

P E R S P E C T I V E

Decline and Fall of Malaysia's Dominant-Party System

Meredith L. Weiss and Ibrahim Suffian

ABSTRACT

Malaysia's 15th general election in November 2022 decisively ended the country's dominant-party system. What might take its place, however, remains hazy—how competitive, how polarized, how politically liberal, and how stable an order might emerge will take some time to become clear. The opposition Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope), having secured a plurality of seats, but with a sharply pronounced ethnic skew, formed a coalition government with the previously dominant, incumbent Barisan Nasional (National Front) and smaller, regional coalitions. This settlement resolved an immediate impasse, but relied upon obfuscation of real programmatic, ideological, and identity differences, raising questions of longer-term durability or results. Examining this uncertainty, we broach three broad queries, with resonance well beyond Malaysia. First, we examine the fragmentation and reconsolidation of Malaysian party politics to explore how party dominance transforms or collapses. Second, we explore the extent to which its dominant party defined or confirmed Malaysia as electoral-authoritarian, and whether we should still consider it so. Third, we ask what possibilities Malaysia's apparent party-system deinstitutionalization opens up for structural reform beyond parties. Does the deterioration of that system—more than simply the previous dominant party's electoral loss—clear the way for more far-reaching liberalization? All told, we find that Malaysia's incremental dismantling of its dominant-party system does not also spell the end of electoral authoritarianism. Party and party-system deinstitutionalization leave the system in flux, but illiberal reconsolidation is as plausible as progressive structural reform.

Keywords: dominant-party system, electoral authoritarianism, hybrid regime, Malaysia, elections, party-system institutionalization, party institutionalization

DOI: 10.5509/2023962281

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Long known as the rare strong-party state in Southeast Asia, Malaysia has seen unprecedented turmoil within and among parties since the run-up to its 14th general election (GE14) in 2018. Two changes of government in the interim before the subsequent election, GE15, in November 2022, offered a chance to test out alliance possibilities among the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Parti Islam seMalaysia (PAS), Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (United Malaysian Indigenous Party, Bersatu), the still-aligned parties in Pakatan Harapan (PH, Alliance of Hope), and both state-based coalitions and solo contenders in East Malaysia, but resolved little. As elections approached, three peninsular coalitions—PH, the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional (National Front, BN), and Perikatan Nasional (PN), comprised of PAS, Bersatu, and small Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Movement Party, Gerakan)—staked their claims, leaving a hung parliament and post-election scramble likely. A surfeit of would-be prime ministers, distrust among parties and rival leaders, and uncertain popular sentiment or propensity to vote left the outcome genuinely unknowable. (Common ideology and programs hardly figured in these discussions.) The final outcome, following frenetic negotiations, even more frenzied rumours, and a push from Malaysia's constitutional monarch, is a "unity government" of PH, BN, and the East Malaysian Gabungan Parti Sarawak (Sarawak Parties Alliance, GPS) and Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (Sabah People's Alliance). More important in the long term, though, than the specific makeup of the coalition is what it represents: Malaysia's dominant-party system is truly kaput.

Found in both comparatively democratic (i.e., Japan) and authoritarian (i.e., Cambodia) regimes, party dominance refers broadly to the ability of one party to remain empowered, election after election. (Although usage can be inconsistent, single-party regimes are those that ban opposition parties, such as China or Vietnam, whereas dominant-party regimes allow competition, even if with constraints.¹) We delve more deeply into this concept below. Complicating the picture, in Malaysia, groups of parties may contest as coalitions, registered as single parties. BN was a clear dominant party (a.k.a., coalition) from the inaugural federal elections in 1955, initially under the Alliance label, until 2018. PH won then, but with institutional reforms uncertain and BN still enfeebled, the coalition seemed potentially on track simply to replace BN as a new dominant party, benefitting from some of the same institutional advantages that had sustained BN. The twists and turns that began in 2020 and culminated in 2022's GE15 make clear that Malaysia

Acknowledgement: Research for this paper was conducted as part of the general election project of the Malaysia Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

¹ Beatriz Magaloni and Ruth Kricheli, "Political Order and One-Party Rule," *Annual Review of Political Science* 13 (2010): 124.

has passed a tipping point. Indeed, we can now confirm retrospectively that it reached that point of dominant-party-system demise in 2018—that BN's losses that time marked more than a kaleidoscopic electoral tantrum against hopelessly corrupt incumbent Prime Minister Najib Razak, and indicated an enduring shift.

In this article, we broach three broad queries. First, we ask how and why Malaysian party politics is fragmenting and reconsolidating, and what light this case sheds on how party dominance transforms or falls. Tethered to this systemic change in Malaysia, is, second, the regime broadly: To what extent does (or did) its dominant party define or confirm Malaysia as electoral authoritarian, and should we consider it still to be so? And third, we tie these strands together by asking what possibilities this apparent party-system deinstitutionalization opens up for structural reform beyond parties. It was arguably early entrenchment of highly institutionalized parties, in a well-institutionalized party system, that stunted the full development of other state institutions.² Does the deterioration of that system—more than simply the previous dominant party's electoral loss—clear the way for more far-reaching liberalization?

Toward that end, we draw primarily on a combination of field research and survey data. One author (Weiss) travelled through peninsular Malaysia for the duration of the two-week election campaign, interviewing candidates and party or campaign-team representatives. Weiss met with around two dozen such respondents along the way, individually or in pairs or small clusters, for semi-structured interviews; many were in Malay, and others in English or a mixture of both languages.³ She also attended campaign events in five states plus Kuala Lumpur, inclusive of all major and some minor peninsular parties. Most of these events were in Malay or rotated among Malaysian languages. Those findings complemented both formal interviews and informal discussions the authors had with politicians and party strategists before, during, and after the campaign. The other author (Suffian) leads Malaysia's preeminent survey-research firm, the Merdeka Center for Opinion Research. As they have for all recent elections, the Merdeka Center conducted tracking polls across the electoral cycle, administered via telephone with a representative sample for peninsular Malaysia, stepping up their frequency and depth as the election approached. Those election-period polls included supplemental questions we added to probe some of the specific dimensions we examine in this article.

We start by reviewing the conceptual framework for our analysis, then

² Meredith L. Weiss, "The Anti-Democratic Potential of Party System Institutionalization: Malaysia as Morality Tale," in *Party System Institutionalization in Asia: Democracies, Autocracies, and the Shadows of the Past*, eds. Allen Hicken and Erik Kuhonta (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

³ Only very few respondents requested anonymity. We respected those requests, of course, and also left most other references to (non-obvious) interview data unattributed.

turn to the recent election itself. Here we consider three angles especially germane to our inquiry: the decline of party differentiation, the shaky premises on which coalitions formed, and the extent to which candidates relied on a personal rather than party vote. We conclude by examining the implications of the disintegration of Malaysia's dominant-party system, including what that development means for the country's regime type and reform prospects.

Key Concepts

We draw on three core conceptual literatures: on dominant-party systems, on (competitive) electoral authoritarianism, and on party and party-system institutionalization.

