Malaysian political parties and coalitions

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The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of political parties and coalitions in Malaysia in the context of existing political science theories with specific emphasis on features which are of interest from a comparative politics perspective. First, the nature of political party competition is discussed by placing the ruling coalition and the opposition along various dimensions of political party competition – the ethnic, local and emerging ‘democracy’ dimensions. Second, the challenges of building and maintaining political coalitions are discussed including the incentives and strategies used to sustain the ruling coalition and the absence of similar incentives for many short-lived opposition coalitions. The favourable circumstances underlying the formation and development of the most recent opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat, seem to indicate a consolidation of the two coalition system in Malaysia. Third, a brief overview in terms of the structures of the major political parties is given. Fourth and finally, a few words are offered with regard to possible developments in the political landscape in the future pertaining to political parties and coalitions.

Nature of political party competition

The nature of political competition in Malaysia determines the formation of new parties and coalitions, their configurations and reconfigurations, the manner in which they campaign and organise themselves and also the path by which they cease to exist. Understanding the various dimensions of political competition is key to understanding the nature of political parties and the coalitions to which they belong.

First dimension of political competition: dominant multiracial coalition in the centre, ethnic parties on either flank

Political competition in Malaysia has been, and continues to occur, largely along the ethnic dimension. Graphically, this has been represented by the coalition that has ruled Malaysia since independence, the Alliance Party and later the reconfigured National Front or Barisan Nasional (BN), occupying the political ‘centre’ with opposition parties ‘flanking’ the ruling coalition on either side (Horowitz 1985: 410–24).
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interests of the non-Malays, the most dominant being the Democratic Action Party (DAP), and on the other are parties representing the interests of the Malays, the most dominant being the Malaysian Islamic Party (Parti Islam seMalaysia, PAS) (Figure 2.1).

The formation of the Alliance coalition pre-independence was instrumental in shaping the nature of political competition post-independence. The success of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) in contesting using a joint slate of candidates in the municipal elections in Kuala Lumpur in 1952 led to the formation of the Alliance, which included the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). The ability of the three parties to pool votes – to attract support from a majority of voters from the respective ethnic groups each party represented – allowed the Alliance to dominate the first pre-independence national elections in 1955 and post-independence elections in 1959 and 1964 (Horowitz 1985: 393–404; Ratnam and Milne 1967).

Even after the electoral setback in the 1969 general elections and the 13 May racial riots, the rewards from vote-pooling as well as the attraction of governing as part of a multiracial coalition enabled the expansion of the ruling coalition under a new name – BN – to include then opposition parties such as Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (GERAKAN), PPP and even PAS as well as a number of parties from East Malaysia. A strong ‘centrifugal’ force was set in motion by the electoral success of the Alliance that exists till today (Horowitz 1985: 439).

That is not to say that there were no other parties or coalitions vying for the centre along the ethnic dimension of political competition. But these parties and coalitions were not politically viable or sustainable as a result of the Alliance’s and then later the BN’s political dominance, the failure to find a unifying identity or cause, and government crackdown, especially against forces on the political left.

The All-Malaya Council of Joint Action (AMCJA) and the Pusat Tenaga Rakyat (PUTERA) or AMCJA–PUTERA Coalition – comprised mostly of non-Malay and Malay forces on the political left, respectively – established in 1946 as a pressure group against British
post-war policies in Malaya, was an early attempt at building a multiracial coalition. But it fell apart in 1948 when it failed to extract any concessions from the British (Oong 2000: 117) and when the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), a key component of the AMCJA, escalated its guerrilla activities as well as a result of the arrest of key members of PUTERA (Andaya and Andaya 2001: 269).

Ong Jaafar, the first president of UMNO, made two attempts at building a Malay-led multiracial party to challenge the Alliance. His first attempt, the Independence of Malaya Party (IMP), occurred as a result of his failure to open up UMNO to all races. But Ong abandoned the party after it succeeded in winning only two out of twelve seats in the KL municipal elections in 1952, losing out to the UMNO–MCA Alliance. Ong then went on to form Parti Negara (PN) in 1954. PN failed to win a single seat in the 1955 federal Legislative Council elections. It limped on by winning only one parliament seat in the 1959 general elections and went defunct after failing to win any seats in the 1964 general elections.

