

## The Downfall of Pakatan Harapan in Malaysia: Coalitions during Transition

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Ufen, A. (2022). The Downfall of Pakatan Harapan in Malaysia: Coalitions during Transition. *Asian Survey*, 61(2), 273-296. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2021.61.2.273>

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## The Downfall of Pakatan Harapan in Malaysia

### *Coalitions during Transition*

#### ABSTRACT

In May 2018 the Malaysian governing coalition Pakatan Harapan (PH) lost in national elections for the first time since independence. But the subsequent reform process came to a sudden halt in February 2020. During transitions, unpredictability and risks for political actors are higher, and political conditions are extremely volatile. Multiparty coalitions such as PH have trouble sustaining the cohesion that was instrumental in their electoral victory. The highly polarized environment and the differing strategic calculations of PH coalition partners after the elections prompted the early downfall of the government. At the same time, the opposition, weakened shortly after the transitional elections, increased its cohesiveness and mobilized its supporters against the government in an environment of deep ethno-religious cleavages. This paper traces the reform successes and failures of the PH government as well as the reconsolidation and strengthening of the new opposition, up to the emergence of the new Perikatan Nasional government.

**KEYWORDS:** post-electoral coalition, democratization, transition, ethno-religious mobilization, Malaysia

#### INTRODUCTION

Until May 2018, when the opposition coalition won the 14th national elections, Malaysia had often been described as an electoral authoritarian regime (Case 2006). In such systems, elections are not fully competitive (Schedler 2013). This has been the case in Malaysia because of party bans, restrictions of basic political rights, curtailed freedom of the press, gerrymandering, and malapportionment. Thus since the early 1970s the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (National

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Front, BN), was often able to win two-thirds majorities. In 2018 the BN consisted of 13 parties, led by UMNO (United Malays National Organization). The other BN parties usually represented the interests of ethnic and religious minorities, but succumbed to the supremacy of UMNO. However, the BN had to accept a gradual loss of power from the late 1990s (Wong 2018). In 2008, the opposition won in five out of 13 states. In 2013, it won a majority of votes—but not of seats in the national parliament. The new opposition coalition, Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope, PH), still seemed too weak to win elections, but it achieved an astounding victory in May 2018 (Funston 2018; Gomez and Osman 2020; Hutchinson 2018; Moten 2019; Welsh 2018). Yet, democratization would fail in less than two years, despite very promising conditions. Arguably, the country is now on the border between electoral democracy and electoral authoritarianism. To Case (2019, 28), “Malaysia has undergone electoral turnover without democratic transition”; Tapsell (2020) meanwhile diagnosed a “change of government without regime change.”

Surprisingly and dramatically, just when major reforms were scheduled to start, the PH fell apart and lost its majority. And this happened not via elections or a military coup, but simply because two party factions switched sides. The new PH government did indeed have good conditions to succeed: a reasonably strong showing in the elections, an electorate fed up with the old regime, a strong leader, access to the spoils of office, and an opposition that was beginning to collapse. Yet after only 21 months in office, everything crumbled in a few days, leaving most Malaysians flabbergasted. Why do coalitions fall apart shortly after they have won elections for the first time in decades even though they have the chance to implement far-reaching reforms?

The Malaysian case helps us better understand the dynamics of coalition-building and coalition fragmentation during transition. Coalitions, both those in government and those in opposition, are subject to rapidly shifting conditions before and after elections. This is especially the case in transitions caused by elections, with frequent shifts, factionalization, and blurring of the divide between reformers and status quo forces.

This paper is organized as follows. First we discuss recent articles on the causes of the PH’s collapse and the failures of democratization. We then present the main argument of the paper based on the specific strengths and weaknesses of multiparty coalitions during transition. We show the relatively strong cohesion of the pre-electoral PH, indicated by the electoral victory in 2018, against the backdrop of a fragmented party system and an electoral

system that necessitates forging broad coalitions. To assess the trouble the PH had sustaining its cohesiveness, we evaluate in detail the reform process after 2018 and the ability of the opposition to gain new strength by mobilizing parts of civil society and establishing cooperation between UMNO and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Islamic Party of Malaysia, PAS). The rise of the new prime minister, Muhyiddin Yassin, triggered by the unresolved question of when Mahathir Mohamad would step down from that post, then reveals some of the major dynamics of coalition-building in Malaysia. The paper ends with conclusions on the cohesiveness of coalitions during transition.

### WHY DID THE PH COLLAPSE?

According to Kapstein and Converse (2008: 40),” roughly one-quarter of all new democracies since 1960 failed within the first two years.” Most studies understandably focus on successful forms of democratization or on its converse, democratic backsliding or autocratization. The latter covers breakdowns of democracy but also the gradual deterioration of democratic traits both within and outside of democratic regimes (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019: 1099). Democratic backsliding is, then, a subtype of autocratization. Backsliding is a phenomenon “occurring through a discontinuous series of incremental actions, not a one-time *coup de grâce*” (Waldner and Lust 2018: 95). But it is still too early to diagnose Malaysia as backsliding.

