

## **EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION**

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After a nail-biting wait for over a year, during which Malaysians had to endure countless speculations about the date of the inevitable 13th General Elections (GE13), Prime Minister Najib Razak chose the fourth anniversary of his Premiership – 2 April 2013, to announce that GE13 was to take place one month later, on 5 May 2013. Najib Razak's decision to drag the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition to fulfil its full five-year term was unprecedented for a Prime Minister, and all the more peculiar for a sitting leader of government without a personal mandate of his own. The previous two Prime Ministers who inherited administrations from leaders who resigned mid-term, namely Mahathir Mohamad and Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, upon taking over from Hussein Onn and Mahathir in 1981 and 2003 respectively, had called for general elections within a year of assuming the reins of government, and upon subsequent election triumphs, sought to reshuffle membership of cabinets to their own liking in attempts to mould administrations in accordance with their inclinations and interests.

Najib Razak's replacement of Abdullah Badawi in 2009, however, occurred under extraordinary circumstances, pertaining especially to internal troubles within the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the dominant coalition partner in BN. UMNO was then still reeling from the unparalleled setback it received during the Twelfth General Elections (GE12) of March 2008. GE12 had witnessed BN losing its two-thirds parliamentary majority for the first time since 1969 and conceding defeat in five states: Kelantan, Kedah, Pulau Pinang, Perak and Selangor, to an abruptly assembled opposition coalition later christened as the Pakatan Rakyat (PR), comprising the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS). To all intents and purposes, Abdullah Badawi had been forced to bow to demands from higher echelon UMNO figures to hand over the leadership to his erstwhile deputy Najib Razak, thus fast-tracking a previous succession plan which Abdullah had originally crafted for implementation in mid-2010. Sustained pressure towards a quicker-than-intended turnover of incumbents at the apex of UMNO's power structure had come from such influential personalities as Vice President Muhyiddin Yassin and former Premier Mahathir, who since 2006 had

emerged as the foremost critic of Abdullah's administration and leadership at both party and government levels. Once in power, Najib Razak wasted no time in promoting "1Malaysia" as the zeitgeist of contemporary Malaysia, effectively supplanting "*Islam Hadhari*" – the doctrine of civilisational Islam closely associated with Abdullah Badawi but later widely discredited for its failure to stem rising ethno-religious tension during his tenure (Ahmad Fauzi and Muhamad Takiyuddin, 2014).

By mid-2011, opposition politicians, civil society and the new media were already calling for a verdict on what they saw as Najib Razak's lacklustre performance. The BN government was seen as staggering on too many issues, chief of which were pervasiveness of corruption and hesitancy to undertake comprehensive electoral reforms. Whereas past opposition pot-shots on these matters had seldom ventured outside the scope of political rhetoric, since 2008 PR was afforded the opportunity of showcasing competent and transparent models of administration in the industrialised states of Selangor and Pulau Pinang, led by chief ministers from PKR and DAP respectively. PAS-led Kelantan and Kedah were less of a success due to lack of resources and their relatively agrarian economies, while Perak, which was also led by a PAS Chief Minister, was conceded to BN in February 2009 through defections of three PR state legislators, purportedly engineered by Najib Razak who was then Deputy Prime Minister (Ahmad Fauzi and Muhamad Takiyuddin, 2012: 936–942).

