

## Explaining UMNO's Downfall Post GE14 and GE15: The Strengthened Convergence Between Two Cleavage Structures

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### ABSTRACT

UMNO's electoral defeat in 2018 and 2022 facilitated a transformation in the Malaysian political landscape. While the party's defeat could be ascribed to conventional factors, including narratives of elite corruption linked to its leadership and internal factionalism; however, another significant factor that contributed to UMNO's remarkable downfall was the cleavage structure that shifted away from the party which therefore eroded their political support. The article seeks to demonstrate the erosion of UMNO's influence among the Malay electorates, particularly in its traditional strongholds of rural parliamentary constituencies in Peninsular Malaysia due to modifications in the cleavage structure. The analysis of the 2013, 2018, and 2022 general elections indicated that UMNO ceded votes to the Islamic party, PAS and the newly formed Malay party, BERSATU, which were partners of the Pakatan Harapan opposition coalition in 2018. The outcomes of the 2022 general elections revealed a further decline in support for UMNO among Malay electorates, attributed to the merger between PAS and BERSATU, to establish a perceived Malay-Muslim coalition in *Perikatan Nasional*. This article argues that UMNO lost its monopoly among the Malay electorates due to the strengthened convergence between the two cleavage structures of ethnicity and religion. The convergence was facilitated by UMNO's promotion of Islamisation, its normalisation of political cooperation with PAS, and the party's inability to compete effectively with BERSATU which ended UMNO's one-party dominance in Malaysia.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study contributes to the existing literature of identity politics in Malaysia. Nonetheless, this study is one of the few studies that examined UMNO's role in identity politics from the perspective of one-party dominance especially in understanding the strengthened convergence of two cleavage structures post-2018 and 2022 general elections.

## 1. Introduction

For more than six decades, Malaysia was known as a strong party state with the long rule of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and its partners in the *Barisan Nasional* (BN) coalition (known as the Alliance until 1974). The UMNO-led *Barisan Nasional* coalition won every single general election it contested in from 1955 (before independence) to 2004 with a two-third majority with the exception of the 1969 general election. Its trajectory then declined, securing only a simple majority in the 2008 and 2013 general elections, and crashed to a surprising defeat in both 2018 and in 2022 general elections. UMNO's defeat is very much comparable with the fates of its counterparts in other countries commonly categorized as 'dominant parties'; the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in Mexico that lost power in the year 2000 after almost 77 years in power, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in Japan that also lost power in 2009 after ruling for almost 54 years with a short interruption in 1993 as well as the Indian National Congress (INC) in India that was completely out of power by 2013 after ruling for almost 54 years although there was a period in the 1970s and the 1990s in which it lost power. Until the defeat of UMNO, Malaysia was one of the only two nations in industrialised Southeast Asia (with the other being Singapore) that had not seen a change in government and the institutionalisation of democratic standards in the political system. The two general election of 2018 and 2022 has indeed squashed the debate around Malaysia's democratic standards especially with UMNO's back-to-back defeat in addition to a hung parliament for the first time in the country's history with no party or coalition obtaining a simple majority of 112 out of the 222 parliamentary seats to form the government.

UMNO's defeat in two consecutive elections signified the party's regression within the Malaysian political landscape, dropping from 88 parliamentary seats in 2013 to 54 parliamentary seats in 2018 (with some defecting later on) and ultimately to 26 parliamentary seats at the end of the 2022 general election, which indicated a remarkable decline. This was a shocking feat for UMNO, which was once regarded as the emblem of Malay nationalism, significantly pressuring the British colonial government to recognise the Malayan independence in 1957 and subsequently positioning itself as the protectorate of the Malay community in Malaysia; a role that the party embraced and latched on electorally for many years. What are the factors that contributed to UMNO's significant fall, culminating in its inaugural defeat in 2018 and subsequently leading to a similar outcome in 2022? There are multitude of viewpoints that have been discussed by scholars in making sense of UMNO's downfall. [Ufen \(2020\)](#) and [Nadzri and Azlan \(2023\)](#) argued that factionalism within UMNO crucially contributed to the party's defeat, particularly in the light of the internal split between then Prime Minister Najib Razak and Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin in 2016 as well as competition between the "court cluster" (UMNO leaders that had pending court cases) and the "cabinet cluster" (UMNO leaders who were appointed ministers during the administrations of Muhyiddin Yassin and Ismail Sabri) from 2020 to 2022. Another major driver highlighted by scholars in examining UMNO's poor performance is the influence of swing votes and the development of local or regional coalitions in the two Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak that were no longer the fixed deposit or part of the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional (especially in Sarawak) in addition to their flexible dynamics in terms of their support for political parties in Peninsula Malaysia ([Chin, 2018](#); [Nadzri & Azlan, 2023](#)).

In this article, the author expands on the aforementioned factors by examining another aspect that equally contributed to UMNO's consecutive electoral defeats within the context of dominant party politics. By employing the social cleavage theory, the article

suggest that UMNO's failure was also the consequence of a series of subtle and gradual shifts in the foundational cleavage structure which rendered a huge challenge in augmenting or even sustaining support for the party, notably among the Malay electorates. The Malay ground had tilted away from UMNO with the 2018 general elections although there was some optimism of recapturing the support that the party had lost when UMNO returned to power in March 2020 after the collapse of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) government. Nonetheless, UMNO popularity among the Malay electorates further declined following the 2022 general elections. In order to understand UMNO's diminished support among the Malay electorates, this article deconstructed the cleavage structures by mapping out features of parliamentary seats with a large Malay population, defined as those with over 50% registered Malay electorates in Peninsular Malaysia, centered around rural parliamentary seats that were once considered as UMNO's "fixed deposit" in terms of electoral support. This article while not exhaustive attempts to provide a theoretical understanding into the secondary cleavage structure of religion that UMNO might have overlooked which contributed to the party's decline in electoral support among the Malay electorates with the Malaysian United Indigenous Party (BERSATU) and the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) emerging as viable alternatives. The next section of the article provides an examination of the literature review by presenting a detailed overview of the theoretical framework and UMNO's political dominance over the cleavage structure during its time in power.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Theoretical Framework: Concept of One-Party Dominance and its Relationship to the Cleavage Structures

