



ASIA MAIOR

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Asia in 2019: Escalating international tensions and authoritarian involution

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Nicola Mocci
Filippo Boni

viella

A large, intricate golden mandala pattern is positioned on the right side of the cover. It features complex geometric and floral designs, including concentric circles, scalloped edges, and radiating lines, creating a rich, textured background.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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When this Asia Maior issue was finalized and the Covid-19 pandemic raged throughout the world, Kian Zaccara, Greta Maiorano and Giulio Santi, all children of Asia Maior authors (Luciano Zaccara, Diego Maiorano and Silvia Menegazzi), were born. We (the Asia Maior editors) have seen that as a manifestation of Life, reasserting itself in front of Thanatos. It is for this reason that we dedicate this issue to Kian, Greta and Giulio, with the fond hope that they will live in a better world than the one devastated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Saleena Saleem

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The Barisan Nasional (BN) opposition coalition led by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) won four out of five by-election contests in 2019. The relatively short time frame between BN's by-election wins and its historic electoral defeat in May 2018 convinced UMNO's leadership that its party recovery strategy was fruitful. This strategy entailed the forging of a political cooperation around the theme of Malay unity with its long-time Islamist rival, the Parti Islam Se Malaysia, and the instrumentalisation of Malay fears over the loss of constitutional birth rights under the new Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition government. A number of ethno-religious controversies at the national level also contributed to a polarised social and political context that exacerbated inter-ethnic distrust and benefitted BN in the by-elections. Both Malays and ethnic minorities perceived the PH's government's disjointed responses to these controversies as ineffectual. Malaysians across the ethnic divide also experienced little improvement on their cost of living woes. The PH government's attempts to boost the economy saw it re-establish large-scale projects with China. Yet the pragmatic realities of Malaysia's economic interests constrained its new foreign policy approach of positioning itself as a leader in the Muslim world. This was evident in Malaysia's muted response to China's treatment of the Uyghurs at the inaugural Kuala Lumpur Summit on Muslim issues. This contrasted with the organised protests by Malay groups at the Chinese embassy in the nation's capital as the year came to a close. These factors cumulatively contributed to an overall citizenry disillusionment with the PH government.

1. Introduction

The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) returned to the seat of power in March 2020 when it formed a new Malay-dominated alliance, Perikatan Nasional (National Alliance, PN), with break-away politicians from the multi-ethnic Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope, PH) coalition government and its long-time political rival, the Parti Islam Se Malaysia (Islamic Party of Malaysia, PAS). UMNO's return to government occurred less than two years after it suffered a historic general election defeat on 9 May 2018 after having governed Malaysia for 61 uninterrupted years.¹

1. UMNO's tenure as a dominant ruling party was previously interrupted by the National Operations Council (NOC), an emergency administrative body that was instituted after the May 13th racial rioting incident in 1969 and disbanded in

This article analyses the key developments in 2019 which had increasingly fuelled public disillusionment with the PH government, and which ultimately contributed to the stunning reversal in UMNO's political fortune in 2020. Section 2 examines UMNO's political motivations in the cultivation of a cooperation with PAS on the basis of Malay unity. Section 3 looks at how the UMNO-PAS pact crafted and instrumentalised Malay fears about being marginalised under the PH government during the 2019 by-elections, which benefitted UMNO electorally. Section 4 shows how ethno-religious controversies and politicians' responses contributed to a polarised socio-political context and exacerbated inter-ethnic distrust. Section 5 looks at the reasons for the persistence of economic insecurities. Section 6 examines the PH government's unconvincing attempt to adopt a more central leadership role in the Muslim world as part of Malaysia's new foreign policy approach and to regain Malay Muslim trust.

2. Malay unity in UMNO's post-GE 14 political recovery strategy

The Barisan Nasional (National Front, BN) multi-ethnic opposition coalition, led by UMNO, experienced a remarkable turnaround in its electoral viability, with four out of five by-election wins in 2019. This was a tremendous morale booster for UMNO.

The UMNO by-election wins occurred in a context that was marked by a pronounced spike in ethnic politics. For much of 2019, ethno-religious issues were at forefront of domestic politics. This magnified both intra-Malay and inter-ethnic distrust in an already polarised political and social landscape. BN's loss of reins to government to the PH coalition had exacerbated fears among some Malays that non-Malays would endanger their *bumiputera* (indigenous) birth rights enshrined in Article 153 of the Malaysian Constitution. This perception gained ground as the year progressed, even though the PH coalition government was fronted by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed, who had a track record of protecting Malay rights as the UMNO head during his first tenure as prime minister (1981-2003). Mahathir's record made it easier for some Malays to switch support from BN to PH during the 14th General Election (GE-14). Furthermore, Mahathir who headed PH's newest constituent party, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Malaysian United Indigenous Party, Bersatu), professed to uphold Malay rights. The leadership from PH's other constituent parties, the Malay-dominated parties, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party, PKR) and Parti Amanah Negara (National Trust Party, Amanah), as well

1971. The NOC was headed by key UMNO Malay politicians. See Marvin L. Rogers, 'Malaysia and Singapore: 1971 Developments', *Asian Survey*, 12, 2, Feb. 1972, pp. 168-176.

as the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP), also expressed a similar stance. Yet from previous election campaigns in 2008 and 2013, DAP and PKR, were known to advocate for equality for all Malaysians. Both parties had proposed dismantling the longstanding pro-Malay affirmative action policies that had become conflated with Malay birth rights in favour of needs-based assistance open to all races instead.² In 2019, PKR and DAP held the largest and second-largest number of parliamentary seats respectively in the PH government.

Conversely, UMNO had consistently branded itself as a defender of *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay dominance) and Malay special rights, which had structured the order of politics in Malaysia for decades. BN was organised as a coalition of ethnic parties, with UMNO as the dominant Malay party leading the minority ethnic parties: Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). Throughout 2019, UMNO chose to maintain its *ketuanan Melayu* positioning to differentiate itself from the PH government, as it leveraged on opportunities to magnify Malay fears.

The key element in UMNO's political recovery strategy in 2019 was the forging of a cooperation around the theme of Malay unity with its long-time political rival, PAS. This cooperation began in earnest in the aftermath of GE-14. With BN's three consecutive by-election wins in January, March and April, the credibility of UMNO's political cooperation with PAS was reinforced. By September 2019, UMNO and PAS formalised their political cooperation with the signing of a National Consensus Charter. With the formalised agreement, UMNO's overtures to PAS to collaborate on Malay and Muslim causes, which had tentatively begun in 2016 appeared to come to full circle in 2019. The year came to a close with another significant by-election win for BN in November.

