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# Opposition in transition: pre-electoral coalitions and the 2018 electoral breakthrough in Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

In May 2018, the Malaysian opposition coalition Pakatan Harapan or Hope Alliance won the federal elections for the first time in the history of the country. The electoral authoritarian system is now in a state of transition. The electoral breakthrough was the result of longer-term socio-economic transformations, but the formation of a strong pre-electoral coalition was ultimately decisive for the victory. The article compares various coalitions and their performance during seven elections since 1990. The structured, focused comparison analyses the coalitions during this period because prior to 1990 the opposition was fragmented. On the basis of a three-level concept regarding the strength of pre-electoral coalitions, the article argues that Pakatan Harapan was successful because the coalition was sufficiently comprehensive (as indicated by the number and the competitiveness of candidates), cohesive (concerning ideological proximity and behavioural routinization) and well-rooted in society (in terms of linkages to voters/supporters and to civil society networks or organizations).

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## Introduction

Especially within the institutional framework of electoral authoritarianism, opposition coalitions are in most cases fragile. They are under permanent attack by the regime, threatened by party bans, restricted by repressive laws, and seduced by co-optation. Nevertheless, they sometimes succeed against all odds. Which opposition coalitions have the best chance of winning elections in authoritarian systems? Whereas there is ample literature on coalitions built *after* elections (with reference to their *size* and *composition*, for example), there is astoundingly little on those established *before* the polls<sup>1</sup>, although democratization by elections as a specific type of transition is increasingly important.<sup>2</sup> This article seeks to fill this gap and to introduce a parsimonious three-level concept regarding the strength of pre-electoral coalitions. Malaysia is a very illuminating case study in this respect. The opposition has worked together under different circumstances over a period of approximately three decades, but this cooperation has been particularly intensive since the late 1990s.

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From independence until 2018, Malaysia was a competitive authoritarian regime<sup>3</sup> with a multiparty system and semi-competitive elections. Measuring in terms of political rights and civil liberties, Freedom House has ranked Malaysia as “partly free” for the last few decades. Repression has been used systematically, though generally more mildly than in fully authoritarian states. The major electoral manipulations were gerrymandering and malapportionment, the latter to the advantage of rural Malay voters and East Malaysian constituencies.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the ruling coalition used the “three Ms” – media, money and the bureaucratic machine – to its advantage. Opposition parties may have ruled in some states, but centralism was so strong that the state governments were very much dependent on Kuala Lumpur.<sup>5</sup> Within the Barisan Nasional (BN), the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) was clearly dominant. The party controlled the state administration, including government-linked corporations (GLCs) and its own business empire.<sup>6</sup> While it was dependent on the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) for campaign financing during the first few elections, it later became the richest party in the country by far.<sup>7</sup>

Coalitions are so important in Malaysia because the plurality electoral system makes it necessary to seek allies. Only if coalescing parties nominate one, and only one, candidate do they have a chance of winning a majority of seats. Individual parties can only win a majority at the state level and in a range of federal constituencies; an example was the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Islamic Party of Malaysia, PAS) in 2018. In that year, after more than six decades, the ruling coalition in Malaysia lost the federal elections for the first time. The opposition coalition Hope Alliance or Pakatan Harapan (PH) won because it was a sufficiently cohesive and comprehensive coalition, and because it had demonstrated its administrative capabilities in Selangor and Penang and could mobilize voters via close linkages to well-organized civil society groups. In comparison to all the previous federal elections, all the necessary conditions to produce an electoral breakthrough converged for the first time in May 2018.

This article’s main contribution is the development of a generalizable concept on the strength of pre-electoral coalitions in electoral authoritarian systems by means of a comparison of such coalitions in Malaysia after independence. It also wants to answer the question how and why the electoral breakthrough in Malaysia came about. It first outlines the basic concept and explicates the elements “comprehensiveness,” “cohesion” and “rootedness.” It shows that in 2018 the pre-electoral coalition was stronger than the coalitions before. It then discusses the development of opposition coalitions since 1957, but especially since 1990. The conclusion evaluates the concept against the background of Malaysian experiences. The cohesiveness has been raised in 2008 with an increasing number of competitive candidates (in contrast to previous elections), and again in 2018 with the inclusion of a party based in East Malaysia. Cohesiveness in 2018 was “very strong” with the highest degree of ideological proximity due to the absence of an Islamist party and a very strong behavioural routinization (like in 2008 and 2013) with respect to campaign coordination, the candidate selection process, etc. And “rootedness” was strongest in 2018 due to the activities of civil society and the linkages to voters and supporters in Penang and Selangor.

### **The concept: the strength of pre-electoral coalitions**

The literature offers a range of reasons why rulers in authoritarian regimes rely on elections.<sup>8</sup> Like regime parties and parliaments, elections appear to prolong the tenure of

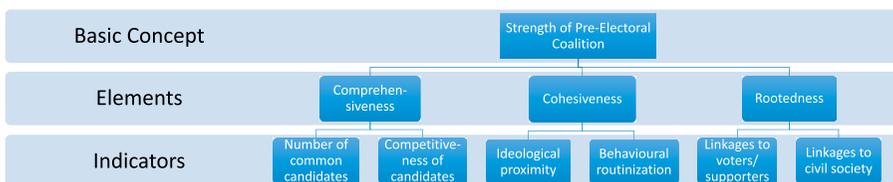
autocratic systems. They help strengthen the dominant party or coalition because party members unite during the campaigns and are driven by common interests. The party leader is able to utilize candidacies not only to forge close relations to subordinates and to deter defection, but also to identify how loyal supporters are; this may also serve to efficiently divide the spoils among the ruling coalition and is conducive to avoiding violent removal from office. More importantly, the regime may use the polls to forge close ties to the electorate through vote-buying and patronage. Elections can facilitate the splitting of the opposition by dividing those factions willing to acknowledge the legitimacy of elections, even though they are unfair, from those who are more fundamentally opposed.

