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MALAYSIA'S CHANGED ELECTORAL LANDSCAPE

MEREDITH L. WEISS

**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
SINGAPORE**

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Abstract

Malaysia's partisan landscape has been shifting, especially since 2008. The hung parliament that the 15th general election produced in November 2022 was both widely expected and in line with that longer-term trend. Yet the unity government that formed among until-then arch-rivals signals a turn. The new administration's policy record and staying power may both be subjected to new legitimacy challenges in state elections and by-elections before the next general election, as a rival, unabashedly communal coalition, which presents itself as less corrupt, claims the ground the previously dominant United Malays National Organisation once commanded. Meanwhile, the fact of a broad unity government blurs the programmatic and ideological boundaries among political parties, even as party leaders' personal ambitions shape strategic decision-making and risk suppressing (or actively do suppress) rising talent.

Malaysia's 15th general election (GE15), on 19 November 2022, marks an apparent turning point in Malaysian politics. Until now, the contours of Malaysian electoral politics have been clear. We might not have known what share of the vote each coalition would secure, but we knew what coalitions were contesting and, until fairly recently, that the Barisan Nasional (National Front, BN) would surely win. Hopes for a BN comeback were quashed dramatically in these polls. The surprise continued when BN and erstwhile rival Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope, PH) collaborated to form a 'unity' government. It is too soon to say definitively what any future election will bring for these coalitions and their leaders, or for others contending. Yet current conditions suggest paths forward or likely foreclosed, and at least indicate patterns to follow as the new government charts its course – especially as Malaysia proceeds toward six states' elections later this year.

We can explore this new landscape through three vantage points: the polity as a whole, the calculations leading parties must now make, and what individual leaders confront. To set the stage, we begin with a brief sketch of what came before.

The status quo ante: How the landscape was

Defining three periods helps illuminate both how much is new and how much extends prior trends. Before 2008, the BN (or its predecessor, the Alliance) had never lost either the popular vote or its parliamentary majority at the federal level or in most states. The BN's path until 2008 was not entirely smooth, nor was its prolonged success inevitable, but the coalition had institutionalised its position over the course of five decades since independence.¹ We begin our story with the 2008 election, as a key turning point in Malaysian politics, when the BN-led electoral authoritarian regime started to crumble. That somewhat liminal state held until 2018, when PH succeeded in ousting the BN – albeit only for 22 months. Our third period is the run-up to GE15: 2020 through 2022.

2008–2018

Throughout this period, the BN remained in control of the federal government. However, the coalition won only a bare majority of the popular vote in the 2008 election (GE12), failing to secure its habitual two-thirds supermajority in parliament and also losing an unprecedented five state governments. Its nemesis was an alliance among the Democratic Action Party (DAP), People's Justice Party (PKR, Parti Keadilan Rakyat), and Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia). At this point, it became clear that BN had lost much of its appeal among Chinese Malaysian voters in particular, and that an increasingly vibrant and mobilised online civil society had the potential to shift popular sentiment, including around issues such as electoral reform. While the regime remained emplaced, at this point, the electoral landscape had arguably shifted: change seemed newly plausible.

¹ William Case. 'Electoral Authoritarianism in Malaysia: Trajectory Shift'. *The Pacific Review* 22, no. 3 (2009): 311–33.

The 2013 election (GE13) cemented that impression. The BN still won control of parliament, but not the majority of the popular vote.² The BN had faced significant odds in the run-up to GE13. PH, still an informal alliance as of GE12, had now consolidated as a reformist coalition. Bersih, a movement for clean, free elections launched ahead of the preceding election, had surged to prominence, raising broader critiques of Prime Minister Najib Razak and his administration, as well. An increasingly vocal ethnonationalist fringe in and around the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the lead party in the BN, hardened most non-Malay voters' alienation from the BN. At the same time, UMNO's Islamist turn might have concerned Malays who favour more secular politics. The advantages of incumbency, from control of electoral rolls and processes to, especially, access to patronage resources, likely saved the day for the BN.³ However, the coalition no longer had so clear a home-court advantage in elections.

