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'A Culmination of Many Factors': Opportunities, Arenas, and Challenges to Malaysia's Dominant Regime

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ABSTRACT

The victory of the opposition Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition in the 2018 Malaysian election was a political earthquake, as it saw the end of over 60 years of rule by the dominant Barisan Nasional (BN) regime. Victory for the coalition resulted from a number of factors, as opponents came together to craft a strategy that was able to overcome an extensive system of social control that the BN regime had built and reinforced during its time in power. The aim of the paper is to examine how civil society and political actors were able to craft a coalition that was sufficiently robust to challenge the dominant position of the BN regime. In doing so, the findings point to the role and impact of civil society in a context of weakening elite control. Drawing on interviews conducted with civil society actors shortly after the election, the paper identifies the key actors involved, how they formulated claims, and the importance of connecting the protest and electoral arenas to achieve their ends.

KEYWORDS

Civil society; Malaysia; political opportunity; social control; dominant party

Introduction

On 9 May 2018, a coalition of opposition parties secured a majority in the 14th Malaysian election, bringing down the entrenched Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition. This outcome was significant, not least because it involved the defeat of a longstanding dominant party regime. The defeat of the governing BN coalition has wider meaning in an era where dominant parties have become entrenched in nominally democratic countries such as Hungary and Turkey.[1] Dominant parties in these states have gradually reduced the space for associational activity to maintain their position. As Tilly[2] argued, "a regime is democratic to the degree that political relations between the state and its citizens feature broad, equal, protected and mutually binding consultation." The very character of the dominant party system means that these characteristics are weak or absent for opponents. This is particularly relevant where persistence has prevailed

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for an extended period, as institutions and practices are entrenched and reinforced over time. The ability of opposition forces to break free of this institutional straitjacket and replace a dominant party is therefore increasingly difficult.

Defeat of the incumbent BN regime provides a valuable opportunity to consider the interaction between civil society and political parties in such weakly democratic systems. Malaysia had been governed by the BN for over 60 years, resulting in the centralization of political control, undermining the independence of institutions, and accompanied by the politicization and marginalization of civil society. Associational space was restricted and reduced through the introduction of laws and regulations aimed at increasing the degree of control exercised by the state. The period leading up to the 2018 election saw these tendencies amplified, meaning it was "marked by increased, but focused patronage and repression," as the dominant party sought to maintain control.[3] The role of civil society actors in overcoming these barriers in cooperation with opposition parties means that its influence is contested. Civil society organizations have been credited as being both a "key factor" in the democratic breakthrough[4] and as having an "indirect" role in the electoral result.[5] Examining the interaction between civil society and political party actors in this case can shed light on how these two arenas interacted to bring about change.

This article considers the role of the civil society mobilization in the 2018 election outcome, drawing on the perspectives of those involved. The aim of the article is to identify how civil society actors draw on opportunities in the protest and electoral arenas to disrupt entrenched regimes in the face of extensive social control. In doing so, it considers the extent to which civil society activity was the driving force behind electoral change when other contributory factors were present, including a more engaged electorate and a fractured dominant party. Findings demonstrate the importance of effective state social control, the interplay between the political and electoral arenas, and changes in political opportunities emerging from the environment. All of these factors helped civil society to challenge Malaysia's dominant BN regime and play a deciding role in ensuring electoral victory for the PH coalition. The remainder of the paper is divided into five sections. The first section outlines the features of the Malaysian regime before 2018, focusing on how associational space was restricted. The second section examines the relationship between social control and opportunity structures in settings with reduced associational space. The section also introduces Hutter's[6] notion of arenas as an organizing concept. The methodology used to examine the role of key civil society actors is outlined in the third section. The fourth section presents the findings of the analysis, drawing on perceptions of those involved in contesting the 2018 election.

Finally, the article reflects on how civil society actors drew on opportunities in the protest and electoral arena to secure change.

