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NO. 335

**LATE MALAYSIAN POLITICS
FROM SINGLE PARTY DOMINANCE TO MULTI PARTY MAYHEM**

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2 August 2021

Abstract

Why has Malaysia's politics, long counted among the most stable in East Asia, suddenly lost durability? Explanation starts with a single-party dominant system, reinforced by a hybrid political regime and grounded in a divided and ranked social structure. In this configuration, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) operated as the single dominant party. And insulated by the hybrid regime and supported by ethnic constituencies, UMNO won ten consecutive general elections between 1974 and 2014. But for reasons explored in this analysis, UMNO gradually lost elite cohesion and constituent support, leading to its momentous electoral defeat in 2018. This fragmented the single-party dominant system and its hybrid regime scaffolding. Accordingly, Malaysia's politics has been cast from single-party dominance into multi-party mayhem, with scant chances for re-equilibration any time soon.

Introduction

What is causing the instability in Malaysia's politics today? For four and a half decades, the country perpetuated a single-party-dominant system embedded in a hybrid political regime. Civil liberties were limited, but not extinguished. Elections were manipulated, yet opposition parties could still win legislative seats. In this mode, Malaysia avoided the iterated oscillations of neighbouring Thailand, the epic upheavals of New Society Philippines and New Order Indonesia, and the deadening militarisation of Myanmar. It also eschewed the personal dictatorship of Cambodia, the one-party systems of Vietnam and Laos, and the monarchical absolutism of Brunei. Thus, Malaysia set a record of political stability without harsh state violence which, across the region, only Singapore matched.

But Malaysia's single-party dominance and hybrid politics are sorely tested today. Through a first-ever electoral turnover, a new government came to power in 2018, appearing to presage a democratic transition. But after defections, this government was ousted in 2020, then replaced by a new coalition that threw this progress into reverse. Accordingly, Malaysia seems finally to have faced the music, scored famously by Samuel Huntington, that "the halfway house does not stand".¹ And yet, efforts to institute "purer" regime types of democracy and authoritarianism have also failed to equilibrate. Politics blossomed but momentarily with new democratic procedures. They then shrivelled under authoritarian controls. And though more deeply coercive today, Malaysia's regime remains brittle, with the government so unsettled that it lurched into emergency rule.

The aim of this paper is to account for the erosion of Malaysia's single-party dominance and hybrid politics, as well as the subsequent failure of both democracy and authoritarianism to take root. The analysis is guided by the assumptions that change processes are bordered by institutional edifices and grounded in sociocultural structures. But within these parameters, Malaysia's steady path dependence has recently been disrupted by leadership clashes, querulous mass preferencing, and unprecedented crises in the economy and public health. Accordingly, while this paper engages with

¹ Huntington, Samuel, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

relevant theorising, it finds faint illumination. Indeed, case material from Malaysia, rather than gaining insight from classic and current writing, presents some hard tests.

Let us quickly preview some of the literature that features in this analysis. First, Malaysia's single-party-dominant system, once so durable, confronts a logic of ethnic "fractionalisation", holding that party institutions are undermined by fissiparous identities and cultural structures. Conversely, the recent break-up of this system challenges claims that party institutions are fortified by abundant patronage resources. As we will see, the dominant party in Malaysia was long animated by fractionalisation, yet was finally weakened by its vast amassment and reckless distributions of patronage.

Second, the brevity of Malaysia's democratic experience problematises influential claims about election effects, a genre that stresses the cumulative benefits over time of "liberalising electoral outcomes" and "democratisation-by-elections". In Malaysia, opposition parties made steady gains across electoral contests, finally triumphing in 2018. But less than two years later, democratic politics collapsed ignominiously in authoritarian rule. What is more, fractiousness has since raged between newly elevated elites, confronting an institutionalist literature that cites the stabilising effects of oversized cabinets and coalitions.

Lastly, with accommodative institutions failing to quell elite-level fractiousness, the pre-eminent party within today's ruling coalition resorted to emergency rule. Parliament was suspended and state assembly and by-elections postponed indefinitely. But this action conflicts with new theorising over "backsliding", for it mainly targets rival elites within the government's own coalition, rather than resurgent opposition parties and restive social forces. Indeed, despite the resentments expressed by ordinary citizens, collective action remains inhibited by Malaysia's distinctively divided and ranked society. Thus, the societal quiescence that to date has mostly persisted belies an intriguing new literature, some of it set in Southeast Asia, about the probabilities of "pushback".

In sum, in developing an account for political change in Malaysia, we will see that recent data challenges sundry logics and claims. The local implications of identity and cultural structures, patronage resources, election effects, accommodative institutions, and broad state-society dynamics of coercion and resistance fail to equate with much comparative politics literature.

Single-party Dominance and Hybrid Politics

This analysis tries to account for changes in Malaysia's recent political trajectory and to estimate the prospects for stabilising. At the same time, it probes some important theorising. As we will see, Malaysia's politics traverse some startlingly shaky terrain today. And the theoretical signposts that stand so prominently in existing literature are often illegible.

At the heart of any explanation for the hybrid regime's durability and collapse lies Malaysia's single dominant party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), and the broader party system that it long operated. UMNO's formation seems common, with single-party-dominant systems appearing in several other countries. Classic cases of single dominant parties operating in a context of hybrid politics include the People's Action Party in Singapore, the Institutional Revolutionary Party in Mexico, and, for a time, the Cambodian People's Party. They can operate in more democratic milieus too, as the Congress Party did historically in India and as the Liberal Democratic Party still does in Japan.

However, single-party-dominant systems in these countries persisted atop ethnically "concentrated" societies, which Robert Bates discovered to be congenial.² Conversely, institutions can be strained by ethnically "fractionalised" societies, to the point of triggering civil warring, according to Montalvo and Reynal-Querol.³ Thus, while patterns of fractionalisation vary, only rarely are tensions mastered in ways that allow single dominant parties and stable regime types to take hold. One well-known historical example involves the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party or KMT) in Taiwan, where a small mainland segment confronted indigenous Taiwanese over several generations. But the KMT, with its Leninist structuring, operated a single-party system that was nearly bereft of meaningful opposition. And during the 1980s, this system was eroded by new leadership preferencing and a "modernising" middle class.

A more remarkable example, then, involves UMNO in Malaysia. Here, society is more deeply etched with segmental identities and tensions. Politically favoured Malay-Muslims, constructed as "indigenous", confront a non-Malay residual, mostly ethnic Chinese, stigmatised as "immigrant". Donald Horowitz has conceptualised this configuration as a "bi-polar" faceoff, a particularly explosive form of fractionalisation.⁴ Yet UMNO eventually drew strength from this tense societal amalgam, enabling it to erect and perpetuate a single-party-dominant system, duly set in a hybrid regime, for some 44 years. This indicates significantly greater durability than was acquired by Taiwan's counterpart frameworks.

² Bates, Robert, "State Failure", *Annual Review of Political Science* 11, No. 1 (2008): 1–12.

³ Montalvo, Jose G., and Marta Reynal-Querol, "Ethnic Polarization and the Duration of Civil Wars", World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 4192, April 2007, <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/359741468339900383/pdf/wps4192.pdf>.

⁴ Horowitz, Donald, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

Thus, as charted below, the conditions in which Malaysia's single-party-dominant party system originated challenge some hoary theoretical claims. Put bluntly, a single dominant party did not emerge in a context of benign ethnic concentration, but instead in a crucible of seemingly hostile fractionalisation.

