaysian General Election: The Return of Mahathir and the Exit of UMNO

James Chin and Bridget Welsh

In coming years, 9 May will be regarded a watershed moment in Malaysia's political history; on the same level as the 13 May 1969 race riots. After 61 years of uninterrupted rule by the Malayan Alliance, and its successor, Barisan Nasional (BN), the governing coalition dominated by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and led by Malaysia's sixth prime minister Najib Tun Razak lost the 14th General Election. In a devastating defeat, BN lost its majority in the national parliament and only retained two of the 12 state governments contested. BN also recorded its lowest share of the popular vote, capturing only 33.8 per cent (a sharp drop of 13.6 per cent).

What was even more incredible was the person who led the opposition alliance, Pakatan Harapan (PH, or the Alliance of Hope), to victory. Mahathir Mohammad, Malaysia's longest-serving prime minister, holding office from 1981 to 2003 (a total of 22 years), came out of retirement, established a new political party, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM), took over the leadership of the opposition PH, and led them into government. He took over as leader when he was 90 years old. On 10 May 2018, the day he was sworn in, he was 92 years old and is now the oldest serving elected premier in the world.

The magnitude of a Mahathir-led victory cannot be underestimated. Most experts on Malaysian politics gave Mahathir and PH little chance of overthrowing Najib Razak and BN. After all, Najib and BN held all the cards. BN, or more precisely UMNO – the dominant party in the coalition and backbone of BN – had unlimited financial resources, crucial for patronage and funding a multifaceted campaign. Perhaps more importantly, UMNO controlled all the state apparatus involved in conducting the elections, from the Electoral Commission (EC) to government departments responsible for patronage, intelligence, and voter registration. These organisations were openly biased in favour of BN. The EC was notorious for gerrymandering boundaries in favour of BN, and the electoral roll was

riddled with suspect voters (Chan 2018). The civil service machinery behaved more like the BN election machinery than a neutral institution. The mainstream media – all linked to the government – openly called on voters to reject Mahathir and support continuity under Najib. Several sultans, always a political factor in nine of Malaysia's states, openly questioned Mahathir and PH (Bhavan Jaipragas 2017). The Selangor sultan famously claimed that Mahathir had an "inferiority complex" (Selangor Sultan 2017). Mahathir was accused of selling out the Malay race; the most infamous headline was "DAP plan to manipulate Dr M revealed: PM" (*New Straits Times* 2018). Malays were warned that Mahathir would take away the privileges and the affirmative action enjoyed by the Malay community, and be beholden to the Democratic Action Party (DAP) – a Chinese-dominant one. In Malaysia's highly racial political system, accusing someone of selling out their race can create significant political damage.

On top of these factors, Najib and UMNO thought that his informal alliance with PAS, the Islamic party, would give them the upper hand in rural Malay constituencies.[1] Winning these constituencies is crucial to triumphing in the election overall, as they account for about half of all the seats in parliament. PAS had always been UMNO's arch-enemy in the rural areas, and this was the first time since the mid-1970s that it agreed to cooperate with UMNO – appealing to UMNO's political base along religious and racial grounds. Najib's biggest weakness, the 1MDB (1 Malaysia Development Berhad) kleptocracy scandal, was not expected to have any real impact among rural Malay voters (see Teh 2018; Wright and Bradley 2018). After all, UMNO claimed that 1MDB was "too complex" for rural voters to understand, and that they were interested in more "bread and butter" issues instead. 1MDB, thus, was labelled an urban issue (*Free Malaysia Today* 2017). BN was projected to hold onto its core rural Malay base, and similarly retain its dominant position in the two states of East Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak – both seen as "safe deposit states" and comprising a fifth of the seats to be competed over nationally. After all, BN had made gains in the 2016 Sarawak election, picking up seats from the opposition.

Going into GE14, BN was, then, confident of victory. The failure of the opposition to win power in the previous general election of 2013 had dampened hopes of a change of government. The ratcheted up use of repression on the part of BN in the years leading up to GE14 had fostered a climate of fear (Human Rights Watch 2016). Mahathir and PH were viewed as the underdogs. In a worst-case scenario for the ruling coalition,

---

1   Hutt (2018). On cooperation, see also *New Straits Times* (2015) and Chin (2017). The process began in 2013, and extended up to GE14.