The concept of one-party dominance is very much an area of contestation as scholars tend to observe the phenomenon from various perspectives. However, there is a widespread consensus that a party is considered dominant based on two primary criteria: its long-term presence in power and its ability to secure a significant number of parliamentary seats to establish the government after elections (Duverger, 1954; Sartori, 1976; Pempel, 1990). Contrary to the widespread consensus, there exist variations regarding the duration of a dominant party's tenure in power and the magnitude of the victory required for the party to be considered dominant. In addition to the two characteristics, the ability of a dominant party to be in full control of the governing structure as well as its role in public policy are additional dimensions to the nature of dominance itself (Pempel, 1990). Therefore, in this article dominant parties are defined through its ability to convince the public of various doctrines and methods by influencing public perception for an extended period of time between 30 to 50 years (Duverger, 1954; Cox, 1997). This enables the dominant party to win either an absolute majority or even a simple majority securing its control in the government and public policy initiatives (Pempel, 1990).

Based on the definition outlined above, the author believes that UMNO fully meets the criteria to be classified as a dominant party. This is very much due to the fact that UMNO managed to showcase itself as the symbol of the nation's independence and became the party of choice among the Malay electorates achieved by its early influence on the political landscape. Subsequently, this factor bolstered their electoral appeal as UMNO successfully surpassed all other political parties by securing victory in thirteen successive general elections, therefore extending their tenure in power for about 63 years, surpassing the threshold that was set by most scholars. The UMNO-led *Barisan Nasional* (BN) coalition also fulfilled the condition of having a large number of votes by winning absolute

majorities or two third majorities in all of the general elections with the exception of 1969, 2008 and 2013 in which it won a simple majority. UMNO showcased its dominance by continuously being in government which enabled it to shape public policies based on the image of the party. UMNO's time in power and electoral dominance was expected to continue before it was halted in both the 2018 and 2022 general elections because of the change in the cleavage structure especially among the Malay electorates that had decided to vote for an alternative Malay party or coalition.

Prior to examining the relationship between political dominance and the cleavage structures, it is essential that the author elucidate the various cleavage structures and their correlation with party systems. The emergence of cleavage structures in party systems is very much attributed to the work of [Lipset and Rokkan \(1967\)](#), which established a connection between political systems and democracies in Europe that was closely intertwined. The party systems were shaped by the existing social cleavages then when voting rights were expanded as a result of the national and industrial revolutions. This resulted in the identification and classifications of four distinct types of social cleavages: center-periphery and religious-secular factions, arising from national revolutions, and urban-rural as well as worker-employer divisions, emerging from industrial revolutions ([Lipset & Rokan, 1967](#)). [Rae and Taylor \(1970\)](#) concurred with [Lipset and Rokkan \(1967\)](#) in identifying social cleavages as conditions that engender divisions within communities or subcommunities, that resulted in significant political differences during specific periods and locations. However their understanding of social cleavages transcends the four classifications, as they introduced three supplementary components of social cleavages: ascriptive cleavages that refer to divisions based on inherent characteristics such as race or caste, attitudinal cleavages that refer to divisions based on ideology or preference and behavioural cleavages that refer to divisions arising from voting patterns and organisational affiliations ([Rae & Taylor 1970](#)). The study by [Bartolini and Mair \(2013\)](#) is more contemporary as they further classified cleavages into three elements: class or ethnicity cleavage in terms of social-structure, values or beliefs cleavage that reflects the self-awareness of the social groups involved as well as organisational or institutional cleavage such as political parties. According to the various scholarly classifications, a social cleavage refers to a separation within society, such as based on class or religion while cleavage groups, on the other hand, are the specific groups that form as a result of this division, such as middle class and working class, as well as even Christians and Muslims. Both these elements has the potential to function as foundations for electoral mobilization, democratization, and politicization ([Bartolini & Mair, 2013](#)) especially in observing the connection between political systems and democracies ([Lipset & Rokan, 1967](#)), as well as the interaction between ascriptive and behavioural cleavages ([Rae & Taylor 1970](#)).

With the understanding of the concept of social cleavage and cleavage groups as well as its correlation with party systems, cleavage structures have also been identified as a function of one-party dominance ([Smith, 2010](#)). One-party dominance over a particular cleavage structure is possible when there is an absence of democratic competition that directly impacts voting behaviour whereby voters would generally vote along cleavage lines for a party that they are familiar with and in some instances political parties themselves would sometimes reinforce the social cleavages for their own benefit ([Chhibber & Petrocik, 1989](#)). One-party dominance is usually more prevalent in societies that are marked by a single deep and salient political cleavage ([Batto, 2018](#)). The African National Congress (ANC) is an example of a party in South Africa that has persisted in its dominance since 1994. While the ANC was an obvious choice for black South Africans



post-Apartheid, it continues to be the preferred choice for the majority black South Africans today, owing to the single salient political cleavage that demonstrates the correlation between ethnicity and political party affiliations (Boucek, 2012). The ANC continues to resonate with the majority of black South Africans as the party that ended their long struggle of apartheid with the Nelson Mandela at the helm with many still believing that the party would continue to represent the interests of black South Africans despite repeated efforts by the opposition parties in establishing parties across the ethnic or racial divide that has indeed been challenging (Myburgh & Giliomee, 2010; Ferree, 2016).

