

# Monopoly and Monotony of Political Representation in Malaysia

Friday 3 March 2023, by [HIN Ooi Kok](#) (Date first published: 1 November 2022).

**Malaysia's parliament system offers two options for the new parties, including MUDA. They can go solo but be stranded in the political wilderness or join a broader coalition that moderates their radicalism and reduces their autonomy.**

21.1 million Malaysians are estimated to head to the polls on November 19, 2022. Approximately 6.2 million newly enfranchised voters, either young or previously unregistered – a whopping 42% increase from the 2018 general election. The big jump in eligible voters was due to the “Undi18” constitutional amendment, which lowered the minimum voting age from 21 to 18, and the automatic voter registration which now registers Malaysians who turn 18 as voters.

Malaysian politics has been turbulent, to say the least, since February 2020, when a group of parliamentarians defected and led to the collapse of the Pakatan Harapan federal government. Prior to its dissolution, the 14<sup>th</sup> parliament witnessed three prime ministers in quick succession.

This general election (GE15) is unpredictable not only because of the unprecedented surge in eligible voters, but also because it occurs in the midst of political fatigue and the monsoon season, which tends to result in heavy flooding.

*New Naratif's* explainer takes you into the complications of Malaysia's parliamentary democracy and explores how new parties – including MUDA, the youth-led party founded by former youth and sports minister Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman – might navigate the path to Parliament in the upcoming GE15.

**Why do some voters feel there are more similarities than differences between the major political coalitions? Namely, Barisan Nasional (BN), Pakatan Harapan (PH), Perikatan Nasional (PN), and Gerakan Tanah Air (GTA).**

Many political scientists and economists subscribe to the [Median Voter Theorem](#). In brief, this states that in majoritarian elections, there is an incentive for parties' preferences to converge because they compete for the median voter. If you stray too far from the centre, your opponent can assume a moderate position and win support from a majority of voters. Whether it is Pakatan Harapan vs Barisan Nasional, Labour vs Conservative, or Democrats vs Republicans, parties often compete for the median and build a broad coalition (The evidence for this is stronger in U.S. presidential elections: during the primary election, candidates “move to the extremes” to appeal to their respective bases, but during the general election, candidates “tack to the centre” to appeal to the median voter.)

But this theorem makes several questionable assumptions. Given the plethora of political issues and positions, it is hard to reduce electoral politics to any one-dimensional spectrum e.g. left-center-right. While useful as a shorthand to understand party convergence, the median voter theorem can sometimes reflect myth more than reality as politics becomes increasingly fragmented and polarised.

## **Is Malaysian democracy representative of the people?**

Malaysia's parliamentary democracy is nowhere as representative as it should be. To take one example, women make up [48.9% of the population](#) but only [14.9% of the Members of Parliament](#). Women's representation in the Cabinet is also [appalling](#). In addition, there are massive gerrymandering and [malapportionment](#) issues.

However, Malaysia's representative democracy does, arguably, reflect certain voter *preferences*. It is sometimes assumed that there exists a fixed set of preferences that most voters agree with, but which politicians fail to represent for various reasons. This assumption underlies politician-blaming rhetoric, such as "We get along just fine. Politicians are the ones dividing us." But in fact, Malaysian politics is fragmented partly because the society itself is divided. Multiple surveys indicated that Malaysians do not agree on many issues, from [freedom of religion](#) to [the acceptability of a female or an ethnic minority as Prime Minister](#), and the position of Chinese [vernacular schools](#).

These diverse preferences are reflected, to some degree, in political gridlock and policy impasse e.g. both Barisan Nasional and Pakatan Harapan governments could not forge ahead with meaningful integration of schools, or the recognition of Chinese independent schools' Unified Examination Certificate (UEC), even though PH promised this. Thus, even before the February 2020 wave of defections that collapsed the PH coalition, disillusionment had set in because of the new government's painfully [slow pace of reform](#) and their failure to implement [one promise after another](#).

## **So why does the political system not reflect this diversity?**

The electoral system was adopted half a century ago, and it entrenches existing power dynamics. The system has not undergone any major changes since then. It was not designed to promote representation for marginalised communities – for instance, women's representation in Parliament was less than 10% in the first forty years and [achieved a dismal 14.4% in 2018](#). We must advocate for electoral reforms to promote diversity and incentivise politicians to compete and cooperate more effectively..

