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Malaysia's 15th General Election: Tracking a Shifting Partisan Landscape

By Meredith L. Weiss

SYNOPSIS

Since independence in 1957, Malaysia has had a dominant-party electoral regime led by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and its multiracial political coalition, the Alliance, now called the Barisan Nasional (BN). A new coalition, Pakatan Harapan (PH), came to power in 2018, but its administration collapsed in 2020. Coalitions have fractured and individual parties have factionalised since 2018. Malaysia's political system is headed towards greater unpredictability.

COMMENTARY

Nomination day for Malaysia's coming 15th general election (GE15) made clear that Malaysia's system of parties and coalitions has changed. It has entered an unpredictable new phase. Whoever wins this election, we cannot expect a return to the same stable, dominant-party system prior to 2018.

Malaysia has long had a dominant party, 'competitive electoral authoritarian' regime. GE14 in 2018 marked the first time a coalition developed sufficiently broad appeal to oust the BN at the federal level. That new PH government itself collapsed and reorganised twice, unable to enact most of its reform agenda and entangled in factional splits and clashes.

The clearest legacy of that turmoil is unprecedentedly widespread multi-cornered electoral contests. Fighting for primacy are a slimmed-down BN, PH, and now, Perikatan Nasional (PN), alongside potential-kingmaker East Malaysian coalitions and myriad smaller-party or independent challengers. Whoever wins GE15, the outcome will be a revamped partisan landscape.

GE14 and Afterwards

Malaysia has edged toward a two-coalition system, at least for the peninsula, since the late 1990s. Successive opposition alliances – Barisan Alternatif, then Pakatan Rakyat, then PH – made incremental headway toward consolidation and against the BN.

Most observers expected that trend to continue. The country's electoral rules favour such a system: "first-past-the-post" elections like Malaysia's tend to push smaller parties to ally, to avoid splitting the opposition vote. Moreover, that the BN catered to all ethnic groups in multiracial Malaysia all but obliged any viable challenger to do the same.

As GE14 (2018) approached, the BN was weakening, to the advantage of the opposition. Already by the previous elections in 2013, concerns over corruption had been escalating. By 2018, the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) saga frustrated UMNO loyalists, sparked elite defections from BN, and galvanised both PH – which expanded to include former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad's new Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) – and Parti Islam seMalaysia (PAS).

PM Najib Razak's unpopularity arguably cost the BN the election: many voters rejected BN less as a vote for reform than in protest against Najib. But the combination of PH's uneasy balance of communal and noncommunal parties; tensions among Mahathir, heir-apparent Anwar, and rival Azmin Ali; and the sheer difficulty of institutional reform absent a clear mandate left PH struggling.

By late 2019, UMNO and PAS had formalised an alliance, Muafakat Nasional, as they rallied racialised, pro-Malay-Muslim opposition to PH. UMNO gained confidence; even Najib seemed rehabilitated among voters. PH fared poorly in a series of by-elections, then collapsed in February 2020. Thirty-two months of political instability followed.

Yet UMNO remained on edge. His appeals exhausted, Najib began a 12-year sentence for corruption in August 2022. Other 'court cluster' trials proceeded, including UMNO president Ahmad Zahid Hamidi's. Anxious to reconsolidate UMNO control, presumably to encourage dismissal or pardon of the court cases against him, Zahid pushed for early polls. A reluctant PM Ismail Sabri finally agreed in October to dissolve parliament.

What to look for in GE15

Malaysia thus approaches GE15 with tensions high both within and between parties. Party presidents Zahid and Anwar have denied factional rivals' berths to contest. Not all coalition partners secured the constituencies they wanted. Angered by seat allocations, Parti Sosialis Malaysia disaffiliated from PH; the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), a BN core component, threatened to sit GE15 out; and multiple politicians switched parties or opted to stand as independents. As many as ten candidates are contesting a single peninsular seat.

Speculation has swirled for months about a possible 'big tent', anything-but-UMNO coalition strategy among opposition parties, either pre- or post-election. If only given their still-superior machinery, the legacy of decades' dominance, UMNO (and PAS, on the east coast) can be more confident than its challengers of getting supporters to turn

out. A broad-based alliance offers the best chance to oust BN – but requires cobbling together ideologically disparate parties, however vague their policy platforms, including multiple would-be PMs.

As the campaign takes off, a post-election coalition seems the most probable outcome. Post-election horse-trading will surely be fraught, and its likelihood may discourage parties from articulating too-clear or -narrow priorities.

Meanwhile, the electorate has changed. A 2019 constitutional amendment lowered the voting age from 21 to 18 and introduced automatic voter registration, increasing the electoral roll by around 40 per cent. Survey data indicate weaker partisan loyalties among voters under 30, and turnout – especially of voters who had not bothered to register previously – seems likely to be anaemic.

Low turnout will almost certainly benefit the BN; higher turnout, most likely PH, but also PN. Getting out the vote – ensuring voter turnout – will be an overwhelming priority across parties, even as they leave ambiguous the configurations each might countenance to form a government.

Implications

GE15 is unlikely to yield a clear winner. Even if one coalition prevails on election night, intraparty factional and interparty coalitional fault-lines will persist. GE14 left the dominant-coalition, competitive-electoral-authoritarian system essentially in place, albeit with a new coalition able to use the system's levers to its advantage. The upcoming election might finally destabilise that regime – even if BN prevails, as polls suggest is likely.

Malaysia's drift toward a two-coalition order has stalled. We could see a return to pre-2008 levels of BN dominance, if UMNO benefits from a highly fragmented opposition. But just as likely is an inchoate mix of parties, as UMNO/BN, PN, and PH vie for the same Malay voters; state-based East Malaysian coalitions throw support to the highest bidder; and different leaders' factions vary in their openness to embracing potential partners.

All told, rather than re-establish political stability, GE15 seems all too likely to sustain the volatility of the past few years, while producing little will or mandate for meaningful reform.

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