

MALAYSIA: Election preview—it's in the turnout

- Turnout is the key; for now, the consensus is that the opposition's dysfunction will result in a lower number compared to 2013, which will help the ruling National Front keep its parliamentary majority.
- If there are signs that the youth and ethnic Chinese and Indians are becoming more active, then uncertainty about the outcome will rise.
- Former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad could deliver Kedah to the opposition, but the races in Johor, Selangor, Kelantan, Sabah, and Sarawak will be watched closely.

The Election Commission has set 9 May as the polling date for the 14th General Elections (GE 14), which will include both parliamentary and state elections.

The protagonists

- The ruling National Front (BN) coalition, which is composed of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC).
- The Alliance of Hope (PH), which is the successor to the 2013 opposition coalition People's Alliance (PR). It comprises the multi-ethnic Democratic Action Party (DAP), the People's Justice Party (PKR) led by Anwar Ibrahim; the National Trust Party (Amanah), which took in progressive Islamists; and the Malaysian United Indigenous Party (PPBM) of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. PPBM was de-registered, however, Mahathir will campaign under PKR.
- The Malaysian Pan-Islamic Party (PAS), which broke away from PR in 2015 and competes primarily with UMNO for the Malay vote in rural areas.

In 2013, BN won 133 seats (60%) in the 222-seat lower house (Dewan Rakyat), with the remaining 89 seats (40%) going to the opposition PR. BN now has 131 seats, while PH (previously PR) has 72, and PAS has 13. Independents and

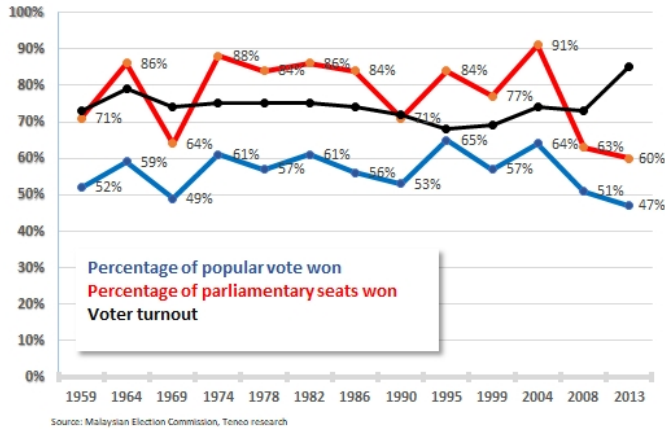
small regional parties hold the other six seats. In terms of control, BN governs 10 of the country's 13 states.

Key electoral dynamics

The ruling coalition remains unpopular and there is broad public recognition of the governance issues that have hounded it the past few years. However, BN is unlikely to shift strategies from its well-worn playbook: it will continue to promise to protect Malay interests and distribute economic largesse while benefiting from the recent electoral redistricting—and many Malays will default, fearing any uncertainty should BN fall. Any surprise in this election will not depend on how BN performs, but how the opposition is able to recover, if at all.

Turnout is key to uncertainty: Reliable and consistent public polling will be difficult to obtain over the next four weeks; therefore, what will be watched closely at the national level is the likely voter turnout as the main proxy for how close the elections could be. The 2013 elections, the most hotly-contested in the country's history, saw both voter turnout at its highest and popular support for the ruling BN at its lowest ever. Disenchanted voters – mainly from among the youth and ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities – are more likely to come out and support the opposition if they believe that their votes could visibly weaken BN. Therefore, should expectations of turnout of 80% or even higher increase, then the perceived uncertainty will also rise. Getting a sense of these numbers outside of anecdotes and how they may affect the outcome will not be easy, given the government's influence over media and the narrow timeframe for the campaign. The opposition is now criticizing the Election Commission for choosing Wednesday as polling day, since this would tend to reduce the turnout.

National Front (BN) performance and voter turnout



Opposition cohesion: Marginal voters, who are likely to vote for the opposition, will only turn out in large numbers if they believe that PH is gaining traction, and more than expected. They have, however, been demoralized by the collapse of PR and are ambivalent about Mahathir Mohamad being PH's standard-bearer; thus, they are for now not optimistic about GE 14 and convincing them of the opposition's chances is more difficult compared to 2013. When PAS left PR, its absence significantly reduced the size of the Bersih pro-reform rallies, highlighted the infighting between Malay and Chinese blocs, and gave UMNO nationalists ammunition to claim that BN's loss would result in a diminution of Malay privileges.

Mahathir's value: To draw Malay votes, the opposition PH agreed to Mahathir leading the party into the elections. This is a play on nostalgia as well as the name-recall that he brings in the rural heartland that is BN's stronghold. However, there is noticeable uncertainty that Mahathir can deliver all of these. In the baseline scenario, he helps PH in one or two states, but not enough to dent BN's share given the ground it makes up elsewhere through gerrymandering and by snatching seats in three-cornered PH-PR-PAS battles.

What are the important races?

Kedah (BN:10, PH:5): No state has probably been impacted more by Mahathir's reentry into politics. PH is hoping that disenchantment over economic conditions in rural areas, the

possible weakening of PAS and nostalgia for the former prime minister in his home state will result in an election surprise.

Johor (BN:20, PH:6): Aside from Kedah, Mahathir has targeted this state – the birthplace of UMNO. Even if BN were to retain control, a substantial loss of seats in Johor and Kedah by the ruling coalition would be something that the opposition could parlay in the next elections; it would generate the signal of BN vulnerability given the right conditions.

Sabah and Sarawak (BN:47, PH:9): The two states on the island of Borneo account for 56 out of 222 (56%) of all parliamentary seats and the common wisdom is that these two states are the path for any opposition win. For this reason, BN has always pledged substantial economic benefits to the two states ahead of elections, and GE 14 will not be any different. It is difficult to see PH making substantial inroads into BN's lead.

Selangor (state level): PH is likely to win more parliamentary seats, but control of the state assembly is less certain because of PAS's departure, which has created a three-way fight, and the electoral redelineation exercise that is expected to have benefited the government. Selangor is Malaysia's showcase state – its most heavily populated and urbanized, where incomes are a third above the national average – and a state-level win by BN would be a significant blow to the opposition.

Kelantan (PAS:9, BN:5): BN is hoping to steal this state away from PAS, which has held it for 28 straight years, in a three-cornered fight. PAS has been weakened by the 2015 death of Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, the state's chief minister for 23 years, and creeping disenchantment with the lack of economic development. PAS still has enough to eke out a victory, but it could be close.

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