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Introduction

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9 MAY 2018 The Unexpected

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INTRODUCTION

The results of Malaysia's 14th General Elections (GE-14) held in May 2018 were unexpected and transformative. Against conventional wisdom, the newly reconfigured opposition grouping Pakatan Harapan (PH) decisively defeated the incumbent Barisan Nasional (BN), ending six decades of uninterrupted dominant one-party rule.

Despite a long-running financial scandal dogging the ruling coalition, an opposition victory had been all but discarded due to: the advantages of incumbency; fissures amongst opposition ranks well into 2018; and a favourable economic outlook. Indeed, prominent pollsters and commentators predicted a solid BN victory or, at least, a narrow parliamentary majority.

Yet, on the day, deeply rooted political dynamics and influential actors came together, sweeping aside many prevailing assumptions and reconfiguring the country's political reality in the process. Voter turnout was significant, economic handouts were disregarded, and the effects of the redelineation of parliamentary and state constituencies were limited.

Beyond consolidating their support in ethnically mixed, urban areas, PH took most semi-urban areas and made important incursions into rural constituencies in the Peninsula's south and west. In addition to losing their parliamentary majority, BN's seemingly impregnable hold on many state governments was breached, and

its East Malaysian fortresses capitulated. In addition, against all predictions, Parti Islam se Malaysia (PAS) thrived, retaining Kelantan, toppling Terengganu and making important inroads in Pahang and Kedah.

Due to its long tenure in power, up until 2018, BN was the only government most Malaysians have ever known. It is formally a parliamentary democracy, but has been variously labelled a semi-democracy (Case 2002), pseudo-democracy (Case 2004) or an electoral authoritarian regime (Ufen 2009). Mostly recently, Lopez and Welsh (2018) labelled it a “resilient regime”, implying one that is strong—though not invincible.

The Alliance-BN’s hold on power for more than six decades was aided by massive structural advantages, including deployment of public resources for partisan campaigning, control over mainstream media, and a compliant electoral commission able and willing to tilt the playing field in their favour (Weiss 2014; Ostwald 2017).

These incumbent advantages were demonstrated in the 2013 elections, when expectations of change were dashed and BN held on—despite winning fewer votes than the opposition. These systemic factors, and perhaps recent electoral history, led many commentators to be overly conservative in their analyses of Malaysia’s 14th general election (GE-14).

Malaysia is a complex country, with important urban and rural realities, and different communities spread across its vast territory. New developments in society and technology have been underway. While BN exerted strong control over traditional media, new media is reconfiguring the country in distinct and unexpected ways. Traditional voter blocs are becoming more heterogeneous in outlook and voting patterns. Diverse geographical patterns of political expression, as well as localized history, refract national issues differentially. Social media posting, and the growing industries of public opinion polling and big data analysis, constitute new arenas for gauging electoral sentiment and influencing public opinion.

Through these means, as well as anecdotal observations in the run-up to GE-14, many discerned a tide of public discontent regarding: the cost of living and economic hardships; perceived corruption of the regime; and a self-serving ruling elite. Some parties were certain that sentiments had reached a decisive point, yet it was widely held that BN’s cohesion and economic management, coupled with Pakatan’s uncertainty and inexperience, had curtailed the latter’s momentum. Public polls reflected a BN buffer—but also large proportions of undecided voters. In combination, the above presaged the sense of shock and disbelief that greeted the results of 9 May.

This book *The Defeat of Barisan Nasional: Missed Signs or Late Surge?* seeks to establish the underlying drivers for change in this election and so contribute to the literature on Malaysia’s political context as well as wider debates on transitions from compromised democracies. An important subsidiary enterprise is to investigate the reasons behind the misplaced expectations regarding GE-14’s results and the untrammelled surprise generated by its denouement.

By way of introduction, this chapter sets out the various themes and sub-themes guiding this book. To this end, the next section will briefly review Malaysia’s electoral

history up until the 2013 general election. The subsequent part will set out the salient issues and drivers in the run-up to the May 2018 general election. The following section will then briefly review the results of that year's election at the national and state levels. The final section will lay out the aims and research design of the GE-14 project before relating it to the structure of the book.

TILTING THE PLAYING FIELD: ELECTIONS IN MALAYSIA

Up until 2018, the ruling regime's longevity—including the Alliance era of 1957–69 as well as BN's post-1974 continuous reign—and ability to eke out victories in the face of formidable challenges were underpinned by several elements. These included the coalition's track record in maintaining social cohesion, stewarding economic growth and overseeing a generous redistribution system. However, its political dominance had deeper roots.

One key element of the Alliance-BN's electoral success was its consociational nature. According to Lijphart (1977), this framework can be used to govern plural societies, namely those characterized by cleavages due to language, religion or ethnicity. Under this arrangement, the representation of the main interest groups in government, as well as effective negotiation between the leaders of these groupings allows stability to be preserved and conflict to be avoided.¹

Consequently, the Alliance-BN coalition brought together the representatives of the country's primary ethnic groups into one grouping, namely: the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC).² In electoral terms, this arrangement entailed several advantages. First, it allowed the coalition to pool candidates and deploy them strategically, usually matching them with the predominant ethnic community in each constituency. Second, even where individual candidates did not match the largest ethnicity of a given seat, many voters could still be persuaded to vote across ethnic lines for BN. This was due to the belief that the coalition's multiethnic leadership meant that their interests were still represented within the grouping and the country at large. Despite their nominal equality, UMNO was the *primus inter pares* of the coalition, as it represented the largest and most politically active demographic at independence. Its power relative to the other coalition members has increased over time, particularly after the civil unrest of 1969 (Mauzy 1993).

Nonetheless, the electoral system furnished various advantages to the incumbent, which BN consistently and effectively utilized. While Malaysia has held regular elections since independence and the BN has secured "performance legitimacy" through competing and winning them, the electoral contests have taken place on a tilted "playing field". The country's first past the post (FPTP) system disproportionately rewards winners by awarding an entire parliamentary seat to the winner—regardless of how narrow the victory. This system helped BN maintain a two-thirds majority in parliament up until 2008. This majority, in turn, allowed the coalition to table frequent amendments to the Constitution, including

through interventions that undermined the Election Commission's (EC) authority and independence (Saravanamuttu 2016; Chacko, this volume).

