

# PERSPECTIVE

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## UMNO's Prospects: Oblivion, Survival or Recovery

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*Anwar Ibrahim (C), the Prime Minister of Malaysia, at the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) General Assembly at the World Trade Center, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on 9 June 2023. (Photo by Farid Bin Tajuddin / ANADOLU AGENCY/Anadolu Agency via AFP).*

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) was founded to be the protector of Malay rights and interests. The party carried that mantle for many decades, but its decline over the past two decades reached new lows in its recent losses to the opposition Perikatan Nasional (PN).
- UMNO failed to rally its members and supporters to vote for candidates from Pakatan Harapan (PH) and Barisan Nasional (BN), the core Peninsula-based coalitions of the Unity Government. Many factors accounted for PN's gains at UMNO's expense, but one of the main contributors was the heightening of 3R (Race, Religion and Royalty) issues and the "Malays being under threat" propaganda.
- The party presently realises that it must utilise its opportunities in the Unity Government to win back Malay voters. Its future can follow three main scenarios:
  - **UMNO fades into oblivion** as internal infighting continues. Its partnership with PH particularly the Democratic Action Party (DAP) is rejected, and party president Ahmad Zahid Hamidi continues to fail in gaining trust and support from UMNO members and from Malays in general.
  - **UMNO enters into survival mode** by reviving the "*Muafakat Nasional*" (National Consensus) and collaborating with PN. UMNO is then no longer dominant and is geographically confined to the south of the Peninsula, conceding the Peninsular northwest, northeast, and centre to PAS and to the Malaysian United Indigenous Party (BERSATU).
  - **UMNO recovers** by staying with the Unity Government, and with Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim giving full backing for UMNO to regain Malay support through allocating it Malay-majority seats. UMNO members and supporters may be persuaded to support the PH-BN partnership if they believe in the Unity government and its *Madani* agenda.
- UMNO-BN in the Unity Government will boost Malaysia's political stability, economic prosperity, and integration, while also moderating polarisation. In order to remain relevant, UMNO will need to appeal to progressive and moderate Malays.

## INTRODUCTION

The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) retained the Pahang state assembly state seat of Pelangai in a by-election on 7 October 2023.<sup>1</sup> The Menteri Besar of Pahang, Wan Rosdy Wan Ismail argued that Pahang BN would stop the “Green Wave” of Perikatan Nasional (PN) — which started during the November 2022 general election and continued through the six state government elections in August 2023. In the August elections, UMNO won a woeful 19 out of 108 seats contested.<sup>2</sup>

Pelangai has been a stronghold for UMNO-BN, and while UMNO did win the seat, the result holds broader implications for the party’s future. UMNO’s candidate Amizar Abu Adam secured 7,324 votes to beat his Perikatan Nasional (PN) opponent Kasim Samat, who received 4,375 votes. The 2,949 majority, however, was smaller than the 4,048-vote difference UMNO secured in the November 2022 general election, when Johari Harun won 7,308 votes while Kasim, then also PN’s candidate, garnered only 3,260.<sup>3</sup>

Non-Malay voters, comprising a sizeable 28 per cent of Pelangai’s registered voters who overwhelmingly favoured Pakatan Harapan (PH) in recent elections, apparently transferred their support to BN – given that BN won in ethnically-mixed voting districts.<sup>4</sup> However, the Malays remain divided, with lower support for UMNO in August 2023 as compared to November 2022. UMNO must continue doing some soul-searching if it hopes to regain its standing as protector of the Malays.

There are two big questions to be answered here. First, what happened to UMNO during the August 2023 state government elections which led to its poor performance and significant loss of Malay support, which continued through to Pelangai? Second, can UMNO still be considered as the protector of Malays, a status that they claim?

This Perspective analyses the performance of UMNO in the August 2023 state elections and the Pelangai by-election, and assesses the drivers that will determine whether UMNO continues to fade, remains a reduced regional party, or recaptures its past glory as the protector of the Malays. The party’s strategic decisions, leadership, and participation in the Unity Government will determine which of these three scenarios transpires.

