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Malaysia's 15th General Election: Ethnicity Remains the Key Factor in Voter Preferences

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Supporters of Malaysia's newly appointed Prime Minister hold flags of his party "Pakatan Harapan" as they celebrate outside the National Palace in Kuala Lumpur, on 24 November 2022. Picture: Hasnoor Hussain/AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In Malaysia's 15th General Election, no single coalition achieved a majority in the Dewan Rakyat. This paved the way for Pakatan Harapan (PH) to form a government with the other major coalitions, except the Perikatan Nasional (PN).
- This election reaffirmed that change of government in Malaysia is possible. The emergence of post-election political realignments comprising rival parties points to more vibrant democratic contestation taking place in a country where race has hitherto been the main barrier to changes of government.
- However, our study based on voter surveys and election results shows that ethnicity remains the key underlying factor determining voters' political choices. Other variables such as economic concerns, governance issues and political stability are also at work, but are secondary to ethnicity. As secondary factors, these other variables come into play to determine voters' choice within an ethnic group only when no single party commands majority support in that ethnic group.
- While Malaysia has shown impressive progress towards ending one-party dominance and has paved the way to more vibrant democratic contestation, one should not ignore race as an underlying factor which still determines voters' political choices.
- Because the Malay votes were split (mainly between UMNO and PN, and with PH to a lesser degree), the post-election manoeuvrings and realignments led to a somewhat paradoxical situation where PH gained the right to lead the government even though its mainstay of support came from the non-Malay voters. This could imply that the current political configuration is intrinsically fragile, with the risk of being unravelled by further realignments among the Malay parties.

INTRODUCTION

The results of Malaysia's 15th General Election on 19 November 2022 revealed that ethnicity remains the key factor determining electoral outcome. Although ethnic issues were not the real focus of the election campaign, pre-election surveys and voting patterns show that Malaysian voters generally still choose along ethnic lines.

In this paper, we demonstrate that ethnicity remains the main marker of Malaysian politics. Identity and cultural dichotomies continue to underpin political choices and overshadow other variables such as economic, class, age, gender and region. Political parties devise election strategies and campaigns based on ethnic support, while voters, even as they put economic and governance issues top of their list of priorities, show a preference for parties that best suit their ethnic interests.

This postulation is supported by a series of pre-election surveys including national surveys conducted from 2020 to 2022, and daily tracking surveys carried out during the campaign period. A key finding is that Malaysian voters remain divided along ethnic lines, with more than 80% of non-Malay voters supporting Pakatan Harapan (PH) and almost a similar proportion of Malay voters rejecting that coalition.

While such a larger majority of Malay voters did reject PH, they were however divided between supporting either Barisan Nasional (BN) or Perikatan Nasional (PN). This situation was what eventually gave added advantage to PH in three-cornered fights between PN, BN and PH especially in marginal Malay-majority seats and non-Malay majority seats. With solid non-Malay support, minimal Malay support and the majority of Malay voters divided in their support for the other two coalitions, PH managed to win the most number of non-Malay majority and marginal Malay-majority seats.

In this paper, we focus our analysis on 165 parliamentary seats in Peninsular Malaysia. The politics in the two Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak have their own dynamics, and warrant a separate analysis.

PRE-ELECTION SURVEYS

For this analysis, we rely largely on five national surveys conducted by Merdeka Centre for Opinion Research.¹ These surveys were finalised in November 2020,² February 2021,³ August 2021,⁴ May 2022⁵ and July 2022.⁶ We also base our analysis on national daily tracking surveys conducted during the election campaign. Historical data found in previous surveys are also used.

It is interesting to note that historical data found in previous surveys shows that different ethnic groups persistently expressed different levels of satisfaction towards the federal government, depending on which coalition was in power. Our surveys since 2013 show that Malay voters were more inclined to perceive BN and PN government more positively compared to non-Malay voters. On the other hand, non-Malay voters were more inclined to perceive the PH government more positively compared to Malay voters (See Figure 1).