A compliant EC oversaw continuous malapportionment, resulting in the persistence of oversized urban constituencies and undersized rural constituencies, and a ratio of rural to urban legislative seats not aligned to Malaysia's urbanizing demographics. Malapportionment has especially benefited UMNO in the rural Malay heartland, as well as indigenous-based parties in Sarawak and Sabah. Gerrymandering, by redrawing boundaries to "pack" districts with concentrations of supporters and "crack" opposition-leaning areas, has further biased the terms of engagement, as part of redelineation exercises conducted about once every decade. Voter irregularities have also marred BN wins in some elections (Ostwald 2017).

In power, BN also possessed various coercive instruments at its disposal. This included control over traditional media: directly via ownership of news outlets by BN member parties; or indirectly through licensing via the Printing Presses and Publications Act controlled by the Ministry of Home Affairs (Tapsell 2013). The government has detained persons without trial and prosecuted dissidents under national security pretexts but clearly with political motivation, most aggressively under the Internal Security Act (subsequently the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act (SOSMA)), and the Sedition Act. The power to take disciplinary action against dissenting university students, enabled by the University and University Colleges Act, contained student activism. The Registrar of Societies (ROS) has also occasionally harassed opposition parties (International Crisis Group 2012).

Barisan Nasional's consociational mode of campaigning worked especially well in Peninsular Malaysia, but began to lose effectiveness from the late 1990s when its popularity in urban, multiethnic areas began to wane, prompting a search for alternative methods of appealing to voters. Thus, BN increasingly depended on East Malaysian coalition partners as well as "developmentalism" (Loh 2002) to appeal to the country's expanded middle class, while continually dispensing patronage to secure party factions and enhance electoral popularity (Gomez and Jomo 1997).

This process was hastened by the developments of 1997. Prime Minister Mahathir's sacking of his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, in the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis, triggered a political crisis as well as the genesis of the *Reformasi* social movement (Pepinsky 2009). A more permanent result from this period of turbulence was the establishment of the Keadilan party—later renamed Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR)—by disgruntled elements of UMNO, led by Anwar Ibrahim. UMNO's past schisms had been short-lived, but new opposition forces were sustained post-1998—albeit with shifts over time.

The *Reformasi* movement along with the mistreatment of Anwar Ibrahim and formation of the Barisan Alternatif, galvanized a protest wave against UMNO—which did poorly in the 1999 general elections. However, while Keadilan and PAS increased their electoral foothold, the Democratic Action Party (DAP) received a rebuke from non-Malay, especially Chinese, voters apprehensive over the cobbled opposition coalition (Felker 2000). Nonetheless, the opposition coalition did well

enough to threaten BN's permanence in power, prompting Mahathir's decision to retire in 2003 and hand over to Abdullah Badawi (Wain 2009).

The handover to Abdullah Badawi was warmly received, and rapturously reflected in the 2004 election results which gave BN its best ever showing. That swing, however, was more issue- than loyalty-driven. This factor, as well as the shortfalls in Abdullah's administration, coupled with increased cohesion in the DAP-PKR alliance, delivered the 2008 shock. That year, BN lost its customary two-thirds majority and relinquished five state governments. Subsequently, the opposition banded together in the PKR-DAP-PAS Pakatan Rakyat coalition (Weiss 2013).

In 2009, Abdullah Badawi, in turn, passed stewardship of UMNO and BN to Najib Razak, a political blue-blood and son of Malaysia's second Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak. Najib vigorously moved to define his administration, courting international opinion, pronouncing a reformist New Economic Model, and rolling out cash handouts to poor families (BR1M) as well as setting up subsidized shops and more health clinics (Nelson 2012; Brown 2013).

The most captivating of reforms concerned a nebulous shift from "race-based" affirmative action to "need-based" affirmative action, including a roll-back of ethnic equity requirements in various services sectors. However, the lack of coherence, clarity and foresight provoked Malay nationalist backlash at perceived loss of privilege, to which Najib responded by introducing new pro-bumiputra programmes. Simultaneously, the failure to truly replace pro-bumiputra race-based preferences deepened disaffection among non-bumiputras (Nelson 2012; Abdillah 2014).

In the 2013 election, Najib's first, BN secured only 47 per cent of the popular vote—less than Pakatan Rakyat—and lost more parliamentary seats. However, the coalition retained power due to the FPTP system and the over-representation of rural Malay-majority seats. Due to this latter factor, UMNO paradoxically obtained a higher number of parliamentary seats than it did in 2008, and also managed to recapture the Kedah and Terengganu state governments (Ostwald 2013). That said, many of UMNO's victories were slim.

With non-Malay support crumbling and BN's Peninsular-based non-Malay parties decimated, the coalition became unprecedentedly UMNO-dominant and more dependent on its Sarawak and Sabah parties in order to secure a parliamentary majority (Chin 2014). Najib's 2013–18 term retained a raft of social assistance programmes targeted at the bottom 40 per cent (B40), especially the BR1M cash transfers, but politically leaned increasingly towards the Malay base (Abdillah 2014).

Barisan Nasional was initially helped by turmoil in Pakatan Rakyat, as PAS left and then, in turn, split into two, with the more progressive faction Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah) joining PKR and the DAP to form Pakatan Harapan. Yet, Amanah's genesis as a splinter party from PAS was fraught with uncertainty, given the fierce loyalties towards its parent party and uncertainty on how to split resources and assets (Wan Saiful 2017).