While the ANC in South Africa demonstrates one party dominance through a single salient cleavage structure, the Kuomintang in Taiwan is an example of a case study that demonstrates a similar single salient cleavage structure too defined by national identity. While the KMT was able to sustain its authority by emphasising the significance of the Chinese identity compounded by other factors such as authoritarian control, there was an eventual breakdown of the single cleavage structure of national identity as segments of the population identified themselves as either Chinese or Taiwanese. This divergence eventually led to the end of KMT's political dominance in Taiwan in 2016 with the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) capitalising on the national identity cleavage by projected support for the Taiwanese identity (Batto, 2018). The case study of the ANC and KMT both very much clarifies the political impact of a single salient cleavage structure in enabling political dominance while simultaneously demonstrating how such cleavage structures could also precipitate the decline of a dominant party. Both case studies closely reflect the Malaysian case, especially in terms of UMNO's control over the cleavage structure of ethnicity – especially among the Malay electorates. Nevertheless, UMNO's political supremacy in Malaysia was undermined due to the disintegration of its cleavage structure, rendering it less influential among the Malay electorates - a support base it had mostly controlled for nearly 63 years due the fact that UMNO had overlooked the role of a salient secondary cleavage. In the following section, the author explores the cleavage structures in the Malaysian political system and discussed how UMNO strategically controlled the cleavage structure of ethnicity which enabled the party to maintain its one-party dominance in Malaysia.

## **2.2. UMNO's Dominance over the Cleavage Structure of Ethnicity in Malaysia**

Electoral politics in Malaysia has been significantly shaped by a fundamental division of ethnicity, particularly in terms of political identification and voting behaviour. Criticisms of the use of ethnicity and electoral results mostly stems from the perception that these studies sometimes adopt a superficial approach in examining ethnicity. However, the underlying structure of ethnicity continues to be a significant factor in shaping voting behaviour among Malaysians. This has been exacerbated by the fact that the majority of vot consistently voted in alignment with their ethnic affiliations rather than across different ethnic groups. Furthermore, UMNO have successfully reinforced the cleavage structure of ethnicity especially in consistently gaining support from the Malay electorates. The cleavage structure of ethnicity in Malaysia primarily originates from the British colonial rule in the Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca, and Singapore, highlighted by the 1891 census which unveiled the segregation within the society among three ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese, and Indians (Hirschman, 1987). This segregation became the prevailing political structure during the decolonisation era in the 1950s, as political parties before independence were mostly established based on ethnic divisions. UMNO represented the Malay community, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA)

represented the Chinese community, while the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) represented the Indian community, resulting in the establishment of an ethnic-based party system (Short, 1970).

Although UMNO, MCA, and MIC subsequently merged under a multi-ethnic consociationalism structure through the Alliance Party (later renamed Barisan Nasional or BN for short in 1974 with the inclusion of other parties), this did not signify an endorsement for multi-ethnic politics. It was merely a concession, as the ethnic party system remained to be a fundamental component of the agreed framework. The reality was that the coalition consisted of three distinct entities or parties that advocated for the interests of the three different ethnic communities. This arrangement was a favourable option for UMNO, particularly the Malay community because UMNO retained its position as the exclusive Malay party, while the non-Malay parties (MCA and MIC) were limited in their participation to only be part of an electoral alliance rather than having a direct membership within UMNO.

UMNO evolved into a pre-eminent Malay party and consistently positioned itself as the exclusive advocate and guardian of Malay rights and privileges, therefore establishing itself as a clear preference during elections among the majority of Malay electorates (Mutalib, 1990). UMNO continuously legitimised itself among the Malay electorates through an array of strategies to showcase its dominance. One of the initial key strategies was the launching the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) in 1956. FELDA is a state land development program aimed at relocating impoverished Malay farmers to new land schemes established for commercial agriculture (Khor & Chia, 2020). This initiative aimed to improve the conditions of a significant portion of the rural Malays by establishing progressive rural communities and modernising the rural economy. Collectively, FELDA relocated roughly 120,000 families between 1959 and 1990, establishing around 470,998 hectares of settler smallholdings and 340,142 hectares of commercial plantations (Salleh, 1991) that generated profits and incomes through cultivation of crops such as palm oil and rubber (Bahrin & Perera, 1977). FELDA successfully facilitated the Malay community's access to vocational training in contemporary agricultural techniques, provided loans for land acquisition, and even offered financial support for the development of small businesses (Bahrin & Perera, 1977). The FELDA settlers, predominantly Malays from rural areas, derived significant advantages from the UMNO-led initiative with the perception that voting for UMNO resulted in socio-economic progress for the Malay community as a whole (Bastien Onn, personal communication, August 24, 2023). Therefore, the FELDA initiative granted UMNO with a solid voter base especially among the Malay electorates.

UMNO's strategy to further cement its dominance among the Malay community was showcased through the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971 (Bidu & Hamil, 2018). The NEP was an affirmative action policy for the majority *Bumiputera* (sons of the soil) and Malay population which ultimately served as a means of dispensing benefits to the Malay community in exchange for political support. It was regarded as one of the most effective policy that consolidated UMNO's control and support among the Malay electorates facilitating direct government intervention (Wan Agyl Wan Hassan, personal communication, September 11, 2023). In addition, it also provided economic assistance for the Malay electorates through an assertive training and educational strategy aimed at developing a professionally trained Malay workforce (Shamsul, 1997). This enabled many from the Malay to attain positions such as bureaucrats, technocrats, company executives, engineers and various other professions that required advanced and specialised training

programs that were provided under the policy (Shamsul, 1997). The NEP also enabled the establishments of new organisations or agencies, including the Social Development Division (KEMAS) – tasked with constructing rural kindergartens and promoting further development in the villages; Amanah Saham Berhad (ASB) - a government-operation unit trust scheme providing risk-free investment opportunities for the ethnic Malays at rates exceeding commercial standards; and National Civics Bureau (BTN) - an entity dedicated to promoting patriotism within the bureaucracy and loyalty to the UMNO-led government (Funston, 2018). These institutions including FELDA as previously discussed fostered a chauvinistic justification for Malay supremacy and bolstered support for UMNO among the Malay electorates, with the aim of securing ongoing advantages from the UMNO-led government. This also enabled UMNO to furnish the Malay community with a rich supply of resources due to the strong links between money and politics for political patronage and exercise financial control by providing attractive incentives during elections because it would have been difficult for UMNO and the Malay electorates to survive without the patronage system (Tan Sri Syed Hamid Albar, personal communication, September 6, 2022). UMNO also gained a reputation as the party of warlords with all 191 UMNO Division Heads exerting their control by dispensing financial favours to the Village Security and Development Committee (JKKK), which typically comprised of quite powerful UMNO members within the community thereby maintaining their dominance among the Malay community (Bidu & Hamil, 2018). These were some of the features which enabled UMNO to effectively control the Malay vote bloc, especially in parliamentary seats with large Malay electorates.

