



# **Election Sentiments Analysis of Malaysia's 15th General Elections (GE-15)**

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## **Final Report**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Malaysia's 15th General Election was held on the 19th of November 2022 against the backdrop of rising cost of living, political instability and global uncertainties. Unlike the usual custom, only 3 out of the 13 States held State level elections for the State Assembly while the remaining opted to hold it in 2023 instead. This election also saw the number of voters doubling with the implementation of UNDI 18 and automatic registration nation-wide.

In terms of electoral process, current evidence shows that the Malaysian population in general, even the new voters, takes democratic elections seriously. This is based on the high voter turnout rate across the board. The Election Commission were able to carry out their mandate professionally and safely through-out the country, with very little complaint made against the commission for unfair or illegal conduct which differs from previous election. To add, no violent outbreaks occurred through-out the country with the exception of low level skirmishes which occurred in Sabah.

The analysis on the results of the elections can be summarised in the following:

1. Public understanding and acceptance of elections as part of the democratic process regardless of background is solid but this does not translate to understanding of democracy.
2. The Malays voting patterns were the most diverse. This is not surprising since there were multiple Malay political parties vying for the same vote base. However, anti-DAP sentiment was prevalent.
3. The assumption that new young voters would vote Pakatan Harapan was a myth. Instead geography played a more defining influence on voting patterns.
4. The Green Wave – the rise of PAS in the northern states and the east coast but this is not a surprise since the investment to win over the Malays had taken place as far back as 2004.





## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a country of 32.5 million people, where about 65 percent of the population are classified as Bumiputera, 23 percent ethnic Chinese, 7 percent ethnic Indians and the rest are classified as Others.<sup>1</sup> The country's population growth in 2022 is at 0.9 percent, with a strong human capital potential for the near future. The total number of eligible voters for the 15th General Election was recorded at 21.1 million.<sup>2</sup>

Based on media reports, social media and anecdotal evidence, the Malay sentiments suggest that **Malay rights were being eroded and that Islam is under threat by non-Muslims**, hence the emergence of new ethnic based political parties fighting over the same demographic - the Malays. This has led to the rise in ethno-religious based campaigning where each political party tried to out-do each other. The Malay voting segment alone is estimated to be around 40 percent of the total voters, a significant piece of the pie. In addition, there will be an increase of collective voting powers where 18 year-old Malaysians have the right to vote, doubling the number of voters for this election.

The three major points prior to elections are on the issue of threats towards Malay-Muslims and they are: Firstly, the DAP threat – the Chinese-dominant party that has been dominating the country's political sphere with its influence goes across onto the Malay's comfort zones with its Malaysia for Malaysians tag-line which is interpreted by some segments as removing the special privileges of Bumiputras.

The second issue is the liberalism threat. The Malays see so-called liberal ideas as a direct threat that pushes non-conventional values deemed as western values and therefore becomes a potent idea of resistance by the Malay-Muslim from the conservative.

Thirdly, the polarising effect of Anwar Ibrahim, an icon in Malaysian politics, for many people he is both a friend and an enemy, who can play at any position in the field if given the opportunity to do so. For those who despise Anwar Ibrahim, are likely to come from the

ethno-religious conservative. These three issues are what drives the current political climate pre-election.

Interestingly, when the date of the 15th General Election was announced, Hizbut Tahrir Malaysia (HTM) made a statement to protest the participation of Muslims in the elections, sees participatory democracy as haram or "steeped with Western blueprints", contradicting the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, who they claimed as a truest *khalifah* or the "greatest politician ever" than a democratic system.<sup>3</sup> HTM followers who supported the Daesh and other extremist militants also claimed that liberalism is a democratic concept that would legitimise the LGBT groups or even elect a woman to lead the country, a signal of "the end of the world" for Muslim ummah if other Muslim leaders should ignore the writing on the wall.<sup>4</sup>

It is very important to note that while Malaysia has yet to experience direct terrorist attacks on its soil, one incident during the 14th General Election in 2018 begs for further reflection as to how others may interpret democratic processes practised in the country as foreign or antagonistic towards the Muslim way of life. On the day of the 14th General Election, according to the PDRM media statement, "A woman was planning to launch attacks using a car, targeting non-Muslim voters during the general election". The PDRM press release also revealed the woman's plot to load a car with gas cylinders and ram it into non-Muslim houses of worship. Around the same period leading up to the election, PDRM sting operations were conducted across Klang Valley, Johor, Kelantan and Sabah resulting in the arrest of six Malaysians, six Filipino nationals, a couple from North Africa and one Bangladeshi national. They were subsequently deported back to their country of origin as they were on the country's wanted list as terror suspects, while the Bangladeshi man was charged for "smuggling weapons for international terrorists".<sup>5</sup>

This study will explore sentiments on the grounds and review the sentiments of Malay-Muslims vis-a-vis what the social media coverage is like.

1. [https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemByCat&cat=430&buLid=MEN2anptL1pCNUZp0HJWTVVPR1ByZz09&menu\\_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVZSkWdzQ4TihUUT09](https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemByCat&cat=430&buLid=MEN2anptL1pCNUZp0HJWTVVPR1ByZz09&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVZSkWdzQ4TihUUT09)

2. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2022/10/21/about-211-million-malaysians-eligible-to-vote>

3. <https://alhaqcentremalaysia.com/?p=2286>

4. <https://mykhalifah.com/bahaya-liberalisme-dan-cara-menghapuskannya/>

5. <https://says.com/my/news/a-housewife-was-arrested-for-her-plan-to-ram-a-car-into-non-muslim-voters-during-ge14>



## Election Period

The Nomination process on November 5th was observed to be orderly and smooth. The Election Commission and BERSIH confirmed that no discrepancies were reported at all 222 Nomination centres. Unlike in the past electoral process, this time around, the festive mood that often accompanied candidates to the nomination centres was found to be more formal and less celebratory. IMAN observed six nomination centres in Kedah, Selangor, Johor, Terengganu and Sabah.

