PERSPECTIVE

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Social Media and Polarization in the "New Malaysia"

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Malaysia's Pakatan Harapan government fell rapidly in late February 2020 as a result of coalition infighting and power struggles among the political elite.

- A major factor in the government's sudden collapse was rising ethnoreligious tension between Muslim-Malay nationalists in the opposition and ethnic Chinese who formed part of the ruling coalition.

- Such tension appeared to have grown over the 22-month period of the multi-ethnic coalition government, leading to concern about political polarization and the potential for communal unrest in Malaysia. Malaysia follows a pattern seen recently in other countries (e.g., Indonesia, United States) where the rise to public office of a minority has been followed by an anti-pluralist backlash.

- Social media played an important role in Malaysia during this period in amplifying and reinforcing religious and ethnic-based appeals. An analysis of social media data shows that, by one measure, the volume of anti-Chinese sentiment online spiked in the days around the fall of the government.

- Although unrest was avoided during these events, more research is needed on the interplay between social media and polarization in Malaysia. The events leading to the fall of the Pakatan Harapan government indicate that Malaysia may be following the Indonesian trend, where the primary cleavage is not one of race but of religious conservatives versus cosmopolitan pluralists.

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INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia over the last two decades, information and communications technology has increasingly been used as tools to further democratisation and to circumvent the government's hold over the news media.[1] Social media messaging and microtargeting was a key part of the reformist Pakatan Harapan coalition's strategy to defeat the Najib Razak government in the election of May 2018, bringing an end to six decades of Barisan Nasional rule.[2] With the historic election victory, hopeful commentators then spoke of a "New Malaysia" symbolised by a multi-ethnic cabinet and Malaysia's first woman Deputy Prime Minister.

After a week of machinations in late February 2020, however, the old Malaysia was back. Following coalition infighting, on March 1, King Sultan Abdullah Ri'ayatuddin Ahmad Shah pre-empted parliament by appointing Bersatu party leader Muhyiddin Yassin as Prime Minister. The result of the 2018 election was effectively reversed, returning power to some of the politicians implicated in Malaysia's 1MDB corruption scandal.

With the dramatic reversal of fortunes for Malaysia's reform movement, questions arise about the dark side of social media in Malaysian political discourse. While the fall of the new government was triggered by power struggles within the political elite, ethnoreligious tension between Malay nationalists and ethnic Chinese Malaysians, much of it amplified online, was a major background factor. Opponents of the Pakatan Harapan coalition had characterized the government as being dominated by ethnic Chinese in the form of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), a prominent coalition member. An anti-pluralist backlash often glossed as "Malay anxiety" had grown—both online and offline—in the context of a reformist government that had promised a shift in policy from Malay Supremacy (*Ketuanan Melayu*) to People's Supremacy (*Ketuanan Rakyat*).

This Perspective analyses the interplay between social media and ethnoreligious tension leading up to the fall of the Pakatan Harapan government. It suggests that far from ushering in post-racial politics, "New Malaysia" led to polarization[3] between pluralists on the one side and Islamists and Malay nationalists on the other. The result is not just a return to the ancien régime but a Malay nationalist government that is even more conservative than before.

ANTI-ICERD PROTESTS

The defining moment of the anti-pluralist backlash during the Pakatan Harapan period was the protest movement in late 2018 to prevent the government from ratifying the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). The protests, organised and attended by the leadership of PAS and UMNO, culminated in a crowd of some 50,000 rallying in Dataran Merdeka in Kuala Lumpur on December 8. Protesters, dressed symbolically in the white of Islam, characterised ICERD as a threat to their religion and to Malay supremacy, and called for opposition unity to defend their rights.

The anti-ICERD rally was striking for its close parallels with Indonesia's mass Islamist mobilisations, known as the 212 movement, triggered in late 2016 by accusations of blasphemy against the Christian Chinese governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama

(Ahok). In fact, the Malaysian rally drew direct inspiration from Indonesia's 212 protests, using the name Himpunan 812—the numbers referring to the protest date in December.

