



TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

# WHY DID BERSATU LEAVE PAKATAN HARAPAN?

Wan Saiful Wan Jan

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## FOREWORD

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# Why Did BERSATU Leave Pakatan Harapan?

By Wan Saiful Wan Jan

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition won Malaysia's 14th general election on 9 May 2018, the first time a regime change took place in the country. However, it lost its majority in late February 2020, when Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (BERSATU) left the coalition.
- The four parties in PH had very different ideologies, especially when it comes to issues of race and religion. But despite taking various steps to create a coalition agreement, the more fundamental differences were never reconciled during the coalition's time in power.
- PH won GE-14 with a relatively low level of support from the ethnic Malays, who perceived it to be a coalition dominated by the mainly Chinese DAP. Fearmongering about how PH and the DAP were a threat to Malay privileges further weakened PH while in government.
- Furthermore, BERSATU disliked the possibility that Parti Keadilan Rakyat (KEADILAN) president Anwar Ibrahim might succeed Mahathir Mohamad as prime minister. They did not trust Anwar to champion the Malay agenda if he became prime minister.
- BERSATU decided as early as in 2019 to explore leaving PH to form a new Malay-led government, and saw the departure as a necessary step for a better chance at winning GE15.
- This was a controversial decision and it created a major rift within BERSATU itself, with party chairman and then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad refusing to accept the party's decision to leave PH.
- Following Mahathir's sudden resignation on 24 February 2020, BERSATU immediately announced their departure from PH. This



led to a series of events that culminated in the collapse of PH and the formation a Perikatan Nasional government led by the three biggest Malay parties, UMNO, BERSATU and PAS.

- The whole episode shows that any coalition or political parties that wish to govern Malaysia must not ignore sentiments among the Malays, especially those in rural areas.

# Why Did BERSATU Leave Pakatan Harapan?

By Wan Saiful Wan Jan<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's Pakatan Harapan (PH) government lasted less than two years. After winning the 14th general election (GE-14) on 9 May 2018 to great fanfare, it crashed on 24 February 2020 following the sudden resignation of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and the departure of Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (BERSATU) from the PH coalition. Many were surprised by Mahathir's move, but a closer look at the nature of PH and how their agenda was received by Malaysians—especially by the Malay bumiputra group—shows that trouble started brewing right from the beginning of its formation. The problems were never resolved and continued to simmer in the background throughout its short tenure.

Some have argued that PH was never truly stable as a government or as a coalition. Leaders from its component parties continuously and publicly bickered, creating a perception that they lacked cohesion. Once in government, PH also lost five of the ten by-elections that took place after GE-14, indicating that their grip on the country's imagination had eroded over time. PH was also unable to maintain popularity while in office, with their poll ratings plummeting as they entered their second year of administration.

Opinions differ as to why PH collapsed. This essay examines the topic from BERSATU's point of view, documenting why the party decided to leave the very coalition that brought them to power. Indeed, many have

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argued that it was wrong for BERSATU to leave PH, but so far none have sought to answer the question why the party chose such a controversial path. This essay is an attempt in that direction.

In conducting this research, this author interviewed several key leaders from all four PH component parties, some of whom are cited here. Relevant literature was reviewed to supplement the primary data gathered from the interviews as well as the author's personal observations. The author sits in the BERSATU Supreme Council and was involved in several high-level discussions related to the topic. As such, this essay also benefits from an insider perspective. At the same time, great effort has been made to avoid making a moral judgement on the decision taken by the party especially since, at the time of writing, sentiments are still running high.<sup>2</sup>

Those familiar with Malaysian politics will notice that some oft-debated issues are not discussed deeply in this essay. These include the role of former Parti Keadilan Rakyat (KEADILAN) deputy president Azmin Ali and his followers, the competence of PH ministers, and PH's questionable commitment to their own manifesto. These issues may have contributed to PH's downfall but were not major factors for BERSATU. Since this is a study of what led BERSATU to leave PH, only issues that played a significant role in the party's decision-making process are discussed here.

The next section discusses the dynamics within PH before GE-14 and the coalition's strategy going into the 2018 general election. Then, the main challenges faced by PH while in government will be described, after which the key factors that contributed to BERSATU's decision are delved into. The week of 23 February 2020 is particularly important as that was the week during which the PH government collapsed. The events during that week are discussed. The conclusion comments on the lessons that can be learnt from PH's experience in government.

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<sup>2</sup>The author is conscious that his direct involvement in the saga may also create bias in the analysis. All reasonable measures have been taken to remove personal partiality, including by cross-referencing to third-party opinions and report. Nonetheless, it is acknowledged that some researcher bias may persist.

## PRE-GE-14 DYNAMICS

The formation of PH was officially announced on 22 September 2015. The coalition brought together three opposition parties—KEADILAN, Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Parti Amanah Negara (AMANAH), and replaced the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) coalition which had KEADILAN, DAP, and the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) as members. After Malaysia's 13th general election, the PR coalition collapsed when its constituent parties failed to resolve their differences. One major contributing factor was the failure of PAS and DAP to reconcile on how much Islam should influence the nature of the state. PAS itself then split into two, with the conservative ideologues staying in the party and their more progressive leaders venturing out to form a new party, AMANAH.<sup>3</sup> This new party then joined hands with KEADILAN and DAP to form PH, to continue the struggle from where PR left off. Despite still being in prison at the time, long-time opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim<sup>4</sup> was named as the de facto leader of PH.

The absence of PAS from PH meant that the opposition coalition did not have a strong party to compete for Malay votes against United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the dominant party in the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN).<sup>5</sup> This lack of Malay representation was somewhat resolved when another new party was formed following the departure of several key figures from UMNO. The new party—BERSATU—was registered on 9 September 2016 and officially launched on 14 January 2017. On 14 March 2017 BERSATU announced that it would seek to join PH to attain a united opposition front. And on 20 March 2017,

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<sup>3</sup> Wan Saiful Wan Jan, "Islamism in Malaysian Politics: The Splintering of the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) and the Spread of Progressive Ideas", *Islam and Civilisational Renewal Journal* 9, no. (2018): 128–53.

<sup>4</sup> In 2015, opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim was sentenced to five years imprisonment for sodomy. Many observers believed that the case against Anwar was politically motivated.

<sup>5</sup> UMNO is the leading party in the BN coalition.

BERSATU was formally accepted into the coalition by PH's Presidential Council.<sup>6</sup>

### *Fundamentally Dissimilar Coalition Partners*

Some knowledge of the background of the parties that formed PH is necessary if we are to understand the coalition's internal dynamics.

- i. KEADILAN's membership is rather mixed. It is not possible to define the party's political ideology on the traditional left-to-right spectrum because it brings together political activists with a variety of backgrounds. That said, some have argued that certain KEADILAN leaders subscribe to social democracy. However, the glue that bonds the party is their historic loyalty to Anwar Ibrahim. KEADILAN was formed after Anwar was sacked as deputy prime minister in 1998. During Anwar's time in prison, KEADILAN led the campaign to get him freed. Since its formation in 1999, KEADILAN has only had two people as its top leaders, Anwar himself and his wife Wan Azizah Wan Ismail.

As a multiracial party, KEADILAN's leadership line-up reflects its membership. Their strength is in mixed constituencies, especially in semi-urban and urban areas, as well as in Anwar's traditional seat of Permatang Pauh in the state of Penang. The first general election they contested was in 1999, in which KEADILAN was part of the Barisan Alternatif opposition coalition. KEADILAN won just 5 of the 193 parliamentary seats then. The party gradually grew to contest for 71 of the 222 parliamentary seats in GE-14, winning 48 seats—mainly in urban and multi-ethnic areas. This made KEADILAN the biggest party in the PH coalition (see Table 1).

- ii. DAP was formed in 1965, which makes it the oldest and most experienced party in PH. It has historical links to Singapore's

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<sup>6</sup> Wan Saiful Wan Jan, *Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia in Johor: New Party, Big Responsibility*, Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 2/2018 (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018).

**Table 1: Electoral Performance of National Opposition Parties, 1995–2018**

	1995	1999	2004	2008	2013	2018
DAP	9	10	12	28	38	42
KEADILAN	N/A	5	1	31	30	50
PAS*	7	27	7	23	21	18
AMANAH**						11
BERSATU**						13

*Note:* \* Not part of PH in GE-14; \*\* Formed after GE-13.

People’s Action Party (PAP). When Singapore left Malaysia in 1965, the process to form DAP was started by PAP leaders who remained in Malaysia.<sup>7</sup> On its website, DAP describes itself thus: “Our original ideology was democratic socialism that promotes the idea of Malaysian Malaysia—unity in diversity in a multiracial and multicultural nation. In 2006, the party amended its constitution to adopt social democracy as its ideology, reflecting a more embracing (sic) of diverse democratic and progressive viewpoints.”<sup>8</sup>

DAP has always realized that no party can win power in Malaysia by standing alone due to the country’s demography. For that reason, even back in 2003, DAP secretary general Kerk Kim Hock stressed that “DAP was willing to take all political risks to help form a coalition which would be a political vehicle to bring about political change in

<sup>7</sup> Chew Huat Hock, “The Democratic Action Party in Post-1969 Malaysian Politics: The Strategy of a Determined Opposition” (MA thesis, Australian National University, Canberra, 1980), pp. 1–3.

<sup>8</sup> <https://dapmalaysia.org/en/about-us/the-party/> (accessed 23 March 2020).

