

Politics in Malaysia Today—Demise of the Hybrid? Not So Fast

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Abstract

Malaysia long operated a hybrid political regime, demarcated by limited civil liberties and calibrated electoral competitiveness. Further, while this regime's asymmetric institutions gained intrinsic resilience, they found grounding in Malaysia's divided and ranked society, pitting a politically favored community of "indigenous" Malays against peripheral "non-Malays," mostly ethnic Chinese. In this milieu, a ruling coalition persisted in power, the *Barisan Nasional* (National Front), centered by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). The country's variant of hybrid politics thus articulated as a durable single-party dominant system. However, after forty-four years of incumbency, Barisan was defeated in an election by a rival coalition, *Pakatan Harapan* (Alliance of Hope). Even so, this study shows that during Pakatan's first year in power, democratic change has been inhibited by a complex set of factors. They include the stifling legacies of hybrid politics, their resonance with insistent communal privileging, and the winning opposition's frailties in office. Thus, while Malaysia is no longer a single-party dominant system, its politics persist within a resilient hybrid category.

Keywords: Authoritarian durability, democratic change, elections, elite cohesion, hybrid regimes, Malaysia, punishment regime.

What happens to a hybrid political regime when an incumbent government loses an election? Does a "double transition" occur, first breaking with authoritarian rule, then forging democratic procedures? Does only a first transition take place, re-equilibrating in a new type of authoritarianism? Or does the hybrid regime persist, its institutional legacies and societal grounding so constraining the winning opposition that democratic change is stunted?

In addressing the above questions, this probe analysis focuses on new data from Malaysia. In this country case, politics were long understood by

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comparativists as amounting to a hybrid political regime. Civil liberties were suppressed, but not extinguished, while regular elections were manipulated, yet retained some competitiveness. What is more, hybrid politics found grounding in Malaysia's divided and ranked society, pitting a politically favored community of "indigenous" Malay-Muslims against peripheral "non-Malays," mostly ethnic Chinese.

In the described milieu, a ruling coalition took power, the *Barisan Nasional* (National Front), anchored by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). Accordingly, hybrid politics gained yet more resilience, articulating as a single-party dominant system. Even so, after winning ten consecutive general elections across forty-four years of incumbency, Barisan was defeated in May 2018 by a rival coalition, *Pakatan Harapan* (Alliance of Hope). Brandishing a highly reformist manifesto, Pakatan ascended to office amid acclaim of a "New Malaysia."

However, this study demonstrates that during Pakatan's first year in office, democratic change has been inhibited by a complex set of factors. To be sure, other countries in which single-dominant parties have lost elections have been hindered in their democratizing progress. In Taiwan, though the long-standing Kuomintang was ousted in 2000, democracy remained "flawed" under the winning opposition, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Democracy's quality foundered on first-family corruption, flimsy accountability, and shaky rule of law.¹ In Mexico, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), in power for seven decades, also lost in election in 2000. But under the winning opposition, the National Action Party (PAN), the democracy that followed was blighted by "drug war...violence and abuse of human rights."²

In Malaysia, though, the obstacles confronting Pakatan are even more intractable than corrupt practices and human rights violations. They include the hybrid regime's authoritarian legacies, the intrinsic resilience of its asymmetric institutions, its resonance with insistent communal privileging, and the winning opposition's own frailties once in office. Thus, while Malaysia's single-party dominant system gave way to electoral turnover, thereby loosening some authoritarian controls, politics remain rooted in the hybrid domain.

Analysis begins by briefly rehearsing the main features of hybrid political regimes, then recounts an important debate over their intrinsic durability. Next, it shows the resilience that hybrid politics attained in the Malaysia case, derived from this regime type's asymmetric political institutions and the divided social structure in which they were embedded. In this context, UMNO's party apparatus fused tightly with the state bureaucracy, tapping it for patronage and distributive resources.

¹ Khari Templeman, Larry Diamond, and Yun-han Chu, eds., *Taiwan's Democracy Challenged: The Chen Shui-bian Years* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Reiner, 2016), 1-28.

² Peter H. Smith and Matthew C. Kearney, "Transitions Interrupted: Routes toward Democracy in Latin America," *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 1 (July 2010): 137-163.

Third, analysis turns to Barisan's surprising defeat in the 2018 general election. What stands out is that Barisan did not so much lose because of Pakatan's promise of political reform and economic renewal. Rather, it lost because of UMNO's "excessive" corruption, the elite fractiousness and popular resentments that erupted, and the party's tactical failure to regain its footing by finalizing coalescence with a Malay-Muslim regional vehicle, *Parti Islam se-Malaysia* (PAS).

Fourth, Pakatan's own weaknesses are enumerated, dampening its commitments to reforming the hybrid regime. In brief, the winning opposition failed to instill cohesion across party elites, assert command over the state apparatus, or gain grounding across a divided social structure.

Analysis concludes by showing that Malaysia's hybrid political regime, in its institutional resilience and societal resonance, has driven Pakatan to revise its strategies and policies. In trying to mitigate elite-level fractiousness and popular resentments, Pakatan has slowed its reformist agenda. In pale form, then, it now resembles the UMNO-led Barisan that it succeeded, leaving many authoritarian controls in place, while resorting to old-time political strategies and policy preferences. Indeed, these continuities or recurrences of controls, strategies, and policies stand as proxies for the durability that hybrid regimes can attain, enabling its Malaysian variant to survive electoral turnover.

Hybrid Regimes and Intrinsic Resilience

Hybrid political regimes, while articulating in sundry modes and labeling, are mainly distinguished by asymmetric institutions. Civil liberties are starkly truncated, but not extinguished, while electoral competitiveness is steeply calibrated, but remains meaningful. Further, while this regime type might front for a military government or personal dictator, it is most effectively deployed by a single-dominant party. But whoever operates them, hybrid regimes should not be coded as "diminished" or "illiberal" democracies. They reside instead in the authoritarian spectrum.³ Indeed, under hybrid regimes, democratic procedures are selectively adopted in order that democracy can be substantively avoided.

As democracy's "third wave" wore on, hybrid political regimes crept into view, encouraging a side debate over the extent of their durability and trajectories for probable change. In early writings, hybrid regimes were regarded as inherently unstable, with even calibrated elections seen as steadily building pressure for more democracy or less. Thus, in assessing some two

³ Juan Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000), and Andreas Schedler, *The Politics of Uncertainty: Sustaining and Subverting Electoral Authoritarianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). For a discussion, see Matthijs Bogaards, "How to Classify Hybrid Regimes? Defective Democracy and Electoral Authoritarianism," *Democratization* 16, no. 1 (2010): 399-423.

hundred electoral events across Africa, Steffan Lindberg found instances of hybrid politics in which elites acquiesced in “democratization-by-elections.”⁴ Conversely, Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe Schmitter warned that where elections were lost, elites would react with vigorous “backlash,” driving their regimes more deeply into authoritarian rule.⁵ Either way, whether democratic change or authoritarian backlash occurred, Samuel P. Huntington’s old dictum is recalled: “the halfway house does not stand.”⁶

But over time, autocratically minded elites grew more adept at operating hybrid political regimes, tapping asymmetric institutions for their intrinsic resilience. Confronted by democratic norms, these elites found that strategies involving truncated civil liberties and manipulated, but multiparty, elections could better gain compliance from citizens and approval from the West, generating new efficiencies by which to perpetuate their incumbency. In these circumstances, opposition parties, in contesting on an “uneven playing field,” could win seats in legislatures, but rarely enough to take power.⁷ Instead, their gains sooner lent strength to the incumbent government, issuing it some legitimating cover.

New literature thus cumulated over the legitimation, voter mobilization, displays of “invincibility,” “safety valves,” and feedback loops that elections, duly manipulated and backstopped by skewed legislatures, could produce. Hence, by the end of the third wave, crude military governments and personal dictatorships were nearly extinct. Hybrid regimes became “the modal form of government in the developing world.”⁸ Further, they were credited by Barbara Geddes with a lengthy life span of some twenty-three years, three times longer than military governments and half again as long as personal dictatorships.⁹ More readily, then, than clubfooted juntas or erratic strongmen, often dependent on costly coercion, hybrid regimes gained resilience and perpetuated incumbency.¹⁰ Scholarly consensus thus mounted over the durability that hybrid regimes can attain, bringing a long pause to discussion.

⁴ Staffan Lindberg, *Democratization by Elections* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

⁵ Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe G. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 174-175.

⁷ Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, “Why Democracy Needs a Level Playing Field,” *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 1 (2010): 57-68.

⁸ Jason Brownlee, “Portents of Pluralism: How Hybrid Regimes Affect Democratic Transitions,” *American Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 3 (2009): 515-532.

⁹ Barbara Geddes, “What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999): 115-144.

¹⁰ Beatriz Magaloni and Ruth Kricheli, “Political Order and One-Party Rule,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 13 (2010): 124.

Malaysia's Hybrid Regime: Societal Divisions and Single-Party Dominance

Malaysia featured a particularly durable form of hybrid political regime, long avoiding electoral turnover. By 2018, it had exceeded this regime type's already long-life expectancy by more than two decades. In Malaysia, authoritarian legacies and asymmetric institutions that give hybrid politics their intrinsic resilience resonated with a favored segment in a divided society. Limits on civil liberties muted criticisms of communal Malay-Muslim privileging. Manipulated elections ensured some popular participation, but also Malay-Muslim control over the state apparatus.

