Borne by Dissent, Tormented by Divides: The Opposition 60 Years after Merdeka*

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Surveying a post-1998 political terrain in Malaysia marked by sociopolitical dissent of diverse origins and goals, this article addresses several related issues. What social transformation and tensions have produced such a situation? What has been the impact of the dissent on contemporary politics? What are its implications when neither the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional (National Front), nor the opposition up to 2017 could claim to have a convincing hold over the popular imagination? The analysis provided here shows that long-term socioeconomic transformation has produced sources of political conflict that go beyond the familiar ones of interethnic divisiveness. The most visible impact of the dissent was the opposition's electoral gains on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia in 2008 and 2013. Those gains demonstrated the efficacy of a new template of dissent consisting of cooperation between opposition parties, their alliances with dissident civil society, and their non-ethnic mobilization of disaffected segments of the electorate. There were populist traits to the mass, multiethnic, cross-class, and mainly urban mobilization of dissent that favored fluid politics that was double-edged. On the one hand, as the views of a number of interviewees suggest, the politics could successfully accommodate a wide range of concerns and actors. On the other hand, the contingent, flexibly structured cooperation among parties was subject to internal or external stresses and strains. But, as the Conclusion suggests, new streams of dissent could emerge in unexpected ways, such as the suspected complicity of the regime's leadership in scandals that led to splits within the ruling party. It remained to be seen whether the 14th general election, which had to be held by mid-2018, would supply a definitive resolution of the virtual stalemate between the regime and the opposition.

Keywords: Malaysian politics, general elections 2008 and 2013, Barisan Nasional, Pakatan Rakyat, sociopolitical dissent, Anwar Ibrahim, Mahathir Mohamad, Najib Razak

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* I wish to express my deep gratitude to the Institute of Developing Economies (IDE-JETRO) for project funding that permitted me to conduct the interviews listed at the end of this paper. Financial support from the JSPS KAKENHI (Grant No. 25101006) for further research undertaken after I had joined The National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies is gratefully acknowledged.

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As the Introduction and other essays in this volume have noted, many kinds of social divides and diverse forms of dissent arose throughout the 60 years that have passed since Merdeka. Stresses of decolonization, state formation, and nation building up to the 1960s—conveniently demarcated by Malaya's independence in 1957, Malaysia's formation in 1963, and Singapore's separation in 1965—threw up ethnic and class divides and dissent that combined to produce the ethnic violence of May 13, 1969. The next two decades, notable for controversies over the New Economic Policy (NEP), saw economic transformation and social change that produced new divides and dissent that climaxed in the 1987–90 split of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the dominant party of the ruling coalition (Barisan Nasional, BN, National Front).[1] A lull in dissent from 1991 to 1997, when Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's leadership seemed unassailable, hinted at a closing of divides. However, Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's dismissal in September 1998 triggered the Reformasi (Reform) movement, which exposed a divide of unsuspected depth. The Reformasi wave seemed to have receded by the time of the general election of 2004, when Mahathir's successor, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, led BN to a landslide victory. Yet, new streams of dissent emerged in 2007 that have challenged the regime to this day. The earlier episodes having been much analyzed, it is the post-September 1998 dissent that forms the subject of this paper.

This latest dissent was mobilized along with an opposition project to defeat BN. The opposition project, which began with Reformasi, had poor results for a decade before it achieved a breakthrough in 2008. A subsequent spurt gave the opposition its best electoral result in 2013, but it was still unable to win power. Thereafter, internal and external problems disunited the opposition. But just when the troubled opposition seemed headed for a new nadir, a fresh crisis of the regime divided UMNO itself.[2] And since 2016, the political terrain has been marked by new social divides and ill-coordinated dissent that has even transformed Mahathir into a dissident.

Surveying a range of dissent diverse in origin and goals, this chapter addresses several related issues. What social transformation and tensions have produced such a situation? What has been the impact of the dissent on contemporary politics? What are its implications when neither the opposition nor the regime can claim a convincing hold

1) For different accounts of the social origins and policy differences in UMNO and the administration that precipitated the split after UMNO's 1987 party election, see Shamsul (1988), Khoo (1992), and Khoo (1995).

2) John Funston (2016) gives a detailed and instructive account of UMNO's transformation as a party; on the "fresh crisis" noted here but discussed in the last section of this chapter, see Funston (2016, 123–132, 146).

over the popular imagination? The analysis provided here shows that long-term socio-economic transformation of Malaysian society has produced sources of political conflict that go beyond the familiar ones of interethnic divisiveness. The most visible impact of the dissent was the opposition's electoral gains on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia in 2008 and 2013. Those gains demonstrated the efficacy of a new template of dissent consisting of cooperation between opposition parties, their alliances with dissident civil society, and their non-ethnic mobilization of disaffected segments of the electorate. There were populist traits to the mass, multiethnic, cross-class, and mainly urban mobilization of dissent that favored fluid politics that was double-edged. On the one hand, as the views of interviewees suggest, the politics could successfully accommodate a wide range of concerns and actors. On the other hand, contingent, flexibly structured cooperation among parties was subject to internal or external stresses and strains. But, as the Conclusion suggests, new streams of dissent can be produced in unexpected ways, such as the suspected complicity of the regime's leadership in scandals that led to splits within the ruling party. Finally, there is no imminent or "permanent" resolution to the dissident ferment that began in 1998, as indicated by the virtual stalemate between the regime and its opponents discussed in the Conclusion.

The first four sections of the paper use secondary literature and publicly available media information. The concluding section draws primarily on personal interviews that the author conducted with social activists and political dissidents in civil society and political parties. The author does not claim that his interviewees represent a full spectrum of dissent, but he hopes that his analysis clarifies the concerns and activities of dissidents and oppositionists in their competition with the regime.