In the 13th General Election held in May 2013, BN suffered a major setback by losing the popular vote for the first time in history. It won the election primarily on the back of Malay support, while Chinese voters had mostly stopped supporting the party to favour PH instead.

From May 2013 to April 2018, during which BN was in power, between 27% and 67% of Malay voters said they were happy with the BN government. Indian voters on the other hand gave a lower score of between 18% and 52%. Chinese voters returned the lowest score. Only 4% to 19% of them said they were happy with the BN government during this period.

These apparent ethnocentric perceptions suddenly changed when PH won the 14th General Election in May 2018. In a national survey done that same month, 88% of Chinese voters said they were happy with the newly formed PH government, followed by Indian voters (87%) and then Malay voters (73%).

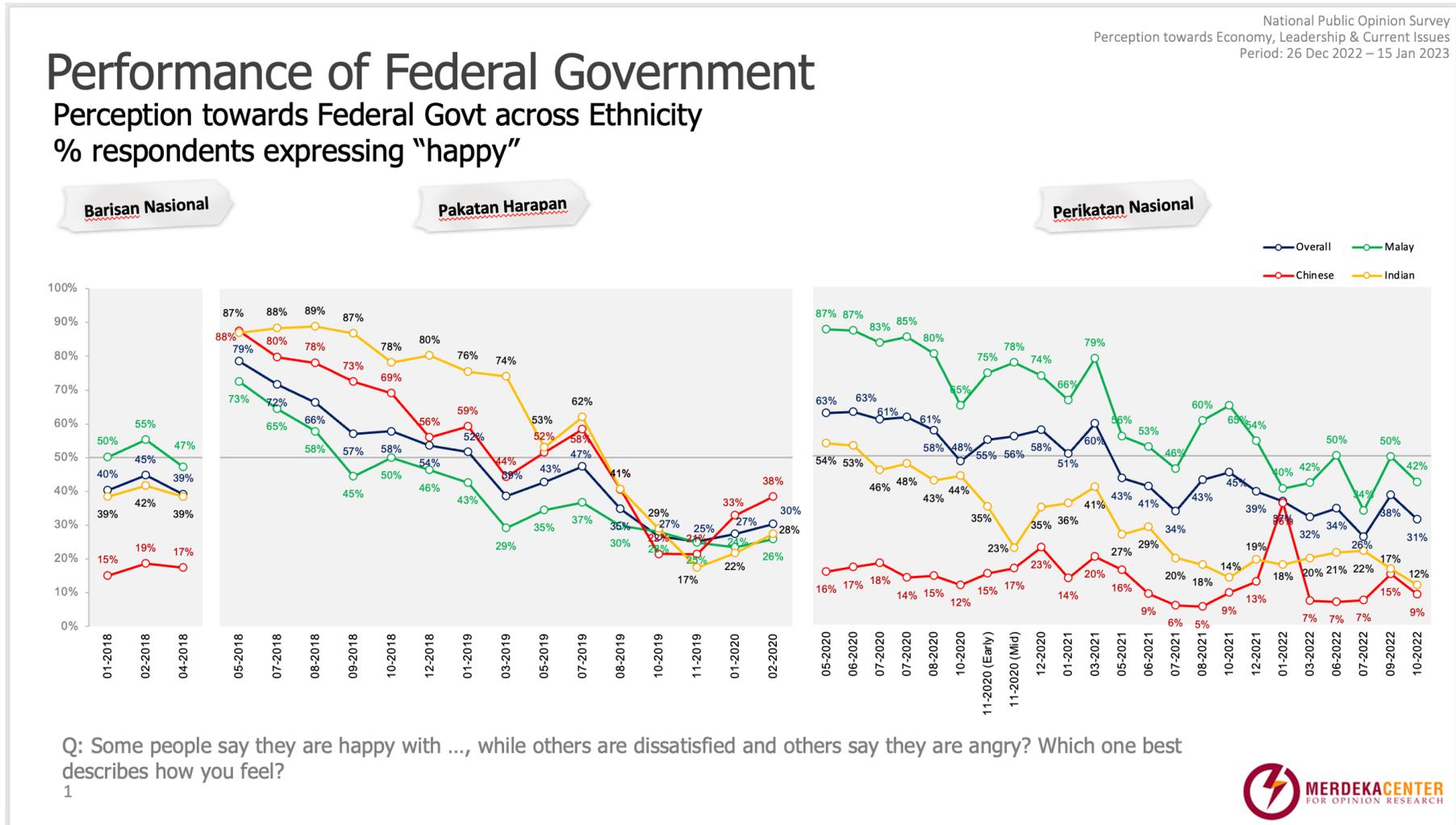
The sudden change in voter perception, especially among Chinese voters (from 17% in March 2018 to 88% in May 2018), occurred despite material conditions such as unemployment rate and inflation not being drastically different across the BN and PH administrations. Malaysia's unemployment rate in 2018 was 3.30%, just a 0.11% decline from 2017, while the Consumer Price Index (CPI) for 2018 increased 1% compared to 2017.⁷

