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The Changing Nature of Populism in Malaysia

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Introduction

With the recent rise of populist leaders and parties across Europe, the United States, and the Philippines, many of whom have won the vote to rule, there has been a surge of scholarly and public interest in the topic of populism and its impacts on democracy and liberal values. This discussion has begun to spill over into Malaysia. Parallels are being drawn between the nativist rhetoric of popular right-wing European parties and the ethno-nationalist and religious rhetoric spouted by members of the now former ruling party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). There are also concerns over the potential socioeconomic and political impact and the feasibility of allegedly “populist” promises made by the now ruling Pakatan Harapan (PH) government on the campaign trail.

In short, populism worries Malaysians. Yet, as is common with any popular topical political terminology used in public and academic discourse, populism is not a clearly defined, agreed-upon term. More often than not, populism is used in charged polemics to discredit political and socioeconomic policies. Far-right parties have also begun adopting populist platforms, adding more confusion to the mix— populism is then mixed up with right-leaning or extremist ideologies such as nativism or fascism.

Hence, this essay first seeks to identify a working definition of populism. This paper will then examine current global trends in populism. This essay primarily seeks to examine current trends of populism in Malaysia. It will examine Malaysia’s political discourse on populism, and then through the definition set will set out to examine what issues constitute as populist in Malaysia. The essay will then look at populism within the PH manifesto. It will conclude with an outlook of how populism will change in Malaysia’s future and suggest directions for further research.

Definition of Populism

The definition of populism varies and there is no wholly agreed-upon definition due to the diversity of the political and socioeconomic environments in which populism can arise. Some scholars define populism as “a set of shortsighted macroeconomic policies adopted for electoral purposes that end up generating more harm than good.” This definition, referred to as the socioeconomic definition of populism, it has lost support amongst most

social sciences, though it is still often used by the media, politicians, and policymakers as a pejorative.¹

Political scientist Cas Mudde has proposed a definition of populism that has slowly gained greater acceptance within the academic community and which has become more implicitly used in mainstream media. He defines populism as “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”² This essay will refer to populism by this definition.

This “ideational” definition of populism has two opposite, competing ideologies: pluralism and elitism. Elitism, the mirror opposite of populism, advocates for politics to be an expression of a moral elite rather than the amoral, vulgar masses. At odds with both elitism and populism, pluralism instead views the political sphere as a “heterogeneous collection of groups and individuals with often fundamentally different views and wishes.” Hence, pluralism instead advocates for diversity, consensus, and compromise.³

Mudde defines populism as a “thin” ideology, meaning it cannot answer most social, economic, and political questions that more developed “full ideologies” such as socialism or liberalism can. However, populism can be combined with full ideologies across the political spectrum, from far-right nationalism to left-leaning progressivism. Hence, the function of populism is to support a more substantive ideology.⁴

It is, however, important to point out that while populists vary ideologically and some populists tend towards anti-democratic ideologies such as fascism and communism, populism can only exist in a democracy. The essential definition of democracy (without adjectives such as liberal or illiberal) here refers to a political system defined by a “combination of popular sovereignty and majority rule.” A liberal democracy, on the other hand, is defined as a type of political regime which combines democracy with the establishment of independent institutions aimed at protecting fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and the protection of minorities. Populism is fundamentally democratic, but is at odds with the pluralist nature of liberal democracy.⁵

Central to Mudde’s definition of populism is the monist and moralistic dichotomy between the masses and the elites. Populists believe that all “people” share the same “pure” values and interests. Consequently, populists believe that all “elites” share the same “corrupt” values which are diametrically opposed to those of the people. Moral conflict is at the core of this dichotomous relationship whereby the will of the people is at odds with the will of the dominant evil and corrupt elites or traditional political institutions. This “us versus them” mindset leads populists to exhibit dismissive behavior towards any opposing views. As a result, populism tends to encourage divisive stances and polarization on common political and socioeconomic issues.⁶

Though integral to populist vocabulary, the definitions of the “people” and the “elite” among populists is often nebulous and arbitrary, and may depend on the populist’s ideological basis. Generally, though, the “people” are defined by three notions— as the sovereign or a collective body from which true political power derives from, the common people or a silent majority excluded from political power due to their sociocultural and economic

¹ Hawkins, Kirk A., and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. “The ideational approach to populism.” *Latin American Research Review* 52, no. 4 (2017).

