

# PERSPECTIVE

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## Continuity and Change: The Limits of Malaysia's Green Wave from a Four Arenas Perspective

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*Anwar Ibrahim campaigning in Kuala Nerang in Kedah during Malaysia's recent state elections. Photo taken on 11 August 2023. Source: Anwar Ibrahim/Facebook.*

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Malaysia has experienced a period of dramatic political change over the past decade, capped off by the November 2022 general election and the August 2023 state elections. Many analyses have pointed to a “green wave” to describe the electoral breakthroughs achieved by the Islamist party PAS and its Perikatan Nasional coalition.
- This analysis adopts a macro-level Four Arenas framework to assess what has, and what has not, changed in Malaysia’s electoral outcomes between 2013 and 2023. The framework conceives of Malaysia as four distinct electoral arenas—three on the Peninsula (Northeast, Malay-majority, and Malay-minority) and East Malaysia—each of which has unique electoral dynamics. Contrary to assumptions of comprehensive political change, the analysis demonstrates that political change is limited to just two arenas and partially a function of coalition realignment rather than significant changes in voter preferences. In other arenas, political outcomes have been remarkably consistent.
- The purported “green wave” is geographically limited in scope. It is clearest in PAS’ consolidation of the peninsula’s northern states, which are for historical reasons demographically distinct. There is less evidence, however, of a green wave affecting outcomes in other arenas: PN achieved few gains in East Malaysia and in ethnically diverse peninsular seats during the 2022/23 elections; in other parts of the peninsula beyond the north, PN’s gains were modest at best and made primarily under the relatively neutral PN—rather than PAS green—banner.
- The PN’s limited success outside of the northern states suggests that PAS may already have achieved most of its “easy” wins, and that significant inroads into new areas—without which securing a parliamentary majority is impossible—might be difficult in the absence of modifying its political positions or restructuring its coalition. Both of those, however, entail their own uncertainties and costs.
- Other coalitions face some form of this basic dilemma as well, as none are well-positioned to secure a parliamentary majority on their own. This requires improvisation and/or cross-coalition collaborations, both of which test the resilience of poorly institutionalized coalitions. Such a mix is not favourable to stability, including in the form of protracted rule by a PAS-led government that some green wave narratives present as the logical outcome of PAS’s recent gains.

## INTRODUCTION

Perhaps no narrative features more prominently in analyses of Malaysia's November 2022 general election (GE15) or its August 2023 (PRN2023) state elections than that of the "green wave". That narrative contends that a growing preference for Islamist politics in Malaysia has driven (and may continue to drive) electoral breakthroughs for the Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition, and particularly its component party Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS). It is the latest of several developments that suggest profound changes to Malaysia's political order, once among the world's most stable.

Malaysia's political order has clearly changed in the past decade. This period includes the tail-end of UMNO's six-decade long dominance of Malaysian politics, proceeds through its unexpected 2018 defeat, enters a period of unprecedented instability that saw three new governments take power in three years, and ends with GE15 and PRN2023, which saw the Islamist party PAS secure more seats than any other. Opinion polling has fed strongly into the green wave narrative, often focusing on such things as indicators of growing conservatism among the Malay-Muslim majority. The same is true for the sentiments of newly enfranchised 18 to 21-year-old voters, not least due to their purported captivation with populist figures—especially PAS' Sanusi Md Noor<sup>1</sup>—and high reliance on social media, which PAS has effectively used to promote its blend of religious and political messaging.<sup>2</sup>

Although narratives on voter sentiments—including the green wave—often contain elements of truth, their direct extrapolation to macro-level political outcomes risks yielding oversimplified and insufficiently substantiated conclusions.<sup>3</sup> This is particularly true for a country like Malaysia, where structural complexities, chief amongst which are strongly pronounced regional differences and an electoral system that distorts the translation of votes into seats, affect how changing voter sentiments impact actual electoral outcomes and the balance of power in Parliament. In short, even if preferences among a subset of the population are changing, their impact on parliamentary numbers is indirect.

