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GE14: WILL URBAN MALAYS
SUPPORT PAKATAN HARAPAN?

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ISEAS YUSOF ISHAK
INSTITUTE

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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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GE14: Will Urban Malays Support Pakatan Harapan?

By Wan Saiful Wan Jan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In Malaysia's last general election, urban voters tended to support the opposition coalition — 72 of the 97 urban parliamentary seats were in fact won by it. However, most of these seats have a mixed demography, with a high percentage of ethnic Chinese voters.
- In the upcoming general election, Pakatan has a good chance of winning the federal government if Malay voters join their Chinese counterparts in supporting the opposition coalition. A subsequent so-called "Malay tsunami" could lead to a Pakatan victory.
- This present study, which is based on a series of focus group discussions held in the Malaysian states of Kedah and Johor, finds that urban Malay voters are very unhappy with the economic condition of the country and are also worried about corruption.
- But despite their grouses, they are still uncertain about supporting the opposition coalition due to the fear of losing the race-based privileges they enjoy as ethnic Malays.

GE14: Will Urban Malays Support Pakatan Harapan?

By Wan Saiful Wan Jan¹

INTRODUCTION

Many studies have found that voting trends in urban areas are different from that of rural ones. City-dwellers tend to be less loyal to a party compared to their rural counterparts. Hence, change from the incumbent tends to happen in urban areas first.²

This essay focuses on urban voters in Malaysia, and their likely voting intentions in the upcoming 14th General Election (GE14) due to be held in mid-2018. It documents the findings from sixteen focus group discussions (FGDs) that were conducted in the northern state of Kedah and the southern state of Johor, in Peninsular Malaysia in January 2018. These two states were selected because they are both high on the list of states targeted by the opposition coalition Pakatan Harapan (Pakatan).³

Following this introduction, the essay will describe the importance of the urban votes in the Malaysian political landscape, followed by the

¹ Wan Saiful Wan Jan is Visiting Senior Fellow at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.

² See, for example, Robin Harding, “Urban-rural differences in incumbent support across Africa”, *Afrobarometer Working Paper* No. 120 (2010); Dominika Koter, “Urban and rural voting patterns in Senegal: The spatial aspects of incumbency, c. 1978–2012”, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 51, no. 4 (2013): 653–79; and Beatriz Magaloni, *Voting for autocracy: Hegemonic party survival and its demise in Mexico* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

³ Pakatan Harapan has four component parties: the Malay-dominated Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM), Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP), multiracial National Justice Party (PKR), and Islamist Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah).

methodology of the study. Subsequently, the findings are presented and discussed. The essay concludes with comments on how the findings may impact the upcoming general election in the country.

BACKGROUND TO URBAN VOTES

Overall, Malaysia seems to follow the global trend wherein urban voters are usually more susceptible to voting for opposition parties. One of the studies that captured this trend was published in an ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute study of the 1986 general election. In that general election, rural voters continued to vote for the incumbent, in this case the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition led by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). The opposition won 29 out of the 177 parliamentary seats, with the Democratic Action Party (DAP) being the biggest opposition party with 24 seats. The study did not specify how many of the UMNO seats were urban or rural, but they categorized all the 24 seats won by the DAP as urban. The same study also implied that the 1986 general election was a continuation of the urban–rural divide that has been recorded in Malaysian politics since the 1960s.⁴

Before going further, it is important to define the terms urban and rural as used in this essay. Following the definition provided by Politweet, a social media socio-political research firm, urban constituencies are defined as densely populated places, usually having within their boundaries a city or larger towns. On the other hand, rural constituencies tend to be physically large but with a smaller population found scattered in small villages.⁵ To illustrate, by these definitions, all the 11 parliamentary constituencies in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur would be considered urban, as well as the likes of Alor Setar in the northern state of Kedah and Kota Baru in the state of Kelantan. Rural seats, however, form the majority of Malaysia’s political landscape.

⁴ Sankaran Ramanathan and Mohd Hamdan Adnan, “Malaysia’s 1986 General Election: The urban-rural dichotomy”, *ISEAS Occasional Paper*, no. 83 (1988).

⁵ <<https://politweet.wordpress.com/2013/05/21/the-rural-urban-divide-in-malaysias-general-election/>>, 21 May 2013.

When the ethnicity of voters is mapped against the urban–rural divisions, it becomes quite clear that there is a correlation. As can be seen in Figure 1, rural constituencies in Malaysia tend to have a higher proportion of Malay voters, while the demography is more mixed in urban constituencies.

Results from GE13 confirm that the urban–rural divide continues to exist in the Malaysian political landscape. Of the 222 parliamentary seats, 125 were rural and the remaining 97 were urban and semi-urban. As shown in Figure 2, the incumbent UMNO-led BN coalition won 108 out of the 125 rural seats, leaving a paltry 17 for Pakatan Rakyat, the former opposition coalition then. But Pakatan swept up 72 of the 97 urban and semi-urban seats, compared to just 25 for BN.⁶ The biggest beneficiary of this urban swing was the DAP. Their research outfit, Research for Social Advancement (REFSA), declared that GE13 was the best-ever election for the DAP after they won 38 parliamentary seats out of the 51 they contested, making them the second largest party in parliament after UMNO.⁷ All of the 38 seats are in urban or semi-urban areas.

A common feature of urban constituencies in Malaysia, as shown also in Figure 2, is that they have a relatively higher mix of ethnic groups. In some seats, ethnic Chinese make up the majority of voters. In fact, in GE13, among the 97 urban and semi-urban constituencies, 30 have ethnic Chinese as the majority group.⁸ The DAP won 29 of these 30 seats, largely attributed to support from the Chinese voters. The Chinese voters' mass rejection of BN led to a sigh of disbelief from many UMNO leaders, with some labelling the GE13 as emblematic of a Chinese “tsunami” and UMNO's mouthpiece *Utusan Malaysia* using the headline “Apa lagi

⁶ Data from Politweet.

⁷ Lam Choong Wah, “Malaysian seats’ are the future of DAP and Pakatan”, 2018 <<https://www.refsa.org/newsletter/malaysian-seats-are-the-future-of-dap-and-pakatan/?frame=0>> (accessed 3 February 2018).

⁸ Lee Kam Heng and Thock Ker Pong, “Thirteenth General Election (GE13): Chinese votes and implications on Malaysian politics”, *Kajian Malaysia* 32, no. 2 (2014): 25–53.

