



Democratization

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Four arenas: Malaysia's 2018 election, reform, and democratization

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia's 2018 election ended more than six decades of dominant party rule by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). Three questions are paramount. How did the opposition finally achieve victory? What did voters who rejected UMNO actually vote *for*? Finally, what do the answers imply for reform and democratization? We argue that Malaysia is comprised of four distinct identity-based polities, each with a unique electoral dynamic and vision for the country's political future. Using this framework provides valuable insights into UMNO's defeat, which was achieved by making inroads, largely through elite splits, into two arenas that were previously impenetrable for the opposition. One arena remains electorally pivotal and thus exerts a disproportionately large influence on the new government's reform agenda, entrenching the primacy of identity politics and ensuring the continuity of many policies that address ethnic relations. The case illustrates the extensive impact of divided polities and regionalism on democratization.

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Introduction

Malaysia's 2018 election unexpectedly ended more than six decades of dominant party rule by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and its Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition partners.¹ The regime demonstrated remarkable resilience prior to 2018, surviving the third-wave of democratization relatively unscathed, weathering the turbulence of the Asian financial crisis, and overcoming numerous internal crises over its decades in power. And yet, as results rolled in on the night of 9 May 2018, it became clear that Malaysia would transition to its first post-UMNO government since independence in 1957.

Three questions stand out in the wake of the transition. First, how did the *Pakatan Harapan* (PH) opposition finally defeat UMNO, despite a heavily biased electoral process and numerous structural obstacles? Second, what did voters who cast a ballot for PH actually vote for? Third, what do the answers to these questions imply for reform and democratization in post-transition Malaysia?

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We argue that a careful examination of the interplay between geography and identity provides important insights into these questions. Specifically, we propose that Malaysia is comprised of four distinct, identity-based polities – which we refer to as *electoral arenas* – that each have their own electoral dynamics and visions of an ideal post-transition Malaysia. In brief, these are: Northeast, East Malaysia, Peninsula Diverse, and Peninsula Malay. By explicitly disaggregating analysis of the 2018 election into these arenas, we are able to present coherent insights into Malaysia’s transition and post-transition politics.

Disaggregating an electorate to facilitate analysis of political behaviour is not novel. To the contrary, nearly all political analyses rely on some form of disaggregation. Typically, studies default to familiar categories like major administrative units or ethnic groups.² Yet these default categories are often ill-suited for understanding political behaviour due to considerable within-group variation *and* across-group consistency.³ By providing what we argue are more coherent categories, the proposed framework allows for clearer insights into Malaysia’s unprecedented transition, and permits us to make a number of distinct contributions.

First, the framework clarifies how PH finally overcame the extensive structural obstacles to achieve victory in GE14. We show that election results are highly consistent in two of the four arenas – the Northeast and Peninsula Diverse arenas – over the last three elections. The defeat of UMNO in GE14, in short, occurred due to unprecedented seat gains by PH in the *remaining two* arenas. Most of those gains were achieved by UMNO-splinter parties, making elite splits and PH’s “soft incorporation” of BN-style politics a decisive element of the electoral breakthrough.

Second, the framework highlights the high degree of coherence to the factors motivating voting behaviour *within*, but not necessarily *across*, the individual arenas. As such, it provides clarity on what voters were voting for, and consequently, how Malaysia’s transition speaks to broader theories of democratization. Modernization theory provides a compelling explanation for voting behaviour in the Peninsula Diverse arena, but is less convincing in the other arenas, where subtly different forms of identity politics and patronage politics dominate. This suggests that no single, overarching explanation for the watershed transition is appropriate.

Third, the framework provides insights into the nature of post-transition Malaysian politics, where identity plays a central role. Most votes *against* UMNO and the BN in the electorally decisive arenas were not votes *for* the *Reformasi*-inspired vision of a (relatively) post-racial Malaysia that has become associated with the *Malaysia Baharu* vision. Specifically, while many voters in the Peninsula Diverse arena that Pakatan has dominated in the last two elections support a levelling of Malaysia’s *de facto* racial hierarchy, relatively few voters from the electorally decisive Peninsula Malay arena support that form of deep social transformation. As maintaining power is conditional on retaining support in the decisive Peninsula Malay arena, PH has largely defaulted to its conservative preferences on identity-related issues. Further entrenching this cautious approach is the rapidly consolidating partnership between UMNO and the *Parti Islam se-Malaysia* (PAS), which has seized upon Malay status loss anxieties in a bid to destabilize PH and pull pivotal voters back to their parties. Consequently, PH finds promised reforms on identity-related issues too risky to press forward, leaving large tracts of the *Reformasi*-inspired reform agenda unfulfilled and the post-racial New Malaysia sought by its progressive core ever-elusive. Regardless of whether PH and the UMNO/PAS partnership are short-lived or prove durable, political competition

in Malaysia will be structured by the incentives and constraints imposed by the four arenas for the foreseeable future.

Finally, the application of the framework in the Malaysian case provides a clear illustration of what is recognized but seldom explicitly acknowledged in other contexts: the electorate in diverse societies is often deeply divided along lines that only partially map on to the default identity categories or administrative divisions. In the United States, for example, “red” and “blue” areas display strong voting consistency, but are often not ethnically homogenous or geographically contiguous, particularly after urbanization and relocation patterns of the last half century. The Malaysian case, then, provides a crucial demonstration of how regionalism in the form of the interplay between geography and identity can shape the bounds of reform and democratization.