Dominance and control in Malaysia

Prior to 2018, Malaysia was characterized as a resilient electoral authoritarian or autocratic form of government.[7] Regular multi-party elections helped provide Barisan Nasional (BN), a coalition of parties dominated by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), with a veneer of legitimacy. Under this system, the success of the ruling party was engineered through electoral manipulation, political patronage, and misappropriation of powers.[8] The fairness of elections was further undermined by the restrictions that were placed on civil liberties and political rights.[9] As prime minister and leader of UMNO from 1981 to 2003, Mohamed Mahathir oversaw, implemented, and perpetuated many of these practices. During his initial tenure as Prime Minister, Mahathir purged UMNO of disloyal members, detained opponents, and opposition leaders under the 1960 Internal Security Act (ISA), shut down newspapers, sacked judiciary members, and implemented preferential rights for the ethnic Malay community.[10]

UMNO maintained control by restricting opposition activity through the implementation of several repressive laws. The ISA was central to this attempt to maintain control, as it allowed preventative detention of anyone deemed a threat to the regime. This core instrument was supported by regulations that banned speech promoting dissatisfaction between races and classes (Sedition Act 1948), student protest and party membership (University and University Colleges Act 1971), and publications deemed prejudicial to public order and/or security (Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984).[11] These regulations were used to ensure that opposition voices were restricted, rather than focusing on the wider good of the state. Control extended to the corporate sector, as the media was largely state-owned and controlled by UMNO, with opposition parties restricted from accessing corporate finance to support their operations.[12] Political rivals were also regularly co-opted into the BN, preventing the opposition from forming to present a cohesive alternative.[13]

UMNO was founded to explicitly protect ethnic Malay interests.[14] This priority was represented in the New Economic Policy (NEP) (1970), an affirmative action program designed to achieve national unity through the restructuring of society and eradication of poverty. NEP policies primarily supported *Bumiputeras*, the ethnic Malay population, through policies focused on poverty eradication in rural Malay provinces, enhancing Malay access to higher education, and developing preferential Malay business policies.[15] These affirmative action policies contributed to UMNO's longevity and dominance.[16] The BN, in conjunction with UMNO-aligned activist groups, perpetuated a narrative that Malay privileges and Malaysian development and

economic stability was conditional on BN maintenance of power.[17] Similarly, in the wake of the 2018 election, the defeated UMNO in conjunction with the opposition and allies in civil society embarked on a campaign of "polarising rhetoric and practices" that framed the new ruling coalition "as an existential threat to the rights of the Malay Muslim ethnoreligious majority."[18]

Decades of state control over civil liberties, political expression and debate constrained civil society space in Malaysia.[19] The ruling BN regime legitimized these restrictions as necessary to limit ethnic conflict between the Malay and non-Malay population[20] and promote domestic and political stability. Civil society activism increased with the emergence of the *Reformasi* movement, following the September 1998 arrest of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Anwar Ibrahim. Anwar's detention without trial under the ISA on politically motivated charges sparked public outrage; triggering mass protests attended by wide swathes of Malaysian society, including students, civil servants, Chinese and Malay professionals, and activists. Demonstrations continued into October, with participants subject to police harassment, surveillance, and threats of imprisonment under the ISA.[21] Ultimately, the movement failed to drive countrywide reform. A central factor was Mahathir's ability to retain the support of key UMNO members and the security forces. For Slater,[22] Mahathir's resilience "represented not simply a triumph of individual will, but also an impressive display of well-developed authoritarian institutions in synchronous motion." Under the dominant party system, "restrictions on political rights, most obviously in less than free or fair elections, worked symbiotically with increasingly Malay/Muslim-chauvinist policies, backed by likeminded civil-society organisations, to sustain a corrupt ruling coalition." Civil society actors in Malaysia were therefore not free from political influence.[23] Despite some civil society organizations working collaboratively with opposition parties to challenge the regime's monopoly on power and promote the work of the opposition, the associational space in which they operate has traditionally been constrained by the state.[24]

Civil society, social control, and opportunities

The restrictive character of the Malaysian regime under successive BN governments requires an assessment of how civil society is able to function under such conditions. Associational space is central to the flourishing of civil society as it enables actors to connect, identify and pursue shared interests. Linz and Stepan[25] note the collaborative nature of civil society when they defined it as:

> an area of the polity where self-organizing groups, movements, and individuals, relatively autonomous from the state, attempt to articulate values, create associations and solidarities, and advance their interests.