This Perspective addresses a simple question: what has, *and what has not*, changed in Malaysia's electoral environment during the tumultuous years from GE13 through PRN2023? In addressing this question, it adopts the "Four Arenas" framework developed in earlier work. This provides a macro-level perspective to complement voter-level studies.<sup>4</sup> Our analysis suggests continuity in some areas and significant change in others, though not always due to changing voter preferences. This has a number of implications, including for the "green wave" narrative. Specifically, PAS' GE15 gains in UMNO's former peninsular strongholds indicate a consolidation of the north, but inroads beyond the north remain limited and difficult to interpret. In short, there may be developments in voter preferences around political Islam, but at least for the time being, any electoral green wave remains regionally contained.

## THE FOUR ARENAS FRAMEWORK

Malaysia can be conceived of as an amalgamation of regions with distinct demographic features and historical origins. That composition creates significant overall diversity, and strong geographic concentration of political preferences. In addition, Malaysia’s electoral districts are highly gerrymandered and malapportioned.<sup>5</sup> These features have myriad implications beyond distorting the translation of voter preferences into parliamentary seats. The Four Arenas framework takes these features into account to allow for macro-level comparisons of developments in Malaysian politics.

The framework views Malaysia as comprised of four distinct polities, each with their own distinct electoral dynamics. Table 1 shows the four electoral arenas, using data from the 14<sup>th</sup> general election (GE14) held in 2018.<sup>6</sup> The **Northeast** arena covers all the electoral districts of Kelantan and Terengganu. This region did not come under British control until the Bangkok Treaty of 1909 and consequently did not experience the same economic and demographic transformations as other parts of the peninsula, a condition that is reflected in its still distinct demographic structure. The **East Malaysia** arena comprises all districts in the Bornean states of Sabah and Sarawak, which operated largely independent of British Malaya during the colonial period and which have retained a distinct political dynamic since. The **Peninsula Diverse** arena is defined as peninsular districts with a greater-than-50% non-Malay electorate in GE14; it contains mainly urban and semi-urban seats, and functions—much as the Straits Settlements did under colonial rule—as a cosmopolitan gateway to the global economy. The (Malay-majority) **Peninsula Malay** arena comprises the peninsula’s remaining districts; they are the traditional stronghold of once-dominant UMNO. Notably, most of the seats, particularly beyond Kedah and Perlis, are also more ethnically diverse than their northern counterparts.<sup>7</sup> The arena’s large number of seats, in which votes are overweighted through malapportionment, made this the cardinal region of Malaysian politics from which political power emanated under BN’s long rule.

**Table 1:** Key attributes of the four arenas, showing data from GE14 in 2018

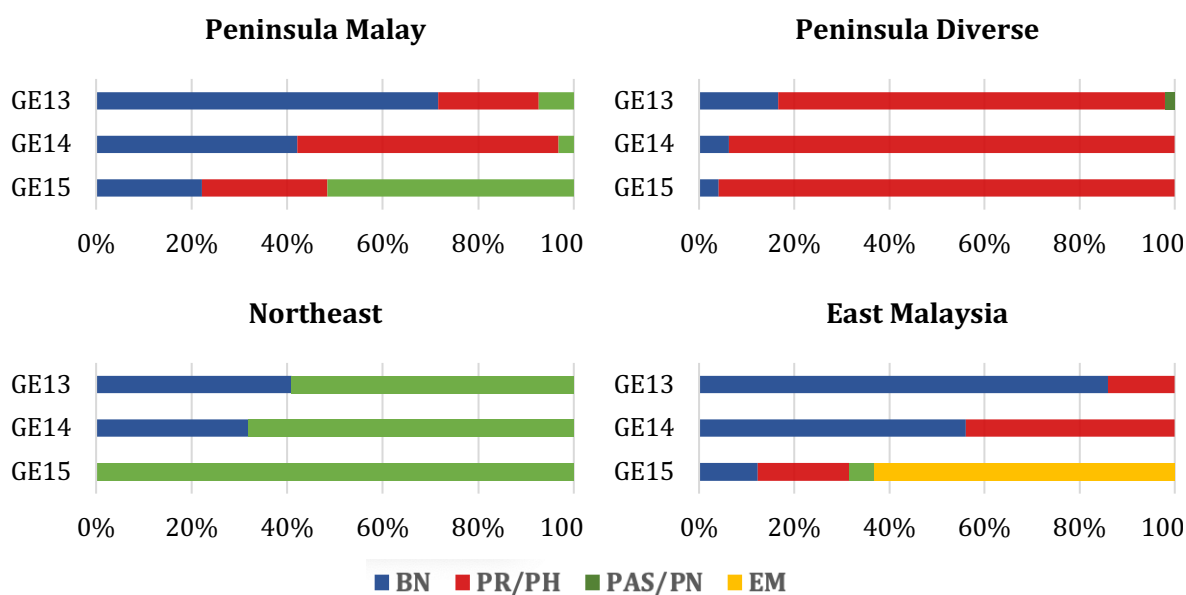
	Seats	Voters (millions)	Bumiputera	Household income	Voters per district
<b>Peninsula Malay</b>	95	6.4	72%	6.9k	67k
<b>East Malaysia</b>	57	2.4	76%	5.3k	41k
<b>Peninsula Diverse</b>	48	4.4	34%	9.3k	91k
<b>Northeast</b>	22	1.8	96%	5.5k	81k