Ethnic Fractionalisation and UMNO Dominance

To support this analysis, it is worth reviewing briefly the ways in which UMNO instituted a single-party-dominant system and hybrid political regime. During the dozen-year period after independence in 1957, Malaya, later Malaysia, perpetuated at least an electoral democracy, bequeathed by British colonial officials as they withdrew. But in an election held in 1969, UMNO faced formidable opposition vehicles, notably, an energised Parti Islam Se Malaysia (PAS), made up of Malay-Muslims, and the Democratic Action Party (DAP), mostly consisting of ethnic Chinese. A stand-off resulted between UMNO's centrist coalition and the opposition parties on its flanks, so weakening UMNO that communal tensions were brought to the boil. In the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, this manifested in severe rioting known locally as the "May 13th incident". The UMNO-led coalition was finally declared the winner in the election, though by narrow margins. And hence, given the precarity of its tenure and the rawness of societal dynamics, UMNO resorted to emergency rule. Malaysia's early political record thus conforms to mainstream expectations over ethnic fractionalisation and institutional breakdown.

But rather than UMNO imploding, its leaders dug in their heels, then tightened their grip on the state apparatus. Indeed, UMNO would grow so fused with the bureaucracy and state-owned enterprises that it produced a veritable "party-state". Its leaders made vigorous use of the regulatory powers and patronage resources that their party had amassed, restoring cohesion among party elites and loyalties across Malay-Muslim constituencies.⁵ In doing this, UMNO leaders demonstrated new managerial skills. For example, the party's president kept control over candidate selection and rents. Thus, through an artful strategy of "sunk costs", they could delay patronage rewards, yet retain the long-term commitments of new generations of suitably talented cadres, therein minimising the agency and moral hazard problems that often bedevil single dominant parties.⁶

At the mass level, UMNO leaders furbished their extensive and intricate party machinery with top-down and ethnically framed distributive programmes, bundled and coded as the New Economic Policy (NEP). Loyalties were thus substantively refreshed by material benefits. They were also charged up emotively by the ethnic tonality that accompanied these distributions. What is more, despite the mounting inequalities *within* their community, ordinary Malay-Muslims drew an additional sense of

⁵ Brownlee, Jason, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁶ See Svobik, Mikhail, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge University Press), 2012; and Magaloni, Beatriz, and Ruth Kricheli, "Political order and one-party rule", *Annual Review of Political Science* 13 (2010), pp. 127, 129.

group worth” from the showy “Malay Millionaires” who, thanks to the NEP, began to spring up in their midst.⁷

In nurturing elite-level cohesion and mass-level loyalties, UMNO’s leaders were able to assert their vehicle’s dominance over the party system and to modulate the regime form. Using varying amounts of persuasion and threat, they absorbed almost all the major opposition parties save the DAP into a new ruling coalition, christened the Barisan Nasional (National Front). Hence, they greatly exceeded Gandhi and Przeworski’s expectations that dictators form single dominant parties in order to ward off “strong oppositions”, not swallow them whole.⁸

Further, atop this expansive new coalition, UMNO’s leaders took peak positions in the cabinet and state apparatus, therein gaining the paramountcy by which to command, but in some degree to conciliate, their subordinate partners. This approach was parsed as the “Barisan way”. However, Tun Abdul Razak, the exultant prime minister, prioritised the exclusivist thrust of this single-party-dominant system, declaring that “[t]his government is based on UMNO and I surrender its responsibilities to UMNO in order that UMNO shall determine its form”.⁹ He also underscored this system’s societal foundations: “Let there be no mistake — the political system is founded on Malay dominance”.¹⁰ Zakaria Haji Ahmad, however, emphasised the bargainable space that remained, influentially depicting the system in more lettered terms as “hegemonic with accommodationist elements”.¹¹

Availed of single-party dominance, UMNO sought next to erect a corresponding political regime by which to acquire more institutional scaffolding. In anticipating episodic popular challenges, whether triggered by economic recessions or ethnic frictions, UMNO might have imposed a steeply repressive regime. But, as has long been understood, repression is costly. At the elite level, leaders must share power with the security forces, whose appetites for positions and resources might later grow.¹² At the mass level, perceptions dim among citizens that these leaders rightfully hold office. Efficiencies are thus lost in earning societal compliance, while scope increases for mobilisation by rival elites.¹³

Thus, after the 1969 election, UMNO forged a more calibrated institutional framework, enabling it to impose coercion when gauged essential, but also to seek popular consent when assessed as feasible. To this end, UMNO modified Malaysia’s constitution, fixing on a mid-point between authoritarian rule and democratic procedures. Under the hybrid approach that resulted, civil liberties

⁷ Jesudason, James. V., *Ethnicity and the Economy: The State, Chinese Business, and Multinationals in Malaysia* (Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁸ Gandhi, Jennifer, and Adam Przeworski. “Cooperation, Cooptation, and Rebellion under Dictatorships”, *Economics and Politics* 18, No. 1 (2006): 1–26.

⁹ Cited in Funston, John, *Malay Politics in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Heineman, 1980), p. 225.

¹⁰ Cited in Das, K., *Malay Dominance?: The Abdullah Rubric* (Kuala Lumpur: K. Das Ink, 1987).

¹¹ Zakaria Haji Ahmad, “Malaysia: Quasi Democracy in a Divided Society”, in *Democracy in Developing Countries: Asia*, ed. Larry Diamond, Juan J. Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1989).

¹² Winetrobe, Ronald, *The Political Economy of Dictatorship* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹³ Magaloni, Beatriz, and Ruth Kricheli. “Political Order and One-party Rule”, p. 128–130.

were limited, but not extinguished, while elections were manipulated, yet significant competitiveness remained.

Before further assessing the functionality of this regime type, we note the rarity of the transition by which it was instituted in the Malaysian case. As Magaloni and Kricheli note in their seminal review, “dominant-party” systems most typically emerge from military governments (33 per cent), single-party systems (25 per cent), and anarchy (23 per cent). Only in 15 per cent of cases are they carved from democratic regimes.¹⁴ The timing of Malaysia’s transition is also anomalous. As Magaloni and Kricheli further observe,¹⁵ instances in which democracies “succumb” to single-party-dominant systems are “mostly a post-Cold War phenomenon”. But in Malaysia, this occurred during the mid-1970s, at the height of the Cold War. We see again the distinctiveness of Malaysia’s political trajectory. Its eschewal of ordinary transitional pathways and its dismissal of historical junctures evoke the pivotal role of the country’s leaders and social structure. Hence, in their search for optimal regime settings, these leaders chose to fortify their single-party dominance with hybrid politics.

Under this hybrid regime, UMNO leaders compressed, yet still ceded, space for societal dissidence and electoral uncertainty. Thus, however tilting and muddied the playing field, activists and opposition parties could gain a foothold in civil society arenas and in federal and sub-national legislatures. But rather than benefiting the opposition, these outcomes enabled UMNO to assert that such popular support that it won was authentic, for citizens were free, within adjustable boundaries, to speak out and vote against it. This served, then, to embellish UMNO’s single-party dominance with legitimating cover, derived from an imagery, however exaggerated, of citizens having been consulted. At the same time, this articulated a reverse rendition of the notion of “tragic brilliance”,¹⁶ with citizens, angered over their dependence on meagre patronage distributions, strengthening UMNO by voting in limited numbers against it.