## UMNO AS PROTECTOR OF THE MALAYS

Since its foundation in 1946, UMNO has presented itself as the protector of Malay interests. For decades, the community remained loyal to the party on these grounds. Syed Hussein Alatas, the eminent professor of Malay Studies, once observed that although the institutional and judicial system of feudalism gradually disappeared in the peninsular Malay states during the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the psychological traits of feudalism have remained, particularly in UMNO. He calls this ‘psychological feudalism’, meaning an attitude or relationship characterised by personal attachment to the leader, in which the subordinate is expected to be loyal under all circumstances.<sup>5</sup>

Fellow social scientist Chandra Muzaffar supports Alatas' view. In his noted book *Protector?*, Muzaffar explores the 'Malay protector-protected relationship',<sup>6</sup> whose origins he traces to the Melaka Sultanate, and as something practised by the party, UMNO.

This relationship between the ruler and the ruled, which has been particularly strong within the Malay community, has been reinforced by a deep psychological need for a 'protector' to look after the community's interests in the face of competition from the economically better-off Chinese minority. Invariably, it was the UMNO President and Prime Minister who donned the mantle of 'protector'. Loyalty to the protector was, however, not just a product of feudal psychology. As in other political systems, what assured the protector of the loyalty of his followers were the perks and positions he could provide.

UMNO's latest electoral defeat must be placed in the context of a longer trend of declining Malay support. A majority of Malays did not vote for UMNO in the 1999, 2008, 2013 and 2018 general elections. The 2004 elections, when UMNO secured its biggest win in history, was an exception. For 25 years since the reformasi movement began in 1999, the Malay vote has tended to be split between UMNO and PAS and, in recent years, PH-member parties. What made 2022 exceptional was not only the extent of UMNO's loss of Malay confidence, but the arrival of new and dominant Malay parties, notably the PN alliance of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and the Malaysian United Indigenous Party (BERSATU).

The results of the November 2022 general election emphatically showed BN's diminished status; the coalition only won 30 seats compared to 79 seats in GE14. In contrast, PN won 74 seats in GE15. Not only did PAS increase its number of seats from 18 in GE14 to 49 in GE15, the best performance ever, it has become the biggest winner of GE15, and is the dominant party in PN. Furthermore, PN captured Perlis, rolled over other Malay states such as Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu, and made further inroads into Selangor, Pahang, Perak, Melaka and Penang.

### **THE 2023 STATE ELECTIONS: A FURTHER STEP IN UMNO'S DECLINE**

BN is no longer in the driver's seat for forming a government. Instead, it is allied with PH in the Unity Government which includes a total of 19 parties. The new configuration saw PH and UMNO — with BN's other ethnic parties dropping out — contending head-to-head against PN in the August 2023 elections.

UMNO recorded its worst performance, with an estimation that only 27 per cent of Malay voters supported the BN-PH coalition. PN, in federal opposition and now the incumbent state government in Kelantan, Kedah and Terengganu, made electoral gains from further increases in Malay support. The popular vote for PN reached 49.3 per cent, almost on par with the Unity Government which won 49.5 per cent. PN gained 146 out of 245 seats, especially in Malay-majority areas. Preliminary analyses indicated that the opposition coalition, with an estimate gain of 19 percentage points, won an overwhelming 73 per cent of the Malay vote. Former Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob said that this result marked a stunning rejection of UMNO.<sup>7</sup> PN's gains in the Malay vote are uneven across the different states, and were highest in Kedah and lowest in Negeri Sembilan.<sup>8</sup>

How has PN gained such a momentous surge in Malay support? The so-called “Green Wave” — for the colour of PAS’ banner and recognising that the party’s brand and machinery made the difference, particularly in Kedah and Penang — saw PN “absorbing” a majority of UMNO votes.<sup>9</sup>