Prior to the start of the campaign period, PDRM issued a statement stating that 70 hotspots (referring to Parliamentary seats) were being monitored by the police following some concerns that the campaign activities could get heated up. These hotspots were also monitored due to a high number of criminal activities involving triads and gangs that could disrupt the electoral process by way of trespassing in neighbourhoods that are controlled by certain provincial thugs. The number of police officers and RELA volunteers were increased in order to avoid any buildup of tensions between rival political parties.<sup>6</sup>

There was only one incident in Tenom that was reported to have some commotion. When the Returning Officer (RO) informed Peter Anthony, a candidate from Parti Kesejahteraan Demokratik Masyarakat (KDM) that he had a pending court case involving falsification of documents that would make him ineligible to contest, his supporters outside the centre started shouting and protesting against the decision, resulting in the police using teargas to disperse the crowd. Peter Anthony is now being investigated under Section 24(A) of the Election Offences Act 1954 and Section 147 of the penal code. He was initially detained by the PDRM for questioning and has been released on bail.<sup>7</sup>

The Bukit Aman through a media statement has revealed that since the start of the electoral process, there's been dozens of police reports being lodged by candidates and political parties on issues such as vandalism of campaign materials, accusatory remarks, or altercations between rival party workers who placed party flags on rival party's turf.

In the Klang Valley region, the first week of the campaign period was observed to be rather quiet as opposed to the growing calls that elections should be organised sooner than later (due to potential floods). However, political parties started off the campaign process by going for small walkabouts, minimal door-to-door canvassing and focused more on the social media presentations. IMAN also noted that activities in the central and southwestern region of Peninsular Malaysia provided easy access for people to join.

## Campaign Period

Pakatan Harapan campaigns in the evening were more sedate this time around had it not been for heavy rains throughout western states of Malaysia. They opted for live streaming through various online channels including on Youtube, Facebook and private and state-run online media. The focus was to encourage people to turn up voting as high votes would give Pakatan Harapan the necessary majority needed to form a new government.

In Sabah, the campaign period was observed to be more intense following multi-cornered fights in all Parliamentary seats contested. Homegrown parties were neck-to-neck with Peninsula-based parties in order to win comfortably to avoid impasse. It was calculated that the race in Sabah would be controversial as three coalitions – Warisan, Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS) and Pakatan Harapan, were all seeking the same mandate from voters following a dismal performance during the State Election in September 2020.<sup>8</sup>

While Warisan in the past few years have been part of the Pakatan Harapan government, the decision to pull out from the pact also contributed to the split among supporters in eastern districts of the state, as observed by IMAN. In the eastern districts, there's no concrete manifesto on elevating the security levels in the ESSZONE areas although many of IMAN's respondents said the maritime security in the east coast of Sabah should be more attended to. The same response was also felt within the KDM circles, where they could not resolve local issues without the "ethnocentrism" questions being played, especially in hotly contested seats of Penampang, Tenom and Keningau.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/ge15-PDRM-identify-less-100-hotspots-388616>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.thesundaily.my/home/commotion-in-tenom-peter-anthony-released-on-PDRM-bail-FI10096461>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2022/11/12/after-2020-state-election-political-fatigue-rather-than-election-fever-in-sabah-this-ge15/39189>



Such anti-Warisan propaganda was used by KDM supporters to attack Shafie Afdal's side from winning seats in the western part of Sabah following rumours that over 500,000 or a 54 percent surge of new voters were reported to have been registered in Sabah. Many Sabahan politicians doubted the number and urged the Election Commission to address the issue as many refused to believe that it's genuine.<sup>9</sup>

Many politicians including Anwar Ibrahim campaigned in Sabah using the Malaysia Agreement 1963 case as the basis of winning the hearts and minds of the Borneo bloc in this election. Sabah and Sarawak have been most sought for in terms of votes following the concern that GPS and GRS both would have the upperhand, hence becoming the "kingmaker" if none of the Peninsula-based coalitions won enough seats to form a simple majority government.

In response to the offer of top seats in the Putrajaya government for the Borneo Bloc, Sabahan and Sarawakian neither cheered nor reacted to these announcements. Both Ismail Sabri and Anwar Ibrahim made promises that the issue of MA63 would get a facelift, to be properly looked into, or so it has been said repeatedly a long time ago. To Sabahan voters, these pledges are nothing new.<sup>10</sup>

### **Role of Social Media**

IMAN observed that most parties have used social media platforms for campaigning much more than in previous General Elections. For example, there were more conversations about the elections by Pakatan Harapan supporters, primarily in English on Twitter than on other social media platforms. Similarly, Barisan Nasional focused its campaign on Facebook, with the belief that BN supporters do not want to be seen riding on the "blue wave" too visibly, as Facebook is also a source of "*cari makan*" (income) for many Malay-Muslim traders as mentioned by respondents of the interviews.

Perikatan Nasional on the other hand used TikTok as a medium to spread its election campaign which analysts agreed to have been very effective for first-time voters.

Instagram platforms and preferred short, simple and comical explanations. Meanwhile, WhatsApp groups whose appeal was largely overlooked, is the source of information amongst the older generation irrespective of racial background, who derived information mostly from third-party sources.