Both movements began with a specific group identity-based grievance but became platforms to unify an opposition movement to defeat the government. Both were reactionary in that they were activated by a loss or perceived loss of political power.[4] Both sought to demonise minorities in high office (in the Malaysian case, the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party and Waytha Moorthy, the junior minister responsible for the policy on ICERD and an ethnic Indian). Both saw an alliance of nationalists and Islamists, symbolised by protestors waving national flags beside the black Ar-Raya with the Islamic profession of faith (a flag popular in Islamist activism). Essentially, both the Indonesian and Malaysian protests represented a backlash against pluralism. [5]

Both movements also made effective use of social media to mobilise followers. In Malaysia, the call for protests online used the hashtag #TolakICERD (Reject ICERD) and #LucutWaytha (Sack Waytha), in reference to Waytha Moorthy. A key force in the Malaysian movement was ISMA (Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia) a youth-based Islamist NGO that was instrumental in the protestors' strong social media outreach. ISMA drew explicit comparison to the success of the 212 movement in Indonesia, describing the movements as the "awakening of the ummah of the archipelago" (Kebangkitan Ummah Nusantara).[6]

Just as the Indonesian protests succeeded in bringing down Ahok, the Malaysian protests succeeded in stopping the ratification of ICERD. Even before the December 8 event, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad announced that the government would not ratify the treaty as it contradicted Malay rights.[7] Mahathir's accommodation of the mobilization of Malay-Muslim identity politics helped to make the opposition strategy a success.

More than any other event during the Pakatan period, the ICERD controversy and the treaty's defeat set the stage for opposition unity based on identity politics and the rejection of the DAP in government.[8] The movement led to a formal Malay-Muslim pact between UMNO and PAS under the banner of "Muafakat Nasional" (National Consensus). The pact was the basis for a series of opposition by-election victories in 2019 which demonstrated the power of Malay-Muslim majoritarian politics and presaged the rise of Prime Minister Muhyiddin's Perikatan Nasional.[9] If the parallel with Indonesia holds, these series of events may have caused a lasting polarization around issues of religion.[10]

ZAKIR NAIK SERMONS

For many Islamist hardliners online, the original sin of the Pakatan Harapan government was to enter into coalition with infidel (kafir) parties. This view was distilled and disseminated in viral videos featuring the fugitive Indian preacher Zakir Naik. In the videos, Zakir condemns any Muslim who chooses to "take the hand of the kafir" in government, even when the Muslim alternatives in question are guilty of corruption. The corrupt will get their punishment on the Day of Judgement, he argues. But "if you are joining a coalition party of a Muslim with a non-Muslim, it is one hundred per cent clear cut … Allah's help will not be with you."[11]

Zakir Naik, an inflammatory speaker who had created controversy prior to the 2018 election, is at the extreme fringe of Muslim opinion. But during the Pakatan Harapan period, he was the perfect lightning rod for social media attention. Videos of his incitements against the perceived enemies of Islam were almost as likely to be shared by his critics as his followers, no doubt fueling polarization. For his critics, his intolerant speech on Malaysia was evidence of the growing tolerance of extremist Islam. Indeed, it is hard to deny that Zakir Naik was tolerated by the Barisan National government, and then to a certain extent under Mahathir also, as part of a broader trend towards a more puritan and conservative mainstream Muslim culture in Malaysia.[12] This broader "conservative turn" in Malaysian Islam, as it had been termed, serves as "background music" for the country's polarization over ethnoreligious identity.

MALAY ANXIETIES AND MINOR CONTROVERSIES

Malaysia is a largely stable and peaceful country, despite long-held fears of a repeat of the race riots of 1969. In fact, recent identity politics controversies that have gone viral on social media have been characterized by their triviality or limited scope. A number have quickly been exposed to be fake news, or deliberate misinformation. Such stories include reports of large numbers of mainland Chinese being granted Malaysian citizenship and a purported image of a Chinese man burning the Malaysian flag (the image was shown to be from an anti-Malaysia demonstration in the Philippines).[13]

Such minor issues, however, appear to drive polarization through a cumulative effect, contributing to a longer narrative. One label for that narrative is "Malay anxiety"—a sense of unease, below the threshold of a threat—to the accustomed central place of Malays in Malaysia.[14]