In the same vein, the “electoral model” by Bunce and Wolchik hints at the potentially liberalizing effects of elections in authoritarian systems.<sup>9</sup> These effects include activities such as

orchestrating large-scale voter-registration and turnout drives; forming a united opposition, linked to NGOs, that campaigns ambitiously throughout the country; making extensive use of rallies, rock concerts, street theater, and alternative media; and pressuring regimes to improve the quality and transparency of electoral procedures through domestic and international election monitoring and parallel vote tabulation.<sup>10</sup>

Such activities may lead to electoral breakthroughs. But how can we conceptualize the strength of such coalitions? It is useful to look at the literature on party and party system institutionalization. Randall and Svåsand<sup>11</sup>, for example, measure party institutionalization with reference to “systemness” (organizational strength), “decisional autonomy” (decisions are not influenced by charismatic individuals or financiers and are protected from arbitrary state intervention), “value infusion” (identification with the platform and principles), and “reification” (reputation and visibility). In a similar vein, Levitsky<sup>12</sup> conceptualizes party institutionalization with reference to “value infusion,” which encompasses linkages to civil and religious organizations<sup>13</sup> as well as reification and legitimation, and to “behavioural routinization,” which consists of stable patterns of organization as well as independence from powerful leaders or financiers. Most of the party institutionalization literature mentions such recurrent features. Well-institutionalized parties need to be rooted in society, a quality indicated by links to civil society and voters. They should be autonomous not only from single individuals, but also from external interventions. They should be behaviourally routinized and organizationally strong.

With respect to these insights, the core concept “strength of pre-electoral coalition” (see Figure 1) used in this article has three dimensions.<sup>14</sup> A strong coalition is highly comprehensive, very cohesive and well-rooted. These three necessary elements are jointly sufficient for the strength of the pre-electoral coalition.<sup>15</sup>



**Figure 1.** The concept of pre-electoral coalitions.

Comprehensiveness is defined not only by the number of candidates, but also by their competitiveness. In order to win, a pre-electoral coalition needs to cover all or a great majority of constituencies with one, and only one, adequate candidate; this means not just any candidate, but someone who is “known and seen among the electorate”<sup>16</sup> and able to properly represent the constituency. Indicators of competitiveness are the ethnic, religious and social backgrounds of candidates: Does he/she represent large parts of the population in the area? Is the person a “parachute” candidate or someone who has lived in the area for a long time and intimately knows the everyday problems of voters. Is he/she well-known in the constituency – for example, according to surveys – and seen as trustworthy? “Very weak” comprehensiveness would denote a very small coalition with few adequate candidates, “very strong” a very broad coalition with capable candidates.

The cohesiveness of a pre-electoral coalition is indicated by ideological proximity and by behavioural routinization. The former is characterized, for example, by a common platform, and by coalition partners trusting each other and being able to speak with one voice. The opposition also has to be capable of defining itself as a clear alternative to the current government and has to convincingly argue that it will institute a new regime (this is much more than just “value infusion”). The latter is characterized by frequent meetings of party leaders, the discussion of major issues, the peaceful settling of disputes and the coordination of joint activities such as campaigning.<sup>17</sup> Pre-electoral coalitions are, almost by definition, loosely structured. In order to win elections, a strong machine is helpful, but can be compensated for, for example, by personalities who are able to bridge existing divisions or by voluntary supporters only superficially integrated into the coalition.

Rootedness denotes existing links to voters and supporters as well as links to civil society groups. The idea is that well-rooted coalitions have opportunities to mobilize voters, to have an impact on the public discourse via social media, and even to influence the agenda of civil society organizations – for example, if these groups organize large-scale demonstrations. If the coalition has governed at the state level, for instance, it also has the means to build clientelistic links to voters or to wealthy supporters. A coalition that is isolated from huge parts of the public will be less successful in elections. One indicator of rootedness is the degree of popularity in the country. Are there clientelist linkages to voters and supporters – for example, because MPs and assemblypersons provide help, distribute patronage goods, etc. in their constituencies? Are political parties in power at the state level perceived as governing successfully? Are the coalition members able to mobilize supporters for online and offline campaigns and for funding?

This article uses this concept to assess the salience of pre-electoral coalitions in seven consecutive Malaysian elections at the national level. The selection of these cases allows for a focused, controlled comparison. The study is based on newspaper articles, party publications, field research during the elections that have taken place since 2004, and interviews. The coding is based on an ordinal scale from 0 (very weak) to 1 (very strong) for the indicators.

Because I am interested in electoral breakthroughs as the outcome variable, coalitions need to encompass enough parties and candidates in order to have a chance to win. Therefore, the dimension “comprehensiveness” has been added to the two other dimensions “cohesiveness” and “rootedness.” “Rootedness” is a common dimension in the party institutionalization literature, while “cohesiveness” is partly

derived from “value infusion,” “behavioural routinization” and/or “systemness.” Since coalitions work differently than individual parties (and party system institutionalization covers *whole* party systems), “cohesiveness” covers a type of combined institutionalization of coalition partners. The coalition needs “value infusion” while avoiding a heterogeneous platform. The organizational strength of the coalition, moreover, needs to encompass the individual parties as well as the cooperation among them.

### Pre-electoral coalitions from 1957 until 1995

By the time Malaya gained independence in 1957, a once strong Communist Party had almost been decimated; two smaller socialist parties, the predominantly ethnic Malay Parti Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People’s Party, PRM) and the ethnic Chinese-dominated Labour Party, combined forces in the Socialist Front. However, they were unable to win more than eight and two seats in the 1959 and 1964 elections, respectively. At the federal level the Alliance, consisting of UMNO, MCA and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), was able to sustain a two-thirds majority in the 1959 and 1964 elections. PAS, at that time more a Malay nationalist than an Islamist party, won majorities in state assemblies only in the economically backward north. Pre-electoral coalitions between PAS and other parties still did not exist. In the May 1969 elections the dominance of the Alliance was considerably shaken, even though the Labour Party had boycotted the polls.<sup>18</sup> Unexpectedly, the Alliance won only 74 of 144 seats at the federal level and 48.4% of the votes in West Malaysia. One reason was the expanded franchise for non-Malays. The multi-ethnic but predominantly ethnic-Chinese Parti Gerakan and the social democratic, also predominantly ethnic-Chinese Democratic Action Party (DAP) attracted many of these non-Malay voters. In a few states, opposition parties even gained majorities. However, opposition coalitions did not materialize.