² Cas Mudde. “The populist zeitgeist.” *Government and opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541-563.

³ Cas Mudde. “The populist zeitgeist.” *Government and opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541-563.

⁴ Cas Mudde. “The populist zeitgeist.” *Government and opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541-563.

⁵ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

⁶ Cas Mudde. “The populist zeitgeist.” *Government and opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541-563.

status, and as the nation or the “people” defined by civic national identity or ethnicity. The “elite” are also vaguely defined, though the term tends to refer to “illegitimate” power holders in the political, economic, media, and cultural spheres who undermine the voice of the people, except for those within these institutions who are portrayed as sympathetic to the populist’s cause.⁷

The general will, or the *volonté générale*, is linked with the writings of philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whereby he defines the general will as the capacity of the people to join together into a community and legislate to enforce their common interests. By employing the Rousseauian notion of the general will, populists are critiquing representative democracy which they view as aristocratic, as citizens are only mobilized occasionally for elections. The general will, however, is not based on a rational process of discussion within the public sphere but rather the notion of the “common sense” of a single homogenous group. However, the danger of the concept of the general will is that it inherently ignores and disregards minority interests or alternative views which may in turn legitimize authoritarian measures or illiberal attacks on those who are allegedly against the general will of the people.⁸

The Malaysian Discourse on Populism

The definition of populism has been fairly inconsistent within the Malaysian political discourse, despite its fairly frequent usage within the media and among some academics. For instance, in the most notable writing on populism in Malaysia, *Autocrats vs The People: Authoritarian Populism in Malaysia* by Anne Munro-Kua, the term “authoritarian populism,” a term first coined by Stuart Hall, “depicts politics as a struggle between ‘the people’ and some combination of malevolent, racialized and/or unfairly advantaged ‘others’ at home or abroad or both. It justifies interventions in the name of ‘taking back control’ in favor of ‘the people’.”⁹

While there are superficial similarities with the ideational definition, Munro-Kua describes authoritarian populism as an “authoritarian form of democratic class politics.” The definition of “authoritarian” here refers to an “expression of the coercive function of the capitalist state” rather than a fascist or dictatorial regime. All states have the power to exert their coercive capacity, but states also possess ideological institutions to exert more subtle forms of domination over the ruled. Populism here describes a political ideological strategy used by the state to reinforce its dominance of the population rather than an anti-establishment “thin-centered ideology.” Populism according to Poulantza “...involves the creation of an ideology which can be used to manipulate the populace and to facilitate the introduction of policies which may be against their broad class interest.” This strategy is used in order to exert ideological intervention into the private sphere of life to promote an ideological stance which attempts to “legitimize” the state’s use of coercive authoritarian measures as being in the best interest of the people. While this essay does not seek to discredit the term “authoritarian populism,” this term and the ideational definition of “populism” are essentially two separate concepts used to describe two different political phenomena.¹⁰

Prior to the fourteenth general elections (GE14), several articles and columns were published expressing

⁷ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

⁸ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

⁹ Anne Munro-Kua. *Authoritarian populism in Malaysia*. Springer, 1996.

¹⁰ Anne Munro-Kua. *Authoritarian populism in Malaysia*. Springer, 1996.

concerns regarding populism in Malaysia. The concerns were mostly over the potentially negative political and socioeconomic impact “populism,” particularly from the “populist” PH manifesto, could have on Malaysia.

New Straits Times (NST) writer Syed Umar Ariff compared the rise of populism in the US and Malaysia.¹¹ The author described populism as the “best tool to use against the establishment or competition in order to rally an army of simple-minded supporters by magnifying pettiness into national-scale issues.” He criticized Mukhriz Manhathir’s call for a two-term limit for the Prime Minister as “populist,” stating that it was a little too late since the same calls arose back during his father Mahathir’s twenty-year tenure as PM. He also attacked the opposition’s “populist” criticisms of the electoral re-delineation move, claiming that it would only benefit the BN.