The widely anticipated GE13 was touted as a testing ground of whether the beating received by BN parties in 2008 was more than a temporary blip, as had occurred for instance during the GEs of 1990, when they lost Kelantan, and 1999, when PAS added Terengganu to the list of states under its control. On both occasions, experiencing setbacks arising from internal revolts of renegade UMNO leaders Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah in 1987 and Anwar Ibrahim in 1998 did not stop UMNO and BN from bouncing back in GE9 in 1995 and GE11 in 2004. As it turned out, upon the announcement of the GE13 results on 6 May 2013, despite managing to cling to power at the federal level and regaining Kedah, BN had performed worse than in 2008. On the whole, BN's tally of 133 or 59.91% of parliamentary seats and 47.38% of popular votes in 2013 compared unfavourably to its 140 or 62.61% of parliamentary seats and 52.2% of popular votes in 2008. By contrast, PR garnered 89 or 40.09% of parliamentary seats and 50.87% of popular votes in 2013 as compared with 82 or 36.93% of parliamentary seats and 47.8% of popular votes in 2008. Not only had PR continued to deny BN its coveted two-thirds majority, but this time PR also beat BN in terms of popular votes. In urban Selangor and Pulau Pinang, PR bolstered its hold on the state government by securing more than two-thirds of state legislative assembly seats.

With cohorts of the electorate becoming increasingly younger, Malaysia's political scenario shows rising evidence of "secular dealignment," by which electoral choices are determined less by party identification and more by issues

and candidates (Abdul Rashid, 2013). In injecting a measure of unpredictability to Malaysia's electoral battles, the long term implications of this to Malaysian politics in general and to BN-UMNO hegemony – long assumed to be a constant, in particular, are enormous. Volatility of young voters had for some time preceding GE13 been an especial cause for concern to both sides of the political divide and pollsters alike (Khairy, 2012; Ibrahim, 2012). Born and bred in the Internet age, the younger generation are more conversant and comfortable with the new rather than the traditional media which continues to be strongly monitored by the powers that be. Dominance in cyberspace has therefore emerged as a new area of contestation in which the BN juggernaut of the 3M (media, money, machinery) notoriety is rivalled and often out-classed by its political adversaries. Hustings now take place not only within Malaysia's electoral boundaries, but also encompass the global village, as exemplified in the influence wielded by foreign-hosted websites and blogs that devoted close attention to GE13 issues (Arakaki, 2013).

Following the official release of the GE13 results, it became manifest that polling in Malaysia was polarised on not only generational lines, but perhaps more worryingly also on ethno-religious lines accentuated further by urban-rural differences. Urban dwellers, of which the ethnic Chinese number heavily among them, had clearly abandoned BN in favour of PR parties especially DAP, thus almost obliterating BN Chinese-based parties such as the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (GERAKAN) in areas with heavy concentrations of Chinese voters (cf. Choong, 2013). While Najib Razak's cries of a "Chinese tsunami" could not be discounted altogether, the situation is more complex than a reductionist "return to communalism" thesis favoured by some analysts (cf. Case 2013). Societal variables had transmuted so dynamically since the early post-independence onslaught of communalism on Malaysian politics that eventuated tragically in the 13 May racial riots around Kuala Lumpur. As explanatory factors of GE13 results, both ethno-religious and class dimensions were more probably present in fairly balanced proportions (Chin, 2013b).

One must certainly be perturbed by the recent turn towards the extreme right of the UMNO-connected mainstream establishment (Hamayotsu, 2013), buoyed by the irony that UMNO's electoral performance had actually improved from winning 79 seats in 2008 to securing 88 constituencies in 2013, corresponding to a surge from 56 to 66% of total BN representation in Parliament (Chin, 2013a). However, one must also not be dismissive of the increasingly converging postures of Malaysians of different ethnic and religious backgrounds as a result of aggressive nation-building pursued by successive *Perikatan* (Alliance) and then BN governments. Limited though these initiatives may have been within Malaysia's semi-democratic set-up, national unity which transcended primordial loyalties was closer to realisation in 2013 than in 1969. That the May 1969 troubles were not replicated in May 2013 when the Malay-Muslim-

dominated ruling coalition was similarly embattled is itself testament to the political maturity that had developed in a little more than 40 years. Although tensions do still exist between the Malay-Muslim communities and non-Malays, both sides have also found more reasons to come together due to an increasing sense of togetherness and shared identity nurtured by a larger pool of collective memories. This mutual sense of belonging is starkly demonstrated when the country is befallen by calamity, as when the region of Lahad Datu, Sabah, was besieged by southern Filipino Sulu terrorists in February-March 2013 and as the nation painfully endures the aftermath of the mysterious disappearance of Malaysian Airlines flight MH370 from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing on 8 March 2014 (cf. Kanyakumari, 2014).