The Socialist Front (SF) – comprising the Chinese-dominated Labour Party (LP) and the Malay-led Parti Rakyat (PR) – won two parliamentary and eight state seats in the 1964 general elections and was gaining support among urban voters, especially non-Malays, in the lead-up to the 1969 general elections. However, the decision of the Labour Party to boycott the 1969 general elections saw many of the non-Malay voters switch their support to other non-Malay opposition parties such as the DAP and GERAKAN (Crouch 1996: 19). The racial riots on 13 May 1969 and the subsequent declaration of a state of emergency, coupled with the expansion of the ruling coalition to include nearly all the political parties in Malaysia, with the exception of the DAP, consequently led to the decrease in support for parties on the left, including the LP and PR.

Multiracial Malay-led parties such as the IMP and PN and more recently, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), inevitably face the challenge of assuring Malay voters that they can better protect their interests compared with the Malay-only UMNO, while at the same time being able to be inclusive enough to capture enough of the non-Malay vote (Mauzy 1983: 15–16). For multiracial coalitions, the challenges are similar. The coalition has to be led by a Malay-led or Malay-dominant party or parties in order to gain the votes of the majority group in Malaysia. And its non-Malay-led or -dominant party or parties have to gain sufficient credibility among non-Malay voters. AMCJA–PUTERA and the Socialist Front were not able to overcome the first hurdle in that they were both perceived to be dominated by the Chinese among the major component groups and parties.

The dominance of the Alliance in the political centre was strengthened with its expansion into the BN after the 1969 general elections. GERAKAN, which had a strong base in Penang, and the PPP, which had a strong base in Perak, especially in the city of Ipoh, joined the ruling coalition, as did PAS, although it would leave the ruling coalition in 1977. In Sarawak, the PBB and the Sarawak United Peoples’ Party (SUPP) joined the BN. The Sabah Alliance comprising the United Sabah National Organization (USNO) and Sabah Chinese Association (SCA) also joined the BN.

BN’s political dominance – helped by the manipulation of the electoral rules (Lim 2002), the use of repressive laws and a massive advantage in money, access to the media and machinery (Hwang 2003) – allowed it to win all thirteen post-independent elections. Until the twelfth general election in 2008, the BN had governed with at least two-thirds control of parliamentary seats, which gave the coalition power to amend the constitution unilaterally.1

BN’s dominance in the centre meant that opposition parties could gain political representation only from occupying the ethnic flanks. With most of the major non-Malay parties...
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joining the alliance, the non-Malay flank was quickly occupied by the DAP. PAS occupied the Malay flank after it left the BN. The DAP won most of its parliament and state seats in non-Malay majority urban areas in the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia while PAS won most of its seats in the majority non-urban areas in northern Peninsular Malaysia.

Interestingly, DAP and PAS dominance in their respective flanks meant that other smaller parties that wanted to contest in the flanks were also crowded out of the political marketplace. Smaller parties such as Parti Keadilan Masyarakat Malaysia (Pekemas) and subsequently the Malaysian Democratic Party (MDP), who were competing for the same non-Malay urban vote as the DAP, were not politically viable.

Second dimension of political competition: local competition at the state level in Sabah and Sarawak

The other salient dimension of political competition has been local competition at the state level in Sabah and Sarawak. Until the 1990s, most of the political parties which won seats in both states had been local parties in that they were present only in either Sabah or Sarawak. At the time of writing, all four parties in the ruling coalition in Sarawak are local parties – Parti Persaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), Sarawak United Peoples’ Party (SUPP), Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP) and Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS). In Sabah, four out of six parties in the ruling coalition in Sabah are local parties – PBS, United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (UPKO), Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRS) and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). UMNO made its entry into the Sarawak political scene only after the then majority party in the BN, Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), left the ruling coalition. MCA only has one state seat and no parliamentary seats in Sabah.

