



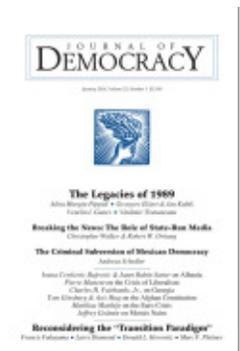
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## Malaysia's Elections: A Step Backward

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# MALAYSIA'S ELECTIONS: A STEP BACKWARD

*Bridget Welsh*

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Malaysia's long-awaited thirteenth general election, held on 5 May 2013, saw the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN or National Front) lose the popular vote and yet emerge victorious once again. The incumbent coalition, which has held power since independence in 1957, won 133 seats in the 222-seat House of Representatives and control of twelve of the thirteen state legislatures. After losing its two-thirds majority in Parliament in the previous election in March 2008, BN now had to contend with a more competitive two-party system.<sup>1</sup> Thus the 2013 contest was widely expected to give the opposition its first chance to govern nationally. Polling on the eve of the balloting pointed to a change in government,<sup>2</sup> yet in the end the opposition fell short of its goal. Instead, Prime Minister Najib Razak secured his maiden electoral victory, denying Anwar Ibrahim, leader of the opposition coalition Pakatan Rakyat (PR or People's Alliance), the chance to assume the premiership.

Although PR won 50.9 percent of the popular vote to BN's 47.4 percent, the power of incumbency prevailed under Malaysia's Westminster-style first-past-the-post voting system. Given the close finish as well as reports of electoral irregularities, not to mention the longstanding complaints about Malaysia's electoral process being unfair, the results continue to be contested, with many questioning the legitimacy of Najib's government.

Why and how did Najib and the BN win? What do the answers to those questions mean for his government and for democracy in Malaysia? In many ways, the 2013 polls typify those of competitive authoritarian systems, in which incumbents use finely honed tactics and institutional leverage to stay in office.<sup>3</sup> Although the 2013 general election

in some ways showcased the sophisticated techniques employed by competitive authoritarian governments, in other ways it revealed social forces pushing for greater democracy. The nature of BN's victory, the voting patterns, and the broader political forces within society point to continuing pressures for further democratization and high levels of political contestation in the future.

Malaysia has appeared to be a possible candidate for regime change ever since the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis. At the time, strongman Mahathir Mohamad was in power, and his deputy was Anwar Ibrahim. The two disagreed on how to handle the crisis, and Anwar was forced from office and from the deputy-presidency of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the dominant party in the BN. Anwar then launched a *reformasi* campaign, calling for political reforms, corruption control, and the expansion of basic freedoms. His subsequent beating and arrest in 1998 triggered outrage and severely dented support for the regime. Although Malaysia's *reformasi* movement failed to bring down the country's strongman as its Indonesian counterpart had done, it nonetheless put in place the drivers for political change.

Mahathir managed to avoid Suharto's fate in large part by using the levers of state power, patronage, and appeals to ethnic insecurity.<sup>4</sup> Malaysian politics has traditionally been divided along ethnic lines. Roughly 80 percent of the country's population is situated on the Malay Peninsula (West or peninsular Malaysia) with the rest residing in the states of Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo (East Malaysia). Malaysians of Chinese and Indian descent make up 24.6 and 7.3 percent, respectively, of the country's total population of 28.3 million. The other two-thirds are known as Bumiputera ("sons of the soil"), a designation that includes Malays, who make up slightly more than 50 percent of the country's total population, and other indigenous groups, the majority of whom reside on Borneo. Since independence, the Malay majority has held the reins of power, while the ethnic Chinese and Indian populations along with the non-Malay Bumiputera communities have tended to organize their representation along ethnic and regional lines, with the latter based in East Malaysia.<sup>5</sup>

When Mahathir left office in 2003, his successor, Abdullah Badawi, sought to increase his base of support by promising reform. This strategy paid off: In 2004, the BN won a record 90.4 percent of the seats in Parliament.<sup>6</sup> Four years later, however, in the March 2008 elections, the BN lost its two-thirds majority in Parliament. Abdullah's losses at the 2008 polls were largely due to his failure to deliver on reform after raising popular expectations. Another major factor was Abdullah's rejection by his own camp, as the more reactionary forces within the BN, championed by Mahathir, continued to play a prominent public role in politics. Abdullah therefore faced, and lost, challenges on two fronts—from a newly empowered opposition tapping into global calls for change and

from his own political base, which viewed him as a weak leader compared to Mahathir. Having failed to maintain a high level of support for his coalition in the election, Abdullah stepped down in April 2009 and was succeeded by Najib.