The Najib administration also became embroiled in a series of scandals, most prominently revolving around the strategic wealth fund, 1MDB. The fund was established in 2009 and directly supervised by the Ministry of Finance—a portfolio

held by Najib Razak himself. By June 2014, the organization had liabilities in excess of US\$10 billion linked to real estate speculation, acquisition of power plants, and debt-funded growth. US\$4.5 billion was allegedly misappropriated by 1MDB's senior management and associates, and US\$700 million was found in Najib Razak's personal bank accounts (*Sunday Times*, 3 June 2018).

The 1MDB scandal acquired an international dimension when the US Department of Justice launched an investigation in 2015. This led to further probes of 1MDB and affiliated companies being launched in six countries. Domestically, additional allegations of mismanagement were made of apex government bodies such as Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA), Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA), and Tabung Haji—institutions of deep significance to the Malay community (*Sunday Times*, 3 June 2018; *The Edge Malaysia Weekly*, 24 October 2017).

An elite schism took place within UMNO as a result of this. Senior party figures such as Mahathir Mohamad, Muhyiddin Yassin, and Shafie Apdal openly criticized Najib Razak's handling of the 1MDB issue. In mid-2015, Muhyiddin and Shafie lost their Cabinet positions and were expelled or suspended from UMNO the subsequent year. For his part, Mahathir left the party in early 2016 (Hutchinson 2018).

Mahathir and Muhyiddin, along with a number of other ex-UMNO leaders, formed Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM) in September 2016. Through focusing on language, religion, and affirmative action, the new party sought to compete directly with UMNO for Malay votes (Wan Saiful 2018). In March 2017, the party joined PKR, DAP and Amanah in the newly reconfigured alliance Pakatan Harapan.

THE RUN-UP TO GE-14

In early 2018, BN's electoral prospects were looking favourable. The benefits of incumbency were thought to carry the day and there was relatively little that hinted at the prospect of regime change.

The economy was doing well, with predictions from the Central Bank that the economy was on course to grow 5.5–6 per cent in 2018. Inflation was a moderate 2–3 per cent, and unemployment a commendable 3.4 per cent (*The Edge Financial Daily*, 29 March 2018). An election budget released in October 2017 increased subsidies and social assistance for the B40, and was accompanied by tax reductions and cash transfers to influential interest groups such as farmers, civil servants, and retirees (Yeah 2017).

From BN's perspective, the 1MDB issue seemed to have been brought under control. Difficulties in communicating the arcane intricacies of kleptocratic dealings in a simple fashion and in categorically incriminating Najib Razak, made the electoral impact of these allegations unclear. Moreover, leaders from key supervisory organizations such as the Central Bank and Attorney-General's office had been replaced. An internal probe carried out by the new Attorney-General absolved Najib Razak of any responsibility in 1MDB's financial irregularities, and that investigation along with a subsequent report drafted by Parliament's Public Accounts Committee were kept under wraps by the Official Secrets Act (*Sunday Times*, 3 June 2018).

In electoral terms, BN held wide swathes of rural territory, particularly along the eastern flank of the Peninsula in Johor and Pahang, and in the northwest in Kedah and Perlis. Sabah and Sarawak constituted other redoubts of consequence. Furthermore, the incumbent coalition held no less than ten out of thirteen state governments.

In March 2018, the ruling coalition pushed through a parliamentary redelineation exercise. In the past, such exercises corresponded with a bump in BN's electoral performance, but this time the coalition lacked the two-thirds majority necessary to increase the total number of parliamentary seats. Nonetheless, the redelineation amended boundaries in ninety-eight seats in West Malaysia, yet it did not address structural issues such as malapportionment or gerrymandering. Instead, it increased the ethnic concentration of a number of key seats, particularly in Selangor (Ooi 2018). The effect of these changes was taken to increase the vulnerability of key PH-held seats or shore up support in marginal BN-held seats.

The following month, the BN majority in parliament approved the Anti-Fake News Bill. Overlooking concerns raised by the Malaysian Bar Council and civil society organizations about freedom of expression, the Bill provided for up to six years' jail and hefty fines for news deemed to be fake. The Anti-Fake News Bill applied to traditional, online, and social media, as well as news regarding Malaysia published locally or overseas. The Bill covered those generating news as well as third parties who hosted information that was classified as fake (*Straits Times*, 2 April 2018).

Poll watchers also pointed to the potential boost to BN's electoral chances accruing from three-way contests, which were anticipated to favour the incumbents by splitting the protest vote. Barisan Nasional tacitly encouraged PAS to run as a third electoral force, and held out the promise of a pact between the two in the aftermath of the election (*Asia Sentinel*, 9 February 2018).

With these factors as a backdrop, conventional wisdom held that BN would retain a parliamentary majority even if it lost the popular vote—much as it had in 2013. Other more optimistic projections held that the incumbents would retain their grip over their “fixed deposits” and rural strongholds, and perhaps even claw back some seats from PH or PAS (*The Sun Daily*, 7 May 2018).

Nonetheless, Pakatan Harapan was not without its electoral assets. Since its inception in 2008, PH's precursor, Pakatan Rakyat, had gained experience in managing coalitional relations, forging common platforms, cultivating ties with activist groups, and sustaining dissent (Khuo 2018). The grouping was also able to refer its credible achievements in Selangor and Penang (Yeoh 2012).

Pakatan Harapan built on these assets in important ways, mostly notably by hammering out an apex organizational structure for the fledgling coalition. In July 2017, the grouping appointed Mahathir as chairman and Wan Azizah, Anwar Ibrahim's wife and PKR Head, as president. The other party leaders were made deputy presidents. In January 2018, PH nominated Mahathir Mohamad as its prime ministerial candidate—marking a first for Pakatan Rakyat and Pakatan Harapan members, who previously could not reach consensus, and this time were saddled

with a dilemma due to Anwar Ibrahim's incarceration and hence ineligibility for the position. In the early part of 2018, the PH campaign also grew more disciplined and its messages clearer and simpler. This was aided by agreements within the coalition on a common logo and campaign platform.