## **Can we choose the Prime Minister?**

The Malaysian Prime Minister is not chosen by all voters — usually only by division heads of the ruling political party or its Members of Parliament. Like other Commonwealth countries with Westminster parliamentary democracy, Malaysian voters do not directly choose the Prime Minister. Voters elect representatives for their parliamentary constituency (there are 222 parliamentary constituencies in total for GE15) Whichever Member of Parliament commands the confidence of the majority among the 222 representatives will be appointed Prime Minister by the King. Party and coalition politics also play a role: often, the Prime Minister candidate is decided by a small handful of party delegates and power brokers.

## **If we don't like the status quo, can we create a new party to champion what we want?**

Some blocs of voters feel that existing parliamentary parties do not represent their interests. They opt to join or form alternatives such as the leftist Socialist Party of Malaysia (PSM), the hard-line Pan-Malaysian Islamic Front (BERJASA), or the 'youth party', the Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (MUDA). On paper, the process is straightforward: gather several adult individuals from multiple states and submit your new party's registration to the Registrar of Society (ROS). Once approved, you will be eligible to field candidates and contest in elections.

But there are many rules governing party organisation, finance and internal party election – failure to comply can result in deregistration. ROS is notoriously beholden to the whims and fancy of the (usually partisan) Home Minister. The Socialist Party of Malaysia (PSM) waited ten years for their registration to be approved, and only succeeded after taking the matter to court.

For expediency, parties usually take over an existing dormant party rather than set one up from scratch. For example, Anwar Ibrahim's People's Justice Party (PKR) was created from the little-known Ikatan Masyarakat Islam Malaysia (IKATAN), and subsequently merged with Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM).

### **Do new parties tend to emerge out of nowhere or from an existing social movement?**

Political parties seldom appear out of a vacuum. Instead, they garner support from social movements, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and civil society organisations with existing bases. These movements provide a critical mass of memberships and supporters, extensive networks, and organisational strength, while the new parties provide potential legislative and executive influence.

Examples abound: civil society associations played a pivotal role in consolidating PKR's early years during the Reformasi. Many members of IKRAM (an Islamic NGO) joined Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah) en masse when pro-Pakatan PAS rebels formed the party by taking over a dormant party.

Leftist PSM was formed by three grassroots movements: Community Development Centre, Suara Warga Pertiwi, and Alaigal. Hard-line Islamist party, BERJASA, is supported by members of right-wing Islamist NGO ISMA. MUDA's co-founders comprise individuals from a few notable movements such as Challenger, Masa Kita, Liga Rakyat Demokratik, and some education and youth advocates.

### **What are the two possible paths to Parliament for a new party?**

A primary objective of political parties is to win seats in Parliament and state assemblies to achieve some legislative or executive influence. New parties have two options in elections: stand-alone or negotiate an electoral pact with other parties.

Going solo preserves the party's autonomy on policy proposals, seats to contest, and campaign tactics. As part of a broader coalition or an electoral pact, a party loses much of that autonomy, but significantly boosts their chances of winning.

This is a Catch-22 situation: smaller or newer parties thrive on differentiating themselves from the mainstream parties and offering to bring a new voice to Parliament rather than being entangled with pre-existing political baggage, but implementing their desired agenda requires them to win. Coalition politics are messy and require collective responsibility, which does not fit with the positioning of, and expectations for, a new party seeking to disrupt the status quo.

### **What do history and data tell us about the prospect of standing alone in elections?**

Malaysia has a [first-past-the-post \(FPTP\) electoral system](#) for our Parliament and state assemblies. This system which usually results (as [Duverger's law](#) suggests) in a two-party system (or two-coalition system) due to tactical voting and parties' need to avoid splitting the votes. The empirical data are not promising for third parties who stand outside of any two major coalitions in a given place, irrespective of ideology. (The identities of the two major coalitions differ from place to place)

Leftist parties standing alone, PSM and PRM, not only [failed to win a single seat](#) in the 2018 election, but lost their deposits in all the seats they contested. (Candidates must deposit RM 10,000

for a parliamentary seat or RM 5,000 for a state seat, which is forfeited if they do not secure at least one-eighth of the total votes.) Hardline Islamist party BERJASA fielded five candidates (two on PAS' ticket), and all but one lost their deposit. In the Tanjung Piai by-election, BERJASA's party president ended up with a mere 2.2% of the votes, despite an initially buoyant mood. Tellingly, in that election, only two out of six candidates received a double-digit share of the votes: Barisan Nasional with 65.6% and Pakatan Harapan with 26.7%.

