




The Rise, Resilience and Demise of Malaysia's Dominant Coalition

Chin-Huat Wong 

Head, Institutional Reforms and Governance Programme, Penang Institute, Penang, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

In May 2018, Malaysia's Barisan Nasional (BN) lost power for the first time since the country's independence. Although the opposition finally succeeded in assuming the reins of government after three failed attempts since 1990, the aspired for 'two-coalition system' did not emerge. Like previous opposition coalitions that disintegrated after electoral defeat, BN is fast melting down and is now reduced to a rump of its Malay nationalist core, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). Officially born in 1974, BN was expanded from its centrist forerunner Alliance, which suffered an electoral setback in 1969 under centrifugal competition. As a permanent grand coalition designed to contain opposition, BN had resiliently survived on a crafty manipulation of communal anxieties of ethnic Malays and Chinese. As unintended consequences, BN had, however, radicalised opposition in first-past-the-post elections and become vulnerable to implosion after electoral landslides. Pakatan Harapan now seemingly emerges as the new dominant coalition, with centrifugal competition from ethno-religious and regional-nationalists.

KEYWORDS

Malaysia; Elections; First-Past-The-Post; One-party Predominance; Permanent Coalition; Consociationalism

Introduction: BN's Quick Meltdown

Malaysia's 14th general election (GE14) which elected the federal government and 12 out of 13 state governments on 9 May did not just end the uninterrupted rule by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) despite regular elections since 1957,¹ it ended its run as the world's record holder after Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party's ousting in 2000. It may also reshape the country's party system and raise interesting questions on democracy in multi-ethnic polities. Politics in the former British colony has always been dominated by communal parties that serve the various ethnic communities: Malay and indigenous communities (69.1%), Chinese (23.0%), Indians (6.9%) and others (1.0%).²

Replacing the UMNO-led National Front (Barisan Nasional, BN) is the three-year-old Alliance of Hope (Pakatan Harapan, PH) made up of five component parties, commanding 48% of the federal votes, 126 parliamentarians and also eight state governments.³ The two largest parties are the multi-ethnic but Malay-dominant People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat, PKR)⁴ led by former Deputy Prime

Minister Anwar Ibrahim and the predominantly non-Malay and secular Democratic Action Party (DAP). They have been allies since 2008 in PH's forerunner People's Alliance (Pakatan Rakyat, PR). Malaysian United Indigenous Party (Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, henceforth Bersatu) led by Prime Minister Mahathir Muhamad and National Trust Party (Parti Amanah Negara, henceforth Amanah) are, respectively, splinters of UMNO and the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, PAS), the third component of the defunct PR. Another UMNO splinter, Sabah Heritage Party (Parti Warisan Sabah, Warisan), is PH's junior partner in the federal government and its senior partner in the Sabah state government (Table 1).

Within two months of its defeat BN, which won 34% of the federal votes, had lost eight out of BN's 13 component parties and 25 out of its 79 federal lawmakers, posing a question as to its viability.⁵ In the biggest blow, its entire Sarawak chapter went independent as the rebranded Sarawak Parties Alliance (Gabungan Parti Sarawak, GPS), now the second largest opposition bloc with 19 federal seats along with the state power which it retained with a landslide in the 2016 state election. The multi-ethnic coalition is now effectively reduced to only UMNO, which holds on to 42 parliamentarians and two state governments – Pahang and Perlis – in the Malaysian Peninsula (West Malaysia) and six parliamentarians in the state of Sabah on Borneo Island (East Malaysia). Its oldest allies, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), while remaining loyal to UMNO, won only, respectively, one and two parliamentary seats and lost their credentials to be communal champions. As the ousted Prime Minister Najib Razak and his deputy Zahid Hamidi now stand trial for corruption involving state investment fund 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) and state contracts, UMNO's fortune is unlikely to be overturned soon. The third largest opposition is PAS, which won 17% of the federal votes and 18 parliamentary seats, 15 of which are in Kelantan and Terengganu, over which it also won state power.

Opposition parties and civil society groups had, since 1990, been promoting the idea of a 'two-coalition' system as an alternative to UMNO–BN's one-coalition dominance, but the quick meltdown of BN would probably be the fourth time the second-placed multi-ethnic coalition would bite the dust after electoral defeat (Table 2). Drawing examples of a few Asian and African countries including Malaysia, Horowitz has argued

Table 1. Vote and seat share of major party blocks in Malaysia's 2013 and 2018 federal elections.

| | 2013 | | 2018 | | Post-election developments/remarks |
|--------------------------------|---------|-------|---------|-------|---|
| | Vote % | Seats | Vote % | Seats | |
| Barisan Nasional | 47.28% | 133 | 33.72% | 79 | 19 parliamentarians from Sarawak BN, 6 from UMNO and 1 each from United Sabah Party (PBS) and United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (UPKO) have since quit |
| Pakatan Rakyat | 51.32% | 89 | – | – | Consisting of PKR, DAP and PAS |
| Pakatan Harapan | – | – | 48.05% | 121 | Consisting of PKR, DAP, Bersatu, Amanah and Warisan. PKR has since been joined by three independent parliamentarians, and Bersatu and Warisan respectively by two and one ex-UMNO member. |
| PAS | – | – | 16.89% | 18 | |
| Other parties and independents | 1.40% | – | 1.34% | 4 | Three independent candidates have since joined PKR |
| Total | 100.00% | 222 | 100.00% | 222 | |

Table 2. The changing configuration of ruling and opposition coalitions in Malaysia, 1990–2018.

