

Dilemmas of Opposition: Building Parties and Coalitions in Multiethnic Malaysia*

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Abstract

Opposition parties in authoritarian regimes seek to win support from the electorate across ethnic, religious, and territorial lines. Yet many parties fail to transform party appeals and organizations in ways necessary to win cross-cleavage support, even as incumbent support weakens. Why do parties struggle to do so? This paper argues and shows that there are inherent tradeoffs between individual and collective strategies to expand electoral power in authoritarian settings. Parties built around demographically limited ethnic, religious, or territorial constituencies face more pressure to expand their core base of support. But at moments of regime weakness—when conditions are most favorable for opposition parties to expand—they also have incentives to build coalitions with other opposition parties to create a united anti-regime platform. Coalition building presses parties to stick to their existing constituencies to avoid competing with coalition partners over the same voters. As a result, even electorally successful parties remain locked into their niches as regime support wanes. I use the theory to explain divergent party strategies in Malaysia, until recently the world’s longest-running dominant party authoritarian regime. I compare three of the country’s opposition parties and their struggles to build broader individual support while coordinating collective efforts against an increasingly unpopular incumbent. By locating some of the challenges of opposition party building in the strategic behavior of parties themselves, the theory and findings illuminate the dilemmas opposition parties face in building broad-based and coordinated challenges to authoritarian incumbents.

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1. Introduction

Approximately one third of the world's states are competitive authoritarian regimes, where opposition parties compete against powerful incumbents that skew political and electoral institutions in their favor.¹ A key challenge for opposition parties under competitive authoritarianism is to build consistent support in the broader electorate beyond their core ethnic, religious, or ideological constituencies. Opposition parties that can stitch together support across deep social cleavages are more likely to unseat entrenched incumbents through elections (Howard and Roessler 2006; Bunce and Wolchik 2011; LeBas 2011). Yet many parties struggle with this task, even as regime support wanes. What tensions and tradeoffs do opposition parties face in building broad-based and coordinated challenges to authoritarian regimes?

Many influential accounts of political competition in authoritarian regimes have highlighted the role of patronage, manipulated institutions, and repression to explain why opposition parties fail to build sufficient electoral support to win power (e.g. Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Magaloni 2008; Lust-Okar 2005). But this literature has largely explained opposition behavior by examining how incumbent governments structure political competition. Instead, this paper focuses on the strategic choices that opposition parties make within constrained authoritarian environments. I argue that in seeking to win national power, opposition parties navigate between the conflicting incentives of individual and collective electoral strategies. At the individual party level, parties face different incentives and costs to expansion based on the particular constituencies around which they initially build support. At the collective level,

¹ Based on data from 2010, 33% of the 186 countries in the Quality of Government dataset are coded as “limited multiparty” systems, where multiple parties compete in elections, but the political system cannot be classified as democratic (Teorell et al. 2015). By this measure, competitive authoritarianism is the second most common regime type after democracy, and much more common than other non-democratic regime types, such as military dictatorships and single party states.

opposition parties seek to coordinate their electoral challenges against the incumbent to build broader power. But when opposition parties work together, they face strong pressure to stick with their existing niche identities, since pursuing strategies of *party broadening* – changes to party image to appeal to new constituencies – risks encroaching on the electoral terrain and core constituencies of their coalition partners.

I use the theory to explain the challenges of opposition party building in Malaysia, a country that until May 2018 was governed by the longest-running dominant party authoritarian government in the world. The ruling National Front (BN) coalition's uninterrupted dominance of Malaysia's post-independence politics cannot be explained only through its material and coercive power, but the dilemmas that the country's opposition parties faced in building broader electoral support and coordinating their efforts along deep ethnoreligious divides. Drawing on interviews with party elites, archival documents, and electoral data, I examine the divergent strategies of three of the country's main opposition parties during the period of 1999-2016.² I show how the different identities and ideologies that mobilized the three opposition parties affected whether they pursued deeper changes to party profiles to broaden electoral support across ethnic, religious, and territorial lines. I also demonstrate that the increased coordination of the parties during the period effectively led the parties to stick to contesting legislative districts in favorable demographic territory, reducing their incentives to make more credible appeals to broader constituencies.

The central innovation in this paper is to turn the analytical focus in comparative authoritarianism away from hegemonic party dominance and towards opposition party strategies.

² I discuss the recent 2018 election in Appendix 1.

In doing so, it makes three contributions. First, I provide a novel explanation for opposition party strategies in authoritarian regimes that takes into account variation across parties in mobilizing strategies and incentives to expand. Second, I demonstrate that individual and collective strategies of opposition involve tradeoffs for parties, an unexplored facet of opposition party competition in authoritarian regimes. Finally, in doing so, I contribute to literature on political competition in multiethnic societies where parties seek both to articulate, and build support beyond, existing political cleavages.

2. Theory

Many influential accounts of political competition in non-democratic regimes have highlighted the role of resources and repression to explain challenges of opposition parties in building support. But opposition parties competing against authoritarian ruling governments in countries such as Malaysia, Mexico, and Taiwan have been able to shift electoral support outside their core regions and demographics even under conditions of resource scarcity (Greene 2007; Rigger 2001). Thus, while resource and repression-focused theories can help explain why incumbent regimes are often successful in deflecting national regime change, they provide less insight into the process by which opposition parties make inroads into new constituencies *prior* to national turnover.

Ruling powers shape the playing field in ways that shape the emergence and electoral strategies of opposition parties. Opposition parties tend to build support from limited core constituencies, often based on ethnic, territorial, or ideological identity. These party brands are a “key mobilizational resource” for opposition parties in authoritarian regimes in lieu of access to material resources (Way 2012), but create barriers for parties both in winning new support and complicate opposition coordination across cleavage lines.

To become credible competitors for national power, then, opposition parties must find ways to appeal to new audiences beyond their core constituencies. The most comprehensive account of opposition parties in such regimes argues that they must transform their party profile – in appeals, party organization, and campaigning – from a niche to catchall character to become nationally competitive (Greene 2007). Similarly, opposition parties in divided societies are more successful when they build party organizations that can appeal to a broad audience (LeBas 2011).

Another set of literature has instead highlighted electoral coalitions as an avenue for opposition parties to pool resources and support in an attempt to overturn the incumbent (Howard and Roessler 2006; Bunce and Wolchik 2011; Arriola 2012; Donno 2013; Wahman 2014). Gandhi and Reuter find that opposition pre-electoral coalitions were formed in a quarter of all authoritarian elections held in the 2000s (Gandhi and Reuter 2013, 140). This literature focuses less on the challenges of individual opposition parties in building support, but rather focuses on the determinants and electoral effects of coalitions.

While these arguments provide insight into the ways opposition parties build electoral support, they fail to account for three key dynamics of opposition growth. First, much of the literature on individual party expansion and coalition building focuses on national executive elections, where parties are incentivized to present (and coordinate) on broadly appealing candidates and platforms. The dynamics of legislative competition are largely unexplored in this literature. Second, while the party building literature has long recognized the tradeoffs that niche parties face in building broader appeal (e.g. Przeworski and Sprague 1988; Greene 2007; Meyer and Wagner 2013), it provides less insight into variation among parties operating in the same environment. Opposition parties do not face uniform pressures to transform appeals or party

organizations in pursuit of political power. For one, opposition parties draw from and mobilize around very different issues, cleavages, and constituencies (Bermeo and Yashar 2016). I argue below that individual party characteristics are important in explaining the choices and constraints parties face in appealing to new audiences, with implications for how they seek to scale up their electoral challenges.

Finally, existing work does not examine how these two strategies are interrelated. Parties often pursue these strategies simultaneously: They seek not only to build a minimum of cross-cleavage support to become nationally competitive, but also to work collectively with other opposition parties to unseat entrenched incumbents. As argued in the following sections, these strategies are also conflicting. Rather than building broad-based parties, parties in coalition win electoral support *without* necessarily building mass appeal.

Diverging Paths of Building Electoral Support

To account for these dynamics, this section develops a theory of strategies of expansion pursued by opposition parties in authoritarian settings. The goal of the theory is to account for why opposition parties face challenges in broadening their support, the dependent variable of this study. I first describe how individual opposition parties try to broaden their support using limited resources. I then describe the factors which influence the extent to which parties pursue these broadening strategies in moments of regime weakness. I highlight the role of party brand and the level of coordination among the opposition as shaping the incentives and ability of individual parties to expand their base of support.

Party Broadening

To win broader support beyond their base, parties must employ what Cox (2008) terms strategies of persuasion aimed at swing voters. But opposition parties face a credibility gap in

appealing to regime supporters – whether because of their limited track record on economic issues (Magaloni 2008), or because they are seen as the representatives of particular ethnic or religious groups (Ferree 2010), or position themselves at the extreme ends of political competition (Greene 2007). This sets up a basic dilemma for electorally ambitious opposition parties: how to pick off swing voters from the regime while maintaining core support.³

To do so, parties seek to enlarge core support based on changes to their party brand – the perception of parties held by voters “based on what they see parties say and do over time” (Lupu 2014, 568).⁴ This involves strategies of *party broadening* to transform, supplement, or dilute party brand to build more credible appeals to swing constituencies. Broadening strategies range from election-specific strategies, such as changing campaign messages and running candidates who fall outside the usual demographic or ideological position of the party, to longer-term strategies such as changing the composition of party leadership and core membership. Parties may also supplement their existing core party appeals by tailoring new appeals to voting groups on dimensions other than the core party identity (Madrid 2012; Luna 2014).