The relative autonomy of civil society is central, as participants remain subject to the legal and political guidelines of the state, as well as the norms that shape the bounds of expected behavior. Chandhoke[26] notes that the bounds are not just tangible arguing:

> we can with some legitimacy conceptualize civil society as a site where people associate in ways that are distinct from the way they associate in the economy or in the political sphere, we can hardly assume that civil society is either emancipated or abstracted from the ethos that permeates these two spheres.

In democratic systems, the space for civil society action is considerably greater than under more politically restrictive regimes. Examining the functioning of civil society in authoritarian states, Lewis[27] points to interactions on vertical and horizontal dimensions. In doing so, he emphasizes interaction between the state and civil society (vertical) and within civil society itself (horizontal). Approaching associational space in this way reinforces the potentially tenuous character of civil society independence, as the maintenance of horizontal ties is essential to reinforce shared interests and work against pressures to isolate, demoralize and undermine civil society.[28] The complexity of civil society and its entangled character mean that it is necessary to consider the ways in which participants may seek to pursue their interests.

Civil society actors operate using a range of tools, shaped by the context and opportunities open to them. At the simplest level, such actors operate in protest and electoral arenas but these arenas are not distinct, enabling actors and ideas to move between them.[29] Distilling the protest and electoral arenas, Hutter[30] identifies the importance of the degree of institutionalization and issue linkage (see Table 1). Actors operating in the protest arena rely on more unconventional actions, as they "do not have regular access to the decision-making processes via more established channels."[31] As Table 1 suggests, actors in the electoral arena are more able to craft a narrative through their access to institutional tools and resources. In both arenas, the mass media provide a mechanism to amplify claims with "election campaigns and protest events . . . [present] the most condensed images of the two arenas."[32] Further amplifying this point, McAdam and Tarrow[33] argue that "electoral campaigns often provide an umbrella under which social movements legitimately mobilize and apply collective action frames that have grown out of more contentious interactions." What this characterization does not account for are situations

Table 1. Conceptual differences between the protest arena and the electoral arena.

	Protest arena	Electoral arena
Mode of Participation	Participation in Protest Events	Participation in National Elections
Degree of Institutionalization	Low	High
Degree of Issue Linkage	Low	High
Main Organizations	Social Movement Organizations	Political Parties
Main Sites of Mobilization	"Street" and Mass Media	Legislature and Mass Media

Source: Hutter (2014, p. 27).

where a dominant regime restricts the associational space available, resulting in a dampening of potential actions in both arenas. This makes it important to consider tools for control deployed against civil society.

The relationship between civil society and the state is primarily shaped by the interests and capacity of the latter. As Chandhoke[34] argues "The state ... possesses the power to select, categorize, crystallize, and arrange social power in formal codes and institutions." The act of defining these codes and institutions enables the state to set the bounds within which civil society actors must operate. However, the state also operates beyond the bounds of the formal, leading Davenport[35] to note "how states establish and maintain control over their territorial jurisdiction resides more in the minds of their constituents than in observing behaviour enacted on the streets." In maintaining order, states attempt to shape behavior and expectations through combinations of both coercion and channeling.[36] As the representative of social power, the state turns to channeling as a way of ensuring "groups, organizations and individuals, conform to standards of behaviour or normative preferences."[37] Examining key social control mechanisms that fall short of coercion, Boykoff[38] points to resource depletion, stigmatization, divisive disruption, and intimidation. These ultimately aim to demobilize and preempt actions, as it "rests on a constellation of power in society."[39] Where the state goes beyond its bounds and is seen as "something other than what is projected [it] could ... result in mass outrage and defection as individuals feel betrayed."[40] This constellation of factors presents challenges and opportunities for civil society actors in restricted environments, making it essential to understand how they recognize and respond to these opportunities (and threats).