| General election (GE) /period | The ruling coalition | | The main opposition | |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|---|---------------------|------------------------|
| | Multi-ethnic | Malay-based | Multi-ethnic | Non-Malay-based |
| 1990 (GE8) | Barisan Nasional | Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah In an effective election pact, led by Parti Semangat 46 (S46) | Gagasan Rakyat | |
| 1995 (GE9) | Barisan Nasional | Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah | | DAP |
| 1999 (GE10) | Barisan Nasional | | Barisan Alternatif | |
| 2004 (GE11) | Barisan Nasional | Barisan Alternatif | | DAP |
| 2008 (GE12) | Barisan Nasional | PAS | PKR | DAP |
| | | In an effective election pact, led by PKR | | |
| 2013 (GE13) | Barisan Nasional | | Pakatan Rakyat | |
| 2018 (GE14) | Barisan Nasional | PAS | Pakatan Harapan | |
| Post-2018 (GE14) | Pakatan Harapan | PAS | Barisan Nasional | Gabungan Parti Sarawak |

that multi-ethnic coalitions can better withstand centrifugal forces than unified multi-ethnic parties.⁶ However, can there be more than one durable multi-ethnic coalition that bridges the ethnic Malays and non-Malays for Malaysia? At least three interesting questions deserve in-depth investigation and ongoing monitoring: Does the replacement of BN by PH mean Malaysia's one-coalition predominance has remained intact despite regime change? Alternatively, could PH's dominance last for only a term or less, and if so what might the new party system be? What explains the rise of BN (1974–) and its forerunner Alliance (1952–1973), its resilience for 13 elections for 63 years from the first one in 1955 and now its effective demise as a multi-ethnic coalition? This paper will attempt to answer the last question in the humble hope that it might be useful for answering other questions. Before examining critical historical junctures such as the 1969 post-election ethnic riot and the 2008 political tsunami that shaped BN's fate, I shall start by reviewing the literature on party systems.

Theorising UMNO's Predominant Coalition

To map comparatively Malaysia's 61-year-old party system, we need to consult three related categories of literature.

The first concerns party system, a concept that normally captures two dimensions: the number of parties and how they compete. Often, the number of parties correlates positively with the ideological distance between them. Sartori identified three basic systems: two-party systems with a small ideological distance; moderate pluralism with a limited number of parties and a relatively small ideological distance; and polarised pluralism with many parties spread across a large ideological distance.⁷ However, parties may compete centrifugally despite a smaller number of parties. Horowitz documented ethnic two-party systems in Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago where ethnic voting simply turned an election into 'racial census'.⁸ But this may even happen in Western democracies, for example the United Kingdom in the 1980s when both the Conservatives and Labour moved away from the centre. Robertson shows that when competition is idle, the party may choose to please the median party member rather

than the median voter because 'vote maximisation, over and above that necessary to win, will not take place'.⁹

Much has been done in the party system literature to pursue quantitative measurement and causal analyses. Laakso and Taagepera propose a useful formula to measure effective numbers of elective and legislative parties, where, for example, two parties that, respectively, command 90 and 10% support count not as 2 but 1.2 to reflect their relative sizes.¹⁰ Formalising and improvising on the mechanical and psychological arguments by Duverger and other scholars,¹¹ Cox explains party system as the consequence of 'party reduction' informed by the strength of the electoral system. As instrumentally rational voters would normally concentrate their votes on only the top-running candidates, Cox proposes that the effective number of elective parties would be the lower between the number of parties generated by social cleavages and $M + 1$, where M is magnitude or the number of contested seats in a constituency. While the first-past-the-post (FPTP)/single-member plurality (SMP) elections in Britain and New Zealand pre-1996 generated a two-party system, that Malta also has a two-party system despite having the proportional single transferable vote (STV) system confirms that electoral system cannot produce more parties than needed by social cleavages. Cox points out that while FPTP elections force voters to support only two parties in their constituencies, the two parties need not be the same across constituencies. What drives a national two-party system is the concentration of national executive power, in executive presidency or single-party government in parliamentary system, where a single large political prize forces political players into two large blocs with the hope of sharing power.¹²

The second concerns one-party predominance, which may be authoritarian or democratic in nature. At one end are *de jure* one-party states such as China, Vietnam and Cuba where effective opposition is not allowed and competitive elections not held. At the other end are what Pempel calls 'uncommon democracies', with examples as diverse as Sweden, Italy, Britain, Israel and Japan, where the dominant parties win plurality of votes and stay in government for a long time and set the political agenda.¹³ Dunleavy defines dominance with perceived effectiveness in the eyes of voters and an extensive protected area in ideological space, so much so that their dominance can only be eroded if the opposition moves ideologically towards them.¹⁴ In between the two extremes are electoral one-party states, a subset of electoral authoritarianism, of which Malaysia is a prototype.¹⁵ In this intermediate category, unbroken rule by the dominant party is necessary as an indicator.