The Centre for a Better Tomorrow (CENBET), a think tank linked with the BN component party the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), asked voters to be wary of PH’s populist pledges, claiming they could devastate the country’s long-term socioeconomic interests.¹²

In March 2018, the New Straits Times published an article in which two political analysts criticized PH’s manifesto as “ridiculous” and “populist,” aimed at garnering votes without properly taking into the account the country’s current economic status. Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) lecturer Md Shukri Shuib suggested that PH’s plan to abolish the GST and control the price of goods was “ridiculous,” as the state of the global economy meant that every country was looking for a means to increase revenue. Universiti Malaya political analyst Dr. Awang Azman Awang Pawi said that PH’s “populist” manifesto lacked implementation strategies and was merely aimed at attracting voters. He added that PH’s promises to control the price of goods and fuel prices did not account for the importance of supply and demand, or factor in the influence of fluctuating global fuel prices. He criticized PH for recycling old issues to woo voters.¹³

Malaysian leaders and parties have rarely described themselves as populist, let alone attached positive connotations to the greatly maligned word. Yet, in an odd twist, UMNO treasurer and Communications and Multimedia then-Minister Salleh Said Keruak claimed UMNO had become the longest ruling party in the world due to its “ultra-populist” nature. It was “sensitive to the needs of the people, understood the aspirations of the people, maintained good relations with component parties, protected the people of all races, helped the poor, and took care of the people’s welfare.” He also claimed that UMNO was a democratic party with the undivided support of a majority of Malays and Malaysians.¹⁴ Ironically, when directing criticism at PH’s planned budget, Salleh said that “populist” policies such as removing taxes and offering free services would put the country in jeopardy.¹⁵

Absent from the “populism” described within these articles and columns is any hint of a moral “people” versus a corrupt “elite” dimension, and there is also an absence of any talk of the general will of the people. Though these articles purport to talk about “populism,” they generally lean towards its oft-used pejorative socioeconomic definition as a set of short-sighted, potentially detrimental but popular economic policies aimed at quickly garnering votes. They sometimes use populism to make a charged attack on PH and its “simple-minded supporters.” Salleh Keruak describes UMNO as “ultra-populist,” but he seems to imply that they are more so a

¹¹ Syed Umar Ariff. "Rise of Populism in US and Malaysian Politics." *NST Online*, September 20, 2016.

¹² "Populist pledges will ruin Malaysia, think tank says ahead of GE14." *The Malay Mail*, February 24, 2018.

¹³ Idris, Rohaniza, Khairul Azran Hussin, and Tharanya Arumugam. "Ridiculous and Populist Pakatan Manifesto, Say Analysts." *New Straits Times*, March 8, 2018.

¹⁴ "Umno an Ultra-Populist Democratic Party: Salleh." *The Sun Daily*, February 8, 2018.

¹⁵ Jalil, Haikal. "Populist Policies will only Jeopardise our Future: Salleh." *The Sun Daily*. October 29, 2017.

“pluralist” party than a populist party. He described UMNO as a party that catered to the interests and demands of all Malaysians, regardless of their ethnicity. However, he too referred back to the socioeconomic definition of populism. Perhaps by describing the issues addressed as “populist” through a socioeconomic lens, they may have implicitly acknowledged the widespread, popular support for promises that aimed to abolish highly unpopular policies and address issues that Malaysians felt were negatively affecting their livelihoods while a few select people in power were benefitting at their expense.

What Socioeconomic and Political Issues Resonate with the Malaysian Public?

As populism is not a substantive ideological stance, what constitutes as populist in Malaysia generally varies from other countries, though there may be similarities. In Malaysian politics, populist issues might center on controversial topics regarding ethnicity, religion, education, cost of living, immigration, political corruption, repressive laws, the Constitution, and taxation to name a few. Moreover, who are or would “the people” be defined as in Malaysia, and what would their “general will” be?