PH government's approval rating across ethnic groups successively declined throughout its 22 months in power. By the end of its rule in February 2020, only 38% of Chinese voters said they were happy with the PH government, followed by Indian voters (28%) and Malay voters (26%).

Although the decline was across all ethnic groups, 15 national surveys done during this period revealed a persistent ethnic pattern where the non-Malay voters viewed the PH government more positively compared to the Malay voters.

Perceptions changed once again when PN took over the government in March 2020. In a national survey done in May 2020, we observed a flip in support for the government, where 87% percent of Malay voters said they were happy with the PN government, followed by Indian voters (54%) and Chinese voters (16%). From March 2020 until August 2021, during which time PN led the federal government, Malay voter sentiments towards the government were consistently in positive territory, while Chinese voter sentiments were in negative territory, as shown in the figure below.

Figure 1: Voter Perceptions towards the Federal Government, across Ethnicities, 2018 – 2022



In our November 2020 national survey, carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, we found that Malay voters' satisfaction towards the federal government was higher compared to non-Malay voters. The survey revealed that 87% of Malay voters were satisfied with the government's performance in managing the pandemic, while only 47% of Chinese voters felt the same. Similarly, 84% of Malay voters were satisfied with the government performance in helping those in need during the pandemic compared to only 47% of Chinese voters who felt the same. This was despite various forms of economic and financial assistance given by the government to all, regardless of race.

There is a more revealing dichotomy between Malay and non-Malay voters' perception towards the government which points to an enduring ethnocentric political choice. The survey found that 85% of Malay voters felt that the PN government protects the interest of the Malays, while 77% of non-Malay voters believed the government does not treat all races equally. This is key to understanding political choices among different ethnic groups in Malaysia, not only in the 15th General Election, but also in previous elections.

A closer look at party choices also reveals the same ethnic pattern. A more detailed national survey in Peninsular Malaysia involving 5,050 respondents across ethnic groups conducted from 29 March to 21 May 2022 found that Malay voters split between supporting either BN (44%) or PN (20%), with only 6% openly expressing their support for PH. 30% of Malay voters did not disclose their party choice. At the same time, the non-Malay support for PH was 49%, for BN (22%) and for PN (3%), while 28% refused to disclose their party choice.⁸

By May 2022, it was clear that among the non-Malay voters, PH was the most preferred choice while PN was the least desirable coalition. It was also clear that PH was not the party of choice for the Malays, who at the same time were split between favouring BN or PN, with BN having a slight edge over PN.

Be that as it may, a closer look at BN and PN leaders' approval rating among Malay voters reveals a slightly different scenario. PN Chairman and former Prime Minister, Muhyiddin Yassin, received a higher approval rating (67%) compared to BN Chairman, Zahid Hamidi (19%).

It seems that, at this point in time, although more Malay voters preferred BN to PN, they were more comfortable with PN Chairman, Muhyiddin Yassin, than BN Chairman, Zahid Hamidi, as their leader. With 30% of Malay voters not disclosing their choice of coalition, the question of whether BN or PN was the most preferred choice among the Malay voters remained unclear.

