



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
POLITICS, PUBLICS POLICY
AND SOCIAL WORKS
(IJPPSW)
www.ijppsw.com



THE BATTLE OF THREE POLITICAL REGIMES IN MALAYSIA
PRIOR AND POST GE 14TH: AN ANALYSIS OF BARISAN
NASIONAL, PAKATAN HARAPAN & THE FORMATION OF
PERIKATAN NASIONAL (PN)

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 01.03.2021

Revised date: 20.03.2021

Accepted date: 28.03.2021

Published date: 31.03.2021

To cite this document:

Yaakub, M. T. (2021). The Battle of Three Political Regimes in Malaysia Prior and Post GE 14th: An Analysis of Barisan Nasional, Pakatan Harapan & The Formation of Perikatan Nasional (PN). *International Journal of Politics, Publics Policy and Social Works*, 3 (8), 29-38.

DOI: 10.35631/IJPPSW.38003.

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Abstract:

This chapter discusses the battle of the three political regimes in Malaysia, the Barisan Nasional (BN) and Pakatan Harapan (PH), in the 14th General Election and the formation of Perikatan Nasional (PN) after the collapse of the PH government. The BN coalition has shown its political influence throughout 63 years of ruling the country since independence which has been hard to break by other opposition parties in Malaysia. BN has manipulated various government instruments in ruling to form a strong political hegemony that affects the voting behaviour of voters in determining rational choice, especially when elections are conducted. However, the strong political domination has been broken by the opposition movement that began in the 12th General Election that eventually toppled the old political regime, BN in the last GE-14. The failure of BN to defend its position as a government is due to several factors including scandals and misuse of power by political leaders, the weaknesses of the government in addressing economic issues, and pressures faced by the people on the cost of living, and limited employment opportunities. Issues that arise are then manipulated by the opposition parties at the same time, which managed to convince voters to change their support from BN to PH in the last GE-14. However, PH, which then had the opportunity to govern the country with a dilemma, as it failed to capitalize on the opportunity and fulfilled its manifesto as promised in their election campaigns. Subsequently, Malaysians, especially the voters in a series of by-election have begun to send a message to the government by voting for opposition candidates as a gesture of protest against the PH government. Furthermore, an analysis of the developments and dilemmas of the direction of the two political regimes before and after the GE-14 is discussed in detail in this chapter.

Keywords:

Hegemony, Power Transition, Rational Choice

Introduction

Elections are one of the most important instruments in a country that practices democracy to show the existence of spaces for people to participate in the process of government. In Malaysia, electoral practices were first implemented in 1951 by organizing the first election in the Penang Town Council elections. The conduct of this township election marked the beginning of the people's involvement in determining the pattern of government administration even though the country was still under colonial rule.

Following the official withdrawal of the British on August 31, 1957, Malaysia continued the election process as one of the key instruments to provide opportunities for people to participate in the country's administration process. Over 13 times the organization of the General Election (GE) in the country, the people have given the opportunity to the coalition of Barisan Nasional (BN) to lead the state administration beginning from the first General Election in 1959 until the 13th General Election in 2013. The domination of Malaysian politics for six decades by BN is gripped by the power of the various systems of government and society. This made it difficult for opposition political parties to compete with the ruling party. However, the political dominance was eventually denied by the people in the 14th General Election when the wave of change triggered in 2018 culminated with the fall of BN as the first government after independence. The fall of BN in the 14th General Election marked the end of its domination and domination of the single-party coalition in the government as it did for the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in Japan in 2009.

Political Hegemony

Gramsci (1971) defines hegemony as the height of the power of a group or social class that can be interpreted through two main forms; that is dominated by violence and coercion, and manipulation by intellectually and morally based leadership. In general, hegemony is part of the strength and success of a ruling class. According to Gramsci, there are two approaches that are often used in the hegemonic process whereby the class exercises its dominance, namely domination and "moral and intellectual leadership". Even this social control has two other basic forms, which are control of behavior and external choices through rewards and punishments. Both forms of social control can also give psychological effects through a form of personal punishment that is commonly associated with daily life. Internal control is a form of moral-social dominance that governs ways of thinking and behaving. In addition, Gramsci (1971) explained that compliance can be obtained voluntarily as opposed to violent approaches through hegemonic actions on a group or class.

