



The Round Table

The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/crt20>

Anwar's long walk to power: the 2022 Malaysian general elections

James Chin

To cite this article: James Chin (2023) Anwar's long walk to power: the 2022 Malaysian general elections, *The Round Table*, 112:1, 1-13, DOI: [10.1080/00358533.2023.2165303](https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2023.2165303)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2023.2165303>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 14 Feb 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Anwar's long walk to power: the 2022 Malaysian general elections

James Chin 

Social Sciences, University of Tasmania, Australia

ABSTRACT

The 15th Malaysian General Elections (GE15), the first since the Covid pandemic lockdown, were supposed to bring back political stability, after three different prime ministers since 2018. The results were inconclusive with no single coalition winning the bare minimum to form a government. The King then asked Anwar Ibrahim to form a new government. The biggest surprise was the rise of Parti Islam Malaysia (PAS), which became the single largest party in Parliament. Another surprise was UMNO supporting Anwar to be prime minister. The role played by the King and the Malay rulers raised questions about the state of constitutional monarchy in Malaysia. PAS's victory will have a profound impact on Malaysia's reputation as a moderate Islamic country and will accelerate the trend towards Islamic identity politics.

KEYWORDS

Malaysia; political Islam; Parti Islam Malaysia (PAS); Anwar Ibrahim; United Malays National Organisation (UMNO); Pakatan Harapan (PH); Perikatan Nasional (PN)

Introduction

The 15th Malaysian General Elections (GE15) were held on 19 November 2022 amidst a world coming out of the Covid-19 pandemic and one trying to recover from the economic damage inflicted by the various resultant lockdowns. The results indicate that the polity was split, with no political party or coalition being able to win even a bare majority to form a government. After five days and intervention from the Malaysian monarchy, Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim, a former deputy prime minister, was sworn in as Malaysia's 10th prime minister on the 24 November 2022. Anwar had been sacked as Malaysia's deputy prime minister on 2 September 1998, and it took him 24 years to climb back to Malaysia's highest political office. The first part of this article deals with the elections and the second part deals with the manoeuvrings that eventually led Anwar back into power.

The political environment

GE15 were held under unusual circumstances. For a start, this was the first GE that was held where there was no firm favourite or dominant player. In all prior elections, including the historic 2018 elections, the Barisan Nasional (BN) was the dominant

CONTACT James Chin  james.chin@utas.edu.au

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

coalition heading into the polls. This time there were three major coalitions contesting: Pakatan Harapan under Anwar Ibrahim, Barisan Nasional (BN) under Zahid Hamidi and Perikatan Nasional (PN) under Muhyiddin Yassin. Second, this was also the first GE held after the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, spanning two years (2020 and 2021), which severely damaged the economy. Third, this was the first general elections where 1/3rd of the 21 million eligible voters were first time voters. In 2019, the laws were changed to lower the voting age to 18 from 21 and to allow automatic registration of voters. And finally, this was the first election in which everyone was searching for political stability. After the first regime change of 2018, Malaysia underwent a period of political instability marked by the fall of the PH government in 2020, which led to the installation of a Perikatan Nasional (PN) government.¹ The PN administration, led by Muhyiddin Yassin from March 2020 until August 2021, also fell apart and was replaced by an UMNO-led government under the premiership of Ismail Sabri. Thus, there were three different prime ministers in the space of four years. Contrast this with the first six decades after independence when the country was ruled uninterrupted by the Malayan Alliance, later rebranded as the Barisan Nasional (BN). During this period UMNO² was so dominant in the ruling BN coalition that Malaysians refer to UMNO and BN as a synonym.

Pre-election moves

There were several important political events which triggered GE15. First, in August 2022, the former prime minister Najib Razak (2009–18) failed in his final appeal over a case of money laundering and other offences, and he was immediately sent to jail for twelve years. This created a political crisis in UMNO as there were fears that other senior UMNO members, including Zahid Hamidi, the party president, could also end up in jail as Zahid, along with several other ministers who served in Najib's cabinet, were also on trial for corruption. When UMNO came back as part of the ruling PN coalition in March 2020, there was an expectation that key UMNO leaders, with outstanding corruption charges, would get the charges dropped or win their cases if the government chose to intervene. Prime Minister Muhyiddin, however, refused to intervene. Najib's jailing caused his supporters to ask Muhyiddin's successor, Ismail Sabri, to call for an early general election so that UMNO could come back into power on its own. There were sound reasons why UMNO thought it could win a GE easily. Two state elections in Johor and Melaka, held in March 2022 and November 2021 respectively, saw BN winning super-majorities. If GE15 had returned similar trends, then BN would have had a two-thirds majority in the Malaysian parliament. With that kind of victory, UMNO would be politically supreme, and it would have been easy for UMNO to intervene in the court cases.

