

New Media, Incumbency and Malaysian Politics: The Defeat of the *Barisan Nasional* (BN) in GE14 (2018)

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Abstract

The Malaysian 14th General Election (GE14) has ended the political domination of Barisan Nasional (BN) of the last 61 years and resulted in a new discussion in Malaysian politics. The main purpose of this study is to explore the factors that caused BN to fail in the last election and to refine the incumbency theory posited by Hirano and Snyder Jr (2012) and Torcal (2014). We argue that various factors have contributed to the defeat of the BN government in the 14th GE, namely the 1MDB corruption scandal, the implementation of the progressive Good and Service Tax (GST), the rise of living costs, and the China-oriented foreign and economic policies, as well as the Mahathir factor. Our results also contribute to further developing incumbency theory. Instead of relying on traditional factor of incumbent defeat in election such as scandal and economic factors, the role of new media in spreading the news about the corruption scandal and the government's economic underperformance have also contributed to a political shift in Malaysia

Keywords: *New Media, Malaysian politics, GE14, Democracy, Government, Incumbency and Election*

Abstrak

Pemilihan Umum Malaysia ke-14 mengakhiri dominasi politik Barisan Nasional (BN) setelah berkuasa selama 61 tahun dan hal ini memunculkan diskusi baru dalam konteks Politik Malaysia. Tujuan dari studi ini adalah mengeksplorasi beragam faktor yang menjadi penyebab kekalahan BN dan mencoba untuk memperbaiki argumen teori petahana (*incumbency*) dalam pandangan Hirano and Snyder Jr (2012) and Torcal (2014). Penelitian kami menyimpulkan terdapat beragam faktor yang menjadi penyebab kekalahan Pemerintahan BN, antara lain, skandal korupsi 1MDB, implementasi pajak progresif (GST), kenaikan biaya hidup, kebijakan luar negeri yang berorientasi terhadap Tiongkok dan faktor Mahathir. Penelitian kami berkontribusi memperbaiki argumen dalam teori-teori petahana. Selain persoalan tradisional kekalahan petahana dalam pemilu seperti halnya skandal dan faktor ekonomi, peran media baru yang menyebarluaskan berita soal korupsi dan kinerja pemerintahan yang buruk menjadi faktor penyebab terjadinya perubahan politik di Malaysia.

Kata Kunci: Media Baru, Politik Malaysia, Pemilu ke-14, Demokrasi, Pemerintah, Petahana dan Pemilu

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INTRODUCTION

Researching Malaysian politics is complex and needs various perspectives, especially when analysing how British colonisation has influenced the dynamics of ethnic relations and the day-to-day dynamics of the political elite and its transactional activities. In this paper, we argue that several factors need to be considered regarding why the incumbent government of BN could be defeated by the contender in the 14th GE. The case of the BN's defeat has provided a narrative that prolonged domination of a group of elites could fail owing to lack of leadership and implementing popular policy for its people.

The Malaysian politics provides evidence that the defeat of the incumbent BN government occurred for various reasons, which have been identified by scholars on incumbency theory, such as Hirano and Snyder Jr (2012), as a personal scandal, or the government's economic underperformance (Torcal, 2014). However, these two factors need the help of 'non-government' new media to generate continuous public awareness

of the need for regime change, especially when the government-controlled media plays a dominant role in driving public opinion in Malaysia.

Furthermore, we take two theoretical standpoints relating to personal scandal (Hirano and Snyder Jr (2012) and economic factors Torcal (2014), both of which contribute to a weaker position for the incumbent in an upcoming election. Based on our findings, we have argued that these two standpoints are correct in some aspects. But, they need refining by adding a discussion of the role of new media in influencing Malaysian public opinion on the need to examine the performance of the BN government in the election. Our argument claims that none of the literature on these particular topics provides a more in-depth discussion on reciprocal relations among personal scandal, economic factors, new media, and the cause of the incumbent government's defeat. Instead of scandal and underperformance of the country's economy, we argued that it is important to involve the role of new media when discussing Malaysian politics nowadays.