The consequence was especially devastating for PSM in the 2018 election. If losing their sole seat was somewhat expected, two other blows were not: PSM's two-term incumbent, Dr. Michael Jeyakumar Devaraj, lost his deposit and finished last behind PH, BN, and even PAS, which had never before fielded a candidate in that constituency. Jeyakumar was an effective parliamentarian, well praised for bringing up class issues and sensible analyses, but personal appeal could not overcome an electoral system designed to favour a two-coalition competition and systematically disadvantage any other challenger.

Table: Sungai Siput election 1999 - 2018

Year	Barisan Nasional (MIC)	Keadilan	DAP	PAS	PSM	MDP(defunct)	Independents
1999	17,480		12,221(Jeyakumar)			565	
2004	19,029	8,680(Jeyakumar)	2,890				
2008	14,637	16,458 (Jeyakumar)					864
2013	18,800	21,593 (Jeyakumar)					197
2018	15,210	20,817		5,194	1,505 (Jeyakumar)		

The case of PSM's Jeyakumar is not an isolated one. Wee Choo Keong was twice elected in the Bukit Bintang parliamentary constituency on DAP's ticket, but later departed the party acrimoniously. When he formed a new party and fought against both the ruling coalition and the main opposition coalition in the same seat, he lost his deposit.

Table: Two-term incumbents who lost deposit when they ran against the two-coalition system

Year	Votes obtained by Wee Choo Keong in Bukit Bintang constituency	Year	Votes obtained by Jeyakumar Devaraj in Sungai Siput constituency
1990	31,829 (DAP)	1999	12,221 (DAP)
1995	20,403 (DAP))	2004	8,680 (PKR)
1999	(Ineligible)	2008	16,458 (PKR)
2004	1,107 (MDP)	2013	21,593 (PKR)
		2018	1,505 (PSM)

The evidence is damning for any party who wishes to contest outside the two-coalition system. The exception is when a third party is strong enough to supplant one of the parties in the two-party system. For example, the Labour Party supplanted the Liberal Party in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain.

Contrary to the idealistic perception that the best candidate will be chosen to represent a constituency, in many cases, popular and respected candidates lose to unknown candidates fielded by more dominant parties. [Strategic voting matters](#) under FPTP. If the new 'youth-centric' party formed by former minister and Muar MP Syed Saddiq were to contest GE15 without an electoral pact with any one major coalition, the Muar MP has a tall order to avoid a repeat of what happened in Sungai Siput and Bukit Bintang.

**Let's talk about seat negotiation, a process by which parties decide how to allocate seats to contest among their allies in a political coalition. Since new parties know that it is hard to win on their own, they want to negotiate seats with a coalition. Under what conditions do they tend to succeed or fail?**

Seat negotiation is one of coalition politics' most important and contentious features. Every party knows it is more beneficial to be inside an electoral pact than outside. One must strike a balance between standing firm (not being bullied in a big coalition) and demanding too much (alienating potential allies). The first hurdle, however, is that one must get to the negotiating table.

Coalitions tend to admit newcomers only to the extent they need to win, and no more, because the distribution of spoils will be inefficient. This theory is known as *minimal-winning coalition*. This is not an absolute law, but it does explain why Pakatan Harapan chose to admit Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM) and exclude the Socialist Party of Malaysia (PSM) in the run-up to the 2018 election. The former was perceived as capable of attracting rural and Malay voters, a weak spot for the coalition. Conversely, PSM was perceived as an unnecessary addition because the coalition felt strong enough in PSM's areas. Thus, coalitions negotiate when a new party has something that the coalition desires but does not have in order to win, or when the new party's threat of contesting will result in a multi-cornered fight that hurts the coalition.

