

The 15th General Election in Malaysia: Pakatan Harapan Resurgence amidst Democratic Backslidings

Pilihan Raya Umum ke 15 di Malaysia: Kebangkitan Semula Pakatan Harapan di Tengah-Tengah Kemerostan Demokrasi

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Abstract: Despite a growing alarm on the spread of authoritarianism, albeit, in many forms, Malaysia appears to be stable and unscathed. Decades of authoritarianism have matured the opposition forces in Malaysia. This study traces the development of events leading up to the 15th general elections (GE15) in Malaysia and will argue that the adverse effect of democratic backsliding in the November 2022 general election in Malaysia warranted undesirable outcomes. Politically engineered form of an internal sabotage was unpredictable and yet inevitable that ousted the elected government of Pakatan Harapan (PH) and replaced with a new form of authoritarian successor parties (ASPs) known as Perikatan Nasional (PN). Growing political instability met its fate when Barisan Nasional (BN) was back in the game through the royal mandate. Eventually BN's internal struggle paved way for the GE15 despite of UMNO's miscalculation that it could win under the pretext of people's mandate. Thus, GE15 witnessed a direct competitive election between the three main contenders, PN, BN, and PH. This study is based on an extensive fieldwork and author's direct observation. An informal and unstructured interview with the voters and party members are also conducted for the purpose of obtaining a deep insight on the electoral events.

Keywords: 15th general election; authoritarian; Barisan Nasional; Pakatan Harapan; Perikatan Nasional; opposition;

Abstrak: Walaupun kebimbangan yang semakin meningkat mengenai penyebaran autoritarianisme, walaupun dalam pelbagai bentuk, Malaysia nampaknya stabil dan tidak terjejas. Bertahun lamanya autoritarianisme telah memantapkan kuasa pembangkang di Malaysia. Kajian ini mengesan perkembangan peristiwa menjelang pilihan raya umum ke-15 (PRU15) di Malaysia dan akan berhujah bahawa kesan buruk kemunduran demokrasi pada pilihan raya umum November 2022 di Malaysia mewujudkan implikasi yang tidak diingini. Sabotaj dalaman yang diolah secara politik tidak dapat diramalkan dan membawa kepada pengusiran kerajaan Pakatan Harapan (PH) yang telah dipilih dan digantikan dengan parti pengganti autoritarian (ASP) seperti Perikatan Nasional (PN). Ketidakstabilan politik yang semakin tegang berakhir apabila Barisan Nasional (BN) kembali beraksi melalui mandat Diraja. Akhirnya krisis dalaman BN membuka jalan kepada PRU15. Justeru, PRU15 menyaksikan persaingan pilihan raya secara langsung di antara tiga pencabar utama iaitu: PN, BN dan PH. Kajian ini berdasarkan kajian lapangan dan pemerhatian secara langsung penulis. Temu bual secara tidak formal dan tidak berstruktur bersama pengundi dan ahli parti juga telah dijalankan bertujuan untuk mendapatkan gambaran mendalam dan terperinci mengenai acara pilihan raya.

Kata kunci: Pilihan Raya Umum ke-15; Barisan Nasional; Pakatan Harapan; Perikatan Nasional; Pembangkang

Introduction

Despite a growing alarm on the spread of authoritarianism, albeit, in many forms, Malaysia appears to be stable and unscathed. Decades of authoritarianism have matured the opposition forces in Malaysia. Arguably, the transition paradigm can be understood through a number of assumptions (Carothers, 2002). Interestingly, the Malaysian context fits Carothers's assumption on the three critical phases which are the opening, breakthrough, and consolidation. Unfortunately, scholars on democratic transition have been optimistic in that they see the transition as an imminent and part of basic requirement for the establishment of the new order. Malaysia's dominant authoritarian parties experienced its first electoral setback in the 12th general election (GE12) held in 2008 when the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) failed to maintain its two thirds majority in parliament. The opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR) consisting of Parti KeADILan Rakyat (PKR), Democratic Action Party (DAP), and Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) made significant gain, even though unable to form a government, in terms of parliamentary seats secured and seized back few states from BN. This leads to an assumption that Malaysian politics began to embrace the phase of opening under the pretext of the so-called Chinese tsunami that electorally swung from the ruling BN to opposition PR. This opening trend marked another footnote when the ruling BN was denied two thirds majority in the 13th general election held in 2013. BN's electoral performance in these two consecutive general elections indicated a serious decline in its legitimacy and coupled with a growing consciousness among the people as a result of globalized technology that provides the masses with different form of alternatives and this eventually has eroded the regime's image.