Finally, it bears underscoring that this single-party-dominant system and hybrid regime gained complementarities through their countervailing, yet mutually reinforcing, logics. Through the coalition’s Barisan way, UMNO sought to win back at least a token sum of non-Malay voters. At the same time, through its hybrid politics, UMNO sacrificed a minority of voters, thereby helping to authenticate its victory margins and iterated return to power. Tun Abdul Razak, then, in surveying his handiwork, memorably intoned that “so long as the form of democracy is preserved, the substance can be changed to suit the conditions of a particular country”.¹⁷

¹⁴ Magaloni, Beatriz, and Ruth Kricheli, “Political Order and One-party Rule”, p. 132.

¹⁵ Magaloni, Beatriz, and Ruth Kricheli, “Political Order and One-party Rule”, p. 133.

¹⁶ Diaz-Cayeros, Alberto, Beatriz Magaloni and Barry R. Weingast, “Tragic Brilliance: Equilibrium Party Hegemony in Mexico”, Working Paper, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, 2003, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228161172_Tragic_Brilliance_Equilibrium_Party_Hegemony_in_Mexico

¹⁷ Cited in Zakaria Haji Ahmad, “Malaysia: Quasi Democracy”, p. 349

To summarise this section, Malaysia's political record challenges a literature that doubts the chances of single dominant parties taking root in fractionalised societies. On this count, in occupying the centremost arena of political life, UMNO framed itself as the Malay-Muslim community's material provider and emotive protector. Further, by privileging this community over a non-Malay residual, it accentuated the tensions inherent in a divided and ranked society, giving added charge to its support levels. To fulfil these aims, UMNO amassed regulatory powers and patronage resources by fusing its party apparatus with the state bureaucracy. It was able, then, to recruit and manage elites through its extensive party apparatus, fostering elite-level cohesion. It energised mass-level constituencies through distributive programmes and penetrative machinery, nurturing grassroots allegiances. And by more broadly installing a hybrid political overlay, it imposed tight limits on civil society activities and electoral dynamics, yet gave breath to critical dissidents and oppositionists. In this way, the voter support that the UMNO-led Barisan garnered, however magnified, was duly authenticated, thereby manifesting in legitimacy.

This complex amalgam, involving sundry institutional vectors, distributive benefits and acculturated norms, long underpinned Malaysia's political stability. At its heart beat UMNO, the single dominant party. Between 1974, marking the inauguration of this party system, and 2018, the year of this system's demise, the UMNO-led Barisan won 10 consecutive general elections. Malaysia's hybrid regime persisted, then, for some four and a half decades, nearly doubling the already long lifespan of 23 years that this regime type is seen on average to enjoy.¹⁸

Electoral Turnover and Regime Decline

Despite Malaysia's record of political continuity, by the mid-2000s, UMNO's single-party dominance began measurably to slip. This process commenced on an unexpected note, with UMNO leaders, in a moment of hubris, amplifying their claims of Malay-Muslim supremacy. This alarmed and further alienated the residual category of non-Malay citizens. At the same time, UMNO leaders, in grossly amassing patronage resources, disturbed a habituated public acceptance of malfeasance. Hence, by inflaming searing new grievances over "excessive" corruption, they alienated many middle-class Malay-Muslims too. What is more, in striving to repair their image among Malay-Muslim voters before the fateful 2018 election, UMNO leaders showed a stunning loss of political learning. Their inept strategising led finally to Barisan's ouster, the break-up of the single-party-dominant system, and the destabilisation of the hybrid regime.

This striking trajectory confronts a literature which, in explaining the fall of single dominant parties, typically lays stress on weakening economic conditions, shortfalls in patronage and the flight of discontented party elites and constituents. In Malaysia, although the economy was hardly robust during this period, it still afforded distributive largesse. It was not the absence of patronage, then, but its very

¹⁸ Geddes, Barbara, "What do we know about democratization after twenty years?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999): 115–144.

abundance, reckless spill-over and threadbare cover-up that doomed UMNO. And, as we will see, attempts at penitent re-imaging and wholesome coalition-building were ineptly undertaken, thus doing little to help.

In 2003, Abdullah Badawi succeeded Mahathir Mohamad as UMNO's president and Malaysia's prime minister. On the heels of Mahathir's pugnacity, Abdullah pledged expansively to serve as a "prime minister to all Malaysians". This struck a chord across ethnic lines, enabling him to lead Barisan in 2004 to win its grandest electoral victory ever. However, some UMNO leaders found in Barisan's new mandate the chance to more zealously assert Malay-Muslim supremacy. Turning their back on the accommodativeness conveyed by Abdullah and the Barisan way, they trumpeted a nativism that in its contemporary rendition was parsed as the "Malay agenda". This was made starkly manifest at two annual UMNO general assemblies that followed, with the president of the party's youth wing brandishing a *keris*, a traditional Malay short sword, during his rousing speech-making to delegates.¹⁹

This spike in ethnic militancy shook the non-Malay residual. Hence, in the next election in 2008, many Chinese swung from Barisan Nasional to an opposition coalition, styled as Barisan Alternatif, the first iteration of Pakatan Harapan. They were joined by a smaller swell of Malay-Muslim voters, an early indicator that this community's new middle class could grow so alienated over UMNO's corrupt practices that it might support a reformist opposition. In this election, the UMNO-led Barisan won a majority of the popular vote, aided by its trusty toolkit of electoral manipulations. But for the first time, it lost its two-thirds majority in parliament. Such puncturing of a super-majoritarian electoral record can wound a party's "image of invincibility",²⁰ hence tempting outwardly loyal elites to break away in search of their own mobilising opportunities.

The outcome of the 2008 electoral contest was thus so close that local observers hailed the emergence of a "two-party" system. Accordingly, under the broad heading of hybrid regimes, analysts reclassified Malaysia's electoral authoritarian variant as *competitive* authoritarianism, a subset in which, despite continuing manipulations, outright electoral turnover grew imaginable.²¹ UMNO leaders, wary of their growing vulnerability, quickly replaced Abdullah as party president and prime minister with Najib Razak, the eldest offspring of Tun Abdul Razak, progenitor of the single-party-dominant system and hybrid regime.

Najib began his tenure by heralding more liberal politics and markets. Thus, in scaling back ethno-religious privileging and statist interventions, he initially cheered Chinese businesspeople and anti-corruption activists. But Najib was soon brought to heel, coming under wilting pressure from Malay-Muslim supremacist groups and rent-seeking networks. Hence, he returned to UMNO's longstanding default patterns, with the party resuming its shrill nativist messaging and patronage allocations. To this

¹⁹ Liew Chin Tong, "A decade after Hisham waved the keris", *Malaysiakini*, 20 July 2015, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/305590>

²⁰ Magaloni, Beatriz, and Ruth Kricheli, "Political Order and One-party Rule", p. 129.

²¹ Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

end, Najib drew heavily on resources amassed by the state development fund, 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), then dispensed them across the party apparatus and the myriad associations that make up the firmament of Malaysia's political economy. Consequently, in the next election, held in 2013, UMNO won back some of the Malay voters that it had lost. But UMNO's return to form under Najib also spurred on the Chinese swing against it, with an estimated 80 per cent flocking to the opposition, by this time badged as Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance). In these circumstances, Barisan not only failed to regain its two-thirds majority in parliament, it lost the popular vote too.

