

Populist Politics in the New Malaysia

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Abstract

This article investigates the role of religion in populist politics by focusing on the nascent democratic transition in Malaysia, where a decades-old authoritarian regime was unseated in the 2018 general election. I propose that this result can partly be explained by analysing the moral and populist battle between political rivals, given the dominance of ethno-religious identity politics amid Malaysia's diverse population. I argue that the nationalist claims of the incumbent regime were overcome by more inclusive claims based on economic justice employed by its political opponents. To illustrate the workings of these competing moral claims, the article briefly examines the debates on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT+) rights during this political transition. I suggest that public attitudes towards LGBT+ rights provide one clear example of the larger moral and populist contest that forms part of the confrontation between the erstwhile ethno-religious nationalist regime and the new government. This perspective contributes vital insights on the role of religion and morality in populist politics, especially in authoritarian or newly democratising contexts which are also highly diverse. The article is primarily based on public statements made by Malaysian politicians before and during the election campaign.

Introduction: The Landmark 2018 Elections

What influence does religion have in populist politics, specifically in constructions of the notion of a virtuous 'people' standing against villainous 'elites' and 'others'? This article addresses this question by focusing on the 2018 Malaysian general elections, in which the incumbent *Berikutan Nasional* (National Front, [BN]) coalition was defeated for the first time in the country's sixty-one-year modern history. This was despite the BN's escalation of repressive tactics leading up to the polls, from last-minute gerrymandering and voter malapportionment to silencing political opponents and civil society activists (Hutchinson 2018: 594-95). Several observers of Malaysian politics predicted that the BN would retain government – with some convinced that it could actually increase its majority – despite popular discontent with its corruption and misrule (Hutchinson 2018: 582, Welsh 2018: 86). The

Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope, [PH]) coalition defied these forecasts through what international headlines described as a 'shocking' victory, securing 113 seats out of 222 in the federal Parliament compared to the BN's seventy-nine seats. An alliance with *Parti Warisan Sabah* (the Sabah Heritage Party) in East Malaysia and one independent candidate increased the PH's aggregate number of seats to 122 (Hutchinson 2018: 597).

Significantly, eighteen seats were won by the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), which was part of the PH's predecessor coalition, the *Pakatan Rakyat* (People's Pact, [PR]). Yet PAS's insistence on expanding the imposition of Islamic criminal legislation catalysed conflict with its coalition partners – especially the secularist, centre-left Democratic Action Party (DAP) – resulting in the breakup of PR in 2015 (Hutchinson 2018: 592-93). In 2018, the PH garnered forty-eight per cent of the popular vote, compared to the BN's

thirty-four per cent and PAS's seventeen per cent. In the previous, also tensely contested election in 2013, the PR won the popular vote by fifty-one per cent against the BN's forty-seven per cent. However, because of the impacts of malapportionment and gerrymandering in the country's first-past-the-post electoral system, the BN still managed to retain Parliament with 133 seats compared to the PR's 89 seats (Hutchinson 2018: 588).

The 2018 election results were also historic because of abrupt changes in the ways that different political parties and coalitions could claim to represent the interests of the electorate. Historically, the BN government had to balance two contradictory narratives – first, that Malaysia is primarily a Malay and Muslim nation and, second, that it is a multicultural utopia. This is because the BN's three main component parties were established to defend specific communal interests – Malay, Chinese, and Indian – but the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), being the dominant partner, was always able to assert the primacy of its Malay nationalist agenda. In other words, 'the people,' according to the BN's governing logic, was at once an exclusive and inclusive concept. The coexistence – and political effectiveness – of these incongruent narratives can be explained by the fact that the Federal Constitution defines Malays as Muslims, effectively fusing the ethnic and religious identity of a numeric majority of Malaysians within a religiously and ethnically diverse electorate.¹ The BN also historically used its advantage of incumbency and executive dominance to cultivate its patronage of well-connected business leaders – Malays and non-Malays – as part of its Malay

nationalism and multicultural tokenism (Gomez and Jomo 1999: 4).

This is why, in the past, it was largely taken for granted that the BN's dominance was virtually unchallengeable. Furthermore, to bolster its nationalist appeal, UMNO would not hesitate to demonise various minority groups whom it portrayed as proxies of the monolithically 'liberal' (and by association 'Islamophobic') West, including Christians, ethnic Chinese, Shi'a Muslims (since Malaysia's official religion is Sunni Islam), human rights activists, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT+) people.

In the 2008 general election, however, the BN maintained power but lost its supermajority (control of more than two-thirds of Parliament). The PR started posing a serious threat to the BN but was hampered by its own internal contradictions. From its inception, the coalition was dogged by PAS's exclusivist focus on Muslims and Islam at the expense of its more multiracial and multireligious coalition partners, the DAP and PKR. Amid this backdrop, the BN and the PR began escalating populist elements in their political rivalry by promising financial aid, subsidies, and (in the case of the BN) cash handouts to entice voters in their budgets and shadow budgets (Welsh 2018: 94). For example, the BN introduced a cash transfer system, *Bantuan Rakyat Satu Malaysia* (BR1M) in 2012 to offset cost of living issues but this failed to neutralise the PR's opposition to the BN's imposition of the unpopular Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 2015 (Hutchinson 2018: 589).