Pakatan Harapan (PH) administration was truly tested when it assumed political office in May 2018 with Mahathir Mohamad from Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (United Pribumi Party of Malaysia, PPBM) became the eighth prime minister. In the post GE14, the major concern was not the authoritarian challenges but to what extent that PH could defend its democratic symbol in the wake of oppositional protest posed by BN-UMNO and PAS.

Hybrid Regimes in the post-Sheraton Move: A Framework

In this section I argue that the hybrid regimes in the post-GE14 was accentuated through the prism of authoritarian successor parties (ASPs). Therefore, the argument has been extended by positioning PPBM as the end product of ASP. Experiencing an electoral breakthrough has been insufficient for the newly democratic framework to survive and sustain and it takes more than that. According to Loxton (2015), ASPs play a significant role in terms of their electoral capability in gaining political support. Due to its defining nature, ASPs are the product of the past authoritarian regimes and it perpetuates its mobilization after the downfall of the authoritarian ruling parties. ASPs do have its identical standard of procedure (SOP) by distancing itself with a typical ruling authoritarian regime in manipulating the democratic menu.

In this way, ASPs are determined to get along with other democratic-based parties and together they seek to obtain political power without attracting too much authoritarian heat. On December 2018, PPBM triggered the feature of ASPs, one of its leaders openly claimed in a party's assembly that *"it's stupid if we don't use the government resources and we have to win the election by any means necessary and without funds from the government we will not be able to sustain the party and the government has to award the developmental project and each of branch leaders must benefit out of it"* (Muhammad, 2018). Such Machiavellian remarks was criticized as it symbolized another version of BN and the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like BERSIH even warned PPBM and reminded them on why did BN collapse at the first place in 2018. For obvious reasons, it was not a coincidence since Loxton (2015) has reminded us that the ASPs potentially inherited the feature of clientelism of distributing the material benefits in securing the votes in the future.

Arguably, the adverse effect of democratic backsliding was severe due to an internal sabotage that led to the downfall of elected PH government through an engineered Sheraton Move that took place on February 2020 and this form of backdoor government was perceived as undemocratic (Panneerselvam & Tayeb, 2023). In a way, the ASPs can only operate within the hybrid framework and its existence is meant to intercept the democratic transition. Apparently, the phase of consolidation during the PH era did not materialize and the Sheraton Move was another turning point in the history of "New Malaysia" in which Muhyiddin Yassin and PPBM and a few PKR members led by Azmin Ali defected from PH. With a support lent from BN and PAS, they formed a new government known as Perikatan Nasional (National Alliance/ PN) with Muhyiddin as the ninth prime minister replacing Mahathir Mohamad through a royal endorsement on March 1, 2020. Therefore, it marked the opening chapter of hybrid regimes in Malaysia under Muhyiddin's PN. Hybrid regime is understood as a considerable amount of regime modification (Azlan & Nadzri,

2023). Electoral competition is realized under the pretext of pseudodemocracy while some other democratic features of governing are systematically percolated without causing too much heat that can backfire the regime's in power. Since there was not any electoral competition during the global pandemic and the only available playing field for Muhyiddin's regime was the Parliament.

Methodology

This study adopted the qualitative method as a research technique. Qualitative means that this study is designed appropriately by considering several qualitative elements such as an interpretative process, fieldwork observation, and unstructured interviews. This study is concerned with the field of political science, especially Malaysia's electoral politics and therefore it has been suggested that the analysis in this study relied heavily on the qualitative primary data. The fieldwork was conducted during the two-week electoral campaign and the author had the opportunity to discuss and interview with some of the voters in different parliamentary constituencies. Besides that, this study also referred to secondary sources such as books, journals, and newspapers.