In May 2018, Malaysia held its most recent election. In preparation, Najib again lavished largesse upon UMNO party elites, most notably the division chiefs, popularly styled as "warlords". But patronage payments came with a reminder of his own pre-eminence, with Najib advising, "Don't forget, I am biggest warlord of all."²² However, by this time too, 1MDB's transactional misdeeds had been widely reported, dispelling the secrecy upon which authoritarian regimes depend.²³ In journalistic accounts, 1MDB was tarred as "one of the biggest scandals in financial history."²⁴ And it was interpreted by many citizens, Malay-Muslims and non-Malays alike, as "excessive" corruption, creating the impetus to vote against UMNO in protest.

Throughout Najib's prime ministership, he and UMNO leaders openly indulged in ethereal high-living. This grated on many Malay-Muslim citizens, who languished in a "high-cost, low-wage economy" that was popularly reviled as a "middle-income trap". They were also pressed by the goods and services tax that had been recently imposed. What is more, 1MDB funds spilled outside the rhythmic redistributions upon which many Malay-Muslims depend. In particular, they fell from hallowed communal exchanges into the "alien" hands of Low Taek Jho, a local Chinese financier, and through his networks to countless foreign operatives. Deep resentments then stirred among many Malay-Muslims against Najib and UMNO.

A copious literature has grown about the importance of patronage for the survival of single dominant parties and the hybrid regimes that they operate. In an influential account based on the record of Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), in power for nearly nine decades, Beatriz Magaloni charts the well-trodden route by which a faltering economy and scarcities in patronage led elites in the party to split, pushing the PRI to its momentous electoral defeat.²⁵ Such resource theorising over "hyper-incumbency" fails, however, to accord with Malaysia's record. By using 1MDB to attract loans and issue bonds, UMNO suffered no shortfalls in patronage. Instead, elites were driven to split by the

²² Cited in Zuraidah Ibrahim, Najib Razak, "Biggest Warlord in Malaysia", *South China Morning Post*, 1 August 2015, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/1845743/analysis-najib-razak-biggest-warlord-malaysia-sends-message>.

²³ Gandhi, Jennifer, Ben Noble and Milan Svobik, "Legislature and Legislative Politics without Democracy", *Comparative Political Studies* 53, No. 9 (2020): 1366.

²⁴ Business Insider, "The Bizarre Story of 1MDB", *Business Insider*, 10 August 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com.au/1mdb-timeline-the-goldman-sachs-backed-malaysian-wealth-fund-2018-12?r=US&IR=T>

²⁵ Magaloni, Beatriz, *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and its Demise in Mexico* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

scandal created over UMNO's having accumulated too much of a "good thing",²⁶ then so recklessly leaking largesse to outsiders. In these circumstances, Najib's deputy, Muhyiddin Yassin, fled from the UMNO-led Barisan to Mahathir's new vehicle, Bersatu (Malaysian Indigenous People's Party), a lynchpin in the opposition coalition, now rebadged as Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope).

UMNO leaders then struggled to cleanse their party's blackened image by engaging the Islamist party, PAS. But as long-time competitors for the same Malay-Muslim constituencies, these vehicles failed to reach full coalescence. Thus, even without any firm alliance or electoral agreements, Najib, after much hesitation, called for the dissolution of parliament in April 2018, just shy of the constitutional deadline.

Hence, rather than pooling their votes, UMNO and PAS found themselves in contention as they faced Pakatan. Debate persists over the extent to which UMNO might have been weakened by the three-cornered fights that took place in many districts.²⁷ But what is clear is that UMNO (with its Barisan partners) and PAS captured some 54 per cent of the popular vote. Had they completed their coalescence, therein adumbrating a "Malay unity government", their vote totals could have filtered through the country's first-past-the-post system to hand them victory.

But at this juncture, UMNO and PAS still stood as competitors, hence affecting voter preferences. And in making their choices, many Malay-Muslim voters dismissed UMNO's vows that it had recovered its moral bearings. Indeed, to the extent that UMNO aligned with PAS, it seemed to reassure Malay-Muslims over the "safety" of voting against it in protest. Accordingly, without meaning to dislodge the UMNO-led Barisan from power, thereby endangering their ethno-religious privileging, the Malay-Muslim electorate split its vote, "mistakenly" handing Pakatan a plurality in the 2018 election.²⁸ Thus, as Najib followed the voter returns on election night, he stood stunned. Beset by the information problems that typically haunt dictators, he turned to advisers to ask, "Do people really hate me that much?"²⁹ And, as he would later recall, "It was a night that shocked the whole of Malaysia, and I admit it shocked me even more..."³⁰ In turn, equally bewildered and distraught Malay-Muslim voters were left collectively to ask, "What have I done?"³¹

²⁶ Case, William. 2019. "Politics in Malaysia Today — Demise of the Hybrid? Not so Fast", *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 15, No. 2 (2019): 51–79.

²⁷ See Otswald, Kai, Paul Schuler and Jie Ming Chong, "Triple Duel: The Impact of Coalition Fragmentation and Three-corner Fights on the 2018 Malaysian Election", *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 3 (2018): 31–55.

²⁸ Hazlin Hassan, "Most Malaysian Chinese voted PH in polls, but Malays in 3-way split", *The Straits Times*, 14 June 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/most-malaysian-chinese-voted-ph-in-polls-but-malays-in-3-way-split>. See also Treisman, Daniel, "Democracy by Mistake", National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 23944, 26 December 2017, <https://voxeu.org/article/democracy-mistake>.

²⁹ Jahabar Sadiq, "BN's Night of Despair and Delusion", *The Malaysian Insight*, 28 May 2018, <https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/50449>

³⁰ Ida Lim, "Najib recalls night of 2018 shocking defeat, Says did not call for emergency out of love for democracy", *Malay Mail*, 30 March 2021, <https://malaysia.news.yahoo.com/najib-recounts-may-2018-night-130139154.html>

³¹ Rahman, Serina, "Rebellion and Regret: Talking to Rural Voters after GE14," *New Mandala*, 27 November 2018), <https://www.newmandala.org/rebellion-and-regret-ge14/>.

In sum, in accounting for the demise of Malaysia's single-party-dominant system and soon, the weakening of the hybrid regime to which it was linked, two points bear underscoring. First, UMNO's electoral defeat challenges standard accounts of the role of patronage resources and their allocation. In Malaysia's case, it was not any scarcity of patronage or the meanness of distributions that led to electoral turnover. Rather, turnover stemmed from UMNO's gross amassment of money and leakage to outsiders, conflicting with a Malay-Muslim sense of heartfelt entitlement and exclusivist conduits.

Second, in striving to refurbish UMNO's scandal-plagued image, party leaders displayed severe information problems, as well as striking lapses in learned dictatorial techniques. Just as they had badly mismanaged 1MDB, so did they "miscalculate" in preparing for the election that followed.³² UMNO's efforts to couple with PAS threw into relief the degree to which the party's leaders had lost command over the single-party-dominant system that their forebears had designed. On this count, we see the pivotal, but unpredictable, effects that flow from leadership preferences and failings, sharply altering political trajectories. It is thus difficult to account in any general theoretical way for UMNO's voluntarist own goal, hastening the erosion of Malaysia's single-party-dominant system and hybrid regime.