Historically, the UMNO-led BN's brand of Malay nationalism was a way of competing with PAS for core Malay votes. Since the 2013 elections, however, PAS and UMNO had to contend with bitter in-fighting which resulted in the formation of two splinter parties – *Parti Amanah Negara* (the National Trust Party, henceforth '*Amanah*') out of PAS and *Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia* (the Malaysian United Indigenous Party, henceforth '*Bersatu*') out of UMNO – both of which swiftly joined the PH coalition (Hutchinson 2018: 593). This fragmentation of Malay party politics accelerated UMNO's decline while also

¹ Muslims comprise 61.3 percent of the Malaysian population of 28 million, while 19.8 percent are Buddhist, 9.2 percent are Christian and 6.3 percent are Hindu. In terms of ethnicity, 67.4 percent are categorised as Bumiputera (a state-created term comprising ethnic Malays and other indigenous peoples, mostly in Malaysian Borneo, who may or may not be Muslim), 24.6 percent are Chinese, 7.3 percent are Indian, and 0.7 percent are classified as 'Other' (Department of Statistics, Malaysia 2011).

transforming the relationship between expressions of Islam, nationalism, and the different parties' moral claims on political legitimacy.

This detailed background underscores this article's main argument, which is that, in the 2018 elections, the PH successfully countered the BN's explicit ethno-religious nationalism and tokenistic multiculturalism by mobilising a different moral narrative. I maintain that the PH primarily focused upon economic grievances to calibrate the moral claims that contributed to its populist appeal. Yet I also critically examine the limits of the PH's more inclusive narrative by exploring a controversy that rocked the PH government after the election, when UMNO and PAS supporters closed ranks to decry the new administration's alleged permissiveness on LGBT+ rights. The new UMNO-PAS alliance and the PH government's ambivalent responses on LGBT+ rights are, I contend, a valuable way of discerning the complex role of religion in the construction of 'the people,' the 'elites' and 'others' in populist politics.

The article begins with a brief review of recent definitions of populism and draws upon some key aspects to guide an analysis of the Malaysian context. It then provides a summary of Malaysian politics in the decades before the 2018 election. In what follows, the article systematically compares the political rhetoric of the PH and the BN by drawing upon key aspects of the definitions of populism highlighted. It concludes by briefly exploring the attacks by Malay and Islamist nationalists against the PH government's allegedly pro-LGBT+ sympathies to illuminate the competing moral claims underpinning populist politics in contemporary Malaysia.

Conceptualising populism in diverse societies

Populism is a contested concept that has been analysed as an 'ideology, a discursive style, and a form of political mobilization' (Gidron and Bonikowski 2013: 1, 5). Drawing upon the framework offered by Rogers Brubaker (2017: 362), Daniel DeHanas and Marat Shterin (2018: 180) define populism as 'a political style that sets "sacred" people against two enemies: "elites" and "oth-

ers.'" DeHanas and Shterin (2018: 182) contend that the notion of 'the people' (who need to be defended against the twin threats posed by 'the elite' and 'outsiders') can be sacralised by populist politicians drawing upon religious 'symbols, tropes, and ideas, and the feelings of belonging, difference and entitlement they reinforce or even generate.' Bearing this in mind, this article does not prescribe a particular definition of populism but approaches it as a form of 'moral politics' (Gidron and Bonikowski 2018: 3). In doing so, it focuses on the role of religion as a resource for the construction of a 'sacred people' in Malaysia's political trajectory in the 2018 elections.

The role of religion in populist politics should also be contextualised by comparing it with nationalism as a parallel phenomenon in which the idea of the 'people' can be made sacred. This is because religion is not the only resource that populist politicians can utilise to construct the notion of a 'sacred' people. This comparison is also instructive because much commentary on far-right politics in Western Europe tends to conflate populism and nationalism. Yet as Benjamin De Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis (2017: 302) argue, it is analytically vital to distinguish between populism and nationalism as 'different ways of discursively constructing and claiming to represent "the people," as underdog and as nation respectively.' Using a spatial metaphor, they contend that the social antagonism that is characteristic of populist politics works on a vertical or 'down/up' axis (hence the 'underdog' taking on the 'elite'). Nationalism, on the other hand, primarily works on a horizontal or 'in/out' axis – hence the 'pure' or 'rightful' members of the nation pitting themselves against outsiders and internal enemies who sully national purity, including migrants and ethnic or religious minorities.

This article acknowledges this rejoinder by De Cleen and Stavrakakis, especially since Malaysia's diversity raises complex questions about the very concept of 'nation.' Can there be a multi-ethnic nation of Malaysians? Or, is the country primarily a Malay (and therefore Muslim) nation

Table 1: Political parties in the 222-seat Malaysian Federal Parliament, from the 2008 general election until the breakup of the *Pakatan Rakyat* coalition in 2015

Role	Coalition	Component Parties	Orientation	Number of seats (2008-2018)	Number of seats (2013-2015)
Government	<i>Barisan Nasional</i> (National Front)	United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)	Malay nationalist	79	88
		Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA)	Chinese nationalist	15	7
		Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC)	Indian nationalist	3	4
		Other junior component parties, including from Sabah and Sarawak (in Malaysian Borneo)			43
Total				140	133
Opposition	<i>Pakatan Rakyat</i> (People's Pact)	Democratic Action Party (DAP)	Centre-left and secularist; multiracial/multireligious (albeit majority Chinese)	28	38
		People's Justice Party (PKR)	Centrist; multiracial/multireligious	30	29
		Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS)	Islamist	23	21
	Not formally part of the <i>Pakatan Rakyat</i>	Socialist Party of Malaysia (PSM)	Socialist and secularist; multiracial/multireligious	1	1
Total				82	89

Sources: Compiled and summarised from *Malaysiakini* archives (malaysiakini.com) and other citations within this article.