This section explored how UMNO was able to exert its control over the cleavage structure of ethnicity especially among the Malay electorates by positioning itself as the protectorate of the community. Furthermore, UMNO strengthened the conviction that parties other than UMNO were incapable of effectively representing the Malay community. UMNO also showcased its ability to shape public policy initiatives based on the image of the party through initiatives such as FELDA and the NEP, which served the interest of the Malay electorates as a whole which enabled the party to maintain its stronghold over the cleavage structure in order to continuously be politically dominant. In the subsequent section, the author provides an overview of the research methodology especially in providing a brief explanation of the data collection and data analysis procedures employed in this article.

### 3. Research Methodology

This article adopted a qualitative case study approach as the main research design. According to Stake (2010), qualitative research is very much based on human perceptions in exploring a particular phenomenon. The article utilises a disciplined configurative case study whereby an established theory, in this case the social cleavage theory was chosen to provide a thorough understanding of a specific case (George & Bennet, 2005). Both primary and secondary resources were gathered for this article. The primary resources were collected through semi-structured interviews with four key informants whom are well versed in the overall understanding of Malaysian politics. The first two informants are former active members of parliament (MPs) whom are Tun Musa Hitam, the former Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia and UMNO Deputy President from 1981 to 1987 and Tan Sri Syed Hamid Albar, a former UMNO Cabinet Minister and former Election Committee Chief for BERSATU. The subsequent two informants are current active members from UMNO in Mr Wan Agyl Wan Hassan, the current UMNO Youth Permanent Chairman and Mr Bastien Onn, the current UMNO Deputy Chief of Segamat Division in the

State of Johor. The secondary resources were collected mainly comprised of published reports by government agencies such as the election commission, online news articles, scholarly books and academic journals. The data collected from both the primary and secondary resources were interpreted by triangulating the narratives and ideas through descriptive analysis, presenting a chronological account of UMNO's loss of political dominance due to the party's indirect reinforcement of the secondary cleavage of religion. The analysis coincided closely with the theory of social cleavage which was the main analytical framework with the concept of dominant party serving as the secondary component of the overall article. The following section will demonstrate the outcomes regarding UMNO's diminished influence over the cleavage structure by specifically analysing the party's performance in rural parliamentary seats which have a significant Malay population. The section will also offer a comprehensive discussion on the ways in which UMNO played an instrumental role in the convergence of both cleavage structures.

#### 4. Findings, Analysis and Discussions

##### 4.1. A Comparison of the 2013, 2018 and 2022 General Election Results in Rural Malay Parliamentary Seats

This section unpacks the shortcomings and the decline in support for UMNO. It specifically observes UMNO's performances in rural parliamentary seats (or constituencies) in Peninsula Malaysia, which has a significant Malay population, to limit the scope of discussion as these parliamentary seats are typically considered as UMNO's electoral stronghold. [Table 1](#) delineates the differences between rural, sub-urban and urban parliamentary seats in Peninsular Malaysia. According to the delineation in [Table 1](#), a subsequent refinement of the number of urban and sub-urban parliamentary seats in Peninsular Malaysia was carried out by the author's interpretation of [Awang Besar et al. \(2020\)](#) and [Ahmad \(2022\)](#).

Table 1: Description of rural, sub-urban and urban parliamentary seats

Type of seats	Description
Rural parliamentary seats	Located in areas with villages, small towns and farms. Generally rural parliamentary seats has a small population
Sub-urban parliamentary seats	Located at the fringes of towns and cities, but which may also contain villages. Some semi-urban cities are also urban cities, but have rural state assembly seats within them
Urban parliamentary seats	Located in areas with rapid development where agriculture is not the main economic activity.

Source: [Awang Besar et al. \(2020\)](#)

The refinement presented in [Table 2](#) identified that Peninsular Malaysia has 80 rural parliamentary seats and 38 sub-urban parliamentary seats that are usually contested during the general elections.

By utilising the demographics data from [China Press \(2022\)](#) and the author's observation of all 222 parliamentary seats, a further classification of the rural and sub-urban parliamentary seats was established based on the percentage of Malay and non-Malay populations. [Table 3](#) illustrates that out of the 80 rural parliamentary seats, 52 seats are classified as Malay dominant; 15 seats are Malay majority; 8 seats are Malay marginal while 5 seats are non-Malay majority seats. As for the 38 sub-urban parliamentary seats,



15 seats are classified as Malay dominant; 6 seats are Malay majority; 4 seats are Malay marginal, and 13 seats are non-Malay majority.

Table 2: Number of rural and semi-urban parliamentary seats in Peninsula Malaysia contested during general elections

Parliamentary Seats	Total	Malay Dominant	Malay Majority	Malay Marginal	Non-Malay Majority
Rural	80 seats	52 seats	15 seats	8 seats	5 seats
Sub-Urban	38 seats	15 seats	6 seats	4 seats	13 seats

Source: Authors' interpretation based on [Awang Besar et al. \(2020\)](#) and [Ahmad \(2022\)](#)

Table 3: Criteria for the classification of the type of parliamentary seats

Type of parliamentary seats	Percentage indicators
Malay Dominant seats	More than 70% Malay electorates
Malay Majority seats	Between 60-69% Malay electorates
Malay Marginal seats	Between 51-59% electorates
Non-Malay Majority seats	50% and below Malay electorates

Source: Authors' interpretation based on [China Press \(2022\)](#)

[Table 4](#) outlines the criteria for the classifications of the type of parliamentary seats as follows: Malay dominant seats - comprising over 70% Malay electorates; Malay majority seats – consisting of 60 to 69% Malay electorates; Malay marginal seats – ranging from 51 to 59% Malay electorates; and non-Malay majority seats - featuring less than 50% of Malay electorates. The classification makers are derived from the author's interpretation based on the demographic data from [China Press \(2022\)](#) to display the data comprehensively for the readers. The author's rationale for interpreting the population percentage in assessing UMNO's decline in electoral performance based on the 2013, 2018 and 2022 general elections is grounded in the historical monopolisation by UMNO among the Malay electorates. Examining the data through percentage indicators was significant in demonstrating UMNO's shortcomings in terms of the party's influence over the different types of parliamentary seats in comparison to the opposition especially PAS and BERSATU with whom UMNO directly competes with for support of the Malay electorates.