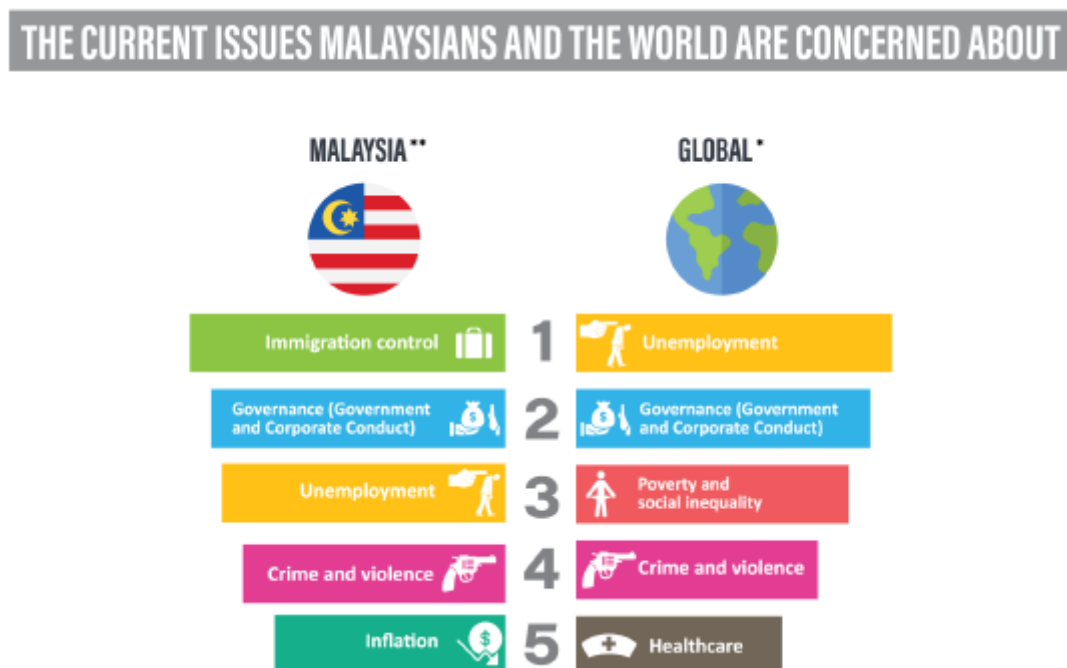
Malaysia’s diverse ethnic makeup and pluralist society makes it difficult to discern exactly whom “the people” might refer to. According to 2010 census data from the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), Bumiputera (Muslim and non-Muslim) account for 67.4 percent of Malaysia’s total population, with Malays comprising a total of 63.1 percent of the population in Peninsular Malaysia. Chinese account for 24.6 percent of the population, followed by Indians (7.3 percent). Approximately 61 percent of Malaysians profess Islam to be their religion, followed by Buddhism (19.8 percent), Christianity (9.2 percent), and Hinduism (6.3 percent).¹⁶ The 2018 population estimates by the DOSM indicate that the Bumiputera are projected to grow to 69.1 percent of the population, up from 68.8 percent in 2017.¹⁷

How does one identify pertinent issues that most Malaysians are concerned with and also take into account these ethno-religious cleavages? Opinion surveys may help us in this respect by providing a general overview of the issues that concern most Malaysians.

A survey conducted by market research firm Ipsos titled *What Worries Malaysia in 2017?* revealed that the top three concerns among Malaysians last year were immigration control (of foreign workers), governance (government and corporate conduct), and unemployment. Foreign immigration was of particular concern to respondents with a household income of below RM 3,000 and/or those living in rural areas. Official statistics from the Ministry of Home Affairs estimate that there are around 1.9 million registered foreign workers in the country, an estimate which does not account for undocumented foreign workers. Ipsos, which conducts similar studies globally, noted that rising unemployment concerns usually correlate to rising concerns on immigration control.

¹⁶ "Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristic Report 2010." *Department of Statistics Malaysia*, 2010.

¹⁷ "Current Population Estimates, Malaysia, 2017-2018." *Department of Statistics Malaysia, Official Portal*, July 31 2018.

Figure 1. What Worries Malaysians in 2017?