### **A Shift in Political Culture**

The story of Malaysia's 2013 general election really begins just after the 2008 polls, when a consolidated opposition began to form. After making important national gains and winning control of five state governments in 2008, three opposition parties formed the PR—Anwar's personality-based reformist People's Justice Party (PKR), the liberal and largely ethnic-Chinese Democratic Action Party (DAP), and the Pan-Islamic Malaysian Party (PAS). While they differ on issues of religion and policy priorities, these parties share an interest in improving governance, controlling corruption, strengthening the rule of law, and bringing about more equitable development.<sup>7</sup> Thus they put aside their ideological differences to focus on the common goal of removing BN from power and bringing about political reform. This spirit of collaboration between Islamists and liberals distinguishes the Malaysian opposition from most of its counterparts elsewhere in the Muslim world.

The 2008 polls emboldened not only the opposition but also voters themselves, who now felt more confident about their ability to bring about political change. This shift in Malaysian political culture, which became clear after Mahathir left office, further boosted the opposition's prospects, as political discourse and the space for political participation opened up. Since 2008, civil society has expanded; exposés on corruption have become the norm; and the scope and content of political commentary have broadened considerably to include more open criticism of political leaders as well as much-needed attention to issues ranging from the removal of draconian laws to economic policy. A boom in Internet access—now at over 70 percent nationally—and the widespread use of social media have facilitated this growing political engagement, especially in urban areas.<sup>8</sup>

The need for electoral reform has become a particular focal point for political activity. In November 2007, this issue galvanized more than thirty-thousand Malaysians into taking to the streets to demand a more level electoral playing field. After 2008, with the real possibility of a change of government on the horizon, a coalition of more than sixty civil society groups known as Bersih (short for the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections) intensified its efforts to educate and mobilize citizens around issues of electoral reform. In 2011 and 2012, Bersih organized huge follow-up rallies to the 2007 demonstration, demanding a host of reforms including a clean voter registry, a fixed campaign

period, the use of indelible ink on ballots, and equal access to the media for all political parties. The harsh police crackdown on the 2011 rally backfired, forcing the government to crack open the door to reforms by establishing a parliamentary select committee that proposed 22 reform initiatives, though some of these would later favor the incumbent government, strengthening its position in the May 2013 elections. Because the government's response did not evoke public confidence, the electoral-reform drive intensified after the parliamentary proposals.

Not surprisingly, the calls for reform and the opposition's gains in March 2008 provoked a counterreaction. The 2008 polls saw the election of the largest number of Indian and Chinese Malaysians in history, and the PR coalition performed extremely well across ethnic lines. This was particularly true of PAS, which has moderated in part due to its success in courting votes from outside its east-coast stronghold—so much so that the government has tried to portray the party as ineffective at representing Malays and protecting the Muslim faith so long as it remains part of the multiethnic opposition coalition.

As one side was pushing for more democratic governance, the other hoped to preserve the status quo and even strengthen the position of the incumbent government. These proregime advocates created their own Malay ultranationalist civil society groups, which demanded greater Malay representation. Appeals to race have always been a factor in Malaysian politics, especially when the incumbent government is challenged. After 2008, hardcore Malay chauvinists united under the umbrella group PERKASA, led by UMNO politicians and former civil servants. Their appeal was premised on the view that the Chinese had gained power in 2008 through opposition victories, and that these perceived gains threatened Malay power in both the political and economic arenas.

Mahathir, the former premier who played a major role in Abdullah's ouster, has been PERKASA's biggest cheerleader. As the main architect of a system that he governed for more than two decades, Mahathir's legacy depends on limiting reforms. A Malay ultranationalist himself, Mahathir stoked Malay fears of a Chinese threat in order to consolidate his political power and rise to the premiership in 1981.<sup>9</sup> This ethnicized zero-sum view of Malays fending off ethnic Chinese epitomizes Mahathir's ideology. Nevertheless, Mahathir managed to win over some non-Malays, especially the ethnic Chinese, in the 1999 contest, despite sharp divisions in the Malay community. After March 2008, however, there was a resurgence of Malay ultranationalism, which was purposefully brought into electoral politics and used to thwart pressures for reform.