Another sign that the voters might vote for the incumbent party came during the December 2021 Sarawak state elections. Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS), which was in fact the Sarawak wing of BN until May 2018, won 92% of the seats in the state assembly, decimating the opposition. Thus, with three state elections in a row (Melaka, Sarawak, Johor) clearly indicating the popularity of BN, there was no reason, according to UMNO strategists, why this trend would not be repeated in a GE.

The timing was also deemed to be beneficial to the BN for two reasons. First, December was the ‘monsoon’ season, when floods are widely expected. This had the potential to lower the voter turnout. The conventional wisdom was that a lower turnout would benefit UMNO since the well-oiled BN election machinery can bring out its supporters to vote. Second, the main opposition, Pakatan Harapan (PH), was seen to be in disarray after their massive defeats in Melaka, Sarawak and Johor. In addition to questions relating to Anwar’s appeal to the voters, Anwar’s own party, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) was in the throes of party elections in July 2022, which led to a split in the party. The assumption was that this split meant that PKR would not be united going into GE15.

The contestants

Although there were numerous parties, including several new ones, entering the fray in GE15, in reality, the main contestants were the following.

The BN coalition under Zahid Hamidi

BN was the ruling coalition since Malaya gained independence from British rule in 1957 and it ruled continuously until 2018. Its core members consisted of UMNO (representing the Malays), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) (representing the Chinese) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC, representing the Indians). In practice UMNO dominates BN, and both MCA and MIC are ‘window dressing’ to show that BN is multiracial. BN only lost power in GE14 in 2018 when the 1MDB scandal sank the coalition. The financial scandal was simply too large and too brazen for the population to ignore, even though UMNO had always been synonymous with corruption (known in Malaysia under the euphemism ‘money politics’). In a nutshell, BN was, in GE15, offering *back to the future* politics. BN campaigned on the theme of ‘political stability and prosperity’, a direct pitch to an electorate unhappy with the constant change of governments since 2018 and looking for political stability after emerging from the Covid-19 lockdowns. In UMNO’s propaganda, BN was the only coalition with the track record to bring stability back to the political system. In other words, a vote for BN is vote for political stability and a pre-2018 Malaysia.

PH coalition under Anwar Ibrahim

GE15 were widely seen as the last chance for Anwar, who is 75, to be elected prime minister. He had made at least three serious attempts since March 2020 to be PM but was thwarted every time. PH’s electoral pitch was simple and divided into two elements. First, that PH’s 2018 mandate was stolen when the PH government collapsed in 2020. Thus, the voters should return PH to power to restore the people’s mandate. Second, that PH is the coalition that truly fights corruption and is committed to multiracial politics in a country plagued by high level corruption and deep ethnic/racial tensions caused by the omnipresence of political Islam and *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) ideology. PH’s commitment to fight corruption and a pledge to multiracial politics was well received by the non-Malay communities who felt discriminated against by institutionalised racism.³

The two main component parties in PH were PKR and the Democratic Action Party (DAP). While both PKR and DAP are multiracial and membership is open to all races, in reality, PKR is dominated by Malays while DAP is dominated by the Chinese. The DAP has a reputation for having the best election machinery in the urban areas and was widely thought to have won close to 80–90% of the Chinese vote in 2018.

PN coalition under Muhyiddin Yassin

Muhyiddin served as prime minister after he played a major role in the fall of the PH administration in 2020. He in turn was forced to step down in August 2021 when UMNO withdrew support for his government.⁴ UMNO withdrew their support largely because he refused to intervene in the Najib and Zahid corruption trials. The two main parties in the PN coalition were *Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia* (PPBM) and *Parti Islam Malaysia* (PAS). PPBM shares the same political DNA as UMNO with its entire leadership comprising of ex-UMNO leaders. PPBM was established by UMNO members who were against the leadership of Najib Razak. In fact, Muhyiddin Yassin was deputy prime minister under Najib Razak when he was sacked from UMNO for questioning Najib over the 1MDB scandal. Thus, PN pitched itself as a Malay nationalist party with Malay leaders who are ‘clean’, in contrast to UMNO leaders.

PAS, as the name suggests, was a party only interested in turning Malaysia into an Islamic state. It appeals mostly to the conservative Malays who want Malaysia to be more Islamic and abandon its colonial-inherited political system for an Islamic system based on the PAS interpretation of the *Quran*. PAS, unlike PPBM, has strong grassroots presence in the Malay heartland states in the Northern states of Peninsular Malaysia, and was generally seen as the party with the best election machinery in the rural Malay heartland.

