

THE PEOPLE'S VICTORY

Kee
Thuan
Chye

Few people believed the corrupt and oppressive Barisan Nasional government could be toppled.

But the people were sick and tired of it. And the scandals surrounding the prime minister. He had brought shame to Malaysia, which became known to the world as a kleptocracy.

This book tells the epic story of how Malaysians took responsibility for their country and struggled against the odds to change their government. Of how a 92-year-old former prime minister who had been an enemy of the Opposition for decades crossed over to join forces with the very man he had sent to jail 20 years earlier, and led the charge to topple the party he once loved.

Starting with the outcome of the 13th general election in 2013 and then moving through five years of drama, surprises, ironies and twists to the climactic 14th general election of 9 May 2018, the narrative grows from despair to hope to euphoria.

This book honours the concerned citizens who fought the good fight and contributed in ways big and small to bring about a new Malaysia.

What they achieved was truly a victory of the people.

Kee Thuan Chye

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HOW MALAYSIANS
SAVED THEIR COUNTRY

Kee Thuan Chye

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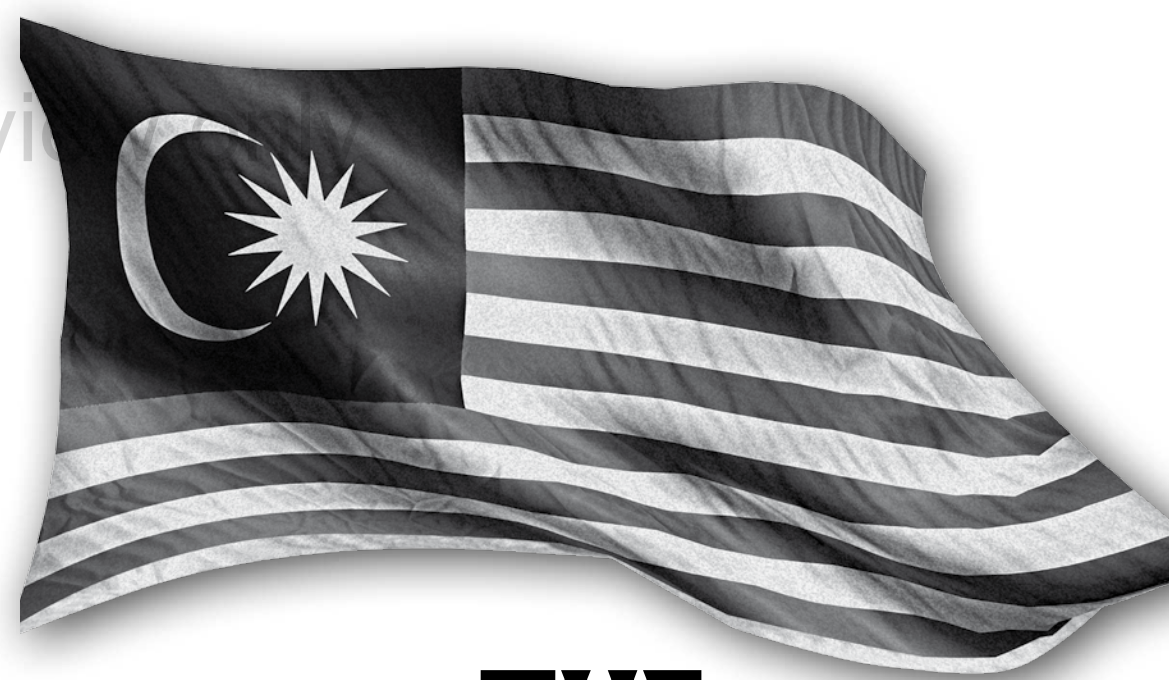
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For Review



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HOW **MALAYSIANS**
SAVED THEIR **COUNTRY**

Kee Thuan Chye

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*This book is dedicated to my wife,
Lim Choy Wan,*

*and my children,
Soraya Sunitra Kee Xiang Yin
and
Jebat Arjuna Kee Jia Liang,*

*Lim Jack Kin
and all those of his generation
who represent the hope and future of Malaysia*

*the comrades for change who protested in the sun and rain,
stood up to tear gas and water cannons,
were harassed by the police and even arrested,
helped out in any way they could,*

*and, above all,
the Malaysian people who voted for change
for without them, there would not have been
a people's victory.*

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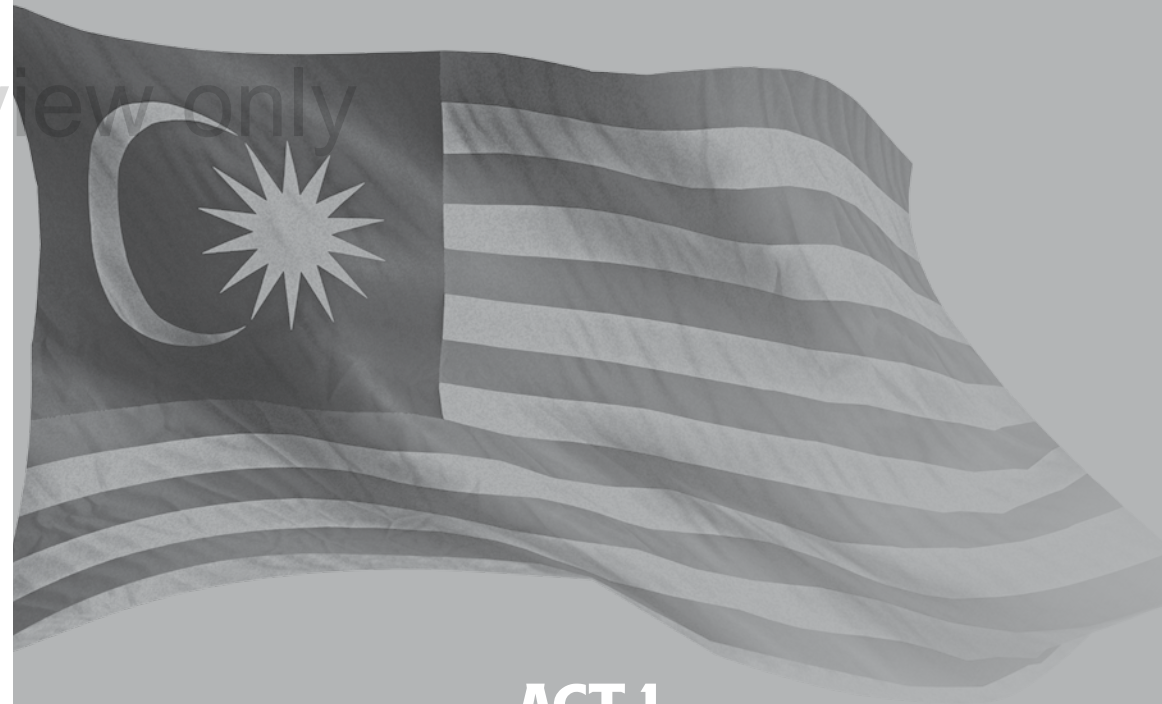
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ACT 1

DESPAIR

THIS IS THE TIME!

On May 5, 2013, hopes ran high that by the end of the day Malaysia would have a change of government. Even before polling stations opened at 8am, throngs of voters were already queuing up, many of them eager to make that happen.

This was the day they had been waiting for, five years after the watershed 12th general election (GE12) in 2008 when the Opposition pact stunned Barisan Nasional (BN) by denying the incumbent ruling coalition its customary two-thirds majority in Parliament and capturing five of the 11 state governments in Peninsular Malaysia.

Now, with the Opposition having exposed the once-mighty BN's vulnerability and also unified itself as an entity going by the name of Pakatan Rakyat (PR), or The People's Pact, it looked ready to take over the federal government at this 13th general election (GE13). Malaysians disgruntled with the ruling coalition felt cheered.

BN had ruled for 56 years since the country attained independence from the British in 1957. Its brand of politics had come to be dictated more strongly than ever before by its dominant party, the United Malays National Organisation (Umno), which had become self-serving, arrogant, divisive and corrupt. This had compromised the ability of the other component parties in the coalition to function as effectively as they should.

With Umno firmly in command, BN had turned out to be indecisive in its administration, lavish in its spending, indifferent to racial harmony, oppressive in its exercise of power, and more. If the coalition were to be

allowed to stay in government, the outlook for the next five years could be unbearably bleak. It was time to vote the whole lot out.

"*Ini kalilah!*" roared the change-seekers at PR's campaign stumps, asserting that this was the time to do it. They would turn up by the thousands at many of these *ceramahs* (rallies) to show solidarity, listen to the speeches and feel uplifted, convinced that the Opposition could win.