To complicate matters, the proregime forces were mobilized around not just ethnicity but also religion. The tie between ethnicity and religion in Malaysia is so strong that the country's constitution defines a "Malay" as someone who, among other requirements, "professes the religion of Islam." From the 1990s onward, the state expanded its jurisdiction over

religious affairs, thereby making the issues of political Islam and religious freedom increasingly contentious as conservative Islamists pushed for less tolerant positions. In March 2008, the destruction of Hindu temples and denial of space for non-Muslims, especially Christians, contributed to rising religious mobilization and antigovernment sentiments. Although the Najib administration tried to deflect controversy involving religious freedom and the treatment of different faiths by keeping the relevant legal cases on hold, civil society groups and conservative Islamists worked to keep such concerns in the public eye. On the eve of the elections, the role of *hudud* (laws governing moral behavior) and *kalimah Allah* (use of the word “Allah” by non-Muslims) became points of contention, with those pushing for more conservative positions provoking those with more liberal positions.<sup>10</sup> BN and its supporters used these issues not only to divide the opposition between the Islamists and the liberals, but also to prove to Malay ultranationalists that the incumbent government would protect the faith against calls for non-Muslim religious freedoms, which they feared could undermine the dominant position of Malays.

### Tilting the Playing Field

The combination of a stronger multiethnic opposition, a more open political environment with an expanding, contentious, and active civil society, and strong proregime mobilization set the stage for the much anticipated 2013 contest, dubbed the “mother of all elections.” Although the elections were competitive, they were conducted on a playing field that had become increasingly uneven in the years since 2008. To understand the 2013 outcome, it is important to consider the many sophisticated steps that the incumbent government took to keep itself in power.

Incumbents everywhere seek to draw electoral lines in their favor. BN is no exception, having long played the delineation process to its advantage by creating heavily malapportioned districts and redrawing electoral lines outside of administrative boundaries. Such measures dilute the urban vote and favor remote rural areas, divide ethnic minorities while simultaneously strengthening the electoral position of the Malay community (especially in East Malaysia, where Malays are a minority), and add seats in safe areas.<sup>11</sup> A seat from an average urban constituency typically represents a population four times greater than a remote rural constituency—in the most extreme cases, the ratio is ten to one. Malaysia’s Electoral Commission is a body of appointed civil servants that reports directly to the prime minister, and the boundary-drawing process is conducted in a manner that lacks public accountability.

The 2013 electoral playing field was further tilted by behind-the-scenes maneuvering involving the strategic placement and registration of voters: Scores of voters were arbitrarily transferred between constituencies, sometimes even dividing households, and some constituencies,

especially those of national leaders or those featuring close races, saw a record increase in new voters.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, evidence given in government hearings revealed that government agencies had granted citizenship to foreigners to bolster the BN's electoral prospects.<sup>13</sup> There were also reports of foreigners in the election receiving identity cards in exchange for voting for the incumbent government.<sup>14</sup> Before the polls, the integrity of the voter roll was in question, as was the process surrounding its administration. The opposition was allowed less than two weeks to review any additional names and a subsequent brief window in which to lodge complaints. Although the opposition did, in fact, challenge the roll's integrity in court, those challenges were dismissed without review.<sup>15</sup> The opposition was never given a complete electoral roll with the names and addresses of voters, not even during the actual campaign period.

Ironically, the government used some of the minor electoral reforms resulting from Bersih's pressure to its own advantage. One initiative involved the introduction of early voting for electoral and security personnel, approved media staff, and overseas voters. The validity of these early votes—which were cast in police stations three days before the election and in many cases counted without opposition observers present—has been questioned, as 89.5 percent favored the government. These early votes are viewed with suspicion largely because the indelible ink used for the election was not in fact indelible in many parts of the country. Many believe that this allowed some voters to vote twice, which may have contributed to the high voter turnout and incumbent wins in tight races.

Other irregularities marred the contest as well: Blackouts occurred during vote counts; opposition polling agents were not provided the recorded counts; in some cases, the recorded counts did not match the officially posted results; there were reports of mysteriously found ballots and ballot boxes; and there were allegations of foreigners coming to the polls to vote. These issues raised further questions about the legitimacy of the results, especially given that in 32 percent of the races the margin of victory was less than 10 percent. While previous polls in Malaysia have experienced reports of irregularities, these were usually localized at the state or even constituency level. This time around, they were widespread and nationwide, leading many to believe that the incumbents owed their victory to their control of the electoral administration.