On the eve of the Election Day, Mahiaddin Yassin made a fiery speech in Muar saying that "the Christians were conspiring with a group of Jews to convert Muslim majority Malaysia". He further stated at the PN's event that "... it is a very dangerous situation in Malaysia if Pakatan Harapan returns to power" claiming that he saw a video of a group of Jews that were "sponsored" by the Opposition, in one of the last attempts to discredit Anwar Ibrahim and Pakatan Harapan from winning the election. His speech was widely shared on TikTok platforms.<sup>11</sup>

Though he denied that he rejected a multiracial society and that his statement was taken out of context, the Council of Churches Malaysia (CCM) in a press release replied that "... such statements, carelessly uttered, have a tendency to create racial and religious tension" and the allegations of conversions of Malay-Muslims in the country to Christianity "... must be addressed by the authorities to ensure that such blatant disregard of the truth and of the sensitivities of the various religions are not condoned or repeated". The organisation was represented by CCM's Secretary General Reverend Johnathan Jesudas who said the community was shocked by the statement and wanted the PDRM to open an investigation paper against the former Prime Minister.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Doubling Down on Malay-Muslim Narrative***

Coming under pressure from not able to sell the Malay-Muslim narratives to the new voters, PAS Chief Hadi Awang said in an interview with local reporters that "... the unity and stability among the Muslims and non-Muslims, especially in states under PAS administration proves that the party does not ignore other races" implying that non-Muslims in Kelantan, Terengganu and Kedah were happy being governed by Muslim leaders who also said that declaring assets (like

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2022/10/19/sabah-parties-call-for-audit-of-state-electoral-roll-after-spike-in-new-voter-registrations/34546>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/anwar-ma63-be-resolved-without-much-issue-if-ph-given-mandate>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2022/11/852019/ge15-council-churches-malaysia-condemns-muhyiddin-over-christianisation>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2022/11/18/council-of-churches-denies-muhyiddins-claim-of-plot-to-christianise-malaysia/40427>



what Rafizi of PKR has done) as “a stupid exercise”, that he was a show off, instead of being transparent.<sup>13</sup>

Former DAP member Hew Kuan Yau was issued with a PDRM report following an allegedly provocative speech he made during DAP's campaigning in Melaka on November 18th. The PDRM also confirmed that Hew also made severe racial remarks the previous day in Raub Pahang in Cantonese dialect, which the PDRM said “... included elements that can disrupt the public peace”. Hew quit DAP in 2016 after making controversial remarks about Mahathir Mohamad, but was still called upon by the party to campaign in certain areas for Pakatan Harapan. On November 23rd, Hew Kuan Yau was booked by PDRM for questioning.<sup>14</sup>

Political leaders like Annuar Musa, Shahidan Kassim from UMNO and Takiyuddin Hassan from PAS continued to complement one another's philosophy of Malay-Muslim consensus, with the former saying that PAS's decision to not declare war on BN as “wise and prudent”, so that “We will not be questioned by God in the afterlife, if we protect one another”. Takiyuddin Hassan reciprocated by saying “It's fine if some areas are won by BN, as long as they do not fall to PH,” and PAS and BN were not enemies, “as both uphold the concept of unity of the ummah”.<sup>15</sup> This arrangement between the two parties has been rather typical and yet hollow at times of desperation.

Jabatan Penerangan Malaysia (JAPEN), the government's official mouthpiece, had mostly been neutral, an improvement from before when their stance was pro-establishment. It had opened up to all parties, allotting equal air time for contesting parties to be featured on the national broadcasting system. Together with other government agencies like the National Disaster Management Agency (NADMA), RELA and Wisma Putra, the overall electoral process of mitigating the right of suffrage from the start until the end was well organised.

Leading up to the polling day, several pollsters released their predictions as to who would garner more votes and form the next government. Most surveys gave Pakatan Harapan a strong chance to win amid a tight race, suggesting that electorates were going to vote for Pakatan Harapan for the sake of the country's economy, as the other coalitions did not have methods of resolving the economy if reelected.<sup>16</sup> Other surveys predicted that Barisan Nasional would win the election based on the performance of Ismail Sabri steering the country out of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>17</sup>

None of the pollsters however, predicted that Perikatan Nasional would give the other two coalitions a run for their money, as we later saw in several constituencies. These surveys seemed to have overlooked the ethnocentrism of the Malay-Muslim demography, that we would conclude as being the real silent majority.



<sup>13</sup> <https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2022/11/849562/ge15-declaring-assets-stupid-says-hadi>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.thevibes.com/articles/news/78284/cops-nab-ex-dap-man-superman-hew-for-provocative-ge15-ceramah>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2022/10/845242/annuar-thanks-pas-wise-remark>

<sup>16</sup> <https://merdeka.org/v2/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/fitch-solutions-projects-bn-win-ge15-revive-gst>





## INTERVIEWS

During the two-week campaign period, IMAN observed and conducted field interviews in several constituencies in Kedah, Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, Johor, Melaka, Terengganu and Sabah. IMAN's teams were able to interview 70 respondents for the study. A set of open-ended questions were asked to respondents about their sentiments on the Malay-Muslim polity. Most of the respondents were classified as Malay-Muslim with the others identifying themselves as non-Muslims.

### Questions

***Are you excited about the election?***

***What is your opinion on it?***

Majority respondents said they were excited about the election as it would give a new hope to the country. Most of the respondents are Malay-Muslim but one-third of interviewees were non-Muslims from the urban region who thought that the Barisan Nasional-Perikatan Nasional government was ripe with problems, notwithstanding the weakening Ringgit against the US Dollars.

Respondents' general concerns on the decision to hold the election during the monsoon season is that the turnout of voters would be less likely to reach the 80 percent threshold needed to secure a convincing win. "I would usually be looking forward to the voting, but I'm not sure if it was a good idea to have it in November, when the weather is known to be a challenge", said one respondent in Terengganu, one of many areas in the east coast that are exposed to heavy rainfall during the monsoon season.

A handful of respondents who are not excited about the election argue that "the last few years have been politically compromised that every party shows no difference in actuality and most politicians show their true colours of hypocrisy". Similarly in Sabah, our interviews showed that respondents don't necessarily feel the election could change anything, and "whether to vote or not to vote would not change the economic status of the Sabahan". The sense of dissatisfaction looms over the choice of bad and worst.

However, in Baling, Kuala Terengganu and Bangi, a handful of respondents had stated that they are excited for the upcoming elections because, "There are many issues at stake and the country is divided between the force of good and the evil, and the prospect is having the same administration over-lording us is scary". Also in Kedah, respondent has stated that this election is important especially for the Malay-Muslim constituents because Islam the religion is facing various challenges, and that the vote if any would likely go to the Perikatan Nasional for there's an Islamic component in the coalition (as opposed to the Pakatan Harapan that has DAP in the pact). Respondents in the northern states tend to relate the election process with Islamic virtue, emphasising that Islam demands its followers to obey "pious" leaders (in reference to PAS).