At Gelang Patah, one of the constituencies in the southern state of Johor, as many as 70,000 people swarmed the car park of a shopping mall on May 1, blowing vuvuzelas and cheering the PR leaders who spoke. Two nights later, an unprecedented 100,000 people filled up the Esplanade in Penang, shouting "*ubah!*" (change), breaking all records of rally attendances.

When a PR politician on stage shouted, "*Ini kalilah!*", the supporters yelled back, "Change the government!" The camaraderie was powerful; campaigners and supporters were in sync.

Outside of the hustings, calls for change resounded on social media, but it was not all just talk. Individuals and groups reinforced it by taking action.

They organised events to help PR parties raise funds, influenced fence-sitters to attend PR rallies, mobilised friends to sign up and be trained to be polling agents for PR candidates for election day. They helped to indirectly campaign against BN by circulating e-mails exposing BN's excesses, corruption and abuse of power, or by posting comments on media websites condemning in strong language the incompetence and the lies of government ministers.

On Facebook, like-minded ones adopted as their profile photos the *ubah* hornbill mascot (launched by one of PR's component parties), as if giving themselves a group identity as comrades for the same cause. Those with more resources created and produced short videos to spread the message of change in a more direct and effective way.

'Remember to *ubah*, ya?'

The comrades for change were frank about the side they would vote for and

had no qualms about declaring it openly. They rebuffed the maxim about keeping their vote secret and proudly stated their stand to get others to join their cause or engage in communion with fellow Opposition supporters, even if they were strangers.

Once, I was in a taxi going home from the airport when the driver and I started talking about politics. As the elections were coming up, it seemed the natural thing to do. I was not surprised that the driver complained about the Government. Actually, he did most of the talking as he spoke out against the cash handouts the Government was dispensing, obviously to buy votes; the bias the Election Commission (EC) was showing towards BN although it was supposed to be neutral and independent; the awarding of lucrative government projects to Umno's cronies; and so on.

I was impressed by his articulate analysis of the issues, his candour and his disregard for the fact that I was a total stranger to him. I happily listened till I got to my destination. Then when I was getting out of his taxi, he said something that got me smiling delightedly. He said, "Remember to *ubah*, ya?"

The wave for change was almost a movement, but not one that was formally created or organised. It had its beginnings in the aftermath of GE12, which sensitised Malaysians to the possibility of a better future for themselves and their children. It grew in presence as campaigns and rallies organised by Opposition parties and civil society bodies raised greater public awareness of the Government's unfair policies and practices.

Soon it burgeoned into a loose fraternity that was not represented only by Malaysians resident at home. Those working and residing overseas, from Singapore to China to Australia to the United States of America, felt united by the same purpose and joined in. When the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Bersih) organised street rallies in 2011 and 2012, overseas Malaysians in more than 30 international cities held simultaneous ones in solidarity with the NGO.

These rallies called on the EC to clean up the electoral roll which was

alleged to contain phantom voters; reform postal voting; introduce the use of indelible ink; allow all political parties free access to the media; and put an end to electoral fraud.

Tens of thousands of concerned Malaysians spilled onto the streets of Kuala Lumpur's city centre to support Bersih's calls. Many more overseas came up with initiatives to support the cause, and when Bersih appealed for a large turnout of voters at GE13 because this would be the only way to defeat cheating or fraudulent manipulation, they made plans to fly home and vote. Even from as far as the U.S.

Weeks before election day, those resident in Singapore encouraged one another to return to vote and even organised the logistics for group travel. They chartered buses and coordinated carpooling. They were as excited as their compatriots in Malaysia about the prospect of *ubah*.

On polling day, however, all that excitement was quite contained. No campaigning was allowed in the polling centre and within 50 metres of it. Anyone caught sporting a party's logo or emblem or the candidate's name could face a fine of RM5,000 or one year's jail, or both.

When the gates opened, voters headed for the officials' desk to check which *saluran* (stream) they should join and proceeded there accordingly. Despite the numbers present, there was no loud chatter. Most of the voters were generally reticent, perhaps relishing a moment that comes only once every five years and appreciating the significance of the task at hand.

They did not complain that the lines were long or that they had to stand in the sun at times. They waited patiently, some for as long as over an hour, for their turn to enter the voting room, have their identity card verified and their index finger painted with indelible ink, receive their ballot paper, mark that all-important cross on it against the candidate of their choice, and drop the precious ballot paper into the box.

That done, they stepped out of the polling station feeling satisfied and valued for having performed a worthy deed. They had made their preference known. They had spoken. Now the anxiety would start.

The rise, fall and rise of Anwar

PR was led by the charismatic Anwar Ibrahim, the *de facto* head of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), or National Justice Party, one of the parties in the Opposition pact.

He was courted to join Umno in 1982 by then prime minister Mahathir Mohamad and made a minister the very next year. By 1993, he had risen to become deputy prime minister and was widely seen to be Mahathir's designated successor.

But he fell from grace in 1998, when he was sacked and charged with sodomy and abuse of power and subsequently jailed.

It was sparked by his fallout with Mahathir over the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis when as finance minister, Anwar adopted an austerity plan recommended by the International Monetary Fund without his boss's prior knowledge. The plan would cut public spending by 18% and halt infrastructure projects initiated by Mahathir. It also insisted that the Government would not bail out companies affected by the crisis.

An angry Mahathir retaliated. He brought in his old friend, businessman Daim Zainuddin, to head the newly formed National Economic Action Council, undercutting Anwar's position as finance minister.

Three months later, in March 1998, state-owned oil company Petronas was co-opted to bail out Mahathir's son Mirzan's troubled company to the tune of RM2 billion.

In June, Umno Youth chief Ahmad Zahid Hamidi spoke out against Mahathir at the Umno general assembly when he called for an end to cronyism and nepotism in the Government. He was punished in September with detention without trial under the Internal Security Act (ISA), and was released when he agreed to step down as Umno Youth chief.

The following year, he admitted that Anwar was the one who instructed him to raise the issues of cronyism and nepotism in return for business opportunities. He sought forgiveness from Mahathir and was welcomed back to the Umno fold.

It looked like he had no qualms about telling on his friend or ally in order

to save his own skin. This same Ahmad Zahid Hamidi would later bounce back from being an outcast to become Najib's deputy prime minister in 2015.

The man who would not be forgiven was Anwar. At the same Umno general assembly, a book titled *50 Dalil Kenapa Anwar Tidak Boleh Menjadi Perdana Menteri* (50 Reasons Why Anwar Cannot Become Prime Minister) was circulated to undermine him. The book contained graphic sexual allegations as well as accusations of corruption against him.

Mahathir, who had earlier publicly declared that sexual allegations made against Anwar in poison-pen letters that emerged in June 1997 were false, now ordered police investigations into the allegations. He also appointed Daim special functions minister in charge of economic development, further undermining Anwar's position.

On September 2, Mahathir sacked Anwar after the latter refused an ultimatum to step down. The next day, Anwar claimed he was the victim of a conspiracy. He led a series of mass protests calling for *reformasi* (political reform).

Police then submitted affidavits alleging sexual misconduct and other crimes committed by Anwar. He was arrested, and his arrest sparked the *reformasi* movement that eventually culminated in the formation of PKR while he was in prison.

Evidently, Mahathir was one person you did not want to fight against. When Zahid accused the Government of practising nepotism and cronyism, Mahathir hit back by revealing the names of others who had benefited from government contracts and low-priced share allocations. They included Zahid himself and Anwar's friends and family.

To address the financial crisis, Mahathir eventually imposed capital controls, pegging the ringgit at RM3.80 to the U.S. dollar, to curb currency speculation that he blamed on the West, calling the speculators "neo-colonialists", "racists", "international criminals" and "wild beasts". To his credit, he was later widely applauded for making the right move.

On his release in 2004, Anwar bounced back with fervour to lead the Opposition to GE12 in 2008. Although his jail sentence disqualified him

from standing in the elections, he proved to be a powerhouse in galvanising PKR and its partners – the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), or Malaysian Islamic Party – to achieve a stunning electoral performance on March 8.

On July 31, 2008, by which time Anwar's disqualification from standing for public office had lapsed, his wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, who had been holding the PKR fort while he was in prison, vacated her parliamentary seat of Permatang Pauh. It allowed Anwar to contest in that constituency, an Anwar family stronghold, in the subsequent by-election. As expected, he won it by a landslide, and was sworn in as a member of Parliament after an absence of 10 years.

Pact of strange bedfellows

Now at GE13, PR was, among other things, banking on its track record of running the state governments of Penang, Kedah, Selangor and Kelantan to sell the idea that it was ready for federal government.

It proposed an affirmative action policy based on needs so that all races would benefit, in contrast to the one practised by BN, which was based on race.