In the setting of Malay-Muslim dominance, operating amid a hybrid political regime and divided society, the UMNO-led Barisan exploited institutional frameworks and societal bedrock. Malaysia's hybrid regime concretized, then, in a single-party dominant system. Next, UMNO "fused" its party hierarchy with the state apparatus, while immersing with its Malay-Muslim constituency. Accordingly, buffered by the hybrid regime's asymmetric institutions, undergirded by favored societal segments, and energized by patronage resources, UMNO perpetuated elite cohesion and popular loyalties, dynamics that were canonized through the party's electoral victories, however manipulated.

The ready access to state patronage resources was crucial to UMNO's sustaining the single-party dominant system. Similar strictures applied to UMNO's comparator party, Mexico's PRI, whose seven decades in power derived from its extraction of "ample spoils [from the state] so as to deter elites from splitting."¹¹ What is more, as Beatriz Magaloni and Ruth Kricheli explain, "the same motivation that leads [such parties] to co-opt elites often encourages autocrats to use the party machine as a patronage system, whereby citizens receive rents from the government." Single-dominant parties thus gather up "land titles, fertilizers, subsidized housing, scholarships, food, construction materials" from the state. They then synchronize distributions to followers in close accord with demonstrations of loyalty, thereby "trapping poor voters into supporting the dictatorship." In sum, after amassing patronage resources, single-dominant parties operate on multiple tiers, forging elite-level cohesion and, by use of what Magaloni and Kricheli label a "punishment regime," locking in popular support.¹²

Malaysia's political record long exemplified these strategies and dynamics. At the elite level, UMNO acted on Mikail Svolic's aviso that "key to survival of authoritarian ruling coalitions is the presence of a strong party." UMNO also met Mikhail Svolic's requirement that this party have access to a "bloated

¹¹ Beatriz Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 18.

¹² Magaloni and Kricheli, "Political Order and One-Party Rule," 128.

public sector...as well as [a subordinate] private sector.”¹³ On this count, recent data from Malaysia indicate that state-owned enterprises, locally denominated as Government Linked Corporations (GLCs), amount to 42 percent of the market capitalization of all listed firms in the country.¹⁴

UMNO, as a single-dominant party, thus took possession of the state apparatus’s positions and assets. It then allocated them as patronage to party elites. It did this by placing its top officials at the peak of ministerial hierarchies and on the boards of GLCs and “charitable” foundations (*yayasan*). It also drew on state revenues in order to issue over-sized state contracts, licenses, loan guarantees, privatized assets, and discounted equities. Amid this largesse, though factional battles erupted episodically in UMNO, a grudging elite-level cohesion historically prevailed.

Next, UMNO modulated its popular distributions across its mass-level constituencies. One mechanism involved employment in the country’s “heavily bloated” bureaucracy. With 1.6 million civil servants, the state apparatus sustains nearly one in six of the country’s 8.8 million workers.¹⁵ UMNO then demanded continuous expressions of loyalty from these functionaries, while setting contract renewals, promotions, transfers, and bonuses proportionately. UMNO also distributed benefits more widely, nurturing small-time contractors, cultivators, low-wage earners, university goers, prospective homeowners, taxi drivers, and myriad other social and occupational categories. In these circumstances, Serina Rahman concludes, poor urban and rural Malays “tend[ed] to support [the Barisan] given their dependence on government disbursements for survival.”¹⁶

Such punishment regimes are commonplace. But in Malaysia, the hybrid political regime and UMNO’s single-party dominant system, in forging a durable alloy, drew additional strength from deep socio-cultural moorings. Myriad accounts are available of Malaysia’s divided and ranked social structure, most centrally pitting “indigenous” Malays, evermore colored with religious sentiments, against “immigrant” Chinese, locally stigmatized as secular, liberal, and tiresomely acquisitive. In this setting, UMNO long posed as the Malay-Muslim community’s “protector,” harping on a trope of the menacing “other.” The party followed up by materially substantiating and socially justifying its exclusive dissemination of positions and benefits across the Malay-Muslim community. Through popular distributions under the

¹³ Mikhail Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 192 and 180.

¹⁴ Terence Gomez, Fikri Faisal, Thirshalar Padmanabhan, and Juwairiah Tajuddin, *Government in Business: Diverse Forms of Intervention*, Malaysia GLC Monitor 2018 (Kuala Lumpur: Institute for Democracy and Democratic Affairs, 2018), 9.

¹⁵ Gomez et al., *Government in Business*, 97.

¹⁶ Serina Rahman, “Was It a Malay Tsunami? Deconstructing the Malay Vote in Malaysia’s 2018 Election,” *Round Table* 107, no. 6 (2018): 671.

New Economic Policy (NEP) and spiritual expressions of Islamic supremacy, backlit by its vilification of interlopers, UMNO long galvanized party elites and mass-level followers. In sum, Malaysia's hybrid political regime, with its intrinsically resilient institutions, intensely segmented societal support, and single-party dominance, forged a particularly hardy type of hybrid politics.

Renewing Debate

A decade ago, scholarly consensus seemed to have been reached over the durability that hybrid political regimes can attain. Although typically enjoying long life, these regimes, however, are hardly immortal. For hybrid politics to generate legitimating benefits, they must, in the asymmetry of their institutions, permit a glimmer of societal dissidence and electoral uncertainty. In rare instances, then, despite their deft calibration, elections carry the risk of an incumbent government's defeat.

For reasons explored below, the UMNO-led Barisan, after long operating a paradigmatic hybrid regime, was defeated in the 2018 general election. In an important new analysis, Christopher Carrothers uses this turnover to reopen debate over the durability of hybrid politics. Indeed, he begins by recounting Malaysia's having "surprised the world with the peaceful electoral ouster of...UMNO, in power since 1957." Encouraged, then, to revisit this regime type in other country settings, Carrothers assesses some thirty-one as having collapsed. And in harking back to Huntington, he dismisses recent consensus to declare that hybrid regimes are "strikingly unstable." In his interpretation, elections might surprise an incumbent government with outright defeat. Or in a more complex rendition, their crude manipulations and threadbare legitimation might more slowly ferment in a "regime-toppling mass movement."¹⁷ But however the blow might be delivered, Carrothers codes Malaysia's politics today as "unstable." Seriously "disrupted" by electoral turnover, they are poised to go the way of other hybrids, destined to tip into "democratization" or "full authoritarianism."

More analytically, in making his appraisal of "instability," Carrothers turns to Jason Brownlee, who specifies that a hybrid regime breaks down when "incumbent rulers" are replaced by some "alternative set of elites."¹⁸ But this is circular, conflating regime institutions with operative position holders. The instability of a regime should not be defined by the fall of a particular government. It is measured instead by systemic shifts in the character of the regime itself. Independent indices include profound changes in the regime's institutions and, after coming to power, the winning opposition's sharply reordering political strategies and policy preferences.

¹⁷ Christopher Carrothers, "The Surprising Instability of Competitive Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 4 (2018): 119.

¹⁸ In turn, Brownlee, "Portents of Pluralism," 519, borrows from Barbara Geddes, "Authoritarian Breakdown: Empirical Test of a Game Theoretic Argument," American Political Science Association annual meeting, Atlanta, GA, September 2–5, 1999.

Based on the above insights, this analysis will show that in Malaysia, a hybrid political regime has substantially survived electoral turnover. To preview, hybrid politics may attain intrinsic resilience, driven by authoritarian legacies and manifesting in authoritarian institutions. Further, in Malaysia, they gain added grounding in a particular pattern of societal divisions. Thus, while an “alternate set of elites” surely has emerged, the Pakatan government that it forms is unable to change fundamentally the institutional and societal parameters by which it is bound. Consequently, in trying just to hold onto office, Pakatan now hews to many of the strategies and policies of the UMNO-led Barisan that it replaced. Hence, even in the absence of a single-dominant party, Malaysia’s hybrid regime remains buoyed by its own institutional armatures and moored in congenial social structure. Far from strikingly unstable, then, Malaysia’s hybrid regime is unnervingly durable.

Electoral Turnover: Malaysia’s 2018 General Election

After an unbroken record of ten electoral victories held under conditions of hybrid politics, the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional lost to Pakatan Harapan in the general election of May 2018. The aim of this section is briefly to enumerate the reasons for the single-dominant party’s defeat, notwithstanding its scaffolding by hybrid politics and its undergirding in social structure.

Elite-Level Defections

Najib Tun Razak operated as UMNO president and Malaysian prime minister for nearly a decade. He systematically amassed patronage resources from the state, then allocated them across UMNO elites, especially the heads of the divisional offices who articulate UMNO’s nationwide apparatus. These elites were popularly stylized as the party’s “warlords.” And in declaring his paramountcy, Najib frankly advised them, “Don’t forget, I am the biggest warlord of all.”¹⁹

During much of Najib’s tenure, patronage allocations perpetuated elite-level cohesion within UMNO. But gradually, extractions and payments grew so swollen that they registered in perceptions of “excessive” corruption, therein alienating some party elites and prompting open splits. In particular, the abuse of 1 Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), a strategic development fund, stands out, for it burst onto the global scene as “one of the biggest scandals in financial history.”²⁰

¹⁹ Zuraidah Ibrahim, “Najib Razak, ‘Biggest Warlord in Malaysia,’” *South China Morning Post* (August 1, 2015), <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/1845743/analysisnajib-razak-biggest-warlord-malaysia-sends-message> (accessed August 5, 2019).