The fall of BN in the GE-14 marks the end of the political hegemony that has existed since the pre-independence era, which is all about protecting the people of this country that only BN and its component parties can do. Hegemony, which is synonymous with voters who still adhere to the conservative trend, is difficult to be eliminated in a short period of time. This serves as an advantage to the BN component parties to continue dominating the political power of the country until the outbreak of the political tsunami in 2008. Although the 2009 General Election was seen as a trigger for the Malaysian political tsunami, the impact on the entire political system only occurred in the 14th General Election when the opposition at that time succeeded

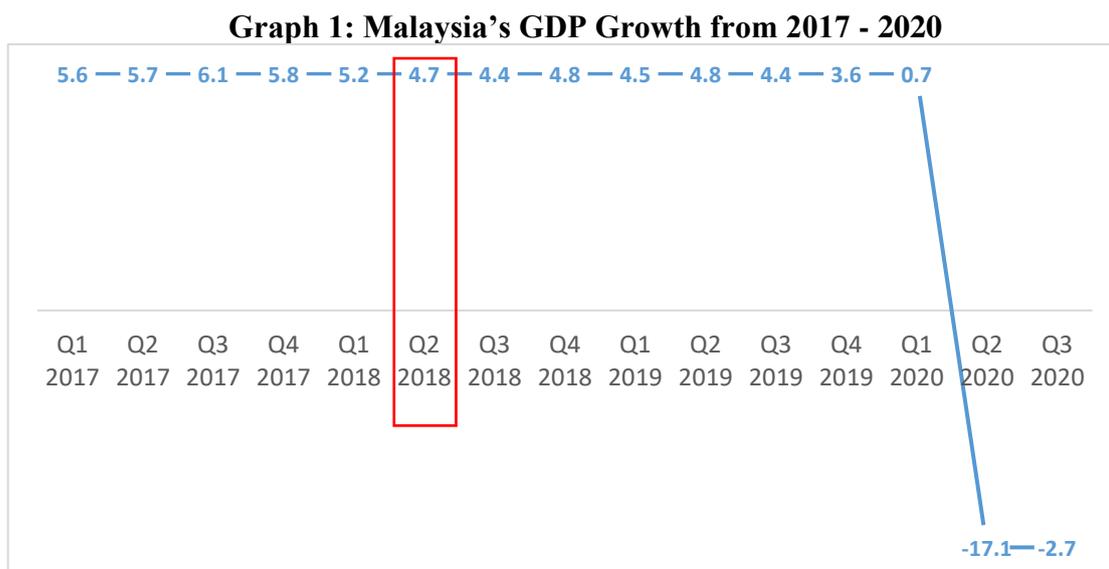
in defeating the BN coalition and paved the way for the democratization of the political system and government controlled by the previous government.

The highlight of the political tsunami which hit Malaysia in the 14th General Election was in fact influenced by the dynamism of voting behavior among Malaysians who have been exposed to changes in the current political environment. This proves that the democratic practice in Malaysia permits the citizens to exercise their rights, especially in elections to choose the government that will be leading the country. Although the BN government denied allegations that the coalition had controlled and influenced the course of the election system in Malaysia, the opposite situation occurs when multiple flaws in the electoral process were disclosed by various groups, including the opposition parties and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The ongoing controversy has sparked a wave of political change along with other current issues, as well as increased the strength of the opposition coalition to confront BN in the last GE14.

The 14th General Election: From Barisan Nasional to Pakatan Harapan

The wave of political change triggered in the GE-12 is an unprecedented event in the political system controlled by the government. Prior to the 14th General Election, the BN manipulated various national political institutions as a platform to gain the support of the people in the final moments of the election. Manipulation by the ruling party at that time stemmed from the complexity of current issues that affects the performance and the government's image locally and abroad.

Among the key issues that were difficult to be addressed by the ruling party are the 1MDB scandal, the rising cost of living, and the rising unemployment rate by the government that is not poorly handled by the government (Case, 2020). This situation has caused the country's economic instability to the detriment of the lives of the people who are facing hardship that has lasted for a long time. The following is the data on the growth rates of the country's economy in 2018 provided by the Department of Statistics Malaysia:



Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia, (DOSM)

Based on the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth of 2018, the country experienced a sharp decline in revenue growth, proving that Malaysia is facing serious economic problems. This situation has been felt by various levels of society affected by the current economic instability, including the Chinese group who are directly involved in business and dominate the economic space in the country.