The difference in the ethnic composition of Sabah and Sarawak compared with Peninsular Malaysia – Malays are a minority in both states; non-Muslim bumiputera are a majority in Sarawak and used to be a majority in Sabah – and the existence of local parties prior to the formation of Malaysia in 1963 – SUPP is the first political party in Sarawak (Chin 1997) – meant the creation of barriers to entry into both states for Peninsular-based political parties.

The same reasons for the presence and dominance of local parties within the BN in both states indicated that the most serious opposition would also come from locally based parties. Peninsular-based opposition parties were vulnerable to attack owing to not being able adequately to represent the interests of the voters in the respective states.

The Sarawak National Party (SNAP) left the Sarawak Alliance in 1966 after it lost the position of chief minister and was the main opposition party until it rejoined the ruling coalition in 1976. During this period, it performed credibly by playing on Iban sentiment regarding the ousting of Stephen Kalong Ningkan as the Iban chief minister and the subsequent appointment of Abdul Rahman Yaakub, with the approval of the federal government, as the first Malay/Melanau chief minister. SNAP won nine parliamentary seats (out of twenty-four) in the 1970 and 1974 parliamentary elections and eighteen (out of forty-eight) state seats in the 1974 Sarawak state elections.

The next serious opposition challenge in Sarawak came from Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS), a breakaway party from SNAP. PBDS, together with Persatuan Rakyat Malaysia Sarawak (PERMAS), a breakaway party from PBB, won a total of twenty out of twenty-eight state seats in the 1987 state elections, with PBDS winning fifteen and PERMAS winning five. However, by the end of 1988, eight of the fifteen PBDS state assembly representatives had defected to BN parties. In the 1991 state elections, PBDS managed to win only seven out of fifty-six state seats. Acknowledging its weakened position, PBDS applied to
rejoin the BN and was readmitted in 1994 (Chin 1996). Interestingly, during its time as an opposition party, PBDS was still part of the ruling coalition at the federal level.

In Sabah, Parti Bersatu Rakyat Jelata Sabah (BERJAYA), a multi-ethnic party, was formed in 1975 to challenge the USNO-led Sabah Alliance. With the blessing of the federal government, BERJAYA went on to win twenty-eight out of forty-eight state seats in the 1976 state elections, thereby replacing USNO as the new state government. BERJAYA was accepted into the BN in 1976. USNO remained as part of the federal government but was in the opposition at the state level (Mauzy 1983: 112). BERJAYA’s success came as a result of unhappiness with the excesses of Chief Minister Tun Mustapha (Sin 1979) that angered not only voters but also BN leaders in Kuala Lumpur. BERJAYA would go on to consolidate its position by winning forty-four out of forty-eight state seats in the 1981 state elections. USNO formed a multi-ethnic alliance with the Kadazan-based Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Nanukragong Bersatu (PASOK) and the Chinese-based Sabah Chinese Consolidated Party (SCCP), but this opposition coalition only managed to win four seats (Kalimuthu 1986).

The next opposition challenge in Sabah was to come from PBS, a breakaway party from BERJAYA that was formed just prior to the 1985 state elections. Relying on mostly Kadazan and Chinese support, PBS pulled off an upset result, winning twenty-five out of forty-eight state seats; USNO, having been expelled from the BN at the federal level in 1984, won another sixteen seats. BERJAYA managed only a meagre six seats. Like BERJAYA before it, PBS would join the BN after the 1985 state elections. After only a year in office, the new chief minister, Joseph Pairin Kitingan, called for fresh elections. Having extended its influence beyond just its Kadazan and Chinese base, PBS was able to win thirty-four out of forty-eight state seats in the 1986 Sabah state elections, then thirty-six in 1990.

Growing frustration with the federal government, especially with regard to the issue of Filipino migrants into the state, among other issues, led PBS to leave the BN just prior to the 1990 general elections. This defection led to UMNO’s expanding its wings into Sabah as well as the formation of new non-Muslim bumiputera-led parties within the BN, including Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP), LDP and AKAR (Parti Angkatan Keadilan Rakyat). The 1994 Sabah state elections were very close, with PBS winning twenty-five state seats and the BN winning twenty-three, eighteen of them by UMNO. The defection of a number of PBS state assembly representatives led to the fall of the short-lived PBS government and the addition of a number of new parties into the BN in Sabah, including Parti Demokratik Sabah (PDS) and PBRS (Chin 1994). Subsequently, having lost power at the state level, PBS experienced further electoral setbacks in the 1995 and 1999 general elections as well as the 1999 Sabah state elections, in which it won only seventeen out of forty-eight state seats. Realising that its chances of winning back power at the state level were all but nil, especially with the increase in Muslim bumiputera voters, PBS rejoined the BN in 2002.