Statistically, GE13 evinced several novel facets in Malaysia's electoral history. Among the electorate numbering 13.3 million, a staggering 2.5 million were new voters. Besides being a testimony to Malaysia's increasingly youthful demography, suffrage was also expanded to new sets of postal voters such as Malaysians domiciled overseas, on the condition that they had stayed in the country for at least one month in the five years prior to the elections. Conscious of the importance of GE13 in charting out the future path of Malaysian politics, grassroots party activists of both BN and PR had carried out intensive voter registration exercises. Voter turnouts commonly surpassed the 80% mark. The heated political atmosphere was signified by the fact that unlike past elections, GE13 saw no candidate winning uncontested on nomination day. At the parliamentary level, 579 candidates battled it out for the 222 seats at stake, involving 132 straight one-to-one fights, 57 three-cornered fights, 24 four-cornered fights, seven five-cornered fights, one six-cornered fight and one seven-cornered fight. For the 505 state constituencies, 1,321 candidates vied amongst themselves in 320 straight one-to-one contests, 107 three-cornered contests, 42 four-cornered contests, 25 five-cornered contests, 10 six-cornered contests, and 1 seven-cornered contest.

The palpable enthusiasm that Malaysians exhibited towards GE13, however, had hardly any impact on reducing the credibility deficit of the Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya (SPR), whose reputation as a supposedly neutral body has been dealt a severe blow for the past few years due to revelations of complicity with the BN establishment and massive street rallies organised by the Gabungan Pilihanraya Bersih dan Adil (BERSIH) since 2007. Anti-opposition bias and practices thus served as a major campaign issue for PR, whose major slogan throughout the hustings was "UBAH" (change) and "ABU" (Anybody But UMNO, or in Malay, *Asalkan Bukan UMNO*) (Chin, 2013c: 536). True enough, the skewed results of GE13, by which BN's 4% deficit of popular votes was translated into a relatively comfortable 20% advantage of parliamentary seats over PR, have thrown the overall legitimacy of Malaysia's electoral system into question, with glaring examples of malapportionment, gerrymandering and recurring procedural irregularities, quite apart from issues related to its first-past-

the-post voting system (Ostwald, 2013). Corroborating evidence to justify claims of the opposition and civil society activists demanding a revamp of Malaysia's electoral system was later provided by researchers of Sydney University's Electoral Integrity Project, whose report covering the period from July 2012 until the end of 2013 found Malaysia's system to be of low integrity, with a Perception of Electoral Integrity (PEI) ranking of 66 out of 73 elections worldwide (Norris, Frank and Coma, 2014: 5, 64). Since then, the EC has come under heavy criticism from not only the opposition but also from concerned members of the BN-UMNO establishment such as newly elected MCA President Liow Tiong Lai and Global Movement of Moderates (GMM) Chief Executive Officer Saifuddin Abdullah – also a former Deputy Higher Education Minister (Beh, 2013; Tan, 2014). EC's image took a further downturn following the murky admission by its former chairman Abdul Rashid Abdul Rahman regarding the hidden agenda behind past redelineation exercises: that of preserving Malay-Muslim power (*Malaysiakini*, 2013). Among civil society, the non-governmental organisation TINDAK Malaysia has come up with comprehensive delimitation proposals for the EC's attention in order to minimise avenues for systemic abuse in the forthcoming redelineation exercise (Bedi, 2014; TINDAK Malaysia, 2014).

