

**Malaysia's Political Crisis:
Democratic Erosion or Progress?**

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GOVT 40.29 Democratic Erosion

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Glossary

United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)	Incumbent political party for most of Malaysia's independence. Lost parliamentary majority in the 2018 elections but returned to power in 2020. Largely appeals to the Malay majority.
Barisan Nasional (BN)	An inter-ethnic coalition of political parties led by the UMNO.
Mahathir Mohamad	Malaysia's 4th and 7th Prime Minister, from 16 July 1981 – 30 October 2003 then from 10 May 2018 – 1 March 2020. Known for severely restricting civil liberties during his first term under the UMNO, but later moved to the opposition and positioned himself as a democratic leader for his second term as premier. Led the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition government.
Anwar Ibrahim	Deputy Prime Minister from 1993 to 1998 under Mahathir. In part due to their strong rivalry, Anwar then led the opposition and called for democratic reform throughout the 2000s.
Muhyiddin Yassin	8th Prime Minister from 1 March 2020 – 16 August 2021, at the height of Malaysia's political crisis as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. Led the Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition. Yassin's term saw many symptoms of democratic erosion.
Ismail Sabri Yaakob	Vice-President of the UMNO and 9th Prime Minister since August 2021. Leads the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition.

Introduction

Four years ago, Malaysia seemed to be on the cusp of a democratic transition. In a watershed election in May 2018, the country saw its first electoral turnover since independence, ending over 60 years of dominance by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) party and its Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition (formerly the Alliance coalition). The newly-elected government announced a series of proposals to improve civil liberties, including the potential creation of an independent media council to regulate the news industry.¹ Yet, these measures never materialised. The new ruling coalition collapsed in February 2020—less than two years after being elected—sparking a political crisis that continues today.

These developments starkly contrast with Malaysia's historical record of political stability under a one-party-dominant coalition government. Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system; elections are held at least every five years. The UMNO, along with shifting coalition partners, held power from independence in 1957 to 2018. Many characterised this regime as electoral authoritarianism.² Though opposition parties were able to win parliamentary seats, the government purportedly manipulated elections through systemic malapportionment and gerrymandering, yielding electoral competition that was 'real but unfair'.³ The Electoral Integrity Project assigned Malaysia a score of 35 out of 100 for its electoral practices from 2012 to 2018, placing it 154th out of 167 countries.⁴

¹ Saqib Rahim, "Moves to improve press freedom in Malaysia met with cautious optimism," *The Guardian*, July 26, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/jul/26/moves-to-improve-press-freedom-in-malaysia-met-with-cautious-optimism>.

² Lee Hock Guan, "Mal-apportionment and the Electoral Authoritarian Regime in Malaysia," in *Coalitions in Collision: Malaysia's 13th General Elections*, ed. Lee Hock Guan, Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman and Johan Saravanamuttu, (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2015), 63.

³ Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, "The New Competitive Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (January 2020): 51, <http://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0004>.

⁴ Max Grömping and Pippa Norris, *Electoral Integrity Worldwide* (Ontario: Electoral Integrity Project, 2019), 6, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58533f31bebafe99c85dc9b/t/604785d34098312195a143ee/1615300055051/Electoral+Integrity+Worldwide.pdf>.

To understand the UMNO's long-standing monopoly on power, it is important to consider Malaysia's ethnic-based politics, in which parties typically champion the interests of a particular ethnic group. UMNO has often advocated for *Ketuanan Melayu*, a concept that emphasises Malay preeminence as a 'national birthright', thereby garnering overwhelming support from the Malay majority.⁵ Deadly racial riots which broke out in 1969 enabled the UMNO to further consolidate power under the guise of restoring racial harmony. The government advanced aggressive pro-Malay policies, tightened its control over the media, and silenced dissenters through laws like the Sedition Act.⁶ Civil liberties were further curbed under Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's leadership from 1981 to 2003. Notably, in a major crackdown (Operation Lalang) in 1987, 106 opposition politicians and civil society activists were arrested under the Internal Security Act for allegedly inciting racial tensions.⁷ Still, Mahathir's pro-Malay policies and Malaysia's strong economic growth under his leadership won him popular support, enabling him to remain the undisputed leader within UMNO and in Malaysian politics for many years.