It promised to abolish highway tolls and repeal laws that restricted media freedom and academic freedom. It also declared war against corruption.

Clearly for many voters PR would bring much-needed reform if it took over the seat of federal government in Putrajaya, the country's administrative capital.

They were prepared to accept the mix of strange bedfellows in the pact – a Malay-led multi-racial party founded on *reformasi* and social justice and the idea that Anwar must be prime minister; a Chinese-dominated multi-racial party that championed democracy and advocated equality for all; and an Islamist party bent on establishing a theocratic state and occasionally on fostering Malay-Muslim unity.

These three were disparate groups with differences in political dreams. In time, problems might arise out of these differences, but so

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far, the three parties had remained united and focused on their goal of conquering Putrajaya.

More importantly, Anwar was holding them together, and the DAP looked well-organised and solid, while PAS was currently taking a politically pragmatic approach of broaching the idea of a Benevolent or Welfare State instead of an Islamic State. The mixed bunch appeared a better bet than BN.

BN thrives on old tricks

The ruling regime, on the other hand, seemed more concerned with playing its old tricks of cajoling, bribing and threatening the electorate instead of attending to its own flaws.

Just a month before the elections, Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak, who was also BN chairman, announced bigger cash handouts for the people in the form of the 1Malaysia People's Aid (BR1M), increasing it from RM500 to RM1,200 a year for households earning less than RM3,000 a month, and from RM250 to RM600 for singles earning less than RM2,000 a month. BN of course denied that it was a tactic to buy votes.

Umno leaders threatened that if Malaysians did not vote BN back to power, they could face another outbreak of racial violence, like that of May 13, 1969.

Former prime minister Mahathir, still an Umno stalwart, also warned of racial confrontation in the event of DAP candidate Lim Kit Siang winning Gelang Patah in Johor.

BN was really worried by PR's bold strategy to take the fight to Umno's fortress, Johor, long considered to be impregnable, with the veteran Kit Siang leading the charge. When it started looking like PR might have a good chance of breaking down at least parts of the fortress, Umno leaders resorted to racial threats.

But these virulent threats were not based on reality, they were merely meant to frighten the voters. Naturally, they did not succeed. In fact, they made the voters more angry.

Acid test for Najib

For Najib, GE13 was an acid test. He had become the nation's 6th prime minister in 2009 and this was his first general election as top leader. He needed a good showing to consolidate his position.

He knew only too well that the man he succeeded, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, had been pressured to step down by his own party for being accountable for the GE12 debacle. If he himself failed to perform well at GE13, he could face the same consequences.

So over the years since ascending to the premiership, Najib had gone all out to work on increasing his popularity ratings. He tried to project a "cool" and "hip" image of himself to the young, extensively made use of social media to show he was "with it", turned himself into a personal brand that often polled higher than that of Umno, and even had numerous public relations events staged that demonstrated how people "loved" the PM!

Unfortunately, however, his job ratings were far from satisfactory. Despite promising "transformation" through projects called Economic Transformation Programme (ETP), Government Transformation Programme (GTP), Political Transformation Programme (PTP) and Rural Transformation Programme (RTP), he could not reach out to the layman for whom such fancy project names were too abstract to comprehend. Neither could they feel the effects of the so-called "transformation".

Money makes Umno go round

Indeed if there was anything that needed transformation, it had to be Najib's own party, Umno. As the biggest partner in the BN coalition of 13 parties and the one that called the shots, it was accountable for having corrupted the system through its abuse of power and promotion of cronyism and rent-seeking.

The party itself was infested with greed. It became a talking point that joining the party was not so much about serving the nation or fighting for the Malay cause anymore but about getting government projects and amassing personal wealth.

It all started in the 1980s, when money politics set in. This was during the time when Mahathir was Umno president and also prime minister. It was alleged that any Umno member who wanted to contest for just the position of divisional head had to spend hundreds of thousands of ringgit to feed and provide for supporters who would vote for them in divisional polls. By the 1990s, the amount had gone up to a million ringgit. But it was worth it. The huge pickings would come during national party elections when each division would send 14 delegates to the annual general assembly to vote for the top positions from party president to Supreme Council members.

These delegates, numbering about 2,500, were actually the people who would pick the country's prime minister and most of his Cabinet members, not the 3 million Umno members, not the many million more Malaysian voters who go to the polling booths whenever a general election is called. Only 2,500 or so individuals, and they had the biggest say in determining the personnel of the country's top administration. Incredible!

However, in 2009, the Umno constitution was changed to increase the number of delegates voting for the top positions to nearly 150,000, and this was to be implemented for the first time at the 2013 national party elections to be held in November that year.

The divisional chief would of course be among the delegates at the general assembly. He or she would also control how the division would vote. As such, their goodwill had to be sought by the candidates vying for the top positions. They were offered not only money but special perks as well, like positions on the board of government agencies or lucrative housing development projects.

A 2013 interview that the online news website *Free Malaysia Today* did with Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir was most revealing. Kadir was a former Umno Supreme Council member and government minister and therefore someone who had first-hand knowledge of the party's culture and practices. What he disclosed corroborated the allegations.

"You can get top positions in Umno by buying votes," he said. "You

don't have to bother going down to the divisions, to the branches, work hard, be popular with the *rakyat* (people), no, no, not necessary anymore. If you have the money and you are prepared to spend it, you can get elected to be a Supreme Council member or even a vice-president or deputy president and so on. So it works in Umno. Money really can buy things. So much so that Najib in his closing speech (at the 2009 general assembly) joked, '*Inilah kita ini Umno dalam dilema. Beri, salah. Tak beri, kalah.*' (Umno is in a dilemma. Giving money is wrong. But not giving means losing.) And everybody down there, the delegates, started clapping and laughing. Because they'd been receiving. And those on the stage, the Supreme Council members, also clapped because they'd been giving."

However, Kadir conceded that not all delegates sold their votes and not all Supreme Council candidates gave money. "Most use money, but some are very reluctant. They do not like it. But as Najib joked, if you don't give, you lose, so when you lose, you lose your ministerial post or your *menteri besar* (chief minister) post, you lose your Supreme Council position, etc. So since that is the culture, you also join in and start giving. ... I've heard that now you have to have a few million ringgit just to get a position in the Supreme Council. And even if you're a nobody who's not gone down to the divisions to work hard at the grassroots level, if you are prepared to spend this money, you can get a position in the Supreme Council quite easily. Just spend money."

'Coffee money' at midnight

Veteran journalist A. Kathirasan touched on the subject in a commentary article published by *Free Malaysia Today* on June 26, 2018.

He wrote about a friend attending an Umno general assembly years before that. The friend, who came from a northern state, was put up in a luxury hotel in the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur and had all his expenses paid.

Around midnight, he and his roommate, another delegate, heard a

knock on the door. He opened it to find "a man smiling from ear to ear". The man stepped into the room and asked if everything was all right. The two delegates said yes. The man looked around, smiled and pushed some notes into their shirt pockets. He said, "*Tan Sri kata minum kopi.*" (Tan Sri says this is for coffee). Then the man left.

"Tan Sri" is the second highest federal title bestowed to someone who is regarded to have provided distinguished service to the nation. When someone is given such a title, their actual name usually becomes secondary and they are publicly referred to mostly by the honorific. In this case, the delegates would know who "Tan Sri" referred to as there would have been only one such title-holder among the candidates for the top positions they would be voting for the next day.

As for *minum kopi*, literally "drink coffee", that is commonly acknowledged as a euphemism for taking a bribe.

After the Tan Sri's man had left, the two delegates reached into their pockets and took out the notes. They counted them. Their hearts leapt when they realised they had been gifted RM4,000 each.

When money politics became the culture of Umno, it appeared all the more evident that the party was not about public service but self-service. It also appeared to have deviated far from the principles of its founders who, if they were alive, would not have recognised the Umno of 2013 as the party they had formed in 1946.

Then, it was to fight for the Malays under British rule. But later it worked with Chinese and Indian parties to achieve independence and thereafter govern the multi-racial nation on the principle of power-sharing.

Under the leadership of Tunku Abdul Rahman, who was the country's first prime minister from 1957 to 1970, Umno largely showed fairness to the other races. It managed to forge with its partners in the coalition called the Alliance Party, the forerunner of BN, a reasonably harmonious multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-lingual nation.

But on May 10, 1969, the Alliance Party fared badly at the 3rd general election. It was returned to power but lost its two-thirds majority in

Parliament and four state governments (nearly comparable to the 2008 general election results).

Then on May 13, racial riots broke out. Now acknowledged to have been orchestrated by Umno right-wingers, the riots forever changed the race narrative.