The polarization between UMNO and the opposition parties representing different ethnic groups during the campaign led to riots just after the elections. As a result, a state of emergency was proclaimed (until 1971). In the early 1970s, the Alliance expanded the coalition to become the BN. It even co-opted PAS for a few years. In addition, it strengthened UMNO financially and organizationally and used authoritarian measures to stifle civil society and political party opposition. The opposition learned that without a cohesive coalition, election success would be unlikely in the future. Yet given the increased authoritarianism, it was very difficult to enhance cooperation in the 1970s and 1980s.

The BN won at least 83% of the seats in the national parliament in the 1974, 1978, 1982 and 1986 elections, against an opposition consisting largely of PAS (since 1978) and DAP.<sup>19</sup> It is puzzling that until 1990, coalition-building within the opposition was an almost complete failure, despite the necessity of avoiding three-cornered fights. The reasons for this included strong ethnic and religious cleavages, a largely depoliticized and weak civil society, and the lack of a realistic chance to overthrow the government electorally. DAP and PAS were oriented towards their respective electorates: the DAP fought mainly against the MCA while PAS fought UMNO, within what was essentially a “bilateral opposition.”<sup>20</sup>

However, during the mid-1980s a part of the opposition established a loose alliance. It was followed by two coalitions formed in 1990 that were interlinked through Semangat ‘46, a party that had split from UMNO in the wake of a battle between two factions in 1986/87.<sup>21</sup> A critical element in the formation of the two coalitions was the active role

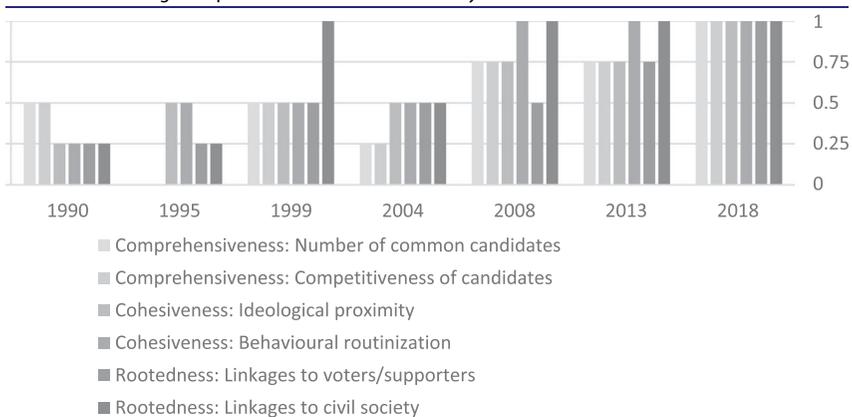
of former UMNO leader Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah as a bridging personality.<sup>22</sup> Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah was able to connect the divergent forces and to build trust among voters because he had substantial governing experience. One alliance, the Islamic Muslim Unity Movement (Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah, APU), was a coalition of Semangat '46 with PAS. The other, the People's Front (Rakyat Malaysia, GR), consisted of Semangat '46, the PRM and the DAP, amongst others. Such an unorthodox construction of two parallel pacts was largely the result of programmatic differences between PAS and the DAP. Ultimately, the opposition won 49 of 180 seats in 1990 (in 1986: 29 of 177 seats). The BN achieved only 53.4% of the votes, its worst result since the debacle in 1969.

The APU/GR coalition construction was innovative and relatively comprehensive, but not well-rooted – with the exception of PAS's association with Islamic milieu and Semangat's old UMNO links. Its cohesiveness was restricted because DAP and PAS communicated via Semangat '46. The two alliances ultimately collapsed due to a range of disagreements. Religious and ethnic cleavages complicated the creation of a cohesive coalition (ideological proximity and behavioural routinization are thus rated “weak” or 0.25, see Table 1). At that time, pre-electoral coalitions had no experience governing at the state level and civil society was still relatively weak (both assessed at 0.25, see Table 1).

In the 1995 elections the BN won 162 out of 192 seats and more than 65% of the votes against an emaciated opposition consisting only of the APU.<sup>23</sup> The APU was “very weak” in terms of comprehensiveness, while its cohesion was arguably stronger than in 1990, but only because it was a relatively small coalition. Its links to voters and civil society were restricted to smaller Islamic communities and networks.

As long as the opposition was largely disunited in terms of programmes, strategies and organization, voters did not perceive elections as an effective way to bring about

**Table 1.** The strength of pre-electoral coalitions in Malaysia since 1990.



Notes: 0: very weak; 0.25: weak; 0.50: intermediate; 0.75: strong; 1.0: very strong.

1990: APU (or Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah: Semangat '46 and PAS) and GR (or Gagasan Rakyat: Semangat '46, DAP, PRM).

1995: APU.

1999: BA (Barisan Alternatif): PKN, PRM, DAP and PAS.

2004: DAP withdrew from BA in September 2001.

2008 and 2013: PR (Pakatan Rakyat): PKR, DAP and PAS. In 2008 as an informal coalition.

2018: PH (Pakatan Harapan): PKR, DAP, Bersatu, Amanah and Warisan; PAS formed another coalition with some smaller parties.

a change in government. They were merely a means to correct certain government policies or to teach UMNO or one of its coalition partners a lesson.