From the early on during the campaign period, IMAN has noted that Perikatan Nasional are among the favourite coalitions to win in the states where Malay-Muslim forms the majority of votes which is consistent with the results of previous elections from the same regional area that based its choice on Islamic values.

***The media has dubbed the 15th General Election to be the most critical/important election of our time.***

***Do you agree with that statement? Why?***

Most respondents agreed with the statements while the rest abstained from stating their stance on the question. In many answers, "current government must be replaced", "the country needs a new direction" and "what has happened is really exhausting and boring". Frustration towards the political system of the country has allowed respondents to find both the election process as "critical" and "wasteful exercise". One respondent in the central region said that the media is "unfortunately one-sided" when reporting about political status in the country, stating further that "politicians with high-level connections stand a chance to win the election anyway, because it plays on personality issues, which is a favourite topic of the election".

Some respondents interviewed remained hopeful that should a new government be elected, it will transform the country into "a better nation that has a stronger economy with less race and religious issues being



politicised". This is referring to the last few years of political upheavals that almost brought in government measures that are "detrimental to the society because the BN-led government and the PN-led before that, clearly on the quest to promote (Malay-Muslim) exclusivity rather than being inclusive".

Respondents in the urbanised region tend to view Pakatan Harapan as more inclusive and democratic with its social programs, while doubting the "Keluarga Malaysia" campaign of the Barisan Nasional-led government as insincere and politically motivated.

***What are your key sources of information regarding this election coming from? Please name your sources.***

In terms of source of information, respondents generally mentioned Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube and local news portals as their main source of information, mainly due to high accessibility to online-based information. In Terengganu, respondents have also stated that they often read Harakah Daily for information regarding PAS' activities, stating that supporting the Muslim-based party is compulsory as a Muslim person, with the elder's insights as a benchmark. Similar answers were also recorded in Kedah.

In the central region of Kuala Lumpur, a few Malay-Muslim respondents stated that they primarily use Facebook to market their products, and that it would be "unwise" to be too politically active online during the election because it could backfire on their businesses if they are seen supporting one side against the other. One respondent said "Facebook is where we earn a living (cari makan), since we are small traders, who as you can see are mostly supporters of the current BN government, who have helped us in the past. We have to eat but at the same time, we have to show our support for them."

In Kedah and Terengganu, our Observers have also recorded responses that gave Perikatan Nasional a strong lead because of their online campaigning on social media particularly via TikTok which is an online platform with huge followings and accessibility amongst younger voters. Similarly, some respondents have stated Instagram and Twitter as their go-to source of information, but our observation also concurred that

while TikTok is utilised in the PN election campaign, Twitter is largely a platform that caters for Pakatan Harapan supporters due to its urban-oriented schemes, and English-based, as opposed to PN and BN's campaign that are mostly in Malay with followings amongst the Malay-Muslim segments of the society, particularly in non-urban areas.

***In your opinion, what are the three most important issues at stake in this election? Please list.***

While the question is a generic one, IMAN wanted to know if there are other issues that are at stake for voters given that they now have few choices of party/coalitions to choose from. Most respondents in the urban domains stated that their concerns are (not in any particular order): "significantly worrying corruption cases", "citizenship status for children with foreign and Non-Malaysian father", "inflations and price hikes" while in a non-urban areas of Kedah, Terengganu, Sabah and Johor answered "lack of job opportunity", "poverty eradication in rural Sabah", "security", and "the erosion of respects for Islam and Malay status quo".

Respondents in non-urban areas said they are worried that a non-Muslim party (referring to DAP) would win in urban area easily (like in the previous elections) while the Malay-based parties would continue to secure their popularity in Malay majority states like Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu. This fear of losing out to a non-Muslim party is seemingly obvious amongst Malay-Muslim respondents interviewed. Although, there are some Malay-Muslim respondents who dismissed the "fear-mongering" tactics that a non-Muslim win of the election would bring detriments to the majority Malay-Muslim population, a tactic that is "too often used by Malay-Muslim groups to sow hatred towards other Malaysians".

In Sabah, respondents have stated similar points as answered by respondents in Peninsula Malaysia, with additional concerns on the status of Malaysia Agreement 1963, physical security (including human security) of Sabahan due to constant external threats by non-state entities. One respondent did mention about the highly anticipated new capital of Indonesia in East Kalimantan, Nusantara, which the respondent said could potentially be a good development for Sabah as the demand for workforce, resources and trading would





increase, if the Malaysian government can start discussing with our Indonesian counterparts.

***In this upcoming election, are your concerns about personality (of candidates) or policies (of party)? Why?***

Out of all the respondents, most stated that in this election, they would vote based on candidates (good profiles) rather than political party. IMAN asked for further explanations for choosing personality over policies and the answers are ranging from the fact that candidates are generally more acceptable because of its origin to the constituency, to political parties are often tainted with politicians who have been around too long and do not want to give in for new players.

Some of the comments regarding choosing candidates are as follow:

- "Candidate with strong leadership to lead the country together with party policies that will drive the economy better."
- "Policies come first, however candidates' personalities and background history are also my concerns for future awareness."
- "Personality-strong leadership, secular, smart, and least racist. Policy-able to solve the citizenship of children born abroad with Malaysian mothers married to Non-Malaysian fathers".
- "I definitely go for personality with specifications of being a Muslim, a Malay, practising the religious routines and prioritising the *rakyat*".
- "Optimistic and goal-oriented with maturity and professional attitude. For party policies anything that benefits the citizen more".

***Are Malay rights under threat in this election? Why?***

This question was asked during the interview as IMAN seeks to understand if Malay-Muslim values are genuinely being masqueraded only during the election period. The responses we received are compelling and surreal especially if we look at it from a post-Election result scenario, where none of the coalitions was able to secure a simple majority on its own, opting for a political merging instead as we came to know following the final results announced on November 20th.