Dominant-Party Systems

The literature on dominant-party (or hegemonic-party) systems is fairly diffuse. Kharis Templeman identifies six variants: one party's dominance through winning most votes or seats, through having held power for a certain number of years or elections (scholars propose different numbers), through having the capacity to form an alternative governing coalition, through ability to control the policy agenda, through control of or identification with the state (as from having been an anticolonial revolutionary vanguard), or because the opposition is fragmented.⁴ The twist on these dimensions we adopt implicitly here, drawing on Pierre du Toit and Nicole de Jager, is that a dominant-party system is one in which one party wins repeated elections, enabling and then sustained by two capacities. The first is "constitutional dominance," or the power to craft constitutional rules to strengthen their own position and disadvantage challengers; the second is "hegemonic dominance," or authority to dictate national historical narratives, ideology, and symbols through control of the state bureaucracy.⁵

What might propel such a party into office, and how it stays there, is generally usurping the middle ground; when that happens, challengers find themselves pushed into marginal niches. From there, opposition parties ordinarily need to join forces in coalition, perhaps bolstered by moderate elites' defection to the opposition to have any real hope of a "liberalizing electoral outcome."⁶ But to organize thus is difficult, especially to the extent of full agreement on goals and leaders, assuming the parties in question are

⁴ Kharis Ali Templeman, "The Origins and Decline of Dominant Party Systems: Taiwan's Transition in Comparative Perspective," (PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 2012), 20–25.

⁵ Pierre du Toit and Nicola de Jager, "South Africa's Dominant-Party System in Comparative Perspective," *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 2 (2014): 104–109.

⁶ Kenneth F. Greene, *Why Dominant Parties Lose: Mexico's Democratization in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5–6; Marc Morjé Howard and Philip G. Roessler, "Liberalizing Electoral Outcomes in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 2 (April 2006): 375–376.

at least moderately differentiated. Sudden or fortuitous catalysts such as the death of a long-time strongman, an economic crisis, or movement along a key cleavage (e.g., national identity in Taiwan⁷), might clear a path for challenger parties—but that these moments tend to occur abruptly may leave the latter scrambling.

Party dominance does not require authoritarianism, although electoral autocracies (variously named)—such as Mexico under what came to be the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which won multiparty elections consistently from 1929–2000—are the most common variant.⁸ Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) is the classic example of a democratic dominant party: other parties compete, but fare near-invariably poorly, notwithstanding electoral reforms in the 1990s and even the LDP's own consistent unpopularity.⁹ (Prevailing explanations centre around clientelism, fiscal authority, and party structure.) Giovanni Sartori calls these predominant-party systems: alternation in power could happen, but does not, unlike in a hegemonic-party system that has taken steps to ensure it will remain in power.¹⁰ India's Congress Party and Sweden's Social Democrats, among other examples, enjoyed such predominance previously, but then lost ground.

Barisan Nasional (or precursor, the Alliance) clearly dominated Malaysian politics from shortly before full independence until 2018; it then grappled its way back into power, with partners, when the PH government collapsed in 2020, reclaiming the premiership the following year. While BN is now again in government—a coalition-building miracle, considering its shoddy performance in GE15—it is clearly there as junior partner. More to the point, *no* party can claim dominance, per any of Templeman's dimensions, from votes/seats to longevity to agenda-setting power. And yet what brought Malaysia to this point was hardly a newly coherent opposition coalition. PH in 2018 was arguably less tightly meshed than Pakatan Rakyat in 2013, given the late-breaking addition of ill-fitting Bersatu, then its mojo was decidedly low heading into elections in 2022, given the preceding two years' political havoc. Rather, Malaysia experienced perhaps the perfect dominance-killing storm of circumstances: unpopular BN leadership, with corruption still the coalition's Achilles heel (and relatedly, sharply reduced access to patronage with which to woo support, as in the past¹¹); emergence of another plausible Malay-communal alternative to BN; and a huge surge in new voters with

⁷ Templeman, "The Origins and Decline," 232–266.

⁸ Beatriz Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1.

⁹ Ethan Scheiner, *Democracy without Competition in Japan: Opposition Failure in a One-Party Dominant State* (New York: Cambridge, 2006).

¹⁰ Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems* (New York: Cambridge, 1976), 200, 30.

¹¹ Aris Trantidis, "Clientelism and the Classification of Dominant Party Systems," *Democratization* 22, no. 1 (2015): 113–133; Edmund Terence Gomez, "Resisting the Fall: The Single Dominant Party, Policies and Elections in Malaysia," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 46, no. 4 (2016): 570–590.

unknown or unfixed loyalties, the result of a 2019 constitutional amendment that lowered the voting age from 21 to 18 and introduced automatic registration of voters. The case is surely too *sui generis* to serve as a model of dominant-party decline, but still allows us to examine what results from that development.

Electoral Authoritarianism and Its Transformation

Similarly salient as a concept is regime hybridity or—our preferred term—electoral authoritarianism. Like party dominance, electoral authoritarianism may be used loosely and labelled differently (electoral autocracy, defective democracy, competitive authoritarianism, semiauthoritarianism), notwithstanding efforts to clarify attributes and usage.¹² Some of these regimes, such as Singapore's, lean hegemonic; others, including Malaysia's, allow moderately meaningful competition.¹³ Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way define the burgeoning ranks of the latter, which they characterize as competitive authoritarian, as those “civilian regimes in which formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power,” but “competition is real but unfair,” because “electoral manipulation, unfair media access, abuse of state resources, and varying degrees of harassment and violence” give incumbent parties clear advantage.¹⁴ Southeast Asia is home to a number of such regimes; much-remarked democratic erosion in Indonesia and the Philippines may further expand the category.

Beatriz Magaloni and Ruth Kricheli assert that, “Dominant-party regimes are also known in the literature as ‘electoral authoritarian’ or as ‘competitive authoritarian’ regimes.”¹⁵ We propose instead the value of disentangling these concepts. In the case of Malaysia, the dominant-party system has crumbled, but, at least for now, the electoral-authoritarian regime—curbs on civil liberties, skewed electoral playing field, etc.—persists. Moreover, the formerly dominant party is not merely in the governing coalition, but accretes bargaining power through its greater ability than PH's to counter their mutual foe, the Malay-communal PN. To put it differently, it is too soon to tell whether these elections might prove more “mechanisms of authoritarian stabilization or democratization.”¹⁶ It may well be that institutional reforms follow in short

¹² For example, see Matthijs Bogaards, “How to Classify Hybrid Regimes? Defective Democracy and Electoral Authoritarianism,” *Democratization* 16, no. 2 (2009): 399–423. See also Meredith L. Weiss, *The Roots of Resilience: Party Machines and Grassroots Politics in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), chap. 2.

¹³ Larry Diamond, “Thinking about Hybrid Regimes,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (2002): 25–26.

¹⁴ Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3–5.

¹⁵ Magaloni and Kricheli, “Political Order and One-Party Rule,” 124.