The third surrounds coalition-building. Groups may merge to be a singular party or bloc that nominates candidates in a single slate, as explained as the process of 'party reduction' in Cox's analysis of electoral logic. The short-lived second multi-ethnic coalitions in Malaysia can be understood as the result of an unsustainable and reverted process of party reduction. However, in most countries, coalitions are not permanent and do not use a single slate during elections, but instead negotiate and form after elections either to share power in government or to collaborate in legislature. For coalition governments, Riker argues that the driving force to bring partners together is not ideological closeness but the calculation to keep the coalition 'minimal[ly] winning', because 'when a coalition includes everybody, the winners gain nothing because there are no losers'.¹⁶

Table 3. The elective and parliamentary dominance of the Alliance/Barisan Nasional (1955–2018).

| Election | Alliance/BN's vote % | Alliance/BN's seat % |
|----------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 1955 | 81.68% | 98.08% |
| 1959 | 51.77% | 71.15% |
| 1964 | 58.53% | 85.58% |
| 1969 | 46.29% | 62.50% |
| 1974 | 60.73% | 87.66% |
| 1978 | 57.23% | 84.42% |
| 1982 | 60.54% | 85.71% |
| 1986 | 57.28% | 83.62% |
| 1990 | 53.38% | 70.56% |
| 1995 | 65.16% | 84.38% |
| 1999 | 56.53% | 76.68% |
| 2004 | 63.85% | 90.87% |
| 2008 | 51.50% | 63.93% |
| 2013 | 47.38% | 59.91% |
| 2018 | 33.72% | 35.59% |

Riker's 'zero sum game' logic of politics seems to contradict with the 'grand coalitions' that have ruled Malaysia since 1955.¹⁷ Lijphart listed Malaysia from 1957 to 1969 as a positive example of consociationalism, characterised by a coalition that included all major ethnic groups.¹⁸ The 1969 post-election ethnic riot ended consociationalism but not the grand coalition model. The weakened Alliance was later expanded to co-opt successfully all but two main opposition parties.¹⁹

Built on such a diverse but related body of literature, this paper will attempt to make sense of Malaysia's 61-year-old dominant coalition. To be clear, the dominant entity studied here is not UMNO but the UMNO-led Alliance/BN coalition. It was extremely secure in five elections, winning more than 60% of votes and 80% of seats: 1955 (81.68%, 98.08%), 1974 (60.73%, 87.66%), 1982 (60.54%, 84.42%), 1995 (65.16%, 84.38%) and 2004 (63.85%, 90.87%), in which Riker's logic may be examined (Table 3).

Origin and Expansion of the Permanent Coalition

Intercommunal power-sharing in Malaysia is structurally inevitable given her multi-ethnic population, but the form it takes – a multi-ethnic coalition instead of a multi-ethnic party – is arguably the result of path dependence. In the 1952 Kuala Lumpur municipal election, the local chapter of UMNO reached out to its counterpart in MCA to fight its multi-ethnic splinter, the Independence of Malaya Party (IMP) founded by its founding president, Onn Jaafar. The successful local joint venture led to a formal national pact of UMNO–MCA as the Alliance, later joined by MIC as the Indian representatives. On the other side of the coin, after the Kuala Lumpur defeat sent IMP into oblivion, no multi-ethnic party had made it at the national level until Anwar's PKR was born in 1999.

What Lijphart identified as 'consociational democracy' in Malaysia was therefore a centrist multi-ethnic 'permanent coalition' facing centrifugal competition from both the Malay- and non-Malay-based opposition at the communal flanks. This was substantially different from the 'grand coalitions' in Switzerland and Austria, or the 'shifting

coalitions' in Belgium and the Netherlands, or the unique 'national pact' in Lebanon (1943–1975), where no major parties were left out from the power-sharing arrangements. The paradoxical outcome of the Alliance monopolising the middle ground was the shrinking of the middle ground as disaffected voters moved to the flank parties.

In the 1969 election, the Alliance led by the nation-founding Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman found itself caught in a perfect storm: a significant desertion of Malay votes on one hand, and the consolidation of anti-establishment non-Malay votes on the other. In the Peninsula, which covered 86% of the electorate and 72% of seats, when compared with the 1964 election the Alliance lost 9.97 percentage points of votes while the Malay-based opposition parties increased theirs by 10.03 percentage points. The vote ratio of UMNO to PAS dropped from 5:2 in 1964 to 3:2 in 1969, effectively challenging UMNO's claim to be the sole representative and protector of the Malays. If this two-party format in Malay politics were to become a norm, PAS might have teamed up with the non-Malay-based opposition to offer a multi-ethnic alternative to the Alliance. However, the under-concentration of PAS votes led to only a minor increase of seats from nine to 12.²⁰ Meanwhile, the three non-Malay-based opposition parties – DAP, the Malaysian People's Movement Party (Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia, henceforth Gerakan) and People's Progressive Party (PPP) – had formed a pact to avoid multi-cornered fights, which helped them to recover eight parliamentary constituencies lost in 1964 due to split votes between the Socialist Front and centre-left opposition parties. Their pact also generated a Chinese swing in the states of Perak, Pulau Pinang and Selangor, which delivered 11 more seats.²¹ As a result, while the non-Malay-based opposition parties' overall vote share in the Peninsula remained stagnant at around 26%, their seats jumped from a sheer six to a whopping 25 (Table 4).

Coupled with the non-Malay opposition's success in capturing the Penang state government and causing hung assemblies in Selangor and Perak, this created a general impression that the Chinese were challenging UMNO's and Malays' political dominance. The stronger and more widespread Malay swing from UMNO to PAS was simply overshadowed and concealed by the FPTP electoral system, conveniently turning UMNO's existential crisis into an ethnic showdown, which triggered the 13 May riot and paved the way for two years of emergency rule. During that period, parliamentary government was suspended to give way to a National Operations Council (MAGERAN) consisting of predominantly Malay political, bureaucratic, military and police elites. Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, the father of Najib, effectively seized power from and later officially succeeded Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman and rejuvenated UMNO's hegemony.