Malaysian politics and the breakdown of dominant party rule

Origins of UMNO's dominance

The history of Malaysian politics is the history of UMNO and its coalition partners, which won every general election from independence in 1957 until 2018. So enduring and comprehensive was UMNO's dominance that Malaysia was frequently described as a quintessential dominant party system.⁴ UMNO was founded in 1946 as a vehicle to represent the interests of ethnic Malays and agitate against the British-endorsed Malayan Union, which it saw as making too many concessions to the country's large ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities.⁵ After successfully blocking the Union, UMNO ushered in Malaya's independence together with its junior coalition partners the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), thereby institutionalizing the fundamental role of ethnicity in Malaysian politics.⁶ For large stretches of its greater than 60 years in power, the coalition held a two-thirds parliamentary supermajority that allowed it to amend the constitution at will. Numerous factors account for its dominance. Malaysia's strong developmental record conferred performance legitimacy, particularly during the high-growth decades prior to the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis.⁷ The monetization of politics and resource asymmetries fundamentally advantaged the incumbent coalition,⁸ while interference in opposition politics hindered their coordination.⁹ Extensive manipulations of the electoral process also provided UMNO with fundamental advantages at the ballot box.¹⁰ As Croissant and Lorenz noted just prior to GE14, “[w]hile elections are [typically] designed to make governments, in the Malaysian context, elections are not intended to break them”.¹¹

The enduring presence of identity politics also played an important role. In addition to Malaysia's ethnic majority Malay group, the country has significant Chinese and Indian communities whose roots largely trace back to economic migration initiated by the Colonial British in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹² Malays and a small number of aboriginal groups – which are concentrated in East Malaysia – are recognized as indigenous and frequently referred to as *Bumiputera* (sons of the soil). Article 153 of the Constitution grants “Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak” a special position in the country.¹³ Moreover, it articulates mechanisms to safeguard this special position, including quotas in the civil service, education, and licencing.

Lingering tensions between the ethnic groups, fuelled by the continued relative economic weakness of the Malays, culminated in serious ethnic violence in 1969. Agitation by a faction within UMNO, which accused the party's leadership of making too many concessions to the Chinese and Indians, set the stage for the 1971 New Economic Policy (NEP), the goal of which was nothing less than the re-engineering of Malaysia's social structure through extensive positive discrimination measures that advantaged the Malays and other *Bumiputera*.¹⁴ Few areas of the economy or society were beyond its reach. In practice, it substantiated and significantly reinforced the tiered citizenship implied by Article 153, thereby underscoring the special position of the Malays at the top of that hierarchy.¹⁵

Over the decades a simplified and somewhat revisionist narrative on the relationship between Malaysia's ethnic groups has taken root. It maintains that independence was achieved through a social contract – often referred to as the “Bargain” – under which the migrant Chinese and Indian communities were granted citizenship in exchange for the Malays receiving a guarantee of political power.¹⁶ The narrative occasionally takes on particularly virulent forms, in which the pro-Malay protectionist measures become an endorsement of *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) over *Tanah Melayu* (Malay soil); the Chinese and Indian communities, by contrast, are cast as *pendatang* (recent immigrants), and thus as guests rather than legitimate co-inhabitants of the country. Within this Malay nationalist paradigm, the racial hierarchy is especially pronounced.

The breakdown of dominant party rule

In retrospect, the erosion of UMNO's dominance is rooted in the *Reformasi* movement of the late 1990s.¹⁷ This movement articulated a range of progressive social and institutional reforms, and saw the creation of the multiethnic but still predominantly Malay *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR). As a Malay-heavy centrist party, PKR was able to bridge the previously fragmented opposition, bringing together the progressive (and predominantly Chinese) Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Islamist PAS.

This partnership managed an unprecedented breakthrough in the 2008 general election, denying the BN the popular vote in the peninsula as well as its customary supermajority in parliament. A highly coordinated and energized opposition, now operating as a formal coalition named *Pakatan Rakyat* (PR), made further inroads during the 2013 general election (GE13), where it won the popular vote by 4%. Extensive malapportionment, however, provided the BN a 20% parliamentary seat advantage despite the popular vote loss, which kept a transition well at bay.¹⁸ The BN's win, despite effective opposition coordination and the unprecedented opposition popular vote victory, made a transition through elections appear nearly impossible. In the shadow of this deflating realization, the significant ideological differences between PAS and the DAP resurfaced, eventually leading to the coalition's collapse in 2015.

Several unexpected developments fundamentally upended Malaysian politics in the run-up to GE14. The most important was the growing discontent against Prime Minister Najib Razak, whose involvement in the 1MDB scandal compounded allegations of poor performance.¹⁹ Najib resorted to increasingly authoritarian tactics to ward off challenges to his leadership from within UMNO, purging his Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin and Mukhriz Mahathir, son of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad.²⁰ Those cavalier manoeuvres insulated Najib from intra-party attacks, but

also focused dissent against him. Importantly, Mahathir Mohamad himself left UMNO to form an UMNO-clone opposition party named *Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia* (Bersatu). Like UMNO, Bersatu limited its membership to Malays (and other *Bumiputera*) and maintained the objective of upholding the special position of the Malays. The new party quickly drew in other UMNO defectors. Despite this, Bersatu joined PKR, the DAP, and PAS-splinter party Amanah, to form the new *Pakatan Harapan* (PH) opposition coalition. A *de facto* partnership with another UMNO-splinter party – the *Parti Warisan Sabah* (Warisan) – expanded PH's potential reach into East Malaysia. While PKR's Anwar Ibrahim was nominally recognized as PH's leader, 92-year-old Mahathir became Chairman and Prime Minister Designate.

An unexpected transition

The election returns from 9 May 2018 shocked nearly all. Together with Warisan, PH captured 48% of the popular vote and 121 of the 222 lower house seats, well above the 112 seats required to form a government. The BN managed just 79 seats on an anaemic vote share of 34%. PAS, which contested widely as a third party, secured only 18 seats.²¹ Nearly 24 tense hours after most polls closed, Mahathir was sworn in as Malaysia's seventh Prime Minister by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, formally ending 61 years of uninterrupted UMNO rule.

