

Malaysia's 15th General Election Saga: Crisis and Party Politics in 2022

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ABSTRACT

The process of electing a new government in Malaysia has been marked by significant turmoil, not least since the 14th General Election (GE14) in 2018, leading to an increasingly unpredictable political landscape. The 15th General Election (GE15), held on November 19, 2022, ushered in a new era of political awakening for voters amidst the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper employs a qualitative approach involving the analysis of commentary regarding the political scenario in Malaysia during GE15. The paper recalls the background factors leading up to GE15, explores the election day itself, and reviews the post-election processes. Notably, GE15 brought forth numerous developments that reverberated throughout Malaysian society. The recent political crisis in Malaysia witnessed acts of disloyalty within political parties, political self-interest, and character assassination. This historic moment in Malaysia's political history saw three different prime ministers and three changes of government within a span of just four years (2018-2022). The present paper holds significance as it can serve as a valuable reference for forthcoming elections, generally among Malaysians and especially targeted at youth, in evaluating their desired party and right candidate of choice before casting their votes.

Keywords: Anwar Ibrahim, GE15, general election, party politics

UNVEILING THE EARLY CHALLENGES

Malaysia's previous general election took place on Wednesday, May 9, 2018, resulting in a surprising outcome. The opposition coalition, Pakatan Harapan (PH), consisting of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (BERSATU), Democratic Action Party (DAP), and Parti Amanah Negara (AMANAH), won the election, ending the ruling party's reign since independence, the Barisan Nasional (BN; Al Jazeera 2018). This historic result came due to the failure of the Barisan National party to control the political narrative on social media. As stated by Nizah and Bakar (2019), since the 2008 general elections, social media has served as a crucial tool for political parties and politicians in Malaysia, facilitating the dissemination of perspectives on various political issues.

At the age of 93, Tun Mahathir Mohamad, a PH leader, was sworn in as the prime minister for the second time, making him the world's oldest prime minister (BBC News 2018). Shortly after the election, Mahathir secured a royal pardon for Anwar Ibrahim, a jailed PH leader (The Edge 2018). Anwar Ibrahim later stood for a by-election in Port Dickson, taking over the parliamentary seat vacated by Danyal Balagopal Abdullah (Aiman 2018). This shows that, as a comrade of a political party, Danyal is willing to relinquish his seat and rights to make way for his esteemed leader to win the by-election. The present situation manifests Anwar's extraordinary leadership capability, and most of his supporters are also eagerly waiting for his return to the political arena.

Mahathir expressed his intention to pass the baton to Anwar Ibrahim after a few years, while Najib Razak, the former Prime Minister and BN's chairman, faced mounting pressure in the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal, one of the world's largest financial frauds (Ngui 2018). Najib was eventually sentenced to 12 years in prison for looting the 1MDB state investment fund (The Guardian 2022). Despite his imprisonment, Najib remained popular among the general public, earning the nickname "*Bossku*" ("my boss"). Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahidi replaced Najib as BN's chairman. Shockingly, the PH government, led by Mahathir Mohamad, fell after governing Malaysia for only 22 months. The Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition took over, comprising BERSATU (after leaving PH), Barisan Nasional, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS), and some former PKR members. Following internal issues, after 17 months, BN assumed government control under the leadership of Ismail Sabri Yaakob (CNBC 2021).

THE INFLUENCE OF RACIAL-BASED POLITICAL PARTIES

Following the assumption of power by PH in 2018, the formation of the cabinet took place. However, during the PH government's tenure from 2018 to 2020, several issues emerged, particularly related to ethnic-based confrontations. These included controversies surrounding the appointment of Lim Guan

Eng, a member of DAP, as the minister of finance. Additionally, for the first time, four ministerial positions were allocated to individuals of Indian ethnicity: Kulasegaran Murugeson (Minister of Human Resources), Gobind Singh Deo (Minister of Communication and Multimedia), Xavier Jayakumar (Minister of Water, Land, and Natural Resources), and Waytha Moorthy Ponnusamy (Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, overseeing National Unity and Social Wellbeing). Furthermore, the appointment of Tommy Thomas as the Attorney General (AG) raised concerns among the majority of the Malay population, fueling the perception that non-Malays held influential positions in the government. The opposition parties' propaganda regarding Islamization and Malay supremacy further exacerbated the situation, intensifying tensions. This deliberate manipulation of emotions and identity politics intensified tensions, contributing to ethnic-based confrontations and divisions within Malaysian society. As stated by Embi, Azizirrahim, and Latif (2019), Malays may face negative repercussions as the PH's triumph relied heavily on the support of Chinese and Indian voters. This could prompt them to govern in a way that caters to the preferences of their voting bloc to build confidence for subsequent elections.