The Alliance's permanent coalition model was expanded and revived in the post-riot remaking of the Malaysian state, society and economy. Abdul Razak Hussein reached out to opposition parties to form coalition governments at state and municipal levels, and eventually in 1974 replaced the Alliance with the enlarged BN which included all but two parliamentary parties, DAP and Sarawak National Party (SNAP). He did not believe that democratic competition would work for multi-ethnic Malaysia because '... in our Malaysian society of today, where racial manifestations are very much in exercise, any form of politicking is bound to follow along racial lines and will only enhance the divisive tendencies among our people'.²² However, at the same time, he understood perfectly the instrumental value of democracy in legitimising power. 'The view we take is that democratic government is the best and most acceptable form

Table 4. Party vote shares in Peninsular Malaysia in the 1964 and 1969 elections.

| Parties | Vote % in 1964 | Vote % in 1969 | Change in vote %, 1964–1969 | Seats in 1964 | Seats in 1969 | Change in seats, 1964–1969 |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------------------|---------------|---------------|----------------------------|
| The Alliance | 58.53% | 48.56% | -9.97% | 89 | 68 | -22 |
| UMNO | 38.62% | 33.98% | -4.64% | 59 | 52 | -7 |
| MCA | 18.37% | 13.35% | -5.02% | 27 | 13 | -14 |
| MIC | 1.53% | 1.22% | -0.31% | 3 | 2 | -1 |
| Non-Malay-based opposition | 25.82% | 25.96% | 0.15% | 6 | 24 | 19 |
| SF (1964) | 16.08% | – | -16.08% | 2 | – | -2 |
| PPP | 3.40% | 3.82% | 0.42% | 2 | 4 | 2 |
| PAP (1964)/ DAP (1969) | 2.05% | 13.57% | 11.52% | 1 | 13 | 12 |
| UDP(1964)/ Gerakan(1969) | 4.29% | 8.48% | 4.19% | 1 | 8 | 7 |
| UMCO (1969) | – | 0.09% | 0.09% | – | 0 | 0 |
| Malay-based opposition | 14.99% | 25.02% | 10.03% | 9 | 11 | 3 |
| PAS | 14.64% | 23.74% | 9.10% | 9 | 12 | 3 |
| Parti Negara(1964) | 0.36% | – | -0.36% | 0 | – | 0 |
| PRM (1969) | – | 1.28% | 1.28% | – | 0 | 0 |
| Independents | 0.66% | 0.46% | -0.20% | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 100.00% | 100.00% | 0.00% | 104 | 104 | 0 |

Source: Election Commission of Malaysia 1965 and circa 1972.

1. Socialist Front (SF) consisted of Labour Party of Malaya (PBM), Partai Rakyat Malaya (PRM) and the National Convention Party (NCP). The Labour Party was Chinese-dominated while the other two were Malay-based. It disintegrated in 1966 and PRM contested on its own. For ease of analysis, SF is grouped as a non-Malay-based opposition party in 1964 and PRM as a Malay-based opposition party in 1969.
2. DAP was formed by People's Action Party (PAP) members after the expulsion of Singapore while Gerakan was formed by leaders of the United Democratic Party (UDP), Labour Party and some public intellectuals.
3. United Malaysian Chinese Organisation (UMCO) contested in only the 1969 election.
4. Contest for the Melaka Selatan constituency, won by UMNO, was held only in 1971.

of government. So long as the form is preserved, the substance can be changed to suit conditions of a particular country²³. The expansion of permanent coalition was his strategy to bring elites of all parties and communities for closed door negotiations, thus reducing politics to mere administration and elections to being a harmless ritual.

Regime Resilience and Communal Anxiety

Communal anxiety did not just rejuvenate UMNO's hegemony but also helped to sustain it against the opposition's challenges.

Following Malay discontent expressed in the 1969 polls, Razak greatly expanded ethnic preferential treatment for the Bumiputeras ('sons of soil', a composite category which covers both the Malays and the Borneo natives) under the New Economic Policy (NEP). While Article 153 of the Federal Constitution provides for a 'special position' for the Malays and the Borneo natives, Bumiputeras, privileging them in public sector employment, educational opportunities and business licensing, such privileges were not, however, effective in lifting the life of ordinary Malays. In education, for example, Malays only constituted 20.6% of the student population at University of Malaya by 1963 even though they formed 53.0% of the Peninsular population.²⁴ Launched officially with the two prongs of eradication of poverty and restructuring of society, the NEP deepened and widened the Bumiputera privileges beyond the Article 153 provision, resulting in an almost all-Malay

bureaucracy, exhaustive communal quotas in university enrolment, Bumiputera quota in private sector employment and equity ownership, and Bumiputera discount in home ownership. Wade characterises Malaysia as an ethnocracy²⁵ but such characterisation overlooks the partisan nature of the system. Not all Malays are equal before the pro-Malay policies. Instead, party affiliation and even factional connections matter in deciding access to governmental aids and contracts, which explains why schisms broke out in UMNO during economic crises in the mid-1980s and late 1990s.²⁶

More interestingly, BN did not survive solely on Malay support. Even at its pre-2008 lowest point in 1990, it still enjoyed about one-third of support among the Chinese. Indeed, Chinese voters swung to BN for the next three elections. Why did the Chinese support BN despite their resentment of the NEP? Such a pattern started in 1974, four years after the introduction of NEP, when MCA recovered six parliamentary seats from DAP. This had less to do with Razak's pre-election visit to Communist China, which many believe appeased the left-leaning Chinese, than the post-riot anxiety of the Chinese community. Fearing repercussions from an all-Malay government, a Chinese Unity Movement sprung up and was channelled towards strengthening Chinese representation in government.²⁷ Because the 1969 poll was widely understood as an electoral revolt by ethnic Chinese, which was in turn blamed for triggering the riot, many Chinese feared to be seen as pro-opposition and often stayed away from any kind of political activism.