Failed Democratisation: Pakatan in Power

In Malaysia, gains made by Pakatan in the elections of 2008 and 2013 could plausibly have been interpreted as "liberalising electoral outcomes", gathering in an incremental process of "democratisation-by-elections".³³ Indeed, the capstone might be sighted in Pakatan's outright victory in 2018. On this count, Jason Brownlee argues that under hybrid regimes, "once incumbents are overthrown", a prior record of elections "bodes well for democratic prospects".³⁴

Malaysia's trajectory defies these expectations. To be sure, after coming to power, Pakatan loosened controls over civil liberties and electoral competitiveness. And it gave new institutional vim to parliamentary functioning and good governance. But throughout its short tenure, Pakatan's pursuit of democratic change was hampered. The coalition's pluralist make-up alienated many Malay-Muslims, thus limiting its mandate. Indeed, as is well known, its share of the popular vote fell from 51 per cent in the 2013 election to 47.5 per cent in 2018. Further, it had not only been opposed by more than half of the electorate, but by some 70 per cent of Malay-Muslim voters. In these circumstances, Pakatan's cabinet was loudly mocked by UMNO leaders as a "Chinese government". At the same time, the coalition heaved with elite-level fractiousness. Fateful defections followed, causing Pakatan to fall from office. Hence, in Malaysia, although a process of liberalising electoral outcomes and electoral turnover upended the single-party-dominant system, it fell short of any lasting democratic change. Indeed, as

³² See Huntington, Samuel, *The Third Wave*.

³³ Howard, Marc Morje, and Philip G. Roessler, "Liberalizing Electoral Outcomes in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes", *American Journal of Political Science* 50, No. 2 (2006): 365–381; and Lindberg, Staffan, *Democratization by Elections: A New Mode of Transition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

³⁴ Brownlee, Jason, "Portents of Pluralism: How Hybrid Regimes Affect Democratic Transitions", *American Journal of Political Science* 53, No. 3 (2009): 515–532.

argued below, Pakatan's composition and policies so inflamed many Malay-Muslims that they seem to have set back democracy's cause. Let us trace this trajectory briefly.

During Pakatan's tenure, UMNO and PAS leaders tightened their embrace, to the point of celebrating a "marriage" that they consecrated as *Muafakat Nasional* (National Consensus).³⁵ In this nativist mode, they chimed with Malay-Muslim aspirations more effectively than Pakatan's pluralist front could. Thus, in advancing their autocratic agendas, they made better use of the new democratic space than Pakatan did. For example, in exploiting freedoms of assembly, broadened by the government's easing of the Security Ordinance and Special Measures Act (SOSMA), UMNO and PAS galvanised Malay-Muslim protesters over the government's planned ratification of the International Commission on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) and the Treaty of Rome. Further, in contesting by-elections, now scrupulously overseen by a neutral Election Commission, they aroused Malay-Muslim anxieties in order to win successive victories. And in holding veto power in the Senate, they forced the government to abandon its campaign pledges to revise or repeal the Sedition Act, the Printing Presses and Publications Act, the Communications and Media Act, and other "draconian" amendments and laws. For good measure, during parliamentary sessions, UMNO and PAS legislators then cynically taunted their Pakatan counterparts over the latter's failure to fulfil their manifesto.

As Pakatan's constituencies weakened, its leaders grew more fractious. In brief, tensions between the prime minister, Mahathir, astride his personalist vehicle, Bersatu, and his presumed successor, Anwar Ibrahim, a founder of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party or PKR), reverberated throughout the coalition. In earlier campaigning for the election, Pakatan's leaders had bottled up their differences, for they faced common foes in UMNO and PAS. But after winning office, only to find their support eroding, disciplining effects were lost. Internal pressures were thus uncorked over leadership succession, policy directions and the prioritisation of reforms and patronage.

In these conditions, large factions in Pakatan suddenly broke away, in a departure from the incremental "splintering" that generally characterises the complex dynamics of defection.³⁶ In brief, as Mahathir became increasingly pressed to hand over power to Anwar, another ambitious leader in PKR, Azmin Ali, leaped onto the forecourt. Energising his faction at a hotel gathering, Azmin sparked defections through what came popularly to be designated as the "Sheraton move". Muhyiddin Yassin, the Bersatu deputy prime minister, fearing for his party's electoral chances as Malay-Muslim support continued to slip, then abandoned Mahathir to join up with Azmin.

³⁵ Financial Edge Daily, "'We're married', says Tok Mat on UMNO-PAS Ties", *Financial Edge Daily*, 6 March 2018, p. 2.

³⁶ Aspinall, Edward, *Opposing Suharto: Compromise, Resistance, and Regime Change Indonesia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

As Pakatan was being hollowed out, a rapid but opaque process set in, during which Mahathir resigned and his government fell. Muhyiddin and Azmin then aligned the parliamentary members whom they controlled with those of UMNO and PAS. Through murky negotiations, Muhyiddin emerged as the leader of this coalition, soon to be branded informally as Perikatan Nasional (National Alliance). And in persuading the country's King that he controlled a majority in parliament, he gained the constitutional cover under which to form a new government in early March 2020. However, in attaining office through a mode of power transfer that turned on elite-level defections, rather than through a general election, Perikatan was widely demeaned thereafter as a tawdry "backdoor government". This bore consequences for popular evaluations of legitimacy, helping later to drive Perikatan's descent into deeper authoritarian rule.

To sum up this section, a literature on liberalising electoral outcomes and democratisation-by-elections fails to anticipate that electoral turnover, if finally it occurs, can sooner lead to democracy's reversal than to its deepening. In Malaysia's case, this outcome arose from the distinctive structural properties of Malaysia's divided and ranked society. After the election in 2018, many Malay-Muslims perceived that they had voted "accidentally" against their communal interests. Their ambivalence had already been expressed through the bare plurality that they had secreted to Pakatan. And they grew warier still over Pakatan's appointments and policies during its tenure. Accordingly, as Pakatan struggled to advance democratic change, it faced a rising wall of political opposition and societal resistance. In paradoxical fashion, then, electoral turnover in Malaysia appears today to have eroded democracy's prospects.

But, despite these mass outlooks, it is wrong to think that Malay-Muslims so prioritise material and emotive privileging that they are indifferent to civil liberties and electoral competitiveness. To the extent that a Malay-Muslim political culture can be validly apprehended, intense interest and keen participation pulsate along party circuitry, from topmost executive councils to down-home village stoops. What stands out, however, is that in the estimation of this community, which self-identifies as indigenous and sovereign, citizenship rights and political freedoms should largely be confined to its own ethno-religious domain. These attitudes formed the bedrock upon which a single-party-dominant system and hybrid regime long stood. But with these institutions now crippled, many Malay-Muslims, in viewing their privileging as threatened, grudgingly acquiesce in the overshadowing of democratic procedures by authoritarian controls. As we will see in the next section, though, in the absence of single-party dominance, Perikatan has no better stabilised political dynamics than Pakatan had before it.

Faltering Authoritarianism: Perikatan in Power

A single-party-dominant system, embedded in a divided and ranked society, then insulated by a hybrid political regime, long stabilised political life in Malaysia. The aim of this section is to show how the country's recent descent into authoritarian rule, as surely as its earlier feint towards democracy, has failed to equilibrate. Put bluntly, single-party dominance was disrupted by electoral turnover, then succeeded by multiparty mayhem.

We review two institutional strategies that were adopted by Muhyiddin, the Bersatu prime minister, in hopes of securing his own party's pre-eminence, set in a functioning Perikatan coalition and a durable authoritarian regime. The results are ambiguous. Much clearer are the ways in which these strategies, in their operationalisation and targeting, depart from the expectations of scholarly literature.