Gerakan Tanah Air (GTA) coalition under Mahathir Mohamad

Unlike 2018, none of the major coalitions (BN, PH, PN) wanted to work with Mahathir. He was widely blamed for initiating the downfall of the PH government in 2020. If he had not resigned suddenly in late February 2020, then Muhyiddin would have never had the chance to form a new government. From the start, nobody took Mahathir’s GTA seriously. Consisting solely of hard-line right-wing Malay groups, including candidates who claimed the Chinese and Indians were brought into Malaya by the British to dispose of the Malays,⁵ it was deemed too extreme even for Malaysia’s racially-riven politics. At 97 years old, most people also thought he was too old to be PM again.⁶ GTA attracted attention solely on the basis it was associated with Mahathir, a political icon in Malaysia.

GPS coalition under Abang Johari

Unlike the other coalitions described above, GPS does not operate outside the Borneo state of Sarawak. It used to be the Sarawak chapter of BN but rebranded itself as GPS when BN lost power in 2018. It stands for ‘Sarawak First’ or state nationalism. It is only interested in getting complete autonomy for the Borneo state under the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63).⁷ Even before GE15, GPS was widely expected to win more than 25 of the 31 seats in Sarawak. This number would have allowed it to play the role of

'kingmaker' if none of the national coalitions won a clear majority. GPS played a kingmaker role in both the short-lived administrations (2020–2021, 2021–2022) when its 19 MPs gave the ruling coalition a majority in parliament.

The campaign

Parliament was formally dissolved on 10 October 2022. The closing date for nominations was 5 November followed immediately by the formal campaign period which lasted until 18 November, with polling taking place on the 19 November. In reality, all the players were already campaigning unofficially since 10 October when parliament was dissolved.

Most of the polling done during the campaign showed that none of the major coalitions could win a simple majority of 112 in the 222-seat parliament. The first week of the campaign was lacklustre with little interest shown by the public. All the political parties really started to ramp up their campaign in the final week. It was widely understood that a significant portion of the voters, as high as 1/3rd in some constituencies, were undecided, suggesting that (a) they have already made up their mind but were not telling the pollsters (b) they were waiting to hear the most important messages from the political parties which is always given in the last 24 hours. In previous elections, political parties have saved their 'best offer' for the last day of campaigning, hence denying the other side a chance to criticise or expose the untenability of such offers.

The most significant change in campaigning, compared to GE14, was the extensive use of online canvassing. The open air *ceramah* (political meeting or rally), which used to be a staple of past elections, was not prominent this time around. While the opposition still organised *mega-ceramahs* on the last few days of the campaign, the crowds, were on average, smaller than similar rallies in GE14. Most people preferred to watch *ceramahs* online. It was not only more comfortable watching these rallies at home but more importantly, given the rainy season, it made more sense to stay at home.

Most of the intense campaigning occurred in the rural areas while in the urban areas, it was much quieter. The non-Malays, who dominated the urban constituencies, were known to be core DAP supporters and were unlikely to switch.⁸ In GE14, the consensus was around 80–90% of the Chinese voters opted for the DAP, hence even if the support dipped, it would not be enough to dislodge the DAP/PH from the urban constituencies, which proved to be true.

In the predominately Malay rural constituencies, the contest was essentially between the PN and UMNO. By the end of first week, it was clear UMNO was losing ground to PN. UMNO was never able to regain the momentum for the rest of the campaign (more later).

In East Malaysia, the campaign did not throw up any major surprises. In Sarawak, the GPS machinery dominated in the rural areas, so much so that most saw Sarawak as a non-competitive state. In Sabah, the campaign was split four ways: PH, Parti Warisan Sabah, Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS)⁹ and BN/UMNO Sabah. There was no dominant party.

The results

Malaysia uses the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system. There were 21.2 million eligible voters, and the turnout rate was 74%, significantly lower than the 82.3% turnout rate for GE14. As widely predicted by the polls, none of the main coalitions were able to reach the minimum 112 MPs in the 222-seat Parliament to form a new government (see, [Table 1](#)).

The surprise was the top two coalitions: PH and PN. Nobody expected the gap to be so close- a difference of 8 seats. This meant both PH and PN were in a position to form a new coalition to bring the number to above 112. If the gap had been wider, say PH winning 99 seats as earlier polling indicated, the PN would have been in no position to challenge PH's win.

The two biggest parties coming out of GE15 were PAS and DAP, with 43 and 40 seats respectively. DAP was really a top performer given that it entered the elections with 42 seats. It was expected to lose at least a dozen seats but managed to lose only two. Much more interesting was the fact that not a single DAP MP defected during the period 2020–2022 when more than two dozen politicians changed their party affiliation.