Despite UMNO's electoral victories, the party began to gradually lose support starting in late 1990s following a wave of civil society activism. In 1998, Mahathir removed fellow UMNO member Anwar Ibrahim as Deputy Prime Minister in a move that was widely criticised as politically motivated, sparking mass public protests.⁸ Calls for democratic reform continued throughout the 2000s, attributed to a new generation of young and well-educated Malaysians as

⁵ Joseph Chinyong Liow, "Ketuanan Melayu: What's in a name?" *The Straits Times*, January 5, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/ketuanan-melayu-whats-in-a-name>.

⁶ Jennifer Pak, "What is Malaysia's sedition law?" *BBC*, November 27, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-29373164>.

⁷ Adrian Morel and Patthiya Tongfueng, *The State of Conflict and Violence in Asia* (San Francisco: The Asia Foundation, 2017), 83, <https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Malaysia-StateofConflictandViolence.pdf>.

⁸ Leslie Lopez, "Mahathir Explains Firing of Deputy; Public Support for Anwar Increases," *Wall Street Journal*, September 9, 1998, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB905285244564114000>.

well as growing popular frustration with corruption and cronyism.⁹ In 2015, then-Prime Minister Najib Razak, a member of the UMNO, became embroiled in a massive financial scandal, sparking yet another wave of public outcry. Unexpectedly, Mahathir, who had largely retired from public life by that point, left the UMNO in 2016 in protest of Najib's kleptocracy. He then formed a new opposition coalition to campaign against Najib, pledging to fight corruption and—ironically—embark on democratic reforms. In the landmark general elections of 2018, Mahathir's Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition claimed victory, ending UMNO's 61-year reign.

The 2018 opposition victory was widely perceived as a step towards democratisation.¹⁰ However, infighting in the new PH coalition led to Mahathir's shock resignation in February 2020, leaving a power vacuum. Muhyiddin Yassin from Mahathir's own party was then appointed prime minister under a new coalition, but resigned within 17 months after losing parliamentary support. Subsequently, UMNO's Vice President Ismail Sabri Yaakob was made premier in August 2021, bringing the party back to power. Crucially, the appointments of both Yassin and Yaakob were decided by Malaysia's monarch after private meetings with members of parliament, and not by a parliamentary vote. Furthermore, this period of political upheaval, which coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, saw a revitalisation of restrictive media laws and led to an 18-point decline for Malaysia on the annual World Press Freedom Index.¹¹

In sum, while Malaysia seemed to be moving towards democracy throughout the 2000s, the recent political crisis points instead towards democratic crisis and perhaps backsliding. Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the crisis, the country has also begun to see growing civil

⁹ Kee Beng Ooi, "Malaysia's Reformasi Movement Lives Up To Its Name," *Heinrich Böll Foundation*, June 1, 2018, <https://www.boell.de/en/2018/06/01/malaysias-reformasi-movement-lives-its-name>.

¹⁰ Sophie Lemièrre, "Democratization On Hold in Malaysia," *Brookings Institution*, January 22, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/democratization-on-hold-in-malaysia/>.

¹¹ "Malaysia," *Reporters Without Borders*, last modified 2020, <https://rsf.org/en/malaysia>.

society resistance and deepening political competition. As such, I suggest that Malaysia does not qualify for deepening autocracy in the long run.

Timeline

1981-2003	During his term as Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad introduces a slew of laws which curb civil liberties and repress political opponents. The incumbent BN coalition, led by UMNO, comfortably wins 5 consecutive federal elections.
2003-2009	Under PM Abdullah Badawi, UMNO's authoritarian regime continues but growing internet penetration rates enable new forms of political mobilisation. While outspoken bloggers face harassment, the government does not implement systemic forms of censorship. ¹² In the 2008 general elections, BN fails to secure a two-thirds supermajority for the first time since 1969 despite unfair electoral practices in their favour. They can no longer freely amend the Constitution, though their simple majority in Parliament still allows them to pass legislation easily. ¹³ UMNO's Najib Razak is sworn in as prime minister on April 3, 2009.
2010-2014	Freedom of assembly remains limited; electoral irregularities persist. UMNO's grip on power continues to weaken. In the 2013 elections, their BN coalition retains a simple majority of parliamentary seats but loses the popular vote.
2015-2017	In 2015, PM Najib is accused of large-scale corruption in connection with state investment fund 1MDB, prompting waves of mass protests. Activists and opposition leaders are arrested at rallies. The government clamps down on press

¹² Thomas B. Pepinsky, "Malaysia: Turnover Without Change," *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 1 (2007): 114, <https://doi:10.1353/jod.2007.0013>.

