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Asia in 2022: The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on local crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

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A large, intricate mandala pattern in a light orange color, located in the bottom right corner of the page. It features complex, symmetrical geometric and organic shapes, resembling a stylized flower or a traditional Indian mandala.

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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MALAYSIA 2022: 15TH GENERAL ELECTIONS AND DEEPENING
POLITICAL POLARISATION

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None of the three main political coalitions in the 15th Malaysian General Elections in 2022 was able to win a simple majority to form the next government. The hung parliament situation ended after the Malaysian King appointed Anwar Ibrahim as prime minister to lead a unity government including Pakatan Harapan (PH), the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), and several smaller parties. The election results indicated several key developments in Malaysian politics: (1) deepening political polarisation along racial lines – most non-Malays voted for PH and a significant number of Malays voted for Perikatan Nasional (PN); (2) PN's component parties, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) won a majority of the Malay vote share, overtaking UMNO as the parties to champion for Malay and Muslim rights and (3); the Islamist party PAS won the largest number of seats, indicating that the strategy of emphasising its religious credentials promoted trust among Malay voters seeking clean governance. Meanwhile, the Russia-Ukraine war resulted in inflationary pressures, food shortages and price hikes that the Malaysian government struggled to manage. On the foreign relations front, the Malaysian Foreign Minister adopted a critical stance towards the Myanmar military regime, even as the government deported thousands of Myanmar refugees despite mounting international criticism.

KEYWORDS – General elections; political polarisation; Anwar Ibrahim; Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS); United Malays National Organisation (UMNO); Pakatan Harapan (PH); Perikatan Nasional (PN); Malaysia

1. Introduction

On 24 November 2022, Anwar Ibrahim – the leader of Malaysia's multi-ethnic political coalition, Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope, PH) – was sworn in as the country's 10th prime minister. Anwar's ascension to the premiership was by no means a certain outcome. The 15th Malaysian General Elections (GE-15) held five days prior had resulted in a hung parliament with no single political coalition able to win the simple majority of 112 parliamentary seats required to form the government. The PH coalition, comprised of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party, PKR) and Democratic Action Party (DAP) with other smaller parties, won the largest

number of seats at 81 followed closely by the Malay-centric Perikatan Nasional (National Alliance, PN) comprised of Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Malaysian United Indigenous Party, Bersatu) and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Islamic Party of Malaysia, PAS), which won 74 seats. The political impasse ended after Malaysia's constitutional monarch, King Al-Sultan Abdullah, intervened. He selected Anwar over Muhyiddin Yassin, the leader of the PN, to form a unity government. For Anwar, this was the culmination of a 24-year-long tumultuous journey to the country's top political position. Having been fired as deputy prime minister in 1998 and imprisoned twice on politically motivated charges of sodomy and corruption, Anwar was finally in a position to embark on his long-stated goal to implement good governance reforms.

However, as a consequence of the deepening polarisation in Malaysian politics and the challenges that laid ahead for him, Anwar had to include political foes from the corruption-tainted Malay nationalist party, United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in his unity government. In the 2018 general elections, the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional (National Front, BN) coalition, which had governed the country uninterrupted since 1957, suffered a shocking defeat at the hands of PH. Nonetheless, by 2020, UMNO had successfully manoeuvred itself back into the folds of governmental power through backdoor dealings with Bersatu and a split away faction from Anwar's PKR [Saleem 2021]. The backdoor dealings led to the collapse of the PH coalition government in February 2020 and paved way for the PN coalition government helmed by Muhyiddin and supported by three Malay parties – Bersatu, UMNO and PAS. The PN coalition though proved to be highly unstable as it struggled to manage waves of COVID-19 infections amid rising public discontent over the pandemic's socio-economic impact. The power struggles between the component parties in the PN coalition resulted in yet another change of prime minister in August 2021 – Muhyiddin was forced to resign after UNMO withdrew its support for the PN government and Ismail Sabri from UMNO took over as prime minister [Mangiarotti 2022].