Overview: The Impact of Dissent

Of the four general elections held in the past 18 years, three left BN with one or another kind of crisis despite retaining power. The first crisis arose at the November 1999 election when UMNO suffered many defeats in its Malay heartland (Maznah 2003). It lost its hegemonic grip on the Malay imaginary as a very large number of Malays began "thinking the unthinkable," that is, a government without UMNO (Khoo 1999). The second crisis came at the 12th general election of March 2008 (GE12). The opposition parties—Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS, Pan Malaysian Islamic Party), and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR, People's Justice Party)—together won 49 percent of the popular vote at the parliamentary level. Yet, in a first-past-the-post system subjected to gerrymandering and malapportionment, the result only gave the

combined opposition just over one-third of the seats in parliament, including 10 out of 11 parliamentary seats in the capital, Kuala Lumpur. At the level of state elections, the opposition won 5 out of 13 states. On the whole, the outcome was a historic achievement for the opposition, which finally proved that it was not a wild hope to fight BN for power. After the election the DAP, PAS, and PKR formed a coalition, Pakatan Rakyat (PR, People's Pact). In the 13th general election of May 2013 (GE13) BN again triumphed, only to face yet another crisis (Johan 2015). For the contending coalitions, GE13 "could be seen as a failure" for both and an "electoral impasse" (*ibid.*, 37, 59): PR only won a few more seats, but it secured 50.9 percent of the popular vote against BN's 47.4 percent, while the loss of the popular vote was a severe blow to BN's legitimacy.

There are already published analyses of those three general elections.[3] Only a big picture needs to be given here for each of BN's crises. In 1999, Malay revulsion at Mahathir's persecution of Anwar Ibrahim sparked a Malay voters' revolt against UMNO. In 2008, an electorate enthralled by Abdullah Badawi's early promises of institutional reform was aggrieved when his administration failed to fulfill them. Five years later, anger over economic hardship, worsening corruption, and the regime's repressive responses to nonviolent mass protests swelled voter disgruntlement with Prime Minister Najib Razak's even less transparent mode of governance.

Two developments that caused BN's crises altered the terms of contestation between the regime and the opposition. One was the opposition parties' cohesion as PR institutionalized DAP-PAS-PKR cooperation, managed its internal disagreements, survived the regime's repression,[4] and defied prophecies of PR's doom as a partnership of "ideologically incompatible" parties.[5] The other was popular dissent that arose during the last third of Mahathir's 22-year tenure (1981–2003), surged in the latter half of Abdullah's government (2003–9), and intensified throughout Najib's administration (since 2009). At first the dissent expressed diverse but disparate grievances and political demands. In the last quarter of 2007 three large rallies were held in Kuala Lumpur. On September 26 the Bar Council led a march of lawyers and social activists to protest "Lingam-gate," a scandal of alleged fixes of high judicial appointment. On November 10

3) See Brown (2005), Loh and Johan (2003), and Maznah (2003) on the 1999 election; Maznah (2008) and Pepinsky (2009) on GE12; and Johan, Lee, and Mohamed Nawab (2015), Khoo (2016), and Weiss (2013) on GE13.

4) For example, the Registrar of Societies refused to acknowledge PR as a legal organization and the Election Commission would not permit the PR parties to stand for election under a common symbol. Thus DAP, PAS, and PKR candidates ran on three separate tickets.

5) Regarding the attempts by PR's predecessor, Barisan Alternatif (BA, Alternative Front), to form a stable coalition, see Hilley (2001) on PAS's need to reorder its ideological and programmatic goals in 1999–2000, and Khoo (2003) on "the cultural imperative of coalition-building."

BERSIH (Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections) organized a mass rally to make four demands of the Electoral Commission: the use of indelible ink on polling day, the cleanup of electoral rolls prior to elections, the abolition of postal ballots, and fair access to the media for all candidates. Then the Hindu Rights Action Front (HINDRAF), an ad hoc coalition of ethnic Indian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), held a huge demonstration on November 25 against what it condemned as the socioeconomic marginalization of the Indian community (Govindasamy 2015). From those separate causes, dissident individuals, members of NGOs, and opposition figures built alliances to support a progression of BERSIH rallies—BERSIH 2.0 in 2011, BERSIH 3 in 2012, BERSIH 4 in 2015, and BERSIH 5 in 2016—that became the largest and most protracted post-Merdeka demonstrations ever mounted. In many instances, nonpartisan dissent blended with the opposition to create a common front, as was seen in the PR-sponsored Himpunan Kebangkitan Rakyat (Gathering of the people's rising) of January 12, 2013 and the run-up to GE13. In other words, BN had to face dissent that deepened, spread, and changed at key junctures.

New Social Bases

Malaysia's multiethnic and multireligious society has long been subjected to the politicization of ethnicity and religion. Earlier phases of postcolonial contestation were suffused with interethnic recrimination, but as this section shows, new sources of conflict with the regime arose which were not matters of interethnic tension. From the 1980s, the UMNO-PAS rivalry for Malay-Muslim support was increasingly laden with competing claims of Islamic religiosity. Yet the political meanings of ethnicity and religion were not static: they changed with the socioeconomic transformation of Malay society. Forty years of urbanization, education, extension of capitalist social relations, acculturation to industrial discipline, and engagement with globalization restructured Malay society socially and ideologically (Shamsul 1988; Abdul Rahman 2002). For a decade from September 1998, with the exceptions of the Bar Council's Walk for Justice and the HINDRAF protest (Bunnell *et al.* 2010; Govindasamy 2015), all major demonstrations of dissent were, if they had to be given an ethnic coloration, predominantly Malay affairs. Before GE12, those demonstrations included the Reformasi protests in support of Anwar (Sabri 2000), the commemoration of Operasi Lalang at the Kamunting Camp (October 27, 2000),[6] the

6) Operasi Lalang was the police term for the mass detention of dissident politicians and social activists on October 27, 1987 (Khoo 1995, 282–286).

anti-toll protest at Kesas Highway (November 5, 2000), and the BERSIH rally of 2007. After GE12, the trend of majority Malay participation in protests continued with BERSIH 2.0, BERSIH 3, and the Himpunan Kebangkitan Rakyat in 2013.