How do we explain this unanticipated outcome? Several accounts highlight the role of elite defections, particularly of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, whose ability to attract votes from the country's ethnic Malay majority and to overcome interference by UMNO-aligned institutions was portrayed as vital.²² Structural changes and modernization likewise feature among the explanations, as do the effects of economic conditions, civil society activism, UMNO's loss of legitimacy due to monetization of consent, and the increasing effectiveness of PH's own personalistic politics.²³ One major edited volume focuses on divisions among the country's ethnic Malay majority, while another instead looks towards the country's ethnic minorities for insights.²⁴

In short, explanations for the transition are varied and focus overwhelmingly on particular dimensions of the election. The results themselves indicate substantial diversity in voting behaviour along ethnic and geographic lines. Credible polls from the Merdeka Centre, for example, suggest that PH captured 95% of the Chinese and 70–75% of the Indian vote, but only a meagre 25–30% of the Malay vote.²⁵ PH did not win a single seat in PAS's traditional heartland. PAS, by contrast, was almost entirely shut out of seats beyond that heartland. We argue that a careful examination of the interplay between geography and identity provides valuable insights to the core questions of GE14. To that end, we propose a novel framework which we explicate below.

Four arenas of Malaysian politics

We conceive of Malaysia as comprised of four distinct polities, each with its own unique electoral dynamics. We call these polities *electoral arenas*. The four arenas are based on Malaysia's 222 electoral districts and coded using the criteria described below. We argue that understanding Malaysian politics in this disaggregated way offers clear insights into GE14 and the country's ongoing political development.

We call the first arena **Northeast**, which comprises all districts in the northeastern states of Kelantan and Terengganu. The second is called **East Malaysia**, which

comprises all districts of Sabah and Sarawak. The third is called **Peninsula Diverse**, which we define as peninsular districts that had greater than 50% non-Malays in GE14.²⁶ Most, though not all of these, are urban or semi-urban in nature.²⁷ The final is called **Peninsula Malay**, which we define as peninsular districts outside of Kelantan and Terengganu that are greater than 50% Malay. **Figure 1** shows the geographic distribution of the four arenas within Malaysia.²⁸

The four arenas have historic origins grounded in the period of Malaysia's state formation. The **Peninsula Diverse** arena functions as the contemporary successor to the British Straits Settlements, maintaining the diverse, largely urban, and globally oriented nature of its entrepot economy roots. Historically, those areas contrasted strongly with the traditional, Sultan-controlled areas of the broader peninsula that are the origins of the **Peninsula Malay** arena. An unrelenting hunger for raw materials found in that arena catalysed British expansion beyond the coastal enclaves, eventually leading to the establishment of the Federated Malay States in 1895. The nature of resource exploitation in the new areas of British influence led to several waves of migrant labour from China and India that transformed the demographics of the western half of the peninsula, merging elements of traditional and colonial structure.

By contrast, British control over the Unfederated States was less direct, especially in the northern states of Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah, and Perlis. These states did not come under British control until their transfer from Thailand under the Bangkok Treaty of 1909. Consequently, they did not experience the same economic and demographic transformation as the rest of the peninsula.²⁹ From the 1950s onwards, PAS effectively leveraged the resulting demographic and social differences, which has helped to sustain the unique features of the region, particularly in the northeastern states of Kelantan and Terengganu.³⁰ The latter two remain distinct enough to comprise the **Northeast** arena.

In what is now **East Malaysia**, the British North Borneo Company governed Sabah, while the White Rajah dynasty governed Sarawak until Japanese occupation in 1941. As James Chin writes, “[i]n terms of history, culture and demography, there was nothing in common between the peoples of the Malayan peninsula and Borneo, other than that all were once part of the British Empire”.³¹ Indeed, Sabah and Sarawak operated more or less independently from British Malaya throughout the colonial period, and retain a distinct – and often insulated – political dynamic through today that produces occasional calls for secession from the federation.

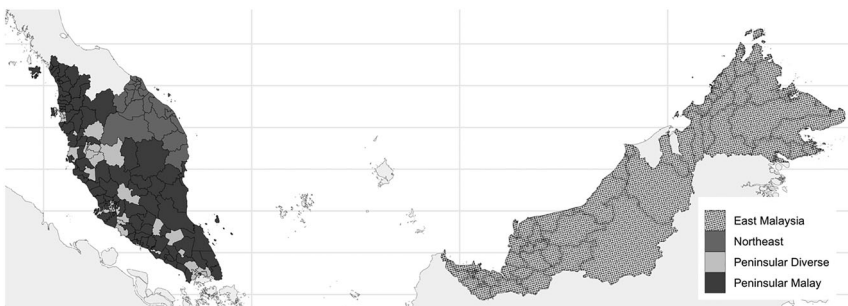


Figure 1. Geographic distribution of electoral arenas. Sources: Data from Tindak Malaysia and the Star Online. Note: Data on electoral district boundaries are from Tindak Malaysia. Data on ethnic composition of districts used to distinguish between arenas are from the Star Online.

The four arenas are ideal types. This means some individual districts have elements that we associate with multiple arenas.³² Moreover, even arenas that closely approximate the ideal type are comprised of heterogeneous voters, so not every voter will accord with the descriptions we attach to their arena. Malaysia's first-past-the-post electoral system, however, amplifies a given district's majority preferences, allowing those to overshadow others. [Table 1](#) provides basic descriptive statistics for the arenas.

Two issues warrant brief discussion. First, the Peninsula Diverse and Malay arenas together contain most of Malaysia's electorate and seats. Neither arena, however, contains a majority of seats, in practice requiring a strong performance in more than one arena to cross the 112-seat threshold needed for government formation. Second, variation in the number of voters per seat between arenas indicates significant malapportionment that amplifies the political influence of votes in East Malaysia and Peninsula Malay. Indeed, votes in those over-weighted arenas on average count for between one-and-a-half and two times as much as do votes in the Peninsula Diverse and Northeast arenas.³³

[Figure 2](#) illustrates the electoral performance – measured by the percentage of seats won – in each electoral arena by the dominant coalitions in GE13 and GE14. To facilitate comparison of results across the two elections, we consider PAS separately from PR in GE13. Light grey denotes the PR/PH coalitions (with PAS considered separately from PR in GE13); medium grey denotes PAS; and dark grey/black denotes the BN.