The remainder of this article analyses the major developments in 2022 that culminated with the appointment of Anwar as prime minister toward the year's end. Section 2 explores the decision-making of the three major political coalitions as each jockeyed to position themselves as front-runners in the lead-up to GE-15. Section 3 analyses the election results and considers the reasons for the unexpectedly strong electoral performance of the Islamist party PAS. Section 4 analyses the government's attempt to mitigate inflationary pressures in 2022 as the world was struck by price hikes and supply chain disruptions caused partly by the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Section 5 examines the government's foreign diplomacy in relation to the Myanmar crisis as it attempted to manage growing xenophobic sentiments over refugees and migrant workers in some segments of Malaysian society.

2. Three political coalitions in competition

The three main political coalition contenders vying for power in GE-15 were BN, PN and PH. Although the UMNO-led BN government under Ismail assumed power in 2021, its hold was tenuous because it needed support from PN and a Sarawak-based party, the Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS). In 2022, BN held 41 seats compared to PN, which held 49 seats, and GPS, with 18 seats; on its part, PH had 90. GPS had been a component party of BN until BN's historic loss in the 2018 general elections. Subsequently, GPS, in spite of the limited number of its legislators, played a kingmaker role by shifting its support to different coalitions. For BN and PN, both of which depended heavily on the Malay vote, the competition between them was thought to be almost evenly matched while a majority of non-Malay support went to PH [Ariffin and Koh 2022].

This deeply divided and crowded political landscape contributed to induce the three main political coalitions to support two important constitutional amendments that would weigh heavily on future general elections. They were: (1) the Constitutional Amendment Act 2019 (CA2019), which lowered the voting age to 18 and created automatic voting registration, and (2) the Constitutional (Amendment) (No. 3) Act 2022, an «anti-hopping» law that prevented members of parliament (MPs) elected under one party from defecting to another party, under pain of losing their seat, which would be reassigned following a by-election. Although for different reasons, each of the three coalitions hoped that the amendments would help them attain an electoral advantage over their competitors.

CA2019 passed in late 2019. It was originally tabled by the then-PH government, which sought to benefit from the urban youth voters' preference for its reformist outlook. BN and PAS supported the amendment in exchange for automatic voter registration. Both believed that they would benefit from removing the logistical barriers related to the previous self-registration requirement for their rural supporters [Chai 2022]. Consequently, the size of the national electorate significantly increased from 15.22 million in 2018 to 21.02 million in 2022 general elections [Chai 2022].

The second constitutional amendment on the anti-hopping law, took effect in October 2022, just five days before Ismail dissolved parliament and called for elections. The anti-hopping law was a key condition in the confidence and supply agreement signed by the Ismail government and the PH opposition in 2021. It had provided Ismail with the opposition's support to pass key legislations and the government's agreement for the implementation of the anti-party hopping law.

The rationale for the anti-party hopping law was ostensibly to improve political stability by limiting party defections by individual MPs, which has been rampant in Malaysian politics. For example, the dramatic 2020 defections by MPs from the ruling PH coalition led to its collapse,

which effectively reversed the outcome of the electoral mandate [Ng 2022]. Party hopping also affected the balance of power in the state governments. When the PH government fell in 2020, lawmakers in four states defected to PN, which caused PH to lose control of those states [Yeoh 2020]. Such political manoeuvrers only widened the trust deficit between elected politicians and the people, which undermined the legitimacy of the government. The anti-hopping law was meant to restore public confidence in the political system. Therefore, bipartisan agreement on the law was arguably a step in a positive direction.

Yet the law, having been designed by politicians with their own vested interests, also had clear limitations. First, the law permitted a sitting MP to join another political party if that MP has been expelled from his own party [Ng 2022]. In the case of the vote of confidence for the incumbent government, an event that had occurred several times since 2018, it was possible that a sitting MP might choose not to vote as directed by her own party, without defecting from it. In such a case, the party-hopping effect could still occur, shifting the balance of power. The dissident MP could be later expelled from her party but suffer no penalty of losing her seat under the anti-hopping law. Political parties may attempt to limit such occurrences by amending their party constitutions to effectively constrain the independence of party members elected to public office [Ng 2022]. For instance, in September 2022, the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP) passed an amendment that required its party members elected to public office to follow party directives or else be expelled from the party [Ng 2022].

Second, the anti-hopping law did not prevent parties from exiting political coalitions. Therefore, a party might contest an election under the banner of a coalition yet exit and join another afterwards. Such manoeuvres could have similar deleterious effects as party hopping by individual MPs, only on a larger scale.