Figure 1: Urban-rural divide and percentage of Malay voters in Malaysia

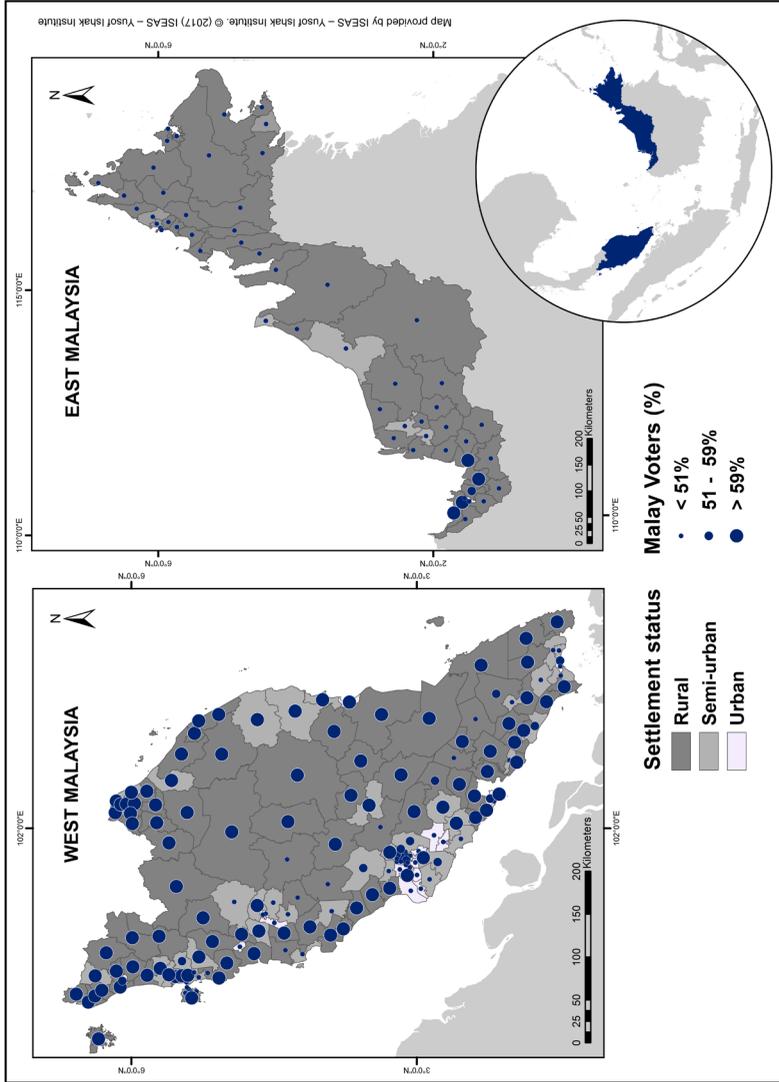
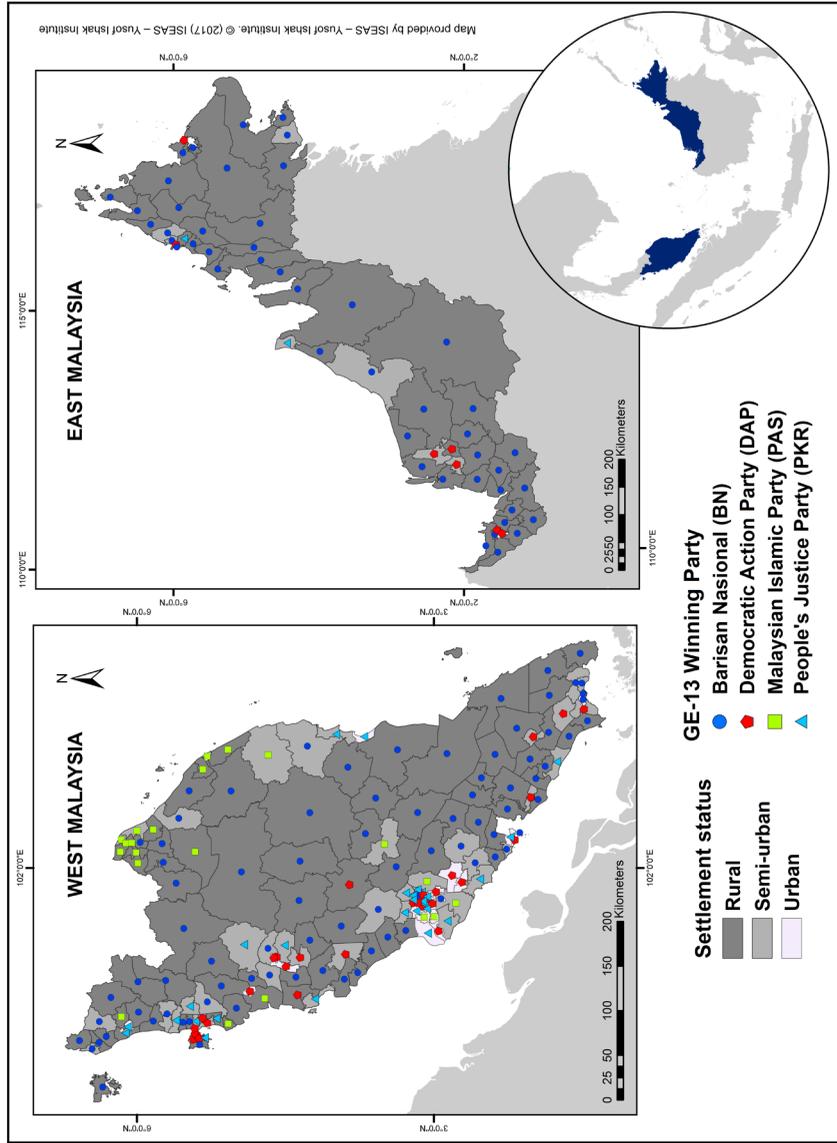


Figure 2: Urban–rural divide and victors of GE13



Cina mahu?” (What else do the Chinese want?).⁹ More importantly, and as we get closer to GE14, this situation raises the question of whether urban Malay voters are showing a similar tendency to join their Chinese counterparts in protesting against the BN, if they have not already done so. Generating a Malay “tsunami” is pivotal for the Pakatan opposition coalition if they want to have a fighting chance in GE14.¹⁰ It can also be argued that if urban Malays show no sign of shifting, then the Malay tsunami is even more unlikely to happen in the rural constituencies, since, as explained earlier, change tends to begin in urban areas.

For GE14, the situation is made more fluid by the entry of Mahathir Mohamad into the fray. Mahathir was the longest-serving Prime Minister of Malaysia and President of UMNO. However, on 14 January 2017 he launched a new Malay party, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM),¹¹ to directly challenge Prime Minister Najib Razak and UMNO. Mahathir was made Chairman of the Pakatan Harapan opposition pact on 14 July 2017, before being named Pakatan’s candidate for Prime Minister on 7 January 2018. It has been argued that the presence of Mahathir increases, or at least creates, the possibility of a Malay tsunami.¹²

The expectation therefore is that urban voters, including urban Malays, would continue the trend of supporting Pakatan. Some academics have even suggested that BN should focus on winning the rural seats because

⁹ *Utusan Malaysia*, 7 May 2013.

¹⁰ Ooi Choong Han, “Shifting political alliances point to ‘Malay tsunami’ in GE14”, 30 November 2017 <<https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/25221/>>.

¹¹ More background information about PPBM can be found in 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).