¹⁶ Ruchan Kaya and Michael Bernhard, “Are Elections Mechanisms of Authoritarian Stability or Democratization? Evidence from Postcommunist Eurasia,” *Perspectives on Politics* 11, no. 3 (2013): 735.

order, though initial indications suggest significant inertia. Regardless, even more-than-momentary flux warrants attention, for what could happen in that time.

Party and Party-System Institutionalization

Lastly, we engage with a distinct literature on political parties, including outside liberal-democratic contexts. The literature on party institutionalization dates back at least to Samuel Huntington's quest for "political order" and democratization in the balance between political institutionalization and participation.¹⁷ Institutionalized parties, Allen Hicken and Erik Kuhonta explain, are "coherent, adaptable, and complex," and important for delivering both tangible and intangible public goods; particularly in democracies, they serve to channel citizens' interests and let citizens enforce accountability. In nondemocracies, they may help regimes "withstand opposition, understand and adapt to changes in citizen preferences, and successfully manage factional conflicts from within the ranks of the ruling party."¹⁸

Vicky Randall and Lars Svåsand offer criteria for evaluating such institutionalization, including outside established democracies. They consider structural and attitudinal aspects, to examine how parties become established both organizationally and in terms of behaviour and attitudes. The core criteria they present are, internally, systemness ("scope, density, and regularity" of structural processes) and value infusion (how committed to and identified with the party its supporters are, beyond instrumental incentives); and externally, decisional autonomy (ability to chart its own strategic course and set policies without interference) and reification (how well "the party's existence is established in the public imagination").¹⁹ Parties within a system—a polity—may not be evenly institutionalized, to the potential detriment of systemic resilience and vibrancy. Moreover, strong cleavages conducive to well-institutionalized parties might impede the competitiveness and mutual respect helpful for a party system.²⁰

Which brings us to party system institutionalization, or, per Scott Mainwaring and Timothy Scully, a "set of patterned interactions in the competition among parties."²¹ What situates a system on a continuum from

¹⁷ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968).

¹⁸ Allen Hicken and Erik Martinez Kuhonta, "Introduction: Rethinking Party System Institutionalization in Asia," in *Party System Institutionalization in Asia: Democracies, Autocracies, and the Shadows of the Past*, eds. Allen Hicken and Erik Martinez Kuhonta (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1–2.

¹⁹ Vicky Randall and Lars Svåsand, "Party Institutionalization in New Democracies," *Party Politics* 8, no. 1 (2002): 10–14.

²⁰ Randall and Svåsand, "Party Institutionalization," 8–9.

²¹ Scott Mainwaring and Timothy R. Scully, "Introduction: Party Systems in Latin America," in *Building Democratic Institutions: Party Systems in Latin America*, eds. Scott Mainwaring and Timothy R. Scully (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 4–5.

inchoate to institutionalized is less the total number of parties that contest, than how volatile or stable patterns of competition are; whether voters can rely confidently on party labels (i.e., that they know which party best represents their interests, across time and administrative tiers); that parties carry greater legitimacy as vehicles toward power than either coups or personality; and whether salient parties have fairly strong and enduring organizations.²²

Malaysia was already an outlier: not just its dominant party (UMNO and its coalition), but also a party system, inclusive of opposition parties, institutionalized so early in the state's formation as to impede the maturation of an autonomous state apparatus. Competition was more intense and democratic legitimacy was stronger within specific parties than in the polity overall. Both the key parties, and the relationships among them, had long been fairly stable, notwithstanding the emergence of the occasional consequential newcomer (what is now Parti Keadilan Rakyat, PKR, in the late 1990s, for instance). Party-system deinstitutionalization ticked upwards with increasing electoral volatility amid the penetration of new influences and ideas in the Internet era, but parties themselves stood initially firm.²³ However, especially since the 1MDB corruption debacle surfaced in the 2010s, UMNO's continuing internal tensions and declining popular support—as first Najib Razak, and now Zahid Hamidi and his circle have clung on—have weakened the dominant party both internally and externally. That damage was manifest already in 2018.²⁴ The messy 2022 elections followed on and accelerated several years' worth of party deinstitutionalization, which has introduced unprecedented fluidity as both politicians and voters have jumped ship, in varying directions.

Malaysia's GE15: What Happened?

Recent developments in Malaysia thus offer a useful testing ground for understanding the concatenation of party deinstitutionalization and dominant-party-system deinstitutionalization, in the context of competitive electoral authoritarianism. Our goal here is not a full exegesis of Malaysia's 15th general election, held 19 November 2022. Rather our primary interest is in those aspects that reflect or define changes in Malaysia's system of parties and coalitions. These issues are clearly highly salient to the overall result, but are not the whole story. We identify here several key, interrelated aspects related to the character of competition, campaign strategies, and voter

²² Mainwaring and Scully, "Introduction," 6–16.

²³ Weiss, "The Anti-Democratic Potential."

²⁴ Faisal S. Hazis, "Elite Fragmentation and Party Splits: Explaining the Breakdown of UMNO in Malaysia's 14th General Election," in *Towards a New Malaysia? The 2018 Election and Its Aftermath*, eds. Meredith L. Weiss and Faisal S. Hazis (Singapore: NUS Press, 2020), 41–60.

sentiment that shed light not just on the outcome, but also on what that result means for the resulting partisan landscape.

Party Differentiation

Across the board, claiming a niche proved elusive in GE15. Parties were hard-pressed to distinguish themselves from competitors, beyond claims to relative cleanliness (both PH and PN), godliness (PAS, primarily, though Bersatu rode its partner's wake), and/or service-orientation (as for small start-ups, such as Parti Bangsa Malaysia, PBM). Indeed, the very fact of the messiness over the preceding two years was testament to the increasingly hazy lines between parties: sufficient MPs changed parties mid-term to galvanize passage of an "anti-hopping" enactment. While a second-best remedy to strengthening party identity to preclude legislators' drifting among interchangeable contenders, that law at least froze allegiances in place and added some greater certainty to post-election coalition-formation. Bersatu President Muhyiddin Yassin could not, for instance, plausibly coopt a tranche of BN MPs to join his PN government (as he claimed he would do) without their likely having to vacate their seats. Yet in the interim, parties remained similar enough to allow, for instance, long-time UMNO incumbent Shahidan Kassim to jump to PAS when Zahid, as UMNO president, declined to nominate him. (As a minister in Ismail Sabri Yaakob's incumbent administration, Shahidan was on the wrong factional turf.) He retained his Perlis parliamentary seat for PN.