Malaysia.”<sup>9</sup> The party regularly adapted their election strategies to suit the coalition that they were in. Electorally, their share of seats in the Malaysian parliament has steadily increased year by year, especially from the time when they joined forces with KEADILAN and PAS for the 1999 general election. In GE-14, they won 42 of the 47 parliamentary seats that they contested for, also mainly in urban and multi-ethnic areas, and this made them the second biggest party in government.

Despite being essentially a non-ethnic-based party, DAP is most frequently tasked to contest in mixed and non-Malay constituencies. They are predominantly seen, and often portrayed, as a party catering to the interests of ethnic Chinese. They have been unable to shed the reputation as a Chinese party, partly because their leadership line up has almost always been overwhelmingly Chinese; and in all the coalitions they were in, they were persistently tasked with winning the Chinese vote.

- iii. AMANAH was launched in 2015 to house Islamists who left PAS after their fallout with conservatives. The party’s ideology is best described as progressive Islamism, indicating their commitment to Islamic political ideals, but in a more progressive and liberal democratic fashion. Although the party is not exclusive to Muslims, their leadership line up and current membership are overwhelmingly Muslim and Malay. There is only one Chinese and one Indian in the national executive committee. Nevertheless, the party does not subscribe to ethnic-based politics, believing instead that Malaysia would be better if her politics were inclusive.<sup>10</sup>

AMANAH’s main target are constituencies that have traditionally been dominated by PAS. Their main audience therefore are those who

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<sup>9</sup> Policy Speech at DAP’s 2003 National Congress.

<sup>10</sup> For further details, see Wan Saiful Wan Jan, “*Parti Amanah Negara in Johor: Birth, Challenges and Prospects*,” Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 9/2017 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017).

subscribe to political Islam but who have lost faith in PAS due to the latter's leap towards conservatism. AMANAH did not do very well in GE-14, however. They contested in thirty-four seats and won only eleven, mainly rural Malay areas, making them the smallest party in the PH coalition.

- iv. BERSATU was launched in 2017 following the expulsion of several prominent leaders from UMNO. In particular, BERSATU's formation was the result of the coming together of three big names in Malay politics: former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad; former Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin; and Mahathir's son, the former Chief Minister of the northern state of Kedah Mukhriz Mahathir. The party was intentionally organized to be a Malay party to challenge UMNO's dominance in Malay-majority areas. Many of the party's leaders at national, state and division levels soon crossed over from UMNO. Mahathir Mohamad, in his capacity as chairman of the party, repeatedly proclaimed that BERSATU intention was to take over UMNO's role as the main political party for ethnic Malays.

BERSATU's ideology is Malay and bumiputra nationalism. Non-Malays can become associate members but with no voting rights. It is therefore not a surprise that within PH, BERSATU was tasked with winning Malay constituencies, especially in rural areas.<sup>11</sup> The bad news for BERSATU, however, was that most of these areas were UMNO strongholds. The party did not do very well in GE-14, capturing only 13 parliamentary seats of the 52 that they contested.

As can be seen from the brief descriptions, the four parties are all different from one another. In terms of composition, KEADILAN is a multiracial party, DAP and AMANAH are theoretically multiracial but

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<sup>11</sup> For further discussion on this, see Wan Saiful Wan Jan, *Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia in Johor*.



in practice are not, while BERSATU is a party set up to champion the Malay-bumiputra agenda. In terms of ideology, DAP is a secular party that subscribes to social democracy, AMANAH is an Islamist party, BERSATU holds to Malay nationalism, while KEADILAN has no clear political philosophy although it can be argued that they hold to some elements of social democracy similar to the DAP.

During PH's formative months, the main uniting factor was not ideology or philosophy. Rather, the four parties were brought together pragmatically. All were realistic enough to know that that they could not win if opposition votes were divided. In the quest to defeat the BN government, they divided among themselves the 222 parliamentary seats, ensuring only straight fights between PH against BN. Although PAS somewhat disrupted this strategy when they created multicornered fights by contesting in 158 of the 222 seats, at least for PH this division enabled each of their component parties to focus in constituencies where they had higher chances of winning, thereby optimizing the use of their campaign resources.

### *Differences Were Never Truly Resolved*

Although the parties were united in wanting to defeat BN, the ideological differences among PH component parties were never truly resolved. This created hurdles. Unlike the BN coalition, where the sheer size of the Malay party UMNO makes them the dominant party, PH had very different intra-coalition dynamics because no one party could claim the leadership position by default. The component parties were seen more as equals,<sup>12</sup> leadership roles had to be negotiated, and parties had to prove their influence and strength to claim authority. This made the relationship complex and less predictable, even making PH seem divided at times. In a country where citizens were used to seeing BN as a united coalition

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<sup>12</sup> Mohd Dzaki Mohd, "Kelestarian Kerjasama Parti Pembangkang di Malaysia Sebelum Pilihanraya Umum ke-14", 2018, [bit.ly/kelestarianPH](http://bit.ly/kelestarianPH) (accessed 22 March 2020).

led by a dominant UMNO, the equality among PH's component parties created a perception that they were incoherent and weak, even with a strong figure like Mahathir leading them.<sup>13</sup>

The lack of a clear coalition leader created both strengths and weaknesses for PH. It was a strength from the perspective that all the parties had to make their case if they wanted the whole coalition to accept their policy position and no one party had the right to impose their position on the others. This ensured rational debates on policy and held potential for it to incubate more mature ideas-based politics in contradistinction from the narrow ethno-religious politics that have plagued Malaysia for decades. But it was also a weakness because much effort was needed to create and maintain coherence within the coalition, especially when there was no "stick" available to punish any coalition partner that stepped out of line.

History has shown that when opposition coalitions fail to manage their differences, they collapse. Malaysian academic Faisal Hazis puts it nicely when, in analysing the collapse of the previous Pakatan Rakyat opposition coalition, he stated that although opposition coalitions were well known for championing issues like combating corruption, reducing the cost of living, fighting crime and other matters that affect the people's livelihoods, this was never enough to bridge the visible differences between the component parties. Pakatan Rakyat crumbled after GE13 because they failed to find the ideological glue to bind the component parties.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, it was evident that PH had inherited the same weakness right from the first day it was formed.

As explained earlier, PH was initially formed by three parties—DAP, KEADILAN and AMANAH. And it was only after months of negotiation that a coalition agreement between PH and BERSATU was

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2017/01/17/pakatan-disunity-preferred-to-bns-unequal-coalition/> (accessed 22 March 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Opinion article by Faisal Hazis available from <https://aliran.com/thinking-allowed-online/2014-ta-online/runtuhnya-pakatan-dan-harapan-rakyat-bahagian/> (accessed 21 March 2020).

signed, on 13 December 2016 (see Appendix 1). Three months later, on 20 March 2017, BERSATU formally joined as the fourth member of PH. BERSATU's entry immediately raised a big question mark about PH's leadership. It should be noted that since 1998, Anwar Ibrahim was always seen as the de facto leader of the opposition movement in Malaysia. Despite being in prison, he remained as the leadership figure for PH and his decisions were still sought from behind prison walls. BERSATU's entry into PH meant that two other giant names in Malaysian politics were now within PH as well—former Prime Minister and BERSATU chairman Mahathir Mohamad, and former Deputy Prime Minister and party president Muhyiddin Yassin. They brought with them the anti-Najib Razak faction from UMNO, creating even more diversity in PH.

With Anwar in prison, PH had to go through difficult negotiations to name a new line-up that included BERSATU for its presidential council, the decision-making body that consists of the top representatives from each member party. This negotiation took another four months, concluding only in a meeting that ended late after midnight on 13 July 2017.<sup>15</sup> Mahathir was named chairman of PH and KEADILAN president Wan Azizah as president of PH. Three deputy presidents were also announced—DAP secretary general Lim Guan Eng, AMANAH president Muhammad Sabu, and BERSATU president Muhyiddin Yassin.

Anwar Ibrahim was named “Ketua Umum” or “General Leader”, a position that put him below Mahathir. This was a very bold decision by PH because, when Mahathir was Prime Minister in 1998, it was he who accused Anwar of sodomy and who sacked him as Deputy Prime Minister. Anwar's political history since then, including the formation of KEADILAN and the coming together of opposition parties in various coalitions since 1998, has been largely predicated on cleaning up Malaysia of the excesses and damage wrought during the Mahathir era. Even Mahathir himself expressed his surprise and gratitude to Anwar for his willingness to prioritize the country over personal grudges. In

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2017/07/257162/pakatan-harapan-announces-leadership-line-anwar-de-facto-leader-dr-m>

a speech at a PH event in January 2018, Mahathir said “When I was running the government previously, Anwar was sent to the Sungai Buloh prison. It is not easy for him to accept me. Not just for Anwar but also for his family who must have suffered when he was imprisoned. They suffered for twenty years and it must be very difficult for the family during that time.”<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless the decision was not universally accepted by Anwar’s supporters. This created a tension that continued to simmer in the background, an issue that will be discussed later in this essay.

At the same event where Mahathir made the above speech, PH announced another milestone in forging the coalition. Negotiations on seat distribution for Peninsular Malaysia had been concluded, and all the four parties agreed on where they would contest. This was a major feat for PH. Reaching an agreement well before GE-14 was called allowed them ample time to select candidates and to start their campaign. BERSATU received the lion’s share of seats, with fifty-two being allocated to them. KEADILAN followed closely behind with fifty-one seats, DAP with thirty-five seats and AMANAH with twenty-seven seats (for a detailed list, see Appendix 2). The numbers changed later as the seats for Sabah and Sarawak were added. Being able to agree on the distribution for Peninsular Malaysia so early in the day was an achievement in itself.