Thus, intra-Malay politics had gone past "out-Islamisation," that is, the efforts made by UMNO and PAS to outdo each other in promoting the role of Islam in public affairs (Liow 2003; 2009). Disputes over material matters abounded, especially over the federal government's refusal to pay oil royalty to Terengganu and Kelantan as long as they were ruled by PAS although Malays formed about 95 percent of the population in each state. The social bases of UMNO-PAS rivalry also extruded from the rural Malay heartland to the urban constituencies of the west coast of the peninsula. In the latter locations, PAS reached out to younger, urban Malays who formed the backbone of the Reformasi and BERSIH rallies (Ahmad Fauzi 2008; Hadiz and Khoo 2011). Likewise, the profile of PAS's candidates in elections changed. From 1999 on, PAS fielded more urban, professional candidates (such as Dzukefly Ahmad Hatta Ramli, Husam Musa, Khalid Samad, Lo' Lo Mohd Ghazali, Mujahid Yusof Rawa, Nizar Jamaluddin, and Siti Mariah Mahmud). These became new non-*ulama* (non-religious scholars) PAS leaders who drew their political sensibilities and mobilizing capabilities from their immersion in urbanization, higher (and, for some, overseas) education, and professional occupations (Dzulkefly 2012; Mujahid 2012).

The terrain of dissent further changed with PKR's revitalization after its severe defeat in the April 2004 election. The UMNO-PKR rivalry, originally marked by the Anwar affair, seemed to be irrelevant after Mahathir's retirement and Anwar's release from prison in September 2004. Besides, PKR was not a Malay party in the way of UMNO or PAS: PKR had non-Malay leaders who came from NGOs or the former Parti Rakyat (People's Party). The UMNO-PKR rivalry was sharpened, however, by the emergence of "new PKR Malays" before and after GE12. Young, urban, and professional PKR Malays, such as Fuziah Salleh, Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad, Nurul Izzah Anwar, and Rafizi Ramli,[7] emerged as the social types to demand merit, competence, equity, transparency, and accountability—the qualities of good governance that underlay the urban middle-class electoral platform of the predominantly non-Malay DAP.

These new dissidents made clear that their anti-regime "Malay politics" grew out of the grievances of many Malays, but they were grievances that did not target an ethnic Other, namely, the Chinese. That made it easier for more non-Malays to join the post-2008 rallies and protests: any threat of disorder or violence came from the direction of the regime, its police, and its allies. In major urban centers, and especially in Kuala

7) Interviews with Fuziah Salleh, Nurul Izzah Anwar, and Rafizi Ramli.

Lumpur, multiethnic dissent was grounded in the material experiences of overlapping socioeconomic grievances. The most readily shared sociopolitical issues were high-profile corruption,[8] institutional degradation,[9] arrogance of power,[10] socioeconomic marginalization,[11] higher costs of living, rising incidence of crime, and deteriorating standards of governance.[12] Such were populist issues, too, that resonated with disaffection over stresses in the social reproduction of urban life. The leading dissidents and PR spokespeople could package those populist issues as a counter-hegemonic message inasmuch as corruption scandals and controversies continually beset the regime.

In retrospect, the organizers of the major protests had two critical achievements. First, they developed viable, cohesive, and extensive networks of dissent. With BERSIH 3, the peak of BERSIH mobilization before GE13, dissident networks were even visible in international media. As demonstrations were held in 72 cities around the world in solidarity with the actual march to Dataran Merdeka, images, YouTube video clips, and other forms of Internet postings of "global BERSIH" went viral. In the creation of an "imagined community of dissent" (Khoo 2016), both creative and optimistic, BERSIH's organizers, participants, and supporters seized the initiative from the regime although the latter had incomparably greater resources and controlled all non-Internet-based print and broadcast media in the country. The second achievement was the opposition's use of the dissent to build an inclusive political platform. On this platform dissenting views, calls for alternative policies, and demands for higher standards of public conduct coalesced into firm electoral support for a two-coalition system.

Transforming Opposition

To reach their goal of a two-coalition system, the opposition had to overcome doubts about their viability as an alternative coalition. Besides knowing only the government of BN (or its predecessor, the Alliance) at the national level, the electorate had witnessed past failures to maintain stable opposition coalitions. Friends and foes repeatedly asked,

8) Abdullah had promised with fanfare to investigate 18 "high-profile corruption cases" as part of institutional reform. The cases did not see the public light.
9) Many despised cases of institutional degradation were related to the conduct of the judiciary, the police, and, after March 2008, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission.
10) In 2008 Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan, Malaysian People's Movement) was completely defeated in Penang, where it had headed the BN state government since 1969. Gerakan President Koh Tsu Koon said that his party had suffered a voters' backlash against UMNO's "arrogance of power."
11) Strong resentment over their "marginalization" galvanized the Indian community as a dissident force (Bunnell *et al.* 2010).
12) NGOs regularly criticized the regime's low standards of governance.