2.1. *Barisan Nasional*

Of the 41 parliamentary seats held by the BN coalition going into GE-15, only three seats were held by BN's race-based component parties – the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA, 2 seats) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC, 1 seat). Since the 2008 general elections, both MCA and MIC steadily lost their support from Chinese and Indian voters who shifted allegiance to PH. As such, BN's political survivability was heavily dependent on UMNO's ability to draw in Malay support as it had done for decades prior to the 2018 general elections. UMNO's main competitor for the Malay vote was Bersatu, predominantly comprised by former UMNO members. Both parties share similar political ideologies, centred on upholding Malay rights and Islamic values. Both also effectively competed for the same type of Malay voters. Unsurprisingly then, the de facto bipartisan political system, dominated by PH and PN-BN, which had characterised politics in 2020, be-

came unsustainable due to the escalating power struggles between UMNO and Bersatu. By late 2021, it was evident that BN did not want to form an electoral pact with PN prior to GE-15. BN took this route even though political analysts, including veteran politicians and former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed, warned that no one party would be strong enough to garner a simple majority on its own [Povera 2022].

BN's stance was due to its electoral successes in preceding state elections. In November 2021, BN won 21 out of 28 seats in the Melaka state elections. Since Melaka's racial and urban-rural makeup resembles that of national averages, these elections were closely watched as a bellwether for GE-15 [Rodzi 2021]. In the Melaka state elections, Anwar's PKR lost the three seats it had won in 2018; meanwhile Bersatu lost its two seats from 2018 but managed to take two new seats from BN and PH. Even though PAS, which was part of PN, did not win any seats, its percentage vote tally improved considerably. In one closely fought seat, PAS lost to UMNO by only 79 votes.

The Melaka results indicated that PN was gaining ground as a credible alternative to BN, particularly in the Malay-majority districts [Zhang and Wan 2021]. Still UMNO was buoyed by the success of GPS (a party that was previously aligned with BN), which won 92% of the seats in the Sarawak state elections in December 2021 [Chin 2023].

UMNO's confidence was further boosted by its win in the Johor state elections in March 2022, another state with similar racial and urban-rural makeup as national averages. BN took 40 out of 56 seats compared to the 19 seats it had won in the 2018 elections.

Despite BN's impressive win, analysts highlighted that it had only marginally increased its vote share compared to the 2018 general elections [Ong 2022]. As such, BN's win could not be read as an indisputable «change in the voting preferences of the electorate» or as an «increase in the effectiveness of the party's political campaigning» [Ong 2022]. BN's win could be attributed more to both the opposition's failures and fortuitous events. In particular, there had been higher voter turnout in the Malay-majority areas that supported BN compared to the lower voter turnout in the racially mixed areas that had supported PH in the 2018 general elections. PH's inability to boost voter turnout had translated into less support for it at the polls [Zhang and Hutchinson 2022]. Also, PH had failed to present a united front, which voters already weary of political instability frowned upon. Illustratively, PKR, a PH coalition member, used its own party logo to campaign in Johor instead of the PH logo. On the contrary, the other PH component parties – DAP and Amanah – had made it a point to use the PH logo [Jaafar 2022]. This suggested to voters that there might be friction between the component parties in PH, which could not but have adverse effect on the popular support for PH.

Soon after UMNO's win in Johor, the party held its general assembly in mid-March. UMNO president, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, announced that

party elections, which had been postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, would only be held after GE-15. Zahid knew that Ismail's position as prime minister of the UMNO-led government was tenuous at best. In UMNO's tradition, the party president was also the prime ministerial candidate in the general elections. Zahid could not take the prime minister's role in 2021 due to internal dissent over his pending corruption cases. By delaying the overdue party elections, Zahid was clearly gunning for the prime ministership in GE-15. By remaining as party president in the lead up to the elections, Zahid had also secured his position to determine the candidates for GE-15 [Saat 2022]. During the party's general assembly, Zahid pushed Ismail to call the general elections that year when they were only due in mid-2023. Although the UMNO leadership presented a united front at the assembly, speeches by several top UMNO leaders pointed to the presence of internal factions. Zahid alluded to «traitors» who sought to threaten his position while Khairy Jamaluddin, the then health minister, argued that the general elections should only be held after the COVID-19 situation had stabilised [Mohsen 2022].