In brief, a first strand of theorising holds that by expanding allocations of patronage, cohesion across elites can be renewed. With instinctive awareness of this precept, Muhyiddin vastly oversized his cabinet. A second strand argues that by tightening controls on accountability, opposition parties and civil society can be kept at bay. To this end, Muhyiddin resorted to backsliding, to the point of imposing emergency rule. But, as shown below, despite the expansiveness of the cabinet, UMNO leaders remained unplacated by the terms of their inclusion. Thus, emergency rule focused more closely on containing their agitation than on quelling the opposition and social forces. On both these counts, the literature is tested by Malaysia's record.

Oversizing the Cabinet

Through complex machinations, Muhyiddin snatched control from Mahathir over Bersatu, absorbed the PKR's factional rump held by Azmin Ali, then rose to the prime ministership atop the Perikatan coalition. Next, in trying to assert the pre-eminence of his party, but also to assuage UMNO, PAS, and sundry vehicles from East Malaysia, he recruited their leaders into an immensely oversized cabinet of some 70 ministers, deputy ministers and appointees with cabinet rank. In addition, party notables who failed to make the grade were soothed by directorships in the country's vast repertoire of government-linked corporations (GLCs). In this context, confidence among Muslim-Malays seemed rekindled by a near absence of ethnic Chinese within the cabinet, as well as a promise of fresh redistributive programmes.

Classic literature argues that so "grand" a cabinet, compared to any minimum clique, raises transaction costs, but better constrains abuses by leaders and rebellions by elites.³⁷ We would anticipate, then, that in Malaysia, Perikatan's broad cabinet formation and open conduits to patronage would help to renew elite-level cohesion and political stability. In post-New Order Indonesia, large executive assemblages that convene voracious party "cartels" appear to bear this out.³⁸

But again, Malaysia defies ready logic. This literature assumes that positions and patronage are allocated in rough proportion to the size of the "segmental pillars" that respective parties oversee in society.³⁹ But this assumption ignores the granular differences in perception over more rightful desserts. At the time of writing, Bersatu holds 31 of the 222 seats in parliament, while UMNO holds 38, the most of any party in the Perikatan coalition. This share of seats has translated into Bersatu claiming 24 ministerships and deputy ministerships, while UMNO has been allocated 17. (The rest are dispersed across PAS, minor Barisan components, sundry East Malaysian vehicles, and independents.)

This clutch of cabinet positions allocated to UMNO, though sizeable, is slightly underweight, vexing party leaders. But even an equitable share would have failed to mollify UMNO fully. With its leaders viewing their party as rightfully the core of any ruling coalition, they demand the lion's share of state positions, most urgently the prime ministership.⁴⁰ Many of them look upon Bersatu contemptuously as a band of "traitors" and "usurpers" that lacks socio-historical lineage and demonstrated commitment. Statements made by the UMNO deputy president, Mohammed Hassan, at the party's annual general meeting in March 2021 illustrate these sentiments:

³⁷ Lijphart, Arend, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

³⁸ Slater, Dan, "Party Cartelization, Indonesian-style", *East Asia Forum*, 14 March 2018, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/03/14/party-cartelisation-indonesian-style/>.

³⁹ Lijphart, Arend, *Democracy in Plural Societies*.

⁴⁰ See GTC Media Group, "Najib: Umno was made to lead and must form the federal government again", 3 January 2021, <https://www.gtcgroup.my/latestnews/nid/92757/> (accessed 20 June 2021).

[T]o leaders of splinter Malay political parties, please do not talk about unity of ummah with UMNO when you have no record whatsoever to prove that you have brought Malays and Malaysians together. Do not talk about the ummah with UMNO, if what you know is to fish and pick those who are fast to abandon struggles for the race.⁴¹

Thus, despite the breadth of Perikatan's cabinet, UMNO leaders have chafed under Bersatu's pre-eminence. In turn, Bersatu, more than modulating patronage, imposes regulatory power upon UMNO, deploying the state apparatus over which it holds sway. Most notably, while Bersatu has allocated cabinet positions to some UMNO leaders, it has allowed corruption investigations, court proceedings and tax office demands to hobble others, driving a wedge deep into its rival. Elite-level fractiousness and multiparty mayhem thus intensify. What is more, PAS, having failed to mediate relations between the two, now tilts towards Bersatu. In turn, alienated leaders in UMNO, while loathing Bersatu, have re-evaluated PAS as a "treacherous" ally. And as enmity deepens, a faction in UMNO appears even to have reached out secretly to Anwar, leader of the Pakatan in opposition, in illusory hopes of a "deal".

Factionalism in UMNO

It is worth canvassing briefly the factional schisms that permeate UMNO at present, with the party split over how to respond before Bersatu's whip hand. This helps us to understand the degree to which Malaysia's single-party-dominant system has been degraded, as well the scant prospects for renewal.

A so-called ministerial cluster in UMNO, allocated cabinet positions and GLC directorships, largely accepts its party's compromised status. But this faction is further rent. One subset has called for extended coalescence with Bersatu. But another is more ambivalent, performing ministerial duties, but agreeing with a resolution passed at UMNO's general assembly that the party should contest against Bersatu in the next general election, either with PAS or alone. Most prominently, this subset includes Sabri Ismail Yaacob, the minister of defence, recently recruited to the deputy prime ministership.

Arrayed against this ministerial grouping is UMNO's "court cluster", which comprises, among others, the party's current president, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, and the former prime minister and UMNO president, Najib Razak. Members of this faction insist that UMNO be restored to its former dominance in the ruling coalition. Bersatu restrains these party leaders by denying them cabinet positions. It undermines them too by wielding regulatory power in the ways mentioned above, notably, miring Ahmad Zaid and Najib in protracted court and tax office proceedings. These behaviours exacerbate tensions between the ministerial and court clusters. We gain insight from Ahmad Zahid's denigrating Annuar Musa, UMNO's minister of federal territories, at the party's last general assembly. In his address,

⁴¹ Mazin Nik Anis, "UMNO fighting for ummah, Malay unity for years, says Mohamad Hasan", *The Star*, 27 March 2021, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2021/03/27/umno-fighting-for-ummah-malay-unity-for-years-says-mohamad-hasan>.

Ahmad Zaid began by branding Annuar as a “parasite”, then vulgarly counselled that “if he is a *jantan* [man], he should resign as minister”.⁴²

In sum, Perikatan, no better than Pakatan before it, has been unable to reproduce elite-level cohesion and political stability. Most notably, Muhyiddin’s oversized cabinet, however mammoth, has failed to placate UMNO leaders fully. He has responded, then, by stoking divisions within UMNO and courting defectors. In addition, he has undercut resistors, imposing the emergency rule to which we now turn.

“Backsliding” into Emergency Rule

With the end of the Cold War and the assurances once given by this conflict to authoritarian proxies, a long wave of democratic change swept across developing countries. Further, many of the new democracies that emerged seemed to gain immunities against executive self-coups, open-ended military coups and gross election-day manipulations. Even so, doubts set in over democratic quality. Briefly, dictators, generals and electoral cheaters turned to more subtle and incremental measures by which to shore up their standings, reflected in new literature on “backsliding”.⁴³ In addition, Cold War incentives have been supplanted by new forms of autocratising allurements, specifically a beckoning “China model” exemplar and an enabling Covid-19 public health crisis, effectively de-valorising democracy’s normative worth. In this milieu, across developing countries — and indeed, first world countries too — the pace of backsliding has quickened.⁴⁴

However, in Malaysia, even when allowing for the country’s economic dependence on China and the severity of its pandemic, the speed with which backsliding has occurred under Perikatan is striking. Malaysia thus challenges new literature that lays stress on the syncopated and legally formalised measures that contemporary autocrats are said to favour.