**POLITICAL CONTINUITY AND CHANGE FROM GE13 THROUGH PRN2023**

The four arenas framework provides a systematic high-level perspective on how evolving political preferences within the electorate affect parliamentary seats across the diverse arenas. Figure 1 captures the percentage of seats won by each major contestant in GE13, GE14 and GE15 in each of the four arenas. This range covers a tumultuous period for Malaysian politics, from the last general election won by the BN (GE13) through the purported green wave of GE15 and PRN2023.

The blue bars denote the UMNO-led and formerly dominant BN coalition. Red bars denote the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) coalition (in GE13) and its successor Pakatan Harapan (PH) (in GE14 and GE15). Note that for the sake of comparison, PAS is shown separately from PR in GE13, despite belonging to the coalition. Green bars denote PAS (in GE13 and GE14) and the PN coalition in GE15. The yellow bar denotes the myriad East Malaysian parties and coalitions.

**Figure 1:** Percentage of seats won in each arena by the major coalitions/contestants



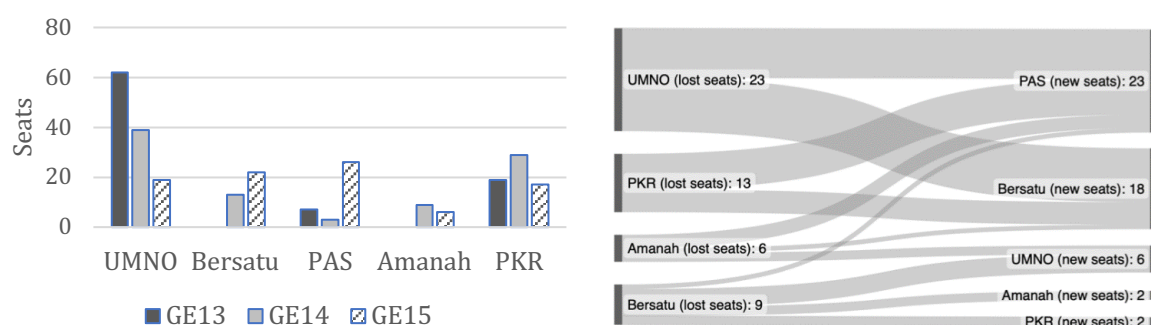
The figures tell a story of both continuity and change. The continuity in electoral outcomes—in the sense of consolidating trends—is most striking in the **Peninsula Diverse** and **Northeast** arenas: the progressive PR/PH coalition established itself as a dominant force in the Peninsula Diverse arena in GE13 and further consolidated that position in the subsequent two elections, conceding only 2 of the 48 total seats in the arena during GE15. The story is similar in the Northeast arena, where PAS has had a significant presence since its establishment in the 1950s. While the BN was typically competitive in the arena up through GE12, the balance steadily



tipped towards PAS in GE13, and was further consolidated in GE14 and GE15 (the latter as part of the PN coalition together with Bersatu).

By contrast, the **Peninsula Malay** and **East Malaysia** arenas have experienced more substantial change. As UMNO’s long-standing stronghold, the **Peninsula Malay** arena is arguably the region in whose image contemporary Malaysia has been shaped.<sup>8</sup> It was also the foundation on which the BN built its dominance: UMNO controlled many of the arena’s (large number of) seats, then relied on supplemental seats—often won by junior coalition partners—in other arenas to secure parliamentary supermajorities. The BN’s grip on the arena remained solid in GE13, where it won nearly three-quarters of the seats, but substantially loosened in GE14 and slipped further in GE15. Figure 2, which depicts seats won in the arena by party (left pane) as well as seat flows between parties in GE15 (right pane), provides additional insights.