It is important to note that these issues and controversies are complex and multifaceted, reflecting the broader challenges of managing diversity and ensuring equitable representation in a multiethnic society like Malaysia. Addressing these concerns requires a delicate balance of inclusivity, dialogue, and a commitment to upholding the principles of justice and equality for all Malaysians, regardless of their ethnic or religious backgrounds.

Significantly, PKR and DAP emerged as the winning parties in the 14th general election, securing the majority of parliamentary seats with 47 and 42 seats, respectively. However, the position of prime minister was given to Mahathir Mohamad from BERSATU, which held only 13 seats. This decision was made unanimously by all component parties prior to the election. Additionally, despite having only nine parliamentary seats, Amanah was given an important portfolio as the Minister of Defense. BERSATU and AMANAH collectively obtained 12 (21%) and 10 (18%) cabinet posts, respectively, out of the total 56 created (Tayeb, 2021). This allocation was based on the fact that both parties catered to Malay interests. It was a political strategy endorsed by the PH coalition to appease the Malay majority and demonstrate the preservation of Malay supremacy under the new leadership.

However, this strategy proved short-lived as political leaders and parties further exacerbated racial polarization, relying on issues related to race and religion to gain publicity and support from the grassroots and the general public. Drawing from media coverage, social media content, and anecdotal accounts, the prevailing Malay sentiment indicates a perception that Malay rights are diminishing, and Islam is perceived to be under threat from non-Muslims. Consequently, there has been a proliferation of new ethnic-based political parties vying for the support of the same demographic – the Malays. This has resulted in an escalation of ethno-religious-centric campaigning, with each political party

attempting to surpass the others in this regard (Iman Research 2023). Slogans like “Anything but UMNO (ABU),” “NO DAP,” and “Protect Islam” became deeply ingrained in the minds and hearts of the majority of Malaysians. The majority of Malaysians were dissatisfied with the PH government’s failure to fulfill many of the promises outlined in their election manifesto, particularly regarding the reduction of the cost of living, tolls, and petrol prices.

THE SHERATON MOVE: PAKATAN HARAPAN’S DOWNFALL

In 2020, the Sheraton Move witnessed the coalition of BN, BERSATU, PAS, and a faction of PKR politicians led by Azmin Ali, joining forces to topple the PH government and establish a new coalition called Perikatan Nasional (PN). The name “Sheraton Move” emerged from a political conspiracy meeting held at the Sheraton Hotel, conceived by Muhyiddin and Azmin Ali with the aim of ousting the PH government. According to Saidin (2023), the crisis initiated the opposition’s clandestine plan to forcefully remove the PH government before the 15th general election. Subsequently, internal efforts within BERSATU and Azmin Ali’s faction in PKR aimed to prevent Mahathir from transferring the prime ministerial position to Anwar Ibrahim. The strained relationship between BERSATU and DAP, coupled with internal conflicts within PKR, proved irreparable and contributed to the downfall of PH. Additionally, the Sheraton Move was a strategic maneuver by UMNO and PAS to undermine DAP’s continued influence within the PH and safeguard the interests of the Malay-Muslim agenda in Malaysia. Lastly, the Sheraton Move was associated with an endeavor to protect certain UMNO leaders facing or anticipated to face legal proceedings related to money laundering and abuses of power.

This alliance resulted in the PH government losing its majority in Parliament. The situation worsened when Mahathir Mohamad unexpectedly resigned as Prime Minister under intense political pressure. His resignation was believed to be influenced by demands from PKR lawmakers urging him to fulfill his promise of handing over the post to Anwar Ibrahim, leading to a significant rift between Mahathir and Anwar. The vacant prime ministership became an opportunity for the new allies to swiftly stake their claim. Both Anwar Ibrahim and Muhyiddin claimed to have the majority support in Parliament to form a new government, seeking the King’s audience for his consent. However, the King made the decision to announce Muhyiddin as the 8th Prime Minister of Malaysia, as he had the support of the majority members of Parliament (Tayeb 2021).