Often, authoritarian successor parties—defined as parties that emerge from authoritarian regimes, but that operate after a transition to democracy (Loxton 2015: 158)—are instrumental in blocking democratization. They emerge from authoritarian regimes as former authoritarian ruling parties or as reactive authoritarian successor parties “created in reaction to a transition to democracy, either by high-level authoritarian incumbents in anticipation of an imminent transition, or by former high-level incumbents shortly after a transition” (159). However, Malaysia is not a case of this type because UMNO and the BN are not dominant in the new governing coalition, Perikatan Nasional (National Alliance, PN). Today, UMNO is not even officially part of the PN, but only supports the government to an extent.<sup>40</sup>

The literature on political developments in Malaysia in recent years has identified a range of factors behind the reform impasse and the PH’s collapse. Case (2019: 21) notes “the coalition’s failure to gain cohesion among party elites, command over the state apparatus, or grounding across a divided social

structure.” To Chin (2020: 288), “the political ideology of *Ketuanan Melayu Islam* was the major ideological trigger for the collapse of the PH government.”<sup>1</sup> Likewise, Ostwald and Oliver (2020: 663, 673) assert the importance of the endurance of identity politics, especially in Peninsular and Northeast Malaysia. In this vein, Dettman (2020: 6) sees a “reinforced . . . gulf between the ethnic and religious electoral support of UMNO and PAS and the victorious Alliance of Hope coalition.” Tapsell (2020: 199f), Wan Saiful (2020: 14ff), and Temby (2020) stress the ethnic and religious polarization, while Raina (2016: 857) underlined at an early stage that “it is hard for a plural society to easily transition to democratic pluralism.” Other sources of difference in the PH were the lingering succession question (Mustafa 2020: 102) and the PH’s lack of a clear policy framework (Tapsell 2020: 196), as well as its inability to work in a cohesive manner (Chin 2020: 291; Wan Saiful 2020: 8ff). But also the active opposition by PAS, UMNO, and parts of civil society, with their promotion of Malay fears (Chin 2020: 296; Dettman 2020: 6), as well as active resistance by top bureaucrats (Chin 2020: 292; Case 2019: 15f) or neopatrimonial legacies (Weiss 2019: 58ff), are further factors frequently mentioned in the literature.

This paper focuses on coalition cohesion without ignoring other levels of analysis, for example the polarization along ethnoreligious cleavages and the impact of personal factors. Scholars have paid limited attention to the challenges facing multiparty coalitions during regime transitions from authoritarianism toward something else—that is, under conditions of extraordinary uncertainty (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986: 3–5). If the transition is by election, coalitions and parties are the most important actors, and the success or failure of democratization depends primarily on them. During transition processes political space is less well-structured, political conditions are volatile, and risks for political actors are often higher (Cotta 1996: 72, 94; Pridham 1995; Lupu and Riedl 2013). New issues arise, and the rules of the game need to be determined once more. Coalitions, especially new ones, are subject to these difficult conditions.

There is a basic difference between pre-electoral and post-electoral multiparty coalitions during transition. Here we are looking at the period starting two to three years ahead of the May 2018 general elections and ending with the collapse of PH in February 2020. Whereas the pre-electoral PH coalition was

1. *Ketuanan Melayu Islam* means “Malay Islamic Supremacy”: the supremacy of Malay Muslims and their culture.

sufficiently cohesive to enable electoral victory in 2018, the post-electoral PH fell apart. The main reason is that the short-term objectives of PH coalition member parties were identical in toppling the so-called kleptocrats around then Prime Minister Najib Razak, yet after the elections it turned out that the long-term objectives of the coalition partners were decisively divergent.

In short, we argue that transitional elections such as those in May 2018 set in motion interconnected processes: the new government loses its cohesion after the elections; at the same time the opposition, weakened shortly after the transitional elections, increases its cohesiveness and mobilizes its supporters against the new government.

### COMPLEXITIES OF COALITION-BUILDING IN MALAYSIA

Because of party-system fragmentation, coalitions in Malaysia are often large and complex. This fragmentation is effected by institutional factors: there are no laws against party switching, and the parliamentary system allows a change of government between elections. In addition, ethnic, religious, and regional divides produce a strongly fragmented party system. This fragmentation is deepened by a cleavage between reformist and conservative parties, especially since the elections in 1999. Moreover, politico-economic factors such as clientelism and “money politics” (Saravanamuttu and Maznah 2020; Weiss 2019, 2020) provide incentives (patronage goods) for switching parties.

All in all, the Malaysian party system is an extremely fragmented one (Table 1; see also Moten 2019: 503f). The 13 East Malaysian parties in the national parliament are often more clientelistic than programmatic in orientation and can quickly switch sides (Chin 2018). In recent years, factionalism and party splits have significantly increased in West Malaysia, too (Ufen 2020b). The emergence of new coalitions started in mid-2015 at the party congress of PAS, where the conservative wing was able to sideline reformers—who are much more inclined to form coalitions with rather secular parties, such as the predominantly ethnic-Chinese Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the mostly ethnic-Malay Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People’s Justice Party, PKR). These marginalized reformers founded, only a few weeks after the congress, Parti Amanah Negara (National Trust Party, Amanah) and then, together with DAP and PKR, established the PH (Ufen 2020a: 176ff). At around the same time, a faction within UMNO led by former Prime Minister Mahathir felt alienated by the incumbent, Najib. This led to

