

Special Report 2

Malaysia's 2013 Election: The Nation and the National Front' (By Amrita Malhi)

Winning an election may still be one of life's great thrills, but the afterglow is diminishing.
(Naim 2013: 1713)

If ever an election victory could be interpreted as a humiliation by the winning side, then the Malaysian federal election, held in May this year, was profoundly humiliating for the National Front (*Barisan Nasional*, or BN).

BN won government for the thirteenth time, and extended its uninterrupted hold on federal government in Malaysia. It also continues to hold a majority of states in the federation. In this sense, BN's political primacy—as the sole government Malaysia has ever known—remains in place, in the nation it argues its predecessors brought in to being in 1957 (Cheah Boon Kheng 2002; Hooker 2003).

Aside from remaining in government, however, BN has nevertheless had to reconcile itself to a new political environment, in which its domination of the architecture of 'the national' is no longer guaranteed. The polls and technics that group together within this new environment have generated much academic

¹ This article is part of a longer journal article in progress, currently entitled 'Malaysian New Media Campaigning: Cleaving the Nation from its National Front'. Please direct any comments or feedback to amrita.malhi@unisa.edu.au.

commentary since May.² Yet one feature of this recent election that remains undiscussed is the extent to which it reveals that BN's hold over narratives of the nation's past, present and future has weakened considerably over the past decade. Indeed, the May election has revealed that BN is no longer assured that it can smoothly weave narratives of its own history together with those of the nation's development (Hooker 2003:Chp 1).

This effect has exposed a heightened level of contestation about how the nation itself should be understood—indeed, how it should be constituted—and this contestation is played out in several key national spaces in which political debate is conducted. These spaces include the federal parliament, in which BN relies on an electoral gerrymander to retain sufficient seats to form government; and the public sphere, which is characterised by the rise of the digital media and the erosion of older print and broadcast mediascapes (Surin 2010; Yeoh Seng Guan 2010). As a result, absolute parliamentary numbers aside, both spaces are increasingly fragmented, and are no longer BN's exclusive domain.

The result is a new narrative instability in the public sphere, as control over the nation's foundational discourses has palpably slipped away from BN. For example, it is no longer the sole custodian of the text of the national constitution, nor can it alone elaborate a doctrine of multi-ethnic unity in the service of development. This is because the capacity for intervention in these two narrative fields is intrinsically linked with access to three

² For example, refer to New Mandala: <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/category/malaysia/>; and Tom Pepinsky's blog: <http://tompepinsky.com/>.



important enablers—which BN once appeared likely to control with impunity for the indefinite future. The first two of these enablers were first lost to BN in 2008, and the 2013 election confirmed these losses. They consist of the federal parliamentary supermajority, and control of every state parliament except for Kelantan. This year, in addition to these two facets of its power, BN also lost the national popular vote, shaking its narrative foundations even further still.

In this new political situation, BN is unable—for now—to make the very claim that has always been central to its very political rationale. This is the claim embodied in its name: namely that BN alone can unite a multi-ethnic plural society, protecting each group from the others' divergent interests, and acting as the sole legitimate channel through which national aspirations should be funneled (Mauzy 1983). Indeed, the 2013 election result does not only illustrate the extent to which the nation identifies with the National Front which leads it; rather it also brings in to question the extent to which the National Front is able to identify itself with the nation it leads.

Barisan Nasional can no longer project its exclusive authority over the national narrative in the public sphere. This is because the erosion of its electoral domination carries profound implications for how BN, the 'national front, projects its affinity with, and its authority over, the polity and the public known as 'the nation'. The crux of these implications is that BN can no longer smoothly conflate its identity and interests with those of the nation; whereas the capacity to do so has been essential to its exercise of power for more than fifty years.

Granted, 'power' is impossible to quantify as an accumulation of elemental

components. Yet in the contest of narratives embedded in Malaysian politics, BN's capacity to claim that only it can represent the nation has been a critical feature of its modality for wielding it. This is particularly the case if 'power' is understood very simply as 'an arbiter of a menu of actions' available to a national executive (Naim 2013: 619). As such, this erosion of power also underpins and enables an argument prosecuted since May by the People's Alliance coalition (*Pakatan Rakyat*, or PR) that it, and not BN, now represents 'the nation'. Now that it commands the national popular vote in addition to strong multi-ethnic credentials of its own—in addition to three state governments and the new media public sphere—PR, in its turn, currently possesses a greatly enhanced capacity for national claim-making. In this dynamic, and at least for this moment, it appears that the nation and its national front are cleaving apart.

Institutional Capacity

BN's loss of access to the three enablers described above is of critical importance because of the multiple ways in which they enforce each other. First, it has now decisively, and possibly even permanently, lost its two-thirds majority—also known as a supermajority—of seats in the House of Representatives (*Dewan Rakyat*). BN originally lost this supermajority at the last election in 2008—the first it had suffered such a loss since 1969. This is therefore only the second period of time in the nation's history during which BN has not held a supermajority. Indeed, this is the first time this has happened within the living memory of the nearly three-quarters of Malaysians who are younger than forty (Weiss 2013: 308-309). Further, the historic 2008 result saw BN win 140, or 63 per cent, of 222 seats.