Why is this study important? **METHODS**

there is a lot of discussion about the Malaysian Politics when it comes to discussing the defeat of BN in the 2018 GE. But, none of the publications has specifically addressed the collapse of BN from the perspective of incumbency theory and new media. Therefore, our research focuses on the discussion that assists us to refine the general tendency about incumbency theory by taking the case of BN defeat as the example.

This paper is organised into several sections. The first section is an introduction and followed by a literature review on incumbency and politics. The method is in the third section, while the fourth explains Malaysia Politics's dynamics from a historical perspective, followed by a discussion about how the opposition parties could defeat the ruling government, explaining the conditions and factors that led to political change in Malaysia post-2018 election. The sixth section discusses Malaysia's political uncertainty and future of Malaysian Politics. The last section is a concluding remark.

In a classic and important study of Malaysian politics, Lijphart (1969) argued that a political consensus among the ethnic groups has been implemented since independence to ensure the stability of the political system. The ethnic segregation policy was implemented in the British colonial era, and the British colonial regime created the dynamics of inter-ethnic contestation in Malaysian politics (Kheng, 2005; Yaakop, 2010). Through

the colonisation process, the presence of three different ethnic groups has transformed Malaysia into a multi-racial country and politically dynamic.

Methodologically, we applied the qualitative approach in this study. Our data has relied on in-depth interviews with the participants. Primary data has been gathered by applying face to face semi-structured interviews with several key persons, such as social activist, Malaysian political specialist, and voter. Participants were selected purposively based on several criteria such as role, knowledge and experience related to the Malaysian Politics. We have

interviewed the participants from July to September 2019. Selected participants were all intimately engaged with the dynamics of Malaysian Politics. They could be regarded as the representative from each of the classified participants. The following section presents the dynamic of Malaysian Politics, focusing on the history, from the establishment of BN and the current situation of Malaysian Politics following by two discussions. Firstly, we discuss how the opposition defeated the incumbent government, arguing several factors of BN defeat. Secondly, we discuss the political uncertainty and the dynamics of current Malaysian politics.

RESULT AND DISSCUSION

THE DEFEAT OF THE INCUMBENT IN THE ELECTION

Discussion about incumbency in the election is always demanding. Many scholars explain that the incumbency factor is the important aspect for being re-elected in the second term of administration. The incumbent who performs well during the first term of their administration has a greater chance of being re-elected (Trounstine, 2011, 2013). However, those with

scandals and weak performance during their first period of administration can then suffer difficulty being re-elected in the second term.

Theoretically, there are a variety of reasons why a particular incumbent can be defeated, but the most common is a personal problem or scandal (Eggers & Fisher, 2011; Fernández-Vázquez, Barberá, & Rivero, 2016; Hirano & Snyder Jr, 2012; Long, 2011, 2019; Praino, Stockemer, & Moscardelli, 2013), decreasing campaign spending (Avis, Ferraz, Finan, & Varjão, 2017), and internal party factions (Ansolabehere, Hansen, Hirano, & Snyder Jr, 2007). Further, Brambor and Ceneviva (2011, p.26), in a study of a Brazilian mayoral election, present a different point of view claiming that the incumbency creates a distinct situation in developing countries (compared with the US, for example) owing to “time horizons, institutional constraints on re-election, fiscal effects etc.”, as well as performing poorly while in office. From a gender perspective, Schwindt-Bayer (2005, p.241) has illustrated the disadvantage of female legislature candidates while they need to compete

with an incumbent and states that strategies need to be taken, such as “implementing a gender quota and using a proportional system”.

Much research has explained that economic issues become the major factor in the defeat of an incumbent government in an election. Various scholars have endeavoured to analyse the impact of economic performance on incumbent electability. Lee (2019) has explained that unemployment is one of the major factors that caused the defeat of the BN government in Malaysia in the 14th GE. Further, in the context of Spanish politics, a study by Torcal (2014, p.203) claimed that the way in which “voters evaluate the economic performance of the incumbent is a better predictor of vote choice than evaluations of the economy as a whole”. Thus, dissatisfaction with the incumbent’s performance can lead the voter to split their ticket with another party in the election. The economic crisis that smashed Spain resulted in ‘a punishment’ to the incumbent party, *Partido Socialista Obrero Espanol* (PSOE) in 2011.