TABLE 1. Seats in the National Parliament, 2018 and 2020\*

	<i>May</i> 2018		<i>Feb. 29,</i> 2020
<b>Barisan Nasional (BN)</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>Perikatan Nasional (PN)</b>	<b>91</b>
UMNO	54	UMNO	38
MCA	1	MCA	2
MIC	2	MIC	1
PBB (Sarawak)	13		
PRS (Sarawak)	3		
PDP (Sarawak)	2		
SUPP (Sarawak)	1		
PBS (Sabah)	1	PBS	1
UPKO (Sabah)	1		
PBRS (Sabah)	1	PBRS	1
		Bersatu (Muhyiddin Yassin and Azmin Ali faction)	30
		PAS**	18
		Gabungan Parti Sarawak (PBB, PRS, PDP, SUPP)**	17
<b>Pakatan Harapan (PH)</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>Pakatan Harapan (PH)</b>	<b>100</b>
PKR	47	PKR (without Azmin Ali faction)	41
DAP	42	DAP	42
Bersatu	13	Bersatu (Mahathir faction)	6
Amanah	11	Amanah	11
Parti Warisan Sabah*	8	Parti Warisan Sabah**	9
PAS*	18	UPKO**	1
STAR (Sabah)	1	STAR**	1
Independents	3	Independents**	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>222</b>		<b>222</b>

SOURCE: Malaysian Election Commission; the list of PH supporters on February 29, 2020, was published in a tweet by Mahathir <<https://twitter.com/chedetofficial/status/1233766104176058369>>.

NOTES:

\*In the 2018 elections, the Parti Warisan Sabah was not an official coalition member but a cooperation partner of PH. PAS formed an independent coalition (Gabungan Sejahtera) with two smaller parties, but all seats went to PAS.

\*\* In 2020, Gabungan Parti Sarawak cooperated with PN. PAS had become part of the PN. The Parti Warisan Sabah was still a cooperation partner of PH. The three independent MPs as well as those of STAR and UPKO supported the PH.

the formation of the Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (United Pribumi Party of Malaysia, Bersatu) in September 2016. In March 2017 Bersatu became a member of PH, and a few weeks later Mahathir became its chairman; in January 2018 PH made him its official candidate for prime minister. According to an agreement, Anwar Ibrahim (PKR) would succeed him after two years if PH won the elections (Hutchinson 2018; Welsh 2018). Moreover, the PH forged an electoral pact with the Parti Warisan Sabah (Sabah Heritage Party, Warisan) in East Malaysia. Warisan itself is a splinter group of the Sabah UMNO chapter.

The fragmented party system brings to light the complexity of coalition-building. It is difficult to find common programmatic ground and to avoid infighting when nominating candidates in elections or for government office. Nevertheless, in 2018 the PH was able to field strong candidates in almost all constituencies. It was cohesive enough to win also because of its ability to mobilize parts of civil society and to shape the public discourse (Ufen 2020a: 175ff). Thus in the May 2018 national elections the PH won 113 of the 222 seats (PKR, 47; DAP, 42; Bersatu, 13; Amanah, 11; Warisan, 8), whereas the BN gained only 79, and UMNO was reduced to a “normal,” midsized and nonhegemonic party with 54. Moreover, this time a third coalition led by PAS (18 seats) contributed to the complexity of the party system (Table 1). The vast majority of ethnic Chinese (95%) and ethnic Indians (70–75%) voted for the PH in 2018, whereas the Malay electorate was more evenly split between the three coalitions (*Straits Times*, June 14, 2018).

But there is a major difference between pre-electoral and post-electoral coalitions. Pre-electoral ones may be relatively strong, like the PH in 2018, but after elections they can easily fall apart because then they have to actually implement policies. Besides, it becomes much harder to paper over cracks existing since the formation of the coalition and widening under the exigencies of governing.

#### THE PH'S AGENDA AND FIRST SUCCESSFUL REFORMS

The election platform of the PH included the abolition of the highly unpopular Goods and Services Tax (GST) introduced a few years earlier, subsidies for petrol, medical care, and an increase of the minimum wage from RM 1,000 (USD 250) to RM 1,500 (USD 375) per month. In addition to these social and economic policies, the PH promised to limit the prime minister's term of office;

restructure the Prime Minister's Office itself; strengthen the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC); abolish the Sedition Act of 1948, the Universities and University Colleges Act of 1971, the Printing Press and Publications Act of 1984, and the National Security Council Act of 2016; and set up an Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission. In its election manifesto, the PH also pledged to abolish the Prevention of Crime Act and certain provisions in the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act of 2012, the Communications and Multimedia Act of 1998, and the Prevention of Terrorism Act of 2015. These reforms were intended to expand the space for civil society activities. The PH also wanted to enforce concessions given in 1963 by the federal government to the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak regarding autonomy rights and oil and gas revenues. And one of the most important projects was electoral system reform with reference to gerrymandering and malapportionment.

The new government did indeed abolish the GST and also limited spending for several infrastructure projects, in particular those funded by China as part of its Belt and Road Initiative, such as the high-speed railway from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur, two pipelines from China to Malaysia, and the East Coast Railway Link. Parliamentary reforms started with the formation of six standing committees. The PH amended the Universities and University Colleges Act, making it easier for students to engage politically. In July 2019, a large parliamentary majority decided to reduce the voting age from 21 to 18. With voters set to be automatically registered, their number will increase by about eight million in the next election (in 2022). The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission ended its blocking of some websites. The controversial National Service Training Programme and courses by the National Civics Bureau, accused of indoctrinating participants, were suspended.