"Can a predominantly non-Malay and secular DAP, a multiethnic PKR with a majority-Malay/Muslim leadership, and an *ulama*-led Malay/Muslim PAS form a coalition that would not be torn apart by ideological differences?" After all, the DAP's objection to what it saw as PAS's commitment to establishing an "Islamic state" was a critical factor in breaking up the Reformasi-inspired Barisan Alternatif (BA, Alternative Front).[13)]

This basic problem of the opposition, explored in this section, was satisfactorily resolved in different ways that transformed the opposition itself. One way to avoid major disagreements was to find common cause for cooperation, such as a demand for "clean and fair elections," the slogan of the original 2007 BERSIH rally that the opposition parties jointly organized with the support of a number of NGOs (interview with Liew Chin Tong;[14)] Liew 2013). Another way was to adapt each party's program to present a shared, if not unified, platform. To that end, the DAP, which had been portrayed by UMNO and its allies as a Chinese chauvinist party, set aside issues of Chinese culture, language, and education and urged voters to support "Change!"—that is, social, political, and institutional change. To moderate its non-Malay image, the DAP recruited and fielded some prominent Malay members as candidates in GE12. In parallel, PAS replaced its *Islamic State Document* of 2004 with a *Negara Berkebajikan* (Welfare state) proposal for GE12. By the latter, less discordant and more inclusive, ideological realignment, PAS strengthened PR's claim of being dedicated to "justice, good governance, transparency, accountability and human rights"—causes that could transcend ethnocentric and religious considerations (Ahmad Fauzi 2008, 233) without compromising the universalism that Islamists claimed for their faith.

From PKR, and Anwar Ibrahim personally, came another way to achieve a semblance of ideological compatibility for PR. By 2006, Anwar had evidently recovered from the ordeals of six years' imprisonment to reenter politics and gain acceptance as the de facto leader of the opposition. With that stature, he boldly tackled what was probably the most intractable ethno-cultural issue of all—the status of the NEP. Before large Malay crowds, and not just non-Malay audiences, he criticized actually existing NEP as mere justification for UMNO's power holders and their corporate allies to enrich themselves. Anwar rushed in where no Malay politician had dared to tread: he called for the abolition of the NEP.[15)] In place of the NEP, Anwar offered a New Economic Agenda (NEA). The NEA was not radical in and of itself. It was not meant to turn the economic system upside

13) "This writer, who was also a secretariat member of the Barisan Alternatif . . . witnessed its demise after PAS launched the Islamic State Document" (Dzulkefly 2012, 185).

14) The designations and affiliations of all interviewees are given in the References.

15) The closest to this was Mahathir's move to "hold the NEP in abeyance," that is, to suspend the restructuring of NEP, in 1986, which, among other things, led to the UMNO split of 1987 (Khoo 1995, 136–143).

down. Yet it was novel in supplying a non-ethnically defined commitment to public welfare and popular rejection of a "timeless Malay agenda" that was raised by many delegates at UMNO's 2006 and 2007 general assemblies.

With such intra-coalitional compromises, the strands of opposition represented by the DAP, PAS, and PKR converged and found confluence with organized nonpartisan streams of dissent and unorganized dissatisfaction with the regime. From PKR came the revived Reformasi stances that drew on Anwar's populist leanings (Khoo 2003, 91–95) to oppose a "greedy and opulent clique"[16] that enriched itself by UMNO's patronage. From the DAP there was the largely non-Malay, urban middle-class, taxpayer-based, anti-statist anger at financial abuses and high-level corruption, combined with widespread Chinese resentment of the Chinese-bashing openly displayed at the UMNO general assemblies. And PAS mobilized the rural and lower- to mid-level urban revulsion against UMNO's corruption and what one of its leaders dismissed as UMNO's "counterfeit religiosity of the rich man" (Kershaw 1969, 65fn13). When the three opposition parties separately campaigned with the differentially nuanced messages conveyed by the DAP's "Change!," PAS's Negara Berkebajikan, and PKR's New Economic Agenda, they could keep faith with their own core constituencies. Collectively, though, they had attained a populist, anti-oligarchic commonality that could be received across ethnic boundaries. Against the odds and much skepticism, the PR displayed a measure of ideological compatibility, roughly hewn and yet genuine and effective for mounting a practical challenge to the regime. Not for nothing was a pro-PR slogan to appeal to voters thus: *Naik Roket pergi ke Bulan mendapatkan Keadilan!* (Ride the rocket to the moon for justice!)[17]

The Zenith of Dissent

Never before GE13 had UMNO-BN had to fight so desperately to retain power. Never before had dissent and opposition been so focused and popular. Yet the zenith of dissent did not solve all the opposition's problems, as may be seen in this section. As noted at the outset, PR gained only 7 more seats in GE13, winning 89 against BN's 133. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explain the severe imbalances in the electoral system —and in institutional, financial, media, and other kinds of power and resources—and how they heavily favored BN and UMNO in first-past-the-post competition. Despite all that, while BN won 60 percent of actual seats, PR won 50.9 percent of the popular vote

16) From the public declaration made in Permatang Pauh, Penang, on September 12, 1998.
17) The "rocket" is DAP's party symbol, the "moon" is PAS's, and *Keadilan* in PKR's name means "justice."

against BN's 47.4 percent. One important inference can be drawn from the opposition's first ever "popular victory": the dissent and opposition had attained such depth by then that their character and quality could influence the future course of politics, the point of this section.