The big surprise was PAS, a PN component party. PAS had 18 MPs going into the election and it won 43 seats this time around. This meant PAS MPs constituted 58% of the PN bloc and 1/5 of the Malaysian parliament, the largest bloc from any single party. This is unprecedented in Malaysian politics.

Another surprise was the under-performance of GPS. GPS was widely expected to win at least 25 of the 31 seats in Sarawak. In the end it only won 23 seats. The primary reason was the Chinese vote. Towards the tail end of the campaign, the Sarawak Chinese decisively swung their support back to the opposition, especially the Sarawak DAP. Prior to this, the Sarawak Chinese had largely supported the GPS in the December 2021 state elections. In this election, all the Chinese majority constituencies in Kuching, Sibul and Miri fell to the opposition. So why the shift back to the opposition? The short answer is that the Sarawak Chinese voters wanted it 'both ways'. This rational approach entails representation in both government and opposition. They know that government politics that impacts on their daily lives are made mostly by the Sarawak state government, thus they will vote GPS in state elections. At the same time, they are unhappy with national policies deemed discriminatory towards the Chinese, such as the *bumiputra* ('son of the soil') affirmative action policies and Islamisation, and thus chose the opposition to voice their unhappiness in the national parliament. Thus, by splitting their vote, it became a 'win-win' situation.¹⁰

Table 1. Malaysia 15th general elections seats won.

Pakatan Harapan (and allies)	82
Perikatan Nasional (and allies)	74
Barisan Nasional	30
Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS)	23
Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS)	6
Others	7
Total	222

[Source: Election Commission (SPR) Malaysia]

The rise and rise of Parti Islam Malaysia

PAS's ascension to being the largest party in Parliament shocked the political establishment. Most did not foresee the dramatic rise of PAS. Most knew that PAS would increase its seats compared to GE14 but to more than double its seats and become the largest bloc in parliament was totally unexpected. How did this happen?¹¹ There are basically seven credible explanations.

The first is the 'protest vote'. Many Malay would-be UMNO voters decided to vote for PAS/PN because they were unhappy with Zahid Hamidi. They knew if UMNO won big, Zahid will probably intervene in his corruption trials from high political office. Even worse, they did not want Najib Razak released from prison. Their belief was that if UMNO won big and formed the government on its own, Zahid will arrange a royal pardon for Najib. This was not a far-fetched notion since Anwar Ibrahim was given a royal pardon hours after PH won in GE14.

PPBM, moreover, had explicitly branded themselves as the 'clean' Malay leaders, unlike UMNO who were 'dirty'. PPBM's coalition partner PAS gave PPBM additional legitimacy that it was not only the party of *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay Supremacy), but it was also *Ketuanan Melayu Islam* (Malay Islam Supremacy).

The second is money politics. According to several informants, PAS's election machinery was endowed with a lot of funds via PPBM. Unlike earlier elections, PAS did not have money problems this time around. In fact, PAS had so much money that they were able to give some voters cash ('vote buying') in key rural constituencies.¹²

The third explanation is connected to the second point. With access to funds, this would also explain how PAS was able to fund social media influencers, producing slick Tik-Tok videos featuring young *ulama* (religious teachers) who asked the viewers to support Islam (read PAS). Pro-PAS/PN videos dominated the Tik-Tok space. Tik-Tok videos were the medium of choice because the short videos can be easily shared via communication media such as WhatsApp and Telegram.¹³ These influencers do not come cheap.¹⁴ In GE14, PAS's social media reach was negligible because it had no money to fund a professional operation. The short video and influencers played a decisive role in swinging voters, especially younger voters, towards PAS and PN.

The obvious question then was about the source of PPBM's war chest. Insiders claim that PPBM was able to accumulate a massive war chest because during the Muhyiddin administration (2020–2021), PPBM benefited from the billions of public contracts given out as stimulus and aid measures for the Covid-19 pandemic. During this period, the country was under Covid-19 emergency rule and parliament was suspended, thus there was no scrutiny of public expenditure. The amount most often cited was RM500 billion (about USD\$115 billion).¹⁵

The fourth explanation for the rise of PAS was the culmination of PAS's long-term strategy. From the 1990s onwards PAS has systematically established PAS-linked kindergartens, *tahfidz* (Quran memorisation schools) and Islamic schools to indoctrinate young people into supporting PAS, and more importantly, supporting the idea of turning Malaysia into an Islamic state.¹⁶ A poll, 'Muslim Youth Survey 2022', in which Muslim youths aged between 15 and 25 were interviewed, 82% agreed that the Quran should replace the Malaysia's current Constitution, up from 72% in 2010. The survey also found

the number of Muslim youths attending religious schools has jumped to 60% in 2022, up from 48% in 2010.¹⁷