Comparing GE13 and GE14, there is little change in the Peninsula Diverse and Northeast arenas. In the former arena, PR/PH thoroughly dominated both elections, winning nearly every seat it contested. In the latter, PAS and UMNO split the available seats at roughly similar proportions, with other PR/PH parties – including PAS-splinter Amanah – proving to be thoroughly uncompetitive in GE14.

By contrast, there is a dramatic shift in results across the two elections in the Peninsula Malay and East Malaysia arenas. In the former, the BN dominated GE13 by capturing 75% of seats, while PR (minus PAS) managed to win only 17% of seats. The outcome in GE14 was far more symmetric: the BN won 42.1% of seats against 54.7% for PH. Although PAS contested almost 95% of seats within this arena in GE14, it was a non-factor and won a mere three, all in Kedah. In the East Malaysia arena, the BN dominated GE13 by winning 86% of seats, while PR (again, minus PAS) managed to win only 14% of seats within the arena. This shifted to near parity in GE14, with the BN winning 55% of seats against 45% for PH (with Warisan). Again, PAS was a non-factor, as it failed to win a single seat in East Malaysia.

[Table 2](#) provides more granular detail on coalition performance in the two elections. As before, PAS is considered separately from PR in GE13. The column titled **Percent Deposit Loss** captures the percentage of seats in which a given coalition/party failed

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for Malaysia's electoral arenas.

Electoral arena	Electoral seats	Voters (Million)	Voters per seat (thousand)	Percent bumiputera (%)
Peninsula diverse	48	4.4	91.9	33.9
Northeast	22	1.8	81.2	96.0
Peninsula Malay	95	6.4	67.1	71.8
East Malaysia	57	2.4	41.5	76.1

Sources: Data from SPR and the Star Online.

Note: Reported figures based upon authors' calculations. Data on seats and voters is from SPR. Data on ethnic composition is from the Star Online. Percent Bumiputera is calculated based upon ethnic composition and the number of voters in each arena.

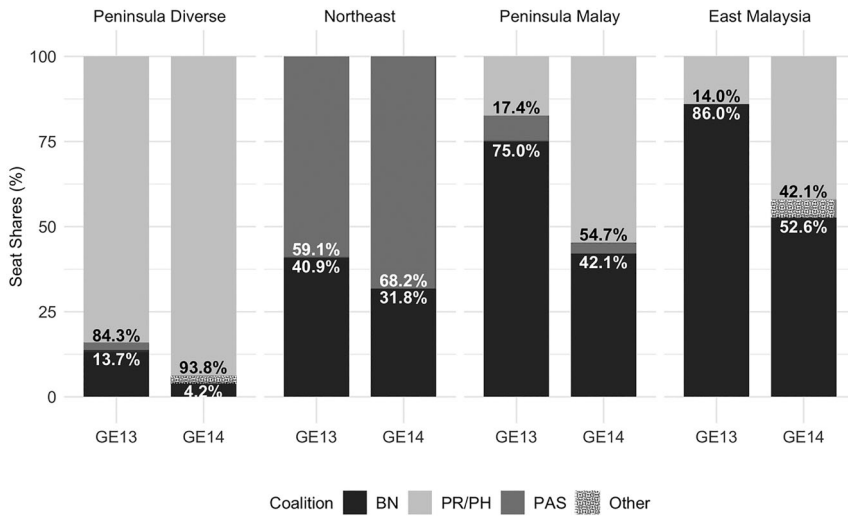


Figure 2. Change in coalition seat shares within arenas. Sources: Data from SPR. Note: Reported figures based upon authors’ calculations. We consider PAS separately from PR in GE13 to facilitate comparison of results across elections.

Table 2. Coalition electoral performance within arenas.

Electoral arena	GE13				GE14				Percent deposit loss
	Vote share	Seats contested	Seats won	Wins (%)	Vote share	Seats contested	Seats won	Wins (%)	
<i>Peninsula diverse</i>									
BN	34.8	51	7	13.7	21.3	48	2	4.2	12.5
PR/PH	62.4	50	43	86.0	70.8	48	46	95.8	2.1
PAS	1.8	1	1	100.0	7.6	33	0	0.0	72.7
<i>Northeast</i>									
BN	48.7	21	9	42.9	39.0	22	7	31.8	0.0
PR/PH	8.4	4	0	0.0	11.0	22	0	0.0	63.6
PAS	45.5	18	12	45.5	48.0	22	15	68.2	0.0
<i>Peninsula Malay</i>									
BN	53.2	92	69	75.0	37.7	95	40	42.1	0.0
PR/PH	26.2	46	16	34.8	44.5	95	52	54.7	1.1
PAS	20.0	45	7	15.6	20.3	90	3	3.3	23.3
<i>East Malaysia</i>									
BN	57.1	57	49	86.0	40.0	57	30	40.0	0.0
PR/PH	34.6	50	8	16.0	45.0	56	24	45.0	5.4
PAS	1.9	7	0	0.0	1.0	14	0	0.0	92.9

Sources: Data from SPR.

Note: Reported figures based upon authors’ calculations.

to cross the 12.5% vote threshold required to recoup the election deposit in GE14, indicating the non-competitiveness of a party and its platform.

Explaining the result

These outcomes suggest a clear answer to how PH finally achieved victory in GE14. Returning to GE13, PR dominated the Peninsula Diverse arena and – through its

inclusion of PAS – captured a majority of seats in the Northeast. While sufficient to win the popular vote, PR’s poor performance in the over-weighted Peninsula Malay and East Malaysia left it significantly short of the 112-seat threshold to form a government. Crossing that threshold required PR to take an additional 25 seats from the BN, far more than remained available in the Peninsula Diverse and the Northeast arenas. Without PAS in the coalition, the seat requirement increased to 40.

