



THIS MALAYSIAN ELECTION IS DIFFERENT

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Malaysia's government has dissolved the Parliament to make way for the 14th General Election (GE14). The country will go to the polls on May 9. From afar, this election seems like a repeat of the last election in 2013, when a polarized electorate was divided over the governance of the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition led by Prime Minister Najib Razak.

Questions of leadership, ethnic inclusion, economic management and democratic reform were at the heart of the earlier polls. These issues remain important. But now there is greater electoral competitiveness, a reformulated opposition and international intervention in an election that will be a crossroads for democracy and governance in Malaysia.

In 2013, the campaign centered on Najib. Painted as a reformer, the BN anchored its success to Najib to pull votes in. His picture was plastered across the country, backed up by a '1Malaysia' public relations blitz and a campaign flush with cash. Najib was able to rally his political base and ally with business, ever dependent on government largesse. He was also able to use his advantage through electoral malapportionment and gerrymandering to win the majority of seats despite losing the popular vote.

In 2018, Najib is still at the center of the campaign but now he is more of a deterrent away from BN. Dogged by allegations of scandal, and with the lowest popularity of any premier in Malaysia's history heading into the polls, Najib lacks the pull he once had. He relies on the power of his office to maintain his advantage as the election is seen as so personalized that he cannot lose.

Race and religion play pivotal roles in Malaysian politics. GE13 was characterized as a 'Chinese tsunami' in which nearly 80 percent of Malaysian Chinese voted against the government, which provoked a Malay counter-reaction toward the government. In 2018, the campaign is being touted as a 'Malay tsunami' as now opposition leader Mahathir Mohamad aims to win over parts of the majority Malay community. Whether Mahathir succeeds or creates a backlash is not yet clear. What is evident is that unlike in the 2008 election, where there was a sense of inclusive national identity, ethnic politics now dominate.

On top of ethnic mobilization is religion. Non-Muslims have been moving away from the BN due to deepening Islamization and greater restrictions on the practice of minority faiths. Najib's tenure saw the troubling disappearances of Pastor Raymond Koh in 2017 and regular verbal attacks on Christianity by public officials. Some non-Muslims are turning back to the BN out of fear of further displacement and reprisals.

This shift has coincided with more frequent calls to 'defend Islam' and for greater Muslim unity against supposed challenges to the faith. The BN has propagated this narrative. The Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) has gone further, calling for a 'Muslim

tsunami’ in which Muslims displace others. Religious mobilization will shape the electoral outcome, as PAS focuses its campaign on ‘defending the faith’ through the implementation of Islamic law and narrowing the space for religious freedom post-election.

Najib is relying on his economic performance to maintain support, especially from the business community. His administration can be credited for navigating the country out of the 2008–09 global financial crisis, as growth has stabilized and reached 5 percent. He is a favorite of the international financial community for introducing a goods and service tax in 2014. But this has come at a cost, with high inflation, record debt, and non-employment-generating infrastructure investment dampening the effects of [growth](#).

Arguably the biggest challenge for Najib is the charge of kleptocracy and mismanagement of government-linked companies in a litany of corruption scandals. Najib’s and his family’s ostentatious ‘shopping trips’ and displays of wealth have served to showcase the distance of the elite. The opposition hopes to capitalize on anger but has yet to win the confidence of business. Electorally, there are two opposing trends: anger at the higher cost of living, and pro-incumbency, risk-averse behavior in a ‘flight to safety.’

From 1999 campaigns have been about democratic political reform, with the winner co-opting a reform narrative. Since 2013, the Najib administration has taken a sharp [authoritarian direction](#), with attacks on critics and a campaign of fear. GE14 has become an election about defending democracy rather than promoting it. What muddies the picture is that the opposition leader touted to lead this defense of democracy is Mahathir Mohamad. The opposition has promised term limits for the executive and more accountability in financial management but is struggling with how to distance itself from Mahathir’s divisive political legacy, especially in East Malaysia where he remains unpopular.

GE14 is still arguably the most competitive election in recent history, with 65 percent of the seats competitive compared to 50 percent in 2013. At

least half of the state governments are open contests. Three-corner fights add to the competition, as PAS is facing off against both the BN (despite the close relationship between Najib and PAS leader Abdul Hadi Awang) and the newly configured opposition. Pakatan Harapan offers quite a different option to voters – not only Mahathir’s leadership in alliance with his former foe Anwar Ibrahim, but the most secular and experienced opposition to date.

The prominent role that the Chinese government is playing in the election is another feature. China’s ambassador has accompanied BN parties on the hustings, and Chinese funding is seen to boost funds for 1MDB debt payments and the current campaign. China’s commitment of US\$55 billion in infrastructure projects in Malaysia makes the Najib government a key ally in China’s geostrategic ambitions. This has provoked strong nationalist responses within Malaysia.

The election outcome will determine not only the political direction and leadership of Malaysia – and the shape of democracy and governance – but will also have reverberations in regional affairs.

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