Table 2: Political parties in 222-seat Malaysian Federal Parliament after the May 2018 general election

Role	Coalition	Major Component Parties	Post-2015 splintering	Orientation	Number of seats
Government	<i>Pakatan Harapan</i> (Alliance of Hope)	DAP	N.a.	Centre-left and secularist	42
		PKR	N.a.	Centrist	47
		National Trust Party (<i>Amanah</i>)	From PAS	Soft Islamist	13
		Malaysian United Indigenous Party (<i>Bersatu</i>)	From UMNO	Soft Malay nationalist	11
	Subtotal				113
	Informal PH allies	Sabah Heritage Party (<i>Warisan</i>)	From UMNO	Sabahan nationalist; multiracial/multireligious	8
	Independent candidate			1	
Total					122
Opposition	<i>Barisan Nasional</i>	UMNO	Into <i>Bersatu</i> and <i>Warisan</i>	Malay nationalist	54
		MCA	N.a.	Chinese nationalist	1
		MIC	N.a.	Indian nationalist	2
		Junior component parties			22
	Subtotal				79
		<i>Gagasan Sejahtera</i> (Ideas of Prosperity)	PAS	Into <i>Amanah</i>	Islamist
	Other parties and independents				3
Total					100

Sources: Compiled and summarised from *Malaysiakini* archives (malaysiakini.com) and other citations within this article

that merely tolerates the presence of non-Malays and non-Muslims? This question goes to the heart of Malaysian politics, which has been described as a hierarchical form of ethno-religious consociationalism – in other words, involving constant compromise between the elites of different communities, with Malays accorded political dominance (Hutchinson 2018: 584-85). It also clarifies this article's analysis – some of the examples provided later could be interpreted as straightforward examples of nationalism, but in discussing them I suggest that the picture is more complicated and that they also illustrate the subtle workings of moral and populist politics. In particular, I suggest that the former BN regime's strong ethno-religious nationalist rhetoric gave the opportunity for the inchoate PH coalition to respond with a moral outrage that activated their successful populist campaign. To flesh out this contention, the next section summarises a recent history of authoritarianism and ethno-religious nationalism in Malaysia prior to the 2018 elections.

Authoritarianism and populism in Malaysia before 2018

Under the charismatic leadership of Mahathir Mohamad, who first became prime minister in 1981 until his resignation in 2003, the BN employed populist strategies to cement its popularity. For example, in a highly symbolic and visible move soon after he came into power in 1981, Mahathir² introduced punch-cards and name-tags for civil servants – which he and members of his cabinet adopted by example – to reduce the civil service's elitist aura and to enable members of the public to make complaints against 'rude or indolent' officers by name (Rehman 2006: 171). Mahathir's combination of populism and authoritarianism was boosted when the charismatic student leader and Muslim activist Anwar Ibrahim, hitherto staunchly anti-UMNO, joined the party soon after Mahathir became premier.

² Full Malay names are patronymic, hence my citing first names upon subsequent mentions.

The Mahathir-Anwar duo provided a new combination of nationalist and religious legitimacy that gave UMNO, and thus BN, the upper hand. Yet the attempts by PAS and UMNO to out-Islamise each other increasingly overshadowed the country's historical multicultural consociationalism. It also coincided with increasing authoritarianism under BN rule, culminating in a crackdown on the independent media, the courts, and civil society in the late 1980s. Particularly sinister was the detention without trial and torture of 106 activists, including feminists and environmentalists, and members of the political opposition, including secular leftists and Islamists, under the Internal Security Act (ISA) in 1987.³

Whilst the BN emerged stronger in the early 1990s, it was severely weakened by the regional economic crisis in the late 1990s which triggered a political crisis. Mahathir's sacking of Anwar, who was by this time Deputy Prime Minister, on charges of corruption and sodomy in 1998 catalysed a democratic reform movement (dubbed '*Reformasi*') which failed to dislodge the BN in elections the following year. The treatment of Anwar introduced an unprecedented intra-Malay, intra-Muslim moral contest between UMNO and its Malay critics – in this case, with UMNO painting Anwar as a traitor based on his alleged sexual proclivities. However, the collapse of the opposition coalition post-1999 paved the way for the BN's comeback, this time riding upon a popular wave of 'moderate' Islam under Mahathir's successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who took office in 2004.