As a result, the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index of 2019 saw Malaysia's overall score increased to 7.16 out of 10. Malaysia was ranked 43rd, a palpable improvement from 52nd in 2018. On the World Press Freedom Index, Malaysia climbed from 145th in 2018 to 123rd in 2019 and 101st in 2020. The 2018 Freedom House scores of 18/40 for political rights and 27/60 for civil liberties improved to 21/40 and 31/60, respectively, for both 2019 and 2020 (Freedom House 2020).

Arguably, the reform process was starting to accelerate (Dettman 2020: 7; Tapsell 2020). The Senate Reform Working Committee was to submit

a report on how to improve the effectiveness of the Upper House to the Parliamentary Reform Committee. An Institutional Reforms Committee made 223 recommendations with respect to governance, integrity, and corruption prevention concerning the parliament, the Election Commission, the judiciary, the Attorney General's Chamber, the MACC, the police, the Immigration Department, the Communications and Multimedia Commission, and the Human Rights Commission. The Electoral Reform Committee proposed the establishment of an independent body responsible for the fair and transparent delineation of constituencies, due in 2026 (SUARAM 2019: 104). In general, the environment for public discussion, for the media, and for academia was more open. The ongoing media coverage of the antics of the Najib family, especially in connection with the 1MDB scandal, exposed the UMNO leadership,<sup>2</sup> and it was expected that a range of other BN politicians would also come under intense scrutiny in the coming months. Expectations were raised by the appointment of respected lawyer Latheefa Koya as the new head of the MACC.

#### **BOTCHED REFORMS AND DWINDLING SUPPORT**

Yet, the PH government ultimately disappointed many of its supporters. Due to the tight financial situation—because of 1MDB, the GST's abolition, and the Belt and Road Initiative projects—the PH was barely capable of introducing new social policies. For example, it only raised the minimum wage from RM 1,000 (USD 250) to RM 1,050 (USD 263).

The report by the Institutional Reforms Committee was never made public. The election manifesto had pledged to give the leader of the opposition in parliament the status of a federal minister, but the PH later backed away from this promise. The government also feigned the guaranteeing of fairness in relations between government and opposition. Before May 2018, opposition MPs and assembly members did not get any allowances. But even after that date, opposition MPs had a much smaller allocation than PH MPs.

A lack of ability or readiness to implement reform was also reflected in the attempt to introduce local elections. The appointments of members of the

2. In July 2015 1MDB (1Malaysia Development Berhad), a strategic development company owned by the Ministry of Finance, became involved in a major scandal. Prime Minister Najib was predominantly responsible for 1MDB transactions, and he is alleged to have channeled almost US\$ 700 million to his own private bank accounts (Case 2017).

Election Commission, the MACC, the Judicial Appointment Commission, the National Audit Department, the Attorney General's Chamber, and similar were not transparent, and often decided by the prime minister alone. Moreover, all the aforementioned controversial security laws remained mostly or entirely unchanged. The government put the Sedition Act 1948 on hold in October 2018, but lifted the moratorium the following month, after a group of protesters on November 26 stormed the Seafeld Hindu Temple in Subang Jaya, demanding its closure and relocation.

While the PH has been credited with bringing some top politicians to justice, Abdul Taib Mahmud, for example, a multibillionaire and the former chief minister of Sarawak (1981–2014), was exempted. The court trials of the major corruption cases that had contributed significantly to the fall of Najib took much longer than expected. And even during the trial, he was able to mobilize his supporters on social media and to play an important role in by-election campaigns. Finally in July 2020 he was sentenced to 12 years in jail for abuse of power plus 10 years for money laundering and breach of trust. Yet, the sentences have been suspended pending appeal.

The reform failures indicated a lack of willingness within PH, but also that the new government faced broad opposition. Popular discontent was indicated by surveys and by-election outcomes (Tapsell 2020: 195f). As of April 2019 it was reported that Mahathir's approval rating had fallen to 46%, from 71% in August 2018 and 83% immediately after the elections. Moreover, only 39% of Malaysian voters rated the PH government positively, in contrast to 66% doing so in August 2018 (*Straits Times*, April 27, 2019). This is all the more significant because Mahathir had been important as a unifying figure during the elections (Abdullah 2019). At the end of the PH government's tenure, by-elections in Kimanis and Tanjung Piai clearly demonstrated its decreasing support (*The Star*, January 18, 2020; *Malay Mail*, November 17, 2019) and Bersatu feared not being able to survive in the next national elections, especially if Mahathir were to transfer power to Anwar.

#### RESISTANCE TO THE REFORMS BY THE BUREAUCRACY AND THE OPPOSITION

Since the New Economic Policy of the early 1970s, the *bumiputera* ("sons of the soil," meaning Malays and some other East Malaysian ethnic groups) have been the beneficiaries of privileges such as facilitated access to

universities, scholarships, positions in the civil service, special licenses, and easy credits. The result has been a strong linkage between UMNO, the military, the police, the bureaucracy, and government-linked companies. This agenda of *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) has been accentuated in parallel with a general Islamization of not only state institutions but also political discourse and civil society (Chin 2020). An end to these pro-*bumi-putera* policies is seen by many Malays as extremely threatening.