Further, in a similar study conducted by Chappell Jr (1990, p.313), taking experiences from the US Presidential Election, he argued that “the votes and approval rating (candidate) are influenced by GNP growth and inflation”. In this sense, in the matter of economic factors, we can understand that the economy is one of the most important issues that directly influences the people. As an example, inflation can create instability within a country, and Indonesia was a concrete example when the economic crisis triggered people’s movement to step down the regime in 1998. Furthermore, experiences from the US and Spain have demonstrated that it is essential for an incumbent to manage the economy well for their people.

According to a study conducted by Ravishankar (2009, p.98), based on Indian politics, the “honeymoon” period for the incumbent candidate of the ruling party is only “two years after they are elected”. This research argued that in the third year, the incumbent party no longer has any political advantage over another party. Consequently, the incumbent party’s

performance becomes important to success of an incumbent: firstly, that being re-elected. As explained by Rico (2012), the (central) incumbent to win election (electoral selection); and government's performance is important secondly, that "high-quality especially in the context of economic incumbents deter challengers (strategic recession, as the ability to drive the challenger entry)". In this argument, we economic crisis by the national found that two of the keys to success as incumbent also influences the the incumbent, ability and quality, are popularity of the regional incumbents represented in the candidate's personal (ibid., 217). leadership.

Many studies have attempted to explore the relations between the incumbent's performance and the election, in relation to the incumbent's performance during the first period of administration either by the elite or political party. In this sense, we cannot separate the incumbency status between the person and political party; there is a connection between the members and the performance of the political party. In advanced democratic countries, the party performance relates to the performance shown by its members. In the patronage democracy model, the relations between the party's elite and its voters are a key issue (Chandra, 2007). In the context of the Indonesian local election, the incumbent has obtained more advantage to be re-elected in the second term of their administration. For example, in the case of Tri Rismaharini in the city of Surabaya's mayoral election, and Herman HN in the city of Bandar Lampung, the incumbent mayors secured more than 80 percent of the popular vote in the 2015 local election owing to the impact of the implementation of popular programmes during the first term of their administration. In these cases, free education and healthcare policies were two programme that raised the popularity of the incumbents.

Moreover, Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita (2008, p.1006), have argued that there are two reasons behind the incumbent has a political advantage because of their opportunity to deploy

bureaucracy and implement populist programmes during their first period of administration. the downfall of the ruling government in the second period of election in some countries, as shown by the cases of

Sulistiyanto's idea is similar to Malaysia, Spain and the US. However, Trounstein (2011, p.271), who claimed few studies endeavour to argue that the that incumbents have a political role of new media in triggering a advantage towards being re-elected political shift is essential, especially because "they served a term in office". when it comes to distributing the news However, Ashworth and Bueno de on personal scandals of the elite and the Mesquita (2008, p.1020) claimed that underperformance of the government to "the changes in electoral environment Malaysian voters. This paper therefore [led] to an increased incumbency argues that the nexus of relations among advantage". Thus the electoral the lack of economic performance, environment can be explained as the scandal, and the role of new media were internal and external factors of the the most significant factors in the defeat election, including the performance of of the BN government in the 14th GE.

administration.