Political and economic mismanagement under Abdullah's administration led to another surge of anti-regime protests which weakened but failed to unseat the BN in the 2008 election. These campaigns entrenched the moral dimensions of the rivalry between the BN and its opponents. This new phase of rivalry was precipitated by two mass demonstrations in November 2007

³ Francis Hutchinson (2018: 587-88) provides an efficient summary of the BN's other repressive measures, which space does not permit me to elaborate at length.

that attracted tens of thousands of protesters (huge by Malaysian standards) – the first organised by the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (BERSIH) and the second by the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) (Lee et al. 2010: 294-95). BERSIH demanded democratic reforms in the country's electoral system, managing to widen its multiracial appeal and support base in subsequent mass actions in 2011, 2012, 2015 and 2016. Meanwhile, HINDRAF sought reparations for Malaysians of Indian descent, characterised as innocent victims of exploitation by the British colonial government – a case of the 'underdog' facing down a rapacious 'elite.'

The goals of BERSIH, and to a lesser extent the short-lived HINDRAF, were supported by several PR leaders, which contributed to its populist appeal as a coalition defending the interests of the '*rakyat*' ('citizens' or 'people') against exploitation by out-of-touch BN elites after the 2008 election. The BN responded by initiating superficial reforms, for example, repealing the ISA, which allowed for detention without trial for up to 60 days. Yet such reforms meant nothing – the BN merely replaced the ISA with the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 which, although reducing the maximum period of detention without trial to 28 days, provided a wider and more ambiguous definition of 'security offences.' As an example of 'moral politics' that is relevant to this article, the BN also sought to discredit Ambiga Sreenevasan, the previous chair of BERSIH 2.0 in 2011, for her support of the LGBT+ rights initiative *Seksualiti Merdeka*. BERSIH, however, continued to respond to the BN's repression through highly successful public demonstrations which served to enhance support for the PR to the extent that the BN was very nearly ousted in the 2013 election.

After 2013, the BN government became mired in a corruption scandal involving 1MDB, a state-created sovereign wealth fund, unleashing exceptional levels of public discontent⁴. How-

ever, the BN strengthened its grip by manipulating Islamic and Malay nationalist sentiments (including by making overtures to PAS); passing even more restrictive legislation against the media; and harassing its political opponents (Hutchinson 2018: 594-95). The regime also intensified ethno-religious nationalist rhetoric against a range of 'others,' including LGBT+ people, Christians, Shi'a Muslims, and the values of liberalism, secularism and human rights. Against this backdrop, the splintering of UMNO and PAS (into *Bersatu* and *Amanah*, respectively) significantly realigned Malaysia's political landscape. The détente between the scandal-plagued Prime Minister Najib Razak and PAS exacerbated the moral rivalry in an already polarised environment – the new BN-PAS alignment targeted 'conservative' supporters of the Malay-Muslim status quo, whilst the nascent PR became the party of choice for 'liberals' and other voters who were enraged by the 1MDB scandal (Welsh 2018: 91-92). The significance of the 2018 election was that the PH, as an untested new coalition, successfully mobilised a different, populist moral narrative – largely based on economic grievances – that triumphed over the BN's explicit ethno-religious nationalism and tokenistic multiculturalism.

Comparing populist claims: *Barisan Nasional* and *Pakatan Harapan*

In this section, I systematically compare the moral rhetoric adopted by the BN and the PH as part of their populist electoral campaigns. This comparison of moral politics, I suggest, illustrates the direct and indirect ways that religion influences populist politics amongst Malaysia's diverse electorate. The timeline of events is crucial. Parliament was dissolved on 7 April 2018, followed by the announcement of candidate nominations on 28 April and polling on 9 May. At 11 days, the official campaigning period was set at the legally allowed minimum (Hutchinson 2018: 595). Yet the BN and PH had been on high alert to contest

⁴ The 1MDB case dwarfed other significant corruption scandals faced by Najib's administration –

Hutchinson (2018, 590-94) again provides a clear and useful summary.

in potential snap elections for months beforehand, since the election was forecasted to be held in late 2017 (Hutchinson 2018: 594). The excerpts I include in this section therefore do not strictly fall within the official campaigning period.

Instead, I focus on verbatim quotes reported in the mass media in three distinct periods – the months before the official campaigning period (1 January to 28 April 2018), the election campaign (28 April to 9 May), and post-election quotes in relation to LGBT+ rights, namely in July–August 2018 and August 2019. I have selected quotes from *Malaysiakini*, the country's most widely read online news site, which is free from government ownership and political control.⁵ As an exception, the introductory quote on the LGBT+ issue comes from the Malay-language, BN-controlled news site *MStar*. My purpose is to analyse the general contours of the PH's and BN's political styles rather than detailed critical discourse analysis, which is beyond the scope of this article.

BN: Ethno-religious nationalism vs unanticipated social changes

Building up to the 2018 general election, UMNO's Malay nationalist and pseudo-Islamist agenda became more strident. Whilst the economic dimension was not completely absent from BN's overall rhetoric, the coalition increasingly focused on ethno-religious sentiments especially in response to its own internal political woes. This is what intensified UMNO-BN's characterisation of the 'sacred people' and the 'other.' For example, Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor, a former UMNO cabinet minister, described the DAP, a PH component party, as follows (Alyaa in *Malaysiakini*, 14 April 2018):

We are facing the most obvious challenge – there is a coalition whose backbone is the DAP – a chauvinist party where most of its leaders are evangelists. If they are Catholics, I would believe them, but when they are evangelists, new Christians, this is the problem. This is what DAP really is, and it is

⁵ Until election day, the BN-controlled media were severely muzzled in their reporting.

Pakatan Harapan's backbone so you must be careful.