Najib and BN would win with a smaller majority but lose the popular vote.[2] The possibility of a hung parliament was touted, but few besides those engaged in generating propaganda for the opposition believed it was possible as the campaign evolved – and especially sceptical were those within the ranks of the governing coalition itself.

How, then, did Mahathir and PH win? This question will preoccupy Malaysian watchers for decades to come. In this special issue, we shed light on this watershed moment by looking at a range of factors contributing to BN's defeat. While we do not claim that the articles here represent a definitive and comprehensive overview of GE14, we nevertheless hope that they illuminate and help explain the many spectrums that came together to create, in a sense, a "perfect storm" for Mahathir and his opposition partners.

The Articles

This collection contains seven articles adopting different theoretical perspectives on GE14, and its implications for democracy. Yet what ties the collection together is twofold: first, the centrality of developments surrounding the GE14 campaign and, second, broader societal shifts away from BN, be they in the dominant party UMNO itself, civil society, East Malaysia, or in the failures resulting from the BN development model. Collectively the articles suggest a rethink of electoral behaviour in Malaysia is necessary, as not only was the election result unexpected but there were also mistaken assumptions made about voting behaviour as well as underestimations of the impact of different factors in shaping political outcomes. Furthermore, while all the essays suggest that the election expanded the possibility of democratic governance, not least of which was a long overdue political transition, the picture for democracy ahead is fraught with uncertainty and obstacles – although the respective authors vary on what these are and what their potential effect(s) will be.

Ross Tapsell's article deals with the role played by social media – in particular, Facebook and WhatsApp. GE14 has increasingly been labelled Malaysia's "WhatsApp" election. The smartphone was used extensively to circumvent mainstream media and as a subversive device for disseminating anti-government messages. For all its serious flaws, social media allows citizens in the rural and semi-rural heartlands of Malaysia to receive alternative news; in GE14, the expansion of telecommunications coverage allowed for even greater geographic inclusion. Facebook was *the* central

---

2   Malaysia uses the first-past-the-post electoral system.

place to see images of Mahathir at rallies and watch his speeches live, but also for Malaysians to regularly read fervent criticism of Prime Minister Najib and BN. Social media was not only a space for alternative information, but crucially also gossip, slander, jokes, and disagreements. Tapsell argues that this empowered the "weak," drawing theoretically from the earlier pioneering work on Malaysia by James Scott (Scott 1987), and ultimately advantaged the opposition in GE14. Tapsell notes, however, that all sides used social media and this space was heavily contested, making for a different campaign environment compared to previous elections and one in which there was greater diversity and complexity.

Kai Ostwald, Paul Schuler, and Jie Ming Chong focus on Malay constituencies, arguably one of the most crucial arenas wherein GE14 was won. They argue that the electoral outcome does not upend conventional wisdom on the opposition's fragmentation, but rather underscores the importance of local context. The authors posit also that the pronounced regionalism of Malaysian politics mitigated the impact of the local third party. This finding points to the need to incorporate greater difference in understanding regional dynamics on the ground, even within Peninsula Malaysia. Furthermore, they contend the elite split within UMNO provided conservative voters with an assurance of continuity that undermined both the incumbent and third-party appeals. Their analysis of vote distributions suggests that the new UMNO and PAS opposition will collaborate henceforth to increase the salience of ethnicity and political Islam, in a bid to build a future winning electoral bloc.

John Funston similarly looks at the Malay vote, but his perspective is different. Rather than look in-depth at the 2018 results, he places his analysis in a broader historical context. He traces the challenges for BN, and UMNO in particular, back to the divisive 1999 election and the first Mahathir era. He also examines the key decisions made by Najib before and after the campaign, before he analyses how UMNO performed in 2018. His analysis shows that GE14 was a devastating defeat for the dominant party. Funston argues that this had to do with long-standing issues of corruption, but also the reconfiguration of the political opposition. He posits PH was able to attract Malay support and thus gain the necessary seats to win government.

Bridget Welsh echoes the importance of looking at vote patterns in her analysis of GE14. She argues that the "surprise" of the election result can be understood to be the consequence of the impactful role of "emotion" in the messaging and mode of the election. She suggests that to understand the outcome, the role that "saviour" politics played in influencing voters was important – aided by an enhanced and more prominently

"emotional" social media campaign. She differs, however, in crediting the outcome to an "elite" split within UMNO or when others attribute it to the opposition. She posits that GE14 was, rather, a product of an "UMNO collapse" in which the deterioration of the party's support was due to both the short- and long-term erosion of its political base notably among younger voters. Welsh contends that while Malaysia may have bucked global trends in embracing a more democratic alternative, a new government, the forces driving political change are, in fact, quite similar to worldwide ones. In Malaysia's case, however, the incumbent BN bore the brunt of anger, political polarisation and rising inequality.

