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# COALITIONS IN COLLISION

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# **COALITIONS IN COLLISION**

**MALAYSIA'S 13TH GENERAL ELECTIONS**

*Edited by*

**Johan Saravanamuttu**

**Lee Hock Guan**

**Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman**



Strategic Information and Research Development Centre,  
Malaysia



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# Foreword

## **Malaysia changes hesitantly with the region.**

Since the 1997–98 global financial crisis, countries in Southeast Asian have been experiencing what without exaggeration can be called a deep restructuring.

At the time of writing this, Indonesia has just completed its presidential election peacefully and is awaiting the final results. For a country ruled for three decades by a dictatorship, the transition to democracy has been impressive indeed and, at the moment, the country seems to be moving into its next stage of democratic development. In Singapore, the 2011 polls saw more opposition members elected into the national Parliament than had been the case in decades. In Thailand, the coup of May 2014 is seen by many as a more or less reluctant reboot by the military of the country's democratising process, being necessitated by a stubborn deadlock that was threatening to derail the country's economic development.

In Myanmar, military leaders recently turned civilian and decided to jumpstart the country's stalled economy through a series of democratic reforms. Changes have been impressive. Since 2011 hundreds of political prisoners have been released, media censorship has been greatly relaxed and freedom of assembly allowed; and the country has received enormous amounts of foreign direct investments. A general election involving all parties is planned for 2015.

Vietnam, in turn, has continued opening up its command economy to the world, following in the footsteps of China, its northern Communist-Party-led neighbour, and has become a major player in regional development. (The Philippines is due in 2016 to hold its sixth presidential election since 1986, when President Ferdinand Marcos was deposed.)

The changes since 1998 have meaningfully been happening alongside these countries' heightened regional ambitions in the form of successive ASEAN integration and wide-ranging trading pacts involving big powers, old and new. These broader dynamics provide a necessary backdrop for many positive developments in Southeast Asia; and for many, the inclusion in ASEAN of Cambodia in 1999, after that country had gained political stability, marked the completion of the organisation's geographical reach.

In Malaysia, cries of 'Reformasi', echoing those in Indonesia, were also heard in 1998 following the dismissal as Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister of Anwar Ibrahim. Since then, much has taken place to redraw the political map of Malaysia. An influential new political party – soon titled *Partai KeAdilan Rakyat* (PKR) – was started to champion Anwar; long-time Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad retired in October 2003; reform agendas became the norm in Malaysia's political rhetoric starting with Mahathir's successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, and followed by Najib Razak; and norm-setting civil society movements came to play a central role in public discourses. These developments also gave birth to organisations that are better known as uncivil society movements which have, in retaliation to rapid social changes, resorted to religious and ethnic provocations to stem the tide.

Most significantly, Malaysia's political structure has totally changed in the last decade. The general election held on 8 May 2008 saw opposition parties gaining control of five (out of 13) states. *Pakatan Rakyat*, the coalition that these parties soon formed, not only managed to oppose the ruling parties at the federal level; it has survived and remains a strong challenge to the federal government. Although this coalition lost one state through defections in 2009, and another in the 13<sup>th</sup> general election in 2013, it managed nevertheless to retain the remaining three with stronger majorities.

A new and resolute pattern has therefore emerged in Malaysia, where East Malaysian states are now much more prominent due to the ruling coalition's dependence on them for electoral support at the federal level; where civil society, fuelled by countless new channels of information and platforms for discussion, actively contributes to political developments; where a change in federal government is seriously entertained by many Malaysians; where two Malay-led coalitions contend with each other on all



fronts; and where governance issues vie with racial and religious issues to determine the country's future.

The main dynamics behind regional changes certainly do vary from country to country. Some, such as the advent of social media and the Internet in general, are decidedly common ones. Others are more localised in character.

In Malaysia, the breakdown of information control by central authorities, along with the urbanisation of the population, lies behind many of the changes. These changes have now led to the emergence of a two-party – more correctly, two-coalition – system, where there once was one gigantic coalition whose effective *modus operandi* was to absorb small parties into its sphere of consensus – and compliance.

In short, the articles in this volume tell different sides of this longer process of change, as mirrored in the 2013 general election.

It was in mid-2013 that discussions between researchers from the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at the National Technological University (NTU) led to this joint book project between two of Singapore's major research institutes doing Malaysia studies.

The end product provides a most adequate understanding of the present state of political affairs in Malaysia.

**Ooi Kee Beng**

*Deputy Director, ISEAS*

*11 July 2014*



# Acknowledgements

This book on Malaysia's 13<sup>th</sup> general election was hatched months before the actual event on 5 May 2013. The hype which animated political analysts regarding its significance, especially after the watershed 12<sup>th</sup> general election of 2008, made the study of this election imperative for the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. As editors, we got much encouragement from the ISEAS management, particularly deputy director Ooi Kee Beng, to press ahead with the project. The idea of a joint publication was initiated by Joseph Liow, Dean and Professor of Comparative and International Politics at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University and it was without doubt an excellent idea to pool together the academic resources and wide networking of RSIS and ISEAS to publish such a book. As co-editors we are greatly indebted to both research institutions for their support and encouragement and to ISEAS in particular for agreeing to the joint publication. We would like to thank Mr Ng Kok Kiong, head of ISEAS Publications, for his unstinting support of the project. Not to be forgotten is the ever-ready willingness of 'Pak Chong' of SIRD to undertake the joint publication of the book with ISEAS and to ensure its wide distribution in Malaysia. We would also like to take the opportunity to thank two anonymous evaluators of the manuscript for candid and helpful suggestions. Our final thanks go to our contributors who have been cajoled, prodded and harassed to deliver their chapters, but with little complaint. The usual caveat applies to the co-editors for any shortcomings and inadvertent errors.

**Johan Saravanamuttu**

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