This statement suggests a nominal recognition of religions other than Islam, but in a manner that effectively reinforces Christianity as a disruptive 'other.' Yet this perspective also distinguishes the 'good' minority apples – quietist Catholics – from 'bad' Malaysian Christians – politicised, power-seeking, anti-BN Evangelicals. Thus, Tengku Adnan's tribute to the role of Islam in contributing to Malaysia's growth and sovereignty came with a warning: 'But all these will be destroyed if we are not careful. It's the same with the special rights of the Malays, our language and many others which could be destroyed because these people do not like what we have achieved' (Alyaa in *Malaysiakini*, 14 April 2018).

Tengku Adnan's sentiment is merely one example of how UMNO's – and by association the BN's – idea of the 'sacred people' revolved around Malay privileges and identity. This religiously framed nationalism informs an explicit moral position that can be discerned through the litany of 'others' who have been cast as enemies by UMNO, including LGBT+ people. One illustration is the following sentiment expressed by former Deputy Prime Minister and current Leader of the Opposition, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, commenting on 'deviationist' groups operating within the country: 'The attack on the Muslim mind also comes through action by certain parties which uphold...pluralism...and activities that celebrate the rights of the so-called discriminated groups such as the lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgenders (LGBT)' (Bernama in *Malaysiakini*, 9 January 2018).

These moral and nationalist ingredients in the BN's political arsenal are not clear-cut examples of populist politics. They also failed to produce electoral success for the coalition in 2018. Instead, they suggest that the BN severely underestimated the institutional and demographic changes which unleashed the PH's highly successful 'saviour politics' (Welsh 2018: 86) within a political milieu that was increasingly polarised and populated by populist politicians. This was

most clearly seen in Mahathir's decision to return to politics as the founder of *Bersatu*, which splintered from UMNO, and then to lead the PH's political crusade to 'Save Malaysia' from Najib and his cronies. The moral and populist dimensions of the PH's 'saviour politics' were most evident during the election campaign, for example, when Mahathir addressed the '*Tsunami Rakyat*' ('Citizens' Tsunami') rally with his recurring campaign motif: 'We want to topple this thief's government.' (*Malaysiakini*, 6 May 2018).

The moral dimensions of this 'saviour politics,' however, were complicated by the fragmentation of the Malay political landscape. The formation of PAS splinter party *Amanah* in 2015 and *Bersatu* (from UMNO) in 2016 meant that there were now four rather than two major Malay-Muslim political parties vying for Malay-Muslim support. The rapprochement between Mahathir and Anwar – who at this point was imprisoned yet again, for a second sodomy conviction – also grabbed the headlines.⁶

By most predictions, *Amanah* and *Bersatu* were unlikely to make inroads by 2018, especially when PAS withdrew from the PH's predecessor political pact and appeared to welcome UMNO's overtures under the guise of Malay-Muslim unity. Yet the BN's share of the vote collapsed and support for PAS also decreased slightly due to swings towards *Amanah* and *Bersatu* during the general election. This benefited PH on the whole, as the DAP and the centrist, multi-ethnic *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (National Justice Party, [PKR]) also won more parliamentary seats compared to 2013.

⁶ Anwar was first convicted of sodomy and corruption in 1999, during Mahathir's administration; this sentence was overturned by the Federal Court in 2004 under the administration of Mahathir's successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (Shah 2018: 129-133). A second, separate sodomy allegation emerged immediately after the 2008 general election, when Anwar provided *de facto* leadership that galvanised the inchoate PR's populist surge against the BN. After a complicated legal process, he was sentenced in 2014, i.e. soon after the 2013 general election, when the PR under his leadership won the popular vote but still failed to dislodge the BN. Anwar received a royal pardon in May 2018, a week after the PH's electoral victory.

PH: Anti-corruption, good governance, and populist moral retaliation

Religious and ethnic nationalist sentiments were not completely absent from the political style of the PH. Yet many of these sentiments were used by ex-UMNO defectors to undermine the party's official rhetoric, as exemplified in the following quote by a former UMNO cabinet minister turned critic, Rais Yatim (*Malaysiakini*, 8 May 2018):

There are four Chinese component parties in BN, but in *Harapan*, there is only one (DAP). DAP may win 35 seats, out of the 54 seats it is contesting, nationwide. This is not enough to determine the future of the country. So the allegations (that voting DAP will threaten Malay rights) are to spook the Malays into not voting for *Harapan*. But the smart Malays have now wised up and changed their minds and started to think about the wrongs committed by the BN coalition. [Issues like] the rising cost of living...and the selling of the country's assets will matter more to the voters than the spectre of DAP destroying Malay rights.

This reframing of ethno-religious sentiments in economic terms is a pivotal example of how the PH primarily focused upon economic grievances to calibrate the moral claims that contributed to its populist appeal. This strategy was especially persuasive since – contrary to official indicators of economic performance – household debt, shortage of affordable housing, and inflation all worsened under the Najib administration (Hutchinson 2018: 588-89). The 1MDB scandal was therefore transformed into a Herculean moral issue that undermined the BN's simultaneous claims to be the guardian of Malaysia's material development, Islamic virtues, and multicultural values.