In East Malaysia, the dynamics worked somewhat differently. The 2016 state elections in Sarawak bolstered BN's hopes of a repeat performance in 2018—albeit without the popular Adenan Satem at its head, as the late Chief Minister had been widely credited with that year's stellar results. However, less compelling leadership in subsequent years raised questions as to the solidity of BN's hold on the state. The increasingly strident calls for state autonomy and respect for indigenous land and local issues also suggested that election contenders' chances would be influenced by their credibility on these specific issues (Lee Poh Onn, this volume).

Sabah, for its part, looked decidedly less sure. Shafie Apdal sought to make inroads in his native state by founding Parti Warisan Sabah (Warisan), which sought to cater to both Muslim and non-Muslim bumiputras. In a further twist, Warisan allied with PH, enabling it to pool resources and field candidates in all of the state's constituencies (Bagang and Puyok, this volume).

The prevalence of UMNO rural strongholds, as well as PH's consolidated presence in urban constituencies, set up semi-urban/semi-rural constituencies as key battlegrounds. Indeed, fifty-four seats were identified as marginal UMNO-held constituencies, which were won by narrow majorities in 2013. In addition, we should note that, while rural constituencies disproportionately outnumber urban ones, 70 per cent of Malaysia's population is classified as urban. Consequently, a significant proportion of rural voters are actually urban residents who return to their towns and villages to vote. Hence, a broader range of electoral issues more commonly associated with the urban electorate concerning governance, corruption, and the like can also gain traction among a significant share of voters registered in rural areas. Thus, relative to past elections, patronage-oriented campaigns frontloaded with giveaways and development promises, might be less effective in rural areas than they used to be.

In addition, despite the positive aggregate economic data, surveys consistently reflected the primacy of cost of living issues for voters. This was due to, among other things, the depreciating ringgit, which made imported items more expensive, and the federal government's phasing out of subsidies on oil, sugar, gas, flour, and other staples. The imposition of goods and services tax (GST) from April 2015 further compounded frustrations, as it visibly increased costs for a wide range of items, including basic necessities that contained some form of value-added processing (Hutchinson 2018).

The electoral gains offered by cost of living issues and GST were also ably perceived by PAS, the third competitor in the elections. Consequently, the party sought to increase its hold over Kelantan and expand its reach into new territory. As for Kelantan, the state had been continuously ruled by the Islamic party since 1990. While it was among Malaysia's poorest states, PAS could point to popular local legislation and make credible claims that the state had been deprived of its

fair share of royalties from petroleum (Norshahril, this volume; Hutchinson 2014). For audiences in other parts of the Peninsula, the party made much mileage out of rising prices, wage levels, and GST.³

While BN looked to be competing from a position of strength, some unique developments in the campaign's final days resulted in greater uncertainty and flux than anticipated.

In a first for the country, polling day was declared on a Wednesday, ostensibly to lower voter turnout, which was deemed to benefit BN (*Today*, 13 April 2018). This generated a public outcry from diverse segments of society, including the civil servants' union, CUEPACS, as well as a petition to the King signed by more than 100,000 people (*Straits Times*, 11 April 2018). Those particularly inconvenienced included voters from Sabah and Sarawak working on the Peninsula, as well as Malaysians working in Singapore, who would have to travel home to vote (*Malay Mail*, 10 April 2018; *Today*, 13 April 2018).

This was partially addressed by the Najib administration's decision to make the day a public holiday. However, the date still had an impact on outstation voters, particularly those living overseas. Unlike in recent elections, when foreign missions processed the ballots of overseas Malaysians, this provision was denied in 2018; in many countries, voters were responsible for delivering their ballot sheets to their district. However, the sheets were only available after nomination day on 29 April—making postage or even express courier services unfeasible. This generated widespread resentment, spurring Malaysians overseas to organize collectively to deliver their ballots, or car-pool to travel back to vote (*The Star*, 7 May 2018; *Channel NewsAsia*, 10 April 2018).

Decisions taken by state organs also compounded feelings of frustration. During the campaign, the Registrar of Societies (ROS) refused to register PH as a coalition and also provisionally deregistered Bersatu as a political party (*Straits Times*, 6 April 2018; *New Straits Times*, 15 May 2018). While this temporarily wrong-footed PH, it forced the component parties to negotiate and ultimately accept to collectively contest using PKR's logo (*The Star*, 27 April 2018). This was complemented by the EC's egregious ruling that only the official president of the contesting party and local candidates could appear on campaign posters (*The Star*, 1 May 2018). This was clearly a tactic to prevent the propagation of Mahathir's image as the de facto leader of non-registered Pakatan Harapan. These moves themselves became election storylines, and may have even backfired on BN, which came across as petty and mean-spirited.

Despite these pivotal developments, there was still a generalized feeling that PH did not inspire overwhelming confidence. Polling firms such as Merdeka Center, Ilham Centre, and Kajidata Research consistently reported low levels of confidence in the new coalition (*Free Malaysia Today*, 27 March 2018; *Malay Mail Online*, 14 February 2018), as did more targeted surveys in key battlegrounds such as Johor (Chong et al. 2017). Indeed, in a press release on 8 May, the eve of the election, the Merdeka Center predicted a narrow win for the incumbents (Merdeka Center 2018). The only exception to this trend was INVOKE, who forecasted a PH victory (Rafizi and Chai,

this volume). However, given that organization's affiliation with PKR, its findings were seen as partisan—limiting its diffusion and impact.

The state of affairs on 6 April 2018, the eve of the dissolution of parliament, is illustrated in the front and back endpapers of this book. The maps depict the seats held by BN, PH, PAS, and Parti Warisan Sabah, as well as five constituencies whose MPs switched their party affiliation to independent status. This includes: Cameron Highlands, Kota Melaka, and Bandar Tun Razak on the Peninsula; as well as Lubok Antu and Selangau in Sarawak.