[Table 4](#), [Table 5](#) and [Table 6](#) shows the number of rural parliamentary seats in Peninsula Malaysia that consist of 50% or more Malay electorates secured by the major parties and coalitions during the 2013, 2018 and 2022 general elections. To examine UMNO's loss of influence among the Malay population, the election results incorporated only 75 rural parliamentary seats with more than 50% Malay electorates, thereby excluding the 5 non-Malay majority rural parliamentary seats.

[Table 4](#) illustrates that the UMNO-led BN coalition (UMNO hereafter) secured 61 of the 75 rural parliamentary seats in the 2013 general elections. Out of the 61 seats, UMNO won 41 Malay dominant seats, 13 Malay majority seats and 7 Malay marginal seats. The Pakatan Rakyat (PR) opposition coalition that comprised of PAS, the People's Justice Party (PKR) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP) won 14 of the 75 rural parliamentary seats with

PAS alone winning 11 seats: 9 Malay dominant seats and 2 Malay majority seats. It signified that UMNO and PAS were indeed the principle contenders for the support of the Malay electorates, with UMNO emerging victorious.

Table 4: Number of rural parliamentary seats based in Peninsular Malaysia won by the contesting political parties and coalitions in the 2013 General Elections

	UMNO/BN	PAS	PR	PR+PAS
Malay Dominant seats (70% above)	41	9	2	11
Malay Majority seats (60-69%)	13	2	0	2
Malay Marginal seats (51-59%)	7	0	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>14</b>

Source: [Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia \(2013\)](#) and [China Press \(2022\)](#)

Table 5 illustrates an erosion of support for UMNO as the party only secured 41 rural of the 75 rural parliamentary seats in the 2018 general elections. Out of the 41 seats, UMNO won 35 Malay dominant seats, 4 Malay majority seats and 2 Malay marginal seats. The new opposition coalition in Pakatan Harapan (PH) (replaced PR after PAS' departure) that consisted of PKR, DAP and the National Trust Party (AMANAH) - a breakaway party of PAS as well as the new Malay party in BERSATU - a breakaway party of UMNO. The PH coalition collectively secured a total of 22 rural parliamentary seats with BERSATU winning 9 seats in its inaugural election, winning 3 Malay dominant seats, 5 Malay majority seats and 1 Malay marginal seat. PAS secured 12 rural parliamentary seats, all Malay dominant seats demonstrating the party's considerable strength in areas with substantial Malay population. The 2018 general elections was the first time in which the dominant party, UMNO was ousted from power, attributable to increased influence of PAS among the Malay electorates especially in rural areas and also the emergence of BERSATU as an alternative Malay party. UMNO was starting to gradual lose its significant influence among the Malay electorates.

Table 5: Number of rural parliamentary seats based in Peninsular Malaysia won by the contesting political parties in the 2018 General Elections

	UMNO/BN	PAS	BERSATU	PH + BERSATU
Malay Dominant seats (70% above)	35	12	3	5
Malay Majority seats (60-69%)	4	0	5	11
Malay Marginal seats (51-59%)	2	0	1	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>22</b>

Source: [Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia \(2018\)](#) and [China Press \(2022\)](#)

Table 6 illustrates that UMNO had a further decline in popularity among the Malay electorates in the 2022 general elections as the party secured only 20 rural parliamentary

seats winning 9 Malay dominant seats, 6 Malay majority seats and 3 Malay marginal seats. UMNO conceded a cumulative total of 45 rural parliamentary seats in the previous two general elections. PH that comprised of just PKR, DAP and AMANAH only secured 12 rural parliamentary seats. BERSATU was no longer part of the PH opposition coalition and formed a new electoral coalition in Perikatan Nasional (PN) alongside PAS and GERAKAN (did not win a single parliamentary seat). The “Malay-Muslim” coalition of PN was the biggest winner as they secured a total of 48 rural parliamentary seats with PAS and BERSATU winning 30 seats and 18 seats respectively thereby establishing the coalition the new stronghold for Malay electorates. The overall data showed that UMNO, previously a dominant party especially in rural areas had lost ground, handing over the baton to PAS and BERSATU of the PN coalition. UMNO now no longer commanded the cleavage structure of ethnicity, especially among the rural Malay electorates. The following subsection, explores the possible factors that contributed to the decline of UMNO’s political dominance over the cleavage structure.

Table 6: Number of rural parliamentary seats based in Peninsular Malaysia won by the contesting political parties in the 2022 General Elections

	UMNO/BN	PAS	BERSATU	PH
Malay Dominant seats (70% above)	9	27	16	0
Malay Majority seats (60-69%)	6	3	2	4
Malay Marginal seats (51-59%)	3	0	0	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>9</b>

Source: [Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia \(2022\)](#) and [China Press \(2022\)](#)

#### 4.2. The End of UMNO’s Dominance: Strengthened Interaction Between Ethnicity and Religiosity in Political Identification

This subsection examines the factors that contributed to UMNO’s decline in support among the majority of Malay electorates following a comprehensive evaluation of their defeat in multiple rural parliamentary seats with a significant Malay population in Peninsular Malaysia. UMNO’s dominance and support from the majority of Malay electorates previously were ascribed to a single deep and salient cleavage structure rooted on ethnicity ([Batto, 2018](#)). However, in the case of UMNO, there was the existence of an imposing secondary cleavage structure that strengthened its dominance, which the party had overlooked. UMNO had reinforced a salient secondary cleavage rooted in religion that primarily targeted the Malay electorates who possessed a profound sense of religiosity. This action aimed to guarantee the continuous support of the Malay electorates for UMNO instead of its closest political competitor at that time, PAS. UMNO’s reinforcements of the secondary cleavage resulted in a fortified or strengthened convergence between the primary (ethnicity) and secondary (religion) cleavage structure into one political identity, as evidenced in the 2022 general elections. The PN coalition received endorsement from the Malay electorate over their electoral arrangement. BERSATU was recognised as an alternative Malay party embodying the Malay political identity, whilst PAS was identified as a party symbolising the amalgamation of political Islam, as both parties advocated for a Malay-Muslim coalition.