Towards the end of the year, the latest story in this narrative was a dispute about a plan to introduce three pages of Jawi (Islamic) calligraphy in the primary school syllabus. The move was opposed vigorously by Chinese education groups, provoking a Malay-Muslim counter-reaction. Muslim youth group GAMIS led a protest of some 300 dressed in white in Kuala Lumpur. The protesters called on the Chinese education organization that had led opposition to the Jawi lessons, Dong Zong, to be banned (diharamkan).[15]

Issues such as these represent a much lower scale and intensity of sectarian tension than the mass mobilizations that led to the jailing of the governor of Jakarta. Yet Malaysia appears to be following the Indonesian trend, where each side came to perceive the other as an existential threat.[16] Writing in February, DAP leader Lim Kit Siang described Malaysia in language reminiscent of the problem of social media and polarization in Indonesia:
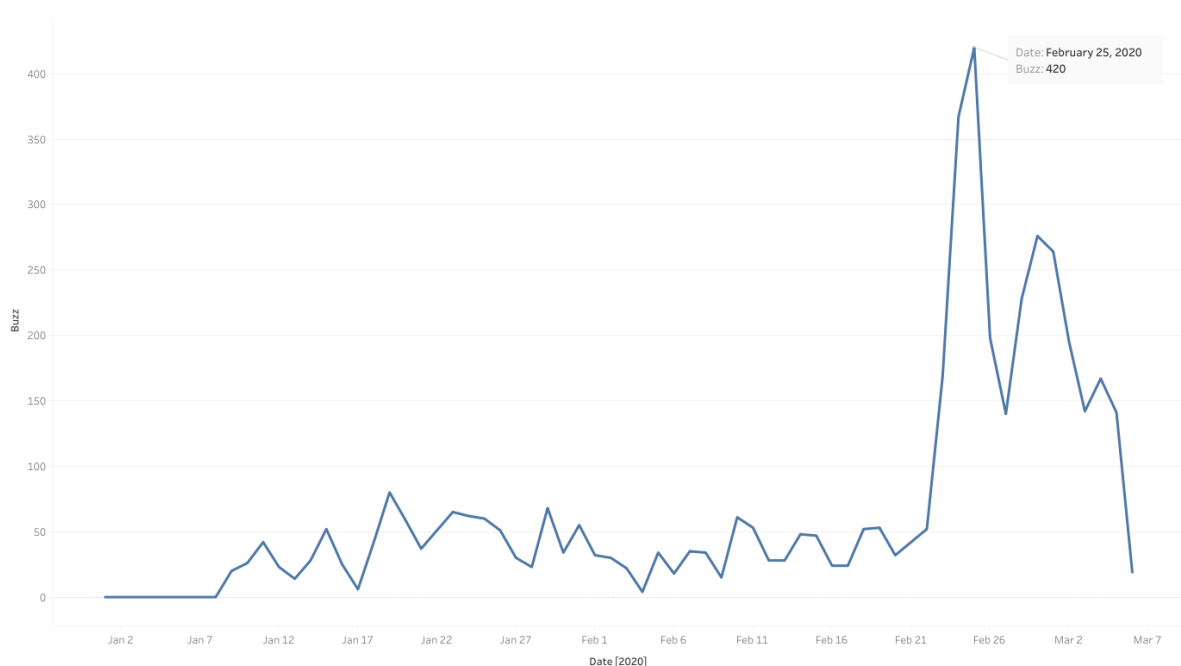
> It is because of such irresponsible and unhealthy level of politicking by a dishonest, destructive and disloyal Opposition to the Constitution and Rukunegara, that twenty months after the historic, peaceful and democratic change of government in the 14th General Election on May 9, 2018 – one of the few victories of democracy in the world in the past decade – that Malaysia has become a very polarised and divided nation where the politics of race, religion, fake news and hate speech sow and incite suspicion, doubt, distrust and hatred among the different communities, and generate the baseless fear that each

community is facing an existential threat with regard to its ethnicity, rights, religion and culture.