The collaboration between UMNO and PAS in 2019 constituted a significant development in Malaysian politics. Notwithstanding short-lived alliances between the two ideologically different parties in the 1970s – UMNO, a Malay nationalist party, and PAS, an Islamist party – had historically competed for the same crucial Malay Muslim voter base, which comprised 61% of the total population in multicultural Malaysia. In recent times, faced with reputational deficit challenges over the highly publicised IMDB financial scandal in 2015-16,³ UMNO helmed by then Prime Minister Najib Razak, made efforts to establish a tacit understanding with PAS.⁴ Najib went as far as to show support for a PAS parliamentary bill that would have paved the way for new provisions of *hudud* (Islamic criminal law) punishments in the

2. Kenneth Cheng, Eileen Ng & Faris Mokhtar, 'Voters not swayed by racial politics in Malaysian GE, but how long will that last?', *Channel News Asia*, 15 May 2018.

3. Stefano Caldirola, 'Malaysia 2015: Najib Razak's hardest year', *Asia Maior 2015*, pp. 213 ff.

4. Eileen Ng & Elizabeth Zachariah, 'The Big Read: After a year of living dangerously, Najib and Umno ride high', *Today*, 30 July 2016.

PAS-held state of Kelantan; prior to this, the UMNO-led government had consistently stymied all other attempts by PAS.⁵ Najib also shared the stage with PAS head Abdul Hadi Awang on Muslim solidarity events such as those for the Rohingya refugee crisis in late 2016.⁶

The warming of ties between UMNO and PAS in the lead up to the GE-14 did not result in tangible outcomes – the PAS *hudud* bill was eventually postponed and both parties never agreed on an electoral pact.⁷ Yet UMNO calculated that the overtures to PAS would reap other benefits. First, given that Malays increasingly identified themselves by religion rather than by ethnicity,⁸ the collaboration between UMNO and PAS on Muslim causes signalled to undecided Malay voters that both parties were willing to set aside political differences to work together and strengthen the Malay Muslim community. Hadi even encouraged Malay Muslims to vote for either UMNO or PAS because he claimed that in comparison to the other Malay parties in the opposition, both UMNO and PAS had shown to «accept Islam» by working in agreement on Muslim causes such as *hudud* implementation.⁹ Second, based on UMNO's two massive by-election wins in 2016 and historical voting patterns, UMNO rationalised that a three-way split in the Malay Muslim vote (i.e. between UMNO, PAS and the opposition coalition) would benefit it electorally.¹⁰ Third, UMNO banked on possible swing votes by ethnic minorities, who were alarmed by PAS' renewed right wing Islamic politics and the prospects of a fractured opposition coalition.¹¹

As such, by facilitating PAS' renewed focus on *hudud* as GE-14 approached, UMNO strategically magnified ideological differences between PAS and its former opposition coalition partners, which divided the opposition.¹² As an opposition coalition partner, PAS drew in a significant proportion of the Malay vote in the rural heartlands during the 2008 and 2013 general elections, which contributed to the opposition's electoral gains. The DAP, whose core supporters were mainly non-Malays, opposed PAS'

5. Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, 'The Hudud Controversy in Malaysia: Religious Probity or Political Expediency?', *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2015, pp. 205-219.

6. Sheridan Mahavera, 'How one Islamist party could sway Malaysia's election', *South China Morning Post*, 18 February 2017.

7. Helen Ting, 'UMNO's hand in Malaysian Islamic law', *East Asia Forum*, 6 June 2017.

8. Teo Cheng Wee, 'More Malays say they are Muslim first: Malaysian poll', *The Straits Times*, 12 August 2015; Norsharil Saat, 'Johor Survey 2017: Attitudes Towards Islam, Governance and The Sultan', *ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute Perspective*, No. 83, 10 November 2017.

9. 'Hadi: Choose either PAS or Umno', *Malay Mail*, 16 April 2017.

10. Rashaad Ali, 'Malaysian By-Elections: Najib's Winning Ways', *RSIS Commentary*, 30 June 2016.

11. Saleena Saleem, 'Malaysia's Right Wing Push: Chinese Swing Benefitting BN?', *RSIS Commentary*, 29 June 2016.

12. Helen Ting, 'UMNO's hand in Malaysian Islamic law'.

renewed *hudud* agenda. This reinforced PAS' stance to remain independent from the PH coalition in GE-14.¹³

BN's stunning loss in GE-14 showed these calculations by UMNO to be a failed strategy. The multiple converging factors that led to UMNO's loss included the electorate's rejection of corrupt actions and abuses of power by Najib and other UMNO figures linked to the 1MDB financial scandal;¹⁴ the spread of news about Najib's abuses and nepotism through the use of smartphones¹⁵; former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed's credible presence in the opposition coalition that appealed to Malay voters;¹⁶ youth concerns over economic vulnerabilities;¹⁷ ethnic minority voters' abandonment of BN;¹⁸ and the changing Malay middle class expectations on socio-economic mobility that went beyond UMNO's parochial racial and religious appeals.¹⁹

In particular, the latter analyses on changing voter expectations contributed to an internal dissent within UMNO over the need for party re-branding on the basis that its exclusively Malay nationalist outlook was no longer politically viable. Critical voices within UMNO such as the party's former Youth Chief Khairy Jamaluddin argued that political survival necessitated a move away from identity politics of the past to one that was centred on inter-ethnic inclusivity.²⁰ Khairy though could not muster enough support in his run for party president in June 2018, which indicated significant resistance to change within UMNO.²¹

UMNO's claim to be able to meet ethnic minority needs through the political vehicle of BN's ethnic minority parties was thoroughly demolished

13. Sheridan Mahavera, 'How one Islamist party could sway Malaysia's election'.

14. Muhamad M. N. Nadzri, 'The 14th General Election, the Fall of Barisan Nasional, and Political Development in Malaysia, 1957-2018', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 37, 3, 2018, pp. 139-171.

15. Ross Tapsell, 'The Smartphone as the «Weapon of the Weak»: Assessing the Role of Communication Technologies in Malaysia's Regime Change', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 37, 3, 2018, pp. 9-29.

16. Walid Jumblatt Abdullah, 'The Mahathir effect in Malaysia's 2018 election: the role of credible personalities in regime transitions', *Democratization*, 26, 3, 2019, pp. 521-536.

17. Bridget Welsh, '«Saviour» Politics and Malaysia's 2018 Electoral Democratic Breakthrough: Rethinking Explanatory Narratives and Implications', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 37, 3, 2018, pp. 85-108.