The types of broadening strategies vary depending on the electoral goals of the party. For many parties, this may mean countering negative perceptions of the opposition as well as reducing voter uncertainty around “untested alternatives” in stable authoritarian regimes. Voters may be less concerned with particular policy positions of parties and instead “[react] to the

³ This dilemma, in part, is familiar to the one parties face in democratic settings. A large literature on distributive politics has explored when, and to what extent, parties focus on mobilizing core support or appealing to swing voters (Cox and McCubbins 1986; Dixit and Londregan 1996; Cox 2008). Unlike parties in democracies, however, opposition parties in authoritarian regimes face stark limits to engaging in what Dixit and Londregan (1996) term “tactical redistribution” – subsidies, tariff protections, pork barreling, and by extension other clientelist strategies such as vote buying (Dunning and Stokes 2007). By and large, these are tactics available to regime parties with access to state resources.

⁴ I adopt Lupu’s definition of party brand throughout. Lupu (2014) focuses specifically on what he terms brand dilution – the weakening of voter certainty over party brand – but as I argue below, brands can also be *supplemented* or *transformed*.

association of the parties with some goal or state or symbol that is positively or negatively valued” (Stokes 1963, 373). As such, broadening strategies are not necessarily comprehensive. Parties may make strategic changes to party rhetoric or campaign messages while leaving party organizations untouched. But more comprehensive changes to party brand – making serious efforts to broaden the leadership and candidates of a party, for example – are more likely to be taken as more credible signals of party intent by voters.

Broadening strategies come with inherent costs. Changing core aspects of the party profile requires resources to cultivate new leaders, disseminate new party messages, and coordinate new strategies across the party. They are also risky, in that changes to party brands may invite dissent from key party factions or constituencies and leave the party vulnerable to counterattacks or pushback from other opposition parties and the regime. They may also erode clear perceptions of party brand among voters, leaving parties more vulnerable to swings in voter perception about party performance (Lupu 2014). Incumbents, of course, often try to amplify the risks for opposition parties. For example, regimes highlight the alleged hypocrisy of “extreme” parties trying to win over new audiences across ethnic, religious, or regional lines. Such strategies increase the tradeoffs of pursuing segmented appeals focused on disparate electoral audiences (Luna 2014).

Determinants of Party Broadening Strategies

When do parties choose broadening strategies, and what dilemmas and tradeoffs do they face in employing them? To bound the discussion, I will focus on contexts where the ruling government does not drastically curb the ability of opposition parties to expand or compete. Instead, as is typical in competitive authoritarian regimes, they rely on what Levitsky and Way

term “low-intensity coercion” against opponents –harassment, surveillance, and use of the legal system against opposition politicians and supporters (Levitsky and Way 2010, 58).

Parties are most likely to pursue these strategies when they perceive that incumbent turnover at the national level is possible. Favorable electoral environments may arise from national events or trends, such as long-term shifts in support away from the regime, short-term shocks such as financial crises or economic downturns, or the gradual decrease of material capacity of or support for the ruling power. When regime support weakens, even risk-averse candidates and parties are more likely to target (and win over) ideologically or demographically distant voters registering their protest with the regime.

Finally, the discussion that follows focuses on district-level strategies in single member district plurality systems like Malaysia. While the two strategies – party broadening and coalition building – remain the same across contexts, the incentives and tradeoffs that parties face in pursuing them are altered by electoral rules that influence the level of fractionalization among the opposition and the electoral thresholds necessary to win power (Barberá 2013).

Party Brand

I argue that opposition party brand is important to understand the incentives of parties to pursue broadening strategies. Party brands structure what Przeworski and Sprague (1988) term party “carrying capacity:” the size of potential electoral support parties can receive based on their core party demographic. If parties derive support from electorally marginal constituencies, they will not be able to nationalize their challenges without changing their party image to appeal more broadly. For such parties, *party building* – turning into “electorally significant and enduring political actors” (Levitsky et al. 2016, 4) – is virtually synonymous with significant *party broadening*. On the other hand, parties which can appeal to an electorally significant

demographic group across districts with minimal changes to their profile will not face strong pressure to adapt to credibly appeal to new audiences. Of course, there is no guarantee that swing voters will be attracted to a party based on demographic similarity alone. But this link between party profile and potential voters reduces the potential dissonance between party appeals to core and swing groups.

The type of party brand also structures the costs and benefits for party broadening. Parties with strong ideological, ethnic or religious identities face steeper tradeoffs in appealing to new voters and retaining core support compared to parties with less coherent identities. For instance, parties based around a popular politician or around an anti-regime message will face less contradiction between strategies to appeal to new voters and their own core audience. Parties that form strong party brands by invoking ethnic or religious cleavages will face comparatively greater skepticism from potential voters and core supporters if they attempt to change core party messages.

Coalition Building

The second factor influencing party broadening is the level of coordination among the opposition. Opposition coalitions are more likely during periods of regime weakness (van de Walle 2006). There are a number of reasons this is so. Coalitions help parties reduce strategic entry over candidates at the district or presidential level risk splitting the opposition vote (Arriola 2012; Gandhi and Reuter 2013, 138). This is brought into stark relief in SMD parliamentary systems like Malaysia, where opposition parties have strong incentives to coordinate on a single regime challenger at the district level to avoid splitting the opposition vote.

Coalitions are also attractive in times of loosening incumbent support because they allow niche parties to make credible appeals to new audiences without pursuing costly party

broadening strategies. This is particularly true if coalition partners can already make claims to represent electorally important swing audiences. Coalition building thus acts as another means of persuasion to appeal to swing voters. By pooling material and symbolic resources, parties also help create a broader opposition identity which allows voters “to view the opposition as an alternative governing coalition” (Howard and Roessler 2006, 371). Parties in coalition seek to draw attention away from the “negative” aspects of their party brand (from the perspective of swing voters) by highlighting the opposition as a collective alternative to the regime. Coalitions also encourage cross-party voting among opposition party supporters by providing a signal to that voting for another party furthers the aim of their own party.⁵ This strategy helps parties ride a wave of anti-regime sentiment, even if they do little to change the party’s base or core brand.

However, the very act of coordination to reduce entry affects party broadening strategies. As noted before, parties in coalition are incentivized to coordinate at the district level to present a single candidate who has the best chance against the regime candidate. In a given district, opposition parties will attract votes both from party supporters, as well as from voters propelled by anti-regime sentiment. In order to win maximum support from both these groups, parties will seek to place a single opposition candidate to avoid splitting the anti-regime vote. Frequently it is the party that represents a significant demographic in a given district that will make more credible claims about their winnability, since they have a comparative advantage in mobilizing such voters.⁶

⁵ Literature on coalitions has also considered their role in signaling to voters about the composition of a future coalition government and the ability of component parties to work together (see discussion in Golder 2006).

⁶ Winnability is a primary, but not the sole, concern of seat negotiations among opposition parties. Such negotiations may involve a broader give and take of resources and campaign opportunities among opposition parties, the concerns or priorities of particular party leaders, and other contingent factors. Nevertheless, opposition parties have powerful incentives to choose candidates and parties that have a good chance of winning.

When parties coordinate electorally, they will thus face less incentive to pursue risky and uncertain attempts at party broadening, especially where it may conflict with other parties that have a perceived comparative advantage over mobilizing support from the same set of voters. Individual attempts at party broadening may also endanger electoral coordination, since it sets up parties to siphon off each other’s core and swing voters and makes seat negotiation a more divisive process.

This relationship does not work entirely in one direction; parties in coalition may be forced to moderate over policy stances or key issues in order to work together. Yet if the parties continue to contest seats where voters largely resemble their core demographics, they face much less pressure to pursue deeper party transformation. Though parties may make rhetorical concessions to issues key to party core audiences, for the most part, coalition members “simply coalesce around a shared goal of ousting the ruling party” (Resnick 2013, 736) without engaging in deeper forms of party transformation. As such, coalitions help opposition parties harness protest votes, but forgo the creation of committed partisans.