¹² A pertinent comment was made by the Executive Director of Penang Institute, Ooi Kee Beng, “Dr Mahathir has chosen a path not too divergent from UMNO’s, and this attracts Malays who are interested in Anwar Ibrahim’s talk of reformation but are unable to let go of their racial dignity and sentiments ... (PPBM) allows them the opportunity to participate in a Malay reformation that is not as radical as the Reformasi. Dr Mahathir is very smart.”, *Malaysian Insight*, 30 November 2017.

it remains difficult for them to recapture urban seats.¹³ Nonetheless, other reports suggest that the attitude of urban voters today is actually rather mixed. In a speech on 1 February 2018, a senior DAP leader had to admit that “urban Malay voters lost enthusiasm with the idea of change and further confused by the presence of Dr Mahathir in the Opposition’s camp”¹⁴ because they are used to attacking Mahathir and his policies rather than supporting him. In fact, in mid-2017 when Mahathir was announced as Pakatan’s leader, a group of Reformasi activists based in Kuala Lumpur and the surrounding area openly revolted and urged pro-opposition Malaysians to reject him.¹⁵

All these events make urban Malay voters an interesting group to be studied. In previous elections, there was a widespread assumption that urban voters rejected the BN. This essay is not a historical examination of GE13 and therefore will not attempt to explain if urban Malays joined the bandwagon at that time. However, by focusing specifically on urban Malay respondents, this essay is an attempt to gauge the likelihood of urban Malay voters voting for Pakatan in the GE14.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SELECTED CONSTITUENCIES AND METHODOLOGY

Kubang Pasu and Sungai Petani are both in the northern state of Kedah while Johor Bahru and Pulai are in the southern state of Johor. The two

¹³ Mohd Noor Yazid, “Undi ikut kaum penentu PRU-14”, 2 January 2018 <<https://www.bharian.com.my/kolumnis/2018/01/369709/undi-ikut-kaum-penentu-pru-14>>; Haziq Alfian, “What analysts say about BN chances to sway urban voters their way come GE14”, 20 March 2018 <<http://www.malaysiandigest.com/frontpage/282-main-tile/728669-what-analysts-say-about-bn-chances-to-sway-urban-voters-their-way-come-ge14.html>> (accessed 30 March 2018).

¹⁴ Liew Chin Tong, “To hell and back: The Pakatan Harapan story”, 3 February 2018 <<https://www.liewchintong.com/2018/02/03/hell-back-pakatan-harapan-story/>> (accessed 30 March 2018).

¹⁵ The “Reformasi” movement was formed when Mahathir sacked his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, in 1998. For coverage of its rejection of Mahathir in 2017, see “Otai Reformasi tolak kepimpinan Dr Mahathir”, 24 July 2017 <<https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/389602>> (accessed 29 March 2018).

states were chosen for this study because they are both being targeted by Pakatan as key states that they want to win in GE14. To make that a reality, as described above, Pakatan needs to create a Malay “tsunami” wherein they need to generate a significant swing among the Malay voters in the two states. The latest key characters of the constituencies selected for this study are summarized in Table 1.

In the first part of this study, sixteen focus group discussions (FGDs) were held, four in each of the selected constituencies. The 117 respondents were all of Malay ethnicity and are Muslim. The respondents were divided into age and gender groups as shown in Table 2 to encourage free and frank conversation. All the FGDs were conducted in January 2018.

Those below 35 years of age, male and female, were all young professionals who are in the early stages of their careers in full-time employment or running their own small businesses. Those above 35 years of age, male and female, are more advanced in their careers, and the majority of them work in the private sector.

The FGDs were semi-structured. Respondents were prompted with three main questions:

- (1) what are the issues that concern you most in the run up to GE14?
- (2) what do you think of the ruling BN coalition and Prime Minister Najib Razak?
- (3) what do you think of the opposition Pakatan coalition and their leader Mahathir Mohamad?

Roughly equal amounts of time were allocated to each of the questions and the respondents were encouraged to comment in a free-flow type of conversation with minimal interruption or guidance from the author. In the first eight FGDs conducted in Kubang Pasu and Johor Bahru, the questions were asked in the sequence listed above. However, in the latter eight FGDs, the question on Pakatan was asked second, while the one on BN was asked last. The reason for this will be explained in the findings section below.

The FGDs were complemented with face-to-face interviews with a subgroup within the respondents. These are the individuals whose income was below RM3,855 per month. They are considered different

Table 1: Key characteristics of the sample constituencies

Category	Kubang Pasu		Sungai Petani		Johor Bahru		Pulau	
	Semi-urban	Urban	Semi-urban	Urban	Semi-urban	Urban	Semi-urban	Urban
Registered voter	74,047		103,637		99,984		116,080	
<i>Ethnic group</i>								
Malays	64,029 (86%)		63,799 (62%)		52,629 (53%)		54,630 (47%)	
Chinese	6,325 (9%)		27,910 (27%)		41,218 (41%)		47,605 (41%)	
Indian	2,566 (3%)		11,389 (11%)		5,020 (5%)		12,174 (10%)	
Others	1,127 (2%)		539 (0.5%)		1,117 (1%)		1,671 (2%)	
<i>Age</i>								
21–29	14,596 (20%)		18,703 (18%)		11,445 (11%)		18,140 (16%)	
30–39	18,232 (25%)		22,798 (22%)		19,822 (20%)		27,077 (23%)	
40–49	13,800 (19%)		20,991 (21%)		19,698 (20%)		26,701 (23%)	
50–59	12,712 (17%)		20,095 (19%)		21,079 (21%)		21,761 (19%)	
60–69	9,213 (12%)		12,897 (14%)		17,085 (17%)		14,271 (12%)	
Above 70	5,494 (7%)		8,153 (8%)		10,855 (11%)		8,130 (7%)	
GE13 Elected MP	Mohd Johari Baharum		Johari Abdul		Shahrir Samad		Nur Jazlan Mohamed	
Party	BN — UMNO		Pakatan — PKR		BN — UMNO		BN — UMNO	
Victory majority	10,444		9,548		10,134		3,226	

Note: Percentages are rounded off.

Source: Voter data from the latest electoral roll published on 19 February 2018.

Table 2: Profile of respondents in the focus group discussions

Parliamentary constituency	Group	Age	Gender	No. of respondents	Income range, to nearest RM*000
Kubang Pasu, Kedah	Group 1	Below 35	Male	8	0 – 5,000 ^a
	Group 2	Below 35	Female	7	2,000 – 6,000
	Group 3	Above 35	Male	9	3,000 – 9,000
	Group 4	Above 35	Female	6	0 – 7,000 ^a
Johor Bahru, Johor	Group 5	Below 35	Male	6	2,000 – 6,000
	Group 6	Below 35	Female	7	2,000 – 5,000
	Group 7	Above 35	Male	7	3,000 – 14,000
	Group 8	Above 35	Female	9	2,000 – 9,000
Sungai Petani, Kedah	Group 9	Below 35	Male	8	2,000 – 5,000
	Group 10	Below 35	Female	7	0 – 5,000 ^a
	Group 11	Above 35	Male	6	3,000 – 20,000
	Group 12	Above 35	Female	8	1,000 – 4,000
Pulai, Johor	Group 13	Below 35	Male	7	2,000 – 4,000
	Group 14	Below 35	Female	8	2,000 – 6,000
	Group 15	Above 35	Male	7	3,000 – 10,000
	Group 16	Above 35	Female	7	0 – 8,000 ^a

Note: ^a Some respondents were either unemployed or full-time housewives.

from the rest because they make up the “bottom 40 per cent” (B40) of the Malaysian income distribution, also known as the urban poor.¹⁶ Of the 117 respondents, 36 had an individual income of less than RM3,855 but only 12 reported that their household income was below RM3,855. For the purpose of this study, and in accordance with the common practice of taking household income as an indicator for socioeconomic status, only the latter 12 are considered as belonging to this category.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents and discusses the key findings from the FGDs and interviews as observed during the study and raised by the respondents.