**Figure 2:** (left pane) seats won by party in the Peninsula Malay arena in GE13, GE14 and GE15; (right pane) seat flows between parties in GE15 (left side indicates seats lost, right side indicates new seats won).



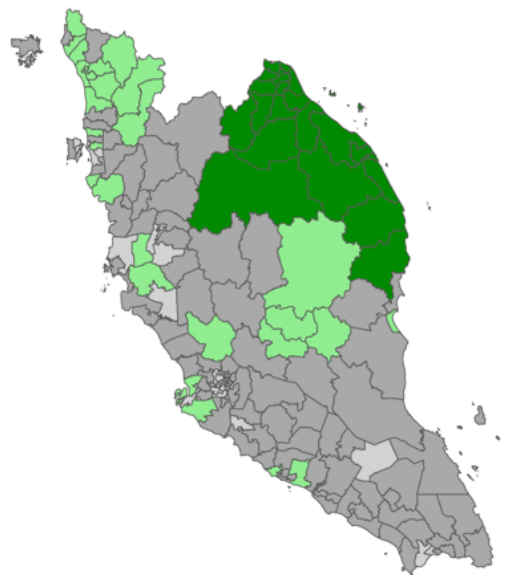
UMNO’s losses in GE14 and GE15 were precipitous, but the beneficiaries differ between the elections. In GE14, a majority of UMNO’s lost seats were picked up by the newly-formed UMNO-clone party Bersatu, which shared much of UMNO’s platform. PAS, which contested widely as a third-party under its own logo, was largely uncompetitive, winning only 3 seats in the arena (and none in the Peninsula Diverse and East Malaysia arenas). In GE15, by contrast, PAS gained 23 seats (for a total of 26) in the arena within the PN coalition, increasing its seat count nearly 10-fold; it picked up 11 seats from UMNO, 8 from PKR, and 3 from Amanah. Bersatu’s seat count increased by a more modest 9, split between former UMNO and PKR seats.<sup>9</sup> In short, the Peninsula Malay arena, which was Malaysia’s most stable arena under UMNO’s long rule, has experienced substantial volatility since GE13.

PAS’ breakthrough has received particular attention, and forms the basis of the green wave narrative. This is not unwarranted: from being largely a non-entity prior to GE15 in Malaysia’s cardinal electoral arena, it now holds more seats than any other party there. But does this validate the green wave narrative? Two important caveats stand out.

First, as Figure 3 illustrates, PAS' expansion remains regionally concentrated, even within the Peninsula Malay arena. PAS picked up six new seats in Kedah, where it now holds 9 of the 15 total. Similarly, in Perlis, it now holds 2 of 3 seats. In total, PAS controls 27 of the 40 seats in Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah, and Perlis, all northern states that remain unique following their relatively late incorporation into British Malaya.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, PAS won every seat it contested in those states, and its grassroots machinery was instrumental in supporting Bersatu's 12 wins, allowing the PN to take 39 of 40 seats in the northern states. PAS' success beyond those states, however, was far more modest; it won only 16 of the additional 37 seats it contested (47%). A similar pattern holds for PRN2023: in the northern states, PN won 108 of 113 seats (96%), of which PAS itself won 75%. In the remaining states of Penang, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan, PN holds only 39 of 133 seats (29%); those are quite evenly split between PAS and Bersatu, leaving PAS with only 18% of seats.