At the same time, the BN-led government's approval rating showed a steep decline, from 50% in September 2021 to 31% in October 2022.⁹ Among Malay voters, only 42% were satisfied with the government's performance while non-Malay voters recorded a much lower satisfaction level, at only 11%.

During this period, several important events took place which likely affected Malay voters' appreciation of the two principal government parties, i.e. Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (BERSATU) and UMNO. In March 2021, UMNO leadership at its annual general assembly passed a resolution to end cooperation with BERSATU after that electoral term. This move

was an open declaration of differences between the party and Bersatu, which culminated in the withdrawal of support by several UMNO MPs, which in turn led to the collapse of Muhyiddin Yassin's prime ministership.

UMNO's party leadership subsequently called for the early dissolution of the state assembly of Malacca in October 2021 and of Johore in March 2022, moves which heightened voter concerns over the stability of the federal government. In our view, such actions coupled with the relative unpopularity of UMNO's top leader (more on this later), coloured Malay voters' perceptions in the months leading up to the general election in November that same year.

Our May 2022 survey found that a myriad of factors were at work which led to low voter satisfaction towards the BN-led federal government, with the main driver being economic concerns (74%), followed by political issues (3%), racial issues (3%) and leadership issues (3%). Inflation (31%), political instability (13%) and corruption (12%) were the top three issues that voters considered most important to them. It is important to note at this juncture that racial issues were not the top priority for voters; instead, a strong ethnic pattern was evident.

Things grew interesting as the election drew close. Our daily tracking surveys during the election campaign showed that the percentage of Malay voters who expressly said they would support PH remained very low, at 11.5%, at the beginning of the campaign, and improved slightly to 13.3% a day before the polling day. It was very clear then Malay voters had made up their mind that PH would not be their party of choice.

Interestingly, Malay voters' preference of either BN or PN as their coalition of choice differed from the findings of our previous surveys. After the campaign began, Malay voters demonstrated a more favourable attitude towards PN. Our national daily tracking survey on 6 November 2022 found that only 17.6% of Malay voters expressly said they would vote for BN. This is a sharp decrease from 48% in August 2022. The same survey also found that 24.4% of Malay voters expressly said they would support PN, a slight increase from 18.7% in August 2022. At this point in time, 45.7% of Malay voters would not disclose their party choice.¹⁰

By the end of the campaign period, it was evident that PN had taken the lead in its contest for Malay votes with BN. Our final daily tracking survey on 18 November 2022 found that the percentage of Malay voters who expressly said they would support PN had increased to 32.4%, while BN was trailing behind at 21.3%. 31.8% of the Malay voters surveyed still refused to disclose their party choice.

However, a cross-check on the choice of Prime Minister candidate among the undisclosed Malay voters shows about 30% of them preferred Muhyiddin Yassin as Prime Minister candidate, followed by Ismail Sabri (18%) and Anwar Ibrahim (8%). The rest of the respondents did not state any preference.

At the end of the campaign, the Malay voters' preferred leader was also quite clear. Muhyiddin Yassin's approval rating among Malay voters stood at 71%, followed by Ismail Sabri (57%), Hadi Awang (51%), Anwar Ibrahim (32%) and Zahid Hamidi (12%). (See Figure 2)

Based on these findings and the actual election results, we estimate that, on average, about 57% of the Malay voters chose PN.