Following the Sheraton Move and the collapse of the PH government, the political parties became divided into four factions within both the ruling and opposition blocs. The first two factions were pro-Muhyiddin from BERSATU and pro-Azmin Ali from PKR, who joined forces with the second faction consisting of BN, PAS, and other smaller parties to form the PN government. The third faction comprised pro-Mahathir members from BERSATU who declined to join PN and remained in opposition

but independent from PH. The fourth faction included smaller parties that aligned with the PH government while maintaining a friendly stance towards PH in Dewan Rakyat, such as former BERSATU lawmakers like Syed Saddiq and Mazlee Malik, as well as Warisan and UPKO in Sabah (Lee 2020). Hence, many fractions of political parties can result in a divided political environment, making it challenging to establish stable governments. In extreme situations, this can result in frequent shifts in leadership and a lack of consistency in policymaking. The 15th General Elections in Malaysia serves as an illustration of this situation.

MALAYSIA'S NEW GOVERNMENT DURING THE PANDEMIC

Malaysia's political landscape is becoming increasingly unpredictable, as observed by Weiss (2022). The newly formed government, Perikatan Nasional (PN), faced not only political challenges but also global challenges, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic. However, under Muhyiddin's leadership, the government managed to control the pandemic despite numerous challenges, including combating vaccine-related misinformation. Various initiatives were introduced to assist Malaysians, particularly those in the B40 category, earning Muhyiddin high regard and a fatherly image among the public, who affectionately referred to him as "Abah," ("fatherly figure").

Securing a mandate from Members of Parliament and avoiding a vote of no confidence became crucial for the government. It is worth noting that Barisan Nasional held the majority of parliamentary seats compared to BERSATU and PAS. However, the spotlight remained on Muhyiddin, the President of BERSATU and the current Prime Minister, which did not sit well with BN lawmakers. They threatened to withdraw from the alliance multiple times. In an attempt to appease them, Muhyiddin increased the number of cabinet posts to 70 and appointed BN leaders to significant positions. Despite these appointments, they were still dissatisfied with their secondary role despite having the majority of parliamentary members (Tayeb 2021).

Amidst the uncertainties, Anwar Ibrahim claimed to have a strong and convincing majority to form a new government in a press conference. However, he failed to prove this to the King after seeking an audience, leaving the palace in a distressed state. Muhyiddin needed to take a stand on the upcoming parliamentary sitting in November, where he had to present the budget for 2021 and potentially face a vote of no confidence. Strategically, he planned to announce a state of emergency, suspending parliamentary activities due to the rising COVID-19 cases. However, he did not receive the King's consent for this plan. With the King's support, he was able to table the budget (Malaysiakini 2021).

On August 15, 2021, the Perikatan Nasional (PN) government, led by Muhyiddin, collapsed when BN withdrew from the coalition. The reason behind this move was Muhyiddin's refusal to bow down to the

demands of BN supporters to drop corruption and money laundering court cases against their leaders, Najib Razak and Zahid Hamidi. BN lawmakers demanded Muhyiddin's intervention to clear their names, but he publicly refused to succumb to political pressure and interfere in ongoing court trials (Malaysiakini 2021). In March 2021, during the UMNO annual convention, a resolution was passed to withdraw support from the PN coalition. This withdrawal of support would leave PN without a majority in parliament. To halt this, Muhyiddin appointed Ismail Sabri as Deputy Prime Minister, temporarily putting the plan on hold. However, the King was displeased with Takiyuddin Yassin (Minister of Parliament and Law) and Idris Harun (Attorney General) for breaking their promise by misleading the parliament to lift the state of emergency and continue with parliamentary debate. This led to public sentiment that Muhyiddin had betrayed the King, who demanded his immediate resignation. In a study, numerous participants conveyed their dissatisfaction with the establishment of the Muhyiddin-PN government, citing concerns that it did not honor the people's mandate and went against the principles of democratic electoral practices in Malaysia (Saidin 2023).

Once again, the position of prime minister was vacant, leaving the ultimate power to the King to appoint the next prime minister, as dictated by Malaysia's constitution. During the Sheraton Move episode, the King fulfilled a crucial role in accordance with his authority as the head of the country (Saidin 2023). The King summoned all Members of Parliament to declare their support for their preferred candidate. Ismail Sabri obtained majority support with 114 votes and became the 9th Prime Minister of Malaysia on August 21, 2021. Learning from Muhyiddin's leadership experience, Ismail Sabri initiated negotiations with the opposition to avoid a similar fate. A Memorandum of Understanding on Transformation and Political Stability was signed between pro-government and opposition parties. Key understandings included not dissolving Parliament before July 31, 2022, and the introduction of anti-party hopping measures. These strategies have positioned Ismail Sabri to hold onto power until the next general election. Before its dissolution, the parliament approved legislation against party-hopping to deter elected officials from changing parties after being voted into office, aiming to bring stability to the country's political system. Historically, party hopping occurred primarily as a result of political corruption, wherein elected representatives exchanged their legislative votes for power or material benefits (Moten 2023).