18. James Chin, 'From Ketuanan Melayu to Ketuanan Islam: UMNO and the Malaysian Chinese: Final Breakup: UMNO and the Chinese in GE14', in Bridget Welsh (ed.), *The End of UMNO? Essays on Malaysia's Former Dominant Party New and Expanded Post GE-14 Edition*, Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2018, pp. 255-304.

19. Dan Slater, 'Malaysia's Modernisation Tsunami', *East Asia Forum*, 20 May 2018.

20. Tashny Sukumaran, 'Malaysia's reform-minded 'young guns', from Nurul Izzah to Khairy Jamaluddin, take aim at race-based politics', *South China Morning Post*, 4 January 2019.

21. 'Ahmad Zahid Hamidi elected UMNO party president', *Channel News Asia*, 30 June 2018.

in GE-14. Having lost over 90% of the Chinese vote and 75% of the Indian vote to PH, the UMNO old guards, headed by its new party president Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, turned its focus to the Malay electorate. The focus was unsurprising because PH was estimated to have garnered only around 23% of the Malay vote, with the bulk going to UMNO (45%) and PAS (32%).²² Instead of rebranding the party around a message of inter-ethnic inclusivity, UMNO leveraged its decades-long experience in capitalising ethno-religious issues to stoke inter-ethnic fears and de-legitimise its opponents for political gain – albeit with one significant difference. Where in previous decades UMNO lambasted PAS as a fundamentalist party with outdated ideas for a modern Muslim majority state like Malaysia,²³ UMNO now concentrated on cultivating a cooperative relationship with PAS.

This strategy was continued with UMNO's Deputy President Mohamad Hasan when Zahid was forced to take a leave from party duties over corruption charges on the 1MDB financial scandal. However, with each BN by-election win in 2019, scandal-ridden UMNO figures such as Zahid and Najib took on increasingly more visible roles – Zahid returned to the party president post in June; Najib's popularity during the by-election campaigns soared with the «malu apa, bossku» (what's the shame, my boss) social media phenomenon that depicted him as an unyielding leader for marginalised Malays, even as he battled corruption charges over 1MDB in court.²⁴

The perceived successes of the UMNO-PAS emphasis on Malay unity undoubtedly first arose with the new PH coalition government's reversal of its decision to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (Icerd) and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) at the close of 2018. UMNO and PAS had framed the PH government's initial decision to ratify the international treaties as a threat to the Malay monarchy, Malay rights and to Islam. Crucially, both parties undermined the PH government's credibility with Malays by accusing it of planning to abolish Malay rights.²⁵ Along with pro-Islam activist groups, UMNO and PAS organised a massive street protest in the country's capital that demonstrated their ability to rally Malay Muslims around fears of losing their birth rights and the primacy of Islam in Malaysia. The massive turnout was reflective of poll surveys conducted between October and December 2018 that indicated over 60% of Malays held the belief

22. Kenneth Tee, 'Survey: Despite Pakatan win in GE14, rural voters still back BN, Umno', *Malay Mail*, 16 September 2019.

23. Lee Hock Guan, 'Malay Dominance and Opposition Politics in Malaysia', *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2002, p. 177-195.

24. Terence Tang, 'The Najib «bossku» hype: Chance on speed or planned campaign?', *Malay Mail*, 29 April 2019; Mazwan Nik Anis, 'Time for me to come back and lead Umno, says Zahid', *The Star*, 2 July 2019.

25. Norsharil Saat, 'Malaysia's anti-ICERD rally a reality check for Pakatan Harapan', *Channel News Asia*, 16 December 2018.

that non-Muslims, in particular those from DAP, were in control of the PH government.²⁶

This instrumentalisation of race and religion, with PAS as a political ally rather than foe, then shaped UMNO's political recovery strategy and set the tone for domestic politics in 2019. It also underlined the recurring theme in UMNO's by-election campaigns during 2019 in which the PH government and its constituent parties were routinely portrayed as a threat to Malay unity – DAP was accused of Chinese chauvinism while the Malay parties, Bersatu, PKR and Amanah, a splinter of PAS, functioned as powerless «DAP spokesperson».²⁷ The UMNO-PAS cooperation then was framed by the leadership of both parties as necessary to bolster Malay Muslim unity; Malay Muslim unity would counter attempts by the PH government, which was dominated by non-Malay minorities with a reform agenda shaped by secularist principles, to marginalise Malays.

3. *UMNO's renewed relevance in Malaysian politics*

With Malay unity as the basis for political cooperation, UMNO and PAS agreed to avoid the three-cornered contests that had benefitted PH in GE-14. This strategy was put into play in the first four by-election contests held in 2018. Although neither party won, UMNO and PAS were able to effectively negotiate the seat allocations without overt signs of party infighting. This was notable because there was a significant level of enmity between hardcore UMNO and PAS grassroots members, who found it hard to reconcile the new UMNO-PAS «marriage» with the decades long history of being bitter rivals.²⁸

For all of the 2019 by-elections, PAS chose not to contest the seats, which allowed BN to reap electoral rewards. The first by-election contest on January 26 was for the Cameron Highlands federal parliamentary seat in the state of Pahang. BN had marginally won the seat during GE-14, but the results were later nullified due to a court ruling that BN's candidate had bribed voters.²⁹ The seat was held by BN's ethnic Indian constituent party, the MIC, since the seat's creation in 2004. For the by-election though, BN opted to field Ramli Mohd Nor, who was from the indigenous Orang Asli ethnic group, a Muslim, and a member of UMNO. This was an astute move

26. 'Majority of Malays unhappy with Pakatan but have hope, says study', *Today*, 31 January 2019.

27. 'Better to have PAS-Umno alliance than work with DAP, Dr M told', *Malaysia Kini*, 9 April 2019.

28. Azril Annuar & Jerry Choong, 'Umno-PAS 'marriage' set to alienate hardcore grassroots, warn Pakatan leaders', *Malay Mail*, 6 March 2019.