Findings and Discussion

The Road to GE15: An Ephemeral Confidence

Regardless of the diminished support and the unconvincing numbers had the BN secured in the GE14, concomitant with the BN's remarkable performance in a series of by-elections held during the PH administration, BN ostensibly portrayed itself as the "dominant" force particularly within the context of Melaka and Johor state elections held in November 2021 and March 2022 by denying the PH and PN's chances of winning. Thus, inter-coalitions disputes were inevitable and the GE15 was called early than its expiration date. Therefore, an important features of campaign strategies, electoral mobilization, and issues pertaining to the each of the contesting parties (PH, BN, and PN) in the GE15 will be examined in the next section.

PH: Anwar Factor

Basically, PH was formed on September 2015 consisting of PKR, DAP, and Parti Amanah Negara (National Trust Party/AMANAH). The establishment of PH this time was materialized without the presence of PAS. Senior leaders from PAS decided that they only cooperate with PKR and such decision was due to PAS's enmity with DAP which had developed even when they were in Pakatan Rakyat (PR). How PH was able to unseat the dominant party of BN in the 2018 election can be explained by a complex set of factors. In 2016, political cooperation was seen inevitable when Mahathir made a surprise visit and met Anwar in a courtroom and revealed his intention to work closely in unseating Najib's regime in the next GE14. Arguably, it was the PH's manifesto that heavily influenced the voters to vote out BN in the GE14 (Nazaruddin & Yusoff, 2023). In return, Mahathir would plead to the King for the royal pardon for the release of Anwar from prison, in which Mahathir did and the King had granted a royal pardon to Anwar after the election and he was promised the premiership by Mahathir (Shukri, 2020).

As Anwar had no choice but agreed to Mahathir's proposal, Najib blatantly condemned the meeting and claimed that as Mahathir's desperate tactic by reaching out to Anwar. Even Mahathir definitely knew that the shortest route to secure the electoral victory over the ruling BN was to extend his political relationship with Anwar and PH and also to avoid from three-cornered fight. After months of relentlessly campaigning, albeit with a number of BN authoritarian maneuver, democratic breakthrough did persist.

In the post-Sheraton Move, PKR experienced a serious deficit of trust in terms of party' members' loyalty because PKR was recorded as the highest defectors involved in the said move. In retaliation, Anwar declared an all-out war upon the PKR traitors few months before the GE15. The unofficial mega campaign initially started on September 2020 in Gombak parliamentary constituency and it was Anwar's intention to send a clear message to Azmin Ali since Gombak was long known as his formidable stronghold and he stated that "*In our election strategy, the constituencies that we will attack the most are those that have been chosen by the people to look after them but they were betrayed and that is the reason why we are focusing on these areas to punish and topple them*" (Asyraf, 2022).

In a conversation with PKR's hard core supporter who is also a voter in Wangsa Maju constituency, he claimed that Anwar's decision in placing Amirudin Shari as PKR's candidate in Gombak was a strategic move because Amirudin is Selangor Menteri Besar (Chief Minister/MB) and would likely be able to pull a significant amount of cross-ethnic electorates to the PH. He further told that all of his family members are registered voters in Gombak and

they would vote Azmin out from Selangor due to his party's betrayal. This clearly signified that not only in Gombak but in the whole Selangor, party's identification remained relevant and significant.

During the election campaign, the authors followed up closely on PH machinery at the grass root level especially on how they mobilized their campaign strategies. In several interviews conducted with the PH's campaign team, they revealed that Anwar strategically targeted few hot seats. Before the team moved in, they had conducted an internal research in gauging the voters' sentiment in a selected constituencies and they found that the level of support towards PH and PN had increased significantly by leaving the BN behind. And based on these preliminary findings, Anwar had focused its campaign by attacking PN especially PAS and moreover the location of the mass sermons was based on the internal survey conducted by the party's machinery.