In part the challenge of differentiating among parties during the campaign resulted from the sheer number of contenders that convoluted recent history produced, including many new to the scene. In contemporary elections, Malaysia has had two core national coalitions, sometimes with PAS as a third choice (but strong only in certain areas). Now it had three—PH and PN each with a party that emerged from a split in BN's UMNO (PKR and Bersatu, respectively)—as well as state-specific coalitions in Sabah and Sarawak. As many as 10 candidates vied for one seat (Kuala Lumpur's Batu constituency); only 9 out of 222 contests were one-on-one. A modal number of four contenders per seat all but precluded substantial differentiation. Movement of key parties among coalitions with distinct stances—most notably, Bersatu's shift from contesting under noncommunal PH in 2018 to under Malay-focused PN in 2022—undermined reification, or consolidation of an image of the party in the public mind, beyond the identity of its leader. And, as in GE14, multiple parties courted Malay-Muslims intent on a communal champion, presenting options to voters unimpressed with UMNO's central leadership.²⁵

In part, the lack of differentiation reflects (and surely also fostered) broad similarities among voters in their policy preferences or top priorities,

²⁵ For example, see Junaidi Awang Besar, "Geopolitik Negeri Terengganu dalam Pra PRU-14, PRU-14 Dan Pasca PRU-14," *e-Bangi: Journal of Social Science and Humanities* 18, no. 5 (2021): 100.

regardless of expressed party loyalty. We found voters across the board fixated on the economy: 74 percent cited economic concerns as their top priority.²⁶ Specific economic foci (e.g., job-creation vs. inflation vs. local development) varied by age, but party was less firm a predictor. Especially with so much of campaigning over social media, framed for TikTok, Twitter, or Instagram, finer points of policy were unlikely to get much play. And indeed, all viable contenders offered anti-poverty, pro-middle class, essentially centre-left manifestos, albeit differing in the precise mix and amounts of subsidies, loan facilities, stimuli, and so forth.

Nor were many candidates, especially from PH, confident in using the term “manifesto,” given what happened after 2018. Then, famously, in explaining why he was violating his coalition’s pledge to appoint a sitting MP as Speaker of the House, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad scoffed that “the manifesto is not a Bible, it is a guidance ... we have to be practical-minded.”²⁷ Many candidates suggested that voters had no cause to trust campaign promises, especially amid ongoing political and economic uncertainty, suggesting programmatic appeals would fall flat. (Then again, as an UMNO campaign staffer stressed, BN compared its record of having delivered on nearly all its promises from 2013–2018 to PH’s failure to thrive;²⁸ an UMNO candidate likewise quipped that BN does not promise “the sky,” but that’s what they deliver.²⁹) A campaign director for the youth-oriented Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (MUDA) mentioned that as a candidate herself in recent Johor state elections, she avoided the term “manifesto,” referring instead to “my focus.”³⁰ A party-mate standing in Selangor likewise ran on a *panduan gerak* (action plan) rather than a manifesto.³¹ Candidates did stress programmatic policies—and for PH, their coalition’s achievements over 22 months in office—but for certain audiences more than others; all described some approach to segmenting voters by ethnicity, age, and/or location (urban/rural) in gauging who would prioritize “personality” and service, “logo,” or policies. In that vein (and as we examine more deeply below), parties’ focus on the personality of their prime minister (PM)-to-be cannot be separated from a lack of differentiation in terms of policies or programs. A focus on Anwar Ibrahim (PH), Muhyiddin Yassin (PN), or (more ambiguously) Ismail Sabri Yaakob (BN) alludes indirectly to their agenda, but without invoking it outright. To some extent, that emphasis echoed GE14, when Mahathir was PH’s counterintuitive PM-designate: voters (with Bersatu’s encouragement) might suspend their

²⁶ All statistics are from the Merdeka Center’s GE15 tracking polls.

²⁷ Koh Gah Chie, “Sometimes Can, Sometimes Can’t—Manifesto not ‘Bible’: Dr M,” *Malaysiakini*, 16 July 2018, see <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/434416>.

²⁸ Interview, Kota Bharu, Kelantan, 14 November 2022.

²⁹ Field notes, Kuala Lumpur, 18 November 2022.

³⁰ Interview, Muar, Johor, 6 November 2022.

³¹ Interview, Tanjong Karang, Selangor, 18 November 2022.

assumptions about PH's noncommunal orientation, to assume a Malay tilt under the coalition's leader.³²

Lastly, in part, and unlike in 2018, this lack of differentiation surely reflected all parties' pragmatic expectation that they might end up working with any of their competitors in order to form a government, a reality conducive to regression toward the mean—or toward the median voter,³³ to be precise. However much each party aspired to lead the government independently, “in politics, all things are possible”—frequently with that precise wording—echoed as a refrain across campaign teams, when asked with whom they might or could not ally. (One incumbent's more cynical take: “How desperate will we be to get into government?”³⁴)

Coalition Premises

This final factor warrants further discussion, especially for the evidence it offers of party-system deinstitutionalization. In the run-up to the election, we saw limited programmatic (policy- and/or ideology-based) as opposed to opportunistic (seat-counting) alliance strategies. That approach seemed to reflect lessons learned since GE14: a programmatic pitch (however complicated by Mahathir's clashing orientation) could propel a coalition into office, but might not keep it there, if legislators peeled away once the euphoria faded and mundane electoral pressures (in Malaysia, especially communal antagonisms) resurfaced.³⁵ Both DAP and Bersatu strategists, for instance, advocated for an “anything but UMNO” approach, describing a “big tent” inclusive potentially of PH, Bersatu, and PAS, either in direct alliance or with Bersatu as a buffer between PAS and DAP (a role previous UMNO-splinter-party Semangat '46 had pioneered in bridging the same frenemy parties in the 1980s).³⁶ From 2020–2022, PN, BN, and East Malaysian partners governed without articulating a platform—leaving no doubt, as UMNO withdrew support from Bersatu PM Muhyiddin in 2021, as to how purely opportunistic and contingent their alliance was.

A concrete indicator of how provisional PN was as a coalition: in PAS's heartland, Kelantan and Terengganu (but not in other states, where voters “don't know much about” PAS³⁷), the coalition ran under the PAS logo, a clearly Islamist white moon on a green field. The message to “*undi bulan*”—

³² For example, see “PRU14: Undi Melayu pilih parti mana?” *Sinar Harian*, 26 February 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/tmca4vjn>; Kai Ostwald and Steven Oliver, “Four Arenas: Malaysia's 2018 Election, Reform, and Democratization,” *Democratization* 27, no. 4 (2020): 671.

³³ Anthony Downs, “An Economic Theory of Political Action in a Democracy,” *Journal of Political Economy* 65, no. 2 (1957): 135–150.

³⁴ Interview, PH candidate, Kuala Lumpur, 17 November 2022.

³⁵ Andreas Ufen, “The Downfall of Pakatan Harapan in Malaysia: Coalitions during Transition,” *Asian Survey* 61, no. 2 (2021): 273–296.

³⁶ Interviews, Kuala Lumpur, 7 and 21 June 2022.

