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JOURNAL



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THE SEARCH FOR BALANCE IN MALAYSIAN POLITICS

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Will Malaysia's Next General Election Finally See Political and Economic Power Shared Between the Chinese and Malays?

The key to political stability and continuity in Malaysia is for the Malays to unite under one party, and the Chinese under another, and for these two dominant parties to then form a coalition. That would resolve Malay infighting and bring the Chinese into government, providing the balance needed.

It is expected in many quarters that Malaysia's next general election will be held before the year is out. But what isn't, is the surprising possibility of an alliance between the former ruling nationalist United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and the Chin-

ese-led Democratic Action Party (DAP), ahead of the polls that must be held on or before July 2023.

Conventional wisdom would dictate that the racial polarization and ethnic tensions between two of the country's main ethnic groups over the last four decades should make any such political cooperation impossible. However, in a country which has seen the formation of numerous political configurations and alliances following the end of the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition's sixty-one-year reign in 2018, something that appeared unthinkable less than a year ago may not seem so far-fetched now.

The two racial groups have a long history of sporadic cooperation and mistrust. Ethnic Malays and other indigenous groups form close to 70 percent of the country's 32.6 million population, while the Chinese are the country's second largest racial group at close to 22 percent of the population.¹ Both groups worked closely together ahead of independence in 1957, with the majority Malays represented by UMNO and the Chinese represented by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), which had teamed up with UMNO as part of the then ruling BN coalition. The relationship became strained as a result of systemic inequalities that led to the May 1969 race riots, and again from the late 1980s onwards when the racially based affirmative action policies that were introduced after the riots were being abused, and endemic corruption coupled with the rise of conservative Islamic

¹ Demographic Statistics Third Quarter 2021, Malaysia, Department of Statistics Malaysia, https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemByCat&cat=430&bul_id=N05ydDRXR1BJWVlTdDY4TldHd253dz09&menu_id=LopheU43NWJwRWVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUT09.



factions within the country led to significant racial strife between the two ethnic groups.²

In recent years, the opposition DAP, which now controls almost all the seats previously held by the MCA, has taken over as the champion of the majority of Chinese in the country. In March 2021, delegates at UMNO's annual general assembly voiced their disapproval of any cooperation with the DAP while Lim Guan Eng, the Chinese-led opposition party's secretary general, was quoted as saying his party would not work with the Malay party in the fifteenth general election or GE15 as it is known locally.³

But to paraphrase British statesman Lord Palmerston, there are no eternal allies or perpetual enemies, only interests. Leaders within both parties are now privately saying their entrenched positions may have significantly softened in the lead up to and following UMNO/BN winning twenty-one of the twenty-eight seats in the Melaka state assembly in November 2021. The opposition Pakatan Harapan coalition, consisting of the DAP, former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim's Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), and Islamist party AMANAH, secured only five seats, with the DAP losing almost half the seats it had won previously and PKR completely wiped out.

The irony was also not lost that the elections were called due to a self-inflicted crisis of the then BN state government's making as Malaysians battled the Covid-19 pandemic. But instead of punishing UMNO for its infighting, voters sought to give them a bigger mandate

² Chew, Jay Hong, "A Revision Of Malaysia's Racial Compact," *Harvard Political Review*, August 18, 2021, <https://harvardpolitics.com/a-revision-of-malaysias-racial-compact/>.

³ Predeep Nambiar, "DAP Will Not Work With UMNO In GE15, Says Guan Eng," March 21, 2021, *FMT*, <https://beta2.freemalaysiatoday.net/post/dap-will-not-work-with-umno-in-ge15-says-guan-eng>.

at the polls. The outcome of elections in the southern state of Johore is also unlikely to change the current trend.

One would think UMNO would now unilaterally go for broke in attempting to secure a strong mandate with early polls. But the reality is much more prosaic. The last three years have not been easy for UMNO. Still learning its lessons, the party has partly returned to power first through the “Backdoor” Perikatan Nasional (PN) government, and subsequently also formed part of the current “Malaysian Family” government which had signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the opposition to hold on to power. It is unclear how long the DAP, PKR and the other opposition parties will be able to placate their members in agreeing to work with the current administration, given they do not have any political power in the government.

So, fresh polls are the only way for UMNO and BN to really get the mandate of the people, which will, only then likely bring back some stability and sense of normalcy to Malaysia. And this harks back to one of the hard truths in Malaysia, something that former Premier Najib Razak had been working towards and which he might now have a chance to champion again. Although Najib is now only an advisor to the BN coalition, he still wields significant influence with the coalition and party’s rank and file, as well as among large swaths of voters in the Malay heartland.