The seat distribution highlights how racial identity was a major influence on PH’s strategy. PH may have been using the slogan “New Malaysia” in their campaign, envisioning a Malaysia free from race-based politics.<sup>17</sup> But the seat allocations showed that the racial composition

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<sup>16</sup> This author attended the Pakatan Harapan Convention on 7 January 2018, in Shah Alam, Selangor. Mahathir’s speech was in Malay and the quote is as follows “Di masa saya memerintah, dia dihantar ke Sungai Buloh. Bukan mudah baginya untuk menerima saya. Bukan sahaja Anwar, malah keluarganya tentu merasai tekanan apabila Anwar dimasukkan dalam tahanan. Mereka menderita selama 20 tahun dan untuk melupakan peristiwa ini bukan mudah buat keluarga Anwar.”

<sup>17</sup> The heavy influence of race and religion in Malaysian politics has been widely studied and commented upon. For example, see Lian Kwen Fee and Jayanath Appadurai, “Race, Class and Politics in Peninsular Malaysia: The General Election of 2008”, *Asian Studies Review* 35, no. 1 (2011): 63–82.

of a constituency remained a major factor. Almost all Malay-Muslim constituencies were entrusted to BERSATU and the Islamist AMANAH, while the secular DAP stayed away from all such seats, and multiracial KEADILAN only went for seats that were mostly mixed. PH was clearly aware of voters' racial sentiment and how it could affect their electoral performance. This race-based strategy is understandable because whatever the rhetoric used by PH, racial sentiment was still pervasive among the electorates. Had PH devised a strategy that ignored this reality, their chances of winning GE-14 would have been slight.

At the same time, PH was clearly aware that Malay voters did not trust the DAP. In the run-up to GE-14, study after study found that Malay voters, both in urban and rural areas, had very low trust in the DAP and saw the party as a threat to the special privileges that they enjoy as per the Malaysian Federal Constitution.<sup>18</sup> This contributed to how the seats were allocated. In fact, the distrust of the DAP was nothing new. Soon after the formation of PH was announced on 22 September 2015, almost half of KEADILAN's central committee members signed a petition demanding an emergency meeting. Their main concern was that DAP's influence and dominance in PH could deter Malay voters.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the challenges posed by the DAP's presence were not just recognized by outside analysts, but also by leaders in multiracial KEADILAN.

Two months after announcing the seat distribution, PH achieved another major milestone. On 8 March 2018, to great fanfare and in front of more than 1,000 people, PH launched their manifesto themed "Rebuilding Our Nation, Fulfilling Our Hopes". The manifesto was arranged into five "pillars", namely (i) Reducing the people's burden;

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Serina Rahman, *Malaysia's General Election 2018: Understanding the Rural Vote*, Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 9/2018 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018); and Wan Saiful Wan Jan, *GE-14: Will Urban Malays Support Pakatan Harapan?*, Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 10/2018 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.mstar.com.my/lokal/semasa/2015/10/05/wan-azizah-dijangka-kena-jawab-lancar-pakatan-harapan> (accessed 2 March 2020).

(ii) Institutional and political reform; (iii) Spurring sustainable and equitable economic growth; (iv) Returning Sabah and Sarawak to the status accorded by the Malaysia Agreement 1963; and (v) Creating a Malaysia that is inclusive, moderate and respected globally.

The manifesto was an ambitious one. Presented as a book of almost 200 pages, it outlines a whole raft of promises from welfare provision to economic and institutional reforms. The welfare and economic promises were very much populist in nature while the institutional reforms were praised by many as exactly what Malaysia needed.<sup>20</sup> Notably absent in the book was how much these reforms would cost and how PH planned to fund them. Nevertheless, the populist welfare and economic promises—such as abolishing the Goods and Services Tax (GST), increasing the minimum wage, and controlling the price of basic goods—were well received by the electorate.

The signing of the coalition agreement, the appointment of coalition leadership, the agreement on seat distribution, and the launch of the manifesto, were attempts to create a stronger framework for the different parties to work together as one government, should they win GE-14. While these steps successfully united the four parties to enter into battle with the ruling coalition, they were essentially superficial moves. Fundamental differences in ideology, and in attitudes towards racial and religious issues, were swept under the carpet as they went into campaign mode after the manifesto launch. But, as will be seen in the next section, the more fundamental differences very quickly came back to haunt PH soon after they won GE-14.

## **POST-ELECTION DYNAMICS**

GE-14 was fiercely contested and, in the beginning, many analysts and pollsters predicted that BN would win.<sup>21</sup> But as it turned out, PH won

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<sup>20</sup>Talk by Laurence Todd, Director of Research at the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS), 28 June 2019.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2018/05/367411/merdeka-center-poll-shows-bn-expected-retain-power> (accessed 10 March 2020).

113 of the 222 available seats, allowing them to form a government with a simple majority. The numbers were further strengthened when another party, Sabah-based Warisan, decided to support the PH coalition, bringing in a further eight seats. But once the euphoria surrounding the historic victory subsided, the unresolved fundamental differences between PH coalition members started to appear.

### *Failure to Address Malay Anxiety*

Of the 113 seats won by PH, KEADILAN had the biggest share with 48 seats. Second was DAP with 42, followed by BERSATU with 12 and AMANAH with 11. This outcome created a situation never seen before in Malaysian politics. Since the country's Independence in 1957, UMNO had always had the biggest share of seats in government, and by extension the largest number of Ministers.

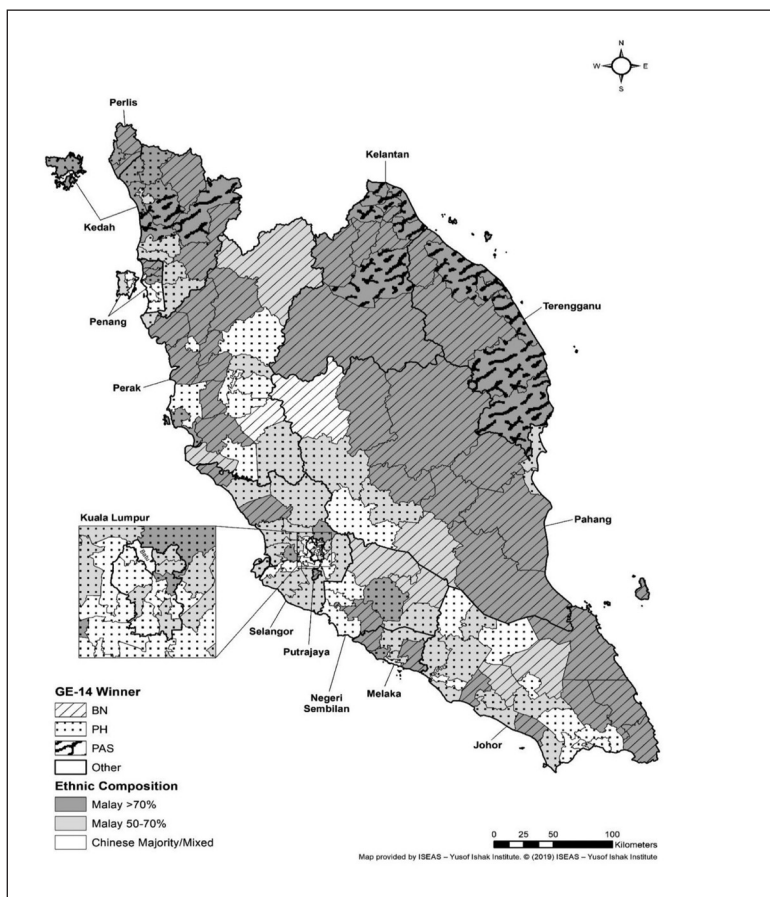
Following GE-14, for the first time in Malaysian history, the two biggest parties in government were not Malay parties, but the multiracial KEADILAN and the Chinese-dominated DAP instead. Between the two, they had 90 seats, which made up almost 80 per cent of PH government seats in parliament. The party within PH seen as representing ethnic Malays, BERSATU, came third with a measly 12 seats. Even if combined with the 11 seats won by Islamist AMANAH, the total number was still very small compared to DAP and KEADILAN.

Even though UMNO did not win GE-14, they maintained their popularity in Malay majority areas, especially in rural parts of Malaysia, as seen in Figures 1 and 2. The two maps show how these two parties actually won a large number of rural and Malay majority areas, while PH won mainly in urban areas and in mixed constituencies. UMNO won 54 seats in total, making them the biggest single party in parliament at that time.<sup>22</sup> Malay voters also voted for the Islamist PAS, giving them 18 seats in parliament.

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<sup>22</sup> Up to the time this essay was written, seventeen UMNO MPs have defected into PH. See <https://pages.malaysiakini.com/defectors/en/> (accessed 5 March 2020).