³⁷ PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang, quoted in “PRU15: Pas guna simbol ‘bulan’ di Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah,” *Bernama*, 14 October 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/yr47evz5>.

vote for the moon—was ubiquitous, from Bersatu and PAS alike; campaign materials presented all candidates as a green-clad, PAS-presenting front.³⁸ Indeed, PAS Secretary-General Takiyuddin Hassan, declaiming at a rally for a local Bersatu candidate, ran through a standard PAS litany, from Anwar’s long-ago sodomy convictions, to PKR’s purported pro-LGBT stance, to the fact of a Chinese finance minister under PH (an administration then headed by Bersatu’s Mahathir), to DAP’s support of a “Malaysian” rather than Malay Malaysia, to the opposition’s lesser religious expertise, without mentioning a proactive PN agenda beyond their slogan of “*bersih dan stabil*,” clean and stable.³⁹ For its part, Bersatu lacked either grassroots strength or a distinct profile among voters—it was weakly reified. Outside these PAS strongholds, Bersatu relied on Muhyiddin’s image, and not, say, their campaign manifesto, to differentiate themselves, especially from UMNO (framed as Zahid).

But the confusion ran deeper. Our asking PN activists in Kelantan and Pahang whether (Chinese-based) Gerakan had a presence there drew chuckles; they acknowledged that Gerakan was present, but not strong.⁴⁰ Elsewhere, PN ran under a logo of “Perikatan Nasional” in white, on a teal background—their banners and posters easily confused with BN’s blue-and-white ones (especially since both also touted “stability”). A Gerakan candidate in Penang admitted that he was pleasantly surprised to learn that Chinese voters he approached were unaware that his coalition included PAS.⁴¹ The PAS election director for Kelantan noted, too, that voters were confused even over who was head of the incumbent government: he told them “all of them.”⁴² And a Malay Bersatu candidate in Pahang, in an area with both a strong PAS presence and a sizeable Chinese minority, crafted TikToks and posters for befuddled voters, illustrating the cohabitation of PAS, Bersatu, and Gerakan in PN. Then again, longer-established PH was hardly immune, running for the first time under a new, coalition-specific logo—in 2018, the full coalition adopted PKR’s stylized eye—and in 2022, PH was rarely the only not-BN choice on the ballot.⁴³ (If, say, a DAP candidate chose to run under their party’s familiar rocket, instead, the coalition president might deny them a *surat watikah*, or candidate appointment letter.)

As the battle lines clarified and each coalition released its election manifesto, the extent of common ground became apparent: again, there is much on which two or even all three national coalitions agree. And however necessary “product differentiation” is to competition, at least a fair degree

³⁸ Field notes, Kota Bharu and Keterah, Kelantan, 14 November 2022.

³⁹ Field notes, Keterah, Kelantan, 14 November 2022.

⁴⁰ Field notes, Kota Bharu, Kelantan, and Indera Mahkota, Pahang, 15–16 November 2022.

⁴¹ Interview, George Town, Penang, 12 November 2022.

⁴² Interview, Kota Bharu, Kelantan, 15 November 2022.

⁴³ PKR staffer, Ipoh, Perak, 10 November 2022; PH candidate, Kuala Lumpur, 17 November 2022.

of “programmatic compatibility” is essential to govern effectively.⁴⁴ Yet such considerations were hardly part of the discussion on forming the government. Rather, pre-election negotiations looked to past results, factoring in estimates of voter turnout and new-voter leanings; post-election negotiations started from seat-counts, then ruled out certain alliances (especially DAP-PAS) as especially unlikely for identity-politics reasons.⁴⁵

As for voters: their preferences among possible coalitions varied most clearly by ethnicity, as well as over time. Preferences clarified as polling day approached. As premonitions of parliament’s dissolution swirled at the end of September—Muhyiddin finally made the announcement on 10 October—support for PN stood at about 9 percent; that share had nearly doubled as the campaign entered its second week. PN’s final tally took many by surprise: 34.8 percent of the popular vote.⁴⁶ But patterns remained distinctive. By the eve of the election, a clear plurality of Malay voters stated a preference for PN (32.4 percent), with 21.3 percent for BN, and 13.3 percent for PH; nearly one-third remained undisclosed. Most of those undeclared voters went for PN—hence the shock final tally. A slim majority (about 55 percent) of Malays voted for PN, with about 29 percent voting for BN and 14 percent for PH. Among Chinese voters, on the other hand, just over 1 percent voted for PN and 5 percent for BN, with nearly all the rest backing PH. That stark ethnic gap is testament to how much divergence an apparent similitude of platforms obscures: there clearly *are* differences in what (or whom) voters understand these coalitions to represent, however absent the latter’s self-presentation.⁴⁷

All told, this all-but-policy-blind approach to coalition building represents a real shift—and one unlikely to nurture stable alliances. BN, PH, and PAS (or currently PN) still do claim at least somewhat different policy and ideological ground, but when BN and PH can form a government together, seemingly without minding the gap, the patterned interactions that structure preferences in the party system erode. Perhaps most starkly, both PH and PN foregrounded the spectre of voting for Zahid in attacking even comparatively reformist, progressive UMNO opponents on the campaign trail. For instance, UMNO’s Khairy Jamaluddin (a.k.a. KJ) aggressively distanced himself from his party’s president in stump speeches. As he mused

⁴⁴ Wong Chin Huat, “A Hung Parliament—What M’sia Most Needs but Most Dread [sic]?” *Malaysiakini*, 17 November 2022, see <https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/644581>.

⁴⁵ For example, see Ilah Hafiz Aziz, “PAS tolak DAP kerana cauvinis, mirip PAP – Abdul Hadi,” *Berita Harian*, 17 November 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/shwmkh7u>; although, for the reverse spin: Noorazura Abdul Rahman, “PN tolak sertai Kerajaan Perpaduan bukan kerana rasis – Wan Saiful,” *Berita Harian*, 27 November 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/4pjznyc6>.

⁴⁶ Data are from Merdeka Center surveys from 28 October, and 12 and 18 November, plus the final result.

⁴⁷ Marzuki Mohamad and Ibrahim Suffian, “Malaysia’s 15th General Election: Ethnicity Remains the Key Factor in Voter Preferences,” *ISEAS Perspective* 2023/20, 24 March 2023.

wryly post-election, the fact that PH gained such traction with the mantra, “*Undi [vote] KJ = Undi Zahid*” makes the outcome—himself out of office, and Zahid as Anwar’s deputy—quite ironic.⁴⁸ Some voters could well lose trust in their parties for such a bait-and-switch, attenuating their loyalty, and hence their parties’ societal roots. However, the social cleavages that provide a first-order communal structure to the partisan map⁴⁹ mean peninsular non-Malay voters have less vote-choice mobility than Malays.

