Malaysia's 2018 general election

On 9 May 2018, Malaysians go to the polls to elect federal and state parliaments. Although a financial scandal and rising living costs have dented the popularity of the government, the opposition faces an uphill battle to end the governing Barisan Nasional coalition’s six-decade rule, and it is not widely expected to win.

Constitution and political system

Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy, with a political system partly modelled on that of its former colonial ruler, the United Kingdom. The monarch, who has few political powers, is elected by the rulers of the nine Malay kingdoms from among themselves for a term of five years. Each of the 222 members of the House of Representatives, the lower house, is elected for five years by a single-member constituency, with UK-style first-past-the-post voting. The upper house of parliament is the Senate, which has 70 members, 26 elected by regional parliaments and 44 appointed by the monarch on the prime minister’s advice; like the UK’s House of Lords, it can delay but not overturn legislation adopted by the lower house.

Malaysia is a federation of 13 states, but one which in practice is quite centralised. Each of the states has its own government and regional parliament. In 2018, 12 of the 13 states (Sarawak held its elections in 2016) will hold regional elections on the same day as the federal vote.

Electoral alliances: National Front (BN) versus Alliance of Hope (PH)

The centre/right-wing Barisan Nasional (BN, National Front) has ruled the country ever since it gained independence in 1957 (prior to 1973 under the name of the Alliance Party). Dominating this coalition of 13 parties is the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), led by Prime Minister Najib Razak, representing the Malay ethnic majority. Its smaller partners, also mostly ethnically based, include the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC).

Unlike the perennial BN, opposition coalitions change from one election to the next. The 2013 elections were contested by the Pakatan Rakyat coalition (PR, People’s Alliance), led by Anwar Ibrahim. Formerly an UMNO member and deputy prime minister, Anwar was jailed in 1999 for alleged corruption and sodomy following a rift with Mahathir Mohamad, UMNO leader and prime minister at the time. During Anwar’s five years in prison, the Justice Party (PKR) led by his wife, Wan Azizah, was set up to support him. Hopes that Anwar would be able to lead the opposition in 2018 were dashed in 2015, after a renewed sodomy conviction based on what he claims was fabricated evidence; he is not due for release until June 2018, making it impossible for him to stand in the election. However, Mahathir, blamed for Anwar’s downfall, left UMNO in 2016, after current Prime Minister, Najib Razak, became embroiled in the state development fund 1MDB scandal: it is alleged that US$700 million from 1MDB ended up in Najib’s personal account. Mahathir reconciled with former adversary Anwar, paving the way for Mahathir to lead a new Pakatan Harapan (PH, Alliance of Hope) coalition, on the understanding that if PH wins the election, he will step aside for Anwar after securing a royal pardon for him. Mahathir has founded a Malaysian United Indigenous Party (PPBM) to join PH. The coalition also includes the Islamist Amanah party and the left-wing Democratic Action Party, which is currently the largest opposition group and has strong support from Chinese voters.

The third main player is the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). PAS has a strong regional power base in the conservative Muslim Malay heartland state of Kelantan, which it has controlled since 1990. In the 2013 election, it was part of the PR coalition; however, it quit the alliance in 2015 over the PAS proposal to give Sharia courts (whose jurisdiction is restricted to Malaysian Muslims) additional powers, by extending the maximum sentence that they can hand down from three to 30 years.
**Issues**

**Ethnicity:** BN owes its dominance in part to solid support from Malay voters (55% of the population). Since the new economic policy of the 1970s, Malays and other bumiputra (native) ethnic groups (as opposed to ethnic Chinese and Indians, respectively 25% and 7% of the population, whose ancestors mostly arrived during the colonial period) have enjoyed certain privileges, such as preferential access to higher education and government contracts. Such privileges are intended to narrow the economic gap between Malays and Chinese (even now, 12 of Malaysia's 14 billionaires are of Chinese origin). Resentment at BN's support for such privileges could cause many ethnic Chinese voters to back PH, rather than BN's ethnic Chinese Malaysian Chinese Association.

Contrasting with BN's 'Malay First' policies, the stance of opposition PH parties is more ambiguous; PKR wants to extend bumiputra rights to all underprivileged Malaysians, while DAP (backed by many ethnic Chinese and Indian voters) is often accused of being anti-Malay. Still, Mahathir hopes that the inclusion of his pro-Malay PPBM in PH will allay such concerns and attract a 'Malay tsunami' of former BN voters.

**The economy** continued to perform strongly in 2017, with growth reaching 5.8%, its highest level since 2014. However, not all Malaysians benefited, due to depressed wage growth and rising living costs, fuelled by an unpopular 6% Goods and Services Tax (GST), introduced in 2015, and the end of petrol subsidies. According to a December 2017 poll, more Malaysians (68%) are worried about inflation than anything else. To address such concerns, PH is promising to scrap the GST and reinstate fuel subsidies; for its part, the BN has already increased welfare benefits, and it proposes to raise the minimum wage.

**Leadership:** recent data on Prime Minister Najib's approval ratings are lacking. According to a January 2015 poll, only 44% of Malaysians were satisfied with his work. Unpublished polls suggest that after the 1MDB scandal broke out in June of the same year, that figure fell even further to around 20%, but has since recovered; the impact of 1MDB seems to have worn off lately, with just 3% of Malaysians expressing concerns about Najib's integrity in December 2017. His opponent Mahathir is an experienced politician and has a strong regional power base in his home state of Kedah; however, how much popularity he still commands is not known. Apart from Mahathir's age (92), his authoritarian rule during a 22-year stint as prime minister (1981-2003) undermines his credibility as leader of the opposition.

**Electoral prospects**

A March 2018 poll suggests that only 42% of voters support BN. However, this does not mean that BN will lose, as electoral boundaries have been repeatedly redrawn over the past few decades (most recently in March 2018) to favour the ruling coalition; as a result, on average PH-held constituencies have 65% more voters than their BN counterparts. In 2013, the opposition won its highest-ever share of the popular vote (51%), but BN (47%) still held on to a parliamentary majority of 60%. This time, even if BN's share of the popular vote falls still further, it could well manage to secure the two-thirds majority it needs to pass constitutional changes, due to the fact that the opposition vote is now split between PH and PAS. Analysts expect a low turnout to further boost BN's results – the probable reason why the election has been scheduled on a weekday, when Malaysians have less time to vote, instead of (as usual) on a weekend. While the lack of polling data makes detailed predictions difficult, few are expecting PH to win.

**How transparent and credible will the elections be?**

In the 2013 elections, monitors raised various concerns, such as registration of dubious voters in the electoral roll, the fact that supposedly indelible ink used on ballot papers could be washed off, the partisan behaviour of the election commission and its reluctance to investigate alleged irregularities. This time, whether or not actual fraud occurs on the day of the election, there are several factors favouring the ruling BN coalition, in addition to the above-mentioned long-standing practice of re-drawing electoral boundaries. The government uses the colonial-era Sedition Act to clamp down on media reports on the 1MDB scandal, and the April 2018 Anti-Fake News Act gives it a further weapon against critical journalism. The rushed timing of the election, announced on 10 April, gives the opposition just 11 days to campaign.

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**European Parliament position:** In its 2015 resolution on Malaysia, Parliament described the prosecution of opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim as politically motivated, and called for his release; it also urged the Malaysian government to allow transparent investigation into the 1MDB scandal, and to allow freedom of expression.

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