(Source: Ipsos Malaysia, 2017)

In a national survey conducted prior to the fourteenth general election titled *Malaysia General Election XIV Outlook* by the Merdeka Center in released on April 26, 2018, inflation, corruption, and job opportunities were the top three issues that concerned the survey respondents at 57 percent, 37 percent, and 21 percent, respectively. Inflation was of particularly high concern amongst 60 percent and 59 percent of Malay and Indian respondents, while 53 percent of Chinese respondents were concerned about corruption (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Malaysia General Elections XIV Outlook: Prospects and Outcome

Important Issues

Issues	Total	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Muslim Bumiputera	Non Muslim Bumiputera
Inflation	57%	60%	49%	59%	56%	70%
Corruption	37%	33%	53%	12%	29%	35%
Job opportunities	21%	24%	9%	40%	34%	22%

(Source: Merdeka Centre for Opinion Research. 2018, April 26)

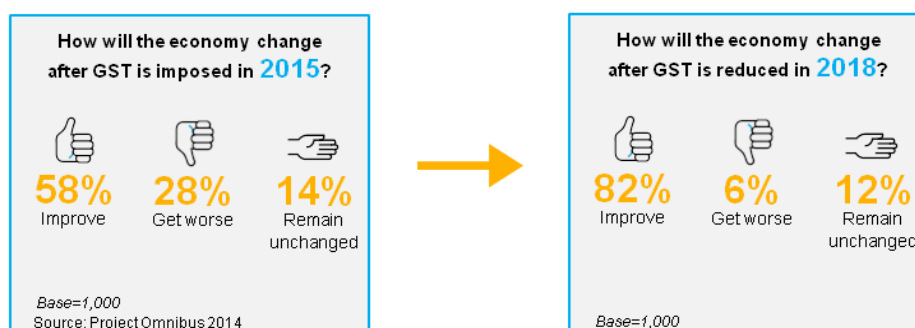
Following the fourteenth general elections, in a survey in July 2018, Ipsos said that overall concerns still remained centered on financial and political corruption (60 percent), unemployment (43 percent), inflation (16 percent) and taxes (14 percent); however, the change was that 66 percent of Malaysians were more confident that

the country was heading in the right direction.¹⁸ Last year, Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI), which surveys a country's public perception of the level of corruption in their country, Malaysia's ranking declined by seven places from fifty-fifth in 2016 to sixty-second in 2017 with a weak score of 47/100.¹⁹

Taxation has always been a touchy subject for most Malaysians, particularly the unpopular implementation of the goods-and-services tax (GST) under the BN in 2015. A survey by market research firm Nielsen saw mixed reactions amongst Malaysian consumers towards the impact of implementing the GST on the economy. While 58 percent of respondents said it would improve Malaysia's economic situation, 28 percent of respondents said it would worsen it. Nielsen then released new survey results for 2018 post-GE14 which revealed that 82 percent of Malaysians believed the zeroization of the GST would improve the economy. In the same survey, more than nine out of ten respondents believed the PH government would reduce or remove tolls, and 77 percent of respondents said the "fuel price fix" would be "good for consumers" (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Malaysians Optimistic About Economic Outlook Following Recent Government Initiatives (Source: Nielsen 2018, July 12)

PERCEPTIONS ON THE ECONOMY IN RELATION TO GST 2015 VS 2018



The results of these surveys may indicate that Malaysians are generally concerned about bread-and-butter economic issues. Malaysians may also link foreign immigration, the GST, and political corruption to the country's economic woes. Public perception may also link the 1MDB scandal and the GST to inflation, a high cost of living, a weakening ringgit, and a high government debt ratio.

Why Were these Issues Considered Populist in Malaysia?

While public opinion surveys provide some insight into what popular issues the Malaysian public is concerned about, it is important to account for how and why the former political elite responded to (or ignored) these

¹⁸ "What Worries Malaysia: Post GE 2018." *Ipsos*, August 16, 2018.

¹⁹ "Corruption Perceptions Index 2017." *Transparency International*, February 21, 2018.

issues. Populism brings controversial issues back to the forefront of the public political discourse, issues that the elites are largely uncomfortable discussing. In the case of Malaysia, which has been referred to as a competitive authoritarian regime— a hybrid regime where competitive regular elections are practiced but where the ruling party has unfair and advantageous access to state mechanisms and institutions (such as the media) which are frequently used to hinder or attack the opposition,²⁰ the elites tend to apply repressive laws to censor discussion of sensitive and “uncomfortable” issues and silence opposition towards the regime.