¹³ Arch Puddington, *Freedom in the World 2015*, (Washington: Freedom House, 2015), 417, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/Freedom_in_the_World_2015_complete_book.pdf.

	freedom; independent news site The Malaysian Insider shuts down in 2016 after the government purportedly dissuades advertisers from working with it. ¹⁴
2018-2020	In the 2018 elections, BN loses power to the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition, ending UMNO's 61-year reign. Mahathir Mohamad takes office as the Prime Minister. The new government embarks on a series of democratic reforms.
March 2020- August 2021	Mahathir resigns, sparking a political crisis. A new coalition (Perikatan Nasional) takes over. Newly appointed PM Muhyiddin Yassin tightens restrictions on press freedom. In January 2021 he declares a State of Emergency to "rein in coronavirus infections", ¹⁵ suspending Parliament and all elections. Coalition partners disapprove and withdraw their support for Yassin.
August 2021	Yassin resigns. UMNO's Ismail Sabri Yaakob is appointed Prime Minister.

¹⁴ Oliver Holmes, "Independent Malaysian news site closes amid government clampdown on media," *The Guardian*, March 15, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/15/independent-malaysian-insider-news-site-closes-government-media-clampdown>.

¹⁵ Reuters Staff, "Explainer: Why a state of emergency raises concerns in Malaysia," *Reuters*, January 12, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-healthcare-coronavirus-malaysia-emerg/explainer-why-a-state-of-emergency-raises-concerns-in-malaysia-idUSKBN29H1HE>.

Precursors of Erosion

As discussed, Malaysia began to experience democratic shifts in the 2000s, culminating in the election of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition in 2018. The democratisation came to halt in 2020 when the PH fell apart. Therefore, it can be said that the most immediate precursor of erosion in Malaysia was Mahathir's resignation as prime minister, which ultimately enabled other parties—notably former incumbent UMNO—to return to power. I posit that these events took place due to strategic miscalculations by several leaders.

Leading up to the landmark 2018 elections, long-standing political rivals Anwar and Mahathir inconceivably allied to form the PH coalition to contest UMNO. (Recall that Mahathir had controversially removed Anwar as Deputy Prime Minister in 1998, sparking close to two decades of public feuds thereafter.) Their reconciliation was contingent on Mahathir's promise that he would lead for only part of the term before handing the premiership to Anwar. However, after the elections, Mahathir appeared reluctant to commit to a specific timeline for the leadership succession, causing divisions within the coalition. Separately, a group of members from Mahathir's own party began plotting a parliamentary coup: To form a new ruling coalition helmed by Mahathir that would exclude Anwar.¹⁶ In a twist of events, Mahathir chose not to back their plans and instead resigned as prime minister 'to show he wasn't power crazy'.¹⁷

Yet, some speculated that Mahathir's resignation was part of a strategic manoeuvre to reinforce his power.¹⁸ Indeed, as Malaysia's MPs went through a series of hasty negotiations to

¹⁶ Yen Nee Lee, "Malaysia's 93-year-old leader on when he will step down: 'I will not go beyond three years,'" *CNBC*, June 23, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/24/malaysia-mahathir-on-stepping-down-handing-over-to-anwar-ibrahim.html>.

¹⁷ Eileen Ng, "Malaysia's Mahathir wants nonpartisan gov't if picked as PM," *AP News*, February 26, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/94f3de13b8a3fb25b015a52919eef1d8>.

¹⁸ Rebecca Ratcliffe, "Malaysia PM Mahathir resigns but is asked to stay as interim leader," *The Guardian*, February 24, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/24/anwar-ibrahim-decries-traitors-amid-cracks-in-deal-to-make-him-malysias-next-pm>.

decide on a new leader, Mahathir proposed to lead a non-partisan unity government. As Khoo explains, had his plan gone through, Mahathir would have been ‘beholden to no party, coalition, or, ultimately, electorate’.¹⁹ Instead, parties withdrew their support for Mahathir. Mahathir’s party deputy Muhyiddin Yassin then took advantage of the divided support between Mahathir and Anwar to emerge as the frontrunner. Just hours after the king named Yassin as the new prime minister, Mahathir made yet another attempt at power, claiming he had majority support from MPs, but ultimately failed.²⁰ These events suggest that Mahathir had resigned expecting to still retain power, only to be outmanoeuvred by Yassin. Moreover, Mahathir was not the only one who had made a poor judgement call; it appears that the initial faction planning a parliamentary coup had also miscalculated Mahathir’s response, not expecting him to resign.