Body Language and Demeanour

In the first instance, the body language and demeanour of the respondents both in the FGDs and the interviews were interesting to observe. In the first few minutes of the FGDs, almost all the respondents were very cautious, with some of them looking very uncomfortable, especially when they realized that the topic was GE14. This is despite them having been informed of the purpose and the nature of the study way in advance. The main concern was whether they could trust that their answers would be not be used against them. They sought assurance that they would not be quoted by name and that their identities would be kept confidential. Some of the respondents, albeit jokingly, suggested that the author tell them the expected answers so that they could give the “correct” answers. This was particularly acute among the female respondents above 35 years of age, and especially when they saw that the FGDs were being audio-recorded. Respondents below the age of 35, male and female, were relatively quicker to feel at ease in the discussion.

¹⁶ Prime Minister’s Department, *Eleventh Malaysia Plan — Strategy Paper 2: Elevating B40 households towards a middle-class society* (Putrajaya: Prime Minister’s Department, 2015), p. 2-1.

In the first two FGDs that were conducted in Kubang Pasu and Johor Bahru, as the conversation went on, and especially when the topic moved away from Najib and UMNO, the respondents became more comfortable with the discussion and towards each other. The discussion became smoother when they discussed the Pakatan coalition, and it was visible that they felt more comfortable discussing Pakatan than BN. However, even though the segment was supposed to be about Pakatan, many of the respondents went back to commenting on UMNO and BN, making more frank and critical comments by comparing the two and raising various allegations of corruption that they had read about in the media about BN, and especially about Najib.

The change of tone and demeanour led the author to question if the comments were influenced by the sequencing of the questions. To address this, the sequence was changed for the FGDs in Sungai Petani and Pulai. This time, the respondents were asked to comment about Pakatan first, before they were asked about UMNO and BN. Indeed, there was a visible difference in how the respondents reacted. The respondents were generally very comfortable to comment on Pakatan, indicating that they felt less threatened by the topic. The ease that they felt carried over into the later part of the session when they were asked to discuss UMNO and BN.

The difference in the respondents' demeanour has two implications. First, it shows that the respondents do not feel safe to express their thoughts on Najib, UMNO and BN when they are outside their usual comfort zone. This fear, although not specifically investigated in this study, resonates with claims made in other studies about how voters are worried that they might be victimized or ostracized if they are seen as critical of UMNO.¹⁷ This study shows that the fear exists among urban Malay voters too.

Second, the finding also shows that, when interpreting results of primary studies that rely on “quick” replies such as opinion polls and surveys, there is a need to appreciate that respondents may give

¹⁷ See, for example, Wan Saiful Wan Jan, *Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia in Johor*.

responses they deem to be safe if there is insufficient time to build trust between the interviewer and the respondent. Therefore, when discussing issues in such environments, it is necessary to invest some time to build rapport. Similarly, survey findings can be greatly enriched if they are complemented by face-to-face interviews and FGDs, since the latter provides greater depths of understanding, enabling the full nuances of the situation to be captured.

Issues Considered Important

When asked about the issues that were most likely to influence their voting intentions, the respondents gave a wide variety of answers. The issues are grouped under six headers as described below.

Goods and Services Tax Is a Burden

The majority of the respondents are generally resentful of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) that was introduced by the Najib administration in 2015. They blame the GST for the rising cost of living. The complaint against GST was voiced equally in all groups, but the male respondents were generally more vocal in expressing their disagreement. They quoted reasons such as “we pay for the weekly groceries and we can feel the impacts directly” and “every time we go to a supermarket, we can feel that our salaries are worth less than before”.¹⁸

The female respondents, mainly those above 35, were less upset about the GST, with several of them stating that they can understand why the GST is needed and that the government was right to introduce it to diversify the country’s revenue sources. Some did voice their unhappiness with the tax, but more respondents in the above 35 female group believed that the campaign against GST was “opposition propaganda” and that “the opposition will retain the GST” even if they were to get into power and despite their protests.

¹⁸ The quotes presented in this and subsequent sections are translated from the FGDs and interviews that were conducted in Malay language. Identities are kept confidential as requested by respondents.

Urban poor respondents were especially unhappy with the GST. They felt that the burden was excessively felt by them because “when prices go up, the rich can still pay but we struggle because our income is lower”. This sentiment was expressed by everyone in the urban poor category. To the proposition that the campaign against GST is merely Pakatan propaganda, they responded that this shows Pakatan understands the day-to-day challenges they face. The explanations given by the government are not fully trusted by the respondents in this group, with many of them questioning the government’s inability to introduce revenue diversification strategies that do not burden those who are already struggling with daily costs.

Abolishment of the Petrol Subsidy Creates Additional Burden

Respondents in the FGDs almost unanimously felt that the removal of fuel subsidy was another major contributor to the rising cost of living and economic hardship. This sentiment was expressed equally by all groups in all the FGDs.

The respondents attributed the increase in daily living costs to the removal of fuel subsidies that “causes an increase in transportation costs which are then passed by shopkeepers to us as consumers”. Mothers in the group complained that “school bus operators increased their prices because their petrol costs have become more expensive” and this resulted in them having to pay more. Many respondents talked about the increased cost of using private transportation in their daily commute as a direct result of the subsidy removal, but their “salaries have not gone up to match the increased costs.”

Quite a few respondents in the above 35 group understood the need for fuel subsidy removal. They argued, some quite eloquently, about the need for diversification of government revenues, especially for a country like Malaysia which has historically been dependent on oil and gas revenues, at a time when global oil prices have plummeted. Some of the respondents in this category stated that they accept the need to “face the short-term pain because we know in the long-term this is for the benefit of the country”. However, most of them also stated that they wished the government would manage the situation better or implement the policy more gradually.

The B40 respondents felt that they were harmed the most by the removal of the petrol subsidy. They were generally grateful for the Bantuan Rakyat 1Malaysia (BR1M) cash transfer assistance that they received and singled out Najib as the first Prime Minister who initiated a programme that specifically targeted them. Yet they argued that the amount was too small to make any real impact.¹⁹ Furthermore, they stated that BR1M's application process occurs only once a year and this means it does not help those who need funds urgently. One respondent explained:

I earn less than RM2,000 a month. Sometimes, I don't even have money to pay for my motorcycle fuel, and yet the fuel prices continue to rise. My BR1M is just a few hundred ringgit per year but it is not enough even for a month. The government's action forces me to ask my mother for money and I am very embarrassed.