Personal Rather than Party Voting

Meanwhile, the dominant-party system faced a different sort of challenge in the heretofore unseen extent to which candidates downplayed their party identity. In a system in which, with very few exceptions, would-be politicians have understood parties as *the* route to power—as we would expect in an institutionalized party system—those labels were now fraught. A significant share of candidates defined themselves less consistently per their party identity (especially when that had vacillated) than personalistically; they asked voters to vote for *them*, not their party. This approach takes for granted an assumption in Malaysia of relational clientelism: of “a personal, responsive, quasi-familial connection with politicians,” nurtured through on-the-ground interaction and service provision, throughout the electoral cycle.⁵⁰ One candidate related a play on a familiar acronym for the national middle-school curriculum, KBSM: *Kenduri Beranak Sakit Mati*—feast, childbirth, illness, death—as when Malaysians want their elected representative present. (A colleague quipped that “*B* also stands for *banjir* [flood],” including during the awkwardly timed, cusp-of-monsoon-season snap campaign.)⁵¹ As a campaign manager for one younger, reformist UMNO candidate acknowledged, while other parties also have corrupt leaders, “we probably are the worst ... but we’ve done a lot for people,” so voters might overlook the bad apples.⁵² A counterpart in Kelantan agreed that, unlike other parties (most notably DAP), UMNO avoids “helicopter candidates”; even “fresh faces” who contest have served in that community first, sometimes for many years, and know “what assistance for what people” will build loyalty.⁵³ Or per a PAS strategist, “*tak kenal, tak cinta*”: if they don’t know you, they won’t love you.⁵⁴

However important social-media campaigns were—and TikTok, Facebook,

⁴⁸ Interview, Kuala Lumpur, 5 December 2022, and field notes, Sungai Buloh, Selangor, 17 November 2022.

⁴⁹ For example, see Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, “Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignments: An Introduction,” in *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives*, eds. Seymour M. Lipset and Stein Rokkan (New York: Free Press, 1967): 1–64.

⁵⁰ Meredith L. Weiss, “Duelling Networks: Relational Clientelism in Electoral-Authoritarian Malaysia,” *Democratization* 27, no. 1 (2019): 102.

⁵¹ Interview, Indera Mahkota, Pahang, 16 November 2022.

⁵² Interview, Melaka, 6 November 2022.

⁵³ Interview, Kota Bharu, Kelantan, 14 November 2022.

⁵⁴ Interview, Kota Bharu, Kelantan, 15 November 2022.

and so forth were critically so⁵⁵—conventional, “touch-based” or “targeted” ground campaigning still mattered, especially among older voters. It favoured parties with a strong branch (*cawangan*) network, and certainly helped PAS, with its PASTi kindergartens and schools.⁵⁶ But that approach also offered diligent ground workers a lifeline. Bersatu/PN incumbent Mas Ermieyati Samsudin, previously in both BN and PH, explained: “If they don’t see your face, they won’t pick you.” Proud of her record of service, she ran explicitly on that record, insisting, “my strength here is not my party ... my strength here is me.”⁵⁷ Another UMNO-turned-PCR-turned-Bersatu candidate, Saifuddin Abdullah, stated that even before the campaign, he decided to tell voters simply, “I am what I am ... this is me”—the “same Saifuddin” they know, regardless of party. He hoped his record of hard work and bringing millions in goods and services as an incumbent would convince the all-important, and unusually numerous, undecided voters.⁵⁸ (In the final pre-election tracking poll, 28.7 percent still did not declare a choice.) Similarly, an MCA candidate in Pahang, aware of widespread frustration with BN’s and UMNO’s “arrogance,” insisted that his voters knew and trusted him for his long experience, sincerity, and commitment: this time, unlike in 2018, they would vote more for the candidate than the party.⁵⁹ And a UMNO candidate pushed to a hardcore PH seat urged voters who had never dreamed of voting other than for PH to look not at his party, but at him as a new candidate who will “work for you”—and (as he cockily promised) ultimately bring extra benefits as PM.⁶⁰ Or as one speaker at a rally for PCR-turned-Bersatu-turned-PBM candidate Zuraida Kamaruddin bluntly asked the crowd: Who is it who comes when they’re in trouble, “*logo ke atau individu?*”—the logo or the individual?⁶¹

Other candidates stood as independents after their parties dropped them from nomination lists, whether for subpar performance or for loyalty to the wrong party leader, touting much the same message of personal service, which they pledged to deliver absent a party. Long-time PCR leader Tian Chua, for instance, now running as an independent, tread a fine line: he sought to “upgrade the quality” of electoral politics and move beyond the clash of “old titans” vying to be PM, without undermining his former party. He hoped his principled “Reformasi branding” and local voters’ familiarity with him would serve him well. (He lost, but performed credibly.)⁶²

⁵⁵ See Ross Tapsell’s article in this issue.

⁵⁶ Interviews, BN division head, Alor Gajah, Melaka, 6 November 2022; Amanah/PH staff, Parit Buntar, Perak, 10 November 2022; PN candidate, Indera Mahkota, Pahang, 16 November 2022.

⁵⁷ Interview, Masjid Tanah, Melaka, 6 November 2022.

⁵⁸ Interview, Indera Mahkota, Pahang, 16 November 2022.

⁵⁹ Interview, Bentong, Pahang, 9 November 2022.

⁶⁰ Field notes, Sungai Buloh, Selangor, 17 November 2022.

⁶¹ Field notes, Ampang, Selangor, 18 November 2022.

⁶² Interview, Batu, Kuala Lumpur, 9 November 2022. He far outperformed the other five independents contesting, albeit trailing the PH, PN, and BN candidates.

Both feeding and following this tendency toward more personal than party voting, voters tended to prioritize the local candidate over issues, the PM-designate, or leadership, though the balance varied across population segments and shifted over time. In the run-up to the election in particular, that candidate-oriented inclination distinguished younger voters, who manifested comparatively weak attachment to parties as enduring institutions. As of nomination day, a clear plurality of *all* voters named their local candidate as the main factor in their choice, followed by the political party; young voters cared slightly more still about the candidate, while party lagged behind issues as a priority. By the final days of the campaign, voters on average looked equally to the local candidate and party. Younger voters, though, still prioritized the candidate, trailed closely by issues; they cared least (by a considerable margin) about party.⁶³ Meanwhile, some older voters accorded UMNO “sentimental value,” understanding it as more an encompassing “ecosystem” than a mere party, or still associated Muhyiddin with the BN, requiring careful messaging.⁶⁴ In fact, the son of a prominent early-generation UMNO leader, standing as an independent in Perak, found that meeting him made some voters “nostalgic for UMNO.” He had to convince them that UMNO of today was a “Frankenstein party,” whereas *he* could embody the “old UMNO.”⁶⁵ That said, being from a party, and *which* party, still mattered: only two independents won seats, and most party-hoppers lost.

Other candidates found themselves pushed toward highlighting not themselves, but their party leader, for a different sort of personalistic voting. Many voters were unfamiliar with their new party’s logo or name—again, especially the case for PN—and others were simply confused by the number of choices. This tendency accentuated a seemingly “presidential” aspect to elections not new to Malaysia, but growing,⁶⁶ and raised concerns of a drift toward the sort of unprogrammable, personal-vehicle parties that prevail in Indonesia. Malaysian parties remain far from that point, but the identity of the intended (Anwar, Muhyiddin) or potential (Zahid) PM stood in stark metonymy, particularly as a shorthand way of identifying the little-known Bersatu/PN or attacking corruption in BN. (In reality, by the latter days of the campaign, while the share of voters most swayed by the PM candidate had nearly doubled since nomination day, it remained only 15 percent.⁶⁷)

Meanwhile, those candidates themselves might run more on their own record than their party label. As a Bersatu leader in Johor explained of Muhyiddin, who himself had served under BN and PH before PN, local voters’ connection with him went back decades: “They don’t care what logo”

⁶³ Merdeka Center polling data from 5 November and 14–16 November 2022.