Two shifts further altered the electoral landscape ahead of Malaysia's 14th general election in 2018 (GE14). What turned out to be the less consequential was the exodus of most of PAS from PH in 2015. The "progressive" wing that remained reconstituted itself as Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah, National Trust Party). PH survived the quake, although Amanah remains far less potent than its progenitor, PAS. The second shift, at around the same time, proved to have a deeper impact: revelation of the bewilderingly convoluted 1MDB corruption scandal. Corruption, and PM Najib's involvement in it, increasingly overshadowed other features of the electoral landscape. Meanwhile, East Malaysian parties had also been re-evaluating their electoral strategies. By 2013, key players saw greater strategic advantage in withholding formal affiliation with peninsular parties, including the BN, to maximise their leverage. That the BN could no longer count confidently on these "fixed deposit" states added new roadblocks along its path to victory. Leading coalitions have held to this playing-coy strategy ever since, to seemingly good result, in the sense of being able to extract at least promises of investment and attention to East Malaysian concerns.

2018–2020

The ground tilted further toward PH by 2018, as 1MDB-related revelations – along with sordid details of PM Najib's and wife Rosmah's specific roles – continued to surface, reinforced by temporary exhibitions of relevant artifacts (e.g., Rosmah's troves of designer handbags and jewellery). In UMNO's corner, former long-time prime minister Mahathir Mohamad and allies left in 2016 to launch a new party: Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (Bersatu). Although communally pitched, Bersatu joined PH for the 2018 elections (GE14). With that reinforcement, alongside increasing irritation over 1MDB and corruption, PH had high hopes once the BN found itself obliged to call elections in 2018. Whereas in 2013 Najib scored well for his coalition, now, tarred by 1MDB and his personal excesses, he dragged the BN down.

² Meredith L. Weiss, 'Malaysia's 13th General Elections'. *Asian Survey* 53, no. 6 (2013): 1135–58.

³ Bridget Welsh. 'Malaysia's Elections: A Step Backward'. *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 4 (2013): 136–50.

Given these and other factors, including Bersih's continued agitation, 2018 marked a seismic shift: PH won a parliamentary majority, as well as the majority of states, although PAS also benefited as Malay voters transferred their support. Hopes for reforms under a "New Malaysia" skyrocketed – ultimately, mostly unfulfilled.⁴ That so many voters changed their vote primarily in protest *against* Najib and the BN, rather than *for* PH (and indeed, often for PAS or in Sabah, Parti Warisan, instead) left PH's path unclear. Still, as of May 2018, PH formed the federal government.

2020–2022

PH may have underestimated – or at least, failed adequately to counter – resistance to its proposed reforms. With Mahathir's impetus, the coalition pushed to restructure anticorruption mechanisms and institutions. But other efforts hit an ethnonationalist wall: UMNO and its allies spun initiatives as countering Malay supremacy, including the primacy of the traditional sultans of nine states, or as demeaning Islam.

The landscape continued to mutate. In late 2019, UMNO and PAS joined forces to form the Muafakat Nasional alliance; together they pressed a racialised case against PH and implied a new electoral contender. Then, with what became universally known as the "Sheraton Move" of February 2020, the PH-led government collapsed – leaving the electoral terrain ahead decidedly foggy, through to the next polls. That saga entailed the fracturing of two PH parties, Anwar Ibrahim's PKR and Mahathir's Bersatu.

Sidestepping elections and appealing instead to the king, the new Muafakat joined with the rest of the BN (by now, just the Malaysian Chinese Association and Malaysian Indian Congress; the coalition's other component parties fell away after 2018) to form Perikatan Nasional (PN or Perikatan), then added Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) to form a "PN-plus" government. Bersatu leader Muhyiddin Yasin, home minister under PH (and before that, BN deputy prime minister) stepped in as PM. The "backdoor government" failed to thrive, not only due to its own dubious legitimacy and Muhyiddin's postponement, then proroguing, of parliament, but also because of COVID-19 and its associated economic dislocation. Still without an election, but now leaving the path ahead even less clear, UMNO withdrew from Perikatan, obliging Muhyiddin to step down in August 2021. UMNO's Ismail Sabri succeeded him as PM, with the same parties in government, but now backed by a memorandum of understanding (MoU), or confidence-and-supply agreement, with PH. Among other provisions, the MoU precluded elections prior to August 2022.