Benefits of Becoming Middle Class Still Unrealized

Some of the female respondents above the age of 35 raised a different point relating to the cost of living. Although they did touch on the prices of daily household items, they spent more time discussing the increase in healthcare and education costs, their worry about the longer term costs of supporting their children, and how much they long for a better quality of life. As stated by one respondent, "as a middle-class mother, I want better things for my family, but I cannot afford many of the better services that the rich can buy."

On healthcare, several of them reported that the long waiting times at government hospitals and clinics deterred them from going there despite the low charges, the main reason being they cannot easily take time off work when their children need medical attention. As a result, they are compelled to use the more expensive private clinics and pay for

¹⁹ BR1M is a cash transfer welfare assistance programme that was introduced in 2012. The amount is staggered based on household income, with those earning below RM3,000 receiving RM1,200 per annum, those with household income between RM3,001 to RM4,000 receiving RM900 per annum, and unmarried individuals earning below RM2,000 receiving RM450 per annum.

the services themselves. Quite a few of these respondents were educated abroad and they compared the healthcare services in Malaysia with their experience while studying. One respondent stated, “In the United Kingdom, my family received free but high-quality healthcare under the National Health Service (NHS) but here in Malaysia, even though we pay, the service is not necessarily the best one.”

On education, these female respondents spoke of their desire to send their children to private schools because they perceive the quality there as better than a typical government school. However, the fees are beyond their reach, and they see this as a restriction on their children reaching their potential. One respondent in Johor Bahru commented: “My daughter keeps complaining that she does not like her school but what choice do I have? Private schools here are expensive and far away from where I live.” The sentiment was echoed by some of the fathers in the group of males above the age of. Several of them stated that even though statistically they are now in the M40 category, they feel like their lives have not improved.

The respondents also expressed longer term concerns related to their children’s future. In particular, they worried about their children’s job prospects, as they feared that their children might still need to be supported financially even after graduating from tertiary education. These respondents believed that even though they earned relatively decent salaries, they were still worried about not being able to support their older children during and after university.

Having said this, it must be stressed that the respondents were generally positive about the socio-economic achievements of the BN administration. They credited the UMNO-led government for successfully helping them and many other ethnic Malays move up the socio-economic ladder, building schools, universities and hospitals that serve all the citizens, and setting the ground for the country’s future growth. They also made comments such as “if UMNO is not in power, prospects for the Malays would not be as good as they are today”, indicating their approval of UMNO and BN’s pro-Malay agenda. They acknowledged BN’s achievements thus far. However, in the words of one respondent, “if we are middle-class, why do I not feel middle-class?”.

Lack of Assistance for M40

The respondents spoke about their longer term concerns, such as having to pay for their children's tertiary education in the coming years. The apprehension is caused by their realization that, as middle-class families, their children might not qualify for government scholarships because of the household income threshold, as most scholarships are targeted at those in the B40 category. However, they do not have enough savings or surplus income to pay for university tuition fees and living expenses. This is a major worry for these parents and they feel that the government has abandoned them simply because they have succeeded in moving up the socio-economic ladder.

The respondents spoke about their frustration because they claim that while the government is giving plenty of assistance to those in the B40 category, middle-class and especially lower middle-class families "are being punished after we worked hard to improve our lot. But we lose a lot more compared to what we gain." Education scholarships were the most oft-cited example. While they accept that the B40 group needs to be helped, they are disappointed that "our right to these scholarships as Malays is being removed because the government has no more money". The linkage that respondents create between alleged corruption and the perceived removal of Malay rights is an interesting finding which will be explained in the section on corruption and governance.

Several respondents who claimed that their household incomes were at the lower end of the M40 category felt that they were the most disadvantaged as a result of the change towards a more targeted assistance programme. While they were generous in praising the government for wanting to help the B40 group, repeatedly stating that they too had benefitted from many of these programmes, they questioned the way the numbers are calculated. They argued that they still needed just as much help and that it was wrong for the government to exclude them just because they earned slightly above the B40 income line.

The respondents who worked in the private sector or ran their own businesses also spoke about government contract opportunities. The Malaysian government uses public procurement as a tool for social engineering, in that usually a *Bumiputera* quota is enforced, often

for smaller contracts, so that they may be awarded to smaller Malay companies. There was a difference in opinion among respondents, with some saying the contracts were still available while others argued that the number of such contracts had decreased. Regardless, the general feeling was that the *Bumiputera* quota that has long benefitted Malay contractors were now less easily accessed and the competition even more fierce. This led some respondents to say that they were being forced to compete too soon, before they were ready to do so.

Corruption and Governance

As the conversation warmed up, many respondents in all the groups expressed cynicism about the current government's commitment to improving governance and fighting corruption. Various issues were raised, ranging from the 1MDB debt,²⁰ the scandal-ridden FELDA²¹ and MARA,²² the skyrocketing national debt under Najib's administration, and the news coverage about leakages and wastage every time the Auditor General's Report is released. Some respondents also cited allegations that Najib's family lives a lavish lifestyle abroad using money obtained from questionable sources. It was clear from the FGDs that, while the respondents knew that the veracity of these allegations was unconfirmed, their perceptions were somewhat affected by them.

In one of the FGDs a male respondent above 35 years of age stated that the Najib administration had incurred so much debt to the extent that "the constitutional rights of the Malays for government assistance and subsidies had to be reduced or removed because we have to service the loans". A heated discussion ensued amongst the group members when several other respondents challenged the veracity of this claim,

²⁰ 1Malaysia Development Berhad is a state-owned enterprise that has incurred debt to the tune of RM42 billion and has been accused of being involved in many improprieties.

²¹ Federal Land Development Agency, a federal statutory body tasked with resettling poor Malays into new areas.

²² Majlis Amanah Rakyat is a government agency tasked with spurring the socio-economic growth of ethnic Malays.

countering it by saying that the subsidy and fiscal reforms are what Malaysians should expect from a responsible government who is committed to ensuring long-term fiscal stability of the country. Even though the respondents disagreed on the reasons behind what they saw as harsh economic reforms, they eventually unanimously agreed that the debt, leakages and corruption must have contributed to the urgent need for reform. They believed that the government could have introduced them at a slower, more gradual pace.

It was interesting to observe that some respondents linked the alleged corruption with what they claimed to be the government's inability to continue fulfilling its obligations towards the ethnic Malays and to Malaysians generally. They firmly believed that ethnic Malays have a constitutional right to certain privileges, especially education scholarships and various subsidies and handouts. However, they seemed to think that the reduction and/or removal of scholarships and subsidies were necessary because the current administration has failed to manage the country's coffers prudently, rather than being committed to reform.