Generally, the Chinese in Malaysia were impressed by the two main things that affect their business interests and racism. The Chinese community in this country has been synonymous with business activities since the pre-independence era and any changes in the political environment that could potentially affect the economic space of this group will be addressed through various pragmatic strategies that could benefit them. This pragmatic action shows the Chinese always put the interests of the ethnic group ahead of other issues that arise. In fact, such pragmatic actions also determine the racial politics of the people that affect the constitution of voters among the race in every General Election and post-2008 by-election. According to Drutman (2016), political dynamism refers to a flexible political system that can be adapted to the current situation, developed, and adapted to achieve the same goal.

Second, the Chinese in this country have a high sense of belonging (Chinese-centric) in the community, which is the basis of their strength in dealing with issues that concern them. A high sense of belonging is also strengthening ethnic identity and the discussion on this matter has been raised by many scholars such as Fujio Hara (2003) through the *Malayan Chinese and China: Conversion in Identity Consciousness 1945-1957* states that the identity of these people in this country is constantly changing based on the development of politics in this country, but the formation of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) is actually a platform to establish their relationship with the Mainland of China. In addition, the Japanese occupation has strengthened and stimulated the spirit of Chinese centric and their self-belonging to the country, thus creating a union that is stronger today. Thus, the discussion of these two points explains that the Chinese are very much concerned with the survival of their race and thus act pragmatically if their interests are at stake.

Based on these concerns, the Chinese voters are considered to be more strategic in their choices, especially from the 12th GE to the 14th GE that ultimately overthrew the BN government (formerly the Alliance) which has governed the country for 63 years. Generally, during the 12th General Election, the influence and domination of the Chinese voters are valued through the success of the Democratic Action Party (DAP) which won a majority of seats and formed a state government in Penang and Perak. Assessment of the influence and power of DAP party in this study is important because there is a shift in the support of the Chinese from MCA to DAP in the last 10 years. The following is a comparison of the seats won by the DAP parties from the 12th GE until the 14th GE for the State Legislative Assembly (DUN) and Parliament throughout the country:

Table 1: Comparison between Parliament and State seats won by the DAP from 12th GE until 14th GE

Elections States	12 th GE		13 th GE		14 th GE	
	STATE	P	STATE	P	STATE	P
Kedah	1	0	2	0	2	0
Penang	19	7	19	7	19	7
Perak	18	6	18	7	18	7
Pahang	2	0	7	1	7	2
Selangor	13	4	15	4	16	4
Negeri Sembilan	10	2	11	2	11	2
Malacca	5	1	6	1	8	1
Johor	4	1	13	4	14	5
Sabah	1	1	4	2	6	3
Federal Territory		5		5		4

*Source: undi.info

Based on the assessment in these three general elections, DAP still gains strong support in certain states such as Penang, Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and the Federal Territory. The aforementioned states offer winning seats to DAP due to urban location factors, the Chinese voter populations, and economic focus areas that are important to Chinese traders. In addition, the shift in support of the Chinese voters in GE-14 did not happen overnight but was first prevalent in the GE-12, and the trend has been consistent ever since. Apart from these key factors, negative perception of the government has gone out of control ahead of the 14th General Election through a range of issues affecting the interests of the people as discussed earlier. Thus, these factors and the development of current issues that ultimately failed to curb have led the political coalition that has long dominated the government to finally collapsed in GE-14.

The Major Support to The PH Government in GE-14 Ended in A Series of By-Election

The success of PH in gaining major support from the voters in GE-14 has been a great blow and has undermined BN as the main coalition that dominated the government since the country's independence. Throughout BN's administration of the country, BN has established strong political support in several states, which are Melaka, Negeri Sembilan and Johor. For BN, it is impossible for PH to penetrate into these states though there are a number of seats won by the opposition party. However, the wave of political change that went beyond the expectations of the people has successfully altered the political landscape of the country.