Table 1: Summary of Expansionary Strategies

	<i>Individual/collective</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Party broadening	Individual	Running more broadly appealing candidates; shifting positions on key issues; shifting emphasis away from niche issues
Coalition building	Collective	Loose electoral coordination; official electoral coalitions; joint statements or strategy around anti-regime message

Table 2: Tensions Between Strategies

	Benefits	Costs	Tensions between strategies
Party broadening <i>(benefits and costs vary by party brand)</i>	Expand base of core support; shift perceptions of party brand among potential new voters	Risks alienating core supporters and factions; draws organizational and campaign resources away from core; less flexible than entering/exiting coalitions	Parties in coordination less likely to pursue party broadening; concessions on divisive issues among opposition likely to be rhetorical
Coalition building	Reduce costly splitting of opposition voters and encourage cross-opposition voting; Create broad opposition identity that allow parties to harness voter resentment against regime; Draw attention away from “extreme” positions by highlighting regime cleavage	Coalitions often unstable; limited returns if combined opposition strength is still low; “Marriages of convenience” may erode public perception of principled opposition parties; heightens tensions and contradiction between disparate party platforms	Parties seeking to expand core support face heightened conflict with opposition parties over the same pool of voters

3. Research Strategy

To evaluate my argument, I use a process-tracing approach to compare the party broadening and coalition building strategies of three opposition parties in Malaysia. During the period under consideration (1999-2016), the three parties engaged in varying levels of electoral coordination and coalition building, as well as party broadening. The parties have distinct party profiles based on a mix of ethnic, religious, and anti-regime messaging. The comparison thus provides variation in the key variables of interest, as well as party types common to other competitive authoritarian regimes.

I focus the analysis on party broadening strategies along and across ethnoreligious and anti-regime lines. Research on Malaysia has long emphasized the deep ethnic divisions that shape political competition. More recent work has documented shifts toward less ethnicized voting patterns as regime issues have become increasingly salient (Welsh 2014). However, as observed through fieldwork and interviews, political discourse, campaigns, and news media still center on ethnic and religious issues and claims of legitimacy to represent those groups. A primary concern for the country's parties, many of which emerged to represent specific ethnic and religious identities, has been to derive support from voters across ethnoreligious lines. While Malaysia may be unusually polarized in this regard, the theory is applicable to countries where ethnoreligious cleavages are not one of primary dimensions of competition, and instead center on economic or ideological cleavages.

I use a variety of sources to document party strategies. I collected electoral data from state-level and national elections since 1999 to examine party electoral success, ethnic composition of party candidate lists, and to document increasing seat contestation and vote share by the opposition. To analyze changes in the ethnic composition of candidate lists, I coded the ethnicities of all opposition candidates by leveraging Malaysia's ethnically distinct names and naming rules to distinguish candidate ethnicity. In Malaysia, names commonly reflect the official categorization of citizens along ethnic lines. These offer reliable cues to ethnicity. For instance, individuals of Indian descent often have "a/l" or "a/p" (*anak lelaki*, son of; *anak perempuan*, daughter of) in their names, while Malay politicians may have the equivalent *bin* or *binti* (son / daughter of) between their given name and father's name. While candidate names are not an infallible guide to the often complicated ethnic and religious backgrounds of individuals, it

provides a way to measure ethnic identity of large candidate lists. Importantly, names are a common way through which Malaysians determine the ethnicity (and religion) of the candidate.

I also draw from in-depth interviews conducted in 2016-2018 with party leaders and politicians with all three parties, as well as direct observation of campaign events and party congresses of PAS and DAP, to probe into party behavior and perceptions of different electoral strategies. I also use secondary sources such as news reports and existing literature, as well as Malay-language strategy documents produced by a BN-affiliated think tank deposited at Malaysia's National Archive (*Arkib Negara*), which provide insights into BN strategy against the opposition and the BN's perception of its electoral losses during this period.

4. Background on Malaysia

Until 2018, Malaysia's National Front (*Barisan Nasional*, or BN) party coalition was the longest-ruling dominant party coalition in the world (Bernama 2017), having ruled the country continuously since independence from Britain in 1957.⁷ While the coalition ostensibly represented a grand bargain between ethnic groups, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) has long dominated the coalition. UMNO not only chaired the BN coalition, but also held the most number of legislative seats, had the best-financed and well-organized party organization, and supplied all the country's prime ministers.

The BN's unique assemblage of ethnic parties reflects, and entrenches, Malaysia's racialized politics. The country's multiethnic population is a result of colonial-era influxes of migrant labor from India and China. The country's Malay and "indigenous" groups are categorized under the broader term of Bumiputera (literally "sons of the soil"). The Bumiputera

⁷ The original coalition (then known as the Alliance (Perikatan) won the first elections held prior to independence, in 1955.

collectively make up around 62% of the population. Malay Bumiputera are primarily concentrated in West Malaysia, and non-Malay Bumiputera communities are largely located in East Malaysia on the island of Borneo. For the remainder of the paper, I use the term “Bumiputera” to represent non-Malay Bumiputera groups located in East Malaysia.

Table 3: Demographics of Malaysia

	1970/80	2010
Ethnicity		
Malay	47%	50%
Chinese	34	22
Indian	9	7
Other Bumiputera	8.7	12
Non-citizens	1	9
Religion		
Muslim	53%	61%
Buddhist	17	20
Christian	6	9
Hindu	7	6
Other traditional Chinese religions	14	1

Sources: Crouch 1996; Department of Statistics Malaysia 2014; Population and Housing Census 2010; Saw 2015

With few exceptions, the BN’s most prominent members are race-based parties for which membership and candidacy is closed to other ethnicities. However, its component parties have long relied on cross-ethnic support mobilized through partner parties (e.g. Taylor 1996, 128). As such, throughout its decades in office, the BN parties relied on a multiethnic coalition, rather than substantive changes to individual party profiles, to encourage cross-ethnic voting.

The two oldest opposition parties in Malaysia represented distinct ethnic groups. The Democratic Action Party (DAP), a social democratic party most often identified with ethnic Chinese leadership and support, and the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, or PAS), which draws support largely from Malay Muslims. The People’s Justice Party (Parti

Keadilan Rakyat, or PKR) emerged at the turn of the century as the electoral vehicle for the opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim. Its message has been explicitly multiracial, though its leadership has been primarily Malay.

The Democratic Action Party was registered in 1966 as the Malaysian successor to the People's Action Party (PAP) after Singapore gained independence. Its founding document declared the DAP's struggle for a democratic, socialist Malaysia "based on the principles of racial equality, and social and economic justice" (DAP 1967). Its call for a "Malaysian Malaysia," where no community would have supremacy, was seen as a communal slogan in the context of post-independence contestation over the place of non-Malays and the rights of the Malay community within the still-new Malaysian nation.⁸ Despite its multiethnic trappings, the DAP found its greatest initial support in its ethnic Chinese urban base. Registration documents from the early period of the party show a leadership that was almost entirely working class ethnic Chinese Malaysian (National Archives of Malaysia 1986). The DAP's professed goal was to build a strong urban presence which would then allow it to build support among the Malay community outside urban areas (Vasil 1980).

The Pan Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) emerged as a factional splinter from UMNO's religious wing in the 1950s (Noor 2014, 40), and grew into a formidable grassroots-oriented party. While initially identifying as a left-wing and anti-colonial Malay organization, its image and base shifted over time towards a conservative Malay Islamic orientation. Yet for much of its existence, the party derived much of its support in the northeast region of Malaysia. The areas PAS has historically drawn its electoral support are overwhelmingly Malay Muslim, largely agrarian, and economically underdeveloped.

⁸ The slogan was originally from the PAP and adopted by DAP after its creation.

In contrast to the DAP and PAS, the People’s Justice Party (PKR) has a much more recent lineage. Formed in 1999, the party drew many of its personnel from activists and civil society campaigners involved in the *reformasi* (reform) movement in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis (Weiss 2005).⁹ The party’s structure centers on the leadership of Anwar Ibrahim, a long-time UMNO politician who became the leading opposition figure in the *reformasi* movement. The party has drawn explicitly on its identity as a multiracial party, as the party that can bring Anwar to the position of prime minister, as well as the vehicle for discontented regime supporters.

Table 4: Party characteristics

	DAP	PAS	PKR
Demographic base	Non-Malay (predominantly ethnic Chinese), urban	Malay Muslim, rural	Multi-ethnic, urban

1999-2016: Increasing competition and the growth of the opposition

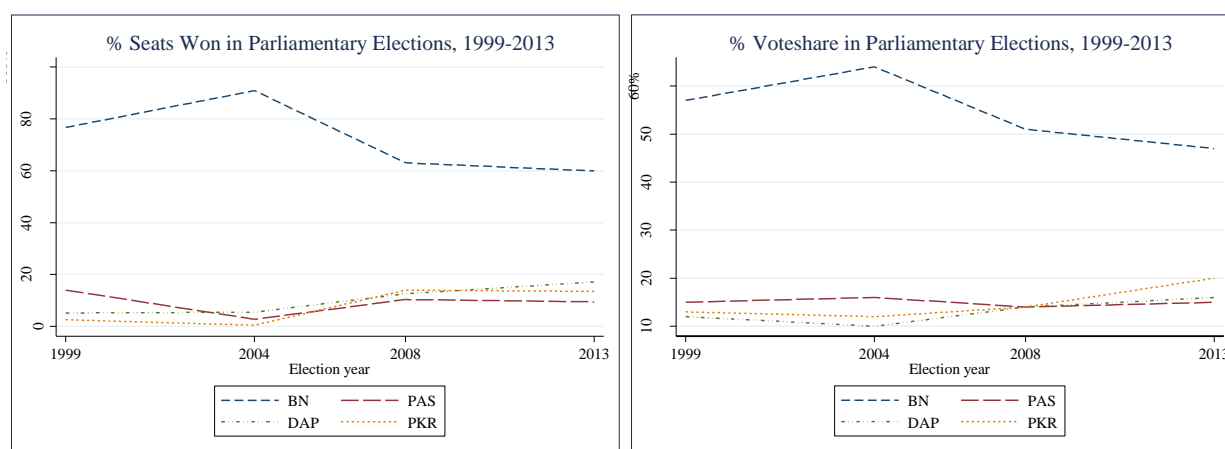
The electoral environment during the period under consideration provided unprecedented opportunities for the opposition parties to broaden their appeals to disaffected regime supporters. Beginning in the late 1990s, all three parties faced incentives, although peaking at different elections, to take advantage of growing discontent against the regime.