Besides that, the details of Anwar's visitation in the targeted constituencies, either in the peninsular or Sabah and Sarawak, had been made available in the party's social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and many more. Top party's leaders and other candidates from DAP, AMANAH, and MUDA were also using the same method in drawing the crowds as many as they could. Based on the field observation, the author noticed that the PH mobilized its campaign by splitting the party's figures in a targeted place and at one point they met and delivered their speeches and split again. For instance, in Tampin constituency in Negeri Sembilan, it was seen that more than a thousand had attended Anwar's speech. On the other occasions, based on our discussion with one of PKR's informants, the plan for sending Anwar to contest in Tambun constituency in Perak had been arranged by Rafizi even before the nomination of candidacy and it was further argued that Rafizi's team had carried out a research to find out the level of actual support that Anwar would receive if he contested in Tambun and they found that around 40% of Malay voters would vote for Anwar and PH only had to ensure that the non-Malay vote is on Anwar's side. This explained the reason why PH decided to make Perak as its 'front line' in the GE15 as part of the accumulated initiatives to establish PH corridor state in the west coast of peninsular and PH initiated their campaign by organizing the party's largest convention in Ipoh, Perak on October and based on this geopolitical justification, PH could draw a huge number of voters out of the west coast.

In terms of manifesto, PH unveiled its 98 pages of manifesto with the caption of 'Kita Boleh: Tawaran Harapan PRU15' (We Can: GE15 Offer of Hope) in convincing the voters that PH is an alternative. The manifesto precisely focused on the first 10 points which are tackling the rising cost of living, eliminating corruption and consolidating democratic institutions, empowering a youth economic opportunities, saving the lost generation (in education), building a resilient protection of natural disaster, tackling an issue of contract medical doctor, tackling gender inequality, the empowerment of Sabah and Sarawak regions, increase the level competitiveness among the needed people, and preserving the natural treasure for the next generation. Arguably, some voters might be attracted towards the party's manifesto and that could be the source of vote attraction but some other might probably vote based on party's identification and remained ignore about the content of the manifesto. Since the GE15 was dubbed as the mother of elections and therefore the manifesto's focus must be substantial enough to convince at least the affected section who are really in need of socio-political assistance.

BN: fractured mobilization

In the post-GE14, the BN-UMNO came to power via undemocratic coup that denied the elected government of PH. Unfortunately, inter-coalitions crisis persisted between the BN and PN during the pandemic of Covid-19 which saw a nationwide lockdown for a few months until it was lifted up. After that, BN had regained its political bonus in the Melaka and Johor state elections which had witnessed its return with a massive majority despite of low turnout rate in both elections. Based on this electoral performance premise, BN boldly claimed that the voters had returned to them and argued that it is time to hold for the next GE15. This had impacted the position of the current prime minister Ismail Sabri Yaakub at that time either to continue his administration or to listen to the party's demand. Arguably, the GE15 was called early due to UMNO's internal crisis between the president's camp Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and the other camp who is developing a close relationship with PN.

After a constant pressure from UMNO, Ismail finally announced the dissolution of parliament on October 2022 and this eventually paved way for the next GE15 within 60 days. From UMNO's point of view, the election was necessary to be held immediately in order to counter the narrative of 'back door' government in which they formed during the Sheraton crisis and besides that, UMNO probably did not want to lose the Melaka and Johor momentum as they strongly believed that the voters were on their side and they could become the dominant party again in this time. UMNO's secretary general Ahmad Maslan argued that the prime minister's position could not hold any longer and

dissolving the parliament is the only way out from this political impasse. In addition, PN's attitude in openly declaring a war towards BN was part of this immediate call for elections. BN's only aim this time was to form a government without the involvement of Muhyiddin PN and it could only be achieved if BN's secured a simple majority at least. Clearly, BN's desire for political power had dragged PH and PN into this highly competitive election ever. PPBM's chief of information Wan Saiful Wan Jan claimed that UMNO's assertiveness in calling for an early election was due to its plan in installing Ahmad Zahid as the prime minister.