In an illiberal political system where a replacement of the regime had not occurred before, to remain in opposition was to be stuck in dissent, struggling to find voice and impact against the weight of institutionalized power. Within parliament, the BN regime with its large majority would not grant PR, as it had never ever granted the opposition any scope to influence the drafting of laws or, for that matter, any meaningful chance of blocking their passage. Outside parliament, the regime continued to use its police, judicial, and bureaucratic powers to charge or prosecute PR parties, leaders, and representatives on different kinds of issues. Nor would the federal government, armed with highly centralized power, allow PR to sway policy formulation. As it had behaved toward any opposition-led state government in the past, the federal government was hostile toward the PR-led state governments, cramping them by bureaucratic means, withholding funds for development, and seeking other ways of undermining them. Under such circumstances, if the integrity of PR as a coalition came under great stress, it owed in no small measure to the external pressures that UMNO-BN and the federal government brought to bear on the PR parties and leaders, and not simply any intrinsic ideological incompatibility among the partners. Maneuvering space was limited for PR. Still, the politics of dissent and opposition had been dynamic in its pace and spread, innovative and challenging in its expressions, and self-transforming in its impact. In short, PR was not bereft of experience or non-financial resources, especially with the momentum it acquired after late 2007, as an analysis of five different aspects of continuing dissent and opposition would show.

First, PR strove to consolidate itself away from the requirements and stresses of electoral campaigning. Through its state governments, PR tried to offer alternative models of administration and governance. When it ruled Perak for a year before being toppled by UMNO's coup in February 2009, the PAS-headed PR government took a reformist stance to assist various social groups of different ethnic backgrounds whose problems with land tenure, for example, had been neglected by BN during the latter's rule (interviews with Nizar Jamaluddin and Jeyakumar Devaraj). The PKR-led Selangor government looked for practical solutions to the mundane but important grievances of the populace that had returned the PR government with a two-thirds majority in GE13. New initiatives were explored in areas of affordable public housing and more efficient urban waste disposal systems (interview with Dzulkefly Ahmad). The PR parties and/or state governments established their own think tanks to improve policy formulation

on socioeconomic matters (interviews with Yin Shao Loong and Zairil Khir Johari). Whether such initiatives were successfully implemented could determine how credibly PR could claim to be capable of being a better national government. In future competition with BN, the strength of PR's performance would be closely scrutinized by voters and specific economic and social interests alike. It would not have been lost on anyone, much less the PR leadership, that just two defections from PKR and one from the DAP led to the fall of the PR government in Perak, while problems of administration, leadership, and disunity in the PAS-led Kedah government allowed UMNO to recapture Kedah in GE13 (interviews with Toh Kin Woon and Wong Hoy Cheong).

Second, PR strove to construct common platforms to resolve a host of contentious economic, religious, and regionalist issues. Sensitive to skepticism over its alleged ideological compatibility, the PR leadership presented a show of consensus each time it took a decision on a controversial issue. And many controversial issues had arisen, often raised by UMNO, the regime's bureaucratic arms, or its NGO allies, and publicized by UMNO-owned and state-regulated print and broadcast media, UMNO's paid "cyber-troopers," and otherwise pro-UMNO social media. A key aim of such controversies was to divide PAS and the DAP over ethnic and religious matters. Unexpectedly DAP-PAS cooperation improved between 2007 and 2013. Several reasons accounted for this development. Supporters of PR exerted enormous public pressure on the two parties to make a success of PR's coalitional framework. In a crucial instance, which arose in Perak after GE12, the DAP conceded the position of Menteri Besar (chief minister) of the state to PAS although the DAP had won 18 seats in the Perak State Legislative Assembly while PAS had only 6. The DAP's decision, taken reluctantly, was legally forced by the stipulation in the constitution of Perak that the Menteri Besar had to be an ethnic Malay—and none of the DAP's elected representatives was Malay. Yet, the DAP's reluctance was partly overcome by its supporters' strong and almost unanimous online appeals that the party should make a "sacrifice" and do whatever it took to keep a PR government in place. In turn, it made all the difference to the DAP that PAS would defend it in public against accusations of the DAP's being anti-Malay and anti-Islam. For that matter, PR's integrity would have been shattered right after GE12 had PAS accepted UMNO's secret overtures to form UMNO-PAS "Malay unity" governments in Selangor and Perak. Likewise, PAS protected the integrity of PR by rejecting UMNO's urgings thereafter to engage in "Malay/Muslim unity" talks[18] (interview with Dzulkefly Ahmad). To some

18) Those were divisive issues for PAS. The line was drawn between those who wanted to form governments with UMNO in Perak and Selangor so that "the position of Islam could be consolidated" and those who maintained that "the majority of those who voted PAS had rejected UMNO and BN" (Mujahid 2012, 61).

degree, it eased relations between the DAP and PAS that they did not compete for seat allocations within PR because each appealed to a core constituency that did not overlap with the other's (interview with Wong Hoy Cheong). On several religious controversies, because of PR's unified position, non-Muslims came to regard PAS as a moderate and tolerant party in contrast with their denunciation of UMNO for manipulating religious tensions that threatened to encroach on minority rights in religious matters (interview with Mujahid Yusof Rawa). Perhaps the iconic moment of DAP-PAS cooperation was reached when the Registrar of Societies threatened not to recognize the DAP leadership just two days before the nomination day for GE13. Faced with the threat that its candidates could not be nominated by their own party, the DAP decided with PAS's assent that, if they were so compelled by the Registrar of Societies, all DAP candidates would contest under the PAS ticket. The DAP-PAS stance, later modified to have DAP candidates stand on the PAS ticket in Peninsular Malaysia and on the PKR ticket in Sabah and Sarawak, compelled the Registrar to rescind a threat that was recognized (even by some UMNO leaders) as a blunder.[19)]