Many reforms failed due to the resistance of conservative forces within the bureaucracy, as well as civil society and partisan opposition. The PH was unable to set up the Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission, for example, due to resistance from the Royal Malaysia Police and its associations, as well as political party opposition. Another example of falling short was the intended abolishment of the mandatory death penalty under the Penal Code; in this case it failed because of public criticism.

For some draft laws, the approval of the second chamber, the Senate, was necessary. The appointed members in the Senate were not replaced immediately after the May 2018 elections, because legally they remain in office for a total of three years. The Senate was therefore able to use a suspensive veto to block certain laws for a year, slowing down the new government's zeal for reform. This is what the Senate did with the Anti-Fake News Act. The act was finally repealed after a change in the composition of the Senate.

As another example, the Federal Constitution (Amendment) Bill 2019 restoring the Malaysia Agreement of 1963 did not obtain a two-thirds majority in the first chamber, the House of Representatives. It aimed at achieving parity between Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak (*Malay Mail*, January 25, 2020).

The PH government also had great difficulty enforcing international agreements. The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) has not been signed due to enormous resistance from civil society and opposition parties. They see the convention as a gateway to curtailing Malay privileges. The government finally renounced ratifying the convention ahead of a major demonstration planned by UMNO and PAS for December 8, 2018 (Temby 2020: 2f).

Another example is the ratification of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which Malaysia revoked in April 2019. The jurisdiction for the prosecution of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and aggression provoked harsh criticism, especially among parts of the

Malaysian aristocracy who feared a limitation of their power. Mahathir had long, bitter disputes with the kings in the 1980s and 1990s. He had tried to curtail their inherited privileges, which included de facto impunity. In the first half of 2019, the feud between Mahathir and the king of Johor and his crown prince hit the headlines.

Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah justified the nonratification of the Rome Statute at the beginning of April 2019 on the basis of the hope that it would prevent a coup attempt. Saifuddin even spoke of resistance by the “deep state,” without explaining the term (*The Star*, December 8, 2019). At the beginning of November 2019, Minister of Finance Lim Guan Eng used the same term in connection with the arrest of several DAP members accused of being linked to the Sri Lankan Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (*Malaysiakini*, November 18, 2019). Apparently, both of them meant the antireform forces within the civil administration, the police, and the aristocracy.

#### **THE EMERGENCE OF A STRENGTHENED OPPOSITION COALITION: MUAFAKAT NASIONAL**

After the May 2018 elections, the national parliament consisted of three major groups—PH, BN, and PAS—and a range of fairly independent East Malaysian parties (Table 1). In June 2018 the Gabungan Parti Sarawak (Sarawak Parties Coalition) was formed, consisting of the Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu, Sarawak United Peoples’ Party, Parti Rakyat Sarawak, and Progressive Democratic Party. Between May 2018 and February 2020 many East Malaysian parties would leave the BN. Most UMNO members of parliament who abandoned the party joined Bersatu.

A few weeks after the elections, the BN therefore consisted of only three rather than 13 parties. UMNO in Sabah, especially, disintegrated, with most assembly members and MPs switching to Bersatu or Warisan. At the same time, the remaining BN partners—Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC)—found no convincing response to the changed political situation. Because DAP and PKR also stress ethnic plurality, MCA and MIC largely lost their original function as representatives of ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indians, respectively.

UMNO, cut off from the money flows from the state bureaucracy and private companies, could no longer maintain the widely entrenched patronage apparatus in the usual way. Within the party, some realized

that the era of Malay hegemony and manipulative authoritarianism might be over. In the weeks following the electoral defeat of May 2018, several UMNO politicians opined that the party should open up to non-Malays. However, at the party congress of mid-2018, reformers around Khairy Jamaluddin were soundly defeated by Zahid Hamidi and his followers, even though Zahid and others in the UMNO's leadership had been tainted by ongoing trials and corruption investigations (*Malaysiakini*, July 1, 2018). Therefore, in late 2018 Zahid handed over his duties as UMNO president to his deputy, Mohamad Hassan, because (in his own words) he wanted to prevent more party members from quitting the party (*Malay Mail*, December 18, 2018).

It was obvious that the BN alone had no chance to topple the PH government. The options to do so were to strengthen links to PAS, to try to divide the PH, or to mobilize civil society. Eventually, in September 2019, significantly improved relations between UMNO and PAS culminated in a formalized cooperation between the two parties: the Muafakat Nasional (National Consensus). Obviously, they wanted to cooperate in the next election campaign. UMNO and PAS signed a Piagam Muafakat Nasional (National Consensus Charter) on September 14, 2019, and held a two-day mega-gathering called Himpunan Penyatuan Ummah (Muslim Unity Rally). They also signed a joint charter and a memorandum of understanding (*Malay Mail*, August 7, 2019). The charter was relatively moderate, in an attempt not to provoke ethnic and religious minorities, but it clearly reaffirmed Islam as the federal religion and the special position of the Malays. PAS politicians have repeatedly advocated the creation of an Islamic state, and UMNO has always been known for its pronounced Malay nationalism.