GE13 results also raised important questions pertaining to the path of reform currently being undertaken in the dominant ruling party – UMNO. An objective assessment of the prevailing state of affairs within UMNO will reasonably conclude that the momentum for "transformation" brought about by Najib Razak had waned even before GE13. If Pepinsky (2009: 109–110) hypothesised that Abdullah Badawi's refusal to employ control measures, ruthless tactics and divide and rule strategies on the opposition during GE12 amounted to costly shortcomings on his side, GE13 campaigning showcased a resurrection of such offensive mechanisms. The ruling establishment's campaign was heavily geared towards the urgency of precluding regime change at all costs. Apart from the uninhibited use of developmental politics expenses, caustic rhetoric and fear-mongering were unabashedly maximised by party conservatives since the UMNO General Assembly of 2011. The rise of Malay-Muslim NGOs such as the Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa Malaysia (PERKASA) and the Pertubuhan Kebajikan dan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia (PEKIDA), whose voices submerged the supposedly moderate approach pursued by the government, was a bane to Najib Razak. As GE13 inched nearer, the Malay-centric patriotic song, "Anak Kecil Main Api" (Little Boy Plays With Fire) – notorious for being melodied throughout largely mono-racial courses of the Biro Tatanegara (BTN) – was unprecedentedly aired over the national broadcasting station Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM), in what seemed like a blatant warning to Malays that a regime change would doom their fate to one of wretched existence in the land of their ancestors. Hence, although BN as a coalition fared worse in GE13 as compared with four years ago, UMNO on its own gloated at the surge of the number of constituencies which came under its control. The fear factor, especially powerful

in rural areas, had again worked handsomely to UMNO's advantage, quite aside from the question of national unity as propounded by its own leaders in more cosmopolitan forums.

The ruling establishment's spontaneous reaction to the GE13 results signified that UMNO had yet to learn to lose (Friedman and Wong, 2008). The detention of several political activists under the Sedition Act, impoundment of opposition newspapers, proposals to vet contents of the social media, resuscitation of detention without trial under the Criminal Prevention Act 2013 and mulling punishing civil servants found guilty of disclosing government secrets with a hefty RM1 million fine and jail sentence, all suggest efforts to restore systemic and systematic control over levers of power. In UMNO itself, progressive voices have been marginalised, as can be seen from the outcome of the most recent UMNO elections of December 2013. Except for Khairy Jamaluddin who retained his position as UMNO Youth Chief, leaders widely identified as pro-reform progressives such as Saifuddin Abdullah and Nur Jazlan lost in the contest for places in UMNO's Supreme Council. The present elected Supreme Council generally comprises faces from the old order, conservatives and reactionaries who are largely resistant to ideas of new politics. Considering the expansion of the Supreme Council's role and influence of late, it is difficult to gauge whether Najib Razak would have a fair share of "agents of change" in UMNO and his cabinet, inasmuch as he desires.

The present special *Kajian Malaysia* issue on GE13 features seven articles which discuss various aspects of GE13. Authors' interests lay not so much in the computation of figures and tabulation of results, but rather on long term ramifications of GE13. Collectively, the authors have endeavoured to delve into deeper issues of social, economic and political significance on which GE13 has impacted one way or another. The first article, the guest editors' own *Malaysia's General Elections Amidst the Shadow of Re-Mahathirisation*, explores the phenomenon of rising attachment towards the legacy of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's strongman rule from 1981 to 2003. Perhaps more than any other living Malaysian politician, Mahathir has defined and influenced the national agenda in a manner seen by his BN and especially UMNO compatriots as having installed the ruling coalition into a position of unassailable dominance. Policies pursued by his successors, Abdullah Badawi and Najib Razak, to create a more inclusive polity have triggered backlash from party conservatives who interpret such efforts as precipitating a whittling away of BN-UMNO hegemony. Reviled by foes from the opposition and civil society, both of whom underwent severe repression under Mahathir's regime, Mahathir's firmness on national and ethno-religious matters nevertheless evokes a powerful yearning among Malay-Muslim nationalists bent on preserving hegemony within an ethnically slanted framework of single party dominance. This movement, acting as a countervailing if somewhat reactionary force against a reformist strand in UMNO represented by the likes of Youth Chief-cum-Abdullah Badawi's son-in-law Khairy