Tsu Chong Chan takes the discussion away from the focus on the campaign and its results, in his article on how Bersih – Malaysia's electoral reform movement – contributed to the opposition's victory in GE14. As a member of the Bersih Secretariat, Chan offers a bird's-eye view of what happened and how this active and important civil society group contributed to political change. Using the framework of political opportunity structures, Chan examines how Bersih used the 1MDB scandal, electoral manipulation, and the re-delineation exercise to mobilise, set the agenda, and to educate voters. He shows how Bersih served to put the BN government on the defensive, and simultaneously helped to forge opposition cooperation and expand the arenas of political contestation. Chan argues that without civil society, and Bersih in particular, the outcome witnessed would not have been possible.

Muhamad Nadzri Mohamed Noor takes a different approach, as he opts to focus in on broader shifts in the political structure and development policies that also contributed to the context for a PH victory. His analysis highlights the central role of shifts within both the ruling coalition and within the opposition. He argues that weaknesses in development engagement ultimately contributed to BN's defeat.

In the final essay, James Chin looks at the campaign in the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak. He argues that, unlike on the peninsula, the issue of the 1963 Malaysia Agreement (MA63) was omnipresent throughout the campaign. For the past half-century, the polity in Sabah and Sarawak have felt that they have lost their autonomy in many areas stipulated in the MA63 agreement due to the centralisation of powers by the federal government. This has created a strong sense of historical grievance among Sabahans and Sarawakians, especially the non-Muslim natives and the Chinese communities. The MA63 issue combined with local factors such as the selection of candidates and internal party disputes as well as sabotage – all taken together – better reflect the experience of GE14 in Sabah and Sarawak.

References

Bhavan Jaipragas (2017), Forget Najib … Watch Mahathir Slug It Out With Sultans in 2018, in: *South China Morning Post*, 30 December.

Chan, Tsu Chong (2018), How the EC Infected Our Electoral System, in: *Malaysiakini*, 23 January, online: <www.malaysiakini.com/news/409710> (20 December 2018).

Chin, James (2017), Najib Set to Strengthen Grip on Power, in: *East Asia Forum*, 12 December, online: <www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/12/12/najib-set-to-strengthen-grip-on-power/> (20 December 2018).

Free Malaysia Today (2017), Disinterest, Indifference Mark Rural Sentiments over 1MDB Affair, 1 August.

Human Rights Watch (2016), *Deepening Culture of Fear: The Criminalization of Peaceful Expression in Malaysia*, 12 October, online: <www.hrw.org/report/2016/10/12/deepening-culture-fear/criminalization-peaceful-expression-malaysia> (20 December 2018).

Hutt, David (2018), How Will PAS Matter in Malaysia's Election?, in: *The Diplomat*, 22 March.

New Straits Times (2018), DAP plan to manipulate Dr M revealed: PM, 2 May.

New Straits Times (2015), Najib to PAS: Let's Be United as Muslims, 17 December, online: <www.nst.com.my/news/2015/12/117741/najib-pas-lets-be-united-muslims> (31 July 2018).

Scott, James (1987), *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Resistance*, Yale University Press.

Selangor Sultan (2017), Mahathir Has an Inferiority Complex, in: *Free Malaysia Today*, 10 December.

Teh, Yik Koon (2018), *From BMF to 1MDB: A Criminological and Sociological Discussion*, Petaling Jaya: SIRD.

Wright, Tom, and Bradley Hope (2018), *Billion Dollar Whale: The Man Who Fooled Wall Street, Hollywood and the World*, New York: Hachette Books.

■   **James Chin** is Director, Asia Institute, University of Tasmania. He is also a senior fellow at the Jeffrey Cheah Institute on Southeast Asia, Malaysia.
<jameschin1@gmail.com>

■   **Bridget Welsh** is an associate professor at John Cabot University in Rome, a university fellow at Charles Darwin University and a Senior Research Associate of the Center for East Asia Democratic Studies of National Taiwan University.
<bridgetwelsh1@gmail.com>