The interlocking communal fear of Malays and Chinese then provided an easy defence mechanism for the party state. BN did not need support across all communities, but instead only enough Malays fearing the end of the NEP state or enough non-Malays fearing a replay of 1969. In other words, all it took for BN to win election after election was political incoordination between ethnic Malays and Chinese. This explains why BN survived the 1990 and 1999 onslaught by the united opposition while its landslide in 2004, which disabled the alarm, turned out to be fatal.

In 1990, BN was abandoned by the Chinese but saved by the Malays' fear. The split of UMNO between Mahathir's Team A and his former Finance Minister Razaleigh Hamzah's Team B since 1987 removed the Chinese's fear as the electoral revolt would be led by a popular Malay prince from Kelantan. The narrative of a 'two-coalition system' was instrumental in legitimising the idea of regime change by assuring that the alternative government would be a better replica of BN, with Razaleigh's Spirit of 46 Party (Parti Semangat 46, named after 1946, the birth year of UMNO, to revive its spirit) as a better replica of UMNO. Razaleigh initially had a sizeable number of UMNO leaders in his camp but Mahathir successfully evoked the Malays' existential fear, especially after the back-stabbing by Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), Sabah's main party dominated by Catholics of Kadazandusun heritage. Defecting to Razaleigh's camp after nomination day, PBS caused BN to lose not just the state government but also, by default, 14 seats in a 180-member parliament, significantly increasing the chance of opposition victory.²⁸ Mahathir played up a photo of Razaleigh wearing Kadazan head-gear with a cross-like pattern when he accepted PBS's entry into the opposition camp, accusing the prince of selling his religion for power.²⁹ Eventually, while the united opposition garnered Chinese support at as high as 70% by some estimates, Razaleigh's Malay candidates could only win in Kelantan and neighbouring Terengganu where Malays had a 95–98% presence.

The game reversed nine years later when UMNO, suffering a Malay exodus, was rescued by the Chinese. When Mahathir purged his popular deputy Anwar Ibrahim and subsequently had him convicted of drummed-up charges of sodomy in 1998, Anwar failed to get many UMNO leaders into his camp, but the ordinary Malays were angered by the gross injustice. In a clear break from Malays' deferential political culture, Mahathir was called names such as '*Mahazalim*' (great tyrant) and '*Mahafiraun*' (great pharaoh) in ongoing street protests and mushrooming pro-Anwar websites. The '*Reformasi*' sent many Anwar supporters and sympathisers into his new-born Justice Party, but more into the well-established PAS. In their intense fury, the Malays accepted an official pact with PAS and DAP and did not ask any questions about whether or not they might lose their political dominance after regime change. However, Indonesia's anti-Chinese riot in 1997,³⁰ which saw many Chinese killed, Chinese women gang-raped and Chinese houses burnt in President Suharto's last days, aggravated the Malaysian Chinese's fear of a replay of the 1969 post-election riot.³¹ The cynical use of this fear of riot was illustrated in anecdotal accounts that MCA's women campaigners subtly asked home-makers in wet markets if instant noodles – a must-have in post-riot curfew – had been stocked up since an election was around the corner. The result was unsurprising: PAS, which contested mainly in the Malay heartland, quadrupled its seats from six to 27, DAP held on to only 10 seats in Chinese areas with two top leaders defeated, while Anwar's party lost all ethnically-mixed areas and won only five Malay-majority seats.

The Unintended Consequence of Opposition Radicalisation

While Razak's one-party state successfully revived and sustained UMNO's hegemony for 49 years after 1969, his aspiration to contain communal divides within a permanent coalition failed. Not only had DAP rejected his co-option throughout and successfully undermined MCA's claim to represent ethnic Chinese, even UMNO could not politically unite the Malays.

Razak's successful co-option of PAS in BN was short-lived and ended with an even more bitter opposition in PAS. From UMNO's ethno-nationalist perspective, Malays need to be politically united to protect their interests from the Chinese and Indians. Multiparty competition in Malay politics is therefore antithetical to Malays' political dominance and thus the existence of Malay opposition is illegitimate. However, with regularly held elections, UMNO could not stop some Malay voters from supporting its own splinters such as IMP and PAS or leftist parties such as the Malaysian People's Party (Parti Rakyat Malaysia, PRM) or in 1969, even the multi-ethnic Gerakan. By 1969, PAS had become the only Malay opposition party in parliament. As the ethnically-charged post-riot atmosphere drove both the Malays and Chinese to crave communal unity, Razak successfully negotiated a coalition government deal with PAS at both the federal and state levels in 1973. PAS became a founding member of BN in 1974 but by 1977 it found its base in Kelantan eroded by UMNO. PAS could not even remove its defiant chief minister, Muhammad Nasir, who enjoyed UMNO's backing. The political crisis ended in four months of federally-imposed emergency rule, PAS's exit from BN and its disastrous defeat in the 1978 state and federal elections.³²

The poisonous divorce of UMNO and PAS was structurally inevitable because the BN model did not offer any solution for competition between allies. A grand coalition is

not just politically unattractive when, as per Riker's insight, 'the winners gain nothing because there are no losers'. It is unsustainable when allies share the common base and are potential competitors in both election and government. To make matters worse, the grand narrative of communal unity lacked credibility in Kelantan where the 95% ethnic majority could not be threatened by minorities.