Speculation that UMNO was divided into Zahid and Ismail factions was confirmed in June 2022 after UMNO MP Tajuddin Abdul Rahman was sacked from his position as member of the UMNO supreme council. In a press conference, an aggrieved Tajuddin revealed that key UMNO leaders had held meetings to discuss methods to force Zahid to step down as party president [Zulkifli 2022].

Concerns had been brewing among some UMNO leaders about the impact of Zahid's ongoing corruption cases on UMNO's ability to repair its image. Tajuddin also claimed that Zahid had urged UMNO MPs to support Anwar's bid for prime minister in 2020, after the PH government had collapsed [Salleh 2022]. As part of its pro-Malay ideology, UMNO had long drilled the message to its grassroots supporters that cooperation with Anwar's PH was impossible because of its close association with the Chinese-dominated DAP. This kind of inflammatory rhetoric by UMNO politicians had contributed to Anwar's de-legitimisation as a «liberal» Muslim [Saleem 2021]. As UMNO had consistently labelled DAP and by extension PH as a threat to Malay interests, Tajuddin's charge was particularly stinging, and it was strongly denied by Zahid. Yet Tajuddin's allegation appeared to be in line with the content of a leaked friendly phone call between Zahid and Anwar in 2021, discussing Zahid's bid to withdraw support from the PN government [Hutchinson and Zhang 2021]. While at the time both Zahid and Anwar had denied the phone call, the subsequent cooperation between the two to form the unity government in 2022 was suggestive of an ongoing backdoor dialogue.

By May 2022, Zahid had consolidated his position with an amendment to UMNO's party constitution to permit party elections to be delayed for up to 18 months from a full 3-year term or 6 months after a general elec-

tion. Zahid and his supporters then pushed Ismail to call for GE-15, arguing that BN should leverage the momentum from its recent wins in Melaka and Johor. Zahid may also have wanted to win decisively in the general elections before his corruption cases, which were still in their initial stages, progressed further in the courts [Hutchinson 2022]. Zahid's urgency appeared to accelerate after former prime minister Najib Razak lost his final appeals in the courts in late August and was imprisoned to serve a 12-year sentence for corruption over the 1MDB scandal. By October, Ismail succumbed to UMNO pressure and dissolved parliament.

BN's election campaign focused on the theme of «political stability and prosperity» and promised to return stability to Malaysia. BN rationalised that this message would resonate with an electorate fed up with the constant politicking and changes in government since 2018 [Chin 2023]. In BN's estimation, it was the only coalition that had the proven track record to achieve national stability [Chin 2023].

2.2. *Perikatan Nasional*

Compared to BN and PH, the PN coalition was new, but comprised of veteran politicians. It was created after the 2020 collapse of the PH government. The primary component parties were Bersatu led by Muhyiddin and PAS. For much of 2022, PN was on the defensive, fending off public attacks from UMNO. When PN contested all seats in the Johor state elections and only managed to capture two seats, UMNO taunted Bersatu. UMNO argued that the Bersatu should step down from the UMNO-led government because of its poor showing [Irisha 2022]. By throwing jibes at PN, UMNO wanted to precipitate the collapse of the government to force early elections.

However, PN had other ideas. It criticised Ismail's decision to dissolve parliament because that meant conducting the elections in November during the height of the monsoon season. The country had been hit by heavy flooding the previous December, so PN's concerns were also echoed by civil society and national agencies like the Malaysian Meteorological Department, as well as the PH coalition [Bernama 2022]. Bersatu portrayed UMNO's insistence as evidence that the party prioritised its own needs over those of the people [Palansamy 2022].

Leading up to GE-15, Bersatu and PAS highlighted UMNO-linked corruption cases to differentiate themselves as clean parties. Muhyiddin reinforced the message that his forced resignation the previous year was orchestrated by UMNO leaders, including Zahid, because he had refused to interfere with the judiciary process in relation to their legal troubles [*Free Malaysia Today* 2022]. Bersatu's campaign tagline, *Prihatin, Bersih dan Stabil* (Concerned, Clean and Stable), emphasised its clean image.