Defeating UMNO and the BN, in other words, was not possible without considerable success in the Peninsula Malay and East Malaysia arenas. There was little to suggest that was feasible for the tripartite PR. PKR and DAP’s *Reformasi*-inspired platform resonated in the Peninsula Diverse arena, but had limited appeal beyond it.³⁴ In East Malaysia, PR had already won the few relatively urbanized seats in GE13, and had no way of effectively competing against the entrenched patron-client ties outside them. In other words, the BN appeared to have a stranglehold on the pivotal and over-weighted arenas that held the key electoral success.

The opposition thus faced a difficult choice: remain in opposition for the foreseeable future, or make the necessary inroads into BN strongholds by incorporating elements of UMNO and the BN. They opted, we argue, to make that Faustian bargain. The inclusion of UMNO-clone Bersatu allowed PH to win a majority of seats in the Peninsula Malay arena, while the partnership with Warisan picked up vital seats in East Malaysia. The importance of UMNO-splinter parties in penetrating former BN strongholds cannot be overstated: they were directly responsible for flipping half of the seats PH captured from the BN and likely indirectly responsible for a significant portion of the remainder.³⁵ In short, the incorporation of UMNO-splinter parties made PH competitive in arenas where PR had previously struggled to make inroads, and without which it could not win enough seats to overthrow the world’s longest ruling elected dominant party regime.

Malaysia Baharu: voting for change?

What were voters who rejected UMNO and the BN actually voting for? Najib’s personal unpopularity was clearly a push factor in the decision of many voters to reject the BN. Similarly, many voted against an economic model that had produced wage stagnation and higher living expenses. But even if such voters were unified in their displeasure with UMNO’s leadership and its governance failures, we argue that there were still fundamental divergences in what voters were voting *for*. There was, in other words, no coherent and unified endorsement of a model to replace the BN across the four arenas. Acknowledging this and examining what motivated voting behaviour provides insights into the reform process, and has relevance for situating Malaysia’s transition into broader theories of democratization.

The Peninsula Diverse arena is the clearest starting point to examine this divergence. Its largely urbanized, outward looking, relatively educated, and diverse population has long been the source of (much of) Malaysia’s progressive civil society. It has also consistently supported demands for political reform, many of which align with those implied by modernization theory, including better governance, more space for civil society, and at least some liberalization of the social sphere. Within it, the DAP’s – and to a lesser extent PKR’s – long standing calls to reduce the prominence of state-imposed racial categorizations resonate strongly, as does the corresponding call to make opportunities in the public domain less conditional on racial and religious

identities. This is reflected in the post-UMNO *Malaysia Baharu* vision that many of its voters hold: a Malaysia that is progressive, cosmopolitan, and (relatively) post-racial, where all citizens enjoy an equal sense of belonging in the country, and the pronounced racial hierarchy of the NEP is at least somewhat levelled.³⁶

Identity politics play a strong role in the Northeast arena as well, though in a fundamentally different form. The prevailing contest was between two related visions of a Malay/Muslim-centric politics, as represented by UMNO and PAS. PAS's model, which advocates for a more robust form of Islamism and the formation of a juridical Islamic state, emerged triumphant.³⁷ Shamsul AB attributes this in part to an increasingly prevalent "moralistic constituency" in the Northeast, which rejected PH due to its perceived anti-Islamic character and the BN due to its endemic corruption.³⁸ It is noteworthy how poorly progressive alternatives to this model resonated among the electorate, as UMNO and PAS collectively captured over 90% of votes in the Northeast arena.

This pattern has well-established roots: Kikue Hamayotsu argues that the exclusionary stances inherent to the model of Islam prevalent in the Northeast are themselves a reaction to progressive demands in the peninsular urban cores, while Mohamed Osman notes that the "conservative turn" that underlies the results includes an explicit rejection of the *Reformasi*-inspired progressive agenda.³⁹ In short, even with PAS-splinter party Amanah contesting several seats, PH's perceived reformist agenda was soundly rejected. Insofar as there was a vote for change in the Northeast, then, it was to increase the role of Islam in the state and to remove a scandal-plagued UMNO leadership. It was decidedly not a vote to embrace a progressive model of *Malaysia Baharu*.

Identity politics were likewise a strong factor in the Peninsula Malay arena. As in previous campaigns, UMNO positioned itself as the true defender of Malay rights, warning that its defeat would bring about an erosion of Malay privilege and Islamic primacy.⁴⁰ That message brought resounding success in GE13, where UMNO won approximately 85% of the seats it contested. GE14's outcome was markedly different: UMNO won less than half the seats it contested, with PH winning all but three of the remainder.

How do we make sense of this dramatic shift? Bersatu's strategy in Peninsula Malay districts focused strongly on Najib and highlighting the failures of his administration. Largely absent, however, were strong references to the progressive elements of PH's reform agenda, let alone to any levelling of the racial hierarchy. Serina Rahman argues that most rural Malay voters were ultimately ambivalent about PH, underscoring the notion that the vote and seat shifts within the Peninsula Malay arena can be understood more as a rejection of Najib than as a clear endorsement of some fundamentally different alternative.⁴¹ In fact, Mahathir arguably offered conservative – and perhaps nostalgic – Malay voters who were concerned with the erosion of Malay primacy a "return" to a more confident era of UMNO-led politics. In that sense, Mahathir and Bersatu assume the role of an alternative UMNO, one based on many of the same principle, but with different and less tarnished faces: "same same, but different". The embrace of that option is thus hardly an endorsement of the progressive and post-racial *Malaysia Baharu* espoused by counterparts in the Peninsula Diverse arena, and does not imply support for a levelling of the Malaysia's *de facto* racial hierarchy.

The distinct political dynamic of Sabah and Sarawak, where local elite networks and clientelistic practices are especially prominent, has received detailed scholarly attention.⁴² In GE13, that dynamic allowed BN component parties to capture 86% of districts. PR, by contrast, secured only a few urban seats and PAS was totally ineffective.