UMNO should have anticipated the convergence of the Malay-Muslim political identity, as it bears partial responsibility for fostering the initial evolution. Preceding an in-depth analysis of how UMNO strategically enhanced the convergence of ethnic (Malay) and religious (Islam) political identity for its political objectives, this article provides a background on the real feasibility of this endeavour. Scholars working on Malaysian politics have long observed a significant correlation between ethnicity and religion. Over time, these two identities have developed concurrently, occasionally impacting political campaigns through the interaction of ethical principles, party loyalty, and political mobilisation (Welsh, 2015). The cultivation of a clear distinction between ethnic and religious identification is often challenging due to their intrinsic connection. Article 160 of the Malaysian constitution, defines “Malay” as an individual who adheres to the Islamic faith (Judicial Appointment Commission Malaysia, 1957); therefore they are legally restricted although variations exist in the practice of Islam among the Malay community. Distinguishing between ethnic and religious identification is difficult due to the explicit connection between the two, especially among the Malay-Muslims. Considering this strong interdependence, does religion impact politics and voting behaviour especially among the Malay electorates?

There are substantial body of literatures demonstrating the influence of religiosity on political identification with past and recent research demonstrating a correlation between the impact of Islamism and voting behaviour (Lahiri, 2005; Liow, 2009; El-Muhammady, 2015; Abdul Hamid (2018). Nonetheless, the question that emerges is the extent to which ethnicity or religion alters voting behaviour among the Malay electorates. The outcome of the 2022 general election suggests that a coalition that had a clear convergence of both emerged as the preferred choice among the Malay electorates, therefore shifting the cleavage structure away from UMNO. As mentioned, it was UMNO that initially facilitated the convergence between the two cleavage structures, which eventually benefited the PN coalition. But how did UMNO facilitate and strengthened the convergence between both the ethnic (Malay) and religious (Islam) political identities, which resulted in the erosion of its own political support among the Malay electorates? The authors analysis indicated that the promotion of Islamisation by UMNO during the Mahathir administration, the normalization of UMNO’s political cooperation with PAS and the failure of UMNO in the management of its political competition with BERSATU as well as its abandonment of the PN coalition contributed to the convergence of the cleavage structures which led to UMNO’s downfall. In the following subsection, the author dissects these three components in more detail to elucidate the relationship between the convergence of cleavage structures and UMNO’s diminished political dominance.

#### *4.2.1. UMNO Promoting the Islamisation Race*

The space of political Islam in Malaysia has traditionally pitted the secular-nationalist UMNO against the Islamist PAS. UMNO initially projected the notion of “Malay supremacy” through its mantra that “*UMNO is Malay and Malay is UMNO*” (personal communication, Tun Musa Hitam, September 22, 2022). PAS consistently had “Islamic supremacy” at the forefront with a view of establishing an Islamic state (Funston, 1980). UMNO has sometimes used its centrifugal force by moving a little to the right of the political spectrum due to the fear of PAS’ influence among the Malay electorates but then again, they are able to come back to centre due its position in the multi-ethnic BN coalition. Despite PAS being consistent in projecting religious supremacy, it was UMNO that facilitated and amplified the convergence between the cleavage structures of ethnicity and religion through a Malay-executed Islamisation agenda to continuously monopolise the Malay electorates



(personal communication, Tun Musa Hitam, September 22, 2022). While this was a feature under other UMNO Prime Ministers, it was more prevalent during administration of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (hereafter Mahathir) through his Islamisation policy to consolidate UMNO's dominance through the recruitment of Anwar Ibrahim (hereafter Anwar), an up-and-coming Islamist student leader from Angkatan Belia Islam (ABIM) in 1982 who was apparently expected to join PAS (Hilley, 2001; Shamsul, 2004). Anwar was rapidly promoted within UMNO and eventually became the Deputy Prime Minister later on. The Mahathir-Anwar duo began infusing Islamic principles into the government establishing Islamic institutions such as International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM), Islam Pilgrims Board (*Lembaga Tabung Haji*), *Islamic Bank (Bank Islam)* and as well as the Department of Islamic Advancement (JAKIM) (Pandian, 2005).

Although Mahathir was aiming at mitigating PAS' growing influence, it was paradoxically UMNO that engaged in a political competition with PAS, commonly themed as the "Islamisation race" (Liow, 2004). Mahathir wanted to demonstrate to the Malay voters that UMNO was more congruent to the Islamic principles than PAS. This was an unavoidable competition that would ultimately be detrimental to UMNO (personal communication, Tun Musa Hitam, September 22, 2022). While UMNO was vigorously competing in this race, PAS chose to adopt a more measured approach, perceiving the situation as a marathon rather than a sprint. PAS engaged in a long-term strategy and were not pursuing administrative power; instead were satisfied by withholding UMNO's cumulative support among the Malay electorates – knowing that UMNO would adopt a more pronounced Islamist agenda out of fear of competition from PAS (Kessler, 2018). In several instances, PAS seemed to have intentionally allowed UMNO to take credit for their Islamisation measures, while PAS was focused on its own long-term Islamic objectives (personal communication, Tun Musa Hitam, September 22, 2022). Consequently, UMNO's attempts to neutralise PAS was inadvertently reinforcing the demand for religiosity, resulting in UMNO advocating Malay Islamic Supremacy (Chin, 2020), which marked the initial phase towards the strengthened convergence between the cleavage structure of ethnicity and religiosity which would later benefit PAS and BERSATU.