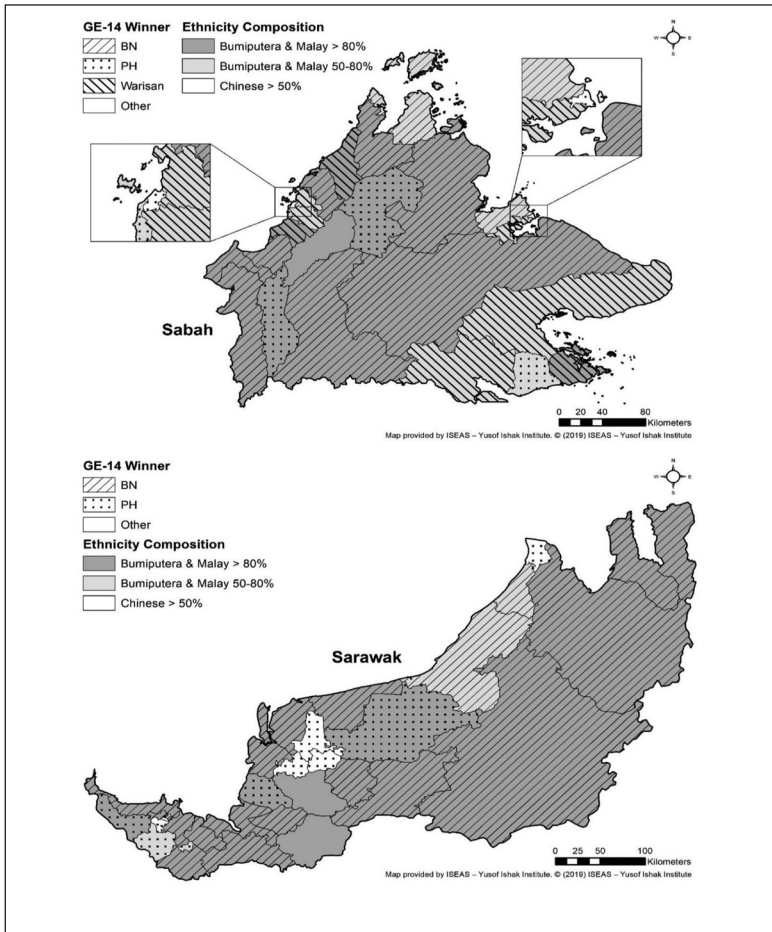
**Figure 1: Parliamentary Seats in Peninsular Malaysia by Ethnicity and Winning Party (GE-14)**



Source: Francis E. Hutchinson and Lee Hwok Aun, “9 May 2018: The Unexpected”, in *The Defeat of Barisan Nasional: Missed Signs or Late Surge?* edited by Francis E. Hutchinson and Lee Hwok Aun (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019), p. 13.



**Figure 2: Parliamentary Seats in Sabah and Sarawak by Ethnicity and Winning Party (GE-14)**



Source: Francis E. Hutchinson and Lee Hwok Aun, “9 May 2018: The Unexpected”, in *The Defeat of Barisan Nasional: Missed Signs or Late Surge?* edited by Francis E. Hutchinson and Lee Hwok Aun (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019), p. 14.

Thus, the two Malay parties UMNO and PAS won 72 seats in total, which is three times that of BERSATU and AMANAH. This outcome is important because it is related to the Malay sentiment discussed in the preceding section. As described earlier, before GE-14, Malay voters had consistently expressed scepticism towards PH, especially due the presence of the DAP. The results of GE-14 showed that not only did the scepticism persist, it was translated into votes. The numbers behind GE-14 showed that PH failed to convince the Malays and rural voters, and consequently their victory was driven mainly by votes from ethnic Chinese and Indians as well as urbanites.

There were exceptions such as in the state of Selangor and some parts of Johor where Malay support for UMNO did decline. But when examined from the national perspective, it was found that only 25 to 30 per cent of Malay voters voted for PH, compared to 95 per cent of Chinese voters and 70 to 75 per cent of Indian voters.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, it has also been argued that some of the Malay support obtained by PH was merely because of the wave of temporary rejection of UMNO. A group of researchers from Monash University studied the phenomenon and summarized their findings thus:

despite an overall swing of Malay voters against BN in GE-14, the lack of a statistically significant change in Malay voting behavior between GE-13 and GE-14 does not warrant calling it a “Malay tsunami”. It is speculated that some Malays voted against BN with a “this time only” mindset, hoping to rid themselves of the GST and former PM Najib Razak. Quoting a CNN opinion piece by ISEAS fellow Serina Rahman, “... a common statement reflected amongst the rural Malays was that ‘there is nothing wrong with UMNO. The problem was Najib. If he had stepped down, none of this would have happened. BN wouldn’t have lost.’”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2018/06/14/report-95-chinese-but-less-than-30-malays-voted-for-ph/> (accessed 5 March 2020).

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.monash.edu.my/research/researchers-say/ge14-did-a-malaysian-tsunami-occur> (accessed 19 May 2020).

Even though the election result should have raised alarm bells within PH about how they failed to win the support of the majority population, PH acted as if there was no urgency in the situation. When Mahathir, as the new Prime Minister, announced the members of his cabinet, UMNO immediately attacked the appointment of DAP Secretary General Lim Guan Eng as Finance Minister. His background as an accountant did not deter criticism. UMNO used his pending corruption trial as the reason for their protest. However, a Malay NGO, PERKASA, immediately supported UMNO's call by saying the post of Minister of Finance must be given to a Malay and not a Chinese from DAP. According to PERKASA acting president Ruhanie Ahmad, "If a non-Malay was appointed, we are worried ... that the socio-economic future of the Malays will be threatened."<sup>25</sup> Even within Mahathir's party, BERSATU, the protest against Lim's appointment was raised, and continued to be raised throughout the life of the PH administration.

Yet it is understandable why Mahathir persisted with his decision. With the DAP being the second biggest party in PH, by convention their leader needed to be appointed to a commensurate post. In addition to the Minister of Finance, two more major appointments also raised eyebrows, namely that of the Chief Justice and Attorney General.<sup>26</sup> Both were filled by non-Malays. Even though the two appointments were non-partisan and non-political in nature—and the nominees are both of towering stature—it opened the door for the PH government to be accused of weakening Malay political power within just weeks of getting into office.

As time passed, the situation did not improve for PH. DAP continued to be seen as too dominant and too vocal in the PH administration. The party insisted that they be treated as a truly equal partner in government,

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<sup>25</sup> <https://malaysiagazette.com/2018/05/16/perkasa-menentang-lim-guan-eng-jadi-menteri-kewangan/> (accessed 5 March 2020).

<sup>26</sup> In June 2018, Richard Malanjum was appointed as Chief Justice and Tommy Thomas as Attorney General.

refusing to accept the previous model practised by BN where the government was designed as a Malay-led government.<sup>27</sup>

DAP top leaders were aware that the public was wary of this attitude, but they failed to manage their own leaders. Two of their Central Executive Committee members, P. Ramasamy and Ronnie Liu, regularly issued statements that roused Malay sensitivities, provoking BERSATU into reacting. Even though BERSATU's responses were meant to show that the Malay party was strong enough to challenge DAP, the continuous spat created a picture of a coalition in disarray, with a Malay party now having to fend off an onslaught from a much bigger non-Malay party.<sup>28</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that an opinion poll conducted a year after PH won power found that the government's popularity had plummeted and Malay insecurity had increased. In the poll, only a paltry "24 per cent of Malay voters felt the country was headed in the right direction—a strong sign that the government needs to reassure the Malays their needs are being addressed." Mahathir's popularity as Prime Minister plunged from 71 per cent in August 2018 to just 46 per cent, while only 39 per cent of Malaysians gave the PH administration positive ratings, a figure that was "almost as low as the 34 per cent vote share former prime minister Najib Razak's Barisan Nasional coalition obtained" in GE-14. In other words, one year after winning GE-14, PH's approval ratings were almost as low as that of BN just prior to them being booted out from government, and they were particularly unpopular among Malay voters. The survey also found that one of the key reasons for the unpopularity was concerns over Malay rights and the protection of the Malay agenda under PH.<sup>29</sup> Six months later, in October 2019, when the results of another poll were

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with Kamaruddin Jaffar, who was a KEADILAN MP and Deputy Minister during the PH administration, 15 April 2020.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2019/10/23/ronnie-liu-has-one-week-to-apologise-says-syed-saddiq>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/mahathir-and-pakatan-harapan-govt-see-popularity-ratings-drop> (accessed 5 March 2020).

published, PH's popularity still had not changed, indicating that the Malay voters remained unconvinced.<sup>30</sup>

The distrust was not just found in polls. When rural Malay voters were interviewed after GE-14 and asked how they felt about BN's downfall, they expressed a sense of regret. They voted for PH in GE-14 but they did not expect the coalition to win. Thus, after GE-14, these rural folks became "worried that the new government would not help them the way UMNO did in the past," and that "there is no longer a party in power that can genuinely champion the Malays and Islam". Some even went so far as to say that the PH administration was a "Chinese government ... working to disempower the Malays".<sup>31</sup> Clearly, even though they may have voted for PH, the Malays were still doubtful about PH's commitment to protect their interests.

Despite the widespread anxiety among the majority population, PH did not make any real attempt to rectify the situation. Top PH leaders were dismissive of the need to tackle Malay fears and insecurity. When questioned about their tumbling popularity, DAP Secretary General Lim Guan Eng merely focused on the economy by saying "We still have four more years to go and we should use this opportunity to turn the economy around" and "The crucial factor is always about economic prosperity so that people feel confident that they will live better than before."<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Mahathir too did not take his plunging popularity, especially among the Malays, very seriously. Commenting on the poll findings, he stated "I don't know how they did this survey, but what I know is many people still want to shake hands, take photos, meaning there is still

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<sup>30</sup> <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2019/10/06/dr-m-dismissed-report-of-plummeting-ph-support/> (accessed 5 March 2020).

<sup>31</sup> Serina Rahman, "The Rural Malay voters in GE-14: Expectations, Surprise, and Misgivings", in *The Defeat of Barisan Nasional: Missed Signs or Late Surge?*, edited by Francis E. Hutchinson and Lee Hwok Aun (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020), p. 179.