And so Malaysia became divided

The New Economic Policy (NEP) was introduced in 1970. It was a social re-engineering and affirmative action policy that was aimed at aiding *Bumiputeras* (sons of the soil) – comprising the majority race of Malays as well as the natives of Sabah and Sarawak – and ensuring that they attained 30% participation in the economy by 1990.

From the look of it, the NEP was racially discriminatory. This made the non-*Bumiputeras* feel disenfranchised. Fewer of them could get into public universities, fewer get employed in the civil service. Many were bypassed for promotion in the public sector on account of race.

Being *Bumiputera* also meant getting the special privilege of a 7 to 10% discount on property purchases, irrespective of the value of the property, which the non-*Bumiputera* did not enjoy. This is still applicable today, even for multi-million-ringgit properties which only the rich can afford.

Yet even so, if the NEP were to be well implemented and to achieve its aims by the allotted period of 20 years, and if it would truly help the Malays feel confident of themselves in due course, it would have to be accepted as a necessary measure. Care, however, needed to be taken to prevent the disruption of the harmonious racial co-existence that the Federal Constitution was designed to protect and preserve.

As it turned out, the policy did help to expand the Malay middle class and provide opportunities for many Malays to improve their well-being in education, business and other areas. But it also aroused the greed of what came to be disparagingly called *Umnoputeras*, the Umno elite who used their connections to benefit from the policy more easily and more bountifully than others.

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The spirit and letter of the policy came to be abused in practice. One of its aims, the eradication of poverty, was not concertedly addressed, so that a large proportion of the people it was meant to benefit, particularly the poor, remained deprived.

When 1990 came around, the NEP was terminated in name but replacement policies maintained the affirmative action for *Bumiputeras*. Even so, as late as 2007, the Government shockingly declared that the 30% *Bumiputera* equity target had not yet been achieved. This was greeted with incredulity. Something must have gone dreadfully amiss in the last 37 years, or the figures were wrong!

However, Lim Teck Ghee, who had done a study of *Bumiputera* corporate equity ownership up till 2004, disagreed. His report on it for the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute's Centre for Public Policy Studies showed that the *Bumiputera* corporate share could be as high as 45%, rather than the official 2004 estimate of 18.9%.

Meanwhile, Malaysian society became divided. The non-Malays felt more than just being marginalised because of the abuse of the NEP; they also felt that their rights were being challenged, although these rights were guaranteed by the Federal Constitution.

Chinese and Indians were derogatorily called *pendatang* (immigrant), even by Umno leaders, thus depriving them of a sense of belonging in the land of their birth and citizenship. Sometimes they were rudely told to go back to where their ancestors came from. There were even calls to strip them of their citizenship.

The idea of *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay Supremacy) was summarily invoked in the 1980s, and over the years it was ingrained in the national psyche, ever ready to be exploited now and again for political purposes. It was also concretised in government policies and practices.

Almost all the highest positions in public office came to be reserved for Malays. Not a single vice-chancellor in the country's public universities was non-Malay. The most important positions in the prime minister's Cabinet went to Malays, unlike during the time of Tunku Abdul Rahman.

In the civil service, Malay staffing increased from 64.5% in 1969 (before the NEP) to 76.2% in 2009, while the Chinese and Indian proportions declined from 18.8% and 15.7%, respectively, in 1969 to 6% and 4.3% in 2009. By 2010, out of 1.2 million civil service employees, only about 10% were non-Malays.

Race was just one of the divisive factors. The other significant one was religion. Umno leaders would politicise both to consolidate their power.

Article 3 of the Federal Constitution states that "Islam is the religion of the Federation" and Article 160 defines a Malay as a person who professes the religion of Islam. This means that all Malays are officially worshippers of the country's premier religion. It gave Umno the moral authority to play both the *Ketuanan Melayu* and *Ketuanan Islam* (Islamic Supremacy) cards to its advantage. Which of course it did.

Malaysia an Islamic state?

When he was prime minister, Mahathir added fuel to the religious fire by declaring in 2001 that Malaysia was an Islamic state, much to many people's dismay and distress, because Malaysia had been widely considered to be secular since independence. It was inconceivable that the British and Tunku Abdul Rahman would have agreed to anything other than that.

The Tunku himself said in Parliament in 1958, "I would like to make clear that this country is not an Islamic state as is generally understood, we merely provide that Islam shall be the official religion of the State." On February 9, 1983, he reiterated this stand in a report published by the English daily *The Star* under the headline 'Don't make Malaysia an Islamic state: Tunku'.

Four days later, he was supported by Hussein Onn, the country's 3rd prime minister, in a report by the same newspaper headlined 'Hussein says no to Islamic state too'.

But Mahathir was obviously not receptive of their position. And in 2007, Najib reinforced Mahathir's line by saying, "Islam is the official

religion and Malaysia is an Islamic state ... we have never been secular because being secular by Western definition means separation of the Islamic principles in the way we govern a country." He was deputy prime minister at the time, but when he later took the higher office, he maintained the same line.

Clearly, what Mahathir and Najib declared was rhetoric designed to win the support of Muslims which they feared losing to PAS, which had been advocating the establishment of an Islamic state since the 1980s after it was inspired by the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

This was the period when Mahathir began his premiership, and the course he then chose to counter PAS's influence on the Malay-Muslim electorate was to out-PAS PAS by making the Government appear more Muslim than the Islamic party. It served Umno and BN's cause, but in doing so, Mahathir turned religion into a monstrous issue that was to have a serious impact on the future of Malaysian politics and the lives of Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Islam's ascendancy affected the development of the other religions. Although the Federal Constitution protects freedom of religion and guarantees that religions other than Islam may be practised in peace and harmony, restrictions came to be imposed on the building of new churches and temples.

Apart from that, it could take years to get an application for the building of a church approved. For example, the Latter Rain Church in the state of Selangor had to wait 20 years for its approval. Conditions were also made that churches must not look like churches, forcing some to operate out of shophouses and looking nondescript like ordinary businesses.

Hinduism was not spared. Temples built many decades before got demolished by the authorities on the grounds that they were built illegally. Many were relocated because they were too near Malay-Muslim neighbourhoods.

Instances of Islamic extremism also arose, in the form of protests against elements of other religions that were considered objectionable, like a cross

on a church too prominently displayed, or something more violent like the desecration of Hindu temples.

Then there was the cow-head incident in 2009 in which protestors stomped on the head of a cow, considered a sacred animal by the Hindus, and spat on it, to show their disapproval of a proposed relocation of a Hindu temple to a Muslim-majority area.

Instead of quelling such religious persecution and tempering extremist sentiments in order to foster public harmony and inter-faith understanding, Umno actually exploited the situation and drummed it in that the Malays and Islam occupied a special place in the country, therefore anyone who questioned, let alone challenged, this established fact would be disrupting the peace, even committing sedition.

Sometimes it got ridiculous, as when Umno would illogically warn from time to time that Islam in Malaysia was under threat, therefore followers of the faith should beware their enemies. But who were the enemies? And how could Islam be under any threat when it is enshrined in the Federal Constitution as the religion of the Federation?

Convention of rednecks

But that was what Umno had become. A party that operated on no real ideology and depended for its survival on engendering insecurities among Malays and Muslims and exploiting these insecurities for the longest time.

At its general assembly every year, the party harped on the issues of race and religion without fail. Anyone who reads reports of the things said during the proceedings would be forgiven for feeling shocked by the racism and bigotry gushing from the assembly, and mistaking it for an annual convention of rednecks.

It is to Umno's utter discredit that its members have exhibited crude ethnocentric sentiments like brandishing a *keris* to warn other races against questioning *Ketuanan Melayu*; blaming the non-Malays for not helping the Malays to achieve their 30% equity target; proposing that there should not

be open tenders for government projects because contracts should instead be given to Umno members.

Incredible, isn't it? A party of supremacists or at least of leaders and followers with a supremacist attitude calling the shots in the governing of a nation made up of many different races? How did this central contradiction arising from race-based politics survive for so long?

No wonder non-Malays increasingly felt that they were being short-changed not only for being citizens with unequal standing but also for being treated like bogeymen or punching bags whenever Umno needed to target them to unite the Malays.

They also felt betrayed by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), the oldest and original partners of Umno going back to before independence. While in the past, these similarly race-based parties had exerted stronger influence in government in accordance with the power-sharing principle, from the 1980s onwards they began to be eclipsed by Umno's shadow.

Despite this, they continued insisting that they stood up for their respective communities and demanded support because their participation in the BN government was essential. But when it came to matters of great import, even those affecting their communities, they were invariably shouted down by the bigger voices of Umno.