Balancing the decision to mobilize against the measures of social control exercised by the state is an important challenge for civil society actors. Decisions to devote resources to the protest or electoral arena can be particularly risky when the state is repressive or closed. One way of assessing these decisions is through consideration of political opportunity structures, capturing the nature of the external environment. Presenting a categorization of key political opportunities, Tilly[41] pointed to openness of the regime, coherence of the elite, stability of political alignments, availability of allies, and repression/facilitation. Each of these factors is dynamic and they interact with each other in different ways, with the rate of change also influencing their potential. In assessing opportunities, Meyer and Minkoff[42] point to the need to consider "the effects of structural changes in opportunities as differentiated from effects or signals sent by the political system." Determining the difference is key, as committing to a course of action based on a weak signal that fails to materialize can be costly. This is further complicated when considering arenas, as actions taken in one may close off others. Meyer and Minkoff[43] reinforce this point arguing that "(actual or perceived) institutional gains [may] diminish

incentives for extrainstitutional mobilization." The result being that in examining actions taken by civil society actors it is necessary to consider the interplay between arenas, social control, and shifts in the opportunities (and threats) emerging from the environment. The paper now considers the case of the 2018 Malaysian election to analyze this interaction.

Methodology

The research presented in this article draws on a series of interviews with members of Malaysian civil society. Initial contacts were drawn from the second author's acquaintances who were also asked to suggest additional study subjects from within their networks. Snowball sampling was chosen as the authors recognized it as "an approach for locating information-rich key informants,"[44] making it possible to access subjects willing to discuss governance in Malaysia. Participants were drawn from a broad section of society, including university academics, current and former journalists, non-governmental organization (NGO) actors, current and former political activists, law professionals and retired civil servants. In-person interviews were conducted with 12 participants in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia by the first author in August 2018. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Ethics Committee at Aston University.

The interviews were transcribed, and notes taken during the interview and written up subsequently. The interview material was used to support and develop concepts and themes emerging from the review of the conceptual and case literature. The process of data interpretation was done through reviewing quotes connected to themes related to civil society actions and challenges faced. We followed Bryman's[45] steps in interpretation of qualitative data, selecting more precise themes from broader themes, discarding those themes and "lower level" quotes which were not closely related to the aims of our article. The themes are presented subsequently in our results section by including for every theme an assemblage of narratives based on our selection of participants' "higher level" quotes.

Disrupting the dominant regime

Single party dominance was an entrenched feature of the Malaysian political system in 2018. The electoral process was among the most "extensively manipulated" in the world, designed to provide the incumbent UMNO party with "substantial advantages in elections."[46] During his initial time in power from 1981 to 2003, Mahathir was "instrumental in bringing the institutions under the control of the executive."[47] This included curbing the powers of the judiciary and monarchy and weakening the independence of parliament and the civil service.[48] Participants noted that UMNO also successfully maintained

dominance by "suppress[ing] class issues ... highlight[ing] more racial and ethnic issues [and] continually reinforc[ing] identity politics,"[49] and "using race and religion as a kind of a tool to evoke fear and threat."[50] Ethnic Malays "penetrated into every sector: administration, businesses, industry" with wealth "acquired, appropriated and abused by a selected group of people."[51] BN dominance was also linked to its positive economic performance, with race-based affirmative action "captured by vested interests, so you really had crony capitalism."[52] This created a symbiotic relationship between the BN and its electorate, with one participant arguing "the Malay benefited from the system, but they believe that that's only happened because of UMNO. So, if you change UMNO you will lose everything."[53]