POLARIZED MESSAGES AND THE FALL OF PAKATAN HARAPAN

The fall of the Pakatan Harapan government had more than one cause. Most reporting has covered the proximate cause of intra-elite competition. From the second half of 2019, as the pressure grew for Mahathir to hand over power to his former deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, machinations began to thwart Anwar's leadership ambitions. Personal rivalry, echoing the rivalry that cut short Anwar's career in 1998, was a factor in the machinations. But it is hard to separate the ethno-nationalist dimension from such rivalry. As Reuters reported in an insider account of the events, "The main message from Muhyiddin, sources close to him said, was the importance of building an alliance that did not include Anwar and the Chinese-dominated DAP, long the bogeyman for Malays."[17]

An analysis of social media data in the months leading up to the fall of the Pakatan Harapan government shows that the fall coincides with a spike in the volume of anti-DAP and anti-Chinese sentiment. As a proxy for such sentiment, mentions of a unique term of abuse used to express a blend of negative racial and political sentiment on Twitter and Facebook, "DAPigs", was tracked from January 1 to May 7 (Figure 1). The chart shows that there were small peaks and troughs in use of the term, beginning early in the year. But in the final week of February, as social media came alive with rumours of the move against the government, mentions of the term rose sharply. These mentions peaked at over 400 on February 25, the day following Mahathir's resignation and the collapse of the coalition government. The mentions fell rapidly after the appointment of Muhyiddin as prime minister on March 1.
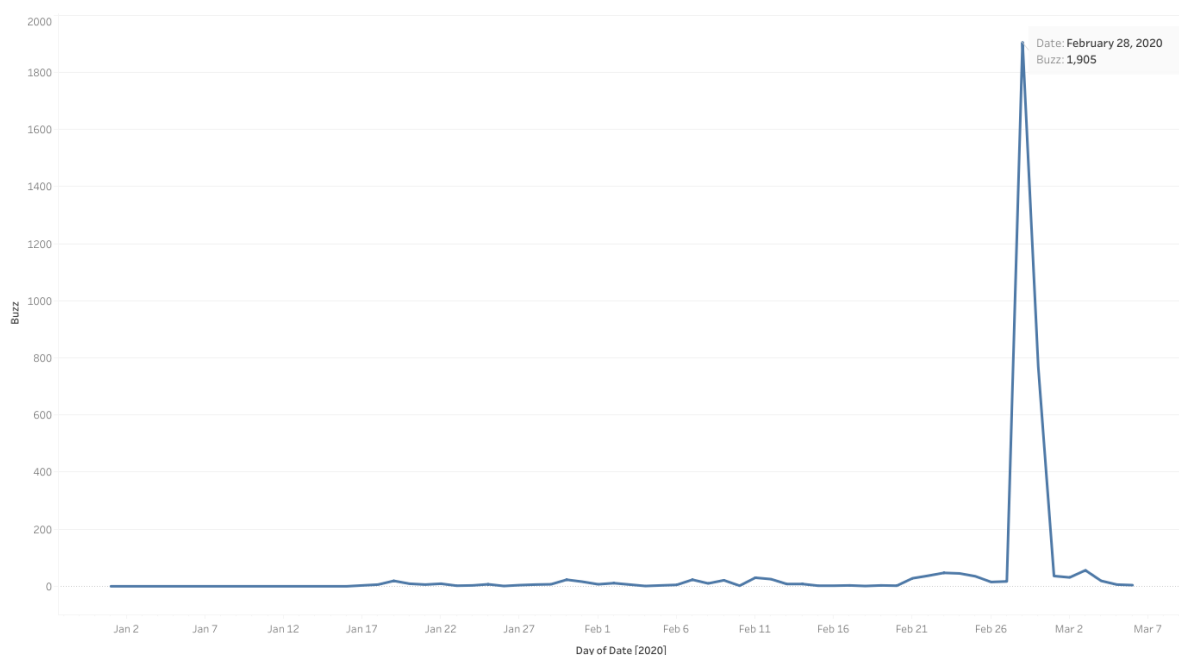

The trend of "DAPigs" over time from 1 January 2020 to 6 March 2020.
ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (2020).