The fifth explanation was that the automatic registration and lowering of the age of voters to 18 benefited PAS/PN. There was anecdotal evidence that many of the first-time voters in the rural areas voted for PAS/PN. Many of the young voters were influenced by their parents and Tik-Tok videos. Other first-time voters also voted heavily for PAS/PN. In previous elections, the latter group were not registered because they did not consider the government 'halal' and thus refused to register or have anything to do with government institutions. Now with automatic registration, they simply went and voted for PAS to establish an Islamic state.

The sixth explanation is the breakdown of the UMNO machinery in rural Malay constituencies. Normally UMNO has been very effective in ferrying voters to polling booths. Wanita UMNO (the Women's Wing) would have hundreds of campaign workers, each targeting several Malay households. On polling day, these Wanita UMNO workers would physically go to their allocated households to ensure their inhabitants come out to vote for UMNO. This system worked remarkably well as long as long as Wanita UMNO volunteers were paid on time and financial resources were plentiful. In GE15, money was largely absent. Post-election interviews suggest that, crucially, money only flowed down to the operational level in the last few days and as a direct consequence, the Wanita UMNO campaign workers did not bother to go to the individual households on polling day to remind them to vote for UMNO.

The seventh, and final, explanation was Zahid's colossal mistake in fielding new candidates in 80% of the constituencies which the party contested. This meant he did not renominate more than a dozen top leaders of UMNO (*ketua bahagian* or divisional chiefs) or allow them to select their preferred candidates. Some of those not selected simply defected and stood as PN candidates. Putting so many new and inexperienced candidates meant many local UMNO branches simply refused to campaign. The UMNO's election machinery was either not working properly, or worse, simply shut down as too many of these new candidates simply lacked the experience to run successful campaigns.

Taken collectively, these seven explanations could explain how PAS was able to more than double its seats to 43 from a mere 18 in GE14.

Anwar Ibrahim's ascendancy

With no coalition getting anywhere close to the minimum 112 seats, horse trading began in earnest. The king initially gave all parties until 2pm on Monday, 21 November, to come up with a working coalition that could command a parliamentary majority. Muhyiddin was the first to announce that he had the numbers comprising PN, BN and GPS. But this was immediately refuted by Zahid Hamidi, president of UMNO, who announced that BN will go with Anwar and PH. The confusion forced the king to extend the deadline to 2pm on Tuesday, 22 November. The Conference of Rulers¹⁸ then met and decided that Anwar and PH should form the government. This was the second time the Royals had to step in to select the PM. When the PH government fell in 2020, the King decided that Muhyiddin had the majority support to form a government.

The final coalition put together by Anwar consisted of PH, BN, MUDA (a single MP party), Parti Bangsa Malaysia (a single MP party), Parti Kesejahteraan Demokratik Masyarakat (a single MP party), Parti Warisan Sabah (Borneo regional party), GPS (Borneo regional coalition) and Gerakan Rakyat Sabah (Borneo regional coalition).

Despite earlier prediction that GPS would play the role of kingmaker, in the end it was Zahid and BN that became the kingmaker. Without BN's 30 MPs, Anwar was unable to get a majority. At first glance, it was a strange alliance since UMNO had for years demonised the PH component party DAP as 'anti-Malay, anti-Islam'. In fact, during the campaign, BN had campaigned in part with the slogan 'No Anwar, No DAP'.

The question is why did Zahid choose Anwar over PN/PAS given that they are more ideologically aligned?

I would argue that Zahid chose Anwar, for both personal and political reasons.

Personally, Zahid has always maintained good relations with Anwar. In 1998, just prior to Anwar's sacking as UMNO deputy president and deputy prime minister, the then UMNO Youth Chief Zahid openly supported Anwar against Mahathir. Shortly afterwards Zahid was detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA) under Mahathir's orders but he quickly recanted his support for Anwar, following which he was released from detention. Since then, they have been friendly with each other in private and it was well known in UMNO circles that Zahid still saw Anwar as a future PM.

This was confirmed in 2020 when Anwar said he had the support of Zahid and a group in UMNO to be PM. However, Anwar was not able to cross the threshold required when the King asked Muhyiddin to form the government instead.¹⁹

Professionally, Zahid knew he would be in a stronger position politically if he was to align UMNO with PH. Under a deal done with UMNO/BN, Anwar promised BN the deputy PM's post.²⁰ Given that Zahid is still the president of BN and UMNO, it would not have been politically possible for Anwar to stop Zahid from occupying the DPM's post, despite his legal troubles.