The shift in the fortunes of the opposition began in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis, which severely damaged the economy and provoked a split among ruling UMNO elites. As a popular Malay leader with extensive party connections and strong Islamic credentials, deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim posed a threat to then-PM Mahathir Mohamed and the

⁹ PKR grew out of a merger of two parties; the National Justice Party (PKN) and the Malaysian People’s Party (PRM). While PKN contested in the 1999 elections prior to the merger, to simplify the discussion, I refer to the party as PKR throughout.

solidity of UMNO. Anwar was sacked by Mahathir and subsequently jailed on charges of corruption and sodomy. His mistreatment in prison was seen as a key factor in propelling widespread discontent with the regime.¹⁰ These events gave impetus to the creation of the *reformasi* movement, a broad collection of opposition parties and activists that channeled discontent against the long-running BN government (Weiss 2005). The reformasi movement also provided the disparate opposition parties, particularly the DAP and PAS, the environment to work together in a new electoral coalition, the Alternative Front (*Barisan Alternatif*), with Anwar Ibrahim as the uniting candidate for prime minister.

Figure 1: Changes in support for BN and opposition parties, 1999-2013



While voting patterns in Malaysia have traditionally fallen across ethnic lines, the post-1999 period saw evidence of cross-ethnic voting, as the opposition won in ethnically mixed seats the BN considered unwinnable by the opposition (National Archives of Malaysia 2015b).

Particularly in the 2008 and 2013 elections, the BN registered downturns across virtually all demographics and regions; internal post-mortems written by a BN-linked research organization

¹⁰ An internal post-mortem commissioned by the Prime Minister's Office in the state of Penang after the 1999 elections found that the issue of Anwar Ibrahim was paramount in the Malay voter turn against BN parties (National Archives of Malaysia 2013).

blamed weaknesses at the local, state and national level: the relative unpopularity of BN politicians leading to weakness of BN mobilizing machinery, lack of state-level evidence of economic progress, and national economic issues (National Archives of Malaysia 2015a).

5. Party Broadening Strategies, 1999-2016

This section examines the divergent party broadening strategies of three of Malaysia's main opposition parties in this favorable electoral environment. All three parties pursued outreach to new communities during this period but varied in extent to which they pursued deeper transformation of party organizations and appeals. One reason is that party brand and shifts in voting patterns coincided at different times for the parties. The DAP saturated its minority ethnic voter base particularly after the "Chinese tsunami" (as it was termed in the local press) swept much of the non-Malay BN support towards the opposition in 2008. This led the DAP to engage in party broadening strategies to increase its appeals to Malay and other Bumiputera voters by altering its campaign messages, organization, and candidate recruitment. On the other hand, PAS benefited from an earlier surge of new Malay Muslim opposition supporters in 1999, and later made modest gains among new constituencies. But PAS largely kept its image as a principled religious party. PAS left its party organization and fundamental orientation largely untouched, and instead used rhetorical appeals to non-Muslim audiences and coalitions (as explained later) to reach new audiences. PKR did not fundamentally change its brand, given it could appeal a wide cross-section of voters based on its anti-regime message, and expanded its appeals to new regions in the country. But ultimately, as shown in the following section, the greatest inhibitor to further party broadening by the three parties was their increasing electoral coordination during this period.

DAP: Saturated Core Support, Organizational Broadening

The party's policy positioning and its brand has long reflected issues of importance to its niche ethnic constituency of non-Malays, particularly the Chinese community. While the other opposition parties benefited electorally from the *reformasi* movement and 1999 elections, the DAP only began attracting greater support from disaffected BN supporters after 2004. The decisive swing of the Chinese Malaysians to the DAP meant that by 2013, the DAP had won all 29 parliamentary seats in which more than half the electorate was ethnic Chinese (Wong 2016).

The DAP's saturation of the ethnic Chinese vote, and awareness of the limits that the party's niche brand put on its appeal to new voters, spurred the party to attempt greater changes to its fundamental appeals. As DAP's Secretary General put it in a 2008 speech, the DAP's goal moving forward was to "[prove]... that we can take care of the Malays and deliver what BN cannot do in 50 years... Our challenge is to consolidate existing support while reaching out intensively to urban Malays, as well as Bumiputras of [East Malaysia]."¹¹ In the past few decades, the DAP's urban strongholds have swung from being majority Chinese to become increasingly multiethnic, with a growing Malay urban population in the peninsula's big cities.¹² The ethnic Chinese population is shrinking relative to the ethnic Malay population, provoking fear about the party's long-term viability.¹³ As one DAP legislator put it, unless the party changes its image to appeal to a broader audience, "[the DAP] is on its way to closing shop in the future."¹⁴

To make inroads among a swing audience composed of demographically distant but still persuadable voters, the party undertook several initiatives. The DAP's messaging began increasingly emphasizing valence issues, particularly on the economy and corruption, that it

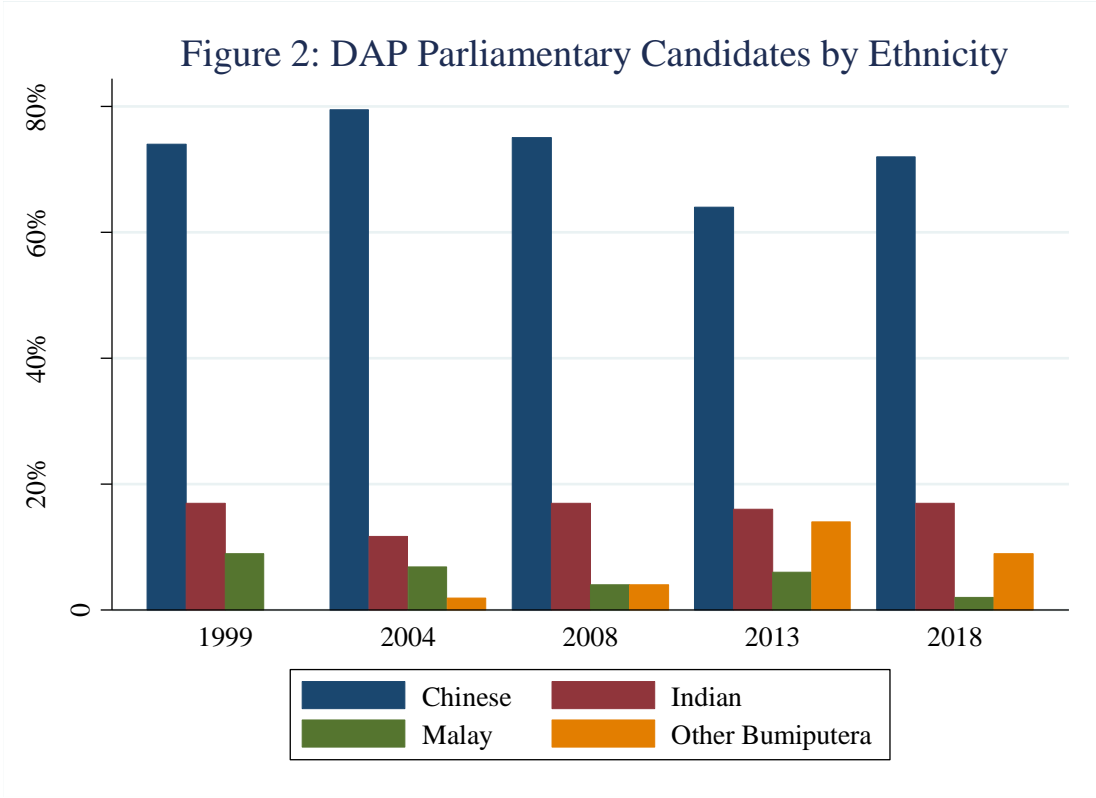
¹¹ <http://dapmalaysia.org/en/archive/dap-national-congressconference/a-responsible-partner-in-power-2008/>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ In 1970, the ethnic Chinese population made up 34% of the population; in 2010, 25% of the population.