These chaotic developments, described by analysts as ‘frantic horse-trading’,²¹ were exacerbated by Malaysia’s culture of party hopping, which can be attributed to the personalised brand of politics along with an entrenched patronage system. Leaders often award elite positions to MPs who pledge their loyalty,²² therefore encouraging shifting alliances based on potential rewards. With members of both ruling and opposition parties regularly switching sides during the political crisis, it was difficult for the king to ascertain who commanded a majority in parliament. Consequently, Yassin was appointed on the weak premise that he ‘likely’ had majority support.²³

¹⁹ Khoo Boo Teik, *The Unrealized Mahathir-Anwar Transitions: Social Divides and Political Consequences* (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021), 30, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/85272>.

²⁰ Hazlin Hassan, “Mahathir claims majority support for PM with backing of 115 MPs ahead of Muhyiddin's swearing-in ceremony,” *The Straits Times*, March 1, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/mahathir-claims-majority-support-for-pm-issues-list-of-114-mps-who-back-him>.

²¹ *The Economist*, “A botched power grab leaves Malaysia without a government,” last modified February 27, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2020/02/27/a-botched-power-grab-leaves-malaysia-without-a-government>.

²² Murray Hunter, “The need to move from personality to policy-based politics,” *Free Malaysia Today*, February 23, 2022, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2022/02/23/the-need-to-move-from-personality-to-policy-based-politics/>.

²³ *Aljazeera*, “Malaysia’s king appoints Muhyiddin Yassin as prime minister,” last modified February 29, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/29/malysias-king-appoints-muhyiddin-yassin-as-prime-minister>.

A third precursor to erosion in Malaysia was the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted parliamentary procedures and was also leveraged by politicians for anti-democratic means. The political upheaval sparked by Mahathir's resignation coincided with the onset of the pandemic in Malaysia. Given the ongoing crisis, the monarch hastened the appointment of a new leader, stating that the process '[could not] be delayed because the country needs a government for the wellbeing of the people and the nation'.²⁴ The time pressure may hence have contributed to the formation of a backdoor government with neither an electoral mandate nor a confident majority in Parliament.²⁵

Furthermore, Yassin's Perikatan Nasional government imposed a nation-wide lockdown on 18 March 2020 to slow the spread of COVID-19. Mass movements and gatherings were prohibited, severely limiting citizens' and opponents' ability to organise and mobilise against the political developments. As described in the next section of the paper, throughout subsequent waves of COVID-19 infections, the government continued to benefit from similar restrictions.

Finally, it is important to highlight that non-democratic institutions and practices have long been entrenched in Malaysia, many of which continued under Mahathir's PH government despite its promise of democratic reform. As such, once Yassin took over as prime minister, the state machinery was already in place for democratic backsliding to take place. For instance, during their decades in power, the UMNO relied heavily on selective patronage and intimate government-business relationships to influence electoral outcomes, with party members liberally appointed as directors of government-linked companies (GLCs). Rather than dismantling this framework through divestment, Mahathir chose to further *tighten* control over GLCs. Therefore,

²⁴Aljazeera, "Malaysia's king appoints Muhyiddin Yassin as prime minister."

²⁵ Khoo, *The Unrealized Mahathir-Anwar Transitions: Social Divides and Political Consequences*, 3.

after his government collapsed and Yassin's PN coalition came to power, parties were easily able to appoint their MPs as heads of GLCs.²⁶

Why did Mahathir's government fail to overturn existing authoritarian structures? Edmund Gomez suggests that the new political elites were, like the previous regime, simply driven by a desire to consolidate power.²⁷ Nevertheless, even where the PH attempted democratisation, ethnic cleavages hindered progress. Under the PH government which was markedly more multiethnic than the previous incumbents, opposition parties including the UMNO began to frame potential democratising reforms as an existential threat to Malay supremacy, forcing the PH to retreat on key decisions in order to maintain electoral support among the Malay majority.²⁸ For example, PM Mahathir initially promised to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), offering an opportunity to expand minority inclusion in Malaysian politics. However, UMNO and Malay right-wing groups organised huge public demonstrations, pressuring the government to backpedal on their decision.²⁹ Thus, the PH government's decision to maintain—and even deepen—non-democratic measures ultimately set the stage for power consolidation by the next government.