A new style of "money politics" also played a key role in the 2013 elections. When Najib became prime minister in 2009, he adopted a new pattern of distributing benefits to the population, using government coffers in an unprecedented way to woo political support. Up to that point, patronage politics in Malaysia had followed the pattern common in the region, whereby political parties (namely, the dominant UMNO in Malaysia) served as the vehicles through which to secure support. In 1999,

for example, Mahathir awarded major government contracts to UMNO members as a means of locking in political backing and mobilizing his political base. Although money and machine politics had long been features of Malaysia's competitive authoritarian system, Najib transformed these mechanisms, waging a modern campaign that relied heavily on the BN's resource advantages and the belief that voters could be bought as part of a commercial exchange.

The major innovation of this new "commercialization" strategy was the use of populist measures to shore up support before the formal campaign. During the last decade, politicians in Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia began wooing voters with such populist policies as cash transfers and subsidies. Thailand's Thaksin Shinawatra pioneered this approach, which began with the distribution of cash grants to rural constituencies and was later extended to the allocation of housing subsidies to consolidate support in urban areas. The direct use of government money, as opposed to funds distributed through political parties, has gradually been growing in regional politics for some time, as traditional forms of party patronage have dried up in the face of population growth, modernization, and weaker political parties. Beginning in the 1990s, the BN adopted the practice of "developmentalism"—promises of better services and targeted government-funded infrastructure-development projects in exchange for votes.<sup>16</sup>

Under Najib, there has been a return to a more personalized market exchange between government and voters via politicized individual cash transfers—or, in Najib's own words, "You help me, I help you."<sup>17</sup> Najib introduced a variety of measures under the rubric of "1Malaysia" (purportedly an umbrella initiative to bolster "national unity irrespective of race or religious belief"<sup>18</sup>)—that included direct cash handouts through the BR1M program, schoolbook vouchers, and housing-loan packages. He coupled these incentives with pay increases to civil servants, direct handouts to schools and local community groups, and funds to NGOs linked to 1Malaysia that would lobby on behalf of the incumbent government prior to the actual campaign. While these initiatives were targeted toward specific swing groups, including youth, women, and civil servants, they focused on lower-income Malaysians. The funds for these populist initiatives—totaling an estimated US\$20 billion from April 2009, when Najib assumed office, through the start of the campaign in 2013—were largely public and directly managed by the premier's office, whose budget increased fourfold from 2009.<sup>19</sup>

Just as Prime Minister Najib's office directed the dispensation of funds, it kept tight control over the 2013 campaign. Rejecting the traditional mode of campaigning through the various BN parties, Najib opted instead for the "war-room" strategy of a centrally managed campaign heavily reliant on well-paid consultants. Much like a presidential campaign, this effort focused on Najib personally and doled out vast sums

for advertising. BN saturated national media outlets and websites with expensive advertisements. Unlike in 2008, when the opposition's skillful use of the Internet gave it an advantage over the incumbent,<sup>20</sup> the Najib campaign carefully and systematically sought to dominate social media and the Internet overall. It paid bloggers and funded websites such as *TheChoice.com*, whose aim was to attack and discredit alternative voices and engage in propaganda. The opposition waged its own Internet and social-media campaign, but in the final analysis the BN's superior resources won out—it dominated the political content of the main sources of alternative media by 49 percent compared to 41 percent.<sup>21</sup>

Najib's ability to effectively mobilize economic interests tied to the regime helped to fund the BN's survivalist campaign. Whereas in previous elections private-sector groups played a behind-the-scenes role and made discreet donations to support the incumbent government, in 2013 "friends" of the government were open primary funders during the campaign itself. Whether providing free dinners with high-paid celebrity endorsers or offering outright financial rewards for votes, private-sector resources were vital tools in the mobilization effort. The incumbent government had clearly given a signal to those who had benefited from access and contracts. From mining and logging interests to gambling and the underworld, BN called in its chips. As a result, companies tied to the government encouraged their employees to vote for BN, and private-sector money boosted the incumbent's resource advantage, making the 2013 general election the most expensive campaign in national history and vote-buying a nationwide phenomenon.