Arguably, in the GE15, BN was totally uncoordinated and lack of intra-party understanding, factionalism, and elite breakup which had caused its poor electoral performance ever (Nadzri & Azlan, 2023). During UMNO's meeting involving 191 of its branches, a motion of supporting Ismail Sabri as the prime minister candidate has been introduced and received support unanimously and Ismail would be the BN's poster boy in the campaign. This was strictly due to a circulating rumor citing that BN would interfere in some of its top leaders ongoing court cases if it becomes a government and BN vehemently denied that it would not happen on its watch. This would be unprecedented to have a party's president who is not a prime minister and vice versa and since UMNO was not raised up that way, it would be a new political culture to be embedded in the party's upbringing. In the leading up to the GE15, BN decided to contest in 191 out 222 parliamentary seats. UMNO's last massive victory in securing more than two third majority was in 2004 elections under the leadership of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (Pak Lah) but since then the party had failed to repeat the same trend except in Melaka and Johor state elections. This had pressured the party to exhibit their outstanding performance in the GE15 despite of tight financial budget and lack of resources and these contributed towards BN's slowing down in its campaign. The decision of contesting in 191 seats had led to a direct clash with PAS especially in the east coast of Kelantan and Terengganu with at least 27 seats.

One of BN's strategies was introducing 70% of new face candidates and many incumbents would be replaced with a new one based on the president's authority and discretion. BN also attempted to fill in at least 30% of women candidates and though to the knowledge of the party, it would be a tough decision to implement such practice. In the same time, BN also gave an opportunity to the 'Friends of BN' to contest in the GE15 such as Parti Cinta Malaysia (Love Party of Malaysia/PCM), Indian Progressive Front (IPF), Malaysian Muslim Indian Congress (KIMMA), Makkal Sakti, and Punjabi Party of Malaysia (PPM). Besides that, it has been argued that in the GE15, BN's tactics of replacing the incumbents had made the party moving backward and it triggered an intra-party crisis. For instance, when Rembau constituency in Negeri Sembilan was given to UMNO's deputy president Mohamad Hasan or Tok Mat to contest, it marked another breakup chapter in Khairy Jamaluddin (KJ) as the incumbent of the seat. During the campaign, KJ was seen as not in the same ship with Ahmad Zahid and made some 'disturbing' comments on the party's president. He even claimed that he did not received any signal from UMNO's top leadership in terms of seats selection and he had to choose on his own by picking up Sungai Buloh constituency in Selangor. Circulating rumors suggested that it was a strategy that would end his political career. In Selangor, party's identification is substantial and on the PH sides. In fact, KJ's popularity is insufficient in winning Sungai Buloh and presumably PH would prevail.

Apparently, BN's strategy of development and political stability had been utilized during the campaign (Chin, 2023). Temporary prime minister Ismail Sabri, in his political sermons, had promised that if he is appointed again as prime minister, he would approve the application made by the hawkers and some other small business communities and urged them to 'help' the BN by accentuating the pretext of 'you help me I help you okay' in front of the thousands of audience in Dataran Merdeka and he also asserted that if the people would like the 2023 budget to be implemented, BN must be voted. Special attention was also given to the Federal and Land Development Authority (FELDA) settlers in the forms of few incentives. Basically, BN's strength lies in the rural voters especially the FELDA settlers who are considered as loyal to the BN's cause for decades. The settlers who constituted the majority of Malay believed that BN's had taken care of their welfare and in return, they offer their gratitude to the BN in the form of substantial vote. However, Ismail also realized that the current situation was unlike before in which BN could win an election even if the party's placed a '*songkok*' as the candidate.