²⁶ Yiswaree Palansamy, "Zahid Hamidi: GLC appointments of MPs to ensure govt policies and 'aspirations' carried out," *Yahoo News*, May 27, 2020, <https://malaysia.news.yahoo.com/zahid-hamidi-glc-appointments-mps-134705075.html>.

²⁷ Edmund Terence Gomez, "Patronage-based business as usual in 'New Malaysia'," *East Asia Forum*, May 8, 2019, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/05/08/patronage-based-business-as-usual-in-new-malaysia/>.

²⁸ Sebastian Carl Dettman, "Authoritarian innovations and democratic reform in the "New Malaysia," *Democratisation* 27, no. 6 (2020): 1038. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1705791>.

²⁹ Datuk Dr Denison Jayasooria, *Understanding ICERD in the Wider Context of the Federal Constitution, Human Rights and Malaysian Society* (Malaysia: United Nations, 2020), 12, <https://malaysia.un.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/ICERD%20Booklet%20Final%20June%2024%202021.pdf>.

Symptoms of Erosion

Indeed, at first glance, the last two years in Malaysia under Prime Ministers Muhyiddin Yassin and Ismail Yaakob seem reminiscent of UMNO's previous decades-long authoritarian rule. Nevertheless, there has also been crucial democratic progress in some areas. This section will detail specific policies indicating democratic erosion—or lack thereof—in Malaysia in three aspects: competitive electoral procedures, civil and political liberties, and accountability.³⁰

The most significant symptom of democratic erosion was arguably the king's declaration of a national state of emergency from 12 January 2021 to 1 August 2021, at Yassin's request. The emergency suspended parliament, blocked elections, and granted PM Yassin's cabinet the power to introduce laws without parliamentary approval—effectively allowing Yassin to rule by decree for over 7 months and removing any platform for horizontal accountability. Although Yassin insisted that the emergency ordinance was necessary to curb the spread of COVID-19, some analysts argued it was primarily a bid to 'preserve his slipping grip on power'.³¹ The emergency came at a time when key allies in Yassin's coalition were threatening to withdraw support.³²

Yassin also imposed a slew of media restrictions during this time, most notably an anti-fake news law. The ordinance criminalised the creation, publication or dissemination of any 'fake news' about either COVID-19 or the state of emergency. However, the law failed to establish clear definitions for determining what was false, essentially giving the Malaysian government a monopoly over the truth. Moreover, any individual who disseminated 'fake news' *not* knowing it was false still faced the prospect of criminal prosecution, thereby intensifying a

³⁰ Ellen Lust and David Waldner, *Unwelcome Change: Understanding, Evaluating, and Extending Theories of Democratic Backsliding* (Washington DC: United States Agency for International Development, 2015), 2, https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PBAAD635.pdf.

³¹ Peter, Zsombor, "Motivation Behind Malaysia's State of Emergency Questioned," *Voice of America*, January 14, 2021, https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific_motivation-behind-malaysias-state-emergency-questioned/6200719.html.

³² Reuters, "Explainer: Why a state of emergency raises concerns in Malaysia."

culture of self-censorship. That year, Malaysia fell the furthest of all countries in the World Press Freedom Index—from 101st in 2020 to 119th in 2021.³³

Yassin's short stint as prime minister further saw the repression of opposition voices and civil society stakeholders. For instance, activists and citizens came together in July 2021 to organise the #Lawan ('Fight Back') rally, demanding Yassin's resignation and calling for the reinstatement of Parliament. Despite citizens' legal right to peaceful assembly, civil society organisations documented police barricades blocking access to protest sites as well as heavy police presence on the ground.³⁴ Furthermore, organisers faced constant intimidation prior to the rally. On 25 July, 13 activists were called in for investigations at various district police stations. On 29 July, 20-year-old organiser Sarah Ariff was arrested under the Sedition Act over social media posts about #Lawan; her phone was confiscated and a search warrant was issued to raid her house.³⁵ She was only released after 11 hours of interrogation. As activists pointed out, these all contributed to a chilling effect to deter others from exercising their right to free speech.³⁶

Civil and political liberties remain restricted under PM Yaakob's Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition following Yassin's resignation. For example, only 16 media outlets were allowed to attend the September 2021 parliament sitting. Neither the reasons for this exclusion nor grounds for selecting the media outlets were made clear.³⁷ In October 2021, less than two months into

³³ Reporters without Borders, "Malaysia."