While PH leaders and allies did not directly refer to 'sacred people' or synonymous terms in their political rhetoric, they imbued the concept of '*rakyat*' ('citizen' or 'people') with more inclusive connotations, juxtaposing it with the concept of '*maruah*' ('pride' or 'honour'), a Malay word often used to sanctify or dignify the underdog. For example, according to the rising PKR leader, Rafizi Ramli: 'So the *rakyat* of all races are now determined to reclaim our honour. We have

lost our nation's soul under Najib' (*Malaysiakini*, 8 May 2018). Rafidah Aziz, a former UMNO cabinet minister who openly supported PH during the election campaign, said: 'Redeeming our tarnished *maruah* (pride) is what needs to be a priority. Not bribing with goodies [economic handouts] that the country can ill afford and will be more burdensome for the *rakyat* (people)' (*Malaysiakini*, 8 May 2018).

Such sentiments by former UMNO grandees and rising PH leaders indirectly sacralised the ethnic and religious inclusivity in the PH's portrayal of 'the people.' It was an effective way for PH's diverse political coalition morally to turn the tables on the BN whilst also sidestepping its own internal contradictions on Islam and Malay nationalism. This message was harnessed to appeal to urban, multicultural, middle-class voters. This tallies with observations that while middle-class Malaysians were historically supportive of the BN regime, there is a growing, multi-ethnic proportion that is increasingly concerned with issues of transparency, good governance, and public accountability (Saravanamuttu 2001: 110-12). Urban middle class Malaysians were therefore a natural target for the PH and the PR, its predecessor coalition.

The other side of this argument is that, since the 2008 elections, the BN's continued dominance was because of its appeal amongst rural Malay voters in Peninsula Malaysia. The BN could also rely on voter loyalty in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak – informally referred to as its 'fixed deposits' – as a result of its entrenched system of patronage there (Hutchinson 2018: 586, 600). The 2018 elections, however, saw a minor electoral swing in Sabah and Sarawak against the BN which framed their regional and communal interests in economic terms. This was succinctly expressed during the campaign of Baru Bian, the Sarawakian PH parliamentary candidate who is now a cabinet minister: 'This is [the 14th General Election], with new social economic issues and a new political consciousness. I hope today we can move beyond racial and communal politics and look at

credible, professional and courageous candidates who will speak for the *rakyat*' (Joseph in *Malaysiakini*, 26 April 2018).

The evidence of the PH's moral claims is most evident in its characterisation of UMNO-BN, and especially of Najib, as out-of-touch elites who were squandering what rightfully belonged to the people. The PH's successful use of the 1MDB scandal struck a chord with voters, despite the BN's vicious clampdown on its critics. Amid the numerous PH references to the scandal, it is worth quoting a significant portion of the open letter published by the senior DAP leader **Lim Kit Siang** (*Malaysiakini*, 7 May 2018) two days before voting took place, which illustrates the moral dimensions of the PH's saviour politics:

On the eve of the historic 14th general election, I ask the 15 million Malaysian voters to save Malaysia and our future generations, and not to save Najib and UMNO/BN. Najib has betrayed both the Malays and Malaysians because he has turned the country into a rogue democracy, forgetting his promise in September 2011 to make Malaysia one of the best democracies in the world. And even worse, he has turned Malaysia into a global kleptocracy as a result of the 1MDB scandal, described by the US Attorney-General as 'kleptocracy at its worst.' May 9 is a 'now or never, do or die' moment for Malaysians, regardless of race, religion, region or party affiliation to set Malaysia free from corruption, abuses of power, injustices and exploitation and to reach for the 'Malaysian dream' – citizens for a united, harmonious, progressive, prosperous nation which is a model to the world of how a multi-racial, multilingual, multireligious and multicultural people can succeed in turning differences and diversities into a unique national strength.

Lim's letter encapsulates some of the recurring themes already discussed in relation to saviour politics and populism – notably its appeal to a righteous, multicultural citizenry needing to redeem its honour from exploitation by a rapacious, entrenched elite (even though the words 'sacred,' 'the people,' and 'elite' are not explicitly used). Also noteworthy is that apart from this skewering of Najib and his allies, there was arguably an absence of rhetoric that systematically demonised minority identities in the PH's

campaign, compared to the BN's. Yet absence of evidence is not evidence of absence – it is too early to tell whether the PH opposes the same or different 'others' that UMNO and PAS consider anathema. Rather, the PH's populist success remains fragile because while it is more convincing about its credentials in cleaning up corruption and other forms of economic mismanagement, it has failed to neutralise sentiments that appeal to Malay-Muslim nationalists. These primarily revolve around the issue of Malay privileges and the sanctity of Islamic law, of which the matter of LGBT+ inclusion and equality is only part of a matrix of other concerns and grievances.

Populism and moral politics: the example of LGBT+ rights

The dualistic ideological and moral cleavage that emerged in these elections – with 'liberals' tending to support PH and 'conservatives' tending to support the BN and PAS – can be glimpsed in one significant development. In the euphoric aftermath of the elections, an openly gay Malay man, Numan Afifi, was appointed as a staff member in the team of the Minister of Youth and Sports, Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman, who is also Malay. The backlash against this appointment prompted Numan to resign. What angered the more socially liberal PH supporters was the response from Syed Saddiq via Twitter, addressed to Numan, which read: 'Your service has been invaluable bro since our campaigning days. Stay strong and I'll always respect your decision. You'll always be a bro.' (Kassim in *MStar*, 9 July 2018).