Despite of BN's poor mobilization, the party still retained its grass root support in a few states. The involvement of the young and first time voters in the GE15 had actually contributed towards the BN's positive development in terms of rural support. A first time voter in the Jempol constituency in Negeri Sembilan confessed that she would vote for BN in the elections because of the party's past record in which had preserved decades of stability uninterruptedly until the 2018 elections and this was in line with BN's manifesto that carried a theme of 'Kestabilan dan Kemakmuran' (Stability and Prosperity) as the guiding principle of its mobilization. In Kuala Pilah constituency, a number of young voters agreed that BN was the only solution and must be voted in. They further explained that they

chose BN because of the party's embedded ideology which promoted the idea of Malay unity and in this multi-racial societies, BN's capability in leading the nation is a guarantee of stability. However, some of them did not dismiss the fact that the anti-DAP sentiment could influence their party's selection and the special rights of Malay and Islam must be defended at all costs and BN is likely the vehicle that carries the voters' aspiration in maintaining such status quo.

PN: the communal/religious campaign

In the GE15, the coalition of Perikatan Nasional (PN) consisting of PPBM, PAS, and Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (GERAKAN) had entered the electoral competition with a question in mind on why the coalition was able to pose a significant challenge and threat to its competitors, BN and PH. Not only that they had engineered, especially the PPBM, the downfall of the PH-elected government just in a day but later on they practically re-branded their authoritarian 'welfare' image in the post pandemic of Covid-19. If in the 2018 elections, their sworn enemy would be their UMNO's predecessor but such belief drastically changed and with PH was out of game, they embraced the idea of cooperation under the pretext of safeguarding the Malay-Islam interests and keep the multi-racial DAP in check. Their primary aim of establishing the Malay-Islam dominated government was realized albeit with the politics of numbers which is probably unsustainable in the long term but they did gamble with that. Unfortunately, their grip on power was not cohesive enough to subdue the rising of UMNO. This was evidently shown in the Melaka and Johor state elections in which PN had been rejected by the voters and though the typical explanation behind the UMNO's victory was due to the low turnout rate but sufficiently UMNO had earned the credit among its rural supporters and probably due to a nostalgic factor.

Arguably, the nature of PN's campaign strategies can only be understood through its communal and religious thought. Approaching some sections in society requires a great deal of systematic deliverance. If UMNO and PH relied heavily on its politics of development and institutional reform mantra, PN probably would undertake a drastic measures and if not backward and controversial but surely is an effective one. During the campaign, PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang boldly campaigned against the PH by targeting the DAP. In his sermons, he openly asked the people to reject the DAP and its communist thought and the danger of communism that could be politically fatal. The speech had also been intensified through the president's Twitter with a hashtag #TolakDAP (reject DAP). Abdul Hadi further argued that the DAP has been closely associated with the communist in which the former had brought back the ashes of Chin Peng, former leader in Malayan Communist Party (Parti Komunis Malaya/PKM) from Thailand to Malaysia, had participated in the event of commemorating the communist, and had published a communist-ideological oriented comic book (Free Malaysia Today, 2022). Besides that, he also concerned about the future of the Malay in the DAP in which the Chinese-dominated party had nominated many Malay candidates in the elections and probably the Malay candidates were simply used or acted as a camouflage for the sake of attracting the Malay electorates to vote for the DAP.

Besides that, PAS commissioner in Perak Razman Zakaria claimed that UMNO and PH would cooperate after the GE15 and urged the voters not to vote for BN as if they would form a government with PH and with DAP inside it. Razman also accused that Anwar is bringing the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) into this country and he would like to legalize the same sex marriage (Leong, 2022). In the same time, Abdul Hadi also reminded its members if they betray the party, they will be condemned by the God. Though he did not refer to PPBM but he strongly believed that such reminder confined within to PAS only and their relationship with PPBM was practically based on a mutual belief and cooperation. At a critical juncture such as during the two weeks' period of campaign, any party would have taken a pre-cautious measure in ensuring that their members are in line and do not jump to the other party. PN's candidate in Ketereh, Kelantan had even claimed that he is a 'candidate' from Allah and not some kind of a parachute candidate in which some rumors had alleged. To the worse, PAS chief of youth in Sik, Kedah had even boldly claimed that those who voted for BN and PH would eventually enter the hell. Clearly, it was part of PN-PAS strategy in creating the culture of fear under the pretext of religious sentiments. This was not a first time incident for such statement to be told publicly. Some people might find it hard to actually believe in such statement but in reality, some people do not hesitate in holding onto that as if PAS is holding the 'key' to the heaven and hell. PN's election campaign precisely targeted the DAP and its relationship with PKR and AMANAH. The attack has also been extended to UMNO as well. PN was profoundly confident that the Malay voters would reject the BN due to UMNO's president Ahmad Zahid allegedly corruption cases.