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2019/08/29/yes-ph-popularity-is-in-decline-but-weve-4-more-years-to-go-says-guan-eng/> (accessed 5 March 2020).

support ... The other (government leaders) also get the same requests. This is proof that there is still support.”<sup>33</sup> In short, the PH administration ignored Malay anxiety, which created a gap between the administration and the biggest voter block in the country.

### *Reform Missteps*

PH’s manifesto promised some very bold institutional reforms, some easier to fulfil than others. For example, the promise to abolish the GST was delivered within just days of PH coming into government. But there were also more difficult promises such as separating the Office of Attorney General from the Public Prosecutor, which would require a two-thirds majority in parliament which PH did not have.

Granted, there is no question about how much Malaysia needed—and still needs—institutional reform. PH immediately took steps to implement this agenda and in just twenty months they declared that they had implemented 60 per cent of their reform promises.<sup>34</sup> They claimed that many of the promised institutional reforms were either implemented or were on track to be introduced. Among the important institutional reforms that PH announced were the revamping of government procurement processes, improving the transparency of Malaysia’s financial administration, limiting the Prime Minister’s tenure to just two terms, giving greater freedom to the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission, and preparing for the establishment of an independent police complaints commission.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/494688> (accessed 5 March 2020).

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/baki-40-peratus-janji-manifesto-ph-akan-ditunai-pada-2020-guan-eng-225316> (accessed 6 March 2020).

<sup>35</sup> For a more detailed assessment of how PH fared in implementing their manifesto promises, see Project Pantau Report Cards no. 1, 2 and 3 published by the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS), accessible from their website <http://www.ideas.org.my/publications/reports/>

Several times, Prime Minister Mahathir reiterated his government's commitment to pursue even more institutional reforms. It was clearly one of his top priorities, as he stated in a parliamentary speech: "The mandate given to us by the people is to change. This is why institutional reform is our priority."<sup>36</sup> Under normal circumstances the commitment to institutional reform would certainly be praised. Unfortunately, in this case it added to the problems faced by the PH government because institutional reform was an agenda that originated from the urban elites, whereas the majority of the population was more concerned about their livelihoods and the rising cost of living. This disconnect was highlighted by Anwar Ibrahim himself, when he commented that "The urban elite sets a list of priorities which are a disconnect from the real problems of the poor, and at times, the elite seems to ignore these real problems. I have not heard them talking about poverty, inequality."<sup>37</sup> Anwar even warned the PH administration that "There is still a feeling among the majority of Malays that the government policies do not benefit them. It is unsustainable for the government to ignore the voices of the majority."<sup>38</sup>

The influence of the urban elites on the PH administration was to be expected because most seats won by PH were urban. This has been illustrated earlier in Figures 1 and 2, and it created a disconnect between PH and the rural and Malay population. The danger of being overly focused on urbanite demands for institutional reform was highlighted soon after PH won power. Barely three weeks after GE-14, a respected analyst of Malaysian politics, Professor William Case, warned that PH's "fast and furious" approach in pushing for reforms could trigger a backlash if not managed carefully.<sup>39</sup> This author too raised the same

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<sup>36</sup> <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2018/10/487727/jawatan-pm-mb-km-hanya-dua-penggal> (accessed 6 March 2020).

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/474060> (accessed 6 March 2020).

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/171266> (accessed 6 March 2020).

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/428005> (accessed 6 March 2020).

concern, calling out those living in the “Bangsar bubble”<sup>40</sup> as being too demanding and insensitive towards the needs of the wider population, especially the rural population and the Malays who form the majority of the electorates.<sup>41</sup>

As implied by the quote from Anwar Ibrahim above, the “real problems” faced by the country have been economic in nature, especially among the poorer segment of society. This is not to say that institutional reforms are not important, but his statement was an acknowledgement that many Malaysians were struggling to cope with the rising cost of living since before GE-14 and this issue was their number one concern going into the election. While no one would deny that institutional reform was needed, most analysts put economic hardship, stagnant wages, and declining purchasing power as the most urgent issues—certainly more urgent than institutional reform—in the eyes of voters.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, when the PH administration was seen as putting more energy into institutional reforms, the outcome was a disenchanted public, because the economic benefits they desired from voting for change in GE-14 had not materialized. Additionally, the situation became worse for PH if the economic situation was analysed based on ethnicity. The Malays have the lowest mean real household income compared to ethnic Chinese and Indians,<sup>43</sup> yet they felt that PH was not addressing their grievances. Whether PH actually helped the Malays or not is beside

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<sup>40</sup> Bangsar is an upper middle-class enclave in Kuala Lumpur. The term “Bangsar bubble” implies that the views of some civil society activists and politicians are too restricted to the elite environment they are familiar with.

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2018/07/21/dont-just-promote-reform-in-bangsar-bubble-wan-saiful-tells-ngos/1654558> (accessed 6 March 2020).

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/runup-ge14-analysts-rising-cost-living-and-stagnant-wages-voters-main-concerns> (accessed 6 March 2020).

<sup>43</sup> Martin Ravallion, “Ethnic Inequality and Poverty in Malaysia”, Paper presented at the Eighth Meeting of the Society for the Study of Economic Inequality, Paris School of Economics, 3–5 July 2019.



the point. PH's problem in this regard was perception. UMNO and PAS also stoked this sentiment to aggravate the situation, a factor that will be described later in this essay. The unpopularity of the PH administration as captured by poll after poll is easier to understand if this economic issue is taken into consideration. Not only did the Malays feel they had lost political power in GE-14, PH's mistaken prioritization of institutional reforms meant they also felt that the government was no longer looking after their economic well-being.

Having said the above, there is one important qualification that must be made. This essay is not arguing that PH was successful in implementing the reforms that they promised. It should be noted that the 60-percent achievement quoted above was a self-proclamation with not much details on how they reached that figure. In fact, some observers felt that PH's drive for institutional reform stagnated after their first year in office, and that PH had only announced the beginning of reform initiatives rather than their completion. Even long-time DAP leader Lim Kit Siang wrote that "the pace of institutional reform is still too slow and unsatisfactory and more should be attempted."<sup>44</sup> Instead, the argument here is that, as a result of being overly-influenced by the "Bangsar bubble", PH's announcements and actions were perceived to be too focused on institutional reforms while welfare was neglected. It can be argued that this perception was factually incorrect because PH did introduce various welfare programmes, such as the "Bantuan Sara Hidup" cash transfer scheme, and they also increased the minimum wage. But, as explained above, PH lost in the public perception battle due to their missteps.

### *The Mahathir-Anwar Tussle*

Another issue that continuously lingered was the never-ending tussle for power and influence between Mahathir and Anwar. The rivalry between the two has dogged Malaysian politics since the 1990s. But, as described earlier, when PH was in the process of being formed, the two opted to

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<sup>44</sup> <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/484755> (accessed 2 June 2020).

put aside their differences. Anwar—at that time still in prison—agreed to relinquish his leadership position to Mahathir when BERSATU joined PH. In return, Mahathir agreed that Anwar should be pardoned if PH were to win power. Indeed, Mahathir delivered on this promise just one week after PH took over.<sup>45</sup>

PH also promised that Anwar would succeed Mahathir as Prime Minister. The time frame for transition was never put to paper but many in PH—especially Anwar’s supporters—insisted that they expected transition to happen by May 2020, two years after GE-14. The two-year time limit was set by Mahathir himself. In an interview with Japanese newspaper *Mainichi Shimbun* published on 3 February 2018, Mahathir was quoted as saying “I can’t stay for very long. At the most, I can last for two years.”<sup>46</sup> The same report also stated “Mahathir revealed that he wants to hand over the role of prime minister to Anwar after his release from prison,” But once in office, Mahathir changed his view and stated that he would instead only resign after the APEC Economic Leaders’ Meeting scheduled for November 2020. He also changed his tone from an outright promise to hand over the responsibility to Anwar to saying that the next Prime Minister is whoever can garner the majority support of MPs in parliament.<sup>47</sup>

Having said the above, it should be noted that BERSATU’s entry into PH was a matter of political strategy. It was generally accepted that to defeat BN, opposition parties must be united under one banner. However, BERSATU, and especially Mahathir, was never enthusiastic about the possibility of handing over the prime ministership to Anwar.<sup>48</sup> It was, in

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<sup>45</sup> <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2018/05/426377/anwar-bebas> (accessed 3 March 2020).

<sup>46</sup> <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20180203/p2a/00m/0na/006000c> (accessed 20 May 2020).

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/mahathir-says-promise-on-leadership-transition-remains-but-pm-must-hold-majority-in> (accessed 4 March 2020).

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Hasnizam Adham, Selangor State Secretary for BERSATU and one of the early activists of the party, 20 April 2020.

fact, a marriage of convenience, which was made clear by many leaders of BERSATU, including Mahathir himself. In various closed-door discussions and meetings after GE-14 attended by this author,<sup>49</sup> Mahathir was both adamant and consistent that he did not want to see Anwar succeed him as Prime Minister despite his public statements. To Mahathir, Anwar is someone who would neither champion the Malays nor defend the privileges accorded to ethnic Malays by the Federal Constitution. Mahathir also believed that Anwar's plans could be thwarted if the three major Malay parties—BERSATU, UMNO and PAS—were brought together so that a new Malay-led government could be formed—doing away with the Chinese-dominated DAP and the multiracial KEADILAN in PH in the process.