The new law, which became operative on October 5, 2022, outlines that the act of leaving one's current political party, joining another, or an independent Member of Parliament formally aligning with a political party will instigate either a recall election or a by-election (Hassan 2022). As a result, MPs who choose to change their political affiliations will risk losing their parliamentary seats.

ANALYZING ELECTORAL PLEDGES: A REALITY CHECK

On October 10, 2022, Ismail Sabri made the announcement to dissolve the 14th Parliament and schedule the 15th General Elections during the monsoon season. This decision sparked anger among many Malaysians, who believed it was an inappropriate time to hold an election. The monsoon season poses challenges as it affects various parts of the country, making it difficult for people to come out and vote. Those living in Peninsular Malaysia, particularly near riverbanks, have long been grappling with the impact of this natural disaster. The major floods not only damage homes and property but also have detrimental effects on people's health and well-being, leading to psychological trauma (Abdullah 2022). Opposition parties view this timing as a deliberate strategy by Ismail Sabri's coalition to gain an advantage in the election by indirectly discouraging voter turnout. Despite these concerns, the campaigning period for the 15th General Election (GE15) began on November 5 and concluded two weeks later, on November 18, 2022 (Malaysiakini 2022).

Moving forward, the three main coalitions—BN, PN, and PH—have unveiled their election manifestos in an effort to win over voters, particularly the six million new voters. Manifestos hold great importance during general elections as they serve as a guiding document for parties and candidates, outlining their priorities and promises to be implemented if they are elected. Hence, it is advisable for the political parties participating in the elections to adopt a more effective strategy in presenting manifestos to voters in the future. This strategy involves attentive consideration of grassroots needs and the formulation of realistic, practical, and feasible plans. The implication is that a well-crafted, realistic, and implementable manifesto can create a mutually beneficial situation for both the contesting party and the electorate (Boymen & Jawan 2022).

These manifestos also provide a platform for coalition parties to share their ideologies, focusing on socioeconomic issues such as the cost of living, corruption, quality education, healthcare, and minimum wage. By presenting their manifestos, parties aim to garner support and convince voters that they have the best strategies and plans to address the country's challenges and improve the well-being of its citizens.

Overall, the dissolution of Parliament and the subsequent general election brought about discussions and debates about the timing of the election, particularly in relation to the monsoon season's impact on voter participation. The election manifestos presented by the major coalitions became essential documents for voters to evaluate and make informed decisions about which party's vision and policies align with their interests and aspirations for the future of Malaysia. The three major coalitions, BN, PN, and PH and their manifestos are summarized in Table 1.

The BN coalition's focus on education-based policies in their manifestos reflects their recognition of the importance of education in driving social and economic development. By proposing initiatives such as free childcare and early education, they aim to provide a strong foundation for children's learning and development from an early age. The provision of free laptops for B40 children aims to bridge the digital divide and ensure equal access to educational resources, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds. The proposal for free higher education for B40 students addresses the issue of affordability and aims to increase access to tertiary education for disadvantaged groups. Therefore, it is utmost important to know that only a comprehensive emphasis on education can drive Malaysia's progress, transforming it into not just a high-income economy but a genuinely developed nation (Da Wan, 2018). Ultimately, it is a good strategy for BN to indirectly draw the voters' attention.

In addition, the BN manifestos suggest that conducting 50 percent of teaching in higher education institutions online can help reduce the overall cost of higher education. This proposal recognizes the potential of online learning to offer flexible and cost-effective alternatives to traditional classroom-based instruction. By embracing technology in higher education, the BN coalition aims to make education more accessible and affordable for a wider range of students. This initiative taken by BN indicated that their manifesto is in line with the vision and mission of the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically the goal number 4, which is quality education. Attaining accessible and high-quality education for everyone reaffirms the conviction that education is among the most effective and established means for sustainable development. Additionally, it strives to offer equitable access to affordable vocational training, eliminate discrepancies based on gender and wealth, and realize universal admission to superior higher education (United Nations Development Program 2023).

Coalition	Slogan	Key Points
Barisan Nasional (BN)	"Stability and Prosperity" (<i>Perancangan Amal dan Usaha – PADU</i>)	- Release Date: November 7, 2022 13 Chapters, 99 offerings - Extensive state largesse and free provisions - Omissions of incumbent of government achievement (2020-2022)
Perikatan Nasional (PN)	"Concerned, Clean, Stable" (<i>Prihatin, Bersih, Stabil</i>)	- Release Date: November 6, 2022 12 mainstays, 30 approaches, 234 offerings (50 major) - Glorious Malaysia (<i>Malaysia Gemilang</i>) – cleaner ethnically based alternative to Barisan Nasional. - Extensive funding for public programmes and institutions - Muhyiddin administration's performance highlighted; Budget 2023 to be enhanced.