As for PAS, they strictly justified their political action based on Islamic understanding and in that way, they easily maintain their cohesiveness under a dire circumstances and that makes the party incomparable to the others in terms of religious attachment. A voter in Rasah constituency in Negeri Sembilan told us that he would vote for PN based on the message that the coalitions carried such as the welfare of the Malay in which it must be preserved.

Another first time voter from Ampang constituency in Selangor revealed that he firmly believed in what the PN has offered in their manifesto. These interviews were actually tally with author’s informal discussions with other voters in which they exhibited a sign of support towards the PN. Arguably because they had enough with BN and PH and they would shift their attention to PN and this probably was attributed to Muhyiddin’s factor during his tenure as the eight prime minister.

With PAS on its side, it surely yields a promising outcome. PN’s promoted its manifesto by the theme of ‘PN Best: Prihatin, Bersih, Stabil’ (Concerns, Clean, Stable) by offering one million jobs, housing loans without interests, 25% discount of educational loans, and many more. PN also emphasized about their plan of eradicating the corruption in their manifesto by introducing the Anti-Corruption Plan (CAP) as part of their serious efforts and commitment in having a clean administration.

When the elections came near, Muhyiddin blatantly raised up an issue involving the PH and the Christianity/Jews agenda and asserted that there was a group of Christianity and Jews planning to take over Malaysia (Malaysiakini, 2022). A short video clip of Muhyiddin’s speech was shared by the TikTok users and watched around 605,800 times. Though the claims did not point out any PH leaders in particular but later on he denied that and told that his speeches were edited outside the context. Though PN knew that this type of campaign strategy would further distant them from the non-Malay section but still they strongly believed in their controversial undertaking. While the PPBM heavily focused on the empowerment of the Malays and PAS consistently fed their support base with religious-based spiritual inclusion. This particular combination undoubtedly would draw many of its supporters.

Electoral Outcomes

The results indicated a serious split of vote among the electorates especially the Malay bloc. All the party’s leaders, except Anwar, had defended their constituencies. In Tambun, PH’s leader Anwar Ibrahim unseated Ahmad Faizal Azumu of PPBM with a majority of 3,736 vote with a voter turnout of 124,769. Clearly, Anwar’s experiment in changing his battlefield had succeeded and punished the traitor who abandoned the elected government during the Sheraton crisis. While in Bagan Datuk, Ahmad Zahid had slightly won by defeating PH candidate Shamsul Iskandar Mohd Akin with a majority of 348 vote. It was a close call for the UMNO’s president and if it was not for the obvious split of vote, PH would have been able to unseat Ahmad Zahid. In Pagoh, Muhyiddin showed a good trend by securing a majority of 10,007 and leaving behind PH and BN. In Marang, PAS also recorded a substantial increase in terms of vote obtained in which Abdul Hadi secured a majority of 41,729 vote.

Table 1
Results of the Malaysian General Election of 2022

Parliament		
Party	Seats Contested	Seats Won
Pakatan Harapan (PH)	220	82
Perikatan Nasional (PN)	171	74
Barisan Nasional (BN)	178	30
Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS)	31	23
Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS)	13	6
Parti Warisan Sabah (WARISAN)	52	3
Other/Independent	120	4
TOTAL	785	222

Note: voter turnout, 73.8% (excluding Padang Serai, Baram, and Kota Marudu parliamentary constituencies).
Source: Election Commission of Malaysia (EC), 19 November 2022.