- "The Bumis rights are at stake. Many representatives hopped from one party to another, utterly disrespecting the voters sentiments and compromised on the norm of democratic processes".
- "No, it isn't. The government has always prioritised the Malays".
- "Yes, because now the Malays are divided into (choosing) one out of three coalitions".
- "Yes, I think that one party (referring to DAP) will dominate the (PH) coalition and threaten the Malay rights".
- "Yes, the racial and religious issues that are being exploited by the Malays themselves are just a recipe for disaster, not very sensitive isn't it?"
- "Malay rights are being threatened, the Malays are divided, backstabbing each other on the back and allowing that party (referring to DAP) to rule the country at the expense of the Malays fighting each other".
- "I disagree, I think the Malay rights are not under any threat as it is protected under the Constitution.
- "DAP has done various actions that challenged the status quo of Malay during the 22 months in power, especially in terms of Malay rights and religious matter i.e. ICERD, Tabung Haji and on the issue of conversions".

In Sabah, respondents said that the issue of so-called Malay rights under threat is irrelevant because what's happening in Sabah is that Bumiputera are neglected far more than those Malays in Peninsular Malaysia.

***Do you discuss national politics? Yes or No?***

***With who – family or friends? Where do you discuss? Online or offline?***

Most respondents said they are aware of what's going on in the country vis-a-vis current politics, and have stated that they usually discuss it with friends and family members. Respondents in the Muslim belt area also stated that their voting choice is usually influenced by the head of the family, usually a father whose references tend to come from local sources and WhatsApp groups.

The reason for this question is because we wanted to know if the voter's choice of who to vote for is influenced by what's available online versus what's



actually being talked about on the ground. IMAN understood that family connections play an important role in determining who to vote for especially among out-of-town voters living and working in cities, who travel back to the hometown to cast their votes because they don't change their addresses when leaving their hometown in the first place.

### ***What is your concern should the party you choose WIN the election?***

Almost half of total respondents stated that whoever wins the election must prioritise the dwindling economy and promote political stability in the country. Naturally, most respondents who said they are going to vote on Election Day would have a candidate or party that they would vote for.

IMAN can conclude that these respondents want a government that can govern smoothly in the next five years instead of going back to "backdoor" negotiations. Irrespective of which party or coalition they choose, the main takeaway is that a winning party must secure a large number of votes, to deny any attempt at subverting the results because of political wrangling after the election result is announced.

Some responses from the Interview sessions:

- "To fulfil all the manifesto and promises made, the reason I choose this party".
- "My concern as a normal citizen is for the party (Pakatan Harapan) to have two-third majority in the parliament".
- "To fulfil the manifesto, stop sugarcoating their weaknesses to cover their mistakes".
- "At least PAS is being honest. Regarding the policies and PAS's administration (in Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu) they are the minority in the PN government and there's just not much they can do because we are talking about bureaucracy, PAS can't implement any without the greenlight from the PN leaders".

### ***Are Malay rights under threat in this election? Why?***

In general, most respondents did not state their preferred political party to win the election, let alone to think whether the party they have in mind stands a chance of winning. In Kedah for example, a respondent

was concerned "about the DAP being in power, and that fear of "anti-Islam" cannot be dismissed as mere say".

In Terengganu, one respondent said "My concerns are that I prefer a hybrid system of Islam and secularism, but I will only accept defeat if the party I choose lost in the game of democracy, not in any other way".

In the central region, respondents said optimistically that the Pakatan Harapan coalition will win by big majority because "they stay true to their principles and unite even stronger and also make early preparation for the next grand election."

In Sabah, respondents preferred to avoid answering the question by stating that they don't know who to vote for as none of those interviewed affiliated or a member of any political parties contesting in the election.

### ***Malaysia in terms of democracy:***

#### ***Are we a democratic country?***

#### ***Does Malaysia practise a rules-based system where everyone is equal under the law?***

#### ***Are all ethnic and religious groups equal under the law?***

In Kuala Terengganu, one respondent said "Yes, we have a General Election every four-year. Malaysia does practise a double standard rules system. The law (is) very biased in terms of ethnic and religious (compositions) — inciting Islamophobic and has desecrated the Muslim community."

- "We are democratic, our country does practise the rules, and all ethnic and religious groups are treated equally with Bahasa Melayu as the national language and Islam as the official religion."
- "Democratic as we are free to speak, and to choose. I am agreeing with both statements."
- "Yes, we are. Agree with both statements because no one is above the Constitution".
- "We want to build an Islamic state, although not everyone is going to support it".

Respondents in Sabah did not give comments on this question.



***The Sheraton move: What do you think the reason is for the Sheraton move? PAS and Bersatu said the Sheraton move was done to protect/defend Malay rights. Do you agree? If yes, why? If not, why? Do you support the Sheraton Move? If yes, why? If not, why?***

One of the respondents in Kuala Terengganu stated "The Sheraton Move happened because the Prime Minister had lost the majority within his own party. (I am) totally agree with PAS statement in order to defend Malay rights but I'm not supporting the Sheraton Move where it has breached the mandate of the rakyat".