Further, the success of the incumbent in being re-elected is due to various factors, the major one being the economy, based on this literature review. Lack of leadership to provide a better economy for the people becomes the factor most likely to lead to the incumbent government being defeated by their contender in the election. The literature also reveals that economic factors, including the rising cost of living, are those most likely to lead to

HISTORICAL DYNAMICS OF MALAYSIAN POLITICS

The Alliance Party (*Parti Nasional*) was first introduced in 1952 and consisted of the three biggest ethno-based parties in Malaysia: United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). The coalition was renamed and registered as Barisan Nasional in 1973, with the additional of six new parties

(nine parties in total) when Abdul Razak Hussein invited the opposition parties to join them for more national unity and stability, especially after the race riots on 13 May 1969. Nevertheless, it was under his son Najib Razak's leadership that the mighty BN, with its 13 component parties, succumbed to its first defeat ever in the 14th GE. BN has dominated Malaysian politics since its establishment in 1973, and for more than 61 years this party's coalition had governed Malaysia with numerous Prime Ministers (PM). Mahathir was the longest-serving PM, from 1981 to 2003, and his second term began in 2018 as a result of the victory of PH over the BN coalitions in 2018.

The symptom of the BN's weakening is said to have started back in 2008, in the 12th Malaysian GE. Under the leadership of Abdullah Badawi, who succeeded Mahathir in October 2003, BN scored a significant landslide victory in the 11th GE in 2004. But BN was only able to win by a slim majority of seats in the 12th GE, where the party lost its two-thirds majority and five states to the opposition pact. After the 12th GE, Abdullah Badawi admitted that ignoring the impact of the

Internet had been a huge mistake in the election. This resulted in BN being able to obtain only 51 percent of the total popular vote (O'Shannassy, 2009). The result of the 2008 Malaysian GE provided the narrative that Malaysian civil society has been starting to examine the performance of the incumbent government based on the achievements on the first period of administration.

The 13th GE, in 2013, became a real political examination for the BN coalition under Najib Razak's leadership. The result of the 13th GE provided a narrative that Malaysians have been continuing to examine the government's performance under the BN coalition, although the Najib government was able to increase the popular vote from 51 percent to 59 percent. Najib Razak's lack of leadership, and the implementation of unpopular policy during his administration, have been detrimental to his popularity in Malaysia. Table 1 shows that the BN Government has lost more than 50 seats in the national parliament, reducing the total number from 133 to 79 in 2018. In contrast, the opposition group has increased their

popularity in parliament by obtaining more than 20 seats, from 89 to 113. Thus the BN lost their domination and enabled the PH to form their coalition government.

Table 1 Comparative Parliamentary Election Result in 2013 and 2018

Parliament Seats	Seats Won in 2018	Seats Won in 2013
Barisan Nasional	79	133
UMNO	54	88
PBB	13	14
MCA	1	7
MIC	2	4
Gerakan (Malaysian People's Movement Party)	0	1
Other	19	19
Sabah/Sarawak (PRS/Sarawak People's Party; PBS/United Sabah; SPDP/Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party; UPKO/United Pasokmumugan Kadazandusun Murut Organisation; SUPP/Sarawak United People's Party; PBRIS/ United Sabah People's Party)		
Pakatan Harapan	113	89
DAP	42	38
PKR	47	30
PPBM	13	-
AMANAH	11	-
Gagasan Sejahtera	18	-
PAS	18	-
IKATAN	0	-
PCM	0	-
BERJASA	0	-

Sources: (Weiss, 2013a), updated by Authors (2020)

Prior to the 14th GE in 2018, Mahathir revoked his political support of Najib Razak by establishing a new party, *Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia* (Malaysian United Indigenous Party). He not only established a new party but apparently also joined the opposition party coalition. Moreover, it is a unique political narrative when 'the enemy' becomes a friend in politics. Mahathir imprisoned Anwar Ibrahim in the late 1990s without proper due process of law.

In a speech after the result of the 14th GE was announced, Mahathir told the media that the new government was not willing to avenge Najib Razak's government. His government wanted to ensure that the rule of law had been returned to the 'right path' in the Malaysian political landscape. Mahathir then appointed some of the senior politicians such as Wan Azizah, the leader of the People's Justice Party (PKR), who also became the first Malay woman appointed as Vice Prime Minister (PM). Mahathir also appointed Lim Guan Eng from DAP as the Finance Minister and Tommy Thomas as Attorney-General (AG). Mahathir also

appointed some of his closest friends as government advisors, such as former central bank governor Zeti Akhtar Aziz and former finance minister Daim Zainuddin. In this sense, we can presume that Mahathir is going to strengthen and focus on economic development by reducing the number of poor people, developing rural areas, and reducing the country's debt to 1 trillion Ringgit.