Jamaluddin, is seen to have reached a climax with the political wheeling and dealing ahead of GE13. After GE13, Mahathir's hidden hands have been implicated in unsuccessful machinations to install his son Mukhriz, by now Chief Minister of Kedah, as UMNO Vice President and to pressure Prime Minister Najib Razak to quit (*The Star*, 2013; 2014). That Mahathir's statements and antics continue to elicit controversy way past his retirement days serves only to immortalise the imprint that he has profoundly bequeathed to successive generations of Malaysians.

Despite mounting speculation of ethnic barriers being overcome in voting patterns as a new politics transcending primordial loyalties gradually crystallise in Malaysian politics, evidence on the ground does not support the contention that ethnic politics is withering away so soon. This is lent credence by the following two essays focusing on ethnic Chinese and Indian polling trends, by Lee Kam Hing and Thock Ker Pong of Universiti Malaya (UM), and Suresh Kumar Vellymalay of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) respectively. Both accounts emphasise the fact that voting patterns of Malaysia's main ethnic minorities are more diverse than a casual reading of press reports suggest. In both cases, class politics enmeshes intricately with ethno-religious politics, but in varied directions. Only when such interests converge can we reasonably predict changes in voting patterns and extrapolate future trends. Hence, as Lee and Thock show, UMNO's turn towards the right of the political spectrum did alienate significant sections of the Chinese community, but to ascribe their ultimate choice of leaving BN in droves to their ethnicity per se would be exaggerating the magnitude of a "Chinese tsunami". While desertion of Chinese-based government parties did occur, Chinese electoral decisions were not simply a factor of their Chineseness, as fondly made out by the state-controlled Malay vernacular press. Many urban mixed constituencies would not have seen such lop-sided results going against BN's Chinese candidates had it not been for the pro-opposition support from middle class Malays, Indians and other smaller racial groups.

The complex picture applies as well in the case of the Indians, as Suresh Kumar Vellymalay points out. Although a large chunk of Indian support did admittedly return to BN, the more socially mobile and informed among them remained steadfast with the mantra of "change" expounded by PR. It would therefore be premature for BN to take for granted Indian votes as its fixed deposit. Insofar as developmental politics still accounts significantly in grassroots Indian politics, BN might harbour wishful thinking towards such hopes, but such thoughts dangerously assume that discontent among Indians can be invariably pacified by material incentives and rewards in a situation of declining resources. Early in 2014 the ground for Indians' continual support of BN already looks shaky with the resignation of Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) leader P. Waythamoorthy from the post of Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department.

Respite for BN and UMNO however can be found in the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) plantations. In a pioneering contribution, independent analyst Khor Yu Leng examines the political economy of elections in FELDA schemes nationwide. Khor chronicles the organic links that have been developed between the higher echelons of FELDA and UMNO, arguing that if there is one BN vote bank that remains largely intact amidst the large swing towards opposition parties in the last two elections, it lies collectively in FELDA settlements scattered throughout the country. With the rural-urban bias inherent in Malaysia's constituency delineation, making inroads into FELDA-based constituencies is of utmost importance for PR in their quest to capture the states of Johor, Pahang and Negeri Sembilan. Yet, registering a swing in favour of BN, FELDA areas voted in toto against the emerging national pattern, regional differences notwithstanding. One must therefore not be too quick to assume that a BN-UMNO collapse in GE14 is imminent. Pockets of BN-UMNO strongholds do exist, and may even be further entrenched out of sync with what the rising middle class see as its historic revolt against the ruling establishment. A lot of hard work is still required of PR grassroots activists on this front, involving resolute face to face campaigning rather than keyboard cybertrooping.