- "To stop PH from ruling the country. I am not agreeing with their (PAS and Bersatu) statement as it was a political agenda to get into power, so I don't support the Sheraton Move."
- A teacher respondent in Kuala Terengganu said "The Sheraton Move is to protect Malay rights. I agree with the statement by PAS and Bersatu and approve of the move. Only cowards would disagree with the Sheraton Move".
- "The Sheraton Move is done to bring back the stakeholders into power. I don't agree with the reasons by PAS and Bersatu because there's no improvements during their tenure. I totally disagree with the Sheraton Move because it has dishonoured the people's mandate in the 14th General Election".
- "I think the Sheraton Move happened because of certain parties backstabbing one another. Muhyiddin is not the people's choice, but I agree with the statement by PAS and Bersatu to uphold and protect the rights of the Malays. For me, whoever in power must do what's best for the country".
- "The Sheraton move was done to prevent Anwar from being the prime minister, and he did not agree with PAS and PPBM's excuse to protect the Malay rights".
- "Greed and treachery that leads Mahathir to lost majority in Pakatan Harapan government. The statement by PAS and Bersatu was an excuse to justify their coup of desperation for power. No support for traitors".
- "The Sheraton Move happened only to serve individual purposes. The excuse by PAS and Bersatu was meant to justify their action. I disagree with the Sheraton Move".
- "It's good to have some PAS politicians as Ministers, even though there's just three. We still benefited from it, especially in certain key sectors and environmental projects in Baling Kedah".

Most Sabahan do not have an opinion on the Sheraton Move, preferring to answer the questions with no comment. It seems that the Sheraton Move was primarily a political scenario that impacted respondents in Peninsula Malaysia only.

***What do you know about the Malaysia Agreement 1963? What is your opinion about it?***

Since these three questions (Q,12, Q13 and Q14) were asked to respondents from Sabah, the answers are that the details of the Malaysian Agreement should be respected by lawmakers in Peninsula Malaysia. For decades, the status of Sabah as an equal partner to the Federation of Malaysia remained politicised, and Sabahan in many cases are frustrated by the lackadaisical of the central government (no matter how many changes of governments) at resolving the economic shortcomings in Sabah.

***What is your opinion on the "Ketuanan Politik Sabah" campaign?***

Respondents in Sabah did not give any further answers to this question citing irrelevant and no comment while one respondent stated that the idea was relevant to the context of Sabah (being neglected by central government). Therefore, the way forward was to deny access for Peninsular-based parties from contesting the elections in Sabah.

Some responses are:

- "Sabah still not able to stand on its own to move alone, so "Ketuanan Sabah" is not really a powerful statement to campaign on as many of us favour being part of Malaysia without the need for secessionist ideas".
- On the contrary, another respondent said, "The political scene from Peninsular Malaysia is totally different than what we have here in Sabah, but most Sabahan have no idea of what is going on there and here either."





***Are there any important issues in the east coast of Sabah that you feel should be the attention of the candidates?***

Most respondents agreed that the security of Sabah is paramount, though the situation has improved, there are still lingering effects over the status of the non-citizens segment of the state. Based on IMAN's observations, especially in the east coast of Sabah, the security around the water territory (Sulu and Celebes Sea area) are still prone to attack from pirates, smugglers and militants. One respondent said, "while ESSCOM is there to protect us, they are not always around for dialogue, because it seems that their

operation in the ESSZONE area is based on what the Federal government thinks is best for Sabah, not what Sabahan thinks of their own state".

A respondent in Sandakan said "the Sheraton Move occurred because the Prime Minister (Dr. Mahathir) simply lost the majority of confidence within his own party which has nothing to do with Sabah. A female respondent in Sandakan however stated that "the citizenship issue (on stateless children), safety and security of the Sabah water territory, undocumented immigrants (PATI), and inaccessible education in rural Sabah among youngsters as the major issue at hands".





## UNCERTAINTY AND INSTABILITY POST 15TH GENERAL ELECTION

The preliminary results from across the country started coming in throughout the night. The air was obviously very intense as new results crushed early predictions with no clear winner in sight. Security alerts were issued by the PDRM urging supporters to not come out to celebrate as this could provoke others into unnecessary situations. At about 3 AM on November 20th, the Election Commission announced the results of the General Election.

From the overall count, Pakatan Harapan won 81 Parliamentary seats, Perikatan Nasional with 73 seats and Barisan Nasional in a distant third with 30 seats. Gabungan Parti Sarawak won 23 seats in Sarawak while Gabungan Rakyat Sabah won just six seats in Sabah.<sup>18</sup> Eight seats were won by other smaller parties/candidates while the Gerakan Tanah Air led by Mahathir Mohamad failed to secure any of the 121 seats it was contesting in. With the results, the hung parliament scenario was confirmed.<sup>19</sup>

The PDRM have managed to enforce that no public gathering will be allowed in the next few days in all states, while decisions are being weighed inside the palace, to ensure calm and peace is observed. Roadblocks were set up in Kuala Lumpur under "Operasi Omnipresence" on major roads in anticipation of public gatherings at the Istana Negara for closer observations to any updates regarding the formation of the new government following the hung parliament. The post-voting landscape looked more uncertain since the decision to form a government reached a deadlock, after the Palace issued the need for more clarity from political parties to make decisions on who is with whom.

In Sabah, on third day without a conclusive government, our observation shown that the dusk-to-dawn curfew in all seven eastern districts are on high alert following rumours that has been circulated on WhatsApp as an "official" instruction from the IGP for PDRM personnel to stand ready to wear uniforms, as "the situation in the country is not stable since the new government is not

yet decided". The same posting also mentioned that some surveillance is in place on social media platforms to look for keywords "*perkauman*", "*agama*" dan "*kesultanan*". Another message that has been forwarded multiple times is about a "24-hour roadblock at Pasir Putih area in Tawau until a new Prime Minister is appointed". In normal situations, there's never been a roadblock in Tawau with such an excuse.

There are many other instances of information that are susceptible to be fake, designed to misinform readers, widespread among WhatsApp groups or community chat groups. IMAN could report that the number of dangerous materials that could cause serious ramification to the political stability in the country such as the use of "*Peristiwa 13 Mei*", "*tiadanya azan yang akan berkumandang*", "*jihad*" (in this case refers to taking action against the target) and even using morality and one's personality to inject hatred.<sup>20</sup>

Semboyan 1 Malaysia (ultra Malay-Muslim consumer-right group) along with several leaders of Malay-Muslim organisations mobilised supporters outside of the palace in show of support for Mahiaddin Yassin amid concerns that gatherings that involve banners and shouting can deteriorate into physical aggressions due to increased hostility. Back in July 2022, the group leader Yusuf Azmi successfully lobbied the authority to blacklist Comedy Crackhouse following complaints that its programs had been "insulting Islam and insensitive towards the Malay-Muslim community".<sup>21</sup>

After five days of political uncertainties and behind closed-door negotiations, the Agong consented for Anwar Ibrahim to be the 10th Prime Minister of Malaysia following much speculation that Mahiaddin Yassin also had the number to form a government with other parties wanting to join his bench. The coalition in Sabah and Sarawak also agreed to form a unity government that would include Pakatan Harapan and Barisan Nasional coalitions for the next five-year terms.