²⁰ “The Bizarre Story of 1MDB, the Goldman Sachs-Backed Malaysian Fund That Turned into One of the Biggest Scandals in Financial History,” *Business Insider Malaysia* (December 19, 2018), <https://www.businessinsider.my/1mdb-timeline-the-goldman-sachs-backed-malaysian-wealth-fund-2018-12/> (accessed August 5, 2019).

Many of 1MDB's dealings have been publicly revealed, so only a few points bear repeating. By 2018, 1MDB had accumulated more than US\$10 billion in debt through bond issues and bank loans. Of this amount, nearly half seemed simply to have been "stolen."²¹ Infusions of cash from 1MDB and its subsidiaries were subsequently tracked to Najib's personal bank accounts. Some of this was used to fund the lifestyles of Najib's family, but much of it was dispensed as patronage throughout UMNO's party apparatus prior to the general elections in 2013 and 2018.

With regard to patronage, Magaloni charts the most common way in which it can trigger splits among elites, ascribing the fall of the PRI in Mexico to an eroding economy and scarcities in patronage.²² However, in the context of 1MDB in Malaysia, fractiousness was caused in a different way. UMNO's patronage resources did not dry up to the extent that elites grew penurious and rebellious. Rather, revelations over the funds in Najib's accounts cumulated in so vast a scandal that alienated elites were driven to defect.

Accordingly, *Finance Asia* branded Najib as the "worst finance minister" among Asia's twelve largest economies.²³ As scrutiny deepened over 1MDB in the United States and Europe, Najib turned his attentions to China. Engaging deeply with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), he replenished patronage resources by greatly overpaying China's state-owned companies for infrastructure contracts in Malaysia, then taking back funds in hopes of stanching 1MDB debts.²⁴

Some party elites began to fret that Najib was "ruining the country." In protest, Mahathir Mohamad, the former prime minister and long-time president of UMNO, called for Najib's resignation. In lending drama to his warning, Mahathir staged his own resignation from UMNO in February 2016. Muhyiddin Yassin, UMNO's deputy president and the deputy prime minister, also criticized Najib openly regarding 1MDB. To be sure, Muhyiddin himself had been made wealthy by patronage, as had his son.²⁵ Hence, Muhyiddin's turning on Najib, leading finally to his sacking, helps us to understand the difference between the functionality of modulated patronage and the fissiparous impact of "excessive" corruption.

²¹ "Impending Graft Trial Raises Curtain on 1MDB Legal Battles," *Edge Malaysia*, February 11, 2019, 21.

²² Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*, 18.

²³ "Najib Razak: Asia's Worst Finance Minister 2016," *FinanceAsia* (February 1, 2016), <https://www.financeasia.com/article/najib-razak-asias-worst-finance-minister-2016/405600> (accessed August 5, 2019).

²⁴ Tom Wright and Bradley Hope, "WSJ Investigation: China Offered to Bail Out Troubled Malaysian Fund in Return for Deals," *Wall Street Journal* (January 7, 2019), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-china-flexes-its-political-muscle-to-expand-power-overseas-11546890449> (accessed August 5, 2019).

²⁵ "Major Realignment Possible in Malaysian Politics," *Asia Sentinel* (June 16, 2015), <https://www.asiasentinel.com/politics/major-realignment-possible-malaysia-politics/> (accessed August 5, 2019).

As defections mounted, other party elites, including some division heads, issued complaints about 1MDB. Mahathir then led his faction in coalescing with opposition and civil society leaders, including Anwar Ibrahim, the de facto head of *Pakatan Keadilan Rakyat* (People's Justice Party, PKR), a multiethnic, but largely Malay urban middle-class party. He also engaged with Lim Kit Siang, de facto head of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), a mostly Chinese middle- and working-class party. In confronting the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional, these leaders founded the new Pakatan Harapan.

Malaysia's trajectories challenge a literature that holds that authoritarian regimes are brought low by shortfalls in patronage and consequent elite-level splits. Specifically, the record in Malaysia shows how in producing too much of a "good thing," nourishing resource conduits can convert into enervating ant trails, carting away so much largesse that now alienated elites defect. It also challenges standard renditions of the regime change that follows. In brief, Malaysia's record approximates the fracturing of autocratic coalitions that was classically mapped by O'Donnell and Schmitter, then traced out more finely by Huntington in new relations between soft-liners and "minimalists."²⁶ But as we will see, despite new elite-level dynamics and electoral turnover, the hybrid regime has persisted, avoiding any democratic transition or authoritarian hardening.

Mass-Level Resentments

During his tenure as prime minister, Najib organized popular distributions for low-income Muslim-Malays. His centerpiece was *Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia* (1 Malaysia People's Assistance). For much of his prime ministership, schemes such as these, punctuated by one-time payments, seemed to placate the Malay-Muslim community. But over time, his gross amassment of resources, while dividing elites, also began to test the loyalties of ordinary citizens.

Even a decade before Malaysia's 2018 general election, ordinary Malay-Muslims registered their skepticism over UMNO, with polling by the Merdeka Center showing that though benefiting from the government's popular distributions, they were resentful over elite-level patronage. More than 60 percent of respondents agreed that UMNO leaders "say that they are fighting for Malay rights but spend more time making money for themselves and giving contracts to friends and family members."²⁷

Closer to the election in 2014, the 1MDB scandal intensified grievances over corruption in UMNO. As ordinary Malay-Muslims dwelled forlornly on rising living costs, road tolls, a hefty new value-added tax, and falling

²⁶ O'Donnell and Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, and Huntington, *The Third Wave*.

²⁷ Merdeka Center, "12th General Elections: Observations on Issues, Voting Directions and Implications" (2008; incorrectly dated 2007), <http://www.merdeka.org/v2/download/Post%20Election%20Overview%20-%20Presentation.pdf> (no longer accessible).

subsidies for staples, they began again to view the party as a “vehicle for the rich fat-cat division chiefs and the political tool of the ‘strongman’ premier.”²⁸ In stark terms, they began to contrast Najib’s high living with their own meager subsistence. Their resentments then extended to the party mediaries in their midst, with UMNO branch leaders, village committee members, and appointed village heads taking the lion’s share of the distributions that trickled down to their rural redoubts.²⁹

In the context of growing resentment among Malay-Muslims, the UMNO-led Barisan was challenged by the new Pakatan Harapan. The opposition’s manifesto was highly reformist and uplifting in tone, stressing democratic change and good governance. It also envisioned economic renewal, recalling the “Asian tiger” status that Malaysia had earned during Mahathir’s first prime ministership in the 1990s. The manifesto called, too, for social equality and international engagement, hence its pledge to adopt the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), a United Nations treaty. At the same time, in his own campaigning, Mahathir tried to reassure Malay-Muslims that their statues would be protected. Taking this nuanced message of UMNO’s venality and Malay-Muslim privileging deep into the agricultural settler schemes run by the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA), Mahathir tried to pry open UMNO’s punishment regime.

UMNO’s Blunders

With UMNO so tainted by corruption and confronted by opposition, it sought to reenergize its elite-level coterie and wavering social base. With patronage and distributive schemes now alienating elites, while failing fully to placate mass-level supporters, Najib drew UMNO ever closer to PAS. Abandoning UMNO’s non-Malay partners in Barisan and cross-ethnic appeals to ordinary Chinese citizens, he issued evermore burning Islamist imagery involving adherence to Sharia law.

UMNO reached out to PAS, even as the latter remained in opposition, in hopes of burnishing its own electoral appeal. In this context, speculation mounted over the terms of a deal known informally as the “national consensus.”³⁰ UMNO allegedly passed hidden campaign funds to PAS. In turn, PAS ranged far beyond its regional base to nominate candidates across the peninsula. Its aim seemingly was to force three-cornered contests that would split the opposition vote between its own candidates and Pakatan’s. This would

²⁸ Bridget Welsh, “Not Business as Usual in Malaysia,” *New Mandala* (March 17, 2016), <https://www.newmandala.org/not-business-as-usual-in-malaysia/> (accessed August 5, 2019).

²⁹ Rahman, “Was It a Malay Tsunami?” 674.

³⁰ William Case, “Democratization in an Age of Authoritarianism: Theorizing Malaysia’s GE14,” in *Malaysia’s 14th General Election and UMNO’s Fall: Inter-Elite Feuding in the Pursuit of Power*, ed. Terence Gomez and Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2020), 21-42.

usher the UMNO-led Barisan back into office, while enabling PAS to retain its regional redoubts.

Questions arose over why PAS leaders would accept an enabling role, given the bitterness that for decades had strained their relations with UMNO. Evidently spooked by Pakatan's cross-ethnic coalescence, vividly illumined by the DAP's inclusion, PAS prioritized new ethno-religious solidarity over advances in democracy and governance. As the party's president, Abdul Hadi Awang, plainly advised,

if the one leading is a Muslim, even were he to be cruel, at least (others) can become cattle herders. But if the one who leads is a non-Muslim, even if he were to be the kindest, (others)...will still end up in hell.³¹

But "national consensus" was not fully consummated in firm electoral agreements. And amid a mounting dynamic of elite-level defections and mass-level disloyalties, the promiscuity between UMNO and PAS backfired. In brief, studies show that few Malay-Muslim voters fled to PAS from Pakatan. Instead, in their revulsion over IMDB, many voters turned to PAS from UMNO, finding respite in images of piety. The UMNO-led Barisan's popular vote was thus split and diminished. Pakatan, then, lifted by unexpected swings in the East Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah, was able to snatch a winning plurality.