Pakatan Harapan (PH)	"We Can" (<i>Kita Boleh</i>)	▪ Release Date: November 2, 2022 ▪ 10 priorities, 39 offerings ▪ Omission of achievements in government in 2018-2022 ▪ Broader commitments and more extensive reforms ▪ We Can: safeguard people's welfare, govern with integrity, prepare the nation to face the future.
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Table 1: Malaysia's GE15 Manifestos. Source: Adapted from Lee 2022.

The BN coalition's reliance on race-based policies stems from their recognition of the Malay community's significant role in their voter base. By focusing on the concerns and aspirations of the Malay community, they seek to build support and ensure their political relevance. These policies may include affirmative action measures or initiatives targeted specifically at addressing the needs and aspirations of the Malay community. According to Welsh (2020), Malaysia has grappled with division along racial, religious, and reform-oriented lines for many years, significantly influencing its electoral landscape. Since gaining independence in 1957, the ethnic Malay majority has been granted constitutionally protected privileges, while ethnic minorities have faced unequal treatment. What adds complexity to Malaysia's polarization is that two additional fault lines, centered on religion and conflicting visions for political reform, intersect with and frequently amplify the existing ethnic divisions. Following the current political instability, political leaders are confronted with the challenging endeavor of drawing insights and adapting to fresh alliances. Malaysia's polarizing divisions persist and appear to be deeply rooted.

The PN coalition's primary focus on healthcare issues in their manifestos indicates their recognition of the importance of accessible and affordable healthcare for all citizens. The proposed *MyPrihatin* health card suggests a comprehensive healthcare program aimed at providing financial assistance and support for healthcare services. This initiative aims to alleviate the burden of healthcare costs and improve access to quality healthcare, particularly for low-income individuals and families. However, the other areas of healthcare issues were not addressed by the PN lawmakers. It is a known fact that many junior doctors have to wait a long time in order to get placement. In addition, the facilities and equipment need to be upgraded. Malaysia Medical Association president, Dr. Muruga Raj, stated that the health aspect of the BN, PH, and PN manifestos lack detail in key areas such as human resources and infrastructure (Arumugam 2022).

The PN coalition's emphasis on supporting the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) communities aligns with their agenda to secure support from *bumiputera* voters – i.e., ethnic Malays and other indigenous ethnic groups. FELDA is a government agency that supports farmers and planters, many of whom are *bumiputera*. By prioritizing the needs and interests of the FELDA communities, the PN coalition seeks to gain their support and address their specific challenges and aspirations.

However, it is important to note that the PN coalition includes an Islamic party as part of its core ideology. While the PN manifestos may primarily focus on healthcare and supporting specific communities, the presence of an Islamic party within the coalition introduces a different ideological dimension. The advocacy for an Islamic state and the implementation of Shariah laws may attract support from hardcore Islamic supporters, but it can also generate debates and discussions regarding the role of religion in governance and its compatibility with a multicultural society. Notably, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), as one of the constituent parties in the Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition, had a significant impact by winning more votes than any other individual party in the election through a nationwide “green wave” (Ostwald & Nadzri 2023).

In contrast, the PH coalition’s manifestos highlight their reform-oriented agenda. By focusing on bread-and-butter issues such as providing free school breakfast and combating corruption, they aim to address immediate concerns that directly impact people’s daily lives (Aun 2022). The emphasis on giving more priority to Sabah and Sarawak recognizes the unique challenges and aspirations of these regions and seeks to bridge the development gap between them and Peninsular Malaysia. The commitment to eliminating discrimination and representing the interests of all groups underscores their vision of a more inclusive and equitable society.

Despite the promises outlined in the manifestos of the three major coalition parties, it is important to acknowledge that the actual implementation of these policies and initiatives depends on the outcome of the general elections (GE15) and the formation of a government. The clarity and execution of these manifestos will become evident once one of the coalition parties assumes power and begins translating their promises into action. However, it all depends on the strategies taken by these coalitions in addressing the pressing issues among the people. As stated by Zawiyah and Mohammad Agus (2019), there are mainly two subjects that matter to them the most. Firstly, there are concerns related to political and administrative matters, including corruption, the misuse of power, and the improper use of government finances. Secondly, economic issues such as the introduction of a goods and services tax, the increasing cost of living, rising petrol prices, and the instability of the national economy are also significant factors. As a consequence, it could have an impact on the outcomes of general elections, resulting in a transformation of Malaysia's political landscape.