⁴Maria Chin Abdullah. 'Bringing the Reform Agenda From the Streets Into Malaysia's Parliament'. *The Round Table* 107, no. 6 (2018): 817–18; Meredith L. Weiss, 'Electing Reform: Barisan Nasional Neopatrimonialism as Impetus for and Challenge to Malaysia's Democratic Transition'. *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 15, no. 1 (2019): 41–61.

It was a series of by-elections between 2018 and 2022, and especially state elections in Sabah in September 2020, Malacca in November 2021, Sarawak in December 2021, and Johor in March 2022, that tested the electoral temper most clearly. BN performed strikingly well, its fortunes boosted, however perversely, by a perplexingly popular-again Najib – who was then forced to sit out GE15 when a final 1MDB-case appeal ended in a 12-year jail sentence in August 2022. Other corruption-related cases – especially those of UMNO president Zahid Hamidi – remained pending, however.

Presumably in light of BN's confidence-building wins, Zahid deemed the moment right for polls. Despite elections needing only to be held by September 2023, he pressed Ismail Sabri to call a snap election rather than wait out the full term. Speculation was rife that Zahid hoped that BN could win, form the government, and relax the legal pressure on him and others in UMNO's "court cluster". Ismail Sabri ultimately gave in, dissolving parliament in October 2022, with elections just over a month later.

The 2022 result

The election did not turn out as Zahid had hoped. The progress of the campaign and full results are beyond our scope here. For present purposes, it will suffice to sketch how parties manoeuvred, then the resultant electoral status quo from which further developments will proceed.

As the July denouement of the MoU approached, Zahid's camp grew more restive. The uncertainty of who would ally with whom highlighted just how murky the electoral terrain had become. Multiple parties, most notably UMNO and PKR, experienced internal factional rifts and personal rivalries that extended to differences regarding how best to approach the looming contest. PH strategists debated the relative merits of pre- or post-election coalition-building. They anticipated a divided electorate – and contemplated (including in at least some cross-party discussions) a "big tent", anything-but-UMNO approach. Meanwhile, Bersatu and PAS approached each other and retreated, unsure whether to align together and/or with other partners in the patched-together incumbent government, or to go it alone. At the eleventh hour, the two parties agreed to run (along with the small, largely non-Malay Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia, or Gerakan) as Perikatan Nasional. Those multivalent discussions, and many observers, presumed that the BN had a strong advantage: yes, Najib was now in prison, and the party's coffers were far less flush than usual, but UMNO has always had excellent machinery on the ground, as well as millions of voters assumed sure to default to their usual choice.

Meanwhile – and again testament to how messy the scene was – about one-third of voters remained on the fence. The influx of 18–21 year old or previously unregistered voters with the recent enactment of the "Undi18" amendment made turnout likewise hard to predict. Survey researchers thus had to estimate who would likely vote, and for whom, based on unstable prior patterns.

Over the course of the two-week campaign, those surveys showed rapidly shifting fortunes. As the MoU wound down (30 July 2022), only undecideds (35 per cent) outpolled BN (28 per cent), though PH (23 per cent) was close behind. Perikatan (13 per cent) trailed by a wide margin. As Ismail Sabri dissolved parliament, PH pulled slightly ahead (26 per cent to 24 per cent for BN), Perikatan's share remained constant, and undecideds still prevailed (31 per cent). But as campaigning proceeded, Perikatan started to surge ahead and BN, to plummet. As of 15 November, Perikatan (20 per cent) pulled ahead of BN (18 per cent), though PH led, with 30 per cent (the same share that were unsure or unresponsive).⁵ As is now well-known, in the end, Perikatan left BN in the dust.