## **Opposition coalitions from *Reformasi* until 2013**

### ***The 1999 election and the Barisan Alternatif***

It was not until the 1999 elections that electoral victory for the opposition at the federal level appeared to be somewhat realistic.<sup>24</sup> When Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was arrested at the height of the economic and financial crisis of 1998/99 due to his quarrel with Mahathir over policy issues, but presumably also over the UMNO leadership, a broad *Reformasi* movement consisting of both civil society activists and opposition parties emerged. Over several months, this movement organized rallies and street demonstrations. Ahead of the 1999 elections, DAP, PAS and the newly established Parti Keadilan Nasional (National Justice Party, later renamed Parti Keadilan Rakyat, People's Justice Party, PKR) even founded a pre-electoral coalition that included secular and Islamist forces: the Alternative Front or Barisan Alternatif (BA). This was the first time in Malaysian history that such a strong alliance encompassing such unlikely bedfellows had been created. Arguably, an effective opposition needs transformational objectives in order to mobilize its supporters and potential voters. In order to water down once salient issues such as ethnic and religious antagonisms, a common platform that transcended all these primordial issues was formulated.<sup>25</sup>

In 1999, the BA was already quite comprehensive and had competitive candidates (both rated at 0.50, see [Table 1](#)), but East Malaysia was only tentatively covered by competitive candidates. It can be argued that cohesiveness was still at an intermediate level, because DAP and PAS were seen as unlikely partners. The PKN was a new party and hardly institutionalized. The coalition partners did not know each other well. Cooperation was difficult – for example, in terms of candidate selection – and ideological tensions were simmering.<sup>26</sup> The BA had “very strong” linkages to the *Reformasi* civil society movement, and the PKN had a number of influential NGO activists in its ranks.<sup>27</sup> All in all, the BA was the strongest opposition coalition with the aim of radically transforming the polity (in contrast to the APU and GR) to date, but it was still much too weak to decisively challenge the BN's hegemony.

The BA won 80 of the 222 seats in the national parliament, despite the usual gerrymandering and malapportionment as well as more direct forms of repression, especially the incarceration of Anwar Ibrahim. The economic crisis began to subside at the time of the elections and many voters still did not trust the coalition's ability to govern the country. Ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indian voters were still very sceptical with respect to the radicals within PAS, and thus the DAP was unable to strengthen its parliamentary representation. Besides, a few top DAP leaders such as Lim Kit Siang and Karpal Singh lost in their constituencies.<sup>28</sup>

### ***The collapse of the BA and the 2004 elections***

The BA's weakness was demonstrated after the elections when PAS radicalized its discourse on the Islamization of the country and the programmatic discrepancies between the Islamists and the liberal democrats became irreconcilable. The coalition collapsed in 2001, when the DAP could no longer tolerate PAS's shift towards an Islamic state

concept. Instigated by provocations from Mahathir, PAS had published the *Islamic State Document*, which the DAP could not accept. The BN was very adroit in fanning the flames of conflict within the opposition, but the latter's dissolution was at least as much a result of its inability to form a cohesive coalition. In accordance with Brownlee's prediction regarding the stabilizing power of strong ruling parties, UMNO's survival strategies after 1999 appeared to work.<sup>29</sup> In 2003, Abdullah Badawi succeeded Mahathir as prime minister, at a time when the opposition was already in shambles and the economy had recovered. In the 2004 elections, only PKR and PAS cooperated to an extent, without DAP. The BN won 64.4% of the votes and secured 198 of 219 seats in the Dewan Rakyat as well as 505 of 552 seats in the state assemblies. UMNO candidates won in 109 of 117 constituencies at the national level. This appeared to be almost the end of the opposition. Among the reasons for the victory, observers also identified Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's popularity as a softly spoken, respectable orthodox Muslim and a cautious reformer.

In 2004, the coalition covered only parts of Western Malaysia and was therefore not comprehensive (it was less comprehensive than in 1999, but still more comprehensive than the APU in 1995) (rated at 0.25, see Table 1). Candidates in East Malaysia were isolated and did not receive much support from the BA. Without the DAP, the coalition was much weaker in urban areas than in 1999. Moreover, voters did not expect the BA to win. The BA's platform was therefore unconvincing. The coalition still had links to civil society, but the *Reformasi* movement was clearly less influential than in 1999 (assessed here at 0.50, see Table 1).

In 2004, after the elections, Anwar Ibrahim was released from prison. Within PAS, reformers willing to cooperate with the DAP and Anwar obtained a range of leadership positions. In 2007, unforeseen mass protests by organizations such as the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Gabungan Pilihanraya Bersih dan Adil or Bersih) and the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) helped forge close links between political parties and civil society.<sup>30</sup>

### ***The Pakatan Rakyat and the 2008 elections***

Although the political uncertainty was palpable at that time, the March 2008 elections were perceived in Malaysia as a "political tsunami" with surprising and, for UMNO and its partners, even shocking results.<sup>31</sup> BN lost its two-thirds majority, while the opposition won 82 of 222 seats in the national parliament and formed governments in five of 13 states, among them the economic powerhouses Penang and Selangor. In West Malaysia only 35% of the ethnic Chinese and 48% of the ethnic Indian populations voted for BN candidates.

There was no formal pre-electoral coalition, but the opposition parties had reached a consensus in February 2008 to avoid "three-cornered fights" in almost all constituencies.<sup>32</sup> During the campaign, politicians from DAP and PKR as well as from PAS and PAS appeared together at events. Each of the main opposition parties had its own manifesto, but the platforms were compatible and had the common theme of "change."<sup>33</sup>

In general, cohesion can be considered relatively solid if the respective parties coordinate their campaigns and the candidacies. The next step is formalized cooperation under the banner of a united coalition. On 1 April 2008, the People's Alliance (Pakatan Rakyat, PR) – again consisting of DAP, PAS and the PKR – was formed.

The victories in five different states had forced the parties to collaborate more closely because they needed some form of power-sharing.<sup>34</sup> In forming the People's Alliance they steered clear of terms such as "opposition" or "alternative."

The coalition partners had built more trust and were well aware of each other's sensitivities. In 2008, the PR was more professional than the BA, covering almost all constituencies with strong candidates (with the exception of Sarawak and Sabah; it is therefore rated at 0.75 for both comprehensiveness indicators, see Table 1). With Anwar Ibrahim the PR had a unifying charismatic figure adroitly bringing DAP and PAS together.

The resurgence of civil society activism with Bersih and HINDRAF was testimony to close links between parties and activists. In 1999, the linkages to civil society were "very strong" because the unprecedented *Reformasi* movement was directly connected to Anwar Ibrahim and his party, but also to DAP and PAS. At the time the movement was enormously enthusiastic and powerful. Since 2008 civil society movements, for example Bersih, were more organized, less close to political parties, but also "very strong" making it very difficult for the regime to prevent mass rallies (see Table 1).