Since its independence in 1957, Malaysia hasn’t been known as a bastion of free speech and democracy. Freedom House gave pre-GE14 Malaysia a freedom rating (a score that measures civil and political liberties in a given country) of “partly free” in its Freedom in the World 2018 report with an aggregate score of 45/100. For comparison, New Zealand was ranked the freest country in the world with a score of 98/100. Among the several issues plaguing Malaysia’s political system, Freedom House highlighted the lack of independence within the Electoral Commission (EC), gerrymandering by the EC, rampant corruption within political institutions, repression and restrictions on civil society, and Najib’s attempt to contain the fallout of 1MDB by purging critical cabinet ministers, as well as targeting media outlets such as The Edge and the Sarawak Report covering the scandal.²¹

International media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF) placed BN-led Malaysia at 145 out of 180 countries in the 2018 World Press Freedom Index with a score of 46.89 (the lower, the better) in 2017. By contrast, top-ranked Norway scored 7.63. RSF cites several legal hindrances to media freedom posed by repressive and draconian laws such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act, the Official Secrets Act, the Communications and Multimedia Act, and the Sedition Act. Furthermore, RSF noted how journalists and media were being harassed for being too independent and critical of the previous regime led by former PM Najib Tun Razak, particularly when covering the 1MDB scandal.²² For instance, news portals such as the Sarawak Report and The Edge Markets were also censored or suspended in the latter case for publishing incriminating investigative pieces on the scandal.

Calls for reforms and to tackle high-level and widespread corruption have been a staple issue in the Malaysian political discourse for over a decade. Since 2006, a coalition of civil society groups and NGOs called the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections (better known by its Malay name “Bersih 2.0”) has organized several large-scale protests demanding substantial political, institutional, and electoral reforms. Some of Bersih’s eight demands include a clean-up of the electoral roll which is allegedly filled with “phantom voters,” free and fair access to media coverage for all political parties, and the strengthening of public institutions.²³

However, the BN regime’s response to these rallies has usually resulted in crackdowns and arrests of Bersih members and rally-goers. In November 2016, Bersih organized the Bersih Five rally which saw further calls for then-PM Najib to resign following the 1MDB scandal exposé. Authorities raided offices and detained Bersih Five leader Maria Chin Abdullah on November 18, 2016 under the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act (Sosma), an act which was supposedly intended to be used for genuine security and terrorist threats. Thus, it was

²⁰ Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. "Elections without democracy: The rise of competitive authoritarianism." *Journal of democracy* 13, no. 2 (2002): 51-65.

²¹ Freedom House. (2018). Freedom in the World 2018: Malaysia. Accessed 1 October 2018. Retrieved from https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/malaysia_

²² "Malaysia." *Reporters Without Borders*, 2019.

²³ "Our 8 demands." *Bersih 2.0.*, 2018.

easy to see that political corruption and the 1MDB scandal were very sensitive subjects for the BN elites who cracked down on any attempt to publicize the issue.

Current Trends in Populism in Malaysia

Pakatan Harapan's GE14 manifesto: Buku Harapan (Book of Hope)

There are several elements of populism within PH's Buku Harapan, despite the fact that it contains only two mentions of the term "elite," both of which are found in a paragraph which describes UMNO and the BN's manipulation of "racial politics" to ensure that the political elite remained in power.²⁴ The manifesto also makes it clear that it aims to cleanse Malaysia of "corruption, malfeasance and kleptocracy," citing the 1MDB case as the primary example.