Moreover, Anwar has every political incentive to have Zahid to be in a powerful position, i.e., deputy prime ministership, to ensure that UMNO does not reverse its decision to support a PH government. Senior UMNO leaders such as Hishammuddin Hussein, the former defence minister, Annuar Musa, ex-minister of communications and Ismail Sabri, the ex-prime minister, have openly campaigned against UMNO teaming up with Anwar. Their mantra 'No Anwar, No DAP' was, as noted earlier, used extensively during the election campaign. They argued that UMNO should instead join up with Muhyiddin's PN to form the government which will sideline Anwar and the DAP.

Zahid has consistently made the argument that if UMNO had picked PN in forming the government, UMNO would have no chance of reviving since Muhyiddin's PPBM party is actually planning to replace UMNO as the party of Malay nationalism. PAS is also trying to kill UMNO politically since UMNO has been PAS's main political adversary since the 1950s. Many of PAS's recent gains in GE15 came at the expense of UMNO and they would need to politically kill off UMNO to keep those seats.

Joining up with PH thus makes sense for UMNO since PKR is not after UMNO's demise. PKR's multiracial approach to politics means it is not after the same Malay electorate as UMNO, unlike PAS and Bersatu who chase the same voters as UMNO.

Additionally, UMNO is the only exclusively Malay party in the PH government, while in a PN government, UMNO, Bersatu and PAS are all exclusive Malay parties.

Zahid can also point to the fact that a pact with PH means UMNO can take over the state governments of Pahang and Perak. In the Pahang state elections, UMNO won 16 seats, PN 17 and PH 8. The UMNO pact with PH allowed it take over the *menteri besar*'s (chief minister) post. In Perak, the same situation prevailed. PN won 26 state seats, followed by PH with 24, and UMNO winning only 9. Due to the UMNO/PH pact, UMNO's nominee became the *menteri besar* despite the party having the least number of state assemblyman. It was clear that if UMNO joined up with PN, UMNO would not be given a chance to occupy the *menteri besar*'s post in both states. It is more likely that PAS and Bersatu would take one state each.

Zahid's inclusion was of course not without controversy. He is still facing several dozen charges relating to corruption and criminal breach of trust (CBT). Although many civil-society organisations (CSO) urged Anwar not to appoint Zahid into cabinet until his cases are disposed of, for reasons I have outlined above, this was not possible. Publicly Anwar made the case that Zahid was 'innocent until proven guilty'. After all, in the 2018 PH cabinet, a DAP leader with an outstanding court case took up a senior ministership. In Zahid's case, it was agreed that the criminal proceedings would continue and would be considered separately from UMNO participating in the government. The consensus attitude was Anwar would deal with the issue if Zahid was found guilty in due course.²¹ For most PH supporters and urban Malaysians, it became a non-issue when it was pointed out that had UMNO supported PN, then a PN government would be monoracial. In fact, there was not a single Chinese or Indian candidate elected under PN. Contrast this with PH, which had about 50 ethnic Chinese and Indian MPs.

Conclusion

The 15th general elections elections saw the remarkable comeback for Anwar Ibrahim. From the time he was sacked as deputy prime minister in 1998, it took 24 years before he ascended to Malaysia's highest office. Along the way, he was found guilty of sodomy under controversial circumstances, served two jail terms, was beaten up by the deputy police chief in jail, and received a royal pardon. Although strictly speaking, he did not win GE15, he was able to cobble together a coalition post-election and the palace gave him the opportunity to form a governing coalition.

The most surprising thing of course was the kingmaker. UMNO, despite only holding 30 seats, exercised that role. For reasons outlined above, it decided that its best option was to support an Anwar administration. This was a remarkable turnaround as UMNO was the main political adversary of Anwar for the past quarter of a century.

The other important issue arising from GE15 is the role of the King and the Malay rulers. Malaysia inherited the British Westminster system of government where the constitutional monarchy is strictly a non-political institution. The royals were forced to decide which candidate it thought could command the confidence of Parliament in 2020 and 2022. When none of the political coalitions could claim a clear majority, the King and the Malay rulers were forced to pick the winner in both cases. While the royalists in Malaysia will immediately claim this was always the inherent role of the Malay rulers as a constitutional safeguard, in reality, this has the potential to undermine the democratic norms in the long run. This may create a norm under which all deadlocked election results will, in future, be decided by the palace, rather than through the holding of fresh

elections or through forcing the political class to come up with a solution. Relying on the palace will damage the principle that election outcomes should carry weight and political legitimacy; the polity will conclude, and not unreasonably, that when no clear winners emerge in any election, intervention by the monarchy will be the inevitable way forward and that the governments established thus will be beholden to the palace.