In January 2021, Muhyiddin, after winning the King’s approval, abruptly declared emergency rule, exalted in form as the Emergency (Essential Powers) Ordinance. As noted, this action shut down parliament and halted elections. Further, in adhering to a present-day template, Muhyiddin sought justification in the pandemic’s resurgence. But he hoped more urgently to ward off challenges to Bersatu’s pre-eminence, whether mounted by UMNO leaders through competitive elections or negotiated defections and backdoor inlets.

⁴² Malaysiakini, “Zahir dares “Empowered to decide PN exit timeline, parasite” minister to resign”, *Malaysiakini*, 28 March 2021, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/568526>.

⁴³ Bermeo, Nancy, “On Democratic Backsliding”, *Journal of Democracy* 27, No. 1 (2016): 5–19. See also Andersen, David. 2019, “Comparative Democratization and Democratic Backsliding: The Case for a Historical-Institutional Approach”, *Comparative Politics* 51, No. 4: 645–663.

⁴⁴ Thompson, Stephen, and Eric C. Ip, “COVID-19 Emergency Measures and the Impending Authoritarian Dynamic”, *Journal of Law and the Biosciences* 7, No. 1 (2020): 1–33.

Malaysia's emergency ordinance was augmented two months later by an "anti-fake news law", providing now familiar cover by which to truncate civil liberties. Another emergency law soon followed, freeing the government from public accountability over supplementary budgets and spending. This quickdraw succession of edicts was set officially to last until 1 August 2021. But at the time, a precedent to extend them appeared to have been blazed by Hungary, ostensibly an advanced, first-world democracy.

But how well were the originating conditions and dynamics of emergency rule in Malaysia explained by new literature? To make an initial probe, we rehearse Nancy Bermeo's concise review of backsliding techniques.⁴⁵ In her summary analysis, self-coups, while once common, have been replaced by "aggrandisement", with executives gradually dismantling institutional checks. Further, power seizures by the military have been supplanted by "promissory coups", with juntas claiming to suspend democracy in order to restore and improve it. And brazen election-day theft has been superseded by craftier manipulations, "done in such a way that elections themselves do not appear fraudulent".⁴⁶

But in Malaysia, the prime minister, Muhyiddin, did not tarry over any measured aggrandisement, "weakening checks ... one by one [as] legally decreed by a freely elected official".⁴⁷ Rather, in suspending parliament and elections in one fell swoop, he carried out the jarring autogolpe of yesteryear, having secured approval from a hereditary ruler in an afternoon's sitting. Indeed, in seeking to gild this backdoor action, UMNO's secretary-general, Ahmad Mazlan, recast it as a grand "palace door" entry, explicitly graced by monarchical preference.⁴⁸ Thus, unlike today's military coup makers, no promises were made over any "improved democratic order". Rather, in harking back to Perikatan's foundational themes, Bersatu's defectors had coalesced with UMNO in the "higher" purpose of ethno-religious privileging. Finally, as Perikatan entered its second year in power, its leaders did not bother even "strategically" to manipulate elections. As noted, they suspended electoral processes outright, at least for half a year.

But more than these anomalies, Muhyiddin's imposition of emergency rule is made unusual by its novel targeting. Unlike most country cases today, where democratic backsliding is designed to contain opposition parties and civil society, Muhyiddin's authoritarian controls are aimed at elite-level partners within his own ruling coalition. To reiterate, Bersatu seeks to defend its pre-eminence in Perikatan against UMNO's bid to regain single-party dominance. Thus, the democratic backsliding evident in Malaysia has been driven less by the government's alarm over opposition and societal challenges than the fractiousness between elites. It is in this way that the motivations, pace and extent of backsliding are best understood in the Malaysia case.

⁴⁵ Bermeo, Nancy, "On Democratic Backsliding".

⁴⁶ Bermeo, Nancy, "On Democratic Backsliding", p. 13.

⁴⁷ Bermeo, Nancy, "On Democratic Backsliding", p. 11.

⁴⁸ Kow Gah Chie, "PN is "palace-door, not backdoor govt" — Ahmad Maslan", *Malaysiakini*, 14 July 2020, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/534295>.

These dynamics that distinguish backsliding in Malaysia confront yet another prominent genre of literature over the functional utility of democratic procedures for authoritarian rule. In this telling, elections can reinforce dictatorships by regulating elite-level pursuits of position and patronage, energising mass-level constituents, opening feedback loops over the government's popularity and divulging the whereabouts of opposition strongholds.⁴⁹ More finely, legislatures help autocrats to "survive" by generating information and credible commitment from their own party's elites, while sharing out "rents" through which to sate those in opposition.⁵⁰ Thus, even if we include regimes that are so closed that their executives are unelected, some 80 per cent of those in the broad authoritarian spectrum boast legislative assemblies.⁵¹

But in Malaysia, Muhyiddin has found that electoral processes and parliamentary functioning do little to secure the standing of his party or authoritarian politics. To the contrary, in conditions of severe elite-level fractiousness, he fears that his party, Bersatu, could be displaced through balloting or defections orchestrated by UMNO. To be sure, Muhyiddin was driven by yet more monarchical intervention to reopen parliament before the emergency was scheduled to end on 1 August. But the writ of parliament's "special session" seemed so restricted that it would achieve little beyond placating the King. New data from Malaysia thus poses a discomfiting caveat for a literature that holds that authoritarian rule may be fortified by democratic procedures.

Societal Quiescence and Avoidance of "Pushback"

Before concluding this section, a short note is warranted on an incipient literature about societal "pushback", a process that can follow on dialectically from democratic backsliding.⁵² In the Southeast Asian setting, where backsliding and even breakdowns have taken place, political parties and civil society organisations have sometimes risen up sharply in mass protest. These dynamics are most visibly manifest in Thailand and Myanmar, respectively challenging "military-monarchical rule" and an outright military junta. But vibrant demonstrations have erupted in Indonesia's electoral democracy, too, in reaction to the executive's proposed curbs on labour organising.

Indeed, in most instances in Southeast Asia where backsliding or breakdown have recently occurred, societal pushback has erupted. Thus, Malaysia — and to a lesser extent the Philippines — stand as outliers. Here, online activists and atomised groups excoriate the government over its ceaseless factional skirmishing and policy failings. But they have yet to gather in heroic street actions. Such societal quiescence might seem puzzling, given the presence of other factors that militate in favour of pushback. As we have seen, elites in the country's "authoritarian coalition" are grievously split.

⁴⁹ See Gandhi, Jennifer, and E. Lust-Okar, Elections under Authoritarianism, *Annual Review of Political Science* 12 (2009): 403–422.

⁵⁰ Gandhi, Jennifer, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship* (Cambridge University Press, 2008); Boix, Carlos, and Mikail Svobik, "The Foundations of Limited Authoritarian Government", *Journal of Politics* 75 (2013): 300–316; and Gandhi, Jennifer, Ben Noble and Milan Svobik, "Legislature and Legislative Politics", p. 1367.

⁵¹ Gandhi, Jennifer, Ben Noble, and Milan Svobik, "Legislature and Legislative Politics without Democracy".

⁵² Thompson, Mark, "Pushback after Backsliding? Unconstrained Executive Aggrandizement in the Philippines versus Contested Military-Monarchical Rule in Thailand", *Democratization*, 28, No. 1 (2021): 124–141.