This year, rather than make up ground this year as it had hoped, BN won only 133, or 60 per cent, of 222 seats. The 2013 result has therefore taken BN back even closer to its 1969 low point, when its predecessor, the Alliance, won only 77, or 53 per cent, of 144 seats.

In part, the significance of this supermajority has been found in the way in which it operates as a form of psychological set point; a base performance trend line beneath which confidence plummets in an increasingly competitive political marketplace. Without it, BN's capacity to command parliamentary authority—even while still in government—is diminished from its previous peak, rendering it psychologically enervated and defensive as a result. The supermajority is also significant because of the relationship it has underpinned between BN and the nation's constitution. Without an automatic assurance of two-thirds of the parliamentary vote, BN has also thereby lost its capacity to unilaterally amend the constitution.³

The loss of the supermajority, then, represents a loss to BN of the institutional capacity it once possessed to '[privatise] the rules and procedures used by a nation-state to keep control over the activities within its territory' (Castells 2008: 81). This loss only underscores BN's humiliation again: the constitution is the nation's founding document, statement of fundamental principles, and an operating manual for the polity. It was drawn

³ Article 159 of the Constitution allows for its revision if amendments are supported by 'the votes of not less than two-thirds of the total number of members' in either House of Parliament. For more details, refer to (2010). *Federal Constitution: Reprint*. Kuala Lumpur, The Commissioner of Law Revision Malaysia.

up by BN's predecessors, alongside British administrators and members of Malaysia's various royal families (Cheah Boon Kheng 2002; Hooker 2003; Sham Saleem Faruqi 2008). Parliamentary supermajority, the constitution, and BN have therefore existed in symbiosis until very recently, and BN has held unchecked power over both institutions as a result. Indeed, according to one recent estimate, BN has invoked its supermajority to author more than 700 amendments to the constitution over the years since independence (Adilah R.A. Nasir 2013). Now that it can no longer make such amendments on its own, it can no longer adjust the nation's textual foundations to reconfigure how the polity operates, whenever it judges this option expedient. This is a significant blow to BN's narrative-making power.

BN's second important loss is that it can no longer claim to function as a force that unites discrete ethnic groups, each possessing distinct, and divergent, interests. This is because, in federal parliamentary terms, BN is now barely a multi-ethnic coalition of parties at all. Of its three component parties, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) are now barely represented in the federal parliament at all, having won only seven and four seats respectively. As a result, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) now dominates BN, holding 88 of its 133 seats (Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia 2011). BN is also now closely identified with the Malay supremacist organisation, Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa Malaysia (Perkasa), whose membership largely overlaps with that of UMNO (Chin 2012: 272). Perkasa serves a dual purpose for UMNO. It is both an external body to which UMNO can outsource its more provocative ethnic wedge campaigns (Malhi 2010); and a pressure group constituted both inside and outside UMNO,



which asserts a chauvinistic pressure on UMNO leaders when they make their political calculations (Welsh 2013).

Second, in addition to this result in the federal parliament, BN no longer commands institutional capacity in relation to the resources and machineries associated with the state governments of largely-urban Selangor and Penang. Its loss of these diverse economic and demographic hubs has also dented its capacity to claim that it alone embodies and represents the multi-racial national public. As a result, BN can no longer claim that it alone can bring this public together to overcome imminent racial strife, guiding it instead toward a common good: economic development. Further, now that it can no longer make this claim, it can also no longer write off largely-rural, agrarian and Malay Muslim-dominated Kelantan—the only state it has failed to hold for nearly the entire period since independence—as an anomaly (Roff 1974; Kessler 1978). Under the leadership of former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad (1981–2003), for example, BN used to frequently make both these claims to characterise support for political alternatives as evidence of religious fanaticism and anti-development stupidity (Malhi 2003).

Third, a new loss of institutional capacity, freshly inflicted by voters in May this year, has also further eroded BN's power over the narrative it has constructed of the nation's foundation and subsequent development. This was the critically important loss of the popular vote, for the first time ever since the nation came in to being. Despite winning government by winning a majority of parliamentary seats, BN won only 47 per cent of votes cast. Even in 1969, the first election in which BN (in its previous avatar, the Alliance) lost its

supermajority, the only government the nation has ever known was still returned with 51 per cent of the popular vote (Nohlen, Grotz et al. 2001). This new development also affects BN's capacity to project its narrative in the public sphere. For one, this is because it entirely exposes the importance of the rural gerrymander in ensuring BN wins sufficient seats in parliament, even while its vote has fallen so far in percentage terms. Granted, BN maintains a distinct advantage in rural seats in which demographic and political tendencies favour the operations of its campaign machinery, namely certain of those known to largely consist of Malay Muslim voters (Aspinall 2013). Nevertheless, as one recent analysis demonstrates, the gap in population size between the largest and the smallest electoral constituencies in Malaysia has grown steadily since 1972, and as a result, the number of seats dominated by Malay Muslim voter populations now comprises 75.2 per cent of the total seats (Lee Hock Guan 2013: 8).