## **Governance and Ethnic Politics**

The opposition and the government had two very different conceptions of legitimacy. BN opted for the common bedrocks of competitive authoritarian systems—economic performance and political stability. Najib's record on the economy was solid, especially compared to that of his predecessor, Abdullah Badawi. With annual growth rates of over 5 percent since coming into office, Najib was touted as a sound economic manager. He issued calls for further economic reform, including a consultant-packaged Economic Transformation Program. Although the proposed reforms were minor and conflicted with Malaysia's high deficit spending and Najib's populist initiatives, the rhetoric of reform and the promise of further fiscal cutbacks after the election bolstered the prime minister's economic credentials. He contrasted his record with the mixed messages coming from the opposition, which, despite having performed well while governing at the state level, lacked a clearly articulated macroeconomic program.

Najib also highlighted the ideological and policy differences between his government and the opposition. The premier and his coali-

tion portrayed the opposition as sowers of social unrest and repeatedly suggested that instability could result if it came to power. The opposition itself helped them make this point—by publicly contradicting itself over religion during the campaign and running more than one coalition candidate in a handful of constituencies. Such miscalculations reinforced some voters' doubts about PR's ability to govern collectively.

For its part, PR made clean government its main issue and focused on the rampant corruption within the incumbent government. Since 2008, the opposition had exposed a series of scandals involving huge sums in misappropriated funds and abuses of power, and it called for an overhaul of existing monopolistic practices and for ridding the country of cronyism. While this message galvanized voters who were fed up with excesses, it also energized those with a vested interest in opposing such reforms. But PR stuck to its message and continued to paint the BN government as one that had stayed too long in power, abusing its position for the sake of entrenched elites. Good governance, PR argued, would require a change in government. This message resonated with educated upper-class and middle-class voters, especially in urban areas.

PR tried to compete with the incumbent government in wooing lower-income voters by launching its own populist proposals, such as lowering car prices and eliminating tolls. The ability to carry out these initiatives depended on reducing the licenses and monopolies of government-linked cronies, but voters struggled to understand the opposition's program and to differentiate its populist initiatives from those of the government. And the opposition, of course, could not match BN in terms of cash and other resources. So voters were left asking themselves how the opposition would govern differently from the incumbent government. It was only in states where the opposition had a strong track record of governing—namely, in Selangor and Penang—that it was able to overcome its unclear messaging and expand its support.

The 2013 elections highlighted two vastly different views of ethnic politics. The opposition promoted full inclusion of all the country's communities, irrespective of ethnicity. This was a successful platform for the opposition in 2008, winning broad support, especially among Chinese Malaysians. In 2013, a record number of ethnic Chinese across Malaysia voted for the opposition in what Najib called a "Chinese tsunami." This reflected the attractiveness of the opposition's more ethnically inclusive messaging. The vast majority of new seats won by the opposition in 2013 came from this increased ethnic Chinese support. The 2013 results revealed that BN—once a truly multiethnic coalition itself—now lacks effective non-Bumiputera component parties. BN's victory essentially consists of Malay seats, especially those won by UMNO in West Malaysia, and other Bumiputera seats in East Malaysia.

**TABLE—2013 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION RESULTS**

Coalition / Party	Number of Seats	Percentage of Vote
<b>BN</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>47.4</b>
UMNO	88	29.3
Malaysian Chinese Association	7	2.1
Malaysian Indian Congress	4	8.1
Sarawak and Sabah Parties*	33	7.2
Malaysian People's Movement Party	1	0.6
<b>PR</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>50.9</b>
PKR	30	20.4
DAP	38	15.7
PAS	21	14.8

\* United Traditional Bumiputera Party (14); Sarawak People's Party (6); United Sabah Party (4); Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (4); UPKO (3); Sarawak United People's Party (1); and United People's Sabah Party (1).

The opposition's push for inclusiveness reflected a new ethnic politics, one in which ethnic identity is superseded by a transethnic Malaysian identity and all communities are represented and respected equally. This message appealed not just to non-Malays, who finally felt included after decades of exclusion, but to many younger and middle-class Malay voters. As a result, PR garnered more support across ethnicities and emerged from the contest a more multiethnic coalition.

Najib and the BN pursued the opposite tack, only to lose the spotlight to the man who had shaped Najib's political career, Mahathir. The former prime minister became BN's most effective campaigner. He managed to mobilize the UMNO base and to reduce infighting within it, in part by sounding an explicitly ultranationalist appeal. The ruling coalition framed the election as a battle to protect the status quo, particularly the Malays' position. As the opposition's message gained ground, its political rallies swelled with large Chinese and multiethnic crowds. The ruling coalition used photographs of these rallies to fan feelings of ethnic insecurity in the Malay community, especially among those in working-class and rural areas with limited access to alternative media. Mahathir's vision of ethnic politics as a zero-sum game took on new life, feeding the Malay-ultranationalist zeal that had exploded since the opposition's gains in 2008.