The result was a widely anticipated hung parliament. PH secured a plurality, but now had either to form a minority government, perhaps with another MoU to ensure some stability, or forge a coalition. Perikatan, trailing PH by nine seats (82 to 73 of 222 total), was vying to form the government, instead; the recently passed anti-hopping amendment was the only hedge against fragmentation and reconfiguration. It was up to the king (Malaysia's constitutional head of state) to decide between alternatives. The resultant "unity" government among PH, BN, Sarawak's GPS (23 seats), and Sabah's Gabungan Rakyat Sarawak (GRS, 6 seats) and Warisan (3 seats) may endure, but more for lack of a viable alternative than more substantive glue.

The electoral landscape post-GE15

The resulting status quo warrants consideration from several perspectives. The first is what direction we might expect from the government as a whole, and how that record may feed into future polls. The second relates to what has long been the defining feature of Malaysian electoral politics, especially vis-à-vis regional neighbours: its strong, enduring parties and coalitions. The third – subject of endless coffeshop talk – concerns the path ahead for specific leaders, both currently in office and on the side-lines.

The full-polity perspective

Now, in mid-March 2023, four months past the election, what the government defines as success appears to be simply *remaining* as the government. A committee is purportedly reviewing the parties' manifestos to identify common ground, but a policy agenda or set of governing priorities remains forthcoming. PH and the BN have announced that they will contest the six state elections due by mid-2023 together. That decision reduces uncertainty and may encourage the parties to compromise on some significant policies, to offer a record on which voters might judge them. Then again, it may well be that the prospect of sharing credit for policy gains deters productive collaboration.

⁵ Merdeka Center tracking survey data.

All told, the messy electoral map bodes poorly for Malaysian politics. Sustaining a government is a means to an end, not an end in itself. And yet the tenuousness of the ruling coalition, not to mention the fragility of its two short-lived immediate predecessors, deters strong action, let alone proactive, progressive risk-taking. The same ethnoreligious grandstanding that dragged PH down after 2018 could well resurface as Perikatan scrabbles for a foothold. UMNO and its allies then were able to spin PH's efforts at reform as "anti-Islam" or insufficiently attentive to Malays' special position, in matters from police oversight to improving civil liberties.

Meanwhile, UMNO's adamant rejection of internal reform now imperils its coalition partners and itself. Previously, PH, like Perikatan, lambasted Zahid as corrupt and scheming. PH questioned his commitment to leave the prime ministership in Ismail Sabri's hands if the coalition formed the government, and relied on legible shorthand that a vote for even a progressive BN candidate was a "vote for Zahid". Now, Zahid is PH's partner and Anwar's deputy. Perikatan will presumably continue in the same vein as during GE15 in the state elections and by-elections ahead – but now a vote for PH will *also* be a "vote for Zahid".

Perikatan may well be able to sustain and extend its GE15 surge in state elections. Doing so may effectively delegitimise the BN/PH alliance. (While the coalition's East Malaysian parties are sufficiently differentiated to be less directly tainted, they too will fall if the government collapses. Yet, the odds are good that a Perikatan alternative would seek to rope them in again.) Weakened legitimacy, and specifically, further evidence that the Malay majority (which did favour Perikatan in GE15) prefers Perikatan to the federal unity government will make it even harder for the latter to govern. The asynchronous state polls will serve as a novel mid-term accountability check for the coalition in office.

Should Perikatan hold not only the states PAS currently controls, but also make measurable headway in PH's, since non-Malay-majority Penang may be PH's only truly "safe" state, Perikatan could well make a play to force a vote of confidence or otherwise oust Anwar's government. In that case, the anti-hopping law may be the unity government's only real lifeline – and the law's tensile strength has yet to be tested.