These practices were perpetuated by Mahathir's successors. As Prime Minister, Najib Razak oversaw a number of oppressive legislative changes that extended BN's control over opposition members. As one NGO representative explained, BN under Najib utilized security forces as "a force of political control."[54] This included the 2012 Security Offences (Special Measures) Act which gave enhanced powers of detention to security forces, the 2016 National Security Council Act, which allowed security forces to conduct searches without a warrant and impose curfews, and a 2018 Anti-Fake News Act making it a criminal offense to create or publish content containing fake news. This legislation was condemned by civil rights activists, who argued that "the effective opposition were cowed by [the] use of laws," which were "used to curb the freedom of association and freedom of speech" and "grossly compromise" civil and political rights.[55] Despite civil society attempts to press for institutional and legislative reforms following the 2008 election, the dominant party refused to institute changes that may benefit the opposition.[56] One participant noted that "real civil society to me [is] still quite lacking in the country" because "there are many NGOs, but some of them are not really nongovernmental."[57] Many NGO and grassroots organizations formally aligned with BN political parties.[58]

Civil society actors adopted a range of strategies to respond to these increased restrictions, becoming a more "influential political player" following the 1997 *Reformasi* movement.[59] This was driven by a more engaged middle class that had greater access to information in the form of the Internet and an independent digital media.[60] Efforts by civil society groups opposed to BN dominance became more formalized following the 2008 election. This included the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Bersih), which hosted rallies in 2011, 2012, 2015 and 2016 calling for free and fair elections. As noted by Chong,[61] Bersih was successful at organizing collective action during the 2018 election campaign in response to three important political opportunities: the 1MDB scandal, BN electoral fraud, and the re-delineation of electoral boundaries. Bersih mobilized mass rallies for citizens to protest against Najib's corruption and excesses of power,

providing what one participant identified as "continuity [and] resistance, to make sure they are free and fair elections."[62] One human rights participant noted that Bersih played a crucial role helping Malaysians to understand the election and gain "confidence in terms of expressing their feelings about the government outrightly."[63] The Bersih Steering Committee acted as watchdog to monitor electoral agencies such as the EC, whilst raising awareness amongst citizens of electoral fraud and the need for reform. This agenda resulted in many voters directly participating in the electoral process in the form of counting agents or polling volunteers.[64] Bersih also launched the Delineation Action and Research Team (DART), which brought together lawyers and activists to legally contest BN's re-delineation campaign.[65] Bersih's role in increasing civic activism and driving resistance to the dominant party through campaigns, collective forums and training exercises helped mobilize and educate the electorate. Bersih was therefore "a good example of how they came out to fight … this is the first time in the history of this country where people are still talking about the manifesto … and that's good."[66]

In addition to Bersih, other civil society organizations mobilized against the BN coalition in advance of the 2018 election. Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF), a Tamil Hindu activist NGO, campaigned for PH under the mantra "Zero vote for Barisan Nasional."[67] Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM), a non-governmental human rights organization that monitors political violence and human rights violations provided "a toolkit on how to do a protest" to support the increased number of citizens attending rallies.[68] Describing the purpose of the toolkit, a SUARAM member[69] noted it provided:

> organisational help in a sense, like we are helping them coordinate with the legal centre on urgent action for lawyers, we'll be coordinating on the ground with the security team, kind of be on the ground with observers for them also in a sense … and sometimes we are just monitors … we just go and observe to see how things go.

Working together with Bersih and Pusat KOMAS, a human rights communication center, SUARAM formed the Pemantau initiative in 2017. This trained volunteer coordinators to observe and report incidences of electoral corruption or fraud, all of which was compiled into an observation report.[70] The National Patriots Association (PATRIOT), an NGO representing Malaysia's military and police veterans, was identified by an observer as "giv[ing] inspiration to Malay people, to reject a corruption regime" and to "convince the older civil servant[s] [and security force personnel] to vote for Pakatan Harapan, directly and indirectly."[71] Malaysia's Human Rights Commission (SUHAKAM) also spoke out against the EC and the re-delineation exercise, labeling it "unfair, biased and disproportionate."[72] During the election, SUHAKAM observed and monitored the election

process to promote confidence in the electorate and investigate complaints of electoral fraud. A member of SUHAKAM[73] noted the significance of this effort, stating:

> Malaysia showed on the record to say that this is people's power, that you can actually bring down a government … [it] will serve as a reminder, for ever and ever, for the ruling governments as to do not underestimate the power of the people.