³⁴ Centre for Independent Journalism, "Civil Society Monitoring Report on the #LAWAN Protest," last modified September 1, 2021, <https://cijmalaysia.net/civil-society-monitoring-report-on-the-lawan-protest/>.

³⁵ CIVICUS, "Harassment of activists, critics persist in Malaysia as new Prime Minister comes to power," last modified October 13, 2021, <https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2021/10/13/harassment-activists-critics-persist-malaysia-new-prime-minister-comes-power/>.

³⁶ Article 19, "Malaysia: Government must stop harassment and intimidation of peaceful protesters," last modified July 31, 2021, <https://www.article19.org/resources/malaysia-government-must-stop-harassment-intimidation-peaceful-protesters/>.

³⁷ Nicholas Chung, "MP blasts restrictions on media coverage of Dewan Rakyat," *Free Malaysia Today*, September 10, 2021, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2021/09/10/mp-blasts-restrictions-on-media-coverage-of-dewan-rakyat/>.

Yaakob's premiership, local activist and graphic artist Fahmi Reza was detained over a satirical poster he made about Yaakob's government.³⁸ Overall, Malaysia's Freedom House score fell slightly from 52 out of 100 in 2019 to 50 in 2021, with a 1 point decrease in each of the two categories: political rights and civil liberties.³⁹

Still, despite these anti-democratic changes, the Malaysian government has also allowed democratic progress in other aspects. Many of these positive changes emerged as a result of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed between the ruling BN coalition and the opposition coalition in September 2021, shortly after Yaakob took office. The government agreed to table a slew of institutional reforms proposed by the opposition, emphasising the need for 'political stability' and cooperation across political divides.⁴⁰ For example, in December 2021, constitutional amendments lowering the voting age to 18 and establishing automatic voter registration took effect as part of the MOU. (The amendments had originally been approved by Parliament in 2019.) The addition of 5.6 new million voters to the electorate, many of whom were from rural areas, indicated a step towards greater political inclusion. Indeed, many opposition voices praised this as a 'rare and encouraging victory' for democracy.⁴¹

Other proposals in the MOU include limiting the prime minister's tenure to 10 years, a ban on party hopping, and granting the Opposition Leader the same remuneration and resources

³⁸ Alyaa Alhadjri, "Fahmi Reza detained for satirical poster on 'Keluarga Malaysia'," *Malaysiakini*, October 4, 2021, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/594032>.

³⁹ Freedom House, "Malaysia," accessed May 9, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/malaysia/freedom-world/2019>; Freedom House, "Malaysia," accessed May 9, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/malaysia/freedom-world/2022>.

⁴⁰ Noah Lee and S. Adie Zul, "New Malaysian PM Offers Political Reforms to Gain Opposition Support," *Berna News*, September, 2021, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/malaysia-pm-offers-reforms-for-opposition-support-09102021153520.html>.

⁴¹ Michael Hart, "Malaysia's 'Politics as Usual' Is Hollowing Out Its Democracy," *World Politics Review*, March 16, 2022, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/30401/to-fix-its-democracy-malaysia-must-learn-from-bersih-s-legacy>.

as ministers, amongst others.⁴² Although Yaakob did not provide a time frame on when these reforms will be implemented, some, such as the anti-hopping law, have recently been tabled in Parliament. These all point to a greater tolerance for political competition in Malaysia.

Crucially, this tolerance does not necessarily translate to *actual* increased competition. Yaakob's BN coalition scored substantial victories in recent state polls despite the influx of new voters, including a decisive 40 out of 56 seats in the state of Johor in March 2022.⁴³ Expert James Chin attributed this dominance to voters' desire for stability, particularly given the economic ramifications of COVID-19.⁴⁴ In contrast to the BN's clear campaign slogan 'Stability For The Future', opposition coalitions remained highly divided following the last 2 years of political turmoil, significantly weakening their political appeal. Still, as Dr Bridget Welsh points out, 15 seats in Johor were won only by close margins, suggesting that the UMNO's foothold is not as secure as it once was and that the electoral landscape in Malaysia remains 'competitive and fluid'.⁴⁵

Overall, Malaysia has seen backsliding in civil and political liberties, as well as accountability, but arguably also improvements in competitive electoral procedures. With the MOU expiring on 31 July 2022 and the next general election scheduled to be held by September 2023, it remains to be seen whether UMNO is genuine about making democratic progress, or whether it will simply return to its business-as-usual anti-democratic rule.