Therefore, around March or April 2019, in a BERSATU Supreme Council meeting chaired by Mahathir, it was agreed that Hamzah Zainuddin—a former minister from UMNO who defected into BERSATU after GE-14—should initiate conversations between BERSATU, UMNO and PAS on the possibility of working together. In another meeting in July 2019, Mahathir asked for a national congress to be organized so that he could showcase his ability to unite the Malays. Once again, Hamzah Zainuddin was asked to coordinate the effort. The Malay Dignity Congress was subsequently held on 6 October 2019. Mahathir delivered the keynote speech, after which he stood on stage flanked by PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang and UMNO Secretary General Annuar Musa, symbolizing the coming together of the three main Malay parties under his leadership. Anwar, however, was not invited until the very last minute, and did not attend.<sup>50</sup>

Anwar's supporters continued to pressure Mahathir to set a firm date for the transfer of power. Week after week, the issue was raised

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<sup>49</sup> As a member of BERSATU Supreme Council since 1 March 2018, this author was privy to various meetings and discussions on this topic, including with Mahathir.

<sup>50</sup> <http://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/kongres-maruah-melayu-anwar-diundang-saat-akhir-219431> (accessed 3 March 2020).

and debated, including by civil society groups close to Anwar such as the Malaysian Islamic Youths Movement (ABIM).<sup>51</sup> Even other PH component parties joined the chorus, with AMANAH deputy president Salahuddin Ayub saying “We accepted Mahathir as the Pakatan Harapan chairperson after arriving at a consensus with a written agreement—that Mahathir will be the seventh prime minister while the eighth will be Anwar ... AMANAH will ensure we uphold the agreement.”<sup>52</sup> Other Anwar loyalists went as far as to threaten holding street rallies to make their demands more visible, alleging that Mahathir was untrustworthy and that he wanted to cling to power forever.<sup>53</sup> Throughout, Anwar hardly made any effort to stop his supporters.

The tension between the two became a major distraction for the PH administration. It was disruptive to Mahathir because he would be bombarded with questions about transition whenever he met the press. It also diverted public attention from the various reforms and good work that the administration had undertaken. This “passive aggressive” attitude shown by Anwar, by portraying to the public that he was not demanding for a quick transition but at the same time refusing to stop his supporters from making very vocal demands, weakened the PH administration and added to the perception that PH was divided.<sup>54</sup>

## THE OUTCOME

As can be seen from the above, during its time in office, PH was riddled with some serious problems. The coalition won GE-14 mainly on the back of support from the non-Malays. Yet despite knowing this fact, PH did not make any real attempt to woo Malay voters. Instead they

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<sup>51</sup> <https://www.bloombergquint.com/onweb/malaysia-s-bersih-calls-for-mahathir-to-set-date-for-succession> (accessed 3 March 2020).

<sup>52</sup> <https://m.malaysiakini.com/news/488453> (accessed 2 March 2020).

<sup>53</sup> Speech by KEADILAN national treasurer William Leong MP, 16 February 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with KEADILAN vice president Tian Chua, 14 April 2020.

continued to prioritize institutional reforms, which, although important for the country, were not the priority for a considerable proportion of the population, who was more worried about their livelihoods and the soaring cost of living. Worse, PH allowed the rivalry between Mahathir and Anwar to fester, thereby adding to the perception that the government was unstable.

### *The Response from UMNO and PAS*

PH's problems became more acute when UMNO and PAS sensed that they had an opportunity to solidify the already negative public perception on the government, especially among the Malays. Some key moves by the two parties were as follows:

- i. *Capitalizing on Malay sentiment*—UMNO and PAS quickly capitalized on the perception among Malay voters that PH was not looking after their interests. After months of discussion, on 14 September 2019, UMNO and PAS signed a joint charter to establish Muafakat Nasional (National Consensus), marking a formal partnership between the two parties. The partnership was unprecedented because the last time PAS and UMNO worked together in a formal pact was in 1974 as part of national reconciliation following the bloody 13 May 1969 ethnic riots. But the formation of Muafakat Nasional was not unexpected. The two parties had started courting each other almost immediately after GE-14, upon realizing that they had a chance to capture the large Malay vote base that did not opt for PH.

The first time that UMNO and PAS had a chance to work together was in August 2018, three months after GE-14. In the run-up to the Sungai Kandis by-election that month, PAS decided to not contest, giving way to UMNO so that there would be a one-on-one fight against PH. A month later, in the Balakong by-election, PAS once again did not name a candidate and openly called for voters to choose BN. In the same month, there was another by-election in Seri Setia. This time, BN did not name a candidate, allowing PAS to challenge PH in a straight fight. Even though PH won all three polls, the relationship between UMNO and PAS grew closer and they continued to work

together in all the ensuing by-elections, in which the relationship started to bear fruit. Together UMNO and PAS defeated PH in three out of the five by-elections that took place between October 2018 and August 2019. Following the official formation of Muafakat Nasional in September 2019, two more by-elections took place and PH lost in both. The most significant one was in Tanjung Piai, Johor, in November 2019. BN named a Chinese candidate while PH put their bet on a Malay imam. BN won a landslide with more than 15,000 majority, indicating that the partnership between the two Malay parties worked even if their candidate was not a Malay who was, in turn, challenging a Malay candidate with religious credentials. The Tanjung Piai by-election showed that Muafakat Nasional was already able to command the Malay voters, including in getting them to vote for a non-Malay candidate.

The formation of Muafakat Nasional marked a rightward shift by UMNO and PAS. Soon after losing GE-14, UMNO toyed with the possibility of opening membership to non-Malays<sup>55</sup> but only briefly. The party quickly discovered that it would be a lot easier for them to regain support if they returned to their core voters, the Malays. Hence their courting of PAS and the subsequent formation of Muafakat Nasional. For UMNO, working with PAS in Muafakat Nasional would enable them to become the dominant party once again because they have a much bigger representation in parliament than PAS. The new partnership would enable them to go back to their Malay constituents with the argument that they were more able than PH to protect Malay interests.<sup>56</sup>

- ii. *Discrediting the PH administration*—UMNO and PAS, together with other opposition parties, also invested time and effort in a well-orchestrated media campaign to highlight the division and the

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<sup>55</sup> <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2018/06/07/pahang-umno-chief-urges-party-to-open-membership-to-all-races/1639232> (accessed 20 May 2020).

<sup>56</sup> Interview with an UMNO Supreme Council member who requested anonymity (19 May 2020).

weaknesses within PH. This was perhaps the easiest step, because PH kept making one blunder after another, and at the same time, PH's communication strategy was very weak and ineffective.<sup>57</sup> The rivalry between Mahathir and Anwar, as well as the perceived dominance of the DAP in the PH administration, became daily ammunition for attacking the government. Social media was widely used to increase public dissatisfaction with the PH administration, enhancing the perception that PH was incompetent.

Questions were raised constantly about PH's commitment to protecting Malay interests. This too was repeatedly exploited by UMNO and PAS to strengthen public assumption that PH was not committed to helping the Malays and that the Malays would be better off under a different administration. The concerted media effort helped to forge public perception that the newly formed Muafakat Nasional could be the saviour of the Malays in Malaysia, especially in the fight against DAP-controlled PH. Whether this view was in reality correct or not is beside the point; that was in any case certainly the perception that was created.<sup>58</sup>

- iii. *Opening the door for a bigger Malay unity*—Perhaps most importantly, having successfully forged Muafakat Nasional and having successfully discredited PH, especially among the Malays, both UMNO and PAS leaders accepted the invitation from BERSATU—through Hamzah Zainuddin as described earlier—to discuss uniting the Malay parties. This was a significant move because even though in public UMNO and PAS portrayed BERSATU as an enemy, behind the scene, negotiations were taking place at the highest level. UMNO and PAS leaders did not just converse with BERSATU through Hamzah, they also maintained a cordial relationship with Mahathir himself, by personally visiting him several times for private discussions.

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<sup>57</sup> Interview with AMANAH vice president and MP for Pokok Sena, Mahfuz Omar, 11 April 2020.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with KEADILAN director of communications and MP for Lembah Pantai, Fahmi Fadzil, 17 April 2020.

These actions bore their first fruit with the organization of the Malay Dignity Congress on 6 October 2019. Mahathir ventured out from the government and even from the PH structure to embrace both UMNO and PAS at that Congress. This move was approved by the BERSATU Supreme Council on the basis that they were the two biggest parties for the Malays. In his keynote speech, Mahathir publicly called for the three Malay parties to unite. He said “We are now divided into six small groups and no one of us is able to garner more than 50 per cent of public support. We did this to ourselves ... When we are divided, we end up fighting each other.”<sup>59</sup> He even derided the need to work with non-Malays to win public support and the subsequent need to share power with them by saying “When we fight each other, we are forced to rely on support from others in order to win. We then feel that we owe them a favour ... And that forces us to pawn our powers to them because we are divided ... I want to admit here that this government, even though led by Malays, our Malayness is not as strong as before ... This is because whether we want to or not, we must consider the feelings of others ... If we do not consider them, we will lose in the elections.”<sup>60</sup>

The organization of the Congress, and Mahathir’s presence in it, may have been a decision made by the BERSATU Supreme Council. But it

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<sup>59</sup> Translated from Mahathir’s speech: “Terpecah kepada enam buah badan yang kecil-kecil belaka dan mana-mana satu dari mereka tidak mampu menguasai 50 peratus daripada sokongan rakyat. Inilah yang kita lakukan kepada diri kita ... Apabila kita pecah dan kita jadi kumpulan-kumpulan yang kecil maka kita berlawan sesama kita.”