Figure 1

An inspection of these mentions indicates that the social media messaging was organic and not due to centrally coordinated or inauthentic behavior. The term "DAPigs" was typically used in combination with crude anti-Chinese or Malay supremacist language. Some posts smeared the DAP as "Chinese communists". Although usage of the term was not high in absolute numbers, the mentions are an index to negative ethnonationalist sentiment that was more widely expressed by implication or by use of more subtle language.

This analysis does not answer the question of whether Malaysia grew more polarized during the rise and fall of the Pakatan Harapan government. Nor can it answer the question of whether polarization was driven by patterns of social media usage, such as the emergence of online echo chambers that reinforce partisan beliefs. The analysis suggests, however, a close correlation between the political crisis that led to the fall of the government and an increase in negative racial sentiment online.

At the same time as the spike in anti-Chinese sentiment, social media data show a parallel rise in online sentiment expressing distrust in the institution of government. This trend can be seen in the volume of mentions on Malaysian social media of "deep state", a term used by those sympathetic to Pakatan Harapan to describe the perceived entrenched hostility of state institutions to reform. Figure 2 shows a sharp rise in mentions of the term, coinciding with the period between the fall of the government and the appointment of the new prime minister.

The trend of "deep state" over time from 1 January 2020 to 6 March 2020.
ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (2020).

Figure 2

The rise of messaging such as this indicates a potentially dangerous erosion of trust in the institution of democracy. But it also suggests that the central polarizing issue to emerge from the failure of the New Malaysia project is not race relations. Rather, the issues are broader, and the primacy societal cleavage is between religious conservatives and pluralists,

with Malays on both sides of the divide. As more Malays support the reformists, we should expect to see conservative Islam playing a greater role in mobilizing one side against the other and greater use of the hyphenate term "Malay-Muslim".[18] The trend mirrors that of Indonesia's polarization, which, as we saw above, was directly influenced by. Malaysia does differ, however, geographically and sociologically. As Serina Rahman illustrates in relation to GE-14, Malaysia's divide has a strong urban-rural dimension, with "urban reformists" disconnected from poorer and more conservative rural Malays.[19]

CONCLUSION

In August 2019, Finance Minister and DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng was defiant in the face of the growing polarisation, which he cast as an opposition strategy:

> "The fanciful dreams of PAS, Umno, MCA and MIC to regain power in the Federal government, through playing up racial hatred and religious fears, will not succeed when the PH government is committed to adopt a rational and moderate approach towards both nation-building and handling hot-button issues."[20]

Presumably, he would not be so sanguine now. Racial and religious tensions undoubtedly played a role in fall of the Pakatan coalition, leading to an abrupt reversal for the reform movement.

The pattern here is broadly similar to that of other democracies such as the United States under president Barack Obama or Indonesia with Ahok as mayor of the capital. Minorities found representation amid much hope but eventually faced a populist backlash, facilitated by social media, which in turn led to polarization. A risk now for Malaysia is that the recent events weaken confidence in the institution of democracy itself over the long term.

An effort is needed to build community forums—both online and offline—in which dialogue between both sides of Malaysia's conservative-pluralist divide is fostered in a way that is constructive and not dominated by extreme voices. In this way, communication networks that are resilient to polarization can serve as critical infrastructure for democratic institutions.

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[1] Foong Lian Hah, *Power Games: Political Blogging in Malaysian National Elections* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016).

[2] Francis E Hutchinson and Lee Hwok Aun, *The Defeat of Barisan Nasional: Missed Signs or Late Surge?* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020), p. 470.

[3] There is growing concern that social media is exacerbating political polarization. Polarization typically refers to a shift in the distribution of political opinion from the centre towards ideological extremes. Social media can drive polarisation by enabling extreme actors at the fringe to "game the system" and dominate the political conversation. Online "echo chambers", meanwhile, serve to

reinforce pre-existing beliefs rather than expose audiences to diverse viewpoints. As one recent study summarises the problem, ""Social media, it seems, amp up moral and emotional messages while organizing people into digital communities based on tribal conflicts." (see "Are Social Media Driving Political Polarization?", Greater Good Magazine, January 16, 2019, https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/is_social_media_driving_political_polarization). For a survey of the literature, see Joshua Aaron Tucker et. al., "Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature", SSRN, March 21, 2018, http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3144139

[4] In the Indonesian case, Islamists suffered a loss of influence after the end of the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono presidency. See Marcus Mietzner and Burhanuddin Muhtadi, "Explaining the 2016 Islamist mobilisation in Indonesia: Religious intolerance, militant groups and the politics of accommodation." *Asian Studies Review* 42, no. 3 (2018): 479-497.