<sup>18</sup> <https://election.thestar.com.my/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.thesundaily.my/local/ge15-ends-in-hung-parliament-without-clear-winner-CH10243616>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/645185>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2022/08/823078/city-hall-permanently-blacklists-crackhouse-comedy-club-owner-registering>





## THE GREEN WAVE

The last five years have been most tumultuous for Malaysia in terms of political stability. It was the first time since the founding of the country that the ruling party - Barisan Nasional - lost its power base in the Malay-Muslim heartland to different political parties. The 1MDB corruption case that was linked to Najib Razak became the last nail in the coffin for the Barisan Nasional coalition after it was made public as to how much of state coffers were syphoned off. The Malay-Muslim grievances towards UMNO that championed the Malay supremacy over other things met its resounding defeat in the 2022 election, with a loss of more seats than in 14th General Elections held in 2018.

In the aftermath of the 14th General Election, IMAN embarked on a study on youth perceptions of politics. Among the key findings from the study was that identity politics would still play a big role among the youths, and no single party would be able to enjoy the majority support of the Malay voters. Looking at the 15th General Election, this trend is proven to be true.

During this period between the two GEs, new emerging parties like Bersatu and Pejuang of Gerakan Tanah Air along with PAS were quick to galvanise a new narrative of Malay-Muslims, to replace UMNO's long standing stance on Malay rights, under the backdrop of a fragmented society that has to do with political instability over the Malay-Muslim issues. This was of course noted with great unease by non-Muslim Malaysians, who are in favour of Pakatan Harapan (PH) - a coalition of Parti Keadilan Rakyat, Democratic Action Party, Parti Amanah Negara, United Progressive Kinabalu Organisation and Malaysian United Democratic Alliance, which is multicultural.

There were several turning points in the political landscape of the country since 2018. When the Pakatan Harapan government headed by Mahathir Mohamad was elected to the Parliament, it was the first time in Malaysia that a conglomerate of opposition parties managed to win the election against Barisan Nasional and its component in what was then dubbed as "political tsunami". However, the first act of resistance against the bona fide Pakatan Harapan government

came as early as July 2018 following the decision by the government to appoint non-Muslim figures to several key governmental positions, such as the Attorney General's Office, the Finance Ministry, the Defense Ministry, and the high profile court cases involving top leaders of UMNO for embezzlement of funds and corruptions. All these were perceived to have been the beginning of the end of PH rule.

The new government also recommended that the country rectify the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), the adoption of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) which Malaysia has said it would consider, following several in-depth studies and discussions that had taken place during Najib Razak's two-terms as the Prime Minister, long before Pakatan Harapan came to power. Najib's administration did not rectify or explain the need for these international covenants to be adopted by the country, because it feared the revolt of the Malay-Muslim population, which has been BN's ardent supporters.

Critics of the international instruments had claimed that it would burden not only the Malays, but also the religion and the Malay monarchy, while the non-Muslims would get the benefits from the pluralized socio-politics at the expense of the Malay-Muslims. Hence on December 2018, PAS, UMNO and various Malay-Muslim NGOs (including pro-Daesh fringe groups) joined forces in the anti-ICERD rally in Kuala Lumpur to call on the Pakatan Harapan government to not sign it, as the rally argued that it would undermine the Constitution of Malaysia that recognizes the special rights for the Malays and Bumiputeras.

Although the ICERD or Rome Statute does not have specific demands on the country's customary political and social status, right-wing groups in the country insisted that the signing of either one of the two international instruments was akin to removing the Malays from their status as Bumiputera and that the royal household of the country could be in danger of being dissolved. Despite not having the evidence to prove their arguments, a conglomerate of academicians prepared a study on how by rectifying these international instruments would turn Malaysia into a republic.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/illusions-of-democracy/economics-politics-and-the-law-in-malaysia-a-case-study-of-the-1mdb-scandal/64FD905F9ED11E894074118C15720931>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/03/25/rome-statute-what-is-it-will-agongs-immunity-be-at-risk/1736067>





As observed during the campaign period, Malay-Muslim issues continued to dominate. There are at least 10 political parties that promote Malay nationalism either a part of or a full part of its political agenda.<sup>24</sup> With newer Malay-Muslim based parties getting involved in the general election, championing Malay-Muslim issues, the political rhetoric has been skewed further to the right and becoming more conservative and identity-based. Each party is projecting themselves as being morally more superior than the other, while accusing their rivals as being morally-corrupt. And as we got into the second week of campaigning, there have been less talks about the party manifestos in the ceramah, but issues on morality have taken centre stage.

Based on our observation following the end of the election, though the youth are exposed to the social media contents that are depicted as public service announcement, the results in Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu where PAS and Perikatan Nasional captured most of the seats could not have been just a coincidence. As early as September, PAS President Hadi Awang has stated that they are targeting Malay-Muslim youth both male and female who are "*jahil*" (ignorance) about Islam and let alone on politics, to vote for PAS.<sup>25</sup>

In fact, going back to GE14, we could already see the gains by PAS in the East Coast-Northern belt of Peninsular Malaysia. This so-called 'green wave' started back then, and with the lack of presence of PH in this region, and the lack of key PH figures where most of them are based in the West Coast and urban areas, PAS and by extension PN emerged as a viable alternative to BN.