Liberal-minded Malaysians and social justice activists saw the Tweet as perfunctory, heterosexist and masculinist – it was interpreted as an example of Syed Saddiq's hypocrisy and implicit homophobia, since he could have stood up for Numan more boldly. At the same time, supporters of UMNO and PAS as well as proponents of the Malay-Muslim status quo within the PH began to question the government's supposed laxity on LGBT+ issues. The *de facto* Minister of Religious Affairs, Mujahid Yusof Rawa, was then

compelled to outline the government's position, reiterating that homosexuality remained a crime under state law and a sin in Islam, whilst urging Malaysians to treat LGBT+ people with empathy and respect and calling for an end to the violent persecution of LGBT+ people (Tong in *Malaysia-kini*, 23 July 2018):

This means that the LGBT community's rights to lead their lifestyle are bound by the law, which does not allow it in Malaysia. Is that clear? At the same time, their human rights as Malaysian citizens will be preserved based on the Federal Constitution which places Islam as the federal religion. In other words, this community cannot be discriminated against in the workplace, and they cannot be betrayed or oppressed.

This compromise was seen as too liberal by many ethno-religious nationalists and too conservative by many liberals and progressives. It later emerged that Mujahid had also ordered that the portraits of two prominent Malaysian LGBT+ activists – Pang Khee Teik, a Chinese-Malaysian gay man, and Nisha Ayub, a trans woman of Malay and Indian descent – be removed from an exhibition in Penang State commemorating the country's independence celebrations in August. This unleashed another public furore. The Minister held a press conference with Nisha and was partially sympathetic about transgender rights, but pointedly refused to engage with any openly gay activists. This triggered another round of backlash – again, by ethno-religious nationalists who saw this balancing act as still amounting to pro-LGBT+ capitulation, and by liberals who saw it as pandering to homophobic Islamist sentiments.

The controversy escalated when the PAS-governed State of Terengganu carried out a punishment of public whipping under Islamic criminal law against two women convicted of lesbianism by a *sharia* court⁷. The federal PH government, led by Prime Minister Mahathir, condemned the

⁷ The administration of Islamic criminal law falls under the jurisdiction of the State governments in the Malaysian federation and has historically been an issue of contention between PAS and UMNO.

punishment as heavy-handed and draconian. A few days later, however, Mahathir reiterated his stand that LGBT+ equality was impossible to uphold in Malaysia because of the immorality of homosexuality and transgenderism.

This yo-yoing on LGBT+ rights revealed a major fault line *within* the PH, i.e. between its desire to wrestle the moral high ground from the BN and its lack of internal consensus about personal morals. Whilst the PH successfully managed to frame the 1MDB scandal as a moral issue, it still has not formulated a coherent stance on civil liberties and human rights *vis à vis* the position of Islam and Malay privileges. This has left the vitality of UMNO's and PAS's combined religious nationalism unchallenged and, at the time of writing, they are regaining support against the PH.

Diversity, populist politics, and post-authoritarian transitions

As explained above, the 2018 elections were not the first time that a diverse collection of pro-democracy reformists in Malaysia sided with a political coalition in an attempt to oust the BN. In fact, strategic alliances between civil society and previous coalitions amongst opposition political parties severely weakened the incumbents in 2008 and 2013. These efforts, however, were hampered by numerous structural obstacles, including the BN's dominance in rural parts of West and East Malaysia, its frequent use of repressive laws, its vast networks of political patronage, and its entrenched practices of malapportionment and gerrymandering.

The BN's defeat in 2018 is thus invaluable for an analysis of the workings of populism in a diverse country such as Malaysia. This is because one of the most noteworthy features of the PH's victory is how it managed to neutralise the BN's tried-and-tested nationalism which, historically, was often sealed by a fusion of conservative Islamic morality and Malay political privileges. I have argued that, besides the unprecedented changes in the country's political landscape, the PH benefited from a populist push in which its

candidates and civil society supporters successfully, albeit indirectly, redefined the idea of the 'people,' the 'elite' and, to a much lesser extent, 'others' to undermine the BN. The PH largely did this by highlighting its position as an underdog – a narrative which resonated with significant numbers of Malaysians who were fed up with the BN's stranglehold on government. As I have also argued, however, this does not mean that the PH coalition is devoid of its own ethno-religious nationalist tendencies. Rather, this article has highlighted the ways in which the two coalitions engaged in a moral battle to define the 'people,' the 'elites' and 'others' within a tensely fought election.

The 2018 Malaysian election shows why it is vital to account for the role of religion in populist politics – because of the direct and indirect ways that it informs the construction of the notion of a 'sacred people' (DeHanas and Shterin 2018: 180). Religious rhetoric and ethnic nationalism often go hand in hand, but what the case of Malaysia uniquely demonstrates is how these elements form part of a populist political milieu that is also very diverse. Thus, while I agree that it is crucial to distinguish between forms of populism that are not nationalist and forms of nationalism that are not populist (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017: 302), I have added to this discussion by investigating populism as a form of 'moral politics' (Gidron and Bonikowski 2013: 3). This framework allows for a more nuanced explanation of how political change might occur in authoritarian yet heterogeneous countries.