However, the PH government has recently suffered a big challenge after several months in power. The main reason for this was the transition of power from Mahathir to Anwar Ibrahim, which prompted Mahathir to resign as the 7th Prime Minister, and unexpectedly Muhyiddin Yassin took over as the 8th Prime Minister. Further, the dynamics of Malaysian politics have continued and are still in an uncertain political turmoil due to mismanagement of Covid-19 and economic uncertainty. As the result, Muhyiddin Yasin has lost majority political support in parliament. On 21 August 2021, Ismail Sabri Yakoob has been appointed as the 9th Prime Minister of Malaysia.

THE DEFEAT OF THE INCUMBENT GOVERNMENT: FROM SCANDAL TO THE ROLE OF NEW MEDIA

Some assessment has been made: various issues relating to the economy appear to have contributed to the decreasing popularity and the weakening position of the BN coalition. These are Najib Razak's 1MDB corruption scandal, the weakening of the country's economy including the rising cost of living cost, and the increasing price of the Good and Service Tax (GST), as well as closer diplomatic relations between Malaysia and China. In this sense, Welsh (2019, p. 85) has argued that "...Malaysia's socio-political conditions before the election - political polarisation, a rise of anger, increasing economic vulnerabilities, as well as increased nationalist and populist sentiments". Moreover, Long (2019, p.1) has also claimed that the category of scandals, which involves "political misdeeds, financial improprieties, and controversial statements ... hurt[s] incumbents the most". Moreover, the economic factor (Lee, 2019; Welsh, 2019) and the regime's corruption scandal was a major factor in voters splitting their

ticket to vote for the PH in the 14th GE. In this context, one of the research participant argues that:

I think there are three main factors to defeating the incumbent government under Najib Razak's leadership. Those factors are the civil society movement's role since ten or fifteen years ago, the Mahathir factor, and the poor BN leadership, as well as the alleged corruption scandal for Najib Razak. To me, BN had already suffered losses since the 2008 election, or perhaps earlier. It took about 10 years to bring down a 'regime' which never been defeated. Within this period civil society played a very vital role, in order to have a clean election. (INT1)

Another participant explained that "in my understanding, the 1MDB corruption scandal became the biggest reason for the defeating of the BN Government" (INT4). Moreover, the role of new media contributed substantially to spreading information regarding the corruption scandal and

the weakening of the country's economy. For instance, the role that is taken by Malaysiakini.com and The Malaysian Insider, two major opposition media that play important role in providing information to the Malaysian voters on lack of leadership of BN Government (Warganegara, Makhya, & Drajat, 2019). In this sense, Nadzri (2019, p.140) has argued for "the advancement of information and communications technology as well as its impact on the emergence of a digital and much more participative society in Malaysia". Moreover, Weiss (2013b, p. 608) has also claimed that:

Political action is hardly the primary reason Malaysians or anyone else turn to new media, and yet clearly, the rise of these media present complex political implications. Most importantly, online independent news sites, online civic media produced by parties and social movement organisations, blogs and social networking tools should be understood to have distinct implications for mobilisation, especially when conceptualised

in terms of the shifts in collective identity that allow new patterns of collective action.

According to economic data published by The World Bank (2018) on the trends of Malaysian economic prospects and projections, the growth of Malaysia's Annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) will decrease from its peak performance in 2017. The World Bank is projecting that the annual GDP will only rise to 4.729 percent in 2020. Regarding the weak performance of the economy, the PH was also able to capitalise on the country's deteriorating economic performance by turning it into an effective political manifesto and negatively affecting the popularity of the BN during the campaign process. In addition, with charismatic leaders such as Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim, these manifestos were so effective, with the help of social media (Welsh, 2019), in reducing the popularity of the BN. The PH manifesto sounds so wonderful and some of it is almost impossible to implement. There are even special pledges which PH promises will be solved in 100 days.