THE RESULTS: DECISION AND DIVISION

Against expectations of a lower turnout rate, polling on 9 May proceeded with a relatively high turnout of 82 per cent and without significant anomalies. Beyond the thousands of volunteers who manned the polling stations and monitored proceedings, there were also international observers from nine countries (*Malay Mail*, 7 May 2018; *The Star*, 11 May 2018). There were, however, isolated cases of irregularities, notably the refusal of some EC officials to countersign and officially endorse the vote counts of ballot boxes (*Malaysiakini*, 10 May 2018).

While the voting process proceeded without significant incident, the release of official results descended into some chaos with the EC straggling to pronounce winners in a timely manner. Early waves of results, swiftly disseminated through the online and social media and eventually declared by the EC, indicated a massive collapse of confidence in UMNO and BN. However, a period of limbo ensued in the wee hours of the morning of 10 May, during which unofficial results based on the tallying by PH campaigns and reporting of district counting centres clearly showed PH winning—but the EC central command stalled confirmation.

In the end, GE-14's verdict could be delayed but not denied. Malaysia and Malaysians were numb, as they took in the new political order and resulting electoral lay of the land. The popular votes were cast: 48.3 per cent for PH (with Warisan); 33.8 per cent for BN; and 17.0 per cent for PAS. Relative to GE-13, BN's vote share fell the most, from 47.4 per cent in GE-13. The three-way contest also affected the other two parties, as Pakatan Rakyat, which included PAS in 2013, also garnered less than the 50.9 per cent it did in GE-13.

Malaysia's political reconfiguration is spatially staggering. The incumbents and GE-14 winners are illustrated, respectively, on this book's front and back endpapers, with additional permutations in Figures 1.1 and 1.2. On the Peninsula, PH carried urban areas and the west coast, BN held on to vast rural swathes notably in eastern Pahang and Johor, and much of Perak, while PAS became more concentrated in portions of Kedah and coastal Kelantan and Terengganu.

The realignment was driven by decisive, overwhelming support of some groups, notably Chinese and Indian voters, and stark divisions in others, especially in the Malay and indigenous electorate (Figure 1.1). Expectations that multicornered fights would split the opposition vote and play into BN's hands were thoroughly

FIGURE 1.1
Parliamentary Seats in Peninsular Malaysia by Ethnicity and Winning Party (GE-14)

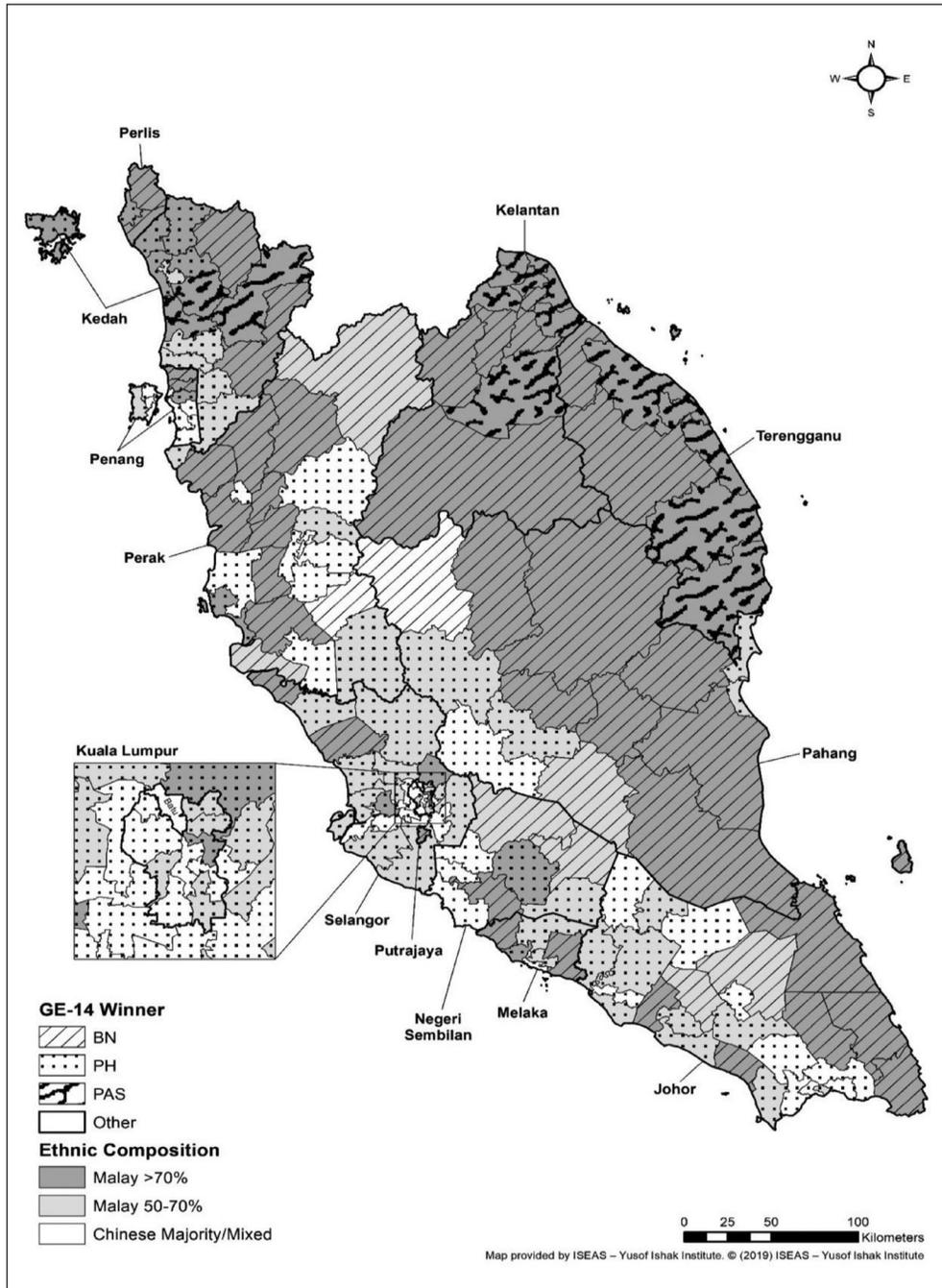
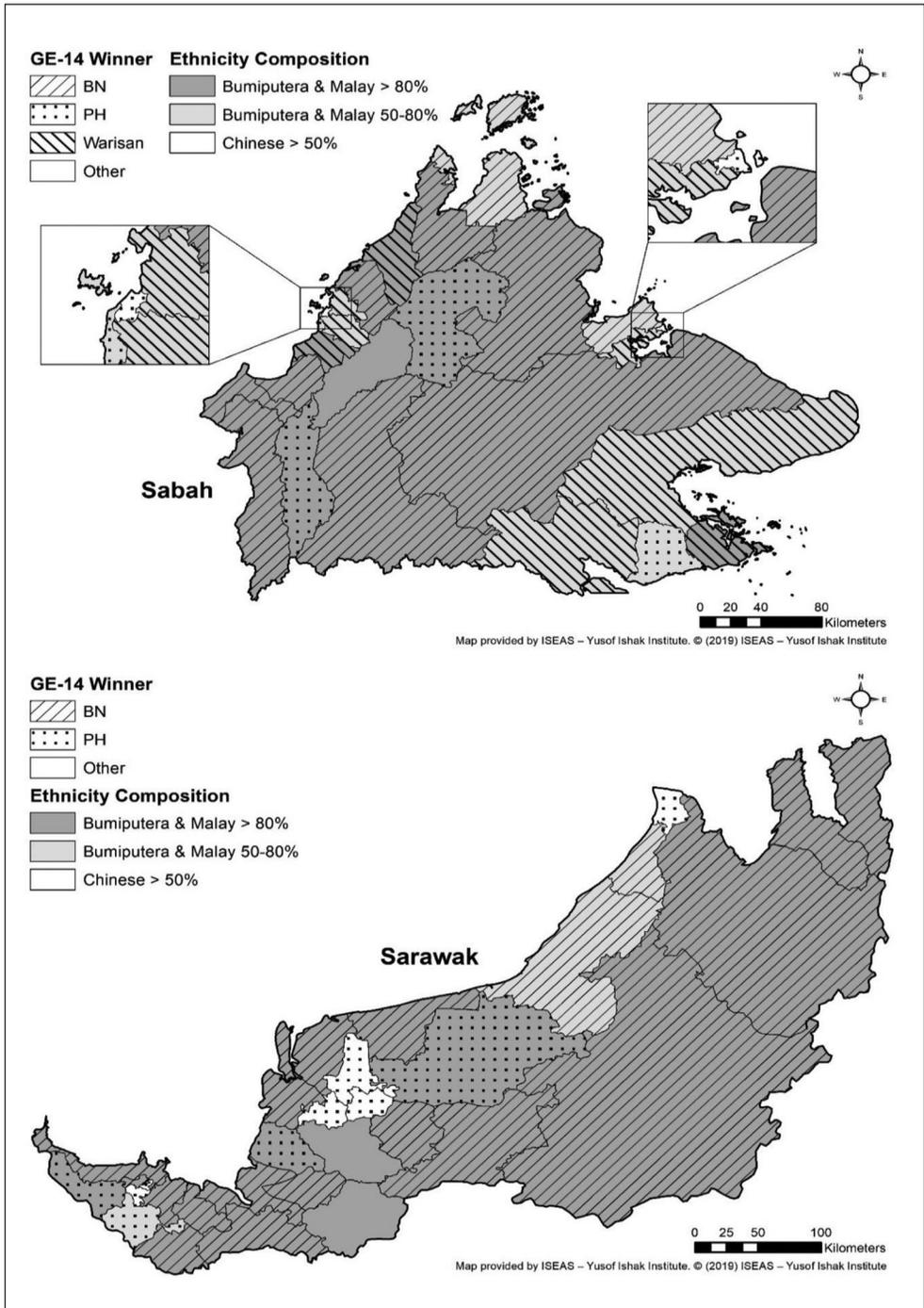


