

The Defeat of Barisan Nasional: Missed Signs or Late Surge?

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The Defeat of Barisan Nasional: Missed Signs or Late Surge edited by Francis E. Hutchinson and Lee Hwok Aun is a welcome addition to the scholarly literature on Malaysia's 2018 general election that led to the first regime change in the country. The Barisan Nasional (BN, National Front), which was the political coalition that had ruled the country for 61 years, was unexpectedly defeated by the Pakatan Harapan (PH, Alliance of Hope) opposition coalition led by former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad. Although the PH government only lasted for 22 months before it collapsed due to defection of 37 parliamentarians and the resignation of the then-prime minister Mahathir Mohamad (Ahmad & Koya, 2020), it is still crucial to understand the factors behind the defeat of BN and the victory of PH in the election. Only then can we make better sense of the collapse of the PH government.

This volume comprises 23 chapters covering four different aspects of the election, i.e. campaign dynamics, voting behaviours of key interest groups, political dynamics of selected politically salient states across Malaysia, and perspectives from the ground of selected participants of the election.

In general, most chapters point to the same conclusion – PH managed to defeat BN in the 2018 election because many Malay voters no longer supported BN. Their switch of support was due to their resentment towards the then-prime minister Najib Tun Razak for his involvement in the 1MDB scandal, the introduction of the goods and services tax (GST) that significantly burdened the people, and the leadership of Mahathir Mohamad in PH. It did not mean that they no longer subscribe to Malay and Islamic primacy in the country.

For instance, in the first part, Kai Ostwald in his chapter points out that Malaysia's electoral process dominated by malapportionment, gerrymandering and money politics was designed to ensure victories for BN especially the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), the coalition's biggest party. Hence, “[d]efeating the BN through that process required a coalition that cloned many of its key attributes, including the bumiputra-centric orientation” (p. 43). PH that was led by Mahathir Mohamad and joined by his UMNO-clone Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM, Malaysian United Indigenous Party) “offered a semblance of continuity to anxious state institutions that may otherwise have blocked a transition” (p. 43).

In the second part, Serina Rahman in her chapter makes a similar argument that rural Malay voters generally “did not transcend ethno-religious concerns” (p. 181). They supported PH in 2018 because of their desperate hope to improve their livelihoods and their memories of the prosperity during Mahathir Mohamad's first tenure as prime minister (1981-2003).

In the third part, Norshahril Saat's chapter on the political dynamics and voting behaviour of Malay voters in Kelantan is worth mentioning. Kelantan has been widely referred to as the “balcony” of Mecca due to its large Malay Muslim population size and its “overwhelmingly Islamic character” (p. 343). It has been a stronghold of the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS, Islamic Party of Malaysia), the biggest Islamic party in the country, since 1990. PAS used to be part of the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) opposition political coalition in 2008-2015. But it left the coalition in 2015 over ideological differences and was not affiliated with any political coalition during the 2018 election. Meanwhile, PR was dissolved and replaced by PH. Nevertheless, PAS managed to retain

control of the state. Saat points out that apart from the party's ability to mobilise voters through its strong grassroots network, PAS's victory was also due to Kelantanese voters' resentments towards Mahathir Mohamad who was involved in frequent conflict with PAS during his first tenure.

In the fourth part, Fahmi Fadzil, the elected parliamentarian for Lembah Pantai, makes a realistic prediction that in the process of reaching out to rural Malay voter base, the PH government may inevitably have to compete with UMNO and PAS "in terms of outdoing each other in order to present one's party as being 'more Malay/Islamist' than the other" (p. 430).

Indeed, the PH government was a fragile political coalition due to internal divisions between the pro-multiculturalism and the pro-Malay and Islamic primacy camps. These divisions eventually led to the collapse of the government after 22 months.

Overall, the chapters of this volume have done a good job in reminding readers that there is nothing to be too optimistic about Malaysia's first regime change. It would be of greatest use to those with an interest in Malaysian politics.

Reference

Ahmad, R., & Koya, Z. (2020, 24 February). Pakatan Harapan govt collapses. *The Star*. Retrieved 6 July 2021, from <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/02/24/pakatan-harapan-govt-collapses>

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