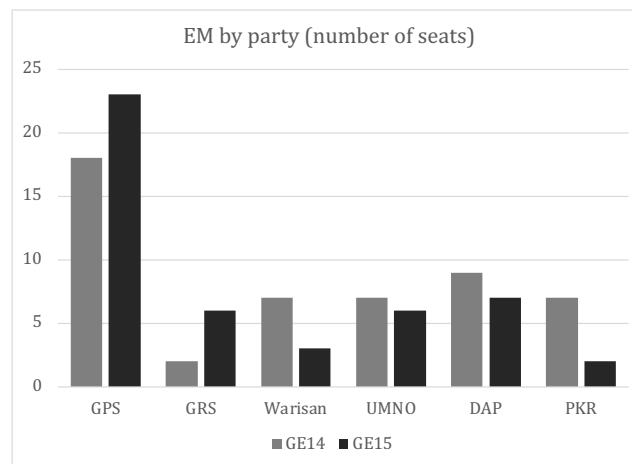
The second caveat relates to another geographically-defined distinction: in the northern states, PAS flags and other party insignia often accompanied (or even overwhelmed) the more neutral and centrist PN blue during GE15 and PRN2023 campaigning; in the remaining states, PN branding dominated, typically leaving little-to-no indication of underlying party affiliation, and thus making it difficult for voters to discern between PAS and Bersatu candidates.<sup>11</sup> In short, GE15 and PRN2023 clearly saw a PAS breakthrough. But the pattern of PAS' wins suggests more a consolidation of northern states than it does a peninsula-wide wave, at least in terms of electoral outcomes. This does not preclude the possibility that underlying socio-political developments are driving an increase in appetite for Islamist politics, but even then, its electoral effects remain geographically bounded for the time being.

**Figure 3:** PAS' expansion in the Peninsula Malay. Dark green denotes Northeast arena seats, light green denotes Peninsula Malay seats won by PAS in GE15.



The **East Malaysia** arena’s states of Sabah and Sarawak were often branded a “fixed deposit” for the BN for their consistent delivery of seats to the once-dominant coalition.<sup>12</sup> This typically came through East Malaysian component parties of the BN coalition, though East Malaysian-led local UMNO branches also contributed seats. The BN’s collapse in this arena is staggering: from winning 49 (of 57) seats in GE13, it managed only 7 in GE15. This suggests a similar fundamental upheaval of political order, as in the Peninsula Malay arena. Figure 4, however, which depicts seats won by party (rather than coalition) in East Malaysia, suggests a different story.

**Figure 4:** Seats won by party in East Malaysia arena in GE14 and GE15



At the party level, political change in East Malaysia—particularly between GE14 and GE15—is more modest than the BN’s collapse would suggest. This continuity amidst the collapse of BN’s seat count results from the decoupling of East Malaysian parties and political elites from their erstwhile peninsular political overlords, and not from instability in party-voter linkages. This began prior to GE14 with a split in UMNO Sabah that created the Warisan splinter party, whose seats helped PH secure a parliamentary majority in GE14. The BN’s defeat in that election precipitated a large-scale exodus of East Malaysian parties from the coalition. Those major parties/coalitions, including *Gabungan Parti Sarawak* (GPS) and *Gabungan Rakyat Sabah*, retained strong linkages to voters that allowed them to continue winning seats independent of the BN. In short, the recent changes in East Malaysian parliamentary seats reflect coalition realignments more than they do underlying changes party/elite-voter linkages.

**IMPLICATIONS:**

This pattern of continuity and change has important implications for political order in Malaysia. The BN’s longstanding formula for securing power—dominance of the cardinal Peninsula Malay arena, supplemented by seats from other arenas—has broken down. Despite respectable performances in Melaka, Johor, Negeri Sembilan, and parts of Pahang, there is little to suggest



that the BN can re-establish its former dominance over the broader Peninsula Malay arena, particularly as PAS/PN have consolidated their control over its northern seats in Kedah and Perlis. Simultaneously, the analysis suggests that any green wave, at least in terms of actual seat wins, remains geographically bounded: PN made no meaningful inroads in the Peninsula Diverse and East Malaysia arenas, and its success in the Peninsula Malay arena was modest at best beyond the north. This does not preclude PN making further gains in the future, but does suggest that the relatively “easy” wins have already been achieved.

As the original Four Arenas article argued, securing parliamentary majorities in Malaysia requires success in multiple arenas. Given the apparent limits of the purported green wave, it is *on its own* unlikely to carry the PN into power. Pursuing the necessary breakthroughs in elusive arenas might compel the PN to moderate some positions or expand the coalition, but such manoeuvres require compromises that could further strain the already tense relationship between PAS and Bersatu. Therein lies the challenge confronting all Malaysian political actors: given the complexities of Malaysia’s political geography and electoral system, *none* of the present coalitions—whether the BN, PH, PN, GPS, GRS, or others—are well-positioned to secure a parliamentary majority on their own. That calls for improvisation between the coalitions, most of which are weakly institutionalized or are actively deinstitutionalizing.<sup>13</sup> Such a mix is unfavourable to stability, including in the form of protracted rule by a PAS-Bersatu coalition that some green wave narratives present as the logical outcome of PAS’ recent seat gains.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> James Chai (2023), “Sanusi’s Bully Pulpit Populism: Boon or Bane?”, *ISEAS Fulcrum*, no. 178.

