

What mattered in GE14: campaigns, Islam, 1MDB, cost of living

To kick off our live blog of Malaysia's momentous 14th general election (GE14), we asked six experts of Malaysian studies to contribute their thoughts on what stood out most about the campaign. Though their responses were provided when the results was not clear, they were insightful (and sometimes prescient) enough that we've reproduced edited versions of their responses here. Check out how New Mandala's guest bloggers analysed the results of GE14 at ge14newmandala.wordpress.com

NM: What has been the most interesting aspect for you in covering this campaign, as a scholar of Malaysian politics?

[Meredith Weiss](#), **State University of New York at Albany**: Definitely the most interesting aspect for me has been the déjà vu of seeing first Mahathir, then increasingly more of his old UMNO gang, resurrected—and even more fascinating has been to see if so many lifelong anti-BN activists and opposition politicians pins their hopes and affection on Dr M. While I'm not blind to the loyalty Mahathir commands among Malay voters (and not just rural voters, the presumption of whose gullibility and quasi-feudal loyalty all sides have starkly asserted), I remain skeptical about the breadth and depth of common ground between Bersatu and its partners. Seeing these parties work out a platform and set of first-priority promises that really sideline a focus on race (let alone religion) in favour of more concrete, especially macroeconomic, agenda items signals a potential new trend in Malaysian political discourse...and yet I do wonder how much of the devil remains in the details.

[Tricia Yeoh](#), **IDEAS**: The most interesting aspect has been observing the reactions by the incumbent Barisan Nasional government as the days drew nearer to polling day. The Election

Commission, known to be an institution partial to the BN, issued a series of unprecedented and arguably incomprehensible rules that only served to show there is some real fear that Barisan's position is being meaningfully challenged. Chief amongst the announcements were the mid-week polling day and the rule that only pictures of Presidents and Deputy Presidents (or equivalents) and that of candidates contesting in the area are allowed on campaign material.

[Greg Lopez](#), **Murdoch University**: The civility within which campaigning took place. GE13 saw many skirmishes where BN supporters would disrupt then Pakatan Rakyat's ceramah. This time around, it was almost unheard of. Furthermore, the use of damaging videos against the opposition, as was in GE13, was non-existent this election. This perhaps is a low bar, as racism and bigotry was rife in campaigning in GE13, but then again, for many parties, that is the very basis of their existence and survival.

[Ross Tapsell](#), **ANU**: Malaysia is always fascinating to examine the role of new media in an election campaign. In GE14 the role of big data companies like Invoke; the debate around Mukhriz's role in hiring Cambridge Analytica, for example. Connected to this, the discourse and material being shared around on Whatsapp is fascinating in thinking about a shifting information society in the region.

[Surinderpal Kaur](#), **Universiti Malaya**: The savviness of Malaysians (candidates and voters alike) in using social media. 2008 had fledgling use of the internet, 2013 showed extensive use of it, but in my opinion, 2018 has shown a very extensive and intensive use of social media. In 2013, online media offered a public space for discussions and debates which people relished since the traditional presses in Malaysia do not offer a public space for such conversation. However, in 2018, the use of social media has afforded citizens with the options of both public and private spaces of conversations through platforms such as FB and Whatsapp.

[Tom Pepinsky](#), **Cornell University**: The mobilisation of PPBM and the return of Mahathir and other stalwarts of 1990s politics like Daim Zainuddin. It is very hard to gauge sentiments "on the ground" from afar, but I am convinced that PPBM may indeed capture a significant swath of the Malay vote.

NM: Has this campaign been different from previous campaigns you have covered?

Tricia Yeoh: This campaign is different in that there has been a lot of uncertainty over voter support—especially amongst the Malay electorate—because of numerous changes in leadership

affiliation, the two biggest of which being having Tun Dr Mahathir switch camps to becoming opposition leader and prime minister-in-waiting, and PAS leaving the coalition to contest on their own. These two factors have split Malay sentiment significantly.

Meredith Weiss: At the time, pretty much every campaign in at least the past 20 years has seemed like THE election: the big chance for a change. (To put it differently: *ini kalilah, sekali lagi.*) That said, the timbre of this campaign has been clearly distinctive. There's been a do-or-die feel to the proceedings, from the initial announcement of a shorter campaign than last time, ending in a bizarre midweek polling date (seemingly only intended to suppress turnout), to Najib's 11th hour proclamation of tax rebates! and public holidays! and free highway tolls! in his final ceramah on the eve of polling day. In that speech and others, with his language of "the bigger the win, the better the prize," he sounded like a carnival barker. Mahathir's focus in his own final ceramah—which 200,000+ watched via live-streaming at once—on equal pay for women and the like made him and his coalition sound so much more sober and dignified and less desperate, by contrast (though also perhaps less fired-up and ready to splash out on thank-you treats). In a different vein, also distinguishing this campaign has been the symbiotic landscape, of two common-logged coalitions (plus PAS) competing, rather than the usual mishmash of opposition flags. That development really made the campaign look different.