The status of parties and coalitions

The current party system – or "the set of patterned interactions in the competition among parties"⁶ – has become essentially inchoate. Lacking now are core attributes of institutionalisation: "stability in the rules and nature" of competition; that parties have sufficiently "stable roots in society" to structure popular political preferences and voting behaviour; that all key actors "accord legitimacy to the

⁶ Scott Mainwaring and Timothy R Scully. *Building Democratic Institutions: Party Systems in Latin America*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995, p. 4.

electoral process and to parties”, and autonomous party organisations, not subordinate to specific party leaders.⁷

With GE15, Malaysia moved from the two-party (or two-coalition) system first-past-the-post voting tends to foster, to a three-coalition system: BN, PH, Perikatan. East Malaysia’s GPS and GRS coalitions, having embraced post-election kingmaker status (or at least, aspirations) over the past decade, remain secure in that status. Since they share kingmakerhood with the BN, they may not be able to extract hoped-for concessions this time around, but periodic partisan conniptions in Sabah notwithstanding, they now represent the most stable component of the party system.

Below the level of the system as a whole, some individual coalitions and parties are more enfeebled or porous than others. Yet key parties, too, are deinstitutionalising. The criteria to consider here are, internally, *systemness*, or the “scope, density, and regularity” of structural processes, and *value infusion*, or how committed to and identified with the party its supporters are; and externally to the party, *decisional autonomy*, or the party’s ability to chart its strategic course and policies without interference, and *reification*, or how well “the party’s existence is established in the public imagination”.⁸ More simply, institutionalised parties have a clear identity, resilient organisational structure, autonomy to chart their own course, and loyalists who believe in that party. They are thus well-positioned not only to outlast leadership changes, but also to differentiate themselves from competitors in elections.

The partisan landscape post-GE15 has left all parties somewhat uncertain of their status. Per these criteria, the only two parties we might consider institutionalised are PAS and the DAP – the two largest parties in the federal parliament, with also the most polarised objectives and constituents. Even the DAP will have a harder case to make to voters of its ideological coherence, having ceded so much ground to its coalition’s objectives; new party leadership has internalised a “backseat” role for a Chinese-identified party (however many Malay candidates they run). The DAP may rely more heavily than previously on its profile in Penang to reassure voters of a stable identity, though disillusionment among Chinese voters could well mount.

But the key parties facing institutional erosion are PKR and UMNO (and with it, the BN, since the coalition is registered as a single party). UMNO came out of the election battered, having continued its multiple-election downhill slide. A few reformists indicated their support for leadership renewal during the campaign – the most vocal among them surely Khairy Jamaluddin – but the chorus against Zahid gained steam as results came in. It soon became apparent that rumours of negotiations between Anwar and Zahid were true: the two party leaders had entered into an agreement.

⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

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

UMNO emerged stronger, as it was now in government, but also weaker, as the wildly unpopular Zahid braided his own lifeline. Now deputy prime minister, Zahid proceeded in February 2023 to secure the party's agreement to a no-contest rule for the party's two top spots in the upcoming UMNO elections. He then ousted or suspended key rivals, including presidential contenders Khairy and Hishamuddin Hussein, and others, such as entrenched "warlord" Noh Omar, who had condemned him for UMNO's poor electoral showing.

This turn marks a low point for UMNO. The party's ability to secure at least more Malay votes than PKR in upcoming state elections, if it can still do so, may sustain its grip on power – Malay support remains PH's Achilles heel – but the party will have difficulty explaining itself to voters. UMNO has never been without a degree of personalisation, but Zahid has transparently put his interests above the party's in rendering himself beyond challenge. Moreover, UMNO is now partnering with the DAP, a party it has attacked vehemently for decades, questioning its ideological and policy stance. At the same time, UMNO will continue to face other Malay-communal parties. Unless something dramatic happens over the next few months, it seems likely that Perikatan will reprise and reinforce its message in the elections ahead of being at least as Malay-Muslim-centred as UMNO, but less corrupt, to UMNO's further detriment. (Bersatu leader Muhyiddin's recent arrest on corruption charges may well be that something dramatic that confounds such an appeal.)