Third, there was, roughly speaking, not a mere handful but a critical mass of dissidents and oppositionists with common and comparable experiences. The veterans among them could trace experiences back to shared time in detention, the outrage felt at Anwar's humiliation, the call of Reformasi, and BA's formation and collapse. For younger or newer ones, arguably the single most important formative experience was to witness the 2008 tsunami and draw from it the inspiring lesson that "Change was possible" and that BN could be defeated (interviews with Roland Chia, Rafizi Ramli, Terence Siambun, and Junz Wong). During their university years, when student politics was tightly circumscribed by the University and University Colleges Act, some younger activists and politicians had made special efforts to cooperate with their counterparts from different ethnic backgrounds (interviews with Adam Adli, Ginnie Lim, and Ong Jin Cheng). Later it was somewhat easier for them, as it was for younger PR politicians, to be assigned roles in co-organizing PR activities because they had had no part of the divisive polemics that had passed between the older leaders of each party (interviews with Liew Chin Tong and Anthony Loke). Many party-based and nonpartisan activists were convinced by the mass

19) While its agreement to let DAP use its logo was sincere and a brilliant tactic by PAS to gain non-Malay/Muslim confidence, some Malays might not have viewed PAS-DAP amiability with enthusiasm. PAS Deputy President Muhammad Sabu observed of the 2013 electoral outcomes: "in [ethnically] mixed areas, PAS did well. The Chinese were threatened with '1 vote for PR is 1 vote for *Hudud*' but the Chinese said, 'We want *Ubah* (Change), we do not care!' So, 85% of Chinese voted for Pakatan. Which is why we could get Selangor back. The Malays were trapped in the racial issue, which is why we [PAS] lost in Malay majority areas. It was the fence sitters—the government officers—who voted for BN. The postal votes . . . we got only 15%" (Zakiah 2013).

demonstrations and the outcome of GE12 that political reform was not vaguely desirable but attainable provided they put in the effort. Some had worked in campaign after campaign even when their hopes were dashed because of their inexperienced assessments and actual conditions (interviews with Ginnie Lim, Lee Khai Loon, and Junz Wong). Some activists were inspired to initiate party organization and mobilization in their local areas to prepare early for GE13 (interviews with Terence Siambun and Roland Chia). The PR parties fielded many young and inexperienced candidates. In 2008 PKR and, to a lesser extent, the DAP were compelled to do so because they lacked suitable candidates to run in what seemed like unpromising contests. The post-GE12 situation changed with the arrival of young candidates who had had some exposure or shown their commitment to dissident activism in different areas (interviews with Nurul Izzah Anwar, Rafizi Ramli, N. Surendran, and Junz Wong). From then, PR was steadily grooming a "second line" corps of leaders who were already blooded along shared pathways of dissent (interviews with Liew Chin Tong, Nurul Izzah Anwar, and Hannah Yeoh). Many went on to assume responsibility in intermediate positions in politics and government (interviews with Rafizi Ramli, Hannah Yeoh, and Zairil Khir Johari). Consequently, after GE13, some younger PR politicians exuded an air of confidence that they could be the key bearers of the oppositionist mission.

Fourth, nonpartisan dissent and party-based opposition retained the symbiosis they had developed through different campaigns that, before GE13, peaked in the BERSIH 2.0, BERSIH 3, and Himpunan Kebangitan Rakyat rallies. The BERSIH 2.0 Committee, which launched its rallies for electoral reform as nonpartisan civil society initiatives, called for the support of all political parties, including BN parties. As there was not a chance of the latter's participation, it was moot whether that all-embracing call prevented BERSIH 2.0 from being identified with the opposition. On the one hand, the PR parties could mobilize a large presence of their members and supporters. Without them, BERSIH 2.0 would have remained a collection of small NGOs, all unable to bring a sizeable rally to the streets. On the other hand, BERSIH 2.0, led by prominent individuals and reputable activists, possessed a preeminent civil society branding. Without that, PR would have found it much more difficult to promote a nonpartisan demand for electoral reform (interviews with P. Subramaniam, Toh Kin Woon, and Wong Chin Huat). Hence, the relations between civil society dissidents and party-based oppositionists were two-way affairs. A number of activists joined the parties (especially the DAP and PKR) and were groomed or selected at short notice to run for elections (interviews with Ginnie Lim, Lee Khai Loon, and N. Surendran). Other activists chose to remain "on the outside," declining offers of nomination for election to avoid the encumbrances and loss of personal autonomy that came with party affiliation (interview with Fadiah). Yet others preferred

to be independent "facilitators" who could better cross party and organizational lines for a range of causes (interviews with Adam Adli, Peter Kallang, and Ong Jin Cheng). One activist who supported the opposition was nonetheless ready to treat PR as "the ruling class in some states" (interview with Fahmi Reza). In any case, the scope of activism ranged from conducting structured programs in civic and legal education (interview with Hou Jian You) to staging spontaneous, small-scale "direct action" or "flash mob" events (interview with Sean Ho). The scope could encompass personal intervention as and when it suited one's "punk" principles (interview with Yuen Kok Leong). Activists and oppositionists alike were aware that differences could arise between them, as when PR in power (state governments) did not accede to civil society expectations (Rodan and Hughes 2014; interviews with Loh Kok Wah and P. Ramakrishnan). But the realm of dissent was comparatively small, while harassment by the regime was common. Necessity as much as virtue encouraged bonding between nonpartisan dissent and party-based opposition as a characteristic of counter-hegemonic activity.