The points about government corruption and weak governance were raised at various points throughout the FGDs. Unlike the other earlier issues, where once they were raised and discussed, the respondents would move on to another topic, corruption and weak governance were raised repeatedly after it was mentioned for the first time. There was a tendency for them to associate many other issues with corruption, from subsidy removal to GST, economic reform, quality of public services, and even when talking about individual politicians. It seemed that this issue lingered in the minds of the respondents. Many were unhappy by what they perceived to be government failure to curb corruption which is believed to have become more rampant at the top, and has spread to the lower layers of government and its agencies.

Status of Islam and Malay Special Privileges

Respondents in the under-35 age groups did not spend much time on this topic. In three out of the four FGDs involving females under the age of 35, this issue did not come up at all. However, it dominated the discussions in the groups consisting of male and female respondents above 35 years of age considerably and the exchanges were lively.

Respondents above the age of 35 generally showed very strong attachment to their ethnic and religious identities. Many of them insisted that the ethnic and religious identities of both the parties and the candidates were important factors that would influence their vote. There was an assumption among the respondents who had a strong opinion on this matter that only Malay politicians from Malay parties could be trusted to defend the position of Islam and to pursue what they called the “Malay agenda”. The respondents also questioned the ability of Malay politicians in non-Malay parties to truly champion Islam and Malay issues. And the level of trust towards non-Malay politicians from non-Malay parties was even much lower.

The same respondents were also adamant that they would only support political parties that could convince them that the status of Islam and Malay special privileges would be protected. In fact, many respondents wanted to see more pro-Malay and pro-Islam policies introduced in the coming years.

When asked to explain their thinking, the respondents came up with varying definitions of what, to them, constituted the “Malay agenda”. All seemed to believe that being pro-Malay and pro-Islam were two sides of the same coin. Despite using the term repeatedly in the discussion, their definition of the Malay agenda varied from one respondent to another. Examples that were quoted included strengthening the Islamic shariah court system, introducing *hudud* law as part of the shariah legal system, increasing budget allocation for Islamic agencies in government, enforcing Islamic dress codes such as the hijab for women in public spaces, the provision of financial and educational assistance to the Malays, and ensuring the national school syllabus has more Islamic content. A small number highlighted that ensuring good governance and fighting corruption are also “Islamic”, and they used the phrase “*maqasid al-shariah*”²³ when explaining their opinions, implying that they were keen to see the Malay and Islam agenda move beyond the traditional

²³ *Maqasid al-shariah* literally translates as “the objectives behind the *shariah*”. Lately the phrase has been used widely in Malaysia to refer to the need to move beyond focusing on the detailed forms of Islam and to look at the ultimate aims of certain Islamic provisions instead. For example, rather than demanding for

approach. Nevertheless, the number of respondents in this category was small.

Several respondents stated that they felt that Malaysian politicians have neglected their duties to defend the position of the Malays and Islam. The increasing spread of more liberal ideas contributed towards this development, and this was perceived as a challenge to “what this country was supposed to become under our current Federal Constitution”. Additionally, respondents felt that the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia had become more assertive in that “they work with each other even though they divide themselves into different political parties like the MCA and DAP”. This new assertiveness was perceived as forcing the government to respond accordingly, making it “necessary for UMNO to accommodate the Chinese more than before, especially under Najib, who is weaker than previous Prime Ministers when it comes to the Malay agenda”.

When this topic was broached, respondents were also quick to move from broad thematic comments to making specific comparisons between parties and individual politicians. As a result, many of the points raised under this theme overlap with comments on the political parties and their leaders. This will be elaborated upon in the next two sections.

Opinion on BN, UMNO and Najib

UMNO Has Successfully Championed the Malay and Islam Agenda

When asked to comment on the BN, respondents generally understood it to mean UMNO, even though the BN coalition comprises of thirteen component parties. Their comments indicate that they felt that BN was controlled and dominated by UMNO to the extent that the other parties were not relevant to the discussion. This was expressly stated by several respondents, for example, “other parties in BN hardly have any say on

the introduction of the Islamic shariah law, those advocating *maqasid al-shariah* usually say that it is more important to ensure that citizens are able to live peacefully and harmoniously first. In the context of Malaysian political parties today, the party that openly champions *maqasid al-shariah* is Amanah and to some extent PKR.

policies” and another, “if we want to understand the BN, we only need to understand UMNO because whatever is decided by UMNO will be adopted by BN as a whole.”

Perhaps indicative of where their socio-political interests lie, almost all respondents immediately linked UMNO with the Malay agenda as well as with the protection and propagation of Islam. This was the first issue raised by the respondents when they were asked to comment about the ruling coalition. UMNO is seen as the only party in the country that has consistently championed the Malay agenda. UMNO is also seen as a party that has successfully introduced many pro-Islam policies and institutions in the country. The other parties in BN are regarded as subservient to UMNO when it comes to championing the Malay agenda. One respondent said “UMNO is so strong under Najib today and I don’t think any non-Malay parties in BN would dare challenge him. He can just tick them away.”

Respondents gave many examples of why they believed UMNO has succeeded in defending the rights of the Malays and Muslims. These included the ongoing building of mosques in their neighbourhoods, the teaching of Islamic Studies in schools, the establishment of religious Islamic Schools, and the inculcation of what they see as Malay and Islamic culture in schools such as encouraging female students to wear headscarves. Some of the bigger initiatives that were quoted included the establishment of the Lembaga Urusan Tabung Haji (Islamic Pilgrimage Fund), the growth of Islamic banking and finance, as well as the international respect accorded to Malaysia’s halal product certification. Many respondents added that they or their children were able to pursue tertiary education thanks to the scholarships given out under UMNO’s pro-Malay affirmative action policies. Some also said that they were the first generation from their family who had moved from a rural village to an urban area, and this social mobility was attributed to UMNO’s pro-Malay policies.

UMNO Brought Development to the Country

Although discussion on UMNO’s successes in championing the Malay and Islam agenda took much of the time in the FGDs, this was not the

only credit they gave to the party. The respondents were very positive about how UMNO negotiated the country's peaceful independence from the British, and then built the country to what it is today. In the eyes of the respondent, UMNO's track record in developing the country and growing the economy is proven. They saw key UMNO leaders as examples of towering Malay leaders. Abdul Razak Hussein²⁴ was very fondly spoken of by the respondents, especially by those with families in the FELDA programme. Mahathir Mohamad²⁵ was unanimously credited for bringing Malaysia's economy and physical infrastructure to new heights. However, opinions on Mahathir's latest political moves varied significantly between respondents, as will be described in the section on Pakatan later in this essay.

Respondents also credited UMNO for catalysing the social mobility of the Malays. Many of the respondents singled out the education assistance that they received from the government as a key factor that helped them climb the socio-economic ladder. Frequently cited comments included "my family originated from a rural village and thanks to UMNO's policies, my luck improved when I was accepted into a boarding school" and "if not because of the scholarship to attend a university in Australia, I would not be here today."