¹⁴ Author interview with DAP legislator, February 2, 2016, Kuala Lumpur.

believed appealed across ethnic lines. The party also made changes to its basic organization by increasing the proportion of Malay and Bumiputera candidates. The importance of recruiting Malay politicians has long been a refrain from party leaders in the party’s history. During the 1970s and 1980s, the party tried to recruit Malay politicians and intellectuals to credibly appeal to Malay constituencies (Chew 1980). As Figure 2 shows, these efforts continued in the post *reformasi* period as the party increasingly ran non-Chinese candidates in national elections.



Note: The 2018 data is discussed in the Appendix.

Figure 2 also illustrates the party’s attempts to target the Other (non-Malay) Bumiputera population, largely located in East Malaysia. The DAP began establishing party branches, holding membership drives and fundraising dinners, as well as creating community projects to provide basic infrastructure (Hazis 2011, 21; Aeria 2013). The party also established two consultative councils to bring in indigenous leaders from East Malaysia. The ethnic composition

of the party's slate in the 2016 state elections in the East Malaysian state of Sarawak reflect its greater attempts at outreach to the Bumiputera community: almost 60% of the candidates the DAP ran were Bumiputera candidates, and the remaining 40% Chinese.

Nevertheless, party adaptation in other aspects of its organization has been slow. The DAP still retains a core membership and leadership which is overwhelmingly Chinese. Perceptions of the party's brand, particularly among the Malay community, have also been slow to change. In a 2015 survey in the state of Selangor, where DAP is one of the three parties controlling the state government, 72% of the Malay community survey felt that the DAP was a racial party and only looked after the interests of the Chinese community (Hamid 2016). As one legislator put it, broadening the DAP's appeal is a "tough road, because no one knows how to do it. No one knows how to rebrand ourselves to appeal to everyone.... UMNO has successfully painted us into a corner. We are seen as party that will threaten the Malay race. No matter how much you do on everything else, [it's] so hard to get rid of that image."¹⁵

Despite the challenges the party faces in expanding its appeals, these changes did not incur significant electoral costs from core audiences. Core support remains strong for the party; during the four elections in this period, the DAP held on to more seats than any other opposition party.

PAS: High Costs to Broadening, Retreat to Niche Identity

In marked contrast to the DAP's broadening strategies, PAS did little during the same period to change its niche ideological orientation, and increasingly retreated from appeals to non-Muslim audiences as it risked party conflict over strategies to build new support. The party saw substantial growth during *reformasi*, particularly from disaffected UMNO activists and Muslims

¹⁵ Author interview with DAP legislator, February 2, 2016, Kuala Lumpur.

angered by the government's treatment of Anwar Ibrahim. PAS membership increased from 400,000 to a million at the height of the *reformasi* movement, including middle class urban professionals (Liow 2009, 77). It seemed too that PAS was poised to transform its brand to a less Islamic image. Its national campaign messages began to emphasize non-religious issues, including slogans calling for Malaysia to become a "Welfare State" (rather than an Islamic state) and its campaign slogan of "PAS for All." It seemed "the momentum of Malay support is with the party and it could afford to make... concessions [on issues important to the non-Malay Muslim population] without fear of any backlash from the Malay community" (Hing 2004, 93).

Yet the party struggled to reconcile its core message and appeals to moderate Muslims and non-Muslims. Party leaders in the party's *ulama* (religious scholar) faction were discontented with moves to change the party image, and clashed with moderates in the party's progressive faction over whether to widen its appeals to non-core constituencies or preserve "ideological purity" (Liew 2007). Even as the party made rhetorical appeals to new audiences, PAS continued pursuing policies that alienated voters beyond its core audience. The party moved to enforce a strict Islamic criminal code in the two states under its control. A variety of other policies implemented in PAS-held states attracted controversy, including restrictions on public entertainment, public service dress codes, restrictions on the sale of alcohol and gambling, and a proposed land tax on non-Muslims (Harding 2012, 230). In anticipation of the 2004 elections, PAS announced it would pursue a two-pronged strategy whereby the Islamic state issue would only feature in PAS' campaign in its strongholds in the northern states (Liow 2004). Unsurprisingly, the regime highlighted the party's actions in its home states to make them part of the national debate.

PAS did not attempt major efforts to change party organization. In contrast with the DAP, PAS did not change its candidate slate away from religious lines; it has run only two non-Muslim candidates in its history. Similarly, the party made only symbolic attempts to incorporate non-Muslims, creating a separate “PAS Supporter’s Club” in 2010 for non-Muslims to join the party, albeit without the same membership or voting rights as Muslim party members (Mueller 2014, 63).

After 2013, PAS shifted away from anti-regime appeals to reach swing voters and doubled down on a Malay Islamic message. The immediate reason was the ascendance of the hardline *ulama* faction in internal party elections in 2015. The most prominent progressives left to form Amanah, a new political party seeking to project a more moderate Islamic image. Importantly, many of the prominent politicians of Amanah are based outside PAS’s territorial stronghold of Kelantan, leaving in place PAS personnel who hold a stake in maintaining the party’s seats in overwhelmingly mono-ethnic constituencies. By 2018, these changes meant the party retreated from coalitions with the other major opposition parties, as well as a shift in focus to state-level support. But until that point, the party largely relied on expanding support among its core audience of Malay Muslims – an electorally potent demographic across Malaysia – as well as coalitions, as argued in the following section.

PKR: Expanding Support on an Anti-Regime Cleavage

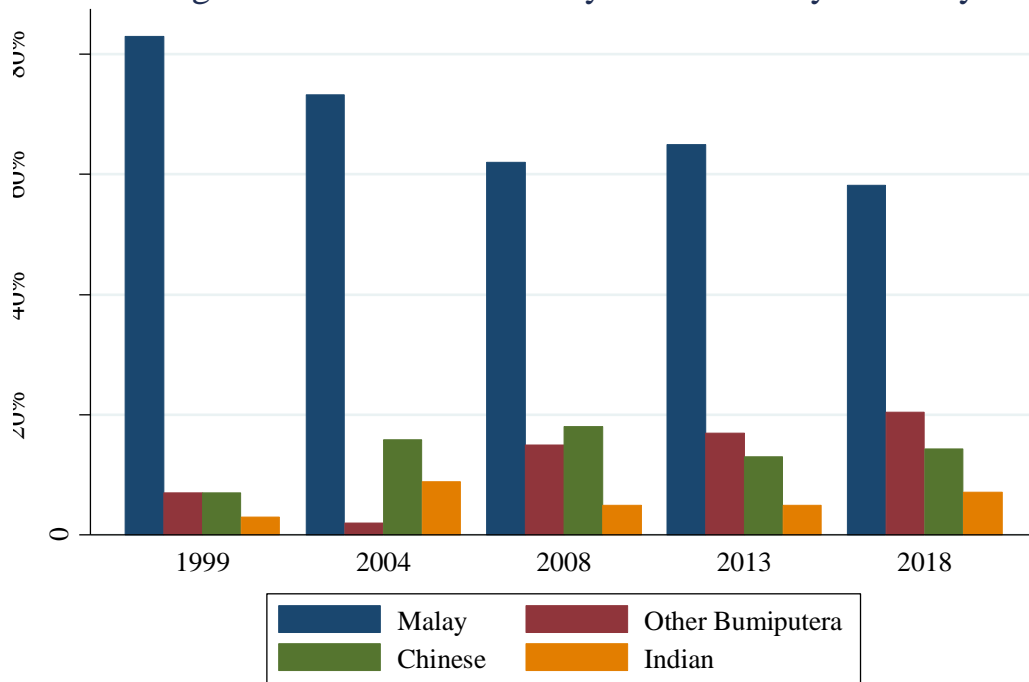
Perhaps more than any other party, PKR relied on the growth of anti-regime sentiment, rather than explicit changes to party orientation, to expand its appeal. PKR’s rise was rapid in comparison to PAS and DAP. While the party did not face the same task of transforming party brand to appeal to new audiences, it has been reliant on volatile anti-regime sentiment. After modest gains in 1999, the party was reduced to a single parliamentary seat and no state seats in

2004, when a new prime minister and improved economy helped BN win back some of the vote share it had lost. But by 2008, as the BN again waned in popularity, PKR won 31 seats, becoming the largest opposition party.

Since its inception, the party has focused itself on a broad anti-regime identity. In 1999, PKR “maintained a determined focus on a combination of [party leader] Anwar and issues that were basically acceptable to anyone seeking at least a modicum of reform” (Weiss 2005, 175-76). As a result, party strategy for PKR has largely reflected their more diffuse core identity as a multiracial party, with its anti-regime stance and a charismatic leader. Its multiracial image and clear anti-BN stance gives it less “baggage” to shed compared to the DAP and PAS.

The party’s image has been one of a multiethnic party, but its origins as the “Party of Anwar” led most of its members to consist of discontented “young, energetic and full of initiative but overwhelmingly Malay” (Khoo 2003, 156). As shown in Figure 3, even though the demographic proportions of its candidate pool are not far from those of the DAP, PKR has escaped an image of ethnic exclusivism.