POLLING DAY: A NEW DAWN UNVEILED

The 15th General Election (GE15) took place successfully on November 19, 2022, with polling centers operating from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. in Peninsular Malaysia and 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. in Sabah and Sarawak, according to The Star (2022). There were 21,173,638 registered voters, comprising approximately 49.83% male voters and 50.17% female voters. However, the actual voter turnout stood at 15,817,307

people, accounting for 74.70% of the registered voters. Among the voters, there were approximately 265,531 early voters, including military, police, and General Operation Forces personnel and their spouses.

Political Party/Coalition	Number of Parliamentary Seats Won
Pakatan Harapan	82
Perikatan Nasional	74
Barisan Nasional	30
Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS)	23
Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS)	6
Others	7
Total	222

Table 2: 15th General Election Results. Source: Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia.

The Election Commission (EC) stated that around 1.4 million new voters between the ages of 18 and 20 were eligible to cast their votes for the first time following the passage of a law by the Parliament that lowered the minimum voting age from 21 to 18. A total of 222 parliamentary seats were up for contest, with 9,536 polling stations available for voters. The number of parliamentary candidates stood at 945 individuals, with 818 male candidates and 127 female candidates. The youngest candidate was 23 years old, while the oldest candidate was 96 years old, as reported on the official website of the Election Commission (Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia, n.d.). It is important to note that a simple majority of 112 parliamentary seats is required to form a federal government.

ANWAR IBRAHIM'S POLITICAL COMEBACK

The 15th General Elections left Malaysia in a state of unprecedented political uncertainty. The absence of a party or coalition with a clear majority to form a government was a historic occurrence. The top contenders in the election were Pakatan Harapan (PH), Perikatan Nasional (PN), and Barisan Nasional (BN), each vying for dominance.

PH emerged as the frontrunner, securing the highest number of votes and winning 82 parliamentary seats. Their strong performance was attributed to their reformist agenda and promises to address bread-and-butter issues. PN closely followed with 74 seats, mainly banking on their healthcare-focused manifestos, particularly their *MyPrihatin* health card proposal. However, BN, the long-standing ruling coalition, performed poorly compared to previous elections, managing to secure only 30 seats (Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia, n.d.).

The most surprising development was the rise of PAS, an Islamic party that became the single party with the most parliamentary seats within the PN bloc, winning 43 seats. The "*Green Wave*" (popularly

known for PAS's party flag color) phenomenon, characterized by PAS's increasing popularity among their traditional rural supporters in Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu, expanded to urban areas as well. This shift was evidenced by the support PAS received from new urban voters in states like Penang, Perak, and Selangor.

DAP, a predominantly Chinese-based party, emerged as the second-highest winner with 40 parliamentary seats. Their success was fueled by disillusionment among Chinese voters towards BN and GPS, particularly due to concerns about the latter's inability to address community-specific issues. GPS, a coalition representing Sarawak's interests, secured only 23 seats out of the 31 they contested. Chinese voter support swung towards opposition parties, notably DAP Sarawak.

The election outcome resulted in a hung parliament, where no single party or coalition possessed the necessary simple majority to form a government. As a result, the King played a crucial role in deciding the next steps. After engaging with various party leaders, including Muhyiddin and Anwar Ibrahim, the King determined that PH should form the government due to their majority support in parliament. PH successfully assembled a coalition consisting of PH, BN, GPS, GRS, and other parties, totaling 148 seats (Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia, n.d.).

Anwar Ibrahim's political comeback was a significant highlight of GE15. His skillful negotiation and ability to convince rival parties to unite behind him enabled him to transform the election's murky landscape. This consolidation of diverse political forces into a unified front demonstrated the willingness of parties to set aside their core principles and ideologies for the sake of political survival. BN, once the dominant ruling coalition, became the kingmaker in this election, wielding influence with their 30 parliamentary seats. Their support proved instrumental in granting Anwar Ibrahim the two-thirds majority necessary to form a stable government.

Finally, after a protracted period of uncertainty, Anwar Ibrahim was sworn in as the 10th Prime Minister on November 24, 2022. He declared the newly formed government as a "Unity Government," emphasizing the collaboration of parties from opposing sides of the political spectrum. This unity government aimed to address the challenges facing Malaysia through collective governance and the representation of diverse interests. The formation of this unique coalition marked a departure from traditional political dynamics, reflecting the evolving landscape of Malaysian politics.