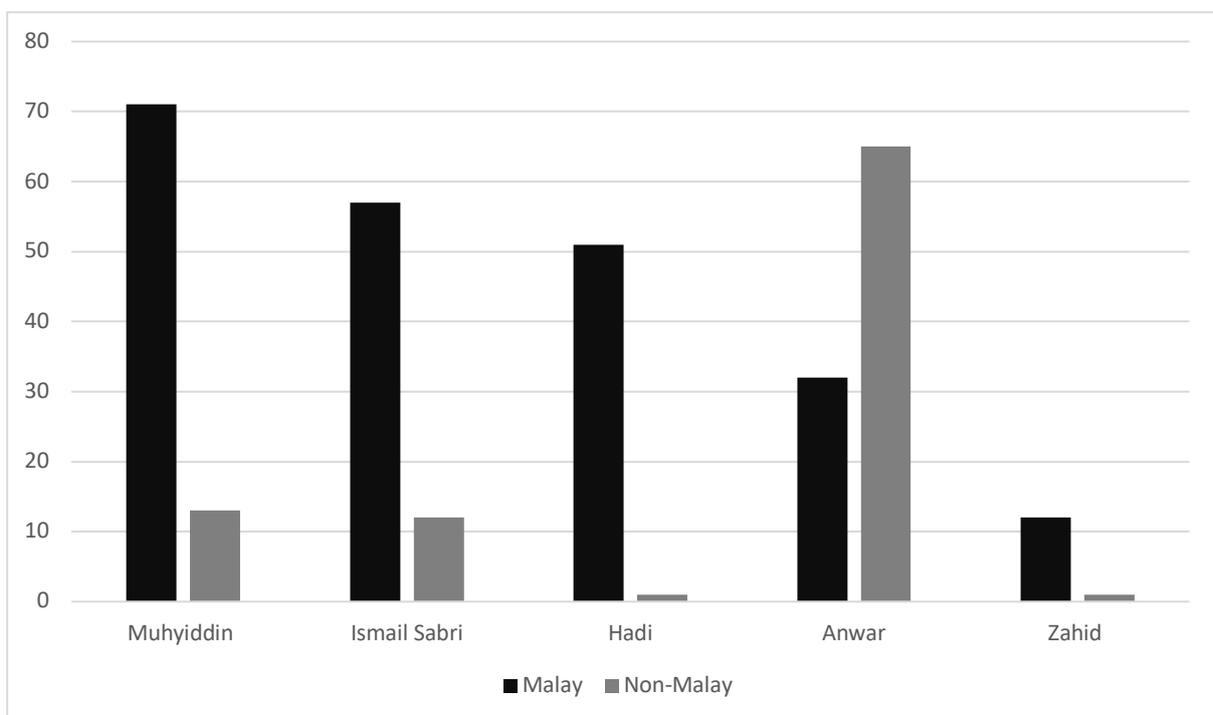
The non-Malay voters were more forthright in expressing their support for PH. The percentage of Chinese voters who expressly said they would vote for PH increased from 57.5% at the beginning of the campaign to 69.1% a day before polling day. Only 3.1% mentioned they would vote BN, 1% would vote PN, while 26.5% still refused to disclose their party choice on the final day of campaign.

Indian voters too indicated a similar party choice. The percentage of Indian voters who expressly said they would vote for PH increased from 50% at the beginning of the campaign to 59.8% at the end of the campaign. Only 15.2% said they would vote for BN, 0.6% would vote for PN and 23.2% were still refusing to disclose their party choice at the end of the campaign.

By the end of the campaign period, the non-Malay voters’ preferred leader was also quite clear. Anwar Ibrahim’s approval rating among them stood at 65%, followed by Muhyiddin Yassin (13%), Ismail Sabri (12%), Hadi Awang (1%) and Zahid Hamidi (1%).

Based on these findings and the actual election results, we estimate more than 80% of non-Malay voters voted for PH. This includes nearly 95% of the ethnic Chinese and nearly 75% of the ethnic Indians.

Figure 2: Percentage of Voter Support for Leaders by Ethnicity at the End of the GE-15 Campaign Period



THE ELECTION RESULTS

Due to malapportionment, the percentage of votes that a party garnered does not necessarily reflect the percentage of seats it ends up winning in an election. For a long while now, malapportionment has been designed to benefit the incumbent.¹¹

In this paper, without ignoring the fact that malapportionment has significant impact on the total number of seats won by a party, we will show that, as our pre-election surveys also indicated, PH won most of the seats in non-Malay majority and marginal Malay-majority areas, while BN and PN won mainly in large Malay majority areas (See Table 1).