Figure 3: PKR Parliamentary Candidates by Ethnicity



Source: 1999 and 2004 data compiled by author; 2008 and 2013 data from Pepinsky (2009) and (2015); 2018 compiled with assistance of Joshua Meyer-Gutbrod.

Note: The 2018 data is discussed in the Appendix.

The party has not pursued broader transformative strategies, simply because its image is already one that is inclusive and multiracial. As one legislator put it, PKR has the “right ingredients” as a Malay-led multiracial party.¹⁶ But the party also pursued broader territorial penetration, particularly in East Malaysia. The party began running Bumiputera candidates in 1999, and expanded its organization into East Malaysia soon after (Jawan and King 2004). While the party initially campaigned on anti-regime issues similar to its West Malaysia campaigns, it quickly pivoted to emphasize local issues that resonated more with the electorate (Hazis 2011, 163). In a party congress held after the 2008 election, Anwar Ibrahim declared that the East

¹⁶ Author interview with DAP legislator, February 2, 2016, Kuala Lumpur.

Malaysian state of Sarawak would be the key to the opposition winning national power (Hazis 2011, 281).

6. Coalition Building: Locking in Core Identities

The previous sections show variable levels of commitment to broadening by the opposition even in a favorable electoral environment. In this section, I highlight a main factor in reducing the urgency of these efforts: the increasing coordination among the three parties during this period. Collective coordination among the opposition reduced the individual incentives for parties to try to build deep links to new communities, given a division of seats and campaign efforts among opposition parties largely along existing demographic strengths of the parties.

Since 1999, the increasingly competitive political environment and weakening of electoral support for the BN led all three parties to engage in forms of coordination and coalition building, including three electoral coalitions since 1999. This section will not address the factors that led to the creation and downfall of these coalitions but will focus instead on the implications of coalitions for party broadening and party core support.

Malaysia's opposition has long engaged in loose electoral coordination on strategic entry to ensure that they do not split the larger opposition vote, though with varying levels of success. This is a result not only of the incentives for two-party competition in single member district plurality systems, but also that the opposition parties often emerged with regional bases of support where their core demographic groups were concentrated.¹⁷ This coordination was most evident in West Malaysia, where many of the country's main opposition parties emerged.¹⁸ Particularly after 1999, coordination increased as support for the ruling BN coalition waned and

¹⁷ Similar dynamics have been noted in Mexico, where district-level competition largely pitted a single opposition party against the hegemonic PRI (Klesner 2005).

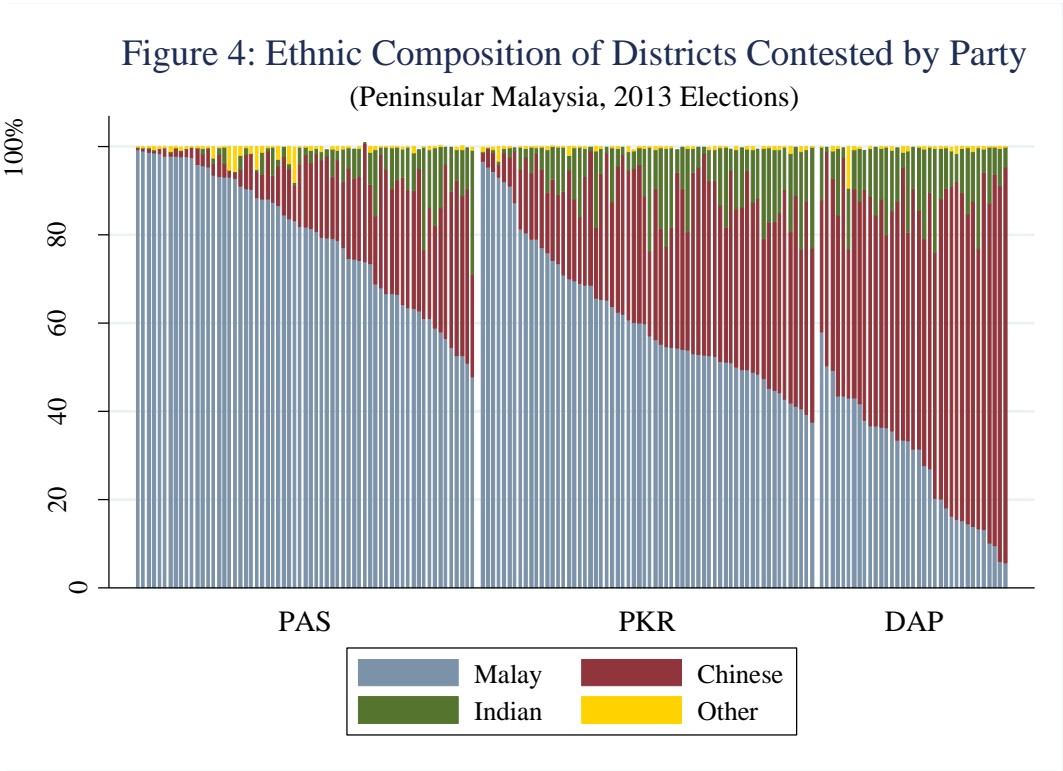
¹⁸ In 1969, 79% of parliamentary seats in West Malaysia featured two-party competition between an opposition party and a BN party; 59% of West Malaysian seats in 1978; and 91% in 1990.

as the opposition parties began engaging in more explicit cooperation. In the 1999 elections, only a single legislative seat was contested by both PAS and PKR. In the elections of 2013, there were no three-way contests among the opposition for all 222 seats in the national legislature.

The post-*reformasi* period provided the political space for the parties to pursue deeper forms of coordination beyond strategic entry to reach a broader anti-regime audience. In 2008, the joint wins of the three opposition parties spurred the formation of a governing coalition, the People's Alliance (*Pakatan Rakyat*), in three of Malaysia's states. In the 2013 elections, the coalition parties coordinated their campaigns through the People's Alliance and explicitly called for cross-party opposition voting (Weiss 2013). The three parties even attempted to register as a formal coalition, thus allowing the coalition to use a single coalition logo on ballot papers – mirroring the BN strategy of using a single coalition logo rather than individual party logos. Their request was rejected by the government (Teik 2013). Coalition building helped the parties to project a collective front and expand the number of voters the opposition could collect through encouraging cross-party voting. Anecdotal evidence suggests all three parties benefited from the coalition in winning seats outside their traditional constituencies. PAS was perhaps most reliant on coalitions rather than party broadening to expand its appeals during this period, since the party has long relied on a “dual constituency of religious supporters and protest voters” (Liw and Chan 2014, 99).

I argue that these deeper forms of coalition building served to increasingly lock parties into their existing niches. Coalition building allowed the opposition parties to increase their voteshares in the seats they respectively contested. However, by coordinating with each other over *which* seats they contested, electoral coordination dampened the incentives of parties to commit to broadening individual party identity.

This was particularly true for the DAP and PAS in Peninsular Malaysia, given that each party can make credible claims about their advantage in mobilizing votes from the non-Malay and Malay communities respectively. As Figure 4 demonstrates, the demographic composition of the legislative seats the parties contest largely lines up with their core demographic strength. The DAP contests in seats without a large Malay voting population, and virtually all seats where an ethnic Chinese voting base is the majority. PAS contests in seats with the largest proportions of Malay voters, and rarely contests seats with a large Chinese population. PKR shows the widest distribution of seat types, contesting both heavily Malay seats and seats where the population is more mixed.



Just as significantly, the opposition parties were incentivized to emphasize their niche identities because they frequently contested against their racial and religious counterparts in the ruling BN coalition. For example, a candidate from the Malay Muslim opposition party PAS

faced off against a candidate from UMNO, the Malay nationalist party that dominates the BN, in 87% of the parliamentary constituencies PAS contested in 2013. This encouraged opposition parties, particularly PAS, to play up its Muslim and anti-regime credentials in contrast to UMNO. While its Islamic message can help win over Malay voters at the district level, they likely hurt its ability to appeal to non-Malay voters. While the DAP consistently fielded Malay candidates, those candidates were run in districts where the majority of the population is non-Malay.

The dynamics of coalition building and party broadening were different as the three West Malaysian-based opposition parties began expanding into East Malaysia. While the DAP and PAS in particular could lay claim to distinct constituencies in West Malaysia, the “rightful” party to contest in East Malaysia’s districts, particularly in the state of Sarawak, was much less clear. East Malaysia has a significant number of districts with a majority non-Malay Bumiputera population. The DAP and PAS (or smaller Islamic parties) contested seats with ethnic Chinese or Malay majorities. The DAP and PKR, however, clashed over which party should contest majority Bumiputera seats. Though PAS has attempted to contest several seats in Sarawak, the party has largely avoided trying to broaden support in the area. The non-Malay Bumiputera population of East Malaysia is comprised of both Muslims and non-Muslims, and its Muslim population is less orthodox than West Malaysia, creating challenges for PAS to appeal to Bumiputera constituencies.