There was a dialectic of partisan and civil society opposition; sometimes they were closely related, sometimes separated to allow for an effective division of labour. Bersih was formed in 2005 and held its first mass rally in November 2007. It had to a large extent been a movement formed and dominated by political parties. Subsequently, it emancipated itself from partisan influence and gained a life of its own.<sup>35</sup> It was reasonable to political parties to take a back seat, because whenever the regime demonized the Bersih protesters, the parties could keep a certain distance.<sup>36</sup> Bersih was the focal point of the civil society opposition and capable of integrating diverse voices. With Bersih, the "organizational capabilities of opposition forces"<sup>37</sup> were much greater than ever before. Moreover, the group's main objectives were directly linked to the political agendas of opposition parties.

### ***The Pakatan Rakyat and the 2013 elections***

The dismal BN performance in 2008 led to internal crises within BN parties, particularly within UMNO. Abdullah Badawi was forced to resign in 2009. The new prime minister, Najib Razak, then sought to portray himself as a reformer. For example, he abolished the notorious Internal Security Act (ISA) and announced a reform of the Sedition Act. He tried to open up the economy at the cost of some Malay privileges and introduced a range of pro-poor policies. His main agenda was to weaken the PR. For a time his approval ratings were indeed quite good, but the 2013 elections again demonstrated the BN's fundamental problems, especially on the part of a few smaller UMNO coalition partners, in mobilizing support.<sup>38</sup>

In 2013 the PR structure was almost the same as in 2008. Yet in 2013, behavioural routinization was arguably higher because of long-term cooperation at the federal and state levels. Since the coalition had won in five states in 2008, it was experienced and able to establish better institutionalized links to voters (see Table 1).

In 2013, Pakatan Rakyat thus won 89 federal seats, 229 out of 505 state mandates, and almost 51% of the total vote.<sup>39</sup> Ideological proximity in 2008 and 2013 was stronger than in 1999 because the coalition members were more experienced in dealing with each other and the reform faction within PAS was more powerful and better able to bridge the divide between PAS and DAP.<sup>40</sup>

The opposition was strong because of the behavioural routinization among the core parties. Linkages to civil society groups were facilitated by new means of communication. Moreover, in terms of ideological proximity, there was a palpable convergence:

DAP ... set aside issues of Chinese culture, language, and education and ... recruited and fielded some prominent Malay members as candidates .... In parallel, PAS replaced its *Islamic State Document* of 2004 with a *Negara Berkeadilan* (Welfare state) proposal for GE12. By the latter, less discordant and more inclusive, ideological realignment, PAS strengthened PR's claim of being dedicated to "justice, good governance, transparency, accountability and human rights" – causes that could transcend ethnocentric and religious considerations.<sup>41</sup>

The 2013 results showed that rural Malay voters were most important for UMNO's survival. The BN received 61.6% of the ethnic Malay votes, and UMNO candidates achieved majorities in 78 out of 99 rural Malay constituencies, whereas UMNO's junior partners MCA, MIC, and Gerakan lost most of their seats. Ethnic Chinese voters in particular opted for opposition parties, prompting BN politicians to speak of a "Chinese Tsunami" and accusing minorities of being ungrateful. The 2013 elections had shown that incremental, protracted democratization via a series of elections might indeed be possible.

In some states electoral breakthroughs indeed came about through a series of elections. The best examples were Selangor and Penang; once the opposition won these states, a path dependency was established and it was very difficult for the BN to win them back.<sup>42</sup> Penang was ruled for a very long time by Gerakan. Gerakan began as an opposition party in 1969 and had been part of the BN since the early 1970s, but it lost in Penang in 2008. UMNO and the MCA were incapable of substituting for Gerakan in Penang after 2008. The DAP took over the state government in 2008, demonstrated its ability to run it, and won again in 2013 with a large majority. In Selangor, the PKR has led the government since 2008 and has also strengthened its position since taking power. In this vein, Dettman and Weiss<sup>43</sup> stress the growing embeddedness of these parties on the ground with the help of clientelistic links to voters. PR has been able to underline its competence in terms of economic growth and better governance, but has also distributed benefits such as free water, shuttle buses and cash transfers.

## The electoral breakthrough of 2018

### *The formation of Pakatan Harapan*

After the 2013 elections, it was important for Najib to deal with the political threat of Anwar, to split the opposition by approaching PAS, and to scapegoat the DAP.<sup>44</sup> He portrayed the 2013 elections as a "Chinese tsunami" and criticized the ethnic Chinese minority for its alleged lack of thankfulness. In early 2014, Anwar was sentenced to five years imprisonment on the basis of trumped-up charges. This incarceration was probably the reason PAS changed its course.<sup>45</sup> PAS leaders obviously saw no real chance of winning at the federal level and thus decided to focus on state-level elections. To them, there was always a trade-off between stressing an Islamist agenda in order to win in Kelantan and Terengganu or toning down its rhetoric as a way to approach DAP and PKR.<sup>46</sup>

At the PAS congress in June 2015, a reformist faction was unsuccessful in elections for leadership positions. This "Erdoğan faction" had always supported coalitions with the

other opposition parties and was ready to compromise on issues such as expanding Islamic law or insisting on the establishment of an (usually ill-defined) Islamic state.<sup>47</sup> The ruthless marginalization at the congress prompted the reformers to form a new party, the Parti Amanah Negara (or: Amanah), in September 2015. A few days later, the Hope Alliance or Pakatan Harapan (PH), consisting of Amanah, DAP and PKR, was formed. Yet to most observers PH without PAS did not have the necessary Malay-Muslim support, especially in the rural Malay heartland.

In February 2016, Mukhriz, Mahathir's son, was sacked as chief minister of Kedah. Mahathir left UMNO in the same month. In March 2016, he and opposition politicians signed a 37-point People's Declaration that called for Najib's resignation. A few days before, he had met Anwar at the Kuala Lumpur High Court to attend the hearing of an application challenging the National Security Council (NSC) Act 2016. The widely publicized meeting had signified the realignment of archenemies.