Out of 86 parliamentary seats categorised as large Malay Majority seats (where Malay voters constitute 65% or more of the total voters), PN won 67 seats (78%), BN 13 seats (15.1%) and PH 6 seats (6.9%).

Out of 32 parliamentary seats categorised as marginal Malay-majority seats (where Malay voters constitute 51%-64% of the total voters), PN won 4 seats (12.5%), BN 8 seats (25%) and PH 20 seats (62.5%).

Out of 47 parliamentary seats categorised as non-Malay majority seats (where non-Malay voters constitute 51% or more of total voters), PH won 46 seats (97.9%) and BN 1 seat (2.1%). PN did not win any non-Malay majority seats.

Table 1: The Number and Percentage of Seats Won by PN, BN and PH in Parliamentary Seats Categorised as Large Malay-Majority, Marginal Malay-Majority and Non-Malay Majority in the 15th General Election.

	Large Malay Majority Seats (Malay voters 65% and above)	Marginal Malay Majority Seats (Malay voters between 51% and 64%)	Non-Malay Majority Seats (Non-Malay voters 51% and above)	TOTAL
PN	67 (78%)	PN 4 (12.5%)	PN 0 (0%)	71 (43%)
BN	13 (15.1%)	BN 8 (25%)	BN 1 (2.1%)	BN 22 (13.3%)
PH	6 (6.9%)	PH 20 (62.5%)	PH 46 (97.9%)	PH 72 (43.7%)
TOTAL	86 (100%)	32 (100%)	47 (100%)	165 (100%)

In total, PH won 81 seats, PN 74 seats, BN 30 seats, Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) 23 seats, Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS) 6 seats, Parti Warisan Rakyat Sabah (WARISAN) 3 seats, independent candidates 2 seats and Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (MUDA), Social Democratic Harmony Party (KDM) and Parti Bangsa Malaysia (PBM) one seat each.

As no single party or coalition commands a majority in the Dewan Rakyat, PH formed a coalition government with other political coalitions and parties, excepting PN. PN is now the

single opposition coalition in the Malaysian Parliament, which is controlled by the PH-led ruling coalition enjoying a two-thirds majority in the Dewan Rakyat.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Based on the findings of our pre-election surveys and the actual election results, we discern that ethnicity remains the key underlying factor in Malaysian politics. But this does not mean that other variables are not important. Variables such as economic concerns, governance issues and political stability are also at work, but are secondary to ethnicity.

As secondary factors, these other variables come into play only to determine intra-ethnic political choice, i.e. party choice within one ethnic community in the event no single party dominantly represents the ethnic group. There has been a strong contest for Malay votes between UMNO and PAS over the past decades. With UMNO dominance now diminishing, the Malays have an alternative party choice in PAS and in the relatively new party BERSATU, which are component members of the newly formed PN.

Since UMNO leaders have been charged in cases of corruption, with its President, Zahid Hamidi, facing criminal charges relating to corruption, abuse of power and money laundering even when he headed the election campaign, UMNO faced a serious trust deficit among Malay voters. At the same time, the BN-led government approval rating was also low due to economic concerns such as high cost of living and rising inflation; this naturally caused Malay voters to shy away from supporting BN.

Although racial issues were not the primary focus of the election campaign, they came into play in determining Malay voters' party choice. Since they did not see PH as the party that would promote their ethnic interests, and BN was facing a serious trust deficit, the only plausible party choice for the majority of Malay voters in GE15 was PN. This would explain why it was PN, and not BN or PH, which won the most number of Malay-majority seats in GE15.

The same clarification for political choice can be given for the non-Malay voters. As they did not see either BN or PH as the coalitions that would promote their ethnic interests, they did not support either. Unlike the contest for Malay votes which saw a strong rivalry between UMNO and PAS over the past decades, the contest for non-Malay votes did not see any strong fight between DAP, MCA or GERAKAN. Since the 2008 general election, it was quite clear that DAP was the only party that would garnered the most support from non-Malay voters. This may explain why in GE15, non-Malay voters' support for PH, in which DAP is a leading component, was overwhelming.