The “Green Wave” that swept across the northern states and parts of Penang and Selangor had several drivers. First, UMNO was split ahead of the elections into two camps: one in favour of the party president, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, who preferred to be part of the Unity Government; and the other siding with Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaacob who favoured working with PN. This was followed by the purging of leaders such as Khairy Jamaluddin, Annuar Musa and Shahidan Kasim by the party’s apex body, the Supreme Council. This took place prior to the party elections of March 2023 during which the top two posts, President and Deputy President, were not contested. Due to these controversial measures, UMNO lost more ground among the Malays.

BN retained only a slim majority of its voters, and failed to rally its base for the Unity coalition. In a survey done by the Nusantara Academy for Strategic Research (NASR), only an estimated 55 percent of BN voters in the states governed by Pakatan Harapan namely Penang, Selangor, and Negeri Sembilan, who voted for the BN in November 2022 then also voted for the Unity Government in August 2023.<sup>10</sup> The much hoped-for massive transfer of UMNO votes to PH did not happen, leading to coalition partner parties, namely the People Justice Party (PKR) and National Trust Party (AMANAH), losing various seats to PN. In the case of Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu, most seats were lost due to UMNO supporters voting for PN candidates.

Second, the failure of PH and UMNO-BN to win Malay votes was partly due to the short timeframe between the November 2022 general election and August 2023 state elections. People had not yet felt the benefits of the Unity Government’s policy, and thus were unconvinced of their manifestos. At the same time, PN’s manifestos were uneven, with some, such as that for Selangor, presenting an array of promises while others did not make extensive commitments.<sup>11</sup> In general, while the economic factor cannot be ignored it should not be overstated. In addition, overly negative campaigning might have put off some voters, especially Malays seeking more security and positive messaging. As argued by the economist K. Kuperan Viswanathan: “PN is wrong in saying the economy is in bad shape. However, getting the support of the Malays will require more time as the Malays are only now getting used to a political scenario without a dominant Malay party to lead the nation”.<sup>12</sup>

Third, the support for PN was influenced by the rhetoric of “Malays under threat from the non-Malays”, particularly the Democratic Action Party (DAP).<sup>13</sup> Leading the charge was PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang who blamed non-Muslims for corruption in Malaysia and expressed sympathy for the Taliban in Afghanistan.<sup>14</sup> PN was using polarisation of Malaysian society for the purpose of gaining Malay votes.

PAS managed to attract Malay votes across the spectrum, from the more overtly nationalist and Islamist to the less ideological Malay who perceive UMNO as corrupt. PAS was able to tap into this anger by referring to the 1MDB case and the corruption charges then facing Zahid and UMNO leaders, and portraying PH as “DAP-led”. UMNO failed to counter the narratives coming from those perceptions especially when disseminated through social media platforms



like TikTok. Through substantial spending on political advertisements especially on race and religiously sensitive narratives, PN managed to dominate social media in the run-up to the August election. This success reflects how PAS and other right-wing groups have successfully propagated the sentiments of “Malay-Muslim insecurity.”<sup>15</sup>

The results of the August 2023 elections show a significant polarisation between ethnic groups, with the majority of non-Malays supporting PH-BN and the majority of Malays voting for PN.<sup>16</sup> For UMNO, this threatens its role as the Malay protector. UMNO needs to respond quickly to regain its position before it loses out to PN or PAS.

## **FUTURE SCENARIOS FOR UMNO**

As a party protecting the interests of the Malays, the August 2023 results were a blow for UMNO. UMNO must now strategise quickly to regain ground. Much uncertainty remains, and the party’s future lies in the hands of its leaders, members, and vote base, and their respective strategies and responses. One of three scenarios now await the once powerful party.