The political temperature increased when Mahathir established the United Pribumi Party of Malaysia (Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, PPBM) or Bersatu on 9 September 2016. On 13 December 2016, Bersatu formed an electoral pact with PH, and in mid-March 2017 it joined the coalition as a full member. Although new coalition partners such as Bersatu made communication difficult at the beginning, behavioural routinization is rated here as "very strong" because of increasingly stabilized interaction patterns sustained by respectable bridging personalities and brought about by a common, potent transformational objective (see Table 1).<sup>48</sup>

In July 2017, Mahathir became PH chairman and in January 2018 was even declared the candidate for prime minister, with Anwar Ibrahim his designated successor. This pact between Mahathir and Anwar was most decisive in assuring the old *Reformasi* activists that Mahathir would only be an interim prime minister and that Anwar would take over some time after his release from prison.<sup>49</sup> Mahathir's role as a unifying figure and "a single veto player for the entire protest movement," who aggregated the movement's preferences into a coherent agenda,<sup>50</sup> cannot be overestimated.<sup>51</sup> The regime elites could not dare to incarcerate Mahathir, who was seen as the father of the impressive economic development of the last decades and the grey eminence of UMNO.<sup>52</sup> Najib himself had become prime minister in 2009 because, among other reasons, Mahathir had trusted and favoured him as Abdullah Badawi's replacement.

In parallel to the partisan coalition-building, civil society activists were still focused on electoral reform. In contrast to the past, the police refrained from exerting much coercion during the large Bersih 4 and Bersih 5 protests that took place in August 2015 and November 2016. Even Mahathir attended the rallies and thereby signalled his commitment to an agenda of radical reform. The Bersih 5 demonstrations were preceded by a Bersih Convoy across the country in order to spread the message beyond Kuala Lumpur. According to Khoo<sup>53</sup> the opposition "developed viable, cohesive, and extensive networks of dissent" and was able to "build an inclusive political platform" that led to "firm electoral support for a two-coalition system."

Bersih worked according to the logic of Bunce and Wolchik's electoral model. These authors' comparative, in-depth study substantiates the supposition that the vulnerability of regimes matters, as do

variations in the willingness and capacity of oppositions to exploit that vulnerability – in particular, whether they coalesce with one another and whether they deploy other electoral strategies that make them more competitive at the polls and, if necessary, in the streets.<sup>54</sup>

In addition, the PH worked together with HINDRAF as a so-called strategic partner. Without the indirect support of Bersih and civil society organizations via street demonstrations and social media, the continuing politicization of scandals, and the criticism of unfair electoral practices, the 2018 breakthrough would not have been possible.

### ***The 2018 electoral victory***

In the 2018 election campaign the ruling coalition pointed to the overall good economic indicators – growth was at 5.9% in 2017 – and to the many welfare benefits they had distributed as part of the 1Malaysia campaign<sup>55</sup>. According to the BN, only they could guarantee political stability, while an opposition victory would lead to chaos.<sup>56</sup> Although stagnant wages, rising costs, corruption (1MDB),<sup>57</sup> and the Goods and Services Tax (GST) were important issues during the campaign,<sup>58</sup> it is reasonable to state that the BN did not lose because of a marked economic crisis.<sup>59</sup>

Arguably, with respect to individual items the PH's manifesto was more comprehensive and clearer than the previous opposition platforms.<sup>60</sup> The PH's demands included the abolition of the extremely unpopular and relatively new GST, a term limit for the prime minister, the restructuring of the overly powerful Prime Minister's Office, and reforms to the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) and the electoral system, the abolition of repressive security laws, and the establishment of an Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission. Mahathir focused on the GST and 1MDB and questioned the usefulness of credit-financed mega-projects such as the construction of the East Coast Rail Link undertaken by state-owned companies in the People's Republic of China. The platform was directed not simply at improving government policies, but at fundamentally reversing them and altering the political system as a whole. In contrast to previous elections, when PAS's commitment to establishing an Islamic state was only put on hold, this time the coalition partners were able to reach a consensus on all major reforms. The Islamic state issue, which had always been problematic for the BA and the PR, especially with respect to the ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indian voters, was no longer an issue in 2018, except in some parts of Northern Malaysia.

In many ways the splitting of the PR brought about the electoral breakthrough in May 2018. One major reason for this breakthrough was the PH's ideological proximity and enhanced programmatic cohesion.<sup>61</sup> The PH was not officially recognized by the Registrar of Societies as a political coalition. Therefore, all coalition partners agreed not to use the common PH logo but rather that of the PKR. Because of a new regulation, the opposition had to cut Mahathir's image from its billboards. Arguably, all these measures were counterproductive and strengthened the cohesion of the coalition. In addition, the PH formed an electoral pact with the Sabah Heritage Party (Parti Warisan Sabah or: Warisan). Warisan's president, Shafie Apdal, formerly an UMNO member, was an important ally in the attempt to win seats in East Malaysia, where the BN had been dominant even in the 2008 and 2013 elections. Warisan's shift to the PH (like that of Bersatu and Amanah) can be interpreted as broadening the comprehensiveness of the pre-electoral coalition and more than counterbalancing the loss of PAS. The opposition was able to field very strong candidates in many Sarawakian and Sabah constituencies, in contrast to all previous elections.

The PH's mobilizational capacities were confirmed by a relatively high voter turnout of 82.3%. PH won nearly half the vote and 113 of the 222 seats, 47 of which went to PKR,

42 to DAP, 13 to Bersatu and 11 to Amanah. In addition, Warisan attained eight seats. BN received less than 34% of the vote nationwide and 79 seats in the national parliament. Of these, 54 went to UMNO and 13 to the ruling party in Sarawak, the Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (United Bumiputera Heritage Party, PBB). The other two West Malaysian BN parties, MIC with 2 seats and MCA with only one mandate hardly played a role. The third coalition, which consisted mainly of PAS, obtained 16.6% of the votes and received 18 mandates, especially in the northern, mostly Malay-Muslim states of Kelantan and Terengganu. According to the Merdeka Centre,<sup>62</sup> 95% of the ethnic Chinese population and 70%–75% of the ethnic Indians voted for PH. The ethnic Malay vote, in contrast, was split between PH (25%–30%), BN (35%–40%) and PAS (30%–33%). According to Ostwald, Schuler and Jie, counterfactual election simulations show that the three-cornered fights were not decisive for the PH's victory. One reason for this is the regional dimension of Malaysian elections, with “two two-way fights on the peninsula: first between BN and Pakatan Harapan along the west coast and the south; and second between BN and PAS in the north and east.”<sup>63</sup> Mahathir and Bersatu were instrumental in eroding the ethnic Malay support for UMNO.<sup>64</sup>