During the campaign, PN relied on social media such as short videos on the TikTok platform to connect with younger voters on its key ideological principles about Malay rights and Islamic values [Tan, C.K., 2022]. Toward

the campaign's tail end, Muhyiddin's comments on Jews and Christians supporting PH to Christianise Malaysia went viral. In defending himself, Muhyiddin maintained that his comments were selectively cropped from a longer speech about unity among the races [Zolkepli 2022]. In the aftermath of the elections, with no clear winner, Muhyiddin's comments were circulated among non-Malay groups as proof that a PN-led and Malay-centric government was undesirable as it would discriminate against non-Malays [Tapsell 2022]. Such worries convinced many PH supporters, who were highly suspicious of UMNO, to grudgingly accept BN in the PH-led unity government.

2.3. *Pakatan Harapan*

Since its win in the 2018 general elections, the PH coalition had steadily lost Malay support. It had to constantly fend off accusations from UMNO and PAS that it would erode Malay special rights and undermine Islam. In fact, Bersatu's growing concerns about its political future within PH motivated its exit in 2020, upon which the PH government collapsed shortly thereafter [Saleem 2020].

PH's attempts to position Anwar as prime minister during the 2020-2021 political crisis also periodically sparked criticism that the opposition coalition was not focused enough on leadership renewal and did not allow the flowering of the younger generation of party members [Straits Times 2021]. Worse, the ongoing political instability and the changes in government had resulted in voter fatigue. The lower voter turnout in the state elections was especially unhelpful to PH. Recognising this, in the wake of the Johor losses, two younger PKR leaders, Anwar's daughter Nurul Izzah and Rafizi Ramli, launched the *Ayuh Malaysia* («come on Malaysia») initiative in March 2022 to re-inspire reform-minded Malaysians to get out and vote at the next general elections [Ganesh 2022].

The PH coalition struggled to work together cohesively as its electoral losses in state elections mounted. For instance, frustrations surfaced after PKR lost all the seats it contested in the Melaka state elections. Some DAP lawmakers openly suggested that Anwar should quit as the PH coalition leader [*Malaysia Now* 2021]. DAP leader Lim Guan Eng laid blame on the coalition's disunity, pointedly alluding to PKR's decision to campaign using its own logo [Tan, Vincent, 2022].

In addition, divisions within PKR emerged during the party's elections in May 2022. The contest for the deputy president position between the party's secretary-general Saifuddin Nasution Ismail and Rafizi Ramli was largely viewed as a contest over the party's direction for the GE-15. Saifuddin favoured a «big tent» strategy wherein PH would keep open channels of negotiations with other opposition parties, ostensibly even with parties not aligned with its political ideology such as PN, in order to prevent BN from winning [The Vibes 2022]. Rafizi was critical of Saifuddin's strategy to retake federal power by working with other coalitions such as PN. Instead, Rafizi

preferred to take a longer approach by rebuilding the party and by winning over undecided voters. Rafizi's message resonated with party members, and he won by a substantial margin. Clearly, most PKR members were not comfortable with working with ideological opponents such as Bersatu and PAS.

PH's 2022 election campaign did not deviate substantially from its core positions on good governance, anti-corruption reforms and needs-based assistance. Its election manifesto also maintained its position on the elimination of discrimination between the races in Malaysia, even though this stance had in the past opened PH to increased scrutiny over fears that the longstanding preferential policies for Malays would be dismantled [Lee 2022].

3. Election results

UMNO's push for early elections backfired. BN performed the worst of the three main coalitions, winning only 30 seats – UMNO with 26 seats and the other BN component parties with 4. The top performing coalition was PH with 81 seats – 40, going to DAP and 31 more to PKR. PN finished closely behind with 74 seats – Bersatu with 25 seats, PAS 49. In terms of the popular vote, PH obtained 38%, PN 30% and BN 23%. Initially, the King of Malaysia indicated that PH and PN should both form a unity government. However, PN's leader Muhyiddin rejected this as he scrambled to form a PN-led government in alliance with Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS) and Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) along with some independent elected politicians [Anand and Teoh 2022]. However, GPS announced that it would support a unity government led by Anwar's PH instead. The King, after meeting with Anwar and Muhyiddin, determined that Anwar had the support of the majority of the elected MPs, and appointed him as prime minister.

There were also other unexpected results in GE-15. Former two-time prime minister, Mahathir Mohamed, who led PH to victory in 2018, had contested GE-15 under a new political party he had formed. He shockingly lost his seat to a candidate from Bersatu-PN, in what was his first electoral defeat in 53 years. Mahathir was walloped: He won 6.8% of the vote compared to the Bersatu candidate who garnered 38.1%. Unceremoniously, the electorate had chosen to retire the 97-year-old grand master of Malaysian politics.