### *Scenario 1: Oblivion*

In this worst-case scenario, UMNO continues losing support and descends into further internal crisis. Internal conflicts have caused UMNO to lose all seats in Northern (Perlis and Kedah) and East Coast states (Kelantan and Terengganu), with one exception in Kelantan. While UMNO has historically been weak in Selangor and Penang, the party is relatively strong in Melaka, Johor, and Negri Sembilan. Although the states were taken by PH in 2018, BN has subsequently managed to wrest back control of the first two states, and is in a coalition arrangement in Negri Sembilan. Following this, UMNO managed to form governments in Perak and Pahang together with PH. But, UMNO realises that if it loses more support, PN could well also capture these states in future.

To avoid further decline, UMNO must address the reasons it has been rejected: its collaboration with DAP; and members’ disappointment with Zahid’s presidency. So far, Malay voters are clearly not convinced of UMNO’s decision to work with DAP, which is viewed as undermining Zahid’s ability to fight for Malay interests. UMNO has still not had programmes or activities to allay anxieties surrounding DAP and to convince supporters particularly at the grassroots level about the benefit of collaborating with PH. If UMNO remains divided and fails to convince Malay voters about DAP, and if PN, particularly PAS, still utilises the 3Rs as campaign material, it is very difficult to foresee UMNO regaining Malay support.

Zahid Hamidi, who is highly unpopular but powerfully entrenched as party president, is a specific concern and a potential pivot. Zahid, who is also Deputy Prime Minister I, became the target of criticisms after he was released on 4 September 2023 from 47 charges, including criminal breach of trust, corruption, and money laundering, in the Yayasan Akalbudi trial.<sup>17</sup> The release can give UMNO room to focus on strengthening itself rather than having their leaders continuously dealing with court charges. However, if the public is still not convinced about the DNAA and Zahid’s ability to lead UMNO, then the party could face further leadership tussles which would split the party. However, with no mass migration of UMNO members to BERSATU or PAS, and no looming party elections, Zahid still has a chance of

regaining the Malays' confidence, and of convincing them that working with PH, including DAP, will make UMNO strong, stable and dominant again.<sup>18</sup>

### *Scenario 2: Survival*

UMNO may survive, without necessarily thriving again, if it ventures to regain Malay support by playing along with the "Malays under threat" narrative and reviving the "*Muafakat Nasional*" (National Consensus) (MN).<sup>19</sup> However, its MN partners will not just be PAS, as before, but PN which includes BERSATU. Former Prime Minister Ismail Sabri's assessment of the August 2023 results is that this setback served as a poignant illustration of Malay voters' disillusionment, and highlighted the departure of UMNO from the founding ideals that once galvanised its supporters. Ismail said that "Even worse, the UMNO leadership destroyed the MN, which was the hope of the Malays for the unification of the *Ummah* (all Muslims). It is worse when the top leadership drags UMNO to join DAP and even urges the machinery to work and vote for that party".<sup>20</sup> Ismail believes that UMNO has a good chance to win if it collaborates with PN to face PH rather than be part of the Unity Government. This option would mean UMNO accepting to become minor partner in PN, and also jointly sharing the Malay-protector mantle with BERSATU and PAS.

This mode of survival, if executed between general elections, may come at the expense of the government and even the country. BN's withdrawal from the Unity Government would trigger another political crisis. This will also lead to further political polarisation in Malaysia's multiracial society. Breaking from the Unity government also hinges on UMNO's leadership, specifically the removal of Zahid who has been instrumental in getting UMNO to join PH in government.

PN believes that if Zahid is no longer the president of UMNO, it can be persuaded to revive MN. That is why PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang proposed negotiation with UMNO without Zahid in order to revive the pact.<sup>21</sup> If UMNO-BN revives MN and later joins PN, the best UMNO-BN can hope for is a regional deal with PAS and BERSATU, in which UMNO retains its control in Southern Peninsular states such as Johor, Melaka and Negeri Sembilan, and perhaps Pahang. UMNO-BN would in turn surrender Perak because PAS has the highest number of seats there among the three Malay-based parties. PAS would want to hold all four states that it now controls, namely Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah and Perlis, plus Perak. BERSATU would probably want Selangor to be under its control. If this were the scenario, UMNO would be known as just a Southern party plus Pahang and potentially irreversibly lose its stature among Malays. UMNO would survive by accepting PAS or PN replacing it as the Malay protector.