Despite the support received by the PH in taking control of the Federal and State governments which were previously ruled by BN, but PH's failure in maintaining the momentum of the support given by voters in the 14th General Election resulted in a shift of support that is increasingly evident, especially in the series of by-elections after GE-14. After the end of the 14th GE, 10 by-elections involving Parliament and the State Legislative Assembly (DUN) seats nationwide were conducted. Here is the list of the by-elections (PRK) held after GE-14 and the trend of transitional support from PH to BN:

Table 2: List of By-Election after 14th General Election

By-Election (PRK)	Party Wins in GE-14	Party wins in PRK
DUN Sungai Kandis	PKR	PKR
DUN Balakong	PKR	PH*
DUN Seri Setia	PKR	PH*
DUN Semenyih	PKR	BN
DUN Rantau	BN	BN
Parliament Cameron Highlands	BN	BN
Parliament Port Dickson	PKR	PH*
Parliament Sandakan	PKR	PH*
Parliament Tanjung Piai	PKR	BN
Parliament Kimanis	BN	BN

*Source: undi.info

*In GE-14, PH used PKR's emblem to contest in GE-14. After forming a Federal Government, an official PH's emblem was used in the by-elections.

Based on the result of the 10 by-elections, the BN coalition has managed to win six by-elections with a sharp increase in the number of votes compared to the previous 14th General Election. BN's success in retaining and winning the Parliamentary and State (DUN) seats in the GE series shows the sudden change of support from PH to BN. Although PH (previously using the PKR logo) broke the BN's political dominance in certain areas such as the Semenyih, Sungai Kandis, Tanjung Piai Parliamentary, but a victory of PH in the 14th General Election was largely due to a political wave triggered by national issues.

This situation shows that the PH does not have a solid base of political power such as ideologies and struggles, unlike BN, which can create strong hegemony among the people. Even the success of BN in defending its political dominance for the past 63 years is also contributed by its basic political ideology which can easily dismiss its political rivals. For example, ahead of the GE-14, the BN has seen a significant drop in support since the GE-12 and its political influence has diminished as the coalition's top leader Mohd Najib Tun Razak is entangled with the 1MDB political scandal.

Besides being allegedly involved in the scandal, the country's economy at that time was in a state of despair, employment opportunities were scarcely available, and the level of consumer purchasing power had declined. The political environment ahead of the GE-14 clearly shows the support of the people was not in favour of the government coalition despite various efforts and response strategies introduced by the government to deflect political attacks by the opposition parties at that time.

The 'rejection mood' by Malaysian people for the ruling party ahead of the 14th General Election was the best opportunity for the opposition parties to gain the support of the people in the elections. Among the outstanding manifesto made by the opposition parties in the manifesto at that time was the suspension of loan payments of Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN) for borrowers who earn RM4,000 and below, the abolition of Good and Service Tax (GST), the increase of minimum wage policy and targeted subsidies for petrol (Case 2020). Subsequently, the people's reactions and support for the manifesto can be seen through encouraging response in social media campaigns, increasing public participation in opposition party campaigns, and a high voter turnout of 82.32 percent. Based on the development of the political environment, PH, in using the PKR's emblem, has achieved major success with the

support of 50.1 percent of popular votes and successfully taken over the Federal Government and several State Governments in Kedah, Perak, Malacca, Negeri Sembilan, Johor, and Sabah while strengthens its power in Penang and Selangor where they previously ruled as the opposition.

Although PH has obtained great support in the last GE-14, the victory earned by the new coalition government does not reflect the continuous acceptance of Malaysians in the coalition. This can be seen through the success of BN in seizing and managing to increase the support of voters in five by-elections that were conducted. Among the factors that led voters to reject PH and shift their support to BN are (i) failure of PH to fulfill their manifesto as promised in the GE-14, (ii) the failure of the PH government in managing racial issues, (iii) shifts in PH component parties and the on-going feud regarding the Prime Minister's position, (iv) the failure of the government to address the problems of the people, and (v) government weakness stemming from the lack of administrative experience.

These issues are impossible to deal with completely within a year of the PH administration as a government as the PH government does not have enough of 2/3 seats in Parliament that would strengthen the government's position to pass amendments and legislation that are vital for the purpose of reforming the political system in Malaysia. Malaysia needs a strong and stable government, but internal conflicts within PH coalition parties continue to complicate the country's administration process.

In order to have a strong government, the ruling party must demonstrate the ability to deal with the members of Parliament in line with the government's aspirations. However, the opposite situation occurs when there are members of Parliament and leaders of PH who openly opposed the leadership of the coalition that led the government. Although PH is recognized as a coalition of political parties that uphold freedom of speech and abuse of power, it still has a stance as an "opposition" among party leaders. Even Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad as the Chairman of PH has repeatedly warned the leadership of the coalition on many occasions to put a stop to their 'opposition mentality and attitude'. The warning expressed by the Chairman of the PH was an open secret, and this has shown the weakness of the PH government.