Two features of local political competition in Sabah and Sarawak need to be noted. First, local opposition parties have successfully campaigned using states’ rights and interference by the federal government as salient political issues. Even though this axis of political competition has an ethnic dimension – Iban disaffection in Sarawak and Kadazan as well as Chinese agitation in Sabah – the larger overarching political message of fighting for the rights of the state was the main message of the political campaign. Second, most of the local parties could not sustain themselves in opposition and would eventually join (or re-join) the ruling coalition as this would give them access to government resources at the state and federal levels. This meant that a strong and credible opposition at the local level in both states could not be sustained, especially by local parties. If any local party emerges as a possible contender against the ruling coalition, incentives will be offered to them to join the BN.
Emerging dimensions of political competition: justice, good governance and democracy

If the dominant dimension of political competition remained along the ethnic axis and if local competition in Sabah and Sarawak could not be sustained, it seems likely that the status quo of the BN’s remaining dominant in the political centre, with little chance of being unseated, would stand firm. While the ethnic dimension of political competition still remains the most salient one, recent political developments have given rise to the emergence of a new dimension of political competition – one that emphasises good governance, anti-corruption, justice, free and fair elections, the protection of human rights and the promotion of democratic values. The rise of this non-ethnic dimension of political competition has allowed for the emergence of a stronger opposition, notably after the 2008 general elections.

A strong case can be made that this new dimension of political competition emerged as a result of the 1998 economic and political crisis. The reformasi movement which led to the formation of Keadilan, which included many civil society agents, and subsequently to the formation of the Barisan Alternatif (BA, Alternative Front) as a united opposition coalition gave rise to the possibility of campaigning on non-communal issues of ‘justice’ and ‘democracy’ (Weiss 2006: 184). Even the success of the BN’s campaign in the 2004 general elections under Mr Clean – Abdullah Badawi – could be characterised as co-opting the reformasi message by the BN. The emergence of the Bersih movement – a campaign to advocate for free and fair elections – in 2007 was also crucial to shifting the political momentum in favour of the opposition prior to the 2008 general elections.

While the specific issues may change depending on their respective political salience, a non-ethnic dimension of political competition has undeniably emerged to contend with the still-salient ethnic dimension of political competition.

The building and maintenance of political coalitions

The Alliance/BN

The conditions that led to the formation of the Alliance have been discussed earlier. The ability of the ruling coalition to maintain itself is explained by the following: (1) access to the machinery, money and media that allow each component party to win seats and hold government positions as part of the ruling coalition; (2) the dominant position of UMNO as the anchor of the ruling coalition; and (3) flexibility in incorporating new members into the coalition.

Within the context of a dominant party authoritarian regime (Greene 2007; Magaloni 2006; Scheiner 2006), there is little chance of forming a government either at the state or federal level outside the ruling coalition. Hence, once a party is in the ruling coalition, there are many more incentives for it to stay within the coalition than to leave it. Furthermore, because of the advantages of vote-pooling in the context of a first-past-the-post, single-member constituency electoral system, parties within the coalition, especially those representing minority groups, know that their chances of winning seats are significantly reduced if they leave the coalition.

Malaysia’s ruling coalition does not fulfil one important criterion of a consociational system (Lijphart 1968): there is no mutual veto within the coalition. One party, UMNO, stands dominant. Ironically, UMNO’s dominant position within the ruling coalition has acted as a ‘stabilisation’ force within the party through its control of the position of prime
minister who acts as the final arbiter on contentious political issues concerning race, religion and language and also in intra-coalition contestations over seats and positions.