GE14 broke the BN's stranglehold on East Malaysia, with PH picking up over 40% of the seats it contested. As in the Peninsula Malay arena, many of PH's gains came through the cooptation of former UMNO-aligned elites. As such, the shift away from UMNO and the BN likewise appears less an endorsement of a new political model, and more a function of local elite realignment, as well as other local factors that are distinct from the broader peninsular political discourse.⁴³

What do the clear differences in voting behaviour across the four arenas imply for theories of democratization? The progressive demands prevalent in the Peninsula Diverse arena align with modernization theory. As PH secured 46 of the 112 seats needed for the transition from this arena, modernization theory clearly provides some analytic traction in explaining it. But it is not the whole story. In the other arenas, identity politics and elite splits offer far more compelling explanations. Beginning with the Northeast, a particular form of Islamist identity politics dominated, with the reformist aspects of PH's agenda being widely met with suspicion. There is no question that the rejection of Najib's governance failures was an important factor in the Peninsula Malay arena vote. That played out, however, against the backdrop of identity politics, where an elite-split allowed Mahathir to offer an alternative to UMNO that credibly reassured conservative voters that Malay rights and the political primacy of the Malays would be preserved. Mahathir lacked the Islamic credentials, however, to have a similar impact in the Northeast. Finally, the East Malaysia arena is largely driven by elite politics and their political networks, with PH's inroads likewise following an elite-split. Such divergent voting motivations preclude a single, coherent theory from explaining Malaysia's transition. Rather than forcing a single explanation on what are multiple, distinct phenomena, it may be more constructive to conceive of the election as several concurrent though interrelated contests, each best understood by discrete – and ultimately regional – explanations.

Reform and democratization in post-transition Malaysia

What does this imply for reform and democratization in post-transition Malaysia? Perhaps the most important question facing Malaysia is whether PH's policy and institutional reform agenda will produce results. We argue that the nature of political competition across the four arenas has clear implications for PH's priorities and the bounds of politically feasible reforms. Only the Peninsula Malay arena is both electorally pivotal *and* highly sensitive to the national political discourse. As a result, its impact on national level political calculations within the PH government is substantially amplified relative to the other arenas. We unpack this logic below.

Strategic considerations

Voters in the Peninsula Diverse arena will likely continue to support any coalition that contains PKR and the DAP – despite disappointments with the PH government – for the simple reason that there are no credible alternatives, at least in the near to medium term. Those voters are, in short, a secure base for the coalition.⁴⁴ Furthermore, PH's dominance of this arena means it has essentially no further seats to gain in it. In conjunction, this decreases the incentives for PH's leadership to prioritize the arena's preferences.

In the Northeast arena, voters show little signs of shifting away from PAS. The return of a grand coalition that brings PAS back into a partnership with progressive parties also appears highly unlikely for the foreseeable future, as the narrative of the DAP's anti-Islamic nature appears too deeply rooted to effectively counter. Consequently, Kelantan and Terengganu are essentially unwinnable for PH or another similar coalition, likewise deprioritizing that arena's preferences in national level political calculations.

That leaves the Peninsula Malay and East Malaysia arenas as the battlegrounds for inter-coalition political competition. While East Malaysia is electorally pivotal, it operates independent enough from the peninsula that a formula of non-interference in its elite politics and strategic concessions on local issues is often sufficient for the ruling coalition to count on support from the Bornean elites. PH's incorporation of controversial former UMNO elite, particularly from Sabah, suggests strong continuity of this dynamic in the post-transition period. In that respect, securing seats in East Malaysia has more to do with intra-elite bargaining and assurances of Bornean elite autonomy than it does with the national policy framework, rendering the arena's influence on national level policy calculations relatively muted as well.

That leaves the Peninsula Malay arena. With its large number of voters, whose political influence is amplified through extensive malapportionment, it is nearly impossible to retain power without a strong footprint in the arena. Yet PH's gains in GE14 were tenuous, being based more on a rejection of now-sidelined Najib than an endorsement of PH's reform agenda. Moreover, UMNO retains strong grassroots presence throughout the arena, compounding the risk that its pivotal voters could defect from PH and prevent the coalition from retaining power in GE15.

PH's attempts to consolidate power in the arena in the year after the election have been effectively countered by UMNO's strategy of doubling-down on the Malay agenda.⁴⁵ Specifically, UMNO has pushed a narrative that PH constitutes a threat to Malay primacy and will eventually lead to status loss for the Malays and Islam. The growing UMNO-PAS partnership, formalized in September 2019, compounds PH's difficulties in countering this message, as it is a major stride towards a Malay/Muslim-unity political vehicle that can credibly assure Malay voters of their status vis-à-vis PH, with its more visible ethnic minority component.⁴⁶ PH's losses to UMNO/PAS in several post-GE14 by-elections within this arena underscores the political precarity of the situation for the PH government.

With Peninsula Malay votes both pivotal and vulnerable, components of the government that can secure votes there have found their influence strongly amplified. This is most evident in Mahathir's premiership, which defies convention since Bersatu has significantly fewer seats than either PKR or the DAP. Equally notable, Bersatu received approximately one cabinet position for every *two* of its parliamentary seats; the ratio for the multi-racial PKR and DAP, whose strongholds are in the Peninsula Diverse arena, was approximately one to *seven*. This asymmetric influence has fundamentally shaped PH's political direction, with many key decisions seeming more UMNO than *Reformasi*-like, as examined below.

Identity politics and limits of reform

PH's general deference to the Peninsula Malay arena has produced a highly cautious approach to issues that affect Malaysia's implicit racial hierarchy. Consequently, large

tracts of the *Reformasi* agenda are too sensitive to directly address, disappointing the expectations of supporters from the Peninsula Diverse arena.