This fear, not spoken about in public because of fears about the use of sedition laws, is far more widespread than is popularly imagined. Six of Malaysia's states will hold state-level elections in 2023 and there could be the real possibility of the respective state rulers being called upon to intervene. Even if there is a clear winner in the polls, it is not inconceivable that the ruler may try to influence the selection of the *menteri-besar* (chief minister) of the state.

Going forward, the Malaysian political environment has now profoundly changed. Prior to GE15, conventional wisdom was that PAS, and the conservative Islamic bloc were largely confined to the Malay heartland states (Terengganu, Kelantan, Perlis, Kedah). This may no longer be the case. In terms of actual votes, PAS made significant gains in states like Penang, Pahang, Perak and Selangor. A rather simplistic way of summarising this phenomenon is to say PAS is now the dominant political force among the Malays in the entire northern half of the Malay peninsula. This will have profound political consequences for a multi-racial country like Malaysia.

The question then is: is GE15 a permanent realignment of Malay votes from Malay nationalism, espoused by UMNO and PPBM, to an Islamic worldview as advocated by PAS? The answer to that question will be answered in 2023 when six peninsular Malaysian states will be holding their state elections. If PAS can repeat their GE15 electoral success in these states, then we are probably going to see a permanent realignment of the Malay/Muslim vote, towards a more conservative Malaysia. If PAS is unable to duplicate its performance, then what we saw in GE15 can be seen as an isolated occurrence.

In the opinion of the present author, the march of political Islam maybe unstoppable in Malaysia. PAS, with its *Ketuanan Melayu Islam* (Malay Islam Supremacy) ideology, is now the party of choice among the rural Malays in Peninsular Malaysia. While they may not reject the current political system wholesale or wholeheartedly, it is clear they want more Islamic elements inserted into the political system. In other words, *Ketuanan Melayu Islam* is Malay identity politics.²² The challenge for the new multiracial administration of Anwar is to show that the current system can meet the needs of everyone, including the rural conservative Malay population. If the new administration adopts more Islamic stances to appease the conservative Malays, it will only start the slippery process whose logical conclusion inevitably will be that Malaysia becomes a *de facto* Islamic state. That would be a tragedy for a country that has always prided itself as a modern, progressive Muslim-majority country.

In the immediate future, the Malaysian polity is highly polarised with no middle ground. The two biggest parties are PAS with 43 seats and DAP with 40 seats. They are on the absolute opposite sides when it comes to their respective ideologies and vision for the country. PAS wants an Islamic state based on *Ketuanan Melayu Islam* while DAP wants a secular, liberal Malaysia based on a multiracial and multireligious polity. There is no middle ground between these two extremes. This is the Malaysian tragedy that has come out of GE15.