The political dominance of UMNO within the ruling coalition can be seen by the number and percentage of parliamentary seats contested and won by the party in each election since 1959. UMNO has never contested fewer than 40 percent of parliament seats. This percentage increased to more than 50 percent after UMNO’s entry into Sabah politics in 1990. The fact that UMNO wins, on average, eight out of ten of the seats it contests further accentuates its dominant position within the coalition. In fact, after the 2004 general elections, in which UMNO won 110 seats (out of a total of 219 parliament seats), it could have formed the government by itself (Table 2.1).

The ruling coalition has also demonstrated a great deal of flexibility in accepting new parties within its fold and designing new structures to incorporate these parties. The reconfiguration of the Alliance into the BN after the 1969 general elections was described earlier. In Sabah and Sarawak, the BN regularly accepts new entrants into the ruling coalition – BERJAYA, PBS, PDS, AKAR, UPKO, PBRS, LDP and SAPP in Sabah; SUPP and the PBDS in Sarawak. It also routinely accepts the return of parties that have previously left the ruling coalition – SNAP and PBDS in Sarawak, PBS in Sabah. In addition, the coalition manages intra-party splits by incorporating parties formed as a result of these splits into the BN. For example, it was quick to admit the PRS, formed after PBDS was deregistered, and SPDP, formed after SNAP was deregistered, into the BN in Sarawak. Even independent candidates who sometimes win seats in Sabah and Sarawak are quickly absorbed into one of the BN component parties.

The admission of these parties into the BN fulfills a dual strategic role. First, the inclusion of the mostly non-Malay and non-Muslim bumiputera parties strengthens the position of the dominant parties – UMNO at the national level, PBB in Sarawak – because the non-Malay and non-Muslim bumiputera seats are allocated among a larger number of parties. Second, it sends a strong signal, especially in Sabah and Sarawak, that the ruling coalition is ‘the only

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game in town’, thus pre-empting the viability and sustainability of any credible opposition parties.

The BN also uses the once-in-a-decade delimitation exercise as part of the coalition management process. Parliamentary and state seats are added during these exercises and each member of the coalition receives some proportion of these new seats. The process is particularly useful when new parties are admitted (or in the case of PBS in 2002, readmitted) into the BN, as the coalition can allocate seats to them while minimising the disgruntlement of other parties which would otherwise have to yield seats to these new entrants.

Elite splits and opposition coalitions, 1990–2008

The nature of political competition illustrated in Figure 2.1 above seems to preclude the possibility of opposition coalitions, especially after the initial failures prior to the 1969 general elections. But examples from other dominant-party authoritarian regimes such as Mexico, Taiwan, Senegal and Paraguay show that a reconfiguration of political party competition could emerge as a result of elite splits. In all these cases, elite splits weakened the dominant party and subsequently extracted sufficient support away from the ruling regime to allow an opposition win to take place in presidential elections. This occurred in Mexico (Magaloni 2006; Greene 2007), Taiwan (Niou and Paolini 2003: 727), Senegal in 2000 (Vengroff and Magala 2001; Mozaffar and Vengroff 2002) and Paraguay in 2008 (Nickson 2009). It would also take elite splits within the ruling coalition in Malaysia to bring about new possibilities in political party competition. But unlike in the aforementioned countries, the parliamentary, first-past-the-post, constituency-based elections in Malaysia require defecting elites from the ruling coalition to work with opposition parties to build new opposition coalitions.

The first such attempt occurred prior to the 1990 general elections after a bitter UMNO party election in 1987 led to the formation of a new Malay party – Semangat ’46 (Spirit of’46 or S46) – by Tengku Razaleigh, a former finance minister and failed challenger to Dr Mahathir for the UMNO presidency (Hwang 2003: 131). But because of ideological differences and fears of a political backlash, both flank parties – the DAP and PAS – could not join with S46 in a grand opposition alliance. Instead, S46 formed a Malay alliance with PAS and two other smaller Muslim/Malay parties (BERJASA and Hamim), and a separate alliance with DAP and two smaller non-Malay opposition parties (PRM and the IPF). The former was called Angkata Perpaduan Ummah (APU) or the Muslim Community Unity Movement and the latter was called Gagasan Rakyat (Gagasan for short) or the Malaysian People’s Front. This two-pronged alliance was meant to unite the opposition, with S46 acting as the bridge that held together the two largest but ideologically incompatible opposition parties on either side of the ethnic divide, DAP and PAS. This was the first serious attempt by the opposition parties to form a united front against the BN at the national level (Jomo 1996: 101).