<sup>60</sup> Translated from Mahathir’s speech: “Apabila kita berlawan sesama kita maka terpaksalah kita bergantung kepada orang lain untuk mendapat kemenangan. Apabila kita bergantung kepada orang lain sedikit sebanyak kita terhutang budi kepada mereka ... Dengan sendirinya kita sudah gadaikan kuasa yang diberi kepada kita kerana kita berpecah belah ... Saya nak mengaku di sini bahawa kerajaan walaupun dipimpin oleh orang Melayu tidak sekuat keMelayuannya sekarang. ... Tidak kuat kerana nak tak nak pun kita kena ambil kira perasaan orang lain. Kalau kita tidak ambil kira, datang pilihanraya, kita akan kalah.”



was also the clearest indication yet that the strategy taken by UMNO and PAS to woo BERSATU out of the PH coalition had started to work. The move towards Malay unity was also approved by Mahathir who spearheaded the effort from within BERSATU.

### *The February 2020 Saga*

With all that happening in the background over the course of many months, the stage was set for the historic saga in February 2020. PH held its Presidential Council meeting on Friday, 21 February 2020, with the issue of transition being the biggest agenda. Reports stated that the meeting became tense when the topic came up for discussion.<sup>61</sup> But it concluded with a decision that Mahathir be given full freedom to decide when he wanted to resign and hand over to Anwar.<sup>62</sup>

Both UMNO and BERSATU then had their respective Supreme Council meetings on Sunday, 23 February 2020.<sup>63</sup> Both debated the possibility of forming a new government led by a coalition of the three Malay parties. While UMNO agreed in principle with the move,<sup>64</sup> the BERSATU meeting chaired by Mahathir deserves further elaboration because it created a raft of consequences for the party and for the country. At the meeting, Mahathir objected to the proposed partnership for two reasons. First, he disliked the idea of partnering with UMNO en bloc, preferring instead to encourage individual UMNO members and MPs to jump ship into BERSATU. According to Mahathir, UMNO was corrupt and did not deserve to be brought into government as one party. Second,

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<sup>61</sup> <https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2020/02/568242/meeting-turns-tense> (accessed 7 March 2020).

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2020/02/567842/its-all-me-dr-m-says-power-transition-plan> (accessed 7 March 2020).

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/02/23/leaders-holed-up-in-political-meetings> (accessed 7 March 2020).

<sup>64</sup> Interview with an UMNO Supreme Council member who requested anonymity (19 May 2020).

Mahathir pleaded that he should be allowed to fulfil his promise to hand over the prime ministership to Anwar. Both these arguments came as a major surprise to others in the meeting. Prior to this meeting, behind closed doors Mahathir had always been clear about not wanting to pass the baton to Anwar, and he was also open to partnering with UMNO as evidenced by his own instruction to organize the Malay Dignity Congress. But at that meeting, Mahathir suddenly changed his mind. Up until the present, Mahathir has not explained the reason behind this significant change of heart.

Mahathir's objection was supported by his son, BERSATU deputy president Mukhriz Mahathir, as well as a small group of party members. But a large majority of Supreme Council members felt it was time to make a firm decision on the matter and for BERSATU to lead the formation of a new, Malay-led government. They argued that this issue should not be guided by Mahathir's personal desires alone. Instead the priority should be the long-term survival of the party, especially among the Malays, whom they feel would not vote for BERSATU in GE-15 if the party remained in a coalition with DAP. Mahathir eventually relented, saying that he would abide by the majority decision. The meeting thus decided (i) with majority support that BERSATU would leave PH and form a new Malay-led government, and (ii) with unanimous support that the chairman of the party could decide when to implement the decision. The latter was proposed by Muhyiddin when he saw how reluctant Mahathir was with the decision.

It should be noted that the decision for BERSATU to leave PH was made on the understanding that Mahathir would remain as Prime Minister in the new government. At the 23 February meeting, it was explained to BERSATU leadership that 133 MPs—mainly from BERSATU, UMNO and PAS—had signed statutory declarations confirming their confidence in Mahathir. The new government would not just be a Malay-led government, but it would also be a more stable government holding a bigger majority, with Mahathir at the helm and free from the pressure to resign within a stipulated time.

But Mahathir caught everyone off-guard when he protested by submitting his resignation both as Prime Minister and as BERSATU Chairman around noon on Monday 24 February 2020. The sudden

resignation drove BERSATU into crisis mode. With Mahathir no longer Chairman of the party, Muhyiddin had to take over as Acting Chairman.<sup>65</sup> The most pressing issue he had to handle on that day was the fact that, with Mahathir's resignation as Prime Minister and PH still holding the majority in parliament, the door suddenly became wide open for Anwar to claim that he held sufficient support to succeed Mahathir. Muhyiddin immediately exercised his power as acting chairman to implement the decision taken by BERSATU Supreme Council the day before, in line with the second decision of the meeting as described earlier. He announced that BERSATU was leaving PH effective immediately, which meant that PH—and therefore Anwar—no longer had the majority in parliament. According to Muhyiddin, this move saved the party from having to accept Anwar as Prime Minister, which was a situation that neither Mahathir nor BERSATU wanted.<sup>66</sup> In the same announcement, Muhyiddin reiterated the party's support for Mahathir to be reappointed as Prime Minister.

Mahathir however remained adamant that he did not want to form a new government that included UMNO. Instead he proposed that parties from all sides join him to form a unity government.<sup>67</sup> This sudden change of heart created a major problem for BERSATU because it meant they could not proceed to establish a new, Malay-led government that had been in the works for more than a year. On Tuesday, 25 February 2020, UMNO and PAS retaliated by announcing that since Mahathir was unyielding in wanting to continue working with the DAP, then they

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<sup>65</sup> Paragraph 16.9 of BERSATU Constitution states that if the chairman resigns or is removed, the president automatically becomes the acting chairman until an election is held to choose a new chairman.

<sup>66</sup> Explanation by Muhyiddin Yassin in a closed-door meeting with BERSATU leaders at the official residence of the Prime Minister (Seri Perdana), 3 March 2020.

<sup>67</sup> <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/02/25/sources-dr-m-eyeing-unity-government/1840794> (accessed 8 March 2020).

would withdraw support for him.<sup>68</sup> To add salt to Mahathir's wound, on Wednesday, 26 February 2020, PH announced that since BERSATU had left the coalition and Mahathir was no longer chairman of BERSATU, they too had decided to withdraw their support for Mahathir, preferring to nominate Anwar as Prime Minister instead.<sup>69</sup> Mahathir was therefore left with insufficient support to return as Prime Minister.

On the morning of Thursday, 27 February 2020, Muhyiddin had a meeting with Mahathir, accompanied by then secretary general of BERSATU Marzuki Yahya and Youth Chief Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman. They discussed the national crisis and concluded that if Muhyiddin was able to garner enough support, Mahathir would agree to support him as the next Prime Minister.<sup>70</sup> Mahathir himself announced that decision on the same day in a press conference, saying "There are various possibilities that we discussed including of course the possibility that Muhyiddin might become the candidate. If everybody chooses him, I am OK. As the PM, yes ... if he goes to parliament and he is given full majority then he has the right to become the prospective Prime Minister and the Agong (King) can appoint him. He can be sworn in and then of course he can form his cabinet."<sup>71</sup>

That announcement by Mahathir started the ball rolling for Muhyiddin's nomination as Prime Minister. The original plan to create a Malay-led government was also back in the picture, albeit this time with Muhyiddin at the helm. On Friday, 28 February 2020, UMNO, PAS and all BN component parties declared their support for Muhyiddin to

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<sup>68</sup> <https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2020/02/569044/bn-pas-pbrs-urge-dissolution-parliament> (accessed 8 March 2020).

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.sinarharian.com.my/article/71607/KHAS/Peralihan-Kerajaan/PH-sepakat-calon-Anwar-sebagai-Perdana-Menteri> (accessed 8 March 2020).

<sup>70</sup> Explanation by Muhyiddin Yassin in a closed-door meeting with BERSATU leaders at the official residence of the Prime Minister (Seri Perdana), 3 March 2020.

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2020/02/27/im-okay-if-more-lenient-muhyiddin-gets-support-for-pms-post-says-dr-m/> (accessed 7 March 2020).

take the helm of the country. A group of eleven MPs led by KEADILAN deputy president Azmin Ali also defected from their party to support Muhyiddin.<sup>72</sup> By the evening, the number of MPs supporting Muhyiddin grew, with MPs from Sabah and Sarawak joining the new Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition under Muhyiddin.

The growing numbers led the King to summon Muhyiddin and other leaders from parties in his new coalition for an audience on Saturday to assess if Muhyiddin commanded the confidence of the majority of MPs in parliament.<sup>73</sup> Subsequently, on Sunday, 30 February 2020, the National Palace announced that “After getting representation from all leaders representing their respective parties and independent Dewan Rakyat<sup>74</sup> members, in the opinion of his Royal Highness, the member that is likely to enjoy majority confidence among the Dewan Rakyat members is Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, the Pagoh MP.”<sup>75</sup> This announcement marked the ending of a tumultuous week in Malaysian politics, culminating with the appointment of Muhyiddin as the new Prime Minister. It also sealed the fate of PH, ending their twenty-two-month rule, and returning them to the opposition benches.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This essay has explained that the downfall of PH was not just due to BERSATU’s quest to ensure Malay interests were better protected and

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<sup>72</sup> Azmin Ali was sacked from KEADILAN on 24 February 2020. In the bigger scheme of things, Azmin and his group of MPs played a significant role that led to the formation of PN government. However, their actions had no major influence on BERSATU’s decision to leave PH. BERSATU’s movement took place independent of the split in KEADILAN. Hence the limited discussion on Azmin’s role in this essay.