Even someone like Najib's own aide, carrying the designation of special officer to the prime minister, could insult the Chinese and the Indians with impunity to the faces of MCA and MIC representatives attending a seminar in 2010.

Nasir Safar called them by the derogatory term of *pendatang*, said Chinese women immigrated to *jual tubuh* (sell their bodies), dismissed the contributions of the non-Malays in the country's effort to attain independence, and threatened to revoke the citizenships of some MIC members. All the MCA and MIC representatives could do in response was walk out of the seminar.

Later, their leaders complained to the media. The MIC president called

Nasir “a racist of the highest order” and demanded that he be punished under the Sedition Act. His demand came to nothing, of course, because Nasir was from Umno and protected, so the MIC chief looked glaringly ineffectual.

But by then Chinese and Indian voters had already wised up to the lame claims of the MCA and the MIC and written them off as “running dogs” and “lapdogs”, and they had punished these flunkys severely at the ballot box in 2008. Come GE13, these voters were expected to inflict more punishment.

Condos for cows?

Leading up to GE13, Malaysia was more divided than ever, and Najib’s premiership was characterised by weak governance, gross mismanagement of public funds, leakages and wastage in the civil service, corruption and scandals.

The hardest-hitting scandal that broke out under his watch was what came to be called the ‘Cowgate’ scandal.

In 2006, the Ministry of Finance had allocated a grant of RM13 million to the National Feedlot Corporation and also approved a soft loan amounting to RM250 million with a 2% interest rate for it to run the National Feedlot Centre (NFC), which was aimed at increasing the country’s self-reliance in the production of beef.

However, instead of investing the money in rearing cows, the company used it to pay for the purchases of luxury condominiums in Malaysia and Singapore, land in Putrajaya and a Mercedes, and for expensive overseas trips. It therefore failed to meet the beef production target set by the Government. The Auditor-General’s Report of 2010 discovered this and called the project “a mess”.

What was equally shocking is the fact that the people running the project were the husband and children of Cabinet minister Shahrizat Abdul Jalil. She disavowed any involvement in the awarding of the project to her family, and claimed she had nothing to do with her husband’s company or business. But this did not stop Malaysians from cackling over jokes about

how pampered the cows must have been with luxury condos provided for them to live in.

Roti Najib without eggs

Scandals aside, Najib had to battle the public’s perception of him as prime minister. A little more than a week before GE13, a survey by Universiti Malaya’s Democratic and Election Centre (Umcedel) revealed that only 39% of voters believed that Najib was qualified to be prime minister whereas 43% preferred Anwar.

The same survey showed that more than 60% favoured PR’s manifesto, compared to 50% for BN’s.

Najib of course disagreed with the survey findings. “We have our own poll,” he said. “My poll indicates that we are ahead.” He also said he was confident that BN would win with a two-thirds majority in Parliament, unless there was internal sabotage.

Winning two-thirds majority would set him on a pedestal and secure his position as Umno president. But was he realistic in thinking that he could attain it?

His four years as prime minister had so far shown that he was nothing if not a weak leader, famous for his numerous flip-flops on government decisions, over matters ranging from toll hikes to civil servants’ remuneration to electoral reform.

He also appeared indecisive when it came to calling for the elections. People waited anxiously for him to dissolve Parliament but he kept delaying his decision. He even considered it apposite to quip that guessing of the election date could turn out to be a “favourite national pastime”.

Annoyed by this, netizens derisively christened him the prime minister with no balls. A meme that went viral on the social media circuit had a picture of Najib giving what appeared to be a fiery speech accompanied by a caption in Malay that cheekily named a popular Indian *roti* (flatbread) dish after him: “*Sekarang ada Roti Najib – roti tanpa telur!*” (And now there is Roti Najib, *roti* without eggs!)

Najib had more eggs on him, however, when, as finance minister as well, he allocated billions of ringgit to his own Prime Minister's Office (PMO) from where expenditure could be made without transparency or accountability because it was not subject to the scrutiny of the Auditor-General. There were allegations that he charged expenses incurred for private events to the PMO, like his daughter's expensive engagement party and his own extravagant birthday bash in 2011.

The liability named Rosmah

Having a wife known to enjoy a lavish lifestyle was also a liability for Najib. Rosmah Mansor was reported going on shopping sprees overseas, and amassing a collection of super-expensive Hermes Birkin bags. Allegations were made, fake or otherwise, that public funds were utilised for some of her purchases.

In 2010, when she visited New York with Najib, a two-page colour advertisement appeared in *The New York Times* to welcome Rosmah as "First Lady of Malaysia" and congratulate her for being conferred a little-known International Peace and Harmony Award. It carried a huge picture of her and a few smaller group photos in which she also appeared.

The online news portal *The Nut Graph* did some checking with *NYT* and was told that the advertisement was placed by an advertising agency on behalf of the Malaysian Government.

The Nut Graph estimated from research that the cost of a full-page advertisement in *NYT* would range "between RM580,000 and RM740,000". As Rosmah's advertisement was a two-page spread, it would have cost much more. If indeed the Malaysian Government paid for that expensive advertisement, was it justified in doing so?

Then there was that matter of a US\$24 million (RM73 million) diamond ring that the NGO Solidariti Anak Muda Malaysia (SAMM) reported to the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) as having been purchased by Rosmah in April 2011.

"US\$24 million is a lot of money, so the question is, where did she

get the money to buy such an expensive ring?" asked SAMM's president, Badrul Hisham Shaharin.

Nothing came of it, however. A few months later, a government minister declared that there was no case to pursue. The MACC had checked with the Customs Department and confirmed that there was "no such purchase of the ring" because after a few days, it was returned to the jeweller in New York.

Did this quell public suspicion? No, because the matter was still talked about for a long time to come. In fact, the people made fun of Rosmah all the more, and a joke went around that she started saving from when she was a child so she could finally have enough money to buy that ring!

1Malaysia sham and shambles

In March 2010, Najib unveiled the first part of his New Economic Model (NEM), which was supposed to be one of the reformist moves of his early days as prime minister.

It was indeed full of promise. Aimed at achieving "high income, sustainability and inclusiveness", it advocated opening the economy to anyone, including international fund managers, who could help stimulate the country's economic growth.

It gave indication of replacing the NEP and even admitted that the implementation of the NEP had engendered rent-seeking, patronage and rampant corruption. It proposed the setting-up of an Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) "to ensure fairness and address undue discrimination".

These positive measures were welcomed by the business community but not by Malay right-wing groups like Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa (Perkasa), or Powerful Indigenous Organisation.

When Perkasa exerted pressure by lobbying against the more inclusive, race-blind provisions in the model, reportedly threatened to burn the document and insisted that the *Bumiputera* agenda should be the national agenda to determine the economic future of the country, Najib exposed his egglessness.

In the second part of the NEM, launched nine months later, the EOC proposal was removed. So were other recommendations aimed at boosting competitiveness by reducing *Bumiputera* quotas.

The late Zainal Aznam Mohd Yusof, who was a highly respected economist and member of the National Economic Advisory Council which drafted the NEM, expressed his ire. "I am not very happy with the final version of the NEM," he spoke out frankly. "The Cabinet did not really want the EOC ... This was the Government's litmus test and at this time, I have to say that there is no political will." This was a slap on Najib's face.

But then Najib was not one noted for conviction and substance. In 2009, he came up with the '1Malaysia' concept, coined to connote inclusivity and promote national unity, but two years after it came into being, race relations had actually worsened, with BN politicians and civil servants making racist remarks publicly and behind closed doors, and social media abuzz with comments spewing racial hatred.

Anwar Ibrahim questioned the sincerity behind 1Malaysia by pointing out that the government agency Biro Tata Negara (BTN), or the National Civics Bureau, was still continuing to promote *Ketuanan Melayu*.

It was still indoctrinating Malay civil servants, employees of state subsidiaries and students at State-owned institutions to beware the Chinese and the Indians. How could that be in line with 1Malaysia's stated goal of making "a nation where, it is hoped, every Malaysian perceives himself or herself as Malaysian first, and by race, religion, geographical region or socio-economic background second, and where the principles of 1Malaysia are woven into the economic, political and social fabric of society"?

On top of that, in 2010, no less than the deputy director of BTN, Hamim Husin, used derogatory terms to refer to the Chinese and the Indians: "The *Si Mata Sepet* (slant-eyed Chinese) who has never gone to a mosque or *surau* only has one vote. The *Si Botol* (alcoholic Indian) who only knows how to go up and down Batu Caves only has one vote." Why had Najib not put a stop to the racist tendencies and practices of BTN?

Perhaps the answer lay in the fact that his 1Malaysia concept was not widely accepted. Not by civil servants. Not even by his own party. Or the then deputy prime minister, Muhyiddin Yassin.