THE EMERGENCE OF "GREEN WAVE"

The wave that swept through Malaysia during GE15 caught everyone off guard, including analysts who had spoken to the people and analyzed the data. The magnitude of this unexpected surge was beyond anyone's prediction, propelling the nation into uncharted territory. Surprisingly, it was the Malay-

Muslim wave originating from the east coast that inundated not only its traditional strongholds but also vast areas of the northern peninsula, including urban centers. This wave consisted not only of rural Malays but also middle-class Malays, including civil servants. This unexpected support for the Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition, which was formed just three years prior, can be attributed to this phenomenon (Kathirasen 2022).

Who could have anticipated that PAS, a partner in the PN coalition, would emerge with the highest number of parliamentary seats? Previously perceived as a regional player, PAS secured 44 seats, surpassing the Democratic Action Party's (DAP) 40 seats. This remarkable achievement by PAS is particularly noteworthy considering that in the 14th general election, the party won only 18 seats in the Dewan Rakyat. A survey conducted by Merdeka Center between October 19 and October 28, involving 1,209 voters from diverse ethnic backgrounds, indicated that 26% of respondents supported the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition, 24% backed Barisan Nasional (BN), and a mere 13% supported PN. Even the Economist Intelligence Unit had predicted that BN would emerge victorious in GE15 and form the government.

According to Kathirasen (2022), the emergence of the "Green Wave" can be attributed to several factors, namely despair, disgust, fear, hope, and the influence of young voters. The economic hardships faced by Malaysian families, particularly the rising prices of essential goods, have created a sense of despair. This struggle is not limited to the B40 group (lower-income bracket) but also affects middle-income earners. These despairing voters, feeling that the UMNO-led coalition government was not adequately addressing their concerns, turned to alternative options, driven in part by the messaging efforts of both PN and PH.

There is a growing disgust among Malaysians towards corruption, with UMNO being portrayed as its epitome. This perception has been amplified by PH and PN during their election campaigns. Malaysians, especially the Malays, are frustrated that the actions of some leaders tarnish their community's reputation. They do not want to be associated with a party that condones corruption simply because they share the same ethnic background. Engaging in political corruption necessitates the collaboration of politicians who are ready to switch allegiance to different political parties and are unashamed of being labeled as "political frogs" due to their pursuit of materialistic gains (Sopi 2023).

The large turnout at PH's campaign events and the momentum generated by its leader, Anwar Ibrahim, created a sense of unease among many Malays. Over the years, parties like UMNO, PAS, and even Dr. Mahathir Mohamad have sowed seeds of fear within the Malay community, portraying the Democratic Action Party (DAP) as an evil entity that would jeopardize Malay privileges if it came to power. These parties have suggested that the Malays would be marginalized in their own country under DAP's rule.

Recently, PAS leader Hadi Awang even insinuated that the DAP had links to communism, knowing well that Malaysians hold a strong aversion to communism (Free Malaysia Today 2022).

The combination of these factors has contributed to the rise of the Green Wave and the shifting political landscape in Malaysia. The electorate's disillusionment, coupled with the aspirations of the younger generation, has paved the way for new political dynamics and the emergence of alternative alliances and ideologies. Gaining the backing of the digitally adept younger generation is a critical element in the strategy for the 15th General Election campaign. The PN coalition, especially PAS, has played their cards very well to attract young voters, especially from the Malay ethnic group.

Anwar Ibrahim has consistently defended the Democratic Action Party (DAP), a key component of the PH coalition. Both Anwar and the DAP have emphasized that, considering the demographics of Malaysia, Malays have no reason to fear as they form the majority and hold prominent positions in the country, including in the police, army, and civil service. They argue that in Malaysia, where everyone is treated equally, the government would assist all races, not solely focusing on the Malays. Anwar's vision is inclusive, aiming to help the poor of all ethnicities, be they Malay, Chinese, Indian, Kadazandusun, or any other racial or background group. However, these arguments have largely been ignored or disregarded by those who are unwilling to acknowledge the truth. It is vital to acknowledge that competition driven by ethnic factors and divisive politics will persist in Malaysia, even within more competitive and democratic electoral settings (Dettman & Pepinsky 2023).