Tom Pepinsky: (1) the three-cornered fights in most districts and (2) the simple fact that former UMNO stalwarts are now urging all Malaysians to vote PH to "save Malaysia" from the BN. The former make it very hard for any party to develop a simple message (because each has two very different opponents from which they must differentiate themselves).

Ross Tapsell: I was in Malaysia for 2 week trips in November, January, February and April. While interest in the election from Malaysians gradually increased, each time I left thinking "there isn't the excitement that there was in GE13". It is interesting how quickly momentum has built in this past 11 day campaign. Imagine if Malaysia had a significant election period?

Greg Lopez: It is both same and different. Same, in that BN had made life difficult for the opposition in the usual manner. Different, in that there is a semblance of a genuine two-party (coalition) system. Both BN and PH, but also GS conducted their campaigns (e.g. running candidates throughout the country, a manifesto with policies etc.) as mainstream parties/coalitions with the real possibility of governing the country.

NM: What has been a feature of the narratives that BN & PH have employed to win over voters?

Greg Lopez: BN essentially talked about its track record (economic prosperity, social stability and a sound coalition) and what the future could hold; but mindful that it had a different message for

different constituencies and social groups. PH talked about the challenges Malaysia faced: inequality, the losing of its sovereignty and dignity, and a future where this can be reclaimed. GS talked about the vision of how a proper Islamic state can be brought to Malaysia, which will enhance the welfare of all.

Tricia Yeoh: BN chose the narrative of stability and predictability in their campaign, also emphasising the many economic hand-outs it has given out especially to the bottom 40 percent in the form of BR1M (one-off cash handouts). It also repeated a mantra of “Fakta, bukan Auta” (loosely translated as referring to facts and not false news), in attempts to defend the opposition’s accusations over Prime Minister Najib Razak’s alleged involvement in the scandal-ridden 1MDB case, implying that these are merely baseless accusations. BN also employed racial tones, stating that PH is being led by Chinese-dominant DAP, a fear-mongering tactic to scare off Malays from supporting the opposition.

PH rode strongly on the need for institutional reform to combat corruption and poor governance amongst BN leadership. Throughout the campaign calls to right the wrongs of 1MDB and other mega-scandals (FELDA, Tabung Haji) were repeated. PH also committed to abolishing the GST which has been considered the main cause for the rising cost of living, saying BN has done little to alleviate the lower to middle class economic woes. Finally, PH used the theme of restoring the nation’s former glory and pride in the eyes of the world, since Malaysia is now known as a kleptocracy internationally thanks to Najib Razak.

Meredith Weiss: Both sides emphasise similar plot devices in their narratives: costs of living, leadership, solidarity for a better future. But each puts a different spin on those aspects. For Pakatan Harapan, costs of living are a reason to drop the BN; for the BN, its record of development and promises of more should win the day. While both sides offer as goodies discounts on tolls, taxes, and more, the BN has been far more aggressive in that effort; Pakatan stresses instead repealing the GST above all. In terms of leadership, PH emphasises corruption in the BN’s top ranks; the BN mocks PH’s marriage-of-convenience (and the extreme age of its would-be PM). And both sides argue for pulling together, across races, for their side’s win—but Pakatan presses Malays to jump on the bandwagon with other Malaysians, while BN pulls out the stops to woo non-Malays (Xi Jinping and Jack Ma on billboards?!). Neither side has relied heavily on a coherent ideological line, though PH, with its stress on good governance and democratic turnover, has come closer than BN, which seems to assume a more purely rational voter calculus of weighing short-term payoffs.

Ross Tapsell: I think it is fascinating to see how 1MDB is discussed. Many political party operatives in KL (and international observers) tend to say that 1MDB doesn’t resonate with rural voters—that people can’t comprehend the complexities. Yet when I was travelling around in rural Kedah (including Langkawi where Mahathir is running) when citizens spoke negatively of BN, arguments were usually formulated around Prime Minister Najib and corruption. Yes, sometimes this was framed around “GST” or “cost of living”, but the connection between these issues and

1MDB and Najib personally is there, I think. So I think it's incorrect to say "[1MDB will play little or no part in the election](#)". The opposition, especially Mahathir, has been successful in drawing these connections for voters, but citizens sharing material on Facebook has played an important role too. That's why the government rushed through the "Anti-Fake News" law just prior to the campaign.