Malay-Chinese Relations as Blueprint for Racial Stability

And the reality is that Malaysia can only have a stable government, prosperity, and progress if both the Malays and the Chinese work together as partners in forming a government and in sharing political and economic power. Of course, it is easier said than done and there are



more than two races in Malaysia. I have also not included the East Malaysian factor into the mix. And yes, although other minorities like the Indians will make a difference, I believe the greatest impact will be from Malay-Chinese relations in the peninsula as this will form the foundation upon which relationships with other races can be built.

History has shown that Malaysia's stability and survival is dependent on the Malays working hand in hand with the Chinese. This was the case with the Perikatan Government in 1957, when the freshly agreed social compact between the Malays and Chinese ensured cooperation between UMNO and MCA. This was also the concern when the Chinese vote splintered in Penang in 1969 and the state voted for the Chinese-dominated Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (GERAKAN). However, I believe Gerakan realized very quickly that if the Chinese (collectively) were not partners with the Malays, they would remain out of real power. So, the community was brought back into the power fold when Gerakan became part of Perikatan (which later became the BN coalition) in 1972.

Forty-eight years on, what the country learned the hard way was that having a sizeable non-Malay leadership in power, like the DAP-led Pakatan Harapan (PH) government, was unlikely to work as a Malay-dominated PN coalition managed to seize control in March 2020, ostensibly to return power to the Malays. But on the flip side, a Malay-heavy government like the PN was just as bad and collapsed because of infighting among its Malay leaders. UMNO's initial decision to tie up with the Islamist party PAS through the Muafakat Nasional (MN) pact was a move to help it consolidate and unite the Malay vote and showed immediate results when they won parliamentary and state by-elections in 2019 and 2020.

However, PAS' bid in 2020 to include Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia or BERSATU (a Malay-nationalist party founded by former Premier Mahathir Mohamad in 2016 after he resigned from UMNO) as part of a grand coalition of Malay Muslim parties did not sit well with UMNO, who were unwilling to work with their splinter party. Infighting eventually led to the resignation of then PM Muhyiddin Yassin and his cabinet in August 2021, ending PN's seventeen months in power.

As the country heads towards GE15, the Malays will have to decide whether to back UMNO or PN (now just PAS+BERSATU). And these parties will have to figure out either how to work with one another or destroy their political rivals in a high-stakes game of winner takes all because they realize if Malay votes remain fractured, the current political limbo will continue.

If the Melaka and possibly the Johor state elections are any indicator, it shows Malays may have already collectively made up their minds on which party to back. Although parts of UMNO may be corrupt, they also represent hope for stability. So, the Malays chose the lesser of two evils. And the Malay tsunami that ensued was so great that it even overwhelmed the advantage PH usually had in the split Malay vote.

Despite UMNO's public bravado in claiming to form the next government on its own, party leaders are keenly aware that the key to political stability and continuity in Malaysia is for the Malays to unite under one party and the Chinese under another, and for these two dominant parties to then form a coalition. That would resolve Malay infighting and bring the Chinese into government, providing the balance needed.

Tossed into the wilderness in 2020 after being in power for just twenty-two months, the DAP (which politically represents most Chinese) is keen to get back into the halls of power in Putrajaya, the



country's administrative capital. But the reality remains that they are also facing charges of corruption among their ranks and realize they will need very significant Malay support that PKR and AMANAH are unlikely to have. So, realpolitik would dictate teaming up with the largest Malay party in parliament to get back into power.

Larger questions remain. Will UMNO be able to get rid of the endemic corruption within, and end its race politicking? And what does the future hold for Malaysians who are now forced to settle for a trade-off between corruption and stability? And if the Malay votes remain split, how long will the current stability last before Malaysia goes through the same cycle all over again?

Taking a metaphor from Netflix's *Game of Thrones* series still popular among many Malaysians, this "wheel of power" can only be stopped if there is a strong Malay party whose multiracial coalition is honest with the people about its shortcomings and who are committed to complete reform. And this needs to happen soon, as "winter" will definitely come.

Note on the Author

Romen Bose is an international correspondent with over twenty-two years of reporting experience in Southeast Asia, who worked as a Political Communications Consultant for former Malaysian Premier Najib Razak for six years. Before setting up his own consultancy, Romen was head of Asian social media at IHS Markit and worked as a senior foreign correspondent with international news agency Agence France Presse based in Kuala Lumpur. He was the founding president of the Foreign Correspondents Club of Malaysia and a senior producer with the English service of Al Jazeera International when it opened its

regional base in Malaysia. Prior to this, Romen was the Indochina Bureau Chief for Channel News Asia, Assistant Director for the north-west India region at the Singapore Tourism Board, and also consulted for the United Nations. Romen has researched and written extensively on the Second World War and its impact on Southeast Asia. His recent book, *Final Reckoning: An Insider's View of the Fall of Malaysia's Barisan Nasional Government*, was published by Penguin Random House in December 2021.