Illuminatingly, PAS's electoral misfortune after its exit from BN to escape absorption by UMNO only radicalised the Islamist party. The FPTP system did not moderate the party that contested in a mono-ethnic heartland within a multi-ethnic country. In 1981, Hadi Awang, its current president who was then only a young cleric, turned the table on UMNO in the contestation of political legitimacy. In his famous 'Hadi's Message' (Amanat Hadi), Hadi proclaimed the rationale for PAS's ideological objection to UMNO: 'We oppose BN not because it has been in power for long. We oppose it because it preserves the colonial constitution, infidel laws and the pre-Islamic (jahiliah) rules.'³³ By virtually calling the post-colonial state a project of fake independence, PAS carved out its niche as the new nation-builder of an Islamic state. UMNO's counter project of modernist Islamisation sponsored by Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim could not eliminate PAS's radical alternative. Instead, PAS benefited from the two schisms of UMNO under Mahathir, so much so that Mahathir resorted to stealing PAS's Muslim-nationalist game by claiming in 2001 that Malaysia was already an Islamic state,³⁴ officially abandoning UMNO's secular nationalism upheld by his predecessors.

Hence, Razak's failed attempt to eliminate opposition parties with manipulated elections only resulted in the unintended consequence of radicalising them, challenging the conventional claim that FPTP encourages electoral moderation.

The Achilles Heel: Vulnerability to Electoral Landslides

The most perplexing characteristic of the BN model of permanent coalition is perhaps its vulnerability to electoral landslides. Twice after securing incredible electoral triumphs in 1995 and 2004, BN landed in a political catastrophe. While the 1998 *Reformasi* wave was triggered by the 1997 East Asian financial crisis, the 2008 political tsunami – the unprecedented breakthrough by the opposition which led to BN's irreversible decline and eventual ousting 14 years later – was not preceded by any economic crisis.

When BN won too big a landslide, competition was shifted from between the coalition and its opposition to within its core, UMNO. After the 2004 election, only 20 out of 219 parliamentary constituencies were left in the hand of the disarrayed opposition: 10 for DAP, 6 for PAS, 3 for PBS and 1 for PKR. Instead of unrealistically aiming for the opposition's last strongholds, aspiring leaders in UMNO trained their guns internally. They would pursue the support of the median party member rather than that of the median voter. This created the internal dynamic for UMNO to move right, symbolised by its youth chief and education minister Hishammuddin Hussein raising a *keris* (Malay dagger) consecutively at the 2005 and 2006 UMNO Youth general assemblies.³⁵ To the non-Malays, *keris* is a symbol of both Malay supremacy and political intimidation. Hishammuddin argued that the strong economy provided the best timing for UMNO Youth to defend Islam because when people became hungry 'they don't want to talk anymore'.³⁶ After the tsunami, he admitted that his act was a cause of BN's poor performance and apologised.³⁷

Beyond the *keris* antic was the general arrogance among Malay bureaucrats, fuelled by BN's electoral invincibility. The resultant excesses such as demolition of temples, 'body snatching'³⁸ and police violence were disproportionately felt by ethnic Indians and triggered the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) rally just four months before the 2008 poll. (See the paper on ethnic Indians' politico-legal mobilisation in this issue.)

The other cause of the tsunami was certainly the split of Malay votes due to the bitter fight between Mahathir and his successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, which was not mediated by any fear that UMNO could lose power.³⁹ Mahathir succeeded in weakening Abdullah but only with BN as collateral damage. Abdullah's scheme to strengthen his position in the party by fielding his favourites as candidates also backfired, as grassroots sabotage cost UMNO 14 federal and 22 state constituencies.⁴⁰ Abdullah's misadventure with candidacy selection was not an exception but was symptomatic of permanent coalitions in Malaysia. As every component party of a coalition can only contest a limited number of seats, while talent may come from all local chapters, candidacy selection has to be top-down, but this only serves to induce bitter factional warfare over constituencies as loyalists of powerful warlords are often parachuted into party strongholds against grassroots' preference.

The BN's decline within a decade from 2008 can be understood as a series of unintended consequences stemming from the 2004 landslide. First, the BN's invincibility emboldened voters, both Malays and non-Malays, to punish the government without worrying about regime change. Second, the post-election peace destroyed Chinese fear of another riot, removing the rationality of them voting for BN despite resenting the NEP. The Chinese's political emancipation was seen in their active participation in Bersih and pro-environment rallies beginning in 2011. Third, the Chinese losing fear in turn raised the Malays' fear of losing their privileges after regime change, causing a big enough swing back to keep BN in power for another term. To compensate for the irreversible loss of Chinese votes, UMNO moved right to strengthen its Malay base by sponsoring ultra-right groups such as Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa (Perkasa) and Malaysian Muslim Solidarity (Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia) and courting PAS with the idea of possible implementation of Hudud punishments in Kelantan (See the paper on Islamist factor in this issue).

While UMNO's rightward shift damaged its credibility in moderation, it could have stayed in power backed by PAS and East Malaysian parties if Najib had not made two political errors. The introduction of the goods and services tax at 6% in April 2015, which caused inflation and contributed to a sharp drop of BN's national vote share by 13 percentage points. (See the paper on the Malay Tsunami in this issue.) The second was the 1MDB scandal which pushed Mahathir out of UMNO to lead PH as prime minister-designate, effectively removing the Malays' fear of regime change and winning support from the bureaucracy and security forces. Linking the two was the Najib family's extravagant lifestyle, which personalised the voters' wrath.

Conclusion: Has the Dominant Coalition System Ended?

While the electoral one-party state is clearly being dismantled, it is not clear whether the dominant coalition system will end. If PH were to replace BN as the next dominant permanent coalition until its ousting, perhaps a few general elections down the road,

then the party system would survive despite the end of BN rule, much like a monarchy surviving dynastic changes.