PH will likely cohere as a coalition through the next election, sustained by symbiosis and a lack of viable alternatives. However, moving forward, it will surely struggle to define its identity and agenda. PH developed specifically in rejection of the BN model, as a non-communal (or at least less-communal), "progressive" coalition. Not merely throwing its lot in with the BN, but accepting Zahid as deputy prime minister and allowing UMNO effectively to upstage the DAP undermines the coalition's internal value infusion and external reification: the extent to which voters understand what the coalition represents and support it for that profile, beyond instrumental incentives.

PKR in particular will bear the brunt of this erosion, given not only party leader Anwar's centrality to the decisions at issue, but also its lack of a clear identity beyond PH in the first instance. Yet Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah) voters, too, could drift toward PAS. Amanah's Islamist supporters are presumably less inclined toward the ethnic slant PAS offers – yet with BN as bedfellow, they may be unable to avoid communalism. Again, what differentiates the parties within the system is hazier than before. In that case, PAS's "clean" image, and perhaps also its greater relative strength, could lead Amanah voters to defect.

All told, the partisan landscape is muddy. A necessary trade-off to forming a "unity" government is loss of differentiation. PH's previous alliance with Mahathir's Bersatu in GE14 already dulled its "noncommunal" lustre; for its part, the BN has wooed support as much through patronage as its policy profile or ideas for years now. By sharing power, these coalitions compromise their claims of

being distinct from one another, as well as their ability to exercise full decisional autonomy. The configurations into which the parties will fall in the next GE – will PH and BN contest together? – and the extent to which any will be able to count on party loyalty among voters, is wholly uncertain.

Individual leaders' perspectives

We might end by considering how specific leaders likely perceive or experience these partisan developments. Anwar looms large, of course. Like Zahid, he smoothed his own path by nominating factional loyalists to stand for election – justifiable in terms of consolidating the party, but also to his personal advantage. The coalition arrangement reveals the compromises he was then willing to accept to become prime minister, an office to which he clearly felt entitled. Ensuring a stable government, and one inclusive of his coalition, obviously factored, as well, in his post-election decision-making – but he apparently started discussions with Zahid well before the results were known, all while others in his party and coalition were contemplating a very different strategy, and although so many in his camp clearly deem Zahid toxic. Anwar remains personally popular, among the options on offer, but given the compromises he has accepted, he may well come to seem more opportunist than ideologue as his party's identity blurs.

Then there is Zahid. Perhaps unfortunately for UMNO, let alone for those specific contenders, Zahid's consolidation of his own position effectively shuts out other aspiring leaders for the time being. The issue is not only who becomes party president or deputy president, but also, what this restriction means for the reputation of those *not* expelled or suspended. Voters could well brand them as evidently disinclined to reform the party, and as therefore less worthy of support, moving forward. But even more than Anwar, Zahid benefits from the partisan mix post-GE15 and may see little impetus to rebuild UMNO, if doing so requires potential challengers to advance.

Perhaps most visible among those challengers is Khairy Jamaluddin, newly expelled from UMNO. Khairy has explained, reasonably, that there is little promise in forming a new party, given Malaysia's electoral rules. He could perhaps join PKR, though his cockiness and unabashed prime ministerial ambitions might give Anwar and *his* challengers pause. Bersatu is another possibility, except that Khairy has sought to differentiate himself thus far as *less* ethnonationalist than other rising Malay leaders, nor as sharing PAS's political Islamism. He may well find himself shut out of competition for the foreseeable future, among the chief victims of how Zahid parlayed the election outcome to save both UMNO and himself.