Electoral Outcomes

With many accounts of Malaysia's general election in 2018 becoming available, it is only necessary here to underscore key outcomes. To begin, Malaysia's hybrid political regime, however durable, finally was unable to prevent the UMNO-led Barisan's defeat. Popular grievances had grown so swollen that they washed over electoral manipulations. Even so, societal grounding for Pakatan remained soft. In winning a mere plurality, Pakatan stood opposed by 51 percent of the Malaysian electorate and, according to estimates from Merdeka Center, 70 percent of Malay-Muslim voters.³² Indeed, Pakatan won a smaller percentage of the popular vote than the opposition had in the 2013 election, as well as a smaller percentage of the Malay-Muslim vote than in the 2008 election. Mahathir's effectiveness in cracking UMNO's punishment regime appears to have been slight.³³

The statistics are compelling, for they adumbrate the steep political and structural barriers that Pakatan would face in trying to make good on

³¹ "Marrying When It's Convenient," *The Star*, March 21, 2019, 11.

³² Hazlin Hassan, "Most Malaysian Chinese Voted PH in Polls, but Malays in 3-Way Split," *Straits Times* (June 14, 2018), <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/most-malaysian-chinesevoted-ph-in-polls-but-malays-in-3-way-split> (accessed August 5, 2019).

³³ Rahman, "Was It a Malay Tsunami?"

its reformist pledges. On this score, it is worth recalling Daniel Treisman's influential notion of "democracy by mistake," for it helps us to conceptualize the frailties of Pakatan politicians once in office, as well as the belief that would strengthen inversely among UMNO leaders that rightfully they should hold power.³⁴ Indeed, in the view of UMNO leaders, their only error had been to fumble the election.

Thus, applying Treisman's notion requires care, for it is wrong to conclude that democratic change has been wrought in Malaysia by "mistake." Instead, the hybrid regime has substantially persisted. But in the view of many Malay-Muslims today, a separate outcome of electoral turnover was plainly mistaken. In Rahman's ethnographic study in the state of Johor, she reports that while many Malay-Muslims had protested UMNO's corruption by voting secretly for PAS, respondents never expected "[Barisan] to lose completely." Voters were then taken aback when the UMNO-led Barisan was defeated, leaving them to fret, "What have I done?"³⁵ Hence, in a series of by-elections that followed, many Malay-Muslims sought to remedy their mistake by flocking back to UMNO, now openly campaigning in league with PAS.

The Winning Opposition and Its Frailties

While commitments varied across the leaders and parties in Pakatan Harapan, the stated aims of the coalition upon coming to office were to democratize politics and promote good governance, therein sparking externalities of economic renewal, social inclusions, and international engagement. But during its first year in power, Pakatan remained sorely constrained. This section enumerates the causes of its enfeeblement and their implications for hybrid politics.

Elite-Level Fractiousness

Prior to the 2018 election, tensions among elites had flared within and across parties in the Pakatan coalition, with aspirants vying for nominations and funds. As one example, a prominent candidate in *Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia* (Bersatu), a new vehicle composed mostly of defectors from UMNO who supported Mahathir as prime minister, described in an interview his fraught experience.³⁶ Persuaded to join Bersatu, he expected nomination by the party in a key Kuala Lumpur constituency. But "stabbed in the back" by rivals, instead he was shunted into an obscure up-country district where, as a "parachute candidate," he stood little chance. "Let's face it," he bitterly opined, "Bersatu

³⁴ Daniel Treisman, "Democracy by Mistake," National Bureau of Economic Research working paper no. 23944 (December 26, 2017), <https://voxeu.org/article/democracy-mistake> (accessed August 5, 2019).

³⁵ Rahman, "Was It a Malay Tsunami?" 674.

³⁶ Case, "Democratization in an Age of Authoritarianism."

is a party of UMNO rejects.” Equally furious jockeying over nominations and seat allocations was reported within and across *PKR*, *Parti Amanah Negara*, a breakaway vehicle from PAS, and to a lesser extent, the DAP.

Yet, in their quest for electoral victory, however unlikely, elites in Pakatan avoided any break-up of their coalition. In the end, Pakatan’s presidential council agreed on Mahathir as their candidate for the prime ministership, to be followed in the event of victory by the transfer of office to Anwar in two years’ time. Further, they were able to allocate seats in ways that avoided multiple candidacies in particular constituencies, while campaigning with a common logo and manifesto.

After Pakatan won the election, however, rivalries among party elites were quickly uncorked. Most notably, severe fractiousness set in during PKR’s internal election in 2018. While Anwar remained unopposed for party president, factional battling erupted over the deputy presidency between Azman Ali, a former chief minister of Selangor associated with Mahathir, and Rafizi Ramli, a younger party activist who supported Anwar. Intense skirmishing reverberated in the venal “money politics” and “phantom voting” that long had been associated with UMNO.³⁷ The party’s new electronic voting system was then hacked, interrupting the electoral process. Anwar’s daughter, Nurul Izzah, a prominent PKR official, so despaired over the viciousness in competition that upon eventually winning the party vice presidency, she quit.

At the same time, in boosting Bersatu’s numbers in Parliament, Mahathir recruited yet more defectors from UMNO. One of them, Shabudin Yahaya, a former Sharia court judge, had gained notoriety for his counseling that girls who had been sexually assaulted could resolve their plight by marrying their attackers. This prompted Lim Guan Eng, secretary-general of the DAP, publicly to brand him a “monster.”³⁸ Serious doubts also arose over the behaviors of other defectors from UMNO, with Rafizi’s likening their recruitment by Mahathir as “collecting rubbish.”³⁹ But Mahathir went further, thrusting his Bersatu vehicle into the state of Sabah in hopes of reeling in old UMNO operatives. In doing this, Bersatu clashed with a local indigenous party, *Parti Warisan Sabah* (Sabah Heritage Party). Though not formally part of Pakatan, Warisan had been cooperating closely with the coalition.

Mahathir also induced Ronald Kiandee, head of the parliamentary Public Accounts Committee (PAC), a key mechanism for executive accountability,

³⁷ Tashny Sukumaran, “In Mahathir’s New Malaysia, Azmin v Ramli Leave Anwar Facing an Old Problem,” *South China Morning Post* (November 12, 2018), <https://www.scmp.com/weekasia/politics/article/2172825/mahathirs-new-malaysia-azmin-v-ramli-leaves-anwar-facing-old> (accessed August 5, 2019).

³⁸ Predeep Nambiar, “Penang Ashamed to Have an MP Like Shabudin, Says Guan Eng,” *FMT News* (April 5, 2017), <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2017/04/05/penangashamed-to-have-an-mp-like-shabudin-says-guan-eng/> (accessed August 5, 2019).

³⁹ “Ex-UMNO MPs in Bersatu-Azmin ‘Repented,’ Rafizi ‘Collecting Rubbish’,” *Malaysiakini* (February 14, 2019), <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/463910> (accessed August 5, 2019).

to defect to Bersatu from UMNO, ignoring a Pakatan manifesto pledge that the committee be chaired by an opposition member. Nurul Izzah then quit her membership in the PAC, too, while denouncing Mahathir as a “former dictator who had wreaked so much damage, not just to our lives, but the system.”⁴⁰ Mahathir replied that “many persons are disappointed. I am also disappointed with them.” Azmin Ali, the economic affairs minister and PKR’s deputy president, followed up in a Twitter posting by disparaging Mahathir’s detractors in Pakatan as “cry babies” (*budak kecil yang merengek*).⁴¹

At the same time, Mahathir favored Azminover Lim Guan Eng, the finance minister and DAP secretary-general. Specifically, in appointing Azmin to head the newly instituted Ministry of Economic Affairs, Mahathir shifted authority to him over many GLCs that previously had been housed in the Finance Ministry.⁴² Further, he selected his old confidante, Daim Zainuddin, to lead new negotiations with China over the infrastructure contracts that Najib had signed. Normally a role for the finance minister, Mahathir vaguely explained that “our choice of candidate is based on certain abilities.”⁴³

These vignettes illustrate that party elites in Pakatan failed to gain cohesion during their first year in office. Instead, their preexisting tensions, muted prior to the election, greatly intensified after their victory. During Pakatan’s second year, this fractiousness would erupt anew in malicious videos and ceaseless hate messaging. The coalition’s commitments and capacity regarding democratic change and governance reforms eroded proportionately.

Bureaucratic Resistance

Pakatan failed not only to generate cohesion across party elites, but also to extend its command over the state apparatus. Indeed, its inability during the election to muster a popular majority, let alone any preponderance across the Malay-Muslim community, foreshadowed the resistance that it soon encountered among rank-and-file civil servants. After coming to office, Pakatan duly swept away top ministerial officials and GLC executives, while terminating many contract workers. It ceased also to routinely grant pay rises,

⁴⁰ Sumiko Tan, “Lunch with Sumiko: It’s Been So Turbulent...My Heart’s Been Broken, Says Nurul Izzah Anwar,” *Straits Times* (March 24, 2019), <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/seasia/its-been-so-turbulent-my-hearts-been-broken> (accessed August 5, 2019).

⁴¹ Ku Syaifiq Ku Fozi, “Nurul Izzah Mahu Reformasi, Azmi Sindir ‘Budak Merengek’” [Nurul Izzah wants reforms, Azmin insinuates “cry babies”], *Utusan Malaysia* (March 25, 2019), <https://www.utusan.com.my/berita/politik/nurul-izzah-mahu-reformasi-azmin-sindir-budakmerengek-1.869307> (accessed August 5, 2019).

