

Towards a New Malaysia? The 2018 Election and Its Aftermath.
Edited by Meredith L. Weiss and Faisal S. Hazis. Singapore: NUS Press, 2020. Softcover: 283pp.

Following more than 60 years of one-party dominance, Malaysia's 2018 general election was a critical juncture as many of the country's political norms crumbled and stability gave way to fluidity. Due to the election's pivotal nature, the opposition Pakatan Harapan's unprecedented victory and the coalition's subsequent unravelling after a mere 22 months, the 2018 election will be revisited continually, not just by country specialists but also those interested in electoral-authoritarian regimes and democratic transitions more widely.

Edited by Meredith Weiss and Faisal Hazis, *Towards a New Malaysia?* is part of the first crop of books that explores the 2018 election and its impact, seeking to establish the drivers of change behind the electoral upset. The book is comprised of three parts, which collectively approach the election from different angles.

The first, and arguably strongest, part of the book focuses on election results and voting behaviour. More quantitative than the latter sections, its four chapters aim to establish voting trends among different population groups and the underlying reasons driving their choices. The section includes explorations of the following issues: overall voting trends; how and why Pakatan Harapan succeeded in attracting new votes; what role elite splits in the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) played in undermining that party's performance; and how voting across ethnic lines affected the ultimate outcome.

The gem is the first chapter by Ibrahim Suffian and Lee Tai De, both of the Merdeka Center for Opinion Research. Using polling-stream data from 165 parliamentary constituencies in Peninsular Malaysia, the authors dissect voting patterns by ethnicity, state and age group—and helpfully compare these findings with the results of the 2013 general election. This chapter comprehensively analyses the degree to which Pakatan Harapan captured the Malay vote and how this varied across the country, how competition between UMNO and the Islamist party, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), came to benefit Pakatan Harapan, and how support for Pakatan Harapan, the former ruling coalition Barisan Nasional, and PAS varied across different age groups. These findings furnish many crucial pieces of the puzzle to understanding how key pillars of Barisan Nasional's support base came undone.

The second part of the book looks at the issues that became salient during the election and the campaign strategies the various parties used to reach out to voters. Rather more qualitative in nature than the preceding section, its five chapters include analyses of the use of big data in campaigning, how Islam figured in the elections, the role gender played in electioneering and how parties reached out to younger voters.

Ross Tapsell's chapter on the use of big data in campaigning is especially useful. He focuses on the case of Invoke, a data analytics firm founded by Rafizi Ramli, the Vice President of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), a major component party of Pakatan Harapan. Invoke garnered much attention in the run-up to the election by correctly forecasting Pakatan Harapan's victory. Although it also incorrectly predicted that PAS would be wiped out, the firm's combination of telephone-based surveys with data gleaned from social media marked a new level of sophistication in studying trends in voting behaviour. Drawing on interviews with company employees as well as key informants, Tapsell analyses the role of the firm in the 2018 election as well as some of the issues that its data-gathering methods raised.

The final section has two forward-looking chapters. The chapter by Wong Chin Huat on the structural features of Malaysia's parliamentary system is conceptually useful. While many observers correctly point out the lopsided nature of the country's political institutions, Wong separates out the implications of the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system from distortions such as malapportionment and gerrymandering that have accentuated over time. From there, he explores whether Malaysia's FPTP system would be representative even if the effects of malapportionment and gerrymandering were reduced or eliminated. The chapter by Meredith Weiss concludes by examining how the results of the 2018 election will shape the political contours of the country going forward.

Towards a New Malaysia? is a solid contribution to the corpus of work on Malaysia's elections and the events of 2018 in particular. That said, its design and topic selection raise several questions. First, the book would have benefitted from a more unified methodological perspective. As it stands, while the first part of the book is slightly more quantitative and the latter sections are more qualitative, the chapters do hark from very different disciplines, use distinct perspectives and "voices" and analyse very different types of data. This variety is all the more pertinent given that all chapters, barring two, arose out of the same workshop. This limits

the degree to which comparisons and contrasts can be made within the book's sections and between them.

Curiously, there is not much analysis of East Malaysia and how this vital part of the country is similar to and different from West Malaysia. The book also appears a little overly-focused on urban areas. This is striking given that one of the key themes emerging from the 2018 election is the importance of UMNO's hold on the constituency-rich rural hinterland on the peninsula.

Last, the book is rather silent on issues pertaining to governance, corruption, wider economic issues and how these figured in the campaign. Let us not forget that the 2018 election was carried out against the backdrop of the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal and the introduction of a widely unpopular goods and services tax.

Nevertheless, *Towards a New Malaysia?* is a solid contribution to the broader literature on Malaysian politics and wider issues pertaining to democratic transitions. The book also contains chapters by a substantial number of younger Malaysia-based academics and sheds light on several key issues regarding the 2018 elections.

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