A participant argued to us that "the weakening of the country's

economy is the fundamental reason for people's dissatisfaction with this government. Indeed, I believe there has been some development progress under the incumbent's government, but overall, I personally believe that issue was able to be capitalised on by the PH to win the people's hearts" (INT2, similarly to INT4). Another participant also supports this argument, stating that "indeed, the economic issue became the major one. For sure, economically, the economy grows so slowly, but you also have to understand that the case of 1MDB also contributed to influencing the shift in voter political behaviour" (INT3). These participant responses are similar to the arguments of Torcal (2014) and Ravishankar (2009) as well as (Dassonneville & Hooghe, 2017) on the importance of economic performance for the re-election of the incumbent.

Another issue that also needs to be considered is the changing political role of the Malaysian Chinese, which also contributed to the political power shift in Malaysia. The weakened political support of the Malaysian Chinese to the BN government is

another factor in the BN losing their majority power in parliament.

Furthermore, the weakened political support of the Malaysian Chinese to the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) is due to various reasons. First, the MCA is unable to be a prudent political medium for the Malaysian Chinese in the Malaysian political landscape. It influenced the fact that the “Chinese voters ... voted overwhelmingly for the opposition” (Moniruzzaman, 2013, p.55). As a result, this phenomenon has been detrimental to the political role of the MCA as the biggest Malaysian Chinese-based party in Malaysia.

The political weakening of the MCA has therefore impacted on the diminishing political role of the BN coalition in national politics; even though it was not really significant, the MCA lost eight seats in the parliament, and overall BN lost seven of their national seats in the 13th GE, for example (Weiss, 2013a, p. 1138). The trend of diminishing political power for the BN continued in the 14th General Election. Many academics believe that the diminishing political role of the BN only occurred in the 13th GE, but this assumption is incorrect when the result of the 14th GE skewed all previous predictions. BN was defeated by the PH, and the BN coalition lost the majority vote in the election for the first time in 61 years.

In this context, a participant argues his point of view:

I believe the poor performance began in 2008. Najib Razak did try hard to regain support by launching the Transformation Agenda, but I think he is a weak leader, poor leadership. His transformation programme, I think, is good, but he failed to execute it accordingly. In fact he rather took a step back. He made a bold step by repealing the Internal Security Act (ISA) 1960, but then after being pressured, he came out with new oppressive laws. (INT1)

After Abdullah Badawi stepped down, Najib Razak took over the leadership full of optimism. The majority of people believed that Najib Razak would be a better leader than his predecessor. Indeed, the transformation programmes that he planned were far from the people’s expectation. People have their own standard for assessing government

performance; they often compare the Malaysia, especially in infrastructure current government with the advanced development projects. It could also be achievement gained by the Mahathir understood as the impact of the leadership. It seems that Mahathir's emerging Chinese economic hegemony legacies became a standard of successful across the globe.

leadership for his successor, one that When analysing the foreign was not able to be met by Najib Razak's policy agenda, it can be seen that there government. One of the participants is a slightly different style of leadership said that "the political leadership of between Najib Razak and Mahathir. Najib Razak in the last 10 years has had Indeed, Mahathir's foreign policy seems less impact than his previous anti-western by standing with the Look leadership. I believe the 1MDB issue East policy, of which choosing to move somehow clouded his performance" closer to China could be interpreted as a (INT3). part. This policy did not mean Malaysia

The aggressive foreign policy of is also close to the western superpower China became another issue that countries; there was no balanced foreign decreased the popularity of the BN policy in Najib Razak's government, Government. The government coalition which may also have contributed to under Najib Razak pretended to play to fragile government. One of the more liberal foreign policy by allowing participant has expressed his view by China to influence the Malaysian saying:

government's point of view. Previously, But during Najib Razak's tenure, the non-block foreign policy we can see China has played a implemented by the Malaysian very dominant role. But this is government transformed into more also due to the emergence of the liberal politics when it came to bringing Chinese economy (read: Malaysia's foreign policy closer to that economic hegemony). of China, rather than other countries Nonetheless, at the same time, such as the US, the UK or Japan. This Najib Razak did not show any could be analysed as the consequences confrontation with any of Chinese government domination in superpowers either (unlike