FIGURE 1.2
Parliamentary Seats in Sabah and Sarawak by Ethnicity and Winning Party (GE-14)



confounded; PH generally won by wide margins. On the Peninsula, UMNO sustained its loyal following in the rural Malay heartland, but PAS also held its ground, and both PAS and PH made some inroads. PH was competitive in constituencies with 50–70 per cent Malay voters, in which UMNO and PH did evenly well. UMNO's popularity held in constituencies where Malays constituted 70 per cent or more, with PAS also securing wins in this demographic. However, in Kedah as well as a small number of seats in other states, PH made some inroads in these seats. PH won all but two Chinese-majority or mixed constituencies without a majority group.

In Sabah and Sarawak, mixed and Chinese-majority seats were also carried by PH or Warisan, without clear patterns based on the indigenous share of the electorate (Figure 1.2). This generalized portrayal of course overlooks the highly heterogeneous composition of East Malaysia's indigenous peoples.

Tables 1.1 and 1.2 shed further light on the GE-14 results. Table 1.1 sets out the change in parliamentary seats between 6 April and 9 May 2018. BN recorded a total loss of fifty seats with a particularly large number of seats, thirty-five, concentrated on the Peninsula—leaving the coalition with a mere seventy-nine seats. Pakatan Harapan gained in similar measure, netting forty additional seats, with most of these also on the Peninsula. By itself, the coalition had enough seats to secure a narrow majority in parliament. However, its majority was complemented by Warisan's seats, which had also increased from two to eight. For its part, PAS built upon its base of thirteen seats with the acquisition of another five—all on the Peninsula.

The win rates for BN shrank from 60.2 per cent in GE-13 to 35.6 per cent in GE-14, while those of PKR and DAP burgeoned from 30.3 per cent to 67.6 per cent, and from 74.5 per cent to 89.4 per cent, respectively. In contrast, PAS fared much worse outside of Pakatan Rakyat, with its win rates plummeting from 28.8 per cent to 11.5 per cent. In terms of the new entrants, Warisan did the best, winning almost half of its contests, while PPBM and Amanah won only a quarter and a third of their respective contests.