As bitter experience taught PSM in 2018, past cooperation with Pakatan leaders on various issues, from human rights campaigns to anti-Goods and Services Tax (GST) protests, does not guarantee inclusion in a coalition:

"Since 2011, we have always said we will work with them but they (Pakatan Harapan) haven't reciprocated. Even when they formed Pakatan Harapan and held seat negotiations, we were not invited...We want them to do well but then they are not giving us much space...They are completely marginalising us, that is our dilemma." - Dr Jeyakumar Devaraj, PSM chairperson

PSM's experience also informs us about another important trade-off in coalition politics. A new party is seeking admission into an existing coalition, which is already packed with other parties, and is threatening the territory of those parties. Game theory may explain this situation: When a new party applies to join an existing coalition, given that everyone knows that the new party will do well in rather than out of the coalition, the parties inside the coalition will seek to minimise their territorial losses if/when they admit the new party, unless it has more leverage to bargain. This predicament is described by PSM deputy chairman S Arulchelvan,

"PSM held two national congresses to decide on our election strategy...We plan to contest in more seats rather than the traditional four seats we have been contesting to show that PSM has expanded and is a national party...[but] [Pakatan] Harapan's final offer to PSM to only contest Sungai Siput under their logo and not contest other seats [which] would actually mean making PSM totally irrelevant."

In short, the coalition offered PSM a prison on the eve of GE14. They were offered one seat in Sungai Siput, but they were to be confined to only that territory. Because PSM did not have more

leverage to bargain, they were not allowed to expand their political influence and contest in other seats. Fast forward four years later, PSM claimed that PH [did not offer a single seat](#) to PSM for GE15. Despite initially seemingly keen on an electoral pact with PSM and MUDA, PH's Presidential Council ultimately rejected PSM's request for an electoral pact and communicated the decision just six days away from Nomination Day. As of the time of writing, MUDA was only allocated a few parliamentary seats - no more than 10 - to contest by PH. The same scenario is apparent from the experience of Islamist parties. Although they were allies in the Gagasan Sejahtera coalition, PAS will not allow BERJASA to contest more than just a few seats to protect their territories. This may explain why the two Islamist parties will go separate ways in GE15: PAS is under the PN coalition, and BERJASA is under the GTA coalition.

### **The two-party system is being upended in other countries. Why not in Malaysia?**

The political changes visible in other countries are hard to replicate in Malaysia due to differences in the systems and electoral channels (see the table below).

<b>Country</b>	<b>Party</b>	<b>Electoral channel that enabled their success but missing in Malaysia</b>	<b>Why it matters</b>
Spain, Italy and New Zealand	Podemos, Five Star Movement, and Jacinda Ardern's Labour Party	<a href="#">Proportional representation</a>	In contrast to FPTP, PR lowers the entry barrier for new political parties, because seats are allocated based on the percentage of vote received. This is fairer to small and medium parties, but it could also empower populist parties. For example, Podemos won 21% of the votes in their first general election and received 69 seats (out of 350). If the election had been conducted under FPTP, Podemos would not have won that many seats: their support would have been dispersed throughout the 350 seats.
Thailand	Future Forward Party	Mixed member apportionment (combines both FPTP and PR)	Prior to 2019, Thailand amended their electoral system into a "Mixed-Member Apportionment" system which incorporates party-list (a form of PR). Despite being only a year old, FFP won 80 seats and <a href="#">became the third biggest party</a> under this system. If we exclude seats that are won under party-list PR and only counts the seats under FPTP, FFP won only 30 seats.
France	LREM (Macron)	Presidential election	Malaysia does not have a presidential system.



Country	Party	Electoral channel that enabled their success but missing in Malaysia	Why it matters
United States	Democratic Party (Bernie Sanders, AOC, Justice Democrats) / Republican Party (Donald Trump; Tea Party)	Primary election	Primary election offers an opportunity for candidates to challenge incumbents and party elites through grassroots mobilisation. For example, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez defeated a party elite in the Democratic Party's primary election and went on to win the general election for a House seat. In Malaysia, there is no primary; election candidates for the general election are selected by a few party leaders. Grassroots may nominate names but no process binds party elites to popular will regarding candidate nomination for the general election.
United Kingdom	Labour Party (Jeremy Corbyn)	Party leadership election through ordinary members and registered supporters.	In 2014, rules were changed to allow anyone to take part in ballot for a £3 fee. Nearly 200,000 additional people took part in Labour's leadership election and many <a href="#">voted for Corbyn</a> , stunning the party's elites. In Malaysia, non-members are excluded from internal party election. Most parties rely on 'electoral college' of division heads casting the votes for their national leadership line-up.

This leaves us with two options: to study comparable cases (such as India, which also practices FPTP parliamentary democracy and has multiparty competition) or push for electoral reforms to incorporate some proportional representation, local elections, or primaries.