⁴² Edmund Terence Gomez, “Business as Usual: Regime Change and GLCs in Malaysia,” *New Mandala* (March 12, 2019), <https://www.newmandala.org/business-as-usual-regime-changeand-glcs-in-malaysia/> (accessed August 5, 2019).

⁴³ Melissa Darlyne Chow, “Dr M Tells Why Daim, Not Guan Eng, Chosen for China-ECRL Talks,” *FMT News* (March 20, 2019), <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2019/03/20/dr-m-tells-why-daim-not-guan-eng-chosen-for-china-ecrl-talks/> (accessed August 5, 2019).

as the “previous [Barisan] government [had done] in order to procure loyalty.”⁴⁴ But in doing this, it alienated many entrenched functionaries, recruited almost exclusively from the Malay-Muslim community.

Accordingly, Pakatan met much institutional resistance within the state apparatus. For example, in early 2019, the government unveiled a new five-year National Anti-Corruption Plan (NACP).⁴⁵ With the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) reporting that more than 60 percent of corruption complaints involve civil servants, the plan targeted areas where “corruption is rampant,” most visibly in public service delivery, procurement, legal and judicial activities, and law enforcement. Transparency International Malaysia reports, however, that such frameworks are typically loathed by civil servants, resentful of any systematic monitoring of their transactions.⁴⁶ On this score, Mahathir recalled that after a National Integrity Plan had been introduced in 2004, the “[corruption] problem became worse.”⁴⁷ Similarly, an independent police complaints bureau, proposed around the same time, had been “attacked” by the Royal Malaysian Police.⁴⁸ Doubts thus arose over whether the NACP’s provision for a new Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission would be any more welcome.

Even more than meeting sullen resistance, Pakatan ministers found that their policies and activities could be actively undermined by rank-and-file civil servants. In this context, the deputy prime minister and PKR vice president, Wan Azizah, “reminded” civil servants not to commit “*sabotaj*.” She advised that the government was aware that there were “circles” of functionaries who had “inherited old government loyalties.” She complained that groups “took advantage of [and] ‘misused’ social media to make ‘accusations’ and ‘criticisms against the government in a reckless way.’”⁴⁹ Enterprises seeking operating licenses and approvals faced a “go slow” ethos (*pelan-pelan*), made manifest in new and excessively meticulous checks. These were administered, according to informants, with an ironic air of “serves you right” (*padan muka*).

One example of sabotaging appeared to take place in February 2019 in the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia. Briefly, the public broadcaster,

⁴⁴ Chester Tay, “Buying Loyalty Not the Way, Says Mahathir,” *Edge Financial Daily*, March 13, 2019, 13.

⁴⁵ Ahmad Naqib Idris, “New Anti-Graft Plan after Slew of Scandals,” *Edge Financial Daily*, January 30, 2019, 3.

⁴⁶ Akhbar Haji Satar, President, Transparency International Malaysia, “IMDB-Never Again?” Foreign Correspondents’ Club forum, Kuala Lumpur, January 30, 2019.

⁴⁷ “NACP States Loud and Clear Govt’s Stand on Corruption-Dr Mahathir,” Bernama.com (January 29, 2019), <http://bernama.com/en/news.php?id=1689740> (accessed September 20, 2019).

⁴⁸ Kuek Ser Kuang Keng, “Police ‘Attack’ IPCMC in Internal Bulletin,” *Malaysiakini* (May 27, 2006), <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/51654> (accessed August 5, 2019).

⁴⁹ “Penjawat Awam Jangan Sabotaj—TPM” [Civil servants, do not sabotage], *Utusan Malaysia*, March 4, 2018, 7.

Radio Television Malaysia (RTM), housed in the ministry, declined to extend live coverage to addresses given by the Minister of Transport, Anthony Loke, a DAP member, or the chief minister of Negeri Sembilan, a Pakatan member, at the new government's inaugural Chinese New Year open-house event. In turn, Loke's press secretary duly complained, "not a single word of the speeches of [Loke and the chief minister] were broadcasted... . Heads must roll over the highly possible sabotage against the government administration."⁵⁰ This prompted the minister of communication, Gobind Singh Deo, to demand that RTM provide an explanatory report.

Similar suspicions emerged over whether officials in the attorney general's chambers were undermining the government's court cases against Najib Tun Razak, begun in August 2019 in connection with 1MDB. Frequent alterations in charges and judicial venues later invited numerous appeals, procedural delays, and possible mistrials. Thus, as proceedings dragged on, their credibility faded, with much of the Malay-Muslim community blithely dismissing accusations against Najib as "fake news."

Top officers within the Royal Malaysian Police also adhered to longstanding patterns of affiliation and loyalty. During his prime ministership, Najib had forged close bonds with the police, in particular, the former inspector general, Khalid Abu Bakar, helping to suppress public criticisms over 1MDB.⁵¹ But Mahathir, after becoming prime minister, seemed unable to gain the same level of cooperation from the police over new democratic and governance reforms. As one example, Mahathir requested that officers cease enforcing the Sedition Act over "insulting" the prime minister, legislation that Najib had vigorously exploited. Yet, despite changes in leadership and policy preferences, the police stuck to old ways, scouring social media postings for "insults" that justified their making arrests. In response to a first detention, Mahathir tweeted, "I don't agree with the actions taken against those who criticize me. I have informed the police about this."⁵² Regardless, throughout the year, the police persisted. Indeed, eventually, as we will see, they would even do so at the Pakatan government's behest.

Further, during the 2018 election, one recalls that police officers had blocked a Pakatan candidate from submitting his nomination papers on the grounds that he lacked an "Election Commission pass," a capriciously instituted requirement. Nine months after Pakatan's victory, a state-level by-election was held in the Selangor state constituency of Semenyih. On election day, while

⁵⁰ "Minister's Aide Questions if RTM Sabotaging Gov't," *Malaysiakini* (February 17, 2019), <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/464443> (accessed September 20, 2019).

⁵¹ William Case, "Stress Testing Leadership in Malaysia: The 1MDB Scandal and Najib Tun Razak," *Pacific Review* 30, no. 5 (2017): 633-654.

⁵² "Dr M Disagrees with Police Action to Arrest Man over FB Insults," *The Star* online (May 18, 2018), <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/05/18/dr-m-disagrees-with-policeaction-to-arrest-man-over-fb-insults/> (accessed August 5, 2019).

officers readily permitted the UMNO candidate to observe balloting, they blocked the Pakatan candidate, for he lacked an Election Commission pass.⁵³

In other sites in the state apparatus, the Pakatan government also shied away from democratizing and governance reforms. Though replacing top executives of the GLCs, the government avoided any deeper tampering with this mainstay of Malaysia's political economy. Similarly, while removing the director-general of the Department of Islamic Advancement (JAKIM), it neglected any more thoroughgoing inspection. Rather, it left a vast religious bureaucracy to pulsate through its extensive networks of mosques and schools, accentuating chords of ethno-religious grievance within the Malay-Muslim community. In sum, Pakatan faced deep resistance, even active sabotage across the state apparatus, slowing its drive to carry out democratic and governance reforms.

Mass-Level Disloyalties

As noted above, some 70 percent of Malay-Muslim voters cast their ballots against Pakatan in the 2018 election, yielding the coalition a bare electoral plurality and parliamentary majority. Among those who supported Pakatan, some were motivated by a general regard for reform. But many others voted for Pakatan—or PAS—out of short-term revulsion over 1MDB.

However, as mentioned, many Malay-Muslims were taken aback when the UMNO-led Barisan was defeated. As Wan Saiful observes, they had been dubious from the start about Pakatan “because they were afraid of losing access to race-based privileges.”⁵⁴ Indeed, their fears initially seemed justified, for upon coming to office, Pakatan began to phase out distributive schemes such as BR1M and the “livelihood loans” extended to FELDA settlers.⁵⁵ At the same time, Pakatan failed during its first year in office to reinvigorate the economy. In these conditions, many Malay-Muslims collectively began to ask, “What have I done? There is no hope for help from this government.”⁵⁶ Loyalties among Malay-Muslims long had been nurtured through UMNO's dense socio-political networks, especially its women's “wing,” UMNO Wanita, ranging across the hinterland of the peninsula's south and west. Others were drawn to PAS's even more heartfelt associations in the north and east. Among parties in Pakatan, none except DAP matched such organized attachments, leaving the coalition with shaky social foundations. Thus, as Pakatan's tenure wore on and popular disillusion set in, old loyalties among Malay-Muslims were reawakened. In

⁵³ “Aiman Tertinggal Pas Calon Rupanya” [Aiman is left behind PAS candidate apparently], *Utusan Malaysia*, February 27, 2019, 6.

⁵⁴ Rahman, “Was It a Malay Tsunami?”

⁵⁵ “Economists See Gradual Phase-Out of BR1M as a Boom,” *Edge Financial Daily*, August 28, 2018, 4, and “NGO Felda Hilang Sabar” [Felda loses patience], *Utusan Malaysia*, March 28, 2019, 3.