Without these distinctions, fiercely contested moral issues, such as LGBT+ rights in a country like Malaysia, run the risk of being stereotyped as merely one of the 'inherent' or 'inevitable' tensions in a supposedly Muslim-majority country. Yet the picture is more complicated than this. Rather than being the rallying cry of a monolithic group of 'Islamists' or 'nationalists,' LGBT+ issues are now being contested by multiple, competing, Malay-led political blocs – the ousted UMNO, PAS, and different factions within the PH coalition government – to redefine the notion of the

‘people’ and hence the nation. To put it another way, Malaysia’s political scene is now seeing a backlash by the still-powerful ethno-religious nationalists – mostly consisting of an uneasy alliance of UMNO and PAS supporters – who are attempting to undermine the new government through mass mobilisation.

In recent months, for example, several Muslim non-governmental organisations have come together under the banner of the *Gerakan Pembela Ummah* (*Ummah Defenders Movement*), staging public rallies with the visible support of UMNO and PAS leaders. At *Ummah’s* recent public convention on Malay unity, chairperson Aminuddin Yahya said:

For the past 10 years, the most brazen movement would be the human rights movement, which fights for equality, bringing in “universal values” which pushes aside religious values. We are shocked by the news that a representative from the LGBT group was given the opportunity to deliver a speech at the Human Rights Convention in Geneva. He was given respect by the (*de facto*) religious affairs minister who purportedly practises tolerance (Faisal in *Malaysiakini*, 25 August 2019).

Aminuddin was referring to Numan Afifi (whose controversial resignation from the Ministry of Youth and Sports was discussed above), who spoke at Malaysia’s Universal Periodic Review at the United Nations in March 2019. Ethno-religious activists such as *Ummah* construe LGBT+ rights as an ideological and moral non-negotiable between a supposedly pure Malay-Muslim identity – upheld by UMNO and PAS – and the elite ‘West’ and Westernised Malaysians, i.e. the liberals within the PH government and its supporters. Thus, controversies on LGBT+ rights could reinvigorate UMNO’s popular support, via an alliance with PAS, that lost momentum under the weakened BN government before 2018.

The PH government’s response – largely an evasion of the conservative moral politics of UMNO-PAS – has been regarded as half-hearted by its supporters, who see it as too conservative, and the opposition, who see it as too liberal. This shows that the PH’s capitalising of corruption as a moral issue has yet to provide ideologi-

cal coherence and political consensus *within* the coalition on human rights and civil liberties. On one hand, it might be argued that the new government’s indecisiveness is largely due to teething problems in the country’s democratic transition. On the other hand, it could also be the case that the PH, as an internally diverse coalition, has not ruled out appealing to ethno-religious sentiments to stay in power. This remains a distinct possibility especially since, even before the 2018 elections, the PH coalition was led by several former authoritarian leaders who defected from the BN, and it continued accepting defections, especially from UMNO, months after forming government. At the time of writing, although the government supports the status quo position on LGBT+ rights, it is proceeding with other democratic reforms, for example, repealing the death penalty, the Sedition Act and other repressive laws.

Conclusion

Malaysia demonstrates unique political features which make it a valuable case to examine the phenomenon of populism. Islam is the established religion and is constitutionally fused with Malay identity, yet the country’s population is highly diverse. The major political parties have historically been drawn along racial and religious lines, yet the country was governed uninterruptedly by the BN – a Malay-led, consociational, multicultural coalition – from independence until the historic 2018 general election.

The BN’s surprise defeat in 2018 introduced fresh directions to analyse social and political change in authoritarian regimes. This article has focused on the direct and indirect influence of religion on this result by analysing populism as a form of moral politics. This is because with Muslim-majority countries, it is tempting to conclude that moral controversies, most visibly on gender and sexuality, are simply about a clash between monolithic religious forces and ‘secular’ political opponents. Such stereotypes can also be entrenched through similarly monolithic notions of ‘nationalism’ or ‘populism,’ or both. These

characterisations, however, do not explain the dynamics within countries with less dominant religious majorities and more diverse populations, such as Malaysia.

In this article, I have shown that moral politics remain central to the erstwhile BN government and its political foes. I have analysed the BN's electoral defeat by examining the contours of the moral contest between the BN and the PH, and have argued that this was a crucial ingredient in the populist politics of the 2018 election campaign, especially from PH. The unprecedented institutional and demographic changes in the country's political landscape introduced a new ideological cleavage which enabled the PH to capitalise on moral rhetoric that neutralised the BN's conservative religious nationalism.

Yet the PH's victory and viability as a government cannot be taken for granted – the bitter debates on LGBT+ rights, for example, expose the still-potent clash of moral politics between the PH and BN. This is where the definitions of populism that encourage us to look at how concepts of the 'people,' the 'elite' and 'others' are construed can still be valuable. They ask us to pay attention to the different resources that populist leaders and their supporters use to sacralise their idea of the 'people,' and to demonise 'the elite' and 'others.'

This perspective – on the moral appeals made by populist actors to define and sacralise the 'people' – is essential for diverse contexts beyond Malaysia, especially where religion and ethnicity play central roles in politics. It forces us to question and analyse the diversities within the interlocking concepts of religion and ethnicity and how these result in multiple and contradictory definitions of the 'people' and the 'nation.'

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