Notes

1. For details on the fall of the PH government, see James Chin, Malaysia: The 2020 Putsch for Malay Islamic Supremacy, *The Round Table*, 109: 3, pp 288–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2020.1760495>.
2. In this paper, UMNO and BN are used interchangeably. In normal usage, most Malaysians see BN as UMNO and UMNO as BN as UMNO totally dominates the coalition.
3. James Chin. “Racism towards the Chinese Minority in Malaysia: Political Islam and Institutional Barriers.” *The Political Quarterly* 93, no. 3 (2022): 451–459. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.13145>.
4. For details on Muhyiddin’s fall, see James Chin, Malaysia in 2021: Another Regime Change and the Search for Malay Political Stability, *Southeast Asian Affairs 2022*, <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789815011036-013>.
5. The candidates came from Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (ISMA), a hard-line Islamic group. See *Indians, Chinese imported to dispossess Malays of ‘birthright’, ISMA claims* (<https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2014/04/21/indians-chinese-imported-to-dispossess-malays-of-birthright-isma-claims/656063>).
6. In the end, all GTA candidates lost, including Mahathir himself. Not only did all GTA candidates lost, they all lost their electoral deposit as well. This was a total rejection of Mahathirism.
7. James Chin. “The 1963 Malaysia Agreement (MA63): Sabah and Sarawak and the Politics of Historical Grievances.” In S Lemièrè (ed.), *Minorities Matter: Malaysian Politics and People* (ISEAS: Singapore), pp. 75–92. 2019.
8. Bridget Welsh, A divided electorate: Preliminary analysis on ethnic voting, *Malaysiakini*, 25 Nov 2022 (<https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/645661>); Ong Kian Ming, State, Constituency and Local differences in voter support for PH, PN and BN in GE15 (using data from P102 Bangi), 2 Dec 2022 (<https://dapmalaysia.org/Kenyataan-Akhbar/2022/12/02/37302/>).
9. The GRS is a collection of largely Sabah-based political parties pursuing Sabah rights and autonomy under MA63.
10. James Chin. “The Sarawak Chinese voters and their support for the Democratic Action Party (DAP).” *Japanese Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 34, no. 2 (1996): 387–401.
11. This section is based on field post-election interviews with knowledgeable PAS, UMNO, PPBM and Gerakan party members, supplemented by the author’s own observations in the field during the campaign.
12. Diyana Ibrahim, Terengganu Umno urges MACC to investigate PAS ‘vote buying’ claims, *The Malaysian Insight*, 30 Nov 2022 (<https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/414748>).
13. Mohd Faizal Musa, “P225” TikTok: Malaysia’s New Constituency?, FULCRUM, 15 Nov 2022 (<https://fulcrum.sg/p225-tiktok-malaysias-new-constituency/>); Ross Tapsell, Co22123 | How Video Campaigning Shaped Malaysia’s Election, *RSIS Commentary*, 30 Nov 2022 (<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/how-video-campaigning-shaped-malaysias-election>); TikTok behind PAS’ victory in 49 seats during GE15, says Hadi Awang’s son, *The Malay Mail Online*, 5 Dec 2022 (<https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2022/12/05/tiktok-behind-pas-victory-in-49-seats-during-ge15-says-hadi-awang-son/43582>).
14. In one conversation, a PAS operative told the author some of the top influencers charged up to RM40,000 for the duration of the campaign.
15. Govt didn’t misuse even a single sen of RM500 billion Covid-19 aid, says Muhyiddin, *Free Malaysia Today*, 16 Nov 2022. (<https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/microsite/2022/11/16/govt-didnt-misuse-even-a-single-sen-of-rm500-billion-covid-19-aid-says-muhyiddin/>); Syed Jaymal Zahiid, Umno info chief wants inquiry into Muhyiddin’s RM600b pandemic spending after PN’s GE15 campaign splurge, *The Malay Mail Online*, 4 Dec 2022 (<https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2022/12/04/umno-info-chief-wants-inquiry-into-muhyiddins-rm600b-pandemic-spending-after-pns-ge15-campaign-splurge/43435>).

16. Amy Chew, Anwar's victory not the only Malaysian shockwave, *The Interpreter*, 1 Dec 2022 (<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/anwar-s-victory-not-only-malaysian-shockwave>).
17. Merdeka Centre, Muslim Youth Survey 2022 (<https://merdeka.org/v2/download/highlights-of-muslim-youth-survey/>).
18. The Conference of Rulers (CoR) is a unique body in Malaysia comprising all the nine hereditary Malay rulers (Sultans). Each of them takes turn to become the Agong (King) for a period of five years. In theory, Malaysia is a ceremonial constitutional monarchy but in practice, the CoR is extremely influential in politics. Individual Sultans have been known to intervene directly in politics by directly selecting the *menteri-besar* (chief minister) of their state against the wishes of the winning political party. The most recent incident occurred in March 2022 when the Johor Sultan chose as *menteri-besar* someone who was not even considered by the winning party in the Johor state elections. See Francis E. Hutchinson, Johor's Menteri Besar Surprise: Poster Boy Makes Way For King's Man, FULCRUM, 29 March 2022 (<https://fulcrum.sg/johors-menteri-besar-surprise-poster-boy-makes-way-for-kings-man/>).
19. Ho Kit Yen, Zahid evades questions about SDs in support of Anwar, *Free Malaysia Today*, 28 June 2022 (<https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2022/06/28/zahid-evades-question-about-sds-in-support-of-anwar/>).
20. The PH and BN pact unveiled, *New Straits Times*, 23 Nov 2022 (<https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2022/11/854192/ge15-ph-and-bn-pact-unveiled>).
21. Innocent until guilty, Anwar responds to calls against 'court cluster' appointments to Cabinet, *Malaysia Now*, 28 Nov 2022 (<https://www.malaysianow.com/news/2022/11/28/innocent-until-guilty-anwar-responds-to-calls-against-court-cluster-appointments-to-cabinet>).
22. James Chin. "Malaysia: Identity politics, the rise of political Islam and Ketuanan Melayu Islam" in *Religion and identity politics: Global trends and local realities*, pp. 75–95. 2021. https://doi.org/10.1142/9789811235504_0004.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to acknowledge a travel grant from the University of Tasmania for fieldwork in Malaysia during the elections

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

ORCID

James Chin  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3631-9913>