Nonetheless, PR, among whom youngsters account for a significant proportion of its foot soldiers, thrives when it comes to campaigning over the social media. As brought out by Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani of Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), new media outlets such as blogs, news portals, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Friendster, MySpace and YouTube have served as crucial arenas where modern elections are fought. As the country and the world become more inter-connected, polls can even be won or lost on the social media front. It is a battleground where PR wins hands down, but where BN is catching up fast although perhaps not quick enough. The "first social media election" was how Prime Minister Najib Razak characterised GE13. That BN managed to hold on to its ground against ceaseless PR attacks indicates that despite its attraction of being trendy, inexpensive and easy to use, the impact of social media in Malaysia is as yet circumscribed by other extant variables of Malaysian politics, economy and society. Perhaps all is not lost for BN and UMNO after all.

Whether the above state of affairs perseveres depends on the extent to and direction and speed in which societal changes are internalised as popular culture. This theme runs through the work of Mohd Hariszuan Jaharudin. A young political activist and municipal councillor in Pulau Pinang, Hariszuan analyses socio-political propensities among his peers, and offers explanations behind BN-UMNO's failure to win hearts of the younger generation, which has cost the ruling establishment dearly at the polls. While there is relief for BN in the fact that Malaysia's electoral and societal structures are firmly embedded to its advantage, its strategists cannot afford to rest on their laurels. Simple demography tells us that with the electorate becoming increasingly younger and exposed to global information over the Internet, old-style shenanigans and offers



of *rentier*-based rewards may no longer work in coaxing voters. Transformations in Malaysian popular culture, argues Hariszuan, is gradually converting Malaysia's political space into a strongly anti-BN environment. Although BN activists have tried to arrest the tide that is turning against them, their efforts have not been imaginative and innovative enough to warrant institutional changes even within BN parties, let alone in the country as a whole.

Our final article is written by Asmady Idris and Suzalie Mohamad, both of Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). Asmady and Suzalie recount the history of BN domination in Sabah ever since the state achieved independence within the Malaysian federation in 1963. They offer an elaboration of how and why BN hegemony was still maintained in Sabah despite recurring complaints concerning the marginalisation of the state and its multi-ethnic population within the national framework. Their explanation is grounded in Gramsci's perspective on hegemony, and further intertwined with rules of the political game associated with political consociationalism within the context of a federal structure. The Bornean states of Sabah and Sarawak have undeniably emerged as ever more important battlegrounds for BN to defend as PR gains increasing momentum in the Peninsular-based states. Even though Sabah's position as a BN fortress does not appear to be in danger of being dismantled in the near future, the 3 parliamentary seats and 12 state legislative assembly seats won by the opposition are still a silver lining in the sense that victories in such quantities are unprecedented. Hence, while remaining a BN stronghold, as vast and rural a state as Sabah, and for that matter Sarawak, is not immune from social transformations on the ground that seems to be sweeping relentlessly across contemporary Peninsular Malaysia. However we see it, over the past decade Malaysia's political landscape has certainly undergone pivotal metamorphoses, making elections all the more unpredictable, very unlike the heyday of BN in the 1970s and 1980s. As scholars, students and the public get more excited in offering versatile intellectual takes of Malaysia's developing political conditions, politicians and other political practitioners understandably shiver at the volatility of Malaysia's new political terrain.

We realise that some other important themes related to GE13 may still be missing from the present *Kajian Malaysia* special issue. Circumscribed by last minute withdrawals and rigorous filtering of contributions towards achieving a set of high quality essays, we hope that this special issue does justice in proffering additional dimensions on GE13 to those which other scholars have dutifully expounded. *Kajian Malaysia's* bilingual policy serves as a germane platform in foregrounding the diverse character of Malaysian scholarship and reading audience. We express our heartfelt gratitude to USM Press and especially *Kajian Malaysia's* Editor-in-Chief Shakila Abdul Manan for the trust and cooperation extended to us throughout the process of publication of this special issue, not to forget all contributors and referees of articles. Last but not least we thank both USM and UKM for funding this project via an incentive grant

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