Table 2

Results of the State Assemblies Election (Dewan Undangan Negeri/DUN) of 2022

State Assemblies (DUN)				
State	Pakatan Harapan (PH)	Perikatan Nasional (PN)	Barisan Nasional (BN)	Total of State Seats
Pahang	8	17	17	42
Perak	24	26	9	59
Perlis	1	14	0	15
TOTAL	33	57	26	116

Source: Election Commission of Malaysia (EC), 19 November 2022.

Arguably, the GE15 clearly indicated that it was a coalition voting. The coalition' brand and image had prevailed. The country's electoral map was clearly divided with PN settled most of its influence in the state of Kelantan, Terengganu, Perlis, and Kedah. Out of 15 seats contested in Kedah, PH won only one in Sungai Petani. No seats were obtained by PH and BN in the rest of states. To the worse, BN was extremely defeated. Only in Sabah and Negeri Sembilan that BN's share of seats was higher than that of PN and PH. Even in BN's stronghold in Johor, it could only garner 9 seats and PH managed to capture 14 seats. Only two rural seats were retained by PN such as Pagoh and Mersing. In Selangor and Melaka, BN failed to make any gains. Its traditional seats, such as in Sabak Bernam, Tanjung Karang (Selangor) and Jasin (Melaka), fell to PN. Though BN had predicted that the three-corner fight would pave way for its victory and unfortunately it was the other way around. PN had benefited the most in this competition and definitely PN had reduced the share of vote, neither the BN nor PH should receive. Quite a number of BN's strongholds had fallen to PN especially the Malay-based constituencies.

Some would suggest that this was attributed to the 'green tsunami' factor that explicitly explained PAS' resilience and dominant in the east coast of Kelantan and Terengganu and the northern part of Perlis and Kedah. PPBM's members who contested under the PAS ticket easily defeated the PH and BN. For instance, UMNO's former member Shahidan Kassim handsomely won its seat with a majority of 23,216 under the PN's ticket. This eventually ousted the 'parachute' candidate that UMNO had devised in replacing its incumbent. Besides that, another factor that could contribute to PN's success was the involvement of the first-time voters, aged from 18 to 20. Based on our informal discussion with some of this type of voter, it was revealed that their inclination to PN was based on what was given to them during the long 2 years of the pandemic Covid-19. Some of their families were heavily affected by the Covid-19 in terms of financial constraints, losing jobs, and many more. This was also supported by a study that suggested a political swing occurred due to voters' economic grievances (Washida, 2023). When Muhyiddin released a Covid-19 financial package worth of millions ringgit, they strongly remembered that 'generous' part of Muhyiddin and this has been translated into the form of a perceived votes. As for PH, they recorded a majority of parliamentary seats obtained only in Johor (14 seats), Selangor (16 seats), and Perak (11 seats). This was a good attempt for PH. If in the 2018 elections, they relied heavily on Mahathir's factor but this time, Anwar's factor alone could at least pull out 82 seats, though it was insufficient to form a simple majority but his personality in drawing a cross-ethnic voters persisted. If the campaign session was prolonged from two to three weeks, it probably would give another advantage for PH to work on something which would yield a positive outcome.

Conclusion

Arguably, the previous authoritarian regime of BN did not survive the global impact of social media. Due to the availability and easy access to any information pertaining to the current issues of Malaysian politics, people's thinking is getting critical. As a result of that global acceleration, BN was punished in the 2018 elections despite of ignoring this sudden shift which had occurred way deep in the society. And the same type of punishment was repeated in the GE15. Based on the electoral outcomes discussed above, it clearly indicated that the split of vote among the Malay electorates

had benefited the PN and had also produced a hung Parliament (Ostwald & Nadzri, 2023). Clearly BN could no longer rely on its traditional support base in some of the rural constituencies. Though BN was still dominant in Negeri Sembilan and Sabah, it did not change the fact that the party has been downgraded to the third place after the PH and PN. In the thought of these coalitions (PN, PH, and BN), they were hoping that the first-time voters would lend their support in ensuring the victory.

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