⁴² The Vibes, "Govt agrees to cap PM's tenure at 10 years, push for anti-hopping law," last modified September 10, 2021, <https://www.thevibes.com/articles/news/41124/govt-agrees-to-cap-pms-tenure-at-10-years-push-for-anti-hopping-law>.

⁴³ Sebastian Strangio, "Malaysia's Grand Old Party Scores Decisive Victory in Pivotal State Election," *The Diplomat*, March 14, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/malysias-grand-old-party-scores-decisive-victory-in-pivotal-state-election/>.

⁴⁴ Eileen Ng, "Malaysia's ruling party wins big again in state polls," *AP News*, March 12, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/2022-midterm-elections-malaysia-elections-general-elections-dab1516ef06b78d3b9cd08b306831d9>.

⁴⁵ Bridget Welsh, "Back to the Future after Johor Polls," *Between the Lines*, March 13, 2022, https://betweenthelines.my/back-to-the-future-after-johor-polls/?utm_term=0_efceaeacfd-8b0608b78e-349878389.

Resistance to Erosion and the Aftermath of the Decline

Yet, this decision may not be up to the UMNO alone. Malaysia's civil society, monarchy and several political leaders have all attempted to limit the country's democratic backsliding. Civil society's role is best exemplified by the Sekretariat Solidariti Rakyat (SSR), a coalition of youth and civil society organisations which led the #Lawan movement from July to August 2021. The SSR had three demands: For Prime Minister Yassin to resign, to reconvene Parliament, as well as to end the national state of emergency. Given Malaysia's strict ban on assemblies and social gatherings as part of COVID-19 restrictions, the #Lawan movement was initially concentrated on social media platforms. Nonetheless, on July 31, 2021 over 1000 people⁴⁶ defied the national lockdown and took part in a street protest in Malaysia's capital Kuala Lumpur. Protestors criticised the 'backdoor government' and suspension of Parliament, arguing that the government was 'destroying [Malaysia's] democracy'.⁴⁷ Subsequently, Yassin resigned on August 16, 2021—about 2 weeks after the demonstration. While grassroots activism may not have the most important cause, analysts highlight that it affected the government's credibility and contributed to already-growing pressure for Yassin to resign.⁴⁸ In this sense, it can be said that the #Lawan movement was successful in at least one of its three demands. As the previous section pointed out, however, authorities have attempted to repress ground-up movements like #Lawan through intimidation tactics. This tension will be further discussed in the final section.

The Malaysian king also countered erosion by calling on Yassin to reconvene Parliament in June 2021, about six months after it had first been suspended. Yassin had previously stated his

⁴⁶ This figure is disputed. Organisers say there were about 1000 demonstrators but the police put the number at about 450.

⁴⁷ Aljazeera, "Malaysia: Hundreds take to the streets in anti-government protest," last modified July 31, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/31/hundreds-take-to-streets-in-anti-government-protest-in-malaysia>.

⁴⁸ Eileen Ng, "Malaysian PM resigns after failing to get majority support," *AP News*, August 16, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/health-coronavirus-pandemic-malaysia-b8233dff8391764afc50e4dbb3d41018>.

plan to delay reopening Parliament until September. However, in a public statement on June 16, the king said that parliamentary sittings should continue ‘as soon as possible’, stressing the role of Parliament ‘as an important platform for elected representatives to convene and discuss various issues’.⁴⁹ This intervention was particularly significant considering that Malaysia’s monarchy has traditionally kept to a ceremonial role. Under growing pressure, Yassin backtracked on his plans and agreed to hold a parliament sitting at the end of July—therefore demonstrating the king’s success in protecting Malaysia’s parliament, an institutional foundation of democracy.⁵⁰