<sup>2</sup> Mohd Faizal Musa (2023), “‘P225’ TikTok: Malaysia’s New Constituency?”, *ISEAS Fulcrum*, no. 334.

<sup>3</sup> Notably, the green wave narrative has been challenged and nuanced. See, for example: Hidekuni Washida (2023), “Voting behaviour after the collapse of a dominant party regime in Malaysia: ethno-religious backlash or economic grievances?”, *The Round Table*, 112(3): 249-272; Ong Kian Ming (2023), “Debunking the Myths of Malaysia’s ‘Green Wave’ in GE15”, *ISEAS Fulcrum*, no. 148; and Nicholas Chan and Hew Wai Weng (2023) “The Green Wave as a Right-Wing Turn in Malay-Muslim Majoritarianism”, *STRATSEA*. A common theme in these is that Malay insecurity, driven partly by economic pressures, played a key role on voter sentiments.

<sup>4</sup> Kai Ostwald and Steven Oliver (2020), “Four arenas: Malaysia’s 2018 election, reform, and democratization”, *Democratization*, 27(4): 662-680.

<sup>5</sup> The “Redelineation Through Visuals” from Tindak Malaysia provides an accessible overview of both boundary manipulations:

<https://www.tindakmalaysia.org/persempadanan/redelineationthroughvisuals>

<sup>6</sup> While the introduction of automatic voter registration and the lowering of voting age to 18 between GE14 and GE15 have implications for district coding, we rely here on GE14 data, as this allows for the clearest comparisons between GE13, GE14, and GE15.

<sup>7</sup> Excluding Kedah and Perlis, the median Peninsula Malay seat is 67% Malay; only 10% of the seats are greater than 85% Malay. By contrast, the median seat in the northern states (Kedah, Kelantan,

Perlis, and Terengganu) is 92% Malay. In short, excluding the northern states of Kedah and Perlis, the Peninsula Malay arena features considerable intra- and inter-seat diversity.

<sup>8</sup> Kai Ostwald and Mohamed Salihin Subhan (2023), “Regional identity formation in Malaysia: Primacy of the political center and its essentialized ethnic identities”, *Asian Politics and Policy*, 13(1): 37-55.

<sup>9</sup> Bersatu electoral path was especially volatility between GE14 and GE15; it won 18 seats in GE15 which it did not previously hold, but also lost 9 that it won in GE14.

<sup>10</sup> As noted earlier, the later incorporation of these states through the 1909 Treaty of Bangkok meant that they were not as exposed to the economic and demographic changes that reshaped other peninsular states. This is most pronounced in Kelantan and Terengganu—which is why the original Four Arenas article included only them in the Northeast—but implications of the unique history remain visible in Kedah and Perlis as well. There is a strong case—based on contemporary political dynamics as well as demographics and history—for reconceiving the Northeast arena as a Northern arena covering all four states. But we leave this to subsequent work, as reformulating the arenas requires addressing a range of other changes that go beyond the scope of this Perspective.

<sup>11</sup> The PN colours and font bear a striking resemblance to the BN’s, which many Malay voters have long associated with relatively centrist/establishment positions. There are suggestions that some voters may have been unclear about the difference between PN and the BN, or at the very least were unaware of the PN’s composition. This complicates attributing the PN’s breakthroughs outside of the northern states to a desire for more Islamist politics.

<sup>12</sup> Arnold Puyok and Piya Raj Sukhani (2020) “Sabah: breakthrough in the fixed deposit state”, *The Round Table*, 109(2): 202-224; Oh Ei Sun (2013), “From fixed deposits to kingmakers: elections, East Malaysia and federal-state relations”, *RSIS Commentaries*, no. 57.

<sup>13</sup> Meredith Weiss and Ibrahim Suffian (2023), “Decline, Fall, and Resurrection of a Dominant-coalition System: Malaysia’s Tortured Partisan Path”, *Pacific Affairs*, 96(2): 281-301.

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