What is clear is that the ‘two-coalition system’ is not happening at the national level. BN has disintegrated and been effectively reduced to Peninsular UMNO and Sabah UMNO. The latter has just teamed up with other Sabah opposition parties to form the Gabungan Bersatu Sabah (GBS) coalition, falling short of breaking away from national UMNO.⁴¹ While Peninsular UMNO is moving closer to PAS, a grand opposition coalition across the South China Sea is simply impossible given the different context of communal politics. Party reduction may only result in regional bipartisanship, with a UMNO–PAS pact in West Malaysia and the Borneo nationalists teaming up in East Malaysia. Deprived of the prospect of taking federal power, it is likely that the opposition blocs would only compete from the flanks, both threatening to tear Malaysia apart and making PH the necessary evil in the middle ground even if it becomes corrupt. Further, as PH inherits the permanent coalition model with no *channels for inter-ally competition and bottom-up candidacy selection*, it may also soon be haunted by cyclical infighting and implosion. If 40 UMNO parliamentarians do join Bersatu as per the latest speculation,⁴² Bersatu’s relation with PH’s largest component party, PKR, and by extension that of Mahathir and Anwar, are likely to be strained.

A new cycle of one-coalition dominance is certainly not a promising prospect for ‘new Malaysia’. After four failed attempts to establish a ‘two-coalition system’, perhaps it is time to ponder whether a Westminster democracy can ever emerge from and survive a society with deep reinforcing cleavages like Malaysia.

Notes

1. Malaysia was formed in 1963 by four former British colonies: Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak, but Singapore left the federation two years later. Malaya had won her independence earlier in 1957 and her political system was adopted by the expanded federation. For simplicity, ‘Malaysia’ will be used to cover Malaya in 1957–1963.
2. The summary provided by the Department of Statistics Malaysia obstructs a more nuanced understanding of Malaysian society and politics lumps together Malays in the Peninsula and Muslim natives and non-Muslim natives in Borneo who do not have homogenous experiences and political outlooks. The data can be found at https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemeByCat&cat=155&bul_id=c1pqTnFjb29HSnNYNUpiTmNWZHArDz09&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUT09, accessed 28 August 2018.
3. PH won 121 constituencies under various tickets of PKR, DAP (Sabah and Sarawak) and Warisan (Sabah). So, PKR has accepted three independent parliamentarians, two from Sarawak and one from the Batu constituency in Kuala Lumpur, while Bersatu and Warisan took in one ex-UMNO parliamentarian each.
4. PKR was originally known as the National Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Nasional) before its merger with the leftist Malaysian People’s Party (Parti Rakyat Malaysia, PRM) in 2003.
5. Its four Sabah parties, Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (UPKO), Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRS) and Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) quit on 10–12 May while its four Sarawak parties, Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), Sarawak United People’s Party (SUPP), Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS) and Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) quit to form Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) on 12 June. Two Peninsula-based parties, People’s Progressive Party (myPPP), as per the claim of its president M. Kayveas, and Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan) left, respectively, on 19 May and 23 June. However, PBRS and myPPP have since returned to BN’s fold

- based on an announcement in October. See A.R. Zurairi (2018) 'Nazri new BN sec-gen to head coalition rebranding, restructuring', *Malay Mail Online*, 27 October, <https://www.malaymail.com/s/1687304/nazri-new-bn-sec-gen-to-head-coalition-rebranding-restructuring>, accessed 30 October 2018.
6. Donald Horowitz (1985) *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, p. 440.
 7. Giovanni Sartori (1976) *Parties and Party Systems – A Framework for Analysis*. Reprint, Colchester, UK: ECPR Press, 2005.
 8. Horowitz (1985, p. 326).
 9. David Robertson (1976) *A Theory of Party Competition*. London: John Wiley and Sons, p. 42.
 10. Effective number, $N = 1 / \sum_{i=1}^n P_i^2$ where P_i is the proportion of each party's votes or seats.
See Markku Laakso and Rein Taagepera (1979) 'Effective number of parties: a measure with application to West Europe', *Comparative Political Studies*, 12(1), pp. 3–27.
 11. Maurice Duverger (1954) *Political Parties: Their Organisation and Activity in the Modern State* (translated by B. North and R. North). London: Methuen, pp. 217–239.
 12. Gary Cox (1997) *Making Votes count: Strategic Coordination in the World's Electoral Systems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 29, 31–32, 76–79, 96–97, 140–142 and 193.
 13. T.J. Pempel (Ed.) (1990) *Uncommon Democracies: The One-Party Dominant Regimes*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
 14. Patrick Dunleavy (2010) 'Rethinking dominant party systems', in M. Bogaards and F. Boucek (Eds), *Dominant Political Parties and Democracy: Concepts, Measures, Cases and Comparisons*. Routledge/ECPR Studies in European Political Science. London: Routledge, pp. 23–44.
 15. Chin-Huat Wong, James Chin and Noraini Othman (2010) 'Malaysia – towards a typology of electoral one-party state', *Democratization*, 17(5), pp. 920–949.
 16. William H. Riker (1962) *The Theory of Political Coalition*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, p. 39.
 17. The Alliance party, which consisted UMNO, MCA and MIC, won Malaysia's first election in 1955, two years before the nation's independence.
 18. Arend Lijphart (1977) *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
 19. Diane Mauzy (1983) *Barisan Nasional – Coalition Government in Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur and Singapore: Marican and Sons.
 20. Also, there was a moderate opposite swing from PAS to UMNO in Kelantan and Besut, Terengganu, costing PAS three parliamentary seats.
 21. There was an opposite swing away from the non-Malay-based opposition parties in some parts of Johor, Malacca and Pahang. Notably, UMNO lost three parliamentary seats to Gerakan and one to DAP, with three of them lost in straight fights, suggesting that there was some convergence of Malay and non-Malay discontent.
 22. Zakaria Haji Ahmad (1989) 'Malaysia: quasi democracy in a divided society', in L. Diamond, J.J. Linz and S.M. Lipset (Eds), *Democracy in Developing Countries*. Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner, p. 366.
 23. *Report of the Proceedings of the 17th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference held in Kuala Lumpur*, London, Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, September 1971. p. xx., as cited in Michael Ong (1987) 'Government and opposition in parliament: rules of the game', in Zakaria Haji Ahmad (Ed), *Government and Politics in Malaysia*. New York: Oxford University Press.
 24. T.W. Tan (1982) *Income Distribution and Determination in West Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, p. 55, as cited in Alis Puteh (2006) *Language and Nation-Building: A Study of The Language Medium Policy in Malaysia*. Petaling Jaya: SIRD, p. 96.