This opposition arrangement did not yield sufficient electoral dividends. While APU managed to wrest the Kelantan state government from the BN by winning thirty-eight out of the forty-eight state seats, S46 managed to win only eight parliamentary seats (out of a total of 180), not enough for it to emerge as even the largest opposition party. The failure of any of the opposition parties to win seats beyond their respective ethnic strongholds (in the northern states for APU and in the non-Malay majority-urban areas for the DAP) meant that the benefits of vote-pooling could not be reaped. S46’s electoral performance worsened in 1995, when it managed to win only six parliamentary seats. With its status as the smallest opposition party and with no hope of displacing UMNO at the national level, S46 disbanded in 1996 and most of its members rejoined UMNO, including Tengku Razaleigh.
The second attempt to build an opposition coalition occurred as a result of the 1998 political and economic crisis. The sacking of then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim led to the formation of a new multiracial party, Keadilan, which provided the anchor to link both DAP and PAS in the first united opposition coalition, named the Alternative Front or Barisan Alternatif (BA). In the 1999 general elections, Keadilan managed to win only five parliamentary seats (out of a total of 199) and, like S46, it failed to emerge as the largest opposition party. PAS won twenty-seven parliamentary seats compared with DAP’s ten and emerged as the leader of the opposition. PAS also won control of the Terengganu state legislature. The weak political position of Keadilan meant that it could not play the role of an effective moderator between PAS and the DAP. PAS’s insistence on passing a *hudud* bill in 2001, despite protests from the DAP, and the 11 September terrorist attacks, created the conditions for the DAP to announce its departure from the BA just prior to the Sarawak state elections in 2001.

The opposition coalition had lasted twenty-two months.

Elite splits at the state level also led to the formation of opposition coalitions in Sarawak and Sabah. Disagreements between then Chief Minister Taib Mahmud and his uncle, former Chief Minister Rahman Yaacob, led the latter to form PERMAS, which then teamed up with PBDS to challenge the BN in the 1987 Sarawak state elections (Chin 1996). The inability of this coalition to win power at the state level and subsequent defections among their elected representatives finally led to its collapse. PBDS would eventually rejoin the BN in 1994 (Chin 1996).

In Sabah, the PBS was able to maintain control of the state government after leaving the BN coalition just prior to the 1990 general elections because it had won the state elections earlier in the same year. It was also able to entice some members of its former political rival, USNO, to join forces to compete under its ticket in the 1994 state elections. Even though PBS won a small majority (twenty-five seats compared with BN’s twenty-three), massive defections from its ranks to the BN cost it the state government (Chin 1994). PBS would eventually rejoin the BN in 2002.

The common challenge all the opposition coalitions described above face is precisely what sustains the BN as a coalition. These opposition coalitions were not able to (1) win access to power and share the rewards of political cooperation; (2) benefit from vote-pooling by winning a sufficient number of multi-ethnic seats; and (3) weather the bleak prospect of continuing in opposition – instead, many either defected as individuals or rejoined the BN as parties. This pattern changed after the 2008 general elections.

*Emergence of a credible opposition coalition*

The 2008 general elections led to the formation of a credible opposition coalition for the following reasons. First, all three opposition parties, even though they were not in a formal opposition coalition prior to the 2008 general elections, were able to pool votes because of an electoral pact to avoid three-cornered contests. As a result, all three parties were able to win seats outside their traditional strongholds, including in many ethnically heterogeneous seats. In fact, the opposition parties won eighty-two out of 222 seats (37 percent), thereby denying the BN a two-thirds majority in parliament. Importantly, PKR (formerly Keadilan) emerged as the largest opposition party by winning thirty-one parliament seats (DAP won twenty-eight while PAS won twenty-three). This meant that PKR, led by opposition leader and candidate for prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim, could effectively anchor the opposition coalition from a position of political strength and credibility. The Pakatan Rakyat or Pakatan coalition was formed soon after the results of the 2008 general election were announced to
Malaysian political parties and coalitions present a united opposition of increased strength in parliament and to form state governments in states where all three parties together held a majority of seats.