### **But why are many independents and third parties still contesting, such as in the 2020 Sabah state election?**

It may be tempting to infer from the plethora of multi-cornered fights in the Sabah state election that the two-coalition system is dead. On the contrary, Duverger's Law still applies because only two blocs (Warisan Plus and Gagasan Rakyat Sabah) won 95.9% of the seats between them. More than half of the candidates [lost their deposit](#). Of about 50 independent candidates, only three were successful.

It is also critical that we do not draw the wrong lessons from the success of then-22-year-old P. Prabakaran, who contested and won as an independent in Batu parliamentary constituency in 2018. Prabakaran was originally slated to go up against the incumbent MP, Tian Chua, but the latter was disqualified from contesting due to a court fine. Prabakaran then received full support from Tian Chua and the Pakatan Harapan machinery to defeat the other candidates from Barisan Nasional and PAS. Had Tian Chua remained in the race, the independent candidate would likely not have won.

Likewise, Pakatan Harapan's victory in three-cornered fights in the 2018 election does not undermine the basic model of Duverger's Law. Looking closely at that election, the two-coalition competition remains largely in place, but the identity of the two main competitors differed according

to region. PAS did not win a single parliamentary seat in Perak and Selangor, where they had substantial representation for the past ten years. In Johor, 90.1% of PAS candidates lost their deposits. But in Kelantan and Terengganu, where UMNO and PAS were the two main competitors, PH candidates [lost their deposits](#) and were completely wiped out on the electoral map over there. Duverger's law is still largely accurate in the Malaysian context. In the 2022 Johor state election, MUDA made its electoral debut and fared decently: it did not lose deposit in all the seats they contested—a feat contributed by their electoral pact with PH as well as their own ability to attract and excite new voters.

### **What can be done to break up the monopoly and monotony of political representation?**

[The Electoral Reform Committee](#) has made promising recommendations, such as empowering the Election Commission, regulating political funding, and reforming the electoral system. This includes introducing a form of proportional representation (PR). PR significantly lowers the threshold to gain political representation, so those who would like to see a greater variety of political parties should lobby for its adoption. However, this comes at a risk: radical right parties are more successful in the PR system, as shown by the rise of the Five Star Movement in Italy and the far-right nationalist Alternative for Germany (AfD).

In addition, Bersih, a coalition of civil society organisations pushing for clean and fair elections, has advocated for [public funding of political parties](#) to promote a more level-playing field. Their recommendations included funding to incentivise policy research and women's parliamentary representation.

Other efforts that could generate more diverse and autonomous political representation are introducing local elections and reforming internal party elections.

### **Is electoral politics all that matters?**

The roles of political parties are not limited to elections. Parties play important roles in organising the masses, mobilising citizens, educating future generations, proposing and challenging public policies, and transforming social and political conflict. Even if a political party performs poorly in elections, they could still influence agenda setting and shift [the Overton Window](#):

The Overton window is a theory designed to highlight the range of mainstream opinions on a given issue. Think about public policy as a continuum: current policy plus a narrow range of possible changes that are somewhere between popular and tolerable. That socially-acceptable span, usually somewhere in the middle of the two poles, is the Overton window. Think of it as the territory covered by the aphorism “reasonable people can disagree.” Not everyone necessarily agrees on the ideas inside the window, but the general consensus is that those concepts are normal. Things outside the window range from the radical to the unthinkable.

Some examples included Bernie Sanders' presidential runs in 2016 and 2020. He did not win the primary, but [significantly shifted the Democratic Party to the left](#) on key issues such as healthcare. Sarah Palin's candidacy for Vice President of the United States, the rise of the Tea Party, and the Trump presidency are examples of how right-wing rhetoric has shifted further to the right and led to the infamous [Muslim ban](#) and surge of anti-Asian [hate crimes](#).

Moreover, voting is only one way for citizens to participate in the political process. In a democracy, citizens can join associations, organise advocacy campaigns, advocate as pressure groups, hold elected representatives accountable, or even run for office.



## What's the one-line takeaway from this explainer?

To overcome systematic disadvantages in an FPTP electoral system, new parties often must choose between being stranded in the political wilderness (remaining outside of power or confined to a few seats in Parliament or state assemblies) or being co-opted into a broader coalition that moderates their radicalism and reduces their autonomy in exchange for greater legislative and executive influence to get policies done.

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