Also stalled in his ascent is Rafizi Ramli, though more likely temporarily. Having made a grand comeback in the years following GE14, Rafizi has reclaimed his prior stature in PKR. Yet his position was specifically averse to a government-at-any-cost approach. His acquiescence to working with UMNO and Zahid could perhaps tarnish his record among supporters. More immediately germane, however, will surely be Anwar's unwillingness to hand the reins to the next generation – and

the validation Anwar, like Zahid gains by having led his party back to power; Rafizi's different approach may lose lustre, in contrast. Rafizi's strongest odds clearly lie with staying put in PKR, though, particularly as Anwar's whittling away of rival factions leaves Rafizi with fewer contenders to best, especially if Khairy remains in partisan purgatory.

More likely ally than contender is Nurul Izzah. Having lost her seat allegedly for poor ground-work alongside a diligent, creative challenge from both BN and PAS rivals, she is in a weaker position to build her electoral base, but can also claim some distance from the BN and Zahid. Having accepted a role as an advisor to her father, Anwar Ibrahim, in early 2023, she might *not* have been able to escape that tarring, had she not retreated from the position after outcry over nepotism. She may benefit in particular from being not only in Rafizi's camp, but also her father's daughter: she models the possibility of both leadership succession and a revival of PH's *Reformasi* image. And indeed, for her rather than Rafizi to ascend is not beyond the pale, *if* she can win a seat perhaps in a more urban area.

Last, there is Muhyiddin. Should he survive a surely not coincidental recent burst of corruption investigations, his position will remain tenuous. Being in Perikatan definitely helped small, still-new Bersatu. They gained access to PAS machinery as well as the advantage of pooling votes. Yet the party's identity was already vague among voters, and Perikatan's, even more so. Muhyiddin – *qua* benign "Abah" – stood in for the party as candidates campaigned. Even so, Bersatu remains manifestly weaker than PAS. Should Perikatan's fortunes advance, PAS will surely claim the cause to be a 'green wave' (that is, attributable to PAS) rather than UMNO voters' search for the most-similar alternative. It remains unclear how long Muhyiddin, as standard-bearer for the junior partner, can stand his ground within Perikatan. Particularly should PAS leader Hadi Awang, rumoured to be in poor health, retreat from politics, a new, more nationally palatable PAS leader could upstage Muhyiddin, propelled less by popular support for PAS specifically than partisan dynamics.

Conclusion

Taken together, these levels of analysis – from the full system, to the party system and component parties, to key individuals – reveal a regime on shaky ground. Party loyalty is unlikely to suffice to sustain the government in the case of a serious challenge, whether ethnonationalist fear-mongering or an economic recession that precludes stabilising patronage. As parties decreasingly structure political leanings and behaviour in predictable ways, electoral outcomes will grow even harder to predict. We may see lower turnout, if the parties seem increasingly alike and/or if vote tally and resultant government seem increasingly disarticulated. And we could well see the end of meaningful pre-election coalitions, if less predictable results lead parties to hedge their bets.

About the Author



Meredith Weiss is Professor of Political Science at the University at Albany, State University of New York. She has published widely on social mobilization and civil society, the politics of identity and development, electoral politics and parties, institutional reform, and subnational governance in Southeast Asia, with particular focus on Malaysia and Singapore. Her books include *Protest and Possibilities: Civil Society and Coalitions for Political Change in Malaysia* (Stanford, 2006); *Student Activism in Malaysia: Crucible, Mirror, Sideshow* (Cornell SEAP, 2011); *The Roots of Resilience: Party Machines and Grassroots Politics*

in Southeast Asia (Cornell, 2020); and the co-authored *Mobilizing for Elections: Patronage and Political Machines in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge, 2022). She has also edited or co-edited twelve volumes, most recently, *The Routledge Handbook of Civil and Uncivil Society in Southeast Asia* (Routledge, 2023). Her articles appear in *Asian Studies Review*, *Asian Survey*, *Critical Asian Studies*, *Democratization*, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, *Journal of Democracy*, *Journal of Human Rights*, *Taiwan Journal of Democracy*, and other journals. Current projects include collaborative studies of urban governance and public-goods delivery, of civil society in Southeast Asia, and of contemporary youth activism in Asia; and a monograph on Malaysian sociopolitical development.

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