Looking at the findings from our report on GE14 and the interviews from the campaign period in GE15, many Malay voters were concerned about two main things; their livelihood and the position of the Malays. This resulted in a two-tier process of choosing their *wakil rakyat*. First, as their livelihood is seen as connected to corruption, they want clean and non-corrupt leaders. Second, they are looking for leaders that will safeguard the position and 'take care' of the Malays.

In Malaysia, elections are not viewed as a contest of ideas, but as a contest of interests. Leaders who are seen as the person who will protect the interest of a certain community will get their backing. In plain terms, looking at ethnic lines, non-Malay voters would have a high tendency to vote for PH, while the Malays would not. And as the campaign from both PH and PN to portray BN/UMNO as corrupt, naturally the Malay voters would lean into the coalition that fulfils the two criterias mentioned above – PN. But also as mentioned earlier, beyond ethnic lines and the so-called urban-rural divide, what we saw is a regional divide in Peninsular Malaysia that had begun many elections ago and seemed to solidify in the recent one.

Regarding the wave of new young voters, the assumption that they will lean towards PH was proven detrimental to the coalition. As many observers have pointed out, without political education and awareness, young voters would be influenced by their surroundings – family members and peers. And without active presence, engagement and campaigning from PH leaders, their votes would reflect the narrative and aspiration of their own community. On this part, MUDA, the component party within the PH electoral pact that was tasked to garner youth voters, have failed to live up to their expectations.

Although one may argue that more participation means the democratic process is actually working, may articulate that democracy and the electoral process are the same thing. Malaysia's style of democratic system, the First-Past-The-Post also known as simple majority, has never been more tainted or tampered with than when to make a choice for a new government, often reaching a deadlock, albeit temporarily.

In a cosmopolitan Malaysia where its population are highly literate and competitive, the Proportional Representation (PR) system is arguably the best electoral system for the country, and it does not compromise the status of the Malay-Muslim identity and the monarchy as illustrated by sceptics. There are ways to make it work. For now, the race and religion issues will continue to find an audience in the next few general elections.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/illusions-of-democracy/economics-politics-and-the-law-in-malaysia-a-case-study-of-the-1mdb-scandal/64FD905F9ED11E894074118C15720931>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/03/25/rome-statute-what-is-it-will-agongs-immunity-be-at-risk/1736067>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/bahasa/s/413230>



## WHAT'S NEXT?

From the onset, we argued that a federal government that is not elected by popular vote would risk the people's sentiments in the long run. Since the tradition of choosing Cabinet line-up rests with the Prime Minister, there's a growing concern that these Ministerial appointments were done through backdoor negotiations in order to stabilise a "patch-up government" or to curry favour with a one-time political rival, rather than through intellectual prowess or professional experiences.

This initiation has been criticised as running contrary to the logic of good governance and transparency. The risk is if any of the ministers in-charge does not have a clue on what's priority under its ministerial leadership, or not genuinely concerned about the portfolio other than to maintain its position within the government, that Cabinet is squeaky. It will be a tough decision yet, in order to balance the odds.

It would be interesting to see what the unity government can do if both their election manifestos are aligned, and the bigger demography it can cover. For now we can say the outlook of this unity government is centrist, leaning slightly to the right but inclusive, while the Opposition is the classic style of conservatism, heavy on the right with women and youth segments not in the equation. It is still too early to know whether personality or policy will reign supreme in the coming months.

The choice of Ministers in the Cabinet can also play an important role in forging better diplomacy with partners from other countries. The new ministerial mandate given should not be abused or turned into private fiefdom or risk undermining the electorate's wishes for a clean and transparent administration. Promises to reduce the monthly salary of ministers and budget cuts for unnecessary expenditures should reflect on the larger segment of the population whose financial situation is acute and the household debt amongst the citizens skyrocketed. Reform should not be election promises but a reality.

In the next few months, the state elections will take place in several states following the end of their five-year cycle as state governments. These elections would inevitably be yet another hotly contested as the major coalitions would wrestle the state from the

incumbents albeit election fatigue. All parties should work together with the Election Commission to ensure standard operational procedures concerning the conduct of elections to be improved, so that the process can go smoothly with minimal incidents.

The recent elections showed that the Election Commission took up the role and responsibility very well, at a short notice. The healthcare side of its officials working on a hectic day as the Election Day needs more improvement. NADMA and other national agencies carried their jobs with great responsibility knowing full well how the November rain works.








The number of new voters will also increase because of the Automatic Voters Registration (AVR) system. Political parties can play a proactive role in encouraging voters to participate in the elections. When the democratic process is transparent and reliable, voters would vote with conviction the best principles and practices available so that the good legacy can be sustained and developed further. Security of the people must also be gradually improved to avoid leaving behind friendlies. All things politics must be given consideration in a manner expected from a good lawmaker. In a diverse Malaysia, ideal democracy is key to stable economic growth.

With the new government installed and the bad weathers have receded, it is expected that both sides of the Parliament will stay as committed as they were during the course of the campaigning, that is championing people's cause at all time. After a week of intense periods, it is now the electorates' rights to demand what's promised to them, to be carried forward for the next five years, without tainting the Constitution

with another political coup. The new Opposition camp must now work harder to ensure there's a check and balance in the government's administration and be done with the shouting and mockery in the Parliament for the sake of the nation.

On the international front, the Malaysian government should represent the country as an important player in the geopolitical arena. Malaysia's good rapport with other nations despite a polarising world should be prioritised especially with neighbouring countries on issues of trade, security, climate change and food security. Malaysia has to be around a lot on the world stage. The conflict in Southern Thailand, Myanmar and in Southern Philippines deserves more attention with concrete solutions in mind, because on the hindsight, it has a strong impact on Malaysia's credibility as a reliable ally in the ASEAN region it co-founded. Global economy is expected to regress next year. If the country is politically stable, businesses and investments would stay longer. Security for all can then be assured with sensible confidence. The world is watching Malaysia. 



Prepared by IMAN Research team, data collection assisted by Hee Yet Yin & Muhammad Hanif Ramlan