Finally, dissidents and oppositionists cultivated a "real world" appreciation of pluralist politics. The PR's structure was loosely egalitarian. Unlike UMNO's domination of BN from the latter's founding, no party in PR could even claim to be first among equals. After GE12, PKR had the highest number of parliamentary seats, but not by much, and Anwar was accepted as PR's de facto leader but not much more than that. After GE13, the DAP had its all-time high representation of 38 seats in parliament. Yet even if it was unrealistic enough to try, the DAP could not have dominated PKR (30 seats) and PAS (21 seats). To some extent, PR's relatively balanced proportion of parliamentary representation was tied to patterns of the ethnic composition and spatial distribution of constituencies that resulted from the regime's many exercises of gerrymandering and malapportionment. The rough internal parity in seats could be established as a fact of PR life, so to speak, as long as the three parties could agree to an amiable allocation of seats for subsequent elections. Then, PR leaders could credibly claim a commitment to consensus building and pluralist exchanges. Nurul Izzah Anwar noted that PR had "entered its fourth year" and "the people could judge for themselves" whether the coalition would continue. Of PR's coalition-building effort, she added, "It is a political process for any coalition, it isn't automatic. What is important is for the component parties to have consensus on the constitution and a common policy framework" (quoted in Aw 2013). In case PR faced a crisis, Dzulkefly Ahmad (albeit with a tone of exasperation) reminded "all leaders to desist from shooting one another" because [a]nyone can hurl any suggestion, recipe, formula and so on, but this will test the unity, fullness and maturity of PR as a coalition of parties" (quoted in Nizam and Yusrizal 2014).

Moreover, the attacks on PR usually targeted each party and its leaders along

chauvinistic ethno-religious lines. The DAP would be accused of being anti-Malay or anti-Islam and PKR and PAS of betraying the Malays and Islam. In response, PR parties had to develop a cautiously balanced approach to majority-minority relations, yet another spur to adopting pluralist practices. Indeed, one of PR's unforeseen achievements was to dislodge UMNO-BN from the political center (interview with Liew Chin Tong). From late 2007 to GE13, PR crafted a strong appeal for urban middle-class voters who wearied of UMNO's ethno-religious manipulations and disdain for its non-Malay-based parties. If a measure of suffering sometimes sharpened one's sensitivity toward the position and plight of others, the PR leaders, themselves targets of repression and undemocratic politics, were logical figures to press for reforms toward more democratic government, pluralist competition, guarantees of constitutional rights, etc.[20] Some PAS leaders had striven to formulate principles of democratic Islamism that would place fair and open pluralist competition at the center of any democracy that PR wanted to construct (Dzulkefly 2012; Mujahid 2012). In practice, some of PAS's elected representatives did not hesitate to defend churches and Christian communities within their constituencies, and to promote interfaith dialogues that had been spurned by the regime's leaders and their NGO allies. A number of PR politicians who had entered party politics from prior activism in rights-based NGOs remained close to those organizations (interviews with N. Surendran and Jeyakumar Devaraj). Of the dissidents and activists who stayed outside political parties, many organized or joined campaigns to support ethnic minority groups (interviews with Jannie Lasimbang and Wong Chin Huat), dispossessed communities (interviews with Baru Bian, Peter Kallang, and Simon Siah) or victims of human rights violations (interviews with N. Surendran and Fadiah Nadwa Zikri). Some dissidents disagreed over the PR's pre-GE13 position on the "Indian question" (interview with Jeyakumar Devaraj, N. Ganesan, and N. Surendran). The majority of dissidents would critically support PR but reject UMNO's "ethnic verticalism" or its insistence that Malay rights must come before others' rights (interviews with Jeyakumar Devaraj, N. Surendran, and Zairil Khir Johari). In the case of the short-lived PAS-led PR government of Perak, its land allocation policies broke with UMNO's practices that discriminated against poor communities in general and non-Malay communities in particular (interview with Nizar Jamaluddin). Some political matters—such as the NEP and the state's policies, non-Muslim rights, and support for all school systems—continued to be "sensitive" issues that tested the PR's cohesion and unity even as the coalition tried to move from

20) Former PAS President Fadzil Noor (1937–2002) said that he had gained a better appreciation of the legitimate concerns of non-Malays and non-Muslims in Malaysia after observing the plight of an ethno-religious minority with whom PAS readily empathized, namely, the Malay Muslims of Southern Thailand.

ethnically oriented policy positions in more inclusive directions.

Divides and Dissent Reconfigured

At GE13 the streams of dissent, which had swelled and converged from 2007, could not overcome the structural, institutional, and resource advantages of the regime. Nonetheless, they left deep imprints on the political terrain, producing results that were variously unsatisfactory for the rival coalitions. For the second time since 2008, a recalcitrant electorate had locked the antagonists in a stalemate on the peninsula, gifting the parties of Sabah and Sarawak with a vital role in shaping the course of politics and government. This final section analyzes some important ramifications for dissent as a whole. For Anwar and Najib, the electoral outcome was scarcely to be welcomed. On the one hand, PR's failure to dislodge BN exposed Anwar to continuing persecution. The UMNO regime, unrestrained by any fear of a pre-election backlash, acted to cripple PR's leadership by removing Anwar.[21] In January 2012 the High Court had acquitted Anwar of "Sodomy II," the popular term for the charge of sodomy leveled against Anwar in mid-2008 (given his first conviction of sodomy in 2000 that was finally overturned by the Federal Court in 2004). The Court of Appeal reversed the verdict in March 2014, the Federal Court upheld the reversal in February 2015, and Anwar was again jailed. On the other hand, BN's performance was worse in some ways than in 2008, for which Abdullah Badawi had been ousted in 2009 from the premiership by his own party. Certain UMNO veterans openly warned that Najib's leadership could bring defeat in the next election. Perhaps Najib escaped being deposed like Abdullah because GE13 inflicted less of a shock on the system than the tsunami of 2008, and UMNO, having recovered some of its 2008 losses, would not risk another sudden removal of its leader.