PAS continues to promote the Islamization of society, politicizing issues of particular concern to conservative Muslims. This applies, for example, to the occupation of top positions by non-Muslims. In particular, PAS criticized Minister of Finance Lim Guan Eng and Attorney General Tommy Thomas. PAS and UMNO portrayed the new government as dominated by ethnic Chinese, in particular by DAP. Mahathir and others were allegedly only puppets of Lim Guan Eng and his father Lim Kit Siang, the elder statesman of DAP.<sup>3</sup>

3. Gandhi and Ong (2019), for example, have shown that the support for PH in 2018 was precarious, because many Malay voters were less inclined to support the coalition with the DAP expected to control the government.

In this vein, a coalition of Malay-Muslim groups demanded the dissolution of the parliament, claiming that the ruling coalition had failed to protect the interests of the majority community. In December 2018, Gerakan Pembela Ummah (Islamic Defenders Movement), a coalition of 300 smaller Islam-oriented NGOs, organized a rally opposing the ratification of the anti-racism charter ICERD (Dettman 2020: 10), and in May 2019 another rally to defend the “sanctity and sovereignty of Islam.” The mass demonstration of December 2018 especially showed the strength of UMNO and PAS at the grass-roots level and the ability of these parties to mobilize thousands of followers in the name of Malay unity and in defense of both the monarchy and Islam. The extent to which religion and ethnicity are politicized in Malaysia was also evident in the turmoil surrounding the controversial Islamic preacher Zakir Naik, who seemed to be under the protection of the government despite India demanding his extradition on charges of hate speech and money laundering. Other indicators of this politicization include the campaign launched by Islamic NGOs to boycott non-Muslim products (*Malaysiakini*, September 3, 2019) and the continued persecution of sexual minorities and religious groups such as Shiites.

Transitions signify polarization, and opposition forces have an advantage in mobilizing their supporters. The PH was successful in 2018 *inter alia* because the coalition was capable of developing a division of labor between the PH and civil society, especially the electoral reform movement Bersih (Ufen 2020a). After May 2018 the major events, in terms of gathering together hundreds of thousands of demonstrators, were staged by antireform civil society groups. To them, it was much easier to mobilize against the backdrop of a government that in their imagination was dominated by anti-Muslim, ethnic-Chinese powerholders and their Malay stooges.

Based on its extensive networks reaching into the state apparatus, as well as into large segments of civil society, the new opposition could take advantage of the glaring weaknesses of the new government. The informal cooperation between UMNO and PAS before May 2018 was transformed into a genuine pact afterward. Besides, after the shrinking of the BN, UMNO was less constrained in its attempts to politicize ethnic and religious issues; it tried to destabilize the governing PH coalition, in particular by approaching Minister of Economic Affairs Azmin Ali and Minister of Home Affairs Muhyiddin.

## DECREASING PH COHESIVENESS

Large multiparty coalitions have to be somewhat vague programmatically. This can be overcome before elections because it is easier to promise major reforms and to paper over cracks in the coalition by concentrating on one theme: ousting the ruling government. After transitional elections, a Pandora's box of contradictory policy initiatives and of infighting over patronage resources may open up (Cotta 1996: 96).

In May 2018 the PH as a pre-electoral coalition was cohesive enough to win the elections because the various coalition partners had a clear target (the BN, and especially the “kleptocrats”); were linked to a strong civil society movement (e.g., Bersih); and had a strong unifying figure, Mahathir, at the helm (Abdullah 2019). But this all changed after the elections because “party elites in Pakatan failed to gain cohesion during their first year in office” (Case 2019: 15). For instance, the new government was not united in the fight against corruption (Case 2019: 22f; Weiss 2019: 58). Renowned Malaysian economist Terence Gomez criticized the PH for continuing to use government-linked companies (GLCs) and government-linked investment companies for patronage (*Malaysiakini*, January 12, 2019). Even Azmin would not deny that competent party members could obtain executive positions in GLCs. The vice president of Bersatu openly demanded at the Party Congress that the party use its position in the government to gain access to patronage resources, “by hook or by crook.”

Of the PH member parties, Bersatu was the most conservative. The commitment of some of its MPs to liberal democracy was questionable from the very beginning. This was evidenced by the ease with which the party invited former UMNO politicians into its ranks. Moreover, Bersatu leaders often tried to pander to the Malay Muslim community. An example was the controversy over *khat* (calligraphy) lessons becoming part of school curricula. Despite a public outcry from non-Muslim groups over creeping Islamization, the cabinet held on to the reform in August 2019—albeit in watered-down form. (The *khat* lessons were renamed, and made optional, and not subjected to testing.) In particular, Education Minister Maszlee Malik became a much-criticized figure. Even more controversial was the attendance of Mahathir at the Kongres Maruah Melayu (Congress of Malay Dignity) in Shah Alam in October 2019 (Chin 2020: 290; Tapsell 2020: 198).<sup>4</sup> The congress was

4. Wan Saiful Wan Jan (2020, 26), a member of the Bersatu faction around Muhyiddin, alleges that “around March or April 2019 in a BERSATU Supreme Council meeting chaired by Mahathir,”

perceived by many non-Malays as a demonstration of Malay and Muslim power and a thinly veiled threat directed toward ethnic and religious minorities. The government seemed to have realized that even the slow elimination of Malay privileges could be extremely dangerous, as UMNO and PAS were most likely to mobilize their followers on the basis of ethnic and religious sentiments. Both parties just seemed to be waiting for the government to fail.