This is reinforced by Ufen,[74] who argued that without civil society's role mobilizing the public and politicizing BN corruption and unfair electoral practices "the 2018 breakthrough would not have been possible."

The 2018 election campaign elicited close cooperation between civil society organizations and the opposition. This was driven in part by prior close friendships that developed between civil society and political actors, with one SUARAM member noting that "everyone has been fighting on the rights issue for [the] longest time,"[75] including providing "manpower into the election campaigns … frontline campaigning, [and] helping with speeches." Bersih cooperated closely with PH political parties to help mobilize and organize a mass rally conducted in 2017.[76] Bersih rallies were also attended by Mahathir. At the Bersih 4 rally held in August 2015 he called on citizens to "show people's power" to remove Najib from office.[77] Mahathir also attended the Bersih 5 rally held in November 2016 to again call for the resignation of Najib. In early 2016 Mahathir formed a rainbow "core group" of concerned citizens opposed to Najib.[78] This included opposition party leaders such as Lim Kit Siang of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), People's Justice Party (PKR) deputy leader and Selangor chief minister Azmin Ali, and civil society leaders such as Bersih's Maria Chin Abdullah.[79] Mahathir also met with HINDRAF chief Waythamoorthy in August 2017 to discuss collaboration.[80] As one human rights advocate[81] explained:

> It's not like we work for the government and for Mahathir because we trust Mahathir. We hate his guts, we remember what he did to the country, he's the root of all these problems we have right now … But we are left without a choice in that sense. We either vote for Mahathir, for possibly a hope of reform, or continue with the regime that's been in power 61 years.

This demonstrates the challenge facing civil society actors seeking to capitalize on the availability of allies while also attempting to maintain control and commitment to the group's core goals.

Victory for PH represented an opportunity for civil society actors to have a role in state decision making. This was based on promises made by PH that it would provide "space for the civil society" to operate.[82] A number of civil society activists accepted roles in the new government following the election. This included Maria Chin Abdullah, who joined PKR (a PH coalition member) and became a member of Parliament in 2018. A member of SUHAKAHM

noted that "those who are from the opposition parties, especially in terms of the main actors, are from the civil society group."[83] They went on to argue that civil society actors "now have a plea and have a part in decision-making" with the new PH government "much more open and willing to listen to different voices, different political opinion[s]." Following the election result, civil society actors were extensively involved, with the SUHAKAM Commissioner appointed as member of the institutional reform committee. This was something that had "never really happened before," with the Human Rights Commission "not [previously] consulted by the [BN] government when they come up with new laws, new draft bills."[84] Reflecting on this change, a NGO member[85] argued that:

> The relationship between civil society and the government has always been confrontational, adversarial ... Whenever the Barisan Nasional government had a chance to crackdown, they would crackdown, Mahathir included ... Now things have changed. But I don't like the change, in the sense that many of the civil society actors actually became very pro-opposition. I mean with good reason at that time, to get rid of Barisan Nasional, but I think slightly compromised now, because they have been co-opted into the new system.

Whilst this subset of civil society actors continued to assist the new government from 2018 onwards, "vehement ethnonationalist protests by another [Civil Society Organization] CSO cluster stymied Pakatan's efforts at institutional reforms and coherent messaging."[86] This demonstrates how civil society in Malaysia has "*both* been pivotal in a transition towards formal democracy *and* key to efforts towards its reversal."[87]

Discussion

Prior to the 2018 election, the regime was effective at closing down associational space for civil society actors. In the protest arena, this was primarily achieved through coercive measures, as represented by the chilling effect of the ISA. At the same time, the space in the electoral arena was managed through processes of malapportionment, gerrymandering, and electoral rigging rather than banning opponents outright. Attempts by the regime to further consolidate its control by redrawing electoral boundaries in 2017 and further restrictive laws were unsuccessful. Attempts at maintaining dominance were undermined by corruption allegations and fractions amongst the UMNO elite, with traditional UMNO members abandoning the party in large numbers in favor of the opposition.[88] These events echo Davenport's[89] claim that control rests as much on how citizens see the state, as its capacity to suppress opposition. Where the state suffers a loss of legitimacy in this way, internal cohesion may also be threatened, making social control less effective and opening opportunities for political dominance to be undermined.