Mahathir, who is known to be between the three dominant ethnic anti-Western countries). So groups: Malay, Chinese and Indian. overall, it is either that Najib Domestically, a closer relationship Razak adopted a more liberal between China and the Malaysian approach, or had no foreign government was also capitalised on by policy at all". (INT1) the MCA leader to raise the party's

Another participant holds a different point of view: popularity with Malaysian Chinese voters. In contrast, this also contributed

We cannot deny the fact that it to the revival of sentiment among the opens up more opportunity to Malays over China, including a global China and Malaysia. In this campaign on the 'style' of the Chinese sense, I believe the media played government debt. One participant well in generating negative argued: "I believe the closer policy over sentiment among Malaysians the Chinese has at least two and South East Asia about consequences: the rising sentiment over Chinese foreign policy. It might the Chinese and the fairness of not have contributed to the decrease paying the Chinese debt". (INT2)

in BN popularity among THE UNCERTAINTY FUTURE OF MALAYSIAN POLITICS
Malaysians, especially when the media and the opposition knew how to play with some sensitive issues. For example, Najib Razak was accused selling off some land to a foreign company". (INT3)

A closer diplomatic tie between China and Malaysia also contributed to ethnic sentiment in the internal politics of Malaysia, which is so fragile when it comes to the contested ethnic politics

Prior to the 14th GE, BN was expected to win a two-thirds majority in Parliament and PAS to lose all their parliamentary seats, based on a survey by Invoke (think tank of PKR/PH). This was clearly just a psychological war to win the vote, as the election result showed a different outcome. The result demonstrated a significant swing in favour of PH. The fence-sitters or the

silent majority seem to have played a crucial role in the election results. Mahathir, as PH's Prime Ministerial candidate, pulled several of his hardcore supporters from the UMNO to PH. Knowing Malay politics had split further - UMNO to Semangat 46, followed by PKR and later PPBM - they only needed to split the Malay votes equally among BN, PAS and PH. The collaboration between UMNO-PAS, which had almost caused BN splits before, seemed to cause 'collateral damage' to most of the BN component parties. The worst scenario would be failure to reach an understanding with PAS, for a one-on-one match with PH caused vote splits and gave an advantage to BN. Based on the GE14 results it was estimated that UMNO-PAS could win around 98 seats if they could reach an agreement or one-to-one understanding with PH.

The 14th GE is more about who the Malaysian voters do not want, not who they want. This was mostly contributed by the roles played by the new media. The character assassination of Najib Razak has really worked favourably for PH. The rule of the law that one is innocent until proven guilty does not seem to apply to BN (only to PH), as most of them have been portrayed as guilty even before going to court, while all accusations against PH leaders were seen as slander by the BN government. Many things seemed to go wrong from the very beginning of the PH government, apart from too much ministerial focus on when Mahathir should hand over the prime premiership to Anwar Ibrahim. First, Mahathir Mohamad conceded that the government may not be able to realise all 10 promises in 100 days, as pledged in the PH manifesto in July 2018. PH claimed they did not expect to win the GE14, which caused them to produce an unrealistic manifesto.

The 14th GE result was a blessing - an opportunity for PH to walk the talk, to show to all Malaysians that they could do better than BN, or that Mahathir could do better in his second spell as Prime Minister than in his first 22 years (1981-2003) in the role. This includes returning the Sabah and Sarawak rights, 20 percent of oil and gas royalties to Sabah and Sarawak, Sabah and Sarawak as equal partners, etc. Unfortunately, in the first 12 months we have been overshadowed by the lame

excuses the government has made about this is indeed a good signal of the 'cleaning up' all the damage caused by improved governance processes in the previous government. PH always Malaysia.

pledge the Rakyat to give them more Furthermore, the defeat of the time as it is impossible to rectify 55 years BN is political evidence that their 'damage' in a few months. conservative style of politics has been