Challenged in 2010 by Kit Siang to prove his commitment to 1Malaysia by answering if he considered himself "Malaysian first", Muhyiddin replied, "I am Malay first, but being Malay doesn't mean I am not Malaysian. How can I say I'm Malaysian first and Malay second? All the Malays will shun me... and it's not proper." What a cop-out!

A bigger cop-out came about the following year when Najib himself was asked by a student what he thought of his deputy's stance and whether he himself was prepared to state that he was Malaysian first.

Najib replied, "I don't want to respond in a way that will divide me from my deputy. 1Malaysia is our guiding philosophy. It does not matter what you say, just as long as you follow it."

He didn't answer the question. He was not man enough, or leader enough, to stand up for his "guiding philosophy". He probably didn't have the guts either to take his deputy aside and impress upon him the need to show commitment not only to the boss but more importantly to the philosophy as well.

It all became clear that 1Malaysia was a sham, and a shambles. It also boded negatively for Najib that Malay pressure groups were against it because they feared that 1Malaysia was an initiative to bring about racial equality and allow all races to share the nation's wealth with no particular race being given special treatment.

The highest turnout ever

At GE13, most voters saw the larger picture. They knew that Umno-BN would not change, would not reform the corrupt system. If it got another mandate to rule, they would have to suffer another five years of poor governance, mismanagement, corruption, racial strife, political bullying and violence, and the arrogance of Umno. They could not bear the thought of putting up with that.

So they went out to vote to change the government. In huge numbers. When voting closed, the EC recorded a voter turnout of 84.8%, the highest ever in Malaysian electoral history.

That night, they waited anxiously for the result.

DO WE HAVE A WINNER?

On election day, I cast my votes for the state and parliamentary seats in my suburb in Petaling Jaya in the state of Selangor.

The state was the richest and most developed in the country, often alluded to as “the jewel in the crown”. In 2013, it accounted for about 22% of Malaysia’s gross domestic product (GDP). PR captured it in GE12 to almost everyone’s surprise, and since then, BN had been pulling all the stops to try and win Selangor back.

When BN lost it in 2008, the coalition was traumatised. Its leaders couldn’t believe how it could have happened. They blamed the then *menteri besar*, Mohamad Khir bin Toyo, for a few mistakes he had made close to the elections, but the reasons for the defeat were probably more deep-seated. A large part of Selangor was already urbanised by then, with easy access to information, so many Selangorians were clued-in to the excesses of BN.

One example was the palatial mansion of Zakaria Mat Deros, an Umno state assemblyman. It had a swimming pool, several gazebos, an orchard, a two-hole golf lawn, 16 bedrooms, 21 bathrooms, a VIP room, three living rooms, a dining hall and a prayer room. There was even a bowling room inside. Photographs of the “*istana*” (palace) were widely circulated via e-mail.

Adding to the controversy was the discovery by the law that Zakaria did not submit building plans for his mansion. He had also not paid assessment tax for a few properties for 10 years or more, and was operating a *satay* restaurant which he had built illegally on government reserve land – without a business licence, to boot. Zakaria’s *istana* and his arrogant

attitude of not following the law came to symbolise the decadence of Umno and BN.

Now at GE13, Selangorians were determined not to let the decadent Umno-BN get back into power. Nonetheless, they felt apprehensive that Najib and his cohorts might pull something off to win back the state by hook or by crook. After all, Najib had made himself BN Selangor election chief to increase his side's chances, and it had spent a lot of money conducting an aggressive campaign to court the voters. People wondered if the money came out of public coffers.

Selangor BN coordinator Mohd Zin Mohamed reached out to voters by sending them letters and SMSes on festive occasions or national holidays to wish them well, but the catch came at the end where they were invariably reminded to vote for BN. Some of these letters were signed by Najib and carried a picture of him.

Mohd Zin's campaign backfired when he also sent out birthday greetings. This peeved the recipients. They didn't appreciate having had their personal information accessed. They felt it was an invasion of privacy and gave Mohd Zin hell for that. Social media was full of curses and invective directed at him.

The upshot of it was that BN was desperate to win. And as election chief, Najib would have a lot to answer for if Selangor slipped through his net. This prompted Selangorians to be vigilant, fearful that BN might stoop to cheating at the polls. More signed up to be polling agents this time than in 2008, to keep close watch on election proceedings.

I signed up too, as I had done the previous general election, and was posted to the state seat of Kota Damansara to help out Nasir Hashim of Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM) who was standing under the PKR banner. He was the incumbent and would have been expected to win against his BN opponent in a straight fight but PAS had broken from the agreement made by all three PR parties not to contest against each other by fielding its own candidate. This made it tough for Nasir.

When I got to the polling centre, I expressed my annoyance at this disappointing development to the PAS candidate's polling agent. I didn't

mince my words, I said it was a stupid move because it would only split the votes for the Opposition and help BN win the seat. The agent knew damn well what I meant, but he had no counter-argument to offer. All he could say was, "*Sabar*" (Calm down).

Anwar tweets victory

After I had done my polling agent bit, I joined a couple of hundred comrades-for-change at a post-vote gathering organised by DAP candidate Tony Pua Kiam Wee. He was defending his Petaling Jaya Utara parliamentary seat which he had won on his maiden election outing in 2008. He was expected to win it again hands down.

A large screen mounted in the open-air square of a suburban commercial enclave in the SS2 area of Petaling Jaya showed the polls results as they were gradually announced by the EC on state television. But relying on this alone was not enough, because the official announcements took time to come on. Most people turned to the online news website *Malaysiakini* for much faster updates.

Malaysiakini also kept followers enthralled by providing them the latest vote tallies for some of the contests. The crowd cheered whenever a PR victory was proclaimed. Or when the latest update showed that a particular PR candidate was leading in his or her constituency.

In the first couple of hours, it looked like the DAP in particular was doing well. Lim Kit Siang, who was initially trailing in the vote count for the Gelang Patah constituency, was now in the lead.

The DAP strategy of taking the fight to BN's fortress, Johor, was working out well, with another candidate holding a steady lead in Kulai while Liew Chin Tong, the DAP master strategist who dreamed up the idea to attack Johor, was slightly ahead in Kluang.

PKR was also doing well, it had won the Bayan Baru parliamentary seat in Penang and was leading in the contests for the parliamentary seat of Miri in Sarawak and the state seat of Indera Kayangan in Perlis.

One of the party's leading lights, Nurul Izzah Anwar, who was facing a

tough fight for the parliamentary seat of Lembah Pantai in Kuala Lumpur, had just broken into a narrow lead against Raja Nong Chik of BN. Much interest was focused on this battle not only because Izzah was Anwar's daughter but also because she was considered a potential future leader.

PAS was winning in its stronghold of Kelantan, the state in the northeast that it had ruled since 1990, and Khalid Samad was leading in the parliamentary seat of Shah Alam in Selangor while Mohd Shukri Ramli looked like retaining the state seat of Sanglang in Perlis for the party.

The mood at the SS2 gathering was buoyant and optimistic. My friend Eng Keong, a retired engineer, was confident the BN government would fall.

Then at 7.28pm, Anwar Ibrahim tweeted, "PR has won. We urge Umno and the EC to not attempt to hijack the results." The word spread through the crowd. Shouts of elation pierced the night sky. I was, however, sceptical. It was still too early to call, how could Anwar be sure?

Malaysiakini contacted PKR's social media strategist for comment. He assured that Anwar's social media accounts had not been hacked, which meant that the tweet did come from the man himself. But he also said, "The results are still coming in and are being counted. The tweet just reflects Anwar's confidence, it is more of a statement of confidence than of fact."

That was unbecoming of Anwar, I thought. If it were truly not based on fact, then he was not acting responsibly by sending out the claim.

By 9.30pm, though, the prospects were still good for PR. It had managed to deprive the Sarawak United Peoples' Party (SUPP) of five out of its six parliamentary seats, which was quite a feat. It had also won Indera Kayangan, which had never fallen to the Opposition before.

The DAP was winning all the seats it contested in Perak, Negeri Sembilan and Selangor. And in Penang, incumbent chief minister Lim Guan Eng announced that PR had retained the state and held on to its two-thirds majority in the state assembly. The BN parties Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan), or Malaysian People's Movement Party, and the MCA were totally wiped out there.

However, these were mostly based on unofficial results. The EC had

made no move yet to announce those PR victories. In fact, about an hour or so after Anwar's tweet went viral, the EC appeared to be concentrating mainly on announcing BN victories. PR's triumphs seemed to be held back, even long after the unofficial results had been known.

Some of us felt an ominous foreboding. The official tally was not keeping up with unofficial results. Officially, BN's score of victories kept rising while that of PR improved only bit by bit. Why was the EC holding back the results of seats won by PR?