The general language of the manifesto attempts to appeal to popular dissatisfaction towards a small elitist and racist UMNO-dominated BN government. PH promises to save Malaysia from the BN, returning it to the right path in order bring back glory to the country. The manifesto emphasizes the socioeconomic discrimination perpetuated by the BN against the common people. PH also echoes the slogans of the 2008 Great Recession populist movement Occupy Wall Street by evoking the disparity between the "99 percent" versus the "1 percent":

Pakatan Harapan is determined to stop UMNO and Barisan Nasional's failure to guarantee the welfare of the common people, especially those who live in rural areas, the Indians, and the indigenous people, as well as the lower middle class who are often forgotten. Our promises are for the 99 percent, and not just for the 1 percent cronies of UMNO and Barisan Nasional.²⁵

Public perception may have attributed the rising cost of living and price of goods to the imposition of the GST, despite BN leaders claiming that the GST would gradually help reduce prices while providing substantial increases in government revenue. These justifications may have failed to assuage public perceptions that linked the GST implementation to the 1MDB scandal and media coverage of the lavish, luxurious lifestyles of high-level politicians which coincided with the implementation of the GST. Pakatan made sure to capitalize on this and establish links between both issues, stating, "Today Malaysians are being forced to pay the regressive GST, only for that money to be used to pay for the luxurious lives of politicians who fly in private jets around the world."²⁶

PH describes the GST as a regressive tax imposed by UMNO and the BN as a result of their failure to properly manage the economy. In its second promise to "reduce the pressures causing burdensome price increases," PH states that the GST is the main cause of higher inflation rates of four percent in 2017 compared to the one percent inflation in 2015. The coalition also criticized then-BN leaders for being detached from the realities of regular Malaysian lives.

The second pillar of the manifesto, institutional and political reform, echoes some of the demands put forth by Bersih to address corruption within the government by placing checks and balances on the prime minister,

²⁴ Harapan, Pakatan. "Buku Harapan: Rebuilding Our Nation, Fulfilling Our Hopes." *Putrajaya: Pakatan Harapan* (2018).

²⁵ Harapan, Pakatan. "Buku Harapan: Rebuilding Our Nation, Fulfilling Our Hopes." *Putrajaya: Pakatan Harapan* (2018).

²⁶ Harapan, Pakatan. "Buku Harapan: Rebuilding Our Nation, Fulfilling Our Hopes." *Putrajaya: Pakatan Harapan* (2018).

ministers, and other government institutions. Najib, UMNO and the BN are largely to blame for most of these political failings through the constant consolidation and abuse of power. Cronyism and kleptocracy are the name of the game, and the existing checks and balances put in place by founding fathers of this nation can no longer function. PH then promises to restore dignity to the defiled institutions.

While the manifesto does use populist language to direct much of the blame toward the BN elite, it is important to note that much of the content of the promised solutions is pluralistic in nature. For instance, the section titled “Special Commitments” accounts for the interest groups that tend to feel marginalized such as women and youth, as well as minority groups such as the Indians, Felda settlers, and senior citizens.

Moreover, the political, electoral, and institutional reforms PH proposes are very much anti-populist in nature as they seek to reform the public institutions and abolish repressive laws to ensure that there are more check and balance mechanisms on the government. This would open communication channels with the government for opposition parties, reform committees, the media, NGOs, interest groups, and citizens to allow them to more freely voice their opinions, concerns, and grievances on relevant issues. Furthermore, the manifesto places an anti-populist emphasis on decentralization. For instance, the fourth pillar of the manifesto sets out to return Sabah and Sarawak to the status accorded by the Malaysia Agreement 1963. The manifesto also promises to revive the true spirit of federalism to encourage decentralization to strengthen the role and power of local authorities.

Many parts of the PH manifesto seek to introduce pluralistic and liberal reforms to improve the governance structure and allow dissenting and competing views to have input into the government. This is antithetical to populism, which proposes the so-called “people’s” will—a one-size-fits-all solution to how the government ought to function which ignores minorities and in some cases may repress dissent. Thus, while the manifesto borrowed populist concepts and language to direct the blame toward the BN regime for recent grievances, the content of the manifesto encourages a move towards a more plural system.

One Year on – has PH Kept True to its Promises?