Even as the longest-lasting coalition between the parties broke up in 2015, the parties still sought to use coalitions to expand their appeal. In the Alliance of Hope (*Pakatan Harapan*), the new coalition formed in 2016 which includes PKR and DAP (but not PAS), the agreement states that the coalition will jointly field a single candidate per constituency, and “In deciding which

party shall represent [the Alliance of Hope]...the Presidential Council shall take into account the factor as to which party has the highest probability of an electoral victory in the said election.”¹⁹

As described in Appendix 1, the logic of seat allocation of the Alliance of Hope is consistent with its predecessor.

As one DAP politician put it:

“Because we started to have political coalitions [and] electoral arrangements... [the DAP] kept getting boxed in... If you’re going to have a coalition or electoral arrangement, the other parties are going to say ‘No no no, why don’t you concentrate on these seats because you’re stronger here, and we’ll take these because we’re more rural’.... Suddenly [the DAP] saw itself for very obvious strategic reasons... reducing its scope and becoming boxed in to a very urban non-Malay majority kind of party. It’s ironic – in trying to break the whole of the BN, in trying to make Malaysia break free from the BN image, we got boxed in to the whole ethnic politics as well, whether we like it or not.”²⁰

Coalitions have been the subject of internal controversy among the parties, notably from core audiences and factions within each party. Historically, even loose coordination with PAS was anathema for DAP’s base, making the party reluctant to publicly state it was working with PAS. This was particularly salient in 1999: while the DAP made modest gains at the parliamentary level, the perception among DAP leaders was that the coalition drove ethnic Chinese voters wary of cooperation with PAS back to the BN (Lim 2001, 25). In 1999, the DAP was hit by attacks from the BN component parties with ethnic Chinese bases – Gerakan and MCA – that the creation of a coalition including DAP and PAS would lead to the implementation of an Islamic state. DAP emphasized in press releases and in its campaign that its cooperation with PAS was confined to “issues of justice, freedom, democracy and good governance and does

¹⁹ Pakatan Harapan Agreement, Clause 5.2-5.3.

²⁰ Author interview with DAP legislator, Penang, June 24, 2016.

not extend to the issue of Islamic state,” and that PAS would not gain enough seats to impose an Islamic agenda (Cornell Rare Collections Archive n.d.).

There is little evidence that PAS suffered from erosion of its core vote because it worked with the DAP; party leaders and analysts have not cited coalitions as a factor in eroding core support. However, at the elite level within PAS, coalition building with the DAP has been very controversial, partly because the ability of PAS to implement its Islamic agenda in a balanced coalition was in question. By 2008, PAS was the third-largest party in the opposition coalition, a trend which suggested it would have decreasing power within the coalition. Disagreement over coalition building was part of the party split that saw PAS moderates exit the party in droves in 2015.

Coalition building by itself did not appear to lead to great moderation by the parties. This is particularly evident in the case of PAS. Though the parties made rhetorical concessions to enter into coalitions, PAS kept to its policy of advocating the Islamic state in Malaysia despite the challenges this placed on its appeals to non-Muslims. PAS’s Islamic message was undertaken alongside its rhetorically catchall slogans to attract non-Muslim audiences. In fact, the strategic choice for PAS appears to have been altered in prioritizing access to some power (especially at the state level) and policy influence.

7. Conclusion

This paper has highlighted a critical problem for opposition parties in competitive authoritarian regimes – how to build up electoral power among new constituencies in the face of crumbling incumbent support. I have argued that party identities structure the costs and benefits of parties to pursue transformation of party brand and organization. However, across party type, party broadening conflicts with the imperatives of coalition building, a second key strategy that parties use to build power. By tracing the divergent strategies and success of DAP, PAS, and

PKR, I illustrated the variable pressures that the parties faced in individually building a national electoral presence while working together in coalitions in a divided authoritarian setting.

These findings have implications for the study of opposition party growth in non-democratic regimes. The argument moves beyond resource-focused and Downsian accounts of party growth to argue for the importance of understanding different party imperatives in stitching together coalitions of voters and parties. Institutional incentives and racially polarized parties hinder the building of broad-based, multi-ethnic and multi-religious parties. But some parties have greater incentives to change these brands when they perceive the chance to build greater power, generating the dilemmas of broadening described here. This explains why parties do not uniformly move towards catchall models of party competition.

Growth without moderation has important implications for understanding the trajectory of politics in liberalizing and newly democratized countries. Parties carving out an electoral “niche” – be it territorial, religious, ethnic, and so on – may collectively build enough electoral support through coalitions to unseat entrenched incumbents, as in Malaysia itself in 2018. But this collective action around the motivating factor of winning national power masks the individual weaknesses of the parties in appealing to broad national audiences.

After the turnover of government through elections in Malaysia, there is an important question of whether its former opposition parties can, as ruling parties, make the transition to fully representative parties. Parties that successfully transform into broad-based but durable organizations are relatively rare (cf. Levitsky et al. 2016). The phenomenon of incomplete transformation has plagued other similar cases, including those of Mexico’s former opposition parties that have struggled to become truly broad based in the post-authoritarian era (Greene 2016). By examining how opposition parties navigate dilemmas of expansion prior to regime

change, there are rich opportunities for exploring how opposition parties ultimately shape the political systems in which they contest.

Appendix 1: Extending the Argument: Malaysia's 2018 Elections

On May 9, 2018, the four opposition parties²¹ in the Alliance of Hope (*Pakatan Harapan*) coalition won national power in the 14th General Election. For the first time in Malaysia's history, the national government was unseated through elections, allowing a new ruling coalition to take its place. In this appendix, I will briefly discuss the 2018 election in light of the theory presented in this paper. The decisive victory of the Alliance of Hope would not have been possible without a combination of the two strategies – party broadening and coalition building – as described in this paper. Nevertheless, the tensions and tradeoffs between the two strategies identified in this paper were still amply evident even in victory. In an election marked by close coordination of the main opposition parties, and sharp downturns in electoral support for the BN across the electorate, the parties again segmented their political competition along ethnoreligious lines.

The Alliance of Hope: New Members, Old Patterns

The opposition coalition that was victorious in the 2018 elections was formed in September 2015, just months after the previous coalition was declared dead. The DAP and PKR were joined in the coalition by Amanah, the splinter party from PAS populated by moderate PAS politicians who had lost in PAS's internal elections some months earlier.²² In March 2017, the coalition added a significant new partner: The United Indigenous Party of Malaysia (*Parti*

²¹ Amanah, Bersatu, the DAP, and PKR. The coalition also created an informal alliance with the Sabah Heritage Party (Parti Warisan Sabah).

²² Amanah had only assumed its name, logo and flag on September 8, 2015, just two weeks before the announcement of the new coalition.

Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, or Bersatu). Bersatu was formed in September 2016 with Mahathir Mohamad and several other high-level UMNO politicians who had defected in the wake of the 1MDB corruption scandal engulfing Prime Minister Najib Razak.

The potential electoral appeal of Mahathir's party was obvious for the opposition coalition. As a breakaway party of UMNO elites with Mahathir as president, it could effectively appeal to regime supporters, particularly Malay Muslim voters.²³ It was also easier to reconcile Bersatu's anti-Najib mission with the other opposition parties than that of PAS, which in the years leading up to the election had increasingly dealigned with the opposition and emphasized an uncompromising vision of Islamic governance.

But it was clear that Bersatu's brand was very different than its coalition partners. As a race-based party, Bersatu seemed to explicitly reject the non-communal political messaging that the opposition parties and civil society had painstakingly crafted during the past two decades. Echoing the paternalistic language which marked his decades in power, Mahathir was clear about the role of his new race-based party in the coalition: "We need some party that can counter [UMNO], that can have the same kind of support from the indigenous Malays, that can promise them that we will look after their worries, and we will attend to them... *We are going to form a coalition [because] we know that the Malays feel more comfortable with a race-based party... we also point out to [the Malays] that we will look after the interests of the Malays in the coalition.*"²⁴

This ethnic logic was extended to how the parties divided up the electoral map. As shown in the figure below, in line with the previous elections described in this paper, the parties of the