At 11.30pm, the DAP's Charles Santiago told supporters that PR had retained Selangor and won two seats more than in GE12. It was not official of course, but still cause for celebration.

Also uplifting was the unofficial news that the Opposition had wrested many more seats from BN in Sabah than it did in 2008, when the DAP won the sole Opposition seat. As Sabah had long been considered BN's electoral "safe deposit", this was a good sign for PR.

It came upon a midnight dreary

By midnight, the crowd at SS2 was thinning out. There was still no official announcement yet on the winner of Putrajaya. Many were still hopeful that Anwar had been right in his tweet, including Eng Keong who went home after telling me that the next day would be a great day for Malaysia. I wasn't so sure, partly because I felt the tweet claiming victory was just another display of bravado from Anwar, and partly because the unofficial results hadn't indicated that either. I decided to go home too, to watch the rest of the EC's announcements on my own TV set.

It got dismal after 12.30am. The EC confirmed that BN had been returned to power in five states, namely, Terengganu, Pahang, Perlis, Negeri Sembilan and Melaka. Analysts had expected PR to capture Negeri Sembilan and Perlis from BN, but this was not to be.

In Labis, Johor, BN's incumbent MP who had looked in danger of losing his seat at 10pm was now declared winner, with a razor-thin majority of 353 votes.

At 12.45am, the EC confirmed that BN had won 108 parliamentary seats, only four short of forming the federal government with a simple majority. Meanwhile, PR was trailing significantly with only half of BN's haul because official news of its victories was being held back.

I hoped against hope that each new result that came in thenceforth would herald a PR victory, but nine minutes later, at 12.54am, it was all over. The EC announced that BN had attained its simple majority, with 112 seats. PR had secured only 58 then.

More dismal news followed. PR failed to win back Perak, which we had thought it had a good chance of recapturing after having won the state in 2008 only to lose it deplorably soon after when three of its assemblymen were induced to defect. But unfortunately, there was no poetic justice for PR this time.

Even worse, it lost the state of Kedah. That was not unexpected because the state government headed by PAS had been suffering internal friction, but the blow was still hard to take.

The final tally for Parliament was 133 seats for BN and 89 for PR. Najib failed to get the two-thirds majority he was desperately seeking. In fact, BN won seven seats fewer than it did in 2008. PR managed to improve on the 82 it won that time.

Umno, however, won nine seats more. But its Chinese partner, the MCA, turned out to be the biggest loser in BN. Out of the 37 parliamentary seats the MCA contested, it managed to win only seven, down from the 15 it had held before GE13. Its score of state seats was a miserable 11 out of the 90 it contested. This clearly showed that Chinese voters had largely rejected the race-based party.

Najib blames 'Chinese tsunami'

At around 1.20am, the TV cameras zoomed in on the BN camp. Its leaders looked dejected despite having won. Najib in particular appeared shell-shocked, as if he could not believe the result. He blamed BN's debacle on a "Chinese tsunami".

He said he had not expected the Chinese community to reject BN in such a big way. "I expected it but I did not expect it to this extent. None of us did. But despite the extent of the swing against us, BN did not fall."

He accused PR of playing on the racial sentiments of the Chinese to woo their support. "I think they were taken in by some of the undertakings given by the Opposition ... and that's why there was that swing ... and a lot of sentiments were being played up in this election, some of them racial in nature, which is not very healthy for this country," he said.

What about Anwar's camp? They looked dejected, too. And what was Anwar going to say about the victory he had claimed in his tweet but didn't achieve? He blamed it on fraud. "As of now, we are not accepting the results ... until the EC responds and issues an official statement to the allegations of irregularities and fraud," he said.

PR won the vote but still lost

The next day, the full official results went up on the EC's website. The most eye-catching piece of information was the popular vote. PR had actually won it, having scored 50.87% compared to BN's 47.38%. But because of Malaysia's first-past-the-post electoral system and the way the electoral boundaries had been drawn, BN's percentage of the popular vote allowed it to win a disproportionately high share of the parliamentary seats (60%) and, with that, the general election.

It was the same with Perak. The newspaper *theSun* reported that PR won an overwhelming 54.8% of the popular vote there, nearly 9% more than BN's 44.4%, but still failed to win the state. PR's 54.8% translated into only 28 seats compared to BN's 31.

PR retained the state governments of Penang, Kelantan and Selangor – each with a two-thirds majority. It did particularly well in Selangor by winning eight seats more. That proved a major setback for its director of elections, Najib.

I was glad to see public nuisance Mohd Zin Mohamed lose to Mohamed

Hanipa Maidin of PAS in his bid for the state seat of Sepang, a loss described by pundits as a surprise.

But I was sad to be proven right that Nasir Hashim's candidacy in Kota Damansara would suffer from a split in the Opposition's votes. If PAS had stayed out, he would probably have won. The combined votes he and the PAS candidate got were higher than the votes of the eventual winner from BN. Stupid!

Mahathir slams Chinese and 'greedy' Malays

Mahathir was most unhappy about the GE13 result. Despite having stepped down as prime minister and Umno president in 2003, he was still a major influence on the party and was actively involved in GE13 behind the scenes.

Like Najib, he blamed it on a "Chinese tsunami", but he also fired his guns at those Malays who he said were greedy for power to the extent that they had forgotten the basic struggle for race, religion and country. "Even if they have to sell their own race to get what they want, they will do it," he asserted.

By this, Mahathir was obviously referring to the Malays in the Opposition parties, but then there had always been Malays in Opposition parties in every general election and they had stood against Umno candidates all the while, so what difference was there this time to warrant their being called traitors to their race? This was democracy. Surely Mahathir understood that.

He was clearly throwing out a racially charged statement for an ulterior purpose, like he had done to discourage the Gelang Patah constituents from voting for Kit Siang. He warned that racial violence would break out if Kit Siang won, but when the latter did win the contest, nothing of the sort happened. Mahathir, as expected, was just playing the role of race baiter.

Other Umno leaders slammed the Chinese, too. Mohd Ali bin Mohd Rustam's tone was particularly bitter. He had just lost in his contest for the Bukit Katil parliamentary seat to a virtual unknown from PKR. The surprise defeat caused him embarrassment as someone who was Melaka BN

chairman and also incumbent chief minister of the state. So he scapegoated the convenient target.

"The results have proven that the Chinese do not appreciate the Government, they just want to change without considering the consequences and what we have done for them all this while," he lamented.

Wild racist claims

Two days after GE13, on May 7, *Utusan Malaysia*, a Malay-language newspaper largely owned by Umno, picked up the cue from Najib's "Chinese tsunami" remark and ran a front-page article with the headline '*Apa Lagi Cina Mahu?*' (What More Do the Chinese Want?).

It said the Chinese had failed to bring down the BN government which was, at its core, Malay. But if they had succeeded, it would have resulted in Kit Siang being appointed deputy prime minister, and this would have allowed the Chinese to make certain demands, like removing the Malay privileges guaranteed in the Federal Constitution.

This was not only hogwash, it was a lie wildly told. It was racist fabrication designed to appeal to the tribal emotions of the newspaper's largely Malay readership, to whip up hatred against the Chinese and stir up insecurity among the Malays.

First, it was wrong and mischievous to spin BN as being fundamentally Malay in order to make a racial issue of it. What about the 1999 general election when the Malays deserted Umno because of Mahathir's mistreatment of Anwar and the Chinese were the ones who actually came to BN's rescue?

Second, there was never any talk of Kit Siang becoming deputy prime minister if PR were to win.

Third, removing the Malay privileges was the last thing the Chinese would have dared to even propose, and it certainly was not something the PR pact would have ever entertained considering that PKR was a Malay-led multi-racial party and PAS was almost 100% Malay-Muslim. In fact, PR's manifesto very clearly affirmed the position of Islam as the country's official religion.

By publishing that article, *Utusan Malaysia* committed the worst sin of journalism. It published untruths. And it sought to create racial antagonism. This was not even a news report, it was an editorial. And it was placed on the newspaper's front page. No self-respecting newspaper does that.

But then publishing untruths was not something *Utusan Malaysia* was doing for the first time. It had been publishing reports without substantiation numerous times before targeting the DAP, a party with a strong Chinese base although it had a good number of Indian members and a small proportion of Malay ones as well.

One was about church leaders conspiring with the party to Christianise the country. As if that were possible! Another was about the DAP planning to dismantle the Malay royalty – protector of Malay rights and sovereignty – and turn the constitutional monarchy into a republic. And throw out all the nine rulers of what used to be known as the Malay States, including the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (the King)! Indeed! The DAP would have to secure a two-thirds majority vote to amend the Federal Constitution to do that. Before they could get that far, there would be an uprising on the streets.