Finally, resistance has also emerged in the form of new political parties, many of which were established by former or current members of parliament as well as civil society leaders. Four new parties emerged in the second half of 2021 alone, indicating a growing desire amongst both voters and politicians for alternative leadership.⁵¹ These parties could potentially increase political contestation in Malaysia and strengthen horizontal accountability, serving as a bulwark against democratic erosion by the incumbent UMNO. Most notable is the Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (MUDA), a youth-centric party which was officially registered in December 2021. Co-founder Syed Saddiq who is also a former cabinet Minister—the youngest in Malaysia to be appointed at the age of 25 —has signalled the party’s desire to serve as ‘a good check and balance system’ and bring a new politics ... in Malaysia’.⁵²

⁴⁹ Amir Yusof, “Malaysia king reiterates call for parliament to reconvene as soon as possible after meeting house speakers,” *Channel News Asia*, June 29, 2021, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/malaysia-parliament-reconvene-as-soon-as-possible-king-covid-19-1966441>.

⁵⁰ Sebastian Strangio, “Malaysian PM Backtracks and Agrees to Convene Parliament,” *The Diplomat*, July 6, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/malaysian-pm-backtracks-and-agrees-to-convene-parliament/>.

⁵¹ R. Loheswar, “Why all these new political parties now? Pundits suggest voters’ disillusionment with the old guard a major cause,” *Yahoo News*, January 2, 2022, <https://malaysia.news.yahoo.com/why-political-parties-now-pundits-210015450.html>.

⁵² Ida Lim, “Syed Saddiq confirms Muda unofficially won one seat in Johor, lost no deposit; says party here to stay,” *Yahoo News*, March, 12, 2022, <https://malaysia.news.yahoo.com/syed-saddiq-confirms-muda-unofficially-153338556.html>.

Analysis

Overall, it appears that democratic backsliding in Malaysia peaked throughout the political crisis from 2020-21 but is now slowing down. There are several tensions at play: Growing political inclusion and competition versus an electoral preference for the incumbents, as well as the presence of civil and political resistance versus continued repression of liberties.

The political crisis, while reversing Malaysia's years of gradual democratic progress, also revealed to the populace the toxicity of Malaysian politics. It highlighted many politicians' opportunistic nature, causing citizens to experience a 'disenchantment with mainstream politicians'.⁵³ Consequently, the rise in new opposition political parties may bode well for Malaysia's democracy in the long run. However, as mentioned in the Symptoms of Erosion section, many voters have still chosen to support the incumbent UMNO for stability. Ethnic lines also play a significant role here as the Malay majority seeks to preserve their preeminence in national policies. Opposition parties, in their current divided state, are insufficient to challenge UMNO's legacy. The possibility for democratisation in Malaysia therefore rests on new parties' ability to develop a solid campaign platform and strong voter base in the coming years. Recent institutional reforms through the bipartisan memorandum of understanding, particularly the lowered voting age and a potential anti-party hopping bill, could also strengthen political competition in the long run.

With regards to civil and political liberties, the government appears adamant to preserve the current culture of self-censorship and limited media freedom. Yet, ground-up movements *are* present and will likely continue to strengthen as COVID-19 restrictions loosen and organising becomes easier. As Lust and Waldner point out, 'apparently exclusionary measures can further

⁵³ R. Loheswar, "Why all these new political parties now? Pundits suggest voters' disillusionment with the old guard a major cause."

democratisation' by providing focal points for the opposition to mobilise around.⁵⁴ In Malaysia, youth organisations, through both digital platforms and in-person protests, have increasingly signalled their disapproval of the current political state and preference for electoral reform. International organisations including Amnesty, Human Rights Watch and Article 19 have also continuously condemned Malaysia's repressive tactics. Even the Malaysian monarch, a conventionally symbolic role, intervened during the political crisis to urge the reopening of Parliament. These forms of vertical accountability all place pressure on the UMNO to limit the extent of civil society repression moving forward.

All in all, Malaysia's case demonstrates that there is much potential for democratisation. Indeed, tolerance for political competition has already begun to loosen; a bipartisan MOU would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. The institutional changes made thus far under the MOU will limit the extent of UMNO's dominance, and any attempts by the government to manipulate elections or remain in power illegally will likely face even stronger resistance from the opposition as well as ground-up civil society movements. Taking all this into account, I posit that Malaysia is already beginning to see a thawing of authoritarianism—and will continue to do so in the years to come.

⁵⁴ Lust and Waldner, *Unwelcome Change: Understanding, Evaluating, and Extending Theories of Democratic Backsliding*, 10.

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