Najib's Problems Are Distracting and Set a Bad Example

All the respondents were aware of the various corruption charges that have been hurled at Najib. Opinions were divided as to whether he was guilty, with the male respondents being less forgiving in their comments. Those who believed that Najib is guilty were more vocal than the rest. Only some respondents defended the Prime Minister, while most of the those whose body language indicated that they were uncomfortable with the conversation opted to stay silent. The female respondents mostly skirted the issue by not responding when someone in their group raised the allegations.

²⁴ UMNO's second president and Malaysia's second Prime Minister.

²⁵ UMNO's fourth president and Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister.

Nonetheless, the respondents generally believed that Najib's personal problems were fast becoming a problem for UMNO. They felt that BN and UMNO leaders had to invest too much time and too many resources to defend Najib when there is no easy way to defend him, and when that time and those resources could be better used elsewhere. The more vocal ones suggested that UMNO would be better off if they had a well-crafted succession plan, so that Najib "does not remain a liability to the party after GE14 ... because UMNO is bigger than any one leader."

A small number of the respondents from the groups of males above age 35 suggested that Najib had failed to pursue many of the reforms he announced when he first became Prime Minister because to stay in office he had to succumb to pressure from Malay nationalists. One respondent even suggested that "in Western countries, if personal issues get in the way of governing, the politician would resign but Najib is acting like he does not know this."

Several respondents also felt that the allegations against Najib have influenced, in a negative way, how other politicians and even government officers behave. The general idea in this context was that "a fish rots from the head and if every day we are told that the Prime Minister will stay in office despite being corrupt, how do you think these people will behave?" An example quoted by more than one respondent was the case of senior officials from a state Water Department²⁶ who were arrested with almost RM60 million in cash found in their possession. The respondents implicitly suggested that such a large graft could not have occurred without the blessings of higher level politicians, and there must be many more such cases that have not been disclosed. However, it must be noted here that the number of respondents who mooted this idea was small.

²⁶ It was reported that the arrests led to the discovery of RM57 million in cash, 19 kg of gold jewellery, 97 designer handbags, and many more luxury items worth RM500,000, and 127 land titles for plots valued at about RM30 million. In total, 49 people were arrested. See, for example, *Straits Times*, "Sabah water scandal: 3 charged with graft", 30 December 2016 <<http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/sabah-water-scandal-3-charged-with-graft>>.

UMNO and Najib Will Exploit Ethnic Sentiment

Even though the respondents stated that UMNO has done very well in championing the Malay agenda, they also remarked that the play on ethnic sentiment is detrimental to social cohesion in the country. Respondents from all groups expressed concern about the ethnic cleavages in the country. The older respondents used phrases such as “we were more united as a country in the older days and there was no problem if I want to go to my Chinese friend’s house” while the younger respondents complained about how “lately everything is being discussed along ethnic or religious lines as if we are not equal citizens in this country.”

The respondents expect ethnic and religious sentiments to be exploited and played up even more by political parties, especially by UMNO, as GE14 approaches. Various reasons were given for this expectation. On one hand, some respondents argued that the Malay and Islam agenda is UMNO’s key strength and UMNO deserves the accolade for their achievements. There are still many ethnic Malays who need government assistance and therefore it is only logical for UMNO to make more promises to this end. On the other hand, respondents, especially men below 35 years of age, suggested that UMNO needs the country to remain divided along ethnic and religious line in order to remain relevant and they would do all they could to prevent the blurring of these identities.

Respondents also noted Najib having changed compared to when he first assumed the premiership. The discussion in one group became rather heated when a respondent said,

When Najib first came into office, he said all the right things about the need for this country to unite under his concept of 1Malaysia. But when the stories about 1MDB and other scandals surfaced, he suddenly became a Malay warrior and he ignored all the ideals behind his 1Malaysia. He is a typical politician. If he needs to divide the country to remain in power, he will do it so that he can retain the Malay votes.

Several respondents in the group disagreed, quite strongly, with the implication that Najib championed the Malay agenda only after the

corruption allegations were made public. The group eventually settled with the idea that when Najib took over the premiership, he used a more unifying language, but over the years he discovered that his and UMNO's real support base was among the Malays. Therefore, quoting another respondent:

Najib today is just a typical UMNO leader. He knows his future is dependent on Malay support. I believe he will divide the country further because, with all his scandals, dividing our country is the only way for him to win.

Opinion about Pakatan and Mahathir

Pakatan Cannot Be Trusted to Champion the Malay and Islamic Agenda

As intimated earlier, the continuation of the Malay agenda is an important issue for the respondents. The ability, commitment, and even interest, of Pakatan to champion the Malay agenda was a major question mark to them. The presence of Mahathir as chairman of the coalition, as well as the size of the membership of his Malay party PPBM, were not a sufficient guarantee. The various statements made by Pakatan leaders affirming their respect of the constitutional position of ethnic Malays were not fully believed either. The main detractor is the presence of the DAP in the Pakatan coalition. The party is seen as a chauvinist Chinese party bent "on amending the Federal Constitution to remove Article 153 which is the last line of defence for us Malays".²⁷

Respondents also felt that the DAP is anti-Islam. Several respondents cited the example of the DAP's persistent rejection of Islamic shariah law as evidence. They argued that the DAP believes Malaysia should be secular. When asked to define what they meant by "secular", the

²⁷ Article 153(1) of the Malaysian Federal Constitution states that "It shall be the responsibility of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong to safeguard the special position of the Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak and the legitimate interests of other communities in accordance with the provisions of this Article."

most common definition centred around rejection of religion, not merely separation of religion from the state. By advocating a secular Malaysia, the respondents believed that the DAP ultimately wants to abolish all elements of Islam and Islamic character from the country. A few respondents tried to challenge this definition, suggesting that in secular countries people of all religions were still able to practice freely. Nevertheless, they easily relented when the more vocal ones refused to accept their suggested explanation. This dynamic was particularly visible in the groups consisting of female respondents above the age of 35.

The focus on the DAP when commenting on Pakatan is an interesting point. It implies that urban Malay voters see the DAP as the dominant party in Pakatan, in the same way they view UMNO as dominant in BN, as described earlier. The respondents also highlighted that the DAP is the biggest parliamentary party in the opposition bloc today, after having won 38 seats in GE13. The general belief was reflected in the comment, “Even if the DAP were to contest 50 seats in GE14, they are likely to win all of them because they are strong and all the Chinese support them.”

As a result, the respondents were not convinced that Pakatan would be able to defend the Malay agenda the way UMNO has been doing successfully for decades. The perceived strength of the DAP, ironically, has become a hurdle to Pakatan in the eyes of these urban Malay voters. The lack of a dominant Malay party in the opposition coalition makes convincing them that Pakatan is equally committed to the Malay agenda difficult.

PAS Absence Makes Pakatan Weaker

In the FGDs, discussions about the lack of a dominant Malay party in Pakatan were regularly interlaced with comments about how the absence of the Islamist PAS from the coalition has changed the dynamics of opposition politics in Malaysia. This was more the case in the groups of respondents above age 35. In these FGD groups, both male and female respondents generally believed that PAS played the balancing role when they were in the opposition coalition. PAS’ presence assured Malay voters that the DAP would not become overly dominating. When PAS pulled out from the pact, the “only party that can ensure Islam remains an

important agenda and defend the Malays for the opposition is no longer there”.