29. Nurbaiti Hamdan, 'Court nullifies BN's GE14 victory for Cameron Highlands seat', *The Star*, 30 November 2018.

because the Orang Asli ethnic group constituted the third largest (21.56%) after the Malays (33.5%) and the Chinese (29.48%) in the region. The Orang Asli group had strongly supported BN in previous elections (up to 95% of the votes in Orang Asli majority districts), which UMNO sought to retain. The prospect of having the first Orang Asli MP in Parliament appealed to many within the Orang Asli group.³⁰ UMNO's choice to field an Orang Asli candidate also shaped the campaign agenda for PH, which similarly made attempts to position itself as the voice of marginalised Orang Asli.³¹

Yet PH had an uphill task. It fielded an ethnic Indian, Manogaran Marimuthu from DAP, who had contested the seat twice before and lost. Furthermore, the by-election was held only weeks after a Malay fireman, Muhammad Adib Mohd Kassim, died from critical injuries sustained after responding to a riot between two Indian factions at the Seafield Sri Maha Mariamman Devasthanam temple in Selangor in November 2018.³² In the months before Adib's passing, tensions between Hindu Indians and Malays became fraught over accusations as to who or what actually caused his injuries. During the by-election campaign, Manogaran's Indian ethnicity and his party affiliation with DAP became a turn-off for Malay voters as racist rhetoric reinforced the growing negative perceptions over the PH government's failure to locate and prosecute those responsible for Adib's death. Flyers that accused Manogaran and the DAP of «killing» Adib were also circulated days before the election.³³

BN further benefited from strong grassroots support as Pahang was an UMNO stronghold, having retained the state during GE-14.³⁴ It was supported by PAS, who campaigned for BN's candidate. This combination of a straight contest between BN and PH, BN's choice of the Orang Asli candidate and Malay voter suspicions about the PH candidate, enabled BN to convincingly win with a 3,238-vote majority compared to its slim margin win of 567 votes during GE-14.

The second by-election of the year was held on 2 March for the Semenyih state-level urban seat in the state of Selangor, which is a PH stronghold. The by-election was called after Bakhtiar Mohd Nor from PH's constituent party Bersatu passed away while in office. The Semenyih seat in the Malay-majority district was won by Bakhtiar during GE 14, with 50.8% of the votes compared to BN's 31.3%. PAS once again made the decision not to contest the seat, but not before highly publicised news of a meeting between Bersatu's

30. Scott Edwards, 'What Does the Cameron Highland By-Election Mean for the Orang Asli?', *The Diplomat*, 2 February 2019.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Norsharil Saat, 'A Complicated Political Reality Awaits the Malays', *ISEAS Perspective*, 21 May 2019.

33. 'Fireman's death turns Malays off Pakatan's Indian candidate in Cameron Highlands by-election', *Today*, 25 January 2019.

34. Norsharil Saat, 'A Complicated Political Reality Awaits the Malays'.

Mahathir and PAS' Hadi emerged. Mahathir claimed that Hadi agreed not to support UMNO in the by-election because the candidate was not from DAP as had been in the Cameron Highlands by-election. PAS later accused Mahathir of playing mind games and asserted that the only agreement reached was to support Mahathir when it came to Malay Muslim causes; a reference to a brewing power struggle within the PH coalition about Mahathir's now uncertain GE-14 promise to pass the reins of premiership to PKR's head, Anwar Ibrahim, after two years.³⁵ Mahathir inadvertently projected an image of a weakened PH that required PAS support; the choice of a young and inexperienced Bersatu candidate in Muhammad Aiman Zainali, the son-in-law of Bakhtiar, further reinforced this perception. UMNO, on the other hand, fielded Zakaria Hanafi a grassroots veteran party member from the Semenyih area, who was able to connect with the local ground. BN's win over PH in the Semenyih by-election was aided by a swing in the Malay middle class vote and PAS voters who backed BN – an estimated 59% of Malays voted for BN, compared to 35% during GE-14.³⁶ The Malay urban middle class swing was telling as these voters were known to prioritise good governance and economic concerns over identity concerns and formed PH's core voter base. The swing indicated that some urban Malays had become sensitive to claims about Malay marginalisation under the new PH government.

Similarly, BN's third by-election win on 13 April was for the Rantau state-level seat in a Malay majority district (55% Malays; 26% Indians; 19% Chinese) in the state of Negeri Sembilan. The by-election contest was between UMNO's then acting head, Mohamad Hasan, who held the seat for three terms and PKR's Streram Sinnansamy. The PH campaign was noted for the absence of key PH leaders such as Mahathir, which appeared to confirm speculations on the unravelling of PH's cohesiveness due to in-fighting in the constituent parties. Within PKR, a power struggle appeared to ensue between PKR's head Anwar Ibrahim and deputy head Azmin Ali, with thinly veiled accusations aired out in the media between pro-Azmin and pro-Anwar factions. Then there were the on-going suspicions about Mahathir's purportedly favourable relationship with Azmin and the possible formation of a pact to prevent Anwar's ascension to premiership.³⁷ The BN campaign, on the other hand, led by UMNO presented a united front, and was once again solidly backed by PAS.³⁸

PH was able to break BN's by-election winning streak on May 11 when it retained the Sandakan federal parliamentary seat in the state of Sabah.

35. 'PAS: We didn't say we won't work with Umno in Semenyih', *Free Malaysia Today*, 17 February 2019.

36. 'BN wins Semenyih with 50.44pct vote share', *Malaysia Kini*, 2 March 2019.

37. Faris Mokhtar, 'Nurul Izzah's «dictator» comment - what it means for Pakatan Harapan, her father and her political career', *Today*, 26 March 2019.

38. Trinna Leong, 'By-election in Rantau: Pakatan Harapan loses third straight fight at polls', *Straits Times*, 14 April 2019.

The seat was in a Chinese-majority district (51%) and the DAP incumbent candidate won 75% of the votes. The win was also facilitated by PH's partner, Parti Warisan Sabah (PWS). Shafie Apdal, the PWS head and the Chief Minister of Sabah, was a former UMNO member, who held much influence among Malay voters in Sabah. Yet this PH win was also widely expected.

However, the magnitude of BN's final by-election win of the year for the federal parliamentary seat of Tanjung Piai in the state of Johor held on 16 November was surprising to political observers. The by-election was called after the death of the Bersatu MP, Md Farid Md Rafik. BN's candidate Wee Jeck Seng was from the MCA, BN's Chinese constituent party that was decimated during GE 14 (MCA managed to retain only one parliamentary seat). Wee won 65.6% of the vote compared to the 26.7% managed by the Karmaine Sardini from PH's Bersatu.³⁹ During GE-14, Wee only narrowly lost to Md Farid by a 1% margin. The by-election results indicated that Wee, who had served as MP for the district since 2008, maintained his clout there. The results also showed a significant shift to BN by both Malay (13.2%) and Chinese voters (34.5%). The Malay shift was contributed in part by PAS supporters, who voted for the PAS candidate (6.6%) during GE 14, but now backed BN.⁴⁰ Although PH attempted to scare Chinese voters about the UMNO-PAS alliance's emphasis on Malay unity, UMNO's backing of Wee, an ethnic Chinese, allowed it to claim it was pluralistic in its practice.