The internal politics relates to challenged by the new *aliran* politics in the question of the failed political Malaysia. The current landscape of consensus between Mahathir and Malaysian politics is demanding Anwar Ibrahim and the style of political progress rather than rhetoric government under Muhyiddin. about ethno-politics and its discontent. Relating to this, a Malaysian specialist This argument is supported by has explained to us that "the style of Mohamad (2008), who claims it is a government will not change ... the symptom of the weakening role of important change is the openness ethnic politics in Malaysia .

processes ... [there is] an ideological A further question has come to commitment ... the local level has not public attention: does the PH bring a changed yet" (INT4). Furthermore, one new hope for a better Malaysia? There point that could be discussed in the are various factors which could help to context of the current political shift in answer this question. Indeed, it is not an Malaysia is the democratisation process easy task for a particular country to that resulted in Malaysian society being recover politically and economically in more open and beginning to evaluate one period of government the performance of the government. administration; see, for example, what This could explain why the Malaysian happened between Mahathir and government under Muhyiddin is so far Muhyiddin. But we assume that the elite relatively successful in coordinating consolidation process needs more than government agencies, especially with one period of leadership, and the 15th the federal government, for example in GE will be the real battle for PH dealing with COVID-19. In some ways, regarding whether they will be able to

maintain their position in power or not. choosing their government, thus it One of our participant was pessimistic depends on how one government about PH's ability to maintain their performs" (INT3).

power in the upcoming election:

Finally, the current politics of

The PH possibly is not able to Malaysia is extremely uncertain and deliver all its election promises. That is volatile owing to King's request to due to its internal and external factors, Muhyiddin Yasin to step down and law as well as the manifesto itself not being maker have then appointed vice based on comprehensive research. The president of UMNO, Ismail Sabri internal factor is mainly caused by the Yakoob as the new prime minister. Will Mahathir party itself. It is another BN return to power? how long the new UMNO, with old culture. At the same established government will retain in time, PH still needs Mahathir. Mahathir power? The Malaysian Politics is once too is now trying to strengthen its small again unpredictable. The opportunistic party, which seems to be growing fast. I and transactional attitude of Members would consider this now as a state of Parliament will determine the future of political uncertainty. (INT1) of Malaysian Politics.

From this narrative we could learn that the shifting of Malaysian political power brings new hope for the increasing maturity of Malaysian voters, especially the hope to make Malaysian politics more democratic (Noor, 2020). People are now starting to vote more rationally by punishing the incumbent government for being involved in corruption scandals and for underperformance. This argument is supported by one of the respondent, who told us "one thing that I can say is that Malaysians are getting wiser in

CONCLUSION

Prior to the 14th GE, many believed that the opposition would not have a chance to win the election owing to unfair elections and the capability of the BN government to capitalise on their state resources, especially for manipulating the final election result. The Malaysian election has been full of intrigue and manipulation for some decades: for example, the BN government could use the party machinery to convict the voter (Ostwald, Schuler, & Chong, 2019), and

the electoral commission (*Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya*) could be influenced by the government's power as well as gerrymandering strategies. But these assumptions were undermined in the 14th GE, as the wave of political change is too strong in Malaysia. Secondly, our assessment has shown that certain fundamental political and economic factors can lead to the defeat of a ruling government. Those issues were the 1MDB corruption scandal linked to Najib Razak and his government during the campaign, the implementation of progressive Good and Service Tax (GST), the rising cost of living, the China-oriented foreign and economic policies, and Mahathir's popularity.

Theoretically, this paper contributes to a new discussion of incumbency theory in elections, arguing that a longstanding and rooted regime can be defeated. The result of the latest Malaysian election has provided new evidence that the economic performance of the incumbent government and freedom from scandal are key to being re-elected (Torcal, 2014). However, Hirano and Snyder (2012)'s and Torcal (2014)'s arguments

need to be refined by consideration that in the context of Malaysia, where the official media was captured and dominated by the BN government, these factors need to be supported by progressive new media in disseminating information to the public.

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