⁶⁴ Interview with PN candidate, Bagan Datuk, Perak, 9 November 2022.

⁶⁵ Interview, Bagan Datuk, Perak, 9 November 2022.

⁶⁶ This aspect surfaced especially in GE13, when UMNO’s Najib Razak enjoyed far greater popularity than his BN coalition.

⁶⁷ Merdeka Center, 14–16 November 2022.

he adopted; it was enough that they knew he's a good person and has accomplished a lot in the constituency.⁶⁸ (Elsewhere in Malaysia, too, PN candidates referred to Muhyiddin as *Abah*, father, to emphasize character and connection—and invoking the image he cultivated as PM during the pandemic, as he presided over distribution of a series of cash-transfer programs.⁶⁹) In sum, not only do we see evidence of an unravelling party system, but also of component parties' fraying at the edges, while the programmatic voting of a healthy democracy remains elusive.

Where Do These Developments Leave Malaysia, and What Does It All Mean?

This election was obviously highly consequential for Malaysia, if only for making clear the extent to which an election alone may not chart a clear path forward. Beyond the all-too-obvious question of whether *this* administration will outlast PH's prior version under Mahathir, we cannot know how well the hodgepodge of parties will work together; whether being back in power will redeem UMNO in the eyes of its supporters, giving Zahid confidence to assert himself even more; or whether this will be a government that capitalizes on consensus to get things done, or that remains mired in gridlock. The election confirms the decline of Malaysia's dominant party; it reveals little about what lies ahead. However, these developments matter, too, for the broader literature, especially in light of how central a case Malaysia has been for theorizing electoral authoritarianism and party dominance.⁷⁰ The Malaysian regime's prior resilience offered analytical insight that was germane to other situations;⁷¹ now, the deterioration of that system is likewise salient.

Collapse of a Dominant-Party System

First and foremost: Malaysian party politics is fragmenting and reconsolidating. The result in 2018 might plausibly have indicated merely a swapping out of the dominant party. In retrospect, that outcome appears more convincingly to flag the system's collapse. The prior dominant party, the BN coalition, lost in 2018, but its core remained structurally intact.⁷² In 2022, the joining of forces by BN and PH and their fairly quick transition to functioning as a coalition (e.g., sharing out by-election seats) revealed a deeper-seated unravelling of the party system.

⁶⁸ Interview, Pagoh, Johor, 7 November 2022.

⁶⁹ Bernama, "Usaha capai imuniti kelompok, tangani pandemik antara usaha keras Muhyiddin," *Berita Harian*, 16 August 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/2p8vwdhj>.

⁷⁰ Greene, *Why Dominant Parties Lose*.

⁷¹ For example, see Weiss, *The Roots of Resilience*.

⁷² Meredith L. Weiss, "Is Malaysian Democracy Backsliding or Merely Staying Put?" *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* (online first; 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1177/20578911221136066>.

Decline of party dominance need not have a fissiparous effect; Japan's LDP has lost dominance, for instance, but pursued reforms to transition to a more competitive, still institutionalized, party system.⁷³ At the same time, and surely feeding system-level decline in Malaysia, parties here are themselves deinstitutionalizing—a possibility all the more conceivable when the party is actually a coalition. Component parties have pushed back against top-down decisions, whether disagreement in the ranks within UMNO (e.g., calls post-election for Zahid to take responsibility for the party's poor showing and resign⁷⁴), within PKR (over Anwar's factional-vendetta-infused candidate selection⁷⁵) and DAP (over the party's taking Chinese voters for granted,⁷⁶ and for having to take a backseat in the cabinet to appease Malay ethnonationalists, despite being the largest party in government⁷⁷), or before the election, a threat from BN's Malaysian Indian Congress, MIC, to sit out the polls in protest against seat allocations. Several parties are experiencing declining internal party systemness, in Randall and Svåsand's terms, including debilitating factional rifts, compounding deterioration in external reification as party leaders let strategic opportunity trump ideological coherence.

Nor is it likely that experience in the unity government will result in a strong, composite, party-like coalition, able itself to achieve dominant status. Forged at the behest of the king rather than spontaneously,⁷⁸ the coalition is structurally unstable, given its component parties' disparate ideological premises, notwithstanding the extent of policy convergence described earlier. (On the other hand, the also-aforementioned decline in party reification might make those distinctions less salient.) All component parties face the imperative of delivering public goods and economic uplift, but UMNO will have to clarify the extent to which it champions Malay interests specifically, whereas PH will be pressed to distinguish its economic strategies and successes from those of the Malay-centric PN. Nor will Anwar Ibrahim's administration be able to spend its way to strength, if the one thing on which all partners can agree is the power of handouts to boost support. The government has inherited a large deficit that it needs to reduce, compounded by diminished revenue streams.⁷⁹

Meanwhile, the rise in personal rather than party voting could further

⁷³ Steven R. Reed, Ethan Scheiner, and Michael F. Thies, "The End of LDP Dominance and the Rise of Party-oriented Politics in Japan," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 38, no. 2 (2012): 353–376.

⁷⁴ Faris Danial Razi, "PRU15: Mood tolak Zahid terasa di Ibu Pejabat UMNO," *Astro Awani*, 20 November 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/purw4vs2>.

⁷⁵ See Amar Shah Mohsen, "GE15: Are 'Former Pro-Azmin' PKR Members Getting Axe from Polls?" *The Vibes*, 28 October 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/5n6aav5e>.

⁷⁶ For example, DAP staffer (in private capacity), Batu Pahat, Johor, 7 November 2022.

⁷⁷ John Bunyan, "Small Cabinet presence a bitter pill for DAP to swallow, say analysts," *Malay Mail*, 10 December 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/y7bbyhuw>.

⁷⁸ "Why is Malaysia's king helping choose the country's next PM?" *Al Jazeera*, 23 November 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/55dzvzm>.

⁷⁹ Ram Anand, "Revenue targets crucial for PM Anwar's maiden budget," *Straits Times*, 25 February 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/4hcxdraj>.

weaken party and party-system institutionalization alike. Particularly at risk is the extent to which parties structure preferences: rogue candidates who do still represent a party inherently undermine manifestos (or even broad stances) as useful or accurate information shortcuts for voters.⁸⁰ Moreover, we know from, for instance, Indonesian experience across electoral regimes the extent to which the need to woo personal votes—the effort to differentiate oneself as a candidate without strong recourse to a party identity—tends to increase the incidence and salience of patronage as an electoral lure.⁸¹ That said, voting on a record of service (even when that term is partly code for “handouts”), does ensure a level of retrospective direct accountability.