25. Geoff Wade (2009) 'The origins and evolution of ethnocracy in Malaysia', *The Asia-Pacific Journal-Japan Focus*, 7(47), p. 4 <https://apjff.org/-Geoff-Wade/3259/article.html> accessed 24 August 2018.
26. See A.B. Shamsul (1986) *From British to Bumiputera Rule*. Singapore: ISEAS; E.T. Gomez and K.S. Jomo (1999) *Malaysia's Political Economy: Politics, Patronage And Profits* (Revised Edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Edmund Terence Gomez and Johan Saravanamuttu (Eds) (2003) *The New Economic Policy in Malaysia: Affirmative Action, Horizontal Inequalities and Social Justice*. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press.
27. Peter Wicks (1971) 'The new realism: Malaysia since 13 May, 1969', *The Australian Quarterly*, 3(4), p. 24.
28. Tengku Razaleigh told the author in a 2005 interview that he had worked on Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak and Gerakan to do the same after PBS, but Mahathir defeated the plot by warning that he would use security laws on them.
29. The photo can be seen at <https://bigdogdotcom.wordpress.com/2016/12/06/negara-sawan-reduction/>, accessed 2 September 2018.
30. See Seth Mydans (1998) 'Indonesia turns its Chinese into scapegoats', *New York Times*, 8 February, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/02/02/world/indonesia-turns-its-chinese-into-scapegoats.html>, accessed 2 September 2018.
31. In a personal conversation with the author on 10 July 2018 Mahathir believed that his Chinese support came from his capital control policy that saved Chinese businesses from collapse which might have been caused by an International Monetary Fund solution. But this could not explain the retained support among majority Chinese voters who did not run businesses.
32. Mohammad Agus Yusoff (2001) 'The politics of Malaysian federalism: the case of Kelantan', *Jebat, Jurnal Sejarah, Politik dan Strategi*, pp. 1–24, 28.
33. Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin (2013) 'Menilai Amanat Hadi Dengan Adil', *drmaza.com*, 3 January, <http://drmaza.com/home/?p=2255>, accessed 3 September 2018.
34. For the context of the debate, see Tommy Thomas (2005) 'Is Malaysia an Islamic state?', *The Malaysian Bar*, 17 November, http://www.malaysianbar.org.my/constitutional_law/is_malaysia_an_islamic_state_.html, accessed 3 September 2018.
35. Liew Chin Tong (2015) 'A decade after Hisham waved the keris', *Malaysiakini*, 25 July, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/305590>, accessed 5 September 2018.
36. Joceline Tan (2006) 'Hisham: the keris is here to stay', *The Star*, 26 November, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2006/11/26/hisham-the-keris-is-here-to-stay/>, accessed 5 September 2018.
37. Teh Eng Hock (2008) 'Hisham regrets wielding keris, he apologises to all Malaysians', *The Star*, 26 April, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2008/04/26/hisham-regrets-wielding-keris-he-apologises-to-all-malaysians/>, accessed 5 September 2018.
38. When some non-Muslims died, their bodies were taken by the Islamic authorities for Islamic burial claiming they had quietly converted to Islam, a fact that was either unknown to or rejected by the grieving families. Beyond emotional shock, such posthumous identification as Muslim has also legal and financial implications to the families as the deceased's civil marriage may become invalid and they lose their right to the deceased's estate. For the famous case of Moorthy Maniam, see K. Shanmuga (2005) 'Re Everest Moorthy', *Malaysian Bar*, 29 December, http://www.malaysianbar.org.my/bar_news/berita_badan_peguam/re_everest_moorthy_.html?date=2017-11-01, accessed 6 September 2018.
39. Connie Levett (2006) 'Mahathir challenges his successor', *The Age*, 2 September, <https://www.theage.com.au/world/mahathir-challenges-his-successor-20060902-ge31zi.html>, accessed 5 September 2018.
40. Malaysiakini (2008) 'UMNO's mistake: selecting wrong candidates', 10 April, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/81208>, accessed 5 September 2018.
41. Bernama (2018) 'BN dead in Sabah, new coalition GBS formed', *Malaysiakini*, 24 October, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/448862>, accessed 30 October 2018.

42. *Straits Times* (2018) '40 UMNO MPs "may join Mahathir's party", as Barisan Nasional mulls changing its name', 27 October, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/40-umno-mps-may-join-mahathirs-party-as-barisan-nasional-mulls-changing-its-name>, accessed 30 October 2018.

ORCID

Chin-Huat Wong  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3292-4868>