⁵⁶ Rahman, “Was It a Malay Tsunami?” 676.

these circumstances, they cleaved again to the logic of the “punishment regime.” As Rahman recounts, “while [UMNO] politicians’ shameless demonstrations of wealth rankled, such behavior was not unexpected, as many rural Malay poor accept their position at the bottom of the social hierarchy.”⁵⁷ Hence, they shed their resentments over the amassment of elite-level patronage under Barisan. They bemoaned the depletion of popular distributions by Pakatan. The Malay-Muslim community’s valuation of democracy, never robust, gave way to new yearnings for Malay-Muslim supremacy and mass-level benefits, however unevenly shared.⁵⁸

In this context, the resurgence of the former UMNO leader and prime minister, Najib Tun Razak, can be understood. During Pakatan’s first year in power, a series of eight by-elections took place. Najib strove to find a role in campaigning for UMNO candidates. But widely blamed for the 1MDB debacle, distracted by court proceedings, and generally regarded as “disgraced,” he initially made little headway.

Over time, however, as popular sentiments toward Pakatan turned sour, many Malay-Muslims revised their assessments of Najib and UMNO. To be sure, caution is needed in deriving broad implications from any one by-election. But a contest held in March 2019 for a Selangor state assembly seat in the constituency of Semenyih, some thirty kilometers south of Kuala Lumpur, is telling. With commitments to democratic change and governance reforms flagging, while longings for distributive schemes mounted, Malay-Muslims in this district grew receptive, even ecstatic, over Najib’s local campaigning. Reinventing himself as an ordinary citizen, Najib adopted the mien of a “Mat Moto” (biker), swapping his bespoke business suits for a black T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers. During visits to shopping malls in the district that were videoed and widely disseminated on-line, crowds looked on gleefully as he loaded staples into his trolley and checked prices. And at nightly kampong appearances, he charmed them with digs at Pakatan, seasoned with village humor, over the coalition’s failure to fulfill its election promises.

Pakatan had wrested the state seat of Semenyih from Barisan in the 2018 general election. But in the by-election some ten months later, the UMNO-led Barisan took it back, an outcome that its leaders attributed partly to Najib’s campaigning. Duly reenergized, then, UMNO was encouraged to advance its collaboration with PAS, sharing an imagery of Malay-Muslim supremacy. Indeed, in charting their growing association in terms of by-elections that had taken place, UMNO’s acting president, Mohamad Hasan, recounted that

⁵⁷ Serina Rahman, “Rebellion and Regret: Talking to Rural Voters after GE14,” *New Mandala* (November 27, 2018), <https://www.newmandala.org/rebellion-and-regret-ge14/> (accessed August 5, 2019).

⁵⁸ See *BTI 2018: Malaysia Country Report* (Bertelsman Transformation Index, 2018), <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/mys/ity/2018/itr/aso/> (accessed August 5, 2019).

“we sent the ‘engagement ring’ at Sungai Kandis, then we got ‘engaged’ in Seri Setia. And today [in Semenyih], this is our wedding ceremony... . We are married.”⁵⁹ In continuing their “strategic polls partnership,” Hasan envisioned the ripening of the “national consensus” in the four states that they controlled into a “united ummah” (*penyatuan ummah*).⁶⁰

Hybrid Regime Outcomes

Having promised democratic reforms, Pakatan Harapan began its tenure by scaling back restrictions on civil liberties and competitive elections. Further, in order to strengthen governance, it promoted new transparency and effectiveness in executive and legislative functioning.⁶¹ Accordingly, some reforms were made. Controls on media freedoms were eased. Limits on dissidence and assembly, imposed by the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act (SOSMA) through a colonial-era principle of preventive detention, were underenforced. Oversight of the Election Commission was transferred from the Prime Minister’s Office to Parliament, enabling by-elections to brim with competitiveness. In these conditions, then, many of Pakatan’s ministers displayed new standards of probity and accountability. And a system of standing committees, encouraging policy expertise and oversight, was canvassed in Parliament.

However, such new space as Pakatan ceded was often better used by UMNO and PAS in opposition, enabling them to vent their ethno-religious appeals and to advance their autocratic agendas. For example, in respecting media freedoms, Pakatan tried in Parliament to repeal the Anti-Fake News Act, passed by the UMNO-led Barisan in its waning days in power in order to stifle criticisms over 1MDB. But although Barisan was now in opposition in the lower house, its appointees retained a majority in the Senate. For the first time in Malaysia’s political record, then, a sitting government’s proposed legislation was rejected by the Senate, leaving the Anti-Fake News Act intact. Further, Pakatan abandoned its pledges to revoke or revise the Sedition Act, the Printing Presses and Publications Act, the Communications and Multimedia Act, SOSMA, and other pieces of “draconian” legislation. It gave up, too, on trying to promote executive accountability by limiting the prime minister’s tenure to two terms. And it recoiled in the face of protests led by UMNO and PAS from ratifying the ICERD and its egalitarian norms.

Thus, while Najib had vowed after his electoral defeat to be a “constructive opposition lawmaker [acting on] the principle and practice of a healthy democracy,” he and other legislators from UMNO and PAS, in

⁵⁹ “‘We’re Married,’ Says Tok Mat on Umno-PAS Ties,” *Edge Financial Daily*, March 6, 2018, 2.

⁶⁰ Mohsin Abdullah, “Of Sincerity and Sacrifices,” *Edge Malaysia*, March 18, 2019, 71.

⁶¹ Cassey Lee, “Making Sense of Malaysia’s Institutional Reforms,” *ISEAS Perspective* (December 11, 2018), https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2018_79@50.pdf (accessed August 5, 2019).

making new use of institutional checks, sooner frustrated Pakatan's reforms.⁶² They then grandstanded and heckled Pakatan during parliamentary debates over its failure to fulfill its campaign promises. Finally, by inciting Malay-Muslim apprehensions and enjoying the guarantees of a strengthened Election Commission, they went on to win a string of by-elections.

This section enumerated the causes of Pakatan's frailties upon coming to office. They included the coalition's failure to gain cohesion among party elites, command over the state apparatus, or grounding across a divided social structure. Thus, to the extent that democratic reforms were undertaken by an enfeebled Pakatan, they were better exploited by UMNO and PAS, helping paradoxically to keep hybrid politics on beam. As will be shown in the next section, Pakatan began to tack back to the authoritarian controls that a hybrid regime provides and the strategies and policies that a favored societal segment expects.

Hybrid Resilience without Single-Party Dominance

Analysis concludes by showing that Malaysia's hybrid political regime, in its institutional resilience and societal resonance, has driven Pakatan to revise its tactical strategies and policy preferences. Put simply, in trying to temper elite-level fractiousness and popular discontents, Pakatan has retreated from its reformist agendas. Thus, a persistence in authoritarian legacies, institutional controls, and old-time strategies and policies beyond electoral turnover gives evidence of the resilience that a hybrid political regime can attain.

During its first year in power, we have seen that Pakatan failed to gain cohesion across party elites or command over the state apparatus. It found, too, that its societal grounding was softening. Hence, to placate elites, especially in Bersatu, it began to use such state power as it possessed to generate some patronage. Further, to assuage mass-level resentments, it resorted, at least tepidly, to various distributive schemes. In short, Pakatan began to prioritize survival in office over democratic change and governance reforms. Additionally, as Bersatu grew more forceful within this coalition, it parsed these allocations and popular distributions in ethno-religious terms, echoing the supremacist messaging of the UMNO-PAS union.

Elite-Level Patronage and Bureaucratic Engagement

Long before the election in 2018, both the PKR and DAP had dealt heavily in elite-level patronage in the states of Selangor and Penang, whose governments they led.⁶³ Most visibly, they recruited senior party officials to the boards of

⁶² "Najib: Umno to Decide on KJ and Anifah Not Joining UMNO's Protest against Speaker," *Asia News Today* (July 16, 2018), <http://asianewstoday.com/blog/najib-umno-to-decide-on-kj-and-anifah-not-joining-umnos-protest-against-speaker/> (accessed August 5, 2019).

⁶³ Gomez et al., *Government in Business*.

their respective state-level GLCs and foundations (*yayasan*). In campaigning for GE14, however, Pakatan pledged that this practice would cease, replacing sinecure appointees with professional managers. Yet, after Pakatan came to power, it continued such patronage with alacrity.

Most notably, at the apex of Pakatan's cabinet, Mahathir, though eschewing his position's traditional hold over a range of GLCs, laid claim to the chairmanship of Khazanah Nasional, Malaysia's sovereign wealth fund. He also appointed his ally, Azmin Ali, to Khazanah's board of directors.⁶⁴ In addition, Mahathir permitted the chief of Bersatu's women's wing, Rina Harun, serving also as the minister of regional and rural development, to recruit from the party the directors for the many GLCs under her ministry's umbrella. As Terence Gomez advises, this ministry, long associated with "rampant patronage...[had] always [been] placed under the control of a senior UMNO leader."⁶⁵ Hence, in observing these strategies, Gomez frets over the "continuity of irresponsible practices."

Another illustration involves Pakatan's appointing Khalid Abdul Samad, the new minister of federal territories and a member of PKR, as chairman of the Federal Territories Foundation (*Yayasan Wilayah Persekutuan*). Board positions were then shared across other party elites from PKR, DAP, Amanah, and Bersatu.⁶⁶ The foundation's main mode of raising revenue was to acquire land at the request of developers from the capital's Department of Land and Mines, then award parcels to these same developers in exchange for payments. In an interview, however, Khalid insisted that any conflicts of interest could readily be minimized by "transparency."⁶⁷

At Bersatu's annual general meeting in December 2018, the party's youth chief and minister of youth and sports, Syed Saddiq, took aim at Pakatan's growing appetite for patronage resources. Specifically, he called for a "halt [to] the culture of awarding contracts to personal associates."⁶⁸ But the party's vice president, Abdul Rahid, responded in his own address to delegates that "this for me is a stupid opinion." He then demanded that "tenders and contracts [be allocated] to party division chiefs so that they may be able to defend their victory in the next election," a riposte that was "widely applauded by the delegates."