Other shock defeats included the defeat of Anwar's daughter, Nurul Izzah. Her loss to a PAS candidate signalled the inroads made by that party into the urban strongholds of PH; the Permatang Pauh seat in the Penang state that Izzah lost had been a stronghold for PKR since 2004.

Another notable loss was Khairy Jamaluddin, who was long seen as a rising star within UMNO. Khairy had openly locked horns with Zahid by calling for him to step down as party president. He then lost to Zahid for

party president in 2018, only to announce that he would try again during UMNO's next party elections. As a result, Zahid sought to neutralise Khairy by shifting him to contest GE-15 in a district known to be partial to PH. While Khairy lost (and later was expelled from UMNO by Zahid in early 2023), his contest was close – he garnered 30.5% of the votes compared to the winner from PKR-PH who garnered 32.2%. The close race indicated that Khairy could have easily won a seat for UMNO, if he had been placed in a strategic district.

Overall, the election results indicated two key developments that will likely continue to be relevant factors in Malaysian politics. First, the results highlighted a deepening political polarisation along racial lines – DAP benefitted from non-Malay support while most Malay voters supported PN. Second, PAS, the largest party in parliament, indicated that the party had managed to successfully appeal to the Malay electorate in ways that it could not previously. By comparison, in the 2018 general elections, PAS had only won 18 seats. The following sub-sections analyses these two developments.

3.1. *Political polarisation along racial lines*

Election analyses indicated that Malaysians are more divided electorally along racial lines than before. In GE-15, non-Malays overwhelmingly supported PH – about 94% of Chinese voters and 83% of Indian voters [Welsh 2022]. This was a continuing trend from the 2008 general elections, when PH's emphasis on equality for all races increasingly appealed to Chinese and Indian voters, increasingly dissatisfied with the exclusive pro-Malay ethno-religious rhetoric and unequal race-based policies espoused by the then UMNO-led government. This shift of the non-Malay vote to PH became significant in the 2013 general elections when the BN government lost its two-thirds parliamentary majority for the first time. UMNO leaders referred to it as the «Chinese tsunami» [BBC 2013]. DAP's win of 40 seats in GE-15 was comparable to the 42 seats it won in 2018, which indicated that the shift of non-Malay vote to the party has been consolidated. The non-Malay vote shift to PH has been largely consistent at the federal level. Therefore, BN's recent wins during the Melaka and Johor state elections do not correspond with voting patterns at the federal level. This is because the ability of Malay-centric coalitions such as BN to attract non-Malay voters at the state level depend more on local factors and the appeal of individual BN politicians rather than disagreement over political ideologies. This was true in the Tanjung Piai (Johor state) by-elections in 2019, which BN won with significant Chinese support because of the connections forged by the BN candidate from the component party, Malaysian Chinese Association [Kassim 2019].

Conversely, the Malay vote in GE-15 was split among the three main coalitions – PN was estimated to have garnered 54% of the Malay vote, BN 33%, and PH 11% [Welsh 2022]. Former BN Malay voters shifted their

support to either Bersatu or PAS in the PN coalition instead of PH. Several reasons could account for this shift. First, PN had successfully differentiated itself from BN by emphasising that the coalition was «clean». During the campaign, Muhyiddin from Bersatu highlighted that no PN politician had pending corruption charges compared to other politicians – UMNO-BN had several as with DAP-PH's leader Lim Guan Eng. PAS also played up its religious credentials to convince voters that it was religiously opposed to corruption and hence trustworthy. PN thus appealed to Malay voters who were disillusioned with BN but not prepared to consider PH because of its ideological stance. Second, PN benefitted from the negative publicity about UMNO. For example, an online clip of Zahid claiming that BN had to win GE-15 to prevent selective acts of prosecution went viral. The clip suggested that Zahid's primary motivation to call for early elections was to avoid prosecution for corruption, which corresponded with the anti-Zahid narrative forwarded by PN [Tapsell 2022]. Third, UMNO's claim to champion Malay rights lost credibility because of the public infighting among party members. In a bid to strengthen his position within UMNO, Zahid attacked his critics within the party. For example, as noted above, he forced Khairy to contest another seat in GE-15. Zahid also dropped Shahidan Kassim, a veteran UMNO MP in Perlis state from defending his seat in GE-15 on the pretext of introducing younger candidates. An angered Shahidan then contested against UMNO on the PN-PAS ticket and overwhelmingly won. Such decisions at the leadership level cost UMNO its much-needed grassroots support during its surprisingly unorganised election campaign.