#### 4.2.2. UMNO normalising its political cooperation with PAS

Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (hereafter Abdullah) also attempted to outmaneuver PAS with his policy on *Islam Hadhari* (Abdul Hamid & Ismail, 2014) to maintain support among the Malay electorates. In addition, Prime Minister Najib Razak (hereafter Najib) similarly employed *Prinsip Wasatiyyah* (Sabtu et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the distinction between both Abdullah and Najib's approaches to PAS lies in Najib's view of PAS as a prospective ally, especially after the 2013 general elections when UMNO experienced a decline in support among the urban Malay electorates as they favoured the PR opposition coalition. UMNO initiated negotiations with PAS by assuring the party that the government would consider endorsing PAS' proposals to enforce Islamic criminal law especially in the state of Kelantan (Loh, 2014). However, UMNO was unsuccessful in persuading the leadership of PAS, then led by Nik Aziz Nik Mat (hereafter Nik Aziz), who maintained his allegiance to the PR coalition. Subsequently, following the demise of Nik Aziz in February 2015, the conservative faction of PAS, led by Abdul Hadi Awang (hereafter Hadi Awang) assumed control over the leadership of party and ended PAS' association with the PR opposition coalition in June 2015. UMNO had killed two birds with one stone because by effectively courting PAS; it had disoriented the opposition and at the same time simultaneously strengthened its outlook among the rural Malay electorates, so augmenting its prospects of preserving its political supremacy. Najib as the President of

UMNO and Hadi Awang as the President of PAS committed to fostering Malay-Muslim unity across various platforms, with UMNO permitting PAS to present the bill on Islamic criminal law as promised and fast tracked it for a parliamentary debate in April 2017 (Chin, 2016; Abdul Hamid & Ismail, 2014). In addition, a massive protest was organised in the capital of Kuala Lumpur, bringing together members of UMNO and PAS as well as multiple Islamic and Malay NGOs, with the then Religious Affairs Minister from UMNO expressing support for the bill on Islamic criminal law by cautioning non-Muslim against interfering in Islamic affairs (Abdul Hamid & Ismail, 2014). Although the bill did not become a legislation, the UMNO-led government devised its own strategy for Islamisation by enhancing the Sharia courts through the Shariah Court Empowerment Committee (JAKIM, 2017) as way of demonstrating the party's commitment on Islam to the rural Malay electorates.

The UMNO-led government appeared to be at the forefront in advocating for the importance of religiosity although it had worked collaboratively with PAS. UMNO seemed to have utilised PAS more as a political opportunity rather than a genuine political ally, in order to undermine the opposition and strengthen its popularity among the rural Malay electorates (Tan Sri Syed Hamid Albar, personal communication, September 6, 2022). UMNO eventually abandoned PAS and contested in the 2018 general election under the BN coalition without any formal partnership. There were suggestions that UMNO and PAS had an arrangement to work together as an electoral coalition or a gentlemen's agreement wherein PAS would back an UMNO-led government if it became the kingmaker (Ufen, 2022). Nonetheless UMNO's strategy proved counterproductive as it suffered a defeat in the 2018 general elections for the first time in its political history. UMNO failed to recognise that the normalization of its cooperation with PAS, was indirectly enhancing PAS' appeal among the rural Malay electorates as well. The acceptability of PAS was indeed growing especially among those that embraced the idea of Malay-Muslim unity that was initially propagated by UMNO which had either directly or indirectly reinforced the acceptance of the convergence between the Malay and Muslim political identity. PAS, once perceived as UMNO's political enemy, was subsequently viewed in a positive light under Najib's leadership of UMNO, culminating in PAS' most successful electoral performance in the 2018 general elections, where it attained the largest number of parliamentary seats in its political history. At the same time, UMNO had also neglected and even downplayed the emergence of BERSATU as an alternative Malay party which further diminished UMNO's political support.

UMNO further solidified the convergence between the cleavage structures of ethnicity and religiosity by amplifying the Malay-Muslim sentiment while in opposition alongside PAS. Under the current leadership of Zahid Hamidi, UMNO and PAS consistently characterized the PH government as pro-Chinese and accused it of attempting to undermine special position of the Malay population (Khoo, 2020). BERSATU was portrayed as a feeble representation of the Malay electorates in government because of its limited number of parliamentary seats. Despite initial setbacks, the UMNO-PAS opposition alliance garnered substantial support among the Malay electorates. UMNO decided to formalise its partnership with PAS as an opposition bloc through the *Muafakat Nasional* (MN) coalition in September 2019 to promote and empower Malay-Muslim unity (Izzuddin, 2020). UMNO was again creating a dangerous territory for itself by demonstrating its willingness to join forces with PAS, resulting in a large turnout of members from both UMNO and PAS during the formalisation ceremony known as the *Himpunan Penyatuan Ummah* (HPU) or the Gathering of Muslim Unity.

This very much strengthened convergence between both cleavage structures further as it opened the door for PAS to have greater influence among the rural Malay electorates. UMNO was once again leveraging PAS as an ally to bolster its own position following the party's electoral defeat, while simultaneously granting increased spotlight to PAS. While UMNO was indeed more influential during this time, PAS was also ascending upwards, buoyed by its most successful electoral performance during the 2018 general elections. PAS did not have anything to lose because they had never been in power while UMNO had substantial stakes to lose. Consequently, UMNO was willing to employ any necessary measures to inspire confidence among its supporters and more importantly, the Malay electorates that an MN electoral partnership was indeed viable, with the objective of reclaiming power (Bastien Onn, personal communication, August 24, 2023), even if it entailed reinforcing the convergence of both cleavage structures, which later proved to be detrimental to the party. UMNO unsurprisingly failed to learn from previous engagements with PAS, which enhanced the party's attractiveness among the electorates, particularly under banner of Malay-Muslim unity. At this juncture, it can be argued that the convergence between both cleavage structures - ethnicity and religiosity had become a solid political idea; however, the question of whether this would lead to an official electoral arrangement remained to be seen until the collapse of the PH government, which subsequently ushered in the establishment of a new coalition government.