Disaggregating Party Dominance from Electoral Authoritarianism

Malaysia's natural lab allows us to examine, too, the extent to which we can disentangle dominant party and electoral-authoritarian regimes. To what extent does (or did) its dominant party define or confirm Malaysia as electoral authoritarian, and should we consider it still to fit that category? Extant conceptualizations of what electoral authoritarianism *is* are better developed, however disputed the details, than of how it ends, or of how we know that such a regime has fallen.⁸² The usual metric in practice for democratization is change of government by elections (such that buzz about a transition in Malaysia was rife among politicians and scholars alike in 2018⁸³). More consequential consolidation comes superficially with multiple such turnovers, or more meaningfully with constitutional, electoral-system, and legal reforms; changes to the party system; taming of veto-players or agreement to stick with the democratic game; and normative commitment.⁸⁴ But these conceptualizations skirt the specific issue Malaysia's experience now raises: Can (and will) the electoral authoritarian regime outlast the fallen dominant party?

Here our response must be speculative, flagging an area for further research. The fact of deinstitutionalizing parties, on balance, bodes poorly for liberalization: most scholars agree that political parties, as vehicles for aggregating, channelling, and articulating interests, are a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for democracy. (While our question is not whether Malaysia will make the leap to full liberal democracy, the same logic applies

⁸⁰ Downs, “An Economic Theory.”

⁸¹ Edward Aspinall, “Parliament and Patronage,” *Journal of Democracy* 25, no. 4 (2014): 96–110.

⁸² But see, for instance, William Case, “Transition from Single-Party Dominance? New Data from Malaysia,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 10, no. 1 (2010): 91–126; Howard and Roessler, “Liberalizing Electoral Outcomes”; Andreas Schedler, *Transitions from Electoral Authoritarianism*, CIDE Working Paper #22 (Mexico City: Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas, November 2010).

⁸³ For example, see contributors to a special issue of *The Round Table* on “Regime Change in Malaysia: GE14 and Its Importance,” eds. Wong Chin-Huat and Ooi Kee Beng, 107, no. 6 (2018).

⁸⁴ Marcus Mietzner, *Democratic Deconsolidation in Southeast Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 6–8; Philippe C. Schmitter, “Twenty-Five Years, Fifteen Findings,” *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 1 (2010): 17–28.

to more incremental liberalization.) Nor is party-system deinstitutionalization a positive step, if liberalization is the goal: it diminishes stability, leaves unclear *how* citizens might best pursue their interests, and may make pathways to power other than the election process appear equally feasible or legitimate.

The parties that performed best in GE15 are also Malaysia's (still) most reified: PAS and DAP on the peninsula (however impossible it is to separate out entirely the coalition effects), and Sarawak's GPS. The last of these does tend to occupy broad middle ground; indeed, until it determined that greater advantage lay in playing coy rather than declaring loyalty upfront, GPS contested as the Sarawak BN. But PAS and DAP are classic products of dominant-party opposition development: neither claims centrality, in the Malaysian context. Neither would thus have the wherewithal to steer the country toward a particular future regime, democratic or otherwise. Further complicating translating this electoral outcome to liberalizing reform is how little parties campaigned on or claim their manifestos. In fact, it was only a full month after the election that the government announced a committee to compare the BN and PH manifestos and to develop a common platform.⁸⁵ Voters cannot hold parties accountable for programs they do not declare.

In short, for now, Malaysia retains the institutional trappings, decision-making apparatus, and hamstrung accountability of an electoral-authoritarian regime. Tellingly, we no longer hear even whispers of the change-oriented "New Malaysia" rhetoric so pervasive following GE14; popular expectations seem firmly in check. The nature of dominant-party collapse has created more of a vacuum than a clear path forward.

Is Liberalizing Structural Reform Likely?

What possibilities does party-system deinstitutionalization raise for structural reform? Again, it was arguably early entrenchment of highly institutionalized parties, in a well-institutionalized party system, that captured the Malaysian state, leaving its institutions otherwise anemic.⁸⁶ Does the deterioration of that system—more than simply the previous dominant party's electoral loss—clear the way for more far-reaching liberalization?

At heart is the character of the state. A weakened prime minister (the past two unelected ones, and now Anwar as head of a patchwork coalition, his fate dependent on reluctant allies) and possibly gridlocked federal parliament (given the real differences that do still distinguish BN from PH, and East Malaysian from peninsular priorities and interests) clears a path for other actors. The civil service in Malaysia is not only bloated, but has historically played a key role in governance. One can imagine something of a twist on

⁸⁵ Tarrence Tan and Ragananthana Vethsalam, "Govt panel to pick and fulfil electoral pledges by BN and PH, says Rafizi," *The Star*, 20 December 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/3kubctam>.

⁸⁶ Weiss, "The Anti-Democratic Potential."

Martin Shefter:⁸⁷ not his focus on the conditions under which strong parties arise, vis-à-vis the state, but under which, once those parties retreat, the state can come into its potential as more than an agent of partisan interests.

Or will we now see other social actors, extricated from parties, vie for agenda-setting and decision-making authority? If so, we might see movement from integrated toward dispersed domination, in Joel Migdal's terms,⁸⁸ should the lack of a strong partisan core to define and capture a capacious middle ground feed subnational claims for recognition, empowerment, and zero-sum resources.⁸⁹ Yet intra-elite feuding, how long the civil service has been steeped in a party-serving ethos,⁹⁰ and the corrosive legacies of patronage logics on institutional functioning across the public sector⁹¹ could yield not just a small state, but also a weak one. In that case, however, the current balance, unstable as it is, might facilitate structural reforms, so long as reformist social forces are more committed or energetic than reactionary ones, and given the lack of a strong vested constituency for stasis.

Conclusion

GE15 marks a turning point in Malaysia's regime that might yet prove highly consequential for institutional reform as well as more mundane policy agendas, government (in)stability, and popular (dis)satisfaction with electoral politics. Whether the outcome will be a more open and accountable polity with a more even electoral playing field, a more opaque and patronage-fuelled system, or something in between remains to be seen. The result for the formerly dominant UMNO alone remains equally unclear: will it see greater promise in reforming its premises and renewing its leadership, so as to differentiate itself on stronger, new grounds; will it take its fortuitous soft landing as reason *not* to reform, but to trust to a lucky Zahid to keep them in government; or will it hover uncertainly between these poles, waiting for a push? Indeed, Malaysia may remain in flux for a prolonged period. However stable the present outcome proves to be, both the fact of this result, and how ambiguous its durability is, mark a structural shift and another critical case for comparativists to consider.

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⁸⁷ Martin Shefter, *Political Parties and the State: The American Historical Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁸⁸ Joel S. Migdal, "The State in Society: An Approach to Struggle for Domination," in *State Power and Social Forces: Domination and Transformation in the Third World*, eds. Joel S. Migdal, Atul Kohli, and Vivienne Shue (London: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 7–34.

⁸⁹ See, for instance, Ngu Ik Tien's article in this forum.

⁹⁰ Hidekuni Washida, *Distributive Politics in Malaysia: Maintaining Authoritarian Party Dominance* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

⁹¹ Weiss, *The Roots of Resilience*, 121–131.