At the close of 2018, UMNO's political viability was severely questioned, with some UMNO members even contemplating shifting to Mahathir's Bersatu.⁴¹ However, the four by-election wins in 2019 indicated that UMNO was still a relevant force in Malaysian politics. There were three main factors that contributed to UMNO's reversal in electoral fortunes. Firstly, UMNO was able to capitalise on growing Malay fears of marginalisation under the PH government as the year progressed and emphasised the necessity of Malay unity. PH had won GE-14 largely on a campaign that promised changes rooted in principles of good governance. For most Malay voters, the desired change was an end to the large-scale corruption in politics epitomised by Najib's misuse of state funds from 1MBD, and a diminution of the cost of living.⁴² Yet, according to UMNO and PAS, the purported change by the PH government boiled down to the probable dismantling of pro-Malay affirmative-action policies in business, education

39. 'BN crushes Harapan with 15,086-vote majority in Tg Piai', *Malaysia Kini*, 16 November 2019.

40. R. Loheswar, 'Tanjung Piai Chinese vote swung massively against Pakatan, says think tank', *Malay Mail*, 22 November 2019.

41. Rachel Genevieve Chia, 'As many as 40 Umno MPs are supposedly trying to join Mahathir's Bersatu – here's what we know so far', *Business Insider Singapore*, 31 October 2018.

42. Serina Rahman, 'Was It a Malay Tsunami? Deconstructing the Malay Vote in Malaysia's 2018 Election', *The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 107, 2018, pp. 669-682.

and housing, which, of course, was not what Malay voters desired. Furthermore, there was little progress made on the economic front, even as ethnic minority politicians appeared to take on a more visible role in governance under the PH government. As such, the narrative of Malay marginalisation was unsuccessfully countered by PH, which led to the discernible Malay swing to UMNO.

Secondly, although ethnic minorities similarly voted for good governance and economic reasons, they also looked forward to fundamental changes toward fair treatment of non-Malays in a more inclusive and pluralist «new Malaysia». Chinese and Indian ethnic minority voters, fed up with years of being side-lined over the UMNO-led government's emphasis on *ketuanan Melayu* and increasingly concerned over Islamisation policies in Malaysia, had abandoned BN in droves for PH.⁴³ Yet for some ethnic minorities, the PH government helmed by Mahathir appeared to accede to various Malay demands over ethnic minority concerns in 2019, which meant it was no different from the UMNO-led government. In this sense, the shift of Chinese voters to BN in the Tanjung Piai by-election was a protest against the perceived ineffectiveness of PH's Chinese-dominated DAP to look after Chinese concerns.

Thirdly, BN's candidate choices in the by-elections, particularly in Cameron Highlands, Semenyih and Tanjung Piai seats, showed that it was able to shift the focus from national to local considerations. In this way, BN demonstrated to voters that it was attuned and receptive to local level considerations. Conversely, while PH attempted to focus on local considerations in its electoral campaign, it was also forced to respond to national issues. For instance, PH had to justify the slow pace of its promised reforms to critics, which only increased voter disgruntlement. PH candidates were also not always adequately supported by the constituent parties. This conveyed to voters that the internal politicking within PH's ideologically different parties had diminished the GE-14 unity that brought the UMNO-led government down; fundamental reforms from a disunited government were deemed unlikely.

4. *The politics of fear*

While local level considerations were certainly a key factor in the by-election outcomes that benefitted BN, a number of ethno-religious controversies at the national level and the disjointed responses from the PH government were also contributing factors. Two controversies, in particu-

43. James Chin, 'From Ketuanan Melayu to Ketuanan Islam: UMNO and the Malaysian Chinese: Final Breakup: UMNO and the Chinese in GE14', in Bridget Welsh (ed.), *The End of UMNO? Essays on Malaysia's Former Dominant Party New and Expanded Post GE-14 Edition*, Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2018, pp. 255-304.

lar, contributed to a polarised social and political context that exacerbated inter-ethnic distrust and an overall citizenry dissatisfaction with the performance of the PH government.

The first controversy arose in August over divisive public comments made by Zakir Naik, a controversial Muslim televangelist from India. Zakir, who was charged by the Indian government for money laundering and was banned from several countries, had lived in exile in Malaysia since 2017. The UMNO-led government attempted to bolster its religious credentials by granting him permanent residency, an act that was viewed positively by Zakir's large Malay following. However, Zakir's presence in Malaysia was not acceptable to some non-Malays and liberal Malay Muslims. Attempts by Hindraf, an ethnic Indian rights organisation in Malaysia, and liberal Malay Muslim lawyers, to contest the legality of Zakir's permanent residency in court failed.⁴⁴ While the calls to deport Zakir continued to arise periodically after GE-14, the issue remained largely out of national attention until Zakir's comments in August.

In his attempt to deflect the continued calls for his deportation, Zakir referred to the Chinese in Malaysia as *pendatang* (guest).⁴⁵ The meaning of the term in the Malaysian context was derogatory; it served to differentiate non-Malay citizens, who were seen as «sojourners» from the Malay citizens, who were loyal to the land.⁴⁶ Zakir also accused Hindu Indians in Malaysia of being more loyal to the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi than to Malaysia's Mahathir.

The public backlash was polarising. Petitions calling for Zakir's deportation received national coverage. Several ethnic Indian ministers within the PH government also called for Zakir's deportation, including Syed Saddiq, a Malay minister from Bersatu. Zakir was investigated by the police for breaching the peace. Yet the rival petitions that were organised by PAS and Muslim organisations such as the Malaysians Islamic Organisation of Consultative Council (Mapim) to support Zakir collected far more signatures than those calling for his deportation.⁴⁷ The police issued a public speaking ban on Zakir to defuse tensions; and Zakir later issued an apology. Within a week, Syed Saddiq back tracked from his calls for Zakir's deportation, and posted pictures of himself having dinner with Zakir.⁴⁸ Mahathir appeared to toe a middle line claiming that Zakir had gone too far,

44. Ho Kit Yen, 'Court throws out Hindraf's suit on Zakir Naik', *Free Malaysia Today*, 18 February 2018.

45. 'Zakir Naik plays «pendatang» card, says Chinese should go back before he does', *The Star*, 14 August 2019.

46. Joseph Chinyong Liow, 'Ketuanan Melayu: What's in a Name?', *RSIS Commentary*, 6 January 2015.

47. 'Pro-Naik campaign touches 100,000 signatures as it races to overtake rival petition', *Free Malaysia Today*, 22 August 2019.