#### *4.2.3. UMNO failing to manage political competition with BERSATU and abandoning the PN coalition*

The UMNO-PAS alliance via MN exerted political pressure on the BERSATU instilling apprehension within the party that they were losing support among the Malay electorates. This led to BERSATU's departure from the PH coalition precipitating the collapse of the PH government in February 2020, a mere 22 months following its historical victory in the 2018 general elections. A new "Malay-Muslim" coalition government was established in Perikatan Nasional (PN), comprising of BERSATU, PAS, UMNO including its allies in BN, and political parties from the state of Sabah and Sarawak. Muhyiddin Yassin (hereafter Muhyiddin), in his capacity as the President of BERSATU, was sworn in as the Prime Minister. The convergence of both cleavage structures at least in Peninsular Malaysia, as advocated by UMNO for years, had materialised in the form of a proper governance structure. The public perception of the PN government was very much favourable among the Malay electorates (Merdeka Center, 2020). However, political competition was brewing between UMNO and BERSATU primarily due to their pursuit of the same voter base, whereas PAS had cultivated a niche voter base of its own over many years (Tan Sri Syed Hamid Albar, personal communication, September 6, 2022). UMNO on the other hand, viewed itself as the "elder brother" in the PN coalition especially in terms of their representation of the Malay electorates while BERSATU was seen as a splinter party of UMNO, as many BERSATU members were formerly from UMNO (personal communication, Wan Agyl Wan Hassan, September 11, 2023). Additionally, BERSATU regarded UMNO as a threat to its own political existence. With BERSATU occupying the premiership in addition to being perceived as the lead party overseeing the COVID-19 pandemic, the convergence of both cleavage structures that was established by UMNO and with PAS was gradually shifting towards BERSATU (Tan Sri Syed Hamid Albar, personal communication, September 6, 2022). The senior leadership within UMNO, especially Zahid as the UMNO President was seen to be left out of government affairs owing to their absence from the cabinet (Weiss & Suffian, 2023). In order to distinguish itself from BERSATU, UMNO passed a resolution during its annual general meeting in March 2021, stating its intention to withdraw from the PN coalition at the end of the

parliamentary term, distancing the party from an official electoral alliance. UMNO also projected its influence further when 11 UMNO MPs withdrew their support for Prime Minister Muhyiddin, which led his resignation in August 2021 (Chin, 2022). The PN coalition subsequently nominated UMNO Vice President, Ismail Sabri as the new Prime Minister. UMNO was finally back at the helm of power and sought to re-establish its presence by moving to the political centre, embracing multi-ethnicity. This approach proved quite successful as UMNO won the Melaka and Johor state elections held in October 2021 and March 2022 respectively, securing a comfortable supermajority (Chin, 2023). UMNO was confident that in the event of an immediate nationwide general election, the party would achieve a resounding victory.

However, this was not the state of affairs as the prevailing perspective at the national level differed. Despite UMNO and its allies in the BN coalition contested the November 2022 election on its own, independently from the PN coalition, the party proved to be unpopular among the Malay electorates, as UMNO lost out massively to the PN coalition, that comprised of BERSATU and PAS, particularly in numerous rural parliamentary seats with a large Malay population. A significant number of the Malay electorates seemed to have embraced the idea of a Malay-Muslim government, especially after the emergence of PN following the collapse of the PH government. The convergence of both cleavage structures under the idea of Malay-Muslim unity became the main feature among the Malay electorates because it was embraced wholeheartedly by BERSATU and PAS in the PN government. The Malay electorates perceived that UMNO did not value the idea of Malay-Muslim unity when the party announced their withdrawal from the PN coalition although the senior leadership in UMNO had to make choices based on the interest of the party (personal communication, Wan Agyl Wan Hassan, September 11, 2023). UMNO seemed to have lost out on the principles that the party had developed among the Malay electorates, since BERSATU effectively occupied the vacuum that UMNO had left when it decided to leave the PN coalition (Bastien Onn, personal communication, August 24, 2023). For now, it seemed that BERSATU has incrementally replaced UMNO as the preferred Malay party by successfully taking advantage of the convergence that UMNO had built alongside PAS, thereby complimenting both political identities, which has culminated in the convergence of both cleavage structures that ended UMNO's one-party dominance and monopoly among the Malay electorates in Malaysia.

## 5. Conclusion

UMNO's one-party dominance in the Malaysian political arena for 63 years was very much made possible by the presence of a primary salient cleavage structure in the form of ethnic political identity, which enabled UMNO to monopolise support among the Malay electorates. Simultaneously, UMNO also facilitated the emergence of a secondary cleavage structure through religious political identity to navigate its rivalry with PAS. While UMNO's initial attempts in its reinforcement of the secondary cleavage through the promotion of Islamisation was to consolidate its dominance over the Malay electorates, the party had also concurrently demonstrated that the Malay-Muslim identity was a viable political idea through the convergence of both cleavage structures. UMNO further encouraged this convergence by normalising its political collaboration with PAS on multiple occasions, enhancing the perception of Malay-Muslim unity which ultimately resulted in the implosion of the PH government. The birth of the new PN coalition demonstrated the possibility of Malay-Muslim governance structure. The PN coalition government was embraced greatly by BERSATU and PAS although UMNO withdrew from the political arrangement prior to the 2022 general elections despite initially endorsing



it. The Malay-Muslim identity eventually became an acknowledged political ideology as the PN coalition emerged victorious over UMNO especially in terms of the support shown by the Malay electorates. UMNO's dominance over the cleavage structure of ethnic identity diminished as the cleavage structure of ethnic and religious identity converged under the banner of Malay-Muslim unity; a doctrine that UMNO had long encouraged, which was seemingly adopted by BERSATU and PAS, ultimately contributing to the end of UMNO's one-party dominance.

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Ethics approval was given by Hiroshima University before the data collection (Approval No. HR-LPES-001571. All procedures performed in this study involving interviewees were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees according to ethical guidelines and standards

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