⁶⁴ Gomez, "Business as Usual," 5.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ "Wee: Pakatan Makes Another U-Turn," *The Star*, September 19, 2019, 11.

⁶⁷ Khairie Hisyam Aliman and Vasantha Ganesan, "Should Govt Flip Public Land for Charity? This Is What Happened in KL," *Edge Markets* (August 24, 2019), <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/should-govt-flip-public-land-charity-what-happened-kl> (accessed September 20, 2019).

⁶⁸ Clarissa Chung, "Bersatu VP: Protect Party Gains 'by Hook or by Crook,' Grant Tenders to Division Chiefs," *The Star* online (December 30, 2019), <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/12/30/bersatu-vp-protect-party-gains-by-hook-or-by-crook-grant-tenders-to-division-chiefs/> (accessed August 5, 2019).

In reaching more deeply into the state apparatus, Pakatan leaders sought also, at least tepidly, to rekindle the loyalties of ordinary civil servants. As one example, in March 2016, in the face of severe national indebtedness, Mahathir called upon functionaries to “tighten their belts.”⁶⁹ But days later, his deputy prime minister, Muhyiddin Yassin, who served also as deputy president of Bersatu and minister of interior, conducted a visit to the Kajang Prison complex, the country’s main correctional facility. There he announced that an increase in the “special incentive payment” had been proposed by his government for prison workers. He added that he expected that this would readily be approved by the finance ministry as the “total was not large.”⁷⁰ Two months later, such largesse was extended throughout the bureaucracy. Specifically, in response to a public sector union, the Prime Minister’s Office granted a Hari Raya Adilfitri “bonus” of RM450 to some 1.5 million civil servants, while issuing half that amount to another 800,000 retirees.⁷¹

Thus, in observing the new government’s behaviors, Gomez assessed that “Pakatan leaders...borrow[ed] the same tools on which Barisan had...relied.” Most conspicuously, this was made manifest in “elite domination and the continued practice of selective patronage, legitimized by advocating race-based policies...implemented through GLCs.”⁷² In addition, sundry ad hoc payments percolated more deeply from ministerial offices to rank-and-file civil servants, recalling UMNO’s fusion with the state apparatus.

Mass-Level Loyalties and Popular Distributions

Pakatan also made broader use of its discretionary state power at the mass-level. During its first year in office, it discerned that many Malay-Muslims seemed less interested in democratic change and governance reforms than in popular distributions. Thus, soon after terminating the UMNO-led Barisan’s BR1M program because of budgetary shortfalls, Pakatan set up Bantuan Sara Hidup (BSH), gracing some family categories with yet more generous benefits.⁷³

Even so, Pakatan lost a parliamentary by-election in Cameron Highlands in January 2019. Thus, in preparing for the state-level contest in Semenih, it more fully replicated Barisan’s strategies of drop-in appearances and ad hoc

⁶⁹ “Rakyat, Penjawat Awam Kena ‘Ikat Perut’” [The people, civil servants are hit with “belt tightening”], *Utusan Malaysia*, March 26, 2019, 2.

⁷⁰ “Polis Boleh Guna Akta Hasutan 1948” [Police can use the Sedition Act], *Utusan Malaysia*, March 21, 2019, 4.

⁷¹ “Raya Bonus of RM450 Each for Civil Servants,” *FMT News* (May 16, 2019), <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2019/05/16/raja-bonus-of-rm450-each-for-civilservants/> (accessed September 20, 2019).

⁷² Gomez, “Business as Usual.”

⁷³ Justin Lim, “BR1M Is No More; Replaced by BSH in Budget 2019,” *Edge Markets* (November 2, 2018), <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/br1m-no-more-replaced-bsh-budget-2019> (accessed August 5, 2019).

payments. Two weeks before the by-election in March, Muhyiddin Yassin, Mahathir's deputy, conducted a "working visit" to police and army units in Semenyih. He claimed that, as this event had been planned much earlier, he had not violated any campaign "ethics."⁷⁴ Likewise, Rina Harun, the minister of rural development, advised during her own visit to Semenyih that she was unveiling a new housing-support program for the poor. However, she insisted that this had been planned long beforehand. She asserted, too, that it would be "unjust" if the people of Semenyih were denied this "aid program just because of the by-election."

In the same month, the finance minister, Lim Guan Eng, announced the "mySalam health protection scheme," whereby one-off payments of RM8,000 would be issued to citizens in the "B40" category (bottom 40 percent income) who fell victim to some "36 critical illnesses." He stressed that the government was "not charging them any premium—this is given for free."⁷⁵

In early March, as the Semenyih by-election drew closer, the Pakatan government followed up with RM100 payments to unmarried citizens in the B40 group, as well as to students in public universities in order to "reduc[e] their financial burdens."⁷⁶ The former prime minister, Najib Razak, often had resorted to such one-off distributions, prompting Mahathir to criticize him for "dishing out cash to buy votes." Najib now gloated over Pakatan's payments, posting on Facebook that "after my attack [over high living costs], the government suddenly announced cash payout for singles." Even so, we have seen that Pakatan's incentive payments were not yet enough, for the coalition lost the Semenyih by-election to an UMNO candidate.

Hybrid Regime Outcomes

After winning the election in 2018, Pakatan Harapan soon bristled with fractiousness among party elites, resistance in the state apparatus, and impatience among social constituents. Thus, as recorded above, the new Pakatan government fell back on old Barisan strategies and policies of elite-level patronage and popular distributions. However, even if responding now to the legacies and logic of the hybrid regime and the pressures of a divided society, Pakatan was not yet able to subdue a resurgent UMNO and PAS, their coalescence strengthening through "union."

Under pressure from rising opposition, Pakatan began to bolster its patronage flows and distributive schemes by reviving, at least mildly, some of the hybrid regime's authoritarian controls. With regard to press and

⁷⁴ "Lawatan Tiada Kaitan PRK," *Utusan Malaysia*, February 13, 2019, 3.

⁷⁵ "Think of the Poor, Guan Eng Tells Critics of mySalam," *Edge Financial Daily*, February 27, 2019, 4.

⁷⁶ CK Tan, "Mahathir Doles Out Cash to Win over Disgruntled Malaysian Public," *Nikkei Asian Review* (February 28, 2019), <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Malaysia-in-transition/Mahathirdoles-out-cash-to-win-over-disgruntled-Malaysian-public> (accessed August 5, 2019).

media freedoms, we recall that Mahathir had called on police to cease their enforcement of the Sedition Act. However, his deputy, Muhyiddin Yassin, during a visit to police in his role as interior minister, advised that as the law had not yet been “abolished,” they could still make use of it in a “mannerly” way (*secara berhemah*) in order to aid their investigations.⁷⁷ In addition, he seemed later to reassure the police over any fallout that might result from formation of an Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission. Pakatan had pledged in its manifesto to create such an agency. But meanwhile, it remained in its planning stages for, as Muhyiddin counseled, it “still needed understanding in a deep way.”⁷⁸

Further, during Pakatan’s first year in office, the Sedition Act was regularly invoked, most often against those who “incited disaffection” for the Agong or “insulted” Islam.⁷⁹ But it also was used by Pakatan against those who criticized the coalition’s party elites. For example, in February 2019, a Pakatan Youth official lodged a police report against an UMNO Supreme Council member, Lokman Noor Adam, for having denounced Mahathir as a “puppet of the DAP.”⁸⁰ Police duly arrested Lokman, as well as his brother. Further, a DAP official in Sarawak lodged a report against a PAS member for having posted criticisms on Facebook of DAP parliamentarians in the state over their failure to organize a “back to school” campaign for their constituencies.⁸¹ Police arrested the PAS member, though in this instance, under the Communications and Multimedia Act, even if slated for revisions by Pakatan. In addition, a report issued by an “eminent persons group” over how to reenergize the economy remained cloaked under the Official Secrets Act. The terms of Belt and Road Initiative projects and contracts, concluded by the Barisan government but renegotiated by Pakatan, were never disclosed, so as “to be sensitive to China’s feelings on the matter.”⁸² And though it demurred, the government threatened the opposition leaders of the anti-ICERD rally with arrest under SOSMA.

⁷⁷ “Polis Boleh Guna Akta Hasutan 1948.”

⁷⁸ “IPCMC Belum Dimuktamadkan” [IPCMC not yet finalized], *Utusan Malaysia*, March 26, 2019, 3.

⁷⁹ Tashny Sukumaran, “Malaysia’s King Has Stepped Down—But Watch What You Say about the Throne,” *South China Morning Post* (January 12, 2019), <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/2181750/malaysias-king-has-stepped-down-but-watch-what-you-say-about-the-throne> (accessed August 5, 2019).

⁸⁰ “Police Report Lodged over Alleged Insults against Dr Mahathir, Parents,” *New Straits Times* (February 14, 2019), <https://www.nst.com.my/news/crime-courts/2019/02/457263/policereport-lodged-over-alleged-insults-against-dr-mahathir> (accessed August 5, 2019).