It was not a 'Chinese tsunami'

To be sure, a huge majority of the Chinese did vote for PR. But this did not mean that BN suffered because of a "Chinese tsunami". The Chinese alone could not have made up the numbers to deny BN a more comfortable victory. They constituted at most only 23% of the electorate.

Someone did the mathematics on the voting and found that with the voter turnout at 84.4%, if as high as 80% of the Chinese voters had given their support to PR, this would have amounted to only 2.5 million votes. It was less than half of the 5.62 million votes that PR secured. The remaining number must have therefore come from non-Chinese.

According to independent pollster Merdeka Centre, the GE13 results showed a major swing among the multi-racial urban and middle-class electorate against BN.

"There were differences between the low-income and the middle-income areas, as well as between the urban and rural areas," its executive director, Ibrahim Suffian, said, adding that Najib's reading was inaccurate because urban Malays had also voted for PR.

Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, a political analyst and academic, told the online news website *The Malaysian Insider* that PR received Malay middle-class support, especially in urban areas. "So the DAP majority increased because of disgruntled Malay young voters' support. ... To label racial polarisation is too easy. Two other factors operate simultaneously with race: class (rich-poor, middle class) and spatial (urban and rural)," he said.

Another political analyst, Lim Teck Ghee, said the results in Selangor, "which has the highest percentage of urban population, as well as in the other west coast states", indicated the urban middle-class trend to vote for PR. He noted that large numbers of Malays formed part of this middle class, "perhaps as many as non-Malays".

In a paper analysing the GE13 results, Lee Kam Hing of Universiti Malaya and Thock Ker Pong of Universiti Sains Malaysia revealed that the urban and middle-class support for the Opposition was over "issues such as crime, the economy, and corruption that cut across ethnic lines", which the voters felt BN had failed to address.

In Johor, PR unprecedentedly won five parliamentary seats and 18 state seats, improving greatly on its 2008 score of only one and six, respectively.

Of these, the DAP won four parliamentary seats and 13 state seats; PKR got one parliamentary seat and one state seat, which signified a breakthrough for the party in the state; and PAS scored its best record with four state seat victories.

In Gelang Patah, Kit Siang defeated no less than the Johor BN chief Abdul Ghani Othman, who was also the incumbent *menteri besar*, with a convincing majority of 14,762 votes.

Umno lost two parliamentary seats and two state seats. All this would not have been possible without a significant contribution of Malay votes.

Even Shahrir Samad, an Umno stalwart who was re-elected MP for

Johor Bahru for the sixth time, agreed that voter support should not be seen from merely a racial perspective.

“Umno won 88 federal seats in this general election; most of them came from rural constituencies in states such as Sabah, Kedah, Kelantan. From the above results, instead of saying that there was a shift in Chinese voters’ support, it should actually be analysed from the differences in area, from the urban-rural divide,” he said.

Another Umno man, Saifuddin Abdullah, said he had seen the signs of change coming a few years before. “At GE12, for the first time, I saw a non-Malay carrying a PAS flag. At that moment, as an Umno candidate, I smelled trouble. This time, I saw a DAP flag in a Malay village. Coming from Umno, I felt this was even more trouble. ... I’d strongly say that if you really care to look at the GE13 campaign, there was strong evidence that more and more Malaysians have become colour blind, and I stand by this argument.”

Despite these many assertions that were contrary to his belief, Najib still appeared to be in denial. He refused to accept what the polls data indicated about the rural-urban divide. He said BN’s own study showed that in the urban areas, the coalition received increased Malay support. Oh, well.

The power of the young

What Najib also failed or refused to acknowledge was the pivotal role played by young voters.

More than five million of the 13.3 million registered voters were under the age of 40, and over two million were first-time voters. They were tech-savvy and adept at networking through social media. They could easily access on Facebook and Twitter the allegations of dirty BN practices that the mainstream media blacked out, and follow debates on political issues that mattered to them.

Najib knew that the Internet would be the battleground for GE13. After having seen how the Opposition had used the Internet to rewarding effect at the 2008 general election, he urged BN to catch up. He himself led the way

by blogging, tweeting and Facebooking like crazy. He also got his lackeys to unleash thousands of cybertroopers to counter the Opposition online.

But at the end of the day, it was still up to the information consumer to decide what they would believe. The younger ones in Malaysia were to mostly believe that the old regime could no longer be trusted.

A survey conducted by Merdeka Centre in February 2013 showed that those aged between 21 and 30 were the most dissatisfied with Najib’s performance.

The Bersih rallies of 2011 and 2012 which drew tens of thousands of participants also showed the commitment of the young to pressing national issues. So did the protest against the opening of a rare earth plant in 2012.

“I know what young people want,” said Mohamed Bukhairy Mohamed Sofian, a 23-year-old political science student who headed a student group advocating academic freedom. “They want a voice and that means change. They have opened their eyes to see that they can change Malaysia for the better.”

Ong Kian Ming, an election strategist for the DAP who was elected MP for Serdang on his first time out at GE13, saw the great potential in the young being kingmakers, and got his party to engage with them. “BN still has the advantage in terms of resources, media, money, and machinery,” he said. “The X-factor we are relying on is the newly registered voters.”

Arise student activism!

Another X-factor was the revival of student activism in public universities. After decades of oppression under the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA), which deprived them of their right to engage in not just political activities but also social activities that were not approved by the Vice-Chancellor, public university students started to break out in 2008.

They were no doubt encouraged by the political landscape that had emerged from the election result of March 8, and by what they saw of the more politically aware *rakyat* demanding real democracy. Some were

influenced even earlier by the *reformasi* movement started in 1998 by Anwar before he went to prison.

From August 2008, students started to make their presence felt in public by staging protests and supporting political parties. They protested not only against the UUCA but also took up public causes like the rising prices of essential goods.

They were not afraid to use strong language to slam government leaders who cared more for their own “coffers and stomachs” or to warn that the Government would be “overthrown in the next general election” if it did not change its attitude.

In December 2011, in anticipation of GE13 being called, a few students like Shazni Munir bin Mohd Ithnin offered themselves as candidates to pro-*rakyat* political parties. This was open defiance of the UUCA.

Writing in an article that was published by the online news website *MalaysianDigest.com*, I called it “an act of courage”. I was elated that students had come to realise that they had “more power now” than they had ever had in the last four decades.

‘Cool’ Najib failed to swing the young

At GE13, the young came out to reject BN. Statistics showed a common pattern of young voters swinging closer to the Opposition. Among young Chinese, as high as 90% of those aged 30 and below voted for PR.

PR also made large gains from Malay youths in urban seats, and on the whole obtained 5% more support from them while BN lost 3% of their support.

Of the PR parties, PAS garnered the highest support from Malay youths in Peninsular Malaysia, with 73% voting for it averaged from all the seats it contested. This amounted to an 8% swing.

It looked like Najib’s efforts to reach out to the young by projecting a ‘cool’ image, gathering nearly 1.5 million followers on Twitter, organising free music concerts featuring international acts, inviting fans to watch televised football matches together with him, and offering BR1M cash

handouts to those earning less than RM2,000 a month ... all these failed to persuade more of them to vote for his coalition.

In fact, in the early hours of May 6, 2013, after the EC had declared BN the election victor, it was the young who felt the most disappointed. The utmost question that came to their minds was whether it was really true, as Anwar had claimed, that the elections were marred by fraud.

They became almost convinced when Bersih came out after Anwar did to announce that it, too, would withhold recognition of BN’s victory, until it had verified reports of electoral fraud, phantom voters and other irregularities in the voting and vote-counting processes.

With Bersih and Anwar declining to accept the election result, the young felt hopeful that GE13 might somehow still be saved. Like Anwar, they were not willing to give up yet.

But was there fraud, really? And if there was, did it warrant denying BN its precious victory?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo by Lee Hock Aun

KEE THUAN CHYE is an actor, playwright, stage director, journalist, political commentator and author who believes in the liberation of the Malaysian mind and looks forward to a better Malaysia. He advocates that a healthy disrespect for authority is always a good thing.

Also by Kee Thuan Chye:

No More Bullshit, Please, We're All Malaysians

Ask for No Bullshit, Get Some More!

The Elections Bullshit

Can We Save Malaysia, Please!

Unbelievably Stupid!

Unbelievably Stupid Too!

You Want This GOONvernment Ab?

March 8: The Day Malaysia Woke Up

March 8: Time for Real Change

1984 Here and Now (drama)

The Big Purge (drama)

*We Could **** You, Mr Birch* (drama)

Swordfish + Concubine (drama)

Old Doctors Never Fade Away (biography)

Just In So Many Words