In December 2018 Anwar appointed his supporters and supposedly rivals of Azmin, then minister for economic affairs, to the PKR leadership; in a primary party election to fill the executive board, there was a strong polarization between the two factions. Azmin's reputation suffered after a sex video surfaced in 2019 allegedly showing him together with a young male party colleague, Haziq Aziz. At the Party Congress in December 2019, PKR was strongly split into two large blocks led by Anwar and Azmin, respectively (*Malay Mail*, December 3, 2019).

Around the same time (in November 2019), at least 22 BN MPs—among them former UMNO vice president Hishammuddin Hussein—and five PKR MPs met at Azmin's official residence. Afterward, Azmin was strongly criticized for trying to forge a new coalition to block the rise of Anwar. This seemed to be a reaction to the PH's loss in the Tanjung Piai by-election two days before. Some blamed Mahathir for the defeat, and demanded a transfer of power to Anwar.

A major reason for this infighting was the lingering problem of succession. Mahathir was to make way for Anwar after about two years. The latter, who had been imprisoned for alleged homosexual acts in 2015, left prison shortly after the elections of 2018 thanks to a royal pardon, and a few weeks later he won the by-election in Port Dickson. Yet Mahathir never announced an exact date of withdrawal and seemed to prefer Azmin. In late September 2019, he even said he could ultimately stay in office for three years. His contradictory statements contributed to considerable uncertainty. Both the Bersatu faction around Muhyiddin and the PKR faction around Azmin obviously feared being sacrificed if Anwar were to succeed Mahathir as prime minister. Bersatu without Mahathir was seen as almost powerless, and Azmin and his followers deeply distrusted Anwar and his faction.

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it was agreed to start "conversations between BERSATU, UMNO and PAS on the possibility of working together." The Kongres Maruah Melayu would have been part of this rapprochement. It is at least reasonable to assume that Mahathir always pursued a kind of hedging strategy.

In sum, the cohesiveness of the PH was undermined by infighting. In contrast, the opposition that had lain in shambles after the May 2018 elections was able to reemerge and to deepen cooperation. Although the machinations among political parties have been mostly elite affairs, wider developments involving the electorate and civil society constituted the background to the collapse of the PH in February 2020.

#### PH'S COLLAPSE AND THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW GOVERNMENT

On February 21, 2020, the PH Supreme Council discussed the long-awaited handover of office from Mahathir to Anwar. Yet Mahathir declared he would not leave before the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in November 2020. It is possible that Azmin and his followers were caught off guard by the defensive reaction that ensued from Anwar and his supporters. A recalcitrant Anwar would have been the best pretext for switching sides and instigating the collapse of the PH government to foil an alleged revolt against Mahathir's continued tenure.

Two days later, the PKR faction led by Azmin met politicians from Bersatu, UMNO, PAS, and some East Malaysian parties at the Sheraton Hotel near Kuala Lumpur. Later called the "Sheraton move," this meeting served to forge a new coalition behind Mahathir, the PN (consisting of Bersatu, BN, PAS, Azmin, and his followers from PKR), and those smaller East Malaysian parties. Yet on February 24, Mahathir resigned as prime minister, surprising all those behind the Sheraton move. Mahathir was not willing to cooperate with UMNO members he saw as kleptocrats, such as Najib and Zahid. It is not fully clear what role Mahathir played behind the scenes, but it is likely that those involved in negotiations about toppling the PH government were kept in the dark about his intentions.

Things were complicated by the reappointment of Mahathir by the king, now as so-called interim prime minister. Mahathir, who knew that the PH did not have a majority in parliament without most of Bersatu and at least 11 PKR MPs, on February 26 proposed the formation of a broad Cabinet of National Unity. This again was rejected by the remaining PH member parties, because such a cabinet would have signified a hemorrhaging of PH parties and unprecedented power for Mahathir. It was then reported that the three remaining PH parties—DAP, Amanah, and PKR—would support Anwar becoming the new prime minister.

On February 27, Bersatu proposed its president, Muhyiddin Yassin, for this position. It was announced that he would seek the support of all UMNO MPs, even those indicted for corruption. At this stage, neither new candidate commanded a majority in the national parliament. Things dramatically turned once more when, on February 29, Mahathir was again proposed as candidate for prime minister, this time by PH and Warisan; but then suddenly the king appointed Muhyiddin prime minister. Although Mahathir claimed to have the support of 114 MPs, the king swore in Muhyiddin the next day. A few days later the new government declared that it would not convene the parliament before mid-May. It was expected that in the meantime the PN would gain support among the MPs of smaller parties in exchange for lucrative executive positions.

During the whole period from the last days of February 2020 up until several weeks after the swearing-in of Muhyiddin it was unclear which coalition, the PH or the newly formed PN, actually commanded a majority in the national parliament. It was often not known how big the different factions within PKR and Bersatu were, or which side some East Malaysian MPs would tend to support (see Table 1). Even the number of independent candidates was open to question. In such transitional periods, “relatively high levels of electoral volatility will appear; the search for new alignments becomes a central preoccupation. This is a propitious moment for the birth of new parties, the insurgence of splits in the old ones and also for the crisis of existing coalitions” (Cotta 1996: 96).