### *Scenario 3: Recovery*

The best hope for UMNO-BN's recovery, having suffered huge losses when going it alone in GE15, is to stay with the Unity Government. This is the best option if UMNO does not want to become a minor partner by joining PN and wishes to avoid collaborating with BERSATU. UMNO also wants to continue championing Malay interests, and is fully cognisant that PAS wants to be the more dominant party for Malay-Muslims.<sup>22</sup> In fact, UMNO was clearly unhappy with PAS' alliance with BERSATU under the PN umbrella, rather than with UMNO

under MN. This was the reason for UMNO abandoning and dissolving MN.<sup>23</sup> It is quite clear that UMNO will not collaborate with PN — at least until the next general election.

Unlike the opposition PN, UMNO is in the federal government and has the advantage in terms of policymaking and power – if given a full term until 2027 – to strengthen itself.<sup>24</sup> It has ample time to persuade supporters to accept PH, especially DAP, a former opponent which is now more embracing of UMNO. Ahmad Zahid Hamidi attended the 2023 DAP Congress on 10 September 2023, becoming the first serving UMNO President to do so after decades of rivalry.<sup>25</sup> Earlier, on 10 June 2023, DAP Secretary General Anthony Loke had attended UMNO's General Assembly. Loke explained that the political conflict between UMNO and DAP ended when they came together to form the Unity Government.<sup>26</sup> PH supporting UMNO in the Unity Government gives UMNO space to win the hearts and minds of as many Malays as possible.<sup>27</sup> Should UMNO visibly champion Malay causes within that context, its esteem as the Malay protector might yet be revived.

Ultimately, UMNO will need to win parliamentary and state assembly seats. By collaborating with PH in the Peninsula, UMNO could continue to be allocated more Malay-dominant seats to contest than would be the case if it were part of PN; in the latter case, UMNO would need to share seats with PAS and BERSATU. The *realpolitik* calculations should incline UMNO to stay with the Unity Government in order to remain relevant and to enjoy a better deal within its coalition. If Malaysia's economy improves and the Unity Government remains stable and performs to the liking of the people, there is a distinct prospect that PH-BN can continue to form the nucleus of government for another term.

This is subject to BN's willingness to continue working with PH in the next general election.<sup>28</sup> Now, the Malays still distrust the Unity Government's ability to serve their interests. That is why UMNO's role is essential to lead an effort to regain Malay trust in itself and the Unity Government. UMNO Deputy President Mohamad Hasan has argued that UMNO must rebrand and position itself as a party that is more progressive in championing the rights of the Malays; it would appear that the party needs to formulate a new Malay-agenda blueprint that is relevant to the country's development.<sup>29</sup> If it manages that, then UMNO can tap into its storied history and legacy to persuade the Malays to trust it again, and to trust the *Madani* Government.

## CONCLUSION

Between the worst case of UMNO's descent to oblivion, its survival in a reduced form, and the possibility of recovery by building on its partnership in the Unity Government, the third scenario seems the most practical and likely. UMNO will have to work hard nevertheless to win back Malay voters; being in the federal government affords them the opportunity. Should PN fail to provide alternative policies, the Unity Government's relevance may be enhanced in its contention against the narrow narratives of race and religion that PN will likely maintain.