At the time of writing, the PH government will have been in power for almost a year. There is a need to assess how successful they have been in implementing their promises. The most notable success has been the zero-rating of the GST and the reintroduction of the Sales and Services Tax (SST) in its place. The government clearly made this move a priority for its administration, knowing full well that any indication otherwise would trigger a backlash from the public and risk losing its hard-won support. As a result of this policy, there was an initial sharp drop in prices, and the lower prices were enjoyed during the tax holiday before going up again on September 1, 2018, when the SST came into place. Malaysians have begun to realize that lowering the cost of living does not simply entail removing an unpopular consumption tax, but requires deeper structural reforms to tackle problems such as stagnant wages and changing consumer habits. The GST is a good example of how populist economic promises do little to serve the *rakyat’s* interest in the long term.

A recent survey conducted by the Merdeka Center reveals that the top three concerns amongst Malaysi-

ans are inflation, corruption, and the preservation of Malay rights/fair treatment of all races.²⁷ Interestingly, all three concerns can be linked to populist narratives. The current tide of dissatisfaction against the PH government is largely due to their failure to reduce the price of goods, curb practices of money politics and patronage, and the perception that they are not adequately protecting Malay rights. There have been eight by-elections²⁸ since the May 9 general elections, three of which have been won by Barisan Nasional. Signs of dissatisfaction are becoming more apparent, and the same Merdeka Center survey shows that the Prime Minister's approval ratings have plummeted from 83 percent in May 2018 to just 46 percent in March 2019. Many commentators have attributed this loss of support to the PH's failure to bring down the price of goods and the perception that Malay-Muslim rights are being threatened.

It is important to note that this dissatisfaction, while natural in a maturing democracy like Malaysia, is also a sign that despite the watershed election results of 2018, the political discourse in the country has not changed much. Populist narratives that feed into larger problems of inequality, rising costs of living, and widening social divides continue to distract the people from having concrete conversations about the policy direction needed to alleviate these concerns.

Conclusion: Changing Currents of Populism in post-GE14 Malaysia?

Following Pakatan Harapan's surprise victory in the fourteenth general elections, their first hundred days in government saw the "zeroization" of the GST and its eventual replacement with the SST. As of now, the government has focused on dealing with the 1MDB scandal and prosecuting figures associated with the scandal, renegotiating project contracts and attempting to slowly reform institutions. However, they have also rolled back or delayed some popular promises such as the promise to abolish tolls, though it is still too early to see where PH's numerous promises will head in the coming years. Now that they are in power, PH's populist language has changed somewhat whereby current government ministers talk about how the challenges currently faced by the government are linked and said to be caused by the failings of the BN.

The now-opposition Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) and UMNO are trying to find their feet in this new political climate. By taking note of populist electoral victories and successful platforms from right-wing, typically nativist parties in Europe and in the US, there may be a possibility that the current opposition will also adopt a more populist stance which may be combined with political Islam and Malay nativist sentiments, particularly now that the new establishment is attempting to encourage a greater degree of pluralism in the political system. Furthermore, UMNO and PAS leaders have always had the not-so-subtle tendency to frame Malaysia's political narrative as a Malay versus non-Malay and/or a Muslim versus non-Muslim political struggle despite their attempts to exhibit superficial ethnic tolerance. The potency of a populist Malay nativist and/or a populist Islamist platform should not be underestimated, especially when one considers that in GE14 only 25-30 percent of Malays voted for PH while the remaining 70 percent were divided between PAS and the BN.²⁹ However, there are voices within UMNO and BN component parties that are seeking to reform their parties in a new direction, though it is uncer-

²⁷ "Survey, Kuala Lumpur: National Voter Sentiments: Excerpt of Principal Indicators." *Merdeka Center*, 2019.

²⁸ In Malaysia, if a Parliamentary/State legislative seat falls vacant, a by-election is held to elect a new representative for that seat.

²⁹ "Report: 95% Chinese but less than 30% Malays voted for PH." *FMT Reporters*, June 14, 2018.

tain where the reform will lead the party or how it will alter its core ideology.

Further research should also raise questions as to how the Malaysian “people” are educated and informed on policy and social issues. Populism plays on the popular sentiments of the people, but the question remains as to how the “people” come to adopt these views and whether there is any factual basis for said views. This is particularly pertinent due to the rise of post-truth narratives which are challenging basic assumptions about information, data, and facts and where social media has played a huge role in the dissemination of alternative narratives and conspiracies and has allowed political echo chambers to thrive.

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