At the state level, the change is even more striking. From its initial holdings of ten state governments, BN was eventually only left with two, Pahang and Perlis. PH retained Selangor and Penang and, with its new holdings, secured a continuous line of control along the west coast from Johor in the south to Kedah in the north. PAS kept Kelantan and secured Terengganu (Figure 1.3). In East Malaysia, Warisan and PH allies mustered a majority in the Sabah state assembly, and in terms of the balance of Sarawak parliament seats, BN affiliates left the coalition to form an independent state-based coalition, Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS).

GE-14 has thus vastly reconfigured Malaysia's political panorama and on a scale far beyond anything most imaged. There are many moving parts to this phenomenon, with certain elements channelling the desire for change and others generating a movement away from the incumbents. The next section will lay out how this book seeks to approach the elections.

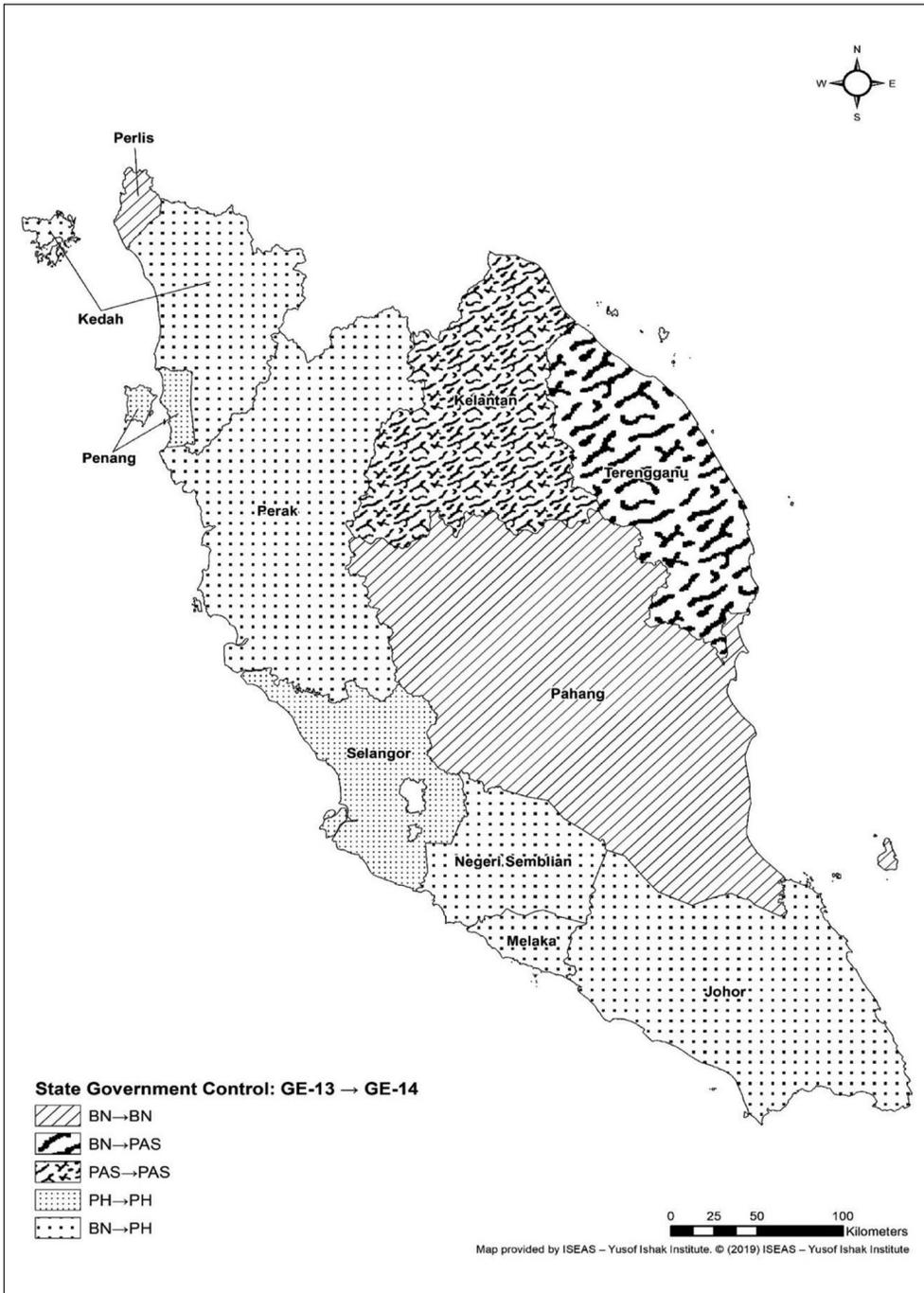
TABLE 1.1
Parliament of Malaysia: GE-14 Change in Seats

<i>6 April (Incumbents)</i>					
	<i>BN</i>	<i>PH</i>	<i>PAS</i>	<i>Warisan</i>	<i>Other</i>
Peninsula	84	65	13		3
Sabah	22	2		2	
Sarawak	23	6			2
<i>Total</i>	129	73	13	2	5
<i>9 May (GE-14 Winners)</i>					
	<i>BN</i>	<i>PH</i>	<i>PAS</i>	<i>Warisan</i>	<i>Other</i>
Peninsula	49	97	18		1
Sabah	11	6		8	1
Sarawak	19	10			2
<i>Total</i>	79	113	18	8	4
<i>Change (Gain/Loss)</i>					
	<i>BN</i>	<i>PH</i>	<i>PAS</i>	<i>Warisan</i>	<i>Other</i>
Peninsula	-35	+32	+5		-2
Sabah	-11	+4		+6	+1
Sarawak	-4	+4			
<i>Total</i>	-50	+40	+5	+6	-1

TABLE 1.2
Parliament of Malaysia: Wins and Win Rates, by Party

<i>GE-13</i>			
	<i>Won</i>	<i>Contested</i>	<i>Win Rate</i>
BN	133	221	60.2%
PKR (PR)	30	99	30.3%
DAP (PR)	38	51	74.5%
PAS (PR)	21	73	28.8%
<i>GE-14</i>			
	<i>Won</i>	<i>Contested</i>	<i>Win Rate</i>
BN	79	222	35.6%
PKR (PH)	48	71	67.6%
DAP (PH)	42	47	89.4%
PAS	18	157	11.5%
PPBM (PH)	12	52	23.1%
Amanah (PH)	11	34	32.4%
Warisan	8	17	47.1%

FIGURE 1.3
Peninsular Malaysia: State Governments in GE-13 and GE-14



THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

The ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute has a well-established Malaysia Studies Programme, which seeks to provide informed analysis on key economic, social, and political issues facing the country.