Second, the opposition managed to win control of five state legislatures. PAS had controlled Kelantan since 1990, but now the opposition also won control of the Kedah, Penang, Perak and Selangor state legislatures. Importantly, the configuration of seats won was such that the support of all three parties was needed in order to govern in all five states. This provided the electoral and political incentive for the formation and also maintenance of an opposition coalition. For example, PAS was the dominant party in Kedah but needed PKR’s seats in order to form the state government. DAP was the dominant party in Penang but needed PKR’s seats in order to form the state government. DAP needed both PAS’s and PKR’s seats to form the government in Perak, while PKR needed PAS’s and DAP’s seats in order to form the government in Selangor (Table 2.2).

Third, the electoral success of all three parties provided the possibility that an opposition coalition, if sustained, could offer itself as a credible alternative to the ruling coalition in forthcoming elections.

While Pakatan failed to win a majority of seats in the 2013 general election, it did succeed in winning more parliament seats (up from eighty-two to eighty-nine) and in winning 51 percent of the popular vote. It also managed to retain the state governments of Kelantan, Penang and Selangor, but failed to win back Kedah and Perak. The electoral incentives of governing at the state level in these three states and the increased prospect of winning power in the next general election seem, at this point in time, to provide sufficient incentives to sustain the Pakatan coalition, at least into the fourteenth general election.

**Number and effective number of parties**

The large number of parties that have contested in the parliament and state elections since independence seem to indicate a fragmented party system. But a closer inspection of the election results shows that the effective number of parties in Malaysia follows Duverger’s law: that the first-past-the-post, single-member constituency system tends to create a two-party, or in the case of Malaysia, a two-coalition system.

According to Table 2.3, the effective number of parties would exceed five since 1969 if the vote shares for individual parties are used in Laakso and Taagepera’s (1979) formula. If all the votes of the BN component parties are added together, then the effective number of parties is

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2.2 Number of state constituencies won by the opposition parties in opposition controlled states, 2008 general election</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>State</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kedah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelantan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selangor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Election Report (2008).*

*Note:* Total state seats in parenthesis.
reduced to an average of 2.78 since 1959. If the votes of all the opposition parties, starting from the 1990 opposition alliance, are tallied, the average effective number of parties reduces further to 2.01. The average effective number of parties reduces to 1.95 if the vote shares of individual parties are used at the constituency level.

Hence, even as new parties are formed and new coalitions are reconfigured—whether among the ruling coalition or the opposition—the underlying pattern of voting and party competition appears very stable, with two main contenders for each seat.

### Structure of political parties

The formation and registration of any political party needs to be approved by the Registrar of Societies (RoS). There have been complaints in the past in regard to selective approvals on the part of the RoS for parties which are aligned to the BN, but much slower approval for parties which are pro-opposition. One of the most contentious approvals for the registration of a new party was that of UMNO Baru by factions aligned to Dr Mahathir after the old UMNO was deregistered by a court ruling declaring its 1987 party elections to be null and void. The RoS had rejected an earlier application from a faction that was aligned to Dr Mahathir’s rival, Tengku Razaleh, to register UMNO Malaysia (Crouch 1996: 120). The RoS reports to the minister of home affairs, who at that time happened to be Dr Mahathir. The minister of home affairs thus has a great deal of control over which applications to form political parties are approved.

The structure of each political party is governed by its constitution, including such aspects as membership, setting up of branches, the conduct of party elections at various levels, the composition and powers of the party leadership, disciplinary processes against members and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of parties</th>
<th>Separate parties</th>
<th>BN vs opposition separate parties</th>
<th>BN vs opposition coalition (starting from 1990)</th>
<th>Effective no. of parties at constituency level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>2.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>2.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5.87</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>2.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5.47</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5.09</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6.41</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5.36</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6.11</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>1.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5.34</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>1.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5.49</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>2.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5.49</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>1.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
<td><strong>17.2</strong></td>
<td><strong>5.38</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.78</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.01</strong></td>
<td><strong>1.95</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note:

* NA = not applicable.
the disclosure of accounts. Each party holds party elections at the national level once every two to three years. These party elections can be postponed for a period of time, usually on the basis that party elections held too close to an impending general election can be harmful to party unity and morale. Only delegates representing branches are eligible to vote in party elections at the national level, although recent reforms within UMNO and PKR have increased the number of eligible voters.