The ability of civil society actors to disrupt the dominant regime rested on the opportunities presented by BN's loss of legitimacy. In the protest arena, Bersih organized mass rallies and mounted information campaigns to highlight state failings. Lower levels of institutionalization in the protest arena enabled actors to respond more quickly to changes in the external environment. At the same time, groups such as Bersih negotiated with other opposition actors to capitalize on the expressions of discontent to form an electoral coalition to present a positive future vision in the electoral arena. By effectively moving between arenas, civil society actors were able to utilize an array of tactics, accessing institutional networks and resources as well as utilizing less conventional methods including social and independent media.[90] Bersih was also effective at maintaining horizontal ties within civil society,[91] working with various NGO's and civil society actors including SUARAM to reinforce shared interests and push back against BN attempts to isolate the opposition and regain control.

Shifts in the opportunities available to actors in the protest and electoral arenas were central to the successful outcome in the 2018 election. Following Tilly,[92] there were significant shifts in the opportunities available, as the fragmentation of the elite and faltering efforts at repression brought new allies to the opposition forces, enabling the formation of a relatively stable alliance under the PH banner. There were risks associated with actions in both arenas, as the regime's past behaviour had suggested that failure would lead to difficulties. Actors therefore had to balance the decision to mobilize against BN's history of dominance and increased attempts at social control. As Meyer and Minkoff[93] note, apparent changes in opportunities do not necessarily represent deeper structural shifts. Defections from the dominant BN coalition were important but there remained uncertainty given the strength of antipathy toward key actors such as Mahathir Mohamad. The closely entangled nature of actors in the protest and electoral arena presented a further challenge after the victory was secured. As our participants noted, there appeared to be greater associational space following PH's victory, but the level of action was constrained to ensure that the coalition was not undermined.

A final factor that needs to be considered in the case of Malaysia is the role of the ethnic Malay majority in supporting the challenge to the dominant regime. The success of the opposition coalition rested on the ability of participants to mobilize support across society, in a situation where the BN coalition had long been seen as the protector of Malay rights. In this context, defections from the BN coalition were important but there remained uncertainty given the strength of the interests of the ethnic Malay majority in determining political priorities. Presenting an alternative therefore rested on generating legitimacy among members of this community to ensure its support. Connecting the fate of this community with that of the state through demonstrations of regime failure was therefore crucial. As Hutter[94] notes,

mass media is a key site of mobilization in both the protest and electoral arenas, requiring actors in both arenas to craft messages that were able to appeal to observers. The electoral campaign presented an opportunity to consolidate actions in both arenas, echoing McAdam and Tarrow's[95] point and further highlighting potential interconnections between the protest and electoral arenas. The interaction between arenas can be most clearly seen in the actions of participants such as Mahathir Mohamad, who operated in the electoral arena but who moved into the protest arena at key moments to reinforce the oppositions claims and assuage potential concerns among the Malay majority.

The factors driving PH success were not necessarily unique to the 2018 election. The 2008 election shared similar features, with civil society actors working collaboratively with the opposition and informing and galvanizing the electorate to deny BN its two-thirds parliamentary majority for the first time.[96] The 2018 election was a demonstration of these same successful tactics, fueled by elite corruptive practices which provided the political opportunity and the cumulative pressure that previous years lacked. Whilst these efforts at coalition building were sufficient to tip the balance in the 2018 election, the subsequent fragility of the PH coalition and its eventual collapse after only two years in power suggests an underlying weakness inherent in elite and civil society coalitions. Whilst differences between the two groups may be put aside in the short term to achieve a common goal, changing agendas and allegiances, and the pressures of power can undermine a coalition over a prolonged period. This is evident in PH, where divisions between Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim and his supporters began to resurface from 2018 onwards. This contributed to the failure of the new regime in 2020. A further contributing factor was the lack of ethnic Malay support, with only 25–30% of Malays voting for PH in 2018.[97] This figure dwindled further post-election, driven by a rejuvenated opposition, ethnoreligious divisions, a deteriorating economic climate, and weak PH credibility, underperformance and instability. The erosion of support for UMNO and BN amongst its core electorate proved fleeting, with voters returning as dissatisfaction with PH grew.[98]