Indeed, even the King, in league with the Conference of Rulers, openly demanded that parliament be reopened.⁵³ In O'Donnell and Schmitter's classic rendition, such fractiousness widens the apertures for "popular upsurge".⁵⁴ In turn, social forces would seem poised to seize these openings, nursing a backlog of grievances over a public health crisis and economic collapse. What is more, to "ignite an effective call to action", Muhyiddin has inadvertently issued a catalysing "bright spark".⁵⁵ Rather than any "slow slide", he imposed an alarming emergency rule, abruptly truncating Malaysia's relative political freedoms.

But through it all, notwithstanding these animating variables, social forces in Malaysia have mostly remained quiescent. Preliminary explanation returns to the country's uniquely ranked and divided society. In this configuration, however depleted their ties to UMNO might seem today, most Malay-Muslims show allegiance to — and so far remain patient with — the wider, if fractious, yet still nativist Perikatan coalition that rules in their name. On this score, they remain informed by, and wary of, Pakatan's earlier nod towards ethnic inclusion. This helps us to understand why Perikatan's backsliding, in targeting its own elites, has not instigated any deeper and concerted societal pushback.

⁵³ Tan, Joceline, "New round of political instability ahead", *The Star*, 20 June 2021, p. 11.

⁵⁴ O'Donnell, Guillermo, and Philippe Schmitter, "Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies", in *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy*, eds. O'Donnell, Guillermo, Philippe Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), Part 4, p. 53.

⁵⁵ Bermeo, Nancy. 2016. "On Democratic Backsliding", p. 14

Conclusions

UMNO and Political Stability

In most analyses of Malaysia's politics today, UMNO remains the fulcrum for any re-equilibration of the party system and regime form. But high, seemingly insurmountable hurdles stand in the way of UMNO's regaining paramouncy. Once single-party dominance is lost, the complex historical legacies, structural resonance, institutional edifices and records of voluntarist choice that had underpinned it grow hard to reconstitute. Indeed, in no country where a hybrid regime existed has a single dominant party that stumbled regained its footing. Let us quickly enumerate the obstacles that UMNO faces and, in the absence of any return to dominance, what new forces will tear at the country's sociopolitical fabric. We remain cautioned, however, by a recognition that Malaysia's path ahead is only dimly illuminated by current theorising.

First, UMNO's image of invincibility has been shattered, initially by the loss of its supermajority in parliament, then by its fall from office. And since its toppling, UMNO has fractured, shaking the confidence that its leaders and ordinary members once possessed in its ringing "made to lead" shibboleths. UMNO's leaders have no experiential narrative upon which to draw in order convincingly to explain, or recover from, their severe diminution of status and power.

In addition, UMNO's fusion with the state apparatus has been ruptured. Although a component in today's ruling coalition, the party has lost command over the top portals to state regulatory power and patronage resources. Unable, then, to credibly offer "promot[ion] into rent-paying positions",⁵⁶ UMNO now finds it hard to perpetuate elite-level loyalties. And at the hands of the pre-eminent Bersatu, the party's factionalism has recently worsened, with the prime minister, Muhyiddin, recruiting UMNO leaders from the ministerial cluster to the deputy and security coordinator roles. In responding to this poaching, UMNO's president, Ahmad Zahid, a leader of the court cluster, has demanded that party members cease cooperation with Bersatu. But this has only deepened his vehicle's ructions. To be sure, UMNO has recovered from splits before (having spawned Semangat '46 during the late 1980s and Parti Keadilan Nasional [later PKR] during the late 1990s).⁵⁷ But in that bygone era, UMNO kept its grip on a party-state, enabling it to re-assimilate or to ward off wayward elites, factions and splinter vehicles.

Thus, many UMNO leaders today, temperamentally ill suited to any subordinate posture, bridle at sharing state power. But without any clear pathway forward, the leaders are split over strategies by which to reassert paramouncy. At the same time, their challenges encourage cooperation between Bersatu and PAS, the latter only nominally UMNO's partner now in *Muafakat*. As PAS cleaves towards

⁵⁶ Magaloni, Beatriz, and Ruth Kricheli, "Political Order and One-party Rule", p. 127.

⁵⁷ Ufen, Andreas, "Clientelist and Programmatic Factionalism within Malaysian Political Parties", *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 39, No. 1 (2020): 59–81.

Bersatu, its president, Hadi Awang, has warned darkly that his party “rejects [any] agenda that seeks solely to protect their respective leaders and groups, instead of saving the country”.⁵⁸ Thus, while currently forging electoral agreements with Bersatu, PAS has paused its bargaining with UMNO. And it has ruled out coalition-building with UMNO after the next general election, whenever it might be held.⁵⁹

In addition, while UMNO’s elite-level cohesion erodes, the loyalties of its mass-level constituencies may disperse. To be sure, the party’s penetrative machinery that Meredith Weiss⁶⁰ has so ably documented retains its institutional armatures and societal platforms, embracing nearly 3.5 million members. Accordingly, the party’s grassroots loyalties, registering in branch-level polling over the past year, seem at least tepidly to support Ahmad Zahid, the party president, in his call for UMNO to break with Bersatu before any general election. But it is Bersatu today which, in holding sway over the state apparatus, designs and administers redistributive programmes, which mount amid the interminable pandemic. Thus, while entwining with PAS, Bersatu stands opposite UMNO today as the stronger material and emotive protector of the Malay-Muslim community. It fills in this framing, however inadequately, with stimulus packages and livelihood subsidies.⁶¹

In the meantime, a grievously wounded UMNO grows ever more divided and disembodied. Even so, while unable to regenerate single-party dominance, the party remains potent enough to prevent its rivals from gaining any similar paramountcy. In consequence, syndromes of elite-level fractiousness, societal dislocation and multiparty mayhem are likely to persist in Malaysia. Further, in recounting the socioeconomic toll that business closures have taken amid the pandemic, a journalistic account asks whether this may be “terminal for the country’s rising middle classes”.⁶² More provocatively, as state agencies struggle with the public health crisis, another asks whether Malaysia is “staggering down the road to failed statehood”.⁶³

In the absence of single-party dominance, then, a brittle authoritarian rule today, no better than the stillborn democracy that preceded it, will fail in helping to stabilise Malaysia’s politics in the ways that a hybrid regime once did. And the lifting of emergency rule, allowing the resumption of elections and reopening of parliament, will sooner accelerate than resolve these fraught dynamics. The extant scholarly literature, though, is unable to tell us quite how.

⁵⁸ New Straits Times, “Pas remains with PN, urges others to back ruling coalition”, *New Straits Times*, 3 April 2021, p. 8.

⁵⁹ Berita Harian, “UMNO mahu penjelasan pendirian tunggu, Lihat PAS”, *Berita Harian*, 12 April 2021, p. 8.

⁶⁰ Weiss, Meredith, *The Roots of Resilience: Party Machines and Grassroots Politics in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

⁶¹ Case, William, “Regime Type and Pandemic Policy: Hybrid Exceptionalism in Malaysia”, *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 16, No. 2 (2020): 31–55.

⁶² Koh Xinghui and Norman Goh, “Is Covid-19 Terminal for the Rising Middle Classes of Malaysia and Indonesia”, *South China Morning Post*, 10 July 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3140392/covid-19-terminal-rising-middle-classes-malaysia-and-indonesia>

⁶³ Moss, Daniel, *Bloomberg Opinion*, “Malaysia is Staggering Down the Road to Failed Statehood”, *Bloomberg Opinion*, 9 July 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-07-08/malaysia-raises-the-white-flag-on-the-road-to-failed-statehood>

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