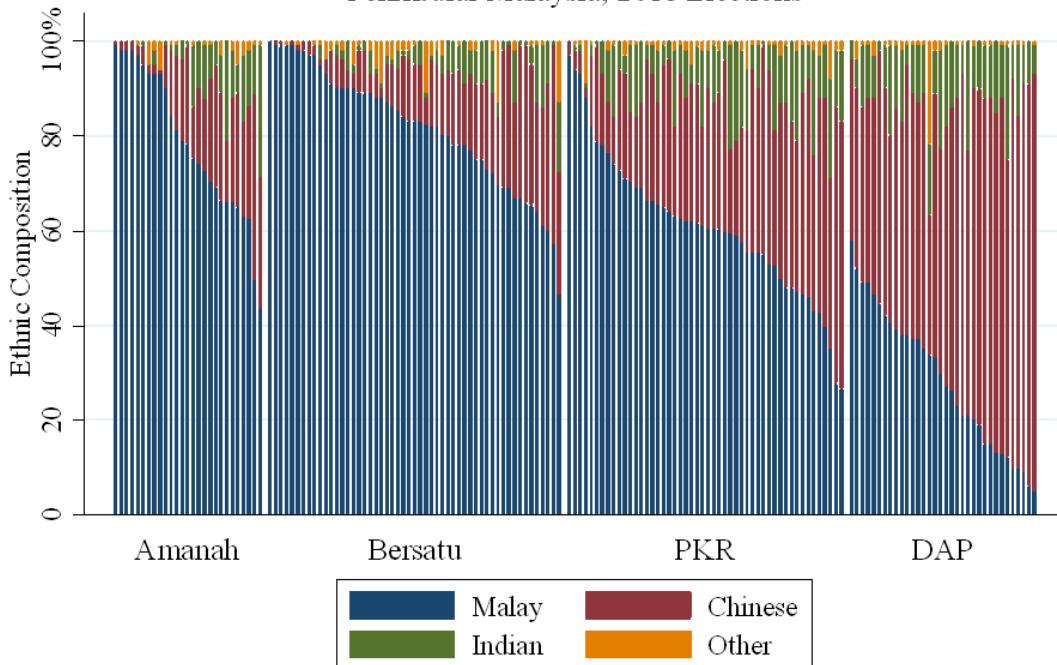
²³ In this way, the party recapitulated the role of the defunct Semangat 46 party in the 1990 elections.

²⁴ Author interview with Mahathir Mohamad, October 16, 2016.

Alliance of Hope coalition largely hewed to districts in West Malaysia that favored their existing demographic bases. Amanah and Bersatu, the two new opposition parties that could make claims on the core Malay Muslim constituencies of PAS, were essentially slotted in to the seats that PAS had contested when it was part of the previous coalition. Of the 73 seats that PAS contested in 2013 as part of the People’s Alliance, Amanah and Bersatu contested 66 of those seats in 2018. (PAS returned to contest virtually all the same seats, and more, in 2018).

Ethnic Composition of Districts Contested by PH

Peninsular Malaysia, 2018 Elections



While the figure above focuses on West Malaysia, even in the more complex demographic and political map of East Malaysia, ethnic considerations for opposition coordination were apparent. In the runup to the 2018 elections, several local parties in Sabah, including a new breakaway party, Parti Warisan Sabah, faced the challenge of dividing up seats to contest. The head of Parti Cinta Sabah, Wilfred Bumburing, outlined his party’s plan to divide up seats among the opposition parties: “What we want is only the [Bumiputera indigenous

group] Kadazandusun Murut (KDM) seats and not the Malay seats or the areas in the east coast, where [Parti] Warisan can contest.... If we are to agree on seat allocations with [Parti Warisan Sabah], they have to let us contest in the KDM areas and they can take the others.”²⁵

The 2018 elections also saw deeper coordination than in previous elections. This was in part an unintended consequence of the ruling BN’s strategies against the opposition. Following the Elections Commission’s rejection of their attempt to register the Alliance of Hope as a coalition, the opposition parties agreed in February 2018 to contest under a single party logo.²⁶ Two months later, the Elections Commission temporarily deregistered Mahathir’s Bersatu party on technical grounds. This led the parties to decide on the PKR party logo as their common symbol in the election.

The use of a common logo was significant given that voters would see a single opposition logo at the ballot box rather than four individual party logos. It also meant that parties could avoid some of the negative stigma – or lack of existing reputation – associated with their party brands. In a post-election interview, DAP leader Lim Kit Siang credited the dropping of DAP’s “rocket” party logo for the party’s successes, saying that using the PKR logo “...was a clear message not only to those in [The Alliance of Hope], but to everyone, that we will be able to rise above race, religion, region and political party.”²⁷

Nevertheless, the coalition left the parties open to familiar counterattacks from the BN about the coalition’s “true” leading party and source of support. This narrative often focused around the position of the DAP and sought to portray its position as leading to ethnic Chinese

²⁵ <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2018/04/03/warisans-seat-allocation-formula-worse-than-bns-says-bumburing/>

²⁶ <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/02/27/dr-m-pakatan-harapan-parties-to-use-common-logo-during-ge14/>

²⁷ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/424952>

political dominance. For example, Prime Minister Najib claimed that the swell of supporters appearing at Alliance of Hope rallies (*ceramah*) were not Malays, only “DAP supporters” – that is, ethnic Chinese Malaysians.²⁸ UMNO politician Khairy Jamaluddin assailed the DAP’s decision to use the PKR logo, calling it “a tactic to confuse... Malay voters.”²⁹

In response, the DAP appeared at pains to show that they were taking the backseat in the coalition. The DAP supported Mahathir as its prime ministerial pick, in line with its stated position that it has “never asked for a Chinese to become Prime Minister.”³⁰ Similarly, despite its electoral successes in 2013, the party contested five fewer parliamentary seats in 2018. In statements to the press, DAP Secretary General Lim Guan Eng stated that the party would only contest 35 seats in West Malaysia compared to Bersatu’s 53. But BN politicians noted that the DAP was only highlighting its seat allocation in West Malaysia, attacking this framing as the DAP trying to downplay its position in the coalition.³¹

Party Broadening and the Effects of Coalitional Strategies

This unprecedented level of coalition building appears to have stalled party broadening attempts. In the 2018 election, the DAP put forward fewer Malay candidates than in the previous four elections, as shown in Figure 2 (see main text). The party also ran fewer non-Malay Bumiputera candidates, likely because the party contested fewer overall seats in East Malaysia. The average district ethnic composition of the seats that the DAP contested was almost identical to that of 2013.

²⁸ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/423595>

²⁹ <http://www.thesundaily.my/news/2018/04/07/dap-using-pkr-logo-fool-malay-voters-says-khairy>

³⁰ Speech by Secretary General Lim Guan Eng, DAP Party Congress, December 2016.

³¹ <https://www.malaymail.com/s/1549925/more-seats-for-ppbm-in-elections-false-impression-by-dap-bn-man-claims>

As shown in Figure 3 (main text), PKR's continued to broaden its candidate base in East Malaysia, as the party ran increasing numbers of non-Malay Bumiputera candidates. But like the DAP, the average district ethnic composition in the seats it contested was virtually unchanged from the previous election.

The party which showed the most dramatic change in the demographics of the seats that it contested was PAS. In 2018, the average composition of the seats that PAS contested in were 67% Malay, 21% Chinese, and 8% Indian, compared to 80% Malay, 15% Chinese, and 5% Indian in the 2013 elections.

Was this the adoption of a broadening strategy by PAS? It appears not. Rather, the party put up many more candidates for parliamentary seats than it ever had before – and more than any other party in the country. In 2013, the party ran 73 candidates. In 2018, it ran 156 candidates, in 70% of all parliamentary districts. By doing so, PAS run in districts well outside its usual demographics – but lost in all of them. The only parliamentary seats the party picked up were in overwhelmingly Malay districts in Kedah and Terengganu, in addition to its usual support in Kelantan. Overall, the party won only 12% of the seats that it contested.

Given that this was the first election in which Bersatu has contested, its party broadening strategies have yet to be tested. The party brand of Bersatu is clearly meant to cue Malay Muslim support; despite the invocation of pribumi (indigenous) identity in its party name, the party appears focused exclusively on Malay voters. The party did not contest in East Malaysia, where non-Malay (Other) Bumiputera populations are concentrated.

The party has claimed that 5% of its membership base is non-Bumiputera.³² But like PAS, non-Bumiputera Malaysians are only allowed to become “associate members” – without

³² <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/syed-saddiq-race-based-parties-stay-020500071.html>

voting rights or ability to contest in elections for internal party positions. Its chairman Mahathir has repeatedly stated the importance of building a racial party, claiming that rural Malays “feared” multi-racial parties and that this led to the opposition’s previous failure to win in BN-held constituencies.³³ Given that Malay voters were on average 65% of the district electorate in West Malaysia, it will also face less electoral pressure to alter its emerging identity.

Implications for the New Government

The electoral fortunes of the Alliance of Hope were buoyed by a historically unpopular incumbent prime minister, economic concerns, and the introduction of a new opposition party comprised of regime defectors. But the coalition’s electoral success was also due to painstaking party and coalition building efforts of the past several decades. It also relied on a voting electorate that rejected the BN across ethnic and religious lines – what some commentators have referred to as a “Malaysian tsunami” rather than the ethnic “tsunamis” of elections past.

However, there is a disjuncture between this narrative and the strategies of coalition building that are still strongly patterned along ethnoreligious lines. In building perhaps the strongest collective coalition identity yet, the majority of the Alliance of Hope parties have paradoxically preserved many of the elements which defined them in opposition, including the reliance on ethnicized party support. This will have implications for decision making by the coalition government and the lines of divide that emerge around policy issues including the role of Islam in society and government and affirmative action policies aimed at the Bumiputera majority.

³³ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/415433>

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