NM: What has GE14 campaign told us about the nature of Islamic politics in Malaysia?

Surinderpaul Kaur: That invoking the Islamic argument is still a very effective way to target Malay voters. There is a very strong force behind the "this is the Islamic way" argument and it's very difficult for Malay-Muslim voters to distance themselves from theological authoritarianism or to shrug it off without feelings of guilt. But at the level of the political parties, I see that this argument has a very utilitarian and functional nature—it serves the interests of the parties to keep the narrative alive.

Greg Lopez: Hew Wai Weng's [piece in NM](#) captures the different hues of political Islam in this election. This, in my view, is the single most important factor that domestic and international observers must be watching. Both BN and PH, and of course Gagagasan Sejahtera (PAS and its allies) have all used Islam (and Malay dignity) as a legitimising framework. The salience of Islam in all three coalitions campaigns suggest that Malaysia is heading towards an era where Islam becomes front and centre of all mainstream political parties/coalitions.

Ross Tapsell: Yes, two great pieces on this topic by Wai Weng [here](#) and [here](#). Other pieces on our GE14 coverage include [Tony Milner](#) and [Clive Kessler](#).

NM: 'Cost of living' has been widely discussed. How important is how voters imagine the economy in determining the result tonight?

Meredith Weiss: Interesting question. The big bogeys of 1MDB, selling off assets to foreign (read: Chinese) investors, and so forth really require that the opposition paint for voters a picture, to help them translate huge numbers into micro-impacts. For instance, 1MDB losses are clearly not the only impetus for the GST, yet campaign rhetoric might give that impression. I do think many voters feel the pinch from rising costs for housing, education, and other necessities. However, given the similarities between PH and BN platforms in terms of what tolls or utility costs each vows to shrink, plus how hard it is to parse the net benefits of the subsidies and discounts each side proffers, I'm not convinced voters selecting on mundane cost-of-living grounds will be able to differentiate decisively between coalitions. So it's that big-picture visualisation that might help to tip the balance: the imagined economy of a Najib-and-Rosmah-free future.

Tricia Yeoh: Indeed, an interesting question. We know that voting is ultimately an emotional matter, and successful politicians appeal to this side of voters. What Tun Dr. Mahathir has done is to conjure up images of the Malaysia he built—it was under his watch that the country became an international economic success in the 1980s and 1990s, thanks to our oil discovery and a flourishing manufacturing sector. The country's prosperity was equally felt and experienced by its people. Fast forward to today, post two major economic crises in the last two decades, amidst a relatively weak economy (growth primarily fuelled by public investment, not private), urban voters are nostalgic over the past and imagine this economic boom can be restored under fresh leadership. However, there is the equal insecurity amongst rural voters where they imagine that economic provisions and handouts by BN they currently enjoy would discontinue under a new government.

Surinderpaul Kaur: I would imagine it will play a major factor, especially with the urban voters as these voters are the most affected and the most critical of the electorate about this issue. When I say urban voters, I do not just mean the middle class educated white-collar voters, but working classes, blue-collar voters too (such as taxi drivers etc) who have seen their cost of living increase over the last 2 years. At the heart of this discontent is the implementation of the GST which is seen to be a bane for most urban voters. This is compounded by the perceived disconnect between the ruling elite and the common man in the street where the cost of living is concerned.

Tom Pepinsky: I think it is very important—but even more important is how voters imagine the other parties responding to economic challenges. For a voter in, say, Johor or Pahang, it is hard to know how they would form expectations about how PH or PAS would help to improve the economy that they face.

Greg Lopez: This is perhaps the most important proximate cause. While concerns of dignity (sanctity of the citizens/people identity) are crucial, it's the grind of the daily life that acts as the proximate cause. As an example, Malaysia's Royals, ulama and captains of industries maybe concerned about dignity, but their status in life will make them vote in a particular manner that maybe different from the majority of how ordinary Malaysians would, simply because the majority of Malaysians imagine the economy differently. And certainly, as demonstrated by this robust debate between a government institutional economists and ordinary Malaysians [on New Mandala](#)—there is a gulf between what the government says about the Malaysian economy, and what Malaysians feel about the economy.