Election's end did not narrow the BN-PR divide. Najib decried a "Chinese tsunami" of anti-regime sentiment for eroding BN's support. Anwar denounced electoral fraud for denying PR power despite its securing the popular vote. Could either man have supplied a different narrative of GE13? Najib clung to the primacy of an ethnic divide upon which UMNO's dominance rested. Anwar maintained his call for reform, the goal of oppositionists and dissidents alike since the triple rallies of 2007. In short, the BN-PR rivalry seemed set to resume as a drudging war of position along that basic rift between ethnic and reformist politics.

21) "Najib gives every appearance of preparing for snap polls on the assumption that Anwar will be out of the way and the opposition decapitated" (Tisdall 2011).

Any such expectation was shattered in February 2015. On February 10, the Federal Court's decision upheld Anwar's conviction of Sodomy II. Two days later the PAS Spiritual Leader Nik Aziz Nik Mat died.[22] And on February 28, *Sarawak Report* (2015) broke its investigative story of what it called "the heist of the century," linked to the sovereign wealth fund 1MDB (1 Malaysia Development Berhad). The fallout from these events reconfigured political divides and dissident alignments.

The first two events exacted a heavy toll on PR. Returning Anwar to jail for another five years matched UMNO's strategy of removing the "glue" that had held the PR intact as a coalition. Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, became PR's nominal leader, as she was Barisan Alternatif's when he was previously in prison. Wan Azizah admitted that she could not bring Anwar's savvy or authority to the position. Nik Aziz, though, was nothing if not charisma, shrewdness, and strength (Farish 2003; Khoo 2004). With him as Menteri Besar, Kelantan held out against UMNO's blandishments and the federal government's hostility for 25 years. Given his influential position in PAS, Nik Aziz had helped PAS "progressives" to win key positions in the party, and they backed PR and Anwar's leadership (Farish 2015a; 2015b). Nik Aziz, implacably distrustful of UMNO, was scornful of PAS leaders who wanted to enter "unity talks" with UMNO after GE12. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss in detail the corrosive barrage of latent ideological tensions, unilateral programmatic initiatives, intra- and inter-party rivalries, and lack of personal empathy that washed over PR in the absence of Anwar and Nik Aziz. Suffice it to summarize the starkest outcomes. The PAS "progressives" were swept out of their party positions in June 2015. They abandoned PAS to form a new party, Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah, National Trust Party). At the same time, a DAP-PAS rupture tore PR just as a similar rift did the BA before and ostensibly because of "ideological incompatibility," too. And although it tried, a PKR leadership that was itself burdened with factional strife could hardly juggle two alliances—one of the DAP, PKR, and Amanah, and the other of PAS and PKR.

The third event of February 2015, the exposé of the 1MDB scandal, which directly implicated Najib, should have made the regime's position untenable. The *Sarawak Report* story was followed by mounting evidence garnered by investigators at home and in several overseas jurisdictions of fraud, corruption, and money laundering on an unprecedented scale. Najib remained virtually silent on the issue. His cabinet and UMNO allies who spoke for him could not rebut allegations posed in and out of parliament. His lawyers threatened but did not file defamation suits against a host of accusers, including *Sarawak Report* and the *Wall Street Journal*. Instead, Najib dismissed several high-ranking public

22) For a short news report on Nik Aziz's death, see Teoh (2015).

officers believed to have compiled a legal case against him. He co-opted several potential critics in UMNO, while the police harried dissidents with investigations for sedition. In mid-2015, as disaffection spread, Najib sacked Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin and Minister of Rural and Regional Development Shafie Apdal. Half a year later, Najib's allies in Kedah forced out Menteri Besar Mukhriz Mahathir. This was followed by the expulsion of Muhiyuddin and Mukhriz, the withdrawal of Shafie, and the departure of a small number of low-ranking office-bearers and members from UMNO.

Now, when the constituency of opposition seemed to be fatigued by defeat and disarray, fresh initiatives of dissent arose with new political divides. From August 29 to 30, 2015, BERSIH organized its largest ever gathering in Kuala Lumpur, ending before midnight marked the 58th anniversary of Merdeka. In a twist of history, BERSIH 4 marked the moment of the 90-year-old Mahathir's reentry into politics—as a dissident determined not merely to oust Najib but to defeat UMNO altogether. Soon after, Mahathir, Muhyiddin, and Mukhriz founded a new party, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu, United Pribumi of Malaysia),[23] that has since joined Amanah, the DAP, and PKR as a coalition. What the opposition gained in Bersatu as an ally in reformist politics it lost in PAS after Hadi and Najib engineered an implicit pact that did not mend the ethno-religious divide. No one knows yet where the intra-Malay divide will lead: presently, the Malay community is confronted by appeals for support from five sources composed in two alliances—UMNO-PAS and Amanah-Bersatu-PKR. Perhaps not least of all the divides is a regionalist rift between Sabah and the federal government that has opened up since Shafie Apdal founded a new "Sabah party," Parti Warisan Sabah (Warisan, Sabah Heritage Party) in Sabah, which has attracted some opposition representatives.

On the eve of the 60th anniversary of Merdeka, therefore, contemporary politics in Malaysia is marked by sociopolitical divides and dissent that endure, not in static but contingent forms, dynamically reconfigured as conditions and protagonists change.

Accepted: June 29, 2018

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