48. 'Syed Saddiq hosts dinner for Zakir, says «let's move on»,' *Malaysia Kini*, 24 August 2019.

but Malaysia was duty-bound not to extradite him to India because his life was at risk there.⁴⁹

The second controversy that also arose in August was equally polarising. The Education Ministry's plan to introduce *khat* calligraphy – a form of brushwork calligraphy in *jawi* (Malay writings using the Arabic language script) was opposed by Chinese and Tamil vernacular school associations. This plan was in the pipeline since 2014 under the UMNO-led government and continued with the PH Education Minister, Maszlee Malik, from Mahathir's Bersatu party. Despite protests from the ethnic minority school associations, the education ministry maintained its position. With the backing of Mahathir, the ministry's stated rationale for the initiative was to familiarise students with the basics of *khat*, which was deemed a national heritage.⁵⁰

Historically, changes in educational policy in Malaysia, especially about language, have always been a sensitive topic. At the country's independence, ethnic minorities retained the right to continue to autonomously run their vernacular language schools (and later government funded vernacular schools too), but periodic calls to abolish vernacular schools for a single national system had existed. In this light, the ethnic minority school associations, such as the Chinese association Dong Jiao Zong (DJZ), have often scrutinised educational policy changes for perceived threats to the maintenance of their ethnic identities.⁵¹ During the 1980s, DJZ and Mahathir during his previous premiership had clashed over education policies.

This time, DJZ claimed that the *khat* plan was yet another form of Islamisation in Malaysia that would erode Chinese identity. In recent years, ethnic minority fears over Islamisation increased, which Malays in turn perceived as a form of Islamophobia. These ethnic minority fears were rooted in the decades of political rivalry between UMNO and PAS around their respective Islamic credentials; Islamist grassroots pressures for more forms of Islamic influence in governance; rationalisation of pro-Malay policies under the political rhetoric of *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay dominance); and state Islamisation policies.⁵² This affected some freedoms of religious practice and expression of non-Muslim minorities in the public sphere.

Amid protests spearheaded by DJZ about *khat*, the education ministry decided to make the subject optional and to reduce the number of pages devoted to *khat* in the planned syllabus. Yet DJZ was not appeased, and Mahathir labelled the association as «racist» for not agreeing to the

49. 'Zakir Naik has crossed the line, says Dr Mahathir', *Today*, 18 August 2019.

50. 'Malaysia's educationists against teaching of jawi calligraphy in vernacular schools as controversy rages', *Channel News Asia*, 5 August 2019.

51. Alan Collins, 'Securitization, Frankenstein's Monster and Malaysian education', *Pacific Review*, Vol.18, No. 4, 2005, pp. 567-588.

52. Bob Olivier, *Islamic Revivalism and Politics in Malaysia*, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

education ministry's changes.⁵³ Notably the responses by some DAP MPs indicated that they were in a tight spot – at one level, aware of how ethnic minorities looked to them to mediate minority concerns, they were critical of Mahathir's and the education ministry's stance; at another level, they had to show a united front to de-escalate inter-ethnic tensions by showing disapproval to DJZ's claim that the introduction of *khat* was another form of Islamisation in Malaysia. Hadi, the PAS head further inflamed tensions when he told DJZ to remember that Malaysia was a «Malay world».⁵⁴ By year's end, a planned anti-*jawī* rally by DJZ was cancelled by the police as a safety precaution while the education ministry remained firm on its stance to introduce *khat*.

These two major controversies characterised the increasing nature of inter-ethnic polarisation in Malaysia that fed into negative societal perceptions about the performance of the PH government. Polls in 2019 showed that Malays expressed concerns over PH's commitment to preserving Malay rights even as fair treatment of ethnic minority groups remained a concern for others.⁵⁵

Ethnic minority disillusionment with the PH government was again fuelled in October, with the Malay Dignity Conference that was organised by four Malaysian public universities and officiated by Mahathir. The conference was widely perceived to be driven by Mahathir as an attempt to address PH's waning Malay support, as well as to shift the attention of Malays from the UMNO-PAS political alliance formalised in September. For ethnic minorities, the UMNO-PAS alliance was blatantly aimed at garnering a simple majority of Malay votes to unseat PH at the next general election. Yet Mahathir's conference's theme of Malay unity, with UMNO and PAS leadership in attendance, signalled to ethnic minorities that the PH government had willfully taken a regressive step for political gain. Furthermore, the absence of Anwar at the conference, ostensibly due to a late invitation, fuelled suspicions that Mahathir's concerns on Malay unity was in reality more about the cultivation of UMNO and PAS support to subvert Anwar's ascension to premiership; even at the cost of side-lining the ethnic minorities who had overwhelmingly backed the PH coalition, and inflaming inter-ethnic distrust.

Tellingly, the resolutions presented to Mahathir at the end of the conference centred on the polarising ethno-religious issues that became pronounced in the post-GE 14 context – for example, the abolishment of vernacular schools within six years; the reservation of top government positions for Malays (under the PH government, the finance minister post went

53. 'Dr M labels Dong Zong as racist for not agreeing with anything', *New Straits Times*, 12 August 2019.

54. Zurairi AR, 'Remember you're living in a 'Malay world', Hadi warns Dong Zong ahead of congress', *Malay Mail*, 27 December 2019.

55. Hazlin Hassan, 'Approval ratings down for Mahathir, Pakatan Harapan govt in Merdeka Center poll', *Today*, 27 April 2019.

to an ethnic Chinese and the attorney-general post went to an ethnic Indian, which rankled some Malay groups); the safeguard of the economic interests of Malays; and the prevention of individuals or groups' interference with issues involving the Islamic religion.⁵⁶ Even though, Mahathir made no promises to the attendees and likely meant the conference to be symbolic rather than geared toward substantive change, the conference magnified the different interests and motivations of the PH constituent parties. Ramasamy Palanisamy, a DAP Penang state legislative assemblyman, criticised Mahathir as irresponsible for taking «Malays on the path of no-return» by normalising racism.⁵⁷

This polarised context then allowed PH's political opponents, UNMO and PAS, to instrumentalise ethno-religious issues under the rhetoric of Malay unity to capitalise on Malay fears. Conversely, the disjointed responses of the different constituent parties in the PH coalition fostered disillusionment of non-Malays over PH infighting and broken promises of fundamental reforms.