UMNO's prospects are foreseeably tied to the success of the Unity Government in maintaining a solid coalition and bringing economic opportunity and prosperity. In order to triumph in the next general election, political parties must also be able to win the perception contest, especially on social media. Malaysia's politically dynamic state demands continual engagement with the people, and the maintenance of narratives and incentives to support



incumbents. It is difficult now to predict the perception of people and political dynamics in two or three years' time. UMNO now with the Unity Government appears committed to performing well and to cultivating a favourable public perception. There is no easy way to win elections, but for a start, the one-year-old Unity Government must perform well—and capture the public imagination.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The by-election was called after then-state assemblyman Johari Harun died in a plane crash near the Elmina Township in Shah Alam, Selangor on 17 August.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/679930>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2023/10/964210/official-results-bn-secures-victory-pelangai-2949-majority>

<sup>4</sup> The main mixed districts that UMNO-BN were Telemong, Sungai Gapoi, Manchis, and Sungai Perdak.

<sup>5</sup> Syed Hussein Alatas. 1968. Feudalism in Malaysian Society: A Study in Historical Continuity. *Civilisations*. Vol. 43. No. 4. 584-585.

<sup>6</sup> Chandra Muzaffar. 1979. *Protector?: An Analysis of the Concept and Practice of Loyalty in Leader-Led Relationships Within Malay Society*. Penang: Aliran.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2023/08/944936/malay-voter-exodus-umnos-core-support-dwindles-27-cent-recent-state>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/675591>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2023/08/16/pns-huge-gains-in-penang-due-to-umno-votes-says-analyst/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2023/08/29/study-finds-one-third-of-bn-voters-switched-sides-to-perikatan-in-state-elections/87883>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.tatlerasia.com/lifestyle/others/malaysian-state-election-2023-results>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2023/08/23/after-state-polls-analysts-say-malay-voters-see-pas-as-new-political-centre/86441>

<sup>13</sup> <https://fulcrum.sg/malaysias-state-elections-surprisingly-unremarkable/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/14/malaysia-elections-ethnic-tensions-chinese-malay-islam-nationalism/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://stratsea.com/from-islamist-to-muslim-majoritarianism-the-rise-of-pas-in-ge15/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/post-analysis-of-the-malaysian-state-election-2023-the-need-for-national-reconciliation/>

<sup>17</sup> The Attorney General (AG), applying his discretion under Article 145 of Federal Constitution to discontinue a criminal trial, requested for the High Court to grant a discharge not amounting to an acquittal (DNAA). <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2023/09/08/zahids-dnaa-was-it-ag-or-court-who-decided-it-legal-experts-clear-the-mix-up/89605>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2023-59-from-the-fringes-of-defeat-how-umno-president-zahid-hamidi-transformed-his-vulnerability-into-invincibility-by-james-chai/>

<sup>19</sup> This was a political alliance made between UMNO and PAS prior to the November 2022 general election. While never formally disbanded, it lost relevance given that BN under UMNO, and PN, comprised of PAS, Bersatu and Gerakan, competed against each other.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2023/08/944914/ismail-sabri-says-umnos-defeat-state-polls-was-due-party-straying>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/634439>

- <sup>22</sup> Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani. 2018. Dilemma in UMNO-PAS relationships. *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (Mandarin). 26 September
- <sup>23</sup> <https://umno-online.my/2021/11/09/umno-di-pasca-muafakat-nasional-khaled-nordin> and <https://www.eurasiareview.com/13022023-malaysia-follows-indonesia-on-the-road-from-authoritarian-hegemony-analysis/>
- <sup>24</sup> <https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2023/09/953361/zahid-hamidi-first-umno-president-attend-dap-congress>
- <sup>25</sup> <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2023/06/10/loke-weve-moved-so-far-along-from-being-political-adversaries>
- <sup>26</sup> <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/681247>
- <sup>27</sup> Such as DAP supporting the debt waiver for FELDA settlers. <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/post-analysis-of-the-malaysian-state-election-2023-the-need-for-national-reconciliation/>
- <sup>29</sup> <https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2023/06/917615/umno-needs-come-out-new-blueprint-malay-development-agenda>

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