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Malaysia's Changed Electoral Landscape

By Meredith L. Weiss

SYNOPSIS

Malaysia's 15th general election revealed a restructured partisan landscape. From an essentially two-coalition parliamentary system, the runup to elections produced a third national coalition, followed by the formation of a post-election 'unity' government. While this forced consolidation allows the government to proceed, the array of political parties is deinstitutionalising, leaving a far less predictable electoral future.

COMMENTARY

Anticipation over state-level Malaysian elections later this year – as state and party leaders confer over dates, partners, and seat distribution – brings to the forefront the implications of Malaysia's 15th general election (GE15) last November. Those polls marked a turning point in Malaysian politics. Although in the past, we could not know what share of the vote each coalition would secure, we could predict with some confidence the set of contenders, and that whichever won the most seats would form the government. We now lack even that certainty.

The hopes for a comeback of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and its Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition were dramatically quashed in the polls. This development, and the solution BN and erstwhile rival Pakatan Harapan reached to collaborate in a 'unity' government, indicate how much has changed. It is too soon to say what any future election will bring, yet current conditions do suggest paths forward or likely foreclosed.

The Electoral Landscape Post-GE15

For now, what the government defines as success appears to be the simple fact of *remaining* the government. A policy agenda or set of governing priorities remains forthcoming, beyond what a late-February 2023 [draft budget](#) suggests, although

Pakatan and the BN have announced that they will contest the six state elections due by mid-2023 together.

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 ethno-religious grandstanding that dragged Pakatan down after 2018 – UMNO's and allies' ability to spin Pakatan's efforts at reform, in matters from police oversight to improving civil liberties, as 'anti-Islam' or insufficiently attentive to Malays' special position – could well resurface as the opposition Perikatan Nasional scrabbles for a foothold.

Challenges Facing the Ruling Coalition

UMNO's adamant rejection of internal reform imperils its coalition partners, apart from itself. Previously, Pakatan, like Perikatan, lambasted UMNO President Zahid Hamidi as corrupt and scheming, relying on a legible shorthand that a vote for even a progressive BN candidate was a 'vote for Zahid'. Now, Zahid is Pakatan's partner and Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's deputy. Perikatan will presumably continue in the same vein as in GE15 during 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/Pakatan alliance. (The coalition's East Malaysian parties are sufficiently differentiated to be less directly tainted, though if the government collapses, they, too, will fall. Yet, odds are good that a Perikatan alternative would seek to rope them in, regardless.)

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 six asynchronous state polls serve as a novel mid-term accountability check for the coalition in office.

Should Perikatan not only hold the states Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) currently controls, but also make measurable headway in Pakatan's, as seems likely, it could well seek to oust Anwar's government. In that case, the anti-hopping law may be the unity government's only real lifeline – and the law's potency in practice has yet to be tested.

Deinstitutionalisation of the Party System and Political Parties

More broadly, the current party system has become essentially inchoate. We cannot predict the combinations in which parties will contest, moving forward, nor how volatile their vote shares will be. Key parties, too, face eroding differentiation in their profiles, organisational weaknesses, and diminishing party loyalty. These parties are thus poorly positioned to outlast changes of leadership or to differentiate themselves from competitors.

The key parties facing institutional erosion are UMNO (and with it, the BN) and Parti

Keadilan Rakyat (PKR). UMNO came out of GE15 clearly battered, having continued its downhill slide since 2008. The party emerged stronger by being in government, but also weaker, as the highly unpopular Zahid consolidated his grip. 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 upcoming UMNO elections. He then ousted or suspended his key rivals within UMNO.

This turn marks a low point for UMNO. Its ability to secure at least more Malay votes than PKR in upcoming state elections may sustain its grip on power – Malay support remains Pakatan's Achilles heel – but UMNO will have a difficult time explaining itself to voters. UMNO is now partnering with the Democratic Action Party (DAP), a party it has attacked vehemently for decades, calling into question its ideological profile and policy stance. At the same time, UMNO will continue to face other Malay-communal parties. It seems likely that Perikatan will reprise and reinforce its message of being at least as Malay-Muslim-centred as UMNO, but less corrupt, to UMNO's further detriment.

Pakatan will likely cohere as a coalition through the next election, sustained by symbiosis and lack of viable alternatives. However, it will surely struggle to define its identity and agenda, moving forward. Pakatan developed specifically in rejection of the BN model, as a non-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 voters' perception of what the coalition represents. 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 Pakatan in the first instance.

All told, the electoral landscape is muddy. A necessary trade-off to forming a 'unity' government is loss of differentiation. That Pakatan and BN are sharing power compromises both their claims to be so distinct or autonomous as they once were. Into what configurations the parties will fall in the next GE – will Pakatan and BN contest together? – and the extent to which any will be able to count on party loyalty among voters, is wholly uncertain.

Conclusion

Overall, we find a regime on shaky ground. Party loyalty is unlikely to suffice to sustain the government in the case of a serious challenge, whether ethno-nationalist fear-mongering or an economic slowdown sufficient to preclude 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 voter 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 ever less predictable results lead the contending parties to hedge their bets.

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