The opposition gained most from the emergence and spread of social media channels, including blogs, YouTube and Internet news sites such as Malaysiakini, etc. After the 2008 elections, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi had conceded that the government had been ill-prepared for campaigning on the Internet. Afterwards, the BN engaged so-called cybertroopers, that is Internet trolls and propagandists, in order to counter online attacks by the opposition. Nevertheless, according to Tapsell<sup>65</sup>, during the 2018 elections increased smartphone usage helped undermine authoritarian rule. In that year, over 70% of Malaysians had Internet access, mostly via smartphones. There were 22 million Facebook users and even in the semi-rural and rural areas Facebook and WhatsApp were the most important means of gathering and spreading information. The Internet was far less censored than print media,<sup>66</sup> and even an Anti-Fake News Law could not prevent netizens from attacking the government. The Internet facilitated communication among civil society and political party activists as well as the wider public, in particular the swelling group of young voters. Invoke Malaysia, for example, headed by PKR politician Rafizi Ramli, proclaims it managed the social media accounts of 103 PH candidates, recruited 42,000 volunteers to support PH candidates, mobilized tens of thousands of polling and counting agents, and conducted more than 50 different surveys. An example of the enthusiasm of opposition supporters was the Facebook group called “GE 14: Postal Voters Discussion” that organized the distribution of sealed ballots from overseas voters via runners to polling stations across the country.

## Conclusion

A major objection to the argument presented in this article could centre on the difficult relationship between the former PR parties and representatives of the old regime in 2017/18. Campaigns were not always well-coordinated, and Bersatu stressed its Malay identity in contrast to the multi-ethnic approach of DAP, PKR and Amanah. Ideological proximity was questionable, and routinized cooperation was hardly possible in view of old enmities and the parties' limited experience working together. But the replacement of PAS with Bersatu, Amanah and Warisan only motivated a tiny fraction of voters in 2018 to abstain from voting or even from supporting the regime coalition. It was decisive that the PH was able to include parts of the older regime forces, especially

Mahathir, Muhyiddin (Johor), Mukhriz (Kedah), and Shafie Apdal (Sabah).<sup>67</sup> The PH's cohesiveness was enhanced because electoral victory was perceived as realistic.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, with the 2018 elections approaching, Mahathir was increasingly perceived as a trustworthy alternative to Najib. With his unmatched political experience and his bold stance against the UMNO government, he was essential as a leader able to bridge the existing divides within the coalition. In addition, the splitting of PAS, originally seen as the end of strong pre-electoral coalitions in the country, was instrumental in enhancing coalition cohesion. Cohesiveness can be very strong even if a coalition is mostly united by the objective of replacing an allegedly corrupt and power-obsessed regime coalition. Ideological proximity means not only that coalition member parties share the same major objectives, but also that these are directed towards a change of government and regime. A cohesive pre-electoral coalition is united in its goals, and in the methods and strategies it uses to achieve these goals.

Parties' linkages to voters and party supporters have become stronger since 1990, because the transformational objectives of the opposition have become increasingly convincing and realistic. Especially the opposition party victories in state elections and the relatively successful governments in Selangor and Penang since 2008 – including their abilities to distribute patronage – have strengthened ties and heightened “reification”<sup>69</sup> in the minds of voters and supporters. The very strong position of these governments undermined the regime propaganda directed at an allegedly incapable opposition whose reign would trigger economic havoc. In addition, opposition parties have intensified their links with civil society networks, especially Bersih. In addition, with Mahathir (and Anwar as designated successor), respectable leaders mitigated fears of a potentially tumultuous regime change. Therefore, the PH was “very strong” in relation to previous coalitions, although there were still tensions in terms of ideology and routinization. Moreover, the strength of the PH was not a sufficient but a necessary condition for the electoral breakthrough. Since the force of the opposition is ultimately measured by electoral success, it is always unclear to what extent the weakness of the regime has played a part.

The article's comparison of various pre-electoral coalitions has illustrated the slow strengthening of pre-electoral coalitions, despite setbacks in 1995 and 2004. It is useful for comparisons of pre-electoral coalitions within a country, and could also be employed for cross-country comparative studies. It has to be considered, though, that the comprehensiveness of the coalition in Malaysia could mean that a slightly different selection of indicators is necessary for presidential systems or for proportional electoral systems.

Opposition coalitions should try to win as many elections as possible at the sub-national level and to use these power bases in order to strengthen linkages to voters and supporters. Opposition coalitions have to cooperate closely but go their separate ways if necessary. Demonstrations, preferably on the issue of electoral reform, can be organized independently from political parties. Most people will understand the urgency of reform when elections are obviously unfair. Finally, it appears to be important to recruit esteemed politicians who were formerly members of the ruling party or coalition.

## Notes

1. Golder, *The Logic*, 4.
2. Lindberg, *Democratization*; Bunce and Wolchik, “Getting Real.”
3. Schedler, *Politics of Uncertainty*.
4. Ostwald, “How to Win,” Wong, “Constituency Delimitation.”
5. Hutchinson, “Federal System.”