5. Persistence of economic insecurities

On top of an increasingly polarised socio-political context that magnified the inter-ethnic distrust, Malaysians across ethnic divides perceived little improvement on their cost of living woes.⁵⁸ The PH government had made a multitude of promises in its 2018 election manifesto to improve the economy, but it struggled to follow through on many of its promised changes. The PH government's ability to tackle substantive structural economic reforms to address cost of living concerns required generating new sources of revenue, identifying the necessary growth drivers for the Malaysian economy, and forging a consensus between the constituent parties on a common direction. However, party differences led to the different government ministries working on their own, without either co-operating or sharing information, which made PH's economic reform ambitions a struggle.⁵⁹

By 2019, the PH government had scrapped the unpopular Goods and Services tax that was introduced by Najib in 2016. It also allocated resources to support small and medium-sized enterprises so as to encourage technological adoption; sought to improve governmental transparency on state

56. Adib Povera & Arfa Yunus, 'Five resolutions presented at Malay Dignity Congress', *New Straits Times*, 6 October 2019.

57. Ramasamy Palanisamy, 'When a Malay Dignity Congress in Malaysia is not really one', *Today*, 6 October 2019.

58. Nurafifah Suhaimi, 'Dissecting the rising cost of living in Malaysia', *Emir Research*, 24 December 2019.

59. Joseph Sipalan & Rozanna Latiff, 'Malaysia's hopes of economic revival under Mahathir fade', *Reuters*, 10 May 2019.

finances; and initiated reforms in the public procurement system to curb corruption.⁶⁰ Yet these measures were short-term and did not alleviate the economic insecurities of Malaysians. Malaysians in the urban areas believed that their incomes were insufficient to meet the cost of living. In particular, there were concerns over the Malaysian currency's decline in purchasing power that directly raised the cost of living; income growth stagnation despite educational attainment; inadequate financial savings; and a lack of affordable housing.⁶¹ All of these concerns were present under the UMNO-led government as well, which exacerbated perceptions of non-progress with the PH government.

The PH government's attempt to address the economic insecurity concerns through the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 (SPV) national economic plan in October was criticised for its emphasis on race-based policies rather than needs-based policies. The SPV plan appeared to be modelled upon similar pro-Malay and race-based policies implemented by the UMNO-led government of the past. The plan's stated aim was to reduce income and wealth inequalities across different dimensions such as race, ethnicity, income groups, and region; however it was race and ethnic dimensions that took precedence.⁶² Furthermore, the plan was launched just one day before the Mahathir-driven Malay Dignity Conference, which suggested that it was geared at allaying Malay fears rather than charting economic reforms.

A number of external factors also hampered the PH government's progress on the economic front. Firstly, the China-USA trade protectionist conflict resulted in a global exports slowdown. Malaysia's export-oriented economy was dependent on its largest trading partner, China. Inevitably, the Malaysian exports suffered from the disruptions to China's supply chains as a consequence of the US-China trade conflict. While analysts initially suggested that Malaysia would benefit as US companies looked for non-Chinese substitutes, this did not materialise. In 2019, Malaysian total exports to the United States fell by US\$90 million per month on average.⁶³

Secondly, investor confidence in the Malaysian economy waned. Although the PH government replaced the GST with the Sales and Services (SST) tax that targeted local businesses and manufacturers, the move was not viewed positively by credit rating agencies. Given the government's dependence on state oil dividends and the SST, Moody's Investor's Services viewed Malaysia's economic resilience and its debt funding capabilities as

60. Syahirah Syed Jaafar, 'Nearly a third of PH govt's economic promises on track', *The Edge Markets*, 9 April 2019.

61. 'Malaysia Economic Monitor: Making Ends Meet', *The World Bank*, 9 December 2019.

62. Hwok-Aun Lee, 'Can Mahathir's government get Malaysians to believe in shared prosperity – regardless of race?', *South China Morning Post*, 27 November 2019.

63. Calvin Cheng, 'Is Malaysia benefitting from the US-China trade war?', *East Asia Forum*, 5 August 2019.

fragile. The oil dividends that the government relied on for revenue were subjected to oil price fluctuations while the annual revenue generated by the SST was approximately US\$ 4.7 billion less than the GST.⁶⁴ As a consequence, the Malaysian stock market lagged behind compared to other regional countries as investor confidence remained low in 2019.

Thirdly, the Malaysian ringgit currency was subjected to the China-US trade tensions for much of 2019. The US imposition of trade tariffs on Chinese products led to China's devaluing of its currency to stay competitive. Given the Malaysian economy's dependence on Chinese trade, this in turn depreciated the Malaysian ringgit currency in relation to the US dollar. The depreciation of the ringgit resulted in an increase in the cost of imported goods, which included food items such as vegetables and fruits. Additionally, domestic manufacturers that imported foreign materials for use in their manufacturing were forced to raise the prices of their end products. These inflationary pressures then reduced the overall purchasing power of Malaysians, which contributed to the perception of economic insecurity.

The PH government made efforts to foster investor confidence and promote foreign investments by reversing its previous decisions to cancel large-scale railway infrastructure projects with Singapore and China that had been negotiated under the Najib-led government. The PH government previously stressed that the cancellations were necessary given the prohibitive high costs of the deals when Malaysia was overburdened by debts incurred from the corrupt mismanagement of 1MDB under Najib. However, by late 2019, the PH government had not only re-established commitments to the deals, but it also revived the Najib-initiated and China-backed Bandar Malaysia plan to create a major transportation hub in the nation's capital.

The external economic factors, the PH government's inability to chart a clear direction for substantive economic reforms, and the reversals to Najib-era initiatives contributed to a perception among some Malaysians that life had been more prosperous under Najib's leadership.⁶⁵

6. *A disconcerted Muslim solidarity foreign policy approach*

In September, Mahathir announced a new guiding framework for Malaysia's foreign policy. While Malaysia's emphasis on a non-aligned stance with major powers was still maintained, the new framework entailed taking a more proactive approach in handling issues that affected domestic interests, as well as taking a lead in fostering solidarity and cooperation in the Muslim world. This included the right of Malaysia to express its opinions,

64. 'Reintroduction of GST poses a challenge to changing people's perception, says Fomca deputy chief, *Malay Mail*, 2 October 2019.