Researchers based at the Institute have followed and carried out research on the conduct of elections in Malaysia over the past decades. The fruits of this work have been shared through monographs published by the Institute as well as, more recently, research products such as *ISEAS Perspectives* and the *Trends in Southeast Asia* series. Over the last ten years, the Malaysia Studies Programme has produced books on the 2008 and 2013 general elections, as well as the conduct of elections more generally.

In *March 8: Eclipsing May 13* (2008), Ooi, Saravanamuttu, and Lee provided a grounded perspective on the 2008 parliamentary elections in the country, discussing the key issues in the campaign on one hand, and providing observations on key contests in Selangor, Putrajaya, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Kelantan on the other.

Saravanamuttu, Lee, and Mohamed Nawab's *Coalitions in Collision: Malaysia's 13th General Elections* (2015) looks at the 2013 general election from a variety of perspectives, including: systemic issues such as electoral malapportionment, the role of FELDA in key parliamentary seats, and the role of the media; as well as specific electoral battles in states such as Sabah, Sarawak, and others in Peninsular Malaysia.

Saravanamuttu's 2016 work *Power Sharing in a Divided Nation: Mediated Communalism and New Politics in Six Decades of Malaysia's Elections* (2016), provides a longer-term perspective on the conduct of elections in the country, looking at the initial design of the electoral system, its subsequent development, as well as the issues and performance of the various parties and coalitions in each electoral contest up to and including the 2013 general election.

Consequently, *The Defeat of Barisan Nasional: Missed Signs or Late Surge?* seeks to continue this tradition of collectively analysing the elections. Seven researchers based at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute participated in the GE-14 project, from design to completion. This core was complemented by a group of selected researchers, largely, but not exclusively, based in Malaysia.

The GE-14 project drew on the past approaches adopted to study the elections, but complemented them with additional lines of enquiry. This collective research design was developed in late 2017, as the momentum for the elections began to gather. The framework entailed studying the conduct of the elections and analysing their results from three angles.

The first angle was a systemic one, seeking to examine the broad context within which the elections were being carried out. This included the electoral process per se, specifically the “rules of the game” and the resulting advantages or disadvantages for the parties contesting, as well as more granular aspects such as how the 2016–18 parliamentary redelineation exercise was carried out and what its implications were. This was complemented by specific explorations of the country's economic context, and more direct analyses of the linkage between economic benefits and voter preferences as well as the implications of money politics in shaping voter behaviour.

The second angle consisted of analysing key trends among major interest groups. This category was defined broadly in ethnic trends, but in certain cases disaggregated further by geographic variables or institutional affiliation. Consequently, members of the team looked at electoral trends and political dynamics among rural Malays, urban Malays, FELDA settlers, in addition to Chinese and Indian voters, respectively.

The third angle consisted of studying the confluence of national and local-level issues, trends, and political dynamics in key states across the country. Consequently, on the Peninsula, researchers focused on the larger and more politically salient states of Selangor, Johor and Kelantan, as well as Sabah and Sarawak in East Malaysia.

This overarching structure enabled the research team to have a shared understanding for approaching the elections and locating their specific inquiry within it. It also allowed for comparison within each axis of enquiry, and lent itself for generating a larger, macro picture across the three aspects.

These findings were shared in a series of four public conferences held at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. These events, with the first held on 13 December 2017 and the subsequent three on 16 March, 2 May, and 27–28 September 2018, were timed to coincide with key junctures in the electoral process. In addition, they served to coordinate the method and substance of differently authored chapters.

In addition to the research team itself, the GE-14 project included two in-house geographic information system (GIS) specialists who worked to develop more than thirty bespoke maps found through this book. Beyond portraying specific results, the maps were invaluable in helping researchers tease out patterns and relations as well as explore specific regional dynamics.

Consequently, the first three sections of the book—Campaign Dynamics, Interest Groups, and States—mirror the framework set out above. This book also has a fourth section entitled “Personal Perspectives”, comprising a selection of essays solicited by the GE-14 team following the 2018 election. While not comprehensive, the section seeks to capture the voices of a range of “players” from different backgrounds and political affiliations, and thus complement the structural analyses in the first three sections with a ground-level perspective.

In the conclusion, this book brings together the themes raised by the various chapters. In addition, it seeks to deal with the central question of whether the unexpected denouement of GE-14 was the result of well-established and misread signs of discontent among Malaysia’s voters or a last-minute movement away from BN towards PH and PAS.

Notes

1. This arrangement can work if three additional requirements are met. First, there is a mutual veto in decision-making, preventing the majority from imposing its will unilaterally on all groups. Second, important positions including public office and the civil service are allocated proportionally. Third, the various groups possess a significant degree of autonomy to manage their own affairs (Lijphart 1977, p. 25). For literature on how this applies to Malaysia, consult Milne and Mauzy (1999) and Crouch (1996).

2. The United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) formed an electoral alliance in 1952, and the Malayan Indian Congress then joined in 1954. This coalition was named the Alliance until 1971, when the formation was renamed Barisan Nasional and expanded to include more political parties.
3. PAS Johor Manifesto, https://www.facebook.com/paskawbakri/videos/1616693205113262/?epa=SEARCH_BOX (accessed 26 December 2018).

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