[5] For a striking comparative analysis of the Indonesian and Malaysian movements, see Hew Wai Weng, "Himpunan 812 and a new rivalry in Malay politics", *New Mandala*, December 18, 2018. https://www.newmandala.org/himpunan-812-and-a-new-rivalry-in-malay-politics/?fbclid=IwAR0Ocl9lJrTcjW8kADdsTELJhWyj9B4pEmGGFJ5M_jT5oDBwExdeL0oXYts

[6] Ibid.

[7] "Mahathir's U-turn on UN race treaty: for Malaysia, a necessary - if backwards - step?", *SCMP*, December 2, 2018, https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/2175870/mahathirs-u-turn-un-race-treaty-malaysia-necessary-if-backwards

[8] Dennis Ignatius, "Mahathir and the ICERD affair", *Free Malaysia Today*, December 13, 2018, https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2018/12/13/mahathir-and-the-icerd-affair/

[9] On the significance of the by-election victories, see Norshahril Saat, "A Complicated Political Reality Awaits the Malays", ISEAS Perspective No. 40, May 21, 2019.

[10] Marcus Mietzner, Burhanuddin Muhtadi, and Rizka Halida, "Entrepreneurs of grievance: Drivers and effects of Indonesia's Islamist mobilization." *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land-en volkenkunde/Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 174, no. 2-3 (2018): 159-187.

[11] See, for example, Zakir Naik, YouTube, July 21, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Thhpv03KLg8&feature=share&fbclid=IwAR2DXhj9WKp4ZtTpU4laEfZvUNqcy5rRZUURB98QgiRJVoX2jkvsm_xOVwE

[12] Mohamad Nawab Osman, "The Islamic conservative turn in Malaysia: impact and future trajectories", *Contemporary Islam* Vol. 11, 1–20 (2017).

[13] Amy Chew, "Malaysia's dangerous racial and religious trajectory", Lowy Interpreter, September 25, 2019, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/malaysia-s-dangerous-racial-and-religious-trajectory

[14] Hew Wai Weng, "Malay anxiety, exclusion, and national unity", *New Mandala*, September 14, 2018, https://www.newmandala.org/malay-anxiety-new-malaysia/

[15] "Despite police warning, Muslim students group proceed with anti-Dong Zong rally", *Malay Mail*, January 1, 2020, https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/01/01/despite-police-warning-muslim-students-group-proceed-with-anti-dong-zong-ra/1823796

[16] Ed Aspinall & Marcus Mietzner, "Southeast Asia's Troubling Elections: Nondemocratic Pluralism in Indonesia ", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 30, No. 4, October 2019, pp. 104-118

[17] "Malaysian machinations: How Southeast Asia's veteran leader lost the plot", *Reuters*, March 6, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malaysia-politics-endgame-insight/malaysian-machinations-how-southeast-asias-veteran-leader-lost-the-plot-idUSKBN20T0HZ

[18] A similar argument is made by Ooi Kok Hin. See Ooi Kok Hin, "What Malay-Muslim Nationalism Is, And How It Matters", *Malaysiakini*, December 11, 2018, https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/455650

[19] Serina Rahman, "The Rural Malay Voter in GE-14" in Francis E Hutchinson and Lee Hwok Aun, *The Defeat of Barisan Nasional: Missed Signs or Late Surge?* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020), p. 153.

[20] "Guan Eng: DAP's failure to shut down Lynas proof party not kingmaker", *Malay Mail*, August 19, 2019,
 https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/08/19/guan-eng-daps-failure-to-shut-down-lynas-proof-party-not-kingmaker/1782112

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