In the eyes of the respondents, the absence of PAS did not just weaken Pakatan’s commitment to the Malay and Islam agenda, it also weakened Pakatan’s overall electoral support base in the country. The respondents explained that PAS has its roots in the Malay heartlands, especially in rural areas. Thus Pakatan’s reach in the rural Malay areas was weakened by PAS’ departure. As stated by one respondent, “when I go back to my parent’s house in the village, they tell me that they are remaining with PAS and they will not support Pakatan. That means Pakatan have lost the votes of some Malays.” By extension, the reduction of Malay support to Pakatan makes it more likely that the coalition will not be as committed to the Islam and Malay agenda as before. The assumption is that “they will focus on winning the more mixed seats which means they must dilute the emphasis on the Malay agenda in order to win over the Chinese.”

Pakatan Does Not Have a Clear Vision

It was almost unanimous among respondents that they did not know what Pakatan is fighting for other than to remove Najib from office due to his alleged corrupt practices. While they agreed that fighting corruption and removing corrupt politicians were important, they wanted to see a clearer agenda for governance from Pakatan. A small number of respondents stated that the failure of Pakatan to announce their shadow Cabinet line-up was an example of how they were not ready to govern. A larger number of respondents argued that too many Pakatan politicians were making too many promises. One comment that summarizes the thinking is: “they can’t even coordinate what to promise us. How can we trust that they can deliver those promises if they are just complacently blurting out everything that came to their minds?”

Some of the younger respondents, especially among male respondents under age 35, focused their attention on the absence of a unified document that outlines Pakatan’s mission. They compared the current Pakatan coalition with the situation during GE13. At that time, “Buku Jingga (Orange Book) was the document that guided all promises but now they can’t even agree what to put on paper.” Overall, respondents insisted

that Pakatan must come up with a written policy document well before GE14.²⁸ Only when such a document is produced can they judge Pakatan properly, as it will provide a basis to scrutinize Pakatan's intentions.

Mahathir Brings Mixed Feelings

The respondents comments about Mahathir were very mixed. One opinion, albeit voiced by only a small number of respondents, was that Mahathir is wrong to go against UMNO. They argued that Mahathir became successful as a result of the platform UMNO provided and without UMNO he would not be enjoying the level of influence that he has today. It was believed that as someone who is already 92 years old, Mahathir's time has passed and he should have retired gracefully.

A larger group of respondents believed that Mahathir is the wrong person to lead the opposition coalition because "he started many of the problems that we inherit today. It was during his time that so many independent institutions were destroyed in this country." For respondents in this group, having Mahathir as leader of Pakatan implied that the opposition bloc had compromised on their principles and that "they have become nothing more than just another group of opportunistic politicians".

The negative impression of Mahathir was particularly acute among the older male respondents. They quoted several examples to highlight Mahathir's excesses during his premiership, such as the removal of legal immunity of the Malay Rulers, the curb on freedom of the press, the removal of a sitting Chief Justice, and several corporate bailouts of companies run by businessmen close to Mahathir. Words like "authoritarian", "iron-fist", "dictatorship", and "undemocratic" were used repeatedly to describe Mahathir's rule. In addition, they found it difficult to justify supporting Pakatan that is now led by the very person they see as the cause of the problems. The discussions however did not go into the details of these claims, or their validity, as this was not the

²⁸ Pakatan launched their GE14 manifesto on 8 March 2018. These FGDs were conducted in January 2018.

purpose of the FGDs. The point is that there among these urban Malay respondents, having Mahathir as a leader was off-putting.

The respondents also believed that Pakatan's need for Mahathir is a symptom of how they have failed to cultivate new leaders from within their ranks. In the absence of Anwar Ibrahim, none of the existing opposition leaders were able to play the much-needed uniting role, to the extent that they had to accept Mahathir as their leader.

Despite their negative comments on Mahathir, the vast majority of the respondents saw Mahathir's leadership of Pakatan as a positive factor for the coalition vis-à-vis attracting Malay support. The presence of Mahathir and PPBM in Pakatan, they believed, ensures that there is hope that the Malay agenda will be defended despite the presence of the DAP. For respondents in this category, Malaysia today is faced with problems that can only be resolved by a change of government. Mahathir brings with him a solid track record of bringing Malaysia to new heights. They argued that with Mahathir's experience, "he will bring us back to better ways of governance and he will get rid of the corruption that is so rampant today."

Intriguingly, quite a few people who believed that Mahathir is important for his ability to generate Malay support started off the FGD by expressing support for UMNO and BN. They actively made positive comments about UMNO, listed examples of how UMNO was pivotal to Malaysia's development, and emphasized the importance of UMNO in ensuring the continuation of the Malay and Islam agenda. Some of them were also very vocal in criticizing the DAP in the FGD. However, they changed their tune when it came to commenting about Mahathir. This indicates that their disagreement towards Pakatan, and their scepticism against the DAP, were somewhat diluted by the presence of Mahathir. This observation also makes it rather difficult to predict if those who do not support Pakatan will remain so on polling day because, as the FGDs showed, their opinions changed even over the short discussion.

CONCLUSION

The FGDs show that urban Malay respondents were very unhappy about the economic condition in the country. They felt the pinch of having to

deal with a surge in the cost of living. Their perception were formed by how the economy was affecting them personally rather than on official statistics. As far as they were concerned, prices were rising at a faster pace than their income. This puts pressure on their finances, especially in urban areas.

For the financial challenges they faced, the respondents blamed the ruling government. They believed that the policies introduced by Najib changed the focus of support towards the B40 group, while neglecting those in the M40 category. To them, this was an unfair situation because they believed that as ethnic Malays, they were supposed to enjoy special privileges regardless of their socio-economic status. They also felt that Najib's administration had not done enough to help them transition into the middle class.

Governance and corruption were causes for concern, but not significant enough to be the determining factor in voting. The respondents were generally aware of the various allegations of corruption surrounding the current administration. They agreed that these were weaknesses that must be rectified. Yet, they did not put too heavy an emphasis of these issues.

Nevertheless, the biggest issue at the back of the respondents' minds is the future of the Islam and Malay agenda. They acknowledge UMNO's success in bringing up the economic status of the Malays, and in introducing Islamic values into public policy. However, they fear that the dominance of the DAP in Pakatan will eventually result in the dilution of the Malay and Islam agenda. Concerns about the Islam and Malay agenda seem to colour all other considerations when it comes to the voting intentions of these urban Malays.

Although the respondents complained about the cost of living, the economy, and weaknesses in governance, they still believed in UMNO. UMNO's exploitation of ethnoreligious sentiments and their persistent campaign to create the impression that the Malays are under siege from other ethnic groups, especially the Chinese, seem to be a winning strategy. As the findings show, even urban Malay voters are cautious about placing their trust in Pakatan. Given these considerations, the Malay tsunami that Pakatan is hoping for cannot be assured.

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