⁸¹ Andy Chua, “Sarawak PAS Member Arrested over FB Post against Four DAP MPs,” *The Star* online (January 3, 2019), <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2019/01/03/sarawak-pasmember-arrested-over-fb-post-against-four-dap-mps/> (accessed August 5, 2019).

⁸² Shankaran Namibiar, “Malaysia’s New Turn to the East,” *East Asia Forum* (May 15, 2019), <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/05/15/malaysias-new-turn-to-the-east/> (accessed August 21, 2019).

Indeed, during its second year in power, it would detain a dozen persons under the act, including two DAP state assemblymen.⁸³

In turning from civil liberties to elections, Pakatan remained cautious in its manipulations. Competitive elections are, after all, the most visible signifier of most modern-day claims to legitimacy in office. Even so, as UMNO and PAS appealed to societal resentments and triumphed in by-election contests, Pakatan showed signs of retreating from its reformist agenda. From the start, we recall Pakatan's low voter margins in GE14. And as the coalition's standing started to slip further, it resorted, if not to overt authoritarian controls, at least to old-time campaigning. After its first by-election loss in the Cameron Highlands constituency, Pakatan responded in the next contest in Semenyih in the way that the UMNO-led Barisan once had, "parachuting" in big-gun ministers to overawe locals. They then drew on public resources to issue on-the-spot development programs in the ways enumerated above. Additionally, as we have seen, they defended this heavy deployment of state authority and resources in Barisan's same doubtful way, claiming that visits and distributions long predated the by-election's scheduling. Hence, in monitoring campaigning in the by-election in Semenyih, a prominent watchdog group, Bersih 2.0, recorded some thirty-five election "offenses." Pakatan was seen to have committed two-thirds of them, mostly involving the "misuse of government machinery."⁸⁴

How is this regime outcome best understood? It seems right to say that, despite electoral turnover and the fall of the single-party dominant system, Malaysia's hybrid regime, possessed of asymmetric institutions and embedded in a divided and ranked social structure, persists in substantial ways. Civil liberties, electoral procedures, and some aspects of accountability have improved. But Malaysia's politics remain rooted in the authoritarian domain. Pakatan Harapan, the winning opposition, is weakened by severe elite-level fractiousness, bureaucratic resistance, and mass-level suspicions, inhibiting its democratizing commitments. In these conditions, the resilience of the hybrid regime stands out, made manifest in the persistence of institutional controls, residual strategies of patronage amassment and allocations, and policy outputs distorted by ethno-religious privileging.

⁸³ Azzaman Abdul Jamal and Nurul Fhatiah Zakinan, "Two DAP Assemblymen Arrested under Sosma," *New Straits Times* (October 10, 2019), <https://www.nst.com.my/news/crime-courts/2019/10/528584/two-dap-assemblymen-arrested-under-sosma-nsttv> (accessed October 30, 2019).

⁸⁴ Kenneth Lee, "Bersih: 35 Election Misconduct [*sic*] during Semenyih Polls, Pakatan Tops Offenders' List," *Malay Mail* (March 8, 2019), <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/03/08/bersih-35-election-misconduct-during-semenyih-polls-pakatan-topsoffenders/1730430> (accessed August 5, 2019).

Conclusions

The aim of this probe analysis has been to enter debate, lately reopened, over the durability of hybrid political regimes. It conceptualized this regime type as a subset of authoritarian rule, distinguished by manipulated, but somewhat competitive, elections. Further, while these elections generally refresh incumbency, their competitiveness can also result in surprising electoral turnover. Analysis thus addressed case material from Malaysia, a country long hallmarked by hybrid politics, but one where turnover has recently occurred. Debate over what might come next in cases such as Malaysia's has been framed by two perspectives: does turnover produce democratization-by-election? Or does it summon authoritarian backlash? Andreas Schedler phrased this most starkly, asking when elections are "regime-sustaining or regime-subverting?"⁸⁵

However, in important new work, Lee Morganbesser and Thomas Pepinsky take a fresh view.⁸⁶ Surveying some eighty-eight electoral events across the Southeast Asian region, they argue that at least in this part of the world electoral turnover rarely exerts independent effects. Instead, where democratization takes place, turnover merely ratifies the impact of causally prior and more fundamental forces at work, involving realignments in interelite relations and mass-level dynamics. Dictators may be stunned by turnover, then. But researchers should have seen it coming.

It is worth concluding by engaging with Morganbesser and Pepinsky's thesis, for it mostly accords with Malaysia's recent electoral experience, although in an obverse way. Electoral turnover has taken place, but democratic transition has not. The secondary effects of turnover, then, are laid bare along a different vector, namely, the persistence of hybrid politics. The impact of turnover is negated by the weightier factors of institutional resilience and societal resonance. We should not be misled, then, by the mere arrival of an "alternative elite" into thinking that Malaysia's hybrid regime has been seriously "disrupted," poisoning it now for more democracy or less. A change of incumbents is not a sound proxy for qualitative change in the regime itself. Better, more independent indicators are discovered in transformations or continuities, both in the regime's institutions and in the strategic and policy directions of its new operators.

By such measures, strong continuities prevailed in Malaysia during the Pakatan Harapan government's first year in power, evoking the resilience of its hybrid regime. To be sure, the media is freer today in some public arenas, by-elections are less manipulated, and corrupt practices are more subdued. In

⁸⁵ Andreas Schedler, *The Politics of Uncertainty: Sustaining and Subverting Electoral Authoritarianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁸⁶ Lee Morganbesser and Thomas B. Pepinsky, "Elections as Causes of Democratization: Southeast Asia in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Political Studies* 52, no. 1 (2018): 3-35.

addition, Pakatan's cabinet better reflects Malaysia's societal make-up, with ministers having been recruited from diverse ethno-religious backgrounds. Still, bound by authoritarian legacies and societal divisions, old political contours persist. Constraints on civil liberties, a resumption of elite-level patronage, and an ad hoc issuance of popular, though skewed, distributions, peaking with electoral cycles, cast a long shadow over institutional functioning, strategic behaviors, and policy outcomes.

Accordingly, despite electoral turnover, Pakatan, the winning opposition, has shrunk from many of the democratic and governance reforms that it had pledged. Unsubstantiated by the realignments in interelite relations and mass-level dynamics that Pepinsky and Morganbesser specify as necessary beforehand, Pakatan has thus failed to boost the regime from its hybrid mode into the democratic band. As we have seen, Pakatan was enfeebled from the start, having ascended to power less on the strength of its promised reformism than on widespread disgust over Barisan's habituated corruption. It has never gone on to forge cohesion among party elites, command over the state apparatus, or broad loyalties at the mass level.

At the same time, UMNO has finalized its "union" with PAS. Hence, the party has remedied its preelection strategic error with new coalescence, enabling it to cloak its transgressions with ethno-religious privileging and piety. Accordingly, in the wake of electoral turnover, UMNO, in league with PAS, is able to pose again as a plausible protector of its Malay-Muslim constituency.

Thus, to the extent that Pakatan eases controls over civil liberties, electoral procedures, and parliamentary functioning, UMNO and PAS make better use of the space that is ceded, freely advancing their communalist strategies and autocratic agendas. Most dismayingly, these parties arouse their Malay-Muslims constituencies by tarring Pakatan, distinguished by ethno-religious inclusion, as a "Chinese government." In particular, they target the DAP's ministers of finance, transport, resources, and environment, striking a powerful chord across their followers. In response, Pakatan tacks back, delaying democratic and governance reforms, while reissuing old-time patronage and popular distributions. However, Pakatan's messaging and largesse cannot reach the high pitch of the union's emotive ring, peeling with fresh resentments over "race" and religion. Further, even in trying, Pakatan risks alienating broad sections of its once solidary non-Malay support.

In sum, Malaysia has undergone electoral turnover without democratic transition, disclosing the resilience of its hybrid regime. As this analysis has stressed, continuities are readily observable in regime institutions, political strategies, and policy preferences. These patterns broadly accord with Morganbesser and Pepinsky's thesis that for a transition to democracy to take place, it must be prefaced by fundamental shifts in elite and mass-level configurations. Thus, democratization remains impeded in Malaysia by a robust amalgam of authoritarian legacies and societal divisions, undeterred by electoral turnover.

But in other ways, Malaysia's record challenges Morganbesser and Pepinsky. First, in their model, though electoral turnover may not by itself promote democratic transition, it necessarily signals that conditions had ripened for democracy's arrival. However, in Malaysia, although turnover has occurred, its signal is false, for hybrid politics persist.

Second, while turnover seldom triggers any transition to democracy, at least in Southeast Asia, it can serve contrarily to re-equilibrate a hybrid regime. Indeed, in Malaysia, turnover has rekindled apprehensions among Malay-Muslims over threats to their privileging, therein encouraging notions of "democracy-by-accident" and voter's remorse. It is wrong, then, to say that turnover never poses causal effects. In Malaysia, in having brought Pakatan to power, dedicated initially to reformism and inclusion, turnover in itself has shaken Malay-Muslim sentiments. Hence, electoral turnover can inaccurately signal democratic change. It may instead activate authoritarian pressures. But Morganbesser and Pepinsky remain on firm ground in Malaysia when contending that democratization-by-election is unlikely.

Thus, if UMNO and PAS in the next general election triumph in union over Pakatan Harapan, this second electoral turnover, amounting to passage of the once famed "two-turnover test," would in no way confirm the consolidation of a new democracy in Malaysia. Rather, underlying continuities in institutions, strategies, and policies would sooner reveal the unnerving durability that hybrid politics can attain.