Conclusion

Leading up to Malaysia's 2018 election, associational space for civil society had been heavily curtailed by the state through mechanisms such as electoral manipulation, repressive laws, co-optation of political rivals, and clientelism favoring the Malay ethnic group. This dampened civil society actions across the protest and electoral arenas. In the 2018 election, civil society actors were able to leverage political opportunities resulting from elite defections and dissatisfaction to increase their ability to coordinate. The ability of the regime to shut down these challenges

was undermined by allegations of corruption, elite loss of legitimacy, electoral fraud, and institutional atrophy. This weakened BN's social control mechanisms, widening the associational space and presenting opportunities which civil society were able to capitalize on by mobilizing supporters to stage protests, amplifying claims through independent media, and utilizing institutional networks and established electoral channels.

These findings demonstrate the importance of three interrelated factors: effective state social control, the interplay between the political and electoral arenas, and changes in political opportunities available to opponents. In the case of Malaysia, BN's increasing fragmented elite under the leadership of Najib Razak presented an opportunity for civil society to consolidate action in both arenas. Shifts in the opportunities available to actors in the protest and electoral arenas were also central to the successful outcome in the 2018 election. This activity supports the findings of Ufen,[99] who credits civil society with the 2018 electoral turnover. Whilst elite-level divisions within UMNO and a disenfranchised electorate were important contributory factors, the former had been evident since the *Reformasi* movement in 1997, and the latter following the 2008 election which caused BN to lose its two-thirds majority in parliament for the first time. Civil society actors were effective in capitalizing on and mobilizing these internal and external factors to their advantage. Through the interplay between social control, arenas, and opportunities, civil society was able to therefore play a critical and decisive role in ending BN's dominance and securing victory for the PH coalition in 2018.

Despite BN's historic defeat, Malaysia has struggled on its path toward democratic governance. The collapse of the PH government in 2020 sparked a period of political turbulence which resulted in a return to power for UMNO in 2021 led by Ismail Sabri Yaakob. His predecessor Muhyiddin Yassin spent only 17 months in power, a period characterized by weak political legitimacy and a deterioration in human rights, with protests in 2021 met by a crackdown on freedom of speech and peaceful assembly.[100] Democratic backsliding has continued to fuel civil society actors in their fight for free and fair elections and the abolishment of draconian laws. Bersih played a critical role campaigning to lower the voting age from 21 to 18 in 2019.[101] It also called for a redelineation exercise to correct voter discrimination in advance of the country's 15th general election in 2022.[102] The election of opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim in 2022 was perceived as a major victory for civil society actors and for democracy.[103] However, a hung parliament forced Anwar to establish a Unity government that includes some unlikely coalition partners, including the previously ousted UMNO. It remains to be seen whether a coalition led by Anwar can consolidate democracy in Malaysia, or if political differences will undermine future reform and political unity.

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Appendix – Interview participants

ID	Role	Organization	Date
A1	Academic	University of Malaysia	20 August 2018
A2	Academic	Islamic University of Malaysia	21 August 2018
A3	Retired Academic	University of Malaya	22 August 2018
A4	Former Academic	University of Malaya and Singapore	23 August 2018
B1	Academic Former Member	University of Malaya SUHAKAM	20 August 2018
B2	Member	Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM)	24 August 2018
CS1	Activist	Bersih	21 August 2018
CS2	Staff Member	SUARAM	23 August 2018
CS3	Retired Civil Servant & NGO Member	Saya Anak Bangsa Malaysia	25 August 2018
J1	Journalist	Malaysiakini	23 August 2018
J2	Legal Advocate and Writer	Malaysiakini and SUARAM	24 August 2018
L1	Retired Lawyer	Corporate Law	23 August 2018