This group of Malays believes they can rely on Muhyiddin to champion Malay causes, as he has publicly stated, "I am Malay first, Malaysian second" (Kathirasan 2022). PAS, on the other hand, positions itself as fighting for the dignity of Islam, a sentiment that resonates strongly with these voters. During the campaign, PN leaders skillfully played on the Malays' fear. For instance, in the final days of campaigning, Muhyiddin spoke of a purported plot by Jews to colonize Malaysia and convert the country to Christianity. Many who voted for PN did so in the hope that this coalition would bring political stability to the nation. Since the previous general election, especially following the controversial Sheraton Move, in which Muhyiddin played a significant role, Malaysia has been plagued by political instability.

A significant segment of those swept up in this wave are likely young voters, including those participating in their first election due to the automatic voter registration and the lowered voting age to 18. Young individuals from the east coast states, influenced by PAS's ideology and slogans, naturally gravitate towards the party. Initially, PAS gained an edge when it came to receiving votes from 18-year-old voters who attended religious schools and were participating in their first-ever election. The majority of these inexperienced young voters faced confusion in deciding which political party or candidate aligned with their preferences, mainly because they lacked adequate political awareness. In Malaysia, rural and semi-rural regions are primarily populated by Muslims, and these areas contain

numerous Islamic schools. These schools are typically privately managed or financially supported by political organizations, and their curriculum is heavily focused on Islamic teachings (Sopi 2023).

Notably, many of these youngsters, having attended Islamic religious schools or received Islamic education, would naturally align with a political party that promotes Islam. Hence, it is understandable why PN, particularly PAS, garnered overwhelming support in Kelantan, Terengganu, and much of Pahang. This wave gained momentum and extended to states like Perlis, Kedah, mainland Penang, Perak, and even Putrajaya.

PN utilized effectively social media, particularly platforms like TikTok, to engage with young voters. The catchy “PNbest” song, for example, resonated with the youth. It emphasized PN’s commitment to providing a clean, stable, and caring government without resorting to belittling or ridiculing anyone. The song’s lyrics promised that corruption, abuse of power, and racial discord would become history under PN. The accompanying video clip showcased Malaysians of diverse ethnic backgrounds, not solely Malays, highlighting inclusivity (Perikatan Nasional Bangi 2022).

CONCLUSION

The 2022 general election in Malaysia marked a watershed moment that brought significant changes and complexities to the country’s political landscape. The aftermath of the election left both Malaysians and the international community astounded by the intricate dynamics that unfolded. It was a time of political intrigue, with conspiracies and betrayals among politicians taking center stage, which seemed to mock the very foundations of Malaysia’s political system.

Despite the tense atmosphere, one remarkable aspect was the maturity and civic consciousness displayed by the majority of Malaysians. Despite being at a crossroads, there were no major outbreaks of violence or public disorder. This demonstrated the underlying commitment of the populace to the five national principles, known as the *Rukun Negara*, which emphasize unity, harmony, and respect for all.

According to Washida (2023), the emergence of an Islamist party (PAS) in the 2022 general election raised alarm that a significant movement toward an ethno-religious backlash was unfolding in Malaysia. The GE15 delivered a powerful message about the enduring influence of racial-based politics in Malaysia. Ethnicity remained a significant factor that shaped voters’ political choices. It served as a reminder that the political landscape in Malaysia continues to be deeply intertwined with ethnic identities and the concerns and aspirations of different communities.

This realization has significant implications for future elections, as it raises questions about the potential for shifts in voting patterns, especially among the youth and first-time voters. Their perspectives and motivations, influenced by socio-political dynamics, have the potential to reshape the electoral outcomes and political landscape.

The GE15 also highlighted the possibility of change and the fluidity of political alliances. The formation of a unity government led by Anwar Ibrahim, comprising a coalition of opposition parties, marked a historic moment in Malaysian politics. However, the task ahead for Anwar Ibrahim and his government is immense. They must navigate the delicate balance of accommodating diverse interests and ideologies within the coalition, all while delivering on the promises made during the election campaign. The success and longevity of the unity government depend on Anwar Ibrahim's ability to foster compromise, maintain stability, and effectively govern until the next general election.

The complexity and fascination of Malaysian politics lie in the interplay of multiple factors. It is a mosaic of diverse ethnicities, competing ideologies, and evolving socio-political dynamics. The ability to adapt, forge alliances, and reconcile differences is critical for political actors to succeed in this complex landscape.

In conclusion, the GE15 was a turning point in Malaysia's political history, presenting a mix of challenges and opportunities. The election emphasized the enduring influence of racial-based politics, the potential impact of the youth vote, and the ability to form unexpected alliances. The unity government led by Anwar Ibrahim faces the daunting task of navigating the diverse interests within the coalition. The intricate nature of Malaysian politics continues to captivate observers, as it unfolds in a captivating, unique, and ever-evolving manner.

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