All the major political parties, with the exception of the DAP, hold direct elections for their top two positions, president and deputy president. All the major parties also have elected committees at the central leadership level comprising between fifteen and twenty-five members. The central leadership or the president of the major parties also has the power to appoint additional members to the ranks of the central leadership committee. For its part, the DAP holds elections for twenty committee members who then decide on the allocation of the various posts, including those of secretary general and chairman.

All the parties hold elections at the branch level for various positions, such as branch chairman, deputy chairman and treasurer. All the major parties also hold elections for at least some positions at the division level. A division is represented by a parliamentary constituency. DAP is the only party which holds elections at the state level. For the other major parties, the party president appoints state leaders.

The president of the major parties (with the exception of DAP, which does not have a directly elected president) possesses significant powers of appointment not just for leadership positions at the state level but also for heads of various political bureaus and other non-elected positions, such as secretary general.

All the major parties have youth wings and women’s wings. The youth wings of MCA, DAP and PKR include both genders, whereas UMNO has separate male and female components (UMNO Youth and Puteri UMNO) and PAS has only a male youth wing.

The power to select candidates to be fielded in elections is very much in the hands of the central leadership of each party. While grassroots members have the right to nominate their preferred candidates, the central leadership has the power to overrule local preferences. It is not uncommon, especially among the opposition parties, to see candidates and incumbents being shifted from one constituency to another, or even one state to another, because of larger strategic concerns – to place a leader or candidate in a safe seat, to place a leader in a strategic seat to break new political ground, or to account for ethnic and gender quotas, for instance. This practice is less common in UMNO because of the entrenched nature of local leadership, more popularly known as local political ‘warlords’. It is also much less common in Sabah and Sarawak because of local opposition toward candidates from other states or from Peninsular Malaysia.

Recent reforms have occurred within some of the major parties to make internal party politics more democratic. For example, MCA has introduced a three-term limit for its top leadership positions, including the presidency. DAP has also introduced a three-term limit for the position of secretary general. PKR held its first party elections in 2010 in which all members could vote for the top leadership positions, while in its 2013 party elections, UMNO expanded the number of eligible voters from approximately 2,000 to 150,000.

**Political developments moving forward**

The pattern of political competition and the major contending parties and coalitions, namely BN and Pakatan, look likely to remain until the fourteenth general election. The consolidation of the two-party system in Sabah and Sarawak, where local parties have steadily lost ground, as indicated in the 2008 and 2013 general election as well as the 2011 Sarawak state
election, also seems likely to continue until the next Sarawak state election, due in 2016, and into the fourteenth general election.

A change in power at the federal level in the fourteenth general election may provide the impetus to change the configuration of political party competition. It would increase the chances of the BN coalition’s fracturing, with some parties leaving its fold and perhaps joining PR. If this happens, UMNO may pull what is remaining within the BN into a flank opposition coalition. Non-Malay parties such as the MCA and GERAKAN may end up on the other flank if they leave the BN. It is also possible that some of the non-Malay parties – MCA, GERAKAN, SUPP – may unite in order to boost their electoral and political strength if the BN loses power.

The introduction of local elections (see Goh, this volume) may also introduce new parties and new dimensions of political competition, especially if a proportional representation electoral system is chosen. This would give rise to smaller parties competing on different issues – the environment, public safety, public transportation, and so forth – at the local level. But at the national level, the effective number of parties competing, especially at the constituency level, is likely to remain at two.

Note

1 The riots of 13 May immediately after the 1969 general elections led to the declaration of emergency rule. When emergency rule was lifted, the ruling coalition had invited a sufficient number of parties to join the newly configured BN to allow it two-thirds control of parliament.

Bibliography