The GE-15 election results indicated that PN had overtaken UMNO as the credible coalition to champion Malay rights. Overall, the results confirmed deepening political polarisation along racial lines. Although PN had fielded a few non-Malay candidates in the elections, all of its elected MPs were Malay. Meanwhile, non-Malay support was solidly behind PH, with some level of urban Malay support.

3.2. *The rising appeal of PAS*

The improved electoral performance of PAS was unexpected – PAS had more than doubled its parliamentary seats in GE-15. PAS also won 24 more than Bersatu, making it the stronger party within PN. There were several possible reasons for this outcome. First was an element of protest vote. A segment of Malay voters perceived that UMNO had utterly failed them by its inability to confront systemic problems within the party, evidenced by the public infighting among key leaders. These voters switched to the two other Malay-centric parties that claimed to fight endemic corruption, PAS and Bersatu.

Second, recent surveys indicate that religion continues to be central to Malay identity [Merdeka Center 2022]. This had previously benefitted PAS

most in the rural communities. In a context of pronounced political instability, for a number of Muslims trust is more easily conferred upon politicians perceived to be religious because they are supposed to hold themselves accountable to a higher divine power and hence less likely to engage in corrupt activities. This type of belief, where trust and respect are conferred upon religious teachers, is cultivated in the network of Islamic schools run by PAS in its rural strongholds and in some urban areas habited by Malays [Hamid and Razali 2022]. Notably, in GE-15, PAS made inroads into some urban areas suggesting that the religious credentials of PAS politicians, many of whom were religious teachers appealed not only to rural Malay voters but also to urban Malay voters.

Third, PAS managed to moderate its hard-line Islamist image while it was a part of the PN government in 2020-21. While in office, PAS downplayed its past agenda of implementing *hudud* punishments (harsh penalties such as amputation of limbs, flogging, or death for certain crimes). Instead, PAS emphasised a comparatively more benign form of public Islam, advocating for conservative Muslim dress code and railing against alcohol sales in public places. This approach appealed to the Malays who desired more Islamic values in the public sphere but who were not keen on the implementation of *hudud* punishments. This strategy allowed PAS to make inroads into urban areas as young professional Malays increasingly favoured a public Islam that was in accordance with their vision of an ideal Islamic democracy, which some Malays believed PAS could achieve. In reality, PAS never did renounce its Islamic state and *hudud* implementation agendas. This situation likely contributed to PKR Nurul Izzah's loss in the urban seat of Permatang Pauh in Penang to a PAS candidate who was a religious teacher.

Fourth, in the aftermath of the 2018 shock defeat of the UMNO-led government, UMNO had cultivated a close relationship with PAS based on the pursuit of Malay unity. On the back of a rise in ethno-religious fear-mongering over the purported subordination of Malays under a PH-led government, a subsequent political pact between the two parties facilitated electoral wins in several by-elections in 2019. Some Malays supported the cooperation as they desired strong political leadership to defend Malay and Muslim rights. When UMNO forged its own way in the lead-up to GE-15, some Malays turned to PAS which had stayed consistent over its stance on Malay unity by cooperating closely with Bersatu in the PN coalition.

Lastly, PAS used social media to effectively connect with younger voters, thus benefiting from the CA2019 constitutional amendment which lowered the voting age to 18 years old [Hamid and Razali 2022]. Younger Malay voters also appeared more inclined to vote in line with their parents, some of whom favoured PAS for the reasons discussed above.

4. Responding to supply chain disruptions

The Russia-Ukraine war which started in February 2022 affected the global economic sphere by disrupting supply chain networks. Malaysia adopted an official policy of neutrality over the war. Nevertheless, it voted in favour of the United Nations General Assembly resolution in March against the aggression against Ukraine. While Malaysia did not issue sanctions against Russia for its invasion, it prevented a US-sanctioned Russian oil tanker from docking locally [Mustafa, Zulkarnain, and Lingan 2022].