The political environment has thus hindered efforts to strengthen the stability of the government, economic development, and social treatment of the people drastically. In fact, the people have started to evaluate the ability of PH as a government through a series of by-elections held during its tenure. Although various reasons were given by the government such as high debt burden, inexperienced government, and short time frame to fulfill their manifesto, the voter's voting behaviour can change at any time, and this is proven by the deterioration of support and defeat of PH in the last six by-elections. After losing in six by-elections, one of the supreme council leaders of Bersatu, Dr Rais Hussin Mohamed Ariff has expressed his concern that the overwhelming support received and the success of taking over the government in the 14th GE would not last long if the will of the people is not fulfilled. The voters have the power to determine which governing party should lead the country based on the existing rational choices. In fact, this is evident from the discussion presented by scholars in theoretical analysis, which clearly states the fundamental importance and advantages that they can enjoy as a primary consideration when voting in every election.

In Malaysia, voting behaviour based on rational choice was controlled by the BN coalition through strong political hegemony before the 14th General Election, and it made it difficult for

voters to vote for a party other than the coalition for the past 11 General Elections since independence (Case 2020). The formidable domination forged by the coalition of the BN government before the 14th General Election was finally overthrown when the hegemonic instrument of the ruling party was no longer capable of influencing the people's vote.

The Formation of Perikatan Nasional (PN) as The New Coalition in Malaysia's Political Landscape

Malaysia's political development became increasingly interesting to discuss when the Parti Pribumi Bersatu (BERSATU) made a drastic political change by leaving PH to form a new political line on February 24, 2020. The move caused the PH-led coalition government to lose its majority in Parliament and subsequently fail to defend its position as the Federal Government. Following the event, new political cooperation was initiated by BERSATU, UMNO, the Sarawak Party Coalition (GPS), and PAS along with 10 former MPs from PKR to form a new Federal Government. The new political alignment was actually based on dissatisfaction with the PH government's actions on some current issues and the internal turmoil of political parties.

Among the issues are the appointment of Tommy Thomas as the Attorney General, the racial tension in the case involving Muhammad Adib Mohd Kassim; the firefighter who was killed in the temple riots in Subang Jaya, the introduction of Jawi calligraphy in Bahasa Malaysia subject, the recognition of the Unified Examination Certificate (UEC), PKR internal turmoil and the dispute over the post of PM between PH component leaders (Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, Azahar Kassim & Ummu Atiyah Ahmad Zakuan, 2019).

The country's political turmoil in the PM's election finally ended on 29 February 2020, when the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (YDPA) agreed to elect Muhyiddin Yassin from BERSATU as Malaysia's eighth PM. He was elected after YDPA was convinced that Muhyiddin Yassin had the confidence of the majority of MPs as provided in Article 43 (2) (b) of the Federal Constitution. He gained the confidence of the majority through the support of 112 BERSATU, UMNO, PAS, GPS, 10 former PKR, and BEBAS MPs.

The election of Muhyiddin Yassin as Prime Minister was the basis for the formation of a new Malaysian political coalition to replace the PH which had lost its majority to maintain its position as the Federal government. This situation has created a new political coalition after BN and PH, showing the dynamism of Malaysian politics after GE-14.

Conclusion

The change in the political regime in Malaysia in the GE-14 was an important milestone that marked the end of the only domination in the democratic system by the longest-ruling coalition in the world led by the BN. The dominance ended with a peaceful transition of power between the previous regimes to PH, which shows the development of democracy in Malaysia.

The support received by PH in the 14th General Election has been the starting point for the democratization of the political system and government, despite the country is plagued by issues inherited by the previous administration. However, the slow-paced change has led voters to exercise their rights through ballot boxes in the six by-elections after GE-14. This is a signal that the PH-led government must immediately address the economic crises faced by the nation and fulfill the manifesto it promised before taking over the country. In this new era, the role of Chinese and young voters from GE-12 to GE-14 and by-elections is important in determining

the success of the parties contesting in each election. If the contesting parties fail to fight for the interests of these two groups, then they can be the trigger for the next wave of political change that will be difficult to deal with by any political party in the country.

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