65. Amir Yusof, 'Progress in Pakatan Harapan's «new Malaysia» plagued by same old issues', *Channel News Asia*, 8 May 2019.

when necessary taking a stand against «injustices, oppressions and other crimes against humanity that are committed by any nations».⁶⁶

Under Mahathir, the PH government scored two key foreign policy successes in 2019 that were geared toward procuring investments in Malaysia. The first was the re-negotiations of the large-scale railway infrastructure deals with China. Mahathir secured a US\$ 11 billion reduction in costs for the East Coast Rail Link with the state-backed China Communication Construction Company. As such, Mahathir was able to portray the cost reduction as further evidence that the Najib-led government had indeed mismanaged the country's finances when it had agreed to the previously inflated costs. Contrary to his previous reservations over Chinese investments in Malaysia, Mahathir now stated that Chinese investments were beneficial, and criticised the US sanctions imposed on Chinese companies for spying.⁶⁷ The second foreign policy success was a US\$ 1.83 billion bond issuance for Malaysia by Japan in March. This was a direct consequence of Mahathir's efforts at fostering closer ties with the Japan soon after the GE 14 win.⁶⁸ To a certain extent, both of these foreign policy initiatives were reminiscent of Mahathir's «Look East» policy aimed at reducing dependence on the West that was a central feature during his previous premiership.⁶⁹

Mahathir's attempt to take a more central leadership role in the Muslim world as part of Malaysia's new foreign policy approach, though, was not as successful as his China and Japan policies. The first indication of Mahathir's focus on the Muslim world came during the 74th United Nations (UN) General Assembly in September. Mahathir announced plans to combat Islamophobia through a jointly run English television initiative with Turkey and Pakistan. This was later followed by plans to convene a summit of Muslim-majority countries in Malaysia's capital of Kuala Lumpur (KL) in December.

The stated aim of the KL summit was the forging of a global Muslim solidarity to address issues of conflict, extremism and oppression in Muslim countries. However, the summit became controversial because it was interpreted as a largely non-Arab initiative to counter the leadership of the Saudi Arabian dominated Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) on Muslim issues, even though this was denied by Mahathir.⁷⁰ This perception was reinforced by the fact that the leaders of Iran, Turkey and Qatar, who

66. Tashny Sukumaran, 'Mahathir to update Malaysia's foreign policy, including on South China Sea and international Muslim cooperation', *South China Morning Post*, 18 September 2019.

67. *Ibid.*

68. Bhavan Jaipragas, 'Malaysia's Mahathir hits foreign policy speed bump after controversial Kuala Lumpur Summit', *South China Morning Post*, 31 December 2019.

69. Karminder Singh Dhillon, *Malaysian Foreign Policy in the Mahathir Era, 1981-2003: Dilemmas of Development*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2009, pp. 160-194.

70. Julia Roknifard, 'At Malaysia's KL Summit, the Muslim world's most pressing concerns got no mention', *South China Morning Post*, 24 December 2019.

were all regarded as regional rivals to Saudi Arabia, were invited to give keynote speeches.

As such, Saudi Arabia regarded the summit as an affront to its leadership; it stressed that the KL summit's agenda should have been discussed under the OIC platform instead. Along with its allies of Egypt, UAE and Bahrain, Saudi Arabia shunned the summit. Saudi Arabia was instrumental too in getting Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan to drop out from the summit. The Indonesian premier also was notably absent.

During Mahathir's previous premiership, positive relations with the OIC was regarded as integral to Mahathir's agenda of boosting Malaysia's Islamic identity with the wider Muslim world, as well as to counter domestic criticism from Malay Muslim opponents.⁷¹ Mahathir also took up various causes such as the Palestine cause on behalf of the global *ummah* (Muslim community), at times in direct opposition to the West. The growing Muslim *ummah* consciousness coupled with Mahathir's uncompromising stance on Muslim causes gained him favour among Muslims worldwide. However, since the Arab Spring conflicts in 2011, Muslims perceived the OIC as ineffective while Saudi Arabia was seen as acting against Muslim interests.⁷² In this light, Mahathir's move to host the KL Summit was reflective of Malaysia's awareness of the spreading in the wider Muslim world of the conviction of the declining relevance of Saudi Arabia's role as leader of the global *ummah*. The move also served to differentiate Mahathir's Muslim policy that was aligned with the *ummah's* perceived sentiments, from Najib's, which had been aligned with an increasingly unpopular Saudi Arabia.⁷³

Yet Malaysia was remarkably muted on pressing issues that affected Muslims. At the KL summit, the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, the conflict in Kashmir, and the Chinese treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang province were all unaddressed. Instead, Mahathir stressed on China's value as a trade partner to Muslim countries.⁷⁴ Malaysia had good reason to be cautious. In October, India threatened to restrict Malaysian palm oil imports after Mahathir criticised India over its revocation of constitutional autonomy over the disputed state Jammu and Kashmir in October; as India was the top purchaser of Malaysia's palm oil, the threat led to a drop in Malaysian palm oil futures.⁷⁵

Malaysia's positioning as a leader in the Muslim world and an advocate for Muslim causes then was constrained by the pragmatic realities of

71. Khadijah Md Khalid, *Malaysian Foreign Policy Orientation and Relations in the Post-Mahathir Years*, University of Malaya, 2009.

72. Mustafa Salama, 'Why did Saudi Arabia shun the Kuala Lumpur summit?', *Middle East Eye*, 23 December 2019.

73. Scott Edwards & Asmiati Malik, 'Saudi Arabian Relations Under Strain in Southeast Asia', *The Diplomat*, 7 November 2018.

74. Julia Rognifard, 'At Malaysia's KL Summit, the Muslim world's most pressing concerns got no mention'.

75. Ravi Agrawal & Kathryn Salam, 'Is India Becoming More Like China?', *Foreign Policy*, 22 October 2019.

its own national economic interests. This was in stark contrast to domestic Malay Muslim sentiments, evidenced by a series of street protests in Kuala Lumpur over the Chinese treatment of the Uyghurs as the year came to a close.⁷⁶ For these reasons, Mahathir's attempt to position Malaysia as a Muslim leader with an uncompromising stance was largely a disconcerted effort in 2019 compared to the experiences during his first tenure as prime minister.

7. Concluding remarks

The key developments in 2019 discussed in this article contributed to an overall sense of citizenry disillusionment with the PH government. In particular, a sizeable number of Malay Muslims lost trust in the Mahathir-led government amid the polarising fear-mongering rhetoric by UMNO and PAS. This was also driven by the ineffectual and disunited responses by PH politicians to the ethno-religious controversies that only served to exacerbate the inter-ethnic distrust. These factors, on top of the persistence of cost of living woes, shaped Malay Muslim negative perceptions about the reform-oriented PH government. The main beneficiary of this politically volatile situation in 2019 was undoubtedly UMNO. The developments of 2019 set the stage for the collapse of the PH government in 2020. The takeover by the new Malay-dominated PN government, in which the largest constituent party was UMNO, was a devastating blow to the Malaysians, who had hoped that GE-14 marked a new beginning for Malaysia. Yet it was also welcomed by many. In sum, ethno-religious considerations still remained a significant force in Malaysian politics, yet to be overcome.

76. Azril Annuar, Jerry Choong & Soo Wern Jun, 'In KL, hundreds of Muslims protest against China's treatment of Uyghurs', *Malay Mail*, 27 December 2019.