Malaysia initially assured its citizens that the local impact of the war would be minimal because trade with both Russia and Ukraine stood at 0.5% of Malaysia's total global trade volume [Jaafar 2022]. However, the war contributed to global food shortages and massive price hikes that ultimately impacted Malaysia's cost of living. For example, Ukraine accounted for 31% of the world's sunflower oil production [Ates and Bukowski 2022]. The war caused a disruption in Ukraine's sunflower production. This resulted in shortages in the global supply chain and an increased demand for other oils such as palm oil.

Indonesia and Malaysia are the top two producers of palm oil. The increased global demand for palm oil created shortages and price hikes in both countries. While Indonesia resorted to a protectionist policy of banning palm oil exports for a period of time, Malaysia insisted that it had enough subsidised cooking oil supplies to meet domestic needs. Yet prices for cooking oil in Malaysia doubled in 2022, along with steep increases in food prices. Despite the growing public dissatisfaction with cost-of-living issues, the government took steps to remove subsidies for cooking oil and other crucial goods in July, which accounted for 9% of the country's GDP. However, by September, the government was forced to back away from the plan due to public backlash [Ghani 2022].

The Russia-Ukraine war also caused price spikes in essential crops such as corn, which ultimately affected Malaysia in its chicken supply. The country's chicken farmers had to import corn feed for the chicken at much higher prices in 2022 than previous years. For many chicken farmers already struggling with a reduced chicken production output due to labour shortage issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and weather-related setbacks, the price hike in chicken feed forced a further reduction in chicken production [Paulo and Dom 2022]. The reduction in domestic chicken supplies and increased prices fuelled public discontent over food price inflation. The UMNO-led government then implemented a temporary ban on chicken exports in June to stabilise domestic chicken supplies. The ban was later lifted in October after pressure from the chicken farmers. By year's end, there were sky-high public expectations on Anwar's newly minted unity government to stem the country's inflation which had risen to 7% in December 2022.

5. *Myanmar refugee crisis*

On the foreign relations front, international human rights organisations and Malaysian activists criticised the Malaysian government for deporting at-risk Myanmar refugees to Myanmar. Malaysia has a large number of refugees from Myanmar, most of whom are Muslim Rohingya who fled violence and killings by the Burmese military. After the military coup that deposed the democratically elected government under Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) in 2021, members of other Myanmar minorities fled to Malaysia.

Prior to the pandemic, refugees were generally tolerated as part of Malaysian society. In fact, in 2016, UMNO and PAS politicians, who were long-time political foes, used the Rohingya cause to rally Malays under the banner of *ummah* (Muslim community) to protest the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya from Myanmar. Malaysians were generally sympathetic to the plight of the refugees within their midst. However, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 sparked off a wave of xenophobic sentiments as more people struggled to make ends meet. The rise in anti-refugee sentiments likely contributed to the tough stance adopted by the Malaysian Home Affairs Ministry in 2022. In 2022, Malaysia returned more than 2000 Myanmar refugees, although human rights activists warned that their lives would be at risk under the Myanmar military regime [Head 2022].

On the regional stage, however, the Malaysian Foreign Minister, Saifuddin Abdullah from Bersatu, was aligned with his fellow ASEAN counterparts on pushing for the ASEAN-backed Myanmar Peace Plan. Saifuddin took a step further by publicly meeting with members of the National Unity Government (NUG) of Myanmar, which the international community regarded as the country's legitimate government, and by advocating for a tougher stance against the military regime. In this regard, Saifuddin became the most vocal critic of the military regime among the ASEAN members.

6. *Concluding remarks*

GE-15 marked an important turn in Malaysian politics in which voters signalled that they would no longer vote out of loyalty to tradition but would be ready to switch support to the party that they believed would best uphold their ideals. The dramatic decline of the grand old Malay party, UMNO, since the 2018 general elections is evidence of this change in mindset. The GE-15 results also indicated that the domination of a single political party or coalition in Malaysian politics is likely a thing of the past. While this may bode well for progressive democratisation in Malaysia, the voting patterns indicated a deepening political polarisation along racial lines that may be destabilising. As the frequent changes of

government over the past five years had shown, politicians are not above instrumentalising race and religion for political gains. If Anwar is to serve as prime minister to the full five-year term, he will have to build trust and successfully manage the competing interests of the different parties within his unity government.

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