Several examples illustrate the seemingly inescapable constraints of identity politics. In the months after the election, Mahathir announced that Malaysia would ratify the UN-backed *International Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* (ICERD), which prohibits discrimination on the basis of “race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin”. Numerous Malay rights groups, clearly endorsed by UMNO and PAS, seized upon the move, claiming that ICERD would undermine Malay and Muslim primacy.⁴⁷ The movement’s aggressive rhetoric and a large anti-ICERD rally in December 2018 largely silenced ICERD’s supporters. PH relented and reversed its position, leaving Malaysia as one of only seventeen countries – including South Sudan, Myanmar, and North Korea – that do not recognize the convention.

A similar dynamic is apparent in debates around the role of race in tertiary education admissions policies. Admission into the low-cost and accelerated pre-university matriculation programme follows a quota under which 90% of spots are reserved for Malay and other *Bumiputera* applicants. This relegates non-Malays to costlier and longer-duration qualification channels. Many non-Malays argue that the system is discriminatory. PH campaigned in part on educational reform – including a pledge to increase equity in the tertiary education admissions process – but political pressure precipitated an early 2019 decision to maintain the 90/10 matriculation quota *and* increase the number of places in the programme by 60%, in effect compounding the risk of non-Malays being crowded out of the public tertiary education.⁴⁸

Numerous other examples, including Malaysia’s sudden withdrawal from the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, the reluctance to act decisively against the controversial preacher Zakir Naik, or the unwillingness to shut down online calls to boycott goods from non-Muslim companies, speak to the sensitivities around any action that can be framed as challenging the position of the Malays at the top of the implicit racial hierarchy. As long as voters in the pivotal Peninsula Malay arena remain averse to an alternative social structure – and UMNO remains a viable political force that can leverage those anxieties – the politics of race and religion will continue to constrain the range of politically feasible reforms. UMNO and PAS, in short, have effectively weaponized intolerance.

Democratization

The constraints imposed by the Peninsula Malay arena’s pivotal role have not, however, precluded meaningful progress in other areas of PH’s agenda. Reports by IDEAS and Bersih highlight some of these.⁴⁹ Notably, a series of constructive economic policy reforms has been implemented, including support for SMEs, anti-corruption measures, improvements to public procurement procedures, and greater transparency on fiscal positions.

Several institutional reforms are also notable. Significantly, the Electoral Commission (EC), which was essentially captured by the Prime Minister’s Department (PMD) during late UMNO rule, has been moved under Parliamentary oversight. As the EC plays a central role in structuring the electoral process, its increased neutrality would substantially correct one of the major impediments to free and fair political competition in Malaysia. Other initiatives seek to reduce the concentration of power in the PMD, including reducing its number of ministers, ending the practice of the Prime

Minister simultaneously holding the Minister of Finance portfolio, and significantly reducing the PMD's budget. As the concentration of power in the PMD was one of the major sources of governance failure under the BN, these reforms have the potential to support ongoing democratization.⁵⁰

Further measures seek to strengthen Parliament, for example through the introduction of a Parliamentary Select Committee system to support and check the Cabinet in key areas including Budget, Major Public Appointments, Defense and Home Affairs, and Federal State Relations. A working group to empower the largely symbolic upper house has also been formed. Concurrently, additional reforms have increased the space for a free press and an active civil society, both of which faced serious constraints under late BN governments.

In a landmark decision, Parliament also lowered the voting age to 18 and called for automatic registration of eligible voters, increasing the electorate from 14.9 million in GE14 to an estimated 22.7 million by the time GE15 is due in 2023. These are meaningful transformations of a political environment that over 60 years was shaped to benefit UMNO and its coalition partners: if fully institutionalized, then these reforms will unquestionably create greater space for political pluralism and competition.⁵¹

Ultimately, GE14 saw a dominant party concede defeat after over six decades in power. A peaceful transition from such deeply entrenched rule is a historic achievement, particularly at a time of general democratic regression. It is indeed the case that the cooptation of UMNO elites was required to make the necessary electoral inroads, as was perhaps the premiership of Mahathir required to reassure anxious institutions. The need for such a Faustian bargain, though, is unsurprising: Malaysia's electoral process was designed, if not preserve UMNO rule, then at least to ensure that its core principles remain intact.

While the dominance of the Peninsula Malay arena may on face appear un-democratic, such disproportionate influence is a core feature of some established democracies as well. The massively malapportioned United States Senate, for example, significantly inflates the influence of voters in rural and interior states relative to their coastal and more urbanized counterparts. If such features and the distortions inherent to them are not viewed as contradictory to the principles of democracy there, then they should not be used to undermine the gains Malaysia has achieved, incremental as they are.

Notes

1. The coalition was known as "The Alliance" until 1973.
2. In the Malaysian context, these are the states and the essentialized Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Other (MCIO) ethnic categories.
3. For example, we would expect different voting behaviour from a middle-class Kuala Lumpur-based Malay, a rural Johor-based Malay, and a suburban Kelantan-based Malay. This within-group variation reduced the utility of the broader Malay category for understanding voting behaviour. Simultaneously, there is little need to distinguish between Kelantan and Terengganu, since voting behaviour is similar enough across the two states that the distinction only adds complexity without providing additional insight.
4. Gomez, "Resisting the Fall"; Brownlee, *Authoritarianism*; Slater, "Strong State Democratization"; Wong, Chin, and Othman, "Malaysia – towards a Topology."
5. Cheah, *Malaysia*.
6. The Federation of Malaya expanded in 1963 to include the Bornean territories of Sabah and Sarawak as well as Singapore, after which it took the name Federation of Malaysia. Singapore left the federation in 1965, leaving the current 13 state arrangement.