The former strongman's very presence on the political stage evoked a certain authoritarian nostalgia. His immediate goal was to position his son, Mukhriz Mahathir, to become the chief minister of the elder's home state of Kedah, but his longer-term aim was to protect his legacy and curtail pressures for reform that might threaten the interests of those who had benefited during his tenure. Malay ethnic insecurity and authoritarian nostalgia proved to be a potent combination in parts of the Malay heartland, where they helped to stem the opposition's political expansion. The losses were most keenly felt by the PAS, which had held many of the seats in Malay-majority rural areas where this ultranational-

ist message was most effective, and where PAS failed to articulate an effective alternative message.

## Widening Cleavages

When the results were counted, the opposition had won the most votes but not the most seats. This had to do in part with malapportionment. Overall, the average constituency size for seats won by BN (46,510) was 40 percent less than for seats won by PR (77,655). Tellingly, these smaller constituencies are mainly in rural and economically disadvantaged areas of Malaysia, carefully carved out to boost incumbent support. Constituency size is only part of the explanation, as factors such as voter transfers, placement of voters, electoral-roll integrity, and electoral-administration bias shaped the outcome. The effects of other aspects of electoral administration are still being assessed. At the time of this writing in late August 2013, a record number of electoral petitions involving more than 60 seats had been filed. Malaysia's conservative judiciary has already dismissed most on technicalities before any hearings, but a handful remain before the courts. Bersih is planning to hold a "people's tribunal" to review the electoral process in September 2013, and this platform will likely bring to light the impact of voter transfers and other irregularities.

Postelection analyses of voting behavior gleaned from opinion polls, focus groups, and polling-station results point to three important trends.<sup>22</sup> First, ethnic voting patterns remain pronounced. The Malay community is split, with the majority having voted for the incumbent government, while the majority of all the other ethnic communities (except the Dayak in Sarawak) voted for the opposition. The post-election ethnic divisions have deepened despite more cross-ethnic voting than ever before. Existing divisions have been reinforced by the framing of the outcome as a "Chinese tsunami" and the reality that the dominant parties in the BN—UMNO and the United Traditional Bumiputera Party (PBB), controlled by Sarawak's Chief Minister Taib Mahmud—are Malay parties. This imbalance will lead to greater ethnic-based discourse in the future and put pressure on opposition unity.

A less obvious but still important factor in the election was class. Lower-class citizens formed the bulk of the government's support. Its control of the mainstream media and its huge resource advantages, along with populist enticements such as cash transfers, helped the BN to secure the votes of less educated, often rural constituents. The opposition won support among middle-class and upper-class voters, though not among those with direct economic ties to the regime.

The third trend in 2013 was the growing importance of East Malaysia in national politics. The incumbent government would not be in power were it not for the quarter of all seats in Parliament that it won in Sabah

and Sarawak, home to only a fifth of the population. The opposition failed to make inroads in these states beyond a few urban Chinese constituencies, in large part due to weaker machinery and fewer resources, vote buying by BN, and the presence of regional parties that split the vote in these states. East Malaysia will continue to be a kingmaker in national politics, with regional bosses such as Sarawak's Taib Mahmud (who effectively controls his state's 25 seats) wielding tremendous power. Moreover, the trend toward decentralization of power, which accelerated after 2008, is likely to continue if local demands are met by the government.

Both BN and PR will face specific challenges. BN, having brought about a resurgence in Malay ultranationalism and fueled populist pressures, will find its ability to implement meaningful reforms severely hamstrung. Najib will have to work to maintain the loyalty of the East Malaysian elites and to keep them satisfied with his leadership. PR, meanwhile, has lost its momentum in promoting inclusive ethnic politics, and it will be hard to regain, especially since the opposition alliance itself is not free of potential ethnic hurdles: The mainly Chinese DAP won 38 seats, nearly double the number won by the Islamist PAS (21), while Anwar's PKR won 30. PR must now take stock and reflect on how to proceed, particularly as it faces some internal conflict over religious issues. It will also have to reformulate its economic message, so that it can be clearly grasped by voters in all classes, as well as find ways to appeal to all voters in East Malaysia, not just the Chinese community.