BN's loss of the popular majority vote also holds a deep narrative significance because the 2013 result was not followed by ethnic violence, as the 1969 election result was, although that result was characterised by a loss to BN of the supermajority alone, and not the popular vote as well. Nor did the 2008 result lead to violence, when the supermajority was first lost for this, the second time. That violence did not occur does not concord with the BN-propagated narrative of national and inter-ethnic instability being the most likely result of voters rejecting their permanent domination of the federal parliament. Indeed, it is for this reason that the question of violence, similar to that which occurred in 1969, has been posed by media commentators at every election since Pakatan Rakyat's emergence as an opposition



coalition, in successive iterations, since 1999.⁴ Most Malaysians today, however, do not remember 1969, and it seems that recent election results have done little to remind them of it. This was despite Kuala Lumpur being on high alert on the night of 5 May—election night; with police check points established on the deserted freeways leading in and out of Kuala Lumpur, and a ban imposed on politically partisan pedestrian and vehicular convoys.⁵

National Claim-Making

The new media has emerged as a relatively free and open aspect of a global public sphere in which Malaysians—regardless of where they might live—participate to produce and shape alternative narratives of the nation and its trajectory (Castells 2008). Due to BN's lack of institutional capacity for maintaining national structures of control around the new public sphere, its capacity for national claim-making is weakened. As a result, a genuine recovery of alternative narratives appears to be gathering pace, and these narratives are increasingly recovered as forms of national memory inscribed within digital networks, in addition to functioning as campaign narratives for *Pakatan Rakyat*. This recovery is afforded not only by the relative freedom of the new public sphere, but also by the increasing levels

of experience, and indeed professionalisation, commanded by certain sections of its participants. It is therefore in the new media public sphere that BN has most obviously suffered a major blow to its capacity to conflate its identity and interests with those of the nation, especially since losing its exclusive access to the other political enablers discussed above.

These alternative national claims are the subject of the full-length article that expands on this half-length contribution to *Berita*. Some of these claims operate as advances on the institutional capacity inherent in the legacy of the *original* constitution (Khoo 2013). Others constitute assertions that PR 'won the election', only to be blocked by the electoral gerrymander and the Election Commission.⁶ Others function to withdraw from BN the multi-ethnic currency which comes with holding the nation's diverse population centres, accusing BN of anachronism and racism instead (Malhi 2013). Additional claims serve to differentiate the 'national' public—that of Malaysian citizen-voters—from the extra-national 'constitutive outside' populated by foreign workers. These workers included the 'planeloads', or '40,000' Bangladeshis alluded to in the 'get out the vote' campaign run by PR, the *Sarawak Report* and campaign pressure group, Anyone But UMNO, along with the electoral reform NGO, *Bersih*.

Ultimately, these new national claims are also accompanied by an urge by sections of

⁴ Refer, for one example from the many surely which abound, to an interview I gave to Radio 2SER in Sydney. It is available at <http://www.2ser.com/component/k2/item/3358-the-daily-3rd-may-2013-malaysians-heads-to-the-polls>.

⁵ From personal observation of driving on the Federal Highway and the New Pantai Expressway, in and out of the Lembah Pantai electorate, centred on Bangsar on Kuala Lumpur's southwest boundary.

⁶ For example, refer to recent comments to this effect by *Pakatan Rakyat's* Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim at the Adelaide Festival of Ideas in October this year: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KESZYyzz_MA.



the pro-PR activist public to recover, memorialise and celebrate alternative possibilities extant in the period of the national liberation struggle, when alternative trajectories for Malaya and Malaysia appeared possible. This urge was evident in the social media circulation in September of images of young activists displaying the *Sang Saka Malaya* flag—a red and white standard popularised by the 1940s Left, illegalised by the Emergency Declaration of 1948. The flag is controversial because it invokes a historical vision of Malaysia as a republic, and appears to blend the national flags of Singapore and Indonesia.⁷ This urge was again evident in the social media circulation of images, videos and debating points after the funeral of Chin Peng, leader of the Malayan Communist Party, in Bangkok in September.⁸

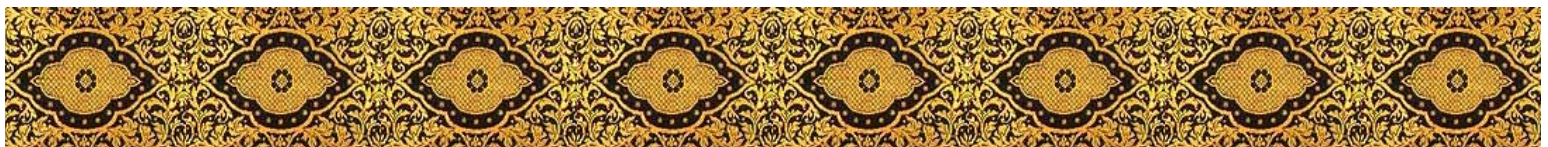
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⁷ For one version of this flag, refer to <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/hes-a-hero-that-guy-who-grabbed-sang-saka-from-activists-says-utusan>.

⁸ For example, refer to video interviews produced by Malaysiakini's video channel, Mediakini, at http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=chin+peng&sm=3.

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