<sup>73</sup> <https://www.sinarharian.com.my/article/71938/KHAS/Peralihan-Kerajaan/Muhyiddin-menghadap-Agong-bawa-suara-Perikatan-Nasional> (accessed 7 March 2020).

<sup>74</sup> Dewan Rakyat is Malaysia’s lower house of Parliament.

<sup>75</sup> <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/512686> (accessed 7 March 2020).

that their party would survive and succeed in the long term, but it was also caused by the failure of PH to adjust their attitude and strategy to suit the political reality. At this point, it is worth recalling that this study set out to examine the episode from BERSATU's point of view. Thus, as stated in the introductory section, although there were many other factors and actors which contributed to the demise of PH, they were disregarded because the interviews conducted in this study found that they did not have a significant influence in BERSATU's decision-making process.

Looking back to when PH was formed, fracture points clearly existed from the beginning, especially resulting from their decision to sweep their ideological differences under the carpet. PH component parties ignored the most significant difference they had—namely their attitude to the issue of racial and religious diversity—pretending that they could mask over it simply by proclaiming that they were committed to defending the relevant clauses in the Federal Constitution. They also downplayed the anxiety shown by the Malays, despite being told repeatedly by many analysts and observers that they were suffering a major trust deficit from that group. And although there were calls for the government to give more attention to the rural and poor Malays who needed economic assistance, PH was too influenced by those in the “Bangsar bubble” who insisted that the government focused on institutional reforms instead.

The presence of DAP in PH was always the Achilles heel when it came to obtaining more Malay support. It is important to note that DAP's commitment to the much-needed institutional reform was unquestionable and, in fact, praiseworthy. But Malaysian politics is heavily coloured by ethnoreligious debates and those who ignore this do so at their peril. PH won GE-14 with a very low level of support from the Malays because the Malays feared what the DAP would do to Malay privileges once in power. UMNO and PAS very quickly noticed this weakness and they targeted the DAP whenever they could, accentuating the perceived threat.

Most BERSATU leaders also realized that DAP was fast becoming a liability because of how they were perceived by the Malays. Ultimately, the majority of BERSATU leaders decided that it was time to place the long-term interest and mission of the party over and above any personal considerations, believing that if they stayed in PH, the party

would perform even worse in GE15. Thus, a decision was made as early as March 2019 to explore forming a new, Malay-led government in partnership with UMNO and PAS, which would be a government more in line with BERSATU's own purpose. The culmination was the change of government in February 2020. For BERSATU, while they acknowledged that GE-14 was won in partnership with PH, a significant change of direction was needed in preparing for GE-15. Their assessment was that staying in PH would result in desertion by Malay voters. Being a Malay party, leaving PH and forming a government that could better serve Malay interests was the most logical course of action.

From the whole episode, it is clear that any political party or coalition that wants to govern Malaysia cannot afford to ignore sentiments among the majority population. Outside of the "Bangsar-bubble", the Malays were not ready for the equality agenda perceived to be championed by the DAP and to some extent by KEADILAN. They saw in PH the Chinese-dominated DAP insisting on being treated as an equal partner, which is something many Malays today still find unacceptable. It did not help that some DAP leaders continued to touch on sensitive issues that served only to heighten Malay fears. This created a heavy burden on other coalition partners, especially on BERSATU, who then had to shoulder the responsibility of defending the DAP against attacks by the sceptical Malay audience.

The public, especially the Malay voters, expressed their disapproval by punishing PH not just in opinion polls but also in by-elections. Yet PH remained either too arrogant or too ignorant about the situation and continued to overlook their grouses, perhaps assuming that the issue be tackled later in their supposed five-year term. Perchance, PH had the correct ideals for the country, envisioning a society where there was true equality for all. Nonetheless this saga proves that in politics, idealism must be tempered with a large dose of reality to avoid being detached from realities on the ground, and, while the ideals must remain the ultimate aim, the push for change must be done gradually.

## ***APPENDIX 1: Coalition Agreement Between Pakatan Harapan And Bersatu***

The agreement was signed on 13 December 2016. At the time, BERSATU had not yet joined PH. Thus, this agreement was considered a “PH-BERSATU” agreement.<sup>76</sup>

1. To ensure that the fight is in line with the spirit of the 1957/1963 Federal Constitution, especially on matters related to:
  - a. Defending the Federal Constitution, Islam as the religion of the Federation while other religions can be practised freely and peacefully in accordance to Article 3; defending the special position of the Malays and the Sabah and Sarawak bumiputra as well as the legitimate interest of other communities in accordance to Article 153;
  - b. Defending the role and responsibilities of the institution of constitutional monarchy;
  - c. Uplifting the status and usage of the Malay language in accordance to Article 152 and to make the Malay language the language of knowledge and regional lingua franca; defending and championing the usage and learning of the mother tongues of other ethnic groups; and improving the command of the English language so as to increase Malaysia’s competitiveness globally.
2. To champion the reform agenda in developing the country for the benefit of the people, based on shared values, including truth, justice, freedom, integrity, welfare, and good governance.
3. To name only one candidate to represent Pakatan Harapan and BERSATU in the election once seat distribution is negotiated and decided based on winnability.

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<sup>76</sup> Translated from Malay. For a more accurate understanding, refer to the Malay version at <https://www.roketkini.com/2016/12/13/kandungan-perjanjian-persefahaman-pakatan-harapan-dan-parti-pribumi-bersatu-malaysia/>



4. To negotiate with other opposition parties so that as far as possible there will be only one opposition candidate opposing Barisan Nasional.
5. To create a united opposition coalition prior to GE-14 with a view to form a government after GE-14.
6. To set up a Joint Technical Committee to negotiate seat distribution, manifesto and a common logo, as well as to plan the work towards GE-14.
7. Based on friendship and cooperation, parties in this agreement will maintain a healthy and cordial relationship with each other and any dispute will be resolved through negotiation.

**APPENDIX 2: Peninsular Malaysia Parliamentary Seat Allocation Within PH**

<b>State (Total Seats)</b>	<b>BERSATU (52)</b>	<b>KEADILAN (51)</b>	<b>DAP (35)</b>	<b>AMANAH (27)</b>
Perlis (3)	Arau Padang Besar	Kangar		
Kedah (15)	Langkawi Jerlun Kubang Pasu Jerai Pendang Baling	Alor Setar Kuala Kedah Kulim Bandar Baru Merbok Padang Serai Sungai Petani		Pokok Sena Sik Padang Terap
Penang (13)	Tasek Gelugor	Permatang Pauh Bayan Baru Nibong Tebal Balik Pulau	Bagan Bukit Mertajam Batu Kawan Bukit Bendera Tanjong Jelutong Bukit Gelugor	Kepala Batas

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**APPENDIX 2 — cont'd**

<b>State (Total Seats)</b>	<b>BERSATU (52)</b>	<b>KEADILAN (51)</b>	<b>DAP (35)</b>	<b>AMANAH (27)</b>
Perak (24)	Larut Lenggong Tambun Bagan Serai Gerik Tapah Kuala Kangsar Pasir Salak	Padang Rengas Gopeng Sungai Siput Bagan Datoh Tanjung Malim	Taiping Ipoh Timur Ipoh Barat Batu Gajah Beruas Kampar Teluk Intan	Lumut Parit Parit Buntar Bukit Gantang
Selangor (22)	Tanjong Karang Sabak Bernam Sungai Besar	Hulu Selangor Selayang Gombak Ampang Pandan Petaling Jaya Subang Sungai Buloh Kapar Kuala Langat	Bangi Puchong Damansara Klang	Kota Raja Sepang Hulu Langat Shah Alam Kuala Selangor

Negeri Sembilan (8)	Kuala Pilah Jempol	Port Dickson Rembau	Seremban Rasah	Jelebu Tampin
Melaka (6)	Alor Gajah Masjid Tanah	Hang Tuah Jaya Tangga Batu	Kota Melaka	Jasin
Johor (26)	Pagoh Mersing Tenggara Sri Gading Pengerang Pontian Muar Simpang Renggam Kota Tinggi Tanjung Piai	Segamat Sekijang Ledang Batu Pahat Semborong Pasir Gudang Johor Bahru Tebrau	Bakri Kluang Iskandar Puteri Kulai Labis Ayer Hitam	Pulai Parit Sulong
Pahang (14)	Jerantut Kuala Krau Lipis Paya Besar Maran Pekan	Indera Mahkota Kuantan Bera Rompin	Raub Bentong Cameron Highland	Temerloh

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**APPENDIX 2 — cont'd**

<b>State (Total Seats)</b>	<b>BERSATU (52)</b>	<b>KEADILAN (51)</b>	<b>DAP (35)</b>	<b>AMANAH (27)</b>
Terengganu (8)	Hulu Terengganu Setiu Besut	Kemaman Dungun		Marang Kuala Terengganu Kuala Nerus
Kelantan (14)	Pasir Putih Bachok Jeli Gua Musang Ketereh Machang Tumpat	Tanah Merah Pasir Mas		Kubang Kerian Kota Bharu Pengkalan Chepa Kuala Krai Rantau Panjang
Wilayah Persekutuan (12)	Putrajaya Titiwangsa	Lembah Pantai Setiawangsa Wangsa Maju Batu Bandar Tun Razak	Kepong Segambut Bukit Bintang Seputeh Cheras	

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