Although the 2013 election was driven mainly by domestic dynamics and political actors, it should also be understood in a global and regional context. The United States was one of the first countries to accept the result of the election, and although the U.S. State Department would later qualify its outright acceptance of the results by noting concerns with irregularities, it had already set in motion international acceptance of the results, with Australia, the United Kingdom, and other European countries soon following suit.<sup>23</sup>

Why does international acceptance of Malaysia's competitive authoritarianism seem to be growing? Regional developments and geostrategic concerns play a part—namely, the West's concern about China's increasing prominence in the neighborhood.<sup>24</sup> The U.S. "pivot" toward Asia under the Obama administration has sharpened competition with China over allies in Southeast Asia, and Malaysia is highly contested. The country is more dependent on China for trade and investment than on the United States, yet Najib has aligned himself with the latter, knowing that he will need international allies to manage his domestic challenges. Najib has sided with the United States on matters of trade relations such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement and on other geostrategic issues, hoping that in return Western powers will overlook irregularities on issues of democracy.

The West has provided very little support to Malaysia's democratic

forces. The U.S. double standard on democracy in the region became clear in July 2013, when Congress conducted hearings over voter-roll irregularities in Cambodia while staying silent about similar problems in Malaysia. Cambodia is already considered to be in China's orbit,

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however, while Malaysia remains up for grabs, and thus the United States has been working to curry favor with Najib's government. Then-U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton made an official visit to Malaysia in 2010, and President Barack Obama is expected to journey there in October 2013.

Malaysia's strategic importance goes beyond China and extends to the entire Muslim world. The Najib administration has agreed to reduce its ties with Iran and to grant the United States access to information on the estimated sixty-thousand Iranians living in Malaysia, and it has strengthened

relations with the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and other traditional U.S. allies in the Middle East. The United States, meanwhile, has been reluctant to embrace Malaysia's opposition, perhaps because one of PR's three main parties, PAS, is an Islamist organization—an indicator that, for the United States, geopolitical interests trump democracy promotion.

The results of the 2013 general election will remain contested, but given the realities of a politically constrained judiciary, the limitations of electoral petitions, and the incumbent's resource advantages, the BN government will likely hold onto power until the next general election. Democratic progress through electoral politics has effectively stalled, and cynicism about the power of elections is likely to grow.

The 2013 general election will nonetheless leave a lasting imprint on Malaysia. The majority of voters cast their ballots for change, yet they got the status quo electorally. If not completely disenchanted by this outcome, Malaysian democrats will focus their energies on three issues before the next election: 1) electoral reform, in particular the delineation process and electoral administration; 2) winning support for pro-reform candidates outside of their traditional ethnic and regional bases; and 3) keeping the electorate engaged. With regard to electoral reform, Malaysian civil society has long been mobilized around this issue and will not give up on it now. What is more, the increasing lack of faith in the electoral process will eventually force the government either to make substantive reforms or to risk facing an ever more alienated electorate, especially among the upper and middle classes.

Overcoming the current partisan divide may prove harder, as it has deepened with every election since 1999. While the opposition won 50.9 percent of the popular vote in 2013, it won only 40 percent of the parliamentary seats due to weighting in favor of safe constituencies. This is likely to result in a more contentious Parliament and more frequent manipulation of social cleavages to score political points. Political fault lines will continue to deepen, and both the government and the opposition will have to fight harder to gain ground, which could foster healthy competition. They will focus on young voters in East Malaysia and within the Malay majority, the communities that have shown the most political fluidity since 1999. This intense partisanship will ensure that Malaysia's politics will remain competitive. The government and opposition have already turned their attention to the next general election (to be held before June 2018), and they are regrouping and evaluating how to win new supporters.

At the same time, however, more and more Malaysians are turning away from formal electoral politics, alienated by power-seeking politicians and partisan bickering. The flawed 2013 general election will serve as another impetus for expanding the efforts and reach of civil society. Today fewer Malaysians are joining political parties; instead they are turning toward alternative forms of political engagement. Several nongovernmental organizations that previously focused on the national political scene are now working on local issues instead. In other words, the focus of efforts to expand democracy is pivoting away from changing the national government toward changing how ordinary people want to be governed and their role in governing. So although the 2013 polls may have delivered a setback to democracy in Malaysia today, they have put in place conditions with the potential to deepen democracy tomorrow.

## NOTES

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