CONCLUSION

While the Malaysian political landscape has significantly changed over the past two decades, ethnicity remains a key factor determining electoral outcome. With the dominant party system gradually ended, the change of government from one coalition to another becomes highly possible. The emergence of new political realignments comprising rival political parties is a new trend; this points to more vibrant democratic contestation in a country where race has hitherto been the main factor conserving the political status quo.

However, more vibrant democratic contestation does not suggest that more substantive democratic reform and political change are to be expected. Malaysian politics and society are still divided along ethnic lines. The only difference now is that the coalition that received the most support from the ethnic Malay majority is in opposition, while the coalition that received the least support from them is leading the government. Any attempt at bulldozing reforms which might be seen by the Malays to be trampling on their special position will have far-reaching implications for political stability and for the cohesiveness of the loose ruling coalition, which includes the former dominant party UMNO that still depends on Malay support for its survival. In Malaysia, the glad tidings of democratic advances should not lull one into ignoring the existence of race as the perennial key factor determining voter preference.

ENDNOTES

¹ Merdeka Centre for Opinion Research is a Kuala Lumpur-based opinion research firm established to synergize the capabilities of a team of dedicated social scientists and professionals in the field of economics, political science, communications, marketing management and civil society. Its mission is to act as a bridge between Malaysians and the leading members of society – by capturing public opinion and expressing them through survey results, analysis and position papers.

² This survey was conducted on 17-27 November 2020 involving 1002 respondents aged 21 years and above in Peninsular Malaysia. The margin of error is $\pm 3.10\%$.

³ This survey was conducted from 27 January to 6 February 2021 involving 1200 respondents aged 21 years and above in Paninsular Malaysia. The margin of error is $\pm 2.83\%$.

⁴ This survey was conducted on 10-14 August 2021 involving 502 respondents aged 21 years and above in Malaysia (including Sabah and Sarawak). The margin of error is $\pm 4.37\%$.

⁵ This survey was conducted from 29 March to 21 May 2022 involving 5050 respondents aged 18 years old and above in Peninsular Malaysia. The margin of error is $\pm 2.12\%$.

⁶ This survey was conducted from 30 June to 23 July 2022 involving 1,207 respondents aged 18 years old and above in Peninsular Malaysia. The margin of error is $\pm 2.82\%$.

⁷ Department of Statistics Malaysia, “Consumer Price Index Malaysia December 2018”, January 24, 2019,

https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemByCat&cat=106&bul_id=M3BFMmRtdVB2MUVoS25kc1FGY3VmQT09&menu_id=bThzTHQxN1ZqMVF6a2I4RkZoNDFkQT09.

⁸ One of the challenges faced by Malaysian pollsters in determining voter preference is that quite a substantial percentage of respondents refuse to disclose their party choice. This could be due to a number of reasons, chief among them is fear of being unfairly treated by employers or government

should their party choice be disclosed. Based on our analysis of previous opinion polls and actual election results, the majority of those who refused to disclose their party choice were supporters of opposition parties.

⁹ PN Chairman Muhyiddin Yassin resigned as Prime Minister on 16 August 2021. He was succeeded by UMNO Vice President Ismail Sabri Yaakob as Prime Minister. Since then, although PN was still part of the government, it was a BN-led government.

¹⁰ The daily tracking survey was based on a four-day moving sampling. The sample was selected through the random stratified sampling method along the lines of ethnicity, gender, age and parliamentary constituencies. 300 respondents were interviewed via telephone every day. By the fourth day, we had about 1,200 respondents. On the fifth day, another 300 respondents were interviewed. We dropped the first day respondents in our analysis for the fifth day. We repeated the same process for the following days until the end of the campaign period.

¹¹ Oliver, Steven and Ostwald, Kai. 2018. "Not Enough to Win Another Lost Election: Malapportionment and Partisan Bias in Malaysia's 2013 and 2018 General Elections". Available at SSRN: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3209653

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