6. Gomez, *Minister of Finance*.
7. Ufen, "Laissez-faire," Saravanamuttu and Maznah, "The Monetisation."
8. Gandhi and Lust-Okar, "Elections under Authoritarianism," Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*.
9. See also Lindberg, *Democratization*, 144f; Howard and Roessler, "Liberalizing Electoral Outcomes." For a rather sceptical take on democratization via elections, see Morgenbesser and Pepinsky, "Elections as Causes."
10. Bunce and Wolchik, "Getting Real," 70.
11. Randall and Svásand, "Party Institutionalization."
12. Levitsky, "Institutionalization."
13. Mainwaring and Torcal, "Party System Institutionalization."
14. According to Golder "pre-electoral coalitions are more likely to form when parties are ideologically compatible, when the expected coalition size is large (but not too large), and when the potential coalition partners are of similar size" (Golder, *The Logic*, 9). Additionally, ideologically polarized party systems and disproportional electoral rules increase the probability of pre-electoral coalition formation.
15. See on collective action problems of individual parties within Malaysian opposition coalitions: Dettmann, "Dilemmas." See also the excellent dissertation by Ong, *Opposing Power*, who focusses on the coordination of campaigning and on coalition agreements to reduce the number of candidates.
16. Weiss, "Payoffs."
17. Ong, *Opposing Power*, 292.
18. Means, *Malaysian Politics*, 6ff.
19. Ong, *Opposing Power*, 159ff.
20. Abdullah, "Inclusion-moderation," 414.
21. Khong, "Malaysia's 1990."
22. Abdullah, "Inclusion-moderation," 414.
23. Gomez, *The 1995 Malaysian*.
24. Loh Kok Wah and Saravanamuttu, *New Politics*.
25. Alternative Front (1999), *Joint Manifesto. Towards a Just Malaysia*, <https://dapmalaysia.org/english/2009/nov09/bul/bul3981.htm>. Accessed June 9, 2018.
26. See on this Funston, "Malaysia's Tenth Elections," 38 and 53.
27. Ufen, "The transformation."
28. Funston, "Malaysia's Tenth Elections," 52.
29. Brownlee, *Authoritarianism*.
30. Govindasamy, "Social movements."
31. Chin and Wong, "Malaysia's Electoral Upheaval," Ufen, "The transformation."
32. On the increasing significance of these agreements: Ong, *Opposing Power*, 166ff.
33. Weiss, "Edging Toward," 749f.
34. *Ibid.* 751.
35. Ong, "Electoral manipulation," 167.
36. Interview with Rama Ramanathan, former Bersih 2.0 steering committee member, Kuala Lumpur, 26.10.2018, and Kia Meng Boon, Kuala Lumpur, 15.10.2018.
37. Vladislavljević, "Competitive authoritarianism," 47.
38. Welsh, "Malaysia's Elections."
39. On the 2013 elections: Pepinsky, "The 2013 Malaysia."
40. Interview with Syed Ibrahim, Central Leadership Council, PKR, Kuala Lumpur, 24.10.2018.
41. Khoo, "Borne by Dissent," 478, see also: Abdullah, "Inclusion-moderation," 416.
42. Hutchinson, "Malaysia's 14th," 600.
43. Dettman and Weiss, "Has Patronage," 749.
44. Ahmad, "The *Hudud* Controversy."
45. Abdullah, "Inclusion-moderation," 416ff.
46. Especially on these trade-offs for individual parties: Dettmann, *Dilemmas of Opposition*.
47. Moreover, UMNO reached out to Malay chauvinists and to Islamists. It supported the move by PAS to table a private member's bill to amend the Syariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act 1965 (Act 355). This bill sought to increase the penalties for certain offences in Kelantan.
48. Interviews with Rais Hussein, Bersatu, Chairman Policy and Strategy Bureau, Kuala Lumpur, 4.4.2018; with Mohd Anwar, Amanah, Secretary General, Kuala Lumpur, 5.4.2018; and with Sevan Doraisamy, Executive Director SUARAM, Kuala Lumpur, 22.10.2018.

49. Hutchinson, "Malaysia's 14th," Welsh, "Saviour' Politics."
50. Ong, "Electoral manipulation," 163.
51. Abdullah, "The Mahathir Effect," Ong, *Opposing Power*, 238f.
52. Shortly after the 2018 elections, Mahathir enjoyed 83% approval according to a national survey (Merdeka Center, National Voter Sentiments, Excerpt of Principal Indicators as at 11 March 2019, <file:///C:/Users/ufen/Downloads/National%20March%202019%20-%20Excerpt%20for%20Press%20Release.pdf>. Accessed May 22, 2019).
53. Khoo "Borne by Dissent," 477.
54. Bunce and Wolchik, "Defeating Dictators," 76.
55. 1Malaysia was a concept introduced by Najib to promote national unity and encompassed a range of public services and welfare programs.
56. Najib, "The Right Choice."
57. Najib was implicated in a scandal surrounding the activities of 1MDB (1Malaysia Development Berhad), a strategic development company owned by the Ministry of Finance. In July 2015, it was reported that Najib had received almost US\$700 million to his personal accounts ahead of the 2013 election.
58. Suffian, "6 Factors," Hutchinson, "Malaysia's 14th."
59. Likewise, to Bunce and Wolchik, "Defeating Dictators," 56f, levels of economic development correlate poorly with the different outcomes of electoral challenges, especially when the focus is on longer-term economic trends.
60. Compare the 2018 platform of Pakatan Harapan (Buku Harapan: Rebuilding our Nation, Fulfilling our Hopes, [https://kempen.s3.amazonaws.com/manifesto/Manifesto\\_text/Manifesto\\_PH\\_EN.pdf](https://kempen.s3.amazonaws.com/manifesto/Manifesto_text/Manifesto_PH_EN.pdf). Accessed January 3, 2019) with that of Pakatan Rakyat in 2013 (*People's Manifesto*, <http://www.keadilanrakyat.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/ENG-Manifesto-BOOK.pdf>. Accessed January 3, 2019) and, in particular, that of the Alternative Front in 1999 (*Joint Manifesto. Towards a Just Malaysia*, <https://dapmalaysia.org/english/2009/nov09/bul/bul3981.htm>. Accessed June 9, 2018).
61. Dettmann, "Dilemmas," 37f.
62. *The Straits Times*, Most Malaysian Chinese voted PH in polls, but Malays in 3-way split, June 14, 2018.
63. Hutchinson, "Malaysia's 14th," 599.
64. Funston, "Malaysia's 14th General," Abdullah, "The Mahathir Effect," 9.
65. Tapsell, "The Smartphone."
66. Abbott and Wagner Givens, "Strategic Censorship."
67. Abdullah "The Mahathir Effect," 10.
68. Wahmann ("Offices and Policies") stresses the role of "real policy divides" and that "coalitions are more probable when an oppositional victory seems realistic."
69. Randall and Svásand, "Party Institutionalization."

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