In the end, the transition by election was usurped by elitist tactical maneuvering. The elections in May 2018 had signified only a partial replacement of the ruling elites. Although the “reform” versus “status quo” cleavage within the party system seemed very deep, at the elite level it had become shallow. Parts of PH realized that resistance within the bureaucracy, by opposition parties, and within segments of civil society was enormous. At the same time, the new opposition learned to adapt organizationally and programmatically to the changed circumstances.

## CONCLUSIONS

To be sure, from the beginning the PH was fragile compared with most multiparty coalitions in stable authoritarian systems or consolidated democracies. However, it was more cohesive than all the other opposition coalitions

that had previously existed in Malaysia (Ufen 2020: 171ff). Thus, immediately after the historic elections, the new PH government seemed to be strong enough to transform Malaysia within a few years' time into a substantially democratized polity. Yet 21 months later, by February 2020, the democratization experiment—the first of its kind in Malaysia—seemed to be stalled. That fateful week in February showed that the fragmentation and the switching between parties and coalitions was extensive and will likely reemerge in the future, but also that the new government is very weakly legitimized and faces problems of cohesion at least until the next elections. This fragmentation is also evident at the state level. In Johor, Perak, Melaka, Kedah, and Sabah the PH state governments were overthrown. The PH still has significant majorities in its strongholds, Selangor and Penang. It is possible that UMNO (with some of its junior partners in BN) will emerge again as the hegemon within the Malaysian party system in the years to come, because it has the advantage of a well-known party brand and patronage-based machines, but so far the party has been essentially weakened and downgraded to one on a par with unlikely bedfellows such as Bersatu and PAS.

Before the 2018 elections, PH component parties decided to nominate Mahathir as the candidate for prime minister. Anwar was still in prison, so there was no clear alternative. When following the elections Mahathir increasingly indicated that he would not step down, coalition partners became restless. At the same time, the rivalry between Azmin and Anwar became ever more virulent. Within PH, large parts of Bersatu—but also some members of Amanah and PKR—distanced themselves from more radical reforms because they sensed resistance within the Muslim Malay community in the face of an alleged Chinese and/or secularist threat. UMNO and PAS successfully mobilized these feelings, and in parallel reached out to those forces in PH that were apprehensive about marginalization within their respective parties and defeat in the next elections.

The PH collapse can be analyzed with reference to personal distrust and the machinations of single politicians and their coteries. But it is necessary to transcend such explanations, so prevalent in Malaysian political debates, because they obscure the forces behind idiosyncratic maneuvers. A macrosociological perspective could claim that democratization in Malaysia was never really possible because of major social cleavages, the politicization of Islam, and the hegemonic *Ketuanan Melayu* discourse. But such analyses have trouble explaining the 2018 electoral victory of PH. This is also true of institutionalist and

political-economy approaches. Institutional factors such as the pluralist electoral system and the lack of an anti-party-hopping law do not sufficiently explain coalition collapse because these factors also can motivate post-electoral coalitions to enhance cooperation. A political-economy perspective also does not satisfyingly account for the downfall of PH because the coalition had vast resources to deliver, and much more so than before the elections.

The differing short- and long-term objectives of the members of the coalition better explain the main mechanisms at work—but of course only if additional factors are taken into account: the opposition of various political parties able to mobilize sections of civil society and to reach an agreement with parts of the ruling coalition to topple the PH government; an environment of deep ethnoreligious cleavages and heightened polarization; and strong elements of personal distrust, especially between Mahathir and Anwar and between Anwar and Azmin.

The Malaysian case is likely generalizable. A fragmented opposition unites in the face of the new government; it has to because of a lack of resources. In contrast, but indirectly connected to this, the ruling coalition loses cohesion. Internal disunity becomes visible and virulent only after the elections because different parties and factions start to become restless in the face of a range of problems. The government is ineffective because of resistance within the bureaucracy, the opposition successfully blocking certain reforms, and disappointed voters. The ruling coalition thus starts to fragment.

The transformation of coalitions before and after elections, which is of the utmost importance during political transitions, has hardly been addressed by scholars. The unclear, transitional status of the Malaysian political system, situated somewhere between “electoral authoritarian,” “electoral democratic,” and “hybrid regime” (Case 2019), produces uncertainty regarding the regime in toto, as well as individual political institutions (Lupu and Riedl 2013: 1343ff), directly impinging on party politics and causing unstable coalitions.

The PN government now has trouble maintaining cohesion. There is palpable friction between Bersatu, UMNO, and PAS (Welsh 2020). Under the PH, democratization progressed quite slowly, but as has been shown above, some things were accomplished. It is too early to decide whether this democratization has been stalled since March 2020. Yet, critics of the PN government point to a trend of autocratization, because Muhyiddin seems to be returning to extensive, old-style patronage politics by way of expanding the cabinet size and blatantly distributing GLC board positions to allies while hindering the

national parliament from working effectively. The latest example of autocratization was the Emergency (Essential Powers) Ordinance of January 2021, purportedly intended to help combat the pandemic, which postpones elections and meetings of the national parliament and state assemblies.

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