7. Pepinsky, "Autocracy."
8. Gomez, "Resisting the Fall"; Gomez, "Monetizing Politics."
9. Gandhi and Ong, "Committed or Conditional Democrats?"
10. Ostwald, "Malaysia's Electoral Process."
11. Croissant and Lorenz, *Comparative Politics*, 154.
12. At present, Malays constitute approximately half of the population. The two largest minority groups (Chinese, 22%; Indians, 7%) are concentrated in the Peninsula. The remainder of the population is comprised of non-Malay indigenous groups found primarily in East Malaysia, as well as several other small groups.
13. Articles 152 and 153 of the Constitution respectively make Malay the official language and Islam the official religion. Moreover, the Constitution makes Islam the religion of all Malays and forbids apostasy. The term *Bumiputera*, however, never appears in the Constitution.
14. While the NEP formally expired in 1991, it was replaced by development plans that carried forward its essence. Gomez and Saravanamuttu, *The New Economic Policy*.
15. We use "tiered" citizenship to denote an informal ranking where the Malays and other *Bumiputera* enjoy a range of legally recognized privileges and advantages unavailable to other groups. See also Chin, "The Malaysian Chinese Dilemma."
16. Puthuicheary, "Malaysia's 'Social Contract'."
17. Wong and Ooi, "Introduction"; Weiss, *Protests and Possibilities*; Noor, "Looking for Reformasi."
18. Wong, "Constituency Delimitation"; Ostwald, "How to Win."
19. Case, "Stress Testing Leadership."
20. Nadzri, "The 14th General Election."
21. See Ostwald, Schuler, and Chong, "Triple Duel," for a set of counterfactual simulations that suggest the three-cornered fights had relatively little effect on the election outcome due to the territorial concentration of supporters.
22. Abdullah, "The Mahathir Effect"; Lemiere, "The Downfall"; Hutchinson, "Malaysia's 14th General Elections."
23. Slater, "Malaysia's Modernization Tsunami"; Hutchinson, "Malaysia's 14th General Elections"; Chan, "Democratic Breakthrough"; Saravanamuttu and Mohamad, "The Monetisation of Consent"; Dettman and Weiss, "Has Patronage Lost."
24. Gomez and Mohamad Osman, *Malaysia's 14th General Election*; Lemiere, *Minorities Matter*.
25. Hutchinson, "Malaysia's 14th General Elections."
26. We use a 50% Malay threshold for its simplicity, not because we suggest that it is a hard line after which a district's political dynamic suddenly changes. We repeat the categorization using 60% and 67% Malay thresholds. Figures for these categorizations are available in the online supplementary material or from the authors upon request. While a small number of districts are categorized differently, the general conclusions remain unchanged. As such, we show only the 50% threshold.
27. While the arenas contain aspects of the urban/rural divide that has attracted attention, it ultimately remains distinct. See Ng et al., "The 2013 Malaysian Elections," and Pepinsky, "Interpreting Ethnicity," for a discussion of that framework.
28. In order to distinguish between Peninsula Malay and Diverse arenas, we use data on the ethnic composition of districts reported by Malaysia's most widely circulated English language daily newspapers, the Star. See The Star Online. "GE14 – Results Overview." The Star Online. Accessed May 9, 2019. <https://election.thestar.com.my>
29. Johor is an exception among the former Unfederated Malay States. Although it did not succumb to British pressure to accept a resident advisor until 1914 and thereby remained outside the Federated Malay States, it experienced similar levels of immigration and development as the Federated Malay States. As a result, it shares the similar demographics and higher level of development with them.
30. Kessler, *Islam and Politics in a Malay State*.
31. Chin, "Exporting the BN/UMNO Model," 83.
32. For example, the dynamic we associate with the Northeast arena is present in some parts of Kedah and Perlis, while the Peninsula diverse dynamic describes political behaviour in some urban and semi-urban areas of East Malaysia. Nevertheless, the categorization presented here helps to orient thinking about important differences.

33. See Oliver and Ostwald, “Not Enough to Win Another,” who show that pro-BN partisan bias resulting from malapportionment provided UMNO and the BN with an even greater potential parliamentary seat advantage over PH in GE14 relative to GE13. Although UMNO failed to capitalize on this advantage in GE14 due to the collapse in its popular support relative to GE13, the prevailing electoral boundaries leave open the opportunity for a resurgent UMNO to capitalize on this in the next election.
34. Some aspects of the progressive narrative may reflect more what Eric Thompson calls an “urban cosmopolitan chauvinism” than broadly supported sentiments. See Thompson, “Urban Cosmopolitan Chauvinism.”
35. Warisan flipped six out of the 10 previously BN-held parliamentary seats in Sabah. Similarly, Bersatu flipped 12 out of 26 previously BN-held parliamentary seats in the Peninsula Malay arena. Though PKR flipped the same number of seats in this arena, this elides the indirect though almost certainly positive effect of Bersatu’s membership in PH on the PKR’s performance in this arena.
36. This does not imply an absence of identity politics: some Chinese voters, for example, support the DAP for its perceived ability to protect their interests *through* a levelling of the racial hierarchy.
37. Ahmad Fauzi, “The Islamist Factor.”
38. See “Siapa Lagi Melayu Mau.” *The Star Online*, June 9, 2019.
39. Hamayotsu, “Towards a More Democratic Regime and Society?”; Mohamed Osman, “The Islamic Conservative Turn.”
40. “Najib Warns Malay Base of Threat to Islam if Opponents Win Power.” *Bloomberg*, November 30, 2016.
41. Rahman, “Was It a Malay Tsunami?” Welsh, “‘Saviour’ Politics” reaches a related conclusion.
42. Faisal, “Domination, Contestation, and Accommodation”; Chin, “Exporting the BN/UMNO Model.”
43. Chin, “Sabah and Sarawak”; Mersat, “The Sarawak Dayaks’ Shift.”
44. Note the #UndiRosak movement, in which progressive voters pledged to invalidate their ballots in protest against PH’s perceived movement away from the progressive agenda prior to GE14, ultimately was a non-factor in the election.
45. Norshahril, “A Complicated Political Reality.”
46. Horowitz, “The Challenge.”
47. Waikar, “ICERD.”
48. Lee, “Education in Post GE-14 Malaysia.”
49. IDEAS, *Projek Pantau*; Bersih, *First Year Report Card*.
50. Ostwald, “Federalism.”
51. At the time of writing, many of the discussed reforms have not been fully codified into law, leaving open the possibility of their reversal.

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